

# Tehran, the Virtual Islamic City:

Urban Visual Transformation in Post-Revolutionary Tehran 1980-1990



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## Urban Visual Transformation in Post-Revolutionary Tehran 1980-1990

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*This essay fulfills the requirements of a dual Master's degree in Architecture and Cultural Studies at the University of Arizona. Alongside the textual descriptive analyses, I have also created a series of photographic images, which have a curious resonance with my actual daily life experiences in Tehran. The images strive to formulate the meaning of what I call women's understanding of public spaces in post-revolutionary Tehran. All these photographic works deal on some level with the relationship between female corporeality and the city in the post-revolutionary era. In producing these works, I have been greatly influenced by writers such as Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray, and Jacques Lacan, who developed psychoanalytical theory to explain the connection between mind and psyche and corporeality. The idea is to translate my written ideas directly into visual form, following Theodor Adorno's call "... not to forget in dreams the present world but to change it by the strength of an image." (Dabashi, 2001: Xiii).*



### Abstract

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After the Iranian revolution of 1979, the Islamic regime of Iran strove to Islamicize the architectural ensemble of Tehran in line with the principles of Islamic fundamentalism. For example, the regime changed the façades of already-existing buildings by covering them with murals depicting the leaders of the fundamentalist movement, such as Ayatollah Khomeini, in larger-than-life proportions. The major effect of these giant iconographies is that they have effectively covered many walls in the city, obliterating the original surfaces and creating a "virtual city." This new city is characterized by the ideological gaze of the masculine demi-deities looking down upon the populace. Not only do the buildings feature the portraits of religious leaders but their outer surfaces also contain lengthy quotes from the leaders and the Qora'n as well. That is, the regime has assigned to the city a new function that traditionally belonged to the mosques. However, the new ideology, while religious in orientation, has reduced the social significance of the mosques. Whereas formerly people attended the mosques in order to say prayers and perform certain rituals, in post-revolutionary Tehran the traditional architectural function of the mosques has been marginalized. Unlike traditional Islamic mosques, which historically contributed to the enrichment of the Islamic city and the growth of opportunities for public interaction, these pictures consume space. They run from one wall to the next

and turn the city into the sacred collective body of the Muslim leaders. In this sense, social interaction among citizens is replaced by one-sided communication between the revolutionary leaders and the public. The patriarchal body images of religious leaders of Iran make it necessary to explore the role of body and body images in public spaces within the context of power and gender relations. The relationship among media, representations, cultural and political myths, and commonsense stereotypes has been extensively studied elsewhere. This thesis examines how female citizens consciously and subconsciously relate to their city vis-à-vis political propaganda images constructed from a masculine viewpoint, and discusses how veiled female bodies are conceived as socio-political artifacts within these spatial contexts. I will pursue the changing relation of corporeality and public space in Islamic cities in addition to Tehran, and I will compare and contrast this set of relationships with those found in a select number of American cities, including Los Angeles.



## Introduction

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Several years ago, as a freshman architecture student in Tehran, I began contemplating the idea of writing this paper while out “walking the city.” There is a personal dimension to my argument, since it originates in my memories of the city from childhood and teenage years and also derives from my own understanding of the city as a woman.

Although this paper presents a series of descriptions of the contemporary city of Tehran, the particular cultural and political framework within which this research is meaningful spans the period from the Islamic revolution of 1979 to the end of the war with Iraq in 1988. There are several good reasons why I have chosen this period. The overarching reason is the strong ideological grip of Islamic fundamentalism on all aspects of political and cultural life throughout this period. In the aftermath of the Islamic revolution of Iran and during the years of war with Iraq, Tehran was under air attack and suffered from domestic terrorist explosions. During this time, the dominant image of Tehran was of a battlefield enclosed by piles of sandbags. For almost a

decade, exterior facades of buildings brimmed with images of political propaganda and revolutionary slogans. (Fig. 1) Since the Iran-Iraq war, the image of Tehran has been changing gradually the government still controls the media, doing its best to weed out “corrupting” western influences. But the Internet and satellite dishes are beginning to penetrate the Islamic curtain with which the authorities have sought to protect Iranian cities (Montaigne, July1999: 14). Because most of the materials--images, maps, etc.--that support the following arguments represent present-day Tehran, it is possible to maintain that the image of Tehran conveyed in this paper is still dominant in the city, if not central.

▼ Fig 1 Tehran during the Iran-Iraq war (www.Iranian.com)



The twentieth century history of Tehran until the Islamic Revolution of Iran can be seen as a response to the political, economic, and cultural challenges of a dominant and domineering West. Extremist modernizers such as Reza Shah Pahlavi sought to move towards total assimilation with the capitalist industrialized Western countries, in

particular the United States. For Reza Shah, as for many other reformers in the Middle East, such as Atatürk in Turkey, modernization was associated with Westernization. Reza Shah’s goal was “to re-build Iran in the image of the West” (Abrahamian, 1980:124). Under the Shah, as a result of the rapid modernization that took place during the fifty-four years of his reign, the structure of the capital city of Tehran came to reflect Western urban and architectural design. This style of architecture was inspired

partly by the Shah's desire to pursue his father's goals of modernizing the country and bringing it into closer compliance with Western, and specifically American, standards. At the same time, however, the city retained many traditional elements, including mosques, which remained the only centers of worship. The Shah simultaneously pushed the country into the mainstream of Western culture and technology and tried to evoke pride in the country's traditional past.

After the revolution, ideological architects sought to bring a religious basis to the architectural ensemble of the city, in line with the return to Islamic fundamentalism. They envisioned the construction of mosques and religious buildings in order to revive authentic Islamic architecture. In 1981, Dr. Nikravesht, The third Mayor of Tehran, told the state media: "The late Imam said urban regulations should conform with Islamic teachings and therefore I conclude that a huge budget allocation in Tehran would be in keeping with Islamic criteria" (Amiri, 2003:1). This was particularly important because mosques in Iran were traditionally associated with political activity. An integral part of the Friday service in traditional mosques was the *khutbah* (sermon). The *khutbah* was one of several ways in which the close relationship between the Moslem ruler and the society was expressed. Historically, in times of civil strife or other kinds of political instability, there was no quicker way than the *khutbah* to inform the populace about the identities of the true ruler and his accredited deputy. Therefore, as the message evolved, the political dimension of the *khutbah's* function was emphasized. It was particularly important for the *khatib* (speaker) to be clearly visible and audible (Fig. 2).



Fig. 2 Tekiyeh Muaven al-Muluk. Kermanshah. Tile painting representing the religious leader in the mosque, giving the *khutbah*. (Chelkowski and Dabashi, 2000: 54)

Following this tradition, the building of mosques for the purpose of reinforcing the position of a religious/political leader and of controlling and stabilizing society seemed to be a primary task in the early days of the revolution. In fact, something very different happened. Because the war with Iraq had exhausted the state budget, the regime could not afford to erect religious buildings.<sup>1</sup> Thus, the Islamic revolutionaries and city planners resorted to changing the facades of already existing buildings by covering them with religious iconography, depicting the leaders of the fundamentalist movement such as Khomeini in larger-than-life guise (Fig. 3).

<sup>1</sup> It can also be understood as a result of the impact of the so called surface culture that became endemic in the postmodern era. For both Jean Baudrillard and Fredric Jameson the 'surface culture' is associated with capitalism that has been witnessed an "emergence of a new kind of flatness or depthlessness, a new kind of superficiality in the most literal sense" (Jameson, 1995: 1). The kind of superficial environment created in Tehran is similar to those found in capitalist cities; however, unlike a typical capitalist environment which has been produced for the consumption of commodities, the surface environment in Tehran has been created for the consumption of state ideology.



◀ Fig. 3 A giant mural of Ayatollahs Khomeini and Khamenei aligned with their revolutionary quotes. Tehran, Motahhari Ave. 2000, photo by the author

These larger-than-life icons effectively cover most<sup>2</sup> of the walls in the city, obliterating the original surfaces and turning the city into a “virtual”<sup>3</sup> mosque. Wrapped walls in Tehran can be acknowledged through the

factors that operate not so much as spatial, empirical, and “real” architectural manifestations as virtual appearances. Baudrillard’s notions may well have something to say about how virtual appearances are applicable to post-revolutionary architecture in Tehran: “... there is no more distinction between depth/shadow on the one hand and that which is situated above or outside, because there is no more ‘original.’ Surface

<sup>2</sup> Here is how an American traveler defines Tehran: “From the moment I stepped off the plane in Tehran, I couldn’t escape the images of the Ayatollah Khomeini and his still living sidekick, the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. I wasn’t afraid or intimidated, because I was used to this kind of propaganda from my trips to Cuba.” (www.Iranian.com)

<sup>3</sup> According to Jean Baudrillard, the French cultural critic, the shift from the real to the “virtual” occurs when representation gives way to simulation. Simulation as described by Baudrillard is not a referential operation (Baudrillard, 1994:1). Instead, it is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal. This happens when the signs lose their referents, presenting a place of endless copies that no longer allude to any original. One can argue that Tehran is standing on brink of such a moment, marked primarily by the emergence of a “virtual” space, i.e., the city that is wrapped by media.

culture has become so endemic and our contact with the phenomenal world so permanently mediated that all we have left is an environment of simulation in which even warfare appears more real as a signifier than as an actual event....” (Baudrillard, 1995: 25)

Real mosques are still in use in Tehran but not in the traditional sense. Tehran is truly a metropolis. In fact, at the same time that the *city* of Tehran was being turned into a large mosque, the function of the original mosques *per se* was changing. In order to control this metropolis, post-revolutionary leaders created murals in place of common mosques that had traditionally served as institutions which moralized and controlled social deeds. Interestingly, rural areas and small towns remained faithful to the tradition of being controlled by their local mosques and were not overtaken by the murals.

In the past, mosques were the central sources of power of Muslim leaders; today, however, citizens rarely frequent the mosques in Tehran, having being lured away by secular Western thought.<sup>4</sup> Illustrated walls displaying the gigantic figures of the fundamentalist Muslim leaders along with their wordy quotes are supposed to possess the ‘aura’<sup>5</sup> of authentic and genuine Islamic mosques, and are intended to bring this aura onto the streets where citizens now congregate.

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<sup>4</sup> “Behind closed doors, young Iranians are simply getting on with it, especially in the cities. Across Tehran, underground rock bands are thriving, just waiting for the day they can come out into the open. And every month thousands more Iranians are going online. Today there are 1.75 million Iranians with access to the internet, and in five years that figure is expected to be five million. While the internet is a window on the world, it is also Iran's leap into free speech. Recently newspapers which the government has closed have continued to publish online.” (Judah, 2002: [www.observer.co.uk](http://www.observer.co.uk))

<sup>5</sup> The notion of “aura,” well-known mostly through “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” was also brought to bear elsewhere on cities and buildings. However, mosques cannot simply be incorporated into Benjamin’s account of mechanical reproducibility. This goes back to



Though the ideological impact of this program on the architectural ensemble of the city and on the ways people relate to spatial settings in Tehran may have not been as effective as the revolutionary leaders anticipated, it nevertheless made a significant impact on Iranian urban life.

By placing Tehran under the watchful eye of the depicted masculine leaders, these ideological wrappings have also masculinized the city. This notion of patriarchal public space necessitates an investigation into the relationship of urban space, patriarchy/masculinity, and politics in Tehran. In fact, the revolution's most essential impact on the city may not have been the production of new ideological architectural and urban structures, but rather the production of new public spaces dictated and dominated by political propaganda showing the leading male political and religious figures. Set in this context, I provide a personal description based on female experience of the public space. I look at how female citizens consciously and subconsciously relate to a city wrapped in political propaganda and in images constructed from a masculine viewpoint, as well as at how veiled female bodies are conceived as socio-political artifacts within urban spatial contexts. I will also bring to bear on my analysis certain western theoretical frameworks which deal with the relations of body and space (such as those found in the works of Elizabeth Grosz and Luce Irigaray). I will be looking closely at the degree to which these theories can transcend cultural differences in order to help shed light on the construction of gender and social space in Tehran.

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Benjamin's fascination for the distinct properties and qualities of buildings. Benjamin tends to clarify carefully the distinction between real spatial practices and representational ones. Consequently, the strategy of transferring the function of the mosques—as religious and political spatial zones—to two-dimensional representational objects fails to revive the 'aura' of the real mosques.

Alongside the textual descriptive analyses, I have created a series of photographic images, which have a curious resonance with my actual daily experiences in Tehran as I strive to express women's understanding of public spaces in the post-revolutionary Tehran. All these photographic works deal on some level with the relationship between female corporeality and city in the post-revolutionary era. In producing these works I have been greatly influenced by writers such as Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray, and Jacques Lacan, who developed psychoanalytical theory to explain the connection between mind and psyche and corporeality. Furthermore, in some of the most recent philosophical achievements found in the works of Gilles Deleuze, Rosi Braidotti, Elizabeth Grosz, the classic mind-body<sup>6</sup> dualism is dismantled by new thinking about the body, issues of corporeality and finally gendered subjectivity. The idea behind the body images found in the following text is to translate my written ideas directly into the form of images. This moment of realization creates a kind of strength on the part of this project following Theodor Adorno's view: "... not to forget in dreams the present world but to change it by the strength of an image." (Dabashi, 2001: Xiii)

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<sup>6</sup> The term is more applicable to Descartes' "*cogito ergo sum*" (I think therefore I am). *Cogito ergo sum* suggests that thinking and awareness of thought are the real substance of being, but it also celebrates the separation of the mind from the body.



## Ideology and Representation of Power in the City

The leaders of post-revolutionary Iran have drawn on numerous symbolic meanings to convey the ideological image of their religious leaders.<sup>7</sup> The type of propaganda on display in Tehran is not particular to the Islamic regime of Iran.<sup>8</sup> For example, in the utterly secular atmosphere of post-revolutionary Bolshevik Moscow, similar types of political propaganda were displayed on the city's facades. In the post-revolutionary era in the Soviet Union, huge pictures of party leaders covered the walls of the city. Lenin was the officially recognized deity. "His image was everywhere; in every government office, every classroom, and every square. Lenin's bald pates were symbols of the Soviet states..." (Kaiser, 1980:110-11). Therefore, "Leaders [such as Lenin and Stalin] appeared [as people] who acted as mediators of culture and invariably took up a position above the viewer, ... and knew better than others what to teach...what was good and what was bad... and played the role of a priest of a new belief to the parishioners of the church of socialist realism." (Bown, 1991: 13)

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<sup>7</sup> According to Peter J. Chelkowski & Hamid Dabashi, most of these symbolic gestures were those of the Shiites; however, the method of displaying them was highly derived from Soviet political agendas.

<sup>8</sup> Products of mass culture are different from what comes out of the popular culture because there are larger dominant ideological paradigms that impinge upon products of mass culture from above. Andreas Hyssen argues that "The hidden subject of the mass culture debate is precisely 'the masses'-their political and cultural aspirations, their struggles, and their pacifications via cultural institutions" (Hyssen, 1986: 191). Similarly, the British cultural critic Stuart Hall regards the meaning of signs --objects of communication-- as a function of their relations of power. In fact, Hall approaches the logic of articulation that fragments social relations and subordinates them to political associations. (Hall, 1981: 235)

In Tehran, streets and public spaces in general were used as stages for the display of all sorts of images that reinforced the ideals of revolutionary leaders. The evocation of space and the nature of political propaganda in the public spaces of post-revolutionary Tehran also share some features with phenomena in other countries in the Middle East. In the early twentieth century in the Middle East, one can trace the history of monumental imagery in totalitarian regimes such as that of Turkey under Mustafa Kamal Atatürk. In the 1920s, when the national war of independence was won in Turkey, the new “National Architecture” and urbanism were highly affected by monumental signs of Atatürk (Bozdogan, 2001:51). These signs were ideologically useful because they truly had the capacity to signify at once both tradition and the new. Sibel Bozdogan argues that “when the population’s primary allegiance was still more to Islam and the [Ottoman] empire than to the new “nation,” Mustafa Kamal must have seen the power of this religious symbolism to make the secularizing reforms more palatable.” (Bozdogan, 2001:44)

In the contemporary Middle East, monumental representations of power become even more complicated. They go beyond the simple aim of emphasizing a particular leader as a representative of modernization, national identity, and independence. Indeed, texts and images also engage other factors central to mobilizing new Islamic identities, e.g. involving religion as a dominant factor and entrusting a leader with god-like status. In his book *The Monument* on art and monumentality in Iraq, Samir Alkhalil writes that “in one of his 1979 speeches, Saddam Hussein claimed to be a ‘descendent of Ali’. It occurs again in his semi-official biography which published a family tree providing ‘proof’ of this claim” (Alkhalil, 1991:13). Moreover, in one of Baghdad’s museums the life-story of Saddam Hussein is told by analogy with that of the Prophet. Such repeated

and well-calculated strategies have worked to solidify a kind of power in Iraq that is akin to religion and to a deliberate establishment of a system of idolatry. In his article “Below the Beltway,” in the January 2003 issue of the *Washington Post Magazine*, Gene Weingarten remarks on the system of idolatry in the creation of the portraits of Saddam Hussein, regarding it as the creation of a utopian figure on the part of the artist:

Like Warhol, the artists are interrogating our perceptions and prejudices about what is art. In declaring their emancipation from traditional notions of how to depict the human face, they question the very nature of portraiture and its tired trafficking in signs of frailty, hubris or pain. Instead they seek and find an idea. What results is an enthusiastically idealized face, preternaturally calm and in control. This is not about what we are, but what we can be. It is artist as Utopian. (Weingarten, 2003: 3)

Since the 1980s under the rule of Saddam Hussein, the embellishment of Baghdad has become something of a national obsession. Public monuments in Baghdad mostly represent the figure of Saddam Hussein. These monumental urban objects either represent him in portraits and body images (Fig. 4), or depict monumental objects that signify his physical and emotional power indirectly.



▲ Fig 4 A giant plywood billboard representing Saddam Hussein astride the ancient Babylonian gate of Ishtar. (Alkhalil, 1991: 53)

Alkhalil argues that “urban form [in Baghdad] has had to adapt itself around the larger of the new edifices... Streets and squares are marked by the presence of such artifacts...”(Alkhalil, 1991:19). As Alkhalil said in a Japanese architectural journal, what happened to the urban structure in Baghdad in the 1980s was like the nineteenth-century reconstruction of Paris under Haussmann (Alkhalil, 1991: 27). “Between 1979 and 1983, architects of the second and third generations of International Architecture gathered in Baghdad from all over the world to participate in the reconstruction and reorganization projects for the city.... President Saddam Hussein has a clear image of what Baghdad should be like in the future....” (*Process-Architecture*, 1985:17-18) (Fig.5)



▲ Fig 5 Mutations in the overall urban structures in Baghdad. the Martyrs monument. conceived by the Iraqi artist Ismail Fattah. Baghdad, Iraq. 1983 (Alkhalil. 1991: 27)

In spite of being similar to Baghdad in terms of its ideological imagery, Tehran’s urban structure in the 1980s took shape in a different way. Streets in Tehran did not have to adapt to any large new edifice or symbolic monument. Streets and squares remained the same, but they carried new meanings that were applied to them by imposing a new skin—the two-dimensional murals that wrapped the walls around and over the streets.

As in Baghdad, images of revolutionary leaders, particularly those of Ayatollah Khomeini, made evident their role as representatives of the holy Imams and biblical

Prophets. This is how *Keyhan*, the popular government's right-hand newspaper, on 21 June 1989 describes Imam Khomeini: "How did Ayatollah Khomeini become an Imam? Much like the holy prophet Abraham<sup>9</sup>, he carried out God's will, smashed idols, was willing to sacrifice his son, rose up against the enemies, and led the oppressed against their oppressors" (Abrahamian 1993:13). When comparing and contrasting the two different approaches to the application of ideological imagery to urban structures in the capital cities of Baghdad and Tehran, it is important to keep several things in mind. The leaders of Iran and Iraq aimed not only at restoring religious, political and cultural independence to their countries; since the early 1980s they were also engaged in a futile war that lasted for almost the entire decade and inflicted huge losses upon the cities of both countries, especially the capitals. Strategies of monumentality in Tehran and Baghdad are similar: they both took shape within a strong tradition of two-dimensional representation. The prevalence of Islamic symbolism reflects a common prohibition against all sorts of three-dimensional artistic representation of natural entities.

Throughout the history of Islam, Muslim artists did not establish a correspondence between real spaces and represented ones. Instead, Muslim illustrators created false spaces that were folded and flat. This kind of representation has been described as theatrical scenery in *Mostly Miniatures: An Introduction to Persian Painting* by Oleg Grabar: "It is an unreal life that prevails everywhere; nothing happens in an authentic way and all the humans, animals and buildings are only, in fact, theatre. The dead arise and bow to the spectators, and the feast begins. But there is more to it. These actors and actresses are themselves immaterial; flat and having no shadows, they are no more able really to exist than the events they depict. Thus the whole art of representation

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<sup>9</sup> Muslims believe that (based on the Koranic texts) it was Adam who built the Ka'bah.

is created that is two times removed from any possible reality” (Grabar, 2000: 130). Elsewhere Grabar notes that buildings represented in paintings were often overwhelmingly simplified. They were treated as theatre stages with a few columns or sketches of arches (Grabar, 2000:87). Robert Irwin also emphasizes the unrealistic features of represented objects in Islamic art by focusing on issues of light and color. According to Irwin, typically, no single light source was assumed and consequently there was no logical depiction of shadows. Painters were not concerned with the effects that might be achieved by highlights. (Irwin, 1997: 196) (Fig. 6)



◀Fig.6 Persian Miniature. A Discussion at the Court of Qadi' (*Bihzad: Master of Persian Painting*, pg 196)

The same two-dimensional, theatrical features now prevail in the ideological images of Saddam Hussein in Baghdad and those of Ayatollahs in Tehran. The erection of two-dimensional portraits of the Ayatollahs in Tehran endowed the city with imagery that was far different from the three-dimensional monumental statues of pre-revolutionary rulers. In pre-revolutionary Tehran and in other large Iranian cities, public spaces were sites for the sculptural symbols of kings and rulers. Later, at the time of the revolution, they became sites where monarchical male was contested by millions of demonstrators who brought down the statues and re-claimed the public spaces of the city as their own. (Madanipour, 1998: 43)



In spite of the similarities between representations of power in Baghdad and Tehran, there are also major differences between the ideologies that gave birth to this imagery in the two cities. In contrast to Saddam Hussein, whose attitude toward the modernization of Baghdad showed certain similarities to Western methods in city planning and architectural design, Ayatollah Khomeini championed an ideal traditionalist revival in various cultural spheres. The sphere of urban design was represented by the doctrine of the rule of clergy and the spread of religious regulations.

Urban objects in Tehran did not fulfill the democratic potential<sup>10</sup> of the Islamic city as promised on the eve of the Islamic revolution of Iran. Instead of creating a new architecture for new institutions, Islamic revolutionaries and city planners resorted to changing the facades of already existing buildings by covering them with religious iconography, depicting the leaders of the fundamentalist movement. Instead of contributing to the enrichment of the city and enlarging the opportunities for public enjoyment, these pictures merely corrupted spatial features. They care little for architecture; they ignore and obscure it. The pictures run from one wall to the next, turning the city walls into the represented bodies of the Muslim leaders. The walls therefore are masked by these bodies, bodies without beginning or end.

As stated earlier, political propaganda in Iran as well as that in most other Middle Eastern/Islamic countries shares the political values of traditional Islamic visual culture. Since the emergence of Islam, the visual culture has prohibited all three-

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<sup>10</sup> "The ideas of freedom and constitutionalism featured as major aims of Islamic revolution... [For example] addressing journalists on May 15, 1979, Khomeini said: "The press must write what the nation wants." (Menashri, 2001:133) Elsewhere, Khomeini challenged his traditional views with Western standards, "...They think Islam is like the United States, the larger the size of its domain the better. The expansionism of the prophet is different from the expansionism of the rulers. [The rulers] struggle for this world... for their own diabolical power, the prophets [on the contrary] intend to humanize a multitude, and they whip them to become humans" (Chelkowski & Dabashi, 2000:18).

dimensional representations of natural entities. It is important to bear in mind that the Islamic worldview, as manifested in the arts, also underscores the importance of masculinity as the dominant identity in public arenas. In fact, the major goal of those who created the propagandist murals in Iran was to create a bridge between the new ideologies and traditional belief systems.<sup>11</sup> This method was also used as an effective tool in Soviet Russia. Russia had a rich tradition of mixing political discourse and popular entertainment. The Bolsheviks are deemed the inventors of modern propaganda with good reason, yet there was a long tradition behind their practice. Russian intellectuals participated in a time-honored tradition of attacking the status quo with symbols, since there were few other weapons available; and popular culture, like *belles lettres*, was never alien to political partisanship (Von Geldern and Stites, 1995: xiii). Moreover, the use of the poster as a tool of political propaganda—lively in its depiction and proclaiming in no uncertain terms the goals of the revolution—helped the early Bolshevik leaders to communicate their message throughout the country.

In Tehran political propaganda came into play in different ways. The city's walls reveal several layers of posters and handbills scribbled on, crossed out, written over and white washed. In the first stage of the revolution, the propaganda war was fought on the surfaces of these walls. The revolutionaries wrote their slogans there, and many demonstrators who had been wounded by the bullets of the Shah's army also wrote

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<sup>11</sup> The postmodernist trends in world architecture were gaining momentum at about the same time the Islamic Revolution was triumphant in Iran, bringing about two motivations which worked in parallel to launch a new period in the architecture of Iran. After the victory of the Islamic Revolution, Iranian architects attempted to lead Iranian architecture towards an independent identity based on Iran's architectural heritage. The other stimulus arose from the greater emphasis postmodern architecture placed on the past architectures of nations. These two forces together helped to create works in Iran which displayed postmodernist tastes and themes, as well as elements taken from the past architecture of Iran (specially the Islamic architecture). (Mirmiraan, 1999:45)

slogans on the walls with their blood. Soon after the Islamic revolution, the Ministry of Islamic Guidance and the Ministry of Culture and Higher Education, in conjunction with the local municipal government of each city in Iran, began to sponsor all the political propaganda and slogans that appeared on the walls of the cities.

In general, the major themes of political murals and posters can be categorized into three different groups. The first group deals with martyrdom. Since the beginning of the war with Iraq in 1980, the cult and veneration of martyrs and martyrdom led the authorities in Tehran to name schools, sport facilities, streets and alleys after martyrs (Chelkowski & Dabashi 2001: 125). Images of the martyrs also covered the walls of buildings, alongside images of the Ayatollahs. (Fig. 7)



◀Fig 7 A Mural representing Ayatollah Khomeini and a Martyr from the Iran Iraq war. Enghelab Ave., Tehran. photo by the author

Slogans and graffiti of the second group condemned the United States, the former Soviet Union, Israel, and Saddam Hussein in particular, as the enemies of Islam and Iran. Through propagandist images of national flags, as well as other icons of these countries such as the Statue of Liberty, the White House, and well known symbols of the

communist state, etc., an official strategy to make Tehran an Islamic city took shape.

Finally, in addition to the graffiti on the walls of major city squares, kitschy representations of sacred buildings in the Islamic world (such as the Dome of the Rock) bear witness to the Islamic Republic's foreign stance, as well as ideological policies toward the Islamic world in general. While the body representations of religious leaders

in Tehran are all two-dimensional on murals and posters, other kinds of political propaganda come into play in three-dimensional forms. The sculpture of the Dome of the Rock in the middle of Palestine Square is one example. The changing of the name of the Avenue and the circle of Kakh (Palace) to Palestine also emphasizes changes in the political identity associated with this part of the city. Before the revolution, the headquarters of the Israeli mission were on *Kakh* Avenue; after the revolution they were turned over to the Palestine Liberation Organization. (Fig.8) (Chelkowski & Dabashi, 2001: 125)



▲ Fig.8 Palestine Square. (Chelkowski & Dabashi, 2001: 125)

The imagery of political propaganda had to speak a language that was accessible to all strata of the population. However, a close reading of these images reveals that emotionally accessible realism was pushed aside to make room for abstract and mythical features. The images shared features with what I call the Shiite political art and departed from the realities of Iranians' everyday life. In the words of Peter Chelkowski and Hamid

Dabashi,<sup>12</sup> most of this was the result of an amalgamation of binary terms: sacred and profane, real and represented, present and past (Chelkowski & Dabashi, 2001: 277). Such binary oppositions, in fact, originated in Shiite political art. An important instance is provided in a Shiite traditional ceremony that strongly employs the political use of myth: the Muharram procession, associated with theatrical representation of an event that took place 1300 years ago at the site of Karbala in Iraq. The Karbala event—a tragically unsuccessful battle between Imam Hussein and his fellows and the cruel Muslim rulers of the time—has remained at the hub of Shiite collective memory, to be reinvented and superimposed on other similar political events. Here is how Peter Brook describes the ceremony:

I saw in a remote Iranian village one of the strangest things I have seen in theatre: a group of four hundred villagers...sitting under a tree and passing from roars of laughter to outright sobbing—although they all knew perfectly well the end of the story—as they saw Hussein in danger of being killed, and then fooling his enemies, and then being martyred. And when he was martyred, the theatre became a truth—there was no difference between past and present. An event that was told as remembered happening in history 1300 years ago actually became a reality in that moment. (Peter Brook in Chelkowski & Dabashi, 2001: 80)

The distance between Karbala and the real calamities of contemporary Iran is thus collapsed in a relentless imaginative contraction of time and place, along with the objects of this theatrical ceremony and the audience alike.

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<sup>12</sup> Peter Chelkowski has been a faculty member of NYU as a cultural historian of the Middle East since 1968. Hamid Dabashi is the Hagop Kevorkian Professor of Iranian Studies, and the director of Graduate Studies at the Center for Comparative Literature and Society at Columbia University. Both come from academic backgrounds that are intensely multi-cultural and multi-disciplined. The purpose of their book *Staging a Revolution*, first published in 2000, is to examine the massive orchestration of public myths and collective symbols in the making of the Islamic Revolution of 1978-9 in Iran and the war with Iraq that followed it between 1980 and 1988.



▲ Fig. 9-1011 Wall painting of Ka'ba: Tehran. Billboard of the holy mausoleum of Hussein in Karbala: Tehran, Billboard of the Dome of the Rock: Tehran (Chelkowski & Dabashi, 2000: 125-127)

In post-revolutionary Tehran the architectural replication of other sites sacred to Islamic memory displaces those buildings from their place of origin to the city's squares or walls, thus bearing some similarity to the displacement of the Karbala event in time (Fig.9&10&11). Tehran as a city becomes an emblem that holds the realities of the outside world into itself—an isolated urban site of political propaganda. The program of displacing real objects and genuine personalities through a process of misrepresentation called for a total reconstruction of Iranian Shiite consciousness, so that Iranians would come to consider their homeland superior to that of other Muslims, including the Iraqis. Tehran was transformed into a city that could literally encompass sacred Islamic regions and buildings from all over the Islamic world. Indeed, in post-revolutionary Tehran, transfigured fragments of the icons of the Islamic world at large were made to support the national and Islamic identity of Iranians.

Sacred works of architecture such as the holy mausoleum of Imam Hussein in Karbala, the Ka'bala in Mecca, and the Dome of the Rock in Palestine were dislocated and transformed from the places of their origin to various Iranian cities in the form of sculptures, images, and icons. Historical events contracted in time and became part and

parcel of Iranians' everyday life, reinvented through theatrical ceremonies, religious processions, and political slogans.

Political art and propaganda, Khomeini believed, were instrumental in bringing Iranians into conformity with their Shiite ideals. He counseled the Minister of Islamic Guidance that Shiite propaganda was much more effective than arms in the cultivation of revolutionary attitudes (Chelkowski & Dabashi, 2001: 274). Since the nineteenth century and in different Iranian revolutionary movements, Shi'ism has been the common denominator of political culture in Iran. Modern manifestations of Shi'ism were, of course, not limited to Iran. In Iraq and Lebanon in particular, Shi'ism has played a significant role in active and radical political awareness. However, as a political and cultural arena of Shi'ism for more than 500 years, Iran was the birthplace of the most prominent features of this branch of the religion of Islam. "Playing on the doctrinal as well as the popular dimensions of Shi'ism, the Islamic revolution extended the full metaphysical possibilities of the ancestral faith to the furthest corners of radical political life." (Chelkowski & Dabashi, 2001: 22)

In *Staging a Revolution* Chelkowski and Dabashi explain the importance of the relationship between the contemporary ideological system of representation, used in all sorts of imagery, and the traditional imagery of Iranian Shiite culture (Fig.12-13):

Any analogical representation, any system of signs brought together in the space of revolutionary posters, stamps, banknotes, or murals, is a constructed reality. The constellation of signs and symbols is put together in order to make a statement. There is nothing accidental about such concentrations of imageries. They are brought together to inform, to convene, to commit, to move, to mobilize. How is this mobilization actually achieved? The communicative power of any symbolic constellation of imageries derives its energy from the common repertoire of the collective cultural memory. The memory is both active and acquisitive. From the scattered parts of dormant memories active ingredients of an exuberant recollection may be constituted. Images and pictorial rhetoric speak the language of these memories....These pictorial constellations, whether on the small piece of a stamp or on the vast span of a mural, are open invitations their observers to participate in a feast of collective

construction of sympathy, apathy, or a range of oscillating sentiments that fall in between.... A representation of a figure of Imam Hussein, a suggestion of the color red, ...are enough to create a universe of relentless signification that in every minute of its detail recreates the Shi'i historical self consciousness....To interpret the image outside of its historical immediacy, one has to think oneself into the collective mind of the receiving audience, on a march towards its revolutionary goals.... Once the cultural and historical network centered around the symbolic image is spread and charted out, its multiple and simultaneous meanings and more important the possibilities of its meaningfulness become self evident. (Chelkowski & Dabashi, 2000: 39-40)



▲ Fig. 12 Tekiyeh Muaven al-Muluk, Kermanshah (Chelkowski and Dabashi, 2000: 39, 56, 54)



▲ Fig. 13 The visual Narrative of the *Karbala* tragedy (Chelkowski and Dabashi, 2000: 39, 56, 54)

One thing that is absent from the explanations of Chelkowski and Dabashi is that contemporary body images can be read in not just one but two ways. As Dabashi and Chelkowski articulate in their arguments, one way is to see them through an encompassing sense of Shiite culture, artifacts, and metaphor—that is, the superimposition of the identity of characters distant in space and time onto contemporary



living figures. The other way to interpret the representations of bodies, in particular, is to see them in a gendered context, something that the authors do not address. As Elizabeth Grosz asserts, in order to conceive of bodies, and to understand the possible active interrelations between representations of the body, each sex needs to be accorded the possibility of a different space-time framework. (Grosz, 1995: 100)



### **His Name, His Body, His Power**

Female historical figures in Islam such as Fatima (the daughter of the prophet Muhammad) and Zeynab (the daughter of Fatima) have been role models for Shiite women throughout history. Fatima is admired mainly for her womanly virtues as daughter, wife and mother and also for her courage in protecting the holy ancestry of the prophet Mohammed. Zeynab is remembered for her militancy and active participation in what she thought to be a just struggle undertaken by her brother, Hussein, to challenge the despotism of the caliph who had usurped power. Zeynab showed amazing courage, resilience, and eloquence in defending and pursuing his cause (Milani, 1992: 41). Contemporary women, however, have few if any opportunities to emulate the perfection of these role models. For example, in the Taziyeh procession, which represents the Karbala event, all female roles are played by petite male actors who disguise their masculinity by means of the veil. Men in Iran, on the contrary, can identify with the holy and deified figures in the history of Islam. The martyrs of the Iran-Iraq war seem to

imitate and symbolize the moral characteristics of Imam Hussein. Ayatollahs, for their part, come into stand in place of deities and even the god of Muslims "himself." Male figures are always accorded the possibility of occupying different time-space frameworks, whereas women are granted neither the framework of the history of Islam nor the framework of their own particular moment.

By the structure of the representation, body images in Tehran deify the Ayatollahs, thus participating in the typical displacement of space and time in Shiite culture. However, this displacement occurs within the frame of the transformation of human beings to the level of deity. In 1977, when revolution became very fashionable, the first portraits of Khomeini began to appear, first as badges and then after the revolution as huge murals on the facades of the buildings. After Khomeini's death, his image was gradually sanctified. Today, the elements of the Islamic Republic's ideological propaganda are somewhat diversified, but they represent variations on the old ideological themes. The regime's propaganda has achieved spectacular [results?] by using the hero cult of the Ayatollahs. This cult is practiced at schools, places of work, and especially in all public places.

In both political posters and urban murals, the bodies of revolutionary leaders such as Khomeini and Khamenei are usually presented as at least twice as large as the entire city with all its citizens (Fig. 14 &15).



▲ Fig. 14, 15 from left to right: A Poster of Ayatollah Khomeini (Chelkowski and Hamid Dabashi, 2000: 121); A Poster of Ayatollah Khomeini (Chelkowski & Dabashi, 2000: 124).

According to these body images, the state and the city exist in a close relationship in which the state functions as the central power, located above everything else:

...The central power of the state is hierarchical and constitutes a civil sector; the center is not in the middle but on top because (it is) the only way it can recombine what it isolates through subordination. (Deleuze and Guattari, in Grosz, 1996: 107)

The gaze of the Ayatollahs is particularly emphasized. The faces of the Ayatollahs in the images are directed neither toward the city and the mass of Iranian citizens nor toward the sky with its association with an eternal Divine. Instead, the face and the gaze are usually directed toward a remote geographical place, which can vary depending on the political message. Quotations placed beside the body images typically address Palestine as a destiny (ex: “Palestine is part of Islam” found on the mural seen on fig: 16, 17), although the specific site might be Karbala, Jerusalem, Mecca or elsewhere.



▲ Fig 16. 17 from left to right: giant murals of Ayatollah Khamenei and Khomeini; Tehran, Motahhari Ave. 2000. Photo by the author

The gaze therefore creates a kind of “aura” that suggests a new destiny for the Iranian population—something that has yet to come. The gaze implies the future of the nation and as a result plays an important role in proclaiming the destiny of the society. Astrit Schmidt-Burkhart describes the connotations of the gaze and issues of power in both religious and social contexts:

The eye, as carrier of the gaze, and thus medium of nonverbal communication, but more as means of mutual control, plays constitutive role above all in the formation of social groups...The dialogic glance should be considered a fundamental point in the establishment of social contacts. Disregarding the rules of perception in a social context, vision becomes a timeless form of socialization, which itself poses the question of the logic of power that results in the rule of one of the senses over the others, or of the precedential right of “free” vision and its instrumentalization for ideological, economical, social, or cultural purposes. Even if the civilizing process was marked with individual and social “interwoven independences” (Norbert Elias), the assumed privilege of “free” vision was mostly connected with a hierarchical system of authority. The overpowering and ubiquitous eye of God can be considered as a prototype of this hegemonic vision. Here optical control is connected with mythology. It epitomizes, so to speak, the iconic apriori of the modern police state. (Astrit Schmidt-Burkhart, 2002: 18)



◀Fig18 A Billboard representing the Gaze of Ayatollah Khomeini. [www.Iranian.com](http://www.Iranian.com)

Representation of the Ayatollahs' gaze also evoked a religious model in which the gaze of Allah was a means of control, playing a constitutive

role in the everyday activities of Muslims. Although it is usually the body that is dominant in the overall layout of these huge images, sometimes the entire body shrinks into two big eyes—especially those of Khomeini. (Fig.18)

The compelling gaze, supreme organ of control in Islam, is masculine in gender. Allah's gaze is pointedly trained on Muslim women, systematically surveying every aspect of the women's bodies. Women must cover their bodies from head to toe when they say prayers to God, even when they are alone and in private. The overpowering and ubiquitous eye of Allah in Islam signifies his hegemonic presence in space. In post-revolutionary Tehran, the optical control of the revolutionary leaders can be tacitly understood within the framework of Islamic ideology and it can be more specifically perceived in relation to Shiite thought.

Unlike the Sunni belief system, which has always prohibited any representation of the face and even the body of sacred figures, Iranian Shiite tradition practiced the re-

creation of the bodies and faces of the saints in the early nineteenth century<sup>13</sup>. This recreation first developed through what is called “narrative painting,” and was designed directly on walls. In narrative paintings and murals, many of the portraits of characters and the saints are labeled *shabih* (impersonator, or likeness of), a term which refers to an actor playing a role for which he is designated. The term is used to ensure that the actor does not pretend to be the actual saint but is manifestly only the role-player (Chelkowski & Dabashi, 2001: 58). Most male characters are carefully delineated, while women characters are wrapped in a veil, and as a result are faceless. The gazes and the faces of the post-revolutionary Ayatollahs bear strong similarities to those of the saints found in narrative paintings and murals of the Karbala event, with the exception that the gazes and the faces of the saints in these paintings are usually directed toward the sky. (Fig. 13, 19)

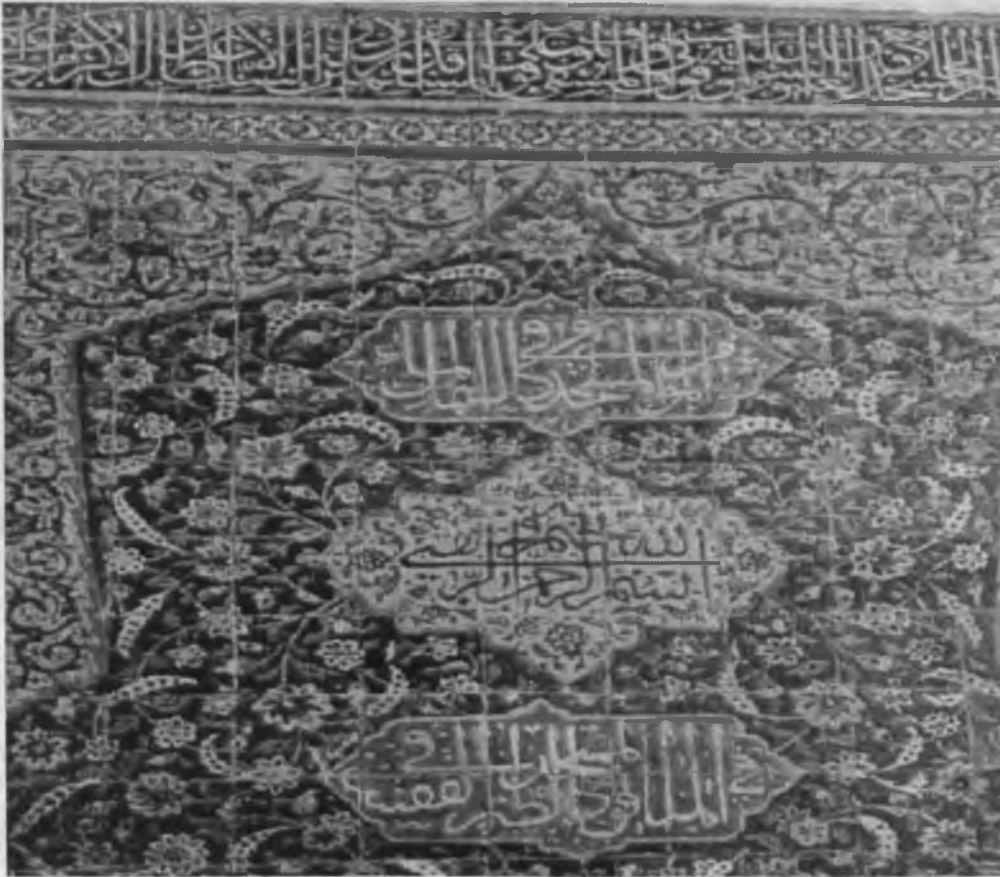


▲ Fig.19 Ta'ziye, Tehran 2002, www.bbc.com.

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<sup>13</sup> The existing records of the Karbala event in the year 1737 in Iran reveal that narrative paintings were not yet produced at that time. (Chelkowski & Dabashi, 2001: 56)

In post-revolutionary murals, some calligraphic messages typically appear together with the bodily representations of the Ayatollahs. Whether in Persian or in Arabic, the revolutionary message makes its first impression through the semiotic qualities of the calligraphy with which it is delivered. Arabic calligraphy signifies the “sacred” because it is the language of the holy book of Muslims—the Koran. Arabic calligraphy also appears on the walls of the majority of the mosques in Iran and elsewhere. To its transposition from mosque to mural, the calligraphy sacrifices the image, transferring to the mural some of the function as well as the decorative features of the mosque. The prevalence of religious inscriptions in Islamic mosques throughout the history of Islam gives Iranians familiarity with a certain type of calligraphy imagery. It is possible to discover specific models for certain types of imagery. In mosques, structural elements such as walls are covered with a series of images in written form (Fig.20). These textual ornaments present repetitive words or simple praises of God, names of the Prophet, the Imams, and many variants on such themes. This repetitive language, which reminds us of the masculine names as well as the name of the “masculine God” of Muslims, makes women encounter what is “other” to them. This otherness is still to some extent in play in Tehran because the Arabic text that appears on the murals cannot be easily read and understood by the majority of the Iranian public. Nevertheless, it creates a sacred field of obedience and certitude into which the Iranian “Muslim believer steps, ready to receive further signals and indications of what needs to be done” (Chelkowski & Dabashi, 2001: 101).



▲Fig20. Safavid period. The Shah Mosque. Calligraphy on an interior wall. Photo by the author

Chelkowski and Dabashi have astutely described how the spatial connotations of the Arabic calligraphy found on murals and political posters might be perceived by a Muslim believer: “The Muslim observer encounters the calligraphic message in Arabic with a sense of awe, respect, and humanity, his guard dropped, his hands loose, and his shoes taken off in a sign of utter devotion” (Chelkowski & Dabashi, 2001: 101).

The significance of calligraphic representation is not limited to the murals. Textual ornaments in mosques present repetitive words or simple praises of God, names of the Prophet, the Imams, and variants on such themes. The post-revolutionary streets of Tehran, whose pre-revolutionary names changed after the Ayatollahs came to power,

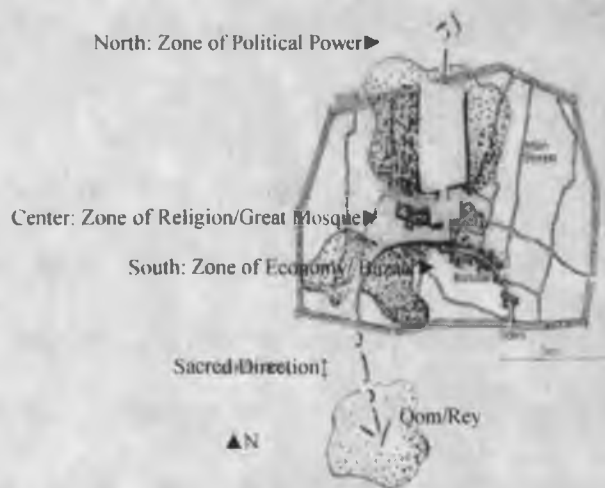


played an important role in producing a new identity for the city, similar to that of the mosques.

The main urban structure of Tehran after the Islamic revolution can best be explained through on account of its unusual growth. Ideological changes in the structure and function of public spaces have been the essential strategic means of control by the fundamentalist state of Iran since 1979. When a city acquires a gigantic scale under a dictatorial state, it becomes necessary to control the unconventional behavior of its citizens. There is a clear link between the establishment of structural patterns, through streets, main axes, and squares, and the imposing murals, banners, and wall-posters in Tehran.

The north-south orientation of Tehran follows the line of the southern slopes of the Alborz mountain chain. In addition to this geographic orientation, axiality represents the combination of the main elements of the urban structure, and is the result of historical power relations. In analyzing the basic urban patterns of Tehran, one can find a possible specific historic precedent for axiality: the pattern of intersecting main axes leading to four gates on four sides. This pattern is a symbolic model that has survived in collective memory throughout history and has been used not only in urban scales but also in smaller scale developments (Madanipour, 1998:118). In the original town of Tehran, the north-south axis included the bazaar as the center of economy in the south, the mosque as the main religious center in the middle, and the royal family's dwelling palaces as the centers of power at the very north. (Fig. 21)

▼ Figure 21: Main urban structures, Tehran, 1851, drawing by the author.



The divide between the north as the zone of political power and the south as the zone of commerce is highlighted by a central connector that is the mosque. In the original citadel of Tehran, religious space also functioned as a joint between the major north-south axis and an east-west cross-axis.

In contemporary Tehran, the central north-south axis linking the south to the most northern areas is where most of the formal and functional political propaganda are revealed. The primary north-south axis can be identified with Vali Asr (meaning the resurrection), and the secondary east-west cross-axis can be acknowledged Enghelab (meaning “revolution”). The elongated form of the citadel resulted from three sets of forces: economic, religious, and state. Major squares that represent zones of political power in the city are located along the two main axes where the majority of protests,

demonstrations, and annual religious rituals, such as Ta'ziye<sup>14</sup>, take place. More importantly, most of the murals are located in line with these axes. For this axially one can hypothesize that the coincidence of power relations, namely the enduring structure of the two old axes of the original citadel, is parallel to the two main contemporary street axes.

Before the Islamic revolution, the central vertical axis was in line with the newly built administrative institutions and ended at the palaces of the royal family in the north. Interestingly, this axis was named after the royal family (Pahlavi) and thus associated with monarchy. As mentioned before, today this axis is named after the future Imam of the Shiite—Vali Asr. The contemporary axis of Vali Asr is in line with the main administrative buildings as they were in the past and extends to the new palaces of the fundamentalist politicians of Iran. However, this axis now ends at the huge monumental tomb of Khomeini in the south which symbolically represents the power of Khomeini's cult.<sup>15</sup> It is also aligned with the road that leads to the city of Qom, the location of the main radical religious schools in the country. The east-west axis in the pre-revolutionary era was named after Eisenhower and thus indicated a secular zone as opposed to the earlier north-south zone, which was in line with the main mosque and thus designated a religious power. Today the street is called "Revolution," and is lined up with the important protests zones such as Tehran University and the

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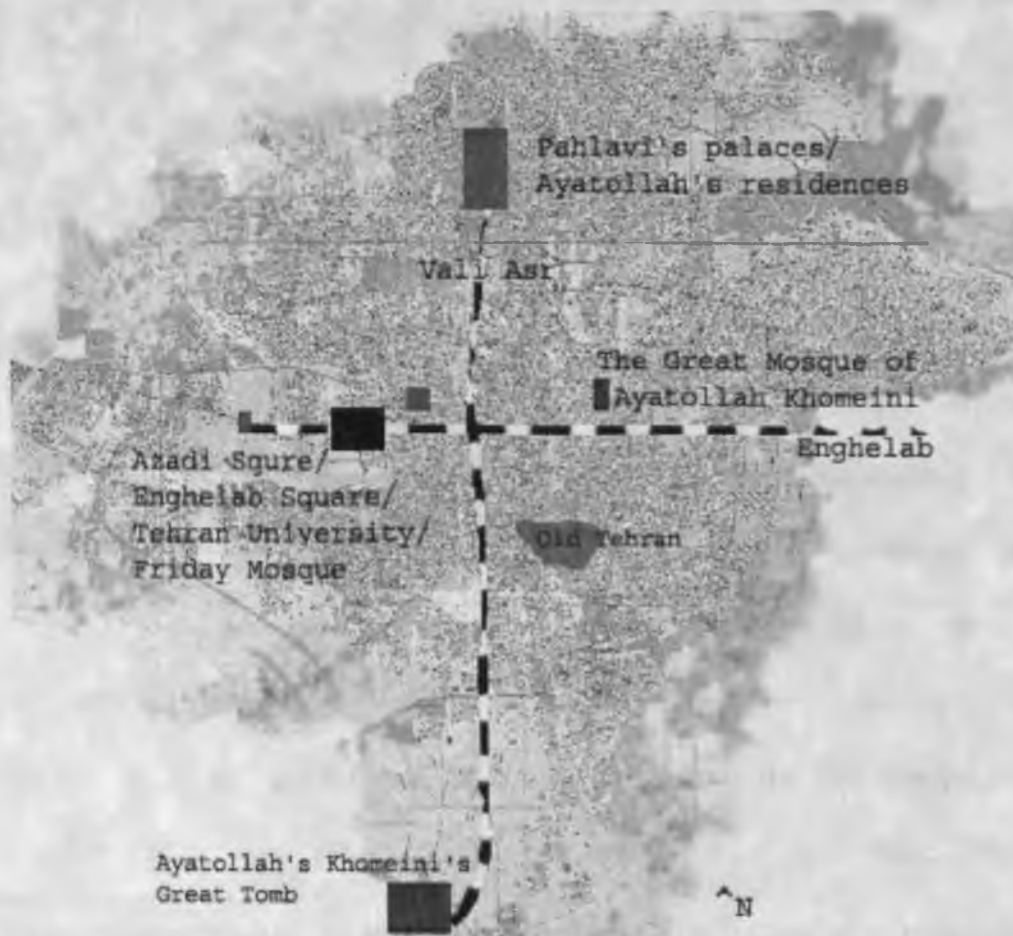
<sup>14</sup> After the revolution, the function of these traditional rituals and processions was transformed into an ideological form to support the aims of the Islamic regime.

<sup>15</sup> In her book, *Lenin Lives*, Nina Tumarkin best explains the importance of the power of a leader after his death. Tumarkin argues that a regime that derives its legitimacy from a single ruler risks instability upon his death. But if after death that ruler becomes the object of a cult predicated on his continuing living power, then that cult can serve as a stabilizing force. This is precisely what happened with Lenin. The cult established nationwide upon his death was based on one theme: Lenin Lives! Lenin's death was not to interfere with his continuing leadership of Soviet Russia. (Tumarkin, 1983: 165)

huge liberty square to the west. A new mosque of Khomeini, located somewhere around the intersection of the two main axes, denotes a new political zone that is at the same time associated with the worship of a 'sacred' religious leader. (Fig. 22)

The major avenues and freeways in the north of Tehran have been named after famous Ayatollas such as Beheshti, Motahhari, Modarres, Khomeini, and Nuri. These names are also most often used for schools, hospitals, parks and stadiums. (Chelkowski & Dabashi, 2001: 125)

▼ Figure 22 Ideological urban structures in post-revolutionary Tehran. Original map from <http://www.arianews.com>. schematic drawing by the author



In some cases, there is a relationship between streets that are named after particular revolutionary leaders and the body images on the facades of the buildings that face them. For example, at the beginning of Motahhari Avenue, a dominant image of Ayatollah Motahhari catches the eye (Fig. 23). His body, along with his name, becomes important when we read the multi-dimensional ideological meanings that are applied to the street.<sup>16</sup>



◀ Fig. 23 A mural of Ayatollah Motahhari. Tehran, Motahhari Ave. 2000. Photo by the author

In his evocative descriptions of spatial practices in “Walking in the City,” Michel de Certeau writes about the names of the streets and their meanings with regard to specific values and power structures in the city.

De Certeau believed that the names of streets create new meanings for them. “[These names] detach themselves from the places they were supposed to define and serve as imaginary meaning points on itineraries which, as metaphors they determine for reasons that are foreign to their original value but may be recognized ... by passers-by” (De Certeau, 1999:131).

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<sup>16</sup> With the establishment of the Islamic Republic, not only were all the names associated with the Pahlavi rule changed; even those names which could be associated with a monarchical system in general were changed. In order to bring in a new Islamic world-view, themes from Islamic history, as well as individuals and heroes from the Islamic revolution and the war against Iraq, lent names to Iranian streets and public buildings. In Tehran alone, between the years 1979 and 1987, 302 avenues, forty one squares, thirteen freeways, and seventeen parks had their names changed. (Chelkowski & Dabashi, 2001: 120)

Furthermore, he argues that these names create new functions for spaces and streets that are named after them. "A rich determination gives them, by means of a semantic rarefaction, the function of articulating a second, poetic geography on top of the geography of the literal, forbidden or permitted meaning. They insinuate other routes into the functionalist and historical order of movement—"I fill this great empty space with a beautiful name." People are put in motion by the remaining relics of meaning, and sometimes by their waste products, the inverted remainders of great ambitions. Things that amount to nothing, or almost nothing, symbolize and orient walkers' steps: names that have ceased precisely to be proper" (De Certeau, 1999:132). The names, according to De Certeau, make the city a "suspended symbolic order" (De Certeau, 1999:132). De Certeau's analysis may well have something to say about how the renaming of spaces and streets functions in present-day Tehran.

The names and the body images of the religious authorities of Iran have featured socio-political spatial hierarchies in Tehran. As a result the city has come to lack what is theoretically an important aspect of a real Islamic city: its egalitarianism. The forms that produce segregation in Tehran are historically variable. In the nineteenth century, for example, lower class citizens' dwelling places were segregated from the elite groups or the royal family. Today, however, the major segregation in the city fabric is neither the segregation of social classes nor of ethnic groups; rather, it is the segregation of an individual from identity. Illustrated walls that contain the gigantic figures of the fundamentalist Muslim leaders place the society under the watchful eye of the masculine leaders. The aim of those who designed the patriarchal images was to have these murals,

posters, banners, and other representations function as objects of worship for the Iranian public, elevating these leaders to god-like status (fig. 24).

These images work similarly in modern-day Baghdad (1980-2003). Samir Alkhalil explains how “Saddam Hussein’s new Baghdad is not merely a run-of-the-mill Third World capital.... It is also a collective state of mind which has its gods...” (Alkhalil, 1991:32). The gods that Alkhalil calls into attention, however, remain obscure in his argument. In other words, he never points out how these gods as ideological artifacts may be understood by citizens in ways other than just political facts.



▲ Fig. 24 A giant mural of Ayatollah Khamenei, Tehran, Motahhari Ave. Photo by the author



## Body and Space

There is an immediate relationship between the body and its space, between the body's deployment and its occupation of space. Before producing effects in the material realm (tools and objects), before producing itself by drawing nourishment from that realm, and before reproducing itself by generating other bodies, ... body is space and has space: it produces itself in space and it also produces that space. (Lefebvre, 1974:170)(Fig.25)



▲ Fig. 25 'Behind the Masculine Walls'. Photo by the author & M. Gonzales

Regardless of their interrelations with issues of power, ideological artifacts in Tehran must be considered important in the production and social constitution of sexual orientations in the city—they masculinize the city. As Irigaray asserts, "In order to make it possible to think through and live [sexual] differences, we must reconsider the whole problematic of space and time. The transition to a new age requires a change in our perception and conception of space-time, the inhabiting of places and of containers, and envelopes of identity." (Irigaray, 1993:7)

As Irigaray mentions, in order to have a better understanding of gendered identity in Tehran, it is important to analyze how the body images function symbolically and what their role is in shaping the city as a gendered context. It is necessary to redefine the body



in space--a shift in thinking about gendered-bodies and public spaces in Tehran and in some other similar Islamic societies at large. In Rosi Braidotti's words, the body is an interface, a threshold, a field of intersecting material and symbolic forces (Braidotti: 1994: 169).

Indeed, one can make a clear analogy between corporeal beings and space, because both body and space are containers. Gottfried Wilhelm von Leibniz best defines this notion: "I must have a body; it's a moral necessity, a 'requirement.' And in the first place, I must have a body because an obscure object lives in me" (Leibniz, 1993: 85). From a feminist point of view, as Irigaray defines it, women's bodies also function as objects of support and as dwellings for masculine beings:

I was your house. And when you leave, abandoning this dwelling place, I do not know what to do with these walls of mine... Have I ever experienced a skin other than the one which you wanted me to dwell within? (Irigaray, 1992: 49)

Murals with represented bodies on them in many cities are significant components of their respective streets. They are parts of the observed street, important images that come into play along with architectural facades. (Fig.26 & 27 & 28)

On the one hand, the body itself is trapped in and influenced by space, and on the other hand it creates a site for the operations of power.<sup>17</sup> In a cultural framework as well as an architectural one, body and space are bound together in profound ways.

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<sup>17</sup> In order to interpret the situation within the framework of theories on body and space, it is also important to acknowledge Nietzsche. In contrast to theories about human existence-in-the-world that take shape mainly in the realm of the mind, such as those found in metaphysics, Nietzsche claims that the body is what compares and creates identity and that thought is its instrument. Nietzsche claims, "Body I am entirely and nothing else; and soul is only something about the body" (Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*: 34). On the other hand, according to Deleuze, "Clearly, there is nothing new about the formula of "having a body," but what is new is that analysis bears upon species, degrees, relations, and variables of possession in order to use it to fashion the content or the development of the notion of being." (Deleuze, 1993: 85)

Conceivably, there are ways in which we can understand the notion of embodiment in space and cities at large. Human interactions, in their very materiality and motility, embody the function of the city. The body, real or represented, is an important field on which the image of the city can take shape in people's minds.



▲ Fig 26 from left to right: Manhattan. Soho: Manhattan, Greenwich Village: Manhattan. Time Square. Photos by the author



▲ Fig 27 From left to right: Manhattan, 8<sup>th</sup> Ave.; Manhattan, Greenwich Village; Manhattan, Greenwich Village; Manhattan, Time Square; Los Angeles, Sunset; Manhattan, Greenwich Village; Tehran, Fatemi Square; Tehran, Kurdistan HWY, Photos by the author

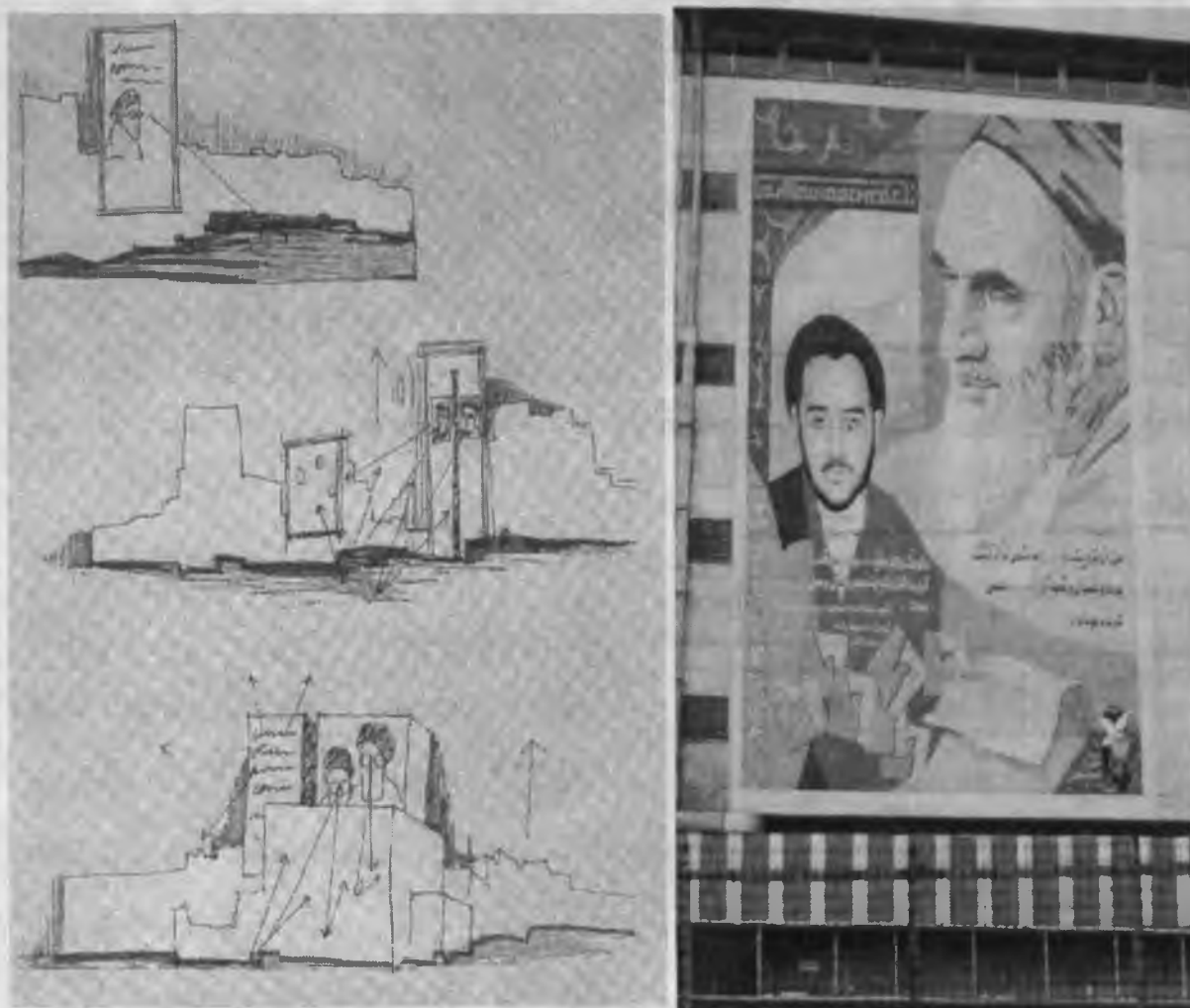


▲ Fig. 28 from left to right: Manhattan, Soho; Manhattan, Greenwich Village, Photos by the author

In Tehran the configuration of space and body is related to the way in which religious, political, and masculine power is mobilized. Thus, either the space is filled with the represented bodies that characterize the city visually and spatially and are brought into alignment through a masculine political power, or the bodies' existence enables a particular kind of power relation to be achieved by citizens.

The body images of the regime on buildings' facades are always of males, creating an overwhelming sense of paternal oversight of public identity. In this sense, male power in Tehran is perpetually at work, culturally shaping the city's subjects, using

representation as a tool for the formation of the identity of the sexed subject, of sexual differences. One of the complexities of this kind of environmental knowledge informing the street is the relation of the body to the power of the gaze. Viewers in Tehran find themselves in captivity to masculine faces. (Fig. 29 & 30)



▲ Fig 29 from left to right: Drawing by the author: Tehran, Mottahari Ave. Photos by the author



▲ Fig. 30 From left to right: Tehran, Kurdistan HWY.; Tehran, Ferdowsi Square; Tehran, Kurdistan, photos by the author.

These faces even decide how the perception of the viewer should be directed (Fig.22). Covered by the traditional Iranian clerical costume, the represented faces and bodies of the revolutionary leaders of Iran constitute a conspicuous public identity for these leaders. The Oxford English Dictionary traces the origin of the word “identity” to the Latin stem *idem*, meaning “*the same.*” Referring to the physical identity of the represented bodies on murals in Tehran, in the eyes of voyeurs, body image can be shaped as a condition of remaining the same person regardless of the various phases of different images of dissimilar individuals. Indeed, a specific public identity is posited by these images: elite, male, clerical. These faces and bodies define a singular identity not only for the group of those represented but for the architectural ensemble of the city as a whole. Since architecture is the first visual evidence of a city’s characteristic identity, these ideological images have an enormous impact on the ways people understand their

relationship to the city's spaces. Female citizens' psychological bearing is, for instance, influenced by these images of male figures.

According to Sigmund Freud, the ego is a bodily being and therefore can be directly associated with issues of sexuality and sexual differences (Freud, 1923:26). Relying on Freud, Jacques Lacan regards the ego as the significance of the body for the subject, and for others. Lacanian "mirror stage" theory, with its psychological counterparts, has been intimately linked to discussions of space found in the works of well-known cultural critics such as Henri Lefebvre. Lefebvre argues that a mirror is analogous to social space, with space acting like a mirror by doubling nature, by mediating different things, by containing and locating bodies, and by providing a position or place in society (Lefebvre, 1974:251). For both Lacan and Lefebvre, the mirror is the archetype for all bodily encounters. According to Lacan's theory of the mirror stage, by looking at our image in the mirror from very early childhood, we perceive ourselves in relation to the "other." *Meconnaissance*, or misrecognition, is Lacan's term for the notion of alienation and segregation of self from self. One could argue that the Iranian regime's gigantic facades are the mirrors for the citizens, wherein they identify their beings according to the body of the masculine "other."

Bodies contemplate one another with eye and gaze. One truly gets the impression that every shape in space, every spatial plane, constitutes a mirror and produces a mirage effect; that within each body the rest of the world is reflected....(Lefebvre, 1974: 184)

Tehran is controlled by the male gaze. A young male single citizen defines post-revolutionary Tehran in these words: "It is worse after the revolution, as there are more restrictions on personal freedom and it is as if you are always being watched. You always have to have a good excuse for what you do" (Madanipour, 1998: 153). In a certain

sense, it seems as if the regime's imagery has reduced all citizens to the kind of passivity stereotypically associated with the female gender.

Regardless of the technique (the male gaze, the gendering of the citizenry, the constitution of individuals in Tehran) women especially will be divided from themselves. They will find within themselves little correspondence to the masculinized content of the murals. In addition, female citizens remain masked behind the veil, demonstrating how outside and in public space. (Fig. 31)



▲ Fig. 31 "The Absent Body," Photo by the author & M. Gonzales

In the following discussion, I consider how female citizens relate to public space in Tehran. It is not my goal to provide an historical overview of how gendered Islamic settings came into being; rather, I am interested in looking from a feminist perspective at how issues of gender can be raised in connection with contemporary public spaces and social interactions in the city. My analysis borrows from the approaches adopted in various other disciplines, but makes particular reference to issues of space and embodiment in Tehran. My intention is not to look at the veil in its historical context, but



to step back from its historical and religious connotations and examine it as a secondary space for women's bodies. It is not a question of how the external world sees these wrapped bodies in the context of the city, but of how those living bodies see the world from behind the shell in which they are meant to reside.

Initially, Rosi Braidotti casts feminist theory as working to overcome a history of female disembodiment:

Feminist theory... expresses women's ... structural need to posit themselves as female subjects, that is to say, not as disembodied entities, but rather as corporeal and consequently sexed beings....I believe that the definition of the female subject starts with the revaluation of the bodily roots of subjectivity and the rejection of the traditional vision of the knowing subject as universal, neutral and consequently gender-free. This 'positional' or situated way of seeing the subject is based on the understanding that the most important location or situation is the rooting of the subject into the spatial frame of the body. (1994:161)

Veiled women in Iran can be understood as disembodied entities, naturalized within the spaces and the society of Tehran.



## **The Wrapped City and The Wrapped Bodies**

A Look at the 20<sup>th</sup> Century History of the Relations between Women's Body, Veil, and Public Space in Iran

In "Confessions in Public Space," Lynne Breslin argues that since the development of new institutions beginning in the late Enlightenment, the private/public spatial dichotomy in the west has broken down. As a result, public and private spaces in western and westernized cities alike have acquired similar spatial characteristics and have even become enmeshed into one. The hospital, school, and prison have been reconfigured to assume characteristics and functions of both the private and public realms. Public

codes of behavior and private impulses often conflict in the daily occupation of public spaces. In 1904, the New York City subway opened to a week of public celebration of this newest of civic amenities, but today, living and sleeping are common activities on subway trains and in stations. The dialectic of private and public allows people of the west to define themselves simultaneously as individuals, and as public citizens (Lynne Breslin, 1996: 264). Relying on Foucault, Gilles Deleuze derives sets of relationships between public and private space within the frame of traditional western disciplinary society and modern western society. In fact, Deleuze is interested in laying bare the features of contemporary western social structure by relating them to issues of public and private. This is how Deleuze describes post World War II western societies:

...since the Second World War we are no longer in disciplinary societies... We're in the midst of a general breakdown of all sites of confinement--prisons, hospitals, factories, schools, [and] the family. The family is an "interior" that's breaking down like all other interiors.... (Deleuze, 2002: 318)

In some contemporary Islamic cities, however, the division of public/private space is still perhaps one of the most important features of spatiality. Interestingly, the divisions between public and private spaces have often centered on the female body. In fact, although revealed only in the private domestic space, women's bodies have always been central to Iranian political discourse in the construction of public space. Soon after Reza Shah came to power at the beginning of the twentieth century, he embarked on his quest to give a modernized image to Iranian cities, ordering the removal of the most conspicuous sign of backwardness—the veil. In 1983 women were again obliged to re-veil, signaling the creation of a strong Islamic image for post-revolutionary Iranian cities. The use of the veil was not limited to the actual wrapped bodies of women, however.

Plastered over the facades of buildings, the words *hijab* or *mohajjabbe* (veiled woman), and the images of faceless veiled bodies of women can still be found today.

In Iran there are links between female corporeality, conceptions of private and public space, and government regulations. In post-revolutionary Iranian political thought, the ways in which the distinction between the public and the private spheres is drawn have served to confine women into typically female spheres of activity like housework and nurturance. In both public spaces and the private domain, women's bodily appearance is minimized. These issues have often been considered part of an ideal Islamic/moral life. Today, the gendered allocation of space has a sweeping relevance to issues of Islamic national identity, and the desire to limit women's space is not peculiar to post-revolutionary Iran. On the Arabian Peninsula, the birthplace of Islam and home to such countries as Saudi Arabia, the obligation to preserve traditional Islamic regulations such as veiling women in public and maintaining gendered space in architectural and urban design is as strict and serious as in post-revolutionary Iran.

Gendered zones are perhaps among the most important features of public and private spaces in Islamic cities. However, as Janet Abu-Lughod points out, it is important to bear in mind that the rules governing gendered spaces established more than just physically distinctive regions; they established visually distinctive or insulated regions. The object was not only to prevent physical contact but to protect visual privacy as well. Line-of-sight distance, rather than physical distance, was the object of urban design. Thus, Islamic law regulated the placement of windows, the heights of adjacent buildings and the mutual responsibilities of neighbors toward one another so as to guard visual privacy. According to Abu-Lughod, the visual features of spatial

settings in Islamic architecture are thus as important as these functional aspects (Abu-Lughod, 1987:167).

These visual features of spatial settings in Islamic architecture can be understood in two different ways when seen from a gender-based perspective: visual control and visual privacy. Indeed, visual control imposed by male power on female inhabitants creates visual privacy for women. In most Islamic cities, visual privacy can be regarded as women's empowerment within the framework of gendered spatial discourse. For example, according to Zeynep Çelik, in traditional houses in the Islamic city of Casbah, gender-based turfs prevented physical contact between men and women, and enabled visual privacy. The *mushrabiyyas* were decorated screens, and the asymmetrical arrangement of these entrance doors protected the interior of the home from the gaze of passersby.

Regardless of the family's income or the size of the building, the houses of the Casbah closed themselves to the street and turned onto a courtyard surrounded by elaborate arcades. The geographic and topographic conditions of Algiers added another element to the houses of the Casbah: rooftop terraces. In contrast to the internalized courtyards and relatively contrived rooms of the house, the terraces opened up to the neighbors, to the city, to the sea--to the world. The concern for privacy so dominant in defining the street facades, disintegrated at roof level. It was this alternative realm that the women of Algiers claimed for themselves--as a place of work, socialization and recreation; indeed a much more pleasant place than the restricted streets below. The Casbah thus became divided into two realms: on the top, occupying the expanse of the entire city, were the women; at the bottom were the narrow streets belonging to men. (Çelik, 1996: 130)

According to Çelik, visual aspects of traditional Islamic architecture can be understood as a double-sided phenomenon when seen from the point of view of gender empowerment. In fact, visual aspects of traditional Islamic architecture create zones of power for men in the public realm and produce realms of power for women in the private. In spite of the fact that women possessed zones of power in the interior, it is important to bear in mind that women's space is always marginalized space because

women are literally secluded from the social discourse. Women who gained power by virtue of possessing visual privacy in traditional houses were indeed merely passive spectators who could not participate in public interactions that they witnessed from behind the screens or on top of the roofs.

Glass screens in Iranian traditional Islamic houses either prohibited or modified vision, but in either case controlled it. In her book *Privacy and Publicity: Modern Architecture as Mass Media*, Beatriz Colomina devotes a section to Le Corbusier's description of what he calls "Arab Architecture." Colomina's intention is to describe Corbusier's experience in the architectural spaces of Arab cities. Like Abu-Lughod, yet with a slightly different perspective, Colomina highlights the visual aspects of these spaces, reinforced by the decorated glass screens, through the eyes of Corbusier:

It is a space that is not made of walls but of images--Images as walls. Or as Le Corbusier puts it, 'walls of light.' That is, the walls that define the space are no longer solid walls punctuated by small windows but have been dematerialized, thinned down with new building technologies and replaced by extended windows, lines of glass whose views now define the space. The walls that are not transparent now float in the space of the house rather than produce it.... The window is no longer a hole in the wall; it has taken over the wall. And if, as Rasmussen points out, 'the walls give the impression of being made out of papers,' the big window is a paper wall with a picture on it, a picture wall, a (movie) screen. (Colomina, 1994:6)

In the courtyards of Iran as well as those of most Arab countries of the Middle East, the tendency for privacy as well as the concern for the harsh natural light conditions in the desert resulted in the creation of colorful glass screens that came into play in place of walls. A sense of incompleteness fills the exterior envelopes of the courtyards. In a sense, the barriers in the inside of the house are fragile and only serve to protect the household from the visual intrusions of passersby, whereas the walls that divide the main interior of the house from the outside world are thick and invincible (Fig.28). These features without a doubt influenced Le Corbusier's design concepts;

however, Le Corbusier used flat transparent glass screens for his houses. As a result the so-called 'walls of light' were not used by Corbusier in their real Islamic functional context--that of visual control.

My purpose in investigating gendered space in contemporary Tehran is to depart from the standard oriental view of two mutually exclusive and hierarchically placed categories: the male public realm of the city and the female private realm of the home, the most pervasive gendered ideology in Islam. According to this framework, traditional courtyards in Islamic houses are, for example, seen as structures built to seclude women from the outside. Openings in the architectural envelope of the home are limited for similar reasons. Here is the French travel writer Lane Poole's description of an Egyptian house in the nineteenth century: "... Here is no sign of life; the doors are jealously closed, the windows shrouded....Women's apartments are carefully shut off from the court" (Poole, 1902:12-17). Most of these oriental views toward gendered space in Islamic settings are bound up with the male/female binary. However, the construction of this boundary is made more complex by the fact that architectural patterns were designed to create both visual and physical control.

In "Islamic City--Historic Myth, Islamic Essence, and Contemporary Relevance," Janet Abu-Lughod, the most persuasive contemporary critic of gendered settings in Islam, attempts to depart from such Orientalist perspectives. In attempting to "deconstruct thinking about the Islamic city," she maintains that Islam along with other features (such as central political power, social structure, class divisions, local traditions and environmental aspects of various Islamic countries) was an important factor of urban design:

To say that Islam was not the only cause of urban form is not to say that it was unimportant. On the contrary, it was a crucial contributing factor in shaping cities within its realms. It contributed in several important ways....By encouraging gender segregation, Islam created a set of architectural and spatial imperatives that had only a limited range of solutions... This structuring of space was different from what would have prevailed had freer mixing of males and females been the pattern. Many spatial divisions were a functional supplement to alternative patterns of person-marking which were also used but often not fully satisfactory.... (Abu-Lughod, 1987:163)

Abu-Lughod believes that this gendered model does, in fact, still exist in contemporary Muslim Arab-cities. She argues that the older binary pattern (male/female) of the city building has been maintained in many sections of "Arabo-Islamic" cities even today because it is still well adapted to the complex demands for visual privacy for women, in effect locking them in and turning them into passive spectators. She further opens up this argument by illustrating her own experience in public and private spaces in "Arab cities." She maintains "how easy it is to tell whether I am in public space or have blundered into semi-private space" (Abu-Lughod, 1987:169). Interestingly, she declares that she has often tried to identify the markers that indicate this:

A sudden narrowing of a path, particularly if that narrowing has been exaggerated by the implanting of low stone posts or even a pile of bricks, is a sign of the shift, especially when the road widens again soon afterwards. But even when the spatial semiotics is absent, the personal ones are present. There is the questioning look or the approach of someone wanting to help but clearly also wanting to know. (Abu-Lughod, 1987: 169)

Abu-Lughod's provocative investigation into what she calls "*Arabo-Islamic cities*" reminds us of the persistence of a gendered cultural tradition in Islamic cities. Nevertheless, Abu-Lughod fails to look at some important urban complexities in the Middle East that, despite their resistance to Islamic tradition, are the result of other local

effects,<sup>18</sup> such as the nationalist passion in Iraq and the Islamic revolution in Iran. Traditional aspects of Islamic culture (including Islamic architecture and urbanism) in these countries possess a decisive political stamp--they shift from their historical stage to those of exhibitionary tools caught up in the political and institutional frameworks.

Post-revolutionary Tehran, with its emphasis on the creation of new spaces adhering to a new visuality, bears a strong similarity to Abu-Lughod's representatives of the visual features of an Islamic city. For this reason it's an important setting within which to investigate issues of gender and space in the Middle East from a contemporary feminist perspective.

At the beginning of the Islamic revolution in Iran, traditional aspects of Islamic culture came into play as weapons for Islam's emancipation, but as a medium of propaganda independent of authentic traditional and religious contexts. For example, the image of the veiled women in Iran was abused for political purposes.

Women's bodies have always been central in post-revolutionary political discourse. Considered sometimes as a flag and badge of national pride, and other times as an emblem of shame and humiliation, a woman's public appearance has had a strong impact on the individual and collective consciousness of Iranians. Attempts to restore as well as sweep aside old orders or to establish or annul new ones have often revolved around the female body. (Milani, 2001:9)

One of the ways in which gender is manifested in spatial planning in Tehran is through the gendering of the streets. Public spaces and streets in Tehran make visible the urban life through what Abu-Lughod terms the "mechanism of visual control" in Islamic cities. In Islamic cities visual control emerges in different ways, including the assertion of boundaries. Islamic architecture creates spaces that are highly articulated in terms of form and function. In the religious architecture of the mosques, the concept of the "sacred"

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<sup>18</sup> By this I want to emphasize some internal factors which are not necessarily the result of "Western" external influences on Islamic cities that have been well formulated in Abu-Lughod's conclusion in the above mentioned article.



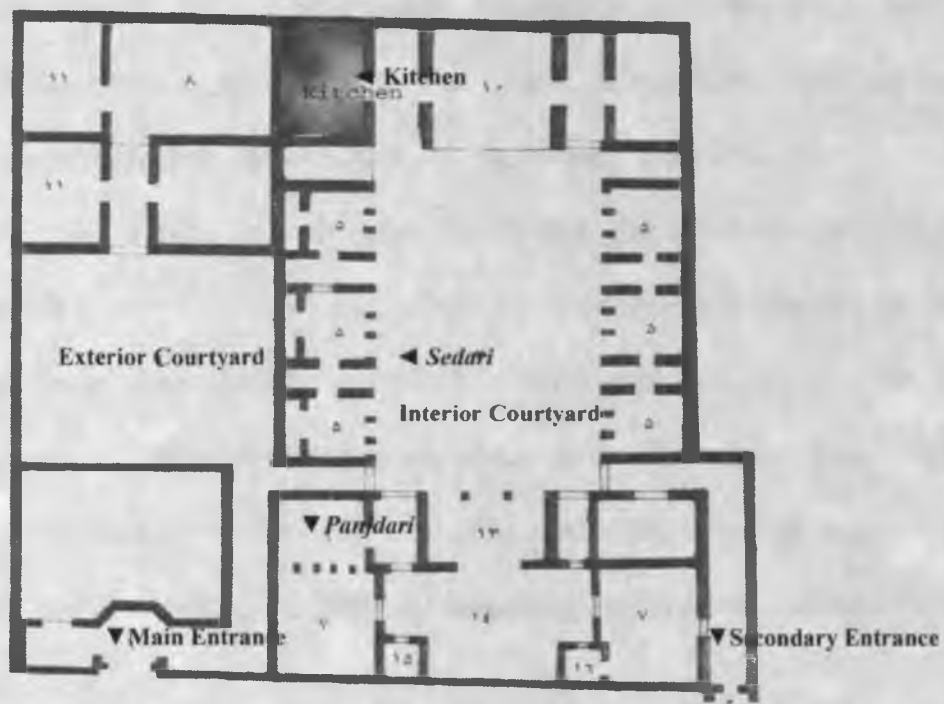
maps a large terrain bounded by the profane. Boundaries also define strongly opposed gendered spaces. According to Abu-Lughod, "What Islam required was some way of dividing functions and places on the basis of gender and then of creating a visual screen between them." (Abu-Lughod, 1987: 163)

In his investigation into the meaning of *khattah* (an Arabic/Persian term used for a place demarcated by a wall) and the territorial structure of early Muslim towns, Jamel Akbar brings in extensive ethnographic knowledge about the meaning of place and boundary from Islamic scholarly works dealing with various time periods. Relying on these erudite works, derived mostly from sources in philosophy, Arabic linguistics, and historical accounts of builders or building sponsors in Arab-Muslim Middle Eastern societies, Akbar discusses *Khattah (verb)* as "marking out a land that has not been settled before." He further explains that in early Islamic times "this act almost always preceded the actual building" (Akbar, 1989: page 23-24). In an ethical context then, the boundary marks a strong sense of privacy and a delineation of property claim on the part of the Muslims. For example, the kitchen as women's working place was not publicly accessible in traditional Iranian houses; thus a woman became a part of a man's private property and inaccessible to others. (Fig.28) Boundaries, in their various forms, from thick walls to colorful delicate glass shutters, created distinctly separate realms that often responded to gender differentiations.

The Prophet Mohammad said, "The house is a sacred area" (Campo, 1991:37). Boundaries emphasize the intermixing of the sexes and create particular patterns of "private," "semi-private" and "public spaces" within the house. To define this schematically, in the traditional Islamic houses of Iran, there was a distinct and obvious

border between spaces and rooms that belonged to men and those that belonged to women. The geographic and topographic conditions of most arid lands of Iran added another element to the houses: the courtyards. The general plan of the houses was an open rectangular courtyard, with rooms around two or four sides. (Fig. 32)

The tall surrounding walls of the courtyard usually provided privacy for the residents. Houses were closed off from the street and turned inward onto a courtyard. The concern for privacy dictated the street facades—all blank, all with the same color and height, and mostly without decoration. It created a sense of mystery and evoked curiosity in the passersby.. Once again, the “mechanism of visual control.” comes into play to protect the house not only from the direct line of vision but even from the imagination of strangers.



▲ Fig. 32 A traditional Islamic house in Iran, Yazd. (Pirnia, 1993:182)

The exterior was blank—the absence of windows, openings, eye-catching code or visual cues discouraged the imagination from extending beyond the boundary or intruding into the interior.

Inside the traditional house, the exterior walls of the rooms reflected the semiotics of sexual segregation: glass shutters--*sedari* and *panjdari* (Fig. 32)—whose densely colorful decorated screens functioned as the literal boundaries which protected the interior of the room from the gaze of *namahram* (strange man). Sexual segregation sometimes came into play in a very obvious manner. The main door of the house, for example, had two different doorknobs--one for women and the other for men (each made a different noise)—so that the residents of the house could tell whether a woman or a man was entering the house.

Public spaces in traditional Iranian cities belonged to men. In the past, most women spent the majority of their lives within their homes and courtyards, and went out only for serious and approved reasons. Outside the home, social life generally was limited to the activities of men. Separate, gender-based turfs prevented physical contact between men and women, and enabled visual privacy. Women were only allowed limited access to public spaces. The mosque was mainly a male dominated space; however, women were permitted to attend the mosque and to say prayers in marginal spaces such as the narrow balconies of the upper floors, and other spaces that were kept apart from the main halls by curtains<sup>19</sup> (Fig. 32). Male and female spheres were thus differentiated physically and visually.

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<sup>19</sup> In his book *Deconstructing the American Mosque* Akel Ismail Kahera argues that the division of space in Islamic mosques in Egypt has always been biased against women. He quotes from the jurist of al-Azhar, Mahmoud Shaltout, who comments on issues of gender in the mosques: "There is no special Jum'ah [Friday congregational worship] for Muslim women.... The consensus of opinion of all the Muslims past

In contemporary Iranian spatial settings, the concept of gendered space still exists, although not in its traditional form. For example, the planning principles of contemporary Iranian houses reveal an order determined by Western architecture. This borrowed architectural order testifies to the struggle of the Iranian nation to define a contemporary model for their living spaces. The conception of gendered spatial differentiation that traditionally employed boundaries and walls has, in fact, turned into unidentified gendered spatial zones both in the residential space and various public places. Women usually reside at the margins of the overall space of the modern houses. For example, they rarely occupy the center of the living room when other men are in the house. Similarly, in public places women occupy the marginal zones. They choose the corner of the sidewalks or a blank spot in public parks, restaurants, and coffee shops. In mosques the women's section typically occupies a corner; the space is unevenly divided (the larger section belongs to men regardless of the number of men and women who are present in the mosque), usually by a curtain (Fig.33). Women are not even allowed access to some public places such as sports stadiums. According to the ideologies of the Islamic government of Iran, mobility and activity are against women's nature.

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and present is that there should be no special prayer for women. But they can pray- if they wish to attend the *Jum'ah* – with men in one *jamaat* [congregation] behind the same imam with the same *khutbah*[sermon]in the same place, but they should line up behind the men.” (Kahera, 2002: 120)



▲ Fig 33 Traditional Mosque in Iran. Isfahan (Pirnia, 1993: 80), Men's space vs. Women's Space in Contemporary Iranian Mosques. Shirin Neshat (Neshat, 2001: 38)

In contemporary Tehran, the sense of boundary is as strong as in its traditional settings. Yet we find a somewhat new mode: the “masculine”—the “sacred” him-self—is denoted by the presence of the boundary (that formerly only kept two contradictory spaces apart from one another) and also by the specific treatment of the boundary’s surface as communicative medium. Therefore the masculine comes into play as a “mediator element” that interrupts the merging of the public and the private space. The walls of Tehran are made over into the simulacrum of the “sacred” masculine bodies, while real bodies (especially female bodies) in their turn are transformed into something distinctively alien. (Fig.34)

▼ Fig.34: "The Absent Body." Photo by the author & M. Gonzales



*As commodities, women are thus two things at once: utilitarian objects and bearers of value.  
(Luce Irigaray, 1985: 175)*



## **The Wrapped Body: An Intervening Image**

The Image of Women and Urban Space in Tehran

In contemporary Iranian fine arts, cinema, and literature, women's wrapped bodies are symbolically used for the purpose of making a political statement about women's repression in all aspects of life. Shirin Neshat's conceptual artworks make a deliberate assertion about the control of female veiled bodies in Iranian cities. Shirin Neshat left Iran in 1974. When she returned in 1990, she was shocked by the frightening changes, by the enormous difference between what she remembered from Iran before the revolution and what she was witnessing sixteen years later. Later she recreated her understanding of women's bodies in post-revolutionary political discourse. Here is how she describes it: "As I became increasingly involved with Islamic topics, it seemed only appropriate to explore space and architecture from the ideological point of view. I came upon interesting parallels concerning the way in which the female body and space are defined, controlled, and coded." (Neshat, 2001:62) (Fig. 35)



◀ Fig.35. Shirin Neshat. "Rapture. production Still." 1999

In fact, the image of women's bodies has always been central to the construction of public space in Iranian political discourse. Soon after Reza Shah came to power at the beginning of the twentieth century, he embarked on his quest to modernize Iranian cities, ordering that the streets be rid of the most conspicuous sign of backwardness—the veil. After five years of forced unveiling (1936-1941), Reza Shah of Iran was ousted by the Allied forces, and clerics cried for the return of the veil. (Shirazi, 2001: 91)

The process of unveiling women, however, continued later during the reign of Mohammed Reza Shah Pahlavi. In 1963, strongly encouraged by his American advisors, the Shah agreed to reforms. These reforms, which took place under a movement called the “White Revolution,” included women's enfranchisement. The modernization efforts of the Shah led to a visible schism among Iranian women: unveiled, educated women living in towns tended to belong to the “Westernized” upper and middle classes; veiled women living in towns were educated at home, often by tutors; and veiled women living in rural areas were mostly illiterate. It was the unveiled “Westernized” Iranian woman who became a scapegoat for the demagogues of the Islamic Republic of Iran. (Shirazi, 2001:91)

In 1979, regardless of social class and family background, women were eager to be veiled, even if it meant supporting the clergy which historically opposed legislation giving women more rights. The Islamic Republic of Iran quickly squashed women's hopes and ambitions for improving their lives. It introduced many new rules and regulations concerning all aspects of women's lives. Now there were rules about which kinds of jobs women could hold and which subjects they could study.



Now a woman had to ask her husband's permission if she wanted to work. Women were aggressively encouraged to have large families; female sexual abstinence was declared a sufficient reason for divorce. And women were now persuaded, often by force, to veil. Women who appeared unveiled in public were assumed to be opposed to the tenets of the Islamic revolution and thus were suspect not only religiously but also politically (Shirazi, 2001: 92). Women were obligatorily re-veiled in 1983:

In 1983, an announcement was added to the [new Iranian] constitution stating that women who harm public chastity by appearing in public without the religiously sanctioned veil are subject to receiving up to 74 lashes. In 1986, another amendment was added stating that those in public view whose dress and makeup are in violation of religious law and those who cause the spread of corruption or violate public chastity will be arrested, given priority when tried in the proper court, and accordingly sentenced to one of the punishments listed in the addendum. (Shirazi, 2001: 93)

Outside of Iran, images of the veiled woman have been used in Middle Eastern/Islamic countries and Western societies alike in order to hawk commercial products. These images are credited with a kind of oriental eroticism, which has become iconic in the eyes of Westerners. In Iran, however, the imposition of the veil since the Islamic Revolution has not entailed erotic meanings, nor was the veil intended to capture the male gaze, as some stereotypical interpretations would have us believe. As Milani puts it, the *socio-cultural* implications of the veil in post-revolutionary Iran went beyond its traditional significance (Milani, 1992:38). With its strong symbolic connotations, the veil became, among other things, a revolutionary emblem. It attained a level of political and nationalistic expression not previously achieved or even envisioned in Iran. (Milani, 1992: 154)

Wrapped in the veil, Iranian women simultaneously reside in both public and private spaces. In fact, women's wrapped bodies have been abused in order to create a new

image for the public environments of the city. These wrapped bodies Islamicize the city along with the walls that are wrapped in and bounded by the body images of the Ayatollahs.

The conventional equation: veiled/silent/absent proved to be no longer operative. Some veiled women are both publicly articulate and visible. In this shifting meaning of the veil, women are neither eliminated from communal life nor relegated to the domain of the private. They are voiced and ever so present in the public scene. The veil has thus developed new connotations quite different from the traditional notions. It is argued, for instance, that the veil frees the country of alien ideologies and establishes women's independence from western domination or styles. Moreover, those who support the veil use every occasion to justify and glorify its use not only in religious or nationalistic terms but also in terms of interests serving women's own welfare. (Milani, 1992: 38)

The concept of the veil in Iran thus departs from that in other Islamic countries. In other Islamic countries, women are mostly separated from the public space, and the veil signifies women's responsibility for maintaining family honor and ensures that they do not dishonor their families. The veil limits women's mobility, places restrictions on behavior and activities, and permits women only limited contact with the opposite sex.

According to Ayatollah Ali Shariati “[By means of *Hijab*], Iranian woman ‘actualizes’ herself as a believer who negates Western Values” (Shirazi, 2001:93). In her book, *The Veil Unveiled*, Faeghe Shirazi provides extensive information about the impact of the veil on East-West material cultural products. She devotes a chapter to cultural products such as postage stamps, posters, and films in post-revolutionary Iran which depict veiled women as strong support for the basis of the revolution. Shirazi argues that “the moral defense of the Islamic republic seems to rest painfully on the shoulders of the properly veiled woman. She has become Iran's cultural bulwark against the cultural assault of Western nations” (Shirazi, 2001: 108). In other words, covered bodies of women came into play as ideological symbols to support the goals of the revolution. These images in public spaces have been a strong tool for preserving the Islamic regime's power since the

early years of the revolution. The image of veiled women protesting in mass demonstrations is one example among many that reinforces how images of the wrapped bodies of women are mobilized in order to create a new identity for the city (Fig.36 & 37 & 38). Irigaray best explains that “as commodities, women are thus two things at once: utilitarian objects and bearers of value.” (Luce Irigaray, 1998)



▲ Fig 36 Women's body: a socio-political artifact in creating a new identity for the city (Chelkowski & Dabashi, 2000: 36)

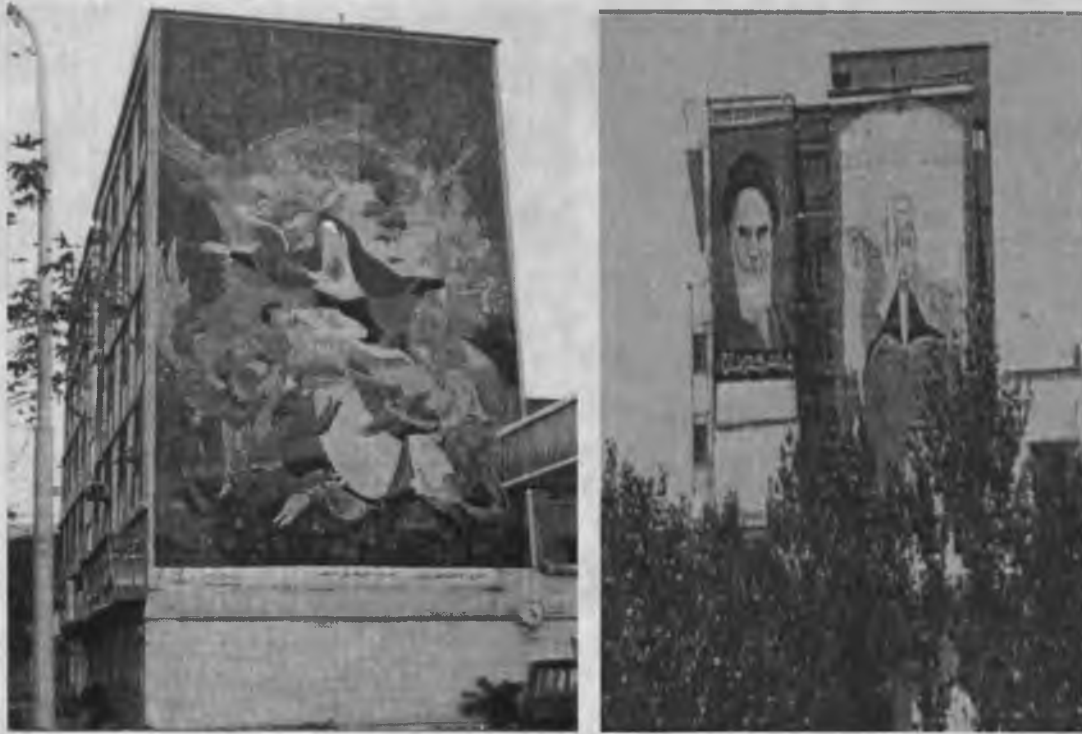


▲ Fig 37 from top to bottom: Creating a new image for Tehran, photomontage by the author: Women's body: a socio-political artifact in creating a new identity for the city, [www.BBC.com](http://www.BBC.com).



▲ Fig. 38 Women's body: a socio-political artifact in creating a new identity for the city ([www.Tehran24.com](http://www.Tehran24.com))

The veil was not limited to the actual wrapped bodies of women. Images of a faceless veiled body of a woman are often used in the slogans plastered all over the white-washed walls of the houses, office buildings, institutional centers, and factories in Iran. (Fig. 39)



▲ Fig 39 from left to right: Representation of faceless and veiled bodies of women on the walls of the city in Tehran, photo by the author; Representation of women on the walls of the city in Tehran, (Chelkowski & Dabashi, 2000: 162)

Recently, even a few illustrated veiled portraits of female actresses on the billboards are most often covered by the government (Fig. 40). Badjens.com, the Iranian feminist newsletter, asserts:

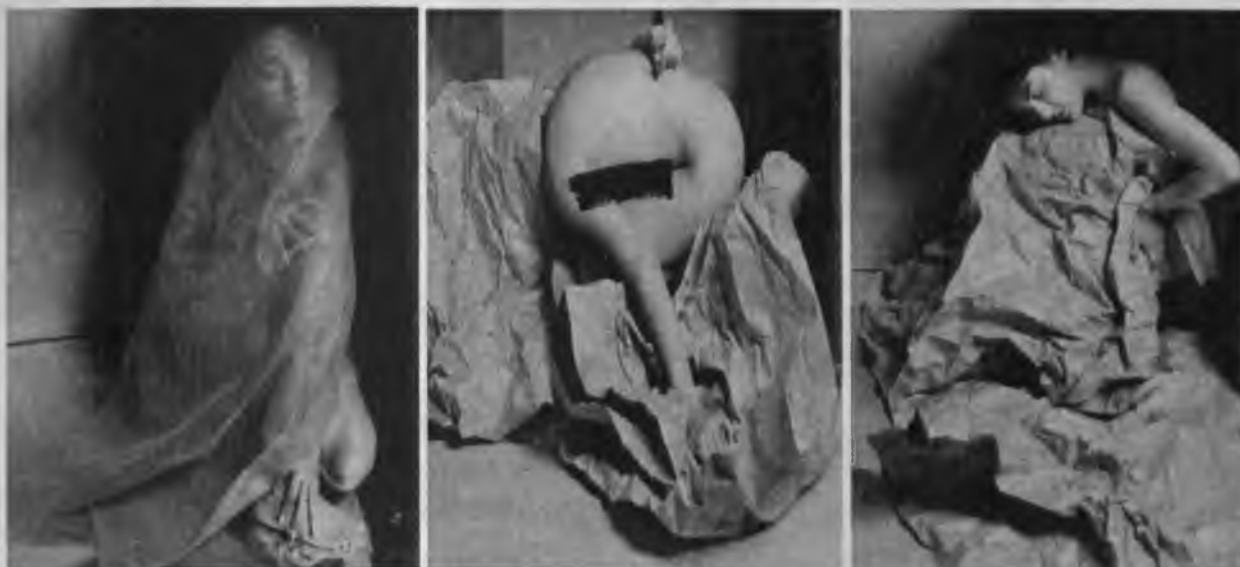
In commemoration of Imam Ali's martyrdom, the nineteenth day of the month of Ramadan began five days of mourning for Shi'a Muslims. On the first day of mourning, Tehran residents woke up to black cloths hanging over several movie billboards. This year was different in that only the women's faces were concealed. In past years, the entire billboards were covered. For a naked glimpse, see *The Towering Wall behind Youth* in this edition. (www.Badjens.com, 2003)



▲ Fig 40 from top to bottom: In commemoration of Imam Ali's martyrdom, on the first day of mourning, Tehran residents woke up to black cloths hanging over women's faces (www.Badjens.com. 2003)

Women who do not appreciate the veil are subject to ideological criticism. Val Moghadam writes that “On the walls of Tehran and other major cities, always covered

with inscriptions of one type or another, the following admonition can be seen: 'Do the women who oppose *hijab* not feel ashamed before the corpses of the martyrs of Karbala'?' (Moghadam, 1988:225)



▲ Fig. 41 "The Wrapped Bodies." Photo by the author & M. Gonzales



### ***Chador, The Portable Habitat:*** Women's Veiled Body and Public Space in Tehran

It is interesting that the term ethics is derived from the Greek word *ethos*, meaning dwelling, or habitat. Dwelling is both a noun (a place to which one returns) and a verb (the practice of dwelling); my dwelling is both my habitat and my habitual way of life. My habitual way of life, ethos or set of habits determines my character (my specificity or what is probably my own). These habits are not given: they are constituted through the repetition of bodily acts the character of which is governed by the habit I occupy. From this understanding of ethos, ethics can be defined as the study and practice of that which constitutes one's habitat, or as the problematic of the constitution of one's embodied place in the world. (Diprose, 1994:19)



The above quotation suggests that an understanding of ethics centers on a constitutive relation between one's habitat and one's embodied nature. This notion identifies the body as the locus of one's ethos--where the body is constituted by a relation to its habitat.

The challenging task of defining the meaning of the "veil" in its historical, religious, and traditional context requires something more than seeing the veil as an entity that can straightforwardly be understood as a secondary space for women's bodies in public. This way of understanding the bodies of women in relation to their habitat is based on how women remain in the private space where they are meant to dwell—the veil—but it ignores how women's wrapped bodies can be seen from the outside within the context of the city. We can find specific evidence of the interrelations of women's bodies and space in post-revolutionary Tehran by looking at the first feminist-conscious enunciations that carefully and cautiously appeared in media—literature, cinema and conceptual art in the post-revolutionary period.

Only a few examples speak to the interrelations of women's body and space. As Farzaneh Milani puts it, "veiling not only curtailed women's bodily expression but also inhibited their verbal self expression" (Milani, 1992: 6). There can be a lot of pressure on women to omit details in order to disguise truths about themselves they do not want to face up to or speak out loud. Women have been drilled in the rules of moral/ Islamic discourse, thus internalizing censorship from the outside into a kind of self-censorship from within. Talking openly about certain matters--"telling the truth about their own experience as a body," as Virginia Woolf put it—"is not nice" (Maris, 1989: xi). The

proscriptions placed on Iranian women's speech foster feelings of shame that lead women to trivialize their own experiences and prevent them from discovering the depth of their lives. Given the religious and social constraints on women's self-expression in public, exceptionally few women have been able to break the silence.

Writing with its potential for public communication, for entering into the world of others, could be considered no less a transgression than unveiling. In both, a woman expresses/ exposes herself publicly. Through both, an absence becomes a presence. Both are means of expression and communication: one gives her voice a body; the other gives her body a voice. (Milani, 1992: 6)

Shahrnouch Parsipour's<sup>20</sup> literary works are among the few feminist-conscious writings that appeared inside Iran in response to limitations imposed on women by the state ideology (Talattof, 1998: XV). Parsipour looks at the interrelation of body and space from the inside. Perhaps she attempts to follow her own feelings to express a psychological condition that can be applied to most Iranian women. In fact Parsipour searches for a better correlation between space and women's corporeal existence. In her stories she describes in detail the physical aspects of women's bodies, such as their virginity, their hair, their hands, and head. More importantly, she relates these physical aspects of the body to conceptions of spatiality. A garden serves as the formal space of departure for almost all of her characters in the narrative of *Women Without Men*; it's a place where women acquire their destiny and it also represents the sexuality of their bodies.

The garden becomes the ultimate destination, a sort of utopia and a place of congregation for these women, who are disenfranchised from society. In the garden, the presence of a man is minimal, and a woman may live independently or choose to become whatever she wants--even a tree. She may turn into smoke to ascend into the skies. She may decide to remain on earth to pursue a "normal" life. The garden promises hope, freedom, and mobility. (Talattof, 1998: XIV)

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<sup>20</sup> The prominent novelist Parsipour was imprisoned in Iran because of her novel *Women without Men*, in which she refers to menstruation and virginity. She now lives in exile.

In post-revolutionary prose by Iranian women, we also find a desire to eliminate masculine corporeal being on behalf of the female characters. In the garden of *Women Without Men*, men have a minimal presence. On one occasion the male body gets fragmented in the thought of a female character known as Zarrincolah, a vivacious young prostitute who has worked in a brothel since childhood. One Sunday morning when the women are obliged to serve customers who have an early morning urge, she sees a man enter as usual, but he is without a head. The headless customer does his business and leaves. From that day on she finds all the customers headless. She vainly tries to overcome the resulting fear by singing at night, and eventually comes to the conclusion that she has to leave the house. Zarrincolah ends up in a garden (Talattof, 1998: XIV). The decapitated male body gives birth to the refuge of the garden, in which the presence of a man is supposedly minimal. The absence of one results in the presence of another, or in Henri Bergson's words: "The presence of the one may be said to consist in the absence of the other." (Henri Bergson, 1911:298)

The absence of the head suggests more gradually the absence of outside authorities. Going back to the dominant image in the propagandist murals, one can draw a link between the dominant image of the head and government regulations. Most of figures depicted in the political propaganda are portrayed from neck up. The head demands and constitutes certain laws; the head becomes an icon for transferring a preaching language to people. Furthermore, the masculinity of the head mostly represses women's power as well as women's sexuality.

In *Tuba and the Meaning of the Night*, Parsipour tells us the story of a woman who comes to the conclusion that "women have suffered throughout history mainly

because they live in a world that does not belong to them, a world where they do not even have a chance to enjoy nature” (Talattof, 1998, IX). What is regarded as nature can also be considered “the outside”—somewhere far away from home and the restrictions of the interior with its boundaries, and even far from the city (which is a sphere of male dominance). The outside, however, always remains a desire in the minds of the characters. Female characters in Parsipour's stories almost always search for a “garden”; however, when they reach the “garden,”<sup>21</sup> their lives seem no longer a reality. “The realities of male-dominated society still disturb the garden experience as the women travel to it.” (Talattof, 1998: XV)

The gardens that Parsipour describes are all located in Karaj, a small town near Tehran, which is well-known for its pre-revolutionary brothels and therefore symbolizes a place of freedom from sexual bounds and social restrictions. The garden is a place far from town “where women would not have any freedom of movement.” (Friedl, 2001: 116)

Wrapped by an artificial skin (veil), the women of Tehran literally do not relate to the outside, because, as Beatriz Colomina states, “To be outside is to be in the image, to be seen, whether in the press photograph, a magazine, a movie, on television, or at your window” (Colomina, 1994:7).

Sex-segregation has influenced the public lives of Iranian women for several centuries, but it was only in the mid-nineteenth century that women began to appear more and more in public places. Slow at first, and prompted by forces of modernity, desegregation gained momentum in the 1940s and 50s. However, as women began to

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<sup>21</sup> The gardens, *Pardis*, built by emperors in *Achaemenian* Iran gave rise to the modern English word “paradise”. Iranian architecture strongly emphasizes a deep passion for gardens and fountains.

leave the cloisters of their homes and reshape those territories previously dominated by men, anxiety over the breakdown of the moral fabric of society increased. The anxiety reached its apogee after the Islamic revolution of 1979, which reasserted male control over public space (Milani, 2001:8). Since then, "Sex-segregation does not only veil a women's voice, it also marks off the public arena as a masculine territory." (Milani, 2001: 9)

In the summer of 2001, forty-seven Iranian women registered themselves as candidates for the presidential elections; none of them were allowed to run. *Mrs. President*, a documentary by Shahla Haeri, presents the thoughts and views of some of these women, who discuss their efforts to change both governmental and popular opinion regarding the role of women in Iranian politics and society.

One of the candidates—a strict Muslim high school principal—expresses her feelings toward the veil or what she calls "the black *Chador*": "I disagree with the idea that women should only wear black chador and remain a housewife for their entire life. I am opposed to my own black chador too. I've been forced to wear this since the age of three and I am used to it ....But black veil was truly the invention of the *Safavid* Shiite in Iran." (Shahla Haeri, 2001)

In the end the principal concludes that women can be both veiled and active politically. However, she expressly states the negative feelings she has toward her "black chador." Instead of coming up with a convincing solution, she simply changes the theme of her argument by bringing in historical surveys about faults of the *Safavids* in the creation of the black *chador* for women. In effect, the principal tries to rescue herself from any critical debates over her opinions. All the other presidential candidates, mostly

from the strict Muslim population of Iran, also raise issues related to the veil. Yet they are not capable of clarifying the problem. They simply change the theme of their argument when they find themselves unable to elaborate on their feelings about Iranian women's veils. In the process, they may suppress the psychological suffering of many years. Here most poignantly we see the internalizing apparatus of self-censorship that has for so long impacted Iranian society.



### Urban Space and Phobia

*The soul has moments of escape,  
when bursting all the doors,  
She dances like a bomb,  
aboard,  
and swings upon the hours*

*Doom is the house without a door,  
'Tis entered from the sun, and then the ladder's thrown away,  
because escape is done. (Dickinson, in *The House without a Door*, 1989:114)*



◀Fig. 42 "The Outside-Phobia." Photo by the author & M. Gonzales

As Farzaneh Milani subtly describes, a survey of the history of urban design in twentieth century Iran reveals that women's bodies have always been central to Iranian political discourse on the reconstruction of public space. Soon after

Reza Shah ousted the Qajar dynasty in the beginning of the twentieth century, he embarked on his quest to modernize Iran by adapting western styles in various cultural

domains such as architecture, urbanism and men's and women's clothing. His reign marked the beginning of a period of socioeconomic reform and the secularization of Muslim culture. When Reza Shah returned from a visit to Turkey, where Kemal Atatürk had started to implement secular reforms, including unveiling, he called his cabinet members and told them: "We must change our image and tradition to that of the West. The first step is to change men's traditional hats to chapeaux. Then the unveiling process must take place..." (Shirazi, 2001: 89). When the anti-veil offensive was finally launched, police were instructed to forcibly remove women's veils in the streets. They were ordered to rid the streets of this most conspicuous sign of backwardness (Shirazi, 2001:90). Many women from traditional families, afraid of being attacked by Reza Shah's police, refused to appear in the streets and other public places. "Women wearing the chador were not allowed in theatres or public baths, and taxi and bus drivers were liable to fines if they accepted veiled women" (Milani, 1992: 34). "This forced unveiling inflicted pain and terror upon those women who were not willing or ready to unveil. Incapable of leaving home unveiled, in cases of emergency...they made their sons, husbands, or brothers carry them on their shoulders hidden in sacks" (Milani, 1992: 35).

Women's desperate desire to cover every part of their bodies in public is something that might be taken into consideration within the framework of gendered space. Why was it so important for them to wrap their entire bodies in public? What psychological, social, and cultural forces provoked those women to resist the anti-veiling process? Stories of women who remained in their houses for several years are passed down to succeeding generations by mothers and grandmothers who either

experienced the phenomenon themselves or knew others who had. These stories have even become part of Iranian women's collective memory. Apparently, resistance to the unveiling process has always simply been attributed to faithfulness to Islam on the part of "good Iranian Muslim women" and faithfulness to their moral responsibility. The veil was a source of respect, virtue, protection and pride.

However, a deeper analysis of the issue reveals that the desire to remain veiled could be related to fear of open space or agoraphobia. The appearance of this phobia on the part of women during this period has not been given the scholarly attention it deserves in work on Iranian society. As established by Esther Da Costa Meyer's studies on the appearance of agoraphobia among nineteenth century bourgeois European women, the transition from a state of total dependence on men—domestic life—to one of expected independence—public life—precipitates a crisis, which may result in agoraphobia. However, such a transition is only one factor in the possible emergence of agoraphobia (or what I call outside phobia) among Iranian women. There are several other factors that may also have contributed to the phobia.

In her article on agoraphobia, women, and public space, Esther Da Costa Meyer provides extensive information about major studies in the field, underscoring the interrelations between agoraphobia, sexuality and architecture in nineteenth century Europe (Da Costa Meyer, 1996: 147). She argues that Freud successfully isolated the main components of the symptomatology of agoraphobia, which is mainly the underlying sexual symbolism" (Da Costa Meyer, 1996: 147). Freud maintains that agoraphobia threatens mostly women. However, true to form, Freud was only successful in defining agoraphobia and its sexual connotations within the framework of



the oedipal triangle based on the case study of a young boy. Furthermore, conceptions of agoraphobia for both Freud and Da Costa Meyer are derived from the nineteenth century bourgeois experience, removed from the realities of Islamic society. Nevertheless, European and Islamic societies share some conceptions in regard to issues of spatiality and the dichotomy of inside and outside. From a psychological point of view, agoraphobia is marked by a fear of being alone, or of being in public places from which escape might be difficult or help not available in case of sudden incapacitation. Issues of embodiment in space are thus other factors that should be taken into consideration, for they transcend social context. Normal activities are increasingly restricted, as fears or avoidance behavior dominate an individual's life (Mairs, 1989, 30). Agoraphobes most commonly avoid crowds, such as busy streets or crowded stores, tunnels, bridges, elevators, and public transportation. "Often agoraphobes insist that family members or friends accompany them whenever they leave home." (Mairs, 1989, 32)

In contemporary Tehran, agoraphobia must, I think, be related to power. The translocation of boundary from an architectural object to the image of a masculine political figure has had great impact on the ways in which women relate to public space and has led to a drastic change from home to the outside. In Islamic public spaces, the veil can, in fact, protect women's bodies from the outside. Physically it is the site of others; psychologically it is the site of fears.

Interestingly, there are some connections between conceptions of spatiality and the veil in Iranian cultural contexts. The term *chador* in Persian means tent and indeed the veil functions as a portable habitat, reduced in size to the bulk of a woman's body.

*Chador* [veil] is perhaps one of the most symbolically significant structures of a complex cultural heritage that expresses, among other things, Iran's prevailing attitude toward the self and the other. It indicates ways in which people relate to or interact with each other and, ultimately, with themselves. It is a ritualistic expression of culturally defined boundaries. Like walls that enclose houses and separate inner and outer space, the veil makes a clear statement about the disjunction between the private and the public. (Milani, 1992: 23)

Agoraphobia in the Islamic city of Tehran is a result of the Islamic republic's identification of femininity with immobility—the main element in the fabricated ideal of the “perfect woman.”<sup>22</sup> Here a young female university student in Tehran expresses her feelings about the city: “At high school my movements were very limited and I didn't know much of the city. Now I have to move around on my own and it is both exciting and a bit scary” (Madanipour, 1998: 155).

The fear of the outside might also be related to society's tendency to keep women in the house. A young girl in Tehran said, “I have not seen my married sister in ten months because her in-laws won't let her out of the house” (Friedl, 2001: 119). In her article *The Thorny Side of Marriage in Iran*, Erika Friedl argues that women who are out alone are routinely harassed: “A thirty-year-old single woman in Tehran said, ‘I leave for work in the morning only after my downstairs neighbor has left because if he hears me on the stairs he opens his door and make advances at me’” (Friedl, 2001: 118). Another young lady who lives in a small town says “I don't go out at all anymore, only to school,

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<sup>22</sup> For example according to Ayatollah Mahdi Hadavi Tehrani: “Women's primary duties are in the private sphere of the family and that modesty demands that they be covered while in public.” (“A profile of a Modern Ayatollah,” [www.pbs.org](http://www.pbs.org))

for fear that a dirty-minded guy will tell his mother about me and she will come here as a matchmaker” (Friedl, 2001: 114). The outside is therefore associated with male supremacy, sexual harassment, and social control. In her movie, *The Apple*, Samira Makhmalbaf illustrates the devastating fear of the outside on the part of two young girls. In one scene a social worker says “The problem is that they are girls. If they were boys they could have played outside. They could even climb people’s walls...” (Dabashi, 2001: 271). *The Apple* turns the real-life story of the protective incarceration of two young sisters by their father into an allegory of deliverance and redemption. It can, however, be understood as a story of the repression of women’s desire to be on the outside in Iran or elsewhere in Islamic societies. The most perplexing characteristic of this phobia in Tehran, I think, lies in women who want to be in power. They cannot stand the masculine architectural imagery. They have a phobia toward being on the outside because the “outside” reinforces the repressed desire of “being in power,” literally, of being a man!<sup>23</sup>

Many women in Iran, in fact, prefer to be wrapped by the veil in public spaces. In her book *Women of Iran: the conflict with fundamentalist Islam*, Farah Azari calls this the justification of self-repression (Azari, 1983:57). Azari is interested in revealing the reasons behind the lack of feminist consciousness among women in Iran (especially in

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23 The entire discussion of the outside phobia can also be read within the discourse of shame. Like space, the body is territorialized--by modalities of definition and classification and by flows of power. According to Islamic *fikh* (law), women’s bodies without the veil are not passive. They influence their surrounding space. According to this view, if not covered by the veil, women find their desires, pleasures and feelings naked and vulnerable in face of others. Shame as a form of repression comes into play to prevent women from being unveiled in public.

the 1980s). She argues that women who support the idea of being veiled in public harbor the mistaken idea that non-veiled Western women are constantly harassed in public. This image, she argues, was popularized in the media by religious leaders (Azari, 1983:59). Set in this context, one can see that whether in agreement or not with the ideology of being covered in public, Iranian women are by and large threatened by the fear of public space.



### **Corporeality, Being and Movement**

“One cannot grasp the unity of the object without the mediation of bodily experience.” (Maurice Merleau-Ponty, 1962:279)

I have a body because I have a clear and distinguished zone of expression. (Deleuze, 1993: 85)

Women in Iran are isolated from the public space of the city. Many walls surround them: the walls of their homes, the walls of masculine political propaganda, and the walls of their veil. Even in traditional Shiite stories and myths the image of women is obscured by virtue of her unseen body. In contemporary Tehran, walls mediate male desires. The built environment operates with walls and through the walls while reinforcing patriarchal and bodily fears. These walls are the defining moment between the female populace and male individuals. Women's bodies, in turn, come into existence by being washed up in a “liminal” space, metaphorically similar to the space between the conscious and the unconscious, between knowledge of their physical presence and the unknown of the masculine other. Social structures have

long had a tendency to dismiss the reality of women's sexuality within the universal gender-free frameworks.

Women's existence is classified by liminality.<sup>24</sup> As Barbara Babcock writes in "Women/women in 'the discourse of man': Edie Turner and Victor Turner's Language of the Feminine," liminality is feminine:

Liminality can perhaps be described as a fractal chaos, a fertile nothingness, a storehouse of possibilities, not by any means a random assemblage but a striving after new forms and structure, a gestation process, ....It is what goes on in nature in the fertilized egg, in the chrysalis, and even more richly and complexly in their cultural homologues. (Victor Turner in Babcock, 2001: 116)

Liminality is always associated with transitional passage between alternative states, a concept reinforced by Luce Irigaray in her book *The Forgetting of Air in Martin Heidegger* (Irigaray, 1999). Irigaray provides a subaltern, "liminal" view of architectural dwelling and the ideology of "being" as it was described in the 1950s by Heidegger. In "Building, Dwelling, Thinking," Heidegger supplanted material conceptions of architecture with a concern for the relationship between space and "being" (Heidegger, in Hofstadter, 2001). Irigaray criticizes Heidegger for connecting all aspects of life into a unitary notion of "being" rather than differentiating between female beings and male beings: "one always issues from two that are irreducibly different." (Irigaray 1999:129)

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24 Victor Turner defines liminal in these words: "As members of society most of us only see what we expect to see and what we expect to see is what we are conditioned to see when we have learned the definitions and classifications of our culture. A society's secular definitions do not allow for the existence of a not-boy-not-man, which is what a novice in a male puberty rite is (if he can be said to be anything). But a set of essentially religious definitions co-exist with these, which do set out to define the structurally indefinable 'transitional being.' The transitional being or 'liminal person' is defined by a name, and by a set of symbols. The same name is very frequently employed to designate those who are being initiated into very different states of life. For example, among the *Ndemdu* of Northern Rhodesia the name *mwadyi* may mean various things: it may stand for 'a boy novice in circumcision rites,' or, yet again, 'the first or ritual wife' ...." (Turner, 1964:6)

Iranian social structure has long had a tendency to dismiss the reality of women's repression, which is due to their sex, within the liturgical gender-free frameworks. By dismantling this situated method of looking at female bodies, one can see the body as a site for a play of forces, as women are understood simultaneously to be sexual objects, socio-political artifacts, and mothers. According to Rosi Braidotti, this body can be also seen as a theoretical topos in an attempt to overcome the classical mind-body dualism of Cartesian origins, in order to reconceive the structure of the thinking subject. The body is then an interface, a threshold, a field of interesting material and symbolic forces (Braidotti, 1994: 169). Typically, however, woman's corporeality in Iran is reduced to the singular meaning of a dominant ideological discourse: that is, the body as emblem of Islam. In Islamic philosophy, bodies and spaces are linked together in a slightly different way from that suggested by the radical Islamic government of Iran.

In his book *Deconstructing the American Mosque*, Akel Ismail Kahera devotes a section to the notion of 'being' and its relationship to Islamic architecture. Kahera compares and contrasts the notion of 'being' found in western ideology to that of Islam.

...Muslim architecture represents a nexus of temporality; hence, knowledge of being shares a meaningful relationship with idioms of architectural expression. Perhaps the statement that is farthest from this concept is Descartes' "*cogito ergo sum*"<sup>25</sup> (I think therefore I am). *Cogito ergo sum* suggests that thinking and awareness of thought are the real substance of being, but it also celebrates the separation of the mind from the body and other activities of being. This Cartesian maxim, which has been adopted in the West to describe reality, is related to the crisis of architecture, which is of course

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<sup>25</sup> Kahera's examination of body and space is ahistorical. He tends to compare and contrast the contemporary existing notions of body and space in Islamic thought with those found in seventeenth century Europe.

also a human crisis. In Islam man is not the center of the universe (*homo universale*); neither is he the measure of all things .... (Kahera, 2002:116)

Kahera connects the relationship of bodies and spaces in some contemporary mosques to issues of spirituality which originated in medieval Islamic architecture: A mosque is both contained and a container. The container does not really exist independently as a tangible form, but rather it exists in the consciousness of the beholder, who visually perceives physical boundaries of space while the intellect perceives the spirits of those elements that are contained. (Kahera, 2002: 117)

Medieval Islamic philosophy considers spaces as the objects that are always filled, even when they seem empty to the senses. The Ikhwan al Safa<sup>26</sup> believed that space is filled not only by materials or physical beings but also by spirits (Böwering, 1992:78). On the contrary, they believed that spirits dealt in spaces. To show further the interrelatedness of things, the Ikhwan also classified the motions of the spirit in a manner similar to those of bodies and related the two to each other.

The key term in the Ikhwan theory about space is soul/spirit. According to Western philosophy, such as that of Hegel, spirit can be associated with thought, mind, and thinking subjects. To become aware of spirit is to understand human consciousness. According to Hegel, spirit in general is mobile, timeless, and placeless. As the Ikhwan states: "We call souls certain real substances, living and moving by their essences, and

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<sup>26</sup> Secret Arab brotherhood founded in Basra, Iraq, in the 10th century. The beliefs of the group diverged sharply from orthodox Islam, incorporating elements of Neoplatonism, Gnosticism, astrology, and the occult sciences. The brotherhood is best known for having produced a philosophical and religious encyclopedia, *Epistles of the Brethren of Purity and Loyal Friends*, whose purpose was to provide enlightenment that would purify the soul and provide happiness in the next life. (www.britannica.com)

we designate under the name movement the actions of a soul on a body” (Ikhwan, in Denys Johnson-Davies and Sabiha Khemir, 1994:82). Again in the Ikhwan’s words, “Movement is a form imposed on a body by the universal soul after it has been shaped, and rest is the absence of this form.” Spirit, therefore, involves a dynamic relation between the subject (being) and something other than it (space). Through opposing or negating the other, the subject (spirit) attains consciousness. In this sense, spirit can be considered as self-consciousness. The more closely an individual can identify with her space and world, and the more lucidly this relation is understood by her, the higher such a person’s consciousness becomes. In this case, spirit is self-conscious and is progressively unified by concrete interaction with whatever is ostensibly other than it, such as space. The Ikhwan’s theology therefore indicates a way of looking at body, space, and the world; it differs from the theology of Iran’s revolutionary clerics because it rejects the canonical representation of a sacred body in the space. This system of thought suggests a model of bodies that are not monolithic, total, and distinct entities, but an assemblage or collection of parts, capable of crossing the space as a whole.

Although Kahera doesn’t say so, Kahera’s thought is rooted in Ikhwan’s theories about being and space. However, for both the Ikhwan and Kahera the body as a material being is not of significance; the materiality of the body and its sexuality are absent from their analyses.

By considering the body in movement, we can see better how the body inhabits space. Instead of submitting passively to space and time, the body in movement is activated. People walking by the murals in Tehran find themselves in communication



with the fixed images of the bodies. These murals present a series of bodies in spaces, not moving--not active. In the street people sometimes don't know anything about these huge bodies, although the latter enliven the space.

The examples of images in Tehran, as well as in Baghdad, New York, and Los Angeles, show that as we walk in the street, we engage the material and the metaphorical; space and knowledge, and the cultural practices implicit in the images. Clearly, the spatiality of our body is brought into being through action.



### The Absent Authenticity



◀Fig.43 A giant mural of Marilyn Monroe. Hollywood. Photo by the author

Traditional Islamic visual culture initially prohibited any correspondence between real and represented objects. For this reason, contemporary ideological iconography in Tehran is for the most part a Western construct. In other words, the Western conception of media has been widely adopted in Tehran, but it has been covered by the gloss of religion.



◀Fig. 44 A giant mural, Los Angeles. Sunset. Photo by the author

The covering and wrapping of city walls by body images is not particular to dictatorial states, nor is it limited to political propaganda in the contemporary Middle East or elsewhere. Today, the artful representations of Disney and Hollywood characters are everywhere (Fig. 43, 44). People of the world do not need to visit these hyperrealist phenomena, rather, “hyperreality” envelops them everywhere—it overrides people’s lives regardless of location. In this sense, as Elizabeth Grosz points out, “architecture inhabits us as much we see ourselves inhabiting it...” (Grosz, 1994: 135). In his paper “The Overexposed City” (1986), Paul Virilio gives us a clear definition of the interconnections between contemporary cities and “hyperreality.” “Due to the cathode-ray tube’s imperceptible substance, the dimensions of space become inseparable from their speed of transmission. Unity of place without the unity of time makes the city disappear into the heterogeneity of advanced technology’s temporal regime” (Virilio, 1986:19). As Elizabeth Grosz argues, Virilio opens up a new argument towards “new replacement of geographical space with the screen interface, the transformation of distance and depth into pure surface, the reduction of space... the face-to-face encounter to the terminal screen.” (Grosz, 1994: 135)

Similarly, the painted billboards in Tehran are daring forms that change social relations, because they allow people no response--people are simply passive spectators. The present system discourages the use of traditional Islamic sites as places of congregation, which could potentially undermine the government. Tehran is no longer a functional spatial entity that motivates social interaction but has become a "virtual" Tehran, wrapped in and bounded by political conservatism.

Urban objects in Tehran have become less important in the experience of the built environment than certain forms of representation such as the murals. Murals in Tehran, as well as elsewhere, make us wonder what might happen if the façades of all buildings were to be used as surfaces for transmitting ideological information. If all cities were to replicate the digital and non-digital murals of Times Square, would architecture then cease to be seen as a complex unified structure, and always be conceived as an assemblage?

These questions call attention to the importance of non-architectural means of creating spaces, methods that are not synonymous with fixed traditional building techniques. As suggested by Jonathan Hill, this creation involves more than the direct, metaphoric translation of physical openness and flexible structure (Hill, 1998:145-147). Other media, such as text and art, can enrich the kinds of person-environment relations particular to architecture. Times Square is a good example in this regard; it seems to break every rule of urban readability and regularity, challenging all traditional models of what a public space should be.

Like Times Square, Tehran's public spaces break away from traditional attitudes toward building structures and urban objects. At the same time, its imagery is quite different in content. The themes of these images are important to the way the image of the city as a

whole is created in its citizens' minds. In Tehran, the iconography of power comes into existence as a double-sided phenomenon. While urban public spaces are now characterized by the transcendent capability of media, they remain static because of the resistance of the power of the clergy and the images that have been brought forth by them. Like religion, contemporary media today also transcend local cultures and places; but unlike religion, which demarcates limits by virtue of its practices, media neither find nor create boundaries and are thus not limited. In this sense, one might argue that the ideological wrappings of post-revolutionary Tehran are as uprooted, weightless, and inauthentic as the hype in some American cities, such as Los Angeles and Las Vegas. If Walter Benjamin found dialectical images in the Parisian glass arcades, we might look for them on the painted walls of Tehran. These walls have become more permeable and less fixed and rigid than those found in Parisian arcades, for one side of the border already infects the "other media."

Jean Baudrillard, the French cultural critic, regards Los Angeles as the world center of the inauthentic and weightless. He also maintains that, "the whole world is implicated in this uprootedness; however, there is only one exception: Islam...and perhaps that is why the West is so weak and vulnerable in the face of the certitudes of radical Islam" (Baudrillard, 1989:53). In contrast to Baudrillard's argument, and based on the ideological wrapping of Tehran, one might argue that the contemporary Islamic city of Tehran has been modernized through the same Western techniques that have shaped the inauthentic nature of some American cities (Fig.43-44). Los Angeles, with its mix of Hollywood and Disney, counts as a site of "anywhere." Considering this, one might argue that there is not much difference in the inauthentic wrapping of the radical Islamic city of Tehran and the forged Hollywood media hype on the façades of buildings in Los Angeles.

Unlike American patterns, words and symbols in Tehran are not used in space for commercial persuasion; however, they are used for political influence. The revolutionary leaders of Iran speak of the return of religion and the awakening of Islam. The struggle of authenticity contrasts with Western materialism and positivism, and the development of pure Islamic patterns is absent within the urban design under their control. The state is commissioned to revitalize, restore and preserve Islamic urban objects and architectural patterns. The Islamic city promised by the Muslim leaders of Iran has been transformed into an anti-Islamic city of weightlessness and inauthenticity, suggesting a lack of historical understanding of the content of Islamic popular culture and the concept of the sacred.

In this context, power comes into play not so much within the framework of those few accepted modes of citizens' interaction, such as voting and protesting, but in symbolic political associations. Iranian politicians have succeeded in establishing their control of space. Symbolic meanings attached to these spatial settings create entirely new meanings for the old rituals that were accomplished within the spatial aura of the mosques and other public sites in traditional Islamic cities..

Overall, this system seems to deflate and obscure Islamic authenticity. In other words, the virtual city of Tehran subordinates what remains of Islamic traditions, traditional forms, and popular ways of life, and transforms them into something new. In his book *Hybrid Urbanism*, Nezar Alsayyad opens up an important genre in contemporary urbanism that emerges from multi-identical features. He argues that "whereas identity may respond to the temporal pressure for uniformity, hybridity can manifest the spatial dimension of multiplicity." Alsayyad sees globalization as an important factor in the production of a local culture and equates hybridity with globalization. (Alsayyad, 2001:16)

Urban visual culture in post-revolutionary Tehran reached its ultimate implosion during the 1980s. In visual terms, it transformed the depth of spaces to surfaces of all kinds—from the two-dimensional murals of the Ayatollahs to women's envelopes. We can understand this phenomenon as a reflection of the processes of capitalist culture, a useful technique serving in Tehran as clothing for ideological purposes. "The postmodernist trends in the world architecture were gaining momentum at about the same time that the Islamic Revolution was triumphant in Iran, bringing about two motivations which worked in parallel to launch a new period in the architecture of Iran" (Mirmiraan, 1999:45). These two forces together helped to create a type of visual culture in Iran which displayed postmodernist tastes and themes, as well as elements taken from Islamic ideologies.

Alsayyad argues that globalization has made it difficult to use urban form to understand the particular manifestations of human behavior (Alsayyad, 2001:13). He casts doubt on the utility of urbanism as an analytical category for representing the cultures of people and places (Alsayyad, 2001:13). Viewed from the outside, Tehran might seem to fit into Alsayyad's global/hybrid model. The view from within--from behind the veil, behind the dark shelter of a repressed female citizen--reveals Tehran as a patriarchal site, establishing its own local hierarchy of power: a site of one, and not the "other."

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