Dubai and other Emirati cities are examples of the ‘high modernist cities’, catalysed by a petro dollar economy since the 1950s, and distinguished by the fact that their growth was not organic, but planned entirely by architects. In their post-liberalisation drive towards becoming global cities, the urban culture has indeed produced petro-modernist cities par excellence. Dubai has in particular emerged as a spectacular media city, with its incorporation of everyday media technologies and embedded media practices in its infrastructure. This allows us to move towards a larger experience of media as a specific experience of modern social life that emerges through a complex process of co-construction between architectural structures and urban territories. Media technologies form a significant part of the Gulf city’s urban infrastructure, shaping its everyday life, popular perceptions of space, environment and representations of the city. The Gulf cities are inseparable from their information superhighways, display boards, art exhibitions, huge installations in public spaces, spectacles of city tours, the architectural wonders of Burj Khalifa, opera and jazz clubs, Bollywood Tours and Filipino concerts.

The UAE’s ‘Free media zones’ compete with other major media capitals of the contemporary world. The UAE government offers subsidized facilities, tax incentives, and labour concessions to such zones that are designed to nurture local capital and lure producers away from other locales, such as Hollywood. With a host of ancillary services, production facilities, broadcast facilities, and changes in policy discourse on creative economies, there is much competition among such cities in their aspirations to become media capitals. In her insightful work on special economic zones of production as architectural units of extra statecraft, Keller Easterling traces the genealogy of the zones as temporary sub-legal economic instruments that absorbed domestic economies into the enclave and spread across the world in the 1970s. The 1970s zone germinated into a new form in the Middle East, particularly Dubai; new campuses developed over the decade, such as Dubai Knowledge City, Dubai Health City, Dubai Media City, and Dubai International Finance Centre. The zones merge both industrial and knowledge economies, allowing for a smooth movement of transnational finance capital and a reservoir of spatial projects that migrate around the world, a model that is now central to the global urban imagination. It is evident that the state has moved from the ‘welfare state’ model to the commodification of the city, in which ‘urban space’ has become a commodity and is thus systematically exploited for the private purposes of profitmaking. The organisation of a city space such as the ‘MedCity’ takes this logic one step further. This represents the ultimate vision of the financialisation of the city, a process by which the city itself is specifically and systematically engineered and designed by finance with the sole and explicit aim of generating profits.

Unorganised production by migrants

Yet, are these cities to be read only as terminator cities? While these are clearly economies that emerge in the context of a globalised political economy of media production, it is incumbent upon us to not lose sight of the relationship between these loci and the deep histories of migration. It is significant to explore the networks that are built in contemporary processes of border crossings, global division of labour, cultural and economic exchange in late capitalism. The intercultural and unorganised production by migrants stands almost as an antithesis to the organised ‘media city’. I argue that the crucial link between this amateur representation economy and the other end of this spectrum, the emergence of informal labour in special free zones of media production like the ‘Dubai Media City’, is the precariat that exists in both.

Most of the migrant media productions – music videos, vlogs, short narrative films and documentaries – are embedded in cyber aesthetics. These productions cast the migrant life outside the dominant paradigm of utilitarian economics, addressing migrants as complex social beings and inhabitants of an emotional landscape of migration. The ‘Gulf city’ emerges as the site of both utopian and dystopian imaginations. On one end of the spectrum is Dubai’s multilingual multi-audience vlog community, in which active participants narrate migrant experiences and act as self-help guides to leading a migrant life in Dubai. They offer advice about job searches, travel, shopping, lifestyle, fitness, cooking, investments and religious rituals. A widely accepted definition of self-help encompasses ‘legally permissible conduct that individuals undertake absent the compulsion of law and without the assistance of a government official in efforts to prevent or remedy a legal wrong’. The scope of self-help consists in behaviour that is both freely undertaken, without the assistance of the state, and in order to prevent or cure a violations.

How do we make sense of such voluntary acts and their visual registers? How does one tie what these videos put forth to a broader cultural circuit in Dubai? Legally, most of the countries in the Gulf Council region have a hierarchical structure, with citizenship limited to ‘native’ Arabs, thus making the legal and cultural lives of immigrants and Arab Communities mutually exclusive domains. The exploitative guest worker system and racialized economic hierarchy in which, for example, Indians and Africans are placed ‘below’ all others is shown to contribute to this profound experience of alienation for the immigrant in the Gulf. The kafala system coalesces resident permits with specific employment contracts, which require a national resident or company to act as sponsor. The system thus keeps the guest worker an economic dependant, or in some cases an outright non-citizen. In the absence of any form of legal citizenship, anthropologists argue that the Emirati states offer a substitute form of consumer citizenship to its residents.

Recognition of the absence of legal citizenship frames the moral compulsion of self-help videos. Cultures of improvement film histories and documentaries are embedded in cyber aesthetics. These productions cast the migrant life outside the dominant paradigm of utilitarian economics, addressing migrants as complex social beings and inhabitants of an emotional landscape of migration. The ‘Gulf city’ emerges as the site of both utopian and dystopian imaginations. On one end of the spectrum is Dubai’s multilingual multi-audience vlog community, in which active participants narrate migrant experiences and act as self-help guides to leading a migrant life in Dubai. They offer advice about job searches, travel, shopping, lifestyle, fitness, cooking, investments and religious rituals. A widely accepted definition of self-help encompasses ‘legally permissible conduct that individuals undertake absent the compulsion of law and without the assistance of a government official in efforts to prevent or remedy a legal wrong’. The scope of self-help consists in behaviour that is both freely undertaken, without the assistance of the state, and in order to prevent or cure a violations.

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