

Imaginations

Journal of Cross-Cultural Image Studies
Revue d'études interculturelles de l'image

IMAGINATIONS

Ways of Seeing Nujoom Alghanem's Nearby Sky (سماة قريبة) and Sharp Tools (آلات حادة) as Docupoetry

Comment voir le ciel proche de Nujoom Alghanem (سماة قريبة) et les outils tranchants (آلات حادة) comme docupoésie

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Volume 15, Number 1, 2024

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1113645ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.17742/IMAGE29707>

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Publisher(s)

York University

ISSN

1918-8439 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Hambuch, D. (2024). Ways of Seeing Nujoom Alghanem's Nearby Sky (سماة قريبة) and Sharp Tools (آلات حادة) as Docupoetry. *Imaginations*, 15(1), 43-66.
<https://doi.org/10.17742/IMAGE29707>

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IMAGINATIONS:
JOURNAL OF CROSS-CULTURAL IMAGE STUDIES |
REVUE D'ÉTUDES INTERCULTURELLES DE
L'IMAGE

Publication details, including open access policy
and instructions for contributors:

<https://imaginationsjournal.ca>

Open Issue

**Editors: Brent Bellamy, Margot
Mellet**

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To cite this article:

Hambuch, Doris. “Ways of Seeing Nujoom Alghanem’s Nearby Sky (سماء قريبة) and Sharp Tools (ألات حادة) as Docupoetry.” *Imaginations: Journal of Cross-Cultural Image Studies* vol. 15, no. 1, 2024, pp. 43-66, doi: <https://doi.org/10.17742/IMAGE29707>.

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.17742/IMAGE29707>



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WAYS OF SEEING NUJOOM ALGHANEM'S NEARBY SKY (سماء
القريبة) AND SHARP TOOLS (آلات حادة) AS DOCUPOETRY

DORIS HAMBUCH

This article proposes to establish a sub-category called “docupoetry” to classify the documentary films by Emirati poet and filmmaker Nujoom Alghanem. Detailed analysis of two selected films, *Sharp Tools* (2017) and *Nearby Sky* (2014), illustrates the unique composition, cinematography, and use of poetic devices, such as rhythm, symbolism, and personification of settings, which render the proposed classification beneficial for viewers. Based on Michael Renov’s concept of the poetic documentary as well as on the poetic mode theorized by Bill Nichols, this study finds the definition of a separate sub-category warranted to understand documentaries such as those by Alghanem.

Cette recherche propose d’établir une sous-catégorie appelée « docupoetry » pour classer les films documentaires de la poétesse et cinéaste émirienne Nujoom Alghanem. Une analyse détaillée de deux films sélectionnés, *Sharp Tools* (2017) et *Nearby Sky* (2014), illustre la composition, la cinématographie et l’utilisation uniques de dispositifs poétiques, tels que le rythme, le symbolisme et la personnification des décors, à la lumière desquels la classification proposée s’avère bénéfique pour les spectateurs. Basée sur le concept du documentaire poétique de Michael Renov ainsi que sur le mode poétique théorisé par Bill Nichols, cette étude trouve la définition d’une sous-catégorie distincte justifiée pour comprendre les documentaires tels que ceux d’Alghanem.

“**A**ll art is storytelling,” Hassan Sharif states in *Sharp Tools* (2017), the film studied in the second section of this essay. Sharif was a friend and collaborator not only to the film’s director, but to other Emirati artists who work in many differ-

ent art forms. Nujoom Alghanem is best known for her poetry and documentary film, and the argument here is that her command of the former is responsible for the unique style of her films. Highlighting specific poetic devices in *Sharp Tools* and *Nearby Sky* (2014), close analysis shows that Alghanem's films are best understood as poetic documentaries, or docupoetry. Devices in question concern technical aspects of her cinematography, the structuring of content, or rhythm, as well as tone. A specific sense of humour characterizes Alghanem's ways in which she encourages her subjects to present themselves. These subjects, or characters, a description preferred by the filmmaker (Yunis 448), so far include a Sufi Sheikh in *Al Mureed*, an actress in *Amal*, a healer in *Hamama*, fishermen in *Sounds of the Sea*, a painter in *Red Blue Yellow*, and a camel farmer in *Nearby Sky*. Diverse in age, class, gender, and national background, these personalities all have in common that they live or lived in the United Arab Emirates, as does the filmmaker.

The unique style of Alghanem's documentaries thus relates to their origin in a fairly young cinema movement as well. Founded only little more than five decades ago, the United Arab Emirates did not start to support local filmmaking until the new millennium (Yunis 8-10; Mirgani 46). Alghanem's pioneering role during this development originates in her recognition as a celebrated poet as well as journalist (Papagianni 322-323). In an interview with *ArabLit Quarterly*, the poet describes her eagerness to apply filmmaking skills after her return from studying in the United States and Australia, and she elaborates on the exploration of photography from the poetic point of departure. "If there is an influence," she states, "it would definitely be the film that got inspired by the poetic way of observing and experiencing the world" ("Nujoom Alghanem"). "I think the poet doesn't need to be a filmmaker in order to write," Alghanem continues in this interview, "however, filmmakers need to learn how to be poets in approaching their ideas." This thought is at the centre of this essay's argument that the appreciation of Alghanem's films benefits from a focus on their poetic elements. It is conducive to this purpose to consider them as examples of a category best described as docupoetry.

The artist, who represented the United Arab Emirates at the 2019 Venice Biennale, made her directorial debut with two short fiction films in 1997 (Armes 47), before moving on to her first documentary, *Between Two Banks* (1999). This film revolves around the life of a former pearl diver who still rowed his taxi boat across the Dubai creek when all his colleagues had switched to outboard engines. Almost a decade later, Alghanem released her second documentary, *Al Mureed* (2008), her first feature-length film, about the Emirati Sufi Sheikh who died in 2006 aged 104. *Al Mureed* won several local awards and prompted a series of seven more feature documentaries. All of these films are tributes to extraordinary individuals, and a closer look at two recent examples, *Nearby Sky* (2014) and *Sharp Tools* (2017), illustrates the director's distinctly poetic style, informed by the hybrid culture of the Gulf region, that warrants the categorization as docupoetry.

About three decades ago, in *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary* (1991), Bill Nichols identified the expository, observational, interactive, and reflexive modes of documentary film. In a chapter titled "The Poetics of Documentary" in his edited collection *Theorizing Documentary* (1993), Michael Renov offered a variation of these modes he refers to as functions. Footnotes suggest that the two scholars developed their models simultaneously and collaboratively (Renov 198). Although it is Renov who focuses on the significance of "Occidental poetics" (12), it is Nichols who expands his model in *Introduction to Documentary* (3rd ed. 2017 [2001]) to include a performative, as well as a poetic mode. For Nichols, the poetic mode corresponds mainly to experimental, avant-garde filmmaking. Renov, in contrast, pursues the concept of "poetics" via Aristotle and Tzvetan Todorov, and emphasizes its "unstable position at the juncture of science and aesthetics, structure and value, truth and beauty" (13). Without references to any of these theories, but relying instead on P. Adams Sitney and Linda Williams, Noa Steimatsky investigates the poetics of Cecilia Mangini's documentary *Essere donne* (*Being Women*, 1965) with a focus on the Italian filmmaker's contact to W. H. Auden (Steimatsky 121). Unlike Mangini, Alghanem is herself a celebrated poet, and the following analysis of her *Nearby Sky*

and *Sharp Tools* serves to expand on Renov's attempt to challenge the respective binaries and to propose a new subgenre called "docupoetry." Like the well-established docudrama or docufiction, this new category will offer unique insights into Alghanem's extraordinary type of screen poetry. It draws attention to the ways in which all her films appropriate a specific environment that provides the source for their material. A crucial element is this environment's rhythm, and how it changes with individual protagonists.

Only one of Alghanem's films, *Sounds of the Sea*, centres on music, but each of her documentaries features a carefully composed score, supported by editing choices. To view the films as docupoetry forces audiences to foreground these rhythmical elements among other poetic devices. Based on an interview with Alghanem for Viola Shafik's *Documentary Filmmaking in the Middle East and North Africa* (2022), Alia Yunis points out that the poetic context "comes across in her films' reliance on landscapes that reveal unspoken details and the visualized silences of her characters" (Yunis 449). The following close analysis of two selected films dwells on such techniques that render them perfect examples of docupoetry. Before turning to the two case studies, however, it is beneficial to recall the concept of documentary poetry, a subcategory of poetry that has received considerably more attention than that of poetic documentary film.

DOCUMENTARY POETRY

Substantial research exists on poetry, which lends itself to applications of documentary theory, but scholars have not highlighted the reverse practice, a poetry-informed approach to the study of documentary film. Renov cautions that his own "initial efforts toward a poetics of the documentary can be little more than first steps" (13) and it appears that these first steps have not yet led to a trail. Although Renov situates "poetics" between "truth and beauty," he does not elaborate on his understanding of "poetry." Well aware of the nearly endless variations within the genre, this essay proposes that the films studied also demand a move beyond "Occidental" poetics. It therefore assumes a very basic understanding of

poetry as “creative expression that relies on respective poetic tool kits of a certain time and place” for the following discussion. Based on this understanding, docupoetry can be defined as the “creative treatment of actuality,” whereby the creativity derives more from impulse and less from calculation, guided by a prioritization of and gift for aesthetics over but not exclusive of education.

In “Poetry in Light of Documentary,” Jill Magi singles out Nichols’s observational mode and applies it to poetry that “uses found or appropriated text” (Magi 251). The resulting analyses allow Magi to define characteristics of documentary poetry, and to pursue three specific goals in the process. Her essay aims to encourage poets (and critics, should they not be poets as well) to benefit from documentary theory, to consider the role of ethics, and to offer insights involving the poetry book, especially the print collection, for the study of documentary films. The present argument builds on the idea of this last goal. A closer look at Magi’s as well as at a related essay on Muriel Rukeyser’s documentary poetry thus offers valuable insight leading up to the two case studies of *Nearby Sky* and *Sharp Tools*.

Magi traces the “brief nominal history” of documentary poetry back to the 1990s, the same time when scholars like Nichols and Renov drew attention to the study of documentary film. With references to a variety of journal publications, Magi criticizes that attempts to define documentary poetry “ignore complex positions in contemporary art about intention, objectivity, representation, and what the function of art should be.” As the basic definition in the first paragraph of this section shows, an understanding of docupoetry as subgenre depends on precisely these same positions, and the present argument reverses Magi’s title to “Documentary in Light of Poetry.” Aiming to move beyond respective questions of definition, Magi highlights ways in which documentary modes derived from the study of film are conducive to considerations of certain types of poetry. She further suggests that documentary theory may learn from studies of the poetry book, and she emphasizes the importance of ethics for both practices. Analyses of poems such as Kenneth Goldsmith’s *Soliloquy* and Charles Reznikoff’s *Holocaust* serve Magi to illuminate uneasy

links between poetry and representation (262). They further lead to the following conclusion:

So while documentary film may help articulate the ethical challenges that a certain text faces, and while such articulations may serve to present poets with new ways to think about their projects, the information about making art flows in the other direction: documentary discourse can learn from the ‘documentary poem’ (Magi 273).

Magi’s interest in the specific connections between the art forms in question rests on the book’s unique involvement with “time, directionality, privacy, touch, and a particular visuality.” The interest in the relevance of poetry for interpretations of documentary film originates, instead, in the recognition of poetic devices as they transfer onto the screen. Much of Magi’s discussion follows her distinction between the acts of reading versus viewing. “A reader,” Magi emphasizes, “while reading, can back up, reread, annotate and research at will” (274). A film scholar, I argue, does the same with films, and recent diversification of streaming possibilities have broadened the required availability. Once we dismiss the given distinction, reread and back up within a film, we can conclude that the discourse of certain documentaries can benefit from the practice of poetry analysis regardless of the poetry’s type of distribution. Reception of all of Alghanem’s documentaries gains from attention to stylistic devices common in poetry. Sensitivity to the poetics of the films therefore enhances their understanding.

Alghanem’s particular manifestation of cross-genre work may owe to the significance of poetry in the Arab world, possibly the non-Western world in general. In “The Dream Builder,” Philippa Kennedy quotes a statement by the artist that underlines this importance: “Poetry in the Arab world,” Alghanem says, “is something that is under our skin” (Kennedy). The same conversation elaborates further on the artist’s practice of diverse forms of creative expression beyond poetry and film. A different conversation identifies an interest in the intersections between various art forms as shared among the members of a studio established in the early 1980s in Sharjah. Hassan Sharif, to whom *Sharp Tools* is a tribute, remembers in the latter di-

alogue how he established this “factory” and how it grew to include Alghanem, as well as her husband Khalid Albudoor, among others (Alghanem, “Doing Performance”). “During that time,” Sharif recalls, “visual art took on another dimension for us that could encompass literature, cinema and movement.” One may recall, at this point, his statement from this essay’s opening, that “all art is storytelling.” An intriguing documentation of Sharif’s performance art interacting with poetry is the small volume *Embodying* (2016), co-authored by Sharif and Cristiana de Marchi. *Sharp Tools* is another such communication between artists, adding a much broader scope and the audiovisual element absent from the print book.

As part of his dissertation research, Julius Lobo analyzed Muriel Rukeyser’s efforts to turn her documentary poem on the Gauley Bridge tragedy in West Virginia (1930-35) into an actual film. The efforts to produce the film on one of the worst incidents of occupational silicosis were unsuccessful, but the existing samples allowed for Lobo’s recognition of a montage technique common to both media. The findings of this research further made him realize that the projected film functioned as “gesture towards mass culture and popular entertainment” (Lobo 94). It might be stating the obvious that different forms of creative expression are bound to reach different audiences. What the present argument holds, however, is that generic overlap may divert a reader/viewer’s attention from one form to another. The political engagement of the texts discussed in both Lobo’s and Magi’s essays, the issue of ethics, is at the centre of Noha Mellor’s remarks on documentary film in a co-edited survey of recent developments regarding Arab media. Mellor describes the documentary genre as a “tool with which to debate and critique socio political problems” (115). This observation, at least to some extent, applies to Alghanem’s work as well. Although commercial distribution is still missing, exposure during festivals and invited screenings provide outreach towards a larger audience. While *Nearby Sky* tackles women’s rights, *Sharp Tools* traces the changing reception of experimental art in the United Arab Emirates.

In the extensive interview with Yunis, Alghanem, expresses frustration over the limitations determined by remaining taboos. She em-

phasizes how, sometimes, she wishes “to have the freedom of going securely straight forward on certain issues” (Yunis 454) and gives examples of how she has had to rely on suggestive symbols instead. Incidentally, such symbolism adds to the unique poetic nature of Alghanem’s films. Yunis is right to point out the potential positive effect of a necessity that the proverb calls the “mother of invention,” which makes Alghanem’s films yet “more creative, magical.” The following sections elaborate on the poetic ways in which Alghanem presents her characters and their concerns on screen, with a focus on the two films *Nearby Sky* (2014) and *Sharp Tools* (2017).

NEARBY SKY (2014): FATIMA AL HAMELI'S PRESENCE IN THE CAMEL INDUSTRY

Alghanem and Albudoor are both renowned poets in the United Arab Emirates. Together, they run the film production company Nahar Productions, named after the oldest of their three daughters. They often collaborate on films beyond production. Albudoor, for example, wrote the script for *Between Two Banks*. *Nearby Sky* as well as *Sharp Tools* were released during the past decade. They were selected for this study due to the contrasts between their respective protagonists, not only in gender but also in level of formal education. Both Sharif and Fatima Al Hameli share, however, a reverence for their natural environment, as well as for their related respective occupations. This kind of reverence is a crucial characteristic for the classification of Alghanem’s films as docupoetry, since the setting receives as much attention as its characters. Yunis points out that the absence of material “not intrinsic to the setting” often owes to the slow funding processes of the films (453), which is another factor to consider when observing the film poetics. While the camel farm and the surrounding desert sustain the life and work of the main character in *Nearby Sky*, beach and wadi terrain play a crucial role in *Sharp Tools*, as they appear in and inspire Sharif’s performance art and some of his installations. Since the artist’s studios were always located in cities, urban space is much more prominent in *Sharp Tools* than in *Nearby Sky*. Both protagonists, however, also share an indebtedness to their socio-political en-

vironment, beyond the desert and the city. While Sharif's connection to his place of origin suggests itself in his decision to return there after his studies abroad, Al Hameli expresses explicit patriotism in attire as well as in statements (Fig. 1).

The title *Nearby Sky* highlights the significance of this film's setting. The protagonist is a widowed camel farm owner, who was the first woman to advance into activities pertaining to the camel industry in her country. Much of the film presents the desert environment (Figs. 1-2) as the source for this woman's livelihood as well as her passion. In clear contrast to Sharif, Al Hameli is an illiterate bedouin. She had never been to a cinema before the premiere of *Nearby Sky* (Shackleton). She is, however, as passionate about her work on the camel farm (Fig. 1), as Sharif is about his art.

Since both of Al Hameli's sons decided to pursue other occupations, she developed the ambition to present her animals at races, auctions, and beauty pageants herself (Fig 4). Throughout the film, viewers



Figure 1: Fatima Al Hameli on her farm.



Figure 2: Desert landscape in *Nearby Sky*.

learn about Al Hameli’s rootedness in the desert (Fig. 2) and understand that it gives her the strength to demand her place among the male camel owners (Fig. 3). At the same time, Al Hameli seems prepared to stand out in the crowd, be that in the actual camel circuit or in its virtual representation on social media.

The business with camels, including races, auctions, and pageants, used to be exclusive to men; as Al Hameli explains, “the men said a woman shouldn’t participate” (Fig. 3). Alghanem, however, also interviews younger camel owners who welcome the changes the protagonist of *Nearby Sky* represents. The latter’s own sons show support even though they themselves do not want to work with the camels. The film moves Al Hameli’s achievements into all kinds of other contexts—film criticism, for one. Mireille Rosello describes one of Agnès Varda’s films as “a poetic and theoretical essay” (Rosello 29). In a similar vein, one might call Alghanem’s films poetic biographies. They adjust rhythm and style according to their indi-

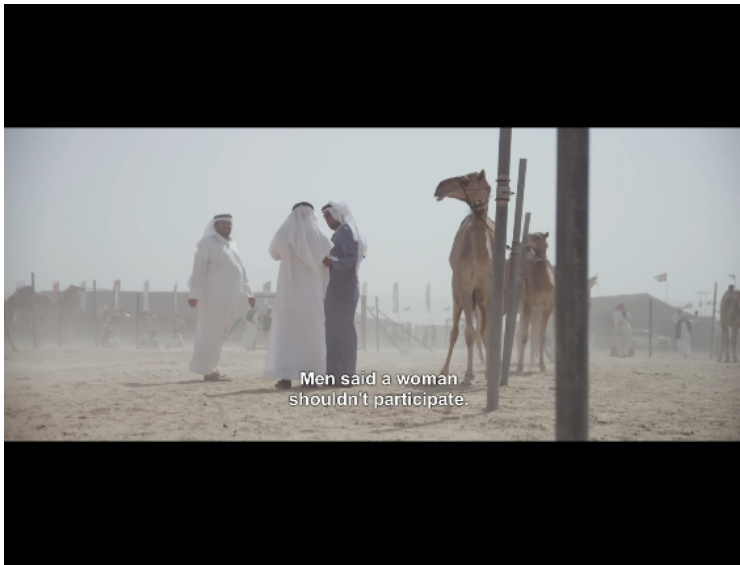


Figure 3: At the camel pageant.

vidual guest of honour. Yet, they are all recognizable as results of Alghanem's poetics, and its realization with the help of a reliable team. Yunis quotes the director's own comparison of working with Al Hameli in contrast to working with fellow artists, in this case the painter Najat Makki, Alghanem's maternal aunt, whom *Red Blue Yellow* (2013) is about:

Sometimes the subject matter forces you to keep a certain way of telling the story. The style has to go with the story and the character. You can't be very experimental with someone like Fatma Al Hameli, although you can be symbolic. But when you make a film about an artist, the artist's world is sophisticated. It gives you the chance to dive in and explore the inner self, the inner peace, the inner questions –how this artist recalls the figures, how she draws the shadows, how masks and spaces appear in this artist's work. (Yunis 453)



Figure 4: Challenging male participants.

A fascinating way in which *Nearby Sky* uses symbolism, for example, is the alternation of scenes at the camel beauty pageant with Al Hameli's visit to a beauty salon. These scenes evoke feminist discourse on the so-called beauty myth and women's submission to fashion dictates. Such discourse receives a thought-provoking twist in light of the grooming of camels for their competition. Al Hameli's boasting about her social media followers during her pedicure adds a comic angle to a portrait that otherwise foregrounds serious determination and spirituality.

Sharif shares Al Hameli's determination, but his world, like Makki's, is more sophisticated, as the following section examines. Before turning to *Sharp Tools*, it is important to emphasize Alghanem's interest in diverse topics for her films. *Between Two Banks* tells the story of a former pearl diver and sailor, and *Sounds of the Sea* (2015) revolves around the songs of fishermen. *Al Mureed* introduces the famous Sufi Sheikh, and *Hamama* (2010) celebrates an elderly healer.

While the main characters of *Red Blue Yellow* and *Sharp Tools* are fellow artists, that of *Nearby Sky* is a camel farmer. Other films focus on a Syrian actress and a beekeeper. The individuals at the centre of Alghanem's films thus differ, as mentioned, in gender, age, level of formal education, national background, as well as specific location within the United Arab Emirates. Together, though, Alghanem's films contribute to a diverse record of her country's collective memory, as accidental or serendipitous this contribution may be. Yunis emphasizes how Alghanem rejects the idea that her films are about heritage, underlining that they are "about characters" instead (447). Yet, Chrysavgi Papagianni is right to detect a visualization of "communal experience that can transcend time" (330). Papagianni relies on the juxtaposition of the global versus the local to identify Alghanem's second feature-length documentary *Hamama* as "a force of localization" (326). Inasmuch as the protagonists of the various films expose certain customs and traditions, viewers do learn about those as much as they learn about any other facets of these characters' lives. While elements of heritage are always subordinate to individual occupations and concerns, it is worth noting that the poetry, "under our skin," in Alghanem's words, and a driving force behind the films, also belongs to the local collective memory.

Like *Hamama*, *Nearby Sky* rejects colonial discourses as it allows a strong woman to introduce herself and to elaborate on the ways in which she claims her place in her community based on her skills and determination. Al Hameli thus offers a different perspective on the collective memory in question, and she does this in the poetic way that connects to her specific rural setting. The succession of long shots surveying the desert, close ups on a camel's body parts, long shots of the pageant location, close ups on Al Hameli, her sons, or her assistant, all contribute to a tangible rhythm of the camel farmer's world. The rhythm of *Sharp Tools* is very different, as the following section shows.

SHARP TOOLS (2017): TRIBUTE TO A FRIEND

In contrast to Al Hameli, the protagonist of *Sharp Tools* is not only literate, he is an intellectual who received a diploma of Fine Arts from the Byam Shaw School of Art in London (Al Qassimi and Marta 290). After his return from London in 1984, Hassan Sharif collaborated with a group of artists in Sharjah and Dubai. This group exchanged ideas for different art forms as well as mutual support during a time when there was much less of an open-minded local audience (Alghanem, “Doing Performance”). *Sharp Tools* carefully traces the changes in public reception of Sharif’s art from resistance and hostility (Fig. 5) to international recognition (Fig. 6).

The Sharjah Art Foundation online archive introduces Sharif as a “pioneer of conceptual art and experimental practice in the Middle East” (“Hassan Sharif”). His entry lists a great number of international group exhibitions that featured his work since the turn of the millennium, though his representation at Sharjah Biennials reaches back



Figure 5: Material for conceptual art.



Figure 6: Hassan Sharif as painter.

to the inaugural 1993 event. Sharif's work has further featured in solo exhibitions and is included in several international collections. The comprehensive retrospective titled "Hassan Sharif: I Am the Single Work Artist," curated by the Sharjah Art Foundation director Hoor Al Qassimi, provides a very moving record of artistic development about a year after Sharif's death in September 2016. Alghanem's film, which premiered at the Dubai International Film Festival's last edition in December 2017, offers invaluable context for any introduction to Sharif. It allows the artist to present himself in an intimate, at times ironic, and always thought-provoking way. His request not to show his smile in a close-up early in the film (Fig. 7) gives a glimpse of Sharif's tongue-in-cheek participation in a dialogue with the filmmaker and crew. It sets the stage for a series of seeming paradoxes, a concept the filmmaker herself celebrates in a well-known poem about an anticipated departure prolonged by deliberate delays (*Lo que queda* 286).¹

Significant departures in Sharif’s life relate to his studies in the United Kingdom, but after completing his studies there, he settled firmly within his group of fellow local artists. A decade prior to the film’s premiere, in 2007, Sharif established a foundation called The Flying House, to promote contemporary artists in the United Arab Emirates (Sharif and de Marchi 156). During his studies at the Byam Shaw School of Art, the French conceptual artist Marcel Duchamp had become his main role model. Alghanem’s film provides visual glimpses of Sharif’s material for conceptual art (Fig. 5) and details of the production process. Consumer goods and, in some instances, found objects provided material only for some of Sharif’s art, however. The diverse art forms practiced by him include, besides conceptual art, cartoons, sketching, painting (Fig. 6), and performance art (Fig. 8) documented in photographs, at times in combination with poetry. *Sharp Tools* celebrates the significance of all of these art forms for Sharif’s career, and it features Alghanem’s original poetry on title cards.



Figure 7: Sharif close-up.

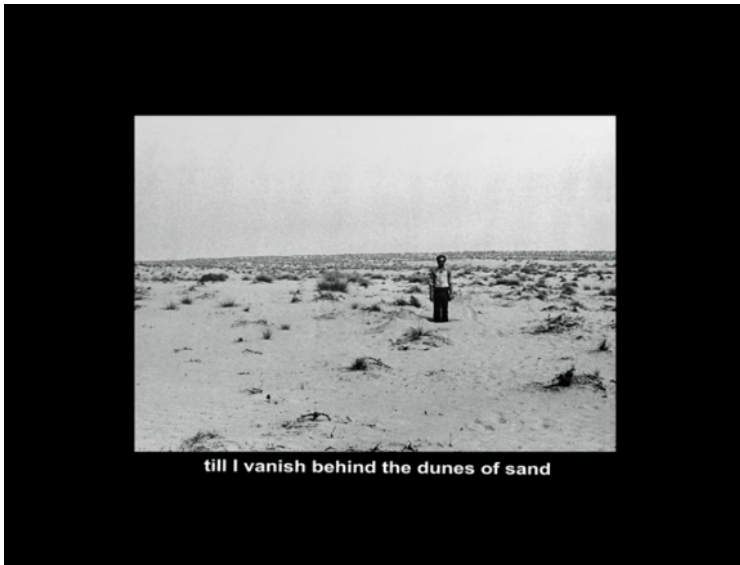


Figure 8: Performance art.

The poetry corresponds with Sharif's abstractions and often suggests his personal perspective. The first card, for example, less than a minute into the film, introduces the symbols of light and darkness, along with linguistic signifiers:

أحدهم أخذ مني الشمعة وأعطاني العتمة
بقيتُ في حيرة الحرفِ والنقطة

Someone took the candle from me and gave me darkness.
I have remained in the bewilderment of the letter and dot.

About forty minutes later, the fifth card returns to the symbol of light, but placed within the speaker this time:

داخل قلبي حفرة للفرح والخوف والغضب
داخل قلبي بياض الأيام ووحشة لياليها

Inside my heart a hole for happiness, fear, and anger
Inside my heart the whiteness and solicitude of the days

Much of the poetry on these cards refers to the speaker's position in relation to a second person, the poet or a single viewer, maybe. At times, however, it assumes a group, an audience. "They will come" is, for example, repeated on the fourth card. The third refers to "their voices and faces" as well as "their traces." While the traces are something the speaker tries to escape from, there is a more positive connotation when one reads "my heart is for them," in reference to friends, much later in the film. In the end, on the last card, one might even sense affinity in the line, "my eyes fall into their eyes," evoking memories.

At his own request, Sharif remains the only interviewee throughout the film, which gives him an extraordinary opportunity to reflect on motivations, philosophies, techniques, and interactions with his audience. Alghanem highlights Sharif's opinion that "the role of the artist is not only to create visual artworks but also to produce the right audience—to create the viewer" ("Doing Performance"). The film suggests how conflict and controversy seem to have had a stimulating function in this process. Alghanem also emphasizes Sharif's call on local artists to write indigenous histories of art, and some of his own critical essays exemplify this task. *Sharp Tools*, likewise, contributes to such an indigenous history with its focus on one key artist at a crucial time in the United Arab Emirates, shortly after the country's foundation. The film traces how, despite influences and inspiration in existing foreign art, the stunning originality of Sharif's works relies heavily on his natural as well as socio-political environment, the sea, desert, and sky, as well as the rapid modernization that accompanied the exploitation of oil resources. The same is true for Alghanem's art.

Repetition is a poetic device that dominates the structure of *Sharp Tools*. One of the re-occurring scenes illustrates Sharif's painting style (Fig. 6), and the high angle that allows the staircase to frame this shot may appear to represent the viewer's distance as well as the centrality of a certain creative process. The film surveys the artist's versatility on one hand, and explains intersections between Sharif's various art forms on the other. A specific concern would inspire him to focus on conceptual art at one time, and on performance at an-

other. The style of drawing from a very early phase resurfaces in a different way for a different kind of work much later in his career. Alghanem is careful to trace these developments, while returning to a large abstract oil on canvas in the house's hallway every so often (Fig. 6). The absence of other interviewees foregrounds the artist's own reflection on the development of his art, accompanied or enforced, by no means interrupted, by the poetry on title cards. Although Sharif speaks mostly to the camera, with the viewer implied, he sometimes engages in dialogue with other characters, such as his assistant.

There are also silent scenes, which require viewers to devote their undivided attention to a specific creative process. These scenes add to the rhythm of the film, along with the repetitions and the music. While *Nearby Sky* features music by Marwan Abado, *Sharp Tools* includes tributes to Sharif's admiration for Philip Glass and music by Mohammed Haddad. In general, the music as well as the cinematography match the personalities of individual represented characters. They complement the significance of settings. They further complement the use of symbols, such as the beauty salon in *Nearby Sky*. The more dominant symbol for Al Hameli, as the film title suggests, is the sky, or heaven. For Sharif, a recurring blue thread plays such a central role. As he pulls this rope through sand in the desert, he denies, with his appreciation for paradoxes, that he has a path. Observed together, all these elements create the poetic style at the centre of this essay. To understand Alghanem's films as examples of docupoetry allows for the appropriate recognition of the interaction of such elements. It might, furthermore, place her films in dialogue with other poets' documentaries.

CONCLUSION

While the characteristics of documentary poetry have received considerable critical attention, those of poetic documentary film have not. Studies such as Steimatsky's analysis of Mangini's *Essere donne* remain exceptional. This essay proposes the category of "docupoetry" in order to lend it an impor-

tance similar to that already assigned to docudrama or docufiction. Why, then, does an analysis of films like *Nearby Sky* and *Sharp Tools* benefit from their categorization as docupoetry? The poetic character of their cinematography, rhythm, symbolism, content selection, and presentation, I argue, is indeed such that it should dominate the reception. One need not simply consider the director's poetics for an interpretation, but one should make it one's point of departure. For his four-function model in "Toward a Poetics of Documentary," Renov uses verbs rather than adjectives as labels. He distinguishes between record/reveal/preserve, persuade/promote, analyze/interrogate, and express (Renov 22-24). The last, which he also refers to as the "aesthetic function," is the most relevant to an understanding of Alghanem's films. Renov blames the "institutionalization of the art/science opposition" for the general neglect of this function, and uses examples from photography to illustrate a "poetic effect" (33). In the conclusion of this expressive or aesthetic function's description, he cites "the ability to evoke emotional response or induce pleasure in the spectator by formal means, to generate lyric power through shadings of sound and image in a manner exclusive to verbalization" (35) for what he then parenthetically calls "artful documentary" or "documentary art." Inasmuch as Alghanem's films emerge within the young cinema movement referred to in this essay's introduction, with poetics very much connected to their settings, these remarks by Renov remain of limited use. A new term, such as "docupoetry" might instead lead the way to new theories of specific poetics or, rather, docupoetics beyond the idea of "Occidental poetry."

In the 1980s, British television introduced the "verse-documentary," and Peter Atkinson presents a detailed discussion of this genre in "Poetic License: Issues of Signification and Authorship in British Television Verse-Documentary, 1986-96." Alghanem's work does not fit into this category because it presupposes a collaboration between two different artists, a filmmaker on the one hand, and a poet on the other. Furthermore, Alghanem's films are not intended for television. The last Dubai International Film Festival film guide offered the special category of "creative documentary." This is a pleonasm if one adapts Grierson's definition of the genre. In "Funding the 'Cre-

ative Documentary': An Art Cinema of Refugees," Kay Dickinson and Viviane Saglier analyze the significance of this category within the Arab context, and their discussion confirms that it does not concern films such as Alghanem's (Dickinson and Saglier 134-135). Also, *Creative Documentary: Theory and Practice* (2013) defines this category as "factual entertainment" (De Jong et al.) which is clearly misguided in the context of Alghanem's films.

"Artful documentary" does not seem to offer more precision. Instead, this essay holds that "docupoetry" is the best term to describe the characteristic style for Alghanem's documentaries, whereby the production process derives from a poetic way of observing and representing selected material. As a category, docupoetry recalls the "first steps" Renov provided more than two decades ago, and whose lack of pursuit may owe to the same persistent art/science divide succinctly described by him in the same essay. It may also relate to a Western ("Occidental") lack of interest in poetry, while in the Arab world, to recall Alghanem's statement once more, poetry is "something that is under our skin" (Kennedy). Alghanem's extraordinary films all allow certain characters to represent themselves in a way conducive to their respective personalities, because the films employ poetic devices, such as rhythm, symbolism, and personified settings. Viewers therefore do well to foreground these techniques in their reception. While it is easy to agree with Sharif that "all art is storytelling," it does make a difference to understand the results in a more prosaic or in a more poetic way.

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IMAGE NOTES

Figures 1-4: screenshots from *Nearby Sky*.

Figures 5-8: screenshots from *Sharp Tools*.

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NOTES

1. “مفارقات,” included in Aghanem’s لا وصف لما أنا فيه, has been translated into German by Stephan Milich for the blog [lyrikline.org](https://www.lyrikline.org), and into Spanish by Muhsin Al-Ramli for *Lo que queda del reproche*. <https://www.lyrikline.org/en/poems/6223>