

**Framing Short Film Practice in Oman (2000-2020):  
Context, Characteristics, Cultural Representation**

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## **Dedication**

This thesis is lovingly dedicated to the memory of my dear father Juma Al-Hadabi. It is a tribute to his unwavering efforts and dedication to nurturing and guiding me in the best possible manner. I will always be proud of being his daughter and of carrying his name with me.

## Abstract

This qualitative study examines Oman's flourishing filmmaking practice, its determining influences, and associated issues. It presents a first comprehensive mapping of the conditions and structures in which film is situated in the Gulf state, considering the country's wider cultural, media and political landscapes as well as specifics such as film education, film festivals or film culture in the Arab World. The thesis specifically focuses on short narrative films, arguing for the importance of examining short films as a distinct sector that can thrive independently of state recognition and large-scale funding, with Oman serving as a prime example of this potential.

*Framing Short Film Practice in Oman* reveals how short films can provide fertile ground for studying a given culture, offering an understanding of how concise narrative shorts can effectively convey and represent that culture. Focusing on Oman's thriving yet less-resourced filmmaking practice, the study examines a representative sample of Omani narrative short films produced between 2006 and 2020. Drawing on film readings as well as conversations with practitioners, the analysis demonstrates that the films, with their visually captivating narratives, constitute an allegorical exploration of the Omani context and help explain the country's ongoing negotiations of tradition and modernity.

The study asserts that Omani short film writers and directors craft their narratives around family and invite viewers to engage with experiences and tensions through stories rooted in the basic unit of Omani society. Ultimately, the thesis concludes that Omani narrative shorts offer a stimulating experience that both solidifies Omani culture and addresses pressing societal issues. It furthermore suggests that the productivity and creative energy of the short film sector might contribute to the emergence of a 'small-nation' cinema in Oman that could be recognised in the Gulf region, the Arab World and beyond.

## Table of Contents

Acknowledgements .....	iii
Dedication .....	iv
Abstract .....	v
List of Figures.....	viii
List of Tables.....	ix
Introduction.....	1
Chapter One: New Contexts as Valuable Grounds for Unresearched Variables.....	9
1.1 Part One: Literature Review .....	9
1.1.1 Oman and Arab Cinema Studies.....	10
1.1.2 Issues Arising from Current Approaches to Contextualising New and Emerging Cinema ...	12
1.1.3 Representation in Arab Film.....	14
1.1.4 Gulf Cinema Literature .....	15
1.1.5 Texts on Omani Filmmaking .....	19
1.2 Part Two: Research Design.....	25
1.2.1 Research Questions .....	25
1.2.2 Approaches to Research.....	26
1.2.3 Research Instruments and Data Analysis .....	28
1.2.4 Film Analysis Approach.....	32
1.2.5 Online Survey .....	38
1.2.6 Limitations and Challenges.....	38
Chapter Two: Between Media and the Arts: Locating Film in the Context of Oman.....	40
2.1 The Unsettled Omani State-Building Process.....	40
2.2 Omani Media as Political Propaganda Tools in the Process of Nation Building.....	45
2.2.1 Government Strategies to Control Internal and External Media .....	48
2.3 Technological Development as the Main Driver for Change .....	50
2.4 Media Democracy between Social Responsibility and the Preservation of Personal Freedom .	55
2.5 Visual Arts as Forms of Cultural Expression .....	57
2.5.1 Omani Arts ‘From’ and ‘For’ Cultural Heritage.....	62
2.6 The History of Omani Film Culture through Individual Memories.....	70
2.6.1 Journey of Transformation: From Viewers to Battling Film Producers.....	74
2.7 Navigating the Position of Narrative Filmmaking in the Omani Context.....	78
Chapter Three: An Insight into Omani Short-Narrative Filmmaking Practice .....	86
3.1 The Development of Omani Narrative Filmmaking Culture.....	87

3.1.1 The Set-up Stage, 2000-2005 .....	88
3.1.2 Exploring the Nature of Filmmaking, 2006-2010 .....	93
3.1.3 Finding One's Own Path within Filmmaking, 2011-2014 .....	95
3.1.4 Self-consciousness of the Practice, 2016-2020 .....	96
3.2 Factors Influencing Omani Narrative Filmmaking Practice .....	99
3.2.1 Theatre as a Bridge to Filmmaking Practice .....	100
3.2.2 Self-censorship and Social Expectations over Official Cultural Policies .....	103
3.2.3 Under-utilized Film Education Capabilities .....	111
3.2.4 Influence of Personal Recognition on Filmmaking Practice .....	114
3.3 Culture as a Priority in Defining the 'Omani Film' .....	116
3.4 Making Sense of the National and the Transnational within Omani Filmmaking Practice .....	122
3.4.1 Globalisation and Films .....	122
3.4.2 The National and Transnational Quality of Omani Filmmaking Practice .....	124
Chapter Four: Omani Short film Analysis Part One: Characteristics and Approaches of Omani Short Films .....	133
4.1 Family as Narrative Frame.....	133
4.2 The Realist Quality of Omani Shorts.....	142
4.3 The Documentary Quality of Omani Narrative Filmmaking Practice .....	149
4.4 Against the Myth of Hollywood's Classical Victorious Hero .....	161
4.5 The Use of Folk Tunes on Soundtracks.....	163
4.6 New Stylistic Outlook .....	164
Chapter Five: Omani Short film Analysis Part Two: Cultural Representation in Omani Short Films... ..	168
5.1 Film, Representation, and Culture .....	169
5.2 Omani Cultural Dimensions Through Omani Short Films.....	172
5.2.1 A Conservative and Religiously Observant Society .....	172
5.2.2 Power and Hierarchy.....	188
5.2.3 Gender Representation in Oman .....	196
Conclusion .....	208
Bibliography.....	214
Appendices .....	228
Appendix 1: Film List .....	228
Appendix 2: Film Analysis Summary (Film Narrative) .....	244
Appendix 3: Organizational Structure of the Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Youth .....	246
Appendix 4: Interview Questions .....	247
Appendix 5: Ethical Approval.....	255

## List of Figures

Figure 1: Picture of Oman 1928-29 AD's videotape in Oman Television library .....	22
Figure 2: Almudeema folkdance. Source: Omani Community Network, @Smucan_OCN .....	60
Figure 3: Salim Sakhi, Oryxs. Oil on canvas, various sizes. n.d. Source: Screenshot from Al-Amri's Article, p. 31 .....	65
Figure 4: Anwar Sonia, untitled, acrylic painting on canvas, 50*70, 2016.....	66
Figure 5: The opening sequence of Biadh in Biadh, 2009 .....	98
Figure 6: The herz in Almenaz, 2009 .....	146
Figure 7: Misfat Al Abriyeen, Oman. An example of mountain villages. Photograph by Hanni Al-Saadi, @haani_saleh.....	147
Figure 8: A passage within a mountain village in Almenaz, 2009 .....	147
Figure 9: Alfalaj in Almenaz, 2009 .....	148
Figure 10: Alfanaar (circled), in Almenaz, 2009 .....	149
Figure 11: The menaz in Almenaz, 2009 .....	150
Figure 12: Omani men's formal costume in Almenaz, 2009 .....	151
Figure 13: Men's domestic costumes in Almenaz, 2009 .....	151
Figure 14: Men's costumes for farming, fishing, and cooking in Almenaz, 2009 .....	151
Figure 15: One type of Omani women's costumes in Almenaz, 2009 .....	152
Figure 16: Old style houses made of cement in Altohooor, 2014 .....	154
Figure 17: General village design in Altohooor, 2014 .....	154
Figure 18: The Sablah in Altohooor, 2014.....	155
Figure 19: A coastal residential area in Alzahrah, 2008 .....	155
Figure 20: Traditional process of making milk in Alzahrah, 2008 .....	155
Figure 21: Drums used in Alrazha and folk dances in general in Altohooor, 2014 .....	156
Figure 22: Alkhanjar (left) and Tirs (right) are used to protect men acting with swords in Altohooor, 2014.....	157
Figure 23: Muscat, the establishing shot in Ana Mashhooor, 2018.....	159
Figure 24: The characters and setting of Hologram, 2018 .....	166
Figure 25: The Quran is directed towards Character Three in Hologram, 2018 .....	172
Figure 26: The Quran on Sundus's bedside table in Alaswad La Yaleeq Bik, 2018 .....	177
Figure 27: University students commenting on a tweet in Almadhalah Alzarqa, 2014.....	184
Figure 28: The student changing her comment in Almadhalah Alzarqa, 2014 .....	185
Figure 29: The characters' placement in Hologram, 2018 .....	189
Figure 30: Character One (the public) in Hologram, 2018 .....	190
Figure 31: Character Two (Authority) in Hologram, 2018.....	191
Figure 32: Character Three (Expatriate) in Hologram, 2018 .....	192
Figure 33: The title shot of Altohooor, 2014 .....	197
Figure 34: The father and mother in Altohooor, 2014.....	199
Figure 35: The disagreement between the father and the mother in Alaswad La Yaleeq Bik, 2018..	200
Figure 36: The mother commenting on the father's ignorance of his responsibilities in Alaswad La Yaleeq Bik, 2018 .....	201
Figure 37: The power held by Razan in Ana Mashhooor, 2018 .....	203
Figure 38: Eye line between Razan and Salah in Ana Mashhooor, 2018 .....	204



## List of Tables

Table 1: Film List.....	31
Table 2: Film Analysis Summary (Representation).....	35
Table 3: Film Analysis Summary (Aesthetics and Approaches).....	36

## Introduction

Oman is a newcomer to filmmaking culture. Unlike film consumption, which started before the 1970s, the practice of narrative filmmaking started in the early years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This qualitative research examines Oman's film production history, its determining influences, and related concerns by focusing on short narrative films. It also investigates film-related structures that have existed since the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the factors influencing them. That is done through mapping the conditions and structures in which film is situated in the Gulf state, considering the country's wider cultural, media and political landscapes as well as specifics such as film education, film festivals or film culture in the Arab World.

Oman, as an Arab Muslim country, is a member of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), in addition to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). It is located at the entrance of the Arabian Peninsula and has just over five million inhabitants, of which Omani nationals constitute approximately 57.62%. Oman is closely influenced by the GCC members and their shared culture and relationships that form the GCC's '*Khaleeji*' identity where '*Khaleeji*' (meaning 'of the Gulf' in Arabic) denotes a socio-political regional identity that is shared by citizens of the six Gulf Cooperation Council states'.<sup>1</sup> This identity has impacted the unity and stability of the region for a long time. However, within the last few years, the appreciation of a unified *Khaleeji* identity has been weakened by many factors, such as openness to other cultures, ideological diffusions, and diverging political orientations. Indeed, the social value of this identity in various cultures is gradually starting to fade. There have been several occasions that mirror these changes, such as Operation Decisive Storm in Yemen in 2015 and the Qatar diplomatic crisis in 2017.

While there are commonalities between the GCCs, Oman has specific historical and cultural characteristics stemming from its ethnic, linguistic, and cultural diversity, which together constitute Omani national identity. Due to its strategic location, the country witnessed significant migration movements from countries such as Baluchistan, Iran, India, and South Africa. Those migrants have settled within the Omani territory, which has resulted in creating a multi-lingual, -ethnic, and -religious society. During the early 1970s, Sultan Qaboos bin Said Al Said (1970-2020) succeeded in building a unified state and setting up the

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<sup>1</sup> Gaith Abdulla, 'Khaleeji Identity in Contemporary Gulf Politics', *Identity and Culture in the 21st Century Gulf* (2016) (p. 2).

characteristics of its identity. That has created a sense of belonging and unity between the various groups. Omani culture is thus built upon the culture and history of residents who are – themselves and by ancestry – indigenous to the Sultanate of Oman.

Even though Oman achieved state and identity building in the early 1970s, stabilising its economic situation to process the modernity of the country remained a challenge. The challenge was enforced mainly by literacy levels, which were overcome by providing both schools and higher education institutions and by importing migrants and experts from abroad. Another challenging factor in the development process is that Oman's economic system depends heavily on the production of natural gas. As such, the Oman economy is directly influenced by the unstable global financial situation. While the government is working to overcome the consequences of its economic system by diversifying it, its influence remains strong. In addition, the continuous changes in the labour market which affect the types of skills required and the emergence of new jobs or the disappearance of others put additional pressure on achieving a stable development process. Those changes, in some cases, enforced the use of experts and expatriate workers, which threatened the success of the national initiative named the 'Omanization' policy that started in 1988. The policy's schemes aim to qualify and equip Omanis with the necessary skills to ensure their active participation in the development of the country.<sup>2</sup> That said, the conditions surrounding the emergence of the Omani state, its diversity, and its characteristics add greater specificity to the context.

Oman is part of the wider non-monolithic Arab region with which it shares its language and has some similarities in socio-economic, institutional, and political status.<sup>3</sup> Aljaz Kuncic examines the similarities and differences between Arab countries using cluster analysis through which he groups various Arab countries depending on 'the society subsystem-specific variables, or overall country characteristics'.<sup>4</sup> According to his analysis, Oman is stable and provides better individual rights than other Arab countries. In this respect, Oman is like Djibouti, Mauritania, Morocco, and Tunisia but different from more authoritarian countries like Iran, Sudan, and Saudi Arabia. In terms of its economic characteristics, Oman is oil-rich

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<sup>2</sup> Salma Mohammed Al-Lamki, 'Omanization: A Three Tier Strategic Framework for Human Resource Management and Training in the Sultanate of Oman', *Journal of Comparative International Management* (2000) (p. 63).

<sup>3</sup> Eisa Al Nashmi, Mariam F Alkazemi, and Wayne Wanta, 'Journalism and Mass Communication Education in the Arab World: Towards a Typology', *International Communication Gazette*, 80. 5 (2018), 403-25 (p. 4040).

<sup>4</sup> Aljaz Kuncic, 'How Similar Are Arab Countries and What Are Their Characteristics', *the 15th annual international* (2016) (p. 4).

and industrial like its neighbouring GCCs.<sup>5</sup> This reflects the differences between contexts in even those countries that share very close historical and social situations. One of these differences is the GCC governments' various approaches towards diversifying their economies. Like Oman, other GCC economies depend on gas. The difference is that while the Omani government recognised the issues caused by the closed economy system in the mid-1990s, improvements to address these issues were timid and slow. In contrast, the applied diversification policies in other GCCs proved successful – earlier in the case of Dubai in the UAE and currently in Saudi Arabia. In these states, diversification policies included developing various fields, such as tourism, by promoting their national image and investing in creative industries, such as the film industry. While Oman incorporates similar policies, and its work within the tourism sector is evident, the film industry, the focus of this project, has been approached differently. Since the 1950s, films have been imported by Indian and British Embassies to provide the cultural interest of migrant workers and communities. However, their use by the Omani government as a film-producing sector has been limited to promoting the image of the state in order to develop the tourism sector through promotional films.

Due to their importance as a powerful popular entertainment, education, and communication medium, films have been utilised as tools to – but have not been limited to – represent cultures, change people's attitudes, and promote national images. As such, films have attracted the attention of many scholars who have studied how they are perceived, interpreted, and constructed. With the popularity of films in various genres, such as animation, documentaries, and features, they have also attracted the attention of scholars from other fields.<sup>6</sup> Film studies have long focused on scrutinising the artistic form and its narratives and the various implications of films in a broader sense in cinema, culture, economics, and politics. Many studies are concerned with feature films as they have been the most widespread form. With the digital turn and advancement of film-related technologies, many small nations have emerged in the field because of the growing opportunity and increased productivity such as New Zealand, Scotland, Tunisia, and Burkina Faso.

Although a 'small nation' is not clearly defined, it is generally understood to be a nation with limited resources and influence. To better comprehend this notion, several disciplines utilise four primary measures of size: population, geographical scale, gross national product (GNP),

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<sup>5</sup> Kuncic, p. 22.

<sup>6</sup> Dudley Andrew, 'The Core and the Flow of Film Studies', *Critical Inquiry*, 35. 4 (2009), 879-915 (p. 883).

and domination. Population size, in particular, is believed to have a direct impact on the size of a nation's internal market before considering foreign trade.<sup>7</sup> This concept of small nations was first elaborated in relation to film studies by Mette Hjort in her book *Small Nation, Global Cinema* (2005) in which she examines the new Danish Cinema. A major scholarly work focusing on cinema of several small nations such as Ireland, Scotland, Singapore, New Zealand, Burkina Faso, and Tunisia is Mette Hjort and Duncan Petrie's book *The Cinema of Small Nations* (2007). Hjort and Petrie assert the importance of examining new contexts by considering their social-economic and cultural specificities, noting that '[i]n line with many of the most incisive accounts of cinema and nations, the analysis calls attention to the complexity of the national formation and the difference and conflicts that are key features to their history'.<sup>8</sup>

Oman is a newcomer in terms of small nation filmmaking, which while excluded from Hjort and Duncan's study, is a target for this project. At the time of the study, Oman did not match key features and criteria set by them for examining contexts with a population range of 4-10 million – a major factor in determining the size of the internal market, which is a crucial element for the high-cost film industry.<sup>9</sup> While examining the Omani internal market in relation to filmmaking practices is beyond the scope of this research, the project lies in the assertion made by Hjort and Petrie on the importance of examining new contexts. As Oman has no deep film history, it has the potential to develop a small nation cinema along these lines. Thus, the current filmmaking practice in Oman will be examined by looking at the socio-economic situation, reasons behind its development, and the influence of culture on it. This will be achieved by focusing on short filmmaking as this is the most common form in Oman.

For decades, filmmaking culture has been dominated by the classic Hollywood narrative style, and at a later stage, Bollywood has also made its place within the cinematic landscape. Yet short-form films, which have 'long lost their minor status as fillers and films preceding features in movie theatre programmes', have benefited from recent technological developments.<sup>10</sup> There has been a rebirth and explosion of shorts in the 21<sup>st</sup> century led by

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<sup>7</sup> Mette Hjort and Duncan J. Petrie, *The Cinema of Small Nations* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), pp. 4-6.

<sup>8</sup> Hjort and Petrie, p. 6.

<sup>9</sup> Hjort and Petrie, p. 4.

<sup>10</sup> Kerstin Knopf, 'Short Films', in *Decolonizing the Lens of Power* (Brill Rodopi, 2008), pp. 171-206AR (p. 171).

film-related technological developments. Several texts deal with the production process of shorts and focus on story building, narrative structures, and production. However, short forms remain under-researched by film studies scholars, who do not recognise their scope and significance.<sup>11</sup> The focus on short films as an excellent training ground through which directors, actors, technical crew, and writers demonstrate their talent and ability in the industry has led to undervaluing these cultural productions. Short films are undoubtedly distinct from feature films; they are a unique and independent genre of film that should be considered as a separate field in its own right. According to Linda J. Cowgill,

Not only do shorts differ from the feature films in the size and scope of the drama, but in plot structure, too [...]. Short films can focus on the conflict in one incident to great effect, but features focus on any number of incidents [...]. Short films can effectively deal with difficult themes longer mainstream feature films avoid for fear of alienating the mass audience.<sup>12</sup>

Moreover, because of their running time, the visibility of shorts is linked to film festivals and video-based Internet platforms such as Vimeo and YouTube. At the height of the COVID-19 pandemic (2020-2022), Miniflix argued that the limited running time of shorts was a winning card that could bring short films back to the forefront with the closure of cinemas and the subsequent shift to online platforms.<sup>13</sup> Miniflix's promotion of short films was clear through its online platform, 'Miniflix.TV,' which is dedicated to showcasing award-winning short films and new media content.<sup>14</sup>

The importance of shorts to this project starts with the understanding that short films are the most produced form in Oman. Omani filmmaking is a small, nascent industry that has undergone several crucial changes in its history; it is situated within three traditions: the Western, the Arab, and the Gulf Corporate Council (GCC) countries. Beginning with imports from larger film culture like Hollywood, Europe, and Bollywood, Omani filmmaking has been influenced by the Arab world's film culture with its rich and attractive history and

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<sup>11</sup> Cynthia Felando, *Discovering Short Films: The History and Style of Live-Action Fiction Shorts* (Springer, 2015), p. 2.

<sup>12</sup> Linda J Cowgill, *Writing Short Films: Structure and Content for Screenwriters* (Lone Eagle, 2005), p. 10.

<sup>13</sup> Miniflix, 'What Making and Showing Short Films Will Look Like in 2021' (2020), <<https://rb.gy/khh9zk>> [accessed 05 June 2021].

<sup>14</sup> 'Miniflix.Tv', *Showcasing The Best In Emerging Short-Form Media* <<https://medium.com/miniflix>>

productions. All the previous multilevel traditions within the global development of world cinema have influence filmmaking practice in terms of taste and approaches. Another influence impacting the filmmaking practice is the characteristic of Oman's optimistic, cohesive society that works towards maintaining its identity. Thus, there are many possibilities for finding under-researched variables that could shed light on a new framework within which Omani film practice is affiliated.

In Oman, there is no fixed government fund allocated to film production. Thus, film practitioners focus on short films because of their low budgets, available equipment, and fewer time pressures. Within short film production, documentary films are made and more widely recognised as Omanis link them to documentary television productions – some are distributed through Omani television for their cultural importance. In contrast, there is less awareness of short narrative films being made in Oman and by Omani directors. A substantial volume of narrative short filmmaking exists outside of formal and commercial distribution channels (cinemas, television). This material is less conspicuous to audiences at large but nevertheless prolific and of importance for Omani filmmaking practice and cultural production more broadly. As such, narrative shorts are the focus of this study and will contribute to the overall knowledge of filmmaking in Oman.

According to Emma Blomkamp, short filmmaking is a 'dynamic field of cultural production where filmmakers explore representations of social identity and experiment with various aesthetic and technical modes of cinematic communication'.<sup>15</sup> Therefore, they provide a fruitful target for examining the cultural identity and representation of any given country. Another reason for studying narrative shorts is that, in most cases, they are indigenous films with local casts, crews, and funding which, in the long-term, have the potential to reform an economically independent national film industry that will fulfil cultural and political requirements. Hence, when it comes to examining a national industry or identity, indigenous practices can provide a better understanding of the influences of short filmmaking. Framing Omani short filmmaking practices requires linking them to the different aspects that characterise Omani society. Short films are cultural productions that are influenced by the culture from which they emerge. As they are often shot on location and mostly acted by

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<sup>15</sup> Emma Blomkamp, 'Framing Short Film: Cultural Nationalism and Economic Rationalism in New Zealand Film Policy' (University of Auckland, 2009), p. 1.

Omanis and people lived in Oman, these shorts convey characteristics of that society. Moreover, they can represent and reflect on various cultural aspects and social issues.

There is a notable dearth of research on Omani filmmaking in general, and very few studies on long-form filmmaking in the GCCs have considered Omani filmmaking. The realm of Omani short filmmaking practice remains unexplored in academic studies. This knowledge gap will be further examined in the following chapter. I propose here that it is important to explore and examine Omani filmmaking practice for various reasons, which are mainly driven and confirmed by the arguments raised by Mette Hjort and Duncan Petrie. Examining short filmmaking within the context of Oman is vital as it is likely that it does not affiliate with or conform to any existing framework. More importantly, the thesis investigates a representative sample of films originating from Oman. Specifically, it employs narrative analysis to investigate how these films explore various aspects of Omani culture, experiences, and tensions within Omani society.

In this project, the discourse is situated within the context of the historical and prevailing factors that have shaped Oman and its current state policies. Jill Nelmes argues that films and their value and aesthetics are determined by the ‘socio-economic organisation of the film industry’.<sup>16</sup> As this project continues, the question that may seem obvious here of whether there is a film industry in Oman will be articulated and the characteristics of Omani filmmaking practice will be framed using grounded theory. Initial data were collected from existing written texts, media releases, and informal discussions with individuals involved in the field. Based on this, two methods were chosen to collect the required data: semi-structured interviews and film analysis. Moreover, as questions regarding the relationship between filmmaking and education emerged, a side method was added: a small-scale online questionnaire. After qualitatively applying both content and visual analyses to the collected data, my findings were classified and conceptualised into three main areas of enquiry: the development of the practice and its determining influences, the characteristics of the filmmaking culture, and cultural representation within short films.

To ensure a comprehensive understanding of the practice of filmmaking in Oman, this thesis is organised in correspondence with the findings. It contextualises and presents the rise of the Omani short film through the following five chapters. Chapter One ‘The Importance of

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<sup>16</sup> Nelmes Jill, *Introduction to Film Studies* (Taylor and Francis, 2012), p. 28.



Examining Unresearched Emerging Film Cultures' elaborates on both the related literature and the research gap, and how the research was undertaken. Following that, Chapter Two 'Between Media and the Arts: An Attempt to Locate Film in the Context of Oman' sets a ground understanding into the context of Oman and its main socio-economic dimensions and provides necessary knowledge on the Omani media and art sectors. It also offers insight into the early years of film and audio-visual production in Oman, as well as the ways in which these productions were received and appreciated by the government and local population.

The following three chapters are the main part of the research, which delves into in-depth discussions of the results that emerged from the data analysis process. Chapter Three 'An Insight into Omani Short-Narrative Filmmaking Practice' focuses on short filmmaking, its development process, and determining influences. The focus within the chapter is on narrative films. The chapter also pays attention to how 'Omani film' as a concept is used and perceived within the field. It also examines both national and transnational characteristics of Omani film culture. Subsequently, the discussion focuses on the results of the analysis of short films, specifically studying the characteristics and advancements of the practice.

Chapter Four 'Omani Short film Analysis: Characteristics of Omani Short Filmmaking Culture' examines the detected patterns and approaches followed by Omani filmmakers and whether they share similarities or differences with other related fields such as theatre and literature. Chapter Five 'Omani Short film Analysis: Cultural Representation in Omani Short Films' inspects how Omani short films construct cultural meaning and the relationship between those constructed meanings and the contemporary cultural discussion within the context of Oman. The chapter also studies gender roles and representation as an important part of any cultural dimension. Finally, the Conclusion synthesises the findings to generate a series of concluding remarks on current filmmaking practices in Oman.

## Chapter One:

### New Contexts as Valuable Grounds for Unresearched Variables

Given that Oman is a newcomer to filmmaking practice – it began in the 21<sup>st</sup> century through individual initiatives – it would be inappropriate to claim that it has a fully developed film industry or cinematic culture. According to Lebanese critic Mohammed Ridha, ‘films are not cinema and cinema is not a film’, and having a cinema requires more than just producing films.<sup>17</sup> Similarly, for Iraqi critic Khadhim AlSaloom, cinema is not just about producing films; it is also subject to more sophisticated market and box office calculations.<sup>18</sup> Therefore, throughout this research, the term ‘filmmaking practice’ refers to Oman’s current short filmmaking culture. Nevertheless, film productions are the basis for all other cinematic practices, such as exhibition and distribution; thus, all cinema-related studies are relevant to this project. This chapter aims to set out the reasons for conducting this project and how it is accordingly designed to achieve its purpose. It is divided into two parts. The first discusses related literature that frames the general work of the project, starting with literature on Arab cinema. The second section describes the construction of this research.

#### 1.1 Part One: Literature Review

This section outlines the thesis’s theoretical framework and discusses the latest debates relating to the main areas of the research, covering mainly two film traditions – Arab and GCCs – and, when applicable, the Western tradition. It also reviews several texts on the Omani filmmaking field due to their importance in foregrounding information about the institutions, individuals and events that may serve as a starting point to dig into the history of film production in Oman.

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<sup>17</sup> Adnan Husain Ahmed, ‘Arab and International Cinema Guide 2013 by Muhammad Reda’ (doc.aljazeera.net: Al-Jazeera documentaries, 2014). [Accessed 20 January 2020]

<sup>18</sup> Hamam Taha, ‘The Identity of Arab Cinema in the Era of Cultural Globalization.’, in *Discussion Seminar on the sidelines of the Duhok International Film Festival* (m.ahewar.org: Modern discussion, 2019). [Accessed 15 December 2020]

### ***1.1.1 Oman and Arab Cinema Studies***

Since the publication of Jalal Sharqawi's *Risala fi Tarikh Al-Cinesma Al-Arabiyya* (Letter in the History of Arab Cinema) in 1970, the field of Arab and Middle Eastern cinema studies has grown significantly. In recent years, many scholars have followed and focused their studies on Arab cinema history, such as Viola Shafik in *Arab Cinema: History and Cultural Identity* (2007); Mostafa Messnoui in his article 'History of Arab cinema (introduction to understanding and interpretation)' (2014); and Nadim Jarjoura's 'The current state of Arab cinema: the stories of individuals and an update on documentary films' (2014). Focusing on a more historical perspective, Shafik's *Arab Cinema* studies both the history of Arab cinema and the characteristics of the cultural identity found within Arab films. Shafik's focus on cultural identity is driven by the scant previous attention given to the subject; she argues that conducting a complex examination and film analysis would best show how Arab cinema is 'rooted in so-called Arab-Muslim culture and what are known as traditional or native arts'.<sup>19</sup> Therefore, instead of considering film stories, Shafik examines the technical/artistic elements and visual composition.

Shafik states that within contemporary Arab film culture, realism, religious, and historical films have acted as a means to resolve the 'unitarian national identity by creating myths and forming affirmative, uncritical self-reflection'.<sup>20</sup> However, what is different in the case of Oman is that during the early 2000s there was no perceived need for cultural change or urgency to reinforce the traditional conservative values for which other Arab filmmakers had previously worked. Unlike Arab countries, which have experienced foreign colonialism and have suffered from difficult political conditions, Oman has a unique historical context due to its past as a "closed" society and its continued existence as an absolutist monarchy, as well as its present harmonious political conditions. Moreover, even with the phenomena of modernisation and Westernisation, Oman is following a deliberate national agenda through which it has not fully adopted or rejected the components of these movements, as elaborated in the following chapter.<sup>21</sup> Thus, I assert the need to independently study the Omani context. Moreover, I challenge Shafik's assertion that Arab films tend in most case to represent the

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<sup>19</sup> Viola Shafik, *Arab Cinema: History and Cultural Identity* (American University in Cairo Press, 2007), p. 4.

<sup>20</sup> Shafik, p. 212.

<sup>21</sup> L.P. Funsch, *Oman Reborn: Balancing Tradition and Modernization* (Palgrave Macmillan US, 2016), p. xii.

‘mixed, impure and contradictory fragmented and globalised realities’ of the Middle East and North Africa region (MENA) in relation to Omani films.<sup>22</sup>

Unlike Shafik, Mostafa Messnoui’s article mainly explores questions about how Arab history is approached and written. His article discusses issues such as the use of translated technical terminology from English, the tendency towards treating history as a ‘chronological inventory’, and the focus on examining Egypt as a context in research related to Arab cinema. According to Messnoui, whoever is thinking of studying the history of Arab cinema should consider all the ‘vigorous’ discussions on related issues in the Western world, especially France’.<sup>23</sup> Messnoui specifies France because of the historical relations between France and Arab Maghreb countries, such as Algeria and Morocco, which have a clear role in the history of Arab cinema. However, the nature and level of that relationship are not applicable in Oman, leading to questions over who has influenced the practice of filmmaking in Oman, not excluding the possibility of indirect impacts that such histories may have had on the Omani context. Rather than French cinema, Bollywood continues to play a role in attracting Omanis to movie theatres and filmmaking practices, as discussed in Chapter Two. To understand who has influenced Omani filmmaking as well as when and how this influence has occurred, a close look at the political and social relationships of Oman with other countries is needed at three levels: Gulf, Arab, and Western. These political and social relationships are elaborated in the following chapter to showcase Oman’s socio-economic and political context.

Nadim Jarjoura questions the use of ‘Arab cinema’ to represent all Arab countries. Besides his concern about focusing on Egypt as a context when studying Arab cinema, he raises several questions that he claims to be essential to understanding the history of Arab cinema, including:

Can we determine the exact moment at which renewal of cinema derived from identity and culture of certain geography actually emerges? What about the use of new technology or what is called ‘experimental cinema’ and ‘video art’ films? And do ‘experimental cinema’ and ‘video art’ films form an integral part of the renaissance of any Arab cinema that imprint the status quo with novelty which needs to be critically analysed in order

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<sup>22</sup> Shafik, p. 253.

<sup>23</sup> Mostafa Messnaoui, ‘History of Arab Cinema (Introduction to Understanding and Interpretation)’, *Contemporary Arab Affairs*, 7. 2 (2014), 195-208 (p. 199).

to understand its origin, forms and dimensions and its relationship with reality, the moment and the local situation?<sup>24</sup>

In my view, Jarjoura's questions establish a critical framework for examining history. Identifying each type of film and providing an independent critical analysis of each would eventually add to the understanding of the status of film history in any newly emerging context. In this project, keeping such a frame in mind would assist in confirming and framing the current filmmaking practice in Oman and its history by investigating existing film forms and genres and linking them to wider contexts. A further discussion related to my project is the relationship between conservatism and cinema in the Gulf. Jarjoura's and Messnoui's concerns are indeed confirmed by many studies, some of which are discussed below.

### ***1.1.2 Issues Arising from Current Approaches to Contextualising New and Emerging Cinema***

Most recent research discusses the emergence of new cinemas and contextualises different emerging themes. Examples include: 'Origin and Patterns in the Discourse of New Arab Cinema' (2005) by Malek Khoury; 'Cinemas of the Maghreb' (2009) by Roy Armes; 'Cinemas of the Maghreb: Reflections on the transnational and polycentric dimensions of regional cinema' (2013) by Patricia Caillé; 'Emergency cinema in Syria: (re)envisioning documentary-as-witness' (2014) by Alex Key McLelland; *New Voices in Arab Cinema* (2015) by Roy Armes; and *Palestinian Cinema in the Days of Revolution* (2018) by Nadia Yaqub. Such studies focus on indigenous film practices that are determined by various interruptions and transformations within the Arab world and investigate the characteristics of these cinemas. Consequently, various cinematic models have been identified within the MENA region (Middle East and North Africa). For example, Egypt is highlighted for its commercial and mainstream cinema as it has succeeded in initiating a film industry; Palestine is lauded for its political cinema, which has been impacted by the political and military activities in the Occupied Territories; and the cinema of the Maghreb is recognised for its long partnership with France and for being a location for foreign films.

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<sup>24</sup> Nadim Jarjoura, 'The Current State of Arab Cinema: The Stories of Individuals... and an Update on Documentary Films', *Contemporary Arab Affairs*, 7. 2 (2014), 209-24 (p. 210).

All the previously mentioned literature that discusses Arab cinema in general confirms Massnoui's and Jarjoura's concerns regarding the examined context. Viola, Khatib, Khoury, Armes, and many others have focused their analyses on Egyptian cinema and, in some cases, mentioned other Arab cinema participants, such as Morocco, Palestine, Lebanon, Tunisia, and Algeria. This leads us to question the reliability of the literature in Oman's newly emerging context. Furthermore, to contextualise emerging cinemas, some scholars depend on analysing the story and narrative of feature films and linking them to important events mainly associated with politics and renaissance movements. Such analytical methods are elaborated in depth in the following section.

Oman started its modern renaissance (*Nhdha*) period in 1970, when it was unified by Sultan Qaboos bin Saeed (1970-2020). During his period of rule, Sultan Qaboos succeeded in transforming the country from an isolated land with no civil infrastructure, 'insufficient social development, and dwindling education opportunities' into a modern country that celebrates its unique history and culture and is keen to preserve its characteristics as valuable traditions and heritage forms.<sup>25</sup> One aspect of this modern country is the inauguration of Oman TV in 1974, followed by other forms of visual art, including films. When filmmaking started in Oman, the country was politically stable; thus, it was not driven by its political-historical context, as in the case of Palestine, Algeria, and others.<sup>26</sup> However, this does not exclude the impact of political power within the field, leaving the question of whether filmmaking practices in Oman are controlled and used by political powers, as they are in Egypt. The engagement of Egyptian films with the political situation and the struggle of the public started in the early years of filmmaking in the country.<sup>27</sup> Two of the productions that are seen as 'a birth of a politically motivated Egyptian national cinema' are *Al Azeema* (Determination, 1939, directed by Kamal Selim) and *Lasheen* (1938, directed by Fritz Kramp).<sup>28</sup> *Lasheen* not only reflects the start of political rebellion through films, but the interference of the royal regime on the

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<sup>25</sup> Funsch, pp. 63-64.

<sup>26</sup> Algerian cinema began during the Algerian Revolution against the French colony. During the Revolution, an artistic team was formed to produce films that highlighted the struggle of the Algerian people for freedom. Ikram Hamza reported that the National Liberation Front had established a school aiming to produce filmmakers who would serve the Revolution. See: Ikram Hamza, 'Political Dimensions in Algerian Cinema' (Larbi Ben M'hidi University of Oum El Bouaghi, 2017), p. 21.

<sup>27</sup> Such engagement is emphasised by the first production company, 'Misr Studio', which was established by Talat Harb in 1935. Misr Studio was said to promote 'the anti-colonial and anti-monarchist movement of the time'. See: Amir Taha, 'Film and Politics in Egypt', in *Film and Counterculture in the 2011 Egyptian Uprising*, ed. by Amir Taha (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2021), pp. 67-103 (pp. 67-70).

<sup>28</sup> Dr Salwa Ali Ibrahim Al-Jayar, *Cinema and Politics: The Origins of the Political Film and Its Treatment of the Most Important Political Issues*, First edition edn (Cairo, Egypt El Maktab ElArabi LImaaref, 2014), p. 24.

production marked the start of political control over films. The original version of this film was seen as a danger to the state as it included some events were similar to political conditions at that time. Therefore, the police were given the order, by Hassan Pasha the Interior Minister, to cancel the screening and destroy the reels. The narrative of the film was then modified and released at a later date.<sup>29</sup> While Egyptian filmmakers have continued to engage with social issues, at the same time the political regime has continue to enforce its control over films that threaten its power by banning such films. This confirms the intertwined relation between films and power and the challenges each imposes on the other.

### ***1.1.3 Representation in Arab Film***

Much Arab literature examines the representation of Arabs within films including, *Filming the Modern Middle East: Politics in the Cinemas of Hollywood and the Arab World* (2006) by Lina Khatib; ‘Issues of Representation in Arab Animation Cinema: Practice, History and Theory’ a PhD thesis by Tariq Alrimawi (2014); ‘Women in Contemporary Moroccan Cinema’ (2016) by Saadia Dinia and Oumlil Kenza; and ‘Representation without Recognition: A Survey of Arab American Images in Egyptian Cinema’ (2019) by Waleed F. Mahdi. Such studies integrate Edward Said’s *Orientalism* within their discussion as a theoretical frame to examine the role of the different parties involved: the ‘Orient’ and the ‘Occidental’, the West and the East. According to Rakesh Nambiar, it ‘stands as a hardly undeniable perspective perpetuated by the European world order (Occident) upon the less advanced non-western world (Orient)’.<sup>30</sup> Despite the importance of Said’s *Orientalism* in relation to representation and cultural image – both constitute an integral part of my research – its relevance is limited. One of the aims of this exploratory project is to examine the representation of culture within short films, which is related more to self-representation. This aspect is argued by many scholars to be missing in Said’s argument.<sup>31</sup> Yet, the discussion encouraged by Said regarding the influence of others on any cultural image may hold some

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<sup>29</sup> Taha, p. 69.

<sup>30</sup> Rakesh Nambiar, ‘Re-Negotiating Orientalism through the Prism of Edward Said Vs. Aijaz Ahmed Debate on Marx, Europe and India (East)’ (p. 6).

<sup>31</sup> Koji Kobayashi, Steven J Jackson, and Michael P Sam, ‘Globalization, Creative Alliance and Self-Orientalism: Negotiating Japanese Identity within Asics Global Advertising Production’, *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 22. 1 (2019), 157-74 (p. 160).

relevance when discussing the determining influences on cultural identity within Omani films at a later stage.

Overall, Arab countries share some traditions and religious practices; however, many qualities differentiate the cinema of Arabic countries from each other, such as political, social, and economic aspects. Lina Khatib argues that film productions do not always reflect their industry as one entity. Hence, an Arab film does not represent Arab countries as one region.<sup>32</sup> However, there is clear evidence of the use of regional construction in these studies and its influence on how certain productions are perceived. The terms ‘Arab cinema’, ‘Asian cinema’, and ‘Eastern European cinema’ for example are still used by film festival organisers, critics, and film studies scholars, challenging the understanding and context of newly emerging film productions. The obsession with theories of national and regional cinema problematises the relevance of Arab cinema’s studies to new cinema from small nations. This leads me to focus on a narrower scale of literature that covers the GCC (Gulf Corporate Council) countries where more similarities are shared.

#### ***1.1.4 Gulf Cinema Literature***

GCC is a term used to describe the joint efforts of countries located within the Arab Gulf Peninsula. To achieve unity, the Gulf Corporate Council works toward coordination, integration, and interdependence among its member states in all fields. It consists of six countries: Saudi Arabia (KSA), Kuwait, Bahrain, Oman, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). It is vital to highlight here the term ‘*Khaleejis*’ which is a concept used to represent indigenous people from Oman, KSA, UAE, Bahrain, Kuwait, and Qatar. It is an imagined identity defined by shared historical patterns, trade and commerce, and the mixed nature of the population.<sup>33</sup> These countries are known for their close nature and relations, which are enhanced by the fluidity of travel between them. All six original GCCs are Arab countries in which Islam is the dominant religion. These countries share strong social lifestyles, and economically depend on oil, gas, and tourism (especially in the UAE and Qatar).

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<sup>32</sup> Lina Khatib, *Filming the Modern Middle East: Politics in the Cinemas of Hollywood and the Arab World* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2006), p. 11.

<sup>33</sup> William O Beeman, ‘Gulf Society: An Anthropological View of the Khalijis—Their Evolution and Way of Life’, in *The Persian Gulf in History* (Springer, 2009), pp. 147-59 (p. 149).



There is little English-language literature devoted to cinema from the Gulf countries, although the following are significant: ‘Cinema of Yemen and Saudi Arabia: Narrative structures, Cultural Challenges, Contemporary Features’ (2011) by Anne Ciecko; ‘Locating Emirati Filmmaking within Globalising Media Ecologies’ (2017) by Dale Hudson; and ‘The political economy of Khaleeji cinema: Historical developments of Arab Gulf film industries’ (2020) by Abdulrahman Alghannam. These articles are most prominent in the discussion of Gulf cinema as a whole or focused on an individual country in the case of Hudson’s article. He notes:

English-language books on Arab, Middle Eastern, or Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) filmmaking often foreground conflict and violence as defining the region. As such, they have not widely considered Emirati films since most concern other topics that do not conform to this preconception.<sup>34</sup>

This is indeed the case with all *Khaleeji* countries due to their specificities and the special circumstances of their film productions, which are mostly linked to film festival funds. In *New Voices in Arab Cinema*, Armes does not consider emerging cinemas of the Gulf, which he justifies by saying:

This book also largely ignores the emerging cinemas of the Gulf since the basis of production there (plentiful local financing, a well-endowed festival structure, limited international distribution, often local training) is so different from the situation which is prevalent elsewhere in the Arab world. Films from the Gulf remain largely unknown in the West.<sup>35</sup>

I would assert that Armes ignored emerging cinema from the Gulf countries because they differ in their history and characteristics from many Arab countries and require separate investigations. Indeed, considering the current situation, some of the ‘well-endowed festival structures’, as Armes describes them, have ended, including Abu Dhabi Film Festival (ADFF), due to unstable local financing. This, however, has not occurred in Oman, and Muscat International Film Festival continues despite the fluctuating economic situation. This raises questions about the future of emerging filmmaking practice. Jarjoura’s discussion on the relation between cinema and the social nature of the Gulf countries is relevant here. She argues that the central ‘crisis’ facing the rise of new Gulf visual production – from the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century – resulted from the gap created by the blurred relationship

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<sup>34</sup> Dale Hudson, ‘Locating Emirati Filmmaking within Globalizing Media Ecologies’, in *Media in the Middle East* (Springer, 2017), pp. 165-202 (p. 168).

<sup>35</sup> Roy Armes, *New Voices in Arab Cinema* (Indiana University Press, 2015), p. 2.

between the ‘conservative societies’ and the requirement of ‘cultural work represented by freedom’. She also stated that ‘the real crisis is that cinema’s needs are completely contradictory to the ways of living in the Gulf on all levels’, adding that the GCC countries’ challenge is their conservative nature and that their social behaviours are firmly connected and associated with religion.<sup>36</sup> Indeed, Jarjoura’s previous concerns are reflected in two factors in the debate about the facilitation of film culture/industry. On the one hand there is funding/distribution/dissemination; and on the other there are societal/political/religious pressures. As such, many related questions are to be addressed by scholars. Are the characteristics of society what creates instability and challenges the development of the emerging filmmaking culture within the GCCs? What kind of conservative societies are the GCC countries? What ways of life contradict the need for cinema? What are the other factors contributing to the current status of filmmaking practice? All these questions need to be considered separately for each country; this project specifically considers Oman.

As stated earlier, this section looks at the narrower scope of literature that covers the GCCs, and Dale Hudson’s article is relevant to this end. Hudson examines the influence of globalisation on the Emirati identity presented in local films and attempts to locate Emirati filmmaking within the context of a larger globalised media ecology. Hudson integrates various determining influences on Emirati filmmaking. Examples include the role of film festivals in the field, the impact of the multicultural notion of the country on identity within films, and the economic context. Despite the close relationship between the UAE and Oman, there is a clear difference in the discussed areas. First, the UAE has an open economic system; its dependence on oil and gas was reduced to 30% in 2017, whereas in the same year Oman still heavily depends on both resources (68% and 85% of total income), which makes the economic status of Oman unstable. Having an open economy provides opportunities for other creative industries such as film to play a role in the economy of the country, which depends on the policies of the authorities. The impact of immigration, on the other hand, may differ depending on the role migrants hold and their percentage weight within the larger populace. With 87.9% of the total UAE population being migrants, mostly from South Asia (India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, the Philippines), Egypt and Europe, they have the potential to impact Emirati films, keeping in mind the country’s open economic policies. In Oman, migrants make up 48% of the population, and with its Omanization strategies, the government aims to

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<sup>36</sup> Jarjoura, p. 213.

reduce and limit the perceived negative consequences of the large migrant workforce. Some of these include unemployment among Omanis and the influence on Omani identity, which are considered at a later stage in the project. This notwithstanding, the relationship between Oman and the UAE validates the relevance of some of Hudson's discussions that are examined within different parts of this project.

A second key article is 'The political economy of Khaleeji cinema: Historical developments of Arab Gulf film industries' (2020) by Abdulrahman Alghannam. Alghannam seeks to trace the development of film production in *Khaleeji* countries from 1930 to 2010 to research the struggle of local cinemas to gain recognition within national and transnational cinema studies. His main argument is the need to examine cinemas from *Khaleeji* countries as one entity under the concept of 'Khaleeji cinema'. He endorses Naficy's call for a focus on regional cinema.<sup>37</sup>

Alghannam's approach may seem valid considering the similarities between the six GCC countries; however, by considering the six *Khaleeji* states as one entity, Alghannam's discussion has the same issue as using Arab cinema to represent all cinema from Arab countries. The limitation of regionalising local cinemas from *Khaleeji* countries can be countered by considering the difference in the economic status of the UAE and Qatar, which both follow a globalisation strategy, and the economic status of Oman. Alghannam's enquiry is based on several states: the UAE, Bahrain, Qatar, and, in some cases, KSA. There is a clear absence of Oman and Kuwait in most of his research. Therefore, Alghannam's argument is limited, and an investigation that pays attention to the specificity of each country is needed. However, Alghannam evidences the absence of academic research in the area and points out some key political and economic stages that have impacted cinema within the region.

In general, the film studies field of the new emerging film industry is mostly challenged by national and regional frameworks. That is because the new contexts are mostly affiliated with an existing framework due to the similarities defined by the neighbouring relationships.

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<sup>37</sup> Abdulrahman Alghannam, 'The Political Economy of Khaleeji Cinema: Historical Developments of Arab Gulf Film Industries', in *The Political Economy of Local Cinema: A Critical Introduction*, ed. by Anne Rajala / Daniel Lindblom / Matteo Stocchetti (Deutsche Nationalbibliothek, 2020), pp. 109-37 (p. 112). See also, Hamid Naficy, 'For a Theory of Regional Cinemas: Middle Eastern, North African and Central Asian Cinemas', *Early Popular Visual Culture*, 6. 2 (2008), 97-102.

That has led to ignorance over the specificities of the new context, which in turn risks the possibilities of new results.

### ***1.1.5 Texts on Omani Filmmaking***

As stated earlier, there have been no academic studies on short filmmaking in Oman, yet there are several pieces of literature on film production in Arabic that mention Oman within the discussion as part of the Gulf context. The only English-language publication that focuses on the Omani context in relation to visual culture is William G. Feighery's 'Tourism and self-Orientalism in Oman: A Critical Discourse Analysis' published in 2012.<sup>38</sup> In this article, Feighery analyses Oman's representation within a promotional film produced by Omani authority. Alongside that, I was able to locate a few film-related writings in Arabic covering the Omani context: *Shots from the Omani Cinema* (2016) by Humaid Said Al-Amri;<sup>39</sup> 'Transformations in the production of documentaries and short films in Oman', an unpublished report submitted to the International Book Fair France "Paris", 14-18/03/2019, by Mohammed Al-Kindi;<sup>40</sup> and an unpublished master's thesis entitled 'Characteristics of the content of documentary films in Sultanate of Oman TV, Analytical study for the period (1974-2015 AD)' (2016) by Rabaa Mohammed Al-Abri.<sup>41</sup> Given their specific focus on Oman, I address these studies in turn.

#### *'Tourism and Self-Orientalism in Oman: A Critical Discourse Analysis'*

This article analyses the first promotional film produced by the Ministry of Tourism in 2001, titled *Welcome to My Country*. The production is directed by Jonathan Ali Khan and produced by Babak Amini. Feighery examines the influence of the 'Occidental authority and dominant

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<sup>38</sup> William G Feighery, 'Tourism and Self-Orientalism in Oman: A Critical Discourse Analysis', *Critical Discourse Studies*, 9. 3 (2012), 269-84.

<sup>39</sup> Humaid Said Al-Amri, *Shots from Omani Cinema*, first edn (Muscat: Bait Al-Ghasham, 2016).

<sup>40</sup> Mohammed Bin Sulaiman al-Kindi, 'Transformations in the Production of Documentaries and Short Films in Oman' (2019).

<sup>41</sup> Rabaa Al-Abri, 'Characteristics of the Content of Documentary Films in Sultanate of Oman TV Analytical Study for the Period (1974-2015 Ad)' (Sultan Qaboos university, 2016).

global power relations' on the indigenous image creators of the Middle East when scripting official touristic promotional productions.<sup>42</sup>

Feighery questions the effect of power on constructing Omani identity within the film. The power discussed here is the power of the elite group and authority holder – in this case the Ministry of Tourism. As per his focus, the choice made by Feighery to analyse Omani self-representation in this production is analytically valuable, as it is the first official visual representation of Oman funded by the government, thus confirming some of the power relations in question. Productions that are part of any promotional campaigns or any communicative strategies controlled by the government are designed in a way that matches the Orientalist imaginary. That is because it targets a specific market to achieve economic and social development. Such productions do not constitute a good target for investigating cultural self-representation, thus my project focuses on investigating narrative short films.

Films are widely acknowledged as instrumental in shaping the perception of different locales and experiences. Their visually compelling narratives offer a stimulating portrayal of a given setting. Despite the distinctions in market orientation, target audience, and governmental oversight between promotional tourist films and narrative short films, the latter have the potential to either validate or contest the depictions presented in tourist films. This prompts an inquiry into the degree of disparity and resemblance in the portrayals crafted by these two film genres. Within the authoritarian Omani context, although Feighery's discussion on self-representation and Orientalism sits within tourism discourse, his critical investigation into the power of the elite and authority holders on how Oman is presented to others is relevant and raises questions regarding the levels of power that may affect a certain production. Is this power extended to control other forms of film, and in what way? Does censorship act as a tool through which authority or power acts? And if promotional films are important to Oman, what functions do other forms of film have?

#### *'Shots from the Omani Cinema'*

Humaid Al-Amri's short book is an individual initiative by the Omani film director and current Head of the Omani Association of Cinema (OAC) to record some of the work and

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<sup>42</sup> Feighery, p. 270.

initiatives of several governmental bodies, companies, and individuals in the area of cinema. In the first part, he defines cinema and provides a brief historical background. He then provides a general overview of the different participants in the field, including the Ministry of Information and the Authority of Radio and Television. The second part takes a closer look at OAC and Muscat International Film Festival (MIFF), major cinematic events such as the Omani Film Forum, the first Omani feature film *Alboom*, and the publication of *Cine Oman* magazine. The last part includes information about the production companies in Oman, some individual initiatives, an overview of the Gulf Film Festival, and a listing of several cinematic websites.

Despite the worthwhile information provided, Al-Amri tends to deal with each element separately. Within the first part, each governmental body is presented with its cinema-related events and activities without giving a clear picture of who has control over whom. What are the current roles of these institutions and what is the organisational structure of each institution in relation to its involvement in the filmmaking field?

*'Transformations in the production of documentaries and short films in Oman'*

This unpublished report was written by Mohammed Al-Kindi, who used his position as a former head of the Omani Association of Cinema and Theatre and his professional network to access the Oman Television archives and meet former people involved in the film production field. The 2,000-word report is organised into five sections: historical background; short documentary films and their importance in Oman; recent transformations in producing shorts (documentaries and fiction); examples of film festivals with Omani participation; and a list of local competitions for short films (animation, fiction, and documentaries).

Al-Kindi starts his discussion by recalling some historical events that show the development of filmmaking in Oman. Starting with the film *Oman 1928-29 AD*, Al-Kindi suggests that it reflects the long existing interest of Omanis in cinema and its ability to visually communicate and record events. According to a personal contact with the library team of Oman Television, *Oman 1928-29 AD* is a two-part documentary filmed by Bertram Thomas and produced by the BBC (Figure 1). The production is dialogue-free and records Sultan Taimur bin Faisal's tour of Oman's coastal areas.



*Figure 1: Picture of Oman 1928-29 AD's videotape in Oman Television library*

Examples of the events given by Al-Kindi include the visit of Assayed Taymour bin Turki Al Said, Sultan of Muscat, Oman, and Zanzibar to the UK in 1928; the visit of Assayed Saeed bin Taymour to Washington and London in 1938; and the visit of Assayed Saeed bin Taymur, Sultan of Oman and Zanzibar to the UK in 1960. However, these recordings were shot outside Oman, which means that they belong to others; a copy was shared and kept within the archive of Oman Television, which was founded in 1974. On the other hand, the nature of these recordings is not film, even if they were created using film techniques. It is important here to distinguish between cinema productions that are selective, creative, and imaginative, and other productions that are produced using similar techniques.

Al-Kindi's discussion about the importance of short documentary films during the period from 2006 to 2019 in Oman and its recent transformations certifies the current movement of short filmmaking. Indeed, my project will foreground short-form filmmaking to establish a clear framework of the practice. Al-Kindi tends throughout the report to move between television and cinematic film production, although what is meant by cinema and the differences between it and television were absent within this report, leading to a blurred line between the two and within the history of cinema in Oman. In general, the report is more of a personal recollection and its merit lies in what it does.

*Characteristics of the content of documentary films in Sultanate of Oman TV: Analytical study for the period 1974-2015 AD*

Rabaa Mohammad Al-Abri's text is a master's thesis that focuses on analysing the content of documentaries produced by Oman TV.<sup>43</sup> It is a descriptive study through which Al-Abri attempts to study the characteristics and themes of Omani documentary films and monitor their development process. She used a content analysis methodology to identify the documentary corpus studied. While such a text is not usually part of a literature review, it is valuable to acknowledge that first, this text is perhaps a sign that there is a growing awareness of a need for Omani media studies. Second, there is a possibility of finding a confirmation or similarities between documentary films produced by television and the narrative short filmmaking. That in turns may assist in generating wider understanding of the filmmaking culture in Oman.

In her conclusion, Al-Abri states that most of the analysed films covered topics related to national development within the country, neglecting other topics. This is understandable, as the films were produced by the official Oman TV, whose aims include promoting national belonging, highlighting the state's policy, plans, and directions. It also reflects its vision of achieving leadership in the field of audio-visual media, based on Oman's identity, historical originality, and contemporary renaissance.<sup>44</sup> The importance of this approach is that it tracks the development of television's film productions as different from cinematic ones; however, because of its close relationship, television production can potentially impact the short filmmaking field. In his article 'Cinematography and Television: Differences and Similarities' (2010), Adriano Nazareth states that 'the principles set out or accepted to lead to a film or television production/direction are identical. It is only the means required to achieve the specific aims that differ'.<sup>45</sup> His claim shows that there is a possibility for each area to feed the other. For example, there are some individuals who are involved in the filmmaking field in

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<sup>43</sup> Rabaa Al-Abri is a worker with Oman TV and her thesis is accredited by Sultan Qaboos University.

<sup>44</sup> Public Authority for Radio and TV (PART), 'A Brief About Part', Public Authority for Radio and TV (PART) (n.d.) [Accessed 15 January 2021]

<sup>45</sup> Adriano Nazareth, 'Cinematography and Television: Differences and Similarities', *Journal of Science and Technology of the Arts*, 2. 1 (2010), 34-39 (p. 38).



Oman who are working or used to work as directors and producers in Oman TV, including Khalid Al-Zedjali, Mohammed Al-Kindi, Issa Al-Subhi, and Salem Bahwan.

Overall, none of the publications above engage with filmmaking practices, especially short forms, in terms of its practical side. In other words, none of the studies pay attention to the act of making films; instead, they focus on the historical record of film production and the individuals involved. My project's involvement with Omani short filmmaking pays critical attention to any variables that have contributed to or currently impact the practice, including social-economic and cultural dimensions.

The relationships between culture, its products, and questions about cultural identity within the everchanging characteristics of societies are very complex. As film is a powerful communicative cultural product and a medium of representation with a solid presence in the global market, this relationship is becoming more complicated. For a long time, cultural identity and the influence of globalisation on films have been discussed in film studies. Many scholars have been attracted to investigating questions such as how is culture depicted in film?<sup>46</sup> What impacts has globalisation had on film and culture?<sup>47</sup> And how have 'self' and 'others' been represented?<sup>48</sup>

In this project, the relationship between culture and film production will be observed within the Omani context in conjunction with the impact of globalisation pressures. This project poses the following questions: What is the impact of globalisation on Oman's cultural identity and films? How is Omani culture depicted within Omani films? How is the influence of cultural identity manifested in Omani films' narratives? To provide insight into the previous questions, the project will qualitatively use a mixed-methods approach, as described in the following section.

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<sup>46</sup> Examples of those are: Jay Ruby, 2000; C. Samuel Craig, William H. Greene, and Susan P. Douglas, 2005; Innocent Ebere Uwah, 2011; and William Uricchio, Roberta E. Pearson, 2014.

<sup>47</sup> Scholars who have studied such question include Stuart Hall 1989, Jeffrey Jensen Arnett 2002, Marwan M. Kraidy 2002, Hugh Mackay 2004, Gavin Kendall, Ian Woodward, and Zlatko Skrbis 2009, Herwina Rosnan, Ismail Mohd Nazari and Daud Norzaidi Mohd 2012, and Sadykova Raikhan et al. 2014.

<sup>48</sup> See: Elena Di Giovanni 2003, Lina Khatib 2006, Tariq Alrimawi 2014, Saadia Dinia and Oumlil Kenza 2016, Waleed F. Mahdi 2019, and Ceren Mert-Travlos n.d.

## **1.2 Part Two: Research Design**

This section provides a comprehensive description and justification of the chosen research design and instruments used to complete the study. This research applies a variety of methods not only to gain a deeper understanding of the investigated matter, but also to ultimately answer the intended research questions. This part is structured around the following four sections: research questions, research design, research instruments and data analysis, and the limitations and challenges faced by the researcher.

### ***1.2.1 Research Questions***

In the context of this project, the rare academic engagement in filmmaking practices within the context of Oman led me to use a set of both primary and sub-main questions to approach the focal point of the research. Before proceeding to the research design, the research poses two main questions as follows:

Q1: What form have (indigenous) film production taken in Oman since 2000, including training, production, and distribution, if any?

Q1.1: What narrative, genre, and aesthetic choices have been made by emerging Omani filmmakers?

Q2: What are the determining influences on filmmaking, especially short forms?

Q2.1: Do Omani short films constitute cultural images with or without the director's intention?

Q2.2: How does this affect the practice?

To answer these questions, there is a need to provide an understanding of the whole structure of the practice and the contextual situations that led to its establishment. To do so, a set of sub-research questions was formulated.

Q3: Which film-related structures have existed in Oman since the 20<sup>th</sup> century?

Q3.1: How have these structures shaped film cultures for Omanis and the country's large migrant population, both as audience members and (potential) media practitioners?

Q3.2: What cultural, financial, or social factors play a role in this development?

Q4: What internal and external factors have aided and hindered the establishment of Omani film culture or industry?

Q5: What is the nature of the relationship between education and filmmaking in Oman?

### ***1.2.2 Approaches to Research***

Research design is a 'strategic framework' consisting of several research practices formed by the researcher to investigate certain research questions and to fill a research gap within a particular field.<sup>49</sup> It is the process of identifying 'What' is being studied and enquired about, 'Why' it is needed, and 'How' it will be approached.<sup>50</sup> In this study, there is a need to explore and draw a broader picture of Omani visual culture and, more specifically, the filmmaking practice before enquiring about representation, culture, and identity in short films. The challenge in using a linear mode of analysis created by the complex within of understanding the socio-economic and political nexus within a globalised world necessitates the use of combined research methods.<sup>51</sup> This thesis, informed by cultural analysis, rests on the perspective of social constructivism, whereby our generated knowledge and meanings of what occurs within a certain society are constructed and influenced by our surrounding environment, context, and culture.<sup>52</sup> Culture, as Rainer Winter says, 'does not belong to a single individual nor does it distinguish them, rather it is the medium by which shared meanings, rituals, social communities and identities are produced'.<sup>53</sup> As such, this study

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<sup>49</sup> Martin Terre Blanche and others, *Research in Practice: Applied Methods for the Social Sciences* (Juta and Company Ltd, 2006), p. 34.

<sup>50</sup> Klaus Bruhn Jensen, *A Handbook of Media and Communication Research: Qualitative and Quantitative Methodologies* (Florence: Taylor and Francis, 2013), p. 267.

<sup>51</sup> 'Combining Methodologies in Cultural Studies' (London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2003) (p. 5).

<sup>52</sup> Beaumie Kim, 'Social Constructivism', *Emerging perspectives on learning, teaching, and technology*, 1. 1 (2001), 16 (p. 3).

<sup>53</sup> Rainer Winter, 'Cultural Studies', in *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Data Analysis*, ed. by Uwe Flick (London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2013), pp. 247-61 (p. 248).

adopts combined research methods to discover knowledge on Omani filmmaking practices, and also the relationship between culture and the short films produced.

As per the project's objectives, my research design is framed to cover three main themes: current filmmaking practice in Oman and its history; short filmmaking and its determining influences; and the relationship between short narrative films and culture. Aligned with that, three methods were selected: the first is semi-structured interviews with film practitioners and representatives/decision-makers in related government and cultural organisations. The aim behind focusing on both practitioners and authority representatives from related institutions is to bring out various perspectives from the key players within the field. This will provide understanding about how the practice is structured. Indeed, by using semi-structured interviews, I was able to ask questions that emerged based on the interviewees' answers to seek further inquiries. Moreover, the interviews with filmmakers were carried out with directors of both narrative and documentary films since the practice is an emerging one and the number of directors focusing on narrative films at present numbers just four, which would limit the information to be gained.

The second method is a film analysis from a cultural perspective, while the third method is a questionnaire targeting Omanis currently involved in digital filmmaking education, recent graduates, and academics. This questionnaire focuses on the quality of the gained input rather than creating a generalised hypothesis and generating statistical data. It is often assumed that questionnaires are quantitative research methods; however, in this project, the questionnaire data were used to synthesise and elucidate qualitative conclusions about the relationship between filmmaking practice which validates its use in the project.<sup>54</sup> Moreover, as this research uses film analysis, it grounds the perspective of the constructivist approach of representation – to facilitate the analysis process, in which film codes, language, and individuals are symbols that produce representation and cultural meaning.<sup>55</sup>

The following sections elaborate on the various methods used in collecting data and the research approaches used in data analysis, with an emphasis on approaches to representation.

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<sup>54</sup> Patricia Bazeley and Patrick Brindle, 'Mixed Methods Research' (London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2015).

<sup>55</sup> Stuart Hall, 'The Work of Representation', in *The Applied Theatre Reader* (Routledge, 2020), pp. 74-76 (p. 11).

### ***1.2.3 Research Instruments and Data Analysis***

In the first stage, the context of Oman's media ecology and the history of film production were examined by collecting relevant information from related government/private body websites, tracking the media coverage of events related to film production competition and events, interviewing senior film directors, and searching through the archives of the Ministry of Information (Oman TV). Later, these materials were used to identify how film production culture entered the Omani context, the key events and participants that played an integral part in reforming Omani visual culture in general, and film production specifically, and to pinpoint film-related infrastructure, stakeholders, and organisations involved. Based on the collected data, questions and knowledge gaps were identified and used to formulate the previously mentioned research questions and determine possible participants.

In the second stage, I prepared questions for the research interviews and designed the online questionnaire. The questions were formulated in correspondence with stage one and covered basic areas of enquiries. Finally, short film samples were collected for analysis.

#### *Semi-structured Interviews*

Twelve semi-structured interviews were designed and conducted. Semi-structured interviews were used because this exploratory research investigates a cultural context and aims to understand participants' experiences, approaches, and behaviours towards the practice. In addition to discussing the different dimensions of the structured research questions, this instrument provides flexibility and an open space for new related meanings.<sup>56</sup> The interviews were conducted online within two categories: film practitioners (eight interviews) and authority holders (four interviews).<sup>57</sup> Authority-representative interviews were conducted with The Department of Cinema (DOC) within The General Directorate of Arts under the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth (MCSY), a member of The Script Approval Committee, as well as with both the current and first heads of the Omani Association of Cinema.

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<sup>56</sup> Anne Galletta and William E. Cross, *Mastering the Semi-Structured Interview and Beyond: From Research Design to Analysis and Publication* (New York: NYU Press, 2013), p. 1.

<sup>57</sup> Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, all interviews were conducted online and recorded using Zoom Meeting software.

The participants from the first category – film directors and screenwriters – were targeted by spreading a mini online survey through the Omani Association of Cinema and using social networking platforms such as Instagram and WhatsApp. Another way was by entering ‘Omani filmmaker’ in the search bar of social media platforms. In contrast, participants from the second category – representatives and decision-makers – were approached through the main office of that organisation. It is to note that I added some participants based on need, for example an interview with a member of the script’s approval committee was added because I was unable to gain knowledge in relation to censorship from the interview with the head of the Department of Cinema. Another participant, Abdullah Al-Batashi, a film director, was also added at a later stage.

A fundamental characteristic of analysis in cultural studies is the theoretical and empirical examination of the relationships between experiences, practices, and cultural texts in a specific context.<sup>58</sup> Focusing on the central element, semi-structured interviews were designed to understand the current film production practice (practice), outline the internal and external factors that influence filmmaking in Oman (context), and investigate how filmmakers approach their films and the aesthetic choices they make (experience). The interview questions varied, depending on the interviewee. The questions for the film practitioners were formulated to cover three areas: personal background, practice, and approaches to filmmaking. The last part focuses on Omani filmmaking and its influencing factors. The interview questions for the authority holders focused more on understanding the role of each institution, the organisational structure of the field, and the importance given to filmmaking in Oman.

The interviews were transcribed, translated from Arabic to English, and analysed with an emphasis on areas of investigation. The discovered knowledge was then linked with the results of the film analysis to detect confirmations or contradictions.

### *Short Film Analysis*

Film Analysis is the second method forming a decisive part of this research. Within this approach, the filmic language of each short film was decoded to construct the cultural

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<sup>58</sup> Winter, p. 248.

knowledge of Omani society. As mentioned earlier, my project focuses on short films due to the low numbers of produced features before 2020 (only four). The film samples were collected from the archives of the OAC and the directors themselves, where the availability of films controlled the corpus for choosing the list. I spent three days at the OAC, where I was provided with three boxes full of DVDs. These boxes constituted the archive of the Association in June 2021. All the included DVDs were sent to Muscat International Film Festival for participation. The earliest year marked was 2006. All films were classified as drama (D), documentary (*Wathaeqi* (W)), or cartoon (C), as follows: D/Sh, D/L, W/Sh, W/L, C/Sh. L and Sh refer to the lengths of the film, short film (Sh), and long feature (L), respectively. Based on the aim of my project, I prepared a list of all narrative films found within the archive and those provided by the directors themselves (Appendix 1: Film List).

To choose the samples from that list, I set a basic criterion to include films for directors who had more than two film productions. This is because many films are produced, but directors are not active practitioners. To consider any film practitioner as a director, they should be an active player and own at least two film productions, considering that Oman is a newcomer to the filmmaking culture. In addition, to validate the studied developments and understand the determining influences, practitioners need to be involved in the field, and not only those who send films to MIFF and whose participation might be a passing experience.

I relied on tracking active directors and obtaining film samples from them. In some cases, they provided contact information for directors who produced films before 2010 as I was unable to source any film samples for active directors within the archive. The studied period within the project from 2000 to 2020 is divided into four time periods: 2000-2005, 2006-2010, 2011-2015, and 2016-2020. Table 1 includes filmographic information on the chosen short film samples. Notably, no film samples were found between 2000 and 2006. This was later understood through the interviews conducted with practitioners involved in the early years. The period from 2001 to 2005 witnessed several activities and initiatives that functioned as a starting point to introduce filmmaking practices to the Omani context, as elaborated in Chapter Three.

After 15 film samples were finalized, I analysed them to examine the type of narrative, stories told, and film genre. In the first stage, each film was described, and the generated information was classified. Subsequently, the information from all films was organised into tables. In a later stage, five of these short films were purposively sampled for a more in-depth analysis

that serves the research aim of examining cultural representation. This method draws attention to Omanis' cultural representations of power, cultural identity, and gender. The primary areas I looked at during the first analysis were plot, setting, pictorial signs, and character design within which forms of cultural representations may occur. According to Rainer Winter, 'The logic of a film or a TV series can be deduced by revealing the cultural values which are hidden in the binary logic of texts'.<sup>59</sup> Therefore, it is crucial to pay attention to various elements and their interrelationships rather than treat each element as a single, self-contained component. Moreover, to uncover the cultural value of Omani short films, I used my experience of the lived reality in Omani society to examine the films' texts and their representation to the ongoing discussion within Oman.

Table 1: Film List

Time Period	2000- 2005	2006-2010
List of Films	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No films found.</li> <li>• Start of a spreading film culture through:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ The start of Muscat International Film Festival January 2001 (only feature films)</li> <li>○ The establishment of The Omani Association of Cinema and Theatre 2002</li> <li>○ Organizing internal competition between Omanis Muscat Festival for Documentary and Short Films (previously Majan Days)</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	Title: <i>Alkarithah</i> Translated title: <i>The Disaster</i> Director: Jasim Al-Batashi Year: 2006 Duration: 19:40
		Title: <i>Bent Gharba</i> Translated title: <i>Girl from West</i> Director: Abdullah Al-Batashi Year: 2007 Duration: 16:09
		Title: <i>Almenaz</i> Translated title: <i>The Cradle</i> Director: Abdullah Al-Batashi Year: 2009 Duration: 21:00
		Title: <i>Biadh</i> Translated title: <i>Whiteness</i> Director: Khalid Al-Kalbani Year: 2009 Duration: 08:45
		Title: <i>Alzahrah</i> Translated title: <i>The flower</i>

<sup>59</sup> Winter, p. 249.



		Director: Jasim Al-Batashi Year: 2008 Duration: 24:35
		Title: <i>Para'ah</i> Translated title: <i>Innocent</i> Director: Jasim Al-Batashi Year: 2009 Duration: 15:00
		Title: <i>Raheel</i> Director: Jasim Al-Batashi Year: 2009 Duration: 13:17
<b>Time Period</b>	<b>2011-2015</b>	<b>2016-2020</b>
<b>List of films</b>	Title: <i>Lilbaia</i> Translated title: <i>For Sale</i> Director: Abdullah Al-Batashi Year: 2014 Duration: 09:51	Title: <i>Almadhalah Alzarqa</i> Translated title: <i>The Blue Umbrella</i> Director: Shouq Abdulaziz Year: 2018 Duration: 4:41
	Title: <i>Altohoor</i> Translated title: <i>Circumcision</i> Director: Anwar al-Ruzaiqi Year: 2014 Duration: 13:00	Title: <i>Alaswad La Ya Leeq Bik</i> Translated title: <i>Black Does Not Suit You</i> Director: Issa Al-Subhi Year: 2018 Duration: 15:32
	Title: <i>Malaekat Alsahra</i> Translated title: <i>Desert Angels</i> Director: Khalid Al-Kalbani Year: 2011 Duration: 08:49	Title: <i>Hologram</i> Director: Haitham Suleiman Year: 2018 Duration: 04:00
	Title: <i>Bateekh</i> Translated title: <i>Watermelon</i> Director: Haitham Sulieman Year: 2014 Duration: 10:26	Title: <i>Ana Mashhoor</i> Translated title: <i>I am famous</i> Director: Muaiad Ambu Saidi Year: 2018 Duration: 21:36

#### 1.2.4 Film Analysis Approach

Discussing the process of understanding representation in relation to culture and the visual arts ultimately brings Stuart Hall's theory of representation to the fore. Hall notes that understanding the act of representation requires us to understand how representation works

through language. According to Hall, there are two systems of representation. The first is in concepts and elements such as objects, people, and events that help us to interpret the world around us. The second is in the language through which we can communicate and translate these concepts to other people.

The analysis conducted in my project aimed to detect any elements, objects, or concepts within the selected short films. These elements were then arranged and clustered to establish a wider understanding of their relationships with the culture from which they emerged.

Analysing representations in films is of continuous interest in film discourse since ‘representation connects meaning and language to culture’.<sup>60</sup> Despite the differences in approaches, scholars have shown a clear commonality of understanding within their research.<sup>61</sup> To understand how cultural identity is constructed and self/other is represented in films, scholars depend on visual or narrative analysis, through which they interpret the linguistic features, emotional geography of the characters, and the work of cinematography. In *Arab Cinema: History and Cultural Identity*, Shafik asserts that scholars tend to focus on analysing storylines (narrative analysis) to illustrate what is meant by identity, but for her, dealing with films by focusing on analysing the technical and artistic work will best serve any film study.<sup>62</sup>

Due to the dynamic nature of films, I analysed them using a multimodal method. On the one hand films are a combination of both text and images; on the other, they are full of encoded messages, signs, and multi-layered meanings. As per Zhang Delu, multimodal discourse analysis is an approach that uses various elements such as ‘visuals, audio, sense multi-lingual symbol system to communicate through multi-means and symbol recourses such as character, image, sound and action’.<sup>63</sup> While reading short films, the focus is on synthesising all given, reflected, and possible multiple meanings to understand the constructed message through all symbols. In addition, I observed concepts, cultural elements, and related contextual situations that may possess any level of confirmation, contradiction, or tension with contemporary cultural discussions. Barthes’s semiotics was integrated to add more validity to the discussion

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<sup>60</sup> Hall, p. 74.

<sup>61</sup> Scholars have used several methods, for examples: a socio-cultural, contextual approach – see Elena Di Giovanni, 2003; textual analysis – see Innocent Ebere Uwah, 2011; visual, character, and music analysis – see Ceren Mert-Travlos, 2021. Others have used a multimodal approach where they combine several analytical tools, such as Erica Halverson, 2010.

<sup>62</sup> Shafik, p. 4.

<sup>63</sup> As cited in Xu Bo, ‘Multimodal Discourse Analysis of the Movie” Argo”’, *English Language Teaching*, 11. 4 (2018), 132-37 (p. 132).

by focusing on cultural connotations or aesthetics, while interpreting and connecting several variables within the visual image. Feyrouz Bouzida expressed the importance of semiotics when reading various visual images such as films, adverts, and television programmes.<sup>64</sup>

The film samples were watched multiple times in order to spot meanings. The analysis was conducted in four stages to identify the meanings by focusing on the film narratives. In the first stage, the focus was on determining the type of stories told, film genres, themes, characterisation, and setting.

Reading through the selected samples, it is worth noting that drama films dominated the film production culture between 2006-2020, highlighting the immense popularity of this genre among practitioners. It is also worth highlighting that this practice witnessed the production of one 3D animation in 2021 and two experimental narrative films. The stories explored themes, such as magic, family, child abuse, war, and family values. Films produced in the first few years of practice were either adopted from theatrical plays or based on Omani folktales. However, in 2009, Omanis began writing their own narratives. The themes explored in these short films are diverse, ranging from desire and death to more complex issues, such as social media obsolescence, power, love, social control, acceptance, chance versus tradition, and self-awareness. All films have an Omani setting, ranging between mountains, deserts, and urban villages. A more detailed analysis of the films can be found in Appendix 2: Film Analysis Summary (Film Narrative).

The second stage was dedicated to reading the visual elements and was guided by Barthes's denotation and connotation (Table 2). In the third stage, the analysis focused on detecting technical developments, narrative strategies, and aesthetics (Table 3).

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<sup>64</sup> Feyrouz Bouzida, 'The Semiology Analysis in Media Studies: Roland Barthes Approach', in *Proceedings of SOCIOINT14-International Conference on Social Sciences and Humanities* (2014), pp. 1001-07 (p. 1003).

Table 2: Film Analysis Summary (Representation)

	2006-2010	2011-2015	2016-2020
<b>Cultural References</b>	Omani clothes Use of traditional folk tunes (2) Omani dialect	Omani clothes (Al-Sharqiyah) (2) Omani food Use of folk tunes Al-Khanjar ( <i>Altohoor</i> ) Omani dialect	Omani clothes Omani dialect
<b>Representation</b>	Male: Working, Caring of their kids (2), Leading, Unresponsible (1) (sexual abuse)  Female: Passive, Loving, supportive, housewife.  .....  Omani Society:  Family values are important Simple, collaborative	Urban Village: women; No <i>abaya</i> , women driving/ male; working and responsible  Old village: women are housewife / male; leading, working.  .....  Omani Society:  Family values are important Simple	Male: Leaders, taking the responsibility of their houses.  Female: strong, Housewives, teachers, readers, educated (controlled in some cases)  .....  Omani Society:  Religious Family values are important Hierarchical

Table 3: Film Analysis Summary (Aesthetics and Approaches)

	2006-2010	2011-2015	2016-2020
<b>Aesthetics and film strategies</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- All films are SD (480p) with 25f/sec.</li> <li>- Generally: there is a clear protraction (too long) in the film's (narrative)</li> <li>- Use of ADR</li> <li>- Actual events start after 0:41 second as minimum and after 2:00 minutes long (Al-Dream house production)</li> <li>- Too long pre-credit sequence</li> <li>- Main character introduced within the first five frames of the actual start of the story</li> <li>- Different camera movements, use of handheld camera in Al Dream productions, all films used different frame sizes: closeup; to show emotions. Long and wide to show the setting</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- One film is SD, one is HD (720p) and 2 are Full HD (1080p)</li> <li>- Use of special effects in an accident scene (For Sale) first film to include</li> <li>- There is a clear protraction (too long) in two of the films (narrative)</li> <li>- Actual events start after 0:13 second as minimum and after 1:22 minutes long (Al-Dream house production)</li> <li>- Use of different frame sizes; close ups and mid-closeups are used a lot to show meaning</li> <li>- In two of the films the title appears with a graphic representing the story told</li> <li>- Only one film includes pre-credit sequence. In the</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- All films are SD (480p) with 25f/sec.</li> <li>- Generally: there is a clear protraction (too long) in the film's (narrative)</li> <li>- Use of ADR</li> <li>- Actual events start after 0:41 second as minimum and after 2:00 minutes long (Al-Dream house production)</li> <li>- Too long pre-credit sequence.</li> <li>- Main character introduced within the first five frames of the actual start of the story</li> <li>- Different camera movement, a use of handheld camera in Al Dream productions, all films used different frame sizes: closeup; to show emotions; long and wide to show the setting</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- All films have pre-credit except one</li> <li>- Order is usually scriptwriter, main actors, director</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>other three the credit at the end</li> <li>- Two of the films start with the story immediately after the production house and later comes the title</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- All films have pre-credit except one</li> <li>- Order is usually scriptwriter, main actors, director</li> </ul>
<b>Text</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- There is clear control of the values and manner in the films.</li> <li>1. Two of the films discuss sensitive issue of sexual assault</li> <li>Both films are not shown to Omanis and kept hidden by the director himself</li> <li>2. In <i>Almenaz</i> film married couples are shown sleeping apart</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The dialogue is explicit and direct. In <i>For Sale</i> the dialogue is poetic</li> <li>- There is a film from an Omani women director but could not get a copy</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Films touching on sensitive issues in society (love relationships, the quest of power, father duty house/religion)</li> <li>- Dialogue is direct and explicit</li> </ul>
<b>Other</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Private production companies owned by the film directors themselves</li> <li>- Six out of seven films analysed within this period were produced by Dream production house (Jasim and Abdullah)</li> </ul>	<p><i>Watermelon</i> film:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- No specific cultural references. Going for more universal style of clothing (in Oman uniforms are worn for university and governmental institutions).</li> <li>- In the film <i>Desert Angels</i> there is an influence of theatre</li> </ul>	

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Women play the main role (3 films)</li> <li>- Men play the main role (1)</li> <li>- Shared (3)</li> <li>- There is a clear influence of the theatre with the film: the used language and acting (<i>Alkarithah, Almenaz</i>)</li> <li>- All cast are Omanis</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>style; theatre actors and the use of formal language which is widely used in Omani theatre</li> <li>- All cast/crew are Omanis except in one there is a non-Omani camera operator</li> </ul>	
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After analysing the short film samples, the results were compared with the interview subsets to identify broader themes, confirmations, or contradictions between the two. The results were then organised and discussed in Chapters Three, Four, and Five.

### ***1.2.5 Online Survey***

The online survey – directed at students involved in digital filmmaking education, recent graduates, and academics – prioritises qualitative values and aims to generate an understanding of the relationship between education and filmmaking practices. The participants were approached by the relevant departments at the University of Technology and Applied Sciences in Oman. A discussion of some related results is incorporated into the discussion of the relevant sections in Chapter Three.

### ***1.2.6 Limitations and Challenges***

As my study is the first academic research on Omani filmmaking practice, focusing on short films, many challenges were faced due to the absence of an established academic literature.

Another significant challenge is that there is no available archive that includes copies of film productions or a compiled list. As mentioned earlier, the copies I was able to search through were those sent for participation in the Muscat International Film Festival. The absence of a film library is not exclusive to Oman; Mostafa Messnaoui reported the absence of a film library that includes Arab productions within the Arab world. Messnaoui also asserted the need for such a library that should include ‘all related documents, such as magazines, critical journalistic articles, books, posters, and radio and television programmes about the works’.<sup>65</sup> The importance of film archives and libraries lies in the rich data they provide for researchers who aim to study the history of film culture and critically examine the importance of film production in society. However, it is worth noting that through the cooperation of filmmakers themselves and by following snowball sampling, I managed to collect samples for analysis.

Another challenge is writing about Omani films and culture in English. Within the film analysis chapters, finding the exact term or verb to describe many cultural discussions was demanding. For example, I found myself limited to terms such as represent, mirror and reflect throughout the discussion as they appear, according to my knowledge, to mostly match the intended meaning in Arabic.

Finally, a major challenge is the lack of academic work in Oman from a cultural perspective, which has limited possible deeper engagement in some cases. However, such challenges confirm the value of this project, as it provides academic grounds for other researchers interested in studying film culture in Oman. It also sheds light on questions that require further academic attention. Therefore, this project is an original contribution to the rare academic scholarly engagements with film culture in Oman and the first to study and investigate the movement of short film production in an attempt to locate Omani film productions within a larger context.

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<sup>65</sup> Messnaoui, p. 205.



## Chapter Two:

### Between Media and the Arts: Locating Film in the Context of Oman

This chapter provides a close look at both the media and arts sectors in the Sultanate of Oman as a first step to towards a working definition of films in Oman and locating Omani filmmaking practice in a wider context. In the context of this research project, it is necessary to situate films within the rich cultural historical nexus of related fields. Academic multi-disciplinarity among art history, film studies, and media theories has long existed because of their shared characteristics. The ever-changing contemporary world presents a variety of new possibilities, understandings, and contested assumptions resulting from rapidly changing digital technology. This, in turn, manifests several challenges to scholars due to the cross-disciplinary boundaries that mark contemporary academic fields. Thus, it is crucial for any academic study to examine the relationships between interconnected fields, their related technology, and socio-cultural historical components – the aim of this chapter.

Since its establishment in the 1970s under the direction of Sultan Qaboos, Oman's radio and television sector has been working towards achieving its goals of being part of the country's development. The importance of media was that it was part of the Omani government-focused project to modernise the state.

#### 2.1 The Unsettled Omani State-Building Process

Looking at the period before 1970, because of its location in the South-Eastern corner of the Arabian Peninsula, Oman held maritime power during Sayyid Said bin Sultan's ruling period. Its power covered South Africa and stretched to include parts of Iran,<sup>66</sup> however, Oman witnessed a dark period of isolation from the world. During the rule of Sultan Said bin Taimur (1932-1970), who aimed to maintain Oman's independence from any external power and to

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<sup>66</sup> John C Wilkinson, 'Oman and East Africa: New Light on Early Kilwan History from the Omani Sources', *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 14. 2 (1981), 272-305 (p. 275).

ensure the sultan's full control and legitimate rights,<sup>67</sup> Oman lost its power and isolated itself.<sup>68</sup>

The harsh ruling policies applied by Sultan Sayeed not only acted as a barrier between Oman and the outside world, but also added to the considerable division in Omani society due to its tribal system. As the Sultan was against modernity, he did not undergo any social or organizational development, which resulted in the disunity of the country and its poor nationwide communication infrastructure. That could be attributed to Sultan Sayeed's desire to maintain his position and legacy and to avoid any tribal coup against him, facilitated by a developed communication system. In other places where the tribal system existed, they 'have functioned as small, autonomous communities each with its own identity, historical narrative, and territory'.<sup>69</sup> However, in Oman, tribes played a crucial role in the country's political system.<sup>70</sup> Even with the rule of the Al Bu Said family since 1749, the opportunities for tribal revolution from the inner areas of the country existed until 1970. In addition to Sultan Said bin Taimur's harsh policies, a major factor was the ruling system of the Sultanate which was run by the Al Bu Said family and contradicted the previous Imamate system. The Imamate system, followed by earlier ruling tribes from the 8<sup>th</sup> century, employed a democratic way of selecting a ruler based on his knowledge and capabilities and followed the Ibadi sect, where the ruler is called 'Imam'.<sup>71</sup> In contrast, in the Sultanate system, the ruling position is inherited. Through this, the Al Bu Said family ensured its supreme authority over the coastal areas and Muscat for a long time with the help of British forces, while the inner areas were still controlled by the Imamate system, until it was ended by Sultan Qaboos bin Said.<sup>72</sup>

However, the mission of Sultan Qaboos to unite the territory during his ruling period (1970-2020) was full of challenges due to economic, social, and political hardship.<sup>73</sup> Sultan Qaboos benefited from the oil boom and started providing the basic needs of state building. In 1976,

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<sup>67</sup> Khalid Al Kharusi, 'Dhofar War 1965-1975' (University of Central Lancashire, 2018), p. 37.

<sup>68</sup> Corina Lozovan, 'A Vision of Modernity: Narratives of Historical (Dis) Continuity in Oman', *Arabian Humanities. Revue internationale d'archéologie et de sciences sociales sur la péninsule Arabique/International Journal of Archaeology and Social Sciences in the Arabian Peninsula*. 16 (2022) (p. 4).

<sup>69</sup> Linda Pappas Funsch, *Oman Reborn: Balancing Tradition and Modernization* (Springer, 2015), p. 25.

<sup>70</sup> Ismail Alzayoud and Fatima Tarawneh, 'The Political Role of the Tribe: The Sultanate of Oman as a Model', *Dirasat: Human & Social Sciences*, 39. 2 (2012).

<sup>71</sup> Husayn Ghabbāsh, *Oman : The Islamic Democratic Tradition* (London: Routledge, 2006), p. 3.

<sup>72</sup> The British presence in Oman had a commercial purpose due to the strategic location of the country. Although Sayyid Saeed bin Taimur sought help from the British on several occasions, they did not have any political power over the Sultanate, which ensured the sovereignty of the Al Bu Said family and maintained the unique characteristics of the Sultanate outside of any colonial influence.

<sup>73</sup> Khalifa Salim Al-Fazari, 'Fiscal Policy and Economic Performance in Oman During 1970-2003' (Durham University, 2006), p. 1.

the government designed its first five-year development plan (1967-1980) as a strategic development planning approach that continues to this date. Developing the country economically was not easier than building a nation state. As Oman opened itself to the world in 1970, it was already challenged by the need to catch up with international scientific and economic developments. During Oman's closed period, the world witnessed huge developments, such as international economic integration and the transfer of policies across borders. The process of modernity, which is 'a set of transformations in the economic, social, political, and cultural realms', that occurred within Western communities from the 1800s, brought about globalisation as a means to achieve that transformation.<sup>74</sup> While globalisation 'cannot be expounded upon with certainty and be applicable to all people and in all situations', all its aspects and characteristics imposed the establishment of a global system within which barriers to communication, trade and cultural exchange are eliminated.<sup>75</sup> Indeed, Oman benefited from some of these aspects, such as the transmission of knowledge and international migration.

At the start of its nation-building project in the 1970s, the open market and labour migration movement worldwide served Oman, especially after the oil boom. Examples of migrants include British forces who were involved in oil exploration projects, Indian merchants, and others who migrated to the region in search of employment opportunities.<sup>76</sup> Moreover, Oman received assistance from experts in different sectors to ensure the success of the process of establishing a state based on a calibrated infrastructure commensurate with international standards in sectors such as education, health, and infrastructure. In addition, the country witnessed a huge migration movement to cope with the work requirements needed to build the state. As such, it managed to stabilise the economic situation and attained considerable social and organizational advancement. Major developments were achieved in the defence, education, health, and infrastructure sectors. As a result, Oman experienced a renaissance period, *Nahdha*, during the Sultan Qaboos rule, and the day of Sultan Qaboos's succession was marked as Omani Renaissance Day, 23<sup>rd</sup> July.

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<sup>74</sup> Zinovia Lialiouti, 'When Did Globalization Start?', in *Research Handbook on the Sociology of Globalization* (Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2023), pp. 16-24 (p. 23).

<sup>75</sup> Nayef RF Al-Rodhan and Gérard Stoudmann, 'Definitions of Globalization: A Comprehensive Overview and a Proposed Definition', *Program on the geopolitical implications of globalization and transnational security*, 6. 1-21 (2006) (p. 3).

<sup>76</sup> Françoise De Bel-Air, 'Demography, Migration, and the Labour Market in Oman' (2015) (p. 4).

However, stabilising the economic situation was not enough for Oman to catch up with other countries and process its modernity. Despite the effective role played by oil revenues in achieving stable economic conditions from 1970 to 1986, its global price fluctuations in 1986, 1991, and 1993 up to today challenged the development process and continued to pressure the country's economy.<sup>77</sup> As with other GCC countries, the Oman economy depends heavily on oil profits, thus it is described as a closed economy. The nature of the Omani economic system and previous poor literacy conditions challenged the stability of the development process. Thus, there was a need for a more diverse economic system, with fewer restrictions. As such by 1990, Oman began easing restrictions on international investments and became an official member of the World Trade Organization in 2000.

Recently, a diversification policy has begun to be effectively implemented, and the economic system is in the process of changing.<sup>78</sup> The government's realisation of such an issue is evident through actions carried out since the mid-1990s, for example, spending more funds on agriculture, fish, and other sectors that have the potential to provide sustainable growth.<sup>79</sup> Another step was to carry out major reforms within the educational system at both the school level and in higher education institutions. During that time, the inward migration movement continued to serve the aim of the Omani state to keep up with the modern and globalised market. While adding more diversity to Omani society in terms of religion, language, and culture, it crucially resulted in the unemployment issue among Omanis.

After developing the education sector and equipping Omanis with the required skills, 'Omanization' was implemented by the government to partially solve the issue of unemployment. However, the increase in population compared to job availability within the public and private sectors and their dependency on expatriates narrowed the effectiveness of the Omanization strategy.<sup>80</sup> This challenge was one of the major factors driving the Arab

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<sup>77</sup> Al-Fazari, p. 81.

<sup>78</sup> The Sultanate's economic diversification policy has a long history and was enforced by the privatization policy in 1989 that gave ownership of some companies to the private sector, for example the telecommunication company. That step aimed to increase the function of the private sector and move pressure to the public. However, as Al-Fazari states, the process of diversifying the economy failed because of the 'the absence of a clear mechanism for making binding privatization decisions' (p. 87).

<sup>79</sup> Gabriella Gonzalez and others, 'Sultanate of Oman', in *Facing Human Capital Challenges of the 21st Century* (RAND Corporation, 2008), pp. 147-98 (pp. 147,86).

<sup>80</sup> Most of the migrants work in three main sectors: construction, hotels and restaurants, and wholesale and retail trade. The difference between both public and private sectors in terms of salary and benefits are major reasons behind the Omani lack of desire to work within the private sector. For more insights see 'Employment in the Private Sector in Oman: Sector-based Approach for Localization' by Yasir Y. Ali, Mowafaq M. Al-Nusair, Farooq S. Alani, Firdouse R. Khan, Latifa H. Al-Badi.

Spring protests in Oman. In that protest, Omanis called for more job opportunities and criticised the high flow of migrant workers.

The steps toward reforming the education system and easing restrictions on international investments were carefully taken because the Omani government regarded globalisation as a type of Westernisation. While these are different concepts they are interconnected as globalisation has been instrumental in the widespread dissemination of Western social relations. Therefore, Oman carefully managed the process of modernity by filtering opportunities provided by globalisation in various ways, although the country has witnessed some manifestations of modernity. For example, the emergence of civilisation, such as the expansion of cities and their transition. The change in social structure, such as increased interdependence between individuals and from loyalty to the tribe to loyalty to the homeland, in addition to changes in the composition of the family and the roles of women.<sup>81</sup> These issues are studied in this project with respect to the relationship between short films and culture.

Nevertheless, these reforms and others put another level of pressure on the public sector which, in turn, approached international lenders for liquidity.<sup>82</sup> The COVID-19 pandemic worsened the situation by stopping many economic activities and hindering the progress of energising the private sector, causing a reduction in total revenue.<sup>83</sup> The unsettled economic situation with all its challenges continues to influence the progress of modernity in the country. However, the country's efforts to ensure its sustainable development goals are evident. Currently, the government is focusing on implementing 'Oman Vision 2040', with a focus on transforming the economic system into a more diverse one. This will allow the country to continue its modernisation process and catch up with neighbouring countries. In 'Balancing the Books: A Deep Dive into Fiscal Policy and Diversification in Oman', Piotr Schulkes reported that 'Oman's economy is rebounding. With the caveat that 'there are substantial uncertainties around the outlook, with downside risks dominating''.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Rashid Suleiman Alghafri, Balqees Ghalib Alsharie, and Hamoud Khalfan Alharthi, 'Globalization Manifestations on Sultan Qaboos University Students in the Light of the Culture of Omani Society Culture', *Journal of the Faculty of Education, Beni Suef University, Egypt*, 14. 1 (2008), 1-35 (pp. 16-17).

<sup>82</sup> Chloe Domat, 'Oman's New Ruler Faces Economic Challenges', in *Haitham bin Tariq is the first Omani ruler with a background in business*. (Online: Global Finance Magazine, 2020).

<sup>83</sup> Tariq Al Amri, 'The Economic Impact of Covid-19 on Construction Industry: Oman's Case', *European Journal of Business and Management Research*, 6. 2 (2021), 146-52 (p. 149).

<sup>84</sup> Piotr Schulkes, 'Balancing the Books: A Deep Dive into Fiscal Policy and Diversification in Oman' (2022), <<https://rb.gy/3lz3kf>> [accessed 26 July 2023].

It is also crucial to point out that modernisation efforts in the country led to the emergence of the term ‘traditional culture’. In accordance with the Omani context, the term traditional is an adjective given to any cultural element, norm, or ideology that has existed for a long time as part of the culture itself. Therefore, it is used to identify emerging and extraneous habits, beliefs, and practices uncovered by the modernity process. The state’s decision to take those practices and norms ahead with an identification aiming to preserve them is a modern choice. First, it will ensure the preservation of the uniqueness of Omani culture. Second, such identification proves the importance of this authentic aspect of culture and assures its continuity as a reference for the new generation to educate them and link them to their original culture. That is, working on the modernity process of Omani Culture is always linked with taking those authentic aspects along with it. The film analysis part of this thesis aims to confirm the relationship between modernity and tradition and the tension caused between the various generations in terms of interests, ambitions, and beliefs. In line with this, the term traditional is used within the project as a reference to authentic cultural elements and practices.

## **2.2 Omani Media as Political Propaganda Tools in the Process of Nation Building**

Sultan Qaboos’s eagerness to unite the country under his legitimacy as well as his realisation of the power of mass media led him to use it to reach out to Omanis, introduce himself and his intention for the country’s development and bringing various disparate groups together into one larger community under his rule.<sup>85</sup> With a short transmission distance of one kilometre, Radio Sultanate of Oman was first broadcast from Bayt Al-Falaj in 1970, only reaching Muscat and nearby areas.<sup>86</sup> To ensure the spread of information to a larger audience, another radio channel began broadcasting in Salalah, covering the southern part of the country. In 1979, the two stations were linked by space satellites to improve the transmission. Radio was the first mass medium to be introduced in Oman to overcome the challenges faced by the government. The second was the print media that came into existence in 1971. However, to achieve its aim of unifying the territory, the government depended more on the radio because

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<sup>85</sup> As a result of Oman’s strategic location on the global maritime trade map, the country has witnessed great migration in and out. Many Omanis settled in Zanzibar; some Baluchistan people migrated to Oman since the beginning of Islam. Other groups moved from Baluchistan to Oman due to the unsettled political situation within the territory, which began in 1928 with an Iranian military invasion. In addition, many others moved in and out for trading. These movements created a diverse society with multiple language, ethnic, and religious groups.

<sup>86</sup> Funsch, p. 132.

of the literacy levels in the country. To this end, there has been a continuous expansion of broadcasting, the opening of new radio stations when needed, and the provision of a proper infrastructure, followed by the establishment of the first colour television station.

The first Oman Television Station opened in November 1974 in Muscat, followed by another in Salalah in 1975. In 1979, both stations merged into an official government station, called the Sultanate of Oman Television.<sup>87</sup> Television was the third mass medium operated in Oman after radio and printed newspapers, and its popularity exceeded that of newspapers. This can be explained by literacy levels, the attractive properties of television, mostly its moving image, and its being an in-house device. In *Shots from Omani Cinema*, Humaid Al-Amri remarked on his memory of the first television set to which he was exposed: the device was placed near their house in the village of Hail Al-Awamer Al-Shamaliah and was available to everyone in the evening for a few hours. He described the device as a long cement or wood column on top with a box in which the television was placed. By gathering together when the device was switched on and sitting on a mat, people were able to watch news and information about what was happening around them. Despite the great new experience, they woke up one day to find the television gone and never knew what happened to it. Some said it was stolen, others thought it was taken for maintenance by the government, and one group said it was taken because it affected people's prayers. However, after living that experience, wealthier families began purchasing television devices for their homes.<sup>88</sup> In addition, the public received radio and television broadcasts for free, and continue to do so. The popularity of television is proven by a study conducted by an Omani researcher in 1996, who found that 99% of Omanis owned a television set and more than 30% owned more than one.<sup>89</sup> Thus, the Sultanate of Oman Television was utilised alongside the radio to achieve one of the politically driven goals assigned to the Ministry of Information: 'strengthening the attachment of the citizen of Oman to their country, its heritage, and Islam, thereby ensuring the unity of the state'. Around 90% of broadcast programmes were local and varied between entertainment, cultural, and discussion programmes, focusing on deepening awareness and awakening a sense of patriotism. For example, *Kalam Min Al-Turath* [*Words from Heritage*, 1997-99], *Shoaa Al-Hadharah* [*A Ray of Civilization*, n.d.], *Sabah Al-Khair Ya Biladi* [*Good Morning*

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<sup>87</sup> Ministry of Information, 'Oman97' (Ministry of Information Portal: Ministry of Information, 1997), p. 274 (p. 70).

<sup>88</sup> Al-Amri, p. 19.

<sup>89</sup> Information, p. 70.

*my country*, 1990s] and many others stressed the importance of both cultural and civilization legacy.

The desire of the new political system was to bring everyone together under the name of Oman as a first step before working on its development. Creating a single national identity for all populations living in the territory was also crucial to achieve unity. The process of creating Omani identity depended on encompassing all cultural practices, historical references, and religious beliefs under a unified umbrella. Indeed, current diverse traditional dances and practices that differ from one area to another and the various spoken languages such as Belushi, Swahili and others are evidence of the multiculturalism and geographical diversity of the Sultanate. Amal Sachedina commented on the Omani government's approach in creating a 'collective history and memory':

Heritage as a recurrent mode of representation and an institutionalised form of modern power establishes authoritative time through practices of progressive historicity and its concomitant production of the national citizen-subject versed in the particular norms – ethical, political, and religious – of secularism.<sup>90</sup>

This step created a sense of belonging to the new unified state in which all practices, norms, and virtues in Oman are framed under one official framework: Omani identity. In addition, one major act was Sultan Qaboos's emphasis on generic Islam as a basic source of guidance. Oman Islamic society consists of groups of Shii, Sunis and Ibadi, with the latter playing a crucial role. Sultan Qaboos's realization of the powerful role played by Ibadi parties and their long held strong political position within the country led him to create the position of Mufti as a central religious reference. The position was given to an Ibadi Imam to first reduce the tension between the Imamate and the Sultanate systems and to ensure the obeisance of those tribes following the Ibadi sect, as they would ensure the continuing presence of Ibadi values and beliefs.<sup>91</sup> Tolerance, openness, consensus, and respect are some of the most visible characteristics of the Omani identity and are reflected in the country's internal and external policies.

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<sup>90</sup> Amal Sachedina, *Of Living Traces and Revived Legacies: Unfolding Futures in the Sultanate of Oman* (University of California, Berkeley, 2013), p. 6.

<sup>91</sup> Lozovan, p. 2.



All previous carefully selected actions by the new young ruler, educated abroad, were empowered by placing his own persona at the centre of this political/cultural identity. As a result of his efforts, Sultan Qaboos was the keystone of the building process and the centre of Omani identity.<sup>92</sup> The importance of his persona to Omani society was evidenced and reflected through the public attitude of calling him ‘Father’ throughout his ruling period. Here, I recall John Peterson’s description of the patriarchal nature of Omani society: ‘The ruler, like the shaykh of the tribe, like the father of a family, is the father of his country’. Peterson’s discussion informed the impact of the ‘traditional pattern of patriarchy’, which is enforced by the long-existing tribal structure on the state.<sup>93</sup> This characteristic gives males superior authority within the society through which they enjoy obedience at the family level.<sup>94</sup> At the national level, it symbolises total loyalty to the ruler.

The efforts towards developing Oman and establishing its identity were also strengthened by the formulation of the Basic Law of the State in November 1996 which functioned as a formal constitution for the state.

### ***2.2.1 Government Strategies to Control Internal and External Media***

The Sultanate of Oman Television service played a satisfactory role in supporting and cultivating government efforts in nation-building. Moreover, unlike other Arab media which ‘failed to fully implement cultural unity and integration’,<sup>95</sup> Omani television succeeded in promoting Omani cultural unity. At the outset, radio, television, and newspapers in Oman were informative and one-way communication tools that covered the development of the country for the local population. This communication medium provided controlled knowledge about the benefits of the authoritarian Omani political system, echoing William A. Rugh’s discussion of media authoritarian regimes. According to Rugh, media sectors that operate within authoritarian regimes are controlled directly and indirectly by the government in

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<sup>92</sup> The two indicators that Sultan Qaboos is a central figure in Oman’s identity are the former Omani national anthem, which mentions his name and celebrates his ascension to the throne, and that Omani National Day is celebrated on his birthday rather than the date of his accession, known as the Renaissance Day.

<sup>93</sup> John E Peterson, ‘The Emergence of Post-Traditional Oman’ (2005) (p. 8).

<sup>94</sup> Fatma Abd El Basset, Robin Bell, and Buthaina Al Kharusi, ‘Reducing Barriers to Female Entrepreneurship in Oman: Does Family Matter?’, *Journal of Enterprising Communities: People and Places in the Global Economy* (2022) (p. 19).

<sup>95</sup> Mohamad Firas Naeb and Sameer Baniyassen, ‘Contemporary Arab Media Reality Problems and Solutions’, *Advances in Journalism and Communication*, 10. 4 (2022), 387-98 (p. 396).

various ways, such as through licencing and cultural policies. Therefore, the media works to enhance government policies even when people are incorporated into discussions.<sup>96</sup>

To ensure the media's successful contribution to the nation-building process, the government dealt very carefully with this critical sector and continued to do so. The government took three significant steps to accomplish this goal, starting with the appointment of the Ministry of Information (MoI) as the central authority. The Ministry is a tool used by the government to stabilise the political system, promote citizenship, and create cultural unity. It is the basic unit responsible for providing guidance for media institutions that would assist them in 'exercising its national role'.<sup>97</sup> There are several media organisations within Oman, starting with the Ministry itself, under which Oman Television channels, government radio stations, the Oman News Agency, and the General Directorate of Press, Publishing, and Advertising operate. Other critical functions and the official tasks assigned to the MoI include proposing media policies in accordance with the state's orientation and presenting them to the Council of Ministers to approve and set media plans and programmes to ensure their implementation, supervising electronic media, and setting the appropriate mechanism to control it.<sup>98</sup> Additionally, the MoI is responsible for establishing a general framework for government communication. This duty is delivered through the Government Communication Centre, which plans a framework to organise communication between government institutions and the people by providing media support for various governmental bodies, thus enhancing community awareness of government projects, decisions, and policies. The Ministry also implements the Law of the Private Facilities for Radio and Television and the Printing and Publication Law. Another task is to permit artistic works for display and circulation in the Sultanate, which is regulated by the Censorship Law on Technical Works through its internal committee, as discussed later.

Second, investment in the media sector was exclusive to the government; therefore, all the channels were governmental until 2004. To cope with the development process, the private sector was given the opportunity to be part of the field under the Law of the Private Facilities for Radio and Television (Royal Decree, 2004/95). Moreover, the Printing and Publication Law was amended to ensure its applicability (Royal Decree, 2004/87). One major political

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<sup>96</sup> William A. Rugh, *Arab Mass Media: Newspapers, Radio, and Television in Arab Politics* (Westport, Conn: Praeger, 2004), p. 23.

<sup>97</sup> Ministry of Information, 'Oman 2005-2006' (Ministry of Information Portal: Ministry of Information, 2005), p. 230 (p. 80).

<sup>98</sup> OMANINFO.

principle stated within the Basic Law of the State is to preserve the independence and sovereignty of the State and to safeguard its entity, security, stability, and defend it against all aggression.<sup>99</sup> Hence, by refraining from international investment during the early years of development, the government avoided any conflict of interest with international bodies, thus ensuring stability towards achieving its goals.

Third, the government limits media forces by controlling some Internet content through a general telecommunication organisation (GTO). The Internet played a role in providing Omanis with wider access to media channels when it first came into operation in 1996. For the public, the accessed knowledge was controlled through the GTO, which is responsible for monitoring data and blocking unwanted content.<sup>100</sup> The decision of the Omani government to increase Information and Communication technology expanded its initiatives to broaden Internet penetration. With all related technological developments, the Omani media and entertainment sectors have witnessed a significant transformation. Indeed, if the Omani nation is to be described in terms of its government's adherence to the means of communication as an effective tool for building the nation, then the concept of national 'communicative space' is appropriate. Oman is thus a nation built on a social communication strategy through which collective singularity has been achieved.

### **2.3 Technological Development as the Main Driver for Change**

Worldwide, technological advancements such as the development of the Internet, streaming services, social media platforms, and mobile devices have led to and continue to revolutionise the media industry. Such developments have enforced changes in media content itself, forms of publishing, consumers, as well as the industries and their strategies, as will be illustrated in relation to the Omani context. Within the Arab world, the influence of the Internet continues to be significant, impacting Arab people's perceptions of their lives as a result of the massive amount of information available to them. Technology, in general, has led to the existence of wider spaces for cross-border transnational communication, which influences people's

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<sup>99</sup> The Sultan of Oman Haitham bin Tareq, 'Promulgation of the Law Organizing the Administrative Apparatus of the State' (Ministry of Justice and Legal Affairs, 2021) (p. 5).

<sup>100</sup> Affairs, p. 74.

understanding of their surroundings and their approach to life.<sup>101</sup> That, however, has led to a varied acceptance of the Internet by Arab governments for political reasons, considering the ability of various online spaces, such as Twitter/X and Facebook to impact public opinion. Social media platforms, through which open conversations in cultural, economic, and most evidently political concerns take place, can influence or even shifting citizens' perspectives.<sup>102</sup> This creates what Jürgen Habermas called the 'public sphere' with the inclusion of the public as the individuals, rather than only institutions. On online platforms, public opinion is not restrained and shared in an accessible realm by all citizens.<sup>103</sup> A key example saw the rise of the Arab Spring Movement (end of 2010 to 2014), which reached Oman in the form of several strikes during the first six months of 2011. The role of social media was evident yet, unlike other Arab countries, the new media, mainly social media, was not adopted by Omanis to topple the government regime and end authoritative religious control.<sup>104</sup> However, I would argue that the Arab Spring was a crucial point that led the government to recognise such a powerful communication medium and thus start working on a development plan through which efficiency, applicability, and professionalism are maintained within the expected global standard.

The major shift witnessed within the radio and television sectors occurred in 2015/16, four years after the Arab Spring. Moving from long-accustomed ways of functioning to a new modern system requires a very careful plan, in which all elements are considered:

The development process, which in its simplest form refers to the transition from the long-existing ways of functioning to the contemporary situation, requires a planned and studied communication process that contributes to enhancing the process of interaction, social integration, belonging and participation, strengthening social relations, and strengthening trust between the elements of the development process.<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> Ahmed El Gody, 'New Media, New Audience, New Topics, and New Forms of Censorship in the Middle East', *New media and the new Middle East* (2007), 213-34 (p. 222).

<sup>102</sup> Andreas Jungherr, Oliver Posegga, and Jisun An, 'Discursive Power in Contemporary Media Systems: A Comparative Framework', *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, 24. 4 (2019), 404-25 (p. 405).

<sup>103</sup> Jürgen Habermas, Sara Lennox, and Frank Lennox, 'The Public Sphere: An Encyclopedia Article (1964)', *New German Critique*. 3 (1974), 49-55 (p. 49).

<sup>104</sup> Najma Al Zidjaly, 'Memes as Reasonably Hostile Laments: A Discourse Analysis of Political Dissent in Oman', *Discourse & Society*, 28. 6 (2017), 573-94 (p. 574).

<sup>105</sup> Obaid bin Saeed Al-Shaqsy and others, *The Future Knowledge Needs of the Omani Public from Awareness Programmes: A Survey Study* (Muscat: Ministry of Information, 2017), p. 14.

The following are some of the improvements sought in the Radio and Television sector: content enhancement, modifications to the directing style of programmes, and a change in the visual identities of channels. Additionally, new digital studios were opened, and news centres were launched. One major boost that has been evident since then has been the promotion of community participation and open dialogue. Many programmes have been established to engage with current discussions in different fields, including culture, education, economics, religion, and others. Programmes such as *From Oman* usually invite individuals from the community to shed light on issues, achievements, and concerns raised by them. Similarly, some radio programmes, including *Good Morning Ya Biladi*, *Panorama*, and *Studio Al-Dhahirah*, covered social concerns. Furthermore, in the news sector, the way of presenting news shifted from the old style known for its formal and serious appearance to a more flexible and natural approach. In addition, instead of only presenting political, economic, and social news nationally and internationally, a new section focused on local youth-related news, achievements, and projects has been implemented. In addition, the government was very keen to be actively online via various new media tools to ensure immediate interaction with audiences through the process of liveblogging of its content.

In addition to the original goals of promoting the spirit of citizenship and belonging, these advancements and others aim to instil the values and concepts of community participation and consolidate production values. In a news investigation of Omani media, Yousef Al-Hooti, a former media advisor at the General Authority of Radio and Television, claimed that citizens and their issues have become a central focus of Omani media activities.<sup>106</sup> Despite being promising, such a claim could be challenged by the degree of involvement, depth of engagement, and results achieved. The latter is the most crucial concern of the public, considering that they can raise issues themselves using various online platforms. As a result, the expectations from official television and radio channels are raised towards a higher level of achieving results.

The change that occurred in media content in Oman illustrates one of the ways in which advancements in information and communication technology impacted the media sector. It is vital for any media or authoritarian system to ensure its continuous development to keep pace with the requirements of contemporary communication systems, ensuring its influence on the public through new media outlets. Despite the challenges imposed on the traditional media

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<sup>106</sup> Hamda Al-Mashikhi, 'Will the Omani Media Turn into State Media?' (Wahj Electronic Newspaper, 2018).

system by ICT, these institutions continue to have power as basic sources of news. In ‘Discursive Power in Contemporary Media Systems: A Comparative Framework’, Andreas Jungherr and others reported that many scholars suggest ‘the continued influence of traditional news organisations on newer contenders and spaces for political talk online’.<sup>107</sup> The power gained by traditional mass media is due to our view of it as a social institution, unlike new media. That is, new media is not a social institution developed to provide a settled framework for individuals to ensure the achievement of cultural values.

Martin Lister and colleagues suggested that media should be perceived as ‘fully social institutions which are not reducible to their technologies’. For them, the issue that hinders giving ‘new media’ a place similar to the traditional media outlets is that it ‘continues to suggest something less settled and known’.<sup>108</sup> Nevertheless, it continues to challenge and manifest pressure on media. In Oman, its impact exceeded that of the content and led to changes in the strategies of the Ministry of Information. As a result, online media has become an integral part of the contemporary Omani media system with a variety of media platforms covering citizens’ educational and entertainment needs. Thus, it provides an opportunity for a traditional medium such as television to be part of the wider transnational nexus.

In addition, the Internet has brought new contributors to media content in Oman, mainly through new media outlets. Social Media Networks (SMN) such as YouTube, Instagram, and Twitter/X are widely used in Oman by individuals and organisations. According to the National Centre for Statistics and Information survey conducted in March 2019, 94% of Omanis owned or used social media accounts.<sup>109</sup> These digital-born platforms allow individuals to be producers, thus contributing to content building rather than acting only as receivers or consumers.<sup>110</sup> That, in turn, enforces challenges to the government because of the shift in the way the public perceives and understands the media content. New media provides an interactive space for collective dialogue and social networks within which people are

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<sup>107</sup> Jungherr, Posegga, and An, p. 405.

<sup>108</sup> Martin Lister and others, ‘New Media and Technologies New’, in *New Media : A Critical Introduction* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009) (p. 10).

<sup>109</sup> Oman Daily, ‘A Third of Omanis Use Social Media to Buy and Search for Goods and Services’ Oman Daily, ‘A Third of Omanis Use Social Media to Buy and Search for Goods and Services’ (omandaily.om, 22 June 2019). (omandaily.om, 22 June 2019).

<sup>110</sup> Lister, p. 10.

expected to actively participate in cultural and social conversations by commenting, sharing, arguing, and other actions.<sup>111</sup>

There is difficulty in controlling and censoring Internet-based modes of communication which provide an endless flow of information from transnational voices worldwide. These voices may contradict those held by the government. Therefore, the Ministry of Information was forced to modify and revise its strategies based only on the traditional means of communication to incorporate and be an online contributor, to administer any cultural and political discussion and avoid unwanted events, such as those fostered by the Arab Spring.<sup>112</sup>

As such, after holding onto the traditional media regimes, the Ministry of Information adopted several policies to enhance its digital media service in response to the high number of Omanis exposed to social media and the Internet, which exceeds that of free television. In a joint survey conducted by the Ministry of Information and Sultan Qaboos University in 2017 to investigate the need of Omani public for awareness programmes, the results showed that the average exposure to different means of communication was relatively close between the Internet, in first place, with an average exposure of 2.64, followed by television, with an average of 2.63.<sup>113</sup> Hence, the Ministry strives to compete with new media outlets in terms of content and publishing methods. First, the online website was redesigned and developed to carry the name ‘The Media Portal of the Sultanate Oman’. The MoI aimed to create an online media library in Arabic, English, and French by providing information about Oman, its system, and many other matters.

Moreover, the Ministry’s intention to keep up with technological advancements expanded to focus on services through its online presence. They own 40 accounts on various social media platforms and mobile applications on which they update all electronic content using both text and visuals and upload broadcast news and reports regularly. It is important to maintain the presence of the government as the main source of news for the public. This notwithstanding, they launched the interactive digital platform ‘Ain’ in 2021, focusing on both Oman and Arab content and interactive communication with the public.<sup>114</sup> The previous discussion and the

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<sup>111</sup> Leah Lievrouw, *Alternative and Activist New Media* (Polity, 2011), p. 14.

<sup>112</sup> Al Zidjaly, p. 574.

<sup>113</sup> Al-Shaqsy and others p. 61.

<sup>114</sup> Ain platforms provide access to audio and visual materials produced by the MOI. This serves as an archive with ‘a glitch-free browsing experience’. The platform also enables the audience to choose their desired media format. Link to Ain: <https://ayn.om/about-us>.

current characteristics of mass media in the country demonstrate the significant impact of the development of information and communication technology in Oman, despite the continued presence of government control.

## **2.4 Media Democracy between Social Responsibility and the Preservation of Personal Freedom**

The joint survey conducted by the Ministry of Information and Sultan Qaboos University in 2017 showed that one of the main reasons for the audience's negative feedback on Oman Television is that the content is from a government perspective rather than the public.<sup>115</sup> A similar concern was reported in a news investigation titled 'Will the Omani media turn into state media?' This investigation was conducted by Hamda Al-Mushikhi (2018) and integrates the responses of individuals involved in the sector. In response to her enquiry regarding the level of satisfaction with Omani media, rights activist Fatima Al-Hinaie remarked on the absence of trust and transparency in the media sector. She also reasoned that people approach online public spheres as being characterised by complete transparency without being biased towards one position only, such as the government's voice.<sup>116</sup> These studies confirm one of the longstanding challenges faced by the television and radio sectors: the freedom of speech of the press and the broadcast media. On the one hand, the government's utilisation of media since its establishment has enforced a restriction on the content broadcast by mass media. Any content that may put the unity of the country in danger is prohibited. On the other hand, the sense of loyalty and belonging fostered by the government among Omanis has created a kind of self-censorship towards everything that may cause an unwanted image of the Sultanate to be conveyed. As a result, both state control and self-censorship played a role and continued to influence the media content. The government controls various media content through the Printing and Publishing Law and Censorship Law of Artistic Work. Through several regulations, these two laws protect three principal entities: the state, the sultan, and religion.<sup>117</sup> Any harm or offence against them is banned in Article 4 of the Censorship Law of Artistic Works and Chapter Four of the Printing and Publishing Law. This has promoted self-censorship and extreme caution from practitioners and authorities involved in the sector. As

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<sup>115</sup> Al-Shaqsy and others

<sup>116</sup> Al-Mashikhi.

<sup>117</sup> Sultan of Oman Qaboos bin Said, 'The Issuance of Censorship Law of Artistic Works' (1997) (p. 2).



part of the discussion in the news investigation mentioned earlier, Salwa Al-Belushi, a journalist for the *Alshabibah* newspaper, shared similar concerns:

Freedom exists, ... Unfortunately, the restrictions of the press have become implanted in the minds of several people and writers who have prepared for their own restrictions and red lines that they cannot cross, even if the principles of freedom of expression are available.<sup>118</sup>

This makes defining the extent of freedom given to various media outlets in Oman a challenging task, especially with the absence of written media-specific policies that can provide proper guidance. Current laws are much more pronounced in terms of general rules with no concentration on the principle of the practice itself. In addition, Omanis hold a sense of social responsibility and patriotic duty, demonstrating the success of the government in creating cultural unity and a sense of belonging within the first years of state-building through the media.

The relationship between media freedom, social responsibility, and the success of media outlets was discussed by the Minister of the MoI, Abdullah Al-Harasi. He expressed his perspective in an interview with *Alsharq Alawsat* newspaper, insisting that: ‘The foundation of media is that both freedom and responsibility are two inseparable concepts. And media professionalism is a lifejacket for responsible media freedom’.<sup>119</sup> He also elucidated the importance, according to the official media perspective, of following the media discourse in which all opinions that credibly address problems do not harm or defame anyone and contribute to the construction of solutions. This position remains controversial, as it goes back to individuals and their understanding of freedom and social responsibility. An earlier critical study by Anwar Al-Rawas, asserted the need for Omani media to eliminate the factors of extreme caution and self-censorship in line with the requirements of a contemporary media system that promotes democracy.<sup>120</sup> Despite this, the changes towards providing more freedom and reflecting the voices of both the government and the public are happening slowly and with careful handling by practitioners themselves and the official media to compete with new media. Many radio stations’ programmes, both private and governmental, tend to pay

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<sup>118</sup> Al-Mashikhi.

<sup>119</sup> Mirza Al-Khuwailidi, ‘Omani Minister of Information: Freedom and Responsibility Are Two Inseparable Concepts’ (aawsat.com: Middle East Newspaper, 2023).

<sup>120</sup> Anwar Mohammed Al-Rawas, ‘The Reality of the Omani Media’s Practice of Freedom and Social Responsibility. A Critical Study’, *Journal of the Faculty of Arts - Alexandria University*, 1. 67 (2011), 341 - 408 (p. 65).

attention to current discussions and problems, and try to establish a dialogue between related individuals and authorities. Examples include *All Questions* (Hala FM); *Al-Dhahera Studio* (the General Radio Station); and *Al-Wesal Forum* (Al-Wesal FM).

The importance of media in the Omani context and its development process is clear. It also contributes widely to the visual culture scene in the country for its ability to combine various sense within its reception processes. The development of new media platforms has not only impacted old media and challenged authority but has also led to the emergence of new visual communication practices. Undoubtedly, the development of visual technology has emphasised the visual quality of culture leading to visuality becoming a contemporary language that constitutes a major component of modernity. As an example, in ‘Social Media, Visual Culture and Contemporary Identity’, Jennifer Stokes and Bianca Price integrated a discussion on how social media platforms have promoted more visual communication practices online and have influenced self-representation and identity.<sup>121</sup> Currently, users tend to create a personal visual identity which proves their existence within a platform and reflects their personal characteristics. As a result, this adds more to the visual culture field and is important to any given context. According to Julier, ‘we regard the visual as an intrinsic and important social and cultural expression of our times’.<sup>122</sup> This demonstrates the interconnected relationship between culture, its specificities, and its products. Therefore, the following section casts its eyes across Omani visual arts and their importance to Oman.

## 2.5 Visual Arts as Forms of Cultural Expression

The contemporary visual arts scene in Oman started in 1970 with the initiative of talented individuals who practised painting and photography as a side interest. Before going forward, it should be noted that the Omani art movement, as stated by Fakhriya Al-Yahyai, ‘does not have a long history compared with other movements, especially in the Arab Gulf countries as well as in Arab countries in general’.<sup>123</sup> One of the reasons for this is the unavailability of any resource that recounts such history. However, rock inscriptions and paintings at several sites

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<sup>121</sup> Jennifer Stokes and Bianca Price, ‘Social Media, Visual Culture and Contemporary Identity’, in *11th International Multi-conference on society, cybernetics and informatics. IMSCI*: <https://www.iiis.org/CDs2017/CD2017Summer/papers/EA876TF.pdf> (2017).

<sup>122</sup> Guy Julier, ‘From Visual Culture to Design Culture’, *Design issues*, 22. 1 (2006), 64-76 (p. 66).

<sup>123</sup> Fakhriya AL-Yahyai, ‘The History of Omani Women in the Fine Arts Movement’, *The International Journal of Arts Theory and History* 7. 1 (2013) (p. 3).

in Oman from the late pre-Islamic period confirm the existence of primitive art. Thus, it can be said that art has deep roots in Oman.

In the 1970s Omani artists paid special attention to natural objects and expressed their heritage through painting and drawing. In the 1980s and 1990s, new methods and forms came to light, such as video art and sculpture, which led to changes in the visual arts nexus. This development was caused by several influential factors such as the state fund for related activities through supporting official bodies, the Youth Painting Studio established in 1980, and The Omani Society for Fine Arts in 1993. The early establishment of these bodies testifies to Omani government's special attention toward the fine art movement. Other factors included the availability of art education in schools and higher education within Sultan Qaboos University's Department of Art Education. Moreover, private organisations, which continue to play a role in the continuity and development of the field, were also important.<sup>124</sup> A major example is Bait Alzubair, a cultural institution that began as a privately owned museum in 1998. In 2005, the Alzubair family expanded the scope of the organisation's work to include other projects related to culture, arts, community services, history, and publishing.<sup>125</sup> The Internet and other technological developments have also contributed to the introduction of new artistic practices and methods. Omani artists became aware of related global events, experiences, and forms, which they started experimenting with and added new artistic approaches to the field.

As mentioned earlier, contemporary media forms a part of overall Omani visual culture, and the visual arts sector is another active player. Looking at the organizational structure of the Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Youth, focusing on the division of the Directorate General of Arts, the visual arts schemes are designated as fine arts, photography, and digital art (Appendix 3: The organizational structure of the Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Youth). Fine art forms include painting, photography, video art, handcraft, architecture, Arabic calligraphy, and sculpture, with varied levels of contribution. Sculpture, for example, is not as commonly practised as the other forms. Fine art is the most academically studied field in Oman, followed by theatre. The academic attention paid to both fine art and theatre is due to their early beginnings and because they are widely practiced in Oman. Another reason is the availability

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<sup>124</sup> 'A Brief About the Beginning of the Fine Arts Movement in the Sultanate of Oman', *Oman Society for Fine Arts Sultan Qaboos Higher Centre for Culture and Science* (n.d.)

<<https://sqhccs.gov.om/affiliates/page/12/140?scrollto=start?scrollto=start>> [accessed 18 April 2023]

<sup>125</sup> More information about the organization is available at: <https://www.baitalzubair.com/ar/bait-al-zubair-2/bait-al-zubair/>.

of academic departments within Sultan Qaboos University that teach those fields in which related academic research is encouraged.

Fine arts are not the only art forms in Oman; other art categories include music, folklore, enshad, theatre, and cinema.<sup>126</sup> It is worth mentioning again that the previous division of the sector was based on the organizational structure of the Ministry, with the only official document showing what could be called a framed picture of the art scheme – visual arts in the Omani context are artforms concerned with the creation of images. This includes photography, various fine arts, and digital art such as graphics.

Other art forms, such as cinema, theatre, folklore, and handcraft, are part of the wider visual cultural scene due to the visual properties they possess. According to Nadia Mounajjed, the meaning of visual culture ‘multiplies to the modern tendency to picture or visualise existence’.<sup>127</sup> Thus, it is not limited to those dealing with creating images as fine artforms but also includes other visual artistic performances. Oman has a varied visual culture that carries within it the nation’s history, diversity, and heritage, and mirrors the early ways of living within the territory. This is reflected in both Omani folklore and handcraft which are two major components of cultural heritage.

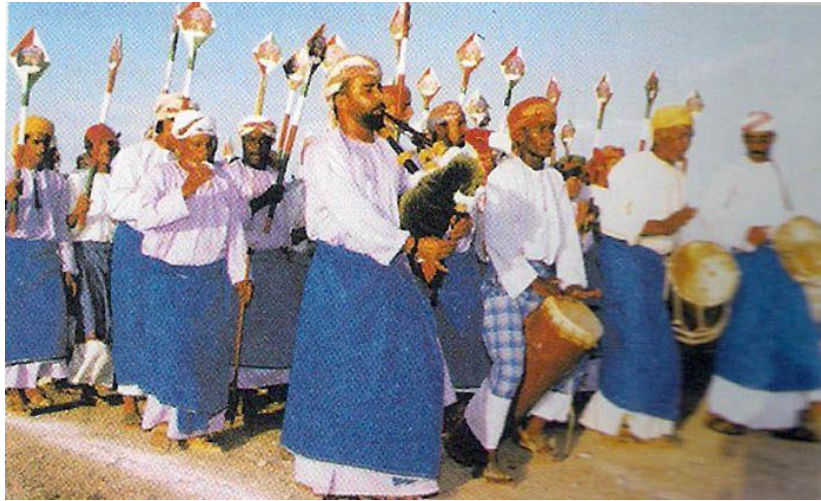
Omani cultural heritage consists of all tangible and intangible properties that hold moral value from an artistic, scientific, literary, aesthetic, cultural, archaeological, or historical perspective.<sup>128</sup> Omani folklore, as intangible heritage, consists of many songs, poetry, and dances associated with many practices such as fishing and agriculture, and others related to occasions such as weddings and celebrations that differ from one place to another, including *Albarrah*, *Almudima*, *Alhaboot*, and *Alsharih*. To illustrate, *Almudima* dancing art is practiced in some coastal areas, especially Sur (Figure 2). This dance is traditionally performed by sailors as enjoyment during their travels; currently the dance is not limited to them and is practiced by young people. The costumes, songs, and wooden sticks, held by the dancers, mirror how fishermen dress and their sailing equipment.

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<sup>126</sup> Enshad is Islamic-oriented songs that often depend on human voices and sound effects instead of using music. The Islamic songs *Anasheed* are distinguished by dealing with topics that have spiritual and religious features such as divine love, or praise of the Prophet Mohammed.

<sup>127</sup> Uzma Z. Rizvi, ‘Visual Culture(S) in the Gulf: An Anthology’, *Journal of Arabian Studies*, 7. sup1 (2017), 129-31 (p. 17).

<sup>128</sup> Sultan of Oman Qaboos bin Said, ‘Cultural Heritage Law’, ed. by Ministry Of Justice and Legal Affairs (2019).



*Figure 2: Almudima folkdance. Source: Omani Community Network, @Smucat\_OCN*

In contrast, handcraft is a tangible property made by Omanis and is considered an income source that contributes to the economy.<sup>129</sup> There are seven main categories of handcraft: silverware, fronds, wood, metals, weaving, and pottery. All these types depend on using materials and tools from the surrounding environment, such as natural fibres, animal skins, tree fronds, and other materials that assist inhabitants in performing their basic living activities. The major handcraft production is *Alkhanjar*, an Omani symbol of pride and authenticity which was added to the UNESCO list of intangible cultural heritage.<sup>130</sup> The importance of Al Khanjar is evident, as it is featured in the national flag as a sentiment for all historical battles that mark crucial turning points in the history of Oman and have led to a peaceful and prosperous Oman. All heritage elements are vital components of Omani culture and contribute to its collective identity, and are thus vital to the discussions presented in Chapters Four and Five.

The government's interest in heritage elements began in the first stage of its establishment, as it constitutes a major part of national identity. The first-line governmental body responsible for preserving heritage is the Ministry of Tourism and Heritage.

<sup>129</sup> 'Omani Crafts - a Documentary Study' (Oman: Public Authority for Craft Industries, 2009), p. 324 (p. 20).

<sup>130</sup> Yasser Al-Balushi, 'The Inclusion of the Omani Khanjar and the Camel Shoe Are Two New Items on the Unesco Lists ' (Oman News Agency, 2022).

Like other states in the region, the oil boom of the 1970s, has enabled Oman to invest in an infrastructure of history-making where the material forms of fort landscapes, handicrafts, old sharī'a manuscripts, and everyday items such as the khanjar or the dalla become distinctive sites of materialisation of the past, premised on the notion that they can be seen and are therefore indexical to the process of 'capturing the past' as heritage.<sup>131</sup>

The Sultanate emphasised the importance of heritage by designating 1994 as the Year of Heritage and by a later establishment of the Public Authority for Craft Industries in 2003, aiming to energise the field of traditional craft.<sup>132</sup> Not limited to handicrafts and folklore, cultural heritage includes Arabic architecture and calligraphy, artifacts, traditions and historical sites.<sup>133</sup> As a result of this and the continuous efforts put into marketing various crafts and sites through festivals, exhibitions, and museums, there has been a recognisable expansion of the heritage industry.<sup>134</sup> The use of museums as a medium to project a visual national identity flourished within GCCs during the early 1970s. Those museums 'contributed more directly to creating nationhood internally, consolidating and creating history and background to the country and its rulers via which citizens might feel connected to a new nation state'.<sup>135</sup> The government also set related rules within Chapter Two of the National Heritage Act, which prohibit the use of heritage properties for trading purposes, copying and imitating those properties, or even establishing private museums without official approval.<sup>136</sup> In addition, the government worked intensively to register its cultural properties within the list of World Heritage Sites.<sup>137</sup> Beside *AL Khanjar*, examples of registered properties include the Fort of Bahla, the *Alfalaj* irrigation system, the ruins of Qalhat, and the Land of Frankincense. This is unsurprising considering both the eagerness of the government to mark out Oman within the global nexus and 'that heritage, in both its material and intangible forms, represents the identity of people'.<sup>138</sup> Many Omani heritage objects are considered art forms and have

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<sup>131</sup> Sachedina, p. 178.

<sup>132</sup> Mohammed Al-Amri, 'Art and Craft Education and Its Institutions in Oman', in *Conference paper for The 1st World Conference on Arts Education, UNESCO, Lisbon* (2006), pp. 6-9 (p. 1).

<sup>133</sup> Mohammed Al-Amri, 'Living Heritage: The Influence of Oman Heritage in Omani Contemporary Art', *Mirat Al J'ama* (2001), 28-33 (p. 28).

<sup>134</sup> Sachedina, p. 1.

<sup>135</sup> Uzma Z. Rizvi, 'Visual Culture(S) in the Gulf: An Anthology', *Journal of Arabian Studies*, 7. sup1 (2017), 129-31 (pp. 71-74).

<sup>136</sup> Qaboos bin Said.

<sup>137</sup> Emad bin Jassim Al Bahrani, 'Efforts of Gulf Cultural Institutions to Preserve the Intangible Cultural Heritage: (Ministry of Heritage and Culture in the Sultanate of Oman) as a Model', in *Popular Culture Magazine* (البحرين: Popular culture for studies, research and publishing, 2019), p. 12 (p. 12).

<sup>138</sup> Fiona McLean, 'Introduction: Heritage and Identity', *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 12. 1 (2006), 3-7 (p. 3).

been a source of inspiration within the art scene. Indeed, if we consider various examples of folklore and handcraft, they are either expressions, references, or products that reflect the way Omanis live and attend to their needs. Thus, some art forms, in one way or another, are forms of popular Omani culture.

In Oman, popular culture refers to the Arabic term *Shaabi* and is any practice, etiquette, or pattern of behaviour attributed to the people. For example, dance such as Razha, Alazi, DanDan, and Bra'a are considered sung *Shaabi* (folk) arts. Another example is *Almidan*, a type of poetry using the Omani dialect; and games such as *Hawaliees*, *Shid Alhabil*, and *Walem*. Folk music uses Omani musical instruments and tunes, such as *Alhaban/Aljurbah*, as well as a variety of local drums, including *Mesindo*, *Alrahmani*, and *Alkaser*. All of these practices and many others are from the people themselves to either enjoy both their free time and long working hours or express their own. These are the only existing forms of popular culture in Oman. Other forms such as television, music, theatre, and games are not marked with *Shaabi* as they did not originate from within the culture itself.

Popular culture in Oman is thus characterised by folk culture. Its forms constitute an integral part of Omani heritage, which in turn represents an essential aspect of Omani national identity. In 'Visual Culture and its Influence on Folk Culture', Walaa M. Mahmoud states that we need a clear identity characteristic that can help visual culture to 'serves as a channel and a tool through which communication is made with others inside and abroad by all means'.<sup>139</sup> Forms of Omani folk culture are tools and elements used within the visual art scene to mirror Omani national identity. They add to it a sense of uniqueness, as I discuss in the following passage, and this is considered within the discourse on the correlation between culture and short films in Chapters Four and Five.

### ***2.5.1 Omani Arts 'From' and 'For' Cultural Heritage***

For a long time, Omani cultural and heritage elements have been sources from which Omanis derive ideas and adapt elements within their work in the field of fine arts, from painting to graphic arts. The strong relationship between culture and art within the Omani context is

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<sup>139</sup> Walaa Muhammad Mahmoud, 'Visual Culture: Its Role in Monitoring Elements of Popular Culture', *Folk Culture, A peer-reviewed quarterly scientific journal*. 43 (2018), 11 (p. 77).

evident not only in terms of practice but also as a general understanding of the interconnected relationship between the two. Mohammed Al-Amri's article 'Living Heritage, The Influence of Omani Heritage on Omani Contemporary Art' manifests the use of cultural properties in some examples of Omani artwork. According to his analysis, the most observed heritage elements are the sea environment and architecture, such as forts, castles, and mosques.<sup>140</sup> Some of these are found within Omani short film productions, the focus of this research, and act as cultural codes that, along with other filmic elements, constitute the cultural meanings imposed by these short productions, as noted in Chapters Four and Five. For example, mosques and both sea and agriculture environments appear in the short films.

Since the establishment of the General Directorate of Art, the directorate has always been located within the Ministry assigned to cultural responsibility. Despite changes and reforms in the organizational structures of some ministries during the ongoing state-building process and the latest state reforms, art departments continued to ensure their official presence under the umbrella of culture. Currently, the General Directorate of Arts operates as a coordinator and follow-up entity under the supervision of the Undersecretary of the Ministry of Culture within the Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Youth. In addition to their official allocation, there is a link between art and culture in official Omani texts, events, and discussions. Several forms of art, such as traditional crafts and aesthetic beauty, in the case of painting, that may be intangible have gained special attention from the government as they are all committed to the cultural identity of Oman.

In 'Beyond Aesthetics: Political Diplomacy and Cultural Policy in the Musics of the Sultanate of Oman', Majid Al-Harthy asserted that the Omani government's attention to and sponsorship of various traditional arts from the beginning was driven by two ambitious goals. The first was to use arts to create 'national integration and unity'; the second was the use of art as 'a mode of communication' through which the Omani identity is expressed worldwide.<sup>141</sup> An effective way to do this is through promotion of cultural elements via mass media and cultural productions such as films. To achieve the ambitions of the government, a special department within the Ministry is assigned to preserve Omani cultural identity. This department, the Division of Cultural Identity, is responsible for conserving related endeavours, taking into account both the traditional cultural heritage and creative cultural

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<sup>140</sup> Al-Amri, p. 28.

<sup>141</sup> Scheherazade Hassan and others, *Music in Arabia: Perspectives on Heritage, Mobility, and Nation* (Indiana University Press, 2021), p. 160.



industries. Indeed, among the topics that are frequently discussed within the academic discourse studying fine arts, traditional arts, and other performative arts in Oman is the relationship between the practice, identity, and cultural components of Omani cultural products. According to Fateh bin Amer:

there is no more important characteristic of Omani arts than experimentation and research, which is divided into two directions. The first is an internal one that is based on values, heritage, life, the environment, and Omani nature. The second is external, sensitive to modern and contemporary media and methods, whether manually or digitally, or scientifically or conceptually.<sup>142</sup>

Al-Amri's earlier publication on the impacts of heritage on some Omani art works provides a related example to support his last claim. The illustrated example of Salim Sakhi's artwork *Oryxs* exemplifies how the Omani Oryx constituted a focused element for the artist to experiment with. In his work, Sakhi linked the basic shape of the Oryx, its symbolic meaning of beauty, and his perception of love and harmony (Figure 3).<sup>143</sup>

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<sup>142</sup> As cited by Mohammed Al-Amri: Mohammed Homoud Al-Amri, 'Contemporary Visual Text in the Sultanate of Oman', in *Pillars of Modernity and Rebellion and Beyond* (Katara Publishing House, 2020), pp. 101-44 (p. 112).

<sup>143</sup> Al-Amri, p. 33.



*Figure 3: Salim Sakhi, Oryx. Oil on canvas, various sizes. n.d. Source: Screenshot from Al-Amri's Article, p. 31*

Another recent example is Anwar Sonia's work from 2016 (Figure 4). In this artwork, Sonia mixed both 'abstraction' and 'pointillism' styles. By using a mixture of colours and a variety of geometric shapes, Sonia reflected the harmony between women in the souq. This, in a broader sense, mirrors positive social relationships within the community.<sup>144</sup> In 'Sources of Inspiration in the Works of the Artist Anwar Sonia: A Critical Reading of the Works of the Visual Artist in the Sultanate of Oman', Saeed Al-Nahwi titled the artwork 'Omani women from inside the souq'. However, it is important to note that the original artwork by Anwar Sonia remains untitled. In my personal contact with the artist, he revealed that he does not typically assign titles to his works, preferring instead to allow the audience to derive their own interpretations from the art.

<sup>144</sup> Saeed bin Abdullah Al-Nahwi, 'Sources of Inspiration in the Works of the Artist Anwar Sonia: A Critical Reading of the Works of the Visual Artist in the Sultanate of Oman', 17 (pp. 13-17) <[https://maqsurah.com/home/item\\_detail/58404](https://maqsurah.com/home/item_detail/58404)>.



*Figure 4: Anwar Sonia, untitled, acrylic painting on canvas, 50\*70, 2016*

The tendency of many artists to test new emerging methods and forms to which they are exposed is somewhat challenging, considering that they come from different contexts and may follow certain ideologies. Thus, as in many other fields, it has the power to influence the cultural specificity of Omani art. This concern was raised by Fakhryah Al-Yahyai. In ‘The Significance of Omani Identity in the Works of Omani Painters’, Al-Yahyai, raised concerns regarding the impact of globalisation on Omani art:

There are concerns that the effects of globalisation and the removal of geographical borders between nations will lead to the importation of Western styles and symbolism into Omani art. Where this has occurred in other parts of the Arab world, some unique features of Arab principles and cultural beliefs have disappeared.<sup>145</sup>

She points to the ‘risk to principles and norms and Islamic ethics’ as a major threat brought about by globalisation, as many cultural characteristics overlap, and the distinction between them becomes blurred. She also mentions Younis Shareif’s (1999) concern regarding the challenges faced by artists who either develop their own identity or preserve their existing one.<sup>146</sup> Favourably, art practice in Oman is still marked by an original cultural vocabulary.

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<sup>145</sup> Fakhriya KN Al-Yahyai, ‘The Significance of Omani Identity in the Works of Omani Painters’, *Journal of Arts and Humanities*, 6. 01 (2017), 21-31 (p. 21).

<sup>146</sup> Shareif’s (1999) cited in Al-Yahyai, p. 24.

The late introduction of the Internet can be credited here as it also led to the late importation of new foreign methods, forms, and ideas. Because of this, Omani artists have had sufficient time to immerse themselves in their own cultural elements, study their applications, and understand them well. In his study on how Omani artists integrate their cultural memories within their art, Tala Moala shows how they carefully handle the process of modernising and energising heritage within their work. According to him, Omanis tend to delve into their basic cultural vocabulary and then adapt it to create a visual picture that shows Omani cultural identity within a contemporary art piece.<sup>147</sup>

It is apparent that the culture provides an endless source of materials, elements, and ideas for practitioners, yet the question remains to what extent it hinders and limits filmmaking practice. Considering the conservative and authoritarian nature of the Omani system, a further question relates to what kind of censorship is imposed on the arts. It was noted earlier that the government controls the media system through various laws in the field. For the arts, the Censorship Law of Artistic Works operated by a special committee assigned by the Ministry of Culture, Youth, and Sport is the only official policy. This law is directed at all audio-visual works, whether acting, theatrical, rhythmic, filmic production, as well as fine arts.<sup>148</sup> As mentioned earlier, the basic aims of such a cultural policy are to protect public order, public morals, and the interests of the state. Article 29 of the law provides the possibility for the minister to form a committee that includes ‘a selected group of clerics, intellectuals, and artists’ to ensure that the production is examined from various perspectives, including technical, religious, and cultural. However, the lack of an official regulation that adheres to the different natures of artforms is a challenge. In general, arts are open to various interpretations, understandings, and experiences. The same applies to what might be morally accepted by the public, harming public order, or against the supreme interest. Thus the practice of censorship is under constant review and in a state of flux.

Another way in which culture may constrain the arts is through the public acceptance of such practices. First, the late start of the practice of various forms of visual art was affected by religious beliefs. Within the Gulf countries, the appearance of literary practices, such as poetry, as cultural expressions were far ahead of visual practices.<sup>149</sup> One of the reasons for this is the ongoing controversy over whether painting or picturing is forbidden by Islam. Art

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<sup>147</sup> As cited on Mohammed Homoud Al-Amri, p. 138.

<sup>148</sup> Qaboos bin Said, p. 2.

<sup>149</sup> Rizvi, p. 17.

in Islam is characterised by its expression of beauty and life with an integrated structure. It also aesthetically highlights the greatness of Allah and strengthens faith in him.<sup>150</sup> However, the structure of art in Islam, as with any other discipline, is regulated according to the rule of Al halal, the permitted, and Al haram, the prohibited, through which Islamic arts commit to preserving the integrity of Islamic faith.<sup>151</sup> I refer here to the discussion on ‘aniconism’ in visual culture which is define as ‘the denotation of divine presence without a figural image both in religious practice and in imagery and visual culture more broadly’.<sup>152</sup> Thus, Islamic art, based on its pure objective, might seem aniconic. The followers of Islamic arts will note that these arts do not literally imitate the actual element but present it using abstract elements, such as geometric shapes. Aesthetic symbols and connotations allow the follower to taste the meanings and appreciate the creator.<sup>153</sup> This abstract tendency is based on the foundations of Islamic law, which forbids imitation and simulation of nature and its components to avoid emulating the creator in his creation.<sup>154</sup> Because of this, Islamic art is aniconic.

The controversy created by the Islamic perception of visual arts arose because of the link made by some Muslim jurists of religion between visual arts and the use of three-dimensional figurines for worship purposes. These jurists depended on the texts of the Quran and Hadith that warn against performing various actions that may lead a person to polytheism. For them, art that includes drawing and shapes of humans and animals is forbidden because it is a stimulation of the act of Allah and may lead some people to shirk their religious duties.<sup>155</sup> Others, such as Sheikh Awaida Othman,<sup>156</sup> argue that picturing is accepted and that what is religiously prohibited is sculpting, because three-dimensional figurines are a form of polytheism.<sup>157</sup> Such debates are caused by various interpretations of related religious texts. In response, Sheikh Kahlan Al-Kharosi, the assistant grand mufti of the Sultanate of Oman,

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<sup>150</sup> Saleh Hindi and Khalida Al-Kilani, ‘Islamic Art: Its Concept and Criteria’, *Human and Social Sciences Studies*, 46. 2 (2019) (p. 492).

<sup>151</sup> Hindi and Al-Kilani, pp. 498-500.

<sup>152</sup> Milette Gaifman, ‘Aniconism: Definitions, Examples and Comparative Perspectives’, in *Exploring Aniconism* (Routledge, 2020), pp. 1-18 (p. 338).

<sup>153</sup> Saleh Hindi and Khalida Al-Kilani, ‘Islamic Art: Its Concept and Standards’, *Dirasat: Human and Social Sciences*, 46. 2 (2019) (p. 499).

<sup>154</sup> Hani Abu Al-Azm, ‘The Concept and Characteristics of Abstraction in Islamic Art and Its Impact on the Development of Contemporary Designs in the Field of Architectural Ironwork Design.’, *Journal of Architecture, Arts and Humanities*, 6. 28 (2021), 533-50 (p. 534).

<sup>155</sup> ‘The Rule and the Wisdom of the Prohibition of Depicting and Shaping Animate Beings’, Islam Question and Answer Website (2012) <<https://islamqa.info/ar/about-us>> [accessed 01 August]

<sup>156</sup> Sheikh Awaida Othman, Director of the Oral Fatwa Department, Secretary of the Fatwa at the Egyptian Dar Al Iftaa.

<sup>157</sup> Ali AbdulRahman, ‘Dar Al Iftaa Clarifies the Rule on Drawing People’ (The seventh day electronic newspaper: The Egyptian Company for Press, Publishing and Advertising, 2020).

emphasised the importance of looking at the meaning of the text rather than depending only on vocabulary.<sup>158</sup> Islam has forbidden the worship of gnomes, and no Quranic text forbids them. Therefore, as Ibrahim Al Bayoumi Ghanem stated: ‘all arts are permissible unless they contradict the oneness of God Almighty, infringe on his prophets and messengers, glorify paganism and its beliefs, or call for immorality and vices’.<sup>159</sup>

Linking this to the discussion of the various impacts of culture in the art field, such controversy explains the unequal acceptance and number of practitioners in various visual arts fields such as painting, sculpture, photography, and filmmaking. Mounajjed notes that ‘the conservative nature of the Gulf societies may have delimited the use of imagery and led to alternative practices of visualization that are very peculiar to this region’.<sup>160</sup> For centuries, the main forms of visual culture in the Middle East were calligraphy, architecture, and decoration.<sup>161</sup>

Overall, the current active field of visual arts in Oman is gaining continuous attention from both the government and practitioners, especially the fine arts, photography, and handcrafts. This reflects the government’s interest in arts as a tool for cultural expression. How is art part of culture and directed by its context?<sup>162</sup> Academic attention is more on the old forms of art that have existed since the 1970s, which have been widely practiced. Art forms such as films, the focus of this project, arrived in Oman in the same period as painting, yet many questions still remain unanswered about this practice. This research is designed to answer questions such as what are the determining influences on filmmaking, especially short forms? How is Omani culture depicted within Omani films? To address these questions, the next section elaborates on the history of film culture and examines its current position in Oman.

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<sup>158</sup> Sheikh Kahlan Al-Kharusi, ‘What Is the Rule on Painting and Drawing?’ | Sheikh Kahlan Al-Kharusi’ (Youtube: Loved ones of the Messenger of Allah, 2016).

<sup>159</sup> Bayyoumi Ghanim Ibrahim Al ‘Fine Arts in the Light of the Theory of the General Purposes of Sharia’, *National Social Journal*, 52. 1 (2015), 31-58 (p. 33).

<sup>160</sup> Rizvi, p. 17.

<sup>161</sup> Rizvi, p. 86.

<sup>162</sup> Al-Yahyai, p. 21.

## 2.6 The History of Omani Film Culture through Individual Memories

Films are a successful entertainment method developed in Oman in response to the large population of foreigners living in the country. Unlike other art forms, especially fine arts and theatre, which gained academic attention within the Sultanate, film has remained relatively untouched. There are no academic studies that trace the history of the film industry in Oman, besides a couple of unpublished conference papers and presentations by Mohammed Al-Kindi, who is trying to provide insight in this regard. This is not exclusive to film history; in his study on the pluralist characteristics of Omani society, Ahmed Al-Ismaili noted a ‘dearth of reliable historical documents’, which challenge scholarly enquiry.<sup>163</sup> Another attempt to research and consider the history of cinema in the Sultanate was made by Majlis Alkhonji in 2020.<sup>164</sup> One of the regular sessions organised by Alkhonji’s majlis was dedicated to discussing and tracking the presence of cinema by inviting input from individuals who witnessed the old days of film screenings in Oman, especially those in Matrah and Muscat. According to a report published by Haider Al-Lawati covering that discussion, the presence of cinematic film screenings – commercial films – dates to the 1950s.<sup>165</sup> Films were consumed as entertainment by migrant workers, especially those from South Asia and Europe. It was noted earlier that before 1970, Oman was only in contact with three countries: Britain, India, and the USA. Indeed, the embassies of these countries were key players in bringing about the film screening culture in Oman. According to Abdul Reda bin Mustafa Sultan, the British Embassy in Oman screened English movies in the 1950s and invited several individuals to watch.<sup>166</sup> Similarly, in the 1960s the Indian Embassy would screen films once a week.<sup>167</sup>

From the Omani side, Mohammed Jawad Sultan, or Jawad Sultan, as mentioned in other sources, was the first to pay attention to film culture. Mohammed Jawad opened the first movie theatre, Cinema Riewi, in 1970 after getting a licence with the help of the Minister of the Royal Court at that time. The first screening at Cinema Riewi was an Indian movie called *Aradhana* in 1971. At the screening the theatre hall was full, and many people entered without

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<sup>163</sup> Ahmed Al-Ismaili, ‘Ethnic, Linguistic, and Religious Pluralism in Oman: The Link with Political Stability’, *AlMuntaqa*, 1. 3 (2018), 58-73 (p. 63).

<sup>164</sup> Majlis Alkhonji is an old Omani Sablah. It was founded by Muhammad bin Abdullah bin Ahmed Al-Khunji in Matrah in 1920. This majlis organises regular discussion sessions and invites related specialists to engage in and provide more insight into the discussed matters.

<sup>165</sup> Haider Abdul Reda Al Lawati, ‘The Film Industry in the Sultanate’ (Sur Al-Lawati Forum, 2020).

<sup>166</sup> Abdul Reda bin Mustafa Sultan is the CEO of Mustafa Bin Sultan Foundation, which has carried out cinema related business since 1970. His uncle and father were actively involved in the film culture scene.

<sup>167</sup> Lawati.

tickets as all tickets had been sold. Jawad's intention to offer film screenings for the diasporic community was clear from the very low-ticket price – 350 Baisah for first class, which is currently less than GBP£1 (nearly one US dollar). He also offered transportation to and from the cinema due to the small number of cars in Oman.<sup>168</sup> The following years witnessed the opening of several cinema halls – for example, Cinema Towell and Cinema Al-Harhi, and Plaza Cinema. Some of these halls were closed, and others, such as Cinema AlNojoom, still run today. Most of the screened films were Indian, Malabar, and Anglophone because of the large numbers of Indian and English workers. Egyptian films were also found in certain cinema halls. The culture of going to the cinema and watching a moving picture on a wide screen attracted not only migrants but also Omanis. In an interview as part of this research project, Khalid Al-Zedjali recalled his memories of watching films in both Towell and Al-Harhi cinemas during the early 1970s:

I used to attend with my father [...] and my mother... I was six years old, or I could be a year before. I liked the picture. The picture was very impressive to me, as was the appearance of the star on a huge, large screen with the movements of the actor and the emotional aspects.<sup>169</sup>

Despite conservative tendencies towards cinema, the field has received widespread acceptance from Omanis. As previously mentioned, some religious beliefs led to the late beginning of visual art, including films. An example is reported by Mohammed Al-Harhi who mentions that cinema attendance was fraught with guilt during the mid-1970s.<sup>170</sup> Going to cinema was believed to distract people from performing their religious duties. This may be related to the disappearance of the television set incident recounted earlier; according to Al-Amiri's, some rumours attributed a negative impact of watching television on people's prayers.

Unlike other visual arts – such as painting, sculpture, and photography – opposition to cinema focuses on its ability to influence audiences, time and money consumption, and the forbidden acts associated with it. Starting with its content, opponents of cinema point to inappropriate content and messages that are spread through films, which may lead to practices that morally contradict Islamic regulations. For example, love stories based on sexual needs, stereotyping

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<sup>168</sup> Al-Amri, p. 16.

<sup>169</sup> Khalid Al-Zedjali, 'Research Interview with Film Director' (Mrs.Sanaa Al-Hadabi, 2021).

<sup>170</sup> Amal AL-Saidi, 'Oman Cinema... From a Platform for Power to Address Common Issues', in *AlFaisal* (alfaisalmag.com, 2018).



perspectives, content advocating for the acceptance of the LGBT community, and many other religiously unacceptable engagements. According to Mohamad Al-Munjad, such content calls for both moral degeneration and intellectual decay.<sup>171</sup> In most cases, these ideas are promoted in a positive way and neglect to provide the negative perspective.

Forbidden acts associated with cinema include filming scenes that contain homosexuality, insults to the Islamic religion, or nudity, and watching these scenes in a mixed environment.<sup>172</sup> Moreover, the atmosphere of the cinema hall is dark and mixed which, it is feared, may lead to adolescents' desires to satisfy their instincts, especially if that atmosphere is accompanied by encouraging content.<sup>173</sup> The origin of Islamic regulation is to avoid any practices, gathering places, and discussions that may negatively affect the morals, behaviours, and thoughts and may lead to a distancing from the Islamic approach.

Going back to the 1970s, despite the unpleasant perspective associated with going to cinema, people continued to do so, but this habit decreased with the advent of home video and VHS players. Omanis continued to enjoy watching movies in various ways. I remember the days when we gathered at my grandfather's house each weekend to watch Bollywood films. My uncle used to own a VHS player and was keen to get newly released Indian videotapes. We enjoyed living a semi-cinematic experience provided by a VHS device in a dark room at home. The early exposure of Omanis to films made them into good consumers of world cinema; in 2021 the income of films screened in cinema halls registered a growth of 720,000 OMR (\$1,876,935) compared to 2020 when revenues totalled 1,239,000 OMR.<sup>174</sup> This confirms the continuity of cinemagoing in Oman, despite technological advancements that brought movies home through various web-based platforms such as YouTube, Vimeo, Netflix, and many others. Whether going to the cinema or watching films through online streaming services, Oman's population fits the title of a 'nation of film fans' used by Gordon Mirams to describe New Zealanders.<sup>175</sup>

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<sup>171</sup> Mohamad Salah Al Munjad, 'Entertainment Industry' (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia: Zad Group for Publishing 2009), p. 64 (p. 33).

<sup>172</sup> Yusuf Al-Qaradawi, *The Lawful and the Prohibited in Islam*: (The Other Press, 2013), p. 138.

<sup>173</sup> Abdullah Naseh Alwan, *The Islam's Rule in the Media* (Dar Al-Salam for printing, publishing, distribution and translation, 2001), pp. 27-28.

<sup>174</sup> 'How Many Times Did You Go to It This Year: About Two Million Omani Riyals in the Revenue for Cinemas' (www.atheer.om: Atheer Electronic Newspaper, 2023).

<sup>175</sup> Alfio Leotta, 'Small Nations and the Global Dispersal of Film Production: A Comparative Analysis of the Film Industries in New Zealand and the United Arab Emirates', *The Political Economy of Communication*, 2. 2 (2015) (p. 5).

In addition to commercial movies, Omanis have been exposed to documentaries on television. Documentary films were produced to target global attention towards more investment in Oman. Between 1974 and 2015, around 210 television documentaries were produced, covering topics including social development, environment and natural life, heritage and culture, history, and economic and industrial development.<sup>176</sup> Oman Television had a discrete unit for documentary films and a special webpage entitled ‘Documentary films’ that served as an online library for Oman Television documentary films.

Oman Television also produced narrative fiction. The most important was the 1995 historical drama *Oman in History*. This series, consisting of 15 episodes, showcased crucial periods in Oman’s history.<sup>177</sup> While the director, his assistants, and the screenwriters were not Omanis, the presence of Omanis within other production roles was evident. Mohammed Al-Kindi, a television director who shifted to filmmaking, was part of the director’s assisting team. Irrespective of all television productions, both documentaries and drama were tools to encourage a national conversation between the government and the public, even if only one-way. This informs the crucial role played by various mass mediums in Oman by enforcing a sense of belonging through the recognisable setting they provide.<sup>178</sup>

Oman Television also worked towards familiarising the public with the cinema by airing a special programme at the end of the 1990s called *Cinema Club*, which discussed several cinema issues and was directed by Khalid Al-Zedjali, a current film director.<sup>179</sup> Moreover, Omani television played an important role in feeding the field of filmmaking with practitioners. Some of the early film directors in Oman, such as Khalid Al-Zedjali, Abdullah Al-Batashi, Mohammed Al-Kindi, Jasim Al-Batashi, and Salem Bahwan, were involved in television directing and some were television actors. Omani Television’s contribution involved providing directors with directing related courses and training.

As a tentative conclusion from the above historical engagement, cinematic culture in terms of consumption has existed in Oman since the 1950s, which preceded the spread of television in the Sultanate and remains evident through the memories of individuals. Although there are important differences between television and cinema productions, they share some basic

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<sup>176</sup> Al-Abri, pp. 16-48.

<sup>177</sup> Ministry of Information and Youth Affairs, ‘Oman96’ (Ministry of Information Portal: Ministry of Information, 1996) (p. 53).

<sup>178</sup> Hjort and Petrie, p. 211.

<sup>179</sup> Al-Amri, p. 20.

principles that allow each area to feed the other with skilled personnel, such as obtaining the best output in terms of image and sound. Adriano Nazareth states that the,

Principles set out or accepted to lead to a film or television production/direction are identical. It is only the means required to achieve the specific aims that differ.<sup>180</sup>

The experience of watching a moving picture accompanied by sound and following a certain narrative is relatively common across cultures, with differences in technique and sense of pleasure. Thus, I endorse the argument that television has a role in the spread of film culture. The present lack of academic research may be due to limited interest in the field. However, the current attention from practitioners and individuals has highlighted the need for extraordinary investigation efforts, to which this project aims to contribute.

### ***2.6.1 Journey of Transformation: From Viewers to Battling Film Producers***

Omani film production practices did not begin until the 21<sup>st</sup> century with individual initiatives that were also behind the establishment of the Omani Association of Cinema and Theatre, currently the Omani Association of Cinema (OAC). The real start of promising fictional filmmaking in this newly emerging context was in 2006, with the first feature-length production *Alboom* directed by Khalid Al-Zedjali (2006: 1:43:43). The importance of this film for the government was to show the pride of Oman. It was funded by the Ministry of Information, Ministry of Heritage and Culture, and Ministry of Finance when choosing Muscat as the Capital of Arab Culture. The film was screened in 50 countries, including the USA.<sup>181</sup> For Omanis interested in filmmaking, this production gave an optimistic vision of the visibility of Omani filmmaking culture. However, what followed this feature were mainly short film productions, the focus of the next chapter – the few features that followed did not gain the same attention as *Alboom*. For example, *Aseel* (2012) and *Zayanah* (2020) by Al-Zedjali, *Search for the Impossible* (2011) and *Mahra Story* (2015) by Salim Bahwan, and *Salma* (2021) by Yousef Al-Belushi. Despite the differences between *Alboom* and the later feature productions, at least in terms of technical quality, the success of *Alboom* could be attributed to government endorsement. The funds provided and the effort to promote the film

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<sup>180</sup> Nazareth, p. 38.

<sup>181</sup> Al-Zedjali.

by the government confirmed the value it holds. The film was utilised by the government to showcase Omani society and the ongoing transformation within the country and to mirror its national image.

In contrast to the previously introduced formal placement of film as an artform in Oman, evidence suggests that, from the beginning, film was a medium for commercial development and social awareness rather than an artform or a tool of soft power. Films in Oman are used for commercial development by promoting Oman as a destination for international investment and tourism. They are also used by nonprofit organisations to promote awareness of social issues, such as campaigns that aim to reduce traffic accidents and promote blood donation. While other arts enjoy great interest and the availability of related activities in terms of public education and related majors within higher education, film in Oman is not seen as an art. This can be shown by the inactive status of the Department of Cinema (DoC) in the Directorate of Arts before 2014. In an interview, the Head of the Department of Cinema told me that, despite its official existence, the department was not active in terms of planning and developing the field.<sup>182</sup> As a result, a crucial question arises: was the Department of Cinema intended for the purpose of developing the field, or was it accidental due to the association of cinema with theatre? I would lean towards the latter based on the continuous link between theatre and cinema. To support my view, I note that the establishment of the Omani Society for Cinema and Theatre was intentionally proposed to develop a filmmaking practice, although the theatre was already an active artform.

As the only governmental body authorised to advance filmmaking practices, the DoC is assigned the role of representing the Sultanate at international events, supporting and sponsoring film-related events financially, organising workshops and training programmes for filmmakers, and proposing laws and regulations to control and organise the practice for both individuals and local/international private production houses that aim to artistically invest in the country. More importantly, the key role of the Directory of Art is to apply the Censorship Law of Artistic Works (97/65), discussed in the next chapter. Irrespective of this, the DoC is not the actual driver of the field, but rather an organizational presence that does not operate without the existence of the practice associated with it. This explains the inactive status of the

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<sup>182</sup> Head of the Department of Cinema, 'Research Interview with Authority Representative' (Mrs.Sanaa Al-Hadabi 2021).

department before 2014. Their actual role is examined in the following chapter to determine the state of the DoC today.

In contrast, OAC is a professional association created by a group of amateurs who aim to develop their practices and spread film culture practices in Oman. OAC runs as an NGO under the supervision of the Ministry of Social Development (Royal Decree 119/2002), on which it depends financially. According to the Royal Decree (2000/14) that promulgates the Law of NGOs, the Omani Association of Cinema is defined as a continually organised group comprising several natural persons, with the intention of conducting social, cultural, or charitable activities rather than pursuing material gains. The Ministry of Social Development administers the Association and provides it with an annual budget that covers administrative and infrastructure expenses, as well as any other activities and workshops. Therefore, despite its active role as a major factor in the filmmaking activity, to what extent could it enhance the practice and develop the film industry? The next chapter, focusing on narrative filmmaking, attempts to conceptualise the role of the Association and examines other influencing factors in the field. Before moving on, it is important to note that, besides the establishment of OAC, technological developments have contributed to the shift from film consumers to producers.

The credit for this shift goes to developments in film-related technology, such as digital cameras, which are lighter, cheaper to buy, easier to use, and have a wide range of editing software that allows creative Omanis to become film producers. Directors like Jasim Al-Batashi, Abdullah Al-Batashi, and Yousef Al-Belushi, who are all from a theatre background, took advantage of the related skills acquired in television and theatre and the available technology to begin producing films. Visual technology advancements have not only helped spread film culture to consumers but have also created the potential for a wider industry.

Digital technologies are removing out ‘medium specificity’ from films.<sup>183</sup> I noted earlier how VHS players reduced the habit of going to cinema halls to watch films by providing people with a home cinema experience. Similarly, new digital platforms are dominating the contemporary era. Grusin argues that films are now interwoven with other media and are no longer singular. For him, films will ‘continue to increasingly be engaged with the social, technological, and aesthetic forms and practices of digital media’.<sup>184</sup> A current example is

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<sup>183</sup> Andrew H Spicer, ‘Film and Visual Culture’ (2012) (p. 481).

<sup>184</sup> Richard Grusin, ‘Dvds, Video Games, and the Cinema of Interactions Dvds, Video Games, and the Cinema of Interactions’, *Ilha do Desterro* (2008) (p. 71).

Netflix, use of which increased in Oman during the COVID-19 pandemic, offering a large range of movies at affordable prices. According to a report from The Telecom Regulatory Authority (TRA) of Oman in 2020, ‘among the online streaming services, Netflix channels topped the increase in consumption by 140 percent’.<sup>185</sup> This change in film watching practice is a positive development for newer practitioners, as it has the potential to facilitate their enrolment within a wider context.

Many Omani youth have been attracted to filmmaking, and they have started using video technology without industry training or knowledge. This is one of the concerns raised regarding digital media. According to Eggo Muller, with new digital media spaces such as YouTube, the opportunity is open for the untrained new generation to participate and produce without following the ‘professional standards of craftsmanship, aesthetic quality, or ethical norms’.<sup>186</sup> Amer Khatib, owner of Barasti production in Oman, shared his perspective in this regard:

[it] has become a fashion, and many people do it without learning the basics and understanding the essence only because that’s the trend. People can use inexpensive cameras, have limited resources, and still make great movies, but they all boil down to the intent, hard work, and dedication for the project that has been taken up. Art is free, but art has rules.<sup>187</sup>

During my search for short films for this project, I searched through various video-based platforms. I came across hundreds of short films produced by Omani youth interested in making films, demonstrating the hard work of young people without any film-related education. However, some of these productions are limited in terms of story treatment and production values, echoing Khatib’s observation that, ‘art is free, but art has rules’.

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<sup>185</sup> OmanObserver, ‘Oman Sees 140% Jump in Netflix Users’ (Online: Oman Observer Newspaper 2020).

<sup>186</sup> Eggo Müller, P Snickars, and P Vonderau, ‘Where Quality Matters: Discourses on the Art of Video Making for Youtube’ (2009) (p. 127).

<sup>187</sup> Times News Service, ‘Explore the Evolving Film Industry of Oman’ (timesofoman.com: Time of Oman Newspaper, 2017).

## 2.7 Navigating the Position of Narrative Filmmaking in the Omani Context

The spread of filmmaking among youth necessitates the availability of clear regulatory rules and structured frameworks for both practitioners and government in an authoritarian system. The importance of regulations is first driven by being a newly emerging practice; and second by the circumstances that led to its upbringing and the methods of its practice. In relation to film, besides the Censorship Law on Artistic Works (CLAW) and the Copyright and Related Rights Law (Royal Decree 65/2008), the only regulations by the Ministry of Culture, Youth, and Sport are a document that includes a list of criteria followed by a text review committee for both stage plays and film scripts. The absence of regulations specifically directed towards the practice of filmmaking is clear.

In considering the media's role in Oman, it becomes clear there is no cultural policy designed to advance its contributions to society. All existing laws are regulatory in nature and are set to ensure the achievement of their primary goal of promoting a singular identity by identifying what is accepted and what is not. It raises critical concerns about how cultural policies can reduce the potential for societal development achieved by media. The need for a comprehensive cultural policy that includes both old and new media is recommended by a critical study titled 'Law Regulating Journalistic Work in the Sultanate of Oman'.<sup>188</sup> In the study, Abdullah Al-Kindi, Husni Mohammed, and Bader Al-Siyabi examined all media-related laws set by the government. Two of the major results are the need to revise and update the rules to be more applicable to contemporary features of media.

According to Al-Kindi and his colleagues, the principles of existing cultural laws regulated the media used during the 1980s – mainly radio, television, and print newspapers. As such, some rules are not fully applicable and do not include news media tools: 'Policies pursued in the past for broadcasting, telecommunications, and media are often inadequate for contemporary media and communications'.<sup>189</sup> This is true in regard to the regulations designed by the institution to apply government policy. In Oman, the Printing and Publication Law (PPL) and the Censorship Law on Artistic Works (CLAW) are fundamental policies that remain valid because of the way they were formulated, which ensured their inclusion of all

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<sup>188</sup> Abdullah Khamis Al-Kindi, Hosni Mohamed Nasr, and Bader Salem Al-Siyabi, 'Laws Regulating Journalistic Work in the Sultanate of Oman, a Critical Analytical Study', *Scientific Journal of Journalism Research* 6(2016), 1-55 (p. 51).

<sup>189</sup> Robert Picard and Victor Pickard, 'Essential Principles for Contemporary Media and Communications Policymaking' (2017) (p. 5).

kinds of modern arts and media outlets. Rather than specifying certain types of art or media, regulations were formulated by mentioning the basic nature of these products. For example, within PPL, publication is defined as ‘all writings, drawings, photographs or any other means of copying or transferring by any means and became tradable’.<sup>190</sup> Similarly, artistic works are mentioned within CLAW as audio-visual works. Therefore, both reflect the basic government’s perspective on practices related to the media and art, even if they are not inclusive of any reference for developing the field to ensure its effectiveness. Thus, what is needed is not a new law but an effective regulation that facilitates those laws. On one hand, there is a need for an updated regulation of the press and publishing law by the Ministry of Information. On the other hand, it is important to establish film acts or policies directed by the Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Youth to facilitate film practices.

The second observation made by Al-Kindi and his colleagues is the inconsistency and commentary between some of the rules as well as the issue that they are operated under more than one official institution.<sup>191</sup> A similar circumstance was mentioned in an interview with the head of the DoC when I asked: ‘Do private production companies fall under the responsibility of the Department of Cinema?’ She responded:

No, not in a direct way. To this day, this issue is not clear. Sometimes, production companies are directed by the Ministry of Commerce to obtain approval from the Ministry of Information, and sometimes from the Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Youth. The vision on this subject is not clear.<sup>192</sup>

A similar case concerns the way in which film funds are regarded. According to the head of the DoC, they provide film funding for productions depending on the economic situation of the country. However, the procedure is that the DoC only studies the submitted work in terms of aesthetics, and if it enhances the Sultanate, they recommend the film for funding. The decision about whether to provide funds and how much is the responsibility of the Department of Administrative and Financial Affairs at the Ministry. There is an obvious need for film regulations with consistent rules. However, what is more important is the

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<sup>190</sup> the Sultan of Oman Qaboos bin Said, ‘The Issuance of the Printing and Publication Law ‘ (1984).

<sup>191</sup> Al-Kindi, Nasr, and Al-Siyabi, p. 51.

<sup>192</sup> Cinema.



effectiveness of these regulations in facilitating desirable contributions to social and economic development.

Film regulations have proven successful in terms of both national economic advancement and promoting the national film industry in other countries from New Zealand to Burkina Faso. They actively contribute to the development of film culture in other relative latecomers such as Saudi Arabia. Compared to Oman, where the first public film screening took place in 1971, in Saudi Arabia the first screening occurred in April 2018.<sup>193</sup> However, over the last six years, the Saudi government has boosted the development of film-related practices. A major derivation is the Saudi Film Commission, established in 2021, which aims to develop a film industry focusing on local production and talent. It is too early to evaluate the success of the Commission's regulations, yet as a first step in spreading film culture in the country, the outcomes are promising.

After a 35-year ban, the Saudi government realised the power of films. In Saudi Arabia, cinema theatres were banned from the 1980s due to Islamic activists the Wahhabi Islamic conservatists, who claimed that movies cause immorality.<sup>194</sup> As a result, all existing theatre halls were closed, although Saudis used to watch movies via satellite, DVD, or video. For Saudi Arabia films are now a crucial instrument for promoting ongoing social transformation and changing international perceptions of the country.<sup>195</sup> Moreover, films as entertainment contribute to government efforts towards diversifying their economy.<sup>196</sup> In the Saudi context, film is clearly positioned because the regulations are effective, and the film commission is able to meet its primary goal of developing a new national image. The need for a clear position regarding film in Oman is important to develop its potential and boost the Omani economy.

As an attempt to categorise and grasp the official active attitude of the government regarding films, I reviewed related official policies and documents describing any related activities and events within the Ministry of Culture, Sport and Youth, and Sultan Qaboos Higher Centre for Culture and Science. Two questions in the semi-structured interviews with authority

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<sup>193</sup> Strategic Gears, 'The Future of the Saudi Film Industry' (Strategicgear.com: Strategic Gears Management Consultancy), p. 26 (p. 4).

<sup>194</sup> Anne Ciecko, 'Cinema "of" Yemen and Saudi Arabia: Narrative Strategies, Cultural Challenges, Contemporary Features', *Wide Screen*, 3. 1 (2011) (p. 5).

<sup>195</sup> Mohammad Salami, 'Not an Act: How Saudi Arabia's Film Industry Embodies Its Modernization Efforts', <<https://rb.gy/ams1bo>> [accessed 07 August 2023].

<sup>196</sup> 'Vision 2030 Kingdom of Saudia Arabia' (vision2030.gov) (p. 22).

representatives aimed to provide an understanding too (Appendix 4: Research's Interviews' Questions). A key document is the Royal Decree 87/2020, establishing the Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Youth, determining its competences, and adopting its organizational structure. Reading through the decree, there is no mention of film or any synonym within the list of functions assigned to the Ministry, despite the presence of other arts. Responsibilities towards other art forms such as fine art, theatre, and folklore are mentioned in the list of competences. Moreover, the only time 'film industries' are mentioned is in the section on Youth Centre, which refers to any film production. As a step toward enhancing the talents of young people and highlighting their creativity as a means to prepare them to be part of the process of social and economic development in the Sultanate, the Ministry established a youth centre dedicated to serving the younger community. The term film is mentioned under the description of the studios that were opened within the centre:

An integrated artistic space [...] for creative and talented young people in the fields of audio arts, sound engineering, photography, film industries, and other related arts, serving amateurs and skilled youth and emerging companies in the sector.<sup>197</sup>

It is clear from the above that the main aim of the studio was not to develop filmmaking practice but rather to enhance youth skills and abilities. These studios relate more to still photography with basic utilities such as cameras, lighting equipment and green backgrounds. As such, it could be argued that the first active reference to filmmaking is as a hobby practiced by youth; thus, the attitude of the Ministry to provide film-related activities and workshops is only a motivation for youth participation.

Another way in which films are perceived as material tools is that they can contribute to economic development through tourism. The sense of such importance was clear in a interview with Lora Said Al-Syabi, the Head of the Department of Cinema. According to her, film production 'has a strong relationship with increasing economic income in the Sultanate and developing tourism'.<sup>198</sup> This is achieved by promoting the country to foreign investors through promotional films that showcase Omani heritage and tourist places. Such an understanding is not surprising as films, mainly documentaries, have been produced since the 1970s and used to cover various development stages of the country to introduce Oman to the

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<sup>197</sup> Youth and Sport Ministry of Culture, 'Youth Centre', <<https://rb.gy/rqalm7>> [accessed 23 May]

<sup>198</sup> Cinema.

world. In her unpublished master's thesis studying the characteristics of documentary films produced by Oman Television, Rabaa Al-Abri concluded that films produced by Oman Television feature functional developments in various fields, through use of positive visuals, focusing on national geographic frames, and verbal text promoting Oman.<sup>199</sup> After using film as a tool to promote a single national identity, the government shifted its focus to promotional and strategic plans to promote a distinct and integrated marketing identity for the Sultanate. The promotion of an Omani marketing identity aims to reflect the competitive elements and advantages it enjoys in an effective modern way, thus creating a positive impression of the Sultanate at local, regional, and international levels.<sup>200</sup>

Moreover, filmmaking is considered a commercial local necessity for private production houses. There are many production companies in Oman which produce commercial films, such as advertising videos, educational short films, event videos, and promotional shorts for both government institutions and large companies. The contribution of these companies to fiction filmmaking is rare because there is no cinema industry. Therefore, producing fiction films is an untrusted investment for them, and they avoid it in unstable economic conditions.

The indirect impact of films on the economy through other fields, such as politics,<sup>201</sup> tourism,<sup>202</sup> and education,<sup>203</sup> is evident and confirms the heteronomous quality of films. Film continues to be a powerful instrument for other fields through which they indirectly impact overall economic advancement. This is not to neglect the powerful singular, autonomous quality of films' artistic value. Films as an art and cultural products are of undeniable influence on the advancement of local economies through providing employment opportunities and 'urban regeneration in stagnating areas'.<sup>204</sup> An example is the film industry in New Zealand, which contributes effectively to the country's economy. In their economic research and analysis, Michael Bealing and Todd Kriebel reported that, in 2016, the film industry contributed \$1.015 billion to New Zealand's GDP. It also provided a great number of

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<sup>199</sup> Rabaa Al-Abri, 'Characteristics of the Content of Documentary Films in Sultanate of Oman Tv Analytical Study for the Period (1974-2015 Ad)' (Sultan Qaboos university, 2016).

<sup>200</sup> Alshabibah- Muscat, 'The Sultanate Launches the Logo of the Marketing Identity to Reach the World' (elaph.com: Elaph electronic newspaper, 2009).

<sup>201</sup> Pelin Agocuk and Gökçe Keçeci, 'The Role of Cinema and the Effect of Educational Levels of Politicians on Voting Attitude', *Eurasia Journal of Mathematics, Science and Technology Education*, 13. 12 (2017), 7941-48.

<sup>202</sup> Rodanthi Tzanelli, 'Constructing the 'Cinematic Tourist' the 'Sign Industry' of the Lord of the Rings', *Tourist studies*, 4. 1 (2004), 21-42.

<sup>203</sup> Ajish G. Mangot and Vasantmeghna S. Murthy, 'Cinema: A Multimodal and Integrative Medium for Education and Therapy', *Annals of Indian Psychiatry*, 1. 1 (2017), 51-53.

<sup>204</sup> Allen J Scott, 'Cultural-Products Industries and Urban Economic Development: Prospects for Growth and Market Contestation in Global Context', *Urban affairs review*, 39. 4 (2004), 461-90 (p. 463).

job opportunities in various related jobs, such as production, postproduction, and visual effects. The total number of employees reached 14,000. Another indirect contribution is the promotion of tourism sectors that benefit from shooting locations, which become attractions for tourists.<sup>205</sup> New Zealand is an Anglophone democracy, benefitting from relatively easy access to a large market for English-language narrative film and is therefore attractive to overseas productions looking for experienced staff and interesting locations. In Oman, although the indirect impact of film is visible, appreciating art film production as a self-governed industry that serves as a significant economic force presents a challenging pursuit for ambitious filmmakers. Like New Zealand, Oman has spectacular vistas, but it is lacking in ‘openness’ and infrastructure for non-Omani productions.

Despite the official placement of film under the general directorate of art, the effort put in by the government around arts and their importance as a form of cultural expression, and the active attitude towards short filmmaking, films are not treated with the same importance as other forms, such as painting and photography. The idea of films as artistic cultural products seems to have been neglected by officials, possibly due to film’s early cultivation as an information, communication, and education vehicle in the media sector. However, it is worth noting that there has been some recent official consideration of films as art in the Sultan Qaboos Award for Culture, Arts, and Literature. In its 7<sup>th</sup> edition in 2018, the award in the art domain was for short film production, and in its 10<sup>th</sup> edition in 2023, it was for cinematic film directing. At first glance this seems promising, but for Oman to establish a national film industry in light of its unstable economic situation, a clear long-term plan is needed.

It is possible to examine the relative film industry in small nations. The experience of Burkina Faso, which has made its mark in the global film industry despite economic hardship, is a good example that Oman could emulate. Despite the difference in population numbers, the societies of both Oman and Burkina Faso are multi-ethnic, -religious, and -linguistic. Moreover, within these two communicative spaces, the media and films have played a crucial role in creating a national sense of belonging. However, in Burkina Faso, from the early years, a special company was designated to develop the field, SONAVOCI. Burkina Faso’s experience focuses on the use of tax shelters to attract international production and investment; part of the tax revenue is also used to develop and fund local production. This has

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<sup>205</sup> Michael Bealing and Todd Kriebel, ‘The Economic Contribution of the Screen Industry’ (New Zealand: NZ Institute of Economic Research 2017), p. 49 (p. i).

succeeded in establishing a proper film infrastructure, education, and an internationally appreciated film industry. The approach of attracting international investment and productions and the use of their revenue to fund locals is also seen in New Zealand, the UAE, and now in Saudi Arabia, each with its own distinct perspective.

The above discussion on the dimensional characteristics of the media and arts within Oman reflects the specificity of Omani culture, which is built upon unity and integration. This is enforced and strengthened by the power of media communication, which is used as a propaganda tool to serve the state's authoritarian political system. The effort of the Sultanate to promote its national image globally is clear through the proceeding work to harden the power of the media in contemporary society, where more emphasis is placed on visual culture. Contemporary Omani media continues to contribute, along with other visual forms and practices, to the visual cultural scene. Oman, as a newcomer to various visual forms, has emphasised the grassroots production of popular art, thus promoting Omani cultural heritage and identity within the global nexus. Such arts include fine arts, theatres, folklore, handcrafts, and photography. Surprisingly, film as a powerful communication medium is not as important as the aforementioned forms, even though it existed as a popular practice before television, through cinematic practices of going to cinema halls and enjoying watching movies. Film was also used by the government in the 1970s as part of their media communication strategy. The varied appreciation between fine arts and film is clear when considering the placement of OSFA and OAC. According to the Royal Decree of the Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Youth, the Ministry is responsible for supervising art-related associations, as in the case of OSFA. However, the Omani Association of Cinema acts for civil society under the Ministry of Social Development.

The government's aim to ensure that filmmakers convey the desired national image through films screened outside its border through the Artistic Censorship Law informs the powerful role of films in creating, promoting, and enhancing the national image. The practice reflects that film culture is actively present thanks to initiatives started by enthusiastic individuals to facilitate the establishment of a cinematic film industry. The government's realisation and appreciation of narrative filmmaking as an instrument for social and economic development a major motive for building an Omani film industry. In his model of cultural hierarchy, Pierre Bourdieu discussed the variations in the level of appreciation of different art forms. As part of his involvement with photography in the art nexus, Bourdieu argued that the placing and

appreciation of different art forms is controlled by ‘a hierarchy independent of individual opinions’.<sup>206</sup> This appreciation could be the reason for the great attention given to fine arts, in contrast to films. A concluding question here is whether the increase in film practitioners and their active efforts in filmmaking practice changes the government’s perspective and ensures a clear position of films within the Omani nexus.

By focusing on Omani narrative filmmaking practices, the next chapter aims to understand how film is perceived in Oman, why it is practised, and the surrounding influences that either hinder or boost its practice. The chapter will also attempt to chart the organizational structure of the practice to understand the general framework within which filmmaking is conducted in Oman.

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<sup>206</sup> John Hill, ‘Uk Film Policy, Cultural Capital and Social Exclusion’, *Cultural Trends*, 13. 2 (2004), 29-39 (p. 30).

### **Chapter Three:**

## **An Insight into Omani Short-Narrative Filmmaking Practice**

In the previous chapter I mapped the development of Omani media and the emergence of various audiovisual production including narrative films – produced for the cinema – in the Omani context, film's consumption as an entertainment medium for the public, and films' use as a communicative tool for the government to achieve wider political and economic aims through official media outlets or private production companies. Film production has impacted the public through raising awareness of contemporary discussions in society and related behaviours. Non-professional short films have been produced by theatre groups, amateur filmmakers, or official governmental bodies for specific campaigns. For example, the Royal Omani Police in Sur produces short films as part of its regular campaigns to raise awareness of road accidents; I was once part of the campaign's production team. As part of the collaborative efforts between the University of Technology and Applied Sciences, Sur in Oman, and other governmental and private institutions, joint programmes and events are regularly organised. These events typically afford students the chance to work in teams and gain practical experience. Students enrolled in film-related courses at the university have the opportunity to produce short films for various institutions. Participation in such endeavours not only adds valuable experience to students' portfolios but also boosts their confidence in pursuing a career in filmmaking after graduation.

Considering the aim of these educational films to raise social awareness, they can be accessed on YouTube and other social media platforms. One of the most salient features of these productions is the capacity to evoke strong emotional responses in audiences, which serves as a primary draw for viewers. Another characteristic is the use of comedy in most films to shed light on contested social behaviours and specific contemporary debates and concerns, such as curiosity about the affairs of others and stinginess. These productions, despite the poor filmic quality of some, cannot be ignored in practice because their existence proves the spread of film culture in terms of production in Oman. They also play a role in training and experimentation for those aiming for professional film art production. Short film director Hussain Al-Belushi stated that he formed a group whose members did not have any relation to art and started producing short films:

That was an experiment to see the extent of acceptance of the audience on how I can deliver my cinematic voice to them. After exploring, I decided

to raise the level of production and, of course, for that, you must know the basics and professional practices to enter the field.<sup>207</sup>

Besides producing social awareness films, producers create artistic films with cinematic qualities – these are the focus of this project. The current practice of professional artistic filmmaking is under investigation because, first, early filmmaking practices followed policies and regulations that were set to achieve the government’s initial goals, which were different from the aims of individual practitioners. Second, film production has been used as a tool by certain institutions that produce them under specific regulations. Regarding films as artistic independent productions, raises questions about the framework that facilitates these productions. The aim of this chapter is to pursue such enquiries based on the data collected from interviews and basic film analysis. The chapter tracks the development of narrative filmmaking, defines what Omani film is, and adds to critically understanding the determining influences on Omani filmmaking including the practitioners themselves, examining the national and transnational quality of the practice.

### **3.1 The Development of Omani Narrative Filmmaking Culture**

As discussed in the previous chapter, film culture in Oman started with citizens, both Omani and immigrants, playing the role of consumers. The focus here is tracking the development of short-narrative filmmaking practices and examining how Omanis shifted from being consumers to producers. The project excludes other types of short films such as documentaries and promotional films produced in the early years of Omani filmmaking. Before considering the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it is worth mentioning a short 20-minute film titled *Alwardah Alhamra (The Last Rose)*, produced by Hatim Al Taie in 1989.<sup>208</sup> Al Taie was one of the first Omanis attracted to filmmaking although he did not continue the practice. His independent film was produced in New York and screened twice; the first screening was within the activities of an Arab cultural evening organised by the Department of Middle Eastern Studies at Columbia University in the city of New York. The second was in a club for Arab immigrants in the adjacent state of New Jersey.<sup>209</sup> The production was not part of any

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<sup>207</sup> Hussain Al-Belushi, ‘Research Interview with Film Director’ (Mrs. Sanaa Al-Hadabi, 2021).

<sup>208</sup> Amal Al-Saidi, ‘Oman Cinema from a Platform of Power to Addressing Common Issues’, in *ALFaisal* (online: Al-Faisal Cultural House, 2018) (p. 53).

<sup>209</sup> ‘He Narrates the Last Rose Lest the First Testimony Wither: From an Omani Film by Hatim Al-Tai’ (2007), <<https://rb.gy/rcwef7>> [accessed 13 June, 2023].



educational course; rather, it was driven by the director's passion for cinema. Short films only gained visibility in Oman after the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Abdullah Habib, a writer and film critic, who is still involved in the field by engaging in related discussions, produced several productions during his early years of filmmaking, including *Shaer (Poetic)*, *Hilm (Dream)*, *Timthal (Statue)*, and *Lasto Ghalionen (This isn't a pipe)* in 1989.<sup>210</sup> The latter received appreciation and won a silver award in the culture and art foundation competition (Abu Dhabi, 1992). After distancing himself from producing films for a long time, in 2019 he produced a personal short film titled *Asabie (Fingers)*. According to Habib, he lost copies of the first four of these films and, as the fifth was being sent to film festivals, he could not share it with me. Moreover, he did not agree to be part of the research interviews, which limited my involvement in his contribution.

During my quest to locate film samples for analysis, I noted an absence of narrative films created before 2006. Thus, the start of Omani film production could be said to begin in 2006, following an initial stage between 2001 and 2005, when a few individuals shifted their attention to filmmaking after working in Omani television due to their passion for cinema. For example, Khalid Al-Zedjali produced the first feature-length *Alboom* and directed a television programme called the '*Cinema Club*' in the 1990s during his work as a television director. This confirms the role of television as a determining factor in facilitating the start of film practice in Oman. The development of short narrative filmmaking is illustrated through the following four sub-sections: The Set-up Stage, 2001-2005; Exploring the Nature of Filmmaking, 2006-2010; Finding One's Own Path Within Filmmaking, 2011-2014; and Self-consciousness of the Practice, 2016-2020.

### ***3.1.1 The Set-up Stage, 2000-2005***

The development of an Omani narrative filmmaking culture – producing film productions for theatrical release – was spearheaded by a group of dedicated people, including Al-Zedjali, Malallah Darwish, and later, Mohammed Al-Kindi and Salim Bhawan. These enthusiastic individuals were instrumental in initiating film-related training programmes for Omanis. Most of these actions occurred between 2000 and 2006. Muscat International Film Festival (MIFF),

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<sup>210</sup> Abdullah Habib, 'Omani Filmmaking Practice' (Sanaa Al-Hadabi, 2022) (p. 198).

started in January 2001, and the Omani Association of Cinema (OAC), established in 2002, were the leading actions that facilitated the real start of filmmaking practices.

The OAC reflects individual ambitions and efforts, as all members are volunteers except for the coordinator. Instead of working in an individual capacity, OAC has served as an association bringing together enthusiastic Omanis interested in filmmaking and structuring their energetic enthusiasm to facilitate the start of the practice. Even with its limited budget and voluntarily membership, OAC has proven its importance in spreading an energetic film culture in Oman through organizing events for the public. The most visible of these is MIFF, which began before the official establishment of the OAC, underscoring the important role of individuals. For those individuals, bringing films into Oman through film festivals would assist them in setting up the field and attracting practitioners. I noted in the previous chapter that Hollywood and Bollywood films – both key powers in the global film market – were the main films consumed because of the huge number of migrants in Oman. Those large film industries have significant promotional budgets, distribution links and other powers on the global film market. For Al-Zedjali, introducing new films to the Omani audience was needed to build a cinematic culture:

The Omani audience is accustomed to only American and Indian films. Well, when you say that you are presenting a new cinematic culture, you should bring new films other than those, such as Brazilian, English, Argentine, African, and Taiwanese films. This is what we did during Muscat International Film Festival.<sup>211</sup>

Aside from the economic advantages of film festivals, they have been used in Europe to ‘reclaim cultural pride for some filmmakers’ as a movement against the domination of Hollywood films.<sup>212</sup> Many European film festivals such as Cannes, Locarno, Edinburgh, and Berlin started after World War II between 1946 and 1951 to achieve ‘cultural and urban regeneration’.<sup>213</sup> Berlin Film Festival was created to rebuild the German film industry that was destroyed during WWII and to reclaim its cultural presence, showcasing Western European national cinemas.<sup>214</sup> In Oman, MIFF was not intended to showcase or rebuild a

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<sup>211</sup> Al-Zedjali.

<sup>212</sup> Ragan Rhyne, ‘Film Festival Circuits and Stakeholders’, *Film festival yearbook*, 1 (2009), 9-22 (pp. 11-12).

<sup>213</sup> Felicia Chan, ‘The International Film Festival and the Making of a National Cinema’, *Screen*, 52. 2 (2011), 253-60 (p. 259).

<sup>214</sup> Marijke de Valck, *Film Festivals : From European Geopolitics to Global Cinephilia* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2007), pp. 51-52.

national film industry because when the festival was established in 2001, there was no film industry. Instead, MIFF was designed to nurture a film culture into existence, providing ‘visual food’ for local practitioners. Film festivals established in locations with no cinematic infrastructure act, as Tanja C. Krainhöfer states, as ‘necessary platforms for meaningful discussions within the context of a film screening’.<sup>215</sup> For example, Burkina Faso Film Festival (FESPACO) – standing for the Festival Pan-African du cinéma et de la télévision de Ouagadougou – began in 1969 on a non-competitive basis.<sup>216</sup> The festival aimed to showcase African films that were ignored within the global nexus; however, it also constituted a platform within which African filmmakers could network and share ideas, not only between individuals but also between countries.<sup>217</sup> According to Manthia Diawara, FESPACO is ‘the most important and culturally unifying event in Africa, despite the ideological contradictions and linguistic differences between some African countries’.<sup>218</sup>

Irrespective of the current international reputation of FESPACO and that it represents a postcolonial undertaking, unlike MIFF, a similarity can be drawn between the circumstances of its establishment and that of MIFF. Both festivals started as individual initiatives; the first editions were non-competitive, with the competition element added later.<sup>219</sup> Therefore, both festivals were established before the existence of a national industry.

MIFF started initially under the name Muscat Film Festival (MFF), and in its first year, it screened non-commercial feature films. A competition element was added to the second edition of the festival. Parallel to the annual operation of Muscat Film Festival in visually inspiring Omanis, the Association of Cinema worked in equipping Omanis with the basic skills required by organising workshops. As part of these parallel activities, participants came up with several productions that then were shown and discussed during an event called Majan Days. In 2007, this became the Muscat Documentary and Short Film Festival, a special festival specifically focusing on productions made in Oman and by Omanis.

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<sup>215</sup> Tanja C Krainhöfer, ‘Mapping of Collaboration Models among Film Festivals’, *A qualitative analysis to identify and assess collaboration models in the context of the multiple functions and objectives of film festivals. Brüssel* (2018) (pp. 18-19).

<sup>216</sup> Manthia Diawara, ‘African Cinema and Festivals: Fespaco’, *Black Camera*, 12. 1 (2020), 106-16 (pp. 107-08).

<sup>217</sup> Diawara, p. 109.

<sup>218</sup> Sheila Petty, ‘African Film: New Forms of Aesthetics and Politics’, *African Arts*, 44. 4 (2011), 94-96 (p. 129).

<sup>219</sup> Imruh Bakari, ‘The Role and Function of Film Festivals in Africa’, in *African Film Cultures: In the Context of Socio-Political Factors* (2017), pp. 188-205 (p. 192).

During its first years, MFF provided Omani filmmakers with filmmaking knowledge, both visually through watching films and theoretically through the provided training and discussion sessions. Film festivals ‘play an important role in [the learning processes of] field participants’ by creating temporary ‘ecologies of learning’.<sup>220</sup> In 2008, Muscat Documentary and Short Film Festival merged with Muscat Film Festival under the new name Muscat International Film Festival. As a result, the festival encompasses both long and short films and a special category called ‘Omani film’ was added. This category is examined later in relation to film labelling and defining the concept of ‘Omani film’.

Through MIFF, Omanis invited international parties – film productions and celebrities – to Oman to establish a national film production culture. As Al-Zedjali remarked:

A star, for the average audience, means something beautiful. When they come to see Hussein Fahmy and Anwar Al-Sharif from Egypt for example. And get a chance to meet Amitabh Bachchan from India, then they begin to know that there is a group of people working in cinema. So, I was doing some kind of celebrity attraction.<sup>221</sup>

The presence of stars as a central attraction at film festivals is evident, adding to the festival’s reputation and attracting a large audience. However, in her engagement with the role of the star system in film festivals Liz Czach claims that centring festivals on the star system has the power to ‘diminish the status and visibility of the cinephile’s moment – making its very existence appear imperilled’.<sup>222</sup> It is noteworthy that MIFF features neither a red carpet nor a commercial element, although it incorporates the idea of a red carpet on a smaller scale to attract Omanis. Thus, it is not as popular as other film festivals in the region.

Two prominent film festivals in the Middle East are the Dubai International Film Festival (DIFF) in the UAE and the Red Sea International Film Festival in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. The Red-Carpet Gala Screening at Dubai Film Festival started in 2004, with the aim of facilitating the promotion of Emirati filmmakers to the global market.<sup>223</sup> It was part of the government’s broader goal of ‘creating a positive brand image of the country to increase its regional and

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<sup>220</sup> Charles-Clemens Rüling and Jesper Strandgaard Pedersen, ‘Film Festival Research from an Organizational Studies Perspective’, *Scandinavian Journal of Management*, 26. 3 (2010), 318-23 (p. 319).

<sup>221</sup> Al-Zedjali.

<sup>222</sup> Liz Czach, ‘Cinephilia, Stars, and Film Festivals’, *Cinema Journal*, 49. 2 (2010), 139-45 (p. 145).

<sup>223</sup> Donya Saberi, Cody Morris Paris, and Belisa Marochi, ‘Soft Power and Place Branding in the United Arab Emirates: Examples of the Tourism and Film Industries’, *International Journal of Diplomacy and Economy*, 4. 1 (2018), 44-58 (p. 52).

global standing as an emerging regional power'.<sup>224</sup> The eagerness of the government's leader to showcase Dubai as both a regional and international player continues to be reflected through various strategic plans.<sup>225</sup> One is to project a sense of soft power. The government funded the Dubai International Film Festival and ensured the addition of a vibrant look to it. Red Sea International Film Festival was established in 2019 as part of a broader initiative undertaken by the Saudi government to liberalize the conservative laws of Wahhabism and promote greater openness in Saudi society, with the aim of altering international perceptions of the country.<sup>226</sup> As such, both the UAE and the KSA put huge effort into promoting their festivals and ensuring that they received international attention. However, Oman does not seek to alter its external image, as is currently the case with Saudi Arabia. While maintaining its conservative quality, Oman enjoys a widespread reputation as a peaceful country with open diplomatic relationships. Yet, in the new millennium, that is not enough and Oman feels the needs to promote its international image as an instrument to diversify its economy like the UAE – to keep up with its neighbours. However, it seems that, for the Omani government, the film industry is not the preferred instrument to achieve this goal. A possible reason is that the government strives to maintain control and authoritarian power, which might be challenged by the film industry.

Nonetheless, the main goals of establishing MIFF was to attract Omanis to filmmaking practice, facilitating the grounds for film production, and in later stages, promoting those films internationally. These goals are being achieved to some extent; as a result, MIFF is highlighted as one of the main influencing factors in the practice of filmmaking. Moreover, besides MIFF, the OAC has put huge effort into immersing Omanis in the world of filmmaking. They have organised several forums, workshops, and mini festivals through the Sultanate. Despite by run by volunteers, the Association was able to promote a film culture and facilitate the start of filmmaking practice in Oman.

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<sup>224</sup> Saberi, Paris, and Marochi, p. 1.

<sup>225</sup> Gouher Ahmed and others, 'Nation Branding as a Strategic Approach for Emerging Economies: The Case of Uae', in *Marketing Communications and Brand Development in Emerging Economies Volume I: Contemporary and Future Perspectives* (Springer, 2022), pp. 41-57 (p. 46).

<sup>226</sup> Salami.

### 3.1.2 Exploring the Nature of Filmmaking, 2006-2010

Two of the leading filmmakers of this period were brothers Jasim and Abdullah Al-Batashi, who run a private production company called Dreams Centre for Art Productions (DCAP) in Muscat. Besides filmmaking, the company provides various audio-visual services for television and radio, advertising, covering and documenting various national and private events, stage plays, and producing animated and infographic works. The Al-Batashi brothers' background as theatre actors and directors has assisted them in partially exploring the film production field.

Looking at the film samples covering the period 2006 to 2010, six out of seven shorts – *Alkarithah* (*The Disaster*, 2006, dir. Jasim Al-Batashi), *Bent Gharba* (*Girl from West*, 2007, dir. Abdullah Al-Batashi), *Almenaz* (*The Cradle*, 2009, dir. Abdullah Al-Batashi), *Alzahrah* (*The Flower*, 2008, dir. Jasim Al-Batashi), *Raheel* (*Departure*, 2009, dir. Jasim Al-Batashi), *Para'ah* (*Innocent*, 2009, dir. Jasim Al-Batashi) – were produced by DCAP. The seventh, *Biadh* (*Whiteness*, 2009) was directed by Khalid Al-Kalbani, who also has a theatre background.

The challenge, it seems, was to write a full film script. *AlKarithah*, one of the short films produced in 2006 was adapted from a stage play, while *Bent Gharba* and *Alzahrah* were based on Omani folktales. Being new to the field, starting with what is known and what they are familiar with is to be expected from new filmmakers and is important in the exploratory stage of the new practice. A similar approach was detected in the start of the theatrical movement in Oman. During the 1970s, cultural clubs such as Alahli, Alnahdha and Oman became interested in theatrical art after it was confined to the school stage. According to Azza Al-Qasabi, most stage plays presented during the early years were borrowed or translated from international works.<sup>227</sup> An example is the play *Doctor Shail Samak* (*Doctor Carrying Fish*), based on a title by French playwright Molière.<sup>228</sup> Other plays were written and directed by non-Omanis, especially Egyptians. Examples include the playwright Noman Ashour and the director Mostafa Hashish, whose works were used by Al-Ahly Cultural Club to stimulate the

<sup>227</sup> Murei Al-Halyan, 'A Vision in Omani Theater: A New Book Provides a Detailed Panorama of the Theatrical Movement in the Sultanate of Oman' (online: Dubai Media Corporation, 2006).

<sup>228</sup> Faraj Omar Ali Faraj, 'Alienation in the Theater of the Sultanate of Oman: The Play "Our Dear Grandmother Welcome" by Abdul Karim Bin Ali Bin Jawad. Aa Model ', *Scientific Journal of the Faculty of Specific Education, Menoufia University*, 1. 31 (2022) (p. 198).

activity of the youth theatre.<sup>229</sup> However, some Omanis were in contact with playwrights and directors, observing them and learning from them. Several years later, they began writing and directing their own stage plays. Most of the scripts of the films mentioned above were written by the poet Samaa Issa, who started writing films due to his interest in cinema. The first of the scripts to be produced was *Bent Gharba*, in a 16-minute-long film – like many others produced in the same period, it had no synchronised dialogue. Directors in this period produced ‘silent’ films and depended heavily on non-verbal acting and the use of music or voice-over to convey and express their ideas.

All the films’ subject matters concerned the desire to reach a destination, escape, and find truth. The prevalence of the adventure motif in these films emphasises directors’ exploratory phase in their respective journeys within the cinematic medium and finding their way through. A clear example is *Biadh*, a narrative about death and how it affects people. The film metaphorically depicts the repression involved in the darkening of whiteness, using the idea that in Oman that dead bodies are covered with white cloth or ‘Alkifn’. The director did not use the colour black, the mourning colour in Oman; instead, he turned the purity and optimism of white into a feeling of darkness and scarceness because of death. In this dialogue-free film, the director builds his story in a non-linear narrative style and plays with a dramatic mixture of sound effects, folk music, and other musical elements (discussed in Chapter Four). Filmmakers did not tend to use the new form of expression, film, to discuss social concerns at that time, except for *Almenaz*, *Raheel*, and *Para’ah*. All three short films were produced at the end of this period and are discussed in the later sections of the thesis. The films exemplify the exploratory approach of the directors to the medium of film to express meanings.

Not exclusive to short films, in literature some of the popular subjects tackled by novelists revolve around self-searching, tracking social changes, and the relationship of Omanis with themselves and others, Westerners, and immigrants.<sup>230</sup> Another connection between novel, short films, and theatre is the use of narration. The practice of using a narrator to tell a story is evident in both theatre and Omani novels, especially in their early days.

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<sup>229</sup> ‘Theater in Oman between Beginnings and Ambitions’, in *Nizwa* (Muscat: Ministry of Information, Oman, 2000).

<sup>230</sup> Gulf Cultural’s Supplement, ‘Narrative’s Narration Experience in the Sultanate of Oman’, *AL-Khaleej* (2009).

It is clear that one of the characteristics of art culture in Oman is the artist's attitude toward experimentation as seen in relation to fine arts practice discussed in the previous chapter, where painters experiment with new tools, approaches, and ideas. Filmmakers seem to experiment by combining approaches from related artistic fields, using similar themes and directing approaches found in theatre and novels. This was a reasonable starting point for directors to find their own path into practice. It is worth noting that the directors' journeys of discovery paid off as two of their films received acclaim during their participation in film festivals. The first is *Biadh*, which won the Special Award of Jury for the Category of Gulf Short Films at the Middle East International Film Festival (Abu Dhabi) in 2008. It also won first prize for its soundtrack. Similarly, Al-Batashi's *Bent Gharba* won two major prizes: the Golden Khanjar Award at the first Muscat Documentary and Short Film Festival in 2007 and the Golden Camel Award at the Emirates Film Competition.

### ***3.1.3 Finding One's Own Path within Filmmaking, 2011-2014***

The achievements and experiences of the directors in the previous stage played a crucial role in motivating people interested in the field to engage and start their journey. Starting in 2010, more youth became involved either in creating non-professional films, such as Hussain Al-Belushi, or delving directly into the film festival world, like Haitham Sulieman and Anwar Al-Ruzaiqi. There was also Muzna Al-Musafer, an Omani female film director, who produced a couple of shorts, which, unfortunately, could not be included within the samples because the filmmaker had lost her copies.

Like the pioneers Al-Kalbani and Al-Batashi, who continued their presence in the field, Haitham Sulieman and Anwar Al-Ruzaiqi started their filmmaking journeys with dramatic shorts. However, Sulieman focused more on experimental films. Unlike previous films, the samples included in this period were scripted by their filmmakers with no literary adaptations. In their journey to start crafting their own ideas, the characteristics of their cultural and social context functioned as fertile grounds. The shorts of this period are centred around society and family values, relations between individuals or between an individual and society. Indeed, these are part of the wider range of subjects brought about by globalisation, which leads people to question their identity and their social and cultural harmonisation.



Despite the continuous influence of the theatrical style on the production of *Malaekat Alsaehra* (*Desert Angels*, 2015, dir. Khalid Al-Kalbani), the previous influence of theatre began to ease noticeably. The new approach is exemplified by Sulieman's production *Bateekh* (*Watermelon*, 2014, dir. Haitham Sulieman). Like his counterpart artists, especially painters, through directing *Watermelon*, Sulieman tried to experiment with a new visual expression. In his abstract film he depended on sound manipulation and played with the visual connotation created between a watermelon's black seeds and the dire consequences of war, as elaborated later in relation to the new stylistic outlook of the Omani short films. Another example is seen in director Hussian Al-Belushi's documentaries, *Almanjoor* and *Missing Piece*. Al-Belushi presented his ideas by incorporating some of the aesthetics and style of television reportage. Thus, both Sulieman and Al-Belushi marked a new wave of filmmaking through which young filmmakers tried to create their own special filmmaking identity.

### ***3.1.4 Self-consciousness of the Practice, 2016-2020***

Globalisation has brought about changes in various fields and added more complexity to several aspects of life. Oman has not escape such impact, and it is reflected through the type of stories told in films produced between 2016 and 2020. Subjects include obsession with social media, materialism, the quest for power, and changes conflicting with tradition. All stories built on family-centred narratives suggesting that these films might mirror Oman's social, cultural, and political reality. The discussion in Chapter Five examines these stories in detail.

It is worth highlighting that during my search for samples in this period, I came across many short documentary productions that were awarded internationally.<sup>231</sup> Such films were not included in the analysis as they are outside the umbrella of television production or commercial films. Therefore, these documentaries, alongside the narrative short films,

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<sup>231</sup> Examples of these award-winning documentaries are Hussain AL Belushi's *The Missing Piece*, which won the Audience Award at the 3<sup>rd</sup> AwladTeima International Film Festival, held in Morocco in 2018. His Film *AlNirooz* won an award in Japan, the Bronze Award at the Tenth Muscat International Film Festival, and the Audience Award at Zagora International Festival in Morocco. Another example is *The Straight Line* by Haitham Sulieman, which came fourth in the Audience Award, and eighth in the Short Film Awards at Wa'ai Competition in Saudi Arabia in 2019. In addition, *Memory-Like Stone* (2016) by Hameed Alameri won awards at Sweden Festival, Samawah International Film Festival in Iraq, and at Alexandria Film Festival.

demonstrate the continued interest of Omanis in filmmaking and the development of the practice that continues to the present day.

The development of filmmaking practice today is facilitated by developments in film-related techniques and equipment. In the film analyses, development within the practice was also visible technologically. Unlike the short films produced in the early years of practice, after 2010, most of the shorts were shot in High Definition (HD) and Full High Definition (FHD) resolution because of the spread of the full HD DSLR camera. I remember using a JVC digital video camera during my bachelor's degree, 2005-2010, provided by our college to produce films as part of the major in Digital Media. These cameras were replaced by DSLR cameras. Enhanced camera technology and editing software have afforded self-funded Omani filmmakers the tools and techniques to begin their journey into filmmaking. Acquisition of personal cameras and laptops has become easier with more companies offering their services in a competitive global market. Similarly, learning new techniques, approaches, and aesthetics is no longer confined to film schools. The Internet provides access to much knowledge and filmmaking equipment globally.

Yet Omanis needed to experiment and engage more within the practice to best employ these technologies to the benefit of their productions. Film-related technological developments only increase the possibilities for film directors; thus, the success of any production is based on the director's ability to use them innovatively.<sup>232</sup> Moreover, an advantage that has benefited Omani filmmakers is a change in viewing habits.<sup>233</sup> The development of video-based platforms has facilitated changes in cinemagoing habits, moving the watching of films into the family living room. However, short films are different as they are not usually screened in cinemas or distributed for collective domestic viewing – they are mostly viewed privately on personal devices, such as mobiles or laptops. Filmmakers have benefited from these platforms in terms of their ability to showcase their productions to international audiences. They are also exposed to international short films from which they are inspired and discover new approaches and strategies in filmmaking.

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<sup>232</sup> Ryan A Piccirillo, 'The Technological Evolution of Filmmaking and Its Relation to Quality in Cinema', *Inquiries Journal*, 3. 08 (2011).

<sup>233</sup> Jingxuan Fang and Wei Xiong, 'Impact of Digital Technology and Internet to Film Industry', in *IOP Conference Series: Materials Science and Engineering* (IOP Publishing, 2020), p. 072112 (p. 2).

There are clear changes in film strategies that followed or appeared in the earlier stages of filmmaking. Starting with the credit sequence, all films produced from 2006 to 2010 included a pre-credit sequence, except for *Biadh*. Their opening title sequences runs for a long time, up to one minute and 18 seconds, and begin with details of the production company, followed by the title, scriptwriter, cast, and director. Instead, *Biadh* starts with a title sequence and moves the credit sequence to the end of the film. The use of cold or title-only openings has become popular. The availability of video-based platforms has provided Omani directors with the opportunity to view different visual content and international films, which has allowed them to understand current approaches to filmmaking.

The title sequences used in films are usually not part of the narrative, but they can add to the film's atmosphere and story. In *Biadh*, the sequence starts with a shot of the location, followed by text on a black screen, then a shot of character, text, shot, and then the title appears (Figure 5).



Figure 5: The opening sequence of *Biadh* in *Biadh*, 2009

In *Altahoor* the title appears in a metaphoric shot showing a disfigured female doll that mirrors the focus of the narrative as addressed in Chapter Five. Unlike *Biadh* and other films, the title of *Altahoor* does not appear at the beginning. The film starts with a scene that

introduces its environment and issues. The title then appears for a few seconds, after which the story continues. Moreover, a similar approach of skipping not only the pre-credit but also the title is followed in two of the examples: *Ana Mashhoor* and *Hologram* start immediately with their story events.

Visually, there is a tendency towards starting films with a long or wide shot that establishes the setting of the story; close-ups are used to add more emotional engagement. All films used a Steadicam for shooting, except those directed by the Al-Batashi brothers, which used a handheld camera. Crucial developments include the use of special effects in the film *For Sale* in a car accident scene and the production of the first animation short *Karantina21* by DCAP.

The eagerness of Omani filmmakers to promote an active film culture is reflected through changes in terms of the number of productions, their quality, and the international appreciation of short productions at various film festivals. However, if we consider the timeframe taken by other small nations to promote their national film industry, the question arises as to why the process has taken so long in Oman? The answer necessitates an understanding of the determining influences that may either power or hinder practice. The following section elaborates on these influences.

### **3.2 Factors Influencing Omani Narrative Filmmaking Practice**

The new, less resource-intensive filmmaking practice in Oman began at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. At that time, the country was challenged by economic globalisation and technological changes, and the focus was to resolve the most urgent challenges to ensure the advancement of living standards and provide the population with opportunities to thrive. Despite the potential contribution of cinema to an economy, Oman has a small population of 4.6 million (2023) and a relatively closed economy, thus filmmaking culture did not attract government attention. In business, the size of the population determines the size of the internal market and demand for certain products, which is a crucial factor in the film industry.<sup>234</sup> Film production costs are very high, and it is crucial for any production company

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<sup>234</sup> Y Li, 'Impact of Population Size on Market Demand under a Market Economy', *Chinese journal of population science*, 8. 2 (1996), 163-68 (p. 1).

to ensure high revenues to survive. In Oman, this is a complex formula when considering the unstable economic situation and unemployment issues.

However, the passion of individuals overcame this challenge and filmmaking took off. Partial credit goes to the homogeneous quality of television drama production and cinematic feature films. Moreover, the role played by television is clear through producing the ‘*Cinema Club*’ programme and later producing and screening films in a cinematic style. Examples of these productions include *Alayadi Albaydha* (*White Hands*, 2016, dir. Anees Al-Habeeb); *Dorob Alhayat* (*Paths of life*, 2018; dir. Alaa Rababah); and *Resalah Wadheha* (*Clear Message*, 2018, dir. Amaar Al Ibrahim). The contribution of television to the filmmaking field is continuing through broadcast of cinema-related programmes, depending on the course of annual schedules. Oman Television recently unveiled its own short film festival, known as Ain Short Film Festival (ASFF), with the inaugural edition taking place 24-28 January 2024.

My previous work with Muscat International Film Festival, as part of the development process of short filmmaking, demonstrated its role as the main influential factor in the field. While few studies have examined the relationship between film festivals and cinema in the Middle East, this project, with its non-exclusive focus on examining MIFF, shows the strong relationship between film festivals and the film industry.<sup>235</sup> Since its inception, MIFF has acted as a two-way street, introducing international films to Omanis and acting as a platform for exchanging knowledge, talent, and opportunities, as illustrated at the end of this chapter. As MIFF’s significance has already been evidenced throughout the chapter, this section explores other factors that influence Omani filmmaking practice.

### ***3.2.1 Theatre as a Bridge to Filmmaking Practice***

Critically examining the film samples included in the study, especially those produced in 2006 and 2014, showed that there is a clear influence of theatre in the Omani context. Most filmmakers analysed have a theatre background, either through education or practice. Most of the directors interviewed in the study and others approached filmmaking after being engaged in theatre as actors, directors, or playwrights – others were also involved with other art forms

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<sup>235</sup> S. Loist and M. de Valck, *Film Festivals/Film Festival Research: Thematic, Annotated Bibliography*. - 2nd Ed (Universität Hamburg, Institut für Germanistik II, 2010), 91, p. 25.

such as painting and music. Regardless of the similarities between the two fields, directors moved into filmmaking, seeking a more creative approach and broader audience:

I started in theatre, and it took me to my dream. I shifted my direction to cinema and started as a screenwriter [...]. Cinema can deliver a message more quickly and its world is very impressive. It is full of impressive things like special effects, photography, editing, and all other complex processes that attract creative people.<sup>236</sup>

I worked before in theatre and television and came to the conclusion that neither is the cinema I admired since my childhood. Therefore, I shifted my direction and started my journey toward filmmaking.<sup>237</sup>

Theatre has facilitated my involvement within the filmmaking practice. Theatre plays a role in refining the skills of enthusiastic individuals. It provides experience in terms of writing and cinematography and how to frame the scene through the camera.<sup>238</sup>

The directors' association with theatre explains the acting style, language, narrative style, and dramatic soundtracks used in the films. There is clear use of formal Arabic and in some the use of 'White Arabic'. Formal Arabic (*Alarbiah Alfusha*) is the standard Arabic used across the Arab-speaking world. In contrast, informal Arabic (*Allahjah Alamiah*) is used at the national level and shows regional variety. White Arabic thus describes the language between formal and informal Arabic used in theatre to ensure the audience's understanding of the message. It is helpful to consider the varieties of Omani dialects as well as those found throughout the Arabic world.<sup>239</sup>

Discussions about language used in theatrical plays continues and has two main concerns. The first is the ambition to maintain Arabic identity in plays, and the second is to reach audiences and ensure their understanding.<sup>240</sup> Using formal Arabic would ensure a regional Arabic identity for plays; it may also serve audience understanding across borders within the Arabic region. Yet, when thinking locally, formal Arabic might be problematic, especially for uneducated audiences or communities where formal Arabic is linked to education and official event settings, such as National Day Celebrations, graduation ceremonies and any event in a

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<sup>236</sup> Hitham Sulieman, 'Research Interview with Film Director' (Mrs Sanaa Al-Hadabi, 2021).

<sup>237</sup> Al-Zedjali.

<sup>238</sup> Abdullah Al-Batashi, 'Research Interview with Film Director' (Mrs. Sanaa Al-Hadabi, 2022).

<sup>239</sup> Mohammed Bin Salem Mashani, 'The Social Aspects of the Language Varieties in the Contemporary Omani Society: A Sociolinguistic Study', *Journal of Arts and Social Sciences [JASS]*, 6. 3 (2015), 97-110 (p. 109).

<sup>240</sup> 'Language in the Theater between Formal and Colloquial' (2006), <<https://www.albayan.ae/five-senses/2006-01-02-1.879466>>.

formal organization. White Arabic works for events requiring public engagement, although that is not always the case. Many stage plays are performed with a variety of Omani dialects, especially those aiming to entertain the audience, indicating the flexible transition between formal and informal modes that characterises everyday language use.

Another area of influence is the type of soundtrack used in the films. There is a tendency to use more dramatic and louder music, as in *Biadh*. In this dialogue-free film, the director built upon his message using a dramatic mixture of sound effects, folk music, and other musical elements that evoke the feeling of watching a play on a stage. The use of recorded dramatic soundtracks has been seen in many Arab theatrical plays through which directors try to add more emotional appeal and engage with events. As a former theatre actor, I remember attending many plays in Oman in which directors used musical soundtracks from the beginning to the end nonstop; in some cases, it even overpowered the actors' voices. *Biadh* uses folk tunes as basic musical elements to produce its soundtrack, unlike many theatrical performances in which directors use international music – because they believe it is more suitable for a dramatic atmosphere than its Arabic counterpart, which is often characterised by emotional romantic appeal.<sup>241</sup> The tendency to use folk music and other cultural elements such as handcrafts and materials in Omani theatre is practised by theatre directors moving to filmmaking such as Anwar Al-Ruzaiqi and Khalid Al-Kalbani, yet in a much-controlled way. The influence of theatre starts to diminish as film directors start to build their sense of filmmaking and its style. Among the last films examined as part of the period from 2015 to 2020, there was little evidence of theatrical experience in terms of directing style.

The relationship between theatre and film cannot be neglected since the establishment of the OAC brought both forms together under the name of the Omani Association of *Cinema and Theatre* (my emphasis). This kept cinema under the umbrella of theatre for a long time. It was only in 2023 that the two were separated.

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<sup>241</sup> Fadel Khalil, 'Music in the Theater... Between Composition and Choice' (2008), <<https://www.ahewar.org/debat/show.art.asp?aid=125984>> [accessed 8 June 2023].

### 3.2.2 *Self-censorship and Social Expectations over Official Cultural Policies*

There are two main cultural policies set to control both the media and art sectors and ensure the protection of three taboos: the state, religion, and the sultan (ruler). Both the Printing and Publication Law and the Censorship Law on Artistic Works articulate the government's view on media and art, yet there is no clear regulation with respect to arts and films that would facilitate the implementation of those policies. As such, their effectiveness in the new emerging practice is limited. Policies were established to control the powerful media regime.

Focusing on the process of applying censorship to film production, there are two stages of approval: the script and final production. The first occurs through a committee formed at the level of the Ministry that approves both cinematic and theatrical scripts. How would a nine-member committee with only one film practitioner approve a film script? The committee includes members who are specialists in Arabic language and writing.<sup>242</sup> However, there is a difference between writing for a film, a play, and a novel. 'The job of the motion picture censor is to patrol the diegesis, keeping an eye and ear out for images, language, and meanings that should be banished from the world of the film', writes Thomas Doherty.<sup>243</sup> Diegesis is the 'semiotic concept' that refers to the film's story world, the 'spatiotemporal universe' created by the narrative text. Meanings in films are created using various elements such as characters, text, non-verbal cues, the sequence of events, music, setting, and symbols. Therefore, the interpretation of a film is a multilayered process. In their study of diegetic construction in relation to role-playing games, Mika Loponen and Markus Montola note:

Interpreting symbols is based on understanding the codes, genres, and contexts of sign use. Codes are systems of signs, enabling us to understand the connection between the sign and its object – languages, alphabets, and heraldic systems are examples of codes.<sup>244</sup>

For Loponen and Montola, it is important for both players and game writers of tabletop role-playing to be able to interpret symbols because the meaning of these games is constructed from 'mostly verbal and predominantly symbolic' cues.<sup>245</sup> A film is a multifaceted medium.

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<sup>242</sup> 5.SA\_JAF, 'Research Interview with a Member from the Script Review Committee' (Mrs. Sanaa Al-Hadabi, 2021).

<sup>243</sup> Thomas Doherty, *Pre-Code Hollywood: Sex, Immorality, and Insurrection in American Cinema, 1930–1934* (Columbia University Press, 1999), p. 10.

<sup>244</sup> Mika Loponen and Markus Montola, 'A Semiotic View on Diegesis Construction', *Beyond role and play* (2004), 39-51 (p. 40).

<sup>245</sup> Loponen and Montola, p. 40.



Understanding its message requires the ability to not only read the referential meaning but also realise both indirect and intentional meanings. That requires the ‘understanding of the codes, genres and contexts of the sign use’ which Loponen and Montola identify. As such, it is crucial that the censor committee includes specialists in film, audio-video production, and arts, in addition to other members.

According to the document outlining the criteria for the review process supplied by Jalilah Al-Fahdi, a member of the script review committee, the committee conducts evaluations and assessments of the work with respect to both its form and content. Content-wise, the focus is to ensure that the work does not prejudice the God self, nor the sublime rulers, does not go against authentic Omani customs and traditions, and does not offend public morals. In Islam, the God self is Allah, the master of the universe, who has no partner in creation. Films are not to contradict this tenet or impose any meaning of questioning both his existence and abilities. In addition to art and media, the act of blaspheming divine glory or the Prophet Muhammed is a crime punishable by the Omani Penal Code.<sup>246</sup> The sublime ruler is defined in the Basic Statute of the State (BSS) as:

The Head of State and the Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces, his person is inviolable, respect for him is a duty, and his command is obeyed. He is the symbol of national unity and the guardian of the preservation and the protection thereof.<sup>247</sup>

The sultan is not only a ruler but the ‘symbol of national unity’; going against him means going against the state and threatening its unity. Individuals who publicly challenge the Sultan’s rights or authority, or offend his person are punished with a minimum of three years in prison.<sup>248</sup>

The third area of concern is authentic Omani customs and traditions, which are major components of national identity. As part of the process of unifying the state, all practiced rituals, behaviours, and principles that do not contradict Islamic laws by various multi-ethnic,

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<sup>246</sup> Sultan of Oman Qaboos bin Said, ‘Omani Penal Code’, in *Royal Decree* (Ministry of Justice and Legal Affairs website: Ministry of Justice and Legal Affairs, 2018).

<sup>247</sup> ‘The Basic Statute of the State’, in *ROYAL DECREE NO. 6/2021*, ed. by The Ministry of Justice and Legal Affairs (Official Gazette, 2021), p. 28.

<sup>248</sup> The Sultan of Oman Haitham bin Tareq, ‘Amendment of Certain Provisions of the Omani Penal Code’, in *68/2022*, ed. by Ministry of Justice and Legal Affairs (official Newspapers: Ministry of Justice and Legal Affairs, 2022).

religious, and linguistic communities were united under a single collective identity.<sup>249</sup> The act of protecting these customs aims to prevent conflict between various groups. Thus, it ensures the presence and continuation of tolerance as a major quality of society.

The last aspect considered is the protection of public morals. As a Muslim country, the integrated system of values and ethics is based on principles of Islamic law, and its main goal is to control human behaviour to ensure the stability of any given community.<sup>250</sup> Respecting the Basic Statute of the State, the laws and orders issued by the public authorities in their implementation thereof, observing public order, and respecting public morals is a duty incumbent on all residents of the Sultanate.<sup>251</sup>

Examples of these morals include respect for oneself and others, collaboration, self-esteem, peace, helping others, honesty, and respect for the privacy of others. These morals regulate a person's relationship with God and others. According to Chapter Five of the Omani Penal Law, issues that may contradict public morale and threaten the stability of society are violations of honour and dignity, incitement to debauchery, sodomy, alcohol and drug abuse, public scandals, fornication, and gambling.<sup>252</sup> In the process of approving any script or film, the committee is keen that the film or text does not contain any scenes that may promote such actions, whether as an act or through dialogue or indirect reference. Thus, the committee members evaluate the work by looking at the language or dialect used, spelling and linguistic errors, styles of expression, characterisation of characters, and many other factors.<sup>253</sup> Incorporating both content and form is crucial and is imposed by powerful cultural products and the symbolic meaning they may impose.<sup>254</sup>

Censorship in the context of Oman is, in the first instance, a regulative and policing process working towards ensuring stability. However, in some cases, it acts as a silencing policy, whereby certain topics are banned from discussion. An example of these topics is discrimination between white and Black people. Despite the abolition of the slave trade in

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<sup>249</sup> Examples of these are, 'Alhena' night in wedding ceremonies, 'Qarnqashoh' in the middle of Ramadan, 'Habtat AlEid', a special open market taking place prior to the first day of Eid, and many other festivals that differ from one area to another in the country.

<sup>250</sup> Mohammed Ahmed Mansour, 'Public Order and Morals' (2013), <<https://rb.gy/wbqns6>> [accessed 10 August 2023].

<sup>251</sup> The Basic Statute of the State.

<sup>252</sup> Royal Oman Police, 'The Omani Penal Law' (Official Gazette: Royal Oman Police), pp. 1-45 (p. 31).

<sup>253</sup> Youth and Sport Ministry of Culture, 'The Criterion for Scripts Review Process', ed. by General Directory of Arts, p. 1.

<sup>254</sup> Laëtitia Kulyk, 'Film Nationality: The Relevance of This Concept in Europe', *The Journal of Arts Management, Law, and Society*, 50. 2 (2020), 71-84 (p. 72).

Oman prior to 1970, certain individuals within Omani society continue to hold the perception that individuals with dark skin are associated with slavery. During the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the demand for labour in Oman led some Arab merchants to import slaves from East Africa for the pearl and date industries.<sup>255</sup> As a result, some Omanis still refer to individuals with dark skin as ‘*Abeed*’ (slaves) and those with white skin as ‘*Arabah*’ (masters). This perception persists at the societal level, and some white families prohibit their members from marrying individuals with dark skin. The committee does not approve any work tackling such issues, as in the case of Haitham Sulieman’s proposed script, which was rejected in case the production’s discussion of the issue created controversy and tension.<sup>256</sup>

In the second stage of censorship – final production approval – the finished film is evaluated by the Department of Cinema, where none of the employees are experts in filmmaking. This is crucial as it leaves production at the mercy of personal interpretation. The concern caused by such an issue at both stages is that it may hinder the process of filmmaking in the first instance and obstruct producing certain films that might have a powerful societal impact. In his interview, Al-Zedjali expressed concern with the censorship process as he often faces initial refusal of his scripts or productions, yet after meetings with higher authority in the Ministry of Culture Sport and Youth as an appeal to the decision, he received required approval. According to him:

If the production tackles, even at a minor level, one of the three taboos, the committee will refuse to approve the work, then you are forced to escalate the matter to a higher official; as a higher official has little fear, it goes up to the top, until you reach the Minister. To whom you explain and obtain recommendations for approval.<sup>257</sup>

Al-Zedjali’s experience is in the feature film production, where the story is more complex in nature. For short films, such issues are rare, but it might have a major influence in the long run. It also brings the question of film education into the discussion as another determining factor. Looking at short filmmaking as a process, the influence of censorship law may not seem to be major, unlike its impact on feature filmmaking. As per my discussion with a member of the script approval committee, the decision on whether to submit a script for

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<sup>255</sup> Matthew S. Hopper, ‘Introduction’, in *Slaves of One Master: Globalization and Slavery in Arabia in the Age of Empire* (London: Yale University Press, 2015) (p. 15).

<sup>256</sup> Sulieman.

<sup>257</sup> Al-Zedjali.

approval is the director's duty, depending on their production plan.<sup>258</sup> It was noted that if a director is planning to produce and show his film production outside Oman, then he should get approval for his production; otherwise, it is not needed. That distinction raises questions about the fourth goal for script approvals – the protection of public morals.

I would relate a recent incident in which an individual appeared on the social media platform Snapchat and engaged in discussion about marriage-related concerns. The person used very specific terms about how sex is performed between couples, including different positions; such terms and topics are not publicly spoken about in Oman and considered a private matter among married couples. Omanis considered the way in which the person talked, and the vocabulary used, was unacceptable and offended public morals. As a result, the incident spread widely, and a special hashtag was issued by the public asking: where is the censorship? The individual was arrested, but the message had already been communicated. The relation between this incident and the present discussion is that even local productions could cause what can be regarded as a social threat for some people, even if they were banned after being shared. Productions may disappear, yet their influence may remain. The incident also mirrors the conservative quality of Omani society. Instead of 'unliking' his content, the majority reacted against him and requested the authority take measures to stop him. This shows the power of the conservative quality of society in maintaining individuals' practices within the frame of 'cultural appropriateness'. What is appropriate is any practice, saying, or idea that does not contradict Islamic regulation and societal values. As such, Omani society constitutes a crucial part of the first censorship stage that empowers filmmakers' self-control over their production. The following section includes some examples and filmmakers' experiences that reflect the role of society in such matters.

During my contact with director Abdullah Al-Batashi seeking film samples, I became aware of two short films, both produced in 2005 and 2010, which had been meticulously preserved: *Raheel* and *Bra'ah*. The director sent these two productions to the Gulf Film Festival, but he did not upload these films online. It might be normal to not share production online, as some directors aim to send films to festivals, yet for Al-Batashi, the main reason he did not share these two films was, according to the director, that *Raheel* includes scenes illustrating sexual abuse of the main character, which would 'not be accepted by the society'.<sup>259</sup>

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<sup>258</sup> 5.SA\_JAF.

<sup>259</sup> Al-Batashi.

In *Raheel*, through the story of a lonely young woman who spends her time travelling between the mountains looking for a suitable place to sleep, the director represents the journey of someone seeking truth. Despite her beauty and young age, the girl moves from one place to another under the sun, carrying her belongings wrapped in a piece of clothing. The film includes a narration describing her journey and, in some places, questioning her living situation. As the girl finds a good place to settle, she opens her staff and sleeps. In the morning, she wakes and washes her face in a nearby running pool of water. She prepares coffee and later wanders around. At night, a man joins her. He rapes the young woman and leaves her in sorrow. The following day, another man arrives and does the same. As time passes, the girl becomes pregnant and continues her journey through the mountains. One day, she reaches an inhabited place, and she gets tired as she is about to deliver her baby. An old man watches her until she delivers her baby and then dies. The old man takes the baby and leaves the place. Time passes, and her baby grows up and keeps questioning the stories she hears from others about her mother by narrating the film.

As I watched the film, the first question that came to mind was about how the director decided to produce it. In the scene in which the man rapes the young woman, the director used close-up and mid-close-up shots of the actors separately, with high and low angles. There is no shot that combines both actors simultaneously, suggesting that they were shot separately. However, societally, if it is not acceptable to speak publicly about crimes against morals, such as rape and other sex-related issues, is it acceptable to act it out on film?

The second film is *Bra'ah*, in which the director touches on a very sensitive issue: the abuse and exploitation of children. Bra'ah, aged eight to ten years, along with two other kids, sells incense to people in a petrol station area, which is crowded and unsafe for them. The issue addressed is that of using children to earn money, as people sympathise with them and buy incense from them even if they do not really want it. The story occurs at night, and we see the children yawn. Bra'ah writes her homework during her rest time, illustrating that she goes to school in the morning. The three kids are watched over by a man, supervising them from a distance, while he does nothing. As time passes, Bra'ah has a nap as she finishes selling all the portions she had. When it is home time, the girl wakes Bra'ah up, as they need to go. Bra'ah decides to go and buy food for her mother and asks the girl to inform the man. The man collects money from the children, counts it, and then gives the kids a very small amount of money as a reward. Bra'ah is late, and while the man is waiting for her, two men see him

and call the police. The man becomes scared and leaves the place immediately, leaving Bra'ah behind. Bra'ah then decides to walk home; on her way, she passes through a children's playground. She enters and enjoys herself. Subsequently, while walking, she passes two drunken men who follow her. The film finishes, showing Bra'ah laying on the ground with her belongings around her. While there is no direct scene showing that Bra'ah was raped, the director decided to protect the actor from being known or affected psychologically when she grew up by choosing not to share the film.

These two short films show the self-control applied by the director himself over his films and his consciousness of what is culturally appropriate. Other film samples also mirror this tendency, including *Almenaz* (2009) by Abdullah Al-Batashi. I will engage with this production in depth in the following chapter, so it is sufficient here to note that the film is about a married couple suffering from the death of their children. In the scenes concerning the married couple, the beds are placed apart. Moreover, in all other films revolving around families, there is no scene where both partners are shot in the bedroom, and all events take place in other locations, such as the dining room or the car. Some may argue that the censorship law has total control over directors; however, Omani television's serials, which follow the same rules, include scenes in bedrooms and showing close contact. Censorship regulations do not ban shared locations and the accepted limits of gender contact; thus, short films' directors' attitudes are a result of self-regulation building on how they were raised.

Whether they went through the censorship process or not, the sense of respecting the cultural morals, value, and specificity was evident throughout all the interviews. For these directors, there is always a way to discuss the current issue in creative ways that does not contradict cultural acceptability. For instance, artists may use metaphorical, symbolic, or satirical expressions to convey their ideas without directly breaching censorship regulations. In his interview as filmmaker, Mahmoud Al-Salami acknowledged that to avoid any conflict with society, he approached his ideas metaphorically and built them in a philosophical way.<sup>260</sup>

This echoes the issue faced by the media sector in which self-censorship overpowers the state's censorship, thus influencing the sector's professionalism and function. However, with young filmmakers, another participant might play a role. Actors or producers may impose another level of censorship, thus challenging this practice. In one of the research interviews,

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<sup>260</sup> Mahmoud Al-Salmi, 'Research Interview with a Filmmaker' (Mrs. Sanaa Al-Hadabi, 2021).

the director told the story of the film that he wrote and wanted to produce. The narrative concerns racism and includes terms that are offensive but are used by some within society as customary names and titles. He did not obtain an agreement for funding from the production company that he approached. He elaborated:

After I completed telling them the story, one said that I am not ready, frankly, to shoot this. We do not want our company to be involved in such production. The second said, ‘It is impossible for me to be part of this type of work’. I told them: ‘Is it not a realistic narrative?’ [...]. They said that we know it exists, but you are showing something that is hidden or sensitive and could cause controversy. They then expressed their fear of being confronted by members of society if they took part.<sup>261</sup>

In this case, the producers refused to produce this film, which was to be screened locally and did not need to go through script approval from the Ministry. They acted as the approval review committee, as in the case of Suliman’s script which was not approved for the same reason.

The issue of censorship committee members’ specialism in feature filmmaking and the importance of addressing such concerns to avoid possible negative influences should not be neglected. Within the scope of short filmmaking, cultural policies have a minor influence on practice, and their impact is primarily added by characteristics of society. This adds another dimension to Nadim Jarjoura’s discussion on the relationship between cinema and the conservative nature of the Gulf countries, discussed in Chapter One. Jarjoura connected the challenges facing visual productions to rifts in society, especially with their conservative quality and the freedom required by some cultural products.<sup>262</sup> However, his point refers to state-level actors, while in the Omani context, members of society play a key role. This necessitates the incorporation of individuals, as key players, within any discussion on the influence of censorship on filmmaking. Instead of narrowing the discussions on censorship-related concerns to the State, represented by censorship law, and the director’s self-censorship, individuals in society should be understood as a third essential element. Notwithstanding, Jarjoura’s concerns about the conservative way of living and social

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<sup>261</sup> 3.FD\_AM, ‘Research Interview with Film Director’ (Mrs. Sanaa AL-Hadabi, 2021).

<sup>262</sup> Jarjoura.

behaviours as factors influencing the practice are demonstrated by the above-mentioned examples, not including the religious factor, to which he linked social behaviours.<sup>263</sup>

### ***3.2.3 Under-utilized Film Education Capabilities***

In my previous discussion of censorship, I highlighted the absence of specialised knowledge among censorship committee members. Even in the presence of a filmmaker, the remaining members are unexperienced in the industry and its structures. A further concern is filmmaking education in Oman – there is no established vocational education course related to filmmaking that would enable film practitioners and academic researchers to engage analytically and critically with cultural production (film studies). Conversely, fine art and theatre enjoy a degree of academic research attention.

The focus here is on investigating the relationship between education and practice. Only a few current Omani film directors hold related academic degrees, while others are self-taught filmmakers. These directors depended on enrolling in workshops and short training courses in filmmaking and scriptwriting to build their knowledge. Moreover, the directors also depended on self-learning from freely available online content to cope with the continuous changes in the field. Education produces filmmakers for the local market, which alone may not be adequate to create a particular type of filmmaker needed to create a national artistic film industry. The first filmmaking course, called Digital Media, was offered in 2005 by the Colleges of Applied Sciences, Oman – despite the programme title, this major focuses on narrative and documentary filmmaking as well as providing courses in 3D animation.

Digital Media as part of the Communication Studies bachelor's degree began alongside other new majors, offered by Colleges of Applied Sciences, with collaboration from a team from New Zealand in designing the programmes. These colleges were created as part of the reform process that occurred within the higher education system in correspondence with the need for the country to diversify its economy.<sup>264</sup> The Ministry of Higher Education, Oman (MoHE) signed a contract with the New Zealand Tertiary Education Consortium (NZTES).<sup>265</sup> As per

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<sup>263</sup> Jarjoura.

<sup>264</sup> Jeremy Jones and Nicholas Ridout, *A History of Modern Oman* (Cambridge University Press, 2015), p. 263.

<sup>265</sup> Susan O'Rourke and HA Al Bulushi, 'Managing Quality from a Distance: A Case Study of Collaboration between Oman and New Zealand', *Quality in Higher Education*, 16. 3 (2010), 197-210 (pp. 197-98).



the contract, four New Zealand universities provided four major curricula and consultations on their implementation.<sup>266</sup> However, the programmes run under the central control of MoHE as it bought the intellectual property of these programmes from NZTES. This granted MoHE the ability to modify the content to match the Sultanate's strategy.<sup>267</sup> One of the major issues that faced Oman in implementing its strategies to diversify the economy was the lack of a trained labour force.<sup>268</sup> Therefore, these programmes were introduced to feed the business sector and industry with qualified graduates that would meet the needs of job markets.

As an academic in the department, I observed the development of the course in terms of study plan, syllabus design, and content. For example, internship has become mandatory for all students during their study period, inviting practitioners or experts from related fields as part of the course syllabus to benefit the students. These modifications and updates continue to be carried out to ensure the role of these colleges in meeting the demands and expectations of the markets. Currently, due to the reorganisation of the state in 2020, the course is running under the College of Creative Industries at the University of Technology and Applied Sciences (UTAS), offering a Bachelor of Art in Mass Communication: Digital Media Degree.<sup>269</sup> While the main intention of offering such a major was not related specifically to the enhancement of a national cinema industry, it has the potential to do so, considering both its theoretical and practical nature. Enrolled students are taught narrative and documentary filmmaking as well as 3D modelling and animation. It produces filmmakers equipped with the required basics to approach the field. However, looking at the actual state of filmmaking, there is little involvement by Digital Media graduates, despite their high number. General statistics provided by the Ministry of Labour in 2021 show that, of 1,493 graduates from both media- and film-related majors, only 183 had a job within the area of their specialty.

As part of this research, I conducted a short survey targeting both graduates and enrolled students to understand the disconnection between the course and filmmaking practice. As per the survey results, students on the course and graduates enrolled because of their passion to

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<sup>266</sup> The four degrees are Bachelor of Information Technology provided by Otago University; Bachelor of Business in Tourism by the University of Waikato; Bachelor of Art and Design and a Bachelor of Communication Studies by Auckland University of Technology (AUT), and English language provision across the degrees provided by Victoria University of Wellington. From O'Rourke and Bulushi, p. 198.

<sup>267</sup> Torsten Brandenburg, 'Bridging the Knowledge Gap: Internationalization and Privatization of Higher Education in the State of Qatar and the Sultanate of Oman' (2012), pp. 135-36.

<sup>268</sup> D Asra Mubeen, D Ravi Kumar, and M Nazneen, 'Economic Diversification in Sultanate of Oman Amidst Oil Crises', *IOSR Journal of Business and Management Ver. IV*, 19. 6 (2017), 2319-7668 (p. 11).

<sup>269</sup> 'Bachelor of Arts in Mass Communication, Major: Digital Media', *Mass Communication* <<https://www.utas.edu.om/cci/programmes/mass-communication/digital-media>> [accessed 13 May].

study filmmaking for its nature as a creative, continuously developing, multidimensional field that can broaden thinking and understanding of life. However, only 13 showed their willingness to pursue the field after graduation. It is important to highlight that by field, they meant any job relating to filmmaking, including personal businesses such as weddings and events, and do not refer exclusively to narrative film. For others their hesitancy was linked to the availability of job opportunities. The absence of a filmmaking industry challenges the ability of such courses to advance the culture of filmmaking. This is not surprising, considering two major factors: the issue of employment within the country and the nature of the shared perception of work within Oman. For Omanis, work is always linked to ‘securing an appropriate standard of living’ for both individual and family.<sup>270</sup> Therefore, securing a job is more important than its relationship with the major being studied. A related issue is that over time, Omanis work to produce basic life necessities but not to produce wealth.<sup>271</sup> This limits the participation of graduates within the filmmaking practice, even if they find work. In his interview, Al-Kindi claimed that filmmaking is ‘a holocaust of money’.<sup>272</sup> Since any film production requires funding, in the absence of a state fund, filmmakers often fund their own productions. Even if the film succeeds in reaching international film festivals, revenue in the best case is exceedingly small.

The second challenge is seen in the response of a female Digital Media student who stated that she will not embark on a career as a filmmaker because ‘it is not possible for a woman to be a filmmaker, it is our culture’. This statement acknowledges the prevalence of cultural issues affecting female students enrolled in the filmmaking programme as well as the broader context of filmmaking practices. In Oman as in any patriarchal and conservative society, there are traditional socio-cultural stereotypes and attitudes regarding the role of women.<sup>273</sup> For example, women are subordinate and are always seen as mothers and housewives. Moreover, in Islam, women are not required to support their families financially. As such, some Omani families will prefer their daughter to stay home instead of working outside, in gender-mixed and time-consuming jobs such as filmmaking.

This discussion shows that Oman’s film education has an influence on practice. However, its influence remains on the control of other major factors, specifically economic and cultural

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<sup>270</sup> Jones and Ridout, p. 262.

<sup>271</sup> Jones and Ridout, p. 262.

<sup>272</sup> Mohammad Al-Kindi, ‘Research Interview with a Filmmaker’ (Mrs. Sanaa AL-Hadabi, 2021).

<sup>273</sup> Salma Al-Lamki, ‘Paradigm Shift: A Perspective on Omaniwomen in Management in the Sultanate of Oman’, *Advancing Women in Leadership Journal*. 5 (1999).

ones. It is not to say that the available courses are inadequate or incapable of creating professional filmmakers. Within this practical and ever-developing field, experience is equally important in the filmmakers' journey to become a film practitioner.

### ***3.2.4 Influence of Personal Recognition on Filmmaking Practice***

After considering the development of the practice and demonstrating the role of the OAC, it is worth mentioning that there is a positive difference between the work and the actual responsibility of the Association. This is in contrast with the role of the DoC, which is responsible for developing and enhancing the field. I have integrated the discussion on the difficulty of positioning narrative filmmaking within the Omani art nexus, which may explain the level of effectiveness of the Department of Cinema. The question to be answered is: What are the factors influencing the appreciation of cinematic filmmaking as an artistic cultural expression? If we exclude both economic and cultural factors that undoubtedly play a role, as shown in the previous sections, then individual recognition has a major influence. In the interviews, a couple of filmmakers expressed the need for people to be passionate about cinema and interested in the field to ensure its continuous development.

The role played by the DoC illustrates that individuals perform their ordinary role and do not really initiate projects for development. One incident saw the halting of a major development project after the reorganisation at the state level caused by the Arab Spring Movement. Within, as some call it, the Arab Awakening, Oman saw protests in a few places, especially in Suhar. Unlike protests in several Arab countries that were sparked by social, economic, and political issues, in Oman protests were motivated by economic pressures, such as unemployment and perceived government corruption.<sup>274</sup> Such protests, which did not seek a change in state control or regime, led Sultan Qaboos to take action in response to public demand, involving 'Royals Decrees including promises of jobs' and 'a massive governmental reorganization'.<sup>275</sup> The change in some ministries and individuals holding authority in some governmental bodies caused a major change in the development plan. The new minister of the

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<sup>274</sup> Jones and Ridout, pp. 295-60.

<sup>275</sup> Funsch, pp. 178-79.

Diwan of Royal Court in 2013 did not see how powerful that project was and the great potential it held in resolving one of the main concerns behind the movement: unemployment.

The cessation of the project was justified by economic pressure and the idea that there were better priorities to spend money on than initiating a cinematic village.<sup>276</sup> This raises a critical concern in the absence of an official regulatory law and appreciation of art films, which may limit the contribution of such films as both ‘economic commodities and a vital form of cultural productions’.<sup>277</sup> It also recalls one of the main influences on practice: available funding.

The importance of state funds in the development of any film industry is unquestionable, especially if the aim is to establish a national film industry. In Oman, the funds received from the government relate to MIFF and OAC. In terms of production expenses, this is no funding, except in the case of the *Alboom* production. During the interviews, participants insisted on the need for state funds to move on to feature film production. Current short filmmaking is vibrant with directors’ independent funds. However, the nature of short forms not achieving financial return to the filmmaker may hinder or reduce the number of film productions. This necessitates the participation of art production companies.

Despite their number within the Omani nexus, the involvement of art production companies is exceedingly rare, even in terms of providing knowledge and training to filmmakers.<sup>278</sup> Most of the available art production companies in Omani provide services such as graphic design, editing, documenting events, producing promotional films, and producing national songs. It is worth noting the effort made by the Akasah Art Production Company to provide training sessions for individuals interested in the field.<sup>279</sup> This reflects how support and contribution are not limited to finance, because the financing of any project is always linked to economic pressure locally and internationally. As such, fixed financial support would be of secondary importance in the context of an unstable economic situation. While there is a need for state funds to provide cinema studios through which international investments could emerge and to support feature film productions that would attract the international to the national, without clear regulations such funds might be wasted.

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<sup>276</sup> Al-Zedjali.

<sup>277</sup> Andrew Flibbert, *Commerce in Culture: States and Markets in the World Film Trade* (Springer, 2007).

<sup>278</sup> Al-Kindi.

<sup>279</sup> Sulieman.

What comes first is administrative government support in terms of setting up a film-independent authority such as a film board or institute. The functions of film boards or commissions are absolute. Establishments such as the Higher Institute of Cinema, which is affiliated with the Egyptian Ministry of Culture, and the Film Commission in Saudi Arabia strive to enhance the technical and professional ability of practitioners by providing training programmes in areas such as directing, scriptwriting, photography, editing, sound, and production. Furthermore, these institutions supply financial support for the production process.

In sum, while all these factors may have an individual influence on film practice, there is an overlap between them, as they directly or indirectly affect each other. Therefore, the discussion of factors influencing filmmaking practice is to be continued, and it requires involvement by each factor as an individual entity for deeper investigation in the first instance.

### **3.3 Culture as a Priority in Defining the ‘Omani Film’**

When initiating discussions with several participants within the study, reading through press releases, and browsing Muscat International Film Festival’s categories, Omani film as a concept was often invoked and raised the importance of understanding what Omani film is or what can be called an Omani film. It is difficult to draw a clear definition of this concept. Such difficulty is encountered by many national cinemas, such as of Japan,<sup>280</sup> China, and Arabian cinema. The importance of defining Omani film begins with considering the special category with that name at MIFF.

The Omani film category was initiated to allow Omani film directors to compete with counterparts from other countries. Al-Zedjali stated:

We got to a point where we found that Omani films were ready to be shown at the Muscat International Film Festival. Therefore, we created a

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<sup>280</sup> Rea Amit, ‘What Is Japanese Cinema?: Imamura Taihei’s Wartime Theory of Japanese Film, Tradition, and Art’, *positions: asia critique*, 27. 4 (2019), 597-621 (p. 597).

short film category and created films from around the world with which Omanis could compete [...]. They started to interact with the world.<sup>281</sup>

He also insisted on the careful selection of films based on quality, in terms of subject matter and directing techniques. This step was crucial as it gave new directors the confidence to showcase their films and interact with experts in the field. It also had the potential to advance the quality of Omani production to win over other films that might be produced by directors who have been practising for a long time and match the expectations of international jury panels. More importantly, this category ensures the presence of Omani filmmakers, thus reinforcing the festival's role in creating a platform to discover new talent, leading to the emergence of an Omani national film industry.<sup>282</sup>

The labelling of a film or assigning a particular identity or nationality to a film raises several related questions. Can a film really have a nationality? Films are categorised for various purposes, such as ensuring that national funding supports industry workers in the country in question. Does the identity given to a film follow the geographical boundaries in which the film is shot and produced? Does film language and culture play a role in this process? What about films that are directed by a director from one country that are shot in different countries or funded by external organisations? Ameer Al-Amri posed a broader question regarding the concept of 'Arab cinema' in this continuing debate: is Arab cinema a political, cultural, or geographical concept, or do all these factors contribute to the construction of such concepts?<sup>283</sup> Attempts to understand or theorise such terms are widespread and typically focus on countries that are relatively new to the world of filmmaking. It is also a topic that occupies a large space in the discussion sessions of film festivals.

One example is the discussion session on Arab Cinema Identity organised in parallel to Duhok International Film Festival in its seventh session (9-16 September 2019), in which participants raised related concerns about Arab cinema.<sup>284</sup> I integrated this discussion into Chapter One with a special focus on Al-Saloom's perception that demonstrated the exclusivity of the Arab cinema concept. Here, the focus is on Nada Al-Azhari's perspective in which she insists on the importance of considering the 'Arab' identity and the question of who

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<sup>281</sup> Al-Zedjali.

<sup>282</sup> Loist and de Valck, p. 20.

<sup>283</sup> Ameer Al-Omri, "Arab Cinema .. The Crisis of the Term" (network.aljazeera.net: Aljazeera Media Network, 2014).

<sup>284</sup> Taha.

is the ‘*Arabi*’, the person who carries an Arab identity? This is due to the importance of identity in the Omani context, which is considered one of the 12 national priorities besides health, job market, education, academic research, and others.<sup>285</sup> By highlighting ‘A society that is proud of its identity and culture and committed to its citizenship’ as a major area of consideration within the Omani Vision plan 2040, the government aims to preserve and reinforce the identity as well as spread it globally through Omanis who are ‘proud of its identity, citizenship, and culture’.<sup>286</sup>

In the discussion session on the concept of Arab Cinema, Al-Azhari asserted that in the case of Arab cinema, attention should be given to the definition of Arab identity in the first instance. The first basic answer to her question, ‘who is the Arabi?’, is a person whose first language is Arabic and who lives in any Arabic territory, in terms of language, and geography. Such a definition is limited, taking into consideration the large geographic spread of Arabic territories and the diaspora communities that exist on different continents, thus encompassing potentially very different historical, political, and cultural contexts. In ‘Arab Identity: Its Components and Determinants of Definition: A Theoretical Framework and an Analytical Approach’, Ahmed Hussain elaborated on various basic elements that constitute Arab identity. In addition to language, which for Hussain is the first and crucial element as it is the tool by which people express and define themselves, other components are important, such as shared history, culture/heritage, religion, and land/geography. The complexity of defining the Arabi is clear and reflects that Arab identity is ‘incapable of being circumscribed and definitive’.<sup>287</sup> This adds complexity to the concept of ‘Arab cinema’.

Moreover, the previously mentioned questions and others are brought up by changes in film production and its distribution systems, an undeniable influence of related technological advancements. This challenges the possibility of setting a clear-cut conceptualisation, system, and approach. One emerging concept that aims to find a working frame for ascribing a certain nationality to film productions shot in several countries, relies on multinational cast and crew, and funded by a range of production companies is ‘transnational cinema’.<sup>288</sup>

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<sup>285</sup> ‘Vision Document’ (State Council Website: Ministry of Economy), p. 47 (p. 17).

<sup>286</sup> Vision Document, p. 24.

<sup>287</sup> Ahmed Hussain, ‘Arab Identity: Its Components and Determinants of Definition: A Theoretical Framework and an Analytical Approach’, *National Social Journal*, 53. 2 (2016), 141-54 (p. 149).

<sup>288</sup> Deborah Shaw, ‘Deconstructing and Reconstructing ‘Transnational Cinema’’ (2010), pp. 47-66 (p. 47).

Within the Omani film culture, geography and cultural specificity are the basis for ascribing a certain identity to a film. This corresponds to the basic elements based on the foundations of Oman's identity before 1970: territory, history, and shared culture.<sup>289</sup> Another element is Islam, which is a major characteristic of modern Omani cultural identity, yet it was not a basic component of its construction. Islamic and Arabic are emphasised not by their specificity in Oman, but by their shared collective identity with other countries.

In the semi-structured interviews I conducted discussions on the criteria for labelling films with Omani identity with Al-Zedjali, Al-Kindi, and Al-Amri, as current practitioners and former heads of the OAC. While there are no published criteria, there is some agreement about what can be submitted to the Omani film categories in Muscat International Film Festival in terms of content.<sup>290</sup> All submitted films in that category should discuss issues related to Omani society or showcase Oman's culture and environment, which ultimately imposes the geographical element and cultural specificity of the subject matter.

The difference in their perspective related to the 'film', specifically who directs or produces it, unlike Al-Azhari's concern with nationality. The first head of the Association, Al-Zedjali stressed the importance of a director's nationality as a basic condition for the film to be labelled as an Omani film. In a similar manner to Hollywood, the names of high-profile directors are used as an identity tag for the films they direct to advertise and market the production.<sup>291</sup> This is a commercial necessity. In *New Hollywood Cinema: An Introduction*, Geoff King states:

The ultimate achievement of the new Hollywood commercial auteur is to become a distinct brand identity marketable on this basis. Stylistic traits and departures from classical conventions are encouraged, up to a certain point, as a way for the director to leave a distinctive mark or sign of authorship.<sup>292</sup>

King not only confirms the idea of an individual auteur as a brand identity for their films, but his use of the auteur concept instead of director makes a key point. It returns to *cinema*

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<sup>289</sup> Anna Rita Coppola, 'Oman and Omani Identity During the "Nahdahs": A Comparison of Three Modern Historiographic Works', *Oriente Moderno*, 94. 1 (2014), 55-78 (p. 78).

<sup>290</sup> The discussion pertaining to the Omani film category was limited to the aforementioned individuals, as each of had previously served as the Head of the Association, occupying the position of festival manager.

<sup>291</sup> Barrett Hodsdon, *The Elusive Auteur: The Question of Film Authorship Throughout the Age of Cinema* (McFarland, 2017).

<sup>292</sup> Geoff King, *New Hollywood Cinema: An Introduction* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2002), p. 114.



*d'auteurs* theory, found in discussions of film authorship within French criticism (unrelated to its commercial aspects). The classical use of the term refers to directors having consistency in their directing style, expression, and themes.<sup>293</sup> This raises a critical question regarding Al-Zedjali's perspective of applying such a tendency to an emerging, non-commercial, short film practice. I argue that this attitude is based on the opposite goal of Hollywood, using labelling to promote the Omani directors themselves and their capabilities rather than the film. This is one of the main goals in establishing the Omani film category. Other goals include introducing Omani culture to the world, showcasing Omani directors' talent, and providing them with opportunities to mix with international filmmakers. In his interview, Al-Kindi shared a similar standpoint; he added the producer's nationality along with that of the director: 'If we come to the process of allocating the local award (Omani film), then of course it is an award for production aspect, the film should be directed and produced by Omanis'. He also insisted on the exclusivity of this category for Omanis: 'for the film to be Omani, it should be a purely Omani production by Omani youth'.<sup>294</sup> Thus, the Omani film category is clearly aimed at distinguishing, promoting, and marketing film productions by Omanis. It is clear that, 'as a marketing strategy, these national labels have promised varieties of 'otherness' of what is culturally different from both Hollywood and the films of other importing countries'.<sup>295</sup> The festival has three main categories distinguished by language and region: Foreign, Arab, and Omani. A former category was named *Khelaiji*, which includes films produced within GCC countries.

Furthermore, the director's nationality as a basic way of labelling productions has changed. While searching within the archive of films submitted to the festival, I came across several short films directed by non-Omanis. One example is a film directed by a female Indian director resident in Oman: *The Call*, directed by Sudha Sha, won best short film in the Omani category. This demonstrates that it is no longer a condition for the film to be directed by Omanis (defined as an indigenous population). This was confirmed by the current head of the Association, Humaid Al-Amri: 'For non-Omanis residing in the Sultanate, they can participate within the category as long as their films revolved around Oman'.<sup>296</sup> Before 1980, there was an exclusive focus on the text and issue as well as territorial boundaries in relation

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<sup>293</sup> John Caughie, *Theories of Authorship* (Routledge, 2013), p. 9.

<sup>294</sup> Al-Kindi.

<sup>295</sup> Stephen Crofts, 'Concepts of National Cinema', in *World Cinema: Critical Approaches*, ed. by W John Hill, et al. (Oxford University Press on Demand, 2000), pp. 385-94 (p. 385).

<sup>296</sup> Humaid Al-Amri, 'Research Interview with the Head of Omani Association of Cinema and Theatre', ed. by Mrs. Sanaa Al-Hadabi (2021).

to the idea of national cinema. That was conceived as a ‘putative national spirit’: I would argue this is the case with the existence of the Omani film category.<sup>297</sup> A similar standpoint to that of Al-Amri is found within a news article, ‘Palestinian Cinema and the Question of Identity: Which Films Make Their Narratives?’, written by Saleem Al-Beik, a Palestinian novelist, film critic, and cultural editor. He stresses the importance of the film narrative and topics, stating that ‘the Palestinian issue is stronger in nature than the narrow national identity of an individual’.<sup>298</sup> Although the director’s identity/nationality is not important to Salim Al-Beik as a fundamental factor determining what can be appreciated as a Palestinian film, he insisted on the need for the director to be sufficiently familiar and conscious of the characteristics and specificity of the country and its concerns, which benefits those arguing in favour of the director’s identity. Al-Beik, however, provided several examples of film productions produced by non-Palestinians, among which some were narratively Palestinian, yet the perspective was not; in other words, it is not what a director with a basic awareness of the context would produce. As such, the question of giving nationality to a film based on its context and related issues will remain critical to any small nation in the process of building a national cinematic culture. This is because, at the very basic level, the idea of national cinema is only a mechanism to effectively administer the field, ‘ensuring state sovereignty’, economic benefits, and gaining ‘the international visibility’,<sup>299</sup> as well as promoting cultural differences.<sup>300</sup> Indeed, that is one of Oman’s long-held goals.

A related international controversy regarding the acknowledgement of credit-giving for any film production was found.<sup>301</sup> In the interviews, directors such as Mohammed Al-Kindi and Humaid Al-Amri gave credit to the producer for financial backing, without which the film may not have been produced. Others, such as Khalid Al-Zedjali, believe that the director is the one who should take credit for the film. Even if the director is Indian and 90% of the cast is Omani, the film is classed as ‘Indian’. According to Al-Zedjali, ‘The director first, then the other elements; if the director falls, nationality undoubtedly falls’. This position suggests that a film is all a director’s vision – it is a reflection of its director’s personality. However, this

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<sup>297</sup> Crofts, p. 386.

<sup>298</sup> Salim AlBiek, ‘Palestinian Cinema and the Question of Identity. Which Films Make Their Narrative?’ (2021), <<https://rb.gy/gj1n8b>> [accessed 25 May, 2023].

<sup>299</sup> Kulyk, p. 71.

<sup>300</sup> Andrew Higson, ‘The Limiting Imagination of National Cinema’, in *Cinema and Nation*, ed. by Scott MacKenzie Mette Hjort (Routledge, 2000), pp. 63-74 (p. 64).

<sup>301</sup> David Tregde, ‘A Case Study on Film Authorship: Exploring the Theoretical and Practical Sides in Film Production’, *Elon Journal of Undergraduate Research in Communications*, 4. 2 (2013) (p. 1) <<http://www.inquiriesjournal.com/a?id=1700>>.

might not be applicable to emerging, independent short film practice, where big production studios do not yet exist, and current film directors are moving towards directing their own scripts. In his interview, Haitham Sulieman mentioned that he had moved from writing scripts to writing and directing his films, claiming that writers love to own their own work.<sup>302</sup> Similarly, Hussain Al-Belushi preferred to direct his scripts.<sup>303</sup> While having written and directed a few short films can be important for a career, but it does not make one an 'auteur'.

### **3.4 Making Sense of the National and the Transnational within Omani Filmmaking Practice**

#### ***3.4.1 Globalisation and Films***

One of the many consequences of globalisation is the transnational circulation of goods and cultural products as films. The intersectional relationship between globalisation and film has been studied by several scholars. There are four aspects that illustrate the impact of globalisation on films, as explored by Mark Lorenzen in 'Internationalisation vs Globalisation of the Film Industry'. The first is the widespread practice of filmmaking, which has rapidly become a universal activity. The second is an increase in global consumption, with more diverse audiences across the world. The third aspect is that since the 1990s film production has become a cross-border activity across different countries with multicultural casts and crews. The latter approach considers two important points. The first is the discussion on the International Division of Cultural Labour (NIDCL), which is a new concept driven by the act of shooting and producing films in other countries where cheaper production costs can be achieved.<sup>304</sup> Second and more importantly, the rise of 'transnational cinema' can be attributed to technological advancements in the film industry, including the availability of advanced filming equipment, reliable Internet connections, and streaming services, as well as the increased openness of trade processes. According to Deborah Shaw,

[the] concept of the transnational was clearly transdisciplinary at a time when Film Studies was reacting to the transnational turn in a range of fields from the late 1980s and 1990s in response to technological

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<sup>302</sup> Sulieman.

<sup>303</sup> Al-Belushi.

<sup>304</sup> Herwina Rosnan, Ismail Mohd Nazari, and Daud Norzaidi Mohd, 'The Globalization of Film Business and Its Effect on the Malaysian Film Industry', *Business Strategy Series*, 11. 5 (2010), 325-32 (p. 325).

developments, global flows of finance and people, and resulting social, political, and cultural transformations.<sup>305</sup>

Cinemas are considered on a broader scale rather than within the limitation of the term ‘national’ used to describe a particular entity’s identity. Cinematic practices cross borders in several ways. Films transcend barriers of nationality, ethnicity, and language. Andrew Higson made a significant contribution by attempting to explain the notion of ‘transnational cinema’. He argues that there are two levels through which we can illustrate the ‘transnational’: the production process; and distribution and reception. To illustrate this, it is useful to first consider the resources and experiences of the crew and cast, who work on a single production, and end with the distribution of the production and how it travels using advanced technological communication channels that work on a transnational basis to reach other audiences in different cultural contexts.<sup>306</sup>

The last aspect of how globalisation impacts film is the establishment of a ‘global form of organisation’. This means that production companies internationalise their work and become multimedia corporations that operate through cooperation with and in other countries.<sup>307</sup> Despite the positive consequences of globalisation, criticism of the potential homogenisation of global culture limits the benefits in favour of large players. In contrast to the dominant film industries (Hollywood, Bollywood, China, and Japan), globalisation has challenged films from less developed countries and newcomers to the film field in various aspects. With the huge flow of globally dominant films, new film industries encounter obstacles to attract the attention of local audiences, leading to competition struggles. This has also affected the field of film studies. ‘National Cinema’ is the most ‘resilient critical category’ in film studies due to its being used to represent film productions from a group of small nations.<sup>308</sup> The complexity of globalisation continues to challenge the conceptualisation of cinema. Nataša Durovicová and Kathleen E Newman note that one of the problems faced by scholars is ‘the language we employ to describe complex systems and histories’.<sup>309</sup>

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<sup>305</sup> Deborah Shaw, ‘Transnational Cinemas: Mapping a Field of Study’, in *The Routledge Companion to World Cinema* (Routledge, 2017) (p. 291).

<sup>306</sup> Higson, p. 68.

<sup>307</sup> Mark Lorenzen, ‘Internationalization Vs. Globalization of the Film Industry’, *Industry and Innovation*, 14. 4 (2007), 349-57.

<sup>308</sup> Naficy.

<sup>309</sup> Nataša Durovicová and Kathleen E Newman, *World Cinemas, Transnational Perspectives* (Routledge, 2009).

With the continuous impact of globalisation, it is crucial to understand the origin of cinema related concepts ‘of being either political or cultural or geographical concepts’.<sup>310</sup> As in the discussion earlier in relation to film labelling and the issue with concepts such as Arab Cinema, what constitutes national, regional, ethnic, and transnational cinema is often subject to the researchers’ criteria that best fits their study outcomes. However, all film productions with differences in genre, form, content, and producing country contribute to the overall cinema development process.<sup>311</sup> Therefore, they need to be recognised by the world and conceptualised. Overall, the dynamic and active economic environment provided by globalisation, which continues to broaden the film market, has led to a huge transformation and advancement in film genres, styles, and formats. However, globalisation is a two-sided coin which has also negatively impacted films. This section considers how Omani filmmaking is affected by these new trends in the global film business. In *China on Screen: Cinema and Nation* (2006), Chris Berry and Mary Farquhar noted that the

idea of “national cinemas” has given way to “transnational film studies”. However, instead of following the rush to abandon the national altogether, we asked what happened to the national in transnational film studies. We called for the final abandonment of the old national cinemas model, which assumed that nation-states were stable and coherent and that films expressed a singular national identity.<sup>312</sup>

Berry and Farquhar identify the complications caused by globalisation in film studies. In the following section, I focus on the conversation between national and transnational facets within Omani filmmaking culture.

### ***3.4.2 The National and Transnational Quality of Omani Filmmaking Practice***

To locate Omani filmmaking within the international frame, I paid attention to the characteristics of Omani filmmaking following a similar approach to both Mette Hjort and Deborah Shaw’s categories of the transnational. Both Hjort’s and Shaw’s approaches draw more detailed frameworks that help in understanding the notion of transnational and avoiding

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<sup>310</sup> Al-Omri.

<sup>311</sup> Stephanie Dennison and Song Hwee Lim, *Remapping World Cinema: Identity, Culture and Politics in Film* (Wallflower Press, 2006).

<sup>312</sup> Chris Berry and Mary Ann Farquhar, *China on Screen: Cinema and Nation* (Columbia University Press, 2006).

any possible misuse of the term. Despite the focus of the study on short filmmaking, this section integrates both short and feature films as well as documentaries to generate the structure of the field. Not all categories set by Shaw and Hjort are applicable – examples of those are the distribution element and the transnational stars and directors – due to the specificity of the less intensive, less-resourced, newly emerging practice. Therefore, my engagement is based on six aspects: narrative and themes, mode of production, film setting, audience and screening locations, collaboration networks, and potential areas of cultural exchange. Before going any further, I note that my intention is not to become involved in the controversy regarding the complexity between the use of ‘transnational’ and ‘national’ terms.

Starting with films’ narratives and themes, I focus on the story told and the cultural elements mirrored by them. The analysis of the film samples and other productions showed that most of the stories were about Omani families, the relationships between parents, and with their children.

Within the short narratives and documentaries, all stories are set in Oman, reflecting many of its cultural elements, including dress, city design, religion, geography, and traditions; a similar tendency is evident in feature films. An example is *Zayana*, directed by Khalid Al-Zedjali and produced by Indian production companies, Diamond Works and Heera Films, in 2019. The film tells the story of Zayana, an Omani young woman who travelled to India to complete her study and escape the unfair treatment she received from her family for fear of being exposed to a scandal. The narrative depicts social concerns in relation to women. How was Zayana treated by her family, unsupported by her husband, and left to run away to India?

The national, in its basic sense of belonging to a certain country, unfolds within Omani films in terms of text and themes based on the context. They provide an inward view of Oman, which is one way to understand ‘the imaginary coherence or specificity of a national cinema’ and its role in promoting the nation and showcasing its culture and tradition.<sup>313</sup> The discussion of *Zayana* as a co-production links to the second aspect under review: the mode of production. The co-production resulted from the director’s continuous efforts to overcome the issue of a lack of national funding. He tried to find production companies that would work in

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<sup>313</sup> Andrew Higson, ‘The Concept of National Cinema’, *Screen*, 30. 4 (1989), 36-47 (p. 38).

collaboration, especially from Egypt and India, due to the historic relationship between the countries.

Another production, *Mudun AlTurab Between Oman and Morocco*, directed by Dawood Awlad Al-Said, documents the similarities between Oman and Morocco in several aspects, such as the pottery industry, old village design, and architecture. The short was produced by OAC and involved some Moroccans among the crew, logistically facilitated by the Moroccan Embassy. *Mudun AlTurab between Oman and Morocco* was shot in both Oman and Morocco (film setting), telling the story of a man who travels to Morocco for business and discovers these similarities between the two countries. The director depended on moving between the two counties, guided by the film narrative, as if the two distant locations one village.

Similarly, in *Zayana* the protagonist travels to India, where a new culture and setting are introduced; hence the film was not exclusive to Oman; it also mirrors some Indian cultural characteristics in *Zayana*'s husband's journey in searching for her. This suggests a transnational angle in these productions. Other short films revolve solely around Oman; therefore, it seems imperative that the filming locations are linked to Omani lands. All short films were shot in Oman with differences that depended on the nature of the short form and the above-mentioned influences. One of them is its limited visibility and screening at film festivals, which restricts its audience to those attending film festivals.

Owing to their structure, short films are exhibited at film festivals. Shorts are known for their inability to be screened in cinema halls as individual entities; they are always shown beside other short films or online, which was previously impossible. As per my conversations with directors, Omani shorts are produced for an audience that thinks and employs some notion of aesthetic taste regardless of borders. Omani filmmakers do not consider the audience as the main factor that influences how they would approach a film, unless the film aims to raise social awareness.<sup>314</sup>

The audiences of Omani shorts are international, and all produced films were translated into English. This can cause concern for local audiences. Are they also taken in consideration as targeted audiences? Filmmakers seek to obtain international recognition and are often keen to send their films to international festivals rather than show their productions locally. This may

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<sup>314</sup> 3.FD\_AM.

impact the spread of professional filmmaking within the country.<sup>315</sup> As these films are not seen widely, most Omanis do not acknowledge the existence of this practice. In any regular conversation with Omanis when they ask about my study, people are surprised that there are such productions and that they are appreciated internationally at film festivals. To minimise this ignorance, OAC started establishing marginal film festivals throughout the country accompanied by competitions. Examples include Ash Sharqiyah International Film Festival, Al Batinah International Film Festivals, Ad Dakhiliyah International Film Festivals, and the AX (reflection) University Film Festival. Through these small film festivals, OAC aims to increase the involvement of Omanis and immerse them in the practice as well as incorporating international participation by opening the competitions to all. This, in turn, facilitates a transnational platform for film screenings as it involves an international competition element.

International contribution is not exclusive to filmmakers participating in festivals' competitions and the involvement of a wider group within the field. This is also evident in the collaboration networks created by the OAC. Before considering individual involvement as part of the cultural exchange below, I focus on groups from the embassies of several countries located in the Sultanate, for instance the Indian, Moroccan, and Egyptian embassies. Two examples of such involvements are the Omani Indian Short Narrative Film Competition from 8-10 August 2018, and the earlier mentioned production of the documentary film *Mudun Al Turab Between Oman and Morocco* facilitated in terms of international logistics and shooting by the Moroccan embassy.

The Indo-Omani Competition 2018 aimed to encourage more collaborative production in short films as a means to exchange talent and experiences and to open the door for more coproduction. This collaboration is part of a wider cultural relationship between the two countries. In 2010, the National Archives of India and the National Records and Archive Authority of Oman (NRAA) signed a memorandum to enhance their cultural cooperation.<sup>316</sup> The Indian embassy organised several cultural events and competitions, including the Indo-Omani short film competition.

The OAC continues to broaden the scale of such partnerships and cooperation. One is a signed memorandum of understanding in 2022 to produce a collaborative feature film with the

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<sup>315</sup> Moradewun A Adejunmobi, 'Nigerian Video Film as Minor Transnational Practice', *Postcolonial Text*, 3. 2 (2007) (p. 2).

<sup>316</sup> Government of India Ministry of External Affairs, 'India-Oman Relations ' (2017) (p. 4).



Iranian production house under the title *Loloah*. The memorandum was signed by the representative of the embassy of the Islamic Republic of Iran and the head of the OAC and aims to open more opportunities within the field.<sup>317</sup> Moreover, the Palestinian embassy, in collaboration with the OAC, organised the Palestinian Cinema Days event to screen Palestinian films. These collaborations and events are vital for ensuring the active status of practice, attracting outsiders, and promoting Omani film directors. They also play a crucial role in the two-way exchange of experiences, knowledge, and cultural products – the notion of cultural exchange.

MIFF, like other international film festivals, is a cultural exchange market with a quality of plurality.<sup>318</sup> A working definition is set by Tom O'Regan: 'By cultural exchange we mean the circulation – the giving, receiving, and re-disposition – of cultural materials among differentiated socio-cultural formations'.<sup>319</sup> O'Regan also elaborates that circulation within filmmaking practice occurs at many levels, including the concepts, themes, and stories told within films, filmmaking techniques, aesthetics and practices, ways of understanding cinema and approaching it, and people involved in the production.<sup>320</sup>

Muscat International Film Festival has created a platform for global communication through partnerships and connections with other international festivals. As it is a non-commercial film festival, there is no collaboration with distributors. Instead, it works in partnership with other festivals through the twinning system that started in its 8<sup>th</sup> edition in 2014. The twinning system acts as a market through which film productions are exhibited and exchanged between festivals, proving their role as 'a solution to the problem of distribution'.<sup>321</sup> Festivals with partnerships with MIFF include Malmö Festival in Sweden, Alexandria Festival in Egypt, Rabat International Author Film Festival (FICAR), Dakhla Film Festival in Morocco, and other partnerships with Kuwait, Bahrain, and France. In their study of film festivals from an organizational structure perspective, Charles-Clemens Rüling and Jesper Strandgaard Pedersen compiled several major roles of film festivals:

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<sup>317</sup> Iran Press, 'Signing a Memorandum of Understanding between Iran and the Sultanate of Oman in the Field of Cinema', in *Executive preparations have begun for the production of the first joint film of Iran and the Sultanate of Oman under the name "Pearl" after a memorandum of cooperation was signed between a number of workers in the field of Iranian and Omani cinema* (Iran Press News Agency, 2022).

<sup>318</sup> Krainhöfer, pp. 17-18.

<sup>319</sup> Tom O'Regan, 'Cultural Exchange', *A companion to film theory* (1999), 262-94 (p. 263).

<sup>320</sup> O'Regan, pp. 263-65.

<sup>321</sup> Marijke De Valck, 'Screening the Future of Film Festivals? A Long Tale of Convergence and Digitization', *Film International*, 6. 4 (2008), 15-23 (p. 17).

While festivals initially served as showcases (mainly for national cinematic production), some scholars have recently argued that the international film festival circuit is increasingly functioning as an alternative to traditional distribution [...], or theatrical exhibitions [...], a trend that has also been observed in other cultural-creative industries...<sup>322</sup>

In practical terms, for film festivals, collaboration and networks are among the most important factors in their continuation. Through its partnership with many international festivals, MIFF has broadened the scale of film consumed in Oman instead of being confined to Hollywood and Bollywood. Second, it has provided a wider space for Omani film to be visible and screen at international film festivals. This follows De Valck's observation of the snowball effect, brought about by the film festival circuit, in terms of the added value a film could receive. She affirms that gaining appreciation and winning prizes in one film festival opens the door for that film to attract more attention from other festivals.<sup>323</sup> A similar notion of the twinning system is that organisers of other film festivals attend to select film productions to be screened at their own festivals.

MIFF confirms the eagerness of the OAC to build a national film culture, that, as Lucy Mazdon describes, 'carv[es] a space in a broader international arena and cinema production, exhibition and reception inevitably involve negotiation of these inter- or trans-national relationships'.<sup>324</sup> In her analysis of the importance of incorporating the Cannes Film Festival (CFF) into studying French national cinema – which she sees as neglected in the discussion – Mazdon argues that the festival plays a crucial role in promoting French cinema. Her claim is based on that the presence of art auteur cinema necessitates the commercial film industry as a first step. This is the case with CFF and its increasingly international and commercial reputation. Film festivals, with their international competition, international jury panels, films from other film festivals, parallel workshops, and discussions incorporating international voices, all provide aspirations and constitute cultural exchange platforms that promote national talent.

Another component of cultural exchange is the practice itself, and the people involved. Omani filmmakers use tabular format to write their scripts, which consists of two columns: one includes the description of the scene, the other includes the dialogue. This was brought about

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<sup>322</sup> Røling and Pedersen, p. 320.

<sup>323</sup> Valck, p. 35.

<sup>324</sup> Lucy Mazdon, 'The Cannes Film Festival as Transnational Space', *Post Script*, 25. 2 (2006), 19-30 (p. 29).

by their contact with Egyptian filmmakers and by studying cinema-related degrees or courses in Egypt as it has the oldest Arabic cinematic history, making it a targeted experience for film practitioners to learn from. Egyptian involvement was also evident from their participation in the production of the first feature, *Alboom* as advisor and art consultant.

Furthermore, there is evidence of participation by non-Omanis within the crew in some shorts. For example, Indians were involved in *Altahoor* and *Malaekat Alsahra*, and an Egyptian and an Indian were on the crew of *The Black Does Suit You*. Since immigrants can participate in MIFF within the Omani film category it has the potential to increase and promote participation within the field outside the umbrella of the festival. For feature filmmaking, the participation of non-Omanis exceeds that found in short films in technical roles.<sup>325</sup> Directors, including Al-Zedjali and Salim Bahwan, have typically relied on international crew members to fulfil technical roles, such as sound and camera operation, when producing their films.

Oman's filmmaking practice is an active importer of knowledge, people, film practices, and many other roles, which, on the one hand, has the potential to develop and enhance the practice, yet on the other, may impact the national specificity of film production. Returning to O'Regan's notion of cultural exchange, especially his argument that the circulation of cultural materials is a double-sided process, he concluded by stating that 'cultural exchange processes are simultaneously a blessing and a curse; they enable cultural development and identity formation, and they disable the same'.<sup>326</sup> The category of Omani film within MIFF has the potential to ease this cultural exchange by focusing on the national context and related text. The following two chapters on the patterns of Omani filmmaking and cultural representation based on short film analysis examine the relation between culture and films.

It is worth noting that the filmmaking practice is not only an importer; it is a small-scale exporter of cultural materials. This can be seen in the presence of films on festival circuits that promote and exhibit Omani culture. In his interview, Al-Zedjali recalled the feedback he received after the screening of *Alboom* in Washington, D.C.:

After the screening in Washington, the audience stood and clapped very much for the film [...]. They told me within the follow-up discussion session, if you think we liked your movie because of the technical side, be careful no one can match Hollywood movies. What is successful about

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<sup>325</sup> Al-Zedjali.

<sup>326</sup> O'Regan, p. 280.

this movie is that it presented Oman [...]. You brought to us the lives of not a perfect society but a society that is transparent and simple and we are looking for it, you gave us something classy. Always present your society, and do not imitate others.<sup>327</sup>

Bill Nichols observes that ‘Films from nations not previously regarded as prominent film-producing countries receive praise for their ability to transcend local issues and provincial tastes while simultaneously providing a window onto a different culture’.<sup>328</sup> Al-Zedjali’s experience of working as a member or head of the jury in some Arab and international festivals is another example of exporting Omani film culture. An example is his participation in Stockholm International Film Festival (SIFF) in Sweden as a festival director.<sup>329</sup> Al-Zedjali’s presence within SIFF reflects a shift towards decolonizing film festivals which takes place in various ways such as the horizontal forms of collaboration within Africa.<sup>330</sup> Decolonising film festivals and the film industry as a whole aims to reduce Western control, to ‘explore more of the undervalued or unexposed context’, and promote younger generations to direct films and curate film festivals.<sup>331</sup>

To summarise, on the one hand, films are cultural productions that would possess some national specificity in relation to the context in which they emerge. On the other hand, their being part of a collaborative process of production, their exhibition not only within local film festivals but also on globally accessible online video platforms points to their transnational quality. According to Shaw, ‘all films are to a degree national, and there does not have to be conflict between the terms national and transnational’.<sup>332</sup> This depends on how both concepts are approached and within which context.

The present thriving practice is clearly driven by a group of filmmakers who aspire to establish a national film industry, despite the state’s failure to recognize the significance of film as crucial to national development. Despite the involvement of several institutions in the field, there is a clear lack of a generic regulatory framework to organise and facilitate the establishment of the national film industry. In the interview with the Head of the Department

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<sup>327</sup> Al-Zedjali.

<sup>328</sup> Bill Nichols, ‘Discovering Form, Inferring Meaning: New Cinemas and the Film Festival Circuit’, *Film Quarterly*, 47. 3 (1994), 16-30 (p. 16).

<sup>329</sup> Al-Zedjali.

<sup>330</sup> Lindiwe Dovey and Estrella Sendra, ‘Toward Decolonized Film Festival Worlds’, in *Rethinking Film Festivals in the Pandemic Era and After* (Springer International Publishing Cham, 2023), pp. 269-89 (p. 280).

<sup>331</sup> Dovey and Sendra, p. 276.

<sup>332</sup> Shaw, p. 65.

of Cinema, I asked whether they had responsibility for the art production companies. She answered:

Not directly, honestly, it is not clear up to today. Sometimes the company goes to the Ministry of Commerce, Industry, and Investment Promotion, and they direct them to get an approval from the Ministry of Information and sometimes from us.<sup>333</sup>

Film's role in fostering national production and developing a vibrant film culture is evident. However, its absence has the potential to waste individual efforts made to this end. Omani filmmakers have demonstrated their enthusiasm for filmmaking and ability to present valuable productions that correspond to international standards and aesthetics. Yet, unclear or missing governmental regulations on narrative filmmaking are a major obstacle. Cinema has long been consumed as entertainment, a leisure-time activity, and even as a challenge; hence, films' popularity as an art industry can play a crucial role as both an economic and social development tool. I conclude by quoting Sandra Grunwell and Inhyuck 'Steve' Ha: 'When local communities and governments invest in the arts they are "not only enhancing quality of life but are also investing in (a community's) economic wellbeing"'.<sup>334</sup>

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<sup>333</sup> Cinema.

<sup>334</sup> Sandra Grunwell and Inhyuck "Steve" Ha, 'Film Festivals: An Empirical Study of Factors for Success', *Event Management*, 11. 4 (2007), 201-10 (p. 2).

## Chapter Four:

### Omani Short film Analysis

#### Part One: Characteristics and Approaches of Omani Short Films

In accordance with the project aims, this film analysis was conducted to investigate two main aspects. The first is to illustrate what might be regarded as an assumption of the characteristics of Omani short filmmaking practices through pertinent examples. The second aim is to examine the representation of Omani culture, society, and gender in Omani films, which is the focus of Chapter Five. Film as a product is controlled first by the director and their convictions, how to present their idea, through which genre, and in what context. The second controller is the narrative conventions of the less-regulated, less resource-intensive, and newly emerging Omani short film culture. The following focused analysis provides insight into the different dimensions of the practice and tracks changes in narrative form and style.

#### 4.1 Family as Narrative Frame

Thematically, the subject of death/survival, children/daughters, and parent-child relations are dominant within not only the film samples but also the list of films found in the archive of the OAC. Most Omani short films are centred on family and its values. They reflect the primary feature of Omani society, which built upon the values of unity. In Oman, family is the key unit of society, and it underpins the strength of the community. This is enshrined and clearly stated as a social principle of The Basic Statute of The State.

The family is the basis of society, and the law regulates the means for protecting it, preserving its legitimate entity, strengthening its ties and values, safeguarding its members, and providing suitable conditions to develop its potential and capabilities.<sup>335</sup>

By the term family I mean *Alailah*, an Arabic term that refers to the extended family, which is given equal importance – and in some cases priority – over *Alusra*, or the nuclear family. A family in Omani society currently consists of a married couple and four to six children. It will

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<sup>335</sup> The Basic Statute of the State, p. 8.

also include other close members, not necessarily those of the blood. Members such as grandfathers and grandmothers, aunts and uncles are always considered part of the family. Hammudah Abd al-Ati's operational definition of what a Muslim family is best suits its actual function within Oman:

A special kind of structure whose principal members are related to one another through blood ties and/or marital relationships and whose relatedness is of such a nature as to entail mutual expectations prescribed by religion, reinforced by law, and internalised by the individual.<sup>336</sup>

Omani filmmakers reflect the importance given to the family as the basic unit of society by accommodating it as the centre around which their narratives are built. However, none of the short films catches the nature of the existing 'extended family' due to their short narratives being condensed into a short film form. Many of them illustrate the nature of the relationship between a father, mother/daughter, son, as in *Biadh*.

*Biadh* (2009, 08:45) is the journey of a young man who is lost in the memories of his mother's death. *Biadh* is a nonlinear narrative and a dialogue-free short film directed by Khalid Al-Kalbani, themed around death and how it affects people. The short opens with a scene showing a child, women, and a young man sitting under a tree. They are tied to the tree using white pieces of clothing. There is a shot of a chair on an empty beach. A young man walks towards the chair and sits on it. Beside the chair, another man stands, and he starts covering the young man with a white cloth, ready to shave his hair. The young man sees white cloth all over him, and he remembers the death of his mother. A group of people dressed in white sit around his mother's dead body, covered with *Alkifn*, white cloth used in Islam to cover the body of dead people. After he finishes shaving, the young man runs along the beach. During a series of flashbacks, a group of people appears, all wearing white; and the young man recalls happy memories of his mother. The man continues to run, and he suddenly sees his mother calling him. The young man recalls his mother's funeral. A group of men carry the mother's body to bury her, and he follows them. When the flashback ends, the young man reaches the location where his mother is buried. He walks, carrying the white cloth until he reaches his mother's grave and covers it with the cloth. Through this narrative symbolism, the

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<sup>336</sup> Hammudah Abd al-Ati, *The Family Structure in Islam* (American Trust Publications Baltimore, MD, 1977), p. 19.

director illustrates how the purity and optimism of the white colour sometimes becomes a feeling of darkness and fear when it is linked to a heartfelt memory – in this case, of death.

*Biadh* focuses on mother/child relationships, through which the strong bond between the mother and her children is mirrored. Even as time passes, as the child ages, the details of the day of his mother's death are still engraved in his memory. This demonstrates his strong desire to have his mother with him, illustrating how important she was to him. Other shorts discuss issues relating to the family as a whole, such as *Almenaz*, *Altohoor*, *Alaswad La Yaleeq Bik*, and *Ana Mashhoor*.

*Almenaz* was written by Khalfan Al-Zydi and directed by Abdullah Al-Batashi (2008, 21:00).<sup>337</sup> The importance of the family is illustrated by a story of a couple trying to protect their new babies from dying. The couple has one child, and each time the mother delivers a new baby, they lose them for unknown reasons. Currently, the couple has one child, but this is not sufficient. The desire to have many children in a family has been, and still is – albeit to a lesser extent – a cause of pride among Muslim families. In Islam, a multitude of children and grandchildren are linked to divine will.<sup>338</sup> For a family, a large number of children is a strength that helps the family perform its duties in society.<sup>339</sup> The director also shows the importance of the children to the family through the son, who, despite his young age, shows a desire to help and support his parents. Khalid, the son, closely watches his mother and sister at home. When he sees his mother talking with a woman who deals with witchcraft and sorcery, he secretly steals the *Herz* and throws it because he wants to protect his family.<sup>340</sup> Moreover, *Almenaz* projects the nature of the father's role not only as a life provider but also as a supporter of his wife and son to ensure family stability. A similar notion of family unity and support through wife/husband, father/son, and mother/son relationships is also projected by *Altohoor* (2014), where parents try to protect their child from society's perspective because he was born with ambiguous genitalia.

A deeper exploration of the strong, coherent unity of Omani society is presented in the first Omani feature film, *Alboom* (2006), in which story events are pushed beyond the setting of a

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<sup>337</sup> The *Menaz* is a term used in Oman to refer to the new-born baby bed with enclosed sides, like a 'Crib'.

<sup>338</sup> Ahmed Al-Kbisi, 'The Philosophy of the Family System in the System of Islam' (University Book House, Al Ain-UAE,).

<sup>339</sup> Al-Kbisi, p. 132.

<sup>340</sup> The *Herz* is an amulet written on a piece of paper, wrapped with a piece of cloth and closed tightly with thread. Other types of *Herz* are wrapped with leather or metal.



private nuclear family. The story unfolds around a group of people living in a coastal village who depend on fishing as a means of living. In the main storyline, the villagers battle the sea, and other subplots emerge. The conflicts between love relationships and norms, bad and good, family ties and personal wishes are all resolved under the pride of the force of good. Hence, the film proves the importance of the family and tribe, and shows the central place they hold in both social and organizational life in the country.<sup>341</sup> The importance of *Alailah* can clearly be seen in the scene where Khamis, a secondary character, goes to Saif to talk to him about his cousin Nor, who loves an old man – this relationship is rejected by society. In his turn, Saif goes directly to Nor and talks to her about the matter. The second example is the dialogue between Aflah and Yousef: while leaving Uncle Othman's house, Aflah asks Yousef about his hesitation to marry his fiancée. Yousef replies, 'It is not only about her. It is about her, her mother, her father, and her village'. It is worth noting here that 'village' (*Alqaryah*) in some cases refers to the extended family. One of the main social characteristics of villages is that their populations are mostly family members, cousins, and relatives, and they have good relations due to intermarriage or joint business relations. Ali's dialogue confirms the discussed nature of family and how the extended family's members hold the power in decision making. However, the composition of *Alailah* is gradually changing and *Alusra* is enjoying more independency in terms of a family's financial situation and living arrangements. As Yahya El-Haddad notes: 'these features do not negate the affiliation of nuclear families to their extended families, both at the relational and the ideological levels'.<sup>342</sup>

Ali's dialogue also confirms another of Oman's cultural characteristics: the 'in group'. According to Richard K. Common, 'the "in group" consists of the extended family and friends, further embedded by a shared place of origin, such as a village'.<sup>343</sup> In addition to Islam, both the family and the tribe in Oman play a crucial role in the structure and performance of society. In their examination of challenges facing the 'Management of Human Resources in Oman', Abdul Basit Al-Hamadi, Pawan S. Budhwar and Helen Shipton found that 'tribal allegiances' have an influence in HR practices and policies:

This finding is in line with other studies, [...] showed that countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) are highly collectivist within the in-

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<sup>341</sup> Abdul Basit Al-Hamadi, Pawan S. Budhwar, and Helen Shipton, 'Management of Human Resources in Oman', *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 18. 1 (2007), 100-13 (p. 102).

<sup>342</sup> Yahya El-Haddad, *Major Trends Affecting Families in the Gulf Countries* (na, 2003), p. 17.

<sup>343</sup> Richard K Common, 'Barriers to Developing 'Leadership' in the Sultanate of Oman', *International Journal of Leadership Studies*, 6. 2 (2011), 215-28 (p. 220).

group (tribe or extended family) and highly individualist with the out-group (non-kin and guest workers). If the outer-group ties between individuals are very loose, interactions are limited, and the emphasis is on an individual's accomplishment. When dealing with the out-group, managers apply the same standards to all employees and put strong emphasis on tasks rather than relationships.<sup>344</sup>

The influence of the in-group is also at the community level, as illustrated in *Alboom*. The film mirrors how such characteristics in some cases represent a burden on individuals. A young woman may lose her right to choose her future groom because there is someone within the 'in-group' who wants to marry her. Another example is limiting the scope of personal freedom for individuals, especially the younger generations, to act and change their lifestyles to keep pace with social changes. This is done through the role of the ancestors, guardians, and senior people in the village, by rejecting any change that contradicts their beliefs or what they were brought up to believe as true. Such traits may sometimes be counterproductive if they do not respond to continuous changes in society and, as a result, they may overpower its positive impact. One way to limit the negative impact of the 'in-group', extended family and tribes is by showing more flexibility towards social transformations.

In Oman, flexibility plays a role in the lives of many families, yet always within the framework of Islamic regulation. It is also important to consider that what is culturally appropriate or accepted is not fixed and differs between groups within the same community. In addition to the loving relationship between the girl and the young man, considered appropriate by society as discussed in the next chapter, another example of socially unacceptable behaviour in the film is when the young man talks to the girl he wants to marry directly to find her opinion before officially proposing to her. In one scene, Aflah puts forth a proposal for Nour's engagement. However, Nour expresses her displeasure towards Aflah for not having consulted her on this matter before arriving at her home. Nevertheless, her brother intervenes and says that Aflah is aware of the customs and traditions and that engagement and marriage arrangements are typically mediated through the parents rather than the individuals themselves.

While the characteristics of the Omani family as a cohesive unit remain evident, some of its characteristics have changed due to the challenges imposed by the modernisation of society.

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<sup>344</sup> Al-Hamadi, Budhwar, and Shipton, p. 111.

The nature of the three to four generations living in one household, parents' roles, family size, working conditions, and income are no longer as they used to be in the 1990s. For example, the role of women has changed due to free access to education, mass media, and their ability to join the job market. They shifted from being dependent to independent co-providers.<sup>345</sup> Some of these changes are detectable in the shorts set in modern Omani society such as *Alaswad La Yaleeq Bik* and *Ana Mashhoor*, which respond to contemporary discussions in society.

*Alaswad La Yaleeq Bik* was written by Issa Al-Subhi and Mohammed Al-Harhi and directed by Issa Al-Subhi (2018, 15:32). As will be demonstrated later, the story is situated in a developed society, in comparison to *Almenaz*. The director depicts the story of a beautiful and educated young girl who is forced to marry an older man. Sundus is a university student and the only daughter of her parents. She loves reading, especially novels, and shares this interest with her secret boyfriend. In Oman, as in any other Muslim country, girls are forbidden from having love relationships. As a result, Sundus talks to her boyfriend while she is at university or in her room at night. Her father's strict character has led her to lead a double life, as she feels scared of him. In her father's presence, Sundus listens to the recorded Quran and reads it as he wants her to. But in his absence, she talks to her boyfriend, watches movies, and reads romance novels. Sundus's attitude illustrates the fear that she lives at home. The feeling of fear of her parents, especially her father, is contrasted to the sense of security that a family is supposed to provide. Families in Oman revolve around unity, feeling safe, and support. In 'Study of the Dimensions and Components of Family Cohesion "Sultanate of Oman"', Taifour Albelie and Rashed Al-Mehrzi state that one of the main characteristics of Omani society is 'the raising of family bonding, communication and empathy with blood ties, relatives and all those included in the social environment of the individual and the family'.<sup>346</sup> This corresponds to the Islamic vision in which family bonding is considered a focal point.<sup>347</sup>

Sundus's feeling of insecurity is caused by the absence of her father or the weak relationship between them. The father's presence within the family is crucial to provide his children with

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<sup>345</sup> Thuwayba A Al-Barwani and Tayfour S Albeely, 'The Omani Family: Strengths and Challenges', *Marriage & family review*, 41. 1-2 (2007), 119-42 (p. 136).

<sup>346</sup> Tayfour Albeely and Rashed Al-Mehrzi, 'Study of the Dimensions and Components of Family Cohesion "Sultanate of Oman"' (2009), <<https://rb.gy/vy6wa5>> [accessed 01 January 2022].

<sup>347</sup> Muhammad Umar Riaz Abbasi and Syed Shahid Tirmizi, 'Multiple Impacts of Globalization on Muslim Culture and Religious Values-an Analytical and Critical Study in Contemporary Scenario', *PalArch's Journal of Archaeology of Egypt/Egyptology*, 17. 7 (2020), 8174-91 (p. 8174).

the psychological needs for their growth, such as security and tranquillity, especially during adolescence.<sup>348</sup> In the film, the father is completely preoccupied with his religious commitments. He is not devoting the required time and effort to caring for his family, which is confirmed by the mother's attitude of repeatedly asking the father to pay attention to them. He does not have a close relationship with Sundus, which makes Sundus scared of him finding out about her relationship. Her way of looking at him shows how scared she is. Despite the mother's care, Sundus is unable to express her feelings to her. This is because the final decision on such matters will be made by the father, who Sundus is sure to be against her desire. In the final scene, the wedding acknowledges the resistance of families to love relationships brought about by the exposure of the younger generation to romantic films through the flow of media content. Moreover, in the wedding scene, in which the director contrasts the beauty of the light shining and Sundus's cloth against her unhappiness and her inability to cry, the director enforces the possible dire consequences behind the beauty of modernity and development. In the film, the compassion we feel towards Sundus is caused by the complex situation in which she is placed, which employs complex dilemmas of relationships, responsibilities, and expectations against current socio-economic conditions.

Another powerful sense of social change, such as new ways of making a living, and new ideas and social values, caused by the current cultural and economic conditions brought about by modernisation, is seen in the short film *Ana Mashhoor*, written by Ahmed Al-Shebli and directed by Muaiad Ambu Saidi (2018, 21:36). The availability of new communication technologies, such as mobile phones, and exposure to a variety of satellite channels and Internet sites, has changed the way of life, especially for the younger generation. The way youths shape their view of reality and the nature of their perception of different issues is highly impacted by their use of the Internet.<sup>349</sup> In the film, Salah is an Instagram 'micro-celebrity' and makes a living through the associated advertising, in which a high number of followers play a crucial role. 'Micro-celebrities' are those individuals who gain popularity via various social media platforms depending on major factors of 'admiration, association,

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<sup>348</sup> Samira Mison and Hamamah Taheri, 'Psychological Compatibility among Children of Parents with Frequent Absences from Home (a Field Study on a Sample of Schooled Adolescents)', in *The Second National Forum on: Communication and Quality of Life in the Family* (The Université de Ouargla, Algeria: Faculté des Sciences Humaines et Sociales, 2013) (p. 1).

<sup>349</sup> Samah Al-Mohamdi, 'The Integration of Youth and Adolescents into Social Networks and Its Impact on Their Perception of Reality: A Case Study on the Issue of Al-Banna and Rajeh within the Framework of the Theory of Cultural Implantation', *Media Research Journal*, 54. 54-3 (2020), 1295-388 (p. 1299).

aspiration, and recognition'.<sup>350</sup> According to van der Heide and Lim, within the online community a high number of followers and likes are important for non-mainstream celebrities as they contribute to 'this person's active engagement, openness to audiences'.<sup>351</sup> Owing to the popularity of social media celebrities and their ability to impact audiences, both old and new businesses use them to market their products and attract consumers.<sup>352</sup> Therefore, for some celebrities being 'Instafamous', as in *Ana Mashhoor*, becomes an essential way to earn a living.

Through the design of Salah's character, the director draws upon changes in the nature of the son/father relationships, types of jobs, and priorities. This recalls the question raised by Vieweg and Hodges: 'how do people who live in societies that value family, adherence to religious authority, and proper public comportment use social media that are conceived of and designed around Western ideologies and social practices?'<sup>353</sup> Their question is crucial in relation to Oman, but there is no single answer. Some individuals refuse to use social media or filter out the Western ideologies to fit their Islamic, Arabic, and Omani characteristics, or immerse themselves completely with those ideologies and start gradually losing their traditional cultural ideologies. To illustrate, Salah's character from *Ana Mashhoor* will be used as a case study to answer Vieweg and Hodges's question.

As stated, Omani society is bound to family ties that are built on, to name a few, respect, unity, and understanding. Moreover, as a Muslim society, in Oman children's obedience to their fathers and their respect is a legitimate duty that gains rewards and punishments in this world and the afterlife.<sup>354</sup> Based on this, from the perspective of the Omani community, Salah's behaviour with his father is considered a mistreatment of his father. An example is a scene in which Salah pulls a prank on his father while he is drinking water, leading the water to spill on him. Salah does not apologise to his father or assist him in drying himself; rather, he continues recording. Moreover, the fact that Salah uses their relationship to gather more followers is culturally unacceptable. Not only does he do this when his father is alive, but he

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<sup>350</sup> Rangsima Kutthakaphan and Wahloonluck Chokesamritpol, *The Use of Celebrity Endorsement with the Help of Electronic Communication Channel (Instagram): Case Study of Magnum Ice Cream in Thailand* (2013), p. 5.

<sup>351</sup> S Venus Jin, Aziz Muqaddam, and Ehri Ryu, 'Instafamous and Social Media Influencer Marketing', *Marketing Intelligence & Planning* (2019).

<sup>352</sup> Melody Nouri, 'The Power of Influence: Traditional Celebrity Vs Social Media Influencer' (2018) (p. 2).

<sup>353</sup> Sarah Vieweg and Adam Hodges, 'Surveillance & Modesty on Social Media: How Qataris Navigate Modernity and Maintain Tradition', in *Proceedings of the 19th ACM Conference on Computer-Supported Cooperative Work & Social Computing* (2016), pp. 527-38 (p. 527).

<sup>354</sup> Wafa Suwid and Al-Romaisa Kishi, 'The Foundations of Family Relations through the Holy Quran' (Echahid Hama Lakhdar University, Algeria, 2022), p. 33.

also uses his death to preserve the number of followers. Salah's way of dealing with his father lacks respect, and the whole idea of using his father to satisfy his own goal runs against the basics of the father-son relationship. Furthermore, the way he tries to use his wife to fulfil and retain his popularity after his father's death confirms how family values are challenged by such practices. Salah lies to his wife and breaks her privacy. Salah's behaviours towards his family lack important elements of the foundations of the Muslim family.

Salah also breaks valuable morals, such as honesty, by lying to his wife and pretending to act in certain ways in some situations. In the hospital scene, Salah shows his father and tells his viewers that he is spending time with his father taking care of him. The truth, however, is that he is sitting on a chair all the time, and even when his father's health worsens, he does not notice. Adding to this is the absence of any religious references within the film. There is no appearance of mosques, sound of *Athan* (the prayer call), or any religious practice such as praying. Some might argue that this is a narrative convention, as there is no need to show such practices in this narrative. However, prayers are a valuable part of any Muslim's life; there is no need to show him praying, but as the storyline covers different days and times, one would expect a reference to religion. In other words, the absence of any religious reference within the film suggests that Salah lives a secular lifestyle.

However, society's determination not to fully submit to the 'Instafamous' phenomenon and its consequences is expressed through Salah's wife, Razan. Throughout the film, the wife refuses to follow her husband's request to show their life to the public. Her responses also confirm the role of *Alailah*, as they have a say in that. In the last sequence she says: 'No, it is not up to you, like you are my husband, I have a father and a brother who do not accept that I show my personal life to the world'. This not only reflects Razan's disagreement with having her life made public, but also the impact of family on their children's decisions. Public morals that are based on Islamic regulation and are set to organise individuals' relationships, such as honesty, respect others, and their privacy, are challenged in the lives of those addicted to social media. What is most critical is that social media occupies individuals and, as a result, impacts the performance of religious rituals.

*Ana Mashhoor* and other examples not only affirm the change of composition of the family in Oman but also shed light on critical characteristics and qualities that have the potential to limit the effective role of the family. The tendency of Omani filmmakers to frame their narratives around the family is a result of being raised and living in a culture centred around

the family. It also asserts the importance given to the Omani family, its existence, as Abd al-Ati describes it, and its cohesiveness in the face of contemporary influences.

## 4.2 The Realist Quality of Omani Shorts

Reading through the selected film samples by focusing on their forms and subjects, the samples in which the story is situated in time periods before the 1990s adhere to a mixture of conventions of both Italian neorealism and New Arab cinemas in Egypt. The neorealist film style is a cinematic movement that emerged in Italy at the end of World War II, focusing on portraying the everyday struggles of ordinary people in a more realistic and sensitive manner.<sup>355</sup> The movement found its way through to other national cinemas, in which directors and intellectuals realized its potential and power. The relevant national cinemas here are the Egyptian and ‘Indian Parallel’ cinemas. Directors from both cinemas perceived a neorealist style as a powerful language through which they could convey their social consciousness of their surroundings, mostly linked to poor economic, social, and political conditions. In Egypt, the neorealist style came into existence after 1967, when directors such as Youssef Chahine, Tewfik Saleh and Shadi Abdel Salam shifted their attention towards raising social awareness.<sup>356</sup> Similarly, in India, especially Bengal, where the style first appeared in 1950, the area was experiencing partition. Violence was perpetrated by sections of both main religious communities. By following the neorealist style, Indian films aimed to ‘portray the “authentic” cultural representation of the land’.<sup>357</sup> It is clear that the main driver of such a movement was political conditions that led to bad social and economic situations. I would suggest here, regarding Oman, to exclude the political factor and focus on the second part, bad socio-economic circumstances. The reason for this is the stable political conditions within Oman during the start of filmmaking practice. Since Sultan Qaboos united the country in the early 1970s, the Sultanate’s political situation stabilised and was characterised by security. There are no political parties; therefore, no battles or conflicts that might constitute rich sources to build film narratives on. In contrast, considering that the practice is a new and

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<sup>355</sup> Aslı Daldal, ‘The Impact of Neorealism in Turkish Intellectual Cinema: The Cases of Yılmaz Güney and Nuri Bilge Ceylan’, *Academic Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies*, 2. 9 (2013), 181-81 (p. 181).

<sup>356</sup> Nouri Bouzid and Shereen El Ezabi, ‘New Realism in Arab Cinema: The Defeat-Conscious Cinema’, *Alif: Journal of comparative poetics*. 15 (1995), 242 (p. 244).

<sup>357</sup> Priya, ‘The Relationship between Italian Neorealism and Indian Parallel Cinema Revisited’, in *The Asian Cinema Blog* (2022).

unfunded field, a connection could be made as the first possibility for reasoning about the similarities between Omani short films and neorealism.

Based on the analysis of the short films, they reflect the basic characteristics of Omani culture as simple, homogenous, and collaborative. These characteristics are presented using Omani locales and cultural elements, such as language, dress code, and folktales, all set in a real village setting with everyday details. This brings to mind two basic characteristics of the neorealist film style. As captured by Stephen Hart in ‘From Realism to Neorealism to Magical Realism: The Algebra of Memory’, some of the principles of neorealist film focus on ‘emerging political and social reality’, depicting the lives of ordinary people and the use of non-professional actors.<sup>358</sup> These characteristics are presented through fundamental *mise en scène* techniques with an added documentary flavour.<sup>359</sup> By following their conventions, Italian directors tended to create deep sympathy for the working class, whose focus was on making a living. Such similarities raise an important question: is there an influence of the Italian neorealist filmmaking style on Omani filmmaking practice and how is it manifested? I turn to these questions in the following section through discussing the short *Almenaz*.

I reviewed the development process of filmmaking practice and its determining influences in Chapter Three. However, the focus here is on how these factors led to the adherence of Omani shorts in terms of realities to those neorealist films. As no attention is given to filmmaking by the government, there is no suitable infrastructure, studios, or funds for production. Filmmakers are left with no choice but to focus on short film production, which they can self-fund. They also use local people as actors, in on-location settings, and focus on stories related to them – a condition similar to the neorealism movement. These conditions force the realities of these short films. The reality imposed by simple stories about ordinary people mirrors the plain characteristics of their culture and lives. For Italian directors, this was a personal choice, but for Omani filmmakers, it is an enforced situation; the quality of reality for both is similar. This finding confirms the possibility of adherence even though none of the interviewed directors confirmed a direct influence by Italian neorealism. However, other factors might also play a role.

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<sup>358</sup> Stephen M. Hart, ‘From Realism to Neorealism to Magical Realism: The Algebra of Memory’, *Romance Studies*, 30, 3-4 (2012), 251-67 (pp. 253-54).

<sup>359</sup> David Thorburn, ‘Italian Neorealism’ (Open Courseware: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2007).



The second possibility for the influence of neorealism is through both Egyptian and Indian ‘Parallel Cinemas’. This is due to the long absorption of both Egyptian and Indian films in Oman. Omani directors like Khalid Al-Zedjali, Abdulla Al-Batashi, and Mohamed Al-Kindi were in direct contact with Egyptian directors who were approached by Omani television and radio channels in the 1970s and 1980s for their experience in the field. These experts directed television series and programmes and were also involved in scriptwriting and story treatment. It could thus be surmised that their influence can be found in the culture of Omani filmmaking, but thorough historical investigation is required to confirm the connection. Until then, I suggest that the economic situation of Oman and the funds unavailable for film practice led those films to share the qualities of neorealist productions. The following analysis of *Almenaz* demonstrates the realist quality of some Omani short films.

In *Almenaz*, Al-Batashi presents the plain living characteristics of Oman society in the 1970s and early 1980s through the simplicity of people’s lives. Through his story of the struggle of two parents to accept the death of their children, Al-Batashi captures both the social and economic hardship reality of the time. There is a clear absence of basic institutions such as hospitals and schools. Throughout the film, we see the suffering of the parents because of their fear of losing their baby, yet there is no mention of a hospital. This absence could be explained by the unsatisfactory situation of the health sector before and in the early 1970s. There were only two hospitals run by an American Mission and ten clinics and dispensaries providing health services to a population of 723,842 people.<sup>360</sup> In addition to infrastructure, there was also a workforce shortage, totalling only 13 physicians and a few nurses in 1970 and no Omani professionals.<sup>361</sup> The unavailability of Omani professionals in the health sector suggests the lack of higher education institutions. This is illustrated through the film, as we see the boys sitting in village passages playing instead of being in school or at an educational gathering. Within the 1960-70s period there were only three schools, and these only enrolled male students; some were sent abroad for further study because of the unavailability of any higher education institution in the country.<sup>362</sup> The notion of the uneducated is confirmed by the mother, who adheres to old beliefs about magic that exorcists have the power to cure and

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<sup>360</sup> Elena Maestri, ‘Healthcare in Oman between Past and Present Achievements, Human Security and the Covid-19 Pandemic’, *Euras Journal of Social Sciences*, 77 (2021) (p. 84).

<sup>361</sup> Basu Ghosh, ‘Health Workforce Development Planning in the Sultanate of Oman: A Case Study’, *Human Resources for Health*, 7. 1 (2009), 1-15 (p. 2).

<sup>362</sup> Shapour Rassekh, *Education as a Motor for Development: Recent Education Reforms in Oman with Particular Reference to the Status of Women and Girls* (International Bureau of Education, 2004), p. 8. And Hamood Alshoaibi, ‘Evolution of the Omani Higher Education System and Economic Challenges 1970-2014’ (2015) (p. 6).

protect people. Despite her youth, the mother's desperate situation of losing her children leads her to go back to an exorcist instead of thinking of any other solution, such as going to the hospital. This practice still exists, although to a lesser extent, and is carried out by older generations. In Oman, as in neighbouring countries like the UAE, a belief in magic is linked to believers' low educational level. In her investigation 'Sorcery... A dummy treatment and a disguised trade', Raja AlGhafri interviews an Omani who, under the pressure of his wife, went asking for treatment and help – the poor outcome he 'blame[d]... on his level of knowledge and education'.<sup>363</sup> The relationship between educational level and attitudes towards magic and sorcery was also found in a study conducted by the Department of Research and Studies at the Department of Family Development Centre in Sharjah, UAE. The study showed that gender and educational level were the two main influential variables. As mentioned in a previous report:

The study... showed that members of the community frequent magicians and sorcerers to solve some of the life problems they face, such as disease [...], issues of love, hate, envy, failure, and the desire to know the future, and this can be explained by the ignorance of these people in the ways scientific knowledge to solve these problems and the misconception that solving these problems lies outside the scope of scientific knowledge.<sup>364</sup>

The rejection of such practices by the community is illustrated by the director through the dialogue between the parents and in the character of their child. Through Khalid's character, the director represents the future, not only for the family but also for society. In the story, Khalid takes the *herz* (Figure 6), which was given to his mother by the women who deal with exorcists, from the '*menaz*' of his sister and throws it far away.

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<sup>363</sup> Raja Al-Ghafri, 'Sorcery.. Fake Treatment and Hidden Trade', *Al Shabiba Newspaper* (2016).

<sup>364</sup> 'Family Development Centers Reveal the Results of a Field Study on Witchcraft and Sorcery' (Emirates News Agency: Family Development Centers, 2014).



Figure 6: *The herz* in *Almenaz*, 2009

Another example of rejecting magic occurs when a woman who gave his mother the *herz* passes Khalid. In this sequence, we see Khalid sitting and watching two boys play when the woman passes by. Khalid follows her and throws a stone at her. The act of throwing the *herz* implies a call from the director to society to eliminate such an attitude.

Besides the absence of basic institutions such as hospitals and schools, another element that suggests economic hardship is the father working in farming. Before the discovery of oil in the late 1960s, Omanis depended on farming and fishing for their living.<sup>365</sup> In those days, most Omanis engaged in farming and fishing not only due to the absence of other means of living, but also because of Oman's dry and hot climate. In summer, the temperature exceeds 45°C, maintaining arid and semi-arid climates,<sup>366</sup> leading Omanis to inhabit areas with natural water resources.<sup>367</sup> The film's narrative illustrates the importance of these water resources for Omanis. The story is set in a small mountain village consisting of clay houses surrounded by farms and mountains (Figure 7).

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<sup>365</sup> Juma Said Khalafan Al-Anbari, 'Understanding Constraints to the Development of the Agricultural Sector in Oman: An Application of the Theory of Planned Behaviour' (University of Reading, 2017), p. 1.

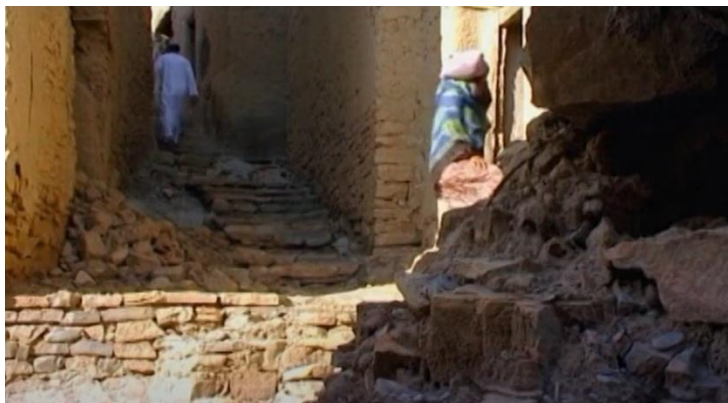
<sup>366</sup> HPW Jayasuriya, AM Al-Ismaili, and T Al-Shukaili, 'Farming Systems in Oman and Mechanization Potentials', *Agricultural Mechanization in Asia, Africa, and Latin America*, 48. 2 (2017), 66.

<sup>367</sup> Al-Barwani and Albeely, p. 123.



*Figure 7: Misfat Al Abriyeen, Oman. An example of mountain villages. Photograph by Hanni Al-Saadi, @haani\_saleh*

Figure 7 illustrates the design of the entire village, not the actual setting of the film, but somewhere similar. Small houses on uneven ground, with a narrow passage between them, and an irrigation system called *Alfalaj* runs through it (Figures 8 and 9). The *Alfalaj* is an ancient irrigation system from 500 AD that consists of water channels spread throughout the village. It is the main water resource on which the inhabitants depend. First, it is used as a water source for watering the farms surrounding the village as it goes through them. Second, for a long time, *Alfalaj* functioned as a water supply for domestic uses such as drinking and washing clothes and was also used for showers.



*Figure 8: A passage within a mountain village in Almenaz, 2009*



*Figure 9: Alfalaj in Almenaz, 2009*

As depicted in the daily routine of the father and other characters, within the course of the story, their daily life practices take place in the village itself. We see the father going to work on the farm in the morning, returning home later, the women go around visiting neighbours, and the children play in the available spaces. There is no interaction within the film between the story's characters and others outside the village, for either personal relationships or work purposes. This notion of isolation enforces the uncomplicated way of living during the early 1970s, as people were not involved in more complex situations or managing several commitments as they do today.

Many Omanis work in Muscat, which is far from their hometowns. Muscat, as the capital, is the centre for all governmental and private institutions, investment projects, and big businesses. While these institutions have expanded their services throughout the country by opening smaller branches, Muscat constitutes to be the focal point for job opportunities. During their casual working days, workers residing in Muscat must accomplish their work and perform their prayers. Some go out with their friends and visit shops. However, for those living in hometowns, or for whom Muscat is their hometown, they need to return to accomplish their home requirements, such as following up their siblings/children's schoolwork, providing groceries, or sitting with family members.

Returning to *Almenaz*, by putting more emphasis on the basic way of life and making a living, which is created by the hard economic circumstances, Al-Batashi also shows the idea of a simple life through the house in which the main characters live. Family members share one large bedroom in which they sleep on the floor using cotton mattresses. These mattresses are

moved during the day so that the room can be used as a dining room. They also depend on *Alfanar*, an oil lamp used as a main lighting source, because there is no electricity supply (Figure 10). The simplicity attached to Omani society continues to be a basic feature, yet of a different nature as the community develops. As the years passed and society became more modern, simplicity in the short films was not presented in terms of housing, way of living, or stories. Unlike the stories discussed earlier, stories told within the period from 2016 to 2020 touch on more sensitive and complicated issues, such as relationships and the quest for power. Nevertheless, a sense of simplicity continues to be presented. In *Alaswad La Yaleeq Bik*, despite living in a more modernised society than before, most Omanis still hold on to their eating habits on the floor.



Figure 10: *Alfanar* (circled), in *Almenaz*, 2009

With its actual projection of the social and economic situation of its time, *Almenaz* and other shorts such as *Altohoor* acknowledge the quality of realism as one of the main characteristics of Omani filmmaking culture. The realist nature of these short films evokes a documentary flavour, which will be illustrated in the following section.

### 4.3 The Documentary Quality of Omani Narrative Filmmaking Practice

*Almenaz* explicitly captures several cultural patterns starting with its title. The *menaz* is an Arabic term that means ‘cradle’. As the story is about the death of babies, the director chose to title his film to deliberately evoke babies and as a means of documenting Omani culture,

ways of living, and its heritage. The director chooses to use old wooden handmade *menaz* (Figure 11) despite the availability of newer types of cradles. The *menaz* is made of palm fronds tied together with a rope of palm fronds, which confirms the importance of farming in Oman, not only for work. It is covered with two pieces of clothing to provide a suitable atmosphere for the baby in terms of lighting and temperature. Although the film was produced in 2006 and other old designs of *menaz* exist, to document cultural elements the director elected to use one of the oldest types.



Figure 11: The *menaz* in *Almenaz*, 2009

*Almenaz* features many symbolic aspects of Omani culture, costumes, dialects, ways of living, and village design. Formal Omani costumes consist of, for men, a white *dishdashah*, an ankle-length, collarless dress (Figure 12), under which men wear white t-shirts and *wizar* (Figure 13). On top of their heads, men wear a *massar* and/or cap called a *kummah*. Omani men wear this for work and during formal social engagements such as weddings, funerals, and visits, and while attending official institutions. During their farming or fishing work, they wear short *dishdashah* for more flexibility (Figure 14).



*Figure 12: Omani men's formal costume in Almenaz, 2009*



*Figure 13: Men's domestic costumes in Almenaz, 2009*



*Figure 14: Men's costumes for farming, fishing, and cooking in Almenaz, 2009*

Women wear an under-knee-length colourful *dishdashah* and pants called *Sirwal*. To cover their hair, Omani women wear a *lihaf*, matching their *dishdashah*; while going out, they wear



a *liso* over it (Figure 15). It is worth mentioning that the details of the dress differ from governorate to governorate.<sup>368</sup> The attitude of wearing such a costume while going out still exists within the villages. Old women wear it when going out to visit neighbours and during weddings. For the younger generation, this outfit is currently linked to ceremonies, such as weddings and Eids. For work and attending official institutions, most Omani women wear an *abaya*, long black clothes, along with their head scarf.



Figure 15: One type of Omani women's costumes in Almenaz, 2009

Another example of Al-Batashi mirroring the material culture is the location where all main events occur (as seen in Figure 11). I argue that Al-Batashi created iconographic cultural patterns in the living room. The set includes many tools that produce knowledge of how Omanis lived during the early 1970s. Examples are the *Jafeer*, a basket made of palm fronds used for gathering dates and carrying items. The *Haseer* is a mat made of palm fronds. Both previous examples demonstrate the long association between Omanis and agriculture as a necessity for life. This also confirms the self-sufficiency needed to cope with the hardships of economic conditions. There is a use of the *Kankoon*, any piece of cloth used for carrying items by wrapping them in it, usually carried by women. Through this detail Al-Batashi constructs a cultural document in his short film.

Al-Batashi also captures some traditional Omani folktales in his films, as in *Bint Gharba*. In his interview, Al-Batashi argued that there is a need for the visual documentation of Oman's

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<sup>368</sup> There are different types and designs of women's costumes attached to different regions. For examples Suri, Dofari, Belushi, and Omani.

cultural and historical specificities. Therefore, he focuses on adding a documentary flavour to his films by working on related vocabulary and environmental elements to serve his story while simultaneously fulfilling his intention of recording Oman visually through narrative films. He claimed:

We have a long history, norms, and a variety of traditions; someone needs to stand to discover them and mirror them through cinema. It is not to say that we preoccupy ourselves with that, but they constitute fertile references to build narratives based on them.<sup>369</sup>

Other short films that are set in the past also carried an ethnographic impulse within their narratives. For example, *Altohor*, written and directed by Anwar Al-Ruziqi (2014, 11:26), displays visual representation of a coastal village. Before engaging with the film, it is worth noting that unlike Al-Batashi, for Anwar AlRuziqi, the documentary flavour is caused by narrative conventions. In his interview, he stated that his need for an interesting and powerful element to reveal the story led him to the old village setting, even though the issue portrayed in the film still exists today.<sup>370</sup> *Altohor*'s main plot is the issue and societal acceptance of those born with ambiguous genitalia. To create a strong storyline, the director used the traditional event of *Altohor*, during which male circumcision is carried out. *Altohor*, also known as *Alkhitan*, used to be practiced up to the first years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century but has since stopped. *Alkhitan* is also performed by individuals who have learned how to do it. The story convention led to the use of an old setting, and a traditional folk dance was performed as part of the event. The story events of *Altohor* take place in a village consisting of houses made of cement mixed with stones (Figure 16). These villages are mostly located along the coastlines. Unlike clay villages, the organisation of houses is random, and there are many free spaces between them (Figure 17).

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<sup>369</sup> Al-Batashi.

<sup>370</sup> Anwar Al-Ruzaiqi, 'Discussion on Omani Filmmaking Practice' (Mrs. Sanaa Al-Hadabi, 2022).



*Figure 16: Old style houses made of cement in Altohooor, 2014*



*Figure 17: General village design in Altohooor, 2014*

As part of the village, there is a gathering place called the *Sablah*, which is made of palm leaves. This place is where visitors are welcomed, and men gather to discuss concerns (Figure 18).



*Figure 18: The Sablah in Altohor, 2014.*

In *Alzahrah* (2008), produced by Jasim Al-Batashi, another old village characteristic is projected, with the place being made entirely from palm fronds (Figure 19). There is also an illustration of how milk was made at home (Figure 20).



*Figure 19: A coastal residential area in Alzahrah, 2008*



*Figure 20: Traditional process of making milk in Alzahrah, 2008*

In addition to showing ways of life and the residential infrastructure, one of the most frequently encountered cultural elements, visually and orally, are folk dances and music. Oman has a rich range of folk dances and songs created through multiculturalism and geographical diversity. These folk expressions usually reflect a way of life through their patterns of individual and collective behaviours and traditions.<sup>371</sup> Examples include *Almdimah* and *Altanborah*, which echo the practice and life of Omanis living along the coastal strip.

Some directors have accommodated aspects of Omani folk music within their short films, either as background music, such as in *Biadh* and *Bint Gharba*, or diegetically, such as in *Altohor* and *Alzahrah*. In *Altohor*, the director shows how traditional folk tunes accompany Omanis in their lives – in this case, through joy and celebration. The director constructs a visual documentation of the *Alrazha* dance by giving more attention to details, movements, instruments, and costumes through close-up shots (Figures 21 and 22). The strong attachments of Omanis to these longstanding traditions are noted through the joy on the men's faces and through the way the director deals with it as a basic story component.



Figure 21: Drums used in *Alrazha* and folk dances in general in *Altohor*, 2014

<sup>371</sup> Rashid Al Hashemi, 'Traditional Arts in Orchestral Musical Works', in *Omani Music* (Muscat: Oman Center for Traditional Music, 2020), p. 19 (p. 6).



*Figure 22: Alkhanjar (left) and Tirs (right) are used to protect men acting with swords in Altohor, 2014*

This documentary flavour is caused by the realist social mode followed within these narrative film samples, as explained earlier. While these films capture the essence and life of Omani culture, they do so through a controlled script, aiming to depict the struggles, triumphs, and complexities of ordinary people. Those cultural essences do not occur naturally. The realist quality accompanied by the documentary flavour of these shorts recalls the relationship between narrative and documentary films in relation to realism and the documentary/fiction juxtaposition. In the context of current Omani filmmaking, this opens up new avenues for investigation, requiring analytical exploration of documentary short films to examine the relationship between these two forms and investigate the extent of similarity between both in relation to realism.

Based on the previous discussion, Omani short films, specifically those set in an older society, through their realist mode employ documentary qualities created through the reality embodied within the films. Taking into account other short films in which the story occurs in a developing society, Omani short filmmaking culture, as a whole, captures the transformation of Omani society during the 21<sup>st</sup> century on different levels. While shorts such as *Almenaz* and *Altohor* mirror the conditions and characteristics of Omani society during the 1970s and the 1980s, *Ana Mashhoor* and *Alaswad La Yaleeq Bik* describe 21<sup>st</sup> century societal shifts.

*Alaswad La Yaleeq Bik* features higher education institutions (Sultan Qaboos University), religious infrastructure, paved roads, the interior design of houses, and other features of modern urban life. As mentioned earlier, during the Nahda process, Oman witnessed a notable

transformation that focused on providing basic official institutions in different fields. Following this, a process of modernisation began and was accelerated by rapid technological developments.<sup>372</sup> Discussions about the impact of technological development on society are continuing and complex, as the impact occurs at different levels across various locales, groups, and individuals.<sup>373</sup> One of the major impacts of technological developments in communication is presented in the short film *Ana Mashhoor*, discussed earlier, where the story is built around the phenomenon social media influencers. Social media platforms ‘epitomize the type of technological innovation responsible for the globalisation of modernity’.<sup>374</sup> According to Sarah Vieweg and Adam Hodges in ‘Surveillance & Modesty on Social Media: How Qataris Navigate Modernity and Maintain Tradition’, the way in which populations from MENA use social media platforms on a daily basis indicates their openness to the world, and shows ‘how they are adapted to cultural contexts beyond those from which they originated’.<sup>375</sup> In Oman, the Internet has become an essential practice in everyday life due to the transformation of society into an information society, ‘in which individuals, governments, and organisations alike generate and accumulate enormous amounts of data that can no longer be analysed manually’.<sup>376</sup> According to DataReportal, by the beginning of 2021, there were 4.92 million Internet users in Oman, of whom 4.14 million were social media users.<sup>377</sup> The use of social media by university students is also seen in the short film *Almadhalah Alzarqa*. A study by Al-Barashdi in 2015 reported a wave of addiction to mobile phone usage among students (33.1 %) among Sultan Qaboos University students.<sup>378</sup> Instagram is the preferred social media platform for entertainment purposes.<sup>379</sup>

Building on the discussion with a focus on *Ana Mashhoor*, the establishing shot clearly depicts the development process. The film starts with an aerial shot showing the physical design of urban cities with large houses, wide-paved roads, and many other characteristics

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<sup>372</sup> Edmore Mutekwe, ‘The Impact of Technology on Social Change: A Sociological Perspective’, *Journal of research in peace, gender and development*, 2. 11 (2012), 226-38 (p. 226).

<sup>373</sup> Sameer Bin Ayyash, ‘Technology and Its Impact on the Cultural Identity of Arab Youth’, *Egyptian Journal of Information Sciences*, 5. 1 (2018), 317-48 (p. 320).

<sup>374</sup> Vieweg and Hodges, p. 527.

<sup>375</sup> Vieweg and Hodges, p. 527.

<sup>376</sup> Abdulrahman I Al-Ghadir and Aqil M Azmi, ‘A Study of Arabic Social Media Users–Posting Behavior and Author’s Gender Prediction’, *Cognitive Computation*, 11. 1 (2019), 71-86 (p. 71).

<sup>377</sup> Simon Kemp, ‘Digital 2021: Oman’ (DataReportal.com, 2021).

<sup>378</sup> Hafidha S. Al-Barashdi, ‘The Addiction of Sultan Qaboos University Students to Social Networking Sites (Sns)’, *Journal of Educational and Psychological Studies*, 13. 2 (2019) (p. 302).

<sup>379</sup> Khuram Shahzad and Syeeda Shafiya, ‘An Exploratory Study on Social Media Trends among the Students in Omani Higher Education Institutions’, *Multicultural Education*, 7. 9 (2021) (p. 155).

(Figure 23). Urbanisation developments are mostly evident with the expansion of Muscat, the capital, where the population is increasing yearly.<sup>380</sup>



Figure 23: Muscat, the establishing shot in *Ana Mashhoor*, 2018

Another example in the film is the language that is used. There is use of extraneous vocabulary that is used in between the talk, such as ‘okay’ and ‘snacks’ in English and the word ‘*Habeeb*’ in Arabic. This endorses one of the main impacts of globalisation and modernisation on the Arabic language. Language is believed to be closely associated with culture. Elizabeth Peterson argues that language is part of culture and reflects it.<sup>381</sup> Many words have found their way into Arabic through an exchange of goods and services on the global market. These words are literal translations of English vocabulary and not the original Arabic – so-called loan words.<sup>382</sup> Examples, such as ‘supermarkets’, ‘genes’, ‘t-shirts’, ‘computers’, and in the case of films, ‘okay’ and ‘snacks’ have been consumed as Arabic terms and are written in Arabic letters. There is even an attitude on social media platforms of using Latin letters in writing Arabic words, known as ‘*Arabizeiah*’.<sup>383</sup> Many young people use this vocabulary to demonstrate that they are modern and open to the world.

This discussion relates to debates on cultural imperialism. I mentioned in Chapter Two that Oman regarded globalisation as a Westernization process. Sultan Qaboos was careful when

<sup>380</sup> John E Peterson, ‘Oman Faces the Twenty-First Century’, *Political change in the Arab Gulf states: stuck in transition* (2011), 99-118 (p. 106).

<sup>381</sup> Elizabeth Peterson and Bronwyn Coltrane, ‘Culture in Second Language Teaching’ (2003) (p. 1).

<sup>382</sup> Waleed Abdul hadi Alowaimer, ‘The Impact of Globalization on the Arabic Language’, *Human and Social Sciences Studies*, 38. 2 (2011), 472-90 (p. 483).

<sup>383</sup> Jilali Bobacar, ‘Language, Identity and Globalization. Argument of Concepts’, *Her Majesty’s Arabic Language* (2016).



managing the modernity process to maintain the unique characteristics of the society. His critical understanding of such influence is evident in his 1993 speech to Sultan Qaboos University students. He stated: ‘Oman is a country with a deep-rooted history, a distinguished character, which has its own philosophy in social life, and therefore we should not allow senseless imitation to impede our progress or passively affect our immortal heritage’.<sup>384</sup> The work toward preserving Oman’s cultural identity and unique characteristics continues in the face of external factors. This is seen in prioritising cultural identity while designing strategic programmes and development plans. However, there is a clear influence of Western culture brought about by the exposure of Omani locals to a wider range of goods, new music and fashion styles, and various global trends.

According to John Tomlinson, cultural imperialism can be defined, broadly, as ‘the exercise of domination in cultural relationships in which the values, practices, and meanings of a powerful foreign culture are imposed upon one or more native cultures’.<sup>385</sup> Several scholars have pointed out considerable evidence of the influence of cultural imperialism, which came from the dominance of Western cultures over others.<sup>386</sup> While the theory is valid, Omani culture is built on Islam, specifically conservative Ibadi ethology, on which most ideologies, beliefs, and practices are based. This led to narrowing the possibilities of pressure over the cultural identity for a certain period; however, of late, that exposure imposes a clear challenge to Omani identity.

Open markets, multinational corporations, the free flow of goods, and rapid changes in technology have led to wider international migration movements. Many Omanis were sent abroad to study and train in various fields. Similarly, migrants were welcomed, and some were intentionally hired to benefit from their skills. This movement of people in and out has informed and continues to inform the diversity of the culture, as mentioned earlier, and adds complexity when examining its identity. Immigrants such as Indians, Bangladeshi, and Egyptians usually try to merge their native identities with those of the Omani. Similarly, Omanis are influenced by migrants and their cultures. In ‘The Psychology of Globalisation’, Jeffrey Arnett explores the influence of globalisation on individuals’ identities. He argues that

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<sup>384</sup> Funsch, p. 77.

<sup>385</sup> John Tomlinson, ‘Cultural Imperialism’, *The Wiley-Blackwell Encyclopedia of Globalization* (2012) (p. 1).

<sup>386</sup> Examples of studies include: Julianne Burton and Jean Franco, 1978; Edward Said, 1993; John Tomlinson, 2012; and Xinyi Chen and Siwen Shen, 2021.

adults tend to create a ‘bicultural identity’ – a combination of local identity and a global identity – through which they try to confirm their place within a wider cultural nexus.<sup>387</sup>

This section has illustrated the transformation of Omani society in various aspects, including education level, economic conditions, and social life practices, compared to the projected ones at the beginning of the 1970s, which has best documented the modernity process within the country. This can be seen in the field of Omani novels: Amna Al-Rubie, a playwright and researcher in modern and contemporary Arabic literature, claims that the novel often ‘resembles a document, rather than a work of art’.<sup>388</sup> While short films such as *Almenaz* illustrate the old organic model of culture, *Ana Mashhoor* and other shorts mirror its contemporary version. However, this does not necessarily affirm that documentary reality is a persistent pattern in practice.

#### 4.4 Against the Myth of Hollywood’s Classical Victorious Hero

Another characteristic of Omani filmmaking found within *Almenaz*’s narrative, but not exclusive to it, is the tendency to create sympathy towards the characters. Compassion for the characters was implicit from the beginning of the first sequence. *Almenaz* starts with a nighttime shot showing a dark, quiet village, followed by a shot of the father sitting in one corner of the house waiting, with fear, to hear news of his wife’s birth. The next shot explains the reason for the fear in detail. In the following lines, the father talks to himself while standing in the graveyard:

Everything is governed by the law of fate. They would leave before the sun opens its eyes, and our eyes tear to lose them. It is as if death is a large circle, with no limits. Their poor mother lost joy and became afraid every day; the labour brings her the news of the end of a journey of torment, with a child she holds in her arms... and the wounds were washed with them. Torment, pain, and cruelty made me hate everything that reminded me of the meaning of labour and the meaning of slain joy in my family’s eyes. How harsh a life is, and how cruel it is for the family

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<sup>387</sup> Jeffrey Jensen Arnett, ‘The Psychology of Globalization’, *American psychologist*, 57. 10 (2002), 774 (p. 777).

<sup>388</sup> Cultural Gulf, ‘The Experience of Narrative Narration in the Sultanate of Oman, Not Older Than 20 Years’ (AlKhaleej Newspaper, 2009).

head to be helpless in protecting his children from death... protecting them from a mysterious disease?

In the previous shot, the director not only introduced the main plot of the story, but with the words used, inspired viewers with feelings associated with the frequent loss of loved ones. Sympathy here is created visually by placing the father alone in the middle of a graveyard, talking to himself. He is also shown leaning on a stick despite his relatively young age, illustrating his inability to move ahead in life without support.

The director depended on language to stress these feelings. There is a use of different concepts that have the same meaning, such as torment, pain, and cruelty. Moreover, the use of the term 'slain joy' illustrates the absence of joy and happiness within their family, which we do not see in their eyes. In the Arabic language, synonyms and metonymy are two aesthetic styles used to emphasise an idea, in this case, the consequences of losing loved ones. The director also reflects on the father's despair by showing a contradiction between his feelings and beliefs. The father starts by stating that '[e]verything is governed by the law of fate, including death'; yet following on from that, he begins to question their fate. One of the pillars of faith upon which Islam is built is the belief in fate, with its good and evil, which is incompatible with people's will in their chosen actions.<sup>389</sup> Death is an inevitable fate that we do not have control over, but that we must accept so we can proceed in life. While talking to himself, the father questions this idea. He ends his talks by asking forgiveness from Allah for his questioning, saying, '*Astaghfer Allah, Astaghfer Allah, Astaghfer Allah,*' a sentence which Muslims use when they do or sometimes are about to make mistakes. Such contradictions between beliefs, actions, and expressed feelings are also repeated in later sequences, confirming the parents' unhappiness.

In *Almenaz* and the other films included in the analysis, directors aim to create sympathy for the characters. Stories involve people fighting challenges imposed by their surrounding material world and not accepting their destiny. In *Alzahrah* (2008), we can see the misery of a mother regretting her daughter's sacrifice. The same theme is found in *Biadh* (2009): the sorrow of losing beloved ones. Moreover, there is a notable absence of a traditional happy ending. Most films do not end with the main character accepting the constraints which they had sought to escape. Their conclusions are more ambiguous and open-ended. Moreover, as

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<sup>389</sup> Mohammad Bin Ibrahim Alhamad, *Belief in Fate and Destiny* (Riyadh, Saudi Arabia: Dar Ibn Khuzaymah for Publishing and Distribution, 2014), p. 305.

shorts are limited in their scope (being *short* films), they keep the tension alive and convey a sense that the story might continue – as if they were simply one act within a longer film. Thus, the shorts can imply the possibilities of different narrative outcomes. Adding to that the directors often intend to show life as it is, so the ‘happy ending’ is not always a satisfying or realistic outcome.

By creating sympathy towards the main characters and moving away from happy endings, Omani directors do not adhere to the norms associated with Hollywood or the figure of the classic hero who can – often single-handedly – overcome any obstacles.<sup>390</sup> Their tendency is similar to new realism’s principle of demolishing the myth of the honourable, classical hero.

#### 4.5 The Use of Folk Tunes on Soundtracks

To emphasise their message and engender sympathy towards their characters, Omani film practitioners depend on music as a powerful tool to emotionally engage the audience and present the film’s context. Music is usually associated with the appearance of certain characters. Such tradition is present within Egyptian cinema and, as Malek Khoury has suggested, ‘helped define the success of Arab cinema from the 1930s to the 1950s’.<sup>391</sup> Music was used to add emotional engagement and create a playful sense of the narrative. Among the short films examined, one common type of music is *Ahaat*.

*Ahaat* involves human sound effects and was invented in the 1990s, specifically in the studios of the Arabian Gulf. These sound effects are used in films and religious programmes instead of musical soundtracks.<sup>392</sup> As mentioned earlier, there is also the incorporation of some Omani folk musical heritage. In *Biadh*, the director depended heavily on music, with a combination of various musical soundtracks, including Omani folk tunes and *Ahaat*.

Another example is the use of Omani Youths’ Year Anthem in *Altohor*, which provides more specificity for context and time period. Omani Youths’ Year Anthem was written and produced in 1983 as part of the 13<sup>th</sup> Omani national day celebrations. That year was dedicated

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<sup>390</sup> Francesco Pitassio, ‘Neorealist Film Culture, 1945-1954’, in *Neorealist Film Culture, 1945-1954* (Amsterdam University Press, 2019) (p. 201).

<sup>391</sup> Malek Khoury, ‘Origins and Patterns in the Discourse of New Arab Cinema’, *Arab Studies Quarterly*, 27. 1/2 (2005), 1-20 (p. 16).

<sup>392</sup> Mohammed Amir Nasher Al Naam, ‘From Kalthomi Human Vocals to Islamic Human Vocals’ (2019), <<https://rb.gy/inf6rx>> [accessed October, 2022]; Naam.

to celebrating young people and emphasised the importance of their involvement in the Oman development process. In the film, the director introduces the anthem along with a sequence of school buildings, illustrating the availability of education, which is one of the most important engines of development. Moreover, the following sequence of the son, dressed up in front of a mirror, shows him entering adolescence, as the anthem is associated with the age of youth. The importance given to youth continues today.

The use of Omani folk culture and its other elements, whether performative, narrative, or aesthetic, is also observed in the Omani theatre. Some traditional Omani musical and performative folk tunes are used widely in Omani theatre practice for both dramatic and aesthetic purposes.<sup>393</sup> This tendency is linked more to the beginning of the practice as a way of communicating and creating harmony with the local audience, who had been newly introduced to theatrical art, assuring their acceptance of this art form.<sup>394</sup> However, according to Jasim Al-Batashi, a theatre actor and director, the purpose of the current uses of such folklore is to attract the audience when all theatrical forms look similar to each other.<sup>395</sup>

This confirms the ability of various cultural elements to add uniqueness to art production. Indeed, the focus on being different from others and ensuring a place within a wider context is one of the characteristics of Omani short filmmaking practice. Currently, young film directors are moving towards creating new waves and styles in their filmic productions. One clear example is Haitham Sulieman, who artistically aims to create a distinguished personal style and technique in filmmaking culture.<sup>396</sup>

#### **4.6 New Stylistic Outlook**

By experimenting with his narrative short films, Haitham Sulieman added a new outlook in terms of theme and style to existing practice. Based on the film samples found during the data collection process, all short and long features are drama. The experimental narrative is not popular in Oman or the GCC region. To analyse Sulieman's approach, I discuss the short film

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<sup>393</sup> 'The Traditional Spectacle in the Omani Theater, Some of the Traditional Arts Have Been Dramatically Exploited and Some Are Still under Wraps', in *Nizwa* (Muscat: Ministry of Information, Oman, 2014).

<sup>394</sup> Mohammed Al-Hamamsi, 'Gulf Folklore Is a Treasure Capable of Enriching the Theatrical Space' (2019), <<http://tinyurl.com/4s8v26ur>> [accessed November, 2022].

<sup>395</sup> Al-Hamamsi.

<sup>396</sup> Sulieman.

*Watermelon*, which he wrote and directed in 2014. *Watermelon*'s tells the story of a deaf young woman, Safia who lives alone. On her way home, Safia passes a fruit seller on the road and buys watermelon. She is keen to take the watermelon and does not wait for the buyer to give her her change. As Safia arrives home, two young boys see her. One of them asks about her, and the second answers that she is deaf, lives alone, and never interferes with others. Safia enters her house and goes to the kitchen. Choosing a big knife, she starts to cut the watermelon by scratching on it. She continues to cut the watermelon in half. Safia then starts touching the inside surface of the watermelon smoothly and takes one seed a time. Each time she holds a seed and looks at it, she remembers an unpleasant world event (politics/war/hunger). In the end, Safia collects the seeds and puts them in a jar.

In his interview, Suliman said that his first produced film, *Watermelon*, was not appreciated when screened in Oman, as audiences did not appreciate the ideas. The director's decision to convey his message through an analogy of the world and its negative events with the watermelon and its black seeds was unfamiliar to the audience. Haitham explored the relationship between meaning and experience in his work. In one regard, the world's beauty is associated with the delicious watermelon, while on the other hand, the director likened the world's negative events, such as war and hunger, to the watermelon's persistent black seeds, which tarnish its beauty. The film was accepted at the Palace Film Festival in Bulgaria and even reached a final shortlist of 100 out of 2,000 films worldwide. The film's lack of acceptance in Oman is not exclusive to film production; another type of fine art, especially abstract painting, was challenged by the same issue. Najlaa Al Saadi mentions that one of the changes facing the artists, especially those doing abstract painting, is that people are not able to accept and understand the artist's thoughts.<sup>397</sup>

Another narrative experimental short film written and directed by Sulieman that employs experimental aspects is *Hologram* (2018, 03:57). While the film is discussed in the following chapter in terms of its narrative, the focus here is on the style and the director's conventions. The events of *Hologram* are not grounded in reality or stylishly adhere to other predominant norms of narrative realism. Sulieman situates his narrative in a room in a building under construction in which an authority figure is giving directions to an individual through a

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<sup>397</sup> Najlaa Al Saadi, 'The Reality of Scientific Research in the Fine Arts, Sultanate of Oman', *International Journal of Humanities & social Science studies (IJHSSS)*, 9 (2022), 90-93 (p. 91).

representative (Figure 24). An expected setting for such activity might be an office in an established organisation, but this was not what Sulieman wanted.

The film reflects the director's efforts to develop new techniques and approaches to filmmaking. The director does not link the title, *Hologram*, with the main issues of the film or the name of the main character as other filmmakers do. A hologram refers to 'special types of photographs made by a laser in which the objects appear solid, as if they are real rather than flat'.<sup>398</sup> The two examples illustrate Sulieman's tendency to pay deep attention to each element of his narrative, starting from the film title, to strengthen the meaning. In his interview, Sulieman expressed the influence of the American director Quentin Tarantino and his way of approaching films. This is apparent in Sulieman's aspirations to create his own special personal directing style.



Figure 24: The characters and setting of *Hologram*, 2018

Although documentary films are not part of this study, it is worth noting that film directors are also starting to add a new stylistic approach to documentary film culture in Oman. An example is Hussain Al Belushi with his short documentaries *Alnairoz Alomani* and *The Missing Piece*. Young filmmakers are full of ideas and perspectives gained from being

<sup>398</sup> 'Meaning of Hologram in English', in *Cambridge Dictionary* (Online).

exposed to a variety of filmmaking styles through different video-based platforms and attending international film festivals.<sup>399</sup>

In general, despite the individualistic nature of the newly emerging filmmaking practice in Oman, all efforts and initiatives show what can be regarded as a broader understanding of short filmmaking dimensions. Indeed, the individualistic nature of the practice might be caused by the directors striving to create and professionally situate themselves within the practice. Additionally, the absence of funds for a feature length film means that collaboration may be required even to make a short film. The practice is also impacted by the context in which that form exists and what it enforces by its socio-economic and cultural specificities. Furthermore, based on the analysed samples and other films within the archive of OAC, unlike other Arab cinema productions, there is a clear absence of short films that question and search for cultural identity within the analysed samples. Notwithstanding, there is a single production that acts as a search for identity: *Niqab* by Muzna Al-Musafer. Despite being excluded from the sample because it is a graduate production, it is worth mentioning that Al-Musafer questions her identity as a woman through this short.

The discussion demonstrates that directors lean towards and continue to create narratives that revolve around the family and related contemporary concerns, such as how family and society, in general, have been represented in terms of identity and characteristics. This and other questions are discussed in the following chapter.

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<sup>399</sup> In their interviews, young filmmakers such as Haitham Suliman, Hussain Al-Belushi, Ahmed Al-Musalmi mentioned that video-based platforms such as Vimeo and attending film festivals have benefitted them in developing their filmmaking skills both visually and aesthetically.



## Chapter Five:

### Omani Short film Analysis

#### Part Two: Cultural Representation in Omani Short Films

This chapter returns to five films – *Alaswad La Yaleeq Bik* (2018, 15:32), *Altohoor* (2014, 11:26), *Hologram* (2018, 03:57), *Almadhalah Alzarqa* (2018, 04:41) and *Ana Mashhoor* (2018, 21:36) – to deepen the analysis of cultural representation. This chapter's interest lies in Omani cultural representation, encompassing both its cultural characteristics and dimensions, as well as issues related to social power and gender. Considering the types and themes of the studied samples, some tended to act more as contemporary social and cultural discussions of events at the time of production. Thus, the samples provided fertile ground for cultural investigation. These narratives are influenced by the cultural context in which events take place and ultimately represent or capture a reality that is mediated by the conventions drawn on by the filmmaker. It also correlates with the discussion of culture upon which the director's experience, background, and understanding are based. For this chapter, the analysis of the abovementioned short films offers a critical understanding of contemporary discourse as a call for attention, questioning, and change. This is done by reading various narrative elements, such as themes, plots, and characters, and scrutinising the films in relation to cultural realities.

To understand how Omani culture is communicated through these films, I used visual content analysis facilitated by semiotics, looking at the narrative and visual content of each short. The necessity of scrutinising every film's component and reading all cultural elements to shape an understanding of how the medium works is led by many reasons. On the one hand, films are powerful mediums of influence and an open source for interpretation, especially those featuring human life and experience. They hold huge power in influencing ways of thinking, as they might directly or indirectly relate to one's life. On the other hand, films can either represent reality or generate a mediated reality. For Richard Rushton, films themselves *are* reality.<sup>400</sup> Whatever is perceived through films is already mediated and re-presented to us following certain cultural codes. By applying content analysis to the films, this chapter will provide an understanding of how Omani culture is re-presented within these indigenous shorts. The analysis also seeks to answer some of the questions posed by the project, such as: How is Omani culture depicted within Omani films? How is the influence of cultural identity

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<sup>400</sup> Richard Rushton, '1 introduction: On the Reality of Film', in *The Reality of Film: Theories of Filmic Reality* (Manchester University Press, 2010), p. 224 (p. 1).

manifested in the narratives of Omani films? How are genders represented in these short films?

## 5.1 Film, Representation, and Culture

Legacy media such as television, radio, and film have played a vital role in providing materials that express cultural identity.<sup>401</sup> Through technological development, new global media act as a means not only to reflect but also to promote long-established cultures and global sub-cultures.<sup>402</sup> Many scholars have pointed out the strong relationship between cultural production and cultural identity/image. According to Candace L. White, cultural productions are powerful enough to impact others' perceptions and contribute to the overall national reputation of their original cultures through their content, style, and message.<sup>403</sup> Films often have deep cultural value and symbolism in their content, characters, stories, and locations.<sup>404</sup>

There is a tendency within films to depict culture, both that of the director and that of other societies. Many studies have focused on capturing cultures within films.<sup>405</sup> The transnational notion of films and the variety of audiences increases the possibility of multiple interpretations of a single production. Such variation of interpretations could be caused by the 'audience's socio-cultural background, profession, and film literacy level'.<sup>406</sup> Therefore, understanding the filmic representations of all related concerns is significant. For a long time, how oneself and others are imaged in films has been a central topic of analysis in film studies. According to Robyn McCallum,

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<sup>401</sup> Douglas Kellner, 'Cultural Studies, Multiculturalism, and Media Culture', *Gender, race, and class in media: A critical reader*, 3 (2011), 7-18 (p. 1).

<sup>402</sup> Vineet Kaul, 'Globalisation and Crisis of Cultural Identity', *Journal of Research in International Business and Management*, 2. 13 (2012), pp. 341-49 (p. 18).

<sup>403</sup> Candace L. White, 'Brands and National Image: An Exploration of Inverse Country-of-Origin Effect', *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy*, 8. 2 (2012), pp. 110-18 (p. 110).

<sup>404</sup> Diana Crane, 'Cultural Globalisation and the Dominance of the American Film Industry: Cultural Policies, National Film Industries, and Transnational Film', *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, 20. 4 (2014), pp. 365-82 (p. 366).

<sup>405</sup> Examples of scholars focusing their attention on studying how culture is depicted within films are; Robyn McCallum, 1998; Elena Di Giovanni, 2003; Lina Khatib, 2006; Innocent Ebere Uwah, 2011; Tariq Alrimawi; Saadia Dinia and Oumlil Kenza, 2016; Ceren Mert-Travlos, 2021.

<sup>406</sup> Dipesh Kharel, 'Visual Ethnography, Thick Description and Cultural Representation', *Dhaulagiri Journal of Sociology and Anthropology*, 9 (2015), pp. 147-60.

representations of social and cultural differences are metonymic of a larger ideology of identity formation, which sees intersubjective relationships between the self and others as constituting the basis for desirable and effective social and intercultural relationships.<sup>407</sup>

The concept of representation has always been central when examining various topics related to films, such as gender, race, culture, religion, self, authenticity, and more. Katherine van Wormer and Cindy Juby state that ‘an excellent place to start building such a sense of cultural consciousness would be through a critical examination of cultural representations’.<sup>408</sup> Their argument supports the use of cultural production – short films in my case – to study cultural representation.

Generally, there is great interest in studying cultural identity and representation within film discourse. However, the representation of the self and others, and cultural identity within Arab cinema have hitherto received less attention.<sup>409</sup> Dale Hudson asserts that ‘critical self-representation by the Gulf filmmakers that question *Asala* (authenticity), and cosmopolitanism is important both at home and abroad as a corrective to misrepresentations and erasures’.<sup>410</sup> *Asala*, as defined by numerous Arabic dictionaries, signifies quality, stability, innovation, and excellence, as well as tradition. In Oman, it is widely used to describe the country’s original cultural assets. The concept of *Asala* is characterised by the maintenance of the essential elements of a matter, which are rooted in legal principles and supported by evidence. Moreover, it involves upholding fundamental principles of authenticity.<sup>411</sup> *Asala* is also always linked to heritage. The Omani government’s emphasis on innovation and development across multiple fields consistently highlights the importance of ensuring that these advancements are compatible with society’s authentic cultural traditions. Oman’s attention towards the authenticity of its culture and identity is evident and continues to receive attention, especially with the ongoing process of modernisation. It is stated in the document of Oman Vision 2040 that:

[w]hile there is a need for modernisation and integration approach in an era of advanced science and technology, such a direction must be

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<sup>407</sup> Robyn McCallum, *Ethnicity, Agency, and Cultural Identity: Nexus and Difference in Australian Youth Films* (University of Canberra, 1998), 2, p. 41.

<sup>408</sup> Katherine van Wormer and Cindy Juby, ‘Cultural Representations in Walt Disney Films: Implications for Social Work Education’, *Journal of social work: JSW*, 16. 5 (2016), pp. 578-94 (p. 582).

<sup>409</sup> Viola Shafik, *Arab Cinema: History and Cultural Identity* (American University in Cairo Press, 2007), p. 2.

<sup>410</sup> Hudson.

<sup>411</sup> Issa Ahmad Mahal AL-Flahy, ‘Alfiqhiu Lesson between Authenticity and Modernity and the Challenges of Globalization’, *College of Education for Women Journal*, 21. 1 (2023), 612-65 (p. 625).

counterbalanced by a deep-rooted sense of belonging to an authentic culture in order to enrich the Omani identity and preserve traditions and privacy.<sup>412</sup>

This emphasis is given priority and is approached using various fields, such as education, tourism, media, and art. For some Omani filmmakers, representing their cultural identity is important; however, it is not necessarily the focus of their narratives. Their film's story governs whether their production mirrors cultural characteristics. In his interview, Sulieman said that his focus is on the narrative idea rather than prioritising the cultural identity. If his narrative is built upon and imposes an Oman-specific characteristic, then Omani identity is prioritised. He provided the following example of one of his (as yet) unrealised projects:

I wrote a script called *Ben Sola* in 2016 that a group from a neighbouring country wanted to produce with some modification. They wanted to convert the script into their dialect and culture, but I refused it completely. I mean it is true that I don't care about representing Omani identity and culture, but the text is from the core of Omani society. So, if you ask how much authentic Omani identity is given priority, I will tell you if the story is from the core of society and place, then 100%.<sup>413</sup>

Sulieman's direction is clear through his various productions, which do not focus on Omani culture. As this chapter's focus is on Omani cultural representation, it reveals the kind of representation engaged in by filmmakers, whether it critically questions Omani cultural authentic identity (*Asala*), which Hudson asserts, or is a realistic depiction of it.

It is important to note that the concept of self-representation is generally as complex as the representation of others: one represents one's world, culture, identity, and group. According to Nancy Thumim, questions arise about whether people usually carry out such representations themselves.<sup>414</sup> In the case of an Omani individual, who is always considered a representative of a family, society, and the country before a representation of themselves, the matter could be even more complicated. Therefore, whether a film represents Omani society or not, in Oman the filmmaker is always performing a representation of Omani thought, openness, behaviour, and belief. Understanding who is doing the practice of filmmaking and why and how they are doing it is vital to obtain a clear picture of the representation.

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<sup>412</sup> 'Vision Document' (The Ministry of Economy), p. 47 (p. 24).

<sup>413</sup> Sulieman.

<sup>414</sup> Thumim, p. 8.

## 5.2 Omani Cultural Dimensions Through Omani Short Films

Focusing on the selected film samples as fruitful environments for cultural representation, the following section examines cultural and gender representations. The notion of self-representation and cultural identity in films is one of my primary objectives, which, alongside the investigation of the history of the practice, the determining influences, and the narrative genre and types, will provide an understanding of current Omani filmmaking practice.

### 5.2.1 A Conservative and Religiously Observant Society

The religious characteristics of Omani society are mainly depicted through the design of characters' personalities and through visuals and practice. In *Almenaz*, faith and belief in Allah are shown through the father's personality and some of his dialogue. Moreover, in the experimental short *Hologram*, religious features were expressed through the Holy Quran. In the film, Character One holds the Quran and directs it towards Character Two, who in turn starts writing on his keyboard, which is attached to Character Three. This sequence demonstrates that the Quran is one of the basic, if not the main, sources of beliefs, laws, and manners in Omani society (Figure 25).



Figure 25: The Quran is directed towards Character Three in *Hologram*, 2018

Furthermore, the film critically contests the contradiction between the idea of using the Quran as a basic source for setting up regulation and work systems and the actual performed regulations. It is set by Islam that all individuals are equal in any workplace all the workers, employers, and administrative officials should share the same rights and perform their duties in the best way. As a result, any workplace guarantees security, happiness, social prosperity, and fair payment for employees. In the film, despite opening with the Quran as a source of regulation, the narrative shows the inequality, unhappiness, and social situation of one of the characters (Character One). By doing so, the director presents the notion of acting in the name of Islam, while simultaneously failing to adhere to its true regulation or following it in a correct manner. The other two characters are enjoying rest and are only giving direction to Character One. Character One's right to not be overburdened and to be treated well is broken by the administrative official – he is not treated as a human; he does not move until a cable is attached to him to process the orders.

A similar notion of not using the Quran as it should be is mirrored through the short film *Alaswad La Yaleeq Bik*, which critically expresses the religious characteristics of Omani society. The title's literal meaning – Black Does Not Suit You – recalls a controversy. The title carries the meaning of wearing black, which refers to the *abaya* worn by Muslim women; it could be read as a call against wearing black *abayas*. In recent years, there has been a tendency for women to wear coloured *abayas* not only in Oman, but also in all other GCCs. Despite its widespread use, this trend remains controversial. Opponents believe that coloured *abayas* are against Islamic obligations of concealment and decency. This is because coloured *abayas* are said to attract the attention of men. In contrast, supporters see that the tendency upholds modesty and is a fashion style that has no link with indecency. For them, black *abayas* are attractive in some cases with their addition of accessories and tailoring. The controversy reached the Iftaa Offices, where Muftis in official institutions that provide guidance and advice on Islam-related issues and practices. These Muftis are Muslim male scholars who are authorised by the state for their religious knowledge to issue fatwas on religious matters. According to Alshaikh Ibrahim Al-Sawafi, the origin of *abayas* is concealment and decency; there is no fixed colour, whether it is black or coloured; what matters is that it covers women.<sup>415</sup> As a result, the film title acts as a reminder of such discussion in the Omani context. Although some might claim that the director is

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<sup>415</sup> Al-Istiqama satellite channel, 'Wearing the Black *Abaya* Outside the Omani Country and It Is Striking ', in *Jurisprudence\_in\_religion* ed. by Omar Makhzoumi (2021).

communicating an unacceptable message and support their claim by pointing to the last sequence of the film, I would say it is not the case. In this sequence, the husband asks his wife not to wear any coloured *abayas* while going out and to stick to a black one, which is surprising, knowing that in the course of the film, Sundus always wears a black *abaya*.

However, the appearance of the romantic novel *Alaswad yaleeq Bik* in the film reaffirms that the film's content is not about wearing black *abaya*. Sundus loves reading romantic novels, including *Alaswad yaleeq Bik*, a 2012 novel by Ahlam Mustaganmi in which a 50-year-old man falls in love with a young woman he sees on television. The girl always wears black, which is understood by many people as due to her mourning her father's death, but for the old man it is a sign of her attraction, elegance, and sophisticated personality. While the commonly perceived meaning of black in Arabic societies is sadness, depression, darkness, and fear, Amna A. Hasan, Nabiha Al-Sammerai and Fakhru Adabi bin Abdul Kadir highlight that black also has some positive connotations such as: the beautiful black eye and the black dress that 'implies elegance, stylish, and smart'.<sup>416</sup> In the novel's narrative, the old man sends a flower bouquet to the woman with a card containing the phrase '*Alaswad yaleeq Bik*': the black suits you. The film title re-anchors the meaning to mourning – in contrast to the novel. However, a further ambiguity emerges in the film: Sundus' mourning is not for a dead elder but for her secret love, or even for romantic love itself.

The film offers critical prospects for some contested understanding and practices brought about by globalisation in Muslim societies. Globalisation has become an undeniable reality in terms of education, economy, and media. The revolution in modern media, which is the most important navigator of globalisation in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, has continued to speed up the process.<sup>417</sup> The challenge created in the face of Muslim society is caused by the difference between the current features of globalisation and the characteristics of Islam.<sup>418</sup> One of these is presented in *Alaswad La Yaleeq Bik*. The film represents a case of contemporary challenges

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<sup>416</sup> Amna A Hasan, Nabiha S Mehdi Al-Sammerai, and Fakhru Adabi Bin Abdul Kadir, 'How Colours Are Semantically Construed in the Arabic and English Culture: A Comparative Study', *English language teaching*, 4. 3 (2011), 206-13 (p. 208).

<sup>417</sup> Raed Ahmed Al-Bayati and Abdullah Hussein Badran, 'The Negative Effects of Media Globalization on the Cultural Identity of Arab Societies', *College of Education Journal\_ Alexandria University*, 27. 4 (2017), 293-330 (p. 295).

<sup>418</sup> Abbasi and Tirmizi, p. 8185.

facing Muslim girls. It also mirrors some of the focused themes within the Islamic modernist movement, such as democracy and human rights.<sup>419</sup>

Through the story of Sundus, a Muslim university student, the director mirrors several threats faced by the Muslim family. In the film, Sundus is influenced by television series and novels, confirming the first challenge caused by the availability of various worldwide channels.

Sundus reads romantic novels and watches a television series revolving around love. Many popular media forms sell unrealistic ideas about love and intimate relationships,<sup>420</sup> which is a concern for adolescents and young adults. This is because at that age, the need for love is one of the most important psychological needs.<sup>421</sup> Many studies note that both male and female adolescents experience an interest in romantic relationships and love during puberty.<sup>422</sup> That is the case for Sundus, who has a secret romantic relationship. The act of falling in love is not considered an issue in Islam, as it is viewed as a natural human inclination, much like any other faith. Indeed, love and hate form the two main axes of human emotions. The concern is how love is perceived and understood by adolescents and what a romantic relationship may lead to. It is clear from the film that Sundus is enthusiastic about reading romantic stories and their influence is clear through the way she talks to her boyfriend, her dream of getting married and travelling, and mostly, when she tells her boyfriend that ‘you are going to write our special love novels yourself... you will immortalise it in memory’.

The challenge of being exposed to media and the unrealistic representations of how intimate relationships look for Muslim girls is that in most cases it goes against the nature and foundations of relationships as laid down by Islam. In the media, relationships are often portrayed in a mediated manner that tends to overlook the negative aspects associated with them, which, it is believed, can destroy the soul of a human. Islam has set several regulations to refine this instinct and love because, ‘love at all and hate at all destroy the soul, they squander her energy and distribute her, and enslave her so that she has no ‘salvation’’.<sup>423</sup>

Although Islam is not against falling in love, the way Muslims deal with love relationships

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<sup>419</sup> Omid Safi, ‘Modernism: Islamic Modernism’, *Encyclopedia of Religion* (2005) (p. 6096).

<sup>420</sup> Joan Shapiro and Lee Kroeger, ‘Is Life Just a Romantic Novel? The Relationship between Attitudes About Intimate Relationships and the Popular Media’, *The American Journal of Family Therapy*, 19. 3 (1991), 226-36 (p. 1).

<sup>421</sup> Imad Hussein Obaid Al Morshedy and Aqeel Khalil, ‘The Need for Love among Adolescents and Its Relationship to Emotional Intelligence’ (2011) (p. 4).

<sup>422</sup> Robin W. Simon, Donna Eder, and Cathy Evans, ‘The Development of Feeling Norms Underlying Romantic Love among Adolescent Females’, *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 55. 1 (1992), 29-46 (p. 30).

<sup>423</sup> Dr. Adnan Mustafa Khatahtbeh and Mona Ahmed Al-Far, ‘Emotional Education for Muslim Girls in Light of Contemporary Challenges’, *Jordanian Journal of Islamic Studies*. 4 (2015), 293 (p. 282).



outside the marriage umbrella, especially those restricted to Islamic matters, suggests the opposite. This tendency leads the younger generation to keep their relationships hidden, which, in some cases, is more dangerous. Love is not forbidden if the look that caused this love was not to *Awrah* or driven by lust.<sup>424</sup> However, Muslim families prevent their children from having love relations to protect them from falling into relationships forbidden by Islam, more specifically relationships involving sexual intercourse.

Sundus not only seems to believe in the unrealistic presentation of love through the media, but she also crosses some Islamic regulations by being a liar, a reprehensible quality in Islam. In front of her family, especially her father, Sundus covers her hair, watches Islamic education programmes, and reads the Quran; briefly, she shows the desirable and approved attitudes of her family. However, in their absence, she does the opposite. When she arrives at university, Sundus puts on makeup and shows a small amount of her hair. In her bedroom, she talks to her boyfriend while playing the audio-recorded Quran as a cover. In one scene, while Sundus is talking to her boyfriend, her mother enters the room. Sundus immediately takes the Quran from her table and pretends that she is reading while hiding her phone from her mother. Sundus's actions reflect the influence of technology and media on young Muslims. Contemporary media forms and technology, such as smartphones, are time consuming, reducing the time spent performing obligations, including religious ones.

A study conducted by Amidda Mazaya Fuadah on the influence of technology on interest in reading the Quran revealed that social media negatively impacts both junior high and high school teenagers' interest in reading the Quran during Ramadan.<sup>425</sup> Fuadah also asserts that social media impacts the behaviours, social, and cultural attitudes of various age groups and the religious education of teenagers. Although Fuadah's research focused specifically on Ramadan, it is relevant here. Ramadan is a holy month in which Muslims not only fast, but also increase and strive to perform their act of worship. Therefore, if teenagers are not interested in reading the Quran during Ramadan, it would suggest that they do not read it during regular days. In the film, despite the presence of the Quran in Sundus's room, she does not touch it except to cover her call; rather, she reads novels or talks on the phone (Figure 26). Moreover, Fuadah points out that many teenagers are less able to understand religious

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<sup>424</sup> *Al Awrah* is what is forbidden to be revealed of the body, whether by man or woman, or it is what must be covered and not shown of the body for non-incest.

<sup>425</sup> Amidda Mazaya Fuadah, 'The Influence of Social Media on Reading Interest Al-Quran in the Month of Ramadan among Teenagers' (2022) (p. 3).

knowledge, and they sometimes underestimate it, as is the case with Sundus. The film thus demonstrates that young Muslims such as Sundus are inclined towards embracing popular culture, alternative lifestyles, and engaging with their peers on social media, while religious rituals and learning hold less appeal to them during this phase of life.



Figure 26: *The Quran on Sundus's bedside table in Alaswad La Yaleeq Bik, 2018*

Through the course of the narrative, Sundus's behaviours mirror the confusion that might occur among individuals due to the 'movement of transmission of ideas and beliefs, values, and customs that are intensely alien and not controlled in other societies'.<sup>426</sup> Indeed, the confusion of values, such as interpersonal harmony, has been asserted by many studies as coexisting with modernity.<sup>427</sup> The cause of the confusion is the prevalence of alien values associated with Westernisation and globalisation. This influence on identity was examined earlier in the analysis of the short film *Ana Mashhoor*. In Islamic societies, many Muslims coexist with contemporary characteristics of society while following Islamic rules. Yet other Muslims have started adapting the Western ways of life and thought as proof of their openness and modernity.

In response to modernity, the exposure of Islamic societies to Western civilisation and, in some cases, the hard economic and social situation in many of these societies, groups such as

<sup>426</sup> Ayman Mansoor Randa, 'Cultural Penetration through Inbound Broadcasting: A Survey of Penetration Literature', in *Media Penetration Symposium Of The Arab World* (Institute for Arab Research and Studies, Egypt: The Arab Organization for Education, Culture and Science - 1996), pp. 12-33 pp. 14-15).

<sup>427</sup> Yan Bing Zhang and others, 'Harmony, Hierarchy and Conservatism: A Cross-Cultural Comparison of Confucian Values in China, Korea, Japan, and Taiwan', *Communication Research Reports*, 22. 2 (2005), 107-15 (p. 113).

Muslim modernists, have started calling for change. The Muslim modernist movement follows an academic approach and depends on Ijtihad to interpret and understand Quranic verses independently, keeping in mind the particularity of the studied case. The discussions carried out by these modernists and other groups of progressive Muslims are not exclusive to Islamic Ummah and are influenced by the civilisation of Western societies. Gender inequality, poverty, religious pluralism, and ethnic pluralism are global concerns. Awareness of individuals regarding the particularity of any raised issue is essential. What is more crucial for Muslims is their consciousness of their religion and ability to relate to their regulations. Shirin Ebadi, a Nobel Peace Prize winner in 2003 for her work with ‘groups such as the Iranian Children’s Rights Society’, once insisted on the importance of a ‘return to a real just Islam’.<sup>428</sup> The importance of a clear understanding of Islamic regulations among young Muslims who are born within this complex dilemma is evident in the film. It also requires parental guidance by providing proper emotional education to their children. This could be a threat in the case of its absence and confirms the second challenge faced by Muslims living in a situation like Sundus.

From the first sequence of the film, the director illustrates the unsuitable conditions of the family Sundus was raised in. On their way home, the father and mother have an argument about the father fulfilling his duties towards his family – a contemporary discussion taking place in Oman. While the mother asks her husband to take care of her and his daughter and spend more time with them, the father replies that he is busy ‘calling to religion through education, lectures, seminars, seeking rewards from Allah’. The mother’s response is that ‘even your responsibilities at home are a must, and they’re also lavishly rewarded by Allah’. Conflicts and balancing family and work are not new issues and have been part of contemporary debate for years.<sup>429</sup> In this case, the focus is on unrecognised conflict between family and religious obligations by the father in a developing Muslim context. Muslims perform some obligatory practices, some on a daily basis, such as the five prayers, and others periodically, such as fasting and Alhaj. In ‘Experiences of Australian Muslim Men in the Workplace: A Field Study of Employment Choices and Consequences’, many of the interviewed Muslims expressed that religious duties are rewarding and assist them in

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<sup>428</sup> Safi, p. 6100.

<sup>429</sup> Stefani Scherer and Nadia Steiber, ‘1375 Work and Family in Conflict? The Impact of Work Demands on Family Life’, in *Employment Regimes and the Quality of Work*, ed. by Duncan Gallie (Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 0 (p. 138).

performing their other work duties.<sup>430</sup> However, for many Muslims, especially those working as preachers, balancing family and religious obligations is challenging, though for some it is an unrecognised issue – adding work duties to these responsibilities leads to further complexity.

Al-Subhi excluded the latter from the film by orienting the story to the father's annual leave. Despite having additional time, he is still unable to fulfil his commitment to his family. For example, the father does not allocate time to going out with his family and spending more time with them, which the mother asked for in the first sequence. The father's character is not only a religiously committed person, but also one that dedicates his time to Islam through lectures and seminars. He practises his daily religious duties, such as praying at the mosque and listening to religious audio lectures. In addition, he is a member of a group that preaches Islam. As Muslims engage with modernity in their everyday lives, they are influenced by surrounding changes in lifestyle and behaviours. Some Muslims 'see something (if not all) of modernity as a constitutive element of their worldview and practice'.<sup>431</sup> Imran Hayat highlights that a common issue among modernists in Muslim societies is their partial or complete adoption of 'Islamisation of Western civilisation and ideas'; he elaborates: 'They are looking for ways to popularise these values in Islamic societies and eliminate their alienation'.<sup>432</sup> Therefore, some groups of committed Muslims see it as essential to raise awareness about Islam to reduce the influence of modernity on Islamic societies. They not only focus on inviting non-Muslims to Islam, but also target Muslims themselves.

During the film, the father invites people to contribute to charitable works such as building mosques through putting up posters, and he plans to go to *Al-Omrah* with groups.<sup>433</sup> Calling for Islam in a Muslim context demonstrates the challenges faced by Islam, which needs more effort and lectures raising awareness about Islam. The father is one of those aware of the importance of calling for Islam and following its regulation, but he is not conscious of the

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<sup>430</sup> Adem Sav, Bernadette Sebar, and Neil Harris, 'Experiences of Australian Muslim Men in the Workplace: A Field Study of Employment Choices and Consequences', *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, 30. 3 (2010), 409-23 (p. 418).

<sup>431</sup> Safi, p. 6095.

<sup>432</sup> Muhammad Husnain and Imran Hayat, 'A Critical Study of Islamic Modernism in the Perspectives of Contemporary Religious Scholarship', *Jahan-e-Tahqeeq*, 4. 2 (2021), 36-51 (p. 38).

<sup>433</sup> *Al-Omrah* is a religious practice where Muslims visit Makkah to worship Allah following certain ritual practices.

challenges in his own house, the media, and the communication technology that draws his attention.

From the father's perspective, he is accomplishing his duties and providing the family with what they need. However, the mother's continual requests for attention prove that the father is only accomplishing part of his role as a provider. This might not be surprising, as the nature of relationships between family members is shifting to be more of a 'consumer economic relationship, linked to by financing, benefit, and interest'.<sup>434</sup> The current change in the father's role due to socio-economic transformation imposes a concern regarding the functioning of the father, especially in economically disadvantaged families.<sup>435</sup> For a long time, the view of the father's role in a family has been that 'he is the educator, the mentor, the source of values, morals and safety, the ideal, the one who controls the rationality of dealing with children next to the mother'.<sup>436</sup> Yet, currently, fathers are seen more as financial providers; they are mostly absent from home, leading them to have less involvement with their children. That influences the involvement of fathers in the process of raising their children and its impact on creating 'children characterised by the characteristics of psychological and educational integration and normal personalities adapted to themselves and those around them'.<sup>437</sup> Sundus's mother's request for more attention from the father emphasises that economic support alone is insufficient – the father's role extends beyond mere financial matters.

The gap between Sundus and her father is clear. The father communicates with Sundus, asks her about her studies, and offers her transportation to and from the university. However, the way Sundus behaves and looks at him reveals her fear of him, illustrating the missing emotional connection between them. Our physiology and behaviour echo our emotions, including fear, love, anger, and so forth.<sup>438</sup> The director illustrates how the absence of emotional engagement between Sundus and her father impacts negatively on their relationship. They do not have a strong relationship, and for Sundus, it does not provide a sense of security but fear and anger. Sundus fears her father because he is strict on matters

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<sup>434</sup> *The Muslim Family in Light of Contemporary Changes*, 1 edn (Jordan: The International Institute of Islamic Thought ,

Dār al-Fatḥ lil-Dirāsāt wa-al-Nashr, 2015), pp. 13-14.

<sup>435</sup> S. Yoon and others, 'Patterns of Father Involvement and Child Development among Families with Low Income', *Children (Basel)*, 8. 12 (2021) (p. 1).

<sup>436</sup> Amro Khalid, 'The Essential Role of the Father' (2017), <<https://shorturl.at/zGU04>> [accessed 30 November, 2022].

<sup>437</sup> Zeinab Alsamahy, 'Parental Education after Arbitration' (2014) (p. 5).

<sup>438</sup> Nathan S Consedine and Carol Magai, 'Emotional Development in Adulthood: A Developmental Functionalist Review and Critique' (2006) (p. 123).

related to Islam, which she secretly crosses. She is angry, as seen in her facial expressions in the first scene, in response to not getting attention from him. In Islam, the process of raising and educating children is ‘of a holistic and integrative nature for all aspects of the personality’ and is carried out ‘according to the criticism of moderation and balance’.<sup>439</sup> The father neglects the basic emotional aspect of personality, especially in adolescence, ‘a period of increased vulnerability and adjustment’.<sup>440</sup> The imbalance of emotional engagement, created by the father’s neglect and the daughter’s need for attention, lead Sundus to look for such attention outside the family by having a love relationship. As a result, she starts to deviate from the religious regulations. This endorses one of the negative acts of not paying the required attention to the integrated process of raising children, especially in adolescence. This finding confirms the additional challenge faced by Muslim girls such as the use of social media, mixing educational institutions, and leisure time. The first two are present in the film, although not as key influences on Sundus or drivers of the narrative. Deviating a little from the film, there is another threat that may add to the challenges faced by Muslim girls: the mother’s absence due to work commitments.<sup>441</sup> This not only challenges the children and their upbringing, but also working women, as will be discussed later.

It is worth noting that the concern about the dire consequences of the father’s absence, whatever the reason, is confirmed by the film. However, the religious element within *Alaswad La Yaleeq Bik* shifts attention from concerns about the father’s absence to the misunderstanding of being Muslim and religiously committed. The reproduction of the ‘simple, vivid, memorable, and easily grasped characteristics’, as Hall describes the practice of stereotyping, occurs in this film, and matches the received idea about religiously committed Muslims in Muslim communities. Stereotyping is characterised by its tendency to generate generic subclasses for certain social groups.<sup>442</sup> According to my experience as an Omani living in this context, even in Oman, a Muslim society, there is an internalised stereotype of being strictly committed to your religion. This misconception is created by one or more lived experiences of the people and brought to the public. In the Gulf countries, any individual committed to religion is called *Mutawa*. In Oman, even if these individuals show only a slim level of commitment towards the basic religious obligation and are not overly strict in their

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<sup>439</sup> Seima Rateb Adnan Abu Ramoz, *Raising a Child in Islam* (Comprehensive library, 2008), p. 13.

<sup>440</sup> Laurence Steinberg, ‘Cognitive and Affective Development in Adolescence’, *Trends in cognitive sciences*, 9. 2 (2005), 69-74 (p. 69).

<sup>441</sup> Asya Al-Lamky, ‘Feminizing Leadership in Arab Societies: The Perspectives of Omani Female Leaders’, *Women in management Review*, 22. 1 (2007), 49-67 (p. 59).

<sup>442</sup> Erin Beeghly, ‘What Is a Stereotype? What Is Stereotyping?’, *Hypatia*, 30. 4 (2015), 675-91 (p. 676).

application, the term *Mutawa* is attached to them. *Mutawa* is also linked to the following characteristics: for males who wear short *dishdashah* and have long beards, the longer the beard, the more committed the person is. Their female counterparts are characterized by wearing black gloves, black socks, and black *abayas* that cover them totally. Sundus's father is *Mutawa*, as he has a long beard, short *dishdashah*, and is committed to religion.

The stereotype of the man who is *Mutawa* is that he is committed to Islam outside the house to the degree that he does not take sufficient care of his home. The film's narrative plays up to this stereotype because the father has one or more of the characteristics linked to the *almutawah* (long beard, short *dishdashah*, and commitment to religion). With similar stories coming to light, a generalised idea about this category of fathers not caring about their children and family is built up. Comments on the film on YouTube show that it offers a stereotypical image of religiously committed Muslims, which should not be emphasised. One of the comments is as follows:

I don't know what message is meant to be delivered to people exactly??  
The film seems to confirm that behind every religious man who calls for religion is a family that is negligent neglected regarding their rights and has morally corrupt children. In addition, marrying a committed man is leads to unhappiness.

Another viewer commented:

I am against the ideas of this video. I do not see that my father is negligent at home. It is unreasonable that he was not allotting time for her or her mother. Even in a video, he asks her, goes, and answers her, but I do not know where these people live. It is all against Islam and that committed people are not performing their duties.

The comment suggests that this stereotypical idea of the religiously-committed-but-absent father is common knowledge, yet they question its veracity and how it may impact the image of Muslims and Islam in general. Stereotypes are types of representation that exist within social groups, and they can be both right and wrong depending on the given context. For the two previous commentators, it is an improper representation that should not be promulgated, yet for others the representation is correct and a lived experience that should be brought to attention. One of the viewers said:

It is reasonable and unfortunately it exists. I am a boy, and my father was like this. He is religious, and Mutawa. He did not ask about the house or its condition. His main concern is his prayer, and he tells people that he is a worshipper and a good man. However, at the house, he is bad for the family, and what is the end of it? Divorce. I have supported my sisters and my mother instead of him now, since I have grown up. If you think that the father cares about his daughter because he offers her a drive to and from university. This might be because there is no one else to take her to university. Moreover, when he sat down, he did not ask her about herself but about her study. He is more interested in her study, so she works and helps him financially. I lived this experience, and it is a real one.

Other responses confirm how the ‘simple, vivid, memorable, and easily grasped characteristics’ linked to the *almutawah* influenced how audiences perceived the film. The comments also show that the challenges faced by Sundus are not unique to Oman. However, they are not as widespread in Oman as in other societies due to the conservative quality of society, which mitigates the force of globalisation and controls its impact.

Oman’s conservative characteristics are linked to Ibadi theology.<sup>443</sup> The relationship between conservative qualities and religion is undeniable. For Muslims, Islam serves as a comprehensive system from which they derive systems that define aspects of their Islamic identity.<sup>444</sup> Before moving to discussion of conservative features, it is worth noting that although Oman follows Ibadi theology, it is known for its religious diversity between the Ibadism, Sunnis, and Shiites sects, which coexist in a high degree of harmony – which can be observed in the film. In one scene, Sundus’ father meets his friend as they go out after finishing their prayers. The diversity of Islamic sects is clear through the position of the worshippers’ hands, demonstrating their religious harmony and tolerance. In the film, a sense of conservatism is mirrored through the dress code, eating habits – sitting on the floor – and deep-rooted customs.

This characteristic can be seen in the short *Almadhala Alzarqa*, directed by Shouq Aziz (2018, 04:41). Beyond the main issues of the film, discussed later in relation to gender representation, *Almadhala Alzarqa* highlights the quality of Omani society related to sticking to its cultural values and norms. The film shows how Omanis adhere to their habits, norms,

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<sup>443</sup> Elliott, p. Abstract.

<sup>444</sup> Salwa Ismail, ‘Confronting the Other: Identity, Culture, Politics, and Conservative Islamism in Egypt’, *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 30. 2 (1998), 199-225 (p. 204).



and values, and how they are processed by the current generation and prove resistant to change. The story takes place in a university setting and shows how even the young, educated Omani generation, despite their openness to new media platforms, is influenced by and cares about social values. The director presents how critical such a quality could be by building the story around a girl who uses a blue umbrella instead of a white one, the colour commonly used in the community.

As the film begins, Hajar, the main character, misses a university bus. After waiting for a while, Hajar decides to take her blue umbrella and walk to her destination on the university campus. On her way, two boys notice her blue umbrella from a distance because it differs from what they are accustomed to seeing. One of them takes a picture of her and posts it on Twitter. *Almadhalah Alzarqa* represents norms, values, and habits that are new and different from what society is used to. The use of umbrellas is rare in Oman and is linked to rainy days only. The director's choice to build the story around using an umbrella to bring to light the difficulty of accepting changes within society is critical. If using a different colour umbrella – which does not interfere with Islamic or moral values – is not accepted and has faces public backlash, what happens when an issue actually threatens their cultural values? This is shown in the film through students' reactions and comments on the posted picture. In Figure 27, one of the students who sees the trending tweet responds: 'you are exaggerating; it is normal nothing wrong'.



Figure 27: University students commenting on a tweet in *Almadhalah Alzarqa*, 2014

While writing, another student comes along, recording a voice message informing her point of view as follows:

Student2: Please she did expose us, how did she do that? Where are our traditions? For a long time, everyone gets used to taking the white umbrella, and at the end of time, she comes and takes an umbrella of a different colour.

As the first student hears, she changes her comment and writes, ‘How is she not ashamed? Blue umbrella? Where do you live?’ (Figure 28), then posts her comments.



Figure 28: The student changing her comment in *Almadhalah Alzarqa*, 2014

The previous scene shows the force of conservative qualities processed in adolescence. How does this quality sometimes lead to meaningless or illogical rules being involved in maintaining traditions? Considering the age of the students, I argue that the main determinant of their beliefs and attitudes is family:

Family is a key unit of the intergenerational transmission of social beliefs. This transmission leads to outcomes that persist over time, even in cases where the environment that gave rise to particular traditions or attitudes is no longer the same. Consequently, parents’ attitudes and beliefs affect a diverse array of children’s outcomes.<sup>445</sup>

<sup>445</sup> Natalie Bau and Raquel Fernández, ‘The Family as a Social Institution’ (National Bureau of Economic Research, 2021) (p. 2).

As discussed earlier, the family holds great importance in Omani society, and its influence on the young generation remains pertinent. It works and is a social institution through which Islamic regulation of cultural values and beliefs are processed and transmitted over generations. Despite the appearance of new technology in the film and the use of social media, the family's role in filtering the influence of globalisation is clear. However, despite the positive impact of conservative qualities in controlling the influence of modernising processes in Oman, it can also hinder the required development in some fields. First, Omani society is not only conservative about its religious regulations and values but also in terms of its customs and belief system. Not accepting new ways of doing things and new ideas, even if they do not contradict morals and Islamic regulation, goes against creativity, which is an important requirement in the ever-changing characteristics of contemporary society and job markets.

The patterns of both religious and conservative features of society continue to receive attention due to misconceptions, as they hold significant power in controlling how society functions. In many Islamic societies, beliefs and customs held by younger generations are inherited from parents and grandparents, which goes back to about 14 centuries ago, based on different circumstances of reality and relationships between members.<sup>446</sup> Jamal Al Khatib notes that 'Omanis tend to hold onto their deeply seated values throughout the transformation of their economy and lifestyle'.<sup>447</sup> An example is seen in *Almadhalah Alzarqa*. In a flashback, the father picks up his daughter from school and asks about her day; she answers: 'Dad, I do not want to be a doctor anymore'. When the father asks why, she says: 'They informed us at school that the best job for women is teaching, and now all girls want to be teachers'. The belief that teaching is the best job for women was largely held by society and continued to be held by some families to date. Indeed, it is seen as an obligation for these families. As schools are not gender-mixed at all schooling levels,<sup>448</sup> families preferred teaching, and girls were raised to pursue that direction. When considering the change in the socio-economic situation between generations, their desires, and capabilities, such preference may not be the best for everyone. For instance, traditional values could include the importance of family and

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<sup>446</sup> Ahmed Al-Khamlishi, 'Men's and Women's Rights between the Islamic Vision and the Prevailing Vision in the Culture of Islamic Society' [accessed January 2023].

<sup>447</sup> Jamal A. Al-Khatib, Mohammed Y. A. Rawwas, and Scott J. Vitell, 'Organizational Ethics in Developing Countries: A Comparative Analysis', *Journal of Business Ethics*, 55. 4 (2004), 309-22 (p. 311).

<sup>448</sup> Currently stage one level, from grade one to four, is gender-mixed and all students are taught by female teachers. From grade five onwards, students in government schools are separated in different schools with male teachers for boys and female for girls. For those studying in private schools it depends on the system followed; in some cases, the school is mixed gender but the students are separated by gender in different classes.

community, while modernization could refer to the increasing emphasis on individualism and career advancement. The tension between these two spheres, traditional values and the demands of modernization, is palpable.

The film sample illustrates the dynamic shift in perceptions of women's career choices. While teaching has long been the conventional career path for women, younger generations are now venturing into diverse modern career paths such as the military, healthcare, and pursuing higher education abroad, marking significant societal progress that have not negatively impacted existing norms.

In *Almadhalah Alzarqa*, the issue is not one of using the umbrella; rather, it is about the umbrella being a different colour to the norm. The response of the film's characters suggest Omanis are against doing things differently. Consider the larger perspective of Oman's hierarchical system. I previously noted the determining influences of filmmaking practices and there was a proposal to develop a cinematic centre with large studios and open investments for large international companies. The proposal's approval was in its last stage when it was stopped because the new person in authority did not see the importance of such development.<sup>449</sup> It was and is still not seen as a priority – the project plan still exists, but it has stalled within the workings of bureaucracy. Strict adherence to beliefs and values is critical and could challenge the modernity process in Oman, especially with its system of hierarchy.

The link between conservatism and hierarchy brings to mind Olivier Morin's 'Cultural Conservatism', in which he asserts that if conservatism is linked to the cost of cultural beliefs and change, it could 'resist even changes that are likely to be beneficial'.<sup>450</sup> He notes how the development processes in societies that 'strongly adhere to social hierarchies' might be challenged.<sup>451</sup> Morin's assertion is based on the implications of coordination games in Sweden. In the case of the GCCs in general, as per Jabbara and Jabra, the adaptation of Western management techniques has not been successful because of the 'powerful traditional administration culture'.<sup>452</sup> This is confirmed in Oman by Salma Al-Lamki in 'Paradigm Shift: A Perspective on Omani Women in Management in the Sultanate of Oman'. Al-Lamki presents the conservative quality of Omani society as a force that hinders the development

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<sup>449</sup> Al-Zedjali.

<sup>450</sup> Olivier Morin, 'Cultural Conservatism', *Journal of Cognition and Culture*, 22. 5 (2022), 406-20 (p. 412).

<sup>451</sup> Morin, p. 416.

<sup>452</sup> Common, p. 221.

process through the countereffects of their traditional socio-cultural attitudes.<sup>453</sup> As in the earlier example, the development was stopped because of a divergence of interest and belief between those holding authority and those proposing the development. This is unsurprising considering Morin's context in Sweden. If a country known for its social welfare, innovations, and global impact throws up barriers to development, what hope is there for a conservative society with a hierarchical system like Oman? This raises questions about hierarchy and its repercussions when other factors are considered.

### **5.2.2 Power and Hierarchy**

The short film analysis shows that the power hierarchy permeates the family, within which the father holds the highest power of decision-making and responsibilities, as shown in *Alaswad La Yaleeq Bik*. However, in most cases, the decision-making process includes mothers in discussions – this can be seen in *Altohoor*, where the husband returns to the mother, informing her about the circumcision event. Another example is in *Ana Mashhoor*, where the husband has a discussion with his wife about showing their life through Instagram. Beyond the family, depending on the situation, there might be a higher power, as illustrated in *Altohoor*, with the character of the big father. The big father is the male head of the family, and in this case, the head of the village. In the film, Uncle Salim holds authority and power. As the village's boys are at the age of circumcision, Uncle Salim asks fathers to prepare for the circumcision event. According to the traditions of some villages in Oman, the boy's circumcision takes place as a celebration when the boys are between three and seven years old. As Hamed was born with ambiguous genitalia, circumcision is not suitable for him. To protect their son's secrets, Hamad's parents defer to Uncle Salem, who decides what should be done. Hamed's father follows Uncle Salem because of his position and power. At the end of the story, Uncle Salem takes Hamed home with him, taking responsibility for his supervision.

Moving from the basic unit, the family, to the larger group, the state, *Hologram* critically assesses this feature. The short starts with quiet music combined with smooth camera movements and pictures from various newspapers. The focus is on national news reports that appear to make a direct link between the narrative and national development plans. This

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<sup>453</sup> Al-Lamki.

introduction fades to black, followed by a scene revealing more details about the peaceful context. As the scene starts, the previously pictured newspapers are shown on a partly constructed wall made of breeze blocks, perhaps signalling the ‘developing’ context – both of Oman in general and, more specifically, of its private sector. In front of the wall are three chairs, introducing the three characters, each of whom each has a role in the working system of the sector (Figure 29).



*Figure 29: The characters' placement in Hologram, 2018*

Before elaborating on the events of the short film, it is again worth noting the director's use of the title. *Hologram* refers to the technique of creating a three-dimensional representation of two-dimensional objects using light.<sup>454</sup> Sulieman creates a deep representation of the Omani context using a two-dimensional fixed frame and fixed camera angle. This confirms the ability of two-dimensional filmic photography to provide an account of any three-dimensional world. The director effectively pictures the hierarchy and unequal distribution of power in the workplace through the characters' placement, physical characteristics, movement, and process of ordering.

<sup>454</sup> Oliver Bendel, 'Hologram Girl', in *Ai Love You* (Springer, 2019), pp. 149-65 (p. 150).

Focusing on the film narrative, the director gradually introduces the three characters. Character One is a thin young man wearing a cracked *wizar*, under which he is wearing pants. On the upper part of his body, different elements are placed: a child's nappy and a type of rope belt called *Alhabool* that palm climbers use (wrapping the belt around their body and the tree to function as a lever, helping them to climb without falling). There are also mobile phones, cigarettes in his mouth, and cables attached to his body. This character signifies the private-sector worker and Omanis looking for jobs in general (Figure 30).



*Figure 30: Character One (the public) in Hologram, 2018*

Character Two is a well-dressed and wearing Omani *dishdashah*, *maser*, *khanjar*, and *Bisht*, and holding *Asaa*. He represents the owner of the private companies. In Oman, ministers and the heads of organisations wear the aforementioned formal attire in official engagements (Figure 31).



*Figure 31: Character Two (Authority) in Hologram, 2018*

Character Three is in the middle, holding a computer keyboard and has no Omani reference in terms of the dress code, implying that he is non-Omani, thus representing the expatriate workers in Oman such as managers and specialists (Figure 32).





*Figure 32: Character Three (Expatriate) in Hologram, 2018*

The director links his narrative to the private sector through the presence of an expatriate in the middle. Expatriates occupy a large number of administrative roles in the private sector. Within government schemes, all administrative roles are held by Omanis; expatriates working in the government are found in cleaning and cooking roles, except in hospitals and higher education institutions where a considerable number of foreigners occupy jobs as nurses, doctors, and academics.

In the ensuing reading, I refer to the characters as follows: Character One, the Omani worker, as P; Character Two, authority, as A; and Character Three, the expatriate, by E. Despite being Omanis, characters P and A are separated by character E, which may illustrate a communication gap and could be confirmed as the characters begin to move. The following passage examines the constructed representation of the power and hierarchy system at the national level with a focus on the private sector.

The first character to move is A, nodding his head right and left repeatedly, followed by character E, who moves in a more natural way. By contrast, character P is frozen and as

controlled as a machine. P starts moving when E attaches a cable to him and then starts typing on the keyboard. By typing on the keyboard, E starts transmitting information to P, confirming its role as a communication channel or medium from A to P. A represents authority and is the one holding power, giving direction and orders to E. The action of E receiving direction from A and encoding them to P not only confirms the communication gap between A and P, but also the direction of orders, from top to bottom of the power structure.

Another way in which the hierarchical power structure is reflected is through the physical characteristics and appearance of all the characters. As described earlier, P, with his slim, stressed body covered with multiple elements, mirrors the pressures of several responsibilities on the public: home (the child's nappy), work (*alhabool*), and social (mobile). Therefore, he resorts to cigarettes to eliminate this unpleasant feeling. In contrast, A's physique is full, and he appears stress-free. The difference between them illustrates the inequality created by the structure's operation. Such inequality is caused by one-way communication that restricts Omani workers from contacting authorities.

The critical focus of the director in terms of the private sector is to shed light on the ongoing discussion on the economic and social impact of foreign workers. At the end of 2013, there was an 8.7% increase compared to the previous year in the number of expatriates in Oman's private sector.<sup>455</sup> One of the main reasons for the arrival of these expatriates is Omanis' refusal to take low-paid jobs.<sup>456</sup>

As the film's plot begins, E drinks *al zemota* drink and then burps, a sign of satiety. *Al zemota* is a drink Omanis use to get rid of flatulence. Through this sequence, the director builds the perception of Omanis towards expatriates. The idea circulated about expatriates working as administrators in Oman is that they are both conspirators and controllers. This is seen when E connects the cable to P to provide orders. Moreover, the sign of satiety provided by the director and emphasised by the physical characteristics of E suggests that expatriates benefit from state goods and benefits to the degree of satiety in contrast to Omanis workers. That satiety is not only caused by the higher salary administrators receive, in contrast to other workers, but also because they only give directions and do not do the hard manual labour.

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<sup>455</sup> Khalid bin Hamad bin Salem Al-Ghayalani, 'The Social and Economic Impacts of Expatriate Workers on Omani Society (a Field Study)' (2014) (p. 49) <<https://books.google.com/books?id=uB41zAEACAAJ>>.

<sup>456</sup> Hind Najm Abd, 'Expatriate Workers in the Sultanate of Oman' (2021) (p. 2) <<https://rb.gy/gbhazk>> [accessed 30 August, 2023].

The knowledge that migrant workers benefit from state goods through their high salaries is not exclusively established between expatriates working in administrative roles and other Omani workers in the private sector. It is widespread in response to the unemployment issue in the Sultanate. One of the negative results of the high number of migrant workers is the increase in unemployment among Omanis.<sup>457</sup> In 2019, Muscat Private Clinic posted a photo of a Nursing Day celebration. In these photos, only three staff members are Omanis, in contrast to the higher number of Indians. These widespread photos aroused the resentment of Omanis, who considered them proof of the domination of migrant workers while there are a high number of Omanis looking for work.<sup>458</sup> Within the first half of 2022, the number of migrant workers in both government and private sectors hit 1,553,981.<sup>459</sup> By the end of October of the same year, the number of Omanis looking for jobs had reached 85,000.<sup>460</sup> Expatriates in Oman occupy jobs in industrial professions, chemical and food industries, basic engineering, general administration and business managers, operating investors, agriculture, nursing, and academia.<sup>461</sup> A lack of job opportunities for Omanis continues to impact social and family welfare. As individuals are unable to find suitable jobs, they become a burden on their families, leading to pressure on the family's financial status, especially with the rise in food prices. In addition, they do not think of starting their own families. The director uses *Alhabool* to connect conditions to the early 1970s and before, when farming was a basic source of living. The government works to balance both Omani and migrant workforces, and the replacement of expatriates with Omanis in some professions is continuing.

Keeping the previous discussions in mind, Suliman's representation presents a deep concern among Omanis about the consequences of the hierarchy system, which adds to ongoing concerns about unemployment. The film's final scene depicts a deeper level of power and hierarchy, ending with character P screaming, after the directions are transmitted to him. In response, E immediately leaves the room, and A faces character P for the first time. A pulls the cable attached to P to silence him. The following shot shows a hand pulling out an

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<sup>457</sup> Al-Ghayalani, p. 71.

<sup>458</sup> Salem Hanafi, 'Pictures from inside Muscat Private Hospital Arouse Dissatisfaction among Omanis. Learn About Its Story!', in *The circulating photos show the celebrating employees, most of whom are Indian expatriates, while only 3 Omanis appeared among the revelers. -According to Omani activists-* (Watan Online Newspaper, 2019).

<sup>459</sup> Haider bin Abdul Redha Al Lawati, 'Developments in Expatriate Workers' (Alroya Newspaper, 2022.).

<sup>460</sup> Shamsa Al-Riyamiya, '35 Thousand Jobs in the Public and Private Sectors within a Year 2022', in In a meeting between the Ministry of Labor and the governors (Muscat: Oman Daily Observer, 2023).

<sup>461</sup> Al-Ghayalani, p. 53.

attached cable from A which shows how A is controlled. This emphasises the role of power, controlled communication, and downward communication at all levels.

Considering the year the film was produced, 2018, it appears to respond to the consequences of the economic crisis in 2014. Despite its hierarchical power structure, Oman was known for its economic and social stability until that point. The notion of inequality in the film's narrative is not a publicly contested discussion. However, 2018 saw crisis brought about by the global oil price collapse, which lasted until 2019. Pressure on the public was caused by rising prices of consumer goods initially, which was increased by the financial measures taken by the government to maintain the economic stability of the country. Some of these reforms reduced the expenses of government units and stopping employee promotions, which did not meet public acceptance.<sup>462</sup> As per the previous Civil Service Law, every four years an employee receives a promotion to the next wage level. Cancelling those promotions negatively impacted both financial and social matters.<sup>463</sup> Excluding the public from the decision-making process at that time and not listening to them add more pressure. The public felt that decisions were not in their favour and that higher authority was not affected because of their privileged salaries. Hence, the hierarchal structure was brought into question in terms of decision making and became a contested discussion at the national level.

Public engagement in the decision-making process is evident in the Sultanate despite its hierarchical structure. An example is their participation in the process of setting up Oman Vision 2040. Public engagement has received significant attention in setting goals and plans. According to statistics provided by the Oman Vision 2040 Implementation Follow-up Unit, the number of individuals participating in the process totalled 41,000. The following categories were represented: civil society institutions, municipal councils, academic institutions and bodies, and other sectors such as women, youth, media professionals, and people with special needs.<sup>464</sup> This demonstrates the current changing situation within the country in terms of how power imbalances are negotiated. However, these changes remain slow and challenging, as long as the hierarchical structure is in place.

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<sup>462</sup> Hatim Al-Taie, 'Oil Prices. Challenges and Dimensions', *AlRoya Newspaper* (2014).

<sup>463</sup> Abdul Hafez Al-Sawy, 'The Sultan of Oman and Economic Reforms: Will They Succeed?' (Gulf House studies and publishing 2021).

<sup>464</sup> Oman Vision 2040 Implementation Follow-up Unit, 'A Brief About the Vision', <  
<https://www.oman2040.om/vision.html>>

### 5.2.3 Gender Representation in Oman

Throughout the previous discussion, gender and gender relations already played a role. This section provides a deeper elaboration of both masculine and feminine constructions within Omani culture. Gender portrayal is an integral part of cultural representation, and understanding how people are represented is essential to understanding the construction of any culture. Observing how both women and men are shown in the analysed short films reveals the masculinist quality of Omani society. Following the changes that have occurred in patriarchal society over the years, representation has also changed and some characteristics have gradually disappeared, as will be discussed later.

Taking into consideration all the analysed samples, men are always shown as leaders, workers, and responsible for providing the home with its necessities. For example, in *Bint Gharba*, the male role is a father protecting his daughter and leading her through their journey home. Similarly, in *Almenaz*, going to work and guiding his wife and son are roles assigned to the father. Moreover, in *Alaswad La Yaleeq Bik*, the value of the male partner to his family is shown as providing the necessities of life through the possible dire consequences of his domestic absence. The film that most exemplifies this masculine feature in terms of narrative and visuals is *Altohor*; thus, it is the focus of this section.

The first shot of *Altohor* depicts a group of men passing a group of boys and the first line is spoken by Uncle Salem, the big father of the village: 'Every year, we are blessed with a baby boy'. He is answered by one of the men saying, 'You are well known Uncle Salim; all your descendants are males'. This reflects the pride of having male offspring in Omani society and how privilege is given to the village for having more male than female children. Moreover, the scene manifests what is expected of boys or, in other words, how they are expected to behave. This is reflected in Uncle Salim's words to the boys, who are playing: 'Tomorrow morning, you will not be able to play like this, as circumcision will take place the next day'. The tone of Uncle Salim's voice, along with his facial expressions, reveals that he is not happy with the way the boys play in the lane, and what will be expected of them after their circumcision is to act more like men. As Uncle Salim leaves angrily, followed by the men of the village, the director introduces the film's title, *Altohor*, meaning 'circumcision' in Arabic, which appears alongside the stark image of a deformed female doll (Figure 33).



*Figure 33: The title shot of Altohor, 2014*

The damaged doll shows how the beauty of a girl is removed by displacing one eye and removing one of her female organs, the breast. The director's metaphorical use of this shot mirrors the film's story. The main character, Hamed, whose parents consider him a male, starts showing female characteristics in his adolescence. Despite this, he is still treated as a male because the family, and society, wants the associated privileges of being male.

The narrative suggests that men are leaders, decision-makers, and more active in society. An exemplar is the big father character, who is given the power to make decisions and provide consultations based on his wisdom and leadership. Village leaders are not formally assigned individuals, and their election is only conducted in the level of the village by men. In the introductory scene, Uncle Salem informs the men that he sent a messenger to Hudaib to come the following day to circumcise the boys, and he orders them to prepare their children. This confirms the power he holds in the village, as it is he who decides the boys' circumcision day, without even consulting the parents. Another supporting event occurred when he is informed of Hamed's secret. In this scene, Hamed's father, Sulieman, goes to Uncle Salem's house. While knocking on the door, Sulieman looks afraid and hesitates, despite the necessity of speaking to Uncle Salim. As Sulieman enters the house, Uncle Salem is cleaning and sharpening *Al Khanjar*, the Omani symbol of pride, with which Uncle Salim is empowered as a leader. After Uncle Salem is informed of the secret, he goes to Sulieman's house and takes

Hamed away with him. The way the parents stand idle and have no control over their son's life on such a private matter confirms their obedience to Uncle Salem and supports the patriarchal patterns in the Omani tribal structure.

Another feature of patriarchal society is the absence of women from the narrative, apart from Hamed's mother. In contrast, men are presented as active; they prepare for the circumcision, cook, and perform traditional dances. In Oman, unlike domestic cooking tasks, which are a woman's responsibility, cooking is the task of men during village feasts and communal occasions.<sup>465</sup> This illustrates that men take responsibility outside of their houses. However, women are totally overlooked, but they are valued as mothers and honoured by the man's responsibility to protect them and do everything to achieve happiness and stability.<sup>466</sup> Considering that Omani culture is a Muslim culture which draws its regulation from Islam, it is worth noting that there is a difference in the rights of men and women between the Islamic vision and the prevailing vision in the culture of Islamic society.<sup>467</sup> Despite the clear principles of equality between the sexes in the Quran, many practices followed by some Muslims contradict them, as illustrated earlier in reference to the discussion of conservatism. Women are not required to function as providers for the family, as per Islamic law; therefore, traditionally, their role was exclusively domestic.<sup>468</sup> The change in their role is now caused by economic pressures which lead women to enter the workforce,<sup>469</sup> facilitated by the spread of education.<sup>470</sup> Omani women are equal to their male partners in terms of wages, which depend on their qualifications and experience.<sup>471</sup>

Returning to *Altahoor*, its representation of the masculine dimension is not exclusive to its story, but also emerges through its visuals. Visually, all shots are dominated by men. There is only one female role (the mother), and she appears only four times in an eleven-minute movie, depicted as a typical housewife. Her first appearance shows her cooking, and the last

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<sup>465</sup> Al-Barwani and Albeely, p. 135.

<sup>466</sup> Mohammed Abdul Maqsood Hassan Dawood, 'Men's Superintendence (Qiwamah) of Women: Facts of Jurisprudence and Fallacies', *Journal of Jurisprudential and Legal Research*, 34. 121-1, (2019), الجزء الثاني (p. 28).

<sup>467</sup> Al-Khamlishi.

<sup>468</sup> Srilekha Goveas and Neelufer Aslam, 'A Role and Contributions of Women in the Sultanate of Oman', *International Journal of Business and Management*, 6. 3 (2011), 232 (p. 236).

<sup>469</sup> Peterson, p. 106.

<sup>470</sup> Shweta Belwal and Rakesh Belwal, 'Work-Life Balance, Family-Friendly Policies and Quality of Work Life Issues: Studying Employers' Perspectives of Working Women in Oman', *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 15. 1 (2014), 96-117 (p. 97).

<sup>471</sup> Sharifa K.N. Al-Yahyai, 'Omani Women's Rights between Legislations and Social Practices and Values' (Retrieved from Gulf Research Meeting: <http://www.gulfresearchmeeting.net> ..., 2011) (p. 12).

shows her standing behind her husband, underlining that she always comes after him (Figure 34). The figure indicates the power held by men at the front of the family, followed by women. This is indicated by placing the father in front of the mother and the space he holds within the frame is larger.



*Figure 34: The father and mother in Altohor, 2014*

In her rare appearances, her role is not only as a caring mother but also as a supporter of her husband. The female characters in films set in the 20<sup>th</sup> century are always supportive mothers and housewives, always shown taking care of their children. However, they are not shown to be passive, as in the case of the short film *Raheel*. Moreover, within the analysed sample, female characters always play a key or supporting role, which contrasts with the representation of Middle Eastern women in some Western films, where they are portrayed as ‘silent shadows or as helpless victims of suppressive customs and traditions’.<sup>472</sup> Omani women are presented in a respectful manner as a valuable part of their families and society. As mothers and housewives, these women are involved in the decision-making process, although this involvement does not necessarily influence the decisions made.

<sup>472</sup> Dawn Chatty, ‘Women Working in Oman: Individual Choice and Cultural Constraints’, *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 32. 2 (2000), 241-54 (p. 1).



Moreover, even with the power given to men, their rigor, and their huge role, male characters also care for and support their children and partners. In *Almenaz*, despite the responsibilities assigned to him, the father considers his wife's emotions and thinks of her. In one scene, the father is concerned about the situation and, talking to himself, says: 'I am afraid that my wife will pass again through this painful experience. He continues: 'I pledge myself to not demand her to have another child'. This sense of caring for and considering his partner is currently considered essential for men.

Many changes have occurred within society in terms of gender expectations and roles and many are addressed in the analysed short films whose stories are situated in a modern setting. In *Alaswad La Yaleeq Bik*, the father's personality of being tough and a worker, confirming the place of masculinity of society, is contested throughout the film. The need for a caring father who shares the responsibilities of his children at home is indicated in the mother's dialogue (Figures 35 and 36).



*Figure 35: The disagreement between the father and the mother in Alaswad La Yaleeq Bik, 2018*



*Figure 36: The mother commenting on the father's ignorance of his responsibilities in Alaswad La Yaleeq Bik, 2018*

The father's character in *Alaswad La Yaleeq Bik*, as well as the changes in the female character's design, imply gradual changes in the characteristics of this patriarchal society. In the short films *Alaswad La Yaleeq Bik*, *Almadhalah Alzarqa*, and *Ana Mashhoor*, for example, women increasingly take on other roles in the community. They are university students, teachers, readers, modern people, and have strong personalities. Their impact is clear at both the local and national levels.<sup>473</sup>

*Almadhalah Alzarqa* (2018, 04:41) presents a story of a female university student. Before moving on to how women are presented, that the film is directed by a woman proves that Omani women can be more than just housewives and mothers. Moreover, the film poses a question about some contested beliefs regarding women's functions in society. I discussed the flashback scene of the daughter with her father earlier in relation to the conservative quality of Omani society, in which the father picks up his daughter from school. In that scene, the daughter informed her father that she had changed her mind and would be a teacher instead of a doctor because her teacher said that teaching was the ideal profession for women. The focus in this section is on the father's reply to his daughter: 'If you all become teachers who will heal the sick, defend the truth [...]?' The father's statement not only presents the different roles women can play, but also pinpoints their importance as equal partners in the

<sup>473</sup> Andrew Miller, 'Are Women's Roles Changing in Oman?' (2014) (p. 24) <[https://digitalcommons.wku.edu/stu\\_res\\_jour/2/](https://digitalcommons.wku.edu/stu_res_jour/2/)> [accessed 05 September 2023].

development process of society. This is clear from the increased interest in women's affairs at the governmental and private levels.

Currently, women hold a certain amount of power in Oman. They are 'the main partner without which the country's development is incomplete', as stated on a page specifically titled 'Omani Women' on the Ministry of Information portal.<sup>474</sup> They are encouraged to participate and function alongside their male counterparts in occupations, such as the armed forces, police, on radio, and on television.<sup>475</sup> However, when the household obligation is taken into consideration, it is the woman or her male counterpart who challenges her engagement in society. Crystal A. Ennis studied women's entrepreneurial activities in both Oman and Qatar in response to the continuing attention given to entrepreneurship in the Gulf region. Her study reveals that while some of the study's participants favoured 'liberalising social structure', others preferred the maintenance of conservative patterns, believing it was best for women to work in the domestic domain.<sup>476</sup>

Moving to the film narrative, unlike the other films, only female characters appear in the first two minutes. The film shows ambitious and educated girls who are also immersed in technology and present on social media platforms. This is different from the roles they appear to play in most shorts, which are set in earlier decades. Through the story of Hajar, who becomes a trendsetter on Twitter for using her blue umbrella, the director establishes how women can lead change. Even though the influence of the family and cultural conservatism is evident, the young women are present on social media platforms where they share their points of view. In addition, in the final scene, Hajar does not change her umbrella because of the negative tweets, she continues on her way with confidence.

An example of a strong, confident woman who can make decisions is presented in the short film *Ana Mashhoor*. Razan is the wife of a famous man, Salah, on Instagram. After receiving some advice to show his personal life with his wife as a way of getting more followers, Salah goes home and asks Razan to help him by recording her shopping, as a way to guide followers on how to choose brands and fashion. This suggests his wife's right to be part of the decision-making process and that she is modern and familiar with fashion trends. Razan is depicted as

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<sup>474</sup> 'The Omani Woman', Ministry of Information, <<https://omaninfo.om/module.php?m=pages-showpage&CatID=193&ID=700>>

<sup>475</sup> Chatty, p. 17.

<sup>476</sup> Crystal A Ennis, 'The Gendered Complexities of Promoting Female Entrepreneurship in the Gulf', *New Political Economy*, 24. 3 (2019), 365-84 (pp. 14-15).

a strong, modern yet conservative housewife. She refuses Salah's suggestion because she is keen on maintaining her privacy. Despite the long-existing tribal system in Oman, which might sometimes clash with personal privacy, the current situation imposes that everything that is related to a person's life, their relationships, and family issues are considered a private matter. It is the family that sometimes crosses privacy borders if it still adheres to the patriarchal system. The personal life of Razan and her husband, and their daily routines, are considered private. Therefore, if Salah starts showing his life at home with Razan, he transgresses the privacy of their life. This is a concern in the era of 'Instafame' in the conservative Omani society.

As Salah mainly focuses on building his followers, he starts recording Razan without her permission. Her discovery of his actions leads them to have serious disagreements. While eating at a restaurant, her husband starts recording on Instagram. He starts to record her while eating – when she notices, she leaves the restaurant. At home, Razan insists that he respects her privacy, proving that she can stand up for what is right for her, and that his duty is to respect her values. The director visually emphasises the strong personality of females in several scenes (Figures 37 and 38).



*Figure 37: The power held by Razan in Ana Mashoor, 2018*



*Figure 38: Eye line between Razan and Salah in Ana Mashhoor, 2018*

Figures 37 and 38 show the power of Razan being the one commenting on the behaviours of her husband while he keeps silent. Figure 37 shows Salah's facial expression as he is unable to respond. Similarly, in Figure 38 the eyeline from Razan to Salah demonstrates her power over him. Furthermore, the director gives Razan more power through her ability to file a divorce case which she attends to without being accompanied by a man.

Omani women's testimonies are considered equal to men's, and they can access justice through the courts.<sup>477</sup> The empowerment of Omani women started in the early 1970s when Sultan Qaboos was keen to involve them in the country's development process. In 2009, Sultan Qaboos used his higher authority to dedicate 17<sup>th</sup> October as an annual Omani Women Day as a step to empower them and change traditional perceptions towards them.<sup>478</sup> However, there is still a suggestion that women's rights are not yet complete, as evidenced by policies and laws followed by the state. An example is the divorce policy, which allows a man to divorce his wife verbally without needing to approach the court (Article 82). A woman is allowed to petition for divorce through the court, but only if she offers proof in any of the following cases: she is harmed by her husband causing suffering that makes it impossible to continue a normal matrimonial life (Article 98); the husband's failure to support her and give her the simplest rights (Article 109); the husband's failure to fulfil the wife's dowry and his inability to do so in the event that they had not yet cohabitated (Article 100); and in the event

<sup>477</sup> Rafiah al-Talei, 'Oman', in *Women's Rights in the Middle East and North Africa: Progress Amid Resistance*, ed. by Sanja Kelly and Julia Breslin (New York: Freedom House, 2010) (p. 3).

<sup>478</sup> Linzi J Kemp and Susan R Madsen, 'Oman's Labour Force: An Analysis of Gender in Management', *Equality, Diversity and Inclusion: An International Journal* (2014) (p. 1).

of a rift between spouses, that it is impossible to reconcile them (102).<sup>479</sup> In contrast, a man can divorce his wife without the need to provide reasons or proof.

For women some policies serve more social and cultural values, thus affording males a higher status than female.<sup>480</sup> However, this is disputed by many others since Oman's legal system is based on the traditions of Al Shari'a (Islamic law). In Islam both sexes have equal rights and duties. However, to ensure the stability of the family, Islam regulates several laws, one of which is that men are responsible for superintendence. In the previous example of divorce, men are asked to provide for their children even if they are under the custody of the mother. Moreover, men are given the duties of protecting women, safeguarding them, administering their affairs, and meeting their needs.<sup>481</sup> Indeed, this is considered an honour and positive attribute among women.<sup>482</sup> Therefore, the accompanying of woman by a father or brother to court is seen as safeguarding and protection, not a means of control. Because men are responsible for women, the belief that there are several roles, whether inside or outside the home, that are best for men persists.<sup>483</sup> For example, in most cases, Omani women engage in the decision-making process in their homes, but the father makes the final decision and is responsible for the consequences. In addition, it is the men's duty to shop for the house, as this may include carrying heavy bags. It is important to emphasise that women possess the right to exercise self-determination in various spheres of life, including the ability to vie for positions on the Shura Council and Municipal Council, as well as the freedom to manage their own property and financial resources.

The second argument against women's claims of gender inequality in Oman is that many articles within the legal system of Oman guarantee women's rights. There are approximately 282 articles assuring women's rights within the Personal Status Law.<sup>484</sup> In 'Feminising leadership in Arab societies: the perspectives of Omani female leaders', Al-Lamky mentions that the 'basic statute of the country proclaims equal rights and opportunities and does not discriminate between males and females in social rights and obligations or occupation of

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<sup>479</sup> 'Promulgating the Personal Status Law', in *ROYAL DECREE 32/97*, ed. by Ministry of Justice and Legal Affairs (Official Gazette, 1997).

<sup>480</sup> Rafiah Al Talei, 'Women's Political Representation in Oman: Tepid and Uncommitted Policies' (Online: Carnegie Endowment For International Peace 2021).

<sup>481</sup> 'English Translation of Surat an-Nisa Verse (34)', SurahQuran.org, <<https://surahquran.org/english-aya-34-sora-4.html>>

<sup>482</sup> Dawood, p. 28.

<sup>483</sup> Kemp and Madsen, p. 3.

<sup>484</sup> 'Women in Oman' (Omanuna, The Official Oman eGovernment Services Portal: Ministry of Transport, Communications and Information Technology).

public office'.<sup>485</sup> Al-Lamky interviewed ten successful Omani women who work in 'executive and policy-making positions in different fields including education, social development, economy, foreign affairs, academia and government'. The interviews revealed that women's inequalities vary across society. While some families showed patterns of masculinity at home and raised their children with the traditional mindset of gender expectations, some participants asserted that they did not witness any kind of inequality between genders. For those interviewees who saw gender discrimination, they claimed that such experience prepared them well to face workplace conditions.

Some policies assuring women's rights begin with Article 21 of the Basic Statute of the State, which states that 'all citizens are equal before the law and share the same public rights and duties. There shall be no discrimination amongst them on the ground of gender, origin, colour, language, religion, sect, domicile, or social status'.<sup>486</sup> Moreover, based on the original marriage policy, women are to gain their guardians' acceptance in order to get married; however, in 2010, an amendment was carried out that means women can now make a claim to the court, which has the right to give her marriage permission, in cases of a guardian's unreasoned or illogical refusal.<sup>487</sup> Furthermore, Article 82 of the Personal Status Law gives women the right to divorce if the right is stated within the marriage contract, without the need to provide reasons.<sup>488</sup> Regarding working conditions, Omani women are granted a 98-day, full-paid maternity leave and 130-day leave for widows, according to Chapter 4 of the Labour Law.<sup>489</sup> It is worth noting that men have more job opportunities; however, this is due to the 'biological and logical' requirements of certain jobs, and does not necessarily adhere to gender inequality patterns.<sup>490</sup> For example, women do not work in security, construction, heavy vehicle driving, or auto-motor mechanics.

The above-mentioned policy examples and others in various fields, such as social security domains, demonstrate the fundamental legislative framework in Oman. However, it is challenged by many factors such as 'the misrepresented religious dogmas' by society

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<sup>485</sup> Asya Al-Lamky, 'Feminizing Leadership in Arab Societies: The Perspectives of Omani Female Leaders', *Women in management Review* (2007) (p. 50).

<sup>486</sup> The Basic Statute of the State.

<sup>487</sup> 'Amending Some Laws', in *Royal Decree 55/2010*, ed. by Ministry of Justice and Legal Affairs (Official Gazette 911 2010).

<sup>488</sup> Promulgating the Personal Status Law.

<sup>489</sup> 'Promulgating the Labour Law', in *Royal Decree 53/2023*, ed. by Ministry of Justice and Legal Affairs (Official Gazette, 2023).

<sup>490</sup> Zeinab Hussein and Leon Goldsmith, 'Gender Politics in Oman: Between State, Sect, and Tribe', *Middle East Institute* (2020) (p. 7).

members, conservative and patriarchal social attitudes, and women's 'legal illiteracy' regarding their own rights. Another challenge is that working women, especially those holding policy-making positions, face high pressure and are 'constantly being pulled in various directions with an added pressure of the cultural expectation which emphasise the traditional home and social responsibilities'.<sup>491</sup> This pressure leads families and some women to promote domestic work, which conforms with result reported in Crystal A. Ennis's research, 'The Gendered Complexities of Promoting Female Entrepreneurship in the Gulf'.

All previous examples reveal the changes that have appeared over time in modifying the patriarchal characteristics of Omani culture. The remaining level of change on women's roles and their equality with men requires that both women and society break from an 'internalised mindset'; the government has already provided the required framework that guarantees women's rights.<sup>492</sup> Despite traditional perceptions of women's social roles in Oman, 'women are becoming visible in their roles as political candidates, leaders, and decision makers'.<sup>493</sup>

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<sup>491</sup> Al-Lamky, pp. 52, 60, 62.

<sup>492</sup> Al-Yahyai, p. 17.

<sup>493</sup> Rafiah al-Talei, 'Women's Rights in the Middle East and North Africa 2010 - Oman' (2010), <available at: <https://www.refworld.org/docid/4b99011f86.html>> [accessed 04 August 2023].



## Conclusion

The examination of short filmmaking practice in Oman to inform an understanding of the politics and socio-economic conditions surrounding its development has been driven by the need to locate the currently flourishing, albeit poorly resourced, practice in a wider context. The project built on the argument of Mette Hjort and Duncan Petrie that there is a need to examine the field of an emerging small-nation cinema, such as Oman, with a critical scrutiny of its historical specificities and the context of its national formation.<sup>494</sup> As such, this project studied filmmaking in Oman by engaging with short film production not merely as an incubator for filmmakers, but as a practice that could constitute an independent cultural sector worthy of investigation. The project's exploratory examination was conducted following grounded theory, which is beneficial for research aiming to 'interpret complex phenomena' and to synthesise 'socially constructed experiences'.<sup>495</sup> Constructing the research using grounded theory, through which the data from each stage was coded and revisited, enabled me to gain a general understanding of how filmmaking is structured and practised by Omanis.

Despite the presence of a limited number of full-length films, coupled with the knowledge that Omani citizens are avid viewers of international films, this study revealed that there is presently no commercial film production industry in Oman, through which feature-length films are produced, exhibited, and distributed in a clear systematic framework. Therefore, this research investigated the practice of short filmmaking practice with specific attention on narrative shorts as there is a lack of awareness that they are made in Oman and by Omanis. The development of short filmmaking practice between 2000 and 2020 has shown how short film culture in Oman has evolved and may be regarded as the formative years of a promising future creative industry.

Analysis of the development of narrative filmmaking practice and its determining influences in Chapter Three, 'An Insight in to Omani Short-Narrative Filmmaking Practice' shed light on Omani short-narrative filmmaking, emphasising the role of Muscat International Film Festival (MIFF) and the Omani Association of Cinemas (OAC) in driving this practice. Several committed filmmakers took the lead in facilitating filmmaking culture by starting MIFF in 2001 and establishing OAC in 2002. Other factors that played a role in enhancing the field

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<sup>494</sup> Hjort and Petrie, p. 6.

<sup>495</sup> Michael Jones and Irit Alony, 'Guiding the Use of Grounded Theory in Doctoral Studies—an Example from the Australian Film Industry', *International Journal of Doctoral Studies*, 6 (2011) (pp. 3-4).

include developments in digital technology that offer Omanis affordable production and post-production equipment and facilities, as well as free access to training and related knowledge. Moreover, while film education directly influences the practice, the partial similarities between filmmaking and other fields, such as television and theatre, have enabled filmmakers to move into filmmaking much more easily.

As the research has shown, short filmmaking in Oman is a bottom-up development. It thrives as a non-profit industry even without the official recognition of narrative films as a form of art. Omani shorts have been brought to international attention through film festival circuits and reflect the spirit and specificities of Omani culture. Thus, the narrative short film sector's importance to Omani culture lies in its capacity to serve as a means of social critique and cultural conservation. The latter is a major goal of the Omani state and one of the priorities set out in Oman Vision 2040.

Within the steadily flourishing Omani filmmaking practice, short films demonstrate filmmakers' ability to represent their culture and constitute a valid source to examine and study that culture. Omani filmmakers come from diverse backgrounds and generations. Thus, their films evidence social transformation, societal norms and beliefs, and conflicts between the generations in terms of interests, beliefs, and priorities – as exemplified in Chapter Four, 'Omani Short film Analysis: Characteristics of Omani Short Filmmaking Culture'. Moreover, while the diversity of Omani culture is not directly represented by any single film, when all film productions are examined collectively, they forge imaginary relationships that highlight the diverse aspects of the culture. These short films possess national specificity by incorporating narrative elements such as traditional dress, folktales, and dialects, as well as elements of collective identity, which feature the national characteristics of the practice.

Along with being national in scope, the practice also possesses transnational dimensions, as proposed by the examination of both characteristics of Omani filmmaking. This examination followed a similar approach to both Mette Hjort's and Deborah Shaw's categories of the transnational. The transnational quality is apparent through, first, the international collaboration facilitated by OAC in both long and short film productions over recent years. Examples are the co-productions of several films, such as *Zayana* and *Mudun AlTurab Between Oman and Morocco*. The transnational characteristics also emerge through the creation of collaborative networks with the embassies of several countries that have an established film industry, such as the Indian, Moroccan, Iranian, and Egyptian embassies.

Even on a small scale, the Sultanate is gaining attention as an attractive destination for international film production due to its spectacular natural settings as well as its mix of historical and modern architecture. A report on the Gulf News website states that ‘Oman is actively promoting the country’s diverse topography as an ideal location to shoot films, especially the vibrant Indian film industry’.<sup>496</sup> An example is the Indian film *Raastha* (2024), which was shot entirely in Oman and includes some Omani actors.

Muscat International Film Festival – the main distribution outlet for short films – is another facet of the transnational characteristic within Omani film practice. The festival operates through a twinning system and currently works alongside other smaller festivals to validate and prove that short films are a productive cultural industry. Omani film festivals are part of broader efforts to decolonise the film festival world; they operate free from the domination of the Western film festival canon and celebrate film productions from underexposed regions. These festivals showcase new talent, provide a transnational platform for exchanging film-related skills and experiences, and distribute short films from small nations internationally.

Besides promoting Omani filmmakers, Omani film festivals have also disseminated Omani culture by establishing an ‘Omani Film’ category. Both Al Sharqiyah International Film Festival (SHIFF) and Al Batinah International Film Festival (BIFF) include this category and specify a theme for it. At the most recent BIFF (12-15 November 2023), the theme was the relation of Omanis with the land; SHIFF (11-12 January 2024) entitled their latest category ‘Take me to Oman’. The discussion on the ‘Omani Film’ category at MIFF in Chapter Three underscores that context is paramount in classifying a film as an ‘Omani film’. That is, film submissions for this category should delve into Oman’s cultural context and pertain to its current dialogues.

The analyses of a selection of short films in Chapter Five, ‘Omani Short film Analysis: Cultural Representation in Omani Short Films’ have shown that the film samples not only represent Omani cultural dimensions but also explain the current status of filmmaking practice. Omani culture is depicted as a predominantly religious, hierarchical, conservative, and patriarchal culture. Although those cultural features exist, the samples also indicate changes due to the process of social modernisation. Omani society is an Arab Muslim society that is challenged by the wider exposure to alternative lifestyles and ideologies elsewhere as

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<sup>496</sup> Gulfnews, ‘Oman Wants to Be ‘Film Shooting Locale’ Six Top Indian Filmmakers Explore the Sultanate During a Visit’ (Gulfnews newspaper, 2013).

well as international good and markets. That exposure to societal change has created tension across generations. The representative sample of the analysed films serves as a valuable resource for those seeking a deeper understanding of the tensions that characterise Omani modernity. While the modernisation process has benefited the country in term of economic and social welfare, many conservative Omanis perceive it in opposition and challenge to traditional norms related to ways of living.

Films such as *Alaswad La Yaleeq Bik* and *Ana Mashhoor* explore tensions within families. A clear example is the changing role of the father and the differences between the younger generation (Sundus) and her mother. All the mother focuses on is caring for Sundus, accomplish her duty at home and accepting the father's situation, while Sundus is looking for a romantic life and travel after marriage. It is clear that her imagined picture of the role her husband will play in her future family is different from her father's current role.

My research asserts that the examined samples substantiate the tension between established norms and evolving practices and ways of life. That tension demonstrates the reciprocal relationship between tradition and modernity. The conservative quality of the culture is playing a key role in increasing the level of that tension. On the one hand, it maintains Omani cultural characteristics and uniqueness through the narratives produced. On the other hand, it imposes challenges in the development process of narrative filmmaking practice and limits its development as a cultural and creative industry.

The analysis also shows that Omani short films result from directors' interactions with their social context. Omani filmmakers situate their narratives in a national context, which underpins the realist qualities of their films. On the one hand, they are limited by the characteristics of short films (the form and what it is possible to show) and the absence of state funding. On the other hand, filmmakers utilise representational conventions that are accessible to them to support their narratives. Therefore, Omani filmmakers use the power of storytelling in their family-centred narratives to shed light on broader societal topics that transcend cultural boundaries and function as social commentaries on their cultural context. As such, these short films depict the inclusivity of the Omani context and challenge common misconceptions and problematise and negotiate issues that are frequently shown in a reductive and stereotypical way in terms of Arab Muslim countries, including gender inequality and a lack of civility. It is also apparent that in some of the samples, the directors followed an ethnographic impulse to construct 'traditional' lifestyles and locations in a (social) realist

mode. This added a documentary flavour to their narratives, which raises questions about the extent to which narrative shorts are similar to documentary films in Oman. That opens a new area for academic investigation of short filmmaking in Oman to consider the relation between narrative and documentary films and realism and the documentary/fiction juxtaposition.

The analysis of Omani short film suggests that Stuart Hall's theory of representation is relevant and offers deeper insight and critical reasoning regarding the filmmakers' work approach to representation. Some Omani filmmakers while trying to get close to the lived experience of their characters and construct an authentic and credible representation of ways of life participate in the modern representation of an imagined reality. That was clear in the case of *Almenaz*. As explained in Chapter Four (discussing the realist and documentary flavour of some short films), director Al-Batashi created a setting that did not simply conform to realist conventions. The film samples all sought to represent the actualities of Omani culture. Given this conclusion, Edward Said's *Orientalism* proves to be less relevant to the study. Omani directors' aims are to represent the reality of the contexts in which they are working. Their films are a result of their interactions with the social context through which they aim for social advancement. Therefore, the current act of representation in narrative shorts is not considered problematic. Indeed, these film samples offer more realistic, stimulating portrayals of different locales and experiences in the Omani context. They present a challenge to the orientalist stereotype for international audiences through Omani tourist films.

On a broader film culture nexus, analysing Omani short films indicates that there are certain similarities in trends and preferences in filmmaking approaches between these films and Arab films elsewhere. These similarities are particularly apparent in the use of music and the departure from the convention of the victorious hero tale often depicted in mainstream Hollywood films. According to AlSaloom, Arab film identity is based on two major features: the social and cultural dimension and the political one. He also argues that language is an unavoidable characteristic, but it does not have so much importance as the other features.<sup>497</sup> None of the Omani films delve into political themes, and the practice appears unrelated to pursuing political or social change. As a result, it can be said that Omani films do not follow some of the more explicitly political or radical trends in Arab cinema. Oman's narrative film culture also differs from existing categories such as MENA, Second Cinema, and Third

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<sup>497</sup> Taha.

Cinema, which were conceptualised at the time to distinguish film productions from Hollywood, which holds power as a mainstream global industry.

Omani short films are national films that show signs of the government's long-existing nationalistic mission. Since its establishment in 1970, the Omani government has worked to limit the role played by the media and to ensure that it speaks in the government's favour. As for Omani film culture, the government controls the practice through the Censorship Law and the instilled loyalty among Omanis. Furthermore, control is maintained by keeping the Omani Association of Cinema (OAC) within the framework of non-governmental organisations, thus limiting its potential to effect meaningful social and commercial changes. Moreover, changes in administrative positions of authority have affected the development of the practice and continue to do so. Overall, these factors highlight the influence of power and politics in shaping film culture in Oman. The relationship between films, culture, and representation will remain crucial and changeable based on the perspectives from which it is studied.

Small nations are challenged in their ability to secure a position in a global market controlled by hegemonic film industries and their ideologies. Similarly, short films are overpowered by the feature film industry. The examination of films' artistic and cultural merits, rather than solely their commercial achievements, and the growing popularity of decolonised film festivals, are ultimately providing a balanced perspective on the value of short films compared to feature-length films. Challenges remain in the lack of an established conceptual framework for short film practice that is separate from the industrial framework that emphasises financial outcomes. To date, Omani short filmmakers have had some success in carving out a space for themselves and their narratives within their own country and distributing their representations of Oman more widely through trans- and international channels and platforms. It remains to be seen whether their productivity and creative endeavour can lay a sustainable foundation for an Omani film culture that will become recognised in its own right in the Gulf region, the Arab World, and beyond.

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## Appendices

### Appendix 1: Film List

Source: OAC's Archive, the Directors, and Online

Date collected: 2020-2022

Collected By: Sanaa Juma Al-Hadabi

\*\* According to the information written on the DVDs, all films are classified as drama (D), documentary (*Wathaeqi* (W)), or cartoon (C), as follows: D/Sh, D/L, W/Sh, W/L, C/sh. L and Sh refer to the lengths of the film, short film (Sh), and long feature (L), respectively.

\*\*\* Documentaries and narrative films produced within educational settings and submitted to MIFF are not included in the list.

No	Film Title	Director/Producer/ Script writer	Production Year	Category
1	Original title: <i>Alhaet</i> Translated title: <i>The Wall</i>	Director: Abdullah Al-Batashi	2006	D/Sh
2	Original title: <i>Bent Gharba</i> Translated title: <i>The Daughter of West</i>	Director: Abdullah Al-Batashi	2006	D/Sh
3	Original title: <i>Alkarithah</i> Translated title: <i>The Disaster</i>	Director: Jasim Al- Batashi	2006	D/Sh
4	Original title: <i>Qatrat Thaeirah</i> Translated title: <i>Rebellious drops</i>	Director: Mohammed Al- Mushikhi Script writer: Mohammed Al- Mushikhi	2007	D/Sh
5	Original title: <i>Bent Gharba</i> Translated title: <i>Girl from West</i>	Director: Abdullah Al-Batashi	2007	D/Sh
6	Original title: <i>Anfas Muharib</i> Translated title: <i>The breath of a warrior</i>	Director: Yousef Al- Belushi Script writer: Yousef Al-Belushi Producer: Blue Cave Production	2007	D/Sh
7	Original title: <i>Qabl Alghoroob</i>	Director: Hamed Al- Shukili	2007	D/Sh

	Translated title: <i>Before Sunset</i>	Script writer: Aza AL-Qasabi Producer: OAC		
8	Original title: <i>Alghaeib</i> Translated title: <i>Absent</i>	Director/ Script writer: Athmar Abbas	2007	D/Sh
9	Original title: <i>Hadath fi Yawom Alkhutbah</i> Translated title: <i>It happened on the day of the sermon</i>	Director: Azam Saleh Script writer: Juma Haikal Producer: Haikal Art Production	2008	D/L
10	Original title: <i>Alfarashah Wa Allahab</i> Translated title: <i>Butterfly and flame</i>	Director: Azam Saleh Script writer: Juma Haikal Producer: Haikal Art Production	2008	D/L
11	Original title: <i>Aljawharah w Um Alkhair</i> Translated title: <i>Jewel and mother of goodness</i>	Director: Azam Saleh Script writer: Juma Haikal Producer: Haikal Art Production	2008	D/L
12	Original title: <i>Alzahrah</i> Translated title: <i>The flower</i>	Director: Jasim Al-Batashi	2008	D/Sh
13	Original title: <i>Aljibah</i>	Director: Amaar Al Abd Alsalam Script writer: Aza AL-Qasabi Producer: Awal Art Production	2008	D/L
14	Original title: <i>Asrar Sagherah</i> Translated title: <i>Small Secrets</i>	Director: Azam Saleh Script writer: Juma Haikal Producer: Haikal Art Production	2008	D/L
15	Original title: <i>Para'ah</i> Translated title: <i>Innocent</i>	Director: Jasim Al-Batashi	2009	D/Sh
16	Original title: <i>Lahdhat Samt Sikolojeiah</i> Translated title: <i>A moment of psychological silence</i>	Director/ Script writer: Al-Riami Producer: Seventh Dimension Art production	2009	D/Sh
17	Original title: <i>Raheel</i>	Director: Jasim Al-Batashi	2009	D/Sh

	Translated title: <i>The Cradle</i>			
18	Original title: <i>Fajir Jadeed</i> Translated title: <i>New Daw</i>	Director/ Script writer: Qais Al-Azri Producer: OAC	2009	D/Sh
19	Original title: <i>Sawad</i> Translated title <i>Darkness</i>	Director: Ruqyah Al-Wadhahi and Hamoud Al-Farsi Script writer: Yousra Al-Alawi Producer: OAC	2009	D/Sh
20	Original title: <i>Almenaz</i> Translated title: <i>The Cradle</i>	Director: Abdullah Al-Batashi Script writer: Khalfan Al-Zydi	2009	D/Sh
21	Original title: <i>Biadh</i> Translated title: <i>Whiteness</i>	Director: Khalid Al-Kalbani Script writer: Qaisar Al-Hanai	2009	D/Sh
22	Original title: <i>Musabeh Almanhoos</i> Translated title: <i>Musabeh the Luckless</i>	Director: Amjad Al-Darmaki	2009	D/L
23	Original title: <i>Sijin Alwafideen</i> Translated title: <i>Expatriates Prison</i>	Director: Nouf Al-Muqbali and Amani Al-Ajmi Script writer: Nouf Al-Muqbali Producer: Crazy Group	2010	D/Sh
24	Original title: <i>Huryah moqayadah</i> Translated title: <i>Restricted freedom</i>	Director/ Script writer: Naima Al-Salami	2010	D/Sh
25	Original title: <i>Heyah Wal Albahar</i> Translated title: <i>She and the sea</i> , [Omani Indi]	Director/ Script writer : Aneer Ban Ray Producer: OAC	2010	D/Sh
26	Original title: <i>Aldomiah</i> Translated title: <i>The Doll</i>	Director/ Script writer : Aisha Al-Belushi Producer: Media Creativity Group	2010	D/Sh

27	Original title: <i>Alhasrah</i> Translated title: <i>The Regret</i>	Director/ Script writer: Hood Al-Hooti Producer: Al-Boom Art Production	2010	D/Sh
28	Original title: <i>Estimarat Tomooh</i> Translated title: <i>Ambition Form</i>	Director/ Script writer : Hafidh Al-Busaidi Producer: Al-Shahba Group for Art and Creativity	2010	D/Sh
29	Original title: <i>Alharis</i> Translated title: <i>The Guard</i>	Director: Khalid Al-Kalbani Script writer: Qaisar Al-Hanai	2010	D/Sh
30	Original title: <i>Alnadhid</i>	Director/ Script writer: Mahmoud Al-Bimani Producer: Lense Art Production	2010	D/Sh
31	Original title: <i>Alsuhbah Alsiah</i> Translated title: <i>Bad Company</i>	Director: Abbas Hasen Al-Sinan	2010	D/Sh
32	Original title: <i>Hayah Rateebah</i> Translated title: <i>monotonous life</i>	Director: Lila Al-Hamdoon	2010	D/Sh
33	Original title: <i>Bara'ah</i> Translated title: <i>Innocence</i>	Director: Jasim Al-Batashi	2010	D/Sh
34	Original title: <i>Alhaqeeba</i> Translated title: <i>The Bag</i>	Director: Saleh Al-Bahrani	2010	D/Sh
35	Original title: <i>Altaxi</i> Translated title: <i>The Taxi</i>	Director: Waleed Al-Kharoosi	2011	D/Sh
36	Original title: <i>Malaekat Alsahra</i> Translated title: <i>Desert Angels</i>	Director: Khalid AL-Kalbani Script writer: Sama Issa Producer: Almada Art Production	2011	D/Sh
37	Original title: <i>Haqeeqah or Khaial</i> Translated title: <i>Fact or fiction</i>	Director: Salah Al-Hadhrami Script writer: Anood Al-Busaidi Producer: OAC	2011	D/Sh



38	Original title: <i>Almawt Li Ajleek</i> Translated title: <i>Death for you</i>	Director/ Script writer: Adil Al-Suleimani Producer: Shomookh Manah Theatre Group	2011	D/Sh
39	Original title: <i>Ashwak Alhayah</i> Translated title: <i>Thorns of life</i>	Director/ Script writer: Younis Al-Mawali Producer: Altomooch Theatre Group	2011	D/Sh
40	Original title: <i>Mansour Fi Zaman Manjoor</i> Translated title: <i>Mansour in the time of Manjoor</i>	Director: Amjad Al-Darmaki Script writer: Husam Al-Obidani Producer: Almajlis Theatre Group	2011	D/Sh
41	Original title: <i>Hajis Taweel Alamad</i> Translated title: <i>Long-term obsession</i>	Director/ Script writer: Misa AL-Zubeidi	2011	D/Sh
42	Original title: <i>Fi Dhakirat Alalboom</i> Translated title: <i>In the memory of the album</i>	Director/ Script writer: Aisha AL-Belushi Producer: Creativity Media	2011	D/Sh
43	Original title: <i>Alfajir</i> Translated title: <i>Dawn</i>	Director: Ahmed Al-Darmaki Producer: Almajlis Theatre Group	2011	D/Sh
44	Original title: <i>Sari al-Layl and al-Andaleeb</i>	Director: Ameer Al-Shaib Script writer: Fatema Al-Suleimi Producer: Alboom Art Production	2011	D/L
45	Original title: <i>Konooz Oman Albahryah</i> Translated title: <i>Oman Marine Treasures</i>	Director: Mohammed Al-Kindi	2012	D/Sh
46	Original title: <i>Habat Alburtoqal Almuntaqah bi ainayah</i> Translated title: <i>Carefully selected orange kernels</i>	Director: Abdullah Khamis	2012	D/Sh
47	Original title: <i>Fakh Almuhtal</i>	Director: Ali Abdo	2012	D/Sh

	Translated title: <i>Impostor's trap</i> [in Belushi language]	Script writer: Ahmed Lord Producer: Tamasha Group		
48	Original title: <i>Matha Bad Zalik</i> Translated title: <i>And then what</i>	Director/ Script writer: Yonis Al-Mawali Producer: Altomoooh Theatre Group	2012	D/Sh
49	Original title: <i>Ana Howah</i> Translated title: <i>I am him</i>	Director/ Script writer: Adnan Al-Bahri Producer: Albahri Art Production	2012	D/Sh
50	Original title: <i>Amam Alkawalees</i> Translated title: <i>In Front of the Backstag</i>	Director: Amjad Al-Darmaki Script writer: Abdi Alraheem Al-Darmaki and Rahma Al-Kalbani Producer: Almajlis Theatre Group	2012	D/Sh
51	Original title: <i>Sameat</i> Translated title: <i>I heard</i>	Director: Mohammed Al-Hashmi Script writer: Salim Al-Shukili Producer: Media Centre for Charity	2012	D/Sh
52	Original title: <i>Damat Taeesh</i> Translated title: <i>Mindless Tear</i>	Director/ Script writer: Ahmed Al-Raheel Producer: Caledonian Engineering	2012	D/Sh
53	Original title: <i>Alnajim</i> Translated title: <i>The Star</i>	Director/ Script writer: Mustafa Al-Lawati Producer: Akasa Art Production	2012	D/Sh
54	Original title: <i>Khabaya Alayam</i> Translated title: <i>The secrets of the days</i>	Director/ Script writer: Moosa Al-Bakri Producer: Sabab Hasas Art Production	2012	D/Sh
55	Original title: <i>Alhadith</i> Translated title: <i>The Accident</i>	Director: Yaser Nasser Script writer: Laila Habeeb Al Hamdoon	2012	D/L

		Producer: Oman Television and Alboom Art Production		
56	Original title: <i>Ber Alwaldein</i> Translated title: <i>Honouring parents</i>	Director: Ahmed Al-Suleimani	2013	D/Sh
57	Original title: <i>Shitan Alans I</i> Translated title: <i>Demon Humans I</i>	Producer: Aini Sports Cultural and Social Team	2013	D/Sh
58	Original title: <i>Li Qatrat Ma'a</i> Translated title: <i>For a Water Drop</i>	Director/ Script writer: Sultan Al-Qamshoei Producer: Dream Art Production	2013	D/Sh
59	Original title: <i>Althekra Alrabiah</i> Translated title: <i>The fourth Anniversary</i>	Director/ Script writer: Zakria Al-Zedjali Producer: Fantazia Art Production	2013	D/Sh
60	Original title: <i>Broadcast</i>	Director/ Script writer: Nasser Al-Darmaki Producer: Almajlis Theatre Group	2013	D/Sh
61	Original title: <i>AlJanib Alakher Min Alhayah</i> Translated title: <i>The other side of Life</i>	Director: Ahmed Script: Thuria and Issa	2013	D/Sh
62	Original title: <i>Kawp Ala Aljidar</i> Translated title: <i>Cup on The Wall</i>	Director: Sultan Al-Qamshoei Script writer: Raida Al-Muharbi	2013	D/Sh
63	Original title: <i>Uboor</i> Translated title: <i>Crossing</i>	Director: Haitham Al-Mosawi Script writer: Haitham Al-Mosawi and Hussain Al-Musawi Producer: Almada Art Production	2013	D/Sh

64	Original title: <i>Badaat Alloabah</i> Translated title: <i>Game started</i>	Director/ Script writer: Adil Al-Suliemani Producer: Shomookh Manah Group	2013	D/Sh
65	Original title: <i>Alfiah Almustahdafah</i> Translated title: <i>The forgotten category</i>	Director: Shas Al-Shanfri Script writer: Ahmed Al-Shanfri	2013	D/Sh
66	Original title: <i>Tahadi Alkhawf</i> Translated title: <i>Challenging Fear</i>	Director/ Script writer: Iman Al-Sinani	2013	D/Sh
67	Original title: <i>Intahat Alloabah</i> Translated title: <i>Game over</i>	Director/ Script writer: Hussain Al-Belushi	2013	D/Sh
68	Original title: <i>Nawafith</i> Translated title: <i>Windows</i>	Director/ Script writer: Faisal Hafidh Al-Shinfri Producer: Golden Massage Art Production	2013	D/Sh
69	Original title: <i>Marah fi Alomer</i> Translated title: <i>Once in a lifetime</i>	Director/ Script writer: Salim Bahwan Producer: Sur Art Production	2013	D/L
70	Original title: <i>Flathat Qalbi</i>	Director: Said Al-Mutaani Script writer: Said Al-Mutaani and Ahmed Al-Bahloli	2014	D/Sh
71	Original title: <i>Altawseelah Alakheerah</i> Translated title: <i>Last Connection</i> [Indi-Omani]	Director: Andban Say Script writer: Nikita Ray Producer: Invor Asia Production	2014	D/Sh
72	Original title: <i>Rasasat Najah</i> Translated title: <i>Success Bullet</i>	Director/ Script writer: Mustafa Al-Sinidi	2014	D/Sh
73	Original title: <i>Alesha 'at</i> Translated title: <i>Rumours</i>	Director: Murshid Al-Yarubi	2014	D/Sh

		Script writer: Said Al-Mendhri and Murshid Al-Yarubi Producer: Alghashib Sport Team		
74	Original title: <i>Saeil Ahmer</i> Translated title: <i>Red Liquid</i>	Director: Nasser Al-Batashi Script writer: Bahia Al-Shukili Producer: Alboom Art Production	2014	D/Sh
75	Original title: <i>Khotwah Ela Almarathon</i> Translated title: <i>Step into the Marathon</i>	Director: Jihad Al-Mamari Script writer: Juhaina Al-Mamari, Amina Al-Harasi and Asma Al-Zaabi	2014	D/Sh
76	Original title: <i>Lilbaie</i> Translated title: <i>For Sale</i>	Director: Abdullah Al-Batashi	2014	D/Sh
77	Original title: <i>Altohor</i> Translated title: <i>Altohor</i>	Director: Anwar Al-Ruzaiqi	2014	D/Sh
78	Original title: <i>Saheeb Altaxi</i> Translated title: <i>The Taxi owner</i>	Director: Abu Turki Al-Oaisi	2014	D/Sh
79	Original title: <i>Alad Altanazuli</i> Translated title: <i>Countdown</i>	Director: Hussain Al-Belushi	2014	D/Sh
80	Original title: <i>Sadeeq Alfajer</i> Translated title: <i>Friend of the Dawn</i>	Director: Hilal Al-Hadi	2014	D/Sh
81	Original title: <i>Ant Alafdhel</i> Translated title: <i>You Are the Best</i>	Director: Hussain Al-Belushi	2014	D/Sh
82	Original title: <i>Lilbaia</i> Translated title: <i>For Sale</i>	Director: Abdullah Al-Batashi	2014	D/Sh
83	Original title: <i>Bateekh</i> Translated title: <i>Watermelon</i>	Director: Haitham Sulaiman	2014	D/Sh

84	Original title: <i>Alishaat</i> Translated title: <i>Rumors</i>	Director: Murshed Al-Yarubi Script writer: Murshed Al-Yarubi, Said Masi	2014	D/Sh
85	Original title: <i>Saf</i> Translated title: <i>Class</i>	Director: Emad Al-Hashmi	2014	D/Sh
86	Original title: <i>Weenic Ya Walidi</i> Translated title: <i>Where are you my son</i>	Director: Laila Al Hamdoon Producer: Alahmad Art Production	2015	D/Sh
87	Original title: <i>Absat Alashiaa</i> Translated title: <i>The simplest things</i>	Director/ Script writer: Adil Al-Suliemani Producer: Shomookh Manah Group	2015	D/Sh
88	Original title: <i>Lahdhah Rujooa</i> Translated title: <i>A moment back</i>	Director: Nasser Al-Batashi Script writer: Islam Karam Al-Adawi Producer: Alboom Art Production	2015	D/Sh
89	Original title: <i>Muscat Zaman</i>	Director/ Script writer: Khalid Al-Wehibi Producer: Alangham Aldhabiah Art production	2015	D/Sh
90	Original title: <i>Fakh Almuhtal</i> Translated title: <i>Brothers of Divel</i>	Director/ Script writer: Yaqoob Al-Sadi Producer: Alboom Art Production	2015	D/Sh
91	Original title: <i>Aljaeijah Alkabeera</i> Translated title: <i>Grand Prize</i>	Director/ Script writer: Abdul Aziz Al-Driai Producer: Telecommunications Regulatory Authority	2015	D/Sh
92	Original title: <i>Min Ana?</i> Translated title: <i>Who am I?</i>	Director: Khamis Ambo Saidi Script writer: Mohamed Al-Hinaie Producer: Issa Al-Subhi	2015	D/Sh

93	Original title: <i>Basaal</i>	Director/ Script writer: Jokha Al-Nabi	2015	D/Sh
94	Original title: <i>Almaqbarah Almajhoolah</i> Translated title: <i>The Unknown Cemetery</i>	Director: Yousef Al-Hsni Producer: Lens Art Production Group	2015	D/Sh
95	Original title: <i>Alhqm</i> Translated title: <i>Pigeons</i>	Director: Hamid Al-Amri	2015	D/Sh
96	Original title: <i>Kursi Alamal</i> Translated title: <i>Hope chair</i>	Director: Dawood Al-Belushi	2015	D/Sh
97	Original title: <i>Kafil Alyateem</i> Translated title: <i>Orphan's Sponsor</i>	Script: Abdullah Al-Aghbari Director: Emad Al-Hashmi	2015	D/Sh
98	Original title: <i>Alqarar Alakheer</i> Translated title: <i>Final Decision</i>	Director: Adel Al-Suleimani	2015	D/Sh
99	Original title: <i>Masuoliaty</i> Translated title: <i>My Responsibility</i>	Script writer: Bader Al-Hadi Director: Suliman Al-Rawahi	2015	D/Sh
100	Original title: <i>Nahnu Huna</i> Translated title: <i>We Are Here</i>	Director: Hussain Al-Belushi	2015	D/Sh
101	Original title: <i>Albahaar</i> Translated title: <i>The sailor</i>	Director: Faisal Al-Oaisi	2015	D/Sh
102	Original title: <i>AL Ghader wa Alintiqam</i> Translated title: <i>Treachery and revenge</i>	Director: Abdul Aziz Al-Gharibi and Mazen Al-Gharibi	2015	D/Sh
103	Original title: <i>Farhat Miskeen</i> Translated title: <i>The Joy of a Poor</i>	Director: Saif Al-Sinani	2015	D/Sh
104	Original title: <i>Kaboos</i> Translated title: <i>Nightmare</i>	Director: Mohammed Al-Oreimi	2015	D/Sh

105	Original title: <i>Altoee</i> Translated title: <i>The Well</i>	Director: Mohammed Al-Salami Story: Younis Al-Mamari	2015	D/Sh
106	Original title: <i>Tajer Alzamn</i> Translated title: <i>The Merchant of Time</i>	Director: Ruqyah Al-Wadhahi Script writer: Haitham Sulaiman	2016	D/Sh
107	Original title: <i>Ela AlYaban</i> Translated title: <i>To Japan</i>	Director: Hussain Al-Belushi	2016	D/Sh
108	Original title: <i>Ajalat Al iftar</i> Translated title: <i>fast Breaking wheel</i>	Director: Jamil Al-Yaqubi Producer: Alturbah Alalamiah Organization	2016	D/Sh
109	Original title: <i>Rifqan Bihim</i> Translated title: <i>Be gentle with them</i>	Director: Osama Al-Haji	2016	D/Sh
110	Original title: <i>Hikayah min Alwaqia</i> Translated title: <i>A tale from reality</i>	Director: Ibrahim Al-Aghbari	2016	D/Sh
111	Original title: <i>Hikayat Yateem</i> Translated title: <i>A story of an orphan</i>	Director: Hamid Al-Amri	2016	D/Sh
112	Original title: <i>Ramadan Ghair</i> Translated title: <i>Ramadan is different</i>	Director: Jamil Al-Yaqubi Producer: Alturbah Alalamiah Organization	2016	D/Sh
113	Original title: <i>Soa Aldhan</i> Translated title: <i>Mistrust</i>	Director: Jamil Al-Yaqubi Producer: Alturbah Alalamiah Organization	2016	D/Sh
114	Original title: <i>Altaoon</i> Translated title: <i>Plague</i>	Director/ Script writer: Abdulaziz Al-Durayie	2016	D/Sh
115	Original title: <i>Saiem Lail Nahar</i>	Director: Osama Al-Haji	2016	D/Sh



	Translated title: <i>Fasting Day and Night</i>			
116	Original title: <i>Alnadhar Almadiyat</i> Translated title: <i>Looking At materialities</i>	Script: Abdullah Mahmoud Directors: Abdullah Mahmoud and Ali Mohammed	2016	D/Sh
117	Original title: <i>Waqti Thamein</i> Translated title: <i>My time is precious</i>	Script: Mohammed Al-Ajmi Director: Ali Mohammed Al-Ajmi	2016	D/Sh
118	Original title: <i>Saiem in Warta</i> Translated title: <i>A Fasting Man is in Trouble</i>	Director: Abdullah Hassan and Abdullah Mahmoud	2017	D/Sh
119	Original title: <i>Thapihat Al Eid</i> Translated title: <i>Eid Sacrifice</i>	Director: Abdullah Abbas Al-Ajmi and Abdullah Mahmoud Al-Ajmi	2017	D/Sh
120	Original title: <i>Lahdhah</i> Translated title: <i>A moment</i>	Director: Ali Al-Hinaie	2017	D/Sh
121	Original title: <i>Albasar</i> Translated title: <i>Sight</i>	Director: Ibrahim Al-Aghbari	2017	D/Sh
122	Original title: <i>Hatha Qadari</i> Translated title: <i>This is my destiny</i>	Director: Nasr Al-Jabri	2017	D/Sh
123	Original title: <i>Khafafeesh Al lail</i> Translated title: <i>Night bats</i>	Director: Dawood Al-Belushi	2017	D/Sh
124	Original title: <i>Alhaajah wa Khifat Alyad</i> Translated title: <i>Need and sleight of hand</i>	Director: Abdullah Abbas Al-Ajmi and Abdullah Mahmoud Al-Ajmi	2017	D/Sh
125	Original title: <i>Alkhait Alabiadh wa Alaswad</i> Translated title: <i>Black and white thread</i>	Director: Munther Al-Hsni	2017	D/Sh

126	Original title: <i>Alzar</i>	Director: Adnan Al-Qasmi	2017	D/Sh
127	Original title: <i>Almubajal ma Aljar</i> Translated title: <i>Venerable with neighbour</i>	Director: Mubarak Producer: Almubjal	2017	D/Sh
128	Original title: <i>Naif Dream</i>	Script writer: Murshed Al-Yarubi and Adel Al-Ghafri Director: Murshed Al-Yarubi	2017	D/Sh
129	Original title: <i>Ghafwah</i> Translated title: <i>Nap</i>	Director: Said Al-Mutaani	2017	D/L
130	Original title: <i>Altareeq Almakshoof</i> Translated title: <i>The Road Exposed</i>	Director: Adel Al-Suliemani	2017	D/Sh
131	Original title: <i>Maah</i> Translated title: <i>Mother</i>	Director: Ali Abdoo	2017	D/Sh
132	Original title: <i>Aluter</i> Translated title: <i>The perfume</i>	Producer: Aljamar Cinematic group	2017	D/Sh
133	Original title: <i>Althaar</i> Translated title: <i>The Revenge</i>	Director: Mohammed Al-Hashmi	2017	D/Sh
134	Original title: <i>Lao Kuntu Waladan</i> Translated title: <i>If I Were a Boy</i>	Director: Shouq Abdulaziz	2018	D/Sh
135	Original title: <i>Hares Alharah</i> Translated title: <i>The Guard of The Village</i>	Producer: Al Majles Band	2018	D/Sh
136	Original title: <i>Khatiyah</i> Translated title: <i>The Fault</i>	Director: Abdulaziz Al-Habsi Script writer: Laila Al-Hamdoon	2018	D/Sh
137	Original title: <i>Alahid</i> Translated title: <i>Covenant</i>	Script writer: Khalid Al-Hadi Director: Khalid Al-Hadi and Suliman Al-Hadi	2018	D/Sh

138	Original title: <i>Bain wa Bain</i> Translated title: <i>In Between</i>	Director: Adel Salim Al-Rudaini	2018	D/Sh
139	Original title: <i>Alexander</i>	Director: Mubarak Producer: Almubjal	2018	D/Sh
140	Original title: <i>Alaswad La Yaleeq Bik</i> Translated title: <i>The Black Does Not Suit You</i>	Director: Issa Al-Subhi	2018	D/Sh
141	Original title: <i>Almadhalah Alzarqa</i> Translated title: <i>The Blue Umbrella</i>	Director: Shouq Abdulaziz	2018	D/Sh
142	Original title: <i>Hologram</i>	Director: Haitham Suleiman	2018	D/Sh
143	Original title: <i>Abuq Alhanan</i> Translated title: <i>Fragrant tenderness</i>	Script writer: Ibrahim Al-Khamisi Directors: Bader Al-Rashdi and Salim Al-Mamari	2018	D/Sh
144	Original title: <i>Dama'at Omi</i> Translated title: <i>Mom's tear</i>	Director: Ibrahim Al-Aghbari	2018	D/Sh
145	Original title: <i>Bila Dhameer</i> Translated title: <i>Without conscience</i>	Director: Ibrahim Al-Aghbari	2018	D/Sh
146	Original title: <i>Mutalaqah</i> Translated title: <i>A Divorced Woman</i>	Producer: Al Nebras Photography	2018	D/Sh
147	Title: <i>Ana Mashhoor</i> Translated title: <i>I am famous</i>	Director: Muaiad Ambu Saidi	2018	D/Sh
148	Original title: <i>Alqarar Alakheer</i> Translated title: <i>The Last Decision</i>	Director: Ibrahim Al-Aghbari	2019	D/Sh

149	Original title: <i>Hibat Alardh</i> Translated title: <i>The Gift of the Earth</i>	Director: Adel Al-Ghafri	2019	D/Sh
150	Original title: <i>Damaat Rajul</i> Translated title: <i>A man's tear</i>	Director: Murshed Al-Yarubi	2019	D/Sh
151	Original title: <i>Yadan bi Yad</i> Translated title: <i>Hand by hand</i>	Director: Ahmed Al-Belushi	2019	D/Sh
152	Original title: <i>Alshawathah</i> Translated title: <i>Juggling</i>	Director: Abdullah Al-Mazroei	2019	D/Sh
153	Original title: <i>Alrehlah</i> Translated title: <i>The journey</i>	Director/ Script writer: Talal Al-Salmani	2019	D/L
154	Original title: <i>Tsholo</i>	Director: Muzna Al-Musafer	2019	D/Sh
155	Original title: <i>Thakerah Kalhajar</i> Translated title: <i>A Memory Like a Rock</i>	Director: Hamid Al-Amri	2019	D/Sh
156	Original title: <i>Hesin Jebreen</i> Translated title: <i>Jibreen Castle</i>	Director: Asmahan Al-Hatali	2019	D/Sh
157	Original title: <i>Al khatea'ah</i> Translated title: <i>The Sin</i>	Director: Abul Aziz Al-Habsi	2019	D/Sh

## Appendix 2: Film Analysis Summary (Film Narrative)

	2006-2010	2011-2015	2016-2020
<b>Genre</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Drama</li> <li>- Four of the films are Without dialogue.</li> <li>- One silent film with narration.</li> <li>- Two are Non-linear narrative.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Drama</li> <li>- One is experimental film (<i>Watermelon</i>)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Two dramas, one is non-linear narrative.</li> <li>- Non-Narrative (2): Animation, Experimental.</li> </ul>
<b>Story told</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Magic/Jin</li> <li>- Family (Parent/child relationship)</li> <li>- Child abuse/women abuse</li> <li>- War</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Family Value</li> <li>- Wars</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Family/society values</li> <li>- Power</li> </ul>
<b>Narration style, if any</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- 3 films with narration:</li> <li>- 1<sup>st</sup> (<i>Raheel</i>): First person narrative; Descriptive and in some places questioning), throughout the film</li> <li>- 2<sup>nd</sup> (<i>Alkarithah</i>): Alternating-person (as voice over of the character) narrative; indirect, explicit.</li> <li>- 3<sup>rd</sup> (<i>Almenaz</i>): first-person narrative; explicit</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- No narration used at any of the films</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Two films:</li> <li>- Third person narrative: direct, commenting on the events.</li> <li>- First person narration: direct, white Arabic (between formal and informal Arabic).</li> </ul>

	and direct guide to the story (start, middle)		
<b>Source</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Adaptation: Theatrical play (1)</li> <li>- Based on Omani tradition (2)</li> <li>- Script writer/director</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Scriptwriter</li> <li>(No adaptation)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Scriptwriter</li> <li>(No adaptation)</li> </ul>
<b>Themes</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Desire to find something, reach a place or escape.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Death</li> <li>- Human Vs Society</li> <li>- Human Vs Human (war) universal</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Social Media Obsession / Materialism</li> <li>- Quest of Power</li> <li>- Love, Social Control, Acceptance.</li> <li>- Chance Vs Tradition/ Individual Vs Society.</li> <li>- Self-Awareness/ loneliness</li> </ul>
<b>Setting</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Mountains</li> <li>- Desert</li> <li>- Old village</li> <li>- Mixed from above.</li> <li>- Urban village, street (1)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Desert</li> <li>- Old village</li> <li>- Urban village (2)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Drama: Urban village (Muscat) (2)</li> <li>- non-Narratives: Un completed building, outdoor (street, beach, forest)</li> </ul>



## Appendix 4: Interview Questions

### *1: Department of Cinema*

Q1: For a long, films played an essential role in society in different fields to raise awareness, document events/bibliographies, entertain audiences, and many other reasons. It is one of the most common video production types besides television production. In this study, my focus is studying the filmmaking culture practice of both fiction and documentaries. Looking at Oman as a small developing country, what do you think of the current filmmaking practice by different parties, individuals, companies, and institutions?

Q2: As part of the Art Directorate in the Ministry of Culture, Sport, and Youth, you play an administrative role in filmmaking to start with the department's name. What is the 'cinema' that you are responsible for?

Q3: As you know, the Sultanate is working, giving massive importance to the different elements of cultural heritage as an essential tool to reflect its diversity of cultural expression. What is the importance given to the filmmaking field in this regard?

Q4: One of your primary roles in the field is approving film scripts. What is the procedure you follow to do so?

Q5: What are the criteria for approving film scripts?

Q6: How often do you receive scripts for approval?

Q7: What difference getting the approval for film script may make for that particular production?

Q8: With the technological development, filmmaking equipment is more accessible for people; therefore, many started producing films and posting them on YouTube and another video-based Internet. What role do you play in this regard?

Q9: Moving to another crucial role of your department, which is funding film production. Do you have a fixed allocated budget for film production?



If yes, how many films did you funded?

- If no, why?

Q10: What are the criteria that you decide upon to fund a particular production?

Q11: Giving the fact that films are produced for a purpose. What role do you play in term of film screening and distributing for a film to be delivered?

Q12: Are there clear policies in films screening and distribution?

If yes, what?

Then, who controls that?

If no, why?

Then, to what extent having such policies will benefit Omani filmmaking culture?

Q13: As you know, there is the Omani Association of Cinema and Theatre which. How would you describe the relationship between you and the Association?

Q14: As the Department of Cinema within the Art directorate, do you play any administrative role whatsoever on the Association as it is working under the Umbrella of another governmental body, the Ministry of Social Development?

Q15: Why don't you, as a directorate responsible for the cinema, administrate such an association?

Q16: In your opinion, what are the limitations and reasons why there is no film industry yet in Oman?

Q17: How do you envisage the future for film in Oman?

Q18: How often do you evaluate your involvement in this area?

Q19: What measures do you use for that?

*2: The Omani Association of Cinema and Theatre*

Q1: For a long, films played an essential role in society in different fields to raise awareness, document events/bibliographies, entertain audiences, and many other reasons. It is one of the most common video production types besides television production. In this study, my focus is studying the filmmaking culture practice of both fiction and documentaries. As an organization that has been established by the initiative of some individuals interested in cinema taking advantage of the royal decree 14/2000 Civil Associations Law, what do you think of the current filmmaking practice by different parties, individuals, companies, and institutions?

Q2: How would you describe your role in the filmmaking culture in Oman?

Q3: As you know, the Sultanate is working, giving massive importance to the different elements of cultural heritage as an essential tool to reflect its diversity of cultural expression. What is the importance given to the filmmaking field in this regard?

Q4: One of the Association's aims is to support joint efforts in establishing an influential film industry. What/whom effort are you talking about here?

Q5: How are film productions supported by the Association, whether they are produced under supervision or not?

Q6: What difference does it make for a filmmaker to be under your supervision or not?

Q7: What are the implications of supervision?

Q8: One of your goals is to introduce Omani filmmakers and showcase their products internationally. What about locally?

Q9: Where do you screen Omani films?

Q10: What distribution tool do you use?

Q11: Are there clear policies in a film screening and distribution?

If yes, what?

Then, who controls that?

If no, why?

Then, to what extent have such a policy will benefit Omani filmmaking culture?

Q12: How are you benefiting from technological development to advance the Omani film culture practice in terms of production and distribution?

\*\* Film Festivals:

Q13: Film festivals are playing an essential role in the field. Focusing on the history of film festivals in Oman, you started by having two main festivals, Muscat film festival (internationally) and Muscat film festival for documentaries and shorts (national), which then have been merged with 'MAJAN DAY' (deducted totally for film screening only) into 'the Omani Film Forum'. What happened to the Omani Film Forum as it is no longer there?

Q14: Looking in-depth at the 'Omani Film Forum', the forum used to include many workshops and training sessions where participants produced short films and then participated in different film festivals. To what extent do you think that the continuation of such an event might have impacted the practice of filmmaking?

Q15: As know film festival provides opportunities to filmmakers to interact and widen their network and share experience which is obvious and you as an association have focused on and celebrating films and individuals. What are other roles played by Muscat International Film festival?

Q16: In general, how would you describe Muscat International Film festival in terms of its primary motivation? Is it celebrity-driven, cinephile or something else?

Q17: What factors influence your decision of the competition categories?

Q18: How would you describe the attendance of the festival?

Q19: Tracking the film participation in the Muscat International Film Festival competition, the Omani participation started from the fourth session in 2006, and within the last few sessions, you have specified specific categories for Omani films only. How would you

describe the Omani participation in the festival from the fourth session in 2006 to the tenth session in 2018?

Q20: What would having specific categories for Omani productions add to the festival and the Omani filmmakers themselves?

Q21: Having specific categories under the name of 'OMANI', you add a national or cultural label to these productions, so how would you define 'Omani film' or what makes a film an Omani production?

Q22: Are there specific evaluation criteria to those categories labelled 'Omani'?

- If yes, what? Then why?
- If no, then why, considering that with this labelling, they might be considered representatives not only for the Omani production but also for the Omani culture?

Q23: To what extent MIFF may work as a transient event for Omani to market their film production or showcase a new indigenous national film industry?

Q24: What are the limitations to that?

Q25: Moving to one crucial aspect of the film festival, which is film circulation. Do you any secured network with distributors, sales agents, and festival programmers?

- If no, why?
- If yes, how did that benefit the Omani film culture?

Q26: How would you evaluate the participation of Omani filmmakers in film festivals locally or internationally in term of number and achievement?

Q27: Do you think that there is a potential of having a film industry in Oman?

\*\* Evaluation:

Q28: The Association has been working for around 18 years; despite the effort made by the Association, we still cannot say that there is a film industry in Oman. What are the reasons for that?

Q29: What are the challenges faced by the Association?

Q30: How often do you usually evaluate your involvement in this practice?

Q31: What measures do you use for that?

3: *Omani filmmakers.*

\*\* Filmmaker background:

- Q1: What is your age?
- Q2: When did you start practicing film making?
- Q3: What educational background do you have?
- Q4: Why do you practice film making?
- Q5: How many films did you make?
- Q6: Where those films self-funded?

\*\* Filmmaking as a practice:

- Q1: Which film genre or format do you prefer?
- Q2: How do you come up with the idea for your films?
- Q3: What are the factors that affect your choice of the story?
- Q4: How do you choose your cast?
- Q5: Are they all Omanis?
- Q6: Can you tell me the process of your film making?
- Q7: How much time does it take to finish a particular production, starting from building up the story to the final film?
- Q8: How do you know that your story/script is ready to shoot?
- Q9: On what elements do you depend to emphasis the theme of your film?
- Q10: Looking at the geography of the country, to what extent it is serving your productions?
- Q11: For whom do you make those film? Who is your target audience?

\*\*Other related questions:

- Q1: What do you think of the current filmmaking practice in Oman?

Q2: What are the factors that influence the filmmaking practice in Oman both negatively and positively?

Q3: Do you think that you, as a filmmaker, are responsible for your culture when building up your story?

Q4: Do you feel that you should represent your culture through your films?

Q5: How is this affecting the type of film you choose to make, the plot, or your film's setting?

Q6: Do you think that film festivals are important? If yes, why?

Q7: Did you participate in any film festival?

If yes, then which?

If no, then why?

Q8: With the technological development and the availability of many platforms such as YouTube and Instagram, many people have accounts. Are you on social media, or do you have a YouTube channel?

If yes? How do you use it in your work?

If no, why?

## Appendix 5: Ethical Approval

RE: FAHC 20-033 - Ethics Application - Approval

Kaye Beaumont <K.D.Beaumont@leeds.ac.uk>

on behalf of

AHC Research Ethics <AHCResearchEthics@leeds.ac.uk>

Tue 1/26/2021 6:09 PM

To:Sanaa Al-Hadabi [RPG] <fhsjda@leeds.ac.uk>

Cc:AHC Research Ethics <AHCResearchEthics@leeds.ac.uk>

Dear Sanaa

**FAHC 20-033 - Framing Short-film practice in Oman: Narrative, Representation and Culture**

I am pleased to inform you that the above research ethics application has been reviewed by AHC Committee and I can confirm a favourable ethical opinion based on the documentation received at date of this email.

*Please retain this email as evidence of approval in your study file.*

Please notify the committee if you intend to make any amendments to the original research as submitted and approved to date. This includes recruitment methodology; all changes must receive ethical approval prior to implementation. Please see [http://ris.leeds.ac.uk/downloads/download/179/amendment\\_form](http://ris.leeds.ac.uk/downloads/download/179/amendment_form) or contact the Research Ethics & Governance Administrator for further information ([ahcresearchethics@leeds.ac.uk](mailto:ahcresearchethics@leeds.ac.uk)) if required.

Ethics approval does not infer you have the right of access to any member of staff or student or documents and the premises of the University of Leeds. Nor does it imply any right of access to the premises of any other organisation, including clinical areas. The committee takes no responsibility for you gaining access to staff, students and/or premises prior to, during or following your research activities.

*Please note:* You are expected to keep a record of all your approved documentation, as well as documents such as sample consent forms, risk assessments and other documents relating to the study. This should be kept in your study file, which should be readily available for audit purposes. You will be given a two week notice period if your project is to be audited.

If you require this confirmation in letter form, for example to show to external funders, then please do email me. I am happy to provide this if required.

It is our policy to remind everyone that it is your responsibility to comply with Health and Safety, Data Protection and any other legal and/or professional guidelines there may be.

I hope the study goes well.

Very best wishes,  
Kaye

*Kaye Beaumont  
Research Ethics Administrator  
University of Leeds*