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Iranian Film Piracy: Roots and Impact on Iranian Cinema

This paper will evaluate the prevalence of film piracy in Iran and its effects on the Iranian film industry today. 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 begin with, the historical time frame that will be covered is from 1978 and on. This time frame was chosen because it encompasses the Iranian Revolution and the resulting departure from the fairly prosperous pre-revolutionary film culture to an almost non-existent film culture.

According to Professor Peter Seeberg, the Islamic Revolution stemmed from a deep discontent with Shah Pahlavi's rule primarily due to his 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. A large

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

proportion of the public viewed this rapid transition of 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 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 a public outrage.³ Because there was large unemployment, many blamed Pahlavi's radically different economic plan for the situation.

The culmination of these issues forced the government of Iran to transitioned from a semi-authoritarian to a theocratic-republic 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

As stated by Nacify Hamid, a scholar specialized in media and cinema, 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. Hamid asserts, "The Islamic Republic's widely reported curtailment of Western-style performing arts and entertainment, its maltreatment of entertainers, and the widespread and harsh

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

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

“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 culture. In the brief period 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.

According to Dr Saeed Zeydabadi-Nejad based in the University of London, the chaos for Iranian cinema immediately after the revolution began to subside through the implementation of the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, also known as the MCIG.⁷ The agency enacted strict guidelines that were based off of theocratic tenets, causing censorship to develop as a central factor in the relationship between the government of Iran and Iranian filmmakers. 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 expressions, the reformist on the other hand have been generally inclined to open up the cultural, social, social, and political atmosphere”.⁸ For example, there were hardly any films that contained women playing a major role in the early 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 represented on more equal terms. Thus, instead of focusing in on teaching Islam, more films were created with the purpose of

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

⁷ Zeydabadi-Nejad, S. "Iranian Intellectuals and Contact with the West: The Case of Iranian Cinema." *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 34.3 (2007): 3759. Web.

⁸ Zeydabadi-Nejad, S. "Iranian Intellectuals and Contact with the West: The Case of Iranian Cinema." 379. Web.

entertaining and evoking emotion.

Despite this easing of censorship, some argue film piracy prevailed in Iran. Gandom Khatib wrote in an online article “the methods of replication and distribution [of films] have kept pace with technological changes”.⁹ As a result, the cost of producing and purchasing illegally ripped movies have been made extremely low. For the price of watching a film in a theatre, practically anyone could buy four high quality bootleg films that have been already been subtitled in Farsi. Consequently, the prominence of film piracy in Iran has always been a relatively large force in the Iranian film industry.

Some scholars believe that this widespread film piracy has caused a substantial negative impact for the government of Iran. Nejad 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.¹⁰ Disapproval of Western influence is a lingering factor from the conservative revolution in 1979. Because pirated films are difficult to regulate, affronts against fundamental Islam could easily pass the MCIG through the utilization of bootleg movies. 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. 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.¹¹ Much like the rest of the world’s governments,

⁹ Khatib, Gandom. "Movie Piracy in Iran - Part 1: From Smuggled Videos to Illegal Downloads." *IranWire*. N.p., n.d. Web. 17 Jan. 2016.

¹⁰ Zeydabadi-Nejad, S. "Iranian Intellectuals and Contact with the West: The Case of Iranian Cinema." 384. Web.

¹¹ Khatib, Gandom. "Movie Piracy in Iran - Part 1: From Smuggled Videos to Illegal Downloads."

the law enforcement of Iran has not kept up with the rapid advancements in piracy technology to eradicate this illegal activity.

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.¹² 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 on the films when they get pirated. According to the Motion Pictures Association of America, 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.¹³ 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”¹⁴. Although these estimates may be high due to a bias inherent in the conducting the research, it is difficult to deny potential tax revenues is being lost.

¹² Zeydabadi-Nejad, S. "Iranian Intellectuals and Contact with the West: The Case of Iranian Cinema." 382. Web.

¹³ Bialy, Carl. "Putting a Price Tag on Film Piracy." *The Numbers RSS*. N.p., n.d. Web. 17 Jan. 2016.

¹⁴ Todd, Chris, Senator. "US Government Identifies Most Notorious Piracy Markets." *Mpaa*. N.p., 12 Feb. 2014. Web. 25 Jan. 2016.

Meanwhile, the impact of film piracy on the quality of movies produced seem to be murky. There are some who believe that film piracy is a necessary evil to enhance the Iranian film culture as a whole. Nejad 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”.¹⁵ He also states, 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.¹⁶ 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 believe that the governmental censorship of film brings about more creative ways to express ideas and emotions. For example director 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”.¹⁷ In this sense, some believe that it is against Iranian nationalism to go against too heavily the guidelines of the government. In a 2011 film by Asghar Farhadi, *A Separation*, a movie about the divorce of a middle class Iranian family ends

¹⁵ Zeydabadi-Nejad, S. "Iranian Intellectuals and Contact with the West: The Case of Iranian Cinema." 391. Web.

¹⁶ Zeydabadi-Nejad, S. "Iranian Intellectuals and Contact with the West: The Case of Iranian Cinema." 391. Web.

¹⁷ Zeydabadi-Nejad, S. "Iranian Intellectuals and Contact with the West: The Case of Iranian Cinema." 387. Web.

the opening scene when the mother asks the judge if she can take her daughter and leave the country because of various circumstances. The judge then responds, “What conditions?”.¹⁸ According to Godfrey Cheshire “the movie exists to answer the judge’s question”.¹⁹ 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.²⁰

Piracy is a divisive issue that clashes the interests of government, production, and filmmakers. It seems that there is a constant battle of the MCIG vs. the filmmakers, while the production companies lose revenue. Instead of trying to idealistically eliminate piracy, the Iranian regulatory agency should work together with the filmmakers to reduce the amount of piracy that occurs. One solution is to subsidize the building of movie theaters like 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. This would allow the rate of piracy to decrease while increasing taxable revenue for the government of Iran. Another way to get Iranians to pirate films less frequently, is to give essentially full artistic freedom to filmmakers. There would be no need to go behind the MCIG’s back and would allow for a reasonable negotiation of what is ideologically acceptable. Government should work together with the content creators to reduce film piracy and catalyze a robust Iranian film culture.

¹⁸ *A Separation*, Asghar Farhadi, 2011

¹⁹ Cheshire, Godfrey. "Iran's Cinematic Spring." *Dissent* 59.2 (2012): 79. Web.

²⁰ "Jodaeiye Nader Az Simin." *IMDb*. IMDb.com, n.d. Web. 17 Jan. 2016.