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## The Pleasures of Polyglossia in Emirati Cinema: Focus on ‘From A to B’ and ‘Abdullah’

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**ABSTRACT:** Polyglot films highlight the coexistence of multiple languages at the level of dialogue and narration. Even the notoriously monolingual Hollywood film industry has recently seen an increase in polyglot productions. Much of Europe’s polyglot cinema reflects on post-war migration. Hamid Naficy has coined the phrase “accented cinema” to define diasporic filmmaking, a closely related category. The present essay considers polyglot Emirati films as part of an increasingly popular global genre. It argues that the lack of a monolingual mandate is conducive to experiments with language choices, and that the polyglot genre serves best to emphasize efforts made to accommodate the diversity of cultures interacting in urban centers in the United Arab Emirates. Case studies of Ali F. Mostafa’s *From A to B* (2014) and Humaid Alsuwaidi’s *Abdullah* (2015) demonstrate the considerable contributions Emirati filmmakers have already made to a genre, which offers a powerful potential for cinema in the UAE. A comparative analysis identifies the extent to which each of the two films reveals elements inherent in three of the five sub-categories outlined by Chris Wahl.

*Keywords:* Ali Mostafa; Emirati cinema; film analysis; Humaid Alsuwaidi; multilingualism; polyglot cinema

### Introduction

The United Arab Emirates is a comparatively young nation, founded in 1971 as the union of seven emirates in the north of the Arabian Peninsula. Cinemas did not become popular in the UAE until the mid-1990s (Yunis, 2014), and until very recently, they screened exclusively movies made in Hollywood, Bollywood, or Egypt. The establishment of numerous initiatives including The Creative Lab (Two-four54), the production company Image Nation, and international festivals has, however, provided substantial support and encouragement for local filmmakers, and Emirati feature films now screen in cinemas more and more frequently. The 12th edition of the Dubai International Film Festival (DIFF), in December 2015, included an unprecedented number of locally produced feature films. One of these films, Majid Al Ansari’s psycho-thriller *Zinzana* (2015), had already received positive recognition prior to the festival, after its world premiere at Fantastic Fest in Texas. Saeed Salmeen Al Murry’s *Going to Heaven* (2015), winner in the Best Muhr Emirati Feature category at DIFF, had received funding via the IWC Filmmaker Award during

DIFF 2014. While dialogue and narration of both *Zinzana* and *Going to Heaven* are monolingual, the story of Humaid Alsuwaidi's *Abdullah* (2015), a world premiere at DIFF15, lends itself to the polyglot genre. Ali F. Mostafa's *From A to B* (2014), opening film at the last edition of the discontinued Abu Dhabi International Film Festival (ADFF), likewise gains from the parallel use of Arabic and English. With the help of a comparative analysis of the latter two movies, this essay considers polyglot Emirati films as part of an increasingly popular global genre. Given the early stages of an emerging local industry, the identification of the specific benefits provided by this genre further serves to outline the model character of respective movies. The essay argues that the polyglot genre serves best to represent the diversity of cultures interacting in the country's urban centers.

There have been polyglot films throughout the history of filmmaking, but the definition and exploration of the category of these films as genre originates in the past decade. Scholars from the fields of translation studies, linguistics, as well as film studies increasingly rely on Chris Wahl's argument first made in "Discovering a Genre: The Polyglot Film" (2005) and refined in "'Du Deutscher, Toi Français, You English: Beautiful!' – The Polyglot Film as Genre" (2008), that the analysis of polyglot films benefits from the acknowledgment of affinities between them with a specific focus on the functions of verbal language. The present essay aims to situate selected Emirati films within this genre carefully mapped by Wahl. Identifications with three of the five sub-categories developed by Wahl support the argument that an emerging industry such as the one in the United Arab Emirates is conducive to experiments with language choices, in particular for the representation of cosmopolitan urban spaces. It will become clear that both films discussed share characteristics from what Wahl defines as "colonial," "existential," and "globalization" sub-categories of polyglot cinema.

"Polyglot films are marked by the naturalistic presence of two or more languages at the level of dialogue and narrative," Tessa Dwyer writes in "Universally Speaking: *Lost in Translation* and Polyglot Cinema" (Dwyer, 2005). Dwyer's focus on Sophia Coppola's 2004 film serves to illustrate an increasing popularity of polyglot films even in the notoriously monolingual Hollywood industry. References to studies in world cinema, in particular examples of European films, as well as background in translation studies, inform Dwyer's conclusion that polyglot film challenges the idea of film language's universality. While this conclusion is problematic as it conflates verbal language with visual (film) language, Dwyer's analysis is helpful to draw attention to the status of polyglot film in Hollywood. Most of the genre's scholarship has revolved around European films. The analyses of *From A to B* and *Abdullah* thus add to the recognition of the genre's importance for World Cinema. They shed light on the idea of the local within the global, or the collaboration between the two within a comparatively young nation.

The use of multilingual dialogue in *Lost in Translation* arises because the story's main characters are away from places they would call "home," whereas the Emirati protagonist in *Abdullah* never leaves his home country. The three protagonists in *From A to B* are bilingual expatriate residents whose complicated sense of "belonging" may function as analogy to the complexities of ongoing debates about national identity in general, and about national cinema by implication. The Emirati filmmaking movement benefits from the country's multilingual environment. While Arabic is the official language, English is the lingua franca that facilitates communications between the numerous diverse communities. In the absence of a monolingual mandate such as the one governing the Hollywood cinema, polyglot productions

best serve to reflect the given co-existence of many different languages, along with continuous mediation between them.

### Emirati Cinema and the Polyglot Genre

Film history on the Arabian Peninsula is still very young, especially when measured in the context of international distribution. Even a recent study of regional cinema such as *New Voices in Arab Cinema* (2015) by Roy Armes devotes only the last four of more than three hundred pages to filmmakers from “The Gulf” (Armes, 2015, pp. 301-4), and the only two case studies provided are of Yemeni Bader Ben Hirsi and Saudi Haifaa Al Mansour. Although credits for the first Emirati feature film go to *The Wayfarer* (1989), the release date of the first more widely accessible film, Ali F. Mostafa’s *City of Life*, is 2010.

*City of Life*, incidentally, is an excellent example of a polyglot film, as it uses parallel editing to tell the stories of three protagonists with different cultural backgrounds. While the young Emirati Faisal speaks the local Arabic with his friends and father, the Indian taxi driver Basu speaks Hindi with his compatriots and English with customers. The only female main character, the Eastern European flight attendant Natalia, always speaks English, but her accent and the identification of her origin early in the movie, suggest that she grew up speaking Romanian. The movie screened in cinemas with English and Arabic subtitles. Manfred Malzahn’s geocritical analysis of the film in “Mapping the United Arab Emirates” (2014) identifies the anonymous cyclist, whose appearance provides a frame for the narrative, as indicative of the fact that diversity in its most general sense reaches well beyond the three protagonists in Dubai’s urban setting (Malzahn, 2014, p. 261). The paths of these characters, including the cyclist, cross ever so often, though none is aware of the other’s existence until they find themselves involved in the same traffic accident. The only person killed is Faisal’s best friend. Faisal himself, Natalia, and Basu survive to struggle with their new perspectives as contributions to a more or less happy end.

Mostafa’s own Emirati-British identity may be the origin of his fascination with polyglot scenarios. His graduation short film “Under the Sun” (2005), also set in Dubai, already introduces this leitmotif in the main character Mohamed, who speaks English with his British mother and Arabic with his Emirati father. Mostafa’s more recent short film “Don’t Judge the Subject by Its Photograph” (2014) presents characters from different parts of the Arab world in charge of a gallery in Dubai. The curators speak English with foreign artists and visitors, but Arabic among themselves as well as with the young Emirati photographer, whose first exhibition finally satisfies the most hostile critic of the gallery. *From A to B*, which I discuss in detail in the following section of this essay, is the first film by Mostafa whose setting is not Dubai. The point of departure of this road movie is Abu Dhabi, and its three protagonists are all bilingual Arab expats.

The current moment in global film history may be particularly opportune for the use of multiple languages on screen. Even the still dominant Hollywood industry, accused to “incarnate a linguistic hubris bred of empire” (Shohat/Stam, 1985, p. 36) and of being “the china shop of monolingualism” (Gramling, 2010, p. 353) has recently seen an increase in polyglot films. Prominent examples include the previously mentioned *Lost in Translation* (2004), but also *Babel* (2006) and *The Revenant* (2015). These films provide contrast to the majority of movies discussed by Lukas Bleichenbacher in *Multilingualism in the Movies: Hollywood Characters and*

their Language Choices (2008). An extensive list of films released between 1984 and 2003 in Bleichenbacher's study illustrates how Hollywood movies rely on foreign languages merely to construct or reinforce stereotypes and prejudices. Such films do not belong to the polyglot genre, as their goal is not a naturalistic representation of characters, an interest in, as Wahl puts it, "verbal and cultural realism" (Wahl, 2008, p. 335). "A polyglot film [...]," so Wahl's definition, "respects the cultural 'aura' and the individual voices of the actors, delivers on a verbal level a naturalistic depiction of the characters, but often has an articulately disillusioning effect because of the use of subtitles" (Wahl, 2008, p. 338). *From A to B* and *Abdullah* both match this definition, though while the former used subtitles in two languages in the cinema, the latter relied on part subtitling in English only.

It may well be that film scholarship following Ella Shohat and Robert Stam's criticism (Shohat/Stam 1985) has made room for the popularity of, for example, Alejandro González Iñárritu's work. Although Dwyer is reluctant to share the optimism (Dwyer, 2005), Wahl confirms "a slow shift in the language policy of American producers" during the past two-to-three decades (Wahl, 2008, p. 350). Likewise, in "Multilingualism at the Multiplex," Carol O'Sullivan applauds the recent increase in "multilingual commitment" (O'Sullivan, 2007, p. 84) among filmmakers in the United States. The abstract of her essay highlights the biggest challenge for a continued flourishing of the polyglot genre. "[T]he growing visibility of translation within mainstream cinema has the potential," so O'Sullivan, "to create space for certain forms of resistance to the dominance of English in the entertainment market, and promote the development of a 'multilingual imagination' in multiplex cinema-goers" (O'Sullivan, 2007, p. 81; emphasis added). It is foreseeable that, unless audiences adjust to the requirements of multilingual storytelling on screen, there will be a reversal to more monolingual production. In this context, polyglossia relates directly to multiculturalism, and the embracing of polyglot cinema implies an advocacy of transculturation. Polyglot films will naturally find more favor among viewers who are familiar with and interested in different languages. Much of the reception depends on the art of subtitling and under certain circumstances unfortunately dubbing. *From A to B*, incidentally, already suffered a release in Italian, which erases the subtleties of its polyglot character discussed in the following section of this essay. Anyone who became aware of this film at an Italian cinema, however, still has the option to explore the original with all its linguistic intricacies.

As implied in the introductory paragraph, among the still easily assessable number of Emirati feature films produced to date, there are at least as many monolingual as there are polyglot movies. *Sea Shadow* (2011) is another important example from the former group. This film is almost exclusively set in a smaller community in Ras Al Khaimah, and although the younger characters are most likely familiar with languages other than Arabic, there is no occasion in the plot on which this would become obvious. The following detailed analyses of *From A to B* and *Abdullah* illustrate that the major reasons for polyglot dialogue and narration relate to the presence of expats or tourists whose first language is not Arabic, to opportunities within the education system, or to technological expertise and mass media. These factors prompt the use of English in the Arab World as they do almost anywhere else. All listed circumstances, however, are more prominent in urban, cosmopolitan locations.

In both films under scrutiny in this essay, Abu Dhabi provides this kind of location. In *From A to B*, the capital is the point of departure for a road trip to Beirut, and in *Abdullah*, it is the protagonist's refuge in pursuit of his dream to become

a composer. Abdullah grows up in a provincial, conservative home marked by the exclusive use of the local Arabic, except for the contact with an East Asian driver. Abdullah's command of English, with fellow musicians and with his British neighbors in Abu Dhabi for example, nevertheless testifies to a considerable exposure during his childhood. Both films provide opportunities for culturally diverse characters to claim their presence within their cosmopolitan setting. In their introduction to *Polyglot Cinema: Migration and Transcultural Narration in France, Italy, Portugal and Spain*, Verena Berger and Miya Komori write that "... the central tenet of polyglot cinema is the representation of language diversity as its protagonists experience it" (Berger/Komori, 2010, p. 9). Based on this tenet, it is my opinion that the polyglot genre offers a powerful potential for Emirati cinema. The films discussed in the following sections testify that filmmakers from the UAE have already contributed considerably to the genre that offers unique ways in which to reflect on the various reasons for the use of and code switching between different languages.

### ***From A to B (2014) by Ali F. Mostafa: Bilingual or polyglot?***

Ali Mostafa's second feature film is a road movie of mostly comical character, though not without a sobering sequence in war-torn Syria. Stops in Saudi Arabia and Jordan precede this sequence on the journey from Abu Dhabi, A, to Beirut, B. The three bilingual protagonists are Arab expatriate residents who attended the same high school, the American Community School of Abu Dhabi. Omar, a P. E. teacher and the initiator of the trip, carries a Syrian diplomatic passport because of his father's profession. The Egyptian Rami, who still lives with his mother, is the most politically engaged of the three. DJ Jay's father is Saudi, and his mother is Irish. The story setting is December 2011, and a prelude identifies a fourth friend's death in 2006 as the road trip's pretext. This friend, Lebanese basketball star Hady, had suggested a similar trip, which was never realized because of his premature death in Beirut during the 2006 Lebanon War. Omar and Hady had been in love with the same woman, Arwa, and Hady had hoped for a reconciliation during the projected trip. Arwa is now Omar's wife and approaching the delivery of their first child. The prospect of fatherhood instills in Omar the sudden wish to make amends for missing Hady's funeral.

Newspaper reports about Hady's athletic achievements during the opening scenes set the stage for a polyglot environment. Arabic papers appear alongside English ones. Rami, during his introduction, is recording a video blog in English and switches to Arabic when his mother interrupts him. Yousef, alias Jay, first appears speaking Arabic on the phone with his father. The English in this scene comes from the young woman who is waking up on Jay's couch as he ends the phone conversation. Omar, who is silent during his first appearance, approaches Rami in front of the latter's house in Arabic. The sentence spoken in English during their re-union establishes their upper-middle class, Americanized identities: "It's good to see you, bro." Such a sentence might even serve to create a connotation of Hollywood movies they may have watched together. When all three re-unite for the first time, on the pier close to the Abu Dhabi Theater, apparently their old hangout, similar stock sentences color the predominantly Arabic conversation. "You're gonna do the road trip?" Rami asks after Omar explains his reason for looking them up after five years of silence. Omar echoes their dead friend's wisdom: "It's not the destination. It's the time we spend together on the road." Jay emphasizes, "We've always been around, bro," in reply to Omar's confession, that he had been missing their friendship after

the fallout with Hady. Spoken with very little accent, these sentences mark the speakers as bilingual. They remind of their common education at a private school with English instruction. They further serve as “device for marking, authenticating and ornamenting a milieu as ‘immigrant space’,” (Gramling, 2010, p. 361) to quote from David Gramling’s study “On the Other Side of Monolingualism: Fatih Akin’s Linguistic Turn(s)” (2010). In this study, Gramling provides a thorough account of polyglot developments throughout the German-Turkish filmmaker’s prolific career.

In contrast to Mostafa’s characters, the people populating Akin’s movies are often from the lower end of the class spectrum. Many of them are the descendants of so-called ‘guest workers’ and use their various heritage languages, including Turkish and Greek, only in the context of family interaction. With regard to Akin’s first movie *Kurz und Schmerzlos* (1998), Gramling speaks of “pan-ethnic monolingualism” (Gramling, 2010, p. 358) because of the small amount of multilingual dialogue, that serves mainly a “mythic” function. Akin’s second film *Im Juli* (2000), however, reaches far beyond such limited use of different languages. A road movie, like *From A to B*, *Im Juli* propels its characters at times into unintelligible encounters. Akin’s Daniel understands neither Luna’s Serbian nor the immigration official’s Turkish. There is only one occasion, on which Mostafa’s Omar and Rami cannot comprehend someone’s speech, and the reason in this scene is an accent or variation rather than a foreign language. Jay turns into the mediator between them and the Pakistani car mechanic asked to repair their windshield in a remote region of Saudi Arabia. Omar, Rami and Jay never journey through a country whose official language is not Arabic. An intensified display of their impeccable English is the result of encounters with other tourists.

Jay’s interest in two female tourists he mistakes for US citizens, and who identify themselves as Israelis later, during a visit to Petra, leads to the most extended conversations in English. Yousef (aka Jay) the womanizer spots the two women at a gas station in Jordan, and deflates one of their car’s tires to delay their departure. Rami, the most Anglophile among the three, probably because of his political activism, expresses exasperation with the friend’s chauvinism: “Of all the times I’ve seen you try to pick up chicks, this is by far the worst!” Since at least one of the young women is as eager to get away as Jay is to delay her and her friend’s escape, a chase becomes necessary. During this pursuit, the women misunderstand Jay’s warning about their “flat tire” as “fat liar,” and they are eventually lucky not to end up injured when the tire bursts. Like the three men, the two women are also well educated. They explain their native fluency in English with their studies in the United States. On the level of production, the casting would have rendered the representation of an Israeli accent very difficult. The women’s immersion in Anglophone culture extends far enough for one of them to recite John William Burgon’s poem “Petra” by heart during a rare romantic moment.

One may ask, at this point, whether the term “bilingual” would be more suitable than “polyglot” to categorize *From A to B*, since the alternation is strictly between Arabic and English. The preference of the latter term relates to the use of English as a lingua franca. The Israeli tourists presumably also speak Hebrew, even though the casting did not make any efforts to support this presumption. The comic element during the surprising revelation of their nationality, of course, requires that the two women speak American English without accent. In the United States, they could be what linguists refer to as “passing.” The car mechanic’s Arabic, on the other hand, is unintelligible for at least Omar and Rami, because of the fact that the former’s first language is probably Urdu. Omar, Rami and Jay also never speak

Emirati Arabic. Sometimes, their Arabic communication identifies their origins, or at least their parents' origins in other parts of the Arab World.

Other characters, such as a yoga teacher in Abu Dhabi, for example, speak English when they are not communicating with anyone capable to understand their respective first languages. Dwyer may exaggerate a little when she writes that, "primarily through the vehicle of cinema itself, English has become the lingua franca of the globalized world" (Dwyer, 2005, p. 300). Other factors, such as international trade and the impact of computer technology should not be underestimated, but the media in general certainly feature on the forefront of this development. Considering, then, that many languages other than Arabic and English are present in *From A to B*, even if they are not part of the film dialogue, I argue that "polyglot" is a suitable term for this film, as it is for *Abdullah*. The following section of this essay will identify affinities of both films with three of the five sub-categories outlined by Wahl.

### ***Abdullah* (2015) by Humaid Alsuwaidi, and the Five Sub-categories of Polyglot Film**

Humaid Alsuwaidi's first feature film contrasts not only with regard to the protagonist's nationality, but also in genre, plot design, and linguistic motivations with *From A to B*. *Abdullah* is titled after its Emirati protagonist who is as fluent in English as the three friends in *From A to B*, but the origin of this fluency is much less obvious than it is in Mostafa's film. An ever so slight accent marks Abdullah as native speaker of Arabic. While Arabic is the official language in the UAE, English has the status of the lingua franca, as suggested in the previous section of this essay. English serves as common tool for communication between sophisticated citizens, expatriate residents from almost everywhere in the world, and the many tourists. It is, however, much more widespread in the urban centers and may not occur at all in remote villages and farms. Since Abdullah hails from a conservative background, in which modernization is not welcome, his command of English is not as self-explanatory as Omar's, Rami's, or Jay's, and it occurs as a first sign of autodidactic determination.

The opening scene during which an attentive young boy, glued to the living room floor, watches a Japanese anime, while his older brother attempts to distract him, establishes two crucial traits of the protagonist. He shows remarkable concentration skills as well as hints of a strong goal orientation, underlined by the subtitle of the only sentence uttered on the small screen, "What makes you think you will make it?" The father's arrival reveals that the brothers have watched the VHS tape previously. When the older brother Hamad reports that there is a kissing scene in the end, the father promptly confiscates the tape. This is the first in a series of rigid displays of authority at odds with Abdullah's curiosity. The tiny toy piano a neighbor gives him when she witnesses his fascination with the instrument, suffers a similar fate as the VHS tape. Such early refusal of support for Abdullah's interests marks the end of the prelude, and the film begins when the teenage protagonist returns home with an oud, the string instrument popular in Middle Eastern music. Physical pain the father seems to consider an acceptable education method eventually accompanies the destruction of this instrument.

The extent to which his family refuses to foster Abdullah's artistic talent is obvious during a point-of-view shot that places him as outcast opposite the other three at the dinner table. A jump cut transitions between this alienation felt at home to eager excitement over an apartment of his own in the center of Abu Dhabi. The



first piece of furniture to appear in this apartment is a proper piano. During work on film productions, Abdullah learns that the composer of the Emirati national anthem is the Egyptian Mohammed Abdel Wahab. His obsession with the idea to compose a new, indigenous score becomes a symbol for the struggle with his personal identity as professional musician. While his parents try to prohibit his interest in music, his friend Fatma, who works as film editor, turns into his most substantial support. The British neighbors in Abdullah's apartment building provide another source of encouragement. This British family, however, also represents the Anglophone influence that originates in the establishment of a British protectorate, following Portuguese control in the 16th and 17th centuries. This history accounts for identification with Wahl's "colonial" sub-category within the polyglot genre. I return to this sub-category after discussing the irrelevance of "migration" and "fraternization" classifications, as well as the insights arising from characteristics offered by the "existential" and "globalization" classifications for the comparative analysis at hand.

Neither *From A to B* nor *Abdullah* fit neatly into one of the five sub-categories of polyglot cinema outlined by Wahl. Instead, they both associate to a lesser or greater degree with three of them. One category to disregard is the "migration" film, which Wahl sees to "emphasize the process of adaptation or integration whether successful or not, to a foreign society and language" (Wahl, 2008, p. 340). Although Mostafa's protagonists are expatriates, they are at least second-generation residents and did not have to learn a foreign language. The other ruled out category is the "fraternization" film, whose background is always war (Wahl, 2008, p. 345). The wars referred to in Mostafa's film do not take place where the protagonists are based, nor do any of the three participate in them directly. The remaining three categories, in contrast, all offer characteristics present in both *From A to B* and *Abdullah*. The preceding analyses revealed some of these characteristics already. The following paragraphs identify their relevance for Wahl's sub-categories. The classifications, in turn, assist in comprehending the different motives behind linguistic choices in the two films respectively. It will become clear that *From A to B* is leaning more towards the "globalization" film, while *Abdullah* includes more elements typical for the "existential" film. Both, however, also share certain affinities with the "colonial" film, which are useful to consider.

"Existential films," Wahl explains, "always tell the story of the search for someone's personal identity, and they always visualize this search by means of journey" (Wahl, 2008, p. 343). The former element is clearly, what motivates Abdullah's struggles with family members, employers, and even his own doubtful self. The closing Arabic sentence, translated into "I am a composer," therefore provides as happy an end as Abdullah's story could possibly afford. His physical journey, from a provincial or suburban home to the urban center of Abu Dhabi, is of course considerably shorter than that of the three heroes in Mostafa's road movie. The two factors, self-discovery and physical journey, almost pursue oppositional proportions in the comparison between the two films. While Abdullah in the end returns home much matured, Rami or Jay never intend such transformations during their long journey, and the closing scene presents their New Year's celebration in Beirut, rather than their actual return to Abu Dhabi. Brief title cards reveal their fates and achievements in the beginning year 2012.

Omar, who arguably feels more prepared for fatherhood after his visit to Hady's grave, welcomes the birth of his and Arwa's daughter, Hadya, shortly after the end of the trip, according to one of these title cards. Rami's vlog (video blog) about the horror they witnessed in Syria affords him new opportunities in journal-

ism. Jay embarks on an international DJ tour, and the fact that he reverts his name back to Yousef deserves more attention in the context of the “colonial,” or rather “imperial” film sub-category. Although these projected changes in the lives of Mostafa’s three heroes are remarkable for each of them, their announcements occur after the film ends, and viewers also distribute their attention between three different characters, while it rests exclusively on a single protagonist’s fate in Alsuwaidi’s film. Abdullah’s transformation accordingly appears as more significant, given that his personal struggle serves as the plot’s center of a film titled after its protagonist. Abdullah travels less far, in other words, but his development from the misunderstood younger son, whose resemblances with the authoritarian father engender a vexing love-hate ambiguity, to the self-confident composer of the closing scene is the more pronounced. In this context, it is worth mentioning that the young musician gathers the necessary inspiration to complete his first major composition, never performed in the movie, after the death of his father.

What is more, Alsuwaidi’s film includes the third element Wahl identifies as common in existential polyglot films, which is self-reflexivity. Abdullah spends considerable time negotiating his music in a film studio, and Fatma’s friendship maintains this contact to film production after he moves on to what he considers a worthier challenge. The conceited female director present during the studio scenes contrasts with the local filmmaker Sultan, whose work Fatma holds in high esteem. During the closing scene, Fatma and Abdullah accidentally encounter Sultan and his friend Jamal, an Emirati screenwriter. Their introduction, finally, leads Abdullah to clarify for himself as well as for them his identification as composer. The otherwise open end leaves hope for future collaborations between these complementary indigenous talents.

As suggested, neither Mostafa’s nor Alsuwaidi’s film falls squarely into just one of Wahl’s sub-categories. Besides the existential polyglot film, the “globalization” film also includes characteristics prominent in both movies. Wahl defines the globalization film through “its symbolic values of simultaneity and exchange” (Wahl, 2008, p. 344), alluding to the idea of the world as “global village,” and the interplay between local and global. Ironically, it is the conservative father in Abdullah, who capitalizes on the benefits of global networks during the arrangement of the older brother Hamad’s marriage. Hamad has plans to continue his studies of medicine in Great Britain, and the future father-in-law worries about his daughter’s implied relocation. Abdullah’s father explains how modern technology has facilitated their communication during Hamad’s stay in the United States, as well as how the latter had been able to visit frequently, because transportation has become less complicated. Abdullah’s parents never speak a foreign language, and they may not be able to, but the status of English further emphasizes the global village sentiment, since English is not merely a lingua franca in the United Arab Emirates, but undoubtedly the language of globalization worldwide.

*From A to B* pays a much more obvious tribute to the notion of globalization. Electronic devices are crucial to facilitate the planning of the trip. Social media and communication networks play a visible role throughout, and Rami’s vlog about his political activism almost takes the significance of a sub-plot. The young Egyptian constantly keeps track of the number of followers on his twitter account. According to the title card devoted to his future, it amounts to an impressive 17.178 in the end, because of his commentaries on the war in Syria. Omar is the son of a diplomat, whose work in the Foreign Service naturally relates to his country’s interactions across the globe. Yousef, as the son of a Saudi as well as an Irish citizen, combines

the heritage of diverse cultures on a personal level. References to previous trips within the region as well as outside the Arab World further underline the cosmopolitan identities of the three alike. Such cosmopolitan experience is responsible for their casual use of the kind of English often reminiscent of North-American media. During conversations among the three friends in *From A to B*, English has an ornamental character that emphasizes cosmopolitan privilege. Abdullah's use of English, in contrast, is always pragmatic and often facilitates local mediation.

While *Abdullah*, then, has more affinity with the existential polyglot film, and *From A to B* favors association with the globalization category, both also include traces of the "colonial" (Wahl, 2008, p. 346) polyglot film. This final subcategory is most prominent in post-colonial contexts, in Caribbean cinema for example. The UAE has never been a colony, and "imperial" may therefore be preferable to "colonial" to describe this classification. In fact, the creation of the United Arab Emirates in 1971 occurred at a time when the last British colonies gained independence. I would argue, however, that the status as British protectorate, the preceding influence of other Europeans, as well as US-American neo-imperialism, still engendered post-colonial conditions in particular in the context of cultural identity. The tension arising from these conditions surfaces in Alsuwaidi's film, for example, when Abdullah realizes that the UAE Symphonic Orchestra does not include a single Emirati musician. In Mostafa's film, it provides comic relief during a scene at the Saudi-Emirati border. When the Saudi border official finds a Manchester City shirt in Jay's suitcase, he reprimands him to support local football teams instead. The fact that Manchester City is currently under Emirati sponsorship, adds irony to this exchange. Ultimately, the very use of English emphasizes an omnipresence of the foreign, in particular via stock phrases such as "you're gonna do the road trip," "we've always been around, bro" or a reference to "pre-mature mid-life crisis." Language always functions as mirror of socio-political conditions. Much scholarship reflects on the naming of places such as New York or New Orleans, as result of colonization (Greenblatt 1976). A famous example of post-colonial reactions to the colonizer's imposition is the succession of Walcott Square for Columbus Square in Castries, St. Lucia. The fact that Jay reverts to Yousef at the end of *From A to B* clearly symbolizes an anti-imperialist embrace of his Arab heritage.

The use of multiple languages in film, likewise, illustrates the balancing between various cultural contexts within a cosmopolitan setting. The polyglot genre, I argue, offers unique opportunities to represent the dynamics in predominantly urban settings. The main challenge for producers of these kinds of films rests in the effective combination between audio, visual, and verbal signifiers. In "Vector, flow, zone: Towards a history of cinematic translatio," Nataša Ďurovičová succinctly comments on the interplay between image and dialogue in film:

It is in the alignment and realignment of the vectorized, deictic, triangulated lines of both projected photograph and language – secured by pointing back to a place of origin in a recognizable world, as well as forward to a point of focus and comprehension – that we can begin to search for the transnational space cinema has opened up (Ďurovičová, 2010, p. 92).

When the respective alignment is successful, the resulting film documents existing socio-historical condition, and invites considerations of their implications at the same time. Such success depends on careful mediation between creation and reception, parallel to similar mediation between the various narrative languages. In "Subtitling and the Relevance of Non-Verbal Information in Polyglot Films" (2011), Elena Sanz Ortega draws attention to the difficulties in time calculation for viewers

to process non-verbal information along with dialogue and subtitles (Sanz Ortega, 2011, p. 32). Mostafa's as well as Alsuwaidi's film meets this challenge at hand, though the fact that one of the languages involved is English certainly works to their advantage in this context. It is nowadays safe to assume that a large number of viewers has sufficient command of what has become a global language. To place this global language alongside or in the background of individual local languages, ultimately highlights the significance of the local before the global.

Conclusion: Cosmopolitan privilege and local mediation

While the three protagonists in *From A to B* are Arab expatriate residents who happen to have spent their formative years in Abu Dhabi, the main character in *Abdullah* is the holder of an Emirati passport who moves to the capital's urban center in pursuit of a career as composer. While Omar's, Rami's, and Jay's use of English occurs casually and without detectable accent, Abdullah speaks English with a very slight Arabic accent to come to terms with his artistic talent, as well as to mediate between his own and the British neighbor's cultural background. While the use of English in *From A to B* sometimes appears ornamental, it is always pragmatic in *Abdullah*. Both movies exhibit characteristics typical for three of the sub-categories defined by Wahl. Emphases of the interplay between the local and the global place *From A to B* closer to the "globalization" category. Abdullah's struggle with his identity as musician, as well as self-reflexive scenes involving film production, categorize Abdullah more easily as "existential" film. Allusions to anti-imperialist resistance in the context of cultural identity justify the classification of "imperialist," rather than "colonial," polyglot film for Mostafa's and Alsuwaidi's movie alike.

As the identification of both films with Wahl's sub-categories calls to mind, language relates to group identity as much as it is expressive of the symbolic kind of power Pierre Bourdieu has prominently elaborated on in "L'économie des échanges linguistiques" (Bourdieu, 1977). People use different registers depending on their audience. They aim to master the more valued variation of a first language if, for example, a career path so requires. They further study and use a foreign language for similar reasons. Abdullah benefits from his command of English mostly during conversations with an employer or, more generally, with people who can assist with his goal to become a composer. As such, the bilingual capability appears as privilege. In turn, it allows for mediation, ultimately for the representation of indigenous culture towards foreigners, such as the British neighbors in Abdullah's building in Abu Dhabi. Rami's vlogs serve a similar purpose on a more political level, while Yousef's projected international tour as DJ compares well to Abdullah's ambitions, though their preferences for musical styles are presumably different.

On the level of production, the development of polyglot characters leads to the localization of respective stories. As Naficy puts it, "polyphony and heteroglossia both localize and locate the films as texts of cultural and temporal difference" (Naficy, 2001, p. 25). Polyphony and heteroglossia, concepts most prominently developed throughout Bakhtinian thought (Bakhtin 1981), are inherent in polyglot cinema. Neither Mostafa nor Alsuwaidi, however, are the kind of "accented filmmakers" Naficy describes in his study of exilic and diasporic cinema. In both *From A to B* and *Abdullah*, the place of narration is identical with the place of production, which is at the same time, at least to some extent, both filmmakers' place of origin. Both films thus are excellent contributions to the polyglot genre, an increasingly popular form of realist cinema. Both prove that, as Gramling's writes, "polyglot film occupies a uniquely fruitful and yet vulnerable position in the global market's push for translatability and universal semiotic access to cultural products" (Gramling,

2010, p. 371). The present essay argues that essentially multilingual, transcultural environments such as the United Arab Emirates are particularly conducive to polyglot productions, and that the complexities in their cosmopolitan urban centers simultaneously gain from this genre's potential.

While the concept of globalization pretends to reveal homogenizing forces around the globe, however trade-oriented or even -exclusive they may actually be, polyglot cinema foregrounds the hybrid and transcultural realities of individual places. It has the potential to give voice to diverse characters, highlight their interaction in a given multilingual space, and represent such transculturation authentically. The two case studies provided in the present essay demonstrate the unique opportunities inherent in the genre of polyglot film for the Emirati filmmaking movement. *From A to B* and *Abdullah* further illustrate the rich material urban settings in the United Arab Emirates offer for this fascinating as well as challenging genre.

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