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Films ex-nihilo: Abu Dhabi's Greenfields Film and Media Policy Model

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▶ **To cite this version:**

Nolwenn Mingant. Films ex-nihilo: Abu Dhabi's Greenfields Film and Media Policy Model. Reconceptualising Film Policies, 2018. hal-03031550

HAL Id: hal-03031550

https://hal.science/hal-03031550v1

Submitted on 30 Nov 2020

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Routledge Studies in Media and Cultural Industries

RECONCEPTUALISING FILM POLICIES

Edited by
Nolwenn Mingant and Cecilia Tirtaine

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26 Films *ex-nihilo*

Abu Dhabi's 'Greenfields Film and Media Policy Model'

Nolwenn Mingant

Few countries at the beginning of the twenty-first century could claim to have no cinema history. Such was the case of the United Arab Emirates, a federation of sheikdoms created in 1971 and whose territories have, for decades, remained quite removed from the paths of cinema. The turn of the century, however, marked the UAE's flamboyant entry into world film history, with the boom of mall culture and multiplexes,[1] the founding of two film festivals (the Dubai International Film Festival in 2004 and the Middle East International Film Festival in 2007, renamed Abu Dhabi Film Festival, in 2010) and a first national film (*City of Life*, A. Mostafa, 2009). By the 2010s, the UAE was also established as a reliable filming location for international productions. The sudden blooming of film in what had hitherto been a 'cinéphile desert' (Weissberg quoted in Yunis 2014, 280) raises issues for film observers and practitioners. Assessing the development of film festivals in the Gulf, Jean-Michel Frodon strongly interrogated – and doubted – the possibility of 'generating a "soil-less" or *ex nihilo* cinema'. (Frodon 2013, par.13) Behind the creation of this 'soil-less' cinema stands the strongly interventionist choices of Gulf authorities decreeing their film industry into existence, in a manner both strikingly performative and quite unique. While many nations around the world started regulating their film industries in the early twentieth century and have constantly adapted their policies ever since, proceeding by accumulation and subtractions, trial-and-error, the UAE's lack of film past enabled it to create from scratch a film and media industry based on the latest public policy models and experiments around the world. Inspired by Goldsmith and O'Regan's concept of 'greenfields studio' (Goldsmith and O'Regan 2005, 76), this chapter argues that the UAE capital, Abu Dhabi, has developed a 'greenfields film and media policy model' – that is, the creation of a film and media industry in a country with no film tradition, no film executives and talent and little appetence for Arab cinema.

Reinventing Abu Dhabi

The establishment of a film industry in Abu Dhabi does not derive from a popular aspiration but from the authorities' desire to give the city a

new impetus, both economically and ideologically. In 2004, the death of Sheik Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan, founder and first president of the UAE, marked a turn in the country's economic orientation. Establishing economic diversification from oil as a priority, the new leading team, under the direction of Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed Al Nahyan, also ruler of Abu Dhabi, identified 'knowledge-based economy' as a lucrative sector (Westwood 2011, 199; Piquet 2013, 129). '(T)ourism, education, aerospace and media' were thus defined as the sectors which would provide 'a truly sustainable, open and globally competitive economy' (Abu Dhabi Council for Economic Development and Abu Dhabi Urban Planning Council 2006, 5, 42). This vision fell in line with the growth model approach to creative industries prominent since the late 1990s and theorised by Potts and Cunningham in 2008 (Leotta 2015, 27), in which culture and creativity are viewed as 'strong economic drivers' (Abu Dhabi Media Zone Authority Executive 2017). Areas to be developed were thus 'mobile, broadband, traditional television, print, entertainment, news, music, advertising & marketing, venture capital & equity finance' (Abu Dhabi Media Summit 2017a).

Unprecedented in the region, this emphasis on primarily culture-related industries also offered an opportunity to modernise Abu Dhabi's image. From 2007, the combination of full government support and ample funding has turned into a destination for business and cultural tourism in a city reconceptualised as 'Brand Abu Dhabi' (Westwood 2011, 199, 201). Besides creative industries, the overall cultural marketing plan included the Abu Dhabi Art Fair (created in 2007), the Jean Nouvel-designed Louvre dome on the Saadiyat Island (planned in 2007, to be opened in 2018) and the Yas Marina Formula One circuit (opened in 2009) (Elsheshtawy 2012, 137; Piquet 2013, 135–6). By the mid-2000s, the development of the creative industry concept had inspired city authorities around the world, which started linking economic growth with urban regeneration. In line with these innovative urban theorisations, Abu Dhabi reinvented itself as one of the new 'media cities', the 'large, planned, highly developed urban areas designated specifically to media and creative industry production' (Mould 2016, 163). In 2008, when Abu Dhabi created a tax-free zone, it intentionally modelled itself on recognised cultural and creative centres such as London, Berlin, New York, Tokyo and Paris and immediately gave the zone a catchy brand name, twofour54, after the capital's geographic coordinates (Abu Dhabi Media Zone Authority Executive 2017). The free zone immediately set to attract businesses in television, radio, film, publishing, online and mobile, music, advertising, gaming and animation.

As was the case with its neighbour Dubai, the birth of Abu Dhabi's media city was not 'the spontaneous development of local media', but the result of 'specific planning' by public officials (Picard and Barkho 2011, 282). The presence and development of the different media sectors

have thus been impulsed and coordinated by the local authorities, in a manner corresponding to 'hierarchical approach model' identified by Koch & Fuchs in 2000: rather than rely simply on market forces, '(p)olitical interventions, using regulatory, planning and/or fiscal instruments or vertical integration of different economic actors are the main instruments for coordinating the development of clusters' (Karlsson and Picard 2011a, 19). In 2007–2008, the Abu Dhabi authorities put the development of a local media industry in the hands of two state-backed companies: the Abu Dhabi Media Company has been in charge of developing local media companies (newspaper *The National*, Abu Dhabi Channel, Abu Dhabi FM, the Super.ae sports website, United Printing and Publishing, Image Nation); Abu Dhabi Media Zone Authority has been responsible for regulating and developing the free zone (twofour54, Film Commission). The authorities also created a film festival, under the Abu Dhabi Authority for Culture and Heritage.[2] This created an ecosystem including all the elements of the film and media chain: education and training, business incubation and innovation, production facilities, local film production support mechanisms, promotion.[3]

Authorities have adopted a similarly hands-on approach when it comes to film and programme content, for example asking foreign production companies wishing to shoot in Abu Dhabi to obtain script clearance from the UAE federal department, the National Media Council. In 2010, the production team of *Sex and the City 2* (M.P. King, 2010) was refused authorisation to shoot in the UAE after submitting their script to the NMC, due to its 'salacious content' (McGeehan 2010, Ahmed 2012).[4] The story of a group of single New York women in caricatural oriental dresses discussing their sexual exploits while stereotypically capering through the desert on camel's back was considered unsuitable, as its orientalist clichés ran counter to the image of modernity and culture Abu Dhabi was aiming to acquire. In 2011, the Media Zone Authority issued a Code of Content to be respected by all companies operating in twofour54:

> The (MZA) Code recognizes the importance of balancing freedom of expression with a duty to take account of the cultural and social expectations of society. Specific cultural expectations that are reflected in the Code include generally accepted UAE standards such as religion, the Ruling Families and privacy.
>
> (Media Zone Authority 2016, 3)

While this interventionist approach to cultural content does not seem to be a major obstacle for international productions, it seems to be more limitative to film-makers benefiting from grants awarded at the film festival. Yunis notes that films partly funded by Gulf festivals – all state-supported

> tend to be about looking back at, for example, the Lebanese civil war, displacement in post-war Iraq, North-African emigration and women's rights; and the perennial issue of Palestine. This is perhaps because within the Gulf these are safe topics with little controversy for the Gulf government to deal with and so for its population to be exposed to.
>
> (Yunis 2014, 281)

As is the case for distribution,[5] production thus operates under state and local authorities' scrutiny. In order to set up this top-down interventionist structure that would reinvent Abu Dhabi in the eyes of the world, the authorities have had to turn to expertise from abroad.

The Centrality of Knowledge Transfer

In her study on Arab satellite television, Sakr notes that Western managers, usually trained in 'global corporate finance and management practices' are commonly hired to provide concrete 'know-how' (Sakr 2016, 178–9). This pattern is common to a large number of private companies in the Gulf which, given the lack of skilled local managers, hire Westerners in leading positions (Piquet 2013, 131). The Abu Dhabi authorities have followed this trend and have recruited Westerners to create a local film and media infrastructure. The Abu Dhabi Media Company brought to its board two Americans with film and television experience. In 2008, Ed Borgerding, who had worked for Disney for a number of years, was asked to set up production company Image Nation. To do so, he brought in two German executives: CFO Stefan Brunner and Narrative and Development head Daniela Tully. In 2011, he was replaced by Michael Garin, a US executive with a career spanning working for Time-Life Television and Warner Television, turning into an investment banker at Lehman Brothers and Dutch bank ING, before coming back to television on the board of East European broadcasting company Central Media Enterprises (Silvester 2016). From 2008 to 2014, the Abu Dhabi Media Zone Authority was headed by Wayne Borg, an Australian marketing executive with previous experience at Disney, Warner Bros. and Universal Pictures International, and from 2009 to 2012, the Executive Director of the Abu Dhabi Film Festival was the American Peter Scarlet, whose professional background included running the San Francisco International Film Festival, creatively directing Tribeca Film Festival for seven years and briefly heading the *Cinémathèque Française* (Belsito and Levine 2012). Abu Dhabi's cultural interest was strongly defended by these knowledgeable managers from abroad. Borgerding renegotiated a deal with Warner Bros., in which Abu Dhabi had little creative control (Arango 2008), and Scarlet changed the festival focus away from international productions towards the showcasing of Arab films (Fahim

2015). These Western executives were, from the start, shadowed by Emiratis poised to learn the ropes of managing film and media structures.

Knowledge transfer from Western sources has commonly been central to the education and training of skilled technicians and talent in the Gulf countries. Lack of local education and training opportunities has been an issue beyond the realm of cinema. The long-term solutions developed have been an upgrading of the education system, based on the adoption of Western norms (Piquet 2013, 132) and partnerships with Western educational institutions. In the audiovisual area, however, the fruits of such collaborations are less to be reaped though the two US institutions established in Abu Dhabi – the New York Film Academy/Abu Dhabi Film School and New York University, which tend to cater to expatriates – than through initiatives such as the twofour54 Tareeb television training programme developed in partnership with the BBC and the Thomson Reuters Foundation (Yunis and Picherit-Duthler 2010, 16–7, 20). Similar partnerships have been pursued in other media sectors, such as the creation of the twofour54 Gaming Academy in collaboration with French company Ubisoft in 2012 (twofour54 2013) and the Cartoon Network Animation Academy in collaboration with the US cable and satellite television channel. Image Nation has also worked to inject know-how into the local film industry, through its training academy, the Arab Film Studio, and through its Mawaheb scheme, which offers internships, grants (conjointly with ENJAZZ from the Dubai Film Festival) and school exchanges (with French film school FEMIS and the Tisch School of Arts, New York) (Image Nation Abu Dhabi 2016a). The company has sent Emirati film-makers to intern as shadow directors on its international co-ventures, thus giving them an opportunity to learn the ropes (Leotta 2015, 30; Mingant 2017). The Media Zone Authority's efforts to attract international productions similarly aim at providing practical training opportunities for local personnel. The 2013 30 per cent tax rebate notably applies to local below-the-liners (Flanagan 2012), thus 'prompting growth of the local crew base and development of production skills' (Vivarelli 2014a). Recently, 'six UAE nationals from twofour54's Creative Lab programme have worked as interns with the *Star Wars* crew both in Abu Dhabi and at the UK's Pinewood studios' (Leotta 2015, 30).

Another key element in the knowledge transfer strategy is the ongoing reflections about technologies, models and practices led through the 2010-created Abu Dhabi Media Summit. It is a meeting place for local, regional and international players to discuss issues such as 'Redefining the Digital Frontier' (2012), 'Leveraging the Digital Age' (2013) and 'Driving and Sustaining Future Media in MENA & Beyond' (2014) (Abu Dhabi Media Summit 2017b). Local players exchanged views with guest speakers from not only the US (Rupert Murdoch, James Cameron, *New York Times* Mark Thompson, Turner Broadcasting Gerhard Zeiler), but also China (China Interactive Media Group CEO Hung

Huang) and India (Zee Network Mukund Cairae, Fox Star Studios CEO Vijay Singh) (Abu Dhabi Media Summit 2014, Vivarelli 2014b). Abu Dhabi authorities have selected to extract film and media knowledge less from other Arab nations with film traditions, such as Egypt and Morocco, than from dynamic film and media centres from outside the region, mostly the US. The aim of the summit discussions between 'top-tier global media players and their emerging-market counterparts' is to successfully achieve the 'transition to a fully networked new world' (Abu Dhabi Media Summit 2017a).

Getting on the Global Film Map, Fast

Abu Dhabi's strategy is indeed to insert itself in the existing global film and media world, notably through recognition of the now established trend towards globally dispersed production. As a consequence, the city has made attracting foreign productions – and thus joining the international 'locational tornament' (Dickens quoted in Goldsmith et al. 2010, 19) – a core objective. Twofour54 Intaj Film & TV Services offers studio space, as well as production services (pre-production assistance, budgeting and scheduling, transportation, etc.), post-production equipment and technicians and a one-stop-shop for broadcasting (twofour54 2016a). The Abu Dhabi Film Commission provides advice on accessing the 30 per cent cash rebate on production spend, free scouting assistance, assistance with navigating the local bureaucracy, as well as finding crew, facilities and accommodation (Abu Dhabi Film Commission 2016). In order to guarantee the sustainability of its production infrastructure, Abu Dhabi authorities have been careful to attract productions from a variety of countries. Alongside the – albeit limited – local shootings of films (*Sea Shadow*, N. Al-Janahi, 2011; *From A to B*, A. Mostafa, 2014) and documentaries, twofour54 has attracted international blockbusters from the US (*Fast & Furious 7*, J. Wan, 2015; *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*, J.J. Abrams, 2015) and India (*Bang Bang*, S. Anand, 2014; *Baby*, N. Pandey, 2015). In the realm of television, twofour54 has hosted the shooting of special episodes from US soap opera *The Bold and the Beautiful* (Bell-Phillip Television Productions, 2014), British motoring programme *Top Gear* (BBC, 2013) and Syrian TV dramas displaced by the civil war (*Hammam Shami*, M. Al Mulla, 2013; *Al Ikhwa*, H. Al Rantissi, Clacket Productions, 2014) (Vivarelli 2014a). A key element in establishing a global media hub with local roots, twofour54 has licensed a mix of international companies (CNN, Cartoon Network, Fox, Ubisoft),[6] regional companies (Flat6labs, Five Colors) and local ones (Image Nation, Qabeela Media) (Hamid 2013; twofour54 2016c). Abu Dhabi has thus been practicing 'geographical diversification', ensuring that all geographical levels are covered to spread risks, guarantee stability and develop networks that are both wide-reaching and deeply-rooted.

One early obstacle, however, was Abu Dhabi's lack of credibility. The absence of film and media tradition – or track record – meant that, for international production companies, Abu Dhabi was 'unknown quantity' (Abu Dhabi Media Zone Authority Executive 2017). The area actually suffered from adverse publicity, as Western knowledge of it was limited to war and strife televised news about Palestine, Iran and Iraq. Hiring Western executives was central to overcoming this weak point, since, besides bringing concrete know-how, they provided the benefit of pre-existing networks and, on a symbolic level, 'business credibility' (Sakr 2016, 180). Twofour54 executives thus aggressively marketed the location to international producers by flying them over during the festive – and busy – Grand Prix, extolling the Arab market potential (notably its large population of people under twenty-five) and positioning itself as a 'safe haven' in a politically troubled region (Abu Dhabi Media Zone Authority Executive 2017). They also carefully studied the methods adopted by other countries in the area, Morocco and Jordan, as well as countries with emerging film and media sectors – especially Singapore, Malaysia and South Africa – and former Soviet countries (Estonia, Lithuania, Bulgaria). After analysing what the producers needed and what the competition offered, twofour54 devised its two-pronged strategy to establish international credibility (tax rebate, vocational training initiatives).

One model cited by Image Nation's Michel Garin, that showed that reaching credibility fast was possible, was New Zealand: through his *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, Peter Jackson was the impetus which enabled a small country to 'successfully set itself up with production skills to become a sought-after film location for international productions, seriously challenging Hollywood's stranglehold on the industry's distribution channels' in a very short time (Williams 2012). In the same way, twofour54 identified attracting international productions as a shortcut to international recognition (Abu Dhabi Media Zone Authority Executive 2017). In that respect, *Star Wars: The Force Awakens,* with its emphasis on Abu Dhabi's breathtaking landscapes, might turn out to be the UAE's *Lord of the Rings*.

Creating a Local Film Industry

Reinventing Abu Dhabi, through a strategy of importing foreign expertise and inserting into globally accepted practices, has been an economic but also ideological project. It is a voluntaristic nation-building project. However, just as Abu Dhabi has been striving to build legitimacy in the international sphere, it has also had to fight the credibility battle at home. As the sheikdom entered the twenty-first century, young people showed little knowledge of and interest for cinema history and film festivals (Yunis 2014, 270). They showed even less interest in entering film and media careers generally considered inglorious. The idea that cinema was a

worthwhile – and viable – pursuit had thus first to be sold to Emiratis themselves (Abu Dhabi Media Zone Authority Executive 2017). Creating a desire for these careers has been all the more important as, from the start, the authorities have considered the presence of Western executives temporary. The massive hiring of foreign managers in many sectors of the economy has been felt as a threat in a young Gulf country struggling to create a strong national identity, hence a policy promoting the progressive replacement of foreigners by locals (Piquet 2013, 131–2, Yunis 2014, 272). On its career opportunities webpage, the Abu Dhabi Media Company thus outlines its 'Emiratisation policy': 'The main goal of recruitment in the company is to maximise the percentage of the UAE national workforce' (Abu Dhabi Media Company 2016). Yunis notes that, from the start, Peter 'Scarlet and his team were training the young Emirati staff to take over their place' (Yunis 2014, 277). When, in 2012, the festival moved under the jurisdiction of twofour54, 'an organisation whose primary goal is to foster Emirati talent in all media', Scarlet and his team were let go. The 2012 replacement of Scarlet by Ali Al Jabri as the director of Abu Dhabi Film Festival and the 2014 replacement of Wayne Borg by Noura Al Kaabi as head of the Media Zone Authority announced the end of a first phase of Abu Dhabi's film and media history. The first twofour54 team was 90 per cent expatriates and 10 per cent Emirati; by 2014, it had moved towards a 50-50 balance; and today, about 70 per cent of the staff is Emirati, with 30 per cent expatriates (Abu Dhabi Media Zone Authority Executive 2017). The influence of the dominant Western creative industries model, however, will persist long after the last US executive has left, as the Emirati they have trained continue to apply their models and practices.

A similar move towards Emiratisation – and similar cultural interrogations – has been visible in Image Nation's local productions. While early Emirati production *Djinn* (2013), directed by US Tobe Hooper, was more of a US production in an Emirati locale, more recent productions such as *Rattle the Cage* (A. Al Mansari, 2015) and *The Worthy* (A. Mostafa, 2016) have tried to give more control to local directors, producers and technicians, to the point that one can consider that an 'Image Nation Generation' is born, including young film-makers Al Mansari and Mostafa, as well as Nawal Al-Janahi and Yasir Al Yasiri. Their expectations, however, point out the potential limits of the national project. These young men, who are all US- or UK-educated, share a global imagination fed more by Hollywood and Asian productions than Arab *auteur* films (Mingant 2017). Their dreams are to direct a James Bond movie and to win an Academy Award (Priest 2016), not to shoot films that will advertise Brand Abu Dhabi in a cultural tourism approach. Although Abu Dhabi's production funds, and the existence of Image Nation, is currently a boon, cracks are already appearing between Abu Dhabi's ideological vision of a local cinema and these young men's dreams of freedom of expression and international careers (Abu Dhabi Media Summit 2014, Priest 2016).

Another key element in the film chain, which is beyond the capacity of the policy-makers, is the audience, as film appetence in the region has mostly benefited Hollywood. Yunis noticed that the Abu Dhabi Film Festival fought lack of interest by the local population and that the films mostly played to an audience of expats as 'cinema is much more embedded in their home cultures' (Yunis 2014, 280). As film analyst Alaa Karkouki notes, 'If there is no real market soon for Arab films, even on a small scale, all of this will be a fake industry' (quoted in Yunis 2014, 280). Local film-makers have tried to answer the lack of local audience by reaching out to audiences in other Arab-speaking countries, such Egypt (*From A to B*, A. Mostafa, 2014). Well aware of the imperative necessity to grow a regional audience, Image Nation has partnered with the Dubai International Film Festival on the social media awareness campaign #SupportArabCinema (Vivarelli 2015). The audience issue shows, however, that while building a credible and sustainable film production centre in a few years is possible with adequate political will and funding, creating a vibrant national cinema culture is a long-term challenge that authorities can only indirectly influence.

Whither the 'Greenfields Film and Media Policy Model'?

Abu Dhabi's strategy is in constant evolution. A streamlining process started in 2015, leading to the closing-down of the Abu Dhabi Film Festival in 2015 (*The National* 2015) and the Sanad film fund in 2016 (twofour54 2016b). Abu Dhabi seems set to concentrate on more commercial avenues, focusing on further attracting foreign productions (Fahim 2015) and putting full responsibility for local production support in the hands of Image Nation Abu Dhabi (twofour54 2016b). Promotional and soft power efforts are pursued on the regional rather than local level, as Abu Dhabi proposed to host the 2017 GCC Film Festival (Khalaf 2016). Internationally, Abu Dhabi aims at claiming a key place in the film world as a pivot not only between Hollywood and the Middle East, but also between Western and Asian film industries, as announced with the December 2016 agreement between Image Nation and China's Intercontinental Communication Center (Vivarelli 2016). In the area of film and media, Abu Dhabi's salad days are now over. As its 'greenfields film and media policy model' grows up, it is entering its own trial-and-error period, but the presence of films with a Gulf producer (*Arbitrage*, 2012) and an Emirati film-maker (*From A to B*) at the Abu Dhabi Film Festival, and the shooting of top Hollywood films (*Star Wars: The Force Awakens, Furious 7*) for now stand as clear 'proof of concept' (Abu Dhabi Media Zone Authority Executive 2017).

This 'Greenfields Film and Media Policy Model' model is thus characterised by three elements. In terms of means, it rests on the combination of strong state intervention and intensive international knowledge

transfer. In terms of scope, it is a hands-on, all-encompassing model answering both to the challenge of globalisation (by including the global, regional and local levels) and convergence (by including all media and platforms). Finally, it holds a specific temporal component, with the combined focus on rapidity (in building physical facilities and manpower, as well as symbolic credibility) and sustainability (in emphasising the notion of creative industries and knowledge-based economy, rather than culture for its own sake).

This model is both unique and traditional. While the *ex-nihilo* creation of a film and media industry stands as quite unique, Abu Dhabi's motivations echo similar use of culture around the world, both for economic purposes (attracting investment, creating employment opportunities, driving growth) and ideological ones (promoting a strong national identity, enhancing soft power) (Elsheshtawy 2012, 133; Frodon 2013, par.6; Mingant 2014). Furthermore, the Abu Dhabi case shows the ambiguities of the Greenfields Film and Media Policy Model. By adopting the norms and practices of the Western-born and globally adopted creative industries models and transplanting them in their specific local context, this strategy raises issue of adaptability. Moreover, by importing a largely economic model, Abu Dhabi authorities have also, as a secondary effect, imported the tensions between protection and control and between culture and economy that stand at the heart of any cultural policy. Abu Dhabi's Greenfields Film and Media Policy Model is thus a case study in adoption, adaptation and transferability, and its future evolution promises to yield valuable lessons, not only for neighbouring countries, such as Qatar, Oman and Saudi Arabia (Leotta 2015, 33; Halligan 2016) or for countries with emerging film industries around the world, but also for countries with older film traditions and film policy models facing a perpetual process of reinvention.

Notes

1 For more on film distribution and exhibition in the Gulf countries, see Nolwenn Mingant, "A Peripheral Market? Hollywood Majors in the Middle East/North Africa Market," *The Velvet Light Trap*, Issue 75 (2015), 73–87.

2 The Abu Dhabi Film Festival came under the responsability of twofour54 in 2012 and was permanently cancelled in 2015 (Fahim 2015).

3 As in other schemes around the world, one can notice the absence of exhibition- and distribution-focused policies. While the exhibition and the distribution of international films are booming sectors in the Gulf region, distribution remains an issue for small-budget local films.

4 The film was finally shot in Morocco.

5 UAE censorship has asked for the ban or cutting of films dealing with religion (*Bruce Almighty*, T. Shadyac, 2003), sex (*Black Swan*, D. Aronofsky, 2010) and domestic policy (*Syriana*, S. Gaghan, 2005) (Mingant 2012).

6 At one point, Time Warner also considered involvement in Abu Dhabi (Overpeck 2011; Mingant 2017).

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