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Wisconsin Film Festival 2012: *I Have Always Been a Dreamer* contrasts Detroit and Dubai

Austin Duerst on Friday 04/20/2012 11:40 am

Winner of the Golden Badger award for Wisconsin Filmmaking, *I Have Always Been A Dreamer* by former UW-Madison communication arts professor Sabine Gruffat contrasts the cities of Detroit and Dubai. Part travelogue, part documentary, the film is centered in the context of a boom and bust economy and shows how each city's development is affected by technology.

I Have Always Been A Dreamer is making its world premiere at the Wisconsin Film Festival. I talked to Gruffat about her film and the pitfalls of basing one's ideologies of a place on digital media sources.

The Daily Page: What led you to make *I Have Always Been A Dreamer*?

Gruffat: Before I taught at UW-Madison, I was teaching at Wayne State University, which is in downtown Detroit. I was also living in the downtown Detroit area in a Mies Van der Rohe building. In other places, like Chicago, those buildings are like condos, but in Detroit it's just cheap housing.

I was there around 2006-2007, and that was the boom time for the world economy. It was sort of cuspung. And yet Detroit didn't seem to be benefiting from this in any way. I was the only person in the whole building who was getting *The New York Times*, and I read articles and articles about Dubai, with all these full-page ads for new housing developments on islands and things like that. I got really overwhelmed by the contrast, and I really wanted to go to Dubai. It just seemed like what was going on in the rest of the world was on another planet, and here we were in Detroit and not affected by it at all.

You have the interest or notion to make a film, but then when you actually make it, it takes time and the ideas change. What initially compelled me to make the film didn't necessarily become the subject for the film. I shot the film over a period of five years, so things were changing as I was shooting it. And then I'd go back and see that things were different. What you have are capsules of time that present one truth but not the whole truth. And it turns out that what the film is for me now is how we perceive places. We have these narratives that color the way we see a place, sometimes to the point that we don't actually pay attention to what's really going on.







'You want to believe it's all as fantastic as it seems.'

Credit: Sabine Gruffat

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Or investigate it, for that matter.

After living [in Detroit] for a year, I realized that there was tons of stuff happening there that never gets media attention, because it didn't fit the cultural narrative that [Americans] have for that city.

What kinds of things are you referring to?

Everyone wants to believe that Detroit is still just an icon for the auto industry, that in many ways it *represents* the auto industry. So if the auto industry is dead, then the city is dead, and then the city is abandoned, blah blah.

But the thing is, the auto industry moved out of downtown Detroit years ago. So downtown is not all about the auto industry. There's lots of young people doing DIY stuff that's really interesting. They're doing art residencies; they're doing urban gardens. There are just all these projects happening. I'm not saying it's going to save the city or anything, but these things don't get included in the narrative. People go to Detroit to see abandoned skyscrapers. They don't want to go there to see a bunch of young people doing cool stuff.

How did you connect your experiences of Detroit with Dubai and plan for a film?

I went to Dubai to shoot. I didn't go there randomly. I don't think I try to pretend that I have any in-depth knowledge of the place. It stays on the surface, in a way, in the film. But the thing with Dubai that's kind of interesting is that a lot of the images of it are computer generated. A lot of the city is sort of virtualized in that way.

For example, if you try and take a picture of one of the buildings -- I had an experience where I tried to go and take some shots from across the street of the Burj Al Arab, which is this iconic Dubai building. There's no public space there; all of it is privatized, and I was basically told that if I needed a photo of the building, that I should download it from their website. There can only be one image, because they control their press so much.

A lot of the buildings are also sold before they are even constructed. And they are sold by virtual imagery. They'll be sold 10 times before it actually becomes a thing. The reality is that their country had a near bust, where Abu Dhabi had to bail them out. So a lot of this development is not because they need to build the stuff, but because money needs to be laundered through Dubai. So a lot of money is laundered through these properties, and that's why a lot of them are sold before they are built. It's just this huge, money-laundering scam.

One of the buildings that I shot when I was in Dubai was the Burj Khalifa, which is the tallest building in the world. [In the film] I mention this guy who came up with this thing called the Skyscraper Index, which says that you know you're near a housing bust when a really really tall building gets built. So apparently there is a direct relationship between building the tallest building in the world, and then there being a large economic downturn.

They were building it then, and the problem now is that if you are in debt in Dubai, you get put in jail. Because of the economic downturn, all of the people who signed contracts for these buildings are forced to stay in their contracts. So they're building these buildings even though there is no foreseeable use for them. A lot of them are vacant.

So they built the tallest building in the world -- and I mention this in the movie -- but in 2010 the building was still vacant. It's interesting because Dubai is also a city that is putting out an image of itself very differently from the real Dubai.

What is the significance of the title, *I Have Always Been A Dreamer*?

A lot of the stuff shot in Detroit was in this sort of theme park called Greenfield Village. It was Henry Ford's dream of what America should be. It was built by Ford to be this ideal America, and so the title is a direct quote from Henry Ford. But I was just thinking how the quote for me took on another meaning, which was that part of how we look at place is so much about our imagination and what we want it to be. So it's sort of like wishful thinking, where you just want these places to exist that don't necessarily exist.

You want to believe there's something deeper than the stock imagery of a place.

You want to believe it's all as fantastic as it seems.

What do you hope viewers take away?

I thought a lot about this. A lot of what I was thinking about while making the film was concerned with the global economy and how it affects these cities that aren't always aware how global things are changing their lives. It's not visible or physically apparent. So I have a lot of questions about it, and the way that I get at these questions is with these two examples, Detroit and Dubai. And the end of the film is not a conclusion. It doesn't make a statement either way. I think it's more about getting people to question preconceived notions about things, or things that we assume that are true that aren't true.

I Have Always Been A Dreamer is screening in the Wisconsin Film Festival at 1:15 p.m. Saturday, April 21, in the Union

South Marquee. A post-film Q&A session with Gruffat follows.