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Holding onto Power: The Film Industry’s Stratification in the Digital Age

ABSTRACT

Iranian cinema scholars argue that digital production has given filmmakers the opportunity to gain independence from the state’s supervision and resource control. Using Bourdieu’s theory of capital, this article argues that the state used its economic, social, and cultural capital to challenge the film industry’s democratization. Utilizing its continued and newly gained advantages over independent producers, the state made big-budget VFX-based movies (called fakher films) and distinguished its cultural productions from independent films. In the process, the state expanded structural inequalities in the industry in favor of its own productions and laid the groundwork for further stratification to strengthen its cultural dominance.¹

Digital technologies’ emergence in media industries came with hopes and promises to reduce inequalities and distribute the means of production. Carol Vernallis stated in 2014 that “new digital cameras and inexpensive software” helped not only professionals but also amateurs to produce content.² Earlier, in 2005, Brian McKernan claimed that the proliferation of personal computers as well as affordable software and hardware increased the number of “talented people” working on post-production, from editing to sound mixing to visual effects.³ However, accessibility is not

¹ This article was first submitted to JCMS in June 2020.

a binary matter, even though the general discourse on digital technologies has considered it as such. To discuss inequality and mobility in a society or within a field, one needs to explore different entities’ extent and type of access. The narrative of accessible and affordable digital technologies is not only exaggerated but also ignores the traditionally marginalized sectors and fails to account for the inertia of extant power structures. David Hesmondhalgh, arguing against such “digital optimism,” discusses the “much deeper” inequalities between different sectors of a certain society and between different countries; and he shows that in addition to access inequality, disparities in skills and access to the market hinder individuals’ participation in content-making on equal grounds. Expecting institutions of power to surrender financial and tech advantages is unrealistic. This not only assumes a readiness to lose influence without a fight but also, as my analysis will show, overlooks using these advantages to maintain dominance, making the idealistic claim that new technologies level the playing field in media too simplistic.

In Iran, filmmakers and critics have debated digital technologies and their roles in cinema for years. The Iranian state runs systematic supervision over the economy and content of the film industry. Hence, the state influences the economic and social dimensions of new technologies’ distribution, implementation, and use in cinema. In this context, a key question is whether digital technologies have liberated filmmakers from the constraints of capital and censorship or whether the state has limited or facilitated the process of democratization.

Scholars of Iranian cinema have argued that digital technologies have facilitated the democratization of media production and distribution and helped dissident voices. They claim that digital cameras allow independent filmmakers to “liberate themselves” from government control and “operate outside of [state-imposed] restrictions.” Parviz Jahed states that “[i]t is now possible—if not simple—to produce a film without relying on support or accreditation from institutional bodies.” Hamid Naficy also discusses the myriad ways several dissident groups, inside Iran and diaspora communities, have achieved access to media production and distribution using digital technologies.

5 In this article, I use state to refer to the totality of the Islamic Republic, commonly referred to as a regime. This so-called regime is not a monolithic system, as internal conflicts exist within any country’s governing body. I replicate the language used in sociology and political economy to refer to a country’s governing system that despite its internal conflicts includes pre-determined structures of hierarchy, policymaking, policy execution, and supervision, making it work as one body. The IR refers to its own totality as Nezam, meaning system. Using state instead of regime is important theoretically to make the findings applicable to other governing bodies around the world.
However, many filmmakers continue to deal with significant constraints, whether imposed by capital or by the state. Experience has demonstrated that the heightened expectations in the early twenty-first century regarding the impact of digital technologies on Iranian cinema were largely unfulfilled. Shahram Mokri, famous for his creative use of digital technologies in such films as *Mahi va Gorbeh* (*Fish & Cat*, 2013), wrote a piece in 2013 on how the emergence of digital cinema would change Iran’s film industry. He declared that digital cinema meant the end of censorship, because anyone could “make a film” even “with a cellphone” and then “share it, for viewing, on the internet.”

Nine years later, censorship has only intensified. The Islamic Republic (IR) now closely monitors even the content shared on the internet by private citizens and prosecutes people who cross various red lines that I will discuss later. Additionally, independent filmmakers face new obstacles in the digital era. Mohammad Shirvani, one of the frontrunners of digital filmmaking in Iran, points to the state’s appropriation of digital media. He refers to the screening of state-funded television movies in theaters, a strategy that has created a new and unfair competition between state-funded productions and independent films. Some other film producers have echoed the same complaint.

Ignoring persistent structural inequalities is key to digital optimism. While filmmakers and scholars have made astute points about increased accessibility to production and distribution, they have overlooked the systematic stratification of the film industry created through new technologies. The discourse around digital technologies has largely addressed the issue of access as a binary issue, hence the term digital divide. However, the type and extent of access have fostered technological inequality between different sectors of society. That is why some scholars have argued for a more nuanced term.

Eszter Hargittai advocates for the term digital inequality, as it moves

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9 Shahram Mokri, “Hameh Chiz dar Marz-e Cinema Ettefagh Mioftad,” (Everything Happens At the Boundary of Cinema), *Film Magazine*, no. 463, September 12, 2013, 51. Unless otherwise noted, all translations from Persian sources are the author’s translation.


away from a binary perspective and instead directs our focus to various aspects of disparities regarding the use of information and communication technologies.\textsuperscript{16} While the scholarship on digital inequalities has mainly focused on access to computers and the internet, this concept addresses the stratification of such industries as film as well.

In this article, using Pierre Bourdieu’s theories of capital, I argue that Iran’s state used its multifaceted advantages over independent filmmakers to produce big-budget films and distinguish its sponsored movies from independent productions in the digital era, in an effort to enhance its dominance in the cultural field. Among state-sponsored big productions, Molk-e Soleiman (The Kingdom of Solomon, Shahriar Bahrani, 2010; hereafter referred to as Soleiman) offers an instructive case study, as it was the first Iranian film with extensive use of digital visual effects (VFX) and represents the state’s practices in the transition from analog to digital. In order to understand the power relations in the Iranian film industry, we will first look at its political economy and infrastructure.

THE POLITICAL ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE OF THE IRANIAN FILM INDUSTRY

In Iran, traditionally, the state has held control over almost all economic and cultural sectors. When the IR came to power in 1979, the economy went through a chaotic period. Most of those in power had no expertise or experience in running an economy.\textsuperscript{17} Left-wing discourse advocated for total state control over all sectors, whereas right-wing voices sought to limit economic intervention.\textsuperscript{18} These disagreements were based on economic concerns and the issue of political power.\textsuperscript{19} In the end, a series of events led the IR to nationalize the economy.

According to Ezzatollah Sahabi, a prominent government and Parliament member in the 1980s, at the beginning of the IR’s rule, many factory owners fled Iran or hid in fear of retaliation from revolutionary forces.\textsuperscript{20} Some did so as the Revolution succeeded, and some did it once they saw the IR’s ruthless approach toward the businesspeople active before the Revolution. Consequently, industrial management became chaotic, causing frustration among workers and a downfall in the country’s manufacturing sector.\textsuperscript{21} Following these events, the post-Revolution interim government took over the factories.\textsuperscript{22} A combination of political factors led the IR to pass laws granting the government control over the entire economy. As Sahabi states, three laws “nationalizing banks,” “protecting industries,” and “nationalizing foreign
“trades” made Iran’s economy centralized and government controlled. Article 44 of the IR’s constitution, ratified months later, acknowledged three sectors in the Iranian economy: State, Private, and Cooperative sectors. The IR was slow, however, to fully recognize this article and privatize government-owned businesses. Some economic privatization started under President Rafsanjani in the 1990s and continued under President Khatami from 1997 until 2005, the year the state laid out a plan for further privatization of the economy. One should note, however, that the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), one of the IR’s armed forces, has exploited this process to take over large sectors of the economy, limiting true privatization.

Cinema has a similar story. Islamists—including Ayatollah Khomeini, the 1979 Revolution leader—believed that cinema corrupted society morally. Multiple theaters were burned during the Revolution, and many others were closed after it. Upon his return to Iran in 1979, Khomeini condemned the corrupting “misuse of cinema” and advocated for using it for the purpose of “educating people.” The state took over the film industry, from production to exhibition, and created a roadmap for Iranian cinema—a path toward what the state commonly calls committed art (Honar-e Mote‘ahhed). Using moral justifications, they banned or censored many domestic films and persecuted many actors and filmmakers involved in pre-Revolution cinema. Thus, for the film industry, economic and political factors were combined with cultural and religious concerns to transform cinema into a public, government-controlled industry.

The state’s control over the film industry took different forms. These include owning institutions responsible for supporting and producing films; educating filmmakers; claiming a near monopoly over film equipment; and controlling the production, distribution, and exhibition of films. The state required filmmakers to obtain permits for producing and exhibiting their films. In the censorship system that has been in place since the 1980s, filmmakers must provide a screenplay or synopsis to the Ministry of Culture to obtain a production permit. With this permit, filmmakers gain access to state-controlled production equipment, film laboratories, low-interest public loans, and permission to shoot in public spaces. Once the film is finished, the producer must submit the final product to the Ministry of Culture and

23 Sahabi, 31–32.
27 Naficy, Social History, 3:5.
28 Naficy, 3:15–22.
29 Naficy, 3:7–8.
30 Naficy, 3:22–43.
request an exhibition permit. This permit gives the film access to theatrical exhibition, but a separate permit is required to grant home video release. The censorship system and the criteria by which the films are assessed have evolved over the years. However, the basic premise has remained relatively consistent. Sex and nudity have always been prohibited under the ban of “promoting . . . moral corruption.” When it comes to political and religious matters, filmmakers are not allowed to insult Islam, Prophet Mohammad, the Shia Imams, or the Supreme Leader. They also face censorship if the government deems that they are disseminating images or information that “would be contrary to the country’s interests and benefits and that could be exploited by foreigners.” Nevertheless, the system’s restrictions can fluctuate based on the government’s attitudes, the permit committees’ opinions, and the country’s sociopolitical conditions.

Moreover, after the Revolution, state-controlled institutions, such as the Mostazafan Foundation (Bonyad), Hozeh Honari, and municipalities, took over theaters. The state-controlled Farabi Cinema Foundation also took “considerable control over obtaining and allocating production equipment and stock.” Economic privatization has let some private production and distribution companies and movie theaters operate, even as the IRGC expands its economic control to the film industry and the state continues its close supervision.

In this restrictive environment, the emergence of digital technologies brought enthusiasm to many filmmakers who hoped the digital age would free them from state control. They could make their films on affordable digital cameras that independent individuals and companies, and not the state, purchased and owned. Later, with the proliferation of optical discs and then the internet, this enthusiasm only increased, as filmmakers hoped to reach audiences by bypassing the state’s control on exhibition. While a handful of underground films were released, such as Kasi az Gorbeh-ha-ye Irani Khabar Nadareh (No One Knows About Persian Cats, Bahman Ghobadi, 2009) and Tehran-e Man, Haraj (My Tehran for Sale, Granaz Moussavi, 2009), that lived up to such expectations, the enthusiasm gradually turned into despair, even as the rhetoric of filmmakers remained optimistic. Examining the power relations and the political economy

32 For more on the permit system, see Naficy, Social History, 3:151–155.
33 “Nezarat bar Nemayesh-e Film va Slide va Video va Sodour-e Parvaneh Nemayesh-e Aan-ha,” (Supervision Over the Exhibition of Film and Slide and Video and Issuing their Exhibition Permit), Islamic Parliament Research Center of the Islamic Republic of Iran, passed February 23, 1983, accessed May 10, 2020, https://rc.majlis.ir/fa/law/show/106928 (access may be restricted to Iran).
34 “Nezarat.”
35 “Nezarat.”
36 Naficy, Social History, 3:151–155.
37 Naficy, 3:118. Naficy claims that the Pahlavi Foundation, controlled by the Shah’s family, “had investments” in some movie theaters before the Revolution. However, Shahram Jafarinejad, a prominent Iranian film critic, claims that the private sector possessed all the movie theaters before the Revolution. Shahram Jafarinejad, “Tosse’eh-yे Por-Shetab-e Salon-ha-ye Cinema dar Keshvar;” (Movie Theaters’ Fast Development in the Country), Film Magazine, no. 545, July–August 2018, 27.
38 Farahmand, “Perspectives,” 90.
of the Iranian film industry is key to understanding both the early enthusiasm for digital technologies and the later waning of those hopes.

The institutions of power—that is, those of the state—enjoyed advantages over independent sectors during the adoption of digital technologies. State officials maintained economic, social, and cultural capital, with new technologies helping them acquire additional capital. In addition, like any system, the film industry experienced inertia during this digital transformation, with established players and relationships rendering true transformation difficult. Bourdieu’s relational approach to society helps us understand these dynamics. A Bourdieusian comparative study of the different sectors of the film industry and their access to digital production during this period of change will reveal the influence that power structures and stratification held within this sector of Iranian society.

**THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

Bourdieu opposed the idea that the only type of capital is monetary or economic and introduced at least two additional types of capital: social and cultural. Economic capital is “immediately and directly convertible into money” and “may be institutionalized in the form of property rights.” In the Iranian film industry, as with all film industries, money and equipment serve as crucial forms of economic capital.

Social capital is “the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition . . . which provides each of its members with . . . a ‘credential’ which entitles them to credit, in the various senses of the word.” Social capital becomes important in the transfer of technology and knowledge between different media industry players around the world. An imbalance in access to such individuals and institutions—that is, an imbalance in social capital—can affect an agent’s relative ability to access the knowledge and technologies others possess.

Cultural capital, for its part, consists of “a collection of habits and tastes that can be used to acquire both economic and non-economic advantages only when those around us grant our habits and tastes symbolic importance.” This has probably been the most important type of capital for the IR’s policymakers. The “Principles of the Country’s Cultural Policy,” passed by the Parliament in August 1992, states that “[t]he Islamic Revolution is indeed a cultural revolution.” The policy notes that “most” if not “all authorities and possibilities” should be used for “cultural progress and

42 Bourdieu, 248–249.
development and mobility in all individual and social affairs.” In the IR’s policy, all forms of capital should be utilized to reproduce cultural capital. This primarily involves promoting the revolutionary principles centered on Islamic beliefs, reinforcing the foundation of the IR, subsequently enhancing its cultural, social, and economic influence, domestically and internationally.

Disparities in the amounts of different capitals held by agents not only drive inequality and stratification but also serve as a form of power, essentially legitimizing it. This is what Bourdieu refers to as “symbolic violence.” Bourdieu writes, “Any capital, whatever the form it assumes, exerts a symbolic violence as soon as it is recognized, that is, misrecognized in its truth as capital and imposes itself as an authority calling for recognition.” Such recognition (or misrecognition) turns any form of capital into a “symbolic capital.” A (mis)recognition of the right of the state to impose and manipulate nationwide policies makes its accumulated capital “symbolic,” disguising the ways the state uses its authority to accumulate more capital at the expense of independent sectors.

In the case of the Iranian film industry, my focus is on the stratification between state-sponsored and independent producers. The concept of independent producer or filmmaker is multifaceted in Iranian cinema and involves issues of finance, ideology, and practice. Iranian filmmakers and critics have debated what counts as independent in Iranian cinema. Some focus on the source of financing as the main criterion, arguing that an independent film does not receive financial support from the state. Some go even further to consider any form of dependency on higher powers as disqualifying for independent status. Mani Haghighi states that independent cinema should own its “means of production,” and if one changes the “essence” of their film just to acquire production permits or financial aid, they cannot call their film independent. That is why some filmmakers and critics believe no film legally made in Iran can be counted as independent. Others prioritize the ideological aspects of the final product, believing that even if someone makes a film with their own money but the idea comes from “somewhere,” meaning institutions

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45 “Osool-e.”
46 “Osool-e.”
48 Bourdieu, 299.
49 Kiarash Assadizadeh, “Bazgasht be Noghteh-ye Sefr,” (Return to the Zero Point), interview by Houman Davodi, Film Magazine, no. 463, September 12, 2013, 84.
50 Mani Haghighi, “Pas az Khandan Besouzan!,” (Burn After Reading!), Film Magazine, no. 463, September 12, 2013, 22.
of power, the film cannot be considered independent. Some other filmmakers and critics use a definition common on the international scene, defining independent cinema as a mode of filmmaking distinct from mainstream cinema. This differentiation focuses on modes of production and budget and prioritizes cinema as an art over cinema as a profitable industry.35

Adopting a Bourdieusian relational approach, I consider independent films as distinct from state-sponsored films, which are fully financed by the state and propagate state-sanctioned ideologies.4 In what follows, I also show how finance is intertwined with ideology and practice. The state’s economic capital grants it privileged access to financial resources and institutions, production equipment, and theaters. This financial disparity also gives the state unrivaled capabilities to import and create new technologies. Internationally, its social and economic capital provide an edge over independent sectors in co-productions and employing foreign expertise. The state’s cultural capital exists in its formally sanctioned ideologies, its advantage in controlling knowledge, and the luxury of making films with the sole purpose of cultural influence at the expense of financial loss. Evidently, these forms of capital are closely related. For example, the aforementioned luxury originates from the state’s economic capital as well. The state leverages its symbolic capital to dominate the industry by dictating and altering the rules. By steering policies, it limits or broadens opportunities for various stakeholders and tries to legitimize such disparities.

Discussing disparities on the social level, Hargittai points to “quality of equipment,” “autonomy of use,” “presence of social support networks,” “experience and user skills,” and “different types of uses” as factors causing digital inequality among different social classes.55 Unsurprisingly, these categories overlap with the above-mentioned factors associated with Bourdieu’s concept of capital, as parallels emerge between digital inequality among social classes and among different filmmaking sectors.

In the film industry, the state not only is the actor with the largest accumulated capital but can also manipulate the field’s rules and different players’ positions and mobility within the field. Here, “field” is used in the Bourdieusian sense, meaning “a structured social space,” which “contains people who dominate and others who are dominated.”56 Bourdieu notes that “[c]onstant, permanent relationships of inequality operate inside the space, which at the same time becomes a space in which the various actors struggle

52 Fardin Saheb-Zamani, “Be Hich-Kas Baj Nadeh; Na Davar-e Jashnvareh, Na Montaghed-e Cinema va Na Tamashagar!,” (Do Not Pay Ransom to Anyone; Neither to Festival Jury Members, Nor to Film Critics and Nor to the Audience!), interview by Shervin Shajari Kohan, Film Magazine, no. 463, September 12, 2013, 55.


54 There is a spectrum from state-sponsored films as defined above to completely independent films, which are totally free from the influence of state, financially and ideologically. For the sake of simplicity, I consider independent and state-sponsored films in a binary manner. However, for each stratification strategy, there can be a spectrum of hierarchies based on the capital different agents possess.


As in most other fields, the state is the dominant player in the field of the Iranian film industry. It uses its different forms of capital to restrict independent actors’ ability to transform the field. Also, the relational factor in field is another reminder that to explore different actors’ mobility within a field, one needs to look at their relationships and relative positions rather than study each in isolation.

Moreover, the utopia of a so-called democratic media industry with new technologies is achievable only if social structures can change independently of their previous status. Bourdieu analogizes this imaginary inertia-less world to the game of roulette, which can alter someone’s capital “quasi-instantaneously.” In this game, unlike social situations, one can find “perfect competition or perfect equality of opportunity, a world without inertia, without accumulation, without heredity or acquired properties, in which every moment is perfectly independent of the previous one.” This inertia is closely related to what he calls habitus. As Loïc Wacquant explains, habitus “is endowed with built-in inertia, insofar as habitus tends to produce practices patterned after the social structures that generated them.” This does not mean that habitus is a deterministic force; rather, it limits the probable outcomes of actions carried out by social agents. Bourdieu refers to habitus as both “a structured structure” and “a structuring structure.” While social agents are formed and bound by the norms and conditions of the field within which they act, they also interact with the other elements in the field and alter the field in turn. The more an entity accumulates capital, the more they can transform the field and the less they are influenced by the other actors, similar to the relationship between an object’s mass and its inertia in physics.

Bourdieu’s concepts help us dissect the power structures governing inequality in digital cinema, allowing us not only to identify factors highlighted by Hargittai but also to understand how institutions of power control and legitimize these factors to maintain dominance. The subsequent sections will examine how the Iranian state leverages and reproduces its economic, social, and cultural capitals in the film industry, thereby exacerbating the disparity between state-sponsored and independent filmmakers in the digital age.

**FINANCIAL RESOURCES**

In Iran, the state dominates a significant portion of the economy, accumulating revenue from taxes, public sector exports, and major nationalized industries such as oil, steel, chemical, and automobile manufacturing. This
financial power gives the state a unique edge over independent filmmakers in cultural industries.

In 2005, the state decided to start making big-budget movies. The Organization of Cinema and Audiovisual Affairs (hereafter the Cinema Organization), working under the Ministry of Culture, proposed the project to the Parliament. The Members of Parliament passed a bill allocating a special budget for such productions, separate from the film industry’s allocated annual budget.63 Soleiman was the first movie made under this plan. As explained, the IR’s official cultural policy prioritizes maintaining and expanding the IR’s cultural frontiers and drawing more people to its sanctioned culture. Thus, they allocated this budget only for religious and historical movies promoting the state’s ideologies. They called these movies “fakher films,” which loosely translates as “prestigious films.” Mohammad Mehdi Heydarian, the head of the Cinema Organization, which proposed the bill, clarifies in an interview that a fakher film is a work that is “honest” and committed to what is “beyond the world of senses.”64 Such a production needs to have “an influential and elevating message,” for which the filmmaker’s religious qualifications (ahliyyat) matter more than their “experience.”65 “Honest,” “beyond the world of senses,” “elevating message,” “ahliyyat”—these are all code words that reinforce the IR’s religious and ideological approach toward art and artists. The state, responsible for institutionalizing culture, has promoted its sanctioned culture as prestigious and high status, implying that other works lack these qualities.

The IR has utilized the spectacle of big productions as a tool to advance this agenda. As Guy Debord points out, “The spectacle is the epitome of ideology because in its plenitude it exposes and manifests the essence of all ideological systems: the impoverishment, enslavement and negation of real life.”66 Soleiman’s religious spectacle tends to provide the audience with experiences beyond a world of material senses, and with its audiovisual magnitude, it tries to overwhelm the audience and lure it into its ideology. The story of the King-Prophet Solomon includes many metaphysical encounters and events, such as the invasion of devils and his flying ship, a godly miracle according to Islamic belief. Such spectacular moments make his story ideal for entertaining propaganda. Chroma keying and computer-generated imagery (CGI) are used throughout the film, providing these moments with digital VFX-driven spectacle.

As a spectacular big-budget film designed to entertain, Soleiman differs from the numerous didactic religious films the state had funded in the pre-digital age. Around 2005 to 2010, many state-sponsored cultural

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65 Heydarian.

producers decided to move from didactic propaganda films made in the 1980s and 1990s to productions able to attract younger audiences. Recognizing that they had been losing the new generations on the IR’s cultural frontiers, they decided to embrace comedies and big-budget productions in an effort to draw millennials and instill in them state-sanctioned Islamic principles.

This marked a deviation from the prevalent trend in Iranian cinema since the Revolution, in which the majority of films, including those sponsored by the state, predominantly focused on realistic social problems. In the 1980s and early 1990s, some action films as well as some war movies on the Iran-Iraq conflict, known as Sacred Defense cinema, occupied screens with some low-budget special effects. However, after that, even Sacred Defense movies became social problem films addressing the socioeconomic problems veterans faced after the war. There were a few exceptions, such as Duel (Ahmad Reza Darvish, 2004), an action war movie. Yet the spectacle displayed in those movies was quite limited. Duel, the most expensive Iranian film until 2004, turned into just another social problem film after its first half that included costly special effects, such as a real-life explosion of a big train. Maryam-e Moghaddas (Saint Mary, Shahriar Bahrani, 2001), a biopic on Mary of Nazareth, only presented very primitive VFX, such as superimpositions or basic light and color manipulations for the scenes depicting miracles. The shortage of spectacle and entertainment in ideological cinema, or what the state calls committed cinema, led state-sponsored cultural producers to find Hollywood-style tentpoles enticing. They saw the global success of American blockbusters and decided to produce films in the same style but with different ideologies. As I will discuss, one can see this approach in the rhetoric and practices of the state-sponsored filmmakers working on such projects.

The IR is effectively using historical epics as propaganda for the present and imagined future, a factor that adds another level to fakhre films’ reactionary character. These films employ Hollywood-style spectacle to counter Hollywood’s ideology. Hollywood has consistently used historical events or stories about the past as allegories for present or imagined futures. As Alan Nadel shows, The Ten Commandments (Cecil B. DeMille, 1956) is a prime example of this trend, consciously positioning the “godly” Christians against the “evil” non-believers, stand-ins for Communists. According to Nadel, this film also supported the United States’ plan to expand its empire into the Middle East.

68 Bajoghli, 61–77. This source focuses on comedies.
72 Nadel, 427.
Western countries’ efforts to construct people’s imagination of the future.\textsuperscript{73} The IR is repurposing the form of imagination-construction that Hollywood uses to build its own imagined future for Iran and the world.

For example, Soleiman’s main message is about the importance and value of a religious state that gains its legitimacy via its connection to God. The materials produced by “a Quranic research group,” essential for shaping the film’s narrative, reveal the producers’ aim to center on Solomon’s kingdom (hence the film’s title) and its association with Velayat-e Faghih, or the Rule of the Jurisprudent.\textsuperscript{74} This is a foundational rule for the IR, included in Article 5 of its constitution: “During the Occultation of [the Shia Muslims’ Twelfth Imam],” a “just” and “pious” Islamic jurist [“Faghih”] should hold the position of jurisprudence [“Velayat-e Amr”] and “the leadership of” people [“Emamat-e Ommat”].\textsuperscript{75}

This aligns with the IR’s resistance to the “soft war” initiated by the United States and the West against Iran and its state.\textsuperscript{76} Soft war is a term that the Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, has derived from Joseph Nye’s concept of “soft power.”\textsuperscript{77} Khamenei uses it to refer to the cultural power the Western media holds on the global stage, and the Western political institutions’ use of such power to combat their so-called enemies, including Iran. Khamenei’s official website has a dedicated page for his soft war statements, a term he first used in 2007.\textsuperscript{78} His emphasis on this topic increased after 2009, following significant anti-state protests in Iran.

The concept of soft war gives us additional insight into the increasing relevance of cultural capital within the IR. Cultural production is no longer simply a method of propagating the IR’s principles, but a response to what the IR believes is a US- and Western-led cultural war on its governing body. State officials’ growing fear of domestic revolt, their belief that Western media deceive Iranians to protest the IR, and their desire to expand the IR’s regional influence against Western imperialism have led them to enlarge their investment in the cultural sphere over the past two decades.\textsuperscript{79} That is why the legislative branch of the state elected to pass a special budget just for \textit{fakher} films.

Once the Parliament passed the proposed \textit{fakher} film bill, the Ministry of Culture contacted Shahriar Bahrani and Mojtaba Faravardeh to offer them an opportunity to make a big-budget epic film never before seen in Iranian cinema.\textsuperscript{80} They were selected for their allegiance to IR ideologies.

\textsuperscript{73} Pak-Shiraz, “Divine Word,” 393–394.
\textsuperscript{74} Pak-Shiraz, 388–389.
\textsuperscript{75} “Constitution”; and “Ghanoun-e Assassi-ye- Jomhouri-ye Eslami-ye Iran,” (Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran), Shenasnameh-ye Ghanoun, October 30, 2012, https://www.shenasname.ir/laws/883-%D9%82%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%88%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%83%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%B8%C
\textsuperscript{76} Bajoghli, “The Outcasts,” 66.
\textsuperscript{77} Bajoghli, 66; and Joseph S. Nye Jr., \textit{Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics} (New York: PublicAffairs, 2004).
\textsuperscript{80} Shahriar Bahrani, in Mehrabi, \textit{Majoraei Bas Azim}.
Bahrani had made Maryam-e Moghaddas as well as Sacred Defense films. Faravardeh had worked on a few religious and Sacred Defense films as an assistant director, director, and production manager, but as a movie producer, he had only made Tarkesh-ha-ye Solh (Shrapnels in Peace, Ali Shah Hatami, 2001), another Sacred Defense film that had not screened theatrically in Iran by then.

The timing was propitious for Bahrani and Faravardeh. When the Ministry contacted them to make a “Quranic fakher film” on a topic of their choice, they were already working on the story of the Prophet-King Solomon. Bahrani (as director) and Faravardeh (as producer) proposed a biopic of Solomon, the film that finally became Soleiman. They received a budget of 5 billion Iranian tomans for the production, the equivalent of almost 5 million dollars at the time, an unprecedented budget in Iranian cinema. Only the state could provide that level of financing, especially for such a risky production in a risky industry. As Soleiman went into production between 2007 and 2010, the average annual budget for the entirety of Iranian cinema was about 15 billion tomans, just three times Soleiman’s budget. The state, as the most economically powerful entity in the country, wagered that this ambitious project would be a culturally significant one.

It is worth noting that the original proposed budget for fakher films was 3.5 billion tomans for a total of five movies, but this number increased significantly in the end. Although exact details on the final bill are unavailability, Soleiman’s budget demonstrates a substantial discrepancy between the proposed and actual allocated funds, whether this occurred during or after the bill’s passage. If this change occurred after the passage, it could indicate haphazard management and a lack of oversight. This common practice may underscore the state’s budgetary advantage. Indeed, a notable shift in financial resource allocation underscores a key aspect of economic capital: the greater the financial resources of an institution or individual, the higher the budgetary risks they can bear.

ABILITY TO TAKE RISK
A higher economic capital entails not only better access to financial resources but also a higher ability to take risks with minimal financial consequences. In fact, Soleiman’s director and, especially, its producer did not seem to have much successful experience in making big-budget movies or historical epics. Nevertheless, the state took a chance in hiring them to produce the first digital VFX-driven Iranian superproduction. As noted, the state trusted them mainly due to their ideological allegiances. Soleiman thus represented a

81 Bahrani; and Faravardeh, in Mehrabi, Majraei Bas Azim.
82 Faravardeh, in Mehrabi, Majraei Bas Azim.
83 Faravardeh.
substantial economic risk that an independent producer would not be able to take. State-sponsored producers, however, are employed to ensure gains at the level of cultural capital. Soleiman producer Faravardeh explains, “One cannot measure [a film’s] cultural influences with money. Although the box office is important, it is not a criterion for us. For us, first, the viewer is important, and then the box office.”

He adds, “In all parts of the world, it is the governments that invest in the field of culture, because in this field, one should not expect financial revenue, but they have to wait for the [cultural product’s] long-term effects.” Obviously, his claim is overly generalized and slightly misleading. Yet it justifies the IR’s policy of investing in ideologically loaded films.

What’s more, Faravardeh’s statement dovetails with Bourdieu’s discussion of cultural capital, which not only originates from economic capital but also disguises it. This act of disguising economic advantage through cultural capital hides and legitimizes economic privileges that also result in cultural privileges. The state’s advantage in economic capital allows its cultural producers to prioritize messaging over critical reception and return on investment in a costly, competitive industry. When the state alleges to care about cultural influence alone, it conceals its unrivaled access to financial resources and the privilege of its financial risks. One can even argue that the state does not really take risks, because as Faravardeh states, the state invests in cultural production with no expectation of financial reward but rather to expand its cultural influence.

State-sponsored producers can thus lose money and still reap the rewards—of a cultural sort. Soleiman incurred significant losses. Despite generating a sizable 1.5 billion toman at the box office, the budget was 5 billion toman. In Iran, the producer receives about 40 percent of the box office revenue, equating to roughly 600 million toman for Soleiman. The significant financial loss was inconsequential for the state, given its control over diversified industries, such as oil and gas, allowing it to offset losses in one sector with profits from others. The state called the film a success and sunk even more capital into its plans for sequels. Producing sequels for epics such as Soleiman is another method used by IR cultural producers to mirror Hollywood while resisting the West’s soft war.

As of 2022, the sequels to Soleiman remain unproduced, while a TV series, reportedly relying heavily on the producer's success, is reportedly in the planning stages.

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86 “Molk-e Soleiman; Yek Gam.”
87 “Molk-e Soleiman; Yek Gam.”
88 Bourdieu, “Forms of Capital,” 245.
90 “Saheem-e Tahije-Konandegan az Foroush-e Film-ha-ye Cinema-i Cheghadr Ast,” (How Much is Producers’ Share from Movies’ Box Office Revenue?), Banifilm, October 28, 2014, available via Wayback Machine, https://web.archive.org/web/20170222233918/https://banifilm.ir/%D8%B3%D9%87%D9%85-%D8%AA %D9%87%D9%8A%D9%87-%DA%A9%D9%86%D8%A7-%DA%A9%DA%AF%DA%AF%DA%A7 %D9%86-%DA%A7-%D9%87%D9%85-%D8%B4-%D9%81%DA%8C %D9%85%DA%86%DA%87%DA%8C-%D8%B3%DA%8C%DA%86%DA%85 %DA%A7/.
91 “Molk-e Soleiman; Yek Gam.”
92 “Az Ghesmat-e Chaharom-e Arbab-e Halgheh-ha ta Ghesmat-e Dovom-e Molk-e Soleiman,” (From the Fourth Installment of The Lord of the Rings to the Second
on AI-based VFX, has been in pre-production for several years. State-sponsored films and series often invest excessively in pre-production, a luxury independent producers in Iran cannot afford with high inflation and sizable budgets.

Soleiman is not a unique case. Another fakher film experiencing a major financial loss was Mohammad Rasoolollah (Muhammad: The Messenger of God, Majid Majidi, 2015). Its budget was about 120 billion tomans, funded by the Mostazafan Foundation, a powerful state institution founded by Khomeini and directly supervised by the Supreme Leader. The producers spent much of the budget on a Hollywood-based crew, such as Academy Award winners Vittorio Storaro (as director of photography [DP]) and Scott E. Anderson (for VFX). The film generated only about 25 billion tomans in returns at the domestic and international box office. It also received an overall negative response from Iranian critics and many notable Sunni scholars. None of that prevented the Farabi Cinema Foundation from submitting the film as Iran’s official entry for the 2016 Academy Awards. The power and wealth of these state institutions enable them to endure significant financial losses with no accountability and expand their cultural influence.

**PRODUCTION EQUIPMENT**

Having more financial resources and the capacity to take risks enables producers to utilize higher-end production equipment. Although scholars argue that the digital era has made affordable hardware and software accessible to more filmmakers, including in Iran, a closer look at the type of equipment and digital methods used by different filmmakers reveals a clear stratification among producers.

Soleiman was made before Iranian cinema widely embraced computer-generated VFX, necessitating the adoption and implementation of new technologies, some of which were imported. Iran, the government’s official newspaper, claimed that Soleiman was the first chroma key (green screen) film produced in Iran. According to Soleiman’s producer, Faravardeh, during the film’s production, they realized how much they lacked the necessary equipment. He notes that the film industry was “in absolute poverty in terms

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95 “Tazeh-tarin.”
of hardware.” As a result, three types of equipment were adopted, making this project distinct from most of its contemporary Iranian movies: (1) high-tier production equipment, such as camera, lighting tools, and proper green screens, needed for cinematography and digital VFX; (2) scanners and recorders for converting film to digital files and vice versa; and (3) post-production hardware and software to implement computer-generated VFX.

According to Hamid Khozouie Abyaneh, the film’s DP, they used the cinematography equipment imported to shoot *Farzand-e Sobh* (*The Son of Dawn*, Behrouz Afkhami, 2011), Ayatollah Khomeini’s biopic. Faravardeh states that at the time, there was only one camera in Iran that they could use in such a production. This camera was the Arricam Lite (LT), a 35mm film (analog) camera bought by the Farabi Cinema Foundation in 2005 for the price of $150,000. It was made by Arri Studios, a company that had shown its “commitment to the digital intermediate process for film production.” As Douglas Bankston notes, “[t]he data stream of camera and lens information from the Arricams, combined with a high-quality video output, begins the transition from the analog to the digital world.” As such, this transition-era camera facilitated “digital effects and postproduction.” It provided an accurate “real time” video assist using “all [camera] status information”—the first of its kind—streamlining much of the production and post-production workflows.

Soleiman also makes extensive use of crane and Steadicam technology, especially in the battle scenes, to move with characters and give the image a dynamic and spectacular look. The Arricam LT, with its low weight and special mechanical and optical features, was “designed for handheld and Steadicam use.” Abyaneh also points to the camera’s wireless focus setting that lets the camera assistant set the focus from afar. He says, “We were lucky that this Arricam had just been imported. . . . If we hadn’t had this camera, we would not have been able to make such [camera] movements easily. . . . It would have been impossible for us to execute” such dynamic aesthetics.

While digital technologies were supposed to make production more accessible, not everyone had equal access to the same levels and types of production. This led to significant discrepancies in the final products. The Arricam LT was one of the most popular high-end cameras at the time, having been used on multi-million-dollar projects such as *The Da Vinci Code* (Ron Howard, 2006) and *Casino Royale* (Martin Campbell, 2006). As late as 2014,

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98 Mehrabi, *Majraei Bas Azim*.
99 Mehrabi.
100 Mehrabi.
102 Bankston, 102.
103 Bankston, 112.
104 Bankston, 112.
105 Walter Trauninger, quoted in Bankston, 116; and Bankston, 116.
107 Mehrabi, *Majraei Bas Azim*. 

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the Tabnak News Agency reported that the cheap digital cameras available in Iran were not suitable for cinematic productions but were nevertheless used in “a significant number of films in the 32nd Fajr Film Festival, like [the situation] in the 30th and 31st festivals.”\textsuperscript{108} The report points to the relatively affordable Canon 5D camera series as the most popular cameras used in the films at the biggest Iranian film festival.\textsuperscript{109} Meanwhile, Mohammad Rasoolollah’s producers also spent 15 billion tomans on cinematography equipment, more than seven times the average budget for Iranian films in the same year.\textsuperscript{110} The contrast is stark. In the past, the state had a near monopoly on 35mm cameras; now, in this new era, it has extended its control to high-end digital cameras. Faravardeh boasts that they also imported expensive post-production equipment for the film’s VFX.\textsuperscript{111} But the equipment probably remains under the control of the state and its cultural producers.

The IR’s advantage over independent sectors was further pronounced in post-production, thanks to the state’s economic and social capital.

\textbf{INTERNATIONAL SOCIAL CAPITAL}

The social positions of state-sponsored and independent filmmakers amplify the film industry’s stratification. The state harnesses its global social capital to establish ties with international entities, a less accessible opportunity for independent filmmakers.

Bourdieu points out that “[t]he volume of social capital possessed by a given agent . . . depends on the size of the network connections he can effectively mobilize and on the volume of the capital (economic, cultural or symbolic) possessed in his own right by each of those to whom he is connected.”\textsuperscript{112} I mentioned earlier that for Mohammad Rasoolollah, director Majid Majidi employed Hollywood-based Academy Award winners to achieve a spectacular and epic look. Similarly, Soleiman was a collaboration, this time between the Iranian production team and Leo Lo of Hong Kong. Lo is a prominent VFX artist, whose work on \textit{Wo hu cang long} (\textit{Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon}, Ang Lee, 2000) drew global attention. In addition to having Lo as Soleiman’s VFX supervisor, the production relied on his scanner and recorder, required for digital post-production.\textsuperscript{113}

The Iranian state used its social capital to make this collaboration possible. In reality, this collaboration was not between Lo and Iran, but between Lo and Iran’s state-sponsored producers, who exploited the state’s access to big money and its recognition on the transnational level as the official


\textsuperscript{109} “Reghabat.”


\textsuperscript{111} Mehrabi, Majraei Bas Azim.

\textsuperscript{112} Bourdieu, “Forms of Capital,” 249.

\textsuperscript{113} Faravardeh, in Mehrabi, \textit{Majraei Bas Azim}. For more on Soleiman’s use of digital VFX, see Alireza Razazifar, “The Emergence and Development of Digital Film-Making in Iran” (PhD diss., University of Bradford, 2015), 239–256, http://hdl.handle.net/10454/14628.
state of a country. Most Iranian film companies and producers are not well known internationally. Except for a few globally recognized filmmakers, such as Abbas Kiarostami and Asghar Farhadi, few independent teams or companies have international clout, certainly not that of a state. Therefore, the state enjoys a significant advantage due to the connections it can establish. Its social capital not only enabled it to collaborate with a prominent foreign entity but also disguised its privilege in terms of economic capital. The state’s reliability stems—at least, partially—from its access to significant wealth, which enables costly international collaborations for state-sponsored cultural producers that most independent producers cannot afford. However, emphasizing the collaboration instead of the securing process obscures the inequalities, leading to further stratification.

**AUTONOMY**

In addition to international reliability, *autonomy* influences an agent’s mobility. Recalling the concept of habitus, the state’s dominance in accumulated capital and its regulatory role in the film industry give it a special edge on its ability to transform or maintain this field’s structure, further stalling the digital’s supposed democratization. Most of the policies and power structures within which the film industry functions predate the digital and did not suddenly disappear during the transition to it. The state’s autonomy in filmmaking and technology use far surpasses that of independent producers. As a result, state-sponsored producers have significantly more freedom than independent ones in negotiating with international entities, importing equipment, and realizing their creative vision. Independent filmmakers, in contrast, must secure government approval for these activities, a slow and highly restrictive bureaucratic process.

To this day, Iran largely imports the equipment required in digital filmmaking. However, the government controls all importations and foreign contracts. Article 44 of the IR’s constitution states that “foreign trade . . . will be publicly owned and administered by the State.” While the private sector has the right to “trade,” it can only operate when it “supplement[s] the economic activities of the state and cooperative sectors.”

By virtue of Iran’s trade laws, importing equipment without paying tariffs using passengers or mail is restricted to a specific dollar amount. This amount was $80 per person in 2011. Obviously, this precludes most filmmaking technologies. To import a product via trading routes, a private importer has to go through a long bureaucratic process. First, they need to obtain a “commercial card” from the government. Trade Promotion Organization of Iran, Directorate-General for Export-Import Regulations, *Export-Import Regulation Act 2011*, 1. For that, the government must confirm their financial ability and experience in working in the commercial field. Then,

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114 “Constitution.”


they must submit their import request to the Ministry of Industry, Mine and Trade (formerly the Ministry of Commerce).\footnote{Trade Promotion Organization of Iran, Directorate-General for Export-Import Regulations, \textit{Export-Import Regulation Act 2011}, 2.} After the request is approved and when the product arrives at an Iranian port of entry, the Customs Administration, supervised by the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Finance, checks the product according to standards and determines the tariff on it.\footnote{“Ghanoun-e Omour-e Gomroki,” (Customs Law), Islamic Parliament Research Center of the Islamic Republic of Iran, passed November 13, 2011, accessed May 20, 2021, \url{https://rc.majlis.ir/fa/law/show/801835} (access may be restricted to Iran).} It is only after that process that one can finally import the product.

Consequently, this process places independent producers at a considerable disadvantage when importing digital technologies. The state, however, is able to circumvent the long, expensive bureaucratic process imposed on the independent sector. As policymaker, the state both sets and manipulates policies for its own advantage.

Additionally, economic sanctions imposed by foreign states have given more advantage to the state in digital film production. Since the early twenty-first century, the United States, the European Union, and the United Nations have imposed some of the harshest sanctions in history against Iran for its nuclear program. Under these sanctions, global banks have been banned from trading with Iran.\footnote{Richard Nephew, \textit{The Art of Sanctions: A View from the Field} (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 65.} In response, the IR has used a multitude of ways to bypass sanctions and transfer funds. For instance, it has set up front companies in countries such as the United Arab Emirates and Germany, and in some rare cases, it has bought out whole factories, opening trade channels with other countries despite sanctions.\footnote{Emanuele Ottolenghi, “Iran Is *Really* Good at Evading Sanctions,” \textit{The Tower}, September 2013, \url{http://www.thetower.org/article/iran-is-really-good-at-evading-sanctions/}; and David Crawford, “Sanctions Hit—and Miss—in German Trade with Iran,” \textit{Wall Street Journal}, December 17, 2011, \url{https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052970204323904577040172793024832}.} Supposedly designed to restrict the IR, sanctions have mainly restrained the independent sectors of Iran, including their ability to transfer money internationally.

Additionally, the sanctions have caused a huge drop in the value of the rial, the Iranian currency.\footnote{One rial = 0.1 toman.} Between 2010 and 2013, the exchange value of the rial to the US dollar decreased by a factor of three, from 10,442 rials per dollar to 31,838 rials per dollar.\footnote{“Motevasset-e Gheimat-e Foroush-e Sekkeh va Arz dar Sal-e 93,” (Average Sale Price of Coin and Foreign Currency in the Year (13)93 [March 2014–15]), \textit{Tabnak}, March 14, 2015, \url{https://www.tabnak.ir/fa/news/483632/}.} While independent producers usually must pay a high exchange rate to import a product, the state probably enjoys a much lower rate, known as “the government exchange rate,” equal to 24,770 rials per dollar in 2013.\footnote{“Gheimat-e Dollar-e Dowlati 2477 Toman Shod,” (Government Dollar’s Price Became 2477 Tomans), \textit{BBC Persian}, July 6, 2013, \url{https://www.bbc.com/persian/business/2013/07/130706_lo3_exchange_rate_centralbank}.} The difference between the market rate and the governmental rate has mostly increased over time, as the state uses its resources to keep its “official” rate artificially low, gaining an increasing advantage over independent...
This is a form of symbolic violence practiced by the state, using its economic and social capital to enhance its control over other sectors of society. Policymaking, policy manipulation, and controlling the exchange rate are all stratifying actions most states legitimize by connecting them to the country’s supposed need for security and unity, common code words institutions of power use to legitimize their power. Similarly, the IR claims that it organizes and supervises the imports and exports of the country to maintain national security and benefits. Consequently, an independent producer does not have the same autonomy as a state actor to import new devices needed for digital cinema, from high-end cameras to film scanners and recorders and other digital production and post-production equipment.

The state imposes another level of symbolic violence on the film industry by supervising and censoring movie productions, mainly by requiring permits. This practice involves an even more overt application of power by the state. Nevertheless, it is symbolic, because the state justifies this not as a display of power over filmmakers, but as a means to safeguard the nation’s security and morality. State supervision can be arbitrary and depends upon the officials in charge, what they may count as safe or dangerous for national interests and security, and their relationships with the filmmakers they are supervising.

More broadly, the Ministry of Culture has a long history of banning films under one administration and later releasing them under another, often without offering clear reasons for these decision reversals. The laws of supervision prohibit anything that insults Islam or threatens national interests. Yet they are vague enough to give the officials the power to impose arbitrary criteria on the censorship process. By law, the Ministry of Culture can even reject films based on their artistic quality, giving yet more power to officials and allowing caprice and bias to tarnish the supervision process.

Furthermore, state-sponsored filmmakers who embrace the IR’s official ideologies enjoy more freedom than their independent counterparts in making their desired films. This is not to say that these filmmakers face no restrictions but that they are able to work on certain topics or cross some so-called red lines that other filmmakers cannot. As Narges Bajoghli has shown, the state divides artists, as they do political groups, into “insiders” (khodi-ha) and “outsiders” (gheir-e khodi-ha). As she points out, this division maintains the state’s revolutionary identity, thus even “cultural institutions spend significant time and resources in propagating this divide.”

126 “Nezarat.”
128 “Nezarat.”
129 “Nezarat.”
One can see this discrepancy in the fact that the state blocked the production of an epic biopic on Cyrus the Great, a national but not religious icon, proposed by the late independent producer, Ali Moallem, for years until his death. More recently, Javad Shamaghdari, an “insider” filmmaker and the head of Cinema Organization in Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s conservative administration (2005–2013), made a TV series called *Rooz-ha-ye Abadi* (*Everlasting Days*, IRIB TV1, 2020–2021), which shows women in wigs. The story takes place before the Revolution, when a hijab was not mandatory. Showing women’s hair is normally banned in visual media because the hijab is compulsory in public spaces. Therefore, many filmmakers must avoid realistic presentations of women, whether in historical works or when women are shown in private settings such as the home. Shamaghdari, however, was permitted to use wigs to bypass these restrictions, while Kianoush Ayari, probably an “outsider” filmmaker, used the same tactic in his film, *Kanapeh* (*Sofa*, 2016), but the state banned the film. This double standard for insiders and outsiders becomes even more striking when one considers that films usually face much looser censorship than TV, especially the national broadcaster that aired *Rooz-ha-ye Abadi*.

State-sponsored filmmakers have considerable autonomy, whereas independent producers face a restrictive permit process and limits on equipment and creative direction. Controlling the flow of knowledge is another method the state employs to deepen this division and stratification.

### CONTROLLING KNOWLEDGE

Filmmakers who wish to possess the means to produce media content require not only equipment but also the necessary knowledge and skills. Faravardeh points out that Iranian cinema lacked technical knowledge in digital VFX around the years 2005 to 2006, when they began working on *Soleiman*.

As noted, Lo supervised *Soleiman’s* VFX and provided his equipment for the film’s production, but he also trained a group of Iranian artists in visual effects. According to Abyaneh, the film’s DP, Iranian personnel eventually executed most of the digital work on the film. The implication here is that the state controlled how the necessary new technology and knowledge were transferred to Iran. This technological transfer is a double-edged sword. Although it could be beneficial for Iran to transfer this knowledge to domestic practitioners, it was instead disseminated to a select group, handpicked by official cultural producers. Instead of investing in the systematic transformation of the whole industry (so more artists benefit from new technologies), the state spends its capital on single projects with selected insiders working on them. That is why Majid Barzegar, a prominent figure in Iranian independent cinema, called the


132 Mehrabi, *Majaraei Bas Azim*.

133 Faravardeh, in Mehrabi.

134 Mehrabi.
attempts to bring “industry . . . from here and there around the world to our cinema . . . very costly and useless.”

The state controls the flow of knowledge as a form of cultural capital to increase its dominance over other sectors of society. As Erik Neveu points out, for Bourdieu, cultural capital could also be called “informational capital.” This suggests that “cultural capital is made of knowledge and know-how, of the skills and analytical tools that allow one to manage and produce social relations, cultural products, and technical devices.” The need to train the Iranian team under a VFX master suggests how exaggerated the common notion of accessible information is in the digital era. Scholarship on the “disintermediation” of knowledge in the new era claims that with the proliferation of the internet and network society, knowledge generation and distribution have become easier, free from “middlemen” or “gatekeepers.” However, the sheer amount of knowledge required for digital filmmaking, including big-budget VFX-heavy productions, remains a barrier. This knowledge needed to be transferred via a sustained, and even intimate, old school–style apprenticeship.

Apprenticeships reinforce the crucial difference between information and knowledge. As Dick Stenmark states, “the fact that routines, procedures, rules, manuals, books, blueprints . . . are useful does not make it knowledge. They all need knowledge to be decoded and are therefore not knowledge but information albeit interwoven with the knowledge required to create it.” This is where personal experiences and interpretations become critical. Knowledge is information decoded according to its usage context. In the film industry, the aesthetic, financial, and cultural contexts of a movie’s production influence the necessary technological knowledge. For Soleiman, it was the Iranian team’s personal and close collaboration with Lo—based on the specific conditions of the film, the artists involved, and the Iranian film industry—that made the knowledge transfer possible. Even though information may become increasingly accessible in the digital age, knowledge does not follow the same pattern. Knowledge management and control, as a result, remain to a large degree means for regulating power structures. The increasing regulation of the internet by governments around the world exacerbates this control of knowledge flow in the digital age.

135 Majid Barzegar, “Hamisheh Razi Bozorg dar Boshghabi Sepid be Ma Ta’arof Mishavad,” (Always, A Big Secret Is Offered to Us On A White Plate), Film Magazine, no. 463, September 12, 2013, 44.
137 Neveu, 350.
CONCLUSION
Before the digital technologies that made Soleiman possible, state-sponsored films were distinguished primarily by their ideological content. High-budget practical (on-set) special effects, such as explosions, were reserved for a few select productions, such as Sacred Defense films. Restrictions on the exhibition of foreign films in Iran had prevented domestic viewers from seeing Hollywood spectacles on big screens with surround sound. Digital equipment gave the state the tools necessary to both distinguish itself from other players in the Iranian film industry and appeal to an audience hungry for cinematic spectacles. Fakher cinema’s annual budget has fluctuated significantly since Soleiman’s release in 2010, sometimes increasing to 50 billion tomans and sometimes decreasing to 14 billion tomans.141 But the state has always allocated a special part of its fiscal budget to producing such movies. Rah-e Abi-e Abrisham (The Maritime Silk Road, Mohammad Bozorgnia, 2011), an epic biopic; Che (Ebrahim Hatamikia, 2014), a film on a prominent revolutionary figure of post-1979 Iran; and Be Vaght-e Sham (Damascus Under Fire, Ebrahim Hatamikia, 2018), arguably the first fiction movie about the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), are other examples of fakher cinema that follow the Soleiman formula, with their VFX, high-end equipment and a style and sound design that distinguish them from other Iranian productions.
Fakher films reproduce the power that state-sponsored cultural producers hold over independent players. The distinction revealed in this article between state-sponsored and independent films shows how the hierarchy between official culture and other cultures is also reproduced—that is, between dominant and dominated social entities. As Bourdieu points out, “[t]he dominant culture contributes to the real integration of the dominant class . . . and to the legitimation of the established order by the establishment of distinctions (hierarchies) and the legitimation of these distinctions.”142 This practice resembles what Hollywood cultural producers have done for the dominance of American culture around the globe. American cinematic marvels travel the world, awe international audiences, and reproduce US market domination. Hence, viewers associate big production movies with the power and dominance American culture has gained. Soleiman producer Faravardeh has revealed that they originally wanted to collaborate with Peter Jackson’s Weta Digital, as they were looking for VFX similar to those seen in The Lord of the Rings trilogy (Peter Jackson, 2001–2003).143 By producing Hollywood-style superproductions, the

143 Mehrabi, Majarαι Bas Azim.
IR participates in the field of spectacle, exploiting our mental association between spectacle and power. In other words, the IR, rather ironically, is playing by the rules established by a more dominant cultural power (Hollywood) in order to exercise power over its own dominated entities.

This strategy can be self-defeating. Using the tools of a power with higher levels of accumulated capital to resist that power is a common mistake. This is illustrated by the fact that many viewers and critics in Iran ridiculed Soleiman’s Hollywood-style VFX upon its release. They claimed the effects looked like amateurish copies of Hollywood productions (especially *The Lord of the Rings*), such as in the devils’ invasion scene, in which the devils are portrayed as nimble smoke clouds.\(^{144}\) As we know, *Soleiman* commanded the biggest budget in Iranian cinema until that point (albeit much lower than Hollywood’s big production budgets), much of which was spent on digital VFX and foreign artists, but ironically, Bahrani, responding to critics, clarified that he “didn’t want the visual effects to take over the concept.”\(^{145}\) He claims that, to Lo’s disappointment, “we faded all” the VFX shots in the devil invasion sequence to prevent the VFX from taking over “our intended general concept.”\(^{146}\) Faravardeh, for his part, responded to criticism by arguing—again ironically, given his stated aim of working with Weta Digital—that one should not “assess this film in the context of Western cinema. We used visual effects as a tool, not as a base.”\(^{147}\)

More importantly, *Soleiman* used public funds for the sake of extending the state’s cultural capital. Outsourcing its VFX to meet a standard unattainable by domestic artists, the production provided the state with the opportunity to promote *Soleiman* as “the first Iranian digital film.”\(^{148}\) Access to more resources allows the state to produce risky high-budget movies such as *Soleiman* and thereby expand its cultural influence. Yet the state hides its efforts at distinction and the resulting stratification of the industry by legitimizing these productions as quality national cinema (“prestigious films”). In the process, the film industry’s technological capabilities are improved, but crucially, independent cinema gains little, if anything, from these technological advancements. The state simply keeps expending its resources, which belong to its citizens, to expand its cultural power. Bourdieu astutely states that the dominant culture

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146 Bahrani and Faravardeh.

147 Bahrani and Faravardeh.

uses such distinction to define other cultures based on their inferiority to the
dominant culture, hence also legitimizing its stratifying strategies.\textsuperscript{149}

Many filmmakers, critics, and scholars have hailed digital technologies
as liberating, enabling anyone to produce content and freeing them from
institutions of power. However, this overlooks the fact that the introduction of
new technologies does not reset existing power dynamics. Existing structures
are influenced by past conditions, and those with more capital possess greater
inertia and impact on others in the field. Institutions of power have used their
different forms of capital to produce more capital, widening the inequality and
power gap between their sponsored producers and independent filmmakers.

Discussing local and global stratification in the film industry extends
well beyond the scope of this article. The same power grab has taken place
on the global level to reproduce inequality between high-income nations and
others. Similar disparities benefiting \emph{fakher} films over independent ones also
drive global entertainment industry stratification, encompassing financial
resources, risk aversion, equipment access, international reliability, autonomy,
authority, and knowledge control. Interestingly, state-sponsored films such
as those discussed here have become victims of the global power system, not
only due to comparisons with Hollywood blockbusters but also because of the
obstacles they may face in terms of international distribution.\textsuperscript{150} Locally, these
films have a market advantage because the state also controls the exhibition
sector. While most Iranian films enjoy a theatrical release window of up to
two months, \emph{Soleiman} and Mohammad Rasoolollah stayed on big screens for four
and six months, respectively.\textsuperscript{151} Thus, systems of distribution and exhibition
complete the pattern of the film industry’s stratification in the digital age.

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festivals.
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\textsuperscript{150} See “Nabard-e Resaneh-i-ye Iran va Amrica baraye Nemayesh-e Jahani-ye ‘Molk-e
Soleiman’,” (Media Battle Between Iran and the United States Over the International
/fa/news/140082/; and “Hollywood Mane’-e Nemayesh-e Jahani-ye Film-e ‘Molk-e
Soleiman’ Mishavad,” (Hollywood Prevents the International Exhibition of the
Film ‘Molk-e Soleiman’), Quds Online, July 9, 2011, https://www.qudsonline.ir
/news/1870/.

\textsuperscript{151} “Moarrefi-ye Film-e Molk-e Soleiman,” (Introducing the Film Molk-e Soleiman.),
and Babak Ghafouri-Azar, "Por-Foroush-tarin Film-ha-ye Cinema-ye Iran dar
Sal-e 84," (Highest Grossing Films of Iranian Cinema in the Year (13)94 [March
-movies/27619783.html.
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