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Viewpoint

Reflection of urban space in Iranian cinema
A review of the last two decades

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ABSTRACT

Cinema as an influential mass medium continuously represents different spaces, environments, events, and symbols, and through which it reproduces viewers' social reminiscence and merges imagination and reality in a constant manner. This paper attempts to illuminate the outlook of Iranian cinema on urban spaces (In this paper, urban space means "outdoor space" or "open space." However, our purpose of applying the term "urban space" is an emphasis on the word "urban." This includes what is connected with a city and its spaces and buildings, residents, and even social, economic, and political issues.), and to analyze the quality of their representation during the last two decades (1979–2006). Identifying displayed urban spaces and determining their strength and limitations, this endeavor not only offers guidelines on urban design pedagogy but also examines impacts of cinema on audiences' visual literacy and perception, thereby exploring their expectations of urban environment.

Based on content analysis of selected movies, we find that the Iranian films only occasionally involve urban spaces, and if they do, this practice is confined to historical or cultural spaces. This failure could be attributed to the poverty of urban spaces and limitations facing the film industry in such spaces on the one hand, and lack of the directors' appropriate understanding of contemporary urban spaces and their mere attention to nostalgic spaces on the other hand.

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1. Introduction

In order to understand, analyze, and offer solutions to transform various urban spaces, urban planning needs to rely on other disciplines such as environmental design, sociology, psychology, economics, and architecture, and to use different multidisciplinary frameworks for offering design solutions. Among various allied disciplines, visual arts play an important role in informing our spatial sensibilities. Compared with other media such as maps, graphics, and fine arts, cinema can come much closer to everyday life, and as such it can inform us about the understanding of various urban spaces. Cinema as an instrument for associating meanings and for expressing both abstract and real world represents spaces, environments, events, symbols, and signs, which educate as well as reproduce and reinterpret everyday life for its audience. Critical analysis and review of cinema's approach to what occurs in a society, therefore, can yield a deeper understanding of different

aspects of the society and everyday urban life. This is particularly important for Iran, whose cinema covers a significant number of social issues, and it has attracted international attention for its content and artistic qualities.

Applying urban-focused movies for pedagogical reasons is important. However, unlike universities such as Michigan (Strickland, 2006) and the University College London (UCL) (UCL Publications & Marketing Services, November 2011), the application of film as a tool for training urban design and planning is not common in Iran's academic system. Holding two conferences on cinema and architecture in Iran (2007 and 2008), it can be indicated that urban managers and scholars have achieved better perception of the necessity for more interaction between these two fields. However, papers presented in these conferences had been focused on the presence of a city in international cinema, and it mainly interpreted symbols and signs (semiotics) in films without any attention to the analysis of urban spaces represented in Iranian films.

In this paper, we focus on Iranian cinema and cinematic manifestation of urban space, which, as previously indicated, is known to be an under-researched area of inquiry. This deficiency might

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be attributed to the lack of a theoretical foundation or failure to take an interdisciplinary approach in Iran. Trying to fill in this gap, the present effort hopes to clarify the extent and quality of representation of urban spaces in Iranian post-Revolution cinema.[1] To identify as well as to classify relevant spatial characteristics, then, contents of sequences depicting urban spaces have been analyzed using qualitative methodology and related techniques.

1.1. The interaction between city and cinema

Koeck and Roberts (2010) believe that human beings feel and read urban spaces similar to film sequences. Whereas the former invites the observer to participate in its spatial narration, the latter's narrator tells spatial stories (O'Herlihy, 1994: 90). In other words, movie sequences are in fact the depiction of urban spaces, narrated in a selective manner (Madanipour, 1996: 46). This selection itself is rooted in the social construction of space and our interaction with it. As such, movies themselves can become tools for examining how particular spaces are understood and interpreted. Shiel and Fitzmaurice (2001: 5) suggests, "Cinema is primarily a spatial system and that, notwithstanding the traditional textual emphasis of much Film Studies, it is more a spatial system than a textual system. Spatiality is what makes it different and, in this context, gives it a special potential to illuminate the lived spaces of the city and urban societies, allowing for a full synthetic understanding of cinematic theme, form, and industry in the context of global capitalism." One thing that cinema – or at least a film – has continued to do since the 1920s has been to teach ways of seeing and so imagining the modern city to its audiences across the globe, whether or not they live in one. City in cinema does not operate just as a backdrop. Nor is the representation of the city really the issue. To use Lefebvre's term, a film presents urban space as representational by itself, as simultaneously sensory and symbolic. It thus provides a paradigm for understanding how and why we experience the real-imagined space of the city as haunted. It establishes distraction as an ontological norm. As the Harvard psychologist Hugo Münsterberg noted in his pioneering study of film spectatorship in 1916, cinematic editing allowed the viewer to have the experience of being "simultaneously here and there" (Donald, 1999). Clarke (1997) argues that on achieving a reframing of the city, the camera's penetration of reality entails a transformation in the perception of cinemagoers, but it does so in a way that is consonant with the viewers' knowledge and experience of the city. It is in this way that Stevenson (2003) shows us that representations of the urban spaces can serve as anchors, which confirm that we are (or have been) here/there/somewhere/anywhere. It is possible to locate oneself in space using the coordinates on the map; we recognize and relate to the buildings and places that we have visited, and to those we have only ever seen in movies or read about – this is how the urban spaces are framed in the imagination. Kronenburg (2010) further acknowledges that a film can also be used for understanding, more clearly, the characteristics of architectural and urban spaces. This knowledge can then be used to improve contemporary design practices (Bentley, 2005). Furthermore, if urban space is seen as a socio-spatial product, it is clear that urban design has much to learn from exploring the spatial structure of urban films. In this manner, and following Madanipour (1996: Xi), urban design can become completely immersed in the socio-spatial context within which it practices. Thus, cinema as a socioeconomic medium can be useful for the understanding of urban space essence. A film forms the preeminent medium for moving between cities, from one urban panorama

to another, and from one architectural nuance to another; the visions generated by such unexpected leaps into the urban unknown have always provided cinema with one of its most compelling traits (Barber, 2002). In its interaction with the city, a film carries a multiplicity of means through which to reveal elements of corporeal, cultural, architectural, historical, and social forms (Barber, 2002). In accordance with this, multiple dimensions such as functional, morphological, perceptual, social, visual, and temporal have also been enumerated by Carmona, Heath, Oc, and Tiesdell (2010) as elements for the understanding of urban spaces. This categorization develops a conceptual model for the realization and analysis of urban spaces represented in chosen Iranian films within the current paper. Furthermore, it accentuates our argument that movies are important pedagogical tools in urban design education and practice.

1.2. Why the Iranian cinema? And why a given period of time?

Today, the Iranian cinema is one of the most highly regarded national cinemas in the world, regularly winning festival awards and critical acclaim for films (Cannes Golden Palm: *Abbas Kiarostami* (1997); Venice Golden Lion: *Jafar Panahi* (2000); Berlinale Golden Bear: *Asghar Farhadi* (2011); The Annual Academy Awards (Oscar): *Asghar Farhadi* (2012)), which combine remarkable artistry dimensions and social relationships. Furthermore, capabilities of this cinema in terms of its connection with a city and particularly with Tehran as the capital of Iran are well established.

A significant majority of Iranian cinematic narratives are based on the city of Tehran and on characters' interactions with the city (e.g., "*Mr. Gullible*" (1971), "*The Tenants*" (1986), and so forth) in a way that the history of Iranian cinema is worthless without urban spaces of Tehran (Hasani-Nasab, 2007). The first film made in Iran ("*Abiand Rabi*," 1930, directed by Oganians) includes shots that show the movement of a chariot in some of the most important urban spaces in Tehran such as *ČerâqBarq* Street, *Tupxâne* Square, and *Alâ'oddole* Street. Although because of lack of sufficient facilities, some of the other Iranian films were made in India ("*The Lor Girl*," 1933, directed by Irani), the city of Tehran still was present in dialogues of the film with this slogan "Tehran is a beautiful city, but its citizens are bad" (Baharloo, 2007). Since then, along with growth and progress in Iranian cinema, filmmakers would portray the city of Tehran as the core of modernization and the center of political power. In this period, the cinematic themes were mainly dominated by counteraction between traditional values and modern ones; city as opposed to village; and city as the focal point of attractiveness and dream. In 1979, Iran experienced the urban revolution, which led to the overthrow of the monarchy and the establishment of Islamic Republic regime. Since then, a new life of cinematic shots is experienced in Tehran, and repression included in public spaces disappeared. The city has been increasingly involved with new events, which their context was urban spaces. Despite the fact that such a trend had already existed, strict censorship was imposed on the cityscape and its cinematic shots. "*Downtown*" (Ghaffari, 1985), "*The Deers*" (Kimiya'i, 1975), "*The Cycle*" (Mehrjouyi, 1974), and the like included sequences that suffered from censorship.

After 1979, housing and significant migration into big cities, particularly Tehran, and also the regulation of and offering services to people who had lived outside of the legal area of a city by 1979 were the most important problems. The new and rapid wave of city dwelling in this period of time has led to an increase in the ratio of city population to rural population (Fanni, 2006). This rapid urbanization has caused unemployment, residential space scarcity, high rural–urban influx, separation of social classes and genders, and an imbalance in city services (Modarres, 2006). Hence, urban slums,

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[1] The Iranian Revolution (also known as the Islamic Revolution or 1979 Revolution).