

Arab utopian futures

Documentary and sf film in the MENA after the Arab revolutions

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This article focuses on documentary and narrative films as modes of utopian expression in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) following the 'Arab Spring' of 2010–12. To talk about the Arab Spring in terms of utopia is to negotiate between the desires of people on the ground in the MENA for a better life now, the desire of Western governments for what the region should come to be, and the reality of the political situation in the MENA. This article examines the films that emerged from the MENA in the past decade to argue that the utopian impulse is crucial to the artistic output of the region and has responded through both narrative and documentary forms to craft complex responses to the successes and failures of revolutions local and national.

Keywords: Arab Spring, Arabfuturism, sf documentary film, Middle East and North Africa, utopia

As the world watched the 2019 protests in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Egypt, Sudan, Algeria, Chile, France, Spain, Hong Kong and half-a-dozen other nations, many commentators noted their similarities to those of the Arab revolts of 2010, commonly called the Arab Spring (AS) in the US and Europe. Tesbih Habbal and Muzna Hasnawi suggest that the protests in 'Syria, Iraq and Egypt prove that what began in 2010 was just the beginning of a long revolution' (n.p.). While some claim the advent of a second Arab Spring, others like Emily Flaherty say that it is rushing things a bit to declare AS 2.0. For Flaherty, the 2019 protests lacked the earlier revolts' transnational quality and focused instead on their local contexts. She suggests they should be interpreted on their own terms and not read solely in the context of the AS. Whatever may come of these protests, it is clear that the AS has set a watermark in the public imagination of revolution and comparisons to it are now inevitable. It is also clear that many desire a return to the spirit of the AS – especially its initial moments where everything seemed possible in a region of the world that for too long has suffered the consequences of concentrated power in the hands of corrupt individuals. Indeed, the AS was a time filled with hope for people across the region – a utopian moment many look back on with nostalgia. The

utopian spirit in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) after the AS went beyond political offices and dramatically changed everyday life. The protests opened up spaces within the culture for new expressions of life to emerge. It is no surprise, then, that since 2010 there has been an explosion of literature, film and visual art from the MENA, from novels and graphic novels to fully-fledged visual art movements such as Gulf Futurism, and documentary and sf film – my subjects here.

Much of this artistic output has relied on traditions within the global genres of utopia and dystopia, with many books and visual art exhibits using the language of that tradition. To examine the post-AS utopian moment, I first consider the context of utopian thought in the MENA. I then read the recent documentary and sf output from the MENA as evidence that not only has the AS enabled new forms to emerge but it has also influenced those forms with its particularly utopian strain of social dreaming. I look to the documentary *The Square* (Noujaim Egypt/US 2013) as well as the sf film *Aerials* (Zaidi UAE 2016) and Larissa Sansour's experimental film *In the Future, They Ate from the Finest Porcelain* (UAE 2015) as examples of how utopianism in the Arabic tradition manifested in post-AS film. Reading utopia in the MENA on its own terms, as Flaherty suggests we should, avoids an interpretation of utopia in the MENA that sees it only in relation to Western forms and genres. Taken together, both the documentary and sf films to emerge from the MENA in the past decade demonstrate that a critical utopian moment is happening in the region as filmmakers document and dream of what a more just, egalitarian future might look like for the everyday lives of people living there.

The revolution of 2010 emanates from the artistic traditions of music and literature of the region that long has spoken truth to power. This is Alexander Key's argument based on his examination of MENA art 'from literature to rap music' (qtd Aquilanti n.p.). There was a growing scepticism that he identifies in the literature and music leading up to the AS. This scepticism has been met by filmmakers in the MENA as they have taken up existential utopia as not only a mode of filmmaking but also as a way to build on the strains of utopia that have existed in the region for hundreds of years. The tradition of utopian thinking in the MENA has been used as a springboard for filmmakers to lay out what social dreaming looks like on the ground as well as to put names, faces and lives to a region that often gets blurred out of focus by a Western tendency to lump all Arab countries together. The films examined here take up this tradition of working through the nihilism that is bound up in a post-colonial, 'developing world' (Potter 422), periphery-to-the-metropole-core status and

attempt to reach out to something, some sort of future that moves beyond the nihilism that informs the present.

The renewal of utopian thought and practice as seen in the artistic output in the MENA since the AS has produced fiction and film that has turned toward representations of both the future and the present that stem from the hope that the AS gave many for what social structures might emerge after the revolutions. Before the AS, the conflict that fuelled the largest production of new art forms was the Palestine/Israel conflict. The conflict has enabled entirely new genres to emerge and writers in occupied Palestine have 'succeeded in transcending the limitations' of what many see as the limited genre of the Arabic novel (Merriman n.p.). In fact, as Rima Najjar Merriman argues: 'The Arabic novel in general has had a history of transgression against the repressive regimes whose demise the world has recently witnessed' (ibid.). Mahmoud Shukair with *Ibnat Khalaty Condoleeza (My Cousin Condoleeza, 2004)*, Suad Amiri with *Sharon and My Mother-in-Law (2006)*, Sahar Khalifa with *Hubbi al-Awwal (My First Love, 2010)* and Raja Shedadeh with *Palestinian Walks: Forays into a Vanishing Landscape (2008)* together represent an emerging genre coming out of occupied Palestine.

While the occupation of Palestine is a recent example of social conditions inspiring artistic output with a utopian bent, there is a long tradition of utopian thinking in the region that is crucial to understanding its current utopian moment. A frequent and fair criticism of analysing art from the MENA and the cultures that produce it through the lens of utopia is that utopia is a Western concept imposed on MENA art and social theory. However, this criticism discounts the tradition of utopian thinking and literature in the region. One of if not the first vision of utopia to emerge in human art comes out of the Middle East. The Garden of Eden has been an inspiration for artists for thousands of years. The garden itself is a metaphor in art of the region as a good, restful place. One needs only look to the tradition of the central garden in Islamic domestic architecture to see evidence of the desire for everyday utopia. Beyond the concept of the garden as a utopian figure in MENA though, the city itself as a premodern entity in the region was viewed not only as a good place but as a pleasurable utopia for the senses. Adam Talib notes many instances in 'premodern Arabic literature' of cities described as 'erotic playgrounds' (138). Marco Lauri has traced the common utopian themes of education, the city and transcendence in Islamic 'philosophical novels' by Ibn Tufayl (بن طفيل) and Ibn al-Nafis (ابن النفيس) (23). And Peter Hill has traced 'utopian writing and thinking in the Nahda [النهضة], the Arab 'Awakening' of the long nineteenth century [in which] forms of social imagination were

responses to fundamental changes' (4). Out of these emerges an intellectual strain of thinking about home and rootedness in Arab thought that is rooted in utopian hope.

The utopian tradition in the MENA, specifically the sf genre, has not been examined by many scholars. Ian Campbell's study of Arabic sf is an exception, and he notes that, before 2015, only one English language examination of Arabic sf exists. Campbell's study challenges the idea that Arabic sf, in the words of Reuven Snir, 'has as yet not generated any serious inquiry into the nature of contemporary social reality' (qtd Campbell 1). Instead, Campbell argues that Arabic sf does indeed engage social reality and it does so through what he calls 'double estrangement' – a nod to both Darko Suvin and Bertolt Brecht. This double estrangement is the perspective writers bring both toward their colonial pasts and their current social conditions. In Campbell's words, 'one layer of its double estrangement critiques ... the colonial gaze, while the other critiques' Arabic culture for being too tied to the past (10). Campbell's work on Arabic sf is important for two reasons. First, he offers an intervention in scholarship that complicates sf from the region instead of brushing it off as serving only as 'amusement or didactic aims' (1). Secondly, he notes the important distinction between Arabic sf and much of sf in the West is that utopia in Arabic sf 'is located in the past' (8).

Much Arabic sf does indeed dwell on what has come to be called the Islamic Golden Age where the vast majority of scientific thinking and production was carried out in territories controlled by Arab and Muslim forces. This looking back for utopia is problematic, yet interesting, for Campbell since 'progressive social values' usually drive sf as a genre (8). To locate utopia in the future in Arabic sf is to estrange oneself from the Arabic literary tradition in very complicated ways. What is particular about many of the novels and films the MENA since the AS is a strain of thinking that is utopian in that it retains a hope in collectives and shirks the nihilism that is so often used to interpret events in the region. This tradition of sf, as diverse and complex as it is, has used estrangement to critique contemporary social conditions by playing the future off the past. Novels such as *Utopia* by Ahmed Khaled Towfik (2013), *The Arab of the Future* volumes 1–4 by Riad Sattouf (2015–19) and Hassan Blasim's *Iraq + 100* (2016) are examples of how utopian thought is especially complicated by the region's history of colonialism. While fiction from the MENA has taken up utopia as its subject, film from the region has also begun to explore everyday life there with a utopian lens.

The Arab sf genre, in particular, has exploded, culminating in comic cons being held in Dubai in 2012 and in Abu Dhabi in 2017. While there are

blockbuster hits such as *Aerials* depicting aliens hovering over Dubai, experimental artists explore the speculative in more avant-garde productions, like Larissa Sansour's film *In the Future, They Ate from the Finest Porcelain*, an experimental meditation on history, myth and resistance.

Documentary, historically a mainstay for facilitating a colonial gaze into the region, has also seen a decided shift toward critical utopian themes. Many recent documentaries from the region focus on the AS itself such as *The Square* (Egypt/US 2013) and *Tickling Giants* (Egypt 2017). Others such as *For Sama* (Syria/UK 2019) and *Return to Homs* (Germany/UK 2013) have turned to the dystopian landscape of war in Syria. Significantly, documentary has challenged the sf tradition Campbell studies in that it has broken the double estrangement of traditional sf in the region and used the future as its utopian point of view instead of the past. Cut from the same utopian cloth, sf and documentary in the MENA since the AS have challenged the idea that utopia can only be found in the region's past.

Documenting utopia

The utopian thinking in film from the MENA since the AS cannot be chalked up to simple nostalgia or a desire for an escape from reality. As the documentaries about the AS show, there is a desire to confront reality and build a world that is both free from internal oppression from strongmen and from external imposition of culture by the US and Europe. The recent field of documentary film from the MENA reflects on this reality and displays a hope for some kind of social and political change for the better. A flurry of documentaries has emerged about and from the region in the past decade. From *The Seed Queen of Palestine* (Shahin UK 2018) to *Oman's Sailing Stars* (al-Zayani Oman 2017) to *Saudi Women's Driving School* (Gornall US 2019), filmmakers both in and outside the region have sought to attract international attention to its conditions and contexts. This list just scratches the surface of the documentary output from the region. Of the 90 feature-length and short documentaries nominated for Academy Awards from 2010 to 2019, fourteen of those films were about the MENA – second only to the US as a subject. Only one won the award, *The White Helmets* (von Einsiedel UK 2016). However, documentaries about the AS itself constitute their own genre and I examine their utopian potential here by looking at their treatment of everyday lives. It is in these scenes of walking through Cairo's streets – eating with others, smoking cigarettes, enjoying music – that utopia comes alive.

While the first documentary to be made about the AS was Mourad Ben Cheikh's *No More Fear* (Tunisia 2011), the documentary about the AS that set the stage for those to come after was *The Square* (Egypt 2013). Directed by Jehane Noujaim, it was notable for being a documentary filmed in Arabic with English subtitles. One of the challenges of the film was the ongoing political situation in Egypt, and Noujaim had to revise the final version in 2014 for broad release to reflect the change in leadership in the country. While its focus is the disruptive violence against protesters in Cairo's Tahrir Square (ميدان التحرير, or 'liberation square' in English), the site of two other Egyptian revolutions in 1919 and 1952, there is a collective hopefulness that informs the film as Noujaim follows her subjects through the quotidian rhythms of the revolution. The Square follows six protesters in and around Tahrir as they try to maintain their hope for what the uprising can bring – even in the midst of being tortured and seeing their friends killed by Egyptian military and police. While larger ideas of representation, justice and economic freedom were engaged by the revolutionaries, the iconic chant from the revolution, 'bread, freedom, social justice', shows that everything else emanates from everyday concerns.

The desire for the revolution to fundamentally transform everyday life in Egypt is evident from the start. The character of Ahmed begins by explaining that he started working when he was eight and has moved from job to job for most of his life. Indeed, the AS began as a protest over working conditions in the streets of Tunisia. As Ahmed describes selling lemons in the street as a child, he says, 'There was no hope for a better future in this country' (Noujaim n.p.). The same streets in which Ahmed sold lemons turn everyday life upside down as they start to be occupied by protesters collectively outraged by corruption and the intense violent reaction against them. Ahmed is the primary narrator of the film and his optimism provides the utopian tone.

Critics immediately picked up on the utopian atmosphere the film tried to capture. A.O. Scott, the *New York Times* film reviewer, noted: '*The Square*, while it records the gruesome collision of utopian aspirations with cold political realities, is not a despairing film. It concludes on a note of resolve grounded in the acknowledgment that historical change can be a long, slow process' (n.p.). Yet some critics like Max Fisher of the *Washington Post* complained that the politics of the film were too utopian because it seems to praise protesters as 'too principled for politics' (n.p.). Whether Noujaim accurately portrayed the atmosphere in Cairo at the time, she was not allowed to air the film in Egypt because it was considered too incendiary. The activation of 'our social consciousness' is a function of documentary many disdain (Nichols 69). The utopian potential of documentary is not just in the social dreaming and longing



The Square. Noujaim Films, 2013.

that it facilitates. This potential is also in the epistemological questions it raises. Nichols asks two vital questions about the sort of knowledge documentaries engage: what kind of knowledge do documentaries provide and to what kind of use do we, and others, put the knowledge a film provides? (41). The sorts of things the subjects in *The Square* want to know is how the revolution will affect their everyday lives. The utopianism of the film, then, emerges as it examines the minute details of living through a revolution that make the revolution worth it to its participants.

An example of this concern for the everyday is a scene in which Magdy, a father and activist associated with the Muslim Brotherhood, is having a conversation with a friend in the tent encampment in Tahrir. As Magdy is discussing the role of the 'Islamists' in the revolution, a man makes the tea rounds in the encampment. Magdy's friend stops him and reminds him that he needs to have some tea. Even revolutionaries need to drink tea, Noujaim seems to suggest. While ideas buzz throughout Tahrir about what Egypt will look like after the revolution, the film is a cluster of everyday moments and objects that remind the viewer not only of the subjects' humanity that is threatened but also of the utopian potential of everyday life; these small moments of community and camaraderie engage what Ashlie Lancaster describes as 'envisaging alternative possible futures' (109). Other scenes show the Egyptian singer Rammy Essam's nightly group singing, which turns to more revolutionary themes as the basic needs of the protesters lead to the contemplation of collective solutions.

Scott's perception of the lack of despair in the narratives of Noujaim's subjects would inform other documentaries about the AS, a movement that retains its utopian appeal to those who see real change coming for the region. Just as *The Square* portrays dire facts on the ground of slow change and violence toward protesters are recorded in the documentaries to come after Noujaim's. None of them, however, cede to the nihilism with which many commentators approach the AS. Each filmmaker has an eye toward a coming emancipatory moment. After *The Square*, a slew of documentaries came out about the revolution that took a similarly hopeful take on the protests across the region: *Bahrain: Shouting in the Dark* (Welsh Qatar 2011), *The Uprising* (Snowdon US 2013), *Cairo Drive* (Elkatsha Egypt 2013), *The Return to Homs* (Derki Syria/Germany 2013), *We Are the Giant* (Barker US 2014), *The War Show* (Dalsgaard and Zytoon Syria/Denmark/Germany 2016), *City of Ghosts* (Heineman US 2017), *Tickling Giants* (Taksler US 2016) and *#ChicagoGirl: The Social Network Takes on a Dictator* (Piscatella Syria/US 2013). The output of film about the AS and its implications can all be categorised as what Bill Nichols calls 'documentaries of wish fulfillment' (1) in that they direct their viewers to imagine along with their subjects to push toward some better and just outcome of the revolutions they document.

A key element of such documentaries is the social dreaming that emerges from the minutiae and textures of everyday life, from sitting around drinking tea, reading, playing guitars and singing. The protesters seem to enact the possibilities that Ernst Bloch ascribed to such seemingly mundane acts. Bloch's *Principle of Hope* describes dreaming as 'an active unrest, with its new origin opposed to rigidity, developing full of premonition. Even in the unusual form in which it appears, this premonition, particularly with that of the objectively Possible' (122). Rita Felski moves this idea of the creatively productive potential of everyday life forward when she states emphatically that 'everyday life simply is, indisputably: the essential taken-for-granted continuum of mundane activities that frames our forays into more esoteric or exotic worlds. It is the nonnegotiable reality, the unavoidable basis for all other forms of human endeavor' (77–8).

These films represent a larger moment in the culture of the MENA that has opened up to social dreaming. Joseph Fahim argues: 'For the larger part of the 20th century, Arab documentary filmmaking was trapped in a long state of stagnation' (Fahim n.p.). The Gulf film festivals that began in the late 2000s in Dubai and Abu Dhabi provided a platform for documentary film to flourish. They continue to offer a platform for filmmakers to show concrete utopian moments that have grown to become region-wide movements, movements that

extend far beyond ‘visionary figments of the imagination that are intrinsically impractical’ (Jamison n.p.). These film festivals, now held in Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria (on hold since 2011) and the United Arab Emirates, have also been the means for filmmakers to explore utopia in more speculative forms and genres. However, it is precisely documentary film’s ability to capture everyday life in the midst of revolution that affords these films their utopian potential.

Arabfuturism

While writing about the waves of African thought that eventually gave us Afrofuturism, Kodwo Eshun explains that the founding trauma of African modernity was the Middle Passage with its ‘capture, theft, abduction, mutilation, and slavery’. He goes on to write of the ‘futurism fatigue’ of black thinkers in the 1980s because ‘the practice of counter-memory defined itself as an ethical commitment to history, the dead, and the forgotten’. Therefore, ‘the manufacture of conceptual tools that could analyze and assemble counter-futures was understood as an unethical dereliction of duty’. ‘Fast forward to the early twenty-first century’, Eshun says, and we find ourselves in a moment obsessed with and keenly devoted to dystopian visions of the future (288). While sf in the MENA has flourished in the last decade, the region has long had a tradition of reading its contemporary movement through the lens of futurism. Arabfuturism, as this particular moment in film in the MENA has been called, was first outlined in a manifesto with somewhat mysterious origins and published on the website of artist Sulāiman Majali as a list of tenets. The first is ‘The nation is dead’ (Majali n.p.). The lack of trust for the nation-state runs throughout the manifesto and it eventually describes the Arabfuturisms project as ‘a re-examination and interrogation of narratives that surround oceans of historical fiction. It bulldozes cultural nostalgias that prop up a dubious political paralysis’ towards histor(ies). The manifesto itself is a utopian document in its attempt to suspend history and time in order to challenge ‘collective political amnesia’ (ibid.). To understand this specific moment of interest in utopia by filmmakers in the MENA, it is essential to understand this somewhat new and little-studied arts movement.

Arabfuturism borrows a lot from Afrofuturism in that it uses ‘an aesthetic repertoire to complicate normalised notions of time and technology but in an alternative geopolitical space’ (Parikka 40). Yet, some call Arabfuturism not so much an artistic movement than ‘a sentiment in flux’ (Nazif n.p.).

Perwana Nazif sees the core of Arabfuturism as a push to disassociate ‘Arab subjects from ... historically Orientalized representations and stereotypes’ through opening up ‘impossible futures where new meanings can be derived from history’ (Nazif n.p.). She sees Arabfuturism as an umbrella sentiment and artistic mode that also encompasses Gulf Futurism, an artistic movement led by the GCC Art Collective of Fatima Al-Qadira, Monira Al Qadiri and Sophia Al Maria that critiques the conspicuous consumerism afforded by oil revenues in the Gulf States. While obscure in its beginnings, Arabfuturism has been bolstered by the increased interest in speculative film in the MENA since the AS. In 2012, Dubai held the first comic con in the MENA. In 2014, Egypt held its first. These conventions have allowed filmmakers, mainstream and experimental, a massive platform for getting their speculative films to a market. Attendance at Comic Con Egypt is now over 3 million. It is not a coincidence that sf and fantasy have found a large audience in the MENA at the same time the region is undergoing massive political change through revolutions. But the growth of the genre is more complex than the simple explanation that the AS caused sf to boom in the region. Lina Mounzer argues that the growth of sf, especially in the dystopian narrative form, is not related solely to the AS: ‘That would be to simplify a complex moment and movement, as to discount the vastly different political landscapes from which these books have emerged’. She notes that the dystopian narratives are primarily coming from Egyptian writers (Mounzer n.p.). To attribute all this activity around sf in the MENA only to the AS is to miss the much longer history the genre has and to discount the goals of Arabfuturism that stand independent of the AS. As Mounzer points out, ‘Egypt can, in part, trace its roots [of dystopian literature] as far back as a century, to a time when Arab writers such as Jurji Zeidan and Hafez Mahmoud were trying to imagine what a perfect, utopian society might look like’ (ibid.). Others have shown how the revolutions were predicted in other novels. Khaled Hroub said in 2012 that ‘the six novels shortlisted for the “Arabic Booker” show how novelists across the region had sensed the moment of revolution coming’ (Hroub n.p.).

There is a long tradition of the spatial play in the literature of the MENA as well and one that informs much of the utopian moment discussed here. The tradition of Arabic poetry from its earliest writing took up the ‘concept of the homeland/nation ... as a virtual space for creating, negotiating or reformulating concepts of Arab identity’ (Günther and Milich xxxiii). Much of Arabic poetry for hundreds of years, as Sebastian Günther and Stephan Milich argue, transformed ‘city space into a utopia of socialism/humanism or turn[ed] a native village into a mystified setting of national renewal and

salvation' (xxxiii). This same concern with homeland and belonging informs Arabfuturism's forays into speculative futures by focusing on familiar sites and everyday objects.

Imagining what the future of the MENA might be with regards to its political makeup and the effect of it on everyday life, has been a pastime for those in and outside the region for centuries. While it is difficult to say what will become of the current protests happening there, the more useful question arises about what new forms of art will emerge after them – not necessarily because of them as Mounzer and Hroub point out. What forms are best suited to depicting an uncertain future? Dystopian fiction and film, at least historically, have been the far more popular choice for artists to imagine the future. The MENA has seen several dystopian films in the past decade that work to critique the present living conditions such as Nadine Labaki's *Capernaum* (Lebanon 2018) that shows the dystopic reality of young children living in the slums of Beirut. However, new developments such as independent groups like Sindbad to Sci-Fi have sought to redefine the genre in the region.

One film that is part of the larger move to redefine the genre is the UAE film *Aerials*, which tells the story of an alien invasion of earth centred in Dubai. As the film begins, a dark cloud with an alien spacecraft hovers in the air just above the towering Burj Khalifa. Film-maker S.A. Zaidi, says of his film that he wanted to create an iconic image of the Dubai skyline and 'give people a new visual perspective, a new iconic image' (qtd Tusing n.p.). While mostly in English and about 25 per cent in Arabic, the film was also made for a broader audience beyond the MENA. Zaidi, though, flips the invasion narrative on its head. Instead of attacking the city or enacting violence against humans, the presence of the aliens simply changes everyday life in Dubai. It is a sort of shift that happens on the ground that is strange but not ultimately destructive.

Zaidi meant for the film to be a contrast to the invasion genre. He rushed to get the film out to compete with *Independence Day: Resurgence* (Emmerich US 2016), a film typical of the alien invasion genre. By reimagining what an alien encounter might be like, and setting it over Dubai, Zaidi suggests Dubai is what the future already is but that the narratives we attach to the future need reassessing. It is difficult to look at the urban architecture of the Gulf States and not see them as gesturing toward some sort of futurism. In fact, many of the films coming out of the Star Trek (1966–) and Star Wars (1977–) franchises are now filmed in UAE. Zaidi's title also plays on the ubiquitous aerial footage the west uses of Dubai and Burj Khalifa.

One of the filmmakers most associated with Arabfuturism is Larissa Sansour, a Palestinian artist who now lives in London. Her work is experimental and



Aerials. Fat Brothers Films, 2016.

multimedia as she blurs the lines between films, books and websites. For much of her work, she collaborates with Søren Lind, a Danish artist, and she was chosen to represent Denmark at the 2019 Venice Biennale. Many Palestinian writers and artists have been subject to controversy, and Sansour is no exception. In 2011, the prestigious Elysée Prize competition was cancelled when Lacoste withdrew its patronage. The stated cause was that Sansour's film *Nation Estate* (Palestine/Denmark 2013), imagining an optimistic future for Palestine after the peace process, did not conform to the theme of *joie de vivre* set by corporate sponsor. While Lacoste denied pulling out because the film was 'too pro-Palestinian', that was exactly what Musée de l'Elysée told Sansour (Milmo n.p.). Despite the controversy, the film demonstrates what a utopian vision for the region looks like. It imagines Palestine as a skyscraper and each floor representing a city in Palestine. A woman ascends the building on an elevator stopping at each floor to view the individual cities. The film ends at the last floor as the woman looks out over Jerusalem while holding her pregnant abdomen suggesting her child's future home will be Jerusalem.

Sansour's films engage in a utopian longing that is deeply critical of the present and uses the same strategy of focusing on the everyday transformations that Noujaim uses in the documentary form. Sansour and Lind's film *In the Future, They Ate from the Finest Porcelain*, according to the filmmaker, 'resides in the cross-section between sf, archeology and politics. Combining live motion and CGI, the film explores the role of myth in history, fact and



Nation Estate. Frederiksen Beofilm, 2013.



In the Future, They Ate from the Finest Porcelain. FLAMIN Productions, 2015.

national identity' (Sansour 'Statement' n.p.). The film is one of her most experimental: it follows a resistance group that buries fine porcelain underground in anticipation of a future civilisation. Land is vanishing along with historical memory as aliens plant false history into the minds of its inhabitants. The film is set on the backdrop of a barren land with a sepia sky, suggesting a dying civilisation or one facing dire ecological collapse. The civilisation's intention is for the porcelain to be found someday and for a myth to be created around it. In Sansour's words, the resistance group implements 'a myth of its own [and] their work becomes a historical intervention – de facto creating a nation' (Sansour 'Statement' n.p.).

The concern for the everyday objects from which people eat becomes the emblem of utopia in the film – but an emblem suffused with longing. In the future they do not eat from everyday dishes; the finest porcelain has replaced them. In one scene, the protagonist, a hooded woman and savior figure, emerges from a dark background saying: ‘Sometimes I dream of porcelain falling from the sky, like ceramic rain’. At first she enjoys the porcelain rain, ‘but then the volume increases, and it’s a porcelain monsoon, like a biblical plague’. The weight of the future seems too much for the woman to handle. Even an everyday object has been converted into an item of oppression. The film is interspersed with a sort of therapy session with an unidentified speaker who asks the hooded woman what she makes of these images of porcelain falling from the sky. The narrator tells her: ‘You’re devoting your life to communicating with the past and the future, but it’s impossible’. Here Sansour exhibits the double estrangement Campbell attributes to Arabic sf. Sansour has set the film in an unknown future and is using it as a critique of her own present. That critique itself garnered the film some controversy.

In the Future, They Ate from the Finest Porcelain was also criticised for being too pro-Palestinian but the controversy over it went even further than that of *Nation Estate*. Despite Sansour’s desire ‘to avoid accusations’ of her work being too political, her attempt to elevate ‘Palestinian issues from the daily grid of competing rhetoric’ was labelled anti-Semitic. But Lind was explicit in his defence when he stated that ‘Palestinians are so disempowered that they have to forge an archaeology that is undergoing erasure as we speak’ (Ditmars n.p.). What Sansour’s films and the controversies that surround them show is that utopia is neither neutral nor exclusive. To imagine a different future for the MENA is to impose drastic changes to present arrangements. Alternatives to what exists now always make people nervous.

Alternative realities are such a useful vehicle for utopian thinking because they ‘are really devices for embarrassing the present, as imaginary cultures are used to estrange and unsettle our own’. Far from ‘making an idol out of the future’, utopian sf has the ability to hold ‘present and future in tension by pointing to those forces active in the present that might lead beyond it’ (Eagleton n.p.). This ability to create a tension between the present and the future has given this Arabfuturist moment its influence on thinking about politics and the implications of the AS for utopian thinking in the region and more broadly.

Negotiating hope

To talk about the AS in terms of utopia is to negotiate between the desires of people on the ground in the MENA for a better life now, the desire of Western governments for what the region should come to be, and the reality of the political situation in the MENA. Such negotiations are par for the course throughout the region and have weighty consequences for the everyday lives of those who rarely make decisions. Desire, nevertheless, is the exact material out of which utopian thinking is made. Carol Franko asks a question of utopian desire that is essential to the context of the AS. She wonders, 'Is the utopian impulse – or 'social dreaming', as one scholar [Lyman Tower Sargent] terms utopia in its broadest sense – universal to human culture, and thus essential for understandings of humanness?' (207). An examination of the films that emerge from the MENA in the past decade leads to the conclusion that the utopian impulse is crucial to the artistic output of the region and, while not universal in the forms it takes, certainly a human impulse that defines our own age.

Archibald MacLeish, the twentieth-century poet most famous for saying a poem 'should not mean but be', once said '[t]o talk of "the best kinds of life" is to invite the charge of Utopianism. And I accept the charge. There is no possible substitute for Utopian thinking' (23). Protesters in Syria, Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon, Sudan and Algeria seem to be accepting the charge as well. It is easy to look at the AS and see failure all around. Despotism was replaced with more despotism in Egypt and Libya. Tunisia is, arguably, the one success story from the protests as it has maintained a representative democracy. If we look only to political pundits, it would seem that cynicism won this round in the MENA. However, what Arab Spring 2.0, as Marwan Muasher calls it (Muasher n.p.), shows is that the desire and demand for actual, immediate change did not die with the failure of AS 1.0. We look to the fiction, film and visual art emerging from the region and see that the conversation about reaching toward possible futures is ongoing.

There are contending interpretations about the AS and its utopian potential. Hamid Dabashi reads it as a radically utopian end to postcolonialism (xvii), while Asef Bayad blames the revolutions for not going far enough because 'acceptance of neoliberal policy has [reduced] revolutionary impulses' (2). There is a tension in readings of the AS between Dabashi's already existing utopia and Asef Bayad's reading of the AS as a cynical acceptance of neoliberalism that continues to quash radical upheaval. While Dabashi is correct in calling the AS a collection of revolutions that were nothing short than a refusal of neoliberal policies enacted on the region since at least the Second World

War, those hopeful for any sort of different future must contend with the prevailing notion that follows Bayad's prediction. Part of the resistance to that cynicism is sustained in Naujam, Zaidi and Sansour's films and in the ability of their utopian work to negotiate individual and collective hope.

This negotiation is an attempt, in Michael Marder and Patrícia Vieira's words, 'to work through nihilism and dystopia ... to harness their negative and critical energies for the project of social and political change, preventing their fossilization into a pessimistic and resigned outlook where all possibilities have been preemptively foreclosed' (3). The MENA's past has long been a source for nihilism about its future. But it is this exact past that Naujam, Zaidi and Sansour use to build their utopias. The tensions between the distant past and an uncertain future, while being a hallmark of the politics of the MENA, is a feature of everyday life in the region that both documentary and sf film have attempted to overcome by facing it directly. In their utopian attempts to educate hope about what the future holds for the region, these filmmakers challenge not only the nihilism that the region's present inspires in some but also bolster the notion that transformation of any sort begins with everyday practices of resistance.

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