

The Role of Cinema in a Post-Oil Saudi Economy: A case study of IthraCenter

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Abstract :

The article explores the role of non-profit organisations in the development of the film industry in Saudi Arabia through a case study of the King AbdulazizCenter for World Culture, known as Ithra. This research focuses on the timeframe between 2016 to the end of 2019. This article investigates the relationship between non-profit organisations and the commercial film industry and how the private sector aims to address the public interest in Saudi Arabia as it relates to the film industry. The article contains an analysis of Ithra's strategy and interventions with other government organisations to support the film industry's development, and it draws from a personal interview with the head of the cinema department at Ithra, MajedSamman. This article argues that Ithra has positioned itself as a dominant force in the industry, and that it promotes the government's image in the West and markets the country's culture to others.

Keywords:

Saudi cinema; Film production; social conservatism; film policy

Introduction

The focus of this article is the role of non-profit organisations in the development of Saudi Arabia's film industry, as explored through a case study of the King AbdulazizCenter for World Culture, known as Ithra. This research focuses on the timeframe between 2016 to the end of 2019. This article investigates the relationship between non-profit organisations and the commercial film industry and how the private sector aims to address the public interest in Saudi Arabia. In a bid to

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strengthen the country's international image and prepare the larger Saudi community for the post-oil economy, the national administration has embarked on several projects, and Ithra, the Arabic word for “enrichment”, is one of those projects (Yamada, 2018, p. 602).

Ithra was established in 2008 and started its programmes in 2016. It has a substantial legacy through its parent company, Aramco, that brought cinema to the state in the 1930s. Makio Yamada (2018) stated, “In May 2012, Khalid Al-Falih, Aramco's chief executive and the founder of Ithra (who has, since May 2016, been serving as Saudi Arabia's energy minister), announced that they would provide training programs in arts to two million young Saudi citizens by 2020” (2018, p. 602). This statement implies that the Saudi film industry will need intervention, aid and support both from government and from private-sector non-profits to thrive. Saudi filmmakers seek support from Ithra to make films and work with international experts to improve their skills, whereas Ithra has strived to improve the government's image and spread the country's history and culture.

This article provides an evaluation of Ithra's main programmes and compares them to Ithra's vision of supporting and developing the film industry in Saudi Arabia. This case study also contains an analysis of Ithra's strategy and interventions with other government organisations to support the film industry's development, and it draws from a personal interview with the head of the cinema department at Ithra, Majed Samman. This article argues that Ithra has positioned itself as a dominant force in the industry, and that it promotes the government's image in the West and markets the country's culture to others.

First, Ithra encourages filmmakers to be professional and to take risks even though the country has few filmmaking professionals and taking risks can have substantial consequences. Risk-taking in this context may involve the integration of topics and scenes that have traditionally been discouraged by Saudi society. For instance, Mark Thompson (2019) notes that “social tradition prohibits the sexual act until after the wedding night” (p. 219). Therefore, incorporating

sexual scenes in a movie expressly violates the social norms of the country, making it difficult for the film to be exhibited locally. In addition, Saudi Arabia as a society is still significantly conservative as regards media content. For these reasons, it continues to be risky for investors in the industry to engage in activities that touch on such aspects. In addition, the government is sensitive towards communication and information. Therefore, Ithra continues to pioneer risk-taking in theatre and film. There is an underlying desire to pursue a libertarian approach to filmmaking and cinema through the introduction of topics that have traditionally been censored by the government. Ithra is pioneering the sensitive steps needed to finally introduce topics previously avoided in cinema and film by encouraging filmmakers to introduce these topics into their scripts.

Additionally, Ithra has moderately elevated the film industry by introducing internationally acclaimed and accepted topics but without content involving sex, religion or political views. By recognising and blending international standards in script writing, language and themes, Ithra is importing styles and frameworks whilst exporting Saudi culture and artistry. In the Saudi Film Days programme, Ithra presented Saudi Arabia in a way that state institutions have not been able to for decades. Ithra plays a significant role in developing the industry and promoting the Saudi government and the country's image and culture internationally; consequently, Ithra plays a dominant role in the industry. Ithra is the only private-sector organisation with the ability to play a major role in the Saudi film industry's development alongside governmental organisations.

Ithra's contribution to the industry arises from the four main programmes that represent its strategy. These programmes are Saudi Film Days, Ithra theatre and cinema venues, co-production with experienced international crews and monthly workshops for prospective filmmakers. Therefore, Ithra's presence matters to Saudi filmmakers, especially those in the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia as the majority of Ithra's events are held in Dhahran city, far from Riyadh.

Ithra has partnered with some of the world's leading industries in art and culture and has presented itself as the singular party pursuing theatre liberty in Saudi Arabia. HanounikHuth (2014) states that "Saudi Aramco succeeded in attracting national tourism through its festivals, programs, and promotions for art exhibitions and future technology" (p. 35). Also, in terms of cooperation, Ithra always plays a superior role rather than being an equal partner, for example, Ithra's domination of the Saudi Film Festival "SFF". In this way, Ithra depicts itself as the solitary entity that fosters growth and development in theatre, film and art, albeit administratively rather than cooperatively. Ithra has often opted to work with organisations that take lower positions, and it has left out those that seek equal roles. This leaves little to no room for budding and equally capable partners to participate in planning and orchestrating the SFF.

Research Problem

The emergence of the Saudi film industry presents a unique confluence of challenges and opportunities in a rapidly transforming socio-cultural landscape. This study delves into the multifaceted intricacies surrounding the initiatives of the King Abdulaziz Center for World Culture (Ithra) in fostering the Saudi film industry's growth. With a nation historically devoid of formal training in filmmaking, the endeavor to cultivate a vibrant cinematic landscape poses considerable challenges. Ithra, as a non-profit institution, has embarked on a multifarious strategy to propel this industry forward, including workshops, collaborations, and the production of films that encapsulate Saudi culture. However, it is critical to ascertain whether these initiatives effectively bridge the gaps between artistic expression, cultural representation, and economic viability. Furthermore, this study seeks to elucidate the extent to which Ithra's strategy aligns with its ambitious vision for the Saudi film industry's development.

Research Significance

The study's significance is manifold, emanating from the unique interplay of cultural, artistic, and economic dimensions inherent in the Saudi film industry's nascent phase. The cultural relevance of this research lies in its potential to illuminate the delicate balancing act between preserving the conservative cultural fabric and fostering creative expression in a historically constrained environment. By scrutinizing Ithra's multifaceted approach, this research contributes to a nuanced understanding of how non-profit organizations can act as catalysts for the growth of cultural industries in a region grappling with both tradition and modernity.

Moreover, this study's insights extend to the realm of international relations and soft power diplomacy. As Saudi Arabia endeavors to reshape its global image, the film industry assumes a role as a potent cultural ambassador. The strategic alignment between Ithra's initiatives and Saudi Arabia's broader diplomatic goals underscores the broader implications of this research.

Economically, the study addresses the viability of Ithra's approach. By evaluating the return on investment for various initiatives, it sheds light on the challenges of fostering a sustainable industry that appeals to both local and global audiences. The implications of this research reverberate beyond Saudi borders, particularly for countries in transition seeking to leverage cultural industries as drivers of economic diversification.

Research Objectives and Research Questions

The overarching objective of this research is to critically analyze Ithra's initiatives in propelling the Saudi film industry and to evaluate the extent to which these initiatives align with the institution's ambitions and the broader goals of Saudi Arabia.

Research Questions:

1. How does Ithra's multifaceted strategy, encompassing workshops, collaborations, and film production, contribute to the development of the Saudi film industry?
2. To what extent do Ithra's initiatives address the historical absence of training and education in filmmaking in Saudi Arabia?
3. What role does Ithra play in navigating the intricate interplay between cultural representation, artistic expression, and economic viability within the Saudi film industry?
4. How do Ithra's initiatives reflect Saudi Arabia's broader diplomatic efforts to reshape its global image through cultural industries?
5. What challenges and opportunities emerge in the endeavor to foster a sustainable film industry that resonates with both local and global audiences?

Methodology

This research employs a case study approach, focusing on the initiatives undertaken by Ithra to catalyze the Saudi film industry. The in-depth interview method is utilized to gain insights from the head of cinema at Ithra. This approach allows for an intimate exploration of the motives, strategies, and challenges underlying Ithra's initiatives. By employing a qualitative methodology, the research delves beyond surface-level observations, uncovering nuanced perspectives that shape Ithra's interventions in the Saudi film landscape. The in-depth interview serves as a powerful tool to capture the multifaceted intricacies of Ithra's approach, as elucidated by the individual spearheading its cinema endeavors. This approach enables a comprehensive exploration of the alignment between Ithra's strategies and Saudi Arabia's broader cultural and diplomatic aspirations.

Furthermore, the case study methodology facilitates the integration of diverse data sources, including official documents, media reports, and publicly available materials, to triangulate and corroborate findings from the in-depth interview. This multifaceted approach enhances the reliability and validity of the research outcomes, painting a comprehensive picture of the relationship between Ithra's initiatives and the Saudi film industry's development.

The Old Aramco and New Ithra

In the twentieth century, among the public and private sectors in Saudi Arabia, only Aramco had an awareness of the potentially significant role of cinema in the state. This was because of the presence of Western workers in the company who in the 1930s were keen to watch movies (Al-khudair, 2019), an interest that has continued in the decades since. After two decades of contributing to the exhibition sector, Aramco entered the production sector and produced its first local film in the 1950s. In its film productions, Aramco presented direct messages to raise awareness and educate people rather than entertaining them. These steps in the exhibition and production sectors were advanced for the Gulf States at a time when illiteracy was widespread and the general public was not interested in education or even entertainment. However, after Aramco's early establishment of the film industry in Saudi Arabia in the mid-1930s, it stopped moving the industry forward. As a result, the film industry remained at that level, with Aramco screening films in its theatres and occasionally producing films.

Aramco not only made films to raise awareness and educate people but also to present government views on political conflicts. In the late 1940s, Saudi Arabia had a dispute over boundaries with Qatar and Oman that derived from oil territories Saudi Arabia shared with its neighbours. Aramco responded to the conflict through marketing and presenting the Saudi view. As a result, Aramco launched its public relations department, made films and established a magazine called *Aramco World* in 1949 (Hanounik 2014, p. 18). All of these were in English, which means these films and magazine articles were intended

for Western audiences. However, no information survives about the majority of Aramco's films, and there is no information from academic or non-academic works that reveal the details of these films, whether they were documentaries or features or how many were produced.

In the 1970s and later, Aramco was less active in building the film industry and produced very few films, instead operating a single theatre in Dhahran that screened US and European films (Al-khudair, 2019). There are many reasons and explanations for Aramco's negligence of the film industry after launching cinema in Saudi Arabia. Among those reasons were difficult political events in the region in the 1970s and 1980s: the Iranian Revolution, the participation of Saudi jihadists in the Soviet-Afghan War, the capture of the Grand Mosque in Mecca by JuhaymanAl-Otaibi and the launch of the Islamic Awakening inside the state (Kliment, 2019). These events not only affected the role of Aramco in moving the film industry forward but also affected Aramco's role alongside the Ministry of Culture and Information, the press and the television industry.

Aramco is credited with launching the Saudi film industry's production and exhibition sectors in the 1930s, but no further substantial progress was made for 80 years. This severe stagnation lasted until 2008, when the company introduced a new vision for the future. During its 75th anniversary, the company announced its creation of Ithra. This film-culture development aligned with the beginning of the SFF in terms of timing. This cultural centre is dedicated to what Ithra itself calls the cultural industries. The concept of cultural industries is a disputed and difficult term, and as David Hesmondhalgh indicated, its problems stem from the difficulty of defining "culture" not to mention the term "industry" (2019, p. 14). The magnitude, rationale and enthusiasm with which the Ithra project was launched signified the seriousness with which the country views art, industry and cultural heritage. The structure to house Ithra was heavily budgeted for and reflects a strong desire to develop Saudi Arabia and to introduce Ithra to a global audience. Its uniqueness is

indicated by a pebbled appearance at the top, a globalised modern design with “glass fins”, “façade panels” and “toggle glazing” (Buro, 2012, p. 121). In essence, the Ithra establishment serves as the centre of the Saudi cultural industries. These industries, as Robert Williams has demonstrated, are the “signifying system through which necessarily (though among other means) a social order is communicated, reproduced, experienced and explored” (1981, p. 13). In simpler terms, cultural industries are usually seen as those institutions “directly involved in the production of social meaning” (Hesmondhalgh, 2019, p. 14). Despite the difficulties and confusion that many researchers have demonstrated in defining cultural industries, all of them include the film industry as a cultural industry (Hesmondhalgh, 2019, p. 14).

As a centre for cultural industries, Ithra aims to enhance the quality and frequency of productions and thereby create an improved version of Aramco’s cultural interventions. The aim in creating Ithra Centre was to compete globally in an industry other than oil and to create an internationally renowned cultural institution and model of social progress through intercultural education and exchange (Aramco, 2019). However, Ithra was inactive for the first eight years of its existence, finally launching its programmes in 2016. From 2016 to 2019, after launching many programmes, it became clear that Ithraworks slowly. Across this period, Ithra supported Saudi filmmakers in producing just eighteen short films and three features. The head of cinema at Ithra, MajedSamman (2019), confirms this claim and indicates that Ithra “moves ... slowly but steadily”. However, the number of films supported by Ithra in those three years is more than Aramco has supported since the 1950s. Although Ithra’s initiatives have been gradual, its general progress compared with Aramco’s is encouraging. By creating more film production avenues in the country, Ithra spreads the idea that there is room for progress in the arts and culture and inspires young people to participate in realising their talent and exercising the available liberty. With such a development, the government is encouraged to exercise restraint in regards to film production, theatre and art, for which Ithra can be credited.

The country's economy is overwhelmingly dominated by oil production, and the drop in the oil price from \$120 per barrel in 2014 to around \$20 in 2016 made the government look for permanent solutions rather than rely on the country's reserves to sustain its economy. As a result, the government announced the establishment of Saudi Vision 2030 on 25 April 2016. One of its challenges is to reshape the economy by creating many new industries beyond oil. The government invested heavily in media, entertainment, sports and cultural activities. In the official document for Vision 2030, it states that "We consider culture and entertainment indispensable to our quality of life. We are well aware that the cultural and entertainment opportunities currently available do not reflect the rising aspirations of our citizens and residents, nor are they in harmony with our prosperous economy" (Vision 2030 website). This 2016 statement represents a huge shift in the government's position and contradicts its past as a theocratic country. The government acknowledged that cultural industries were less funded by government and that it is time to meet the aspirations of its citizens and residents. Therefore, Ithra focuses on developing creative and cultural industries that support the government's vision of creating post-oil industries. Aramco already planned to create post-oil industries and announced it in 2008 by launching Ithra Centre, before the government's vision was announced in 2016. This indicates that the country needed to reform its economy and support cinema activities as part of the creative and cultural industries.

The future post-oil economic framework proposed for the country meant introducing projects that would globalise Saudi Arabia and elevate its status internationally. Ithra is one of those projects. When Aramco built Ithra, its goals were extremely ambitious and went beyond cinema. According to Samman (2019), Ithra not only supports filmmaking but also a variety of cultural and creative activities to "enrich the filmmaking experience, theatre experience [and] ... different creative aspects like painting and music". Aramco built the centre to "have a different economy other than oil" (Samman). The establishment of a specialised centre to support and enrich culture and creativity in Saudi Arabia was a unique project as there is a lack of

government and private institutions that support talent and art of all kinds. An important portion of these objectives also involved the “integration of English movies as teaching tools” to improve the prowess of film enthusiasts in communicating in foreign languages (Kabooha, 2016, p. 248). However, creating a post-oil economy through the creative industries is extremely ambitious and involves enormous challenges. Ithra has established four main programmes to develop the film industry in Saudi Arabia, but these programmes are not sufficient to achieve such a goal. In addition, the Saudi film industry is an emerging industry, and its economic self-reliance will require years of work and government support to establish. Thus, Ithra cannot achieve this goal by itself or without an alliance with government institutions.

In developing a modern and futuristic platform for filmmaking, it was important to examine the past Aramco model and identify the aspects that needed improving. Consequently, before the cinema department at Ithra launched its programmes, its staff considered some of the past poor practices of Saudi filmmakers and developed a plan to address them. An example of such poor practices is filmmakers being involved in multiple roles in their projects, such as directing, producing, editing and supervising digital colour correction. Samman (2019) claims that the cinema department teaches filmmaking starting with the basics and focuses on teaching “filmmaking as a business”. Samman believes that previous Saudi films did not have release and distribution models, and for that reason, Ithra provides participants “the tools and the know-how [...] to create a business out of films” (Samman). Focusing on past missteps and developing a plan to address them is Ithra’s strategy– one that had not been considered by government organisations that support cinema in Saudi Arabia or other Gulf States. It was essential, therefore, that in shifting from Aramco to Ithra, the past production model was enhanced and new initiatives introduced to enhance the quality and frequency of productions.

Furthermore, Ithra not only approaches the modern production from a singular point of view but utilises several systems and mechanisms.

Ithra's support for the film industry comprises four main programmes designed by its cinema department. These four programmes, as noted at the start of this article, are Saudi Film Days, Ithra theatre and cinema venues, co-production with international experts and monthly workshops for general audiences. Ithra's aim for these programmes is to support filmmakers, not to make money or to screen the films in theatres in foreign markets such as the US or UK. The message is "to promote [...] Saudi filmmakers and empower them to make films and ... show them across the world" in festivals and cultural events (Samman). In other words, part of Ithra's mandate at its inception was to globalise Saudi film production enterprises. From Ithra's perspective, the programmes are a success if audiences watch films produced by Ithra and appreciate their production values and how the directors translated the stories to films. Samman points out that they are working on this goal, but they are "still in the beginning". Ithra is clearly not looking to profit from the films at this stage; instead they are focusing on quality and teaching filmmaking from scratch. This non-profit, talent-oriented approach distinguishes Ithra from international production firms and enables the organisation to focus on quality productions. However, even as a non-profit organisation, Ithra must balance its budget to ensure its continuing support for the industry.

One of the programmes to support the film industry is providing national venues for screenings and networking events for filmmakers. Samman (2019) points out that most Saudi talent in the film industry does not have "a venue to show their movies to the public, and only YouTube was available for them". Ithra has a 300-seat movie theatre, a 900-seat performing arts theatre and a great hall for hosting events and festivals in Dharan (Aramco, 2019). Ithra's building is a venue for those who live in the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia. An example of the use of Ithra as a venue for Saudi filmmakers was hosting the fifth SFF in March 2019. Ithra provided all of the logistical support for the event in addition to the budget, and Samman says "the financial aspect is always the last thing we think about" and that their focus was on empowering the festival managers and providing what they needed. This logistical input was provided in the form of

facilities including “a convention hall” (Aljuwaiber, 2019, p. 198) and a 900-seat theatre” (Insoll, 2019, p. 520). However, the idea of creating a venue for filmmakers has existed in Saudi Arabia since 1974 through the SASCA. This organisation has artists’ headquarters in 15 cities across the state. Ithra’s venue does not provide anything different from it; however, Ithra has a huge budget, exceeding that of all 15 branches of the SASCA, allowing Ithra to offer more programmes and events for filmmakers.

Advancing filmmaking requires investment in talent, which is exactly what Ithra has been engaging in. Ithra stages workshops for prospective filmmakers as another programme to support the film industry. Ithra tries to teach the public, especially young people who love cinema and the arts, by providing rigorous professional training. Ithra is committed to hosting at least two workshops each month from each department at Ithra, including the cinema department (Samman, 2019). These workshops are delivered in collaboration with technical experts from the Gulf States. The workshop programme includes film screenings, hosting panels and other discussions, and it is designed for all levels but focuses on prospective filmmakers, and it can be a second chance for filmmakers who have not benefited from Ithra’s other programmes. An example from the programme is a workshop about how to make films and 3D animations using smartphones (Samman). This programme’s goals have yet to be achieved, but it is a significant way to increase the knowledge about production in a society that has historically lacked training in filmmaking.

Ithra also seeks to enable Saudi filmmakers’ storytelling by hosting workshops on writing and by sending Saudi filmmakers to Los Angeles for advanced writing workshops. Samman (2019) claims that Saudi stories are not original. As Samman observes, in the past decade, most Saudi and Arab films have been dramas and family stories that are remakes of previous films. Samman adds that when viewers see a good new story in a film, they may like the first act, but by the middle of the film, the story is lost. According to Samman, the quality of stories in Saudi films is the result of ignorance about the storytelling process. For that reason, Ithra focuses on writing, from

fundamentals to the advanced level, to improve the storytelling in Saudi films through numerous workshops. Therefore, a diversity of advanced schools are used for writing workshops, such as a school in Los Angeles, a school in London and in the Gulf, at Ithra in Dhahran. With a vision to present the Saudi film industry to the rest of the world, Ithra sees partnerships with global film giants including Hollywood and London as the perfect platforms through which it can launch the Saudi film industry to greater heights by increasing the number of talented productions.

The promotion of Saudi culture to local audiences, including foreign-born residents who comprise more than 40% of the population, requires that Ithra introduce the community to the Saudi film industry. Therefore, part of Ithra's strategy is to work with filmmakers to find ways to make films that can be released within Saudi Arabia's conservative culture. In its writing workshops, Samman finds that filmmakers are afraid of censure from society and are sensitive to moral criticism; therefore, Ithra and other sponsors limit the themes and details in the stories to avoid social criticism. Although international acceptance and recognition are important as the country is strategising a post-oil economy, it remains vital that filmmaking initiatives start with the Saudi audience.

Ithra focuses on making both films and film-exhibition venues with Saudi audiences in mind. Ithra's facility itself leads by example in its architectural design that incorporates Saudi's contextual, functional and aesthetic qualities because architecture is a combination of art and technology. As described, "The content of each project touches deeply upon the current movement of cultural and social development in Saudi Arabia, initiated [...] within a population of which more than 40 per cent is under the age of 17" (Thorsen and Greenwood, 2010, p. 90). As such, Ithra seeks to enable Saudi filmmakers' storytelling while trying not to violate Saudi Arabia's conservative cultural standards. However, because topics such as religion, sex and politics violate the domestic conservative norms, Ithra limits filmmakers' creativity by forcing them to avoid those topics.

A regional approach to theatre development and film promotion has remained central and integral to Ithra's goals in advancing the Saudi film industry. In 2013, "Creating a new gallery devoted to exploring Islamic visual culture allowed curators at Ithra the opportunity to investigate the complex question of whether employing conventional approaches used in the presentation and interpretation of Islamic art by other museums abroad is effective or appropriate in the Saudi Arabian context" (Norton-Wright, 2020, p. 120). This was done as part of Ithra's long-term plan to expand the awareness of Saudi films to all audiences within the Middle East. Ithra is involved in many aspects of culture, including fine art such as art galleries, showing its broad conception of culture and cultural industries.

Whereas Aramco remained conservative in establishing a restrained national film production framework, Ithra is increasing the scope of production and the range of subjects that films include to target audiences across the border. This would mean exporting filmmaking to all regions of the nation as well as to cities in neighbouring states. Under this initiative, Ithra has remained committed to connecting cultures not only nationally but regionally through theatre, art and cultural heritage. An approach that allows diverse audiences to watch Ithra's productions means sharing languages, cultures and experiences and eventually getting communities to unite in advancing Ithra's objective of gaining global visibility for Saudi films. Targeting eastern Saudi Arabia remains a major focus for Ithra. The workshops at Ithra are intended to be extremely valuable to communities in the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia, especially as government institutions, such as the Saudi Film Council "SFC", focus on cities in other regions, such as Riyadh and Jeddah.

Training and the creation of workshops continues to enable Ithra to recognise innovative and talented producers, directors and actors, among other personnel. An advantage of Ithra's training strategy is that there is a programme to support non-professionals and film lovers, unlike other institutions that only offer programmes for filmmakers. These workshops help improve the image of cinema in Saudi Arabia's conservative society, large portions of which look with

suspicion at the arts in general and cinema in particular. The fear of cinema is the result of decades of incitement campaigns by extremists who are ignorant of the cultural role of cinema because religious scholars do not see how cinema can be used positively. If audiences attend workshops and learn about cinema and its cultural and entertainment value, many may change their attitude from considering cinema taboo to considering it an effective tool to spread Saudi Arabia's cultural identity. For instance, the King Abdul Aziz University in Jeddah conducted a study for its students at its English Language Institute. The study examined the performance of Saudi students when they watched films as a tool for English-language learning. The study found that after teachers integrated films with traditional learning methods, the films motivated students to learn the language and “increased students’ participation and engagement in the classroom” (Kabooha, 2016, p. 255). Film screenings are a significant tool to convert those who oppose cinema in general to accept that film can be used as a soft power tool to spread the cultural values of Saudis.

There are many limitations for non-profit institutions in developing commercial artistic products, particularly exportable films. One such limitation is budgetary. Ithra's limited budget for films is not in line with its vision to produce films that are globally competitive in movie theatres and at film festivals. Ithra provides a maximum of 1.5 million SAR (400,000 USD) to support each feature film, and according to Samman (2019), no candidate has received the full 1.5 million. Samman claims that filmmakers can make high-quality films with less money if they are creative. Ithra wants filmmakers to bring their creativity and add value without using much money or “spending it on nothing” (Samman). Ithra believes that its budget for filmmakers is appropriate and that big-budget films usually spend most of their budget on three things: known actors, multiple locations and marketing. Ithra's point of view is appropriate if its vision is to compete in the region, as most of the films produced in Gulf States cost less than \$500,000. Ithra aims to produce films that attract audiences around the world, especially Western countries, but in terms of budget, Ithra wants to produce such films differently from how

films are produced in Western countries. Rather than produce high budget films that capture the global audience, Ithra looks to produce properly budgeted films that highlight Saudi culture and expound it to the rest of the world. There is a desire to have the global audience turn its attention to Saudi Arabia by professing its culture in theatre and film productions. Whereas international film producers obtain personnel from all over the world, Ithra seeks to create and utilise low cost locally available talent. Ithra wants the world to look at Saudi Arabian culture and lifestyle through film, even though the productions will be of internationally recognised standards. This shows the dynamic relation between such non-profit institutions and commercial industries in the country.

Neglecting the value of professional actors may be why Ithra's films have not reached international audiences or large film festivals in the West. Not every producer in Saudi Arabia can produce a film with unknown actors and reach the US and European markets. Although there are many Saudi actors with successful experiences, such as Fayez Al-Malki, the protagonist of *Menahi*, and Reem Abdullah and AhdKamel, the leading actors in *Wadjda*, Ithra did not use them. None of the short or feature films produced by Ithra have featured stars, none of its short films have been nominated in prestigious festivals and none of its feature films have been accepted by exhibitors in Saudi Arabia or abroad. There are many important reasons to recruit known actors with mass appeal within the Middle East. In particular their ability to draw audiences to theatres and their acting skills are needed to make a film successful.

Without marketing and public relations campaigns for projects, Saudi films may remain largely invisible to prospective Western audiences. Considering marketing an unnecessary luxury is incompatible with Ithra's goal of teaching "filmmaking as a business" (Samman, 2019) not just as an art form. Film as a business means films should not be considered creative projects without paying attention to the bigger picture, which includes economics. Marketing campaigns for films are essential regardless of whether marketing budgets are high or low. More importantly, experienced producers always have a marketing

strategy to promote their film to the public within the budget available rather than dismissing marketing as unnecessary.

These issues and gaps in Ithra's vision call into question its ability to succeed with its strategy, especially as it has produced three feature films and none of them have entered US, European or Asian movie theatres as Ithra aims. In addition to not participating in prestigious festivals, none of the films have been nominated for international prizes. Ignoring the significant role of experienced actors, film locations and marketing indicates that Ithra has chosen the hard way to reach a global audience without realising it.

Marketing Saudi Culture

Ithra recognises the need to create programmes to advance its larger national and international agenda. Saudi Film Days is a major programme that Ithra started to invigorate and enhance the film production industry. In the programme, Ithra receives applications through their official website from Saudi citizens who want support to make a short or feature film. The programme opens once a year, and after the jury reads the submitted scripts, it decides which candidates receive financial support. The programme requires that the filmmakers attend workshops at the centre and other film institutions in the UK, such as the London Film School, and non-profit arts organisations in the US, such as Film Independent. The centre is involved in script development, the pre-production process, production and the post-production process. The purpose of their involvement in these steps is to “make high-quality [films] that can meet ... international standards in visual aspects and ... storytelling in a way that [they] can go to international festivals and win” (Samman, 2019). However, intervening in every step of filmmaking raises concerns and questions about the extent to which Ithra guides stories towards an ideology the government favours or at least keeps filmmakers away from stories that criticise authority.

Like most government and private institutions that fund films in Gulf States, Ithra claims to allow a high degree of freedom and that their

support does not control the ideas or messages of the films. Samman (2019) confirms that Ithra does not control the projects or intervene in stories, but he admits that there must be boundaries. Ithra has three forbidden topics: religion, sex and politics. While there is an executive regulation for the audiovisual media system, which falls under the censorship of the Genral Authority of Audiovisual Media and is dedicated to oversight, Ithra maintains even more stringent oversight standards (Alamri, 2023). These topics cannot be discussed in the films that Ithra supports, and Samman advises filmmakers who want funding to “talk about anything except that”. By these standards, *Wadjda* which is the most popular Saudi film would not pass Ithra’s standards. As Islam is fundamental to Saudi daily life, it is difficult not to discuss religion in Saudi films. However, these redlines are actually grey, and each person’s understanding of them is different. For example, Muslims believe that religion is relevant to all aspects of their lives; thus, according to the understanding of most religious leaders, any criticism of a social or economic issue can cross over to religion. In 2016, Ithra supported eleven Saudi films that participated in Saudi Film Days in Los Angeles. One of these films, *Wasati* (2016), was later distributed on Netflix, and its story revolves around the practice of some extremists of preventing cultural plays from being shown in private Saudi universities. The film is based on real events that occurred in 2006 when a play was forcibly stopped by extremists and the actors were attacked. *Wasati* is a clear and explicit criticism of the opinion of some religious scholars that theatres and the arts are prohibited and must be stopped.

Another argument is that criticism or the discussion of politics, religion or sex may not necessarily be offensive or negative. In fact, researchers have been quick to point out that Ithra functions as a “double agent” which “constructs images in the mind of the public” to push its agenda for freedom of content in film production (Hanounik 2014, p. 6). Absolute judgement on such things and the ambiguities of redlines in the media and arts have been dilemmas for Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf States for decades, and there are still no detailed regulations or guidance for filmmakers on redlines and prohibitions in any Gulf state. This speaks volumes as regards to Ithra’s case in Saudi

Arabia. Perhaps in recognition of Ithra's strong connection to the SASCA, Ithra has paved the way for a grey area as far as the inclusion of prohibited topics in film is concerned. Ithra may be gradually opening an avenue via which politics, sex and religion can be included in films in ways similar to those of internationally recognised films. For example, Ithra may be lenient in supporting politically oriented films but is supportive of the state view, or it may support a film that criticises religion but agrees with the state's approach, such as criticism of extremism and Islamic groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood or the scholars of the Islamic Awakening. Hence, Ithra can be the torch that potentially lights the way for the Saudi film industry to reach new heights.

Saudi Film Days is an event held by Ithra outside the country, mostly in London and Los Angeles. The first edition was in 2016, when Ithra presented eleven short films by Saudi filmmakers. When the projects were complete, Ithra presented the films at an event in Los Angeles. Later, Ithra held other Saudi Film Days in London and other countries. These events bring Saudi filmmakers together with international producers to help Saudis find co-production companies to work with them on Saudi projects. However, from 2016 to 2019, despite the films being shown in many countries, none of the filmmakers have had an international co-production company finance any part of an upcoming project. The idea of gathering Saudis together with international experts has achieved Ithra's strategy in this programme, but the results Ithra aspired to have not been realised.

The Saudi Film Days programme has not achieved all of its goals, but it has attracted the press, media and film lovers in each city where an event was held. The advantage of such events is showing the press, media and film lovers a new image of Saudi Arabia through arts and entertainment. Ithra presented Saudi Arabia in a way that state institutions have not been able to for decades. Attempts by the government to present itself to the Western world as an open state with an interest in arts and culture were unsuccessful, as they were only speeches and press releases. However, Ithra exhibited Saudi openness and interest in the arts by holding cultural and artistic events

and exhibitions in Western capital cities, of which Saudi Film Days was one such event. After four years of this programme, Ithra has benefited from it as a public relations campaign, and the Saudi government has benefited by its amendment of Saudi Arabia's image in the Western world.

Marketing Saudi Arabia or promoting the government in the Saudi Film Days programme is not Ithra's job. Saudi filmmakers seek support from Ithra to make films and work with international experts to improve their skills, not to improve the government's image. When the programme launched, the focus was on a new image of Saudi Arabia and its promotion rather than on participating filmmakers. In 2018, thirteen filmmakers returned from the Saudi Film Days event without deals or negotiations with US production companies, and the media and attendance attention was on the country's historical culture and contemporary lifestyle. The Arab News called the event "a bridge between [the] Kingdom and the world" and indicated that government efforts were to strengthen US–Saudi Arabia ties, particularly on a cultural level (Al-kinani, 2018). As a result, Saudi filmmakers are caught between representing themselves and highlighting their work to get the attention of international producers on the one hand and focusing on marketing Saudi culture and the nation of Saudi Arabia on the other.

In the Saudi Film Days programme, Ithra also aims to teach filmmakers to be professional in meeting deadlines and managing expectations and budgets. Ithra has found that it is hard for some filmmakers to manage expectations in the production of their films. After supporting the production of many films, Ithra realised that filmmakers need help with professionalism. Samman (2019) believes the reason for this is the lack of experienced producers in the Saudi film industry. Samman claims that fostering professionalism is important because of the role that producers play in moving the industry forward, not just finding locations, crew and actors. Producers cannot drive the industry and sell films internationally if they cannot meet deadlines and wisely manage expectations and budgets. By teaching producers professionalism, Ithra sharpens their

skills, experiences and expectations, thereby raising the bar for film production. Meeting timelines, honouring deals, observing protocols and raising the standards for talent and the industry points the way to higher quality productions. This means that Ithra is growing the industry in terms of production. Therefore, the programme improves the skills of producers and helps them to meet foreign production companies attending film screenings.

The Saudi Film Days programme faces a major challenge: sustainability. The programme is implemented at a high cost, and if there is not a clear financial return over time, Ithra may not be able to continue financing this program. Most of the costs are first-class airline tickets and expensive hotels in Los Angeles for more than 200 filmmakers, actors, producers and crew members in addition to guests. However, the total of the films' budgets does not exceed \$200,000. This makes it difficult to sustain the funding for this programme, which spends more on travel costs, party hall rentals and dinner parties than it spends on producing the films shown.

Ithra's continued funding of this exorbitantly expensive programme for several years without any financial returns has made critics, journalists and filmmakers suspect ulterior motives, such as the involvement of the Prince Mohammed Bin Salman Foundation (MiSK) in the film and media. According to Thompson (2019), "MiSK has organized informational sessions on media, writing, and film, to satisfy the desire for personal expression while providing a state-approved framework for public engagement" (p. 121). MiSK organises these informational sessions each year without seeking financial returns. MiSK's involvement makes people think that state approval is merely another phrase for administrative control. With MiSK casting its administrative shadow over film production and with its far-reaching control, little can be accomplished as regards the freedom of expression that internationally acclaimed films enjoy. As a result, Ithra may continue to fund this programme for many years without a financial return, whilst creating a specific pattern for the films it produces with the restrictions that Ithra believes in. Therefore, unless the centre is explicit about its goals for this programme, there

will be many negative interpretations by researchers and the Western media about the hidden goals of the programme, and Ithra does not want that for its reputation.

***Joud* (2018) and Local Talent**

The fourth programme is Ithra's own productions. In the Saudi Film Days programme, Saudis submit scripts and apply for support, but Ithra's production programme follows a different pattern. Ithra reaches out and hires filmmakers with international expertise to enable Saudis to learn from internationally known names in cinema. According to Samman (2019), Ithra wants to make special projects of which Saudis can be proud. For instance, Ithra's first production was *Joud* (2018), a collaboration between Saudi and British production companies. The movie is 70 minutes of what Samman describes as "non-narrative beautiful images of Saudi Arabia with amazing soundtrack music", and from Samman's and Ithra's perspective, this programme is "another way for supporting the Saudi film industry" (Samman). However, producing *Joud* runs counter to Ithra's core vision of making high-quality narrative films that can compete at international festivals. *Joud* does not have a clear story, plot or even dialogue. The film was shot in sixteen locations in the west, east, south and north of Saudi Arabia, but it is minimal and not competitive with films that win at international film festivals. Generating positive public opinion is different than focusing on empowering filmmakers and letting them achieve their artistic visions. This approach of keeping a hypothetical national audience in mind is different from other countries' arts institutions that focus mainly on artistic aspects.

Ithra tried to market *Joud* to the media and the public and promoted the film's achievements through exposure in 40 cities around the world. However, the screenings were free, and Ithra bore the financial cost of hiring the venues (Samman, 2019). The film was not nominated at any of the prestigious festivals around the world, and it was not accepted by any distributor or exhibitor in Saudi Arabia or abroad for screenings in commercial theatres. Therefore, based on Ithra's vision, the film cannot be considered a success. Thus, these

issues raise the question of the effectiveness of Ithra's strategy in supporting the growth of the film industry in Saudi Arabia. Judging the success of films is a complex process, and many critics may disagree. However, if a film is not nominated at film festivals, many critics consider it a commercial failure because it is not selling commercially or is not technically qualified to participate in festivals.

The main advantage of Ithra's own productions is the collaboration between Saudis and film industry experts from the West. Samman (2019) points out that young filmmakers are ambitious, and as a result, they want to perform as many roles in their films as possible. Samman indicates that filmmakers have been doing this for a long time, and it is time to change that by teaching them that filmmaking is not a one-man show. Samman says that these filmmakers are not aware that films are a collaborative process. In this programme, Ithra teaches filmmakers the importance of collaborating with other experts in the field. This goal is significant and indicates that Ithra understands the fundamental problems with previous poor practices in the industry. In addition, using Ithra's own productions to solve the playing-too-many-roles-in-a-project issue is further proof of Ithra's determination to solve limiting past practices.

The issue of playing too many roles in a project arises because many Saudi filmmakers take their aesthetic model from YouTube and learned filmmaking on their own through individual effort. Their films are produced by three to four people, each responsible for several roles during each stage of the project. Filmmakers who participated in film festivals before YouTube also learned filmmaking by themselves. They had no opportunity to participate in the television productions that were popular in Saudi Arabia because of the monopoly by a few companies, such as Al-Sadaf for sound and video production, Al Hadaf for media production and Fayez Al-Malki for audiovisual production. As they relied on specific crews that worked together for decades, those companies were not interested in training young people or bringing new minds and talent into the industry. Therefore, the one-man show issue is a consequence of the lack of local film schools,

as universities in Saudi Arabia focus on designing programmes for journalism, radio and television, not feature films.

Conclusion

Ithra's full name is the King Abdulaziz Center for World Culture. The words "world culture" may appear misleading as each state/region in the world has a unique culture, and looking at the Ithra programmes discussed in this article, it is clear that this cultural centre is dedicated to Saudi culture. Ithra has had four main programmes for supporting industry development since 2016. The outcomes of two of the four remain to be achieved, but these two programmes have achieved other advantages. For instance, the goal of Saudi Film Days is to bring Saudi filmmakers together with international producers to work on Saudi projects, but that has not happened. Meanwhile, the programme has attracted the press, media and film lovers and presented Saudi Arabia in a way that state institutions have not been able to for decades. This programme has promoted the government's image in the Western world and marketed the country's culture to others. The second programme is workshops, and in this programme, Ithra's goal is to enable Saudi filmmakers' storytelling. The outcomes of this programme are to spread cinematic culture in a society that has historically lacked cinema. Thus, there are differences between Ithra's ambitions and its achievements to date.

This article investigates the relationship between non-profit organisations and the commercial film industry, and how the private sector aims to address the public interest in Saudi Arabia. The article evaluates Ithra's main programmes and compares them to Ithra's vision of supporting and developing the film industry in Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia's emerging film industry faces obstacles in determining its structures and oversight, and there is no relationship between the SFC and Ithra although they play the same roles. The significance of Ithra's strategy is that Ithra's programmes aim to rectify past missteps by teaching film as a business rather than an art form, addressing the one-man show issue and training filmmakers to meet deadlines and manage expectations and budgets. The development of the Saudi film industry has long been limited because Saudi universities have neglected to offer programmes dedicated to

journalism, radio, film or television. In addition, the few television production companies in the country were not interested in training young people or bringing new minds or talent into the industry. Therefore, Ithra is significantly contributing to the industry as a non-profit organisation attempting to lead the industry.

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