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Brother Tarantino in the mosque: An analysis of the cultural and political instrumentality of satire in "The Lizard" (2004)

Tavernaro-Haidarian, Leyla

2008-12-02T13:17:16Z
http://hdl.handle.net/10539/5862

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INTRODUCTION

My report will demonstrate that the Iranian film, *The Lizard* (Tabrizi, 2004)[1], constitutes a satirical exploration of the role and significance of the clergy within the context of contemporary Iranian society. I argue that, in its use of satire, *The Lizard* presents a significant departure from dominant representations of clergy that circulate within Iranian media. I propose that the film questions the role and influence of clergy in Iran today through its satirisation of the clerical establishment. Furthermore, I argue that the film challenges the ubiquitous images of clergy that shore up the establishment's authority.

According to Iranian film critic Shahlah Azizi, *The Lizard* confronts the predominantly "untouchable and authoritative" images of clergy in Iran's media outlets by portraying an "ordinary and fallible" cleric whom viewers can relate to (2004: 2).

The Lizard's protagonist, Reza, is a hardened prisoner who is in jail for robbery. Reza escapes from the prison hospital in a mullah's[2] attire. He ends up in a small, non-distinct town where his contacts can help him cross the border to a neighbouring country and into freedom. Yet the town is waiting for its newly appointed mullah who, unbeknownst to them, is sick in Tehran. Reza is mistaken for the eagerly awaited cleric. He plays along for fear of the police who are following in his tracks. The clumsy Reza accidentally becomes a popular preacher while his quest for a passport and border crossing continues.

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[1] In this research report I use Harvard referencing 2007, as laid out in: Snooks & Co., *Style Manual: For authors, editors and printers*, 6th edn,, Australia: John Wiley & Sons, 2002.

[2] 'Mullah' is the Farsi word for Moslem cleric.

In commenting on the film's genre, Azizi suggests that comedy "exposes the human-nature" of a cleric by "mocking him" (2004: 3). In *The Lizard* we laugh about a clumsy criminal who becomes a moral authority. He stumbles around in his cloak and is openly jeered in the streets. I believe that these types of representational strategies question the authority of clergy because they suggest that a mullah's cloak alone does not guarantee moral aptitude.

I will compare these images to those in other films and media forms, where such comparisons become necessary to highlight how the film pioneers in its depiction of the Iranian clergy[3]. However, given the parameters of this project, I cannot provide an extensive survey of Iranian cinema. Therefore, I will periodically refer to the depiction of clergy in one particular film, namely Seyyed Reza Mir-Karimi's *Under the Moonlight* (2001).

In contrast to *The Lizard*, *Under the Moonlight* exemplifies the 'conventional'[4] depiction of clergy because it portrays them as educated theologians. Theology is something, Azizi says, clergy in most Iranian films limit their discourse to (2004: 4). Conversely, the

[3] I must acknowledge that, while I claim that *The Lizard* demonstrates progressive images of clergy, its narrative evidences gender-bias. I discuss one such instance in Chapter 2, p85. I would like to further acknowledge that some of the sources consulted in this research report likewise indicate gender-biased terms and concepts. For example, in Chapter 1, p31, I quote Linda Hutcheon referring to "mankind", rather than to 'humanity'. Where similar terms have been my own choice, I have tried to keep such biases to a minimum.

[4] I am aware that it is difficult to summarise a 'dominant image' of clergy as conveyed through Iran's mass media outlets. This would be a project in its own right. Therefore, I have chosen a film that, I claim, represents the predominant clerical image because it shares certain features with other Iranian films. In contrast to *The Lizard*, *Under the Moonlight* conforms to 'mainstream' cinematic product in that it was not banned after its release.

mullah in *The Lizard* preaches about worldly matters such as relationships and food. Moreover, *Under the Moonlight* follows the prevalent[5] Iranian cinematic style of what Chris Knipp calls "neo-realism"[6] (2002: 4). This style is known for its "allegorical" mode and "serious" tone (Trevor 2005: 17). In contradistinction to this non-confrontational style, I would argue that comedy, in *The Lizard,* facilitates a more judgmental or "irreverent"[7] (Azizi 2004: 3) tone. Finally, what distinguishes *The Lizard* from *Under the Moonlight* is that it has been described as the "most successful Iranian film ever" (*BBC News*, 6 May 2004).

A film that sets itself apart from others is hard to make in Iran where, critic Hannah MacGill says, all official media is fully controlled by the government (2004: 2). The government is, in turn, under the auspices of religion because Iran has been a theocracy since 1979. The term theocracy refers to a form of government in which the clergy exercise all legitimate political authority and in which religious law takes precedence over civil law (Johnson 2006: 87). In Iran, the Muslim church constitutes an authoritarian voice, which stipulates that the image of Islamic figures[8] must be protected. This

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[5] Sassan Parvin points out that, in Iran, there also exists an industry of low-budget films that are produced and released informally and straight to video (2006: 2). In the context of this study, however, I will focus on the formal Iranian cinema industry.

[6] David Macy writes that this term was first coined in the 1920s and applied most specifically to films and novels produced in the decades following Mussolini. According to Macy, the style is characterised by a naturalistic depiction of the lives of ordinary people and breaks with conventions that dominated Italian cinema. Macy describes neo-realist films as being shot on location, on a low budget and using non-professional actors. These are conventions typical of Iranian films. On political terms, the movement was based on an appeal to freedom, expressed the ideals of wartime resistance and the values of the people (Macy 2001: 67). Iran's New Wave movement is heavily influenced by and resembles Italian neo-realism (Hosseini 2004: 4)

[7] This term will be discussed further.

[8] It is debatable, for example, whether the Prophet Mohammed may or may not be depicted: "14th century Iranian paintings certainly depicted the Prophet, whereas the Saudi Islamic sect of *Wahabi* Moslems completely forbids any depiction of Holy figures" (Bloom cited in Akram 2006: 2).

stipulation requires that clergy be depicted "reverently"[9] in the arts and media. 'Reverence' is a quality that, John Trevor says, is defined subjectively on a case-by-case basis through scrutiny by Iran's clergy (2005: 2). Trevor notes that 'reverent' portrayal requires the conservation of the mullah's "authority and integrity" (2005: 2).

Beyond respecting mullahs, films must also unequivocally communicate their agenda. As McGill claims, next to the government's voice, "no plurality is allowed" (2004: 4). I propose that, in *The Lizard,* a voice emerges that challenges the integrity of the clerical establishment by portraying a fallible, imperfect mullah who rises in the ranks without being noticed.

To understand how *The Lizard* is able to break the mould in Iran, it is useful to further examine what Azizi refers to as Tabrizi's choice of an "atypical" genre, comedy, within the context of Iranian cinema (2004: 3). Tabrizi suggests that humour is "accessible and universal" to all audiences (cited in Betts 2005: 1). Although Simon Critchley argues that the details of a joke are culturally specific, he also acknowledges that all cultures share the experience of laughter (2002: 4-5). Tabrizi argues that this shared experience has the ability to diminish differences in perception and experience (cited in Betts 2005). In uniting diverse audiences and views, then, I think comedy has a disarming quality that

[9] While 'reverence' is a subjective term, another example will highlight the sensitive nature of depicting figures in a Moslem context. In 2005, the Danish Newspaper, *Jyllands-Posten,* printed satirical cartoons of the Prophet Mohammed. One such cartoon depicted the Prophet with a turban-looking bomb on his head. The international uproar from the Muslim world that was born in the aftermath of this publication included the burning of Danish flags and the severing of diplomatic ties to Denmark. This emphasises the religiously transgressive potential of depicting holy or ecclesiastical figures in the arts and media.

creates an authorised space in which clergy can be "mocked" or criticised (Azizi 2004: 3).

Nevertheless, criticism is a balancing act in the Iranian theocracy where the mullahs propagate an authoritative self-image based on the religious belief that clergy are "sacrosanct" (Parvin 2006: 5). Therefore, *The Lizard's* irreverent depictions of clergy constitute a religious[10] transgression and, in the case of the Iranian theocracy, a transgression of authority. I will use narrative analysis to examine how comedy enables such a transgressive and satirical exploration of the role of the clergy in Iran.

Narrative analysis is a textual approach that recognises the extent to which the stories we tell provide insights about our lived experiences. According to Robert Lapsley and Michael Westlake, film theory has always contested the assumption that narrative is 'natural' to life. (1988: 129). Jerome Bruner, for example, argues that through narrative humans "impose meanings" on experience (1990: 48). While Roy D'Andrade (1987) suggests that such meanings are individual and encapsulate a culturally specific understanding of the world, Ruth Berman and Dan Slobin (1994), in turn, relate that most cultures pass down certain themes and plots that are questioned and reworked with each new generation. With the above assumptions in mind, my report proceeds on the understanding that patterns of narratives can be seen as opportunities to view what a group of people deem important in the conduct of human affairs.

[10] I am using the term 'religion' as that which Iran's clergy interpret and communicate it to be through their media outlets. These include the national broadcasters, the official press and all forms of sanctioned public forums, such as mosques.

Narrative then, is a tool that, although universal in some respects, unfolds and is interpreted in culturally specific ways. In the current Iranian cinematic context, a key theme is the relationship of God to the individual (Nottingham 2002: 5). Steve Nottingham says that, since the Islamic Revolution in 1979, most Iranian films have sought to encourage acceptance of one's fate (2005: 6). I would argue that *The Lizard* displays a more rebellious attitude than that by portraying a mullah who actively changes his circumstances. I believe this suggests that mullahs have the ability to take charge of personal and political reformation. I acknowledge that audiences both within Iran and abroad saw *The Lizard* and that the film would have been read differently within divergent contexts. However, I will not empirically examine audiences in the context and scale of this project, hence the question of spectatorship will not feature in my study. I will refer to the film's Iranian audience only by drawing on secondary sources where this becomes necessary.

In this report, I will focus on the text's narrative[11] grammar, which, Lapsley and Westlake say, "involves the establishment of the minimal units of narrative and the laws governing their selection and combination to produce meaning" (1998: 130). The authors identify these units as *mise-en-scene*, lighting, camera work, spatial organisation and editing (1998: 130). They further suggest that the historically and culturally specific procedures

[11] The first analyses of narrative came from structuralists such as Genette, Bremond, Barthes, Todorov and, within film theory, Christian Metz (Lapsley & Westlake 1998: 131).

that fabricate meaning are not innocent but constitute an ideological force through their "apparent representation of reality" (1998: 130).[12]

In order to examine the ideological make-up of a work, Bordwell suggests, that a narrative can be studied "semantically", in a quest for meaning; "syntactically", as an exploration of form; and "pragmatically" as an authorial act of presenting a story to a perceiver" (in Rosen 1986: 17). By focusing primarily on the semantic level of *The Lizard,* I can examine the narrative in its cultural and political context. I will analyze how the film's narrative units work in conjunction with dialogue to form an internally consistent construct that sometimes emulates and sometimes differentiates itself from other texts and conventions, to which *The Lizard* alludes.

Narrative analysis then, allows me to examine what *The Lizard's* satirical procedures relate about the contemporary socio-political moment in Iran and why so many moviegoers "stormed the box-office" in Tehran to see it (*Agence France Press,* 6 July 2005). As I will show, the restrictive filmmaking environment in Iran relates to a painful recent history that the country is coming to terms with. Narrative is a platform where this history can be assessed, and future 'what ifs' explored. On the other hand, Mark Currie proposes that narrative can be used to repress such analyses in order to buttress the status quo (1998: 15). However, I believe that *The Lizard* promotes political change and pioneers in emphasising the role of the clergy in bringing about that change. Therefore, I refer to Graeme Turner's understanding of narrative, when he says that, "through

[12] Stephen Heath echoes this when he says that the human subject is not first of all constructed and then placed within social and ideological formation, "but that the constructing and the placing are one and the same process, which continues interminably" (Heath in Lapsley & Westlake 1998: 139).

imagination we can enter subjunctive worlds and try on identities that we would ordinarily not be bold enough to assume" (1996: 3). Although Turner speaks primarily of performers, their exploration of new and alternative roles inevitably bears consequences for audiences and thereby for the 'real' world. Iranians do not have many official channels to explore social and political scenarios (Azizi 2004: 4). Through the character of Reza in *The Lizard*, however, audiences are able to imagine and explore alternative images of Iran's political guardians, the clergy.

In *The Lizard,* an ordinary Iranian enters the world of the clergy[13] and explores its "sensitive and damaged" (Tabrizi 2004: 9) relationship with the people of Iran. My analysis of the film's narrative devices will reveal what political stance it takes towards this relationship. Beyond the emotional quality of severe political changes in Iran since 1979, the exploration of the status quo is hampered by the restrictions of an authoritarian theocracy that does not allow public critique of the current system (McGill 2004: 4). *The Lizard* challenges these restrictions through its narrative techniques.

In my first chapter I will establish that while films that adopt a comedic register are unusual in the Iranian context they can, as Steven Neale says, "legitimately" address our forbidden desires (1980: 4). In the case of *The Lizard,* I propose that audiences enjoy watching a cleric stumble because they are secretly "critical" of the current system in Iran

[13] In the Iranian cinematic context, which is heavily influenced by post-war Italian and French neo-realism (Knipp 2005: 3), the themes that dominate, since the authoritarian theocracy was established in 1979, include narratives about: war, poverty, suffering, nature, children and women, faith and the relationship of God to the individual (Nottingham 2002: 5).

(Hosseini 2004: 4, Tabrizi 2004, 9). Their pleasure in seeing a mullah fall is legitimate because Reza is not really a cleric but a prisoner in a cleric's clothes.

Beyond licensed laughter then, comedy in *The Lizard* evidences a critical attitude, which Tabrizi delivers through satire. According to Westphal, satire uses humour and ridicule but constitutes "devastating critique" with the intention of provoking change (1996: 54). Some critics, such as John Wrathall, perceive *The Lizard* to be too mild to classify as a satire, calling it "a fish-out-of water comedy" (2005: 65). However, I disagree with this interpretation and concede that my reading is inevitably informed by my cultural sensibilities as an Iranian[14]. I propose that Farsi is a language of understatement and subtlety where, as Sassan Parvin explains, harsh criticism can come across through "one look of the eye" (2006: 7). Critchley, moreover, proposes that a text must be understood in the light of the specific culture and society that frames it (2002: 4).

I propose, moreover, that the film's particular use of irony strengthens my case for defining it as a satire. Echoing Golbert Highet (1962), Linda Hutcheon proposes that satire can use irony to criticise the ways of the world (1985: 43). As a prisoner in the mosque, Reza, the protagonist, is a fish out of water. However, the fact that a criminal inspires a religious congregation is ironic and belittles or criticises the concept of the Iranian clergymen's assumed piety and authority.

[14] My view is strengthened through what I know of public opinion in Iran by participating in various internet forums and following the Iranian press.

Though critical, the delivery of satire in *The Lizard* is sufficiently nuanced to have passed the clerics' initial censorship. In a sense, the film adopts a 'mask' to disguise its criticism. This strategy is typical of satirical art forms. As Highet says, satire "speaks out of a mask" and thus creates a space of license and detachment (1962: 48). In the second chapter, I will argue that, in *The Lizard,* this space is created through the ways in which the film deploys the narrative techniques of parody and masquerade. Horton (1991) relates masquerade to Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of the carnivalesque. In *Rabelais and His World* (1984), Bakhtin theorises a relationship between masking practices and laughter and freedom in which carnival "celebrate[s] a temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order" (Bakhtin 1965: 82). In a similar vein, Ivan Erickson argues that the carnival mask frees people of their limitations, 'separating' them from themselves and the confines of their social condition (2005: 14). This separation of 'selves' is also found in parody, which, Hutcheon (1985: 43) proposes, highlights the similarities but most importantly the differences, or 'distances', between two texts or text forms. In my view, *The Lizard* creates a gap, akin to the one Hutcheon describes, between the predominant, authoritarian images of the clergy sanctioned in mainstream Iranian media and the clumsy, irreverent depiction of clergy in the form of Reza. I believe this gap emphasises the 'constructedness' (Hutcheon 1985: 44) of established images and thereby weakens their monopoly on authority.

I will further examine how the film's images challenge the existing socio-political system in Iran. Through portraying 'cultural' transgressions, such as socially forbidden interactions between women and men, and 'textual' transgressions, such as crossing

comedy with tragedy, Tabrizi confronts established norms. I will show that this confrontation is authorised because on the one hand, parody 'affirms' and thus respects its original text (Hutcheon 1985) and on the other, Reza's mask legitimises his irreverence. Therefore, while Reza's character affirms that clergy clearly do have a role to play in Iranian society, the exact definition and terms of this role are explored and critiqued by Tabrizi. Parody and masquerade create alternative space, which enables the apotheosis of new clerical images that set themselves apart from pervasive images of clergy in *Under the Moonlight*.

In my third chapter, I examine this new space by analysing Lucy Sargisson's (2000) model of 'transgressive utopianism'. Sargisson suggests that, by creating utopian or alien spaces, humans can explore their relationship to the 'real' world and free themselves from commonly held paradigms. She further claims claims that this fosters the creation of new ways of thinking (Sargisson 2000). I propose that, in *The Lizard*, this utopian space redefines the established relationship between clergy and the Iranian people. This new definition might not be perfect or universal but it emancipates itself from the currently portrayed model. In so doing, the film suggests that there might be alternative interpretations of the Iranian clergy's role and significance in society. Such alternatives are cause for celebration according to Richard Dyer (1993), who focuses on the triumphant nature and political force of utopias. Drawing on Dyer's work on utopian cinema and musicals, I argue that the exact terms of these utopian visions are not as important as their mere existence. In other words, the provision of an option empowers change and enfeebles authority.

Following on this desire for reform, my concluding chapter discusses the film's dual effect of 'affirming' and 'denying' past images. I show that the current Iranian ideology is represented and exposed in the space of 'affirmation' that parody and masquerade provide. I will then prove that this ideology is commented upon and threatened in the utopian space of 'denial', or 'ironic difference', that the abovementioned techniques create. Through this twofold process, *The Lizard* constitutes a critique that is directed towards the status quo.

My hypothesis is that while *The Lizard* does not directly attack the Iranian theocracy or seek to replace it with another system it nonetheless uses narrative techniques that authorise transgressions within the current model, and that this translates into a critique of the prevailing political system within the framework of the existing 'hegemony'[15] in Iran. This redefines the role and significance of the clergy in Iran today but does not discard their relevance completely. Raymond Williams argues that amid censorship and political persecution in an authoritarian society such as Iran, media that is alternative to the mainstream becomes oppositional (1977: 126) and is therefore rejected[16]. Based on Ali Shariati's theory on oppositional political thought and culture, I will show that this makes director Tabrizi an "ideologue" (Rahnema 1998: 3) in the sense that he takes apart the

[15] I am aware that the term 'hegemony' requires further discussion, and I will provide one in my concluding chapter. For now the term 'hegemony' refers to the overriding cultural, social and political framework that is provided and upheld through Iranian clergy and their specific understanding of Islam.
[16] Jannati, who is the head of the Iranian government's un-elected Guardian Council, later condemned the film publicly as "an insult to religion and the clergy" (Azizi 2004:4). As a result, the film was banned soon after its successful release (*Agence France Press*, 3 June 2005).

dominant ideology, challenges the status quo and offers the possibility of an alternative world order.

As an Iranian in diaspora I care about Iran's future. My family's painful experiences of religious persecution, especially during the 1979 Islamic Revolution, remain a defining force in my life. Although only a film, I think *The Lizard* is a budding signal that Iranians are beginning to articulate their assessment of the current system and take a stance towards it. This will hopefully contribute to making Iran the 'promised land' its people want it to be.

CHAPTER ONE: COMEDY AND SATIRE IN AN IRANIAN FILM

In this chapter, I situate *The Lizard* within the Iranian political context to substantiate my claim that Tabrizi made a provocative choice by selecting to make a politicised film in a comedic register in a tightly restricted film industry. I will begin with a brief overview of the salient political and cultural developments over the past fifty years. I intend to explore how the film fits into this context, addressing key social and political issues of the day. It is necessary to sketch this socio-political context to establish that *The Lizard* constitutes a satirical commentary on contemporary Iran. After analysing comedy as a means for catharsis and release from social conditions, I will focus on satire as the specific form of comedy evidenced in *The Lizard*. This leads to my identifying and outlining the narrative devices Tabrizi uses to effect his transgressions of the current socio-political system in Iran.

Breaking Taboos: A film jumps out of line

Iran's political history

The contemporary Iranian context is informed by a political revolution in 1979 that transformed Iran from an autocratic monarchy[17], under Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi[18], to an Islamic theocratic[19] government under the rule of Ayatollah[20] Ruhollah Khomeini.

[17] According to Shams, "the Shah of Iran was the hereditary ruler of the Iranian monarchy, one of the largest in the world. Mohammad Reza of the Pahlavi dynasty was the last Shah. For most of its existence, the Iranian monarchy had been an absolute monarchy, although there were attempts to reform it into a constitutional monarchy in the early twentieth century and following World War II" (Shams: 2004).

[18] 'Shah' means 'king' in Farsi and was the official title of Reza Pahlavi.

[19] In a theocracy, governmental policies are either identical with, or strongly influenced by, the principles of a religion the government typically claims to rule on behalf of God. The administrative hierarchy of the government is often equivalent to the administrative hierarchy of the religion. This distinguishes a

According to journalist Reza Shams, the Pahlavi dynasty had been ruling Iran since World War I and began facing increasing pressures from nationalist parties when British troops invaded Iran and took control over its oil industry and with it the Shah in World War II (2004: 34). Hamid Khosro notes that when Iran's oil industry began booming, the Shah's plan to alleviate the prevailing extremes of wealth and poverty was not immediate enough to meet the urgency of a need for change from the people (1998: 15).

In her book, *Iran Awakening* (2006), Nobel Peace Prize Laureate, Shirin Ebadi[21], explains that the Shah's aim to turn "an expansive country of villages and peasants overnight into a centralized nation" was a complex task. According to Ebadi, the Shah believed it would be impossible without the participation of women and set about emancipating them by banning the veil. Ebadi says that the Shah and the mullahs that followed him thus acted out their political agendas on the frontier of women's bodies (2006: 42). Therefore, the Shah's arguably well-intentioned efforts can be interpreted as 'undemocratic' in the sense that he forced his views on all women, regardless of their religious convictions.

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theocracy from forms of government, which have a state religion, or from traditional monarchies (Wikipedia 2005).

[20] 'Ayatollah' is a title given to major 'Shiih' clergymen and means 'sign of God' in Farsi. Shiih Islam is one of two major branches of Islam, the other being 'Sunni' Islam. Shiihs believe that the successor of the Prophet Mohammad is *Immam Ali*, who is directly related to the Prophet. Sunnis believe that the *Caliphs*, who were Mohammad's companions, are his rightful successors. The difference has led to varying interpretations of Islam's holy book, the 'Quoran', and tensions between the Arab and Iranian worlds (Wikipedia 2005).

[21] Journalist Stuart Jeffries writes that Shirin Ebadi worked as a judge during the monarchy of the Shah. After the revolution, she was forced to perform clerical tasks in the courtroom she once presided over. According to Jeffries, Ebadi now critiques Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's regime. She has been described as a champion of women's rights and a thorn in the side of all three leaders (Jeffries 2006: 14). Jeffries explains that her international acclaim for winning the Nobel Peace Prize has saved her from the death threats of Iran's clerics. In his interview with her, Ebadi explains that she is able to live in Tehran, because she has bodyguards who protect her but also report all her activities to the government (2006: 15).

In response to the Shah's efforts to forcefully 'westernise' his people, Parvin reports that a group of intellectuals began promoting Marxism and called for a revolution that would create a democratic republic (2006: 2). Initially a communist revolutionary movement, Khosro claims it was "high-jacked" (1998: 15) into an Islamic revolution. As Parvin suggests, intellectuals constituted a small number of Iranians. The masses, on the other hand, were mobilised towards change through "the passion of religion" (Parvin 2006: 2). With backing from America and France, Ayatollah Khomeini was sent into Iran to assume power (Shams 2004: 35). Thus, the revolution can be divided into two stages: the first stage saw an alliance of liberal, leftist, and religious groups oust the Shah; the second stage, often named the 'Islamic Revolution', saw the Ayatollah's rise to power.

According to Parvin, Khomeini was responsible for the deaths of thousands of opponents, especially a large number of political prisoners who were executed at his orders in the summer of 1988 (Parvin 2006: 4). By appointing the hard-line cleric Khalkhali as revolutionary judge in 1979, Khomeini was also responsible for the execution of hundreds of government officials and military officers of the Pahlavi era without a trial (Parvin 2006: 3). The Iranian theocracy is organised in such a way that clergymen constitute large parts of the government, such as the Council of Guardians. Khosro explains that this Council ensures that the legislature adheres strictly to the laws of Islam. The chief clergyman, the Ayatollah, is referred to as the Supreme Leader and cannot be replaced until he dies[22] (Khosro 1998: 16).

[22] In fact, the Ayatollah's sphere of power remains to a certain degree after his death. For example, Khosro relates that the *fatwa*, or death sentence, proclaimed on the life of Salman Rushdie, the British Indian author who was accused by Khomeini of attacking the Quoran in his *Satanic Verses* (1988), cannot be

Iran analyst Christopher Hitchens describes the Ayatollah Khomeini's claim for supreme leadership in terms of a Moslem concept known as *velayat-e faqih*, or 'guardianship of the jurist'. In its original phrasing, says Hitchens, it can mean that the clergy assumes responsibility for orphans, for abandoned or untenanted property. According to Hitchens, Khomeini argued that *velayat* should be extended to the whole of society, making him the guardian and his subjects his trust (Hitchens 2005: 8). It is upon this concept that the theocracy of Iran builds its authoritarian claim and justifies all subsequent measures to uphold this claim. It is against this framework that freedom of expression, for example through arts such as film, is measured.

The contemporary Iranian social and political context

Since the 1979 Revolution in Iran, freedom of expression has been controlled by the Islamic[23] Republic's leaders and sometimes prohibited in the arts, politics and religion.[24] As Hitchens notes, "huge billboards and murals proclaim Iran an Islamic republic, under the eternal guidance of the immortal memory of Ayatollah Khomeini" (2005: 5). Through parades and paroles in the street, Hitchen says, the Revolutionary Guard and the

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revoked save through Khomeini himself. Therefore, the *fatwa* will remain until Rushdie's death (Khosro: 1998).

[23] Parvin defines the term 'Islamic Republic' as a theocracy in which the laws of the state are required to be compatible with the laws of Islam, while the state remains a republic. Parvin describes that in the case of Iran, many citizens and exiles who disagree with this form of government object to the elections that constitute the president and members of the legislature, as only those candidates approved by the clergy are allowed to run for office (Parvin 2006: 5).

[24] Human Rights Watch (2005), for example, reports that 35% of all internet content is censored, while internet journalists regularly face torture in detainment without charge. Amnesty International (2005) and UN Freedom of opinion and expression Rapporteur, Ligabo, (IRNA: 2005) report on human rights abuses towards groups such as Iran's largest religious minority, the Bahai's, who are denied access to tertiary education and frequently imprisoned, or oppositional political parties, such as the left-winged Mojahedins.

country's religious police ostensibly protect the Islamic Republic and its values from corrupt forces (2005: 5).

These values are difficult to define save, perhaps, through what they do not stand for. In other words, they are defined through the restrictions and rules that inform all aspects of society in Iran, such as the dress code[25]. On the one hand, Ladane Nasseri and Alan Eisenberg suggest that Iran does not stand for the "West" and everything associated with it should be avoided (2005: 27). For example, according to journalist Ben MacIntyre, listening to 'Western' music, and in some instances any form of music, is punishable by "anything from one night in prison to whip lashes" (2005: 3). On the other hand, all philosophies that are deemed threatening to Iran's understanding of Islam are actively destabilised. As a recent report by UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, Asma Jahangir, stated, the current Ayatollah Khamenei has addressed multiple government agencies, including the Revolutionary Guard, to monitor any and all activities of Iran's largest religious minority, the Baha'is[26]. In her report, Jahangir outlined the concerted effort of the country's media in disseminating misinformation about Baha'is through its main newspapers, TV and radio programmes. According to her report, an anti-Baha'i organisation is being supported in its efforts to exterminate the Baha'i Faith from Iran (UNHCR 2006). These efforts have been likened by members of the international media to the efforts taken against Jews in the Third Reich (Kimel 2006:

[25] For example, Hitchens points out that women in Iran must cover their head and their bodies including the neck, wrists and ankles. This is based on the teachings of the Quoran (Hitchens 2005: 5).

[26] The Baha'i Faith was born in Iran in 1844. The main tenets expressed by its Prophet-Founder, Baha'u'llah, is the unity of God, the essential unity of all religions and the unity of humanity. Some of its principles are the eradication of all forms of prejudice, the equality of women and men, the harmony of science and religion and universal education. Baha'is do not have clergy. (*The Baha'is,* 4 May 2006).

14). Hence, it can be said that the Islamic Republic of Iran bans the expression of any ideology or viewpoint that it deems threatening or detrimental to its existence[27]. 'Islamic values' are thus understood as those principles that uphold and support the Islamic Republic. They are articulated by the Iranian clergy and based on their interpretation of the values expressed in the Quoran. For the purpose of this study, I shall hereafter define them in terms of the controls, restrictions and prohibitions that the theocratic government of Iran places on its people through the law.

Nasseri and Isenberg observe that the present political climate in Iran is leaning towards more rigidity than ever before when commenting that: "the new president certainly aims to install a more rigid Islamic government. He's been sweeping away moderates and, in many cases, replacing them with incompetent, ideological cronies" (Nasseri & Isenberg 2005: 27). Nasseri and Isenberg are of course referring to President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who was appointed president in August 2005. Philip De Wett notes that Ahmadinejad is viewed as a "charismatic conservative". He has been widely criticised, especially by the Bush Administration in the United States for his outspoken, and often provocative, foreign policy position. His hostile stance on Israel and his persistence that Iran has a right to develop its own nuclear programme is perceived as particularly controversial (De Wett 2006: 20). Nasseri and Isenberg describe that the current President Ahmadinejad wants to define Iran's economic, cultural and political policies

[27] The Baha'i Faith itself accepts Mohammed as one of God's many teachers, ranking alongside Jesus Christ, Moses, Buddha, Krishna, Zoroaster and many other 'manifestations of God'. However, Baha'is believe that, since Mohammed's dispensation, a new teacher has appeared, the teachings of whom they adhere to (*The Baha'is,* 4 May 2006).

based on the belief that the Islamic messiah, *Imam Mahdi*[28], will soon return (Nasseri & Isenberg 2005: 27). This further demonstrates the extent to which religion is used to define society and determine political action in Iran. In my view, many scenes in *The Lizard* exhibit the authority of religion in Iran by portraying and ultimately satirising the supremacy of its guardians, the mullahs. For example, in one scene, the protagonist Reza is dressed as a cleric and drives down a one-way street. When the policeman realises that a mullah sits in the car, the transgression has no consequences. Here, the film accurately reflects life in Iran, where "traffic violations […] are very closely scrutinised. It is impossible for a normal person to circumvent them", says Dr. Riaz Hosseinabadi[29] (2006: 8).

However, according to Nasseri and Isenberg, Ahmadinejad and his government's efforts to promote, even more rigidly, the Islamic republic are met with resistance from the people of Iran (2005: 27). Journalist Scott MacLeod mentions that, although there are strong tensions within the Iranian polity in response to Ahmadinejad's appeals to nationalism, the Bush administration tends to unify Iranians against an impending military threat from America (2006: 18). Ebadi supports this view when she claims that, "US President George W. Bush has done nothing to help reforms in Iran. When Bush threatens Iran with a military attack, he actually gives the Iranian government an excuse to crack down on freedom seekers, under the guise of national security" (Ebadi cited in

[28] Shiiah Moslems await the coming of the *Imam Mahdi*, who is the 'Promised One'.

[29] Hosseinabadi uses a pseudonym to protect his identity. He is an Iranian-born author who lives abroad. Hosseinabadi regularly travels back to visit his family who are under the close and unpredictable scrutiny of the authorities for teaching English to children.

Shott 2006: 14). This highlights the significance of *The Lizard* as a film that articulates a subversive voice, which is home grown rather than imposed by America.

Hosseinabadi describes the internal forces that subvert the current regime when he explains that Iran has developed into a two-tiered society: "There are those few who genuinely believe in the form of religious state that currently rules Iran and those who believe religion and state should be separated[30] and suffer from the restrictions imposed on them" (2006: 9). The latter, Hosseinabadi claims, are willing to go to great lengths in order to undermine the system. Hosseinabadi mentions two subversive forces here. On the one hand he describes a number of government officials who ostensibly support the system but are corrupt in their execution of it. According to Hosseinabadi, their tactic is to ruin the reputation of the system by making it unbearable. As Hosseinabadi says, one policeman in Tehran "vowed to make life in Iran a living hell" (2006: 8). The rationale behind this thinking, Hosseinabadi describes, is a desire to create unbearable circumstances that would prompt another revolution towards democracy. The other force comes from Iran's youth who reject religion and have created an underground sub-culture of drugs, bootleg films and other illegal activities (Hosseinabadi 2006: 9).

Ebadi highlights a third subversive force when she refers to Iran's feminist movement. Ebadi directly criticises Ahmadinejad's interpretation of Islam, which he claims rejects the equality of women and men. She suggests that he will be powerless to confront the growing lobby of women in Iran because it is in his own interest to have accomplished

[30] According to Hitchens, the grandson of the late Ayatollah Khomeini, who founded the Islamic Republic, has expressed his desire for a separation of religion and politics (2005: 5).

women like herself defend the nation's international image (Ebadi cited in Shott 2006: 14).

Although Hosseinabadi and Ebadi believe that the majority of Iranians reject the current regime in Iran, a second revolution has not yet happened. I think this is because, as Parvin proposes, previously the masses were best mobilised for revolution by religion. However, religion, as Hitchens confirms, is now their very enemy:

> People are willing to die for religion. Now it is religion they hate. And they certainly don't want to die for it. Nobody wants to be the first to be blinded by acid or to have their face lovingly slashed by some Hezbollah enthusiast […] What else to do then, except tune into the new Iranian underground 'grunge' scene or kick back in front of the Italian porn channel or one of the sports and fashion and anti-clerical channels beamed in via illegal satellite from exiles in Los Angeles? (Hitchens 2005: 5)

Hitchens describes a passivity that, I suggest, is a result of a large number of Iranians being "jaded and increasingly apathetic towards the Islamic Republic" (Hosseini 2004: 4). I agree with Hosseinabadi (2006: 9) when he claims that the decline of religious conviction is paired with an increasing quest for wealth and material comfort. To mobilise against the Islamic Republic is to give up material comfort and risk anything from torture to death, a price many are not willing to pay. Great numbers of Iranians then,

can be said to be escaping into an illegal sub-culture that, by its unlawful nature, opposes the clerical establishment but which is also a political *cul de sac*.

While Iran is known as an 'Islamic Republic', Alan Caruba notes that two-thirds of the population, consisting of under-30 year-olds, are non-religious and do in fact reject religion because of its restrictive associations (Caruba 2004: 3). According to Caruba, young people are leaving the mosques in search of material prosperity because they see what is available to them in the outside world via illegal satellite television and the internet[31]. "They want good jobs and opportunities, but as long as the ayatollahs remain in control, they have few of either" (Caruba 2004: 4). A report on Iran by Borzou Daragahi notes that, "the economy remains in the control of conservative clerics and their allies who seized businesses at the beginning of the Revolution" (Daragahi cited in Caruba 2004: 15).

According to MacIntyre, one of Iran's only outlets for free speech is the internet in the form of 'weblogs', or online diary entries. This is because the internet is still difficult to control although the Islamic Republic has developed sophisticated censoring mechanisms (MacIntyre 2005: 30) and now bans high-speed internet to prevent its citizens from viewing video material (*Reuters*, 18 Oct 2006). The blogosphere[32] has become a political force in expressing what is prohibited publicly in Iran:

[31] MacIntyre reports that the more sophisticated internet censorship becomes the more sophisticated efforts become to circumvent these restrictions. Despite arrests and installation of filter software, the government has not yet been able to control the vast number of Iranian 'bloggers' who exchange their views freely on the internet (MacIntyre 2005: 30).

[32] This is computer terminology for the virtual space in which people post their diary entries and conversations on the internet.

> The collision between these two sides of Iran – hard-line versus online – represents the latest and most important battle over freedom of speech. The outcome will dictate not only the shape of Iran but also the future of the internet as a political tool, heralding a new species of protest that is entirely irrepressible (MacIntyre 2005: 3).

Despite attempts by the Iranian government to control what is said and how it is said, new and creative ways of communicating ideas freely find realisation. In Iran there are now more than one hundred thousand active 'weblogs' or individual online diaries covering every conceivable subject (MacIntyre: 2005). This is an indication of the vast need for freedom and diversity of expression. MacIntyre identifies some of the issues discussed on Iran's clandestine internet weblogs. These include the American pop scene and films, the freedoms and restrictions of women in society, new technologies such as the internet, Iran's politics towards the USA and Israel and finally human rights abuses in Iran (MacIntyre: 2005).

While weblogging is an illegal, though uncontrollable, activity in Iran (MacIntyre: 2005), filmmaking is not. As I will elaborate in the next section, this is because Iran's films are produced in decorum with and by support of the government. It is intriguing to examine why *The Lizard* was banned for insulting clergy (Azizi 2004: 5) when the clergy themselves initially endorsed it for production. I will now provide an overview of the cinema industry in Iran to help clarify why a ban was eventually pronounced.

Iranian cinema

In her analysis of Iran's film industry, McGill describes that films are subsidised and controlled by the government, which provides monopole[33] funding and production equipment for any film activity (2004: 60). Film critic John Trevor relates that, in Iran, clerics initially rejected cinema. During the Islamic Revolution in 1979, one hundred and eighty cinemas were shut or burned down, and more than three hundred people died in one arson attack on a cinema in Abadan in 1978. According to Trevor, soon after 1979 the clergy changed their attitude and cinema could be used as a way to uphold what he calls "Islamic values" (Trevor 2005: 15). As I mentioned previously, because Trevor does not specify what these values are and suggests that clergy define them on a case-by-case basis, I believe that they manifest themselves best in terms of their taboos. For example, Trevor highlights the severe strictures placed on Iranian filmmakers. They are not allowed to criticise the Islamic Republic, the clergy or Islam itself. Women are not to be depicted without their hair and body fully covered and actors and actresses are not allowed to touch (Trevor 2005: 15). McGill explains that the Iranian government has a rigorous process in place in terms of which every script is examined before it can be sanctioned (2004: 61). The filmmaking industry therefore reflects many societal restrictions including the dress code.

[33] McGill relates that, in Iran, there are no legally permitted independent production companies that could fund films or rent equipment to filmmakers. Production is facilitated through the government (2004: 60). I cannot, however, exclude the possibility that there might be a limited number of illegal production companies.

I will now look at two influential, contemporary Iranian directors to demonstrate that there is a degree to which filmmakers subvert the cleric's rules. While some critics, such as Tariq Ali, have argued that "it's what makes them some of the world's best directors" (2005: 38), in my view, they do so using techniques that differ from those Tabrizi adopts. Tabrizi uses a more direct approach and actually shows the vices and follies of a clumsy cleric, whereas other directors avoid directly criticising the system and instead expose the general injustices of the human condition.

I believe this makes their work more indirect and ambiguous. For example, critic Constantine Santas (2000: 34) relates that renowned director Abbas Kiarostami depicted suicide in *Taste of Cherry* (1997). However, this simple assertion is debatable. In order to explain this, I will briefly describe Kiarostami's background. According to Ali, Kiarostami sees cinema as an art form no different from a painting or a sculpture, with landscapes and settings being equally important as actors. As a graduate of Tehran University's Faculty of Fine Arts, he was first involved in painting, graphics and book illustrations, making his way into film by creating credit titles and commercials (Ali 2005: 38). His style has been described as "unique, but unpretentiously poetic with a philosophical vision, permeated by his fine arts background" (Saeed-Vafa 2002: 9). For instance, Kiarostami innovatively draws attention to the constructedness of film by challenging the linear narrative when he appears as himself in *Taste of Cherry* (1997)[34]. Kiarostami walks into the shot with his cameramen and their equipment. His protagonist, evidently relieved from his chores as an actor, offers Kiarostami a cigarette. However, in

[34] Please refer to the appended filmography for a summary.

the early part of the film, the reason for the protagonist's planned suicide is not given. Consequently, the audience has to speculate as to why the character is desperate. As the director says himself, "the untold or unexplained parts of the film are created in the minds of the audience" (Kiarostami cited in Santas 2000: 33). When the censors objected to the apparent portrayal of suicide in the film[35], Kiarostami explained that the film did not depict the act of suicide and was really about the different choices involved in living out each day (Kiarostami cited in Ali 2005: 39). Such deliberate ambiguities arguably allow films to fall through the censorship cracks.

In *The Lizard*, on the other hand, taboo subjects are treated in a more explicit manner. For instance, in one scene, Reza the protagonist has already established himself as the moral authority in the village and tells two young men in his congregation that they should not feel guilty for having feelings for young women: "If God didn't want you to commit sin, then he would not have given you the tools for it". The Farsi word *aalat*, used in the film, means both 'genitals' and 'tools'. Because explicit sexual references are forbidden in Iranian films (Trevor 2005: 15), this pun enables an authorised transgression of the clerically prescribed moral code, suggesting that God himself endorses the sexual drive. It is remarkable then that *The Lizard* was approved for production. In the next chapters I will be exploring the techniques that enable Tabrizi to put such words in the mouth of a cleric.

[35] Suicide is *haram*, or forbidden, in Islam (Shams 2004: 35).

Jafar Panahi is another influential Iranian filmmaker who weaves controversial topics into allegorical story lines but never addresses them explicitly. His film *Crimson Gold* (2003) is described as a "neo-realist masterpiece" that addresses the taboo of young men and women socialising, "while on the surface dealing only with economic inequalities" (Ali 2005: 38). Compelled by artistic restrictions then, many filmmakers rely on ambiguous storylines to introduce certain topics. This production style, known for its allegorical[36] mode and political commentary, is referred to as 'Iranian New Wave' (Trevor 2005: 17). According to Trevor, the Iranian New Wave finds its roots before the Revolution in 1979 when a group of filmmakers began opposing the mainstream 'escapist' cinema that dominated hitherto. While cinema under the Shah imported or emulated Hollywood films and musicals (Trevor 2005: 20), Daryoush Mehrjooi's *The Cow* (1970)[37] broke those conventions. The film portrays the mysterious death of the only cow in a village that drives its owner to madness. Trevor shows that since the 1979 Revolution, the Iranian New Wave has predominated and challenged the restrictions of the Islamic state (Trevor 2005: 17).

Unfortunately, the people of Iran never see some of the progressive Iranian films feted by international critics and festival juries. For instance, Panahi's *Crimson Gold* has yet to be screened in Iran. McGill argues that "the Iranian ministry of culture maintains a contradictory stance towards its international stars, celebrating such renowned names as

[36] According to Macy (2001: 18), often considered a sustained metaphor, allegory is a form of narrative or visual image whose literal or obvious meaning masks one or more other meanings, often with a didactic purpose. For example, in the film *White Balloon* (Jafar Panahi, 1995), a girl buys her own fish back from someone who has wrongfully acquired it. This is arguably an allegory for Iran buying its own oil from the British, who were perceived to have deceived Iran out of its own oil (Hosseinabadi 2006: 6)

[37] A summary of the film is available in the filmography.

Panahi and Kiarostami as success stories while remaining suspicious of their work with films often cleared for shooting only to be banned for release" (2004: 4).

The Lizard

Within the context of this restrictive film industry, I propose that *The Lizard* stands out as a bold film that challenges these restrictions on an entirely new level. It deviates from the neo-realist tradition and depicts clergy in ways that transgress the prescribed understanding of 'reverence' (Trevor 2005: 15) as stipulated by the government's rules and prohibitions. For example, the film portrays the mundane preoccupations of a cleric thinking of women and food versus the lofty concerns of the clerics depicted in *Under The Moonlight*. In the latter film, mullahs enter into theological debate while *The Lizard* essentially "ridicules" a mullah (Hosseini 2004: 2) by showing his worldly side in a country where clerics are not to be ridiculed. I suggest that these alternative images are achieved through narrative techniques that give license to transgression and result from the comedic frame that surrounds, and regulates, narrative elements.

In the next sections, I will examine what possibilities the comedic genre opens up in terms of authorised transgressions. In particular, I propose that *The Lizard* is a satirical comedy. I will focus on the critical aspect of satire to demonstrate how the images of clergy in the film subvert established images. In the next chapter, I will analyse the narrative devices Tabrizi uses to execute his satirical critique.

Laughing Secretly: The possibilities of comedy

In *The Lizard*, the film's protagonist, Reza, is a thief. Reza is nicknamed 'the lizard' because he is a very skilful climber. The film opens with a sequences depicting Reza as he is apprehended whilst climbing a wall. After being captured, he is called before Montazedi, the prison chief, who has no sense of humour and whose aim is to give Reza a hard time in prison. In the first scene, Montazedi is seated behind his desk and addresses the standing criminal from his sphere of authority. By calling the criminal into his office setting, Montazedi seeks to assert his authority and power. In this scene, Montazedi addresses Reza, whom he has just called incorrigible:

> **Montazedi:** […] I believe we have to go on a diet for our spiritual health too. A spiritual diet. So, this is not a prison and I'm not the head of this prison. This is a sanatorium.
>
> **Reza:** You don't say.
>
> **Montazedi:** And you are patients who come here to gain your spiritual health through my diet. I will send you to heaven, even if I have to use force.

At this point Reza laughs spontaneously while the prison chief snaps in response.

> **Montazedi:** What is so funny about that?

Taken aback by Montazedi's sharp words, Reza twitches.

> **Montazedi:** Nothing. The part about how you wanna send us to heaven by force was a little cute.

Montazedi tries to intimidate his inmate but Reza's sense of humour shields him from feeling fearful. As Bakhtin says, "fear never lurks behind laughter" (1984: 67). Bakhtin (1984) further proposes that laughter defies any authority that is built on fear. Andrew S. Horton echoes Bakhtin's claim and relates his theory of comedy to Bakhtin's notion of carnival by pointing out that both theories share the concept of the audience's "wish-fulfilment and social release" (1991: 13). Horton says that comedy and carnival create "freedom to turn the world as we know it upside down and inside out without fear of punishment, pain or consequence" (2000: 45). Similarly, Linda Hutcheon suggests that carnivalesque liberation creates a subversion of authority and hierarchy because the existence of an alternative order rules out the exclusive claim of any single order (Hutcheon 1988: 61). Reza's use of humour as a tactic of resistance exposes Montazedi's lack of authority. This has political implications because Montazedi represents the prison system, which is an arm of the Iranian government. To undermine him is to undermine a system of the government, and that is forbidden in Iranian cinema (Trevor 2005: 15). Because Montazedi is ridiculed in this scene, the film suggests that he is not as powerful as he would like to be, it can be translated into an emasculation of the prison system and thereby the Iranian government.

I believe that the above sequence reveals the film's satirical impulse because it exposes Montazedi's false sense of power and with it the "vices and follies of mankind" (Hutcheon 1985: 43). For Hutcheon, satire is directed at real life and its social and moral implications. Its tendency, Hutcheon proposes, is to lay bare weaknesses of a system with a view to improving it (1985: 43). Following Hutcheon's logic then, Reza's character

must not only expose Montazedi's wrongful claim to power but also provide a better alternative. He embodies such an alternative model successfully when he steals the mullah's clothes and becomes a popular cleric.

Before escaping however, Reza suffers in prison and tries to defy the system by attempting suicide. With its direct reference to suicide, the film transgresses the restrictions placed upon it by the Iranian film industry yet again. Reza is about to swallow a bottle of tablets when a fellow inmate sees him. The inmate grabs the glass from Reza and scolds the latter for bailing out of hardship. As the two fight over the bottle, it falls to the ground and breaks. Reza then tries to slit his wrists with the broken glass whereupon his fellow inmate faints, seeing Reza's blood. In the scene, Reza and his fellow prisoner explicitly speak of the intention to "commit suicide". Reza's intention is carried out in so far as he cuts his wrists and bleeds. This explicit portrayal of suicide, which is prohibited in Iranian cinema (Trevor 2005: 15), stands in contrast to the more ambiguous portrayal of suicide in *Taste of Cherry*. In Kiarostami's film, the reason for suicide is never given and the actual act is never portrayed. Rather, *Taste of Cherry* explores the inability of its protagonist to end his life and depicts his journey as he discovers the things that are worth living for.

Tabrizi's use of humour in Reza's suicide scene makes light of a subject, which Islam traditionally deems serious and forbidden (Trevor 2005: 15). According to Critchley, humour serves to take the meaning out of any act that is culturally significant (2002: 5). Hence, the scene can be said to belittle the Iranian clergy's stance on the subject:

Reza: Leave me alone!

Inmate: Damn you! You want to take these tablets and enjoy a peaceful death while we poor bastards have to sit in this misery called life? Damn you! Oh no, you're not gonna have it easy…

At the end of the fight, Reza is wounded but not dead. Because the prison infirmary is fully occupied, Reza is sent to a public hospital to recover from his attempted suicide. It is in the hospital that Reza sees an opportunity to escape. He steals the clothes of a mullah he shares a room with and sneaks out of the hospital unchecked. From this very moment a comedic masquerade begins, which constitutes a key narrative device through which Tabrizi challenges the predominant image of clergy in Iranian cinema. *The Lizard* portrays a cleric who is not really a cleric but someone from the opposite end of the social spectrum, namely a prisoner. Reza tries to emulate what he thinks a cleric should be like but fails in fulfilling all his clerical duties. His own cheeky and ignoble personality shines through the pious garb in humorous incongruity. Once he adopts his clerical disguise, Reza is humorously able to explore a new, ecclesiastical role and question previously held images of clergy. By wearing a 'mask' he is liberated from the confines of his own place in society. This links to Bakhtin's view of popular carnival where marginalised and oppressed people overthrow authority by turning the world "upside down" (1984: 67). While Bakhtin did not actually write about film himself, his theories have been applied to cinema, among others, by Naomi Greene. For example, Greene (1992) singles out Pier Paolo Pasolini's films, saying that they defy authority

through the use of abusive language, nicknames and references to the 'lower bodily functions'. These functions have been identified and praised by Bakhtin as an element of popular carnival. Reza also focuses on the most basic human needs when he thinks of food and women, whom he is very clumsy with.

Reza's clumsiness begins the moment he slips into the clerical garb and stumbles over his cloak. From the first minute then, it is established that Reza is a misfit in his role. Echoing his temperamental inadequacy, Reza is framed as a vulnerable figure. For example, in one scene, he tries to hitchhike to a train-station but is to the back of the frame as he tries to signal for cars to stop. In this shot, Tabrizi foregrounds the cars racing by and enhances their irreverent attitude towards the cleric by overriding Reza's voice with car sounds. I suggest that a reverential posture towards the cleric would be signalled by cars lining up to take him along. In *Under the Moonlight* for example, a passer-by wonders why a cleric would chose to use the subway when "he should be driven in a car". Reza is forced back onto the pavement each time a car speeds past him, almost knocking over his body. A lack of respect towards clergy is a gesture that is repeated throughout the film. For example, in another scene, a few youngsters trick Reza into believing that he is wearing his turban the wrong way around. This kind of 'sight-gag' is created through "the juxtaposition of incongruous elements" (Carroll cited in Horton 1991: 26), which, in this case, are 'the thief' and 'the cleric'. This sort of witticism directed against clerics constitutes a thematic leitmotif throughout the film and in turn manifests the film's politico-satirical attitude. Reza is openly jeered in the streets and,

according to Hosseini, this reflects the Iranian public's "secret disdain" (2004: 4) for clergy.

This kind of portrayal is certainly transgressive in the context of the Iranian film industry. However, strictly speaking, it is not a cleric but a criminal who is being disrespected. Therefore, there is a degree of license in his guise that authorises the clergyman to act the way he does. His mask enables him to be foolish, a license that Bakhtin refers to as carnival's 'anything goes' (1984) attitude. In my next chapter I will elaborate how this is significant in the context of masquerade.

Finally, Reza gets himself onto a train and makes his way towards a border city, where he hopes to meet up with his smuggler friends who are to help him out of Iran. In the train, Reza's duties as a cleric begin. He is placed in a compartment with a young lady and her mother. The mother confides the intimate details of her daughter's private life to the cleric whom, the film has established, she regards as a father figure. Reza tries to hide his attraction for the young lady but moves as close to her as he can in order to touch her hand. His body language is one of obvious attraction. For example, Reza does not take his eyes off the young lady. He smiles and leans over to her, taking her hand. "We mullahs are like fathers, young lady. You can tell me", he encourages her, as she hesitates to reveal the details of her married life. In this scene, Reza realises that he has immense power and opportunities to interact with whomever he wishes through his newly created position. As a prisoner he may not be able to share a compartment with two young ladies, but as a cleric he can. The potential to abuse this power becomes evident when he realises

that he can extract intimate details from the young lady towards whom he fosters doubtful motives. This sequence exposes the fact that clergy are in a state of unquestioned power that is not always and necessarily used for honourable purposes. As journalist Sebastian Usher says, Reza "revels in the privileges and power with which his fraudulent donning of clerical robes endows him" (2004: 14). Such images contribute towards the disintegration of the predominantly "pious" (Usher 2004: 14) images of clergy espoused in other Iranian media.

At one point, the train stops for prayers and one traveller comments on the lack of religious interest that has permeated Iranian society: "A train full of people and not even twenty stop to pray". The film's attitude is perhaps less satirical and more 'serious' in this scene. By this I mean that it accurately, rather than exaggeratedly[38], reflects the loss of faith in Iran. The scene faithfully echoes Caruba's previously mentioned reports on the lack of religious dedication in Iran (2004: 3). Ironically, Reza is one character who does not believe in God but is now among those who get out to pray. Of course he does this in order to maintain his disguise. This suggests that, beyond the freedom endowed to Reza, his clothes come with a certain responsibility. He can chose to live up to his responsibility or, as the train scene demonstrates, abuse his power. According to Hutcheon (1985: 31), irony is an important element of satire and I suggest that the ironic conceit at work in the potential abuse of power manifests the film's satirical attitude towards authority. This irony plays out between Reza's real and criminal character and his sudden responsibility in leading a religious congregation in prayer. The satiric nature

[38] Jonathan Schwarz suggests that one element of satire is a certain level of exaggeration, the lack of which renders a satire ineffective as, he proposes, is the case with *Dr. Strangelove* (Stanley Kubrick 1964). Schwarz suggests that the reality of life was actually worse than that portrayed in the film (2006: 2).

of *The Lizard* is therefore closely linked to Reza's masquerade and what I will later discuss as his parodic appropriation of clerical conventions.

When the train arrives at its destination, Reza is met by a congregation who are awaiting a mullah to head up their mosque. Unbeknownst to them, the mullah has fallen sick in Tehran and will not arrive. When Reza disembarks from the train they take him for the cleric they were expecting. Reza has been travelling with an immigration officer and a policeman for the last leg of his journey and quickly accepts his new identity. With the authorities close at his heels, he needs to lay low before attempting an escape. From then on Reza's sojourn in the border village begins. It is here that his inadequate behaviour as a mullah becomes increasingly apparent. The complications begin when he is asked to head up afternoon prayers, something he does not know how to do. Although he insists that someone else do it, the congregation prevails. He mumbles his way through the prayers, looking over his shoulder to copy others whom he is supposed to lead.

Reza's sermons are as unusual as his prayers. He refers to God as a "cool, heavy dude" and makes grammatical mistakes in trying to adapt his uneducated street Farsi into eloquent and scholarly Quoranic[39] language. In his first sermon, for example, he likens the many pathways to God to the many ways of breaking into a home. He uses his knowledge of the world as a thief, rather than theology, to connect to his congregation. The language he uses reflects his reality:

[39] The 'Quoran' is the most holy book of Islam, revealed by the Prophet Mohammed.

> **Reza:** Ummmm…..In the name of God. Today that I'm hanging out with you respectful citizens for the first time, I am very happy to be present in this radiant crowd.

Reza goes on to share his philosophy that there are as many pathways to God as there are people: for the sinner and the saint alike, for rich and poor, for high and low. The film clearly shows that his sermons are met with enthusiasm and support by the ordinary townsfolk. They contradict the message of Montazedi who, as a representative of the government, expresses his view that sinners cannot change. In the first scene of the film, he says to Reza, "people like you will never reform". Reza opposes the 'official' voice expressed through the prison chief, Montazedi, and offers a new 'official' voice. His message is that everyone can reform. I would say that Reza's character is a 'parodic' appropriation of a mullah. In short, Hutcheon (1985) defines parody as a text, in the broadest sense of the word[40], that simultaneously emulates yet also differentiates itself against another, earlier text. That difference, Hutcheon says, is always ironic but not necessarily critical of the parodied text. It can, however, be critical of the real world and thereby express a satirical attitude towards something outside of the textual world. I believe that in *The Lizard*, Reza's 'parodic' embodiment of authority is directed at the powers that be in Iran since he differs from Montazedi's authoritative character. Montazedi echoes predominant images of authorities in Iranian media and represents the current system of that country. Montazedi is the link to the 'real' world and to what Hutcheon calls satire's "extramural" target (1985: 31). Simply by being 'different' then,

[40] According to Hutcheon (1985), 'text' is understood broadly and includes all forms of art, such as paintings, sculptures, dances or music as well architecture or more conventional text forms such as literature or film. I will discuss parody in more detail in the next chapter.

Reza offers a satiric posture towards established forms of authority. His unique sermons and interactions are spaces that host this new posture.

Reza expresses this posture and his message of universal salvation from the pulpit of his mosque, where more and more people come to hear him speak. Meanwhile, in the evenings, Reza tries to slip out into the nearby town centre to track down his friends from the underground who are to help him escape. One day, members of his congregation discover him. They mistake his nightly visits to the bars and shady parts of town as an attempt to distribute money and clothes to the poor. This touches them deeply. Ironically, whatever Reza does, his congregation becomes more devout. Even the town thug, who began by cursing the cleric, comes back into the fold and begins worshipping in the mosque. I believe that this reformation contributes to the film's overarching ironic message in suggesting that criminals are not lost souls. On the contrary, they might know more about faith than the average mullah. In contrast to the mullahs in *Under the Moonlight,* whose role is that of scolding and moralising, Reza functions as an understanding friend to satirical effect and questions the existing definition of a mullah. I expand on this irony in my next chapter, when I discuss parody as a "process of revising" (Hutcheon1985: 11) established images, such as those of the Iranian clergy.

Reza's days in the village soon come to an end when Montazedi finds a clue that leads him onto Reza's tracks. He finally reaches the village that Reza preaches in. Just before Reza is apprehended, he gives one last sermon and tears up. Filled with comic moments and humorous dialogue, the film takes a sudden turn towards the tragic. The mood of the

musical score changes and Reza's sermon takes its most urgent and profound form. Instead of focusing on the light and sometime grotesque subjects of life, such as food, relationships or everyday concerns, he focuses on the noble nature of humanity, which can defy station, rank and attire. He makes his final statements:

> **Reza:** […]'Man is worthy of honour for his soul and his humanity. Beautiful attire does not reflect his worth.' […]

In the last shots Reza is escorted to a police car. Montazedi realises that Reza has reformed and decides not to handcuff the man he has been chasing down so passionately. The film ends on a low note for a man who has changed the lives of hundreds of people for the better.

Out of this simple summary of a complex and clearly humorous film, I would suggest that two key points emerge. Firstly, the need to look at the nature and possibilities of comedy and secondly, the need to examine the film's sudden deviation from comedy into tragedy[41]. In this section I will identify *The Lizard* as a comedy and briefly investigate the possibilities that genre cinema and specifically comedy enable in terms of providing a platform on which norms may be transgressed. I will then establish that the specific order of comedy evidenced in *The Lizard* is satire. This will lead into an analysis of satire's

[41] I am referring to Gustav Freytag's model of tragedy and will elaborate on it in the next chapter. In brief, he describes tragedy as that which ends in what he calls a *catastrophe,* regardless of the protagonist's initial rank, which Aristotelian tragedy stipulates must be high (Freytag 1968: 135). I suggest that the film has a complex relationship to tragedy, because ostensibly Reza's station begins low, rises high and ends low again. On another, spiritual level, he begins Godless and low and rises to the heights of faith.

main function in the context of this film. In the next chapter I will address the genre-crossing of comedy with tragedy within my analysis of the film's parodic manifestations.

As mentioned before, the use of comedy as a genre is significant in the context of Iranian cinema because comedy is not a prevalent form. In the past, comedy was occasionally found as an element of Iranian film but not frequently as a genre[42]. Behzad Eshqi explains that while humour is vital to Iranian audiences, sustaining it across an entire narrative difficult:

> Producers of Iranian comic films have claimed that making Iranian people laugh is much harder than making them cry, because they have had a tragic past and have always been suffering from despotism and colonialism and are more ready to cry (Eshqi 2005: 5).

This would tie in with Hamid Dabashi's view that contemporary Iranian cinema is an example of what he defines as 'national cinema'. For him, "national cinema is that which emerges out of national trauma" (2005: 40). In the light of Iran's relatively recent revolution this could well be one reason for the lack of comedy in Iranian cinema.

[42] For example, comic moments were present to create a break from sentimental, nostalgic scenes to cheer up the audience in *Qaysar* (Kimiai, 1969). *Qaysar* is essentially a tragedy but it is not devoid of humour. In one scene, the protagonist creates a break in the film's tragic story and makes the audience laugh with a joke. A summary of *Qaysar* can be found in the filmography.

Yet another reason why the use of comedy becomes significant in relation to Iranian cinema is the film's unmatched box-office success[43]. It suggests that masses of Iranian viewers do in fact respond to comedy when they have a chance to see it. I believe that the unprecedented acclaim *The Lizard* received is linked to the fact that audiences were "relieved" (Hosseini 2004: 5) to be able to laugh at their "discontent with corrupted and dishonest religious figures" (Massoumi 2005: 45). Horton also argues that comedy, in some circumstances, functions as relief. He specifically points out that comedy creates "social release" (1991: 13) from the status quo. Stephen Neale, in turn, suggests that an important aspect of genre cinema is that we come to it with a certain expectation that is then addressed. For example, in a thriller we expect to be on the edge of our seat while a heroine manoeuvres her way through a scary old house. Neale says that we enjoy the ride, knowing that she will ultimately come out of this experience unharmed (1993: 49). In a comedy then, we expect to laugh at someone's misfortune because we are induced to do so and are aware that laughing is a licensed response.

According to Neale, genre cinema in general offers a space where different drives and desires are mobilised. For example, Neale believes that men's pleasures are founded on repressed homosexual voyeurism. He claims that in heterosexual, patriarchal societies the male body cannot be marked explicitly as the erotic object of another male look and is therefore motivated some other way. Neale says, "the mutilation and sadism are marks both for the repression involved and of a means by which the male may be disqualified, so to speak, as an object of erotic contemplation and desire" (1993: 14). According to

[43] Various news sources (*Agence France Press* 2004, *Aljazeera* 2004, *Cineblog* 2005) confirm that *The Lizard* "received the highest box office takings in Iranian cinema history" (Massoumi 2005: 45), however I have not been able to find actual figures.

Neale, a male viewer has the license to enjoy seeing the eroticism in another male, because he is watching a socially accepted form of eroticism when he views bodies engaged in combat. In other words, the erotic look at the male body is disavowed by the complexity of the forms of looking that are at work. In Neale's view then, genre cinema can facilitate licensed voyeurism. While the example of repressed homosexuality specifically addresses voyeurism of the eroticised male body, it is the legitimacy of a voyeuristic act, which is at stake in Neale's description and for my reading of *The Lizard*. Audiences enjoy a form of legitimized, political voyeurism when they watch a cleric stumble and fall in *The Lizard*. Being prohibited from critiquing the clerical establishment in any other way, Reza's humorous character of a criminal mullah authorises the enjoyment of 'forbidden' images. The "desire to laugh at mullahs" (Hosseini 2004: 2) is 'secret' because it is prohibited in the Iranian context (Trevor 2005: 15), yet it is authorised by virtue of the horizon of expectations the genre produces for spectators. Scott Cutler Shershow suggests that the expectation of laughter in comedy is linked to the expectation of catharsis. He is aware that "Aristotle's doctrine of *katharsis* was linked specifically to tragedy" but believes "that comedy purged 'pleasure and laughter' from its audience as tragedy purged pity and fear" (1986: 28). Laughter or mockery is also authorised through Reza's masquerade. The cloak symbolises the fact that viewers are technically laughing at a prisoner rather than a mullah. This indicates that, in principle, no clerics are being mocked and therefore no laws of the Iranian society or film industry are being transgressed.

In the case of a comedy like *The Lizard* then, Neale's 'drives and desires' (1993:14) can be identified as something socially forbidden, which the viewer is licensed to see and feel through narrative techniques such as masquerade. In the next chapter, I will address masquerade alongside the aforementioned technique of parody as a space in which dichotomies can be inverted or negated and boundaries transgressed.

In exploring how certain comedic forms and performance styles create spaces of authorised transgression it is also useful to refer to Kathleen Rowe. From the perspective of feminist film theory, Rowe argues that comedies, even within the Hollywood machinery, can offer alternative, empowered images of women that challenge established ones. She writes about women who have emerged from the mould that a cinematic tradition has cast for them and explains that humour is used to challenge the patriarchal norms that are deemed to be preordained. For example, Rowe highlights the case of Roseanne Barr by arguing that "Roseanne's humour aggressively attacks whomever and whatever would denigrate fat, poor women: husbands, family and friends, the media, or government welfare policies" (Rowe 1995: 65). Rowe argues that many actresses, such as Roseanne, transgress conventions and offer alternative images to those presented in conventional Hollywood product (Rowe 1995: 67). As with Neale's analysis of genre as a space where different, socially taboo, drives and desires are mobilised, Rowe describes comedy as a space in which societal norms are transgressed and their boundaries explored by challenging established media images.

Yet in his analysis of comedy in Iran, Eshqi proposes that comedy requires a certain liberal environment which is not a given in Iran. He further suggests that for comedy to thrive where freedom of expression is limited, comedy tends to take a certain form:

> Comic cinema needs security and freedom in order to follow a critical discourse and in closed societies it distances itself from its truth and inclines toward satire and ridicule […] Freedom for flourishing comic cinema has been lacking (Eshqi 2005: 5).

Therefore, Eshqi proposes that in a context such as Iran, where freedom for critical discourse is not available, comedy takes the form of satire and ridicule. Ziva Ben-Porat echoes Hutcheon's (1985) definition of satire as critique of the social and moral conditions in the real world. He says that satire targets the "non-modelled reality" whereas parody targets the "modelled reality" (1979: 247). In the next chapter, I will focus on parody's modelled, or as Hutcheon describes "intramural" (1985:43), nature as a space for authorised textual transgression. For now it is important to focus on satire's "expository role in making a negative statement about its extra-textual target" (Hutcheon 1985: 44).

According to Highet (1962:168), irony is one device that facilitates satire's criticism of people, institutions, attitudes and events. I believe that in the light of the contemporary political moment in Iran, the irony of a criminal leading a people to salvation is one reason why this film might be construed as an exercise in satire directed against the

clergy. In a scene towards the end of the film, Reza addresses a crowd of prisoners who do not know of his real identity. Reza's voice is emotional and he tears up. At this point the film shifts from a comic to a more dramatic register. This shift signals the transformation of comedy into tragedy. Here, Reza summarises what he has learned during his experiences in the village. He says, "God doesn't only belong to good people! Our God is the God of the criminals as well. And it is only God who doesn't look upon people differently". In another scene, Reza mirrors this humility on the level of *mis-en-scene* when he descends from the pulpit and physically places himself at one level with his congregation. His congregation is deeply touched by this act. Both examples show a criminal refining his own character and deepening the faith of others. This irony shatters the hierarchy of clerical authority towards ordinary Iranian people and thus satirically criticises the image of authority upheld in Iran's official media.

Criticising Mullahs: Satire reveals

> A satire done well is a film about truth. This makes it sometimes difficult to view, but when a satire is working right you'll find yourself laughing and saying, 'it's funny because it's true! (Altman in *Satire Screening Room* 2002: 2).

> Satire is not supposed to be the kind of Comedy Lite you can find on every other channel. Satire assumes the audience has a brain. Good satire has you laughing so you don't start crying—and, in the end, maybe it gets you thinking about just what […] is going on in this strange world (Moore 2004: 4).

While Altman's quote addresses the expository role of satire paired with humour, Moore's definition goes one step further in suggesting that satire encourages audiences to think critically. I propose that satire, in *The Lizard* (2004), is a tool to instigate critical thought and influence action by offering an alternative model of reality. In the context of the contemporary Iranian cultural and political climate, a sinner who becomes a moral authority must emerge from such an alternative reality.

According to Highet, the literary genre of satire derives its name from the Latin word *satura*, or medley and hotch-potch (1962: 49). According to him, through devices like irony, overstatement, puns and sharper ones like sarcasm and hoaxes, it criticises people, institutions, attitudes, events and circumstances. Highet defines satire's purpose to "distort, to belittle, to wound" (1962: 69). William Thrall et al provide a well-rounded definition in the context of this study of *The Lizard* when they describe satire as a manner, which "blends a critical attitude with humour and wit to the end that the human institutions or humanity may be improved" (1960: 436). *The Lizard* certainly blends humour and wit with what I have argued is a politically critical attitude. Hutcheon further extends the literary conceptions of satire when she defines its target to lie outside the realm of the text (1985: 43), namely in the real world. In the case of *The Lizard* then, the target can be defined as Iran's clerical establishment.

James Nichols distinguishes three different forms of satire. Firstly, he identifies indirect satire, which is the most characteristic form. Secondly, he identifies direct satire, which consists of invective, deliberate and direct overstatement such as a direct frontal assault

upon a victim. I believe that with Tabrizi we find a combination of the two forms of satire, which Nichols calls the third, or mixed kind (1971: 45). On the one hand, the assault is direct when the town thug insults Reza and uses physical violence to attack the man of God. On the other hand, Tabrizi uses what Highet calls a "more subtle variant of the satirical monologue in which the satirist is speaking out of a mask" (Highet 1962: 48). I would suggest that Highet's 'mask' produces the critical distance Hutcheon alludes to in theorising satire's procedures. She suggests that satire uses 'distance' to make a negative statement about the object of critique.

This distance can firstly be defined in terms of the narrative technique of parody that Tabrizi uses to satirise the clergy. Hutcheon describes parody as "difference at the heart of similarity" (Hutcheon 1985: 31)[44]. As the next chapter will discuss, *The Lizard* parodies other films, clerical conventions and genres. Hutcheon observes that satire frequently uses parodic art forms for expository or aggressive purposes when it desires textual differentiation as its vehicle (1985: 43). Hutcheon, therefore, stresses the importance of 'difference' between the parodied text and parodic text. This difference, she says, is created through ironic distance or 'inversion' (1985: 6). In *The Lizard,* ironic inversion challenges the many dichotomies thematised in the film. For example, in one scene, which parodies Iran's infamous clerical television discussions[45], a TV cleric introduces the idea of studying Quentin Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction* for spiritual reasons:

[44] In other words, a parody both resembles, and most importantly differs from, another text. I elaborate on parody in the next chapter.

[45] Iran regularly broadcasts clerical discussions on various topics. According to transcripts of the Middle East Media Research Institute (2004-2006), such topics include contemporary developments in the arts, sciences and politics. Clerics discuss these topics against their interpretation of the Quoran in order to articulate a stance towards issues presented.

"We will continue our discussion of salvation in ultimate darkness by reviewing the movie *Pulp Fiction*…As Tarantino says: I want to be where God wants me". By allowing 'Western values', like those in Tarantino's film, to inform the cleric's understanding of Islam, the dichotomy of 'West' versus 'Islam' is undermined. Thus, although Tabrizi imitates clerical television discussions, he shifts the usual terms of debate that would render Tarantino's films ungodly. Tabrizi is a satirist who speaks out of the 'mask' of parody with its ironic "difference" (Hutcheon 1985:6) from predominant images.

Secondly, when Hutcheon speaks of "distance" and Highet refers to "speaking out of a mask", this mask can be taken literally because the criminal masks as a cleric. This allows him to get away with preaching about "Brother Tarantino". Reza is able to pull this off because of his theological ignorance. Therefore, satire's other chief vehicle in *The Lizard* is masquerade. As in the case of parody, irony plays a role in masquerade. It is situated between Reza the irreverent criminal and Reza the sincerely pious man. I propose that the devices of parody and masquerade create a licensed space in which dichotomies can be inverted. I will now proceed to examine Tabrizi's satirical use of parody and masquerade.

CHAPTER TWO: PARODY AND MASQUERADE

In the previous chapter, I demonstrated that *The Lizard* is a satirical film that thematises certain Iranian social taboos in a filmmaking environment that principally forbids and censors the depiction of their transgressions. I established that the film is able to achieve this through its use of comedy, which I have demonstrated is atypical within the Iranian context. Drawing on Highet and Hutcheon's definitions of satire, I determined that the film deploys two key strategies, namely parody and masquerade, in constructing its satirical critique of the clergy. I will now proceed to investigate how parody and masquerade create alternative, satirical images of Iran's clergy.

Parody: Difference at the heart of similarity

I previously said that parody is different from satire because it is "intramural" (Hutcheon 1985: 12), or text-oriented. In other words, a parody both resembles, and differs from, another text. This could be a literary text, a film, a piece of art or any other form of creative expression (Hutcheon 1985: 13). Hutcheon suggests that parody distinguishes itself from other related techniques, such as pastiche or imitation, by 'transcontextualising' a text (Hutcheon 1985: 12). She elaborates on this idea by referring to Mel Ramos' opus. Ramos reworks Ingres' 1814 painting of a woman on her bed, *La Grande Odalisque*. In his 1973 *Plenti-Grand Odalisque*, Ramos paints a modern woman lying in the same pose on her bed. Hutcheon suggests that through this transcontextualisation of a woman on her bed, Ramos implies that what we find erotic today may, indeed, not have changed since the nineteenth century (1985: 47). This

example illustrates that, with parody, original forms or texts exist in the fabric of new ones. Irit Rabinowitz describes this process as a form of "artistic recycling" (1980: 241). Hutcheon argues that parody is organised through the repetition of a code but with 'difference'.

> Although two texts […] have accord and intimacy, it is the fact that they differ, rather than simulate, that makes it a parody and not, say, imitation, quotation or allusion (1985: 31).

According to Hucheon then, the reader's awareness of the difference between two texts is activated through irony (1985: 51). Irony therefore contrasts the new text from the old one. Hutcheon identifies two functions of this irony. One is the semantic contrast between what is stated and what is meant[46], and the other is its pragmatic function of judging either the text it was based on or a social phenomenon thematised by it (Hutcheon 1985: 53). Although parody is one text's comment on another, it is frequently used with a satirical purpose to criticise and correct a societal phenomenon. In the case of Ramos, Hutcheon suggests that his parody of Ingres satirises the narcissism of modern woman (1985: 16).

[46] Hutcheon is aware of the problematic nature of the structuralist and post-structuralist debate on the producers of texts. Yet she proposes that, when we call something parody, "we posit some encoding intent to cast a critical and differentiating eye on the artistic past, an intent that we, as readers, then *infer* from the text's (covert or overt) inscription of it" (1985:84). Responding to the Romantic emphasis on the originating creator, says Hutcheon, critical formalism talks of *implied* authors, yet she believes that the receiver is the ultimate key to "getting" what is implied and may not do so (1985:84), therefore she suggests talking about an *inferred* encoder.

It is precisely this relationship of 'intramural differentiation' in the service of 'extramural criticism' that characterises satire and parody in *The Lizard*. I propose that the film uses various levels of parody to satirise the role and significance of the clergy in the contemporary Iranian context. *The Lizard* evidences at least three levels of parody which I shall focus on: firstly, its relationship to previous films with similar story lines; secondly, its parodic representations of clerical speech types, or conventions; and thirdly, the film's crossover between comedy and tragedy or, as Hutcheon calls it, "genre-crossing" (1985: 105).

Angels and lizards

There is a tradition of filmic narratives that deal with characters escaping from situations by disguising themselves. In an interview with Ryan Haidarian of the National Film and Video Foundation of South Africa, director Tabrizi specifically called *The Lizard* a narrative sibling of David Mamet's[47] *We're No Angels* (1989) (Haidarian 2005: 1). Mamet's comedy is a remake of an earlier film by the same name, directed in 1955 by Michael Curtiz. In this section I will look at the development of this narrative motif from Curtiz's film through to Mamet's and finally Tabrizi's film. In doing so, I plan to trace the key similarities and, most importantly, the key differences between these texts. I should note that Curtiz based his film on a Broadway comedy by Albert Husson, which evidences striking similarities to Charlie Chaplin's *The Pilgrim* (1923)[48]. Similarly, Mamet's *We're No Angels* preceded a film of a similar storyline called *Nuns on the Run*

[47] Normally, films are referred to in terms of their director. Because screenwriter David Mamet's fame has overshadowed director Neil Jordan, *We're No Angels* (1989) is generally referred to as 'Mamet's film'.
[48] In this short film, an escaped convict, known as 'the tramp', is mistaken for a pastor in a small-town church. More details are available in the filmography.

(Lynn, 1990). To contain the scope of my analysis, I will only focus on Curtiz and Mamet's films in relation to *The Lizard*.

I will begin by discussing the film's *syuzhets*. *Syuzhet* is a term used by Bordwell that refers to the actual arrangement and presentation of the story. It is the patterning of the story or plot[49], which arranges events according to specific principles (Bordwell 1985: 8).[50] In Curtiz's *We're No Angels,* three convicts escape from a prison on 'Devil's Island' and arrive at a nearby French colonial town. Escaping a police search, they are able to disguise themselves as three of the Island's three hundred parolees. Initially, they plan to steal supplies and clothing from the local store and make their way onto a big ship that will take them to Paris. However, they begin to take a liking to the store owner's family, especially the young daughter and decide to stay and help the family overcome their difficulties. In the end, the three convicts have been transformed. Almost boarding the ship for Paris, they decide they can always escape again next year and turn around to return to prison on their own accord.

In Mamet's version, two convicts on death row escape the clutches of a relentless warden. The town launches a huge search for the convicts. At the same time, the local monastery awaits the arrival of a couple of noted priests. The convicts find refuge behind

[49] Paraphrasing E.M. Forster, Janet Burroway distinguishes between these two terms in the following manner: "A story is a series of events recorded in their chronological order. A plot is a series of events deliberately arranged so as to reveal their dramatic, thematic and emotional significance" (Burroway 2000: 39).

[50] The principles governing all three *syuzhet*s evidence a three-act structure of set-up, development or conflict and resolution. I will refer to this structure in all three films without evaluating it. After all, as Lapsley and Westlake say, "the classic narrative is a historically contingent form, one road out of several that could have been taken" (1998: 131) and my study does not aim to appraise structural choices.

the monastery walls when they are mistaken for the awaited priests. Their plan becomes to escape the country through a religious procession that normally crosses the nearby border to Canada. One of the convicts falls for Molly, a single and therefore frowned-upon mother of a handicapped child. The other falls deeply in love with religion. Just as they are about to escape through the procession leading into Canada, a third convict arrives and creates havoc thus preventing their successful border crossing.

In all three plots, convicts are thrown into situations that positively influence their character arcs and those they meet. Curtiz portrays three convicts, while Mamet portrays two and Tabrizi narrows the story down to one. All three films have settings that place the sphere of freedom close within the protagonists' reach. In *We're No Angels* (1955), a ship sits in the harbour. If the convicts reach the ship, they effectively reach Parisian ground and with it freedom. In *We're No Angels* (1989) and *The Lizard*, the convicts hide in small towns that lie on the border to other countries. Crossing over the border will liberate them. In all three films the protagonists' aim is to escape. In the second act, they interact with secondary characters and, in the course of their involvement, reassess their aim. In *We're No Angels* (1955), the three convicts help their host family rid themselves of two oppressive and selfish relatives. In Mamet's version, the convict's interactions with the town's estranged prostitute affect the way others view marginalised people. In *The Lizard,* the convict resuscitates a congregation and becomes religious in the course of it. In all three narratives, the characters fulfil a purpose outside of their initial aim. Their transformation is best symbolised in the last shot of Curtiz's film when the three convicts walk away with halos on their heads.

Following this short comparison it becomes clear that, although *The Lizard* is related to Curtiz's 1955 film, it most closely resembles Mamet's more recent *syuzhet*. Both feature clergymen in a border-town with escape plans that are ultimately frustrated. In both films convicts hide behind the walls of religious establishments and their clerical garb endows them with societal power that transcends that of a criminal. In both narratives the protagonists speak in uneducated street-language and leave a lasting moral impact on the secondary characters. Both *We're No Angels* (1989) and *The Lizard* portray a female character who is disgraced by society, at least one eager and well-intentioned seminarian and a mysterious child who does not speak.

These similarities are important to establish in order to highlight the differences between the films and evaluate their significance for a satirical reading of *The Lizard*. For that reason, I will now examine the narratives' *fabula*s, a word Bordwell uses to describe the cues and perceptions received by the viewer from the story or *syuzhet* (1985: 9)[51]. While this perception may vary from person to person, I support the claims I make about each *fabula* with evidence from the filmic text. By comparing the *fabulas* I will establish the "ironic distance" (Hutcheon 1985: 49) between Tabrizi's parodic text and Mamet's parodied text. I will prove that *The Lizard* differs most strikingly from its predecessors on the level of *fabula* and will discuss the implications that follow from this departure.

[51] Bordwell describes *fabula* as the viewer's internal perception of the diegetic world he or she is forming (1985: 9)

To begin with, Mamet's protagonists, Ned and Jim, do not have allies to help them escape the country. However, in *The Lizard*, Reza communicates with an array of secondary characters from the underworld who intend to help him out. Here, the difference lies in the fact that, in Tabrizi's film, Reza has many resources while Mamet's characters do not. On the one hand, this distinction thematises the existence of an 'underworld' that co-exists with the official world in contemporary Iran. This renders *The Lizard* more than just an imitation but rather a "trans-contextualisation" (Hutcheon 1985: 12). In other words, Mamet's story is 'transplanted' into another time and society. It is altered in order to reflect the context in which *The Lizard* is being watched. This context is contemporary Iran with its 'official' world based on a clerical interpretation of Islamic laws and an alternative world, which exists illegally and independently of the 'official' world (Hitchens 2005: 5 and MacIntyre 2005: 30). On the other hand, I believe that the difference between the two *fabulas* accentuates *The Lizard's* religious focus. Even though Reza has the advantage of having ties to the underworld he fails to escape. I propose that this points to Reza's relative powerlessness in relation to 'fate', 'destiny' or 'the supreme will of God'. By the end of the film, Reza actively aligns his will to 'the greater' one, or to God's.

In both films religion plays a great role. Firstly, it provides a refuge for those who have transgressed the laws of society. Tabrizi hides a mullah in a mosque, while Mamet hides priests in a monastery. Secondly, religion validates the existence of criminals. This is best demonstrated in *We're No Angels* (1989) when one character cautions others for judging anyone lest they be angels in disguise. He recites:

> Keep on loving each other as brothers. Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing, some people have entertained angels without knowing it (Hebrews 13:1-2).

In the above quote the emphasis lies on how a community should treat strangers (or convicts), rather than the other way round. Mamet's film strongly echoes Curtiz's original *fabula* in this respect. For in the 1955 version of *We're No Angels,* the convicts' character arcs are defined by their host family's actions; their grace and hospitality towards the convicts. At a crucial turning point at the end of act one, the store owner asks the convicts to stay for Christmas dinner. This frustrates the prisoners' plan to kill the family and loot the store. Instead they begin to develop trust and a genuine liking for their host family. Their character arcs begin to undergo a transformation in the second act. By the third act they help rid the family of its demons; a cousin who has terrorised the family and his son. In the last shot of the film they return to prison with halos on their heads, suggesting that they could, in fact, have been angels in disguise. In that film, the antagonists remain hostile towards the three prisoners, treat them with suspicion and are thereby rejected by the convicts. Therefore, it is the family who is active in bringing about the prisoners' transformation.

In the case of *The Lizard*, however, the act of effecting transformation shifts from the secondary characters to Reza himself. Reza preaches that there is a pathway leading to God "even for the prisoner". By being compassionate to others, Reza wins the love of his

congregation. In the resolution, Montazedi finds a different Reza than the one he knew at the beginning of the film. Montazedi apprehends a man who has found God and has helped others to find Him too. In contrast to both versions of *We're No Angels* then, *The Lizard* disempowers secondary characters and empowers the protagonist. The aforementioned biblical reference is ironically inverted in *The Lizard,* where it is Reza's actions that effect change. In my opinion, this is a strong call for Iran's clergy to be proactive and make some introspective changes. On the pragmatic and satirical level, this ironic shift in responsibility suggests that In Iran the power to transform lies with the clergy and not with the people.

Both *We're No Angels* (1989) and *The Lizard* portray a female character who breaks society's taboos but ultimately finds acceptance. In Mamet's film, Molly is a single mother of a child. The film depicts townspeople rejecting her. They do not socialise with her and gossip behind her back. The convicts, Ned and Jim, find it easy to be compassionate towards someone they can identify with because they are 'transgressors' themselves. Thus they use the power of their clerical garb to reinstate Molly into society. In *The Lizard,* Faezeh is a divorcee. In Iranian society divorced women are considered second-class citizens. Iranian analyst Farideh Farhi describes that in 1979 the Family Protection Law was abrogated, effectively denying women the right to divorce and re-establishing men's unlimited right of divorce (Farhi 1998: 12). *The Lizard's* narrative makes it clear that Faezeh initiated her divorce, which makes her doubly transgressive.

The most striking ironic difference between *We're No Angels* (1989) and *The Lizard* is that Faezeh is not a social outcast. While Mamet's world is still heavily under the influence of a judgmental doctrine, Tabrizi's world is far more complex. Tabrizi depicts a dual process that consists of the disintegration of clerical power on the one hand and the rebuilding of a new clerical paradigm on the other. The first process is marked by a group of secondary characters who ignore, jeer or threaten Reza the cleric and refrain from worshipping in the mosque. The second process is manifested through a growing congregation who are attracted to Reza's interpretation of Islam. The congregation that Reza is building includes 'transgressors' such as Delangiz, the town thug. Delangiz is a large man and is always framed looking down on the shorter Reza. In his first scenes, Delangiz is characterised as a rough, disrespectful gangster who tells Reza to go back to where he came from. His disdain for clergy and hostility towards Reza is expressed through his dialogue when he says, "Piss off, or I'll kick you in the…" Reza's only choice is to answer back in the language that Delangiz understands namely with a fistfight. After Reza wins the fight, Delangiz develops respect and awe for the mullah and returns to the mosque with his entire criminal entourage. In the mosque Delangiz is framed looking up at the influential Reza on his pulpit. In this scene, the *mis-en-scene* accurately reflects the character's internal developments. Unlike the Iranian clergy, Reza's doctrine embraces everyone, criminal and divorcee alike. Faezeh is at home in both the process of disintegration and the process of renewal and needn't fear estrangement. Therefore, I propose that *The Lizard* imagines a new world order and encourages spectators to do the same.

However, both films also portray devout characters. One such character, in *We're No Angels* (1989), is the seminarian who looks up to Jim. *The Lizard* has a similar character, the young Gholamali, who genuinely cares about what Reza thinks of him. In both films, the seminarians are caught in a battle of conscience, trying to live up to the high religious standards they have set for themselves. However, while in *We're No Angels* (1989) the young seminarian simply idolises Jim, in *The Lizard* Gholamali engages in deep discourse that ultimately transforms his goals in life. In one of the last scenes of the film he breaks the news to his previous mentor, Fazly, that he will no longer take part in the Quoran competition. Instead, Gholamali is determined to help feed the more. He believes that charity more accurately reflects the spirit of Islam than learning verses off by heart. I would argue that in this instance, the distance that the film establishes from its source material is ironic and *The Lizard* effects a more profound engagement with question of 'true spirituality' versus religious dogma. Reza has a profound effect on his congregation. In contrast, the narrative in *We're No Angels* (1989) emphasises the comic situation of criminals dressed as clerics and the protagonists' drive to escape. For my reading of *The Lizard,* this difference strengthens my claim that Tabrizi does not seek to detach himself from the entire framework of Moslem thought. He simply redefines the function of religion in society. He suggests that a cleric can be a friend rather than someone who harshly admonishes their congregation.

Finally, both films portray a silent child. In *We're No Angels* (1989), this is Molly's child who is both speech and hearing impaired. The child's misfortune is underlined by the fact that he has a social outcast for a mother. The young boy is a constant reminder that 'bad'

things can happen to good people. His presence questions society's punishments and suggests that they are undeserved. In *The Lizard*, the child is a more ambiguous character. Appearing first in the scene where Reza arrives in the small town, he seems to be looking straight through Reza's disguise. The child appears in several other scenes, acting as a mirror to Reza's conscience, never saying anything, only smiling wisely and making Reza nervous. The young boy has his most memorable performance in the scene where Reza is giving money and food to the poor. Reza notices that the silent child is watching him and reaches out with a bill, which the child rejects. On the most apparent level Reza is simply reaching out to a poor child. On a more profound level I believe Reza is trying to bribe his conscience.

I would argue that in *The Lizard* then, the character of the silent child is more abstract than in *We're No Angels* (1989). The child is never seen with a parent and doesn't seem to 'belong' to anyone specific. Rather, he symbolises Reza's conscience as a pair of eyes that watch him, much like the audience. I would argue that this unexplained character foregrounds the self-reflexivity of *The Lizard* by creating awareness of its narrative construct. A child who looks straight through Reza is a constant reminder of who Reza is and where he is going. As an expression of his conscience, the presence of the child suggests that he cannot get away with everything, even though he wears a cloak. It suggests that someone somewhere – his conscience or God - is watching at all times. Given the Iranian context, where a large portion of the public is unhappy with the mullahs "who live in their ivory towers" (Hosseini 2004: 15), I would propose the child functions as a textual device that is used to highlight, and comment on, the clerical

hypocrisy. This is at once an 'extramural' message, an appeal for introspection and reformation to Iran's clergy at large and an 'intramural' testimony to Reza's character transformation.

Overall then, *The Lizard* distinguishes itself from its forerunner(s) in its *fabula*. The active agent of change in the *The Lizard,* as opposed to the other two films, is the cleric. For the satire in general, the ironic distance created between *The Lizard* and its source material serves to create a more acute discourse on religion, its search for a new definition and the active role that clergy have to play in this process. The film emphasises the personal transformation of a criminal who in turn inspires the transformation of those around him. Thereby, the film stresses the need for a reformed cleric who has the capacity to transform Iranian society.

Clerical speech types and conventions

Through his unorthodox sermons, Reza functions as a reformed cleric. *Under the Moonlight* does not exhibit any clerical sermons that I could compare to those portrayed in *The Lizard*. In fact, in the collection of Iranian films available to me for this study, I could not locate any depictions of sermons. For that reason I shall refer to transcripts of original sermons held in Iranian mosques or broadcast on Iranian national television. Both of these media are controlled by the government and therefore, I would propose, represent "predominant" clerical discourse. The following is a transcript of a sermon by the Secretary of the Iranian Guardian Council, Ayatollah Ahmad Jannati, which is archived with The Middle East Media Research Institute. The sermon was televised on

Channel 1, Iranian TV on February 17, 2006. The following excerpt highlights the Iranian leadership's stance on America. I argue that this is a 'typical' sermon because it echoes the format of a majority of transcripts filed with the Institute and reflects the prevailing official attitude towards the United States of America:

> **Ayatollah Ahmad Jannati:** Western culture and civilisation - and especially criminal America - are heading towards a serious collapse.
>
> **Crowd:** *Allah Akbar*[52].

This is chanted 3 times.

> Khamenei is the leader.
>
> Death to those who reject the rule of the Jurisprudent.
>
> Death to America.
>
> Death to England.
>
> Death to the hypocrites: *Mojahedin-e Khalq* and Saddam.
>
> Death to Israel.
>
> **Ayatollah Ahmad Jannati:** The Koran tells us about the Jews in the early days of Islam: "They destroyed their homes with their own hands, and with the hands

[52] *Allah Akbar* is Arabic for 'God is the Greatest'. This is normally exclaimed by congregations in the mosque and is reminiscent of the Christian use of 'Haleluja'.

of the believers." It says: "With their very hands and with the hands of the believers" they are destroying their homes. This is exactly what is happening now. They're destroying their homes with their hands and with ours.

[...]

People are prepared to sacrifice their lives for the sake of the Prophet. There is no doubt about it. We've sacrificed so many martyrs. You insult him...

Crowd: Death to America!

This is chanted 8 times.

Ayatollah Ahmad Jannati: You have trampled everything underfoot.

(Jannati 2006: 1045)[53]

From this excerpt it can be concluded – among other things – that America is denounced in Iranian clerical discourse. Other transcriptions, for example by the Head of the Iranian Expediency Council, Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani (2005: 640), confirm that "Death to America" is a common message of sermons in Iran's mosques, universities and media outlets. In fact, out of the ten sermons sampled from The Middle East Media Research Institute, this slogan was recited more frequently than "*Allah Akbar"*. In that particular

[53] According to journalist, Reza Shams, Iran's frustration with the 'West' began when British troops invaded Iran and took control over its oil industry after World War I (2004: 34). Shams describes that the current regime in Iran accuses Great Britain, the United States and everyone associated with those two countries of forcing their will upon other nations in the pursuit of power and oil (2004: 33). Acknowledging these frustrations, I propose that Iran's clergy perpetuate sentiments of resentment against America and its allies by using religious imagery (such as comparisons to satan) in order to preserve and legitimize their own power in Iran as a vital counter-force to 'the West'.

sermon mentioned above, Rafsanjani accuses the Christian church of "all the vices of America and the West" (2005: 640).

The format of sermons featured in *The Lizard* closely echoes those referred to in the above examples. A preacher talks and the congregation echoes with: '*Allah Akbar'*. However, there are crucial differences. Firstly, in the example above, the worshippers support the preacher by chanting slogans in turn and on time. They do not disrupt the sermon. In one particular sermon given by Reza in *The Lizard,* the congregation is highly disruptive to the sermon's flow. Furthermore in that sermon, far from renouncing America or Christianity, Reza suggests that American and Christian culture is something worth studying in the mosque. In that scene, the setting is the village mosque and Reza sits on the pulpit above his worshippers in a position of power. Juxtaposed with this display of authority, he has a hard time actually capturing the attention of his congregation:

> **Reza:** I want to open an important discussion with you dear ones and that is about the issue of cinema. If brother Gholamali would allow me…please be quiet! I want to have an important discussion with you. Yes. Today we are going to talk about *Pulp Fiction*. Mojtaba! Do I have to call your names one by one? Be quiet! Both of you be quiet! Eh! We want to talk. Yes. This movie is made by Brother Tarantino. He is one of the great Christian filmmakers and I've heard he has won a few prizes. Mojtaba and Gholamali, I asked you to be quiet. Stop whispering. You have already asked all your questions, son. Ah! I won't continue the

discussion because I can't concentrate anymore. That's it. Enjoy your tea.

Here Reza is clearly suggesting that Quentin Tarantino[54] is "great" and worth studying in the mosque. This stands in direct conflict with Jannati's sermon where he renounces America and therefore anything American. This transgression is emphasised in another parodied convention in *The Lizard,* namely in a televised clerical discussion. In Iran, these clerical discussions on various current affairs are a regular part of television programming (Parvin 2006: 15). One original transcript of such a public broadcast in Iran condemns American films and cultural products. It also addresses Islam's denouncement of 'Western-style' relationships:

> **Hassan Rahimpur-Azghadi:** With regards to American and European films, they are the expression of satanic desires.
>
> […]
>
> Relationships in European countries are based solely on sexual pleasure.
>
> (Rahimpur-Azghadi 2005: 820)

In *The Lizard,* a television cleric is featured in a scene where Reza and his friend, Jackson, are watching television. In contrast to the above excerpts from an authentic clerical discussion, this cleric delves into an American film for the purpose of exploring Islamic themes:

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[54] The American filmmaker Quentin Tarantino is continually referred to in *The Lizard*. Even within the United States, Tarantino's work has been described as "controversial, violent and unabashedly self-reflexive" (Sibbett 1999). Tabrizi's choice of validating 'Western' culture at its most contentious heightens the force of his transgression in breaking the dichotomy of 'Islam' versus 'America'. In so doing, he undermines any of Iran's clergy who would find this blasphemous.

> **Cleric**: We will continue our discussion of salvation in ultimate darkness by reviewing the movie *Pulp Fiction*.
>
> […]
>
> As Tarantino says: "I want to be where God wants me".

In the same scene, the television cleric discusses the possibilities of the internet: "For instance, one of the unique capabilities used in the internet is chatting", he explains. As established in the previous chapter, chatting and the use of the internet are far from encouraged in Iran. In one Iranian clerical television discussion, it was proposed that the internet be reduced to an 'int*ra*net' (Rafsandjani 2004: 613), meaning a closed-circuit national web. The idea is to restrict the possibility of browsing sites that are "influenced by the West and accessing weblogs" (MacIntyre 2005: 3).

In the above examples, the parodic 'copies' of clerical conventions offered by *The Lizard* differ from those the film cites in at least one crucial way. Contrary to the real conventions, both the sermon and the television discussion featured in the film suggest that Islam can benefit from an exploration of the spiritual values evident in American cultural products. This suggestion is affirmed when Reza's sermons attract a large numbers of people back into the mosque. As opposed to the scenario presented when the film begins, by the end of the film the mosque fills with worshippers. In this shift, I would suggest, the film reinvents the image of a cleric. This cleric uses the values of Iran's greatest enemy, America, in order to deepen Moslems in their faith. This suggests

that the way in which clergy have exercised their role in the past has left the mosques empty. As the policeman says early on in the film, "a train full of people and only twenty get out to pray". Through Reza's interactions and sermons, as well as the attitudes and values that underpin them, the mosque fills up. He represents the need for a redefinition of the mullahs' role.

On a semantic level it is ironic that, in *The Lizard*, Reza defines Islam through what is portrayed in mainstream Iranian media as its greatest enemy[55]. This irony satirises and sabotages prevalent clerical discourse because it unites what Iran's clergy perceive as two irreconcilable opposites, namely America and Iran.[56] *The Lizard's* technique in this case echoes Jacques Derrida's concept of 'suspension'. In suspension an entire hierarchy is rejected, rather than inverted (Hügli & Lübcke 1991: 123). Derrida argues that inverting the hierarchy can simply lead to affirming its existence. In the case of *The Lizard,* this could mean that by exalting the 'West' above 'Islam' Tabrizi would simply create a new imbalance and no real change to the system comes about (Hügli & Lübcke 1991: 124). Therefore, in *The Lizard*, the 'West' is not inverted to stand above 'Islam'. Rather both are considered as valuable. This suspension can but question or problematise the dichotomy of 'West' versus 'Islam' upheld in Iran's 'mainstream' sermons.

Another level of irony emerges with regards to *mis-en-scene* and the way Reza is framed not as an authority but as an equal in relation to his congregation. In the Jannati sermon

[55] When referring to 'Islam's greatest enemy', this is not a statement of fact but an interpretation by Shiih leadership in Iran.

[56] In a recent interview with *Time* Magazine's Scott MacLeod, President Ahmadinejad affirms that a popular Iranian slogan is 'death to America'. Ahmadinejad blames this on what he thinks America represents, namely "aggression […] bullying tactics and violations of rights [..]" (MacLeod 2006: 18)

transcribed above, the congregation chants "*Allah Akbar"* and "Death to America" in absolute unison. In *The Lizard*, Reza's language is unrefined and clumsy. He has a hard time controlling his disruptive congregation. The Tarantino sermon is, in fact, called off because of his inability to silence the crowd. In a later scene, Reza descends from the pulpit and places himself on the same level as his congregation. This scene comes at a relatively advanced stage of the plot. Reza has not been successful at smuggling himself out of the country. He is tired, and his transformation from a self-absorbed, rebellious criminal to humble servant is well on its way. In the aforementioned scene, he expresses that he feels unable to preach from above. On a semantic level, the irony here is that Reza's inability to be an authoritative cleric is what connects him to his ever-growing crowd. The congregation understands his simple language and appreciates the fact that he does not distinguish himself from them. This irony inspires the satirical purpose of the film by suggesting that clerics are more successful when acting humbly and exposing their vulnerabilities. This ironic inversion of the sermons normally depicted in Iranian television weakens the clerical claim of authority they communicate and suggests that a mullah can be an accessible equal.

In stark contrast to Tabrizi's film, in *Under the Moonlight*, the congregation has no choice but to comply with what the mullahs ordain. In one scene, a few clergymen hold discourse on the criminals' fate. In particular, one cleric expresses that "there is no pardon or salvation for the thief". This message runs contrary to what Reza preaches in his sermons. In one of his first sermons, he uses the analogy of the criminal world he comes from to suggest that there is salvation for everyone, including the thief. It is worth

quoting from this sermon since it convincingly establishes Reza's claim about universal salvation and sums up his unique message.

> **Reza:** Yes. And for you, sir, there is one way to get to God. And for you, Mr. Fazly, there is a path that leads to God too. For the baker, the butcher, the prisoner, yes - pay attention to this - there is also a path that leads to God for that God-forsaken, miserable prisoner. Speaking of prisoners; I want to tell you something. Imagine you want to enter a house, okay? There are several ways for that. You can use the key and open the door, okay. But if you don't have a key, the other option is a master key. If you don't have a master key, you can use a piece of wire, clippers, anything a screwdriver, or you may climb the wall, use a rope and so on. Now sometimes you may want to climb the neighbour's wall and enter the house. That's okay too if you ask me. That's another way that leads to God, of course, provided that you don't bother the neighbour. In my opinion, that's all right too. Anyhow, there is no person in the world who doesn't have a path to reach God. I mean the one thing that God has given people is lots of paths and they all lead to…
>
> **Congregation:** God!

In a later sermon Reza addresses a group of prisoners by noting that "God doesn't only belong to good people! Our God is the God of the criminal as well. And it is only God who doesn't look upon people differently. Actually, God is the heaviest dude in gentleness, the heaviest dude in forgiving…"

The difference between Reza's interpretation of clerical discourse on the question of criminals and that of clergy in *Under the Moonlight* is unmistakable. In *The Lizard,* a clergyman preaches universal salvation, whilst the purpose of discourse in *Under the Moonlight* is to distinguish between those who are saved and those who are not. Reza's phrase, "There are as many pathways to God as there are people", reverberates throughout the narrative. Tabrizi suspends the dichotomy that splits believers from infidels. It is not a question of whether one is saved at all anymore. Rather the debate is shifted to 'how' one finds God because the film suggests there is ultimately a path for everyone. This in turn empowers the individual in relation to the establishment and encourages reformation of the current system.

Genre-crossing

The many paths to God that Reza preaches about are equally significant to him as they are to his congregation because he too finds that there is ultimately a path for him. Reza begins as a 'Godless' man. Early in the film he attempts suicide and lies in hospital next to a man he does not know is actually a mullah. Reza says: "Heaven and hell are bullshit. They talk about these places so they can fool folks like you and me". When he sees the opportunity to flee prison, he does. By the end of the film, Reza has transformed. His message to the prisoners is: "Don't busy yourselves with thoughts of escape. God has not forgotten you. The prison gates might be closed to you, but the gates to God's blessings are always open to you". When Montazedi arrives to arrest him, he does not resist or run

for his life but submits to his fate. However, on a narrative level, Reza ultimately fails in achieving his goal of running away from prison into freedom.

The narrative development here can be referred to as a parodic technique that Hutcheon calls 'genre-crossing' (1985: 105). In other words, a film complies with the conventions of a particular genre with the exception of one crucial difference. In the case of *The Lizard*, what clearly starts and develops as a comedy ends suddenly in a tragedy. Using Gustav Freytag's model that theorises a distinction between tragedy and comedy, if the falling action of the narrative ends in *denouement*, where the protagonist is better off than she was at the beginning of the exposition, we talk about a comedy[57]. If, however, the protagonist is worse off than she was at the beginning, the narrative ends in a *catastrophe* (Freytag 1968: 135). In the case of *The Lizard*, Reza's antagonist, Montazedi, catches up with him and Reza lands back in prison, this time for good. Objectively, he does not fulfil his quest of fleeing the prison and the border. I would argue that, although Reza's physical journey ends in a *catastrophe*, his spiritual journey does not. And this is the reason why a tragic ending, in my opinion, only serves to highlight more strongly his spiritual evolution. It is ironic that while his initial goal to flee fails and ends 'tragically', he actually detaches himself from that goal and attains the spiritual maturity he so often feigns as the story progresses.

[57] I am aware that matters are more complex than I outline here, since a number of other scholars would contest this definition in an effort to include different orders of comedy, such as 'black comedy' and 'dark' humour. However, I believe that *The Lizard* evidences a lighter, utopian sense of humour, which I shall explore in the next chapter. For this reason and to keep my study compact I will focus on Freytag's model.

Reza's transformation begins at the turning point between the first and second act when he finds himself in a new kind of 'moral' imprisonment by being a mullah. He says to Faezeh, "these clothes tie our hands". As the narrative progresses towards the falling action, it becomes increasingly clear that Reza will not be able to cross the border. By the end of the film, he discovers his ability to touch hearts. He transforms the town thug, inspires his congregation to give charity to the poor and, in the end, ironically finds spiritual liberation in his new form of imprisonment. Reza is now detached from the outcome of his life. He no longer tries to flee. He does not resist when Montazedi arrives, it simply does not matter. Montazedi, in turn, does not handcuff him because he is aware that Reza is no longer in danger of fleeing. Reza's aim has changed and therefore the failure of his initial aim is no longer substantial. Reza's subversive energy is thus contained by a theological imperative. I would therefore argue that *The Lizard* criticises elements of the socio-political system but remains respectful to the greater religious paradigm that cradles it. So the film never steps out of the boundary of religion but explores and redefines its elements. This renders the film 'alternative' to the predominant image or understanding of religion but not necessarily 'oppositional' because it does not seek to replace the entire system. I will further discuss the subversive force of the film's alternative paradigm in my concluding chapter.

In closing this analysis of parody, I would like to refer to Hutcheon's claim that genre-crossing is a blurring of lines between what is fiction and what is real (1985: 151). As Neale proposes, we come to a certain genre expecting a certain set of conventions and outcomes (1993: 14). When these are not met it throws us off, making us aware of the

distortion that took place. This distinction draws attention to the film's 'constructedness' (Hutcheon 1989: 45) because it brings to mind the relationship between texts. Parody signifies a choice, a self-conscious stance towards the past because it replicates as well as distances itself from that past. Thus genre-crossing creates a self-awareness of the distance between comedy and its parodic form in *The Lizard,* precisely because it does not fulfil what Neale calls the 'expectations' of a genre (1993: 13). Self-reflexivity questions the reality of the modelled world represented and underlines the critical aspect of satire, which requires a little more than passive consumption from the audience. As Moore's quote affirms: "Satire assumes the audience has a brain. Good satire has you laughing so you don't start crying – and, in the end, maybe it gets you thinking about just what […] is going on in this strange world" (Moore 2004: 4).

Masquerade: Anything goes

Reza is a nimble climber. In one scene, he scurries up the prison wall in order to free a bird that is stuck in the barbed wire. In another scene, he hurries up the façade of a locked home in order to free his romantic interest, Faezeh, from the violent clutches of her ex-husband, Delangiz. However, the moment Reza puts on his clerical garb to flee the hospital, he stumbles over it. In a later scene, he sits on the back of a truck with Faezeh and tries to approach her seductively. He stumbles over his cloak again and says, "If only Islam hadn't tied our hands". However, tied as his hands may be through his new disguise, it also liberates him.

Liberation from, and subversion of, the existing social order are two outcomes of the masking practices Bakhtin outlines in his exploration of medieval carnival. I argue that *The Lizard's* form of masking echoes Bakhtinian carnival in both respects. I am particularly interested in the subversive function he refers to as it relates to satire. According to Bakhtin (1968), by dressing as kings, bishops and potentates, oppressed classes inverted the social order and freed themselves from their daily restraints. Through this liberation, he claims, they were able to "uncover, undermine – even destroy the hegemony of any ideology" that claimed absolute truth (Bakhtin 1968: 132). By showing that the social order can be inverted, Bakhtin says, carnival exposes its chance nature and undermines its authority. Similarly, I believe that by putting a thief in the shoes of a mullah, *The Lizard* compromises the integrity of Iran's clerical establishment.

The Lizard's form of masking is therefore linked to Bakhtin's notion of carnival in two ways. Firstly, of course both involve the practice of assuming other identities. In that respect both procedures liberate those who mask themselves from the limitations of their 'real' identities. Secondly, carnivalesque masking practices relate to those in *The Lizard* through their common comedic streak. I believe that comedy and humour have a subversive force both in Bakhtin's carnival and the form of masquerade evident in *The Lizard*. Horton makes the connection between carnival humour and film comedy when he proposes that both turn the world upside down and inside out (2000: 45). Critchley asserts that by simply laughing at the established order we expose its contingency (2002: 11). And if the current model is incidental this means that it can be replaced with a new model.

Based on these theories, I propose that *The Lizard* employs a form of humorous masquerade at the clergy's expense in order to criticise and undermine the Iranian theocracy. Through the device of masquerade, Reza is at first liberated from the mould of past representations of clergy and is then able to provide new and different images that undermine those past representations.

Critique of the established order begins with the freedoms and possibilities that open up for Reza through his new attire. By going through life as a mullah, Reza is liberated from the prejudices others may have towards a criminal, from some of the general daily societal restraints found in Iran and from the social hierarchy that would determine his fate. Reza is freed from his existence as a thief the moment he walks out of the hospital unchecked. He is dressed as a mullah and emulates what he thinks mullahs act like. The people he interacts with treat him with a great deal of respect. For example, for a short period of time Reza does not follow Tehran's rigid traffic regulations because, as a cleric, he stands above the law. Thus, the film uses a form of masking to unlock the political power and possibility reserved for clergy in Iran. This alters Reza's reality but also changes the way in which people treat him. Ivan Erickson has commented on the efficacy of masking strategies:

> Masks have the power to transform those who wear them. When one wears a mask there is a transformation into someone different. Masks not only change the person wearing them but also those who interact with them (Erickson 2005: 14).

Erickson mentions the changes in those who interact with someone who is masked. In *The Lizard*, the transformative effects of masking Erickson describes are evident in a character by the name of Montazedi. In prison, Montazedi mistreats and scolds Reza exercising his power to put him in solitary confinement. When Montazedi meets Reza in a later scene, he no longer talks down to Reza but respects the clergyman and offers him a seat. Therefore, masking can create an opportunity for equality and respect. This is crucial for a political reading of the film because it suggests that the mullah's authority is legitimized through his garb rather than his character. Reza is still the person he was before, but Montazedi now blindly respects him, seeing the cloak rather than the person in it. Tabrizi thus undermines the genuine potency of the clergy, disqualifies the relevance of their messages and reduces their influence to the sphere of their robes. I believe that these sorts of masking practices mirror the carnival tradition in exposing the whimsical nature of official power. Erickson confirms this when he says, "carnival has a tendency to equalise all social sectors" (2005: 15). In *The Lizard*, Reza is made 'equal' through his clerical mask in the sense that he is re-integrated back into functional society. His clerical authority is acknowledged and people have to listen to him. However, they don't have to love him or accept his message in their heart. Notwithstanding this fact it is significant that they do. Reza's mask is therefore also an opportunity for people see to past his criminal identity. His opinion can be valued and considered for its own sake and not censored because of his social rank as a criminal. So while Reza's cloak has the potential to conceal his shortcomings, it also allows those strengths to shine through that were previously obscured by his stigma as a criminal. In fact his influence transcends that

of his cloak because his congregation is sincerely drawn to his message. The people he meets do not simply obey the orders of a politically powerful mullah; rather they respond to his spiritual message. For instance, the young Gholamali is genuinely inspired to dedicate his life to the poor, the community launches socio-economic development projects in his honour and the town's gangsters quit their criminal careers. I believe that the consequence of this portrayal is another 'extramural' or satirical message to Iran's clergy. While they may be carrying 'the holy grail' of power, the film suggests, authentic power lies in the nobility of character. Reza's nobility is manifest in the way he inspires his congregation to do good.

Besides liberating him from the stigma attached to convicted criminals, the masking device also frees Reza from some of the societal restraints reserved for ordinary people. For instance, in contrast to ordinary citizens, as a mullah, he does not undergo an identity check when leaving the hospital. Likewise, a policeman allows him to drive the wrong way on a one-way street, and he automatically receives a fantastic first class carriage all to himself on his train-ride to the border of the country. Even when he cannot remove himself completely from his duties, Reza is free to reinvent them. For instance, in one scene, he is expected to head up prayers in a mosque. Because of his position, nobody questions his wisdom and authority even though he does nothing but mumble meaningless words. Bakhtin describes a similar effect when he refers to carnival as a form of liberation for the participating masses from the existing social order. According to Bakhtin, carnival was a time when the typical restraints of everyday life were cast aside and people indulged in their newfound freedoms (1968: 157). Bakhtin's 'real

world' carnival, therefore, evidences fictional roles and artificial realities that correspond in their fantastical nature with Reza's fictional world in *The Lizard*. As I elaborate later[58], both Bakhtin's notion of carnival and Tabrizi's masking technique are linked through their creation of an alternative world, in which rank is transcended by inversion of the hierarchy.

Bakhtin goes a step further when he views carnival as a transgression of norms because, during carnival, the societal order was temporarily inverted and the poor and lowly were made rich and powerful. As Bakhtin says, "carnival's aspiration is to twist, mutate and invert standard themes of societal makeup" (1968: 46). In the same way, Reza goes from being a lowly criminal to being a respected mullah at the top of the social hierarchy. He is now an authority whether people like it or not. I would argue that what is at stake here is that they like it.

This is because Reza uses his new freedom as a mullah in a way that is 'different' from what his congregation is used to. When he arrives at the border town, the guardian of the local mosque, Fazly, bemoans the fact that their mosque has not had a mullah for a long time. Fazly is worried because his community has largely turned away from religion. This suggests that in the world of *The Lizard*, clergy have previously failed in their mission to inspire people. Similarly, in *Under Moonlight,* the young seminarian and his friends from Tehran's marginalised communities feel estranged from the clergy and their otherworldly concerns. I propose that all of these images reflect the reality of Iran, where

[58] See p. 88.

a large portion of the population feels alienated by religion (Azizi 2004: 4). Against the backdrop of this bleak landscape, Reza's vivid redefinition of a mullah stands out and suggests that it is necessary to reinvent the mullahs' role in Iranian society.

Through his clerical mask he is free to explore a mullah's role from a fresh perspective, namely that of a criminal from the other end of the spectrum. I believe that this new perspective on mullahs makes masquerade, in *The Lizard,* an extended form of parody. Hutcheon (1985) draws attention to parody as a new perspective on past representations. She says that parody, and I propose masquerade, depends on images that are 'familiar' and 'established' in order to critique them against 'new' and 'different' ones. In other words, parody expresses a stance towards to the past. In *The Lizard*, Reza might look like a mullah but he walks, talks, thinks and interacts with people 'differently' than other clergy in Iran's mainstream media. However, in so far as his existence depends on those previous images, he affirms them. As Hutcheon claims, parody "confirms and subverts the power" of past representations (1985: 95). So parody copies, but also differentiates itself from, established images. This means that Reza's character affirms that mullahs have a role to play but changes the definition and terms of that role.

I suggest that these new and liberated images that Reza creates contribute to the second function of masquerade, which is its subversive force. In order to substantiate my claim, I will draw once more on Hutcheon who believes that the 'affirmation' and 'denial' of past images are marked by ironic distance (1985: 95). *The Lizard* affirms that Reza is a mullah and that mullahs are a part of Iranian life and society. However, the film undermines any

previously established definitions of a mullah by portraying him 'differently'. This difference is ironic because Reza essentially inverts and contradicts what other mullahs preach and communicate. Unlike other mullahs in mainstream Iranian media, he does not denounce America rather he praises it. Reza does not constantly reaffirm his authority rather he compromises it by stepping off the pulpit. Furthermore, he does not deny the sexual impulse; he encourages it, while constantly protecting the youth in his congregation from the reproaches of Fazly, the guardian of the mosque. Thus he affirms the existence of mullahs but denies their established value-system. In *The Lizard*, the techniques of parody and masquerade are closely linked because Tabrizi uses masquerade to parody a clergyman. This parody is satirical because Reza rejects established values by promoting worldly thoughts and breaking religious taboos.

One of the taboos that Reza is able to address through his newfound liberty is that of sexual relationships. *Under the Moonlight* does not evidence any explicit discourse on sexual relationships and from the abovementioned transcripts of The Middle East Media Research Institute, it is clear that relationships outside of wedlock, 'Western-style' or homosexual relationships are condemned in Iran. Iran's government goes further, in fact, by denying the validity of marriages of other religions[59]. Also, in Iran, women must wear the compulsory headscarf, *hijab*, and overcoat, *manteau*'[60]. MacIntyre (2005: 4) reports

[59] Journalist Judith Whelan reports of instances where people were stoned to death for allegedly having extra-marital relationships, when in fact they were married under the laws of other religions. The government chooses to prohibit such marriages and leaves minorities with no other form of legally recognized matrimony (Whelan 1998: 3).

[60] *Hijab* refers to a scarf that should cover a woman's head, chest and neck. Its purpose is "inner purification" (Saleem 2005: 5). The *manteau* is classically a black, large cloak that is supposed to conceal the body, its shape, ankles and wrists (Saleem 2005: 4). According to Hosseinabadi, women in Iran often defy the clothing restrictions by wearing *manteaus* that accentuate their figures in bright, fashionable

that women write illegal weblogs expressing their views on various subjects including relationships, although they do not have the right to publicly express themselves in terms of their sexual agency.[61] 'Agency', according to MacNay (2000), takes into account the dynamic act of responding to and engaging with ever-changing social conditions. I believe that because this is an active, rather than a passive process, it opens the doors to independent thinking and poses a threat to the status quo. That is why free discourse and the open exploration of sexual relationships is somewhat taboo in Iran. *Under the Moonlight* echoes the socially accepted position of women in Iran. In one scene, a desperate prostitute has come looking for the protagonist, Hassan, in the seminary where he stays. She has claimed to be his sister and some strands of hair protrude from under her *hijab*. Just after she leaves, a young man from the seminary suspiciously asks Hassan to confirm Islamic law for him to assert that the lady was in fact in breech of it. He is thoroughly upset by her appearance and finally speaks up:

> **Panahi:** Sir excuse me, sir, I am sorry, sir. I just have one question, forgive me. Am I right that hair should not be showing from a woman's *hijab*?

Hassan hesitates.

> **Hassan:** Indeed, yes. It shouldn't.

Having relieved his stowed-up tension, Panahi then exhales.

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colours. Hosseinabadi further refers to a law that was passed in 1996 and that forbade women to wear make-up in public. He reports that government officials were told they could use any method to deter women from doing so. Consequently, a few extremist officials hid razors in cotton swabs and mutilated women who were found in the street wearing make-up (Hosseinabadi 2006: 13).

[61] Lois MacNay (2000) provides a useful variant on the existing theories around female agency that supplements leading poststructuralist work. She claims that especially Foucault and Lacan "remain within an essentially negative understanding of subject formation" (2000: 2), because they view the subject as a passive, discursive 'effect'. MacNay believes it useful to take into account that, in contemporary society, relations between men and women constantly change and that this provokes a more active, generative understanding of agency.

Reza espouses less absolutist forms of thinking than Panahi. For example, in one scene, the young Faezeh and her mother join him in his train carriage. Because of his cloak, Reza is able to pass as a trusted confidant and reveals his understanding for a woman's dilemma. The setting is most significant, as all other carriages are full and the three of them are forced to companionship in a limited space. They have never met him before, yet immediately the mother mirrors their physical closeness through her dialogue. She praises Reza's presence: "Mullahs are like doctors, you can confide in them", she says. The mother begins to tell him intimate details of her daughter's now terminated marriage to whom we later meet as the thug Delangiz: "What can I say, *hajji*[62]? He was this big, but his…was this small!" Of course the mother is referring to Delangiz's penis. Besides clearly breaking the filmmaking code that Trevor refers to, when he says that sexual references are forbidden in Iranian film (2005: 15), this scene implies that women have needs and desires of their own. However, these needs, if recognised at all, are deemed to be secondary to men's needs, as is implied when the mother says that she fears her divorced daughter will not be able to marry again. So, although Faezeh is stigmatised by society, Reza is attracted to her. He sits even closer to her and consoles her mother: " God willing, a hot dish…I mean a modest, smart lady like her won't be hard to pass off".

Clearly, Reza has an advantage in this scene. He is wearing a clerical cloak and can engage with the ladies who otherwise would not speak to him, let alone confide in him, if they knew he were a criminal. Furthermore, they have nowhere else to go because all the

[62] Literally *hajji* is a title for someone who has gone on Moslem pilgrimage to Mecca. However, in Iran, mullahs are often referred to as *hajji*s.

compartments are full. Here it becomes clear that Reza's mask has liberated him not only from physical confinement but also from any restrictions in his interactions with others. The fact that two ladies find nothing wrong with Reza is ironic. It suggests that there is no difference between a so-called pious man and a criminal. This irony denigrates the clergy's integrity and so serves the critical function of satire in *The Lizard*.

Reza goes further in distancing himself from established images of the clergy when he encourages the idea of exploring youthful sexual energy. In one scene, he is seated with the congregation and is asked about marital laws in outer space. He proposes that it is not a problem for a male and female astronaut to touch since they are not grounded. The guardian of the mosque, Fazly, then raises doubts about the legitimacy of certain relationships on earth:

> **Fazly:** Excuse me, *hajji*, this is true for space, but since there is gravity on earth the relationship between and girl and a boy is problematic.
>
> **Reza:** No, Mr. Fazly. Excuse me, but I think you're thinking wrong. It seems to me that you have had all your share of fun in life and now, that it's these youngsters' turn you are being more catholic than the pope? I mean don't we youngsters have hearts?
>
> **Congregation:** Yeah! Hurray!

Reza dismisses Fazly's concerns and endorses youthful sexual appetites. This new image stands in stark contrast to the way morals are represented in *Under the Moonlight*. In Mir-

Karimi's film, guilt is used as a tool to intimidate young seminarians into obedience. For example, the chief cleric of the seminary reprimands the protagonist, Hassan, for skipping class when he admonishes him by saying: "You were not in class! You did not do your homework! What are you reading? A sports magazine? Filth. I want to talk to you after the prayers". Reza, however, actively counteracts sentiments of fear and guilt. In one scene, he talks to Gholamali who has been seeing a young girl in the park. He encourages their relationship:

> **Reza:** Look at me. You are a man and all human beings are attracted to mischief. It's not your fault. It's human nature. God is not as strict as they say. If he were totally against these things he wouldn't have given us the tools/genitals[63] for mischief. Go live your life, darling. As the representative of God in this area and all other areas, I'm telling you that God has forgiven you. Finished. Go and have fun!

The fact that a clergyman, a moral authority, endorses sexual appetites is ironic because of the dichotomy between a mullah's typical message about 'Western-style' relationships (Rafsanjani 2005: 613) and Reza's approval of them. Reza's newfound freedom allows him to transgress certain roles and conventions. Instead of chastising the youth, as clergy do in *Under the Moonlight*, he encourages their relationships. His interpretation of the concept of chastity undermines the more stringent interpretations that clergy are mostly portrayed to have.

[63] As mentioned in the previous chapter, the Farsi word *aalat,* or 'tools', also means 'genitals'.

The Lizard further stages another carnivalesque inversions of power structures through Reza's influence on his congregation. He transforms the hierarchy that dominates the village he has come to. Most people stay out of the mosque and the village is clearly run by a group of thugs headed up by Delangiz, Faezeh's ex-husband. At first, Delangiz has no respect for Reza and terrorises the neighbourhood. One night, Delangiz violently cleans out a local grocery store. Reza arrives and uses street language to express that justice must be served to Delangiz and his gang. He proposes a highly transgressive method for this purpose: "Under such circumstances it is necessary to fuck…I mean to beat the hell out of the thugs!" And this he does, taking transgressive language to the level of transgressive behaviour. At the end of the sequence that begins with the store robbery, Reza arrives at Delangiz' house. The latter has locked himself in with Faezeh and is yelling for her to take him back. In this scene, Reza breaks several conventions. First of all, he climbs a wall to enter the house through the window. Once inside, Reza beats Delangiz to a pulp[64]. The man who terrorised the city is finally defeated and Reza rises to the top of the power hierarchy. Ironically though, he is a criminal himself. This scene suggests that it takes a criminal, or an ordinary man, to sanction the power of a mullah. Reza literally had to fight his way to the top. Furthermore, the fact that the fight takes place between two criminals who both end up in the mosque, one as a preacher and one as a worshipper, suggests that clergy may have no role to play in the spiritual

[64] I would like to acknowledge the gender-bias in *The Lizard* by highlighting the example above. In this scene Faezeh is portrayed as a helpless character who is not capable of freeing herself from the grasp of her ex-husband. It takes another male character, Reza, to climb the wall, break into the house and free Faezeh. However, in an earlier scene, Faezeh's mother breaks some of the Iranian societal conventions (see p. 82, footnote 58) that forbid women from speaking about their sexuality. Therefore, I propose that *The Lizard's* gender-bias must be seen in the context of the restrictions of Iranian cinema and society.

education of mankind.

Reza has not only transgressed in his role as a clergyman, he has also transgressed in his role as a thief or criminal because he is using his skills to restore justice and condemns the exploitation of the corner grocery store. What crystallises here is the beginning of Reza's own transformation. The process of acting like a man of religion reforms Reza's criminal character. Except for the protagonist Hassan, who is studying to be a mullah, clergy in *Under The Moonlight* do not undergo transformation. Their stance is the same at the beginning of the narrative as it is in the end. Although Hassan tries to initiate a discourse on the inner meaning of the Quoran, rather than its many laws and ordinances, he does not succeed in inspiring his superiors. The clergy continue with their rigid indoctrination of the young seminarians.

Reza's transformation, on the other hand, marks a difference in meaning between what a criminal might stand for and the compassionate virtues he actually ends up promoting while masked. Likewise, he redefines the moral restrictions a mullah normally advocates in Iranian media by promoting song, dance and sex. Whether it is the 'holy criminal' or the 'worldly mullah', either way, a concept is featured in a sense that is contrary to its conventional meaning. Hutcheon calls this ironic 'antiphrasis' (1985: 54) and proposes that this textual procedure opens up the possibility of satirical criticism because it provides an alternative model to an established one. By offering an alternative reality, Bakhtin suggests, that a value system can be 'destroyed' or subverted (1986). In the case of *The Lizard*, this new or alternative reality is the possibility of a criminal being Godly

or a world where anyone can find a pathway to God, including through 'Western values'. In my next chapter, I will argue that the existence of this alternative model is itself potentially subversive to the established order and can end in "destroying the hegemony of any ideology" that claims absolute truth (Bakhtin 1968: 132)

Certainly the device of masquerade in *The Lizard* is not of the same order as the 'live' carnival that Bakhtin talks about. In *The Lizard,* it takes the form of a filmic narrative device that is concealed from the other characters. In Bakhtin's carnival, on the other hand, there is a societal awareness and consent to this collective practice (Bakhtin 1968: 248). However, both the masking technique in *The Lizard* and Bakhtin's notion of carnival are linked through their creation of an alternative world in which rank is transcended by inversion of a hierarchy. Of course it is possible to argue that by inverting a hierarchy its existence is simply validated. As Bakhtin says about carnival's twisting of reality, "it asserts and denies, it buries and revives, such is the laughter of the carnival" (1968: 252). However, Reza's liberation from the confines of his own status in society allows him to explore and redefine the role and significance of mullahs in Iranian society.

His clothes give him a pretext to be heard and he uses this opportunity to influence people's lives. In one of the last scenes of the film, Reza acknowledges Delangiz's transformation from thug to God-fearing man. He says, "Delangiz now lives up to his name", which translates into 'he who captivates the heart'. I would argue that Reza is not 'temporarily liberated' (Bakhtin 1986: 132) from the social order but permanently liberated from his state of mind as criminal. At the end of the film, he has to return to his

life as a prisoner but he has now developed a set of virtues and values that allow him to welcome the consequences of his actions. I will now examine the alternative world that Tabrizi creates through Reza's character and how its mere depiction shakes the foundations of Iran's status quo.

CHAPTER THREE: THE TRANSGRESSIVE UTOPIAN SPACE

In the previous chapter, I analysed pivotal instances of parody and masquerade, two narrative techniques that underline *The Lizard's* satirical tone. In particular, I demonstrated that parody and masquerade explore a self-reflexive "distance" from other texts and text forms whilst incorporating in them. This distance is the space I will now examine. In this chapter, I will explore the alternative utopian reality that is created through 'distance' and how it serves the critical function of satire in *The Lizard*. I propose that parody and masquerade liberate the images of clergy in the film from established ones by inverting reality and creating an alternative, utopian world. This site of resistance, as I shall argue in my conclusion, will necessarily be subversive in the Iranian context.

Space of Power and Possibility

The previous chapter demonstrated that, in *The Lizard*, both parody and masquerade transgress established clerical images in Iranian media. Through these techniques, Tabrizi addresses taboo subjects such as sex and depicts a cleric engaged in mundane preoccupations that would not be shown on government-sanctioned media. These transgressions are textually authorised. In the case of parody, Hutcheon explains that parody "is an acknowledgment of itself as part of its history" (1985: 4). She also refers to Bakhtin in establishing that carnivalesque parody, or what I call 'masquerade', is authorised transgression (1985: 26): by dressing a criminal up as a cleric, the cleric is authorised to transgress the limits he is normally bound by.

I also illustrated that these licensed transgressions happen in a space of ironic 'difference' between established images and new ones. As a result, both techniques simultaneously affirm and deny established images because they depend on but differ from them. Hutcheon claims that this dual process signals "how present representations come from past ones and what ideological consequences derive from both continuity and difference" (Hutcheon 1989: 93). She further argues that this procedure contributes to deconstructing and politicisation of past representations because it shows that they are relative to the ideological framework in which they are constructed (1989: 93-95). So when Ramos parodies Ingres, he is demystifying the image of a beautiful woman by making us aware of the fact that our view of it may still be the same now as it was when Ingres 'mystified'[65] it (Hutcheon 1985:47). This kind of demystification takes place in the space of difference between prevalent images of clergy in Iran and Reza's image. Reza answers to physical needs, discusses banal subjects such as food and relationships, comes down from the pulpit to address his crowd and beats up the town thug. The difference between Reza's interpretation of a mullah's role and the way in which clerics are depicted in other Iranian films and media demystifies those latter images. No longer can a cleric be thought of without his "human" or "ordinary" side (Azizi 2004: 3).

As a form of parody, the masking practice in *The Lizard* similarly liberates Reza from past representations through the license to explore new roles. As an appropriation of other representations, masquerade is a "transgression" of the "sacred intent" of those other

[65] I am not implying that this was a conscious or deliberate choice on the part of Ingres.

representations and contributes to a "demythification" (Perlmutter cited in Horton 1991: 207) of what is emulated. As Robert Stamm says, the carnivalesque "suggests a demystificatory instrument for everything in the social formation which renders such collectivity difficult to access: class hierarchy, political manipulation, sexual repression, dogmatism and paranoia" (Stamm in Stallybrass & White 1986: 47). Critchley refers to a similar effect when he talks of the 'anti-rite' (2002: 5). According to Critchley, humour can take the meaning out of a rite[66] when it is interrupted. He gives the example of a funeral. If someone bends over the coffin and drops his or her hat onto it, the funeral loses its mystified meaning. This kind of accessibility to social sacraments is illustrated well in the scene where Reza lies in hospital and humorously belittles the holy writings of the Quoran. He addresses the mullah who lies in the bed next to him and complains that, "these stories are too far out there". By dressing as a mullah, Reza is forced to confront the teachings of the Quoran because his congregation demands spiritual guidance. He finds a connection to the Quoranic writings by exploring his own experiences as a thief against the few verses he has learnt in the past. By stepping into the shoes of a cleric, therefore, he is essentially able to make a connection between the writings of the Quoran and his own life as a criminal. The writings are no longer 'difficult to access' because his unique clerical rhetoric leads to his own understanding of them.

According to Victor Turner, when a social structure is difficult to access, or "mystified", it cultivates the creation of alternative spaces that can explore those structures. He says "a given social structure as an organisation of constraint dialectically fosters alternative

[66] Critchley describes a rite as a "symbolic act that derives its meaning from a cluster of socially legitimated symbols" (2002:5).

realms apart from the typicality of the quotidian" (1969: 23). Here, Turner suggests that there is a division of reality into the "normative structure and a liminal anti-structure" (1969:47). He describes the liminal realm as a site for resistance struggles, inversions and repudiations, breaking norms and expressing acts or feelings that are usually forbidden or taboo. Thus, through the agency bestowed on Reza by his clerical garb, Reza is liberated from his position in life and the audience from predominant images of clergy. Along with Reza, the audience can now explore the otherwise 'inaccessible' (Azizi 2004: 4) reality of a cleric and, in doing so, de-mystify it. This makes it possible to "extend the narrow sense of life" (Bakhtin 1984: 177) experienced by Iranians and allows for a multiplicity of voices in the process. The fact that Reza presents an alternative, mundane and ordinary image of a cleric, is itself the expression of a new voice alongside those in mainstream Iranian film.

Because Bakhtin sees dialogism[67], or the provision of more than the one established voice, as a fundamental aspect of carnival, he believes that this plurality of a "fully valid consciousnesses" (1984: 9) brings with it a different point of view that will ultimately "uncover, undermine – even destroy the hegemony of any ideology that seeks to have the final word about the world" (1984: 177). In other words, the very existence of an alternative voice destroys the domination of any one voice. Reza's presence destroys the predominant images of clergy in Iranian film. His expression or interpretation of a cleric, facilitated through his mask, threatens the monopoly of other images. I propose that

[67] 'Dialogism' is a term coined by Bakhtin. According to Jack Lynch, it means the competition of several voices within a literary text (2006: 45).

masquerade allows an exploration of alternative viewpoints or voices and liberates from established ones.

Throughout my analysis of parody and masquerade in the previous chapter, I reiterated the unconditional respect, power and possibility that are opened to Reza. As opposed to when he was still a thief, Reza is now able to meet women and talk to them intimately, he is able to ignore traffic laws, encourage his young seminarians to explore their sexual prime, and he is able to preach his understanding of the Quoran. I also demonstrated that Tabrizi constantly keeps us aware of the potential abuse of this newfound power. For example, a silent child follows Reza, symbolising his conscience, looking through his disguise and reminding him of his responsibility as a cleric. In particular, Reza is tempted to chase the beautiful young Faezeh but draws a line when she asks him to help her carry bags into her apartment. He knows he will be tempted to abuse the situation and decides to turn down her request. It is significant then, that in this space of 'endless' possibility, Reza ultimately uses his power to make moral choices and puts his own needs after those of his community. This choice encapsulates the nature of images in *The Lizard*. He serves his community, fosters unity among its members and contributes to its prosperity.

I propose that Tabrizi uses two kinds of transgressions to achieve these new images of a mullah in this space of ironic distance: inversion and suspension. As I mentioned briefly, 'suspension' is a term Derrida uses to signify the rejection of an entire hierarchy (Hügli & Lübcke 1991: 123). According to Anton Hügli and Paol Lübcke's reading of Derrida, inverting a hierarchy can simply lead to affirming its existence. In the case of *The Lizard,*

this could mean that by placing Reza in the shoes of a cleric, Tabrizi is simply creating a new cleric and no real change to the system comes about. In order to effect real change, the authors claim, a system needs to be suspended (1991: 124). Although *The Lizard* does not suspend the Iranian societal hierarchy, which is headed up by Iran's clergy, it suspends certain societal concepts and ideas. For example, when Reza suggests that the 'West' can illuminate 'Islam' without compromising the latter, he suspends that dichotomy. The 'West' as a previously subordinate term is not inverted to suddenly be superior to 'Islam'. Rather, they exist as potentially equal categories or sets of values. The dichotomy is therefore suspended. Inversion, on the other hand, happens when the low criminal rises to the rank of the high cleric and enjoys all the privileges that go with this new rank. In the remaining portion of this chapter, I will argue that, through suspension and inversion, Tabrizi portrays utopian and 'universally'[68] desired images of a mullah that amount to a new paradigm of clerical reality. In my concluding chapter, I will show that these images shift the entire definition of a 'mullah' in the context of mainstream Iranian media.

Utopian Images and Universal Desires

The above discussion reveals that, in *The Lizard,* parody and masquerade enable new and different images of clergy, which are liberated from established ones. Hosseini describes these images as "hopeful" and proposes that this is what Iran's population has been wanting to see (2004: 4). The "suspension or reversal of usual codes of morality, dress

[68] I acknowledge that the term 'universal' is problematic as it assumes the existence of a unified desire or vision shared by all Iranians alike. However, I choose to use Richard Dyer's (1979: 14) term because he describes the universality of audiences experiencing a longing for escapism rather than the many different facets such desires may have. I believe the term also characterises the desire of those audiences who supported *The Lizard* to see change, any change, in the status quo.

and self-presentation" (Turner 1969: 111) result in images of a mullah who has power but ultimately uses it for selfless purposes. When the members of his congregation see Reza sneaking around the centre of town at night, they suppose he is giving money and food to the poor. They arrive at his door with a collection of donations and urge him to distribute them among his contacts. Reza has the option to pocket the contributions but instead joins them in their awakened charity. As the previous chapters demonstrated, Reza is non-judgmental and forgiving. He welcomes sinner and saint into the mosque, endorses human weaknesses, sanctions forbidden 'Western' culture, and is himself prone to all the weaknesses and appetites of his fellow human beings. Reza is humble and serving. In contradistinction, the images of clergy in mainstream Iranian media foster dichotomies of 'West' versus 'Islam', or 'criminal' versus 'pious man' and the idea that only certain topics and virtues, such as chastity, are worthy of discourse. I propose that these 'humble', 'serving' and 'selfless'[69] images amount to a new definition, or paradigm[70], of clerical reality that confronts established images. I further propose that Reza communicates 'universally' desired images. This assumption is based on *The Lizard's* positive press reviews and its triumph as the "most commercially successful Iranian film of all times" (*Agence France Press*, 6 July 2005).

Richard Dyer argues that, "utopia projects onto the screen our wishes" (1979: 14). Arguably, *The Lizard* projects the 'wishes' of the Iranian audience for an alternative clerical paradigm, primarily in so far as it shows alternative images of a mullah.

[69] I am aware of the subjectivity of these terms and will further discuss them in the next section.
[70] Thomas Kuhn defines a 'paradigm' as a model or set of "exemplary values" against which reality is measured (1961: 161).

Secondly, these images can be said to correspond with the wishes of the Iranian audience because they question and undermine a number of restrictions that Iranians are clearly resisting through their illegal activities outlined in chapter one. It that sense then, the film can be described as utopian. Ashleigh Harris defines utopia as 'eutopia'; meaning a good, an ideal place and 'outopia'; meaning no place, or unattainable (1998: 83). Harris sees a 'utopian escape' (1998: 93) in Bakhtin's notion of carnival when he says "carnival celebrated a temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order" (1965: 199). Dyer similarly characterises utopia as "the image of something better to escape into or something we want deeply that our day-to-day lives don't provide" (Dyer 1979: 5). Thus the escape from some form of reality into another, alternative one, is a major aspect of utopia. Hence, audiences are able to escape from the unforgiving restrictions and laws of contemporary Iranian life into a more tolerant, lenient world in *The Lizard*.

I propose that, while utopia may well provide the image of something better to escape into, it is not actually the perfection of this alternative world that makes it utopian. The perfect world is as subjective as terms such as 'humble', 'serving' or 'selfless'. Rather, the fact that it is alternative to predominant depictions matters. In the language of laughter and masquerade, *The Lizard* builds its own world versus the official world, its own church versus the official church, its own state versus the official state (Bakhtin 1984: 177) and thereby provides an alternative paradigm and a plurality of voices. This paradigm expresses the universality of experience in encountering images that are forbidden, not the universality of the content of such images. Iranian audiences have a

shared desire to see new images, whatever they may be, and *The Lizard* provides those, by showing images of a humble servant of humanity.

Transgressive Utopianism: The political power of 'some place else'

Through its textual devices then, *The Lizard* creates a utopian space that allows alternative images of clergy, which are responsive to the real world in the sense that they thematise subjects and provide images that are sensitive to the Iranian cultural and political context. Josie Appleton explains that several leftist theorists have recently been re-examining the idea of utopia as a route out of twenty-first century political "doldrums" (2005: 3). Key amongst these scholars is Frederick Jameson[71], who comments on the dearth of political solutions and describes utopias as "hallucinatory visions in desperate times" (2005: 5). Appleton suggests that utopias are designed to reveal the cracks and shortcomings in the society of their authors. She says, "society is taken apart and reassembled" (2005: 3) through utopias. These claims resonate with what I have argued for *The Lizard*. Tabrizi takes apart and reassembles Iranian society when he offers fresh images and interpretations that consist of the same basic elements: clergy, congregation, Islam. In this respect, I suggest that the film evidences the kind of reinvention that Jameson describes when he says:

> Like the inventors, [utopias offer] a garage space in which all kinds of machines can be tinkered with and rebuilt (Jameson 2005: 13).

[71] Jameson is a political and literary critic and theorist. He is best known for the analysis of contemporary cultural trends and has described postmodernism as a disease of culture under the pressure of organised capitalism (1991).

This political potential of utopia is why Lucy Sargisson's idea of transgressive utopianism (2000) becomes relevant to my study of *The Lizard*. According to Sargisson, sustainable political change requires that we first enable ourselves to break free of mental constraints and think differently (2000: 3). In order to think differently, we need to access alternative spaces, paradigms or worlds. Sargisson sees what she calls 'transgressive utopianism' as a tool that enables this access and ultimately allows a paradigm shift in consciousness. Essentially, transgressive utopianism is an alternative site that transgresses established norms and boundaries. The site is 'good' but not necessarily 'perfect' (2003: 4). Her concept is utopian, but at the same time it is connected to the 'real'[72] world and is "pragmatic" (2000:1). I believe that Hutcheon substantiates this connection when she says that parody (and I propose also masquerade) imitate art in order to comment on reality (1985: 27).

Sargisson suggests that utopias (good places that are no places) are useful because they are outside this real world but engage critically with it. They provide for "bodies-of-thought spaces" in which creativity is possible. (2004: 3). For the purpose of my analysis, I chose to substitute the word 'place' with the broader term 'reality', which I believe is more precise in encapsulating the alternative sphere that Reza creates. So in the case of *The Lizard*, the world created within the narrative may be utopian in its depiction of a 'good' reality that is no reality yet clearly engages with themes and images that relate to the contemporary Iranian cultural and political context: Reza comments on Iran's relationship with America when he quotes Tarantino, he engages in the debate on

[72] I would like to acknowledge that it is problematic to assume a unified, stable, external 'reality'. However, in the context of Sargisson's argument, I interpret this 'reality' as the existing external conditions that affect the various experiences of reality, which exist at any given time.

weblogging and his presence in the mosque confronts the subject of criminals in the face of Islamic law. In other words, Reza's reality is anchored in the established world.

For Sargisson, "creating heaven on earth is not a function of utopias" (2003: 1). Rather, they should break rules and confront boundaries. A utopia should challenge paradigms and thus create a new conceptual and political space from which new ideas and propositions can be explored and made possible (Sargisson 2003: 4). The utopian reality portrayed in *The Lizard* breaks rules and confronts boundaries when it turns from comedy to tragedy, when it portrays a cleric who engages in preaching messages that are considered blasphemous in Iran's mainstream clerical discourse. It challenges paradigms when it transforms dichotomies and creates thus, a conceptual and political space where "different bodies of thought can meet on a ground to converse. This ground is transgressive utopianism" (Sargisson 2003: 4). Hence, transgressive utopian spaces express needs and enable a process to take place. I believe this process explores different routes to an 'ideal' destination but does not constitute the destination itself. It is the environment from which "sustainable political change" (Sargisson 2004: 3) can happen. *The Lizard* creates this space within the comedic genre. Comedy, in *The Lizard,* is created through "incongruities" (Eidsvik cited in Horton 1991: 93) between Reza the criminal and his appropriation of a mullah. Reza's parody of various clerical conventions and his identity-concealing mask merge the world of mullahs with that of the ordinary person and thus create a third, new world. This new world shows images of a clergyman that are portrayed by a common man, Reza, and can thus be said to relay his interpretation of what a mullah should and could be.

In expressing the audience's needs, utopia can be described as "cathartic" (Harris 1998: 83). According to Harris, for that to hold true, its 'universal' aspect must be emphasised. In referring to Stallybrass and White (1986), she explains that with the emergence of capitalism utopia shifted from communal participation to the individual representation of an ideal. This, she proposes, split the relationship of utopia from catharsis. Harris points out that the utopian space created by the *Bildungsroman* in realism, for example, is "restricted by the repression of the bourgeoisie" (1998: 83) and perpetuates the prevailing order instead of challenging it. In other words, the *Bildungsroman* shows the 'ideal' in the status quo rather than questioning it. However, Harris argues that with the emergence of the film industry, cathartic utopia returns. (1998: 83). I would argue that this catharsis comes from the celebration of a parallel, or "second life", which Horton ascribes to comedy (1991: 222). Horton proposes that Bakhtin's concept of carnival has pollinated film comedy in providing this other realm in which there is freedom from the established order. This is where, I propose, it becomes all right to laugh at Reza's incongruous appropriation of a clergyman.

In brief, *The Lizard* projects liberated and 'universally' desired images that can be considered utopian in the sense that they are alternative to established ones. The film creates a utopian space from whence it is possible to engage in political critique and in which alternative approaches to the world can be explored (Sargisson 2003: 7). My concluding chapter will show how this space interacts with established images in order to critique and reform the role and significance of clergy in contemporary Iran.

CONCLUSION

So far, I have defined *The Lizard* as an unusual film in the Iranian cinematic context because it projects images of clergy that are very different from those in Iran's mainstream media. These images are controversial because they convey subjects and views the expression of which is forbidden by the government of Iran. Paradoxically, the government itself produced the film before pulling it off the circuit. In exploring how *The Lizard* merited clearance for production, I identified the use of comedy as an atypical but effective choice that enables a licensed playground for transgressive images. I further established that the type of comedy evidenced in *The Lizard* is satire. I then examined satire's two key techniques of delivery in the film: parody and masquerade. By virtue of their respective relationships to ironic distance, these two techniques create a space in which transgressive, liberated, yet authorised images can be created. This transgressive, and as I defined it, utopian space allows for the provision of alternative images and voices.

I believe that these new and alternative images redefine the role of the clergy and thus critique the current establishment in Iran. Hosseini suggests that the Iranian population has been secretly criticising the clerical system in Iran but that, through Reza, *The Lizard* now offers a public face to that critique:

> Behind closed doors, Iranians have ridiculed mullahs and their triteness. With the release of *The Lizard*, the subject is no longer private, breaking a long-established taboo of making fun of Iranian religious authorities (Hosseini 2004: 4)

I will now describe the way in which satire constitutes a critique of the current clerical model by simultaneously providing a new paradigm for clerical reality. With this dual process, Tabrizi's satire undermines the role and significance of clergy as authoritative figures and suggests new terms and definitions for their existence. I will then expound on the cultural and political consequence of satire, showing that it becomes an expression of oppositional political thought on the Iranian theocracy. In particular, my analysis will confirm that, as Charles Eidsvik argues, humour in totalitarian states often functions as an act of rebellion against state-sanctioned values and taboos (Eidsvik cited in Horton 1991: 91).

If satire "blends a critical attitude with humour and wit to the end that the human institutions or humanity may be improved" (Thrall et al 1960: 436), then this improvement precludes total nihilism or rejection of the establishment. On the one hand, it necessitates an affirmation of the existing 'human institution', and on the other, it exposes its weaknesses in order to "distort, to belittle, to wound" (Highet 1962: 69). In *The Lizard,* satire achieves this dual process of affirmation and attack through parody and masquerade. The nature of these two techniques is to "speak out of a mask" (Highet 1962: 48) or to affirm and simultaneously distance themselves from other representations. I believe that in the space of affirmation, where *The Lizard's* parody and masquerade

resemble other texts, Tabrizi satirically exposes the clockwork of the old world order. In other words, the established clerical paradigm is characterised where *The Lizard* meets and affirms other texts and representations. These overlapping spaces testify to the "extramural" (Hutcheon 1985: 43) world order.

These semblances and affirmations include the portrayal of a cleric who stands above the law. As a mullah, Reza is able to ignore traffic laws. He holds the respect of the traffic policeman and of Montazedi. Montazedi runs the prison and is depicted as a powerful man who is able to treat his prisoners anyway he likes. There is no system of checks and balances in place and nobody stands above him, except the mullah, Reza. Through his garb, Reza has the power to meet women and converse with them in public places. He is able to preach his own interpretation of the Quoran because of the power bestowed on him through his mask. Through parody and masquerade, Reza is able to access and tap into the existing power structure, at the top of which he stands. His rank and power echoes the television discussions and sermons transcribed in chapter two. These media forms are used as a forum to reiterate and affirm power through the obedient chanting of a congregation and become a platform for broadcasting religious law. The sum of hierarchical power expressed in *The Lizard* resembles other texts and also Iranian reality. *Under the Moonlight* similarly confirms that clergy stand unquestioned at the top of the power hierarchy in Iran. Mullahs interpret the Quoran and make the law. It is in these places of overlap with other texts that the extramural or real world is portrayed. This world is one of unconditional and arguably 'unlimited' possibility for a mullah.

However, in *The Lizard,* this power is exposed. The character of a silent child follows Reza and is a constant reminder of the existence of someone who can see through his unchecked power, through his guise and into his heart. I argue that this child is a reminder of the 'potential' of power, which can be used for selfish or selfless purposes. Therefore, the child represents the node at which choices are made and semblances to other texts turn into differences. Specifically, this means that Reza has the choice to use his power anyway he wants. He can use it to feed his own status and authority, or he can use it to serve other people's needs. This potential can be seen like a fork in a path. The choice Reza makes sends him down a path that splits from predominant representations of clergy as unquestioned, 'sacrosanct' and powerful authorities. It sends him down a path of selflessness and humility.

It is here that satire's criticism kicks in because new images emerge and confront old ones. The sum of these new images offers an alternative interpretation or paradigm for clerical reality. In the last few chapters, I established that Reza transgresses predominant images of clergy in some of the following ways: He is not unconditionally pious and free from earthly desires on the contrary, he loves food, music and women. He is responsible for his own spiritual development and constantly has to check that he does not slip too far. For example, he is very tempted to chase Faezeh but draws a line at flirtation, though he has the power to wed her. He also has the choice to pocket his community's donations and use them towards his exit out of the country but decides, instead, to give them to the poor. He is in a constant battle between his desires and what he knows to be right. Therefore, Reza is compassionate and understanding. He acknowledges young people's

sexual impulses, suspends the dichotomy of the 'West' versus 'Islam' and turns a blind eye to weaknesses, accepting everyone into his mosque. So Reza characterises a new role and significance for clergy, one that is 'humble' and 'imperfect', among other things.

I propose that the new paradigm that is created confronts the old paradigm in a process of what Derrida calls *Umdrehung*. In an effort to prevent the reinvention of authority through processes that simply flip power around, *Umdrehung* is neither a reversal of terms nor even a complete anarchical rejection of hierarchical structure per se (Derrida cited in Hügli & Lübcke 1991: 124). Rather, it can be seen as a total redefinition of existing roles within a hierarchy. For example, Derrida claims that according to Heidegger's reading of Nietzsche, the model of 'passive, receptive consumers' must be replaced by one of 'producers' (Derrida: 1978), thus redefining a role from 'passive' to 'active'. Although Nietzsche talks about the role of consumers in the 'real' world rather than a narrative world, what is at stake in his description and my reading of *The Lizard* is the concept of redefining roles. The narrative world of Reza explores a comparable, albeit fictional, redefinition of roles but nevertheless with 'real' consequences for an Iranian society barred from open political discourse. Tabrizi inverts the social hierarchy through masquerade and thus creates a shift in paradigm. He does not reject the entire concept of clergy but challenges and develops the established role of a mullah. In mainstream Iranian film and media, a mullah's role is that of the 'guardian' (Hitchens 2005: 8), the moral leader and authority on matters of religious interpretation. This role amounts to that of power and authority. Tabrizi's paradigm offers images of a cleric who serves the community, gives money and food to the poor and embraces the morally volatile into his

mosque. In essence, a hierarchy still exists but under new terms and definitions. The mullah's role is not authoritative but humanitarian. Tabrizi does not suspend the entire socio-political edifice in Iran. He is not adopting a strategy of displacement that Derrida outlines through suspension. He is rather affirming the current structure of the Iranian clerical paradigm but with a crucial difference. In the sense that he redefines the role of the cleric from 'powerful authority' to 'humble servant', he changes the terms of the debate. Since the government in Iran reflects the authoritative paradigm it communicates in its media, these new images directly attack its claim to power. They suggest to their audiences that mullahs do not have to be rich and omnipotent but can be modest and accessible.

Whether Reza's model of a mullah accurately reflects every single viewer's vision or not, is not important. His very existence undermines the unconditional power motivated by the old paradigm because it offers an "alternative" (Sargisson 2003: 7) to the existing interpretation of the role and significance of clergy. The legitimacy of these paradigms is subjective but, as Sargisson argues (2003), in the provision of an 'alternative', the shift is subversive.

In order to complete my analysis of the subversive force of satire in *The Lizard*, I will now refer to Raymond William's understanding of cultural products and ideology to show that this 'alternative' space essentially becomes oppositional in the context of Iran's cultural and political environment. I will conclude this report by claiming that *The Lizard* is a cultural product that becomes a site of political resistance and finally that director

Tabrizi is an 'ideologue' as Ali Shariati defined someone who replaces what 'is' with what 'ought to be'.

Iranian films are cultural products and are produced by the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance (*BBC News* 3 May 2005). The government considers them part of its cultural output and scrutinises them closely (McGill 2004:4). Likewise, the international film scene views Iranian cinema as 'national cinema', one aspect of which is its designation as a cultural product (Dabashi 2005: 40).

I agree with Raymond Williams that cultural products adopt a particular stance towards the culture they are born into. According to Phil Edwards, Raymond Williams challenges the Marxist notion that culture is a mere reflection of political structures and argues instead that culture expresses political experience, and that political activity takes cultural forms (1999: 1). For Williams, culture is always political; it is "a whole way of life", which makes up society (Williams in Edwards 1999: 2). Edwards argues that Williams views culture as political, because the social process addressed by political analysis is always embedded in culture (1999: 2). As anthropologist Clifford Geertz remarks of symbol systems such as films, "they are extrinsic sources of information in terms of which human life can be patterned – extrapersonal mechanisms for the perception, understanding, judgment, and manipulation of the world" (Geertz 1973: 216). In other words, narratives, such as films, are cultural products that are constructed and organised to produce meanings that reflect a certain - politicised - worldview.

However, I believe that those meanings are not necessarily at the mercy of one dominant, ideological[73] superstructure. Rather, I believe that *The Lizard* expresses its own relationship and views on the dominant ideology[74]. It articulates a social reality that can be said to resonate with many Iranians because they supported the film like none other in the history of their nation's cinema (*BBC News*, 6 May 2004). Peter Berger and Thomas Luckman (1966) confirm this view when they suggest that the social reality specific to any group or society is collectively constructed by the people of that group through cultural products such as film or music. Benedict Anderson (1991) expounds on this phenomenon when he defines the concept of nationalism as a construction created in the space of imagination by a country's print media. According to Anderson, national identity is imagined through the images that media provides but problematised when media that was limited by geographic location becomes global.

If, as I propose, Iran's media can be defined as 'limited' and controlled, *The Lizard* challenges the existing imagined identity of the Iranian clergy and offers newly imagined identities. Similarly, in my introduction, I outlined that narrative is a platform where history, present-day and future 'what-ifs' can be examined. Therefore, when people create narrative, through music or film, they explore their own imagined or concrete realities and experiences (Turner 1996: 3). For example, Edwards refers to the music of social and political protest of artists like Bob Dylan and John Lennon who, he says, were significant in defining and communicating emergent and oppositional ideologies and in

[73] I am aware of the problematic term 'ideology' and will define it more concisely for the purpose of my study in a later paragraph.
[74] I am referring here to the ideology of the Islamic Republic, which is expressed through its official media outlets.

formulating the structures of what were called "the youth countercultures of the 1960s and 70s" (1999: 2). Therefore, as Edwards argues, "in addition to the dominant ideology of any society, which is constructed and supported by the cultural symbols produced within it, there can evolve various alternative ideologies, usually based in some subordinate grouping that is critical of the established order" (Edwards 1999). Williams has made a useful distinction between the dominant ideology and various possible co-existing alternatives. Such alternative ideologies, created and supported by their own cultural symbols, may be either oppositional, that is challenging the dominant ideology, or alternative, in other words co-existing with it (Williams 1977).

If *The Lizard* is a cultural product and thereby inherently political, the relationship it expresses to the predominant Islamic ideology may be seen in terms of the values and views it articulates. Stuart Hall (1980) argued that the dominant ideology is typically inscribed as the 'preferred reading' in a media text, but that readers do not automatically adopt this. The social situations of readers/viewers/listeners may lead them to adopt different stances. Hall continues to relay that 'dominant' readings are produced by those whose social situation favours the preferred reading, while 'negotiated' readings are produced by those who inflect the preferred reading to take account of their social position. This could explain why the clergy initially endorsed *The Lizard* before Iranian audiences produced 'oppositional' readings. Hall says this happens with viewers whose social position puts them into direct conflict with the preferred reading (1980: 135). According to Nick Stevenson, Williams sees ideology as a signifier of a distinct set of ideas and beliefs that are internally held and produced by a particular class or social

group (1995: 9).[75] Following Williams, all beliefs and ideas can be summed up to form part of the ideology. In Iran, the 'ideology of the Islamic Republic' belongs to its clergy and is expressed, among other channels, through its media and films. *The Lizard* offers an 'alternative' interpretation of this ideology but does not seek to replace it with a new ideology altogether. Rather, it expresses a new paradigm, or new terms, within this ideology and challenges its 'immaculate' image.

However, I believe that, in the context of contemporary Iranian politics, this challenge becomes oppositional. Since the utopian space of ironic distance creates an alternative to the mainstream images of clergy in Iran, it provides a heterogeneous system of multiplicity (Hutcheon 1988: 61). Because Bakhtin sees the multiplicity of voices, or dialogism, as a fundamental aspect of carnival, he believes that that plurality of a "fully valid consciousnesses" (1984: 9) produces a different point of view that will ultimately "uncover, undermine – even destroy the hegemony of any ideology that seeks to have the final word about the world" (1984: 177). In other words, the very existence of an alternative voice destroys the domination of any one voice. In a society like Iran, where only one voice or interpretation of 'Islam' is sanctioned through its clergy, any alternative becomes oppositional.

Williams describes that the struggles for the return of democracy in certain regions stimulated the mushrooming of alternative media and cultural products. He claims that,

[75] Stevenson makes a point of distinguishing 'hegemony' from 'ideology', stressing that hegemony can be upheld through "economic, political or ideological means" (1995: 10) and is therefore not interchangeable with the term ideology. Hegemony, according to Antonio Gramsci (Sassoon 1982: 74), can mean the way in which patterns of domination are secured through processes of force and consent.

amid censorship and political persecution, alternative media or culture necessarily becomes oppositional (Williams 1977: 126). Iran is one such milieu of censorship and political persecution. Chapter one related that Iran imprisons people who propose any kind of reassessment of the current regime. The government also bans certain websites, weblogs and restricts media output. Williams argues that in such an environment, alternative images become threatening:

> The effective penetration of the dominant order into the whole social and cultural process […] narrows the gap between alternative and oppositional elements. The alternative, especially in areas that impinge on significant areas of the dominant, is often seen as oppositional and, by pressure, often converted to it (Williams 1977: 126).

I would argue then, that *The Lizard* constitutes an alternative cultural product that is politically oppositional because it expresses a stance that does not affirm Iran's 'official' ideology. That is why I believe the head of the un-elected Guardian Council, Ayatollah Jannati, ultimately condemned the film publicly as "an insult to religion and the clergy" (Azizi 2004: 4), before banning it. It is his interpretation of religion and clergy that the film insults. According to my understanding of Ali Shariati, who was perceived by many as the "ideological father of the Islamic revolution" (Rahnema 1998: 3), *The Lizard* would make Tabrizi an 'ideologue' who replaces the fatalistic 'what is' with the utopian 'what ought to be' (Rahnema 1998: 3).

Ali Rahnema describes Shariati as a philosopher, lecturer and poet (1998: 4). Rahnema views Shariati as someone who felt that any cultural expression needed constant updating and re-evaluating: "A firm believer in the inevitability of change and the necessity of adaptation, he was a modernist who usually detested the persistence of outmoded traditions, customs and institutions" (1998: 8). Shariati writes that every society has a cultural expression best suited for authentic revolution. This cultural expression is some sort of ideology[76] that opposes the dominant one and is used as a tool for mobilising society (Shariati 1979: 76). For Shariati, the chosen ideology seems to be fluid, not 'set', but ever adapting: he felt that ideology could and should be reinterpreted so that it would be possible to extract from it a worldview conducive to any active political change that is necessary (Shariati 1979: 112). In other words, Shariati sees an ideology such as 'Islam' as a sort of tool that can be reinvented, reshaped and reinterpreted as needed to achieve a certain goal. It is not an end in itself. It is a means to an end. Similarly, I believe that the new paradigm created through Tabrizi's satire is a means to achieving dialogue and reformation of the clerical system in Iran.

In the 1970's, Shariati felt that Iran was being exploited by "the materialistic intentions of the Shah and America" (Rahnema 1998: 13). Shariati believed that Islam was the revolutionary ideology to be used for change and emancipation from the West (Rahnema 1998: 13). According to Rahnema, Shariati's rationale is that, from its inception, Islam sided with the oppressed. Mohammed fought for social equality and surrounded himself with the deprived society. In Rahnema's words: "Islam is biased towards the poor and the

[76] For Shariati, "Ideology […] is the thinker's belief relative to the value of the external realities – their evaluation, what inconsistencies such realities contain and how to transform them into ideal form" (1979: 110). Therefore, 'ideology' always refers to the oppositional one, not the dominant one.

weak. In Islam Shariaiti found the language and beliefs of the people who he felt were oppressed and tried to reach through their religion" (1998: 14). Hence, Shariati can be said to have used the spin of 'Islam as liberator of the oppressed' as an ideology to affect the expulsion of the Shah from Iran and seek whatever change he envisioned.

Therefore, Shariati modernised and "moulded" Islam (Rahnema 1998: 16) into a tool for change. Laurence Reza Ershaghi points out that it is debatable weather Shariati himself believed in Islam, but that is actually irrelevant to the fact that he used it (2003: 64). His ideas were a synthesis of Islamicism and Marxism and so he has been described as a Marxist Islamist (Rahnema 1998: 20). According to Rahnema, he used Islam to mobilise the crowds against the Shah. His vision was for a democratic Iran: In the ultimate social revolution he saw the end of all injustice, oppression and inequality (Rahnema 1998: 22). While *The Lizard* is a film and not a social or political movement, and therefore does not operate in the same way as an Islamic revolution, it does show significant similarities to Shariati's approach. The film moulds and reinterprets 'Islam' into a tool for change. It uses the spiritual, cultural and political foundation of Iranian society and redefines its source – Islam – to achieve images of a 'better' Iran. It responds to its viewers' universally shared desire for a better place by showing how clergy are the main source of Iran's public dissatisfaction today and how they 'should' or 'could' be.

In today's Iran, the faces of power have changed but the extremes of wealth and poverty, the cleft between authority and oppression have intensified since the fall of the Shah (Vick 2006: 3). Iran has become the place that Shariati warned it could turn into if clergy

ascended their "ivory towers" and assumed the same totalitarian rule he had tried to root out (Ershaghi 2003: 64). Ironically, I believe that if Shariati were to see the outcome of the Islamic revolution he set in motion, he would call for a new revolution that redefines the role of mullahs and demands that the oppressed be liberated once again. When reading *The Lizard* in the light of Shariati's vision of Iran and Islam's role in the achievement of that ideal place, I believe that the film could be seen as an expression or tool for such a revolution. Shariati was a revolutionary but in the authorised framework of Islam. *The Lizard* is a subversive piece yet in an authorised textual and cultural framework. Tabrizi, the 'ideologue', uses new and different images of an Islamic ideology to show us what 'is' and what 'ought to be' – or rather 'what could be'.