

Journal Title: *Wide Screen*

Vol 1, Issue 2, June 2010

ISSN: 1757-3920

URL: <http://widescreenjournal.org>

Published by Subaltern Media, 153 Sandringham Drive, Leeds LS17 8DQ, UK

URBAN IMAGINATIONS AND THE CINEMA OF JAFAR PANAHI

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Abstract: The city in Iranian cinema acquires a character of its own. This paper through the exploration of the fabric of Jafar Panahi's films attempts to evaluate the claims of this statement and deduce in his cinema an 'aesthetic of veiling'¹ as a narrative and enunciative coordinate that defines the post-revolutionary cinema in Iran. Working through a Benjaminian analysis of the urban experience located in the flaneur; the essay will attempt to understand the cinematic flanerie of Panahi's camera, the perceptual prowess of his children in *The White Balloon* (1995) and *The Mirror* (1997) and the adventures of his flaneuse in *The Circle* (2000) and *Offside* (2006) as a desire to map the experiential realm of Tehran that is located within the marvellously mundane and the monumental everyday.

"The past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again...for every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns, threatens to disappear irretrievably."

(Walter Benjamin, *Theses on the Philosophy of History*)

For Benjamin the present can only be negotiated through the remembrance of the past. The teleological assertions of traditional historiography ineffectually produce grand narratives that grapple with ways to reveal and understand the past. The metropolis is pivotal to Benjamin's radical notion of historical inquiry and method. The urban form embodies within

its crevices the traces of the past, present and future. The present moment is caught up in transience and is blind to this nature of history which is inaccessibly hidden in the spatial regimes of the city. Benjamin imagines the city as an active site for archaeology, a museum of the past “to be eradicated, catalogued or glorified.”² It is through the mnemonic apparatus of remembrance that the city bears witness to its own historical metamorphosis and thereby enables the production an inherently discursive awareness of history.

The fascination for the city in cinematic practices is perhaps least surprising. The cinematic apparatus ontologically inhabits the digressions and diversions of urban experience, functioning as a mirror which not merely reflects but refracts the exhilarations of city life via its form. Through the orchestration of the everyday, the individual and the personal, cinema attempts to explore the rhythmic conjugality of space and time that marks the haptic and psychic registers of metropolitan life and in the process recuperates a history gauged by unconventional traces of nostalgia, fluid identities and experiences.

Tehran is a city marked by a turbulent historical past, the debris of which still swathes the mundane realities of the present in registers that are located beyond the architectural. Hamid Naficy in his seminal work on Iranian cinema highlights how the turbulent conditions of the revolution in 1979 ushered not merely an Islamist regime but indoctrinated culture, which was categorically classified on puritanical ethicalism and theocratic anti-imperialism. It is the paradox of a colonially militated modernism and eventual stringent censorship in Iran that inevitably led to the development of a new aesthetic language of cinema where the disorientations of lived realities are translated through an imaginative register of the ‘aesthetic of veiling’. The films of Behram Beiza’i, Abbas Khiarostami, the Makhmalbaf clan (Mohsen, his wife Marziyeh Meshkini, and daughter Sameera), Jafar Panahi and Majid Majidi to name only a few stalwarts of the new cinema incorporated into the symbolic and thematic structure of their films a hermeneutic inquiry of socio-political debates that plague contemporary Iran. Inheriting a gift of lyricism prevalent in farsi poetic tradition, these filmmakers of the new cinema in Iran are perhaps the visual poets of their nation using the poesis of cinema wrapped in a neo-realistic documentative mode. “Through a process of

cultural negotiation and haggling- not just hailing and interpellation” (Naficy 1995: 551)⁴ post-revolution cinema in Iran is characterised by narratives that are locally contingent but bear a stamp of experimental finesse that speaks a universal language of cinema.

Jafar Panahi -The Urban Flaneur

Panahi fits the bill of a flaneur, the urban observer who goes ‘botanizing on the asphalt’⁵ collecting and recording images of urban interactions and social encounters. He is at once a ‘dreamer’, an ‘artist’, a ‘collector’ and an ‘archaeologist’ who experientially reads the city and articulates his perceptions into filmic texts. One of Iran’s most promising contemporary filmmaker, Panahi’s style of filmmaking possesses an imagistic tactility that is calibrated via form. His films are charged with an urban vitality, a love of the streets and of the people that inhabit them, and one of the incidental pleasures of all of his films is the portrait of Tehran that emerges from them. Panahi does amazing things with sound design, embedding his films in an aural landscape of city noises, the honking of cars and passing vehicles, the street musicians, radio and TV transmissions etc. suggest the sea of activity and human life that his characters inhabit and that give his films their remarkable sense of presence. His film *Offside* is so ensconced in the reality that it was actually filmed in part during the event it dramatizes – the Iran-Bahrain qualifying match for the 2006 World Cup⁶.

The use of a camera veritae style of photography and an editing style that mimics the humdrum of everyday rhythms, Panahi’s putative documentative mode is a careful orchestration that self reflexively highlights the machinations of cinema. In an unexpected break from narrative realism almost halfway through *The Mirror*, just as one is getting lulled into the meanderings of the lost girl Mina and her pursuit to find the right bus home, something strange and unexpected happens. The young actress pulls off her costume, looks straight into the camera, and announces that she is not going to continue acting in this movie. The fourth wall has suddenly been shattered. The cinematography changes dramatically and we are subjected to jerky, hand-held shots. The film stock looks grainy, the colour balance of

the shots is off, and the shots no longer appear to be framed and in focus. During these hand-held shots, Panahi, himself, is shown with his crew trying to coax Mina back into resuming her role (but she refuses). Since Mina still has her radio-controlled microphone clipped on, the film crew at this point attempts to keep the filmmaking process going and continue filming her (now “real”) journey home.

The Circle plays out almost entirely on the streets of Tehran and in public buildings. The relentlessly dark narrative of the film is about the lives of women and their attempts to overcome their constrictions imposed by a patriarchal order that subjugates them as second class citizens. The narrative of the film opens in a prison hospital⁷ with a mother being told that her daughter Solmoz Gholami has given birth to a girl and not a boy as the tests had predicted. This unseen figure brings the circular structure of the narrative film full circle creating a compelling metaphorical transition from light to dark as apparent in the first scene in the film through the white hatch in the maternity hospital door through which Solmaz’s mother speaks to the nurse and in the last scene the dark hatch in the door of the prison cell as the guard shuts it. The form of the film is governed by Panahi’s flanerie, featuring continuous carefully composed and structured shots of the kinesis that marks the city streets, he holds the spectator’s attention on the characters and their surrounding, constantly moving the narrative along, even though one thread is dropped without resolution as another one is picked up. *The Circle* has no music score and the city noises, terse dialogue, and tense silences set the tone for most of the film. The cacophony of traffic, sirens, machinery, the blur of voices, PA announcements in bus depot and hospital suggestively gestures towards the danger and the indifference that surrounds the escapees but also allow the spectators to absorb the essence of metropolitan chaos.

Female Flanerie and the Urban Experience

Panahi’s films read the city not merely through the aural, visual and architectural markers of Tehran but they offer the possibilities of explorations of the metropolis through the elusive figure of the female flaneuse. The use of space specifically by women has historically been marked by an anxious limitation conventionally imposed by repressive regimes that are

patriarchal in nature. “Restricted to the home, limited to functional forays into the public, forced to forgo the lure of aimless strolling...women are unable to indulge their full fascination with the metropolis...”⁸ In Iran the socially sanctioned scopophilia is the privilege of men but the women in *The Circle* and *Offside* risk themselves in the pursuit of flanerier despite their perennial and materially realistic limitations. The access to the Tehranian cityscape is a mark of their subversive rebellion. Their very presence in the public domain of the stadium in *Offside* or in the commercial building in *The Circle* is indicative of an obstinate desire and an insistent determination of these flaneuse to locate themselves within the experiential realm of the city. Even though their ways and movements in the street remain structurally organised and socially oriented along boundaries, invisible or otherwise, redirecting and restricting their ‘social maps’⁹. Nargess’s gaze in *The Circle* constantly breaks free ‘catching things in sight’¹⁰. Indulging herself she dreamily observes the world around her with a scopophilic hunger, nothing passes by her unnoticed, the man with a white car decorated in yellow confetti, or the Van Gogh reproduction she mistakes for the landscape of her hometown Razliq or the shop windows at the bus terminal, she absorbs the sights and sounds of Tehran’s streets which beckon to her like phantasmagoria. Having escaped from jail, Nargess and Arezou are on a run, walking through a ‘forest of gestures’¹¹ they seek an ‘asylum in the crowd’¹². Since the women do not have proper identification and they are not accompanied by any male relatives, their situation on the street is always precarious. In pursuit of their freedom, the city becomes for them a space paradoxically imbued with momentary concealment, stimulating excitement and threatening exposure and confinement. It is unfortunate that at the ending of the film, the circular pan inside the prison cell does reveal their eventual imprisonment.

There is an ‘epistemological awareness’¹³ of constriction emblazoned onto the women’s experience of the public sphere. The uncanny nights in a city are marked not merely by a putative attack on cognition but also on physiognomy. The liaison with darkness is precluded with a precariously volatile scrutiny, evaluation and judgement which then pejoratively translate into surveillance, unwarranted harassment and sexual assault. Nayereh in *The Circle* played by legendary Iranian actress Fatemeh Naghavi (one of the two professional actresses in the film) is accosted by leering catcalls and offensive honking, orchestrated brilliantly by

Panahi in an extensive long take. Nayereh has just abandoned her daughter, hoping that she would be adopted by a decent family, but since no one comes to claim her, the child is picked up by the authorities. Distraught, as her attempts to make a phone call at a booth fail, Nayereh wanders the dark streets of Tehran in a state of delirium. There is a certain kind of intrusive violence in the image, as she walks evidently submerged in her own thoughts; she is followed by the camera that hauntingly takes on the garb of the passersby's gaze. Panahi's camera consciously doesn't leave her and neither do the persistent car(s) and their unidentified occupant(s) who remain off-screen throughout the sequence. It is merely through the soundtrack that the perils of the situation are enunciated. Music wafts from a car and one hears the voice of a man asking if she wants a lift. She continues to walk, one assumes the car has left as the soundtrack suggests but the sudden reappearance of the sound of the engine and the car halting is a stark reminder of the eeriness of the night and foregrounds imminent danger. Nayereh stops and so does the camera, she stops, hesitates but gets into the car, the camera deliberately cordons off the male driver, staying with Nayereh as the car engine revs up and the car starts to move, our gaze is still held by a visibly uncomfortable Nayereh. The feeling of nightmarish neurosis continues as the camera now fluidly adapts to the movement of the car. She rolls down the window and just as she is about to light a cigarette, her expression transform to a state of panic, as spectators we don't know what she has seen, Panahi leaves it to our imagination but we know that she is in "trouble". It is then finally that the camera cuts to the image of a roadblock and the identity of the man is revealed as the hajji (police inspector) who has entrapped her on presumptions of being a prostitute.

In Iranian cinema, for the women, no space is exclusively private; the public intrudes and collides via a spatial and social estrangement that is imposed through the mechanism of the hejab. The putative gendering of spaces is elided through hesitations enforced by cinematic censorship as well. The appearance and conduct of all performers in Iran is regulated by a strict coda where all spaces are deemed as public. "Filming must follow certain codes of decorum. Actresses must always appear in hejab. Their hair must always be covered and they must wear a loose outer layer of clothing."¹⁴ Therefore the politics of the hejab is also connotative of decorum of space, which is based on a coherence of the private and the public. It is then remarkable to see Panahi's films that negotiate through the performative, their own

confinement and that of their characters. Thus even though the authoritative systems of repression through an imposition of a “feminine” dress code like the hejab, chador or burqa attempts to seclude, contain and subdue, the flaneuse uses these sartorial impediments to her advantage. Characterised by a dialectical bind that oscillates between empowerment and disempowerment, while for Nargess in *The Circle* her chador acts like a protective shield at the bus Terminal, Pari cannot enter the hospital without it.

The women in *Offside* long to be admitted into the coveted realm of the stadium, the spectacular possibilities of exhilaration and stimulation that it offers can only be accessed through subterfuge. The entry to the stadium is prohibited to women thus disguised in men’s clothes, face painted in the tricolours of the Iranian national flag, the women masquerade through the city in buses and behind crowds, hoping to merge and collapse with the herds of men entering the stadium. Spatial practices through their structural organisation are imbued with a deterministic conditioning of social relations. The city presents a contradictory enigma between “the collective mode of administration and an individual mode of reappropriation”¹⁵ as apparent in *Offside*. Samandar, the Azari soldier constantly reminds the girls in ‘captivity’ of the apparent ‘masculine’ nature of the stadium and thus they are held up in the compound outside the stadium. The urge to flout these paternalistic harnesses is apparent in the hilarious episode when one of the girls wants to use the public toilet just so that she can enter the stadium and watch the match from close quarters. One of the soldiers escorts the girl to the toilet; he punches out the eyes of a cardboard poster of a player to mask her face. Upon reaching the toilet a scuffle ensues between the soldier and the young men who want to use the bathroom. There is much confusion and confrontation and the girl escapes into the heart of the stadium, sitting right behind the goal post to watch the match.

Childhood and the City

The panoptic implementation of the ‘cinematic hejab’¹⁶ over films by the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance¹⁷ was dodged through cloaking philosophy and politics in metaphorical raiment of children’s stories such as *Banshu the Little Stranger* (1985) by Beiza’i, Kiarostami’s *Where is the Friends House?* (1986), Sameera Makhmalbaf’s *The Apple*, Jafar

Panahi's *The White Balloon* (1995) and *The Mirror* (1997) and *Children of Heaven* (1997) by Majid Majidi among the myriad. Developing their own special industrial and financial structures, the forms of these films, unique in their ideological themes and production values, bear within themselves inscriptions that are subversively heroic in nature. The figure of the child acts as a vector of historical knowledge and perception through which urban space and time is centrally addressed.

“To understand the mourning of such radiant glorious cities one must have been a child in them... to know the city as a ‘place of sorrow and wonderment’ child’s misrecognition offers an insightful counterpart to adult perception.”¹⁸

(Walter Benjamin)

The child has a privileged access to the city. For Benjamin the child gathers the experiences of the urban form without complete comprehension. It is this ability to experience the world in a meticulously scrupulous way that the adult must decipher despite his/her ineptitude. The child then is not merely a topos to comprehend the intricacies of memory but functions as a methodological device to understand the dynamics of the metropolis¹⁹. The child is metaphorically the collector, ragpicker and archaeologist, while the adult is the recollector, the flaneur in the labyrinth of childhood memories²⁰. It is the child’s perception that must be mobilized by the adult to recollect memories of childhood to interpret urban spaces thereby gaining an access to the present through an understanding of the past.

The intimately ephemeral world of Tehran is made accessible through the wanderings of Razieh (Ayda Mohammad Khani) in *The White Balloon* and Mina (Adya’s sister Mina Mohammed Khani) in *The Mirror*. *The White Balloon*, for which Kiarostami provided the story, concerns with the quest of young Razieh to buy a goldfish for the New Year’s celebration and the difficulties she faces along the way. The films illuminate the sublime sensations of everyday encounters that acquire a state of monumentality as the object world is transformed by the perception of the child’s imagination. The films possess an infectious

attention to detail where the quotidian acquires a character of its own and the child's perception becomes the vehicle through which such deliberations take place. The opening shots of both the films are thoroughly immersed in the noisy intensity of modern Tehran. *The White Balloon* opens up with the sounds of the bazaar, the flaner's camera is indicative in the distracted movement of the images, as the roving cinematic eye acquires a rambling tone moving from one character to another in seamless fluidity. In a complicated long take, from the barber's shop, the camera follows the two musicians in their revelry into the bazaar, only to abandon them at the sight of a motor vehicle, now catching a glimpse of a marriage procession and then focussing on the boy selling balloons, the camera finally halts on Razieh's mother searching for her through the bustling crowd. Panahi reinstates through the social cityscape, a nuanced characteristic of Tehran and the confluence of the modern with the traditional.

Panahi opens up *The Mirror* with a spectacular three-and-half-minute panning shot that makes a full 360-degree circuit around a traffic circle. Later on, there are other carefully crafted, long-lasting shots showing Mina wandering in and out of the screen, sometimes disappearing in the crowd, and then reappearing. When Mina climbs into a bus she thinks will take her home, she sees a young couple on the bus, who must occupy separate gender-specific sections and can only shyly eye each other from a distance. The men on the bus listen vicariously to a radio broadcast of the Iranian soccer team playing South Korea. Listening to an old woman complain about being neglected by her family, she overhears other women complain about their marital circumstances, it is through Mina that we access the everyday in Tehran. There are no heroes or villains, just people trying to handle the vicissitudes of life in the big city.

The child has a special proximity to the objects and spaces; according to Benjamin it is their ability to mimetically fuse with the world around them that defines their encounters with the city. Both Razieh and Mina develop a strangely intimate relationship with the people and the spaces they encounter during their journey in the city. Curiously enough, their encounter with the city is characterized by a sense of proximity and propinquity rather than detachment.

Following a childish instinct Razieh's immediate and intimate connections with the people lead her to intuitively share their sorrow like the snake charmers, the old lady and the soldier.

The objects and settings of the urban environment perceived and transformed by the child's imagination are recalled in adulthood. Like Razieh and Mina's journey, the spectator through the act of viewing the films participate in an act of reminiscence, embarking on a journey of their own where the traces and essences of Tehran inexplicably stay on and are revealed, triggered and evoked in cinematic practice.

It is evident how Jafar Panahi's cinema mobilizes a spatio-cognitive register which is characteristic of the sensorium of Tehran and its landscape. Through the use of the child and the flaneuse, Panahi attempts to decode the urban topography illustrating through the impossibilities within 'cinematic hejab' the possibilities of flanerie.

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NOTES

1. Hamid Naficy "Iranian Cinema under the Islamic Republic" in *American Anthropologist*, New Series, Vol. 97, No. 3, Blackwell Publishing, 1995: 551. Available at: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/683274>.

2. Graeme Gilloch "Urban Memories: Labyrinth and Childhood" extract from *Myth and Metropolis: Walter Benjamin and the City*, Polity Press, 1996: 77.
3. Naficy 1995: 548.
4. Naficy 1995: 551.
5. Benjamin as quoted by David Frisby in "The Flaneur in Social Theory" in Keith Tester ed. *The Flaneur*, London & New York: Routledge, 1994: 92.
6. He used a compact digital camera for shooting and although from the 'look' of the film it appears to have been shot in a single day, the production took 39 days to complete filming. As stated by Panahi in an online interview. Available at: http://www.opendemocracy.net/arts-Film/Offside_3620.jsp
7. The identity of the hospital like many other biographical details is elided over by Panahi. Explanations that might at first seem necessary as to why Nargess and Arezou were in jail, why Nargess has a raw bruise on her cheek why Pari's husband was executed, and so on are simply brushed over. In an online interview with David Walsh, Panahi states "The new Iranian cinema generally leaves many things up to the viewer, to their knowledge and their thinking, as to how to interpret the film." Available at: <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2000/oct2000/pan-o02.shtml>.
8. Anke Gleber in "Female Flanerie and the Symphony of the City" in Katharina Von Ankum ed. *Women in the Metropolis: Gender and Modernity in Weimar Culture*, Berkeley, Los Angeles & London: University of California Press, 1997: 73.
9. Susan Buck-Morss as quoted by Gleber 1997: 75.
10. Benjamin as quoted by Frisby 1994: 92.
11. According to Michel De Certeau, the wanderings of these pedestrian "forests of gestures" make "some parts of the city disappear and exaggerate others, distorting it, fragmenting it, and diverting it from its immobile order." See "Walking the City" from *The Practice of everyday Life*, Berkeley, Los Angeles & London: University of California Press, 1988: 102.
12. Benjamin as quoted by Frisby 1994: 87.
13. Gleber 1997: 73.
14. Ataollah Mohajerani, Minister of Culture and Guidance, responsible for laying down the guidelines for the Iranian film industry as quoted by Norma Claire Moruzzi in "Women's Space/Cinema Space: Representations of Public and Private in Iranian Films" in *Pushing the Limits: Iran's Islamic Revolution at Twenty*, Middle East Report, No. 212, Middle East Research and Information Project, Autumn, 1999: 52. Available at: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3012917>.

15. De Certeau 1988: 96.

16. Moruzzi 1999: 53.

17. Established in 1982, the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance (MCIG) enforced policies whereby the Ministry has a monopoly on film stock and equipment, they review the film's synopsis and scripts, issue a production permit, review final cuts and then finally issue an exhibition permit. According to director Majid Majidi in an online interview "they also rate them (films) on artistic and cultural merits. They reward A-grade films with rights to advertise on the government controlled media and screenings at the best theatres, while C-grade filmmakers can be kept from making films for a year." Available at: <http://www.rossanthony.com/interviews/majidi.shtml>. According to Naficy, the MCIG has since 1989, scrapped the requirement for the approval of screenplay for directors of apparent "quality" films. See Naficy 1995: 549.

18. Benjamin as quoted by Gilloch 1996: 75

19. Gilloch 1996: 67.

20. Gilloch 1996: 92.

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