

مؤتمر
النقد
السينمائي
Film Criticism
Conference

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INTRODUCTION

In 2018 Saudi Arabia reintroduced public cinema viewing, markedly changing the experience of film and film criticism in the Kingdom. To this end, the inaugural Film Criticism Conference was a wide-reaching, Film Commission initiative hosted at the Cultural Palace in the Diplomatic Quarter, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, for the first time in November 2023. This comprehensive collection captures the essence of some of the discussions and insights that were shared by various national and international film critics, scholars, cinephiles, and filmmakers at the Film Criticism Conference, providing a glimpse into the varied perspectives that emerged from the event. This collection serves as a lasting record of the critical exchanges that transpired at the Film Criticism Conference, with an aim to foster continued dialogue around the many diverse dimensions of the profession and practice of film criticism in Saudi Arabia locally, nationally, across the Middle East and North Africa region, and beyond.

In addition to the Film Criticism Conference in Riyadh, five smaller Film Criticism Forums took place earlier throughout the year, each with its own theme, in which we invited critics and presenters specializing in different facets of film criticism, in order to develop lively discourse and to promote community outreach in several distinct geographic locations across the vast territory of Saudi Arabia—a country that is currently undergoing rapid change in light of Vision 2030. We invite you to navigate the various sections of this collection to explore the nuanced analyses and thoughtful reflections on a wide variety of approaches to film criticism that were presented throughout this expansive and ambitious initiative.

Beyond the Frame

In Riyadh, the inaugural Film Criticism Conference bore the theme *Beyond the Frame*. In order to unify disparate approaches to film criticism, it was necessary to define parameters around which we framed the discourse, knowing we would be hosting critics from Saudi Arabia and around the world, people who came from different traditions of film criticism. Film, similar to its precursor, photography, is essentially the art of capturing images on light-sensitive, analogue film stock, although film has since developed to include digital media. Nevertheless, cinema, in its original analogue medium, is based on stitching together distinct frames of film stock and displaying the result, tracing the technological genealogy of film to the practice of photography. In *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Susan Sontag states: "To photograph is to frame, and to frame is to exclude," thus our thinking in the context of the relatively new reintroduction of public cinema viewing in Saudi Arabia necessitated that we think beyond the frame, metaphorically discarding exclusion and moving towards inclusion. We privileged consideration of what has been omitted from various canons and we sought, through this program, to explore what encompasses film criticism in a vibrant, engaged, and sophisticated milieu.

We live within a virtual infinity of images: film, media, television, gaming units, browser windows, billboards, static pictures in frames, and vast digital worlds online and through VR headsets. Whether on large screens or smaller ones, the medium of

film has the ability to surprise us with what we have never imagined before, allowing us to reconsider ourselves, and others, in distinct ways. Film mediates our experience of the world, pointing to horizons of endless possibilities and unrequited aspirations. Even as we celebrate and enjoy these modes of experiencing film, such changes also invite us to think critically about the growing centrality of film and moving images in our everyday lives, leading us to demand even more about how film is consumed, received, and understood.

Within the medium of film, the frame itself articulates, constrains, and defines what we see and how we see it. It also has an almost magical ability to remove us from our own immediate experience of the world, allowing us to visit other worlds. Filmmakers meticulously choose what is enclosed within a single frame of film to shape viewers' experience and to orient our attention. The frame can create a visual balance and convey meaning, however, it is not just a physical border; the frame is also a conceptual construct that invites interpretation and encourages us to consider what lies beyond its edges. What are we meant to see and why? What lies outside the frame? Does the horizon of endless possibilities offered by the multitude of worlds we visit lie within the frame or beyond? *Beyond the Frame* focused on the vital role that film criticism plays in our increasingly complex media ecosystem. We considered film criticism itself as a kind of frame that highlights our understanding of the many worlds of film while acknowledging the shifting role and structures of cinema.

In the context of *Beyond the Frame*, renowned filmmaker and critic, Yousry Nasrallah (Egypt) reflects on the continuing importance of film criticism and how it informed his filmmaking. Scholar and curator Aboubakar Sanogo (Canada) enlightens us with his vital investigation into the origins of film in Africa by the Lumière brothers at the turn of the twentieth century and at the inception of the medium. Film scholar and critic Richard Peña (US) discusses the crucial role played by developing a knowledge of film history, whereas professor Tarek El-Ariss (US) expands upon ideas of a particularly Arab-Islamic history of vision. Author and film critic Saad Albazei (Saudi Arabia) speculates on meta-cinematic narratives in his insightful and creative contribution, which engages in the very practice that he explores. Peter Limbrick (Australia/US) leads us to consider new geographies of cinema through an examination of the colonial histories of film. May Adadol Ingawanij (UK) explores a curatorial project that she developed on artists' film and considers their capacity to reimagine relations. Özgür Yaren (Turkey/Thailand) acquaints us with the phenomenon of Turkish *dizi* (a form of telenovela). Filmmaker Ayman Tamano (Saudi Arabia) meditates his use of archival and found footage to express his lived experience, as his filmmaking practice has included personal tragedy. Archivist Amal Ahmed (Pakistan/US) investigates collective memory in South Asian film archives. Filmmaker and festival director Alia Yunis (UAE) encourages us to think about reciprocal relations between the future and the past in narrative film. Professor Hideaki Fujiki (Japan) investigates the ecological imagination of a particular anime: *Japan Sinks*. Scholar Laura U. Marks (Canada) considers climate catastrophe in film. Film critic Chafic Tabbara (Lebanon) causes us to contemplate what is an intolerable image, and artist Jalal Toufic (Egypt) introduces us to his

profound concept of radical closure. Taken together, these varied perspectives allow us to triangulate a vision for the new and exciting possibilities of film criticism in a changing world.

Spirituality in Cinema

As part of the important role that community outreach plays, we held a Film Criticism Forum during Ramadan in Jeddah. During this period of introspection, we considered the constant human struggle to understand our world and our cosmos while acknowledging the capacity for human failure. The attempt to understand humanity's place in the universe, with an awareness of the inevitable limitations and flaws that we, as humans, possess was at the core of *Spirituality in Cinema*. At the Islamic Arts Biennale and in Al-Balad in Jeddah we brought together film critics, filmmakers, and scholars for whom the pursuit of spirituality, or faith, was part of their critical and creative practice.

In the world of contemporary art, faith and art are often perceived as diametrically opposed. To be a filmmaker or an artist demands that criticality be cut off from faith or religion. In *Spirituality in Cinema*, we aimed to move beyond these binaries and, rather, to explore the explicit and implicit fluidity of seeps, leakages, and imprints that faith and spirituality can have in certain films and through related presentations. We invited audiences to explore distinct impressions of *spirituality in cinema* from a variety of positions and perspectives, considering the multivalent layers and meanings in which spirituality can exist and flourish. In this section, eminent film director and critic Paul Schrader (US) updates his thinking on transcendental cinema many years after identifying the idea of a transcendental style in film. Scholar Joseph Kickasola (US), who has collaborated on several occasions with Schrader, offers further insight into Schrader's transcendental style. Professor Naminata Diabate (Côte d'Ivoire/US) discusses women's political protests and spiritual practices, whereas Sérgio Dias Branco (Portugal) presents an example of a collaboration between Saudi Arabia and Portugal in service of developing a multi-faith cinema. Lecturer Syed Haider (UK) explores expressions of festivities and joy in Bollywood cinema and scholar and critic Ruba Al-Sweel (Saudi Arabia) considers worldbuilding through time and space via the emancipatory work of Saudi artist and filmmaker Anhar Salem. The contributions to *Spirituality in Cinema* do not claim to be authoritative, but rather, they collectively act as a prism through which many diverse ideas can fragment into new ways of thinking, creating new and vital perspectives on the ineffable.

National Cinema

In Dhahran, we explored the theme of *National Cinema* in another accessible Film Criticism Forum to develop community outreach. We considered questions such as, what does the development of a national cinema mean in a country that had an extended pause on public cinema viewing? How do we reconstitute cinema viewing practices and develop film criticism anew? The economic argument is ever-present: Cinema's mass appeal and the recognition of its potential wide-spread influence motivates governments to invest in the film industry. Film is an obvious and accessible mode for the expression of nationhood. We took this opportunity to explore the concept

of national cinema in its current contextual complexities: the expanding ecosystem of streaming platforms, the convergence of media, multinational co-productions, and the accelerated restructuring of distribution chains. Considering the multifaceted efforts to develop the film industry in Saudi Arabia, this Film Criticism Forum examined the state of cinema in the Kingdom as the industry has responded to recently established initiatives, policies, and institutions—governmental or otherwise. Influential critics, researchers, and practitioners explored the process of continued collective exchange, through which national cinemas, including Saudi national cinema, fit within the web of transnational networks of exchange.

At the Film Criticism Forum that was held at the King Abdulaziz Center for World Culture (Ithra) in parallel with the Saudi Film Festival, scholar on national and transnational cinema, Andrew Higson (UK) considered what is national cinema in the age of globalization. His essay in this volume helps us unpack some of those important questions. Scholar and filmmaker Haya Alhossein (Saudi Arabia) focuses on the global reach of Saudi Arabian cinema, and film critic Hédi Khelil (Saudi Arabia) goes back to the roots of Saudi cinema by examining the influence of photographer Saleh Al-Azzaz. Kay Dickinson (Scotland) writes on Arab cinema travels, Sreya Mitra (UAE) examines the popularity of Bollywood stars in the Middle East and North Africa region, and professor Abdulrahman Alghannam (Saudi Arabia) considers audience engagement in Gulf cinema by conducting a comparative analysis of Saudi Arabian comedy-drama films. The Film Criticism Forum on *National Cinema* performed community outreach while providing audiences with well-informed possibilities for challenges, opportunities, and aspirations for Saudi cinema in relation to local, regional, and international film communities.

Landscape

A Film Criticism Forum was held in Abha in which we examined the relationship between landscape and the medium of film as an intricate interplay of visual aesthetics, narrative construction, and symbolic representation. Filmmakers have long recognized the potential of landscape to evoke emotion, establish atmosphere, and enhance storytelling. By composing and representing natural environments, filmmakers harness the visceral power of landscape to contribute to narrative and thematic potentials of film. The landscape serves as both a backdrop and an active participant within the visual language of cinema, with the ability to shape the mood, tone, and meaning of narratives, often appearing as a character in and of itself. By utilizing various cinematic techniques such as framing, lighting, and camera movement, filmmakers manipulate landscape to convey a range of emotions. Moreover, landscape often carries symbolic significance, representing larger social, cultural, or historical contexts in film—and, like film, landscape has the ability to record the passage of time. Landscape surrounds us; we are never outside of it. Abha, located in Aseer Province, is home to particularly cinematic terrain: majestic mountains, vast valleys, and lush forests, as well as sea and desert panoramas encompassing the fundamental elements of land, sea, and sky. While we might take in the visual pleasure of landscape—it can be awe-inducing, wondrous, fantastical, overpowering—we, as human beings who are part of living ecosystems, are also constantly negotiating our relationship with the natural world. For this reason, at this Film Criticism Forum, we asked: How are we implicated

in the landscape in which we reside and immerse ourselves, even when we take it for granted? Professor and film critic Hammadi Gueroum (Morocco) delves into aesthetic representations of the desert in cinema and the concept of space by considering a number of films in which landscape features prominently, filmmaker and educator Samirah Alkassim (US) analyzes two films in which history and memory are inscribed in the landscape, and film critic and author Ahmed Algasmī (Tunisia) examines the metaphorical role of cinematic space in several films, including Nacer Khemir's *Desert Trilogy*. *Landscape* brings the background to the fore, exploring landscape as metaphor, as material, and as network of relations.

Technology and the Film Viewing Experience

In the century and a half since the invention of film, moving images and related technologies have steadily innovated, but planned obsolescence has become a feature of new technologies. Before 4K, movies were shot in 35mm, 16mm, and 8mm analog. Some versions of films can no longer be accessed because the technology by which we would formerly display them has become outdated and fallen out of use. Users of basic flip phones in the early 2000s would never have imagined that their portable telephone would have the capability to make a feature film, as we can now do on our contemporary smartphones. At a Film Criticism Forum in Tabuk on *Technology and the Film Viewing Experience*, we paid homage to films and filmmakers that satisfied our endless thirst for futuristic speculation and to current technologies that facilitated all that came before. We underscored cinema's own machinations, from 35mm to immersive VR, that brought us to the place we are now—in the present and looking into the future of constantly evolving technological change.

Editor Nehal El-Hadi (Canada) focuses on special effects in particular technologically oriented films; professor and curator Dale Hudson (UAE) reframes humans as part of nature through case-studies in VR, on mobile screens, and through video installations; researcher Zoe Meng Jiang (US) examines grassroots visibility in twenty-first century China through the rising popularity of video shorts; and Mariam El Ajraoui (Morocco) empowers the audience through a consideration of interactive cinema technology and viewers' ability to choose. All of the contributions to *Technology and the Film Viewing Experience* demonstrate the evolving nature of the cinematic experience as it relates to the continual development of the medium of film.

Migration, Travel, and Movement in Cinema

Migration and the movement of peoples is a multifaceted human phenomenon and an activity that leaves profound and lasting impacts on the societies that people move to, and away from. The constant movement of people has always contributed to the transmission of cultures, religions, and ideologies across borders while remaining a deeply interlaced topic due to the complex interrelationships between culture, identity, and diversity. At present, with the increased scale of human migration, whether voluntary or forced, new patterns of nomadism have emerged. The movement of peoples has intensified, resulting in heavily intertwined cultures that foster creative cross-pollination. This intermingling manifests in themes of migration as expressed in cinema. As the art of moving images, cinema is perhaps the most appropriate

medium to represent migration and it has inspired films that spark lively discourse and that warrant analysis. Particular films address the lives of people who have left their homelands in the hope of achieving a better life, and other films vary in meaning and nuance according to the distinct cultures and societies from which they emerge. Filmmakers from countries where migration is common provide particular insights, as their subjects often exist between worlds.

The Film Criticism Forum that took place in Buraydah on *Migration, Travel, and Movement in Cinema* was concerned with the multitude of possibilities that human movement presents, the relationships forged, the myriad ways in which filmmakers tell these stories of migration, and how cinema itself has the potential to be reimaged when it represents and engages with these themes. The city of Buraydah in particular plays a key role with regard to the theme of migration. This is, in part, because of its centrally located geographical position within the Al Qassim region, but is mainly due to crucial economic factors that evolved because of trade and migration over many years. As early as 1370 C.E. merchants known as Al-Oqilat travelled great distances to trade livestock and other valuable items in exchange for spices, foodstuffs, household items, and weapons from other countries, developing a vibrant trade network that reached as far as Kuwait, Iraq, Palestine, Jordan, and Egypt. The commercial network of the Al-Oqilat merchants greatly contributed to the continued prosperity and culture of the region. During the Film Criticism Forum in Buraydah, participants and guests had the opportunity to visit a private museum honoring the history and living heritage of Al-Oqilat merchants, which showcased the integral legacy of trade, as well as the ways in which migration, travel, and the movement of peoples was—and remains—indelibly interconnected. Buraydah's cultural web of migration, travel, and economic history is in fact related to storytelling due to the significance that oral history has held within this legacy of trade and commerce. Of course, as cinema is often understood as an expanded storytelling mechanism, this is why groups and cultures with a tradition of oral history gravitate to cinema over other media. In the present collection that commemorates the Film Criticism Forum in Buraydah, film critic Ibrahim El Ariss (Lebanon) elaborates on the connotations of cinema and migration in international and local milieux, Youssef Rakha (Egypt) analyzes the films of Youssef Chahine vis-à-vis the migration of Arab cinema, and film critic Habib Nasry (Morocco) proposes this idea of an "immigrant cinema."

Cinema allows for expressions of the self, and for ruminations on the Other, while bringing society's ruptures into sharp relief. The viewer reconstructs what they have seen, drawing meaning from what resonates on the screen. It is the role of film criticism to thoroughly investigate this endlessly fascinating mode of expression, and our dedication to moving images has been at the core of this entire endeavour. It is what we sought to foster through the inaugural large-scale, international Film Criticism Conference in Riyadh and through the associated Film Criticism Forums in Jeddah, Dhahran, Abha, Tabuk, and Buraydah, smaller-scale events that performed important community outreach. We hope to continue this discussion well into the future.

The Organizers

Beyond the Frame

Installations

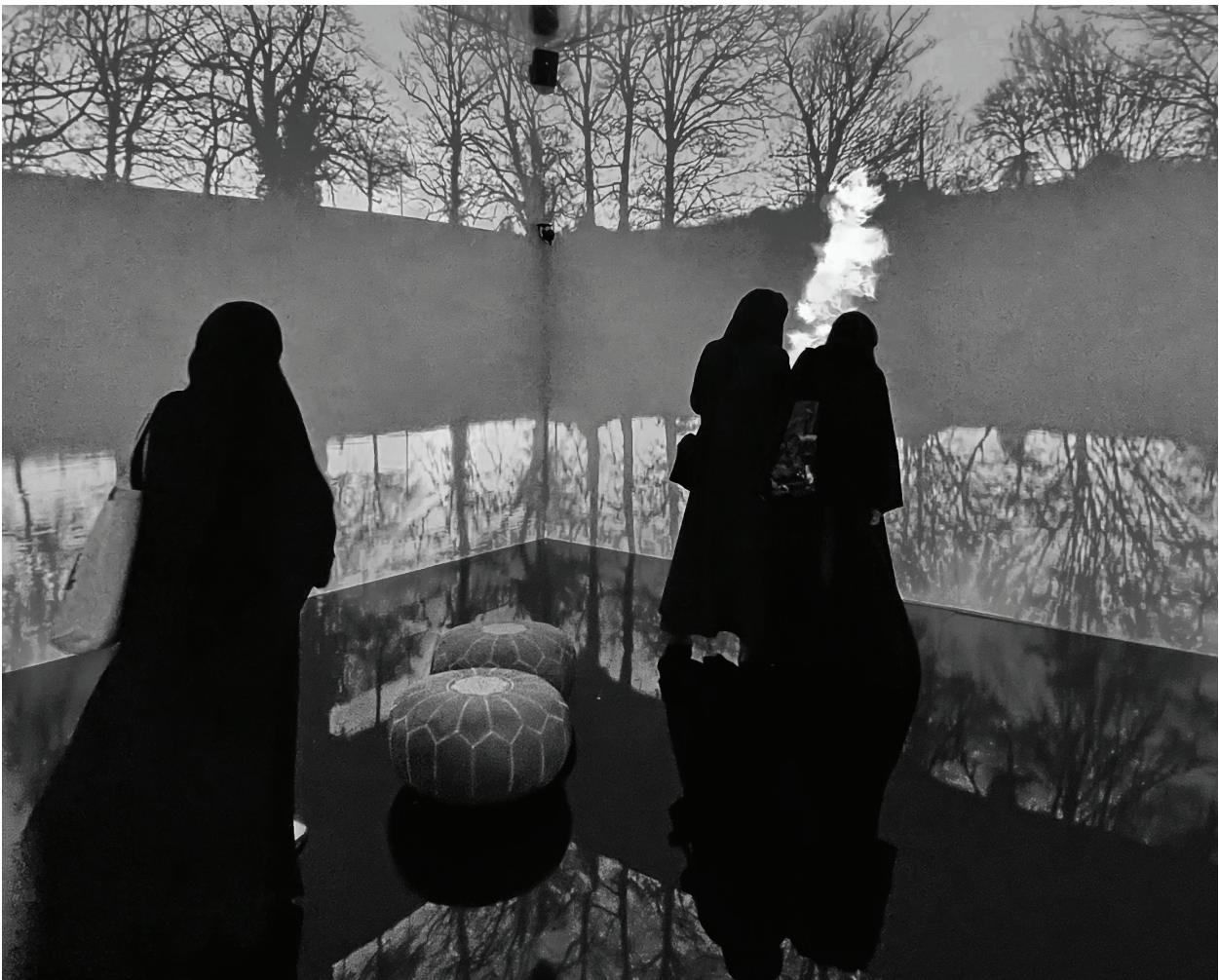
Laia Cabrera and Isabelle Duverger

Interactive design by Aniol Saurina Masó and Jianhao Ma
Original music by Nana Simopoulos

Dream-e-scape (2021)

Immersive Interactive Cinematic Art Installation, 360° video projection, 12 minutes

This immersive, interactive installation is a sensory voyage that captures the surreal nature of dreams, where the line is blurred between the physical and the digital world, between the real and the imaginary. Dream-e-scape explores the concept of lucid dreaming, the sleep state in which we become aware we are dreaming and have the ability to control the dream and gain agency over our thoughts and desires. We are testing reality: Are we awake?





Laia Cabrera and Isabelle Duverger, *Dream-e-scape* (2021). Installation view.



List of Installations

ARTWORKS EXHIBITED

May Abdalla and Amy Rose, *The Collider* (2019). Multi-media, immersive installation, 40 min.

Haya Alghanim, *Two Captains Sink the Ship* (2023). Three-channel video, 5:27 mins.

Laia Cabrera and Isabelle Duverger, *Dream-e-scape* (2021). Immersive, interactive installation, 360° video projection, 12 mins.

Jean-Luc Godard, *The Image Book* (2018). 84 mins.

Mohammed Hammad, *#INFINITESINCE83* (2019). Single-channel video, 7:19 mins.

Harshini Karunaratne, *Siren Speaks* (2023). Single-channel video, 7:30 mins.

Ayoung Kim, *Delivery Dancer's Sphere* (2022). Single-channel video, 25 mins.

Hayoun Kwon and Innerspace VR, *Kubo Walks the City* (2021). Black and white 3D animation, sound, VR installation, 15 mins.

Various, anonymous, *Travelogues: Views of West Asia and North Africa* (1909-1927). Silent films, 64 mins.

Biographies



Laia Cabrera

Laia Cabrera is an award-winning filmmaker and video artist who lives in New York, working in installation art and new cinema. Her work explores new ways of using space and the visual imagination as a tool for narrative storytelling and audience connection, merging cinematic arts, dance, music, theater, and digital and interactive arts. With Isabelle Duverger, she co-founded Laia Cabrera & Co., which created *The Now*, a 72-foot-long interactive digital film at Port Authority Bus Terminal, Times Square, New York.

Naminata Diabate

Naminata Diabate, Associate Professor of Comparative Literature at Cornell University, is a scholar of gender, sexuality, and race. Her most recent work on literary fiction, cinema, visual arts, and digital media has appeared in a monograph, peer-reviewed journals, collections of essays, and public platforms, including podcasts, newspapers, and news outlets. Her book, *Naked Agency: Genital Cursing and Biopolitics in Africa*, was published by Duke University Press in 2020 and awarded the African Studies Association 2021 Best Book Award and the African Literature Association 2022 First Book Prize. This year, she holds the Ali Mazrui Senior Research Fellowship at the Africa Institute of Sharjah in the United Arab Emirates, where she is working on two monographs, "Pleasure and Displeasure in Global Africa" and "Digital Insurgencies and Bodily Domains."



Sérgio Dias Branco



Sérgio Dias Branco is Assistant Professor of Film Studies at the University of Coimbra, Portugal, where he directs the master's program in Art Studies and coordinates the Laboratory for Investigating and Practicing Art (LIPA). He is a researcher at the Centre for Interdisciplinary Studies (CEIS20) at the University of Coimbra and collaborates with the Research Centre for Theology and Religious Studies at the Catholic University of Portugal and Nova Institute of Philosophy. He has taught at Nova University of Lisbon and the University of Kent, where he was awarded an MA and a PhD in Film Studies. He was President of the Association of Moving Image Researchers between 2018 and 2020 and a member of its Board of Directors between 2014 and 2020. He is the research coordinator of FID: Film and Interreligious Dialogue and a member of COREnet: Connecting Theory and Practical Issues of Migration and Religious Diversity.

Kay Dickinson

Kay Dickinson is a Professor of Film and Television Studies and convenor for MA Creative Arts and Industries at the University of Glasgow, Scotland. She is the author of *Supply Chain Cinema: Producing Global Film Workers (2024)*, *Arab Film and Video Manifestos: Forty-Five Years of the Moving Image Amid Revolution (2018)*, *Arab Cinema Travels: Transnational Syria, Palestine, Dubai, and Beyond (2016)*, and various articles on Arab popular and experimental culture in peer-reviewed journals and award-winning anthologies.



Isabelle Duverger

Born in France and based in New York City, Isabelle Duverger is an award-winning visual artist. She has presented her painting and immersive interactive installations throughout the US, Asia, and Europe, including New York's St. John the Divine Cathedral, Fabra I Coats in Barcelona, and Hong Kong City Hall. She makes public art with projection mapping on buildings and projection art for theater and dance, video art, and animation.

Mariam El Ajraoui

Mariam El Ajraoui is a director, actress, educator, and film researcher affiliated with Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne, specializing in cinemas of the Arab world. She has published scholarly work on Moroccan filmmakers Faouzi Bensaidi (*in Les arts dans la sphère publique, 2016*), Hakim Belabbès (*Filmer le quotidien, 2017*), and on Moroccan cinema more generally in *A*DESK: International and Independent Institution of Criticism and Contemporary Art (2022)*.

