Collective Sensuality: Exploring the Intimate Geographies of Cinema in Iran

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Introduction

From its inception cinema has been defined by its capacity to foster collective experience. The Lumière brothers' inaugural 1895 public screening on Boulevard des Capucines, Paris, was not only a technological breakthrough but also a social phenomenon, establishing a novel communal experience for modern urban audiences. As Miriam Hansen observes, cinema swiftly cultivated a distinct "public sphere of its own," offering mass appeal that fulfilled a longing for connection in an increasingly fragmented urban experience.[1] This communal dimension is foundational to cinematic spectatorship: as Vanessa Schwartz asserts, "cinematic spectatorship cannot be recounted simply in terms of the connection between an individual spectator and a film. For it is necessarily among a crowd that we find the cinematic spectator."[2] The movie theater thus transcends its function as a site for image consumption, instead emerging as a relational space where audiences engage in shared sensual acts—a dynamic underscored even by early observers such as Ricciotto Canudo, one of the earliest theoreticians of cinema, who in 1908 characterized cinema as a locus of "public gathering" and "collective joy" that temporarily alleviated the isolation of modern urban life.[3]

Yet classical film theory, particularly within psychoanalytic and structuralist frameworks, has long privileged the individual spectator's gaze, emphasizing mechanisms of identification,

voyeurism, and visual pleasure while sidelining the theater's physical and social dimensions. This narrow focus, as Giuliana Bruno argues, neglects the "emotion of viewing space"—the affective and spatial dynamics shaped by audiences' corporeal presence and interactions.[4] Building on this critique, scholars like Anne Friedberg and Miriam Hansen have challenged the notion of spectatorship as a static, disembodied act, contending that dominant theories often ignore the material conditions of heterogeneous spectatorship, such as mobility, distraction, and communal participation.[5] Together, these interventions call for a shift from analyzing film as a purely visual text to understanding cinema as an embodied, social environment.

This reorientation reveals how the movie theater functioned as a transformative space for urban audiences, and it did so in a way that was notably more inclusive than many other public venues at the turn of the twentieth century. For individuals ensnared in the isolating rhythms of metropolitan existence, cinema offered liberation from rigid social hierarchies. Within the theater's darkness, diverse spectators—across class, ethnicity, and gender—experienced a level of egalitarianism rarely found elsewhere, united as equals before the screen.[6] Granted, the earliest days of public commercial cinema were not wholly devoid of exclusions, especially along racial and gender lines. Nevertheless, compared to other public spaces of the era—such as exclusive men's clubs, segregated restaurants, or private salons restricted to upper-class patrons—the movie theater offered a relatively porous threshold. Women, for example, could and did attend, often without male escorts, as filmgoing gradually grew into a mass pastime. Non-elite viewers, including workers and immigrants, also managed to participate in the cinematic experience more readily than they could enter more prestigious or stratified sites.[7]

[1]Miriam Hansen, Babel and Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), 7; Anton Kaes, "Movies and Masses," in Crowds, ed. Jeffrey Thompson Schnapp and Matthew Tiews (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), 154-157.

[2]Vanessa R. Schwartz, Spectacular Realities: Early Mass Culture in Fin-de-Siècle Paris (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999), 179.

[3]Canudo cited in Francesco Casetti, Eye of the Century: Film, Experience, Modernity (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 154.

[4]Giuliana Bruno, Atlas of Emotion: Journeys in Art, Architecture, and Film (New York: Verso, 2002), 16.

[5]Anne Friedberg, Window Shopping: Cinema and the Postmodern (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), PAGE NUMBER; Miriam Hansen, Babel and Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), PAGE NUMBER

[6]Anton Kaes, "Movies and Masses," in Crowds, ed. Jeffrey Thompson Schnapp and Matthew Tiews (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), 154.

[7]Miriam Hansen, Babel and Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), 80-81.

[8]Zhen Zhang, An Amorous History of the Silver Screen: Shanghai Cinema, 1896–1937 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 84.
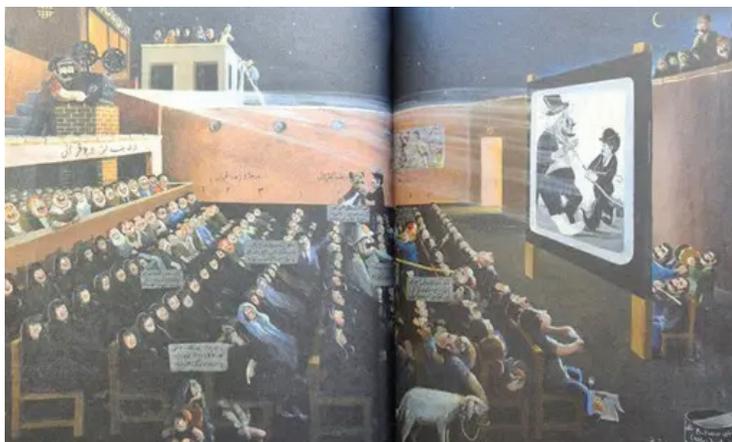

Figure 1: Cinema as a locus of public gathering. A caricature from Jaʿfar Tijāratchī depicting the chaotic atmosphere of cinema in Iran (1969).

Unlike these exclusionary spaces that demanded conformity to a singular identity (elite, white, male), the cinema fostered a communal experience that resisted rigid social gatekeeping. The multisensory nature of cinema-going—encompassing not only sight and sound but also the theater's atmosphere, the physical proximity of bodies, and even olfactive dimensions—intensified its affective power. This liminal environment, where normative codes loosened, allowed for novel forms of interaction and emotional expression, transforming the theater into a breeding ground for desire, intimacy, and urban modernity itself.[8] Indeed, while discriminatory practices in broader society still seeped into early film culture (certain theaters in some regions barred or segregated Black audiences, for example), the fact that people from a range of backgrounds could sit together—even if not always without tension—marked the cinema as a comparatively inclusive domain in an era rife with social exclusions.

Central to the space of the movie theater was the interplay of darkness, sensory stimuli, and collective presence, which rendered the theater fertile ground for eroticism. The proximity of strangers in a shared yet intimate setting blurred personal

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boundaries, facilitating romance, flirtation, and the public negotiation of desire.[9] Such dynamics positioned cinema-going as both a cultural ritual and a courtship practice, mediating relationships through the convergence of spectacle and social interaction.[10] While myriad forms of desire—queer and otherwise— could and did find expression within the ambiguous spatiality of the theater, this article focuses on heterosexual relationships because these were most visibly sanctioned by the modern consumerist culture of the period. As Miriam Hansen observes, early film exhibition and publicity often addressed an idealized bourgeois family audience that largely assumed heterosexual coupling as its norm.[11]

Moreover, by publicizing previously private dimensions of eroticism, cinema normalized modern sexual relationships, allowing individuals to collectively navigate desire within a communal framework. This shift, as Graeme Gilloch notes, transformed sexuality into a subject of public discourse, reshaping societal norms and personal behaviors.[12] Cinema, acting as more than passive entertainment, not only reflected urban modernity and its new secular, publicized heterosexual order but actively shaped it. In doing so, it offered audiences a "sensory-reflexive horizon" through which to process rapid societal change, train the appropriate responses to modernity, and, ultimately, to modernize themselves and communally participate in the novel, emerging order.[13]

Early film culture capitalized on the "respectable" nature of middle-class romance while simultaneously exploiting the allure of cinematic darkness to cultivate unconventional social and sexual dynamics. In Tom Gunning's "cinema of attractions," for instance, the spectacle of modern life frequently intertwined with sensational performances that both upheld and subtly subverted prevailing moral scripts.[14] Such heterogenous viewing contexts enabled new forms of interaction, bringing courtship rituals— and the very performance of desire—into urban public spaces that were simultaneously regulated and surprisingly permissive.

[9]Dominique Mainon and James Ursini, Cinema of Obsession: Erotic Fixation and Love Gone Wrong in the Movies (New York: Limelight Editions, 2007), PAGE NUMBER

[10]Zhen Zhang, An Amorous History of the Silver Screen: Shanghai Cinema, 1896–1937 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 85-86.

[11]Miriam Hansen, Babel and Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), PAGE NUMBER

[12]Graeme Gilloch, Myth and Metropolis: Walter Benjamin and the City (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1996), 36-37.

[13]Zhen Zhang, An Amorous History of the Silver Screen: Shanghai Cinema, 1896–1937 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 103.

[14]Tom Gunning, "The Cinema of Attractions: Early Film, Its Spectator and the Avant-Garde," Wide Angle 8, no. 3–4 (1986): 63–70.

[15] Afsaneh Najmabadi, Women with Mustaches and Men without Beards: Gender and Sexual Anxieties of Iranian Modernity (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), PAGE NUMBER

[16] Masʿūd Mihrābī, Tārīkh-i Sīnimā-yi Īrān: Az Āghāz tā Sāl-i 1357 (Tehran: Muʾallif, 2020), 425-426.

Thus, although alternative expressions of desire certainly circulated in this liminal environment, the spotlight on heterosexual relationships reflects how cinema—particularly in its formative years—served as a showcase and testing ground for the normative romantic ideals of an ascendant consumerist society.

Figure 2: The interplay of darkness, sensory stimuli, and collective presence, at the movie theater. Movies, Five Cents (1907) by John French Sloan.

Building on cinema's global role in mediating eroticism and modernity, the Iranian context offers a striking case study of how these dynamics opposed and clashed with deeply rooted traditions. In 20th century Iran—a society marked by strict gender segregation, limited access to public spaces for women, and a strong presence of forbidden-yet-overlooked homoerotic inclinations—the arrival of cinema introduced a transformative communal experience laden with erotic, heterosexual implications.[15] The rise of Iranian cinema coincided with the nation's broader modernization projects, such as the centralization of state power; the introduction of compulsory military service; the expansion of a state-run education system; the construction of railways and modern infrastructure; and policies encouraging Western dress, such as the ban on traditional headgear, in the 20th century.[16] As a novel cultural institution, it attracted cross-class audiences and became a contested arena for renego-

tiating sexuality and courtship. Romantic narratives on screen, coupled with the sensual interplay of strangers in theaters, exposed audiences to alternative models of intimacy that gradually permeated the collective consciousness.[17] The darkened theater, a rare heterosocial space in an emerging modernizing landscape, subtly destabilized norms of separation by allowing men and women to share a collective environment. This setting fostered a distinct form of eroticism, merging the sensory allure of film with the charged proximity of diverse audiences, thereby enabling interactions that transgressed traditional boundaries.[18] Cinema's dual function—as both a mirror and an engine of social change—amplified cinema's cultural significance, and contributed to the moral ambiguity of cinema in the eyes of traditionalists who were wary of cinema's "corruptive" effects. Such spatial and social transgressions epitomized moral decay and critics decried them as sites of indecency that eroded religious and cultural values.[19] Such critiques underscored the tension between Iran's modernization efforts and the persistence of established norms, framing cinema in Iran as a battleground for competing visions of societal progress.

Despite cinema's profound social implications, scholarly work on Iranian cinema has predominantly prioritized interpretive and ideological analyses, emphasizing narrative structures, political subtexts, or religious concerns. This focus has overshadowed the medium's role as a heterotopic space—one that both reflected and actively shaped competing notions of sexuality, desire, and public interaction. Here, we draw upon Michel Foucault's seminal notion of heterotopias as "places that are absolutely different from all the sites that they reflect and speak about," spaces in which "real sites . . . are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted." Foucault lists the cinema (among sites such as trains, cafes, and beaches) as an example of this principle due to its capacity to "juxtapose in a single real place several spaces… that are in themselves incompatible."[20] Extending Foucault's insight, Hansen likewise situates cinema within this heterotopic framework, underscoring how its spa-

[17] Janet Afary, Sexual Politics in Modern Iran (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 159.

[18] Hamid Naficy, A Social History of Iranian Cinema, Volume 1: The Artisanal Era, 1897–1941 (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 14.

[19] Hamid Naficy, A Social History of Iranian Cinema, Volume 1: The Artisanal Era, 1897–1941 (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), xxxvi.

[20] Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces," Diacritics 16, no. 1 (1986): 23–25.

[21] Miriam Hansen, Babel and Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), 107.

[22] Giuliana Bruno, Streetwalking on a Ruined Map: Cultural Theory and the City Films of Elvira Notari (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), 56.

[23] Siegfried Kracauer, "Cult of Distraction: On Berlin's Picture Palaces," in The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays, trans. Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 323–328

tial and symbolic configurations—its "odd rectangular room" housing the illusion of three-dimensional space—facilitate new modes of spectatorship and social practice.[21] By invoking the concept of heterotopia, then, we aim to highlight how the cinema in Iran functioned simultaneously as a reflection of social norms and as a site of their critique, negotiation, and reinvention. Rather than merely a vehicle for ideological or political content, cinema also provided a liminal territory where emerging forms of desire, public interaction, and social identity could be articulated, tested, and transformed.

Addressing this gap, our study investigates the "erotic geographies" of Iranian cinemas, examining how these venues functioned as sites of modernizing influence and moral anxiety.[22] By analyzing historical accounts, literary texts, and filmic representations, we trace cinema's fraught legacy as a space deemed inherently transgressive—a reputation that solidified its infamy as a corrupting force while simultaneously cementing its centrality to Iran's urban modernity. Through this lens, we illuminate how the erotic experience of cinema-going not only mirrored societal transformations but also shaped the contours of Iranian sexual and social identity in the 20th century.

Erotic Geographies: Cinema as a Pedagogical Space (Training the Senses for Urban Alienation)

For urban populations thrust into the disorienting vortex of modernity—torn between resisting traditions and the accelerating demands of industrialized, urban life—cinema emerged as a critical pedagogical space. It functioned not merely as entertainment but as a school for the senses, training audiences to navigate modernity's sensory overload and fragmented temporality. Siegfried Kracauer argues that movie theaters, with their chaotic architecture and immersive atmospheres, mirrored the metropolis itself, replicating its psychological disarray while offering a structured, communal context to process it.[23] These spaces operated as Susan Buck-Morss' "mimetic machines,"

simulating modernity's dislocations—mechanized labor, anonymous crowds, traffic—and allowing spectators to rehearse adaptive responses in a collective environment.[24]

This pedagogical role proved vital for displaced migrants, workers, and marginalized groups confronting the clash between traditional lifeways and urban capitalism's alienating rhythms. Miriam Hansen frames cinema's function as cultivating a "sociocorporeal sensorium"—a shared bodily and perceptual grammar—through which audiences internalized modernity's experiential modes.[25] The flickering screen's rhythmic editing mirrored factory machinery and street traffic, while synchronized soundtracks acclimated viewers to the cacophony of urban life. The theater's darkness softened this transition, buffering sensory assaults and reframing leisure as a survival ritual.

Architecture of Refuge: The Theater as a Paradoxical Counterworld

The cinema's design amplified its role as a sensory training ground. Antonia Lant highlights the opulent interiors of early theaters—gilded decor, plush seating, orchestrated lighting—as deliberate contrasts to the austerity of factories and tenements.[26] These spaces, which Siegfried Kracauer calls "counterworlds," paradoxically depended on modern technologies (electric lighting, film projection) to suspend the dehumanizing effects of industrial society.[27] For many urbanites caught in the impersonal rhythms of wage labor and crowded living conditions, theaters became a "second home," a communal refuge where the collective anonymity of the audience offered respite from the isolating anonymity of the city.[28]

This sense of urban alienation was embedded in larger capitalist structures that, as Karl Marx argues in his Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844, separate the individual from the products of their labor, from fellow workers, and from their own humanity.[29] Under such conditions, labor is commodified

[24] Susan Buck-Morss, "Aesthetics and Anaesthetics: Walter Benjamin's Artwork Essay Reconsidered," October 62 (1992): 3–41.

[25] Miriam Hansen, Babel and Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), 15.

[26] Antonia Lant, "The Curse of the Pharaoh, or How Cinema Contracted Egyptomania," in Visions of the East: Orientalism in Film, ed. Matthew Bernstein and Gaylyn Studlar (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2005), 160.

[27] Siegfried Kracauer, "Cult of Distraction: On Berlin's Picture Palaces," in The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays, trans. Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 326.

[28] Siegfried Kracauer, "Cult of Distraction: On Berlin's Picture Palaces," in The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays, trans. Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 326.

[29] Karl Marx, "Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844," in The Marx-Engels Reader, ed. Robert C. Tucker, 2nd ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1978), PAGE NUMBER

[30]Georg Lukács, History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1971), PAGE NUMBER

[31]Georg Simmel, "The Metropolis and Mental Life," in Georg Simmel on Individuality and Social Forms, ed. Donald N. Levine (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), 324–39. First published in 1903.

[32]Anton Kaes, "Movies and Masses," in Crowds, ed. Jeffrey Thompson Schnapp and Matthew Tiews (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), 154.

[33]Zhen Zhang, An Amorous History of the Silver Screen: Shanghai Cinema, 1896–1937 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 103.

and social relations become increasingly transactional, eroding communal bonds and personal fulfillment. As industrial centers expanded in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the intensification of wage labor, mechanized production, and urban crowding heightened feelings of anonymity and detachment. Georg Lukács conceptualizes this process as "reification," wherein social relations and lived experience are rendered impersonal and objectified, fueling a pervasive sense of dislocation.[30] Georg Simmel, meanwhile, underscores the "blasé" outlook provoked by the sensory overload and monetization of social interactions in metropolitan life, exacerbating the very alienation that cinema might temporarily relieve.[31] Within this milieu, the lush interiors and communal darkness of the movie theater offered a liminal social sphere—neither fully private nor entirely public—where viewers could reconnect with others and experience an alternative social reality, if only momentarily.

The immersive environment—darkness, collective laughter, haptic vibrations—masked pedagogy as pleasure. As Anton Kaes illustrates through Franz Biberkopf's cinematic encounter in Berlin Alexanderplatz, the shared presence of "parentless" spectators fostered an "oceanic feeling of community," temporarily dissolving isolation.[32] This recalibration of perception through collective affect allowed audiences to endure modernity's fractures without overtly challenging traditional norms.

Forging a Cinematic Public Sphere: Transient Solidarity in Fragmentation

Cinema's communal essence lay in its capacity to forge a social public sphere—one that transcended individual adaptation by cultivating collective experience. Zhen Zhang argues that cinema mediated urban identity through a "sensory-reflexive horizon," constituting a "composite public body" that redefined belonging in the modern metropolis.[33] Unlike traditional institutions, the movie theater assembled transient audiences united by shared physiological reactions: laughter, tears, gasps. Kra-

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cauer observed in Weimar Berlin how these reactions dissolved hierarchies, transforming a "menacing mass" into a "homogeneous cosmopolitan audience" where "from the bank director to the sales clerk, everyone [had] the same responses."[34]

This democratizing effect stemmed from cinema's sensory-spatial conditions. The darkness allowed spectators to "lose themselves" in the screen's hypnotic allure while remaining acutely aware of the crowd's noises, smells, and physical presence.[35] This duality—solitary immersion and collective participation—enabled audiences to negotiate modernity's tension between individuality and mass culture. The theater's "restless" and "contingent" composition fostered a provisional solidarity, bound not by shared identity but by shared consumption and desire.[36]

[34]Siegfried Kracauer, "Cult of Distraction: On Berlin's Picture Palaces," in The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays, trans. Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 326.

[35]Antonia Lant, "The Curse of the Pharaoh, or How Cinema Contracted Egyptomania," in Visions of the East: Orientalism in Film, ed. Matthew Bernstein and Gaylyn Studlar (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2005), 160.

[36]Miriam Hansen, Babel and Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), 94.

Figure 3: The communal experience of cinema serves as a point of attraction in this early ad for a cinema on Lālahzar Street. circa 1909.

[37]Roland Barthes, "Leaving the Movie Theatre," in The Rustle of Language, trans. R. Howard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 345; Giuliana Bruno, Streetwalking on a Ruined Map: Cultural Theory and the City Films of Elvira Notari (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), 53.

[38]Roland Barthes, "Leaving the Movie Theatre," in The Rustle of Language, trans. R. Howard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 345-246.

[39]Giuliana Bruno, Streetwalking on a Ruined Map: Cultural Theory and the City Films of Elvira Notari (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), 57.

[40]Zhen Zhang, An Amorous History of the Silver Screen: Shanghai Cinema, 1896–1937 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 85-86.

[41]Miriam Hansen, Babel and Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), 1-3.

[42]Siegfried Kracauer, "Cult of Distraction: On Berlin's Picture Palaces," in The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays, trans. Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 326.

Erotic Geographies: Cinema as a Laboratory of Modern Desire

Cinema, that according to Roland Barthes, "best defines modern eroticism of the big city," plunges the audience deep into erotic journeys.[37] But this erotic journey, is not limited to the visual sense, nor caused only by the image on screen. As Barthes observes, "The darkness of the theater is prefigured by the 'twilight reverie'… which precedes it and leads the subject from street to street, from poster to poster, finally burying oneself into a dim, anonymous, indifferent cube… The 'noir' of the cinema… is also the color of a diffused eroticism."[38] The communal, multisensory experience of cinema is inextricably bound to its erotic potential as well. The interplay of darkness, bodily proximity, and on-screen desire forged a pedagogy of the senses, training audiences in publicized heterosexuality while destabilizing traditional morality. Giuliana Bruno frames theaters as "erotic geographies" where "forbidden pleasures" were explored through the nomadic gaze, blending urban exploration with intimate spectatorship.[39] In Shanghai, Zhang notes, cinemas became laboratories for "illegitimate" social and sexual dynamics, congregating diverse audiences to confront desire beyond marital confines.[40] The cinema's sensory architecture amplified this erotic charge. Darkness dissolved visual hierarchies, creating a "socially transgressive space" where women, in particular, accessed public erotic spheres.[41] Plush seating, shared fragrances, and visceral reactions to on-screen intimacy transformed theaters into tactile arenas for modern courtship. Kracauer observed how cinematic "distraction" fostered collective erotic imagination, dissolving class and gender distinctions.[42]

Vernacular Modernism: Mediating Tradition and Modernity

Cinema's eroticism bridged traditional norms and modern heterosexuality. Romantic narratives and star personas contributed

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to the overall eroticism of cinematic experience, providing a sensory lexicon for desire and democratizing access to fantasies through Hansen's "vernacular modernism."[43] Venus such as film magazines extended this pedagogy, normalizing public discussions of romance via advice columns and star gossip.[44] These publications, part of a "libidinal economy," trained audiences to perform desire as a public act. The nomadic gaze of the flâneur, replicated in cinematic spectatorship, turned viewers into "desiring machines," destabilized by metropolitan impressions yet reassembling desires within a legitimizing collective framework. The cinematic experience was inherently transnational, as evidenced by numerous cross-cultural examples that highlight how these processes extended beyond national borders. In Naples, for example women reclaimed public space through "erotic journeys of the gaze," while Shanghai's darkness veiled clandestine interactions that rehearsed modern norms.[45] Although these examples come from contexts outside Iran, they demonstrate how cinema's erotic undercurrent could simultaneously negotiate inherited norms and modernizing impulses across varying cultural geographies. They also illustrate how seemingly disparate societies undergoing rapid change experienced cinema as a common site for reimagining social and sexual identities—an approach that enriches our understanding of Iranian cinema's parallel engagements with modernity. Ultimately, it can be contested that cinema's erotic geographies crystallized the tensions of vernacular modernism in various cultures, each negotiating their traditions with change and transformation in modern spaces such as cinema. By mediating globalized fantasies and localized codes, theaters became sites where "modern bodies" experimented with sexual identities in a conflation of traditional norms and modern ones. Hansen's broadly defined vernacular movement democratized erotic agency, transforming sexuality into public discourse while retaining communal traces.[46] The result was a contested modernity—where "illegitimate" pleasures coexisted with marital laws, subtly reshaping morality through the collective sensorium of the dark theater.

[43]Miriam Hansen, "Vernacular Modernism: Tracking Cinema on a Global Scale," in World Cinemas: Transnational Perspectives, ed. Nataša Durovicová and Kathleen E. Newman (New York & London: Routledge), 287–314.

[44]Zhen Zhang, An Amorous History of the Silver Screen: Shanghai Cinema, 1896–1937 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 82-84.

[45]Giuliana Bruno, Streetwalking on a Ruined Map: Cultural Theory and the City Films of Elvira Notari (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), 53; Zhen Zhang, An Amorous History of the Silver Screen: Shanghai Cinema, 1896–1937 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 86.

[46]Miriam Hansen, Babel and Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), 15.

[47]Jamāl Umīd, Tārīkh-i Sīnimā-yi Īrān, 1279-1357 (Tehran: Rawzanah Publication, 1995), 870.

[48]Hamid Naficy, A Social History of Iranian Cinema, Volume 2: The Industrializing Years, 1941–1978 (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 68.

[49]Ziba Mir-Hosseini, "Iranian Cinema: Art, Society and the State," MERIP 219 (2001): 34–40; Golbarg Rekabtalaei, Iranian Cosmopolitanism: A Cinematic History (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 199-203.

Iran: Cinema and Its Erotic Spaces
Early Cinema and Moral Anxieties (1900s–1940s)

Cinema arrived in Iran at the dawn of the 20th century and was quickly recognized as a marvel of modern technology, soon coming into conflict with traditional morals. The very first public theater in Tehran (opened in 1905 by Mīrzā Ibrāhīm Sahhāf-Bāshī) was shut down within weeks under clerical pressure—police raided it, citing religious opposition to this new spectacle.[47]

Early screenings often segregated the sexes to assuage moral concerns, despite women's desire to participate in this new social venue. By the 1910s, pioneers like Khān-Bābā Muʿtazidī, recognizing this market, arranged women-only showings to ensure women's safety from male harassment and to prevent the intermingling of the sexes. Additionally, watching unveiled foreign actresses would be without scandal if the audience consisted solely of women.[48] However, due to the enormous popularity of cinema from its early days and modernists' appreciation of it as a pedagogical venue, restrictions eased over time. By no later than 1928, Cinema Parī opened, hosting both male and female audiences. With the increasing popularity of cinema and even the production of Iranian films by the 1930s, along with the appearance of Iranian women on screen, anxieties persisted. Conservative segments deemed it sinful for men and women to sit together in the dark watching love stories. For many pious families, merely going to the cinema was "tantamount to committing a sin," illustrating how deeply suspicious traditional society was of cinema, particularly its potentially erotic atmosphere.[49]

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Figure 4: A still from The Window (Panjarah), directed by Jalāl Muqaddam, 1970.

Figure 5: A still from Night of the Foreigners (Shab-i Gharībān), directed by Muhammad Diljū, 1975.

A landmark confrontation with these moral concerns came in 1933 with Dukhtar-i Lur (The Lor Girl), Iran's first sound film. The film's heroine appeared unveiled and sang on screen—a bold break from convention that thrilled audiences but outraged conservatives. Rūhangīz Sāmīnizhād, the actress who played the Lor girl, became a target of public harassment after the film's success. Religious zealots excoriated her for "exposing her body to the public," forcing Sāmīnizhād to flee her home-

[50]Shahla Lahiji, "Chaste Dolls and Unchaste Dolls: Women in Iranian Cinema since 1979," in The New Iranian Cinema: Politics, Representation and Identity, ed. Richard Tapper (London: I.B. Tauris, 2002), 217.

[51]The term was first introduced in 1953 by Dr. Hūshang Kāvūsī, who combined the words "Farsi" (Persian) and "Film" to critique what he perceived as the industry's low quality. In Kāvūsī's assessment, these films' only genuine marker of Iranian identity was their Persian dialogue; in all other respects, he argued, they merely imitated lower-tier international productions. See: Golbarg Rekabtalaei, Iranian Cosmopolitanism: A Cinematic History (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 197.

[52]Hamid Naficy, A Social History of Iranian Cinema, Volume 2: The Industrializing Years, 1941–1978 (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 149-151.

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town, change her name, and live in anonymity in Tehran out of fear.[50] This stark response underlined the era's tensions: while urban moviegoers were drawn to the novelty of romance and female performers on screen, traditionalists saw early Iranian cinema as an insidious intruder threatening Islamic modesty. Local newspapers and clergymen's sermons in the 1930s and 1940s frequently denounced cinema as a corrupting influence, objecting to any display of women's voices or bodies in public, both on screen and in front of it. Thus, decades before the Revolution, the seeds of social debate over cinematic "indecency" were sown, with eroticism (even in its nascent, relatively tame form) at the heart of the controversy.

The Fīlmfārsī Era: Song, Dance, and Sensuality on Screen (1950s–1960s)

After World War II, Iran's film industry boomed with popular melodramas and thrillers that unabashedly incorporated musical and dance sequences. These mass-market films—derogatorily nicknamed Fīlmfārsī—found an enormous audience appetite for on-screen sensuality.[51] Musical melodramas were always a favorite genre among Iranian moviegoers, and producers quickly learned that adding comedy and titillating dance numbers, spiced with sexual allusions, kisses, heated romance, and revealing dresses—especially for cabaret dancers—would pack theaters.[52]

By the 1950s, it had become formulaic for mainstream films to feature at least one cabaret or nightclub scene in which a glamorous dancer performed in revealing attire. This trend was partly influenced by Egyptian and Indian cinema; like Egyptian belly-dance films and Bollywood spectacles, Iranian cinema discovered the popularity of dance scenes, both for voyeuristic male audiences and for female viewers, whose momentary sexual liberation in cinema—participation in a heterosexual atmosphere, exposure to erotic representations, and bodily presence in a space charged with desire and emotion—"was crystallized

in dance."[53] Stars such as Furūzān (a popular actress often cast as a seductress or dancer) became sex symbols, and posters routinely depicted them in sleeveless dresses and short skirts. Such imagery, both on screen and in lobby posters, was designed to entice audiences, trading on the allure of the female body as an erotic promise in the darkened theater.

Figure 6: Furūzān, a leading star of 1970s Iranian cinema, performing a song in Goodbye Little One (Khudāhāfiz Kūchūlū), directed by Rizā ʿAqīlī, 1975.

Audiences in the 1960s embraced these flashy musical interludes with enthusiasm. Contemporary accounts describe cinema halls erupting in cheers or whistles when a beloved actress began a dance number, with young viewers memorizing the sultry songs. Filmmakers, aware of this reaction, inserted random musical scenes set in nightclubs to keep crowds engaged, even at the cost of disrupting the narrative.[54] The Fīlmfārsī formula of the era typically saw the plot pause for a sultry cabaret performance: the camera might linger on the dancer's figure as she shimmied under colorful lights, while on-screen male patrons ogled—an obvious invitation for the real audience's gaze. Meanwhile, young female viewers would glance at the screen furtively from the corners of their eyes, sitting beside friends or boyfriends. These vignettes offered a permissible outlet for erotic desire in an otherwise conservative society.

[55]Hamid Naficy, A Social History of Iranian Cinema, Volume 2: The Industrializing Years, 1941–1978 (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 193-195.

On a Friday night in 1960s Tehran, a packed cinema might be filled with cigarette smoke and anticipation as viewers waited for the expected dance scene; when it arrived, the haptic charge in the auditorium was palpable. Men would lean forward, and women might giggle or nudge their companions, as the darkness of the hall fostered a sense of collective intimacy. Yet this mainstream eroticism was not without backlash. Iran's modernizing monarchy tolerated a degree of sexual display in cinema, but conservative elements and intellectual critics increasingly decried the trend. Moral guardians complained that Iranian films had become dominated by "scantily clad female bodies," undermining the country's values. Clerical leaders and traditional parents warned that cinemas were corrupting the youth by promoting immorality. At the same time, many educated Iranian cinephiles found the incessant cabaret numbers artistically crass—a sign of lowbrow commercialism. In fact, the emerging Iranian New Wave of the late 1960s was, in part, a reaction against these very conventions. Directors like Amīr Nādirī and Dāryūsh Mihrjū'ī pointedly avoided gratuitous song-and-dance sequences in their "serious" films, critiquing the shallow erotic tropes of Fīlmfārsī. Magazines and film journals of the period hosted debates pitting popular cinema's fans—who argued these films were merely escapist fun—against cultural critics, who lamented the "excessive display of sexuality" and poor artistic quality.[55] Still, by the late '60s, the formula persisted because it worked—audiences continued flocking to see their favorite stars in romantic dramas, and dancing on stage, reveling in the festive atmosphere of cinemas. The allure of on-screen eroticism had firmly taken root in Iran's urban pop culture, creating a vibrant yet contentious cinematic landscape.

Cinemas as Sensual Social Spaces

The physical space of pre-revolutionary cinemas was itself imbued with a charged, haptic atmosphere. By the 1970s, Iran had hundreds of movie theaters—from ornate modern picture palaces to humble provincial cinemas—drawing people from all

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strata of society.[56] For many young Iranians, a night at the movies became one of the few socially acceptable ways for men and women to be "modern" and mingle in public. As Janet Afary notes, cinema in Iran "created a new public space where young men and women could spend a few private hours together."[57] The dimly lit hall provided a cocoon where couples could sit side by side (often away from the eyes of chaperones), and even unrelated strangers shared a rare closeness in the dark. This proximity gave moviegoing an illicit thrill in a segregated society; as the lights went down, the rules loosened. Naficy comments that "young girls and boys, who were not customarily allowed to walk the streets together or to meet openly in cafés and restaurants without chaperons, found the darkness and safety of the movie houses conducive to the charged moments of privacy, intimacy, and eroticism."[58] Holding hands, stealing glances, or exchanging whispers during a love scene became common among dating youths, even as elders frowned upon such behavior.

Inside the theater, the sensory experience was intense. The air was thick with cigarette smoke and the smell of buttered popcorn, with all kinds of food sold or brought in by the audience. Conversations, arguments, and reactions created a feedback loop with the on-screen action.[59] Journalists and intellectual elites were always engaged in pedagogical efforts to teach the proper way to watch films and cultivate the culture of cinema-going.[60] Although cinema-going was indeed considered a form of "culture" to some extent, cinemas—especially those showing popular films, whether Iranian or imported—never attained the calm and quiet atmosphere sought by elite cinephiles who attended solely for the sake of watching a film. This led to proclamations such as: "The agony of watching Fīlmfārsī isn't just enduring the torture of two hours of despicable sights, but going to the cinemas specialized in showing Fīlmfārsī and sitting among the audience of Fīlmfārsī is also another torture."[61] Intellectuals like Jaʿfar Shahrī even chose to completely abandon cinemas, as he stated: "The reason I gave up going to the

[56]Hamid Naficy, A Social History of Iranian Cinema, Volume 2: The Industrializing Years, 1941–1978 (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 156-159.

[57]Janet Afary, Sexual Politics in Modern Iran (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 159.

[58]Hamid Naficy, A Social History of Iranian Cinema, Volume 1: The Artisanal Era, 1897–1941 (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 256.

[59]Hamid Naficy, A Social History of Iranian Cinema, Volume 1: The Artisanal Era, 1897–1941 (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 115.

[60]Golbarg Rekabtalaei, Iranian Cosmopolitanism: A Cinematic History (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 58.

[61]Quoted in Parvīz Ijlālī, Digargūnī-i ijtimāʿī va fīlm-hā-yi sīnimāʾī dar Īrān: jāmīʿah-shināsī-i fīlm-hā-yi ʿāmmah-pasand-i Īrānī (1357–1309) (Tehran: Āgāh, 2016), 100.

[62]Quoted in Mas'ūd Mihrābī, "Khūb, Bad, Zisht." Māh-nāmah-yi Sīnimā'ī-i Fīlm 101 (1991): 31.

movies very often was this sort of [disruptive] behavior."[62]

However, for the typical audience, going to the movies was a journey out of the social order and into the wild, liberated, multi-sensory festivity of cinema, where they could indulge their gastronomic, olfactory, haptic, and sexual desires in a communal manner. During an erotic or romantic scene—perhaps a first kiss or a heroine coyly removing her veil—one could feel the tension ripple through the crowd. Men might clear their throats or chuckle, and at times, brash youths would let out a low whistle at the sight of a favorite actress in a tight dress. Female audience members, if present in the general section, often sat in the balconies or middle rows, sometimes shielded by a husband or brother to avoid unwanted attention in the dark. (Some cinemas unofficially maintained a "family section" to segregate unaccompanied women from boisterous groups of men, a testament to the very real concerns about harassment in those shadowy aisles.) The more daring women would embrace their liberated sexuality in the company of girlfriends who had come to the cinema under various pretexts, or they would bashfully watch erotic scenes beside their boyfriends.

Figure 7: A still from The Morning of the Fourth Day (Subh-i rūz-i chahārum), directed by Kāmrān Shīrdil, 1972.

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Figure 8: A still from The Singer (Mutrib), directed by Ismāʿīl Nūrī ʿAlā, 1972.

The combination of the giant flickering images and the communal bodily closeness made the movie hall feel almost tactile—viewers laughed, gasped, and even yelled advice to the heroes, engaging all their senses. In action films, fistfights in a cabaret might draw claps and stomps from excited patrons; in melodramas, a teary love confession could hush a rowdy crowd into sniffles. Such embodied, collective viewing heightened the erotic charge when it came—an on-screen embrace or a shimmying dance not only stimulated the eyes but seemed to electrically pass through the packed rows of seats.[63]

The cinema thus became a laboratory of the senses in pre-revolution Iran: a modern public space where touch, sight, and sound converged to challenge traditional social boundaries. In particular, it emerged as a vital arena for cultivating modern heterosexual relationships—a development that supporters of modernity viewed as pivotal in "the transition from homosocial premodernity to heterosocial modernity."[64] This emphasis on heterosexual courtship took on special significance in a cultural setting where, as Afsaneh Najmabadi notes, "falling in love was what a man did with other men … Falling in love with women more often than not was unmanly."[65]

[63] For interesting accounts on film-viewing habits of general populace, see: Hamid Naficy, A Social History of Iranian Cinema, Volume 2: The Industrializing Years, 1941–1978 (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), chap. 3; Golbarg Rekabtalaei, Iranian Cosmopolitanism: A Cinematic History (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), chap. 5; Masʿūd Mihrābī, Tārīkh-i Sīnimā-yi Īrān: Az Āghāz tā Sāl-i 1357 (Tehran: Muʾallif, 2020), chap. 'Sīnimā'hā' (Cinemas).

[64] Hamid Naficy, A Social History of Iranian Cinema, Volume 1: The Artisanal Era, 1897–1941 (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 280.

[65] Afsaneh Najmabadi, Women with Mustaches and Men without Beards: Gender and Sexual Anxieties of Iranian Modernity (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 160.

[66]For deeper discussion, see Afsaneh Najmabadi, Women with Mustaches and Men without Beards: Gender and Sexual Anxieties of Iranian Modernity (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), and Janet Afary, Sexual Politics in Modern Iran (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009). Both explore the historical tolerance for homoeroticism in Persian poetry and court culture, abusive homosexual relationships between master (Murshid) and disciple (Murīd), possible historical reasons for this social phenomenon, as well as the eventual shift toward heterosocial norms in the context of modernization.

Such remarks reflect a broader historical reality in Iran, where the social and literary traditions of the Qājār era (1789–1925) permitted—and often celebrated—homoerotic relations, but relationships with women was usually limited to marriage, conducted out of economic and social considerations, rather than intimate relationship or affection. Afary and Najmabadi both trace how classical Persian poetry and courtly practices valorized male homoeroticism as a spiritual or aesthetic ideal, especially in elite literary circles.[66] These same practices placed less emphasis on exclusively heterosexual pairing, creating a cultural context that contrasted sharply with emerging Western-influenced ideals of "companionate and romantic marriage." By the early twentieth century, however, Iran's modernizing discourses—spearheaded by state-led reforms, intellectual movements, and exposure to European norms— which advocated western bourgeois morality, began explicitly advocating the formation of heterosocial public spaces and reorienting romantic ideals toward heterosexual unions. Cinema, introduced during this transformative period, became one of the most visible and accessible settings for reshaping sexual and social norms. In the darkened theater, "modern" heterosexual interactions could be publicly enacted and observed, thus providing a pedagogical arena for a new kind of romantic and social script. By highlighting this context, we see more clearly why the cinema functioned as a "workshop for heterosexuality." It channeled the broader push to redefine intimate relationships, using movies and the attendant culture of film magazines, star gossip, and advice columns to naturalize newly valorized forms of male-female bonding. In a society that had historically accommodated robust homoerotic traditions, the cinematic experience thus played a central role in directing the social gaze—and, by extension, sexual practice—toward a normative ideal of modern heterosexual desire and love.

Unsurprisingly, many devoutly religious Iranians approached cinemas with unease or outright avoidance, not because traditionalists inherently objected to heterosexuality—indeed, it

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aligned with the officially prescribed ethics of the time—but rather because it publicly showcased courtship and flirtation well beyond marital confines. The problem lay in how these "modern" practices appeared in the dark, collective sphere of the theater, where men and women (nāmahram) mixed freely and witnessed unveiled actresses singing and dancing, turning formerly private or marital behaviors into something openly consumed by a broad audience. Newspapers recount incidents of older conservative men scolding younger viewers for applauding a sensual dance scene or of chador-clad women hurriedly leaving a theater when a revealing costume appeared on screen.[67] These anecdotes highlight the divide in how erotic content was received: for one segment of society, cinema in the Pahlavī era (1925-1979), was a thrilling escape into a more liberal world of lights, music, and romance, even if it was followed by a sense of guilt; for another, it was a den of vice infiltrating Iranian culture. This very split—between a growing, mostly urban audience acclimated to on-screen intimacy versus a traditional society alarmed by the breakdown of norms—would set the stage for the showdowns to come.

[67]For historical accounts, refer to Hamid Naficy, A Social History of Iranian Cinema, Volume 1: The Artisanal Era, 1897–1941 (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), chap. 4; Kamran Talattof, Modernity, Sexuality, and Ideology in Iran: The Life and Legacy of a Popular Female Artist (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2011), chap. 4.

Figure 9: In the darkened theater, "modern" heterosexual interactions were publicly performed and observed, creating a pedagogical space for new romantic and social scripts. A still from But Problems Arose (Valī uftād mushkil'hā), directed by Hazhīr Dāryūsh, 1965,

[68]Calum Marsh, "Insidious Tempter: A History of Iranian Cinema," Hazlitt, accessed March 1, 2025, https://hazlitt.net.

[69]Cited in Calum Marsh, "Insidious Tempter: A History of Iranian Cinema," Hazlitt, accessed March 1, 2025, https://hazlitt.net.

Social Debate and Backlash in the 1970s

By the early 1970s, the clash over eroticism in Iranian cinema had moved from hushed debates to a loud public outcry. The content of popular films had steadily pushed boundaries: actresses appeared in ever shorter skirts, implied bedroom scenes and passionate onscreen kisses made their way past censors, and the taboo of going to the cinema loosened, with even young girls venturing to theaters alone in the 1970s. To secular-minded youth in Tehran, this was simply the natural progression of art and entertainment during the "Swinging '70s." To Iran's traditionalists and Islamist factions, however, it was proof of cultural degradation under the Shah.

Hardline clerics and even leftists, fearing the West's corrupting influence, lumped cinemas together with dance halls and mixed swimming pools as sites of moral contamination. Critical voices in mosques and conservative journals described the typical Iranian movie as fāsid (corrupt) and decadent. They warned that the allure of on-screen flesh and fantasy was leading an entire generation astray from traditional moral standards. An influential hardline cleric of the 1950s, Navvāb Safavī, had earlier warned that Hollywood films were "a smelting furnace" before whose heat "the sanctity of Islam would wither."[68] Other revolutionary clerics amplified that rhetoric, thundering that movies "corrupt our youth," calling the Shah's theaters hotbeds of sin, and railing against "depraved secular horrors like dance and mixed-sex gatherings," which they claimed "rape the youth of our country and stifle in them the spirit of virtue."[69]

This stark rhetoric captured the belief that pre-1979 Iranian cinema's flirtation with eroticism was a serious social problem—one that the Revolution sought to purge. In hindsight, the haptic thrills and permissive displays of pre-revolution cinema played a vital role in Iranian history. They provided the public with decades of exposure to modern sexual relationships, desires, and fantasies, allowing audiences to collectively experience de-

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sire, laughter, and tears in the dark. Although the cinemas were brought down, its effects created were too deep and endured. Sexuality and sexual desire, romantic love, the public presence of heterosexual relationships, and the visual and public display of eroticism had become too deeply rooted and were already intrinsic to Iranian modernity. Pahlavī-era cinema had "contributed to the project of normative heterosexuality" in Iran, and its impact could not be reversed.[70]

Eroticism of Cinema Represented

"The next evening, he went to the cinematograph with her for a few minutes before train time. As they sat, he saw her hand lying near him. For some moments he dared not touch it. The pictures danced and dithered. Then he took her hand in his. It was large and firm; it filled his grasp. He held it fast. She neither moved nor made any sign."[71] This passage from D. H. Lawrence's 1913 classic, Sons and Lovers, is an early example of the discussed phenomenon of cinema theater eroticism, as represented in literature. In fact, cinema's eroticism, as a heated, multisensory urban experience, found its way into numerous representations across various media. This applies to Iranian cultural works as well.

For example, in Gulī Taraqī's 2014 novel The Event (Ittifāq), in which the narrative unfolds in the modern urban spaces of Pahlavī-era Iran, cinema plays a significant role as a space that allows young characters to engage with modernity in a haptic and sensual way, experiencing romantic, heterosexual relationships that are socially frowned upon. Thus, it warrants closer examination. The brother and sister protagonists of the story, Shadī and Nādir, had previously visited this street many times with their parents. However, in one particular incident, they experience the city alongside friends their own age, an encounter that awakens in them a sense of maturity: "Shadī and Nādir had been to Istanbul Street with their mother many times before, but that night, their parents were nowhere in sight… They had

[70]Janet Afary, Sexual Politics in Modern Iran (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 159.

[71]D. H. Lawrence, Sons and Lovers (CA, San Diego: Icon Group, 2005), 389.

[72]Gulī Taraqī, Ittifāq [The Event] (Tehran: Nīlūfar, 2014), 46.

[73]Gulī Taraqī, Ittifāq [The Event] (Tehran: Nīlūfar, 2014), 46.

[74]Janet Ward, Weimar Surfaces: Urban Visual Culture in 1920s Germany (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 166.

[75]Gulī Taraqī, Ittifāq [The Event] (Tehran: Nīlūfar, 2014),

a strange feeling—an amalgamation of pleasure and anxiety."[72] As they revel in the city's attractions, they pass by cinema halls, gazing in fascination at the enchanting movie posters: "They would stop in front of the cinemas along the way, staring, mesmerized, at the pictures of the actors."[73]

In this story, the ritual of going to the cinema is intertwined with the experience of being present within other urban landscapes. The use of visually striking posters, glowing electronic and neon signs, and artificial lighting on the cinema's exterior façade were key elements in the strategy to attract audiences into a world of images and desires.[74] As a result, the cinema's façade was transformed into a seductive spectacle capable of drawing the masses away from their everyday lives and into the realm of cinematic entertainment.

The depiction of cinema-going in the story is also linked to the desire for touch and intimacy between the young male and female protagonists. In another scene from The Event, the adolescent characters go to the cinema together to watch a film. Nādir is infatuated with his female companion, Tania. The sensual intensity of the dark cinema hall amplifies their mutual longing to touch each other's bodies. Taraqī describes this fervent desire in the following passage:

Nādir was floating above the clouds. Was he dreaming? He gripped the decayed armrest tightly and pressed his heel against the floor… Tania stared at the film, but her mind was on Nādir. Both of them sat nervously, gathering themselves… Tania's left hand rested on her knee, just a finger's width away from Nādir's hand. Both were acutely aware of this proximity. Their restless hands trembled but never met. Tania waited, and Nādir lacked the courage to bridge that slight gap. It was one of those sultry nights, with a half-clouded sky and the distant rumble of thunder.[75]

Later in the story, due to the cinema being open-air and an un-

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expected downpour, everyone gets drenched. This act of being soaked reconnects them with their corporeality and physicality:

Half an hour hadn't passed before the rain came pouring down, like a waterfall from the sky. Some grumbled and left. Tania and Nādir, along with a few others, took shelter under an arch, and as soon as the rain stopped, they returned to their seats. The chairs were filled with water, and their clothes were half-wet. They sat down, and a wave of happiness—one of those magical happinesses that visits a person only once in a lifetime, and only in youth—swept through their restless hearts, wrapping around their fresh, rain-drenched bodies like an invisible thread.76

Iranian cinema, too, was acutely aware of cinema's sexual and erotic significance in Iran. Apart from the socially conscious films of the Iranian New Wave, such as The Experience (Tajrubah, ʿAbbās Kiyārustamī,1973) and Under the Skin of Night (Zīr-i Pūst-i Shab, Fereydun Goleh, 1974), which consciously portray the eroticism of cinema and its effects on the Iranian psyche, multiple instances of popular cinema also represent cinema's eroticism as a socially established aspect of the cinematic experience. This representation not only highlights the erotic dimensions of cinema itself but also enhances the erotic quality of the films, contributing to their box office success.

In Parvīz Usānlū's Black Hassan (Hasan Siyāh, 1972), while Hasan Siyāh intends to marry Fātī, who is significantly younger than him, Fātī is drawn to Mahdī, a young member of the performance group that Hasan leads. These two youngsters are deeply enamored with each other. In one scene Mahdī takes Fātī to the cinema. He first purchases some snacks (two sandwiches and a packet of sunflower seeds) from the concession stand in the theater's waiting area before they both hand over their tickets and enter the screening hall, where they will engage in a collective multi-sensory feast. The scene cuts from a shot of them in the brightly lit waiting area to a medium shot inside the darkened cinema, where they search for seats in the dimness.

The flickering light from the screen intermittently illuminates their faces before fading into darkness again. They move toward the camera and sit down near it. A medium shot captures the interplay of light and shadow on their faces as they eagerly watch the film on the screen.

Figure 10: Mahdī buys some snacks first; the theater experience was more than just watching the screen. A still from Black Hassan (Hasan Siyāh), directed by Parvīz Usānlū, 1972.

Figure 11: ahdī and Fātī sit before the screen, where the dreamy atmosphere invites the possibility of physical intimacy. A still from Black Hassan (Hasan Siyāh), directed by Parvīz Usānlū, 1972.

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The scene then cuts to the film being projected—a Western erotic movie is playing. A semi-nude woman undresses and a man are making love, and they whisper their mutual affection. The image on the screen then cuts to a close-up of Fātī's hands resting on her chador, which is draped over her lap. Mahdī's hand reaches out, firmly grasping Fātī's hand and guiding it beneath her chador. The camera reveals only the chador itself, while their movements, beneath it, allude to physical intimacy. The scene then cuts to a tight two-shot of them—Mahdī gazes intensely at Fātī, and after a moment, she turns toward him, locking eyes with him in fervent anticipation. With a look of quiet satisfaction, she glances downward while Mahdī continues to gaze at her face with longing. As this moment unfolds, the shifting images from the screen intermittently darken their faces, with the interplay of light and shadow continuing across their features.

Figure 12: The couple's attention drifts from the screen—though typically central to the cinema experience, the screen isn't necessarily the main attraction for viewers like Mahdī and Fātī. A still from Black Hassan (Hasan Siyāh), directed by Parvīz Usānlū, 1972.

Through poetic and metaphorical cinematic language, the film-maker conveys the yearning for closeness and the erotic charge that the experience of sitting in a darkened cinema can evoke in viewers. In particular, the close-up of their hands touching beneath the chador—the preferred traditional garment intend-

77Black Hassan, dir. Parvīz
Usānlū (Tehran: Ali Abbasi
Production, 1972), 00:44:46.

78Black Hassan, dir. Parvīz
Usānlū (Tehran: Ali Abbasi
Production, 1972), 00:45:11.

ed to preserve women's chastity—serves as a symbolic barrier
for their forbidden intimacy that is happening beneath its cover,
much like the darkness and anonymity of the cinema theater.
With just a few brief shots, the film portrays the eroticism of
the cinema hall, the influence of its darkness, and the power of
images on the screen to arouse its audience.

The scene then cuts to Hasan Siyāh in his shop, accompanied
by Shamsī—a woman his age with whom he had a relationship
in their youth and who still desires to rekindle their connection.
During their conversation, Hasan expresses his attraction to the
young Fātī, acknowledging that her youth makes her more ca-
pable of stimulating him. Shamsī, speaking in a tone of irony,
warns that a beautiful young woman might easily be taken by
a younger rival. Suddenly, Hasan interrupts and asks Shamsī
where Fātī is. She replies, "she went to the cinema."[77] Suspicion
flares in Hasan's eyes, and he abruptly turns to his apprentice,
demanding to know Mahdī's whereabouts. Upon realizing that
Mahdī has also gone to the cinema, Hasan becomes enraged.
Hasan knows all too well what happens in the darkened spaces
of the cinema.

The scene cuts to the exterior of the cinema, where Hasan, scan-
ning the crowd, spots Fātī and Mahdī among the masses. Over-
come with fury he forcefully pulls Fātī away from Mahdī and
drags her with him. As he marches her away from the cinema,
he angrily declares, "Now I'll show you what it really means
to go to the cinema!"[78] At this moment the film briefly shifts to
two onlookers in the crowd. Mistakenly assuming that Hasan is
Fātī's father, they express satisfaction, approving of his actions.
One of them remarks that a father should keep his daughter
away from the corrupting influence of the cinema.

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Figure 13: Hasan takes Fātī away from the cinema, a space he sees as morally corrupting. A still from Black Hassan (Hasan Siyāh), directed by Parvīz Usānlū, 1972.

In the second case study, ʿAlī Kunkūrī (1973) by Masʿūd Asadallāhī, Jalālfar, a notary, takes Malīhah into his home after her divorce, intending to marry her. However, his lonely son, ʿAlī, and Malīhah develop feelings for each other. Jalālfar opposes their union, as he himself is infatuated with Malīhah, leading to a romantic rivalry between father and son. In a humorous scene, ʿAlī takes Malīhah to the cinema, unaware that Jalālfar, having discovered their plan, is rushing to intercept them and prevent their time alone together. A sequence of shots follows: ʿAlī and Malīhah walk through the streets toward the cinema, while Jalālfar, moving swiftly behind them, struggles to catch up. ʿAlī and Malīhah enter the theater and proceed into the screening hall. The scene then cuts to a shot from behind the audience, showing only their silhouetted heads against the glowing screen—a visual metaphor for anonymity in the cinema hall.

Figures 14 & 15: ʿAlī and Malīhah walk through the modern space of metropolis to reach its center, the cinema. Upon entering the cinema, Malīhah's hijab loosens. Stills from ʿAlī Kunkūrī, directed by Masʿūd Asadallāhī, 1973.

The film then cuts to Jalālfar, breathless as he enters the cine-ma, searching frantically for the screening room. It seems that like Hasan in the Black Hassan, Jalālfar is also aware of what can transpire in the cinema. Another cut takes us to a two-shot of ʿAlī and Malīhah inside the darkened theater, their faces and skin intermittently illuminated by the flickering light from the screen. The intimacy of the cinema envelops them. When Malīhah whispers, "If your father finds out, this will be bad," ʿAlī reassures her, replying, "It'll be fine. When we get home, I'll tell him I've found the cure for my pain,"[79] a reference to his mental distress and his belief that being with Malīhah is the remedy he needs. They relish the experience of being in the cin-ema together, and ʿAlī excitedly speaks of his dreams of mar-rying Malīhah. They laugh along with the collective audience, momentarily forgetting their concerns—particularly Jalālfar's disapproval of their relationship. The cinema's charged atmo-sphere—the emotional flow of the crowd—seems to dissolve their individual anxieties, drawing them into the collective rhythm of the audience.

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Figures 16 & 17: A collective sensual experience unfolds, bringing ʿAlī and Malīhah closer than ever. Stills from ʿAlī Kunkūrī, directed by Masʿūd Asadallāhī, 1973.

[80]ʿAlī Kunkūrī, dir. Masʿūd Asadallāhī (ʿAsr-i Talāʾī, 1973), 00:42: 21.

[81]ʿAlī Kunkūrī, dir. Masʿūd Asadallāhī (ʿAsr-i Talāʾī, 1973), 00:42: 30.

Suddenly, at the edge of the frame, a figure moves between the rows of seats—it is Jalālfar. His entrance disrupts the dreamy, erotic atmosphere developing between the lovers in the cinema. Jalālfar calls out to ʿAlī. The same shot holds as the audience reacts with annoyance, protesting against the disruption. Finally, Jalālfar spots ʿAlī and Malīhah, his expression filled with anger and urgency. As Jalālfar begins to reprimand ʿAlī, the loud protests of the audience force him to take a seat. The mise-en-scène positions Malīhah in the middle, flanked by the two men.

The scene cuts back to the familiar shot from behind the audience, showing their silhouettes against the screen. A three-shot follows, framing Jalālfar, Malīhah, and ʿAlī. Lowering his voice, Jalālfar reproaches ʿAlī: "Have you thought about what people will say? You brought a woman who is staying in our home as a guest to the cinema."[80] ʿAlī, unfazed, responds, "It's no one's business."[81] As the argument unfolds, ʿAlī gently reaches for Malīhah's hand, offering her reassurance. The audience once again protests, demanding silence. A cut to the screen follows, then to a close-up of ʿAlī's hand slowly moving toward Malīhah's, eventually taking her right hand in his. The dimly lit cinema setting amplifies the desire for touch and closeness. Malīhah, surrendering to the moment, places her hand fully in ʿAlī's, allowing him to cradle it between both of his, caressing it in an unmistakably erotic manner. The prolonged close-up lingers on this intimate gesture.

The shot then cuts back to the three-shot, where it becomes clear that Malīhah has turned her face toward ʿAlī, visibly enjoying this physical connection. Suddenly, another close-up reveals that Jalālfar, too, reaches for Malīhah's free hand, intertwining his fingers with hers and gripping it firmly. A close-up of Malīhah's face follows—she is still turned toward ʿAlī, relishing his touch—until she suddenly feels Jalālfar's hand enclosing hers. Startled, she turns toward Jalālfar, her expression shifting to shock and discomfort. A cut to Jalālfar's face reveals his satisfaction in this clandestine, erotic contact. Malīhah then sharply turns back to ʿAlī, as the camera lingers on his face, showing his quiet pleasure in holding her hand.

Neither ʿAlī nor Jalālfar realizes that the other is also holding one of Malīhah's hands. The darkened cinema obscures their awareness, allowing the tension to build. A rapid sequence of close-ups follows: Jalālfar's hand gripping Malīhah's tightly, then ʿAlī's hand caressing hers. A return to the three-shot shows Malīhah visibly distressed by Jalālfar's touch. In an abrupt act of defiance, she jerks both hands away, breaking the physical connection.

Figure 18: Both men are holding Malīhah's hands. A still from ʿAlī Kunkūrī, directed by Masʿūd Asadallāhī, 1973.

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The film on the screen then cuts to an inverted reflection of their situation—depicting a man caught between two women. This ironic visual parallel heightens the emotional charge of the scene.

Figures 19 & 20: Malīhah is caught in the middle. In a comedic twist, her situation mirrors an inversion of what's happening onscreen. Stills from ʿAlī Kunkūrī, directed by Masʿūd Asadallāhī, 1973.

A close-up follows of both ʿAlī's and Jalālfar's hands, each reaching out once again in search of Malīhah's. However, with Malīhah having withdrawn, their hands inadvertently make contact with each other. Each, assuming he is still holding Malīhah's hand, tenderly clasps the other's fingers. The camera frames their faces in tight close-ups as they remain unaware of the mistake. Suddenly, the film on the screen ends. The theater lights begin to rise. A cut back to the three-shot captures the moment of realization in a comic tone—ʿAlī and Jalālfar both register, with dawning embarrassment, that they have been holding each other's hands rather than Malīhah's.

Taken together, Black Hassan and ʿAlī Kunkūrī underscore the unique place cinemas held in pre-revolutionary Iran as charged, liminal spaces where social norms could be temporarily suspended or renegotiated. In both films, young protagonists exploit the theater's anonymity and intimacy to pursue illicit or frowned-upon relationships—Mahdī and Fātī defying Hasan's authority, and ʿAlī and Malīhah defying Jalālfar's jealousy. The theaters in these stories emerge not as passive backdrops but as active participants in the drama: darkened rooms that embolden

lovers to express forbidden desire, heighten emotional responses through collective viewing, and ultimately provoke the ire of those invested in guarding social decorum. Yet the two films also illustrate the tensions and comedic ironies inherent in such spaces. In Black Hassan, Hasan's rage—and the approval of bystanders who mistake him for Fātī's father—reveal the broader societal suspicion toward cinema as a "corrupting force." Conversely, in ʿAlī Kunkūrī, Jalālfar's attempted interruption collapses into embarrassment when he unwittingly holds his son's hand. Both conflicts revolve around the same premise: the older generation views cinema as a den of moral peril precisely because it enables new forms of proximity between men and women—a possibility they cannot fully control or police.

By highlighting these parallel encounters, the films point to a larger cultural ambivalence. On one hand, cinema extends a liberating promise, permitting intimacy and flirtation outside of marriage. On the other, it stands as a flashpoint for conservative anxieties, made visible in the outraged father figures determined to suppress erotic transgressions—yet who are themselves hardly immune to cinema's temptations (as Jalālfar is not when he sits beside Malīhah in the cinema). The final scenes of both works highlight how the fallout from these cinematic encounters spills into everyday life, underscoring that the theater's power lies not only in its on-screen images but in its capacity to reshape social interactions. In doing so, both Black Hassan and ʿAlī Kunkūrī offer a nuanced glimpse into Iranian society's evolving sexual mores and the contested role of cinema as a crucible for negotiating new forms of desire.

Conclusion: Cinema's Eroticism and the Contours of Iranian Modernity

The history of cinema in Iran reveals its profound role in the dialectic of tradition and modernity, with eroticism serving as both a catalyst and a battleground for cultural transformation. As a medium that inherently merges the sensory, the social, and the

symbolic, cinema did not merely reflect Iran's modernization—it actively shaped its trajectory. By fostering a communal, heterosocial space where urban audiences could collectively negotiate desire, cinema became a pedagogical force, training Iranians in the rhythms and rituals of modern life. The darkened theater, with its charged proximity of bodies and flickering fantasies of romance, functioned as a sensory-reflexive horizon where the tensions of a rapidly changing society were felt, rehearsed, and reconfigured.

Cinema's role in modernizing Iran lay in its ability to democratize access to new forms of intimacy. The multisensory environment of the theater—its darkness, collective laughter, and haptic stimuli—dissolved rigid social hierarchies, allowing diverse audiences to experience a provisional egalitarianism. For women, whose public presence was tightly policed, cinemas became rare spaces of agency, where they could navigate desire both on-screen and in the anonymous crowd. This shift was not merely symbolic; as noted by Afary, displacing earlier homoerotic social norms and redefining gender relations in urban Iran. The erotic charge of Fīlmfārsī's cabaret scenes, however crassly commercial, offered a vernacular modernism that hybridized global tropes with local anxieties, rendering modernity tangible—and consumable—for mass audiences.

Yet this modernization was inherently contested. The backlash against cinema's "corruptive" influence, articulated by clerics and traditionalists, underscored its disruptive power. But their very outrage revealed cinema's success in publicizing previously private desires. Theaters became heterotopias—spaces of exception where social norms were temporarily suspended, enabling Iranians to experiment with modern subjectivities. Even as the 1979 Revolution sought to purge these spaces, the sensory and social practices they fostered proved indelible. The collective experience of desire, laughter, and tears in the dark had already normalized a new public intimacy, embedding romantic love and heterosocial interaction into the fabric of Iranian urban life.

The legacy of pre-revolutionary cinema endures in Iran's cultural memory as a testament to the irreducible complexity of modernization. Cinema's eroticism, far from a mere indulgence, was a crucible for Iran's negotiation with global modernity—a space where tradition was neither wholly rejected nor passively preserved, but dynamically reinterpreted. In this sense, the history of Iranian cinema mirrors the broader paradoxes of modernity itself: a project of liberation and discipline, of fractured identities and fleeting solidarities, played out under the flickering light of the silver screen.

As Iran continues to grapple with the tensions between cultural authenticity and global influence, the cinematic past offers a reminder that modernity is not a fixed destination but an ongoing negotiation—one that unfolds not only in grand political acts but in the intimate, sensory exchanges of everyday life. The darkened theater, with its whispers, glances, and collective gasps, remains a metaphor for this process: a space where the old and the new collide, and where the erotic, in all its ambiguity, becomes a force of historical change.

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