

Iranian Film Piracy: Roots and Impact on Iranian Cinema

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This paper will evaluate the prevalence of film piracy in Iran and its effect on the Iranian film industry. Because Iranian cinema has always been interconnected with the government since its inception, it is important to look at an overview of recent Iranian history to observe the changes in the relationship between filmmakers and the government. With this background information, one can more effectively evaluate the resulting negative and positive consequences of film piracy on the Iranian film culture with regard to the government and filmmakers.

To highlight a radical shift in government, the historical period that will be covered is from 1978 and on. This time frame was chosen because it encompasses the Iranian Revolution of 1979 and the resulting departure from a fairly prosperous pre-revolutionary film culture to a restrictive film culture. According to Professor Peter Seeberg, the Islamic Revolution stemmed from a deep “discontent with Shah Reza Pahlavi's social and economic policy”.¹ He argues that the pro westernization policies enacted by Pahlavi angered religious and social conservatives. One of these policies was mandating a Westernized dress code and banning the chador for women, a large cloth that is wrapped around the upper body and head. Another example of his disregard for Islamic customs is Pahlavi's conversion of using the Islamic Calendar to the Imperial Calendar. The historically conservative public viewed this rapid transition into Westernization as a deterioration of Iran's history and culture. Furthermore, Seeberg claims that there seemed to be a consensus among Iranian citizens that Pahlavi was a “corrupt individual”, who did not care about the Iranian people.² He maintained a lavish and luxurious lifestyle, while

¹ Seeberg, Peter. "The Iranian Revolution, 1977–79: Interaction and Transformation." *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 41.4 (2014): 483-97. Web.

² Seeberg, Peter. "The Iranian Revolution, 1977–79: Interaction and Transformation." *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 41.4 (2014): 488

much of the lower class were not guaranteed some basic human rights. Amidst all of the social unrest, there was another key influence for starting the revolution. Parsa Misagh, a sociology professor at Dartmouth College, claims the economic contraction from 1978-1979 exacerbated the public outrage.³ Because of the surge in unemployment, many blamed Pahlavi's radically different economic policy for the situation. The culmination of these issues forced the government of Iran to transition from a semi-authoritarian to a theocratic-republic form of government. The Iranian citizens held a national referendum to become an Islamic Republic in April of 1979 and in December of 1979 Ayatollah Khomeini began his rule as the Supreme Leader.⁴

Immediately after the revolution, Naficy Hamid, a scholar specialized in media and cinema, states very few films were produced in the aftermath of the revolution.⁵ Because Iran's film industry was so interlaced with the government, which consistently acted as a subsidizer of film production and regulator of film content, the political transition to the far right caused a substantial shock in the ensuing film culture. Naficy asserts, "The Islamic Republic's widely reported curtailment of Western-style performing arts and entertainment, its maltreatment of entertainers, and the widespread and harsh censorship..." created a toxic environment for filmmakers.⁶ The post-revolutionary film culture was muffled and constrained because Iranian religious fundamentalist viewed film as a Western tool that could harm Iran's traditions and diminish the role of the Islamic Clergy as an entity for teaching morals. In the brief period

³ Parsa, Misagh. "Contributors." *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 27.2 (2007): 53. Web.

⁴ Zeydabadi-Nejad, S. "Iranian Intellectuals and Contact with the West: The Case of Iranian Cinema." *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 34.3 (2007): 382. Web.

⁵ Naficy, Hamid. "Iranian Cinema under the Islamic Republic." *American Anthropologist* 97.3 (1995): 548. Web.

⁶ Naficy, Hamid. "Iranian Cinema under the Islamic Republic.", 549. Web.

following the revolution, over 90 percent of theatres were burned down and previous films were re-edited or destroyed in alignment with the Islamic doctrine.

Because of the distrust in pre-revolutionary film, according to Dr. Saeed Zeydabadi-Nejad based in the University of London, the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance(MCIG) was implemented to reduce “confusion about what was acceptable” in the new era of filmmaking.⁷ The agency enacted strict guidelines that were based off of Islamic tenets, causing censorship to develop as a central factor in the relationship between the government of Iran and Iranian filmmakers. Gandom Khatib wrote in an online article, piracy “began immediately following the Islamic Revolution in 1979” due to strong governmental regulation.⁸ Because very few films could pass the stringent guidelines, the lack of access to new domestic films expanded the use of film piracy.

However, from the 1980s to now, a gradual development of a more liberal interpretation of the guidelines created an emergence of more creative freedom. Nejad states, “[the MCIG] belonged to a faction in Iranian politics which later became known as reformist. While the conservative faction in Iranian politics has sought to limit artistic and political expression, the reformist on the other hand have been generally inclined to open up the cultural, social, and political atmosphere”.⁹ For example, Naficy claims, “women and their representation on the screen were major sources of contention”.¹⁰ In the 1980s, the cinema was dominated by a male protagonist and often portrayed women as a subordinate sex, but this slowly changed as female characters began to be more three-dimensional. In fact, actresses and directors began to be

⁷ Zeydabadi-Nejad, S. "Iranian Intellectuals and Contact with the West: The Case of Iranian Cinema." 379. Web.

⁸ Khatib, Gandom. "Movie Piracy in Iran - Part 1: From Smuggled Videos to Illegal Downloads."

⁹ Zeydabadi-Nejad, S. "Iranian Intellectuals and Contact with the West: The Case of Iranian Cinema." 379. Web.

¹⁰ Naficy, Hamid. "Iranian Cinema under the Islamic Republic.", 550. Web.

represented on more equal terms. Thus, instead of focusing in on teaching Islam, more films were created with the purpose of entertaining and evoking emotion.

Despite this easing of censorship, Khatib argues film piracy has continued and was out of control from its inception. He states, “the methods of replication and distribution [of films] have kept pace with technological changes”.¹¹ As a result, the cost of purchasing movies that have not been approved by the MCIG has been made extremely low. For the price of watching a film in a theatre, practically anyone could buy four bootleg Hollywood blockbusters that have been subtitled in Farsi. Consequently, the increase of accessibility and lower cost of films has allowed piracy to become a relatively large force in the Iranian film industry. The inability for government to effectively eliminate film piracy is evident in that the average citizen can pay “60 or 80 cents, [and] can buy *12 Years a Slave*, *Gravity*, *Iron Man 3*, or the latest episodes of the fourth season of *Game of Thrones*” without much difficulty.¹² Much like the rest of the world’s governments, the law enforcement of Iran has not kept up with the rapid advancements in piracy technology to eradicate this illegal activity.

Nejad believes that this widespread film piracy has caused some negative influence for the government of Iran. He articulates piracy harms the government of Iran because “some of the conservatives [who] believe that the West wants to exert ‘morally corrupting’ influence in Iran”, are losing control of what the public is able to view.¹³ Because pirated films are difficult to regulate, affronts against fundamental Islam, a lingering fear from the conservative revolution in 1979, could easily pass the MCIG. Movies containing sexually explicit scenes or drugs have the

¹¹ Khatib, Gandom. "Movie Piracy in Iran - Part 1: From Smuggled Videos to Illegal Downloads." *IranWire*. N.p., n.d. Web. 17 Jan. 2016.

¹² Khatib, Gandom. "Movie Piracy in Iran - Part 1: From Smuggled Videos to Illegal Downloads."

¹³ Zeydabadi-Nejad, S. "Iranian Intellectuals and Contact with the West: The Case of Iranian Cinema." 384. Web.

potential to be distributed through piracy. Although most of the infractions against the censorship of the Iranian government are not severe, film piracy allows for the possibility of Western ideas and imperialism to expand unfavorably.

This loss of censorship capabilities is present not only with regards to the spread of Western culture but also of political critique. Although the MCIG began to be more liberal in its interpretation of what is deemed offensive to Iran and Islam, it has consistently maintained a baseline of conservatism. According to Nejad, some political conservatives “do not miss any opportunities to attack their reformist rivals” when liberal films are produced and distributed.¹⁴ Though films that criticize the government are able to pass the MCIG, they are often very subtly executed through satire. Therefore, filmmakers who wanted to explicitly condemn the government often pirated their own films to distribute to the masses because it was a relatively easy way to circumvent the censorship of the Iranian government.

Additionally, some organizations believe the government of Iran gets less taxable revenue when films get pirated. According to the Motion Pictures Association of America (MPAA), piracy in Iran is a fairly common occurrence with 58 percent of Middle Eastern and African citizens pirate movies, while in North America 21 percent of people pirate movies.¹⁵ To provide a sense of scope, the motion picture industry lost 18.2 billion dollars worldwide motion picture in 2005. Furthermore, the MPAA states for “workers and their families, piracy can mean declining incomes, lost jobs and reduced health and retirement benefits”¹⁶. Although these estimates may be high due to a bias inherent in the conducting the research, it is difficult to deny

¹⁴ Zeydabadi-Nejad, S. "Iranian Intellectuals and Contact with the West: The Case of Iranian Cinema." 382. Web.

¹⁵ Bialy, Carl. "Putting a Price Tag on Film Piracy." *The Numbers RSS*. N.p., n.d. Web. 17 Jan. 2016.

¹⁶ Todd, Chris, Senator. "US Government Identifies Most Notorious Piracy Markets." *Mpaa*. N.p., 12 Feb. 2014. Web. 25 Jan. 2016.

potential tax revenues is being lost.

Meanwhile, the impact of film piracy on the quality of movies produced seem to be murky. Nejad argues that film piracy is a necessary evil to enhance the Iranian film culture as a whole. He claims that “filmmakers ... forego the possibility of domestic public release by including themes and stories that they know to be highly unlikely to be shown in their countries of origin”.¹⁷ He also states that some filmmakers would prefer the pirating of movies simply because they do not care so much about the money, focusing instead on the artistic expression.¹⁸ Because of the difficulty in regulating piracy, the filmmakers can make directorial choices that would have been too risqué for the MCIG to let through. For example, after director Jafar Panahi was put under house arrest for propaganda against the regime because of his previous films, he created a documentary of his time. His film, ironically titled This is Not a Film, was an attempt to capture the life of an enemy of the state. The harsh critique of Iran was at first distributed via usb flash drive to international film festivals, where it garnered much acclaim, and later shared to the masses via piracy. He knew that the MCIG would not approve the film, so he embraced piracy as a mechanism of effectively spreading his artistic vision.

Yet others, such as Godfrey Cheshire, believe that piracy is unnecessary because the governmental censorship have created “obstacles [that] have only stimulated the creativity of filmmakers”.¹⁹ In a 2011 film by Asghar Farhadi, *A Separation*, a movie about the divorce of a middle class Iranian family begins the film with the mother asking the judge if she can take her daughter and leave the country because of various circumstances. The judge then responds,

¹⁷ Zeydabadi-Nejad, S. "Iranian Intellectuals and Contact with the West: The Case of Iranian Cinema." 391. Web.

¹⁸ Zeydabadi-Nejad, S. "Iranian Intellectuals and Contact with the West: The Case of Iranian Cinema." 391. Web.

¹⁹ Cheshire, Godfrey. "Iran's Cinematic Spring." *Dissent* 59.2 (2012): 77-78. Web

“What conditions?”²⁰ According to Cheshire “the movie exists to answer the judge’s question”.²¹ The movie cleverly shows some of the downfalls of the Iranian judicial system, while still remaining within the MCIG’s regulation. The pitfalls of religion, politics, and the socio-economic inequality in Iran are all explored in this film. In fact, the film won numerous awards from international festivals and has a 8.4 on IMDB making it one of the highest rated films to date.²² Furthermore, director Abbas Kiarostami said, “I will not be proud and pleased to make a film which gets banned. I have to use my knowledge of the government and socio-political socialization to pass under the censorship blade. I don’t want the cut up pieces of my film to be taken out of a box years later”.²³ In this sense, some directors believe that it is against Iranian nationalism to go against too heavily the guidelines of the government.

Although there are arguments for and against piracy, it appears as if there is no end in sight for the existence of widespread of piracy. Therefore, the MCIG should work to reduce piracy by gradually allowing for nearly complete artistic freedom. Furthermore, the Iranian government should subsidize the construction of movie theaters similarly to the pre-revolutionary era. Because movie theaters provide a viewing experience that cannot be replicated on a computer screen, the theaters would boost box office sales as long as the they were in good condition and the tickets be relatively inexpensive. The increase in creative control and potential funding for filmmakers could elevate the Iranian film culture to be even more vibrant than it has ever been.

²⁰ *A Separation*, Asghar Farhadi, 2011

²¹ Cheshire, Godfrey. "Iran's Cinematic Spring." *Dissent* 59.2 (2012): 79. Web.

²² "Jodaeiye Nader Az Simin." *IMDb*. IMDb.com, n.d. Web. 17 Jan. 2016.

²³ Abbas Kiarostami

Professor Commentary:

Jason,

As we talked about throughout the process, because your topic is so specific and narrow, your review of literature was bound to be a bit narrower as well. You could, however, have added sources in a few places to bolster the sense that you're examining a broader selection of scholars and ideas. In particular, your historical section could have benefited from additional sources that examine the cultural forces driving the revolution, as I know much has been written on the topic. Further, additional sources that establish the conservative nature of the MCIG, even if those sources focus on things besides film, would make the final section seem better supported by relevant literature.

In terms of connections among paragraphs and ideas, you've made some real improvements, though you miss a number of opportunities to connect individual paragraphs and sections to the larger purpose of the paper.

One other small issue: As you're using footnotes, I imagine you're work on a Chicago style paper, but you also have elements of MLA elements here. You're also missing a bibliography, which is a vital part of any citation style.