

A film studies approach in architectural research: urban space in three Iranian films

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ABSTRACT: Architecture and film studies are interrelated disciplines, and architects can take advantage of existent commercial, dramatic, comedic or documentary films for inspiration and historical research. As examples of how existent films can be utilized innovatively in architectural research, this paper critically examines three contemporary Iranian films: *"Ten"* (2002), a realist docudrama directed by Abbas Kiarostami, *"Chaharshanbe-soori"* (2006), a melodrama directed by Asghar Farhadi, and *"Dayere Zangi"* (2008), a comedic urban drama directed by Parisa Bakhtavar. Through this examination, the paper argues that the lens through which a filmmaker looks at buildings and urban settings is unique, and that in every film, from the most abstract to the least, and whether the film maker is actually conscious of it or not, there is an underlying exploration and documentation of the way architecture affects and (re)shapes society. In Iran, film has always been one of the few poetic, enlightening, and powerful ways to explore, among other social and cultural phenomena, the issue of power in urban public space. Contemporary Iranian cinema has proven itself able to depict the natural and built environments as the loci for both private and public presentations of self, and these films reveal many suppressed, typically unexamined, issues surrounding the multiple meanings of place and identity. This research shows the aptitude of these filmmakers, or any filmmakers, to present views of contemporary society, supporting a broader understanding of contemporary urban life than is officially permitted or can be academically achieved. Hitherto, no other media has been found to be as great a resource as film to "freeze frame" the flow of life in an urban setting, or time in a space. With their unique lens, filmmakers are architects' fellows, making possible the observation of potential topics of inquiry; for instance, ethical and socio-political themes related to space and power.

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1. ARCHITECTURAL SPACE IN CINEMA: NATURE, TECHNIQUE, METHOD, AND FUNCTION

There are primarily two different ways that architects can use film to enhance their work. The first and most common is the employment of cinematic techniques, which includes animation and virtual modeling as well as actual videos of their projects, to (re)create both virtual and real experiences of an architectural space. These techniques are wonderful tools for architects to present their design concepts to non-architects, the public users of space and/or the clients. Through these media, architects can offer, for example, walk-throughs of a space, and views of people interacting with it, whether in the virtual computer mock-ups, the animations, or in the real films showing the phenomenology of the built environments. A second and less common way that architects can take advantage of film is simply to use existent commercial, dramatic, comedic or documentary films for both inspiration and historical research. This paper claims that the lens through which a filmmaker looks at

buildings and urban settings is unique, and that in every film, from the most abstract to the least, and whether the filmmaker is actually conscious of it or not, there is an underlying exploration and documentation of the way architecture affects and (re)shapes society.

In every society, its architects, urban and landscape designers, or any scholars studying the built environments, can take advantage of existent films as they incorporate fragments of memories, still breathing, and they can fit in pieces of histories about the cultures for and the society within which they are produced. As architect Juhani Pallasmaa describes, the physical space created within film is the "architecture without architect", and the filmmaker is the "architect without client." A filmmaker, like a novelist or a painter, provides "the human event he is presenting a setting, a place." Thus, as he puts it, a filmmaker "performs a job of architectural design without a client, structural calculation, or a building permit." (Juhani Pallasmaa 1986: 451) As examples of how existent films can be utilized innovatively in architectural research, this paper will critically examine three contemporary Iranian films. In Iran, film has always been one of the few poetic,

enlightening, and powerful ways to explore, among other social and cultural phenomena, the issue of power in urban public space. As Hamid dabashi puts it, Iranian cinema is the perfect measure of Iranian culture in living memory. (Hamid Dabashi 2007) Contemporary Iranian cinema has proven itself able to depict the natural and built environments as the loci for both private and public presentations of self. Further, as case studies, three films are selected for the paper, revealing many suppressed, and typically unexamined, issues surrounding the multiple meanings of place and identity.

The first case study is "*Ten*" (2002), a realist docudrama directed by the internationally acclaimed auteur, *Abbas Kiarostami*. It includes ten interrelated stories, all taking place inside a car passing through the streets of Tehran. Interestingly, the entire scenario is filmed from just two camera angles, the driver's side and the passenger's side. The second film is, "*Chaharshanbe-soori* (Fireworks Wednesday)" (2006), a melodrama directed by *Asghar Farhadi*, showing the overlapping life stories of three women coinciding on the day of *Chaharshanbe-soori*, a culturally important Persian ceremony, celebrated on the last Wednesday night of every Persian year, bringing to the streets of Iranian cities its particular urban spectacles and collective memories. The third case study, "*Dayere Zangi*" (2008), directed by *Parisa Bakhtavar*, is a comedic urban drama, in which the narrative space illustrates some underlying challenges and conflicting interactions between neighbors up on the roof of an apartment building in Tehran. In this film, the semi-public realms of the building become places of tension, contradiction, and ultimate reconciliation. In short, this paper will show the aptitude of these filmmakers, or any filmmakers, to present views of contemporary society that support a broader understanding of contemporary urban life than is officially permitted or can be academically achieved. Hitherto, no other media has been found to be as great a resource as film in Iran to "freeze frame" the flow of life in an urban setting, or time in a space.

2. EVERY FILM A DOCUMENTARY: LOCATION, A CINEMATIC SPACE BETWEEN FILM AND REALITY

In every film, reasons why filmmakers might prefer a location to another and different ways they treat such physical spaces in their films, whether they choose real or studio-based locations, along with the organization of cinematic *mise-en-scenes*, are enlightening facts in representing many aspects related to architectural space and life within urban/rural environments. Hence, whether the physical settings are realist that nothing has been added to their existence or they are film production studios, together with the reasons why filmmakers chose them as their preferred locations, the physicality of location turns into a prolific research material for architects and urban designers. In particular, location treatments in films open up new possibilities for the phenomenological analyses of

space. Therefore, through the nuances of locations, in conjunction with the fact that cinema can make possible the use of human bodies' and objects' close-ups and panoramic representational landscapes, films, more than any other form of art, posses the competence for architectural research. Mainly, by bringing objects and landscapes to the sight's foreground instead of keeping them in background and by providing all-encompassing wide perspectives, any film from any genre, realist or fictional, commercial, dramatic, or comedic, turns into a unique documentary, with its unique and more dynamic generic definition(s).

Let's say, there are documentary aspects to any films that can at least reveal some portions of the spatial realities out there, the aspects that are almost related to the documentations of physical space as the location. Any film embodies certain levels of reality, in terms of the location (physical space) it (re)presents or (re)produces and/or the relationships between temporality and space. As film scholar Thomas Schatz and Rick Altman argue, film genres are not static, they are dynamic phenomena ought to be viewed in wider socio-cultural contexts. According to Altman, a new critical strategy is required in genre study, a poststructuralist criticism that can simultaneously examine the contradictory forces in-between genres. He argues for a semantic/syntactic approach to genre study which, according to him, is a dual approach that not only considers the textual but also the contextual meanings of different genres, and explores the interconnections of micro-level semantic features and the macro-level socio-cultural aspects. (Rick Altman 1984) Further, Thomas Schatz also theorizes that film genres and cultural systems are interrelated; thus, any theory must analyze a twofold nature of genres, its "static deep structure" as well as "dynamic surface structure." (Thomas Schatz 1991) Therefore, these theoretical assumptions address contradictory forces within different genres and explain that any film can at the same time be included in or excluded from one genre. Thus, these theories can support the argument that any films in general can be embraced by documentary genre and approached according to their narrative spaces, historical contexts, and ideological perspectives. As a result, such a theory in film makes possible the exploration and documentation of how, on the one hand, the physical space is organized and, on the other hand, how it can affect and (re)shape the society.

Compared to other arts, cinema is a superior one in portraying architecture and urban space; it is seen as the closets art to architecture. Further, there are also intimate relations between a filmmaker and an architect. On the one hand, in Juhani Pallasmaa's words:

The presentation of architecture in other arts is the "pure looking" of a child's way of experiencing things, for the rules of architectural discipline do not regulate the experience or the way it is presented. (Juhani Pallasmaa 1986: 451)

As he asserts, although other arts like the novel writing, painting, and photography can also illustrate buildings, landscapes, and structures symbolically, film is quintessentially the most pristine art. Film is the closest art to architecture given that architectural spaces are (re)produced within the films and through the documentation of their elements of physical existence. (Juhani Pallasmaa 1986) Moreover, as the architect and film theorist Siegfried Kracauer argues, physical space (re)constructed in film is a more powerful setting than that of the photography in that, with the contribution of cinematic techniques and devices, settings in films can, more than any other medium, "represent reality as it evolves in time." (Siegfried Kracauer 1960: 293)

On the one hand, it is necessary to correct the notion that it is not only with the contribution of cinematic techniques and devices that, according to Kracauer, representations of reality as it evolves in time might become possible in film. The initiatives of cinema, as André Bazin puts it, are based upon cinema's "original myth," a myth that has made possible the existence of cinema as a superior art. Cinema, as Bazin asserts, has always dwelt in the soul of every human being, and longing for it in the hierarchy of human desires. In his words, "the real primitives of the cinema" exist "in complete imitation of nature." As he puts it:

Every new development added to the cinema must, paradoxically, take it nearer and nearer to its origins." (André Bazin 1946: 202)

As theorized earlier in this paper, every film has some portions of documentary aspects to it, and as a result, it incorporates certain levels of reality related to its represented or reproduced physical space. Thus, not only the realist cinema, which Bazin argues for, is the most relevant source of material for architectural research, but also the *mise-en-scenes*, narratives, and character types in any film genre are amongst the dynamic research materials. On the other hand, referring to the intimacy between filmmakers and architects, as Mehrnaz Saeed-Vafa alleges, there is even a significant portion of reality beyond filmmaker's choice of location:

For the filmmaker, the choice of location is a cultural and at time a political statement, which consciously or unconsciously reveals aspects of the filmmaker's personal identity as well as his or her attitude toward the dominant culture. The location and its cinematic representation by the filmmaker constitute the world of his/her films. They reflect the filmmaker's state of mind, as well as that of the characters, and can pass a metaphor for his or her cultural and emotional situation at the time of filming. (Mehrnaz Saeed-Vafa 2002: 202)

3. THE FUNCTIONS OF CINEMATIC SPACE

With their unique lens, filmmakers are architects' fellows in that they can make possible the observation

of potential topics of inquiry such as ethical and socio-political themes related to space and power. In any films, objects and landscapes passing across the screen are not mere backgrounds for the narrative plots and characters. By comparing architecture, as a profession and a unique functional art form, to the art of filmmaking, one can locate many similarities in that cinema is also a functional art, and much like architecture, a dynamic profession. According to Siegfried Kracauer, cinema has three "revealing functions." First, it reveals "things normally unseen," small things through close-ups and big things such as "masses" of people and vast landscapes through wide camera angles, as well as the most transient elements of the environment and least permanent impressions, attitudes, and behaviors. Foremost, films reveal to us the "phenomena which figure among the blind spots of the mind," where "habits and prejudice prevent us from noticing them." Second, films help to identify, without distortion, the "phenomena overwhelming consciousness," those such as catastrophes and wars. Finally, films disclose the "special modes of reality," which are the physical realities that might appear to "individuals in extreme states of mind". (Siegfried Kracauer 1960: 296) In addition to Kracauer's three "revealing functions" of films, "things normally unseen," "phenomena overwhelming consciousness," and "special modes of reality," there is a fourth dimension, another revealing aspect, to cinema related to film's functions and the spatial organization of a movie theatre. This aspect, described by Michel Foucault in his essay "Of Other Spaces utopias and, Heterotopias," deals with the spatiality of a movie theatre as an uncanny type of architecture; Foucault suggests that a movie theatre is a type of Heterotopia, a physical place capable of juxtaposing multiple incompatible spaces within its rectangle. Movie theatre is a rectangular space at the end of which one can see "the projection of a three-dimensional space" on a "two-dimensional screen," where one observes an intact "series of places that are foreign to one another." (Michel Foucault 1967) Therefore, the cinematic spaces, generated on the screens of movie theatres, are mysterious heterotopias, extraordinarily uncanny rectangular spaces at once functioning as present-time real definable spaces and counter-sites, stimulated in imagination and memory, their locations not easily definable in reality.

3.1. Heterotopics of the Iranian Cinema: Definition, Production, and Screening

Whether before or after the 1979 revolution, the cinema of Iran has been a heterotopia, parallel to Michel Foucault's sense, a simultaneously definable space and a counter-site stimulated in imagination and memory. Further, as Hamid Dabashi puts it, for the young people before the Islamic revolution, to go to the cinema or to watch a movie was "an act of defiance." (Hamid Dabashi 2007) I would say that it has been a sign of insubordination and opposition to either the patriarchal society or some of its traditional and religious value systems, or as a political statement, against concurrent constitutions of power. According to

Dabashi, in the height of the 1979 revolution, the revolutionaries' belief was that cinema was an apparatus of the west and Pahlavi kings, so they set many movie theatres, including the Cinema Rex in Abadan, on fire against westernization and as an emblematic protest against Pahlavi's corruption. (Hamid Dabashi 2007) Since 1979, right after the formation of the Islamic republic government in Iran, veil has become compulsory for women in public and many Islamic revolutionaries, who had deplored cinema as an apparatus of Shah's corrupt policies, as Hamid Naficy asserts, have advocated that cinema should only be used for the purpose of teaching "Islamic values, traditionalism, monotheism, theocracy, and anti-imperialism." (Hamid Naficy 1998:230) Between 1980 and 1987, during the Iranian Cultural Revolution, the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance established in 1982, and became the responsible organization required of assessing and censoring film those synopses and screenplay stages which do not conform to the necessary codes of conduct. Since 1979, this ministry has been watching over the Islamic codes of conducts, issues such as women's proper veiling patterns in media as well as their modesty, that should be, according to the established codes, the only aspect of women's life authorized to be displayed in films.

Despite the fact that, since the 1979 revolution, the central government has owned all the means and resources of the film and media production, the cinema of Iran has not only sustained the limiting obstacles of the state, but also flourished, not only through the filmmakers' creativity, poetic imagination, and wisdom - those making films inside the country as well as the ones in exile -- but also due to its imaginative and intuitive audience. Islamic codes of conduct and women's veiling rules of modesty, along with the economical crises as the aftermaths of both the revolution and the eight-year devastating Iran-Iraq war faced this cinema with many obstacles. However, besides the entertainment and pleasure aspects of watching a film, cinema offers to many Iranian cinemagoers, both inside and outside the country, other opportunities; cinema can instigate "an act of defiance," as Dabashi puts it, as well as its narrative plots and storylines can present means of closure and functional spaces by the help of which the audience might escape many social injustices, political tensions, and even their own vulnerabilities. Sometimes the audience walks into a movie theater with the hope of making their everyday lives more bearable; they watch a film either to forget their own problems in life or to remind themselves of many existing social realities they and their fellow citizens go through in the course of their everyday lives. Thus, the way spectators look at the cinema of Iran is itself one of the aspects that can make the entire cinema of this country distinctive. As Dabashi asserts, Iranian cinema today, with its "global, urbane, and emancipatory" characteristics, is a unique one. (Hamid Dabashi 2007) Hence, one of the functions of the Iranian cinema is that it is a mirror to the contemporary society of Iran, reflecting to its

audiences their life styles, beliefs, problems and hopes, a notion that brings us back to Kracauer's revealing functions of cinema. Cinema of Iran reveals many everyday life realities of its people, urban/rural communities and the social environments that, in the real life, might normally be taken for granted and/or become unseen, the day-to-day realities that might become overshadowed, not because of their lack of importance, but due to the facts that people are so engaged with their routines that their habits, problems, and/or prejudice prevent them from noticing them. As it is required of architects and urban/landscape designers, responsible about their societies, to consider many design factors such as the social, cultural and historical phenomena, and the fact that they might as well be overwhelmingly engaged with the routines of their own everyday life issues, cinema as a mirror can help such professionals out to better notice the realities of their built environments.

3.2. Iranian Cinema: Space and Time, Place and Memory, and the Nuances of Urban Life

There are two general categories for the cinema of Iran, the art cinema, known as the New Iranian Cinema, and the popular culture cinema. On the one hand, "New Iranian Cinema" is more associated with the "Italian New Realism" and the "French New Wave," characterized by the use of natural locations, usually outdoors, non-actors, relatively accurate real-time durations and blurring lines flanked by fiction and documentary, drama or docudrama, as well as telling the stories of the everyday struggles of many ordinary people. Furthermore, according to Shohini Chaudhuri, Iranian neorealist films narrate particular stories such as the meandering journeys or quests, symbolisms inspired by Persian culture, and closing freeze-frames. (Shohini Chaudhuri 2005) On the other hand, Stephen Weinberger views this cinema as the "neorealism, Iranian style." According to Weinberger, there are distinctive differences between Iranian and Italian versions of neorealist cinema by which, he asserts, Iranian filmmakers "made neorealism their own;" these two cinemas diverge in two different aspects, in film endings and in "their connections to their societies." Although, similar to the Italian neorealism, in the Iranian version also characters will remain with their problems unresolved up to end of the film, the film endings in the Iranian version are more optimistic, as Weinberger puts it. These endings will let the audience see that neither the problems they face are beyond their abilities to neither resolve nor "the social order is at fault." In other words, as the author argues, Iranian neorealist cinema is very different, or let's say, more humanistic, spiritual, motivating; this is a style in which the last scenes are not relatively sad, as they are in the original Italian version. As he asserts, the two styles also differ in their associations to their societies; in 1949 Italy, the Andreotti Law banned the export of realist films as they introduced the country as an unfavorable place to the international audience. However, as Weinberger claims, the circumstance in Iran has been the polar opposite; besides the fact that the popular image of

Iran, for instance in other medias, might often be shown as "extreme and hostile," these Iranian neorealist films offer a very different, yet positive, stance of the country. Neorealist cinema of Iran portrays a view of the country which is the closest to its reality than any other media can and/or wants to show, a poststructuralist lens to look at things. However, later in his arguments, Weinberger claims that the reason why the Iranian government has always been pleased to support neorealist films is totally understandable, as they always depict a gentle, humane, and decent view to the country. (Stephen Weinberger 2007) Although an invaluable statement, as an insider, I assert that this cinema is neither a naïve pessimism/optimism nor always "gentle and humane." There are different reasons why the current regime in Iran might supports this cinema for the purpose of export and not for being shown inside Iran; many of these films has been banned from being screened and/or distributed inside the country. There can be a twofold explanation here, either the authorities are not aware of the critical, yet metaphorical, meanings behind the somewhat gentle and humane narratives, not able to *read between the lines*, or they assume that the international audience of these exported films might not be able to understand those metaphoric, but political statements, the films' deeper structures which can be, according to Kracauer's argument, the simplest realities often unseen or unknown, every so often intimidating, miserable, and/or pessimistic.

New Iranian Cinema is a true realism, akin to Andre Bazin's description of "true realism." It is not as an exact reproduction of reality, an absolute historical and/or materialistic reality, imitating the natural world to serve abstract, theatrical, ethical, or ideological purposes. It discloses the simplest realities, often unseen or unknown, the underlying concepts of being and the world, and in essence, it is an "ontological position" and a phenomenology, contrariwise to the expressionist realism and the exhibitionist cinema. (André Bazin 1953) New Iranian Cinema is less about the expressionistic *mise-en-scènes* or dramatic time periods, artificial and abstract durations of narratives. It is about using the existent physical settings, real locations, those humble appearances as well as arrogant, sometimes aggressive, manifestations of being and reality. Thus, it is highly expected from its audience to deconstruct their lenses and search more for connotations, the mythological concepts rooted in the Persian literature and culture, the socio-cultural and historical implications of realities of the realist physical environments as the mirrors to the Iranian society. In addition, it is also required of the audience to look at the peoples' interactions with the depicted cinematic space in films given that this cinema is almost about ordinary character types, not necessarily non-professionals, but those whom their existence can equate with the people in the street. First, they perform in the natural locations, narrative spaces that are away from studio settings, artificial lighting and decorations. Second, characters play within the narrative structures with an almost actual duration of events, approximately

parallel to real life timing. In short, the total film assemblage in Iran is less about fiction as films do not normally add many things to the existing and credible realities.

Nevertheless, it is not to argue that only Iran's art cinema reveals the unseen and has documentary aspects to it, but the entire cinema of this country can be taken the same. Any film, within any specific genre, can depict the blurring boundaries and many contradictions that exist between the meaning of *private and public space and self*. Further, these films divulge many realistically treated urban exterior scenes, along with the psychological status of characters, as real people interacting within such exterior spaces. As a whole, the challenges that exist between inner and outer spaces of characters are amongst the most important realities that the whole cinema of Iran offers, an aspect that can be criticized in terms of its socio-cultural meanings. In other words, cinematic locations in these films are meaningful narrative spaces, the heterotopias in Foucault's expression, that can put adjacent to one another an assortment of real spaces, urban/rural structures, and architectural elements, and ultimately reveal realities related to lifestyles and cultures, mentalities and traditions, socio-political conditions, people's everyday struggles, politics of bodies and appearances, and foremost, the blurring boundaries between public and private space and self. There are certain, relatively unique, aspects to locations in Iranian films which make them relevant to architectural research and urban studies. First and foremost, as Mehrnaz Saeed-Vafa argues, this cinema is highly associated with real locations, mainly due to the specific case of its low-budget non-studio-base characteristics; most films are shot on "location with minimal intervention or alteration by the filmmaker," real places with "realist treatment of the social environment." Second, in Iranian films, relationships between characters are defined by "their surroundings and the places they live in or travel to." (Mehrnaz Saeed-Vafa 2002: 202) The third aspect, which will be thoroughly discussed through the examination of three case studies in this paper, is the predominance of exterior locations, together with the preference of filmmakers in using them over other interior type private spaces. Let's say, by filming in public or semi-public locations, filmmakers might become able to avoid some of the limitations defined by the state, and as a result, make their films even closer to the reality of society.

Filmmakers in Iran face with many restrictive factors, from which they try to evade by locating their narrative plots in less private and more spaces; instead of showing the private bedroom of a couple, filmmakers prefer showing the couple's interactions inside cars, city parks or urban public spaces. For example, women must be veiled in the public spaces while veil is not obligatory in the private ones such as in one's home; therefore, narrative plot would be less realistic and more incredible if a filmmaker shows a female character head to toe covered at her private bedroom, sleeping with a scarf on her head. In addition, for the Iranian spectators, such appearances are not only seen

as unrealistic treatments of physical space, but also cheating on the audience, well-informed about the social norms and less deceivable by such a fakeness of space. To remove the barriers put for the filmmakers in Iran, they use various tactics, more or less related to their personal identities, ideological stand points, and approaches towards the existing cultural values. Since in Iran people are not allowed to give a speech unsupportive of the regime; for instance, they are not authorized to criticize the government in public, some filmmakers, like Abbas Kiarostami, might lean towards the more semiprivate locations, as metaphors of social spaces, semiprivate places where characters can talk fairly freely about many of the socio-political realities they face in the course of their everyday life. However, there are problematic boundary lines, not easily definable, between private and public self and space. Hence, the (re)presentation of these problematic challenges are enlightening phenomena to be explored in this paper, as portrayed in three Iranian films cases. Selected from different genres and cinematic techniques, each of which attracting a different type of audience, these films represent various aspects of the space and life in Tehran. As Ali Madanipour asserts, Tehran is a megapolis with the largest immigrant population in the country, a city of strangers with less collective emotions and further individualistic behaviors, an ever-growing city which is always in transition, for which the social relations of individuals have always been with uncertainty and tension. (Ali Madanipour 1998)

3.3. Private Self in Public Space: Location in a Kiarostami's Zeitgeist Film *Ten* (2002)

To illustrate the point, let us consider *Ten* briefly, a film that has hitherto attracted a lot of audience, though prevented from being shown inside Iran in case there would be a message for its local audience that current authorities in Iran don't want to get out. The auteur, Abbas Kiarostami, features everyday real-life situations of a woman in *Ten*, neither as a role mother nor a lover, and neither as a heroine nor as someone who is oppressed and long-suffered. The narrative space in the film, the interior room of a car driven through Tehran, is a semiprivate space, the *only* place this film's entire socialization takes place. To some extent, this semiprivate space of the car becomes the only comfortable and legitimate tribune, not just for democratic social interactions, but also for harsh criticisms and idea clashes. In a complex metropolis such as Tehran, this cinematic location turns into a place to discuss many existing social realities and clashes between generations, together with the manifestation and fluidity of ideological positions and values; for instance, juxtaposition of a freedom that this immature kid has to liberally critique, as he believes, the self-centeredness of her mother and the fact that she disregards family values by getting divorce with the mother's speech, on the one hand, to convince the kid about her right to decide for her life, and on the other hand, to prove to herself not to perpetuate a sense of guilt for causing problems for her son by her divorce

decision in this film location makes it unique. The car, intentionally chosen by the filmmaker, is the feasible space to portray the social status and challenging consequences of the main female character, interacting with different passengers, her son and older sister, a new friend and a prostitute, and an old religious woman. Furthermore, multiple readings are possible given that the car, moving in the entire film, becomes a metaphor for a society in transition, between tradition and modernity, ideology and secularism, and traditional family values and modern individualism. Divorce and the possibility of sex outside marriage, issues that have long been taboos in traditional Iranian society, were not so common subjects to be discussed in the public realm of media, become legitimate topics and possible to be talked about only in the semi-privacy of the car as location.



Figure 1: Mother-son interactions

Amongst the ten interrelated scenes, three depict the social space of mother-son interactions. The 7-year-old aggressive son in figure 1 acts up, without respect, and blames his mother for divorcing his father and getting married again with his current step father whom, despite his mother's insistence, he refuses to live with. Source: (DVD cover, Author Unknown)

Instead of the film's narrative plot, this section focuses on location's explicit and implicit meanings. Symbolically, Kiarostami portrays car as a dynamic place for socialization and an urban space type analogous to "third places," in Ray Oldenburg's term. According to Oldenburg, "first place" is where one lives, "second place" is where one works, and "third place" is an important place used for leisure time activities, where one can freely take part in the social life of the community, broaden many creative interactions with other people, and ultimately, establish a "sense of place." (Ray Oldenburg 1989: 58) Deliberate action of the filmmaker, portraying no other "third place" than a car itself an abnormal place for socialization, is his socio-political and existential statement. It might be true that, by excluding other types of third places from the scenes and replacing the car instead, the filmmaker alleges levels of indifference about and ignorance of the urban space, which he portrays as rather impractical for community and useless for collective interaction.

In the scene in figure 2, the female driver gives ride to a young girl, coming back from worshipping in mausoleum Ali Akbar. In the car, they become friends. On the right, the mausoleum's entrance gate, seen through the driver's window, instigates memory and creates a



Figure 2: Female driver gives ride to a young girl

sense of place. In this film, the mausoleum becomes a meeting place for both secular and religious groups, a location and urban node making the city graspable, a place to which personal and cultural identities are belonged. Religious places become, to some degrees, secular meeting places; yet, interpreting the filmmaker's unconcluded position and ideological standpoint towards the significance of such places in cities remains unanswered; he neither appreciates nor ignores their existence, and just accepts their reality as it is.

Although not a devout Muslim, the young girl (fig. 2), emotionally desperate, as she broke up with her boyfriend, with whom she wanted to marry, regularly visits Ali Akbar mausoleum and prays to god for a reconciliation. In the ninth scene, the main character, not a devout Muslim either, coincidentally meets the girl again beside the same mausoleum. Surprisingly, the main character tells the girl that, since they first met, it has been her second time visiting the place. When asking about the girl's relationship with her boyfriend, she recognizes that the girl shaved her hair due to finding no hope for a compromise. Shaving, an action with multiple meanings in various contexts, can have different interpretations for the spectators -- divine, profane, defiant, or fashionable.

In figure 3, the interpretation of the filmmaker's general statement is in this scene tricky, portraying a revealing action, striking scene where the girl takes her scarf out and shows her totally shaved hair to the driver. Taking out scarf in public in Iran takes multiple readings and ramifications. The particular condition of women in Iran is to be veiled in public, but free to be unveiled if hairless. Based on Islamic rules, woman's hair is the important catalyst for man's gaze to commit sins. The action can be examined as an opposition against restrictive social factors in public and the undemocratic conditions of women in Iran. Shaving the hair becomes either "an act of defiance" or "closure."

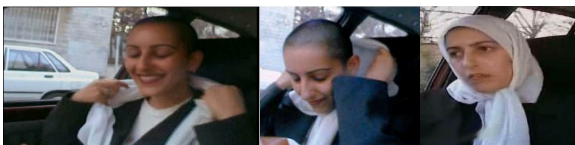


Figure 3: Girl takes her scarf out

3.4. Density, Crowding, and Privacy: a Drama of Location in *Chaharshanbe-Soori* (2006)

Chaharshanbe-Soori is a drama portraying in-depth emotional uncertainties of a wife, Mojdeh, distrustful of a husband having secret love affair with a divorced

neighbor, Simin, who also runs a beauty salon in the same rental apartment where she lives. On the one hand, there is a negative perception about Simin, a relatively attractive single woman who might be looked at as a danger to wives in this high density apartment building. On the other hand, a negative social perception about female beauticians makes her lifestyle a subject to neighbors' doubtful and exclusive attitudes. Based on Kracauer's third function of cinema, this film reveals particular "modes of reality," physical realities appearing to characters, such as Mojdeh, in their "extreme state of mind." In addition, the film becomes a space appealing to the heightened sentiments of the audience.

Film's Melodramatic plot, about crises of characters with failed emotional circumstances, strained familial situations, and tragedies of everyday life, embraces doubts and fears of a suspicious wife, losing a husband, family, and social stability, and the hopelessness of an intruder, a socially excluded beautician and a divorced mother with an unhappy loveless life given that she can rarely see her daughter; Simin's miserable life is seen as one of the reasons behind her having a love affair with a married man. In addition, the drama shows paradoxical personal identities of this married man, trying to hide the truth. Besides the dramatically conflicting associations between and within these characters, the main character, who is also the narrator, through the experience of whom spectators perceive the entire cinematic space, is Roohangiz, a young girl from a westerly lower-class town in the outskirts of Tehran. Like other small towns in the country, hers incorporates a traditional environment where family and kinship is the social space to facilitate marriage, a meeting place for young couples. She is a housecleaner and commutes back and forth every day to work in Tehran on the motorcycle of her fiancé, Abdolreza. Not having enough job opportunities in their hometown, they are amongst the daily immigrants of Tehran, adding to its population during the working hours.

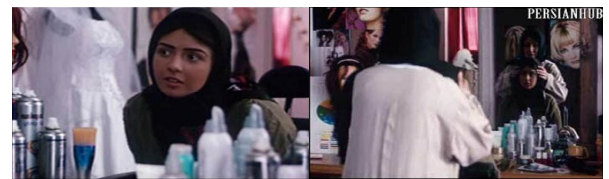


Figure 4: Roohangiz enters a low-quality high-density middleclass apartment building

As a housecleaner, Roohangiz enters a low-quality high-density middleclass apartment building in Pasdaran, a neighborhood in northeast Tehran, and into the chaotic life of a couple and their not-yet-cleaned home. Before getting in, watching the broken window of their home, she realizes something wrong. Later, she is exposed to a one-day reality of this couple's life and habitual fights. At the end of the day, this previously unsophisticated and naïve girl from province become mature as she encounters the urban

reality and not-always-happy side of marriage.

Now let us move from film's narrative plot to narrative and temporal meanings of its space. On the one hand, the entire film takes place in the last Wednesday of the year when, throughout the country, people celebrate the feast of *Chaharshanbe-Soori*. The film's one-day duration, close to a real time, instigates cultural and historical memory as temporality becomes a historic phenomenon for national collective memories. On the other hand, the film's dominant location, a middleclass apartment building in Tehran, portrays an uncomfortable place with high density, undesirable crowding, and lack of privacy. Such inefficiencies, along with the encroachment of business activities into this residential building, for instance, Simin's beauty salon, changes the way people interact with each other and their level of social tolerance in space. Hence, the location is a documentation of how self and identity, and privacy and security play in urban space, and further, shows how inefficiencies in physical space lead to the deterioration of the social quality of built environments. Density, crowding, and privacy inefficiencies related to this cinematic location are to be seen as the phenomena that, by bringing ambiguities and tensions to social interactions, negatively affect the social life of the neighboring communities. In the film, spectators recognize how, for instance, lack of parking space in this medium-rise building creates unhealthy interactions between neighbors. In a scene, a neighbor intentionally punctures another neighbor's vehicle as it is parked in front of the garage entrance through which no one can pass to the street.

In general, this film also shows characteristics of the family structure, social polarization of city, and dilemma of identity, and describes tensions and uncomfortable interactions in a middleclass building in Tehran. One integrated function of this film is that it manifests, yet explicitly, many socio-spatial realities of the physical space in terms of community and neighboring relations, and in the macro scales, the film location represents fragmented social fabrics and family structures, social polarizations, and the dilemma of cultural identity in Tehran. The film is considerably engaged in distorted boundaries between public and private self and space, for example, windows of the building, extrovertly open to a busy street, and the lack of socializing spaces and definable public realms in this building depicts lack of public participations in the management of the city. In summary, this physical space in the film explores the existence of more-than-bearable residential densities and weak local governments, lacking power and control over many unproductive property developments and inefficient city management.

In figure 5, Mojdeh sends Roohangiz to Simin's beauty salon to spy to see whether Simin really have the love affair with her Husband. Roohangiz gets married in few days, during the Persian New Year holidays, so she finds picking the eyebrows, for the first time in her life, as a good excuse to get into the beauty salon. Picking eyebrows, based on her family values, is only acceptable when getting married. Besides Roohangiz's negative perception about Simin, gained through



Figure 5: Mojdeh sends Roohangiz to Simin's beauty salon

Mojdeh's gossips, this unsophisticated girl finds Simin trustful and pleasant; she cannot believe that Simin is the sort of woman, having affairs with married men. Before leaving the salon, she tells Simin her neighbors do not like her and want her out of the building.



Figure 6: Simin and Mojdeh's husband together

Figure 6 is the first and last scene to see Simin and Mojdeh's husband together. The entire scene occurs in a car, a semiprivate meeting place and the space for this socially unacceptable relationship. Simin, determined enough, terminates the secret affair and encourages the man to go back to live with his wife in peace. At the end, with the relationship ended, Simin leaves the man desperate and unhappy.

3.5. Urban Space and Cultural Identity: the Case of the Film *Dayere Zangi* (2008)

"*Dayere Zangi*" (2008), the first movie directed by *Parisa Bakhtavar*, is not a mere comedy, but also an urban drama on the content of which one can criticize the manifestation of culture and identity crises in a capital city such as Tehran. The film is an accurately tangible and realistic image of Iran's contemporary society. This film is an account of many social issues related to a multicultural, diverse, and sometimes disorganized, society. As a result, a documentation of a somehow inefficient urban environment, this film shows existing cultural differences between different Iranian families and conflicts between traditional and modern lifestyles, in general, between ideology and technology. In the film, the filmmaker and scenarist bring up the issue of installing satellite dishes in Tehran, a global phenomenon with its many challenges for a still-in-transition society of Iran, from tradition to modernity. Accordingly, this film discloses contemporary confrontations between multiple ideologies and lifestyles in Tehran and presents dramatic demographic changes happening in the last 3-4 decades as a result of immigration. Hence, the film reveals a need for a more culturally diverse housing patterns and more adaptable apartment buildings to diminish the tensions and increase more healthy community interactions.



Figure 7: Shirin, the bad girl of the story,

In figure 7, Shirin, the bad girl of the story an “escapee from home,” created, one night before, a fender-bender with the car she had stolen. Together with her recently-found boyfriend, Ramin, a satellite dish installer, they enter an apartment building in north Tehran, a neighborhood where affluent, yet at some levels, nouveaux riche residents live. Satellite installing is an illegally underground economy for some youths in Tehran where other job opportunities are rare. Shirin lies to Ramin about the stolen car, that it is her father’s car for which she has to earn money in order to compensate the damages; otherwise, her father gets mad at her. The unsophisticated boy from downtown Tehran, where mostly poorer families live, believes her and attempts to earn money for her by installing satellite dishes in this particular apartment building and fixing the dishes of the residents, flipped due to the windy and rainy weather of Tehran one night before. The scene in figure 8 is about the government’s control over even the private and semiprivate spaces. When the police force is seen in the street, the neighbors run down, from the roof to their apartments, and try to hide the satellite dishes. Almost all the residents in this building have satellites, except for some families, who are either very religious and don’t want their young kids be exposed to the western culture or fearful of the state; having satellites is an activity defined against the law and formally unauthorized by the Islamic regime. One’s home, although a private place, is under the observation of the state’s power.



Figure 8: The government’s control over even the private and semiprivate spaces

In some scenes, location becomes a chaotic space and a metaphor for a frantic urban life in Tehran. In addition to the excitements and unpredictability of this metropolis, a city of immigrants and strangers for both secular and religious groups, the film portrays some existing conflicts between citizens, uneasy relationships between families, with multiple and sometimes polar opposite ideologies and cultural values. According to some underlying differences between citizens, their cohabitation and juxtaposition in a compact high-density building is not without controversies. Like the city itself, *Dayere Zangi* is a crowded, and full of

dialogue and character film, describing many realities of the urban space of Tehran, the physical realities which are, back to Kracauer, amongst “things normally unseen,” “phenomena which figure among the blind spots of the mind,” where “habits and prejudice prevent us from noticing them.” (Siegfried Kracauer 1960: 296) The film shows clashes of ideas, ideologies and identities in space and a simultaneous reconciliation, communications, and community interactions where public space consequently becomes a democratic place to learn from each other how to tolerate existing differences.



Figure 9: Contradictions in space

In figure 9, the scenes show contradictions in space. A religious family in the building uses the roof to dry cloths under the sun, the same behavior pattern it had in its previous courtyard house, to which it tries to adapt the lifestyle of this modern building. There are conflicts between neighbors in defining the public vs. private space. The religious family cannot tolerate other neighbors putting satellite dishes on the roof that is a semiprivate space in this building. This family has the belief, like that of the government, that it has the right to tell others what to do and not to do. Ultimately, what happens is reconciliation in space; all the neighbors get together in the religious family’s apartment to watch a movie.

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