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*Nacim Pak-Shiraz*¹

Exploring the City in the Cinema of Bahram Beyzaie

This article will explore five of Bahram Beyzaie's urban films over the last four decades to study their critique of the process of modernization and social changes that have taken place in Iran. These include The Journey (Safar, 1972), The Crow (Kalagh, 1977), Maybe Some Other Time (Shayad Vaqti Digar, 1987), Killing Mad Dogs (Sag Koshi, 2001) and When We are All Asleep (Vaqti Hame Khabim, 2009). It will examine the impact of modernization on the architecture and landscape of the city and consequently on the local community. It will then study the increasing complexity of ascertaining the real and unreal within the city. Finally, it will look at the changing values, the fears and threats within the city and the impact these have on its inhabitants, particularly women and their movement within the city.

Introduction

During a presentation at a summer programme in London recently, I asked participants to state the first thing that came to mind when I mentioned Tehran. The participants, who were from diverse cultural and professional backgrounds, listed responses ranging from “Ahmadinejad”, “Ayatollahs”, “uranium enrichment” and “anti-American government” to “bloggers” and “women who push the boundaries”. Many of them had obviously based their ideas of the city on the images they had received from the media. Indeed, for those living in the West, Tehran is usually associated with many of the same stereotypes. Anti-Western attitudes demonstrated through flag burnings and protests in the streets of Tehran are perhaps

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one of the most widely presented images of the city in Western media (though images of demonstrations post 2009 elections were for a while dominated by protests against the election results rather than anti-Western sentiments). Many of our ideas of cities around the world are often based on our screen visits to these places as represented in films and the media. Our perception of the world is increasingly influenced by the images presented to us. In fact, we may have built a familiarity with places we have never physically visited but come to know only through their frequent depictions in the media. Barbara Menzel uses an example from Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List* (1993) to demonstrate how the real and the mediated can end up becoming indistinguishable. For those who have seen the film, she argues, "the reality of Auschwitz may be subsumed in the filmic representation — that is, visitors to the actual concentration camp may well spontaneously think that the gate to Auschwitz looks just like the one in the film rather than the other way around".²

Within this constructed world of mediated images, the cinema of Bahram Beyzaie offers us an alternative image of Tehran, allowing us to study some of the social and political changes the metropolis has undergone over the last four decades of his film-making. The city "has come to be a symbol — maybe even a symptom — of almost every social and cultural process [...] often read as the medium through which modernity (and then postmodernity) gets expressed, worked through, concretised".³ Amongst these changes, modernization and its relevance to the local context remains a constant concern in Beyzaie's films. This article will explore five of his urban films to study their critique of the process of modernization and social changes that have taken place in Iran. It will begin by examining the impact modernization has had on the architecture and landscape of the city, including its subsequent effects on the local community. Then it will study the increasing complexity of ascertaining

² Barbara Menzel, *Cities and Cinema*, (New York, 2008), 14.

³ David Bell and Azzedine Haddour, *City Visions*, (Harlow 2000), 1.

the real and unreal within the city. Finally, it will look at the changing values, the fears and threats within the city and the impact these have on its inhabitants, particularly women and their movement within the city. As Mark Sheil asserts “cinema is primarily a spatial system” and it is this feature that makes it significantly important with a “special potential to illuminate the lived spaces of the city and urban societies.”⁴

Shifting Landscapes

The modernization of Tehran has gone hand-in-hand with the destruction of many old structures. The decision to destroy the city’s ancient walls, for example, was taken in December 1867, during the Qajar period, so as to expand and modernize the city.⁵ The specific motivations for doing so appear to include the construction of new gates to increase the security of the city, the development of carriageable roads and the provision of water to mitigate the effects of flooding, as well as the appeal of foreign ideas and techniques. The burgeoning of Tehran’s population from 15,000 in the 1790s, shortly after it became the capital, to 100,000 in the 1850s was seen as another important factor.⁶ These ancient walls dated back to 1554 when the Safavid ruler Shah Tahmasp I endowed Tehran “with a central bazaar and surrounded it with a wall”.⁷ The destruction of older structures in the pursuit of modernization continued in Tehran well after the Qajars. Studying the modernization projects of the first Pahlavi period, Grigor states that “architecture was imperative in the success of

⁴ Mark Sheil and Tony Fitzmorris, *Cinema and the City: Film and Urban Societies in a Global Context (Studies in Urban & Social Change Series) (Studies in Urban and Social Change)* (Oxford, 2001): 5-6.

⁵ C.E Bosworth, V. Minorsky, B. Hourcade and J. Calmard, “Tihṙān”, *Encyclopaedia of Islam, 2nd Edition* (Brill Online) <http://brillonline.nl/subscriber/entry?entry=islam_COM-1220> (Accessed on 16/07/ 2011).

⁶ Bosworth, *et al*, “Tihṙan”.

⁷ Planhol further states that even though the reason for Shah Tahmasp’s interest in Tehran has been explained to be the tomb of their ancestor buried in the nearby Shah ‘Abdul Azim Mausoleum, or Tehran’s long history as an active Shi’i centre; the decision to turn Tehran into the capital might have been more strategic. The Ottoman threat on the West had led Shah Tahmasp to move his capital from Tabriz further east to Qazvin. Tehran, some 150 kilometres to the east of Qazvin, “could potentially provide his forces with a convenient fall back”. See Xavier de Planhol, “Tehran i. A Persian City at the Foot of the Alborz” (July 2004) *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, ed. Ehsan Yarshater (Iranica Online) at <<http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/tehran-i-a-persian-city-at-the-foot-of-the-alborz>> (Accessed on 25/07/2011).

the [...] modernising agenda” and that “control over the physical and conceptual ‘heritage’” allowed the modernists “to erase the immediate past to construct the ‘progressive’ future”.⁸

Buildings and construction sites are important markers in Beyzaie’s urban films. They constitute a recurring image — albeit an evolving symbol — starting from his early pre-Revolution films to his most recent productions. *The Journey (Safar, 1972)*, an early short film, depicts a day in the lives of two abandoned 12-year-old orphan boys. One of them, an eternal optimist, believes his parents to be alive and hopes to find them as he sets out to look for couples who have lost their children. In *The Journey* the dominating and empty building sites form an important reference to Beyzaie’s criticism of the modernization projects. As the children trek through the city, the film exposes a changing landscape with contradictory symbols and values. The city’s old quarters, characterized by traditional arches and corridors filled with rubble are contrasted with the large, modern structures erected around the city. As Curtis observes in reference to skyscrapers in cities both within the developing and developed countries, such large building sites mark “a series of intrinsic paradoxes”: “they are wealth machines”, but they are also “objects which can impoverish the life of a city around them” and can have “a certain complexity and richness” while also possessing “an enormous potential for banality”.⁹ In Beyzaie’s films, as we shall see shortly, Tehran’s large construction sites similarly suggest more an impoverishment and the potential for banality than a promise of complexity and richness.

Criticisms of the mass modernization projects continue in *The Crow (Kalagh, 1977)*. In this film Beyzaie offers a glimpse of old Tehran both through the mise-en-scène and the narrative of Alam — an elite, old woman — as she recalls her memories and mourns the

⁸ Talinn Grigor, “Recultivating ‘Good Taste’: the Early Pahlavi Modernists and Their Society for National Heritage,” *Iranian Studies*, 37, no. 1 (March 2004), 18.

⁹ William J. R. Curtis, “The Skyscraper and the City” *Design for High-Intensity Development*, ed. Margaret Bentley Sevckenko, (Cambridge, M.A., 1986), 15.

spatial changes within the city. *The Crow* revolves around a family's gradual obsession with finding a young woman reported missing in the newspaper. Initially, it is Esalat, a television presenter, who is intrigued by the picture as it appears familiar to him. His obsession then spreads to his wife, Asiyeh, and his mother, Alam, who become increasingly preoccupied with finding the girl. Asiyeh finally solves the mystery as she discovers that the picture is of none other than her mother-in-law in her younger days: Alam herself had put up the ad in the newspaper.

The city's transformation and its forgotten history are arguably personified through Alam. Both have swiftly faded and lost their glamor. Just as Alam has changed and is unrecognizable, so has Tehran. The city in certain films "becomes a protagonist, but unlike the human characters, it is not a fictional one".¹⁰ Because the reality of the city is irrefutable, its presence in the films becomes even more powerful. Alam's happy memories of Tehran are that of her early childhood and youth, before her father's bankruptcy and her fiancé's death during the Second World War. Being from a privileged background that had embraced many aspects of modernity, it is not the loss of the more traditional aspects of life and society that she laments. Instead she is nostalgic about the garden parties, music and fashion she used to enjoy — which formed part of her Tehran of those days. Her reminiscences are not just of days long gone, but also the neighbourhood in which these memories are set. Both Alam and Tehran have changed through what they have experienced and witnessed — their memories and histories forgotten by everyone — even those closest to them: Alam's youth and biography remain unknown to her own son inasmuch as Tehran's earlier configurations and past is unfamiliar to its modern citizens. This loss of history is partly due to the expansion and development of Tehran, which caused drastic changes in the demographics of its

¹⁰ Geoffrey Neol-Smith, "Cities: Real and Imagined", in *Cinema and the City: Film and Urban Societies in a Global Context*, eds. Mark Shiel and Tony Fitzmaurice (Oxford, 2001), 104.

neighborhoods. To provide but one example, Bosworth notes that

The bazaar quarter, inhabited by the many migrants from the provinces, rapidly became the centre of lower-class Tihṙān; at the same time, what had been the modern centre at the beginning of the century was gradually abandoned by the affluent classes, while retaining its administrative function.¹¹

In the course of the early Pahlavi modernization projects, the “old, it was vehemently argued, had to be ‘demolished’ in order to give rise to ‘revival’ of ‘good taste.’”¹² This, of course, remained a purely subjective practice, with many historical structures being destroyed in the process. Chief among these was the magnificent nineteenth-century Takyeh Dowlat, razed because it was considered backward to stage *ta‘ziyeh*, the only traditional Islamic drama, re-enacting the events that led to the death of Hosein, the third Shi‘i Imam.

In *The Crow*, this early twentieth century Tehran is remembered and reconstructed through the memories of Alam. The implementation of hasty processes within the urban landscape has transformed the city into foreign territory for Alam. She no longer identifies the city as her “old Tehran” and seeks to reconstruct the alleys, buildings and their details as she reminisces of days gone and glories past. Through her memories, which she relates to her daughter-in-law, Asiyeh, as they walk together through the city, Beyzaie offers a glimpse of old Tehran. In a dreamlike sequence, the background morphs to yield Alam’s nostalgic images of her memories of Tehran.

In discussing the reconstruction of Beirut after the Civil War (1975-90), Lina Khatib observes how the centre of Beirut was not restored but cleared to make way for new

¹¹ Bosworth, *et al*, “Tihṙān”.

¹² Grigor, “Recultivating ‘Good Taste’...”, 36.

structures.¹³ As Hasgim Sarkis notes, this “created a collective homesickness for Beirutis even if they resided in Beirut. All manners of nostalgia and sentimentalized recollection were unleashed”.¹⁴ In *The Crow*, even though Tehran has not been defaced by war, the scale of its transformation is enough for Alam to make her unable to relate to what she sees around her. Now she can only yearn for the city that she remembers.

Images of old Tehran and the large concrete buildings continue to find significance in Beyzaie’s next film. *Maybe Some other Time (Shayad Vaqti Digar, 1987)*¹⁵ is also set in Tehran, this time in post-Revolution Tehran, and narrates the internal struggles of Kiyān and the growing suspicions of her husband, Modabber, who, like Esalat in *The Crow*, also works in television. In one of the film rushes for a documentary on traffic and pollution, Modabber recognizes Kiyān in another man’s car. Modabber identifies the man as Homayun Haqnegar, an antique dealer. Desperate to find out the truth, Modabber embarks on a series of investigations which finally reveal that Kiyān is the sister of Haqnegar’s wife, Vida. Their mother’s poverty had led her to leave Kiyān for adoption on a door when she was a baby. Kiyān ended up in an orphanage and was later adopted by a couple but remained unaware of her real history and identity.¹⁶

By contrasting old and new images of the city in *Maybe Some Other Time*, Beyzaie draws our attention to modernity’s failed promise of order and progress, revealing a city that has instead stagnated and is in disarray. The Tehran of 1987 in *Maybe Some Other Time* no longer resembles old Tehran. In the documentary (as in *The Crow*, a film within a film) that Modabber is working on, old images of wide streets lined with buildings on two levels are

¹³ Lina Khatib, “The Contested City: Beirut in Lebanese War Cinema,” in *Visualizing the City*, eds. Alan Marcus and Dietrich Nuemann (New York, 2007), 98.

¹⁴ Quoted in Khatib, “The Contested City...”, 98.

¹⁵ *Maybe Some Other Time* was made in 1987 and released in 1988.

¹⁶ Interestingly, the orphan theme first raised in *The Journey* is resurrected here.

juxtaposed with contemporary images of tall, gray concrete structures towering over the city. These characterless concrete edifices may well be the construction sites, now complete, that were depicted earlier in *The Journey*. Beyzaie implies that this juxtaposition alone is enough to expose the failed promise of modernity, for the documentary's director cancels the voice-over stating that the images are themselves quite clear. The wide, open spaces and the free movement of people around the cars of the old city are contrasted with contemporary images of traffic jams, frustrated drivers and restricted pedestrian movement. Modernity's solution of flashing traffic lights and zebra crossings offers no respite to the endless chaos at the heart of the city. In fact, the traffic jams in *Maybe Some Other Time* appear as an extension to the barren and infertile wastelands of disused cars and horse-driven carriages seen in *The Journey* — only this time the junkyards of the city are created through the slow-moving cars. As in *The Crow*, Beyzaie recreates the image of old Tehran through his characters' recollections in *Maybe Some Other Time*. Through the memories of Kiyan and Vida, their mother's experience of losing Kiyan is reconstructed against the streets of old Tehran. This time, however, unlike Alam's memories in *The Crow*, it is no longer a dreamlike sequence of a vibrant and buzzing city, but a nightmarish episode in threatening and deserted streets.¹⁷

The construction site is revisited in *Killing Mad Dogs* (*Sag Koshi*, 2001). After a year of being estranged from her husband, Golrokh Kamali, a writer, returns to Tehran from a provincial town to save their marriage. Golrokh finds out that her husband, Naser Moaser, has gone bankrupt and is in hiding. After planning together that she would buy out all his debts for a fraction of the price, he surrenders himself to the authorities and is imprisoned. Golrokh then takes on the arduous job of obtaining the creditors' consent and finally settles all his accounts, an experience that transforms her completely. After Naser's release she

¹⁷ For a discussion of city, family and identity in *The Crow* and *Maybe Some Other Time*, see Saeed Talajooy, "Khaneh, Khanevadeh va Shahr: Bahram Beyzaie va Ravayat-e Tajadod dar *Kalagh* (1356) va *Shayad Vaqti Digar* (1366)" *Iran Nameh*, 27, 1 (1391/2012), 45-69.

realizes that it had all been a lie — her husband’s business partner had not escaped with the company’s capital and her earlier suspicions about Naser’s relationship with his secretary had been entirely justified. In fact, Naser had schemed to scare his business partner out of the country and manipulated his wife to pay a fraction of what the company owed, whilst he planned to take the remainder of the money and leave the country with his secretary.

Amongst the hazardous visits Golrokh makes to negotiate repayment terms with her husband’s creditors, one involves a visit to a construction site — the largest of all those depicted in Beyzaie’s films. In the high-rise labyrinth of the city the buildings of old have clearly been overtaken by new constructions. Beyzaie no longer offers any juxtaposition of the old images of the city against the new, as though this were a spatial battle already lost. The city’s reconstruction projects that were implemented in the years following the eight-year Iran-Iraq war — the period in which this film is set — included little planning for the preservation of old structures. Here, the old, the faded and the lost no longer stand a chance. Indeed, the reconstruction processes during the Islamic Republic do not appear to have departed notably from the modernization projects of the early Pahlavi period, in which the “undertaking had two major consequences for the architectural profession in Iran: the revival of “forgotten” forms and the destruction of “traditional” forms”.¹⁸ The old and traditional forms continued to be effaced after the Revolution to give way to new constructions.

In Beyzaie’s latest film *When We are All Asleep* (*Vaqtī Hame Khabim*, 2009), the construction sites appear — but only fleetingly — in the opening shots of the film, reflecting the city through the mirror and glass façades of modern buildings. The landscape of the city of Tehran in *When We are All Asleep* is a radical departure from that of *The Journey* made some forty years earlier. There are no traces of the local and the specific — indeed, the streets

¹⁸ Grigor, “Recultivating ‘Good Taste’...”, 39.

and buildings could belong to any modern city. The single exception is the reflection of Iranian traditional architecture in the modern, mirrored walls at the beginning of the film. Like an ephemeral dream, the image of the old structure lingers momentarily in the sequence before yielding to the surrounding images of the modern buildings. In this film, the city does not bear the memory of its history, nor do the memories and nostalgic reminiscences of the characters engage in reconstructing the old days. Now, the main streets are lined with buildings of glass and mirror, reflecting the surroundings of other buildings of glass and mirror, rather than standing as witness to a people, culture or history.

Reconstructing the City

Architectural and spatial transformations are just one set of references to the loss and replacement of local and traditional forms within the modern and global in *The Journey*. Aside from architectural reconstructions, Tehran's modernization led to a change in the nature of work itself. In Europe of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, modernization "not only changed the nature of work, but also dramatically transformed the organization of society, gender and kinship relations, and the dominant form of human settlement".¹⁹ Similarly, a number of Beyzaie's films refer not only to these changes through the depiction of the construction sites, but also to the new workforce employed to establish these changes. In *The Journey*, construction workers with their modern helmets and uniforms are contrasted with traditional craftsmen. The camera pans over a group of men lying still on the streets, appearing to take their afternoon nap. Whilst the construction workers stride assertively as the new lords of the city, the craftsmen have lost their agency and lie asleep in the ruins of old sites, clutching their tools as the world around them moves on. The city's new obsession with

¹⁹ Deborah Stevenson, *Cities and Urban Cultures*, (Maidenhead, 2003), 13.

construction has led to the displacement of these craftsmen. Skilled in local and traditional crafts that are no longer wanted, they are now redundant.

The construction workers also feature in *The Crow*, even though they are not seen in the vicinity of Alam's house. During the modernization process under Muhammad Reza Shah, development in the south of Tehran was "blocked by industrial zones and by prohibitions on construction imposed by the urbanisation plan".²⁰ As such, the workers reappear in Esalat's television reports, this time without their signature helmets and glasses as depicted in *The Journey*, but instead with scarves that cover their heads and faces. Whilst the local workers slept among ruins in *The Journey*, they appear to have been roped in to join the mechanical workforce of construction as they march ahead in *The Crow*. Modernization thus seems to have turned the labor force into an identical mass of people for whom the only marker of difference and individuality is their names. Whether it is the helmets and glasses or the scarves, the workers remain indistinguishable from one another. In one of the reports Esalat files on the construction sites, he asserts, "it appears that our real faces will be forgotten forever". The worker next to him affirms the statement, adding that even though they are colleagues they rarely see each other's faces and that the only way they are able to identify each other is by shouting out their names.

References to individuality and homogenization are reiterated in Beyzaie's later films. As in *The Crow*, his inclusion of documentaries within the film is repeated in *Maybe Some Other Time*. Both films contain scenes related to making of documentaries on pollution. The documentary narrator in *Maybe Some Other Time* warns against the increasing pollution that will ultimately force everyone to wear full face masks like those of miners working underground. This warning is accompanied by images of fully masked faces on screen,

²⁰ Bosworth, *et al*, "Tihran".

looking identical and lacking any individuality just as the modern construction workers in *The Journey* resemble one another in their helmets and dark sunglasses and those in *The Crow* have scarves masking their faces. In *Killing Mad Dogs*, this theme is taken up yet again. Here, as Golrokh navigates through the maze of imposing buildings emerging out of an enormous construction site, she shouts out the name of the creditor to the innumerable workers she drives past, all indistinguishable in their helmets, masks and glasses. In this world of concrete and steel continually overcast by smog, dust and shadow, we cannot help but remember what Esalat foretold from over three decades earlier. The individuality, history, and memory represented by a face is increasingly effaced, leaving only a name, which is so collectivized that it is totally ineffective in distinguishing one person from another. This is evident in the way Golrokh receives a group response when she calls out for Sangestani, one of her husband's creditors.

In all these films Beyzaie appears to comment on the process of modernization and its impact on identity. In *Maybe Some Other Time*, the characters of Kiyān, Vida and their mother is played by the same actress, ensuring their identical appearance against their individual, distinct life stories, fears and aspirations. In this regard, Modabber's confusion of them leads to the chaos and disruption that takes over his life. Equally, the inclusion of "documentaries" within the films warns of a threat far more serious than pollution. It points to the loss of individual relationships and bonds in a city that is increasingly turning its inhabitants into a mass of faceless people defined and identified only by their work. More dangerously, these faceless pawns move rapidly in wiping out the past of the city and substituting it with 'modern' and concrete structures, which they replicate across the city.

In *Killing Mad Dogs* the construction workers, as representatives of a particular social class, are no longer minor agents in the transformation of the city. By now they are the

builders of the city, both literally as well as metaphorically, because they also now set the values that are becoming increasingly dominant in society. They have turned into property developers and dealers and are among the city's new lords. Their humble origins are evident in their use of language, which betrays their uneducated backgrounds and opportunistic attitudes to life. To them money, which is to be obtained at any cost, is all that matters, a point we shall return to later. Human progress is thus measured through the sole criterion of wealth accumulation regardless of the manner through which it is secured. *Killing Mad Dogs* marks Beyzaie's last depiction of the construction workers. His latest film, *When We are All Asleep*, dispenses with the construction workers altogether.

Walls of the City

Another visual feature alluding to the changes taking place within the city is that of murals, which appear in four of the urban films discussed here. As Jean-Jacques Guibbert states, "the city has its language, and one can discover it all along its walls", which "are the receptacles of the pulsations of local socio-economic structure".²¹ In the case of Tehran, Beyzaie highlights how the murals on these walls reflect not only the city's socio-economic status, but also its cultural and political debates. In *The Journey*, the old, traditional paintings of *pardeh*, lining the city's walls are juxtaposed with large, imposing murals and billboards emblazoned with modern goods and entertainment.²² Indeed, the briefly seen images of *pardeh* compete with depictions of semi-naked women on billboards advertizing the latest consumer products or films.

²¹ Jean-Jacques Guibbert. "Symbols, Signs, Signals: Walls of the City" in *Reading the Contemporary African City*, ed. Brian Brace Taylor (Singapore, 1983), 75.

²² *Pardehs* are large, painted screens illustrating Shi'i religious narratives, or stories from the *Shahnameh* and used for poetic recitations and narrations of religious or epic stories in public spaces.

The incongruity of the latest developments within the city, as against its traditional fabric, is not restricted to the wall illustrations. These contradictions are also seen in the daily life of the city and the movement within it. Thus, women clad in long black veils are shown engaged in religious rituals against the backdrop of billboards depicting barely clothed women in *The Journey*. Similarly, as Asiyeh runs through the streets of the city in *The Crow*, she goes through alleys crowded with fully veiled women who have congregated around Shi'i symbols and are engaged in religious rituals even as the walls around them bear the contrasting images of larger-than-life women advertising 7UP.

In *Killing Mad Dogs*, images and symbols on walls once again find great significance, appearing in a number of shots of the city. At the beginning of the film when Moaser ostensibly drives his partner to safety at night, they pass through streets with murals similar to those of traditional paintings in *pardeh*. This time, however, they depict the stories of the Islamic Republic from the 1979 revolution to the Iran-Iraq war: angry men and women in demonstrations, soldiers bidding their families farewell and Ayatollah Khomeini's image hovering above them all. Walls that in earlier films were contested spaces for the expression of tradition and modernity are now contested spaces voicing both state ideology and popular dissent. As Golrokh passes through the streets upon her arrival in Tehran, billboards display images of martyrs while a long stretch of walls reveals various voices: slogans in black being whitewashed, yet others being filled out in black paint to cover the black inscriptions on the last whitewash, so much so as to subsequently turn the walls into a screen with black and white patches. The only uncontested slogan, which has not been written or painted over, is the one that says: "Death to the bad-veiled women".

By the time we get to *When We are All Asleep*, only a few walls are seen, that too in passing, bearing slogans on water and life. However, the backdrop of the wall against which

Chakameh leans is a long stretch bearing only black and white vertical stripes without any illustrations or depictions, as though the black and white patches in *Killing Mad Dogs* were repeated so many times as to tire their authors to silence. The voices in the city, it appears, have been wiped out — only a weak, barely visible, childish scribble in chalk saying “Death to love” remains on the wall. This erasure was exemplified most recently in June 2011 with the overnight whitewashing of over five thousand square metres of the longest mural in the country in Mashhad. The walls surrounded a property belonging to *Astan-e Qods-e Razavi*, (The Organization of the Sacred Shrine of Imam Reza), and the painting appeared to have been commissioned by the city’s local authority in collaboration with *Astan-e Qods*. A team of illustrators and calligraphers had painstakingly painted the massive wall with stories from Ferdowsi’s *Shahnameh*. However, on the fifth of June, just a few months after the completion of the project, the walls were wiped clean. *Astan-e Qods* was not available for comment, and the long, empty stretches of white walls now only bore a notice stating: “This property belongs to the endowments of Imam Reza *Astan-e Qods-e Razavi*”.²³

The City and the (Un)Real

Most of Bahram Beyzaie’s urban films contain references to the complexity of the real and the unreal, and include film(s) within the main film. In many of these films documentary and fiction merge and question each other. Indeed, the “documentary”, too, is staged; it appears “real” but does not, in fact, use existing documentary footage or even include a neo-realist style of the kind employed by some other filmmakers. As such, Esalat’s documentary reports in *The Crow* and Modabber’s in *Maybe Some Other Time* are not real documentary footage but part of Beyzaie’s own construction. He uses these constructed documentary forms to

²³ “Mahv-e Shabaneh-ye Chand Hezar Metr-e Moraba’ Naqqashi Divari-ye Shahnameh dar Mashhad” in *BBC Persian* at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/arts/2011/06/110607_141_pics_mashad_graffitti_removed.shtml> (Accessed on 05/08/2011).

critique both the claims of documentary filmmaking to “authenticity” as well as the concept of “reality” itself. In *Maybe Some Other Time* this is evident in the references made to Modabber’s inability to distinguish the “real” smoke from the “fake” one, which has been added to the documentary footage on pollution for effect. Alam’s nostalgic reconstruction of Tehran in *The Crow* is also the result of the non-existence of the real. As Jean Baudrillard argues, when “the real is no longer what it used to be, nostalgia assumes its full meaning” and it is here that “a proliferation of myths of origin and signs of reality; of second-hand truth, objectivity and authenticity” comes into play.²⁴

The theme of the “film within a film” is taken to an extreme in *When We Are All Asleep*, although this time there are no documentaries, but a complex web of fictions within a fictional film about filmmaking in Iran and identities that merge with and slip in and out of one another. In fact, it is not until 38 minutes into the film that we realize all we have been watching thus far, has been a film within a film. *When We are All Asleep* depicts the struggles of a filmmaker and his crew to make a film against the increasingly disruptive demands and interventions of the producers and investors. Despite having no experience or understanding of film or filmmaking, the producers demand to substitute the competent actors with their own inexperienced people. This continues to the point where eventually the director himself is replaced by someone who has not even looked through a recording camera before.

The complicated structure of this film, which is constructed of multiple films and multiple actors for some characters, makes it difficult to ascertain the real and unreal within it. In fact, the fragmented and unreal seems to extend to the whole world in which *When We are All Asleep* is situated, resulting in the depiction of a city which appears to be a mere reflection of the real rather than the real itself. Baudrillard argues that the simulation of the real, which has

²⁴ Jean Baudrillard, *Jean Baudrillard: Selected Writings*, ed. Mark Poster (Stanford, 1988), 171.

ultimately replaced the real, is a symptom of the contemporary world and a matter of “a question of substituting signs of the real for the real itself”.²⁵ It is, he argues, “an operation to deter every real process by its operational double, a metastable, programmatic, perfect descriptive machine which provides all the signs of the real and short-circuits all its vicissitudes.”²⁶

The multiplicity of role-plays in *When We are Asleep* may be illustrated by the following example. The female protagonist of the film within the film is played by two actresses, each of whom have an off-screen character, which in turn becomes the character of the main film, even as differentiating between the two films becomes increasingly complicated. Thus there are four different names/persons for one particular character: The female protagonist of the fiction within the film is Chakameh, a widow who has lost her husband and son in a road accident. Chakameh is played by Parand who is not just an actress but also the scriptwriter of the film within the film. From the moment of this revelation onward, the audience comes to know her outside her role as Chakameh. Parand, the actress, is later replaced by the novice, Khatereh, though most of the information available on her is clearly questionable, demonstrated through the fabrications of the new investor’s relationship with her and that of the media reports. Khatereh replaces Parand at the insistence of this investor whose relationship to the former remains uncertain. The investor variously introduces Khatereh as the daughter of his father’s sister, of his mother’s sister, of his father’s brother and of his mother’s brother — leaving no doubt that all of his claims about their relationship are untrue. Finally, in the film within the film, Chakameh claims to have a sister, Labkhand, a drug addict, whom she intends to get killed. Later, it becomes clear that it is Chakameh who acts as Labkhand and the question remains as to whether Chakameh’s constant pain in the hands

²⁵ Baudrillard, *Jean Baudrillard: Selected Writings*, 167.

²⁶ Baudrillard, *Jean Baudrillard: Selected Writings*; 167.

is a projection of her own drug abuse upon a non-existent sister. As shown above, there are, therefore, four people as one: Chakameh who also acts as her fictional sister Labkhand is played by Parand and Khatereh.

The fragmented narrative of the film is construed through repeated scenes that intersperse the story. The first scene, for example, is repeated three times, each time with a different combination of actors and actresses. By the time the director himself is replaced, the ending has been changed into a happy one with the in-film audience privy only to a glimpse of this 'new' film. The removal of the authors (the screenwriter and director), dictated by the wishes of the novices, has not yet meant the death of the author who persists despite all odds. The film within the film instead has an unhappy ending, as we see Parand and the original male actor, act out the ending, even though by now the reality of the sequences occurring on screen or in her/their minds is highly debatable.

The film blurs the boundaries of the real and the unreal, where the actual and the imaginary are intertwined and the truth is fragmented. The fiction within the film, as in the main film itself, is titled *When We are All Asleep*. The question that then arises is whether there was ever a fiction within the fiction or if each was merely a reflection of the other and ultimately that of the status quo. The film begins with contradictions, played out in the conflicting orders of the prison warden. He shouts at the main male actor who is being released: "Don't leave anything behind! If you do, it's your own responsibility," immediately followed by the warning: "If I were you, I wouldn't take anything from here, you understand?" In this film, Beyzaie introduces the city through its reflection on the mirrored walls of buildings, as it is no longer possible to see its edifices other than through their reflection. Chakameh is introduced to the audience through her reflection on the buildings of the city as she drives through the streets. She, in turn, watches Nejat through his reflection in

her car and pocket mirrors before deciding to give him a lift back to his neighborhood. Chakameh pretends she is on the telephone, but her conversations are with herself as they are voice recordings where she is both the speaker and the listener. She is her own imaginary sister and writer friend. As she confides to Nejat later, “There was no writer, no friend, no one on the phone; she was talking to, just to herself!” Similarly, other people’s life stories and relationships — as in the case of Khatereh and the investor discussed earlier — remain uncertain. To complicate matters even further, the media, in solidarity with the film investors, circulate yet another version of the actors’ life stories and their reasons for leaving or joining the film crew. Thus, not only have the film crew been unfairly discharged but they have also been unjustly portrayed by the media, their efforts at establishing the truth to no avail. The city is no longer real but a dream-like reflection, where none appear to be acting as themselves and the city itself, perhaps, a mere reflection of its inhabitants.

The masks that the inhabitants of the city wear in *The Journey*, *The Crow* and *Maybe Some Other Time* are of a different nature in *When We are All Asleep*. In the latter, the masks are not necessarily physical veils, but a marker of the different roles and identities they assume. The real person is thus lost, veiled and concealed under the various roles and identities. The concern in *When We are All Asleep* is no longer the consequences of pollution or modernity, but as Parand states, of one’s very identity and existence: “We wanted to talk about our rights but now it is our very existence that is under threat”. As Baudrillard puts it,

When the real is no longer what it used to be [...] there is a panic-stricken production of the real and the referential, above and parallel to the panic of material production. This is how simulation appears in the phase that concerns us: a strategy of the real, neo-real and hyperreal, whose universal double is a strategy of deterrence.²⁷

²⁷ Jean Baudrillard, *Jean Baudrillard: Selected Writings*, 171.

Shifting Values, Threats and Gender within the City

The dilapidation of the old structures in *The Journey* extends beyond architecture and the urban landscape to include the very fabric of society itself. One of the consequences of modernization the film alludes to is the loss of community. Modernization appears to be about constructing a façade, a “renewal” of space, with no real concern for its occupants. In this process, the vulnerable suffer the most.

The abandoned children are forced to live a hazardous life in a brutal society. Bar a few exceptions, the adults encountered by the two orphans are the cause of much of their fear and anguish. These adults punish the hungry boys for stealing bread, exploit them for cheap labor, and mock or ignore them when they ask for directions. The children live in constant fear of the adults and the harm they might inflict upon them. Indeed, they even deprive the children of seeking divine intervention that might alleviate their misery. Since they cannot afford a candle to light in the shrine, they pray over one lighted by a woman, but she immediately blows out all the candles as though the boys were undeserving of a miracle. Though the boys finally find the couple they are looking for, the film does not have a happy, *Oliver Twist* ending. The boy cannot be the couple’s child as their missing son would be ten years old and not twelve. Ultimately, the children live in a society that is particularly brutal towards the weak and vulnerable.

Another vulnerable group suffering as a result of being neglected in a disintegrating community is the sick and elderly. In their journey, the two orphans pass through ruins and bleak landscapes, as well as junkyards containing disused cars and horse-driven carriages. Hidden within the corpses of these old and new human inventions are the sickly, driven out of sight and tucked away in the margins of society. Like the disused cars and carriages, the old and the ailing no longer have a place in society and are cast aside. One of the recurring

images in the film is of an old man being carried in a stretcher along with a few other men carrying his bulky household objects. Even as the initial images belie a caring community that assists its elderly, quite the contrary is revealed in later sequences. The old man is shuttled around, finally to be ‘disposed of’ outside the city. He and his belongings are abandoned in the middle of nowhere, between railroads, the insignia of progress and development.

In Beyzaie’s early cinema, women seem to experience the city as a space of restricted access and movement, even a potential threat if the access is of a kind that falls outside the accepted norms of their public presence and movement. However, this presence and movement does not remain static and, rather, evolves over time in Beyzaie’s cinema. In *The Journey*, the city is a male-dominated space. Even as the old and the ailing are disposed of, men generally are allowed to move freely within the city. The few shots of women in the city depict them as engaged in religious rituals, such as performing the daily prayers or visiting shrines. The only female character of the film is that of the mother of a lost boy, who makes a very brief appearance, remaining silent and standing submissively behind her husband. In contrast, women drive the main narrative of *The Crow*, as the film revolves around Asiyeh and her mother-in-law’s experiences — both past and present. The two women explore the city together, but these female excursions are usually accompanied. The city presents its perils to Asiyeh, who, in a moment of distraction, mistakenly gets into a car she assumes to belong to her colleague and faces the threat of abduction and raped. Her experience turns the city into a threatening and hostile space as she navigates her way back home. In *Maybe Some Other Time*, women’s movements are once more limited and mainly accompanied. Kiyān’s movements within the city remain functional and confined to the small scope of her daily routines. Indeed, her absences from home when she sets out alone to the orphanage and her foster parents fuel the suspicions of her husband. Both Kiyān and her sister, Vida, are seen

accompanied when they venture beyond their neighborhood. As such, the public presence of women and their engagement within the city remains fairly regulated and limited in scope from *The Journey* of 1972 to *Maybe Some Other Time* of 1987.

Women's movement in the city takes a significant shift in *Killing Mad Dogs*. Here, whilst their appearance in public is still only safe as long as it is limited to what is socially "acceptable" for the space, Golrokh's experience illustrates how stepping beyond these limits can be disastrous. When she takes on the responsibility of settling her husband's accounts, she is forced to venture outside the defined and permissible boundaries, but she is met with shock, disgust, temptation and violence. The possibility of sexual favor becomes an important negotiating factor for the men with whom she has to engage. These are men from different social backgrounds, including those with a holier-than-thou attitude who consider it beneath them to talk business to women, to others who regard themselves open-minded and westernized, evident in their insistence on using token English words and displaying a western lifestyle. Despite successfully dodging these sexual demands through various devices, she is finally trapped by two illiterate creditors who make no demands and simply rape her. After this incident she no longer bothers to take along the simple-minded gardener whom she had earlier taken as a chaperone as his presence proves futile to the dangers she has to face. Other creditors beat her ruthlessly and still others attempt to swindle her as she moves across social classes and accesses the hidden and forbidden corners of the city. If Asiyeh in *The Crow* had managed to escape the single threat she had come across, Golrokh finds herself not only violated but also forced to continue plunging into the unknown as she moves under the skin of the city.

The shift in social values across the films is also noticeable in the attitudes towards female honor. Women's sexual honor, which the husband in *Maybe Some Other Time* is so

protective of, is no longer of any importance to the husband in *Killing Mad Dogs*. This theme is taken up once again in *When We are All Asleep* where the absurdity and hypocrisy of those who uphold female honor is criticized. Unlike Naser in *Killing Mad Dogs*, who is from a well-off background, Nejat in *When We are All Asleep* is from a very deprived background. Out of shame, his family do not accept him after his release from prison not because he had murdered his wife, but for being acquitted of it. Nejat's wife, Toranj, had turned to prostitution to pay off her husband's debts and thereby have him released from prison — yet another woman sacrificing herself to clear off her husband's debt. Nejat, however, had understood his wife's actions as her ultimate sacrifice for him. The hypocrisy of the patriarchal system, which condemns one form of prostitution and forces another, is clearly questioned in the film. Nejat's brothers who welcome him home with fists and beatings for the 'disgrace' he had brought upon the family have themselves sent their underage sister to the Emirates, to work as a prostitute and send money home. Shame and honour appear to be very much time and space bound and treated differently inside and outside the boundaries of the city.

The rapid disintegration of community and its binding values are evident in the primacy that society gives to the accumulation of wealth. In this corrupted city, money dictates the values. The encroachment of construction sites are not simply symbols of a changing landscape, workforce and community, but more importantly a symbol of shifting values. The upsurge in property development has brought forth a class of nouveau riche who have little regard for anything other than financial gain, and which comes at the expense of culture and knowledge. Very tellingly, Beyzaie portrays the status quo through Golrokh's response to the property developer's demands that she belittle herself by begging, sobbing, amusing or seducing him before he agrees to the business proposition: "What other satisfaction than for you to know that my father who has worked for the culture of this country for the last thirty

years is still bereft of his basic requirements, from ink and paper to the permission to print each and every word.”

It is not only culture and knowledge that have been depreciated in the changing value system of society. Honor, dignity and even life itself can be easily exchanged for money. Just after Golrokh is beaten up on the orders of one of her husband’s creditors, the latter immediately accepts her demands for the retaliation of her beater’s punches for she has enough in her account to pay off not only the deal but also, as she puts it, “the blood money” of her beater. The nouveau riche in *When We are All Asleep* have built the sites, established their international offices and are now turning their attention to culture. But this is not a happy coincidence of resources merged with talent; it is rather more an attempt to satisfy the whimsical desires of rich amateurs, whose interferences prove destructive to art. The construction workers who represented the process of unbridled modernization in Beyzaie’s earlier films become the rich and greedy property developers of *Killing Mad Dogs*, and ultimately the opulent destroyers of art and culture in *When We are All Asleep*. That in this process they destroy the careers and aspirations of others and act without integrity appears to be of no importance to them and society at large.

The city and its threats take an interesting turn in Beyzaie’s later films. Tehran as a warzone — both in its literal and metaphorical sense — is best depicted in *Killing Mad Dogs*. Even though the film was made in 2000, it is set in 1988, the final year of the eight-year Iran-Iraq war, when the missile attacks on Tehran intensified, and the immediate aftermath of the ceasefire. Unlike *Maybe Some Other Time*, which was made in 1987, *Killing Mad Dogs* makes direct visual references to the war and explicates the date on which the story unfolds. The many piles of sandbags in the streets, Iranian soldiers marching with their weapons in the background and posters of soldiers bidding goodbye to their loved ones as they leave for the

frontline, form much of the backdrop against which the characters manoeuvre their ways in the city. However, the city itself in *Killing Mad Dogs* is not depicted as a battlefield. Even though Tehran suffered aggressive air raids, which intensified during the last months of the war, it was never physically invaded. The enemy and the attacks here take on a different shape, one that is far more destructive and enduring than the missiles.

The foreign enemy has no physical existence in the city for *Killing Mad Dogs* depicts no attacks or defence. The continuing war is not seen as the primary danger threatening society and the ensuing chaos, similarly, not the result of the plunder of war or its aftermath. Instead, Tehran is a city at war with itself with citizens who have turned against each other. Indeed, here, Tehran has become the ground for a different kind of battle as its inhabitants ruthlessly cheat, manipulate and abuse each other. Naser deceives his wife, his business partner and his creditors, who in turn abuse each other. The secretary deceives Golrokh about her relationship with her husband. It is a mad place, and in all of this deception and loss of values only Golrokh stays true to her principles. Even as the experience changes her, she maintains her integrity and dignity. By the end of the film, she leaves Tehran, now a place of corruption, lies and violence, to go back to her hometown.

The fear in which the citizens live is not just of each other, but also of the state. Naser is able to manipulate this fear into forcing his business partner, Javad Moqaddam, to stay away whilst he carries out his fraud. The threat occasioned by having had relations with elites of the former regime and the family's possible socializations abroad, which could be construed as problematic by the state, are just some of the excuses that Naser contrives to intimidate Moqaddam. Even though these fears prove to be unfounded — perhaps a necessary step for Beyzaie to circumvent censorship — Moqaddam's extreme reactions points to the existence of an authoritarian state that terrorizes its citizens.

The city also does not afford its inhabitants any private space. In *Maybe Some Other Time*, the city is watched through the cameras of the television crew who film and document it. Ironically, even as brutal crimes go unnoticed in *Killing Mad Dogs*, ordinary citizens are seen to be under constant surveillance. In the first scenes, the guardians of the revolution and the Basij paramilitary troops have taken over the city, blocking roads to stop and inspect cars. In the later sections, Golrokh's privacy is constantly invaded not only by the construction workers across her hotel room, but also by the receptionist who openly listens to her telephone conversations and the prison warden who listens to her conversations with her husband. The same form of intrusive surveillance is observed in the fragmented world of *When We are All Asleep*, in which Chakameh is continuously followed and watched by the lawyer who has now turned into a threatening stalker. Those wishing to inflict harm upon their victims can easily monitor them. The police, however, in both *Killing Mad Dogs* and *When We are All Asleep* are depicted as being involved in enforcing minor disciplinary actions such as traffic accidents and slight anti-social behaviour rather than actively attempting to protect the citizens against real crimes.

Concluding Remarks

Beyzaie's cinema invites its viewers to reflect on the continuous transformation of the city as a manifestation of the social, cultural and political changes it undergoes. Beyzaie focuses on a number of issues in his representation of the city, among which the urban landscape, the complexity of the real and the unreal, community disintegration, and the fears and threats of the city were discussed in this article. The unbridled modernization projects of the last century which often entailed drastic changes in the architectural appearance of the city are represented in Beyzaie's cinematic world in the frequent depiction of construction sites in his films. The huge towers of steel and concrete have not only changed the urban landscape but

in the process of renewing and reconstructing have also wiped out much of the city's history. Through Alam's nostalgic recollection of the "old Tehran" in *The Crow*, Beyzaie uses the medium of cinema to reconstruct and momentarily revive the forgotten history of the city. In this way, just as Alam, who seems to personify Tehran, wanted her children to know and remember her history, Beyzaie, even if briefly, honours and remembers it. Perhaps these reconstructions of old Tehran through Aalam in *The Crow* and Kiyan, Vida and their mother in *Maybe Some Other Time* are Beyzaie's cinematic recreations in response to his own nostalgia of a forgotten Tehran.

In Beyzaie's cinema one also observes how the process of modernization has affected the workforce and turned it into an identical mass. In his films, even people's names, the only marker of their difference and individuality, becomes increasingly uncertain and interchangeable. We can trace these changes over the last four decades in Beyzaie's films, where the construction workers start off replacing the local craftsmen in *The Journey*, increase in numbers in *The Crow*, become property developers and businessmen in *Killing Mad Dogs* and finally transform into billionaires in *When We are All Asleep*. In this process, however, the sole concern of the developers is not that of reconstruction, restoration or even renewal, but the acquisition of wealth. Their increasing influence, which extends beyond the construction sites and is accompanied by a crumbling value system, has proved destructive to the city. In his pre-revolution films, Beyzaie highlighted the contrasts between the modern and the traditional within Iranian society through a variety of means, including the depiction of women, architecture and the images of murals. The murals as contested spaces continue to appear in his post-revolution films. However, in these films, the murals and graffiti on the walls of the city — silently but clearly — narrate the conflicting voices of the dominant ideologies and that of their citizens.

Another important aspect of Beyzaie's depiction of the city is the arrangement of space and people's mobility and navigation within it. The congestion of the city roads blocked by traffic or the Basij, the fears and threats experienced by its inhabitants — particularly the vulnerable, provide a claustrophobic image of the place. Beyzaie depicts how the city has ceased to protect its vulnerable through his representation of the orphans, the ailing and the elderly. Moreover, in his representations of women he demonstrates their strictly-regulated movement within the city and the dire consequences of any transgression beyond the social codes that women might make, voluntarily or otherwise. As seen in the discussions above, those abiding by the social ideals of female honour are in turn mocked as hypocritical and controlling. Over time, the city in Beyzaie's films sinks to a level where inhabitants are cruel and untrustworthy, with values such as honour, integrity, culture and knowledge having lost out to greed and materialism within the Islamic state. Here, even loved ones can no longer trust each other and relationships become meaningless. In this confused state of affairs, it has become increasingly difficult to decipher the 'real' from the 'unreal' so much so that the city itself and the very existence of its inhabitants come under question.