

Kuwait Cinema History and Future

A Case Study

Husain A. Murad, PhD*

Husain A. Ebrahim, PhD**

Ali A. Dashti, PhD***

Abstract

The study examined the historical movement of Kuwait cinema from its inception and the challenges of the industry in Kuwait. The researchers used multiple methods, of historical qualitative method, documents, and interviews to answer two research questions. The study found that the cinema industry in Kuwait barely existed due to the lack of government funding and cinema infrastructure basis. Further, the future of Kuwaiti cinema relays upon the youth population through the usage of new digital media technologies such as social media platforms to create an alternative cinematic movement for Kuwait. The conclusion and implication are provided at the end to revive the Kuwaiti cinema.

Keywords: Cinema, Hegemony theory, Kuwait, film industry

Introduction

Cinema is a popular art that attracts human minds. Cinema plays a major role in the development of societies around the world. Some scholars have pointed out that moviegoers have a mortality rate that is four times lower than people who do not attend due to the fact that movies trigger happiness and other emotions in their lives (Konlaan et al., 2000; Wang & Tang, 2021). The motion picture is a powerful disseminator for education, leisure, propaganda, profit, and cultural purposes (Shah, 2011). According to the recent data, Walt Disney Pictures had the highest income for movies they produced compared to all other production companies, with a total income of domestic and worldwide box offices of 56.4 Billion Dollars (Nash

* Kuwait University Assistant Professor

** Kuwait University Assistant Professor

*** Gulf University for Science and Technology Associate Professor

Information Services, 2022). This astonishing number represents only a small fraction of how people are attracted to cinema globally.

The American, Russian, and European cinemas have been in existence for a long time, and many scholarly works have examined these industries' development from inception. For example, Soviet cinema is known for its realist films that promote the new world order of communism. The French are best known for their new wave cinema movement, while the Italians are recognized for their neo-realist films (Abdulazeez, 1982; Bondanella, 2019). Arab cinema has tried to keep up with Western cinema since 1920, but it still lags behind the motion picture industry (Alexan, 1982; Armes, 2015). Egypt is considered the hub of Arab cinema due to the fact that it has produced 8,000 films since the 1930s (Ghawanmeh, 2020; Shafik, 2007). Therefore, it is very important to shed light on Arab cinema in general, and in Kuwait precisely, because of the absence of scholarly work on this cinema as well as the fact that Kuwait is considered one of the pioneers of cinema and television production in the Arab world (Asfour, 2000; Ginsberg & Lippard, 2020). In this paper, the researcher will critically examine the history of cinema in Kuwait from its inception and the trajectory of cinema, as well as discuss the future of film in the country.

Statement of Problem

Cinema is considered a benchmark of modernization and a sign of the nation's cultural identity (Baron, 2018; Hammond, 2005). Cinema has the ability to break all cultural boundaries to introduce an artistic story to the public. However, the film has different meanings and interpretations from one person to another (Purnamasari, 2020). For example, motion picture films can be considered a form of escapism from reality in certain cultures like the Western world (Shafik, 2007). While in other cultures, the film serves as a vehicle of social change, bringing about events such as the Algerian revolution in 1990 (Hammond, 2005).

Countries like Egypt, Tunisia, and Algeria started to produce films in the mid-1920s. The golden age of cinema in Egypt was between 1930 and 1969. It produced various short, silent, and feature-length films (Abdulazeez, 1982; Ghawanmeh, 2020). Its decline began

in the 1970s and continued until the 1990s. Its fall was due to economic and political factors such as the Arab-Israeli War (Najem, 1991). Kuwaiti cinema was, initially, only accessible to society elites and merchants who traveled for trading between Kuwait and India because they were the only people who could afford personal viewing projectors in their homes (Najem, 1991). Kuwait was among the first Arab countries to embrace cinema, with its first film shot in 1946. The first cinema company was established in 1954 (Oruc, 2020). The country produced short films for the founding of the Kuwait Oil Company and educational films, documentaries, and three full-length features (Abdulazeez, 1982).

This study aims to present and analyze the history of Kuwaiti cinema to uncover the events that led to its deterioration. According to Shah (2011), cinema reflects both present and past society. The cinema is a communicative form that can reach certain cultures and different cultures globally (McDowell & Nissen, 2021; Zahra, 2021). Kuwaiti cinema boomed right after the country gained independence from the United Kingdom in 1961 (AlNowiari, 2003). The film was used to educate citizens about different aspects of life and foster diverse voices (Al-Nakib, 2016). The demise of this art form requires a close examination of the critical factors that led to the decline of film production in Kuwait. Therefore, the study is essential to shedding light on the history of Kuwaiti cinema and films to understand the socioeconomic factors that obstructed its prosperity. This study aims to analyze the historical Kuwaiti cinema movement that led to stardom during the 60 and 70. In addition, to present the factors that led to the decline of the current Kuwaiti cinema production to help revive the future of Kuwaiti cinema to move in the right direction of success.

Theoretical Framework

The study uses Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony. Hegemony is the idea that the ruling group can maintain its power over subordinate groups through force, consent, or both (Croteau et al., 2011). The dominant group's force can be illustrated by the use of law enforcement to coerce or create a threat to force the obedience of other groups; dominant groups can also use the power of culture or ideology rather than the threat of physical force (Bates, 1975). An

excellent example of hegemony is the United States' dominance of the motion picture industry, which has led to the spread of American films across the world. Consent is an important element of Gramsci's theory because the dominant group believes that its consent is a won privilege that can be imposed on others through cultural leadership. As a result of the privileged position of the dominant group, the rest of society accepts that view as a universal way of thinking (Croteau et al., 2011). Legitimizing cinema's power over others without contestation allows the dominant group to decide what is best for the subordinate groups and impose its interests over theirs. This theory aligns with the situation in the Arab world because Great Britain and France culturally dominated most countries during colonization. During the Cold War between the United States and Russia, this domination can be seen when each nation used its economic, military, and cultural powers to impose its interests upon subservient countries (Kamalipour, 2007). As a result of these two countries' dominance, the burgeoning superpowers divided the world into two main blocs: the Eastern hemisphere and the Western hemisphere, allies of the United States (Lake, 2006). Nowadays, private American media outlets impose specific ideas to serve their interests (McChesney, 2004). This study employs hegemony theory to analyze the historical trajectory of Kuwaiti cinema.

Historical Background

For the purpose of this study, the literature review will present some historical background on Arab and Kuwait cinematic history. Much of the scholarly literature only presents specific issues and biases toward Kuwait's cinematic history (AlFuraih, 1999). Other scholars saw Kuwaiti cinema as a failed attempt to create a real cinematic movement in the country (AlNowiari, 2003). Some see Kuwaiti cinema as a complement to the larger world of Arab cinema (Shafik, 2007).

Several Arab states started their film industries by producing short films for television immediately after gaining independence. Iraq, Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, Syria, and Lebanon were some of the Arab countries to produce over 500 feature films; Egypt was the only Arab country to produce feature films for cinema rather than television (Alexan, 1982). Many scholars have tried to determine the

first seminal work of Kuwaiti cinema but have failed due to a lack of documentation (AlFuraih, 1999). The first film in Kuwait occurred in 1932. It is credited to Allen Flood, a tourist filming parts of Kuwait's seaport (Abdulazeez, 1982). The full-length documentary shot in Kuwait was of a pearl-diving journey entitled *Sons of Sinbad*. Alan Flippers produced it, an Australian explorer in 1939 with a whole crew of Kuwaiti pearl divers aboard the ship Ali Alnajjdi (AlFuraih, 1999). On a private level, the first film was done by Kuwait Oil Company in 1946. Entitled *Oil in Kuwait*, the film is a documentary about the discovery of oil in the country. This film was followed by *Oil and Kuwait Life* in 1950 (Abdulazeez, 1982).

On an individual level, a Kuwaiti named Mohammad Qabazarb produced the first feature-length film in 1948 called *Kuwait in the Past and Present* (Abdulazeez, 1982). On a governmental level, the Ministry of Education started the first cinema department in 1950. The department produced more than 60 short films that raised public awareness about education, health, marriage traditions, and Kuwaiti art and folklore (Alexan, 1982). The Ministry of Public Affairs and Labor established the second cinema unit. The ministry produced 25 films that encouraged Kuwaitis to embrace art and theater (Abdulazeez, 1982).

By 1961, the Ministry of Information had established its cinema department. Its first release was *Alyaoum Al Mashhood* (The Awaited Day), an hour-long documentary celebrating Kuwait's independence. The cinema boom started with the short film *Alasefa* (The Storm). Released in 1965, it was directed by Mohammad AlSanosi and was recognized at the Karlovy Vary International Film Festival (Najem, 1991). This film was followed in 1972 by Khalid AlSediq's feature-length film *Bas ya Bahar* (The Cruel Sea), which won awards at the Chicago, Venice, and Tehran Film Festivals. *Al Saqer* (The Falcon) was a short film released in 1966, and two other feature films by AlSediq were produced: *Ers Alzain* (Zain's Wedding) in 1979 and *Shaheen* in 1981 (AlFuraih, 1999). The rise in Kuwaiti filmmaking encouraged other directors such as Bader Almudaf, Hashim Mohamad, Abdullah Almuhammad, Abulwahed Alkhalfan, Nadra Alsultan, Amer Alzuhair, and Ibrahim Qabazarb. These directors made 40 films between 1971 and the mid-1980s

(Abdulazeez, 1982). The technological advancement and lower video cost led directors to replace their film cameras with digital ones. Nevertheless, since the mid-80s, cinema and film production vanished from Kuwait with only a few attempts made by some ambitious filmmakers. For example, *Sedera* was a short dramatic film produced in 2001. The film focuses on the life of a girl and her grandfather during the Iraqi invasion of 1990 (AlNowiari, 2003).

This literature review presented the cinematic history of Kuwait. Many scholars believe that the discovery of oil led to the development of Kuwaiti cinema from the late 1960s to the early 1980s (Najem, 1991). The importance of introducing Kuwait as something other than a rich, illiterate country while others pointed out that Kuwaiti people used to be familiar with cinema through their trading travels (AlFuraih, 1999). All the scholars examined the boom of Kuwaiti cinema without studying the decline that began in the early 1980s (Abdulazeez, 1982). Therefore, the study seeks to understand why cinematic film production rarely existed and the future of cinema in Kuwait. These days, there are in movie theatres. Most of the film production, only 12 Kuwaiti films in 2021, were produced individually and aimed for profit-making rather than the cinema art itself (Shafi, 2021).

Research Questions

The study asks two research questions:

RQ1: Did the hegemony of elite power over the cinema in Kuwait effected the deterioration of the Cinema in Kuwait?

RQ2: What are the historical challenges that face Kuwait cinema from prospering?

Methodology:

The paper examined the Kuwaiti cinema historical movement in a critical qualitative method. The research design uses the multiple methods of historical qualitative method, documents, and interviews that improve the quality of understanding of the critical work (Sherrod, 2006). According to Sherrod (2006, p 22), "Historical methods were used to obtain in-depth understanding." Henceforth, as a first phase of the multiple historical methods, this article intensely

investigated the limited literature that studied Kuwaiti cinema. The Kuwaiti cinema is suffering from the paucity of scholarly research. As a result, researchers investigated the broad cinema literature as a second phase of the multiple historical methods to answer the research questions. The third phase of the methodology compared the past Kuwaiti cinematic production to the current cinematic production.

Discussion

There were conflicts in the scholarship about the existence of cinema in Kuwait before or after the oil discovery because the exact date is unknown (AlFuraih, 1999). However, many scholars agreed that Kuwaiti cinema had an excellent start because the country had begun to move away from British protection and needed to formulate a strategic plan to educate people about public policies such as the importance of education and health for good citizenship. In general, the decline of film production began after the mid-1980 when the Ministry of Information started to neglect the needs of cinema by not expanding the cinema department, censoring films, and cutting funding (Murad, 2016). This coincides with Bisschoff's statement that Arab cinema has been inactive for the past 30 years because of many crippling limitations that have not allowed the cinema industry to prosper in the Arab region.

Through the historical background of Kuwaiti filmmaking, a movement was led by certain Kuwaiti directors who studied abroad, such as Khalid Sediq in India, then the US, and Hashim Mohamad in the UK. There were also Qabazard, Alkhalfan, Almudaf, and Alsanousi, all of whom studied in the US (Abdulazeez, 1982). These directors wanted to use their vision to present their image of Kuwait via feature and short films. Hence, most Kuwaiti film directors were encouraged and funded by the Ministry of Information to earn film degrees. This step was taken by the leaders who had a clear desire to enhance film production in Kuwait. This desire was held primarily by the late Amir of Kuwait, His Highness Sheik Sabah Al Ahmad Al Sabah, and the late Sheikh Jaber Al Ali, who were heads of the Ministry of Information. For example, during the establishment of Kuwaiti cinema, directors encountered many challenges, such as the lack of studios to develop film reels, inexperienced crews, high costs, and a lack of awareness of authentic Kuwaiti cinema among the

public. Although they faced these struggles, directors produced films such as *Kuwait Between Yesterday and Today*, *Kuwait on the Path of Development*, *Al Adan Diving*, *Sailors Memoirs*, and *The Wolf* that enriched Kuwaiti culture and created an image of a modern Kuwait (AlFuraih, 1999).

Unfortunately, the Ministry of Information leadership was changed in the mid-1980s because of the Kuwait National Assembly members who interfered with the assignment of ministers in the government. In addition, the cronyism that comes with this kind of assignment to gratify certain political groups rather than considering the leader's job qualifications. According to the recent data from The Transparency Organization, Kuwait is ranked 73rd, scoring 43 in government corruption (Transparency International, 2022). Therefore, the change in leadership created unstable long-term plans to enhance entities contained within the Ministry of Information like television, radio, and cinema, which imposed certain leaders who did not appreciate or understand cinema's role in building societies and Kuwait's image abroad. Another factor that led to the decline of Kuwaiti cinema was the fast technological advancement of camera equipment that led many directors to shift from film to digital cameras. This advancement enabled film directors to concentrate on television productions such as drama series that have gotten Kuwait considerable recognition in the Arab world. Moreover, the fact that higher education institutions have not established cinema departments has also added to the loss of interest in Kuwaiti cinema among the younger generation. This is added to by the saturation of imported US films in Kuwait cinema that changed people's perception toward Hollywood motion picture work rather than authentic Kuwaiti production.

The future of Kuwait's cinema trajectory, most scholars pointed out a lack of primary cinema industry in Kuwait (AlFuraih, 1999). After several years of negligence, the Ministry of Information dismantled its cinema department in 2000. This move represents the confusion of an administration to overthrow a fundamental pillar of Kuwait's history. This act created a burden on film directors to merge into television and radio or pursue their filmmaking passion in countries like the United Arab Emirates, which embraces talented

filmmakers from the entire Arab region. Asfour (2000) stated that most talented directors tend to leave the Middle East for funding, typically found in Europe or the United States.

In addition, the Ministry of Information spent 750 million Kuwaiti Dinars (\$2,250 billion) on television production and invested nothing in cinema (AlFeeli, 2013). Some of the explanations can be connected to hegemony. For example, leadership believed that importing American films was what the public wanted, and they would get more viewers. Another way to look at the spending on television rather than film is that corruption and poor leadership have caused the underrepresentation of cinema. Hence, most of the managers in charge of Kuwait media now do not have any media experience or a degree in mass communication. Another explanation for not investing in Kuwaiti cinema relates to the experience of funding two major Hollywood feature films, *The Message*, and *Omar AlMokhtar*; both were received so poorly that they ended up in the Hollywood Hall of Shame (AlFuraih, 1999). The fear of government and private funding is a continuous problem for cinema in Kuwait.

Kuwaiti Cinema Past, Current, and Future. Cinema production in the past was used for the purpose of nation-building and branding. For example, the internal use for such films was to educate Kuwaiti citizens about the importance of good citizenship and awareness for promoting education, health, and legal matters. While in nation branding, the cinema was an important tool to promote Kuwait as an independent and sovereign country to the whole world. As mentioned above, the past film production presented Kuwait as a new role player in the international oil market (Abdulazeez, 1982). The emergence of Production executives during the 1980s led to the commercialization of cinema production as an opportunity to reduce the cost of film production on the ministry of information. Nevertheless, this move festered a market for nepotism and greediness from the production companies to make a maximum profit rather than good film content and quality.

Over the last decade, the government has broken the monopoly of Kuwait's only licensed cinema company, named Kuwait National Cinema Company (KNCC), which has worked solely since its establishment in 1954 (Oruc, 2020). The Kuwaiti market has five

companies with movie theatres with 91% market share for KNCC, and the rest shares are distributed among Ozone, Sky, Grand, and Vox cinemas (Shafi, 2021). The current problems facing cinema are summed up into the shortage of nightly shows for the movie theatres, lack of government legislation for cinema production, lack of funding, the scarcity of professional cinema writers /directors, and the vanishment of the Kuwaiti cinema union to protect the rights of cinema professionals (Shafi, 2021).

Therefore, the future of Kuwaiti cinema is still vague, and unless the government imposes laws to develop this movement, the cinema industry will only be a dream. As the CEO of KNCC, Hisham Alghanim, asserts, the Kuwaiti cinema needs to adopt a marketing plan and establish a very generous fund to support cinema production in Kuwait. Additionally, the adoption of social media is an important venue for the Kuwaiti cinematic movement to encourage the youth to create an alternative and independent cinema (Salh, 2019). Also, the Mass Communication and Journalism department at Kuwait University, established in 1995, has to step up by establishing a cinema department that can educate future media graduates on the importance of cinema.

Conclusion

In today's fast-moving world, people are exposed to vast quantities of media that shape their perceptions. Nevertheless, the art of cinema is the pathway to introducing different cultures to the rest of the world. Filmmaking in Kuwait cannot be considered an industry. Most of the 60 films between short and 3 full-length feathers were ambitious individual attempts to create the cinema industry in Kuwait. Unfortunately, the challenging environment in Kuwait does not foster creative cinematic work. The lack of private and governmental funding, the lack of a cinema production infrastructure, the huge cost of making films, and the lack of leadership stand in the way of Kuwait creating a cinema that represents the world. Fortunately, Kuwait's Cinema Club, which started in 1976, is still functioning. This club encourages young Kuwaitis passionate about film to attend workshops to keep the art of cinema in existence.

The only hope for Kuwaiti cinema being revived is by the young generation adopting and appreciating the role of cinema in shaping the world. Therefore, this study offers the following implications to foster film and cinema production in Kuwait:

- The government encourages the art of cinema by providing scholarships, building theaters for Kuwait short films only, establishing a Kuwaiti Film Festival, and encouraging funding.
- Institutions must embrace the role of cinema and add it into their future curricula to encourage students to pursue film.

Limitations and Future Study

This study encountered limitations such as time, lack of English literature about cinema in Kuwait—much of the scholarship was in Arabic—and the contradictory information from different scholars regarding specific historical documentation dates. Future work can examine the burgeoning trend among Kuwaiti amateur filmmakers using the new digital technology to help establish a short film industry in Kuwait.

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