Genre Shift and Identity Maintenance – An Analysis of Iranian War Film Genres (1980_2013) with Niklas Luhmann's Social Systems Theory

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Abstract

A close observation of Iran-Iraq war films in the Iranian society reveals that their genres have shifted in the course of the society's evolution. This questions the category-based principles of genre we have known so far in literature concerning film theory and necessitates a new conceptualization of genre, which can be realized with the aid of Niklas Luhmann's social systems theory. This theory abandons categorization in favor of functional differentiation and helps us observe Iranian war movies in their societal context. By taking a close look at the function of film in the society as one of the mass media, and through locating the concepts of memory, reality, identity and genre in Luhmann's theory, I shall find a pattern in the mentioned genre shift which is in turn punctuated by the Iranian society's different stages of evolution. To do so, I shall rely on a qualitative, analytical and critical method.

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Introduction

The 8-year war between Iran and Iraq was, like any war in any society, post factum widely reflected on in the Iranian mass media: from the TV documentary series *Ravāyat-e Fath[1]* to epics which illustrated the prowess of Iranian soldiers who were fighting for the sake of Shia Islam and in favor of protecting the still young "Islamic Revolution". The close observer can however trace a shift of war film genres in different stages of the Iranian society's evolution after the war. The late 1980s and almost the entire 1990s witnessed films in which the movie camera did not roam at the war front any more, but rather behind the front, observing stories starring children[2], questions of nationality and identity[3], prisoners of war and missing soldiers[4] and the social problems of war veterans[5].

It is implicit in the above observations that the element-based or theme-based principles of genre which we have known by now do not come in handy in such a treatment of motion pictures. As opposed to the definition of genre in literary theory by philosophers and literary theorists such as Northrop Frye and G.W.F. Hegel[6] – who lived with enough historical distance to different literary genres on the one hand and were armed with apt theoretical tools on the other to be able to develop solid, all-encompassing theories of literary genre – the term "genre" in texts about film was first applied by film critics and journalists contemporary to the conception and development of the motion picture. Film theorists only arrived on the scene to take genre as their research subject when the multitude of different concepts of the term were already too widespread to be rethought. They were confronted with an already-existing term which now had to be regularized

within scientific jargon. The outcome of these endeavors was to attribute a film's genre to its formal qualities (western), its themes and motifs (war film, apocalyptic film), its main characters (doctor films, detective films) among other qualities. However, these principles of genre are still not informative enough despite their diversity. For example, considering a genre as "war film" is not helpful in a case like ours because all of the films mentioned above thematize the 8-year war, whereas they perform totally different social functions. It is here that Niklas Luhmann's social systemic theories of art and mass media can open up distinct ways of looking at the question of genre, not as classification but rather as *functional differentiation*. Furthermore, Luhmanns theory can contribute to finding answers to the following questions:

- Why is the Iranian society still reflecting on a war which it experienced 39 years ago through the medium of film?[7]

- What socio-evolutional shifts have led to the change of war film genres in the Iranian society?

I shall answer the above questions in a qualitative, analytical and critical argumentation. In order to make my position and discussions more clear I shall focus on concrete examples of each genre as well as the genre shifts mentioned, and I will try to explain the latter with the aid of Luhmann's social systems theory. This analysis presupposes a concise critical reading of Luhmann's theories of art and mass media, which make way for developing a *Luhmannian* theory of film.

What is film and what are its genres?

Doubtlessly, Niklas Luhmann views film as one of the mass media, which he considers a social system with its specific function. For

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him, the mass media are all of the arrangements in a society,

"which are at the service of disseminating information through technical means of duplication. In the first place books, magazines and newspapers come to mind which are products of the printing press; but we can also think of photographic or electronic copying processes of any kind, as long as they create products in massive numbers and with unknown addressees."[8] (Luhmann 1996, 10)

The fact that movies are made only once and then hundreds and sometimes millions of their copies are perceived by addressees out of the director's reach shows that the motion pictures fit within Luhmann's definition of the mass media. The paradox in his theory is faced then, when he considers information/not-information to be the *symbolically generalized medium of communication*[9] specific to the system of mass media, and then he attributes three distinct programs to this code, namely *news/reports, advertisement* and *entertainment.* (ibid: 51) Obviously, in making this statement which serves as the foundation of his entire theory of mass media, Luhmann is only thinking of TV and radio programs and newspapers. Hence he loses sight of all other mass media such as books or movies – each of which in turn embrace a wide range of forms and subjects and perform vastly diverse functions. Of course there are films which have been merely made for the sake of entertainment, and the existence of informative and advertising films cannot be denied. But Luhmann fails to take note of pedagogic films (which are made/consumed by the Education subsystem of society), propaganda films (which are taken advantage

of by the Polity subsystem) and art films (which belong to the subsystem of Art) among many others. To close this gap, we should approach film from another angle of social systems theory, starting with the notions of communication media and codes.

In his communication theory, Luhmann enumerates three different problems or *improbabilities*[10] on the way of communication. These are:

- the improbability of communicating at all;

- the improbability of reaching the addressees, since it is not always possible for both communication parties to be present at the same place at the same time; and

- the improbability of the success (i.e. acceptance) of communication.

Societies develop specialized solutions to these problems. The first improbability is overcome with the emergence of language. The second is removed thanks to the invention of mass dissemination media. The first of these is the written language, which makes the writing of letters possible and which is further developed following the emergence of the printing press. Telegraph, telephone and fax are other forms of mass dissemination media. But the final problem is specific to social systems. Let us clarify this problem and the solution to it with an example. Suppose you are walking along the street. You are very hungry but you have left your wallet at home. You come across a bakery. What keeps you from helping yourself to the freshly-baked breads and just walking away? This is the most likely thing one would do if only one's physiology were concerned. But one refrains from doing it, which is an improbable reaction, because the *Law* designates this act as rubbery and punishes it. Furthermore, one's *Moral* or

Religious upbringing have taught them that stealing is *bad*. Law, Morality, Religion: these are three different social subsystems, each of which functions with a symbolically generalized medium of communication and a binary code, which make a certain improbable communication likely to happen. The Law system's code is lawful/unlawful, with those of Morality and Religion being right/wrong and good/evil respectively. Each side of these codes is valued as either negative of positive, and it is the positive side, which is also the improbable side, for which each subsystem strives.[11]

Luhmann's definition of the system of mass media is highly controversial. I argue that the programs of the mass media cannot be reduced to entertainment, advertisement and news/reports. Furthermore, the code information/not/information is too general to embrace the complexity of communications of the mass media. But then the question would be: how can entertainment, news and advertisement be understood within Luhmann's theory without a system of mass media? What if we hypothesized that they belong to other social subsystems? That is to suppose that advertisement belongs to the Economy system, news to a supposed subsystem of "Information", and that Entertainment were an autonomous subsystem in itself. Luhmann does not negate the latter hypothesis. In rejecting the idea of considering the mass media *simply* as technical dissemination media at the service of the communicative operations of other subsystems, he adds that,

> "there are such considerations for the news sector [namely that the news be an autonomous system]. But then advertisement and entertainment remain left over, and one shall have

to attribute them to other systems, for instance to the Economy system or to a (difficult to identify) system of "free time" consumption." (ibid: 126-27)

I want to set this assumption as my starting point, and from there try to formulate a new definition for film. I shall start my investigation from the hypothesis that the mass media do not count as a social system (which would necessitate the assignment a unified success code and specific programs to them), but they are rather mass dissemination media which are taken advantage of, among others, by Art and Entertainment social subsystems.

Film: Art and/or Entertainment?

Luhmann defines the function of art as follows:

> "through art, new possibilities of the acoustic and optic world are discovered and are made available, and the result is: when looking for [problem] solution strategies, more possible world orders can be gained than what the world [without art] would put at our disposal." (ibid,1986: 9)

In that sense, Art generally elevates the societal system's level of creativity in communication by proposing "alternative realities". For Dirk Baecker, Art offers an alternative means of communication to the three communication media explained above. (Baecker 1996, 82-83) A thorough discussion regarding the function, creation and reception of Art requires a separate paper. Let us content ourselves with the function and communication code of the Art system which we have at hand, and move on from here to Entertainment which is, as per my hypothesis also a social system.

I propose the code interesting/boring for

the Entertainment system, with its function being, as mentioned above, the passing of time which would otherwise have no "meaning"[12]. As Luhmann puts it,

> "entertainment has an amplifying effect on the knowledge already at hand. But it is not aimed at instructing, as the news and reports do. It rather uses the already available knowledge to silhouette itself against it. Entertainment aims [...] at activating what one has experienced, hoped, feared, forgotten – as the oral myths once did. […] Entertainment re-impregnates what one already is without it." (Luhmann, 1996:108-109)

Entertainment alters the audience's existing life and value balance and their familiar routines in the beginning, but relieves them in the end by reassuring them that everything is as it used to be – be it in a Hollywood romance or in an amusement park, or in returning "back home" after a concert or a football match.

Here the question of the difference between Art and Entertainment is brought up: apparently an eternal question with yet no satisfactory answers. However, Baecker proposes an answer which is very compatible with generally-confirmed observations of the two systems:

> "This is […] what differentiates literature, and art generally, from entertainment: in entertainment experiences of the *identity* of communication and consciousness are staged, but in art, on the contrary, experiences of the *difference* between them." (Baecker 1996, 101) (Emphases added)

If we accept this explanation, then the border between Art and Entertainment becomes very fragile. How is it possible to distinguish the two, when consciousness alters from Ego to Ego[13]? This refers us back to the Kantian problem of the subjectivity of aesthetics[14], without his answer being satisfactory enough for the present argument because here we are dealing with societal and not with consciousness systems. It would also be highly problematic to thematize motion pictures (or more generally films) since they are in our assumption a communication medium to which no social functions can be attributed. No consensus can be reached upon whether a certain film is purely artistic or merely entertaining. It is nevertheless possible to attribute common functions to Art and Entertainment systems which in turn enable their *structural coupling*.[15] To unfold these functions presupposes discussing concepts of memory and *reality*.

Memory and Reality

It is important to note that Luhmann does not theorize the memory of a society as a storage which safeguards all the information about which the society has communicated and constantly remembers that information, but rather it is a mechanism of forgetting! The reason is that the society always needs to free its communication capacities for new operations. Otherwise it would have no future. Remembrance only then takes place, "when the current operations offer an opportunity for repetition, for "re-impregnation" of the freed capacity." (Luhmann 1996, 180) Paradoxical as this statement might sound at the first glance, it can be confirmed by our common experience as psychic systems or consciousnesses. Luhmann brings the example

of a host, serving a drink to their guests. The host fills the glasses without ever thinking that the glasses per se are unknown objects which only exist as a subjective composition. We see it rather this way: when there are guests and when there is a drink, then there are also glasses. (ibid: 162-63) In other words, after the information about glasses was processed once by consciousness, it needs not be called upon every time they are confronted, but rather it can be forgotten.

Thus the significant role of memory in the evolution of a society is emphasized. Thanks to its leaving behind the earlier conflict managements, a society can, in its communicative operations, always create free space for new and more complex communication, thereby reaching higher stages of evolution. Furthermore, memory functions as a control mechanism for ensuring the consistency of the system. For its observational operations, the system needs a two-way orientation in time: memory (which targets the past) on the one hand, and an open future on the other in which chances of shifting between the two sides of any difference are contingent[16]. In order to assure the availability of that future, the system should always check if its current operations are consistent by comparing them to contents of its memory. Every time this consistency is approved, reality is constructed within the system. In Luhmann's words,

> "reality is nothing more than the indicator of a successful examination of consistence within the system. Reality is processed, within the system, through sense-making. It occurs when inconsistencies which can emerge due to the involvement of memory in the system operations are solved […]."

(ibid: 19)

It can be concluded from the above statement that there exist multiple realities within the internal environment of a society, each generated by a different social subsystem. And it is very much possible that these realities enter into conflict with each other. At their acutest, system conflicts can turn into crises, which implies that the system can only solve them with a change of its structures.

Among the mentioned realities, we can now point out those constructed by the systems of Art and Entertainment. Returning to fashions of a societal system's relating to time, I would like to sketch an adjunction to Luhmann's theory founded on the past/future dichotomy. If, according to Baecker, Entertainment is based on the identity of current information in communication with earlier experience, then we can assume that *Entertainment in principle relies on memory as its information reservoir, while Art either manages to communicate new information or to present the information already available in memory in a defamiliarized way, in order for the Ego to rethink, criticize, and revise the past in favor of the future.* It is noteworthy that I do not claim this time-relation to be a principle of aesthetics, which is in turn the *program*[17] specific to the communication code of Art, namely beautiful/ugly; it rather addresses the social function of the systems in question: while one functions to stabilize and "re-load" the society's memory, the other directs attention towards the future and the necessity of evolution by offering alternative information and/or utterances for communication.

With these alleged functions, it becomes clear how each of the mentioned systems constructs reality: entertaining reality

reassures the society that the state of the affairs is unchanged and even if the society is experiencing conflicts, they are soluble just like the conflicts which were experienced in the past. It guarantees that the familiar order of things still exists or will soon be retained again. Artistic reality, on the other hand, invites the society to proceed towards the unknown future and to cast a new, critical glance at its memory to avoid recession. In this sense, films as mass dissemination media are simultaneously coded by both Art and Entertainment social subsystems[18]. Thus, *the social function of film, like any other communication medium commonly used by Art and Entertainment, is to construct a unit of reality with reference to time*. The difference between film and other media like the novel in this respect is that the perception of reality in the movie theater is the closest to the experience of life-world reality, hence making cinematographic communication more likely to be accepted.

It is important to draw a distinction between this statement and the prescriptive theories of realists like André Bazin and Siegfried Kracauer. Their theories of film were based on a pessimism which resulted from the experience of Fascism and Nazism in Europe, which were ideologically amplified through propaganda films within Italian and German societies. Let me emphasize again that when I speak of reality in the context of Luhmann's theory, it is not a claim on the conformity of reality constructed by film with the "real" or the everyday reality, but rather this reality is a construct of Art and Entertainment in their structural coupling in the medium film with regard to the notions of societal time and memory. As Luhmann puts it, the mass media create, in the Kantian sense, "a transcendental

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illusion" (ibid: 14) as opposed to reality in the common sense.

Having introduced a rough sketch of a proposed Luhmannian theory of motion pictures, I can finally set out to cast a systems theoretical glance at the genre shifts of the Iranian war cinema.

The question of identity and the evolution of Iranian war cinema

In order to identify itself, a society should be able to perform a second-order observation of its own operations through the re-entry of its differentiation from the external environment into its internal environment.[19] According to Luhmann, "in the context of a theory of autopoietic systems, identity marks a form that is secured by the continuity of operations in a system; that is, through differentiating between identical/not-identical." (Luhmann 1990, 21) In other words, identity is obtained continuously by the system as it checks the compatibility of its current state of operations to the previous ones which are "remembered" by the memory.

Armed with this notion of identity, let us consider the Iranian society after the 1979 revolution. This is a new-born societal system which differentiated itself from the environment based on the *friend/foe* dichotomy through its communicative operations.[20] Its identity, that is its reassurance that its borders are safe and that it can operate consistently, is secured through the recurrent generation and observation of the same differentiation principle.[21] This presupposes a constant return to the society's memory of its early moments of differentiation. For the Iranian society, the friend/foe dichotomy was symbolized by the eight-year war with Iraq. This clarifies the repeated thematization of the

war in the Iranian cinema from 1980 to 2013, but it fails to explain the change of genres which the war films have demonstrated. To understand this diversity, the concepts of medium/form will come in handy.

Luhmann defines medium as a set of loosely-coupled elements, out of which numerous tight couplings are possible.[22] Forms can always serve as media for the formation of further forms, and this succession goes on permanently. The best way to understand this is through an example: The English alphabet with its 26 signs serves as a medium for the formation of English words. These words in turn function as medium for language as form, which is in turn a medium for literature and so on. This is our link to the subject of genres, because they can be understood as a certain stage in a chain of medium/form developments.

In his poetics, Aristotle assumes that every tragedy is necessarily composed of "plot, character, diction, thought, spectacle and song"[23]. Bakhtin, in turn, introduces the concept of chronotope or "time space" which implies the intrinsic connection of time and space in a work of literature.[24] I would like to conclude from the above statements that "literary utterance[25]" is a medium composed of specific elements which serve as the foundation for the formation of numerous forms, namely works of literature. These elements, which are loosely-coupled before any work of literature is created out of their tight coupling, are: narration, characterization, chronotope, and themes and motifs. It is out of this medium that literary modes as forms emerge. According to Bakhtin, literary modes may be conceived of as potentially containing all genres available at their time[26], or in systems-theoretical terms, as media for genres to be forms. So it can be

concluded that a specific work of literature (which I would like to call level 5 in this specific medium/form succession) is a form of the medium of genre (level 4), which is in turn a form of the medium of literary modes (level 3), which are forms of the medium of "literary utterance" (level 2), which is itself a form out of the medium of language (level 1). The same structural principle applies to fiction film. It is true that fiction film takes advantage of a wider variety of media in level 1, but these sonar and visual media only make the levels 1 and 2 richer at the service of the construction of "more real" diegetic forms.

Genres are distinguishable not only structurally, but also with reference to their social function. These functions are determined based on the type of social "conflict" each genre chooses to communicate about. According to Rahnama (1998), these conflicts are:

- Epic: the conflict of the societal system (right) with its environment (wrong);

- Drama: the conflict of one social subsystem (right) with another (which is also right in its own terms);

- Lyric: the conflict of one system with itself, that is, the conflict of right as wrong with wrong as right;

- Novel: which is the synthesis of all of the above.

In epic, the hero is not introduced as an individual with personal interests, but rather as the representative of a society which is still in its early stages of differentiation from the environment. The epic hero is destined to secure social demarcations. Drama, on the other hand, engages with conflicts which occur between two or more hierarchical groups (in stratified societies) or subsystems (as they are in the early stages of differentiating and

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defining themselves). For example, Antigone represents the conflict between the subsystems of Religion and Polity, or Macbeth that between Polity and Morality. Rahnama suggests a very interesting function for lyric literature: In order to be able to observe itself, each social subsystem needs to imagine itself outside of itself, observing itself as if it belonged at the same time to its environment. In such a state of affairs, the literary subsystem of ART maintains its own beautiful/ugly code while reversing the codes of other subsystems in its observations of the state of the society. This is how the conflict of right (as wrong) with wrong (as right) occurs.[27] Finally, the novel can be understood as the synthesis of all of the above mentioned genres, with the added characteristic that it also thematizes conflicts between consciousness systems besides social systems. As a result of the novelization of the earlier genres, they can also tend to conflicts between psychic systems.[28]

Returning to the subject of film, a major number of Iranian war movies made between 1980 and 1988 – that is, synchronously to the war – manifest elements of the epic genre. The theme of conflict between right (the Iranian society) and wrong (the Iraqi society which was supported by the European and American governments of the time against Iran) is not only present, but also illustrated with the chronotpe being the war front at the borders of Iran and Iraq. One successful example of epic war movies is *The Eagles* (Samuel Khachikian, 1984) which not only depicts the battles of the Iranian society to protect its borders from Iraqi invaders, but also shows how the Kurds (who were leading a civil war at the time for their independence as a state) cooperate with the combatants to save an Iranian pilot. (Image 1) Another good

example is *Neynava* (Rasoul Mollagholipour, 1983) which narrates the story of two wounded soldiers who, despite their severe injuries, keep the enemy back at the frontline. A close look at other contemporary movies to the war makes the attribution of the epic genre to these movies more plausible. These include *A Voice from Beyond* (Saeed Hajimiri, 1984), *A Boat towards the Riverbank* (Rasoul Mollagholipour, 1986), *Kani-Manga* (Seifollah Dad, 1987), *Man and Weapon* (Mojtaba Raie, 1989).

As already pointed out, a common point in the characterization of the epic genre is that its protagonists embody less of personal traits and more of the virtues of a national hero. Coupled as the friend/foe dichotomy is for the Iranian society with the code of Religion good/evil, protagonists of epic war movies are perfect examples of mystical beliefs on the one hand and bravery and selflessness for the protection of their homeland (geographical borders) and the young "Islamic revolution" (functional differentiation of the Iranian society) on the other. This coupling of the communication codes of Religion and Polity is best manifest in war films with allegories to epic reproductions of the battle of Karbala, based on which Imam Hussein and his 72 accompanying soldiers were martyred in 680 AD. A good example of these films is *Flying at Night* (Rasoul Mollagholipour, 1986).

By the end of the war, the Iranian society faces a dilemma in its communications. On the one hand, the society's identity is based on a dichotomy strongly symbolized by the war. On the other hand, when the war is not current anymore, it would be evolution-hindering to busy the society's communication capacity with memories of war, hence leaving no space for operations

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which target the future. To solve this problem, the society should take one step further in its course of evolution, which also manifests itself in Art and Entertainment systems. War films of this era rely on new modes and genres which embrace contemporary themes. *The Glass Agency* (Ebrahim Hatamikia, 1998) is a drama concerning the conflicts of war veterans who are still struggling with the physical and psychic aftermath of war, and the authorities who are enjoying order and safety in the society, having forgotten the heroes who have actually made this state of relief possible. This conflict is representative of that of the society with its put-behind memory of war which was constantly refreshed for eight successive years and then "forgotten" for the sake of increasing social complexity. This movie can be considered the statement of the Iranian society's anxiety about the loss of its principle of differentiation. (Image 2)

Another noteworthy film of this genre by Hatamikia is *The Red Ribbon* (1999). His cinema knows by now that nostalgic communication about the epic past stops short of making any contribution to social evolution. So it moves on to narrate a return story, in which the event of war belongs to the diegetic past but the story is unfolded in a former war front. The Red Ribbon stars Davoud (Parviz Parastui) who has been demining the desert ever since the end of the war when Mahboubeh (Azita Hajian) returns to the area, determined to reside in the ruins which used to be her home prior to the war. The film ends with the spouting of a spring amidst the dry desert, which signifies hope for the future. Like The Glass Agency, this movie too complies with principles of drama in presenting the conflict between Mahboubeh (representing hope for the

future), Davoud (representing the grasp of the society on its past) and Jom'e (Reza Kianian), an Afghan man who guards the tank graveyard (and who symbolizes a reasonable, sometimes economical approach to the affairs). Jom'e lives in the nick of time, in the very present moment, without any attachment to the past or future, perhaps because he is not a member of the Iranian society and therefore does not relate to it temporally. (Image 3)

In these movies, the war plays a background role and functions not as the main theme any more, but only as the cause of the conflicts which emerge in the Iranian society. Examples of dramatic Iranian war films are galore. Among them are the following films and the intra-social conflicts about which they communicate: *Bashu, the Little Stranger* (Bahram Beizai, 1989) with the conflict between different Iranian ethnicities which

Image 1. *The Eagles*, film poster
(www.sourehcinema.com)

encounter each other because of the war (image 4); *Snake Fang* (Masud Kimiai, 1990) which casts a look on the conflict between morality and financial profit that is embedded in the economic hardships of the post-war Iranian society; *In the Alleys of Love* (Khosrow Sinai, 1991) which unfolds the inner conflicts of a homecoming war refugee; *Kimia* (Ahmadreza Darvish, 1995) which thematizes the legal question of the right to parenthood; *Trip to Chazabeh* (Rasoul Mollagholipour, 1995) which thematizes the society's conflict between its memory including the war and its evolution-oriented temporal tendencies. The latter tries to relieve the society by ensuring it that the war, hence the differentiation principle to which it contributed, will never be forgotten.

The last epoch I would like to examine from this theoretical point of view is the 21st

century war cinema of Iran, which has made way for the emergence of two specific approaches in its few but still existing war films. In *Che* (2013), Hatamikia both relies on new means of utterance, namely digital special effect, and shifts to a new genre for telling a story of the war time again. He thematizes a lyrical conflict faced by Mostafa Chamran (Fariborz Arabnia) who has been sent to Paveh to end the civil war between the separatist Kurds and the revolutionary guards. He tries to solve the conflict through dialogue, since he cannot resolve to open fire on the rebel Kurds who are on the one hand endangering the consistency of the society, but are also his compatriots on the other.

(Image 5)

As the mentioned examples among many other war films made since 1980 demonstrate, there has been a shift of genres from epic to drama and lyric. The reason for this genre shift seems to be the change of the Iranian society's attitude towards its primary principle of differentiation. As soon as communication can no longer offer new information, or as soon as the repetition of information that is analogous with former experience becomes functionless, the communication process is deprived of meaning. The above examples show that it suffices to maintain at least one of the war-related elements of literary utterance[29] to make communication about the war possible – be it a soldier, a war veteran, the chronotope of war, etc. With such an abundant reservoir of Iran-Iraq war films, it would be very difficult to produce further meaningful

Image 2. *The Glass Agency* (www.sourehcinema.ir)

communication about war within the genres epic, drama and lyric. Masoud Dehnamaki's trilogy *Deportees* (2007, 2009, 2011) is a witness to the fact that thematizing the war in our times without a shift of genre would end up in a merely-entertaining work (if at all)

that cannot surpass the level of modes (being romance and comedy in this case) and hence fails to perform any social function. Now the only genre left unexperienced here is the novel. But the emergence of novelized war films in the Iranian society is very improbable as long as the social subsystem of Polity claims an exclusive right to communication about the society's principle of differentiation, hence making it impossible to thematize the strongest symbol of this differentiation from an individual point of view.[30]

Conclusion

My starting point in this analysis was the question: why have Iranian war film genres changed in the course of the Iranian society's evolution since 1980? To answer this question, I first questioned the term genre as it is used in existing film-theoretical discourses. I resorted to Niklas Luhmann's social systems theory because I found the existing, category-based theories of genre dysfunctional. The advantage of Luhmann's theory is that is relies on functional differentiation instead of categorization, and hence operates at a meta-level of theoretical enquiry which offers possibilities of context-based analysis.

Casting a critical view on Luhmann's theory of mass media, I demonstrated how these media cannot function as a social system if we, legitimately, include films or books within them. So I explored the theoretical body at hand for possibilities of the inclusion of the programs ascribed to the mass media, namely news/reports,

advertisement and entertainment. I proposed to consider an Entertainment subsystem in (modern) societal systems to argue how film functions as a common communication medium between Art and Entertainment at the service of creating reality. The temporal orientation of this reality in each movie depends on which one of these subsystems, Art or Entertainment, plays a stronger role in the formation of that movie. I based this thesis on the assumption that in their reality-constructing communicative operations, Art tends towards the future by exploring new information and means of utterance for communication, whereas Entertainment relies on the society's memory as its information supply.

Having conceptualized the function of film in a society, I set out to establish the concept of film genres in a model originally derived from literary genre theory. In this model, genre is a stage in the medium/form succession: language → literary utterance →literary modes → literary genres → a specific work of literature. I ventured to find a functional definition of film genres based on the sort of conflict about which they communicate, and

Image 3. *The Red Ribbon* (http://avinyfilm.ir)

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Image 4. *Bashu, the Little Stranger* (http://www.dreamlabfilms.com)

communications made by and within the society in its different phases of evolution.

This inquiry could be, and should be, complemented with further elaboration on the social function and sociological conceptualization of Art and Entertainment. More specifically, Entertainment has received very little attention in Luhmann's theory and in other social theores. It has been less understood as an abstract philosophical concept than it has been observed in its concrete forms in specific societies and as a subset of culture. I hope that this, together with the still open conceptualization of film genres in social systems theory, serves scholars

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showed how these conflicts have successively emerged in the course of the Iranian society's reference to its memories of war, resulting in the formation of the war film genres epic, dramatic and lyric. I then mentioned examples of Iranian war movies made in different genres during the different phases of the Iranian society's evolution. (Table 1) I consequently suggested reasons for why it is not possible for the Iranian society to reflect on the war in a novelized film due to its principle of differentiation from the environment. This paper does not at all claim that films made in a specific phase of evolution in a society are solely confined to the genres that were mentioned here. Surely there are always exceptions to this principle. What this text would rather like to suggest is, that the quantity of certain film genres is higher at specific stages of evolution in societies with specific principles of identity. This also applies to other artistic and entertaining

Image 5. *Che* (http://www.whatsupiran.com)

in cultural studies, film studies, philosophy of art and sociology as an anchor point for their further critical and analytical contributions.

Name of the movie	Name of the director	Production year
Neynava	Rasoul Mollagholipour	1983
The Eagles	Samuel Khachikian	1984
A Voice from Beyond	Saeed Hajimiri	1984
Flying at Night	Rasoul Mollagholipour	1986
A Boat towards the Riverbank	Rasoul Mollagholipour	1986
Kani-Manga	Seifollah Dad	1987
Bashu, the Little Stranger	Bahram Beizai	1989
Snake Fang	Masud Kimiai	1990
In the Alleys of Love	Khosrow Sinai	1991
Kimia	Ahmadreza Darvish	1995
Trip to Chazabeh	Rasoul Mollagholipour	1995
The Glass Agency	Ebrahim Hatamikia	1998
The Red Ribbon	Ebrahim Hatamikia	1999
Che	Ebrahim Hatamikia	2013

Table 1. Notable war movies produced in the Iranian society and their genres

Endotes

1. Moreteza Avini, 1986-1988.

2. *Adults' Game*, Kambuzia Partovi, 1992.

3. *Bashu, the Little Stranger*, Bahram Beizai, 1989.

4. *Scent of Yousef's Shirt*, Ebrahim Hatamikia, 1995.

5. *The Glass Agency*, Ebrahim Hatamikia, 1998.

6. See for example (Frye, Anatomy of Criticism 1973), (Frye, The Secular Scripture, A Study of the Structure of Romance 1976) and (Roche 2005).

7. With the latest instances being *Che* (Ebrahim Hatamikia, 2013) and the trilogy *Deportees* (Masoud Dehnamaki, 2007, 2009, 2011).

8. All translations from German to English are mine.

9. For a definition of symbolically generalized media of communication see (Luhmann 1981, 25-34); also (Luhmann 1976, 61).

10. Unwahrscheinlichkeiten

11. According to Jahraus, "in order for a system to be able to differentiate itself, in order for it to be able to distinguish itself from its environment, it needs an operative and operational criterium of differentiation, which it can handle as an indicating difference. Luhmann calls this indicating difference the code of the system in question. He relies on a strict binary schema and an asymmetry between a positive and a negative value." (Jahraus 2012, 238-39). For further information on communication media see (Luhmann 1987, 217-222).

12. For a more elaborate definition of meaning in Luhmann's theory see (Kirchmeier 2012).

13. The Luhmannian "Ego" can be equalled to the "addressee of communication" in the formalists' sense. In Talcott Parson's communication model which was adopted

by Luhmann, communication is the synthesis of three successive selections – namely information, utterance and understanding – which takes place between Alter and Ego. For compact information on the concept of communication in social systems theory see (Baecker 2012).

14. See (Kant 2014).

15. For a deliberate explanation of structural coupling, see (Luhmann 1997, 92-119).

16. For example the Newtonian physics provided a program for coding further statements in physics with true/false – which is the binary communication code of Science. The existence of a future equals considering the contingency of the alteration of these code values in the present time. And this actually was the case when Einstein's theory of relativity changed the selections which the Science system would make regarding the trueness/falseness of its communications.

17. While the code assures the operative closure of the system, programs are responsible for its openness. Programs make it possible to decide for one or the other side of a binary code. For example theories as programs in the system of Science help us assign any statement to one of the sides of the code true/false.

18. And here I am solely thematizing fiction films. Otherwise, it goes without saying that purely artistic films like the avant-garde works of Hans Richter, Maya Deren, Luis Buñuel and the likes have existed and do exist, not to mention the merely entertaining box-office Hollywood productions.

19. Put roughly, social systems differentiate themselves from their environment through a border which is nothing more than their specified communicative operations. Luhmann calls this operative closure. Observation, in its turn, is a form in Georg Spencer-Brown's sense (Spencer-Brown 1972) that is, drawing a distinction between the object of observation and everything else which it is not. When performing an observation, a system cannot observe itself unless through an act of "re-entry", which means that the system enters its own differentiation from the environment back into its communicative operations, as if it were an external observer, observing its own observation. In this sense, its observation of its own operations is considered a second-order observation.

20. Every society which goes through a revolution or any other overthrow of structures such as a war needs to develop a new principle of differentiation from the environment. Another example of a changed principle of identity is the post-Second World War German society which had to abandon its race-based way of identification after losing the war and the subsequent crises it had to endure.

21. The friend/foe principle is not the only principle of differentiation accessible to societal systems. Each societal system develops, based on the context in which it differentiates itself from its environment, different principles of identification and these principles reappear in the society's cultural communications over and over again.

22. See (Luhmann 1986).

23. See (Aristotle 2000).

24. See (Bakhtin 1981).

25. Again, utterance is meant here in the sense of the Parsonian communication model, i.e. the synthesis of information, utterance and understanding.

26. See (Bakhtin 1981).

27. See (Rahnama 1998, 84f.).

28. Ibsen's plays are a convenient example of novelized drama.

29. or should we rename this medium

cinematographic utterance in favor of the present study?

30. Which is understandable given the fact that the society cannot risk making its principle of differentiation from the environment available to polyphonic, hence novelized, interpretation. This shall not happen until the society has assured a secure consistency of its operations and an unconditional functionality of its principle of identity.

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