Who Believes in Gulf Futurism?

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When the American-Qatari artist Sophia Al-Maria and Kuwaiti composer Fatima Al Qadiri coined the term “Gulf Futurism” more than a decade ago, they employed it in two intertwined but dissonant senses. Gulf Futurism in the first sense is descriptive and historical. It names the unfathomably rapid, almost traumatic, oil-driven modernization of the Persian Gulf region, where in the span of a single generation a place like Dubai morphed from a humble fishing port into a high-rise megacity and global financial hub. Bedouins became bureaucrats, camels cars, tents towers.As Al Maria put it, “one of the most ancient ways of living came head-on against extreme wealth and capitalism – glass and steel against wool and camels.” On this understanding, Gulf Futurism is the Burj Khalifa, the Palm Jumeria, the Mall of the Emirates, the Mars probe Hope, the Louvre Abu Dhabi, and the wildly ambitious Vision 2030 plans announced by Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the UAE.

Gulf Futurism in the second sense is aesthetic and critical. It names an artistic tendency that reckons with the existential fallout of the aforementioned “Dubai-ification” of the region, marked by the spiraling proliferation of megamalls, megacities, mega-everything. To the extent that Gulf Futurism is a coherent art movement rather than merely the idiosyncratic vision of two individual artists, it is associated with the GCC—an art collective founded in 2013 that deliberately confuses its name with that of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). The latter is a political and economic consortium of six Gulf states founded in 1981, comprising Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, and Oman.

The GCC collective parodies the GCC consortium; it is a “delegation” of nine Gulf artists, the exact identities of which have varied over the years. Al-Maria and Al Qadiri were among its founding members. Unlike its intergovernmental counterpart, the art collective’s name is “an image, like a .jpeg file,” not an acronym. Adopting a homonym with as long as a shadow as “GCC” is bold, not least for how it tanks SEO fitness, but it is a decision which encapsulates the collective’s critical project. After all, the aesthetic of Gulf futurism innovated by the GCC is, in the final analysis, a parodic one, parasitic on and subversive of the self-presentation of the Gulf Cooperation Council.

Gulf Non-Futurism

In the words of one critic, “when GCC…appropriate the gestures and self-mythologizing imagery involved in diplomatic proceedings, they seek to uncover them as a kind of ridiculous theatre, rituals with no real meaning.” In its critique of state as brand and government as corporation, the GCC mimics the uncanny vernacular, at once local and impersonal, produced by the intersection of indigenous tribal structures with late global capitalism—“the language of PR, the language of selling real estate, language of selling leisure and lifestyle options, the language of the performance [rather than reality] of labor.” Put differently, Gulf Futurism, as interpreted by the GCC, is a representation of Gulf hyperreality, a simulacrum of a simulacrum.

Across exhibits in New York, London, Kuwait, Berlin, Beijing, Copenhagen, and Dubai, the GCC has attempted to reflect and refract the breakneck accelerationism and New Age positive-thinking that have become the definitive modes of Gulf politics and culture. The GCC describes its artistic project as “a kind of positive realism,” but it is ultimately an ironic and even cynical one—much closer to an aesthetics of capitalist realism than anything resembling the blistering optimism of Italian Futurism, or most other futurisms since. Gulf Futurism, as understood by the GCC art collective, describes a future that is already present as environmental disaster and consumerist dystopia.

Al-Maria's 2016 solo exhibition in the United States, *Black Friday*, articulates Gulf Futurism in its most obviously pessimistic, capitalist realist register. As Christopher Lew writes, the video-based exhibition is "ouroboros-like," depicting a "mall in limbo," with "automated walkways that appear to go both up and down but lead nowhere, neither to heaven nor to hell," even as the video's narrator speaks of a dream that is a nightmare, and an "apocalypse that is already here." As a term and a concept, then, Gulf Futurism is conflationary and oxymoronic. It does not distinguish between the state-managed, oil-fueled project of social, economic, cultural, and technological modernization, and the aesthetic critique of said modernization as inauthentic unreality. Gulf Futurism is in fact Gulf non-Futurism. The corporate state conceals what itscorporate critics reveal: behind the gloss and pomp, the big nothing.

But even the GCC understands, on some level, that Gulf non-Futurism maintains a relationship, however tenuous, with the future. For all that its artists dismiss as fake the patriotic pan-regionalism and technological utopianism peddled by the Gulf Cooperation Council, they still registered shock at the deployment of Peninsula Shield (the GCC's military) to suppress the 2011 protests in Bahrain: "Everyone knows that it's a show union, not a real union…Then it became so real." It was a moment which suggested the real-world power of belief: "By producing these regionalist pop songs and media productions and things like that, [the GCC has become] reality for a lot of people." With this begrudging admission, the GCC collective comes close to understanding that the bugs they have sought to expose with their artworks—the artifice of all the very official summits, forums and press conferences—are in fact integral to the design. There's an extent to which these artists are stuck in a Platonic frame, fixated on a distinction between the Real and its shadows which matters less than they believe.

The GCC's 2017 Basel exhibition, "Belief in the Power of Believe," is truer than its own creators may have known. Its meditation on the Gulf governments' co-option of "positive energy movements" as state policy, while clearly satirical and critical, may be better read as simply documentary. "Belief in the power of believe"— this is indeed state policy. It is not merely a cynical tool of legitimation and depoliticization. It is, in all seriousness and sincerity, the official strategy by which the Gulf states intend to bring forward the future.

I want to demonstrate what I mean by examining two projects that I take to be especially representative of Gulf Futurism, understood here as a top-down, state-sponsored aesthetic and political project that at once represents and realizes the future: the UAE's Museum of Future, opened in Dubai in 2022; and Saudi Arabia's state-sponsored animanga production studio, operative since 2017. The question I ask is, what is Gulf Futurism as seen from the perspective of the state, rather than its critics?

Tomorrow Today

The Museum of the Future is a remarkable feat of engineering. Built at a cost of $136 million, the torus-shaped structure is seven stories tall and clad in more than a thousand stainless steel/fiberglass/carbon-fiber panels, each designed with 3-D modeling software and individually molded by the computer-driven machinery of a local Emirati company. "The project….is an example of how buildings may be designed and assembled for decades to come: a blend of human skill and digital power," declared the New York Times. Five floors of interactive exhibits invite visitors to imagine Earth in 2071. The tour begins on the top floor, at the OSS Hope space station (named after the Emirati Mars probe), before descending through the HEAL Institute (featuring a digitally re-created Amazon rainforest, a DNA library of 2,400 specimen, and a laboratory touting the ecological possibilities of human-engineered biodiversity), an "oasis" exploring the therapeutic potentials of supersonic devices and evolved meditation techniques, and a children's play area for "Future Heroes."

The exhibit most revealing of the Museum's ideology of the future is the penultimate exhibit on the second floor, titled "Tomorrow Today." On display are more than 50 tech products, extant and prototypical, from autonomous vehicles to jetpacks to robot falcons. The tech is purported to address future challenges ranging from agriculture and irrigation to food security and sustainable waste management. The paradoxical temporality announced by the exhibit—"Tomorrow Today"—is true of the museum as a whole, and it is given a more explicit formulation by a line from the poem adorning the building's exterior as oversized calligraphy: "The future will be for those who will be able to imagine, design and build it, the future does not wait, the future can be designed and built today."

"Tomorrow Today"—this is the temporality of Gulf Futurism. The Museum of the Future claims to imagine the future, but is itself, in its ostentatious architectural implausibility, a statement that the future is already here.This is a representation of the future that is itself a manifestation of that future. It announces an impossible temporality: a future that is imminent, but also a future that is already here. In this timescape, there is no present, or even past: there is only the future, in which we currently live, but whose arrival we are also working to bring about.

The future ceases to be "the future"; it cannibalizes time itself, such that "the UAE" has been in the future "all along," even "before," when "we" were desert-dwelling, robe-wearing, shakshuka-eating, falcon-racing tribesmen; it is precisely the endurance of such traditions—even if only as aesthetic affects or tourist traps or robot falcons—which distinguishes this future as *our* future. In this way does a politics of the future reify the nation more effectively than a politics of nostalgia ever could. The invention of the national future always doubles as an invention of the national past. For this reason, the Museum of the Future is set in 2071: it is the centennial of the UAE's founding, tying the scientific breakthroughs and technological innovations of this now-momentous year to a specifically Emirati history. Note the circularity of it all: 2071 is made into a world-historical watershed by the political coincidence of 1971, and 1971 is in turn eulogized by its relationship to the world-historical watershed of 2071.

This forever temporality is conveyed well by the conceptual contradiction of a museum of the future. The premise is a form of time travel: it memorializes the future that has yet to happen, and thus casts the future as past. This is a museum that has arrived from somewhere else, from another time, yet its thrill comes precisely from its contemporaneity, from its present possibility, from its *now*-ness. A museum of the future—as in a museum *about* the future, or a museum *from* the future? The superposition is the point. This is the time of Gulf Futurism—a time of quantum.

Emirati Futurism

That the future already realized and being realized by the UAE is culturally authentic is evidently of great concern to the royal family, given that its futurism is another name for nationalism. The UAE's rulers are not oblivious to the contradictions flagged by the GCC art collective—that so much of the Gulf states' futuristic aesthetic seems lifted wholesale from abroad, from the iconography of Hollywood blockbusters and Western science fiction, with a local accent somewhere between accidental and incidental.

If the GCC's critique was Gulf Futurism, the UAE's response is Emirati Futurism: "A cultural, aesthetic and philosophical effort to explore the intersection of Emirati heritage with high technology, futuristic concepts and science fiction themes." So went the announcement of the Emirati Futurism Award in 2021, a national design competition patronized by Sheikha Latifa bint Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum's Dubai Culture and Arts Authority and the Dubai Future Foundation (the logo of which is the Museum of the Future). "The UAE has a rich heritage & tradition," we are told. "But our images of the future look like they come from somewhere else." Accordingly, the award "invites anyone living in the UAE to share their interpretation of what an original Emirati Future might look like." We see here, again, that the mere envisioning of this future is taken as how it will be realized—the goal is to imagine "a new aesthetic that can inspire, guide, and empower a new generation of designers, artists & entrepreneurs." If the indigenous future can be thought, it can be willed.

The Emirati Futurism Award was given to 21 winners across seven categories, including architecture and urbanism, fashion and jewelry, product and industrial design, photography and graphic design, music and performing arts, the fine arts, and, most relevantly for our purposes, film and animation. The award announcement singles out that last category "one of the most difficult and powerful" in the competition, reflecting, perhaps, the growing Emirati interest in building a domestic animation industry.

The UAE has long been a major player in Arab animation, the Emirati animated comedies*Shaabiat Al-Cartoon* and *Freej* having been staples of regional Ramadan programming for nearly 20 years. But much more significant is the extremely successful Dubai-based children's channel, SpaceToon. The television channel, on air since 2000 with an international audience of more than 130 million viewers, arguably represents a nascent form of techno-philia and sci-fi imaginary that would become pillars of Gulf Futurism.

SpaceToon is, per its tagline, "the channel of the youth of the future," a claim underlined by its central conceit: an "in-universe" solar system of ten planets, each corresponding to a theme-based bloc of programming complete with its own animation and musical number. *Dragon Ball Z* airs "on" Planet Action, *Captain Tsubasa* on Planet Sports, and so on. The idea is that the child viewer, every time he watches any show, traverses the vast expanse of space to visit the planet with which the show is associated, based on its genre (or, in the case of Planet Emerald, its prescribed demographic). Each opening animation begins in orbit before descending for a tour of the planet's surface; this is the "landing" of the spaceship that is the television set, piloted by the eager child sitting cross-legged before it. The closing animations open aboard the television-spaceship—"Our visit to this planet has concluded," announces the ship's AI interface—and off we blast, repeating our tour of the planetary surface but this time ascending up and away, until next episode.

While SpaceToon's sci-fi framing device was quite original for the Arab world at the turn of the millennium, the channel itself aired virtually no original content of its own. The overwhelming majority of its programming came from Japanese animations dubbed into Arabic. This is essential context for understanding the form now taken by Saudi Arabia's burgeoning and regionally unparalleled animation industry—the other form of Gulf Futurism to which we now turn.

Saudi Futurism

Manga Productions, a subsidiary company of the Mohammed bin Salman "MiSK" Foundation, was established in 2017—the same year that Muhammad bin Salman was appointed crown prince. It is but one front in the sustained social, cultural, and economic diversification of the Kingdom enacted by bin Salman's Saudi Vision 2030 program. Manga Productions must be understood as the Saudi state's attempt to politically and economically capitalize on the cultural impact of SpaceToon, which is largely responsible for the immense popularity of Japanese animation in the Arab world (even before the global mainstreaming of anime in the past decade or so). Unsurprisingly, Manga Productions hired Rasha Rizk, the Syrian songwriter beloved for her Arabic theme songs of the dubbed anime classics that aired on SpaceToon, to sing the opening and ending theme songs of its first television series,*Future's Folktales.*

The first season is set in Riyadh, the capital of Saudi Arabia, while the second is set in NEOM. Grandmother Asmaa, living in the Riyadh of the future, entertains her grandchildren by relating traditional Arabian folktales. This frame story, vaguely evocative of Shahrazad and *The Thousand and One Nights*, simultaneously projects (Saudi) Arabia into the far past and the far future. Visually, it is a familiar future—the robot assistants, suspended railways, spaceports, VR headsets, holograms, and hovercars of this new Riyadh were already standard sci-fi fare decades ago. The solarpunk aesthetic of the industrial NEOM eco-city called the Oxagon, built on water and shrouded in greenery, is only marginally less familiar.

The distinctly Saudi Futurism of *Future's Folktales* lies less in its visualization of Riyadh and NEOM than in the form of the show itself. It is an Arabic animated series produced by Saudi Arabia in partnership with a Japanese animation studio. It is, in other words, a demonstration of Saudi Arabian cosmopolitanism, industry, modernity. The operation here is precisely the same as that of Dubai's Museum of the Future: the projection of the imminent future is done via a medium that itself announces the arrival of that future. The future is coming, and it is already here. The Saudi state's ability to produce rather than import a product as expensive and labor-intensive as animation, and to do so on an industrial scale with "authentic" content reflective of indigenous culture, is evidence enough of the future such animations depict. This is the implicit claim made by every new piece of animation from Manga Productions. Still, given that the Saudi regime is as concerned with marketing cultural authenticity as its Emirati counterpart, the seeming lack of a distinctly Saudi aesthetic in these imagined futures is felt as a real concern. The best*Future's Folktales* can do is bluntly juxtapose ancient folklore and science fiction, "Arabizing" the future by insistently drawing a direct line from it to the remote culture and aesthetic of Bedouin life. A solution, perhaps, but one that works through association rather than substance.

Again, this attempt to develop an indigenous aesthetic of the Arab future via the medium of animation continues a project that goes back to at least SpaceToon. We see glimpses of it on Planet History, which features bulbous

aircraft and towering mosques in a desert dense with visual signifiers of the medieval Arab past. We also see it on Planet Science, partly via its visuals—the surface is essentially a giant motherboard crisscrossed by satellites, windmills, solar panels, plasma balls, copper wire, electric currents, and all manner of vaguely scientific gizmos and colorful neon—but more directly through the musical direction: a synth track punctuated by mechanical beeps, culminating in the familiar female vocals of traditional Arabic music. This is clearly trying to indigenize the soundscape of technological modernity, to suggest, however simply and briefly, an Arabian reinterpretation of techno-pop and synthwave—those genres of music most closely associated with science fiction and the "future" in the Western imagination.

Future's Folktales was the first attempt by Manga Productions to realize something akin to SpaceToon's self-consciously Arab futures, but it has not been the last. Consider the two-minute short it animated for Saudi Arabia's 2024 National Day. The premise of the short is that Saudi Arabia must save humanity by stopping an asteroid on a collision course with Earth. Our protagonist is a Saudi mecha pilot named Raed (which, naturally, translates to "pioneer"). He launches from a space station while his parents, wife, and son anxiously watch back on Earth. An ostentatious display of technological prowess ensues, as Raed activates his super-powered jetpacks, lands on the surface of the asteroid, and defeats the space beast revealed to be piloting the asteroid by stabbing it in the eye with a massive blade.

The mix of CGI and hand-drawn animation is impressive, but aesthetically, there is little to distinguish the short from its inspiration: Gundam, the influential Japanese military sci-fi franchise. Indeed, personnel from the recent Gundam series helped direct and animate the short. The result is Gundam draped in a Saudi Arabian flag, distinguished only by language and cosmetics (Raed's mecha suit, for instance, has green accents and a palm tree on its chest plate). The most un-Gundam-like element here is the overt religiosity: inscribed in Arabic on Raed's helmet is a prayer ("May God protect you"), and he invokes God's assistance in his climactic slaying of the one-eyed space monster. As I have written elsewhere, this is in keeping with how Bin Salman's regime has reappropriated Islam for its new nationalisticproject. While Raed invokes God, he is no Islamist—his post-victory text to his family is an ode to the glories of this new, space-faring Saudi Arabia: "Above the shooting stars, lies our most treasured land."

There is little reason to deny that such a short might feature something like a Saudi futurist aesthetic. The Emirati and Saudi embrace of the visual tropes of Western and Japanese sci-fi to articulate their futures may trouble a puritan nationalist ideology of authenticity, but clearly the regimes in question experience this borrowed imagery as a bothersome rather than decisive problem. Saudi Arabia has shown few compunctions about invoking a sense of futurity through the iconography of Japanese mecha; Manga Productions just recently announced a reboot of the iconic anime series *Grendizer*, first introduced to the Arab world via SpaceToon. Indeed, the universal prestige of the Western sci-fi imaginary may actually advantage the Gulf states, insofar as this imaginary provides credible metrics by which their progress into the future may be measured. All any foreign observer has to do to bestow the honor of the future upon Dubai is watch*Blade Runner*, or *The Wizard of Oz.*

Conclusion

We can draw at least two conclusions from this brief survey of the UAE's and Saudi Arabia's imagined futures. The first is that there is not one Gulf Futurism, but many, specific to each Gulf state's idiosyncratic historical experience and geopolitical objectives. Certainly there are shared features, driven as much by cooperation as competition—runaway investments in decadent urban development projects, pursuit of record-breaking heights and sizes, a commitment to business at all costs, and a pragmatic dance between safeguarding U.S. imperial interests and building regional autonomy through partnerships with China and investments abroad (a dance reflective of a networked understanding of international relations). But there are divergences, nonetheless.

One striking distinction between Saudi and Emirati Futurism, for instance, is the presence of Islam, or absence thereof. Given its recent Wahhabi past and current custodianship of Islam's holiest sites, Saudi Arabia cannot imagine a future emptied of religion (nor would it want to—religion is good for business). Saudi Futurism is thus frequently articulated in an Islamic register: the sprawling expansion of Masjid al-Haram, the installation of live *qibla* compasses on the jets of Saudi Arabian Airlines, the construction of a high-speed railway between Mecca and

Medina, and the planned restoration of 41 landmarks along 300 miles of the Prophet Muhammad's historic migration route between the two aforementioned cities. Emirati Futurism, meanwhile, has no comparable religious sensitivities or business motives—especially given UAE ruler Mohammad Bin Zayed's quarter-century-long war on Islamism—and its secularism is thorough-going. Rather than the five pillars of Islam, the Museum of the Future gives us the five pillars of "sustainability, innovation, creativity, humanity and hope."

The second and rather more important takeaway is that Gulf Futurism, as planned and executed by state actors, operates via a type of hyperstition. It seeks to disseminate the ideas, images, and memes which will, through their dissemination, bring about their own existence. The GCC art collective had it right: "The Belief in the Power of Make-Believe." The important point is that this act of imagination is not itself imaginary. The Museum of the Future draws its power not from its arresting vision of 2071, but from the very real wealth and engineering necessary to build such a museum at all. The same is true of Saudi Arabia's animations about the future, which in their mere existence serve as proof-of-concept for said future.

The entire pitch of Gulf Futurism is deliberately paradoxical—the future is imminent, and this imminence is verified by the fact that the future is already here. A version of this quantum temporality is inherent to the genre of science fiction, which always talks about the present by talking about the future (and vice versa), and it is science fiction projects like the Museum of the Future and *Future's Folktales* which can see, and *be*, double. Science fiction is how the temporality of make-believe is made and, yes, *believed*. This is not to deny that there's still reality in hyperreality, and that said reality will sooner or later make its presence known. NEOM, the planned $500-billion mega-city being built along the Red Sea, recently met reality, in the form of severe construction delays and escalating expenses. As it turns out, the world of stone and soil is not yet interchangeable with that of software and spreadsheet; to believe is not yet to be.

NEOM's overdue meeting with reality has inspired much schadenfreude, a cathartic exhale of "good riddance" to all the gauche future-talk. NEOM is an interlinguistic portmanteau of "neo" and "m," the first letter of the Arabic word for future, "mustaqbal"; Dubai's Museum of the Future, patronized by the Dubai Future Foundation, is inscribed with an Arabic poem about the future. It's all very literal. NEOM and the Museum of the Future are the multimillion equivalents of a gold-framed oil painting that is just the word "art," in gold.

One is unsurprised that the worldly sophisticates of the GCC art collective should find all this offensive, this marriage of pulpy science fiction to puerile promotionalism and banal despotism. But it is the unblinking excess of it all, the endless announcements of future plans and their logistical naivete and gaudy aesthetics and seeming indifference to reason or ridicule, that is precisely how Gulf Futurism *works*. Its prophecies are derivative and delusional, and this is inestimably less important than the fact that it *presumes to prophesize*.

No particular project matters. That's the gamble. The success or failure of NEOM matters less than the hegemonic cultural and political project of which it is a part, one whose every cog circumambulates around the Kaaba of The Future (literally, in some cases). It is the cumulative impact of this sustained future fetishism that is decisive. However graceless the incessant crowing about the future, it builds a real and self-sustaining cultural momentum. Dubai was first built in the twentieth-century sci-fi consumed by the Emirati elite of today, and Gulf Futurism aims to repeat this hyperstitional process—to manifest the future aesthetic of the future through sheer reiteration. Its extravagant solarpunk urbanism is but one gear in a total project encompassing everything from domestic space programs to genomics and biotechnology.

The goal of every Gulf regime, but especially Saudi Arabia and the UAE, is to impress upon subject and ally alike a visceral sense of acceleration—to impart to everyday life the ambience of a train on the brink of derailment, with all the attendant taste of risk and exhilaration. The goal is a culture that feels entitled to "the future," that is imbued with an agitated lust for it, that demands possession of it. There's a violence to this manufactured appetite for speed and more speed, and it is in the innocent violence of this desire—along with the worship of industry and the collapsing of politics into aesthetics—that Gulf Futurism emerges as a true successor to Italian Futurism.

As at least one reviewer has noted, the Museum of the Future seems to trumpet every type of technology but one:

governance. For all the museum's showy interactivity and idolization of human agency, there is little sense of civic life, and this is true of Gulf Futurism as a whole. The Gulf rulers' pitch for legitimacy is that they, the governing elite, will deliver the future—indeed, that they already have. So long as MBS and MBZ and all the rest rule, the promise goes, so long is the future here. The Gulf's good subjects will be given a few tools by which to help expedite the ETA of the future, of course, but for the most part they need only feed on the fruits of the new Eden.

The knowing cynicism of the GCC art collective may thus be justified—but it is also a cynicism of decline and dead ends. It is the cynicism of an Arab diaspora educated in Western institutions, initiated into the Western cultural elite, and immersed in the Western zeitgeist. It is the cynicism, in other words, of the contemporary Westerner, who can scarcely be said to exercise much greater political power than his Gulf counterpart. The only difference is that the former believes himself to have lost the future, while the latter does not. No society that believes itself to have lost the future is likely to have much of one. Even if well-grounded, the GCC collective's pessimism, or "positive realism," cannot but make for a fruitless politics. A politics of positive thinking, of quantum time, of make-believe—no matter how plastic its face or hideous its underbelly—may well be the one that makes the future.

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