Arab SF Film and TV in the Twentieth Century

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Abstract: This article defines the most prominent features and conventions of Arab SF film and television in the twentieth century by examining its narrative, structural, cultural, and production-related conventions. This includes the usage of folk literature and local mythology and certain SF devices, such as advanced medicine. In addition to breaking down the genre's plot devices, the paper looks at its history, its transitions from comedic to serious modes of narrative, and its evolution over the course of the twentieth century.

Keywords: Arab Science Fiction, film, television, plot devices, 20th century

Despite the fact that relatively few Arab entries in the science fiction (SF) genre exist, they have not received much study. Most critics claim that from the 1930s to 2000s, no more than fifteen Arab SF films have been produced (Louis, 2020). But they do not extensively analyze these works or outline their narrative and formal conventions, nor do they discuss them in relation to other genres. Similarly, deep discussion of SF television programming is relatively rare. Responding to this, my paper surveys twenty-three films adhering to the SF genre and two TV series with SF elements released from 1934 to 1998. Critically examining them will reveal a close relationship between SF and fantasym as well as point to how approaches to genre and filmmaking styles have changed. I focus on 20th-century works as they demonstrate a consistency of characteristic elements, and Arab SF in the twenty first century undergoes a considerable shift, which my concluding statement will touch upon. As Table 1 shows, most of these titles are Egyptian, though there are some Syrian and Lebanese examples. It is important to note that there is no consensus regarding what represents the earliest Arab SF. For example, some critics identify the thriller *Time Conqueror/Qaher Alzaman* (Al-Sheikh, 1987) as the first Arab SF film (Basmaji, 2019). However, this work takes up the position of Jan Aliksan (1982), Mahmoud Kassem (2018), and others that find *Mysterious eyes/ Eyoon Sahera* (Galal, 1934) to be the first Arab SF chronologically.

The definition of SF varies according to its temporal and cultural contexts, often depending on whether or not one discusses it in relation to the genre of fantasy. Scholars such as J. P. Telotte and Christine Cornea rec-ognize that the boundaries between SF and fantasy are difficult to distinguish. For them, SF occupies the middle ground between fantasy and reality (Cornea, 2007, p. 4-5). M. Keith Booker agrees on the difficulty of distinguishing these genres, but refers to some standards of processing physical laws, science, and magic. Booker explains that SF's physical principles differ only slightly from those operating in our world as the result of the SF creators' elaboration of scientific principles or technologies unknown in our world. Arthur C Clarke says, "Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic" (Clarke, 1977, p. 38). On the other hand, fantasy fiction typically takes place in worlds that operate according to a logic of their own; fantasy worlds thus need not obey our physical laws (Booker, 2010, p. 2). For Muhammad Azzam, SF has two primary functions: to deploy thought in the service of humankind and to solve problems and predict human developments by extrapolating from current technology (Campbell, 2018, p. 97). The relationship between SF and our world/reality is closer than its fantasy counterpart. As such, the distinction between science and magic sets a clear boundary between SF and fantasy. However, the author admits that the boundary itself can sometimes be permeable, and it is undoubtedly the case that images and motifs typically associated with fantasy can sometimes be found within works belonging to SF, and vice versa (Booker, 2010, p. 2). These definitions suggest that one can approach SF as a rational variation of fantasy.

Ada Barbaro's work supports the idea of a close relationship between SF and fantasy. In *La fantascienza nella letteratura araba* (2013), Barbaro refers to early

Arab SF Film and TV, continued

Film	Director	Genre Within SF	Country of Production	Date of Release
Mysterious Eyes/ Eyoon Sahera	Ahmad Galal	Romance, drama	Egypt	1934
Felfel	Seif El Din Shawkat and Mustafa Al-Attar	Comedy, drama	Egypt	1950
Virtue for Sale/ Akhlaq lel-Bai	Mahmood Dhulfeqar	Drama, comedy	Egypt	1950
El Sab'a Afandi/ Mr. Lion	Ahmad Khurshid	Comedy	Egypt	1951
Where Did You Get This?/ Min Ayn Lak Hatha	Niazi Mostafa	Romantic comedy	Egypt	1952
Have Mercy/ Haram Alek	Isa Karamah	Comedy, horror	Egypt	1953
The One who has Dazzling Eyes/	Hassan El-Seifi	Comedy	Egypt	1958
Journey to the Moon	Hamada Abdelwahab	Comedy, thriller	Egypt	1959
Haa 3	Abbas Kamel	Comedy, crime	Egypt	1961
Ashour, the Lion's Heart/ Ashour kalb El-assad	Hussein Fawzy	Adventure, comedy, romance	Egypt	1961
Please Kill Me/ Ektellni Men Fadlek	Hassan Al Seifi and Nader Galal	Comedy, drama	Egypt	1965
The Fake Millionaire/ Al-million-aire Al-mouzayyaf	Hassan El-Seifi	Comedy	Egypt	1968
The Land of Hypocrisy	Fatin Abdel Wahab	Comedy, drama	Egypt	1968
El-Maganin El-Talata/ Three Madmen	Hassan El-Seifi, Mahmoud Elseify, and Atef El-Sisi		Egypt	1970
Adam and Women	El-Sayed Bedeir	Comedy, post-apocalyptic, action, thriller	Egypt	1971
The World in 2000/ Al-Alam Sanat 2000	Ahmad Fuad	Comedy	Egypt	1972
The Queen of Love/ Malikat al Hobb	Romeo Lahoud	Romance, comedy	Egypt & Lebanon	1973
Uncle Zizuo Habibi	Niazi Mostafa	Family, comedy	Egypt	1977
Time Conqueror/ Qaher Alz-aman	Kamal Al-Sheikh	Horror, thriller	Egypt	1987
Monsters Run/ Gary Elwohosh	Mohamed Nabih	Drama, thriller	Egypt	1987
Adam Without A Cover/ Adam Bedoun Ghetaa'	Mohamed Nabih	Comedy-post-apocalyptic, romance, thriller	Egypt	1990
The Dance with the Devil/Al Raqss Ma El Shaitan	Alaa Mahgoub	Thriller, horror, drama	Egypt	1993

Arab SF Film and TV, continued

Film	Director	Genre Within SF	Country of Production	Date of Release
Risala 'iilaa Alwali/ A Message to the Elderman	Nader Galal	Comedy, drama, fantasy, history	Egypt	1998
A TV Series of 4 Seasons: *Once Upon a Time/ Kan Yama Kan*	Ayman Sheikhani and Bassam al-Mulla	Family, fantasy, drama	Syria	1990-2000
A TV series: The Robot/ Alrajul Al-aliu	Mohammad El-Sheikh Najib	Family, drama, educational	Syria	1998

Table 1. Twentieth-century SF films and some TV series discussed in this paper

SF in several Arabic literary works. Barbaro states that Arab SF is rooted in classical traditions. For example, *The Epistle of Forgiveness/ Resalat Al-Ghufran* by the Syrian poet Abu al-Ala' al-Ma'arri (around 1033 CE), describes a voyage to paradise and interactions with spirits of various figures from the past. *Hayy Ibn Yaqzan* depicts the human transformation from primitive conditions to a philosophical utopia through science, experience, meditation, and knowledge (Ibn Tufail, early 12th C). In the thirteenth century, Ibn al-Nafis wrote *Theologus Autodidactus* (1968), a philosophical novel that ends with an apocalypse (Campbell, 2018). *One Thousand and One Nights/ Alf Layla Wa-Layla* might date back to the middle ages, and has been cited by Arabic bibliographers in the fourth century, such as Ibn al-Nadim, who summarized the Arabic published stories in his book *Al-Fihrist*. A story in *One Thousand and One Nights, The City of Brass*, and many other folk tales contain early elements of SF, including controlling nature, future technology, and proto-cyborgs (Campbell, 2018, p. 61- 63). Barbaro's theory of the classical influences of Arab SF literature can also be applied to the twentieth century Arab SF films, which have maintained the conventions of fantasy in SF and SF in fantasy. Many Arab SF films intertwine supernatural and rational causes for impossible events. For this reason, numerous SF films double as fantasy films, meaning that Arab cinema emphasizes and foregrounds genre hybridity with pictures that one could describe as "science-fantasy."

An Egyptian film that incorporates powerful SF elements within fantasy is *Risala 'iilaa Alwali/ A Message to the Elderman* (Galal, 1998). In 1807, Harfoush, a strong knight, tries to deliver a message to Egypt's ruler, Muhammad Ali, to help the city of Rasheed, which is besieged by the British. While running away from some hired enemies in a cave, Harfoush meets a wise man who transfers him to the twentieth century. He recognizes modern Cairo, where he gets accused of being crazy. Inas, a social worker, sympathizes with him after learning his story and confirming his identity. After a lot of trouble and heroism, Harfoush sees the house and fortune that he will make in the future, a touristic archaeological site in modern Cairo. Holding on to a photo of his beloved Inas, he finally comes back to the cave and his time, knowing that he will succeed in his mission and that Egypt will free itself from Ottoman and British colonialism. In the historical house of the knight, Harfoush, Inas sees a big, partially wiped painting that looks like her and meets a person who is a great-grandchild of Harfoush. The uniqueness of this film's narrative and mise-en-scene techniques lie in its utilization of Egyptian history and how it sets a past time narrative to make the current Cairo a future city for Harfoush. The wise man smoothly transfers Harfoush into modern Cairo through strong lights and magic. To give an impression of a future time, the film depends on real footage from Cairo's streets, historical spaces, and the performance of an astonished character by Adel Imam.

Syrian TV series exemplifies this duality between sci-

Arab SF Film and TV, continued

ence fiction and fantasy. *Once Upon a Time/ Kan Yama Kan* (Sheikhani and al-Mulla, 1990-1999), which most Arab youth of the author's generation grew up watching, was written and produced by a private-sector producer, Daoud Sheikhani, and directed by Ayman Sheilhani, his son. The show contains elements of family drama, and its narrative depends on global, Arab, and Middle Eastern mythologies, especially *One Thousand and One Nights* (Fig. 1). Each episode presents a problem in the contemporary daily life of a Syrian family. We learn a lesson through the wisdom of the folktales and each of the grandparents who narrates the story. The series deploys simple cinematic effects to create illusion and fantasy elements such as giants, magic, flying carpets, etc. It was the first Arab TV series that used computer animation to create audio-visual illusions. It was also the first Arab live-action production globally marketed after winning at the Festival Prix Jeunesse (Marefa, 2020). The series contains many vital SF elements and sources that fundamentally accomplish the same purposes as modern technology. For example, the idea of individuals communicating and crossing all borders freely, with no cost, is not a reality yet, but it can be conveyed equally well via a magic carpet, which is derived from folk tales, or a transporter, as seen in Western SF. As another example, characters in *Once Upon a Time/ Kan Yama Kan* may return to life or to be healed from fatal disease by drinking magical herbs. Analogously, Western SF portrays the desire for immortality through the creation of cybermen or androids or mind transfers and memory technologically.

The Egyptian film *Haa 3* (Kamel, 1961) uses a similar approach. The main character, Abbas, an elderly factory owner, undergoes an experimental medical procedure that entails entering a machine that physically de-ages him into a young man. However, the de-aging results in catastrophic changes for Abbas and his family, landing him in prison awaiting execution. At this point, the film uses a radial visual transition to return audiences to the point before Abbas entered the machine, revealing that regaining his youth had been a dream. Now awake, Abbas refuses to finish

the procedure and returns to his family to fix their unresolved problems. These films allow us to enjoy the SF unreality, but both suggest that fantastic elements are ultimately escapist illusions that cannot truly exist within the narrative diegesis. This type of dream narrative framing is a recurring convention. One encounters it in *Adam Without a Cover/ Adam Bedoun Ghetaa* (Nabih, 1990), where in the end, things fall apart in Adam's apocalyptic world and it turns out to only have been a dream. The dream convention also appears in *Mysterious Eyes* (Galal, 1934) as well in *Please Kill Me/ Ektellni Men Fadlek* (Al Seifi and Galal, 1965). The attempt to regain youth is encountered again in *Three Madmen/ El-Maganin El-Talata* (Elseify, Elseify, and El-Sisi). A veterinarian (Tawfiq) experiments on his friend, and instead of making him younger, mistakenly makes him one hundred and eighty-six years old.

Devices

Other films rely on diegetic plot devices to explain impossible events, and in the process explore social issues of the time in which they are made. Advanced medicines, including pills, herbs, drugs, elixirs, etc., are some of the most popular devices. For instance, in *Mr. Lion/ El Saba' Afandi* (Khurshid, 1951) SF elements manifest in the plot. The main character randomly buys magical pills and takes them excessively to later discover a secret magical ability of breaching walls. He becomes a popular hero because of his good deeds that he was able to accomplish through his superpower. Although walking through walls is an old magical idea, it is placed in a modern context such as the pill container and the office issues and the relationship between the main character and his boss.

In *The Land of Hypocrisy* (Abdel Wahab, 1968), the story of which is reminiscent of *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (Stevenson, 1886), they serve as a means for the main characters to change personalities. Masoud, a kind person who suffers from the oppressive actions of people around him, discovers a mysterious scientific laboratory and a doctor that sells seemingly magic drugs that can positively and

Arab SF Film and TV, continued

negatively affect a user's morality. Masoud begins taking these medicines and acquires various (virtues and vices), such as "hypocrisy," significantly transforms his character and negatively affects his family and job. In the end, he tries to transform the corrupted society around him by throwing the "honesty" drug into the river that serves as the source of drinking water, but the effects do not last. Masoud goes back to his old life, sad about not being able to change his society. The shop itself also closes as it runs out of "moralities" and so the world ultimately reverts to normal, playing into the idea that a moral society is itself a fantastic concept. This film's story is adapted from Yosef Asebaei's novel, *The Land of Hypocrisy* (Al-Sebai, 1949). *Virtue for Sale* (Dhulfeqar, 1950), which is a lesser-known earlier film, surprisingly uses the same story, but in a more fantastic style. An old sheikh-like figure sells virtue powders that also transform personalities. However, he has run out of vices, and so can only provide positive characteristics such as courage and chivalry.

In *Uncle Zizuo Habibi* (Mostafa, 1977), the protagonist takes dangerous "satanic herbs" that endow him with supernatural powers and make him a star footballer. His powers, however, eventually expire and Zizuo comes to understand that his real strength lies in his will to succeed without any injections or magical herbs. His story shares a number of elements with that of *Ashour, the Lion's Heart/ Ashour Kalb el-assad* (Fawzy, 1961), in which a scientist injects the weak and poor Ashour with a serum that grants him superpowers. This allows Ashuor to defeat all his colleagues in sports competitions and gain the attention of the girl whom he has always loved. In the end, when the drug's effect wears off, she abandons him, and only his true friend and a poor girl who loved his personality take care of him. Then, he realizes that his love should be given to people who like him, not his muscles.

The medicines that appear in these films, and other movies such as *Where did You Get this?/ Min Ayn Lak Hatha* (Mostafa, 1952) and *The World in 2000/*

Al-Alam Sanat 2000 (Fuad, 1972) are inspired by traditional Arab medicine and are similar to the magical herbs that appear in folk tales and works of fantasy literature, which themselves draw on global, Arab, and middle Eastern mythologies. Although sometimes, the elixirs that give superpower are stopped or do not work at the end, they help in resolving romantic storylines. Even when characters refuse to depend on the elixir at the end, it actually works to an extent as the experience always raises the characters' social status, transforms their awareness, and ultimately solves their problems. At the same time, the plots of these films often end up encouraging the characters to realize their true potential rather than depending on the abilities granted by the elixirs. Such a depiction of "medicines," especially in *Uncle Zizuo Habibi*, parallels drama films that highlight the negative effects of drug abuse in society. The subject of drug abuse was especially prominent in Egyptian films of the 1980s (Kassem, 2018), such as *Shame/ El Ar* (1982) and *The Addict/ al-Modmen* (Francis, 1983). In this context, the advanced medicine serves as a fantastic stand-in for performance-enhancing drugs like anabolic steroids. Its effects, however, are impermanent, discouraging viewers from using real-life analogues.

Another common device is the use of advanced brain operations by what often is an evil or mad scientist. In *Have Mercy/ Haram Alek* (Karamah, 1953), an evil scientist plots to awaken a mummy and so learn the secrets of an ancient mummification technique by transferring a living human brain into its head. The same pattern is established in *The One who has Dazzling Eyes/ Abo Oyoun Gareaa* (El-Seifi, 1958), in which a corrupt German doctor and his accomplices buy and transfer brains, changing people's personalities through a series of funny and disastrous situations until they get caught. In *Felfel* (Shawkat and Al-Attar, 1950), after research and experiments on animals, a doctor makes a medical procedure in which he takes the vocal cords of a famous singer and gives them to the market boy and poor Felfel as a way of taking revenge on his enemy. This changes the equation of the stories of all characters; Felfel becomes strong

Arab SF Film and TV, continued

and rich. However, they all, including the doctor, realize their mistakes. So, the doctor returns everything to its original situation. Such pictures typically examine the ethics and moral effects of science, calling to mind works like Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. This is especially central to the Arab SF films of the 1980s, to which I will return later. Now that some of the genre's common narrative devices have been outlined, it is time to discuss its cultural and historical dimensions, as well as its influence by SF literature.

Robots are recurring characters throughout the genre, often created with cheap special effects costumes usually made of cardboard box, such as Auto in *Journey to the Moon* (Abdelwahab, 1959), one of the oldest cardboard box robots in Arab SF cinema. In *The Fake Millionaire/ Al-millionaire Al-mouzayyaf* (El-Seifi, 1968) Mak Mak is a sophisticated robot who can love, regenerate with other machines, and who understands human ethics. It is made by the struggling inventor Mr. Hamdi and an actual actor wears the costume. Some of this inventor's other inventions are artificial rain, a super jet car, electronic doors, and a magnetic cupboard that helps in automatically changing clothes. *The Robot/ Alrajul Al-aliu* (El-Sheikh Najib, 1998) includes Arfan the robot who knows everything. This prop was designed by Anwar Zarkali. It has orange flashing lights, can move, and becomes like a friendly teacher to Ammar.

Culture

Barbaro recommends viewing modern SF literature from a post-colonial perspective (2013). It is common to present SF elements within a local and traditional cultural environment distinct from Westernized technological environments. The many technologies found in Arab films are considered to have Eastern inspiration and origins in the past, such as fantasy folk tales. A goal of Arab filmmakers has been to resist cultural homogenization and produce a local, non-Western film commodity.

Marwan Kraidy discusses the question, "Do Arab media reflect Arab reality or do they represent foreign

attempts to define a new reality?" (2010, p.4). Generally, Arab media attempt both, and I think that the dialogue between global and regional media should always be an active component of the theory and practice. However, television shows that copy Western programs, such as *Star Academy* (Adma, Lebanon, 2001—) and *Arab Idol* (Future TV and MBC 1, 2011), are frequently criticized as furthering globalization, though this does not impact their popularity. Rasha Bkhyt asks, do these shows represent Arab youth in a global form? Or do their styles eliminate Arab specificity? Or are they a form of successful cultural exchange and Arab union in media? (Bkhyt, 2016) One critique, which comes from a religious perspective, refers to the disadvantage of Arab satellite broadcasting, which copies foreign programs, such as reality shows and video clips, without considering Arab traditions. This problem affects Arab youth and weakens their sense of belonging to Arab-Islamic culture. Others see that such popular foreign programs frustrate local attempts to produce competitive Arab shows. A compelling point, which comes from an artistic and cultural view, is that local production in Arab broadcasting satellite is an advantage that avoids some of the disadvantages of globalism and Western domination (Ibrahim, 2017, pp. 7-159). Furthermore, Kraidy has described the situation as being a balanced relationship that embodies equal, creative powers of Arab media and Western culture. So, the SF media's tailoring of Western elements and techniques to a local and traditional frame is emblematic of how "media usage helped Arab and Muslim communities to accommodate modernity without forsaking their heritage" (Kraidy, 2010, p. 5).

Once upon a Time/Kan Yama Kan highlights the Arabic language as an essential element of Arab identity and postcolonial theories as an orientation in public education and media. Arjun Appadurai describes how "the central problem of today's global interactions is the tension between cultural homogenization and cultural heterogenization... There is always a fear of cultural absorption by politics of larger scale" (Appadurai, 2003, p. 40). This show reacts to these fears and suggests creative ways of reconciling global and

local culture by emphasizing local folk tales, and Arabic language and culture. Western-style special visual effects and filmmaking techniques appear within the narrative frame of Arab folklore, modern culture, local issues, and morals.

SF devices often allow films to delve into history and mythology. *The Queen of Love/ Malikat al Hobb* (Lahoud, 1973) uses a time machine to offer an Egyptian and Lebanese take on mythological Atlantis's rich fiction. A timeship, which is supposed to transmit three scientists to the future, travels by mistake to early Atlantis. The general theme was inspired by American SF films (Louis, 2020) such as *Atlantis, the Lost Continent* (Pal, 1961). However, its plot reclaims the myth of Atlantis through placing the events in modern Egypt and on the South of Libya, where the film situates Atlantis. In this way, the film draws on real historical findings of the geography of Atlantis, offering a counter-narrative to Western mythology.

Journey to the Moon (Abdelwahab, 1959), meanwhile, uses the spaceship to explore the context of the space race in the 1950s. The film also demonstrates the heavy influence of Western films including *Destination Moon* (Pichel, 1950), *Cat-Women of the Moon* (Hilton, 1953), and especially George Melies' *A Trip to the Moon* (Melies, 1902), in which a driver, hoping to become a chief newspaper editor, tries to take unauthorized photos of a spaceship and accidentally launches it. The ship brings him to the moon with Dr. Sharvin, its German inventor, and Mr. Rushdie, an Egyptian meteorologist. They meet the moon inhabitants, including Dr. Cosmo, his daughters, and the robot Auto. The film is worth discussing in more depth as it contains both specific references to local Arab culture and Western Pop-culture.

In the film's plot, the news about the moon's trip is published in the Egyptian *El-Akhbar Elyoum/Today's NEWS*, an actual newspaper. Mass media plays a vital role in the plot. The driver's motivation is directly tied to the popularity of journalism, which in 1959 played a significant role not only by providing news, but also in constructing the national identity. Paralleling this, the narrative also constructs a kind of nation-

al myth by letting the driver, inspired by his desire to work in mass media, launch the spaceship and so further Egypt's status as a competitor in the space race. These elements help to convince the Arab audience that a space trip setting off from Egypt is possible. The SF narrative reflects the political context of the 1950s and a cultural desire to compete with dominant world powers.

At the same time, the film clearly draws on and reworks' Melies' *A Trip to the Moon* (1902). Both films share the premise of two groups travelling to the moon. Both contain many errors reflecting the lack of understanding of the nature of space, such as the characters' abilities to live and breathe on the moon. Today, these inaccuracies play into their comedic styles, helping elicit audience laughter.

Journey also makes an explicit reference to Melies' film by including a ballet scene on the moon but the meanings of both scenes differ. Within an Arab and Egyptian cinema context, ballet dancing seems alien and foreign, so it defamiliarizes the moon dancers. The return of the spaceship ends up with a celebration similar to the ceremony in Melies' movie. But where Melies' film arguably promotes a pro-colonialist narrative, Abdelwahab's film offers some critique. Melies' *Trip to the Moon* can be read as a metaphor for Wester's colonization of new territories. It depicts the lunar inhabitants as savage and fighting aliens that can be a kind of threatening foreign other. By contrast, Abdelwahab depicts the lunar inhabitants as friendly, hospitable, technologically advanced, and humanized beings similar to the Earthlings. The astronaut who lives on the moon with his daughters is a refugee from a war that is not specified. Melies' film inherits the theme of superiority over the others while Abdelwahab suggests equality with other people. So, this film is a good example of how Arab SF can promote certain cultural narratives and global dialogues.

Comedy and its techniques

It is important to note that in addition to being classifiable as fantasy picture, the majority of Arab SF films also qualify as comedies and so often make their SF

Arab SF Film and TV, continued

elements funny and comedic. This reflects their generally ironic attitude towards their subject matter. The fact that most Arab SF are comedies speaks to the popularity and dominance of comedy in commercial Arab cinema. Including comedic elements and characters would help sell a SF film to mainstream audiences.

Both Ashour, from *Ashour, the Lion's Heart* (Fawzy, 1961), and Zizuo, from *Uncle Zizuo Habibi* (Mostafa, 1977), are a type of comedic hero that one repeatedly encounters in Egyptian cinema from the 1970s until the 1990s. The characterss hopes are a reflection of the rosy dreams of the 1970s. The hero is usually an honest, unlucky citizen who lives through some difficult situations but who, at the end, is able to change his social and financial situation for the better (Al-Sa'ehi, 2020).

This approach had also been applied in *The World in 2000* (Fuad, 1972). A scientist predicts that worldwide famine will result from overpopulation. Therefore, he tries to create an elixir to diminish the size of human beings. However, when his brother Shawky takes the potion, he becomes so small that he disappears from view, except for his voice. Because of Shawky's terrible financial situation, his girlfriend's father has refused to let them marry. Shawky uses the experiment to regain his girlfriend, which creates funny situations. Shawky's invisibility is performed through the rest of the characters' mime and reactions, a style inspired by American comedies, especially Charlie Chaplin cinema. Shawky's invisibility allows for comic gags. Another film that uses mime techniques is *Where Did You Get This?/ Min Ayn Lak Hatha* (Mostafa, 1952). Wahid, a medical student, uses a medicine invented by his professor to become invisible and destroy the marriage party of his beloved Salwa, whose father was forcing her to marry the hypocritical, drug dealer, Taher. To implement Wahid's disappearance, Salwa dances as if her hidden beloved is dancing with her. This way, her father thinks she is mentally affected. However, after a lot of trouble, action, and the appearance of Taher's real colors, the lovers succeed in getting married. So, both films demonstrate how an SF

element can be subordinate to comedic effects.

The use of comedy played well into the low budgets and lack of resources. The history of the SF genre up until the end of the 1960s reflects the producers' hesitation to invest in extensive scenery and staging. The 1970s subsequently sees the emergence of more serious films that tackle post-apocalyptic themes. With that, the genre sees higher production values and less reliance on comedy. That is not to say that post-apocalyptic plots lack comedic elements.

Turning away from Comedy

Adam and Women (Bedeir, 1971) is an Egyptian film with satirical elements that indirectly reflects some global political tensions. The plot is set in a world where atomic weapons have led to mass male infertility, leading countries to compete over the ownership of the last fertile man on Earth. The film also contains interesting views about racial discrimination. Despite the setting, the film is quite light-hearted and silly, with lots of jokes taking place alongside more serious ideas such as criticism of the nuclear industry. The pursuit of the main character stands for global conflicts over control of resources.

Adam and Women can be compared with *Adam Without a Cover/ Adam Bedoun Ghetaa* (Nabih, 1990) in terms of the changes in their apocalyptic plots and comedic styles. Only two people remain alive on Earth following an undefined event. The film is darker and more serious in tone than the similarly titled *Adam and Women*; it focuses on the loneliness of living in a largely barren world. The apocalyptic scenario is treated with appropriate gravity. But the film also attempts to elicit laughter by following the main characters as they go on various escapades and adventures, such as visiting an ancient museum and broadcasting on TV. They philosophically question the essence of their relationship, life, and loneliness. The differences between the two titles evince how much the SF genre will have changed in two decades.

New filmmakers of the 1980s challenged the traditions of production and started to make more serious

Arab SF Film and TV, continued

films (Alashri, 2006, Pp. 13- 142). SF movies of the 1980s demonstrate the era's debates about science and religion, as well as the pros and cons of future technology. *Time Conqueror* (Al-Sheikh, 1987) stands out from its predecessors in terms of mise-en-scene, costumes, and prop design. It is based on the milestone Arab SF novel, *The Lord of Time,* written in 1966 by Nihad Sharif, who is considered, according to Barbara and others, the father of Arabic SF (2013). The filmmaker, Al-Sheikh, nicknamed "Egypt's Hitchcock," uses many techniques to generate suspense in telling the story of a historian searching for his journalist cousin who had vanished investigating the mysterious disappearances of patients from a hospital. The historian discovers that a doctor is working on a scientific experiment to freeze sick people's bodies for years to allow their survival until suitable medicine is invented to heal them.

The film is more convincing in its depiction of the future and futuristic technology, which suggests that it has a relatively bigger budget than previous titles in the genre. Transparent freezers or capsules for preserving bodies take on the appearance of mummy coffins, taking inspiration from the Pharaonic culture. Through graphic elements of painting and photography, we see believable future images of the elegant Cairo of 2110. The unity of the narrative with these elements allows the film to successfully tackle complicated questions, in this case, the ethics of scientific experiments on human bodies. In line with this, *Time Conqueror* is one of the first Arab SF movies completely devoid of comedy. This film also projects the popular currents in Arab cinema of the 1980s and 19990s, such as the spread of TV (Alashri, 2006, Pp. 13- 142), which appears in the actors' performance.

Another serious SF film that tackles the questions of science and ethics is *Monsters Run/ Gary Elwohosh* (Abdel-Khalek, 1987). It tells the story of three friends. A doctor finds a way to cure infertility via brain surgery. He operates on his wealthy friend so he can have a child. His friend pays a poor man to donate the part. The operation succeeds, but ironically the lives of both the rich and the poor are ruined on all levels. In the end, neither achieves the happiness they were seeking through the child or the money. Despite its outlandish premise of brain surgery, the film tries to maintain as plausible a plot as possible. Through this SF element, it addresses class relations. The trend towards seriously tackling social issues in Arab SF continues into the 1990s.

The success of films such as *Time Conqueror* and *Monsters Run* led to *The Dance with the Devil/ Al Raqss Ma El Shaitan* (Mahgoub, 1993), which tells the story of a chemist who formulates a floral medicine that gives him the ability to travel through time. However, the drug causes hallucinations that almost result in the chemist killing his unborn child. The film deals with the question of whether or not it is ethical to alter the flow of history for personal benefit and includes multiple philosophical discussions about science and morality. It is reflective of an overall less ironic attitude towards SF in the 1990s. Similar approaches to storytelling are also visible in *Adam Without a Cover* (1990) and *The Message to the Elderman* (1998), in which the main character travels to the future. Finally, the unironic attitude is apparent in Syrian children's educational TV programs, such as *The Robot/ Alrajul Al-Aliu* (El-Sheikh Najib, 1998). The show has a funny premise, wherein a child finds a highly intelligent robot named Arfan and gets him to do his schoolwork. The series uses the robot to seriously promote children's education, inspiring young viewers to learn through honest hard work. As a whole, then, between the 1930s and the 1990s, Arab Cinema had largely transitioned from a generally ironic to serious stance on SF. In part, these changes are attributable to the general transformations in Arab SF film production.

Production

Compared to other genres, Arab SF has not been very popular in Arab cinema, in the sense that relatively few titles in this genre have been produced in comparison to the total number of Arab films made in the twentieth century. Egyptian productions alone number at least four thousand titles (Arab Thought Foundation, 2008). This is curious, given that most of the SF films have been commercially successful. For instance, *Mysteri-*

Arab SF Film and TV, continued

ous Eyes reportedly had significant box office/ticket sales, and its marketing tended to emphasize its identity as a SF picture. In the story, a woman named Delilah tries to bring her beloved Sami back to life through a combination of witchcraft and chemistry, after he dies in an accident. In the press, the filmmakers disavowed the role of witchcraft in the picture, after being forbidden from screening the film, by positioning it as a mix of chemistry and magic. Because of this, the film's plot becomes difficult to classify as explicitly supernatural or rational. Furthermore, the end of the picture reveals that everything that the audience had seen was part of Delilah's elaborate dream (Kassem, 2018). So, the film attempts to further rationalize all the impossible narrative events as the products of the main character's imagination. In this sense, positioning the film as SF, where impossible events can be explained via non-supernatural means, allowed the picture to circumvent censorship. This illustrates how SF helped prohibited subject matter make it to the screen. That more filmmakers had not taken advantage of this capability suggests some resistance to the SF genre within the Arab film industry.

Comments by pioneer Syrian producer Nazih Shahbander in the documentary *Light and Shadows/ Noor wa Zilal* (Malas, Amiralay, and Mohammed, 1994) support this idea. Discussing an unrealized project, he states that the first Syrian picture he had aimed to make would have been a SF film about an alien that arrives on Earth in an oval-shaped, spiral-winged spaceship to learn from people and their morals. But soon, the alien becomes disenchanted with humans and discovers that the bad aspects of life on Earth outweigh the good. However, the investor pushed Shahbander to make a more conventional dramatic film devoid of SF elements, which became *Light and Darkness* (Shahbander, 1948). From this, one can infer that even when producers were interested in SF pictures in the 40s, they were beholden to the conservative interests of investors.

It seems evident that budget was a notable issue. SF can require a high level of production value to convincingly realize their worlds and scenarios. Some film industries simply do not allow such budgets. For example, in Syria, the National Organization of Cinema, a state-run institution, controls most of the cinematic production. Due to its strict standards, it does not produce commercial entertainment, focusing instead on and arthouse and educational films. There are also political events and factors that can negatively influence film production as a whole. Because of this, there is little to no financing for SF pictures. At the same time, private-sector cinema is not able to generate enough money independently to execute a quality SF production.

Even Syrian TV, which has a successful private sector, is still constrained by low budgets. An example is *Al-Obur/ The Crossing* (Isber, 2014). In a TV interview, its director, Abeer Isber, says that her production company became interested in making a SF series, but the low production values considerably impacted the visual execution. The show could not make extensive use of mise-en-scene or computer technology and so had to represent SF elements in terms of verbal exposition and costume design (ElaphVideo, 2013). One can infer from the Egyptian films discussed here that budget was also an issue in commercial Egyptian production. A lot of the SF films are playing around the limitation of the budgets. They tend not to depict certain effects directly on the screen, hence, there is a tendency to tell, not show.

For Arab producers, it is not a genre that has ties to local history and, hence, appeal to a local audience. The Syrian producer, Mustafa Al-Barkawi (Lighthouse VFX), believes that the production of the SF genre has been considered a risk up until the twenty-first century because of low budgets and the domination of TV channels, which follow the policies of advertisers that consider this genre to be unprofitable. Moreover, many producers still see it as a foreign product (Al-Barkawi, personal communication, 2020). For them, SF is a predominantly American genre and so is rooted in Western cultural traditions. Perhaps, that is why Arab SF films have a tendency to over-rationalize and over-explain implausible aspects suggesting that maybe the audience would not accept them otherwise.

Arab SF Film and TV, continued

Another interpretation by Nesrine Malik links the lack of SF production to the cultural tendency to glorify the past and to the absence of an Arab equivalent to Neil Armstrong or Yuri Gagarin, a contemporary iconic figure that inspires public interest in the present and future (Malik, 2009). While I agree with the author about the Arabic fixation on the past, I would not attribute it to the prevalence of religious thinking and the suspicion of science. I would argue that it is related to a combination of economical, historical, political, artistic, and other factors.

Ideologically, Arab culture has romantic bonds with the glories of the past, perhaps because the Arab community is not associated with current technological marvels. A lot of the SF films carry themes of nostalgia, which is proven through their extensive use of plot devices typically associated with ancient Arab culture and mythology. Many ideas in Arab SF, such as phasing through solid matter, levitation, invisibility, miniaturization, and herbal magical medicines, are drawn from folk literature. For example, in *Once Upon a Time/ Kan Yama Kan*, even if the characters are using future technology such as light to move through spaces in seconds, the time frame is set in the past. Past problems teach lessons about the present and the future. It frees the plot from the limits of logic. The past is used as a metaphor of wisdom and neutrality. In the ancient past anything is possible.

Conclusion

Having looked at its general conventions, narrative devices, and evolution, one can recognize that Arab SF is an actual genre that has unique features, a history, and a place in Arab cinema. It did not have a lot of cultural recognition, especially as many titles have not been recognized as SF. Arab SF films in the twentieth century demonstrated valued global, local, and cultural dialogues. Over the course of six and a half decades, the genre had undergone some interesting transitions, and it continues to evolve in the twenty-first century. There are currently signs that the genre is going to become more widely visible due to developments in marketing. For example, *Maskoon* fantastic Film Festival "ushered in the region's first

festival for horror, action, fantasy, and science fiction films" (Dabbagh, 2019). This can potentially help in producing and exhibiting new SF films.

Twenty-first century Egyptian SF shows a greater degree of inspiration from foreign film and TV. For example, *Super Miro* (El Halfawy, 2019) is a TV series about an Egyptian superheroine that uses a technologically advanced costume. Other examples reflect new cyber and alien elements, such as *Cima Ali Baba* (El Gendy, 2011), which is a parody of *Star Wars* (Lucas, 1977- 2019) and the drama/ thriller TV series, *The End/ El Nehaya* (Samy, 2020). As we notice at the end of the twentieth century, the genre frees itself from comedy and fantasy, opening up new creative directions for SF storytelling. The twenty-first century witnesses a more significant increase in production of Arab SF. Egyptian cinema is not the only center anymore. New, emerging competitors appear such as UAE. New standards and conventions define the genre in the twenty-first century. There is more overlap between arthouse and mainstream films (Fahim, 2019).

With that, the new titles tackle the twenty-first century's social and political issues. New SF cinema and TV from Palestine, Arab Maghreb, and Syria, as well as diasporic filmmakers, reflect Arab futuristic perspectives exploring climate change, diaspora, collective traumas, exile in space, etc. The Emirati, post-apocalyptic film, *The Worthy* (Mostafa, 2017), tackles the subjects of war, water pollution, fear, destruction, and hunger, anticipating what happens when political conflicts escalate. *Aerials* (Zaidi, 2016) is an entertaining, horror SF that imagines an alien spaceship invasion of the earth and presents issues of communication, fear, alien abduction, and lockdown. There emerge low budget short films such as *The Way of Hope* (Nasser, 2015) and *The Capital of Destruction* (Nasser, 2016). The former responds to the Syrian crisis, while the latter posits that a global disaster forces people to immigrate to space. New generation filmmakers take advantage of the advancement of technology to overcome the limitations of low budgets. So, low production value is not a constraint for SF anymore.

Arab SF Film and TV, continued

There are some advancements in TV programs which present different systems of production. For example, *Spacetoon*, a pan-Arab and Indonesian children's channel, uses animated SF themes to present its programs promoting Arab futuristic visions. Some of its ideas aim to prepare Arab children for the age of globalization (Hijazi, 2012) and others are to educate them about science, music, arts and crafts, the environment, and other cultural topics.

A significance of studying Arab SF film and TV is how much it tells us about Arab culture, media, its history, and future. Yasser Bahjatt demonstrated examples from movies that envisioned future technology that we are using now and said that the advancement in SF leads to advancement in science (Bahjatt, 2012). There is a belief that if there is no advanced technology, you cannot produce SF. But for me, SF is a form of art that inspires cultural and technological advancement.

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