

The Development of the Film Industry in Saudi Arabia

2005–2020

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the development of the film industry in Saudi Arabia from 2005 to 2020. It divides the industry's development in Saudi Arabia into two periods: from 2005 to 2015 and from 2015 to 2020. In the first period, the industry was supported and led by two key industry figures, the Rotana Group and the Saudi Film Festival (SFF). The second period was characterised by the government and non-profit organisations leading the industry's development through the Saudi Film Council (SFC), General Commission for Audiovisual Media (GCAM) and King Abdulaziz Center for World Culture (Ithra). This thesis includes personal interviews with industry decision-makers and leaders such as the CEO of SFC, founder and CEO of the SFF and the Head of the Cinema Department at Ithra Centre.

This thesis contributes to the knowledge of the Saudi Arabian film industry through a comprehensive analysis of the industry structures that can support the industry's growth, enabling government agencies, non-profit organisations and cultural institutions to better support its further development. The findings reveal that religious opposition to cinema led to its decline after 1979, and in the first time period, this opposition limited Rotana's ability to produce more films and closed its theatres. Events in the second time period demonstrate the government's seriousness about supporting the industry and its growth, and the government has established a massive financing policy for local and foreign films produced inside Saudi Arabia. Nevertheless, the challenges of censorship still trouble film producers, especially for domestic films, whereas foreign films have greater freedom although the executive regulations for censorship do not differentiate between foreign and domestic films.

Overall, this thesis aims to answer the question: What is meaningful about the Saudi film industry's development in the twenty-first century?

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Abbreviations

ADFC	Abu Dhabi Film Commission
CPVPV	Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice
GAC	General Authority for Culture
GCAM	General Commission for Audiovisual Media
GCC	Gulf Cooperation Council
Ithra	The King Abdulaziz Center for World Culture
MBC	Middle East Broadcasting Center
MiSK	The Prince Mohammed bin Salman Foundation
SAPDA	Saudi Arabia Producers & Distributors Association
SASCA	Saudi Arabian Society for Culture and Arts
SFC	Saudi Film Council
SFF	Saudi Film Festival
RedSeaFF	Red Sea International Film Festival
UKFC	UK Film Council

Introduction

Overview

Since its inception in 1932, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has undergone many difficult political, economic and cultural periods. For the cinema, these difficulties have been even more severe because Saudi rulers, from the country's inception until 2017, have fluctuated in their position regarding the acceptance or rejection of cinema. Moreover, the position of religious scholars in the country has varied between the categorical rejection of films and their acceptance subject to specific strict conditions that are difficult to implement. However, filmmakers and the owners of media companies have sought to confront these challenges and have struggled against the religious scholars. The state's position has a complex history; it has progressed from a period in which the state supported cinema, through a period in which cinema was forbidden and now it is once again allowed. Saudi society has been the victim of these conflicts; it has been exploited and influenced by religious scholars, the film industry and production companies. In conflicts over cinema, both sides have argued that Saudi society supports their opinion when in fact, the Saudi people have not been allowed to voice their opinions on decisions related to the film industry.

The Saudi people have historically suffered from a lack of access to the arts and cinema, especially because of religious conflicts and the government's hesitant position. This led to the formation of an industry without systematic organisation or professional training that since the 1980s, has relied mostly on short films or documentaries. However, since 2005 and the beginning of King Abdullah's rule, change and reform has slowly begun. Many film distribution channels have been

established, including theatres in cultural and literary centres. However, a major obstacle to the growth of the industry, especially the monetisation of films, has been the absence of copyright laws.

Copyright violations did not begin with films but with music. Music stores made unauthorised copies of albums and gave customers the option of buying the original or a copy with the same content. The copies sold at up to half the price, 10 riyals (2.60 USD) of the originals, 20 to 25 riyals (5.30 to 6.67 USD). This approach benefited consumers and was profitable for music stores (and later video stores) but not production companies. The Ministry of Culture and Information (later the Ministry of Media) did not monitor these stores or punish them to protect the property rights of artists and production companies. Such violations continued with VHS tapes and DVDs, until the advent of the Internet and faster internet speeds led Saudi consumers to switch to watching them online for free.

Copyright violations have long been a crime in many countries, but Saudi Arabia was different. Two factors explain the difference. First, the Basic Law of Governance stipulates that the country's constitution is the Qur'an and the Sunnah. Therefore, government regulations and laws cannot conflict with Islamic law as interpreted by religious scholars. Religious scholars, including all of the country's grand muftis have considered films forbidden. Therefore, the government could not regulate or protect the copyrights of something that is forbidden (Khalejia, 2014). There are many examples of similar issues in Saudi Arabia. The most prominent example is religious scholars' opposition to laws against sexual harassment because they believe that the mixing of the genders is forbidden. A law against sexual harassment would suggest that gender mixing is normal and permitted and implicitly allow it (Khalejia, 2014).

Second, the oil boom has led Saudis to rely on the government for support and services, either for free or at reduced prices. For example, Saudi citizens are accustomed to free entry to festivals and recreational activities. Attendance is free for most cultural and literary activities, and film screenings at the literary club in Al-Ahsa (discussed in detail in Chapter 4) and entry to the first and second editions of the Saudi Film Festival were free. Thus, Saudi citizens became accustomed to attending cultural, artistic, media and sports events for free because of government support.

These factors indicate a lack of awareness of the importance of copyright laws by both the government and film lovers. In 2018, the General Commission for Audiovisual Media (GCAM) issued the Executive Regulations for Audiovisual Media, which include strong support for content producers and copyrights, but these regulations were not implemented. Instead a royal order established a body to protect intellectual property, as the lack of property rights protection has affected not only films and music but many other creative industries. The regulation establishing the Saudi Authority for Intellectual Property, which allowed it to form a board of directors and operate, was issued in May 2018. This new government agency gradually began to protect all forms of intellectual property, including films. In June 2020, it closed 231 websites and released a press statement stating that copyright violators will be fined up to 250,000 Saudi riyals (66,666 USD), their websites will be shutdown and/or their commercial license canceled and in some cases the owners will be imprisoned for up to six months (Saudi Press Agency, 2020). Copyright issues were a key problem in the monetisation of films and thus the development of the industry beyond independent and amateur short films. The Ministry of Culture and Information and GCAM failed to protect copyrights, but the Saudi Authority for

Intellectual Property has been taking a sterner approach to protecting copyrights since 2019.

This thesis discusses two distinct periods in the Saudi film industry's development. The first is from 2005 to 2015 when key industry figures, such as Prince Al-Walid bin Talal and Ahmed Almulla, led the industry. The most prominent achievements in this period were Rotana's production of three feature-length films (one each in 2006, 2008 and 2012) and the Al-Ahsa literary club's establishment of the Saudi Film Festival (SFF) in 2008.

After the death of King Abdullah in January 2015, the rule of King Salman began, and he followed the approach of his late brother in supporting openness but with more rapid progress. In April 2016, Deputy Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman announced Vision 2030, the country's development vision. However, it did not attract much public interest when it was launched. Since 1970, the government has launched five-year development plans to implement various important programmes to achieve goals such as diversifying the country's economy, improving the quality of life, supporting entertainment and achieving sustainability. None of the nine previous development plans were implemented; however, the country's tenth development plan, Vision 2030, is different. Whether it succeeds or not, this tenth vision is significant because it is being implemented and has specific performance indicators, allowing its progress to be observed and measured, unlike the previous versions, whose achievements were largely hypothetical.

Saudi Vision 2030 has three main axes: a vibrant society, a thriving economy and an ambitious nation. There are thirteen major programmes to achieve these three axes. Each of these programmes has hundreds of strategic goals, plans and initiatives. One of the thirteen major programmes is the Quality of Life Program, which aims to

support the growth of the film industry. This programme includes dozens of initiatives to support the development of the industry and provide financing for local films as well as training, education and other benefits related to filmmaking. In addition, the main document for Vision 2030 announced the state's position that it will support cinema as an industry, including providing financing and supporting filmmakers and workers. The state recently recognised (for the first time in its history) that cinema is a cultural and entertainment activity that requires support by government authorities, as the main document of Vision 2030 states. Two weeks after Vision 2030 was launched, the government signalled its commitment to supporting the film industry in particular and artistic and entertainment activities in general. The King issued orders to establish the General Authority for Culture (under which the SFC falls) and the General Entertainment Authority. After establishing those bodies, it worked with the Audiovisual Media Authority to develop regulations, initiatives and support for the film industry. Finally, the government lifted the cinema ban in December 2017. Many changes to the structure of the industry quickly followed, the most important of which was the defeat of those who sought to impede its progress. Hence, this thesis also explores a second period, 2015–2020, which was characterised by the leadership of governmental and non-profit cultural institutions such as SFC, GCAM and Ithra.

These shifts in Saudi policy, and the defeat of the religious scholars and their tough stance on cinema, are worth exploring. Scholars typically ignore the Saudi case, as the country has been sensitive about releasing information, making it difficult to obtain. In addition, most studies focus on cinema in other countries in the region, such as Egypt, Lebanon and Morocco. Studies examining Saudi cinema tend to focus on a specific aspect of it such as a single film, for example, those that consider *Wadjda* (2012) such as Amrita Deb (2016), Doris Hambuch (2019), Marguerite La Caze

(2020) and Maud Ceuterick (2020). Therefore, this thesis makes a significant contribution to the literature as it is a comprehensive study of the industry and its structures. The transformations in Saudi Arabia regarding cinema in the last fifteen years require research attention to understand the many lessons that can contribute to the study of national cinemas and the cinema of small nations.

Research Questions, Aims and Objectives

The overall aims of this thesis are, first, to examine the development of the film industry in Saudi Arabia in the twenty-first century by providing a historical narrative. Second, it aims to examine Saudi cinema from the perspectives of the cinema of small nations and national cinema to illustrate the important roles of key industry figures in keeping the industry alive during the conflicts with the religious opposition from 2005 to 2015. Third, this study aims to examine the structures of the film industry in Saudi Arabia through the broader perspective of the government's interventions in the industry's development from 2015 to 2020.

The key objectives of this study are to explore and understand in greater detail the development of cinema in Saudi Arabia both financially and culturally, explore the religious conflict regarding cinema and filmmaking from 1979 until the cinema ban ended in December 2017 and gain insight into the important role the government's intervention played in the development of the Saudi film industry from 2015 to 2020.

Research Questions

Overall, this thesis addresses the question: What is meaningful about the Saudi film industry's development in the twenty-first century? To answer this question, two sub-questions are explored: (1) What roles did key industry figures play in the development of Saudi cinema from 2005 to 2015? and (2) How did the Saudi government's intervention contribute to the Saudi film industry from 2015 to 2020?

Research Methods

This study uses qualitative research methods, including semi-structured individual interviews as the primary research method and the analysis of government and industry materials and case studies of numerous institutions as secondary methods. The primary research method, individual interviews, is the most commonly used method for qualitative research (Mason, 2002). Rubin and Rubin (2011, p. 3) point out that "qualitative interviewing helps reconstruct events the researchers have never experienced". In this study, interviews are used to gain a general understanding of the film industry's development through an industry-oriented lens. Therefore, the interviews were with key industry figures, leading institutions and industry decision-makers. Interviews were conducted individually with the CEO of the SFC, the CEO of the SFF, the head of the Cinema Department at Ithra Centre and a leading actor from the Saudi feature film *Menahi* (2008). The four interviews were conducted in person in Saudi Arabia in early 2019 at the workplace of the entity each interviewee represents. The interview subjects were carefully chosen, as the main goal was to identify the persons who could provide the most information and who could best answer the relevant questions based on their knowledge and experience with the issues examined in this thesis.

Interviews have various advantages over other data collection methods. First, interview responses are first-hand information, so they lack the interpretation bias common in secondary data. For example, podcasts or documents may reflect biases, as they usually contain the author's opinions and reflect their personal interests. As interviews are private, the interviewer can assess the interviewee's emotions and non-verbal cues to understand their perceptions related to the topic. Also, interviews allow the interviewee to provide in-depth explanations, making interviews more appropriate for complex issues.

Interviews can also present various challenges, some of which were encountered in this research. First, qualitative interviews are time-consuming. The parties must coordinate their schedules and allocate time for the interview. It took more than six months to schedule and meet with the interviewees for this thesis. In addition, interviews can be tiresome, and subjects might not participate as expected. For example, the data collection process for this thesis included a field trip to GCAM headquarters. However, despite having previously agreed to participate, the GCAM CEO refused to be interviewed after a member of his team learned the types of questions that would be asked. Therefore, researchers must have alternative plans, lest the research fail. An interviewee might also provide misleading information or withhold information. In the case of GCAM, its leaders considered the discussion of film censorship and the associated politics too sensitive to discuss at the time of the scheduled interview in 2019.

Although the University of Nottingham's ethical standards for research were made known to the participants from GCAM, specifically that their responses would be kept confidential and not used for any purpose other than this research project, GCAM postponed the interviews. Permission to observe the Film Censorship

Committee reviewing films to license their screening in local theatres had been granted; however, that permission was withdrawn. This reluctance to speak on the record indicates that cinema, and policy surrounding it, remains a sensitive subject in Saudi Arabia, posing challenges not only for those involved in the industry and government but also for researchers.

The second method, accessing publicly available data such as news reports, articles, web sites and research on the Saudi film industry, provides the largest pool of data available about the Saudi film industry. Document analysis is a distinct approach to qualitative research, and documents can be obtained in many ways, such as from the internet, newspapers and magazines (Mason, 2002). This thesis uses two types of documents: official documents and media reports and recordings. Specifically, three official documents are analysed along with the most prestigious and trusted Saudi and international newspapers and magazines as well as podcasts and YouTube videos. Official documents regarding rules and policies for cinema, such as the Executive Regulations for Audiovisual Media, are essential to understanding how censorship law and film regulations affect the industry's development. The data in such documents provide important insight, and therefore, they are analysed alongside the Saudi Vision 2030 strategy.

The advantages of official documents make them suitable for this research. Most of the documents used are primary documents, which lack interpretation biases. The documents reviewed include those related to the Saudi Vision 2030 strategy and Quality of Life Program 2020. Such documents increase government transparency and allow the government's actions to be monitored through official reports. For instance, the Ministry of Culture issues an annual report on the cultural situation in Saudi Arabia that documents cultural events and achievements, including movie

theatre attendance numbers, the number of films screened, a list of Saudi feature and short films, etc. However, relying on official documents also presents various challenges. The government decides what information to give the public; therefore, researchers might not have access to vital information.

As this study examines a new research topic, there are few studies to draw from, primarily because of Saudi Arabia's 35-year cinema ban and the lack of academic degrees with film majors in Saudi universities. In addition, both non-profit and commercial publishing houses in Saudi Arabia have avoided cinema topics, and most significantly, the religious opposition to cinema and its portrayal of cinema as evil have limited research on the Saudi film industry. The comparatively limited amount of English-language research on Middle Eastern and Arab cinema in general reflect the lack of interest by English-language scholars and the publishers and institutions that support them. These factors have led to a lack of academic research on the Saudi film industry.

Before the government lifted the cinema ban in late 2017, there were only two studies that examined any topic related to Saudi cinema. When non-Saudi researchers study Middle Eastern or Arab cinema, many countries are discussed in great detail, but some countries, such as Saudi Arabia and Yemen, receive little or no attention. An important reason for scholars' lack of attention to Saudi cinema may be the absence of available information, the difficulty of obtaining what information there is or the difficulty of conducting research inside Saudi Arabia on any subject related to Saudi cinema. Therefore, finding studies dealing with the research topic of this thesis was a great challenge.

In contrast, there are abundant newspaper and trade magazine articles that document many of the significant events related to the Saudi film industry, and these

are used to explore the shape and structure of the Saudi film industry. Media documents “offer an excellent source of data”, and the data they provide are “extraordinarily valuable” for qualitative researchers (Braun et al., 2017, p. 119). Therefore, newspaper and trade magazine articles and television interviews on YouTube are the most appropriate alternative sources of information for this thesis. Media outlets have documented historical events in Saudi cinema that researchers neglected. Due to the lack of research attention before the reopening of cinemas in 2017, research on Saudi cinema is very limited. The media has covered the conflicts between religious scholars and the leaders of the Islamic Awakening on one side and production companies, such as Rotana, and film festival founders, such as Ahmed Al-Mulla, founder of the Saudi Film Festival, on the other. Consequently, the archives of local and international newspapers and television channels provide a rich source of information for this thesis.

Although these items fill much of the gap, using such sources may raise questions about reliability. Journalistic and non-journalistic sources do not always supply consistent, verifiable information. For example, there are conflicting reports in two major US newspapers about the events surrounding the film *Menahi*, which is discussed in Chapter 3. Therefore, using newspaper and magazine articles reduces the information gap but results in concerns about accuracy. To alleviate these concerns, emphasis was placed on verifying the information by looking for another source to confirm what was reported. This verification process extended the time required to conduct the research but helped to reduce the likelihood of citing inaccurate information.

Therefore, this approach, along with personal interviews, is the most appropriate method for obtaining information and exploring the structure of the industry to address the gap in the literature.

This study's third method is case study research. Case studies involve the assessment of a particular issue and the in-depth exploration of complex real-life situations. The advantage of the case study method makes it appropriate for this research. Specifically, case studies allow for in-depth analysis, which makes the research more thorough and intensive (Lindvall, 2007). However, the case study method is idiosyncratic. Each case is particular to its specific conditions; therefore, the findings may not be generalisable. Generalisability is a huge concern for researchers because of the possibility of bias (Yin, 2009). This thesis includes seven case studies, each related to the topic of a chapter, to explore the complexities and circumstances related to those topics. These cases are the most appropriate to answer the thesis questions.

Thesis Structure

This thesis is divided into seven chapters. The first chapter reviews academic literature relevant to the Saudi context. In addition, case studies related to national cinema and the cinema of small nations are presented. The chapter provides an analytical look at the features and conditions in which national cinemas, particularly the cinema of small nations, thrive and how those factors relate to Saudi Arabia. Through these concepts, the chapter provides a perspective through which to further explore and analyse the Saudi film industry.

The second chapter examines the history and development of Saudi cinema from the 1930s to 2005. Although the timeframe for this thesis begins in 2005, it is

important to understand the pre-2005 situation to understand the challenges and circumstances of cinema in Saudi Arabia. The beginning of the decline of cinema and religious opposition to it began in 1979 during Juhayman Al-Otaibi's occupation of the Grand Mosque in Mecca. Therefore, Saudi film history and development can be divided into two general eras: before 1979 and after 1979. Before 1979, the media and arts sector in the country had become more liberal and freer than ever, resulting in cinema flourishing, especially in Riyadh with its "cinema alley" movie theatres. There were also a wide range of exhibitions, including at embassies and in various public locations. In 1979, two events occurred that changed the course of the state, particularly its film and arts industries. First, the attack on Mecca changed the country's stance on the cinema, with religious leaders pushing for more conservative policies and decisions. Second, the Iranian Revolution increased the pressure on the Saudi government, resulting in a cinema ban and other restrictions on the arts.

As noted previously, to answer the research questions, the relevant timeframe is divided into two periods. The first is from 2005 to 2015, which the third and fourth chapters address, and it is distinguished by the influence of key individuals. The third chapter explores the roles of Rotana and its owner, Prince Al-Waleed bin Talal, in supporting the growth of the industry and in countering its opponents. The chapter provides an analysis of the opposition and Al-Waleed's use of his political and financial influence to counter it. During this period, Rotana produced three films, which is very few compared with the film industries of many countries in the region, but the conflicts in this era were different from those in other countries. This chapter argues that the case of *Keif al-Hal?* demonstrates the efforts made to advance Saudi cultural expression in a climate of censorship and social conservatism, explores the

significance of home video in fostering an emerging Saudi screen culture and further examines the conservative social attitudes of filmmakers and producers.

The fourth chapter also discusses the 2005–2015 period, dealing with the role of the SFF in supporting local filmmakers who had no other opportunity to present their films commercially. The chapter explores the festival's role as a gathering place and networking venue for filmmakers. It explores the evolution of the festival, its transformation from foreign film screenings to a competition and then to a festival that became a destination for local movie lovers to watch Saudi films, as the festival was the only screening venue in the country at that time. The chapter explores the festival's contribution not only to supporting filmmakers but also to developing publications on cinema topics that commercial and non-profit publishing houses avoided, supporting authors who write about cinema topics.

The second period is from 2015 to 2020. The fifth, sixth and seventh chapters deal with this period, which was characterised by the transformation from individuals leading and developing the industry to governmental institutions and non-profit cultural institutions doing so. Chapter 5 explores the role of the SFC in supporting the growth and development of the industry. The council develops and executes government policies related to logistical support and financing for Saudi and foreign films produced inside Saudi Arabia. Focusing on the council from its inception in March 2018 through the end of 2019, this chapter explores the major role the council plays by offering courses and training to Saudis and funding their films. It also explores the foreign film support system, which enables the council to promote Saudi Arabia and its heritage areas, consistent with the country's vision to make Saudi Arabia an international tourist destination. This chapter focuses on the council from its inception in March 2018 through the end of 2019.

Following the discussion of the SFC as the designer of government policies to finance and support the film industry in Chapter 5, Chapter 6 considers GCAM's role in policymaking, regulations and legislation related to the licensing and oversight of the industry. The chapter provides an analysis of the regulatory history that led to the establishment of GCAM and then examines how GCAM has operated and led the industry. It also explores GCAM's two most significant activities: its regulations to support the development of the film industry and its contribution towards censorship policies. The chapter explores GCAM's role in supporting the industry and seeks to determine whether GCAM is an overall contributor to or constraint on the industry in relation to film censorship. The sixth chapter analyses the most recent version of the Executive Regulations for Audiovisual Media, which was issued in 2018, regarding regulations for film-industry sectors and film censorship in particular. The chapter examines the significant challenge GCAM faces balancing freedom of expression and openness with its obligation to consider and respect Saudi society's culture and traditions.

The seventh and final chapter explores the role of non-profit organisations in the development of the film industry in Saudi Arabia through a case study of the King Abdulaziz Center for World Culture, known as Ithra. This chapter investigates the relationship between non-profit organisations and the commercial film industry and how the private sector aims to address the public interest in Saudi Arabia as it relates to the film industry. The chapter provides an evaluation of Ithra's main programmes and compares them to Ithra's vision of supporting and developing the film industry in Saudi Arabia. The chapter also contains an analysis of Ithra's strategy and interventions with other government organisations to support the film industry's development.

This is the first PhD thesis in any language to focus on the film industry in Saudi Arabia. It examines the development of Saudi Arabia's film industry and the industry structures that can support the industry's growth. This enhanced understanding of the industry can serve to link government agencies, non-profit organisations and cultural institutions to support the industry's further development in the twenty-first century. This thesis provides an original historical account of Saudi cinema as well as a detailed analysis of its re-emergence as a key creative industry in a rapidly transforming Arab nation. Particularly given the lack of scholarship on Saudi cinema to date, it is essential to highlight the efforts to develop a film industry in Saudi Arabia, to champion worthwhile industry and government practices, and to advocate for practices and policies that allow creativity and local expression to flourish.

Chapter 1: Cinema of Small Nations

This chapter is a critical review of the academic literature relevant to the cinema of small nations and national cinema. This analysis primarily focuses on the concept of the cinema of small nations to provide insights into the features and conditions of small-nation cinema and small cinema and their relevance to the Saudi Arabian context. This chapter also discusses film festivals, film councils and censorship to provide an overall context in which to better understand Saudi cinema. Next, this chapter provides a general overview of national cinema and the relationship between small-nation cinema, national cinema and Saudi Arabian cinema. This overview provides critical knowledge concerning the research topic and creates the foundation of this study. This chapter analytically considers the features and conditions in which national cinemas, particularly the cinema of small nations, thrive and how those factors relate to Saudi Arabia.

The Cinema of Small Nations: Features and Conditions

The persistence of national film culture cannot be ignored. Dudley Andrew (2004) argues that contextualising films in terms of nationality is a dominant factor in the world of cinema, and thus film studies must acknowledge the national element to critically analyse and understand films. For instance, film festivals and the films entered in them have a national element. The identification of a film by country shows that differences in nationality result in differences in films. It is, therefore, necessary to examine films while considering their country of origin to better understand them. Duncan Petrie and Mette Hjort (2007) support the claims made by Andrew (2004) regarding the persistence of the national element in film studies by suggesting that the

consideration of a film's origin country creates a relational aspect that enhances the understanding of films.

However, Petrie and Hjort (2007) acknowledge the globalisation of the film industry, and they argue that the consideration of country in film studies is mainly used to understand relational phenomena that help illustrate cross-cultural trends, such as cinema themes. Small-nation cinema is thus a relational phenomenon that aids the understanding of films. Petrie and Hjort further argue that most small nations are still affected by the legacy of colonial rule, and thus their perspectives on several social, economic and political issues are likely to differ from the perspectives of Western nations (Petrie and Hjort, 2007). The concept of small-nation cinema is, therefore, an important analytical tool for cinema studies because it enables insights into how national, regional and global factors interact and compete in the cinematic sphere.

Although the concept of the cinema of small nations is generally accepted as an important relational phenomenon in the study of films, the definition of what constitutes a small nation remains problematic. The definition is ever-changing, and scholars do not agree on a single definition (Bacchus, 2008). Mohammed Kazim Bacchus notes that a persistent challenge is determining the level of population that should serve as the basis for defining a country as a small nation. According to Bacchus, small nations are those with populations less than three million. However, some countries with larger populations share characteristics with these nations. Bacchus goes on to argue that population alone is not a valid basis for defining small nations. Factors such as the nation's governance and economic state can be used to define countries as small nations. Therefore, Bacchus attempts to define "small nation" in an economic context.

Ruth McElroy and Rebecca Williams (2011) propose population as the key defining factor of a small nation. Their definition is more relevant to this study because they focus on television and the celebrity culture in a nation. They consider Wales a small nation even though it is economically more advanced than a country such as Ivory Coast with a much larger population. Their definition of “small nation” is, therefore, mainly based on a country’s population and its global cultural influence. However, Adams (2004) defines a small nation from the perspective of political influence. Adams considers small nations to be those countries with minimal geopolitical influence. These definitions show that a singular definition of “small nation” has not been established because of various contextual factors. The need for context means that the sphere of film requires its own definition of “small nation” (Adams, 2004). A small nation in terms of population is not necessarily small in terms of GDP per capita.

According to Staiger Bordwell and Thompson (2003), small nations in the context of films are those countries that produce a small number of films each year compared with countries that produce many films. Bordwell and Thompson further claim that many films produced in small nations are shot on location as opposed to being filmed in a studio. They also state that filmmakers from small nations typically strive to differentiate their films from those produced in large nations. To achieve this objective, they tend to create storylines that borrow from national history or literature. Bordwell and Thompson claim that the practice of making low-budget films that focus on national issues and exploit picturesque landscapes within a country is a persistent trait in the cinema of small nations. Bordwell and Thompson’s definition of a small nation is significantly different from the definition in the socioeconomic or political contexts. Bordwell and Thompson, however, suggest that it is necessary to

include economic aspects in the definition of “small nation” in the film context because the audience matters. National economic resources are considered in Chapters 5 and 6 in which the SFC’s mission of creating an economic system to develop the film industry in Saudi Arabia is discussed.

The use of the term “small nation” in film studies is not aimed at belittling countries that are regarded as such. According to Petrie and Hjort (2007), the categorisation of some countries as small and others as large is meant to identify the challenges and injustices faced by the small nations and to propose mechanisms through which these challenges can be addressed.

The various definitions of “small nation” used in film studies show that it is important to understand the features and conditions of small-nation cinemas to differentiate them from more established film industries. According to Bordwell and Thompson (2003) small-nation films are mainly made for a national or local audience. For instance, Saudi Arabian films do not have a global impact comparable to that of films produced in the US or the UK. Small-nation films are inspired by national histories and landscapes and, therefore, these films are supposed to be of particular interest within a nation.

David Martin-Jones and María Soledad Montañez (2013), however, also introduce the aspect of viewership in relation to national population. They argue that the films produced in small nations are viewed by only a small portion of the population as most of the audience watch global cinema. Hjort and Mackenzie (2005) also regard viewership as a key defining feature of small-nation cinema. They claim that small-nation films are generally characterised by a low level of viewership and are limited to local consumption.

Martin-Jones and Montañez (2013) argue that some nations' film producers have attempted to shed the "small nation" tag by engaging in the erasure of their backgrounds. As a result, these films have greater international appeal and an expanded viewership base. In the Saudi context, the producers of the Saudi feature film *Shoot* (2018) sought to erase much of their cultural and religious backgrounds in the film. The film portrays a love story, but it is narrated and filmed using the Western open concept of lifestyle, not a Saudi lifestyle. The family life of the film's hero is Westernised, and the language is mostly English, although some scenes are in Arabic. Such practices highlight the complex interaction between a film's production and its reception.

Although the number of films produced in a single year in a country can define the size of a nation's film industry, Andrew (2004) argues that numbers might not always tell the full story. He suggests that a country's film industry could produce hundreds of films in a year, but the industry would still be regarded as small, and the films categorised as small-nation cinema. Andrew suggests that the concerted efforts of the state and various stakeholders to support a country's film industry can influence the global recognition of the films produced. According to Andrew (2004), a country that produces ten widely recognised films in a year can be considered a large country in relation to the film industry compared with a country that produces hundreds of films a year that have only local viewership. The transnational impacts of the films produced in a country determine whether those films will be treated as small-nation films (Andrew, 2004).

Censorship is also a key feature of small-nation cinema, especially in democracies where the contents of films in terms of storyline are not restricted. Petrie and Hjort (2007) argue that the cultural policies of a country can negatively affect the

development and success of the film industry and, therefore, render it small.

Raminder Kaur and William Mazzarella (2009) support this claim by suggesting that cultural regulation limits the ability of a country's film industry to grow and compete at the international level. Ilan Peleg (1993, p 4) defines film censorship as "the systematic control of content by a government through various means". The important points are that the government oversees the censorship and that the censorship controls content. In the case of Saudi Arabia, the General Commission for Audiovisual Media (GCAM) are responsible for film regulation, which includes censorship. Censorship limits both the types of films that can be made and the types of films (including foreign films) that can be shown in theatres. The role of censorship in the Saudi film industry's development is addressed in Chapter 6.

These features and conditions of small-nation cinema show that "small nation" in the context of cinema is not merely defined by a country's population. Various factors determine whether the films produced in a particular country are categorised as small-nation cinema. Most small-nation cinemas, however, lack state support and must partner with international companies to obtain funding for production. Martin-Jones and Montañez (2013) suggest that the organisation of successful film festivals by the state can play an important role in the development of a country's film industry and open it up to a global audience.

Saudi Arabia as a Small Nation in the Global Film Industry

Saudi Arabia is not a small nation when defined by population, geographic scale or the size of its economy. According to government statistics, the population of Saudi Arabia currently stands at about 32.94 million (General Authority for Statistics, 2018). Based on the definition of "small nation" provided by Bacchus (2008), the

country should be regarded as a large nation because its population significantly exceeds three million. Saudi Arabia is a large country not only in terms of population but also in terms of land mass. Saudi Arabia is approximately 2.15 million km², and it has a strong economy that largely relies on oil exports. Saudi Arabia is a member of the G20, and it has the largest economy in the Arab world. Saudi Arabia is the largest oil exporter in the world, and this has given it both economic and political influence (Ellyatt, 2018). According to the definition of “small nation” provided by Adams (2004), Saudi Arabia cannot be regarded as a small nation because of its economic and political influence.

Compared with its television industry, Saudi Arabia’s cinema has struggled and, in many respects, failed to grow since Aramco (the Saudi Arabian Oil Company) first introduced cinema to Saudis in the late 1930s. According to Tyler McCarthy (2018), the first contemporary public film screening was the screening of *The Emoji Movie* (2017) in December 2017. In April 2018, the country opened its first purpose-built film theatre in more than 35 years for the screening of the Marvel superhero film *Black Panther* (2018). A very small film industry is a key defining feature of small-nation cinema (Hjort and Mackenzie, 2005). Saudi Arabia has shut itself out of the global film industry as it produces few films each year and as a result, has limited viewership. Hjort and Mackenzie (2005) and Bordwell and Thompson (2003) consider low viewership as a factor that defines a country as a small nation in the film industry context. In the case of Saudi Arabia, there has been no viewership because cinema was banned for almost 40 years. The relatively recent reopening of cinemas offers hope for the Saudi film industry because it is likely to inspire the industry’s development.

Although the Saudi government has lifted the cinema ban, the country's film industry still operates in a highly regulated environment. Before and after lifting the cinema ban, the government conducted several test screenings to determine whether it was the right move. For instance, four months before the Saudi government lifted the cinema ban, a non-profit foundation of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, known as MiSK, screened *Bilal* (2015) at Hakaya theatre in Riyadh city for four days in August 2017. In an interview with Arab News, Nada Al-Tuwaijri the MiSK media department manager announced that Hakaya theatre will be used for the first time in the kingdom's history to display a feature film (Hameed, 2017). Al-Tuwaijri said that Hakaya theatre had been used several times before to show local short films and plays but not a feature film (Hameed, 2017). Following the lifting of the cinema ban, the authorities screened animated films for families and children, such as *The Emoji Movie* (2017) and *Captain Underpants* (2017), in a state-run cultural centre in Jeddah city. The authorities provided a red carpet and popcorn machine to complete the movie-going experience. Amr Nabil (2018) argues that this is an example of the high level of control exercised over the film industry by the Saudi government. Nabil further states that religious hardliners played an important role in shutting down cinemas because they view the film industry as promoting secularity. Religion has a pivotal role in Saudi Arabian society, and therefore, it significantly influences government policies. Al-Atawneh (2009) argues that Saudi Arabia is a theocracy to an extent because of the influence of religion on state matters. Censorship is, therefore, common in the country to ensure that film content does not violate religious beliefs and practices. Saudi Arabia's film industry can expand even if the government does not allow filmmakers complete freedom. Although the extensive censorship may not

conflict with the government's goal of developing the industry, it may sideline many filmmakers, potential filmmakers, certain topics and stories.

The lack of state support for Saudi cinema also confines the country's film industry to the cinema of small nations category. Hjort and Mackenzie (2005) suggest that in small-nation cinema, filmmakers are not afforded meaningful support by the state compared with other nations in which film policies are supportive. The Saudi government halted the development of its film industry by banning movie theatres in the country, leading to the transfer of creators and investors to television and film industries abroad, such as Egypt. This complicates the definition of a national cinema or Saudi Arabia as a small-cinema nation as its film industry has operated by proxy or as a satellite industry without local infrastructure. Although the ban has been lifted, screening films in the country is extensively a state-controlled affair. The small number of films produced in the country in the last three decades shows that the country's film industry has not received state support. From 2006 to 2016, Saudi filmmakers made five feature films without state support: *Keif al-Hal?* (2006), *Menahi* (2009), *Wadjda* (2012), *Bilal: A New Breed of Hero* (2015) and *Barakah Meets Barakah* (2016). All of these films were screened in cinemas around the world and shown in many film festivals. For instance, *Wadjda* was nominated for a BAFTA Award for Best Film Not in the English Language in 2014, and *Barakah Meets Barakah* won the Prize of the Ecumenical Jury and was nominated for Best First Feature at the Berlin International Film Festival in 2016.

The cinema of Saudi Arabia can also be categorised as small-nation cinema because local films might be produced for mostly local audiences. The few films produced in the country since the early 2000s have focused on storylines that relate to the history and culture of the country. For instance, *Wadjda*, is a Saudi Arabian drama

in Arabic. The film was exhibited at major film festivals such as Cannes and Venice. The use of the local language and a local cast places the film firmly in the small-nation cinema category. Martin-Jones and Montañez (2013) suggest that small-nation films are mainly characterised by their use of the local language and a local cast. Films intended to appeal to a global audience, however, tend to use English and shed some of the local culture. Montañez (2013) provides the Uruguayan film industry as an example of a film industry that has strived to achieve global appeal by masking its “Uruguayness”. Film industries that embrace their localness, however, continue to be viewed as small-nation cinema.

Saudi cinema is, therefore, the cinema of small nations because it meets many of the criteria that define small-nation cinema. The film industry essentially stopped when the cinema ban was imposed by the Saudi government more than 35 years ago. Movies are also extensively censored. The film industry does not receive state support, a factor that has contributed to the industry’s stagnation. The use of local casts and local storylines in Saudi films also show that the country’s film industry fits the definition of the cinema of small nations.

However, as part of Saudi Arabia’s economic and social reforms, as stated in Vision 2030, His Royal Highness Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman spearheaded the reopening and operation of commercial cinemas in the kingdom. The Ministry of Culture and Information announced the prince’s decision (Amah 2018). The kingdom plans to open more than 350 cinemas, which represents 2,500 screens, by 2030. From this, Saudi Arabia expects a net annual income of about 1 billion USD. Furthermore, the growth of the cinema sector is expected to create approximately 30,000 permanent and 130,000 temporary jobs by 2030. GCAM has developed close relations with exhibitors and distributors to fulfil the aspects of Vision 2030 related to cinemas. For

instance, in 2018, AMC Entertainment had plans to open three more screens at the King Abdullah Financial District (KAJD; Amah, 2018). To advance and grow Saudi Arabia's entertainment industry, AMC Entertainment has partnered with the Development and Investment Entertainment Company, which intends to invest approximately SAR10 billion in entertainment projects by 2030. These large investments compared with the smallness of the local industry will reform the country's film-industry infrastructure. In addition to creating tens of thousands of jobs, this growth will create new companies in highly specialised areas of the industry. Instead of a few companies dominating the industry and the production, distribution and exhibition sectors, there will be many companies, each specialising in a specific sector.

The Cinema of Small Nations as a Conceptual Framework for Saudi Arabia

Although small-nation cinemas rarely draw the attention of a global audience or big production houses, they play an important role in the film industry. Hjort (2011) argues that small cinemas matter because they are culturally upright and embrace a nation's traditions. Developed countries such as the UK and Australia have moved to enact laws that enhance sustainability in both the public and private sector. Preserving culture also requires sustainability and international conventions that may affect the film industry. The UK government, for instance, sought to ensure sustainability in the public sector after the 2005 World Summit on Sustainable Development challenged governments to ensure sustainable public procurement practices (Walker and Brammer 2009). The Paris Agreement on Climate Change further emphasised the need for governments to ensure sustainability in both the public and private sector. Hjort (2011) claims that Hollywood is one of the most environmentally unsustainable

film industries in the world. The author suggests that big-budget productions tend to damage the environment. Hjort, however, argues that small-nation cinemas do not destroy the environment. Nico Meissner (2009) supports the arguments made by Hjort (2011) concerning small cinemas and environmental sustainability. Meissner argues that independent and small budget films are environmentally sustainable because their production does not have a significant negative impact on the environment. The issue of environmental sustainability in filmmaking shows that small cinemas matter. Saudi Arabia faces many challenges regarding sustainability and the environment due to its dependence on the oil industry. Therefore, Saudi Arabia in its Vision 2030 announced plans to move away from an all-oil economy and to rely on other industries such as film, tourism, etc. If the film industry in Saudi Arabia expands successfully along with other cultural industries, in addition to reducing the reliance on the oil industry, the problems of sustainability will recede. The sustainability factor will be a catalyst for the Saudi government to provide more support to the film industry.

In the case of Saudi Arabia, the Saudi Vision 2030 document states that Saudi Arabia has a strategic location and that the kingdom will capitalise on the government's reserves of real estate by allocating prime areas within cities and along its coasts to tourist projects. The kingdom also aims to create attractions of the highest international standards, to improve visa issuance procedures for visitors and to prepare and develop its historical and heritage sites. The National Transformation Program 2020, which is part of Saudi Vision 2030, includes around eighteen initiatives to develop tourism in places such as Okaz, Al-Ula and Asir. The initiative to develop tourism in Okaz aims to create the first cultural tourist destination by developing the land, infrastructure and cultural sites. The tourism development initiative for Al-Ula aims to develop the world's largest open-air museum by

developing its infrastructure, enhancing historical sites and establishing relevant artisanal centres that will support the local community. The tourism development initiative for Asir aims to develop it as a tourism destination by capitalising on the region's geographical potential by developing its infrastructure and implementing several tourism projects such as the rehabilitation of forests, parks and reserves and establishing a tourist boulevard.

The cinemas of small nations also play an important role in highlighting the challenges small nations face. Martin-Jones and Montañez (2013) argue that a key defining feature of small-nation cinemas is their focus on local issues. Developing storylines that focus on local issues helps to bring these issues to the attention of a global audience. For instance, a Kenyan film about a lesbian couple was banned by the country's film classification board that claimed the film violated societal norms. That film, *Rafiki* (2018), received a lot of attention at the 2018 Cannes Film Festival because of the controversy it stirred. The reaction of Kenya's film classification board also called attention to Kenya's record on LGBTQ rights (Amah 2018). *Rafiki*, as a small-nation cinema film, played a key role in raising awareness about a social challenge in a small nation. Small-nation cinemas, therefore, matter because they draw attention to local challenges in a way that big-budget films do not. When big-budget films produced by large industries address social issues, they tend to consider multiple dimensions such as politics, marketing and attracting large audiences. Therefore, even if they discuss social issues, they are often not radical or blunt in their storytelling, unlike small-nation cinemas, which are often accused of telling stories and portraying pain without regard for, for example, political challenges. In the Saudi context, filmmakers can tell social stories in ways that large film industries cannot. One of the most important examples is *Wadjda*, in which director Haifaa Al-Mansour

was able to portray the social cruelty women experience in Saudi Arabia and the patriarchal practices against women that prevent even the youngest of them from riding a bicycle.

In addition to creating awareness about various challenges in small nations, the cinema of small nations also enables filmmakers in these nations to explore their creativity on significantly small budgets. According to Diane Grams and Michael Warr (2003), low-budget films and art projects enable creatives to pursue their interests while benefiting their neighbourhoods. These claims are supported by Ramon Lobato (2010), who argues that small-nation film industries have been able to thrive on low budgets by exporting their films to geographically or culturally adjacent countries without the financial backing of major production and distribution companies. Lobato suggests that this is possible mainly because of their low budgets. Small-nation cinemas, therefore, thrive in tough economic conditions because they rely on relatively small budgets due to the lack of government support.

Studies show that small cinema in Saudi Arabia can thrive under various conditions. The major conditions are state support, artistic leadership, collaboration between practitioners, film festivals and the balancing of the production and reception aspects of filmmaking. Saudi Arabia's film industry has struggled and nearly failed because theatres were banned for over 35 years. However, the kingdom is gradually allowing the operationalisation of the film industry. Saudi Arabia as a small nation in the film industry can benefit significantly from small cinema. As argued by Hussein (2010), the nation can produce its own films to provide counter-narratives to the dominant Western and Eurocentric discourses in big nation films. Hussein argues that Arabs and Arab nations have been wrongly portrayed in most Hollywood films. Small cinema, therefore, enables the country to challenge these narratives and tell its local

stories as its local filmmakers can be expected to approach local subjects with greater cultural familiarity than a foreign filmmaker would. Patrícia Vieira (2015) also suggests that postcolonialism plays a critical role in accurately presenting stories and discourses in the film and literature of small nations. Although Saudi Arabia did not experience colonialism, small cinema in Saudi Arabia can help the country tell its stories without the discourse being controlled by European or American filmmakers.

Saudi Arabia can also use the cinema to open its boundaries to the outside world. Martin-Jones and Montañez (2013) suggest that small-nation cinema plays an important role in presenting local stories. The nation can, therefore, draw the interest of international visitors by making local films that also serve as documentaries about the country. Saudi Arabia mostly attracts religious tourists (Henderson, 2011). The country could, however, attract a broad range of tourists by showcasing the country's various attractions in films. Small-nation cinemas can, therefore, benefit a country's tourism industry by showing a side of the nation not often shown in Hollywood films. For instance, Medâin Sâlih in Saudi Arabia (300 km from Jeddah) has great historical aspects, and its civilization dates to 200 BC. It features fascinating rocky carvings, and its infrastructure is largely unchanged. It occupies a strategic position on the ancient trade route linking southern Arabia, Mesopotamia, the Levant and Egypt. It was the land of Thamud in the Wadi Al Qura, "Valley of Villages", lying between Medina and Tabuk. Madâin Sâlih is also known as Al-Hijr. The site is mentioned in the Torah (the Old Testament) of the Holy Bible and in the Holy Quran with reference to the Prophet Saleh (PBUH; Saudi Commission for Tourism and National Heritage 2014).

Small-nation cinemas can also highlight various social and political challenges that countries such as Saudi Arabia face and in the process, attract international

attention to these challenges to create positive change. As suggested by Martin-Jones and Montañez (2013), small-nation cinemas can focus on local issues and draw both national and international attention to these issues to create social value and positive change. Naomi Sakr (2008) argues that media can engage in reductionism and the inaccurate representation of issues affecting Saudi Arabian society. Western films continue to show a stereotyped vision of the Arab world. The comparatively recent Saudi-set film *A Hologram for the King* (Tom Tykwer, 2016), for example, starring Tom Hanks, portrays Saudi culture as incomprehensible to the point of absurdity. However, small-nation cinema, through local filmmakers, can offer better cultural representations. Sakr argues that the position of women in Saudi society is often misrepresented and that local films can function as correctives to such misrepresentations. Though Sakr does not discuss *Wadjda* specifically, the film exemplifies the complexity of representation that small-nation cinema can offer. In an interview with the press, the film's director said she aimed to present an accurate portrayal of women's situation in Saudi Arabia by creating believable characters (Hannah, 2013). The film shows the diverse daily challenges faced by Saudi women of all ages and the unbalanced power dynamics between women and men (Hannah, 2013).

Saudi Arabia can, therefore, benefit from cinema in various ways. By embracing cinema, the country can enjoy improved growth in its tourism industry, overcome the stereotypes portrayed by Western films, create social value and explore solutions to political and social challenges in the country.

The Conditions under which Small Cinema Can Thrive in Saudi Arabia

It is important to examine the conditions under which cinema can succeed, and there are many that will allow small-nation cinema to thrive. One of the key conditions is political, as argued by Bordwell and Thompson (2003). State support plays a critical role in the development of a small nation's film industry. Without government policies aimed at promoting the local film industry, small-nation cinema cannot thrive. Kaur and Mazarella (2009, p. 13) suggest that government policies, such as extensive cultural regulation, can limit the growth of small cinema in a country. In Saudi Arabia for instance, the film industry is entirely regulated by the state. The regulations limit the ways in which filmmakers can explore their creativity and make films. Filmmakers in countries where such conditions exist often leave to find opportunities in more liberal countries. Hjort (2011) argues that as such filmmakers exit the local film industry, they take their talent and experience with them, which in turn hinders the industry's growth. The near absence of cinema in Saudi Arabia has thus been a key motivation for talented local filmmakers to exit the scene. The country only allowed cinema again in 2018 after more than 35 years, as previously noted. With government support, small cinema could thrive in Saudi Arabia.

Saudi Arabian cinema can also thrive if there is artistic leadership. According to Hjort (2011), artistic leadership in a country provides direction for a small film industry and rallies stakeholders around common objectives. Leadership can galvanise creatives to push for better policies that favour the development of the local film industry. Without effective artistic leadership, small cinema in Saudi Arabia cannot thrive. Hjort mentions that closely related to artistic leadership as a success factor for small cinema is the avoidance of the "winner-takes-all" mentality. Successful small-nation filmmakers should not hoard success but instead mentor and provide opportunities for other creatives and filmmakers in the industry. Hjort

suggests that collaborative projects can help small cinemas thrive because such projects bring practitioners together and support the creation of films.

Small-nation film festivals can also support the development and growth of small-nation cinema. According to Martin-Jones and Montañez (2013), film festivals expose local films to a wider audience and can also attract international filmmakers to fund local projects. They further suggest that such festivals require state support to succeed. Hjort (2011) argues that the success of film festivals also depends on collaboration within the industry. Hjort argues that it is only through collaboration that small-nation cinema can thrive. In the case of Saudi Arabia, the stakeholders must come together and push for the visibility of the nation's film industry. They could also collaborate to organise film festivals that will attract international and local filmmakers to support the industry's growth. Such collaborations could also seek to create awareness concerning the local film industry to increase viewership. Hjort and Mackenzie (2005) suggest that viewership is an important factor in the development of the cinema of small nations. Without an audience, local films cannot thrive because they are mainly made for the consumption of local viewers. Film practitioners in Saudi Arabia could collaborate to increase viewership and public awareness regarding the industry. With cinemas reopening, the country's small cinema can thrive. However, despite the need to stick to the local narrative, Martin-Jones and Montañez (2013) suggest that local filmmakers should consider the importance of balancing production and reception. They argue that the commercial aspect of filmmaking cannot be ignored if a successful small-nation film industry is to be realised. Filmmakers in small nations require funds to make films and dependence on state and donor funding is not sustainable.

Small cinema in Saudi Arabia could thrive if filmmakers and creatives take a pragmatic approach to problem-solving instead of adopting a defeatist attitude. According to Hjort (2011), small-nation cinemas face several challenges that hinder the development of local film industries. However, a creative approach to overcoming constraints will help small-nation filmmakers to achieve success even in a tough operating environment. Although Hjort does not specifically address autonomy and oversight, practitioners in small nations generally operate in an environment that is significantly affected by factors beyond their control.

Film Festivals

Film festivals were established in the twentieth century, and after World War II they gained great popularity and were important in the renaissance of film industries in many countries such as Italy, France and the United Kingdom. The Venice International Film Festival in 1931, Cannes Film Festival 1946, Edinburgh International Film Festival 1947, Berlin International Film Festival 1951 and London Film Festival 1953 all contributed significantly to the film industries in their respective countries. These early European festivals were government-supported events (Stevens, 2016). By the late twentieth century, film festivals had spread to most countries of the world with the exception of a few countries that prohibited cinema, such as Saudi Arabia, Oman and Qatar. Film festivals have been created for many reasons such as to serve as “political agendas as a way of promoting nationalistic sentiments as well as to help boost the country’s film industry and tourism” (Bryan, 2018). However, not only did the Saudi Arabian government in the twentieth century not support film festivals or benefit from them but the country fought the arts in general and since 1979, cinema in particular.

Film festivals play a significant role in the industry. As Mark Peranson (2008, p. 24) notes, “the best thing about film festivals is that they provide the opportunity for audiences to see films that, otherwise, they cannot see”. Film festivals allow films without strong commercial potential to flourish. Peranson argues that film festivals “exist as an alternative distribution network” and asserts that the major goal of film festivals is to provide “audiences with opportunities to enjoy commercially unviable films projected in a communal space” (2008, p. 23). Therefore, film festivals contribute to film industry development and serve as a venue for art film lovers.

Film festivals are important to the industry because “by presenting brand new films, a festival is able to shape the perception of the contemporary cinema landscape” (Di Chiara and Re, 2011, p. 134). Hence the importance of the film selection process and programming. Programming is an important factor in attracting an audience that wants to explore new films, with a focus on local films. Since 1971, festival programming has been considered “the core business of film festivals worldwide” and rather than favouring commercial box office success, programming tends to focus on cultural value (De Valck, 2007, p. 167). In Saudi Arabia, film festivals became an alternative way to screen films because of the ban on commercial movie theatres.

Programming plays a significant and critical role in the success of film festivals. Peter Bosma (2015, p. 71) observes that programming is “the ‘product’ of a film festival”. Programming usually focuses on two concepts: “passion ... and political sensibility (representing both large social movements or liberation struggles and personal issues that remained underrepresented among the mainstream, such as those relating to gender, race, and ethnicity)” (De Valck, 2007, p. 167). Marijke De Valck asserts that in the area of programming, passion and political sensibility

“rejuvenated the film festival” (2007, p. 174). These two elements are the basis of programming’s critical role in the success of festivals because enthusiasm (passion) contributes to the discovery of new talent and political sensibility produces stories that contribute to civil rights, freedom and human rights.

Although film festivals contribute to not only the development of the industry but the rebuilding of national identities and cultural and political expression, they face financial threats. According to Hannah McGill, “the sources of private and public funding on which film festivals depend are on undeniably shaky ground in most territories” (2011, p. 282). McGill also claims that many film festivals “are not designed to make a profit at all” (2011, p. 282). The funding and sustainability issues that face most film festivals worldwide are also a major threat to the Saudi Film Festival. This is discussed in more detail in Chapter 4.

Many festivals in the UK counted on the support of the British Film Council from 2000 to 2010, and they suffered after the council’s abolition. The Edinburgh International Film Festival, which has a venerable and esteemed reputation internationally, and many other small film festivals in the UK have since lacked a clear source of support (McGill, 2011). In Saudi Arabia, the SFF moved from operating without resources in its first two editions to depending on non-sustainable resources, with its model remaining unchanged.

After several decades, festivals have evolved their own models. Peranson (2008) points out that there are “two ideal models of film festivals”: a business festival and an audience festival. The majority of film festivals fall into one of these two models or are a combination of the two. Audience festivals are characterised by a low budget, limited corporate sponsorship, little market/business presence, small staff, no investment in films (no films funded) and most of the films are also screened at

other festivals or solicited. In contrast, business festivals feature the opposite characteristics (Peranson, 2008). However, Peranson (2008, p. 33) claims that “many festivals are in fact ill-equipped to handle the change that’s happening in the world because they are either resistant to change or if they do change ... the drive for change comes either from within or in response to another festival’s expansion”. In Saudi Arabia, the resistance to developing the SFF’s model might affect its ability to remain a significant cinematic event in the country because there are new entities, supported by the government, that are supporting the film industry. One example is the RedSeaFF, which was established as a non-profit organisation funded by the Ministry of Culture to implement one element of Saudi Vision 2030.

Film Councils and Soft Power

As a country’s film industry develops, an urgent need arises for a single body to organise and develop it. Film councils are one such solution (Kelly, 2016). Empowering and supporting filmmakers is an aim for film councils around the world. For instance, the aims of the UK Film Council (UKFC, 2008, p. 1), which was established in 2000 but later dissolved with the BFI assuming its role in 2011, were “encouraging the development of new talent, skills, and creative and technological innovation in UK film” and “helping the UK film industry compete successfully in the domestic and global marketplace”. Film councils are a unified approach to developing talent and supporting the industry to be competitive, rather than a multiplicity of government organisations with various objectives.

Production companies and individual filmmakers in many countries suffer from a lack of cooperation from other government organisations. Helen Blair (2001, p. 149) confirms that “outside the sector, the film industry is little understood in

industrial terms although it is seen to be of great symbolic import”. Blair adds that “both academic and national and international policymakers, view the forms of organisation evident in the film industry as typifying those emerging in the ‘information economy’ of the twenty-first century”. Saudi Arabia’s industry faces obstacles specific to the country’s legislative, economic and cultural characteristics as well as challenges similar to those universally faced by film industries as they engage with government and other businesses. As such, Saudi Arabia’s film industry is similar to those of other nations. Therefore, the presence of a film council in Saudi Arabia helps to fill this void and serves as a link between government agencies and between production companies and filmmakers, as Baltyuor (2019) stated. This is discussed in more detail in Chapter 5.

Although film councils are concerned with training and developing talent, the benefit of academic training for prospective contributors to the industry has been widely debated. In 2003 in the United Kingdom, Skillset and the UKFC announced a development strategy for the UK film industry. The new training strategy, entitled *A Bigger Future*, noted that despite a large increase in academic film courses, “only a few of these courses deliver the right mix of vocational skills which equip students to enter the industry” (UKFC, 2003, p. 17). Thus, the gap between education and professional practice is prominent and one of the challenges that film councils face.

Film councils help filmmakers to confront exhibition obstacles and to market and exhibit globally. Film marketing is important for attracting consumers, and it is defined as “any activity that assists a film in reaching its target audience at any time throughout its life” (Durie et al., 2000, p. 5). During the 71st Cannes Film Festival in 2018, Saudi Arabia participated for the first time through the Council. The Council had a large pavilion at the Marché du Film. The Council invited all known filmmakers

in Saudi Arabia and launched a feature film, *Joud* (2018), and ten short films. *Joud* “draws on a pre-Islamic form of poetry called the Qasida” and was produced by Ithra (Vivarelli, 2018). Eight of the ten short films were produced by filmmakers and two were produced by Ithra. The Council arranged meetings between filmmakers and production companies interested in the Saudi market. The marketing provided by the Council was only for exhibition although the marketing process typically “begins at the new product development stage and continues through the formation of the project ideas, through production and into distribution and exhibition” (Kerrigan, 2010, p. 9–10). However, the exhibition step is significant because Saudi filmmakers struggle with it as they lack experience with international distributors and exhibitors.

Another reason behind the creation of film councils in countries such as Saudi Arabia has been film’s potential as a soft power tool for the government. Soft power “is the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments” (Nye, 2004, p. 12). Joseph Nye suggests three main sources for a country’s soft power: “the attractiveness of a country’s culture, political ideals, and policies” (p. 12). The SFC, therefore, aims to utilise Saudi culture as soft power for Saudi Arabia globally through films (Baltyuor, 2019) because “pictures often convey values more powerfully than words” (Nye, 2004, p. 72). Using this approach as a soft power tool in Saudi Arabia’s foreign policy, the SFC can enhance the kingdom’s image internationally via the film industry. Emrah Aydemir (2017) notes that a country could achieve its desired results by influencing other countries to follow and admire it as well as “envy the model constituted, and reach the level of its welfare and poverty” (Aydemir, 2017, p. 79). By portraying a national story, image or culture that is admirable to other countries through its films such as *Born a King* (2019), Saudi Arabia tries to influence international relations. Imed Ben Labidi (2019) argues that

the work of Muslim and Arab filmmakers rarely reaches a global audience. To influence other countries through its portrayal of Saudi national stories or culture, the Council must first garner a global audience for the Saudi film industry.

Although some film councils use the film industry as a soft power tool for the government, the close monitoring and censorship of context could jeopardise the industry's potential in this regard. Yang (2016), in an article exploring the use of Chinese cinema as a soft power tool, argued that in Chinese society, the fundamental function of cinema as a propaganda tool, along with the wider censorship system, is largely unchanged. According to Yang, as a result of policy configurations, there is tension between “the state’s attraction to censorship” and “the ‘attraction’ of soft power” (p. 71). Consequently, as Dal Yong Jin (2011) notes in relation to cultural policies and situations, there is little room for films to contribute to soft power in any meaningful way. As discussed in Chapter 5, the SFC faces a similar situation. Despite the government’s commitment to empowering and exploiting the film industry as a soft power tool among its people and in foreign policy, there are still strict freedom of expression regulations and context censorship.

The use of soft power to promote ideas and political change is not only linked to governments but also to terrorist organisations. The discussion of terrorists’ use of mass media, especially Al Jazeera, and the use of empathy with the public, as mentioned previously, is related to soft power. Nye (2004, p. 51) points out that “terrorism depends crucially on soft power for its ultimate victory ... [and] It depends on its ability to attract support from the crowd at least as much as its ability to destroy the enemy’s will to fight”. Nye confirms that “terrorists also depend on getting their messages out quickly to a broad audience through mass media and the internet” (p. 50). Nye’s evidence for this claim is “the widespread dissemination of bin Laden’s

television interviews and videotapes after September 11” (p. 51). Unfortunately, the use of soft power with religious empathy has helped al-Qaeda and other terrorist organisations expand and attract people’s attention for irrational reasons. Therefore, entertainment in general, and cinema in particular, can also be a powerful way to combat domestic extremism.

Film councils are interested in supporting tourism because filming cultural stories in picturesque local landscapes, particularly in a small cinema nation, is linked to attracting tourists. Audience visits to film locations are important due to their positive effect as “a fast-growing form of tourism with increasing economic importance” (Couldry, 1998, p. 94). Nick Couldry indicates that film tourism “provides not only short-term employment and publicity for the chosen location but also, some argue, long-term tourism” (p. 94). In addition, film tourism takes many forms and has characteristics that can be beneficial to a country. As described by Busby and Klug in Sine Heitmann’s article, “a film location can be an attraction in its own right ... movie tourism can be part of a main holiday, movie tourism can occur as the main purpose out of special interest, movie tourism packages can be created by the private sector, [and] travel programmes” (Heitmann, 2010, p. 33).

Despite the importance of film councils, they face the challenge of sustainable financing. Councils could attain long-term sustainable funding through a broadcaster’s obligatory investment, public funds, private financing and fiscal incentives. Julio Talavera Milla, Gilles Fontaine and Martin Kanzler (2016) propose solutions to film councils’ financial problems based on their examination of the funding of the film and audiovisual sectors in Europe. In their report, Milla et al. outline the public support mechanisms in place to support the audiovisual and film sectors. These mechanisms are public funds, obligatory broadcaster investment, fiscal

incentives and collateral facilities to secure access to private financing (p. 10). Gillian Doyle and associates (2015) analyse the UKFC's success and suggest that it is an example of "public support for film". Although their report is about European sectors, similar mechanisms custom-designed for Saudi audiovisual sectors could be implemented by the SFC to ensure the sustainability of its funding.

Censorship

In the Western world, censorship has been extensively studied and discussed, particularly since the 1980s (Jansen, 1988; Wood, 1997; Flew, 1998; Post, Post and Roth, eds., 1998); however, in the Gulf States, the situation is different. The academic debate on the censorship of media activities in the Gulf States, especially in Saudi Arabia, is very limited because it is a sensitive and unpopular topic unless the discussion is pro-censorship. Internationally, censorship is a sensitive topic because it is viewed as the suppression of people's freedom. Nicole Moore claims that "censorship is generally understood to be the official suppression or prohibition of forms of expression" (Moore, 2013). Critics in Saudi Arabia cannot explicitly describe censorship as the suppression of freedom while they are trying to persuade the government to relax its censorship. Describing censorship in the Gulf States as the suppression of freedom is considered an insult to policymakers and viewed as opposition to the government. Religious scholars support censorship and reject cinema entirely, yet they insist that Islamic law guarantees freedom of expression to individuals. Consequently, some Saudi critics use mild criticism that does not insult policymakers and avoid the appearance of opposing the government. This is discussed in more detail in Chapter 6.

Censorship is carried out by government agencies, with or without pressure from religious organisations or organisations concerned about children and family rights. Film censorship in general is defined as “the systematic control of content by a government through various means” (Peleg and Wozniuk, 2019, p. 4). The important points of this definition are that the government controls censorship and that censorship involves the oversight of content. According to Terry Flew, the term censorship “is something of an omnibus for a diverse range of legal and regulatory practices, applied to quite distinct materials in very different contexts” (Flew, 1998, p. 91). In Saudi Arabia, religious groups and society have had stronger influence than government agencies due to the Islamic Awakening, as discussed in Chapter 2. However, with Saudi Vision 2030, since 2016 the role of religious groups has diminished, especially regarding the censorship of media productions. As a result, the government now has more influence over censorship than religious and community groups.

Although anti-censorship groups in Saudi Arabia are not prominent, many international academics support anti-censorship perspectives. Richard Collins, who wrote the foreword for Frank Caso’s *Censorship*, claims that “everyone’s duty” is to oppose censorship and that anti-censorship is necessary to “obtain truthful information” to allow freedom of expression (Caso, 2008, pp. xii–xiii). This argument is from a Western perspective, as Western governments do not have much power over what their citizens can or cannot see. However, the situation in the Middle East is quite different. In Saudi Arabia, anti-censorship groups are not prominent but self-censorship is.

Self-censorship by Saudi filmmakers is a common practice that many adopt for various reasons. According to Philip Cook and Conrad Heilmann, self-censorship

“means that individuals internalise some aspects of the public censor and then censor themselves” and in some cases, it arises when “a public censor is either absent or irrelevant” (Cook and Heilmann, 2013, pp. 178–179). Many filmmakers believe that patriotism includes a duty to not criticise the government, religion or the royal family. Therefore, many filmmakers avoid any topic that might conflict with the Saudi regime or security. By their understanding, this means films and television series must avoid criticism and irony regarding the roles of traffic officers, firefighters, emergency forces and the security and intelligence services.

Although some filmmakers may engage in self-censorship out of patriotism, others may use self-censorship to avoid criticising the religious scholars, their practices or the general public, even if the criticism is aimed at raising awareness of defective practices or systems. Religious people may link any criticism, especially that in the media and films, to religion itself and claim that the film or television programme aims to undermine Islamic teachings. Regarding self-censorship, Jytte Klausen (2009, p. 16) points out that those who engage in self-censorship do so “out of respect for other people’s religious beliefs or from a desire not to hurt people’s feelings”. Undoubtedly, any discussion of religious practices or religion itself is considered a redline to most people in Saudi Arabia, and such discussion are considered offensive. Consequently, some filmmakers avoid any topic that might conflict with or criticise Islamic teachings, even though the government has become more lenient on films and television operas that criticise religious practices and religious extremism. Any discussion concerning religion is difficult and sensitive as criticising the practice of Islam is considered questioning Islam’s value.

Self-censorship is not always motivated by the filmmaker’s desires. Filmmakers may choose to avoid the risk of potential attacks from extremists by

exercising strict self-censorship despite their opposition to censorship. As Jytte Klausen stated, “self-censorship may be caused by a credible fear of retaliation and bodily harm” (Klausen, 2009, p. 16). Although governments may allow filmmakers to address sensitive issues, they cannot prevent angry reactions from viewers. Social media platforms are full of angry posts and comments that develop into full-blown campaigns, especially among Arab peoples. Therefore, some filmmakers may see self-censorship as a way to avoid such reactions, even if they have government support.

Overview of National Cinema

The discussion of the concepts of small-nation cinema, film festivals, film councils and censorship lead us to a similar term, “national cinema”. According to Hjort (2007), the term “national cinema” has been used to describe each nation and their specific originality regarding film. Few theories consider the concept of national cinema, regardless of its remarkable contribution to the globalisation of the film industry. Over the years, film has been used as a window for portraying the culture of a society.

However, the definition of national cinema has been debated among scholars. According to Martin-Jones (2013) there are several factors that determine whether a film can be classified in the national cinema category. If the financing for the film was provided by the parent country, the film is likely to be considered national cinema. Another determining factor is the language spoken in the film, the style of dress and the nationalities of the characters. The type of music and the setting of the film can also determine whether it falls in the national film category. Similarly, Petrie (2007) adds that to categorise a film as a national film, one must evaluate the industry structure, cultural transfers, market forces and the role of the government in its

making. These categories by Petrie are significant when defining Saudi Arabian national cinema.

Montañez (2013) also defines national cinema from a more theoretical perspective, referring to it as large groups of films with texts that carry great historical weight and coherence. Another element of national cinema is that it calls for an understanding of a nation's traditions or past. This contextual issue defines a film's content, narrative structure, medium, style, costumes, backgrounds, cinematography and characters. For instance, context also refers to the cultural background of a film's characters and that of the filmmakers.

Song Hwee Lim (2013) connects national cinema with the ancient art of storytelling. Ancient communities and tribes used storytelling as a way of unifying a nation or tribe. Literature has also been used for the same purpose. According to Andrew Higson (1989), written words played an important role in developing nationalism during pre-industrial times. Literature includes a variety of forms of storytelling, such as poetry, novels and short stories, and literature disseminates language within a country. Nations are also unified through language and ideologies. Mackenzie's (2005) premise is that the development of a film industry is the continuation of the tendency to combine national language and storytelling arts in an international platform to crystallise a country's unique identity far from its borders. Cinema therefore emphasises the ongoing importance of nationalist ideology. National cinema, as described by Mackenzie (2005), is dynamic and its nature is difficult to define.

According to Higson's (1997) stipulation, it is important to consider the concept of genre and its influence on nationality when trying to define national cinema. Although genre seems to complicate the discussion on national cinema, one

can simply argue that comedy is comedy, and romance and horror also have definite universal descriptions. The difference, however, lies in how the ideas are presented. Comedy, romance and horror films each portray specific cultural ideas and values. In the Saudi context, comedy plays a significant role in the transmission of cultural ideas because people tend to accept bold cultural ideas more readily through comedy than through other genres.

Genre therefore adds to the understanding of cinema and its relationship to nationality. Higson (1997) explains that a film's genre depends upon the filmmakers and the audience and emphasises that film genres were not created by organisations or critics, and they are not unchanging. Film genres are dynamic, and studios create them to cater to the changing demands of audiences. Therefore as tastes change and nations become more dynamic, film genres also change.

In considering the parallels between the values that define genres and those that bring together a nation, Nuria Triana-Toribio (2012) argues that they are similar yet dynamic and independent. The effects of genre are significant and should be considered when evaluating national cinema. Different nations have different genres and subgenres that have different effects on other nations. For example, a Russian horror film might not have the same meaning in India or China. As Triana-Toribio (2012) argues, audience tastes dictate national film genres for different countries. As discussed, taste is dynamic and frequently and rapidly changes.

Films and national cinema are not exempt from the influence and effects of globalisation. As Susan Hayward (2005) states, globalisation presents both destructive and constructive forces that affect the concept of national cinema. However, Hayward also points out that regardless of the homogenous implications of globalisation, it

involves a tension and a complicated paradox that has overwhelmed the roots of filmmaking.

In considering the challenges of national cinema and how Hollywood affects the concept of national cinema, Higson (2002) points out that Hollywood assumed the role of a national cinema and was thus eventually classified. Thus the big question is how to classify the cinemas of other nations. The concept of national cinema has lost its traditional locus of production and ownership that indicated a national cinema. This clearly shows the effect of globalisation on nationality and national cinema. Some filmmakers have risen to the challenge of globalisation by attempting to create a film with local flavour with the aid of international influences. Despite featuring a unique culture that is locally bound, these films only pretend to be local or national as they are influenced by Hollywood. The viewpoints and themes are often reworked such that not much of the local aspect remains.

Relationship between Small-Nation Cinema, National Cinema and Saudi Arabian Cinema

For over three decades, cinema was banned in Saudi Arabia. Its recent reopening was warmly welcomed by those who favour cinema and public entertainment generally, as youths celebrated the end of a dark era for film lovers. Although the film industry is still fighting its way through several challenges, it is a relief for film lovers that they can now simply walk into a theatre and enjoy films like in many other nations. The nation is culturally cantered; therefore, cinema becomes a critical decision considering most of the population were not yet born at the time of the cinema ban.

Saudi Arabia's cinema ban reflects conservative ideologies that the rulers were not ready to challenge or tamper with considering the political climate of the

country at that time. The ban represented an extreme measure, considering there were other options available that would have allowed the national cinema to continue to operate.

Most small nations face instability from political, economic or social issues. Bordwell (2003) notes that the establishment of national cinema infrastructure can be costly depending on the financial and political position of a country. Many small nations have had to fight for their freedom and independence from colonial governments, setting them behind politically and economically. Reconstructing a political system that incorporates both cultural freedom and Western civilization is challenging; therefore, most small nations take baby steps regarding the acceptance of Western influence. Small nations tend to prioritise conserving their cultural identity regardless of other external forces.

Hjort (2002) acknowledges that one of the purposes of a national cinema is national identification. This aspect has been the driving force behind most of the films produced by the national cinemas of small nations. These nations want to express their identity to the rest of the world by telling stories through film. In doing so, they provide an authentic representation of their national identity to the rest of the world and counteract the misrepresentation of their culture by other filmmakers. For this reason, Saudi Arabia reopened its theatres to create another experience of cinema that would benefit the nation globally.

In addition to nationality, Triana-Toribio (2012) also stipulates that the cinema of small nations focuses on enhancing the viewership of local content. This is what a national cinema aims to achieve. If a nation is focused on protecting its people from Westernisation, it must provide alternative entertainment. Saudi Arabia's national cinema was shut down over claims that the content of global films was explicit.

However this left the nation out of the film industry. The initial reasons for shutting it down were valid, but the nation recovered from the political instability and cinema had to be brought back.

Martin-Jones and Montañez (2013) also relate the current state of cinema in Saudi Arabia to the fact that many small nations are not economically stable as they recover from colonisation. Related to this is whether national cinema receives funding from the government to produce films that tell the country's story. Many small nations shun such extra responsibility as it would strain the economy.

Saudi Arabia did not set aside funding to build a film industry and create national cinema. As there was no expertise in film production, the cost was incalculable. Over the years, a film industry slowly started to emerge. Film was introduced in the education system, and eventually, local television stations were able to provide the satellite signals necessary for filmmaking. In the long run, the nation has been able to establish a national cinema even though it is still in its infancy.

Mackenzie (2005) also relates the conditions of national cinema to the fact that most small nations focus on growing and developing local talent and content. This is similar to the goals for national cinema in many countries. One objective, according to Hjort (2007), is to identify and nurture local talent while ensuring that the people can enjoy local entertainment. This objective also ensures that the cultural identity of a nation remains intact and that the nation's heritage is not lost in the diversity of a rapidly changing society.

To ensure their objectives for national cinema are met, Saudi Arabia has put forward regulations and guidelines that filmmakers must adhere to, and local content must be produced using local actors. Another specification is the use of the national language and local music and settings. The return of cinema in Saudi Arabia has been

warmly received, and the nation is determined to connect with the rest of the world through film. To provide an understanding of how the Saudi film industry's development was impeded in the twentieth century, the next chapter examines the historical background of cinema in Saudi Arabia.

Chapter 2: Historical Background of Saudi Cinema in the Twentieth Century

Introduction

The history of cinema in Saudi Arabia from the 1930s to 2005 centres around the myriad challenges that cinema faced, especially in the 1970s and after 1979. To establish a deep understanding of the development of cinema in the country during the twentieth century, this chapter first discusses the pre-1979 period and then examines the post-1979 period. Each of these periods is important because each presented unique challenges and limitations.

This chapter presents the in-depth history of cinema's development in Saudi Arabia during both the more open period before 1979 and the more conservative period after 1979. This chapter is significant because it illuminates the production, exhibition and regulatory activity that occurred from the country's founding through the early twenty-first century. First, this chapter provides a critical examination of the nature of cinema in Saudi Arabia, including the key industry elements of production, distribution and exhibition before 1979. Then, it examines the impact of the political events that occurred in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf in 1979 and the decision to ban movie theatres in the country. The influence of conservative religious scholars and the leaders of the Islamic Awakening in persuading the government to ban cinemas are also explicated. The development of cinema in terms of production, distribution and exhibition from 1979 to 2005 is then explored. In addition to the religious ideological perspectives that have affected the development of cinema in Saudi Arabia, factors such as technology have also played a significant role. Thus, the last section of this chapter discusses the influence of technology to provide a clear understanding of the state of cinema in Saudi Arabia.

Nevertheless, because of the conservative nature of Saudi society, producers in the 1960s and 1970s still had to consider the kinds of content they produced, as it had to conform to the ideas and principles of conservatism (Sayfo, 2017, p. 70). Nonetheless, this was short-lived as cinema after 1979 experienced numerous challenges because, as David Ottaway (2009) explains, Wahhabi scholars opposed movie houses, public dancing and even women's sports centres. The government did not help cinema to expand in terms of production, exhibition or distribution as its power was overshadowed by conservatives after the Islamic Awakening in 1979. However, these gains were significantly threatened by the ban on film production and exhibition after 1979. In July 1965, national television channels were established in Saudi Arabia, and they were a much-needed breath of fresh air for the development of the film industry.

Overall, 1979 represents an important turning point as both domestic and international events significantly changed the country. This chapter argues that the Islamic Awakening impeded the chance to build a film industry in the country and prevented Aramco from leading the development of cinema as production migrated out of the country. Additionally, there are huge gaps in the knowledge of Saudi Arabia's film history, so it is unknown when the first shorts and features appeared or whether certain decades included any local productions.

Cinema in Saudi Arabia Before 1979

Before delving into the history of cinema in Saudi Arabia, it is appropriate to briefly consider Saudi Arabia's history as it directly relates to cinema. According to Tim Niblock (2008, p. 13), Saudi Arabia experienced a dramatic economic boom due to oil revenues after 1973, and this led to the country adopting a five-year development

plan aimed at fostering significant economic growth. However, it can be argued that Saudi cinema did not benefit from this boom, which would have further contributed to the economy. The oil boom led not only to economic growth but also to what extremists regarded as increased Western influence. AlMuhaini (2017) puts this in context by stating that the culture of Saudi Arabia before 1979 was moderately religious and open to life and a future that accommodated everyone regardless of their religion. Certainly, such an environment offered opportunities for cinema to grow because of the open nature of society and the tolerance that engendered. However, Omar Adam Sayfo (2017, p. 71) argues that despite the growth Saudi Arabia was experiencing in the 1970s, the development of cinema in the country was curtailed by factors such as the lack of trained personnel and infrastructure to support film production. Consequently, producers, especially those of animated films, outsourced labour-intensive production processes to more developed countries (Sayfo, 2017, p. 71). Another obstacle to the growth of cinema was the lack of qualified film producers, which may indicate that there was little interest in cinema at the time. Despite these challenges, progress was made and cinema became known and grew in the 1970s. However, the 1979 Grand Mosque seizure nullified the gains made in Saudi Arabia, especially regarding having an open culture, as the country was forced to revert to a strict traditional Saudi Arabian culture (Allison, 2011, p. 1). Efforts after 1979 were aimed at hindering Western influence, but they also stopped the growth of cinema. Generally, the development of cinema in Saudi Arabia did not continue with the re-emergence of conservatism after 1979. Arguably, conservatism dealt cinema a severe blow.

Before 1979, Western influence was strong in Saudi Arabia. In terms of cinema, there was significant growth with a mix of both Saudi and Western cultures.

Al-Rashed (2018) claims that in the 1960s and 1970s in particular, Riyadh was filled with entertainment, and at the weekend, movie theatres screened two films, one was in Arabic and the other was a US English-language feature with subtitles. According to Al-Rashed, during the 1960s and 1970s, Riyadh's cinemas were always crowded, indicating enthusiasm for the sector. The turnout at movie theatres during that time reflected the fact that cinema was mainly people-centric. Saudis supported the cinema by going to movie theatres. Movie theatres were a huge part of the new modernised society, and they were among the major symbols of a society that was becoming freer and more liberal. The next section discusses the development of Saudi Arabian cinema regarding the production, distribution and exhibition sectors in the pre-1979 era.

Production

The production of films in Saudi Arabia has been characterised by many challenges. In the 1960s, technology leapt forward after the launch of national television channels in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf (Sayfo, 2017, p. 70). Their establishment created production opportunities for local content, which was a key target for national authorities (Sayfo, 2017, p. 70). It is important to note that the government did not directly contribute to the production of films but created a platform for it through the establishment of local television channels. Hence, producers put their best efforts into creating content that conformed to the conservative values of the country. Even with national television channels, there was still a gap in the production sector, forcing TV channels to rely on imports from Europe, the United States, and Japan (Sayfo, 2017, p. 70). Thus, production was a key challenge for cinema because of the lack of qualified personnel and infrastructure. Despite the general popularity of cinema, local

and locally produced films did not flourish at all. The absence of adequate production infrastructure meant that such films could not compete with the much better produced films being screened at the time.

In Saudi Arabia, film production experienced challenges right from the 1960s. Sayfo (2017, p. 71) explains that filmmaking faced two key obstacles in the 1960s and 1970s, namely, a lack of trained personnel and the absence of necessary infrastructure. The entire process was challenging because of the lack of adequate knowledge. This explains why film production in Saudi Arabia was limited, and Saudi films could not compete with Egyptian or Lebanese films. Saudi Arabia's lack of experienced personnel and infrastructure meant it could not match other Arab countries, such as Egypt, that produced 80–90 motion pictures annually in the 1970s (Smith, 2018). Producers of animated films and television programmes struggled the most and were forced to seek foreign assistance. Sayfo (2017, p. 71) notes that producers in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf had to outsource some of the operations for animated films, particularly those that were labour intensive, and sometimes, the entire production process was outsourced to firms in foreign countries where producers knew what the process entailed. Another option was to set up an overseas headquarters to retain control over their work (Sayfo, 2017, p. 71). Essentially, the lack of trained personnel and infrastructure was indicative of the absence of the resources required for a local film industry to succeed. Had there been trained staff, producers would not have had to establish studios abroad or outsource the production process. Yet, in an increasingly globalised world, that became the norm for Saudi producers who lacked the necessary experience and relevant supporting infrastructure.

With this significant gap in the production process, the country lagged in terms of the films that were made. Ruba Obaid (2017) asserts that Saudi film

production in the 1960s and 1970s was characterised by the creation of documentary films, although there were very few, and they were sponsored and produced by Aramco (Obaid, 2017). Organisations such as Aramco were key to the production of motion pictures. They created numerous documentaries such as the film about the inauguration of the first petroleum well in Saudi Arabia. The significance of organisations such as Aramco cannot be underestimated because they helped shape the production process in Saudi Arabia. Moreover, the contributions of individuals such as Abdullah Al-Muhaisen, a pioneer director, are substantial, especially due to the films released in 1975, 1976 and 1977 (Obaid, 2017). In fact, Abdullah Al-Muhaisen directed the very first Saudi film *Riyadh Evolution* that was released in 1975 (Obaid, 2017). It focused on the development of the city of Riyadh. Al-Muhaisen's next film was *City Assassination* in 1977, and it was about the Lebanese civil war and the damage done to Beirut (Obaid, 2017). Abdullah Al-Muhaisen won several accolades for these two films, including the Nefertiti Prize for the best short film. Without the contributions of organisations such as Aramco and individuals like Abdullah Al-Muhaisen, film production would have been more difficult in the country.

Exhibition

The exhibition sector is critical to cinema because it directly connects films with audiences. Al-Rashed (2018) reveals that Riyadh was filled with movie theatres, and there were even projectors set up for outdoor screenings at weekends in the Al Murabba district. According to Al-Rashed people would throng to the cinemas to watch their favourite films, which included both Arabic and US films. The public's support for cinema was overwhelming, and thus, interest in the cinema was growing

in the country. Obaid (2017) reports that the main cities in Saudi Arabia had movie theatres half a century ago, and the Westerners who were working at the California State Oil Company (later Aramco) were instrumental in introducing Saudis to cinema. In fact, the immense influence that Aramco had on shaping film production in the country cannot be underestimated.

Cinema in Saudi Arabia began in the 1930s when Westerners installed large screens at their residential compounds. From there, movie theatres spread to the major cities in the country including Riyadh, Taif, Jeddah and Abha until there were about 30 cinemas with ticket prices ranging from 3 SAR (0.8 USD) to 10 SAR (2.7 USD) (Obaid, 2017; Mahjoob, 2018). The spread of movie theatres throughout the biggest cities illustrates the positive response that films were getting. The Western activity of watching films in cinemas became popular, reflecting the openness of Saudi Arabian society in the pre-1979 era (Mahjoob, 2018). The fact that Saudis accepted the idea of going to movie theatres to watch films, both local and foreign, accentuates the development of the film culture in the country from the 1930s onwards. A wide range of options and cinemas to choose from not only increased the quality of the experience but also reduced the price, and that made it easier for Saudis to view films.

The location of early movie theatres was critical because their location influenced attendance. The first cinemas were in foreign embassies and sports clubs, and some were personally sponsored by certain individuals, especially Westerners. However, movie theatres in Saudi Arabia were of a lower standard compared with those in other Arabian cities such as Cairo and Beirut (Obaid, 2017). Even as Saudi Arabia made progress regarding the exhibition sector, the country faced the challenge of providing desirable quality movie theatres. It was a relatively new industry, and the movie theatres in foreign embassies and sport clubs were exclusive. These included

Al-Hilal, Al-Nusser and Al-Shabab in Riyadh and two clubs in Jeddah, Al-Ahli and Al-Etihad.

The “cinema alley” was an area in Riyadh that boasted many movie theatres (Obaid, 2017). The popular places among movie-goers in Jeddah were Bab Sharif in the older area of the city and the Abu Safeya movie theatre in Hindawi district (Obaid, 2017). These locations are the historical areas in which movie theatres flourished in Saudi Arabia. Moreover, they point to the acceptance of cinema among the population, which contributed to its growth. The cinema alley is a historical place that represents a past the country is only just beginning to reclaim. It tells the story of a thriving sector that was once the backbone of entertainment in Saudi Arabia as there were few other forms of entertainment available (Obaid, 2017). The alley was the main driver of the development of the cinema, where many people viewed a wide range of films. These places reveal the pervasive nature of cinema in Saudi Arabia in the pre-1979 era, as in every city there was somewhere for people to watch their favourite motion pictures. No single region influenced or epitomised Saudi cinema as much as the cinema alley. It was a place that everyone could visit because it was not exclusionary or elitist like the cinemas in embassies. The cinema alley became legendary because of its accessibility to the general public.

Distribution

Most film fans regularly went to movie theatres to view films before 1979. For instance, films from countries such as Egypt, the US, Syria and India, among others, were popular and were often exhibited in the kingdom (Mohammed, 2017). The distribution of films within Saudi Arabia must be viewed from a cultural perspective. As stated, Saudi Arabia was highly conservative, which affected the nature of most

social and cultural activities in the country, especially before 1979. Saudi Arabia's case is somewhat paradoxical. The country was heavily involved in the filmmaking of other countries in the region, providing support and funding, especially in Egypt (Shafik, 2007, p. 27). In Saudi Arabia, however, there were heavy restrictions. The late 1970s saw a turning point in the development of the cinema, and it had a lot to do with the political environment in the country at the time. It was a period of change, both domestically and internationally, and these transformations deeply affected Saudi Arabia.

Television was another key distribution channel for films. The rise of the television industry occurred in the 1960s and 1970s in Saudi Arabia (Sayfo, 2017, p. 70). In the 1960s, the growth of television occurred because most of the Gulf countries, including Saudi Arabia, established national television channels. This was particularly crucial for the distribution of local content that could be easily understood and kept within the conservative context of Saudi Arabia. As a result, the creation of content for television became an important goal for national authorities. The government-run television channels therefore sought to fill their time slots with content they believed would be entertaining enough while also being conservative (Sayfo, 2017, p. 70). Apart from local content, which was created by local producers with local actors, the country's national TV stations also relied on dubbed international content, especially from such regions as Europe, the US and Japan. Programmes were dubbed and made appropriate for Saudi Arabia's moral values and traditions. The choice of which countries to screen content from was often political (Sayfo, 2017, p. 70). As for Saudi Arabia and the neighbouring Gulf countries, most of the content was from the US and Japan. Before the changes in 1979, even though the country was relatively conservative, it still had vibrant cinema and arts sectors.

The government-run TV channels focused mostly on entertainment, with most of the content being simplistic Anglo-American films and TV shows.

The Political Events of 1979

Historically, 1979 was a pivotal year for Saudi Arabia as it pushed the country towards conservatism. The siege of Mecca was the highlight of the political events of 1979. The now famous siege started in the early hours of 20 November 1979 when almost 50,000 Muslim faithful from around the world gathered, as expected, for prayers in the huge courtyard that surrounds the holy Kaaba in Mecca (BBC, 2019). Mecca is the holiest place in Islam. However, among the crowd were about 200 men led by a charismatic preacher Juhayman al-Utaybi (BBC, 2019). When the imam finished the prayers that morning, this group pushed him aside and seized the microphone. They had placed coffins at the centre of the yard, which was not unusual as it is a way to seek blessings for the recently deceased. However, these coffins contained handguns, which the men quickly distributed among themselves. They then demanded the closure of the gates, stating that anyone resisting would be shot (BBC, 2019). The attack was horrific, and it ushered in a period of self-reflection in the country. There was a general belief that the monarchy had moved away from the real Islam. It is because of these sentiments that the country started to slowly return to its conservative roots (Paracha, 2019). The perpetrators of the attack on Mecca called attention to some of the issues in the country, particularly those that religious leaders had pointed out previously. Although everyone agreed that the way they went about it was wrong and had to be condemned, there was a consensus across the state that the demands of the attackers were worth considering. Therefore, following the attack, Saudi Arabia embraced more conservative policies.

The Iranian Revolution must also be considered in the context of the changes in the cinema. Iran and Saudi Arabia had long a tense and rather unfriendly relationship that was the consequence of many events (Soltaninejad, 2019, p. 104). The Iranian Revolution was one of the biggest reasons for tension between the states. For Iran, it resulted in a whole new government, with the new leaders guided by a completely new philosophy based on religious ideals. Iran wanted to impose that religious and conservative ideology on the rest of the Muslim world, starting with Saudi Arabia, which was seen as its biggest rival in the Islamic world. Iran's claim to legitimacy as a leader lay in its ability to present itself as a more devout country, and this pressured Saudi Arabia into making changes that would demonstrate its leadership. As a result, Iran's embracing conservatism and strict Shia religious philosophies and trying to extend that influence over all Shia Muslims throughout the world pushed Saudi Arabia to embrace Sunni philosophies and aim to lead all Sunni Muslims in the world. Ultimately, the reactions to the Iranian Revolution were all about establishing and maintaining credibility as a true Muslim nation, with each country trying to occupy a position of superiority in the larger Muslim world.

The Influence of Religious Scholars and the Leaders of the Islamic Awakening

Because of these significant political events, religious scholars and the leaders of the Islamic Awakening had greater influence because of the emerging conservatism, and they convinced the government in Saudi Arabia to ban movie theatres. Cinemas had been an important part of the country's social life before 1979 (Obaid, 2017). Even though they were used to screen movies, many of them were not actually cinemas. Many were located in sports clubs or foreign embassies, and they were sometimes supported by individuals. Any open or large area could potentially be converted into a

movie theatre (Obaid, 2018). This all changed in 1979 when the official cinema ban came into effect. Although 1979 is often identified as the year when the change occurred, the actual prohibition was the result of a long movement or trend, which culminated in the Islamic Awakening amidst pressure from Islamic leaders. The Saudi Islamic Awakening, referred to as Sahwa (al-Sahwa al-Islamiyya), was a period of social and political transformation in Saudi Arabia between the 1960s and 1980s, which is seen as the main reason that movie theatres were eventually banned in the country (Ibrahim, 2019). The Sahwa started because of the actions of the Muslim Brotherhood, which inspired a religious movement in Saudi Arabia between the 1960s and 1980s (Ibrahim, 2019). The influence of the Muslim Brotherhood can be traced back to the 1950s and the actions of the then King Faysal Al-Saud (Ibrahim, 2019). Thousands of members of the Muslim Brotherhood were given shelter in Saudi Arabia after they fled repressive regimes in countries such as Egypt and Syria (Ibrahim, 2019). They then went on to entrench themselves in positions of power, leading schools and other educational institutions and incorporating elements of traditional, cultural Saudi thought systems into their ideologies. By the 1970s, the Sahwa had become a system of religious groups with a wide range of outlooks, both social and religious, and hence, it had enough power to convince the government to revert to strict conservative values by banning movie theatres. The Muslim Brotherhood was hugely influential, with its members filling positions in the government, religion and social life in Saudi Arabia.

Even though these religious groups and their Islamic leadership varied in terms of their religious and social outlooks, their basic ideologies were the same. They believed in non-violence and supported the intersection of religion and politics. Perhaps more importantly, however, was the fact that they also believed in the need to

follow and be proud of Islamic teachings and their influence on the daily lives of Saudi citizens (Ibrahim, 2019). The Sahwa, at least at the time, was highly focused on the youth, especially because they had largely been side lined by the state's clergy. Traditionally, the clergy left politics to Al-Saud, the royal family. The Sahwa at that time, however, expressed interest in politics and voting. Islam was seen as a practical movement, one that was supposed to be incorporated into the general activities of the state. This was a relatively new direction, as the country and the royal family were not used to mixing religion and politics or the active participation of religious leaders in both.

Two events linked the Muslim Brotherhood and their beliefs to the prohibition of movie theatres, the maligning of the arts in general and a wide range of social and religious changes. In addition to the Sahwa, which was an elitist, political and pragmatic movement, another Islamic movement developed and was supported mostly by lower-class individuals who were often described as rejectionist or neo-Salafi (Hegghammer and Lacroix, 2007, p. 106). It is from this rejectionist group that the attack on Mecca originated. Although the attack resulted in many deaths, it was essentially a rebellion against the Al-Saud focus on a general system of religious liberalism and the adoption of less conservative ideals. Many of the members of this movement were young men, most of whom came from poor backgrounds. These were individuals who believed that Islam had become corrupted by various moral and social innovations, and they considered this reprehensible. Thus, they sought to fight for religious and social reforms, advocating for the return to strict and literal meanings and interpretations of Islam, the Qur'an and the Hadith. They regarded Islam as the sole source of truth and rejected the teachings and belief systems espoused by scholars who went against this ideology, including scholars such as Ibn

Habbal and Ibn Tamiyya (Hegghammer and Lacroix, 2007, p. 108). The literal reading of religious texts, extreme social conservatism and rejectionist attitude towards the intersection of Islam and modernity were in direct contradiction with the ideas of the elitist Sahwa movement. The attack on Mecca was therefore in many ways a rebellion against it. In the end, even though the killings were condemned, there was general agreement that the beliefs behind the movement were legitimate and that there was a need for change and for the country to return to the more conservative ideologies of Islam. The attackers were executed, but their ideologies survived.

The overall political and social environments in the country and region were also important determinants that led to the push on behalf of religious leaders to ban various art forms and movie theatres. The Saudi leader at the time, King Faisal, was a staunch traditionalist and conservative. For instance, he helped create the Muslim World League (MWL) and was pivotal in providing support to countries in the region and world that were focused on Islamic conservatism (McCants, 2017). However, leaders in the region, particularly those that were in direct opposition to Saudi Arabia and King Faisal, were going the opposite direction and used this as a weapon against him. Of particular note is Gamal Abdel Nasser of Egypt who at the time was one of the most influential leaders of the Arab world. Nasser taunted Saudi Arabia for being backwards, making fun of it for holding onto old ideals and traditional perspectives. Gamal Abdel Nasser's criticism led to many changes in Saudi society that many viewed as contrary to traditional conservative ideals. In fact, there is a widespread belief that one of the explanations for the assassination of King Faisal is that he allowed television to enter the country and encouraged the establishment of national channels that broadcast films, plays and songs. In addition, women appeared on

television in clothing that was considered inappropriate by conservative standards, which many Saudis were not used to. Therefore, one of the king's nephews killed the king in revenge for the prince's brother, a religious extremist who opposed attempts to modernise Saudi Arabia and was killed in his confrontation with police (Juan de Onis, 1975). This was one event in the 1970s that led up to the attack on Mecca as a result of the belief that the government was taking the wrong direction regarding social and political ideals. Television and media were seen as some of the greatest indicators that society was deteriorating, and that is why many individuals, including religious leaders, opposed television and similar media.

The attack on the mosque in Mecca by radicals was the factor that eventually pushed religious leaders to support a ban of art and movie theatres in Saudi Arabia (Alawsat, 2020). Religious leaders on both sides of the fence, namely, those supporting the Sahwa and the rejectionists, both believed that the country had deteriorated because of liberalism. The attacks were horrendous and condemned by many, but they functioned as a wake-up call. The Saudi arts and media environment before the attacks had been relatively open and liberal. After the attacks, the Islamic Awakening became the single biggest push for change not only in the cinema but also in the larger arts sector (Alawsat, 2020). The government was surprised by the attack. They were used to the fact that their enemies were mostly from the political left and did not realise that they could face opposition from religious extremists and the religious establishment (Hegghammer and Lacroix, 2007, p. 111). In the end, the government, under the influence of religious leaders, prohibited arts and movie theatres in the country. According to the then leaders, even though Juhayman was executed, his ideology lived on (Alawsat, 2020). The government's cinema ban was

meant to not only pacify the religious leaders but also keep up with regional power shifts.

Cinema in Saudi Arabia after 1979

As a result of the cinema ban implemented following these events, there was little film production and no public film exhibitions for a few years after 1979, as there were no movie theatres in operation because of the cultural and legal restrictions imposed by conservatives. During this period, a patriarchal system emerged and took shape in Saudi society. The leaders of the Islamic Awakening and the state were both practicing patriarchy over society, even in the simplest matters in the private lives of families. Gilligan (2018, p. 10) defines patriarchy as “an anthropological term denoting families or societies ruled by fathers. It sets up a hierarchy – a role of priests – in which the priest, the hieros, is a father, pater. As an order of living, it elevates some men over other men and all men over women; within the family, it separates fathers from sons (the men from the boys) and places women and children under a father’s authority”.

The Middle East and North African countries are the most patriarchal in the world (Soekarba, 2019). In Saudi Arabia after 1979, not only were cinemas closed but many patriarchal laws were enacted. For example, the guardianship system began, in which a father is the guardian of his wife and daughters, and a woman cannot complete any transactions without her guardian. For example, opening a bank account or having minor surgery requires the approval of a male from the woman’s family. In some cases, the guardian is a younger brother or the 15-year-old son of a widow in her forties or fifties. As such, the cinema ban was a minor example of state patriarchy that later became more prominent in people’s lives.

Some elements of the patriarchal system were present before 1979 in some segments of society such as the tribes, but it is a long-standing cultural practise among those tribes. However, after such patriarchal practices by the state and Islamic Awakening leaders began to increase, the effects became clear on the generations born in the eighties and nineties. For example, Crown Prince Mohammad Bin Salman, who was born in 1985, said in an interview with the 60 Minutes TV show that his generation suffered from the effects of religious control in the country after 1979. He claimed that before 1979 Saudis lived normal lives and women drove cars, people went to movie theatres and women worked without restrictions or gender segregation (Al Arabiya English, 2018). Professor Madawi Al-rasheed indicates that Saudi Arabia is considered “a masculine state” where “men control political, economic, cultural, religious, and social institutions” (Haykel et al., 2015, p. 292). Such masculinity in Saudi Arabia not only oppresses women but affects the lives of people of both sexes, as the state and religious scholars interfere in individuals’ lives. For instance, although the board members of cultural associations and literary clubs are elected, such groups are monopolised by religious conservatives, as noted by the founder of the Saudi Film Festival, Ahmed Almulla (2019). Therefore, society is directed by a small group of men. The state and Islamic Awakening leaders use Islamic law to “legitimate and justify violence”, and Islamic law is based on religious leaders’ interpretations of the religion (Soekarba, 2019, p. 195). Using religion to control people and interfere in their lives is effective because of the high respect Saudi society has for religion.

Despite the state and Islamic Awakening leaders controlling people’s lives and affecting the development of the film production, distribution and exhibition sectors, film lovers did not stop watching films but found ways to watch them at home. This

section explores the production, distribution and exhibition of films in Saudi Arabia between 1979 and 2005. Furthermore, it considers the influence of technology, such as video home system (VHS) tapes and DVDs, on film consumption during this period.

Production

Strict restrictions on cinema meant there were no opportunities for production, at least of local films, in Saudi Arabia between 1979 and 2005. The closure of movie theatres meant that any possibility for the advancement of national or transnational film cultures in Saudi Arabia was essentially lost. The absence of cinema halls and the prohibition on exhibiting films meant that the general public would not actively participate in film culture or encourage the development or production of films by locals for the local audience (Ciecko, 2011, p. 5). Nonetheless, Saudi Arabia and its stereotype still appealed to Hollywood and Western media, so it remained an attractive filming location for foreign filmmakers. Consequently, several foreign films were produced in Saudi Arabia in this period such as *Malcolm X* (1992), *Baraka* (1992), and *Le Grand Voyage* (2004). The main attraction of the country was that it was seen as the centre of the Muslim world, the symbolic location of the culture and religion.

The US film *Malcolm X* is one notable film that was shot in Mecca in 1992. The biographical drama about the life of Malcolm X dramatised some of the key events in his life, including his incarceration, conversion to Islam and membership of the Nation of Islam. It also covered his pilgrimage to Mecca, which is the part of the motion picture that was filmed in Saudi Arabia. It became the first non-documentary film and the first US film ever to be shot in Mecca. The filming process was complex,

given the fact that non-Muslims were not allowed to film there. This meant that the film company had to hire a whole new crew to do the job (Fuchs and Lee, 2002, p. 25). Eventually, the film crew and film company successfully shot the scenes in Mecca. These difficulties show that despite the changing world, clashing cultures still interfered with filming, especially because the country was much more conservative at that time compared with the 2010s onwards.

Most of the films that have been filmed in Saudi Arabia since 1979 feature the pilgrimage to Mecca as a fundamental element, and it had to be captured for the stories being told. For instance, a non-narrative documentary film *Baraka* explores various human-interest events, activities and technological phenomena. It was shot in 24 countries across 6 continents, and the filming took more than 14 months (Hinson, 1993). Another critically acclaimed film that was partly shot in Saudi Arabia is the French film *Le Grand Voyage*, which tells the story of the relationship between a father and son as they embark on a pilgrimage by car (Anon, 2005). The film was screened at the Toronto and Venice film festivals and won awards at the Mar del Plata International Film Festival. Even though most of its scenes that were set in the Middle East were filmed in Morocco, some of the scenes that involved the two main actors were shot in Mecca. This film is significant because it is one of the first to be shot during the actual Hajj festival (*The Guardian*, 2005). The director described the experience as surreal, as not many people looked at the crew or even noticed they were there (*The Guardian*, 2005). Overall, Mecca and the Hajj pilgrimage have become important for foreign filmmakers in their quest to accurately portray the Muslim world.

Distribution

From the 1980s after the cinema ban was implemented up to the early 2000s, the distribution of films evolved because of both technological changes and changes in the needs of average Saudi Arabians. It is important to note that the cinema prohibition concerned movie theatres not necessarily the distribution of films. Even though there were few local Saudi films to choose from during this given period, there were a significant number of international films and productions available for distribution. In the 1980s and 1990s, the principal form of film distribution in Saudi Arabia was through their sale or rental in VHS format. After the ban on movie theatres in the country, there emerged a broad network of special shops to quench the appetites of Saudi film lovers. Film distribution occurred mainly through neighbourhood film and video shops, which purchased films, most of which were censored and dubbed, and then leased them to people that lived nearby (Al-Mansour, 2018). However, these shops operated within the context of the social rules of the country. For instance, women could not enter video shops which meant that the men who worked in these shops had to bring the films a woman wanted out to her, often secretly because of socialisation laws (Al-Mansour, 2018). Males, however, could freely visit these video shops and purchase or rent the films they wanted to view. As technology evolved, it became much easier to distribute films as DVDs became popular and mainstream. Film shops selling and renting films on VHS and DVD were the principal distribution channel for a long time. Despite operating within the social and religious rules, they offered easy access in the absence of cinemas.

The development of new media during this time was also a huge step forward in terms of bridging the film distribution gaps within the country, especially in the latter years of the cinema ban. Films were very affected by new media, and as information and communication technologies developed, it became clear that films

could exist in many forms (Daly, 2010, p. 141). As films evolved into a digital product, the modes of distribution also changed significantly. Technology developments not only filled in the gaps and severed the connections between distribution and exhibition but also enabled distribution in ways that made the cinema ban irrelevant to a certain extent (Ciecko, 2011, p. 6). Through the internet, for instance, many local Saudi film lovers could easily access their favourite films or productions in the 2000s without the need to leave their homes. The internet acted as an equaliser, shifting the power dynamics and changing the relationship between consumers and video-shop owners because of the digitalisation of content. This ease of access gave people the freedom to watch films anywhere and anytime.

Exhibition

Despite the ban, there were several forms of film exhibition across the country. In 1979 and the 1980s, there was increasing pressure and objections regarding the existence of movie theatres. However, in 1980, Saudi Arabia still had some temporary film halls, most of which were in cities like Jeddah and Mecca. Many of these screened Egyptian, Turkish and Indian films, and they operated without government authorisation because there was no licensing system. In the years that followed, even more objections to cinema from the conservatives pushed the authorities to close these exhibition centres (Admon, 2010). In the following decades, formal film theatres became a rather obsolete form of distribution, as the state still strictly controlled cinema. It was not until the early 2000s leading up to 2005 that many people began seeing signs of change in the sector. After being absent for about two decades, movie theatres made a comeback in 2005, at least temporarily, targeting women and children and screening mainly animated films. This was the result of a

collaboration between organisers and municipal authorities (Whittaker, 2005). Even then, the screenings were done carefully, and they strictly followed the social and religious rules of the country. For instance, one of the reasons cinemas were banned was the belief that they were immoral and often screened offensive content. They also came under fire because they encouraged the mingling of men and women in ways that were considered inappropriate. Consequently, these new screenings focused on foreign animated films dubbed into Arabic. Additionally, only women and children were allowed, and the screenings ran for two weeks starting at the end of the holy month of Ramadan (Whittaker, 2005). This was a small move considering the sheer potential of cinema in the country, but it not only was an important exhibition outlet but also showed the general willingness of the country to embrace cinema once again. As Saudi Arabia woke up to the possibility of cinema and wanted to reinstate movie theatres in some way, the authorities were still wary of the history of cinema in the country and the opinions of religious leaders.

Television

In the late 1980s and 1990s, television became more prominent as an exhibition channel. During these years, it became a cultural and social phenomenon, both locally and internationally. In the 1990s especially, owning a TV was not just a medium for receiving images but also a sign of prestige (McQuail, 1994, p. 28). It also offered much more in terms of reach and flexibility than traditional channels like print media and radio. In Saudi Arabia, the penetration of television as a communications medium was impressive. According to surveys, over 82% of Saudis watched television for more than two or three hours every day (Al-Garni, 2000, p. 1). It became a major distribution channel for films, filling in the gaps created by the cinema ban.

Television was quickly embraced by many households, and with the number of people having access to it so high, it automatically became the primary means of entertainment in homes.

Several factors led to the spread of television and the fact that it focused mainly on international and Anglo-American content. Since 1975, the country had invested heavily in the infrastructure to support the spread of television. In 1982, for instance, a number of ultra-modern media facilities were built. This enabled the spread of television in Saudi society through high-quality television signals (Al-Garni, 2000, p. 4).

As a mass media outlet, the content television provided in terms of films was skewed towards foreign content. The main strategy and objectives of Saudi Arabian television broadcasting was to transmit programmes that informed and provided education and entertainment. However, television ended up being primarily a tool for entertainment, and in some instances, a government means for passing and reinforcing certain messages. According to Douglas Boyd (1982, p. 120), television programmes were mainly oriented towards entertainment, with few attempts at using television for education. This was due to the lack of production personnel and facilities, the absence of a philosophical guide for programming and a regulatory environment that made it easy to purchase outside entertainment programmes (Boyd, 1982, p. 120). Most of the films screened on television were of Anglo-American origin because they were conveniently available, familiar to the audience and inexpensive. Further, US and UK film productions had technical superiority, meaning they were of higher quality than Saudi film and television productions. The problems of poor infrastructure and the lack of necessary skills and experience meant that local productions could not

compete with international productions, which was largely because of the effects of the cinema ban.

There was, however, an element of counterbalance in terms of the productions shown by Saudi TV leaders on Saudi channels 1 and 2. Films from countries such as Egypt, Syria and Lebanon soon became more popular. They were seen as appropriate because they were an alternative to the Anglo-American films that dominated television. In addition, they were often presented with the Saudi market in mind, with special religious and political considerations made (Al-Garni, 2000, p. 8). Yet there was still an obvious absence of Saudi films on local television. Consequently, television as a distribution channel started becoming better organised and the articulated objectives of the Saudi media were passed in 1982 (Al-Garni, 2000, p. 8). The adopted policies covered, among other things, issues such as the development of programmes targeting children and education and a greater focus on the family. For instance, it was reiterated that television would focus on the family and give it due attention in programming as it is the essential unit of society. In terms of concentrating on children, the policy acknowledged that they are the citizens of tomorrow, and therefore, there must be a strong relationship between children's TV programmes and children's needs. Perhaps more importantly, though, was that the policy was centred around religion and religious values. In its role as a service provider to Saudi society, television was meant to consolidate Islamic values, retain Arab traditions and perpetuate inherited customs, and any programming going against these would spoil the harmony and purity of society (Al-Garni, 2000, p. 9). This essentially acknowledged that television, given its prominence, was taking the place of cinema, while also indicating the need to police and guide programming, especially with respect to its effects on the family and children. Although the goal of television

was to consolidate Islamic values, the television administration contradicted this goal by screening American and British films.

The popularity of television put it in the crosshairs of religious leaders, who started seeing it as another source of content that did not necessarily align with their belief systems. However, the sheer reach and power of television meant they had little recourse. The fact that television was in many ways replacing cinema, which religious leaders had recognised as a negative societal influence, meant that it became a target of criticism. As television took on a bigger role in terms of the exhibition of films, the religious clergy in Saudi Arabia expressed their opposition. The Saudi religious elite, referred to as the Ulama, started voicing their complaints about television. The Ulama traditionally did not meddle in politics because of their status (Bligh, 1985, p. 37). Yet in this case, some members of the religious elite complained directly and personally to the King, criticising the new technology and labelling it a corruption of Saudi culture and traditions (Al-Garni, 2000, p. 9). These appeals were especially weighty considering the important position the Ulama held in the Saudi social structure and hierarchy. The spread of television and the content it promoted was sure to have an effect, and the Ulama becoming involved was a significant development. Nonetheless, the growth of television was part of the larger trajectory of technological development, which meant that these complaints would largely go unheeded.

The Internet

The advent of the internet meant that ordinary Saudi Arabians were exposed to a whole new world when it came to film distribution. Several elements of the internet made it an especially powerful option for Saudi Arabians, especially at the turn of the century. First, the internet is a vast resource, and unlike video libraries and movie

theatres of the past, it basically offers unrestricted access to a massive number of films through an internet connected device. Second, the internet fosters anonymity and the Saudi government at that time was not paying attention to the internet, meaning individuals can go about their business without the risk of being identified or caught doing something they should not be doing. The allure of anonymity was especially significant considering that cinema in Saudi Arabia was heavily restricted. Third, peer-to-peer sharing systems started becoming popular and mainstream in 1999. Since 2002, an increasing number of internet sites have enabled internet users to illegally download films without worrying about legal or copyright issues (Bramantoro, AlAwadh, AlGhannam, and AlWeda'ah, 2015). Individuals can therefore watch the films they want without having to pay for them or seeking permission from the copyright owners. As an exhibition platform, internet access to films is not always through legal means, as pirating and peer-to-peer file sharing dominate.

The Influence of New Technology

One of the main reasons there are still cinema and film enthusiasts in Saudi Arabia is because of technology. New technologies had a tremendous impact on the continued availability and distribution of films in Saudi Arabia during the cinema ban when there were few local productions or films.

Traditionally, it was thought that there could not be a cinema and film loving culture without movie theatres. Although this was true in many respects, the role that movie theatres played, especially in Saudi Arabia, was diluted by the development of new technologies. The operators of movie theatres once controlled everything regarding films. They decided what films people could watch, the venues in which

films were screened, the modes films came in and issues of quality and censorship. New technologies shifted the ownership and control of these processes. Whereas movie theatres concentrated such control in small groups of people, newer technologies like the internet, television and enabling technologies like video players mean that almost anyone can own a film and choose when and where to watch it, at least within the context of the laws of the country. For instance, even though video shops housed numerous films and brought them closer to people, women were not allowed to visit these shops (Davies, 2012). Moreover, films were often screened in embassies in Saudi Arabia. In most cases, these screenings were invitation-only events, so they were generally only attended by individuals of high status within the government or diplomatic circles. This limited access to films changed with the introduction of video rental shops as they essentially made films accessible to anyone, and they were close enough to neighbourhoods to serve Saudis at a local level. Whereas in the past people needed cinemas or film and video shops as intermediaries to access films, the internet provides them with almost complete control of everything related to films.

The physical distance between people, the films they watch and cinemas were also affected by new technologies. Despite the glory of cinema alley and the contribution it made to cinema in Riyadh and Saudi Arabia, cinemas were still places one had to go to in the middle of town (Obaid, 2017). This meant that attending a film screening required a fair amount of prior planning. Therefore, many who lived further from the city, and even some individuals in and around the city, did not have the luxury of enjoying films. However, the advent of video shops and, especially, the development of television closed the distance between individuals and films, both literally and figuratively. With so many people having access to television and being

able to watch it for extended periods of time, individuals can now access films in the comfort of their homes. Furthermore, the fact that video shops were available in most neighbourhoods at that time also contributed to films being more easily accessible, reducing the distance and time constraints related to watching films. Technology has also given individuals the power of choice. The fact that films can be converted into easily stored formats like VHS and DVD not only makes access easy but also allows people to choose what to watch according to their tastes.

In a country that generally lacked the infrastructure, goodwill and technological empowerment to make films locally, the introduction of these new technologies also, unfortunately, negatively affected local filmmaking (Helal, 2018). The development of a local film industry relies heavily on the presence of movie theatres and audiences that can identify with the messages and themes prevalent in local films. With fewer viewers to target, the Saudi film industry dwindled, and few films were produced. In fact, some of the most successful films associated with Saudi Arabia during that period were foreign. There are several reasons that technology facilitated the success of foreign films. First, foreign films were easy to acquire and relatively cheap, particularly for the TV channels in the country at that time. Second, the film industries in the US and UK were far more advanced and experienced. Their stories were simple, meaning they appealed even to the audience in Saudi Arabia. Moreover, those film industries had invested a great deal in novel technologies and processes. Therefore they could produce higher quality films, which strengthened their appeal to the Saudi Arabian audience, especially as there was a stark lack of comparable local films to choose from. Third, the Saudi film industry that was already struggling under the weight of both regional and global competition was dealt a heavy

blow by the cinema ban. This prohibition had the unintended consequence of promoting international films over local films.

New technologies also created the circumstances that allowed the country to start warming up to the idea of movie theatres operating legally again towards the end of the 1979–2005 era. Digital technologies meant that the average film fan could easily bypass movie theatres as mediators in the relationship between viewers and films. The fact that one no longer had to go to a movie theatre to watch a film implied that movie theatres were no longer important, and therefore, the ban had little to no effect. With television essentially functioning as an exhibition tool for films, there was no point in prohibiting cinemas. In addition, technology had not only enabled the enforcement of conservative social norms and requirements but also led to their dismantling. When the cinema ban was passed, the government and religious leaders had complete control over the cinema and film screenings through various media and communication policies. Films were dubbed in Arabic, and this enabled only appropriate translations to be shown in the country. However, technologies like peer-to-peer file sharing systems such as BitTorrent can circumvent all that, meaning that anyone with an internet connection can access any film at any time. Therefore they can watch any type of content, even content that is considered offensive and inappropriate. For instance, Dr Aid Al-Qarni, a religious scholar and leader of the Islamic Awakening, strongly opposed the 1975 production of the film *The Message* (1976). Al-Qarni referred to the sanctity of cinema and the prohibition of images representing prominent Islamic figures such as the Prophet Muhammad (Al Ikhaa, 2015). The scholar believed there was no room for the portrayal of the Prophet Muhammad in films, yet 30 years later, he recanted his opinion of *The Message* (Al Ikhaa, 2015). In the end, technology made the cinema ban obsolete so that even those

who had taken hard-line stances concerning the prohibition, like Al-Qarni, started believing it was unnecessary as a means of enforcing conservative social norms and religious standards. Technology changed the nature of the cinema so much that even those who previously had strong feelings understood that censorship and control no longer worked.

The cinema ban and restrictions on the arts in Saudi Arabia followed incidents that, at least to religious leaders and conservatives, signalled that the country had gone too far in allowing certain liberties and freedoms that were considered less than Islamic. Movie theatres were among the biggest symbolic challenges as they were considered particularly immoral (Helal, 2018). However, the changes the authorities sought to impose, especially those pertaining to the cinema ban, could only be successful if officials could maintain control of the content, distribution and exhibition of films. As technologies continued to develop, it became harder and harder to oversee these processes. The country's cinema ban only made sense while the government was able to maintain control over the kinds of films people watched. In the absence of such control, it was no longer meaningful, and cinemas reopening offered more control.

Saudi National Day

By the end of the 1979–2005 period, religious extremism in Saudi Arabia had reached a peak after more than two decades of patriarchal practices by the leaders of the Islamic Awakening and the state. Cinema in the country had suffered, as had most of the creative, cultural and entertainment industries, as most of these activities were prohibited by religious scholars. Prince Abdullah bin Abdulaziz ascended to power after the death of King Fahd in the summer of 2005. Since 2005, a new nationalist

ideology has flourished in the country. Nationalism “unites the country around common values to accomplish things that people could never manage alone” (The Economist, 2016). In Saudi Arabia, one of its most prominent manifestations is the organisation of official celebrations of Saudi National Day, a national holiday. One of the most important reasons for the state’s adoption of nationalism is to mitigate the influence of the religious, such as religious scholars and the leaders of the Islamic Awakening (Alhussein, 2019). A Saudi researcher at the European Council on Foreign Relations points out that the nationalist mobilisation by King Abdullah is strikingly similar to the state-sponsored religious mobilisation in the 1980s, which, according to the researcher, ultimately backfired (Alhussein, 2019). King Abdullah has adopted nationalism to balance the influence of religion and its scholars with the state’s influence on citizens’ lives. This has led the state to vary its communication with society between nationalist and religious discourse.

Despite Saudi Arabian rulers’ adherence to the Islamic religion and it being the main component in the establishment of the state, King Abdullah deviated from the approach of previous kings in 2005. Saudi National Day is not the only a result of the new nationalism. For example, a course of national education was added as a compulsory subject for students at all levels. This was met with great opposition from the leaders of the Islamic Awakening, both from the pulpits of mosques and through the media. The state did not pay attention to this sharp religious criticism but moved forward in promoting nationalism throughout society, balancing the importance of religion with the importance of the homeland. Nationalism continued to develop in Saudi Arabia until 2015, when King Salman came to power, and then began what Professor Madawi Al-rasheed called “hyper-nationalism”, in which the ruling establishment increasingly emphasises nationalism (Kinninmont, 2017, p. 23). The

political conditions in the region, a sharp drop in oil prices (on which the Saudi government depends) and two changes to who holds the position of crown prince in just two years made hyper-nationalism an ideal way to unite the country.

One of the most prominent manifestations of hyper-nationalism is social media influencers switching from referring to “Saudi Arabia” to “the Great Saudi”. Hyper-nationalism is defined as “an extreme form of nationalism that perpetuates a belief in the superiority of one’s country and/or a particular race or class of persons within that country” (Khan, 2016, p. 81). In 2015, hyper-nationalism helped the state gain the support of conservative and liberal theologians and all segments of society during the Yemen war and for Saudi Vision 2030.

Conclusion

Saudi Arabia is widely considered one of the ideological and economic leaders of the Muslim world, especially as it is home to some of the holiest cities and locations in Islam, particularly Mecca, which attracts millions of pilgrims every year. Leading up to 1979, despite its position in the Muslim world, the country had developed a social system and way of life that religious leaders saw as immoral and generally lacking in piety. Despite years of protest against the deterioration of social and religious norms in the state and the shift from the strictest forms of Islam, the leadership at that time did not heed the complaints of religious leaders and conservatives.

Ultimately, two major events changed this. First, the attack on Mecca resulted in the Islamic Awakening. Led by a group whose ideologies focused on Islam in its simplest, most literal sense, the attacks on Mecca were shocking. The worshippers did not understand what was going on, and the government had not expected it. The result was that many worshippers died at the hands of the attackers who had smuggled guns

into the prayer location. Although these murders were condemned, the main idea and ideology the attackers preached were not. Religious leaders believed the country had indeed moved too far from the purest form of Islam and therefore needed to return to the basics. One of the suggestions by religious leaders was to ban cinemas and restrict the arts.

The second event that resulted in the prohibition of cinemas and suppression of the arts in Saudi Arabia was the Iranian Revolution. This revolution was considered successful as it established a new regime and religious and social order in Iran. The success of the Iranian Revolution was associated with the emergence of Shiite leadership in the Islamic world. Moreover, it put the Saudi political leadership under great pressure to give Saudi Sunni scholars a greater place in decision-making. Under pressure from religious leaders at home and from overzealous rivals abroad, Saudi Arabia had to make drastic changes to appease both. What followed was the implementation of the cinema ban in 1979 and the early 1980s.

Despite the ban, films, particularly foreign films, continued being produced, distributed and exhibited in Saudi Arabia. Films were legally distributed on television and informally circulated via file sharing and streaming. Over time, new technologies, like television, VHS, DVDs and the internet changed the balance of power. Soon it became just as easy, and perhaps even easier, to access films than it would have been had cinemas not been banned. Leading up to 2005, it became clear that prohibiting cinema was not necessarily a practical solution to the problems raised by religious leaders.

Chapter 3: Rotana and the Revival of Film in Saudi Arabia

Rotana is a major media group in the Middle East founded in 1987, and it includes a film production company, television channels, radio stations and a music company.

Rotana has played a pivotal role in supporting the film industry in Saudi Arabia. This chapter explores the details of Rotana's role in supporting production, distribution and exhibition in Saudi Arabia during King Abdullah's rule of the country from 2005 to 2015. At that time, according to researchers such as Naomi Sakr (2012), Rotana was the only player in the industry. Saudi Arabia produced only three films during this period, namely, *Keif al-Hal?*, *Menahi* and *Wadjda*. These films were all produced by Rotana and each had challenges and unique conditions. For instance, *Keif al-Hal?* could not be shot or exhibited in Saudi Arabia but was distributed there via DVD. *Menahi* could not be filmed in Saudi Arabia, but it was exhibited in Saudi Arabia and abroad. *Wadjda* was shot in Saudi Arabia and exhibited there and abroad, and it won awards at several prestigious film festivals.

This chapter focuses on the roles of Rotana and its owner Prince Al-Waleed Ibn Talal because Rotana and Al-Waleed, with his political and financial influence, were important to keeping the industry alive. The mere survival of the industry, even without progress, was an achievement at that stage, given the strength of the opposition to cinema from religious institutions. The conflict between religious scholars and their followers on one side and Rotana and the political leadership on the other was at its height during the screening of *Menahi*. Religious scholars' opposition to the cinema had greatly damaged the industry and was responsible for its lack of investors. Therefore, this chapter investigates Rotana's significant role in reviving the industry and financing films while underestimating the economic and political

consequences of film production. This chapter is based on press interviews of Prince Al-Waleed, Ayman Halawani, Haifaa Al-Mansour and Meshaal Al-Mutairi as well as a personal interview with Tariq Al-Harbi, one of the leading actors in *Menahi*. The chapter is divided into four parts: the first focuses on the roles of Prince Al-Waleed and Rotana; the second focuses on *Keif al-Hal?*; the third, *Menahi* and the last, *Wadjda*.

Prince Al-Waleed and Rotana Group

This section narrates part of Rotana's history and the prince's attitudes and activities and by doing so, it explores the challenges presented by the opposition from religious authorities and social conservatism towards openness and expression through films.

To understand the roles of the Rotana Group and its owner Prince Al-Waleed bin Talal, one must understand the political and religious context of Saudi Arabia in 2005. In August 2005, King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz became the ruler after the death of his brother, King Fahd bin Abdulaziz. King Abdullah sought many social changes almost immediately, the most important of which was his support for openness and social reform, especially because of the global pressure on Saudi Arabia after the 11 September 2001 terrorist attack in the US (Sakr, 2012). After 2005, the "faltering return of cinema" in Saudi Arabia began, and it was linked to a series of unclear trade-offs involving religious institutions and princes and their business interests (Sakr, 2012. p. 211). The 11 September terrorist attack also motivated the new King to reduce the authority of religious scholars over society. The terrorist attack was a shock to the Saudi political leadership, which began trying to balance the demands and expectations of conservatives and religious scholars on the one hand and liberal and open-minded people on the other. Therefore, the start of King Abdullah's reign

was an ideal time to consider the return of cinema in the country and develop the film industry to produce films locally rather than abroad.

Rulership in Saudi Arabia is via monarchical succession. The great princes are the sons and grandsons of King Abdulaziz, and they dominate the younger princes. The closer a prince is to the king, the more influence on the king's decisions he has. With generations of princes in key positions at all levels of the government, contacts with government figures are seen as essential to running businesses in Saudi Arabia. Hence, these princes have significant influence over business activity in Saudi Arabia, and as they have stronger relationships with the king, they can do what others cannot, and thus the development of the cinema was possible because of the prince's patronage (Sakr, 2012). Most cinematic work related to the production, distribution and exhibition sectors in Saudi Arabia during this period was subordinate to one of two men: Prince Al-Waleed bin Talal, the King's nephew or Sheikh Waleed Al Ibrahim, King Fahd's brother-in-law (Sakr, 2012). These two powerful men competed in the television and film industry, and each had his own company: bin Talal owned the Rotana Group and Al Ibrahim owned the Middle East Broadcasting Center (MBC) Group. The personal business interests of princes and other influential people led to their support of the cinema and filmmaking. Their personal interests proved essential to the emerging industry in the 2000s and 2010s.

Prince Al-Waleed bin Talal was not only a political powerhouse within the country but also a successful businessman. In 2005, *Forbes* magazine ranked the prince the eighth richest person in the world, with estimated wealth of \$20 billion (Dagher, 2006). The prince was a shareholder in several US companies such as Time Warner, Disney and News Corporation. He also acquired, through Rotana Group, the world's largest library of Arabic music and films. Rotana channels, such as Rotana

Cinema and Rotana Zaman, screened films produced by the prince. In 2006 the *New York Times* described Rotana as one of the fastest-growing media companies in the Middle East and described the prince as a person who “commands special power within Saudi Arabia” (Fattah, 2006). However, religious scholars saw the prince as corrupt and made serious accusations against him, such as that he sought to destroy society’s values and was hostile to religion. Scholars used mosques, universities, schools and summer camps to attack him. In February 2009, one of those scholars issued an edict against Prince Al-Waleed and demanded his prosecution by the general prosecutor (Khalaf, 2009). Despite the prince’s political influence and financial strength, his efforts were overwhelmingly rejected because of the influence of the religious scholars and their control over mosques, universities, schools and summer camps.

Prince Al-Waleed demonstrated openness to criticism, so he did not retaliate his opponents, but he did face off with the Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice (CPVPV). The CPVPV managed to stop most of the prince’s initiatives related to cinema and music. For instance, in 2005, the prince influenced government authorities to allow him to open a movie theatre for children (Fattah, 2006). However, within a few weeks of its opening, the CPVPV issued an order to close the theatre. The prince claimed that nothing in Islam prohibits films and that he had researched the matter himself (Fattah, 2006). Although the prince was not known as a social or human rights activist, he pointed out that he seeks, through his films, to correct a major mistake, and he tells young people that they deserve entertainment and that they have the right to watch films and listen to music (Fattah, 2006). The prince considers these rights for youth, whereas religious scholars and the CPVPV consider them forbidden and want them eliminated without exception.

Therefore, the prince's confrontations with the CPVPV began as his political influence increased, and they have revolved around the emancipation of women and supporting cinema and music.

From 2005 to 2015, despite these two powerful figures leading the television, cinema, theatre and music sectors in the country, their confrontations with their opponents differed significantly. These confrontations caused one to step back and head to Dubai, while the other remained in Saudi Arabia. Al Ibrahim chose not to continue confronting the opposition from religious scholars and the CPVPV. Instead, he focused on developing his television channels and supporting films by broadcasting from outside Saudi Arabia. However, Prince Al-Waleed stayed to face the CPVPV and declared that he was seeking to effect social change in Saudi Arabia. The prince indicated that he believes in social change and progress (Fattah, 2006). He stated that he aims to change perceptions because they are not reality and that he wants to change the way people think (Fattah, 2006). This is an implicit indication that he seeks to challenge what scholars have taught children and youth in schools, universities and mosques. When a *New York Times* reporter asked what Al-Waleed would do to confront the CPVPV if he wanted to change the way people think, the prince said he would face them with logic and rationality (Fattah, 2006). One argument that supported Al-Waleed in front of the political leadership is that the strong influence of religious scholars in the country led to a minority of extremists secretly participating in the events of 11 September. Therefore, although Al-Waleed had produced many Arab films in countries such as Egypt and Lebanon before 2001, after the terrorist attack and the beginning of King Abdullah's rule, the prince shifted to supporting the film industry in Saudi Arabia.

Al-Waleed spoke out against the prevailing opinion and in favour of supporting the film industry, and his media statements and interviews were followed by swift action. Within several months after the new king took office in August 2005, Al-Waleed began implementing his plans. According to an April 2006 *New York Times* article, the prince built many commercial theatres, some of which were constructed without the necessary licences or legal status (Fattah, 2006). The article indicated that the prince sought to embarrass the authorities and force them to allow cinema inside the country (Fattah, 2006). The prince wanted to support the growth of the film industry in the country, which was very small at that time and only produced short films and documentaries (Dowd, 2006). Despite a heavy bureaucracy that delayed progress, Al-Waleed was able to build many theatres in several cities within several months. However, these theatres never opened and were stopped by the government without explanation. Thus, instead of becoming commercial theatres, they became private theatres for hotels and cultural centres. The lack of a statement or clarification regarding the government's actions is typical of political and religious conflicts in Saudi Arabia, which are characterised by ambiguity and non-disclosure.

Al-Waleed's vision and ambition to bring about social change required the assistance of experts knowledgeable about Saudi culture. Al-Waleed hired Ayman Halawani as a producer and made him the head of production at Rotana's film division. Mr Halawani was educated in the West and lived in the US for sixteen years. He also had extensive experience in film production and financing. Halawani's openness and experience in the US coincided with Prince Al-Waleed's interests and vision, so he was a suitable choice for Rotana. Halawani had a great ambition to make films in Saudi Arabia (Dowd, 2006). After Halawani joined Rotana, he indicated that he aimed not only to promote cinema in the country but to support the industry and

produce many feature films. Halawani stated that Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries are only one-tenth of the population of the Middle East, but they are enormously wealthy. Therefore, Halawani saw Saudi Arabia as “a massive untapped market” and bet on its view of cinema transforming over time (Dowd, 2006). Thus Al-Waleed benefited from hiring Halawani because they shared the same ideas about entertainment and openness. In addition, they are both Saudi and well aware of the very conservative culture and the influence of religious scholars in the country.

Prince Al-Waleed was considered the most important supporter of Saudi cinema (Al-Bishri, 2009), and Rotana dominated the Saudi film industry from 2005 to 2009 (Sakr, 2012). However, despite Al-Waleed’s statements and interviews conveying strength and confidence, he did not achieve the promised results. Al-Waleed was enthusiastic about opening theatres and making Saudi films locally, but his opponents managed to prevent him from fulfilling most of his promises. The prince and his team at Rotana promised to produce plenty of Saudi films and establish several movie theatres. These theatres did not open, and of the dozens of films produced by Rotana and the hundreds of films screened through its channels, only three were Saudi films: *Keif al-Hal?*, *Menahi* and *Wadjda*. Al-Waleed and Halawani announced several times in the media that one of their main goals was to support local industry, but *Keif al-Hal?* was shot in Dubai and *Menahi* in Egypt. *Wadjda* was the only film shot in Saudi Arabia. The obstacles and challenges Al-Waleed faced were greater than he had imagined based on the tone of his interviews and speeches, and he only overcame the opposition in a few projects, such as filming *Wadjda* in Saudi Arabia. There may have been some trade-offs between he, the political leaders and the religious scholars, as he was unable to open the movie theatres he built, but he was able to screen *Menahi* in several cities and *Wadjda* for one day before the screenings

were stopped. The *Menahi* and *Wadjda* screenings are discussed in more detail in the following sections. These events indicate that the political leadership was trying to strike a balance between the liberal current in the country and the religious scholars who oppose any kind of openness.

Rotana's First Saudi Production, *Keif al-Hal?*

Al-Waleed and Rotana's support of Saudi film production really began with *Keif al-Hal?*. *Keif al-Hal?* is a comedy-drama film and the first Saudi production of the Arab Rotana Entertainment Company. The film portrays the tension between religious extremists and the struggle for globalisation, especially among youth, while supporting positive Islamic values. Halawani, head of the company's production department, pointed out that they considered strict Saudi social standards, specifically, "deciding what to show on the screen" (Dagher, 2006). Therefore the production team was careful not to show anything "offensive to Saudi society" to the extent that, according to Halawani, they watched the actresses' eyes during shooting to decide whether each look was socially appropriate (Dagher, 2006). Rotana exercised caution in making this film as it was the company's first real attempt to confront cinema's opponents. Although the film is a love story, it is completely "free of any romantic dalliances, hand-holding or secret dating" (Dagher, 2006). Therefore, the strict social standards were considered and honoured so that the film could be completed and released to Saudi audiences. This section argues that the case of *Keif al-Hal?* demonstrates the efforts to advance Saudi cultural expression in a climate of censorship and social conservatism and the significance of home video in fostering an emerging Saudi screen culture.

The film was released at the Cannes Film Festival in 2006 (Dowd, 2006). The film's stars are Saudi actress Hind Muhammad, Saudi actor Meshaal Al-Mutairi, who has a great deal of experience in theatre and television series, and Saudi actor Hisham Abdulrahman. Hisham Abdulrahman won the pan-Arab version of the Star Academy talent contest in 2005. Although the film was intended to support the Saudi film industry, it was shot in the UAE with a predominantly foreign crew. Dubai's film industry at that time was not significantly different from that of Saudi Arabia. However, since the early 2000s, Dubai has been attracting capital by facilitating business, including simplifying visa requirements for workers and government procedures for shooting in public places. These conveniences were not available in Saudi Arabia. The film was written by Lebanese and Egyptian writers and directed by a Palestinian-Canadian (Dagher, 2006), with a Saudi production company, Rotana, and associate producer Haifaa Al-Mansour, a female Saudi filmmaker. This combination of experience, multinationality and filming outside Saudi Arabia did not benefit the Saudi film industry as Rotana had promised, but its artistic quality was equivalent to that of Egyptian films, which are considered pioneering in the region. In addition, the use of foreign expertise and the film's production outside Saudi Arabia allowed it to be exhibited at the Cannes Film Festival and distributed in international and regional commercial movie theatres.

After the film was released at the Cannes Film Festival, international screenings of the film began in London and throughout the Middle East, except Saudi Arabia, where movie theatres were still banned at the time (Dawn, 2006). The official ban only applied to theatres, which meant that films could be distributed in the country through any other medium. Therefore, the only way to sell the film in Saudi Arabia was via DVDs through video shops. Video shops filled the role of the cinema

during the ban, and VHS was the predominant means of film distribution in Saudi Arabia during the 1980s and 1990s. In the 2000s, as discussed in Chapter 2, DVDs replaced VHS. After the film had been screened at Cannes, then London and throughout the rest of the Middle East, Rotana began showing the film on television through its Rotana Cinema channel (Fattah, 2006). Al-Waleed believes that this helped the film reach cinema fans who did not have the opportunity to watch it in theatres or buy it from video stores (Fattah, 2006). Rotana Productions benefited from their ability to use Rotana Group channels as well as video shops, which was in cities and villages throughout Saudi Arabia, to quickly distribute the film.

Making this film was difficult for Rotana, despite its experience in producing, distributing and screening Arab films. The film was difficult to make because conditions for these three sectors of the film industry in Saudi Arabia were completely different from those of other Arab countries with which Rotana had dealt. When the film was released in 2006, the vast majority of Arab countries, including the Gulf States, did not have controversy over cinema and considered it a cultural and entertainment activity. However, Saudi Arabia continued its rejectionist stance on this matter. Halawani pointed out that creating a film industry, including production, distribution and exhibition sectors, from scratch is a tall order, but it was their hope and ambition for the future (Dawn 2006). Halawani argued that after they finished this film, they observed a great hunger among Saudis to see their lives on the screen (Dawn 2006). Therefore, according to Halawani, this film is important in charting the growing role of women in Saudi Arabia. The BBC also stated that those behind the film clearly hoped it would help ease some of the social restrictions on women in this very conservative country (Dawn 2006). The difficulty of the filmmaking experience

did not deter Rotana from increasing their criticism of social and human rights issues in Saudi Arabia, especially those concerning women.

After the film was complete, it became clear that the film producer and cast had different opinions about the film. Although Al-Waleed and the Rotana team consistently indicated that their support of the cinema was for its entertainment value (Fattah, 2006), one of the main characters in the film, Khaled, was opportunistic. His appearance was a provocation to conservatives because the character was a religious person with a long beard who dressed in a style similar to al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden (Dagher, 2006). This representation suggests that there is no difference between members of the al-Qaeda terrorist organisation and the religious scholars and community conservatives. In addition, the film's actress, Hind, also stated that Saudi society is puritanical and dominated by men and that the reactions to the film are a backlash (Dagher, 2006). Hind justified her statement by pointing out that in schools, women are taught that they are weak and dishonourable and should not speak up (Dagher, 2006). Therefore, Hind wanted to prove that women can do things. However, Halawani argues that the film shows a story and the audience, not the producer, should decide what they think of it, as Rotana itself does not seek to determine what is right and wrong (Dagher, 2006). However, this argument is disingenuous because the film sends a clear anti-religious message about scholars and their followers and hints at similarities between scholars and terrorists in terms of their dress and the style of their beards. So the film linked religious conservatives with terrorists in the minds of the audience, not through a literal portrayal but through similar appearances. This film was clearly intended more for political than entertainment purposes because it portrays religiosity and opposition to globalisation, openness and change as the cause of the country's problems. This work that promotes

bold cultural expression resulted in cast and crew media interviews that were highly inconsistent.

Whatever its producers' intent, the film exceeded the typical boundaries for criticism of sensitive political and religious issues despite the production company being owned by the king's nephew. Many Western newspapers indicated that the film pushed for openness, and the *New York Times* pointed out that the film presents "delicate questions about social oppression" (Fattah, 2006). The actor Al-Mutairi, who played Khaled's extremist character, indicated that no change will happen within the country as long as many in Saudi society consider "a desire for modernity and self-expression through arts" such as cinema to be "an immoral attachment with Western values" (Dagher, 2006). Al-Mutairi claims he was the last to graduate from the theatre division of the media department at the King Saud University in Riyadh before it closed in 2000. Although universities are more open than other institutions, such as schools, literary and cultural clubs, and less dominated by religious scholars, there was, according to Al-Mutairi's description, a group of hard-line professors who fought to stop the closure of the theatre division of the media department (Dagher, 2006). In a bold press interview, Al-Mutairi pointed out that creative space is limited because of the government's intolerance of all forms of political expression, but at the same time, the government is fighting suspected al-Qaeda fighters bent on overthrowing the monarchy (Dagher, 2006). Al-Mutairi statement implied that such strong intolerance of freedom of expression may lead the young to migrate towards terrorist organisations to overthrow the monarchy (Dagher, 2006). Although Al-Mutairi and the other Saudis who worked on this film agreed with the visions of Al-Waleed and the Rotana Company, the film was the last project on which Al-Mutairi worked with Rotana, possibly because Al-Mutairi linked the state's

suppression of freedom of expression with terrorist organisations. Al-Waleed has always sought to confront the opponents of cinema, but he did not go as far in his criticism and descriptions as Al-Mutairi. The film contributed to pushing openness and transcending the traditional boundaries that are typically avoided, delving into sensitive issues of politics and religion.

Adapting a Beloved Television Character to Film

In 2005, Saudi state television produced a series called *My Brothers, Sisters* (2005). The well-known Saudi actor Fayez Al-Malki played the lead character, named Menahi. Menahi is an uneducated Bedouin, lacking knowledge of the simplest technical matters, pretending to understand too much and, sometimes, trying to fool others. The character dressed similarly to those who lived in the desert three decades prior, such that the outward appearance and manner of speech were authentically Bedouin. The series achieved great success because of this character being performed in an entertainingly comic manner, which led the MBC Group to convince Al-Malki to leave state television to play the starring role in a new series, *Between Me and You*, in which Al-Malki portrayed Menahi in the first and second seasons in 2007 and 2008. Although the character did not change or develop, it retained its resonance and was a great success. After the success of the character Menahi in *My Brothers, Sisters* and then *Between Me and You* seasons one and two, Rotana persuaded Al-Malki to collaborate with the company to produce a film using the name and character of Menahi. Al-Malki agreed, and after filming the third season of *Between Me and You*, he withdrew from the series and went to Rotana. Before playing this character, Al-Malki had played more than 180 characters over 20 years (Al-Suhaimi, 2007), but Menahi changed Al-Malki's career. *Menahi's* production and release show the

intersections and frictions between Saudi television and film and further indicate the conservative social attitudes of filmmakers and producers.

After Rotana produced and distributed *Keif al-Hal?* in 2006 and the Menahi character had become popular with audiences, Rotana started producing another film, *Menahi*. The character Menahi had appeared on MBC channels for two years, watched by audiences throughout the Middle East and North Africa. This made it an ideal opportunity for Rotana to produce a film based on the character. In 2008, the film was produced in Egypt with an Arab crew, and Saudis were limited to acting roles and the production's senior management. Although *Keif al-Hal?* addressed sensitive topics and criticises religious scholars, *Menahi* (2008) is the opposite. It presents a comedic story without delving into controversial or sensitive topics related to religion or politics, possibly because the film's star, Al-Malki, is known for his support of religious scholars and has always refused to criticise them, the leaders of the Islamic Awakening or other Islamists. His brother Dr Ali Al-Malki is a religious scholar and advocates Islamic activity.

Rotana began promoting the film in the fourth quarter of 2008. Al-Waleed managed to obtain the approval of his cousin, Prince Khalid Al Faisal, the Governor of Makkah Province. Although Prince Khalid's father, King Faisal, was conservative and inclined to support religious scholars, his son is inclined to support liberalism and steps towards openness and has been described by some in the international media as a reformist (*The Guardian*, 2008). With Prince Khalid's approval, Rotana began preparing to screen the film in cultural centres in Jeddah and Taif. Prince Khaled's approval was conditional on following the demands of the CPVPV, specifically to prevent mixing by having screenings for men in one theatre and screenings for women in another. In addition to avoiding mixing inside the theatre, the building had

to have separate entrances for men and women (Abeer, 2009). Despite these conditions, the opponents of cinema were angry and opposed the screenings; however, this time the second most important religious figure (after the Grand Mufti) in the country at the time and the General Chairman of the CPVPV, Sheikh Ibrahim Al-Ghaith, made a statement to the media. Al-Ghaith stated that cinema is evil and argued that the position of religious institutions regarding cinema is clear because it is an evil, needless tool and the country has had enough of its evils (*The Guardian*, 2008). Despite the severity of this statement, he issued a counterstatement less than 24 hours later, saying that cinema could be tolerated if the film did not violate Islamic law. Despite his retreat from his original statement, a royal order was issued to remove him as chair of the CPVPV a few weeks later.

The General Chairman of the CPVPV retracting his statement regarding screening films in cultural centres did not stop the opposition. After the CPVPV failed to stop the screenings of *Menahi*, the religious scholars used other means to pressure the government, the most important of which was confronting the King in person. Before confronting the King, the CPVPV had arrested a group of Saudi actors while they were filming a television show in a Riyadh hotel (Allam, 2009). The actors were detained for one week for violating the strict rules about gender segregation. After this arrest became a public opinion issue in Saudi Arabia, the actors were released. Two weeks later, the confrontation with the state developed into a petition to the King. Religious hardliners usually reside in central Saudi Arabia in Riyadh or Qassim Province, far from the city of Jeddah in western Saudi Arabia. Nevertheless, hardliners used some of the citizens of Jeddah to present a petition in the name of “the people of Jeddah” signed by dozens of prominent religious scholars (Allam, 2009). The petition repeated the complaint about cinema and stated that it involves spreading

corruption, warning that it cannot be tolerated. The religious scholars asked the King, in the past, cinema has always been rejected as evil in the Holy Land, how is it that it has “become permissible in your reign?” (Allam, 2009). The *Financial Times* indicated that this petition was in response to Rotana’s announcement that it would like to produce several more films. After this petition was submitted, a new Minister of Culture and Information was appointed and, according to the *Financial Times*, the new minister was explicitly under pressure to clamp down on the media (Allam, 2009). What is notable about these events is the behaviour of the religious scholars and institutions, as if they rule the country rather than the King and his family. In addition, they bypassed the ministries and were not afraid to suspend entertainment, cultural or other events by force, even if their actions did not comply with their own standards.

Not satisfied with the results from their previous methods, the opponents of cinema exploited conservative channels to promote their position. The Daleel Channel broadcast a television programme entitled *The Witness About Cinema in Saudi Arabia* in which Dr Mohamad Alsaidi represented religious scholars and the official spokesman for Rotana Productions, Ibrahim Badi, represented the film *Menahi*. Alsaidi began by attacking cinema and citing a few studies on the negative effects of cinema on family, women and children in the US (Moftrs, 2009). Then Alsaidi warned that the country should not make the mistakes that countries with cinemas have made. Badi defended *Menahi* and asked Alsaidi why he rejected the film. Alsaidi responded that it was because of gender mixing, Badi responded that all of the screenings of *Menahi* in Riyadh, Jeddah and Taif were without gender mixing. This weakened Alsaidi’s argument, and he replied, gathering people to view *Menahi* is a forbidden meeting (Moftrs, 2009). Alsaidi claimed that the *Menahi* screenings were a

pretext for introducing corruption into Saudi Arabia and that gender mixing had entered countries such as Egypt and Syria through such activities (Moftrs, 2009). Alsaïdi tried to portray the screenings of *Menahi* as contrary to the opinions of Saudi society. Notably, religious scholars often claim rejection by society in general to justify their opposition to something.

After religious scholars' attempts to prevent *Menahi* from being screened were unsuccessful, their attacks on cinema and its supporters became irrational, and they resorted to superficial claims. For instance, Dr Yusuf Al-Ahmad, one of the most prominent scholars of Islamic jurisprudence and a professor at Imam Muhammad bin Saud Islamic University, issued a fatwa against Rotana's owner. He demanded the imprisonment of Al-Waleed because he considered him as dangerous to society as a drug dealer, likening Al-Waleed's owning channels that broadcast films and his production of films for screening in Saudi Arabia to drug dealing (Abu-Nas, 2009). Ironically, not only is Al-Ahmad a jurisprudence scholar at a Saudi university but he was the head of the author team for Islamic curricula, including the jurisprudence curriculum for all Saudi schools. Therefore, cinema supporters faced powerful opponents in government institutions, especially in the ministries that directly influence youth, such as universities and the Ministry of Education. This explains why religious scholars have always claimed that they represent society, because they design curricula for schools and universities, give weekly sermons in mosques and run summer camps for school and university students.

Some observers of the heated events between the film's producers and religious scholars offer a different explanation for the wrath of the religious scholars and their actions during that period. According to a Saudi television executive, who wishes to remain anonymous, the religious scholars in Saudi Arabia face two major

problems (Khalaf, 2009). The first problem is that if they do not object to film screenings, film content can open society and lead to reform and change. The executive notes that films create hopes and dreams and thus may make it difficult to indoctrinate people who are more open (Khalaf, 2009). The second problem, according to the executive, is that the recognition of cinema is a threat to the continued separation of the sexes in public (Khalaf, 2009). At the time the film was screened, the political and religious leadership agreed on the prohibition of gender mixing. Thus, if religious scholars tolerated cinema, they would have to deal with these two issues.

The events surrounding *Menahi* occurred for one important reason: Rotana and MBC broadcast *Keif al-Hal?* and other non-Saudi films from outside Saudi Arabia. Although *Menahi* was a comedy without any religious criticism (unlike *Keif al-Hal?*) the religious scholars were shocked when the halls were opened in the cultural centres. After three decades of no movie theatres, *Menahi* was the first film to overcome the ban in Saudi Arabia (Abu-Nas, 2009). The film was screened in three theatres in Riyadh, Jeddah and Taif through cultural centres, and Rotana sold more than 25,000 tickets (Abu-Nas, 2009). Despite a comprehensive campaign of religious opposition, with media support from conservative channels and an attempt to portray society as rejecting of the film, five theatres accommodated more than 25,000 cinema lovers to view it. Although the authorities in Riyadh did not allow women to attend the show, more than 9,000 tickets were sold to women in Jeddah and Taif. Badi points out that Rotana did not receive permission for women to attend as the Riyadh authorities were more conservative than those in the Emirate of Makkah Province (Abu-Nasr, 2009). This is proof that there was a significant number who believed in

cinema in Saudi Arabia and wanted to exercise their rights without having to travel abroad to watch films in theatres.

Rotana sought to commercialise the popularity of the *Menahi* character and benefited from international media coverage; however, one of the film's actors did not regard Saudi films as significant, preferring television work instead. Tariq Al-Harbi (2019) stated that his participation in the film was his first and last film experience, despite the film successfully recouping its budget at the box office. Al-Harbi was happy to participate in the film and cooperate with Rotana, but he did not consider films worthwhile compared with television series (Al-Harbi, 2019). Al-Harbi stated that he enjoys the follow-up and interest from local audiences that occurs with series but not films. Al-Harbi believed that as movie theatres were banned at the time, films were only screened abroad, so few Saudis would know about the film or its actors (Al-Harbi, 2019). When he participates in a project, Al-Harbi aspires to reach Saudi audiences first, then citizens of the other Gulf countries and, finally, those of other Arab countries. He believes that Saudi series attract local and regional audiences unlike films, which attract only a regional audience (Al-Harbi, 2019). Certainly, banning movie theatres and not regulating video stores to allow them to operate legally does nothing to stimulate investment in Saudi film production. Therefore, series are considered a safer investment than films and are more popular with Saudi audiences.

Rotana's goal was not to make money from *Menahi*. Al-Harbi pointed out that Rotana spent millions of Saudi riyals without considering the film's economic viability. Rotana was also interested in participating in the distribution and exhibition of *Menahi*, which was beyond the company's usual scope, but it wanted to support the Saudi film industry. However, Al-Harbi emphasised that the film industry needed

significant reforms and development (Al-Harbi, 2019). Al-Harbi disagrees with those who oppose government censorship of films and asserts that censorship is important (Al-Harbi, 2019). Al-Harbi cited what happened with *Menahi*, a screenplay the Ministry of Culture and Information (the ministry in charge of approving screenplays before the creation of the GCAM) approved. Al-Harbi stressed that the ministry did not request the amendment or deletion of any scene or word in the film (Al-Harbi, 2019). Thus, Al-Harbi believes the problem was the absence of a Saudi film industry and infrastructure, not censorship. Censorship and its application in Saudi Arabia are discussed in more depth in Chapter 6. *Menahi* was part of Al-Waleed's goal, which is to lead social progress through Rotana Group, and achieving this goal matters more to Rotana than profit does despite Rotana being a company that generally pursues profits.

***Wadjda* (2012), Testing Cultural Boundaries Again**

After struggling for years to produce Saudi films and overcoming numerous obstacles, Rotana finally produced a Saudi film that received widespread acclaim and won awards at prestigious film festivals. That film is *Wadjda* (2012), directed by the first female film director in Saudi Arabia, Haifaa Al-Mansour. What distinguishes this film from Rotana's previous films is that it was the first film shot entirely inside the country and written and directed by a Saudi national. Given that at the time, the country still had a ban on women and men mixing in public, Al-Mansour had to direct the film while sitting in a van segregated from the men. From this vantage point, Al-Mansour oversaw the entire production process, guided the cast and communicated with the crew via walkie-talkie (Atakav, 2013). Al-Mansour stresses that while producing *Wadjda*, she respected the laws of the country, and she

personally made sure that none of the rules were broken (Lapin, 2013). Al-Mansour sought to make her film successful by not subjecting the production to efforts by the CPVPV or police to stop or suspend it. Having shooting permits from GCAM does not mean that shooting will not be stopped if the country's laws or social conduct rules, such as segregation, are violated. Therefore, the best solution for Al-Mansour was to stay inside the van to avoid being seen by a pedestrian who might contact the authorities. *Wajda* and the career development of its director, Haifaa Al-Mansour, further indicate how Saudi producers dynamically use screen media to tell Saudi stories and to expand the boundaries of expression within the country, in this case addressing not just to local but also international audiences. At the same time, local critiques of the film demonstrate the contested environment confronting Saudi filmmakers, particularly women such as Al-Mansour or others testing the cultural boundaries.

Al-Mansour's career is one of the most significant indirect outcomes of video shops in Saudi Arabia. It is essential to recognise the significant contribution of video shops in supporting the country's cinema and fostering interest in film, particularly among young people. Al-Mansour notes that when she was young, she watched many films, not in theatres but on VHS (Lapin, 2013). Al-Mansour was influenced by the films rented in these stores, and her favourite films were US, Chinese and Indian films. Al-Mansour imagined herself in the films, so although Al-Mansour lived in a small country, the films gave her strength and imagination that allowed her to "travel" away from her hometown (Lapin, 2013). Al-Mansour describes the world in which she lived as small, but the films exposed her to ideas and feelings that she had not felt or experienced in her hometown (Lapin, 2013). Thus began Mansour's emotional attachment to the world of filmmaking, even though she could not have known that

she would go on to study in Sydney to obtain a master's degree in cinema and then become an internationally acclaimed filmmaker.

When Al-Mansour obtained Rotana's approval to produce the script, she needed professional actors. For professional, experienced and popular actors, the television industry provided the obvious talent pool. Al-Mansour wanted actress Reem Abdullah to play the role of Wadjda's mother and described her as a great television actress who was shocked when she was asked to participate in the film (Lapin, 2013). Noting that the theatre ban had led people to focus on television series rather than films, Al-Mansour stated that Abdullah initially refused to join the production because film as an art form did not exist in Saudi Arabia at that time. Al-Mansour tried several times and sent Abdullah the script many times to convince her before she finally agreed (Lapin, 2013). Abdullah's reluctance was based on a preference for series over films, like that of Al-Harbi as discussed previously in this chapter. In Saudi Arabia, it is difficult for TV actors, especially the most popular, to participate in films because they have established careers and would not see a need to move to perhaps more precarious or less widely seen film work. In addition, actors usually make less money from films compared with television series.

Rotana garnered significant international attention for *Wadjda*. The film participated in dozens of international festivals, with 22 wins and 33 nominations (Al-Mansour, 2012). Among the most important festivals at which the film won accolades were the Los Angeles Film Festival, the Dubai International Film Festival, the Venice Film Festival, where it won the CinemAvvenire award, and the 67th British Academy Film Awards, for which it was nominated for the Best Film Not in the English Language award (Al-Mansour, 2012). This international presence was unprecedented for Saudi films, which had participated at the regional festival level but

not annually. Commenting on this achievement, Prince Al-Waleed described Rotana as representing the face of social progress in Saudi Arabia and stated that Rotana would continue to make social progress (Trade Arabia, 2012). Al-Mansour emphasised her commitment to women's rights and women's issues in Saudi Arabia and claimed that as a woman who lives there, she wants to tell stories about her and her sisters because she wants to promote social change (Concannon, 2013). One of the most significant factors for the film's recognition is that it was the first film to focus on the sensitive issues faced by Saudi women and their suffering in the male-dominated society – such as the cultural veneration of virginity and the parallel phenomenon of child brides – and it was narrated by its female director.

The film's story revolves around a rebellious ten-year-old girl, Wadjda, who overcomes difficulties and obstacles to own a bicycle. To achieve this socially forbidden goal, Wadjda had to achieve something socially approved, participating in a competition for memorising the Noble Quran in school. Wadjda's goal was to buy a bicycle with the prize money because her father would not buy her a bicycle because she is female, and girls traditionally do not ride bicycles in Saudi society. A strong scene in the film is when Wadjda is secretly learning to ride the bicycle on the roof of their house, but when her mother finds her, she panics, falls off the bike and hurts her knee, causing it to bleed. Although she was a child and it was a simple thing, her mother felt shame and covered her face when she saw her daughter bleed. Interestingly, the mother's imagination went so far as thinking that Wadjda had lost her virginity when she fell off the bike and bled. This scene could be painful for girls who grew up in this culture or a similar one.

The father character in the film was particularly important because he made the decisions at home, and he could allow or refuse Wadjda owning a bicycle. The

father was also going to marry a second wife at his mother's insistence because his current wife had not given him a son. However, the father was not very present in the film, and the symbolism of this may only be noticed by someone deeply familiar with the country's culture. Nothing in the Islamic religion prevents a man from spending most of his free time with his wife, but the film depicts the culture of Saudi conservatives. As men in this segment of Saudi society usually do not spend much time at home, when a man has free time, he spends it with his relatives and friends away from home. Therefore, a man spends most of his time with men, and a woman spends most of her time with her children or her female neighbours.

Al-Mansour indicated that she wanted to attract the Saudi audience and make them feel that this film represents them, unlike foreign films that do not represent the lives of Saudis (Lapin, 2013). The film depicts Saudi life realistically in terms of location, from the home to the neighbourhood to the school, and these locations give the audience a greater connection with the film, unlike other Saudi films that have been shot inside studios or outside Saudi Arabia. Therefore the film specifically portrays Saudi streets in an avowedly authentic way and gives a rarely seen intimate view of Saudi middle-class life.

Although the film deals with many women's issues and struggles, they are portrayed in a simple and uncomplicated story. A qualitative exploration of the positive psychology concepts in *Wadjda* points out that its storytelling is "unique" and unobtrusively conveys "vital messages" (Deb, 2016, p. 531). The study indicates that the film was simple and positive in its storytelling as only "positive emotions, warmth, and hope for change" are transmitted, and they stay with the audience long after the film ends (Deb, 2016, p. 531). The film does not present Wadjda's father as bad, but rather as a traditional father who loves his wife and little girl but must follow

conservative notions. These conservative notions include marrying a second wife who might give him the son his first wife has not (Deb, 2016). One advantage of Al-Mansour's story is that she has been able to strike a balance between highlighting injustice to women and reducing her status and developmental role in society, while giving hope that change is possible. For instance, despite the great restrictions and suffering of the women in the film, its closing scene offers an optimistic tone, as Wadjda achieves her goal and rides her bicycle to the main street that is crowded with cars and then smiles, indicating that the next challenge is driving a car. The film particularly offers optimism for progressive-minded women and anyone who favours women's basic rights.

Several scholarly studies, such as that of Deb (2016), and media outlets, such as Trade Arabia (2012), have described *Wadjda* as “revolutionary” because of the bravery required to discuss such sensitive topics in a very conservative society and because it was written and directed by a woman who had been exposed to circumstances similar to those in the film. In a press interview, Al-Mansour indicated that she did not seek to be a feminist with *Wadjda* (Concannon, 2013). She added that she wants to tell stories about her and her sisters, and there are many women's rights issues in Saudi Arabia. In the same interview, Al-Mansour stated that she has a daughter that she wants to have a better life and to be respected by men and allowed to live freely, but Saudi Arabia still has a long way to go to achieve this (Concannon, 2013). Al-Mansour asserts that women still need to fight and voice their demands, and filmmaking is one way to achieve this (Concannon, 2013). These statements may seem contradictory, as Al-Mansour denies being a feminist, then demands a fight, expresses demands and complains about the lack of rights for women in the country. The term “feminism” is controversial in conservative circles, and not just in Saudi

Arabia, even if the actual principles of feminism are widely supported in words if not deeds. Al-Mansour clearly sought to appeal to both parties, the government and women in Saudi society, as talking about feminism, especially at the time of the press interview in 2012, could have ended Al-Mansour's career in filmmaking and caused her to be imprisoned for an indefinite period. Therefore, walking a fine line between the government and her career was a way for Al-Mansour to continue expressing her ideas in films.

As discussed, the film highlights the suffering of women in Saudi society. Notably, the screenplay and film include some geographic and cultural inconsistencies that commentators have not addressed in depth. Among these is the fact that the husband's absences were because he worked in the Aramco fields. The Aramco fields are in the eastern region of the country, far from Riyadh, where the film's events take place. The second issue is that the husband, despite his love for his wife, was considering marrying another because his wife had not had a boy. This rarely occurs, and if it does, it is usually after the mother has given birth to at least four or five daughters. In such cases there is social pressure on the father to marry another woman because his first wife has not given birth to a son. Therefore, it is not fair to society for the film to portray that after a woman has had one girl, a husband would marry another woman who might give birth to a boy because this does not happen often, and if it does, it is usually after the wife has given birth many times. Despite these minor inaccuracies, the film presents the hardship of being a female in Saudi society at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

What is notable about the screenplay is that the family is portrayed as traditional, meaning socially very conservative. A family that forbids its daughter from riding a bicycle would not have a wife who works in a hospital. At the time this

film was produced, Saudi social norms did not allow women to work in hospitals, which involves gender mixing. Therefore, because of social pressure, women cannot study medicine or any health specialities because after graduation, they would work in the gender-mixed work environment of hospitals. A contradiction in this film is that the husband married a woman who works in a hospital, did not object to her gender-mixed work and allowed her to be driven to work alone by a foreign driver, another significant social issue, but the daughter is not allowed to ride a bicycle. The film focuses on women's rights but neglects the two biggest problems facing women at that time: gender-mixed work and riding in a car with a foreign driver. Instead, it focuses on a small problem: cycling. The first two problems are common in Saudi homes, but the film does not portray them as problems, whereas the latter problem may only be present in a few homes, but it was portrayed as a common problem. Thus, the film's international acclaim shows that commentators may be willing to overlook factual inaccuracies to champion a feature film that represents Saudi culture in-depth as there is no regular representation of Saudi films in prestigious film festivals.

Al-Mansour and her film, *Wadjda*, received high praise from international critics and the media and won many international awards. The film also received many positive reviews and was the subject of articles about its discussion of sensitive social and cultural issues. Tariq Al Haydar (2014), a Saudi intellectual and assistant professor at King Saud University, wrote a lengthy article asking whether *Wadjda* won international acclaim because it is an exceptional work of art or because it was the first film shot entirely in Saudi Arabia and, more importantly, its director is a Saudi woman. Al Haydar argued that the reception of *Wadjda* reflects the old imperial dream that Gayatri Spivak described as "white men saving brown women from brown

men” (Spivak, 1994, p. 93). According to Al Haydar, Al-Mansour is a Saudi filmmaker who lives with her American husband in the Kingdom of Bahrain and fought to produce a film in the streets of Riyadh that portrays a backward and uncivilised society. Further, Al Haydar asserted that Al-Mansour was not obligated to make an explicitly political film just because she is a Saudi artist. She took that responsibility on through her film; no one forced her to direct a film exploring the oppression of women in Saudi Arabia. However, as Al-Mansour decided to explore women’s oppression in Saudi Arabia, politics cannot be ignored, and Al Haydar stated that it is illogical for Al-Mansour to portray patriarchy as merely a product of society or culture. Al Haydar asserted that it does not take extraordinary intelligence to conclude that the film’s message is “specious”. Al Haydar noted that there may be some patriarchy in Saudi society, but it is not the same as state patriarchy. Al Haydar supported his argument by pointing out that Saudi society did not establish prisons and fill them with its opponents. He also stated that the film talks about women’s lack of mobility, but it is not Saudi society that jails and interrogates women when they try to drive cars (Al Haydar, 2014). Al Haydar’s allegations are worth considering, especially because when the state decides something, it forces everyone to abide by it, even if it is paternalistic, such as guardianship. At the time the film was made, the Saudi government and private companies, including banks, did not accept transactions or requests from women without the signature of their male guardian. This guardianship system that existed in Saudi Arabia at that time had nothing to do with religion, and it violated societal norms. The guardianship of a woman is not part of Islam except within very narrow limits such as marriage.

During the 2005–2015 period that this chapter focuses on, the state did not support the cinema or filmmaking except for *Wadjda*. The state’s official position was

clear, which was to refuse to support the cinema, and the leadership avoided discussing the issue with the media. However, Al Haydar argued that the state interfered in *Wadjda* (Al Haydar, 2014). First, according to Al Haydar, it was the first time a leader spoke about a Saudi film. Sultan Al-Bazai, president of the Saudi Arabian Society for Culture and Arts (SASCA), said the authorities granted the film its full blessing and support. This was a strange and new position for the Saudi government (Al Haydar, 2014). Second, in the film's final scene, Wadjda is riding the bike that she dreamed of throughout the film, and it is the national colour green with the phrases of the national emblem. The scene includes a view of a school bus passing a large poster of the Saudi flag and pictures of the country's political leadership, the King, Crown Prince and Deputy Crown Prince. Also, next to the state flag and pictures of political leaders, is a phrase that roughly translates as, "I hope that the glory of the nation continues". After Wadjda passes the bus, the camera remains on the poster even after the actors are no longer in the shot. According to Al Haydar, the end of the film explicitly emphasises respect for the state alongside the portrayal of women's oppression and their struggle for social and cultural rights (Al Haydar, 2014). Al Haydar concludes his argument by stating that if we agree that the film aims to explore the oppression of women in Saudi society, and that is what the director confirmed to the press, the film fails to address the problem honestly because the patriarchal role of the state is absent in the film (Al Haydar, 2014). In addition to the previous arguments, Al Haydar talked about the SASCA nomination of *Wadjda* as the country's official nomination for the 2014 Oscars, a first in Saudi history (Brooks, 2013). Saudi Arabia had not previously nominated a Saudi film for an Oscar, including the films previously produced by Rotana, *Keif al-Hal?* and *Menahi*.

Conclusion

As noted at the outset of this chapter, in ten years, Rotana produced three Saudi films. In most economically developed countries, that number would appear quite small, but Saudi Arabia differs greatly in terms of timing. When the twenty-first century began, the religious authorities were still intolerant of cinema and behaved as church groups and women's organisations had in developed countries at the beginning of the twentieth century. Rotana and Al-Waleed were involved in confrontations with the religious authorities in which Al-Waleed and Rotana prevailed. However, the opposition managed to disrupt Al-Waleed's largest project, which was building hundreds of theatres around the country, and they were able to cancel most of the films Rotana had planned. Rotana sought to produce several Saudi films annually, but as a result of the conflicts, only produced three films across a decade.

Al-Waleed was only able to defeat the opponents because of his political power as the nephew of the King and the eighth richest man in the world. Al-Waleed used his influence during this period and made it clear that the young have the right to entertainment and the right to enjoy watching films and listening to music. However, the religious scholars viewed cinema as a pretext to corrupt people morally, and they believed that cinema could not enter the country without negative effects and damage to society, the family, women and children.

Some more religious scholars such as Mohamad Alsaidi (Assilo, 2012) believe that films are not explicitly forbidden but that it depends on their content. However, those scholars contradicted themselves regarding the screening of *Menahi*, which is the only one of the three films that does not criticise society or religion or violate moral values. *Menahi* is a comedic story that does not address controversial topics,

but when it was screened in theatres, all of the scholars became angry and unified in their opposition to the film. This contradiction shows the religious authorities' attitudes towards testing cultural boundaries by filmmakers.

This era and its religious conflicts have had lasting negative effects on the industry. Among these negative effects is investors' reluctance to invest in any of the industry's three stages, production, distribution and exhibition, given that the consequences and returns are unpredictable because of the state's unclear position regarding cinema. Another negative effect is the transfer of production to outside Saudi Arabia and the closure of the theatres built by Al-Waleed. In addition, television series stars are reluctant to participate in films because of the lack of theatres in the country and because the television industry is removed from the conflict with religious scholars. These effects show the difficulties of advancing cultural expression in a climate of censorship and social conservatism to foster an emerging screen culture.

Although the 2005 to 2015 era has passed, its events hold a significant lesson for anyone claiming to represent Saudi society. Although the conflict between Rotana and those opposed to films was at its peak during the screening of *Menahi* and few theatres were available to show the film (three theatres in three cities), more than 25,000 tickets were sold. Despite women being prevented from attending the screenings in Riyadh, more than 9,000 tickets were sold to women. This indicates that there is a cinema culture in the country and that audiences are hungry for the experience of watching films in theatres rather than at home. However, the opposition of the religious authorities and social conservatism towards openness and expression through films was a major challenge in the period.

Chapter 4: Film Festivals' Contribution to Industry Visibility

Film festivals are effective in advancing film industries, and this role is more significant and its impact greater if festivals are the only means to screen films in a country, as was the case in Saudi Arabia. This chapter focuses on the festival as a means to build a domestic film culture. From 2008 until April 2018, the SFF was the only place in the country that organised public screenings of local and regional films, and its first edition included 44 Saudi films. The festival was first held in 2008 under the name “Saudi Film Competition” and then again in 2015 under the name “Saudi Film Festival”. When the festival started, it had no specific goal or agenda except screening films. Later editions of the festival began to promote local films, gather talent for networking and help the Saudi film industry grow. Although the festival did not have government or other sustainable financial support, it published two to five books with each edition. This has been a significant contribution to Saudi cinema because while cinema was banned, commercial and non-profit book publishers were not interested in publishing books related to cinema. Thus, this chapter investigates the SFF's contribution to supporting Saudi cinema in light of the official cinema ban, its contribution to the industry's visibility and its contribution as a networking event for local talents.

The focus of this chapter is a case study of the SFF that examines the multidimensional aspects of the festival's challenges to official authorities and religious institutions and the festival's lack of funding. Examining the history of the SFF provides a deep understanding of how religious groups have influenced government decisions and their role in shaping society's opinion of cinema as morally corrupt. Drawing from a personal interview with the founder and president of the

SFF, Ahmed Almulla, this chapter begins with the story of the festival's creation and its development from weekly international film screenings to a film competition and, later, a film festival. This chapter also explores the festival's programming, film types and publishing of books on subjects related to cinema. Finally, this chapter addresses the festival's model and the crucial question of the financial resources necessary for the festival to thrive. This chapter argues that the SFF gave new talent the opportunity to present documentary and fiction stories that were not commercially viable despite facing challenges from the religious authorities, especially the CPVPV.

The Creation Story

Near the beginning of the twenty-first century, specifically when King Abdullah assumed power in 2005, his government brought about many social changes. These changes were considered by the religious and conservatives as undermining Islamic values and teachings. In 2005 and 2006, the Ministry of Culture and Information (now the Ministry of Media) put in place new regulations governing the elections of presidents and board members of literary clubs and the responsibilities of such clubs. Literary clubs had been established in Saudi Arabia in 1975, when King Faisal consulted a number of writers and intellectuals from various regions of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to find an institutional formula to activate the role of culture in the country. Aziz Diya proposed the establishment of literary clubs in sixteen cities around Saudi Arabia (Makkah, 2015). What distinguished the new regulations was their flexibility and attention to intellectual diversity in the activities of literary clubs that previously had been exclusively controlled by religious scholars and the leaders of the Islamic Awakening.

These social changes included allowing a greater variety of views to be expressed through media, especially by Saudi liberals, who had been subject to imprisonment for their views because religious institutions deemed such views forbidden. However, liberalism in Saudi Arabia is vastly different from European or US concepts of liberalism. Liberal ideas in Saudi Arabia revolve around simple rights such as allowing women to drive a car and travel without a guardian, to allow cinemas, plays and concerts and to not close shops during prayer times. The changes by the new King also allowed for the participation of women in leadership positions, such as appointing a woman deputy minister of education, and gave women membership in the Consultative Assembly, which is the formal advisory body of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. These social changes allowed for some changes to the culture and arts of the country, despite resistance by the leaders of the Islamic Awakening and their efforts to ban the changes. In media reactions to these events, the *Financial Times* indicated that “the liberals won the first big battle since King Abdallah acceded to the throne in 2005” (Khalaf, 2009). The success of these changes relied on the participation of young adults to lead literary clubs and culture and arts associations, and to motivate the youth to hold literary, cultural and artistic activities for the public.

The Literary Club

Literary clubs in the 2000s were usually managed by elderly intellectuals or the conservative religious, with little participation by youth, which hindered their support for events that oppose the tendencies of religious institutions. By the end of 2005, Ahmed Almulla was a member of the board of directors of the literary club in Al-Ahsa and the executive officer of its events committee. Almulla was a member of the

young, irreligious generation that took advantage of the flexibility in the new regulations for literary clubs in Saudi Arabia. One of the sub-clauses in the new regulation allowed literary clubs to organise screenings of cultural documentaries. Almulla presented this idea in one of the board's meetings and tried to convince them to have weekly screenings at the club. Each literary club has its own physical site for events and other gatherings, and although nothing prevented women from participating in club activities or running for president, men dominated such clubs. Almulla says that he "was fortunate that all board members were young men, so they accepted the idea and supported it well" (2019). Almulla claims that "the Ministry of Culture and Information at that time had a conscious plan aimed at pumping young blood into literary clubs to reduce the Islamic Awakening's dominance, beginning with the young generation at that time managing literary clubs" (2019). The ministry's goal according to Almulla was to empower a generation of young, enthusiastic and open minds to win elections and make changes. Empowering the youth, according to Almulla, was not a pretext to encourage political consciousness or political activity but rather a way to encourage social and cultural openness. Thus, Almulla asserts that the enthusiasm of youth facilitated his task, paving the way for film screenings.

Almulla, a poet and novelist, did not have any connection with filmmaking except that according to his description, he is "a good viewer and an observer of cinematic works" (2019). Saudi Arabia in the early 2000s produced a lot of poetry and fiction because there was no consensus on its prohibition by religious institutions, and poetry and fiction were part of Arabian Gulf history and culture. Literary clubs and the SASCA were focused on managing poetry and fiction events and ignored other artistic and cultural forms that were popular in various regions of the country.

For example, each of the thirteen administrative regions in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has a unique folkloric dance culture and uses different musical instruments and equipment to perform the Ardha, a folkloric group dance. Therefore, Almulla chose to support films, and he knew the literary club in Al-Ahsa would make a significant contribution by providing an exhibition venue in addition to getting ahead of other literary clubs in the country that might also benefit from the new regulations. According to Almulla, the board of directors of the Literary Club of Al-Ahsa allowed him to implement his plan because of their belief in the importance of films in literature and culture. Thus, the club had many events that supported culture and literature, but they had never held a film screening event.

At the beginning of 2006, Almulla began the film screenings, which lasted through July 2007. As Saudi Arabia was not producing many films, Almulla began screening films from a specific country each month. Among the most popular screenings were those of Japanese, French, Iranian (political relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran were stable at that time) and European fiction films. These screenings were a significant opportunity for audiences to see films and Almulla says that during these screenings, “we noticed increasing audience sizes and an audience different from the audience that attended the traditional literary club activities” (2019). Almulla confirms that in 2006, each month’s audience was larger than the previous month’s audience until the club became famous among the residents of the eastern region of Saudi Arabia (2019). At that time, Saudis extensively used online forums to exchange news and information about events. The films screened at the club became subjects of discussion on the most popular online forums in Saudi Arabia, such as the Cinemac forum, and these discussions have helped build a film culture. The online forums used by the youth helped expand the club’s presence and reputation, especially as internet

sites were not monitored by the government at that time and the religious were not paying attention to online sites.

Organising the screenings was full of challenges. Almulla and his team “faced many conflicts and challenges with the Ministry of Culture and Information”, which had designed the executive regulations for literary clubs that allowed them to hold film screenings (Almulla, 2019). There was also a serious confrontation with religious institutions and the conservative public. Almulla tried to hide these conflicts and manage them behind closed doors with the relevant parties. Almulla says that the screenings were “somewhat out of context, and it was unusual for a public event to be organised to watch films in the country” (2019). Therefore, Almulla tried to manage these conflicts but did not stop the film screenings despite external pressure on the club’s board of directors.

Despite the Ministry of Culture and Information permitting these screenings, the religious institutions and Mohtasebeens bypassed government institutions and attempt to stop such events. Mohtasebeens work to promote virtue and prevent vice among others without any financial or non-financial rewards, considering it an expression of affection and obedience to Allah. There are often confrontations, sometimes even fistfights, during events such as the Riyadh International Book Fair, plays and the SFF. For instance, a reporter for the London-based newspaper *Al Arab* witnessed a confrontation between the film festival management and representatives of the religious institutions (Al-Sadeer, 2016). The reporter noted that fifteen minutes before the start of the festival, a CPVPV car stopped in front of the gate. Two men from the car entered the building and tried to stop the event. The men looked for anything to indicate the festival was unauthorised, like a lack of permits or official papers for the festival. Although they did not have the authority to verify such papers,

as those who do have that authority are the emirate of the region and the Ministry of Interior, the festival management showed them the official papers. The men did not find any transgressions, so they went to the audience, which the newspaper described as a “large crowd”, and tried to harass them and remind them of the prohibition against men and women mixing (Al-Sadeer, 2016). After many unsuccessful attempts, they were ordered to leave. The reporter pointed out that no one knows what was said between these men and the festival management after they were shown the permits as the festival management refused to comment. The newspaper mentioned that the festival’s executive management was conservative in talking to the media about the matter, fearing problems caused by press attention; however, the festival clearly outperformed the religious institution and won (Al-Sadeer, 2016). The general supervisor of the festival, Sultan Al-Bazie, later expressed his joy at overcoming these difficulties and said that Almulla had put them in a beautiful dilemma when he announced the launch of the third edition early, which invited attention (Al-Sadeer, 2016). These challenges were serious because although the state grants permits for such events, it cannot protect the events from attempts at sabotage by religious institutions and Mohtasebeens.

From Weekly Screenings to an Official Festival

After the club had gained a strong reputation among young people because of its weekly international film screenings, according to Almulla, many audience members began to show an interest in entering the industry and making films. Then Almulla suggested to the board of directors transforming the weekly screenings into an official film festival dedicated to Saudi films. Almulla notes that “the idea in 2007 was considered crazy by many”, given the great risks involved (2019). Despite the

riskiness of the idea, Almulla was aware of the importance of supporting local cinema, art cinema and independent cinema, as indicated by numerous studies on film festivals. For Saudi Arabia, film festivals were even more important because of the limited official film screening platforms in the country. At that time, there were no public film screenings; films were only accessible through television broadcasts or video rental shops. Therefore, a local film festival would support local production and filmmakers.

The board of directors agreed on the idea of launching a film festival but had reservations about the name because it had the potential to intensify the opposition from the religious and Islamic Awakening leaders. The board of directors decided to name the event the Saudi Film Competition instead of the Saudi Cinematic Festival. Almulla points out that they “took care to avoid using the words ‘cinema’ and ‘festival’ because of their sensitivity to the religious institutions”, although the name has the same meaning (Almulla, 2019). In 2007 this was a bold decision, given the powerful influence of religious institutions and the leaders of the Islamic Awakening over government decisions.

Almulla’s claim about the sensitivity to using words such as “cinema” and “festival” was noticed by many filmmakers and film columnists. Among these was Raja Almotairi, a Saudi columnist specialising in film and series criticism, who wrote an article in 2005 titled “We and the Cinema, Phobia of the Term”. The writer emphasised Almulla’s point about the sensitivity of the Saudi religious to the use of the word “cinema” and mentioned an important example: Abdullah Al-modifier’s film *White Hatred* (2005). Al-modifier screened the film and invited many religious and Islamic Awakening leaders who attended and supported the filmmaking team because of the purposeful message of the film’s content.

The reason that religious conservatives regard cinemas, but not necessarily films themselves, as problematic is that the genders mix inside cinemas. Muhammad bin Al-Uthaimin, who was a Saudi scholar and one of the world's leading Salafi scholars, expressed his opinion of cinema several times. Al-Uthaimin believed not only that cinemas are forbidden but that working in cinemas or in any function associated with them, such as programming in film festivals or movie theatres, is prohibited and should be abandoned (Al Mali, 2017). The use of the word "cinema" is sensitive because of the mixing of men and women in one audience. As for the word "film", there is disagreement among scholars. Some scholars believe that films are forbidden because they believe there are no films without forbidden things such as music, nudity and portrayals of women behaving in ways that such scholars consider inappropriate. One such religious scholar is Mohamad Alsaidi (Assilo, 2012). However, other religious scholars believe that films are not entirely forbidden but that whether a film is forbidden or permissible depends on its content. One such religious scholar was Abd al-Aziz ibn Baz, the Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia from 1993 until his death (DadinhOfficiel, 2013). Nevertheless, even among scholars who believe a film's permissibility depends on its content, their content restrictions are that films must not have any music and the film's message must protect morals and serve Islam or benefit the public (DadinhOfficiel, 2013). Their definition of nudity differs significantly from the prevailing Western definition. For instance, the portrayal of actresses with their hands or legs exposed is considered nudity. Therefore, the word "film" is less provocative to religious scholars and their followers than the word "cinema" although the word "film" is not fully accepted.

The First Edition of the Saudi Film Competition

After Almulla and the board agreed to move forwards, their next step was to decide when to launch the competition. Almulla and his team waited several months to pick the right time. From their perspective, the occasion of Saudi Aramco's 75th-anniversary celebration in 2008 was the perfect time (Almulla, 2019). This huge event was to be attended by the King and would have a large media presence from both local and international media outlets. Almulla indicates that they carefully chose this time to launch the competition along with Aramco's celebration for two reasons. First, the King's presence at the ceremony would distract opponents from complaining about the film competition. Second, the King's presence in the eastern region would prevent the event from being suspended by officials, because the news would reach the King, embarrassing the Minister of Culture and Information (Almulla, 2019). Almulla's focus on the appropriate timing indicates that he insisted on making it happen regardless of the consequences. It also shows that politics and the prospect of a religious or political ban were key factors, separate from typical festival concerns such as a funding source, acquiring titles to exhibit, securing guests, promotion etc.

After setting the date for the launch of the competition, the literary club board of directors and the Culture and Arts Association in Dammam agreed to cooperate in organising the competition. They then sought official approval from the Ministry of Culture and Information, which was reluctant to agree. After several weeks and only a few days before the start of the competition, the ministry gave its approval without the minister's knowledge. Almulla says, "I do not know if the minister was not informed about the competition by his team on purpose or by chance, but his ignorance benefitted us greatly" (2019). Almulla indicates that the minister learned about the

competition a couple of hours before its launch and was in an embarrassing position, which forced him to attend the opening. The launch of most events and activities in Saudi Arabia are attended by either the governor of the region or the relevant minister. Minister of Culture and Information Iyad Madani attended the competition and gave an opening speech to the attendees. In Almulla's recounting, the minister's attendance was a shock to the religious and conservatives who did not expect him to attend, and it was viewed as support for the competition and those in charge of it. These events indicate that the festival started almost by accident rather than by design. Either way, a favourable bureaucratic decision seems to have made it possible as that was the key obstacle other than financing.

The minister's support of the competition was only the first of many shocks for religious scholars, the Islamic Awakening leaders and much of society. In Almulla's recounting, most people were surprised by the press coverage of the event, particularly pictures from the red carpet, the joint presence of men and women, women ascending the stage to deliver speeches alongside men and the organising committees consisting of both men and women. According to Almulla, these were all first-time events inside the country, and he claims that the literary club succeeded because they knew whom to choose to participate (2019). The concerns about having a red carpet and women participating with men in all tasks in 2008 indicate the complexity of the Saudi case. The mixing of men and women did not occur at official state occasions or at activities carried out by associations or companies, given that many religious scholars consider it prohibited. These events demonstrated the government's hesitation and its conflict between declaring or refusing its support. The events also showed the power of the religious scholars and Islamic Awakening leaders, and the limits of that power due to their lack of authority.

In the 2000s a major problem in Saudi Arabia was that the religious scholars and leaders of the Islamic Awakening were leading society and directing the government, especially in local issues, and they believed that they were representatives of the people. However, Almulla's response to this claim is that it is "a mistake to read Saudi Arabia as one case, one perception or one mentality" (2019). Almulla asserts that "specifically in cultural work, you must have an awareness of the existence of diversity in the country, and therefore you must accept the difference" (2019). Therefore, the festival management sought to prove the opposite and to demonstrate the diversity of society and the acceptance of cinema by some despite the unequal levels of power and influence between them and the religious scholars.

After the festival management succeeded in organising the competition in eastern Saudi Arabia, a Saudi filmmaker in western Saudi Arabia became enthusiastic about holding a film festival in Jeddah the following year. Mamdouh Salem sought to hold the Jeddah Film Festival in 2009; however, on the day the festival was launched, orders were received to cancel the festival after religious scholars impelled the government to cancel it. Almulla says that his fellow arts advocate Salem thought that the success of the first edition of the Saudi Film Competition, with the Minister of Culture and Information at the opening, indicated that the government had approved cinematic activities inside the country. This prompted Salem to launch a huge media campaign before the start of the festival, which, according to Almulla, was provocative to the community, not just the religious scholars (2019). That festival's management chose a Yemeni feature film *Al-raham al-khasar* (2008), "The Losing Bet", directed by Fahdel Al-Olofi, to be the opening film for the festival in July 2009 (Al-Bishri, 2009). The film attacked religious scholars and portrayed them as a threat to society and the cause of the spread of terrorism in Yemen. The festival

management persuaded the mayor of Jeddah to attend the opening ceremony, but Deputy Crown Prince Nayef bin Abdulaziz ordered the event to be cancelled a few hours before it was scheduled to start (Al-Bishri, 2009). However, Almulla emphasises that the first edition of the Saudi Film Competition succeeded because his team realised that the event was sensitive and that any problem would send them back a decade or more and then they would face conditions like the 1980s and 1990s, when the Islamic Awakening's influence on government decisions was at its height (2019). If the government cancelled the competition, the literary club would not even be allowed to hold the weekly screenings it had been holding. In retrospect, the events in Jeddah showed the necessity of caution.

After the Ministry of Culture and Information permanently cancelled the Jeddah Film Festival in 2009, the Islamic Awakening leaders increased their campaigns in mosques, schools and through media outlets. The atmosphere was not suitable for the festival management to announce the second edition of the Saudi Film Competition. Almulla states that they realised that if they had applied in 2009 for a permit to organise the second edition, it would have been rejected immediately, and if that happened, the ban would be permanent (2019). Almulla (2019) argues that he was afraid they would be considered the same as the Jeddah Film Festival and thus the Saudi Film Competition would be suspended forever. Almulla indicates that they were aware of the issues and did not want a direct conflict with the government, so they decided to withdraw quietly and postpone the second edition for another time. Almulla adds that they were "afraid of the future and wanted to advance the field of cinema" (2019) and from his perspective, fighting the government would not help to achieve their goal. Since 2006 the board of directors of the literary club in Al-Ahsa has been keen to avoid any problems, but they did not realise that the problem might

come from outside their club. The time required to solve this problem led to the second edition being postponed for seven years until 2015.

Film Programming

For the first edition of the Saudi Film Competition, 44 Saudi films were selected. The majority of these films were shorts, split evenly between fiction and documentary.

Almulla points out that they did not aim for any financial return and all of the competition activities were free (2019). What distinguished the first edition was the presence of many new filmmakers who benefited from the competition, the ease of programming and the criteria for entering a film in the competition.

Almulla (2019) indicates that “the selected films in the first edition were expressive cries”. According to him, the films had bold stories that dealt with many social and religious prohibitions. In Almulla’s view, the selected films discussed sensitive issues in a sharp way, including issues such as human rights, manifestations of social cruelty, issues of equality between women and men, restrictions imposed on women, such as guardianship, and other sensitive social issues. In 2008 religious scholars and the leaders of the Islamic Awakening were using mosques, the media, schools and universities to denounce the Ministry of Labour’s approval of women working in public places with men, in addition to their ongoing opposition to traditional issues such as men and women mixing and women driving. There was only one voice from the religious, but the films that participated in the competition featured other voices with different opinions. Therefore, although the beginning of the competition was full of difficulties, programming played a vital and critical role in its success.

At the first edition, the festival programmers decided to allow space for expression that did not exist in film festivals in other GCC countries. There was no formal censorship of the films, only the self-censorship of the filmmakers. Therefore, the films dealt with sensitive issues. Among the most famous of these films was the documentary *Cinema 500 km* (2006), directed by Abdullah Al-Eyaf. Al-Eyaf's film sarcastically documents a 500-kilometre drive to another country to watch a film because of the Saudi cinema ban. The film portrays individuals being happy as they cross the Saudi border because they can go to a commercial theatre to watch films. Thus, the Saudi Film Competition programming committee chose completed films and did not restrict filmmakers' creativity. This decision resulted in many surprising stories for an audience that was not used to discussing sensitive issues openly.

Although programming played an important role in the Saudi Film Competition in terms of removing censorship and supporting the creativity of filmmakers, including newcomers, feature-length fiction films were missing. There were few feature films compared with an abundance of short films in the first edition. Almulla attributes this to the financial aspects of filmmaking. Almulla adds that feature films are considered an investment and that an investment requires a financial return (2019). There were no commercial theatres in Saudi Arabia, which meant there were no businessmen or investors willing to finance films. Therefore, Almulla attributes the preponderance of short films as a way for the youth to express themselves without expecting a financial return on their films.

The programming stimulated the participation of filmmakers according to their limited financial and technical capabilities because of the lack of censorship by the festival management. Also, the lack of a negative response by government agencies, such as the Ministry of Culture and Information, created an enthusiastic

atmosphere for filmmakers to participate and express their views freely and without fear of consequences. Since the first edition in 2008, industry leaders have emerged from the festival. Those first attempts by new filmmakers that were showcased in the festival helped to build their reputations, and they would later lead the Saudi film industry. Initially, Almulla, the founder of the competition, later became the head of the Saudi Film Archive in the Ministry of Culture. Abdullah Al-Eyaf, who wrote and directed *Cinema 500 km*, became the founder and CEO of the Saudi Film Authority in the Ministry of Culture. Hana Al Omair wrote *The Goal*, Osama Al-Khuraiji, *The Truth* and Bader Alhomoud, *Without Sheath*. They all participated in the first version of the Saudi Film Competition and later became leaders of the Saudi film industry and produced many films for leading institutions in the Middle East and North Africa such as the MBC, one of the world's leading streaming entertainment services, Netflix and the Prince Mohammed bin Salman Charitable Foundation, MiSK. These individuals did not have any media or cinematic presence before the first film competition, but they later played a large part in the leadership of the Saudi film industry.

In the first edition, the honourable personality that was unanimously selected to receive an award for the first edition was director Abdullah Al-Muhaisen for his body of cinematic work, his pioneering beginning and his perseverance under the circumstances surrounding his experience since the early 1970s. He was subsequently appointed by royal order to be an adviser in the Royal Court, with a high rank. The excellent rank is equal to that of a minister, and it cannot be obtained except by royal order, and he is addressed to his excellency. The holder of this rank receives many special benefits that outweigh those of ambassadors and senior military commanders. That was the first time in the history of Saudi Arabia that such an honour was bestowed on a person with a cinematic or artistic background. Al-Muhaisen had not

made a media appearance or film since the beginning of the twenty-first century, but the competition brought him back into the spotlight, which later led to his appointment to this high position.

Film Types

Although Saudi films did not have support until 2019, when the Ministry of Culture established a fund to support films and the Red Sea International Film Festival (RedSeaFF) was launched, participation in the Saudi Film Competition has increased with every edition. In the first edition, there were 85 films and screenplays, and in the sixth edition, there were 384. The event changed from a competition to a festival in its third edition. This change did not affect the films, but it did result in the expansion of workshops, seminars and audience events. In its fourth and fifth editions, it received support from the Ithra Centre, and in its fifth edition, it received support from the Ministry of Culture represented by the General Film Authority. Table 4.1 shows the number of films and screenplays for each edition of the festival.

Table 4.1 SFF films and screenplays by edition

Edition	Year	Films Applied	Films Selected	Films Selected – Out of Competition	Screenplays Applied	Screenplays Selected
1 st	2008	44	44	-	41	41
2 nd	2015	104	66	-	74	34
3 rd	2016	112	70	-	72	55
4 th	2017	136	37	22	116	67
5 th	2019	154	37	18	186	89
6 th	2020	105	53	-	279	177

Source: Almulla (2019)

Just as the festival started modestly, so did the number of participating films. The festival started with only 44 films in the first edition, and applications peaked in the sixth edition with 154 films. Similarly, 41 scripts were submitted in the first edition, but by the seventh version that number had jumped to 279 scripts. The vast majority of these films and scripts did not receive any governmental or nongovernmental support or funds. Although many scripts were submitted each year, there was no support to transform them into films. However, in later editions of the festival, the winning scripts had opportunities to receive support from other organisations. Almulla admits that in the first edition of the festival, the quality of the films was modest and their number was limited. However, Almulla claims that the goal was to “push young filmmakers to face challenges” (2019). According to Almulla, after the success of the first edition, they noticed a significant rise in the quality and number of films and screenplays in the second edition. This development made Almulla and his team, according to his description, raise the standards of acceptance for films and screenplays, and with each edition of the festival, it was narrowed further to raise the quality of the festival. Therefore, from a modest beginning, it became a major event for Saudi filmmakers and a showcase for local films.

The improving quality of the films in the festival has been noticed by the critics and Saudi media that cover the event. The Saudi media, especially the *Al Riyadh* newspaper, has supported all editions of the festival and has avoided criticising it. The Saudi media has been supportive of all arts activities, whereas the religious institutions and Mohtasebeens vehemently oppose such events. The media may avoid criticising festivals and artistic events to avoid giving the religious

institutions and Mohtasebeens an opportunity to use such criticism to undermine cultural activities.

However, the *Al Arab* newspaper, a foreign newspaper that has covered all of the festival's editions, published a headline for the third edition of the festival in 2016 saying "substandard films" (Al-Sadeer, 2016). The newspaper pointed out that the festival management made a great effort at organising and providing special facilities to filmmakers but that most of the films that competed for the main award, the Golden Palme, were disappointing. The newspaper claimed that the films were below the standard expected by the audience and critics. Specifically, it claimed that the short narrative films did not have good scripts (Al-Sadeer, 2016). Dr Mubarak Alkhaldi, a Saudi novelist, expressed that he, like others, went to the festival seeking pleasure, which is a combination of auditory, visual and aesthetic enjoyment (Al-Sadeer, 2016). He went on to say that the films in such festivals must offer some level of enjoyment to attract an audience, but the majority of the films did not offer such enjoyment. Alkhaldi pointed out that the films failed to provide even the least amount of enjoyment for him and that films should stimulate enjoyment rather than boredom (Al-Sadeer, 2016). Despite Almulla's insistence on the quality of the films and the support of the local media for the festival, critics and non-Saudi media outlets have different views regarding the quality of the films.

The government's overseas scholarship programmes have been a major factor behind the development of the films that have participated in the subsequent editions of the festival. Almulla (2019) attributes the improvement in the quality of the films to the return of Saudi scholarship students from studying filmmaking abroad. Saudi Arabia has the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques' Overseas Scholarship Programme, which was launched in 2005. This programme supports Saudis to earn

bachelor's, master's and doctoral degrees in subjects that are not available in Saudi universities. Filmmaking was among the most important disciplines for which Saudis benefited from this overseas scholarship programme. Although cinema and its teaching were forbidden inside the country, it was available through the overseas scholarship programme. Saudis were accepted into the programme to study marketing or media subjects because of their proximity to filmmaking. Then, after going to the United States, the students would submit a request to amend their major to the Saudi Ministry of Education to study film directing, photography, production or other film-related majors. In this way, thousands of Saudis have studied filmmaking even though the system forbids it. The government has tolerated this in support of young people but did not dare to announce the availability of overseas scholarships in the fields of cinema and the arts before 2017. Although the programme started in 2005, the festival management did not notice any effects of the programme on the quality of the films participating in the festival until 2015. The results of the overseas scholarship programme took ten years for the festival management and others working in the Saudi film industry to notice, and the length of the delay may have been because of the official ban on cinema.

Although Almulla credits the government overseas scholarship programmes for the development of the films that have participated in the festival, some media outlets have sharply criticised foreign school graduates. The *Al Arab* newspaper reported that in the 2016 edition of the SFF, there was a group of Saudi films with innovative ideas, but the films lacked depth in their cinematic treatment, resolution and climax (Al-Sadeer, 2016). The newspaper levelled this criticism specifically at the filmmakers who were educated overseas. The newspaper claimed that the films made by those who studied overseas lacked depth and had superficial and direct

storytelling (Al-Sadeer, 2016). There are conflicting opinions in Saudi Arabia regarding the value of overseas scholarship programmes, a topic discussed frequently by the media regarding many industries, not just the film industry. Despite the criticism directed at international university graduates, there was not a single college programme in film production or filmmaking in Saudi Arabia in 2016.

The types of films participating in the festival made Almulla aware of the industry's problems and challenges. There have been no cinema gatherings in the country except for the SFF, which made it the screening venue for the best local films. Almulla (2019) points out that although the films were strong expressive screams that dealt with bold themes, they lacked talented writers. Almulla describes the films as individual efforts by directors who wrote the scripts and produced and directed their films with help from a few friends to finish production. Thus, on average, three people performed all of the roles in a film, with each also performing four or more additional tasks. Almulla (2019) asserts that this was one of the biggest problems affecting the industry, as there were no specialists in the various filmmaking tasks, such as acting and cinematography. Almulla (2019) also notes that the participating films have avoided the use of animation and other advanced visual effects, especially in the first edition of the festival.

The films in the first edition were, in Almulla's judgement, of low quality, made without professionals and plagued with many other problems. However, filmmakers took advantage of global technological developments in the industry. Almulla (2019) notes that digital cameras and the technologies that came out after 2000 made film production easier. Almulla argues that the young filmmakers could not handle film cameras as they had not been trained to operate them, but digital cameras were much easier to use. In addition, internet access became widely available

in Saudi Arabia after 2000, which allowed young filmmakers to reach sites that specialised in film. Digital cameras and the internet, as a place for filmmakers to learn filmmaking, were the two most important factors that supported short films, which the filmmakers participating in the first edition of the festival relied on.

Alternative Contribution to the Industry

Many film festivals in developing countries offer talent development and production financing programmes. In Saudi Arabia, the RedSeaFF provides funding for Saudi films. In the region, the Dubai International Film Festival provides support to Gulf citizens, especially Saudis, to produce films intended for screening at the festival. These festivals are supported mainly by government agencies and many government-owned companies, but the SFF does not have this support. Therefore, the festival's focus on publishing books provided an alternative way to support the industry. Over time, the festival's publications became a focus of the press and the audience alongside the selected films.

Despite the obstacles and challenges that have faced the festival from 2008 to 2020, the festival has sought to document Saudi cinematic history despite its limitations. This documentation has been through the release of various books at the festival. These books include biographies of Saudis and foreigners, books documenting filmmaking in Saudi Arabia and books dealing with technical aspects of the industry. The festival has published sixteen books that have become references for those interested in Saudi cinema, such as researchers and journalists. The festival began by publishing three books in each of its first and second editions, which grew to ten books each in the last two editions. Table 4.2 presents a list of all of the books published.

Table 4.2 SFF books

No	Title	Publication date	Author/translator
1	<i>Writing with Light: Trends and Issues in Cinema</i>	2008 (1 st edition)	Amin Saleh
2	<i>Filmography of Saudi Arabia: From 1977–2007</i>	2008 (1 st edition)	Khaled Al-Sayed
3	<i>Ebrahim Alkazi, a Bridge Between Two Cultures</i>	2012 (2 nd edition)	Festival staff
4	<i>Saad Al-Fraih ... Help TV and Rescue Viewers</i>	2016 (3 rd edition)	Festival staff
5	<i>Kurosawa: Samurai of Japanese Film</i>	2017 (4 th edition)	Hana Al Omair
6	<i>Actor Saad Khidr: Violinist and Kung Fu Champion</i>	2017 (4 th edition)	Festival staff
7	<i>Masoud Amar Allah Al Ali: The Spiritual Father of Gulf Cinema</i>	2019 (5 th edition)	Muhammad Ahmad
8	<i>Lotfi Zaini: The Masterpiece of Saudi Art</i>	2019 (5 th edition)	Khaled Al-Sayed
9	<i>Saudi Filmmakers: Reading in Selected Films</i>	2019 (5 th edition)	Khaled Al-Sayed
10	<i>Save the Cat! The Last Book on Screenwriting That You'll Ever Need</i>	2019 (5 th edition)	Blake Snyder, translated by Ghassan Al-Khunaizi
11	<i>Robert De Niro ... and the Shock of Transformation</i>	2019 (5 th edition)	Amin Saleh
12	<i>Film Production in the Arab Gulf: Industry and Culture</i>	2020 (6 th edition)	Edited by Abdulrahman Alghannam and Mohammed Al-Obthani
13	<i>As Water. Reflections on Saudi Cinema.</i>	2020 (6 th edition)	Dr Mohamed Albashir
14	<i>The Poetic of Cinema</i>	2020 (6 th edition)	Amin Saleh
15	<i>Critical Notes on Cinema Experiences</i>	2020 (6 th edition)	Mohammed Reda
16	<i>Filmography of Saudi Arabia: From 2008–2018</i>	2020 (6 th edition)	Khaled Al-Sayed

Source: The SFF website, <https://www.saudifilmfestival.org/>

The topics of these books vary among cinema, theatre and television, and they highlight Saudis who have made great contributions to the industry as well as the contributions of some who are unknown inside Saudi Arabia, such as Ebrahim Alkazi. Alkazi wrote and directed numerous plays and films in India from his youth until his death at the age of 95. Alkazi graduated from the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art in London in 1954 and then returned to India, where he had grown up after his Saudi businessman father settled there. He has been described as the person who shaped the modern Indian theatre (Malick, 2020). Alkazi won several awards, such as Padma Vibushan, the second-highest civilian award in the Republic of India, Padma Bushan, the third highest such award and Padam Shri, the fourth highest (Salama, 2020). Alkazi is an internationally known director and an icon in India, but he was unknown to most Saudis. The festival's release of his biography was enriching for Saudi filmmakers and was enthusiastically received, according to Almulla. Publishing biographies and other film-related books has contributed materially to film culture in Saudi Arabia.

The festival looks beyond the nation and promotes those who have made significant contributions to the film industries in the Gulf countries, not only Saudi Arabia. Thus, The festival highlighted Emirati director Masoud Amr Allah Al Ali. Al Ali has worked to co-establish and direct many festivals in the Gulf since the 1990s. Almulla has also participated in the founding and management of many of these festivals, such as the Gulf Film Festival and Dubai International Film Festival. Almulla points out that Al Ali worked to encourage young Saudis to participate in film festivals in the United Arab Emirates to enable them to screen their films. Al Ali

had strong relationships with Saudi filmmakers but was not widely known to the public. Therefore, the festival sought to honour him by releasing a book documenting his history, achievements and role in supporting Gulf cinema.

Before the SFF published its first book in 2008, no books related to cinema were being published at all in Saudi Arabia. There was no governmental or non-profit support for such books, and commercial book publishers were not interested in them. The only available option was to find a publisher in another Arab country, but selling a book in Saudi Arabia requires permission from the Ministry of Culture and Information, which is not guaranteed. Thus, the festival contributed by cultivating a culture of support for cinema-related books. After the festival's publications succeeded and received a strong media response, especially in social media, other organisations, such as the Ithra Centre and MiSK Foundation, began supporting these types of books. The festival management have been credited with taking the lead in establishing film festivals in Saudi Arabia and supporting the issuance of books on topics that had been neglected by publishing houses, non-profit organisations and Saudi university publishers. Such topics include anything related to cinema, theatre or television.

The Saudi Film Festival Model

The SFF started as weekly film screenings in an arts venue before becoming a competition and later, a film festival. The path has been full of challenges, but from the time it was a weekly screening, it has had an idealised festival environment. Researchers consider the general festival environment to be a “cosmopolitan space in which spectators are encouraged to participate in a kind of concentrated cultural tour of the world” (Chan, 2011, p. 253). The weekly screenings of films from across film

history presented cultural tours via European, US and Asian films. These screenings and the discussion sessions afterwards served as lessons for film lovers to learn from both Eastern and Western styles of thought regarding films. According to Almula, these screenings were an inspiration to some in the audience who later became filmmakers.

When the SFF was established, it was the only venue available for film screenings in the nation. The Saudi Film Competition, and later the SFF, has served as an alternative distribution network for the work of Saudi talent ignored by television and media production companies. For instance, the Rotana Group, owned by Prince Al-Waleed bin Talal, has the largest library of Arabic films and music in the Arab world. Rotana also has a channel dedicated to Arab films, but there were no Saudi films when it started. The Rotana Group also owns film production and distribution companies, but few Saudis have benefited from it other than some well-known names such as Fayez Al-Malki and Haifaa Al-Mansour.

With the passage of time, the SFF's identity and reputation within Saudi Arabia grew until it became the largest gathering of filmmakers in the country. The festival management succeeded in facing all challenges, especially those related to opposition from religious institutions and Mohtasebeens, until the festival became a destination for filmmakers and audiences from across the country. From the beginning of the festival in 2008 through the present, no cinematic activities held by nongovernmental organisations have enjoyed great popularity and success except for the SFF. The SFF significantly changed cinema activity in Saudi Arabia as it is the only event dedicated to cinema that has successfully occur and be repeated five times. Thus, the SFF helped the industry and reshaped the cinema by screening local films during a time when cinema was banned.

The festival management, especially in 2008, did not have financial resources and were unable to obtain financing or loans, so they were forced to rely on limited resources from the literary club. The SFF has relied on other non-profit organisations, such as Ithra Centre and the Saudi Film Commission, for financing, but those funding sources are not sustainable. The festival's reliance on these two organisations presents a major challenge to its long-term sustainability, as these organisations typically finance events like the SFF for specific periods of time. After several years, these organisations move on to support other industries to serve the national development plan, Saudi Vision 2030.

The festival management adopted two main goals that enabled the festival to flourish. These two goals were to transform the festival into a meeting and networking place for filmmakers and to introduce Saudi audiences to local cinematic works. As TV channels and video shops were focusing on showing foreign films, they were not interested in showing local films. From this perspective, the SFF contribution originated. Therefore, the festival quickly became popular with the locals and gave them the opportunity to watch local films. It also became popular with filmmakers because it was the only place for a coordinated gathering of people from different sectors to meet others in the industry.

After several decades, festivals have evolved their own models. In the case of the SFF, the characteristics of an audience festival apply. As the festival management did not have a large staff, there were neither investors nor a film market presence. Despite the absence of investors and a Saudi film market, the selected screenplays attracted the interest of film and television directors and producers who attended or participated in the festival. Therefore, the festival has become a place where directors, cinematographers, screenwriters and others can see each other's work and then

collaborate on upcoming projects. Many of the films presented had already been shown in other Gulf festivals, and there were no commercial sponsors other than that the last three editions received support from the Ithra Centre and the Film Commission, but those are not commercial sponsors.

According to a media outlet, the SFF has gained a large audience and become a focus of attention (Al-Shaiban, 2017), but the festival has been unable to change its model into a business festival or a combination of the two models. The government of Saudi Arabia has a vision for the country for 2030 and openly supports cinematic activities as well as tourism, entertainment and the arts. The resistance to developing the SFF's model might affect its ability to remain a significant cinematic event in the country because there are new entities, supported by the government, that are supporting the film industry. One example is the RedSeaFF, which was established as a non-profit organisation funded by the Ministry of Culture to implement one element of Saudi Vision 2030. The eastern region of the country has always been the destination for the country's filmmakers and cinema lovers, but in 2019, the RedSeaFF entered the industry in the western region. The RedSeaFF has many advantages that the SFF lacks, such as financing Saudi and non-Saudi filmmakers with up to US\$500,000 – the most funding provided by any non-profit or governmental organisation in Saudi Arabia. The Ministry of Culture has not announced a budget for the RedSeaFF, but it appears that the festival has a significant financial capacity. The festival has a unique location in the historic Jeddah area, and huge facilities were set up for the first edition of the festival on the coast of Jeddah. Unfortunately, the events related to the Covid-19 pandemic stopped the festival days before its launch.

Film festivals in Saudi Arabia are being subjected to externalities, suggesting the fragility of an emerging film culture in the country. With the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic in mid-March 2020, the RedSeaFF established an urgent social support fund for filmmakers in Saudi Arabia (Al-Kashouti, 2020). The fund aims to help filmmakers in Saudi Arabia whose income has been directly and severely affected by the measures to curb the spread of the new coronavirus. The fund provides direct financial aid to any workers in the Saudi film industry whose work has been disrupted or whose income has been significantly affected (Al-Kashouti, 2020). In addition, when the Covid-19 pandemic began, the government suspended all state programmes related to the country's development vision, such as entertainment, culture, arts, sports and tourism projects, for all of 2020. However, the RedSeaFF, which receives government support, announced in September 2020 funding of US\$500,000 each for two feature films. These initiatives from the RedSeaFF indicate its ability to quickly gain favour and draw the attention of filmmakers to the western region rather than the eastern region.

The SFF, from its inception through the present, has not benefited from the cultural diversity and geography of its location, as the Shia population in the eastern region is nearly equivalent to that of the Sunni. Its location in the eastern region is adjacent to Oman, Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar and the UAE. This proximity to most of the Gulf countries increases the likelihood that filmmakers and audiences from those countries will attend and participate in the festival. This is unique to the SFF as the other Saudi festivals are far from the other Gulf countries. However, the SFF has not taken advantage of this. In contrast, other GCC countries have tried for many years to attract Saudis from the Eastern Province to attend and participate in film festivals

because of their proximity. The significance of regions within a country in terms of positioning festivals for local audiences or those in adjacent countries.

The festival's current model did not face the challenge of gaining acceptance from filmmakers and film lovers, given that it was the only platform for screening local films and the only meeting place for filmmakers. However, as cinema has become a permitted activity supported by the government and non-profits, competition has increased. When the first four editions of the festival were held, there were no commercial movie theatres in the country. The MBC Group only started showing Saudi films through its channels and streaming platform, Shahid VIP, in 2015. Likewise, other film festivals in the country did not launch until after 2017. Therefore, the SFF was the only venue for audiences interested in local films and for local filmmakers who wanted to screen their films. With these competitors, change might be the only way to preserve the festival's reputation as one of the most popular film gatherings and cultural events in the country.

Conclusion

The SFF started in 2008, but it has not become an international or even regional event like the festivals that originated in other GCC countries. However, most of its book publications are outward looking and include regional spotlights and translations of works by notable figures from various regions. Financial, religious and governmental challenges have been the biggest obstacles for the festival's management. Together, these obstacles stopped the festival for six years from 2009 to 2014, but that did not stop Almulla from starting the festival again and continuing through today. Despite significant challenges, the Culture and Arts Association in Dammam and the literary club in Al-Ahsa launched the first film festival in Saudi Arabia, overcoming

challenges. They are also credited with supporting the publishing of books related to cinema and becoming the first in Saudi Arabia to publish books in this specialised field.

The events discussed in this chapter illustrate that when the Saudi authorities permit an event, they can and do periodically retreat from such decisions. Typically, such a retreat occurs as a result of pressure from religious conservatives. Likewise, when the government allows such an event, it does not mean that the religious scholars and their followers, such as the CPVPV, Mohtasebeens and leaders of the Islamic Awakening, will silently accept it. Rather, they will try to stop the event even up to the last moment. Some such attempts have been successful, and others have been unsuccessful. For example, they stopped the Jeddah Film Festival a few hours before its launch, but their attempt to stop the SFF fifteen minutes before its launch was unsuccessful. These conflicts and opposition to government decisions are not unique to Saudi Arabia; they are part of the context of society in the Gulf States, where religion, which scholars interpret for the people, has priority over the government.

The SFF's management resolved confrontations with their opposition and tried to solve the problems behind closed doors without media escalation. The festival management was very wary, especially in 2008, of clashing with the government, as they were aware of the sensitivity of cinema to Saudi policymakers at that time. The festival management maintained a balance in the intensity of the confrontations with the religious institutions and Mohtasebeens and focused on the goal of continuing the festival. The festival's comparative success demonstrates that festival management supported programming that did not censor the films in the festival's first edition. Such lack of censorship may not be unique for festivals in the Western world, but the

GCC countries are drastically different, and therefore, it is considered a great achievement. This strategy led young people to express their views, which had been ignored by the media, without fear of censorship.

Chapter 5: Developing Film Production and Infrastructure

Introduction

The focus of this chapter is a case study of the Saudi Film Council (SFC or “the Council”) and the major areas of industry development that the Council works on to support and develop the film industry in Saudi Arabia. These areas, which the Council calls the “five pillars”, are talent development, regulations, funding, monetisation and infrastructure. However, some of the pillars have issues that limit industry growth. Those issues include talent not wanting to work as freelancers or in below-the-line roles, a lack of awareness among relevant government parties regarding the value of cinema, a tight regulatory environment and the complexity of getting permits. This chapter examines these major areas of industry development and other strategies of the Council in order to answer two main questions. The first section considers the question: how does the Saudi government perceive the cinema as an industry? With an understanding of that perception, the second section considers the question: what is the SFC’s plan to develop the film industry? The answers to these questions will help this study explore the Council’s role in the development of the Saudi film industry and how the Council works to achieve its goals. Those goals range from developing the production sector to facing the challenges and changes after the cinema ban was lifted in 2017. This case study also contains an analysis and investigation of the decision-making strategy and government interventions currently operating to support local and international film production, and it draws from a personal interview with the CEO of the Council, Faisal Baltyuor.

The Council works to position itself as an interface between GCAM and Ithra Centre for the Saudi film industry, and it seeks to professionalise film production as

an independent sector by empowering youths with direct and indirect support. Empowering and supporting filmmakers is an aim for film councils around the world. This chapter argues that the Council plays a significant role in the extensive restructuring of the national film industry and introducing a commercial perspective to the industry. The Council tends to give its support on more than aesthetic ground. Economic concerns, soft political power and tourism were the actual purposes behind the creation of the Council.

As the Council was only established in March 2018 and its work remains at an early stage, it is too early to discuss the outcomes of its initiatives and pillars to develop the industry's infrastructure and production sector. However, the creation of a dedicated Council for films is an unexpected and historic decision due to the social isolation and conservative lifestyle in Saudi Arabia. That lifestyle is the result of control by religious authorities and their oversight of the private lives of individuals, applying Islamic law, called Sharia, according to their narrow interpretation of it. Therefore, the hopes of filmmakers and film lovers hang on the role played by the Council in supporting the industry's development.

The Creation

By royal decree on the seventh of May 2016, the Saudi Arabian government announced the establishment of the General Authority for Culture (GAC). The GAC is responsible for all cultural activities, including these sectors: film and content, visual arts, performance and theatre, music and literature (Baltyuor, 2019). The public authorities concerned with film, including the Quality of Life Program 2020, GAC and GCAM, accept the role of cinema and its importance in "soft power [and] marketing Saudi Arabia globally in the field of films" (Baltyuor, 2019). Therefore, in

March 2018, the GAC announced the creation of the SFC. According to Baltyuor (2019), the Council was launched as an initiative from the Quality of Life Program, one of the programmes created to achieve Saudi Arabia Vision 2030.

Saudi Arabia's far south and north have unique cultures and histories that are generally unknown to foreigners. Therefore, "Saving national stories and highlighting Saudi culture both inside Saudi Arabia and abroad" are additional reasons for the creation of the Council according to Baltyuor (2019). Bordwell and Thompson (2003, p. 78) point out that "in the smaller producing nations ... filmmakers frequently sought to differentiate their low-budget films from the more polished imported works by using national literature and history as sources for their stories". This approach, Bordwell and Thompson claim, is a strategy that remains relevant to contemporary cinema. Moreover, "The strategies of using national subject matter and exploiting picturesque local landscapes have remained common in countries with limited production to the present day" (Thompson and Bordwell, 2003, p.79), which is a tool that Saudi Arabia uses to promote its ideology through taking advantage of national literature and history. This strategy helps the state exploit local culture through film.

Films can help create historical narratives that serve the current ruling class in Saudi Arabia. For example, *Born a King* (2019) tells the story of King Faisal. When he was 14 years old, in 1919, the prince was dispatched from the deserts of Arabia to London by his warrior father, King Abd Al-Aziz, sent on a high-stakes diplomatic mission to secure the formation of his state. He had to negotiate with many pre-eminent figures of that age, such as Lord Curzon and Winston Churchill. This example illustrates how government can benefit from presenting its perspective of national literature and historical achievements to an audience.

Saudi Arabia's history includes many stories that can present significant national events to show how the people and government were united in crises. For instance, when al-Qaeda attacks occurred in Saudi Arabia from the late 1990s to 2009, most people stood with the government while al-Qaeda leaders made emotional appeals based on religion to try to gain the people's support, releasing videotapes and giving interviews with television channels such as Al Jazeera. Often, Al Jazeera reported critically on global terrorism yet also broadcast video from al-Qaeda, giving them the opportunity to present their views. Using religious empathy was not new to a conservative state like Saudi Arabia. Another example is Juhayman al-Otaybi and other rebels when they used emotional appeals based on religion in 1979 and led the Grand Mosque seizure of Mecca that lasted for more than two weeks. Saudi filmmakers, therefore, can make films inspired by these past crises and events to demonstrate national cohesion among all segments of society as well as the government. The media in the Gulf States engage in ideological battles, and by participating in film production, the Saudi government gains more opportunities to produce screenplays through which to disseminate its views.

The Council aims to attract not only film tourism but also foreign productions. Therefore, "cinema has long played an important role in the cultural economies of cities all over the world in the production, distribution, and exhibition of motion pictures" (Shiel, 2001, p. 1-2). As a result, the Council formed a team to build an online "location library with more than 50 unique sites for filmmaking such as: islands, mountains, deserts, natural settings and relic sites" (Baltyuor, 2019). These sites are for local and foreign filmmakers. Baltyuor (2019) says "the Council wants to show them the variety of sites" Saudi Arabia has to offer. The idea of creating a location library is not new to the region. The Abu Dhabi Film Commission (ADFC)

has a smaller online library, providing many film location options, that can be easily accessed by any international production company.

The rationale behind the decision to create a location library was to showcase Saudi Arabia's diverse settings for local and international filmmakers to encourage filming at those locations. At the same time, it helps combat the stereotype, especially in the West, that Saudi Arabia is a boring desert state. For instance, the Tom Hanks vehicle, *A Hologram for the King* (2016), portrays Saudi Arabia as a desert with large uninhabited areas and presents Saudi culture as incomprehensible to the point of absurdity. The film also portrays Saudi Arabia as an underdeveloped country with no modern cities or deep-rooted civilisation. This negative stereotypical image of Saudi Arabia includes the misrepresentation of women. A significant cause of this misrepresentation is the lack of information and knowledge about the country. The location library helps producers to get to know the country better and at the same time allows the government to direct producers by choosing which locations to be shown in the library.

Many Saudi filmmakers such as Haifaa Al-Mansour claim that Western films, and media in general, present Saudi women inaccurately and exaggeratedly. For instance, *A Hologram for the King* presents "women in burqas" and people who are generally "wary and distrustful of Westerners" (Battersby, 2016). In the face of such limited Western representation, *Wadjda* director Al-Mansour observes in an interview that she aimed to present an accurate portrayal of women's situations in Saudi Arabia by creating believable characters (Loewentheil, 2013). Her film portrays the diverse daily challenges faced by Saudi women of all ages and the unbalanced power dynamics between women and men (Loewentheil, 2013). The online location library can help foreign screenwriters and directors see what Saudi Arabia is like, including

its variety of sites, before writing a script. In addition, creating a location library will help counter stereotypes about Saudi Arabia by facilitating access to film sites in Saudi Arabia other than deserts. However, this initiative cannot prevent a potentially distorted treatment if the Council does not have the authority to approve screenplays.

The Saudi government could use films and television shows to address its own people instead of others and external states. As an example, from 2014 to 2018, many Arab films and television series portrayed the Arab Spring as “autumn” and detrimental to Arab peoples, not as “spring” or a source of freedom. Baltyuor (2019) did not confirm if the Council would use Saudi films for political messages. However, Nye (2004, p. 72) indicates that “political messages can also be conveyed by ... the multiple images portrayed by television or cinema”. Another example is when Saudi Arabia, UAE, Bahrain and Egypt cut their diplomatic relations with Qatar on 5 June 2017. Two weeks later MBC1, through its most watched television show, *Selfie* (2017), screened an episode called “Almothi” (“The Harmful”). The episode’s message was obvious, and it focused on showing the ruler of Qatar, Prince Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani, as harmful to his brothers (other Gulf rulers) and as someone who shares his opinions outside his ruling family, specifically with Azmi Bishara, former member of the Israeli Knesset. At the time, people in Gulf countries were shocked and did not believe the conflict would last long because previous political disagreements had always been short. Therefore, this episode delivered the message to Gulf citizens that this time, the conflict with Qatar was different. After the episode, the media and social media platforms in the Gulf countries flared up over the conflict, and interactions regarding the episode continued for a couple of months. *Selfie* has 90 episodes, but none of those episodes present a political view other than “Almothi”.

Even if the Council gives filmmakers a degree of freedom, in the end, the filmmakers must get the screenplay approved by GCAM before starting the production process. When Baltyuor (2019) confirmed that the Council aims to use soft power to promote Saudi Arabia via entertainment as other states in the Gulf region do, it raised a significant question: would the SFC control films' content by providing financial support and training for specific filmmakers while deliberately ignoring others? Baltyuor (2019) claims that the SFC does not control content and "does not have an ideological agenda". Baltyuor also admits that "the Council had an idea to specify the themes of the films the Council funds" but it cancelled this idea to avoid taking creative control. The Council believes that films and other types of creative industries "cannot be guided in the way of ideas and creative thinking" (Baltyuor, 2019). The Council walks a fine line between granting autonomy and exercising control, which may be a challenge for the Council to maintain over time without narrowing filmmakers' creative freedom.

However, Baltyuor (2019) suggests that "while filmmakers need freedom and creative space, they also need to be within the cultural norms and regulations set by GCAM". The Council can be flexible and does not guide filmmakers or control content, but it is notable that the Council is very selective in choosing filmmakers who receive funds and other benefits. Thus, when the Council chooses filmmakers knowing their ideological and political inclinations and agrees with them, the Council does not need to be concerned about the content of the films they make. This indicates the strength of government intervention in the industry.

Funding based on ideological agreement with the Council may cause filmmakers to care more about standards unrelated to filmmaking, such as ideological acceptability, rather than focusing on the quality of the screenplay and the originality

of a film's ideas. Regrettably, this may motivate some filmmakers to seek financial support because of their agreement with the Council's ideology without developing their professional skills and raising the quality of their productions. The more concerning issue, however, is that the Council may withhold funds from a filmmaker not because their idea or screenplay is contrary to the Council's ideology but because the filmmaker's previous work, social media activity or media coverage has caused public uproar and inspired campaigns against him. The Council may refuse to support the filmmaker even if the situation occurred years ago.

Another issue is that freedom and creative space contradict the cultural norms and censorship restrictions set by GCAM for two reasons. First, GCAM censorship is tight, and some of its regulations do not apply to foreign films. Second, cultural standards vary from city to city. For instance, in Jeddah most citizens are open-minded and support liberalities. Buraydah, on the other hand, is Saudi Arabia's most conservative city, and most of its religious residents refuse the cinema and call it forbidden. The progress of the citizens of Jeddah is historic because it has been a transit area for Hajj and Umrah to Mecca for decades, which has allowed its inhabitants to benefit from interactions with pilgrims from different cultures and educational and intellectual levels. Meanwhile, Buraydah is famous for its religious scholars and ultraconservatives. For instance, in 2017, a monument in front of the Qassim Municipality building in Buraydah was destroyed because an extremist compared it to the Christian cross. Also, since Saudi Arabia was established up to the present, Jeddah has hosted music concerts, film festivals and cinemas, while none have been held in Buraydah. Therefore, what people in Jeddah accept is different from what people in Buraydah accept.

The Council plays a major role in the development of the Saudi film industry. Baltyuor (2019) points out that the Council was established to lead and contribute to building the industry. He also states that the “film sector was disabled for a long time without real government support”. Despite restrictions in the past due to religion and culture, many Islamic and Arabic countries that share the same culture, religion and identity with Saudi Arabia have supported cinema for a long time. For instance, since 1987 “the Tunisian government has developed various cultural policies meant to support cinema” (Hjort, ed., 2007, p. 214). The Tunisian government went beyond that to be more tolerant through “allowing filmmakers to handle topics often deemed taboo in other Muslim cultures, such as male homosexuality, sex before marriage and adultery” (Hjort, ed., 2007, p. 216). This tolerance is not seen in Saudi cinema because of the religious, the Bedouin and Saudi Arabia’s strong tribal roots.

Religious authorities and the government in Saudi Arabia refuse to call the Tunisian policies tolerance because public discourse in Saudi Arabia does not consider it tolerance but rather a threat of moral degeneracy. However, every industry needs a degree of freedom to function, and some degree of autonomy is required to tell even the most inoffensive stories about contemporary Saudi Arabia. Authorities in Saudi Arabia sometimes do not allow TV series or films to discuss taboo topics even if the message of the show opposes male homosexuality, sex before marriage or adultery. This attitude deserves more study because not only is the government sensitive to these issues, but also individuals in society, economists, the media, celebrities and artists are afraid to openly state their positions on these issues. These conditions indicate how the industry functions in Saudi Arabia and its challenges not only related to the government but to other powerful parties such as religious authorities.

Pressure from religious authorities and society affect many governmental decisions, causing the creation of vague restrictions on freedom. For instance, *Winds of Change* (2018), a television series by Nasser Al Qasabi (known as Saudi Arabia's king of comedy) was announced by MBC (considered the most influential television network throughout the Middle East and North Africa). The show was set in the late 1960s and early 1970s when the Islamic Awakening affected Saudi Arabia, and the trailer showed an illegitimate child from adultery as evidence of decay in society. Angry reactions on Twitter from well-known people in Saudi society led to cancellation of the show from the live stream schedule in April 2017. Then, imagining that Saudi Arabia was opening up and curtailing the power of the religious authorities, MBC aired the show on the first day of Ramadan in 2018 after it had been suspended for 13 months. This illustrates the complexity of the red lines around freedom in Saudi Arabia.

Pressure usually begins with religious influencers and conservatives attacking liberals, and the liberals call the conservatives extremists and accuse them of sympathising with terrorism and hatred. Then the conservatives rally to respond via social media, especially Twitter, launching a campaign against the screening of a film or TV show that they believe violates Islamic values or the traditions of the country, even if the violation is small. Then the government intervenes in an undeclared manner and ends the conflict by cancelling the show. Sometimes the intervention is announced through the Ministry of Media, but at other times the production company or channel announces the cancellation without mentioning a reason. So, in the case of *Winds of Change*, the Ministry of Media ordered MBC to hold the show for a while without releasing a statement to the press. These conflicts between the intellectual and religious currents in Saudi Arabia are a major challenge for the Council: supporting

freedom of expression for filmmakers and protecting them from hate campaigns while maintaining balance in preserving religious and social values.

Saudi Arabia, as previously stated, created the SFC for several reasons. The Council operates under the GAC. The reasons behind its creation are political soft power, tourism, marketing Saudi Arabia globally, saving national stories and using picturesque local landscapes to tell cultural stories. However, the top decision-maker for developing the Saudi film industry remains unknown. The CEO of the SFC could not confirm who that person is or even identify his position. Baltyuor (2019) acknowledges this and says, “unfortunately, this subject is vague”. This confusion is a normal part of the development process for newly emerging national film industries, and it is part of the opaqueness that characterises Saudi government and its political affairs. Throughout the history of Saudi Arabia, ambiguity and uncertainty have been used in policy as well as delaying disclosure of internal or external positions to achieve certain objectives. In 2019, supporting cinema was still a sensitive topic for those who stand against cinema and the arts in general for religious reasons.

Government institutions receive their budget from the ministry to which they are linked. For instance, GCAM gets its budget from the Ministry of Media. However, Baltyuor admits that “the Council’s budget and support is from the Quality of Life Program 2020”. The Quality of Life Program is part of the Saudi Arabia 2030 Vision programmes, and it aims to improve the lifestyles of individuals in Saudi Arabia by developing an ecosystem to support participation in art, cultural, environmental and sports activities. However, the SFC’s budget situation is extremely unusual because in Saudi Arabia, each governmental body normally gets its budget and logistical support from its primary agency, one of the ministries. Therefore, the SFC’s budget should be from the GAC, whose budget is from the Ministry of Culture. The only thing that

Baltyuor confirms is that the regulations for the distribution and exhibition sectors are set by GCAM, and the regulations for the production sector and funding are set by the SFC.

Five Major Areas of Industry Development: The Pillars

The Council is considered a cultural institution under two state entities, the Ministry of Culture and the GAC. However, the Council focuses on economics, and finding an economic system to develop the industry is a top priority for the Council's leadership. According to Baltyuor, "the Council's mission is to create a healthy and good economic system" to develop the industry. Introducing a commercial perspective to the industry to produce a large number of films each year, and for those films to receive box office proceeds, requires a governmental plan after the government hesitated to support cinema and other forms of art, culture and entertainment in the twentieth century. Baltyuor emphasises the government's determination to develop the industry and identifies five pillars that the Council focuses on to achieve this goal. These pillars, as mentioned in the Introduction, are talent development, regulations, funding, monetisation and infrastructure. These five pillars are important to discuss as it reveals the Saudi government's perception of the cinema as an industry.

Each pillar has many initiatives proposed by over 100 Saudi film industry workers, including directors, producers, actors and screenwriters. Many open meetings were held with them in Riyadh and Jeddah in the beginning of 2018. The Saudi talent that attended the meetings provided more than 200 initiatives to identify industry gaps and develop every aspect of the industry (Baltyuor, 2019). The Council also works with foreign advisers. Those advisers are people such as Shivani Pandya Malhotra, who was the managing director of the Former Dubai International Film

Festival, and Mohamed Bendjebbour, the audiovisual attaché at the French Embassy in the UAE. Bendjebbour had served in LA and India before moving to the UAE (Baltyuor, 2019). The reason these advisers were chosen is their cultural familiarity with the region, their understanding of regional film industry challenges and of course, their successful experience in the field.

Talent Development

Talent development is the first pillar on which the Council focuses. Film education is the groundwork for film industries globally, and since the 1950s, the historical development of creative industries such as film have been driven by “a substantial number of moving image professionals [who] have been educated in film schools” (Petrie and Stoneman, 2014, p. 3). Saudi Arabia does not have a national film school, so its industry training is with overseas partners, including educational institutions such as the University of Southern California, trade schools such as the London Film School and non-profit arts organisations, such as Film Independent. The SFC has designed customised training programmes with many of these acclaimed institutions. Baltyuor (2019) claims that “the Council tries to design a variety [and] approaches the best schools in each aspect of the film making process”. The Council does not count on national universities as most small-nation cinema industries do but instead focuses on cooperation with high-ranked international universities. However, Baltyuor did not mention the usefulness of this initiative.

Many Saudi filmmakers are not fluent in English, limiting their ability to participate in training programmes at international universities, where English and other non-Arabic instruction dominates. The Council funds attendance at specialised courses in film but does not support any language programmes to prepare participants

before these specialised courses start, as the Ministry of Education and other government agencies do when they send their employees to international courses.

Baltyuor (2019) points out that “the Council focuses on the quality and the strength” of each course. Many small countries support their own national film schools, whereas the Council sends amateur filmmakers to top film programmes in democratic nations. Baltyuor gives the University of Southern California as an example, saying, “the Council gives grants for filmmakers to go there for directing courses [and] to La Fémis for cinematography courses”. Baltyuor adds that there is also diversity in the choice of countries because “each country has a particular style of education and training”. Thus, the Council solved the education gap in two ways: first, by being selective about the courses at each institution and second, by having diversity in the choice of states. These two steps are effective and generate a great deal of vocational talent in the industry. Since 1974, the media and film departments/colleges of Saudi universities have failed to graduate qualified workers for professional jobs in television or film production. The Council, therefore, ignored domestic universities and focused on cooperating with highly ranked international universities.

As the UKFC (2008, p. 4) asserts “the main value of the sector was that it offered opportunities for talent in all departments and grades to progress within the industry”, the first initiative the SFC started was developing film crews through education and training programmes in the US, UK and France. A training plan using the best schools in the world is significant and effective in any industry, not just the film industry. However, it depends on the trainees and whether they have passion for their career or not. In summer 2018, the Council sent a group of Saudis to a six-week training programme in Los Angeles for below-the-line positions. According to

Baltyuor, “after the course finished, the trainees didn’t get it. They didn’t have a passion for what they were to do”. Baltyuor confirms that the trainees went to one of the best courses in the United States, but most of them do not want to work in below-the-line positions. So, after many training programmes, the Council realised that one of the issues preventing the development of the film industry is that Saudis do not want to work below the line. Most of them want to be directors and producers (Baltyuor, 2019). This situation illustrates an issue that limits industry growth on the labour side for social reasons outside of the industry. Not only does the industry have a skills gap in below-the-line roles but there is also an attitudinal gap, with people not wanting to train for or work in certain roles. Saudis, because of oil wealth, are accustomed to leadership positions and office jobs rather than manual labour that requires physical fitness, except for the military and security jobs. Those jobs are considered to have social value, but Saudi people would not be proud to work in any manual labour roles outside of those fields. For example, some families do not allow their daughters to marry a man who works for a private company rather than a government company, ministry or authority because of his job’s lack of social value. Over time, from the 1970s to the 2010s, it has become obvious that skilled Saudi craftsmen in the creative fields are rare. Film and television crew and cast are generally freelancers hired for specific projects. This is not acceptable in Saudi traditional culture because of the desire for a permanent job and medical insurance. So, filmmakers tend to find creative jobs in a government company or ministry. However, this mentality has changed slightly since Saudi Arabia launched its strategy for 2030 in April 2016 and the government officially announced its support for freelance and part-time work in the private sector.

Although the Council invests in people, the regulations in Saudi Arabia limit the development of the industry. The SFC is not the regulator, but it has plans to make the regulations more effective to support development. Consequently, regulations are the second pillar that the Council aims to develop. Baltyuor (2019) asserts that “the Council makes sure that current regulations don’t reduce the movement of film production and don’t cause any conflicts or difficulties to filmmakers”. For instance, film permits are considered one of the biggest problems for filmmakers in Saudi Arabia because sometimes producers must have four permits from four different government departments for one film location. To solve this problem, the Council has an initiative called “one stop shop”. Through this program, the Council contacts governmental and private organisations to issue all of the permits required for a project (Baltyuor, 2019). Producers need only contact the SFC, and the Council does the rest.

The “one stop shop” initiative is a significant program in a very bureaucratic country, but it raises a significant question: what will the Council do if one of the government or private organisations delays or cancels the issuance of a film permit because of the reputation of the film’s director or a leading actor? In fact, the Council has no authority over those organisations, which means that its task in facilitating film permits could be difficult and requires strong coordination with decision-makers in other organisations. Before the Council began this initiative, such a program existed in only one Gulf region state, the ADFC in the UAE. The ADFC’s facilitation of permits is not limited to shooting but includes access to government services, permits, visas, customs clearance and script approval from the National Media Council.

Restrictions on the film sector due to tight regulations are common not only in Saudi Arabia but in the Middle East in general. In the introduction to *Middle Eastern*

Cinema, Terri Ginsberg and Chris Lippard claim that there is a high degree of governmental control in the Middle East, and unfortunately, censorship characterises the region (2010, p. xliii). Ginsberg and Lippard (p. xliii) further observe that “regulations are most commonly enforced to limit the discussion or depiction of material deemed contrary to desired images of the state”. In the case of Saudi Arabia, Baltyuor confirms that one of the restrictions preventing development of the Saudi film industry is that relevant parties in the government are not aware of the value of cinema. Moreover, Baltyuor claims that some government officials do not cooperate with the SFC, despite knowing that the Council is an official government body.

Local Film Funding

Funding individual projects is the third pillar that the SFC focuses on to help industry growth. The Council believes that subsidies and other financial incentives are the primary way to foster the industry’s development. Baltyuor (2019) states that “if the Council did everything to support the industry to grow except funding, then we’ll not see outcomes”. Therefore, the Council has a huge financial programme for Saudi productions and a rebate programme for international productions. The Council has specific qualifications for funding of individual projects. For instance, the director must have a profile and previous projects that the Council can base their decision on. As most great films have outstanding story and plot, the Council also requires a strongly written script. For credibility and integrity, the Council has an external jury similar to those that international festivals use (Baltyuor, 2019). To have continuity in funding for many years, the Council takes 20-30% of the profits (if any) from each Council-funded project and returns it to the fund. The CEO of the Council asserts that “the Council’s aim is not to earn profits but to keep going” (Baltyuor, 2019).

Cash Rebate for Foreign Films

The second incentive scheme is the rebate programme for international productions.

Many countries offer such rebates to attract overseas productions. In May 2018 at Cannes Film Festival, the CEO of the GAC and the CEO of SFC announced a rebate of 35% to international production companies producing all or part of their productions in Saudi Arabia as the government will pay costs directly. Baltyuor (2019) says “we studied every great programme in the world and found that Abu Dhabi has one of the greatest models in the region. So, we decided to make a better programme.” The ADFC has the Middle East’s first production incentive, providing up to a 30% rebate, which includes airline tickets and accommodations.

Consequently, the Council raised the percentage from 30% to 35% to be competitive with the ADFC and announced another rebate of 50% for all Saudi labour employed on the production. This percentage for labour is extremely high and shows that the Council wants to engage Saudis as much as possible in below-the-line roles. The high labour rebate motivates global production companies to hire Saudis, especially graduates of US and UK media and film colleges. This opportunity could be expanded to engage global companies to provide training for students and new graduates.

The rebate programme for international productions helps industry growth by attracting international companies and encouraging them to employ Saudis, which means Saudi labour performance should improve substantially after working with high-quality international production companies. Thus, over time, the industry will have more experienced local workers. Although the incentive system for international productions is a stimulant for production companies that want to visualise a specific

location in Saudi Arabia, it is not a stimulant for regional producers who want to produce in Saudi Arabia to cut costs. Many Arab states have better film infrastructure than Saudi Arabia at about one quarter of the production costs. For example, Egypt is an Arab state with better film infrastructure and lower production costs, so Saudi producers choose to fully or partially produce their projects there, especially post-production. *Menahi* was shot and fully produced in Egypt although its cast and funds were all from Saudi Arabia. The various rebates do not offset the much higher production costs in Saudi Arabia. Thus, the rebate programme provides an incentive for Western production companies to film in Saudi Arabia rather than Middle Eastern companies, which have very small budgets compared with their Western counterparts.

By Middle East film industry norms, the incentive scheme for international productions is clear in terms of its percentages, whereas the programme for Saudi projects is not. Baltyuor (2019) points out that the Council may financially support a project in full, in part or not at all. The Council is committed to supporting filmmakers but must make efforts towards the equitable distribution of funds and allowing creativity in the subsidy system because the traditional funding system does not work for the industry. Saudi Arabia is a rich state, but money alone cannot move the industry forward unless the Council succeeds in regard to sustainability. Collecting a percentage of the profits from each Saudi-produced and Council-funded project only provides limited funds for the Council, leading over time to unsustainable shortfalls for a few reasons. First, not all Council-funded films will make a profit at the box office. Second, the money returned to the production company is only about 28% of each ticket sold (the rest pays 5% tax, 25% to GCAM and about 42% for exhibition and distribution costs), which almost covers the budget of the film. So

investing in individual filmmakers is not a sustainable approach if the Council aims to fund itself solely from the profits of the films it funds.

There are ways to support the industry and solve its financial problems before it causes a decline in the emerging national film industry. One solution is to invest in local companies rather than individuals. Corporations are more likely to be sustainable as they aim to grow and expand, which means they will not need government support after a time, they would presumably generate income on their own. Another solution would be to involve the banking sector in funding films. Unfortunately, banks in Saudi Arabia do not provide loans to any creative projects like films or television series. The Council, as the official government authority, is responsible for developing the film industry and the production sector. It is aware of this problem but has not provided a solution. The Council fails to solve this problem because it is unable to resolve it. Banks' support will accelerate the production process in addition to supporting sustainability.

Making Money from Films

Monetisation is an important area of the film industry's development, and it is the SFC's fourth pillar. After finishing a project, the next steps of distribution and exhibition are obstacles. Before 2018, there were no official film-exhibition outlets, which led filmmakers to make films for YouTube or screen them only for family and friends. A few filmmakers participated in regional film festivals in the UAE, Egypt and Bahrain. From the Council's perspective, Baltyuor (2019) responds "this is not a success story". Therefore, the Council connected with each distributor and exhibitor in Saudi Arabia. One of those exhibitors is VOX Cinema, who has an agreement with

the Council to support local films by screening Saudi films without restrictions. This initiative facilitated the screening of Saudi films in Saudi theatres.

Another initiative to promote short films is supporting their screening on television. The Council financed an MBC programme to screen 30 short films during Ramadan. Drama is a staple during Ramadan and according to *Arab News* (2018), TV viewership during Ramadan “goes up by 78 percent in the Middle East”. MBC is known as the most influential television network throughout the Middle East and North Africa, presenting Saudi films and interviewing filmmakers. Through this initiative, MBC provides huge advantages for filmmakers. The first is screening films for tens of millions of the region’s broad audience, and the second is marketing their talent and showcasing it to other production companies.

In addition to marketing films and presenting them globally, the Council helps Saudi films with PR campaigns as well. Such PR is not only for known directors, such as Haifaa Al-Mansour. It is for everyone who can help the industry grow or achieve new accomplishments. For instance, Raed Alsemari, a young director, received the prestigious Jury Prize at the Sundance Film Festival in 2019. Alsemari and his crew and cast were not known in the industry or to audiences until the Council created an event for them. The Council screened their film *Dunya’s Day* (2019) at VOX Cinema in Riyadh and presented the director, producer and main actor to the audience, which was made up of professionals in the field. The screening occurred after the film was officially nominated but before it won the award. The Council and media spread news of the project, and Alsemari and his team benefited from the Council’s PR support, which promoted their project twice. The first time was among industry professionals when the film was selected, and the second was for audiences through social media and television after the director won the award. PR tools, such as the press and using

social media to release news and photos, played a pivotal role in promoting the film to a wide audience.

Launching film festivals is part of the Council's plan for monetisation.

Baltyuor (2019) stated that short- and feature-length films produced within the state need a film market and film festivals. Saudi Arabia has many film festivals, but they are all small, such as the Abu Ajram film festival in the north and subject-specific festivals such as the W3i Award for raising health awareness, supported by the Ministry of Health. The only well-known festival in the Gulf region and dedicated to films is the SFF in Dammam city. Thus, in March 2019, the Ministry of Culture announced the creation of the RedSeaFF. The festival takes place in Jeddah city, and its first edition was planned for March 2020. Launching another big film festival in the state gives filmmakers more opportunities to reach audiences and more variety in exhibition outlets among TV, film festivals and commercial theatres.

Another benefit of film festivals is increasing funding streams for filmmakers in the state. For instance, in 2019, the RedSeaFF funded six feature films for Saudi filmmakers and another six feature films for Arab filmmakers. Saudi filmmakers for decades were struggling to receive finance to fund their projects. At present Saudi filmmakers have the Council in the central region, the RedSeaFF in the western region and Ithra in the eastern region. The geographical diversity of these institutions gives Saudi filmmakers more options, as each institution has a different funding strategy.

The monetisation plan helps new filmmakers to present themselves to current filmmakers and to audiences both inside and outside Saudi Arabia. The Council proved its ability to promote the exhibition of Saudi films within the state. However, the Council has no partnership outside Saudi Arabia and has no clear plan to support

Saudi films in commercial theatres worldwide. These attempts to promote films through non-commercial screenings are positive but do not allow filmmakers to receive box office profit like Hollywood and European films. Despite the importance of commercial screenings, the monetisation pillar is huge and historic for Saudi Arabia as it moves from banning cinema and having tight restrictions on filming in public to promoting and presenting Saudi films globally through the Council's support and funding. However, another organisation has a vision to support Saudi films worldwide: the King Abdulaziz Center for World Culture (Ithra). More details about Ithra and the effectiveness of its vision of supporting Saudi films globally are in Chapter 7.

Expanding the Production Infrastructure

Four of the pillars (talent development, regulation, funding and monetisation) need infrastructure, and based on the Council's strategy, developing that infrastructure is the fifth pillar. In Saudi Arabia, most companies focus on providing crew, cast, equipment and sound stages but none of them have water tanks or backlots. Since the rule of King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz began in 2005, the Saudi government has hesitated to build a production city. However, with the 2030 Vision and the reopening of cinemas, the need for a production city in Saudi Arabia has become significant. Baltyuor (2019) mentions that the industry needs more than one production city. He indicates that the Council has a study and through its results will create a large project to build a production city or cities (Baltyuor, 2019). Building solid infrastructure will help the Council achieve its mission, which is "to create a healthy and good economic system".

In expanding the infrastructure, it is not only important to build big complexes for sound stages, water tanks and backlots but also animation studios, technology-based infrastructure, post-production houses and script consultancies. Since the 1990s, animation films have been produced outside the state. For instance, *Bilal: A New Breed of Hero* (2015), a Saudi animated film, was produced in the UAE. Ayman Jamal, the producer and director of the film, raised \$30 million from Saudis but could not make the film in Saudi Arabia due to the lack of infrastructure. By building a solid infrastructure, the government will benefit from the money that will be spent in the local economy, which will positively affect the employment rate. Also, dozens of films being produced annually in Saudi Arabia, with budgets equivalent to as much as the \$30 million of *Bilal*, will support other industries such as hotels and car rentals. The hospitality and transportation sectors will thrive when demand increases in the small cities where filming is taking place due to natural or historical monuments. Thus the Saudi economy loses money each year from its lack of film infrastructure, which would also benefit other industries.

Saudi Arabia lacks basic technology-based film-production infrastructure because of the 35-year cinema ban. This has caused investors to rely on international companies. In the production sector, for instance, *Born a King* (2019) was directed and produced entirely by a foreign company with a foreign cast, yet the story is very local. In the exhibition sector, Saudi investors rely on international partnerships. For instance, the Public Investment Fund of Saudi Arabia is working with AMC, Alhokair Group is working with Cinépolis and Al-Rashed Empire Cinema Consortium is working with CinemaNext. The only nationally owned and operated cinema is Muvi Cinema, which also relies on international experts. The challenge is engaging Saudi workers in the film industry. In 2017, a senior GCAM official confirmed to the press

that after lifting the cinema ban, the film industry will directly generate 30,000 jobs and indirectly generate 130,000 jobs for Saudis (Hussain, 2017). Unfortunately, technology-based challenges and know-how prevent local talent from filling these jobs.

The post-production process is another obstacle for filmmakers in Saudi Arabia. Most filmmakers travel to other states in the region, such as Egypt or the UAE, for post-production. In Egypt, Saudi producers gain access to quality resources and a competitive price advantage due to the weaker currency, and in the UAE, Saudi producers can use government facilities. These benefits (quality resources, competitive price and government facilities) were not available in Saudi Arabia until the creation of the Council in 2018 and the lifting of the cinema ban in 2017. The Council is making efforts towards developing facilities, but quality resources and competitive pricing are still lacking. The completion of this pillar will increase quality within the industry and promote competitive prices due to the high demand and government support. The success of expanding film infrastructure, especially in the post-production process, means that producers will not need to go out of the state for post-production after pre-production and production inside the state.

Conclusion

The Council parallels the UKFC model in two important points: first, it provides opportunities and encourages new talent to advance in the industry and second, it helps the film industry compete successfully domestically. The Council also parallels the ADFC model in many of its initiatives, especially in three areas: facilitating filming permits, the location library and the rebate incentive scheme for foreign productions. The Council, despairing over the lack of quality educational outputs

from national universities, bypasses domestic universities and focuses instead on cooperation with high-ranking international universities, such as the University of Southern California. As a result, the Council has succeeded in designing a high-quality global training programme and in designing a model that combines aspects of the UKFC and ADFC. In addition, the consultants' efforts are clear in the Council's pillars and initiatives, especially Malhotra, the former director of the Dubai International Film Festival, and Bendjebbour, the audiovisual attaché at the French Embassy in the UAE, who delivered three successful and important elements of the ADFC model to the SFC.

The government views cinema as a soft-power platform to promote and market Saudi Arabia globally, highlight national stories, save historical stories, use picturesque local landscapes to tell cultural stories, stimulate tourism and contribute to the economy. The government's economic interests are to introduce a commercial perspective to the industry after the cinema was disabled for a long time without government support. The government's plan to develop the film industry is through five pillars: talent development, regulations, funding, monetisation and infrastructure. However, there are four factors that limit industry growth: talent not wanting to work as freelancers or in below-the-line roles, lack of awareness of cinema's value by relevant government parties, a tight regulatory environment and the complexity of obtaining permits. The lack of governmental awareness is the most significant issue obstructing industry growth because the cinema sector currently depends primarily on government funding and is highly controlled by the government.

The mission of the Council, according to Baltyuor, "is to create a healthy and good economic system", but this mission has been executed somewhat unevenly and with favouritism, as the SFC has discriminated in its support. This discrimination in

providing support and funds to filmmakers is based on ideological and political inclinations and is at the expense of the cultural aspects of film. In addition, the absence of equity in funding, even if only for some projects, will generate distortions in the cultural aspects of films. Finally, focusing on the economic and commercial aspects of film at this early stage of Saudi cinema seems to exceed the priority of the development of aesthetic aspects.

This chapter's discussion of the role of the SFC in supporting and financing the local film industry leads to discussion about a larger subject, that of film industry politics and regulations. The Council undertakes policy regarding financing and support, as discussed in this chapter, but GCAM is the censor and government policymaker regarding regulations in general. The next chapter explores the role of GCAM and analyses the executive regulations released in 2018. As this chapter has explored the Council's contribution to supporting the film industry's growth, the next chapter – focused on the period after cinemas reopened, from April 2018 to 2020 – asks whether GCAM's censorship policy contributes to or hinders the growth of the industry.

Chapter 6: Film Regulation and Censorship

Introduction

GCAM is the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia's policymaker for all audiovisual media in terms of licences, organisation, coordination and oversight, but funding and development of the film production sector are the responsibility of the Ministry of Culture, which was separated from the Ministry of Media in 2018. This chapter examines GCAM through a case study and highlights GCAM's role in policymaking. Therefore, this chapter focuses on the most recently available Executive Regulations for Audiovisual Media, released in 2018, and is based on an analysis of media coverage and policy documents (executive regulations) governing the film production, distribution and exhibition sectors in Saudi Arabia. In addition to publicly available materials as primary resources, such as official government documents (the Quality of Life Program 2020), news reports, trade magazines and certain web sites, this chapter benefits from secondary models in film studies relating to policy and censorship. The chapter argues that the GCAM censorship policy, as an extension of the state, functions to protect the reputation of supreme state leaders, the royal family and religion.

The chapter begins with an analysis of the regulatory history which led to the establishment of GCAM, and then examines how GCAM has operated and led the industry. It also includes a study of GCAM's two most important functions: regulations to support the development of the film industry and its contribution towards censorship policies. GCAM has enabled the film industry's development and provided new economic and ideological impetus to the industry: economically through regulations to organise the industry to generate profit and ideologically by

presenting cinema to society as a modern tool for art and creativity. However, GCAM's strict censorship is contradictory in that it prevents free expression and stifles creativity. All film activities in Saudi Arabia operate under the government through its authorities and the GCAM. The biggest challenge for GCAM is to balance freedom of expression and openness with its obligation to consider Saudi society's culture and traditions. Although GCAM is clearly moving in the direction of seeking to revive and develop the Saudi film industry, its policies are limited to economic and regulatory aspects, such as licensing, whereas important issues such as the labour rights of film-industry workers and production sector regulations are disregarded. In this light, GCAM policies somewhat limit the comprehensive development of Saudi national cinema, which has the potential to become the pride of the kingdom and a worthy reflector of modern Islamic culture and the values of Saudi people, contextually aligned with the Saudi Vision 2030 strategy.

Film Regulations Before GCAM

Since 1954 the Ministry of Culture and Information has been responsible for all print, radio and visual media activities. The ministry has issued regulations covering printing and publishing, press institutions, radio, copyright protection, television and more recently, audiovisual media organisations. The ministry once supervised, regulated and controlled all media industries. However, after Saudi media companies matured, the government started establishing other bodies that are responsible for oversight and regulation with the ministry remaining at the top as a supervisory authority.

One such body is the Saudi Arabia Producers and Distributors Association (SAPDA). The association was established by the Minister of Culture and

Information on 30 May 1994 (General Union of Arab Producers, 2020) to support artistic, radio, television, cinematic and theatrical production activities and serve importers, distributors and producers (SAPDA, 2020). The association performs the services that producers had been receiving directly from the Ministry of Culture and Information, such as filming permits, professional licences and supporting the participation of young people and new graduates in television production. Producers must have a membership to get these benefits, and the membership fees support the association's annual budget. Although most of SAPDA's revenue comes from its membership fees, the fees are low. Membership is 100 SAR (less than 26.6 USD) for individuals, 500 SAR (less than 133.3 USD) for distribution companies and 1,000 SAR (less than 266.6 USD) for production companies.

Despite little income and a lack of power over government organisations, the association granted value to the industry that did not previously exist. This value came from obtaining necessary visas directly from the relevant authorities (SAPDA, 2020). Producers, especially in film, struggled to bring in outside experts and professional crew due to government bureaucracy and the lack of regulations for independent filmmakers and freelancers to obtain temporary visas. At that time in the 1990s and 2000s, Saudi Arabia did not offer a tourist visa, artist visa or any visa for workers in the industry. The association was able to work directly with the Ministry of Culture and Information and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to solve this problem and promote television and film production in Saudi Arabia. By the beginning of the 2000s, the ministries began to support visas for media industries to employ non-resident workers thanks to SAPDA who affirmed the international nature of media industries and the need to recruit outside workers to maximise creativity and fill the skills gaps in Saudi Arabia. Before the SAPDA initiative, companies recruited foreign

workers under various career visas, such as driver or farmer, for long-term contracts that lasted many years. The SAPDA initiative helps companies to recruit foreign workers for media production projects lasting one month or more so that the workers can come to Saudi Arabia officially with the appropriate visa.

Unfortunately, the association was marginalised, and the Ministry of Culture and Information took over its role. The government has not justified such marginalisation and no association official has spoken of the reasons for it, but there are three potential explanations for the government's failure to rely on this association. First, the association was established based on the aspirations of Saudi producers not from authorities' desire to provide a new impetus for the industry. Saudi producers demanded an association because many were members of the General Union of Arab Producers, but Saudi producers wanted an independent Saudi association or union (General Union of Arab Producers, 2020). Second, the association derives its regulations from the Minister of Culture and Information, and it is the first civil society organisation to operate under the umbrella of the ministry. Saudi Arabia does not have civil society organisations that function like those in the West. Therefore, the government, seeking total control over the cultural sector, has taken steps to marginalise organisations that could jeopardise or challenge that control.

The third potential explanation for the government's failure to rely on this association is that the association has legal status and independent financial support through the election system. The election system allows anyone to lead an association if they are elected to do so by the association's members, which means that the government cannot control who is elected. The election system has been in Saudi Arabia since the 1980s, but it has been confined to sports, cultural, artistic and

journalistic entities. In the decades since the election system was established, such entities have not received government funding and have been subject to restrictions from government ministries to limit their influence. These three reasons explain why SAPDA did not receive government attention or power after its creation in 1994, and this is clear in terms of its tight financial resources and limited powers.

Such limited power has led to the association's lack of influence and effectiveness in its support for visual production activities. The association continued to play a role in supporting visual productions, but without media appearances or coverage of their achievements. As a result, in March 2012 the General Authority for Audiovisual Media (GCAM) was established by Cabinet Resolution No. 236 as an independent legal body enjoying government financial and administrative independence. The royal decision established GCAM as the only authoritative reference in the media and film fields for governmental and private institutions, which meant that SAPDA no longer had the power to issue licences or organise the film industry. However, the association continued its work for three more years, from 2012 to 2015, until GCAM took over from the association after preparing regulations for the various sectors.

Notably, from 2012 to 2018, the audiovisual media regulations were amended substantially, and the latest version was issued in November 2018. In a previous executive regulation released in summer 2017, cinematic activity had a separate regulations list, but with the latest update, all audiovisual activities were merged into a unified list of visual and audio media activities. The only exception is film classification, which is in a separate regulations list. Overall, GCAM worked on censorship policy as an extension of the state, functioning as a guard to protect the reputation of supreme state leaders, the royal family, religion and society.

This brief history explores the regulations of three different agencies: the Ministry of Culture and Information, SAPDA and GCAM. In the first two stages, the policy model did not provide any new impetus for the Saudi film industry either economically or ideologically. However, the third stage does, and from the latest draft of the audiovisual executive regulation in 2018, GCAM clearly aspires to mobilise the film industry economically and ideologically to align with the Saudi Vision 2030 strategy.

Currently the Saudi film industry is led by GCAM in terms of industry monitoring and issuing permits and licences for the production, distribution and exhibition sectors. However, the Ministry of Culture with its departments, such as the SFC, supports industry development through financing the production of local short, feature and student films. It financially supports film festivals such as the RedSeaFF and offers a cash rebate programme for international productions. That is, GCAM is the regulator and censor, whereas the Ministry of Culture deals with funding and grants.

An Evaluation of Film Regulations

The previous section investigated the role of GCAM and its position among other governmental organisations, with a brief history of film industry regulations in Saudi Arabia. This section critically analyses the application of such film-industry regulations for distribution and exhibition and investigates the lack of regulation of the production sector, especially regarding labour rights. The executive regulations include specific details for distribution and exhibition, the acquisition system and the protection of competition between companies, but details regarding labour rights are absent. This section discusses how the economic features of cinema operations in

Saudi Arabia, specifically with respect to the licence fee that is charged by GCAM, slow industry growth by placing a significant financial burden on movie theatres. Furthermore, this section analyses the weaknesses of labour regulations of the rights of film crews and actors regarding working hours, the provision of medical insurance and other integral labour guarantees. Ultimately, this section shows how the shortcomings of current GCAM policies and priorities limit the development of the film industry in Saudi Arabia.

When GCAM redrafted its regulation to include cinema, it had to consider initiatives related to cinema in Saudi Arabia's Quality of Life Program 2020, which aims to use Saudi cinema as a soft power tool. The programme insists that GCAM make "a positive social impact and growth of the KSA's soft power through film production" (Quality of Life Program, p. 134). Also, GCAM must create "a competitive environment for regional and international operators" (Quality of Life Program, p. 134). Therefore, GCAM must make its regulation to present the new image of openness in Saudi Arabia and to meet the international standards for attracting global entertainment companies. This updated version of the regulation must now contain all aspects of cinema including the production, distribution and exhibition sectors.

Distribution and Exhibition

According to the most recent, late-2018 regulations, individuals and companies can distribute films in Saudi Arabia provided they obtain an official distribution licence from the GCAM. After obtaining this licence, a distributor can bring foreign or local films for which they have the distribution rights for Saudi Arabia to the GCAM and pay a fee for the approval and classification of each film. The fee for licensing films is

2,000 SAR (approximately 533 USD), and the fee for a distribution licence is 30,000 SAR (8,000 USD). The relationship between distributors and the authority is governed by the laws in the executive regulation for distribution, and there is no support or incentive for the distribution sector. However, the regulation is clear regarding companies' financial obligations. Before this regulation was released, the financial costs and how to get an official licence were unclear, especially to international investors and companies. This damaged the distribution market and created opportunities to breach intellectual property rights protections.

When GCAM drafted its new regulation, the focus was clearly on two things. First, only allowing experienced, quality operators with expansion plans for their proposed operations. Second, charging operators a lot of fees because most films shown are foreign films and most of the operators are foreign companies. The film regulation draft shows that theatres must have two licences to open and operate: one for opening the cinemas and another to operate each movie theatre. The fee for a permanent cinema operating activity licence is 210,000 SAR (56,000 USD), whereas a temporary cinema licence is 105,000 SAR (28,000 USD). The yearly fee for a permanent licence to operate cinemas is 21,000 SAR (5,600 USD) for each screen, and for a temporary cinema, the fee is 1,000 SAR (266 USD) for each screen each day. In addition, movie theatres must pay a 25% commission for each ticket sold and 15% VAT. Such fees, commission and VAT put pressure on theatres and limit their expansion to other cities and villages. In addition, across Saudi Arabia, comparatively high ticket prices motivate audiences to look for other ways to watch films. In the Gulf States and most Arab states, movie tickets range from 30 to 45 SAR, but Saudi ticket prices range from 60 to 75 SAR for a standard ticket.

Before the cinema ban was lifted, there were no technical requirements for theatres in Saudi Arabia. Each organisation, whether government-run or private, built its own theatres without consistent standards, even for safety. After the cinema ban was lifted in 2017, everything changed and each government or private organisation had to follow the GCAM regulation and get a licence to operate a theatre, even if it would not be used for commercial purposes. Thus, distribution and exhibition licences require that GCAM be provided with evidence that the applicant has the necessary expertise along with operating and expansion plans for the company. These regulations require quality, experience and an expansion plan even for proposed operations in small villages. Consequently, GCAM's goal is to ensure economic viability for the industry. Thus, GCAM collects fees from companies and sets technical regulations, and the Ministry of Culture provides funds and qualifies young people to enter the industry. Saudi industry workers have noted challenges in securing appropriate exhibition venues. For example, Tarek Alharby (2019), a Saudi actor, claims that before these regulations, movie theatres were not technically for films, and screenings were held in performing arts theatres. He points out that for their film *Menahi*, screenings occurred in all of the Gulf States, including Saudi Arabia. However, the screening in Saudi Arabia was in Abha city in a theatre that did not meet the technical requirements for a cinema. *Menahi* was screened when there was no regulation for the exhibition sector. Therefore, the updated GCAM executive regulation has many requirements that improve theatres' features so that they are similar to those in countries with established exhibition sectors.

GCAM has not announced how the fees imposed on distributors and exhibitors are used, which means that these fees currently return to the government treasury at the end of each year. However, some countries use such taxes and fees,

especially from foreign films, to support citizens and young people who work in the industry. Local filmmakers and new graduates who want to enter the industry need governmental support, and such support also helps to stimulate the industry and private investment. So governments use taxes “as the primary tool for financing industrial development”, and its aim is to raise “private investment into the film business” (Phillips, 2004, p. 131). In the Saudi context, GCAM has not announced plans for the income received from taxes and commission fees, though it levies these fees equally on local and foreign films.

Malik Nejer, a Saudi director, in an interview on the *Fnjan* podcast claims that these fees are huge and that he attempted to open a discussion with GCAM about cancelling some of the fees for local films, but his request was rejected (Thmanyah Radio, 2020). The reason for the rejection was that the VAT cannot be cancelled except by order of the Council of Ministers. Nejer tried again to get a waiver of the 25% commission on tickets that goes to GCAM and was again unsuccessful. Nejer states that he does not want financial support from the government for films because it is not fair for filmmakers to have equal funding (Thmanyah Radio, 2020). Therefore, Nejer believes that the best solution is for GCAM to return the 25% commission fees that it has received from the films made by Saudis. This is an example of how Saudi filmmakers navigate the regulatory and state financing environment.

Although many Saudi filmmakers expressed their happiness to the media when the Ministry of Culture announced its fund to support local films, Nejer opposes using taxes and fees to fund local films. He believes that it is unfair for government funds to support both hard-working and non-diligent filmmakers with money from filmmakers who have sold large numbers of tickets for their films. Nejer believes it

would be fair to return the money to the filmmakers rather than transfer it to finance films by other filmmakers who did not work for the money (Thmanyah Radio, 2020). Nejer also believes that filmmakers will not work to face and overcome challenges if they receive funding from government agencies, unlike filmmakers who receive financing from commercial partners. In the former case, the filmmaker is not obligated to work harder to succeed, whereas in the latter case, there is such a burden, which results in more effort and better results (Thmanyah Radio, 2020). This is a logical argument from a person who has faced the challenges of filmmaking and whose film has been screened in eight Gulf and Arab countries. However, GCAM has not announced such a transfer of income from taxes and commissions to the film support fund in the Ministry of Culture.

Labour Rights

Although the executive regulations include organising cinema with details for distribution, exhibition, the acquisition system and the protection of competition between companies, other details are absent. One such aspect is the rights of film casts and crews. Article Eighteen is devoted to protecting the rights of workers and consists of two points. The first relates to the protection of workers' rights in the event of the cancellation, suspension or non-renewal of any licence, and GCAM obliges the company to pay workers' dues and financial benefits throughout the suspension period. The second is that GCAM reserves the right to impose restrictions and take appropriate measures to ensure that the interests and rights of employees are not compromised. These two points are general and focus on corporate employees, as if they are all administrative, and do not address the issues specific to technicians, such as cast and crew. Despite the many complaints and criticisms from workers in

the film and television industries about losing some of their financial rights, GCAM has not provided any solution to this problem to protect workers' interests. One of the latest examples involves *Najd* (2020), a Saudi film screened in movie theatres in July 2020. The leading actor, Majed Mutrib, retweeted a tweet by a journalist saying that in *Najd* some of the actors, including Mutrib, did not receive their salaries from the film (Najmi, 2020). The next day, U FM Radio tweeted a video of Mutrib stating that he would never work again with *Najd*'s producer (Ufmradio, 2020). This kind of complaint has existed for a few decades without a response from GCAM. These practices are an example of GCAM's ignorance regarding protecting labour, as mentioned in the executive regulation, and show the low level of professionalism in an emerging film industry.

Although Article Eighteen addresses workers' rights, there are no regulations regarding crew and cast working hours. Thus, actors often disclose to the media their hardships at work during the daytime fasting of Ramadan. Working hours are according to the financial needs of production companies, reaching eighteen hours per day in some instances. During Ramadan, other employers reduce working hours to five hours a day for public sector employees and six to seven hours a day for private-sector employees. However, production companies do not follow these rules, despite the rules having been made by high-level government officials. Therefore, most Saudi feature films are shot in less than 30 days. A famous example is *Baraka Meets Baraka* (2016), a 90-minute feature filmed in only 25 days. The leading actor, Hisham Fageeh, spoke to the media about the pressure on actors during the production process. In an interview with the Al Arabiya news channel, Fageeh said that they shot many exterior scenes each day, with a maximum of two to three takes, to stay on schedule (Al Arabiya, 2016). As GCAM lacks a regulation for filming hours, which is

common in the film industries of many countries, these practices can be understood to impede the artistic development of films and reduce the creativity of the crew and cast due to time pressure.

Long working hours for film workers are an international issue. Recognising the creative and physical risks of overlong working days, US cinematographer Haskell Wexler directed a documentary, *Who Needs Sleep?* (2006) about excess working hours. Film workers are more at risk of injury than those in other industries because of a lack of sleep and the effort required to film over long hours. It affects productivity, and this issue is more acute for Muslims whose Ramadan fasting makes it that much harder to maintain stamina. Moreover, most Arab TV shows are screened during Ramadan and films are screened during Eid after Ramadan ends. Although the government forces private companies to reduce working hours during Ramadan, GCAM does not force production companies to reduce working hours or even respond to actors' complaints regarding film and television production.

Although the crew and cast work more than twelve hours a day, sometimes in difficult conditions, GCAM does not require producers to provide medical insurance for workers. When crew members are injured during filming, they are obliged to go to a government hospital even if it is far from the filming location because the producer will not bear the costs of the treatment. Also, GCAM does not require producers to pay a minimum wage for basic working hours or overtime. This forces casts and crews to establish personal relationships with producers to ensure that they get rewarding work contracts. It also puts casts and crews under pressure from producers not to complain to the media during production about long working hours or delays in salary payments. These issues also apply to child actors, and therefore, many of their parents refrain from participating in films. Parents' refusal may be the result of a lack

of clarity about their rights and duties. As a result, children appear in few Saudi series or films. These problems are important and constitute a challenge to industry growth, and the failure to solve them may mean the loss of workers from this field to other fields as they seek safety. It could also negatively affect the ability to have children working in the industry. These issues are common among film industries, but more established industries have provisions in place because of union demands and other activism. Such activism may not be permitted in Saudi Arabia and could harm those who participate in it.

Censorship Practices and Types

This section investigates the way that censorship works in Saudi Arabia and the types of censorship that films experience. Censorship includes governmental, societal and religious censorship as well as filmmaker self-censorship. Details regarding government censorship can be found in the executive regulations. Chapter 1, Article 4 of these regulations focuses on censorship. It has 26 specific points for censorship controls on audiovisual content, including films. This section also discusses the effects of censorship as a governmentally, socially and religiously sponsored practice on Saudi film content. This section reveals the significance of censorship as an Islamic policy that protects fundamental religious values. However, it also demonstrates how censorship can limit the development of society in the context of freedom of individual expression, as far as this is permissible in Islamic society. Thus, this section provides an overview of the different perspectives on censorship in the cinema, their impact on the development of the industry and the social effects produced.

Censorship is carried out by government agencies, with or without pressure from religious organisations or organisations concerned about children and family rights. In Saudi Arabia, religious groups and society have had more influence than government agencies due to the Islamic Awakening, as discussed in Chapter 2. However, with Saudi Vision 2030, which started in 2016, the role of religious groups has diminished, especially regarding the censorship of media productions. As a result, the government now has more influence over censorship than religious and community groups. However, the diminishing influence of Islamic Awakening leaders and restrictions on their power does not mean that Saudi Arabia has stopped its censorship of cinema but rather that it has changed to government control. Government control on censorship is better than that of government and religious authorities together. The government is interested in cinema and wants to use it to further its interests, but it has some reservations, particularly regarding political content. However, religious authorities completely reject the idea of cinema inside the country. Thus, government restrictions can be eased over time, but religious views regarding cinema cannot be changed.

In Saudi Arabia, censorship is strict, and it includes many practices in the media field. Before GCAM implemented the regulation, it had to be approved by the Bureau of Experts and the Council of Ministers. However, despite comprehensive censorship regulations for media activities, regulations have not been fully implemented, and fewer than half of them are applied. Thus, “common customs” are formed so that everyone knows – implicitly if not explicitly – what the limits are for what they can criticise. When a censor raises the level of freedom, official documents such as the executive regulation are not amended. Then, at some point, the government retreats and punishes a filmmaker or speaker. Therefore, dozens of

producers may break censorship rules for several years without harm, but the government may suddenly begin to punish anyone who violates the executive regulations (applying the regulation as it is written). Thus, when a producer is arrested, he is guilty because he violated the executive regulation. The possibility of censorship can have a chilling effect on expression generally because it is unclear what will or will not be allowed in practice. As a result, filmmakers are subject to the mood and understanding of the official involved in their projects.

Being subject to the mood and understanding of such officials is risky. The country currently has a bit more openness towards the arts and women's engagement in media than before. However, one day something might change without an obvious reason. For example, in February 2020, a film crew produced a music video for a Saudi female rapper who described Saudi women as powerful and beautiful, and the rapper's hair was covered in the video (she was wearing a hijab). The song lyrics did not have any obscenities or insults, and the video did not have any pornographic scenes, nudity or smoking. The singer was dancing with men and women together in the holy city Mecca, which angered many people who created a Twitter hashtag, "They're not the girls of Mecca" (BBC News, 2020). This event caused a sensation among the people as many described it as a creative work in pace with the Saudi Vision 2030 that supports freedom and openness. However, opponents believed that it defiles the value of Mecca as a holy place for Muslims. Two days later, the girl and the entire video crew were arrested and faced a charge of insulting the customs of the people of Mecca (BBC News, 2020). Thus, the most accurate description of censorship in Saudi Arabia is that it is strict, complex and includes many aspects, but its application is selective in terms of time, place and topics. This indicates that Saudi

censorship policy is obscure, but most Middle Eastern countries are similar to Saudi Arabia as regards media censorship.

Government Censorship

There is a political image of the state as an incubator for Muslims and a model for Sunni scholars around the world. That image cannot be changed because Saudi Arabia's system of government emerged from an alliance between a politician, King Abdulaziz ibn Abdulrahman known as ibn Saud, and a religious leader, Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab. According to the alliance between these two parties, the King undertakes political work and the management of state affairs, but religious and ideological actions are carried out through religious leaders. Ibn Saud also united the majority of Saudi lands in agreement with the tribes of Arabia, who were mostly conservative. In addition, the state does not have a constitution; instead the system of government stipulates that the state operates according to the principles and laws of Islamic Sharia. For these reasons, the government cannot make reforms without considering religious and tribal aspects.

Understanding these tribal and religious circumstances helps explain censorship in the Executive Regulations for Audiovisual Media. For example, in the 26 points of censorship, many emphasise tribes and society, such as point eight, that the content must avoid subjects related to folklore and tribes. Enhancing national cohesion and preserving the social fabric is in point five. Preserving values and virtues, promoting social values and the family as the cornerstone of building society is in point six. These three points are considered redlines, and therefore no filmmaker can mock social values, tribes or families. Before the preparation of these regulations and during the Saudi cinema ban, many film and television series producers used

comedy to criticise aspects of the behaviour of tribes. Using comedy was an effective method to deliver messages to society and avoid punishment. For example, *Menahi* portrayed the failure of some tribes that live in the desert away from education and civilisation in an amusing way. The film won popular acceptance because of its comic content and the popularity of its lead actor, Fayez Al-Malki, across the Gulf countries. Offering a potentially critical view of Saudi society, the film suggests that when tribe members become rich, they exhibit negative characteristics, such as being immature, uneducated, fraudulent, easy to steal from, indifferent and romantically interested in all women, including female co-workers. The comic tone and an appealing lead actor helped insulate the film from criticism and win popular acceptance.

As the example of *Menahi* suggests, filmmakers can bypass censorship limitations through indirect criticism, such as exaggeration, that reflects the opposite of what they want to express. In *Menahi*, topics related to social values, tribes and families are portrayed critically by being presented it in an exaggerated manner, suggesting to audiences that the opposite is meant. In this way, sensitive issues that only the King and Crown Prince can settle are discussed in television series and films. For example, there have been many social campaigns for women drivers since 1990, and in August 2013, a music video called “No Women, No Drive” was released on YouTube the night before one such campaign started. In 2016 another short musical film called *You Will Not Drive* was released on YouTube. These two examples seemed to support the government view by portraying that women driving is unacceptable and cannot happen in Saudi Arabia. However, it was clear that exaggeration was used to parody, and thus critique, the government position. Exaggeration was used to praise the state’s opposition to allowing women to drive

using superficial and trivial justifications, which makes the audience understand that what is meant is the opposite.

These two techniques of using comedy to address sensitive subjects and using exaggeration to overpraise a matter and thus convey the opposite meaning have been effective over the past three decades. Film and television series producers have been able to discuss sensitive issues related to both politics and society. However, since 2017 things have changed, and criticism using exaggeration or comedy is not acceptable and subjects the producer to punishment.

GCAM's censorship policy is not predictable despite it having released a regulation. The foregoing discussion presented negative experiences with GCAM censorship. However, Malik Nejer, the director of *Masameer: The Movie* (2020) had a different experience with GCAM, which he recounted in an interview for the *Fnjan* podcast. *Masameer: The Movie* (2020) is a Saudi animation film for children that screened in movie theatres across the Gulf countries – including Egypt, Jordan and Iraq (but not Qatar, due to its political conflict with Saudi Arabia) – in January 2020. The film is based on one of the most successful YouTube cartoon series in the Middle East. Director Nejer stated that before *Masameer* was produced, he was afraid GCAM would force him to delete some scenes from the film. Nejer said that he feared double standards as he had expected GCAM to allow US films greater freedom regarding profane language. However, *Masameer* was expected to be rejected from GCAM on the pretext that “we are the children of this country and it is not a good idea to publish some profanity words or deviant meanings” (Thmanyah Radio, 2020). Nejer was surprised that GCAM allowed them to screen the film without any restrictions or comments on the screenplay. Nejer considered this experience with *Masameer* as indirect support from GCAM to the film industry.

Nejer's positive experience with GCAM may be attributable to *Masameer's* lack of a specific political view or any discussion related to the tribes, religion or sex. *Masameer* is a comedy film for children and young people. Nejer's fears were not because his film contains deviant meanings or nudity but because no one knows how censorship will be applied (Thmanyah Radio, 2020). Nejer's claims demonstrate that Saudi filmmakers believe foreign films are allowed more room for freedom of expression than local films. GCAM does not force foreign films screened in Saudi Arabia to delete scenes that contain profanity, nudity or sexual meanings in their dialogue, but no Saudi filmmaker expects to be able to do the same and be approved by GCAM's censorship office. Also, Nejer's claims suggest the complexity of GCAM's decision-making. In principle, there is no reason for Nejer to worry about censorship if his film is intended for children and does not contain any pornography or nudity or oppose the state or religion.

Social and Religious Censorship

The second major factor in censorship is the response to a film by social commentators and religious authorities. If the state is lenient in allowing any media activity, such as films and TV series, to contradict Islamic teachings or social traditions in Saudi Arabia, social commentators and religious scholars put pressure on the government to prevent the production or circulation of such media content. Societal and religious pressure to control film content has been common in many countries around the world. In countries such as the United States and Australia, "church groups and women's organisations" demanded controls on film content to protect "children and social morals" (Walker, 2011). Such organisations included the

Catholic League of Decency in the US (Jowett, 1991) and the Protestant Council for Civic and Moral Advancement in Australia (Bertrand, 1978).

In the early twentieth century, the press in the United States and Australia described cinema as a venue for teaching “bad habits” and “evil communications” (Walker, 2011). The government responded after pressure from various organisations and groups to implement film censorship (Walker, 2011). The early decades of US cinema included many battles with religious leaders and efforts to placate religious groups. Eventually, the industry had defenders in government who recognised film’s economic value, though in the US, the influence of religion in everyday life was waning in general. In Saudi Arabia, the situation is different. The government has already implemented censorship, but some groups, especially religious groups, demand additional restrictions on film content. Society’s concerns are mostly regarding the accuracy of the representation of historical figures and events in films, whereas religious censorship is mostly concerned with protecting morals. Another difference is that such groups in the US and Australia pressured the government for censorship during the 1920s but later relented, after industry codes (and eventually, ratings systems) appeared, whereas in Saudi Arabia many people still pressure the government for more censorship. Also, most Saudi religious scholars still view cinema as sinful and regard going to a movie theatre as forbidden, regardless of the content. The situation in present-day Saudi Arabia has similarities to the situation in other countries during the early twentieth century because cinema has only recently re-emerged in Saudi Arabia.

Religious scholars and their followers generally support censorship, and religious scholars believe they represent the people. However, there are those who oppose censorship who accuse Saudi society and religion of being complicated and

not open, thus hindering the development and growth of society and contradicting the country's strategic vision for 2030. Many anti-censorship and cinema supporters claim that the pro-censorship people are not representative of all of society. Khaled Al-Sulaiman, a Saudi celebrity columnist, in hosting the Rotana satellite channel describes them as not understanding cinema at all and that it is a shame and tragedy that someone wants to prevent films and sees them as corruption. Al-Sulaiman did not mention these groups by name, but his statements came after religious conservatives' criticism and only religious conservatives want to prevent cinemas. In academia, Garth Jowett describes society and religion as "a heterogenous collectivity of individuals, with different social and cultural predispositions" (Jowett, 1991, p. 161). Groups of social and religious conservatives think they are protecting Saudi values without realising they are playing a guardian role for all of society by allowing only what they think is safe for people to watch.

Although anti-censorship groups in Saudi Arabia are not prominent, many international academics support anti-censorship perspectives. A careful examination of Saudi Arabia's executive regulations clearly indicates no support for freedom of expression, even implicitly. However, there is a list that warns of lots of things that are forbidden, including some economic and health issues. Anti-censorship may not be everyone's duty or even that of the majority in Saudi Arabia as Collins stated, but there is a small group that seeks to support freedom of expression even though doing so may cause them harm. GCAM has a challenge to balance freedom of expression and censorship. Hence the importance of an anti-censorship presence to pressure GCAM to ease restrictions on filmmakers to support creativity in films. Writing newspaper articles has been one of the most popular means of criticism and defence of cinema and the arts in general in Saudi Arabia. Among the most prominent

columnists who fought against extremists and supported cinema and free expression were Khaled Al-Suleiman and Raja Al-Mutairi, but their strong voices have changed since 2016.

Self-Censorship

Self-censorship by Saudi filmmakers is a common practice that many adopt for various reasons. Many filmmakers believe their patriotism includes a duty to not criticise the government, religion or the royal family. Therefore, many filmmakers avoid any topic that might conflict with the Saudi regime or security. By their understanding, this means films and television series must avoid criticism and irony regarding the roles of traffic officers, firefighters, emergency forces and the security and intelligence services.

Self-censorship is common in Saudi Arabia because it is a safe way for filmmakers to protect their interests. The Saudi government offers a lot of financial and logistical support to workers in the industry. Many leading members of the royal family and merchants have personal relationships with filmmakers. These relationships help filmmakers find funding for their films or other needed support. For these reasons, many filmmakers have no interest in political or social issues. Some even avoid expressing opinions or ideas that are contrary to social norms and traditions because they fear losing these relationships and the associated benefits simply by criticising authority or a sensitive social issue. Although this might protect their economic self-interest in the short term, it also goes against filmmakers' creative interests by limiting the richness of their storytelling, which could eventually limit them economically if originality and complexity are valued. Therefore, self-censorship may be useful when filmmakers know the boundaries and play around

with them, but when it only used to protect their interests to gain financial and logistical support, it might harm them in the long term.

Filmmakers may choose to avoid the risk of potential attacks from extremists by exercising tight self-censorship that they do not agree with. There are also fears of social media campaigns, which have occurred when the government allows filmmakers to criticise certain sensitive issues and then popular anger is expressed through social media. Popular anger leads to campaigns from popular social media accounts that continue until the government begins to back down. The rise of social media has made it easier and faster for public anger to accrue, and the expression of this anger and the resulting bullying have become emotionally harmful to filmmakers. A well-known example involves Saudi director Haifaa Al-Mansour, who has avoided portraying sexual scenes or kisses in her Saudi films. In contrast, when she directed *Nappily Ever After* (2018), a US romantic comedy, the film contained three sex scenes, several kisses and even partial nudity. Because it is a US film, distributed through Netflix and not to movie theatres in Saudi Arabia, Al-Mansour was able to exercise a greater degree of freedom than in her Saudi films. Al-Mansour and other filmmakers fear for their safety after social media campaigns, so they avoid provocation when they make local films. However, Al-Mansour returned to local production with her film *The Perfect Candidate* in 2019. Al-Mansour's international reputation insulates her a bit from local critiques and companies continue to support her financially, including the government by making *The Perfect Candidate* Saudi Arabia's official Oscars entry. Al-Mansour's international success helps her to gain respect inside government agencies, which gives her easy access to funds and logistical support.

There are motives for self-censorship, in which taste and morals are considered to avoid provoking the community by criticising Islamic teachings or addressing other sensitive topics. In addition, from the nationalistic side, self-censorship seeks not to prejudice or harm the reputation of security authorities. However, other forms of self-censorship emerge from fear. These reasons for self-censorship in the Saudi context are patriotism, protecting the nation and its security image, fear of punishment by the authorities, fear of losing government financial benefits and fear of social media attack campaigns. However, using self-censorship for self-protection is understandable, but relying on self-censorship for self-interests such as financial benefits limits creativity over time because film stories are inspired by free-thinking.

The Quality of Life Program 2020

In April 2016, the government established its vision for the future, Saudi Vision 2030. To achieve the goals of Vision 2030, the government created thirteen programmes. One of those programmes is the Quality of Life Program 2020, as discussed in Chapter 5. This programme aims to improve the lifestyles of individuals in Saudi Arabia by developing an ecosystem to support participation in art, cultural, environmental and sports activities. GCAM was responsible for implementing some of the initiatives of this programme and the programme's initiatives were supposed to be completed by 2020. GCAM has achieved most, but not all, of the initiatives.

GCAM's first mission was to unlock the exhibition sector, which happened in September 2017, with the first theatre opening in April 2018. Implementing the decision to open theatres was very difficult as it was a huge decision. Just eight months previously, the Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia, Abdul Aziz bin Abdullah Al-

Sheikh, stated on his weekly television programme that there is no good in cinema. Al-Sheikh claimed that films may “broadcast shameless, immoral, atheistic or rotten films”. He also expressed concerns about the risks of mixing of the sexes and about the corrosive influence of cinema on people (Sharman, 2017). Therefore, “unlocking” the cinema after such religious statements was challenging, and it took a few months for GCAM to make it happen.

The second major mission for GCAM was to draft the regulation for the infrastructure required for opening cinemas. GCAM worked on it from when the decision was made by the Ministry of Media in September 2017 until March 2018 when the regulation draft was released for businessmen and companies to apply for a theatre licence. Taking six months to open cinemas and draft the regulation required for opening theatres is considered a success because of the numerous religious and cultural challenges. The draft regulation contains specific requirements and many details based on the latest experiences of other countries regarding the exhibition sector, but there was nothing new related to the production sector. The old regulation for television productions was added to the draft regulation to create the film production regulation. Therefore, GCAM succeeded in implementing what was required of it by organising exhibition sector regulations, but it neglected another important aspect: organising the production sector. One explanation might be that the government evaluated GCAM leaders’ performances according to their achievements based on the Quality of Life Program 2020. As a result, GCAM may have prioritised its work by focusing on what had to be done, and in the Quality of Life Program 2020 there is no focus on the regulations for production and distribution sectors.

Unlocking the cinema and drafting the regulation were not GCAM’s only jobs, and the Quality of Life Program 2020 also set specific targets to measure

success. For example, by 2020 Saudi movie theatres were required to sell 3.8 million tickets. After the end of 2019, the Ministry of Culture issued a report on the Saudi cultural situation and stated that from April 2018 to December 2019, movie theatres in Saudi Arabia had sold over four million tickets (Saudi Arabia Ministry of Culture, 2020, p. 123). Consequently, GCAM successfully achieved more than its goal, and this number indicates the popular appetite for cinema despite the limited number of theatres in the country. The four million tickets were sold by only twelve movie theatres despite comparatively high price tickets. Movie theatres in Saudi Arabia sell tickets at double the price of other cinemas in the Gulf and Arab states. For example, VOX Cinemas sells tickets for 30 to 40 SAR (around 8 to 10.6 USD) in its theatres in UAE, but in Saudi Arabia, its theatres charge from 60 to 75 SAR (around 16 to 20 USD) for a standard ticket.

Saudi investors have not been keen to invest in movie theatres despite government support programmes for local investors. Investor apprehension is due to the lack of official statistics about the extent of Saudi interest in cinema and demand. In addition, the religious and conservatives have long promoted the idea that Saudi society does not like or favour cinema and that only a few people want it. So the government, through the Public Investment Fund of Saudi Arabia (PIF), went to foreign companies such as AMC, Cinépolis and VOX Cinemas. In April 2018, AMC opened its first movie theatre in Riyadh, and one month later VOX Cinemas opened its first theatre, also in Riyadh. Consequently, data are now available for investors to predict the market before investing. Figure 6.1 illustrates the domination of foreign commercial theatres over home-grown cinemas, as there is only one national cinema brand, Muvi Cinemas. Muvi Cinemas has only 10 of the 32 commercial theatres in the country.

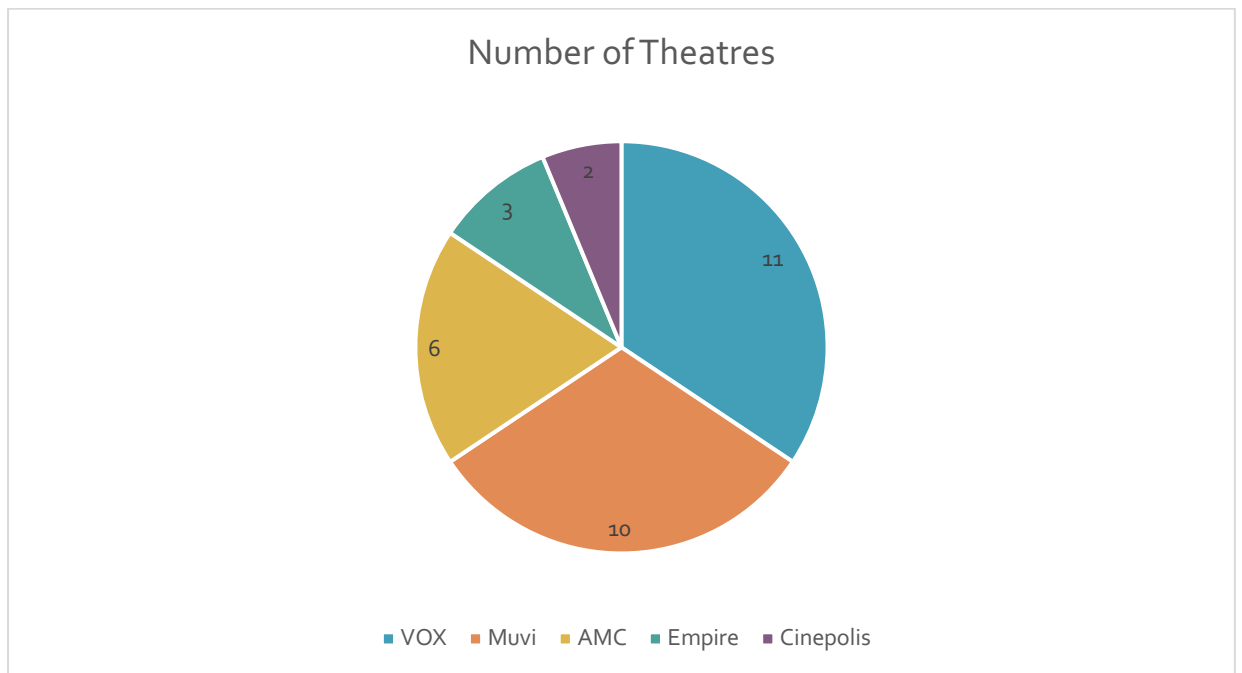


Figure 6.1 Cinemas in Saudi Arabia by brand.

Source: Report on the cultural situation in Saudi Arabia issued by the Ministry of Culture for the year 2020.

GCAM's second target for success was to have 45 movie theatres by 2020. GCAM failed to hit that target, and as of mid-2020, Saudi Arabia had 32 movie theatres in eleven cities, with 5 operators: VOX, AMC, Empire, Cinépolis and Muvi cinemas. The Ministry of Culture's report indicates that Saudi Arabia only has 3.3 screenings for every million people (Saudi Arabia Ministry of Culture, 2020, p. 123). Although GCAM has licensed eight operators, only five of them have launched their movie theatres.

Thus, GCAM succeeded in its first target of selling four million tickets but failed to make its second target of opening 45 movie theatres. However, the blame for this failure could lie with other government agencies. During King Salman's rule from 2015 to 2020, the country faced many political, economic and social challenges,

and these events may have affected GCAM's ability to achieve this target. Also, the level of international investments inside the country has dropped, and the promises made by the foreign companies regarding the number of theatre openings have not yet been fulfilled. There are four operators who have not opened their theatres yet but have started their social media activity and websites. Thus, GCAM might achieve this target belatedly, but the timeline of events indicates that GCAM is likely to achieve more than expected but needs more time.

GCAM's overall initiatives have been significantly successful in the Quality of Life Program 2020 when considering the historical timeline of the film industry's development. The country was divided for 40 years regarding the presence of cinema in the country. The industry's development in the early 2000s was extremely slow, particularly compared with what GCAM achieved in less than three years, from 2017 to 2019. Thus, GCAM's progress is in line with Saudi Vision 2030, and in the exhibition sector, it has made a huge difference by facilitating the process of opening movie theatres. GCAM's draft regulations provided a new economic and ideological impetus to the industry: economically through regulations to organise the industry to generate profit and ideologically by presenting cinema to society as a modern tool for art and creativity. A positive aspect of the GCAM regulation is that it does not neglect the need for movie theatres in smaller cities, as other government agencies have in previous development projects related to social openness. Also noteworthy is that GCAM's regulation forced theatre-chain operators to include medium and small cities, such as Hafar al-Batin and Tabuk, in their expansion plans to reach 350 movie theatres by 2030. In small cities, the GCAM faces a greater challenge because it must negotiate with the regions' conservative and tribal citizens. Figure 6.2 shows the geographical distribution of cinemas in Saudi Arabia in 2020.

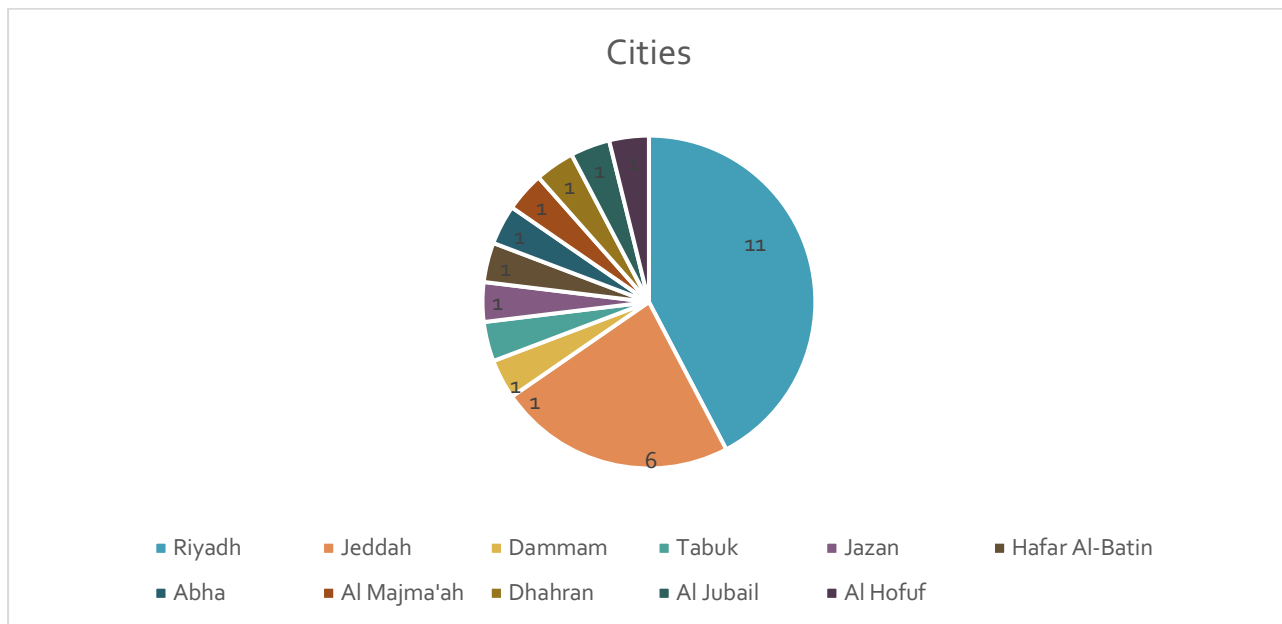


Figure 6.2 Distribution of cinemas by city

Source: Report on the cultural situation in Saudi Arabia issued by the Ministry of Culture for the year 2020.

Conclusion

This chapter has discussed the features of Saudi film regulation and censorship practices in terms of GCAM regulatory activities. As a relatively new state body, GCAM developed a qualitatively new policy regarding the regulation of filmmaking activities. In particular, because of the organisation's efforts, the film industry – including both production and exhibition sectors – has started to evolve. GCAM predominantly focuses on the economic aspects of film-industry regulation, namely, licensing for films' distribution and exhibition. As the executive regulations indicate, GCAM's goal is to create an economic model that supports industry development. The comprehensiveness of the regulations is evident in the details for the distribution, supply and acquisition systems and the protection of competition between companies. However, aside from content censorship, there is a clear lack of regulations

concerning the production sector. This lack of regulation to support the production process and preserve the rights of workers may over time lead to a slowdown in domestic production and make work in the production sector unattractive and unpleasant. Therefore, GCAM regulations emphasise making an economic impact but lack detailed protections for labour and children's rights.

As discussed in this chapter, GCAM's explicit focus has the disadvantage of insufficiently supporting productive industry development. High taxes, fees and licensing rates compared with other Gulf countries put strong pressure on film producers. Moreover, GCAM does not explain how the funds received from taxes, fees and licensing rates are distributed, which is another drawback of the authority's practices. Further, as also discussed above, GCAM has not addressed the labour rights of film industry workers and child actors; most significantly, it does not regulate working hours or the provision of medical insurance. This is a substantial drawback of GCAM's policy, which may lead to polarisation among the film professions and decreased contributions from acting.

Further, this chapter addresses censorship's impact on the development of the emerging contemporary Saudi film industry. Censorship is, in principle, based on respect for the traditions and religious values of Islamic society as well as unwavering respect for the activities of the government. As discussed, governmental, social and self-censorship of directors are necessary regulators of the film industry, which ensure the purity and high moral value of films. At the same time, examples show how excessive censorship limits the freedom of creativity of directors and actors, thereby not only reducing their creative potential but also inhibiting the development of the industry and society. Current trends in GCAM politics are considered in relation to the Saudi Vision 2030 strategy. Overall, although GCAM's policy on Saudi Arabia's

film industry has contributed to the industry's expansion, the authority's policies are somewhat one-sided, which ultimately slows the development of Saudi filmmaking and arguably puts film industry workers in an unequal position compared with employees of other cultural sectors such as arts and tourism.

The challenge of film censorship in Saudi Arabia and the region in general is difficult, and officials are usually reluctant to participate in studies. GCAM's lack of participation in this research project influenced the results of this chapter. The researcher had to rely on an analysis of the Executive Regulations for Audiovisual Media, which contain information about censorship, and other available materials, such as official government documents, news reports, magazine articles and certain websites. These materials contain criticism and opinions from participants in various parts of the industry with the exception of GCAM. GCAM's perspective does not appear in media reports, especially regarding censorship. Had GCAM agreed to participate in this research project, a broader understanding of the philosophy of censorship in Saudi Arabia could have been provided to explain the complexities that filmmakers face, which are frequently mentioned in the media. Consequently, GCAM's nonparticipation affected the results of the chapter, which concluded that GCAM's censorship is contradictory and complex.

This and previous chapters have discussed the role of government organisations and their contributions to developing the industry to achieve the country's vision for 2030. The next chapter deals with the role of non-profit organisations in supporting the Saudi film industry. It reveals the vision of one of Saudi Aramco's most important soft power tools, Ithra, and focuses on the implementation of Ithra's vision for filmmaking from 2016 to 2019. Although the country suffers from a lack of non-profit organisations dedicated to supporting

filmmaking, Ithra offers a unique model of support to the film industry. It is used to support state policy, such as promoting a new image of Saudi Arabia abroad as an open country.

Chapter 7: The Role of Culture in a Post-Oil Saudi Economy

Introduction

The focus of this chapter is the role of non-profit organisations in the development of Saudi Arabia's film industry, as explored through a case study of the King Abdulaziz Center for World Culture, known as Ithra. This chapter investigates the relationship between non-profit organisations and the commercial film industry and how the private sector aims to address the public interest in Saudi Arabia. In a bid to strengthen the country's international image and prepare the larger Saudi community for the post-oil economy, the national administration has embarked on several projects, and Ithra, the Arabic word for "enrichment", is one of those projects (Yamada, 2018, p. 602).

Ithra was established in 2008 and started its programmes in 2016. It has a substantial legacy through its parent company, Aramco, that brought cinema to the state in the 1930s. Makio Yamada (2018) stated, "In May 2012, Khalid Al-Falih, Aramco's chief executive and the founder of Ithra (who has, since May 2016, been serving as Saudi Arabia's energy minister), announced that they would provide training programs in arts to two million young Saudi citizens by 2020" (2018, p. 602). This statement implies that the Saudi film industry will need intervention, aid and support both from government and from private-sector non-profits to thrive. Saudi filmmakers seek support from Ithra to make films and work with international experts to improve their skills, whereas Ithra has strived to improve the government's image and spread the country's history and culture.

This chapter provides an evaluation of Ithra's main programmes and compares them to Ithra's vision of supporting and developing the film industry in Saudi Arabia.

This case study also contains an analysis of Ithra's strategy and interventions with other government organisations to support the film industry's development, and it draws from a personal interview with the head of the cinema department at Ithra, Majed Samman. This chapter argues that Ithra has positioned itself as a dominant force in the industry, and that it promotes the government's image in the West and markets the country's culture to others. This chapter contributes to the thesis' overall argument by revealing the industry structures that have the potential to support the industry's growth.

First, Ithra encourages filmmakers to be professional and to take risks even though the country has few filmmaking professionals and taking risks can have substantial consequences. Risk-taking in this context may involve the integration of topics and scenes that have traditionally been discouraged by Saudi society. For instance, Mark Thompson (2019) notes that "social tradition prohibits the sexual act until after the wedding night" (p. 219). Therefore, incorporating sexual scenes in a movie expressly violates the social norms of the country, making it difficult for the film to be exhibited locally. In addition, Saudi Arabia as a society is still significantly conservative as regards media content. For these reasons, it continues to be risky for investors in the industry to engage in activities that touch on such aspects. In addition, the government is sensitive towards communication and information. Therefore, Ithra continues to pioneer risk-taking in theatre and film. There is an underlying desire to pursue a libertarian approach to filmmaking and cinema through the introduction of topics that have traditionally been censored by the government. Ithra is pioneering the sensitive steps needed to finally introduce topics previously avoided in cinema and film by encouraging filmmakers to introduce these topics into their scripts.

Additionally, Ithra has moderately elevated the film industry by introducing internationally acclaimed and accepted topics but without content involving sex, religion or political views. By recognising and blending international standards in script writing, language and themes, Ithra is importing styles and frameworks whilst exporting Saudi culture and artistry. In the Saudi Film Days programme, Ithra presented Saudi Arabia in a way that state institutions have not been able to for decades. Ithra plays a significant role in developing the industry and promoting the Saudi government and the country's image and culture internationally; consequently, Ithra plays a dominant role in the industry. Ithra is the only private-sector organisation with the ability to play a major role in the Saudi film industry's development alongside governmental organisations.

Ithra's contribution to the industry arises from the four main programmes that represent its strategy. These programmes are Saudi Film Days, Ithra theatre and cinema venues, co-production with experienced international crews and monthly workshops for prospective filmmakers. Therefore, Ithra's presence matters to Saudi filmmakers, especially those in the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia as the majority of Ithra's events are held in Dharan city, far from Riyadh.

The main issue with Ithra's strategy is that the organisation seeks to dominate and control the industry. Ithra has partnered with some of the world's leading industries in art and culture and has presented itself as the singular party pursuing theatre liberty in Saudi Arabia. Hanounik Huth (2014) states that "Saudi Aramco succeeded in attracting national tourism through its festivals, programs, and promotions for art exhibitions and future technology" (p. 35). This approach has excluded other prospective and similarly minded firms. Also, in terms of cooperation, Ithra always plays a superior role rather than being an equal partner, for example,

Ithra's domination of the SFF. In this way, Ithra depicts itself as the solitary entity that fosters growth and development in theatre, film and art, albeit administratively rather than cooperatively. Ithra has often opted to work with organisations that take lower positions, and it has left out those that seek equal roles. This leaves little to no room for budding and equally capable partners to participate in planning and orchestrating the SFF.

The Old Aramco and New Ithra

In the twentieth century, among the public and private sectors in Saudi Arabia, only Aramco had an awareness of the potentially significant role of cinema in the state. This was because of the presence of Western workers in the company who in the 1930s were keen to watch movies (Al-khudair, 2019), an interest that has continued in the decades since. After two decades of contributing to the exhibition sector, Aramco entered the production sector and produced its first local film in the 1950s. In its film productions, Aramco presented direct messages to raise awareness and educate people rather than entertaining them. These steps in the exhibition and production sectors were advanced for the Gulf States at a time when illiteracy was widespread and the general public was not interested in education or even entertainment. However, after Aramco's early establishment of the film industry in Saudi Arabia in the mid-1930s, it stopped moving the industry forward. As a result, the film industry remained at that level, with Aramco screening films in its theatres and occasionally producing films.

Aramco not only made films to raise awareness and educate people but also to present government views on political conflicts. In the late 1940s, Saudi Arabia had a dispute over boundaries with Qatar and Oman that derived from oil territories Saudi Arabia shared with its neighbours. Aramco responded to the conflict through

marketing and presenting the Saudi view. As a result, Aramco launched its public relations department, made films and established a magazine called *Aramco World* in 1949 (Hanounik 2014, p. 18). All of these were in English, which means these films and magazine articles were intended for Western audiences. However, no information survives about the majority of Aramco's films, and there is no information from academic or non-academic works that reveal the details of these films, whether they were documentaries or features or how many were produced.

In the 1970s and later, Aramco was less active in building the film industry and produced very few films, instead operating a single theatre in Dhahran that screened US and European films (Al-khudair, 2019). There are many reasons and explanations for Aramco's negligence of the film industry after launching cinema in Saudi Arabia. Among those reasons were difficult political events in the region in the 1970s and 1980s: the Iranian Revolution, the participation of Saudi jihadists in the Soviet-Afghan War, the capture of the Grand Mosque in Mecca by Juhayman Al-Otaibi and the launch of the Islamic Awakening inside the state (Kliment, 2019). These events not only affected the role of Aramco in moving the film industry forward but also affected Aramco's role alongside the Ministry of Culture and Information, the press and the television industry.

Aramco is credited with launching the Saudi film industry's production and exhibition sectors in the 1930s, but no further substantial progress was made for 80 years. This severe stagnation lasted until 2008, when the company introduced a new vision for the future. During its 75th anniversary, the company announced its creation of the King Abdulaziz Center for World Culture, known as Ithra. This film-culture development aligned with the beginning of the SFF in terms of timing. This cultural centre is dedicated to what Ithra itself calls the cultural industries. The concept of

cultural industries is a disputed and difficult term, and as David Hesmondhalgh indicated, its problems stem from the difficulty of defining “culture” not to mention the term “industry” (2019, p. 14). The magnitude, rationale and enthusiasm with which the Ithra project was launched signified the seriousness with which the country views art, industry and cultural heritage. The structure to house Ithra was heavily budgeted for and reflects a strong desire to develop Saudi Arabia and to introduce Ithra to a global audience. Its uniqueness is indicated by a pebbled appearance at the top, a globalised modern design with “glass fins”, “façade panels” and “toggle glazing” (Buro, 2012, p. 121). In essence, the Ithra establishment serves as the centre of the Saudi cultural industries. These industries, as Robert Williams has demonstrated, are the “signifying system through which necessarily (though among other means) a social order is communicated, reproduced, experienced and explored” (1981, p. 13). In simpler terms, cultural industries are usually seen as those institutions “directly involved in the production of social meaning” (Hesmondhalgh, 2019, p. 14). Despite the difficulties and confusion that many researchers have demonstrated in defining cultural industries, all of them include the film industry as a cultural industry (Hesmondhalgh, 2019, p. 14).

As a centre for cultural industries, Ithra aims to enhance the quality and frequency of productions and thereby create an improved version of Aramco’s cultural interventions. The aim in creating Ithra Centre was to compete globally in an industry other than oil and to create an internationally renowned cultural institution and model of social progress through intercultural education and exchange (Aramco, 2019). However, Ithra was inactive for the first eight years of its existence, finally launching its programmes in 2016. From 2016 to 2019, after launching many programmes, it became clear that Ithra works slowly. Across this period, Ithra

supported Saudi filmmakers in producing just eighteen short films and three features. The head of cinema at Ithra, Majed Samman (2019), confirms this claim and indicates that Ithra “moves ... slowly but steadily”. However, the number of films supported by Ithra in those three years is more than Aramco has supported since the 1950s. Although Ithra’s initiatives have been gradual, its general progress compared with Aramco’s is encouraging. By creating more film production avenues in the country, Ithra spreads the idea that there is room for progress in the arts and culture and inspires young people to participate in realising their talent and exercising the available liberty. With such a development, the government is encouraged to exercise restraint in regards to film production, theatre and art, for which Ithra can be credited.

The country’s economy is overwhelmingly dominated by oil production, and the drop in the oil price from \$120 per barrel in 2014 to around \$20 in 2016 made the government look for permanent solutions rather than rely on the country’s reserves to sustain its economy. As a result, the government announced the establishment of Saudi Vision 2030 on 25 April 2016. One of its challenges is to reshape the economy by creating many new industries beyond oil. The government invested heavily in media, entertainment, sports and cultural activities. In the official document for Vision 2030, it states that “We consider culture and entertainment indispensable to our quality of life. We are well aware that the cultural and entertainment opportunities currently available do not reflect the rising aspirations of our citizens and residents, nor are they in harmony with our prosperous economy” (Vision 2030 website). This 2016 statement represents a huge shift in the government’s position and contradicts its past as a theocratic country. The government acknowledged that cultural industries were less funded by government and that it is time to meet the aspirations of its citizens and residents. Therefore, Ithra focuses on developing creative and cultural

industries that support the government's vision of creating post-oil industries. Aramco already planned to create post-oil industries and announced it in 2008 by launching Ithra Centre, before the government's vision was announced in 2016. This indicates that the country needed to reform its economy and support cinema activities as part of the creative and cultural industries.

The future post-oil economic framework proposed for the country meant introducing projects that would globalise Saudi Arabia and elevate its status internationally. Ithra is one of those projects. When Aramco built Ithra, its goals were extremely ambitious and went beyond cinema. According to Samman (2019), Ithra not only supports filmmaking but also a variety of cultural and creative activities to “enrich the filmmaking experience, theatre experience [and] ... different creative aspects like painting and music”. Aramco built the centre to “have a different economy other than oil” (Samman). The establishment of a specialised centre to support and enrich culture and creativity in Saudi Arabia was a unique project as there is a lack of government and private institutions that support talent and art of all kinds. An important portion of these objectives also involved the “integration of English movies as teaching tools” to improve the prowess of film enthusiasts in communicating in foreign languages (Kabooaha, 2016, p. 248). However, creating a post-oil economy through the creative industries is extremely ambitious and involves enormous challenges. Ithra has established four main programmes to develop the film industry in Saudi Arabia, but these programmes are not sufficient to achieve such a goal. In addition, the Saudi film industry is an emerging industry, and its economic self-reliance will require years of work and government support to establish. Thus, Ithra cannot achieve this goal by itself or without an alliance with government institutions.

In developing a modern and futuristic platform for filmmaking, it was important to examine the past Aramco model and identify the aspects that needed improving. Consequently, before the cinema department at Ithra launched its programmes, its staff considered some of the past poor practices of Saudi filmmakers and developed a plan to address them. An example of such poor practices is filmmakers being involved in multiple roles in their projects, such as directing, producing, editing and supervising digital colour correction. Samman (2019) claims that the cinema department teaches filmmaking starting with the basics and focuses on teaching “filmmaking as a business”. Samman believes that previous Saudi films did not have release and distribution models, and for that reason, Ithra provides participants “the tools and the know-how [...] to create a business out of films” (Samman). Focusing on past missteps and developing a plan to address them is Ithra’s strategy – one that had not been considered by government organisations that support cinema in Saudi Arabia or other Gulf States. It was essential, therefore, that in shifting from Aramco to Ithra, the past production model was enhanced and new initiatives introduced to enhance the quality and frequency of productions.

Furthermore, Ithra not only approaches the modern production from a singular point of view but utilises several systems and mechanisms. Ithra’s support for the film industry comprises four main programmes designed by its cinema department. These four programmes, as noted at the start of this chapter, are Saudi Film Days, Ithra theatre and cinema venues, co-production with international experts and monthly workshops for general audiences. Ithra’s aim for these programmes is to support filmmakers, not to make money or to screen the films in theatres in foreign markets such as the US or UK. The message is “to promote [...] Saudi filmmakers and empower them to make films and ... show them across the world” in festivals and

cultural events (Samman). In other words, part of Ithra's mandate at its inception was to globalise Saudi film production enterprises. From Ithra's perspective, the programmes are a success if audiences watch films produced by Ithra and appreciate their production values and how the directors translated the stories to films. Samman points out that they are working on this goal, but they are "still in the beginning". Ithra is clearly not looking to profit from the films at this stage; instead they are focusing on quality and teaching filmmaking from scratch. This non-profit, talent-oriented approach distinguishes Ithra from international production firms and enables the organisation to focus on quality productions. However, even as a non-profit organisation, Ithra must balance its budget to ensure its continuing support for the industry.

One of the programmes to support the film industry is providing national venues for screenings and networking events for filmmakers. Samman (2019) points out that most Saudi talent in the film industry does not have "a venue to show their movies to the public, and only YouTube was available for them". Ithra has a 300-seat movie theatre, a 900-seat performing arts theatre and a great hall for hosting events and festivals in Dharan (Aramco, 2019). Ithra's building is a venue for those who live in the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia. An example of the use of Ithra as a venue for Saudi filmmakers was hosting the fifth SFF in March 2019. Ithra provided all of the logistical support for the event in addition to the budget, and Samman says "the financial aspect is always the last thing we think about" and that their focus was on empowering the festival managers and providing what they needed. This logistical input was provided in the form of facilities including "a convention hall" (Aljuwaiber, 2019, p. 198) and a 900-seat theatre" (Insoll, 2019, p. 520). However, the idea of creating a venue for filmmakers has existed in Saudi Arabia since 1974 through the

SASCA. This organisation has artists' headquarters in fifteen cities across the state. Ithra's venue does not provide anything different from it; however, Ithra has a huge budget, exceeding that of all fifteen branches of the SASCA, allowing Ithra to offer more programmes and events for filmmakers.

Advancing filmmaking requires investment in talent, which is exactly what Ithra has been engaging in. Ithra stages workshops for prospective filmmakers as another programme to support the film industry. Ithra tries to teach the public, especially young people who love cinema and the arts, by providing rigorous professional training. Ithra is committed to hosting at least two workshops each month from each department at Ithra, including the cinema department (Samman, 2019). These workshops are delivered in collaboration with technical experts from the Gulf States. The workshop programme includes film screenings, hosting panels and other discussions, and it is designed for all levels but focuses on prospective filmmakers, and it can be a second chance for filmmakers who have not benefited from Ithra's other programmes. An example from the programme is a workshop about how to make films and 3D animations using smartphones (Samman). This programme's goals have yet to be achieved, but it is a significant way to increase the knowledge about production in a society that has historically lacked training in filmmaking.

Ithra also seeks to enable Saudi filmmakers' storytelling by hosting workshops on writing and by sending Saudi filmmakers to Los Angeles for advanced writing workshops. Samman (2019) claims that Saudi stories are not original. As Samman observes, in the past decade, most Saudi and Arab films have been dramas and family stories that are remakes of previous films. Samman adds that when viewers see a good new story in a film, they may like the first act, but by the middle of the film, the story is lost. According to Samman, the quality of stories in Saudi films is the result of

ignorance about the storytelling process. For that reason, Ithra focuses on writing, from fundamentals to the advanced level, to improve the storytelling in Saudi films through numerous workshops. Therefore, a diversity of advanced schools is used for writing workshops, such as a school in Los Angeles, a school in London and in the Gulf, at Ithra in Dhahran. With a vision to present the Saudi film industry to the rest of the world, Ithra sees partnerships with global film giants including Hollywood and London as the perfect platforms through which it can launch the Saudi film industry to greater heights by increasing the number of talented productions.

The promotion of Saudi culture to local audiences, including foreign-born residents who comprise more than 40% of the population, requires that Ithra introduce the community to the Saudi film industry. Therefore, part of Ithra's strategy is to work with filmmakers to find ways to make films that can be released within Saudi Arabia's conservative culture. In its writing workshops, Samman finds that filmmakers are afraid of censure from society and are sensitive to moral criticism; therefore, Ithra and other sponsors limit the themes and details in the stories to avoid social criticism. Although international acceptance and recognition are important as the country is strategising a post-oil economy, it remains vital that filmmaking initiatives start with the Saudi audience.

Ithra focuses on making both films and film-exhibition venues with Saudi audiences in mind. Ithra's facility itself leads by example in its architectural design that incorporates Saudi's contextual, functional and aesthetic qualities because architecture is a combination of art and technology. As described, "The content of each project touches deeply upon the current movement of cultural and social development in Saudi Arabia, initiated [...] within a population of which more than 40 per cent is under the age of 17" (Thorsen and Greenwood, 2010, p. 90). As such,

Ithra seeks to enable Saudi filmmakers' storytelling while trying not to violate Saudi Arabia's conservative cultural standards. However, because topics such as religion, sex and politics violate the domestic conservative norms, Ithra limits filmmakers' creativity by forcing them to avoid those topics. Limitations are essential in Saudi Arabia, where fully open creative expression is not possible given the consequences.

A regional approach to theatre development and film promotion has remained central and integral to Ithra's goals in advancing the Saudi film industry. In 2013, "Creating a new gallery devoted to exploring Islamic visual culture allowed curators at Ithra the opportunity to investigate the complex question of whether employing conventional approaches used in the presentation and interpretation of Islamic art by other museums abroad is effective or appropriate in the Saudi Arabian context" (Norton-Wright, 2020, p. 120). This was done as part of Ithra's long-term plan to expand the awareness of Saudi films to all audiences within the Middle East. Ithra is involved in many aspects of culture, including fine art such as art galleries, showing its broad conception of culture and cultural industries.

Whereas Aramco remained conservative in establishing a restrained national film production framework, Ithra is increasing the scope of production and the range of subjects that films include to target audiences across the border. This would mean exporting filmmaking to all regions of the nation as well as to cities in neighbouring states. Under this initiative, Ithra has remained committed to connecting cultures not only nationally but regionally through theatre, art and cultural heritage. An approach that allows diverse audiences to watch Ithra's productions means sharing languages, cultures and experiences and eventually getting communities to unite in advancing Ithra's objective of gaining global visibility for Saudi films. Targeting eastern Saudi Arabia remains a major focus for Ithra. The workshops at Ithra are intended to be

extremely valuable to communities in the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia, especially as government institutions, such as the SFC, focus on cities in other regions, such as Riyadh and Jeddah.

Training and the creation of workshops continues to enable Ithra to recognise innovative and talented producers, directors and actors, among other personnel. An advantage of Ithra's training strategy is that there is a programme to support non-professionals and film lovers, unlike other institutions that only offer programmes for filmmakers. These workshops help improve the image of cinema in Saudi Arabia's conservative society, large portions of which look with suspicion at the arts in general and cinema in particular. The fear of cinema is the result of decades of incitement campaigns by extremists who are ignorant of the cultural role of cinema because religious scholars do not see how cinema can be used positively. If audiences attend workshops and learn about cinema and its cultural and entertainment value, many may change their attitude from considering cinema taboo to considering it an effective tool to spread Saudi Arabia's cultural identity. For instance, the King Abdul Aziz University in Jeddah conducted a study for its students at its English Language Institute. The study examined the performance of Saudi students when they watched films as a tool for English-language learning. The study found that after teachers integrated films with traditional learning methods, the films motivated students to learn the language and "increased students' participation and engagement in the classroom" (Kabooha, 2016, p. 255). Film screenings are a significant tool to convert those who oppose cinema in general to accept that film can be used as a soft power tool to spread the cultural values of Saudis.

There are many limitations for non-profit institutions in developing commercial artistic products, particularly exportable films. One such limitation is

budgetary. Ithra's limited budget for films is not in line with its vision to produce films that are globally competitive in movie theatres and at film festivals. Ithra provides a maximum of 1.5 million SAR (400,000 USD) to support each feature film, and according to Samman (2019), no candidate has received the full 1.5 million. Samman claims that filmmakers can make high-quality films with less money if they are creative. Ithra wants filmmakers to bring their creativity and add value without using much money or "spending it on nothing" (Samman). Ithra believes that its budget for filmmakers is appropriate and that big-budget films usually spend most of their budget on three things: known actors, multiple locations and marketing. Ithra's point of view is appropriate if its vision is to compete in the region, as most of the films produced in Gulf States cost less than \$500,000. Ithra aims to produce films that attract audiences around the world, especially Western countries, but in terms of budget, Ithra wants to produce such films differently from how films are produced in Western countries. Rather than produce high budget films that capture the global audience, Ithra looks to produce properly budgeted films that highlight Saudi culture and expound it to the rest of the world. There is a desire to have the global audience turn its attention to Saudi Arabia by professing its culture in theatre and film productions. Whereas international film producers obtain personnel from all over the world, Ithra seeks to create and utilise low cost locally available talent. Ithra wants the world to look at Saudi Arabian culture and lifestyle through film, even though the productions will be of internationally recognised standards. This shows the dynamic relation between such non-profit institutions and commercial industries in the country.

Neglecting the value of professional actors may be why Ithra's films have not reached international audiences or large film festivals in the West. Not every producer in Saudi Arabia can produce a film with unknown actors and reach the US and

European markets. Although there are many Saudi actors with successful experiences, such as Fayez Al-Malki, the protagonist of *Menahi*, and Reem Abdullah and Ahd Kamel, the leading actors in *Wadjda*, Ithra did not use them. None of the short or feature films produced by Ithra have featured stars, none of its short films have been nominated in prestigious festivals and none of its feature films have been accepted by exhibitors in Saudi Arabia or abroad. There are many important reasons to recruit known actors with mass appeal within the Middle East. In particular their ability to draw audiences to theatres and their acting skills are needed to make a film successful.

Without marketing and public relations campaigns for projects, Saudi films may remain largely invisible to prospective Western audiences. Considering marketing an unnecessary luxury is incompatible with Ithra's goal of teaching "filmmaking as a business" (Samman, 2019) not just as an art form. Film as a business means films should not be considered creative projects without paying attention to the bigger picture, which includes economics. Marketing campaigns for films are essential regardless of whether marketing budgets are high or low. More importantly, experienced producers always have a marketing strategy to promote their film to the public within the budget available rather than dismissing marketing as unnecessary.

These issues and gaps in Ithra's vision call into question its ability to succeed with its strategy, especially as it has produced three feature films and none of them have entered US, European or Asian movie theatres as Ithra aims. In addition to not participating in prestigious festivals, none of the films have been nominated for international prizes. Ignoring the significant role of experienced actors, film locations

and marketing indicates that Ithra has chosen the hard way to reach a global audience without realising it.

Marketing Saudi Culture

Ithra recognises the need to create programmes to advance its larger national and international agenda. Saudi Film Days is a major programme that Ithra started to invigorate and enhance the film production industry. In the programme, Ithra receives applications through their official website from Saudi citizens who want support to make a short or feature film. The programme opens once a year, and after the jury reads the submitted scripts, it decides which candidates receive financial support. The programme requires that the filmmakers attend workshops at the centre and other film institutions in the UK, such as the London Film School, and non-profit arts organisations in the US, such as Film Independent. The centre is involved in script development, the pre-production process, production and the post-production process. The purpose of their involvement in these steps is to “make high-quality [films] that can meet ... international standards in visual aspects and ... storytelling in a way that [they] can go to international festivals and win” (Samman, 2019). However, intervening in every step of filmmaking raises concerns and questions about the extent to which Ithra guides stories towards an ideology the government favours or at least keeps filmmakers away from stories that criticise authority.

Like most government and private institutions that fund films in Gulf States, Ithra claims to allow a high degree of freedom and that their support does not control the ideas or messages of the films. Samman (2019) confirms that Ithra does not control the projects or intervene in stories, but he admits that there must be boundaries. Ithra has three forbidden topics: religion, sex and politics. These topics

cannot be discussed in the films that Ithra supports, and Samman advises filmmakers who want funding to “talk about anything except that”. By these standards, *Wadjda* which is the most popular Saudi film would not pass Ithra’s standards. As Islam is fundamental to Saudi daily life, it is difficult not to discuss religion in Saudi films. However, these redlines are actually grey, and each person’s understanding of them is different. For example, Muslims believe that religion is relevant to all aspects of their lives; thus, according to the understanding of most religious leaders, any criticism of a social or economic issue can cross over to religion. In 2016, Ithra supported eleven Saudi films that participated in Saudi Film Days in Los Angeles. One of these films, *Wasati* (2016), was later distributed on Netflix, and its story revolves around the practice of some extremists of preventing cultural plays from being shown in private Saudi universities. The film is based on real events that occurred in 2006 when a play was forcibly stopped by extremists and the actors were attacked. *Wasati* is a clear and explicit criticism of the opinion of some religious scholars that theatres and the arts are prohibited and must be stopped.

Another argument is that criticism or the discussion of politics, religion or sex may not necessarily be offensive or negative. In fact, researchers have been quick to point out that Ithra functions as a “double agent” which “constructs images in the mind of the public” to push its agenda for freedom of content in film production (Hanounik 2014, p. 6). Absolute judgement on such things and the ambiguities of redlines in the media and arts have been dilemmas for Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf States for decades, and there are still no detailed regulations or guidance for filmmakers on redlines and prohibitions in any Gulf state. This speaks volumes as regards to Ithra’s case in Saudi Arabia. Perhaps in recognition of Ithra’s strong connection to the SASCA, Ithra has paved the way for a grey area as far as the

inclusion of prohibited topics in film is concerned. Ithra may be gradually opening an avenue via which politics, sex and religion can be included in films in ways similar to those of internationally recognised films. For example, Ithra may be lenient in supporting politically oriented films but is supportive of the state view, or it may support a film that criticises religion but agrees with the state's approach, such as criticism of extremism and Islamic groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood or the scholars of the Islamic Awakening. Hence, Ithra can be the torch that potentially lights the way for the Saudi film industry to reach new heights.

Saudi Film Days is an event held by Ithra outside the country, mostly in London and Los Angeles. The first edition was in 2016, when Ithra presented eleven short films by Saudi filmmakers. When the projects were complete, Ithra presented the films at an event in Los Angeles. Later, Ithra held other Saudi Film Days in London and other countries. These events bring Saudi filmmakers together with international producers to help Saudis find co-production companies to work with them on Saudi projects. However, from 2016 to 2019, despite the films being shown in many countries, none of the filmmakers have had an international co-production company finance any part of an upcoming project. The idea of gathering Saudis together with international experts has achieved Ithra's strategy in this programme, but the results Ithra aspired to have not been realised.

The Saudi Film Days programme has not achieved all of its goals, but it has attracted the press, media and film lovers in each city where an event was held. The advantage of such events is showing the press, media and film lovers a new image of Saudi Arabia through arts and entertainment. Ithra presented Saudi Arabia in a way that state institutions have not been able to for decades. Attempts by the government to present itself to the Western world as an open state with an interest in arts and

culture were unsuccessful, as they were only speeches and press releases. However, Ithra exhibited Saudi openness and interest in the arts by holding cultural and artistic events and exhibitions in Western capital cities, of which Saudi Film Days was one such event. After four years of this programme, Ithra has benefited from it as a public relations campaign, and the Saudi government has benefited by its amendment of Saudi Arabia's image in the Western world.

Marketing Saudi Arabia or promoting the government in the Saudi Film Days programme is not Ithra's job. Saudi filmmakers seek support from Ithra to make films and work with international experts to improve their skills, not to improve the government's image. When the programme launched, the focus was on a new image of Saudi Arabia and its promotion rather than on participating filmmakers. In 2018, thirteen filmmakers returned from the Saudi Film Days event without deals or negotiations with US production companies, and the media and attendance attention was on the country's historical culture and contemporary lifestyle. The Arab News called the event "a bridge between [the] Kingdom and the world" and indicated that government efforts were to strengthen US–Saudi Arabia ties, particularly on a cultural level (Al-kinani, 2018). As a result, Saudi filmmakers are caught between representing themselves and highlighting their work to get the attention of international producers on the one hand and focusing on marketing Saudi culture and the nation of Saudi Arabia on the other.

In the Saudi Film Days programme, Ithra also aims to teach filmmakers to be professional in meeting deadlines and managing expectations and budgets. Ithra has found that it is hard for some filmmakers to manage expectations in the production of their films. After supporting the production of many films, Ithra realised that filmmakers need help with professionalism. Samman (2019) believes the reason for

this is the lack of experienced producers in the Saudi film industry. Samman claims that fostering professionalism is important because of the role that producers play in moving the industry forward, not just finding locations, crew and actors. Producers cannot drive the industry and sell films internationally if they cannot meet deadlines and wisely manage expectations and budgets. By teaching producers professionalism, Ithra sharpens their skills, experiences and expectations, thereby raising the bar for film production. Meeting timelines, honouring deals, observing protocols and raising the standards for talent and the industry points the way to higher quality productions. This means that Ithra is growing the industry in terms of production. Therefore, the programme improves the skills of producers and helps them to meet foreign production companies attending film screenings.

The Saudi Film Days programme faces a major challenge: sustainability. The programme is implemented at a high cost, and if there is not a clear financial return over time, Ithra may not be able to continue financing this program. Most of the costs are first-class airline tickets and expensive hotels in Los Angeles for more than 200 filmmakers, actors, producers and crew members in addition to guests. However, the total of the films' budgets does not exceed \$200,000. This makes it difficult to sustain the funding for this programme, which spends more on travel costs, party hall rentals and dinner parties than it spends on producing the films shown.

Ithra's continued funding of this exorbitantly expensive programme for several years without any financial returns has made critics, journalists and filmmakers suspect ulterior motives, such as the involvement of the Prince Mohammed Bin Salman Foundation (MiSK) in the film and media. According to Thompson (2019), "MiSK has organized informational sessions on media, writing, and film, to satisfy the desire for personal expression while providing a state-

approved framework for public engagement” (p. 121). MiSK organises these informational sessions each year without seeking financial returns. MiSK’s involvement makes people think that state approval is merely another phrase for administrative control. With MiSK casting its administrative shadow over film production and with its far-reaching control, little can be accomplished as regards the freedom of expression that internationally acclaimed films enjoy. As a result, Ithra may continue to fund this programme for many years without a financial return, whilst creating a specific pattern for the films it produces with the restrictions that Ithra believes in. Therefore, unless the centre is explicit about its goals for this programme, there will be many negative interpretations by researchers and the Western media about the hidden goals of the programme, and Ithra does not want that for its reputation.

***Joud* (2018) and Local Talent**

The fourth programme is Ithra’s own productions. In the Saudi Film Days programme, Saudis submit scripts and apply for support, but Ithra’s production programme follows a different pattern. Ithra reaches out and hires filmmakers with international expertise to enable Saudis to learn from internationally known names in cinema. According to Samman (2019), Ithra wants to make special projects of which Saudis can be proud. For instance, Ithra’s first production was *Joud* (2018), a collaboration between Saudi and British production companies. The movie is 70 minutes of what Samman describes as “non-narrative beautiful images of Saudi Arabia with amazing soundtrack music”, and from Samman’s and Ithra’s perspective, this programme is “another way for supporting the Saudi film industry” (Samman). However, producing *Joud* runs counter to Ithra’s core vision of making high-quality

narrative films that can compete at international festivals. *Joud* does not have a clear story, plot or even dialogue. The film was shot in sixteen locations in the west, east, south and north of Saudi Arabia, but it is minimal and not competitive with films that win at international film festivals. Generating positive public opinion is different than focusing on empowering filmmakers and letting them achieve their artistic visions. This approach of keeping a hypothetical national audience in mind is different from other countries' arts institutions that focus mainly on artistic aspects.

Ithra tried to market *Joud* to the media and the public and promoted the film's achievements through exposure in 40 cities around the world. However, the screenings were free, and Ithra bore the financial cost of hiring the venues (Samman, 2019). The film was not nominated at any of the prestigious festivals around the world, and it was not accepted by any distributor or exhibitor in Saudi Arabia or abroad for screenings in commercial theatres. Therefore, based on Ithra's vision, the film cannot be considered a success. Thus, these issues raise the question of the effectiveness of Ithra's strategy in supporting the growth of the film industry in Saudi Arabia. Judging the success of films is a complex process, and many critics may disagree. However, if a film is not nominated at film festivals, many critics consider it a commercial failure because it is not selling commercially or is not technically qualified to participate in festivals.

The main advantage of Ithra's own productions is the collaboration between Saudis and film industry experts from the West. Samman (2019) points out that young filmmakers are ambitious, and as a result, they want to perform as many roles in their films as possible. Samman indicates that filmmakers have been doing this for a long time, and it is time to change that by teaching them that filmmaking is not a one-man show. Samman says that these filmmakers are not aware that films are a collaborative

process. In this programme, Ithra teaches filmmakers the importance of collaborating with other experts in the field. This goal is significant and indicates that Ithra understands the fundamental problems with previous poor practices in the industry. In addition, using Ithra's own productions to solve the playing-too-many-roles-in-a-project issue is further proof of Ithra's determination to solve limiting past practices.

The issue of playing too many roles in a project arises because many Saudi filmmakers take their aesthetic model from YouTube and learned filmmaking on their own through individual effort. Their films are produced by three to four people, each responsible for several roles during each stage of the project. Filmmakers who participated in film festivals before YouTube also learned filmmaking by themselves. They had no opportunity to participate in the television productions that were popular in Saudi Arabia because of the monopoly by a few companies, such as Al-Sadaf for sound and video production, Al Hadaf for media production and Fayez Al-Malki for audiovisual production. As they relied on specific crews that worked together for decades, those companies were not interested in training young people or bringing new minds and talent into the industry. Therefore, the one-man show issue is a consequence of the lack of local film schools, as universities in Saudi Arabia focus on designing programmes for journalism, radio and television, not feature films.

Domination of the Market

Market domination not only concerns companies but also non-profit organisations because market dominance has advantages beyond economics. In the case of Ithra, it can take advantage of its dominance to influence socially and culturally within the state and abroad. Samman (2019) admitted that Ithra works alone in developing the film industry, but Ithra cooperates with others such as the SFC. Samman's statement

is vague and confusing as he admitted that Ithra works alone but cooperates with others. This is one of the main obstacles facing emerging film industries: determining structures and oversight. There is no formal relationship between SFC and Ithra, but each plays the same role. The similarities between SFC and Ithra programmes are their support of filmmakers and industry development, but the SFC is a government organisation, and Ithra is a non-profit organisation that relies on support from the private sector.

Ithra's lack of cooperation with the SFC does not indicate that Ithra operates independently of government policy and government's direction in developing the industry. Samman confirms that Ithra has the same vision for the industry's development as the government, and he stated that Ithra has cooperated with three editions of the SFF. Evidence of collaboration with other institutions, such as the SFF, confirms Samman's point but raises questions regarding its dominance seeking. Noticeably, Ithra tends to cooperate with those who are subject to domination, and it often puts filmmakers in a subordinate position. Therefore, the relationship is not one between equal parties, and Ithra always plays the role of the superior party. As a non-profit organisation, Ithra plays a major role and is dominant in the industry. In instigating its position as a dominant force, Ithra seeks to consolidate its pursuit of developing the Saudi film industry. There is a need to carve out a niche that appeals to international standards and leaves little room for governmental influence, and Ithra is determined to eliminate any competitors that might fall prey to government control. By placing partners in subdued positions, Ithra dominates the progress of establishing a film industry that recognises the interests of the public and potentially overlooks the grip of the government's controls.

At the 2019 festival previously known as the SFF, Ithra changed the festival name to Saudi Film Festival–Ithra. Although this might appear to be a brand awareness strategy, the goal of the name change was to consolidate Ithra’s sole authority pursuant to utilising the festival as a stepping stone to grow the film industry. Progress can often best be attained by using an existing brand to win over an audience. In this context, Ithra uses the SFF as part of its mission to be the game changer in the Saudi film sphere. In terms of numbers, Ithra helped the festival increase its number of workshops and overall attendance. Each previous edition of the festival was attended by a couple of thousand people, whereas the fifth edition was attended by more than fifteen thousand people and had 80 workshops and a large media presence (Sanad, 2019). The Chairman of the Board of Directors of the SASCA told the press that the SFF was based on Saudi filmmakers, but in 2019 it celebrated a paradigm shift in partnership with Ithra at the festival level, which was presented as a distinctive level of organisation and management (Sanad). This proves Ithra’s capability of empowering and supporting others in the industry but is also evidence of Ithra creating a structure of dominance and subordination.

Playing the higher party over a lower party is part of power, as many studies in political economy have pointed out. Vincent Mosco (2009, p. 2) defines political economy as particularly concerned with “the power relations, that mutually constitute the production, distribution and consumption of resources”. According to Mosco, the concept of power in the political economy “addresses how people get what they want even when others do not want them to get it” (Mosco, 2009, p. 2). In the case of Ithra, the organisation uses its power to pressure SFF management to serve Ithra’s agenda. Part of Ithra’s agenda is to add its name to the festival’s name. Similarly, in previous editions of the festival, Ithra has taken advantage of media exposure at the expense of

the festival's managerial autonomy. Therefore, Ithra empowers the festival's management and provides them what they need, but in return, Ithra exerts its influence on the event. For this reason, the major non-profit organisations in Saudi Arabia do not work with each other but instead form hierarchical alliances with smaller organisations. Despite Ithra sharing its goals with the MiSK Foundation in supporting cinema and the arts, there is no collaboration between them.

In the development of the production sector, Ithra and the SFC are the dominant players. The presence of such dominant organisations in the production sector from both governmental and non-profit organisations is an advantage in Saudi Arabia because these entities seek to develop the industry for the public interest. These dominant parties can support the industry for a long time to achieve the film industry's goals, and because they control a large part of the industry, they can protect it from domestic market declines and pump money into it to continue supporting filmmakers and film production. It is noteworthy that all of Ithra's programmes are for audiences in eastern Saudi Arabia, whereas the SFC is active in the central and western regions of the country. There is no formal agreement on this, but given the previous programmes and events held by Ithra and the SFC, it is obvious that each avoids holding events in the other's region.

Although Ithra and the SFC have not worked together to organise an event, there is clearly policy coherence between them. Both parties have local and external training programmes, both focus on the new generation and both give priority to YouTubers and social media influencers. These are indications of compatibility between the two organisations and their roles in developing the film industry. One explanation may be the presence of senior government executives who were employees of Aramco. Senior executives of the Ministry of Culture and the GAC are

former employees of Aramco, including the CEO of the GAC and the CEO of the SFC, who was the head of the cinema department at Ithra. That may be the reason for the consensus on how to develop the film industry in the state.

Although Ithra dominates film-industry development through its four programmes, its role in movie theatres is non-existent. Hollywood films dominate Saudi Arabian commercial theatres, such as Muvi, AMC and VOX cinemas in Riyadh, Jeddah and Dammam cities. From 2015 to 2019 of the Saudi films screened in cinemas, none were produced or supported by Ithra. These feature films are *Bilal* (2015), *Barakah Meets Barakah* (2016), *Born a King* (2019) and *Roll'em* (2019). Ithra's domination is primarily in producing and screening films in its own venue, organising film festivals and hosting talks and workshop events; real domination in commercial theatres does not exist. Ithra's challenge is to promote the viewing of local rather than foreign films by cinema audiences; however, since the cinema ban was lifted, US films have aroused the most audience interest. Therefore, Ithra's industry domination is because of their huge budget for industry development. The real challenge is box office domination, and up to the present, Ithra has not been able to make that happen.

Another view is that Ithra plays a major role because there are not many players in the industry, and there are no commercial giants competing for domination of the domestic market. The major players in Saudi Arabia are two governmental agencies, GCAM and the SFC, and two non-profit organisations, Ithra and MiSK. The competition between these four organisations is geared towards training programmes, workshops and events to bring together local filmmakers and international experts, while competition for funding to support film production is very limited. Ithra

dominates the industry, but that dominance depends on the absence of large production companies.

Domination of the industry without economic rewards means temporary domination, which may disappear if a new company starts reaping profits. Ithra does not focus on box office revenue, and its share from the box office is zero. Not considering profits may have made sense during the period after the cinema ban was lifted in 2017, but there is still no plan to begin seeing financial returns from the box office in the near future. Dominating the industry without profits or returns to cover costs is not a sustainable strategy. The concept of a non-profit organisation allows Ithra to not focus on profits, but there must be cost-effective returns to ensure continuity. Ithra's domination is precarious due to its indeterminate industry status and vulnerability to the rise of a growing company that may dominate film revenue.

As Ithra's domination is not stable, it must maintain its position as a dominant player. To remain dominant for a long time "requires the ability to restrict or exclude competition" (Schmalensee, 1985, p. 5). Restricting the growth of competitors is Ithra's only option. However, another vital avenue involves "capacity building in terms of power, rank, and globalization of its brand" (Yamada, 2018, p. 589). Expanding its territory to reach international markets can consolidate its position as a giant not only in filmmaking but also in the arts, development, society and culture. If Ithra is forced to make this choice, it is not in its interests as a non-profit organisation that seeks to develop a commercial film industry in Saudi Arabia. The stifling competition contradicts Ithra's role in supporting industry development. Therefore, it may be prudent to embrace the enriching growth of competitors to achieve its goals of creating a post-oil economy in the cultural and entertainment industries. If small film production companies succeed in growing and dominating with Ithra's help, their

success is also Ithra's success. Therefore, Ithra's efforts to dominate the industry conflict with its interests because it is a non-profit organisation involved in supporting the cultural and entertainment industries, not competing with producers in the market.

Conclusion

Ithra's full name is the King Abdulaziz Center for World Culture. The words "world culture" may appear misleading as each state/region in the world has a unique culture, and looking at the Ithra programmes discussed in this chapter, it is clear that this cultural centre is dedicated to Saudi culture. Ithra has had four main programmes for supporting industry development since 2016. The outcomes of two of the four remain to be achieved, but these two programmes have achieved other advantages. For instance, the goal of Saudi Film Days is to bring Saudi filmmakers together with international producers to work on Saudi projects, but that has not happened. Meanwhile, the programme has attracted the press, media and film lovers and presented Saudi Arabia in a way that state institutions have not been able to for decades. This programme has promoted the government's image in the Western world and marketed the country's culture to others. The second programme is workshops, and in this programme, Ithra's goal is to enable Saudi filmmakers' storytelling. The outcomes of this programme are to spread cinematic culture in a society that has historically lacked cinema. Thus, there are differences between Ithra's ambitions and its achievements to date.

This chapter investigates the relationship between non-profit organisations and the commercial film industry, and how the private sector aims to address the public interest in Saudi Arabia. The chapter evaluates Ithra's main programmes and compares them to Ithra's vision of supporting and developing the film industry in

Saudi Arabia. Ithra's four main programmes that represent its strategy are the Saudi Film Days, Ithra theatre and cinema venues, co-production with international experts and monthly workshops for prospective filmmakers. Saudi Arabia's emerging film industry faces obstacles in determining its structures and oversight, and there is no relationship between the SFC and Ithra although they play the same roles. As a result, there are similarities between SFC and Ithra programmes and overlap between their roles. The significance of Ithra's strategy is that Ithra's programmes aim to rectify past missteps by teaching film as a business rather than an art form, addressing the one-man show issue and training filmmakers to meet deadlines and manage expectations and budgets. The development of the Saudi film industry has long been limited because Saudi universities have neglected to offer programmes dedicated to journalism, radio, film or television. In addition, the few television production companies in the country were not interested in training young people or bringing new minds or talent into the industry. Therefore, Ithra is significantly contributing to the industry as a non-profit organisation attempting to lead the industry.

Conclusion

This thesis examines the development of Saudi Arabia's film industry from 2005 to 2020. It includes a critical analysis of the industry's complex development and the structures that can support its further growth. Additionally, it explores how government agencies, non-profit organisations and cultural institutions have influenced the film industry and the interactions between the government and the film industry.

Although Saudi Arabia is geographically large and its economic and political positions are substantial, cinema in Saudi Arabia falls under the category of small nation cinema. The country produces a limited number of films, ranging from one feature film in 2016 to ten feature films in 2020, and its film industry substantially depends on external support from neighbouring countries. Censorship in Saudi Arabia is complex and opaque, given that GCAM imposes different standards on local and foreign films, although the executive regulations do not differentiate between these categories. Before 2015, Saudi Arabia had neither dedicated funding for a national cinema nor expertise in producing, distributing or exhibiting films, and the longer the government delayed providing support for the industry, the greater the cost of establishing national cinema became. Cinema was not funded or permitted in Saudi Arabia until a new vision for the country was announced in 2016. In that announcement, the government first expressed support for the nascent film industry and the production of films in Saudi Arabia. This thesis is the first research to develop an understanding of cinema in Saudi Arabia from the perspective of national cinema and the cinema of small nations.

This dissertation examines the development of the Saudi film industry into the twenty-first century. To better understand cinema in Saudi Arabia, it considers two

distinct periods, each with different circumstances and challenges. It aims to answer two basic questions: (1) what roles did key industry figures play in keeping the industry alive from 2005 to 2015? and (2) how did the government contribute to the film industry's development from 2015 to 2020? The results of this analysis make it clear that in the first period, key industry figures were the most prominent supporters of the industry's development, whereas in the second period, government institutions, such as SFC, GCAM and Ithra, were the most prominent. As such, the first was a period of individual efforts, and the second was a period of government efforts.

To understand these two periods, it is important to explore the history of Saudi cinema that preceded them. Saudis first encountered cinema when American workers at Aramco introduced movie projectors to the company's residences in the mid-1930s. The second chapter examines the role of Western oil field workers in introducing cinema to the country, the emergence of cinema and the production, distribution and exhibition sectors in the country.

After the exploration of the historical background of cinema in the country, the third and fourth chapters consider the roles of Rotana and the SFF in developing the industry. These chapters discuss the challenges faced by individuals in supporting the industry and keeping it alive despite strong opposition during King Abdullah's rule from 2005 to 2015.

As discussed in Chapter 3, Rotana, and specifically its owner Prince Al-Waleed bin Talal, played a major role in reviving the Saudi film industry during the first period. Prince Al-Waleed was considered the most prominent reformist and supporter of openness in the country during King Abdullah's rule. However, Prince Al-Waleed and Rotana were surprisingly absent from the film industry during the second period. The Prince's absence is explained by political events in Saudi Arabia

over the past five years. Prince Al-Waleed had political ambitions and was considered a threat to the throne. The prince did not deny or respond to these rumours until he was arrested at the Ritz-Carlton hotel in 2017 as part of the Crown Prince's anti-corruption campaign. Then Prince Al-Waleed participated in a television interview, broadcast by his media network, in which he denied that he had any political ambitions. Rotana's absence is a loss for the industry, particularly the young talents it was supporting. The government is betting on a new generation of young leaders and wants to inject new blood into all industries. Therefore, it appears there is no place for Rotana in the Saudi film industry unless major political changes occur.

As discussed in Chapter 4, film festivals were among the most important factors that led to the development of Saudi Arabia's film industry. The greatest contributions of an international film festival are perhaps to a nation's culture and economy, as it is an opportunity to promote the nation's films and attract tourists and revenue for the industry. Film festivals in the Gulf have been particularly important for Saudi filmmakers. Audiences first encountered Saudi filmmakers at the Dubai International Film Festival and later at the film festivals in Qatar and Bahrain, and finally at the Saudi Film Festival in 2008. Due to the country's cinema ban, Saudi society and the Saudi press learned about Saudi filmmakers through their participation in these festivals. Therefore, regional film festivals are of paramount importance to Saudis as they have been the only place to view films.

In 2019, when the Ministry of Culture announced its vision, it also announced the establishment of a huge international festival, the Red Sea International Film Festival. This is another incubator for talents, and it features a special programme to develop and support talent financially and through training programmes for Arab filmmakers. The success of the Saudi Film Festival, despite its humble beginnings,

motivated the Ministry of Culture to establish its own film festival. The Red Sea International Film Festival provides important support for filmmakers in the GCC countries after the decline and disappearance of other festivals in the region. Beginning in the early 2000s, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar and Bahrain supported film festivals that focus on the peoples of the region. However, after two decades some of these festivals have disappeared, and the most prominent among them, the Dubai International Film Festival, is now held every two years instead of annually. Saudi Vision 2030 is promising for culture and entertainment in the country, especially the film industry, but a challenge it faces is helping Saudi film festivals to create sustainable business models that will last beyond 2030.

The fifth, sixth and seventh chapters present the second period of Saudi Arabian film industry history. After the beginning of King Salman's rule in 2015, his son Prince Mohammed bin Salman launched the country's development plan call Vision 2030 in April 2016. Since then, the shape of the film industry has changed dramatically, and the government has implemented serious reforms to enable the return of cinema. The first decision was in December 2017, when the Minister of Culture and Information (later media) announced that GCAM had been directed to prepare a draft regulation for organising the opening of movie theatres in the country and to allow companies wishing to invest in the industry to apply to GCAM to obtain the necessary permits.

The establishment of the SFC, as discussed in Chapter 5, represents an important transformation in the Saudi government's support for films. Filmmakers, such as director Bader Alhomoud, had only wanted the government to allow the establishment of commercial movie theatres. Therefore, Saudis were surprised when the General Authority for Culture established five councils, one of which is the SFC,

as people had long believed that the government could not finance such projects. The mere announcement of these councils generated a great deal of activity in the industry. Although film production has been supported through film festivals or specialised government agencies, such as tourism agencies that support tourist films, the idea of a film council is new to the GCC countries. The success or failure of the SFC will determine how other GCC countries approach establishing their own film councils, as the GCC countries usually share goals.

Despite the establishment of the SFC, regulation and censorship are still issues for GCAM. The executive regulations lack specificity regarding worker protection and the practical relationships between all of the parties in the industry. The censorship rules are incomprehensible and contradictory in practice. A prominent example mentioned in Chapter 6 is that the censorship system does not differentiate between local and foreign films; however, in practice, censorship differs according to the identity of the filmmaker. Saudi Vision 2030 strongly supports the film industry and its growth, but the GCAM regulations do not reflect this support. All of the industry stakeholders, from government organisations and the private sector to the non-profit sector, are cooperating to achieve the goals of the vision, but GCAM may be an obstacle to the future of the industry.

Overall, this thesis critically analyses the film industry in Saudi Arabia from 2005 to 2020. It explores the complex history of cinema development in Saudi Arabia and examines the factors that triggered the film industry's decline. The chapters are structured to answer the main research questions, as the most appropriate way to develop a thorough understanding of the Saudi film industry is by separating it into two periods. The research also investigates how the cinema of small nations and national cinema are related to the development of the Saudi film industry.

This thesis contributes to the literature in several ways. First, it is the first PhD thesis to focus on the film industry in Saudi Arabia. No researcher has previously conducted a comprehensive analysis of the Saudi film industry. This thesis contributes to film industry knowledge by providing a comprehensive analysis of the structure of the Saudi film industry and by linking government agencies, non-profit organisations and cultural institutions. Studies typically focus on a small part of the industry, such as subsidies and cashback policies or on specific films such as *Wadjda* (2012), but none collectively consider all of the organisations that have had a significant impact on the Saudi film industry. As this thesis positions Saudi cinema according to the concept of the cinema of small nations, an analysis of all aspects of the industry contributes to the understanding of the industry's decline and failures as well as its growth.

Second, this thesis applies the concepts of national cinema and the cinema of small nations to Saudi Arabia to provide a deeper understanding of the Saudi context. Studying Saudi Arabia from these two perspectives is a significant contribution to the film studies of the region. Most of the countries in the region, and specifically the Gulf States, have conditions similar to those in Saudi Arabia. This similarity applies not only to the structure of cinema but also to internal conflicts such as religious opposition and conservative societies. Thus, this thesis can inform future research in understanding the relationship of cinema to small states and the relationship between states and their emerging film industries. Therefore, this thesis makes a novel contribution to the literature regarding the cinema of small nations.

Third, by examining Saudi cinema from the perspective of national cinema and the cinema of small nations, this thesis contributes to the knowledge in terms of the potential for the film industry's expansion in the region, especially among the

countries bordering Saudi Arabia. This thesis also contributes to the literature by providing foundational research for future studies on Saudi cinema beyond 2020.

Fourth, this thesis contributes to a deeper understanding of the religious conflict regarding cinema and its development from the actions of Juhayman in 1979 until the ban was lifted by the Ministry of Culture and Information in December 2017. Religious conflict regarding cinema has been understood as religious militancy without consideration of its inception and development. The literature has mostly dealt with the religious perspective on films in Saudi Arabia without differentiating it from the academic perspective.

As this thesis reveals the Saudi public's appetite for cinema, based on their purchasing more than four million tickets in one year through only twelve movie theatres, it would be interesting to conduct studies on cinema culture and audience attendance. As of mid-2021, companies are opening multiple theatres every month. An analysis of ticket sales could reveal the tastes of the Saudi audience. Many critics point out that Saudi audiences prefer Hollywood films to Saudi films. However, there are no statistics available for box office receipts by production country or film genre. In addition, it is important to consider why some types of films are more popular. For example, it may be because many US productions reach Saudi Arabia, whereas there are few Saudi productions. Similarly, the artistic quality of US films compared with that of Saudi films may be a factor, or Saudi audiences may be accustomed to watching US films in theatres rather than Saudi films. The culture of going to theatres in Saudi Arabia is still relatively new after the long cinema ban. Therefore, future studies could focus on the consumption of films to better understand the tastes, perceptions and culture of cinema among the Saudi public.

This dissertation explores the contradictions in GCAM's censorship of foreign and Saudi films, even though the censorship regulations do not differ by country. A comparative analysis could provocatively examine how films shown in other nations' cinemas present bold scenes such as pornography, nudity or bloody violence to explore the differences in how those aspects are portrayed in foreign versus Saudi films and the extent of those differences. Many Saudi filmmakers argue that the limits of freedom in foreign films are different from those applied to Saudi films, although the censorship system applies to both, and the same committee licences foreign and Saudi films. It would also be interesting to examine how Saudi films circumvent these strict standards in presenting scenes that contain pornographic or nude scenes or that contain violence. Future studies could examine how boundaries and unwritten rules have developed in Saudi films from *Keif al-Hal?* in 2006 to the films released in 2020. During the *Keif al-Hal?* period, the country was culturally very conservative and under the influence of religious scholars who oppose cinema, whereas in 2020 the country has a high level of cultural and entertainment openness, supported by the Vision 2030 programmes. Saudi Arabia's film production and exhibition industries have substantial potential, and their future development should be of great interest to film and media scholars and to everyone interested in the creative industries, culture and politics in the Middle East, the Arab sphere and worldwide.

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