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Urban Space and Capital in Iranian Cinema: Intersections of Gender, Psyche, and Society in Mehrjuee's *The Tenants*, Bayzaee's *Killing the Dog*, and Farhadi's *The Salesman*

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Abstract

In recent decades, the rise of what is colloquially called the jerry-building industry in Iran has significantly reshaped the urban landscape and the lives of its citizens, often disregarding concerns for aesthetics, mental health, and social welfare. This paper critically examines the impact of real estate developments and the second circuit of capital on Tehran's urban space as represented in three seminal Iranian films: Dariush Mehrjui's *The Tenants* (1986), Bahram Bayzaee's *Killing the Dog* (Sagkoshi) (2001), and Asghar Farhadi's *The Salesman* (2016). Using Urban Cultural Studies, sociospatial approach, theoretical insights of Henri Lefebvre, and David Harvey's critiques of capital, it explores the commodification and capitalization of space. Through detailed textual analyses, the films reveal how profit-driven property development and 'creative destruction' lead to spatial dislocation, irreversibly disrupting the lives of Tehran's residents. The narratives highlight how such transformations generate various forms of violence, contributing to a risk society. By engaging with Marxist critiques, psychoanalytic theory, and embodiment studies, the paper unpacks the complex interplay between space, capital, body, and psyche, illustrating how these forces converge to shape personal and societal struggles. This exploration sheds light on the broader socio-political realities, particularly unchecked urbanization in Iran.

Keywords: Space, capital, *The Salesman*, *Killing the Dog*, *The Tenants*, Tehran.

A review of city and cinema in Iran

Cinema has long served as a mirror to societal structures, reflecting the complexities of human experience in diverse cultural contexts. Iranian cinema, in particular, has gained global recognition for its ability to weave intricate narratives that delve into themes of socio-political transformation, individual struggles, and collective consciousness. Among its many dimensions, the interrelation between space, capital, body, and psyche emerges as a recurring motif, offering a lens to explore the lived realities of Iranian society. Scholars note that one way to understand urban spaces is to study them through films[1] and the relation between cinema and city has become a 'growing field of study in recent years.'[2] Artistic discourse including films is 'a particularly good basis' for 'understanding representation' which is 'the key to understanding cities' and acquiring 'urban knowledge'[3], because films are produced at a definite time and in a definite place and are implicated in a discourse.[4]

With the exception of Goharipour, there has been a considerable gap in the literature explaining the correlation between films and cities in Iran which is surprising given the significance of the connection.[5] The existing body of literature concerning Iranian films tend to depict cities as pure evil manifesting in derelict places, small-centred towns, old dusty neighborhoods of Tehran or even inner city areas.[6] Salehi et al. also concur that though chain of most of the films are filmed in Tehran, it remains an under researched city.[7] Tehran is depicted as a violent city, or bad city very much like a city in a classic Hollywood noir movie.[8] In his examination of Tehran's portrayal in cinema, Goharipour argues that the city is characterized by its immigrant population, refugees,

[1] Salehi, Sara, Hassan sajadzadeh, Mohammad Saied Izadi, kasra ketabollahi, 'Evaluating the representation of urban spaces in the selected works of Iranian cinema with a focus on public spaces in Tehran', *Motaleate Shahri* (*Urban Studies*) 11:44 (2022), 17-30. https://doi.org/10.34785/J011.2022.332

[2] Maryam Ghorbankarimi, 'Tehran's genius loci in Film' in Culture and Cultural Production in Iran: Past and Present, (University of St Andrews, UK, Conference paper, 2016)

[3]Benjamin Fraser. *Toward an Urban Cultural Studies: Henri Lefebvre and the Humanities*. (Palgrave. 2015) pp.25.

[4] Baas, Renzo, *Fictioning Namibia as a Space of Desire: An Excursion into the Literary Space of Namibia During Colonialism, Apartheid and the Liberation Struggle*, (Basler Afrika Bibliographien. 2019) p.39

[5] Hamed Goharipour, 'A Review of Urban Images of Tehran in the Iranian Post-Revolution Cinema', in F.F. Arefian and S.H.I. Moeini, (eds.) *Urban Change in Iran*, (Springer, 2016), p. 50, pp.47-57.

[6] Mohammad Iranmanesh, and Djavad Rasooli, 'Experience of Urbanscape Essence in International Award Winning Iranian Movies', *Space Ontology International Journal*, 7: 3, (2018) pp.11- 22.

[7] Salehi et al. 'Evaluating the representation'

[8] Habib Allah Moghimi, 'Exploring Iranian Daily Life by Analyzing Iranian Cinema', PhD Thesis. (The University of Sydney, 2020), pp.92, 102

urban sprawl, skyscrapers, speculation, runaways, and substance abuse.[9] Iranmanesh and Rasooli identify 28 out of 47 films, including Farhadi's *The Salesman*, set in Tehran, discussing the city's perception and various dimensions. They emphasize that despite Tehran's complex nature and diverse cinematic themes, its 'filthy aspects' are frequently highlighted.[10] Ravadrad and Mahmoudi note that in the films *Twenty* (2000), *Darband* (2013), *Special Line* (2014), and *Thirteen* (2013), Tehran embodies a mix of love and disdain from its residents.[11] Rashidpour, Habibi, and Tabibian conduct a qualitative and quantitative analysis of seventeen films, including *The Salesman*, finding that the cinematic portrayal is insufficient to encapsulate Tehran as the darker side of modernity.[12] Rezazadeh and Farahmndian argue that an analysis of 36 films, including Bayzaee's *Killing the Mad Dog*, reveals a lack of urban knowledge among filmmakers and urban planners regarding Tehran.[13] Research on high-rise residential buildings in Tehran, analyzed through four films including *The Salesman* and *Killing the Dog*, illustrates how these structures have altered family dynamics and the role of women.[14] Salehi et al. studied 53 post-Revolution films and noted a focus on Tehrancentrism, even though the city often serves as a mere backdrop.[15] Pak-Shiraz examines how Bayzaee's films explore the impact of modernization and housing development on residents' identities and values in Tehran.[16] Ejlali and Goharipour compare 47 films from pre-revolution and post-revolution eras, concluding that cities are depicted as perilous and alluring, with developers and jerry-builders suffocating the urban landscape, particularly in films like *Soltan* (Masoud Kimiai, 1996) and *The Tenants* (Dariush Mehrejuee,

[9] Goharipour, 'A Review of Urban…' p.56.
[10] Iranmanesh, and Rasooli, 'Experience of Urbanscape…'p.20
[11] Azam Ravadrad, and Baharak Mahmoudi '"Experience of Tehran": Image of Tehran in the Films of Today's Cinema of Iran', *Quarterly Journal of social studies and research in Iran,* 6: 2, (2017) p. 200, pp.169-201. 10.22059/JISR.2017.133928.278
[12] N. Rashidpour, , Habibi, SM., Tabibian, M. 'Clarification of the hidden language of the modern metropolis of Tehran by analyzing the selected Iranian movies in 2016', *Motaleate Shahri* (*Urban Studies*), 11(43), (2022), pp.77–86. doi: 10.34785/J011.2022.166/Jms.2022.98.
[13]R. Rezazadeh, and Farahmndian, H. 'Reflection of urban space in modern Iranian cinema', *Honar-Ha-Ye-Ziba: Memary Va Shahrsazi (Journal of Fine Arts:* architecture and urban planning*), 2*(42), (2010), pp. 13-24.
[14]Y. Amirsardari, , Foroutan, M., Moazzami, M. and Mohammadi, M., Residential Tower in the Cinema Frame; Semiological Exploratory Study of High-rise Residential Buildings in the Cinema after the Islamic Revolution of Iran. *Bagh-e Nazar*(*Journal of Theoretical studies of Art and Architecture*), 16:74, (2019), p.31, pp.19-34.
[15] Salehi et al. 'Evaluating the representation'
[16] Nacim Pak-Shiraz 'Exploring the City in the Cinema of Bahram Beyzaie', *Iranian Studies*, 46:5, (2013), 811-828, DOI: 10.1080/00210862.2013.789745

1986).[17] Khorshidifard argues that in films such as Abbas Kiarostami's *Ten* (2002) and Asghar Farhadi's *Chaharshanbe-soori* (2006), architecture and space significantly influence and reshape society.[18] Rozkhosh (2019) posits that Bayzaee's *Killing the Dog* serves as an artistic response to significant government-backed socio-economic changes referred to as Economic Structural Modification during the late 1980s in Iran, which has been critiqued for fostering neoliberal policies that led to class conflict, consumerism, rentierism, and corruption.[19] In the context of Iranian cinema, scholars such as Hamid Naficy have highlighted the significance of confined and transitional spaces. Naficy's *Accented Cinema* emphasizes the role of spatial displacement in films produced by exilic and diasporic filmmakers. Similarly, Azadeh Farahmand explores how urban spaces in post-revolutionary Iranian cinema mirror societal tensions and aspirations. The juxtaposition of public and private spaces—a hallmark of many Iranian films—serves as a metaphor for the collision of tradition and modernity, as well as individual and collective identities. Hamid Naficy situates *The Tenants* within "social realism," arguing that the apartment building—both a physical and metaphorical space—represents class struggle in Tehran's urban landscape.[20] Azadeh Farahmand argues that the barren landscapes and sparse dialogue in the film mirror the protagonist's psychological isolation, creating a visual language of despair.[21] Anahid Kassabian's analysis delves into the film's fragmented narrative structure, suggesting that it reflects the protagonist's fractured psyche and explores themes of regret and disillusionment in post-revolutionary Iran.[22]

The research is grounded in theoretical frameworks that emphasize the interconnectedness of space, capital, body, psyche and gender. Henri Lefebvre, David Harvey, Doreen Massey and sociospatial approach provide foundational understanding of how social, political, and economic forces produce sociospatial realities. Psychoanalytic theories, particularly those of Lacan, shed

[17]P. Ejlali, and H. Goharipour, , 'Images of Cities in Iranian Films:1930-2011' *Social Sciences Journal*, Volume 50, (2014), pp. 229-278, doi: 10.22054/qjss.2015.
[18] S. Khorshidifard, 'Genuine, Protean, *Ad Hoc* Public Spaces: *Patogh*-Space networks of Tehran', *e. polis*, Volume IV, fall/winter, (2011), pp. 36-64.
[19] Mohammad Rozkhosh 'Art and Contemplation of Social Issues: The case of Killing the Dog, Post Iran-Iraq War Society and Economy', *Sociological Review*, 26(1),(2019), pp. 69-89. doi: 10.22059/jsr.2019.72846
[20] Hamid Naficy. *A Social History of Iranian Cinema, Volume 2: The Industrializing Years, 1941–1978*. (Duke University Press, 2011).
[21] Azadeh Farahmand "The Open Image: Poetic Realism and the New Iranian Cinema." *Iranian Studies*, vol. 42, no. 3, 2009, pp. 423–440.
[22]Anahid Kassabian, *Ubiquitous Listening: Affect, Attention, and Distributed Subjectivity*. (University of California Press, 2013).

light on the psychological dimensions of desire and money, while embodiment theory highlights the role of the body as a site of resistance and vulnerability. Gender too as a social construct intersects with spatial, economic, and psychological forces, amplifying the complexity of cinematic representation.

This paper investigates the dynamic interplay of space, capital, body, and psyche in the three pivotal films: Dariush Mehrjuee's *The Tenants* (*Ejareh-Neshinha*, 1986), Bahram Bayzaee's *Killing the Dog* (*Sagkoshi*, 2001), and Asghar Farhadi's *The Salesman* (*Forushande*, 2016). These films, though distinct in narrative and style, share a thematic concern with the ways spatial environments, economic systems, bodily experiences, and psychological states shape and are shaped by sociospatial forces. By examining these intersections, the study aims to uncover the deeper meanings embedded within their cinematic language.

Theoretical Considerations

Media serves as an arena where the imagined city is represented in various forms. The city depicted in media can range from "the city of fear, drudgery and loneliness" to "the cities of Utopia." Viewers might encounter the entire city or just fragments of it, experiencing familiar images or being introduced to unfamiliar facets of urban life[23]. For some artists, "exploring the city through art is an aspect of a much bigger political project," revealing "much about nations."[24] The relationship between the urban and the humanities has become a central concern of Urban Cultural Studies (UCS), an interdisciplinary field that investigates urban phenomena through humanities texts such as literature, film, popular music, and digital spaces. UCS advocates for a "humanities-centered cultural paradigm" that bridges the humanities and social sciences.[25] Feinberg quotes Benjamin Fraser, describing UCS as a project concerned with the intersection of "urban art" and "urban society," as well as "the relationship between an 'urban project' and an 'urban formation.'" [26] . Fraser emphasizes that interpreting the city and its representations across cultural expressions

[23] Stevenson, Deborah, *Cities and urban cultures*. England: Open University Press, 2003, p.,119
[24] Stevenson, *Cities…,* p.114
[25] Fraser , B., and Jolanda-Pieta van Arnhem. "A Collaborative Approach to Urban Cultural Studies and Digital Humanities." In *Laying the Foundation: Digital Humanities in Academic Libraries*, edited by John W. White and Heather Gilbert (Purdue University Press, 2016). p.158, pp. 151-178.
[26] Matthew I. Feinberg, 'Teaching urban: Reflections from Hispanic Studies', *Journal of Urban Cultural Studies*.1.2, (2014), p.308, pp. 305 – 314.

requires negotiating the "twin processes of the urbanization of capital and that of consciousness, and their particular spatial manifestations."[27] These concepts draw heavily from Marxist political economy, which examines how capital urbanizes consciousness through the commodification of spaces and human relations.[28] The UCS methodology for analyzing the representation of the city in cultural production consists of three interconnected stages: (1) analyzing the city as it appears in works of art, (2) analyzing urbanized consciousness, and (3) examining the unity of text and world. These stages must be conducted simultaneously during textual analysis.[29] This research employs these stages as well as concepts and theories of the second circuit of capitalism, the real estate sector, and sociospatial approach to analyze space, capital, and real estate in films. Moreover, to enrich the analysis, it also draws on Lacanian notion of desire, embodiment theory, and gender studies.

Gottdiener and Hutchison advocate for the sociospatial approach, which surpasses traditional urban sociology (or ecology) and political economy approaches by highlighting the overlooked role of real estate in metropolitan development and life. Traditional urban ecology emphasizes technological change as a driver of urban transformation, while Marxian political economy focuses on capitalism and industrial development's influence on spatial arrangements. In contrast, the sociospatial approach incorporates both push factors (e.g., technological change and economic production) and pull factors (e.g., government policies and the real estate industry) as agents of metropolitan growth. [30] In sociospatail approach, space is treated as a key determinant of human behavior, aligning with Henri Lefebvre's understanding of the function of space in urban contexts. It examines the interactions among global capitalism, the real estate sector, government policies, urban and suburban settlement structures, and culture. Metropolitan development, in this framework, arises from the interplay of government planners, developers, financiers, and real estate institutions. Notably, the real estate sector—comprising banks, mortgage companies, real estate investment trusts, and individual investors—plays a pivotal role in shaping metropolitan life

[27] B. Fraser, 'The space in film and the film in space: Madrid's Retiro Park and Carlos Saura's Taxi', *Studies in Hispanic Cinemas*, 3:1,(2006). pp. 15–32, doi: 10.1386/shci.3.1.15/1
[28]Nathan Richardson. *Constructing Spain: The Re-Imagination of Space and Place in Fiction and Film, 1953-2003*, (Bucknell University Press, 2012).
[29] Benjamin Fraser, *Toward an Urban Cultural Studies: Henri Lefebvre and the Humanities*. (Palgrave, 2015), p.118.
[30] Gottdiener, Mark and Ray Hutchison. The new urban sociology, 4th ed. (Westview Press, 2011).

by facilitating land investment and the commodification of space.[31] Residents and businesses perceive space differently: residents often value it for its use value, while businesses prioritize its exchange value. Under capitalism, space increasingly acquires exchange value, driving urban transformation. Gottdiener and Hutchison highlight this dynamic as the "missing link" in previous urban sociology approaches. Feagin too argues that it is "capitalist developers, bankers, industrial executives, and their business and political allies" with the aim of maximizing profit dictate urban form.[32] Similarly, Warner holds accountable the profit-seeking builders, land speculators, and large investors for the shape of American cities and "[their] lots, houses, families, and streets."[33]

Space and capital alone are not enough in understanding the ins and outs of imagined cities in these films. Other vectors such as body, gender (with a focus on agency) and subjectivity are also to be attended to. The portrayal of the human body in cinema reflects broader cultural and societal attitudes. Judith Butler's work on performativity and embodiment underscores the body's dual role as a site of agency and oppression. In cinematic narratives, the body often becomes a canvas for exploring themes of identity, resistance, and vulnerability. In the context of Iranian cinema, embodiment refers to the way in which female characters navigate the cultural, religious, and social limitations imposed on them. Iranian films frequently depict the body as a locus of vulnerability, particularly in the context of gender dynamics and socio-political constraints. Scholars have examined the ways in which cinematic representations of the body intersect with notions of identity and resistance. For example, some Iranian directors challenge traditional gender norms by portraying women's bodies as sites of agency and resilience.[34] The films analyzed here feature three female characters that exemplify the archetypal Iranian mother's selflessness and peacemaking (as seen in Mehrjuee's *The Tenants*), a defiant figure standing against male aggressors (in Bayzaee's *Killing the Dog*), and disentangling herself from patriarchal structures (illustrated in Farhadi's *The Salesman*). Another key aspect of these films is the varied expressions

[31] Gottdiener and Hutchison, 2010.
[32] Feagin, J. *The Urban Real Estate Game: Playing Monopoly with Real Money.* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall. 1983), p.8
[33] Warner Jr., S. *The Private City: Philadelphia in Three Periods of Its Growth* (*Philadelphia*: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1968), p.4
[34]Paidar, Parvin. *Women and the Political Process in the Twentieth-Century Iran*. (Cambridge University Press, 1995); Zeydabadi-Nejad, Saeed. "Politics of Iranian Cinema: Films and Society in the Islamic Republic of Iran." *The American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences* 27, no. 3 (January 1, 2010); Pak-Shiraz, Nacim. "Exploring the City in the Cinema of Bahram Beyzaie." *Iranian Studies* 46, no. 5 (September 2013): 811–28. https://doi.org/10.1080/00210862.2013.789745.

of agency of Iranian women. In *The Tenants*, the mother asserts her agency by influencing the male figures through a combination of guidance and tenderness. In *Killing the Dog*, Golrokh, despite enduring violence and humiliation from patriarchal forces, continues to fight for her husband's release from prison, cleverly outsmarting each man using specific strategies; she identifies their vulnerabilities and ultimately overcomes them— she takes men's tactics and applies them back on them. Rana, violated by masculinity, seeks a way out of anxious masculinity.

Psychoanalytic theory provides a framework for understanding the psychological dimensions of film narratives. Lacan's theories of desire and subjectivity have been instrumental in film analysis. The psychological aftermath of trauma, particularly in the context of violence and displacement, often serves as a central theme in cinema. In Iranian cinema, themes of trauma and psychological conflict are prevalent, often reflecting the socioeconomic-political upheavals experienced by the nation. Farhadi's *The Salesman*, for example, delves into the psychological aftermath of violence and the moral ambiguities it engenders. The film's nuanced portrayal of trauma—manifested through silence, avoidance, and moments of emotional rupture—resonates with Lacanian concepts of the Real, where unresolved trauma disrupts the Symbolic order of relationships and societal norms. Lacan's concept of desire is rooted in the notion of *manque* (lack), which he posits as fundamental to human existence. Desire arises from the recognition that the subject is incomplete, perpetually seeking fulfillment in the *Other*—a symbolic construct of external validation, recognition, and meaning. Lacan's idea of the *objet petit a* (object-cause of desire) represents unattainable objects that spark desire[35]. In film, these objects often manifest as plot drivers, characters, or unattainable ideals. In the context of cinema, desire structures narrative and character development. As Todd McGowan notes, film's ability to portray the object of desire creates a visible manifestation of what, in Lacan's terms, is fundamentally invisible.[36] Integrating Lacanian psychoanalysis with economic critique, McGowan argues that capitalism thrives by exploiting the structure of desire, positioning money and commodities as solutions to lack while ensuring that lack persists. He specifies that capitalism's genius lies in its ability to keep individuals perpetually desiring, which drives consumption and economic growth.[37] Desire for an ideal object lies at the core of the films: Mehrjuee's critique of mania for profit at any price, Bayzaee's

[35] Jacques Lacan. *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*. (Hogarth Press, 1977).
[36] Todd McGowan. *The Real Gaze: Film Theory After Lacan* (SUNY Press, 2012).
[37]Todd McGowan, *Capitalism and Desire*: The Psychic Cost of Free Markets, (Columbia University Press, 2016).

commentary on the commodification, assetization, and commercialization, Farhadi's theme of selling and buying depict a community which is implicated in the marketization of things and individuals as objects of exchange.

The underlying desire in these films is the desire for more profit through construction industry which is primarily epitomized through the second circuit of economy or, real estate sector. The production of space, according to Lefebvre, marks a moment when 'Capitalism appears to be out of steam. It found new inspiration in the conquest of space – in trivial terms, in real estate speculation, capital projects (inside and outside the city), the buying and selling of space. And it did so on a worldwide scale.'[38] He argues that the decline of surplus value in industry leads to an increase in 'real-estate speculation and construction.' Then, the second circuit 'becomes…essential.'[39] Lefebvre's theory of the production of space underscores how urban development serves the interests of speculators, builders, and financial institutions in that "capitalism survives by producing space, by occupying space," emphasizing that space under capitalism becomes a purified site for commodification and surplus absorption.[40] David Harvey observes that "under capitalism, there is a perpetual struggle in which capital builds a physical landscape appropriate to its own condition at a particular moment in time, only to have to destroy it, usually in the course of a crisis, at a subsequent point in time."[41] His writings on urbanization and neoliberalism underscore the commodification of space and its impact on social relations.[42] Hutchison contrasts Marx, Harvey, and Lefebvre in their understanding of second circuit: for Marx, it involves unproductive labor generating money capital; for Harvey, it reflects urban growth under capitalism; and for Lefebvre, it signifies the production of space in capitalist society.[43] Nowadays cities are characterized by massive construction projects as a conduit of capitalist expansion, driven by the logic of creative destruction.[44] Real estate speculation comprises

[38] H. Lefebvre. *The Urban Revolution*. (University of Minnesota Press, 2003). p.155
[39]Lefebvre, *The Urban Revolution*.p.160
[40]Henri Lefebvre, *The Survival of Capitalism: Reproduction of the Relations of Production*. (trans. Frank Bryant), (St. Martin's Press, 1976), p.21
[41] D. Harvey, *Spaces of capital*. (Routledge, 2001), p.28
[42] David Harvey, 'Neoliberalism and the City', *Studies in Social Justice*, 1 (1)(2007), 2–13.
[43] Ray Hutchison 'Secondary circuit of capital', in George Ritzer (ed.), *Blackwell Encyclopedia of Sociology*, (Blackwell, 2007)pp. 388-389.
[44] Richardson, *Constructing Spain*, pp. 12-13

destructive cycles of demolition, expropriation, and rapid redevelopment.[45] Harvey calls this process 'accumulation by dispossession' whereby the high-market value land is accumulated at the expense of dispossessing low-income inhabitants of their homes and communities.[46] Fainstein, cites Harvey that "drugs and real estate developments" were twin forces that destroyed New York City.[47] Harvey also understood that 'different classes construct their sense of territory and community in radically different ways', thus 'Successful control presumes a power to exclude unwanted elements.' [48] The spatial reorganization of urban environments to prioritize capitalist interests often manifests in cinema through narratives of displacement, economic inequality, and resistance. Mehrejuee's *The Tenants* serves as a microcosm of class conflict within the context of Tehran's urban housing crisis. The film captures the tenants' battle against displacement, highlighting how spatio-political forces perpetuate cycles of poverty and disenfranchisement. The commodification of housing—seen in the landlord's attempts to capitalize on the tenants' vulnerability—reflects broader neoliberal policies that prioritize profit over human welfare. This critique of capital aligns with Harvey's assertion that urban spaces often become sites of contention between capital accumulation and social justice.[49]

The real estate industry, playing a very key role in the spatial structuration of the metropolitan life in the films, does not simply consist of a group of investors; rather it includes both individual agents and structures. The latter comprises banks, mortgage companies, and real estate investment trusts which facilitate flow of money and land investment, thus making more profit possible. Gottdiener and Hutchison refers to the disregard of the real estate industry by the traditional approaches in urban sociology as 'the missing link.'[50] The high profitability of the real estate sector renders it indispensable in our analysis and evaluation of the development of the metropolis and the resultant spatial arrangements.[51] Among the myriad themes explored, real estate—as a symbol

[45] Gotham, Fox Kevin, 'Creating Liquidity out of Spatial Fixity: The Secondary Circuit of Capital and the Subprime Mortgage Crisis' *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 33:2 (2009), p.359, pp. 355–71, DOI:10.1111/j.1468-2427.2009.00874.x
[46] Buckingham, Shelley (2020), 'The OUR Waterfront Coalition: Defending the Right to the City in New York', in Sugranyes, Ana and Mathivet, Charlotte (eds.), *Cities for All: Proposals and Experiences towards the Right to the City*, (Habitat International Coalition, 2020), p.219, pp. 219-223.
[47] Susan S. Fainstein, *City Builders: Property Development in New York and London, 1980-2000*. 2nd ed. (University press of Kansas, 2002), p.28
[48] David Harvey, *The Urban Experience*. (John Hopkins University Press, 1989), pp.265, 266.
[49]Buckingham, 2010, p.219
[50] Gottdiener and Hutchison, *The new urban* p. 394
[51] Gottdiener, and Hutchison. p.17

of class, power dynamics, and social mobility—holds a particularly significant place in the narrative framework of films like Bahram Bayzaee's *Killing the Dog* (*Sagkoshi*), Asghar Farhadi's *The Salesman* (*Forushande*), and Dariush Mehrjooee's *The Tenants* (*Ejareh-Neshinha*). Each film utilizes property and living spaces not merely as backdrops but as potent metaphors to explore broader societal issues. In these three films, real estate transcends its conventional role as a mere setting to become a central narrative force. Whether through the bleak struggles in *Killing the Dog*, the intimate trauma in *The Salesman*, or the satirical lens of *The Tenants*, Iranian filmmakers use property and living spaces to dissect the complexities of social stratification, power, and human relationships. By doing so, they craft stories that resonate deeply with audiences, both within Iran and beyond, offering a cinematic lens through which to view the intricate interplay between space and society.

Daryush Mehrjuee's *The Tenants* (1986): The Real Estate as a Narrative Device

Mehrjuee's *The Tenants* is a landmark film reflecting the socio-economic realities of Iran in the 1980s. The film emerges in a context marked by the aftermath of the 1979 Islamic Revolution, during which the nation faced profound political upheaval, social restructuring, and economic challenges. Mehrejuee situates his narrative in a dilapidated apartment building, symbolizing the fractured state of urban life in post-revolutionary Tehran. Mehrjuee's film belongs to the category of social comedy, highlighting, among other things, the chronic housing problem in contemporary Iran. It starts with an extreme and then a long shot of Tehran, showcasing its streets, including the famous Vali-asr Street, along with high-rise residential complexes, commercial offices, and government buildings, reflecting the prominence of construction projects and widespread post-war developments. After a few minutes (00:00-01-55), the camera transitions from a high angle to a close-up of a house surrounded by a large piece of land, where government officials are seen pinning the number 19 on the front door of a four-story building. The owner of the house remains unidentified, but Abbas falsely claims to be the legal representative of the alleged owners living abroad. The house is home to various individuals: Abbas, his mother, and his teenage son on the ground floor; Abbas's architect brother and his family on the first floor; Mr. Tavasoli, a government clerk, and his wife on the second floor; two other brothers (Qandi) on the third floor; and an opera singer on the fourth floor. The diverse residents represent different walks of life. Two real estate

agents compete to take illegal control of the house, using manipulation and persuasion on Abbas and the other residents, exacerbating the tenants' already precarious situation as they live in a dilapidated building on the brink of collapse. Eventually, the government seizes the house and sells it back to the tenants.

The film portrays real estate agents as the driving force behind the tenants' struggles, as they lack crucial information about the house's legal status and its location in Tehran's comprehensive urban plan. In contrast, the real estate agents possess insider knowledge about the house (rentier information), its location in Tehran's urban development plans, and future construction prospects. This information gap traps the tenants in a dilemma, unsure whether to leave or repair the house. Abbas, influenced by Gholam, one of the real estate agents, forces the tenants to leave, but they cannot afford the high rents elsewhere or buy a new home, nor are they permitted to repair the crumbling house. Following a melee, Baqery, a rival real estate agent, reveals to the tenants that the house lacks an owner, giving them legal rights to decide its fate. The tenants attempt to repair the house, but Abbas prevents them. Caught between the conflicting interests of the real estate agents and the tenants, the house nearly collapses. Eventually, government urban planning experts inform the tenants that the government owns the house and will sell it to them in installments, fulfilling their dream of homeownership.

The central conflict in the story lies in the clash between the use value and exchange value of the house, urban space, and the city. The film illustrates how urban spaces have been commodified, prioritizing economic logic over social needs. Francesco Biagi notes that when the "exchange value" of space dominates over its "use value," citizens are excluded from decision-making processes.[52] Real estate finance and property ownership significantly influence urban and national economies, affecting government revenue, politics, inequality, housing opportunities, ownership types, and land use.[53] In the film, real estate agencies exemplify what Lapavitsas describes as "profiting without producing."[54] Added to the real estate influence, government policies and plans further transform the house into a profitable commodity. Upon learning that the house is part of Tehran's master plan, the real estate agents try hard to claim it and sell it at a higher price. The film

[52] Francesco Biagi, "Henri Lefebvre's Urban Critical Theory: Rethinking the City against Capitalism." *International Critical Thought* 10, no. 2 (April 2, 2020): 214–31. https://doi.org/10.1080/21598282.2020.1783693.
[53] Hyötyläinen, Mika , and Robert Beauregard. "Introduction." In *The Political Economy of Land: Rent, Financialization and Resistance*, edited by Mika Hyötyläinen and Robert Beauregard. (Routledge, 2023), p. 2.
[54] C. Lapavitsas, The financialization of capital: Profiting without producing. *City* 17(6)(2013)792–805.

underscores the important role of government in the commodification of land and urban spaces, emphasizing the interplay between global capitalism, the real estate sector, government development efforts, social structures of urban spaces, and cultural significance.[55] Metropolitan growth results from interactions across government planners, developers, financiers, and real estate institutions. Scholars have noted that collaboration between municipality and construction sector in Tehran. The construction sector, including house construction, ranks as 'the most central economic sectors in Iran with a huge share of total annual investment.'[56] To earn more revenue, Tehran municipality adopted the policy of 'the urban densification with a monetary approach' without taking into account its various harmful social, political, environmental, and cultural consequences. In 2013 and 2014, more than 50 per cent of Tehran Municipal revenue came from the construction sector.[57] According to information from the World Bank report no. 28983 (May 2004), Tehran has the highest share in the world of private sector investments in urban housing (56.2 %). The 'neo-liberalization' of urban land in the context of Tehran ended up in 'commodification' which caused a spike in land value and as a result more profits out of housing speculation, attracting more investment.[58] Tehran's urban layout results from 'the complex interaction between market forces, public investment and regulations,'[59] ending up in Tehran's 'disjointed' growth and its sprawl 'in all directions.'[60]

The Tenants epitomizes some of the foregoing developments. Likewise, one of the characters who is a representative of urban planning office promotes the area's promising future, saying that: "There will be a park in front of the house, an autobahn over there, and other houses nearby. This area will have a bright future." But as Lefebvre metaphorically puts it "the bulldozer" realizes the "plans."'[61] The image of the bulldozer echoes 'spatial violence' which alludes to different forms

[55] Gottdiener and Hutchison, 2010.
[56] H. Shayesteh and P. Steadman, 'The impacts of regulations and legislation on residential built forms in Tehran', *The Journal of Space Syntax*, *4*(1),(2013), p.92, 92-107.
[57] M. Ghadami and P. Newman, 'Spatial consequences of urban densification policy: Floor-to-area ratio policy in Tehran, Iran', *Environment and Planning B: Urban Analytics and City Science*, *46*(4), (2019), p. 632, pp. 626-647.
[58]Shayesteh and Steadman 2013, pp. 92, 94.
[59] A. Bertaud, 'Tehran spatial structure: Constraints and opportunities for future development' *Ministry of Housing and Urban Development, Tehran*.(2003) p.6, pp.1-43.
[60] A. Madanipour, 'Urban planning and development in Tehran' in *Cities*, 23:6,(2006) p.434, pp.433-438.
[61] Japhy Wilson, ' "The Devastating Conquest of the Lived by the Conceived': The Concept of Abstract Space in the Work of Henri Lefebvre" *Space and Culture* 16 (3)(2013), 364–380. p.136.

of damage caused by built environments.[62] Therefore, government policy and and the actions of real estate(the second circuit of capital) are conducive to metropolitan growth.[63] In addition to government and real estate, Iran's economy is also like other rentier economies controlled by the 'rentier class' who are 'developers, realtors, and banks who have an interest in the exchange of land and property.'[64] The 'processes of financialization' and the subsequent 'sociospatial transformations' produce built environments, practices and financialized subjects.[65] These financialized subjects become individual financial actors in the future of Iran, who are masterfully captured in Bahram Bayzaee's *Killing the Dog* (2001).

Bahram Bayzaee's *Killing the Dog*: The Faceless City

Bahram Bayzaee's *Killing the Dog* (*Sagkoshi*, 2001) portrays the relentless encroachment of capitalism on Tehran's urban and social fabric. The film vividly depicts a city dominated by economic actors—financiers, contractors, property developers, and other members of the informal economy—driven solely by the pursuit of profit. These individuals engage in unethical practices such as cheating and forgery, embodying the greed and amorality of unregulated capitalism.

The film's protagonist, Golrokh Kamali (Mozhdeh Shamsaee), returns to Tehran after a year of estrangement from her husband to reconcile and make amends for her accusations of betrayal. Her arrival symbolizes a return to what has been lost: love and trust.[66] However, her journey through the transformed city reveals how deeply the landscape, people, and values of Tehran have changed under the weight of capitalist forces.

On her way to her hotel, Golrokh is struck by the rapid transformation of Tehran. High-rises and construction projects dominate the skyline, illustrating the city's shift toward an economy rooted in urban speculation. "It's changed a lot, hasn't it?" asks her driver (Bayzaee, 12:26–12:46). This question underscores the disconnection between the city's outward growth and its erasure of

[62] C. Boano, 'The impossible city: short reflections on urbanism, architecture and violence', *Materia Arquitectura*, *12*,(2015), p.100, pp.94-107.
[63] Gottdiener, and Hutchison. 2010, p.90
[64] Reyhan Varli-Görk,'The Transformation of Antalya into a "City of Culture": An Attempt at Rhythmanalysis', in Erdi-Lelandais, Gülçin (Ed.) *Understanding the City: Henri Lefebvre and Urban Studies*. (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014) p.147, pp. 139-169.
[65] Martín Arboleda, 'Financialization, totality and planetary urbanization in the Chilean Andes' *Geoforum* 67,(2015) p. 11, pp.4–13.
[66] Karen Rodríguez, *Small City on a Big Couch: A Psychoanalysis of Provincial Mexican City*. (Rodopi, 2012).

memory and identity. Golrokh's hotel room faces a construction site where workers labor day and night, mirroring Tehran's unrelenting urban expansion. Lefebvre's notion of "abstract space" aptly describes Tehran's identity-less transformation. Abstract space prioritizes functionality, geometry, and exchange value over history and individuality, resulting in buildings that are faceless and devoid of meaning.[67] Sangestani's construction site, depicted as vast and chaotic, epitomizes this abstraction. The workers, indistinguishable in their helmets and masks, declare, "We are all Sangestani" (Bayzaee, 1:57:30), symbolizing the dehumanizing effects of capitalism. As Pak-Shiraz observes, the construction workers' lack of individuality reflects the city itself—anonymous, devoid of memory, and built by nameless laborers.[68]

Violence permeates *Killing the Dog*, both explicitly and implicitly. Golrokh's brutal rape by one of her husband's creditors is the most devastating act, leaving her physically bruised and emotionally shattered. This violent act, occurring within the space of capital, echoes Lefebvre's assertion that capitalism nurtures violence by prioritizing profit over human dignity. As Golrokh roams the city, her black glasses and bruised face symbolize her anger and pain, exposing the brutal realities of patriarchal capitalism. The construction site itself becomes a metaphorical monster, portrayed through dynamic camera work. Long shots show the towering, angular buildings cloaked in dust and smoke, while close-ups reveal the workers' frantic activity and masked faces. The site's overwhelming scale and industrial chaos evoke a phallic dominance over the city, with Golrokh as its victim. Abstract space or space of capital consists of three central characteristics or formants – the geometric, the visual, and the phallic.[69] Sangestani's workers' pursuit of Golrokh, culminating in her dramatic escape, emphasizes the predatory nature of this economic system. To distract her pursuers, she throws paper money into the air, a slow-motion sequence that reveals the workers' frenzy as they scramble to grab the bills. This act critiques a society consumed by "money madness," [70] where human relationships are reduced to fetishized transactions.[71]

[67] Henri Lefebvre, *Production of the space*, (trans. Donald Nicholson Smith), (Blackwell, 1991)
[68] Pak-Shiraz, 2013.
[69] Christian Schmit, *Henri Lefebvre and the Theory of the Production of Space*, (Translation by Zachary Murphy King), (Verso, 2022)
[70] From a poem by D. H. Lawrence titled 'Money Madness'.
[71] Lefebvre, 1991.

In *Killing the Dog*, Golrokh's desire for reunion with her husband and his release from prison, on the one hand, and the other debtors' desire to take back their money, on the other hand, come into collision. Money represents an endless pursuit to fill the void of lack, but it can never truly satisfy the subject. Therefore, money is not just a practical tool but a deeply symbolic object tied to fantasies of completeness. It is fetishized because it appears to hold the power to resolve our fundamental sense of incompleteness. Accordingly, under capitalism, accumulation of wealth often becomes an end in itself, mirroring the perpetual nature of desire. Money is central to this system as both a mediator and a representation of desire. Seeking more material goods and wealth promise satisfaction, only to intensify desire. *Killing the Dog* embodies what Akerlof and Shiller (2009) call the 'animal spirits' in that almost all of main economic characters/actors are guided by their irrational drives. Akerlof and Shiller maintain that unconscious drives underlie the apparently rational calculations.[72] In the film, we witness collective fantasies and desires about money. Golrokh's rape by one of her husband's debtors, whose facial features and idiolect evoke a macho vendor full of lusciousness, aggression, anger and revenge, embodies a patriarchal economy marked by phallic symbol of power and dominance, reinforcing gender hierarchies. The rape within the context of patriarchal economies shapes subjectivity and social relations.[73]

In *Killing the Dog*, capitalism and patriarchy work hand in hand to maintain male dominance. Golrokh's attempts to settle her husband's debts challenge traditional gender roles, threatening the Iranian men's macho identity. Her rape becomes a violent reassertion of patriarchal control, symbolizing how capitalism commodifies women and reinforces their subjugation. As Von Werlhof argues, capitalism violently penetrates the bodies of women, men, and nature, perpetuating male dominance and systemic inequality.[74] The male characters in the film treat Golrokh as a commodity and a fantasy, using salacious language and gestures to sexualize her. Doreen Massey says that contemporary world mirrors a 'masculine sexuality which objectifies women's bodies.'[75] Even her escape from Sangestani's site underscores her isolation and vulnerability in a system designed to oppress her. Yet Golrokh's resistance to this system grows

[72] George A. Akerlof and Robert J Shiller. *Animal Spirits : How Human Psychology Drives the Economy, and Why It Matters for Global Capitalism*. (Princeton University Press, 2009).
[73]Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*. Ithaca, (Cornell University Press, 1985).
[74] Claudia Von Werlhof , 'No Critique of Capitalism Without a Critique of Patriarchy! Why the Left Is No Alternative', *Capitalism Nature Socialism*, 18:1, (2007), DOI: 10.1080=10455750601164600
[75] Malcolm Miles, *Cities and Cultures*. (Routledge, 2007), p.9

as the narrative unfolds, culminating in her rejection of material possessions and her escape from the capitalist web that entraps others.

Tehran in *Killing the Dog* is a city of facades, its outward transformation masking an identity-less core. Like the construction workers whose individuality is erased by their masks, the city itself becomes anonymous, reduced to abstract shapes and forms. In abstract space, 'everything [is] face and façade.'[76] '[T]he impersonal, structural logic of abstract space' is the 'new enemy' who 'is faceless.'[77] Cities lose their singularity and as a result metamorphose into shapes, forms and faces because capital 'cares only for exchange value – and thus for abstraction.'[78] The materialization of abstract space produces geometric, linear, and functional buildings which efface nature and history. As Lefebvre notes, capitalism survives by producing and occupying space, turning cities into investment opportunities rather than homes.[79] This dichotomy is evident in Golrokh's father's discomfort in Tehran. "This place makes me feel uneasy," he tells Golrokh (Bayzaee, 1:17:48), contrasting his sense of home with the city's impersonal, profit-driven character. For economic actors like Sangestani, Tehran represents wealth and power; for others, it is a daunting and alienating environment. The film critiques this abstraction, showing how it effaces the city's history, memory, and humanity.

At the film's conclusion, Golrokh abandons her desire for possessions, achieving a sense of freedom and fluidity that sets her apart from the other characters. No longer "trapped in the system of capitalist exchange"[80], she rejects the values that dominate Tehran's economy, finding liberation in her detachment. Bayzaee's *Killing the Dog* is a scathing critique of neoliberal capitalism and its devastating effects on individuals, relationships, and cities. It reveals how economic systems dehumanize workers, commodify women, and reduce human connections to monetary transactions. As with Farhadi's *The Salesman*, violence is omnipresent, serving as both a symptom and a mechanism of the capitalist machine. Through its stark portrayal of greed, betrayal, and

[76] Lefebvre,1991, p. 274
[77] Matthew Thompson, 'LIFE in a ZOO', *City*, 21:2, (2017) p.112, pp. 104-126, DOI: 10.1080/13604813.2017.1353327.
[78] Derek R. Ford, 'Lefebvre and atmospheric production', in Michael E. Leary-Owhin and John P. McCarthy (eds.), *The Routledge handbook of Henri Lefebvre, the city and urban society*, (Routledge, 2020), p.311, pp. 309-316.
[79] H. Lefebvre, *Writings on Cities*, (trans. and ed. E. Kofman and E. Lebas), (Blackwell, 1996), pp.63-181.
[80] Janet Ng, *Paradigm city: space, culture, and capitalism in Hong Kong*, (State University of New York Press, 2009).

resilience, the film invites viewers to reflect on the cost of progress in a society where money reigns supreme.

Years of unregulated desire for more profit through more and more construction take its toll on the body of the city and individuals in *The Salesman* when Emad (Shahab Hosseini) on the roof of another decaying old building looks onto the city and says: 'What they are doing to the city!', wishing that it were possible 'to destroy the entire city of Tehran and rebuild it.' (Farhadi, 14:31-14:41).

Asghar Farhadi's *The Salesman* (2016): From Greenery to Concrete

Tehran, once celebrated for its abundant Oriental Plane trees and lush orchards, has undergone a dramatic transformation due to rapid urbanization. As Mirsadeghi notes, the city's "rapid growth and development" has stripped it of its green spaces, leaving behind a dense urban landscape of brick, cement, and high-rise buildings.[81] This change is poignantly captured in films like Asghar Farhadi's *The Salesman* and Bahram Bayzaee's *Killing the Dog*, which depict Tehran not as a city of nature but as a sprawling, chaotic metropolis. This shift mirrors the concerns of Iranian poet Sohrab Sepehri, who in 1965 described the city as "geometric growth of cement, iron, [and] stone."[82] Tehran's transformation stems from policies prioritizing profit over sustainable development. Fueled by real estate speculation, the city has become a "commodity," shaped by unchecked construction and a relentless drive for surplus value. Scholars like Ortiz have described this as "real estate violence" against low-income residents, with the benefits of urban growth disproportionately favoring wealthier classes.[83] The commodification of space has exacerbated inequality, turning Tehran into a fragmented and identity-less city.[84] Unsurprisingly, some even claim that to produce a city without 'discrimination', 'real estate speculation' must be 'inhibited.'[85]

[81] P. Mirsadeghi, 'Tehran and the Lost Nature', in Fatemeh Farnaz Arefian and Seyed Hossein Iradj Moeini, (Eds.), *Urban Change in Iran Stories of Rooted Histories and Ever-accelerating Developments*, (Springer, 2016)
[82] Sohrab Sephri, *The Lover is Always Alone: Selected Poems*, (trans. Karim Emami), (Sokhan Publishers, 2004)
[83] Enrique Ortiz, 'The Construction Process towards the Right to the City: Progress made and challenges pending' in Sugranyes, Ana and Mathivet, Charlotte (eds.) *Cities for All: Proposals and Experiences towards the Right to the City*, (Habitat International Coalition, 2010), pp. 113-121.
[84] Reza M. Shirazi, *Contemporary Architecture and Urbanism in Iran: Tradition, Modernity, and the Production of 'Space-in-Between'* (Springer, 2018).
[85] María Lorena Zárate, 'Mexico City Charter: The Right to Build the City We Dream About', in Sugranyes, Ana and Mathivet, Charlotte (eds.) *Cities for All: Proposals and Experiences towards the Right to the City*, (Habitat International Coalition, 2010), p.263, 259-267.

The so-called speculation transforms the city into a 'merchandise', thus leading to the 'commoditization of urban land and real estate valuation.'[86] All this intensifies 'commodification, capital circulation, and capital accumulation.'[87]

In *The Salesman*, Farhadi weaves the consequences of Tehran's urbanization into the lives of his protagonists, Emad (Shahab Hosseini) and Rana (Taraneh Alidoosti). The film opens with a dramatic scene where the tenants of a high-rise are forced to evacuate due to the building's imminent collapse. Farhadi's roving camera captures cracks in the walls, broken windows, and leaking pipes, reflecting the precariousness of urban life. Then, a low-angle shot of an excavator digging for illegal construction underscores how the relentless growth of the construction industry destabilizes the lives of ordinary residents. This chaotic displacement serves as the film's inciting incident.[88] Emad and Rana are forced to relocate to a shabby apartment previously occupied by a notorious woman. The intrusion of a stranger into their new home leads to Rana's assault, a moment that encapsulates both spatial and bodily violation. Spatial production, according to Lefebvre, affects the body of the subject, too: the body and its relation to space/things in space, the body as space and the connection of the physical body to the state.[89] Farhadi's cinematography underscores how Tehran's urban expansion disrupts the physical and emotional security of its inhabitants. These themes align with Henri Lefebvre's theory of spatial production, which argues that urban spaces are shaped by power structures and capitalist accumulation. In *The Salesman*, the displacement of Emad and Rana highlights how residents are denied their right to define their own spaces, echoing David Harvey's concept of "accumulation by dispossession."[90] Tehran's urban chaos, driven by speculative investments, exemplifies Lefebvre's critique of capitalist spatial production as inherently unjust and alienating. The film substantiates the real estate growth fever in Tehran where people are, in Elgueta and Morales' words, 'tailored to fit the city' not vice versa (2010:214).

[86] Nelson Saule Júnior and Karina Uzzo, 'The History of Urban Reform in Brazil', in Sugranyes, Ana and Mathivet, Charlotte (eds.) *Cities for All: Proposals and Experiences towards the Right to the City*. (Habitat International Coalition, 2010), p.249, pp.247-259.
[87] N. Brenner, 'Theses on urbanization' *Public culture*, 25:1,(2013), p.95, pp.85-114.
[88] Robert McKee, *Story: structure, style and principles of screenwriting*. (Reganbooks, 1997).
[89] Baas, Renzo, *Fictioning Namibia as a Space of Desire: An Excursion into the Literary Space of Namibia During Colonialism, Apartheid and the Liberation Struggle*, (Basler Afrika Bibliographien,2019), p.59
[90] Buckingham, 2010

Tehran's chaotic growth has profound psychological and social consequences. Traditional single-family homes with courtyards have been replaced by anonymous apartment blocks, eroding residents' sense of privacy and security (Tabrizi & Madanipour, 2006). This shift creates feelings of alienation and disorientation, as individuals are displaced from spaces imbued with personal and collective meaning. In *The Salesman*, these effects are evident in the characters' lives. Emad and Rana move between temporary spaces—their apartment, the theater, taxis—never finding a sense of permanence. Farhadi's depiction of this transient existence reflects the broader identity crisis of Tehran, a city described by Shirazi as a "space of uncertainty, disorientation, [and] confusion."[91] Spaces in *The Salesman* serve as heterotopia too. Heterotopias are real places and counter-sites. They are incompatible spaces (theatres, cinemas, gardens, carpets) with different temporality (quasi eternity vs. ephemerality) and restricted access (e.g. prisons). They can be categorized into different types: heterotopias of crisis (honeymoon hotels), heterotopias of deviance (prisons, rest homes, psychiatric asylums), or heterotopias of illusion (brothels) or heterotopias of compensation (the Jesuit colonies).[92] *The Salesman* represents some heterotopic spaces such as theatre (where the death of a salesman happens), school (deviance), cinema (a man metamorphoses into a cow), taxi (the phobia of sexual harassment) and apartments (physical dislocation and sexual rape) which are in a sense heterotopias of crisis. In the film Tehran resembles a 'risk society' where the citizens are vulnerable to different threats.[93] The film's portrayal of urban spaces as fragmented and temporary serves as a metaphor for Iran itself, which has been characterized as a "pick-axe society" subject to constant upheaval.[94]

Farhadi's exploration of urban displacement extends to the intimate spaces of the body. In *The Salesman*, Rana's assault reflects the intersection of spatial and sexual violence. Violence, abstract space and capitalism are closely knitted. Capitalism is known for its rage for growth, looking for new markets to reinvest and increase its profit.[95] Whatsoever the consequences, it only thinks of accumulating more wealth. Emad and Rana are physically displaced by the excavation for another

[91] Shirazi, 2018.
[92] Andrea Strolz, 'Spatial Practices, Representations of Space, and Spaces of Representation in Margaret Atwood's Novels', in Eibl, G. Doris and Rosenthal, Caroline (Eds.) *Space and Gender: Space and Gender Spaces of Difference in Canadian Women's Writing,* (Innsbruck University Press, 2009), p.64
[93] Beck, Ulrich (1992), *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity* (Sage, 1992).
[94] Homa Katouzian, 'The short-term society: a study in the problems of long-term political and economic development in Iran', *Middle Eastern Studies*, 40:1(2004), pp. 1-22, DOI: 10.1080/0026320041233130186 7
[95] Harvey, 2001.

construction. Displacement applies to spatial dislocation which involves the disruption of three psychological processes of familiarity, attachment, and identity which in turn result in disorientation, nostalgia and alienation whereby the mental health of the subjects are weakened.[96] Dislocation repeatedly occurs in Farhadi's film. The intrusion into her home mirrors the bulldozer's destruction of physical spaces, highlighting how both acts disregard boundaries and privacy. Lefebvre's assertion that urban spaces are inscribed with power dynamics is evident here, as Rana's body becomes a contested space marked by violence and control. This interplay between gender, space, and power recalls Massey's critique of masculine sexuality that objectifies women's bodies.[97] In *The Salesman*, the boundaries between private and public spaces blur, as Rana's personal space is violated in a manner that mirrors the commodification of urban land. The old man who assaults her, like the excavator in the opening scene, embodies the destructive forces of a city ruled by capital and power. The old man who breaks into Rana's house and rapes her is a stranger and in a sense a trader, following the logic of the market transaction by leaving some money on the refrigerator for what he had done.

Tehran's urban transformation is a stark example of how capitalist forces reshape cities for profit. Financial and real estate companies dominate Tehran's development, prioritizing economic gain over cultural, social, or environmental considerations.[98] This neoliberal approach has turned Tehran into a "shapeless blob" of structures and streets, devoid of identity or meaningful "place."[99] [100] In this context, the apartment in *The Salesman* becomes a microcosm of Tehran's urban commodification. Previously occupied by Ahoo, a faceless and abstract figure represented as a commodity, the space carries the weight of its history. Ahoo's apartment corroborates Doreen Massey's notion of 'double articulation of place', positing that places are always already historicized due to their occupation by subjects whose identities take form in the sutures of

[96] James Telfer, 'The clinical discovery of time and place', in Maria Teresa Savio Hooke & Salman Akhtar(eds.) *The Geography of Meanings: Psychoanalytic Perspectives on Place, Space, Land, and Dislocation*, (The International Psychoanalytical Association, 2007), pp. 197-8, pp.191-206.
[97]Doreen Massey, *Space, Place, and Gender*. (University of Minnesota Press, 1994).
[98] Jean-Pierre Garnier, 'Greater Paris': Urbanization but no Urbanity –how Lefebvre Predicted Our metropolitan future, in Łukasz, Stanek, Christian, Schmid, and Ákos Moravánszky (eds.) *Urban Revolution Now: Henri Lefebvre in social research and architecture*, (Ashgate, 2014), pp.133-157.
[99] Shirazi, 2018.
[100] Asma Mehan, *Tehran: from sacred to radical*. (Routledge, 2023)

different discourses.[101] Ahoo is discursively constructed because the audience only hears stories about her, thus represented as faceless and identity-less (abstraction). She is a commodity on the market since, as Walonen states, under neoliberalism, everything (including prostitution) is reduced to exchange value.[102] She is, in Simmel's words, 'characterless… just like money.'[103] Money and prostitution are ontologically identical because both show indifference to the use, lack of attachment to anyone, and objectivity.[104]

Through films like *The Salesman*, *Killing the Dog* and *The Tenants* Tehran's urban transformation is brought into sharp focus. The commodification of space, driven by speculative real estate investments, has eroded the city's identity and created a fragmented, alienating environment. Farhadi's nuanced portrayal of displaced characters and violated spaces underscores the human cost of this urban chaos, aligning with Lefebvre's critique of capitalist spatial production. Tehran's rapid urbanization reflects broader global trends, where cities are increasingly shaped by the logic of profit. However, as *The Salesman* demonstrates, these transformations are not just physical but deeply personal, affecting the lives, identities, and psyches of urban inhabitants. To create more equitable and meaningful cities, it is essential to challenge the commodification of space and prioritize the needs of communities over capital.

Comparative Analysis

Capital emerges as central forces driving the narratives of these films. Mehrejuee critiques the commodification of housing in *The Tenants*, portraying the landlord's greed as emblematic of broader capitalist exploitation. This critique is echoed in Farhadi's *The Salesman*, where economic instability exacerbates the characters' moral and relational crises. While Bayzaee's *Killing the Dog* does not explicitly address class, the protagonist's existential despair can be seen as a response to societal disillusionment in post-revolutionary Iran. The interplay between economic forces and

[101] Caroline Rosenthal and Doris G. Eibl, 'Introduction: The Difference Space Makes', in Eibl, G. Doris and Rosenthal, Caroline (eds.) *Space and Gender: Spaces of Difference in Canadian Women's Writing.* (Innsbruck university press, 2009) p. 9.
[102] Michael K. Walonen, *Contemporary World Narrative Fiction & the Spaces of Neoliberalism*, (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), p.124.
[103] Simmel, Georg, *The Philosophy of Money*, 3rd ed. (trans. Tom Bottomore and David Frisby), (Routledge, 2004), p.393.
[104] Simmel, 2004, p.379

personal struggles creates a shared thread across the films, highlighting how capital shapes and constrains human experiences.

The body serves as both a site of vulnerability and resistance in these narratives. In *The Tenants*, the tenants' physical labor to maintain their building symbolizes their collective resilience. In *Killing the Dog*, the protagonist's body becomes a repository of trauma, with his gestures and movements conveying unspoken emotions. Farhadi's *The Salesman* addresses bodily violation and its aftermath, exploring how trauma reshapes the characters' relationships and identities. The films' nuanced portrayals of the body underscore its centrality to the human condition, reflecting both individual agency and societal constraints.

These films demonstrate the manner in which money is tied to the structure of desire, perpetually promising fulfillment but never delivering it. Psychoanalytic theory identifies compulsive hoarding or spending as neurotic behaviors tied to unresolved psychological conflicts.[105] Economics acknowledges pathological behaviors, such as gambling addiction or excessive risk-taking, as deviations from rational utility-maximizing behavior.[106] Neoliberal policies, consumerism, globalized economy exacerbate the desire for money which is mediated by the Other. The subject's desire for money is entangled in their quest for symbolic validation and the fantasy of mastery over lack. The desire for money in Iran must be situated within broader social, economic, political contexts. Importantly, Lacan suggests that the desire for money is shaped by its relational aspect—it exists in the interplay between the subject and the *Other* (society, culture, or authority). In *The Tenants* and *Killing the Dog*, seeking money turns into a fetish, a psychological object imbued with excessive meaning. This fetishization often obscures money's practical value, elevating it to an almost sacred status in modern societies. In Marxist economic theory, the desire for money is shaped by capitalist structures, where money operates as a fetishized commodity. The intrusive acts of the bulldozer and the old man in *The Salesman* embody the dominance of the desire for the 'creative destruction' on the city and the female body with disastrous consequences.

[105] S. Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. Translated by James Strachey. Vol. 9. 1905. Reprint, (Hogarth Press, 1959).
[106] Peter Subkowski, "On the Psychodynamics of Collecting." *the International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 87, no. 2 (2006): 383–401. https://doi.org/10.1516/4UMF-YF9G-FVFR-JM09.

Technically, the films employ a variety of cinematic techniques to enhance their narratives. Mehrejuee's use of close-ups and tracking shots in *The Tenants* emphasizes the house and its location within the broader plan which affect the life of the tenants, while Bayzaee's emphasis on the construction mania in *Killing the Dog* creates a potent critique of how unbridled urban development disrupts the social fabric and personal lives of individuals. Farhadi's dynamic framing of apartments, buildings and spaces in *The Salesman* suggest the impact of Tehran's urban transformations on personal lives. By emphasizing confined, fragile, and often contested spaces, Farhadi underscores how the built environment becomes a silent yet powerful participant in shaping human relationships, amplifying tensions, and exposing power imbalances.

Despite their shared themes, the films diverge in their narrative structures and emotional registers. Mehrejuee's *The Tenants* balances humor and pathos, using satire to critique systemic inequality. Bayzaee's *Killing the Dog* adopts a more somber tone, immersing viewers in the protagonist's existential crisis. Farhadi's *The Salesman* navigates moral ambiguity with precision, crafting a narrative that is both intimate and universal. These differences underscore the versatility of Iranian cinema, showcasing its ability to address complex issues through diverse storytelling approaches.

The Crises Reflected in Iranian Cinema

The three films analyzed in this study—Mehrejuee's *The Tenants*, Bayzaee's *Killing the Dog*, and Farhadi's *The Salesman*—offer profound insights into the crises that have gripped Iran over three pivotal decades. These films collectively depict a nation grappling with the enduring complexities of socio-economic instability, cultural transformation, and psychological fragmentation. By examining the specific crises reflected in each film, we gain a deeper understanding of how Iranian cinema serves as both a mirror and critique of its sociohistorical context.

In *The Tenants* (1980s), Mehrjui uses a decaying apartment building to critique the socio-economic struggles of post-revolutionary Iran, where urban neglect and inadequate infrastructure mirror the nation's failure to fulfill revolutionary promises. The landlord's attempts to displace tenants symbolize the encroachment of profit-driven motives into spaces meant for communal living, highlighting the tension between ideals of social justice and capitalist exploitation.

By the 2000s, Bayzaee's *Killing the Dog* explores the effects of rapid urbanization and the commodification of space in an Iran marked by war trauma and international isolation. The barren

landscapes and stark urban settings underscore the alienation caused by the relentless capitalization of space, where development prioritizes profit over community. The protagonist's psychological decline reflects the broader dislocation and existential void created by urban transformations that sever individuals from cultural and historical roots. Both films reveal how capital-driven urban development reshapes space, exacerbating societal fragmentation and personal despair.

Farhadi's *The Salesman* (2016) intricately explores the interplay between urban space, capital, the body, and gender in a society balancing globalization and cultural conservatism. The film's opening sequence, depicting the collapse of the couple's apartment building, serves as a striking metaphor for the precarity of physical spaces shaped by unchecked urban development. This displacement underscores the commodification of space and its destabilizing effects on personal lives, as the protagonists are forced into environments that magnify their vulnerabilities. The narrative's focus on trauma and morality is deeply tied to the spatial and bodily experiences of its characters. The invasion of domestic space becomes a violation not just of property but of bodily autonomy, with gendered power dynamics intensifying the impact. Farhadi uses these disruptions to critique the ways urbanization and capital-driven priorities exacerbate inequalities, particularly for women, whose agency is often constrained within patriarchal frameworks.

These films collectively reveal a nation in crisis, with each decade presenting distinct but interconnected challenges. In *The Tenants*, the crisis is rooted in economic exploitation and urban neglect, reflecting the socio-political contradictions of a post-revolutionary society. *Killing the Dog* shifts the focus to psychological and existential crises, capturing the alienation and disillusionment of a generation navigating the aftermath of war and modernization. By the time of *The Salesman*, the crises have evolved to encompass the moral and emotional complexities of a society caught between globalization and traditional values.

In a broader sense, these films highlight the transformative power of Iranian cinema as a medium for critical reflection and cultural expression. By situating personal narratives within their historical contexts, Mehrejuee, Bayzaee, and Farhadi create works that resonate far beyond their immediate settings. Their films serve as a testament to the enduring relevance of art in addressing the crises of society, offering both a critique of existing structures and a vision of potential transformation.

Broader Implications for Iranian Society

The findings of this research reveal critical insights into the intersections of space, capital, women, and subjectivity in contemporary Iranian society as reflected in its cinema. First, they underscore how Iranian filmmakers use depictions of urban space to critique the commodification of the built environment and its impact on individual lives. Films such as *The Tenants* and *Killing the Dog* expose how unchecked capital-driven urbanization leads to spatial dislocation, systemic neglect, and the erosion of communal bonds, highlighting the social and psychological toll of such transformations.

Second, this study sheds light on the gendered dimensions of space and capital. Farhadi's *The Salesman* vividly portrays how urban spaces shaped by patriarchal and economic forces become sites of vulnerability and conflict, particularly for women. The invasion of domestic spaces and the bodily and emotional violations that ensue underscore how spatial and economic inequities intersect with gender-based oppression, amplifying the struggles faced by women in navigating these power dynamics.

Third, the analysis highlights cinema's role in exploring subjectivity within Iran's socio-political context. The protagonists in these films often grapple with alienation, disconnection, and moral ambiguity, reflecting the broader effects of rapid urbanization and the commodification of both space and human agency. The narratives bring attention to how economic and spatial transformations reshape individual and collective identities, often reinforcing systemic inequalities while also opening possibilities for resistance and self-awareness.

Finally, this research affirms the power of Iranian cinema in fostering critical engagement with space, capital, and gender. By centering marginalized experiences and interrogating the socio-economic structures that shape urban life, these films not only critique systemic exploitation but also invite audiences to imagine alternative futures. This perspective is particularly significant in Iran's rapidly modernizing yet deeply traditional context, where cinema becomes a crucial medium for negotiating and reimagining the intersections of space, capital, and subjectivity.

Conclusion

The interconnections between space, capital, body, and subjectivity in *The Tenants*, *Killing the Dog*, and *The Salesman* offer profound insights into the socio-economic realities of contemporary

Iran. They exemplify the ways Iranian cinema engages with space and capital as central forces shaping human experience. Cinematic techniques such as Mehrejuee's use of shared spaces to highlight collective struggle, Bayzaee's stark visual contrasts to evoke alienation, and Farhadi's intricate framing of domestic environments to underscore moral ambiguity bring these themes to life with emotional and intellectual depth. By leveraging these spatial and aesthetic elements, Iranian filmmakers reveal how capital and space intersect with individual and collective identities. The consciousness of the characters is shaped by the urbanized environment, which is itself a product of capital's influence, materialized in real estate developments and the broader mechanisms of the second circuit of capital. Second circuit of capital (or Real estate) and the construction industry lie at the core of the films: Mehrjuee's critique of mania for profit at any price, Bayzaee's commentary on the commodification, assetization, and commercialization, Farhadi's theme of selling and buying depict a community which is implicated in marketization of everything as objects of exchange. The characters come to realize that their existence unfolds within a space dominated by capital, where commodification, exchange value, and urbanization define the conditions of life. Within this context, the overarching "Big Other" of capitalism leaves little room for any radical ethical transformation of subjectivity. The characters find themselves tightly bound within an urbanized and continuously urbanizing capitalist framework, where possibilities for genuine change or resistance are severely constrained. By analyzing *The Tenants*, *Killing the Dog*, and *The Salesman*, this study underscores the transformative potential of cinema as a medium for critical reflection and cultural expression. These films not only illuminate the complexities of Iranian society but also contribute to a broader understanding of the human condition, reaffirming the importance of art in navigating the challenges of an ever-changing world.

From a methodological perspective, the study illustrates the value of interdisciplinary approaches to film analysis. By integrating theories from urban studies, psychoanalysis, Marxism, and embodiment studies, this research provides a multifaceted understanding of the films' narratives and aesthetics. This approach not only deepens the analysis but also highlights the richness of Iranian cinema as a subject of academic inquiry.

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