THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

The Interpreter of Desires
Iranian Cinema and Psychoanalysis

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for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
Department of Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies
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DECLARATION

I hereby certify that the work contained herein has been composed by me in its entirety, and represents my own scholarly work. Besides Chapter 2, which has been published in the peer-reviewed journal *Camera Obscura*: *Feminism, Culture, and Media Studies*, no part of this thesis has been previously submitted for any other degree or professional qualification.

Signed:

Farshid Kazemi

Abstract

The goal of this thesis is the study of the structure of desire and sexuality in post-revolutionary Iranian cinema, through the prism of Lacanian psychoanalytic film theory. The scholarly literature on Iranian cinema has largely come from fields outside film studies and film theory, and almost no studies exist that focus on the question of desire and sexuality in Iranian cinema. Deploying a psychoanalytic film theoretical perspective, I discuss two distinct movements in Iranian cinema. Part I of the thesis focuses on the well-known New Iranian Cinema, where I foreground neglected aspects of this movement and consider the formal logic of this movement to revolve around the axis between the gaze and voice. I analyze the gaze as the Lacanian object-cause of desire in two filmic examples, and demonstrate that contra to the theory that the New Iranian Cinema is the locus of 1970s feminist gaze theory, I argue that it is one of the exemplary sites of the Lacanian object-gaze and one of the few examples of the cinema of desire in the world. I also foreground the voice as an important object of study in the New Iranian Cinema for the first time, and link Chion's concept of the acousmatic voice to Lacan's object-voice as the object-cause of desire, where the voice becomes a love-object in two filmic examples of the New Iranian Cinema. Then as the final example, I analyze a single film foregrounding several motifs such as transgender, and male and female homoeroticism through its female protagonists' forced gender re-signification and cross-dressing, where the logic of the Lacanian feminine 'No' and feminine *jouissance* become operative. In Part II, I theorize the emergence of a new film movement in Iranian cinema that represents a shift away from the conventions of the New Iranian Cinema of the 1990s and 2000s and deploys elements of the horror genre but with an uncanny dimension that evokes the weird and the eerie. Through a close textual analysis, I analyze two respective films that I situate in this new genre bending film movement. The first film was analyzed through a Lacanian prism that looks at the film's two-part structure where the first half functions as the world of fantasy and the second as the world of desire – where the traumatic Real of desire appears in all its nightmarish dimension. The last film was also theorized as an example of the uncanny between the weird and the eerie and analyzed through the psychoanalytic notion of the return of the repressed, where the chador-clad female vampire represented the return of feminine sexuality in the Real, due to its repression in the Islamic Republic or the (patriarchal) symbolic order. The common motif that runs through the films of this new movement, both at the level of form and content, is the palpable sense of the nightmarish atmosphere of fear and anxiety in contemporary Iranian society.

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The study of cinema has been, in many ways, a coming home for me. When I was a child my mother used to take me, and my sister to a cinema theater in Tehran that used to be called Goldis (now renamed Golriz) in Yousef Abad near our home. There we would watch Western and Iranian films, and I often could not wait for our next venture to the cinema. I particularly recall watching Franco Zeffirelli's film *Jesus of Nazareth* in that theater when I was about 6, and it had a profound effect upon me. It is to this cinema that I owe my first memories of the magic art of cinema, and the precious memories of my happy childhood and family in pre-revolutionary Iran. As Rumi says: 'Whoever has been separated from their origin, will seek their days of union once again.'

There is a wonderful anecdote about the French symbolist Alfred Jarry, who would make a short and pithy formula that would describe the essence of a person and what they did; for instance of Redon he said, "Redon: *he who mysteries*," or "Lauterc: *he who posters*," and so on. If I were to adapt this formula by Jarry, it would have to read: "Farshid: *he who interprets*."

–Farshid Kazemi, August 27, 2018
Edinburgh, Scotland

A Note on Transliteration

I have used a simplified and modified version of the *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* (*IJMES*) transliteration system. For vowels in Persian I have used the ‘e’ in place of ‘i’, and the short ‘o’ instead of the ‘u’. I have dispensed with all diacritical marks in the transliteration. Persian and Arabic terms that are common in English usage have not been transliterated or italicized. The transliteration system in cited sources have been retained in their original form.

Introduction

Iranian Cinema and Psychoanalysis (or Watching Iranian Movies with Lacan)

The Iranian government calls psychoanalysis, the enemy of the state.

– Gohar Homayounpour[1]

The central question that grounds the inquiry of this thesis is: why couple psychoanalysis and Iranian cinema or Iranian cinema and psychoanalysis? What is at stake in reading Iranian cinema through the prism of psychoanalytic film theory? At first glance, the two seem like an unlikely couple, but as psychoanalytic theory reminds us, it is only through probing the gaps, ruptures and fissures in the filmic text that the world of unconscious desires reveals itself. The wager of this thesis is that, in fact, there is a profound homology between Iranian cinema and psychoanalysis which can only be discovered through a short-circuiting reading of the two, where through a crossing of wires between them, unexpected sparks and theoretical insights come to light, which would otherwise remain unthought. The metaphor of short-circuiting as a method of critical reading is provided by Slavoj Žižek:

> A short circuit occurs when there is a wrong connection in the network—wrong, of course, from the standpoint of the smooth functioning of the network. Is therefore the shock of short circuiting not one of the best metaphors for a critical reading? Is not one of the most effective critical procedures to cross wires that do not usually touch: to take a major classic (text, author, notion), and read it in a short-circuiting way, through the lens of a "minor" author, text, or conceptual apparatus ("minor" should be understood here in Deleuze's sense: not "of lesser quality," but marginalized, disavowed by the hegemonic ideology, or dealing with a "lower," less dignified topic)? If the minor reference is well chosen, such a procedure can lead to insights which completely shatter and undermine our common perceptions.[2]

From this perspective, films in post-revolutionary Iranian cinema function as texts which when read in a short-circuiting way, through the "minor" conceptual apparatus

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[1] This is what the Iranian psychoanalyst Gohar Homayounpour says in a talk on her book, *Doing Psychoanalysis in Tehran*, at the Freud Museum in London. Homayounpouer goes on to state, "which I think they are right." See, http://podcast.freud.org.uk/e/doing-psychoanalysis-in-tehran/ time: 57:40. Accessed online, March 12, 2015.

[2] The first book in the Short-Circut series was by Žižek himself, see Slavoj Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf: the Perverse Core of Christianity* (MIT Press 2003), vii.

of Freudo-Lacanian psychoanalysis (again "minor" in the sense intended by Deleuze and Guattari as marginalized, disavowed, but also subversive and revolutionary),[3] completely shatter our common perceptions and conceptions, not only of Iranian cinema but of psychoanalysis itself. There is a radical political core inherent to this approach, since the crossing of wires between psychoanalysis and Iranian cinema can generate a theoretical short circuit that can uncover the unthought in the libidinal economy of the ruling ideology.

As the opening quote from Homayounpour demonstrates, psychoanalysis is seen as politically subversive by the hegemonic ideology of the Islamic Republic, since it considers psychoanalysis to pose such a threat that it must be deemed an enemy of the state. The theoretical question to be asked here is: why should psychoanalysis pose such a threat to the Islamic Republic? To put it briefly: the threat that psychoanalytic theory poses to the theocratic state lies in the fact that psychoanalysis is concerned with what is deemed the terrain of the ruling Shi'i *'ulama* (clergy) and *fuqaha* (jurists), namely desire and sexuality or Eros and eroticism. The ruling Shi'i clerics are concerned with covering over all expressions of (sexual) desire, especially feminine desire and female sexuality.[4] Indeed, desire and

[3] See Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Kafka Toward a Minor Literature* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1986).

[4] This underlying fear and threat of psychoanalysis ascribed to the Islamic Republic's ruling ideology by Homayounpour may be traced back to one of the early ideologues of the Iranian Revolution and vehement critics of the Pahlavi regime, namely the leftist Islamist, Ali Shariati (1933-1977). Regarding Freud and psychoanalysis Shariati writes, "In this new bourgeoisie, [he] armed himself against all moral and human values, against all high and ascending manifestations of the human soul and called it realism… A prophet of the bourgeoisie, whose religion was *sexualism*…. This prophet was named Freud. His religion was sexuality; his temple, *Freudism*." In another instance, Shariati blames psychoanalysis for the moral corruption of women, "… From *Freudism* [the bourgeoisie] built a supposedly scientific and humane religion. From sexuality they built their place of worship and created a powerful servant class. And the first sacrifice on the threshold of this temple was women's human values." Ali Shariati quoted in Orkideh Behrouzan, *Prozak Diaries: Psychiatry and Generational Memory in Iran* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2016), 37-38. A history of psychoanalysis in Iran is currently a desideratum. The main figure in Iran who has perhaps done most to try and rehabilitate psychoanalysis from such blatant misreadings is perhaps the British trained psychoanalyst and psychiatrist Mohammad Sanati. See Mohammad Sanati and Arash Javanbakht, "Psychiatry and Psychoanalysis in Iran," *Journal of The American Academy of Psychoanalysis and Dynamic Psychiatry*, 34(3), pp. 405-414, 2006. Available online: http://www.mohammadsanati.net/1390/culturepsychoanalysisiran/580. See also,

eroticism is the subject of psychoanalysis par excellence, since as Jacques Lacan states what, "Freudian thought has placed at the center of our interest in the economy of the psyche, [is] namely, Eros and eroticism."[5] In another turn Lacan states, "Desire is indeed the essential base, the goal, the aim, and the practice too, of everything that is being announced here, in this teaching, on the Freudian message."[6]As we shall see throughout this thesis, it is in Shi'i jurisprudence (*fiqh*) that a whole set of legal theories were elaborated in order to delimit or repress the representation of masculine and feminine desire and sexuality in relation to the cinema, through the enactment of the logic of the veil or the system of modesty (*hejab* in its broadest sense). In this sense, the Islamic Republic and its legal theoretical apparatus was/is concerned with the repression of (sexual) desire not just in society, but its articulation in the cinema. This is why the historicist approach to sexuality derived from Michel Foucault would fail in a proper analysis of post-revolutionary Iranian cinema (and Iranian society under the Islamic Republic for that matter), since as Joan Copjec states, "[historicism] refuses to believe in repression and proudly professes to be *illiterate in desire*."[7] Indeed, Foucault famously positions himself against what he calls, "the repressive hypothesis" (of desire), in psychoanalytic theory.[8] In this sense, to read post-revolutionary Iranian cinema, we have to be able to read desire, to know that desire is almost always unconscious desire, to recognize that desire is never transparent, neither to the subject nor to society or its cultural texts, and that where desire is concerned it always requires interpretation.

This brings me to the question of how we might understand the relationship between the psyche and culture, or how universal elements interact with cultural

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Nader Barzin, 'La pscychanalyse en Iran,' *Topique* 1, pp. 157-71, 2010. I have dealt with some aspects of psychoanalysis in Iran in a forthcoming book chapter, Farshid Kazemi, "The Repressed Event of (Shi'i) Islam: Psychoanalysis, the Trauma of Iranian Shi'ism, and Feminine Revolt," in *Psychoanalytic Islam and Islamic Psychoanalysis* (London/New York, Routledge, 2018).

[5] Jacques Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*: *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Book VII*. Ed. Jaques-Alain Miller, Trans. By Dennis Porter (London and New York: Routledge, 2008), 175.

[6] Jacques Lacan, *Anxiety: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book X*. Ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014), 214.

[7] Joan Copjec, *Read my Desire: Lacan against the Historicists* (Cambridge and Massachusetts: MIT, 1994) 14.

[8] See Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 10-12.

particularities. To answer this question we must look at the historical emergence of Freudian psychoanalysis itself. Indeed, if Freudian theory, in its original articulation, was appropriate to explain a certain cultural matrix and historical milieu in the West that relied on a Judeo-Christian ethics of sexual repression and control; then similarly, it fits well the structure of Iranian society in the aftermath of the 1979 Iranian Revolution, since Iranian society underwent a total Islamization where traditional Islamic ethics of sexual repression and control became operative in the wider culture and society. As the German-Korean philosopher Byung-Chul Han puts it:

> Freud's psychic apparatus is a repressive apparatus of domination and compulsion that operates with commands and prohibitions, that subjugates and oppresses. Just like disciplinary society, it is full of walls, barriers, thresholds, cells, borders, and border posts. Freud's psychoanalysis is therefore possible only in repressive societies, such as the society of sovereignty or the disciplinary society, which base their organization on the negativity of prohibitions and commands.[9]

In this precise sense, Freudian psychoanalysis is possible in post-revolutionary Iranian society precisely because it is a repressive society, at once a society of sovereignty and a disciplinary society (a Shi'i theocratic state operating with an Islamic legal code), whose organization is structured on prohibitions and commands. This is why a psychoanalytic theoretical method fits well with the structure of the psyche operative in post-revolutionary Iranian society and its cinematic production, since the interaction of psyche and culture in this formulation is based on repression, domination and compulsion.

My overall purpose in this thesis is to demonstrate that Freudo-Lacanian psychoanalytic film theory, more than any other theoretical framework, is the privileged instrument through which we may draw out the structure of desire and sexuality operative in post-revolutionary Iranian cinema, that would otherwise remain repressed or disavowed. This study then stages a mutually productive encounter between Iranian cinema and psychoanalytic film theory, which goes beyond the first wave psychoanalytic film theory of the 1970s and takes its place along Lacanian theorists such as Joan Copjec, Slavoj Žižek and Todd McGowan, who have initiated

[9] Byung-Chul Han, *Topology of Violence* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2018), 23.

a new wave of Lacanian film theory. If this thesis may be said to have one central aim: it is to argue that in order to properly read post-revolutionary Iranian cinema, we must become *the interpreter of desires*, to "become literate in desire" as Copjec puts it, in order to read what is unarticulable in these filmic texts, since it is *desire and its interpretation*[10] that is at the nexus of post-revolutionary Iranian cinema and psychoanalysis.

Iranian Cinema and Psychoanalysis: Parallel Histories

There is a fortuitous co-incidence in the historical appearance of psychoanalysis and Iranian cinema that has hitherto remained undiscovered, the uncovering of which is the first step in drawing out the homology between the two through a psychoanalytic procedure. The relationship between the historical emergence of psychoanalysis and the cinema has long been noted in film theory and by film theorists, with several volumes that variously foreground the parallel histories of cinema and psychoanalysis.[11] It was in 1895 that Freud and Breuer first published their work *Studies on Hysteria* and in the same year the Lumière Brothers screened the magic art of moving pictures in Paris to an astonished audience. In a now famous letter to his friend Wilehlm Fliess dated June 12, 1900, the significance of this date was registered by Freud, "Do you suppose that some day a marble tablet will be placed on the house inscribed with these words: 'In This House, on July 24th, 1895 the secret of Dreams was Revealed to Dr Sigm. Freud.' At the moment there seems little prospect of it."[12] However, this 'secre of dreams' was not disclosed to the world until Freud's seminal publication, *The Interpretation of Dreams* in 1900.[13] (In a strange twist of

[10] Jacques Lacan, *Le séminaire: Livre VI, Le Désir et son interprétation*, (Paris: Editions de la Martinière, 2013).
[11] Janet Bergstrom, ed., *Endless Night: Cinema and Psychoanalysis, Parallel Histories* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); also in the same volume see Stephen Heath, "Cinema and Psychoanalysis: Parallel Histories," in *Endless Night*, 25–56.
[12] Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams* (I), trans. James Strachey, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 4, ed. James Strachey (London: Hogarth, 1953), 121n.
[13] McGowan rightly observes that the *Interpretation of Dreams* appeared at the end of 1899, but Freud asked his publisher to date the book 1900 to publish the manuscript, in order to signal the epochal character of the book. See Todd McGowan.

fate, Lacan was also born in the same year on April 13, 1900). It is this book that Freud considered, even late in life, to contain the most important discoveries and insights of his career, as he states, "It contains, even according to my present-day judgment, the most valuable of all the discoveries it has been my good fortune to make. Insight such as this falls to one's lot but once in a lifetime."[14] It is in *The Interpretation of Dreams* that Freud provides his first psychoanalytic theorization of the unconscious, and the analysis of dreams, as he states, "The interpretation of dreams is the royal road to a knowledge of the unconscious activities of the mind."[15] It is in dreams and their interpretation therefore that we find a parallel between psychoanalysis and the cinema, since the cinema has long been considered as a form of public dreaming and a *dream factory* (an appellation that was first given to Hollywood cinema).[16]

It was in the same year, in August 18, 1900 (21 Rabi al-Thani 1318) that the first cinematic images were captured by an Iranian photographer. These images were shot by the Baha'i born Mirza Ebrahim Khan Akassbashi Sani al-Saltaneh (1874-1915), the court photographer of the Qajar king, Mozaffar al-Din Shah, who accompanied the king in his first visit to Europe.[17] It was during their visit to France whilst seeing the Exposition in Paris earlier in July that Mirza Ebrahim Khan Akassbashi was introduced to the '*Cinématographe*.' The entrance of the cinematograph or film technology in Iran was a subversive event during the Qajar era, and created an uproar among the Shi'i *'ulama* (clergy), and was especially deemed a threat to the performers of Iran's religious dramatic art, *ta'ziyeh* or Shi'i

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Psychoanalytic Film Theory and the Rules of the Game (New York: Bloomsbury, 2015), 2.

[14] Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams* (II), trans. James Strachey, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 4, ed. James Strachey (London: Hogarth, 1953), 608.

[15] Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams* (I), trans. James Strachey, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 5, ed. James Strachey (London: Hogarth, 1953), 608.

[16] Vicky Lebeau, *Psychoanalysis and Cinema: The Play of Shadows* (New York: Wallflower Press, 2002), 6.

[17] On the life and background of Ebrahim Khan Akassbashi see, Hamid Naficy, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema Volume 1: The Artisanal Era, 1897-1941* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 44-50; cf. Farrokh Gaffary, "Akkas-Bashi." *Encyclopedia Iranica*, vol. 1, ed. Ehsan Yarshater, p. 719. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985. Available Online: http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/akkas-basi-ebrahim

passion play, such as Shaykh Hassan Shimr, Haji Barak Allah, Akbar Taziyeh Khan, Amr Allah Malmoos and Ahmad Marmari.[18] The *Tekkiyah-ye Dowlat* (the Royal State Theater) was constructed by Nasir al-Din Shah (1831-1896)[19] specifically for the purpose of performing the passion plays, and many of these actors (*shabih khans*) orchestrated its performance to devout male Shi'i audiences, for whom witnessing the enactment of the tragic events of Karbala functioned as a form of religious purgation or catharsis.[20] As Mas'ud Mehrabi states in his history of Iranian cinema: "suddenly among the gifts Mozaffar al-Din Shah brought back from his visit to Europe (*farang*), a technology entered Iran that incited the influential voice of Shaykh Hassan Shimr and drew his powerful presence in opposition to: The Magic Lantern (*cheraq-e jadoo*)"[21] (i.e., the cinema).

It was after seeing the films at the Paris Exposition that Mozaffar al-Din Shah became enamoured with "this magical phenomenon," the details of which he records in his travelogue:

> "….[A]t 9:00 P.M. we went to the Exposition and the Festival Hall where they were showing cinematographe, which consists of still and motion pictures. Then we went to Illusion building ….In this Hall they were showing cinematographe. They erected a very large screen in the centre of the Hall, turned off all electric lights and projected the picture of cinematography on that large screen. It was very interesting to watch. Among the pictures were Africans and Arabians traveling with camels in the African desert which was very interesting. Other pictures were of the Exposition, the moving street, the Seine River and ships crossing the river, people swimming and playing in the water and many others which were all very interesting. We instructed Akkas Bashi to purchase all kinds of it [cinematographic equipment] and bring it to Tehran so God willing he can make some there and show them to our servants."[22]

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[18] Massoud Mehrabi, *Tarikh-e sinema-yi Iran: Az aghaz ta sal-e 1357* (The History of Iranian Cinema: From the Beginning to 1979) (Tehran: Film Publication, 1988), 14.
[19] Abbas Amanat, *The Pivot of the Universe: Nasir Al-Din Shah Qajar and the Iranian Monarchy, 1831-1896* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2008) 435.
[20] On the *ta'ziyeh* see Bahram Beyzaie, *Namayesh dar Iran* [Dram in Iran]. Tehran: Roshangaran va motale'at-e zanan, 2001); cf. Peter J. Celkowski ed. *Ta'ziyeh: Ritual and Drama in Iran* (New York: New York University Press, 1979).
[21] Mehrabi, *Tarikh-e sinema-yi Iran*, 14.
[22] Translation of the travelogue in Ali M. Issari, *Cinema in Iran 1900-1979* (Metuchen: The Scarecrow Press, 1989), 58-59.

Hence on the order of Mozaffar al-Din Shah, Akkasbashi purchased two film cameras, one a Gaumont, including some film stock and a number of films to bring back to Iran.[23] Akkasbashi then was responsible for the introduction of film technology to Iran, and may be regarded as Iran's first filmmaker. It was before their return to Iran, that Akkasbashi shot this film footage in Belgium while at the Festival of Flowers or Flower Parade in Ostend, and recorded the parade in which the Shah participated, where a group of (unveiled) women traveling on floats threw flowers and bouquets at the king, and he enthusiastically threw flowers back at the them. This moment was not only the first images of movement captured on the Iranian cinema(tograph), but as Negar Mottahedeh notes, it was during the parade in 1900, that there was "an exchange, in effect a movement – a movement of desire between the shah and European women, who, unlike women on the streets of Tehran, were moving about unveiled."[24] In this way, at the beginning of the introduction of film technology into Iran, desire was inscribed and recorded on this technology, whereby the "mutual exchange (of glances) on the anticipatory eve of modernity was overwritten years later by the veiling of all women from the voyeurism of the gaze and the Islamization of desire for the contemporary Iranian screen."[25] Beyond the fascination and novelty of movement in the technology of the moving image (i.e., cinema), there was the movement of desire.

At the heart of the Freudian discovery is the theory of the unconscious. The Freudian unconscious is not the site of human feelings or emotions, but rather the reservoir of desires and drives. In psychoanalysis the unconscious operates under a different logic that is incommensurable with the conscious mind, namely the logic of desire. Indeed, as McGowan notes, the most significant element that functions as a co-incidence between psychoanalysis and the cinema is that "Freud takes an interest

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[23] Naficy, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema Volume 1*, 44.
[24] Negar Mottahedeh, *Representing the Unpresentable: Images of Reform from the Qajars to the Islamic Republic of Iran* (Syracuse University Press, Syracuse, 2008), 209. It is interesting that one of the earliest short films made by Akkasbashi in Iran, is a film shot of Iranian women wearing their long veils (*chador*) with their face veils (*rubandeh* or *charchoq*), which may index his modernist Baha'i views by highlighting the status and condition of women in Iran in juxtaposition to their unveiled European counterparts as seen and shot by him in his European tours with the shah, exemplified by the Flower Parade. See, Mehrdad Zahedian's *Lost Reels* (*Halqehha-ye Gomshodeh*, 2004). Film.
[25] Mottahedeh, *Representing the Unpresentable*, 210.

in dreams because they unlock the unconscious and films, which share the structure of dreams, carry the same promise."[26] In this way, psychoanalysis and Iranian cinema are mutually connected not only because they originate in the same year (1900); but more significantly, because psychoanalysis makes its most important discoveries through dream analysis, and in this sense it resembles the cinema itself, since "the cinema remains a dream factory, a form of public dreaming."[27] But, as McGowan notes, there is a fundamental difference between films and dreams, since a dream is the product of an individual subject, but a film is not made by a single director but through collaboration with hundreds of other individuals.[28] Nonetheless, what we encounter in films is our collective dreams or nightmares: it is in the cinema where we are confronted not only with our own innermost desires but the desire of the (social) Other.

Figure 1. Mirza Ebrahim Khan Akkasbashi Sani al-Saltaneh in Europe in 1900 (spotlighted). Frame enlargement from Zahedian's film *Lost Reels*.

[26] McGowan. *Psychoanalytic Film Theory*, 2.
[27] Ibid, 1.
[28] Ibid, 2.

First and Second Wave Psychoanalytic Film Theory

Psychoanalytic film theory may be delineated into two distinctive historical phases or waves.[29] The primary sources for both of which are the thought of the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan (1901-1981), and secondarily the father of psychoanalysis himself, Sigmund Freud (1856-1939). The first wave of psychoanalytic film theory also called Screen theory – since many of the film theorists associated with this wave published their work in the British journal *Screen* – began in the late 1960s and 1970s which emphasized Lacan's Imaginary order (and to a lesser degree the Symbolic order), in Lacan's ternary orders of psychic formation: the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real,[30] and was characterized by a critique of the operation of ideology and the role of the cinematic apparatus in purveying this process. In Anglo-American cinema studies, one of the seminal publications was the collective reading of the film *Young Mr. Lincoln* (1939) by the group in the French journal *Cahiers du Cinéma* (a journal that as we shall see also plays a seminal role in relation to psychoanalysis and Iranian cinema as well) that was translated in *Screen* in 1972. It is from this moment onwards that psychoanalytic theory became the dominant mode of theorizing cinema, and *Screen* became the foremost anglophone journal of film theory with references to Freud and Lacan as its point of departure.

[29] Here I follow Todd McGowan's delineation of the two waves of psychoanalytic film theory. See Todd McGowan, "Introduction." In *Lacan and Contemporary Film*. Ed. Todd McGowan and Sheila Kunkle (New York: Other Press, 2004); cf. the introduction in *The Real Gaze: Film Theory after Lacan* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2007) xi-xxix.

[30] Although Lacan never capitalized the ternery order of the Imaginary, Symbolic, and Real in the original French, throughout this thesis all references to Lacan's orders will be capitalized to distinguish them from the ordinary senses of these terms, hence Real rather than 'real.' However, whenever they appear in quotes from the work of other authors, they are left as they are in the original.

This first wave of psychoanalytic film theory or Screen theory was distinguished by such figures as Jean-Louis Baudry,[31] Christian Metz,[32] and later Laura Mulvey[33] among others, who deployed the works of Lacan, inflected through the lens of the Marxist theorist Louis Althusser's concept of ideology and interpellation in the formation of the subject.[34] The first wave of psychoanalytic film theory was based on the ideological dimension of the cinematic apparatus and in its analysis of filmic reality, as it positioned the spectator as a passive subject, who functioned as a mere consumer of images on the screen that interpolated her/him ideologically and thereby subjectivized (even subjugated) him/her according to the hegemonic or dominant ideology (i.e., Hollywood cinema). The feminist psychoanalytic theory à la the work of Laura Mulvey that has also been called feminist gaze theory was an elaboration of some of the central elements in Screen theory.[35]

In feminist psychoanalytic film theory the work of Mary Ann Doane and Kaja Silverman may be considered exemplary, since they both theorize the gaze and the voice in novel ways (see especially the chapter on the voice where I engage with their work). However, despite the sophisticatation of their theorization of the gaze, they both remained within the existing coordinates of the ideological reading of the gaze in Screen theory. For example, although Silverman's understanding of Lacan's concept of the object-gaze is not a misreading, yet she still differeniated her position from Lacan by maintaining that images projected by the gaze are "ideological" and "culturally generated." She states, "Although [Lacan's] *Four Fundamental Concepts*

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[31] Jean-Louis Baudry, "Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus." In *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology: A Film Theory Reader*. Edited by Philip Rosen, New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 286–298; cf. Jean-Louis Baudry, "The Apparatus: Metapsychological Approaches to the Impression of Reality in Cinema" [1975]. In *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology*. Philip Rosen. Ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 299–318.

[32] Christian Metz, *Psychoanalysis and Cinema: The Imaginary Signifier* (London: Macmillan Press, 1982).

[33] Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." In *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*. 5th Ed. Ed. Leo Braudy and Michael Cohen (833–845) (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

[34] Althuser states, "Ideology interpellates individuals as subjects… All ideology has the function of (which defines it) of 'constituting concrete indviduals as subjects." See Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses." In *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*. Trans. B. Brewster (New York: Monthly Review, 1971), 162.

[35] For a detailed discussion of Laura Mulvey and feminist gaze theory see Chapter 1.

does not do so, it seems to me crucial that we insist upon the ideological nature of the screen by describing it as that culturally generated image or repertoire of images through which subjects not only constituted, but differentiated in relation to class, race, sexuality, age, and nationality."[36] In this respect, Silverman remains within the logic of first wave of psychoanalytic theory where the screen always already functions to ideologically interpellate the viewing subject into various socioculturally determined subject positions.

The break with the first wave of 1970s Lacanian film theory, called by Todd McGowan "an Imaginary Lacan"[37] due to its emphasis on the Imaginary register – also an allusion to its misunderstanding of Lacan by evoking the notion of illusion/fiction inhering in Lacan's concept of the Imaginary – came in the late 1980s and early 1990s. This second wave was spearheaded by two central figures, the first of which is Joan Copjec, who in her work *Read my Desire*, particularly in the essay that appeared earlier called "The Orthopsychic Subject: Film Theory and the Reception of Lacan", characterized the earlier reception of Lacan in film theory, especially Mulvey's notion of the "male gaze," as the "'Foucauldization' of Lacanian theory."[38] The second figure is the philosopher and Lacanian theorist Slavoj Žižek,[39] especially through his intervention in *The Fright of Real Tears*, which is entirely dedicated to rehabilitating Lacanian film theory against its misunderstanding and its detractors through an instantiation of its actuality via the cinema of Krzysztof Kieślowski.[40]

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[36] Kaja Silverman, *Male Subjectivity at the Margins* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 150; cf. *The Threshold of the Visible World* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 125-161. For a similar critique of Screen theory and feminist gaze theory, see Henry Krips, *Fetish: An Erotics of Culture* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1999).
[37] McGowan, *Lacan and Contemporary Film,* xiii.
[38] Joan Copjec, *Read my Desire: Lacan against the Historicists* (Cambridge and Massachusetts: MIT, 1994) 19. See especially chapter 2, pp. 15-38.
[39] Aside from Slavoj Žižek, to some extent the other members of the Ljubljana School of Lacanian psychoanalysis**,** such as Mladen Dolar and Alenka Zupančič, belong in the second wave. Dolar and Zupančič often allude to cinema in their respective works, but some of their sustained film analysis appears in relation to the cinema of Alfred Hitchcock and Ernst Lubitsch. See *Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Lacan, but Were Afraid to Ask Hitchcock*, ed. Slavoj Žižek (London/New York: Verso, 1992); *Lubitsch Can't Wait: A Collection of Ten Philosophical Discussions on Ernst Lubitsch's Film Comedy*, ed. by Ivana Novak, Mladen Dolar, and Jela Krečič (Ljubljana: Slovenian Cinematheque, 2014).
[40] Slavoj Žižek, *The Fright of Real Tears: Krzysztof Kieślowski Between Theory and Post-Theory* (London: BFI Publishing, 2001).

In Copjec and Žižek's work on Lacanian theory there is a shift in the emphasis from the register of the Imaginary, to the Symbolic and especially to the Real. The Lacanian Real is not synonymous with 'reality,' it is a term that goes through several stages of development in Lacan's teaching, but to formulate it in "theological" terms: the Lacanian Real is like the *theos apophasis*, the *deus obscunditus* of negative theology, which cannot be articulated in positive terms; it is the failure of signification. As Paul Verhaeghe states apropos Lacan's concept of the Real, a "difference [lies] between knowledge and something beyond knowledge, something that belongs to another register, other than the symbolic order....[T]here is something that cannot be put into words, something for which words are lacking"[41] For Lacan, "the Real is beyond symbolization," it is not reducible to the order of the signifier (i.e., language). According to Lacan "truth" is different from "mere knowledge;" in that "the essential characteristic of truth is that it confronts us with the ultimate point where knowledge about desire... can no longer be put into words.... This dimension beyond the signifier is the Lacanian real."[42] The Real appears at the point where the signifier misfires, at the moment where signification fails to signify within the signifying system.

As important as the first wave of Lacanian film theory was, yet its deployment of Lacan was critiqued in this second wave as a "misconception" of some of the concepts of Lacan such as the concept of the "gaze" and "apparatus." As Joan Copjec has stated:

> Let me first… summarize what I take to be the central misconception of film theory: believing itself to be following Lacan, it conceives the screen as mirror; in doing so, however, it operates in ignorance of, and at the expense of, Lacan's more radical insight, whereby the mirror is conceived as screen… This misconception is at the base of film theory's formulation of two concepts - the apparatus and the gaze - and of their interrelation….[43]

[41] Paul Verhaeghe, *Beyond Gender. From Subject to Drive* (New York: Other, 2001) 38.
[42] Ibid, 39.
[43] Copjec, *Read my Desire*, 15-1 6. For a discussion of the Lacanian gaze, see Chapter 1.

Indeed, it is one of the signs of the dominance of this early semiotically inflected psychoanalytic film theory during this period that in her criticism Copjec simply refers to it with the blanket term "film theory". But the error of film theory that she points to is not the error of film theory as we would understand the term today, but that of the first wave of psychoanalytic film theory.

Another critique came from a different quarter in film studies, namely the cognitivist school. The first wave psychoanalytic film theory came under severe criticism by a band of film studies scholars, largely from the Anglo-American tradition, with such figures as David Bordwell and Noël Carroll spearheading the attack, through an edited volume of articles called *Post-Theory*.[44] They effectively sought to completely collapse the entire edifice of psychoanalytic film theory and its pervasive influence in film studies that the first wave of Lacanian film theory exerted.[45] However, as Copjec and Žižek's work have shown this first wave of Lacanian film theory was based on some misconceptions of Lacanian concepts. In his book *The Fright of Real Tears*, Žižek critiques both first wave psychoanalytic film theory and the historicist-cognitivist approach to cinema. For Žižek, the film theory of the 1970s and 80s was based on a reading of Lacan that was a reductive reading of Lacan's earlier work on the mirror stage, and in this sense Lacanian film theory operated under what he termed, "the case of the missing Lacanians" (e.g., Copjec and himself, Zupančič and Dollar). In this sense, Žižek argues that cognitivists (Carol and Bordwell et al) were effectively dismantelling a straw man, a caricature of Lacan, rather than the Lacanian theoretical edifice as such. Žižek then advances readings on Andrei Tarkovsky (*Stalker* and *Nostalghia*), Krzysztof Kieślowski (the *Three Colours Trilogy*) and David Lynch (*Lost Highway*) based on the 'Real' Lacanian interpretation.

Similarly Todd McGowan, who himself stands squarely in the second wave of psychoanalytic film theory, has stated apropos the above critics of Lacanian film theory:

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[44] David Bordwell and Noël Carroll (ed.), *Post-Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies,* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996).

[45] The current hegemonic approach to film studies comes from the analytic-cognitivist (empiricist, positivist) Anglo-American tradition, and the other from continental philosophy, which may be called mainly Deleuzian, with 'Deleuze' as its master signifier.

> For… opponents of Lacanian film theory, the theory's great error lies in its attempt to account for everything on the level of theory alone without empirical verification… It is my contention, however, that traditional Lacanian film theory became a target for these attacks not because of its overreliance on purely psychoanalytic concepts, but because of its deviation from these concepts, and that, therefore, the proper response to the demise of Lacanian film theory is not a defense of its previous claims but rather a return to Lacanian concepts themselves in the analysis of the cinema—and with this a renewal of the endeavor to theorize the filmic experience.[46]

According to these criticisms of Lacanian film theory, everything remains only at the level of "theory" and has no empirical verification, and that what Lacanian theory describes are only ideal spectators that do not exist in reality.[47] Such critiques do not invalidate my approach to Lacanian theory either, since my deployment of Lacan is grounded in particular issues (i.e., desire and sexuality), in which Lacanian psychoanalytic theory provides important insights that cannot be rivaled with any other theoretical framework.[48] Indeed, as mentioned above, for Lacan the central terrain of psychoanalysis is desire or Eros. Therefore the ultimate goal of second wave psychoanalytic film theory, and my own effort here, is a sort of 'return to Lacan,'[49] by attending closely to Lacan's concepts and thereby staging a renewed encounter between Lacanian film theory and cinema, and in this instance Iranian cinema. A number of works have begun to appear that deploy the theoretical edifice of this second wave Lacanian psychoanalytic film theory that demonstrates the theoretically productive dimension of this return to Lacan, hence the requiem for the departed soul of psychoanalytic film theory was/is, to say the least, premature, since Lacanian film theory is standing alive and well beside these happy mourners. Thus, my own approach to Lacanian film theory in reading Iranian cinema will be grounded more on this second wave rather than the first wave, as I will stage the radical disruption of the Real into the Iranian Imaginary and Symbolic operative in the Islamic Republic, where desire and sexuality are foregrounded in the register of the

[46] McGowan, *The Real Gaze: Film Theory after Lacan*, 5.
[47] John Mullarkey, *Refractions of Reality: Philosophy and the Moving Image* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 58–61.
[48] See also Erfani, *Iranian Cinema* 94. I am in agreement with Erfani on the use of Lacanian theory in this respect.
[49] Lacan famously referred to his own teaching as 'the return to Freud,' and in a way the second wave psychoanalytic film theory can be called 'the return to Lacan.'

Real rather then the register of the Imaginary apropos voyeuristic pleasure and ideological identification. It is the eruption of the Real of desire in the filmic form and narrative, which as we shall see, often destabilizes the censorship codes and conventions that regulate Iranian cinema.

Psychoanalytic Film Theory and Iranian Cinema

One of the first Iranian film critics/theorists who employed psychoanalysis in his writings on film was the novelist, essayist and film critic Fereydoun Hoveyda (1924-2006). The brother of the more famous Amir-Abbas Hoveyda, the prime minister of Iran under Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi (from 1965 to 1977),[50] Hoveyda received his education at Sorbonne University and worked in Paris for UNESCO in the 1950s. Whilst living in Paris, Hoveyda became part of the influential film critics at *Cahiers du cinéma* "who developed the *politique des auteurs* in the 1950s,"[51] and contributed regularly to the film journal from 1955 to 1965. Along his famous colleagues who were to become the auteurs of the new wave (*La Nouvelle Vague*) – such as Jean Luc-Godard, François Truffaut and Claude Chabrol, Rohmer, and Rivette – Hoveyda was one of the key figures in the elaboration of auteurism in *Cahiers*, particularly in foregrounding the role of *mise-en-scene*, as seen in his celebrated review (published in May 1960) of Nicholas Ray's *Party Girl* (1958): 'What constitutes the essence of cinema is nothing other than *mise-en-scene*. It is through this that everything on the screen is expressed, transforming, as if by magic,

[50] Hoveyda was accused of being a Baha'i by the Shi'ite clergy in order to discredit the Pahlavi regime since their father, Habib Allah, had come from a Baha'i family, although there is evidence that he had grown distant from the Baha'i faith, and did not bring up his children in the religion. In the biography of Amir Abbas Hoveyda, *The Persian Sphinx*, Abbas Milani refers to an account from Fereydoun Hoveyda that states, "I was fourteen years old when I first heard the word 'Baha'i' and learned what it meant from a friend." See Abbas Milani, *The Persian Sphinx: Amir-Abbas Hoveyda and the Riddle of the Iranian Revolution* (Mage Publishers, 2000), 47; cf. also see, Abbas Milani, "Hoveyda, Amir-Abbas," *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, Vol. XII, Fasc. 5, pp. 543-550. Available online: http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/hoveyda-amir-abbas

[51] Robert Lang, "An interview with Fereydoun Hoveyda," *Screen* 34:4 Winter 1993, p. 392.

a screenplay written by someone else and imposed on the director into something which is truly the film of an auteur.'"[52]

Apropos psychoanalytic theory, from the mid 50s to the mid 60s Hoveyda authored 52 articles in total in *Cahiers*, many of which alluded to Freud and Lacan or psychoanalytic concepts. In one particular reference to Lacan, that is relevant for our purposes here, Hoveyda also highlights certain resemblances between the psychoanalyst and the function of the film critic/theorist. He writes:

> In many respects, it [the film critic] resembles that of the psychoanalyst. Does he not, in effect, have to reconstruct through the film the discourse of the auteur (subject) in its continuity, bring to light the unconscious that underpins it and explain the particular way it is articulated? The unconscious is indeed, as Lacan would say, marked by a gap; it constitutes as it were the censored sequence. But, as in psychoanalysis, the truth can reveal itself; it is written not in the 'visible' sequence of the images, but elsewhere: in what we call the auteur's 'technique', in the choice of actors, in the decors and the way actors and objects relate to these decors, in gestures, in dialogue, etc. A film is a kind of rebus, a crossword puzzle. Or rather it is a language which sparks off a debate, which doesn't end with the screening of the film but engenders a real searching.[53]

This early reference to Lacan and psychoanalysis by Hoveyda in 1961 is quite startling,[54] since it prefigured the semiotic inflected first wave Lacanian psychoanalytic theory which was to be later developed by figures such as Christian Metz, especially in his 1965 essay in *Cahiers*, "On the Impression of Reality in the Cinema,"[55] and of course later fully developed in "The Imaginary Signifier"

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[52] Lang, "An interview with Fereydoun Hoveyda," 392.
[53] Fereydoun Hoveyda: 'Self-Criticism" ('Autocritique', *Cahiers du Cinema* 126, December 1961) in *Cahiers du Cinéma Volume 2. 1960-1968: New Wave, New Cinema, Re-evaluating Hollywood*, ed. Jim Hillier (London: Routledge, 1986), 261.
[54] Jim Hillier writes, "Fereydoun Hoveyda's 1961 'Self-Criticism', noting the general imprecision of critical language, makes manifest the desire to find a more 'scientific' critical language and gives some sense of this 'opening up': his main points of reference are Saussure, Merleau-Ponty and the nature of signification in language, Marx on literature, Lévi-Strauss and anthropology, Lacan and psychoanalysis. This may be a startling array of references for an essay dated 1961, when *Cahiers* was generally reckoned to be thoroughly obsessed with American cinema, authorship and *mise-en-scene*!" See, *Cahiers du Cinéma Volume 2. 1960-1968: New Vave, New Cinema, Re-evaluating Hollywood*, ed. Jim Hillier (London: Routledge, 1986), 226.
[55] See "On the Impression of Reality in the Cinema" in Christian Metz, *Film Language – A Semiotics of Cinema* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974).

published in *Screen* in 1975.[56] Therefore, from the various references to Lacan and psychoanalysis in Hoveyda's oeuvre during his *Cahiers* period,[57] he may be regarded as one of the proto-psychoanalytic film theorist who was among the earliest figures that prefigured the advent of first wave of psychoanalytic film theory or Screen theory.

Although Hoveyda intermittently used psychoanalysis or Lacan in his film criticism in general, he never deployed psychoanalytic theory in relation to Iranian cinema, since he almost never wrote an analysis of any Iranian films, although he does refer to the cinema of Abbas Kiarostami in passing.[58] The first sustained and insightful engagement between Iranian cinema and psychoanalytic film theory, particularly feminist gaze theory, was Negar Mottahedeh's already classic text, *Displaced Allegories* (2008).[59] Mottahedeh's work is influenced by psychoanalytic film theory via Christian Metz's film semiotics and Laura Mulvey's critique of the male-gaze in her essay, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," both of which are seminal figures of first wave psychoanalytic film theory or Screen theory. Since I locate my own work in second wave psychoanalytic film theory, I critically engage with Mottahedeh's work in depth in the chapters on the gaze (Chapter 1) and voice (Chapter 2).

Another important figure is the film scholar Hamid Naficy, who although does not utilize Lacan often, yet on occasion refers to Lacan and psychoanalytic theory. For instance, Naficy states apropos the veil in Iranian cinema that, "the concept of the veil as a lure or masquerade can profitably be discussed through Lacan's theories."[60] This concept of the veil as a lure apropos masquerade is more

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[56] Christian Metz, "The Imaginary Signifier" *Screen*, Volume 16, Issue 2, 1 July 1975, Pages 14–76.

[57] In another essay in *Cahiers* in 1961 Hoveyda refers to Lacan and psychoanalysis, while interpreting Jean Rouch's film *Chronique d'un été* (1961), See Fereydoun Hoveyda: *Cinéma vérité*, or Fantastic Realism' (*Cinéma vérité ou realism fantastique'*, *Cahiers du Cinema* 125, November 1961), in *Cahiers du Cinéma Volume 2. 1960-1968*, 252.

[58] Fereydoun Hoveyda, *The Hidden Meaning of Mass Communications: Cinema, Books, and Television in the Age of Computers* (Westport, Connecticut/London: Praeger Publishers, 2000), 27, 71.

[59] Negar Mottahedeh, *Displaced Allegories: Post-Revolutionary Iranian Cinema* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009).

[60] Naficy, "Veiled vision/powerful presences", in Life and art: the new Iranian cinema, edited by Rosa Issa and Sheila Whitaker (London: British Film Institute, 1999) 63.

related to first wave psychoanalytic theory, indeed Naficy mentions the work of the first wave feminist psychoanalytic film theorist Mary Ann Doan in the footnote as an example of the use of the veil.[61] More recently Naficy has used Lacan's concept of the Imaginary and Symbolic discussing the contradictory logic that emerges from a pre-modern "psychosocial configuration" that "produces an apparent contradiction between an inner private self and an outer public self… "[62] Naficy considers the Lacanian Imaginary and Symbolic to be operative in Iranian cinema and its representation of women. As he states:

> In Lacanian terms, the interior is the realm of the undifferentiated self, which is united with the Imaginary prior to the mirror-stage experience, while the exterior is the realm of the Other, where individuals must negotiate their entry into the Symbolic. This dual, collective, and hierarchical conception of the self produces tensions between individual subjectivity and collective identity that are widespread in Iranian cinema and in women's representation by it.[63]

Naficy's reading of the Lacanian Imaginary and Symbolic into the filmic structure of post-revolutionary Iranian cinema and women's representation in it are generally correct, yet I will demonstrate that in the examples of Iranian films that I analyze there is an outburst or eruption of the Lacanian Real that disrupts, transgresses and destabilizes the Imaginary in its construction of the subject and in the Symbolic order, where the realm of politics and social normativity resides. Here again by focusing on the Imaginary and the Symbolic, Naficy's brief use of Lacan falls under first wave psychoanalytic film theory.

Indeed, when speaking of Lacan in relation to the cinema, Naficy often refers to the Lacan of first wave psychoanalytic film theory or Screen theory. For instance, in his discussion of the various looks that cinema engenders/produces, he speaks of three looks, the first is voyeuristic and derived from Freud, the second is narcissistic and derived from Lacan, and third is masochistic, referring to Delueze's discussion of

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[61] Naficy states, "For a relevant application of these to cinema see Mary Anne Doane, *The Desire to Desire: The Women's Films of the 1940s* (Bloomingdale: Indiana University, 1987)."
[62] Naficy, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema Vol. 4*, 102.
[63] Ibid, 102.

masochism[64] to derive the last conception of the look, which he particularly associates with post-revolutionary Iranian cinema.[65] This reference to Lacan's concept of the look and its relation to cinema is derived from Screen theory, which as already discussed has as its point of departure Lacan's early essay on the mirror stage where he developed the imaginary order in which the child's identification with its specular image creates the illusion of wholeness, hence the Lacanian *imaginary* signifying at once both image and illusion.

Hamid Dabashi has also written that, "Lacan's distinction among what he called the imaginary order, the symbolic order, and the real had always fascinated me,"[66] and goes on to apply Lacan's concept of the Imaginary and Symbolic in his reading of Kiarostami, where he considers that Kiarostami's "anarchic imaginary disorder" disrupts the symbolic order. However, this is a misreading of Lacan's concept of the Imaginary, and Farhang Erfani rightly corrects Dabashi's misinterpretation and states that, "'anarchic disorder' is on the side of the real and not the imaginary."[67] Although Dabashi has written a number of books on Iranian cinema, his use of Lacan in this instance is based on a misunderstanding of the Imaginary for the Real, since it is only the eruption of the Real that can disrupt the smooth functioning of the Symbolic order.

Perhaps the most significant figure to have used Lacan in reading Iranian cinema is the Lacanian theorist Joan Copjec. Copjec's deployment of Lacan in reading Kiarostami's film, *Bad ma ra khahad bord* (*The Wind Will Carry Us*, Iran, 1999), especially through Lacan's concept of the object-gaze, may be considered to be the first serious attempt at deploying Lacanian film theory in reading Iranian films by a Lacanian theorist who is one of the founding figures of second wave psychoanalytic film theory.[68] Copjec's work is dedicated to the study of Iranian cinema through a focus on perhaps the greatest auteur of the New Iranian Cinema,

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[64] Gilles Deleuze, *Masochism: Coldness and Cruelty & Venus in Furs*, trans. Jean McNeil (New York: Zone Books, 1991).
[65] Naficy, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema Vol. 4*, 107.
[66] Hamid Dabashi, *Masters & Masterpieces of Iranian Cinema* (Mage Publishers, 2007), 283.
[67] Farhang Erfani, *Iranian Cinema and Philosophy: Shooting Truth* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2011) 88.
[68] Joan Copjec, "The Object-Gaze: Shame, Hejab, Cinema," *Filozofski Vestnik* (Ljubljana), vol. XXVII, no. 2 (2007), 161-83.

namely Abbas Kiarostami.[69] However, based on the contents of various articles published by Copjec on Kiarostami, she has become more engaged with Islamic philosophy as a theoretical framework for reading Kiarostami's cinematic universe, where Lacanian theory seems to have taken the theoretical back stage, although it is not absent.[70] Particularly inspired by the scholarship of the French philosopher and Islamo-Iranologist Henry Corbin (1903-1978)[71] and his elaboration of the concept *alam al-mithal* or the world of images in Islamicate philosophy and mysticism, famously translated by Corbin as 'the imaginal world'[72] (from the Latin *mundus imaginalis*). Copjec's work on Kiarostami is influenced by this Corbinian inflection, which was partially articulated earlier by Negar Mottahedeh in her work, arguing that the concept of the imaginal world is operative in post-revolutionary Iranian cinema, where drawing on the reservoir of Shi'ite mytho-history (the martyrdom of Imam Hosayn) and drama (*ta'ziyeh*), "the post-Revolutionary film industry in the Islamic Republic was to purify these [filmic] technologies and thereby articulate the Iranian nation as a this-worldly displacement of an imaginal world – in other words, to create a world beyond the commodified image world of Hollywood."[73] In fact, it is possible that in one of his lectures in 1974 where Corbin distinguishes between the

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[69] Joan Copjec's forthcoming book is on Kiarostami, provisionally titled: *"Cloud": Between Paris and Tehran*, to be published by MIT Press.

[70] For these studies see, Joan Copjec, "The Fate of the Image in Church History and the Modern State," *Politica Comun: A Journal of Thought*, vol. 1, no. 2 (Nov. 2012), Mexico: 17, Instituto de Estudios Criticos/TAMU/ Aberdeen/ Universita degli Studio Salerno; cf. Joan Copjec, "The Censorship of Interiority," *Umbr(a*), special issue on "Islam," Spring 2009. Joan Copjec, "Cinema as Thought Experiment: On Movement and Movements," *differences* (2016) 27 (1): 143-175.

[71] For a critical appraisal of the work of Corbin, see Steven M. Wasserstrom, *Religion After Religion: Gershom Scholem, Mircea Eliade, and Henry Corbin at Eranos*, (Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1999); also, Vahid Brown, "A Counter-History of Islam: Ibn 'Arabi within the Spiritual Topography of Henry Corbin," *Journal of Ibn Arabi Society*, Volume XXXII, Autumn 2002. For a response to some of the critiques of Corbin, see Maria E. Subtelny, "History and Religion: The Fallacy of Metaphysical Questions (A Review Article)." *Iranian Studies*: March 2003, 36(1): 91-101. Also, Nile Green, 'Between Heidegger and the Hidden Imam: Reflections on Henry Corbin's Approaches to Mystical Islam', in M.R. Djalili, A. Monsutti & A. Neubauer*, Le monde turco-iranien en question, coll. Développements*, (Paris, Karthala; Genève, Institut de hautes études internationales et du développement, 2008), pp. 247-259.

[72] Joan Copjec, "The Imaginal World and Modern Oblivion: Kiarostami's Zig-Zag," *Filozofski Vestnik*, Volume XXXVII, Number 2, 2016, pp. 21–58.

[73] Mottahedeh, *Displaced Allegories*, 8.

'imaginary' and the 'imaginal' he not only wished to distinguish it from the common understanding of the term imaginary as "being equivalent to signifying unreal, something that is and remains outside of being and existence," but also from Lacan's already famous formulation of the Imaginary, as both image and illusion.[74]

Recently one of the more sustained encounters between second wave Lacanian film theory and Iranian cinema, is staged by Farhang Erfani in his book *Shooting Truth: Philosophy and Iranian Cinema*. Erfani uses Lacanian theory to read two well-known Iranian films: Abbas Kiarostami's *Nema-ye nazdik* (*Close-Up*, Iran, 1990), and Marzieh Meshkini's *Ruzi ke zan shodam* (*The Day I Became a Woman*, Iran, 2000). Indeed, in his reading of Kiarostami's *Close-Up*, Erfani employs Lacan's theory of the gaze and relies on the work of Joan Copjec who had already made "the connection between Lacan and Kiarostami…" and as Erfani states Copjec's "work is invaluable for my thesis in this chapter…"[75] The second film that Erfani reads via Lacanian psychoanalytic theory is Meshkini's *The Day I Became a Woman*, in which he uses Lacanian ethics and his concepts of desire and *jouissance* (enjoyment). Erfani's book consists of an encounter between Iranian Cinema and (Western) Philosophy, but it is not clear or self-evident how Lacan as psychoanalyst is considered a philosopher. Indeed, Lacan called his teaching "anti-philosophy," and declared, "I rebel, if I can say, against philosophy."[76] Therefore the use of Lacan as a "philosopher" requires some justification, which Erfani does not provide. Another element that is missing in Erfani's reading of Iranian films, and distinguishes it from my own procedure, is the technical lexicon of film studies that informs my analysis of the film form as well as the narrative. Thus, my own theoretical contribution will

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[74] Henry Corbin, "Mundus Imaginalis or The Imaginary and the Imaginal", (Paris/Teheran) Spring 1972 - Zürich. Available online: https://www.amiscorbin.com/bibliographie/mundus-imaginalis-or-the-imaginary-and-the-imaginal/

[75] Erfani, *Iranian Cinema* 88.

[76] Lacan cited in Adrian Johnson, "This Philosophy which is Not One: Jean-Claude Milner, Alain Badiou, and Lacanian Antiphilosophy," *S: Journal of the Jan van Eyck Circle for Lacanian Ideology Critique* 3 (2010): 137. For a discussion of the debates surrounding the meaning of Lacan's anti-philosophy and how he may be considered a philosopher, Also, Alain Badiou's seminar on the notion of Lacan as anti-philosopher, *Séminaire Lacan : L'antiphilosophie 3, 1994-1995* (Paris: Fayard, 2013); cf. Alain Badiou, *Lacan: Anti-Philosophy 3*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018); See also, Justin Clemens, *Psychoanalysis is an Antiphilosophy* (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh, 2013), especially the introduction.

be to stage a mutually productive encounter between Iranian cinema and second wave Lacanian psychoanalytic film theory, whereby both can mutually illuminate and enrich each other in a short-circuiting way.

Psychoanalysis Iranian Style: Lacanian Desire and Persian Poetics of Desire

Throughout this thesis the Lacanian concept of desire and its various formulations is at the center and periphery of every chapter, it is the pivot around which everything else turns. I use desire in its psychoanalytic sense as theorized by Lacan, where it is inherently unsatisfiable and distinguished from need, which has an object of satisfaction (all bodily functions are related to need, but desire is related to the psyche and the unconscious). According to Lacan, desire does not have a proper relation to an object, but to lack (*le manque*); it is in the world of language and signification that we come to recognize desire, and where desires must be interpreted. In this sense desire is never fully articulated and articulable as it is always entangled within the play of signifiers, and therefore it is never realized but forever differed, always to be satisfied but never satisfiable. It is the structure of lack in human subjectivity that gives rise to desire. In this sense, desire is constitutive of being human, since human beings are beings of language.

Now, a theoretical short-circuit is enacted here by conceptually correlating Lacanian desire with desire in Persian poetics. This relation of desire to lack that is constitutive of human subjectivity has its correlation in Persian poetics in the work of the 13th century Iranian Sufi mystic poet Jalal al-Din Rumi (d. 1273).[77] In the opening exordium of his magnum opus, *Masnavi-yi Ma'navi* (The Spiritual Couplets), often called *ney-nameh* (the Book of the Reed-Flute), which is said to contain the distilled essence of the entire work:

> LISTEN To this reed
> play out its plant
> unfold its tale
> of separations:
>
> Ever since they cut me

[77] On the life, thought and works of Rumi see Franklin Lewis, *Rumi: Past and Present, East and West. The Life Teachings and Poetry of Jalâl al-Din Rumi*. Foreword by Julie Meisami (Oxford: Oneworld, 2007).

from my reedy bed,
my cry
makes men and women
weep
I like to keep my breast
fretted with loss
to convey the pain of longing
All those severed from their roots
thirst to return to the source.[78]

The reed-flute is symbolic of the human self (*nafs*) or soul (*rouh*), and the reed-bed its unknowable origin in the world of the spirit for which it inherently longs. This separation is co-extensive with Lacan's concept of *le manque*, which has often been translated as *lack*, but it can equally be translated by the word *absence*, and it is absence or lack, that lies at the heart of the Lacanian notion of the subject of desire, since desire emerges due to lack according to Lacan, which is constitutive of human subjectivity. This logic of lack inhering in being human comes close to the logic of the primordial separation of the reed-flute (*ney*) from its source in the reed-bed (*neyestan*) in Iranian Sufism (*tasawuf*) as articulated by Rumi here in the *Masnavi*. It is the absence or lack that is constitutive of the reed-flute from this primordial loss of the reed-bed, that is at the heart of the reed-flutes lament; its longing and desire emerges at this separation, at this absence, at this lack. In psychoanalytic terms, the reed-bed functions as the lost object for the subject (reed), it is this primordial lost object that the subject seeks to recover, and which gives rise to the desiring subject. Lacan states that desire is always "desire for something else,"[79] this something else is therefore the imagined lost object (later in his teaching Lacan calls the lost object, the *objet petit a* or object-cause of desire). This cutting of the reed-flute from the original reed-bed, is what brings the reed-flute into existence and which allows it to articulate (through music, sound) its longing, its desire; this stage may be correlated to what Lacan calls symbolic castration at the origin of the individual's or subject's entry into the Symbolic order, which is why, in Lacanian theory, lack and castration are effectively synonymous.

[78] *Rumi: Swallowing the Sun*, trans. Franklin Lewis (Oxford: Oneworld, 2008), 31. For another translation see Jalal al-Din Rumi, *The Masnavi*, *Book One*, trans. Jawid Mojaddedi (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 4.
[79] Jacques Lacan, *Écrits* (Paris, Seuil, 1966), 518.

According to Lacan, it is through castration that the subject enters the world of language and signifiers – the Symbolic order – and it is here that the subject becomes sexed according to the logic of sexual difference, male or female, masculine or feminine. This is accomplished through taking up a position with respect to the phallus (the masculine position as 'having the phallus,' and the feminine position as 'being the phallus'). In Lacanian theory *sexuation* (being sexed) has nothing to do with biology (the sexual organs), but the way a subject is positioned in relation to the signifier and its lack (the phallus). For Lacan, the phallus is not the anatomical penis, but the signifier of desire, which is why there is only an imaginary or symbolic phallus.[80] It is here that another profound correlation can be drawn between the reed-flute and the phallus. Michael Glünz has discussed the significance of Lacan in classical Persian poetry by establishing a correlation between the sword, the pen and the phallus,[81] and the reed-flute in Rumi's *Masnavi* can be added to this list. The relation of the phallus to the reed-flute which is made out of the bamboo reed, and from which pens were made in classical Persian culture (and continue to be used in Persian calligraphy), establishes the link between the reed and phallus to the world of language and signifiers. The Persian word for the reed-pen is *qalam* (which also entered into Arabic), which is related to the Greek word *kalamus* or *calamus* and the Persian and Arabic *kalam* and *kalameh*, which mean 'word' are all derived from the same root. This is also why the abyssal core of human subjectivity in both Persian poesis and Lacanian theory is feminine, since it is in the feminine position that one is the phallus, and similarly the words in Persian (borrowed from Arabic) for soul (*rouh*) or self (*nafs*) are feminine, which is why Annemarie Schimmel's book on the feminine in Islam is called: *My Soul is a Woman*.[82] Finally, it should be recalled that the entire field of psychoanalysis is based on the analysis of the psyche, which in the original Greek means *soul*.

[80] Jacques Lacan*, Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: Norton, 2007), 575-584.
[81] See Michael Glünz, "The Sword, the Pen and the Phallus: Metaphors and Metonymies of Male Power and Creativity in Medieval Persian Poetry," *Edebiyat* 6 (1995): 223–243.
[82] Annemarie Schimmel, *My Soul is a Woman: The Feminine in Islam* (London: Continuum, 2003).

The Interpreter of Desires: The Mystic or Saint, the Analyst, and the Film Theorist

In this section I will foreground the significance of the title of my thesis through a short-circuiting conjunction of the figures of the mystic or saint, the analyst and the film theorist, since what they all have in common is that they are all *the Interpreter of Desires*. In the first tale of Rumi's *Masnavi* called, "the tale of the King and the sick slave girl," there is a figure who is linked to the Persian philosopher Ibn Sina, variously called "the invisible guest," "the divine physician," and "the pure and trustworthy one" (1/6, 7, 8), and particularly the "saint" (*wali*), who is brought by the King to heal the slave-girl that he loves but who has fallen mysteriously ill. The saint in the tale functions like the psychoanalyst trying to interpret what is ailing the slave-girl. The saint begins to ask her various questions whilst holding her wrist with his fingers on her pulse, and the slave girl begins talking – like the psychoanalytic talking-cure – and as the saint asks her various questions about her family, her hometown, etc., he discovers that her pulse rose considerably faster as he closed on the city of Samarkand, and finally he discovers that the source of her ailment is the love that she secretly harbours for a goldsmith who lives there, and her separation from him is the cause of her illness. In a similar way, in 1974 in *Television*, Lacan makes a startling claim and posits the figure of the psychoanalyst "in relation to what was in the past called: being a saint." Lacan states, "The more saints, the more laughter; that's my principle, and it may even be the way out of capitalist discourse."[83] This correlation of the figure of the saint and the analyst in Lacan, is homologous to what we encounter in Rumi's tale, since the saint in the tale functions as the analyst who is called the "physician of the soul" or psyche, in other words, a psychoanalyst.

Having already mentioned Henry Corbin earlier, it is important to note the influence of Corbin's work on Lacan,[84] especially through his book on the Andalusian Sufi mystic Ibn 'Arabi (d. 1240) called, *Creative Imagination in the*

[83] Jacques Lacan, *Television: A Challenge to the Psychoanalytic Establishment*, ed. Joan Copjec, trans. Denis Hollier, Rosalind Krauss, and Annette Michelson (New York: Norton, 1990), 16.
[84] For the influence of Corbin on Lacan see, Elisabeth Roudinesco, *Jacques Lacan: An Outline of a Life and History of a System of Thought* (Cambridge: Polity, 1999).

Sufism of Ibn 'Arabi. In his seminar VII on *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, 1959-1960, Lacan already mentions this book by Corbin, specifically in his discussion of courtly love.[85] Corbin discusses Ibn 'Arabi and many of the Sufis among the precursors of the tradition of courtly love, calling them *Fedeli d'amore* or the faithful of love.[86] But what is significant here is another reference to Ibn 'Arabi by Lacan that is mentioned by Fethi Benslema, namely the event of the encounter between the Andalusian philosopher Ibn Rushd (d. 1198) (Latinized as Averroes), and Ibn 'Arabi:

> On at least one other occasion, Lacan returned to Ibn Arabi. This took place at a 1960 conference at the Facultes universitaires Saint-Louis (Brussels), to which he was invited by J.-P. Gilson. In the typed transcript that was sent to us, Lacan recalls the episode of the meeting of and dialogue between Averroes and Ibn Arabi in Andalusia, and affirms that his position as a psychoanalyst is aligned with Ibn Arabi rather than the philosopher.[87]

This encounter between Averroes and Ibn 'Arabi is recorded in Corbin's book, and it would have been the only place that Lacan could have learnt of it.[88] However, what is significant for our purposes here is that Lacan aligns the position of the analyst with

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[85] Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, 183.

[86] Corbin states that what: "we group as the *Fedeli d'amore*… [are] dominated by two great figures: Ibn 'Arabi, the incomparable master of mystic theosophy, and Jalaluddin Rumi, the Iranian troubadour of that religion of love whose flame feeds on the theophanic feeling for sensuous beauty. *Fedeli d'amore* struck us as the best means of translating into a Western language the names by which our mystics called themselves in Arabic or Persian (*'ashiqun, muhibbun, arbab al-hawa*, etc. [lovers, the loving ones, lords of desire', etc.]) Since it is the name by which Dante and his companions called themselves, it has the power of suggesting the traits which were common to both groups and have been analyzed in memorable works." Henry Corbin, *Alone with the Alone: Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn 'Arabi* (Princeton: University of Princeton Press, 1998), 110. The term *arbab al-hawa* by which these mystics referred to themselves significantly means 'the lords of desire'.

[87] Fethi Benslama, *Psychoanalysis and the Challenge of Islam* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009) 220.

[88] What is interesting to note is that the Ibn 'Arabi we encounter in Corbin's book is a thoroughly Persianized figure, and Lacan's encounter with Ibn 'Arabi therefore, is through Corbin's Persianizing prism. This is one of the elements that Vahid Brown foregrounds in his critique of Corbin's reading of Ibn 'Arabi, as he states, "Examples of Corbin's essentialist characterizations of Iran, Iranian spirituality, or events and personalities somehow related historically to Persian culture could be multiplied for pages, as they appear constantly throughout his many works. It will be seen to have been a constant theme in Corbin's visionary rearrangement of the facts of the life-history of Ibn al-'Arab in his efforts to fit the latter into his own esoteric 'counter-history'." See Brown, "A Counter-History of Islam," 50.

that of the mystic Ibn ‘Arabi. This link between the psychoanalyst and the mystic can also shed light on what Badiou calls Lacan’s ‘anti-philosophy’ or Lacan as an ‘anti-philosopher’, since by associating the psychoanalyst with Ibn Arabi vs. Averroes, Lacan is positioning himself against a certain type of philosophy exemplified by the figure of Averroes, namely Aristotelian or peripatetic philosophy, rather then philosophy as such. It should be recalled that Ibn ‘Arabi himself was a philosophizing mystic or mystic philosopher, and deeply influenced by the tradition of Platonic and Neo-Platonic (Plotinus) philosophy as translated into Arabic in the great translation movement in Baghdad during the Abbasid caliphate.[89]

One of Ibn ‘Arabi’s theories that has a profound resonance with the position of the psychoanalyst is that the world is structured like a dream, a dream that requires interpretation. In the *Fusus al-Hikam* (The Bezels of Wisdom), whilst referring to the famous prophetic tradition (*hadith*), “‘All men are asleep; only when they die, do they wake up’,” Ibn al-‘Arabi states “that ‘the Prophet [Muhammad] called attention by these words to the fact that whatever man perceives in this present world is to him as a dream is to a man who dreams, and that it must be interpreted”[90] This correspondence between the position of the mystic and the analyst comes to the fore in the title of Ibn ‘Arabi’s collection of poetry entitled, *Tarjuman al-Ashwaq* or the *Interpreter of Desires*.[91] Ibn ‘Arabi is said to have composed these poems after his encounter with the daughter of an Iranian family originally from Isfahan, named Nizam. She was called by Ibn ‘Arabi and others, “*ayn al-Shams wa’l-Baha’*, translated by Corbin as “Harmonia, Eye of the Sun and of Beauty.” Regarding her Corbin states, “the young girl who was for Ibn ‘Arabi in Mecca what Beatrice was for Dante, was a real young girl, though at the same time she was “in person” a theophanic figure, the figure of the *Sophia aeterna* …”[92] The poetry of *Tarjuman*

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[89] For the translation movement see Dimitri Gutas, *Greek Thought, Arabic Culture: The Graeco-Arabic Translation Movement in Baghdad and Early 'Abbasaid Society (2nd-4th/5th-10th c.)* (London/New York: Routledge, 1998).
[90] Toshihiko Izutsu, *Sufism and Taoism* (Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1983) 8.
[91] Reynold Nicholson, *The Tarjumán al-Ashwáq: A Collection of Mystical Odes by Muhyiddīn Ibn al-ʿArabī* (London: Royal Asiatic Society, Oriental Translation Series, New Series xx, reprinted by the Theosophical Publishing House, Wheaton, Illinois, 1981); for a more contemporary translation of a selection of the poems see, Michael Sells, *Stations of Desire: Love Elegies from al-ʿArabī and New Poems* (Jerusalem: Ibis Editions, 2001).
[92] Corbin, *Alone with the Alone*, 100-101.

contained such sensual and erotic imagery that Ibn ‘Arabi was castigated by the religious scholars (*‘ulama*) to have only written of carnal desire and profane love in the guise of mystical poetry; Ibn ‘Arabi was forced to write an extended interpretation of each poem articulating their esoteric (*batin*) allusions, lest his life become endangered at the wrath of the *‘ulama*. It is in this title that we can discern the profound confluence of the position of the mystic and the analyst, since the entire function of the analyst like the mystic is to be the interpreter of desires, which is why as I already mentioned, Lacan called one of his seminars: *Desire and its Interpretation*.

In the final analysis, it is here that we can see that the status of the mystic (Ibn Arabi) is akin to the psychoanalyst (Lacan), and the status of the analyst may be correlated to the film theorist/critic, as perceptively posited by Freydoun Hoveyda, insofar as they are all *The Interpreter of Desires*.

The Structure of the Thesis

One of the principle axis around which this thesis is structured is the Freudian partial (sexual) objects to which Lacan added the gaze and voice – the others being the phallus, the scybalum and the breast. Each chapter contains one of these partial objects, although in the case of the first two chapters the gaze and voice are positioned in the foreground, and in the case of the following three – the phallus, the feces, and the breast – they appear in the background. In Chapters 3 to 5 the partial objects do not function as the main argument of the chapters but as their libidinal underside, and although they are discussed in relation to the films they do not form the central core or argument of the chapters, as they do with the gaze and voice. All of the partial objects are different forms of what Lacan calls *objet petit a* or object-cause of desire, since they all form an object that is imagined as an extension of the body, from which the subject must separate itself in order to constitute itself as subject. As Lacan states, “You know: the breast, the feces, the gaze, the voice, these detachable parts which are nevertheless entirely linked to the body - this is what is involved in the *objet a*.”[93] Although Freud imagined the sexual objects in terms of the

[93] For a provisional translation of this seminar, see Cormac Gallagher, Jacques Lacan, Seminar *the Logic of Fantasy*, Seminar XIV (1966-1967), 4. Translation modified. http://www.lacaninireland.com/web/wp-content/uploads/2010/06/THE-SEMINAR-

developmental phase of the child, namely the initial oral phase, the breast, and later followed by the anal object, the excrement. The phallic phase is the last phase where the relation to the phallus (as object) organizes the way sexual difference is constituted (boy vs. girl). The other innovation of Lacan was to reinterpret the phallus not as the anatomical penis, but as a signifier. In Lacan the *objet petit a* does not have a developmental structure, but it is the way a field is organized around that particular object, hence the *objet a* in the visual field is the gaze and in the aural field it is the voice.

The thesis is organized into two parts. Part I *The New Iranian Cinema between Gaze and Voice*, is structured around three chapters that theorizes that the New Iranian Cinema revolves around the axis between the (Lacanian) gaze and voice. Starting with Lacan's concept of the gaze Chap. 1, "A Cinema of Desire: Object-Gaze in the New Iranian Cinema", provides a close reading of Abbas Kiarostami's *Shirin* (2008), and Majid Majidi's *Baran* (2001) in light of the gaze. I argue that contrary to Negar Mottahedeh's thesis who argues that post-revolutionary Iranian cinema or New Iranian Cinema is the realization of the goals of feminist gaze theory, whereby the male gaze is absent, and hence can be conceived as a "women's cinema" or a "feminist cinema," I argue instead that what appears in the New Iranian Cinema is the Lacanian object-gaze, which makes this cinema, a cinema of desire, since the logic of desire is based one what is often beyond the visual sensorium, rather then what is reducible to it. I demonstrate that the logic of the averted gaze due the Shi'ite modesty system (*hejab*), that is operative in this cinema can be theoretically correlated to the logic of 'looking awry' formulated by Žižek apropos Lacan; but unlike Mottahedeh and Naficy, who missed the Lacanian dimension of looking awry, I foreground it as an instance of the object-gaze in Lacan.

In Chapter 2, "The Object-Voice: The Acousmatic Voice in New Iranian Cinema", I theorize the structure of the voice in the New Iranian Cinema, especially through what Jacques Lacan calls the object-voice and the French film theorist Michel Chion calls *acousmêtre* or acousmatic voice, namely the disembodied voice. I focus on how the voice without the body, or a bodiless voice, in which the voice of a

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OF-JACQUES-LACAN-XIV.pdf. For the unpublished French version, see Jacques Lacan, *Logique du Fantasme*, Seminar XIV (1966-1967), 9. Available online: http://www.valas.fr/IMG/pdf/S14_LOGIQUE.pdf.

character is off frame detached from a particular body, is often operative within Iranian cinema, as a way to circumvent showing bodies, especially female bodies, in erotic configurations. This phantom like voice without a body or *acousmêtre*, like a spectral presence, haunts the entire landscape of post-revolutionary Iranian cinema. I will also focus on the male voice without a body, which acts to subvert the logic of veiling female bodies, since representing the acousmatic male voice without a body, critiques the foregrounding of the male subject as the privileged site of subjectivity. I analyze two films in light of the acousmatic voice, namely Mohsen Makhmalbaf's *Gabbeh* (1996) and Rakshan Banietemad's *The May Lady* (1999), and demonstrate that in both films the voice acts as an erotic signifier, and becomes a love-object, since the body cannot be displayed erotically on the screen the voice at times fills in the erotic void created by the censors.

In Chapter 3, "From Femininity to Masculinity and Back: The Feminine 'No' in *Daughters of the Sun*," the idea that guides the analysis of this chapter is the Lacanian feminine 'No' and feminine *jouissance* in reading Mariam Shahriar's neglected masterpiece *Daughters of the Sun* (*Dokhtaran-e Khorshid*, 2000). I provide an close textual analysis of the film's protagonist Amangol's gender re-signification from feminine to masculine by her father through the technique of shaving her hair, and cross-dressing her as a boy. I argue that in the texture of the film a constellation of motifs emerge such as transgender, gender and sexual ambiguity, same-sex desire or homoeroticism, and cross-dressing or transvestism that provides Shariar with an opportunity to critique not only the imposition of the veil, but the loss of feminine identity. Finally, I demonstrate that the Lacanian ethics of the feminine 'No' and feminine *jouissance* are enacted by Amangol, through a radical suicidal act that entails the burning of the carpet-weaving sweat shop, whereby she sacrifices her imposed embodiment of masculinity. Thus, Amongol traverses from femininity to masculinity and back through the logic of the feminine 'No', and the full reassertion of her feminine identity.

Part II of the thesis consists of two chapters that articulate the shift away from the New Iranian Cinema of the 1990s and 2000s by theorizing a new filmic movement that is structured around what I call, *Unheimlich between the Weird and the Eerie* (relying on Mark Fisher's formulation). In Chapter 4, "Dreaming of a Nightmare in Tehran: The Fright of Real Desires in 'Atomic Heart'" a close textual reading of Ali Ahmadzadeh's film *Atomic Heart* (2015) is provided, where I first

theorize Mark Fisher's formulation of *the weird and the eerie* and situate this film (along with *A Girl Walks Home Alone At Night* in Chapter 5) as belonging to this category that I consider to form part of a new film movement. The film is structured into two halves with the first half apparently functioning as reality and the second half as surreality. I turn this double or two-part structure of the film around and deploying Lacan's theory of fantasy and desire, I argue that contrary to outward appearance, the first part of the film functions as the world of fantasy and the second part as the world of desire. It is in the second half, when reality loses its grounding in the world of fantasy, that we are confronted with the traumatic (Lacanian) Real in all its horror in the figure of Toofan, whose link with totalitarian and dictatorial figures (Sadam, Hitler) represents the Islamic Republic, and the Iranian president Mahmud Ahmadinejad. I argue that the second part of the film stages Lacan's dictum of the enigma of the Other's desire, *Che vuoi*? where the question of what is the Other's desire remains an incessant mystery, namely what does the Other, as in Toofan, who symbolizes the State, want from the two female protagonists of the film. In the second part of the film Nobahar and Arineh's lesbian or homoerotic desire functions as the fright of Real desires, since in the Islamic Republic same-sex desire is forbidden and may bring one into confrontation with the Law, exemplified in the figure of Toofan. It is this oppressive, sinister and menacing atmosphere in Iran that this film so powerfully stages, and which is what all the films related to this emerging new movement have in common, and that I have theorized as revolving around the two modes of the weird and the eerie.

In Chapter 5, "The Return of the Repressed: The Real of Feminine Sexuality in *A Girl Walks Home Alone At Night*", I provide a detailed analysis of the diasporic Iranian filmmaker Ana Lily Amirpour's vampire film *A Girl Walks Home Alone At Night* (2014), through the prism of the Freudian 'return of the repressed,' with a Lacanian twist. I demonstrate that if *Atomic Heart* typified the nightmare of the people living in Tehran, this film stages the nightmare of the Islamic Republic: the fear and anxiety of autonomous and uncontrolled female sexuality, embodied, as it is, in the figure of the chador-clad female vampire, the Girl. The return of repressed feminine sexual energy, or libido, is represented by the figure of the vampire Girl, who haunts and kills the male inhabitants of Bad City. I demonstrate that female sexuality functions as the traumatic Real (in the Lacanian sense), in Islamo-Shi'ite jurisprudential imaginary, which is why it functions as a source of traumatic horror to

the Islamic Republic. In order to contain this traumatic excess or Real in female sexuality, the system of modesty (*hejab*) was established to cover over this surplus in feminine sexuality. In this way, to have a veiled female vampire attacking and killing the men in Bad City functions as the pure nightmare of the State. I provide a contextualization of the film in the history of Iranian horror cinema in the post-revolutionary era, but theorize it more specifically as an instance of the films that I consider to exemplify the two modes of the weird and the eerie. I locate the film's aesthetics in Hamid Naficy's theory of *accented cinema*, due to the film's diasporic status, and provide a number of Freudo-Lacanian readings that circulate around the idea of the return of the repressed: the double, castration anxiety, *das Ding* (the Thing), the death drive, and obscene immortality. Finally, the Persian writing in the diegetic reality of the film (i.e., graffiti, signs, posters, tattoos, etc.) is theorized through Michel Chion's concept of *athorybos* and the inscription of desire in Lacan, where I point out (apropos Lacan) that in the final analysis 'the written' in the diegetic space of the film itself functions as the return of the repressed.

Finally, this thesis simultaneously makes several theoretical interventions in a number of related fields and/or theories: first, it contributes to a Lacanian film theoretical approach to Iranian cinema and reconfigures the previous approach that was dominated by first wave psychoanalytic film theory or Screen theory; second, it makes a case for the productivity of a Lacanian theoretical approach in studies of desire and sexuality in Iranian cinema and in Iranian studies more generally; third, it contributes to the new and emerging field of the encounter between psychoanalysis and Islam; finally, it theorizes that a new avant-garde and genre bending film movement is emerging in Iranian cinema moving on from the New Iranian Cinema of the past, and also beyond the influence of a figure such as Asghar Farhadi. In all these areas this thesis has either opened up new avenues of theoretical enquiry or reconfigured older approaches and debates to questions of desire and sexuality by enacting a theoretical break through a Freudo-Lacanian psychoanalytic intervention.

Part I

New Iranian Cinema between Gaze and Voice

Chapter 1

A Cinema of Desire: the Object-Gaze in the New Iranian Cinema

The *objet a* in the field of the visible is the gaze.

– Jacques Lacan[94]

In this chapter, I will theorize the deployment of the gaze in the New Iranian cinema, especially through what Lacan calls the object-gaze (*l'objet regard*). As it will be seen, the gaze according to Lacan is not on the side of the subject looking or the camera, as it was theorized by Screen theory where the camera's look represented the male-gaze, but rather on the side of the object. In this way the gaze is that obscure stain or blot in the image, that when looked upon (either by the character in the film or the spectator watching the film) returns the gaze. I will argue that the Lacanian gaze often appears within the New Iranian cinema as the result of censorship restrictions that impose the rules of the modesty system (*hejab*) on the cinema and enjoined the practice of the averted gaze, as a way to purify or cleanse the visual sensorioum in order to contain the male-gaze. In this way the New Iranian cinema inadvertently or paradoxically becomes the site of the Lacanian gaze rather than the site of feminist gaze theory as proposed by Negar Mottahedeh. This pervasive presence of the object-gaze in the New Iranian cinema renders it the *locus classicus* of the *cinema of desire*, as theorized by Todd McGowan, since it is what is often invisible rather than visible in the field of vision that structures the formal logic of this cinema. In this sense, the New Iranian cinema is the cinema of desire at its purest. I will look at two filmic instances in which the object-gaze appears in the New Iranian cinema which implicates the spectator's desire by removing our ability to see, by staging what cannot be reducible to the visual field, and by removing the ability of direct vision from the spectator, focusing thereby on Kiarostami's *Shirin* (2008), as well as Majid Majidi's *Baran* (2001). In Kiarostami's cinema the gaze appears through the lack or absence in the visual field, which activates the spectator's desire, that is, the desire of the viewer is accounted for through what cannot be seen in the screen image, or what remains invisible from the scopic field. I will argue that with *Shirin*, Kiarostami reaches the apotheosis of the gaze, in which the film itself returns

[94] Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller and trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: W. W. Norton, 1978), 105.

the gaze. In *Baran*, the gaze appears not where it is expected, in Latif's voyeuristic act of looking as theorized by Screen theory, but in the opacity of the window, which blots the picture and behind which is the silhouetted figure of Baran. In this sense, it will be argued that the New Iranian cinema is one of the exemplary sites of the (Lacanian) gaze, since it relies on absences and lack in the cinematic form and narrative, and in this way it is linked to other film movements such as Italian Neorealism and the French New Wave as exemplary instances of the cinema of desire.

1.1 The Gaze in Lacan: From Screen Theory to the Object-Gaze

In the introduction I briefly articulated the difference between the first and second wave psychoanalytic film theory and gestured towards the difference that lies between the two, namely the gaze and the cinematic apparatus and their interconnection. Here I will foreground their differences in the deployment of the gaze, especially psychoanalytic film theory or gaze theory, and mark out the difference of Lacan's object-gaze from the gaze operative in feminist gaze theory which operated under first wave psychoanalytic film theory. The first phase or wave of psychoanalytic film theory also called Screen theory (because many of the film theorists associated with this phase published their work in the British journal *Screen*), began in the late 1960s and 1970s and emphasized Lacan's Imaginary order and to a lesser degree the Symbolic order, in Lacan's ternary registers of psychic formation (i.e., Imaginary, Symbolic, and Real). It was characterized by a critique of the operation of ideology and the role of the cinematic apparatus in purveying this process. In this first phase of psychoanalytic film theory such figures as Jean-Louis Baudry,[95] located this ideological interpolation of the subject (apropos Louis Althusser's notion of ideological interpolation) in the cinematic apparatus rather then

[95] Baudry, Jean-Louis. "Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus." InNarrative, Apparatus, Ideology: A Film Theory Reader. Edited by Philip Rosen, 286–298 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986); cf. Jean-Louis Baudry, "The Apparatus: Metapsychological Approaches to the Impression of Reality in Cinema" [1975]. In *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology*, edited by Philip Rosen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 299–318.

the filmic narrative.[96] According to this phase of psychoanalytic film theory, as articulated by Baudry and Metz, the gaze functions as a way to ideologically construct the spectator as a subject, since it purveys the illusory impression of control and mastery over the visual field. This is then developed by other theorists such as Jean-Pierre Oudart[97] and Christian Metz,[98] and especially, Metz, whose influential study *The Imaginary Signifier* was the first full length study to deploy psychoanalytic theory to articulate the ideological work of the (dominant) cinema as a sign system. These theorists problematized the specific spectatorial position produced by the cinematic situation, which they argued was a voyeuristic and fetishistic position that produces a gaze of mastery in the spectator. Through the camera's gaze, the spectator is positioned as mastering all that it sees, and in this way the spectator's constitutive dependence is occluded. In this reading of the gaze, the spectator is always already positioned as a voyeur.

The feminist iteration of this conception of the gaze was theorized by Laura Mulvey in her formative and foundational essay, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,' where following Baudry and Metz, she argues that Hollywood cinema or dominant cinema is intrinsically voyeuristic and based on the logic of the male-gaze that positions the female character in the filmic diegesis as an object of what she calls "to-be-looked-at-ness," not only for the spectator but within the film world itself. Mulvey states:

> In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly. In their traditionalexhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so

[96] Figures such as Stephen Heath, Daniel Dayan, also directly critiqued the ideological process of the cinematic apparatus in this period from a psychoanalytic perspective. See, Stephen Heath, *Questions of Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981); Daniel Dayan, "The Tutor-Code of Classical Cinema." In *Movies and Methods*. Vol. 1. Edited by Bill Nichols, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 438–450.
[97] Jean-Pierre Oudart, "Cinema and Suture." Translated by Kari Hanet. *Screen* 18.4 (Winter 1977–1978): 35–47.
[98] Christian Metz, *Psychoanalysis and Cinema: The Imaginary Signifier* (London: Macmillan Press, 1982).

that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness.[99]

In this essay, Mulvey articulates three forms of the gaze operative in cinema: first the cinematic gaze or the look of the camera, which is always voyeuristic; second the way male characters look at female characters in the profilmic universe; and lastly, the spectators gaze or the spectatorial gaze itself, which due to the previous logics of the gaze, namely the cameras look and the look of the male protagonist(s) at female characters, structurally demands the adoption of a (heterosexual) male position as a viewer. In Screen theory the gaze is conceptualized as an ideological problem that must be overcome, whereby a cinema in which the male-gaze is absent can become possible as part of a feminist emancipatory struggle to overcome privileging the male subject. Mulvey deploys Lacan's mirror stage essay as a way to equate the male spectators look at the female character in the screen image with the child's look into the mirror. The child's gaze into the mirror bestows an illusion of wholeness on the fragmented body, whereby the child misrecognizes the seen object (i.e., its body in the mirror).[100] Therefore, Mulvey conceives the cinema screen as mirror and the gaze as a form of violence enacted on the the female body, and in this way the gaze functions as the modus operandi of classical cinema and thereby functions as the site of the dominant ideology (patriarchy) and must be critiqued and dismantled. It is here that the misunderstanding of Lacan's notion of the gaze and the logic of the look in Screen theory becomes visible, since for Lacan gaze is not on the side of the looking subject nor does it have anything do with mastery and control, but rather on what destabilizes and disrupts our control or mastery in our vision or when we look,[101] as Lacan states, "the gaze is not the vehicle through which the subject masters the object, but a point in the Other that resists the mastery of vision."[102] Therefore, Screen theory erroneously conceives the cinematic screen as a mirror, and in so

[99] Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," In *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*. 7th Ed. Ed. Leo Braudy and Michael Cohen (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 715.
[100] Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," 714.
[101] Todd McGowan, *Psychoanalytic Film Theory and the Rules of the Game*, p. 60-61.
[102] Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, 73.

doing, as Joan Copjec aptly puts it, "it operates in ignorance of, and at the expense of, Lacan's more radical insight, whereby the mirror is conceived as screen."[103]

This conception of the gaze has been influential in theorizing the visual structure of the New Iranian Cinema, particularly in Negar Mottehdeh's use of feminist gaze theory in her book, *Displaced Allegories*, which is particularly indebted to Laura Mulvey, and is operative under the sign of first wave psychoanalytic film theory or Screen theory. Mottahedeh's argument rests on the premise that due to the Shi'ite laws of the modesty system (*hejab*), post-revolutionary Iranian cinema, at the level of form, is the enactment of the goals of feminist film theory, and is therefore "the apotheosis of 1970s feminist gaze theory." She states, "In the attempt to cleanse its technologies, the post-Revolutionary Iranian film industry came to produce a cinema that I will argue is the apotheosis of 1970s feminist gaze theory."[104] In this reading, contra Hollywood cinema, the male-gaze is absent in Iranian cinema, since through the logic of the veil the spectator is no longer positioned in a voyeuristic or fetishistic spectatorial position. In this sense, Mottahedeh derives her theory of visuality in the new Iranian cinema from Screen theory that influenced feminist film theorists (Mulvey, Doanne, Silverman), a psychoanalytic film theory based on a misconception of Lacan's concept of the gaze and its relation to the imaginary order, identifying the gaze with the camera and the voyeuristic (heterosexual) male-gaze which rendered female bodies into objects of to-be-looked-at-ness. In this sense, Mottahedeh's deployment of feminist gaze theory inherits some of the misconceptions and misunderstandings of Lacan's theory of the gaze from Screen theory as she applies them to the New Iranian cinema.

One of the admirable theoretical efforts of a rapprochement between Screen

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[103] Copjec, *Read my Desire*, 15-16. The notion of the screen in Lacan must be understood in light of his discussion of the gaze in his seminar XI, where he states, ""Only the subject - the human subject, the subject of the desire that is the essence of man-is not, unlike the animal, entirely caught up in this imaginary capture. He maps himself in it. How? In so far as he isolates the function of the screen and plays with it. Man, in effect, knows how to play with the mask as that beyond which there is the gaze. The screen is here the locus of mediation." Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*,107. In other words, the screen acts as the point of mediation between the gaze and the I in the field of the visible. Once the gaze becomes manifest, the visual field takes on an uncanny dimension of alterity. It no longer seems to belong to the subject, to the encunciative I, and straightaway takes on the form of a screen. See Copjec, *Read My Desire*, 35.

[104] Mottahedeh, *Displaced Allegories*, 2.

theory and the Lacanian theory of the gaze is developed by Henry Krips[105] in his critique of Joan Copjec. Although Krips agrees with Copjec that Screen theory is based on a particular misunderstanding of Lacan's concept of the gaze, he claims that Copjec has gone too far in emphasizing their differences. Krips sets out to demonstrate their similarities by how the logic of the gaze in Screen theory, which is based on the look of surveillance operative in the Foucauldian panoptic gaze (based on Bentham's panopticon), can function like Lacanian gaze in so far as they both represent the notion of being seen from all around. However, Krips' effort at reconciling the two concepts fails since Screen theory's Foucauldian logic of the panoptic 'gaze' hinges on mastery, control and surveillance of a supposed subject looking; whilst the Lacanian gaze in contrast is based on the gaze that is on the side of the object and the non-conicidence of vision with a look of mastery and control, and the split between the eye and the gaze, which enacts the destabilization and disruption of the subjects control or mastery in the act of looking. In this sense, the two theories are fundamentally irreconcilable.

The misconception of the gaze in Screen theory is not only based on what Joan Copjec has aptly termed "a Foucauldianization" of the gaze, but also on the Sartreanization of the gaze, where the 'look' is conceptually confused with the Lacanian notion of the gaze.[106] It should be noted that the confusion lies in the difference between early and later versions of the gaze in Lacan, where later Lacan himself clearly distinguishes his notion of the gaze from Sartre's. Indeed, it must be recalled that Lacan's early formulation of the gaze owes much to Jean-Paul Sartre's analysis of 'the look,' since in his first seminar "Freud's Papers on Technique" (1953-1954), Lacan's concept of the gaze is almost indistinguishable from Sartre's, although there is still a discernable kernel of difference (in fact the term 'look' which is often translated for Sartre's works in order to distinguish it from Lacan's gaze, is the same term in French: *le regard*). Sartre's interpretation of the gaze/look is what makes the subject to acknowledge the Other also as subject, which (like Lacan) is clearly influenced by Hegel's dialectic of the master and the slave. For Sartre, the

[105] Henry Krips, "The Politics of the Gaze: Foucault, Lacan and Žižek." *Culture Unbound 2* (2010): 91–102.

[106] This Sarterrian logic of the gaze is evident in an article written by one of the early exponents of gaze theory, Peter Wollen, a long time collaborator with Laura Mulvey and the author of *Signs and Meaning* (1969). See, Peter Wollen, "On Gaze Theory," *New Left Review 44*, March-April 2007, pp. 91-106.

possibility of being seen by the Other is what constitutes our connection with the Other-as-subject.[107]

It is in his Seminar XI, *the Fundemental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* (1964), that Lacan develops his full theory of the gaze as object, in which the gaze is no longer on the side of the subject in the act of looking, but on the side of the object. In this sense, Lacan divests the term gaze from its common sense meaning or dictionary definition, and invests it with a new theoretical significance that disturbs our normal subject and object relations, wherein the gaze is no longer the subject looking (or cinematic spectator), but appears outside (in the filmic image), where the object looked upon returns the gaze. It is here that the gaze as object acts as the agent that causes our desire in the visual field, and thereby becomes what Lacan calls *l'object petit a* or the object-cause of desire, as he states, "The *objet a* in the field of the visible is the gaze."[108] The locution *objet petit a* signifies that the object at issue here has no positive substantiality, but appears only as a gap or void in the scopic field. It is not located in the subject's act of looking at the object, but appears in the fissure or hole within the subject's seeming look of mastery over the visible. This lacuna in our act of looking signals the moment at which our desire becomes manifest in the very thing that we see in the order of the visible (i.e., the screen image).[109] This is the point at which our desire distorts the visual field, and this distortion is registered by us through the gaze as *objet petit a*. As Žižek puts it, "the object *a* is an object that can be perceived only by a gaze 'distorted' by desire…."[110] In this sense, the object manifests itself in the visual field only through a gaze 'distorted' by desire. Therefore, the gaze as *objet petit a* is this distortion of the visual field through the subject's desire.

In Lacan the gaze is an eyeless gaze, it does not derive from a subjective eye(s) that look(s), but from a gaze without an eye, which is why Lacan says there is a split between the eye and the gaze.[111] Using Lacan's own approach where he often uses the homophony between words, let us draw out the homophony in the word

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[107] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes, (London, Methuen, 1958 [1943]), 256.
[108] Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, 105.
[109] Todd McGowan, *The Real Gaze*, 5-6.
[110] Slavoj Žižek, *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan Through Popular Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992), 12.
[111] Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, 72.

'eye' and the pronoun 'I' in English, since they both have the same sound, and in this way 'eye-less' becomes 'I-less', which is what the gaze is, it is without an 'I,' it does not come from the first-person subject looking, but rather from the object, hence the object-gaze. Apropos the gaze, in French there is an expression that exemplifies Lacan's notion of the gaze, namely *jeter l'oeil*, which has a less than satisfactory counterpart in English, to 'cast a glance'.[112] The term literally means 'to throw an eye', as though it is on the obverse side of where the eye is, the eye literally is never cast or thrown but remains fixed in its place on our head, in their sockets, but in this throwing as it were, the eye is outside as an object, as Lacan states, "…outside, is the point of gaze."[113] In Persian there is an expression *chashmi-bendaz*, which literally means 'to throw the eye,' that is the precise correlate of the French *jeter l'oeil* and exemplifies what Lacan means by the gaze. For instance, in Persian we often say, go to the party or store and *chashmi-bendaz*, meaning go and have a look, but its literal sense is to 'throw an eye' which is where its Lacanian dimension comes in. Therefore, the expression *chashmi-bendaz* in its literal sense is to have the eye or the faculty of vision out there on the side of the object.

In his seminar *Les non-dupes errent* (The Non-Duped Err) (1973–1974), Lacan asks himself a rhetorical question as to what he invented apropos psychoanalysis, and he states that it is the "*objet (a)*".[114] Lacan often insisted that the term always remain in French as *objet a* or *objet petit a*, so that it may signal its non-coincidence with the social order or the big Other (*grand l'Autre*), the world of language and signification. [115] The *objet petit a* is an element which the subject must

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[112] In a talk on Hitchcok's *Vertigo (*1957), whilst discussing the object gaze Žižek refers to this French phrase via a French joke about the famed idiot Martin, "In English I think you can say "to cast an eye over something" but in France you can say "*jeter l'oeil*" which means literally "to throw an eye". There is a wonderful French fairy tale about Martin, the legendary idiot, who being an ugly boy cannot find a girlfriend, so his mother tells him "why don't you go to a church on Saturday and '*jeter l'oeil*' throw an eye around. So he goes first to a butcher, buys some pig eyes and throws them around and comes back and says: 'look, mother, it didn't work, no girl loved me for doing that." Slavoj Žižek, "Organs Without Bodies," Thursday 6 November 2003 Accessed May 15, 2018.
http://www.aaschool.ac.uk/VIDEO/lecture.php?ID=373

[113] Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, 96.

[114] Jacques Lacan, *Les non-dupes errent*, lesson 11 (April 9, 1974), p. 185. <http://www.valas.fr/IMG/pdf/S21_NON-DUPES---.pdf>.
http://www.valas.fr/Jacques-Lacan-les-non-dupes-errent-1973-1974,322.

[115] Todd McGowan, *The Real Gaze*, 6.

separate itself from in order to constitute itself as subject in the process of entering the world of language and signification (the symbolic order),[116] which is why the *objet petit a* is not any thing that exists as such but exists only in so far as it is lost. The loss of the *object a* is only posited retroactively after the subject's entrance into language, since it does not exists before it is imagined as lost. This is where the constitutive lack inhering in the subject emerges, since the loss of the object gives rise to the desiring subject, the subject emerges as desiring insofar as it lacks the (desired) object. In this way, the *objet petit a* is the object-cause of desire, rather than the actual desired object. The *objet petit a* is the unattainable object of desire, always eluding the subject's reach, which is why desire always circulates around this privileged object without ever attaining it. This is what in psychoanalysis is called the drive (*Terib*), and where the split between the eye and the gaze manifests itself.[117]

Since the gaze functions as the *objet petit a* in the visual field, it is through the gaze that this field is ordered. When something within the visual field provokes the subject's desire, the gaze appears there beyond the sensorium. The gaze attracts our look, as it seems to offer us access to what is unseen, the obverse side of what is visible. The gaze is the point at which we recognize that we are co-implicated in what we are seeing and the moment in which what is seen appears to take our desire into account.[118] The object-gaze occurs therefore when the visual field or the screen image in the cinematic fiction implicates the desire of the viewing subject. In this way, the gaze is on the side of Lacan's register of the Real (as with all the other instances of *objet petit a*), rather than the Imaginary or Symbolic, whereas in Screen theory the gaze was formulated in light of Lacan's mirror phase, and hence it was on the side of the Imaginary, which is why the screen was conceived as a mirror that did the work of ideological or imaginary identification. The gaze as an instance of the Real rather than the Imaginary "marks a disturbance in the functioning of ideology

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[116] Lacan states, "It is here that I propose that the interest the subject takes in his own split is bound up with that which determines it —namely, a privileged object, which has emerged from some primal separation, from some self-mutilation induced by the very approach of the real, whose name, in our algebra, is the *objet a*." Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts*, 83.

[117] Lacan states, "The eye and the gaze—this is for us the split in which the drive is manifested at the level of the scopic field." Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts*, 72.

[118] McGowan, *The Real Gaze*, 7.

rather than its expression".[119] In this sense, the Lacanian gaze has a political dimension that functions as a critique of ideology, unlike the (male) gaze in Screen theory, which is part of the dominant ideology.

In his book, *The Real Gaze*, Todd McGowan provides a theorization of the cinema of desire based on the way the gaze appears in this cinema. He states, "In the experience of desire, the gaze remains a motivating absence: it triggers the movement of desire but remains an impossible object in the field of vision. Visually, desire concerns what we don't see, not what we see…"[120] McGowan distinguishes between the way in which desire and the gaze function in what he calls the cinema of fantasy, exemplified by Hollywood cinema as the cinema of fantasy par excellence, from the way it manifests in the cinema of desire, "Whereas the cinema of fantasy renders the gaze manifest through a distortion of the filmic image, the cinema of desire sustains the gaze as a structuring absence and an impossibility."[121] Contrary to the cinema of fantasy that seeks to resolve the tensions of desire through the creation of a fantasy scenario, "the cinema of desire offers spectators the opportunity of recognizing and embracing their position as desiring subjects."[122] In this sense, the New Iranian Cinema and its apotheosis in the cinema of Kiarostami, is the cinema of desire, since its logic is based on absence and lack or what remains invisible in the visual field, and thus what causes us (the spectator) to desire is the structuring absence in the order of the visible. Therefore, the filmic image reveals the gaze as *objet petit a*, through what remains unseen in the field of vision.

In the chapter dedicated to the cinema of desire, McGowan considers two film movements, Italian neorealism and the French *nouvelle vague* (and a couple of individual directors such as Orson Welles and Claire Denis), to be examples of the cinema of desire.[123] To this we may add the New Iranian Cinema as another film movement that can be theorized as the cinema of desire, and Kiarostami as its exemplary practitioner, since it is based on absence in the cinematic form and narrative that is distinctive to this cinema, and in this respect, it bears a close resemblance to these film movements. Indeed, the New Iranian Cinema and many of

[119] Ibid, 7.
[120] McGowan, *The Real Gaze*, 69.
[121] Ibid, 70.
[122] Ibid, 70.
[123] McGowan, *The Real Gaze*, 71.

its directors have been variously associated with the influence of the above two movements, and Kiarostami himself has acknowledged the influence of Italian neorealism on his cinematic universe.[124] But I would argue that this link is not based on what has often been characterized as their similarity (rural settings, nonprofessional actors, realist technique, etc.), but rather on the specific deployment of the gaze operative in their filmic structure and in the way Kiarostami's cinema for instance always contains, both at the level of form and narrative, what remains invisible and unseen in the visual field or is irreducible to this field. In this sense, Kiarostami's cinematic oeuvre, emblematic of the New Iranian Cinema, can be designated as an exemplary instance of the cinema of desire.

1.2 The Averted Gaze as Looking Awry: An Islamic Theory of the Gaze

The advent of the 1979 revolution brought about a radical transformation of the cinema in Iran, which was nothing short of "the Islamization of film culture in Iran,"[125] as Naficy puts it. In 1982, 'the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance' (*Vezarat-e Farhang va Ershad-e Islami*) was instituted in order to ensure that films made in Iran were produced according to the codes and conventions of an Islamic "system of modesty" – veiling or *hejab* in its broadest sense. These guidelines were instituted in order to control the ways in which women's bodies were to be represented on screen. Women were to be portrayed wearing veils, headscarves, and loose fitting clothing that obscured the contours of their bodies. The rules were to ensure that women's movements on the screen would not frame their bodies in an erotically charged manner. The guidelines also sought to proscribe the visual field by the "commandments of looking" (*ahkam-e negah kardan*), which was to ensure that unrelated men and women do not glance at each other on screen with a desiring gaze – hence the logic of the averted gaze.[126] All these restrictions were related to the

[124] Abbas Kiarostami, *Lessons with Kiarostami*, ed. Paul Cronin (New York: Sticking Place Books, 2015), 139.
[125] Hamid Naficy, "The Islamization of Film Culture in Iran," in *The New Iranian Cinema: Politics, Representation and Identity*, ed. by Richard Tapper (London/New York: I.B. Tauris, 2006).
[126] Mottahedeh, *Displaced Allegories*, 8-9.

"purification" (*pak-sazi*) of the sensorium, so that it may be aligned to an Islamic system of modesty or veiling.

In post-revolutionary Iranian cinema or New Iranian Cinema, the female body becomes the site of heterosexual erotic desire par excellence. The female body must be veiled from the male gaze both on screen and in the theater. The Islamic modesty system proscribes close-ups of women or point-of-view shots prevalent in dominant or Hollywood cinema, that create the cinematic illusion in which unrelated men and women directly look at each other on screen. The eye-line matches and shot-reverse-shot that are the constituent elements of the system of suture (the invisible stitching of the spectator into the filmic narrative) in dominant cinema are often absent as they represent "a threat to male piety, in relation to a female body in which, in Islamic culture, heterosexual desire itself is said to reside."[127] This censorship of visuality or veiling of the visual sensorium hinges upon the Shiite logic of the veil, which was to ensure that the male gaze would be contained or controlled through the modesty system, and the female figure would not be staged on screen in a way that would arouse male desire. In an Islamic jurisprudential theory of the gaze, there are strict laws that regulate the gaze (*negah*)[128] and the voice (*seda*).[129] The concept of averting the gaze has its origin in the Qur'an, where it states that God has set the limits (*hodud Allah*) of what is permissible and impermissible: "Say to the believers to cast down their eyes and guard their private parts; that is purer for them. God is aware of the things they work" (24: 30–31).[130] Such statements are further elaborated in Islamic law (*fiqh*) and tradition (*sunnah*), where an elaborate set of prescriptions set limits on what is a "'lawful look' (*al-nadhar al-mubah'*)."[131] As Bouhdiba has perceptively noted, the corpus of Islamic traditions functions as a veritable super-ego

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[127] Negar Mottahedeh, "'Life Is Color!' Toward a Transnational Feminist Analysis of Mohsen Makhmalbaf's *Gabbeh*", *Signs*, no. 30, 2004, pp. 1403-1428.
[128] Shahla Haeri, "Sacred Canopy: Love and Sex under the Veil," *Iranian Studies*, Volume 42, 2009, p.117. For sources on the proscription of the gaze or *ahkam-e negah*, as it relates to the cinema in Shi'i Islamic jurisprudence, see Ayatollah Ali Moraweji, *Sinama dar ayine-ye fiqh* (Cinema in the Mirror of Jurisprudence), ed. by Mohammad Reza Jabbaran. (Tehran: Pazhuhishgah-e farhang va honar-e Islami, 1999).
[129] On the voice, see the next chapter.
[130] Cited in Haeri, "Sacred Canopy", 118.
[131] Abdelwahab Bouhdiba, *Sexuality in Islam*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Saqi Books, 2012), 39. First published as *La sexualité en Islam* (Paris, Presses Universitaires France, 1975).

injunction over the Muslim community.[132] For example, in a controversial tradition (*hadith*), prophet Muhammad states, "The *zina* [adultery], of the eye is the gaze."[133] In her discussion of sexuality within a Muslim framework, Fatima Mernissi has argued that the eye "is undoubtedly an erogenous zone;"[134] and in some jurisprudential sources the logic of the veil is prescribed as a way to impede "*zina al-'ayni*", namely adultery of the eye or visual adultery.[135]

In the context of Islamic legal theory (*fiqh*), the direct gaze is part of what is called *'awra* which variously means nakedness or ones private bodily parts, especially a women's body and hair which is to be veiled or covered before all non-related men (*na-mahram*).[136] As Haeri states, "In the context of the Perso-Arab Muslim society, a woman is perceived as 'aura, or 'aurat in its Persian usage, though the meaning of the term is not understood exactly the same in the two cultures. The Arabic term *'arua* is complex and multifaceted, meaning, among other things, both woman and genitalia."[137] The term *'awra* has a profoundly rich root in Arabic, and as Bouhdiba notes, it also signifies the "loss of the eye." Bouhdiba notes that it is here that a powerful and culturally significant association between the gaze, the sexual organ and the logic of women as *'awra* become co-incident.[138] There are several *ahadith* (traditions), according to Baouhdiba that "bear witness to the canonical and oneiric importance of *'aura*." For instance, ""The man who looks with concupiscence

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[132] Baouhdiba states, "… the traditional corpus… has formed a veritable super-ego presiding over all Islamic cultural development." Bouhdiba, *Sexuality in Islam*, 5.
[133] Haeri, "Sacred Canopy", 117; Bouhdiba, *Sexuality in Islam*, 39; for a discussion of debates surrounding the authenticity of these traditions (*ahadith*), see Moraweji, *Sinama dar ayine-ye fiqh*, 50, 56, 74.
[134] Fatima Mernissi, *Beyond the Veil: Male-Female Dynamics in the Modern Muslim Society* (rev. ed.), trans. Mary Jo Lakeland (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 141.
[135] Bouhdiba, *Sexuality in Islam*, 39.
[136] Apropos the concept of *na-mahram* Haeri states, "*Namahram* may be roughly translated as "forbidden," as in the prohibition of association between adult women and men who are not related to each other within a certain degree of consanguinity or affinity, e.g. cousins, or strangers. Here, women must religiously observe veiling. Mahram, also roughly translated as "permitted," is the opposite of namahram, meaning that in relationships created as results of consanguinity and affinity, e.g. nieces and paternal and maternal uncles, or father-in-law, women need not maintain veiling: in these categories men and women are considered mahram to each other." Haeri, "Sacred Canopy," 118.
[137] Haeri, "Sacred Canopy", 117.
[138] Bouhdiba, *Sexuality in Islam*, 38.

at the attractions of a woman who is not his will have lead poured into his eyes on the Day of Judgment."[139]

Now in Iranian Shi'i legal theory in general, there are limits set on both men and women's gazes, and a distinction is made between what is considered "a lustful gaze (*raybe*), and an innocent look."[140] Whilst the former is completely forbidden, the later has been a source of constant debate among religious scholars (*'ulama*).[141] As noted earlier, in Shi'ite law a whole system of guidelines were constituted called *ahkam-e negah*, which formed an elaborate set of prohibitions on the gaze. For instance one of the clerics, Ayatollah Khoe'i states: "Gazing at the body of a *namahram* [non-related] woman is forbidden for a man, whether it does or does not invoke feelings of pleasure."[142] Ayatollah Khomeini contends, "It is best, *ihtiyat-i vajib*, not to look at a woman's body, face and hands, even if it does not provoke pleasure. Likewise, it is forbidden for a woman to look at a man except for his face and hands."[143] This is why Khomeini was against the Pahlavi state, since it allowed women to appear unveiled in the cinema. Khomeini states:

> By means of the eyes they [the Shah's government] corrupted our youths. They showed such and such women on television and thereby corrupted our youth. Their whole objective was to make sure that no active force would remain in the country that could withstand the enemies of Islam so they could do with impunity whatever they wanted.[144]

This is why the logic of the averted gaze as related to the modesty system (*hejab*) was enacted in relation to post-revolutionary Iranian cinema. Hamid Naficy makes an important link between Žižek's concept of "looking awry"[145] and the averted gaze as it appears in Iranian cinema; he writes, "Like the looking awry' that Slavoj Žižek

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[139] Ibid, 38.
[140] Haeri, "Sacred Canapy," 118.
[141] Ibid, 118.
[142] Khoe'i cited Haeri, "Sacred Canopy", 118; cf. Moraweji, *Sinama dar ayine-ye fiqh*, 53.
[143] Khomeini cited in Haeri, "Sacred Canopy", 118; cf. Moraweji, *Sinama dar ayine-ye fiqh*, 53.
[144] Cited in Naficy, "Veiled Visions/Powerful Presences", 132.
[145] Žižek takes the locution "looking awry" from Shakespeare's play Richard II, and in his characteristic fashion states, "Richard II proves beyond any doubt that Shakespeare had read Lacan…" Slavoj Žižek *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan Through Popular Culture* (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1992), 9.

formulated, the averted look theorized here is anamorphic, as it makes the power relations at work in the game of veiling clearer: anamorphic looking is charged, and distorted, by the *voyeuristic* desires and anxieties of the lookers and by the regulations of the system of modesty" [emphasis added].[146] Mottehedeh also uses the term "looking awry," gesturing towards Žižek (but without mentioning his name or citing him), and similarly links it to the averted gaze.

> But the Iranian camera's adoption of the averted and modest gaze, in embodying the look of the veiled subject, also emphasizes the spectator's vulnerability vis-àvis the inscription of *voyeurism* in cinematic codes, as his look identifies mimetically with the look of the camera. Acknowledging possibilities of reversal within film technologies, the post-Revolutionary camera *looks awry* in a gesture of purification, not only in self-defense against the subject's loss of mastery, in its becoming image, but also to produce a different relation to time and space in film beyond the commodified image [emphasis added].[147]

However, although I agree with the theoretical link that Naficy and Mottahedeh have made between the averted gaze and Žižek's looking awry, they nonetheless confuse the notion of looking awry with the first wave psychoanalytic theory's concept of the gaze and link it to voyeurism, on which their work is largely based, and thereby miss the radical Lacanian dimension of Žižek's formulation of looking awry. Žižek states:

> If we look at a thing straight on, matter-of-factly, we see it "as it really is," while the gaze puzzled by our desires and anxieties ("looking awry") gives us a distorted, blurred image. On the level of the second metaphor, however, the relation is exactly the opposite: if we look at a thing straight on, i.e., matter-of-factly, disinterestedly, objectively, we see nothing but a formless spot; the object assumes clear and distinctive features only if we look at it "at an angle," i.e., with an "interested" view, supported, permeated, and '"distorted" by desire.[148]

Here Žižek's formulation of looking awry is precisely related to Lacan's concept of the gaze as *objet petit a*, which he derives from Lacan's reading of a painting. In *Seminar XI*, Lacan provides an instantiation of the gaze in Hans Holbein's painting

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[146] Hamid Naficy, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema, 4 Volumes* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 107; cf. Hamid Naficy, "The Averted Gaze in Iranian Postrevolutionary Cinema." *Public Culture*. 3.2 (1991): 29-40.
[147] Mottahedeh, *Displaced Allegories* 157.
[148] Žižek, *Looking Awry*, 11.

The Ambassadors (1533). The painting is a representation of two world travellers and the wealth they have acquired in their journeys. However, at the bottom of the painting there appears a distorted image, which the viewer is unable to make out at first, and which functions as a disruption in the painting. This image is an *anamporphosis* or an anamorphic figure which when looked at directly nothing is clearly seen, but once we look at the figure from an angle and to the left, the image of a skull comes into focus. It is here that for Lacan, the anamorphic figure of the skull functions as the site where the gaze appears in the image.[149] This is why Lacan states, "We… see emerging on the basis of vision… the gaze as such, in its pulsatile, dazzling and spread out function, as it is in this picture [i.e., Holbein's *The Ambassadors*]."[150] The anamorphic figure in the image thereby acts as a blot or stain in the image which when looked at awry takes the viewing subject into account, and returns the gaze.

This looking awry or viewing sideways has the structure of the averted gaze or the sideways glance in the Islamic system of modesty, in which the female subject is not to be directly looked upon in a frontal direct way nor is she to look directly at the male subject – hence in this paradoxical way, the averted gaze, far from reducing or diminishing the cause of desire, on the contrary becomes the object-cause of desire, the Lacanian *objet petite a*.[151] In other words the object of desire (either the male or female) only properly becomes the desired object by being viewed sideways or by looking awry – this is the paradoxical logic of the averted gaze, it does not suppress your desire, but rather causes you to desire. Recall for instance the first moment in Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958), where Scottie sees the fake Madeline in the restaurant. While sitting at the bar in the restaurant Scottie waits to get a glimpse of Madeline, and once she passes by he glances at her sideways, this is done through the camera by a lack of a subjective-point of view shot, and in this non-subjective shot his look is effectively averted so as not to draw attention to himself by looking awry rather than directly at her. It is precisely at this moment that Madeline

[149] Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts*, 89; cf. McGowan, *The Real Gaze*, 7.
[150] Ibid, 89.
[151] This is also acknowledged by Naficy, "Veiling and the system of looking which has developed to deal with it hide aspects of women (and to some extent men)…. [and] tend to turn the object of the look into an erotic object. Veiled women thus may become highly charged with sexuality, which ironically subverts the purpose of the religious principles of veiling…" Naficy, "Veiled Visions/Powerful Presences", 141.

becomes the object-cause of his desire, as she enters the coordinates of his desire by entering his frame of fantasy. This is why fantasy is "the *mise en scène* of desire,"[152] as Jean Laplanche and J. B. Pontalis put it. In his chapter called, "Troubles with the Real: Lacan as a Viewer of Alien," Žižek states: "The status of this object-cause of desire is that of an anamorphosis: a part of the picture which, when we look at the picture in a direct frontal way, appears as a meaningless stain, acquires the contours of a known object when we change our position and look at the picture from aside. Lacan's point is here even more radical: the object-cause of desire is something that, when viewed frontally, is nothing at all, just a void—it acquires the contours of something only when viewed sideways."[153] In this sense, the averted gaze, which is rightly linked to the logic of looking awry by Mottahedeh and Naficy, is co-incident with the Lacanian gaze. In this quite formal sense, the way the averted gaze functions in the New Iranian Cinema is how the (Lacanian) gaze becomes manifest.

In his discussion of Islamic prohibitions on the gaze regulating relations between the sexes, Bouhdiba makes a fascinating connection to Sartre's conception of the look and writes, "The confrontation of the sexes, as conceived by Islam, transforms each sexual partner into '*être-regard*', being-as-a-look, to use Sartre's term."[154] (37). Here, I would go further than Bouhdiba, and contend that the relation between the sexes as conceived in Islam renders each sexual partner susceptible to what Lacan calls *l'objet regard* or the object-gaze. For instance, as one religious scholar, Daylami, states, ""Never go into water without clothing for water has eyes…""[155] This recalls Lacan's notion of the gaze as object, since such descriptions take on an uncanny dimension where even water (an object) can return the gaze. In this way, a short-circuiting reading becomes possible where there is an uncanny homology between the Lacanian gaze and the Shi'i Islamic theory of the averted gaze. In order to contain the "male gaze" as it were, by prescribing the modesty system's averted gaze, the New Iranian Cinema paradoxically became the exemplary site of the Lacanian gaze, and thereby produces, a cinema of desire.

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[152] See Jean Laplanche and J. B. Pontalis, "Fantasy and the Origins of Sexuality," *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 1968; 49(1): 1-18.
[153] Slavoj Žižek, *How To Read Lacan* (London: Granta Books, 2006), 68.
[154] Bouhdiba, *Sexuality in Islam*, 37; cf. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 268.
[155] Ibid, 38.

1.3 The Film Returns the Gaze: Abbas Kiarostami's *Shirin*

Upon his untimely death, Abbas Kiarostami (d. 2016) was perhaps the greatest and the most renowned *auteur* of the New Iranian Cinema. For more than three decades he created a unique form of cinematic art that mesmerized the world and left an indelible mark in the history and language of cinema. It is perhaps a testament to this profound influence on the formal language of cinema that no less of a figure than Jean Luc-Godard said of him, "Film begins with W.D. Griffith and ends with Abbas Kiarostami."[156] The cinema of Kiarostami garnered world-wide praise for its poetic beauty and at once formal complexity and narrative simplicity, and won major awards in prestigious film festivals around the world including the Palme d'Or at the Cannes Film Festival for *Ta'm-e gilas* (*Taste of Cherry*, 1997), the first ever to be given to an Iranian director.

It is little wonder than that among all the Iranian filmmakers of his generation, it is Kiarostami's cinema that has received the greatest critical attention by some of the most renowned film critics, scholars and theorists, who have each strived to distill the essence of his cinema by describing its unique formal and narrative structure. The cinema of Kiarostami has variously been designated as the cinema of "delay and uncertainty,"[157] the "cinema of questions,"[158] of "ellipsis and omission,"[159] an "unfinished" or "half-finished cinema,"[160] "cinema as thought experiment,"[161] the cinema of "an open image,"[162] and "a cinema of silence."[163] Many of these scholars have often noticed and noted both the aural and visual absences in Kiarostami's

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[156] Mottahedeh, *Displaced Allegories*, 90.
[157] Laura Mulvey, "Kiarostami's Uncertainty Principle," *Sight and Sound* 6 June 1998, 24-27.
[158] See Godfrey Cheshire, "Abbas Kiarostami: A Cinema of Questions," *Film Comment* 8, no. 6 (July/August 1996): 34-36, 41-43;
[159] Mehrnaz Saeed-Vafa, and Jonathan Rosenbaum, *Abbas Kiarostami* (Urbana-Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2003).
[160] Mostafa Mokhtabad, "Kiarostami's Unfinished Cinema and its Postmodern Reflections," in *International Journal of the Humanities* 17, no. 2 (2010): 23-37.
[161] Joan Copjec, "Cinema as Thought Experiment: On Movement and Movements," *differences* (2016) 27 (1): 143-175.
[162] Shohini Chaudhuri and Howard Finn, "The Open Image: Poetic Realism and the New Iranian Cinema," *Screen 44*, no. 1 (Spring 2003): 38-57.
[163] Babak Tabarraee, "Abbas Kiarostami: A Cinema of Silence," *Soundtrack* 5, no. 1 (June 2012), 5-13; cf. "Silence Studies in the Cinema and the Case of Abbas Kiarostami" (Unpublished Master's thesis, University of British Columbia, 2013).

cinema, yet no one has fully theorized the significance of these absences. Indeed, it is in Kiarostami's cinema that we can witness the proper tension between gaze and voice: the axis around which the art of cinema revolves. This is why I argue that the cinema of Kiarostami is the cinema of desire par excellence, since the (Lacanian) gaze (and voice) is ubiquitous in his cinematic universe. It is through an analysis of Kiarostami's film *Shirin* (Iran, 2008), that the logic of the gaze that produces this cinema of desire will be analyzed.

It is perhaps no coincidence that more than any other auteur of New Iranian Cinema, it is the cinema of Abbas Kiarostami that has attracted the gaze of psychoanalytic film theorists. Psychoanalysis and Kiarostami's cinema see through a similar lens as it were and Kiarostami himself notes this uncanny co-incidence in a foreword to a book on psychoanalysis in Tehran, and states that, "the psychoanalytic lens closely resembles what I see through my camera". [164] Indeed, one of the loci where these two lenses converge and come together is through the logic of the gaze. Although the gaze has been theorized to a degree in film theoretical work on the New Iranian Cinema, it has largely been in the form of the first wave psychoanalytic film theory or Screen theory (i.e., the absence of the male-gaze),[165] and only recently has there been instances of a direct engagement with the Lacanian gaze in light of New Iranian Cinemas master practitioner Abbas Kiarostami.[166] It was the philosopher

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[164] Gohar Houmayounpour, *Doing Psychoanalysis in Tehran* (Cambridge Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2012) ix.

[165] For the deployment of feminist gaze theory or Screen theory in reading post-revolutionary Iranian cinema and the films of Kiarostami, see Negar Mottahedeh, *Displaced Allegories: Post-Revolutionary Iranian Cinema* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009. Also see Sara Saljoughi, "Seeing, Iranian Style: Women and Collective Vision in Abbas Kiarostami's *Shirin*", *Iranian Studies*, Volume 45, 2012 - Issue 4, pp. 519-535. Saljoughi argues that in *Shirin* Kiarostami "challenges the post-revolutionary modesty laws and their emphasis on not looking at women and at avoiding a spectator–image relationship based on the fulfillment of the desiring male gaze."

[166] For the use of the Lacanian gaze see, Joan Copjec, "The Object-Gaze, Hijab, Cinema," *Filozofski Vestnik*: XXVII (2) (2006), 161-83; also, Farhang Erfani, *Iranian Cinema and Philosophy: Shooting Truth* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2011). Contrary to Copjec and Erfani who discuss the gaze only in relation to one of Kiarostami's films – Copjec analyzing the Lacaian gaze in *The Wind Will Cary Us* (1999), and Erfani's analysis of the gaze in *Close-Up* (1990) – I argue that the object-gaze is ubiquitous in Kiarostami's entire cinematic oeuvre. Since a full analysis of the gaze in Kiarostami's cinema is beyond the scope of this chapter, I can only briefly allude to several other films where the gaze is operative. For example, in *Zendegi va digar hich* (*Life and Nothing More…*, 1992), the gaze appears at the end of the film when

Jean-Luc Nancy, in his now classic book on Kiarostami, *L'évidence du film* (2001), who described Kiarostami's cinema as the cinema of the gaze (the French *le regard*, is often translated in the book into English as 'look'), as he states, "Kiarostami mobilizes the look (*le regard*): he calls it and animates it, he makes it vigilant."[167] But, although Nancy's formulation of the gaze in relation to Kiarostami's cinema was influential on subsequent attention on the way the gaze appeared in Kiarostami's cinema, it bears slight relation to Lacan's notion of the object-gaze or the gaze as *objet petit a*, since Nancy's use of the look/gaze is on the side of the subject (spectator) looking or what the camera shows, it is still related to the looking subject, rather than a split between the eye and the gaze.

Shirin (2008) is the apotheosis of Kiarostami's experiment with what is unseen in the screen image, and if we accept his own assessment that he would like *Shirin* in some ways to be regarded as his last film, we can well understand that what this film achieved at its purest, was a common motif that ran through all his films, namely "their play with what's not shown on screen"[168] *Shirin* consists mostly of single close-up shots of a group of 114 women in the foreground (with a few men partially visible in the background), who are presumably (I say presumably, since as we shall see they were not in a movie theater, and were never watching a film) in a darkened movie theater watching the film-within-a-film about the life of princess named Shirin based on the 13th century poet Nezami Ganjavi's romance *Khowsrow and Shirin*. Throughout the film we never see the film-within-a-film, but hear its

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we are unsure if the father/director will be able to find the boy in the next village. This exemption of narrative closure is what engenders the gaze since our desire has been accounted for in the cinematic image. Similarly, in the final closing-scene of *Zir-e derakhtan-e zayton* (*Through the Olive Trees*, 1994), the two figures are staged amdist olive trees in an extreme long-shot where we are unable to hear the reponse to the wedding proposal that would provide us with narrative closure–by being denied this closure we are left desiring as spectators, and it is at this moment that the gaze appears, since the spectator's desire has been implicated in the formal and narrative structure of the film. Lastly, in Kiarostami's *Dah* (*10*, 2002), we are denied the ability to see the female driver for about 17 minutes and only hear her voice (a voice that is acousmatic and only later becomes de-acousmatized – see next chapter on the acousmatic voice) whilst the camera is focused on the son. It is here that the object-gaze appears in the film (among other instances), since the subject's desire is implicated through its desire to see the invisible or absent presence in the image.

[167] Jean-Luc Nancy, *L'Évidence du film. Abbas Kiarostami*. [The Evidence of Film: Abbas Kiarostami.] (Bruxelles: Yves Gevaert Éditeur, 2001),16.

[168] Geoff Andrew, "Kiarostami and the Art of the Invisible." DVD booklet for *Shirin*. (London: British Film Institute, 2008) 1.

narrative story on the soundtrack, and gleams of reflected light cast on the actresses faces from the (supposed) film. All we can see as viewers is the reaction and the emotions writ large on the faces of these women (consisting of mostly famous actresses in Iranian cinema, including the French actress Juliette Binoche) who are presumably moved by the power of this love story that is being enacted and heard through music, sound effects, and the actors' voices. The women at times appear to look into the camera at the viewer, but more often they appear to be looking at an invisible point, presumably the cinematic screen. This, in short, is the entirety of the 85 minutes that make up *Shirin*.

In order to bring to the fore the structure of the gaze in *Shirin*, I will use Lacan's reading of a famous painting by Diego Velázquez, *Las Meninas* (1656), since as I will argue, there is a profound co-incidence between the way the gaze functions in this painting and the film. The painting depicts a scene in an expansive room in the Royal Alcazar at the court of the Spanish King Philip IV, with several figures notably the young Infanta Margaret Therassa at the centre, the king's youngest surviving daughter, surrounded by maids of honour, chaperone, a bodyguard, a dwarf, a child and a dog. At the left hand of the painting, Velázquez has portrayed himself engaged in the act of painting on a large canvas. Several of the figures, including Velázquez and Margaret Therassa, directly look outwards beyond the space of the painting towards where the viewing subject would be standing. There is a mirror at the back of the painting, which reflects in a medium shot (to use a cinematic term) the figures of the king and queen, who seem to be positioned outside the pictorial space possibly in the position of the viewing subject. Finally, just to the right of the mirror, there is another figure, a man standing by an open door, who looks back towards the scene just as he is about to exit the room (Figure 1.1).

Figure 1.1 *Las Meninas*, by Diego Velázquez (1565); Wikimedia Commons.

In his unpublished Seminar XIII, *l'Objet de la Psychanalyse* (*The Object of Psychoanalysis*) (1965-1966),[169] Lacan provides a brilliant reading of *Las Meninas*, (against Foucault's reading in his book *The Order of Things*).[170] In this seminar Lacan argues that the "the painting functions as a trap for the gaze, [and] its imagery

[169] For the unpublished seminar see, Jacques Lacan, *l'Objet de la Psychanalyse*, Seminar XIII (1965-66), available online: http://www.valas.fr/Jacques-Lacan-l-objet-de-la-psychanalyse,258; for a provisional translation of this seminar, see Jacques Lacan, Seminar XIII (1965-66) *The Object of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Cormac Gallagher, http://www.lacaninireland.com/web/wp-content/uploads/2010/06/13-The-Object-of-Psychoanalysis1.pdf.

[170] Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things* (London: Routledge, 2001), chapter 1.

incites the spectator's desire and does something with this desire."[171] For Lacan, there are several ruses operative in the painting, which many interpreters are taken in by (such as Foucault), namely the mirror in the back of the painting where the image of the king and queen appear. According to Lacan, such a reading occludes the question of the desire of the looking subject, or the desire that divides the subject. As Aaron Schuster notes the overall thesis of Lacan "is that the subject is not only the spectator who looks at the picture, but the picture in a way looks back, it looks back at the subject and frames it in its own manner, the subject's gaze is inscribed in the picture as something separated from it, as an object, an object that is the subject."[172] In this sense, the subject is not only outside the painting, looking at it from a safe distance, but is effectively drawn into the painting, and as Lacan puts it, is "caught like a fly in glue",[173] and appears there as an uncanny object. As Schuster notes, this "synthesis of the divided subject with a partial object, in this case the gaze, defines the structure of fantasy," since for Lacan *Las Meninas* "provides a brilliant illustration of the visual structure of fantasy."[174] Hence, Lacan argues that the painting is not a "representation of representation" (as it is for Foucault), but an instance of the Freudian "representative representation" (*Vorstellungsrepräsentanz*), which signifies a representation of the scopic derive.[175]

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[171] Aaron Schuster, "The Lacan-Foucault Relation: *Las Meninas*, Sexuality, and the Unconscious." 8. Transcript of a lecture delivered at the "Lacan Contra Foucault" conference, American University of Beirut, December 4, 2015. Lacan states, "the picture is a trap for the look, that it is a matter of trapping the one who is there in front…" Lacan, *The Object of Psychoanalysis*, 226. In his Seminar XI, whilst talking about Hans Holbein's painting *The Ambassadors*, Lacan similarly states, "This picture is simply what any picture is, a trap for the gaze. In any picture, it is precisely in seeking the gaze in each of its points that you will see it disappear." See Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts*, 89.

[172] Schuster, "The Lacan-Foucault Relation", 8.

[173] Ibid, 8; cf. Lacan states, "believing that nothing is happening to us when we are in front of a picture, we are caught like a fly in glue;" Gallagher trans. Lacan, *The Object of Psychoanalysis*, 226.

[174] Schuster, "The Lacan-Foucault Relation", 8; cf. Lacan states, "We are here to see how this picture inscribes for us the perspective of the relationships of the gaze in what is called fantasy, in so far as it is constitutive" [translation amended]. Gallagher trans. Lacan, *The Object of Psychoanalysis*, 227; cf. Lacan, *l'Objet de la Psychanalyse*, 607. The Lacanian *matheme* for fantasy is "$<>a": The $ is the symbol of the barred or split subject, *a* is *objet petit a* or object-cause of desire, and losange or diamond functions as the relation between the two.

[175] Ibid, 8-9; cf. Lacan states, "It is a structure different to any representation. It is in this connection that I insist on the essential difference constituted by this term of

It is here that we can turn to *Shirin*, since in the film the gaze formally functions in the same way as it does in Lacan's interpretation of *Las Meninas*. Like *Las Meninas*, *Shirin* functions as a trap for the gaze, the images on screen evoke the spectator's desire, and it does something with this desire. The first ruse at work in *Shirin* is the film-within-a-film, which we can hear on the soundtrack and observe the women watching it but remains unseen and invisible. The spectator's desire is thereby aroused, since we want to see the invisible film-within-the-film that the women are watching. While watching the film we are taken in by the trick that these women are watching a film, but in reality they were never watching a film. All the women were shot separately, in small groups sitting in Kiarostami's living room. Similarly the trick of the film is to make us think that they are responding to a real film, but no such film exists, the actresses were told to just look at a few dots above the camera. The supposed film was a radio play performance of *Khowsrow and Shirin* that was used later by Kiarostami and added on the soundtrack in the editing process, matching the various emotions of the actresses to the development of plot points in the story. In this way the spectator looking at the film, all of a sudden has the uncanny feeling that the film returns the gaze, and thereby divides the subject, the subject's gaze becomes inscribed in the film as a separated object, an object that functions as the subject. In this sense, the spectator is no longer outside the film looking at it from a safe distance, but is drawn into the film, and appears there as an uncanny object. This division of the subject from the partial object, namely the gaze, is what characterizes the logic of fantasy, and following Lacan's reading of *Las Meninas*, it may be said that *Shirin* is a cinematic visualization of the structure of fantasy.

In Lacan's reading *Las Meninas* is not about the play of mirror reflections (as it is for Foucault), but a window, "the window or the frame of fantasy."[176] Lacan argues that the mirror functions as a sort of trap in the painting, and that the true key for understanding the painting is the window or frame.[177] Indeed, the logic of the frame, or the frame of fantasy is exactly what is at work in *Shirin*. Kiarostami himself

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representative of the representation, *Vorstellungsrepresentanz*, borrowed from Freud." Lacan, *The Object of Psychoanalysis*, 231; cf. Lacan, *l'Objet de la Psychanalyse*, 615.

[176] Schuster, "The Lacan-Foucault Relation", 9.

[177] Ibid, 9.

was fully aware of this function of the frame, as he states, "I've often noticed that we are not able to look at what we have in front of us, unless it's inside a frame."[178] From this perspective, each shot of one of the actresses in the film functions as a frame, or the frame of fantasy. The other ruse in the painting is the question of the canvas, namely the mystery of the painting within the painting, and what Velázquez is painting there. Many interpreters (such as Foucault) are taken in by this trick of the painting, but Lacan suggests that perhaps there is nothing on the canvas at all, and that "the question of what's on the canvas is the wrong question to ask. The very question is a trap. The painting wants us to wonder about what's on the other side of the canvas."[179] This is the trick of *Shirin*, since the film wants us to wonder about the contents of the mysterious film-within-the-film, which does not exist. *Shirin* is perhaps the only film in which the film-within-the-film is itself completely fictional and non-existent.[180] In an interview Kiarostami states, "Someone who had seen the movie told me, and I quote, 'when I was watching the film, I just wanted to see the things they were watching.' Do I want to see what they were watching, I asked myself? The answer was no way, no way."[181] In other words, for Kiarostami what they are watching is a ruse, what we should be watching is the cinematic screen itself.

Figure 1.2 Actresses watching the invisible film-within-the-film (*Shirin*)

[178] *24 Frames*, directed by Abbas Kiarostami (Iran: CG Cinema and Kiarostami Foundation, 2017), Film.
[179] Schuster, "The Lacan-Foucault Relation", 9.
[180] On film(s) within film see Christian Metz, *Impersonal Enunciation, or the Place of Film* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016). In Chapter 8.
[181] Khatereh Khodaei, "Shirin as Described by Kiarostami," Volume 13, Issue 1 / January 2009. http://offscreen.com/view/shirin_kiarostami

Now following Lacan, what we have to do here is to analyze how this trick operates in the film, rather then be taken in by it. Lacan argues that the way the canvas functions in the painting is to stage "the painting's completely fictional status," as Schuster states, for Lacan "The point is not merely to create an illusion, but to make illusion appear as illusion, or to make appearance appear as appearance."[182] This is what is formally operative in *Shirin*, Kiarostami has not just created a cinematic illusion through the film-within-the-film, but has made illusion appear as illusion, namely to make cinema appear as cinema. In order to draw out this fictional status of the painting as a way to make illusion appear as illusion, or how the painting within the painting functions, Lacan makes an illuminating link between another painting, namely René Magritte's *The Human Condition* (1933) as a way to understand what is at work in *Las Meninas*.

In *The Human Condition* Magritte draws a paradoxical image in which a painting canvas stands in front of a window, in which the contents of the painting become part of what we see through the window. The two become indistinguishable, as Lacan states, Magritte, "inscribes a picture in a window."[183] As Schuster puts it, "Instead of looking through the painting, as it were, and entering into its scene…we think we are going to enter into the painting and then we discover that the painting is actually an obstacle in front of the reality it is meant to be depicting."[184] In his seminar on *Anxiety*, Lacan had already referred to Magritte's painting in order to illustrate the structure of fantasy, and Schuster sums it up and states that for Lacan, " fantasy… is like a painting enframed by a window… fantasy acts as a screen that frames reality while also obscuring what's behind it… a window provides a frame through which we can see, and fantasy is like a window on reality…"[185] Lacan's ultimate point here is that we never get to see reality in itself unmediated, since space is the Real (beyond symbolization), we only have access to reality through the frame of fantasy, through a fiction that structures reality, without which reality would

[182] Schuster, "The Lacan-Foucault Relation", 9.
[183] Ibid, 9; cf. Lacan writes, "… this is the provocative image that a painter like Magritte produces before us when, in a picture, he in fact inscribes a picture in a window". Lacan, *The Object of Psychoanalysis*, 231; cf. Lacan, *l'Objet de la Psychanalyse*, 616.
[184] Ibid, 9.
[185] Ibid, 10.

disintegrate.[186] In this sense, we should read the following statement of Kiarostami's in light of Magritte's *The Human Condition*, "My films attempt to express *the human condition* rather than the specific conditions or masks that localize this or the other group or person [emphasis added]."[187] *Shirin*, like *Las Meninas*, functions as a Magrittean revelation in *The Human Condition*.

Although Kiarostami's cinema has mostly been read as a form of self-reflexivity (films about the process of making film) and as the symbiosis of documentary and narrative fiction, but what this cinema reveals is not self-reflexivity or *mies-en abyme* but what it does is to question our very conception of reality itself. Jean Luc-Nancy is correct when he states that "[Kiarostami] is not interested in the film about the film or in the film, he is not investigating the *mise-en-abyme*."[188] The achievement of *Shirin* as cinematic art is rather to make us discern the fictional structure of reality itself, that is to say, reality would cease to exist without the fictions or the fantasmatic support that sustains it. As Žižek's formulates it: "The ultimate achievement of film art is not to recreate reality within the narrative fiction, to seduce us into (mis)taking a fiction for reality, but, on the contrary, to make us discern the fictional aspect of reality itself..."[189] This is what Kiarostami's cinema is about in general, and which *Shirin* stages at its most distilled form. *Shirin*, like *Las Meninas* and *The Human Condition*, is not about the representation of reality by reproducing it as representation cinematically, but it reveals that reality itself can only be viewed through the window of fictions, through the frame of fantasy; this is the elementary lesson of fantasy in psychoanalysis: without the fictions that sustain reality, there would be no reality as such, since reality is always already mediated by fictions. Such is the truly radical core of Kiarostami's cinema, it does not give us the reality of fiction but the fiction of reality; what cinematic art at its best gives us is

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[186] Lacan writes, "It's crucial to grasp the nature of the reality of space as a three dimensional space if we are to define the form that the presence of desire takes on at the scopic level, namely, as a fantasy. The function of the frame, the window frame I mean, which I tried to define in the structure of the fantasy, is not a metaphor. If the frame exists, it's because space is real." Lacan, *Anxiety*, 283.
[187] Abbas Kiarostami, 'Foreword', in Gohar Houmayounpour, *Doing Psychoanalysis in Tehran* (Cambridge Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2012) x.
[188] Nancy, *L'Évidence du film*, 27.
[189] Slavoj Žižek, *The Fright of Real Tears: Krzysztof Kieślowski Between Theory and Post-Theory*).

rather the recognition that we never get to bare naked reality without fantasy. In this formal sense, *Shirin* stages the fictional structure of reality itself.

In *Shirin* therefore the story of the invisible film-within-the-film on the soundtrack is a ruse that incites the subject's desire to see this invisible film, but as Kirostami states, "I believe if you dare let go of the story [of Shirin], you will come across a new thing which is the Cinema itself. In fact, I suggest you let go of the story and just keep your eyes on the screen."[190] By letting go of the story and keeping our eyes on the screen what we come to realize as spectators is that it is not only we who look at the film, but in a way the film itself looks back at us. Even an avowed post-theorist such as David Bordwell recognized that what is going on in *Shirin* is that "the movie looks back at us."[191] But since Bordwell lacks the theoretical terms to articulate the gaze as a cinematic object, he is unable to recognize that when an object, such as the movie-screen looks back at the viewer, what we have is the object-gaze. Therein lies the profound significance of *Shirin*, since it is one of the few masterpieces in the history of cinema where the film itself returns the gaze.

1.4 The Fantasized Object-Gaze in *Baran*

Majid Majidi's *Baran* (2001) is one of the post-revolutionary films produced in Iran that received world wide critical attention, and was distributed in the US by Miramax films. The film represents an example of 'poetic cinema' (an appellation that Majidi himself endorsed in relation to his films), which came to be associated with the New Iranian Cinema at international film festival circuits.[192] *Baran* fits well into what Blake Atwood has theorized as a set of "reformist aesthetics" that he argues are unique to films produced in the reformist era under president Mohammad Khatami (1997-2005), such as the motif of "mystic love."[193] Like many of Majidi's films,

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[190] Khodaei, "Shirin as Described by Kiarostami."
[191] David Bordwell, "The movie looks back at us," Wednesday | April 1, 2009, accessed 20 May, 2018. http://www.davidbordwell.net/blog/2009/04/01/the-movie-looks-back-at-us/
[192] Shiva Rahbaran, *Iranian Cinema Uncensored: Contemporary Film-makers since the Islamic Revolution* (London: I.B.Tauris, 2015), 151.
[193] Blake Atwood, *Reform Cinema in Iran: Film and Political Change in the Islamic Republic* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 23. For a review of the book see, Farshid Kazemi, "Reform Cinema in Iran: Film and Political Change in the Islamic Republic," *Iranian Studies* Vol. 50, Iss. 5, (May 2017): 741-744.

Baran often draws on Sufi mystical discourse, such as the mystical allegory of the voyage of the soul towards the divine Beloved, as found in the works of classical Persian poets, such as Sana'i, 'Attar, Rumi, and Jami.[194] In this way, most of Majidi's cinematic oeuvre, including *Baran*, have often been read in light of the mystico-philosophical motif of "the Voyage and the Messenger," to borrow a phrase from Henry Corbin's eponymous book.[195]

Baran (literally meaning 'rain' in Persian) is effectively a story of youthful love between an illegal Afghani worker and an Azari construction worker. The Azari youth, Latif (Hossein Abedini), works at a construction site for Memar (Mohammad Amir Naji), doing simple jobs such as grocery shopping and serving tea to the workers. During a work accident, an Afghan worker named Najar breaks his leg, and his fragile looking son Rahmat is brought in as replacement for his father, by an elderly Afghan family friend, Soltan, so that the poor family may survive. Once Rahmat appears, Latif suddenly feels threatened by him, as he immediately loses his work in the kitchen to him, forced to engage in heavy work instead. His initial hatred is transformed into amorous desire when he finally discovers that the fragile androgynous boy is in fact a girl named Baran (Zahra Bahrami), who had cross-dressed as a boy in order to work at the construction site. During a raid by authorities, the illegal Afghanis, including Baran, run away and she is reduced to working at a nearby village lifting large heavy stones from the river to support her family. Latif discovers her plight and buys crutches for her father Najaf, and entrusts his year of wages to Soltan to give to Najaf, as a way to compensate for his disability pay. In similar poverty, Soltan instead takes the money and returns to Afghanistan, promising in a note to pay the boy back. Desperate to help Baran and her family, Latif sells his identity papers and gives the money to Najaf under the pretext that it is from Memar, but in a twist of fate, Najaf uses the money to go back to Afghanistan. In the final scene, just as they are about to leave, Baran drops some fruits on the floor

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[194] See Nacim Pak-Shiraz, *Shi'i Islam in Iranian Cinema: Religion and Spirituality in Film*. (London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 2011) 93-122; Michael Pittman, "Majid Majidi and Baran: Iranian Cinematic Poetics and the Spiritual Poverty of Rumi," *Journal of Religion & Film*: Vol. 15: Iss. 2, Article 4, (2012); Cyrus Ali Zargar, "Allegory and Ambiguity in the Films of Majid Majidi: A Theodicy of Meaning," *Journal of Religion & Film*: Vol. 20: Iss. 1, Article 3, (2016).

[195] Henry Corbin, *The Voyage and the Messenger: Iran and Philosophy* (Berkley, California: North Atlantic Books, 1999).

and Latif helps her pick them up and for a moment she looks at him, before flipping the *burqa* (Afghani face-veil) over her head to leave on the back of the truck, but her shoe gets stuck in the mud, and Latif takes the shoe and holds it as she puts it back on her foot. The last shot of the film is of rain (*baran*) filling the footprint left behind by Baran, which will shortly wash away.

The emblematic scene where we get the imagined, fantasied gaze is perhaps the most beautifully shot in the entire *Baran*. The scene begins with a shot of Latif about to carry a heavy cement bag, and as he moves towards the camera, a rush of rustling wind blows a fog of debris across the screen that agitates Latif's eyes, causing him to momentarily lose his sight. The sound of the rustling leaves and wind and thunder in the background, all of a sudden turn his attention towards the kitchen where the curtain covering the kitchen door is being blown open lightly by the wind, which draws Latif towards the kitchen area. At the same time as we hear the sound of wind blowing and thunder, we can hear the faint sound of a female humming on the soundtrack. As Latif's blinking stops, the camera pulls towards him in a medium close up, and we get a reverse shot of the curtain slowly blowing in the wind and as the camera pulls closer for a brief moment we get a glimpse of the silhouette of a female figure behind an opaque window frame combing her hair. The camera stays in medium shot by the curtain and we see Latif enter the frame with his back to the camera as he approaches the curtain. Latif slowly pulls the curtain partially open and we get a reverse shot of Latif looking through the crack of the semi opened curtain, his eyes widening at the full revelation of what he is seeing. Then in a reverse shot, which is a subjective point of view shot of Latif, we see the silhouette of Baran behind an opaque window frame brushing her long hair, presumably humming to herself (although the voice seems to be extra-diegetic yet the implication is that the source is Baran). The logic of the modesty system is maintained by having Baran framed behind an opaque window which functions as a veil that separates the look of Latif and that of the spectators from seeing her unimpeded, and the backlighting creates a strong contrast where she becomes a shadow cast on a screen (a cinematic screen even). The scene ends when all of a sudden Latif hears the sound of footsteps, and he realizes that she is about to come out, which makes him run away in panic,

and hide behind the stack of cements, as he spies on her leaving, dressed as a boy, with a tray of tea in her hands (Figure 1.3).[196]

Figure 1.3 The location of the gaze in *Baran* is in the opacity of the window glass, representing the cinematic screen, rather than Latif's voyeuristic look.

This scene where Latif is effectively a peeping Tom or voyeur, is a perfect instantiation of the fantasized or imagined gaze, and the power of fascination in this entire scene resides in the fact that it traverses from the Sarrterian gaze to the Lacanian gaze. In the scene at first you have the classic description of the gaze in Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* regarding the voyeur peeping through a keyhole. For

[196] Michelle Langford, "Negotiating the sacred body in Iranian cinema(s): National, physical and cinematic embodiment in Majid Majidi's *Baran* (2002)." *Negotiating the Sacred II: Blasphemy and Sacrilege in the Arts.* E. Burns-Coleman, and S. Fernandes-Dias (Canberra, The Australian National Univeristy Press, 2008), pp. 167-168.

Sartre the gaze emerges not only from the organ of sight, but is evoked through the sound of rustling leaves, which startles the voyeur. Sartre states:

> Of course what most often manifests a look is the convergence of two ocular globes in my direction. But the look will be given just as well on occasion when there is a rustling of branches, or the sound of a footstep followed by silence, or the slight opening of a shutter, or a light movement of a curtain.[197]

This description of Sartre uncannily resembles what we get in this scene from *Baran*, all the elements are there, the sound of rustling branches via the wind, the light movement of the curtain, etc. According to Sartre, these sounds are heard at the moment he is engaged in the act of looking through a keyhole and where a feeling of shame associated with the gaze suddenly surprises the voyeur, since a gaze is what is imagined in the field of the Other. It is at this moment where the voyeur imagining himself being observed by another acquires a sense of self. [198] In this sense, as Joan Copjec states, in Sartre the gaze acts "as an 'indispensable mediator' between the voyeur and himself, the condition necessary for precipitating him out as subject from the act of looking in which he has until this point been totally absorbed".[199] Here the voyeur emerges as a subject, without which there would only be a peering through the keyhole. Sartre's description of the voyeur peeping through a keyhole and the rustling of wind that surprises him can be precisely mapped within the coordinates of the above scene where Latif as a voyeur peeps through the curtain, and all of a sudden at the end becomes aware of himself as subject through the intervention of some noise (wind, birds flying, footsteps, etc.) that startles him. In other words, the entire scene functions as a way to jolt Latif into self-awareness as a subject; but here Latif is less a Sarterian subject that becomes aware of himself through the gaze imagined in the field of the Other, but is rather a Lacanian subject, namely, a subject of desire.[200] Thus, in foregrounding Latif as the subject of desire, we traverse from the Sarterian gaze (apropos shame) to the Lacanian gaze (apropos desire).

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[197] Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 257
[198] Ibid, 369.
[199] Copjec, "The Object-Gaze", 177.
[200] Lacan after a critical summary of Sartre's notion of the gaze in order to distinguish it from his own, brings to the fore what for him is the crucial relation of the gaze to the subject of desire, he states, "But does this mean that originally it is in the relation of subject to subject, in the function of the existence of others as looking at me, that we apprehend what the gaze really is? Is it not clear that the gaze

The (Lacanian) gaze in the scene is therefore not located in Latif's voyeuristic looking, which is where Screen theory would have located the gaze, but on the contrary it is located in the inter-space that acts like a crack in reality itself, from where Latif opens the curtain to look. It is as though Baran is out there, in common existing reality, while Latif is peering at her from some in-between space, a *barazakh*, from some mysterious liminal world. As Žižek states, "This is the location of the imagined, fantasised gaze. Gaze is that obscure point, the blind spot, from which the object looked upon returns the gaze."[201] There is an intense inter-filmic dialogue at work between this scene and a similar one in Hitchcok's *Vertigo*, where we see Scottie in a position of the voyeur observing Madeleine from behind the crack of a door. This seeming crack in reality or "inter-space" from which Scottie observes Madeleine is precisely the location of the fantasied gaze.

The key question to be asked here is: why did Latif get drawn to the kitchen in the first place where Rahmat is and like a peeping Tom spy on Rahmat? Therein resides the key to the whole scene, which stages the Lacanian notion of the gaze. In his *Seminar I* (1953-1954) Lacan states, "I can feel myself under the gaze of someone whose eyes I do not see, not even discern. All that is necessary is for something to signify to me that there may be others there. This window, if it gets a bit dark, and if I have reasons for thinking that there is someone behind it, is straight-away a gaze."[202] This is precisely what happens to Latif as he is drawn to the kitchen curtain that is being blown lightly by the wind, the window is a little dark, and he has reasons to think there is someone behind it, and this straight-away becomes the gaze.

The gaze then is not where we usually expect it, it is located in the blurred, opaque window, which manifests the subject's (Latif's and the spectators) desire and distorts the visual field. The gaze is not on the side of the subject looking (Latif), but is encountered by the spectator in the object, in the window. This opacity of the window, blots the visual field and distorts everything that Latif sees, as well as what

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intervenes here only in as much as it is not the annihilating subject, correlative of the world of objectivity, who feels himself surprised, but the subject sustaining himself in a function of desire? Is it not precisely because desire is established here in the domain of seeing that we can make it vanish?" Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts*, 84-85.

[201] Slavoj Žižek, *Pervert's Guide to Cinema*, directed by Sophie Fiennes, (2006). Film.

[202] Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar, Book I: Freud's Papers on Technique* (New York: Norton, 1988), 215.

the spectator's sees, since the window as blot or stain represents Latif's desire as well as the viewers desire. This is why Lacan states, "And if I am anything in the picture, it is always in the form of the screen, which I earlier called the stain, the spot."[203] The gaze thereby triggers the spectator's desire in the visual field, and becomes the *objet petit a* or object-cause of desire. This play of light and opacity of the window is the screen, the stain or the spot where Latif's desire and our desire becomes manifest. It also stands for the cinematic screen itself, where our desires appear to us at such moments. Once the spectator encounters the opacity of the window as a stain or blot, suddenly the whole scene is de-naturalized, since we recognize that our desire has been accounted for by what we are looking at. In this way, Latif's desire and our desire is inscribed as a blot on the window screen and the cinematic image, and our libidinal investment in what we are viewing is brought to the fore. This is the traumatic dimension in encountering the gaze, since it forces the spectator to confront their desire, which acts as a distortion of reality, and de-naturalizes the world by rendering it non-neutral (i.e., since our desire appears inscribed in what we see out there in reality).

This opacity of the window is also the window or frame of fantasy that enframes reality, just as we saw above how Lacan illuminated the fantasmatic structure of the window apropos the painting *Las Meninas*. Once Latif glimpses the silhouette of Baran behind the window (whom he had originally thought to be a boy), it is at that moment that she enters his fantasy frame and the coordinates of his desire. Without this fantasmatic window enframing reality, Latif's desire would not have been aroused, since it is the window of fantasy that provides "the *mise en scène* of desire". Paradoxically, this is where the logic of the modesty system (*hejab*) and the Lacanian gaze become co-incident, since the opaque window is placed there by Majidi so that Latif and the spectator will not be able to directly look at Baran combing her long tresses (since women's hair is *'awra*). In this technique of veiling Baran behind the opacity of the window whilst the backlighting illuminates the contours of her silhouette, the object-gaze becomes manifest.

A theoretical question imposes itself here apropos the figure of the peeping Tom or voyeur; namely why is it that in *Baran* (a so-called religio-mystical film) the male protagonist, Latif, assumes the position of the voyeur, observing through a

[203] Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts*, 97.

crack the feminine figure through a window? Is this just an anomaly in *Baran* or is the same logic operative in other so-called religious or mystic films. Indeed the same logic is operative in other so-called mystic films produced in post-revolutionary Iran, such as *Khoda nazdik ast* (*God is Near*, 2006), where the central character, Mohammad Esfahani, falls in love with a beautiful teacher and assumes the position of the peeping Tom gazing at her outside the window of her class. It is as if the secret message in the libidinal economy of these films is: the only way for the religious male subject to look at a woman is to assume the position of a voyeur or peeping Tom. (Besides Majidi's own religious commitment to Shi'ism, Hitchock's own Catholicism must be recalled here, since instances of the peeping Tom figure reverberate in his films, especially in *Vertigo* and *Psycho*).

Baran is effectively about the sublimation of male (sexual) desire into spiritual or mystical love; which is why at the end of the film Baran is no longer needed, as she had to be overcome for Latif to become a mystic-lover (*'arif-e'asheq*) in search of the true Beloved (*ma'shuq-e haqiqi*) i.e., God. From this perspective woman (Baran) simply functions as a vanishing mediator, once she has served her purpose, she disappears. This is precisely the lesson of Otto Winenger, where he effectively claims that "woman doesn't exist", and that "*woman is the sin of man.*"[204] In this way, such films as *Baran* are often profoundly reactionary and misogynistic, since woman as the object of desire stands for lust or carnal desire (*shahwat*), which the mystic (Latif) must traverse in order to reach the true invisible object of desire, the divine Beloved (i.e., God). Majidi states, "In a way, he [Latif] renounces Baran. He leaves his cap behind, which is an indication that he goes beyond material things and becomes a spirit."[205] This is the hidden libidinal economy of the film.

Conclusion

This chapter has theorized that the New Iranian Cinema is the site of Lacan's notion *l'objet regard* or the object-gaze. By deploying Lacan's concept of the gaze, the

[204] Otto Winenger cited in Žižek, *Metastasis of Enjoyment*, 141.
[205] "Refugees in Love and Life Interview with Majid Majidi by Gonul Donmez-Colin (Film Critic)," (Reprint from Asian Cinema Studies Vol 13, No 1 Spring/Summer 2002.), accessed September 19, 2017, http://www.cinemajidi.com/

chapter analyzed the way in which the object-gaze operates in the New Iranian Cinema through two filmic examples, namely Abbas Kiarostami's *Shirin* and Majid Majidi's *Baran*. Contrary to the logic of the gaze operative in first wave psychoanalytic film theory or Screen theory where the predominance of the camera's look is undergirded by the male-gaze or the look of the male subject both within the diegesis, and in the spectatorial position; the Lacanian gaze was demonstrated to be on the side of the object rather than the looking subject, where the object looked upon, returns the gaze. It was argued that the object-gaze is constitutive of the New Iranian Cinema, which renders this cinema among the few examplars of the *cinema of desire*, since what is often invisible or unseen in the visual field structures both the formal and narrative logic of this cinema.

Through a close look at the proscriptions on the gaze in Islamic and Shi'i legal theories of the gaze, where it is considered part of a women's *'awra* or nakedness, it was argued that the censorship codes that enforce the system of modesty (*hejab*) on the cinema, recommended the practice of the averted-gaze in order to cleanse the screen image from the male-gaze. I demonstrated that one of the consequences of these restrictions on the gaze, paradoxically, made the New Iranian Cinema one of the exemplary sites of the Lacanian gaze due to its uncanny correlation between the Islamic theory of the averted-gaze as opposed to Negar Mottahedeh's reading, where post-revolutionary Iranian cinema is seen as the locus of feminist gaze theory and hence ostensibly "a feminist cinema." Indeed, I demonstrated that Mottahedeh's invocation of the term 'looking awry' as a way to read the Islamic injunction of the averted gaze unconsciously relies upon Lacan via Žižek without realizing its explicit connection to the Lacanian gaze; similarly Naficy also directly invoked Žižek apropos the motif of looking awry in relation to the averted gaze, but both of them failed to recognize the Lacanian origin of Žižek's formulation, and hence the consequences of its relation to Lacan's object-gaze.

It was seen that in Kiarostami's cinematic universe the gaze often manifests itself through the play of lack and absence in the visual field, which acts to solicit the spectator's desire, since the *objet petit a* or the object-cause of desire in the visual field is the gaze. Based on this 'unseen' that structures his films, I argue that within the New Iranian Cinema, Kiarostami's cinema is *the cinema of desire* par excellence, since the gaze (and the voice) is constitutive of his cinematic oeuvre. In order to theorize this structure of the gaze in *Shirin*, I deployed Lacan's interpretation of

Diego Velázquez painting, *Las Meninas*, as a prism to read the uncanny similarity between the way the gaze appears in this painting and the film. I demonstrated that among Kiarostami's film, *Shirin* acts as the apotheosis of the Lacanian gaze, since in this film the cinema screen itself returns the gaze.

Through a detailed analysis of one of the most famous peeping Tom scenes in Majidi's *Baran*, I demonstrated that it contains the exemplary site of the Lacanian gaze. The scene where Latif appears as a peeping Tom or voyeur is an instantiation of the fantasized or imagined gaze, as it traverses from the Sarrterian gaze to the Lacanian gaze. Contrary to where Screen theory would have located the gaze, namely in Latif's voyeuristic act of looking through the curtain, I argued that the Lacanian gaze is located in the inter-space that acts like a crack in reality itself, from where Latif opens the curtain to look. This is the site of the fantasized or imagined gaze. The gaze was also located in the opacity of the window behind which was the silhouette of Baran and triggered Latif's and the spectator's desire by distorting the visual field. The Lacanian gaze in this instance was not on the side of the looking subject (Latif), but in the object (window screen) itself. Paradoxically, this is where the logic of the modesty system (*hejab*) and the Lacanian gaze find their homology, since the opaque window functioned as a screen, as a veil, so that Latif and the spectator could not directly look at Baran unveiled. Through this technique of screening Baran behind the opaque window, the object-gaze appears as a stain in the image, that when looked upon, returns the gaze.

In the final analysis, this chapter has contributed to second wave psychoanalytic film theory or Lacanian film theory, by demonstrating how the New Iranian Cinema may be considered one of the emblimatic sites of the Lacanian gaze in the cinema rather than the locus of feminist gaze theory. The New Iranian Cinema may be regarded as one of the film movements in the world that is not only one of the emblematic instances of the *cinema of desire*, but an exemplary instance of the art of cinema itself: the dialectic tension between the gaze and voice.

Chapter 2

The Object-Voice: The Acousmatic Voice in the New Iranian Cinema[206]

What object is at issue here? This object is the one that is called the voice.

– Jacques Lacan, *Seminar X*, *Anxiety*.

Slavoj Žižek states that the proper tension –that is "the principal axis" –in the cinema is the one between *gaze and voice*.[207] This axis is of special significance in post-revolutionary Iranian cinema, as it revolves around the staging of the female body. For female bodies to be represented on screen, legitimate use of the voice and gaze had to be discovered within Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*). As Hamid Naficy states, "Theologians mined Islamic doctrines to develop further guidelines about women's representation, their on-screen relations with men, and the permissible uses of *voice and gaze* – theirs as well as those of men"[208] [my emphasis]. In this fascinating sense, post-revolutionary Iranian cinema is born out of the problem of representing the female body between the gaze and voice.

Though the gaze has been discussed to some extent in the scholarly literature on Iranian cinema and on cinema more generally,[209] the voice, on the contrary, has not received the theoretical attention that it rightly merits.[210] In this chapter, I will

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[206] An earlier version of this chapter was submitted to *Camera Obscura* and accepted for publication on September 28, 2016, but due to the journal's long queue it was published on May 2018. See Farshid Kazemi, "The Object-Voice: The Acousmatic Voice in the New Iranian Cinema," *Camera Obscura: Feminism, Culture, and Media Studies*, 98 (vol. 33, no. 2) 2018, pp. 56-81.

[207] Slavoj Žižek, *Reflections of Media, of Politics and Cinema*. Interview with Geert Lovink, *InterCommunication* 14, February 27 1995, accessed December 12, 2015, http://www.lacan.com/zizek-reflections.htm

[208] Hamid Naficy, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema*, Vol. 4. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 111.

[209] On the Lacanian gaze see Chapter 1.

[210] At present there is one study that addresses aspects of the female voice in Iranian cinema, Rosa Holman, *Iranian Women's Cinema: Recovering Voice, Reclaiming Authority* (Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, UNSW, Australia, 2014). However, Holman does not use Chion's concept of the acousmatic voice (or Lacan's object-voice) that I deploy as the privliged film theoretical term that sheds light on the unique structure of the female voice operative in some instances of post-revolutionary Iranian cinema. As indicated the vast majority of the literature on cinema has focused on visuality or the gaze, with only a handful of studies focusing on the female voice in Hollywood or classic cinema. Besides Doane (1980) and Silverman (1988) that I will discuss below,

theorize the deployment of the voice in post-revolutionary Iranian cinema, especially through what the French film theorist Michel Chion calls *acousmêtre* or the acousmatic voice. The acousmatic voice is a voice without a body or disembodied voice, in which the voice of a character emanates from off-screen space detached from a particular body. The acousmatic voice is often operative within post-revolutionary Iranian cinema as a way to circumvent the restrictions on staging bodies (both male and female) in intimate or erotic configurations. This phantomlike voice without a body haunts the entire landscape of post-revolutionary Iranian cinema like a spectral presence.

I will look at two instances in which the acousmatic voice is deployed as a way to subvert the logic of veiling the female voice through the acousmatization of the male voice, focusing on two films, namely Rakhshan Banietemad's *Banoo-ye ordibehesht* (*The May Lady*, Iran, 1997) and Mohsen Makhmalbaf's *Gabbeh* (Iran/France, 1996). The instances of the voice in these films represent a feminist move and a counter-ideological gesture since what is rendered acousmatic in these two films is the male voice rather than the female voice. This male acousmatic voice acts to subvert the logic of veiling the female voice, since representing the male voice without a body, critiques the foregrounding of the male subject as the privileged site of subjectivity in the Islamic Republic. In this way, the acousmatic voice foregrounds female desire rather than male desire, whilst simultaneously drawing out the erotic potential of the male voice, a dimension only ascribed to the female voice in Islamic jurisprudence. Relating Chion's concept of *acousmêtre* with that of Lacan's notion of the voice as *objet petit a*–alongside the concept of "voice-off" in feminist film theory of Mary Ann Doane and Kaja Silverman–this chapter argues that the voice acts as a signifier of desire and becomes a love-object, in place of the forbidden erotic configurations of bodies on the screen. In New Iranian Cinema, therefore, the acousmatic voice fills in the erotic void created by the censors.

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exceptions include: Amy Lawrence, *Echo and Narcissus: Women's Voices in Classical Hollywood Cinema* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991); Sarah Kozloff, *Invisible Storytellers: Voice- Over Narration in American Fiction Film* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988); Britta Sjogren, *Into the Vortex: Female Voice and Paradox in Film* (Urbana and Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press 2005).

2.1 Chion with Lacan: The Acousmatic Voice and Feminist Psychoanalytic Film Theory

One of the foremost theorists of the voice in cinema is the French composer and film theorist, Michel Chion. In his classic text, *The Voice in Cinema* (*La voix au cinema*, 1982), Chion refers to a voice whose source or origin is obscured from the visual field as *acousmêtre* or the acousmatic voice. As Chion states, "For the spectator… the filmic *acousmêtre* is 'offscreen,' outside the image, and at the same time in the image…It's as if the voice were wandering along the surface, at once inside and outside, seeking a place to settle. Especially when a film hasn't shown what body this voice normally inhabits."[211] Though Chion borrowed the term *acousmêtre* from his teacher, Pierre Schaeffer, it is to him that we owe its full articulation in relation to the cinema. The acousmatic voice therefore is a voice that is heard in the diegetic reality of film, but is not specifically attached to a body; it is a disembodied voice – a spectral voice freely floating without a body. For Chion, there are different forms of the *acousmêtre* operative in cinema, such as the complete or partial *acousmêtre*, commentator, radio, telephone, and already visualized. According to Chion, once the acousmatic voice is finally anchored in a specific face or body it is then that the voice becomes de-acousmatized. Therefore, for Chion the acousmatic voice becomes a cinematic object, no less powerful than the images that pervade the cinematic screen.

In referring to this illusive object-voice in cinema, the acousmatic voice, Chion makes a subtle but important connection to Jacques Lacan's theory of the voice as object. Chion considers Lacan to have provided "a serious theoretical elaboration of the voice as an object."[212] Indeed, Lacan added two more objects, the voice and gaze, to the list of the Freudian partial objects (as already discussed in the introduction).[213] As Chion notes, "Lacan… placed the voice – along with the gaze, the penis, the feces, and nothingness- in the ranks of "*objet (a)*," these part objects

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[211] Michel Chion, *The Voice in Cinema,* trans. Claudia Gorbman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 23.
[212] Chion, *The Voice in Cinema*, 1.
[213] In *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* Lacan states, "These are the *objets a* –the breasts, the faeces, the gaze, the voice. It is in this new term that resides the point that introduces the dialectic of the subject qua subject of the unconscious." See Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1978), 242.

which may be fetishized or employed to 'thingify difference.'"[214] For Lacan, *objet petit a* acts as a partial object, an element which is imagined as separable from the rest of the body, such as the voice. There is a crucial distinction to be made between what you desire, the loved one, and what *causes* you to desire. The Lacanian *objet petit a* is not the object of desire (the beloved, etc.), but rather the object-cause of desire, that ever elusive feature which causes one to desire, the surplus that produces or evokes desire.[215] As Žižek puts it, "*Objet petit a,* the object-cause of desire [is]: an object that is, in a way, posited by desire itself. The paradox of desire is that it posits retroactively its own cause, i.e., the object *a* is an object that can be perceived only by a gaze 'distorted' by desire…."[216] In a similar way, the voice as *objet petit a* is an object that can be heard in the aural field only by an ear that is 'distorted' by desire. The voice as *objet petit a* is a distortion of the aural field through the subject's desire.[217] This is why the acousmatic voice can become a love object, not in the sense that one would fall in love with a voice, but in the sense that it is a medium, "a catalyst that sets off love."[218] In this sense, the voice as object-cause of desire is intimately connected with the acousmatic voice.

Though Chion, as noted, addresses Lacan's concept of the voice as a psychoanalytic object, Lacan's notion of the voice as *objet petit a* provides an important supplement to Chion's acousmatic voice, since in Lacan's formulation the dimension of desire in the voice and its ability to function as a love-object is foregrounded. It is here that the voice as object-cause of desire and the dimension of desire in the female voice in post-revolutionary Iranian Cinema become co-incident.

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[214] Chion, *The Voice in Cinema*, 1.
[215] For a full discussion of the gaze as *objet petit a*, see Chapter One. Cf. Jacques Lacan "Of the Gaze as *Objet Petit a*," in *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*. 67-119.
[216] Žižek, *Looking Awry*, 12.
[217] Todd McGowan states, "Though Chion doesn't explicitly identify himself with psychoanalytic theory, the *acousmêtre* is a conception of the voice as *objet a*. When the spectator hears the *acousmêtre*, she or he encounters the voice as a detached object. The voice as *objet a* manifests the subject's desire because it is what can be heard beyond the regime of sense." See McGowan, *Psychoanalytic Theory*, 77. But as I have indicated, Chion does refer to Lacan at the beginning of his book, and therefore implicitly makes a connection between the voice as *objet petit a* and the *acousmêtre.*
[218] Slavoj Žižek and Renata Salecl ed., *Gaze and Voice as Love Objects* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), 3.

Lacan's concept of the voice brings to the fore then the logic of desire that inheres in the voice, a logic that is operative in the invocatory drive.[219]

Another correlation between Lacan's concept of the voice as *objet petit a*, and the acousmatic voice, may be found in the technological apparatuses that stage this dimension of the voice. For Lacan, the voice as *objet a* can be found in "those objects that can be lined up on the shelves of a library in the form of gramophone records or reels of tape."[220] Indeed, among some of the first technologies that rendered the voice acousmatic was the radio, gramophone, tape-recorder and the telephone, in which the source of the voice was no longer seen but only emanated from the various technological instruments, and the true source of the voice remained hidden, invisible.[221] Therefore, such technologies as the gramophone or reels of tape that Lacan mentions, in which the voice appears separable from its source is at once both the voice as *objet petit a*, and the acousmatic voice. As we shall see, in *The May Lady*, the telephone is the apparatus through which the acousmatic dimension of the voice as *objet petit a* is manifested.

One of the first sustained applications of psychoanalytic film theory to the voice in cinema, Kaja Silverman's *The Acoustic Mirror*, foregrounds the female voice in its analysis of classic cinema in a similar manner that 1970's feminist gaze theory or Screen theory (particularly Laura Mulvey) foregrounded the male gaze. In her text Silverman critiques Chion's analysis of the voice in the cinema on the grounds that he does not address the question of gender of the voice in classic cinema. She states, "unfortunately, Chion's sorties into the domain of sexual difference seem motivated primarily by the search for poetic props, and so remain for the most part both uncritical and devoid of self-consciousness."[222] Silverman goes on to say that Chion's discussion of the voice remains "within existing gender demarcations" and "assumes much of the symptomatic value of a Hollywood

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[219] Lacan writes, "At the scopic level, we are no longer at the level of demand, but of desire, of the desire of the Other. It is the same at the level of the invocatory drive, which is the closest to the experience of the unconscious. Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts*, 104.

[220] Jacques Lacan, *Anxiety: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book X*, trans. A.R. Price (Cambridge: Polity, 2014), 315.

[221] Mladen Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2006), 63.

[222] Kaja Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and* Cinema (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 49.

film…"[223] In this respect, Silverman's foregrounding of the gender of the voice in classic cinema and the female voice in particular, is especially relevant in relation to post-revolutionary Iranian cinema. Indeed, for Silverman what is occluded in Chion's analysis is that the acousmatic or disembodied voice is often the male voice, whilst the female voice is generally confined to the spectacle of her body. Although Silverman's critique of Chion is generally apt, she may be overstating the case however, since Chion seems to be aware of the gender of the acousmatic voice, as he states, "(it must finally be said) most *acousmêtres* are masculine."[224] According to Silverman, in classic cinema (Hollywood cinema), "the female voice and body [are] insistently [relegated] to the interior of the diegesis, while relegating the male subject to a position of apparent discursive exteriority by identifying him with mastering speech, vision, or hearing."[225] For Silverman, authority and power are located in the disembodied voice that is either a voiceover or voice-off, which speaks whilst remaining invisible. This voice is almost always male. Conversely, the female voice is often embodied within a character that the viewer can see, which effectively disempowers the woman.[226]

In *Gabbeh* and *The May Lady*, the voice operates under a different logic. Because of modesty laws, to have the female voice manifested by a character that one can see grants her apparent discursive powers. Conversely, to have the male voice as a disembodied voice with a voiceover, remaining unseen whilst speaking, does not give power to that voice, but renders it impotent since in the visual economy of the New Iranian cinema, space or spatial relations are gendered: what you see or what is visible is considered male space (public space), and what is invisible or should remain hidden is female space (private space) – hence the logic of the veil.[227] By

[223] Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror*, 49.
[224] Chion, *The Voice in Cinema*, 55.
[225] Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror,* ix.
[226] McGowan, *Psychoanalytic Theory*, 76.
[227] This feature of a gendered space was even part of the architectural structure of traditional homes in Iran, which contained what is called a *biruni*, an outer public space, reserved for men, and the *andaruni* or inner private space, reserved for the women of the household to which men had no access. This gendered architecture was not unknown in the Europe of the 18th and 19th century as well, where the *parlor* (from the French, 'to speak') in the house was a women's room vs. the *gentlemen's room* was reserved for men.

rendering invisible the male body from the screen image, the male voice is feminized formally through its acousmatization.

The auditory regime of the New Iranian Cinema therefore operates under a different logic from classic cinema due to the logic of the veil, in which the female voice is often un-synched or asynchronous with their bodies, emanating from beyond the frame or off-screen space in order to veil the female voice. For Silverman, the equivalent of shot/reverse-shot and other elements of suture in classic cinema is the operation of synchronization, which syncs or marries sound and image in each frame. As she states, synchronization is "the sound analogue of the shot/reverse shot formation."[228] But, significantly the standard shot/reverse-shot in Hollywood or classic cinema is absent in the New Iranian cinema, especially when the two characters are an unrelated man and a woman. This shift away from the rule of synchronization affects the auditory register of the film, and exposes the illusion of the unity of voice and body mediated by the cinematic apparatus and the film's site of enunciation. In this way, the female voice in post-revolutionary Iranian cinema often functions as an acousmatic voice, with her body remaining invisible from the visual field within the screen. Paradoxically, then, the New Iranian cinema is the realization of the ideals of feminist voice theory espoused by theorists such as Doane and Silverman. Negar Mottahedeh notes something similar at the level of the gaze, when she claims, somewhat hyperbolically that "Iranian cinema is the apotheosis of 1970s feminist gaze theory."[229]

Upon closer scrutiny, however, such claims are not entirely correct. Post-revolutionary Iranian cinema cannot be considered an "apotheosis" of feminist voice-theory (or gaze-theory for that matter), but appears so only on the surface, since the sound regime of Iranian cinema hinges on Shi'ite laws of veiling the female voice due to its erotic power to seduce the heterosexual male subject both within and without the diegesis. Therefore, though Iranian cinema paradoxically achieves, at the level of form, some of the goals of a feminist voice theory (non-synched, not confined to their bodies, emanating from off-screen spaces etc.), an emancipatory feminist logic does not necessary follow.

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[228] Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror*, 45.

[229] Mottahedeh writes, "In the attempt to cleanse its technologies, the post-Revolutionary Iranian film industry came to produce a cinema that I will argue is the apotheosis of 1970s feminist gaze theory." Mottahedeh, *Displaced Allegories*, 2.

There is a theoretical correspondence or homology between Chion's acousmatic voice and voice-off (*voix-off* in French at once denotes both voiceover and voice-off)[230] in feminist film theory. This is how Mary Ann Doane describes it in her foundational article, 'The Voice in the Cinema: The Articulation of Body and Space:'

> "Voice-off" refers to instances in which we hear the voice of a character who is not visible within the frame. Yet the film establishes, by means of previous shots or other contextual determinants, the character's "presence" in the space of the scene, in the diegesis. He/she is "just over there," 'just beyond the frameline," in a space which "exists" but which the camera does not choose to show.[231]

This description of the voice-off is virtually identical to the way that Chion has characterized the acousmatic voice. In his discussion Chion states that the complete *acousmêtre* is "the one who is not-yet-seen, but who remains liable to appear in the visual field at any moment".[232] For Silverman on the other hand, the voice-off is still gendered and "sexually differentiated in much the same way that a synchronized voice is…" which means that the male voice is the privileged site of voice-off.[233] In contrast to this, in post-revolutionary Iranian cinema it is the female voice that is often a voice-off or rendered acousmatic due to Shi'ite laws of veiling.

In order to illustrate the operation of the acousmatic voice in cinema, Chion provides several cinematic examples such as the mother's voice in Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960), Dr. Mabuse's voice in Fritz Lang's *The Testament of Dr Mabuse* (*Das Testament des Dr Mabuse* (1933), and the director's voice in Orson Welles' *The Magnificent Ambersons* (1942).[234] In his discussion of the acousmatic voice in (largely Euro-American) cinema, Chion often draws attention to the *uncanny*

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[230] Regarding the voice-off Chion writes, "The French term for the word 'voiceover' is 'voix-off' (as if any voice could be 'off') and it designates any acousmatic or bodiless voices in a film that tell stories, provide commentary, or evoke the past. Bodiless can mean placed outside a body temporarily. Detached from a body that is no longer seen and set into orbit in the peripheral acousmatic field." Chion, *The Voice in Cinema*, 49.
[231] Mary Ann Doane, "The Voice in the Cinema: The Articulation of Body and Space," *Yale French Studies*, No. 60, Cinema/Sound (1980): 37.
[232] Chion, *The Voice in Cinema*, 22.
[233] Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror*, 48.
[234] Chion, *The Voice in Cinema*, 18-19.

and haunting effects of the acousmatic voice in the above films (Žižek and Dolar both also focus on the uncanny dimension of the acousmatic voice), whereby the voice through its acousmatization acquires a terrifying dimension, becoming all-pervasive, all-knowing and all-seeing.[235] Similarly Doane also highlights the uncanny effects of the voice-off and how by becoming detached from the body, it reveals itself as a signifier: "As soon as the sound is detached from its source, no longer anchored by a represented body, its potential work as a signifier is revealed. There is always something uncanny about a voice which emanates from a source outside the frame."[236] In this way, the acousmatic voice and voice-off are theoretically co-incident since they produce an uncanny effect upon the spectator due to the de-coupling of the voice from its source, the body.

However, in the New Iranian cinema, the acousmatic voice has a different libidinal economy, it is less concerned with the *uncanny* dimension of the *acousmêtre* or voice-off (though this feature is not completely absent), but with its capacity to become a love object, the voice as *objet petit a* or object-cause of desire. Before turning to this aspect of the acousmatic voice in examining *Gabbeh* and *The May Lady*, especially through the complete and partial *acousmêtre*, I will first provide the necessary background for an Islamic theory of the female voice that informs the auditory sensorium of post-revolutionary Iranian cinema.

2.2 Veiling and Aurality: An Islamic Theory of the Female Voice

Besides the censorship on visuality, discussed in the previous chapter on the gaze, another important guideline of the system of modesty is the proscription on aurality, the veiling of the auditory sensorium, which was to ensure that the female voice would not be represented on screen in a way that would evoke male desire, since in the libidinal economy of the Islamic Republic heterosexual desire is desire *par excellence*. According to the logic of the veil (*hejab*), the female voice must be veiled or concealed from men's aurality, since it may cause them to become sexually aroused. In an Islamic jurisprudential theory of the voice, the voice of women is considered part of her *'awra* or private parts of her body (pudenda) that are deemed

[235] Ibid, 25.
[236] Doane, 'The Voice in the Cinema,' 40.

"shameful" and should be covered or concealed before unrelated men (*na-mahram*).[237] As Abdelwahab Bouhdiba states, "the voice of a Muslim woman is also *'aura* [*'awra*]. Not only because of the sweet words coming from her mouth must be heard only by her husband and master, but because the voice may create a disturbance and set in train the cycle of zina [unlawful sexual relations or adultery]'[238] Though there is no direct reference to the proscription of the female voice in the Qur'an, some scholars who argue for the female voice as *'awra*, refer to verse 24:30-31. But the concept of the veil or *hejab* (literally meaning a curtain) has both a visual and aural dimension as is evident in this Qur'anic verse: "And when you ask of [the wives of the prophet] anything, ask it of them from behind a curtain. That is purer for you and their hearts" (33:53). Similar injunctions on the female voice are found in Judaism and Christianity,[239] but perhaps the precise homologue to the Islamic concept is provided in Jewish Rabbinic sources such as the Babylonian Talmud, which states, "a women's voice is nakedness."[240] There are many Shi'i traditions (*hadith*) in this respect, indicating that only the husband or a relative can hear the voice of a woman. For instance, there is a *hadith* attributed to Imam 'Ali prohibiting women from speaking more than five words with anyone other than her husband or a relative (*mahram*).[241] Similar *hadith* exist in Sunni sources, such as this one, "Women is a "shameful thing" [*'awra*]. If she goes out, Satan attempts to

[237] Ayatollah Ali Moraweji, *Sinama dar ayine-ye fiqh* [Cinema in the mirror of jurisprudence], ed. Mohammad Reza Jabbaran (Tehran: Pazhuhishgah-e farhang va honar-e Islami, 1999). On the question whether the female voice is *'awra*, see 36–47. Also see, Shahla Haeri, "Sacred Canopy: Love and Sex under the Veil," *Iranian Studies*, Volume 42, 2009, p. 116, 119, 124-125.
[238] Bouhdiba, *Sexuality in Islam*, 39.
[239] For the interdiction against the female voice in the New Testament, see Corinthians 14:34-35, and 1 Timothy 2:11.
[240] Efrat Tseëlon, "On Women And Clothes And Carnival Fools," in *Masquerade and Identities: Essays on Gender, Sexuality and Marginality*, Ed. by Efrat Tseëlon (London/New York: Routledge, 2001), 155.
[241] Abu Ja'far Muhammad b. 'Ali b. al-Husayn b. Babuya al Qummi al-Shaykh al-Saduq, *Man la yahduruhu al-faqih*. Vol. 4, accessed December 15, 2015, http://www.alhassanain.org/arabic/?com=book&id=216

control her."[242] According to some Sunni jurists, the female voice is considered *'awra* that must be veiled before men.[243]

This logic of the Islamic theory of the female voice is also operative within Sufi discourse (Islamic mysticism), which is often thought to value music and the aesthetics of the voice, especially through the practice of *sama* or spiritual audition. For instance, in a Sufi hagiography it is related that a certain 'Umar Murshidi whilst sojourning through the desert heard a beautiful voice in which he took great pleasure. Afterwards he was overcome with a powerful desire to see the person to whom the voice belonged and could not cast out the idea from his mind even after he had returned to his Sufi lodge. As Bashir relates it:

> Then, when he was reading the Qur'an, he suddenly heard a voice commanding, "Look!" When he did this, he said, "I saw a woman, naked from head to foot, sitting and showing me her vagina, unhesitatingly and boldly, uncovering herself in a way that no wife would ever do in front of her husband." The voice then said, "This is the woman whose voice you had heard and taken pleasure from. *Your hearing of her voice is the same as seeing her vagina* [my emphasis].[244]

In this way, even within Sufi discourse the ideology of Islamic legal theory mediates the social relations among the sexes, whereby hearing the voice of an unrelated women indexes the possibility of unlawful or adulterous sexual relations between them.[245]

On the question of the female voice, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the Shi'ite cleric and revolutionary leader of the new Islamic Republic stated that, "the conversation of a women with a man in a provocative manner, the mellowing down of her expression, the softening of her talk, and the prettifying of her voice so that a heart-sick person is enticed is *Haram* [forbidden]."[246] Indeed, unrelated men must

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[242] L. Clark, '*Hijab* According to the *Hadith*: Text and Interpretation', in *The Muslim Veil in North America*, ed. S.S. Alavi, H. Hoodfar, & S. McDonough, pp. 214-286 (Toronto: Women's Press, 2003) 218.
[243] A. El Fadl, *Speaking in God's Name: Islamic Law, Authority and Women* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2001) 185.
[244] Shahzad Bashir, *Sufi Bodies* (Columbia: Columbia University Press, 2011), 148. It is important to note that both the female voice and the voice that the Sufi hears later whilst reciting the Qur'an are each acousmatic voices.
[245] Ibid, 149.
[246] Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, *Resaleh-ye novin* [New treatise], trans. 'Abdul Karim Baizar-e Shirazi (Tehran: Ketab, 1982), 69. For a discussion of the

make themselves known by their voice before entering a home, so that women in the house will have a chance to arrange the mise-en-scène before the male gaze. As Naficy puts it, "A woman must not only veil her body from unrelated men but also her voice. The veiling of the voice involves using formal language with unrelated males (and females), a decorous tone of voice, and the avoidance of emotional expressions such as singing or boisterous laughter, although grief or anger are allowed."[247] It is clear that the female voice, beyond expressions of grief or anger, is considered to possess a seductive power to sexually arouse the (heterosexual) male subject.

A traditional method for women to veil their voices in Iran was for a woman to distort her voice. For instance, when an unrelated man would knock at the door of the house (in many old traditional houses in Iran there were two separate doors with separate gate handles for women and men, whence knocking at the appropriate gate handle for men would alert the women inside that a man is at the door), she could distort her voice by placing her index finger in the side of her mouth and pull it while speaking with the unrelated man outside. An allusion to this practice is described by the Babi feminist Sadigheh Dawlatabadi (1882-1961),[248] in an article called, *The Return of the Veil*, she writes, "For instance, previously it was said if a virtuous woman was obliged to talk to a man, she should curl her tongue like a nut, so her voice would not sound alluring or attractive and be the cause of corruption. This is foolish."[249]

This distorting of the female voice is operative in Iranian cinema often through the distortion of the female singing voice. This changing of the female singing voice is rendered palpable in Ali Hatami's film, *Delshodegan* (*The Love-Stricken*, Iran, 1992), in which a group of Persian classical musicians in the Qajar era

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proscription on the female voice, see Farzaneh Milani, *Veils and Words: The Emerging Voices of Iranian Women Writers* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1992), 48–52.

[247] Naficy, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema Vol. 4*, 104.

[248] See Farzin Vejdani, *Making History in Iran: Education, Nationalism, and Print Culture* (Stanford California: Stanford University Press, 2014), 104. In this connection Vejdani states, "opponents of the women's movement accused many feminists of being irreligious, atheistic, or Babi. The specter of being labeled *Babi*—a term made synonymous with heresy—haunted pioneering women journalists and editors of the late 1910s and 1920s."

[249] Lloyd Ridgeon, *Religion and Politics in Modern Iran: A Reader* (London/New York: I.B. Tauris, 2005) 82.

go abroad to make a recording of their music on a gramophone. The composer Hossein Alizadeh (b. 1951), who composed the score for the film, "used the wordless voice of Sudabeh Salem (b. 1954), a pre-revolution soprano singer, to create a powerful nostalgic effect."[250] In this precise way, Salem's voice was distorted through a heteroglossia of voices in a wordless song of inarticulate speech.

Another form of veiling the female voice is to literally have the veil (*chador*) lifted before the face as a protective screen whilst speaking to unrelated men. This image of veiling the female voice is perfectly exemplified in Mohsen Makhmalbaf's film, *Nun va goldun* (*A Moment of Innocence*, 1996), when in the last iconic freeze-frame shot at the end of the film, the young girl (Maryam Mohamadamini) lifts her veil like a screen/curtain to cover her face and thereby her voice (Figure 2.1), while asking the young policeman the time. In post-revolutionary Iranian cinema therefore, the gender of the voice is significant, since the female voice is conceived as part of a woman's private body parts, it must be veiled or concealed from unrelated men, but the male voice does not have the same prohibitions attached to it.

Figure 2.1 Veiling the voice in *A Moment of Innocence.*

[250] Parmis Mozafari, "Carving a Space for Female Solo Singing in Post-revolution Iran," in *Resistance in Contemporary Middle Eastern Cultures: Literature, Cinema and Music*
edited by Karima Laachir, Saeed Talajooy (New York/London: Routledge, 2013), 265. Mozafari notes that since there is a ban on female solo singing in Iran to this day, there are 5 ways in which female singing is staged in post-revolutionary Iran: 1) singing in choruses, 2) singing along with a second or third voice, 3) Singing in a changed voice, 4) singing in private gatherings inside houses, 5) singing in female-only performances in music halls.

As mentioned earlier, at the origin of the acousmatic voice is the figure of Pythagoras, who spoke to his disciples from "behind a curtain." This act of speaking from behind a curtain, recalls a similar event at the dawn of Iranian modernity, when the female Babi poet, philosopher and mystic Tahirih Qurat al-'Ayn (d. 1852),[251] like an *acousmêtre* hidden behind a curtain, would speak to a band of her fellow disciples, until eventually she enacted the paradigmatic traumatic event in early modern Iranian history: unveiling herself before a male audience. She was officially the first Iranian woman to have at once de-acousmatized the female voice and to have removed her face veil – a double act of unveiling voice and vision. This is why, as Farzaneh Milani has so perceptively noted, she had to be silenced by the Qajar State and the Shi'ite clerical establishment, so she was strangled to death (which as Milani reminds us, *khafeh kardan* in Persian also means "suppressing, stifling and silencing" the voice).[252] Indeed, one of the iconic images of the New Iranian cinema that may well allude to her act of unveiling, as well as the unveiling of her voice or de-acousmatization occurs in Bahram Bayzaie's film *Bashu, gharibe-ye koochak* (*Bashu, The Little Stranger*, Iran, 1988). In the scene, the camera turns to an empty space within a field, and the female lead Na'i (Susan Taslimi) suddenly rises into the frame, holding a veil before her head and mouth, and directly looks into the camera. Naficy describes this historical moment in the New Iranian cinema thus, "With this one shot, which draws attention to the alluring possibilities of unveiled vision . . . [Bayza'i] breaks years of entrapment of films by rules of modesty."[253] But, this iconic shot draws our attention to another phenomenon, the alluring possibility of the unveiled voice, the revelation of the female voice, which may be termed *vocophany*. In this dramatic moment, it is as if Na'i is about to rend the veil asunder from before her hair and mouth (unveiling of the voice), an image that indexes the revolutionary act of Tahirih Qurat al-'Ayn a century earlier: the de-acousmatization of the female voice (Figure 2.2).[254]

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[251] On Tahirih Qurrat al-'Ayn see Abbas Amanat, 'Qurrat al-'Ayn: The Remover of the Veil,' in *Táhirih in History: Perspectives on Qurratu'l-'Ayn from East and West*, Jasion, Jan T. (ed). (Kalimát Press: Los Angeles 2004), 113-158.
[252] Milani, *Veils and Words*, 49.
[253] Naficy, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema Vol. 4*, 144.
[254] Bahram Beyzaie is working on a dramatic play on the life of Tahirih, parts of which he read in the memory of the Persianist Amin Banani at Stanford University.

Figure 2.2 The image of Na'i indexing both Tahirih's act of unveiling, as well as the female divinity of the voice Vac/Vak/Vach/Vaq in Bahram Bayzaei's *Bashu, The Little Stranger*.

In many of the cinematic works of Bahram Beyzaie, the leading female character(s) are represented through several different codes, often gesturing towards aspects of Iranian cosmogonic or creation myths. One such symbol or code structuring his strong female characters is the myth of the Speaking Tree mentioned in the *Shahnameh* or Epic of the Kings, and which in the more ancient Indo-Iranian tradition is called Vac/Vak, Vach or Vaq. Vac is the female divinity or goddess (*izad banoo*) of the word, speech, or *voice* and is related to the theme of creation, fertility and life.[255] Indeed, Na'i is perhaps one of the most vociferous and strong female heroines of post-revolutionary Iranian cinema, and she is also symbolic of the female divinity Vac/Vak/Vach/Vaq, who later becomes synonymous with another female divinity in Iran, Anahita.[256] Her name itself is related to the voice, to breath, since

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See "In Memory of Amin Banani: A life in letters and Iranian Studies." Available here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w0cwmoxKV50. Beyzaie's talk is at the 1:29:50 mark.

[255] See Bahram Beyzaie, *Hezar Afsan Kojast*? [Where is A Thousand Tales?] (Tehran: Roshangaran va motale'at-e zanan, 2011). Farshid Kazemi, "The Speaking Tree: The Mytho-Poetics of the Female Voice in Bahram Beyzaie's Cinema," paper presented at the symposium, *In Conversation with Bahram Beyzaie*, University of St. Andrews, UK. June 23-24, 2017.

[256] This mytho-poetics of the female voice appears in a number of Beyzaie's films such as, *Gharibeh va meh* (*Stranger and the Fog*, 1976), *Cherike-ye Tara* (*Ballad of Tara*, 1979), *Shayad Vaghti digar* (*Maybe Some Other Time*, 1988), *Qali-ye*

Na'i gestures to the sound of the human voice, and refers specifically to one who breaths into the reed-flute (*ney*), namely the reed-player (*na'i*). In this sense, the female divinity of the voice symbolically embodied in many of the female characters in Beyzaie's cinema, completely shatter the entire effort of the censors to veil over the female voice and hence female identity and agency.[257]

Apropos the singing female voice, Bahman Ghobadi's mesmerizing *Niwemang* (*Half Moon*, Austria/France/Iran/Iraq, 2006) is a resounding critique of the proscription on female singing in and outside the cinematic screen. The film was banned in Iran and has never been allowed screening in the country. The film critiques the restriction imposed by the Islamic Republic on solo female singing, through directly staging a female character named Hesho (Hedieh Tehrani), who is said to have a "celestial voice", to sing in the film. An elderly Kurdish musician, Mamo (Ismail Ghaffari), who has been invited to Iraqi Kurdistan to give a concert, is intent upon bringing the female singer Hesho for the concert, where she has been exiled to a village along with 1,334 women singers who were consigned there as punishment for their public singing in the past. In a remarkable scene, Hesho is seen off by many of the women, who all gather around her and line up on rooftops singing (although the female voices are extra-digetic) and playing the *daf* (a sacred hand drum for the Kurds), whilst she leaves with Mamo. Then comes the scene which is one of the most beautiful moments of the liberation of the female singing voice in post-revolutionary Iranian cinema, where Hesho sings a solo piece in a practice session, and the verse of the Kurdish love-song that she sings signifies all too well the plight of these women: "the heart of the world is full of joy/ but only my heart is filled with sorrow." In the end, the problem is how to conceal Hesho from the Iranian authorities at the border, but they discover her in the bus and take her back to the village.

Through a short-circuiting reading, one of the paradoxes that comes to light is that the Lacanian theory of the female voice has certain correspondences with the Islamic theory of the female voice, in which at least for some men, the female voice

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Sokhangu (*The Speaking Rug*, 2006) and *Vaqti hame khabim* (*When We Are All Sleeping*, 2009).

[257] For a different reading of Beyzaie's cinema, see Negar Mottahedeh, "Bahram Bayzai's *Maybe … Some Other Time*: The Un-Present-Able Iran", *Camera Obscura* 43, vol. 15, no. 1, 2000, pp. 163–191.

may act as the cause of their desire. As Bruce Fink notes, "In the case of certain men it is a woman's voice that is of primary importance; it is not so much what she says as the way in which she says it, the tone and timber of her voice, that arouses their desire."[258] The difference between the psychoanalytic theory of the female voice vs. the Islamic theory however is that in the Islamic context it is universalized to all men, rather than being confined to certain men. In her discussion of sexuality within a Muslim framework, Fatima Mernissi has argued that the eye "is undoubtedly an erogenous zone."[259] Indeed, in Islamic jurisprudence the ear is an erogenous zone as well. According to some compendia of Islamic jurisprudence, '"aural adultery' (*zina al-udhuni*) was considered a constant danger even where the veil impeded 'visual adultery' (*zina al-'ayni*)."[260] Indeed, for Lacan the ear also functions as an erogenous zone, which forms part of the invocatory drive that is related to sexual desire. (Lacan identifies four partial drives, the oral, anal, scopic, and invocatory). According to the logic of an Islamic theory of the voice, therefore, there is always a erotic surplus in the female voice that must be veiled or contained through various means, so that the full disclosure of the voice in all its erotic dimensions may be veiled from the male ear on screen, or the male spectator in the cinema. In this sense, the soft and sonorous timber associated with the female voice acts as an exposed private bodily part that is thought to be the cause of men's desire.

In order to delimit the eros of the gaze in Iranian cinema, the voice is often foregrounded. But according to the above theory, the voice itself is filled with eros: the attempt to contain it backfires, and the voice retains its erotic surplus. This is one of the central concerns of post-revolutionary Iranian cinema: how to de-eroticize the female voice. But of course such a procedure of censoring, veiling or containing the voice (and gaze) is impossible, as there is always an *indivisible remainder* (to borrow a phrase from Žižek), a surplus in the voice that resists de-eroticization. This is the voice as *objet petit a* or object-cause of desire. Indeed, the more you focus on the erotic potentiality of the voice (and the gaze), by trying to erase it or to efface all traces of eroticism in it, the more it escapes your grasp, remaining ever elusive and

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[258] Bruce Fink, *The Lacanian Subject* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 92.
[259] Mernissi, *Beyond the* Veil, 141.
[260] Bouhdiba, *Sexuality in Islam*, 39; also see H. E. Chehabi, "Voices Unveiled: Women Singers in Iran," in *Iran and Beyond* edited by Rudi Matthee and Beth Baron (Costa Mesa, California: Mazda Publishers, 2000) 151.

uncontainable – the over avoidance itself thus draws more attention to the voice and foregrounds it as the object-cause of desire.

The proper theoretical question to be asked here then is: what is the appropriate mode of aurality in an Islamic theory of the female voice? Indeed, the paradox is that the ideal mode of hearing the female voice in Islamic voice-theory would be the acousmatic voice: to hear the voice without the source of its origin, namely the female body, and to have the body properly veiled from the visual field of the male spectator. In this precise sense, the female voice would be rendered acousmatic and hence religiously acceptable. But of course the problem is that the acousmatic voice, this voice without a body, can still function as a love-object and hence become the object-cause of desire. Moreover, according to Silverman and Doane, the voice whose source is invisible is more powerful than the embodied voice: it seeps into the extra-diegetic register, where it is free to roam in the enunciative space of the text. According to their arguments, in classical cinema, male voices tend to be given greater liberty: they are permitted to narrate, to be detached from the body, to emanate from off-screen spaces. Female voices, by contrast, tend to be synched up and confined to the bodies from whence they emanate. Fascinatingly, in certain examples of Iranian cinema, this paradigm is reversed: the mandate to veil the female body results in her voice occupying an acousmatic, "off-screen" space normally reserved for male characters. In this sense, as it will be seen in the two filmic examples below, the acousmatic voice is deployed to subvert and destabilize the modesty system's injunction of veiling the female voice by rendering acousmatic the male voice, and by turning the voice into an object, a love-object that sets off desire.

2.3 The Acousmatic Voice in *Gabbeh*

Mohsen Makhmalbaf's film, *Gabbeh* (1996), is perhaps one of the most well known art-house films produced after the revolution in Iran (co-produced by a French production company MK2), and is representative of the colorful visual poetics and aesthetics associated with post-revolutionary Iranian cinema. Occupying as it does the middle period of Makhmalbaf's cinematic career, *Gabbeh* was the last film he made in Iran before becoming a diasporic and exilic director. At first, Makhmalbaf had intended to make a documentary film of the Qashqa'i nomads in Iran, and the

weaving practices of their colorful gabbeh rugs, but in the process he came to settle on a fiction film.

Gabbeh is ostensibly a tale about a young nomadic girl of the Qashqa'i tribe in Iran who is in love with a youthful lover on horseback, and who is prevented from forming a union with him by her possessive tribal father. The frame narrative of the film begins with an elderly couple, who are bickering about which one of them will wash their *gabbeh*, a carpet that is weaved by the Qashqa'i tribes women, and which contains the narrative love story of the couple. Then through the technique of magic realism, from the rug/*gabbeh*, a girl, called Gabbeh (Shaghayegh Djodat) magically materializes from the rug. The girl as the rug-gabbeh begins to tell the narrative history of her family to the elderly couple and how she came to love a stranger on horseback. In the film one of the obstacles to Gabbeh's union with her young lover on horseback is her father and her uncle's arrival and search to find a bride. As the story unfolds we slowly come to realize that the young girl Gabbeh, who is narrativizing the tale, is in fact the elderly woman, and the elderly man, is her youthful lover on horseback. The narrative temporalities in the film are not presented in a chronological order, of past, present and future, but are weaved together like the wool and spool of the *gabbeh* rug, in which the past, present and future are simultaneously occurring in a timeless present.

The first thing to be noted at the outset is the *gabbeh* carpet on which the figure of Gabbeh appears is the same type of Qashqa'i carpet that adorns Freud's famous couch, the couch being synonymous with psychoanalysis itself (Figure 2.3). The psychoanalytic connection between the carpet on Freud's couch and the *gabbeh* carpet is a fortuitous conjunction, as Gabbeh who materializes on the carpet precisely begins to talk and narrate her story, and psychoanalysis was called "the talking cure" by the first female patient Anna O who went into analysis with Freud. Gabbeh narrates her troubled love story, with the figure of the father functioning as the ultimate obstacle to the erotic relationship between her and the lover on horseback. This image is not incidental as a woman appearing on the rug (or couch) also evokes the image of Shahrazad in the frame narrative of *The Thousand and One Nights*, which was based on a Middle Persian or Pahlavi original from the pre-Islamic Sasanian period called, *A Thousand Tales* (*Hezar Afsan*), that is now lost. There is a profound link between Shahrazad and the female voice in Iranian mytho-poetic textual universe, in which the figure of Shahrazad is related to the old indo- Iranian

goddess of the voice and speech, namely Vac (mentioned above). [261] In her excellent essay, "Freud's Couch: A Case History", Marina Warner refers to the film *Gabbeh* and notes the psychoanalytic connection to the carpet on Freud's couch and to Shahrzad,[262] but although she evokes the figure of Shahrazad in this connection, she is unaware of the link between Shahrazad and the ancient Iranian female divinity of the voice, Vac.[263] Warner also recalls incorrectly the detail of the appearance of Gabbeh and states, "… she appears, stepping out of the stream…"[264] whereas Makhmalbaf had her appear from the *gabbeh* itself in a magic realist turn, in order to establish a connection between the two.

[261] Shahrazad who speaks at night and tells stories to her husband King Shahriyar in the frame story of *The Thousand and One Nights*, with her sister Dinazad or Dinarzad are in fact the two sisters mentioned in ancient Iranian sources, Sanghavak and Arenavak. The two sisters appear in Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh* as Shahrnaz and Arnavaz in the mythic section of the story of Zahak, but they are derived from the much older Zoroastrian Avesta in relation to the myth of Yima (Jamshid) and Azhi Dahaka (Zahak), where they are called: Sanghavak and Arenavak. Note both names end with Vak the female divinity of the voice. See Beyzaie, *Hezar Afsan Kojast*?, 211-234.
[262] Marina Warner, "Freud's Couch: A Case History," *Raritan*, 31 (2), (2011). pp. 146-163. See also, Nathan Kravis, *On the Couch: A Repressed History of the Analytic Couch from Plato to Freud* (Cambridge, Mass., MIT Press, 2017). In Kravi's otherwise fine book, the Iranian mytho-history related to the carpet and the couch and its connection to the female voice still remains "repressed." For the complex history of the entanglement of Persian carpets as a national commodity in the transnational circuitry see, Minoo Moallem, *Persian Carpets: The Nation as a Transnational Commodity* (London/New York: Routledge, 2018).
[263] Warner is fascinated by the frame story of Shahrazad in *The Thousand and One Nights*, and its relation to the female voice and story telling and has dedicated an entire book in exploring it, but since she does not read Persian, she has not been able to uncover the genealogy of Shahrazad back to the *Shahnameh* and ancient Zoroastrian sources, that I have briefly gestured to here. See Marina Warner, *Stranger Magic: Charmed States and the Arabian Nights* (Boston: The Belknap Press/Harvard University Press, 2012).
[264] Warner, "Freud's Couch," 154.

Figure 2.3 The Persian *gabbeh* carpet on Freud's couch at his home in London. Courtesy of the Freud Museum London.

In one of the first scenes of the film, Gabbeh is shown in a mid close-up shot centered within the frame, with her back to the camera (with a *mise-en-scène* of a gabbeh behind her), where through the sound of a wolf-like howling voice off-screen, she turns around to face the camera. Though at first glance it looks as though she is directly gazing at the camera and hence the spectator, yet upon a closer look we can see that her gaze is directed off-screen (which in film studies is called, a *look of outward regard*) towards the direction of the wolf's howling voice outside the frame. In the dominant cinema (i.e., Hollywood), such a shot anticipates an eye-line shot of what she sees, but in the New Iranian cinema this formal procedure is absent due to the proscription on the exchange of glances between male/female couples. Here, the logic of the averted gaze of the modesty system is operative within the frame, and therefore her gaze does not visually address the spectators sitting in the theater. In this precise sense, the close-up shot does not allow the direct gaze or the taking pleasure of looking, or the activation of scopophilia in the spectator, by not constituting the spectator as the subject of Gabbeh's gaze. This forecloses the possibility of the direct relay of looks between the characters (Gabbeh and the offscreen lover), as well as Gabbeh and the spectator. The formal structure of the scene ensures that the spectator is not sutured into the diegesis. In this way the desiring gaze of Gabbeh is directed towards elsewhere, towards the absent body of

her youthful lover (almost always shot off-screen), but more precisely to the voice, the voice without a body.

As discussed earlier the voice without a body is what Chion calls, *acousmêtre*, or what Doane has called voice-off, and Silverman the disembodied voice. This voice without a body, or a bodiless voice, in which the voice of a character is off-screen detached from a particular body, is often operative within Iranian cinema as a way to circumvent showing bodies, especially female bodies, in erotic configurations. This phantom like voice without a body in *Gabbeh*, is exemplified by the howling voice of the youthful lover. In the film there is a partial de-acousmatization or embodiment of the voice of the youthful lover. Since even though we see the body of the young horse riding lover often in a long shot or very long shot, we never see him speak or make the howling sound, but only see parts of his body such as his hands; hence he formally remains a partial *acousmêtre*. On the other hand, the young horse riding lover's voice without a body, acts to subvert the logic of veiling female voices and bodies on screen, since representing the acousmatic male voice without a body, critiques the foregrounding of the male subject as the privileged site of subjectivity.

In *Gabbeh*, the voice further acts as an erotic signifier, and becomes a love-object, since the body of the young lover cannot be displayed erotically on screen with Gabbeh. In this way, the acousmatic voice of the youthful lover fills in the erotic void created by the censors. For Lacan, the voice as *objet petit a* acts as a part-object, which sets off desire through the distortion of the aural field. In Gabbeh, the howling voice of the youthful lover, is precisely the Lacanian partial object or *objet petit a*. There is within the voice an inflection that eludes the empirical dimension, which transforms it from an everyday object into the object-cause of desire, thereby eroticizing the aural field. This is parallel to the gaze of Gabbeh towards the howling voice – a gaze distorted by desire in the visual field. It is as it were, the very cinematic texture of the screen points to an uncanny observation: it is not the body or person of the youthful lover that is desired by Gabbeh, but rather it is as it were the voice *itself* – it is the voice that sets off her desire, or in Lacanian terms, it is the voice that acts as the object-cause of her desire. In one early scene of the film this is narratively enunciated by Gabbeh, who states, "I fell in love with a horseman, with a *strange voice*, with an illusion, that like a shadow, followed our tribe to take me

away." Thus the wolf-like howling voice without a body or acousmatic voice of the youthful lover is *literally* the love-object for Gabbeh.[265]

Apropos the voice in the film, there is a structural parallel between the voice of the youthful lover, and the voice of the future bride of Gabbeh's uncle. In an important scene set by the stream, we follow Gabbeh's uncle who the night before has had a dream of a canary by the stream, and now is following the acousmatic voice of a girl singing a Turkish poem offscreen. The uncle follows the acousmatic voice to the stream and discovers the daughter of Alladad, who is singing a poem that she composed the night before, the "singing canary by the stream." Here, unlike the voice of Gabbeh's young lover on horseback, the voice of Alladad's daughter becomes de-accousmatized and becomes attached to a specific body. In this precise sense, Alldad's daughter through her voice and poetry becomes the canary of the uncle's dreams, whereby he asks for her hand in marriage. The acousmatic voice of the young lover on horseback also contains a poetic secret, which Gabbeh states in an earlier scene of the film in which the elder Gabbeh asks the younger Gabbeh why his voice sounds like the howl of a wolf, and she states "it's a secret between him and me," and provides the meaning in the coded message of the voice, which in a more complete translation from the Persian states: "I've gone mad from love's desire/ I've become restless, why don't you come?" (Figure 2.4) The acousmatic voice of the youthful lover, typified by the howling voice which often acts as the partial *acousmêtre* is literally the love-object for Gabbeh, as it is always to this haunting wolf-howl that her desiring gaze is directed.

Indeed, it is not incidental that the voice of the youthful lover is properly not a male voice, it is rather the voice of a wolf, which is striped of its human dimension, and hence its erotically charged potential. The same goes for the voice of Aladad's daughter whose voice is symbolically substituted with the voice of a canary. This is precisely why the singing voice of Alladad's daughter is heard off-screen, without showing her singing the song. Her singing voice remains acousmatic and does not become de-acousmatized by showing her face and mouth as she sings. In this precise

[265] For another reading of *Gabbeh* largely from feminist gaze theory of the 70s, see Negar Mottahedeh "'Life Is Color!' Toward a Transnational Feminist Analysis of Mohsen Makhmalbaf's *Gabbeh*", *Signs*, no. 30, 2004, pp. 1403-1428; cf. Mottahedeh, *Displaced Allegories*, 157-168.

sense both voices are deprived of their human dimension by taking on animal form, and thereby stripped of their capacity to signify an erotic dimension. Such a transformation of their voices is an attempt to contain the voice in all its erotic ambiguity.

At the end of the film, the voice in all its radical ambiguity is narratively foregrounded as the site of libidinal investment and the love-object *par excellence*. In the very last scenes of the film, Gabbeh's voice over narration states, "my father had not killed us, but it was rumored everywhere that he had. So that from now on, my sisters may not lose their heart and religion by *the voice* of a howling wolf. That is why, since 40 years on, no one has heard, from any spring, the song of a canary" [emphasis mine]. In this precise sense, the two voices – the howling wolf like voice of the young lover on horseback and Alladad's daughter – are intimately linked within the filmic text, and their signification as the site of erotic desire or as the love-object are narratively enunciated, just as they were enunciated within the formal structure of the film.

Figure 2.4 The wolf like-howl of the young lover's partial acousmatic voice in *Gabbeh*

2.4 The *Acousmêtre* in *The May Lady*

Rakhshan Bani-Etemad is perhaps one of Iran's most celebrated post-revolutionary female directors (along with Samira Makhmalbaf and Tahmineh Milani), who started her career as a documentary filmmaker in the mid 1980s. She has won many international awards and accolades around the world for her films, the most recent of which was *Tales* (*Ghesse-ha*, 2014), for which she was awarded the best screenplay at the 71st Venice International Film Festival, with long time writer-collaborator Farid Mostafavi.

Bani-Etemad's *The May Lady* (*Banoo-ye Ordibehesht*, 1997/8) is the story of a female documentary filmmaker Forough Kia (Minoo Farshchi) – her first name is a clear allusion to the female Iranian poet Forough Farrokhzad[266] – a divorced single mother in her early forties, who lives with her teenage son Mani (Mani Kasraiyan). While pursuing her career, and raising her rebellious teenage son, she has a romantic relationship with a man with whom she is not married, despite her sons dislike for the man. While working on a documentary commissioned by television on the lives of bereaved mothers who have lost their husbands and sons to the Iran-Iraq war, the film ruminates – in a self-reflexive move both through the digetic documentary and the narrative fiction – on the theme of the societal expectations on what it means to be a mother in Iran, and on the trials and tribulations of a single mother who longs for love and intimacy, but who is denied them by the superego injunctions of Iranian society, where what it means to be a "good" mother is to remain single interminably (after being widowed or divorced).

But, how is this love relationship between Forough and her lover staged in the film? Given the restrictions of the censorship codes imposed on directors in post-revolutionary Iran, especially on staging intimacy between a woman and an unrelated man on screen, how is the liaison between Forough and her lover represented? In a word: through the *voice*, or more precisely by turning him into a complete *acousmêtre*, an acousmatic being present in the diegesis only through the voice. As Chion states, "When an acousmatic presence consists of a voice – and above all when

[266] See Hamid Naficy, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema, 4 Volumes*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 161; also Gönül Dönmez-Colin, *Cinemas of the Other: A Personal Journey with Film-Makers from the Middle East and Central Asia* (Bristol: Intellect, 2006) 20.

that voice has not been visualized, and one cannot therefore yet put a face to it – one is dealing with a being of a particular sort, a kind of talking, acting shadow, which I have named *acousmêtre* – that is, an acousmatic being."[267] Therefore, by rendering his voice acousmatic through the apparatus of the telephone, Banietemad is able to circumvent the censors and deploy a subtle critique of veiling the female voice in Iranian cinema. Hamid Naficy, in his brief analysis of the film notes the unique uses of the voice in *The May Lady* and states, "One of the narrative innovations [of *The May Lady*] is the way the male lover is simultaneously both effaced and inscribed in the film by means of a complex game of veiling and unveiling as well as voicing and unvoicing. He is visually absent from the entire film, but he is simultaneously present throughout by the epistolary means of telephone, letters, and voice-over poetry."[268] Yet again, we encounter the acousmatic: the theoretical term for what Banietemad has technically achieved with the male lover's voice here is the *acousmêtre*.

Throughout the film, the body of the male lover remains off-screen, absent from the spectator's visual field but ever present through his acousmatic voice, heard only through the telephone, the answering machine, and the apartment buzzer – never becoming embodied or de-acousmatized. The acousmatic dimension of the voice has been deployed in cinema through the telephone in the past. Films such as *When a Stranger Calls* (Fred Walton, 1979), exemplify the use of the telephone as a device for the acousmatization of the voice.[269] But, what these filmic examples bring to the fore again is the uncanny dimension of the acousmatic voice in cinema, whereas with *The May Lady*, it is not so much the uncanny aspect of the accousmatic voice that is staged (though this is not completely absent), but it's ability to become the love object, the voice as *objet petit a*. In this instance the telephone as "technology is a catalizer, it enlarges and enhances something which is already here"[270] – the voice as partial object. Indeed, in *The May Lady*, the telephone is deployed as a technology to

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[267] Michel Chion, "The Impossible Embodiment," in *Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Lacan, but Were Afraid to Ask Hitchcock*, ed. Slavoj Žižek (London/New York: Verso, 1992), n1 206.
[268] Hamid Naficy, "Veiled Voice and Vision in Iranian Cinema: The Evolution of Rakhshan Banietemad's Films," *SOCIAL RESEARCH*, Vol. 67, No. 2 (Summer 2000), 572; cf. Naficy, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema, Volume 4*, 160.
[269] Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More*, 66.
[270] Mladen Dolar, "Telephone and Psychoanalysis," *Filozofski Vestnik*, Vol. 29, No. 1 (2008), p.12, quoted in Slavoj Žižek, *Less Than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism* (London: Verso, 2012), 674.

foreground the male lover's voice as an erotic signifier or signifier of desire. The lover's voice as *acousmêtre* becomes a love-object for Forough, since the body of the two lovers cannot be displayed erotically on screen, the accousmatic voice of the lover and Forough's conversations with him fills in the erotic void created by the censors.

In one scene while Forough is conversing over the phone with her lover, there is a subtle overlaying of her voice onto his acousmatic voice. As the male lover reads one of his love letters, her voice becomes superimposed onto his voice. It's as though the merging and fusion of their voices on top of each other simulates the act of love making, since their bodies cannot be displayed laying on each other in an erotic embrace, it is their voices that merge and unite in place of their bodies. As Naficy puts it, "These interweaving male and female voices symbolically substitute for the desired but dreaded – because outlawed – physical contact between unmarried couples. By means of the verbal epistolary communications, they [Forough and Dr. Rahbar] are able to express their mutual love for one another and by means of voice fusion, they are able to become one vocally."[271] Hence the acousmatic voice acts as a substitute or proxy for intimacy that mediates between the two characters of Forough and Dr. Rahbar, since representing them physically on screen would not have been possible due to the censorship restrictions imposed by the system of modesty. Indeed, in an interview Banietimad was asked why she chose to have the lover remain invisible throughout the film and represented only as a voice, she responds, "The limitations we have in Iran in regards to showing realistic relations between opposite sexes determined my choice of the technique of the letter and the voice to display a much more natural relationship of love between a man and a woman."[272]

There is an intimate connection between the evocation of the telephonic voice in *The May Lady* and a poem by Forough Farrokhzad called, *All That Remains is the Voice* (*Tanha seda-st keh mi-manad*).[273] Michael C. Hillmann in his book on her life and poetry renders the title of the poem as "It is Only Sound that Remains"[274], but the problem with this rendering is that it occludes the sense in which the word 's*eda*',

[271] Naficy, "Veiled Voice," 572.
[272] Dönmez-Colin, *Cinemas of the Other*, 23.
[273] Forough Farrokhzad, *Iman biavarim be aghaz-e faṣl-e sard* [Let Us Believe in the Cold Season] (Tehran: Morvarid, 1963), 74–81.
[274] See Michael C. Hillman, *A Lonely Woman: Forugh Farrokhzad and Her Poetry* (Washington, DC: Mage, 1987), 160-162.

means both voice and sound, and in the context of the poem it is intended by Farrokhzad as the voice, the voice that reads her poems, the voice of poetry, her voice. We still have recordings of Farrokhzad's recitation of her own poetry that she made for the radio. Indeed, others have also noted the allusion to Farrokhzad's poem in relation to the foregrounding of the voice in *The May Lady*,[275] but what is missing in such passing references is precisely the acousmatic dimension of the voice that is evoked here by Farrokhzad, since the voice that remains is an acousmatic voice, a disembodied voice, gesturing to her vocal recitations of her poetry that will remain in recordings on cassette tapes; a technology which precisely foregrounds the voice both in its acousmatic dimension and as the Lacanian object-voice.

The long intimate telephone conversations throughout the film, between Forough and the male lover through the phone strangely recalls another phenomenon around which a whole industry was created (now largely waning), namely phone erotica. Before the advent of "sexting," which has become the preferred mode of playing out sexual fantasies, it was the phone that served this purpose. To be precise, it was the voice, the acousmatic voice on the other side of the telephone line that enabled the listener to enact their fantasies. As Chion states apropos the *acousmêtre*, "A person you talk to on the phone, whom you've never seen, is an *acousmêtre*.."[276] The industry of phone erotica was precisely based on the logic of the acousmatic voice; it was founded on the assumption that the acousmatic voice can offset desire, and function as the fantasmatic support for erotic fantasies. In the absence of the body, it is the voice that fills in the fantasmatic void. The voice enters the fantasy frame as a partial object, becoming the object-cause of desire or *objet petit a*. In this sense, in *The May Lady*, the logic of the acousmatic voice functions as a fantasmatic support for Forough's desire, as well as the spectator's desire.

This is precisely why the acousmatic voice that is never de-acousmatized holds a certain power of fascination, and takes on an uncanny dimension. Indeed, the acousmatic voice of the male lover, Dr. Rahbar, holds this power of fascination for the viewer, and causes the viewer's desire; the spectator desires to see the source of

[275] Sheila Whitaker writes, "Safari refers to the use of the telephone as having '… echoes of a well-known poem by Farrokhzad, All That Remains is the Voice." Sheila Whitaker, "Rakhshan Bani-Etemad," in Rose Issa and Sheila Whitaker, *Life and Art: The New Iranian Cinema* (London: British Film Institute, 1999), 72.
[276] Chion, *The Voice in Cinema*, 21.

the voice, which forever remains obscured and haunts the surface of the screen. This is the voice as the *objet petit a*, which detached from its origin becomes a partial object, and thereby the love object. In this way, the viewer's desire is implicated, since the viewer also fantasizes about the absent source of the *acousmêtre*.

There is an Oedipal imbroglio between the mother and the son in the film that is operative at the level of the mother's voice – the maternal voice. Since one of the central motifs of the film is the role of the mother, there is a fascinating correlation between the mother's voice and the libidinal economy of the son, since the primordial acousmatic voice is precisely the maternal voice. As Dolar states, "'the mother of all acousmatic voices' is precisely the mother's voice, by definition the acousmatic voice *par excellence,* the voice whose source the infant cannot see—his tie with the world, his umbilical cord, his prison, his light."[277] Indeed, the threat that Dr. Rahbar poses to Mani therefore is the loss of the maternal object signified through the mother's voice, the maternal object-voice to which he is libidinally attached. It is as if the son's (Mani) jealousy of the lover (Dr. Rahbar) is located at the level of the mother's voice as the object-cause of desire (*objet petit a*), since through the telephonic apparatus, it is the lover who has access to the mother's acousmatic voice, which acts not only as an object-cause of desire for Dr. Rabar but more primordially for the son, since in the matrix of the womb it is the mother's voice that was the first sonorous envelope that enfolded him and provided him with auditory pleasure. Therefore, the libidinal threat that Dr. Rahabar poses to Mani is in possessing the maternal voice, or more precisely the mother's acousmatic voice.

In one particular scene, the son's libidinal attachment to the maternal voice is clearly indicated. While Forough is having dinner with her son, she reprimands him for falling asleep in school for staying up and watching films late at night stating, "now go ahead again and watch films every night. I should take your hand by force at 8 pm every night, as I used to do when you were a child, and recount to you so many stories until you would fall asleep." At this moment, in a reverse-shot while looking at her Mani says, "you had several phone calls," alluding to Dr. Rahbar. It is precisely at the moment of the significance of the voice, in her narrating stories to him before falling sleep as a child that he looks at her with a sense of longing and despondency indicating that someone else is now the recipient of the auditory

[277] Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More*, 65-66.

pleasure of her voice, the mother's lover. In an interview Banietemad was asked about the relationship between the mother and son in the film and its almost sensual dimension, which the interviewer describes as "very Oedipal..."[278] Banietimad effectively confirms her sentiment and states, "Naturally, the relationship between the lone boy and the mother has a specific form as well as a broader definition. Apart from all these definitions, such relationships endure specific qualifications of our society. For instance, [Iranian] men are very sensitive in issues regarding their women, wives or mothers. The boy has such feelings. *We can also name it Oedipus complex as a psychological issue*" [emphasis added].[279] Here Banietemad herself endorses an Oedipal scenario in the relationship between the mother and son.

Finally, in the pure texture of the film not only does the male lover's voice remain acousmatic for the viewer, but crucially, from the viewer's perspective Forough's voice is effectively acousmatized for the male lover. Since at the level of the diegetic reality of the film, what we see is that the lover only hears the voice of Forough but never sees her (regardless of the offscreen implication that they would meet, etc.), therefore in this way, her voice is an acousmatic voice for him, though it is de-acousmatized for the extradiegetic look/hearing of the spectator. The subtle point to be noted here is that by the lover (Dr. Rahbar) being always off-screen with only an acousmatic voice, what we get is the formal requirements of the Islamic theory of the voice, in which the female voice should ideally be heard through a veil, a screen, or an obstacle; and in the film this is effectively accomplished through the apparatus of the telephone, which acts as a veil that covers over Forough's voice and thereby renders her voice acousmatic for the lover (Dr. Rahbar).

Conclusion

This chapter has provided a new theorization of the unique structure of the voice operative in the New Iranian Cinema through what the film sound theorist Michel Chion calls the *acousmêtre*, or the acousmatic voice. By bringing together Chion, Lacan, and feminist film theory, the chapter analyzed the acousmatization of the male voice in *Gabbeh* and *Banoo-ye ordibehesht* (*The May Lady*). A close examination of

[278] Gönül Dönmez-Colin*, Cinemas of the Other*, 24.
[279] Ibid, 24.

Islamic, especially Shi‘i legal theories of the voice were highlighted that impose restrictions on the female voice which was considered part of a woman’s *‘awra*, or parts of her private body that are deemed shameful and should be veiled or concealed before unrelated men because of their seductive powers to sexually arouse the (heterosexual) male subject. I argued that *Gabbeh* and *The May Lady* deploy the acousmatic voice to subvert the logic of veiling the female voice (through the acousmatization of the male voice) and also to circumvent the prohibitions imposed on staging male-female erotic configurations on-screen. The chapter contributes to psychoanalytic film theory, and feminist film theory in particular, by demonstrating how New Iranian Cinema, largely owing to the Shi‘ite logic of the veil or system of modesty, reverses the structure of the voice in classical Hollywood cinema, in which the female voice is often synched up to the body while the disembodied voice (i.e., the acousmatic voice and voice-off) is almost always male.

Gabbeh and *The May Lady* represent two unique examples within the New Iranian cinema in which the acousmatic voice is creatively deployed in order to bypass the censorship restrictions imposed on filmmakers in Iran in representing heterosexual desire. The deployment of the acousmatic voice in Iranian cinema, as these filmic examples demonstrate, has a political and counter ideological dimension, in which filmmakers can mobilize the *acousmêtre* as a form of resistance and subversion of the injunction to veil the female voice. In this sense, by rendering the male body invisible, the acousmatic voice in New Iranian cinema is able to critique the privileging of the male voice over the female voice, and thereby male desire over female desire, and ultimately masculinity over femininity. Therefore, to render the male voice acousmatic or to distort one into a wolf’s howl is to stage what is often done to the female voice in Iranian cinema and society at large. Such films indicate that an unveiled or de-acousmatized voice is the only proper way for a woman’s voice to be heard. But to deploy the acousmatic voice in this manner also stages another dimension of the voice, namely its potential as the Lacanian *objet petit a* or the object-cause of desire. Just as in an Islamic theory of the voice it is thought that a female voice is endowed with an erotic surplus, these two filmic examples demonstrate that the male voice can also be equally invested with an erotic dimension, which can act as the object-cause of desire for women. In this precise sense, by rendering the male voice acousmatic these films bring to the fore the very aspect of the female voice which the rules of modesty seek to minimize, namely its

ability to offset desire. In both films, by rendering the lover's body invisible or placing him in the background, the voices of the lovers are foregrounded and act as the love-object for Forough and Gabbeh, who, in the final analysis, seem to be in love with "a voice and nothing more."[280]

[280] The title of Dolar's book on the voice is based on a saying reported by Plutarch, "A man plucked a nightingale and, finding but little to eat, said: "You are just a voice and nothing more." Plutarch, *Moralia: Sayings of Spartans* [Apophthegmata Laconica]. See Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More*, 3.

Chapter 3

From Femininity to Masculinity and Back: The Feminine 'No!' in *Daughters of the Sun*

In her groundbreaking book, *Professing Selves: Transsexuality and same-sex desire in contemporary Iran*, Afsaneh Najamabadi provides perhaps the most incisive analysis on transsexaulity and same-sex desire in modern Iran.[281] Deploying an anthropological methodology as well as theories of gender and sexuality, Najamabadi problematizes the either/or logic that considers Iran either "as a transsexual paradise,"[282] or as the place where "sex reassignment surgery (srs)…[is]… performed coercively on Iranian homosexuals."[283] In her analysis Najamabadi notes that Khomeini was in fact the first cleric to have issued a *fatwa* (legal opinion) on transsexuality and thereby inaugurated the whole complex of "legal, Islamic jurisprudential (*fighi*), and biomedical/psycho-sexological discourses,"[284] of the state that categorize and partially subsidize sex reassignment surgery. Najamabadi's analysis covers the historical changing relationship with transsexuality, the religio-cultural categories of femininity and masculinity, the emergence of gay, lesbian, and feminist discourses of the 70s, the advent of the Iranian Revolution and its impact on, medical, political, and religious disputes. She also discusses the autobiographical lived lives of transsexuals narrating their own self-narratives, trans activism, and aspects of popular culture and media coverage. Najamabadi, however, does not take up the task of analyzing Iranian cinema or Iranian documentaries on the subject, and notes, "The international effect of these television and video documentaries [on transsexuality] obviously deserves more than one line noting their quantity, but this is not a task I take up in this book."[285] Indeed, there is an immense lacuna in the scholarship on the subject of transgender and same-sex desire in Iranian cinema.[286]

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[281] See Afsaneh Najmabadi, *Professing Selves: Transsexuality and Same-Sex Desire in Contemporary Iran* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2013).
[282] Rochelle Terman, "Trans[ition] in Iran." *World Policy Journal*, Spring 2014. http://www.worldpolicy.org/transition-iran
[283] Najmabadi, *Professing Selves* 2.
[284] Ibid, 15.
[285] Ibid, 305.
[286] Najmabadi refers in the notes to only a single essay related to the subject by Roshanak Kheshti, "Cross-Dressing and Gender (Tres)Passing: The Transgender Move as a Site of Agential Potential in the New Iranian Cinema." *Hypatia* 24, no. 3 (summer 2009): 158–77. Although this is a completely new field of study in Iranian

Therein resides the theoretical need for a sustained analysis of the filmic texts that bear on these motifs in post-revolutionary Iranian cinema.

In this chapter, I will read Mariam Shahriar's film *Daughters of the Sun* (*Dokhtaran-e Khorshid*, 2000), through the prism of the logic of the feminine 'No' and feminine *jouissance* in Lacanian theory. In the film, the female protagonist Amangol's gender is re-signified from feminine to masculine by her father through the act of shaving her hair, and cross-dressing her as a boy in order to send her to a carpet-weaving shop to earn money for the family. This re-signification of her femininity into masculinity stages several motifs that run throughout the film such as transgender, gender and sexual ambiguity, same-sex desire or homoeroticism, and cross-dressing or transvestism, all of which function as a subversive gesture that problematizes concepts of gender, sexuality and desire in the Iranian cultural imaginary. I focus on several different registers in the representation of Amangol's embodiment of masculinity in both the filmic form (e.g. *mise-en-scène*, long shot, medium shot) and content of the film, in particular how Amongol's re-signified body functions as the site of erotic desire, and particularly the feminine body as the locus where socio-political-religious tensions are staged. Indeed, the technique of shaving Amangol's hair and unveiling her, as well as gender masquerading and passing as male, enables Shahriar to deploy such strategies of unveiling to problematize and critique not only the imposition of the veil on women in the Islamic Republic, but also the loss of feminine identity, enacted through the repressive measures of the patriarchal symbolic order exemplified in the Iranian State. In the end, Amongol enacts the Lacanian ethics of the authentic act par excellence, namely the logic of the feminine 'No', where she stands up to the patriarchal symbolic order, through a radical act that entails a suicidal gesture of burning down the carpet-weaving sweat shop and thereby sacrificing the masculinity she had thus far embodied. In this way, she traverses from femininity to masculinity and back, and exemplifies what Lacan calls the feminine 'No', through the reassertion of her feminine self-identity by standing up to the figures of paternal authority embodied in the State and religion.

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cinema, there is, at present, more than one study and they will be discussed accordingly throughout the chapter.

3.1 Daughters of the Sun (*Dokhtaran-e khorshid*)

Daughters of the Sun (*Dokhtaran-e Khorshid*, 2000) by the first time director Maryam Shariar, is perhaps one of the underrated art-house films of the post-revolutionary Iranian cinema or New Iranian Cinema. Upon its release the film won several international awards, such as the best fiction film at the Montreal World Film Festival in 2000, and circulated widely in gay and lesbian film festivals and was marketed as "the Iranian Boys Don't Cry – a shocking drama of forbidden love,"[287] and has been called "Iran's first lesbian film."[288] As a diasporic filmmaker Maryam Shahriar returned to Iran after 10 years in Italy during the time of the presidency of Mohammad Khatami (1997-2000), in which some of the regular censorship restrictions imposed on filmmakers by the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance (MCIG) were thought to have loosened due to the Khatami's liberal tendencies and his predilection towards the arts. Shahriar returned to shoot *Daughters of the Sun* and initially got an approval for the script by MCIG, but as she finished and submitted the final cut, the censors asked her to cut out the first and final scenes of the film, to which she bravely replied, "over my dead body!" However, she eventually complied with the objections raised by the MCIG and in one night cut out all the "touching" scenes in order to show the film at the annual Fajr International Film Festival in Tehran. The censors never allowed her to screen the film at the festival and after Shahriar convinced one of the representative censors that there "was nothing political" in the film, they finally granted her permission to screen it in theaters outside the festival at 11 p.m. The censors objected that the film was "too bitter" in its portrayal of Iranian society and had questions as to why she had dedicated the film to the late poet Ahmad Shamloo (1925-2000), who was persecuted by both the Shah's regime and the Islamic Republic, and whose belief in the separation of state and religion were well known.[289] The film was never again allowed official screening in Iran.

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[287] Kheshti, "Cross-Dressing," 171.
[288] Gönül Dönmez-Colin, *Women, Islam and Cinema* (London: Reaktion Books, 2004), 181. Kheshti does not refer to this study and its discussion of *Daughters of the Sun*.
[289] The following information is based on Judy Stone, "Daughters of the Sun," DVD booklet on *Daughters of the Sun* (Chicago, Illinois: Facets Video, 2004), 4-6..

The film's narrative story centers on the life of a young rural girl, Amangol (Altinay Ghelich Taghani), whose head is shaved by her father and sent out as a "boy" named Aman, to another village to work as a carpet weaver to help support the family. S/he is then locked within a weaving shop, effectively a sweatshop, with three girls (one girl is blind and remains nameless, and the other two are named Bibigol and Belghis), and a domineering and harsh master overseer who punishes them regularly. Whilst there s/he develops an erotic love relationship with one of the girls named Belghis, whose uncle wants her to marry an elderly man, but she wants Aman to marry her and to leave together for her home village Tiva. A wandering darvish, who has come to the village, often plays music outside her room and also falls for Aman, and eventually proposes her to run away with him, but s/he refuses to leave with him. Aman eventually refuses Belghis' proposal as well and while returning to the shop after being beaten by the master overseer, finds that Belghis has hanged herself. In the end, as retaliation for their harsh treatment and their slave-like work conditions, Aman sets fire to the weaving sweatshop. There is perhaps a deliberate ambiguity in the ending of the film, as we are unsure if Aman committed suicide by setting the sweatshop on fire while remaining in it. The final scene may be a shot of the real Amangoal on the road to her village, or a spectral apparition of Amangol freed from the toils and burdens of the sweatshop.

Daughters of the Sun (*Dohkhtaran-e Khorshid*), represents one of the few art films in the New Iranian cinema that stage motifs such as transgender, gender passing, corssdressing or transvestism, sexual and gender ambiguity, same-sex desire or homoeroticism. Indeed, other scholars have noted the significance of these elements within the film text of *Daughters of the Sun*. In his discussion of the film, Hamid Naficy refers to the deployment of these motifs as a way of circumventing the imposition of the veil on women, "Transgender masquerade and passing were among the strategies of critiquing the imposed rules of veiling, while they introduced their own narratives of mistaken gender identity and political complications."[290] Indeed, as Naficy has pointed out, by removing the veil and shaving the hair, films such as *Daughters of the Sun* render, "faces sufficiently androgynous and ambiguous in their beauty and sexuality to be read as both male and female, creating doubt about both the sexual orientation and the gender of the characters, a most disturbing and

[290] Naficy, *Social History*, 130.

counterhegemonic move under a regime founded on the clear demarcation of sexes and their complete separation."[291] Minoo Moallem also reads the film as staging the theme of "passing," as well as containing non-normative modes of erotic desire and sexuality. Moallem states apropos *Daughters of the Sun* that, "the transgendered hero(ine) [Amangol]… by staging antinormative erotic desire, permits fantasizing about and promotion of alternative sexualities. Through silence, eye contact, gestures, and dress codes, an erotically ambivalent situation is set up that allows a display of sexual deviance."[292] Moallem provides a queer reading of the gender ambiguity operative in *Daughters of the Sun* and states, "The queering of the gendered citizens of the Islamic republic and the cinematic display of bodies that are ambiguous with respect to gender mean that… *Daughters of the Sun* transgress the boundaries of citizenship and subvert veiling as a disciplinary tool."[293] Roshanak Kheshti grounds her reading of the film on "cross-dressing" and "passing" as well. She reads the film as a "transgender move" that creates "a temporary space of political and agential potential that many spectators—both domestic and diasporic—seek in the post 1990s New Iranian cinema."[294] Kheshti also sees films such as *Daughters of the Sun* as a way to "help construct sites of gender and sexual transgression that resonate beyond the screen, creating spaces of queer and transgender potential within the Iranian mediascape."[295] Similarly, Vanzan in her brief analysis of *Daughters of the Sun*, sees the film as staging "the queerness of gender" and considers that the motifs of "cross-dressing" in the film, "implies issues of gender identity and … challenges the heteronormative [film] canon."[296]

Though these scholars consider the deployment of these motifs in such films to be subversive of the Islamic Republic's 'essentialization' of gender norms and valorization of heterosexuality as normative, Naficy does not seem to consider these elements to be a truly subversive or transgressive gesture in such films as the *Daughters of the Sun*. Naficy writes, "However transgressive, subversive, or modern

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[291] Ibid, 133.
[292] Minoo Moallem, *Between Warrior Brother and Veiled Sister: Islamic Fundamentalism and the Politics of Patriarchy in Iran* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 149.
[293] Moallem, *Between Warrior*, 149.
[294] Kheshti, "Cross-Dressing," 158.
[295] Ibid, 159.
[296] Anna Vanzan, "The LGBTQ question in Iranian cinema: a proxy discourse?" *DEP n25*, 2014, 47-48.

these strategies of gender masquerade and passing may seem, in reality they were not, … [as] there is a rich tradition both in *taziyeh* performances and in the history of modern theater, dance, and cinema in Iran of men playing women's parts."[297] However, Naficy seems to forget that that is precisely the point, since in these older traditions of *ta'ziyeh* it was men who played women's roles or gender masqueraded as women, but in these new films it is women who are playing men's roles, thus the gender role playing are reversed.[298] In fact, the *ta'ziyeh* – the dramatic passion play that represents the martyrdom of Imam Hussein in Karbala, the third Shi'i Imam – was also performed among women, who cross-dressed for male roles, but all of these Qajar performances of the *ta'ziyeh* was only confined to a private female only audience, and not for the general male public.[299] This gender masquerading reversal in which women are gender passing as men in post-revolutionary Iranian cinema such as *Daughters of the Sun*, is part of the transgressive dimension of these films, but as I argue the subversive core of the film lies elsewhere, in Aman's ethical authentic act of the feminine 'No!' enacted at the film's end as the reassertion of her feminine identity.

However, none of the scholars mentioned above theorize the transgender field in Iranian cinema through the prism of psychoanalytic theory. The only single study solely dedicated to the representations of the transgender in cinema is the book by John Phillips called *Transgender on Screen*. Indeed, Phillips in his book also deploys Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalytic film theory as a theoretical lens for reading the transgender subject in the filmic texts that he analyses, as he states, "…my approach presupposes an unconscious sub-text which is accessible to psychological and psychoanalytical investigation. Hence, the application of Freudian and Lacanian theory – essential tools in the exploration of a powerful textual unconscious."[300] Therefore, my own deployment of psychoanalytic theory will fill the gap in the scholarly literature on theorizing the representation of transgender bodies and

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[297] Naficy, *Social History*, 130.
[298] On crossdressing in the *ta'ziyeh* see Negar Mottahedeh, "Ta'ziyeh: Karbala Drag Kings and Queens" *The Drama Review* (1988-), Vol. 49, No. 4, (Winter, 2005).
[299] For women's *ta'ziyehs* see Negar Mottahedeh, *Representing the Unpresentable: Images of Reform from the Qajars to the Islamic Republic of Iran* (Syracuse University Press, Syracuse, 2008), 83-85.
[300] John Phillips, *Transgender on Screen* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006) 5.

feminine homoerotic desire in Iranian cinema in particular, and cinema in general, in light of Lacanian film theory.

Before I proceed directly into the analysis of the film, it is important at the outset to clarify some terms that I will be using throughout this chapter. The term 'transgender,' is often deployed as an umbrella term that designates bodies that have been re-signified male or female. Therefore, by transgender I mean broadly the act of passing or traversing from one gender to another (from male-to-female or female-to-male), which may or may not involve medical treatments (i.e., hormone treatments, etc.) or sexual reassignment surgery (srs) (which in Amangol's case it clearly does not). This can include the symbolic re-signification of the subject's body as either 'female,' even when biologically 'male,' (male sexual organ) or as 'male,' even when biologically 'female' (female sexual organ) (which is what is at work in Amangol's case). My engagement with the transgender field operative in this film is a contribution to a broader rapprochement between Lacanian theory and transgender studies, as well as to gender and queer theory.[301]

I also use the terms cross-dressing and transvestism synonymously, as an act of dressing, behaving or appearing in ways that are normatively associated with the opposite sex, regardless of sexuality. In this respect Marjorie Garber's definition of transvestism is relevant here, as she states, "transvestism is a space of possibility structuring and confounding culture: the disruptive element that intervenes, not just a category crisis of male and female, but the crisis of category itself."[302] In this reading, trasvestism stages the crisis of the category of male/female, heterosexual/homosexual, but I would go further and suggest from a Freudo-Lacanian perspective, that the crisis of category itself is constitutive of sexuality. It is the disruptivity inherent in sexual identity that is brought to the fore in cross-dressing.

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[301] For select studies on Lacanian psychoanalytic theory and trans studies, see all the essays in *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly*, Volume 4, Numbers 3–4, November 2017; also Patricia Gherovici, *Please Select Your Gender: From the Invention of Hysteria to the Democratizing of Transgenderism* (London: Routledge, 2010); cf. *Transgender Psychoanalysis: A Lacanian Perspective on Sexual Difference* (New York: Routledge, 2017); Oren Gozlan, *Transsexuality and the Art of Transitioning: A Lacanian Approach* (New York: Routledge, 2015); Shanna T. Carlson, "Transgender Subjectivity and the Logic of Sexual Difference." *differences* 21, no. 2: 2010, 46–72.
[302] Marjorie Garber, *Vested Interests: Cross-dressing and Cultural Anxiety* (New York, NY and London: Routledge, 1992), 17.

In another instance Garber relying significantly on Lacan's notion of the Symbolic order states that, "there can be no culture without the transvestite, because the transvestite marks the entrance into the Symbolic."[303] In other words, at the very threshold of entrance into the Symbolic order stands the figure of the transvestite, signaling that the Symbolic functions to categorize and stabilize through the signifier concepts of gender and sexuality, male vs. female, heterosexual vs. homosexual. However, I would argue that when we are dealing with sex and the subject, since in psychoanalytic theory the subject is always a sexed subject, the subject is not reducible to the signifier, but is its ultimate misfire. There is no way of having any knowledge of a sexed subject (him or her), "*Sex serves no other function than to limit reason, to remove the subject from the realm of possible experience or pure understanding* [emphasis in the original]."[304] This is why sexuality is always co-incident with subjectivity in psychoanalytic theory, which is unknowable and unfathomable to sense and reason. As Joan Copjec states:

> … sex… for psychoanalysis, [is] never simply a natural fact, it is also never reducible to any discursive construction, to sense, finally. For what such a reduction would remain oblivious to is *the radical antagonism between sex and sense*. Sex is the stumbling block of sense. This is not to say that sex is prediscursive; we have no intention of denying that human sexuality is a product of signification, but we intend, rather, to refine this position by arguing that sex is produced by the internal limit, the failure of signification. It is only there where discursive practices falter-and not at all where they succeed in producing meaning– that sex comes to be.[305]

Therefore, what the cross-dressing figure stages is the radical undecidability of sexuality itself; in other word, cross-dressing foregrounds the logic of bisexuality at the abyss of human sexuality, and what psychoanalysis teaches us is "not [to] confuse the fact of bisexuality -that is, the fact that male and female signifiers cannot be distinguished absolutely with a denial of sexual difference."[306] To put it in Lacanian terms: sexual difference is Real, rather than Symbolic;[307] that is to say, sexual

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[303] Ibid, 34.
[304] Copjec, *Read My Desire*, 207; also see Alenka Zupančič, *What Is Sex?* (Cambridge Massachusetts, MIT Press, 2017).
[305] Ibid, 204.
[306] Ibid, 216.
[307] Slavoj Žižek, "The Real of Sexual Difference." In *Reading Seminar XX: Lacan's Major Work on Love, Knowledge, and Feminine Sexuality*, ed. Suzanne Barnard

difference resists symbolization absolutely.[308] This is the antinomy at the heart of human sexuality, which throws reason into contradiction at every turn in its efforts to understand it, as Lacan states, "Everything implied by the analytic engagement with human behaviour indicates not that meaning reflects the sexual, but that it makes up for it."[309] In other words, the sexual makes up for our inability to make sense of it, not that it reflects meaning or sense.

3.2 Symbolic Castration and the Name-of-the-Father

In the opening scene of the film the girl/Amangol is framed in the foreground looking offscreen with a large portion of her hair partially revealed (a clear violation of the system of modesty), and three female figures (her sisters) are framed in the background mise-en-scène. Then in the next shot the camera shows in a medium close up the ground and pieces of her long hair falling to the ground at the centre of the frame. The loss of her hair is symbolic of her feminine identity – her gendered signifier as a woman has been shorn off. Through the act of cutting her hair she is re-signified from femininity to masculinity. Then in a long shot Amangol is shown sitting while her father continues to shave off her hair and the camera through a close up of her face shows her melancholy face and downcast glance. She is clothed in a dress in this scene, which acts as another signifier of her female gender and feminine identity. While her father, who is cutting her hair, is blurred or out of focus in the background, she slowly raises her head and gazes off screen into the distance, foreclosing the possibility of the direct gaze into the camera as part of the system of modesty in Iranian cinema. Hamid Naficy in his brief analysis of this scene in *Daughters of the Sun* states, "shorn of her hair and androgynized, the girl may also reveal the other forbidden feature of a woman: her direct gaze in close-up, which masculinizes her, since this counters the demure and averted look required of women."[310] However, the problem is that there is no direct gaze into the camera by

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and Bruce Fink (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2002), 57–76.
[308] Copjec, *Read My* Desire, 207.
[309] From Lacan's unpublished Seminar XXI cited by Jacqueline Rose in "Introduction II," in *Feminine Sexuality: Jacques Lacan and the ecole freudienne*, ed. Juliet Mitchell and Jacqueline Rose (New York and London: W. W. Norton, 1 982), 47.
[310] Naficy, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema* 131.

Aman, as the gaze is towards an invisible point off screen. In this precise way, the logic of the averted gaze in the Islamic system of modesty is maintained.

In the *Daughters of the Sun* the cutting of Aman's hair has an important symbolic and metaphorical function. Indeed, for Maryam Shahriar the shaving of Aman's head, "became a great metaphor for the loss of identity."[311] Naficy on the other hand sees the hair as a strategy for unveiling or showing the female hair without a veil, "She [Shahriar] shows the protagonist's long hair at the film's beginning, violating the modesty rules, however, only when it is detached from her, and in extreme close-ups as the locks fall to the ground after being cut. With this strategy, Shahriar pointedly noted that the only permissible way to show women's actual hair is in its disembodied form."[312] Indeed, the shaving of hair is a clear strategy of unveiling, however, beyond this formal technique of unveiling there is another significance to the shaving of Aman's hair in the narrative structure of the film. To put in a psychoanalytic terms: the cutting of Amangol's hair in the symbolic universe of the film represents *castration* and the *loss of the mother*. In Jeffry Anderson's psychoanalytic interpretation of the fable of Rapunzel (1980), there are three symbolic meanings or functions to the cutting of hair, namely "castration, loss of the mother, and reparation."[313] Indeed, as we shall see, excluding reparation, the other two symbolic registers of castration and the loss of the mother are operative in the cutting of Aman's hair.

There is a structural parallel between the cutting of Amangol's hair, and the cutting of her name from Amangol to Aman. Indeed, the motif of gender passing is gestured in the name of Amangol being transformed to Aman, as the name itself is at once a 'castrated' name. Here the 'name' stands as the signifier for the re-signification of gender identity. The excising of the feminine element of the name from the masculine inscribes within itself the gender passing process. The name Aman is a male name meaning 'protection,' (literally s/he is the 'protection/Aman' of the family from poverty) and the word *gol* means 'flower' in Persian. In this way *gol*, which is cut off from the first part of the name Aman, like her hair, is the feminine

[311] Stone, DVD booklet, 4.
[312] Naficy, *A Social History of the Iranian Cinema* 131.
[313] Jeffry J. Anderson, "Rapunzel: The Symbolism Of The Cutting Of Hair." Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association, 1980, 28:69-88, Cited in Alessandra Lemma, *Minding the Body: The Body in Psychoanalysis and Beyond* (New York: Routledge, 2015) 139.

aspect that must be cut in order for her to be re-signified as masculine. In this sense, she is 'castrated' from her feminine identity, from her flower or *gol*, symbolizing her vagina, which incidentally many Iranian mothers often call their baby daughter's vagina *gol*, or playfully redoubled *gol-gol*, which is an instance of what Lacan would have called *lalangue*,[314] and with the further connotation of sexual de-flowering, which will have reverberations within the later part of the filmic narrative. Here, the cut or castration of *gol* from Aman, which stands as the signifier of feminine identity, is the Lacanian symbolic castration. In Žižek's formulation of Lacan, symbolic castration occurs when the subject, in this instance Aman, experiences the "gap between my direct psychological identity and my symbolic identity, (the symbolic mask or title I wear, defining what I am for and in the big Other)…"[315]As Žižek states elsewhere, "I am what I am through signifiers that represent me, signifiers constitute my symbolic order"[316] Thus, Aman is represented through the signifiers of her shaved head and new name, and thereby (re)inscribed into the Symbolic order as a masculine subject through these signifiers.

This symbolic castration is re-doubled cinematically in the next shot. As Aman is shown leaving the village with her/his hair completely shaven, s/he is foregrounded while her/his family is out of focus in the background, s/he then glances back at the family and the father blocks her mother with his hand, so as to obstruct their reunion. The key feature to be noted here is the gesture of obstructing the mother by the father, in other words to prohibit access to the mother (See Figure 1). This is the enactment of Lacanian symbolic castration signified by the term, 'The-

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[314] On Lacan's notion of *lalangue* Bruce Fink writes, "The French… *lalangue*, is a term Lacan creates simply by putting together the feminine article la with the noun langue (language, but specifically spoken language as in tongue). Lacan discusses what he means by *lalangue* in the course of this seminar… very roughly speaking, it has to do with the acoustic level of language, the level at which polysemy is possible due to the existence of homonyms (like those Lacan plays on throughout this seminar). It is the level at which an infant (or songwriter) may repeat the one syllable of a word (for example, "la la la"), the level at which language may 'stutter…'" See *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XX: On Feminine Sexuality, the Limits of Love & Knowledge 1972–73: Encore*, ed. Jaques-Alain Miller, trans. Bruce Fink (London: W.W. Norton, 1998), 44

[315] Žižek, *How to Read Lacan* 34.

[316] Žižek, *How to Read Lacan* note 15, 122. Lacan borrowed the term "signifier" from the semiotic theories of Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913), but used the term in a novel way, as Žižek states in the same note, as "a feature, a mark, which represents the subject."

Name-of-the-Father,' *(le nom-du-père)* the paternal symbolic authority. According to Lacan, The-Name-of-the-Father (not the real father as such) is associated with the Symbolic Order, also called the big Other: the network of pre-existing social reality, such as language, laws, and customs (which is why in Lacan's ternary register of the Imaginary, Symbolic, and Real – The-Name-of the-Father is one of the operations of the Symbolic Order), into which the child is born. As Lacan states, 'It is in the *name of the father* that we must recognize the support of the symbolic function which, from the dawn of history, has identified his person with the figure of the law"[317] Lacan often played with the homophony "of *le nom du père* (the name of the father) and *le 'non' du père* (the 'no' of the father)," as an emphasis of the "legislative and prohibitive function of the symbolic father."[318] Indeed, in his earlier Seminars the Name-of-the-Father is related to Freud's notion of castration, as the process that severs the child's attachment to the mother. For Lacan, "[This] relationship to the phallus . . . is established without regard to the anatomical difference of the sexes."[319] Therefore since the phallus is symbolic in its signification, both girls and boys go through the castrating experience through the operation of the Name-of-the-Father.[320] Thus, the father in this scene stands as the Lacanian Name-of-the-Father, who castrates Aman's attachment to the mother by denying access to the (m)other, and thereby (re)inscribing her/him into the Symbolic order as masculine.

[317] Lacan, *Écrits* 67.
[318] Evans, *Dictionary*, 122.
[319] Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection.* Trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Tavistock Publications, 1977) 282.
[320] As Miller states, "'Lacan argues that all speaking subjects, masculine and feminine, are "castrated" by their entrance into the symbolic order." Elaine P. Miller, *Head Cases: Julia Kristeva on Philosophy and Art in Depressed Times* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 192.

Figure 3.1 The father barring access to the mother, an instance of Lacanian symbolic castration and 'The-Name-of-the-Father' *(le nom-du-père*).

The exemplary case of the deployment of the motifs of gender ambiguity and cross-dressing in the figure of Aman(gol), is brought to bear at the very beginning of *Daughters of the Sun*. In the same scene before leaving the village, s/he is shown in a medium close up with her clothes as yet unrevealed, but as the camera is positioned behind her and shows her walking on the road, we see that she is dressed as a boy, with her/his shaved and no longer in a dress. The re-signifying of her body, or transgendering her identity is staged through two markers: hair and dress. Here the motif of cross-dressing or transvestism comes to the fore in the figure of Aman. The cross-dressing motif also gestures towards the performance of gender by Aman, but *not* the "performativity" of gender as theorized by Judith Butler where she states, "There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; ... identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results."[321] Aman's performance of masculinity is gestured to in another scene in the film, where Aman arrives at the village where s/he is to work as a weaver. Aman is shown in a long shot walking on the road, with her gait mimicking a "man," or the way she

[321] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (London: Routledge, 2011), 25. Ever since the publication of this book, Butler has been at pains to distinguish her notion of 'performativity' from 'performance.' For a critical appraisal of Butler's notion of gender performativity see below.

imagines a man would walk, performing and enacting masculinity with her feet striding wide apart from each other.

3.3 The Depressive Position and Melancholic Identification

One of the consistent scenes throughout the *Daughters of the Sun* is the anguish and melancholia that is palpable on the face of Aman. In Kristeva's deployment of Klein's concept of the child's normal psychic development, the child accepts the depressive position in the process of normalization; following this formulation, Aman seems unable to accept the depressive position due to her hair being shaved (the signifier of her femininity), and seems to persist in it. On the other hand, Aman's melancholy throughout the film may recall Butler's interpretation of melancholic identification (reinterpreted from Freud) with the lost object or the mother, and her desire for the reconstitution of gender identity or feminine self-identity. Indeed, what has to be problematized apropos Amangol's identity is that she is forced into the transgender subject position. The new transgender identity is forced or imposed upon her form outside, by the father, perhaps with the logic that by becoming re-signified as a masculine subject, she may be less harassed in her new work environment (which of course does nothing to save her from the abuses and beatings of the master overseer). This is significant, since she has not chosen to go through the "gender reassignment right,"[322] as Kheshti calls it, of her own accord. There is no agency here, but rather a forced choice. Unlike the standard categories of transgender identity in the West, in which trans subjects themselves choose to go through the transitioning process, either from male-to-female or female-to-male, Aman has had no choice but to go through the "transitioning" process as it were. This precisely stages the depressive dimension and melancholia writ large on the face of Aman as she leaves her village, and throughout the film. Indeed, Deleuze and Guattari's statement, "the face is a veritable megaphone,"[323] applies perfectly to the face of Amangol, bespeaking the silent scream of her sorrow. Since Aman experiences symbolic

[322] Kheshti, "Cross-Dressing," 170. This critical dimension is not referred to by Kheshti, in whose reading the "gender reassignment right" is read as a subjective choice of Aman, which is clearly not the case.
[323] Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi. (London and New York: Continuum, 2004) 199.

castration through the Name-of-the-Father (or what Lacan often playfully calls the 'No' of the father) by severing her attachment to the mother and denying her access to the object of desire, the father thereby inscribes Aman into the world of language and culture: in other words, into the Symbolic Order through this violent inscription, which is why she persists in the depressive position and internalizes the lost object (mother) via melancholic identification.

Julia Kristeva in her discussion of "depression" deploys the psychoanalyst Melanie Klein's notion of the "depressive position" at the origin of the subject's entrance into the Symbolic Order.[324] According to Kristeva, within the subject's normative psychic development, "the ego takes shape by way of a depressive working through."[325] In this view of the child's standard psychic development, as Elaine Miller notes, depression "is caused by the child's gradual and necessary separation, as it grows older, from its "mother," or primary provider, and its subsequent assumption of a subjective identity in the "father's" realm of language and social interaction."[326] In this perspective, the subject must be installed into the world of language, law, and culture or the Symbolic order, and cannot go back to the earlier stage of being fused with the mother, though the child can often and does attempt to recover the mother, "along with other objects, in imagination and, later, in words."[327] Therefore, the depressive position, as Klein calls this transtionary phase, is effectively a necessary stage in the process of the child's normative development. Miller then rhetorically asks why Kristeva would deploy the image of "decapitation and recapitation as a figure for this process?" She then states, "Decapitation has long been associated with castration in the literature of psychoanalysis."[328] Indeed, if we deploy the image of the "cutting of hair" rather than "decapitation" as the figure for this process, as Anderson's psychoanalytic discussion of the cutting of hair as a symbol of castration demonstrates (see above), then we can see how Aman has gone through this process and persists in the *depressive position*. Hence, the transgender/transsexual subject in Iran may be said to persist in the "depressive position", unable to accept it as the normal course of psychic development, since

[324] Miller, *Head* Cases, 26-7.
[325] Julia Kristeva, *Melanie Klein*, trans. Ross Guberman, Female Genius: Life, Madness, Words, vol. 2 (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 89.
[326] Miller, *Head Cases*, 27.
[327] Ibid, 27.
[328] Ibid, 28.

normative Iranian society's stigma on trans subjects (in this instance not the Law (*sharia*) but social customs) does not allow for an easy traversal of the depressive position by the transgender subject.

A related question apropos Aman's character is that of melancholia. Why does Aman seem to persist in melancholia throughout the film? It is possible that she persists in her attachment to the lost object, namely the mother. Given the gender and sexual undecidability operative in the very texture of the film related to Aman, the question is if her attachment to the mother is related to the Freudian incest taboo, or is it a prohibition of homosexual desire for the (m)other? In one reading, this melancholic identification with the lost object may be consititutive of her gender identity and sexuality, as Judith Butler notes:

> Consider that gender is acquired at least in part through the repudiation of homosexual attachments; the girl becomes a girl through being subject to a prohibition which bars the mother as an object of desire and installs that barred object as a part of the ego, indeed, as a *melancholic identification* (my emphasis). Thus the identification contains within it both the prohibition and the desire, and so embodies the ungrieved loss of the homosexual cathexis. If one is a girl to the extent that one does not want a girl, then wanting a girl will bring being a girl into question; within this matrix, homosexual desire thus panics gender.[329]

Hence, for Butler gender identity is formed partially as the result of rejecting homosexual attachment (i.e., a girl's attachment for the mother as the object of desire), and thus the identification contains both the "loss and the desire" which forms the melancholic identification. According to Butler heterosexuality is produced through the prohibition of homosexuality even prior to the prohibition of incest, as she states:

> This heterosexuality is produced not only through implementing the prohibition on incest but, prior to that, by enforcing the prohibition on homosexuality. The oedipal conflict presumes that heterosexual desire has already been *accomplished,* that the distinction between heterosexual and homosexual has been enforced (a distinction which, after all, has no necessity); in this sense, the prohibition on incest presupposes the prohibition

[329] Judith Butler, *The Psychic life of Power: Theories of Subjection* (New York: Columbia University, 1997), 136.

on homosexuality, for it presumes the heterosexualization of desire.[330]

According to Butler then the homosexual attachment has a more originary or primordial prohibition then the incest taboo, since the first object of libidinal attachment for the child is the same-sex parent, whilst the price for becoming a "normal" heterosexual subject is to identify with the lost object, in order to become a "normal" subject. A girl identifies with maternal femininity, a boy identifies with the paternal masculinity, and in this way you accept the loss and symbolize it, since you identify with the lost object and become a normalized subject. In Butler's reading, since homosexuals remain true to their love for the lost object (e.g., mother or father), and are unable to symbolize the loss, they internalize and incorporate the lost object within their psychic economy and in this way they persist with *melancholic identification*. But this line of argument by Butler seems to contradict her theory of gender as "performatively produced."[331] Butler provides a succinct definition of performativity: "In the first instance, performativity must be understood not as a singular or deliberate 'act,' but, rather, as the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names." [332] If this is true, then how can the child identify with the same-sex parent prior to performative identification? It is as it were, the girl or boy experiences sexual difference (father or mother) prior to any performative constructions through discourse in society, and seems to indicate an essentialisation of homosexual identity before any performative enacting or construction of gender. This is one of the theoretical problems inherent in Butler's gender theory of performativity.

So the question to be properly asked here is: why does Aman persist in her melancholic identification? This question is answered within the pure texture of the film and especially at the film's end, since the melancholy is due to the loss of her feminine identity, and the forced choice of embodying masculinity. In this way, the film may also be a subversive gesture to the possibility of enforced sexual reassignments in the Islamic Republic, as Naficy notes, "Significantly, this use of transsexual passing in fictional films was happening at the same time that transgender surgery as a social practice was on the rise among young men and women and dealt

[330] Butler, *Psychic life of Power*, 135.
[331] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 24.
[332] Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 2.

with in documentary films."[333] Indeed, due to the prohibition on homosexual desire in Islamic Law (*sharia*) in the Islamic Republic, some men or women who are considered to be homosexuals have been persuaded to go through the transitioning process.

Apropos the motif of cross-dressing, in one scene the blind girl is shown putting pieces of black wool threads as a mustache on Bibigol. Here the masculine gender masquerading has a comedic effect and the two girls start to laugh. The mustache of course stands for virility, masculinity and the phallus.[334] It is as if, there is something inherently comical about the masculine subject. This comical effect recalls what Jaqcues Alain-Miller wrote apropos love stating, "One only loves from a feminine position. Loving feminises. That's why love is always a bit comical in a man."[335] There is always a minimum of comedic effect with masculinity, with this imagined 'thing' protruding outward – the phallus – from the male figure. It is as if there is inherently a dimension of "imposture" to the male subject,[336] to masculinity as such, and the female subject or femininity is the Real subject. As Žižek states in his analysis of Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1957):

> A subject is a partial something, a face, something we see. Behind it, there is a void, a nothingness. And of course, we spontaneously tend to fill in that nothingness with our fantasies about the wealth of human personality... To see what is lacking in reality, to see it as that, there you see subjectivity. To confront subjectivity means to confront femininity. Woman is the subject. Masculinity is a fake.[337]

This is precisely what Lacan himself states apropos the female subject, "By and large, women is much more real and much truer than man…"[338] What Lacan means

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[333] Naficy, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema Volume 4*, 132. Naficy refers to Sharareh Attari's documentary *It Happens Sometimes* (2006). Another documentary is written and directed by Tanaz Eshaghian called *Be Like Others* (2008) (aka *Transsexual in Iran*).
[334] See Hassan Daoud, "Those Two Heavy Wings of Manhood: On Moustaches," in *Imagined Masculinities: Male Identity and Culture in the Middle East*, ed. Mai Ghoussoub and Emma Sinclair-Webb, (London: Saqi, 2000), 273–80.
[335] Interview with J.A. Miller, http://www.lacan.com/symptom/?page_id=263
[336] Lacan states, "…I will say that in man's realm there is always the presence of some imposture…" Lacan, *Anxiety*, 191.
[337] *Pervert's Guide to Cinema* (2006), directed by Sophie Fiennes.
[338] Lacan, *Anxiety*, 191.

here by "more real" is that the female subject or the feminine position is closer to the Real, that is, femininity is at the inherent limit of signification; hence women are closer to the void at the heart of human subjectivity. Now the laughter of the girls draws the attention of the master overseer, who directs his threatening gaze towards them to see why they are laughing and enjoying themselves. The master figure represents the Iranian state apparatus at its purest – the figure of paternal authority always denying or controlling access to enjoyment, or *jouissance*. This figure of the master with all its patriarchal trappings, acts as the Lacanian Name-of-the-Father, namely the whole symbolic network of language, laws and customs (in this instance laws based on Islamic jurisprudence or *figh*) with its super-ego injunctions and prohibitions and its controlling machinery. The scene could also gesture to another ambiguity, the possibility of the girls' knowledge of the gender masquerading of Aman, her cross-dressing: that is they may already know that 'he' is really a 'she,' and find the whole masquerade somewhat comical.

In one of the most cinematically beautiful scenes in *Daughters of the Sun*, Aman is shown behind the weaving apparatus or loom, which thinly veils her like a curtain or screen. S/he begins to silently read a letter and one of the girls (Belghis) asks her if it's a letter from her parents. Then in one of the most formally beautiful shots in the film the profile of the face of Belghis is foregrounded, whilst in the background the figure of Aman is framed with her shaved head, behind the screen of the carpet tapestry. The mise-en-scène separates the two of them with the weaving apparatus as we view Aman through the threads of the loom, while Belghis stands on the other side of the loom in the foreground. The screen not only gestures to the prison like reality of the weaving shop in which they live, but symbolizes the patriarchal and masculinist order of the Islamic Republic in Iran, not just for women, but for those whose gender and sexuality is not in line with the binary of male and female gender categories. At the narrative level, this division of Belghis and Aman via the screen of the loom, already formally gestures through the mise-en-scène that the love between the two is doomed at the outset, even before we learn of their erotic interlude later in the narrative.

3.4 Female Homoeroticism and *Objet petit a*

In an important scene, the beginning of the homoerotic relation between Belghis with Aman is staged while sitting alone in the room weaving on the loom. Belghis glances at Aman and says to him/her "come" (*bia* - both the English and the Persian word here have obvious sexual connotations), and Aman goes and sits beside her. The whole scene is shot from behind the loom, it is as if the loom acts as a protecting screen from the overflowing of erotic tension as they turn and glance at each other silently and longingly and we get a scene cut. Indeed, the loom as screen or veil also functions formally at the level of censorship imposed on visuality by the Islamic Republic on Iranian cinema, and foregrounds the tension that the only way to show the possibilities of an erotic relay of glances on screen is when both characters are literally female. This scene cut may be interpreted as the moment in which the two will have an erotic encounter, which for obvious reasons could not have been represented on screen due to the Islamic system of modesty (*hejab*). In this scene same sex or lesbian desire is staged through the gender ambiguity or cross-dressing/transvestism of Aman.

Figure 3.2 The moment of erotic tension as Aman and Belghis gaze at each other through the screen of the weaving loom.

Being a girl gender masquerading as a boy in this way, s/he finds herself the object of Belghis' desire – hence a full configuration of female homoerotic desire is staged. Therein resides Lacan's lesson of *objet petit a,* or the object cause of desire. Here, gender ambiguity acts as a signifier for the arbitrariness of the signified, which acts as its own cause, namely as the object-cause of desire, where who one desires (regardless of which gender, sex etc.) is of little or no consequence – for the motif of misrecognition itself stages the ambiguity inherent in or constitutive of desire. This is the Lacanian *objet petit a,* at its most elementary. As Slavoj Žižek states:

> *Objet petit a,* the object-cause of desire [is]: an object that is, in a way, posited by desire itself. The paradox of desire is that it posits retroactively its own cause, i.e., the object *a* is an object that can be perceived only by a gaze 'distorted' by desire [like the distorted gaze of Belghis for Aman], an object that does not exist for an 'objective' gaze. In other words the object *a* is always, *by definition*, perceived in a distorted way, because outside this distortion, "in itself," *it does not exist*, since it is *nothing but* the embodiment, the materialization of this very distortion, of this surplus of confusion and perturbation introduced by desire into so-called 'objective reality.'"[339]

In this sense, the gaze of Belghis is distorted by her desire, which is precisely why she *sees* in Aman what she desires (i.e., a man), not what Aman is in her/himself in objective reality. Therefore though Aman is misrecognized as male and desired by Belghis, but conversely Aman seems to desire Belqis precisely as woman, even though s/he is gender masquerading as male. But, things become even more complex and ambiguous here: since Aman was first misrecognized as a boy, after the erotic encounter (which all the formal elements of the scene indicated that they were intimate) Belghis could no longer have remained innocent of Aman's true gender identity, or can she?[340] Anna Vanzan in her reading of the relation of Aman and Belghis has also noted this ambiguity operative in the film, "It is true that Bilghis does not know (or does she?) that Aman is a girl, but Aman is well aware of being a girl: or isn't s/he? Cross-dressing, in this case, opens a window onto gender

[339] Žižek, *Looking Awry*, 12.
[340] According to Judy Stone, "To comply with those objections [by the censors], she cut all the 'touching' scenes in one night, which wreaked havoc with the editing to get it ready for the annual Fajr International Film Festival in Tehran." DVD booklet 5.

ambiguity, as it allows the film to suggest that "other" ways of love are also possible."[341]

Let us imagine the erotic scene, as it would have been staged had there been no censors to cut the scene, to prevent its enactment. The erotic encounter could have been structured like the scene in Freud's description of the primal trauma of fetishism, as Žižek notes apropos the inversion of this primal scene and the failed sexual encounter in *The Crying Game*, "the child's gaze, sliding down the naked female body towards the sexual organ, is shocked to find nothing where one expects to see something (a penis) - in the case of *The Crying Game,* the shock is caused when the eye finds *something* where it expected *nothing."*[342] But, in the case of the *Daughters of the Sun*, the shock would have been caused when Belghis finds *nothing* where she expected *something*. This is the inversion of the standard metaphysical question: Why is there nothing, instead of something? The metaphysical question being: why is there *something*, instead of *nothing*? If we were to gender this metaphysical question, then it is clearly on the side of femininity. This is why the primal scene of the trauma of fetishism, has something of the order of a metaphysical problem to it, not simply of masculinity or femininity but of *sexuality* as such.[343]

It may be argued that the film continues with this formal ambiguity, because it allows the spectator to read Belghis' continued desire for Aman, possibly as a sign of her love beyond the discovery of her gender identity as female. It is precisely here, after the potential revelation of Aman's feminine gender that the dimension of true love emerges in Belghis, since she persists in her love of Aman perhaps despite this revelation. In another scene, in a moment full of fragility, Belghis exposes herself to Aman, in all her vulnerability, and says to her, "come let us go together to Tiva." Then Belghis describes Tiva to Aman in all its ethereal beauty, as a paradisal place full of luxurious and verdant trees and fragrant groves and colorful flowers, where they can build a house together. Then in a moment of full pathos Belghis says to Aman, "marry me, I'll make you happy." Aman, welled up with tears, responds:

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[341] Anna Vanzan, "The LGBTQ question in Iranian cinema", 48.
[342] Žižek, *Metastasis of Enjoyment*, 103.
[343] Žižek puts this metaphysical conundrum at the heart of human sexuality in this way, "Freud focuses on sexuality because, for him, the most elementary break with animal life, the passage to a meta-physical dimension, happens here, in the emergence of a sexual passion detached from the biological needs of animal coupling. Slavoj Žižek, *Disparities* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), 17.

"Okay, I will." Indeed, this is the sublime moment in which true love emerges, where the beloved one (Aman), returns the love of the loving one (Belghis), as Žižek has noted apropos the transvestite character, Dil, in *The Crying Game*:

> It is only at this point that true love emerges, love as a metaphor in the precise Lacanian sense: we witness the sublime moment when *eromenos* (the loved one) changes into *erastes* (the loving one) by stretching out her hand and 'returning love'. This moment designates the 'miracle' of love, the moment of the 'answer of the Real'; as such, it perhaps enables us to grasp what Lacan has in mind when he insists that the subject itself has the status of an 'answer of the Real'.[344]

Aman's statement "Ok, I will" to Belghis' proposal, is precisely the Lacanian "answer of the Real," the moment where she stretches out her hand "returning love." Perhaps in this instance what the other, namely Belghis, sees in Aman, is what there is in her/him more than himself/herself", the *objet petit a* or object cause of desire; in this sense the asymmetry of the loving one (Belghis) who loves the beloved one (Aman) is that what she sees in the loved one, may be a "man", whilst what the loved one knows of himself/herself is that s/he is a 'woman.' However, it may be that Belghis loves Aman regardless of the discovery of her gender identity as 'woman,' and it is precisely here that true love emerges when the object of love, also becomes the subject of love, that is, when the one who is moved by this gesture of love, the beloved, also returns love. Lacan states, "… the lover appears here as the desiring subject [le sujet du désir], with all the weight that the term "desire" has for us, and the beloved as the only one in the couple who has something."[345] This something is the *objet petit a*. Indeed, one evidence in the film that gestures to the possibility that Belghis may know Aman's true female identity is gestured to when Belghis has found the letter that Aman's parents sent, about her mother being sick. Since it is a private letter, which Belghis only accidentally discovers and reads, it is very unlikely that Amngol's parents would have still pretended that she was a boy. Thus the letter would have been addressed to her as their daughter Amangol.

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[344] Žižek, *Metastasis of Enjoyment*, 103. Žižek's formulation here is derived from Lacan's seminar on *Transference*.
[345] Jacques Lacan, *Transference, The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book VIII*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Bruce Fink (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2015), 34.

Be that as it may, in this formulation, love is the "answer of the Real,"[346] Real in the Lacanian sense of "the impossibility of symbolization" or that which is "beyond symbolization", which causes the loving one to see the beloved one through the distorted prism of desire. Therein resides the instantiation of the Lacanian *objet petite a*. In this way, the gender and sexual ambiguity is still maintained as we are no longer sure if Aman is being proposed as a *man* or as a *women*, since if an erotic interlude did occur between them, then it is likely that this is an instance of female homoeroticism or same-sex desire, and especially after the revelation of the content of the letter. This formal ambiguity or formal tension must be maintained due to the censors, since Aman by masquerading and cross-dressing as a 'man' or as transgender would not be scandalous by displaying affection for Belghis, but what would be scandalous is if what is staged on screen is homoeroticism between two females, female homosexuality or lesbian love, which in the very formal texture of the film it is precisely what is staged, since both actors are literally women.

This is the radical core of the *Daughters of the Sun*, its female homoeroticism or same sex desire, which is staged through the transgender move. Indeed, sexual reassignment in Iran which is approved and even encouraged by the state apparatus, should not be considered or thought as radical, for this procedure signifies nothing radical for the Islamic Republic, as through surgery what is still maintained is the distinction between the two genders, female and male, masculine and feminine. What is unacceptable, however, is to have subjects (male or female) that desire the same sex: that is the radical category, which the state would not be able to tolerate. You can transition from one sex to another, since you are still dealing with the accepted sexual difference, male vs. female, which remains within the coordinates of Shi'i discourse in Iran, even sanctioned by its spiritual and political leader Ayatollah Rouhallah Khomeini, but once you have same sex desire, that is the unlawful category, since that is the disavowed kernel of the Iranian states sexual imaginary which is deemed illegal and even punishable by death.

But where is Tiva, this paradisal space for which we would look for in vain in the geographical coordinates of Iran, since there is no such village that exists in Iran. Perhaps Tiva than is an imagined space, a utopian space beyond the Law – with all its super-ego injunctions and prohibitions – that stands for an autonomous zone of

[346] Lacan, *Transference,* 103.

freedom, beyond the coordinates of the patriarchal order and the imposition of the *sharia*, exemplified by the authoritarian figures such as the master overseer, Aman's father, and Belghis' uncle, all of whom may represent the oppressive and repressive aspects of the Iranian state apparatus.

3.5 Love beyond Law and Feminine *Jouissance*

On an errand outside with the master overseer in the woods, Aman hears the sound of a musical instrument located in an off screen space, the *tar* (the instrument is played by the Persian master composer Hossein Alizadeh who has composed the musical score for the film), whose sound seems to fascinate Aman and s/he follows the sound of the diegetic music while the overseer stops to relieve himself. Then when the camera pans to her point of view, we see the village in a long distant shot, whilst the diegetic music echoes from the village. In the next scene, Aman is sitting in her/his dimly lit room beside her loom, in a medium shot, the camera zooms in and moves steadily closer to her face, and we hear the sound of instrumental music again that s/he heard whilst walking outside, but this time the instrument is *setar* (also played by Alizadeh), and Aman is shown slowly rubbing her hands and her face and her shaved head. At the level of the pure texture of the filmic text, it is as if the character of Aman is relishing her freedom from the injunction of the *hejab*, and through this formal strategy of unveiling, Shahriar seems to allude to this freedom being unavailable to women in Iran. The camera begins to move to a close-up of her face – with a look of a distinct enjoyment, an ecstatic enjoyment, which in Lacanian terms is called feminine *jouissance*.[347] Then s/he is shown putting on a dress and begins to dance like a whirling *darvish* to the ecstatic undulations of the Sufi music and with her dress flowing like the garment of the Mowlavi whirling *darvishes* (Figure 3) – the Sufi order of the Persian Sufi mystic and poet Jalal al-Din Rumi mentioned in the introduction – she spins in ecstasy (what in Sufi discourse is termed,

[347] The French term *jouissance,* means both 'orgasm', as well as 'enjoyment'. In Lacan's writings, this ambiguity of the term must always be retained, which is why it is often left untranslated.

hal).[348] In fact, Lacan alludes to the Sufis in relation to the "knowledge of *jouissance*", and speaking of Buddhism and Islam where such knowledge may be found, he states, "Need I mention the tantras, for one of these religions, and the Sufis for the other?"[349] Now, this moment may be read as an instance of what Lacan calls "Love beyond the Law" and feminine *jouissance*, in which there is a feminine sublimation of the drives, through the 'asexual' or non-sexual 'Thing' (*das Ding*), such as *music* in this instance, as an enactment of ecstatic surrender that is emancipatory, as Žižek states:

> "Love beyond Law" involves a "feminine" sublimation of drives into love… love is here no longer merely a narcissistic (mis)recognition to be opposed to desire as the subject's 'truth' but a unique case of direct asexual sublimation (integration into the order of the signifier) of drives, of their *jouissance*, in the guise of the asexual Thing (music, religion, etc.) experienced in the ecstatic surrender. What one should bear in mind apropos of this love beyond Law, this direct asexual sublimation of drive, is that it is… beyond meaning: meaning can only take place within the (symbolic) Law; the moment we trespass the domain of Law, meaning changes into enjoy-meant, *jouissense*.[350]

Through this feminine *jouissance* expressed through her body via music and dance, Aman reaches an experience of "ecstatic surrender" and freedom. Aman seems to rise above the imperative of the Law symbolized by the oppressive master overseer and by extension the Law as symbolized by the Islamic Republic with its constant prohibitions and super-ego injunctions to obey the religious law (*sharia*), etc. However, here Žižek fails to go as far as Lacan himself, for Lacan equates this feminine *jouissnace* with mysticism or the ecstatic experience of the mystics. Indeed, this Lacanian notion of feminine *jouissance* is not unlike the experiences of the Sufis during *sama'*, which has a precise bodily component, in their acts of reaching ecstatic

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[348] See, Jean During, "Hal." In *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, vol. 8. Ehsan Yarshater, ed. (New York: Encyclopaedia Iranica Foundation, 2003), 580. Kheshti reads this moment in these terms, "Aman relishes in the joys of flowing fabric, billowing around legs that twirl like a little girl or a meditating Sufi, whirling around in a trance-like state to the sounds of mystical music" (172). For a Lacanian reading of Rumi's mystical poetics, see Mahdi Tourage, *Rumi and the Hermeneutics of Eroticism* (Leiden: Brill, 2007).

[349] Jacques Lacan, *...or Worse: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book XIX*, trans. A. R. Price (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018), 148.

[350] Slavoj Žižek, "*Love Beyond Law*", accessed March 20, 2015, http://www.lacan.com/zizlola.htm

states (*ahwal*) via dance and music.[351] Lacan in the seminar *Encore* (meaning "again" which gestures towards the never ending or unsatifiability of desire or the circuit of *jouissance* in the derive, but also Lacan's promise to return to the questions of his Seminar VII, *the Ethics of Psychoanalysis*), specifically articulates the idea of a feminine *jouissance* as "a supplementary jouissance," beyond what the phallic function designates as *jouissance*, as he states, "There is a jouissance, a joussance of the body that is…'beyond the phallus."[352] This feminine *jouissance* "of the body" is, according to Lacan, ineffable, since men and women may experience it, but know nothing about it.[353] It is at the very limits of being and language, and therefore of the order of the Lacanian Real. As Žižek admits in one instance, "mysticism… is the encounter with the Real."[354] Again, here there is a homology between the ineffability of the experience of the Sufi mystics (and mystics of most religious traditions), which has been termed by Michael A. Sells as the "Mystical Languages of Unsaying."[355] Indeed, later in the same text Lacan explicitly links this feminine *jouissance* with the experience of the mystics, exemplified by the female Christian mystic Saint Teresa. He writes, "There are men [mystics] just as good as women. It happens. And who also feel just fine about it. Despite – I won't say their phallus – despite what encumbers them [men] that goes by that name, they get the idea or sense that there must be a *jouissance* that is beyond. Those are the ones we call mystics."[356] This

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[351] See Shahzad Bashir, *Sufi Bodies: Religion and Society in Medieval Islam (*New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 74-77. For general discussions of *sama'* in Sufi praxis see Fritz Meier, "The Dervish Dance: An Attempt at an Overview," in *Essays in Islamic Mysticism and Piety* (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 23-48; Leonard Lewisohn, "The Sacred Music of Islam: Samā' in the Persian Sufi Tradition," *British Journal of Ethnomusicology* Vol. 6 (1997): 1-33

[352] Lacan, *Encore*, 74.

[353] In *Encore* Lacan states that some women may experience feminine *jouissance*, but not all, though all mystics do experience it. See Lacan, *Encore*, 74, 76. See also Lacan, *Anxiety*, 183-84.

[354] Žižek, *Metastasis of Enjoyment*, 117.

[355] Michael A. Sells and James Webb, "Lacan and Bion: Psychoanalysis and the Mystical Language of Unsaying." *Theory and Psychology* 5.2 (1995): 195–215; cf. Michael A. Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unsaying* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

[356] Jacques Lacan, *Seminar XX: Encore*. Trans. Bruce Fink. Ed. Jacques-Alain Miller. (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1999) 76. Speaking of mystical texts, Lacan incredibly calls his own book *Écrits* a mystical text, "These mystical jaculations are nither idle chatter nor empty verbiage; they provide, all in all, some of the best reading one can find – at the botom of the page, drop a footnote, 'Add to that list

jousissance that is beyond the phallus is feminine *jouissance*. Here, Aman's experience is at once erotic and ecstatic - it is a perfect instantiation of what Lacan calls, feminine *jouissance*. In this way, Shahriar seems to deploy the various elements of this scene – Aman's unveiled shaved hair, dancing, and enjoyment of music; all things which are forbidden to women in public spaces according to the logic of modesty laws or *hejab* in Iran – as a strategy to perform a critique of Iranian society and culture, especially the State apparatus.

Figure 3.3 Aman's dancing as an instance of *feminine jouissance*

Jacques Lacan's *Écrits*,' because it's of the same order." Lacan, *Seminar XX: Encore* 76.

3.6 Misrecognition and Male Homoeroticism (*shahed-bazi*)

One of the central elements of the *Daughters of the Sun* is the motif of misrecognition of identity, in which the motif of gender ambiguity and cross-dressing or transvestism are effectively deployed to stage this motif. This misrecognition can be linked to Badiou's discussion of the "passion of the Real," where taking up Lacan's concept of "misrecognition" in the mirror stage, he suggests that there is a "power of misrecognition" (*puissance de la meconnaissance*) and moreover that "there is a function of misrecognition that makes it such that the abruptness of the real operates only in fictions, montages, and masks"[357] In this way, the mask concealing Aman's true gender, stages the Real of illicit desire (i.e., homoeroticism) repressed in the filmic unconscious and in the Iranian cultural imaginary. Now, in the midst of Aman's dancing, at once the diegetic music abruptly comes to a halt, and the camera turns to a shot of an instrument hitting the ground, the instrument is clearly a *setar*. The shot shows a shadow across her small windowpane, and it gestures to the spectral presence of someone – the *darvish* who was playing the instrument has seen her/him put on a dress and dance. Does this scene stage an instance of homoeroticism (*shahed-bazi*) in which the *darvish* misrecognizes Aman as a male who is "effeminate," especially by putting on the dress of one of the girls? Or is this an instance of recognition that Aman while masquerading as a "boy," or gender passing as male, is in reality a 'woman'? Here it seems that the masculine signifier is divided into the 'feminine' in the figure of Aman whose mask of "male" or "masculine" status is compromised. It is as if Aman as a "male" subject is now cross-dressing as "female." This redoubling of the cross-dressing motif as it were further reinforces the gender and sexual undecidability in the filmic text, as well as the notion of desire as the erotic force that is beyond gender signification. The ambiguity is important here since it redoubles the narrative tension in which Belghis also misrecognizes Aman's gender identity. In other words, just as Aman is misrecognized for being "male" by Belghis, s/he may also be misrecognized by the iterant *darvish*.

[357] Alain Badiou quoted in Adrian Johnson, *Žižek's Ontology: A Transcendental Materialist Theory of Subjectivity* (Evanston, Illinois: North Western University, 2008) 183.

Another formal element in the scene is that the *darvish* hidden behind the window-pane is like a voyeur gazing at Aman from outside the window, we never see his voyeuristic gaze, since to show him literally looking at Aman with an erotic gaze and voyeuristic pleasure, would have been another cause for censoring the scene, therefore the only strategy to gesture to his off screen presence and his voyeuristic gaze (other than the strategy Majidi took in *Baran*, namely by 'veiling' her behind the opaque window), is to have an abrupt break or jolt of the music ending with the shot of the instrument (*setar*) hitting the ground. This voyeurism or "looking" can be read through the prism of what is called *shahed-bazi* or homoeroticism and the logic of *nazar-bazi* (play of glances).[358] Indeed, there is a long tradition of homoeroticism in Persian mystical poetry and in Sufi discourse called in Persian *shahed-bazi* or the "witness play", which was the act of contemplating divine beauty in beardless youths or pubescent boys[359] and has been interpreted as an instantiations of pre-modern "homosexuality."[360] Sirus Shamisa in his exploration of homoeroticism (*shahed-bazi*) in Iran through the lens of Persian poetry states, "Persian lyrical literature is essentially a homosexual [*hamjens garaie*] literature."[361] Similarly Janet Afary notes in her *Sexual Politics in Modern Iran*: "In nearly half of lyric poems, the love object is unquestionably an adolescent boy. In the other half, which is also often homoerotic, the distinction is lost to the reader because the same adjectives can apply

[358] For *nazar-bazi* in Iranian cinema see Shahla Haeri, "Sacred Canopy: Love and Sex under the Veil," *Iranian Studies*, Volume 42, 2009, 113-126.
[359] Shahzad Bashir writes apropos *shahed-bazi*, "The practice of contemplating young boys as beautiful forms that represent divine beauty is usually known through the term *shahidbazi* and has a controversial history in Sufi texts… while it is difficult to substantiate *shahidbazi* as a widespread practice, such "looking" is a common feature of Persian poetic rhetoric." Bashir, *Sufi Bodies* 146.
[360] See Sirus Shamisa, *Shahedbazi dar Adabiyat-e Farsi* (Tehran: Ferdows Press, 2002); for a valuable discussion of homoeroticism and homosexuality in Iran, see Janet Afary, *Sexual Politics in Modern Iran* (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 2009). For homoeroticism in pre-modern Islamic sources, see Khaled El-Rouayheb, *Before Homosexuality in the Arab-Islamic World, 1500–1800* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2005), especially Chapter One: Pederasts and Pathics 13-52; Walter G. Andrews and Mehmet Kalpaklı, *The Age of Beloveds: Love and the Beloved in Early-modern Ottoman and European Culture and Society* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2005), 32-84. On homosexuality in Islamic law see, E. K. Rowson, "HOMOSEXUALITY ii. IN ISLAMIC LAW," *Encyclopædia Iranica*, XII/4, pp. 441-445, available online at http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/homosexuality-ii (accessed on 30 December 2012).
[361] Shamisa, *Shahedbazi* 10, quoted in Afary, *Sexual Politics*, 88.

to either male or female objects of desire"[362] What is of particular interest is that, as Afary states apropos Shamisa, there is a rich lexicon in Persian of homoerotic relations embedded in the language itself:

> The Persian language itself is rich with allusions to homoerotic relations. A wealth of words is used to refer to various stages of courtship, from flirtation (*nazar bazi*), to adoration of the beautiful (*jamal parasti*), to actual homosexual intercourse (*lavat*). As in the Greek tradition, there are different terms for the "active" partner (*fa'el* [the doer], *gholam bareh* or *gholam pareh* [lover of pages] *jamal parast* or *surat parast* [one who loves beautiful faces] *bache baz* [pederast], *luti* [from the verb *lavatat*]. There are also terms referring to a "passive" man, such as *ma'bun* or *maf'ul* [the receiver], *amrad* [beardless adolescent], *kudak* [child] *now khatt* [one with a budding mustache] *bi rish* [beardless] and *pesar* [boy].[363]

Indeed, throughout the film the overseer does not call Aman by name, but by the term *pesar* (boy). Aman also has no facial hair or is beardless (*bi rish*) and has the look of a *now khatt*, a boy with a budding mustache, or an *amrad*, a beardless youth. It is important to note that the motif of pederastic courting and the cult of the *ephebe* has a long genealogy that reaches back to classical Greece, in such institutions as the *symposium*, and through both the literary (poetry, philosophy, drama) and visual (art, vase paintings) cultural production of Greece, which reached as far as the Hellenistic Middle East.[364] The motif of pederasty itself also goes back to the ancient Greeks, especially with the god of wine Bacchus[365] and in the ways "boys" were contemplated as gods.[366] In his Seminar VIII on *Transference*, where Lacan has an extended commentary on Plato's *Symposium*, he states, "You'll have to get used to the idea that Greek love was love for young pretty boys. And… that's it."[367]

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[362] Afary *Sexual Politics*, 87-88.
[363] Shamisa, *Shahedbazi* 10, quoted in Afary *Sexual Politics*, 88.
[364] For the literary evidence, see Andrew Lear and Eva Cantarella, *Images of Pederasty: Boys Were Their Gods* (London and New York, 2008).
[365] Interestingly, since Persian and Greek are both Indo-European languages, there is a lexical and linguistic relation between the Greek word Bacchus and the Persian *bache*, meaning "young boy, child, son; or a page and servant boy". In fact, the Persian term *bacha-bazi* literally means, pederasty.
[366] "When they asked the poet Anacreon why he wrote hymns to boys instead of the gods, he replied, "because boys are our gods." 'Footnote to an ancient edition of Pindar's second Isthmian Ode (iii 213 Drachmann)." Quoted in Andrew Lear and Eva Cantarella, *Images of Ancient Greek Pederasty: Boys Were Their Gods* (London and New York, 2008) 8.
[367] Lacan, *Transference*, 30.

However, such sexual practices in the pre-modern period should not be called homosexuality, as we understand it in the modern sense of the term, since homosexuality is related to the politics of identity, which is a modern category (Foucault already noted the construction of the category of homosexuality in the Europe of 19th century),[368] and hence a more proper term in the older Iranian context would be homoeroticism.

In the context of the emergence of Iranian modernity, Afsaneh Najmabadi has demonstrated the existence of a "pre-modern and early modern Persian homoerotic culture."[369] In the 19th and early 20th century the Qajar cultural imaginary was based on a preference for male homoeroticism, typified by such terms as *amradparasti* (love of young adolescent men), *ghilman* (youth or boys, slaves) and *wildan* (boys), all of whom did not yet show signs of adult masculinity or manhood, namely they were beardless, and were regarded as objects of desire by older men (Figure 4). Similar terms for youth or boys were deployed in Arabic with regards to homoerotic relations, such as *shabb* (youth).[370] Indeed, Najmabadi contends that the encounter with the scornful "European gaze" at these practices, Iranians "began to reconfigure structures of desire by introducing a demarcation to distinguish homosociality from homosexuality."[371] Therefore the encounter with the European gaze resulted in the "disavowal" of the homoerotic culture in the Iranian past.[372] In this sense, it could be said that this predilection for homoeroticism in pre-modern and early modern Iranian

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[368] See Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volum 1: An Introdoction* (New York, Vintage Books, 1990) 43.

[369] Afsaneh Najmabadi, *Women with Mustaches and Men Without Beards* (California: University of California, 2005), 15. Also see, Willem Floor, *A Social History of Sexual Relations in Iran* (Washington, DC: Mage Publishers, 2008), especially Chapter Four.

[370] As Khaled El-Rouayheb notes, "Homosexual relations in the early Ottoman Arab East were almost always conceived as involving an adult man (who stereotypically would be the "male" partner) and an adolescent boy (the "female"). The latter—referred to in the texts as *amrad* (beardless boy); *ghulam* or *shabbi* (boy); or *fata, shabb,* or *hadath* (male youth)—though biologically male, was not completely a "man" in the social and cultural sense; and his intermediate status was symbolized by the lack of the most visible of male sex characteristics: a beard." El-Rouayheb, *Before Homosexuality* 26.

[371] Najmabadi, *Women with Mustaches*, 38.

[372] Ibid, 38. Interestingly Najmabadi often uses the psychoanalytic term 'disavowal' to characterize the denial of this past.

history and literature was not only disavowed but also *repressed* in the wider cultural imaginary.

Figure 3.4 An example of homoerotic culture in the Qajar era:
photo of "Naqi Khan and Taymur, with two others", from the'Ali Khan Vali's Album in Women's Worlds in Qajar Iran.The description of the photo reads: "This picture is on page111 of the album. The writing under the picture reads:"Colonel Naqi Khan flirting with Taymur the dancer,Mirza Asad Allah and Abu al-Qasim Khan looking on with envy [literally: swallowing saliva and yawning]."
http://www.qajarwomen.org/en/items/1257A129.html

In the next shot we see Aman walking outside and s/he hears again the diegetic music whilst walking in the street, with a crowd gathered around the source of the music, and s/he goes to look and a man, perhaps a wondering darvish, is playing the *setar* and she looks at him and he returns her gaze, and there is an erotic relay of glances by the darvish as he recognizes Aman. In this scene she is holding a

collection of wool strings in her/his hand while the darvish is playing the strings of the instrument (*setar*). There is certainly a homology here between her character as weaver who works with "strings" knotting together the double meaning of the word *tar* as both strings of the weaving apparatus and the darvish's playing of an instrument with the link being the string/*tar*, as Kheshti notes using Moallem's linking of the two meanings of the term *tar*:

> Literally meaning 'string,' tar denotes many things in this film: Aman's 'lived material body' is animated in a dialectic between the musical tar and the pood [weft] of hir workday existence, the strings of the instrument resonating through hir while the psychic burden of hir mother's illness and the overseer's panoptic gaze muffles its musicality; or, as a master weaver, the choreography (s)he daily enacts with the tar, the pood and hir hands is a reiterative performance that continuously weaves hir into the narrative of nation in the creation of the quintessential 'Persian' object.[373]

However, one of the problems with Kheshti's interpretation à la Moallem, is that she has conflated or blurred the distinction between several Persian instruments such as the *tar*, *setar*, and *tambour* for her interpretive purposes – calling all the instruments *tar*. Indeed, retaining the distinction is important as the *setar* for instance in Persian classical music is commonly known as 'the instrument of the night' (*saz-e shab*) due to its soft sonority, and is thought to be "well suited for spiritual music."[374] Therefore, it is not insignificant that the night scene in which Aman was in the room listening to the instrument was not the *tar*, but the *setar*.

In this outdoor scene, we get a shot of the *darvish* playing another instrument, the *tanbour* outside Aman's window.[375] A hand emerges from the windowpane and Aman gives him something to drink through the window. But the master overseer sees this and goes in and begins to beat Aman again complaining, "I brought you here

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[373] Kheshti, "Cross-Dressing," 173. Kheshti has chosen to refer to Aman as 'hir' in order to gesture to the transgender subjectivity that the character has embodied.
[374] Jean During and Zia Mirabdolbaghi, *The Art of Persian Music* (Mage Publishers, 1991) 122. For *setar*, see pages, 118-122; for *tar*, 127-133. For a study of writings on the theory and praxis of Persian music, see Mehrdad Fallahzadeh, *Persian Writing on Music: A Study of Persian Musical Literature from 1000 to 1500 AD* (Studia Iranica Upsalienisa-Uppsala Universitet 2005).
[375] The *tanbour* is an instrument that is considered sacred by the Sufis, especially among the Kurdish Sufis in Iran called *Ahl-e Haqq* (the People of Truth), who make ablutions before playing it; hence the instrument has a liturgical and ceremonial function in relation to the practices of *zekr* (remembrance), *sama'* (audition), and attaining mystical states of ecstasy (*hal*).

to work and to oversee the girls." After being beaten, Aman looks up at the wool strings hanging from the rope in the room, and walks back and forth with her head bent backwards and rubs her face into the wool strings and smells their fragrance. The scene again gestures to the activation of the Lacanian feminine *jouissance* and ecstatic freedom. Incidentally, the unnamed musician that I have chosen to call a '*darvish*,' is often standing by her window or door, which is precisely what the etymology of the term *darvish* is derived from, namely "standing by the door."[376] Indeed, there are many wandering *darvishes* or *qalandars*, itinerant Sufis who roam the Iranian country side and villages, often playing music or telling tales, though they are less prevalent in modern times, as Sufis are severely persecuted by the Iranian state apparatus, but it is still possible to find them wandering the remote villages in Iran.[377]

In a later scene Aman suddenly wakes up when the wind slams the door of the room open, which was almost always locked by the overseer. Aman looks around the room, and then we see that the *darvish* is in the room and s/he becomes frightened. He grabs a bundle from where she sleeps, which seems to be Aman's belongings. S/he hides behind the loom or weaving apparatus, afraid of his intentions. As he leaves, s/he looks at him with longing and trepidation, and he turns back to look at her, and she closes the door. With this act he is proposing to Aman to come with him, to go away with him from this prison, full of pain and suffering. This moment is filled with erotic ambiguity, does the male *darvish* recognize that Aman is a girl masquerading as a boy, or does he want to be with Aman as a "boy"? Thus, the question is: is his desire for Aman a heterosexual or a homoerotic desire? But Aman does not go after him and rejects his offer of love – in this instance the *darvish*'s love remains unrequited. In the morning she goes outside and brings back the sack that he took outside the house and we get a long shot of the *darvish* with his back to the

[376] Carl W. Ernst, *Sufism: An Introduction to the Mystical Tradition of Islam* (Boulder, Colorado: Shambhala Publications, 2011), 3.
[377] For wandering *darvishes* and *qalandars* in Iranian history and thought see, Muhammad Reza Shafi'i-yi Kadkani, *Qalandariyah dar Tarikh: Digarandisi-ha-yi yek Ide'olozhi* (Tehran: Sokhan, 1386/2007); de Bruijn, J. T. P. "The Qalandariyyat in Persian Mystical Poetry from Sand'i Onwards" in Lewisohn, Leonard (ed.) in *The Legacy of Mediæval Persian Sufism* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 1992), 61–75; Ahmet T. Karamustafa, *God's Unruly Friends: Dervish Groups in the Islamic Later Middle Period. 1200-1550* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1994).

camera leaving the village, an image that cinematically reverberates the film's last scene with Aman leaving the village.

3.7 The Lacanian Act and the Feminine 'No!'

At the very end of *Daughters of the Sun* there is a double catch, a double ambiguity even operative at the last scene, as we see a shot of Aman(gol) leaving singing the same melancholic Azari song that she sang at the beginning of the film with her shaved head, but now she has donned her female dress (Figure 6).[378] Is the final scene, then, to be read as the reassertion of her own agency and female identity?[379] I would argue yes, and that indeed this is the ultimate lesson of the film. Aman's gender re-signification or transgendering was not her choice, but an act that was imposed on her by paternal authority. This reading of the reassertion of her feminine identity is corroborated in Shahriar's own statement regarding the film, as she states, "I never saw the shaving of the head as a physical thing…. It became a great metaphor for the loss of identity. What is your role now? How do you find out who you are? It's NOT a cultural thing. Unfortunately all of us in the world have reached the same level… I wanted to say aside from our roles in society we should celebrate our femininity. No matter who you are or what you are, it's wonderful to be a woman."[380] This gesture of Aman remaining faithful to the end to her femininity and female identity is itself the ultimate subversive act, and can be read as an instance of the Lacanian "authentic act" and the feminine 'No!' at its purest. In Lacanian ethics, the supreme ethical act or the "authentic act" is one in which the subject does not cede with respect to his or her desire.[381] According to Lacan, the question that must be asked when speaking of the ethical act is, "Have you acted in conformity

[378] According to Judy Stone, the sensors "wanted her [Shahriar] to cut the first and final scenes, but she adamantly refused. Her reaction was: 'Over my dead body.'" See "Daughters of the Sun," DVD booklet, 5.
[379] Moallem also reads the end of the film as Aman's return to femininity. See Moallem, *Between Warrior*, 145.
[380] Maryam Shahriar cited in Judy Stone, DVD booklet, 4-5.
[381] Frances L. Restuccia, *The Taming of the Real: Zizek's Missed Encounter with Kieslowski's Insight*," accessed April 01, 2015, http://www.lacan.com/white.htm

with the desire that is in you?"[382] This is contrasted to "traditional ethics" of philosophers such as Aristotle or Kant. In traditional ethical theory, ethics revolves around a conception of the "Good," where different kinds of "good" compete with the position of the "Sovereign Good."[383] In Lacanian ethics, this ideal of the "good" is seen as an obstacle to desire; hence in performing an authentic act, "a radical repudiation of a certain ideal of the good is necessary."[384] This ideal of the "good" is often what is purveyed as the Law in society. In this formulation, Aman burns the weaving sweatshop, which symbolically represents the patriarchal core of Iranian society and the state as the lynchpin of the Law (i.e., Islamic law), by remaining faithful to the end to her feminine self-identity (Figure 5). This is the enactment of the Lacanian "act" at its most subversive.

This final act of Aman in which she burns the sweatshop, may be read in light of Žižek's interpretation of Antigone's suicidal act via Lacan (in Seminar VII, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*), as the feminine act, and an instantiation of Lacan's feminine *jouissance*. For Žižek the feminine character of the radical act is characterized in these terms:

> … every act worthy of this name is 'mad' in the sense of radical *unaccountability*: by means of it, I put at stake everything, including myself, my symbolic identity; the act is therefore always a 'crime,' a 'transgression,' namely of the limit of the symbolic community to which I belong. The act is defined by this irreducible *risk*: in its most fundamental dimension, it is always *negative*, i.e., an act of annihilation, of wiping out – we not only don't know what will come out of it, its final outcome is ultimately even insignificant, strictly secondary in relation to the NO! of the pure act.[385]

In this perspective Aman's 'No! of the pure act' is a transgressive act that stands up to all that the overseer and the prisonlike sweatshop symbolize – the Iranian state apparatus as the Law. Indeed, once the subject performs the act, s/he is no longer the same as before. This is precisely what Žižek formulates apropos Anigone's act of saying "No!" to Creon (in Sophocles' tragic play *Antigone*):

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[382] Evans, Dylan. *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis*. New York: Routledge, 1996). 57.
[383] Dylan, *An Introductory Dictionary*, 57.
[384] Ibid, 57.
[385] Slavoj Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom!* (New York: Routledge, 2001) 44.

> …the act is not simply something I 'accomplish' – after an act, I'm literally 'not the same as before'. In this sense, we could say that the subject 'undergoes' the act (passes through it) rather than 'accomplishes' it: in it the subject is annihilated and subsequently reborn (or not), i.e., The act involves a kind of temporary eclipse, *aphanisis* [annihilation], of the subject.[386]

Figure 3.5 Amangol burning the weaving sweatshop.

This is how Aman returns to femininity from "masculinity," she traverses or passes through masculinity as it were, via the passage through the *act* of burning the sweatshop. This act of using patrol to burn the weaving sweatshop is exactly how Lacan describes *jouissance* in Seminar XVII, where he states that *jouissance*,"Begins with a tickle and ends with blaze of petrol." That's always what *jouissance* is.[387] Through the act, Aman's "masculine" subjectivity is "annihilated", an *aphanisis* through the fire as it were, and she is subsequently "reborn" in her femininity as a woman, signified through her wearing of the dress once again, the marker of the reassertion of her femininity. Thus, like Antigone, Aman's feminine 'No!' of the pure ethical act of burning the overseer's sweatshop, is the eruption of the Lacanian Real

[386] Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom!*, 44.
[387] Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: The Other Side of Psychoanalysis Book XVII*, Edited by Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Russell Grigg (New York/London: W.W.Norton & Company, 2007), 72.

into the Symbolic, and stands as a powerful symbol of the emancipatory potential and resistance of women in Iran to the authoritarian rule and patriarchal state of the Islamic Republic. In this instance, Aman's character also represents or stands as the *alter ego* for Shahriar the director of the film herself, and her own act of defiance through the making of this film. It is little wonder then that the censors wanted the last scenes to be cut out of the film, since they were politically savvy enough to read the subversive core of the film's message at the end, but Shahriar refused saying, "Over my dead body," and we are left with one of the most memorable scenes of feminine defiance in the history of New Iranian Cinema.

Figure 3.6 Amongol dressed in her skirt as she leaves the burning weaving sweatshop.

Conclusion

In this chapter I focused on the formation of the (Lacanian) subject through the figure of Amangol, and how the female subject may destabilize or transgress that subject positioning assigned to her or imposed on her in the (patriarchal) symbolic order. In *Daughters of the Sun*, Amangol's journey of subject formation or constitution of self-identity goes through several Lacanian or psychoanalytic operations, the first of which is the installation of the subject, namely Amangol, into the symbolic order through symbolic castration and the 'The-Name-of-the-Father,'

(*le nom-du-père*), or the paternal metaphor, by re-signifying her from femininity to masculinity, indexed by shaving her hair and renaming her Aman. In the texture of the film Aman's cross-dressing or gender masquerading results in a homoerotic configuration between her and Belghis, which I read via Lacan's concept of *objet petit a,* or the object cause of desire, the object which is the remainder of the Real, and that resists symbolization. Here the subversive power of love was staged, in which regardless of gender or sexuality, the misrecognition of Aman as male by Bilghis and Aman's reciprocation of this love, stages the fact that love is beyond normative conceptions of gender and sexuality. In this way, a full configuration of female homoeroticism or lesbian love was staged in the film, since Amangol and Belgis were literally women (played by female actresses). The beginning of Aman's rebellion was theorized through the activation of feminine *jouissance*, an enjoyment beyond the limits of logic and reason, and in what Lacan calls "Love beyond the Law," the sublimation of drives through the "Thing," (*das Ding*)[388] a mystical ecstatic surrender to the subversive core of her desire that is emancipatory. The motif of misrecognition in the film was also brought to the fore through Badiou's use of Lacan's concept of "misrecognition" in which it functions as the way the Real operates through masks, and in relation to Aman having to mask her gender identity through cross-dressing, in which the ambiguity of male homoeroticism (*shahid-bazi*) was staged through the figure of the *darvish*. Finally, the end of the film stages the Lacanian ethical act and the feminine 'No' – around which all the various elements of the chapter circulate – and the full activation of feminine *jouissance*, where Aman defies the demands of the symbolic imposed on her by figures of paternal authority (her father, the master-overseer), and traverses from masculinity back to femininity by sacrificing her embodied masculinity through the act of burning the carpet-weaving sweat shop, representative of her bondage and captivity. In the end, the symbolic identification between Amangol and Shahriar as filmmaker resound a profound critique of the patriarchal order that is the Islamic Republic, in suppressing female self-identity and femininity.

[388] Freud's concept of 'The Thing' or *das Ding* (*la chose*) in Lacan is a complex topic, but for our purposes here, it refers to the object of desire or the primordially lost object, which is forever to be resought. It is the prehistoric and immemorial Other. See Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, 53.

Part II

Unheimlich between the Weird and the Eerie: Iranian Cinema Moves On

Chapter 4

Dreaming of a Nightmare in Tehran: The Fright of Real Desires in *Atomic Heart*

If you are caught in another's dream, you are done for.

- Gilles Deleuze[389]

Before the eve of the 1979 Iranian Revolution, Michel Foucault, who was intensely engrossed with the events in Tehran, wrote a series of articles on the revolutionary events, in one of which he posed an uncharacteristically psychoanalytic inflected question: "What are the Iranians dreaming about?"[390] After the events of the 2009 presidential election and the subsequent protest movement, which functions as the backdrop for *Atomic Heart*, we may ask the question again today: what are the Iranians Dreaming of in Tehran? The cinematic answer provided by *Atomic Heart*, at least, seems to be: they are dreaming of a nightmare in Tehran. The nightmare is not only related to the fears and anxieties of a possible nuclear destruction of Tehran, but more precisely, to the totalitarian nightmare of the Islamic Republic, personified in the monstrous dictatorial figure of Toofan.

In this chapter, I will focus on the double or two-part structure in Ali Ahmadzadeh's "surrealist" road film *Atomic Heart* (*Qalb-e atomi*, 2015), in which the first part is considered as the realist and the second part as the surrealist half of the film. I will argue that the two parts of the film represent the world of fantasy in the first and the world of desire in the second that are staged horizontally as it were.[391] This formal double-structure is advanced by the director's own reading of the film, as he states in a post-screening of the film at the Berlin Film Festival, "The most important aspect of the film for me is that the first part and second part are

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[389] This is part of what Deleuze says in a lecture on cinema, see "Gilles Deleuze on Cinema: What is the Creative Act, 1987", accessed October 16, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a_hifamdISs

[390] For this article by Foucault, see Janet Afary and Kevin B. Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution: Gender and the Seductions of Islamism* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2005) 203-9. For a critical reassessment of Afary's and Anderson's reading of Foucault's involvement in the Iranian Revolution, see Behrooz Ghamari-Tabrizi, *Foucault in Iran: Islamic Revolution After the Enlightenment* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2016).

[391] Todd McGowan in his reading of Lynch's *Mulholland Drive* (2001) also splits the two parts of the film into the world of fantasy (first part) and the world of desire (second part). See Todd McGowan, *The Impossible David Lynch* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007) 194-219.

differentiated. The first part is reality and the second part, when the character of Mohammad Reza Golzar [Toofan] appears, is the surreal part. The film is a contrast between realism and surrealism."[392] However, this standard reading has to be turned around, as I will suggest that the first part of the film is the fantasy half, and the second part of the film is the reality half. By 'reality' here, I intend a very precise psychoanalytic notion of reality, that is: when reality is deprived of its fantasmatic supplement, reality itself turns into a kind of nightmarish surreality. When reality is stripped of its frame of fantasy, we do not just get reality as such, but what we get is "an 'irreal' nightmarish universe," too traumatic to be approached directly, which is why we must fictionalize it. As Kant knew very well, we can never know the real kernel of reality *in-itself*. Kant made a distinction between phenomenal reality as appearance, to which we have access, and the noumenon as the *thing in-itself*, which we cannot access with our categories of reason; this is preicsley where our reason falls into antinomies or contradictions; in this sense, reality always requires a transcendental schema in order to be constituted as reality.[393] The psychoanalytic name for the Kantian transcendental scheme is fantasy.[394] As Žižek states apropos the notion of fantasy in Lacan:

> when the phantasmic frame disintegrates, the subject undergoes a *'loss* of reality' and starts to perceive reality as an 'irreal' nightmarish universe with no firm ontological foundation; this nightmarish universe is not 'pure fantasy' but, on the contrary, *that which remains of reality after reality is deprived of its support in fantasy.*[395]

Indeed, although on the surface it appears that the first part of the film is reality, shot in a realist style, where there is the normal run of things and the second part is surreality; what I argue instead is that the first part is the fantasy narrative or the fantasmatic scenario, and the second part is reality deprived of its fantasmatic

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[392] Post-screening discussion with Ali Ahmadzadeh, "Iranian Film "Madare ghalb atomi" ("Atom Heart Mother") @ Berlin Film Festival 2015", accessed October 09, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cxA3wLhVs3E

[393] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 1998) 362.

[394] Žižek writes, "In order to experience something as part of our reality, it has to fit the frame that determines the coordinates of our reality; Kant's name for this frame is the transcendental scheme, and the psychoanalytic name is fantasy." Slavoj Žižek, *Disparities* (New York/London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016) 14.

[395] Slavoj Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies* (New York: Verso, 2008), 66.

support. It is precisely when reality is deprived of its frame of fantasy that we encounter the traumatic Real, the Real in the Lacanian sense, that which appears in reality more then reality itself and distorts it. In the film, this Real appears as the Real of desire, which acts as a distortion of reality, since the way "desire inscribes itself into reality, [is] by distorting it. Desire is a wound of reality."[396] In this sense, desire acts as a distortion of reality in the second half of the film and what we get is a kind of nightmarish reality, since the fantasy support that sustained the coordinates of reality has collapsed. Therefore, I argue that *Atomic Heart* is comprised of three ontological registers: fantasy, reality, and the Real.[397] The first part is representative of the world of fantasy and the second part that of the world of desire. It is in the world of desire in the second part of the film that the Real in all its traumatic horror appears through the character of Toofan, and where Arineh and Nobahar are confronted not only with the fright of the Real of their forbidden desire– forbidden because it is a homoerotic desire; but also with the mystery of the Other's desire (Toofan) in all its uncanny dimension. In another formulation the entire film is structured like a dream, where the first half is the dream as fantasy or the dream as wish fulfillment (in Freudian terms), and the second half of the film is where the dream sequence turns into a nightmare.

4.1 *Unheimlich* between the Weird and the Eerie

There is a notable shift in the films that are emerging from Iran today from the art-house films of the New Iranian Cinema discussed in the previous chapter and that used to populate and dominate international film festivals with directors such as Kiarostami, Makhmalbaf, Panahi, Rasoulof, and Ghobadi; a shift which was even noted by the film scholar Kristin Thompson in her review of Iranian films at the Vancouver International Film Festival in 2014, including *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* by Ana Lily Amirpour (2014) and Shahram Mokri's *Mahi va gorbeh* (*Fish and Cat*, 2013). Kristin Thompson states:

[396] Slavoj Žižek, *A Pervert's Guide to Cinema* (dir. Sophie Fiennes, 2006). Film.
[397] Frances Restuccia also considers *Mulholland Drive* (2001) to comprise the same three ontological levels. See Frances Restuccia, *The Blue Box: Kristevan/Lacanian Readings of Contemporary Cinema* (London/New York: Continuum, 2012) 95.

> Maybe it's just the particular selection of Iranian films at this year's festival, but I sensed a shift from the ones we've seen in previous years…. all three of the Iranian fiction features this year depart from some conventions we've grown used to in the New Iranian Cinema of the past decades."[398]

Indeed, Ali Ahmadzadeh's new 'surrealist' road film *Atomic Heart* (*Qalb-e atomi*, 2015) also called *Atomic Heart Mother* (*Madar-e qalb atomi*), must be included in this band of new Iranian films where a visible shift can be detected between the New Iranian cinema of the mid 1990s and 2000s, with its unique style and recognizable conventions (i.e., the blurring of documentary and narrative fiction, the use of non-professional actors, rural landscapes, etc.), and these emerging avant-garde and genre bending films. Despite some minor continuities between this film and the older generation of Iranian films, such as the well known motif of an entire film centering on characters driving and talking in a car, it is in its discontinuities that we may discern the shift away from the earlier New Iranian cinema.[399] In order to theorize this new shift in Iranian cinema, I situate Ahmadzadeh's film *Atomic Heart*, and Amirpour's film *A Girl Walks Home Alone At Night* (analyzed in chapter 5), as two films that are part of a new filmic movement that I have termed: *Unheimlich between the Weird and the Eerie*. I rely on Mark Fisher's theorizing of the two modes that he uncovers in certain instances of music, novels and films, and that he characterizes as "The Weird and the Eerie (Beyond the Unheimlich)."

In his eponymous book, *The Weird and the Eerie* (2016), Fisher considers that although the weird and the eerie are two distinct modes, there is a common logic that structures them both, namely the logic of "the strange" and "the outside", he states:

> "What the weird and the eerie have in common is a preoccupation with the strange. The strange — not the horrific. The allure that the weird and the eerie possess is not captured by the idea that we "enjoy what scares us". It has, rather, to do with a fascination for the outside, for that which lies beyond standard perception, cognition and experience. This fascination usually involves a certain apprehension, perhaps even dread — but it would be wrong

[398] See Kristian Thompson, "Iranian cinema moves on," Thursday, October 9, 2014, accessed May 25, 2016, http://www.davidbordwell.net/blog/2014/10/09/middle-eastern-fare-at-viff/

[399] Ahmadzadeh seems to be influenced mostly by Abbas Kiarostami's aesthetics in this respect, especially Kiarostami's *Taste of Cherry* and *Ten* with much of the action set in a car. Another example may be in the way that one film acts as a catalyst for another film, such as Kirostami's Koker trilogy and Ahmadzadeh's own previous film *Kami's Party* (2013), which acts as a catalyst for *Atomic Heart*.

> to say that the weird and the eerie are necessarily terrifying. I am not here claiming that the outside is always beneficent. There are more than enough terrors to be found there; but such terrors are not all there is to the outside."[400]

This concern with the strange rather then the horrific is what distinguishes the weird and the eerie. The two modes are highly refined in this sense, since they are not simply to be collapsed with another genre, namely 'horror', although they can evoke affects such as dread and terror often associated with horror films (and novels), but it is a peculiar sense of a terror that is to be found in the 'outside', something that gestures to an outside in our common existing reality, which does not sit comfortably with our common-sense notions of reality: this is what is evoked by the weird and the eerie. Fischer claims that he came late to discover the particularity of the two modes of the weird and the eerie because they were obscured by Freud's concept of the uncanny (*unheimlich*) (meaning 'unhomely' in the original German and translated by James Starchey as 'uncanny'). He notes that, "The *unheimlich* is often equated with the weird and the eerie — Freud's own essay treats the terms as interchangeable. "[401] In a moment of pure inspiration it should be said, Fisher considers "psychoanalysis itself as an *unheimlich* genre; [since] it is haunted by an outside which it circles around but can never fully acknowledge or affirm."[402] The examples of the *unheimilch* that Freud discusses in his essay are "doubles, mechanical entities that appear human, prosthesis" all of which "call up a certain disquiet".[403] Indeed, Fisher does consider that the weird and the eerie do have something in common with the *unheimlich*, since "They are all affects, but they are also modes: modes of film and fiction, modes of perception, ultimately, you might even say, modes of being. Even so, they are not quite genres."[404] Although Fisher makes a strong case that the weird and the eerie are beyond the Freudian uncanny (*unheimlich*), I would argue that the weird and the eerie may be considered as the two poles of the experience of the uncanny, rather then beyond it. In this sense, *unheimlich* is situated between the weird and the eerie.

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[400] Mark Fisher, *The Weird and the Eerie* (London: Repeater Books, 2016), 8.
[401] Fisher, *The Weird and the Eerie*, 9.
[402] Ibid, 10.
[403] Ibid, 10.
[404] Ibid, 9.

Fisher then sets out to provide the qualities or characteristics that distinguish the weird from the eerie, or what is particular and peculiar to each mode. According to Fisher the weird concerns what does not belong. "… *the weird is that which does not belong*. The weird brings to the familiar something which ordinarily lies beyond it, and which cannot be reconciled with the "homely" (even as its negation). The form that is perhaps most appropriate to the weird is montage — the conjoining of two or more things which do not belong together."[405] For Fisher, the experience of the weird has something to do with "a particular kind of perturbation. It involves a sensation of *wrongness*: a weird entity or object is so strange that it makes us feel that it should not exist, or at least it should not exist here."[406] According to Fisher, what the weird stages is that the sense of wrongness is not with the weird thing as such, but what it renders palpable is the very inadequacy of our conceptions and categories to account for it.[407] The film director that he exemplifies as the master of the weird mode is none other than David Lynch, especially the uses of curtains, doorways and gateways in Lynch's cinematic oeuvre. Indeed, as we shall see, the Lynchian universe is a point of reference both for Ahmadzadeh and Amripour (Amirpour directly cites Lynch as an inspirational source not just for *A Girl*, but as an artist). For Fisher, the predilection for weird juxtapositions is what links the weird to surrealism, which rendered the unconscious into a montage machine. In this respect Fisher considers Lacan to be the exponent of "a *weird psychoanalysis*, in which the death drive, dreams and the unconscious become untethered from any naturalisation or sense of homeliness."[408] Although, it is true that Lacan was close to the surrealist movement and drew inspiration from surrealism early in his career, but it should be said that psychoanalysis did not need to wait for Lacan to come along for it to be weird, since Freudian psychoanalysis was already weird enough from the beginning.[409] The weirdness of psychoanalysis itself may account for why the surrealists were attracted to psychoanalysis in the first place.

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[405] Fisher, *The Weird and the Eerie*, 10-11.
[406] Ibid, 15.
[407] Ibid, 15.
[408] Ibid, 11.
[409] The London Freud Museum video introduction to psychoanalysis begins with the question: "What is Psychoanalysis? Part 1: Is it Weird?" accessed May 09, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pxaFeP9Ls5c

Apropos the eerie, Fisher notes that although the eerie may at first glance bear a closer resemblance to the uncanny (*unheimlich*) than the weird, what the weird and the eerie have in common is a relation to the 'outside.' In case of the eerie, the 'outside' can be understood both at an "empirical as well as a more abstract transcendental sense." According to Fisher the sense of the eerie is never evoked by enclosed or inhabited domestic spaces, but we can discover the eerie "more readily in landscapes partially emptied of the human." The questions that may be evoked at looking at desolate landscapes or abandoned buildings, emptied out streets and ruins evoke the sense of the eerie, "What happened to produce these ruins, this disappearance? What kind of entity was involved? What kind of thing was it that emitted such an eerie cry?"[410] For Fisher what marks the weird is an exorbitant presence or over presence of something, but "The eerie, by contrast, is constituted by a failure of absence or by a failure of presence. The sensation of the eerie occurs either when there is something present where there should be nothing, or there is nothing present when there should be something."[411] According to Fisher the eerie is related to the unknown, once we obtain sufficient knowledge of a thing or phemnomenon, the eerie disappears.[412] The films of Kubrick, Tarkovsky and Nolan are all characterized by the eerie, according to Fisher, since they often evoke a radical alterity so align to our ordinary sense of reality that we cannot properly symbolize it within the coordinates of our signification. In this sense, although Fisher does not make the connection, the eerie can be correlated to "the inertia of the Real, this mute presence beyond meaning."[413] It is this mute presence of the Real that resists our attempts at symbolization.

One of the Iranian authors whose influence may be said to haunt this new avant-garde film movement like a spectral presence, is the modernist fiction writer, essayist and folklorist Sadeq Hedayat (1903-1951) – the Iranian Kafka (it should be recalled that Hedayat translated Kafka's Metamorphoses into Persian and wrote a literary analysis of Kafka called, "the Message of Kafka (1948)"). The work of Hedayat may indeed be said not only to contain aspects of the Freudian *Unheimlich* or the uncanny, but also the two modes of the weird and the eerie, particularly in the

[410] Fisher, *The Weird and the Eerie*, 11.
[411] Ibid, 11.
[412] Fisher, *The Weird and the Eerie*, 62.
[413] Žižek, *The Pervert's Guide to Ideology*.

group of his works categorized by Homa Katouzian as "psycho-fiction." Katouzian considers this group of works by Hedayat to be influenced more by Jung rather than Freud, but I would argue that contrary to Katouzian's suggestion,[414] it is in Freudian (and Lacanian) psychoanalytic theory that we can discover the key to Hedayat's psycho-fiction. Indeed, the influence of Freudian psychoanalysis on Hedayat has been demonstrated by the Iranian psychiatrist and psychoanalyst Mohammad Sanati and discussed in his book on Hedayat.[415] In a piece that Sanati wrote on the history of psychoanalysis in Iran for the Iranian newspaper *Farhang-e Emrooz* (Today's Culture), he writes: "…the oldest writing that I have encountered that has dealt with psychoanalytic theories is the satirical piece called, 'The Case of Freudism', published by Sadeq Hedayat in the book, 'Vagh Vagh Sahab,' in 1313/1934, the same year of the establishment of the University of Tehran."[416] Hedayat was perhaps one of the first Iranian authors who was directly influenced by Freudian psychoanalysis, and as Katouzian notes by the "techniques of French *symbolisme* and surrealism in literature, [and] of surrealism in modern European art, and of expressionism in the contemporary European films…"[417] This last aspect of the influence of German expressionist cinema on Hedayat's work is profoundly significant as well, in light of the new avant-garde film movement exemplified by *Atomic Heart*, and especially *A Girl*.

In a documentary-drama film directed by Khosrow Sinai called *Goftegoo ba Sayeh* (*Talking with a Shadow*, 2000), the influence of German expressionist cinema is foregrounded in relation to Hedayat's work, specifically the influence of three

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[414] Homa Katouzian, "Introduction: The Wondrous World of Sadeq Hedayat," in *Sadeq Hedayat: His Work and His Wondrous World*, ed. Homa Katouzian (London: Routledge, 2008), 10.
[415] Mohammad Sanati, *Sadegh Hedayat va Haras az Marg* (Tehran, Markaz, 1380).
[416] See Mohammad Sanati, "Vorood-e Ravakavi be Iran va Ertebat Yaftan an ba Adabiyat/ Az Freud ta Kalemat-e Hedayat." Wednesday 23 Esfand, 1396, accessed June 01, 2016, http://farhangemrooz.com/news/54188/%D9%85%D8%AD%D9%85%D8%AF-%D8%B5%D9%86%D8%B9%D8%AA%DB%8C-%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%AF-%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%86%DA%A9%D8%A7%D9%88%DB%8C-%D8%A8%D9%87-%D8%A7%DB%8C%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86-%D9%88-%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%AA%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%B7-%DB%8C%D8%A7%D9%81%D8%AA%D9%86-%D8%A2%D9%86-%D8%A8%D8%A7-%D8%A7%D8%AF%D8%A8%DB%8C%D8%A7%D8%AA
[417] Katouzian, "Introduction,"10.

films that Hedayat saw whilst in Europe, Paul Wegener's *Der Golem* (1915), F. W. Murnau's *Nosferatu* (1922), and Tod Browning's *Dracula* (1931). In the film, one of the characters says to the another (Mehdi Ahmadi) that the motif of the shadow (*sayeh*) has become really intriguing for him and quotes from Hedayat's *The Blind Owl*, "If I have now made up my mind to write it is only in order to reveal myself to my shadow, that shadow which at this moment is stretched across the wall in the attitude of one devouring with insatiable appetite each word I write."[418] Then he states that he has found the films – *der Golem*, *Nosferatu*, and *Dracula* – and watched them and that in all the films the shadow plays a central role. In response, Mehdi Ahmadi's character says, " yes, all these films are related to that period, the art of expressionism, expressionist cinema and psychoanalytic debates were very prominent, and it was a topic of intense interest, which was precisely around the same time when Hedayat was in Europe. But the role of the shadow is also very interesting to me." Ahmadi also quotes from Hedayat's work called, 'Some Notes on Vis and Ramin,' where Hedayat states, "parallel to water, which is the glory and honor of the material world, the shadow has an importance in the non-material world (*ghayr-e madi*)…etymologically, the shadow (*sayeh*) has the meaning of the double, and shadow-stricken (*sayeh zadeh*), and Jinn-stricken or possessed by jinn (*jinn gerefteh*), and also it refers to a spiritual essence (*seresht-e rohani*), which appears in a material body (*heykal-e madi*)." All of these motifs not only bear a clear resemblance to Freud's *Unheimlich* or the uncanny, but also gesture to the possibility of reading his work, especially his psychoanalytically inflected fiction, as the privileged site of the weird and the eerie. Therefore, Hedayat's work must be seen as the spectral presence that haunts this new avant-garde film movement theorized in this section.

What distinguishes and characterizes the films of this new film movement that I have called the weird and the eerie is their evocation of the menacing environment of post-2009 Iran (which includes diasproic or exilic films like *A Girl*), and a number of thematics that they commonly share. For example, among the various components shared by this movement, and discussed in the following two chapters at various points, are such motifs as political and ideological critique through the deployment of supernatural elements or occult phenomenon (devil/satan, vampires, jinn, Aal and

[418] Sadegh Hedayat, *The Blind Owl*, trans. D.P. Costello (New York: Grove Press, 2010), 2.

zaar, etc.). They also touch on such taboo subjects as (female and male) sex/sexuality, homosexuality or queerness in Iran. They are often pervaded by doubles or Doppelgängers, dreamlike worlds, nightmarish landscapes, paranoid and menacing atmospheres, invisible threatening forces, and a sense of pervading fear and terror or impending doom. Some of these thematics appear in the film form or style which share certain formal features with the universe of German expressionism and *film noir* that includes such techniques as contrasts of light, dark, and shadows; evoking a sense of mystery, dread, existential angst, moral corruption and crime; these are evident especially in their use of color, light and darkness (low-key lighting, or chiaroscuro lighting), the mise-en-scène, setting, objects and spaces; and camera techniques such as strange unbalanced (tilted) off angle shots (Dutch angle) or oblique angle shots, long takes, extreme long takes, and even the entire film as a single take (especially Shahram Mokri). The soundtrack or musical score of the films may also contain subversive Iranian undergraound music (*A Girl* is emblematic in this respect, although it is not one of the thematics that I discuss in the chapter). This is precisely why I consider these films to constitute a new movement, since beyond embodying the two modes of the weird and the eerie, they share a common set of motifs that evoke the menacing and suffocating atmosphere of post-2009 Iranian society.[419]

Ahmadzadeh's film seems to be inspired and influenced not only by Iranian cinema and literature, but also by transnational cinema and literature. Among some of the literary works that seem to be a visible influence on the film is Mikhaiel Bulghokov's novel *The Master and Margarita* as the lead character of that novel is the Devil (the Judeo-Christian and Islamic concept of the Devil, itself has an Iranian provenance and is influenced by Zoroastrianism through the figure of Ahriman), and the novel deploys the supernatural as an allegory of the totalitarian structure of the

[419] Aspects of this new cinematic movement theorized here may resonate with cultural elements in contemporary Iran, which has seen a rise in interest in classical Islamic occult sciences (*'ulum-e khafiyya or 'ulum-e ghariba*) with an amalgamation of Western style New Age spirituality. See Alireza Doostdar, *The Iranian Metaphysicals: Explorations in Science, Islam, and the Uncanny* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018); cf. "Hollywood Cosmopolitanisms and the Occult Resonance of Cinema" (unpublished article, forthcoming in *Comparative Islamic Studies*); cf. "Portrait of an Iranian Witch", *The New Inquiry Magazine* Volume 21, October, 2013, pp. 36-43.

Soviet State with the Devil as Stalin. Another important influence is George Orwell's book *1984*, in which the figures of Big Brother or Ministry of Truth function as important points of reference. The influence of the works of Kafka such as *the Trial* are also evident, as well as Dostoevsky's *The Double*, especially the logic of the double or Doppelgänger operative in it, since it is one of the instances of the Freudian *unheimlich*. However, it is perhaps to the cinema of David Lynch, the emblematic cinema of the weird, that Ahmadzadeh's film has the most striking resemblance. In its formal structure *Atomic Heart*, more than any other Iranian film, has an uncanny resemblance to the two-part structure of the two masterpieces of the Lynchian universe: *Lost Highway* (1997) and *Mulholland Drive* (2001), but especially to the latter.

4.2 Reality Structured by Fantasy or Fantasy as an Ideological Category

On the surface the first part of *Atomic Heart* has a straightforward narrative realism that does not require any explication. The first part of the film's narrative story can be summed up briefly. After a night of partying in one of the underground house parties in Tehran, two upper-middle class girls in their 20s Arineh (Taraneh Alidoosti) and Nobahar (Pegah Ahangarani) leave, half drunk, in their car after midnight. Once they are on the road they run into their friend Kami (Mehrdad Sedighiyan) (the absent character of Alizadeh's previous film, *Kami's Party* (2013)) who is walking home at night wearing a pair of sunglasses. After a short ride the three of them stop by the side of the road overlooking Tehran, with the implication that they have just smoked a joint. They start conversing about subjects ranging from the history of the structure of Western toilets (see below) to the nuclear issue; from ridiculous male pickup lines, to Kami's nightmare about the nuclear destruction of Tehran (which incidentally was not called Tehran in the dream, but *Atomic Heart Mother*, after the title song of the same name by the British rock'n'roll band Pink Floyd). After this they cruise the highway in Tehran, like other bored Iranian youth, and start to sing together the song by Michel Jackson, "We are the World," after which they get into an accident (as I will discuss later, this is not incidental, since the accident functions as the abrupt jolt that concludes the film's first fantasy half and inaugurates the second part of the film, where we are confronted with reality devoid of fantasy; the appearance of the Real in all its monstrosity).

After the accident which inaugurates the second half of the film, they meet a mysterious stranger named Toofan, who pays for the damages to the owner of the other car and does not accept to be reimbursed, but asks for a ride. It is here that the story turns into the weird and the eerie, since Toofan is not what he seems. Soon after, whilst driving through Tehran at night, Arineh and Nobahar are introduced to a nightmarish world of dead dictators and parallel worlds, and cannot seem to escape the hold of Toofan who becomes ever more menacing, and who seems to bend time and space and reappear at will. I will come to an analysis of the second part of the film later.

The narrative story of the first part of the film has a clear and straightforward realism, which is why Alizadeh himself considers it to be the realist half of the film. After leaving the party and looking for where they may have parked their car (since they are drunk they can't really remember where they parked the car), one of the girls says, "I will now divide the street into two parts, before the revolution, and after the revolution." And the other girl says, "I'll go to before the revolution." Beside an allusion to the two part structure of the film again, this is one of the narrative clues as to the formal logic of the film, where the first part represents in a way pre-revolution Iran, or the Pahlavi era, but again a fantasmatic pre-revolutionary Iran where the middle and upper class youth imagine it to be a time of unfettered freedom, enjoyment and pleasures, and the second half as post-revolutionary Iran, a kind of nightmarish universe in which the two girls are terrorized by Toofan who is the embodiment of the State (or as we shall see a figure that simultaneously embodies diabolical evil or the Devil, the figure of a dictator, and Mahmud Ahmadinejad), and hence the Lacanian Real in all its terrifying dimension.

Now what is crucial at the formal level is that the film structures the difference between the first fantasmatic part and the second surreality half representing reality deprived of its fantasy frame. The first part of the film, in contrast, produces a scenario in which Nobahar and Arineh can enjoy themselves: they are coming from a party, drunk, joking and laughing; the mood is light and jovial, comedic and peaceful; and the first part of the film concludes with them singing the song, "We Are the World." This song itself functions as emblematic of the atmosphere of the first half of the film. This is precisely the fantasy frame that supports the coordinates of their reality in Tehran, without all these fantasmatic elements (such as parties, drinking, smoking drugs, incessant jokes and laughter),

reality itself would disintegrate and what we get is a nightmarish world – which is precisely what we get in the second part of the film. It is here that fantasy functions as an ideological category, disguising a deadlock or antagonism in reality, as Žižek states apropos the fantasmatic structure of ideology, "Ideology is not a dreamlike illusion that we build to escape insupportable reality; in its basic dimension it is a phantasy construction which serves as a support for our "reality" itself; an "illusion" which structures our effective, real social relations and thereby masks some insupportable, real, impossible kernel…"[420] What this ideology or fantasy construction masks represented by the first half of the film is the impossible Real kernel embodied in the figure of Toofan (typifying the figure of Ahmadinejad) that appears in the second part of the film, and who stands for the traumatic Real kernel of their situation, a situation that Ahmadzadeh wishes to equate with violence and repression in the Islamic Republic and its homology with the dictatorial logic of totalitarianism.

In the film, this separation between the experience of fantasy and reality (and the Real of desires) is rendered through changes in the lighting, camera work, editing, and the overall character of the shots between the first and second parts of the film. In the first part, all the shots of the camera are even and the lines are straight and the camera is stable, but in the second part, after the accident scene, already the camera angle becomes skewed, we get a dutch angle shot throughout the scene, gesturing towards the uncanny dimension of the world which we have entered not unlike the world of *film noir* – a world without the support of fantasy and the appearance of the Real, the Real in all its traumatic dimension. As soon as the mysterious figure of Toofan appears within the frame, the lighting visibly becomes darker and the atmosphere of the film changes. A filter is placed on the camera lens and from this moment onwards this world is sufficed with an aura of darkness with dark blue tones. Just before Toofan appears the colors are bright, with lighter tones and bright lighting that bring out the tones in natural colors that accentuate the sense of the light mood and brightness in the texture of the first half (happy, boisterous, peaceful, etc.). This mood is even gestured to by Nobahar's whistling of the theme song of the cartoon television show that they discussed earlier in the film. But, when the figure of Toofan suddenly leaves the frame, the police appeares on the scene of the accident (this

[420] Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, (New York: Verso, 1989) 45.

disappearance of Toofan at the appearance of the police also suggests a link between the Law and Toofan), it is as if he represents the obscene underside or double of the police/law, and they cannot be framed together since they are both one entity, which is why after the police leaves, Toofan mysteriously reappears again (strangely the name of the police is Ahmadzadeh, which is the same as the director's last name: this is a bizarre moment of self-reflexive identification that can only makes sense in light of the police's comments to Arineh where he states, "even you guys with your looks are sometimes in agreement with the regime"). In this sense, the police acts as Ahmadzadeh's *alter-ego* who also finds himself in agreement with the regime at times, (i.e., this is gestured to in the scene where Arineh and Nobahar agree with the police on the stereotypical and demonizing depictions of Iran and Iranians in Hollywood films such as *Argo* (2012), etc). During Toofan's absence the filter is removed again from the lens and we get the bright lighting back, but when he returns again later, the dark filter is placed back on the camera lens and the lighting of the diegetic reality of the world is baptized in darkness.

In the second part of the film, the lighting is not only much darker, but the editing also undergoes a radical shift. For example, in the second part, in an important scene when Arineh runs from the apartment staircase with the camera following her, we get a continuous steady-camera long-take without a cut, which at a formal level, stages the fear and anxiety of Arineh. The same shot is re-doubled when she comes back up the stairs, and the camera follows her in a continuous shot or single-take without a cut to the roof. This editing technique suggests that there is an ontological difference between the two worlds of fantasy and reality; and when reality is deprived of its fantasmatic supplement the uncanny dimension of the Real manifests itself.

4.3 Ideology and the Structure of Toilets

One of the elementary lessons of cinema studies and film theory is the analysis of the formal structure of the beginning and endings of film. Films often begin with an establishing shot which stages within the *mise-en-scène* some of the motifs that may often play a significant role in the film, and can contain key elements that illuminate the film text when read retroactively. Therefore, the proper theoretical question to be asked here is: why does *Atomic Heart* early on begin with a shot of

Nobahar sitting on the toilet? Lets examine this first scene in some detail. The film effectively begins with a shot of Nobahar sitting on the toilet. The camera slowly tracks vertically from her shoes, which are incidentally two different colors, one blue and the other red,[421] and finally the camera moves to a close-up of her face. The first thing to be noted about this scene is that it would certainly have been considered inappropriate to the censors, since showing a woman sitting in the toilet is beyond the limits of the modesty system (*hejab*), not least that we get a close-up of her face in this most private of spaces. It is likely that this scene was among the many scenes that the censors found objectionable and for which the film has never been granted permission for screening in Iran. Indeed, the film was denied initial screening in Iran's most prestigious film festival, the Fajr Film Festival. In the semi-official Iranian news agency called *Fars News*, one of the so-called purported objections to the film was its discussion of the nuclear issue.[422]

This scene already adumbrates a number of motifs that runs throughout the film. First, the same toilet scene is repeated in the second part of the film, this time with Arineh sitting on the toilet. Then there is repeated reference and discussion of toilets in the film or the need of the characters (Nobahar and Arieneh) to avail themselves of the toilet. But, more crucially the first instance of the dialogue in the film is from Nobahar who exclaims to Arineh, "Whoever invented the Western toilet certainly created the most important invention in human history!" Indeed, this first line of dialogue and the first scene on the toilet takes on added significance later in the first part of the film, where Kami provides the cultural history of the structure of Western toilets and how they were originally Persian in ancient times. Nobahar asks Kami saying, "Kami, do you know who invented western toilets?" and Kami responds, "The western toilet was Iranian at first (originally). Then they changed its name." Then Nobahar says in characteristic naivety, "seriously?" And Kami states, "Yes, the ancient Achaemenids really took care of their joints. Because they were mostly warriors, and engaged in a lot of physical activities. So, they built a stone platform with a cesspool in the middle. They would sit on it and do their thing. Later, its name was changed to western toilets." Then Nobahar asks: "My question is why

[421] Given the oneiric dimension of *Atomic Heart* and references to another parallel world, an allusion to the two pills in *The Matrix* (1999) films is not impossible.
[422] "'Qalb-e Atomi' Saranjam Roonamai Shod", *Fars News*, accessed July 09, 2016, http://www.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=13931121000045

were the [original] western toilets replaced by the Iranian squat toilets?" And Kami replies, "That's because the Mongols attacked Iran. They would shit in a hole and pour soil on it. That's how Iranian – or rather originally Chinese toilets came to be." The obvious point to be noted here is that even though Kami's tone is ironic, even comedic, nonetheless the whole narrative still functions as an instance of nationalist ideology. It is here that the toilet scene at the beginning of the film can be read retroactively as a comment on the relation between nationalist ideology (fantasy) and the structure of toilets. Here we are confronted with two other objects among the list of the Freudian-Lacanian partial objects, namely the feces and the urinary flow. As noted in previous chapters Lacan links the *objet petit a* to all these partial objects, and the anal *objet a* is the fecal object. The *objet petit a* at its most elementary refers to those anchoring points of the Real, or those parts of the body that seem to be attached to an organ or are produced by an organ. They can effectively be detached from the body (feces or urinary flow) and which can be imaginerized as detachable.

In *The Plague of Fantasies*, Žižek has noted that even within the structure of toilets we can find "the exemplary case of how ideology is at work precisely where you don't think you will find it." He goes on to distinguish between the German, French and Anglo-Saxon (English) versions of toilets as instances of how the most utilitarian objects can often function as unconscious sites of nationalist ideologies.[423] So if we were to add to Žižek's triad of the German, French and Anglo-Saxon lavatory, the missing fourth Iranian lavatory, we can complete the logical set, or to put it in Aristotelian terms, the Iranian toilet functions as the formal cause of the other three toilets. According to this logic the Iranian lavatory functions as the originary or *Ur*-lavatory that influenced the very form of this triad. In this way, Kami's primordialization of the Iranian toilet that influenced the structure of Western toilets is the Iranian nationalist ideology *par excellence*. In other words, the logic goes something like this: "whatever western civilization thinks it has accomplished, it is we (Iranians) who invented or achieved it first and this is even evident in the very structure of their toilets, and without it they would be back in the dark ages knee deep in their shit." In this way, the scene of the girl(s) sitting on the toilet stages the fact

[423] "It is clear that none of these versions [of the toilet] can be accounted for in purely utilitarian terms: a certain ideological perception of how the subject should relate to the unpleasant excrement which comes from within our body is clearly discernible…" Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies*, 3.

that we are already knee deep in ideology (as Žižek would have put it). Thus, the cultural history of the structure of toilets in the film functions as the fantasmatic narrative of nationalist ideology.

In his classic text, *The History of Shit* (*Histoire de la merde*) Dominique Laporte provides another theoretical reading of the history of the excremental function that is relevant to Kami's narrative. In his book Laporte conceptualizes a link between the individual and the destiny of human waste, where "the history of shit becomes the history of subjectivity." And as the subtitle of the book suggests, the history of shit functions as a prologue or proglomena to "a prehistory of modernity and the modern subject."[424] In this sense the cultural history of the structure of Western toilets recounted by Kami is not incidental, since by claiming that Iranians were the first to invent the toilet, which later influenced the structure of Western toilets, it claims for itself the history of the formation of subjectivity (*à la* Laporte) and consequently of modernity itself. According to this logic Persian civilization not only preceded the Euro-American civilization, but even taught them the rudimentary elements of hygiene and gave them the very form of their toilets. The ideology here is one that is related to the history of the influence of Iranian civilization on the culture of Western civilization that is largely unknown or disavowed outside the academy and the scholarly public. However, in this context it is irrelevant whether there has been such a history of influence, which scholars have amply documented; but the important point to note here is the nationalist ideological narrative. It is this sort of nationalist ideology, which is often bordering on racism, and which developed in the early 20th century on certain racist tendencies in Iranian nationalist discourse,[425] which unwittingly, aligns middle and upper middle class Iranians (such as the Nobahar, Arineh and Kami) with the ideology of the Islamic Republic. In this way

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[424] Dominique Laporte, *The History of Shit* (Cambridge Massachusetts, MIT Press, 2000), viii. For an earlier forgotten classic on this subject see John G. Bourke, *Scatalogic Rites of All Nations*, (Washington, D.C.: W. H. Lowdermilk & Co, 1891). Incidentally Freud wrote an introduction to the German publication of the book and Laporte wrote the forward for the French publication.

[425] For this racist dimension in the emergence of Iranian secular nationalist discourse, see Reza Zia-Ebrahimi, *The Emergence of Iranian Nationalism: Race and the Politics of Dislocation* (New York: Columbia University, 2016), especially chapter 3, "Pre-Islamic Iran and Archaistic Frenzy," chapter 4, "Of Lizard Eaters and Invasions: The Importance of European Racial Thought," and finally chapter 6, "Aryanism and Dislocation."

the older nationalist ideology becomes co-incident with the Islamic community (*'ummat*) of the Islamic Republic, which is why the policeman who gets into the car to question Arineh and Nobahar, says that "even you guys with your looks [presumably modern or western looks], are at times in agreement with the regime." This emblematizes the paradoxical coming together of Iranian nationalist ideology (exemplified in the pre-revolutionary period by the Pahlavi regime), and the ideology of the Islamic Republic that positions Iran as an "Islamic nation" (*keshvar-e islami*).

This excremental dimension or lavatory logic that pervades both the formal and narrative logic of the film can also be read as a reference to the ideology of the Islamic Republic, which is even interested in the most intimate domains of the life of its citizens, such as in the way (female and male) subjects are to avail themselves of the toilet. Ayatollah Khomeini had composed a jurisprudential treatise (*resalah*) called *Tawzih al-Masail*, in which he goes into graphic and obsessional detail as to how a Shi'i believer is to properly go to the lavatory (i.e., they must not be facing Mecca, they should wash their anus with their left hand and enter the toilet with their right foot, etc.). For example, Khomeini states:

> After urination, one must first wash the anus if it has been soiled by urine; then one must press three times with the middle finger and the base of the penis; then one must put his thumb on top of the penis and his index finger on the bottom and pull the skin forward three times as far as the circumcision ring; and after that three times squeeze the tip of the penis.[426]

Indeed, the writing of a *Tawzih al-Masai* was not peculiar to Khomeini, as many of the Shi'i *'ulama* had their own similar treatises (*resalahs*), much of which pertained to delineating the laws of cleanliness (*taharat*) and impurity (*nejasat*), and formed part of what is called *ahkam-e ab* or commandments of water. It is interesting that just before the 1979 revolution Khomeini had published the treatise with illustrations that describe how to use western toilets (Figure 1), but after the revolution and the establishment of the Islamic Republic and its anti-western stance, especially towards the US, the publication of this treatise with the reproduction of the images of western

[426] Ayatollah Sayyed Ruhollah Mousavi Khomeini*, An Unabridged Translation of Resaleh Towzih al-Masael*, Translated by J. Borujerdi, with a Foreword by Michael M. J. Fischer and Mehdi Abedi, (Westview Press/ Boulder and London, 1984), 42.

toilets and how to use them ceased.[427] This brings us to the curious fact that in the two scenes where Nobahar and Arienh are sitting on a toilet, the actual toilet is never shown on screen, but only implied. The western toilet remains invisible throughout both scenes. In this sense, the toilet itself is never shown in the film, likely in order to not fall foul of the censors. Despite such precautions, the film was never granted screening permission.

Finally, it seems that Ahmadzadeh is symbolically equating the State with the excremental function, with feces and the toilet. Indeed, Laporte in a provocative turn equates the State with the sewer, "Surely, the State is the Sewer. Not just because it spews divine law from its ravenous mouth, but because it reigns as the law of cleanliness above its sewers."[428] Laporte's formulation here can almost isomorphically be mapped onto the theocratic State that is the Islamic Republic, namely that not only does it 'spews out divine law', but 'it reigns as the law of cleanliness,' where every aspect of cleanliness and impurity is enumerated in obsessional detail. Similarly, Sadeq Hedayat had already referred to Iran and its political system during his life under the first Pahlavi regime as a "latrine" (*kala*),[429] and Ahmadzadeh may well be alluding to this excremental dimension of the State and its ruling ideology.

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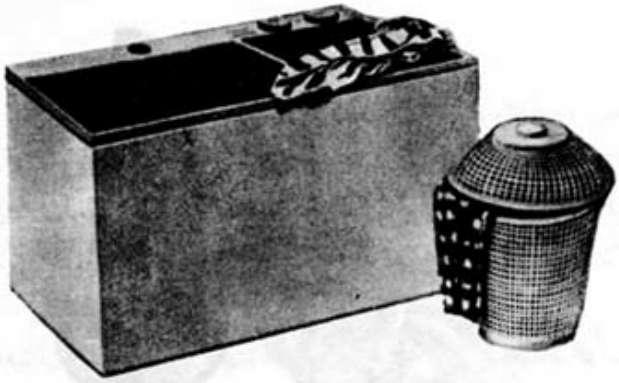
[427] Pamela Karimi, "Secular Domesticities, Shiite Modernities: Khomeini's Illustrated *Tawzih al-Masail*," in *Visual Culture in the Modern Middle East: Rhetoric of the Image*, edited by Christiane Gruber and Sune Haugbolle (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2013), 39-41.

[428] Laporte, *History of Shit*, 57. On the same page, Laporte goes on to quote Lacan and writes, ""Civilization," says Lacan, "is the spoils: the *cloaca maxima* [Roman sewage system]." We could easily substitute State here for civilization…"

[429] Homa Katouzian and EIr, "Sadeq Hedayat," *Encyclopedia Iranica*, accessed March 08, 2016, http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/hedayat-sadeq-i



قلیل به‌روی آن درصورتیکه در مرتبه اول آب از آن خارج گردد پاک می‌شود و باید بعد از هر دفعه با فشار آب آن خارج شود.

در مورد پیشاب کودک شیرخوار یک بار کافی است.

توالتهای خارجی

کسانی که درکشورهای خارجی اقامت دارند و یا به خارج سفر می کنند و مجبورند در راه، در هواپیما و در شهرهای اروپایی از توالتهای فرنگی استفاده کنند. تکلیفشان چیست ؟

در چنین توالتها می‌توان از بیده، یا شلنگ یا ظرف لوله‌داری مانند ظرفی که برای آب دادن گلدان مصرف می‌شود، استفاده کرد و خود را با آب شست و یا با کاغذ توالت خود را پاک کرد همچنانکه می‌توان حتی با سنگ، کلوخ، پارچه پاک خود را تمیز کرد. و میزان برطرف شدن آلودگی و پاک شدن است و همانطورکه در رسالهٔ تحریر-الوسیله آمده:

Figure 4.1 Reproduction of a page from Khomeini's *Tawzih al-Masail* describing how to use foreign toilets. From Khomeini's *New Risaleh*, 1:54." Image in Karimi, "Secular Domesticities, Shiite Modernities", 40.

4.4 Repetition or The Double as the Thing (*das Ding*)

In *Atomic Heart*, the double structure of the film is mirrored in the structure of the double in the film. It is apparent in the redoubling or repetition of events and motifs that appear in the first part, and are repeated again in the second part, sometimes in their nightmarish traumatic dimension in the second repetition, often representing the dark underside or double of the first part. It is as if the film follows the Freudian logic of the compulsion to repeat or repetition compulsion (*Wiederholungszwang*), where events are repeated in their traumatic dimension. For example, in the first part of the film, the mise-en-scène in the car is staged with Kami in the back seat (background) and the women in the front seats (foreground); the same mise-en-scène is repeated in the second part of the film, but with Toofan taking the place of Kami in the back seat in the same triangular formation. In this formal way the three figures in the car are doubled and the first and second half mirror each other.

This formal structure suggests a subterranean parallel between the character of Kami and Toofan, where Toofan represents the dark, obscene underside of Kami, his double or doppelgänger. In this sense, what the figure of the double mirrors forth is a spectral obscene dimension in ourselves that we wish to repress or disavow. In this way the double always functions as the uncastrated dimension of ourselves, it is the Thing in us more than ourselves. As Žižek notes apropos the double, "…the double embodies the phantom-like Thing in me… the dissymmetry between me and my double is ultimately that between the (ordinary) object and the (sublime) Thing. In my double, I don't simply encounter myself (my mirror image), but first of all what is 'in me more than myself': the double is 'myself,'... under the modality of the other, sublime, ethereal body, a pure substance of enjoyment exempted from the circuit of generation and corruption."[430] This is an almost exact description of the figure of Toofan, a sort of terrifying sublime ethereal body, who drives obscene enjoyment (*jouissance*) from the anxiety of the two girls and whose existence is beyond the circuit of generation and corruption, where like an atemporal phantom-like Thing he can appear and reappear anywhere, which is why Nobahar and Arineh are unable to escape from him. In the second part of the film, the basic problem of the

[430] Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom!*, 21.

two girls is how to get rid of Toofan. It is much easier to get rid of a real person, you can evade them or run away from them, which is precisely what the girls try to do (they drive away when Toofan puts the fake Sadaam in the limousine), but it is impossible to get rid of a fantasam, a spectral presence that sticks to you like glue. This inescapability from the fantasmatic figure of Toofan, represents the all-pervasive presence of the State in the life of Iranians.

This logic of repetition or doubling proliferates throughout the film. For instance, the lookout point that they drive to and which looks over Tehran appears both in the first and the second part of the film, once with Kami where he relates his dream, and then with Toofan when they pickup the figure of Sadaam (who himself is referred to by Nobahar as perhaps a body double of the real Sadaam). The elevator scene at the beginning of the film has a light and comedic dimension in the first half, but a similar elevator scene appears again in the second part in a more nightmarish and foreboding dimension. In the first part at the beginning of the film, we get a close-up of Nobahar sitting on the toilet, and in the second part we get an exact shot of a close-up of Arineh in the toilet. The motif of C-27 is also repeated twice in the film (the so-called club of those who have died at age 27, which Kami explains to Nobahar in the car, which includes inter alia, Jim Morrison, Jimi Hendrix and Janice Joplin among others), again with the second repetition becoming more ominous (alluding to an otherworldly place where Toofan is about to take Nobahar). This structure of the double, which is repeated throughout the film, both at the level of form and narrative, gestures to another characteristic of life in Tehran under the Islamic Republic, namely the double-life led by many of its subjects. This structure of a double-life, where you dissimulate the truth in order to survive is part of the technique of *taqiyya* (dissimulation) in Shi'ite doctrine, which has permeated social and political relations in Tehran. [431] In her book *City of Lies: Love, Sex, Death and*

[431] On *taqiyya* in Shi'ism see Etan Kohlberg,"Some Imami-Shi'i Views on Taqiyya", *Journal of the American Oriental Society* Vol. 95, No. 3 (Jul. - Sep., 1975), pp. 395-402; Etan Kohlberg, "Taqiyya in Shi'i Theology and Religion," in *Secrecy and Concealment: Studies in the History of Mediterranean and Near Eastern Religions*, edited by Hans Hans Gerhard Kippenberg, Guy G. Stroumsa (Leiden: Brill, 1995), 345-80. L. Clarke, "The Rise and Decline of Taqiyya in Twelver Shi'ism," *Reason and Inspiration in Islam: Theology and Inspiration in Islam*, ed. Todd Lawson (London: I.B. Tauris Publishers, 2005), 46-63;

the Search for Truth in Tehran, Ramita Navai refers to this structure of a double-life in Tehran and states:

> In order to live in Tehran you have to lie. Morals don't come into it: lying in Tehran is about survival. This need to dissimulate is surprisingly egalitarian – there are no class boundaries and there is no religious discrimination when it comes to the world of deceit. Some of the most pious, righteous Tehranis are the most gifted and cunning in the art of deception. We Tehranis are masters at manipulating the truth. Tiny children are instructed to deny that daddy has any booze at home; teenagers passionately vow their virginity; shopkeepers allow customers to surreptitiously eat, drink and smoke in their back rooms during the fasting months and young men self-flagellate at the religious festival of Ashura, purporting that each lash is for Imam Hossein, when really it is a macho show to entice pretty girls, who in turn claim they are there only for God. All these lies breed new lies, mushrooming in every crack in society.[432]

Due to the strict controls, surveillance and policing of society by the State apparatus, Iran is a janus-face society, with everyone leading a double-life as a survival strategy. The outward (*zahir*) reality of their lives is never what it seems, and the inner (*batin*) reality is never co-incident with outward appearances. However, this does not mean, as Navai has noted, that "Iranians are congenital liars," but on the contrary that these lies are "a consequence of surviving in an oppressive regime, of being ruled by a government that believes it should be able to interfere in even the most intimate affairs of its citizens."[433] As noted already, this interference extends into the most intimate domains of life such as monitoring (sexual) desires and even the use of toilets. In this sense, the logic of the double in the film is a subtle critique of the way the regime has created a sort of totalitarian nightmare where the people in Tehran lead a double life, in order to keep up appearances before the watchful eye of the big Other (or to put it in Orwellian terms, Big Brother).

[432] Ramita Navai. *City of Lies: Love, Sex, Death, and the Search for Truth in Tehran* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2014), 1.
[433] Navai, *City of Lies*, 2

4.5 *Che Voui*? or the Desire of the Other

The narrative coherence of the opening section becomes especially pronounced when we contrast it with what follows. The second part of the film is structured around the incessant mystery of desire, around the question of the role of desire and its surveillance in Iran by the State, embodied in the monstrous figure of Toofan (as we shall see in the case of the two female protagonists it is the forbidden same-sex desire). Arineh and Nobahar, as well as the spectator, do not know what Toofan really wants from them, at first it appears that he wants money that he paid on their behalf for the accident, but later at the end of the film in the rooftop scene when Arineh finally gets the money to give to him, he says, "money isn't everything," and Arineh, in visible distress and anxiety, finally states: "what do you want"? This is precisely the logic of desire formulated by Lacan in the famous interrogative in Italian, "*Che voui*?" What do you want? Lacan expanded the psychoanalytic notion of desire in several stages, adding to his earlier formulation "do not compromise with respect to your desire," (discussed in Chapter 3), another famous formulation: *desire is the desire of the Other*. For Lacan, our desires do not emerge spontaneously from some unfathomable abyss of human subjectivity, but rather our desires are learned, we have to learn how to desire. In order for us to desire for example chocolate ice cream we must first be properly installed within the symbolic order where chocolate ice cream is already an object of desire. In this sense, our desires emerge through the Other's desire, as Lacan states,

> man's desire is the Other's desire, in which the *de* /of/ provides what grammarians call a 'subjective determination' – namely, that it is qua /as/ Other that man desires. … This is why the Other's question – that comes back to the subject from the place from which he expects an oracular reply – which takes some such form as '*Che vuoi?*', 'What do you want?' is the question that best leads the subject to the path of his own desire.[434]

In this sense the subject's desire is not self-generating, it is always constituted through the desire of the Other. The question of desire is not what do I want? But rather, what does the other want from me? What is it that the other sees in me and thereby desires me? As Žižek states:

[434] Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection* (New York: W.W. Norton), 1981.

> One should always bear in mind that the desire 'realized' (staged) in fantasy is not the subject's own, but the *other's desire:* fantasy, phantasmic formation, is an answer to the enigma *Che vuoi?*-...The original question of desire is not directly 'What do I want?, but 'What do *others* want from me? What do they see in me? What am I to others?'[435]

Following this formulation, the desire 'realized' or staged in fantasy (the dream/fantasy as the film) is not the desire of the two female characters (Adrineh and Nobahar), but rather the Other's desire, namely the desire of Toofan, whom we may equate with the mysterious voice/text that directly addresses the spectator at the beginning of the film. In other words, the dream/film is a fantasy formation where we encounter the desire of the Other in all its traumatic dimension. So what does the Other, as in Toofan, want? In a sense, what Toofan desires in the two girls is what Lacan calls the *objet petit a*, that illusive unfathomable X in them, that makes them the object of his desire. This is similar to Lacan's formulation: "I love you, but, because inexplicably I love in you something more than you, the *objet petit a*, I mutilate you."[436] This is the destructive passion of the Real that seeks to annihilate you in order to get at the real kernel of your being. [437] This is why the encounter with the Other's desire is always traumatic, anxiety inducing; since what the Other (Toofan) desires is this impossible Real kernel in them (Nobahar and Arineh), and he is ready to destroy them in order to extract it. Lacan referred to this unfathomable X with the Greek term *agalma*, a luminous and "shining" precious object that was hidden inside Socrates and which functioned as the object cause of Alcibiades' desire.[438] A correlation can be made between the Greek *agalma* and one of the most sublime concepts in Zoroastrianism, the Avestan concept of *Khvarnah*, meaning 'splednour' or 'glory' (Old Persian *farnah*, middle Persian *khwarr*, new Persian

[435] Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies*, 9.
[436] Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts*, 263.
[437] Slavoj Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf* (Cambridge Massachusetts, MIT Press, 2003) 59.
[438] Jacques Lacan, *Transference: The Seminar of Jaques Lacan, Book VIII*, trans. Bruce Fink (London: Polity Press, 2015), 135-148.

khurrah or *farr*), derived from *khvar*, 'to shine, to illuminate',[439] which was translated into Greek as *doxa*, but could very well be rendered as *agalma*.[440]

Conversely, if we read Toofan's behavior as a way to contain the inherent destabilizing dimension of the Real of their (same-sex) desire, it can be seen as a reaction to contain and control the revolutionary force of desire as such. Perhaps no one was more aware of this revolutionary dimension of desire than Deleuze and Guattari, as they state:

> If desire is repressed, it is because every position of desire, no matter how small, is capable of calling into question the established order of a society: not that desire is asocial, on the contrary. But it is explosive; there is no desiring-machine capable of being assembled without demolishing entire social sectors. Despite what some revolutionaries think about this, desire is revolutionary in its essence – desire, not left-wing holidays! – and no society can tolerate a position of *real desire* without its structures of exploitation, servitude and hierarchy being compromised. [my emphasis][441]

Here despite the apparent differences between Deleuze and Guattari and psychoanalytic theory, their formulation of desire as revolutionary is compatible with psychoanalysis, since in psychoanalytic theory there is something always inherently destabilizing about desire, that can erupt and derail the order of things, which has led to the efforts of its containment or domestication via mechanisms of repression both psychic and societal. Even Deleuze and Guattari's locution "*real desire*," recalls the

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[439] See Gherardo Gnoli, "Farr(ah)/ xᵛarəənah," *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, IX, 1999, pp. 312-19, also available at www.iranicaonline.org/articles/farrah. On the *Khvarnah* also see H. W. Bailey, *Zoroastrian Problems in the Ninth-Century Books* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971, 1943), 1-77. On the etymology see Alexander Lubotsky, "Avestan xᵛarəənah-: the etymology and concept", in Meid, W., *Sprache und Kultur. Akten der X. Fachtagung der Indogermanischen Gesellschaft Innsbruck* (Innsbruck: IBS, 1998), 479–488. For the transmission of the concept of *Khvarnah* into Islamicate philosophy, see Henry Corbin, *Spiritual Body and Celestial Earth: From Mazdean Iran to Shi'ite Iran*, trans. Nancy Pearson (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977).

[440] Lacan concluding a long list of etymological roots states, "In short, the idea of sparkle [*éclat*] is hidden in the root [of *agalma*]. And *aglaos* [related to *Aglaia*, the youngest of the three Graces or Charites], which means "shining" or "splendor," is there to provide us with a familiar echo." Lacan, *Transference*, 141.

[441] Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 118. It should be recalled here that Gauttari was a student of Lacan and was a practicing psychiatrist as well. For a fruitful encounter staged between psychoanalysis and Deleuze see, Aaron Schuster, *The Trouble With Pleasure: Deleuze and Psychoanalysis* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2016).

Lacanian formulation of the Real of desire. Indeed, this insight of Deleuze and Gauttari is even more apropos with respect to authoritarian or totalitarian societies, which is precisely how *Atomic Heart* casts the Islamic Republic – as a totalitarian state that represses erotic desire at every turn and not only in its same-sex iteration but desire in all its radical possibilities.

From this perspective, the name Nobahar, becomes a signifier of revolutionary force since in Persian her name means New Spring (it must be recalled the whole rise of the Arab Spring, was preceded by the Iranian Spring which was brutally suppressed), and alludes to the new revolutionary protest movement, the so-called Green Movement, that erupted in Tehran in June of 2009 after the disputed presidential election of Ahmadinejad, and whose participants were captured via video and photographed by *Basiji* agents of the state dressed in civilian clothing; many of the youth that participated in the protest were subsequently haunted down, beaten, tortured and jailed in the aftermath of the uprising. This is precisely why Toofan wants to take Nobahar to another world. The character of Nobahar or New Spring is sick and dying (she has MS), which symbolizes the sickly and dying condition of the protest movement. Toofan says, "I am here to take you, you are dying anyways."

4.6 The Fright of Real Desires

Apropos the double structure of *Atomic Heart*, there is an important relationship between Ahmadzadeh's two films, *Kami's Party* and *Atomic Heart*, not only in that Kami's character appears in the second film, who was absent throughout the entire duration of the first film, but more crucially, what was only verbally gestured in the first film is visually staged in the second film, namely the existence of same-sex desire in Iran. In this formal sense, the films are two versions of the same film.

In the first film, *Kami's Party*, one of the female characters (which not incidentally happens to be played by the same actress that plays Nobahar in *Atomic Heart*) who has divorced her husband, states that her husband had turned out to be gay, and the male character says in some-what mock surprise but "we don't have any gays in Iran." This formulation of course is a comedic reference to the (in)famous statement of Mahmud Ahamdinejad in his response to a student question at his talk in Columbia University in 2007, where he stated: "In Iran we don't have homosexuals like you have in your country" (*dar Iran ma methl-e shoma ham-jens baz*

nadarim).[442] The female character responds that "yes we have a few," (he says, "no I swear to God we don't have any," and she retorts, "I am telling you we do.") have gay people in Iran. In this way, what was initially verbally gestured to in *Kami's Party* is formally staged in the same-sex relationship between Nobahar and Arineh. This disavowal of the existence of homosexuals in Iran is again part of the janus-faced structure of contemporary Iranian society, where on the face of it, or to keep up the order of appearances, it must be pretended that homosexuals do not exist; but the question is for whom should appearances be maintained since everyone knows very well that homosexuals do exist in Iran? The answer is, to put in Lacanian terms, for the big Other. It is for this virtual big Other as the agency of appearances for whom a façade must be maintained. For example, something is prohibited (homosexuality, alcohol, etc.), but it is not simply enough that it is prohibited, what is important is that it should not exist in the eyes of the big Other, even if we already know that it does exist out there in social reality.

As it was demonstrated in chapter one in the analysis of *Daughters of the Sun*, the shaving of the female hair was a strategy that was deployed not only as a technique of unveiling but more importantly as a technology of undecidability for staging same-sex desire or female homoeroticism in the New Iranian Cinema. For instance through shaving the head and cross-dressing an ambiguity of gender and sexuality was produced whereby same-sex desire and more specifically lesbian desire could be staged visually. Through the technique of shaving the head it was possible to represent sexual desire in all its radical ambiguity, since all non-heterosexual desire is forbidden and punishable by death in the Islamic Republic,[443] it can never be explicitly staged on screen (recall the trans imagery in *Daughters of the Sun* where it is precisely through the operation of the shaved head that a palpable sense of same-sex desire or female homoeroticism is evoked), they can only be gestured through the technique of shaving the head. But, in the shift away from the older generation of New Iranian Cinema exemplified by *Atomic Heart*, a new formal procedure is enacted to represent same-sex desire outside the semiotics of the shaved head,

[442] For Ahamdinejad's reply, please see his speech, accessed April 12, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U-sC26wpUGQ

[443] In Article 131 of the Islamic penal law it is written: "If the act of lesbianism is repeated three times and punishment is enforced each time, [the] death sentence will be issued the fourth time." Article 129 states that "the punishment for lesbianism is a hundred lashes for each party."

through other visual and narrative cues, especially through the dialogue, namely through double entendre, in the clever verbal locutions of the young hip upper middle class Tehranis that are the protagonists of this film.

There are several subtle visual and narrative clues throughout the film that suggest that Arineh and Nobahar are not just close friends who live together, but are within a same-sex or lesbian relationship. There is a certain ambiguity operative in the often close nature of female friendships in Iranian society that the film exploits, since female friends can even appear in public spaces holding hands or walk arm in arm, without raising any suspission as to the possible erotic dimension of their relationship (the same is true for young men who also can be seen to hold hands with their friends or walk arm in arm, though this has become less prevelant in recent years, since there is a more visible pressure on moral policing by the *Basiji*'s of the heterosexuality of male relationships).[444] This ambiguity is explored in one early scene, for instance, when Kami asks Arineh how do you wake up Nobahar in the morning, and Arineh lovingly puts her hand on Nobahar's face and caresses it saying, "I turn and say, wake up my dear (*'azizam*)." In this instance there is a clear reference to them sleeping together in the same bed.

In another reference to Nobahar and Adineh's sexuality, while talking about how girls are more sexually aggressive these days, Kami states, "but at least you two are not dangerous." In other words, signaling that they are a lesbian couple, and therefore pose no danger to him. In the second part of the film as well, we get more clues as to the lesbian relationship of Arineh and Nobahar. Whilst in the car, Toofan in a sort of subtle sexual interrogation of the girls says in a double entendre, "I can tell, you girls must like ice cream cones," suggesting that they like phallic oral copulation or fellatio, and Arineh retorts, "we don't eat ice cream cones – never"; meaning they have never been with men sexually or like to give fellatio to men, in other words they are lesbians. In one of the crucial scenes after Toofan has made evident his sexual interest with each of the girls, he says to Arineh that he likes and wants her friend Nobahar, and Arineh says, "You should know by now that, that is impossible," meaning, you should know very well by now that we are a same-sex

[444] The Article 112 of Islamic penal law on the sexual relations between men and boys states that: "If a mature man of sound mind commits sexual intercourse with an immature person, the doer will be killed and the passive one will be subject to *ta'azir* of 74 lashes if not under duress."

couple. The logic here is strictly that of the perverse heterosexual male chauvinist universe in which it is thought that the lesbian couple can be 'rehabilitated' or 'converted' back into heterosexuality through 'normal' heterosexual intercourse: in other words, according to this obscene logic all that lesbians need is heterosexual copulation and they would then be normalized. Juynboll refers to how the subject of lesbian desire is dealt with in Islamic jurisprudence within Muslim societies and provides its meaning: "Lesbian (*sihaka* meaning rubbing). Male authors feel uncomfortable with the subject matter, because they lack knowledge about lesbian practices, and thus, it is an alien subject. Usually, they argue in favor of 'converting' these women to normal male-oriented heterosexual behavior and the use of judicial discretion (*ta'zir*) rather than the recommended death penalty."[445] Such is the way Toofan acts towards the two girls, where he consistently terrorizes them; in other words in this instance the enigma of the Other's desire (Toofan) is that he wants to render them heterosexual by copulating with them.

It is precisely here, that not only the two female protagonists encounter the Real of the Other's desire (Toofan), but are also confronted with the deadlock of the Real of their own desire, a desire that is unsymbolizable ("illicit," "deviant") within the heterosexual matrix of the Islamic Republic. Thus, the figure of Toofan (in another formulation) stages the Real of their forbidden and outlawed erotic desire, he is the materialization of the impossible Real of their desire, and since same-sex desire is prohibited in the Islamic Republic, Toofan becomes the very embodiment of this prohibition. This is the fright of Real desires: when the traumatic kernel of your innermost desires become manifest.

4.7 The Collapse of the Fantasy and the Lacanian Real

The second half of the film is the collapse of the fantasy, and represents reality stripped of its fantasmatic supplement, where the figure of Toofan (Mohammad Reza Golzar) functions as the appearance of the traumatic Real and the disintegration of

[445] G. H. A. Juynboll, "Siḥāḳ," in EI2 IX, pp. 565-67. For an analysis of same-sex relationships in Islamic jurisprudence, see Kecia Ali, *Sexual Ethics and Islam: Feminist Reflections on Qur'an, Hadith and Jurisprudence* (London: Oneworld Publications, 2016), especially chapter 5, "Don't Ask, Don't Tell: Same Sex Intimacy in Muslim Thought."

the fantasy exemplified by the first part. In other words what we get in the second part is the appearance of the Real in all its horror, where reality becomes deprived of its fantasy support, and we get an irreal or surreal nightmarish universe. This cut between the dimension of fantasy and the world of reality is embodied in the figure of Toofan, who is the materialization of the excess of the traumatic Real. The Real has gone through several permutations in Lacan's work, but one of the fundamental aspects of the Real emerges at the point at which Symbolization fails. It is the limit inherent in Symbolization itself, where the symbolic malfunctions or breaks down. We come close to encountering the Real at moments of trauma, anxiety, aversion, and disorientation. As Glyn Daly states:

> The Real is experienced in terms of the Symbolic (dis)functioning itself. We touch the Real through those points where symbolization fails; through trauma, aversion, dislocation and all those markers of uncertainty where the Symbolic fails to deliver a consistent and coherent reality. While the Real cannot be directly represented… it can nonetheless be *shown* in terms of symbolic failure and can be alluded to through figurative embodiments of horror-excess that threaten disintegration (monsters, forces of nature, disease/viruses and so on).[446]

In the film, the Real is represented as monstrous: through the monstrous figure of Toofan; the eerie and ominous figure who is the embodiment of the patriarchal State or the totalitarian regime of the Islamic Republic. The name Toofan in Persian literally means tornado, which precisely fits in with Lacan's notion of the Real and represents one of the forces of nature whose catastrophic dimension brings us face to face with the horror of the Real. Just as a tornado appears like a sort of monstrosity from the depths of nature destroying everything in its wake, so Toofan also seems to suddenly appear from no-where, like a monster from the depths of inner space, and begins to terrorize the two girls until the very end of the film. Also it should be recalled that in a later scene when Toofan is asked by Arineh about his father, he states, "My father is a monster".

In the second part of the film the traumatic Real embodied in the figure of Toofan is not disclosed all at once, but we are confronted with it only gradually. At first Toofan seems to be just a hip, stylish but excentric character who is full of wit

[446] Glyn Daly, "Slavoj Žižek: Risking the Impossible," for Lacan.com 2004, accessed November 10, 2016, http://www.lacan.com/zizek-primer.htm

and humor, but slowly we discover that there is a dark and sinister dimension that lurks beneath his apparent humorous façade. This is the logic of the Freudian uncanny (*das Unheimliche*), when at first glance Toofan appears as an excentric funny nice guy who just wants to help the girls (he pays for their car accident), but upon closer inspection all of a sudden a more terrifying dimension begins to emerge. It is here that Toofan takes on a dark and sinister aura, and turns from a witty and humorous character, into one who identifies and associates with dictators (Hitler, Sadaam), and incessantly terrorizes the girls and physically abuses them. As Žižek states apropos the notion of the Freudian uncanny:

> a perfectly "natural" and "familiar" situation is denatured, becomes "uncanny," loaded with horror and threatening possibilities, as soon as we add to it a small supplementary feature, a detail that "does not belong," that sticks out, is "out of place," does not make any sense within the frame of the idyllic scene. This "pure" signifier without signified stirs the germination of a supplementary, metaphorical meaning for all other elements: the same situations, the same events that, till then, have been perceived as perfectly ordinary acquire an air of strangeness"[447]

It is in this precise sense, that the same situation and character (Toofan) which at first seemed perfectly ordinary and funny becomes all of a sudden "denatured" and "uncanny" and takes on a horrifying and traumatic dimension. In this way the Freudian uncanny and the Lacanian Real are mutually linked, since there is always an uncanny dimension to the Real. This is also why, as Žižek has noted, there is always an *Unheimliche* dimension to the double, as he states, "the double is 'the same as me,' yet totally strange; his sameness all the more accentuates his uncanniness." In this sense the double always has the structure of the *Unheimliche*.

If there is a figure in theological terms that personifies the fantasmatic dimension of the Real in all its horror, it is the devil. In the film there are several visual and narrative clues that links Toofan with the figure of the Devil, not unlike the Devil in Bulgokov's novel *The Master and Margerita*. Indeed, there are a number of Christian or demonological motifs that runs through the film that are significant (from Arineh exclaiming that she is Christian and hence can drink alcohol, up to the scene in the Church where Toofan reappears again mysteriously, including the police asking the girls and Kami, "are you Satan-worshipers?") as they gesture towards the

[447] Žižek, *Looking* Awry, 55.

diabolical dimension of Toofan and his supernatural powers; but this supernatural dimension should not deceive us, as this is not a theological devil but a political one, with all the force of the theologico-political role of the totalitarian leader or the State exemplified in Ahmadinejad and the Islamic Republic. In one instance in the car Toofan states, "I am in Syria right now." The two girl's look of puzzlement is mirrored in the confusion of the spectator: How can a person be in two places at once? This reference to the fact that he is in Syria at this moment is an allusion to the entanglement of the Islamic Republic in the politics of Syria. It is one of the most explicit statements in the film that gestures towards the figure of Toofan as being the embodiment of the Iranian State or the Islamic Republic.

Freud in his text called, *A Seventeenth-Century Demonological Neurosis* (1922), analyses the story of Christoph Haizmann the painter, who purportedly had the devil appear to him and where the devil figures in several of his paintings. In his analysis of this case Freud conceives of the devil as a father-substitute, and the evil obverse or double of God as the father figure.[448] In this sense, the devil is one of the Names-of-the-Father in Lacanian parlance (for the Name-of-the-Father, see chapter on *Daughters of the Sun*) and stands for the totalitarian leader or the State. The character of Toofan is in a way representative of what Immanuel Kant called diabolical Evil and is similar to the diabolical killer Anton Chigurh played by Javier Bardem in in the Coen brothers film *No Country for Old Men* (2007). In his reading of the film, Žižek equates Bardem's character to the Kantian figure of *diabolical evil*, especially in how he decides to kill his victims through a flip of a coin.[449] Regarding

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[448] Sigmund Freud, *The Complete Psychological Works Of Sigmund Freud*, The Vol. 19: "The Ego and the Id" and Other Works vol. 19 (London: Vintage Classics, 2001), 69-108.

[449] I am using the notion of diabolical evil here within the symbolic economy of the film, since Toofan is equated with the devil. Kant made a distinction between *radical* evil, "an insurmountable wickedness," that lies in the human heart and that human beings are "by no means [able] to wipe out" (66). As for *diabolical* evil, Kant argued that it is evil for the sake of evil itself, not evil in opposition to the moral law, but evil with its own internal moral law or maxim that motivates action. Kant ultimately denied the existence or possibility of diabolical evil in human beings, and stated that "diabolical being" is not "applicable to human beings" (35). See Immanuel Kant, *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, trans. Theodore M. Green and Hoyt H. Hudson (New York: Harper and Row, 1960). Žižek takes up this notion and claims that Kant was unable to accept the possibility of diabolical evil. Alenka Zupančič and Joan Copjec, each in their own way, mount a defense of Kant's rejection of diabolical evil. See Alenka Zupančič, *Ethics of the Real: Kant and Lacan* (London: Verso,

this figure Žižek states, "the figure of the pathological hired killer played by Javier Bardem - a ruthless killing machine, with an ethics of his own, sticking to his word, [is] a figure of what Kant called diabolical Evil."[450] About the fantasmatic nature of this figure Žižek writes:

> The key to this figure is the fact that it is not a real-life person, but a fantasy-entity - the embodiment of the pure object-obstacle, that unfathomable Y of blind fate - which always, in a weird mixture of chance and inexorable necessity, as the necessity of a chance (a stroke of bad luck), intervenes to undermine the fulfilment of subjects' plans and intentions, guaranteeing that, one way or another, things will always somehow go wrong.[451]

In this way Toofan also function as a fantasy-entity whom, like a weird co-incidence of chance and inexorable destiny, the two girls are unable to escape from. At the end of *Atomic Heart* there is a scene in the rooftop that is one of the hermeneutic keys to the figure of Toofan. Toofan tells Nobahar to jump with him over the rooftop as it represents one of the gates through which they can enter the other parallel world. Arineh refuses and Toofan states, "okay we will decide by playing rock/paper/scissors, and if I win we all have to jump and if I loose then I will jump." This image of the game of rock/paper/scissors with the figure of Toofan that will decide the destiny of the girls, is precisely the Kantian figure of diabolical Evil, and recalls the character of Bardem (Anton Chigurh) in *No Country For Old Men* (the main difference between the two is Toofan's at times sadistic humor), such is the nature of the will of diabolical Evil, where the arbitrary flip of a coin or rock/paper/scissors, will determine who lives or dies. At the end when Toofan loses the rock/paper/scissors game, he sticks to his word (demonstrating an ethics of his own, a diabolical ethics), and does not make the two girls jump off the roof, but prepares to jump himself.

4.8 The Enigma of Desire and the Dream within a Dream

Atomic Heart like *Mullholand Drive* is a film that splits the realms of fantasy

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2000), 90-101; Joan Copjec, *Imagine There's No Woman: Ethics and Sublimation* (Boston, Massachusetts: MIT, 2002), chapter 5.
[450] Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*, 658
[451] Ibid, 658.

and desire, where the first part depicts the world of fantasy, and the second part stages desire in all its radical mystery. Through the procedures of clearly distinguishing the visual register of the first part of the film from the visual world of the second part, the filmic text gestures respectively to the two worlds of fantasy and desire that are being posited as it were side by side. Indeed, the film opens up the sense of mystery through a direct textual address to the spectator that inaugurates the oneiric world, which we are about to enter:

> This film is about one of the most important characters of our time. This film is about me. About one of my *dreams* whose events occur on the night the subsidy payments were being distributed. I will never tell you who I am or what my name is, and you will never find out.

From this direct textual address to the spectator in the prelude before the film, what we get effectively is that the film is one of the *dreams* of this mysterious figure addressing us from the cinematic text, in other words the film is the addressor's inner fantasy space projected onto the cinematic screen. In this way the spectator or addressee is put in the position of a desiring subject, since the addressor remains undisclosed and the possibility of knowing who is addressing us from behind the text is foreclosed and our desire is thereby aroused from this sense of mystery. We want to know who is this mysterious figure addressing us from the screen, but are left desiring for an answer – as Žižek notes, this is "the perverse art of cinema, it does not give you what you desire, it tells you how to desire."[452] In this sense the film text is the portrayal of a dream and the dream text is the portrayal of the film.

The dream logic of the film comes to the fore when in the first part just before delving into the history of the structure of toilets, Kami recounts a dream (or more precisely a nightmare) to Arineh and Nobahar that he has had the night before, which he remembers in a kind of *déjà vu* whilst overlooking Tehran with lights of the city stretching into the horizon. Kami says that in the dream he was looking for Omid to light his cigarette when all of a sudden an atomic bomb destroys the city and its flames light his cigarette. Then he states that the city was not called Tehran but *Atomic Heart Mother*, a reference to the 1970 Pink Floyd record of the same name. The dream of course alludes to the anxiety over the nuclear program in Iran and the

[452] Žižek, *The Pervert's Guide To Cinema*.

hardline stance on the issue by Ahmadinejad. This is the oneiric logic of the film in which the interpretation of the dream is in the dream within a dream. It is here that a Freudo-Lacanian logic of dreams becomes operative, in which censored material from waking reality return in the dream content as the Real. As Žižek states, "The situation is similar to that of the Freudian logic of the dream, in which the Real announces itself in the guise of a dream within a dream."[453] Indeed, the Real that discloses itself in the dream within the dream (film) is the Real of the atomic bomb and the possibility of nuclear disaster in Tehran. From this perspective a Freudo-Lacanian reading of the film is certainly justified, since the logic of fantasy and dreams structure the entire film (both of which fall within the theoretical coordinates of psychoanalysis). There is even a reference to Freud himself in the film, when in the car Kami, while making fun of an Iranian diasporic news anchor in the U.S., refers to Arineh as "Dr. Freudian." In fact there is a hint that Arineh may be a practicing psychoanalyst, as she is asked by Kami and Nobahar to provide an *interpretation* of Kami's dream, where in good psychoanalytic fashion she corrects them saying "analysis" (borrowed from English) rather than "interpretation" (*ta'bir*), to distinguish psychoanalytic dream interpretation from the older manuals of Islamic dream interpretation, such as Ibn Sirin's book on dreams, that proliferate in Persian translations and are popular among Iranians.[454] In this connection Elizabeth Sirriyeh states:

> It is not unusual to find sections in bookshops containing works on dream interpretation by psychoanalysts placed next to medieval dream manuals. Sometimes there are also attempts to claim that oneirocrits such as Ibn Sirin prepared the way for the modern discovery of psychoanalysis. It is also not unusual for the introductions to books of Muslim dream interpretation to contain lists of great authorities on dreams, beginning with the classic Muslim authors and ending with Sigmund Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams*.[455]

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[453] Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*, 348.

[454] For dreams in Iran, see Hossein Ziai, "Dreams II: In the Persian Tradition," EIr VII: 549-51.

[455] Elizabeth Sirriyeh, *Dreams and Visions in the World of Islam* (London/New York: I.B.Tauris, 2017), 183. On the significance of dreams, visions and their interpretation in Islamicate societies including Iran, see Özgen Felek and Alexander D. Knysh, *Dreams and Visions in Islamic Societies* (State University of New York Press, 2012); cf. Henry Corbin, "Visionary Dream in Islamic Spirituality," *The Dream and Human Society*, ed. G.E. von Gurnebaum and Roger Caillois (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1966); cf. Pierre Lory, *Le rêve et ses interprétations en islam* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2015); cf. Nile Green, 'The Religious and Cultural

Although Sirriyeh's discussion is on Egypt, the same can be said of Iran, where the older Islamic manuals on dream interpretation can be found in bookstores in Tehran alongside Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams*.

One of the philosophical lessons of *Atomic Heart*, then, is that reality itself is structured like a dream, a dream/fantasy/fiction that is mistaken for reality but through interpretation the dream character of reality can be revealed. As Žižek states, "The ultimate achievement of film art is not to recreate reality within the narrative fiction, to seduce us into (mis)taking a fiction for reality, but, on the contrary, to make us discern the fictional aspect of reality itself..."[456] Perhaps this is the ultimate achievement of *Atomic Heart* as film art, since it stages the fictional or dreamlike structure of reality *itself*, and not only reality within the coordinates of authoritarianism or totalitarianism, but that reality *itself* would be non-existent without the fictions or dreams that structure it.

4.9 Dreaming of a Nightmare in Tehran

In *Atomic Heart* there is a traumatic truth or Real that the film as dream has concealed and it is not in reality that we would uncover it, but in the dream (as the film) itself. *Atomic Heart* is a film where the fiction –or in this instance the dream– provides the means of accessing this traumatic Real instead of functioning as an obstacle to it. Although the film provides a sense of reality, particularly in the first half, this is only to juxtapose it to the second half of the film, where the logic of the dream world is foregrounded and privileged. At the end of the film Ahmadzadeh sets up the possibility that waking up is a way of escaping this traumatic Real, rather than confronting it. Lacan in his *Seminar XVII, The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, provides a perfect illustration of this notion between the desire to wake up and its relation to the traumatic truth. He states, "A dream wakes you up just when it might let the truth drop, so that the only reason one wakes up is so as to continue

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Roles of Dreams and Visions in Islam', *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 13, no. 3 (2003): 287–313.

[456] Slavoj Žižek, *The Fright of Real Tears: Krzysztof Kieślowski Between Theory and Post-Theory* (London: The British Film Institute, 1999) 77.

dreaming—dreaming in the real or, to be more exact, in reality."[457] To explicate the logic of this formulation, Lacan turns to his earlier seminar, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, where he refers to a famous dream recounted by Freud, where a father dreams that his son is burning and exclaims, "Father don't you see I am burning."[458] This traumatic moment makes the father wake up from his dream but only to discover that the coffin of his deceased son has caught fire by candles. Lacan provides an incisive interpretation of this dream that goes beyond Freud's point that the dreamer is often aware of external reality while still dreaming. For Lacan, the father wakes up precisely at the crucial moment where the dream is about to reveal the horror of his own desire, namely the desire for his son's death. In this way the father waking up to the reality of the burning coffin functions as a defense mechanism against the traumatic truth of the horror of his own desire that the dream is about to reveal, and he thereby wakes up in order to escape confronting the traumatic truth of his desire.[459] This escape into reality from the horror of the traumatic truth revealed in the dream provides a sense of relief, since it protects us from the horror of our desire, whilst the logic of the dream asks us to confront our desire(s), regardless of how traumatic its disclosure may be. We wake up in order to escape the traumatic Real of our desires revealed in the dream.

In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud alludes to the nightmare '*Alptraum*' only on two occasions in chapter 1 and does not develop a full theory of the nightmare. But towards the end of chapter 7, Freud refers to the nightmare with an interesting term "'*Schreckgespent*', which would be classically linked to the *Alptraum* – 'incubus' or, literally, 'frightful specter'."[460] This frightful specter that emerges from the depths of inner space is precisely the Real in all its horror, which

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[457] Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XVII: The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Russell Grigg, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (New York: Norton, 2007), 57.
[458] Sigmund Freud (1900), *The Interpretation of Dreams* (Part II), in *The Standard Edition*, Volume V. (London: Vintage/Hogarth Press, 2001), pp. 339–627 (p. 509).
[459] For Lacan's reading of the father's dream, see Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, Chapter 5.
[460] See John Forrester's introduction to the new translation of Freud's text, Sigmund Freud, *Interpreting Dreams*, (London: Penguin Books, 2006) li. On the psychoanalytic notion of nightmare, see Ernest Jones, *On the Nightmare*, (London, 1931); also see Jacques Lacan, *Anxiety: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book X*. Ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014) 61. For a detailed analysis of the figure of the nightmare see the next Chapter.

once confronted in our dream, the dream quickly turns into a nightmare. Indeed, it is in the second half of the film that we are confronted with this 'frightful specter', the horror of the Real in the form of Toofan whose *jouissance* becomes the cause of the two girls' anxiety, as Lacan states, "… the nightmare's anxiety is felt, properly speaking, as that of the Other's *jouissance*."[461] The Other's *jouissance* or enjoyment, namely Toofan's enjoyment, is the source of anxiety for the two girls, but their anxiety is precisely the source of his enjoyment (*jouissance*). In *The Pervert's Guide to Cinema*, Žižek provides another name for what occurs after fantasy that structures our reality disintegrates, as he states, "When fantasy disintegrates, you don't get reality. You get some nightmarish real, too traumatic to be experienced as ordinary reality. That would be another definition of *nightmare*."[462] It is often in the dream that turns into a nightmare that we encounter some repressed truth of our desire that appears as the traumatic Real in all its horror. In this sense the end of *Atomic Heart* stages the need to wake up back into reality from the horror of the Real confronted in the dream, embodied in the figure of Toofan. The logic here is effectively Lacanian, at first you dream in order to escape the unbearable reality, but then what you discover in the dream is (even) more horrifying than reality, hence you escape your dream in order to get back to reality. This is the elementary logic of the Lacanian insight, we do not only avoid a deadlock in reality by escaping into our dreams (fantasies), but more crucially we escape into reality from the nightmare of our dreams. But more crucially, we wake up in order to continue to dream, that is, to continue in our fantasy.

Conclusion

In this chapter I theorized that there is a shift away from the New Iranian Cinema of the 1990s and early 2000s, through a detailed textual analysis of Ali Ahmadzadeh's film *Atomic Heart*, and situated the film (along *A Girl Walks Home Alone At Night* in the next chapter), as an exemplary instance of the logic of *unhimelich* between the weird and the eerie. I demonstrated that the formal structure of the film was based on a double or two-part structure – the motif of doubling and repetition throughout the

[461] Lacan, *Anxiety*, 61.
[462] Žižek, *The Pervert's Guide To Cinema*.

film itself functioned as instances of *unhimelich* – where the first part was theorized as the world of fantasy rather than reality, despite the realist style and technique, and the second part or surrealist half of the film was the world of desire, where reality deprived of its fantasy supplement, turned into a nightmarish surreality. It is in the second half, when reality loses its grounding in the frame of fantasy, that we encountered the traumatic (Lacanian) Real in all its horror, in the figure of Toofan, whose link with totalitarian and dictatorial figures (Sadam, Hitler) symbolized the Islamic Republic itself, or the former Iranian president Mahmud Ahmadinejad. It is at this point that the Real of desire also manifested itself, since desire functioned as a distortion of reality and de-naturalized it, rendering it irreal and nightmarish. It is in the world of desire that we encountered the Lacanian *Che vuoi*? The enigma of the Other's desire, of desire as the desire of the Other, and the question of what does the Other (Toofan) want? In the second half of the film Nobahar and Arine's homoerotic or lesbian desire appeared as the fright of the Real of their desire, since it is a forbidden desire in the Islamic Republic that can bring one into confrontation with the law, typified in the figure of Toofan.

In the final analysis, the entire logic of the film was structured like a dream, where the first half functioned as the dream-fantasy or the dream as wish fulfillment of Nobahar and Araneh (and Kami), and the second half of the film was where the dream sequence swerved into a nightmare (swerved is an appropriate metaphor here since it was precisely at the moment of the car accident that the two worlds of dream and nightmare, fantasy and desire became separated), the nightmare being the dream of the figure that textually addressed the spectator from the screen at the beginning of the film, which stated that the film is one of his dreams. It is in this sense that the epigraph by Gilles Deleuze with which we began this chapter must be understood: "If you are caught in another's dream, you are done for." In this way Nobahar and Arineh stand as symbolic representations of young Iranian women, and perhaps all young people living in Tehran, who are 'caught in another's dream,' the figure of Toofan symbolizing the State, a dream that is a nightmare.

Chapter 5

The Return of the Repressed: The Real of Feminine Sexuality in *A Girl Walks Home Alone At Night*

What is refused in the symbolic order re-emerges in the real.

– Jacques Lacan[463]

If *Atomic Heart* in the previous chapter was about the nightmare of people living under the totalitarian structure of the State (Islamic Republic), the diasporic Iranian film under analysis in this chapter, *A Girl Walks Home Alone At Night* (dir. Ana Lily Amirpour, 2014), is about the nightmare of the State itself. I argue that the nightmare of the Islamic Republic staged in the film is none other then the fear and anxiety of uncontrolled and autonomous female sexuality and desire. In this sense, the vampiric Girl is the embodiment of the nightmare of the State, as she is literally the figure of the nightmare itself, namely succubus, which in Persian is called *bakhtak* or *kabus*. The film stages the return of the repressed Real of feminine sexuality, the Real in its Lacanian sense of a traumatic core, that once confronted, is the source of horror to the ideology of the Islamic Republic. Since what the state apparatus or the Islamic Republic represses is feminine desire, specifically female sexuality, this is why women are to be veiled, for according to this logic women are possessed by an excess or surplus of (sexual) desire and enjoyment (*jouissance*) which must be contained and controlled, hence the logic of the veil (*hejab*). In effect, the veil is meant to cover over this surplus enjoyment (*plus-de-jouir*), this excess of *jouissance* (enjoyment) in women. Therefore, the female vampire, the Girl (Sheila Vand), represents the Freudian return of the repressed par excellence. The return of repressed feminine sexual energy, or libido, is represented by the figure of the vampire Girl, who haunts and kills the male inhabitants of Bad City. To put it in Lacanian terms, what is refused in the Symbolic order (i.e., female desire) returns in the Real embodied in the chador-clad female vampire.

In this chapter, I will briefly provide an analysis of the concept of the return of the repressed in psychoanalysis and its articulation in psychoanalytic horror film theory, but with a Lacanian twist to the standard theory. I will then analyze the

[463] Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jaques Lacan, Book III. The Psychoses, 1955-56*, trans. Russell Grigg (London: Routledge, 1993), 13.

concept of female desire and sexuality in Shi'ism and the logic of the veil and provide some contextualization of the film and its reception and its place in Iranian horror cinema – where I theorize it as an instance of the uncanny between the weird and eerie. In the next section I will analyze the film's aesthetics and site of enunciation through Hamid Naficy's theory of accented cinema. Finally, I will end with an analysis of aspects of the film through a Freudo-Lacanian prism,[464] foregrounding those aspects that stage the return of the repressed, and will conclude with a formal analysis of the writing found in the diegetic reality of the film (i.e., graffiti, signs, posters, tattoos, etc.), through coupling Michel Chion's concept of *athorybos* with the inscription of desire in Lacan.

5.1 The Return of the Repressed (with a Lacanian Twist)

According to Slavoj Žižek, "the first key to horror films is to say, let's imagine the same film [but] without the horror element,"[465] that is to say, let us subtract or abstract the element of horror from the cinematic fiction and see what remains. In another instance referring to Alfred Hitchcock's *The Birds* (1963) Žižek similarly states, "We must imagine *The Birds* as a film without birds."[466] Following this logic, the question to be asked here is: if we imagine *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night*, without the horror element (i.e., a chador-clad female vampire), what are we left with? What we are left with is "the return of the repressed" in the form of the Real of female sexuality (i.e., the Girl) taking its vengeance on the patriarchal socio-symbolic order for its repression

Freud famously states that the "return of the repressed," the repressed truth of a traumatic event, can appear either as symptom, or as fetish. For instance, the subject has a traumatic experience and subsequently "represses" it, trying to erase the

[464] Mahdi Tourage has recently provided a psychoanalytic reading of the film as well, but it differs from my own approach since it focuses on masculinity rather than feminine sexuality; and it is theoretically rooted in the older first wave psychoanalytic film theory (the use of Laura Mulvey, the male-gaze, etc.), whereas my own approach is part of second wave psychoanalytic film theory. See Mahdi Tourage, "An Iranian Female Vampire Walks Home Alone and Disturbs Freud's Oedipal Masculinity," *IranNamag*, Volume 3, Number 1 (Spring 2018), LXXXIV-CVI.
[465] Žižek, *The Pervert's Guide to Cinema*.
[466] Žižek, *Looking Awry*,105.

traumatic memory or event by suppressing it, consigning it from the conscious to the unconscious, but the repressed trauma always returns in distorted forms such as symptom(s), jokes, slips of the tongue or pen, etc. (parapraxis). As Freud puts it in his essay on "Repression" (1915), "the essence of repression lies simply in turning something away, and keeping it at a distance, from the conscious."[467] However, the repressed never stays in its place and always threatens to return, subverting the repressive narrative. Indeed, the logic of the Freudian return of the repressed is what returns in the form of the Real of female sexuality, exemplified in the figure of the female vampire, the Girl. This is why Lacan states, "What is refused in the symbolic order re-emerges in the real." [468] The Real of female sexuality is nothing but the Real of its traumatic dimension, its disturbing element that perturbs the smooth functioning of the (patriarchal) symbolic order. Therein lies the reason that this Real or traumatic excess in female sexuality has to be repressed.

There is a well-established history of the deployment of the logic of the return of the repressed in psychoanalytic film theory. One of the earliest film scholars to argue for this reading of the figure of the "monster" in horror films as the return of the repressed is Robin Wood, particularly in the now classic collection: *The American Nightmare*. Wood's combination of Marxism, feminism, psychoanalytic theory and post-structuralism, proposed that the figures of horror cinema are "our collective nightmares ... in which normality is threatened by a monster."[469] Some have critiqued Wood's Freudian reading of horror films and the figure of the monster, but as Wood states: "Freudian theory is vulnerable to attack on many points, but not, in my opinion, on the one that formed *The American Nightmare*'s psychoanalytic basis: the theory of repression and the " return of the repressed."[470] In that seminal

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[467] Sigmund Freud, "Repression (1915)" in *Complete Psychological Works Of Sigmund Freud, The Vol 14: "On the History of the Post Psychoanalytic Movement", "Papers on Metapsychology" and Other Works* (London: The Hogarth Press, 2001), pp. 146–58, (p. 147).
[468] Lacan, *the Psychoses*, 13.
[469] Robin Wood, "An Introduction to the American Horror Film," in Richarrd Lippe and Robin Wood (eds), *American Nightmare: Essays on the Horror Film* (Toronto: Festival of Festivals, 1979), 10.
[470] Robin Wood, "Foreword: 'What Lies Beneath?'" in *Horror Film and Psychoanalysis*, ed. Steven Jay Schneider (Cambridge: Cambridge University press, 2004), xv. Wood writes, "Murnau's *Nosferatu* (1921), made in the very shadow of Freud, strikes me as almost textbook Freudianism – the monster as " return of the repressed" (and its

text, Wood (following Horowitz) divides the logic of repression into basic and surplus repression, with surplus repression rendering the subject "into monogamous heterosexual bourgeois patriarchal capitalists…" Wood provides a list of what is repressed in western culture, such as "sexual energy itself," bisexuality, female sexuality/creativity, and infantile/child sexuality; as well as, "the particularly severe repression of female sexuality/creativity, the attribution to the female of passivity, and her preparation for her subordinate, dependent role in our culture."[471] Here Wood considers female sexuality emblematic of the most severe form of repression in western culture, and following Freud, attributes passivity to the feminine position (although this is a misreading of Freud, which I address in the next section). However, as we shall see there is a different libidinal economy operative in the Islamic-Shi'i conceptualization of female sexuality, which conceives it as active rather than passive, and this is exactly why it must be repressed so as to contain the excess of erotic energy or libidinal surplus inhering in it. Others have similarly argued that at "the heart of cinematic horror lies a patriarchal fear of female sexuality. In order to tap into this fear, it is held that the genre defines female sexuality "as monstrous, disturbing, and in need of repression."[472] Whether this logic holds any longer in contemporary western societies is debatable (and irrelevant to the context of my argument), but as I argue here, this formulation of the return of the repressed as a patriarchal fear of female sexuality is operative in Iran under the Islamic Republic, especially in the Shi'ite juridical conception of female sexuality (see below).

According to Lacan, there is a time paradox operative in the structure of repression. The repressed cannot be heard at the point of its repression but only when the repressed returns, it is only at that point the repressed begins to speak. This is why Lacan points out that "repression and the return of the repressed are the same thing."[473] In light of the film this can be formulated in this way: the thing repressed (female sexuality/desire) returns in the form of its repression (chador/veil). It is through the return that we are able to retroactively hear what the repressed was

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ultimate re-repression) in almost diagrammatic (yet extremely powerful) form." Wood, *Horror Film and Psychoanalysis*, xv.

[471] Robin Wood, "The American Nightmare," in *Horror, the Film Reader*. Edited by Mark Jancovich (London/New York: Routledge, 2002), 26; cf. *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan, and Beyond* (Columbia University Press 2003), 63–84.

[472] Mark Jancovich, *Horror* (London: B.T. Bastford, 1992), 10.

[473] Jacques Lacan, *Seminar I*, 191.

saying in the past. It is only by listening to the return of the repressed via interpretation that the act of repression can be uncovered in the past. This is why psychoanalytic theory focuses on the construction of the primal traumatic scene, instead of striving to access a memory of it. The primal scene of trauma is therefore only traumatic retroactively, it is in the future anterior that it will have been traumatic, that is why Žižek states, "The Lacanian answer to the question, from where does the repressed return, is then paradoxically: from the future."[474] In this sense, the figure of the veiled female vampire is the return of the repressed not from the past but from the future. This is why as the embodiment of the Real of female sexuality the chador-clad Girl represents a point of trauma for the Islamic Republic, since she embodies and adumbrates the revolt against the patriarchal symbolic order for its repression of women.

5.2 Veiling over Feminine Desire: Shi'ism and the Real of Female Sexuality

In order to properly theorize the significance of the Islamic veil (*hejab*), the Islamic/Shi'i conception of female sexuality must be briefly analyzed. In her influential text, *Beyond the Veil* (1975), Fatima Mernissi theorized the way the veil functions in Islamicate societies. According to Mernissi in Judeo-Christian western societies, as well as Freudian psychoanalytic theory, femininity is perceived as *passive* whilst masculinity is active. Mernissi argues, on the contrary, that Islamic doctrine is a reversal of this standard theory and is based on the logic of an implicitly *active* female sexuality. If female sexuality is not contained and controlled, this potent force has the power to destabilize society and cause "*fitna* (disorder or chaos) (*Fitna* also means a beautiful woman – the connotation of a *femme fatale* who makes men lose their self-control)"[475] (indeed the chador-clad vampire is a sort of horror version of the *femme fatale* in the universe of *film noir*), and to threaten the civic and religious universe of men. In this way, the *hejab* and the structurally related gender segregation are strategies for the control and containment of female sexuality in Islamicate societies. Therefore, the patriarchal logic operative in Islamicate societies

[474] Slavoj Žižek, 'The Truth Arises from Misrecognition Part I' in *Lacan and the Subject of Language*. Ed. Ellie Ragland-Sullivan and Mark Bracher (New York and London: Routledge, 1991), 188.
[475] Mernissi, *Beyond the Veil*, 41.

is predicated on the "fear of unrestrained female sexuality,"[476] hence the logic of the veil. Though this reading of female sexuality as active in Islamic theory is generally apt, its reading of Freudian theory of female sexuality as "passive" has to be problematized, since as Lacan reminds us, what has to be "remembered [is] Freud's often repeated warning not to reduce the supplement of feminine over masculine to the complement of passive to active…"[477] In other words, though the logic of passive and active may be operative in the conceptualization of traditional Islamic notions of femininity/passive and masculinity/active (and for that matter in Christianity/western society), this cannot be predicated on a reversal of these notions in Freudian psychoanalysis.

In Shi'i Islam, especially in contemporary Shi'i jurisprudence (*fiqh*) in Iran, women are viewed as an object for the sexual pleasure of their husbands – their sexual and reproductive organs are an object or "a commodity – actually and symbolically – that is separated from the woman's persona and that is at the core of an individual, social, and economic transaction – an object that is abstracted, reified, and then treated as a separate entity."[478] This abstraction of sexuality from the feminine body is thereby conceived by the ruling male (Shi'i) ideology in Iran as representative of a woman's entire being. In this way woman is no longer a person but an object for the (sexual) pleasure of men. As Shahla Haeri perceptively puts it:

> Women are thus ideologically perceived not only as symbols of sexuality but as the very embodiment of sex itself; woman and "it" become almost indistinguishable. Collapsing the symbol into what it stands for, Shi'i Islam views women as objects to be owned and to be jealously controlled, objects of desire to amass, to discard, to seclude, and to veil, objects of indispensible value to men's sense of power and virility.[479]

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[476] Ibid, 25.
[477] Juliet Mitchell and Jaqueline Rose (ed.), *Feminine Sexuality: Jaques Lacan and the école freudienne* (New York/London: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc. 1985) 93.
[478] Shahla Haeri, *Law of Desire: Temporary Marriage in Shi'i Iran* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2014), 70. On Shi'i conceptions of female sexuality in Iran see also, *Shi'ism and Social Protest*, edited by Juan Ricardo Cole, Nikki R. Keddie, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986); cf. Nahid Yeganeh and Nikki R Keddie, "Sexuality and Shi'i Social Protest in Iran," in *Women of Iran: The Conflict with Fundamentalist Islam*, ed. Farah Azari (London: Ithaca Press, 1983), 108-136.
[479] Haeri, *Law of Desire,* 70.

This collapsing of sex itself with the being of women and the ontological structure of femininity is what foregrounds the threatening dimension of female sexuality. According to this logic, the threatening power of female sexuality lies in the very equation of women/femininity with sex/sexuality, with the thing-*itself*. Haeri, deploying a Levi-Strassian binary model of culture/male vs. female/nature, suggests that women are perceived as embodiments of nature, and "thus are perceived to be irresistible, indispensible, capricious, powerful, and fearsome." For instance, a whole set of legal prescriptions and cultural beliefs forewarn men of the sexual power of women, and forbid men "to look at their wife's vagina, for otherwise their progeny will be born blind"."[480] This is not peculiar to Shi'ism, as a *hadith* reported in Sunni sources states, "The sight of the [female] sexual organ engenders oblivion."[481] This threatenting, almost magical power of the female sexual organ, perfectly exemplifies the (Lacanian) Real of female sexuality within the Shi'ite legal imaginary. According to Shi'i doctrine then, female sexuality is seen as a radical threat to men and the social-symbolic order, and if unveiled, women are liable to lead men astray from the so-called "straight path" (*sirat al-mustaqim*) by arousing their sexual desires,[482] since it must be recalled that an unveiled woman is effectively nakedness itself (*'awra*). Khomeini in one of his declarations, whilst castigating the Pahlavi regime states, "they regard the civilization and advancement of the country as dependent upon women's going naked in the streets, or to quote their own idiotic words, turning half the population into workers by unveiling them (we know only too well what kind of work is involved here)."[483] Here Khomeini equates women going out unveiled with nakedness, and he insinuates that where women are unveiled in public for their employment, the kind of work involved is effectively prostitution. Thus, in the masculinist economy of Shi'i legal theory women are to be controlled and contained through segregation and veiling, so that men can be guarded against the threatening power of female sexuality.

In order to properly draw out (the traumatic dimention of) the Lacanian Real in the Shi'i conception of female sexuality, we cannot provide a better example of

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[480] Ibid, 70.
[481] Bouhdiba, *Sexuality in Islam*, 38.
[482] Allameh Majlisi cited in Haeri, *Law of Desire*, 70.
[483] Imam Khomeini, *Islam and Revolution: Writings and Declarations*. Tr. Hamid Algar (London: KPI Limited, 1985), 171-72.

what came to be called the "boob quake" among Iranians. In a Friday sermon in 2010, the Friday prayer leader in Tehran, a cleric named Hojjat al-Islam Kazem Sediqi stated that, "Many women who do not dress modestly lead young men astray and spread adultery in society which increases earthquakes…"[484] This is the perfect instantiation of the definition of the Real of female sexuality in its Lacanian sense, since, "While the Real cannot be directly represented… it can nonetheless be *shown* in terms of symbolic failure and can be alluded to through figurative embodiments of horror-excess that threaten disintegration (monsters, forces of nature, disease/viruses and so on)."[485] What causes the earthquake in this instance is exactly the Real of female sexuality, without the proper veiling to contain and control it the earth itself shudders. In this sense, what is so traumatic about the veiled female vampire, the Girl, is that what was to effectively function as a protective screen (i.e., the veil), covering over the Real of feminine sexuality (its disturbing and traumatic dimension), becomes co-incident with this very traumatic excess in female sexuality. In other words, the signifying system of the veil becomes scrambled, it no longer functions as a signifier for containing the excess of female sexuality but becomes its exact opposite, the signifier of its imminent threat. This is what Lacan means by repression is the same thing as the return of the repressed: in this instance the thing repressed (female desire) is returned in the form of its repression (the veil/chador). This is the nightmare of the Islamic Republic embodied in the figure of the chador-clad female vampire, which is why, this film was immediately deemed against the Islamic veil (*zid-e hejab*).

5.3 The Reception of the Film in Iran

Unlike its critical success and positive reception in the West, the reception of *A Girl Walks Home Alone At Night* in Iran, especially in the state backed media, was extremely negative. The film is officially banned in Iran and various Iranian news websites, such as the state backed *farsnews* agency have condemned the film as "anti-

[484] "Iranian cleric blames quakes on promiscuous women," BBC News, Tuesday, 20 April 2010, accessed June 20, 2017, http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/8631775.stm
[485] Daly, "Žižek: Risking the Impossible."

Iranian" (*zid-e Iran*).[486] The term or concept "anti-Iranian" is an interesting one and has its origins in totalitarian societies. Noam Chomsky, the American political dissident and philosopher, who has been condemned as "anti-American" on many occasions, provides a succinct explanation that is relevant here:

> The concept "anti-American" is an interesting one. The counterpart is used only in totalitarian states or military dictatorships… Thus, in the old Soviet Union, dissidents were condemned as "anti-Soviet." That's a natural usage among people with deeply rooted totalitarian instincts, which identify state policy with the society, the people, the culture. In contrast, people with even the slightest concept of democracy treat such notions with ridicule and contempt.[487]

In this sense, the term "anti-Iranian" is an ideological term that has been deployed by the Islamic Republic as a way to condemn anyone or anything that they perceive to be critical of the Islamic Republic and its value system. Several other state run sites have appeared forewarning Iranians who would download the film, stating that the "downlowding of the anti-Iranian film *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* is religiously forbidden" (*haram*).[488] Therefore, downloading this film could bring one into confrontation with the law in Iran. Another site called Aviny Artistic Cultural Institute – a site dedicated to the filmmaker Morteza Avini (d. 1993), who was killed in the Iran-Iraq war and is hailed by the state as a "martyr", as are almost all those who lost their life during the war – besides calling the film "anti-Iranian," states that the film is "against the *hijab*"[489] (*zid-e hejab*), by which the black chador that the female vampire wears in the film is intended.

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[486] "Zan-e muhjabeh-ye Irani khoon asham dar jashnwareh-ye Sundance and Berlin," Farsnews, accessed March 06, 2015, http://www.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=13921105000175 All translations from the Persian are my own, unless otherwise noted.

[487] "Is Chomsky 'anti-American'?" Noam Chomsky interviewed by Jacklyn Martin, The Herald, December 9, 2002, accessed August 26, 2015, https://chomsky.info/20021209/

[488] "Didan-e film-e zan-e muhjabeh haram ast", sinemapress.ir, accessed September 05, 2015, http://cinemapress.ir/news/

[489] "Dokhtari tanha dar shab be khaneh meravad," AvinyFilm, accessed September 05, 2016, http://avinyfilm.com/category/%D8%AF%D8%AE%D8%AA%D8%B1%DB%8C%20%D8%AA%D9%86%D9%87%D8%A7%20%D8%AF%D8%B1%20%D8%B4%D8%A8%20%D9%BE%DB%8C%D8%A7%D8%AF%D9%87%20%D8%A8%D9

A number of similar objections to *A Girl* are discussed in a fascinating video in which a state sponsored film critic, Ali-Reza Pour Masoud, provides a critique of the film that is extremely interesting, and stages the paranoiac logic that is operative in condemning the film as anti-Iranian and anti-hijab. In the video Pour Masoud states, "the reason for the need to analyze and critique this film arises from the fact that in this film, a girl who is wearing a full chador and veil becomes a vampire, but it is not clear how she becomes a vampire in the film. The film creates an image of an Islamic-Iranian identity (*huviyat*) that may mislead those who lack any information about Iran, and who may therefore form a false opinion of the country."[490] Pour Massoud then goes on to provide several interpretations as to why the film is anti-Iranian. First he states that, "In this film, a story is told of a city, which is called Bady City, and the city stands as the symbol for Iran…."[491] According to him, the film provides a dark portrayal of family life in Iran, by negatively depicting a Muslim family and particularly a father with a Shi'i name, "In the film family has no meaning, and we only see one family that has very negative qualities…. For example, the Iranian father in the family is represented as ordinary, a gambler, a womanizer and a junkie, who uses drugs to numb his pain…. Arash, and his father Hossein, and by the name of Hossein, it is clear that they are Muslims and that they belong to the Shi'i faith…."[492] The name of Hossein given to the junkie father is considered offensive by Pour Masoud, and represents a critique of the Shi'ite faith, the Muslim family and all Iranian fathers. But the name Hossein seems to have been chosen simply as a common Iranian name, and nothing more. He then further discusses the films portrayal of moral and social corruption represented in the figure of the pimp and prostitute stating, "The film portrays a deeply frightful image of Iran… there is also a pimp in the film who is a despicable character, and whose body is filled with tattoos of profane words that cannot even be uttered. Another character in the film is

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%87%20%D8%AE%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%87%20%D9%85%DB%8C%E2%80%8C%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%AF

[490] Ali-Reza Pour Masoud, "Naqd-e film-e dokhtari shab tanha be khaneh meravad," Roshangari, accessed September 09, 2015, http://roshangari.ir/video/36298 The description provided by the website about itself is as follows: "The purpose of establishing this site is to create a bank of comprehensive videos regarding the true values of the Islamic Revolution, in order to enlighten and bring the truth of political and social events."

[491] Pour Masoud, "Naqd-e film."

[492] Ibid

a prostitute who is saving money in order to leave Bad City, its meaning is that so she can leave Iran and that Iran is not a livable place."[493] The drug-dealing pimp has obscenities tattooed on his face in Persian such as "pimp" (*kos kesh*, the English word "pimp" does not convey the obscenity of this term in Persian, which literally means: 'vagina stretcher') and "sex" transliterated into Persian.

Pour Masoud then tries to highlight the prostitute's immoral character by referring to a scene where she dances with a balloon, but he mistakes or confuses the prostitute with the figure of the silent mysterious transvestite character in the film (it is interesting that the figure of the male transvestite has successfully passed as female for Pour Masoud, or else he would have likely condemned the male cross-dressing as well). According to this perspective a woman dancing is further proof of her immorality, since it is forbidden for women to dance in public in Iran, and for which they can get arrested and receive 70 lashes. Then Pour Masoud turns his attention to the negative depiction of the Islamic veil or chador in the film stating, "It is interesting that the only individual in the film with a full body *hejab* [*chador*], is the vampire girl, which is a fully Islamic *hejab* and chador… And it is clear that the film has targeted its attack against the *hejab*, and has portrayed all the negativities [in Iran] through the *hejab*. And it is possible for whoever has no knowledge of the *hejab* or any understanding of the Iranian *hejab*, to become completely against it."[494] This is another misreading, as there is another chador-clad female at the hospital, when Arash goes to get a cast for his broken hand, we see her at the helpdesk behind a window glass.

Finally, Pour Masoud discusses the representation of social and economic ills of society via reference to the oil industry and states, "This film is through and through an insult to the Islamic-Iranian identity…. It constantly shows the oil industry, implying that Bad City is very wealthy, with a strong economy but does not spend any of the wealth on its people, and therefore the majority of people are either poor or prostitutes."[495] Indeed the scenes of oil drills in the city function like vampires sucking the oil out of the earth, oil itself as a commodity is one of the biggest exports of Iran, and also the very foundation of economy and of modern capitalism in general. In this sense, the true vampire is the state (and capitalism itself)

[493] Pour Masoud, "Naqd-e film."
[494] Ibid
[495] Ibid

with its eternal cycle of consumption and reproduction, it is as it were, the oil drills are vampire-capital sucking the life force of the earth turning the earth into a dead corpse, as Marx puts it famously in *Das Capital*, "Capital is dead labour which, vampire-like, lives only by sucking living lanour, and lives the more, the more it sucks…"[496] In this sense the drills are the vampiric dimension of the Islamic Republic who are like the real vampires sucking the blood (wealth and resources) of the Iranian people, it is no wonder then that the corpses that are strewn into the ditch at the opening scene of the film, gesture not only towards the trail of corpses left behind by the vampiric Girl, but more crucially by the state, represented in the film by the figure of the Boss (*ra'is*), (who represents a spectral presence that haunts the subjects of Bad City with the Girl functioning as the obverse of that spectral presence who takes revenge) who often functions only as a voice (an acousmatic voice), and we only see him a few times on the television set.

Apropos the *hejab*, it is not the first time in Iranian cinema that extreme sensitivity has been shown by the state (*irshad* or state censors) towards films that portray a chador-clad woman in a way that could be perceived negatively. A film made by Bahram Bahramian called *Parinaz* (2012), has a female lead (Fatemeh Motamed-Aria) who is a traditional woman that wears the chador that was banned in Iran, as it was said to depict a veiled woman with "moral and psychological issues." The films producer, Abdolhamid Najibi stated:

> This woman is very religious and suffers from deep personal issues which cause problems inside the home. Although these issues get resolved at the end of the film, the cinema authorities have said that a chadori woman [woman wearing the long-black veil] should never be shown with moral or psychological issues…[497]

Here "moral issues" can be related to female sexuality, since uncontrolled female sexuality is often considered the essence of immorality (*fesad-i akhlaqi*) and hence punishable by Law. In this way, it is little wonder that the state media have taken issue with a film representing a female vampire donning the Iranian black chador, a

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[496] Karl Marx, *The Portable Karl Marx*. Ed Eugene Kamenka (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1983), 203.
[497] "14 Films That Have Been Banned in Iran Since 2007," 21 August 2015, accessed September 10, 2015, https://globalvoices.org/2015/08/21/14-films-that-have-been-banned-in-iran-since-2007/

vampire who is at once imbued with an aura of eroticism, power and violence, subverting the often religious and pious associations of the black chador in Shi'i religious consciousness, and Muslim female propriety, and is thereby repeatedly condemned.

5.4 An Iranian Nightmare

When Ana Lily Amirpour was asked during the Q&A at the BFI London Film Festival in October 2014 where she got the idea for the nightmarish Bad City, she said that she saw it in a dream;[498] in other words, in a nightmare. Though *A Girl* draws from the history of the vampire genre in both Anglo-American fiction and cinema, yet the film also taps into the vast reservoir of Iranian folklore and myths about a female vampire-like creature, namely the figure of *bakhtak* or *kabus*, otherwise known as the nightmare (Figure 5.1). In ancient Iranian folklore there is a female creature possessing a horrifying form that is the personification of the nightmare. Some of the legends associated with *bakhtak* consider her to have been one of the slave girls of Alexander the Great, who accompanied him in his search for the water of life (*ab-e hayat*). According to this legend, after the water was discovered it was placed in a goatskin; but it was punctured by a crow and the water spilled onto the ground. *Bakhtakk* then scooped the water and drank it, and thus she and the crow became immortal. Alexander, enraged, ordered her nose be cut off and replaced by a clay nose. The immortality of *bakhtak* already gestures to the possibility of the origins of immortality for the vampire in later folklore. It is said that a nightmare occurs when *bakhtak/kabus* throws herself on the sleeper's chest in the dark, and if the sleeper wants to stop the nightmare and to drive *bakhtak* away, he must wiggle his finger. *Bakhatak* has also "been described as a massive, perspiring black bundle, which falls upon the sleeper and tries to suffocate him."[499] The image

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[498] Parviz Jahed (ed.), *Directory of World Cinema: Iran 2* (Chicago: Intellect Books, 2017), 365.

[499] F. Gaffary, "Bakhtak," *Encyclopedia Iranica*, Vol. III, Fasc. 5, p. 539, accessed September 12, 2015, http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/baktak-a-folkloric-she-creature-of-horrible-shape-personifying-a-nightmare; Ali Balukbashi, "Bakhtak," *Dāʾirat al-Maʿārif-i Buzurg-i Islāmī*, Vol. II, p. 82-83, accessed September 12, 2015, http://www.cgie.org.ir/fa/publication/entryview/29228. Also see, Bess Allen Donaldson, *The Wild Rue: A Story of Muhammadan Magic and Folklore in Iran* (London: Luzac & Co., 1938), 175-76. For some contemporary accounts in Iran that

of a black-veiled immortal female vampire in the film who falls on the chest of her victims and suffocates them with her fangs and drinks their blood is a perfect cinematic image of the *bakhtak* or *kabus.*[500] (Figure 5.2).

This incubus or *kabus/bakhtak* that emerges from the depths of inner space is the Real in all its horror, which once confronted in our dreams–the dream quickly turns into a nightmare. Indeed, in the film we are confronted with this figure in the form of the vampire Girl, whose *jouissance* becomes the cause of Arash's anxiety by the film's end, as Lacan states "… the nightmare's anxiety is felt, properly speaking, as that of the Other's jouissance.[501] This is why at the end of the film, Arash stops the car and gets out and paces about, whilst the vampire Girl sits in the car; this is the anxiety induced by the Other's *jouissance* (e.g., the vampire's)

refer to *bakhtak/kabus*, see Orkideh Behrouzan and Michael M. J. Fischer, "Behaves Like a Rooster and Cries Like a [Four Eyed] Canine: The Politics and Poetics of Depression and Psychiatry in Iran," in *Genocide and Mass Violence: Memory, Symptom, and Recovery* ed. Devon E. Hinton, Alexander L. Hinton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 105-136.

[500] The oldest source for the motif of the search for the water of life as a means of attaining immortality goes back to the Sumerian and Babylonian *Epic of Gilgamesh*, a motif that was later transformed into narratives related to Alexander's search for the water of life, particular in a cycle of Hellenistic works called, *The Alexander Romance*, and some of these traditions also entered into Persian as *Iskandarnamehs*, and particularly in Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh* or Epic of the Kings. See *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, trans. Andrew George (London: Penguin Classics, 2003); *The Greek Alexander Romance*, trans. Richard Stoneman, (London: Penguin, 1991); cf. Richard Stoneman, Kyle Erickson, Ian Netton (ed.), *The Alexander Romance in Persia and the East* (Groningen: Barkhuis Publishing; Groningen University Library, 2012); Abolqasem Ferdowsi, *Shahnameh: The Persian Book of Kings*, trans. Dick Davis (London: Penguin Classics, 2016).

[501] Lacan, *Anxiety*, 61.

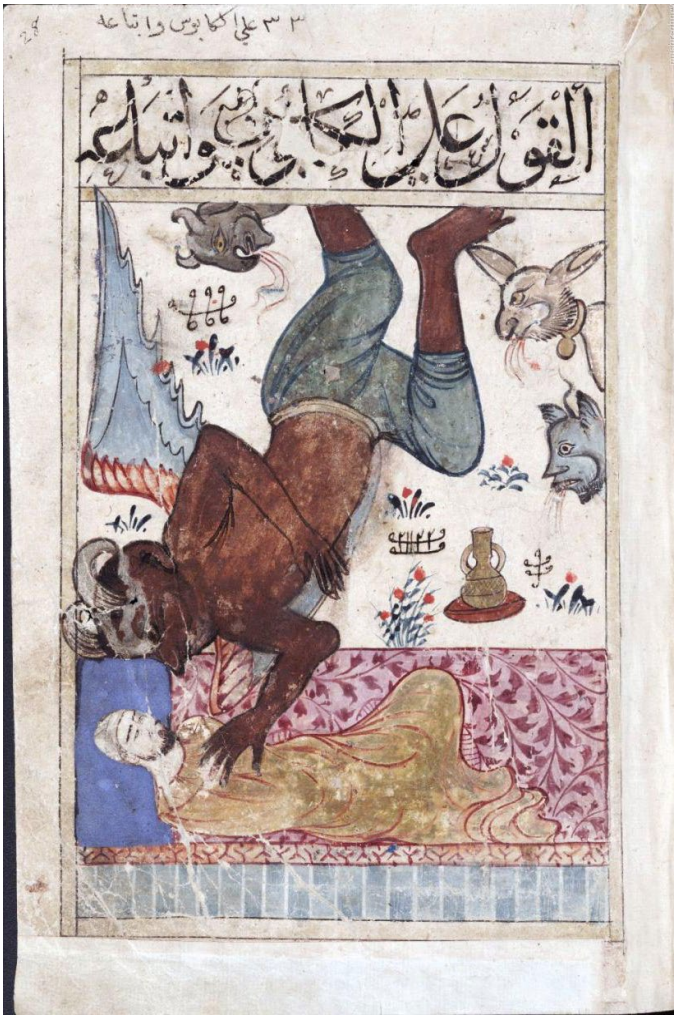

Figure 5.1 “Demons: *Kabus*, the incubus. Demon portrait. From a 15th-century Arabic collectaneous manuscript known as *Kitab al-bulhan*” or “Book of Wonders,” held at the Bodelian Library, University of Oxford, MS. Bodl.Or.133, fol.28r. The Arabic at the top of the page reads, “On the Nightmare (*kabus*) and his followers.” By permission of The Bodleian Library, University of Oxford.

Figure 5.2 *The Nightmare* (1781), John Henry Fuseli. An incubus or the figure of the nightmare sitting on the chest of a woman in sleep. Wikimedia Commons.

The figure of the nightmare in European folklore is the subject of Henry Fuseli's famous painting, *The Nightmare* (1781) (Figure 5.2). This image of *The Nightmare* by Fuseli, evoked and invoked by Carl Theodor Dreyer in his expressionist masterpiece *Vampyr* (1932) (Figure 5.3), may be originally related to the Iranian *bakhtak* or *kabus*. In the European folkloric tradition, the nightmare was described as a horrifying creature, the incubus or succubus that would bear down on the sleeper's chest at night. As noted in the previous chapter Freud does not develop a theory of the nightmare in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, but alludes to the nightmare through the term '*Schreckgespent*', which is classically linked to the *Alptraum* – 'incubus' or, literally, 'frightful specter'."[502] Indeed, the other name for *bakhtak*, namely *kabus*, literally means "nightmare" in Persian and Arabic, and may well be

[502] John Forrester, "Introduction," in Sigmund Freud, *Interpreting Dreams*, trans. J. A. Underwood (London: Penguin Books, 2006), li.

related to the Latin *incubus*. Ernest Jones, in his classic text, *On the Nightmare*, provides a sexual interpretation of the nightmare, and dedicates a chapter to the incubus and the vampire respectively. In the section on the incubus Jones states:

> We have already commented on the interesting circumstance, so significant for our sexual theory of the Nightmare, that the scientific name for this condition in the Middle Ages also denoted a lewd demon who visits women at night, lies heavily on their chest and violates them against their will. These visitors of women were called Incubi (French *follets*\ Spanish *duendes*\ Italian *folletti*] German *Alpen*); those of men were called Succubi (French *souleves*).[503]

Bakhtak is also sometimes related to another figure in Iranian folklore, namely a she-devil or demon called *Aal*. *Aal* is a creature that personifies perpetual fever, and has been described as a child-stealing witch or demon.[504] One of the ways *bakhtak* has been related to *Aal* is that both creatures are said to possess a clay nose, and each share a similar name called *bingeli* or clay nosed. Similarly, in certain parts of Iran the *Aal* is referred to as *Aal-e bakhtak*.[505] The German term *Alb* or *Alp* (the German word *Alptraum* is the conjoining of *Alp* = goblin, demon, with *Traum* = dream), from which meaning a demon or goblin that is thought to give the sleeper a nightmare by pressing down on its chest, may be related to the Iranian *Aal* as well. This is not at all unlikely as both Persian and German are Indo-European languages and share a common linguistic heritage.

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[503] Ernest Jones, *On the Nightmare*, (London, 1931), 82.
[504] A. Shamlu and J. R. Russell, "Al," *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, Vol. I, Fasc. 7, pp. 741-742, accessed September 12, 2015, http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/al-folkloric-being-that-personifies-puerperal-fever
[505] G. S. Asatrian, *âl-i bakhtak*, in *Majallah-i îrànshinàsì 3* (1999), 644–9.

Figure 5.3 The female vampire in Carl Theodor Dreyer's *Vampyr* (1932). Dreyr's iconography here gestures towards Fuseli's painting, *The Nightmare* (1781).

In this connection Lacan (*à la* Freud and Jones) provides an important elaboration between the relation of the nightmare and the incubus or succubus, especially as a questioning being:

> The correlative of the nightmare is the incubus or the succubus, the creature that bears down on your chest with all its opaque weight of foreign *jouissance* [enjoyment], which crushes you beneath its *jouissance*. The first thing that appears in the myth, but also in the nightmare such as it is experienced, is that this creature that weighs down with its *jouissance* is also a questioning being, and even reveals itself in the developed dimension of the question as the riddle. The Sphinx, don't forget, who in the myth arrives on the scene prior to all of Oedipus' drama, is both a nightmarish figure and a questioning figure."[506]

There is an important scene in *A Girl Walks Home Alone At Night* that stages the Girl as both a nightmarish and questioning figure. In the scene the Girl follows a young boy with a skateboard and as the boy turns to look back she disappears; then suddenly as the boy turns back to walk, the Girl appears in front of him, and looking down at him asks, "Are you a good boy?" It is significant that the first time the Girl

[506] Lacan, *Anxiety,* 61.

speaks in the film, it is as a questioning being. Indeed, just as Lacan has noted, the Girl, much like the figure of the incubus or *kabus* (*bakhtak*) is both a nightmarish and questioning figure, and exemplifies the dimension of the question as riddle. In another vampire film called *Let the Right One In* (2008) directed by Tomas Alfredson, Eli the vampire appears for the first time, when Oskar fantasizes about a confrontation with his would-be bullies at school by stabbing at a tree, repeating "what a good piggy you are." It is clear Oskar is fantasizing about vengeance, at which moment his fantasmatic wish is fulfilled when the vampire Eli appears and asks him, "What are you doing"? In the end Eli kills all the boys that were bullying him in the swimming pool – the lesson is clear: Eli is Oskar's revenge fantasy realized. In both films, the vampire first appears as a questioning being, a being that is the correlative of the nightmare, *kabus* or the *incubus* both in Iranian and European folklore traditions.

In his seminar on *Anxiety*, Lacan relates the figure of the vampire to the maternal breast in the oral-relation and to anxiety (*l'agnose*). For Lacan anxiety is an affect that does not deceive, it is one of the truest psychic affects, and it arises through the desire of the Other, and in the question, what does the Other want? As Lacan phrases it cryptically, anxiety is not without an object. In other words, anxiety has an object, but this is not an object in any ordinary sense, but the *objet petit a* or object-cause of desire. Apropos the figure of the vampire Lacan states, "As mythical as it is, however, the vampire image reveals to us through the aura of anxiety that surrounds it the truth of the oral relation to the mother."[507] According to Lacan what the message in the mythic image of the vampire accentuates is "that of a possibility of lack, a possibility that is realized beyond what anxiety harbours by way of virtual fears over the drying-up of the breast."[508] For Lacan, the breast as partial object functions as the point of anxiety, and the fantasmatic figure of the vampire materializes this anxiety through its relation to the drying up of the breast. Lacan states further, "The relation to the mother, inasmuch as it stands out in the image of vampirism, is what allows us to distinguish between the anxiety-point and the point of desire. At the level of the oral drive, the anxiety-point lies at the level of the Other."[509] Lacan's point is not that the baby functions as a little vampire, seeking to

[507] Lacan, *Anxiety*, 236.
[508] Ibid, 236.
[509] Ibid, 236.

pierce the innards of the mother's breast and draw out the milk, or that the baby at the mother's breast is what elicits anxiety, but rather that what is anxiety inducing is the over-presence of the *objet a*; this is what renders its status (the breast) as a partial object and which conjures the image of the vampire. As Joan Copjec notes, "The danger that anxiety signals is the overproximity of this *object a*, this object so inalienable that like Dracula and all the other vampires of Gothic and Romantic fiction it cannot even be cast as a shadow or reflected as a mirror image, and yet so insubstantial that like Murnau's *Nosferatu* it can disappear in a puff of smoke."[510] This is the danger that is signaled by the chador-clad female vampire in the film, the overproximity of *objet petit a*, especially at the film's end when Arash realizes that she is the one who killed her father. This moment is full of anxiety and indecision and is rendered in one of the last images of the film where Arash get's out of the car and paces about, since he knows full well the vampire Girl is the figure of death, the Hegelian negativity. In this sense, Arash's final act to leave with the knowledge that to tarry with the Girl will mean certain death, is, to put it in Hegelian terms: "tarrying with the negative."[511]

5.5 Iranian Horror Films (between the Weird and the Eerie)

The tag line for *A Girl Walks Home Alone At Night* as the "first Iranian vampire-western film," provides an opportunity to explore and situate the film in the history of Iranian horror films, although the film deploys some of the conventions of the vampire genre, it is not a conventional horror genre film and as indicated before, falls within the coordinates of the uncanny between the weird and the eerie, since the film does not evoke a sense of horror, but rather a more profound sense of the 'strange' that is characteristic of the two modes of the weird and the eerie. The incongruous juxtaposition of a vampire wearing the traditional long black veil (*chador*) is itself a weird image. There is also a palpable sense of the eerie to the film, not only in the empty dark streets at night, or the industrial noise that reverberates in

[510] Copjec, *Read My Desire*, 119.
[511] Hegel states, "Spirit … [looks] the negative in the face [i.e., death] and [tarries] with it." See G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 19; see also, Slavoj Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel and the Critique of Ideology* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1993).

many scenes (evocative of the same industrial soundscape in David Lynch's similarly monochrome *Eraserhead (*1977)), but to a more invisible menacing force that pervades the atmosphere of the film that suggests someone else is watching beyond the vampire Girl's watchful eyes – the eyes of the big Other. Such images of spectral eyes that seem to be watching is gestured by several close ups of the cat's (Masuka) eyes looking, as well as the silent figure of the transvestite who also often watches the goings on in Bad City.

Among the various genres that populate Iranian cinema such as comedies or melodramas, there is a paucity of examples of the horror genre in Iranian cinema. Indeed, only a handful of horror films have been made in Iran in the pre and post-revolutionary period, many of which are of poor or uneven quality, with only a couple of examples of high quality films. But*, A Girl*'s promotion as the first vampire film has to be problematized at the outset, since that distinction goes to a rather derivative film that goes back to the pre-revolution era in the Pahlavi period, called *Zan-e khun asham* (*Vampire Woman*, 1967) directed by Mustafa Usku'i.[512] However, among the first higher quality films that should be mentioned is Dariush Farhang's *Telesm* (The Spell, 1988), a gothic tale set in 19th century (Qajar) Iran where the carriage of a newlywed couple breaks down during a storm, forcing them to seek refuge in a haunted mansion. Hamid Rakhshani's, *Shab-e bist o nohom* (*The 29th Night*, 1990) tells the story of a married couple, Mohtaram and Haj Esmail, where an evil female spirit named Atefeh haunts the mind of Mohtaram. Mohammad Hoessein Latifi's, *Khabgha-e dokhtaran* (*Girl's Dormitory*, 2004), deploys "popular Muslim beliefs and practices where a young woman becomes the target of a crazed killer claiming to be under the command of the jinn."[513] Although Partovi provides an excellent reading of this film and its context, a crucial element is missing from his analysis of the killer's possession by the jinn, namely that there is an allusion to a sexual intercourse between the jinn and the murderer.[514] Mehrdad Mirfallah's *Khab-e Leila* (*Leila's Dream*, 2010), is the story of a young woman who lives alone in her

[512] Mehrabi, *Tarikh-e sinema-yi Iran*, 120.
[513] Pedram Partovi, "Girls' Dormitory: Women's Islam and Iranian Horror," *Visual Anthropology Review*, Vol. 25, Issue 2, pp. 186–207.
[514] See Pierre Lory, "Sexual Intercourse Between Humans and Demons in the Islamic Tradition," in *Hidden Intercourse Eros and Sexuality in the History of Western Esotericism*, ed. Wouter J. Hanegraaff and Jeffrey J. Kripal (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2008) pp. 49-64.

inherited family home, and is haunted and attacked by a 6 year old girl possessed of supernatural strength. All these films fall within the conventions of the horror genre and none of them are part of the new genre bending avant-garde movement that is part of the two modes of the weird and the eerie.

One of the most artful horror films to appear from Iran is Shahram Mokri's *Fish and Cat* (2013), which has been described as an Iranian slasher film. Indeed, Mokri's *Fish and Cat* can be said to have inaugurated the genre bending film movement that I have called the uncanny between the weird and the eerie. Mokri's more recent film, the apocalyptic vampire film *Hojoom* (*Invasion*, 2017), also fits perfectly into the coordinates of these two modes. *Fish and Cat* is formally innovative, and is among a handful of films in the world to be shot in a single long-take, such as Bela Tarr's *Macbeth* (1982) and Alexander Sokurov's *Russian Ark* (2002). The camera follows elliptically a number of students in the camp who have traveled to the Caspian region to participate in a kite-flying competition during the winter solstice. Nearby their camp is a small restaurant, whose three cooks seem to be serial killers using human meat for their restaurant. They are out on the hunt for new meat for their restaurant with plenty of students around to serve as the next meal. The film never actually shows a single murder, and throughout, the film is pervaded by an eerie sense of looming violence, a violence that always remains virtual but never realized on screen. The constant threat or virtuality of violence in the film creates a profound sense of terror and anxiety that metaphorically comments on the way Iranian society is under a constant threat of violence from state authority. This is the structure of symbolic authority as such, in order for it to "function as an effective authority, it has to remain not-fully-actualized, an eternal threat."[515] Both *Fish and Cat* and *Invasion* evoke the menacing, dark and threatening atmosphere in contemporary Iran.

Besides *Atomic Heart* and *A Girl*, other filmic examples of the weird and the eerie may be mentioned, although a full discussion of each film is beyond the scope

[515] Slavoj Žižek, *Organs without Bodies: On Deleuze and Consequences* (New York and London: Routledge, 2004), 4. This is precisely why the brief actualization of violence by the state in June 2009 in Tehran was so traumatic; but on the other hand, whenever the threat of symbolic authority passes from virtuality to actuality, the true impotence of its power is displayed. This is the moment of emancipatory consciousness, to see that beneath the façade of its power and authority: the "emperor has no clothes."

of this chapter. These films include Keywan Karimi's *Drum* (2016), Nima Farahi's *Zar* (2017), Farid Valizadeh's *The Mirror of Lucifer* (2016), and *Aal* (2010) by Bahram Bahramian. Indeed, Bahramin's *Aal* is an early proto-example of the weird and the eerie, since its subject matter of the figure of the nightmare, *Aal* (discussed above), places it within the thematic coordinates of this movement. Similarly Farahi's *Zar* also deploys the supernatural wind or *zaar* (see below), as a way to evoke the paranoid and menacing atmosphere of post-2009 Iranian society.

Perhaps inspired by the success of *A Girl*, another critically acclaimed diasporic Iranian horror film was made in the past year, this time in the UK, namely Babak Anvari's *Under the Shadow* (2016).[516] The film is set during the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988), and centers on the life of a married couple, Shideh and Iraj, and their young daughter Dorsa. After the father (Iraj), who is a doctor, leaves to offer medical aid at the frontlines, an Iraqi missile hits the roof of their apartment building but does not explode – a scene that seems to have been inspired by the Spanish-Mexican ghostly horror film directed by Guillermo del Toro, *The Devil's Backbone* (2001). It is after this incident that the daughter and mother are haunted by the appearance of the *jinn* (as noted above the jinn folklore was also used in the *Girl's Dormitory*), who relentlessly attack them until they finally escape their building. There is a formal connection made in the film between the unexploded missile and the appearance of the *jinn* (a similar connection is drawn in *The Devil's Backbone* between the unexploded bomb and the appearance of the ghost) on the building that serves as a political allegory for the horrors of the Iran-Iraq war, and the nightmarish universe created by the new Islamic regime after the revolution. The influence of the motif of *zar* or evil wind in southern Iranian folklore on the film is also evident especially as much of the imagery linked to the jinn is gestured through the motif of the wind

[516] At the premiere screening of *Under the Shadow* at the Cameo cinema in Edinburgh in 2016, during the Q&A session I asked Babak Anvari whether *A Girl* or any other Iranian horror films were an influence on his film, but he was not very forthcoming on the influence of *A Girl*, but mentioned the Iranian horror film *Girl's Dormitory*. For other filmic and directorial influences both western and Iranian, see "Under the Shadow: the films that influenced this creepy Iranian horror," interview by Samuel Wigley, Updated: 13 February 2017, accessed April 25, 2017, http://www.bfi.org.uk/news-opinion/news-bfi/interviews/under-shadow-babak-anvari-influences-iranian-horror.

(*baad*) in the film may be related to beliefs pertaining to *zaar*.[517] This film however cannot be considered to belong to the new film movement that evokes the two modes of the weird and the eerie, since it is strictly a horror genre film that does not break away from horror conventions, and its themes are not related to contemporary Iran, but Iran during the Iran-Iraq war.

As discussed earlier, the reception of *A Girl Walks Home Alone At Night* in Iran was overwhelmingly negative (not public reception but state reception, since the film was never screened in Iran and is categorically banned). Indeed, it is not incidental that a new popular film about vampires was filmed for the first time in Iran by Reza Attaran called, *Derakula* (*Dracula*, 2016).[518] The comedy-horror film tells the story of a drug-addicted family man that is kidnapped by a vampire who is a descendant of Dracula, whose ancestors emigrated to Russia and eventually fled to Iran after World War II. The kidnapped man (played by Reza Attaran himself) slowly turns the descendent of Dracula (Levon Haftvan) into a drug addict, by convincing him that it will help him overcome his blood addiction. In the end Dracula finally kills the man, as he realizes that he has been turned into a junkie. In the film, the figure of *bakhtak* is directly mentioned and correlated with the vampire. In one scene, when Dracula and the character of Reza Attaran are visiting the doctor to seek help for their drug addiction, the doctor berates Dracula in a moment full of irony, saying, "You are like a *bakhtak* who has fallen upon society, and will not allow it to breath; like a bunch of parasites that feed on the blood of human beings. You are blood-suckers." The comedic irony here, of course, lies in the fact that the doctor does not know that he is literally speaking to a *bakhtak* or a blood-sucking vampire. Though the film is a parable of the problem of drug addiction in Iranian society, yet the subtext of the film effectively functions as an ideological response to *A Girl*, since it

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[517] "Zār, harmful wind (*bād*) associated with spirit possession beliefs in southern coastal regions of Iran. In southern coastal regions of Iran such as Qeshm Island, people believe in the existence of winds that can be either vicious or peaceful, believer (Muslim) or non-believer (infidel). The latter are considered more dangerous than the former and zār belongs to this group of winds." Maria Sabaye Moghaddam, "ZĀR," *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, accessed October 22, 2016, http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/zar

[518] For the popularity of Reza Attaran and how he serves the maintenance of the status quo in Iran, see Babak Tabarraee, "Rationalizing the Irrational: Reza Attaran's Popularity, Stardom, and the Recent Cycle of Iranian Absurd Films," *Iranian Studies* Volume 51, 2018 - Issue 4, Pages 613-632.

locates the vampire as a foreigner (the Dracula family in the film are Russian aristocrats who came to Iran). In this sense the vampire or Dracula is not native to Iran (unlike the chador-clad female vampire in *A Girl*), but a foreign intruder. Linking the Dracula family to Russia (and let's not forget the British origins of the novel *Dracula*) may also allude to Russia's (and Britian's) imperial interests in Iran in the 19th century, and thereby renders the vampire or Dracula into a foreign intruder who lives on the life-blood of Iranians.[519] In this way, it seems that the state may have been eager to support the making of *Dracula*, as it provides a filmic counter-narrative to the so-called "anti-Iran" (*zid-e Iran*) film *A Girl Walks Home Alone At Night*.

5.6 A Vampire's Accent or Accented Cinema

A Girl Walks Home Alone At Night was submitted to the Vancouver International Film Festival and the Sundance Film Festival as an Iranian film. The theoretical question to be asked here is: can a film made in America, which is effectively an independent American film, be considered an Iranian film? Indeed, the film scholar and critic Kristin Thompson writing about the film in David Bordwell's website on Cinema, notes this ambiguity in the categorization of *A Girl* as an Iranian film. She writes, "Whether *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* (2014) is actually an Iranian film is debatable, though it is listed as such in the program… Amirpour is of Iranian descent, and the film is in Farsi, which may be enough to have it considered Iranian."[520]

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[519] For Russian and British imperialist projects in Iran, see Firuz Kazemzadeh, *Russia and Britain in Persia, 1864-1914: A Study in Imperialism* (Yale University Press, 1968). Also, during the reign of Reza Shah in World War II in 1941, when the Shah chose neutrality in the war against Nazi Germany, the British and Russians invaded Iran, and deposed Reza Shah and sent him into exile, and in his stead placed his son Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, as the new Shah of Iran. Finally, the 1953 Coup was instantiated by the British MI6 and the American CIA, in order to oust the democratically elected prime minister, Mohammad Mosaddegh (d. 1967) for nationalizing Iranian oil. See Ervan Abrahamian, *The Coup: 1953, the CIA, and the Roots of Modern U.S.-Iranian Relations* (New York: The New Press, 2015).

[520] Kristian Thompson, "Iranian cinema moves on," Thursday, October 9, 2014, accessed May 25, 2016, http://www.davidbordwell.net/blog/2014/10/09/middle-eastern-fare-at-viff/

In order to theorize the film's cultural location, especially its hybridity or liminality, I will deploy Hamid Naficy's concept of *accented cinema* to illuminate the film's aesthetics. An accented cinema is structured by a complex relationship to home or homeland by directors working outside their country of birth. These films are defined as diasporic, exilic, and migrant, and are often very diverse, but still share a common style:

> Accented films are interstitial because they are created astride and in the interstices of social formations and cinematic practices. Consequently, they are simultaneously local and global, and they resonate against the prevailing cinematic production practices, at the same time that they benefit from them. As such, the best of the accented films signify and signify upon the conditions both of exile and diaspora and of cinema. They signify and signify upon exile and diaspora by expressing, allegorizing, commenting upon, and critiquing the home and host societies and cultures and the deterritorialized conditions of the filmmakers. They signify and signify upon cinematic traditions by means of their artisanal and collective production modes, their aesthetics and politics of smallness and imperfection, and their narrative strategies that cross generic boundaries and undermine cinematic realism.[521]

Amirpour's *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* fits well within the theoretical coordinates of accented cinema, in some respects but not in others. The film was not made in Iran but was shot and produced in the US in Tufts/Westwood California, with the dialogue entirely in Persian with an Iranian cast and characters. The director's parents are Iranian, and left Iran after the 1979 revolution and immigrated to England, and Amirpour eventually moved to the US with her family. In other respects the film is not a perfect fit. For example, *A Girl* is a generic film made within some of the conventions of the vampire film, and largely (although not fully) operating within the codes and conventions of that genre, although as Kristian Thompson states regarding the film, "the genre is the vampire film, though this one is hardly conventional;"[522] but many of the films within the aesthetics of accented cinema function often outside generic modes and conventions. In other ways *A Girl* fits within the conceptual framework of accented cinema, as it is a film that stages the (dis)location of the filmmaker, and deals with the deterritorialized conditions of the director, who represents a hybrid generation of Iranian-Americans, and who although

[521] Hamid Naficy, *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking* (Princeton: University of Princeton Press, 2001), 4-5.
[522] Thompson, "Iranian cinema moves on."

ethnically Iranian, are culturally hybrid (American and Iranian). In this sense, the director's own liminal identity and status is perfectly mirrored through the most liminal of creatures, the nameless female vampire, the Girl. Amirpour's film also bears relation to other accented Iranian female directors such as Shirin Neshat and Marjane Satrapi, and especially to Satrapi's work, since her graphic novel memoir *Persepolis* and its film adaptation, seem to be particular influences on the film's *chador* (veil) iconography. Neshat's black and white photographic series, *Women of Allah*, is another visible influence on the black-chador aesthetics of the film.

Another aspect of the film's hybridity or liminality that contributes to its accented aesthetic is the way Bad City is visualized in the film. Bad City is a kind of amalgamation of Tehran and Los Angeles, a sort of hybrid city. The film symbolically comments on the underbelly of Iranian society, especially Tehran and which form together a nightmare like noir city baptized in darkness, as we often see the city through the vampire's eyes, like an endless night filled with drug dealers, pimps and prostitutes–the unwanted underside of the city. In this sense the noir like city – Bad City – is a liminal space, a nightmarish interzone between dream and wakefulness, between reality and fiction, a world which is double in its uncanny formation, which is why Amirpour has called it 'Tehrangelis,' (a hybrid term coined by Iranians living in Los Angeles long ago, due to its large Iranian immigrant or diasporic population), since it was shot in a suburb of Los Angeles (the film was shot in Tuft), the quintessential noir city, by rendering it into a stylized Tehran underworld, the two cities become one in this dreamscape of a city that effectively is the materialization of the psyche of their characters, like the masterpiece of German expressionism *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920). [523]

Similarly all the actors in the film are diasporic or exilic subjects living outside Iran, which is why the Persian spoken by the female vampire (played by Shiela Vand) and many of the characters in the film (except Marshal Manesh) have an accent that is discernable to a native Persian speaker. At times the Persian spoken by the central characters, especially the Girl, is even ungrammatical. For instance, where the Girl (Shiela Vand) says to Arash "you don't know me," Amirpour has the

[523] See Ron Kelley, *Irangeles: Iranians in Los Angeles* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993). See also, Nazanine Naraghi, "'Tehrangeles,' CA: The Aesthetics of Shame," in *Psychoanalytic Geographies*, edited by Paul Kingsbury and Steve Pile, (London/New York: Routledge, 2016), 165-180.

Girl say in Persian "*to mano nemidooni*," which is grammatically incorrect in Persian and should be "*to mano nemishenasi*". It is clear that Amirpour has translated the English word "don't know" back into Persian as *nemidooni*. In this sense, the film literally has an accent for native Iranian audiences, but again this fits well with the concept of an accented cinema as it stages an 'aesthetics and politics of smallness and imperfection.'

5.7 The Female Vampire as Castrator

One of the motifs of *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* is castration anxiety and the disavowal of castration. Throughout the film the female vampire, the Girl, is associated with the image of castration and scenes and images that allude to castration and emasculation pervade the film. Indeed, the vampire – the Girl – is the figure of castration *par excellence*. In her book, *The Monstrous-Feminine*, Barbara Creed conceptualizes a psychoanalytic feminist theory of the horror genre, wherein she locates the figure of monstrosity in the female reproductive body. Creed argues that many horror films reveal that the fear of the (monstrous) woman is related to castration or woman as the castrating threat. Creed writes:

> Whereas Freud argued that woman terrifies because she appears to be castrated, man's fear of castration has, in my view, led him to construct another monstrous phantasy – that of woman as castrator. Here woman's monstrousness is linked more directly to questions of sexual desire than to the area of reproduction. The image of woman as castrator takes at least three forms: woman as the deadly *femme castratrice*, the castrating mother, and the *vagina dentata*.[524]

Here Creed proposes that feminine/female monstrosity in horror films are related to issues of sexual desire rather than to reproduction. The three forms of the figure of the castrating woman in horror films: *femme castratrice*, the castrating mother, and the *vagina dentate* are also embodied in the figure of the veiled female vampire.

There are several scenes throughout the film that stage this logic of castration, and I will take each of them in turn. For example, in one of the emblematic scenes in which the Girl represents the *femme castratrice* is in her encounter with the pimp,

[524] Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 1993), 7.

who invites the Girl to his home, but she pauses at the entrance to be invited inside – a conventional formula of the vampire genre, alluding to the necessity of having to invite the vampire inside before they can enter. As they enter, the Girl looks around his flat while Saeed performs his machismo masculinity, and takes drugs, lifts weights, and dances (a perfect verisimilitude of performing masculinity evident in parts of the underground rave or techno subculture which abound both in California and Tehran). In this scene the roles become reversed in which the predator (the pimp/dealer) becomes prey, and the predator is the vampire Girl. Before getting ready to have sex with her, he places his finger in her mouth, and she begins to suck his figure slowly, clearly evoking the act of fellatio. Suddenly her fangs protrude outwards and she bites off his finger – effectively castrating and emasculating him. This is the first scene in which we are introduced to the powers of the female vampire, where she is staged as the horrifying figure of the *femme castratrice*. The Girl stands as the castrating woman *par excellence*, the figure of feminine vengeance, she enacts what Atti and Arash were incapable of doing (for instance, Atti is forced to prostitute herself and was just forced to give the pimp fellatio; and the pimp castrated Arash by taking his 1950s thunderbird – a phallic symbol of male potency). In this sense, she is the fantasmatic realization of their desires.

Figure 5.4 The Girl about to suck Saeed's finger and bite it off.

In another scene, the Girl like a specter follows the boy with the skateboard, recalling Marx's famous opening line in the *Communist Manifesto*, "A specter is haunting Europe"; here another specter is haunting Iran or Bad City as its obscene double, the specter of female sexuality. All of a sudden the Girl appears near him, and as the boy turns, the Girl asks him, "are you a good boy?" Here the questioning stages the riddle of the sphinx, the riddle of feminine mystery. Then she insists: answer me, are you a good boy or not? The tariffed boy answers: yes. Then the Girl bends down and gazes at him with a probing look, and says: "don't lie." Then she interrogates him with the same question a third time: "Are you a good boy?" And he says, evermore frightened, "yes." Then she says, "I'll ask you again, are you a good boy?" Then she growls at him displaying her vampire fangs, and with an obscenely distorted or anamorphic voice that no longer sounds feminine says: "I can take your eyeballs out of your skull and give them to the dogs." The eyeballs here symbolize the boy's testicles, and the threat is again a castrating threat. Then she says, "I'll be watching you till the end of your life, understand?" The boy trembling says, "yes." She then tells him for the last time be a good boy, i.e., don't masturbate, forbidding masturbatory *jouissance* with the threat of castration. In this sense, the vampire Girl here functions as the castrating mother. The image of blinding the boy by taking his eyeballs, recalls the image of Oedipus Rex who blinds himself in the end once he discovers the horror of incest with his mother. In his famous text, *The Uncanny* (1919), Freud states:

> We know from psycho-analytic experience, however, that the fear of damaging or losing one's eyes is a terrible one in children…. A study of dreams, phantasies and myths has taught us that anxiety about one's eyes, the fear of going blind, is often enough a substitute for the dread of being castrated. The self-blinding of the mythical criminal, Oedipus, was simply a mitigated form of the punishment of castration — the only punishment that was adequate for him by the *lex talionis*.[525]

[525] Freud, S. (1919). The 'Uncanny'. *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XVII (1917-1919): An Infantile Neurosis and Other Works*, 230.

In this sense, Oedipus' act of blinding himself can be read in light of the Freudian logic of castration or self-castration in this instance, wherein the revelation of the horror of incest results in Oedipus blinding himself (i.e., blinding = castration).

The boy may also stand in as a symbolic representation of all Iranian boys in the Islamic Republic as potential future men, the female vampire's superego-like injunction to be a good boy is the threat to treat women with dignity and equality; in this sense the threat is on the side of the Lacanian Real and all the more radical, since it emerges from the feminine position against the (patriarchal) symbolic order structured by the Law (*sharia*). As a last act, the vampire Girl takes the boys skateboard, which is another allusion to castration, since the skateboard stands for the boy's phallus – the image of a chador-clad female vampire riding around a skateboard signals that she is a phallic woman or mother, not to be trifled with.[526]

Another logic of castration in the film is related to Arash's father who functions as the castrated father. In the film, Arash's mother has left his father and he is left to care for his junky father. Arash wishes to be unburdened of this responsibility and fantasmatically wishes for the father's death, but cannot really kill him. In the film, the paternal figure is staged as "castrated" and "impotent", whose impotence is signaled by being a lifeless junky, incapacitated by his addiction. The father has lost all paternal authority and is later banished from the house by Arash, which is rendered verbally by Arash's violent outburst, "what kind of a father are you? You are supposed to be my father?" This moment stages the full collapse of paternal authority. The death of the father later by the vampire Girl effectively functions as Arash's fantasmatic wish fulfillment, the materialization of his fantasy of patricide, since he was too "impotent" to kill the father himself. As Žižek states, "We don't want our fathers alive. We want them dead. The ultimate object of anxiety is a living father."[527] In this sense, the vampire Girl stands for the figure of the absent mother or substitute mother whom Arash possesses at the end, once the paternal figure as obstacle is removed and no longer functions as a barrier to sexual union.

Arash's incestuous desire for the (absent) mother is staged in one particular scene in the film. Before going to the underground masquerade party, Arash longingly looks at his mother's photos, and then takes her lipstick and uses it as

[526] Creed, *Monstrous-Feminine*, 157.
[527] Žižek, *The Pervert's Guide to Cinema*.

makeup, and makes a Dracula costume from her clothing items. This dressing and assuming the identity of Dracula through the makeup and clothing of the mother, renders visible Arash's unconscious desire to sexually possess the mother. The erotics of dressing and assuming the identity of Dracula stages the libidinal desire to possess the mother in all its erotic ambiguity, but it also functions as a desperate attempt for potency and phallic authority – Dracula is, after all, the figure of masculine phallic potency par excellence. This desire is staged in a scene where there is a comedic encounter between Arash masquerading as Dracula and the Girl vampire. The first comedic dimension at work here is the evocation of the iconography of Western films, namely the famous standoff between the hero and the villain. The other comedic moment here is not simply that one is the real vampire and the other is a fake masquerading one (Dracula), but that phallic potency is on the side of the feminine (female vampire), rather than the masculine (Arash as Dracula). Here the Girl is the 'Real' Dracula in its full Lacanian sense, the Girl as the Thing and the *objet petit a*, the embodiment of the traumatic Real. It is here that the Girl as vampire acts as the very realization or materialization of Arash's fantasy, his wish fulfillment, namely to kill the father and possess the mother–in this instance the substitute mother, the vampire Girl herself. This is one of the elementary lessons of psychoanalysis: the more horrifying thing then *not* getting what you desire, is to *get* what you desire. As Oscar Wild puts it, "In this world there are only two tragedies. One is not getting what one wants, and the other is getting it."[528]

The scene or shot in which the Girl and Arash in the Dracula costume encounter each other in the street, cinematically stages the encounter between the new type of vampire represented by the Girl (who listens to punk music, etc.) and the old traditional vampire, namely Dracula – which is of course represented by Arash who embodies the traditional masculine role in his views towards women, representative of old traditional Iranian masculinity or male chivalry called *jawanmardi* (lit. young-manliness). This comes to the fore in one emblematic scene where a girl for whom Arash works doing gardening and other menial work asks him to fix her television set. When Arash is in her bedroom fixing her television and she continues to stay in the room scantly clad talking on the phone he states, "what will

[528] Oscar Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest and Other Plays* (New York: Pocket Books, 2005), 161.

your parents think of you being alone with me" – here the logic of *na-mahram* in Shi'i culture is strictly operative, where non-relative males should not be alone with girls who are either not their close relatives or spouse.

Figure 5.5 Arash dressed as Count Dracula meets the Real 'Dracula,' the Girl. The scene also gestures towards the iconography of the stand off in the Western genre.

5.8 The Vampire Thing, the Death Drive and Obscene Immortality

The properly feminist psychoanalytic procedure here would be to ask, why does the Girl attack mainly the 'men' in Bad City? It is here that we can read her attacks as the Freudian 'return of the repressed,' namely the return of repressed sexual desires, the female libidinal energy, which had not found a proper outlet in life, so it continued after death, as a kind of 'undead' life force (vampire), persisting beyond life and death. Indeed, this is the Freudian death drive par excellence. The Freudian death drive (*Todestrieb*) is not simply the derive towards death or self-destruction, nor some kind of "transcendental" immortality, such as the nirvana principle, but rather the obscene life energy of the libido, which insists beyond life and death. As Žižek puts it:

> This is why we should not confuse the death drive with the so-called "nirvana principle," the thrust toward destruction or self-obliteration: the Freudian death drive has nothing whatsoever to do with the craving for self-annihilation, for the return to the inorganic absence of any life-tension; it is, on the contrary, the very opposite of dying—a name for the "undead" eternal life itself, for the horrible fate of being caught in the endless repetitive cycle of wandering around in guilt and pain.[529]

[529] Žižek, *The Parallax View*, 62.

The last part of this quote by Žižek can to be read via a significant scene in the film, where the prostitute Atti asks the vampire Girl, "what are you?" and she replies: "I am bad." The phrase "I am bad" is not a reference to Michael Jackson's song in the mid 1980s (albeit it could be, in light of the 1980s iconography in the vampire Girl's bedroom), but functions like the description of the figure of the depressive provided by Julia Kristeva:

> According to classical psychoanalytic theory (Abraham, Freud, Klein), depression, like mourning, hides an aggressivity against the lost object and thereby reveals the ambivalence on the part of the mourner with respect to the object of his mourning. 'I love him/her', the depressive seems to say about a lost being or object, 'but, even more, I hate him/her; because I love him/her, in order not to lose him/her, I install him/her in myself; but because I hate him/her, this other in myself is a bad ego, *I am bad*, worthless, I am destroying myself' [emphasis added].[530]

In this sense, the female vampire is the figure of the depressive par excellence, and the lost object is the 'I' of the subject of enunciation, namely the Girl before becoming a vampire. The Girl's eternal thirst for blood, its aggressivity and killing, is in reality the vampire's perpetual desire to kill herself: to erase herself out of existence, to be annihilated – in effect, the desire to die and escape this obscene immortality. But, since the vampire has become immortal – in a perpetually living death – she can never truly die, no matter how much she kills; in a sort of Freudian repetition compulsion, the outward lust for death/blood is ultimately aggressivity turned towards itself – no matter how much she kills her victims, her own death is never realized. The endless cycle of killing and feeding is the eternal desire to die once and for all, but paradoxically, the very act of killing and feeding perpetuates her immortality. The vampire's immortality is thus an obscene immortality, a curse, from which she seeks release.

Apropos the vampire Girl, who remains nameless throughout the film, and is named only 'The Girl' in the credits; beyond the obvious gesture towards the nameless Samurai *rōnin* (masterless Samurai), originally played by Toshiro Mifune in Akira Kurosawa's two masterpieces *Yojimbo* (1961) and *Sanjuro* (1962), from

[530] Julia Kristeva, "On the Melancholic Imaginary", *new formations*, Number 3, Winter (1987): 6-7.

which Sergio Leone stole the idea for *A Fist Full of Dollars* (1967), with Clint Eastwood as the nameless drifter; there is a twist to this standard figure of namelessness in Iranian Sufism that is worth recalling here. In Sufism having no name or being nameless (*bi nam-o neshani*) is the station of mystical death or *fana*; here in this instance, we have a strange reverberation of this motif in which the next mystical station after *fana* (death) is *baqa* or subsistence or persistence after death (*fana*),[531] literally subsistence after death, or immortality – the horror name for this immortality is obscene immortality, which is exemplified in the figure of the vampire.[532]

The vampire Girl's lack of a name, functions as the non-symbolization of the figure of the vampire, the missing signifier of the name means that the vampire does not belong to the Symbolic order, the socio-symbolic universe of language, laws, customs, etc. which precisely mortifies and castrates the subject into being (through entry into the world of language). Human subjectivity is constituted by the symbolic but the figure of the vampire is beyond both imaginarization or specularization, since the Lacanian imaginary is typified by the mirror phase and the vampire has no mirror image, and as well as symbolization, which is precisely why the vampire is on the side of the (Lacanian) Real. This is what Žižek also states apropos the vampire's lack of mirror image in his own characteristic fashion, "It is therefore clear why vampires are invisible in the mirror: because they have read Lacan and, consequently, know how to behave-they materialize *objet a* which, by definition, *cannot be mirrored*."[533] In this sense, we can say the horror of the female vampire is that she is a non-castrated being. Such a figure is what was evoked by Freud's myth of the primordial father, who was the non-castrated figure of total *jouissance*, a kind of monstrous figure who had to be murdered by his brothers, and from whose death the twin Oedipal laws at the origins of civilization were constituted.

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[531] See, G. Böwering, 'BAQĀʾ WA FANĀʾ,' *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, Vol. III, Fasc. 7, pp. 722-724. Available online: http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/baqa-wa-fana-sufi-term-signifying-subsistence-and-passing-away

[532] Žižek has various formulations of obscene immortality in his work related to the figure of the undead in horror fiction, and to the Lacanian concept of *lamella*, but for a general view see Slavoj Žižek, "The Obscene Immortality and its Discontents," *The International Journal of Žižek Studies*, Vol 11, No 2 (2017), pp. 1-14.

[533] Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom*, 126.

In an interview Amirpour was asked what fascinated her about vampires, and she replied: "If a vampire showed up, I'd be like: "Do it: I want to live forever." That's my feeling about vampires."[534] The search for the fountain of youth or immortality, which today is staged through bio-computer technology and the possibility to merge with computers and to download ourselves digitally into ever new software *ad infinitum*, is the dream and promise of immortality held out by techno-capitalism. This dream has a name in psychoanalysis: a nightmare. This nightmare is realized in *The Girl*, in the figure of the female vampire (the Girl) who provides a version of this fetishized longing for immortality (since the vampire is immortal), and the flight from mortality and inevitability of death. In the face of existential aloneness, alienation and the abyss of death, the fantasmatic figure of the vampire holds out the alluring promise of love and immortality for Arash, and by extension every subject who longs for love and immortality. This perverse longing for physical immortality, is what is called obscene immortality. As Žižek states: "It's not as classical metaphysics thinks, we are too terrified to think we are mortal beings, we would like to be immortal. No. The truly horrible thing is to be immortal. Immortality is the true nightmare, not death."[535] Today's version of immortality then is an undead immortality or the immortality of the undead. Which is why the figure of the vampire holds a certain power of fascination and functions as a perfect fetish, a stand in for the promise of immortality offered up by digital neoliberal capitalism.

In the very final scene of the film, where Arash and the Girl vampire drive off in his car, the Freudian death drive is *literally* enacted, the dissolution of the subject through the love-object or *das Ding*, the Thing–the vampiric Girl. It is the final masochistic act of love in which Arash as subject accepts his own being-towards-death, as Heidegger calls it.[536] Here the love-couple itself has the structure of vampirism in which in order to be properly installed into the symbolic universe of love, the lover (Arash) must accept its own death as subject, to mortify himself – to be *in*-love is to die for and through, the loved Thing, the beloved Other (the vampire).

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[534] "ND/NF Interview: Ana Lily Amirpour," by Emma Myers on March 19, 2014, accessed November 12, 2016, https://www.filmcomment.com/blog/interview-ana-lily-amirpour/
[535] Žižek, *The Pervert's Guide to Cinema*.
[536] Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 247-74.

As Byung Chul-han puts it, "Love means *dying in the Other*."[537] It is only through the acceptance of death, that immortality becomes possible, albeit in this instance, an obscene immortality.

5.9 Chion with Lacan, Take Two: *Athorybos* and the Inscription of Desire

In his recent text, *Words on Screen* (*l'écrit au cinéma*), Michel Chion provides some of the most fascinating theoretical analysis of writing in the diegetic space of the film world. One of the formal features of writing that appears in the profilmic universe, Chion baptizes with the Greek name: *athorybos*. Chion states:

> I have given the name *athorybos* (Greetk privative *a-* + thorybos, noise) to any object or movement in the image that could–either in reality or in the imagination–produce sound but which is not accompanied by any sound. It is my contention all the writing we read in a film image that is not accompanied by an utterance, or is not the source or "launchpad" for an utterance, merits this term."[538]

In this formulation, *athorbyos* is a writing "without noise" or writing without voice, that is a writing in the film image that would normally produce sound or can be imagined to produce sound but remains silent. In this sense, Claudia Gorbman rightly points out that, "This idea is the analogue to Chion's term *acousmatic*… describing sound whose visual source is not seen."[539] For Chion there are two forms of *athorybos* operative in the cinema that he calls: private *athorybos* and public *athorybos*, a few of which I will be concerned with here, namely tattoos (private *athorbyos*), posters and graffiti (public *athorybos*).[540]

Though Chion does not address the question of desire that may be evoked in relation to the concept of *athorybos*, Lacan's concept of desire as an inscription at the level of language provides an important supplement to Chion's concept. Lacan states, "Desire is always what is inscribed as a repercussion of the articulation of language at

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[537] Byung-Chul Han, *The Agony of Eros* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT press, 2017), 24.
[538] Michel Chion, *Words on Screen*, trans. Claudia Gorbman (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 60.
[539] Chion, *Words on Screen*, 203.
[540] For a full list of private and public *athorbyos* theorized by Chion, see the section, "Diegetic Writing as Athorbyos," Chion, *Words on Screen*, 59-90.

the level of the Other [i.e., the social Other]."[541] According to Lacan, the articulation of language at the level of the (social) Other is what always writes/inscribes desire in the subject – in other words desire is never self-inscribed (self-induced, self-generated), but always appears/emerges through the big Other, the Symbolic order (i.e., language and society). This perfectly tallies with the forms of athorybal writing in the cinema that Chion mentions, such as tattoos, posters and graffiti which function as an address or the articulation of language in the (social) Other, wherein the subject's desire is aroused. In this sense, Lacan's notion of desire as an inscription of language at the level of the Other, brings to the fore the logic of desire operative in any athorybal inscription in the cinema.

The diegetic writing as *athorybos* that appears in Persian in the profilmic universe of *A Girl*, (which only native Persian speakers can read since it does not form part of the subtitling of the film), has the function of evoking the spectator's desire, since the writing arouses the spectator's desire to know the meaning behind the mysterious writing that appears in the diegetic space of the film, through tattoos, signs, posters, and graffiti. The spectators may ask themselves, "What does all this writing mean?" In this way, the (non Persian-speaking) spectator is the subject of the athorybal address, but is unable to decipher its cryptic message. Indeed, since the film was shot in Tufts California, it is clear that all the athorybal writing in the film is not a found image, functioning as part of the natural setting and location of the film, but rather was deliberately constructed in the mise-en-scène of the relevant shots. Therefore, the athorybal writing in the diegetic reality of the film-world plays an important role in the filmic universe, which functions as a supplementary form of meaning-making at the level of form and as the dialectic counterpart of the narrative. In this sense, the film form itself through its athorybal inscriptions conveys a message that is consonant with the narrative: the athorbyal writing is the return of the repressed, as Lacan states, "my idea of *the written* – to situate it, to start from there… Well let's say it, colon, *is the return of the repressed*" [my emphasis].[542] In this sense, the athorybal writing in the film itself functions as the return of the repressed since some of the writing on the wall includes words such as 'sex', 'fear', 'boss,' etc.

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[541] Jacques Lacan, *My Teaching***,** translated by David Macey (London: Verso, 2008), 38.
[542] Lacan, *...or Worse*, 16.

One of the scenes where athorybal writing appears in the form of a poster is when the vampire Girl comes out of a grocery store, and through a long shot we see on the wall to the left a large poster of a black veiled female figure and on the right hand side of the window of the grocery store is an poster that says, "Boss/Leader" (in Persian *ra'is*). The image of the black-chador female has a face that is blanked out or emptied out in white, a blank image where the face should be – a perfect instantiation of the Lacanian void subject – and on which it is written in Persian, "who is it"? (*shoma*?) The question in the poster is not only addressed to the people of Bad City in the filmic universe, but the question is also addressed to the spectator, asking us "who is it?" (*shoma?*) Who is the vampire Girl, and what does she want? To put it in the (in)famous terms that Freud put it, "what does a woman [vampire] want?"[543] This again is the question of desire, recalling Lacan's formulation *Che vuoi*? What do you want? What does the Other want? The spectator's desire is thereby aroused and implicated here, since the spectator wants to know what the Other/vampire wants.

At the bottom of the poster we read the words, "is this you? (*in to'ee*) – call now (*zang bezan*)," with a number given below. It is as if the film, in an obverse form of the Althusserian interpellation – where you are addressed by the figure of authority in the dominant ideology – the viewer is interpolated to revolt, recalling Julia Kristeva's formulation, "Revolt, She Said".[544] It is an athorybal address to the (female) spectator to call and join the revolt. Indeed, it seems the film text is directly interpolating the female spectator telling them that they are all the embodiments of the vampire Girl. The empty face like mask stands as the empty container that can be the face of every feminine/female subject in Iran. The athorybal address, "call now" is calling all women in Iran to revolutionary action. The emptied out face of the veiled woman on the poster, recalls the mask of Guy Fawkes in the film *V for Vendetta* (2005), (based on Allen Moore's eponymous graphic novel) in which every citizen subject wears the same Guy Fawkes mask at the end of the film representing the revolutionary subject and as a gesture of revolutionary solidarity, while

[543] It is reported that "[Freud] said once to Marie Bonaparte: 'The great question that has never been answered, and which I have not yet been able to answer, despite my thirty years of research into the feminine soul, is 'What does a woman want?' See, Ernest Jones, *Sigmund Freud: Life and Work* (London: Hogarth Press, 1953), Vol. 2, 421.
[544] Julia Kristeva, *Revolt, She Said* (Massachusetts: Semiotext(e) / Foreign Agents, 2002).

occupying the square in London; similarly the figure of the Girl in the poster and in the universe of the film seems to call all women in Iran to take revolutionary and insurrectionary action against the State (the Islamic Republic), against the figure of the Boss/Leader (*ra'is*), and against all figures of paternal authority.[545] In this sense, the Girl like V in *V for Vendetta* stands for the figure of the female revolutionary subject par excellence. It is no wonder that the Iranian authorities banned this film, and in their reviews of the film noted that this film is "against Iran" and "against the veil (*hejab*)" by which they meant against the Islamic Republic.

Conclusion

In this chapter I theorized that contrary to the previous chapter where the people were caught in the nightmare of the State, in *A Girl Walks Home Alone At Night* the nightmare of the Islamic Republic appeared in the figure of the chador-clad female vampire, the paradoxical embodiment of uncontrolled feminine sexuality. I argued that the vampire Girl, symbolized the return of the repressed of female desire and sexuality. I demonstrated that the film stages the Freudian return of the repressed, specifically the repression of feminine desire through an analysis of the concept of the return of the repressed in psychoanalysis and its articulation in psychoanalytic horror film theory, but with a Lacanian twist to the standard formulation, where the return of the repressed is, paradoxically not from the past but from the future.

It was seen that female sexuality according to Shi'ite legal theory is possessed of a traumatic Real, in the Lacanian sense, that is the source of horror to the ideology of the Islamic Republic. Indeed, in the Islamic Republic the repression of female sexuality is enacted through the logic of veil, since according to an Islamic theory of feminine sexuality women are possessed of an active sexuality, a surplus of sexual desire and enjoyment (*jouissance*) that must be covered over and controlled lest it be a cause of social chaos (*fetna*). The logic of the veil (*hejab*) is thereby meant to cover over this surplus enjoyment (*plus-de-jouir*), this excess of *jouissance* (enjoyment) inhering in women that is a threat to the patriarchal symbolic order. This was also seen in the way the film was received by official sources in Iran as an "anti-

[545] The figure of the *ra'is* (whom we see in posters) may allude to the Supreme Leader (*rahbar*) or the Guardianship of the Jurist (*velayat-e faqih*), a role or office first instituted and occupied by Ayatollah Khomeini and now by Ali Khamenei.

Iranian" and an "anti-hejab" film. The film was contextualized in light of post-revolutionary Iranian horror cinema and as theorized as an example of the two modes of the weird and the eerie discussed in the previous chapter. It was also demonstrated that the film's aesthetics was in line with Naficy's theory of accented cinema, and its status as an Iranian diasporic film functioned to critique the state more freely, since it would have been impossible to make such a film in Iran.

In this way, the chador-clad female vampire, the Girl, stands for the Freudian return of the repressed, where the weird juxtaposition of an eroticized female vampire with a chador destabilizes the logic of the veil, which is meant to cover over the threat of uncontrolled female sexual desire. The return of the repressed is then the eruption of feminine libidinal energy, typified by the vampiric Girl, who haunts and kills the male inhabitants of Bad City. In the final analysis, all the various elements, such as the vampire Girl as castrator, the logic of obscene immortality and the death drive, Chion's notion of *athorybos* and Lacan's inscription of desire, all circulated around the motif of the return of the repressed, the repressed Real of feminine sexuality exemplified in the paradoxical figure of the chador-clad female vampire.

Conclusion

I would like to return again to the question with which I began this thesis, namely what is at stake, today, in coupling psychoanalysis and Iranian cinema? If we accept, as I have argued, that psychoanalytic theory is, at its core, concerned with the structure of desire and its interpretation, than we can discern that it is in Iranian cinema, perhaps more than any other cinematic universe, that the logic of desire is operative both at the level of form and content. It is through the encounter between Iranian cinema and Freudo-Lacanian psychoanalytic theory that the interpretation of these desires can be brought to light, desires that often undermine the explicit ideology of the Islamic Republic and uncover its hidden libidinal economy.

It is a little puzzling that it has taken this long for psychoanalytic film theory to be systematically coupled with Iranian cinema, since as this thesis has demonstrated, the short-circuiting of (Lacanian) psychoanalysis and Iranian cinema is capable of bringing out theoretical insights that shatter our common perceptions and conceptions of the two in novel ways. Walter Benjamin once used a profoundly counter-intuitive metaphor that is relevant here, he indicated that we must "act as if the classic work is a film for which the appropriate chemical liquid to develop it was invented only later, so that it is only today that we can get the full picture."[546] In this sense, it is perhaps only today that we can get the full picture of the structure of desire in Iranian cinema by applying the chemical liquid that is psychoanalytic theory to Iranian films.

In his magnum opus, *Less Than Nothing*, Žižek strangely claims psychoanalysis only for the western Judeo-Christian tradition against Islam, by theorizing that it is only the former that endorses the full reality of the objects of desire, whereas for the latter all objects of desire are merely illusory. He states, "This is why psychoanalysis is firmly entrenched in the Western Judeo-Christian tradition, not only against Oriental spirituality but also against Islam, which, like Oriental spirituality, endorses the thesis on *the ultimate vanity and illusory nature of every object of desire* [emphasis added]."[547] Indeed, it is apparent that Žižek is woefully ill-

[546] Slavoj Žižek, *Antigone* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), introduction, iBooks. See Walter Bejamin, "the Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections* (New York: Schocken Books, 2007), 220-221.
[547] Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*, 132.

equipped in dealing with the nuances, intricacies, and complexities of the study of Islamic thought in relation to desire and sexuality. This thesis has variously demonstrated that (both Sunni and Shi'i) Islam acknowledges everywhere the reality and efficacity of (sexual) desire and the erotic, as Bouhdiba states, "In Islam, then, sexuality enjoys a privileged status. Whether in the texts that regulate the exercise of sexuality in social life or in those that allow the dream its full oneiric density, the right to the pleasures of sex is stated forcefully."[548] The reading that claims psychoanalysis only for the western Judeo-Christian tradition is a disavowal of the profoundly shared cultural and intellectual heritage of these monotheistic religions of the book throughout history, a disavowal that is symptomatic of our contemporary era. One of the achievements of this thesis is to have put to rest such reductive readings, by staging a productive encounter between (Lacanian) psychoanalytic film theory and post-revolutionary Iranian cinema, where the logic of desire inscribed in the formal and narrative structure of this cinema is brought to the fore.

This thesis demonstrated that desire and sexuality, like a spectral presence haunts the cinematic landscape of post-revolutionary Iranian cinema. In the thesis I explored the nexus between desire and sexuality, or Eros and eroticism in the New Iranian Cinema, as well as in the shift away from the New Iranian Cinema of the past with a new genre bending Iranian film movement that I categorized as the uncanny between the weird and the eerie (as theorized by Mark Fisher). The issues involving the theme of the representation of the desire and sexuality and its consequences, had remained untheorized in the study of Iranian cinema, except indirectly through the study of women and gender. This is why I theorized the structure of desire and sexuality operative in Iranian cinema, as it provided a new angle, a new analytic lens, through which to view and interrogate post-revolutionary cinematic practice. Lacanian psychoanalytic film theory was foregrounded as the privileged method in uncovering the logic of desire operative in post-revolutionary cinema, as it in enabled the foregrounding of desire as an important and neglected object of study in Iranian films, especially due to the unique spectatorial relations that this cinema produces between the film text and the spectator.

Therefore one of the significant contributions of this thesis is the opening up of a new theoretical and discursive space, in which the study of desire and sexuality

[548] Bouhdiba, *Sexuality in Islam*, 88.

can be seen as an important object of theoretical enquiry in post-revolutionary Iranian cinema. To this end, this work has contributed in shedding a new light on already existing debates such as the representation of women and gender in Iranian films, and more broadly in film studies and film theory. Indeed, one of the key contributions of the thesis to the study of Iranian cinema is to have deployed the methodologies of film studies and film theory –particularly second wave (Lacanian) psychoanalytic film theory–as a method of formal analysis, whilst much of the scholarly literature on Iranian cinema has largely come from fields outside film studies such as literature, history, sociology, and anthropology. In this way, this thesis has not only firmly situated the study of Iranian cinema within the discipline of film studies and film theory, but has demonstrated that film studies and film theory itself has to take stock of the unique formal structure of Iranian cinema that has contributed, and continues to contribute, to the formal language and art of the cinema.

In Part I, we saw that the dialectical tension that is the principle axis in New Iranian Cinema is the one between gaze and voice – the two forms of the Lacanian object-cause of desire or *objet petit a*. In Chapter 1, it was seen that the object-gaze appears in Iranian cinema as the result of the system of modesty imposed on the cinema, which is meant to veil over (sexual) desire through the Islamic logic of the averted gaze. Paradoxically, the averted gaze is co-incident with the logic of *looking awry*, which renders this cinema a particularly rich potential as the site of the object-gaze instead of the apotheosis of feminist gaze theory (as formulated by Mottahedeh). The object-gaze often structures the formal logic of New Iranian Cinema, since desire is related to what cannot be seen or what remains hidden from the visual field. This is why I theorized that the New Iranian Cinema – with the cinema of Abbas Kiarostami as its *locus classicus* – exemplifies *the cinema of desire* at its purest. Both Kiarostami's *Shirin* and Majidi's *Baran*, are two emblematic instances where the object-gaze appears in the formal structure of these films, and where the desire of the spectator is accounted for in the cinematic image. The uncanny experience of the gaze in such films raises the sensation in the viewing subject that the object looked upon (the cinematic screen), is returning the gaze. The chapter made several theoretical interventions that contributes to film studies and film theory more broadly: first by delineating first and second wave psychoanalytic film theory in light of their respective conceptions of the gaze, and how New Iranian Cinema is one of the permier sites of the object-gaze rather than feminist gaze theory. Second, Lacan's

interpretation of *Las Meninas* in Seminar XIII was deployed in the analysis of the gaze in *Shirin* (a film never hitherto considered in light of the object-gaze), instead of the usual reference to the *Ambassdors* in discussions of the gaze in second wave psychoanalytic film theory. Finally, I located New Iranian Cinema as one of the film movements that represents the cinema of desire, along with Italian neorealism and the French *Nouvelle Vague*.

In the next chapter I provided a new theorization of the structure of the voice in the New Iranian Cinema, through the film and sound theorist Michel Chion's concept of *acousmêtre* (acousmatic voice) and Lacan's concept of the voice as *objet petit a*. The theoretical orientation of the chapter was grounded on coupling Chion with Lacan, inflected through feminist psychoanalytic film theory, especially through an engagement with the concept of the voice-off in the work of Mary Ann Doane and Kaja Silverman. The core argument of the chapter theorized that the two films under analysis, namely Makhmalbaf's *Gabbeh* and Banietemad's *The May Lady*, use the acousmatic voice as a way to subvert the logic of veiling the female voice in Iranian cinema by the acousmatization of the male voice rather than the female voice. Through these two filmic examples, it was seen that since male or female bodies cannot be displayed erotically on the screen, the voice acted as a signifier of desire and became a love-object. In this way, the acousmatic voice is often deployed in the New Iranian Cinema as way to fill in the erotic absence created by the modesty system. Like the previous chapter on the gaze, the chapter on the voice makes an original contribution to the field of New Iranian Cinema by foregrounding the voice as an important theoretical lens through which to read previously neglected aspects of this cinema. Both chapters deployed the methodology of film studies and film theory in the analysis of the films, which is another novel contribution to the study of the auditory regime of the New Iranian Cinema. In this respect, the theoretical intervention in the chapter contributed to an encounter between second wave psychoanalytic film theory and feminist film theory, by showing how the New Iranian Cinema, due to the Shi'ite system of modesty, reverse engineers the logic of the female voice in classical Hollywood cinema, where the female voice is usually synched to her body, while the acousmatic voice or voice-off is often a male voice who is granted powers of discursivity.

In the final chapter of Part I, through a detailed analysis of Shahriar's *Daughters of the Sun*, I theorized the film as an enactment of the Lacanian

logic of the feminine 'No' and feminine *jouissance* through its female protagonist Amangol, where she became the embodiment of the motto of Lacanian ethics: "do not cede with respect to your desire." Through an analysis of Amangol's forced gender re-signification from feminine to masculine where her father shaved her hair and cross-dressed her as a boy, I looked at various motifs that were staged in the film such as transgender, gender and sexual ambiguity, female and male homoeroticism, and cross-dressing or transvestism, many of which were/are subversive of the gender and sexual imaginary of the Islamic Republic. The scholarly examination of non-normative genders, bodies, and queer sexualities in post-revolutionary Iranian cinema is in its infancy, and one of the contributions of this chapter was to foreground this neglected area and to open up a discursive space for further theoretical and critical work. Indeed, there is ample room for theoretical analysis of films that contain either subtle or overt representations of these motifs in post-revolutionary Iranian cinema, many of which have been virtually neglected. Finally, one of the important theoretical contributions of this chapter is to have staged a critical but productive encounter between Lacanain theory and transgender studies, as well as gender and queer theory.

In Part II of the thesis I explored the logic of desire and sexuality in the shift away from the New Iranian Cinema of the past with a new genre bending Iranian film movement that I theorized as the uncanny avant-garde between the weird and the eerie. I situated Ahmadzadeh's film *Atomic Heart*, as one of the films that exemplify the logic of *unhimelich* between the weird and the eerie. The film is split into a two part structure that I theorized as positing the Lacanian logic of fantasy and desire side by side, where the first half formed the fantasy scenario and the second half as the Real of desire – desire in all its traumatic dimension. The two female protagonists of the film represented young Iranians in Tehran who after a night of partying were caught in the dream of a mysterious figure called Toofan, who although was equated with the devil, in reality represented the Islamic Republic and the totalitarian and dictatorial logic of the State (or Ahmadinejad). The first fantasy half of the film represented the way ideology functions as a fantasy or dream that obfuscates the antagonism or deadlock in reality, in the social order, and the second part represented the collapse of this fantasy frame. What we were confronted in the second part of the film was a nightmarish Real too traumatic to confront directly. The film's end has a cynical, even a hopeless message: Nobahar and Arineh wake up from the nightmarish

Real of their really existing reality in Tehran, back into the safety of reality – a reality supported by ideological fantasy. To put it in Lacanain terms: they wake up in order to continue to dream (fantasize). *Atomic Heart* is one of the emblematic films of the new film movement theorized in this chapter, since it depicts the current nightmarish atmosphere in Iran that is filled with fear, paranoia and anxiety.

In the final chapter, I located the diasporic or *accented* Iranian vampire film *A Girl Walks Home Alone At Night* directed by Ana Lily Amirpour, among the new cycle of films that represents the uncanny avant-garde between the weird and the eerie. I theorized that the film stages the return of the repressed Real of feminine sexuality, where the figure of the black chador-clad female vampire, stands for the (Lacanian) Real of feminine sexuality, which in Islamic and Shi'ite legal theory (*figh*) is imagined to possess an inherent surplus enjoyment (*jouissance*) that can cause chaos and destabilize the social-symbolic order – hence the logic of the veil is meant to cover over this excess in feminine desire as a way to contain and control it. In this sense, female sexuality unimpeded functions as a source of terror to the ideology of the Islamic Republic. The film therefore stages the return of the repressed desire embodied in the female vampire, the Girl, who hunts the male inhabitants of Bad City, representative of the dark underbelly of Tehran. There is a revolutionary core at the heart of the film where the vampire Girl stands for the call to all women to revolt against the patriarchal symbolic order, exemplified in the State and all its super-ego injunctions that seeks to control and delimit female autonomy and agency. In this way, although the film was made outside Iran, it is a veritable commentary on the oppressive and repressive atmosphere that is prevalent in contemporary Iran. One of the theoretical contributions of this chapter was to cross wires between psychoanalytic horror film theory and second wave psychoanalytic film theory, through a Lacanian intervention apropos the standard Freudian theory of 'the return of the repressed.' The other theoretical intervention was to couple Lacan with Chion yet again, this time by supplementing Chion's concept of *athorbyos* in relation to the diegetic writing in the film, with Lacan's concept of 'the inscription of desire' at the level of the Other (language).

Finally, I would like to end this thesis with a poignant moment that stages the continuity between the New Iranian Cinema in Part I, and the post-New Iranian Cinema theorized in Part II, a genre bending film movement that I called: *Unheimlich* between the weird and the eerie. In Abbas Kiarostami's last film *24 Frames* (2017),

there is a fleeting moment where the director places a note written in Persian underneath a tree. It is perhaps the director's last testament as a tribute to the person whose name it contains. The name on the note reads: "Shahram Mokri", the young director of *Fish & Cat* (2013), a film that Kiarostami greatly admired, and who, as previously noted, inaugurated with this film a new genre-bending film movement in Iran. Today, there is a subtle but visible shift away from the formal and narrative strategies of the New Iranian Cinema. I have categorized the formal logic and aesthetics of this new iteration of Iranian cinema as the uncanny suspended between the weird and the eerie, and if the New Iranian Cinema was recognizable under the sign of its master practitioner Abbas Kiarostami, the new trend in Iranian cinema is perhaps under the sign of young directors such as Shahram Mokri.

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