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# *The Outcasts*: The Start of ‘New Entertainment’ in Pro-Regime Filmmaking in the Islamic Republic of Iran

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**ABSTRACT** *With developments in the past decade of such popular films as Masoud Dehnamaki’s trilogy, Ekhrajiha (The Outcasts), we are privy to a new trend in pro-regime filmmaking in Iran, one that centers on the creation of ‘new entertainment.’ This pivot by pro-regime cultural producers is based on a perceived need to do away with the ‘war time propaganda’ that ‘no one wants to see anymore’ (as one pro-regime screenwriter told me), and to replace it with ‘new entertainment’ that can engage with youth. The former head of Ansar-e Hezbollah in Iran, Masoud Dehnamaki, emerged at the forefront of this new movement by creating popular films that employ slapstick comedy about the war and which sell at historic box office numbers. His first narrative film, The Outcasts, is the focus of this article, as it signaled the beginning of a ‘new entertainment’ by pro-regime cultural producers. Based on ethnographic fieldwork, this article analyzes the film and filmmaker most responsible for the creation of ‘new entertainment.’*

**KEY WORDS:** *Cultural producers; Massoud Dehnamaki; Film; Iran; Iran-Iraq War; Islamic Republic; Media*

As the Islamic Republic approaches its fourth decade, it confronts the demographic reality that two-thirds of its population is under the age of 35. The vast majority of the population, therefore, does not remember the 1979 revolution, or the eight-year Iran-Iraq war, the foundational events of the Islamic Republic. Pro-regime cultural producers face a prevailing question: Can they ensure commitment to a revolutionary project given these drastic generational changes? The continuation of the Islamic Republic in its present form is arguably dependent upon the regime’s success in communicating certain cultural messages about the ‘ideals of the revolution’ from one generation to the next. The notion that there may be a failure in communicating these ideas to the predominantly young generation arises from the fact that young people voted in large numbers for reformist president Mohammad Khatami in 1997, and were among the biggest sectors protesting for more fundamental changes when hardline forces stood in the way of reform. The 2005 election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as president offered an opportunity for some pro-regime cultural producers to seek the creation of new forms of entertainment that could communicate the proper ideals of the revolution to

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the second and third generations and bring them back into the fold of the Islamic Republic.<sup>1</sup>

The tenure of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as president from 2005–2013 coincided with an increased effort by the Revolutionary Guards and Basij paramilitary organization to take a more active role in creating this pro-regime ‘new entertainment,’ in both film and television. This pro-regime new entertainment differed from pro-regime media produced in previous years in the Islamic Republic. Throughout my ethnographic research with pro-regime cultural producers in Iran, I found that starting in 2007, pro-regime cultural producers openly talked about the need to move away from what they call the ‘propaganda’ of the 1980s and 1990s.<sup>2</sup> Instead, they argued for new entertainment that remained tied to the ideals of the revolution, but connected with popular culture that young people consumed. This new entertainment focused on being ‘less dry,’ as multiple producers told me, to striving to offer ‘true entertainment,’ while not compromising any core revolutionary ideas. Thus, common tropes in the films and television programs of this new entertainment include the incorporation of banned pop songs from Iranian diaspora singers in Los Angeles; the revival of popular masculine tropes such as *luti/laat* figures (thugs); and the use of characters who are not pious, but learn to believe in the piety of the revolution through the ‘proper’ role models of the Basij and Revolutionary Guards. In my research with pro-regime cultural producers from 2009–2015, I focused on how producers and filmmakers turned their attention to this new entertainment as a means to regain audiences, mainly those in the second and third generation.<sup>3</sup> This connection between media, the messaging of ideology, and managing a state were organic connections that my interlocutors made. When in the last decade, pro-regime media producers noticed a large decline in sales of their films and books among the population, it set off a sense of crisis for the cultural elite of the Islamic Republic.

With the coffers of the Basij and Revolutionary Guards full in the post-war era, new money poured in for pro-regime cultural productions. The decade since Ahmadinejad’s election has witnessed the production of a plethora of ‘new entertainment’ films from a wide array of pro-regime forces.<sup>4</sup> The first to make a big impact in these new forms of entertainment from pro-regime cultural producers was the film *Ekhrājīha* (The Outcasts, 2007) by Masoud Dehnamaki. In this article, I focus on this film in particular for two reasons: (1) The film broke all box office records in Iran at the time of its release, demonstrating its popularity among the very young audiences that pro-regime media producers seek; and, (2) this film had a significant impact on pro-regime filmmakers in Iran, even among those who dislike the film and its director. *The Outcasts* elevated pro-regime filmmaking to new levels as indexed by its record-breaking sales, and breathed new life into pro-regime cultural centers with the notion that this ‘new entertainment’ potentially could win over the very audiences that

<sup>1</sup> In Iran, generations usually are described in terms of the decade of birth. Thus, those born in the 1360s on the Iranian calendar (1980s), are known as the *dah-ye shasti-ha* (the 80s generation), and those born in the 1370s on the Iranian calendar (1990s) are known as the *dah-ye haftadi-ha* (the 90s generation). The second generation in the Islamic Republic is known as the 1980s generation, and the third generation is the 1990s generation. For more discussion on generational demarcations in post-revolutionary Iran, please see O. Behrouzan (2015) Writing *Prozak* Diaries in Tehran: Generational Anomie and Psychiatric Subjectivities, *Culture, Medicine, Psychiatry* 39(3); and N. Bajoghli (2016) Paramilitary Media: Revolution, War, and the Making of the Islamic Republic of Iran (New York University Dissertation).

<sup>2</sup> N. Bajoghli (2016) Paramilitary Media: Revolution, War, and the Making of the Islamic Republic of Iran (New York University Dissertation).

<sup>3</sup> My ethnographic research entailed participant-observation with pro-regime film producers, editors, and directors. Specifically, I observed film shoots, production meetings, subtitling sessions, editing sessions, and partook in distribution campaigns. The majority of my research took place in Tehran, but I also worked with pro-regime cultural producers in Karaj and Abadan.

<sup>4</sup> N. Bajoghli 2016.

pro-regime cultural producers were having such a hard time targeting. Massoud, a veteran pro-regime film producer, told me: ‘As much as I dislike Dehnamaki and the films he makes, young people watch them, and we need to pay attention to why. After all, we need young people to watch our films. Otherwise, we’re just wasting our time.’<sup>5</sup>

*The Outcasts* is a comic war film about a group of neighborhood thugs who journey to the warfront in order to impress their girlfriends and wives with their bravery. None of the thugs wants actually to fight in the war—instead, they plan on being at the warfront for only a few days to snap some pictures to bring back to their girlfriends. Through the process, however, a kind Basiji (volunteer soldier) takes them under his wing and transforms them into ‘proper’ men worthy of the war, and by extension, the Islamic Republic. This film then was followed by two sequels, *The Outcasts 2* (2009) and *The Outcasts 3* (2011).<sup>6</sup>

How did this war film, directed by the former General Commander of *Ansar-e Hezbollah*, Masoud Dehnamaki, become popular at a time when other war films struggled to make a profit? Critics attributed the widespread appeal of the film to its slapstick comedy, its star appeal, the ‘red lines’ that it crossed in depicting the ‘sacred defense’ of the warfront,<sup>7</sup> and curiosity among audience members about the ‘reformation’ of its ultra-conservative director. These same critics described the director as nothing more than a modern-day thug and the film as ‘cheap’ and filled with ‘lumpen’ jokes—so bad, in fact, that it made them question the intelligence of the audience.<sup>8</sup> What can we understand about pro-regime cultural production in the Islamic Republic, especially during the Ahmadinejad presidency, when a film so critically panned and directed by a well-known ‘hezbollahi’ became so popular?

I argue that the story of *The Outcasts*, and the movement it spurred in pro-regime film-making in the Ahmadinejad administration, are not only narratives about the past but more crucially about the future of the Islamic Republic. In many of these new pro-regime productions,<sup>9</sup> the eight-year Iran-Iraq war continues to serve as a backdrop, but the issues are about the values that need to be present today in order to ensure the vitality of the Islamic Republic. Unlike the ‘Sacred Defense’ films of the 1980s and 1990s, with few exceptions (*Marriage of the Blessed*; *Leili is with Me*), these new productions acknowledge the grievances that many young people feel about the regime. *The Outcasts*, and the films that follow in this vein, drive home the message that the ‘pure’ ideals of the revolution, embodied in the Basij and Revolutionary Guards, can heal the divisions in society. Embedded in the depictions in this film, including the juxtaposition of pure Basij men with corrupt clerics, are notions of masculinity that are crucial to the time period in which these films are produced, namely, the presence of American troops on nearly all of Iran’s borders. ‘Can our young men today rise up and defend our country like our brave young men did when Saddam attacked in 1980?’ asked Hessam, a retired high-ranking member in the Navy of the Revolutionary Guard, and today a film producer. ‘That is our biggest worry, and we need communicate to our young men that they can defend their country, even if they don’t agree with their government.’<sup>10</sup> As these ‘new entertainment’ films continue to be produced, concerns over the possibility of domestic opposition and insurgency after the 2009 Green Movement arose, as did the growth of Islamic State (ISIS) after 2014. These events all heightened the need, from the

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<sup>5</sup> Author Interview, Tehran, Iran, 2010.

<sup>6</sup> *The Outcasts 2* is about prisoners of war and the betrayal of the opposition movement, Mujahedin-e Khalq (MKO). *The Outcasts 3* is about the 2009 presidential elections and the Green Movement.

<sup>7</sup> The Iran-Iraq War in Iran became known as the ‘sacred defense’ (*defa’-e moghadas*).

<sup>8</sup> A. Khooshkhoo (2007) *Chera Ekhrajiha filme khubi nist. 40Cheragh*.

<sup>9</sup> Films such as *The Best Statue in the World* (2010), *Che* (2014), *The Last 50 Steps* (2014).

<sup>10</sup> Author Interview, Tehran, Iran, 2011.

point of view of the pro-regime cultural producers, for this kind of media production that sought to ‘win back’ young audiences.

*The Outcasts*, its topic, genre, plot, and director, all provide us a window into exploring the wider cultural and political issues that surround the Islamic Republic today, and help us understand why Basij commanders have opened cultural centers across the country since 2007, encouraging more Basij and Hezbollah members to go into media production.<sup>11</sup> The particularity of the historical moment out of which *The Outcasts* comes makes not only the content of the film significant, but also it draws attention to the fact that with the rise of the Revolutionary Guards and Basij to formal and informal politics in Iran, we are witnessing a new political elite in the Islamic Republic, one that attempt to ‘reform’ their young generation through the use of popular culture.

#### *The New Pro-Regime Filmmaker*

Dehnamaki’s turn to cinema apparently comes from a belief that cinema is a powerful medium that reaches the people. In an interview, he said: ‘During the Iran-Iraq war, we had to shed blood for the revolution, and we did. Later, we believed we should publish journals and books for the revolution, and we did. Today, we think cinema expresses our goals best, so we make movies.’<sup>12</sup> He claims that now he is a social critic against the corruption of the state and its ruling elite: “There was a time that I believed that the people were the problem, but that was a mistake. The real problem is that our rulers have become used to corruption and cannot fulfill the promises of the early days of the revolution about social justice and equality.”<sup>13</sup> Dehnamaki’s desire to return to the values of the revolution place him on the periphery of the old political elite, yet his voice found resonance with the Ahmadinejad administration, during which time he received favorable treatment.

Dehnamaki was a war veteran, quitting high school at the age of 16 to volunteer for the war, and fighting in the long and arduous battle to oust the Iraqi forces from the port city of Khorramshahr in 1982.<sup>14</sup> The effects of the war greatly affected him and have informed his work ever since.<sup>15</sup> Prior to turning to film, Dehnamaki edited journals geared toward war veterans and the conservative supporters of the regime.<sup>16</sup> His turn to filmmaking began with his 2002 documentary *Faghr o Fahsha* (Poverty and prostitution), which traced the roots of prostitution to poverty and blamed the state for not providing for the people. The film was banned, presumably because it drew a direct line from the actions of the state to

<sup>11</sup> N. Bajoghli (2016) Paramilitary Media: Revolution, War, and the Making of the Islamic Republic of Iran (New York University Dissertation); and Dehnamaki (2007) blog. Available at <http://www.ekhrajiiha.blogfa.com/>, accessed: July 2008.

<sup>12</sup> Author Interview, Tehran, 2009.

<sup>13</sup> N. Fathi (2005) A Revolutionary Channels His Inner Michael Moore, *New York Times*. November 26, 2005. Available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/11/26/international/middleeast/26dehnamaki.html?ei=5090&en=9b13e-03ffb753873&ex=1290661200&adxnnl=1&partner=rssuserland&emc=rss&pagewanted=print&adxnnl-x=1196140505-pBoYzx8x1Mjg3TnePeBinw>, accessed September 2016.

<sup>14</sup> This major southern port was the first city captured by Iraqi soldiers in the war, and it took Iran 18 months to expel them. The battle for Khorramshahr, in which Dehnamaki participated, caused over 13,000 deaths.

<sup>15</sup> Until recently, Dehnamaki’s basement office was decorated as a trench with sandbags, grenades, ammunition, and pictures of war martyrs.

<sup>16</sup> His journal, *Shalamcheh*, was shut down, presumably for criticizing Ayatollah Khui, a reformist cleric. Four days later, Dehnamaki applied to open a new publication, named *Jebhe* (‘front’). He describes this magazine as more political than his first one because he turned from targeting and criticizing the people to criticizing the political elite (M. Danesh (2007), Khashm va khandeh va faryad. *Film Magazine*, p. 34). After 55 issues, *Jebhe* was shut down as well. His next publication was *Do-kuheh* which had a shorter life than the first two.

the rise of prostitution, but it became highly popular on the black market, mainly because people were curious to see the ‘transformation’ of an ultra-conservative personality who now was criticizing the political elite on culturally taboo subjects such as prostitution. His second documentary, *Kudaam Esteghlal, Kudaam Pirouzi?* (Which Independence? Which Victory?, 2004), addressed soccer violence, but it was poorly received and has gone relatively unnoticed. *The Outcasts* was his first feature narrative film.

### Studying Media in Iran

As scholarship has shown, Iranian media production, whether in Iran or the diaspora, since 1979 has been vast. In the early days (1978–79), there were revolutionary posters, cassette tapes, and leaflets.<sup>17</sup> During the Iran-Iraq war, war murals commemorating the war dead were common,<sup>18</sup> while an expansive state television broadcasting service developed, the internationally famous art-house films of directors such as Abbas Kiarostami, Mohsen Makhmalbaf and Asghar Farhadi emerged (and would continue after the war and up to the present),<sup>19</sup> while a plethora of war films were produced.<sup>20</sup> Since the early 1990s, Persian has become one of the most used languages on the internet: for years Persian blogs were popular;<sup>21</sup> there is ubiquitous use of social media platforms across all groups of society;<sup>22</sup> and, two dozen 24-h Persian language stations are broadcast over satellite into Iran from the diaspora. Iranians in general, and young Iranians in particular, consume a lot of media—just not the media the state wants them to hear, read or see.

In the rich plethora of scholarship on media in Iran, one of the gaps that remain is popular media, and specifically, popular media produced by pro-regime cultural producers. The majority of scholarship about film and media in Iran focuses on ‘art’ films that garner much international attention. Given that many of these art films either are banned in Iran or shown in cinemas for only short periods of time, such analyses risk overlooking the films that the majority of Iranian cinema-goers watch and engage with on a more frequent basis. Although the cinematic quality of these popular films is significantly lower than the widely acclaimed art films, and their plots are often formulaic, some of the more popular ones also are engaged in pushing the lines of censorship and registering social and political

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<sup>17</sup> See further P. Chelkowski & H. Dabashi (1999) *The Art of Persuasion in the Islamic Republic of Iran* (New York: New York University Press); and A. Mohammadi & A. Sreberny-Mohammadi (1994) *Small Media, Big Revolution: Communication, Culture, and the Iranian Revolution* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press).

<sup>18</sup> R. Varzi (2006) *Warring Souls* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press).

<sup>19</sup> H. Dabashi (2001) *Close Up: Iranian Cinema, Past, Present, and Future* (New York: Verso Books); N. Mottehedeh (2008) *Displaced Allegories: Post-Revolutionary Iranian Cinema* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press); H. Naficy (2011–12) *A Social History of Iranian Cinema: Volumes 1–4* (NC: Duke University Press); and R. Tapper (2002) *The New Iranian Cinema: Politics, Representation, and Identity* (London: I.B. Tauris).

<sup>20</sup> H. Sadr (2006) *Iranian Cinema: A Political History* (London: I.B. Tauris).

<sup>21</sup> N. Akhavan (2015) *Electronic Iran: The Cultural Politics of an Online Evolution* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press); N. Alavi (2006) *We Are Iran* (Berkeley, CA: Soft Skull Press); Y. Kamalipour et al. (2010) *Media, Power, and Politics in the Digital Age* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield); A. Sreberny & G. Khiabany (2010) *Blogistan: The Internet and Politics in Iran* (London: I.B. Tauris).

<sup>22</sup> A. Sreberny and G. Khiabany (2010) *Blogistan: The Internet and Politics in Iran* (London: I.B. Tauris); N. Mottahedeh (2015) *#Iranelection: Hashtag Solidarity and the Transformation of Online Life* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press).

criticism.<sup>23</sup> For pro-regime cultural producers, media have been of utmost importance to the state-building project in the Islamic Republic. Specifically, they are attempting to ward off what Ayatollah Khomeini, and later his successor, Ali Khamenehi, believe are attempts by the West to use culture as a means to influence Iran's population (which Khamenehi has termed 'soft war' [*jang-e narm*]). For this reason, the Supreme Leader's Office under Khamenehi has given media production a privileged platform in the past decade.<sup>24</sup>

### The War and the Creation of the Sacred Defense Film Genre

Following the 1979 revolution and the establishment of the Islamic Republic, the new government quickly began its task of 'Islamicizing' society through the Cultural Revolution.<sup>25</sup> With the onset of the Iran-Iraq War in 1980, the war-film industry and the many institutions created to support this new genre began in September 1980. At the beginning of the war, the War Group Team at the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB) made television documentaries about the war, and shortly thereafter, the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance created the War Films Bureau at the Farabi Cinema Foundation in order to depict the 'Sacred Defense' as spiritual rather than militaristic in character.<sup>26</sup> Thus, the official name of the war film genre is sacred defense cinema (*sinema-ye defa'-e moqaddas*). The Islamic Republic constructed the supposed sanctity of the warfront by employing the story of the killing of Hussein, the third Imam of Shi'a Islam, a story Shi'as consider as the supreme act

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<sup>23</sup> Films such as Tahmineh Milani's *Do Zan* (Two women, 1999), *Zan-e Ziadi* (The unwanted woman, 2005), and the highly popular *Atash Bas* (Ceasefire, 2006) criticize the position of women in Iran; Kamal Tabrizi's *Marmulak* (Lizard, 2004) pokes fun at clerics as lying criminals; Davoud Mirbagheri's *Aadam Barfi* (Snowman, 1994/7) deals with immigration from Iran and cross-dressing; and Saman Moghaddam's *Maxx* (2005) is a musical comedy that looks at the relationship between Iranians in the diaspora returning to an Iran that has drastically changed and those who remained after the revolution.

<sup>24</sup> By the late 2000s, the Supreme Leader of Iran, Ali Khamenehi, along with others in the conservative factions, referred to what they saw as cultural assaults from the West as *jang-e narm* (soft-war). As F. Sabet & R. Safshekan (2013) noted in 'Soft War: A new episode in the old conflict between Iran and the United States,' soft-war can be understood best through the prism of J. Nye's 'soft power' (2004). Soft power, comes from 'the attractiveness of a country's culture, political ideals, and policies,' what Nye collectively calls a country's 'primary currencies' of soft power (Soft Power and American Foreign Policy, *Political Science Quarterly* Summer 119(2), p. 256). As Sabet and Safshekan argue, 'The story of the conflict the Islamic Republic calls soft war is in many ways the story of the exercise of U.S. soft power on Iran' (op cit., p. 6).

<sup>25</sup> Cinema was a particularly contentious site for the new religious government since religious groups targeted cinemas during the revolution as a symbolic act against the shah. Although Ayatollah Khomeini claimed that cinema corrupted people's thoughts prior to the revolution (Khomeini [1981] *Velayat-e Faqih: Hokumat-e Eslami*. Tehran: Amir Kabir), upon his triumphant return to Iran, he commented on the role of cinema in a post-shah Iran at Behesht-e Zahra cemetery: 'The cinema is a modern invention that ought to be used for the sake of educating the people, but as you know, it was used instead to corrupt our youth.' (H. Algar [1981] *Islam and Revolution: Writings and Declarations of Imam Khomeini*, p. 258 (Berkeley, CA: Mizan Press). Accordingly, only a 'pure,' 'Islamicized,' and ideologically driven cinema had a place in the new Islamic Republic. Despite its attempt to Islamicize cinema, 'Iranian post-revolutionary cinema is not Islamic in the sense that it is not by any means a monolithic, propagandistic cinema in support of a ruling ideology' (H. Naficy [2002] *Islamicizing Film Culture in Iran: A Post-Khatami Update*, in: R. Tapper (ed.) *The New Iranian Cinema*, p.30 (London: I.B. Taurus).

<sup>26</sup> R. Varzi (2002) *A Ghost in the Machine: The Cinema of the Iranian Sacred Defense*, in: R. Tapper (ed.) *The New Iranian Cinema*, p. 157 (London: I.B. Taurus).

of suffering and redemption in history.<sup>27</sup> During the war, posters and murals were created to recall the particular sensibility of the Battle of Karbala—the iconic representations of sacrifice were carefully constructed around the heroism of Imam Hussein, creating a sense of righteousness, piety, and martyrdom around the ‘imposed’ war with Iraq.<sup>28</sup> Khomeini, in addition to making nationalistic proclamations about the war, commonly repeated that there would be no victory until Iran freed Karbala from Saddam’s rule. The ubiquitous reference to Imam Hussein and the use of imagery surrounding the Battle of Karbala, contributed to the sense that the warfront was a sacred space.

In the Islamic Republic, representations of the war, not the revolution, evoke the idyllic moment of the regime’s foundation story, where the ‘true’ spirit of the Islamic Republic is to be located. The revolution contained too many leftists, nationalists, secularists, and liberalists to be neatly packaged as ‘Islamic,’ as much as the state tries. Thus, the political leaders of the Islamic Republic constructed the war as a ‘sacred’ space where the ideals of the ‘Islamic’ Revolution<sup>29</sup> could be realized: Ideals epitomized by sacrifice and struggle for an Islamic Iran.<sup>30</sup> The war allowed the newly formed regime to consolidate its power, imprison and silence the opposition for reasons of ‘national security,’ and mobilize the population around the ‘imposed’ war, which the regime presented as threatening the new post-revolutionary Iranian nation.

### *The Outcasts*

Habibollah Kasehsaz and the Center for the Advancement of Documentary and Experimental Cinema—a funding center created in 1983 along with the Farabi Cinema Foundation to promote the young generation of filmmakers and give them their first experience in cinema—produced *The Outcasts*. The film’s screenwriter, Peyman Ghasemkhani, also wrote the screenplay for *Lizard* (Marmulak, 2004), a satire on the clergy in Iran, which became the highest grossing film in Iranian history at the time of its release, though it was only in

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<sup>27</sup> P. Chelkowski & H. Dabashi (1998) *Staging a Revolution: The Art of Persuasion in the Islamic Republic of Iran* (New York: New York University Press). Hussein was martyred in Karbala during the month of Muharram in 680 AD at the order of the Umayyad Caliph, Yazid. The Shi’a version is told as such: Hussein was traveling with 72 companions, some notable members of the prophet’s family, from Medina to Kufa (in modern Iraq), where he had been invited to lead the local Shi’a community. Yazid’s army, said to number in the tens of thousands, surrounded Hussein and his companions on the first day of Muharram, barring them access to the Euphrates river. On the tenth day of Muharram (*Ashura*), Yazid’s army attacked Hussein and his companions and all but one of the males were killed. Their severed heads were carried to Damascus, along with the captured women and children.

<sup>28</sup> The Iran-Iraq War is referred to in the official discourse of the Islamic Republic as both the ‘Sacred Defense’ and an ‘imposed’ war. This distinction of ‘defense’ and ‘imposed’ was harder to maintain after 1982, when Iranian troops recaptured Khorramshahr and other Iranian territory, then launched an offensive into Iraq.

<sup>29</sup> There has been wide debate among scholars, as well as activists and political opposition groups, whether the 1979 revolution in Iran was an ‘Islamic’ revolution. In the official discourse of the Islamic Republic, the revolution is acknowledged as solely an Islamic one. I choose to put the ‘Islamic’ in quotation marks here because this is a contested issue, and because my wider point is that the narration of the revolution and the Iran-Iraq War are articulated for particular political purposes. An ‘Islamic’ revolution purposely elides the numerous non-Islamic groups involved in bringing about the 1979 Iranian Revolution.

<sup>30</sup> P. Chelkowski & H. Dabashi (1999) *Staging a Revolution: The Art of Persuasion in the Islamic Republic of Iran* (New York: New York University Press).



theaters for one month before being banned.<sup>31</sup> *The Outcasts* was in cinemas in Iran for nearly two months and generated over two billion *tomans* (nearly \$2 million USD at the time) in revenue, becoming the highest grossing film in Iranian cinematic history. The film has also been shown in film festivals geared toward the Iranian diaspora in such cities as in Boston, Moscow, New York and Toronto.

*The Outcasts* is set in 1988, during the last year of the war. The characters' accents reveal their ethnic differences (Azeri, Khorasani, Kurdish, etc.), depicting the imagined community of a unified Iranian nation, especially in a time of war.<sup>32</sup> The film begins when Majid (Kambiz Dirbaz), a thug from the south of Tehran, is released from jail with his friend, the drug addict, Amir (Arjang Amirfazli). In order to avoid embarrassment in his neighborhood and to save face in front of the woman he loves, Narges (Nousha Zayghami), Majid and his friends pretend that his absence was due to a trip to Mecca. His lie is instantly revealed, and Narges vows never to talk to him again. In order to prove that he is worthy to marry her, Majid decides to go to the warfront—the ultimate arena for manhood and bravery during that time. He plans to go only for a short period of time, take a few pictures to prove that he was there, and return an 'honorable' man to marry Narges. Not wanting to go alone, Majid convinces his friends to journey with him to the warfront. His friends include Amir the drug addict, Beyram (Akbar Abdi) the scared and simple-minded friend, Bijan (Amin Hayai) the thief, and Mostafa (Alireza Osivand), Majid's uncle and old thug—not at all the typical 'pure' volunteers who were depicted as going to the warfront in the official discourse of the regime.

In *The Outcasts*, there are several people who vehemently oppose the thugs' presence at the warfront, and the juxtaposition is set up between the self-serving neighborhood religious leader, Haj Saleh (Mohammad Reza Sharifinia), who represents pragmatic clerics such as former President Rafsanjani, and the truly pure Islamic characters, such as the kind cleric and the commander of the platoon, a Basiji, Morteza (Javad Hashemi), who are at the front for the 'right' reasons.<sup>33</sup> In one scene, the thugs go to their local mosque to sign up for the war and Haj Saleh, disapproving of their appearance and mannerisms, is determined to keep them from the 'sacred land of the front' (*jebhe khakash paake*). In this comedic scene, Haj Saleh interrogates them about Islamic values in order to prove that they are not righteous enough to fight in the 'sacred defense,' barraging them with such questions as: 'How do you bury the dead?'; 'With which foot do you enter the bathroom?'; 'Have you ever been to Friday prayers?'; and 'How many *raka'ah* are in each prayer?' Not only can they not answer these questions, but they offer silly responses that are reminiscent of popular jokes

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<sup>31</sup> *Lizard* depicts the life of a criminal who dresses as a cleric to avoid further incarceration. It was not banned for 'market' reasons, since it was doing so well commercially, but presumably it was banned precisely *because of* its widespread popularity. Living in Iran when this film came out, I witnessed many young boys and men verbally attack clerics walking down the streets in Tehran by calling them 'lizard' to the amusement and laughter of bystanders. Anytime a cleric would get in the same shared taxi in which I was, the same taunting ensued. As the popularity of *Lizard* grew, it was rumored that many clerics changed out of their distinct clerical robes and into regular shirts and trousers before walking down the streets in order to avoid the verbal taunting.

<sup>32</sup> Many of the actors in *The Outcasts* are well known and have not typically played in war films. Akbar Abdi, one of the main protagonists in *The Outcasts*, played in *Snowman* (Adaam Barfi, 1994/7), a highly controversial, yet extremely popular film that was first banned and subsequently released during President Khatami's administration. The film portrays a man (Akbar Abdi) who dresses as a woman to marry an American man in Turkey in order to leave Iran and get a visa to the United States. Under Dehnamaki's instigation, *Hezbollah* fiercely attacked theaters in Tehran and Isfahan that showed *Snowman* because of Akbar Abdi's role as a cross-dresser who desires to flee Iran.

<sup>33</sup> As Dehnamaki stated in an interview: 'The character that Sharifinia plays [Haj Saleh] represents a specific category of people that is widely recognizable in our society' (Ali Ehsani [2007] Omidvaram CD-ash birun nayad, *Souroush Weekly*, p. 141), thus striking a cord with an audience disillusioned with the ruling clerics.

told against the clerics and that circulate via SMS texting on mobile phones (thus leading critics to refer to this film as simply recycling bad ‘SMS jokes’). For instance, in response to the question about which foot do you enter the bathroom—which points to conceptions of cleanliness, Amir the drug addict responds, ‘You let me go with my friends to the warfront, and I’ll go into the bathroom head first!’ Hearing these questions, the kind cleric at the mosque pulls Haj Saleh aside, reprimanding him: ‘What does going to the warfront, which is a duty, have to do with these questions? With all these questions, we should have asked the angels to come down from heaven and volunteer for the war, not humans! Our martyrs didn’t come down from heaven to serve—they came from normal people on this earth.’ Like other pro-regime cultural producers in the new cohort of Revolutionary Guards and Basij filmmakers, who are creating this new entertainment, Dehnamaki attempts to move away from idealized representations of soldiers as pure. ‘Our youth are tired of our films because they no longer can relate to these characters,’ Ali, one prominent Captain of the Revolutionary Guards, who is also a filmmaker, said to me. ‘Who can be pure and religious all the time? That was the mistake with our films in the 1980s and 1990s. That’s why young people are bored with our work. Not everyone is always pure and good. We have to show them that even if they are not always like Imam Hossein, they can become him when the Yazid’s of the world attack us.’<sup>34</sup>

Once the protagonists arrive at the warfront, the gang immediately is discharged for bad behavior: They gamble (a sin), smoke, do not know how to pray, and Amir continues to use drugs. The kind cleric and Basiji, Morteza, are determined to reform this gang, and they vow to take these thugs under their wings. Slowly, they demonstrate to the thugs that the social codes of the *luti/laat* are not true conceptions of manhood; instead, they must emulate the other Basijis, who are in turn emulating Imam Hussein, for they demonstrate the ‘true’ ideals of revolutionary manhood. In one of the more important scenes, as the Basij commander Morteza is teaching all the soldiers how to use hand grenades, he asks for a volunteer to pull the lever, count to three, and throw the grenade. A young soldier with a severe stutter volunteers and Majid the thug immediately replies: ‘By the time this kid tries to count to three with his stutter we’ll all be dead.’ ‘Fine,’ Morteza replies, ‘then why don’t one of you try it.’ Majid, as the leader of the group, orders his friend Bayram, the simple and scared one, to do the exercise. Unwillingly, Bayram stands up and as Morteza hands him the grenade he accidentally pulls the lever too soon and panicking, drops the grenade where they are all gathered. As everyone tries to flee before the grenade explodes, the young soldier with the stutter throws himself on the grenade so that its explosion will only kill him and not the other soldiers. To their surprise it does not explode because Morteza had given them an empty grenade for the exercise. As Morteza helps the young boy with the stutter up from the ground, he looks at the thugs and says: ‘Being a man has nothing to do with thick mustaches and Yazdi bandanas. It is at the war front that men like this [pointing to the young Basiji] can be found in large numbers.’<sup>35</sup>

The volunteer soldier, the Basiji, as the ideal man is juxtaposed with the *luti/laat*.<sup>36</sup> The *luti/laat* is anti-authority, unrighteous, deviant, and ultimately, an outcast, while the Basiji

<sup>34</sup> Author Interview, Tehran, Iran, 2013.

<sup>35</sup> Thick mustaches and Yazdi bandanas (*sibihay-e koloft va dastmal-e yazdi*) are the symbolic ‘uniforms’ of *lutis/laats*.

<sup>36</sup> In the literature of the Iran-Iraq war, a distinction is drawn between the volunteer forces (Basij and Revolutionary Guards), and the soldiers (members of the professional army, *artesh*, and those serving their obligatory military service). This division was crucial in the war, as the soldier did not possess spirituality, whereas the Basij and Revolutionary Guard member did.

embodies discipline: He is obedient, both to the nation and to Islam. In the Islamic Republic's discourse, it is the Basiji who embodies the ideals of the revolution, the one by which the *luti/laat* is measured and eventually made to emulate. The thug must be disciplined, in both mind and body, in order to become a true member of an ideologically homogenized Islamic state; and this transformation can be realized through the guidance of the very same Basij.

The line between *luti* and *laat* is a thin and often blurry one. *Laat* (meaning 'ruffian') is in a sense the villainous opposite of *luti*, and often, one neighborhood's *luti* is another neighborhood's *laat*. Both *lutis* and *laats* have been used as middlemen between rival landowners, clerics, and government officials throughout Iranian history.<sup>37</sup> The *luti* characters in Iranian culture have a tradition tracing back to pre-Islamic Iran,<sup>38</sup> and they were employed widely in popular pre-revolutionary films.<sup>39</sup> Over time, the term *luti* came to refer to two distinct groups: the first group was composed of entertainers (jugglers, clowns), while the second group was formed by the urban social bandits in local neighborhoods.<sup>40</sup> As social bandits, the *luti* (meaning 'generous and brave') acted heroically in order to obtain justice for the underdog in the face of authorities, at times using violence to defend the oppressed. *Lutis* showed respect to elders, protected women and children, and epitomized loyalty, piety, bravery, self-sacrifice, and truthfulness. They represent the ideal Iranian man, in other words, the *javanmard*,<sup>41</sup> while the *laats* are considered pure thugs with very little redeeming social qualities.

*Luti* filmmaking was highly popular during the 1960s and early 1970s,<sup>42</sup> and although this genre evolved over the years, its basic components remained stable:

formulaic plots involving male rivalry, jealousy and revenge, often over women and turf; a presentational acting style that emphasizes destiny and the presentation of ideal types, particularly of manhood; strong binary characters of *luti* and *lat*, with subsidiary

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<sup>37</sup> William Floor dates this practice back to Qajar Iran in the nineteenth century. A main characteristic Qajar Iran was a small elite that ruled over a preindustrial society with a broad agrarian base and illiterate population. The central government was unable to control the local leaders, and therefore had to play them off against one another. Floor argues that loyalties of individuals were first and foremost to their city quarter (*mahalleh*), effectively allowing local leaders, clerics, and government officials to hire *lutis* to help settle scores and obtain social control through violence. Thus, both *lutis* and *laats* were feared and respected within their neighborhoods for different reasons (H. Naficy [2001] Iranian Cinema, in: O. Leaman (ed.) *Companion Encyclopedia of Middle Eastern and North African Film*, p. 147 (London: Routledge)). Since the era of the Qajars, *lutis* and *laats* have been used for various political ends, with the exception of Reza Shah's reign (1925–1941), which was characterized by a strong centralized government. After his abdication in 1941, however, the *lutis* reemerged (W. Floor [1981] *The Political Role of the Lutis in Iran*, p. 92). They were especially visible during the tenure of Mohammad Mossadeq, the prime minister of Iran from 1951–53. Both the royalists (and by extension the CIA and MI6 who staged the coup against Mossadeq by paying *lutis* in southern Tehran to stage protests against the prime minister), and the nationalists employed *lutis* during this tumultuous time. However, because the *lutis* lacked the organization or long-term political objectives to become their own agents, they did not become a formidable political force during or after the 1979 Revolution.

<sup>38</sup> Bahar (1976) *Barresy-e Farhangi-Ejtemai Oye Zurkhanehha-ye Tehran* (Tehran: High Council of Culture and Art).

<sup>39</sup> The only substantial and consistent scholarship on *lutis* in Iranian films and literature has been by Hamid Naficy (2001) Iranian Cinema. *Companion Encyclopedia of Middle Eastern and North*. Prior to Naficy's study of *luti* filmmaking, other studies regarded these films as cultural aberrations, which pointed to a social pathology of the late Pahlavi era as uncouth, corrupt, and lacking in sophistication (see Akbari [1973] *Lompanism*. Tehran: Nashr-e Sapehr; Mehrabi [1984] *Tarikh-e Sinema-ye Iran az Aghaz ta Sal-e 1357*; and Karimi [1990] *Qahreman ya Qorbani. Mahnameh-ye Sinemai-ye Film*, Dey 1369, pp. 52–54).

<sup>40</sup> W. Floor (1981) *The Political Role of the Lutis in Iran*, in: M. E. Bonine & N. Keddie (eds) *Modern Iran: The Dialectics of Continuity and Change*, p. 86 (NY: State University of New York Press).

<sup>41</sup> See further F. Adelkhah (2000), *Being Modern in Iran*, pp. 30–52.

<sup>42</sup> The most significant of these films during that era include Masoud Kimiai's *Qaisar* (1969) and *Dash Akol* (1971), based on Sadeq Hedayat's stories by the same name.

characters of holy or whorish women; pleasurable depiction of the tough guy lifestyle and exploits in their favorite hangouts, such as in tea-houses, nightclubs, bars and the streets, involving their favorite dances, musical numbers, songs and brawls; adherence to specific codes of dress, language and behavior (chivalric and violent) that sets the good guys apart from the bad guys, and repeated casting of familiar and beloved actors in heroic and villainous roles, including their female counterparts.<sup>43</sup>

*Luti* films and literature established a binary between good/bad, pure/impure, holy/whorish, and *lutillaat*.<sup>44</sup>

This genre did not disappear with the revolution, but became Islamicized. In their Islamic configuration *lutis* were not idealized as the epitome of manhood; instead, the post-revolutionary *lutis* in films represent those who have to be transformed and redeemed for the Islamic revolution by the pure Basijis, or ‘soldiers of the Imam,’ as they were called. The post-revolutionary *lutis* are often depicted as social deviants who are addicted to drugs, are smugglers, and are anti-social, much like the protagonists in *The Outcasts*. It is up to the Basij to reform and redeem these post-revolutionary *lutis*.

The ‘selective tradition’ of the *luti*, in the words of Raymond Williams, is ‘an aspect of contemporary social and cultural organization, in the interest of the dominance of a specific class. It is a version of the past that is intended to connect with and ratify the present. What it offers in practice is a sense of *predisposed continuity*.’<sup>45</sup> The transformation of the *luti* by the Basij connects different modalities of Iranian masculinity and clearly positions the Basij as the dominant class in the contemporary social and cultural organization of the Islamic Republic. The *luti* serves as a selective tradition in Dehnamaki’s film as a means to connect traditional forms of Iranian masculinity, with which the filmmaker assumes young audiences connect, with the Islamic Republic’s ideal masculinity, the Basij. This transformation indicates a direction for the future of the Islamic Republic as a means to keep its revolution alive and its ideals flourishing.

Implicit throughout the film, and explicit in Dehnamaki’s interviews about the film are the themes of reforming these outcasts and teaching them the ‘right’ Islamic (revolutionary) values. Dehnamaki states: ‘We have to continue the *aadam saazi* (literally, “people building/making”) that the Imam [Khomeini] preached . . . look at what he did to that young generation of the war—how he trained us . . . we have to struggle against the current state in society to do the same. Our war is a war of ideas.’<sup>46</sup> He attempts to demonstrate how this metamorphosis from a thug to an ideal man of the Islamic Republic can take place through the guidance of ‘pure’ characters such as the Basij commander, Morteza, who, upon volunteering to redeem

<sup>43</sup> H. Naficy (2001) *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking*, p. 148 (NJ: Princeton University Press).

<sup>44</sup> At the height of its popularity, however, the government of Mohammad Reza Shah passed an edict in 1972 against the tough guy films. Though they were not banned outright, the edict restricted certain components of this genre, such as knife-wielding, displaying details of sexual relations, and personal revenge, among others. The edict presumably was due to the fact that *lutis* are signifiers of anti-authority figures who take the law into their own hands to defend justice—a characteristic that could not be promoted under a dictatorial regime in which citizens were meant to obey the shah. Furthermore, the CIA employed *lutis/laats* during the 1953 *coup d’etat* against Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadeq in order to reinstate the power of the shah, and it is plausible that the shah believed those same *lutis/laats* could be employed against him at another point, thus the need to control their popularity. Within three years of this edict, the tough guy films declined from 40 to 24 films and by 1978, they dropped to five. H. Naficy (2001) pp. 149–150.

<sup>45</sup> R. Williams (1977) *Marxism and Literature*, p. 116.

<sup>46</sup> *Shab-e Shishei* television interview.

the thugs, decides to engage them by learning some of their slang and games in order to gain their trust. In one scene, he agrees to learn how to play one of their games if they promise him that after the game is over, they all will go pray.

Using 'their' slang, he befriends them and gains their trust, and in turn, he is able to convince them to change some of their behavior. For instance, on their travel to the battle in which they ultimately are martyred, Morteza is successful in stopping the thugs from singing a popular dance song about loving a woman and leads them in singing a joyous song about all the *houris* they will encounter in heaven after their martyrdom.<sup>47</sup> In these scenes, *The Outcasts* appears to be directly speaking to the Basij and *hezbollahi*, who traditionally resort to force to deal with 'un-Islamic' behavior by youth. As Dehnamaki notes: 'I was one of those who ... thought that with physical force and presence on the streets we could reign certain things in. But as time passed, I eventually came to the conclusion that we must communicate with the public.'<sup>48</sup> These scenes, in a sense, are meant to demonstrate to the Basij and Hezbollah how this 'communication with the public' can take place. Furthermore, it serves as a form of public relations for audiences that good Basijis use kindness, not violence. Dehnamaki, by saying outright: 'We must communicate with the public,' offers an example of doing so in this film. The new pro-regime entertainment that he helps spearhead with this film holds at its core the notion of communicating with the public not through what they deem as propaganda of the 1980s/90s, but by using the very characters and cultural symbols of those who are their target audience, namely, youth. In an attempt to accomplish this in this film, Dehnamaki utilizes not only humor and *luti* characters, but also music.

### Music

Dehnamaki uses popular songs as a trope to appeal to a wider audience, following the lead of many recent popular plays in theaters.<sup>49</sup> The characters in *The Outcasts* sing songs by banned Iranian pop singers who live in Los Angeles, and which audience members would in turn clap and sing to in the theaters.<sup>50</sup> The use of these songs in Dehnamaki's film are all the more important for three reasons: (1) As a commander of the *Ansar-e Hezbollah* during the 1990s, he was in charge of making sure people did not listen to this 'decadent' music in their cars and in public; (2) the music of Iranian singers in Los Angeles are the very Iranian entertainers who had to leave the country after the revolution because of real or presumed ties to the shah's regime, for fear of their lives, or because it became increasingly hard (and virtually impossible during the war) to produce their music; and (3) the lyrics of their songs are not 'Islamized,' meaning they openly sing about love and lust. Thus, the fact that the main characters of a Hezbollahi-turned-cinematic-director sing censored Los Angeles pop songs at the 'sacred defense' on the big screen was shocking, to say the least, to an Iranian audience in 2007. Moreover, the fact that these songs co-exist with the well-known and officially promoted war songs of Kuwaitipour who likens the soldiers to the sacred Imam Hussein, blur the lines between permissible/impermissible, and pious/impious.

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<sup>47</sup> *Houri* is mentioned in the Qur'an and hadiths and is interpreted and translated in many different ways. The way it was employed popularly during the war in Iran and the way it is used in the lyrics of the song that Morteza sings in this film implies that *houris* are the female companion(s) who will greet one in heaven.

<sup>48</sup> Mehrzad Danesh (2007) *Khashm va khandeh va faryad*, *Film Magazine*, p. 33.

<sup>49</sup> *Zahra Khanoom's Tea House* (2005) was performed every night for nearly two years in Tehran because of popular demand; its appeal was due to its *luti* characters and use of banned popular songs.

<sup>50</sup> Pop songs from Iranian singers in exile (mostly in Los Angeles) officially are banned in Iran, yet they are widely available in most music stores throughout the country.

The use of the melody of one popular protest song at the very end of the film where the protagonist is martyred occupies a particularly ambivalent space. The protest song *Yar-e Dabestani-e Man* (My Schoolmate) originally written by Mansour Tehrani, is a song against oppression and a call to ‘me and you [my schoolmate]’ to do away with repression in society. This song became popularized during the reformist movement of the Khatami presidency (1997–2005). Young people sang it during Khatami’s election and re-election campaigns as a sign of support for him, and later it was a rallying cry during the July 1999 and December 2000 student protests at Tehran University.<sup>51</sup> The song thus is associated *ipso facto* with a pro-reform student movement. It continues to be sung at student gatherings today to register protest against the government and camaraderie among those making a stand.

By using this song, Dehnamaki is connecting his vision of the Basij with the public’s relationship to the youth. The appropriation of this distinct melody in a war film, and the changing of the lyrics to be no longer about resisting oppression but about the glories of the war, creates a contradictory and ambivalent space. Thus, Dehnamaki uses a symbolically significant, and indeed defining, song of the second and third generation, collapsing generational differences in the concluding scenes of his film where the thugs redeem themselves by the ultimate sacrifice for their homeland: martyrdom. By deploying a prominent symbol of youth/student protest against the government while the thugs are ‘reformed’ and martyred in the film, Dehnamaki creates a new space where the disaffected youth who have signaled their resistance to this government can be incorporated (and reformed) with the aid of Dehnamaki’s generation, i.e., the pure and kind Basijis, in returning to the values of the revolution.

*The Outcasts* invokes the memory of the war not for sentimental and historical reasons, like most pro-regime war films of the 1980s/90s, but to bring issues of the present to the fore. The utility of the war in these new pro-regime films lies in the fact that its representation is the landscape upon which a picture of the future can be painted precisely because it is the foundation story of the Islamic Republic. The war as a ‘sacred’ space is part of the selective tradition that the Islamic Republic created. Despite the fact that since the end of the war, many, including those still in political power, have questioned the utility of the war,<sup>52</sup> those who are pro-regime still regard the war as a sacred symbol that remains the space upon which notions of masculinity, loyalty, and bravery can be communicated.

## Reviews of the Film

The reception of *The Outcasts* in the Iranian press was mostly negative. The film was criticized for lacking any real quality and only employing popular jokes for commercial purposes. In contrast, the other war films distributed the same year, such as *Rooz-e Sevom* [Seventh Day], *Outubus-e Shab* [The Night Bus], and *Padesha-e Sukut* [The Silent Ruler] were more standard war films, and they were dealt with somewhat more favorably, while *The Outcasts* was widely disparaged. For example, Mahzad Danesh, reviewing the movie for the popular *Film* magazine wrote: ‘More than the message of the film—which doesn’t

<sup>51</sup> It was also a very popular song among protestors during the 2009 Green Movement.

<sup>52</sup> Because the Islamic Republic framed the war as an Islamic battle against the ‘infidel’ Saddam Hussein and the Iraqi Ba’thist party, Khomeini promised never sign a ceasefire or to give up the war effort until the government in Iraq crumbled and an Islamic government was established in its place. Thus, the unexpected ceasefire of 1988 (with Iran’s territorial position essentially the same as it was in 1982 when the Iraqis were driven out of Iranian territory) therefore led many to question the utility of the war (from 1982–88), and it left many soldiers feeling betrayed. For some of the veterans, the end of the war revealed the ambiguities and contradictions of the Islamic government.

reveal itself until the end—it is the use of jokes that people have exchanged for years, and that few directors would have the permission to employ in cinema—and in sacred cinema at that—that this film became popular.<sup>53</sup> Indeed, for reviewers, the jokes either were poorly written and too popular to lend any artistic quality to the film, or they were offensive to the sanctity of the war. Even if it was because of these jokes that ‘the general public [was] glued to their seats’<sup>54</sup> and that led to high box office sales, it does not in any way mean that this was a good film. Arash Khooshkhoo contended: ‘*The Outcasts* is not a good film, even if its box office sales reach that of the *Titanic*.’<sup>55</sup>

Baffled by the public reception, Khooshkhoo of *40Cheragh* magazine, a popular reformist cultural magazine aimed at a young audience, wrote: ‘I confess, the wide reception of this film by people completely challenges my previous beliefs about cinema and the relationship of an audience with a film ... [watching the film and seeing everyone’s joyous reaction to it], I felt like I don’t understand my people at all.’<sup>56</sup> Khooshkhoo could not comprehend how audiences found a film based on ‘populist’ and ‘simple’ comedy so entertaining.

Many critics attributed the success of the film to the high profile and popularity of its cast, including critics from popular monthly film magazines such as *Donya-e Tasvir*. Hossein Moazezinia, the critic writing in *Donya-e Tasvir*, found the humor offensive to the ‘sacred defense,’<sup>57</sup> while others objected to the fact that Dehnamaki had crossed some ‘red lines’ with his comedy. The plot and message of the film was highly criticized:

*The Outcasts* is a bad film. It’s a film that, with the most superficial and simplest material wants to create the deepest and most complicated story. Even though none of its characters go beyond being clichéd caricatures, it wants to leave a lasting impression on the audience. And if the whole film is meant to show how these thugs become ‘people,’ the film does not show how this process actually happens—why they reform.<sup>58</sup>

All reviewers of the film focus a great portion of their articles on Dehnamaki himself and why he chose to direct this film. For these reviews, his personal history is scrutinized and the question is asked that perhaps the popular reception of this film stems from people’s curiosity as to how a figure like Dehnamaki could create such a film that ‘cheapens’ the warfront with its ‘lumpen’ comedy. For these reviewers, the political message of this film is only secondary and they glean that most audience members ignored the political aspects in favor of the jokes. It was the fact that these jokes crossed ‘red lines’ and that the film employed comedy to deal with the sacred space of the warfront that audience members returned to the movie theaters to watch the film multiple times.

It is precisely because of the use of these jokes that it becomes difficult to locate the effectiveness of Dehnamaki’s message about reformation *vis-à-vis* the Basij and notions of proper masculinity. As a film, it is fundamentally entertainment. As Lila Abu-Lughod argues about Egyptian television dramas, regardless of what the directors and producers of a television drama (or film) may intend to depict, how an audience interprets the media is uncontrollable: ‘The producers can guide but in the end cannot determine audiences’

<sup>53</sup> M. Danesh (2007) Khashm va khandeh va faryad, *Film Magazine*, p. 33.

<sup>54</sup> A. Ehsani (2007) Omidvaram CD-ash birun nayad, *Souroush Weekly*, p.138.

<sup>55</sup> A. Khooshkhoo (2007) Chera *Ekhrajitha* filme khubi nist, *40Cheragh*.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> H. Moazezinia (2007) Film-e jangi-e irani va tamashagarash: Aya sinema-ye def’ a moghadas mokhatebash ra peyda kardeh ast? *Dunya-e Tasvir*, pp. 49–51.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 49–51.

readings.<sup>59</sup> In order to create a pedagogical film with a moral message about the ‘right’ way to be a patriotic, pious, Islamic, righteous, and revolutionary citizen, such as *The Outcasts*, Dehnamaki creates the popular ‘other’ of the *luti* characters who are parodied for contrast. These characters, nonetheless, can steal the show by claiming the attention of the audience away from the righteous protagonists. The popularity of *luti* characters in Iranian cinema makes this a very real possibility in this context. Viewers are selective about their readings of media messages.

Although Dehnamaki may have intended the message of the film to be about redemption via the guidance of the Basij, it is unclear if audience members actually received the film in that way since the *luti* characters index the popular pre-revolutionary Iranian films banned after the revolution for ‘corrupt’ behavior, yet widely broadcast into Iranian homes via satellite television stations. The continued popularity of *luti* films signals a nostalgia, albeit one that is complex and hard to locate. This nostalgia can be for the age of pre-revolutionary Iranian movies, which index an era in stark contrast to the post-revolutionary period. Similar to Joel Gordon’s discussion of nostalgia in Egypt following the release of the film *Nasser 56*, the foundations for this nostalgia are complex and tied to social and political developments since the revolution.<sup>60</sup> The disillusionment with the Islamic Republic among many sectors of the population combined with the constant barrage of an alternative vision of Iranian popular culture broadcast from over two dozen satellite stations in London, Los Angeles and Toronto by Iranian exiles opposed to the Islamic Republic, heightens this nostalgia.<sup>61</sup> Pre-revolutionary *luti* films constantly are aired on these satellite stations, as are songs, concerts, and music videos of pre-revolutionary stars as well as new stars who are not able to perform in Iran today. The sense of nostalgia may be due to similar sentiments of disillusionment with the present, which the *luti* characters of *The Outcasts* index.

## Conclusion

These stories of the Iran-Iraq war that circulate in contemporary Iran are not narratives of the past, but more crucially, they are stories that shape future imaginaries of the Islamic Republic. These are stories that aim to reconfigure the very ideas of what it means, or what it *should* mean, to be a ‘proper’ man in the Islamic Republic. It is about demarcating the difference between the righteous Basij, loyal to the Islamic Republic, and the misguided youth. This film is the start of a ‘new entertainment’ by pro-regime cultural producers in Iran that began with the Ahmadinejad presidency, and that has continued since. These new films aim to speak to two audiences in particular: (1) The second and third generations of the revolution, in order to show them that they, too, can be ‘proper’ members of their society and defend their nation; and (2) Basijis and Hezbollahis, by saying to them: ‘we must communicate with our public and show them that our path is the right path. We can communicate, and force is not always needed.’ Nonetheless, the debates over how to resignify the past to define the future are extremely fraught. The fact that pro-regime cultural producers from the Basij, Revolutionary Guards, and Hezbollah outwardly advocate a turn to media as the

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<sup>59</sup> L. Abu-Lughod (2005) *Dramas of Nationhood: The Politics of Television in Egypt*, p. 235 (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press).

<sup>60</sup> J. Gordon (2000) *Nasser 56/Cairo 96: Reimagining Egypt’s Lost Community*, in: W. Armbrust (ed.) *Mass Mediations: New Approaches to Popular Culture of the Middle East and Beyond*, pp 161–181 (CA: University of California Press).

<sup>61</sup> E. Gheytañchi (2008) Iran’s TV Adds Entertainment to Propaganda.” San Francisco Gate. Available at <http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2008/04/05/INJKVSDHN.DTL>, accessed April 6, 2008.



arena where this ‘war of ideas’ is to play out, is telling.

Not only has the revolution gone astray in the eyes of Dehnamaki and others in the Revolutionary Guards, but the heightened threat of foreign powers and the future of the Islamic Republic make the task of reforming the new generation in body and spirit imperative. We cannot overlook the possibility that the new entertainment of pro-regime filmmaking centered around the war, starting with *The Outcasts I* in 2007, and continuing today with *Che* (2014) by Ebrahim Hatamikia, serve not just to bring back the values of the revolution, but also to invoke nationalist feelings against another potential military threat, the Islamic State (ISIS), and the broader proxy war with Saudi Arabia. Conjuring the real war of the 1980s serves to recall the ideas of nationalism and unity generated against an enemy—ideas that presumably can be conjured again, but this time in a filmic war. In the war films of the 1980s and 1990s, the enemy was rarely identified as Iraq, though it was implied; rather, the films focused on the ideals of nationalism, bravery, heroism, martyrdom, and the sacred space of the warfront. The unidentified enemy challenging the Islamic Revolution can morph into various entities at different points in time: ‘the enemy’ can be the internal other who does not abide by revolutionary ideals, such as the protagonists in *The Outcasts*, or the external enemy who physically challenges the sovereignty of the Islamic nation (Iraq in the 1980s and the United States since the start of the ‘War on Terror,’ and now ISIS).

*The Outcasts* positions the war as the idyllic moment when the values of the revolution were alive and evident, where the errant men were reformed by Basijis, both in spirit and in body by sacrificing themselves on the battlefields. The past is brought back into this film not solely to remember that time, but also to register the essential moment of the ‘sacred defense’ and consciously to re-work it for political and social purposes today. The history of the director and the timing of the film, nearly 20 years since the end of the war, point to the wider debate in Iran today among pro-regime cultural producers: namely, how to instill the revolutionary values in the younger generation. Their answer, at least in the past decade, seems to be this ‘new entertainment.’

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