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**Spatial Narratives: Architecture as Cinematic
Language in the Films of Bahram Beyzâei**

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Introduction

In the first shot of the movie *Uncle Mustache*, the camera zooms out from a couple of young boys running with a ball, to an empty landscape with a lonely house in the middle. The house is not inviting, and it has a retinal quality, like a painting. It's isolated and far from anything civilized. The children disrupt this chosen isolation, and its owner, *Uncle Mustache*. The house is a metaphor for the man's state of mind, and the children represent to him what he has lost. Their imagination and playfulness cannot be contained, and they don't need much to activate it; a big empty piece of land is enough, and their youthful energy will do the rest. The director, *Bahram Beyzâei*, uses the bulk of volume amid all the emptiness as a way to highlight characterization—revealing the children as free, formless, open and undefined, and the Uncle as closed off, isolated, stiff, out of place, and not in balance with the outside world.

This paper explores how, much like the example given above, the acclaimed Iranian director employs architecture, spatiality, and the politics of space-time relations in his films as a storytelling device. In Beyzâei's movies, the utilization and presentation of space—through the framing of objects, the camera's movement around them, and the manipulation of spatial elements—plays a significant role. Even first-time viewers can easily recognize this aspect. Therefore, it is worthwhile to delve deeper into his works to examine how he purposefully uses spatiality, whether through architecture or the interaction of subjects within that architecture, to tell a story. This analysis concentrates on a selection of his films that warrant this interpretation, supported by visual analyses—using his movies as primary sources, and other secondary sources to substantiate the argument further.

Many books and articles discuss the relationship between architecture and cinema in the broad sense, focusing on different themes and looking at the subject from various lenses. There is a minimal number of studies that discuss Beyzâei's use of architecture, buildings, and urban spaces in both English and Persian. However, more studies exist in both languages that explore other themes and motifs in his films.

The sources that have brought a wider architectural framework to this paper include works from Juhani Pallasmaa, Barbara Mennel, Renée Tobe, and Giuliana Bruno. These works focus on a variety of topics concerning architecture and film: how human

experiences are framed within a cinematic spatial context,¹ how specific cities are portrayed in films, focusing on themes such as modernity, mobility, love, war, and ruins,² how philosophical ideas merge with the art of cinema, particularly in its use of space,³ and how the cultural history of spatio-visual arts can be explored.⁴

Additionally, other sources critique, introduce, or interview Bahram Beyzā'ei, including a collection of essays gathered and edited by Zaven Ghokasian⁵ and his book of interviews with Beyzā'ei,⁶ as well as Mehdi Fotuhi's thought piece on Beyzā'ei and Iran's architecture.⁷ These sources are in Persian and have been translated by the author, unless otherwise noted.

Using the sources, this paper tries to synthesize and cover a range of theoretical and sometimes philosophical ideas that merge spaces in real life and cinema, with the selected films of Beyzā'ei as the case studies. There are two main themes, each of which will be explored in a separate chapter. In these chapters, two or three films are analyzed to show how narrative informs spatiality and vice versa, to communicate the story better.

A Journey Through the Alien City

The movies discussed in this chapter are *Maybe Some Other Time*, *Journey*, and *Killing Mad Dogs*.

Maybe Some Other Time (1988 - a.k.a *Shāyad Vaghti Digar*)⁸

The movie is about a woman's angst and confusion regarding her past. It starts with dubber Mr. Modaber seeing his spouse Kian with a stranger, while he's adding voiceover to a video at work. He starts investigating Kian and the stranger, only to find out that his wife has a doppelgänger. All the while, Kian is suffering from an identity crisis, with curiosity about her past, without knowing why.

¹ Juhani Pallasmaa, "The Existential Image: Lived Space in Cinema and Architecture," *Phainomenon* 25, no. 1 (October 14, 2021): 157–74, <https://doi.org/10.2478/phainomenon-2012-0020>.

² Barbara Mennel, *Cities and Cinema*, 0 ed. (Routledge, 2008), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203015605>.

³ Renée Tobe, *Film, Architecture and Spatial Imagination*, Film, Architecture and Spatial Imagination (Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon New York: Routledge, 2017), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315533735>.

⁴ Giuliana Bruno, *Atlas of Emotions: Journeys in Art, Architecture and Film* (London: Verso [u.a.], 2002).

⁵ Shahram Jafarinejad et al., *A Collection of Essays in Critique and Introduction of Bahram Beyzā'ei's Movies*, ed. Zaven Ghokasian (Negah Publications, n.d.). My translation.

⁶ Zaven Ghokasian, *A Conversation with Bahram Beyzā'ei* (Tehran: Agah Publication Association, 1993). My translation.

⁷ Mehdi Fotuhi, "Beyzā'ei's Cinema, and the Forgotten Architecture of Iran," *Azma*, no. 109 (2016): 22–25, <https://www.noormags.ir/view/fa/articlepage/1373674>. My translation.

⁸ Bahram Beyzā'ei, *Maybe Some Other Time* (Tehran: Novin Film, 1988), film.

The gradual buildup towards the end of the film, clears that the reveal of the mysterious doppelgänger's identity is the solution to Kian's crisis. Her distress is shown through sequences of nightmares, illusions, and panic. One instance of this representational imagery is a ruin that she runs into in the early stage of the film. It sets the foundation for a surrealistically crafted reality, where Kian constantly finds herself in these 'scenes' that somehow relate her to her mysterious childhood. As for the ruin, a functional structure appeals to our logic, while a dilapidated building ignites our creativity and latent dreams.⁹ (Figure 1)



Figure 1. Kian in front of a ruin, symbolizing her childhood narrative as it crumbles¹⁰

Another instance is the merging of memory and the physical world. As Pallasmaa says, "Lived space is space that is inseparably integrated with the subject's concurrent life situation."¹¹ When Kian reflects on her childhood, the sequence that captures this memory is a shot of a long corridor that is dimly lit and highly contrasted, with a baby carriage in the middle, slowly coming towards the camera. It has a hallucinatory and uncanny effect. The long perspective creates a sense of anticipatory mystery. As the camera zooms out, we see that Kian is looking at this long corridor from behind the window of her house. Her interior life, injected into the physical world, is visualised in such a way. Beyzāêi does so to accentuate her angst to the viewer. In her experience of lived space, "memory and dream, fear and desire, value and meaning, fuse with the actual precepts."¹² (Figures 2, 3, and 4)

⁹ Pallasmaa, "The Existential Image," 168.

¹⁰ The following stills of this sub-chapter are taken from *Maybe Some Other Time*, directed by Bahram Beyzāêi (1988).

¹¹ Pallasmaa, "The Existential Image," 158.

¹² *Ibid.*



Figure 2. Long, dimly lit corridor with a carriage coming towards the camera



Figure 3. As the camera zooms out, we see that Kian is looking at this long corridor from behind the window of her house.



Figure 4. Inside her house, Kian is often framed with stark contrasts, with walls that are close to each other, giving the domestic a stifling feel.

In dream sequences, a sense of otherworldliness is intensified. Kian runs across the floors of what is implied to be an orphanage. Beyzā'ei cares about the effect of a dream sequence and the uncanny dream-like quality: “the formal ambiguity of sleep; that is, touching on a specific visual experience, to find that distantly familiar quality of sleep, which is unrecognizable upon being seen, although it seems lucid; and which is meaningless when it’s being observed, although it undoubtedly has meaning.”¹³ Long corridors and sharp lines of light and dark are elements featured in Kian's dream sequences. With a subjective camera perspective, she is placed in the middle of a vignette that feels out of place and surreal. It is reminiscent of German Expressionist cinema. The premise of such films is “the expression of psychological states through imagery, often distorted and closed, in the sense they refer only to themselves, a closed world presented in film. With their exaggerated mise en scène and use of painted or sculpted sets these films create distorted reflections of emotional stress and imbalance.”¹⁴ (Figures 5, 6, 7, and 8)

¹³ *Hitchcock in Frame: Beyzā'ei in Conversation* (Tehran: Roshangaran Publications, 1996), 31. My translation.

¹⁴ Tobe, *Film, Architecture and Spatial Imagination*, 21.



Figure 5. One of Kian's dreams, with her bed in the middle of what is implied to be an orphanage



Figure 6. With a subjective camera perspective, she is placed in the middle of a vignette that feels out of place and surreal.



Figure 7. “The formal ambiguity of sleep; that is, touching on a specific visual experience, to find that distantly familiar quality of sleep, which is unrecognizable upon being seen, although it seems lucid; and which is meaningless when it’s being observed, although it undoubtedly has meaning.”



Figure 8. Scene from a ruined orphanage in Kian’s dream

As a clue for the answer to the mystery, at the beginning of the film, when Modaber is in the recording booth and on the phone with his wife, there are pictures projected on the background and also hung on the walls. These images depict the Postkhāne building, which was opened in Tehran in 1928 and demolished in 1970. They serve as a subtle

hint towards the answer to the mystery, suggesting the answer lies in looking at the past, in streets and buildings that no longer exist. This is because Beyzā'ei considers this building one of the most beautiful ones in Tehran of that era, and one that belonged to a time where "Tehran was practicing its resemblance to early 20th-century Paris or Vienna, and before this practice could be realized, the new Tehran swallowed it up and destroyed it."¹⁵ Minutes later, when Modaber is asked what he is looking for, he replies, "A cure," and the film cuts to images of this building again. (Figures 9 and 10)



Figure 9. The 'Postkhāne' building, which was opened in 1928 and demolished in 1970.

Towards the end, Modaber visits an antique store to meet the owner, the stranger who is married to Kian's doppelgänger. The antique store is staged to reveal the truth. The camera moves slowly around the various objects, creating an atmosphere filled with antiquity. Among the items, there is a painting of Kian—or her doppelgänger, as we later discover. What makes this location significant for uncovering the mystery? The answer may lie in how Beyzā'ei perceives these types of spaces. In an analysis of Hitchcock's films, for example, he highlighted how certain spaces are used to enhance the contrast between ephemerality and eternity. "Churches and even courts, as ceremonies of life and death, gradually become in Hitchcock's films an eternal order against the short fate of his subjects. So do art galleries and memorials and museums, and all the cold, silent, eternal places."¹⁶ According to such a view, utilizing this space aligns well with the theme. Because "the experience of being in such places is accompanied by a kind of apprehension; places like libraries and archives, cemeteries, temples, and memorials;

¹⁵ Ghokasian, *A Conversation with Bahram Beyzā'ei*, 150.

¹⁶ *Hitchcock in Frame: Beyzā'ei in Conversation*, 24.

places that represent the silent antiquity of eternity against our short fate.”¹⁷ (Figures 11, 12, and 13)



Figure 10. The 'Postkhāne' building in the background

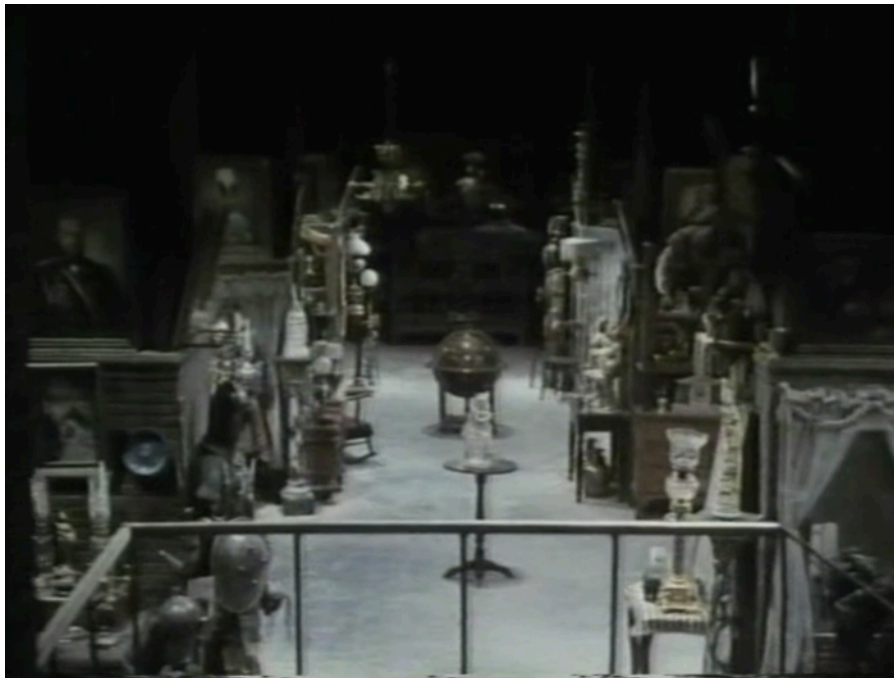


Figure 11. The antique store

¹⁷ *Hitchcock in Frame: Beyzā'ei in Conversation*, 24.



Figure 12. "[...] the experience of being in such places is accompanied by a kind of apprehension; places like libraries and archives, cemeteries, temples and memorials; places that represent the silent antiquity of eternity against our short fate. We have relied on a world that is against us."



Figure 13. Painting of Kian's doppelgänger

In the end, after meeting her doppelgänger—who is discovered to be her long-lost twin sister—the movie journeys into the past from the basement of the antique shop. The door opens, the camera zooms in, and we see the same architectural style as in the

photographs featured in earlier scenes. Transported back to the narrow alleys of a Tehran that has not been shown throughout the movie. *Passing through the historical corridor*,¹⁸ the audience experiences flashbacks of her mother, herself, and her twin sister, ultimately revealing the mystery. (Figures 14 and 15)

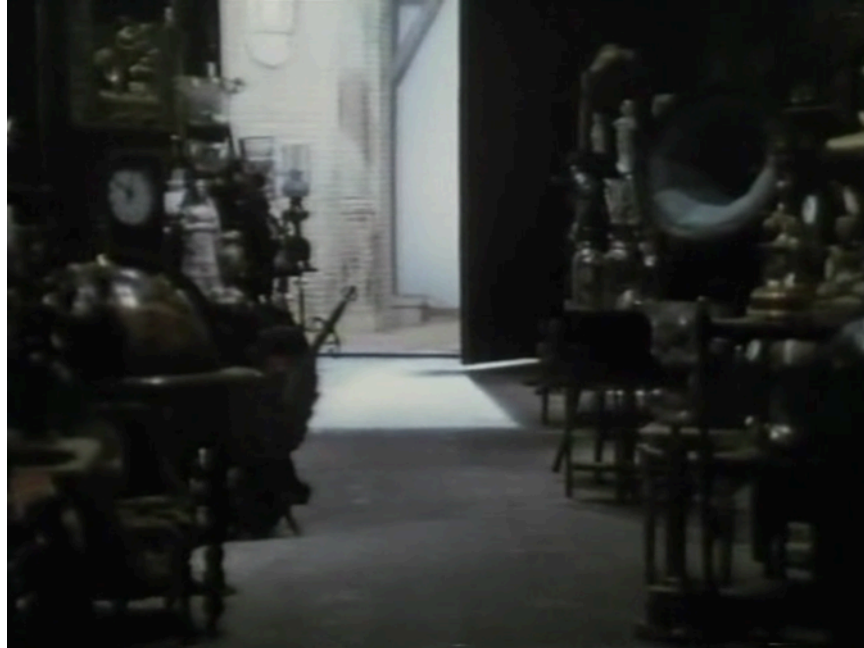


Figure 14. The door opens, the camera zooms in, and we see the same architectural style as in the photographs featured in earlier scenes.



Figure 15. Flashback of Kian's mother, running in the streets of 'Old Tehran'

¹⁸ Jafarinejad et al., *A Collection of Essays in Critique and Introduction of Bahram Beyzāēi's Movies*, 521.

Ultimately, the theme of this movie revolves around lost identity. As mentioned earlier, Beyzâêi has always been concerned about the changing face of the city and how people are becoming strangers to themselves. He aims to convey that in a city that feels increasingly alien, where developments are occurring rapidly and without proper planning, one can feel like a stranger in their own town.

Journey (1972 - a.k.a *Safar*)¹⁹

Journey follows two boys as they travel from downtown to uptown, seeking the address of one boy's parents to find them.

The story begins when one boy approaches his friend, excitedly telling him that he has found the address of his parents. His friend responds, “You find a new address every day!” The people around them show no interest in their conversation.

The film portrays a vision of an ideal world through high-rise buildings, contrasting sharply with the worn and aged architecture of downtown, where the boys come from. This contrast serves to illustrate the separation between the boys' dreams versus their upbringing and current circumstances.

As the boys journey through the city to reach their destination—the given address—they encounter various elements and settings that seem to exist on the fringe of urban life and not quite within its core. They walk past ruins where men are sleeping inside; a representation of their indifference. If according to author Barbara Mennel, Ruins serve two separate roles in films that depict war in urban settings—firstly, as a backdrop of destroyed structures asserting a sense of realism, especially in rubble films, secondly, in postmodern cinema, the motif of the ruin references a lineage from Romanticism and Baroque allegory, contrasting with realist precision²⁰—then the ruins, rubbles, displaced carriages and vast lands of scrap metal yards show how the city itself is displaced, with every element within it being like so. This is not a ruin left from a time of war; it is a ruin from a city that is eating itself from within; meaning that the part of the city that is unidentifiable and is detached from history and itself, does not allow for any new history.

Despite the existence of a crowd, there is no sense of a knot bringing people and a community together. It is not simply an allegory, symbolizing the passing of time²¹, but in a way it is reversing that effect; the city is trapped in time, and it cannot contain the

¹⁹ Bahram Beyzâêi, *Journey* (Institute for the Intellectual Development of Children and Young Adults, 1972), film.

²⁰ Mennel, *Cities and Cinema*, 110.

²¹ *Ibid.*

youthful desires of its new generation. (Figures 16, 17, and 18)



Figure 16. The two boys are passing through the city, going from downtown to uptown²²



Figure 17. Lands of displaced elements

²² The following stills of this sub-chapter are taken from *Journey*, directed by Bahram Beyzā'ei (1972).



Figure 18. Lands of displaced elements

When they reach “uptown”, there is no one on the streets. Due to the camera angles and set design, and the placing of the taller buildings all in a row next to one another, they appear fake and artificial, as if the world has not settled in, and it seems to be just a prop. But it is not simply a failed counterfeit. Their point is their fakeness and artificiality. “To counterfeit is to use fake props and painted backdrops in such a manner that they are meant to fool the camera into thinking what is revealed is reality. The condition of counterfeiting reality is part of the status and history of film. While with the artificial, on the other hand, the point of the fake props and painted backdrops is explicitly their fakeness and unreality,”²³ as author Renée Tobe writes. (Figure 19)

They are not welcome. The address is wrong, and there is no one to turn to. The sense of alienation in this area feels different, as it presents an abstract image of what good luck and fortune look like from the boys’ youthful perspective. There is no sense of everyday life, and the landscape feels barren. The modern architecture stands in contrast to the old, traditional brick structures of their neighborhood. Ultimately, the upscale uptown feels just as distant and alienating as the more familiar, deprived alleys of downtown. In the end, this isn't the conclusion of their story. The boy says to his friend, "I'll find a new address tomorrow!"

²³ Tobe, *Film, Architecture and Spatial Imagination*, 21.



Figure 19. The boy, disappointed, with the uptown neighborhood as his background

Killing Mad Dogs (2001 - a.k.a *Sagkoshi*)²⁴

*The movie is about Author Golrokh Kamali, who returns to Tehran and her husband after spending a year in the provinces. Regretting and ashamed of doubting her husband's fidelity, Golrokh must come to his defense when a group of unscrupulous businessmen end up imprisoning him for debt.*²⁵

Although she used to live in the city, its new look has become very unfamiliar to her. The movie depicts the time when Iran was at war with Iraq. To create the atmosphere of the film, Beyzâei looks no further than the city itself to convey feelings of alienation, detachment, and ultimately the destruction of a collective identity. Much like in *Maybe Some Other Time* and *Journey*, the urban landscape appears polluted, dark, messy, and nightmarish; here, however, there is no possibility of returning to the old Tehran, even in a dream. The audience and the characters have moved beyond that time, and all that remains is the changing landscape.

And this changing landscape, always in the background, reflects the inner turmoil and eventual transformation of Golrokh. Upon her return to Tehran from a smaller city, she is innocent, hopeful, and somewhat naive. In dealing with all the corrupt businessmen one by one, she gradually changes and becomes what is expected of her to survive in this town; cunning, brutal and resilient. In an unstable state, her house has been sold

²⁴ Bahram Beyzâei, *Killing Mad Dogs* (Tehran: Silkroad Production, Lissar Film Group, 2001), film.

²⁵ "Plot Synopsis from Mubi," <https://mubi.com/en/nl/films/killing-mad-dogs>.

without her knowing, and she has to stay in a hotel while she works to complete her mission. The hotel is used as a contrast to the stability and enduring quality of home. Outside her window, she can see men working on a construction site, welding and hammering, which disrupts her view and signifies change. In Beyzāêi's view, this is a violation of her privacy, comfort, and—as a reflection of the plot—her own self.²⁶ (Figures 20 and 21)



Figure 20. Golrokh looking at the disrupted view ²⁷



Figure 21. The construction always in view

²⁶ Zaven Ghokasian, *Bahram Beyzāêi and the Phenomenon of Killing Mad Dogs* (Tehran: Khojasteh Publications, 2002), 94. My translation.

²⁷ The following stills of this sub-chapter are taken from *Killing Mad Dogs*, directed by Bahram Beyzāêi (2001).

The opening chapter of the film introduces Golrokh and her mission: to buy back the checks from the eight businessmen to whom her husband is presumably indebted. At this point, the audience is introduced to these characters. Each of them lives and works in different circumstances, and runs businesses of different caliber. Some are traditional, some belong to a bygone era, and some are the symbol of what is to come in the future. These differences contribute to the alienating and almost fearsome portrayal of Tehran in the film; there is a lack of harmony. The film shows a variety of architectural styles, revealing many faces of Tehran, giving the city a heterogeneous quality. “The cultural conflict and contradiction seen in the heterogeneity of architecture exacerbate the conflict between individuals.”²⁸

The first creditor’s office is located in a traditional house from the early 1300s. He is a traditional type, and this type of architecture is not very common throughout the city anymore. (Figures 22 and 23) Another creditor’s place, Haji Naghdi’s chamber is another example of old architecture. It’s very dark, and the way he is framed brings a sense of untrustworthiness to him. (Figures 24 and 25) Another creditor, Nayeri’s house features pretentious nouveau riche decor. He attempts to seduce and take advantage of Golrokh. The house is illuminated with red lights, highlighting the man’s womanizing character. (Figure 26) The final creditors, Sangestani-ha, appear rigid and block-like, resembling the disproportionate concrete buildings they are constructing. Beyzā’ei views them as the future of Tehran.²⁹ In the story, they are the final creditors to be paid. Throughout this process, Golrokh has transformed into what she needed to become. She successfully purchases the last check, but it’s not a sweet victory. (Figures 27 and 28)



Figure 22. Exterior of the first creditor’s office

²⁸ Ghokasian, *Bahram Beyzā’ei and the Phenomenon of Killing Mad Dogs*, 108.

²⁹ Ghokasian, 109.



Figure 23. A closer look at the traditional windows of the building, with the creditor standing behind



Figure 24. Golrokh in Haji Naghdi's chamber



Figure 25. The way he is framed brings a sense of untrustworthiness



Figure 26. Nayeri's house features pretentious nouveau riche decor with red lights to accentuate his womanizer character



Figure 27. The concrete buildings that the last creditors are building



Figure 28. The final creditors appear rigid and block-like, resembling the buildings they are constructing

The movie concludes with Golrokh uncovering the truth that her husband had been lying about their debts all along, and that he was not deceived by his financial partner, but rather, he was the deceiver himself. It is a bitter twist, but it's not entirely hopeless. Golrokh learns that she needs to leave all of this behind, not forget, but live with the painful knowledge that came at such a high cost.

At the beginning of the film, there is a clue in the form of ruin. She mistakenly arrives at an old, historic structure. As she looks for a different location, she asks a stranger for directions and then drives away from the dilapidated building. According to Mennel,

“Historic examples also relate to apocalyptic imaginaries.”³⁰ This structure serves as a symbol on multiple levels, reflecting what ultimately happens to Golrokh—she becomes broken and estranged from the world. Additionally, it serves as a reminder of how everything is changing, with this type of architecture disappearing from the landscape. “Ruins always point to temporality, since ‘they are an obvious remnant of the past that stubbornly remains in the present, they also point to a future when the present will have become history.’”³¹ Taking this interpretation further, Golrokh stubbornly remains who she is, which is evident in how she puts all of this behind her and leaves the city, even though the scars and marks of the events will be ever-present. (Figure 29)



Figure 29. Golrokh arrives mistakenly at a dilapidated building

A House and a Mill: Theatrical Cinema, or Cinematic Theater

The movies discussed in this chapter are *Travellers* and *Death of Yazdgerd*.

Travellers (1992 - a.k.a. *Mosāferan*)³²

A young woman's wedding becomes a mourning ritual when her sister dies in a car accident on the way to the wedding, along with her husband and two children. The sister was bringing a mirror, without which the young woman could not marry.

Travellers is a film in which ceremonies, customs, and ideas take center stage. It explores a cycle of contrasts, particularly between mourning and celebration, and life

³⁰ Mennel, *Cities and Cinema*, 107.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Bahram Beyzā'ei, *Travellers* (Tehran: Filmsaz, 1992), film.

and death. From the very first shot, one of the most significant elements of the movie is introduced: the mirror. This mirror symbolizes life and joyful ceremonies, reflecting the sky, the sea, and nature—all integral parts of the cycle of life and death. It is intended to be brought to the young sister's wedding, but it will ultimately not make it there. This, we are told at the very beginning. The fate of the sister who's bringing the mirror is already set. She looks into the camera, and tells her fate: "We are going to Tehran for my younger sister's wedding. We won't get to Tehran. We will all die."³³ This line shifts the tone of the movie to surrealistic, granting permission to what happens in the end, which will be discussed.

The shots of nature, when paired with later shots of the house in which the ceremony will take place, can be interpreted with the concept of Heidegger's fourfold. The fourfold includes humans, deities, earth, and sky, which together unify or gather, as Heidegger calls it, to create a space where our human experiences, actions, and emotions can take place.³⁴ (Figures 30 and 31)



Figure 30. The mirror, showing the sky, before it is brought to Tehran for the wedding ceremony³⁵

After the car accident, the rest of the movie is set mostly within the house where the wedding ceremony is hosted. In a way, it acts as a character of its own, said Iraj Rāminfar, the movie's set and costume designer. "The film required a setting—a house where the entire story unfolds both inside and outside. This house serves as one of the main characters. Its architecture reflects the lives of its inhabitants, evoking memories

³³ Bahram Beyzā'ei, *Travellers*.

³⁴ Tobe, *Film, Architecture and Spatial Imagination*, 20.

³⁵ The following stills of this sub-chapter are taken from *Travellers*, directed by Bahram Beyzā'ei (1992).

and dreams. We envisioned a central hall with rooms surrounding it, similar to the traditional Iranian architectural feature known as the *ghulām-gardān* (ambulatory). The design included a central hall, with rooms located both upstairs and downstairs. The connection between these two floors was created by stairs, which played a crucial role in the decor and the movements of "Mahrukh" [the bride] as she ascended and descended."³⁶ (Figure 32)



Figure 31. The sister's children are playing, framed within bars, with the sea behind



Figure 32. Picture from the house's model ³⁷

³⁶ agrandisman, "Home in Travellers by Bahram Beyzā'ei," Youtube video, 2021, 2:28, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bACXdIH9zqY>. My translation.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 3:36.

Inside the house, the set design is stripped of anything unnecessary. The interior and mise-en-scene are set with only the most essential elements of a house. The bare white walls, the darkened furniture, and the way the house is planned, all bring it back to its most fundamental essence: its *idea*. (Figures 33 and 34)

Navid Poormohammadrezā, an urbanist and cinema researcher, analyzes the portrayal of the house in this film and compares it to those in contemporary Iranian cinema, particularly in the works of *Darius Mehrjui* and *Masoud Kimiāei*. In some of Mehrjui's films, the house has a realistic quality, it is a real contemporary house in which people live, not a decor. It reflects the current living conditions of young Iranians of a certain class. Conversely, in Kimiāei's films, the house symbolizes something that has been abandoned, forgotten, and covered in dust. In comparison, Beyzāei's perspective does not present a contemporary house nor a remnant of the past; his approach stands apart from both.³⁸ "Travellers is a summary of Bahram Beyzāei's general conception, encounter, and interpretation of dwelling in this land. The life that takes place there has neither the pain and longing of Kimiāei's films, nor is it a life based on the contemporary relations of Mehrjoui's cinema. Rather, it is a ritual or ceremonial life. A life worthy of the idea of home, not home itself."³⁹



Figure 33. The house, with bare white walls and a central hall

³⁸ agrandisman, 1:05.

³⁹ agrandisman, 4:18.



Figure 34. *Mahrokh*, the bride, framed within multiple windows

With this interpretation, it would make sense for a director to empty the scene of anything redundant. At a fundamental level, certain architectural elements—such as doorways, bridges, windows, and stairs—serve not only as points of passage or transition but also facilitate discussions and deepen our understanding of philosophical concepts. In particular, they illuminate the idea of the fourfold, as expounded on by Heidegger, and interpreted by Tobe.⁴⁰ “The fourfold is preserved in the ‘simple essence of dwelling’. Examples include: the house as a dwelling where humans live; the door or gate as a means of transition between inside and outside; the window as an opening to view the sky; and the bridge as a connection between two pieces of land. ‘Things’, like Heidegger’s hammer, are like knots or webs of situations, entirely involved in a purposeful act, not primarily as an ‘object’ but as part of a situation.”⁴¹

Such ‘objects’ constantly frame the characters, or layer the audience’s view, to better communicate the characters’ inner lives. Through different angles and setups with a clear hierarchy, the viewers’ experience is enriched through such multiplicity, and the house is better known. Guiliana Bruno considers the viewing of a film “a practice of space that is dwelt in, as in the built environment.”⁴² Through constant ascending and descending of stairs, and shots from the windows, we see the house from multiple perspectives, thus making it an “architectural space [that] becomes framed for view and offers itself for consumption as traveled space that is available for further traveling.

⁴⁰ Tobe, *Film, Architecture and Spatial Imagination*, 20.

⁴¹ Tobe, 24.

⁴² Bruno, *Atlas of Emotions*, 62.

Attracted to vistas, the spectator turns into a visitor. The film 'viewer' is a practitioner of viewing space—a tourist."⁴³ (Figures 35, 36, and 37)

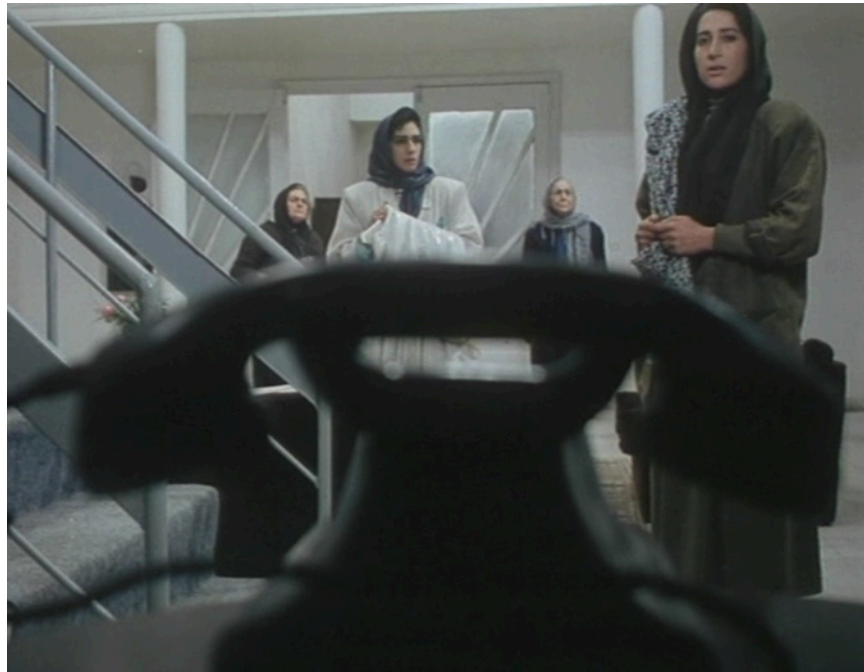


Figure 35. The telephone, as bearer of bad news, becomes an important object



Figure 36. Shot of Mahrokh on the top floor, showing the hall and stairs in the background

⁴³ Bruno, 62.



Figure 37. The rest of the family, as they are gradually realizing that a change of ceremony is needed

When the wedding ceremony shifts and becomes a time of mourning, the house transforms into a center stage resembling Ta'zieh.⁴⁴ In a Ta'zieh play, one of the main elements is the relationship between the actors and the spectators. Generally, the story being performed is already known and established among the audience. With the existence of this communal gathering, "what matters is not just the narrative and the events, but rather how they are reflected and their overall quality. This shift allows for a more active role for the audience in engaging with the text."⁴⁵ And this audience is both the movie's audience, and the audience *within* the house; the mourners.

The house is now entirely black. Although the walls are not painted, they appear darker due to the lighting setup and the presence of people dressed in black. One by one, each relative or friend of the victims from the accident steps onto the stage, carrying a framed picture and sharing their story. The mourners (or the audience) are arranged in a circle to create space for the performers. The central hall is the central stage for unfolding the story. (Figures 38, 39)

⁴⁴ "The nucleus of the Ta'ziyeh is the heroic martyrdom of Hossein, the grandson of the prophet Mohammad... But although it is Islamic in appearance, it is strongly Persian, drawing vital inspiration from its special political and cultural heritage. Its genius is that it combines immediacy and flexibility with universality. Uniting rural folk art with urban, royal entertainment, it admits no barriers between the archetype and the human, the wealthy and the poor, the sophisticated and the simple, the spectator and the actor. Each participates with and enriches the other." Peter J. Chelkowski, "Ta'ziyeh: Indigenous Avant-Garde Theatre of Iran," *Performing Arts Journal* 2, no. 1 (1977): 31, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3244963>.

⁴⁵ Shamim Shahla, *The Concept of Ta'zieh in Bahram Beyzā'ei's View* (Tehran: Roshangaran and Women Studies Publishing, 2021), 118. My translation.



Figure 38. The police officer who reported on the car accident, on the 'stage' of mourning



Figure 39. Mahrokh in the center

During the mourning period, the only person who doesn't believe in the death of the travellers is the bride's grandmother. Her demeanor and the way she is portrayed on camera convey her steadiness and faith. Even though she acknowledges their physical absence, she insists that they are not truly gone. Earlier in the film, when the travellers

reveal their fate to the camera, it feels like a build-up to the final chapter. From that moment on, the film takes on a surreal tone that prepares the audience for what is to come. After listening to everyone sharing their thoughts during the spectacle, Mahrokh, inspired by her grandmother's words, decides to wear a wedding gown and descends the stairs with a new aim. She has chosen to remain hopeful, and at that moment, *the travellers* enter with the mirror. (Figures 40 and 41)

“The metaphysical aspect of the house in Beyzāêi's view is one that can even bring back the dead,” says Mehdi Fotuhi.⁴⁶ It is a symbol of strength, hope, and a place to retrieve one's identity. When the mirror is brought to the wedding, it shines its light on everyone, signifying a new beginning—Mahrokh and Rahi's union—over the backdrop of grief and sorrow for the terrible event. (Figures 42 and 43)

As the bride is basked in the bright light of the mirror, the grandmother congratulates her, and this hopeful ending is the culmination of the story.



Figure 40. Mahrokh coming down the stairs in her wedding gown

⁴⁶ Fotuhi, “Beyzāêi's Cinema, and the Forgotten Architecture of Iran.”



Figure 41. The travellers enter with the mirror



Figure 42. Mahrokh's sister, bringing the mirror



Figure 43. Mahrokh, basked in the mirror's light

Death of Yazdgerd (1982 - a.k.a *Marge Yazdgerd*)⁴⁷

"Thereupon, Yazdgerd⁴⁸ fled towards Marv and sought a watermill for refuge. The miller, longing for his treasures, killed him in sleep." -History!⁴⁹

The film opens with the above sentences. Afterwards, we see a man's dead body in the middle of a mill. He is said to be the king. Around him are three of the king's men, and the miller, his wife, and his daughter. What ensues is an attempt to retell what occurred by people of less power: The miller, along with his wife and daughter, each provide their own account of the same event as they attempt to clear their names.

The story is based on a historical narrative, yet it does not limit itself to the boundaries of that story. Though physically, the camera is entrapped within the mill at all times. The miller's family transforms into different characters—either another family member or the deceased king—to tell the tale. The camera never ventures outside the mill. It doesn't require any other perspective. This is a narrative choice because the miller's family is imprisoned in the mill until their deaths.⁵⁰ The place is simple and bare, devoid

⁴⁷ Bahram Beyzā'ei, *Death of Yazdgerd*, (I.R.I.B. Channel 1, 1982), film.

⁴⁸ Yazdegerd III, was the last king of the Sāsānian dynasty (reigned 632–651), who were the last empire of ancient Iran, before the Arab conquests. The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica. "Yazdegerd III." Encyclopedia Britannica, January 1, 2025. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Yazdegerd-III>.

⁴⁹ Bahram Beyzā'ei, *Death of Yazdgerd*, 1982.

⁵⁰ Ghokasian, *A Conversation with Bahram Beyzā'ei*, 199.

of anything unnecessary. Since the audience needs to use their imagination, anything that is decorative, ornamental, or superfluous in the scene is removed. The stage is set.

The audience's focus is directed within the confines of this building, yet there is a great deal of dynamic movement at play. There is a duality and interplay of staying in one location throughout the whole film, and yet not being confined to it. The camera is constantly moving, with subjects frequently entering and exiting the frame, sometimes in focus and other times out of focus. It's as if the audience is constantly walking around the mill, discovering its nooks and crannies. The characters are often blocked in a way that places some in the foreground and others in the background, giving layers to a scene. "There is a mobile dynamics involved in the act of viewing films, even if the spectator is seemingly static. The (im)mobile spectator moves across an imaginary path, traversing multiple sites and times."⁵¹ Though in this film, what the audience experiences is the heroes traversing through their imaginations, taking them to a mental past.⁵² (Figures 44 and 45, 46 and 47)



Figure 44. Anything that is decorative, ornamental, or superfluous in the scene is removed. The stage is set.⁵³

⁵¹ Bruno, *Atlas of Emotions*, 55.

⁵² Jafarinejad et al., *A Collection of Essays in Critique and Introduction of Bahram Beyzāēi's Movies*, 546.

⁵³ The following stills of this sub-chapter are taken from *Death of Yazdgerd*, directed by Bahram Beyzāēi (1982).



Figure 45. People are often blocked in a way that places some in the foreground and others in the background, in an attempt to communicate their inner lives.



Figure 46. The trial of the miller's family

The story is rightfully theatrical, not only to the film's audience but also to the audience of the miller's family; the king's men who are trying to understand how the king has died. To enhance the feeling of impending doom—both historically and concerning the fate of the miller's family—the mill is poorly lit from very small openings on the mill's

walls. These openings provide minimal information from the outside, yet enough to reflect the fears of everyone inside: The mill's inhabitants fear for their lives, while the king's men worry about the future of the country as the enemy's army approaches. (Figures 47 and 48)



Figure 47. Glimpses of the exterior, from inside the mill



Figure 48. The gallows for the miller's family seen from inside

As the story unfolds, Yazdgerd's body is frequently shown in the background while the miller, his wife, and daughter take on various roles, including that of the king. There is no need to expand to a different scenery or flash back to when Yazdgerd was alive, as he is not the focus of this play; rather, it is his legacy that matters. Yazdgerd's dead body is undoubtedly stronger than his living presence, and no one seems to know how to cope with the pain he has left behind; the pain that everyone on the *stage* carries a part of.⁵⁴ Even though the camera is in one location, with the actors' interchanging roles, something happens that makes this space not what it used to be, and elevates it to something that takes a different shape in each viewer's mind. "The heroes' journey through time is one of the elements of *mise-en-scène* and one of Beyzāêi's main tools in creating the atmosphere of his films."⁵⁵ According to Pallasmaa, "Re-structuring and articulating time—re-ordering, speeding up, slowing down, halting and reversing—is equally essential in cinematic and architectural expressions."⁵⁶ (Figures 49 and 50)

The film ends as the enemy's army approaches, and the dead man gets hanged instead of the miller, while the legend of Yazdgerd's death remains unchanged.



Figure 49. The miller's wife, as she takes on the king's role

⁵⁴ Ghokasian, *A Conversation with Bahram Beyzāêi*, 216.

⁵⁵ Jafarinejad et al., *A Collection of Essays in Critique and Introduction of Bahram Beyzāêi's Movies*, 546.

⁵⁶ Pallasmaa, "The Existential Image," 161.



Figure 50. The king's men in the background, as the miller takes on the king's role

Conclusion

There is no doubt that each of these movies could warrant a 6,000-word paper. However, in addressing the paper's initial question—how Bahram Beyzāēi has utilized architecture and spatiality as a storytelling devices—it was beneficial to include a broader range of films, thereby providing a wider perspective in the research.

Often, Beyzāēi's mind is occupied by the theme of identity crisis, not only at an individual level but also within a collective context. He deeply dislikes the direction that big cities in Iran have taken, mentioning that he often felt like a stranger in the city where he had lived for many years.⁵⁷ Intertwining personal and collective identity issues, he has utilized the city as a representation and enhancer of alienation, change, and unfamiliarity of its characters. Even during their journeys in their hometown, the characters' relationship with the city is complicated. He shows this through high contrasts, unnatural perspectives, and the use of ruins, while contrasting traditional architecture with the identityless structures of modern-day Iran. His yearning has two dimensions: one is for a sense of estrangement and identity, and the other is for the familiar city he once knew.

Furthermore, he draws an artistic vision from specific locations, using these settings to convey philosophical ideas or to create the right atmosphere. In a broader sense, architecture often serves as a shorthand for characters that require exploration.

⁵⁷ Berliner Festspiele, "Interview Bahram Beyzāēi | 10 Days of Iranian Cinema," Youtube video, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iAbNzRgXdoE>. My translation.

Cities, buildings, and interiors play a significant role in Beyzâei's movies, as they are deeply connected to the characters' identities. The characters are inherently tied to their lived environments, and as per the directors' experience, these ties are often portrayed in a negative, darker light.

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