

The Supernatural in Contemporary Arab Films

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Abstract

In movies, supernatural elements like ghosts, fairies, witches, phantoms, demons, etc. stand for dread and reversal of moral values. The power they wield or represent is ultimately demonic. Supernatural elements symbolize the general evil that prevails in the world. We are either able to overcome this evil and remain good human beings, or we succumb to its temptation and become bad. Evil comes to nothingness if human beings are not tempted by it. Supernaturalism refers not only to beliefs about 'things' that lie beyond our consciousness but is also related to the 'dangerous thoughts' in the human mind that are unexpressed or inexpressible. Supernatural elements in literature and film thus serve to ease out the unholy or uncommon thoughts that burden people from birth. Fear of the unknown, of uncertainty, and of death also makes supernatural elements perennially relevant. This paper would examine and illustrate the above through examples from selected Arabic films, such as *Qariyat Almansiya* (*The Forgotten Village*, the first Saudi Arabian horror movie), *The Djinn* (the first UAE horror film), and *Camp* (an Egyptian horror film). Supernatural elements are sometimes introduced in movies because they are a source of enjoyment, suspense, and thrill to audiences. Nevertheless, in many such films, the demonic powers are conquered, and good triumphs over evil.

Keywords: Supernatural, evil, literature and film, fear, Arabian horror movie, djinn, and Egyptian horror film.

In searching for the history of Arab horror film-making, we would not find much said. Arab horror films are extremely difficult to be found due to their lack in number and those present only form a beginning in shaping the history or the separate genre of Arab horror films. There has been several attempts here and there to create a convincing Arab horror film and some dates go back to the 1940's but the genre has only actually found its way in the 1980's. Even though many of these films turn out as failures due to lack of experience in the field and insufficient technological advancements in cinema production and sometimes also strong censorship against some elements as being inappropriate to be displayed to the public. By facing some of these obstacles and also working on a narrow range as compared to Hollywood, still some films make it to the cinema and to the TV screen. The Arab horror films *The Forgotten Village*, *Camp*, and *Djinn* are such examples.

Horror films can be defined as unsettling films designed to frighten and panic, cause dread and alarm, and to invoke our hidden worst fears, often in a terrifying, shocking finale, while captivating and entertaining us, at the same time, in a cathartic experience. Horror films effectively center on the dark side of life, the forbidden, and extraordinary and alarming events. Horror films usually center on the arrival of an evil force, person, or event. Many Horror films include mythical creatures such as ghosts, vampires, and zombies and they incorporate a large amount of violence into the plot. The horror film genre has many characteristics related to this special kind of genre which distinguishes it from other genres like: isolated settings, atmosphere of fear, graphic scenes, appearance of ghosts, fearful music in the background, hearing sounds and voices and many others.

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The film *Qariyat Almansiya (The Forgotten Village)* is characterized by its being an horror film acted by foreign actors from France, Canada, America and Saudi Arabia. The scenario of this film was written by the Saudi scenarist Tarik Al-Dakheel and directed by the Palestinian director Abdulla Abo Talib- a long experienced director in documentary films. The film stars are a group of Saudi youth, who have experience in the field of advertisements such as Ala'aAmeen. The story of this film is about two groups : Saudi youth and foreign tourists, who lost their ways and then meet in the forgotten village, which has its own beliefs that complicate the events and create a great deal of suspense. In the movie strange events take place by the appearance of some fabulous characters in the Gulf countries like "Nimnim", "Dagiran" and "Black Magician". This film is also featured with its use of Hollywood technical effects. The Forgotten Village is the first horror Saudi film, shot in many areas such as Khulais Village- North of Jidda, Dubai and Cairo.

The Forgotten Village uses a multinational and multi-ethnic cast and plays on elemental tropes of the horror genre, borrowing staple elements from the cannon of Western horror film, but it deploys local color and ethnic Arab and Middle Eastern elements to create a hybrid form and thematic texture. Using a bilingual script, complete with Arabic subtitles for the English dialogue, which further reinforces its hybridity, *The Forgotten Village* projects essential cinematographic effects of the archetypal Western horror film. It deploys deserted locations, scenes of night and darkness, uninhabited landscapes, and supernatural presences in the form of ghosts, monsters, or evil spirits. At the same time, it departs from the stock imagery of the conventional Western horror flick by bringing in ideas, images, and mythological elements from local myth and folklore, and borrowing aspects of the supernatural embedded in ancient Arab culture and narrative traditions.

For instance, the evil creatures or incarnations that haunt the village appear to have been constructed from descriptions of the genii or the djinns of Arab folklore and religious or quasi-religious traditions: a deformed or semi-human form, pitch black in color, with flaming eyes that symbolize evil, the devil, or the satanic. Local and traditional horror elements are further accentuated by the film's desert setting, which enshrines the mood of desolation on its main scene, and by camera-work that manipulates and alternates between darkness and light. They emphasize the barren landscape, the ruined structures, and the forlorn and deserted elements of the uninhabited village, which is a quintessentially Arab location. Local folklore is also stressed by insisting on the ancientness of the village- the dialogue insists that the village is at least 1200 years old, which links the place to a distant past, and to a collective or racial memory going back to pre-modern times, again embedding the scene and atmosphere of the film in local history, culture, and myth.

The Arab and the Western youth due to circumstances have to stay in an isolated and abandoned village that is thought it is haunted by evil spirits and creatures that chase these youth in the evening. The film sheds lights on the phenomenon of quackery and the Gulf people's beliefs in superstition. The hybrid nature of the script is established by its mixed cast of characters: The cast includes a group of young white Europeans, and Americans, who are tourists in the area, and a few Westernized Arabs, who are friends of the Europeans and the Americans and also their guides- the latter group is ethnically mixed, from both Arab and African descent, further diversifying cast and character types. It is this group that takes a tour of the deserted ancient village, which has a reputation of being haunted by evil spirits. The Westerners and the Americans mock and scoff at these rumors as empty superstition. However, their rational Western consciousness is shaken when they find themselves trapped in the village at nightfall, unable to escape from it. They are chased by creatures that resemble the genii of local folklore and religious tradition. The film thus pits the modern sensibility against ancient superstition, a clash in which the rational and pragmatic outlook is exposed threadbare, and shown as inadequate to comprehend deeper or mysterious elements that lie hidden behind surface meaning and truths.

In giving the reason of producing this film as an horror film, the director confirms his awareness of the Egyptian cinema which is rich with comedy films that dominate the cinema markets in Egypt and Arab countries. For this reason, he has worked on a new field in order to ensure success commercially and in addition to critical appreciation. *The Forgotten Village* is the third long fictional film, which got a lot of debates among the Saudi people who are interested in cinema, from one hand, and who are interested in the Saudi society and its traditions, from another hand.

These debates are due to the refusal of some Saudis for the existence of Saudi films and cinema theaters in Saudi Arabia, while others think that it is time to establish high-quality cinema manufacturing because it is a great art and at the same time it is important for the Saudi economy to vary its economical resources as it is in America, where cinema manufacturing is one of the most important economical resources.

Moreover, traditional Saudi culture is also skeptical of the conventional supernatural elements that are deployed in these films, which becomes another reason these films are not promoted by dominant Saudi culture. Regarding the reasons of choosing Khulais area for the film, the director said that this area has many ancient castles, wells and villages that make this area as a real décor for the film shooting so that it requires only some simple touches. From his side, the film screenwriter Tarik Al-Dakheel said that the story of the film totally reflects the Saudi life, touching upon the beliefs of heresy, quackery and superstition practiced by some people to live in illusion. He added that the film stars endeavour to deliver a message that disunity and dispersal ultimately lead to lose after getting into a forgotten village in the history where a number of actions take place and conclude with tragic end.

For the use of Arabic and English languages in the film, the director said: both English and Arabic languages are intentionally used in the film because the horror films are common in English and Arab audience are used to that. For this reason, the film is produced in both English and Arabic languages in order to maintain the Arab audience's interests in the horror films which are common to be watched in English. The director introduces the stars of the film namely: Mohammed Hashim, who plays the role of the black magician- due to his huge body, and Hamid Al-Ghamidi, who plays the role of Nimnim which comes out of its tomb to suck victims' blood. Due to Saudi customs, Saudi women do not play any role in the film, but the director engaged ShaimaFadhel – a correspondent of one Egyptian T.V. channels to play the role of the tourism guide in the film.

As to the production and encouragement of this kind of film, the some Egyptian critics recommended this experiment like ShafikSubhi, who said: " showing the film and its production is a good opportunity to call the Saudi institutions to support film production, encouraging the cinema manufacturing and opening cinema theaters". The Egyptian actor Hisham Abdulhameed expressed " his happiness for the existence of such experiments in Saudi Arabia, which has been far away from the interactions related to arts", confirming " the necessity of supporting such experiments because cinema always reflects the freedom of creativity and it should take place in Saudi Arabia".

While the horror genre is still new to Saudi audiences, Egypt was and still is the origin or beginning of the Arab horror film making industry. The majority of Arab horror films produced in the past century are mostly copies or recreations of American horror films but with a touch of the traditional beliefs of the Arab world in ghosts, demons, and jinn. One such film is the Egyptian film *Camp* (2007), which is characterized by being a horror film or slasher movie which recreates similar American horror films like *Scream* and *I Know What You Did Last Summer*. Even though Egyptian films focus on comedy, there are still some trials in the genre of Arab horror film-making. These kinds of productions are considered new and very limited in number. Egypt has one of the most ancient cultures in the world which is rich in superstitions and supernatural beliefs. It has the pyramids and mummies. It has the temples and the pharaohs. These ancient possessions have not been incorporated fully into the Egyptian horror film making trials, unlike American horror films which have used these foreign elements in some of their horror films due to the American culture's understanding of the important role such ancient sites arouse in superstitious and supernatural beliefs of the viewers. At the same time the Egyptian film making industry has not reached the technological advancements as that of Hollywood which may be developed on a wide scale in creating such convincing horror films. However, they are not bad as a start and may prove to be a good beginning.

Camp is directed by Abdel Aziz Hashad who began as an assistant director of commercials and later on moved to work on TV series with other famous directors. However, his real dream was in directing horror films and he always wished that his first film would be of this kind. Amir Abaza the producer, is also a first time producer. Similarly, the screenwriter Haytham Waheed admits about *Camp* that it was his first experience writing a movie of this type. The crew did a good job and they were invited to participate in the Horror Film Festival in France which gives this film a privilege over many other films and forms a sense of encouragement to develop in the field. Most of the members of the cast were also new coming Egyptian actors with the exception of a few who had little previous experience like Mohammed El Kholey, who acted before in 'Ouja', the young singer Ayman El Refaey in his first acting role, as well as Amira Hany who acted in the TV series 'El Amma Nour' series and Yasmine Gamal.

The Egyptian film *Camp* is actually a slasher movie which is a type of horror involving a psychopathic killer stalking and killing a sequence of victims in a violent manner and often with a cutting tool like an ax, knife, or dagger. The action begins when a group of young friends decide to spend their holiday in a deserted resort called "Beach Camp" as an adventure getaway. When they reach the place, mysterious incidents begin to occur. Suddenly, they become the target of a mysterious masked serial killer and suspicion towards each other finds its way into the group of friends. The name or title of the film does not convey any sense of fear in the beginning of the film. It is only after we see the sign leading to the place and we reach the place the viewer realizes there is something wrong with the building that the group intends to settle at.

The first haunting element the director uses is the isolated setting. The main action takes place in an old rundown hotel on the beach and in the middle of nowhere. The road that leads to this hotel is a dirt road in a desert which shows no sign of life. Even the sign that is at the fork of the road with the name of the hotel Beach Camp is also unusual and queer looking pointing to a desolate area to be found after so many kilometers in the desert. It seems that the place once had a busy past where tourists and visitors usually spent their holidays relaxing away from the tensions of everyday life. It is a perfect getaway for relaxation if you wish to be in complete isolation of the world. The place at first seems to be abandoned. Some of the groups were actually reluctant to enter the building in the first place due to its old and shabby appearance. As the group of teenagers enters the hotel they meet the owner of the hotel who is an old man. They learn that the old hotelkeeper, his young wife, and three servants are the only inhabitants of the exceptionally large place. The hotel has so many empty rooms and a dark basement which raise a feeling of suspicion in the actors and viewers that something is just not right. It is too late in the day to return or search for another place to spend the night so the group is forced to stay there till the next day. Nighttime falls on this remote area giving a scary feeling of entrapment. The location and timing of the setting is perfect in creating suspense and building of tension. This makes the audience have the sense of fear for the characters knowing that something is wrong and that they are in danger.

The second haunting element the film focuses on is the use of sound effects. The element of sounds in a horror film helps enhance the emotional impact of scenes. The reason that people become scared during horror films is in a large degree associated with the music and sound effects that help create tension. If these audio features were not used during horror films they would not be as scary. All the sounds that accompany the actions of the film are distinguished by a tone of fear. These sounds add intensity and danger to the given situation. There are different types of sounds displayed throughout the film. There is the certain melody which accompanies the appearance of the killer. This is a kind of symbol which is vital in horror films. Sometimes certain sounds are exaggerated to make a specific action stand out. Other sounds are there to create background noise like the sound of the waves on the beach. There are also the screams of the actors themselves when left alone or faced with a horrifying situation. The use of silence also has an effect of causing fear especially when it is followed by a big shocking sound. The director and producer have tried to mix the different sound effects as a part of the underlying elements to help create the sensation of fear in the viewer. They have followed the Hollywood technique in the use of such an element in the most proper and affecting way.

Another very familiar haunting element found in the film is the use of the ghost story. Although no supernatural action occurs in the film unless we want to attribute the killings of the teenagers to an unknown entity at the start of the film. Of course, there is a rumor that the place is haunted by the ghost of a man who was murdered in the hotel some time ago and this gives rise to the suspicion that he may be the killer. The hotelkeeper tells the group the story of the murder in the hotel just as they are checking in which arouses the sense of fear in the different characters. He even shows them the room which the murder took place in and says that it has not been occupied ever since. Nonetheless, it has to be occupied by one of the teenagers now since each member of the group wants a room of his own.

The old hotelkeeper knows that the murder is true but the story of the ghost is fictional. However, he has his own reasons which are later explained for creating the story. Unlike the sound effects and the isolated settings which are a copy of the American horror film making, the belief in ghosts and haunted areas is not something new in the Arab belief and superstition. Ghosts have a deep-rooted background in the Arab faith and folklore.

The Arab culture is embedded with ghost stories and strong faith in the idea of haunted places. The film tries to carry forth this belief in a modern Arab horror film but which takes its action for the carrying out of the idea from similar American thrillers. The use of the knife or dagger along with a mask or costume is one of the most important elements in the making of horror films. The Arab horror film production does not diverge from this plane either. The film *Camp* uses this technique of showing the weapon used in the murders. It is a large knife which is usually seen in the hands of the hotelkeeper causing suspicion that he is the killer. However, once he is killed too, the group begins to set accusations towards one another. The knife is a clear symbol of death and killing especially when the camera sets focus on it several times and is later seen in the hands of the killer. The mask and costume are also important in the murders and this is a clear imitation of American horror films and their use of costumes. In the film the killer is wearing a long black overcoat and covers his face with a rubber mask. He is always silent and blood appears on his face every time he kills because he wipes his face with his bloody hands. Blood is also a symbol of death and killing and is found accompanying each slaughter. It is also used to create bathtubs full of blood similar to the American horror films where the victim is drowned in a pool of blood.

One improvised method the Arab horror film making industry tries to achieve is to dominate the angle of shooting of the different scenes. The art of camera work is an important element displayed in horror films, and this element is also evident in *Camp*. Weird angles and point of view shots make the viewers feel more involved and build tension or even express fear. Some scenes occur indoors while others occur outdoors. There are different situations where the actors are running from one crime scene to the other, from one floor of the building to the other, and from one room to the other. The camera tries to handle all the situations perfectly to create a whole image of the actions going on. Some camera shots are made directly into the eyes of the killer to create suspense or terror to the audience. In addition, light in media or film making has a significant role to play especially in horror films.

The lighting of a room can suggest that something is about to occur. Low light directly means that something scary is about to take place. In the film there is a constant turning off and on of the electricity every time something frightening is going to happen.

The themes of horror films are usually similar in nature, whether related to American or Arab horror films. Themes are universal, meaning that they normally have something to do with struggle, with good against evil, with loyalty verses deceit, or with revenge of an aggrieved, with serial killers, and with demons or exorcisms. They are used to scare, thrill, and entertain the audience. They usually center around something forbidden and alarming, something strange and dark, something mysterious and shadowy. The theme of the film "Camp" is no deviation. It focuses on revenge which is a recurring theme throughout history and in all cultures. In the beginning of the film there was a birthday party for one of the teens in the group. The party ended with the rape of one of the teenage girls. Her boyfriend sets out to take revenge because he could not protect her at the time. This group trip offers him the best chance for his vengeance against those who took advantage of his girlfriend. Therefore, the theme of revenge in this film is not new to the making of Arab films and large number of action films have dealt with the same idea.

The *Djinnis* the world's first supernatural-thriller to be delivered in English and Arabic. It is set in Jazirat Al Hamra, in Ras Al Khaimah, a fishing village that was abandoned years ago. It seems that UAE has finally made a horror film which is not only a feature length film, but is also gaining widespread attention, mainly because of the fact that the production company, Image Nation Abu Dhabi, managed to persuade the legendary horror films director Tobe Hooper to direct it. Tobe Hooper earned international fame in the 70s when he directed the horror classic *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*. The first horror film from UAE is called *The Disappearance of the Djinn*.

The story revolves around an Emirati couple who returns to the UAE and move into a lavish apartment. Little do they know their home was built on a haunted fishing village and are subsequently visited by Djinn, or genies. A Djinn is a type of spirit, a novel ghost for what otherwise sounds like a familiar a apartment-haunting story. The spirit in this film are from an abandoned fishing village, angrily roaming the high-rise apartment complex built over their former home.

The prologue tells of a baby who is half-human, half-djinn (a shape-shifting demon), taken from his mother, who now searches the world for her offspring. Shift to New York, where guilt-ridden Salama (RazaneJammal) feels she is to blame for her infant's death. Hubby Khalid (Khalid Laith), an orphan from way back gets a transfer back to the UAE. Salama is reluctant to go, but her family is thrilled to have her return.

A clunky flashback shows a ghostly fishing village, apparently nowhere near water, haunted by djinns. A tall apartment block is built on the space, and that, of course, is where Salama and Khalid are housed. Salama is uneasy: Could it be the constant fog (cheaply done)? The strange concierge (Malik McCall)? The disembodied baby cries? Meeting bizarre, black-clad, plastic-faced neighbor Sara (Aiysha Hart) makes her only more uncomfortable, and then the "Rosemary's Baby" parallels really kick in, when she and Khalid are invited to Sara's apartment to meet the neighbors (alas, Ruth Gordon is nowhere in sight). Chills are nonexistent and frights minimal thanks to third hand concepts such as the djinn's habit of crawling and mumbling.

The film *Djinn* was very much able to make its presence felt all over the movie. What makes it relevant to the region is its realistic portrayal of a young couple who are torn between the lure of the West and the beckoning call of the Arab world. The characters' crisis of nationality and lack of belonging underlies the entirety of the plot, and conversations switch between Arabic and English throughout the film in a way that is true to the experiences of many Westernized Arabs today. In that sense, the movie was able to resonate with-and subsequently instill terror into- a certain segment of viewers who usually benefit from feeling a sense of detachment from horror film victims who look and talk nothing like them. Of course, the movie's modernized exploration of the evil-doing Djinn only served to amplify this. Djinns are spiritual creatures of the unseen world mentioned in Islamic texts who may have grown up feeling. As lead actress Razane Jammal said during red carpet interviews prior to the screening, the movie provides a change from the usual werewolves and vampire narratives that the industry is oversaturated with, giving us something new to shake in our boots over.

The use of Djinns as the centerpiece supernatural device sets an Arabized or Middle Eastern tone in this film, setting it apart from the traditional Western horrors genre. Djinn embeds its plot and cinematography into the culture of the East to a reasonable extent through its Eastern locale and setting, which locates it in an Eastern cultural context.

In the films *The Forgotten Village*, *Camp*, and *Djinn*, if the supernatural is seen as a phenomenon that projects latent or buried emotions onto the psyche, then the release of dark forces in the deserted settings of these films can be seen as the manifestation of the atavistic, darker side of the seemingly balanced, rational American, Western characters, suggesting the instability of rational, Western thought. Similarly, the evil manifestations of these films reveal deep fissures of fear and turmoil within the psyches of the Westernized characters, showing layers of trauma beneath their pragmatic exteriors. Also, if being conscious of fear, or living with fear, is a sign of humility, then the Western mind, as depicted in these scripts, has abandoned this humility. The persecution of Western characters in these films comes as just punishment for their monstrous pride or hubris, and for their false beliefs in the absolute certainties of mind and intellect, which are shown as shallow and inadequate in the face of grave crisis.

If horror or the supernatural reverses the moral order, or challenges traditional moral values, then the unleashing of evil in *The Forgotten Village*, *Camp*, and *Djinn* reveals this with full force, as the seemingly self-contained, confident, and skeptical Western characters lose control of their lives, as power is wrested from them. For instance, in *The Forgotten Village*, the night of horror ends in sequential deaths – the manners of the deaths suggesting ideas of damnation or eternal punishment entrenched in the Arab tradition: death by fire, death by being buried alive, and death by being trampled under the hoofs of a horse or an animal. All these movies engage in typical titillations of horror that would be reminiscent of any Western horror film. They insist on the ancientness of their locations, by creating a host of monsters drawn from local myth and culture, and by pitting West against East in intriguing ways. They depart from the conventions of horror film-making in the Western tradition, charting new territory and appropriating a Western genre by infusing it with local elements.

We have discussed the major elements which make a horror film what it is. We have seen how such elements are incorporated into the Arab horror film making. Some elements are clear imitations while others are original ideas and beliefs. Even if these trials have not reached the success they were aimed at achieving, still they are very good and clearly strike the tone for future experiments in the same field. More studies on the Hollywood techniques of filmmaking with the complementation of more homemade trials and ideas are the only way to improve in this field. The Arab horror film industry has to be more daring and willing to risk chances in venturing into this field and coming out with superb works that will shock viewers worldwide.

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