The Dissertation Committee for Somy Kim Certifies that this is the approved version of the following dissertation:

On Witnessing: Postwar Cinema in Iran and Lebanon

Committee:

Mohammad Ghanoonparvar, Supervisor

Elizabeth Richmond-Garza

Tarek El-Ariss

Samer Ali

Kamran Aghaie

Charles Ramirez-Berg

On Witnessing: Postwar Cinema in Iran and Lebanon

by

Somy Kim, B.A., M.A., M.A.

Dissertation

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

The University of Texas at Austin

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

The University of Texas at Austin

August 2013

Dedication

For my son Marwan, and my daughter Mirae.

Acknowledgements

Without a doubt there would have been no path to the completion of this dissertation without the people around me who helped to bring out my own voice through writing. They assisted me in finishing this dissertation, through which I was able to discover the transformative capacity of writing.

I would like to thank first and foremost my committee: Dr. Mohammad Ghanoonparvar, you are a veritable history of Persian Studies and I am so fortunate to have had the opportunity to work with you before your retirement. You have always allayed my fears and encouraged my research pursuits. I will cherish the VCR you gave me along with all your expertise in Iranian cinema and literature. Without your support I could not have gotten this far. Dr. Tarek El-Ariss, thank you for your creativity, theoretical rigor and always pushing me with your characteristic zeal--("Define trauma, ya Somy!"). Dr. Kamran Aghaie, I will always appreciate your candid talks, expertise in Iranian history and academic support throughout graduate school. Dr. Charles Ramirez-Berg, thank you for sharing your love of cinema and teaching me the language of film. I have appreciated your kindness and think of you as a model for teaching cinema lovingly and effectively. Dr. Samer Ali, a thousand thanks for always believing in me and my work. Without your mentorship and support this dissertation would not have been possible. Your encouragement led me to present at my first MLA convention and see myself as a professional in both scholarship and teaching. I appreciate all of the ways you have helped me shine. And finally, I owe a debt of gratitude to Dr. Elizabeth Richmond-Garza who has without fail been a solid rock throughout my graduate career. During my moments of doubt, I thought of your light. Your love for the arts and the mission of Comparative Literature has shone through your engagement with texts, colleagues and students, and I have been but one of very many students who have benefited from that light.

Other professors not on my committee have contributed a great deal to my intellectual and linguistic abilities in literature, theory, Arabic and Persian. For their mentorship I thank Hina Azam, Karen Grumberg, Kristen Brustad, Mahmoud al-Batal, Michael Hillman, and Kamran Ali who all have left indelible marks on my academic roadmap.

Throughout my graduate school career at UT I am grateful for the engagements I have had with the graduate students of the departments of Comparative Literature, History, Radio, Television & Film, and Middle Eastern Languages & Cultures. In particular I would like to thank Assem Nasr, Kristi Barnwell, Ben Koerber, Nora El-Tahawy, Ali Issa, Melanie Magidow, Anna Zjiaka-Stanton, Lanie Millar, Nandini Dhar, Simone Sessolo, Pilar Cabrera, Marina Potoplyak, and Rhituparna Basu. In Persian Studies, I

On Witnessing: Postwar Cinema in Iran and Lebanon

Somy Kim, Ph.D.

The University of Texas at Austin, 2013

Supervisor: Mohammad R. Ghanoonparvar

This dissertation examines the particularly dynamic postwar cinema of Iran and Lebanon (1988-2007). Through a comparative approach, I consider the cinematic narratives that emerged from this critical period of national reconstruction in these two Middle Eastern countries. I argue that the precarious condition of the postwar, globalizing period allowed the untold stories of class and gender for instance, to appear from within the fabric of the discourse of war storytelling in particular ways. By comparing these two contexts I am able to draw from a shared visuality, and specifically the visual trope of the martyr that was popularized in Iran and Lebanon in the war periods. In Chapter One I trace the formidable production of the visual rhetoric of war in Iran and Lebanon through posters and cinema. In Chapter Two I highlight the emergence of an auteur filmmaking of the globalizing period in the Middle East, which emphasized the instability of representation and 'true' witnessing. In Chapter Three, I argue that an aesthetics of performing witnessing illuminated the class issues troubling cities like Tehran and Beirut. Finally, in Chapter Four I show how the generic conventions of popular genres like comedy and musical allowed for otherwise controversial social issues to be articulated in war films.

Table of Contents

List of Figures

Preface

The seeds of this project were planted at various points, beginning even before I entered graduate school. When I first traveled to Iran in 2002, I was most impressed by the national cemetery in Tehran, *Behesht-e Zahra (Zahra's heaven)[1]*, where the majority of the Iran-Iraq war veterans are buried. On each plot lies an up-right metal box with glass, each personalized box full of the belongings of the young man who died in the Iran-Iraq war. This kind of memorialization of the war and these soldiers' lives were echoed in the murals, billboards and the everyday visual culture I experienced walking around the city. However, while in Beirut in 2004, the bullet-ridden buildings and poorer sections of the city, like the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps were the only vestiges that showed any signs that a fifteen year war had ever taken place. Indeed, the newly constructed and polished downtown architecture did not include any memorials of a war that affected the country so formidably. Therefore, when my interest in war and postwar cinema from the region increased, my questions began to take the shape of these differing contexts, one of memorialization and the other, of attempts at erasure.

Then, it was in my first attempts as a young aspiring filmmaker that I began to think about the complex issues of representation. In 2004, as a Fulbright student in Damascus, Syria I collected interviews from my Syrian neighbors asking their opinions about the different Arabic dialects in the Arab world. My hope was to understand how the linguistic differences within a perceived language community affected the perceptions of

---

[1] Zahra is another name for the Prophet Muhammad's daughter and Ali's wife, Fatima.

speakers within that community. A kind of *shibboleth* project, I was concerned with how the issues of identity and language intersect. While I had to leave the country before finishing the project, through interviewing Syrians as an American, this experience started me thinking about the stakes involved in the documentation and representation of culture, and in this case, of the Middle East.

As I researched the cinemas of Iran and the Arab world, I became increasingly interested in the way that postwar cinema as a particular kind of genre enabled stories of class, gender and sexuality to emerge particularly in the films of Iran and Lebanon. Since war cinema is conventionally defined by its emotive qualities and particularly by its relationship to trauma, or the inability to cognitively process violence, I found it fascinating that it seemed like a vehicle through which stories of everyday traumas have been told.

And finally, my particular position as an American scholar working on the Middle East and representation at a time when my government is sustaining war in the region in places like Iraq and Afghanistan, compels my work. The further I have delved into my research I realize that it is no coincidence that my work is deeply concerned with the role of witnessing war at a time when I am attempting to understand my own ethical position as a witness and one who represents and tells stories. Thus, the filmmakers discussed in this dissertation have taught me a great deal about the struggle of telling those stories and moreover, have been a resource for my own understanding of what it means to be a storyteller in a time of war, and consequently the implications of the ways war is remembered, or forgotten.

Introduction

> The aesthetic realm is autonomous and should never be
> confused with or reduced to politics, economics, or history,
> even though every work of art is necessarily connected to its
> own time and place in society. The essence of criticism is of
> course to specify the nature of that connection, which is totally
> different for every work, given that the aesthetic artifact is
> utterly individual and irreducible.
>
> EDWARD SAID, *Cultural Politics*
>
> Suddenly, as if by magic, surrounded by perfect strangers, I
> felt less alone and at the same time less hot.
>
> ABBAS KIAROSTAMI,
> *Cinema of North Africa and the Middle East*

Edward Said's comment in a 2000 *al-Ahram* article, "Cultural Politics," echoes

prevailing criticism about the ways critics tend to apply a reflection model when looking

at art from the Middle East (along with other non-western parts of the world). While

European and American cinema is categorized into a diverse array of genres, periods,

often individualized by particular idiosyncratic aesthetics, scholarship on the arts of Iran

and the Arab world largely bases its recognition of artists on their ability to reflect social

circumstances and/or they are accused of becoming famous based on their western

sensibilities. Abbas Kiarostami is one such figure and his meditation on cinematic

spectatorship, quoted here, encapsulates the relationships explored in this dissertation.

Kiarostami describes a kind of dream where "[i]t's unbearably hot, a kind of heat that's

only felt in the South" (xi). So, while he marks the South as different, he points to the

experience of cinematic spectatorship as one that quells that difference. This sentiment

speaks to what I explore in this dissertation; the ways filmmakers from Iran and Lebanon

have negotiated their identities as local and global filmmakers. As the most internationally well-known "Middle Eastern" filmmaker, Kiarostami is an enigmatic figure, on the one hand lauded for his authentic use of Persian poetics and on the other hand accused of succumbing to Western sensibilities of filmmaking. This seeming contradiction illuminates the tension that exists between and within international and local critical communities on non-Western filmmaking. Ultimately, Kiarostami expresses a spectator's love for cinema and the way that cinema can be a source of communal comfort for global viewers by the inclusive experience of cinema in this ever increasingly globalizing world.

The kind of globalism that affected the world after 1989 manifested in particular ways in Lebanon and Iran, two countries in the midst of combat wars throughout the 1980s. While Lebanon was fighting a local war with fighters from separate factions within Lebanese society, Iran was fighting an external enemy, Iraq, under Saddam Hussein. This is important to recognize when considering the cinemas of these two countries during this period and thereafter. Expectedly, these wars had a tremendous financial effect on the economies of these countries, including their film industries. There are numerous factors that distinguish these countries from one another but textual evidence shows how these very different cultural contexts developed postwar cinema that share cinematic qualities. When we delineate the contrasting political, social and cultural factors that influenced the postwar cinema of this period, we can then appreciate their shared formal and thematic qualities. In doing so we can grasp the ways that postwar cinema enabled a certain kind of storytelling specific to postwar Lebanese and Iranian

cinemas, that is, one of discourses in tension with a national narrative and at times, contradistinction. For example, examining how class is critiqued in the Iranian film, *Crimson Gold* reveals the locale-specific ways the Iran-Iraq war affected postwar society Iran but comparing it with the Lebanese film, *Love in the Battlefields* prevents readings that reduce the prevalence of postwar class issues to Iran alone. Furthermore, the notion of witnessing that is highlighted in these two films manifests particularly through the use of cinematic devices, demonstrating the powerful and singular way that film can narrate.

The post-in the postwar cinema of this dissertation embodies much more than the temporal positioning of these films after the war periods in their respective countries. While certainly the films discussed in this dissertation occurred after the wars of Iran-Iraq and the Lebanese civil war, the reason they meet in this project have much more to do with what aesthetics they share, and consequently the ethical positions they question. When Homi Bhabha introduced the weight of this prefix in his 1994 seminal text *The Location of Culture*, the post- in postcolonial studies did not merely index the literature, theory and movements occurring after the period of colonial rule, but instead highlighted the notion that what was central to what was included in this body of literature was in fact, an anti-colonial ethics. Furthermore, as he showed that postmodernism and postcolonialism as fields of study were a kind of awareness of the limits of western modernity, he underscored that these post- prefixes connoted the "enunciative boundaries of a range of other dissonant, even dissident histories and voices" (Bhabha 6). Therefore, the post- prefix radically probes the foundations upon which western modernity has established itself, consequently opening up debates about the other modernities to which

16

postcolonial studies attempts to attend. His concepts of 'mimicry' and 'hybridity' attend to that performance of an obedient colonized self "that can read against the grain to reveal the subject's troubling self-awareness of the speciousness of their fictive role" (Lopez 4). The performance of identities and the self-awareness of their fictive roles connect the post- of postcolonial studies and the post-ness of the postwar genre that I interrogate in this dissertation.

For my study I have focused on the films of Mohsen Makhmalbaf, Jafar Panahi, and Massud Dehnamaki from Iran and Joana Hadjithomas, Khalil Joreige, Danielle Arbid and Philippe Aractingi from Lebanon, because they all have offered postwar realities that counter the national narratives that have centered on the hyper-masculine figure of the martyr. Instead of hyper-masculine figures portrayed in typical war films, they have focused their attentions on marginalized narratives such as those of the antiheroic war veteran, an adolescent girl coming of age, a silenced female photographer, refugees, social misfits and socially unacceptable couplings. *On Witnessing* intervenes in debates on national cinema by arguing that these postwar films have contributed to more nuanced notions of national identity. They do so by virtue of the shared mode of the postwar film which is characterized by the non-combat emphasis on the everyday experiences of living in postwar societies that include parallel national narratives of martyrdom and sacrifice. Furthermore, generic conventions of the "postwar" film, comedy and musical have facilitated the telling of these marginalized stories.

On Witnessing begins by discussing the concepts of *shahīd* (martyr) and *shāhid* (witness) in the context of national cultural memory and the visual culture of war in Iran and Lebanon through the 1980s and 1990s. I focus on one of the major topoi in the visual mobilization of war, the figure of the martyr, which not only functioned as a type of mourning but also a call to arms. I examine the ways the films in this dissertation problematize this national narrative through the resistance to such masculine and hetero-normative images. Jacques Derrida's notion of the archive in relation to Giorgio Agamben's concept of the witness helps me to understand the ways these films function as alternative archives to the official ways war figures have been represented. In this chapter I interrogate the implications of these relationships to the corpus of Iranian and Lebanese films.

Chapter two reads the Lebanese film, *Around the Pink House* (1999) by Joana Hadithomas and Khalil Joreige and the Iranian film, *Marriage of the Blessed* (1989) by Mohsen Makhmalbaf. I argue that these filmmakers, resisting the image of the *shahīd*, or martyr, put emphasis on the *shāhed*, or witness. Thus, just as the Iranian and Lebanese cinemas are emerging as internationally recognized national cinemas, filmmakers are considering their positions as postwar subjects in a globalizing world. This chapter investigates the aesthetics of this position and its relationship with the concept of witnessing by comparatively analyzing the similar ways presence and absence have been dealt with in films that have emerged from two different historico-political contexts, indicating larger interdependent issues of postwar trauma, representation, and the changing nature of the image.

Chapter three interrogates that kind of performativity of witnessing in Jafar Panahi's 2003 film, *Talā-ye Sorkh* (*Crimson Gold*) and Danielle Arbid's 2004 film, *Mʿārek Hob* (*In the Battlefields*). Indeed, the combination of performativity along with a sense of a traumatized main protagonist characterizes Panahi's antihero, Hussain. The affective representation of Hussain's everyday engagements invites viewers to not only be moved by, but move *in* the narrative enunciation of his experiences. As a result, the opening scene of his suicide sets the stage for what Susan Sontag calls "an iconography of suffering," and an already mourned for Hussain acts as a witness to the story preceding the eventual denouement. By emphasizing the performative act of witnessing, I call attention to the ways that the main character Hussain's witnessing of the inhabitants, or characters of Tehran, incite our own witnessing as film viewers. In *In the Battlefields*, I examine a similar aesthetic that is adopted by Arbid, making our twelve year old protagonist our witness to everyday life in war-time Beirut. By doing so, I argue that Panahi and Arbid's aesthetic invites viewers to simultaneously witness the stories of everyday social class and gender dynamics, facilitated by cinematic devices of storytelling. Ultimately, I enable a reading of the critique of social class and gender in these films not merely as an attempt at reflecting social ills, but a way of highlighting the ways filmmakers have attempted to engage our affective positioning by attaining a witness's insight.

Finally, in chapter four I examine the way the postwar mode manifests in the popular genres of the comedy and musical. The films discussed in chapters two and three in this study have been from the generic category of drama, and specifically of the art

cinema tradition in Iran and Lebanon. In this chapter, I am concerned with how two rather well-received films, one Lebanese musical in 2005, *Bosta*, and the other, an Iranian comedy of 2007, have challenged the notion that traumatic narratives are particular to the aesthetic of drama and art cinema. Mas'ud Dehnamaki in Iran and Phillippe Aractingi in Lebanon have produced postwar films that have resonated with their respective local audiences and they have done so through the mode of the postwar film.

Note on Transliteration and Translation:

All translations from original Arabic, Persian and French are mine. In cases when texts have previously been published in English translation, I refer to them by the title under which they were published. I have based all transliterations from Arabic and Persian on the guide provided by *the International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* (*IJMS*). Rather than transliterating authors' and literary characters' names I have used the most common romanized spellings.

Chapter One: War, Witnessing, and Cinema in Iran and Lebanon

> [a] cool eye that is our realization that the world we see is the same world that others see, a world of which we possess nothing but the commonable [sic] reviewing of lights flickering upon its moving images.
>
> WALID SADEK, *Laisser-Passez*

In this first chapter I focus on one of the major topoi in the visual mobilization of war, the figure of the martyr, which not only functioned as a type of mourning but also a call to arms. I examine the ways the films in this dissertation problematize this national narrative through the resistance to such masculine and hetero-normative images. Jacques Derrida's notion of the archive in relation to Giorgio Agamben's concept of the witness helps me to understand the ways these films function as alternative archives to the official ways war figures have been represented. In this chapter I interrogate the implications of these relationships to the corpus of Iranian and Lebanese films.

In both Persian and Arabic, the word *shahīd* denotes a martyr. Significantly, for this study, it is important to highlight that *shahīd*, according to Lisān al-'arab, means a *witness*, in the sense of "one who *witnesses* what was done."[2] Thus, part of the Arabic valence translates a *shahīd*'s death to a testimony of their faith. Therefore, when martyrs become *shahīd*, they are the embodiment of this testimony. I approach the concept of martyrdom not only in religious terms but as part of certain ideologies and therefore culturally relevant to the religious and non-religious communities of Iran and Lebanon.

---

[2] http://www.baheth.info/all.jsp?term=شهيد

In this way I adopt Talal Assad's notion of the secular I use the term 'secular' by way of Talal Assad who references Charles Taylor's definition of the secular as "the attempt to find the lowest denominator among the doctrines of conflicting religious sects" (2) in his *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (2003). In Iran, as Shi'i martyrdom was an already embedded cultural framework, an effective means to encourage fighters to sacrifice and fight for the imagined community came in the form of "martyrology" (Varzi 189). What is particularly poignant about the reach of this martyr culture is its presence in secular films, that is, films made by secular directors. (rewrite with Talal Assad's Formations of the Secular) The appropriation of martyr symbolism and responses to martyr culture are evident in each of the films analyzed in this dissertation. I argue that the significance of witnessing as a *shahīd* was preserved and appropriated by some filmmakers to attest to the experience of war as lived reality.

MARTYRDOM IN THE VISUAL ART OF WAR

Iran

In Iran, the Iran-Iraq war became the raison d'etre for the Islamic Republic's legitimacy which was propelled by the formidable production of Islamic Republic images. This "image regime"[3] poured their massive production and distribution of images of Khomeini, war martyrs, mourning mothers and slogans throughout the city during and after war time. The more noticeable images came in the form of murals, posters and other public forms of display. However, other ways images were dispersed throughout the country were through textbooks, stamps, and other everyday paraphernalia. By saturating

---

[3] Roxanne Varzi's term for the Islamic Republic that emphasizes its image-focused propaganda.

popular culture with these images, the Islamic Republic was able to construct an "iconography of suffering"[4] that ultimately became the basis for the average Iranian's experience with the war.

The symbols of martyrdom have become central to this visual literacy of war from the 1980s to the present. According to Roland Barthes, the non-coded image is the image without cultural interpretation, also called the perceived image, while the coded image is one that contains the connoted information that was intended by the maker.[5] The coded images of the Iran-Iraq war, of posters and murals in particular, portrayed young soldiers often with bandanas, holding rifles, embracing one another departing for war, with slogans like "Sing to my ear the hymn of how to live like a man…" (Chelkowski 163). Images of manhood not only included battle-ready soldiers, but there were also a special type of stock images of soldiers prostrated in prayer at the warfront. So masculinity came not merely in the form of war-readiness but in the expression of religious piety. This feature is particularly relevant for the comparison with Lebanon as it is this very rhetoric of the *shahīd* (martyr) that is a shared feature of the cultural memories of both countries and thus, becomes the crux upon which the postwar reclamation of witnessing rests. As Roxanne Varzi articulates, "[i]t is not the martyr himself and his desires that are important per se, but the role he plays in creating a desire, a need, a fear—a culture of survivors, bound by blood to the nation" (62).

---

[4] From Susan Sontag's *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003).
[5] See Roland Barthes's "Rhetoric of an Image" in Robert Innis' *Semiotics: An Introductory Anthology* (1985).
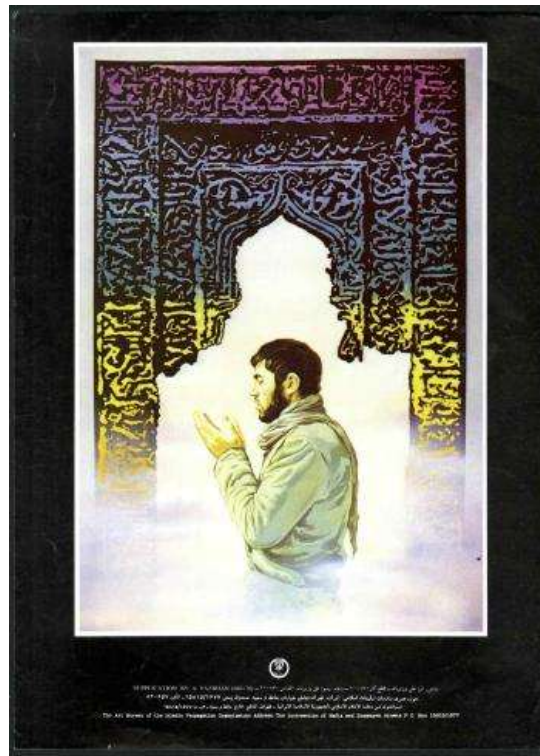
Fig. 1.1 The martyr as pious soldier.[6]

Morteza Avini, the Islamic republic's main filmmaker's series called Revāyat-Fath (Chronicle of Victory) encapsulates the way the war was projected to Iranian audiences. Also called the *cinema-ye defa'e moqadas* or the cinema of Sacred Defense, the embedded film director not only interviewed the typically young and enthusiastic of soldiers but the old and dedicated of war heroes. Thus, images of sixty and seventy year old fighters filling the missile launchers headed for Iraq inspire awe in the viewers who can hardly imagine the throes of the war front let alone the loyalty it would take for the elderly to join such a threatening venture. Roxanne Varzi in *Warring Souls* contemplates the contradictions between the propaganda-led revolutionary principles of war and

---

[6] All images included in the Iran section of this dissertation, other than film stills, were acquired from the *Iran-Iraq war archive* housed at the *International Institute for Social History* in Amsterdam.

postwar Iranian society and the visions of the youth who grew up and within the revolution's period of reconstruction in the 1980s and 1990s. She notes that Avini was crucial in changing the approach to screening the war; the public was disenchanted by the images of dead Iraqi bodies and Avini proposed that they show the difficulties of war in order to engage and inspire volunteers (77). Thus, his documentaries aimed at not only showing faith through courageous acts by believing soldiers, but inspiring faith through that witnessing. Significantly, Avini claimed that the kind of filmmaking that he practiced was more real than neorealist filmmaking because he and his crew were not trained professionals but instead filmed from some inner inspiration (Varzi 90). That this somehow made them more authentic of a witness was important to Avini and those who filmed with him. In fact, when the Farabi Film Foundation created a War Movies Section out of the Ministry of Culture, they enlisted filmmakers who were Muslim and had been to the war front (Varzi 98). Mohsen Makhmalbaf and Ebrahim Hatami-kia were two of those filmmakers who began their careers through this process.

Ebrahim Hatamikia's *Az Karkhe ta Rhein* (From Karkhe to Rhine, 1993) is one of the most recognizable war films in Iran. It deals with difficulties of reconciliation between a veteran with his sister. Hatamikia is considered to be the best and most well-known of filmmakers of the war genre in Iran. His films deal with the traumas and difficulties of war through popular drama and thus, his films are regularly shown in Iran. Other films to his credit include *Bū-ye Pirāhan-e Yusef* (The Scent of Yusuf's Shirt, 1995) and *Āzhāns-e shishei* (The Glass Agency, 1997) which also dealt with the aftermath and dealing with how to re-situate back into society after war. What Hatamikia

captures so well is the difficulties of living in a postwar society. He was one of the first and the most lauded of directors to express this difficulty on screen.

Thus the war effort and national defense was connected with religious piety and martyrdom in ways that emphasized the significance of bearing witness. Not only through Avini's films, but the proliferation of martyr images on murals, stamps, posters and other visual media created a city of witnesses to the war and its casualties. From Roxanne Varzi's research in Tehran she writes,

> The city is mapped by death. Around every corner death appears as a cagelike funeral contraption laced with strings of lights (on nights when there is electricity) that holds blurred snapshots of now-dead boys. The inky images slip out and move like ghosts through the city, taped to the back windows of taxis and trucks […] Tehran is a city of living and dead ghosts (106-7).

Varzi's description captures the degree to which martyr images filled the city and its public spaces. Chelkowski and Dabashi document this production in their *Staging a Revolution*, a pictorial account of the Islamic Revolution and its most famous revolution images. Young men donning slogan bandanas, holding kalishnikovs in their hands and running toward a horizon is a famous mural image that has been repeatedly used in posters, books, Significantly, the variety of memorial images produced during and after the war were not only religious in nature, but were also culled from Iranian medieval myths like the *Shahnameh* resulting in a visual culture that seemed to encompass a longer Iranian cultural heritage (Chelkowski 42). Thus, Khomeini's visage was not confined to portraits with religious, qur'anic script but included portraits that were in the design of classical miniature painting motifs. By appropriating a broader cultural heritage than a merely Islamic one, Khomeini was able to take advantage of Iran's rich and variegated

cultural traditions to reach further and deeper into Iranian communities. Thus, the coding in such images includes a larger audience of Iranians, ones who may not be Muslim in particular.
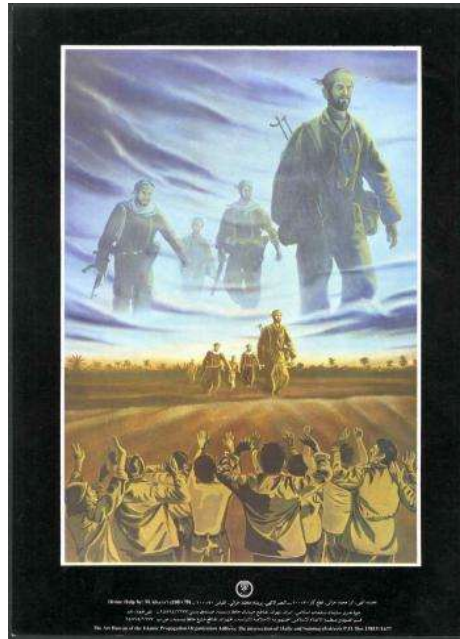
Figure 1.2 Martyrs as ghosts.

Lebanon

In Lebanon, while the *shahīd* and the civil war have been defining features of Lebanese cultural memory, a national effort to forget about the war has resulted in a kind of cultural amnesia. This tendency to reject sharing in and remembering Lebanese collective trauma has been studied by Sune Haugbolle who finds,

> "the Lebanese are victims of a lacuna between personal memory and collective amnesia. When there is no echo of the (traumatic) personal memory to be found in the collective memory, the reality of that memory is liable to be put into doubt" (195)

In Hoda Barakat's *Letters of a Stranger* she is deeply self-aware of the way Lebanese, including herself avoid talking about the war but it is in this awareness and recognition that I find Haugbolle's concept of memory and doubt particularly useful in its inability to characterize Barakat's writing. In essays like "Allegro" for example, Barakat is able to overcome that doubt without recounting, but still recognizing its happening. In "Allegro," she writes about the way Lebanese abroad find it difficult to remember the war, "as if we are still people of that country. As if we didn't live through all of it. As if it was a story that we read a long time ago from a book we lost and almost..." (37) Thus, her "as if" is a verbal intervention into the process of forgetting, challenging the "amnesia" that plagues those who experience war. This act of writing is wrought with seeming contradiction as she resists and affirms memory and identity throughout her letters. By writing her awareness of the possible erasure of a traumatic history Barakat escapes being part of the group of "victims" that Haugbolle finds to be a present in a postwar Lebanon.

In Lebanon, the vision of the *shahīd*, while concentrated in, was not confined to the remembrance of Shi'i martyrs, rather is a secular[7] concept. The first rendition of the famous, city-central Sāḥat al-burj or the Martyr's Square memorial was of two women, a Muslim and a Christian, holding an urn containing the ashes of *both* Muslim and Christian martyrs (Volk 55). Volk argues, that through this, "one nation was created ... in Lebanon's first piece of national art" (59). Only most recently, in an effort to resist the cultural amnesia of the war artists like Jalal Toufic, Rabih Mroue, Joanna Hadithomas,

---

[7] I use the term 'secular' by way of Talal Assad who references Charles Taylor's definition of the secular as "the attempt to find the lowest denominator among the doctrines of conflicting religious sects" (2) in his *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (2003).

Khalil Joreige and others have explored the ramifications of sacrifice and community in their work as well. Jalal Toufic's *Ashura: This Blood Spilled in My Veins* is an experimental film documenting an Ashura ritual, Rabih Mroue's short film *Three Posters* explores the recording of a would-be martyr and Joanna Hadjithomas, along with partner Khalil Joreige feature young men willing to be martyrs in *Around the Pink House*, a film analyzed in this dissertation. Thus, the concept of martyrdom is not merely a subject for religious Shi'i Muslims but a topic that has been a key source of inquisition for non-religious (secular) Lebanese artists since the war.

Much like Judith Butler in her *Precarious Life*, these artists question the way public mourning of hyper-visible lives, like that of the martyr, can render other lives invisible through their public invisibility, their lives become unmournable, "unmarkable" (Butler 35). Bulter writes in the context of post- 9/11 and the effects of the public mourning of American lives on the lives of Others, like the civilians whose lives are affected in other countries as a result of the war on terror. In the case of Lebanon and Iran, how have the ways martyr stories have been projected on the walls, screens and even living rooms of the everyday affected the stories of the non-masculine and non-martyred?

Martyr imagery during the war came in the form of political posters and as a result, became part of the everyday landscape of Beirut. There was no central organization of propaganda, rather there were numerous political parties[8] that had their

---

[8] The various political parties included the Lebanese Front, National Liberation Party (NLP), Lebanese Ketaeb Party (LKP) or Phalange, Tanzim, Guardian of the Cedars, Marada, Lebanese Forces (LF), Lebanese National Movement (LNM), Lebanese National Resistance Front (LNRF), Palestinian Liberation

own designers. Zeina Maasri's work on the range of political posters during the war emphasizes the different organizations that designed and produced the visual culture that lined the walls of Beirut. In the most basic form, martyr posters functioned as public obituaries. While styles varied, the shared features of a martyr poster included the portrait of the martyr, name, birth to death dates, party affiliation and sometimes the location of where the martyr died (Maasri 88). Several types of martyr posters included the obituary format, collective martyrs, acclaimed martyr-heroes, 'martyrdom operations, jihad and martyrdom (Maasri 89-99). These varied and numerous posters not only fulfilled the function of informing their communities of their deaths, but served as a way to recruit potential fighters for their party's cause.

Fig. 1.3 "In the sea of martyrdom until we reach the shore of victory."

Organization in Lebanon (PLO), Progressive Socialist Party (PSP), Lebanese Communist Party (LCP), Organization of Communist Action in Lebanon (OCA), Syrian Social National Party (SSNP), Independent Nasserist Movement (INM), Socialist Arab Union, Arab Socialist Baath Party, Amal Movement and Hizbullah (Maasri 25-9).

For the past forty years Lebanese cinema has been largely preoccupied by the theme of the civil war that lasted from 1975 to 1990 and claimed over 150,000 lives. Add to that number, the number of internally displaced refugees and missing persons, themes of loss, longing and trauma have taken different forms in the cinema. As early as 1981 with Borhan Alawiyeh's *Beirut, al-liq'a* (Beirut, the Encounter) and 1982 Maroun Baghdadi's *Horub al-saghira* (Little Wars), filmmakers have been documenting the war as lived reality. Furthermore, the collaborative and technical nature of filmmaking has made it, as in many countries, an endeavor that has depended greatly on transnational production and one of the many "miracles of globalization." Walid Sadek likens globalization to a shared, single eye, "[a] cool eye that is our realization that the world we see is the same world that others see, a world of which we possess nothing but the commonable [sic] reviewing of lights flickering upon its moving images" (Sadek 18). In his essay, "Laissez-passer," Sadek attributes the burgeoning of the Lebanese art community to the greater network of global collaboration and co-productions that characterized the post-war period.

Lina Khatib's claim that Lebanon lacks a national cinema is based on the definitional bases of four categories[9] within which Lebanon does not fit. First, national cinemas can be categorized by their production value which includes cost of production, exhibition and consumption, cultural specificity, and representation. Khatib finds that Lebanon fails to own any one of these characteristics and therefore, can be said not to possess a national cinema in the conventional sense. However, she finds the one constant

---

[9] See Andrew Higson's *Waving the Flag: Constructing a National Cinema in Britain* (1995).

and shared characteristic of the majority of films from the postwar period is the theme of the Civil war.

Documentary filmmaking in Lebanon took the form of experimental art videos and installations which became a venue to question the representation of war. In Walid Raad's "Excerpts from an Interview with Souheil Bachar," the purported hostage, Souheil Bachar, was the only Lebanese hostage of the 1983 hostage crisis held with five American men. In this mock-documentary Souheil sits in front of the camera reliving his experience while under captive. He describes the American men, Terry Anderson, Benjamin Weir, Thomas Sutherland, Martin Jenco and David Jacobsen who were, in fact, held captive by Hezbollah and since their release in the early 1990s, have released memoirs of their time in captivity. In a mock-interview with Walid Raad, Raad asks why he requests to have his voice dubbed in a woman's voice when screened internationally. Also, Raad mentions that the translations are often incorrect and sometimes the exact opposite of what is said in the original Arabic. Souheil's response that all of this is true highlights Raad's point that the effort at representing reality and truth is often undermined by its expected advocates of that truth. This distrust of reality and representation runs through other films like *Around the Pink House* that centers on the power of documentation and the fabrication of it.

DEBATES ABOUT THE THIRD WORLD AND LITERARY ARTS

As I proceed with my analysis with the assumption that fictional narratives can function as national narratives, or in Jameson's term, *national allegories*, I refer to a well-known debate about the nature of art and fiction in the purported "third-world." This

debate about euro-centric models in literary theory is famously embodied in the discussion between Frederic Jameson and Aijaz Ahmad. Jameson in his "Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism" wrote:

> All third-world texts are necessarily, I want to argue, allegorical, and in a very specific way: they are to be read as what I will call *national allegories*, even when, or perhaps I should say, particularly when their forms develop out of predominantly western machineries of representation, such as the novel (Jameson 69).

In a scathing response to this euro-centric claim Aijaz Ahmad asserts "allegorisation is by no means specific to the so-called third world" and asks "what else are [...] Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* or Ellison's *The Invisible Man* but allegorisations of individual – and not so individual – experience?" (Ahmad 15). He insists that instead of configuring our world in terms of three zones and therefore determining some model particular to "third-world" literatures, literary theorists must deal with the fact that "this world includes the experience of colonialism and imperialism on both sides of Jameson's global divide," and however difficult, must put them on the same plane while appreciating their specific localities (Ahmad 9).

By refuting the claims of those resisting euro-centric models, my aim is not to ignore the prevailing euro-centric mode of analysis in critical discourse. On the contrary, just as Ahmad articulates, I find the call for measuring non-western literatures, and cinema in the case of this dissertation, on grounds completely unrelated to western cultural production actually contributes to the marking of those literatures and cinema as

sub-standard or necessarily and essentially incompatible. Allow me to turn to a discussion about the Arabic novel that deals with similar contentious issues of literary frameworks, the third world, and power. In regards to the discourse on the novel Samah Selim claims that, "[s]ince orientalism always positions modern Arabic/Islamic culture within a Eurocentric teleology, these texts are important because they belong to an intermediate stage in the development of the novel in Arabic" (109). Thus, the weight of the terms "orientalism" and "eurocentric" marks the novel as a conspicuous target. Here she connects these concepts of hegemonic power to the genre of the novel in such a way that the latter is a monolithic object lacking its own history and various manifestations. Furthermore, she argues, "[b]y examining the critical reception of the series of late nineteenth century Arabic texts that constitute what I will call 'illegitimate fictions,' we can better understand the ways in which genre is appropriated and constructed as a hegemonic cultural discourse at a given historical moment" (110). Selim's study attempts to show how specific the Arabic case is and the incompatibility of western theory and Arabic discourse. This effort to distance the Arabic case from prevailing critical discourse by creating a standard of its own exhibits the same division of "worlds" that Ahmad criticizes Jameson of positing.

This instance indexes a particularly faulty critical move in comparative analyses that emphasize center-periphery models. For example, as Selim compares nineteenth century European novels with late nineteenth century Arabic novels, she is bound to find the latter substandard. However, this has much more to do with the fact that Selim compares the peak of novel writing in European literary history with that of the advent of

novel writing in Egypt, rather than comparing analogous periods of development. This methodological oversight weakens Selim's argument and is terribly misleading in its efforts to provide a more accurate description of the history of the Arabic novel.

POSITIONING THE MIDDLE EAST IN DISCURSIVE NATIONALISMS

Jonathan Culler's interrogation of nationalism since the production of Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* is particularly necessary to discuss the nuances of national imaginaries and their relationship with fiction. Culler recollects the astonishment at the arrival of *Imagined Communities* and the succeeding wonder that no scholar had up until that point articulated the concept that "all communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact (and perhaps even these) are imagined" (Anderson 6). Since the publication of Anderson's seminal text, any work dealing with nations or communities has cited Anderson's book as a reference. In his article "Anderson and the Novel" Culler points out Anderson's second edition of *Imagined Communities* and his overlooked quotation of Ernest Renan who said, "In fact the essence of a nation is that all the individuals have many things in common and also that they have all forgotten many things" (Culler 21). This emphasis on the communal forgetting of the past as a shared and constitutive part of national identity is particularly resonant in the case of Lebanon.

TRANSNATIONAL CINEMA

Furthermore, examining Iranian cinema and Lebanese cinema in relation to transnational and global studies is necessary to situate these films globally, but more importantly to highlight the lack of attention paid to fully describe the distinct and global characteristics of Iranian and Lebanese filmmaking in this period. As defined by Ezra and

Rowden, the transnational can be thought of as the "global forces that link people or institutions across nations" (1). This takes the concept of transnational cinema beyond the mere economic and sociopolitical origins of the genre. Thus, the concept of transnational filmmaking asserts a kind of shared viewing public, one whose references and language are shared amongst one another. This language goes "beyond the desire for and mindlessly appreciative consumption of national narratives that audiences can identify as their 'own'" (Ezra and Rowden 3). This framework resists notions of local and national audiences as the sole receptors for which cinematic affect and success apply. For the cinema in Iran and Lebanon of the 1990s and 2000s this is especially significant considering their participation in the global practice and aesthetics of filmmaking, as demonstrated in this dissertation. Changes in the international viewing public can be seen in the shift from European to more global cinema tastes in the contents of the *International Film Guide*, a guide published largely for film critics and scholars. The inaugural edition of the *International Film Guide* argued for quality films that were "serious" and through their publication hoped to contribute to the "wider and more thorough distribution of overseas art films" (Ezra and Rowden 4). By 2008, the Guide included a wider range of filmmakers from Africa, Latin America, and Asia, regions that were often underrepresented in the *Guide*.

Hamid Naficy's *An Accented Cinema: exilic and diasporic filmmaking* focuses on the films that postcolonial, Third World filmmakers in exile have made since the 1960s. While he contends that there is nothing common about exile and diaspora, deterritorialized people and their films share certain features that he finds must be

36

emphasized in this climate of ethnic difference. In this comprehensive study he includes "close-ups" or specific case studies to highlight their individual contexts and histories. In this way he avoids prescribing a general universal to films from vastly different histories and specific contexts. Naficy terms this cinema "accented" in contrast with dominant cinema that serves as the normative/universal basis of comparison. Aware of the dangers of such a large project and the difficulty of accounting for all genres, especially popular cinema, he claims, "Although many of the films are authorial and autobiographical, I problematize both authorship and autobiography by positing that the filmmaker's relationship to their films and to the authoring agency within them is not solely one of parentage but also one of performance" (4). Particularly relevant to the films discussed in this dissertation, accented films "are in dialogue with the home and host societies and their respective national cinemas, as well as with audiences, many of whom are similarly transnational, whose desires, aspirations and fears they express" (Naficy 6). While the films discussed in this dissertation indeed exhibit these qualities, it cannot be said that the intended audience of *Marriage of the Blessed* or *Around the Pink House* is necessarily an exilic one. In fact, while the films use tools of filmmaking largely considered 'global' by virtue of their technique, the rich cultural content of these films indicate an intended spectatorship that includes a local audience. Furthermore, both films were released locally and received favorable reception. Indeed Naficy differentiates between the demands and expectations of the general local population who prefers entertaining and uplifting narratives versus displaced communities that often demand "authentic" and

corrective representations. This problematic of representation manifests in a self-aware aesthetic, one that Mark Westmoreland terms "post-orientalist aesthetics."

POST-ORIENTALIST AESTHETICS

Mark Westmoreland's insightful study on experimental video and filmmaking by Lebanese artists provides a productive framework from which to discuss postwar filmmaking not only in Lebanon, but in Iran. He finds Hamid Naficy's concept of "deterritorialized" cinema, cinemas that defy the concept of a national cinema and or some singular cultural logic a point of departure for his study. Thus, Westmoreland suggests a translocal framework over a transnational one. If the transnational consists of the "global forces that link people or institutions across nations" (Ezra and Rowden, 1) then the translocal are those visible and apparent aspects of these forces that have traversed the national borders into the local sphere of language, aesthetics, and cultural practices. For example, in his research on the experimental documentary in Lebanon, Westmoreland locates the translocality between Lebanon, Syria and Palestine in the momentous Arab defeat of 1967. He claims that this conflict between the nations of Israel and Egypt made an impact in the creative practices of filmmakers of the Arab world. Indeed, Tunisian filmmaker and critic Nouri Bouzid argues that several strategies emerge from the consciousness of an Arab defeat in what he calls the "defeat-conscious cinema" of this period (242). Westmoreland considers this difficult condition of representing defeat a shared burden by filmmakers of the region whose national public discourse also adopted the Arab-Israeli narrative as its own.

Moreover, the concept of post-orientalist aesthetics challenges the notion that artists working from subaltern positions lack agency. The massive artistic output generated by artists in Lebanon and Iran speak to this overdetermined assumption given credence by Edward Said's *Orientalism*. Thus, the aesthetics exhibited in works by such artists and critics as Jalal Toufic[10] and Walid Raad[11] are a testament to the active role artists have played in envisioning the nation. Here, I pause to consider the limitations of a framework by which we misuse or confuse visual representation for affective strategies. As this study is not a quantitative account of audience reception, I do not delve into the effectiveness of strategies implemented by the filmmakers discussed in this dissertation. However, I find it extremely important to document the ways artists attempt to counter narratives that are more public and widespread. This highlights another characteristic of post-orientalist aesthetics whereby open-endedness and ambiguity welcome disorientation, even misunderstanding. Westmoreland finds interventions posed by Lebanese artists in the form of "ficto-criticisms" a particularly Lebanese form of visuality.

For my study I take as one context of comparison, the post-Cold War period, when, according to Rashid Khalidi, the Middle East was fertile ground for sowing crisis by foreign intervention and consolidating local executive power.[12] He quotes James Madison that "war is in fact the true nurse of executive aggrandizement" (163). For Iran,

---

[10] Jalal Toufic is a Lebanese video artist, writer and professor at Kadir Has University in Istanbul, Turkey.
[11] Walid Raad is co-founder of the Atlas Group, a fictional collective that created an archive of the Lebanese war. Raad is associate professor of Art at Cooper Union in New York.
[12] See Rashid Khalidi's *Sowing Crisis: The Cold War and American Dominance in the Middle East* (2009).

the Iran-Iraq war that lasted eight long years between 1980 and 1988 became a focal point for Khomeini and necessarily a platform from which his legitimization arose. Thus, the postwar society of Iran saw the glorification of war on a mass scale through murals, posters, TV shows, documentaries and of course cinema. Morteza Avini's TV series, *Revāyat-e Fath* was key to the project of glorifying the Iran-Iraq war in Iran. Taking Westmoreland's study as a model, how do Iranian filmmakers fare in the context of Iran's postwar glorification of war compared to the "war amnesia" of Lebanon? If part of the basis of post-orientalist aesthetics in Lebanon lies in the efforts to recover a lost memory of war and reconciliation, what can an analogous aesthetics in Iranian filmmaking uncover about the nature of post-orientalist aesthetics?

The politics of representation in particular, figure prominently in the works of Iranian and Lebanese filmmakers of the postwar periods. When read with an eye towards their aesthetic manipulations we understand their filmic reflexivity and comment on the unreliability of mimetic codes as a way to attend to the loss or purported unreliability of witnessing. Through the consistent re-telling of traumatic experience these films emphasize the precarious moment of not only their own postwar contexts, but also the post-Cold War period when walls are being torn down and identities being constructed. In terms of scholarship, if the study of post-revolution Iranian cinema has largely been dominated by its relationship with politics, it can be said that studies on Lebanese cinema have been greatly defined by its relation to the Lebanese Civil War.[13]

---

[13] Lina Khatib makes a similar argument in *Lebanese Cinema: Imagining the Civil War and Beyond* (2008).

Critics now avoid such terms as 'third world' cinema in favor of the more neutral term 'global art cinema.' However, the debates continue on what this category, in fact, entails. Galt and Schoonover claim that while art cinema has been taking great leaps worldwide, little scholarship has been dedicated to it since the 1970s.[14] When considering Middle Eastern cinema, this estimation mirrors a trend in the scholarship on cinema in Middle Eastern area studies. Thus, most recently there has been a large corpus of studies on Iranian cinema, claiming to resist the attention paid solely to Iranian art cinema. This sentiment comes from the international, not necessarily scholarly, attention that Iranian cinema has received in international film festivals. Considering the dearth of academic studies on Iranian and Lebanese cinema these claims reveal more about the intellectual communities of Middle Eastern Studies than the state of the discipline of cinema studies and the Middle East. In fact, the decline in the studies on art cinema came with the cultural turn of the 1980s when art cinema received the death mark of 'elitist' (Galt).

POSSIBILITIES OF WITNESSING

In the Persian language *shāhed* denotes testimony and witness. *Shahid*, its linguistic counterpart in the Arabic language, also carries the valences of testimony and witness but includes the verbal function of viewing and seeing. Therefore, one can say not only *shahid* for witness, but also *yushahid*, (he witnesses) or *shahidtu*, (I witnessed or I saw). This act of seeing and witnessing is particularly relevant in the context of the post Iran-Iraq war period in Iran and post-civil war in Lebanon, where differing visions of a

---

[14] See Galt and Schoonover's *Global Art Cinema: New Theories and Histories* (2012).

national narrative were largely based on how the nations chose to remember their wars. Thus, while the cultural memory of Lebanon is predicated on the erasure of war and Iran's is largely based on glorifying its war, the cinema of these differing contexts demonstrate similar ways of subverting these state-propelled narratives.

Chapter Two: The Camera as Witness in *Marriage of the Blessed*[15] and *Around the Pink House*[16]

> Producing images in this region, what kind of images you produce, what kind of images [have] power, or [no] power, you know, […] we thought, what is our stature as filmmaker in this region? […] We had an encounter with a guy from Arte and the guy from Arte said, you know your film, now after September 11, it's totally anecdotal. And this we kept. This we kept and said, okay, we are going to do this film.[17]
>
> JOANA HADJITHOMAS

In 2003 Hadjithomas shot *al-film al-mafqūd (The Lost Film)* with her husband and long-time film partner, Khalil Joreige, to document their search in Yemen for a lost reel of their first feature film, *al-bayt al-zahr* (*Around the Pink House*, 1999). Hadjithomas's sentiment in the quote above captures not only the acknowledgement of her position as a cultural producer of the Middle East, but more importantly, encapsulates her defiance to the expectations of the global culture industry on Arab artists in a post 9/11 environment. This double bind of re-presenting culture through the image while challenging expected narratives characterizes the films produced during postwar reconstruction in Iran and Lebanon. Interestingly what has been overlooked in the small corpus of studies on the cinema of the Middle East is the relationship between the aesthetics of the works produced and their contextual heritages. Specifically, the globally recognized cinema of

---

[15] This is the international title of Makhmalbaf's *'arūsī-ye khūban* in Persian.

[16] The Arabic title was released as *al-bayt al-zahr* while the French release was titled *Autour de la Maison Rose*.

[17] Quoted from a public lecture and screening of *al-film al-mafqūd* as part of the series *Image in the Aftermath* at the Beirut Art Center in Lebanon, July 13, 2011.

Iran of the 1990s and 2000s and the renaissance of filmmaking in Lebanon of the same period have become internationally known as the national cinemas of these countries. Understanding the nuanced context of postwar Iran and Lebanon illuminates how their national cinemas have been characterized by the productive relationship between several prolific filmmakers and the limits and capabilities of the cinematic image.

In this second chapter, I argue that these filmmakers, resisting the image of the *shahīd*, or martyr, put emphasis on the *shāhed*, or witness. Thus, just as the Iranian and Lebanese cinemas are emerging as internationally recognized national cinemas, filmmakers are considering their positions as postwar subjects in a globalizing world. This chapter investigates the aesthetics of this position and its relationship with the concept of witnessing with a comparative analysis of films emerging from two different historico-political contexts, however exhibiting thematic and formal features that indicate the larger interdependent issues of postwar trauma, representation, and the changing nature of the image.

As evidenced in chapter one, the national narratives of reconstruction in Iran and Lebanon were propelled through the use of visual culture in public spaces. Iran, needing to legitimize its eight year long war resulting in 500,000 casualties, remembered the war as a good war, a war for the "poor and downtrodden," essentially a war for the people. These co-opted socialist narratives traveled through the Islamic Republic's popular culture and media, especially its cinema. In Iran, this manifested in TV series and films by the famous war director of the *Defāʿe Moghadas* or Sacred Defense, Morteza Avini. In Lebanon, a host of media outlets, like al-mostaqbāl or Future, attempted to produce

commercials and shows interpellating new Lebanese subjects, to take on a Lebanese identity, downplaying the religious affiliations that came to symbolize the main conflict of the war. In chapter two I read two films that act as counter-narratives to the national narratives described in chapter one.

Informed by the scholarship on Iranian and Lebanese cinema studies, I examine the filmic techniques and cinematic narratives of two postwar films – Iranian filmmaker Mohsen Makhmalbaf's 1989 film *'arūsī-ye khūban* or *Marriage of the Blessed* and the 1998 Lebanese film *al-Bayt al-zahr* or *Around the Pink House* – to better understand the role of remembering war in the construction of cinematic narrative, national and otherwise. Both films function as counter-narratives to the national postwar rhetoric of the period in their specific contexts, and more importantly, their aesthetic choices extend the filmic language found in a large repertoire of films that challenge the illusion of reality and mimesis. Indeed, their strategies of reflexivity and narrative construction, what Mark Westmoreland calls a post-orientalist aesthetics,[18] position these filmmakers as highly innovative and participating in a dialogue with other artists of transnational film in this period of globalization. Some overarching questions with which I am concerned are: How do these films challenge notions of national cinemas? What do they say about the role of war in the reconstruction of the national narrative? And most importantly, how does the significance of representation in the works of transnational cultural producers during this period exhibit globally conscious but locally oriented filmmaking?

---

[18] See Mark Westmoreland, "Post-orientalist Aesthetics: Experimental Film and Video in Lebanon," *Invisible Culture: An Electronic Journal for Visual Culture* 13: Spring 2009. http://www.rochester.edu/in_visible_culture/Issue_13_/westmoreland/index.html.

When read within their specific political contexts, Makhmalbaf's film being produced after the Iran-Iraq war and *Around the Pink House* during the period of reconstruction after the Lebanese Civil war, these two films propose counter-narratives to the national narrative of reconstruction in their respective countries. By showing the process of selective memory through the mechanics of photography, Makhmalbaf attempts to recover the effects of traumatic erasure of memory. Hadjithomas and Joreige implement a similar strategy by foregrounding the construction of images and emphasizing diverse frames of reference. Ultimately, the aesthetic moves made in these films enable narratives that challenge notions of any cohesive postwar national narrative.

I position my readings as amendments to paradigms set forth by Negar Mottahedeh in her book *Displaced Allegories: Postrevolution Iranian Cinema* and Hamid Naficy's essay on the Independent Transnational Film Genre. Furthermore, by adding the critical framework of war I am probing the concept of the limits of witnessing as testimony as proposed by Dori Laub in his essay "An Event without a Witness." Indeed, in these films, Makhmalbaf, Hadjithomas and Joreige use their cameras to 'write' a theory of trauma and witnessing. While they explore the limits of witnessing and recollecting narrative memory, they simultaneously attempt to reconstruct alternative narratives as well.

Readings of post-revolution Iranian cinema have often emphasized the politics of the new Islamic republic, focusing on the interplay between filmmakers and state

censorship.[19] While illuminating in their social, political, and anthropological analyses, our understanding of the story of Iranian cinema has been largely determined by its reflection of Iranian society and politics. Negar Mottahedeh's *Displaced Allegories* intervenes in this discourse by analyzing films of the post-revolution period according to feminist and cinematic frameworks. As Michelle Langford has noted, "throughout *Displaced Allegories*, Mottahedeh argues that one of the most important characteristics of this new filmic language is its focus on the technological *processes* of filmmaking itself – film's formal properties – which are brought to the surface, and at times made visible, in the director's negotiation of censorship regulations. Drawing upon Christian Metz's theorization of filmic enunciation, Mottahedeh refers to the consciously constructed nature of filmic enunciation in post-Revolutionary Iranian cinema as necessarily 'reflexive'" (Langford web). Naficy considers this reflexivity a quality of transnational films or more specifically, independent transnational films which he defines as "1) belonging to a genre of cine-writing and self-narrativization with specific generic and thematic conventions and 2) products of the particular transnational location of filmmakers in time and place and in social life and cultural difference" (205). Contextualizing the wars within these theories of reflexivity and transnational filmmaking points us toward possible reasons for the necessitation of these types of aesthetic conventions in the filmmaking of this period.

---

[19] See Hamid Reza Sadr, *Iranian Cinema: A Political History*, I.B. Tauris, London, 2006; Shahla Myrbakhtyar, *Iranian Cinema and the Islamic Revolution*, McFarland and Company, Jefferson, 2006; Eric Egan, *Films of Makhmalbaf: Cinema, Politics and Culture in Iran*, Mage Publishers, Washington, 2005; Roxanne Varzi, "A Ghost in the Machine: The Cinema of the Iranian Sacred Defense" in Richard Tapper (ed.), *The New Iranian Cinema: Politics, Representation and Identity*, I.B. Tauris, London and New York, 2002.

Significantly, it is in this environment that, in 1989, Mohsen Makhmalbaf released his film, *Marriage of the Blessed*. In 1989, 88 Iranian films had been shown in international film festivals with 17 of them having garnered awards (Egan 127). By the end of the then-president Rafsanjani's term in 1993, that number peaked to 415 films being shown in film festivals worldwide. This had greatly to do with the loosening of restrictions by then minister of culture Mohammad Khatami and an effort by the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance to promote the Islamic revolution through culture. Considering this precarious moment for the Islamic Republic, Makhmalbaf's move toward an anti-war film is a bold one to say the least. Ostensibly, Makhmalbaf's film *Marriage of the Blessed* is about an Iran-Iraq war veteran who returns home from the front, haunted by his memories and disillusioned by postwar Iranian society. Makhmalbaf's story recalls the definition of trauma by Cathy Caruth quoted above.

Mohsen Makhmalbaf is arguably the most well-known Iranian filmmaker, competing with the other globally recognized director, writer and poet, Abbas Kiarostami. Before making the film of this study, Makhmalbaf had already produced several films in the early years of the revolution with films like *Tobeh Nasuh* (Nasuh's Repentance/1982), *Do Chasme bi su* (Two Sightless Eyes/1983), *Este'azeh* (Fleeing from Evil to God/1984), *Baycot* (Boycott/1985), *Dastforush* (Peddler/1987), and *Bicycleran* (The Cyclist/1989). He is internationally regarded for his later films that won such international film accolades as the UNESCO Frederico Fellini Prize in 2001 for *Kandahar*. Makhmalbaf has not only been the director and writer of over twenty films but he runs the Makhmalbaf Film House with his children and wife being the principal

participants of filmmaking and photography. Marriage of the Blessed was made at a particular juncture in his career when he produced films emphasizing social justice issues. Completely self-taught, Makhmalbaf read books on film production spanning such technical areas as directing, editing, sound, and camera operations to make up for what he saw as a "lack of psychological depth" in his films (Dabashi 74). A decisive shift in his aesthetics began with his film *Boycott* (1985), *The Cyclist* (1989) and *Marriage of the Blessed* (1989).

In the film, the protagonist Haji prepares for the upcoming marriage to his fiancée Mehri, who has been waiting for his return since he left for the war. Egan calls this film the third and most innovative of Makhmalbaf's "*Mostazafin* (Downtrodden) trilogy" consisting of films from Makhmalbaf's second stage in his career, a time when he took on social justice issues while also experimenting with his cinematic style, paying more attention to formal cinematic detail than in his earlier works (101). Indeed, Makhmalbaf's innovation in his camera technique plays a great role in the construction of this narrative that, in fact, questions image construction itself in a story about trauma and the nature of witnessing.

CONFLICTED MEMORIES: COMING HOME TO BROKEN PROMISES

Through the character of Haji, an Iran-Iraq war veteran attempting to resettle in Tehran after the war, Makhmalbaf creates a figure that challenges the notion of the valiant hero of the *Defa'e Moghadas* (The Sacred Defense), the local name of the Iran-Iraq war. Indeed, by emphasizing the main protagonist as a mentally wounded war veteran, Makhmalbaf creates a new figure of male identity. Whereas the hero of the war

period was characterized by strength, piety, and loyalty, the physically and mentally weak hero that occupies *Marriage* provides a stark contrast. Haji's perception is marred by the trauma of the war as evidenced through his intermittent loud cries and physical breakdowns triggered by various factors, but most significantly by the introduction of images. He is the epitome of the kind of victim who attempts to "bear witness" but is unable to do so, as he took part in the very traumatic event that caused his current malaise. Dori Laub defines a witness as "someone who [can] step outside of the coercively totalitarian and dehumanizing frame of reference in which the event [is] taking place" (81). Haji lacks the frame of reference necessary to narrate objectively. Thus, his emotive responses to everyday activities highlight his social paralysis and Makhmalbaf's critique of the social conditions in Iran for war veterans. This counter-narrative to the Islamic Republic's claim of tending to the welfare of the "shanty-dwellers" in society exhibits itself in Haji's inability to live everyday reality and instead, to become haunted by his memories of war. He remembers limbs being blown off of comrades and the explosions so common in numerous combat films. As a photographer, he functions as the witness of witnesses. He carries the heavy burden of documenting combat, and then at home, unable to release his camera, he instead focuses his attention on and documents the lives of other figures who have been abandoned, the homeless subjects of his photographs. The images of these lives hardly reflect the social rhetoric of the revolution slogans written on the walls that open the film. On the drive from the sanitarium to his home in Tehran, the camera foregrounds the Mercedes Benz symbol of the taxi as the writings on the wall come into and exit the frame: "*The country belongs to the shanty*

dwellers," "*The crop always belongs to the farmer*" and "*We will drag the capitalists to the court of justice!*" are some of the slogans that line the city's walls. Thus, we are introduced to the new city that Haji enters after the war. Makhmalbaf documents the broken promises of the Islamic Republic, flashing his camera at the dwellers in the dark.

Fig. 2.1 Traumatized war veteran.   Fig. 2.2 War veteran photojournalist

Thus far, Haji's memories and images have been the source of reliving his suffering. In an attempt to aid Haji's recovery, Mehri presents Haji with old photographs of them as children. As an act of rehabilitation Mehri evokes their past innocence in order to replace his most recent memories of war. She utilizes the archival force of photography to enact a change in Haji's mental state. If until now, memories and images can act as an agential force, having physical repercussions in Haji's present reality, she attempts to incite positive emotions by using the same tactic. Mehri attempts this intervention by excavating Haji's visual source of knowledge. However, she unintentionally shows him his old reels, which include a news reel of starving children in Africa, triggering a nervous breakdown. This introduces Makhmalbaf's suggestion of

Caruth's claim that "repetitions of the traumatic event…[are] inextricably tied up with the belatedness and incomprehensibility that remain at the heart of this repetitive seeing" (49). In terms of technical effects in this scene, Makhmalbaf highlights the position of the viewer, in other words, the viewer's frame of reference. As viewers we watch Haji watching the screen. As Mehri attempts to intervene, she jumps in front of the screen, frustrated at his recurrent episodes of physical frenzy. Mehri functions as the meta-narrator, indicating Haji's inability to differentiate reality from illusion. Furthermore, Mehri's visual positioning in the screen interrogates her function as the 'truth gauge' in the film.

CENSORED SIGHTS: WHAT IS DOCUMENTARY?

In the boldest reflexive move in the film Makhmalbaf institutes the classic film strategy of breaking suture or filmic continuity by entering the frame. One evening Haji and Mehri drive around the city and photograph the poor and homeless. Amidst the dark, flashes of light from their cameras reveal people who live in the shadows of the city. They chase down a man and his children and corner them, they take cardboard boxes off of people sleeping, anything to uncover their conditions. When the police come to question them, Makhmalbaf enters the screen assuring the police that he has the permit to work on this documentary called *Marriage of the Blessed*. Along with Makhmalbaf's comment on restrictions on filmmaking, including Mehri in the scene and capturing the process of filmmaking brings attention to the narrative's artificiality. So there is simultaneously a focus on uncovering truth that contradicts the post-war national narrative and the emphasis on the artifice of narrative. In this scene, Mehri functions as

the witness, the non-participant in the story of Makhmalbaf and his censored sight. In other words, reflexivity enables a reading of the film to include a resistance to truth-telling and moreover activates a questioning of narrative cohesion.

PHOTOGRAPHY AS A SITE FOR SEEING

Fig. 2.3 Haji breaks the fourth wall.   Fig. 2.4 Mehri as photographer.

Significantly, Makhmalbaf breaks the fourth wall[20] by having Haji look at the screen, at the viewer. At the opening of Mehri's photography exhibit Makhmalbaf decides to break the fourth wall in the one place that the construction of narratives and images are not taken for granted – the art space. As a photographer and Haji's fiancée, Mehri's role as his beloved carries a significant weight. Thus, Mehri as an art photographer is contrasted with Haji, a photojournalist. While Haji documents the untold stories of the everyday through his photojournalism, Mehri attempts to do the same through the space of the art gallery. This contrast of mimetic documentation and artistic endeavor correlate directly with the film's emphasis on witnessing and the construction

---

[20] The *fourth wall* in cinema is the imaginary wall between viewers and the world of the movie.

53

of narrative. Mehri's particular role as observer and "distanced witness" is crucial to understanding the way social critique is layered in *Marriage*. Thus, as a war film, Haji's war story and subsequent trauma fit the expectations of a war film. By incorporating the character of Mehri into key scenes, Makhmalbaf provides a beloved who narratively acts as a silenced figure, in that she has few lines and seems like a side character. However, her position as a witness not only to Haji's trauma but at the scene of filmic rupture indicates her meaningful intervention in the normative tale of war trauma. Indeed, Makhmalbaf compares the relationship between fiction and documentary through the main characters' relative occupations.

Fig. 2.5 Present-day wounded Yusuf.   Fig. 2.6 Flashback of photograph of Yusuf.

Photographs also begin to bear active functions or bear witness at the couple's wedding. Haji takes a photo of his father and father-in-law, but he begins to see old photographs in place of the people he is photographing. This displacement of the present with the past repeats when Haji photographs his old military friend, Yusuf. When he shoots the picture he sees the old picture of himself seated with Yusuf, before Yusuf was

wounded in the war. The displacement of real subjects onto photographed ones further indicates Hajji's deterioration and his development from a possible witness to a victim. Moreover, the emphasis on documentation in the film takes a particular turn in this scene. Before, Haji took photographs of the poor and his everyday reality. In this scene, the pictures seem to take on a life of their own and enter his vision, replacing the living reality in front of him. This contrasting of active and passive witnessing furthers Makhmalbaf's questioning of fiction and documentary, the real and constructed.

Makhmalbaf's final comment lies in the film's last images. After his breakdown at his wedding, Haji escapes the veteran rehabilitation center and sleeps outside in the streets underneath cardboard. He is awakened by a photographer who is taking his picture. He calls Mehri to tell her to forget about him. She frantically runs out in the street and as she hails a taxi, a camera takes a picture of her. L ikewise, Haji is photographed as he walks in the streets of Tehran. Our last image is of the typing of a typewriter at the *jebhe* (warfront) juxtaposed with the skyline of Tehran. In this last scene both photographers have been transformed into the typical subjects they were documenting throughout the film – a voiceless woman and a traumatized soldier. Only Makhmalbaf's cinematic telling shows the process by which subjects come into being.

AROUND THE PINK HOUSE: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

In *Around the Pink House* two Lebanese filmmakers manifest their comment on image construction and witnessing in their 1999 film about internally displaced refugees. The Lebanese civil war took place between 1975 -1990 and the postwar environment of

Lebanon consisted of large-scale reconstruction projects aimed at rebuilding the country after its long war. In fact, this postwar historical amnesia sought to forget about a war that took an estimated 150,000 lives, and instead attempted to mark it as "*une guerre pour les autres*" (a war of others) in order to solidify a national identity. In this interesting cinematic contrast to the national narrative of a unified Lebanese identity, the Lebanese filmmaking duo Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige create a narrative that encompasses the intricacies of postwar recovery that instead highlights the divergent visions of a postwar future. Whether an intellectual fighting for a future based on human rights or a militant decrying the deaths of his martyred friends, the various characters in the pink house, in fact, support divergent paths but share the experience of the impending destruction of a home they have shared under forced conditions. The pink house serves as a metonym for Beirut during a time when, Lina Khatib claims, efforts to "sanitize the war and induce forgetfulness" were the national imperative (78). It is in this context that Hadjithomas and Joreige interject their narrative *Around the Pink House*.

Figure 2.7 Imagining Beirut.

Around the Pink House begins with an image of Burj Square in Beirut, the camera zooming out to reveal the image as a picture held up by a man selling it as a poster, standing in the middle of a traffic jam. This comment begins our tale, proposing the artificiality of the image and the film's critique of the economic dimensions of postwar recovery. We hear the news that the traffic jam is a result of construction efforts, "the sounds of construction having replaced the sound of bombs." As Khatib notes, "the reconstruction of Beirut is a symptom of the postwar amnesia experienced in Lebanon and that Lebanese cinema tries to counter," and "Beirut emerges as a city contested between dominant discourse and the resistant voice of cinema" (77). Indeed, in *Around the Pink House,* the pink house serves as a metonym for Beirut itself, the city with its

57

inhabitants struggling to define home. In one of the first scenes, a real estate developer, al-Mattar, now owner of the pink house, also called Lady Fortuna's mansion, comes to evict the two families who took refuge in it during the civil war. He gently gives them the news that they have 10 days to vacate the house they have called home for the past 11 years. The developer emphasizes that he wants to keep the ancient façade of the home in hopes of maintaining their memories as the façade is "Wijhat zikrat-na" or the face of our memories. After this, a feud erupts between the two families over whether to leave, negotiate costs, or fight to stay.

MULTIPLE FRAMES OF REFERENCE

Fig. 2.8 Abdullah gazing.   Fig. 2.9 Layla seeing being watched.

Throughout the film there is a consistent emphasis on seeing the camera and the process of filmmaking. In *Around the Pink House* characters look through its windows and through its walls as voyeurs. The love story between Layla and Abdullah begins with Abdullah looking at Layla through binoculars. Frames of reference abound as Layla looks straight at him, cognizant of being viewed. He also sees Mounir taking photos and he is also being watched by his friend. This emphasis is furthered by the filmmakers

"frame within a frame" technique from the opening shot. As a gesture of truce, Jaber, the cousin who collaborates with al-Mattar, brings the cameraman to film their eviction. The process of storytelling with the camera is foregrounded through this attempt at documenting the impending destruction of the pink house. Thus, there exists the same tension between documentation of post-war realities and deconstructing narrative that we see in *Marriage of the Blessed*.

FRAME WITHIN A FRAME: A REFUGEE AMONGST REFUGEES

Here I focus my attention on one figure that functions as our anti-hero similar to Haji in *Marriage of the Blessed*. Mounir as a character mirrors the frames within a frame motif in *Around the Pink House*. Mounir is a refugee among the family of refugees and stands as an outsider. He fell in love with Farah, daughter of the Nawal household, and in his re-telling of the story we get a sense of the pain and anger of being left by a loved one. He was allowed to stay with the family because he claimed that he was a refugee but in fact, only acted like one to be with Farah. When the neighbors begin reciting Mounir's tale to the cameraman Mounir intervenes. He scoffs at how inaccurately they remember the story and challenges them to laugh at his lament. He re-iterates, *Ma Raḥit, Harabit.* (She didn't leave, she fled.) His comment highlights the emphasis on reconstructing memory in this film and more importantly, how overlooked nuances in conventional storytelling can become significant betrayals of individual memory. This is particularly resonant in the overarching theme of the film where the narrative of national unity is being challenged. Significantly, in terms of cinematic technique, while Mounir narrates his version of the story, we watch him through a long tracking shot, the only place we see

such a shot in the film. Thus, a strange forward movement carries Mounir closer toward us in an unnatural manner, as his body moves in stillness.

Fig. 2.10 Mounir breaks the fourth wall.

Here, he also breaks the fourth wall and looks directly at the viewer. Through Mounir's curious way of preserving the memory of Farah for her grandmother he ultimately creates an internal witness to his experience. He has made a life-size cut-out of Farah and changes her clothes periodically so that he can take a picture to show Farah's grandmother to assure her of Farah's existence and safety. Witnessing in this scene takes a specifically interesting shape. In his tale of Holocaust trauma Dori Laub recounts a survivor's strategy for survival: a boy keeps a picture of his mother that provides him comfort (33). Laub reads this attachment to the image as a coping mechanism whereby

the person in the image functions as a veritable witness in the place of the victim who can never be a true witness.

Figure 2.11 Mounir constructs a witness.

POLITICS OF REPRESENTATION IN THE POST-COLD WAR PERIOD

I have attempted to tell the stories of these two films through their emphasis on the inability of the image to witness life after war. Who is looking back at Haji staring through the screen? Who is the recipient of Mounir's story of his lost love? Why do they look at us? Hadjithomas asks in her exhibition on Beirut and its phantoms, "Can the image come back?" Perhaps in the eyes of the postwar viewer personal narratives can be resurrected or in these cases, constructed and created. These films alone narrate the story of their respective countries' postwar story, but together comment on the role of witnessing in the nature of postwar recovery.

Chapter Three: In-sighting the Witness: Performativity in Jafar Panahi's *Crimson Gold* and Danielle Arbid's *In the Battlefields*

> Empty frames. The same as those of the martyrs, but left empty. Frames waiting for an image, waiting for a martyr. Those "holes" are like a missing-place, off-frame, a latent image, like mine, bearing all the possibilities. An elsewhere, a transparency. What we could really see would be beyond this transparency."
>
> JOANA HADJITHOMAS & KHALIL JOREIGE, *Latency*

In their essay, "A State of Latency," Hadjithomas and Joreige meditate on the empty frames that populate the poles alongside the road between the Beirut airport and the Mediterranean sea. What strikes them are not the photos of martyrs on these poles, but the empty frames that accompany them. They ask about the stakes involved when there are "[f]rames waiting for an image, waiting for a martyr." By bringing attention to these absences, they probe the ramifications of image-making and martyrdom.

Similarly, in her readings of Ebrahim Hatamikia's films, Roxanne Varzi claims that postwar films are a "safe realm for mourning. The task of these particular postwar films becomes the task of mourning itself. It is a many-layered project that strives to use images as supplements that beautify and spiritualize a war-torn environment. It is a project in making the invisible, the missing bodies, visible without naming ghosts, without pointing to a possible injustice or crime on the part of the government (Varzi 192-3).

Witnessing as an almost impossible endeavor and the limited access to an origin of traumatic events more generally, has been the main focus of research in Trauma Studies. The implications of this claim for cinema have resulted in the paradox of the paralysis caused by traumatic experience on the one hand, coupled with the desire to represent those experiences of trauma. However, most recently, critics have opened a line of investigation into the framework of performativity whereby the witness in a narrative is thought of as a performer rather than merely a victim of trauma. This chapter interrogates that kind of performativity of witnessing in Jafar Panahi's 2003 film, *Talā-ye Sorkh* (*Crimson Gold*) and Danielle Arbid's 2004 film, *M'ārek Hob* (*In the Battlefields*). Indeed, the combination of performativity along with a sense of a traumatized main protagonist characterizes Panahi's antihero, Hussain. The affective representation of Hussain's everyday engagements invites viewers to not only be moved by, but move *in* the narrative enunciation of his experiences. As a result, the opening scene of his suicide sets the stage for what Susan Sontag calls "an iconography of suffering," and an already mourned for Hussain acts as a witness to the story preceding the eventual denouement. By emphasizing the performative act of witnessing, I call attention to the ways that the main character Hussain's witnessing of the inhabitants, or characters of Tehran, incite our own witnessing as film viewers. In *In the Battlefields*, I examine a similar aesthetic that is adopted by Arbid, making our twelve year old protagonist our witness to everyday life in war-time Beirut. By doing so, I argue that Panahi and Arbid's aesthetic invites viewers to simultaneously witness the everyday social class and gender dynamics that is constitutive of postwar Iranian and Lebanese societies. Ultimately, I enable a reading of the critique

of social class and gender in these films not merely as an attempt at reflecting social ills, but a way of highlighting the power of cinema to allow us to engage with the insight of a witness figure. This engagement indexes the postwar aesthetic in both form, through cinematic structure, and content, by taking an ethical position on class and gender.

WITNESSING AS A FRAMEWORK

Trauma Studies has largely highlighted the ways in which trauma works to limit the understanding of an original experience and has generally emphasized how knowledge is unattainable by those who experience trauma. Cathy Caruth defines trauma as "the response to an unexpected or overwhelming violent event or events that are not fully grasped as they occur, but return later in repeated flashbacks, nightmares, and other repetitive phenomena" (49). Thus, Caruth's definition of trauma includes a kind of paralysis and block to knowledge, that is, the knowing of what happened is only attainable later, in dreams or repetition. Felman and Laub reiterate this position that the paralyzing effect of trauma is its most salient feature. In their collection of essays on trauma, scholarly positions range from witnessing of the Holocaust to … but all share the feature of cessation and inaccessibility to experience. In contrast, Tamar Ashuri's "I Witness: Re-presenting Trauma in and by Cinema" interprets the witness as a performer rather than merely a victim of trauma. In this way, Ashuri is able to draw the connection between the scholarship on trauma that either focuses on victimhood and suffering[21] and

---

[21] See Agamben's *Remnants of Auschwitz: Archive and Testimony* (2002), Felman and Laub's *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History* (1991) and Cathy Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* (1996).

those studies that interrogate the moral implications of witnessing from a distance.[22] By emphasizing the performativity of witnessing, attention can be paid to the ways that the witness changes, transforms, and affects their experience and others, principally those who witness their re-telling. In the films *Marriage of the Blessed* and *Around the Pink House*, the act of witnessing enacts subject positions that question the role of viewers but take this further by asking what the quality of that viewing looks like. More specifically, characters like Mehri and Farah interrogate our notions of active and passive *affecting* of audiences through their own presence/absence. Thus, while Mehri watches an interruption in the making of the film *Marriage of the Blessed*, Farah, in *Around the Pink House* is completely absent and we only know about her through the memories of the characters in the film. The ways in which their characters perform witnessing, actively in the former and passively in the latter, attend to the historical differences between the two films, while their emphasis on the construction of the performance of witnessing itself invites a comparative investigation.

Susan Sontag, a writer deeply invested in the implications of witnessing in *Regarding the Pain of Others*, claims that images "worthy of representation are those understood to be the product of wrath, divine or human" (40). Sontag points out that much of what has been represented in photographic or painted images of suffering excludes images of suffering as a result of accident, as if such suffering did not exist at all. This difference indicates that a part of the desire to see images of suffering has much

---

[22] See Susan Sontag's *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003); Lilie Chouliaraki's *Spectatorship of Suffering* (2006); Roger Silverstone's *Media and Morality: On the Rise of the Mediapolis* (2006); Asbjørn Grønstad and Henrik Gustafsson's *Ethics and Images of Pain* (2012).

to do with a desire to "commiserate with the sufferer's pain," but why? In Giorgio Agamben's *Remnants of Auschwitz: Archive and Testimony* the author dissects the position of the subject and questions the meanings of archive, testimony, and witness. Central to this work is his concept of the *Muselmann*, those "living corpses" who lacked dignity and humanity in the Auschwitz camps. What is particularly important for Agamben is the way these non-beings are still also human: "At times a medical figure or an ethical category, at times a political limit or an anthropological concept, the *Muselmann* is an indefinite being in whom not only humanity and non-humanity, but also vegetative existence and relation, physiology and ethics, medicine and politics, and life and death continuously pass through each other" (Agamben 48). By presenting a kind of paradox, Agamben asks us to question the principles upon which we base our ethical judgment. Can we identify with and bear witness to "nameless hulks?" He furthers his argument by challenging our notion of archive if our ability to bear witness is based on the ability to speak with a language to which we may not have access: "[…w]e may say that to bear witness is to place oneself in one's own language in the position of those who have lost it, to establish oneself in a living language as if it were dead, or in a dead language as if it were living – in any case, outside both the archive and the corpus of what has already been said" (Agamben 161). Agamben's meditations offer a notion of subjectivity that shifts the idea of witnessing to one of being defined by one's subjection and less by one's agential ability to witness. Thus, Agamben states that "Auschwitz represents the historical point in which these processes collapse, the devastating experience in which the impossible is forced into the real" (148). As de la Durantaye

66

notes, "The 'impossible' in question is the literal passivity of subjectivity and it directs Agamben's reader to the point where a subject is subjected to so much, is forced to integrally experience its own impotence, its own powerlessness, its own inherently subjected state so mercilessly, that that very subjectivity seems to contract to a flickering point" (432). This Foucauldian emphasis on the historical and social factors involved in defining the subject position offers a paradigm that underscores the limitations of an active, agential model of subjectivity and consequently, for this study, challenges the concept of an active witness.

AESTHETIC ARCHIVING AS COUNTER-NARRATIVES

A counter-narrative is a positional category that assumes that there exists a dominant narrative to be countered. In this dissertation I use this term to describe the films that resist the national narratives that were promoted during and after war in Iran and Lebanon. Specifically, I focus on the construction of the martyr image as ideal and the ways that the films discussed in this dissertation attempt to archive other lives that are testimonies, in effect, witnesses to the national war experience. The archive, according Derrida in his *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, illuminates the nature of memory and writing. Relevant to this project is his concept of the archive not only as a means of *commencement*, but also *commandment*, and so while knowledge production begins with the archive it is simultaneously commanded as so. Thus, the authority that archives hold, originate with a maker and is far from the innocuous placing of materials and documents in a holder. In other words, Derrida interrogates the power that archives and archivists hold in the recollection and construction of collective memory. A crucial aspect of Derrida's philosophy recognizes the ways that while at the same time commencing an

archive, there exists the destruction of another. In other words, the archive consists of consignation at the same time that it also depends on the destruction and aggression drive. This is a significant factor in the reification of national identity as "[t]he archive has always been a pledge, and like every pledge, a token of the future. To put it more trivially: what is no longer archived in the same way is no longer lived in the same way. Archivable meaning is also and in advance co-determined by the structure that archives" (Derrida 18). Thus, Derrida's emphasis on the construction of the archive as the power to determine the characteristics of future national identities links his reading of the archive with the films I read in this dissertation.

THE MUSELMANN AND THE ARCHIVE

In Giorgio Agamben's *Remnants of Auschwitz: Archive and Testimony* the author dissects the position of the subject and questions the meanings of archive, testimony, and witness. Central to this work is his concept of the *Muselmann,* those "living corpses" who lacked dignity and humanity in the Auschwitz camps. What is particularly important for Agamben is the way these non-beings are still also human: "At times a medical figure or an ethical category, at times a political limit or an anthropological concept, the *Muselmann* is an indefinite being in whom not only humanity and non-humanity, but also vegetative existence and relation, physiology and ethics, medicine and politics, and life and death continuously pass through each other" (Agamben 48). By presenting a kind of paradox, Agamben asks us to question the principles upon which we base our ethical judgment. Can we identify with and bear witness to "nameless hulks?" He furthers his argument by challenging our notion of archive if our ability to bear witness is based on the ability to speak with a language to which we may not have access: "[…w]e may say

that to bear witness is to place oneself in one's own language in the position of those who have lost it, to establish oneself in a living language as if it were dead, or in a dead language as if it were living – in any case, outside both the archive and the corpus of what has already been said" (Agamben 161). Agamben's meditations offer a notion of subjectivity that shifts the idea of witnessing to one of being defined by one's subjection and less by one's agential ability to witness. Thus, Agamben states that "Auschwitz represents the historical point in which these processes collapse, the devastating experience in which the impossible is forced into the real" (148). As de la Durantaye notes, "The 'impossible' in question is the literal passivity of subjectivity and it directs Agamben's reader to the point where a subject is subjected to so much, is forced to integrally experience its own impotence, its own powerlessness, its own inherently subjected state so mercilessly, that that very subjectivity seems to contract to a flickering point" (432). This Foucauldian emphasis on the historical and social factors involved in defining the subject position offers a paradigm that underscores the limitations of an active, agential model of subjectivity and consequently, for this study, challenges the concept of an active witness.

I am interested in how Agamben has highlighted the ways that subjection actively causes a subject to lose the will to witness. In contrast with Laub for example, who posits a psychological inability to process violence or trauma, Agamben reads one possibility for a lack of witnessing as an intentional act on the part of the subject. Thus, we can think of the non-witnessing of the *muselmann* who were abhorred for their non-dead, non-alive state, as a choice. By describing the awful conditions the *muselmann* bore in the

Auschwitz camps, Agamben powerfully highlights the ways that those subjected bodies resorted to coping with their oppressive environments.

In *Crimson Gold* Hussain is the *muselmann* who lives "outside […] the archive" and through the postwar film, Panahi is able to tell that story which creates a kind of aesthetic archive. As I argued in the introduction, the postwar film relies on the presence of rupture to indicate the inability to tell a complete story. This generic convention acts as a *mode*, or possibly a *modality* in the sense of language—a possibility, a contingency, a suggestion.

PERFORMING THE WITNESS IN JAFAR PANAHI'S *CRIMSON GOLD*

Jafar Panahi is considered the quintessential global Iranian filmmaker. He introduced the world to the Iranian "children" films and was an assistant to Abbas Kiarostami before emerging on the scene with his well-received film, *Bādkonak-e sefīd* (The White Balloon, 1995) and then, *Āyeneh* (The Mirror, 1997). *The White Balloon* won the Caméra d'Or at the 1995 Cannes Film Festival which ushered in the boom of Iranian trademark films with children as their main protagonists. The combination of censorship and the impact of Abbas Kiarostami's *Khāneh-ye dust kojāst?* (Where is the Friend's Home?, 1987) on Iranian filmmakers resulted in the corpus of children films produced from Iran. Particularly successful have been, Majid Majidi's *Bachehā-ye Āsemān* (Children of Heaven, 1997), *Rang-e Khodā* (The Color of Paradise, 1999), and Makhmalbaf's *Sokūt* (Silence, 1997). However, the topics of Panahi's films have spanned a diverse array of themes, including feminist ones, with films like *Dāyereh* (The Circle, 2000) and Offside, 2006. Particularly astute was his portrayal of an Iran-Iraq war veteran

who commits suicide in *Talā-ye Sorkh* (Crimson Gold, 2003). The film opens with his suicide and works backward to have the audience witness the life that precedes the opening act.

MOURNING HUSSAIN

Beginning with Hussain's violent suicide invites the viewer to witness his life as a prelude to his final death. Before the opening shot of the film we hear the squawking of a bird until the sounds of shuffling and struggle become clearer. The light behind the two struggling characters comes out and we see that a large man has a smaller, older man pinned from behind, yelling for the key to the jewel safe and says he will shoot him. This first shot of the interior of a jewelry shop directs our vision towards the light from beyond the store gates, as if watching from within a prison. Indeed, in the first few minutes, after the victim pulls the alarm and runs away, the perpetrator shoots him and after that people from outside the gates are screaming, including his partner. At the peak of this scene he points a gun to his head, the shot blacks out and we hear the gun fire off-screen. From the beginning of the film Hussain, the anti-hero, overweight, slow, disheveled pizza delivery man hardly speaks. His slow movements are contrasted with the fast movement of the cars and people in the city. And in fact, in contrast with the opening shot, the rest of the film moves relatively slow, full of held shots and very little dialogue. Thus, Hussain's presence in the film is one of a slow observer. He traverses the cityscape on his scooter delivering pizzas, having doors open from realities very different from his own.

While *Crimson Gold*'s Hussain indeed experienced the battlefield, unlike the Hussain of Karbala, he was not martyred and instead stands as the postwar living *bāqiyeh*

71

(leftover) of the "sacred defense." In fact, Hussain's namesake recalls "the strong memory of victimization and persecution lives on in the commemorations of the deaths of Ali and Husayn" (Varzi 51). What is crucial in this film about a lonely pizza deliveryman is the way heroism and idyllic narratives can have detrimental effects on the lives of those who do not fulfill the roles assigned that at one time created meaning for them. How do non-martyrs live in a society that reveres those who made the ultimate sacrifice? How does Hussain's existence challenge our notions of heroism and its innocuous benefits? When a client recognizes Hussain as a former soldier, he hands him a large wad of money and sends him on his way, unable to look at him. Hussain claims the cortisol has transfigured him and the general says he did not recognize him to which Hussain replies that he is hardly recognizable to himself. This is a grim look at the costs of postwar living for those whose bodies did not turn into ghosts, but instead live as ghosts in the everyday. Significantly, "like a manifesto, a proclamation of death, cinema provides an image to be mourned, a ghostly presence" and this film in particular, encapsulates how "the martyrology of the earlier war cinema is replaced by a hauntology of the postwar films that are created in the wake of non-dead martyrs" (Varzi 189). Hussain's unique somberness is commented on by many of the characters, including his boss who complains that he is "off in another world" most of the time.

Figure 3.1 Master thief lectures Hussain and Ali

In the first flashback scene after the suicide, Hussain's friendship with his friend Ali introduces his role as an observer as an experienced thief discusses the finesse of stealing with a purpose. The experienced thief references the Persian proverb *gar hokm shavad mast girand/ dar shahr har ānkeh hast girand* (If they arrest the drunkards [thieves, in this case], they'll have to arrest the whole city). By claiming that there are more thieves in Tehran than honest people, he justifies their *motakhasos* (expertise) as one based on *ensāf* (justice/ethics). Thus, he pedantically elaborates on the unethical ways thieves have hurt people for some "small change" and how important it is to "calculate the consequences" when stealing. While Ali engages with the thief Hussain sits quietly listening to him speak. When the thief gets a phone call Hussain expresses his disdain and rejects the kind of camaraderie that the thief implies exists between them. Severed from the community at large as a thief, and even further as an outsider within the community of thieves, Hussain marks himself as an observer, in contrast with Ali, who participates in conversation and carries a more upbeat demeanor. This scene prompts us to question Hussain's motivation for the jewelry heist.

Performance comes in the most direct form when Hussain takes his fiancée to the jewelry shop. They dress up in formal wear, attempting to fit in the elite jewelry shop but their plain suit and dress clearly do not match the chic designer clothing of the wealthy clients who end up there. The owner ignores Hussain, his fiancée and Ali and is finally persuaded by the owner to look at a cheaper shop for what they need. Therfore, despite Hussain's attempt at performing the role of an upper class client, the jewelry shop owner rejects his patronage, revealing the performativity of Hussain's ill-rehearsed act. The physical effect this has on Hussain shows when he needs to catch his breath outside, loosen his tie and begins to shiver. While Ali and his sister express great surprise and concern, Hussain, in his typical manner, maintains a kind of stoicism throughout his panic attack. Similar to her brother, Hussain's fiancée speaks more than Hussain and continually questions his motivations and feelings, but with receives no response. "Hussain, were you mad because I came dressed up? Or was it when I took off my scarf to show you the necklace? What happened? Why are you upset? Did I do something to upset you?" His only reply to her string of questions involves the amount of money the jeweler had talked about.

Mis-recognition plays a part in Hussain's initial characterization and the impermeability of certain social class identities in *Crimson Gold*. A long take up four flights of stairs takes Hussain to his first pizza delivery. Hussain says, "General ?" and the man closes the door, asking, "Who's asking?" "It's me, Hussain." He pauses, looking for a while, and finally says, "Hussain, of course! I hardly recognized you." "I can barely recognize myself. It's the cortisol." The general takes out a large wad of money and tells

Hussain to take care of himself and shuts the door. The brotherhood of the Sacred

Defense has faded and the equality of soldiers has disappeared in postwar life. Not only

does the general, who at one time was a comrade of Hussain's reject him, but Hussain's

own physical body betrays him. The effect of the medication has engorged his body,

unable to hide the traces of the war.

However, Hussain's corporeal slowness and bigness carries with it a deliberate

observance of life around him. For instance, in his second delivery, Hussain unknowingly

comes upon a party raid by the authorities. The house is surrounded by disguised police,

hiding in cars and worried parents who have come to pick up their sons and daughters.[23]

Hussain sits with a young soldier who watches the silhouettes of dancers in the floor

above them. Hussain's questioning of a young soldier likens him to a big brother,

concerned for the welfare of such a young boy who has not eaten all day, but is sitting as

a guard so late in the evening. Hussain offers him pizza but the boy refuses. Then, as if

re-creating a band of soldiers, Hussain offers the commander of the group some pizza and

after some refusal, he accepts which allows the others to follow suit. After approaching

each car of people waiting on the street, he comes back to the young soldier who finally

accepts and thanks Hussain. Such an act of hospitality, especially in this hostile of an

environment, invites us to think about Hussain's insight and role as a caretaker, as

opposed to a victim. Hussain offers pizza to the police along with the parents of the

young people at the party. As if they are all watching a scene on a stage, Hussain brings

---

[23] Inspiration for this part of the film came from a local story about a couple who was chased down by the police after a party and the man was shot and killed as a result. Panahi emphasizes that the personal and political are inescapably intertwined in the everyday (Walsh 2003).

by refreshments as they sit and wait. Commenting on the frequent party raids in Iran, Panahi included this particular scene after an incident where a young man was shot and killed as he was running away (Walsh 2003). The waiting is broken up by the comings and goings of couples who get stopped, harassed and rounded up by the police.

Figure 3.2 At the wealthy home.   Figure 3.3 In Hussain's home.

In the final scene, before the suicide replays, Hussain makes his last delivery to a quite wealthy home. In the large mansion an anxious young man invites Hussain in to eat with him as he complains about the girls who left and for whom he ordered the pizza. In this scene we see a slow revival or birth of sorts. Hussain washes up in a bathroom that plays instrumental music (muzak) and shaves his beard. After he eats he takes a long walk around the huge house with its own indoor swimming pool. Staring at the pool and the water, he jumps in. Significant to this scene is his final look out on Tehran's cityscape from the top of the man's home. A quiet look out onto the scene that is broken when the scene from the beginning of the movie replays and ends abruptly as we know what happens. Moments of birth and death are aligned here at the climax of the film. Hussain's realization that his value as a man can be attained through wealth is exemplified through

the somewhat harmonious visit he has with the wealthy man. However, what he realizes after he shoots and kills the jeweler is that in fact, the reality where his value is worth rather little does exist. And thus, he makes his death final when he shoots himself in the head.

Hussain, in Jafar Panahi's *Crimson Gold* bears witness in a strikingly remarkable way. As if a ghost from the Iran-Iraq war, he drives through the streets of Tehran showing us the realities of postwar Iran. In contrast with the kind of "hauntology" of Varzi's reading of Ebrahim Hatamikia's Scent of Yusuf's Shirt, in *Crimson Gold*, the ghost is present and his presence allows us to engage and bear witness along with him.

Fig. 3.4 Siham and Lina.

WITNESSING SEXUAL MATURATION IN DANIELLE ARBID'S *IN THE BATTLEFIELDS*

Set in 1983 Beirut, eight years after the beginning of the Lebanese civil war and one year after the Sabra and Shatila massacre[24], the narrative begins with a girl's voice whispering, *tetzekari?* (Do you remember?), asking her friend whether she remembers that a lover came to meet her there. The other girl leans over and whispers, "Siham, you and I are the same." Thus, the film begins with the aligning of two girls with each other, along with emphasizing memory and sexuality. Indeed, the film follows the development of Lina's relationship with Siham, her aunt's maid, amidst the family drama and surrounding sounds of war outside. Arbid offers a protagonist whose coming of age during war time reveals other conflicts undergirding the larger political narrative.

Danielle Arbid produced two notable documentaries, *Ḥālat Ḥarb* (Alone in War, 2000), a documentary of interviews with militiamen during the war and *Ḥodud* (Border, 2002), a road trip documentary to Palestine and Israel and several short films. She has also produced three feature films, *M'ārek Ḥob* (In the Battlefields, 2004), *Rajil Ḍa'i'* (A Lost Man, 2007) and *Beirut Bilayl* (Beirut Hotel, 2011). Arbid was five years old when the Lebanese civil war began and left Lebanon in 1987, three years before it ended. In an interview she says,

 "That's what the war is for me. For me it was the sensation of risk taking and at some point it was exciting, this war. It became a kind of drug for everyone in Lebanon. Even if most are ashamed to admit it. But that's what it was, taking incredible risks, and then

---

[24] The Sabra and Shatila Palestinian refugee camps are located in southern Beirut. In September of 1982, Phalangists of the Ketaeb (Christian) party killed a purported 800-3000 Palestinian and Lebanese Shi'I men, women and children while Israeli military forces stationed outside of the camps.

feeling alive. At some point you get sick of the violence around you, you want to be stronger than the violence itself."

Lina's relationship with Siham form the basis of the film's narrative arc. Beginning with playful hair-plaiting, cleaning the hallway and watching a boy undress across the street, Lina and Siham are hardly distinguishable. Siham entrusts Lina with her secrets of lovers and thus, Lina's coming of age takes place largely through watching and hearing sexual relationships unfold, whether of Siham's or her parents'. When Siham has sex with her boyfriend, Marwan, in his car, Lina waits outside watching with one of his friends. Typical of Lina's role as a witness, an observer, she experiences her first kiss but expresses neither resistance, nor consent. Instead we are left to imagine our own affective response to experiences like these, filling in her lack of action and/or re-action.

Fig. 3.5 Lina looking.   Fig. 3.6 Lina sees.

Her parents' strained relationship contrasts with the light and intimate encounters Siham has with her lovers. Her father, Fouad's gambling problem brings strange men to their home, threatening their lives. As a result, Lina watches her pregnant mother,

Therese, either crying or throwing things around the house. However, the contours of their relationship reveal themselves when Lina hears them having sex and combs her father's hair after her mother has left. Love and possession are deeply interconnected. Thus, Siham's rendezvous acts as a counterpoint and escape from the family battles being waged in the home. In fact, the family matriarch, Fouad's much older sister controls the money in the home and treats Siham so cruelly that Lina attempts suicide by submerging her face in water. Whether to cause a scene or a true attempt at killing herself, Lina attempts to intervene in the battles of the home over which she has very little control. The lack of control over her world coincides with the adults' inabilities to control their outside world of warfare as they huddle in their bomb shelters or gamble with money, playing games of risk, "feeling alive." Unfortunately, the games of risk result in Lina's father's death as his unpaid debts catch up with him.

The final scene aligns Lina's father's funeral with the death of her relationship with Siham. What began as a sisterhood ends in an exercise of power when Lina tells her aunt that Siham is planning to run away. Lina breaks Siham's trust in order to keep her but in the end lose her through her betrayal. Siham attempts to strangle Lina but is interrupted by a family member who comes upon them and the film ends with Lina chasing Siham down the empty streets.

Fig. 3.7 Death and Loss.

In both *Crimson Gold* and *In the Battlefields* individual stories are foregrounded while the war is in the background. While the political implications and context of the war very well have caused the predicaments of our characters, the emphasis in these stories are placed on the individuals themselves and their attempts at understanding their situations. Panahi and Arbid have in effect taken those stories made invisible by the hypervisibility of the masculine and martyr and replaced them with ones where our hero and heroine are not lauded for their heroic qualities. In fact, their empathetic qualities are balanced with their more unsympathetic qualities of moral ambiguity.

HUSSAIN AND SIHAM AS MARTYR FIGURES

In these two films the non-masculine and hyper-sexualized figure of Siham, the maid, and the non-martyed Hussain, the veteran who embodies the ills of the war,

illuminate the ways postwar cinema narrates marginalization. These two figures attempt to cope with their environment, Hussain through eating and driving his motorcycle around the city and Siham through her sexual escapades. Hussain's visceral reaction to being insulted by the jewelry store owner manifests in the inability to breathe and body shivers. Siham's body is literally locked up in a home in an attempt to keep her from fleeing. Their bodies become sites of confinement and fail to serve them in their societies. In fact, in contrast with the body of the martyr that is hailed and honored, these bodies are in a way, unrecognizable, therefore, unmournable. Hussain, because of his low social class and the antithesis of a war hero and Siham as a Syrian refugee kept captive by her Lebanese owners.

Judith Butler in her *Precarious Life*, question the way public mourning of hyper-visible lives, like that of the martyr, can render other lives invisible through their public invisibility, their lives become unmournable, "unmarkable" (Butler 35). Bulter writes in the context of post- 9/11 and the effects of the public mourning of American lives on the lives of Others, like the civilians whose lives are affected in other countries as a result of the war on terror. In the case of Lebanon and Iran, how have the ways martyr stories have been projected on the walls, screens and even living rooms of the everyday affected the stories of the non-masculine and non-martyred?

Chapter Four: Generic Mediations: War in Comedy and Musicals

The films discussed thus far in this study have been from the generic category of drama, and specifically of the art cinema tradition in Iran and Lebanon. In this chapter, I am concerned with how two rather well-received films, one Lebanese musical in 2005, and the other, an Iranian comedy of 2007, have challenged the notion that traumatic narratives are particular to the aesthetic of art cinema. Mas'ud Dehnamaki in Iran and Phillippe Aractingi in Lebanon have produced postwar films that have resonated with their respective local audiences.

Genre Studies has a long history of ill-fated conclusions of what actual features of genres maintain "purity." Naficy's definition of genre works to frame my discussion of postwar as a possible genre of filmmaking. He states that "[g]enre cinema […] rests on the existence of an implied contract among four parties: filmmakers/authors, film texts, individual spectators and interpretive communities, and the film industry and its practices" (Naficy 206). Part of what makes the postwar genre a category is the ambiguity of these parties. Thus, this liminal period of societal restructuring, while allowing for more freedom of creativity, also makes it more difficult to pin down the salient features of this postwar genre that could account for a broad range of films. This dissertation is an attempt at analyzing and proposing some of those features. However, the significant aspect of this categorization lies in documenting and delineating the efforts by filmmakers to create personal versions of national identity based on a resistance to the dominant visions of national belonging.

By emphasizing cinematic media at this critical historical juncture of the 1990s and 2000s in both Lebanon and Iran I privilege a productive analysis of visually constructed changes. Thus, I interrogate the importance of the robust activity of filmmaking during a time when national narratives were being constructed, contested, and reconfigured. Lukács's articulation of genre and its relationship to society is relevant to this analysis:

> The genre-creating principle ... does not imply any change in mentality; rather, it forces the same mentality to turn toward a new aim which is essentially different from the old one. It means that the old parallelism of the transcendental structure of the form-giving subject and the world of created forms has been destroyed, and the ultimate basis of artistic creation has become homeless... The novel form is, like no other, an expression of this transcendental homelessness (Lukács 185).

What is particularly interesting about the birth of genre is not so much the supposed change in social consciousness, but the efforts by artists to respond to new historico-political circumstances with the *same* culture biases and social structures that they have understood and approached their world, before and during this social change. This has great bearing on the argument that looking at transnational developments of genres demonstrates a "universalist tendency to attribute a monolithic development to a particular aesthetic form" (Davis 42). Since Lukács articulates the change in social consciousness as an *a posteriori* phenomenon to the social change occurring in the environment, his theory accounts for the ability of a theoretical model to describe what possible circumstances provoked the genre to be culled upon and how it has enabled certain types of storytelling.

Thus, I propose that the salient features of the films discussed in chapters two and three are 1) emphasis on witnessing, 2) diegetic rupture, and 3) marginalized stories. In chapter four I argue that the genres of comedy and musical already possess the generic legibility that the postwar genre seeks to fulfill. Thus, the postwar, comedic and musical genres offer a generically legible form of spectatorship, appealing to the expectations of audiences, making particularly marginalized war stories to emerge from them. I would like to further propose that postwar acts more like a *mode*, than a genre. Thus, the postwar film relies on the presence of rupture to indicate the inability to tell a complete story. This generic convention acts as a *mode*, or possibly a *modality* in the sense of language—a possibility, a contingency, a suggestion. While certainly similar to genre, a crucial difference would be the ability of the postwar to merge with other genres. It has been argued that the same can be said for all of the genres but through an examination of these films I assert that the comedy and musical also exhibit the emphasis on witnessing, marginalized stories and a revision of the martyr trope. However, they lack the feature of diegetic rupture by virtue of their generic categories as popular genres of comedy and musical.

Discussions of genre in Film Studies have hinged on the applicability of certain arguable features of said genre. For example, many critics argue whether John Ford's Stagecoach (1939) should be considered a western. Rick Altman "suggest(s) that genres arise in one of two fundamental ways: either a relatively stable set of semantic givens is developed through syntactic experimentation into a coherent and durable syntax, or an already existing syntax adopts a new set of semantic elements." (Altman 34). In this

model, Genre is a conduit of expectation but capable of being innovative. Similarly, Steven Neale adopts a kind of "reflection" model and thinks of Genre as embodying the expectations of viewers and those expectations work within a system of interrelated characteristics of a genre. Verisimilitude or the likelihood of something happening in the film, helps viewers to identify their expectations or the temporary logic of this cinematic world. Studios respond to these expectations by creating a "narrative image" for each film, helping viewers discern the genre and therefore more capable of choosing their kind of film.

COMEDIC MEDIATIONS: WAR AND GENRE IN *EKHRĀJIHĀ*, *THE OUTCASTS*

From across the street of a dark, southern Tehran road we see a woman get hassled by a driver, when suddenly, a man who has been watching the scene on a motorcycle takes a chain, smashes the car window, and pulls the driver out of the car. From the commotion of the scene we are taken to a prison where the man receives a warm welcome from crowds of inmates chanting repeatedly, "Bravo, brother Majid!" This opening scene of *Ekhrājihā*, or *The Outcasts*, introduces the film's protagonist of who has yet to be unmasked as we follow his steps from behind his shoes. Significantly, our protagonist is revealed when he steps out of a car into his neighborhood where he receives the same chanting welcome from his neighbors who think he has been away on the hāj in Mecca. These two scenes stage the main conflict of the film, that is, Majid's *lūtī*, or thug life, with that of a pious one. This tension allows the simultaneity of critique

of and support for the Islamic ideals of the revolution, ideals that have been under great

debate in Iranian society since the Islamic revolution.[25]

Fig. 4.1 Movie Poster for *The Outsiders*.

The Outcasts premiered in Iran in March of 2007 and its popularity astonished

critics and viewers alike.[26] At its release, it was the highest grossing film of all time,

generating more than one billion toman in the first month of screening.[27] Thirty years

after the Islamic Revolution, which was upheld by its eight year long war with Iraq, many

critics asked how a comedy about the propagandistic war of the 1980s could win the

hearts of the Iranian public in the 2000s. Their surprise was based on the assumption that

support for the ideology of the revolution had waned in the past several decades. The

first, most visible form of this discontent took the shape of the mass protests and student

revolts of 1999. Locally known as "*hijdah-e tir*" or the 18th of Tir, students were killed

---

[25] Various critics debate whether to refer to the revolution of 1979 as the Iranian revolution or the Islamic revolution. Since this paper deals with the Islamic values espoused by the Islamic Republic and its policies, I refer to the revolution as the Islamic revolution.

[26] See Daragahi, Borzou. "The World; A different view of Iran's soldiers; A movie takes on the myths that underlie the Islamic Republic: who fought in the war with Iraq, and why." *Los Angeles Times* 14 September 2008: A16.

[27] See "Ekhrajiha passes one billion." *Cinemā ye mā*. Web. 6 April 2007
<http://www.cinemaema.com/NewsArticle2074.html>.

and imprisoned for their dissenting actions, and many in the thousands were injured.[28] So, what could have appealed to this post-revolution generation of Iranians in a movie about a wayward son finding his way to martyrdom in the Iran-Iraq war? Most reviewers did not take the film seriously enough for critical study, while one scholar located its significance in the way that the film attempted to collapse generational differences and instill a renewed belief in the Islamic Revolutionary ideals through the figure of a marginalized "other" in Iranian society.[29] I elaborate Bajoghli's claim of reading that difference, but in terms of social class, and furthermore, I analyze how the generic conventions of comedic melodrama enabled subversive critique of class difference while maintaining a respect for war veterans. Ultimately, through the incongruity principle of comedy, the film is able to balance the critique of the clerical elite through jokes revolving around religion while still preserving a respect for the cultural memory of the Iran-Iraq war and consequently, its war veterans.

The Outcasts is a comedic melodrama set in the 1980s during the Iran-Iraq war. A local thug from southern Tehran, Majid (Kambiz Dirbaz), decides to go to the war front in order to prove his worthiness to the father of Nargess (Niousha Zeyghami), the girl he wants to marry. His close neighborhood friends, Amir (Arzhang Amirfazli), Bayram (Akbar Abdi), Bijan (Amin Hayai), and his uncle Mostafa (Alireza Osivand), decide to go with him. However, they are tested and scrutinized by Haj Saleh (Mohamad Reza

---

[28] The 18th of Tir occurred in July 1999 in protest of the closing of the Iranian reformist newspaper *Salaam*. It was the largest demonstration of anti-regime sentiment at the time and is mourned every year for those who died, were beaten and arrested as a result. The clashes of 2009 following the upheaval of the 10th presidential election of Iran were especially resonant because of this anniversary.
[29] See Nargess Bajoghli's The Outcasts: *Reforming the Internal "Other" by Returning to the Ideals of the Revolution*, MA Thesis. U of Chicago, 2008.

Sharifinia) on their Islamic knowledge and motivations for going to the front. After a series of antics, they are allowed to go to the front only to be kicked out of training for inappropriate behavior. Morteza (Javad Hashemi), a neighborhood friend, vouches for them, they are allowed to come back, and Morteza attempts to reform the group. Ultimately, Majid volunteers to go through a mine field and eventually dies a martyr in a tank raid at the end of the film.

Martyrdom in Iran has played an especially formidable role in shaping the country's popular and visual culture of Iran since the Iran-Iraq war.[30] During and after the war, the Islamic Republic's culture industry projected images of martyrs in everything from billboards, cinema, and television shows, to textbooks and postage stamps.[31] Within this national narrative, the soldiers of the Iran-Iraq war were likened to Husayn, the Prophet Muhammad's grandson, who according to the Shi'i branch of Islam, was wrongly killed and therefore martyred in what is well known as the Karbala massacre. As the war industry appropriated the Karbala narrative, the Iran-Iraq war itself was called the Sacred Defense and in this case, a defense from Iraqi enemies. As a religious youth growing up with this ideology, the director of *The Outcasts*, Masud Dehnamaki, volunteered to go to the war front (*jebhe*) at sixteen years old and had hoped to go even sooner when he was fourteen (Interview in *Māhnāmeh-ye Sinemāi-ye Fīlm*, March 2007). The Advancement of Documentary and Experimental Cinema, which was one of the film production centers created in the period of the establishment of the Islamic Republic,

---

[30] The Iran-Iraq war began less than two years after the establishment of the Islamic Republic and lasted from September 1980 to August 1988.

[31] See Chelkowski and Dabashi's *Staging a Revolution: The Art of Persuasion in the Islamic Republic of Iran* (New York: NYU Press, 1999).

produced Dehnamaki's first feature film, *The Outcasts*. Therefore, those familiar with his biography connect him with Islamic revolutionary ideals. In fact, the more controversial part of the success of *The Outcasts* lies in the tri-partite tension between the director's religious background, the negative portrayal of the clergy and the religious 'reformation' of the main characters. Masoud Dehnamaki was the former general commander of Hezbollah, notorious for publicly beating students for un-Islamic behavior. While he has denounced his previous extremist actions, critical reviews of his work emphasize his ties to the Revolutionary Guards and his religious devotion. Thus, a film about the reformation of misfits into exemplary martyrs and veterans of the war has highlighted the tension between critical voices and the public at large.

Significantly, however, the conventions of the genre of comedy enabled the film *The Outcasts* to appeal not only to audiences otherwise critical of the hegemony of the Islamic Republic's policies, but also to those who could identify with the film's characters. Viewers might identify with antics like going through the motions of prayer, frequently misunderstanding religious language, and acting inappropriately carefree in a religious or war environment. While the film's melodramatic aspects and its eventual denouement indicate a kind of glorification of piety and martyrdom, the film's critique of the clerical elite and societal norms through comedy offers a parallel reading to the more melodramatic tenor of the film. According to the United Nations Statistics Division, the unemployment rate for youth aged 15-24 in Iran in 2007 was at 22.3%.[32] Therefore, Amir's drug addiction and Bijan's thievery along with the group's overall class status

---

[32] See "Youth Unemployment Rate." Indexmundi.com. Web. 25 January 2013. <http://www.indexmundi.com/iran/youth-unemployment-rate.html>.

attend to contemporary issues of a failing economy combined with dealing with the cultural policies of the Islamic Republic's rule. Furthermore, while the generic qualities of the comedy appealed to the audiences, its melodramatic traits enabled its public release and approval by the authorities.[33]

By combining elements from the two genres of comedy and melodrama, *The Outcasts* resulted in a popular film with controversial implications. However, along with the film's popularity, its comedic style distinguishes it from other war films that valorize war and martyrdom. In *The Outcasts*, a combination of narrative elements results in a layered effect, appealing to the audience beyond the value of its denouement. Thus, the continual criticism of the clerical elite, melodramatic effects of war life, and the brotherhood of the main characters offer an affective panoply of appealing entertainment that contests a sole reading of the film as merely upholding the ideology of martyrdom and religious reformation.

The lack of studies on comedy as a serious genre in Film Studies demonstrate that comedy has traditionally been dismissed in critical circles in both Iran and the United States. However, one of comedy's appeals is that while it seems to be safe and non-political, it is significant in its emotional appeal to audiences. This innocuous and attractive trait of comedy has allowed it to combine with other genres to create hybrid forms of entertainment. Because of this, Geoff King in *Film Comedy* argues that comedy is more of a mode than a genre based on its ability to traverse all genres of cinema.[34] For example, the ability of westerns and romances to be comedic has resulted in comedic

---

[33] Dehnamaki claims he had to cut the screenplay considerably to get it approved by the censors.
[34] Geoff King. *Film Comedy* (London: Wallflower, 2004) 5.

westerns and romantic comedies.[35] I consider King's definition an apt description for *The Outcasts* being a comedic melodrama.

In Iran, the genre of comedic film has focused on criticizing high society and the elite and poking fun at the low, usually the poor. In *Ganj-e Qarun/Qarun's Treasure* (1965) a poor youth befriends an old man who attempts suicide, and discovers this man is the richest man in town, and incidentally, the father who gave him away as a baby. Like *The Outcasts*, this blockbuster hit of the 1960s criticized the elite through the comedic but heart-warming antics of protagonists who mean no harm, unlike their elitist counterparts. Significantly, during the period of *filmfarsi*, or popular cinema, alternative cinema began to take shape and formed what is now considered by critics as "New Iranian Cinema" or the "Iranian New Wave".[36] A majority of these dramas like Ebrahim Golestan's *Khesht o Ayeneh/Mud Brick and Mirror* (1965) and Dariush Mehrjui's *Gāv/The Cow* (1969) criticized the elite as well, but because of the avant-garde nature of the films, did not appeal to popular audiences like filmfarsi films. Interestingly, criticizing the elite has historically endured as a particularly compelling theme in both dramatic and comedic Iranian films.

The main principle guiding the comedic effects of *The Outsiders* can be explained through the concept of incongruity. The incongruity principle is one of three main attempts at theorizing the way comedy functions. While superiority theory reads humor as a result of audience members feeling a sense of superiority over the characters in the

---

[35] King 5.
[36] See Richard Tapper's *The New Iranian Cinema: politics, representation and identity* (London: IB Tauris, 2002).

film, relief theory roots itself in the way humor relieves tension in the film. In contrast, incongruity theory bases the power of humor in the way viewers' expectations contrast with the film's occurrences and the humorous consequent response. One of the earliest incongruity theorists, Immanuel Kant, defines laughter as "an affection arising from the sudden transformation of expectation into nothing" (qtd. in Lippitt 147). In *The Outcasts* the melodrama of the story is punctuated by various incongruous moments of unexpected situational impropriety.

While Comedy hinges on the delicate interplay between cinematic devices and social norms, comedy as a genre has been generally understudied in the realm of film studies. Significantly, numerous critics of Iranian Cinema have noted the attention paid to art cinema over popular cinema such as popular drama and comedy, but that contentious issue is one repeated in film studies as a whole, and has much more to do with the establishment of film studies as a legitimate field in critical studies than the particularity of Iranian cinema studies emphasizing art films. Along with its non-elite status as a comedy, *The Outcasts* has been dismissed by critics who consider it merely a crowd-pleasing movie. Dehnamaki had produced only two documentary films before this feature. As he hails from the same poor Eastern district of Tehran as the Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, Dehnamaki embodies the everyman that he creates in the characters of his popular film that indexes the genres of comedy, melodrama, war, all under the umbrella of filmfarsi.

Filmfarsi, a critical category referring to popular cinema, began as a derogatory term and still carries with it a kind of judgment in critical Iranian circles. First coined by

film critic and historian Dr. H. Kavoosi, the term referred to mainstream cinema that offered no philosophical message, but was produced merely for entertainment.[37] This sentiment echoes contemporary critics' assessments of comedy in Iran. In *Soureh Cinema*'s special issue on comedy, critics decry the dismal state of affairs in Iran concerning their comedy. Jamshid Sedagatnejad claims Iran has no comedy because the basis of the genre of comedy rests on its comedians, like Charlie Chaplin, and in the case of Iran, the censorship of comedians prevents them from expressing their full creativity (42). Because of this drawback, Sedagatnejad's critical stance on comedy in Iran, shared by other writers in the special issue, claims there are "funny films," but not comedic films, in Iran. However, the claim that the genre of comedy does not exist in Iran is largely based on its comparison with the history of comedy in the United States.

The filmfarsi comedies of the Pahlavi period saw a history of popular success that came under scrutiny during the transition period under the Islamic Republic. For example, two comedic films, *A Party in Hell* (*Shabneshini dar Jahannam*, 1957) and *The Go-Between* (*Mohallel*, 1971) were the basis for imprisoning film producer Mehdi Misaqiyeh. Not only did revolutionaries burn down his Capri cinema, but he was arrested and beaten for "insulting Islam by parodying it" (Naficy 33). These films, in particular, "made fun of the religious *haji* types' greed, parsimony, and duplicity" (Naficy 33). The shift from a newly minted Islamic republic needing to establish its legitimacy to the incumbent government attempting to hold on to any credibility serves as one of the differentials between these contexts. This historical and political difference can explain

---

[37] See Massoud Mehrabi's "The History of Iranian Cinema: Part Three." Web. 23 January 2013 <http://www.massoudmehrabi.com/articles.asp?id=659039788>.

the formal necessity of *The Outcasts* to set up a hierarchy of piety that contrasts 'good' religious figures with 'bad,' or misguided ones. In contrast with the former comedies directly critiquing and parodying religious figures, *The Outcasts* attempts to rectify the caricature-like representation of religious characters and thus provide a more nuanced and believable set of characters, meanwhile pleasing the authorities and more moderate audience-goers alike.

Significantly, the main theme of social class that drives *The Outcasts* dominates the controversial criticism surrounding it. Thus, reviewers were disappointed with its enormous success and appeal to the general public, for both lack of aesthetic merit, along with threatening the sanctity of the Sacred Defense (Bajoghli 31). Indeed, those reviewers who took issue with its lack of artistic quality conceded they "must not understand [their] people at all" if such a "simple" comedy could be so entertaining (Bajoghli 31). While this particular reviewer writes for a youth-directed critical culture magazine, *40cheragh*, a reviewer for the popular film magazine *Donya-e Tasvir* was offended by the film's desecrating the sanctity of the war by joking about it (Bajoghli 31). This sentiment implies the film is offensive not only to the memories of those who died, but also to the living war veterans. He attributes the film's success to the novelty of hearing jokes made about the war, something he finds does not make up for the weak plot and lack of character development (Bajoghli 31). These reviews highlight a particularly significant difference within the cultural make-up of Iranian critical discourse, based on social class and cultural capital. Pierre Bourdieu's central thesis of his *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* resonates in this instance, whereby "[taste] functions as a sort of

social orientation, a 'sense of one's place,' guiding the occupants of a given … social space towards the social positions adjusted to their properties, and towards the practices or goods which befit the occupants of that position" (Bourdieu 466). For these reviewers comedy as a genre is either 1) not conducive to critical study or 2) not an appropriate mode or genre for serious topics. Interestingly, the former sentiment is expressed by a critical culture magazine with a more secular, upper class base while the latter represents a magazine with a broader, more popular audience with concerns about religiosity. Ultimately, disagreements concerning the film in critical circles had much more to do with the ways those communities defined their own social orientation in relation to the film. These disagreements around the film, between its offensiveness and its lack of artistic merit, suggest not only that it has meant something different for different audiences, but that the difference has, at some level, been delineated through differences in social class.

Along with comedy and *lūti* (thug) themed cinema, *The Outcasts* builds on the war cinema that preceded its release. During and after the Iran-Iraq war, the Islamic Republic created cinematic institutions like the Farabi Cinema Foundation and Ayat Film Studio[38] in order to support local filmmaking in Iran and to capitalize on the ability of cinema to reach mass audiences. Thus, the beginnings of a formidable film production emerged out of a war culture industry and the Islamic Republic's efforts to legitimize its

---

[38] For a comprehensive history of the institutions and policies concerning cinema in this period, see Hamid Naficy's *A Social History of Iranian Cinema: Volume 3* (Durham: Duke UP, 2012).

power during this period.[39] However, while the melodramatic parts of *The Outcasts* share some dramatic characteristics with standard war films like *From Karkhe to Rhine* (1993) by Ebrahim Hatamikia, and his other well-known film *The Glass Agency* (1997), the comedic parts of the film enabled it to gain a popularity surpassing all others before. Furthermore, it is worth noting that *The Outcasts* shares the audience appeal of *The Lizard* (2003) by Kamal Tabrizi, about the comedic antics of an ex-con who poses as a cleric. *The Lizard* was the highest grossing film before *The Outcasts* and was banned only a month after its release. So, while *The Lizard* did secure popular appeal, it did not provide enough ambiguity in its narrative to ensure its longevity in the theatres. In contrast, the most accepted reading of *The Outcasts* takes the denouement as resolving this tension, whereby the narrative arc is resolved with the hero's ideological reformation.

The characters portray their lowness principally through their acts of impropriety. While ethnic differences like Majid's mother who speaks with an Azeri Turk accent come up in the film, their presence is secondary to the main source of laughter that comes from the group's lower class status. The most well known of comedic characters in Iranian comedic history comes from the Samad series of the 1960s, in which Parviz Sayyad played a bumbling *dehāti* or villager navigating city life. While his outsiderness as a villager plays a great part in what makes him comedic, his ignorance and low station, in fact, carry the narrative and comedy of the shows. Likewise, in *The Outcasts*, Majid and his neighborhood friends who speak with accents from the southern suburbs of Tehran, a lower-class neighborhood, are comedic in so far as their caricature represents

---

[39] See Roxanne Varzi's *Warring Souls: Youth, Media, and Martyrdom in Post-revolution Iran* (Durham: Duke UP, 2006).

97

their low status. While Majid's accent informs the audience of his roughness and masculinity and signals him a lūti, his friends' similar street accents are less masculine and more uneducated.

The degree to which Majid performs masculinity, in particular, differentiates him from his fellow "outsiders." Since the 1960s the figure of the lūti, or thug, has been infused with the added element of protector and hero of the common man. *Qeysar/Caesar* (1969), a film about a man who seeks revenge for a raped sister and murdered brother, also revolves around a lūti figure who enacts his masculinity with honorable intentions. In this way, Majid functions as a typical lūti figure grafted onto the figure of the war martyr, a hyper-visible figure of masculinity in postwar Iranian popular culture. An example of this juxtaposition can be seen in a scene during their military training when, amongst a battalion of soldiers, Majid is compared to a weak soldier. Morteza is lecturing about using hand grenades and asks for a volunteer. A young soldier volunteers, but Majid teases him and says, "This kid stutters. By the time he gets to three we'll be dead." Everyone laughs. Morteza asks one of them to volunteer, and playing cool, Majid offers the fearful Bayram who hesitantly walks forward. Bayram accidentally pulls the clip too soon and in slow motion, the soldiers try to disperse. However, the stuttering soldier jumps on top of it but nothing happens because Morteza used a non-functioning grenade for the exercise. In this scene the soldier bears the mark of a real man in the film, in contrast with Majid, who was not willing to sacrifice his life. He says, "Manhood is not defined by … yazdi bandanas. You can find (real) men like him at the front in great numbers." Majid's role as the heroic male lūti figure becomes the crux upon which the

film is able to balance its appeal as a comedic melodrama and its characteristics of a typical war film.

Significantly, Majid carries the melodrama of the film by not being the receiving end, nor the agent of joke-telling, while his friends, Amir, Bayram, and Bijan are direct sources for the comedic parts. Each of his friends exhibits typical stereotypes of low class characters: Bijan is a thief, Amir is a drug addict, and Bayram is especially unintelligent. This kind of exaggeration is the most commonly known method of achieving comic effects, but King also indicates incongruity as a productive means of understanding the highly potent and subversive possibilities of this 'mode' on audience members (5). Their ignorance of social norms and acts that create incongruous moments in the film come directly from their low status in society. Narges Bajoghli argues that what drives the film is the reformation of an "other" in Iranian society to learn the true Islamic (revolutionary) way (3). At a time when members of the Revolutionary Guard and Iran-Iraq war veterans begin to enter the political stage, the making of this film seems all the more significant (Bajoghli 3). However, does the intent of the propaganda machine or the intent of the filmmaker necessarily signal the success or acceptance of the intended message? Considering Roxanne Varzi's (2006) study on the post-revolutionary disillusionment of youth with the current regime, a message about the virtues of martyrdom and piety wouldn't be popular with a youth rejecting the restrictive policies of a regime that has consistently come up against popular resistance. However, Varzi's illuminating study focused on the discontent of upper class youth in Northern Tehran, a study that could

account for a portion of the movie-goers, but hardly the majority. This is particularly

important to consider when balancing critical reviews with popular reception.

Fig. 4.2 Misfits go to war.

In a typical good cop/bad cop routine, the soldiers are managed by religious

authorities who argue frequently about the presence of the group of outcasts on the front

line. When Majid and his friends attempt to sign up to go to the war front their

knowledge of Islam is tested by their ability to state how many prostrations are in a

prayer, how people get buried, and with which foot you enter the bathroom. These

questions result in comedic answers as they fumble through wrong answers, and the

scene culminates with Amir, the drug addict, saying he would go head first into the

bathroom if they let them go to the front. Everyone bursts out in laughter with Amir

looking baffled. A typical instance of incongruity, the humor in this scene is caused by

the unexpected nature of Amir's response to a religious question. Haj Saleh is taken aside

by Mirza and an older cleric who chastises him for asking such questions and expecting

soldiers to be as pious as angels from heaven. Along with Mirza's talk with Abbas earlier

in the film, this scene highlights the tension between the original ideals of the revolution and the ways they manifest in the minute details of everyday actions and ritual.

In fact, the central way the film pitted 'good' piety against 'bad' is through the arguments between Haj Saleh and the cleric. Haj Saleh and other commanding officers decide to send Majid and company back to Tehran, claiming they belong in the city square and not the war front where the ground is pure. But the cleric protests, "Those are your words and not the words of religion." This constant differentiation between the rigid expectations of the misguided religious authorities is voiced by the two older religious figures of the film, Nargess' father Mirza and the cleric. These voices of reason are what Bajoghli claims propel the film's "message," that is, that the revolution's ideals have not been upheld by the current regime and the marginalized in society suffer as a result. The elders promote a more lenient approach to those less pious in service of the higher purpose of fighting the war.

Along with this contrasting of clerical elites, the development of Majid and his friends challenges the notion that the ultimate martyrdom in the film indicates some kind of resolution. Rather, looking at how Majid and his friends Amir, Bayram, and Bijan are being represented as lower class lūtī figures illuminates the class critique in the film. Particularly resonant here is King's claim that "as a social product, comedy is often involved – implicitly and explicitly – in the politics of representation: the way one group or another is identified, distinguished and portrayed. Who and what we laugh at, and why, has implications in terms of both how we see others and how we define ourselves, the two often closely interconnected. Gender, race/ethnicity and national identity are

three major sets of grounds (although not the only ones) on which such distinctions and identifications are constructed and articulated; as such, it is not surprising that they should be recurrent sources of comic material in film as elsewhere" (King 129). Majid's identification with the nation or lack thereof contrasts with the pious soldiers. On their jeep ride to the war front Majid shows ownership of his difference by distancing himself and his friends by speaking of Iran as *mamlakat-e shomā* to Morteza. By assigning the role of devotee to "your country" to Morteza, Majid further reveals his lack of allegiance to the sacred defense and instead highlights his ulterior motives for being there. Thus, part of his reformation must include his eventual incorporation into the body politic and identification with the status quo, his moral development.

In the film, Majid's shoes, an old pair of *giveh*, emphasize the significance of his character as a common man and this class-based rendering of his identity. Giveh are shoes recognizable from the poor parts of Tehran and the rural areas of Iran. In the film, Majid's giveh are highlighted when he first enters the prison and when he exits the car to step into his neighborhood. Connecting two disparate places through the common element of his shoes links the places of the prison and his home to his precarious identity. Further, throughout the film, his shoes take him to the war front and most heroically through a mine field and finally to his death when a tank charges through his barracks. The confluence of the Tehran streets, prison, and the war front meet in the footsteps of our hero. What is striking about his steps are not that they are the steps of a war martyr; rather they are the steps of an ex-prisoner, liar, gambler, smoker, and poor local boy. Therefore, lūti identity becomes the crux upon which audience identification rests.

The concept of *Ādamsāzi* or moral development is central to understanding the function of reformation and the implications of martyrdom in the film. Ādamsāzi comes from Ādam, signaling the first man, meaning human, and sāzi comes from sākhtan, to build. Thus, when the cleric says that the war front is not for the angels, rather for the ādamsāzi of people like Majid and his friends, he indicates his belief in the active intervention in the moral development of Majid, the building of his humanity. As aforementioned, this attempt at reforming Majid and his misfit friends forms the main tension in the narrative, with old clerics embodying the ideals of the revolution, on the one hand, and the new clerics concerned with the rituals of Islam on the other. However, the way this education or reformation unfolds signals a disjuncture between the conventional concept of ādamsāzi and one that the narrative of the film suggests, and moreover, signals a critique on reformation as a viable possibility for our hero at all.

What kind of reformation takes place in *The Outcasts*? The attributes most distinguishable and referred to in the film are Amir's drug addiction, Bayram's cowardliness, and Bijan's thievery. The new clerics criticize their ignorance of Islamic rites and based on this, deem them unfit to go to the front with pious men. Thus, a solid reformation of the characters involves their cessation of these particular unfit acts along with their education of the Islamic rites that they are so ignorant of throughout the story. However, there is no expression of their education process resulting in some kind of ultimate, enlightened version of themselves. Furthermore, Majid bears no recognizable vice that necessitate cessation as with his friends. However, in contrast with the other

characters, Majid's sole mark of difference, that is, his non-allegiance to the nation, carries the film's central weight.

In terms of reformation, Bijan, the thief, is the only character who exhibits actual moral reformation as a result of the war experience. From stealing shoes at the mosque to prayer beads from clerics, Bijan's thievery is represented as a compulsion. Thus, when they arrive at a bombed village, he begins to loot the houses and schools. However, when he accidentally finds a dead girl in a closet, he carries her to the other soldiers weeping, distraught from the sight. After this dramatic scene, back at the camp he returns all of the stolen goods to their owners. Therefore, Bijan's change occurs in his ādamsāzi as a result of the impact and harrowing reality of war. We see no similar kind of reformation or epiphany with the other characters, including Majid. While Majid does sacrifice himself by walking through a mine field and finally being run over by a tank, his reasons for doing so flash in his mind as Nargess, her father, and his friends, drawing a connection between his martyrdom and his community rather than the nation.

Amir is particularly significant as Majid's foil in this comedy about masks and false piety. As a drug addict, Amir speaks his mind, thus serving as the uncensored mouthpiece for the audience and characters in the film. He unknowingly unravels Majid's plan when he runs up to him just as Majid is giving Nargess' father water from the holy river of Zamzam from his purported pilgrimage to Mecca. At the war front Amir offers drugs to soldiers with head injuries, marking his impropriety not only in public but also on the "pure ground of the war front." He humorously imagines an Islamic ritual of entering the bathroom headfirst. While his actions in these scenes reflect socially

unacceptable behavior most boldly embodied in his drug use and physical countenance, Amir, in fact, challenges these notions by being ignorant of their controversial nature. Ultimately, he serves as Majid's unprotected (not sober) self who speaks through the mask of masculinity.

If Majid's death inscribes the impossibility of a lower class figure to integrate into a postwar, Ahmadinejad-led Iranian society, then the integration of Bayram must signal a conditional aspect of this impossibility. By the end of *The Outcasts* Majid becomes a *shahīd* and consequently does not reunite with Nargess, but rather is inscribed into the national (re)membering of him as a lover of the nation. Significantly, Bayram acts as Majid's foil in regards to pursuing their love interests. When Majid first comes back from prison and his neighbors think he came back from hāj, Bayram attempts to kill a lamb for the welcoming rite. This scene introduces Bayram's interest in Majid's sister Marziyeh as they exchange looks and Majid shows his disapproval by storming off. Two scenes that compare the relationship of Marziyeh and Bayram with that of Majid and Nargess occur at places of delivery, one at the bus stop and the other at the phone station at the war front. At the scene of departing for the war front, Bayram hesitates and instead proposes that he marry Nargess and when Majid comes back they can trade places. To further the scene's comedic effect Marziyeh ceases her lamenting his departure in order to scold him for being cowardly and then resumes crying when he quickly agrees to go. Immediately following this scene is Majid's nervous goodbye to Nargess who says she will wait for him. The evident relief and joy in his face underscores the hope and motivation that drives his action in the film.

The complimentary positioning of these two couples is further developed in the scene of the phone calls to the women. Bayram calls Marziyeh only to have Majid pull the phone away from him. Marziyeh hangs up after hearing her brother's voice. Afterward, Majid dials Nargess' number and just as she is about to pick it up, her brother Abbas picks up the phone instead and greets the caller with a resounding religious salutation, assalām w'aleikom! Majid hangs up. Here, the two brothers' interventions in the phone calls of their sisters with their love interests indicates a connection being drawn between social norms and propriety and not so much religious propriety. Their actions parallel one another and suggest a critique of social norms, but not religion. However, ultimately Majid dies and does not reunite with his lover while Bayram lives and does. Having Bayram succeed at overcoming death to eventually reunite with his love interest casts doubt on Majid's supposed reformation reached through martyrdom.

While the film's denouement suggests the ideological reformation of Majid and his deviant gang of friends, this is significant only in so far as we place the gravitas of the film at the end and assume reformation of moral values based on the hero's death. Instead, the film shows that looking through the prism of a comedic mode of filmmaking, which typically capitalizes on mockery of higher groups (groups in power) and an investment in 'lower' characters, enables a reading that, in fact, critiques the resolution of a martyred ending. Iranian war films only recently began to criticize the reasons and effects of the war. Ebrahim Hatami-kia's melodramas in particular have been the hallmark of war films after Morteza Avini's films of the Sacred Defense. While Avini's films promoted the heroism of soldiers and the necessity of fighting for the Islamic

republic, Hatami-kia's films centered on the trauma of war veterans and the destitute lives they have lived in the post-war period. However, both of these directors have upheld a somber vision of the war hero, one that is challenged by the comedic characters in a comedy like Ekhrajiha. Attention to this generic interplay highlights the tension between the critical stance that the film's appeal originates from its reclamation of Islamic ideals, and the hugely popular reception of a film with a plot seemingly unappealing to a 2007 Iranian audience struggling to accept the strictures of an increasingly restrictive government.

GENERIC NEGOTIATION: CONFLICTING IDENTITIES IN PHILIPPE ARACTINGI'S FILMS

I now turn to two Lebanese films by Philippe Aractingi and how they grapple with the perceived division between the liberal, cosmopolitan Lebanese and the conservative, traditional one. Critiques on Lockean liberalism have emphasized the exclusionary nature of liberal ideology and its inability to account for multiple realities outside a rigid model of western-based subjectivity.[40] This history of liberal discourse has critiqued the binary paradigms that have resulted and divided globalised societies into conceiving and speaking of the "modern" versus the "traditional." While anthropologists have criticized this model as relegating any lived reality in contradiction with the liberal

---

[40] See Uday Singh Mehta's *Liberalism and Empire: A study in nineteenth century liberal thought* (U of Chicago Press, 1999).

values as "pre-modern,"[41] we see these notions adopted by society and we are able to chart this battle through material culture.

Significantly, looking at the function of genre in these films aids our understanding of the way genre can allow and hinder readings by the viewer. Ultimately, I aim to show how *Bosta* (2005), by virtue of its genre as a melodramatic musical allows more room for social critique than the more serious documentary drama hybrid of *Under the Bombs* (2007). Moreover, these social issues represented in both films are rooted in the problematic division between acts, lives and perspectives considered to be "modern" or "traditional."

In 2005, the first locally funded Lebanese film, *Bosta*, topped the Lebanese cinema charts in a position usually occupied by American blockbuster films such as *Harry Potter* and *Armageddon*. *Bosta* received critical acclaim across the Arab world along with global audiences once it was released internationally in 2007. One Lebanese reviewer wrote, "If you're Lebanese, you can expect – for once and for the first time – to see yourself in a world-class Lebanese feature film/musical, yourself as you are, not a melodramatized version of who you're supposed to be" (Jurdak). Interestingly, this reviewer pits the idea of "world-class" against "melodramatized" as conflicting features. Contrasted with this reception, Aractingi's second feature film, *Under the Bombs*, filmed during the ceasefire between Hezbollah and Israel in July of 2006, is a dramatic portrayal of a mother looking for her son set within documentary footage of the war. Aractingi

---

[41] See Partha Chatterjee's "Community in the East" in *Economic and Political Weekly* (7 February 1998), p 277-82.

attempts to resist the way war flattens out individual stories by playing with perception, mixing fictional and non-fictional characters, narratives, and images. With his experience of filming over forty documentaries, Aractingi intended to relay the realities of war beyond what he found to be the limits of non-fiction film.[42] Using what he calls "neo-realist video," he extends the neo-realist method of combining objective realist setting and characters with a fictional protagonist.[43]

After producing more than forty documentaries about the Lebanese Civil War, Philippe Aractingi decided to write his first feature film, which he wanted it to be a musical. He says he was tired of making films about war and wanted to present the vitality he found in contemporary Lebanese society:

> [A] whole universe that's on the Eastern kitsch side, sometimes absurd, but
>
> always full of life. But when I actually got down to the writing, I realized I
>
> couldn't sum up this lightness. For four years, I struggled against a past that made
>
> up half my life, and that was the war. So I finally understood that all the energy
>
> the Lebanese people have is really an instinctive survival strategy of some sorts –
>
> a way to get over the weight of past suffering. And I decided that I had to make a
>
> film that reflects who we really are: both light and sad. (Jurdak)

Aractingi touches upon several of the issues that are delineated in the genre theory espoused by such scholars as Richard Dyer. I am particularly interested in Dyer's concept of musicals as expressing "[a]lternatives, hopes, wishes—[as] the stuff of utopia, the

---

42 See "Under the Bombs," 15 Apr 2009 <http://underthebombs.com/entretieninterview.html>.

43 See David Bordwell's *Narration in the Fiction Film* (Madison: U of Wisconsin Press, 1985) 150.

sense that things could be better, that something other than what is can be imagined and maybe realized" (177). Notably, entertainment does not necessarily offer a utopian world; "[r]ather the utopianism is contained in the feelings it embodies" (ibid.). In fact, the world presented in *Bosta* is far from ideal, but the diegetic musical scenes provide periodic utopia through "injecting electronic dance music into the Lebanese folk dance of *dabke*, [which] has struck a chord with local audiences during a troubled time" (Jaafar). *Bosta* speaks to an audience ravaged by fifteen years of civil war (1975-90) and subject to continual bombardment as recent as 2006. Through a melange of characters this story revolves around a dance troupe traveling through Lebanon trying to popularize the "digi-dabke," a new twist on the traditional Lebanese dance. This musical written and directed by the filmmaker Philippe Aractingi was advertised as a "100% Lebanese" film, responding to the desire to reinforce a unified Lebanese identity after a brutal sectarian conflict that has become part of the Lebanese cultural memory. While Phillip Kemp of *Sight and Sound* finds *Bosta* "essentially fluffy, feelgood stuff," he also attests to its "appealing insight into the vigour – and resilience – of Lebanese culture" (55). In fact, Aractingi and Dyer both identify the musical as a genre where serious societal issues converge with form, an observation I would like to further by including the role of excess in melodrama and its realization in *Bosta*.

In American film criticism, the melodrama as a genre became a relevant topic of study in the milieu of the 1970s when neo-Marxist, feminist and psychoanalytic theory took up projects of mass entertainment in order to explore underlying societal issues (Mercer and Shingler 4). They looked at American women's melodrama in the 1950s in

particular and the way this genre embodied the frustrations of the women of the period. They quote Nowell-Smith who argues that characters in melodrama are distinguishable by their "inability to take action to resolve their problems; they are effectively oppressed and repressed individuals ... and as a consequence of this passivity and inaction, we see emotions and tensions building up that cannot be turned into action and then resolved in a satisfactory fashion" (qtd. in Mercer and Shingler 22). He goes on further to say that "excess" acts as a safety valve, siphoning off the ideological contradictions that cannot be resolved in the narrative of the melodrama (ibid.). This is particularly relevant for understanding how *Bosta* embodies the anxieties, frustrations, and hopes of the popular Lebanese imagination in the aftermath of a war that has defined the country's identity. How are serious issues like war trauma, sexual taboos, and religious conflicts sublimated in the melodramatic scenes of *Bosta*?


Fig. 4.1 Movie Poster for *Bosta*.

The film begins with grainy footage of an aerial view of Beirut before the war, then moves closer in on people on the beach, jet-skiing, retro architecture, and people dancing the dabke in traditional clothing. The scene cuts to a flash forward of contemporary congested Beirut, people honking and swearing at a broken-down bus. Amidst the commotion we notice a line of policemen on their motorcycles pass freely on the other side of the road taking no heed of the traffic problem. All the people in the traffic jam stop and stare as the police drive by, then the frame cuts to the characters of the film rehearsing for a performance. From the beginning of *Bosta* we see the juxtaposition of an idyllic pre-war Beirut coupled with dabke dancing, a modern Beirut congested with cars, held up by a bright red bus (our central image throughout the film) and people yelling and fighting only to be silenced by the mere presence of state authorities. The film evokes the bus as a symbol of the Lebanese civil war by referring back to the bus bombing of 1975, which arguably started the civil war that lasts fifteen years. The bus driver, Mr. Naim says, "17 years of war, and not one bullet! Not even a scratch ... This bus is blessed by the heavens! Nothing happened to it during the war." His words reflect the magic of the bus that seemed to dodge the assault of the war, which the film's characters were themselves unable to do . Thus, the bus acts as a protective shield in which they travel through Lebanon and through their memories. Eventually the film's characters paint over the bus in order to "heal the wounds" of the war and thus attempt to reshape their futures.

The female dancer Arze, a peripheral character who incorporates gender issues, tells the story of Kamal and the dance troupe. As she shows the news reporter Isabelle her

photo album, she narrates the missing facts of the preceding scene. She speaks of Kamal's father, their teacher, Nabil, and his vision of the Utopia School of Aley, "not just any school, but an idea. [He wanted] a school without any social, gender or religious differences." Later we understand that he was sent a bomb disguised as a gift that Kamal, his son and the main protagonist of the film, had handed him. Here, we are introduced to the film's main conflict, that is, Kamal's reconciling with his father's death. Furthermore, the other periphery character, Omar, acts as Kamal's mirror in respects to father relationships. His father, who sent Omar abroad for medical school, is disappointed in his son's decision to dance for a living. This clichéd trope becomes important toward the film's end, when Omar's father comes around. As he hugs and reconciles with his son, Kamal turns away and finds it difficult to cope. Through both of these periphery characters Kamal's position as protagonist and his relationship to dabke, his father, and the homeland are illuminated.

DABKE AS CONSTRUCTED TRADITION

Ostensibly, the dance troupe is showcasing this new "modern" form of the dabke to show the "traditional" Lebanese that they need to recognize progress. The first dance performance of the film takes place at the auditions for the National Dabke Festival of Anjar. The main judge, Mahfouz Barakat, stops the performance, incensed at the "attack [on their] cultural heritage" and criticizes the fusion of "sufi, eastern, western," and the way they have taken the "last remaining cultural piece of heritage" to promote a modern fusion dance. He challenges Kamal's authenticity, a recurrent theme in the film, and asks, "Lebanese, does this word mean anything to you?" Kamal responds: "In what

113

supermarket can we get this heritage? Dabke, sir, is alive, just like us, it breathes, evolves, adapts... you're still hanging on to a bygone Lebanon and there's no turning back. The road is blocked. So why this longing for something that's been ravaged and killed?"

Fig. 4.2 The digi-dabke.

This melodramatic scene is key to understanding Kamal's own desire to recapture the past through gathering his old school friends and creating this digi-dabke tour. His journey back home from a fifteen year absence in France and his subsequent return to the site of his father's death indicate how this indictment of the judge's inability to accept change reflects his own inability to let go of his past. This slippage of self through another character significantly manifests at the crux of discussing a symbol pregnant with cultural meaning.

Significantly, there was a shift from the pastoral, nostalgic musical theatrical productions of the 1950s to the musical parodies of the 1970s onward. Lebanese musicals became popularized in the 1950s with the folkloric nostalgia of works by 'Asi and

Mansur Rahbani, better known as "The Rahbani Brothers," starring the iconic figure Fairuz playing the lead role in most of their films and musical plays (Stone 152). This is particularly important in considering *Bosta*, as it not only re-imagines the collective trauma of post-war Lebanon but revises a musical and cinematic tradition that began as a form embedded in an ideal sense of Lebanon as unified, simple and rural. By contrast, the central motivation that propels Bosta is a dance troupe's desire to change the style of the traditional dance. Stone recounts the Rahbani Brothers attempt to "canonize" a Lebanese form of the dabke. Before the 1950s a national form of the dabke did not exist. Through his essay Stone shows how Ziad Rahbani, the son of Fairuz and 'Asi Rahbani, attempted to embrace the polyphonic, multicultural, multi-religious aspects of Lebanese society. The heteroglossia that defines Lebanon is delineated through three of his 1970s films. *Bosta* also participates in this portrayal of Lebanon's diverse make-up with its cast of characters from star-crossed lovers of different religions, expatriates returning from France, a homosexual character coming to terms with his sexuality, and trauma victims remembering the war. *Bosta* is a prime example of representing a utopia that is embodied in the dance that attempts to reflect and reshape the understanding of a Lebanese society that is affected by war, but not defeated.

SEXUALITY UNBECOMING

From the forbidden love affair of Vola and Toufic who come from different religious backgrounds to the implied homosexuality of Khalil, the film invites viewers into more erotic sexual spaces that are simultaneously rife with political connotation, prompting several reviews in the Arab world to warn that this film is "for adults only"

(Mustafa) . However, a look at the main protagonist, Kamal, and how he differs from his foils, Toufic and Khalil, offers a better understanding of what is actually being hidden within the melodramatic performances of these characters.

Vola, a Christian, and Toufic, a Muslim, play out the typical star-crossed lovers of Lebanon in *Bosta*. While many sects, religious, and political groups participated in the long civil war, Christians and Muslims made up the largest groups. Vola's story begins with her throwing out her lover from her bedroom, a friend of her father's who is married and has "forty-five minutes maximum" to spend before his wife gets suspicious. Toufic is settled down with a wife and a daughter with whom he is clearly unhappy. As the main critic of Kamal's new style of dabke, Toufic embodies all that goes wrong with those who follow the status quo and the unhappiness they live as a result. Full of anxiety, the troupe gets invited to perform at a wedding in the traditional province of Baalbak. Toufic insists that they dance the traditional form, but when they are on stage Kamal switches the music to the digi-dabke version, resulting in a dance-off between the white-clad Utopia troupe and a group of old men dressed in traditional black. This amazing face-off of old and new illuminates the spectacular strengths of both styles. Here the inextricable link between what has been previously divided, that is, the "modern" and "traditional", coalesces in a visual frenzy of dance.

Significantly, following the performance, two scenes are juxtaposed, ending with a mysterious out of place flashback. The new bride brings Alia into her bedroom and we find out the bride feels a disconnect from the husband she just married. When alternated with a sex scene between Vola and Toufic we understand the larger connection between

the two couples, Kamal/Alia and Toufic/Vola. When asked about why she is not married, Alia says she has been waiting too long for prince charming. The scene fades out and we fade into a flashback of Alia and Kamal, mysteriously lit, where Kamal asks, "Will you wait for me?" and Alia answers, "Don't worry, I'm here." We see their faces in extreme close-up, Alia hovering over Kamal's, and the music alludes to a romantic scene but we have yet to know where they are. In fact, other scenes in the film never lead to sexual fulfillment – Kamal rejects Alia's proposition to come to her bed and only at the end of the film do we see the full picture of them, not in bed, but in an ambulance; this scene acts as a key to the story as it refers back to the bombing that killed Kamal's father and the basis of the couple's deep connection. Kamal and Alia's relationship, while visually compared to Toufic and Vola's through cinematic juxtaposition, never concludes in sexual encounter. This contrast gestures towards the "purity" of their relationship being rooted in their post-war trauma. The illumination of sexual difference between the couples is further emphasized by the role of Isabelle, the news reporter covering the troupe's travels from central to south and then north Lebanon. When Kamal propositions her, she refuses, but keeps an ongoing flirtation with Kamal that causes Alia to leave the group later in the film. Thus, we are assured that Kamal's desire for women is not an issue; rather his relationship with Alia is somehow "special." Notably, the only overt sex scene in the film is between the Christian and Muslim character.

While romantic relationships may be "a somewhat hackneyed theme not only in Lebanese but in Arab culture as a whole" (Mustafa), *Bosta* manages to invigorate romance through ambiguity. The film alludes to Kamal and Alia's possible sexual

117

relationship, only to subvert these allusions as a misunderstanding of their "true" relationship being the bond of the father's fatal bombing. This repression leads one to question what is actually latent and what is manifest in this film about war trauma. While the film wraps up the "real" reason for Kamal's return from France after fifteen years of exile, the narrative does not resolve the issues of social relationships, namely that of Khalil, the homosexual character, and the inter-religious relationship between Vola and Toufic. Thus, as we have established the centrality of Kamal and his relationship with Lebanese identity, what does his relationship with Toufic and Khalil tell us about multiple Lebanese identities/realities as exemplified through sexuality?

While on the road, they stop the bus so that the men, Toufic, Omar, Kamal, Khalil and the bus driver, Mr. Naim can urinate. As the women watch, the men look out onto the green valleys and admire the view:

Kamal: This country is blessed by God!

Toufic: Blessed by God and ruined by its people.

Khalil: Ruined by its people? We are its people, you and me. Toufic? Are we back to the same old story?

Kamal laughs to himself. This interjection by Khalil, the homosexual character, illuminates his position as the film's alternative storyteller. He wears a "rainbow pop" t-shirt and after Aliya leaves, Khalil whispers to Kamal, "you know I can do it." Kamal looks hopeful, asking, "you know what that means?" Khalil responds, "I always wanted them to know, and now they can applaud." Surreptitiously referring to his sexuality, the next scene shows a successful performance in Khalil's hometown up north in Jounieh,

with Khalil playing the lead female dance role, feathers and all. One reviewer is disappointed that "nothing is sufficiently developed" with the character of Khalil as his story ends favorably with this performance (Mustafa). Indeed, nothing is ever explicitly said about his homosexuality, and we know he was the only one who stayed with Kamal after the group originally disbanded. When asked by Isabelle, he says that one day everyone will know. This issue is not brought up again until the performance in Jounieh. The repression of Khalil's story as the only homosexual character in the film challenges the notion of *Bosta* as a film that overturns tradition and seeks to redefine old-fashioned ideas of the collective. In fact, we get a better understanding of the limits of such social commentary and how the musical as a genre provides the form to articulate, at least through dance, this character's alternative identity.

Kamal, on the other hand, is the leader and the only non-dancer in the troupe. He practices in his room, limp, scarred and damaged from the explosion fifteen years earlier. Instead he acts as manager, songwriter, and disciplinarian. Several times throughout the film, characters comment about his father's stringent style of management, and we see Kamal take on that very role. He begins the film angry over the rejection by the council for the National Dabke Festival of Anjar and is further angered after the group's eventual acceptance into the festival towards the end. In a frenzied outburst he declares that revolutions are never begun from the inside. All the group members and the reporter are confused and accuse him of being "self-absorbed" when they have all been waiting and working for this chance at fame. This scene reveals Kamal's deeper desire for something else. In fact, on the bus Kamal decides to take the group to the dance school where they

met, the site of his father's death. The group disagrees and feels they have dealt with their pain while Kamal is "playing with [his] nightmares," and Aliya reminds him that "they have not forgotten." This comment refers back to Aractingi's seminal conflict in *Bosta*, that is, that Kamal in exile still suffers from trauma after the war has ended, while the others have dealt with their pain. Aliya articulates this conflict well when she says, "Kamal, you come and go and you're still in the same place."

THE SORROW IN SONG

The juxtaposition of non-diegetic and diegetic music is of particular import in understanding what is being narrated about the characters in *Bosta*. Generally, the non-diegetic music in Bosta narrates and informs our understanding of the characters' inner worlds while the diegetic music, like the soundtrack, adds to the film's mood and gaiety. As an example of the non-diegetic music, as Aliya is recording the main song that will recur at the end of the film, frames of several characters are presented to indicate the narrative connection. We see Toufic at the shooting range as Alia sings, "How can it work out? Each within a private struggle. This man worries, wakes from his sleep in sweat. He knows the past can't be forgotten or laid to rest." Then we see the most cryptic of characters, Khalil, teaching in his dance studio while Aliya sings, "This man won't take chances except through his dancing. Locked in lies, hidden, secluded." However, this song that begins as non-diegetic ends as a diegetic song for Aliya after she storms off the bus because of Kamal and Isabelle's flirtation. She walks the countryside and starts singing the main chorus, now her story:

This girl, trapped in her worries. Wakes from a dream to find her past constantly

reset. She can't let go but she must move on. But she can't let go. She must move

on. Where do you come from, my friend, where? Where are you heading, where?

Can you learn to let go of the weighted past? Learn to love after the pain?

This scene exemplifies how "songs, rather than claiming to 'redefine' pure music itself

into song, in fact, seek to transform spoken words into sung words" (Laing 5). The music

continues onto the bus and Kamal sings, "I can't find my path/ I've strayed too far/

Longing for the past/ Lost to time/ The image I had of you was so strong/ Now it fades

and your voice has gone." Another important feature that distinguishes the non-diegetic

from the diegetic music in *Bosta* involves how the former embodies sad tones while the

latter tends to be light and upbeat. Interestingly this corroborates Feuer's idea that "in

becoming song, language is in a sense transfigured, lifted up into a higher, more

expressive realm." (qtd. in Laing 5). In *Bosta* this expression most forcefully finds its

place when the non-diegetic and diegetic are combined.

When considering the realist films that dominated the Arab mainstream cinema of

the post-1967 period, creating a musical like *Bosta* to deal with the "defeat" of war

underscores its innovation. In fact, Nouri Bouzid finds filmmakers after the major defeat

of 1967 were working from places like the Maghreb, Syria, Lebanon and Palestine, where

the search for identity became the prevalent trait of the new realist films (242). Having

grown up on Nasserist pan-Arab nationalist rhetoric, these filmmakers were from a

generation deeply affected by the politics of identity disrupted by the defeat of 1967. He

distinguishes this period as a time when Arab writers were negotiating their

understanding of what it meant to be part of, and thus representing, a defeated nation. Many of these films challenged classical literary and cinematic notions of masculinity and femininity by depicting characters in great frustration and confusion over their social roles. *Bosta* also redefines male and females roles, extending the new realism that did not manifest in the musicals of the famous Rahbani brothers to the genre of melodramatic musicals.

Thus, considering the history of musicals and realist dramas in the Arab world, the fact that the first locally funded Lebanese film was made in the genre of the musical places *Bosta* in a particularly unique place in the Arab cinematic context. *Bosta* is an international example of a musical that is enabled by the generic capabilities of both the musical and melodramatic genres to present the after-effects of war. Furthermore, it engages in its historical foundation through the focus on the dabke and challenges notions of sexuality, a contentious contemporary issue. As a musical, *Bosta* escapes the severity of a war film and focuses on what ultimately matters, the way people have persevered and dealt with the trauma of death, through celebrating their lived realities.

Conclusion

In this dissertation I have focused on the films of Mohsen Makhmalbaf, Jafar Panahi, Massud Dehnamaki from Iran and Joana Hadjithomas, Khalil Joreige, Danielle Arbid and Philippe Aractingi from Lebanon, because they all have offered postwar realities that counter the national narratives that have centered on the hyper-masculine figure of the martyr. Instead, they have, in different ways, focused their attentions on marginalized narratives such as those of the antiheroic war veteran, an adolescent girl coming of age, a silenced female photographer, refugees, social misfits and socially unacceptable couplings. *On Witnessing* intervenes in debates on national cinema by arguing that these postwar films have contributed to more nuanced notions of national identity. They do so by virtue of the shared mode of the postwar film which is characterized by the non-combat emphasis on the everyday experiences of living in postwar societies that include parallel national narratives of martyrdom and sacrifice.

Bibliography

Abecassis, Michaël. "Iranian War Cinema: Between Reality and Fiction." *Iranian Studies* 44.3 (2011): 387–394.

Agamben, Giorgio. *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*. New York: Zone Books, 2000.

Ahmad, Aijaz. "Jameson's Rhetoric of Otherness and the 'National Allegory.'" *Social Text* 17 (1987): 3-25.

Al-Ariss, Ibrahim. "A look into Lebanese war cinema on the civil war's twenty-fifth anniversary," *Al-Hayat*, April 14, 2000 (Arabic).

---. "An Attempt at Reading the History of Cinema in Lebanon: From Cinema to Society and Vice Versa," in Screens of Life: Critical Film Writing From the Arab World, vol. 1. Edited by A. Arasoughly, pp. 19-39. Quebec: World Heritage Press, 1996.

Anderson, Benedict R. O'G. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. 2nd ed. London: Verso, 1991.

Appadurai, Arjun. *Modernity at large: cultural dimensions of globalization*. U of Minnesota Press, 1996.

Aractingi, Phillipe. *Bosta*. Beirut: Fantascope Productions. 2005. Film.

Armes, Roy. *Third World Film Making and the West*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987.

Asad, Talal. *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity*. Stanford University Press, 2003.

Bajoghli, Nargess. "The Outcasts: Reforming the Internal 'Other' by Returning to the Ideals of the Revolution." 2008 : Thesis.

Bassnett, Susan and Harish Trivedi *Post-Colonial Translation Theory and Practice*. London: Routledge, 2002.

Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. London ; New York: Routledge, 1994.

---. *Nation and Narration*. London: Routledge, 1990.

Bordwell, David. *Narration in the Fiction Film*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985.

Bourdieu, Pierre. *Distinction: a Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1984.

Bouzid, Nouri and Shereen el Ezabi. "New Realism in Arab Cinema: The Defeat-Conscious Cinema." *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics* 15 (1995): 242-250.

Brooks, Xan. "Public Enemy." *The Guardian* 2 Sept. 2003. *The Guardian*. Web. 13 Mar. 2013.

Butler, Judith. *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. London ; New York: Verso, 2004.

Butte, George. "Suture and the Narration of Subjectivity in Film." *Poetics Today* 29.2 (2008): 277-308.

Caruth, Cathy. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996.
---. *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995.

Chakar, Tony et al. *Tamáss 1: Contemporary Arab Representations--Beirut/Lebanon*. Ed. Catherine David. Witte de With/Fundacio Antoni Tapies, 2002.

Chaudhuri, Shohini. *Contemporary world cinema: Europe, the Middle East, East Asia and South Asia*. Edinburgh University Press, 2005.

Chelkowski, Peter J. *Staging a Revolution: The Art of Persuasion in the Islamic Republic of Iran*. London: Booth-Clibborn Editions, 2000.

Clarke, David B. *The cinematic city*. Psychology Press, 1997.

Cooke, Miriam. *Women and the War Story*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996.

Culler, Jonathan. "Anderson and the Novel." *diacritics* 29.4 (1999): 20-39.

Dabashi, Hamid. *Close up: Iranian cinema, past, present, and future*. Verso, 2001.
---. "Dreams of a Nation: on Palestinian Cinema * Filming the Modern Middle East: Politics in the Cinemas of Hollywood and the Arab World * Iranian Cinema: a Political History." *Screen* 48.4 (2007): 537-542.
---. *Makhmalbaf at Large: The Making of a Rebel Filmmaker*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2008.
---. *Masters & Masterpieces of Iranian Cinema*. Washington, DC: Mage Publishers, 2007.
---. *Post-Orientalism: Knowledge and Power in Time of Terror*. New Brunswick, N.J:

Transaction Publishers, 2009.

Daragahi, Borzou. "The World; A different view of Iran's soldiers; A movie takes on the myths that underlie the Islamic Republic: who fought in the war with Iraq, and why." *Los Angeles Times* 14 Sept. 2008 : A.16.

Davis, Lennard J. *Factual Fictions: The Origins of the English Novel*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1983.

Dawes, James. *That the World May Know: Bearing Witness to Atrocity*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2007.

De la Durantaye, Leland. *Giorgio Agamben: a Critical Introduction*. Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 2009.

Dehnamaki, Masoud. *Ekhrajiha* (*The Outcasts*). 2007. Film.

Dyer, Richard. "Entertainment and Utopia." *Movie* 24 (1977): 2-13.

Edensor, Tim, and NetLibrary, Inc. *National Identity, Popular Culture and Everyday Life*. Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2002.

Esfandiary, Shahab. *Iranian Cinema and Globalization*. Bristol: Intellect, 2011.

Evans, Martin and Kenneth Lunn. *War and Memory in the Twentieth Century*. Oxford: Berg, 1997.

Ezra, Elizabeth, and Terry Rowden. *Transnational Cinema: The Film Reader*. London: Routledge, 2006.

Felman, Shoshana. *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*. New York: Routledge, 1992.

Fischer, Michael M. J. *Mute Dreams, Blind Owls, and Dispersed Knowledges: Persian Poesis in the Transnational Circuitry*. Durham, N.C: Duke University Press, 2004.

Fisk, Robert. *Pity the Nation: Lebanon at War*. 3rd ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001.

Galt, Rosalind and Karl Schoonover. *Global Art Cinema: New Theories and Histories*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2010.

Gana, Nouri. "Reel Violence: Paradise Now and the Collapse of the Spectacle."

Comparative Studies of South Asia Africa and the Middle East 28.1 (2008): 20-37.

Gilmore, Leigh. *The Limits of Autobiography: Trauma and Testimony*. Ithaca, N.Y: Cornell University Press, 2001.

Golamkani, Hushang. "Ranandegi-ye Batrili-ye Hijdah: Goftogu Ba Masoud Dehnamaki Darbare-ye Ekhrajiha." *Māhnāmeh-ye Sinemāi-ye Fīlm* 365 (2007): 169–176.

Grant, Barry Keith. *Film Genre Reader III*. Austin, Tex.: University of Texas Press, 2003.

Guerin, Frances and Roger Hallas. *The Image and the Witness: Trauma, Memory and Visual Culture*. New York: Wallflower Press, 2007.

Guneratne, Anthony R. and Wimal Dissanayake. *Rethinking Third Cinema*. London: Routledge, 2003.

Hackforth-Jones, Jocelyn. *Edges of Empire: Orientalism and Visual Culture*. Oxford: John Wiley & Sons, 2007.

Haugbolle, Sune. *War and Memory in Lebanon*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010.
---. "Public and Private Memory of the Lebanese Civil War." *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 25.1 (2005): 191-203.
---. *The politics of remembering in post-war Lebanon: civil war, memory and public culture*. University of Oxford, 2006.

Ḥaydarī, Ghulām. *Fīlmshinākht-I Īrān: Fīlm'shināsī-I Sīnimā-Yi Īrān, 1347-1351*. 1st ed. Tihrān: Daftar-i Pizhūhish'hā-yi Farhangī, 1378.

Higson, Andrew. *Waving the Flag: Constructing a National Cinema in Britain*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995.

Homayoun, Nader. *Iran Une Revolution Cinematographique*. First Run/Icarus Films, 2007.

Innis, Robert E. *Semiotics an Introductory Anthology*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985.

Jaafar, Ali. "Domestic Battlefields: Danielle Arbid on Maarek Hob By Ali Jaafar | Bidoun Projects." Web. 15 Mar. 2013.
---. "Arabs Catch Local Bus." *Variety* 401.6 (2006): 8-18.

Jāhid, Parvīz. *Nivishtan Bā Dūrbīn: Rū Dar Rū Bā Ibrāhīm Gulistān*. 3rd ed. Tihrān: Akhtarān, 1385.

Jameson, Fredric. *The Geopolitical Aesthetic: Cinema and Space in the World System*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992.
---. "Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism." *Social Text* 15 (1986): 65-88.

Jurdak, Hania. "A 100% Lebanese Feature Film." *Ya Libnan* 22 January 2006.

Kemp, Phillip. "Bosta." *Sight and Sound* 18.8 (2008): 55.

Khalidi, Rashid. *Sowing crisis: the Cold War and American dominance in the Middle East*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2009.

Khatib, Lina. *Filming the Modern Middle East: Politics in the Cinemas of Hollywood and the Arab World*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2006.
---. *Lebanese Cinema: Imagining the Civil War and Beyond*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2008.

Khouri, Malek. *The Arab National Project in Youssef Chahine's Cinema*. Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2010.

Kiarostami, Abbas. "The Hallucinations of a Filmmaker from the South." *The Cinema of North Africa and the Middle East*. Trans. Chris Darke. London: Wallflower Press, 2007.

King, Geoff. *Film Comedy*. London ; New York: Wallflower, 2002.

Laing, Heather. "Emotion by Numbers: Music, Song and the Musical." *Musicals: Hollywood and Beyond*. Ed. Bill Marshall and Robynn Stilwell. Exeter: Intellect, 2000. 5-13.

Lefebvre, Henri. *The Production of Space*. Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 2000.

Lippitt, Jonathan. "Humour and Incongruity." *Cogito* 8.2 (1994): 147-153.

Lukács, György. *The Theory of the Novel; a Historico-Philosophical Essay on the Forms of Great Epic Literature*. Cambridge: M.I.T. Press, 1971.

Maasri, Zeina. *Off the Wall: Political Posters of the Lebanese Civil War*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2009.

MacDougall, David. *Transcultural Cinema*. Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1998.

Madānāt, ʿAdnān. *Taḥawwulāt al-sīnimā al-ʿArabīyah al-muʿāṣirah : qaḍāyā wa aflām*. 1st ed. Dimashq: Dār Kanʿān, 2004.

Magrini, Jim. "Film Perspective: On the System of the 'Suture' in Cinema." 17 Apr 2009,

Mehrabi, Massoud. "The History of Iranian Cinema." 16 Sept. 2012.

Mercer, John, and Martin Shingler. *Melodrama: Genre, Style, Sensibility*. London: Wallflower, 2004.

Mihrābī, Masʿūd. *Tārīkh-I Sīnimā-Yi Īrān: Az Āghāz Tā Sāl-I 1357*. 7th ed. Tihrān: Intishārāt-i Fīlm, 1371.

Mirbakhtyar, Shahla. *Iranian Cinema and the Islamic Revolution*. Jefferson, N.C: McFarland, 2006.

Mirzoeff, Nicholas. *The visual culture reader*. Psychology Press, 2002.

Mottahedeh, Negar. *Displaced Allegories: Post-Revolutionary Iranian Cinema*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2008.

Muḥammadī, Murtaẓá Sayyid. *Farhang-I Kārgardānhā-Yi Sīnimā-Yi Īrān, 1309-1375*. 1st ed. Tihrān: Nashr-i Dashtistān, 1998.
Mustafa, Hani. "A Cinematic Omnibus." *Al-Ahram* 7 June 2007.

Naficy, Hamid, Ella Shohat, and Gustave E. von Grunebaum Center for Near Eastern Studies. *Cinema of displacement: Middle Eastern identities in transition*. Center for Near Eastern Studies International Studies and Overseas Programs, UCLA, 1995.

Naficy, Hamid. *A Social History of Iranian Cinema*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011.
---. *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking*. Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 2001.

Pārsīʹpūr, Shahrnūsh. *Women Without Men: A Novella*. 1st ed. Syracuse, N.Y: Syracuse University Press, 1998.

Pines, Jim and Paul Willeman. *Questions of Third Cinema*. London: British Film Institute, 1989.

Rastegar, Kamran. "Trauma and Maturation in Women's War Narratives: The Eye of the Mirror and Cracking India." *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 2.3 (2006):

22–47.

Ṣadr, Ḥamīd Riẕā. *Iranian cinema: a political history*. I.B.Tauris, 2006.

Saeed-Vafa, Mehrnaz, and Jonathan Rosenbaum. *Abbas Kiarostami*. Urbana: University
    of Illinois Press, 2003.

Said, Edward W. *Humanism and Democratic Criticism*. New York: Columbia University
    Press, 2004.
---. "Al-Ahram Weekly | Culture Page | Cultural Politics." Web. 1 Apr. 2012.

Sedagatnejad, Jamshid. "Dast o Bal-e Ma Baste Ast." *Soureh Cinema* 23 (2008): 42.

Seigneurie, Ken. "Anointing with Rubble: Ruins in the Lebanese War Novel."
    Comparative Studies of South Asia Africa and the Middle East 28.1 (2008): 50-
    60.

Selliez, Jean-Baptiste. "Interview of Danielle Arbid, Director of In the Battlefields." Web.
    15 Mar. 2013.

Shafik, Viola. *Arab Cinema: History and Cultural Identity*. New rev. ed. Cairo, Egypt:
    The American University in Cairo Press, 2007.

Sherzer, D. ed. *Cinema, Colonialism, Postcolonialism: Perspectives from the French and
    Francophone Worlds*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996.

Shohat, Ella, and Robert Stam. *Multiculturalism, postcoloniality, and transnational
    media*. Rutgers University Press, 2003.
---. *Unthinking Eurocentrism: multiculturalism and the media*. Psychology Press, 1994.

Soja, E. *Postmodern Geographies: Reassertion of a Critical Spatial Perspective*. London
    and New York: Verso, 1989.

Stone, C. R. *Popular Culture and Nationalism in Lebanon: Fairouz and Rahbani Nation*.
    New York and London: Routledge, 2007.

Stringer, J. "Global Cities and the International Film Festival Economy," in *Cinema and
    the City: Film and Urban Societies in a Global Context*. Edited by M. Shiel and T.
    Fitzmaurice, pp.134-44. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1991.

Sturken, M., and L. Cartwright. *Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture*.
    Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001.

Tapper, Richard. *The New Iranian Cinema: Politics, Representation and Identity*.

London: I.B. Tauris Publishers, 2002.

Tuan, Yi-Fu. *Space and Place: Theories of Identity and Location*. London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1993.

Varzi, Roxanne. *Warring Souls: Youth, Media, and Martyrdom in Post-Revolution Iran*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2006.

Virilio, Paul. *War and Cinema: The Logistics of Perception*. London: Verso, 1989.

Volk, Lucia. *Memorials and Martyrs in Modern Lebanon*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2010.

Walsh, David. "An Interview with Jafar Panahi, Director of Crimson Gold." *International Committee of the Fourth International* 17 Sept. 2003.

Westmoreland, Mark. "Post-Orientalist Aesthetics." *Invisible Culture* 13 (2009): 37-57.

Whitlock, Gillian. *Soft Weapons: Autobiography in Transit*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007.

Williams, Linda, and Christine Gledhill. *Reinventing film studies*. Arnold, 2000.

Zeydabadi-Nejad, Saeed. *The Politics of Iranian Cinema: Film and Society in the Islamic Republic*. London: Routledge, 2010.

Innis, Robert E. *Semiotics an Introductory Anthology*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985.