Iranian Studies (2024), 1–21
doi:10.1017/irn.2024.24

Association for Iranian Studies
انجمن ایران‌پژوهی

ARTICLE

The Collapse of the Male Gaze in the Cinema of Bahram Beyzaie: *The Crow* and *Maybe Some Other Time*

Seyed Aria Ghoreishi, MA

Dramatic Literature, University of Tehran, Iran
Email: a.ghoreishi88@gmail.com

(Received 24 November 2023; revised 22 July 2024; accepted 23 July 2024)

Abstract

This article explores the correlation between two of Bahram Beyzaie's films and Laura Mulvey's theories on the male gaze. The films in question are *The Crow* (*Kalāgh*, 1977) and *Maybe Some Other Time* (*Shāyad Vaqti Digar*, 1987). This article delves into the films' narrative structures, revealing a subtle yet significant shift in the dynamics of power and gaze. Initially, both films appear to conform to conventional representations of male dominance, establishing a seemingly patriarchal landscape. However, as the narratives unfold, a gradual transformation occurs, subverting conventions of the male gaze. By employing Mulvey's framework, this article deciphers the interplay between Beyzaie's cinematic language and Mulvey's theoretical underpinnings, highlighting Beyzaie's role in deconstructing patriarchal structures and crafting a more nuanced portrayal of gender relations.

Keywords: Bahram Beyzaie; Laura Mulvey; male gaze; feminist film theory; gender representation; Iranian cinema

Introduction

The discourse around women's oppression in certain films is not limited to the views of Laura Mulvey. According to numerous feminist psychoanalysts, female sexuality is frequently perceived as a menacing and perilous force that necessitates restriction and eradication for the narrative's resolution. For instance, in the concluding scenes of the film *Casablanca* (Michael Curtiz, 1942), Rick (Humphrey Bogart) realizing the Nazi plot is likely less important than his ability to win the love of Ilsa (Ingrid Bergman). Therefore, *Casablanca* can be seen as a film not about the struggle against the Nazis, but instead about control over female sexuality. The ending of the story, according to these feminist psychoanalysts, shows that women must either learn to obey men or be punished.[1]

However, it is important to acknowledge that Mulvey attributes these features to mainstream and dominant cinema as a whole, rather than solely to specific films, in her essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," initially published in the journal *Screen* in 1975 and later reprinted in her book *Visual and Other Pleasures* in 1989.[2] Mulvey's essay marked a significant advancement for feminist theory, as she employed patterns previously used in non-gendered and formalist semiotic analyses. This approach fostered an awareness of film viewing as inherently involved in gendered identities.[3] Susan Hayward points out

[1] Marc Jancovich, "Screen Theory," in *Approaches to Popular Film*, ed. Joanne Hollows and Marc Jancovich (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), 143.
[2] Ibid.
[3] Maggie Humm, *Feminism and Film* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997), 17.

that, in this essay, Mulvey focused less on textual operations and more on textual relations between screen and spectator. However, the essay still provides important clues for examining the narrative and performative qualities of film.[4]

Among the leading figures of contemporary Iranian cinema and theater, few have dealt with female protagonists as extensively as Bahram Beyzaie. A substantial portion of his plays and films have female protagonists. Indeed, among the ten feature films written and directed by Beyzaie, only *Downpour* (*Ragbār*, 1972), his first film, has a male protagonist. Women take the leading roles in all nine of his other films.

Nevertheless, as per Laura Mulvey, a film must go beyond merely the presence of female protagonists to be considered free from a dominant, patriarchal gaze. The key point is how women are represented. Women can come under the control of the male gaze simply by refraining from challenging men's potential power. Men can make the image of women beautiful, but the world remains under the control of the sign of male power or masculinity (symbolized by the phallus). Within such works, the discourse remains phallocentric and reflects the weakness and helplessness of women's situation. This relationship does not change only by creating women characters with a voice.[5] According to Mulvey, many films are ostensibly female-centered but still portray women as passive and under the control of the male gaze. As James D. Bloom notes, as long as the owners of the gaze have a commanding position in constructing the images and narratives of women, that narrative will still be under the control of the male gaze.[6] As Judith Butler more generally suggests, it is not enough to simply ask how women might become more fully represented in language and politics. It is imperative that feminist critique understands how the category of "women," the subject of feminism, is produced and restrained by the very structures of power through which emancipation is sought.[7]

Bahram Beyzaie's approach to women, on the other hand, extends beyond merely having female characters as the center of his works. Indeed, by portraying pragmatic women (or women who progressively take control of affairs) and implementing shifts in points of view, Beyzaie achieves an approach that can be evaluated using Mulvey's feminist theories. Among his cinematic works, *The Crow* (*Kalāgh*, 1977) and *Maybe Some Other Time* (*Shāyad Vaqti Digar*, 1987) have undeniable similarities to each other. At the beginning of both films, it seems we are faced with the conventional male gaze. However, as the position of the subject and object gradually undergo a transformation, we face an approach that can no longer be evaluated based on the male gaze. An examination of the techniques used in these two films shows how this gradual collapse of the male gaze is achieved.

Mulvey's "visual pleasure": evolving the male gaze

According to second-wave feminist film theory, narrative in mainstream cinema defines the role of women according to the logic of patriarchy and male desire. In other words, mainstream female characters are objects either defined by male desire or ones who must conform to that pre-defined logic.[8] Laura Mulvey explored this idea in both narrative and image. According to Robert Stam, as per Mulvey, a narrative based on a patriarchal gaze turns the male gender into the active subject of the narrative and the female gender into a passive object provided for the male gender.[9] The male character is responsible for establishing the narrative framework and situating women within it.

[4] Susan Hayward, *Cinema Studies: The Key Concepts*, 5th ed. (London: Routledge, 2017), 158.

[5] Bernard F. Dick, *Anatomy of Film*, 3rd ed. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), 251–252.

[6] James D. Bloom, *Reading the Male Gaze in Literature and Culture: Studies in Erotic Epistemology* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 5.

[7] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 5.

[8] Warren Buckland, *Narrative and Narration: Analyzing Cinematic Storytelling* (New York: Wallflower Press, 2020), 66.

[9] Robert Stam, *Film Theory: An Introduction* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2010), 174.

https://doi.org/10.1017/irn.2024.24 Published online by Cambridge University Press

The reason for this approach, within a patriarchal culture, is that men do not want to be objectified by being stared at themselves and, accordingly, direct their gaze towards women. In other words, the concept of the male gaze is a reflection of men's desire for being active rather than passive subjects and, as such, assign the role of passivity to women. This type of transfer gives men a sense of control over the situation and belief in their superiority over women, the object of their gaze. When a woman accepts her position as the object of the male gaze, she is given the full treatment.[10] Thus, visual pleasure in cinema reproduces the dual structure of men looking and women exhibiting "to-be-looked-at-ness," a reflection of the asymmetrical power relations of our social world structured on the basis of sexual imbalance.[11] Under such conditions, the female viewer has no choice but to empathize with either the active male protagonist or the passive female antagonist.[12]

As Janet McCabe has emphasized, the split between the pleasure of looking as active/male and being looked at as passive/female is, in Mulvey's view, indicative of the way the unconscious of a patriarchal society constructs a cinematic form.[13] In this form, and traditionally, women are displayed in two ways: as erotic objects for the characters within the film's story and as erotic objects for the film's viewers. These two types of male gaze are merged together. Mulvey points to the showgirl as an example of these two gazes becoming one without creating an obvious break in the diegesis.[14]

As Mulvey describes, the origin of the active perception of the male gaze and passive perception of the female gaze traces back to Freudian theory. In discussions of the Oedipus complex, Freud typically focused on the male child; a child, usually between the ages of three and six, who comes to understand that he is no longer the sole object of his mother's attention, as his father also holds a place. Because the father engages in sexual relations with the mother, the child develops resentment towards his father. Boys, in a segment of this Oedipal competition with their fathers, often worry (in their imaginations) about being castrated, losing their masculinity, by their fathers as punishment. Due to this anxiety, the child identifies with his father, seeing him as a role model and idol, while developing affection for the mother.

According to Freud's perspective, girls are also drawn to their mothers. While a girl is not concerned about castration, she becomes aware at this stage of her lack of a penis, experiencing what Freud terms "penis envy." The root of penis envy lies in the view that girls, upon seeing the clearly visible and larger genitalia of their brothers or playmates, consider it superior to the corresponding organ in their own bodies (the clitoris), which is smaller and less conspicuous.[15] This marks the beginning of the process of girls' transition from an active to a passive sexual goal, seeking not so much to love as to be loved.[16] Mulvey's conventional cinematic gaze classification of male (active) and female (passive) categories stems from this hypothesis.

Mulvey's discussion of the male gaze continues with her comparison of the genders' perspectives. In a world structured by sexual imbalance, in Mulvey's view, the pleasure of looking is divided into two categories: active/male and passive/female.[17] Mulvey sees this division as the cinematic equivalent of what happens in traditional storytelling, where the female character is always passive and the male character assumes an active role. Examples of this active/male and passive/female dichotomy can be seen in fairy tales; for

[10] Dick, *Anatomy of Film*, 252.

[11] John Storey, *Cultural Studies and the Study of Popular Culture*, 3rd ed. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), 84.

[12] Stam, *Film Theory: An Introduction*, 174.

[13] Janet McCabe, *Feminist Film Studies: Writing the Woman into Cinema* (London: Wallflower, 2004), 29.

[14] Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," in *Visual and Other Pleasures* (London: Macmillan, 1989), 19.

[15] Rosemarie Tong, *Feminist Thought: A Comprehensive Introduction*, 4th ed. (Boulder: Westview Press, 2014), 129.

[16] Ibid., 130.

[17] Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," 19.

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example, the princess waiting for a brave male hero to rescue her.[18] According to Mulvey, "The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed."[19] This binary structure, which is based on gender difference, controls the production of images in classical cinematic narrative in general and Hollywood cinema in particular.[20]

Laura Mulvey identifies three types of gaze in cinema: (1) the spectator's gaze; (2) the camera's gaze; and (3) the gaze of the film's male characters towards its female characters.[21] Mulvey argues that feminist films can at least replace the third gaze with an exchange of gazes between women. Additionally, according to Buckland, Mulvey also attempts to offer ways of countering the dominant forms of the first and second gazes through efforts such as her film *Amy!* (1980).[22]

Due to the fact that the gaze in cinema is basically controlled by men, Mulvey considers all the above categories, in their classical form, as male. In such a scenario, even the look of the camera objectifies women as sexual objects. Therefore, as Doughty and Etherington-Wright noted, the viewer's gaze is formed based on identification with the camera.[23] Mulvey also affirms the validity of this perspective for the female audience. From her point of view, in the usual Hollywood style, the cinematic grammar places the audience alongside the hero, and the female audience adapts to this convention. Kaja Silverman has explained this adaptation as a form of trans-sex identification, where the female spectator accepts this as a re-actualization of the phallic phase of her gender.[24]

The combination of gazes demonstrates how classical Hollywood cinema presents a narrative and viewpoint that is inherently gendered.[25] According to Mulvey, this specific narrative form is considered the primary means of control in cinema, resulting in the formation of two main types of pleasure. The first type is scopophilia, where the woman is objectified as a source of pleasure, and the second is derived from narcissism. According to Doughty and Etherington-Wright, Mulvey draws on Jacques Lacan's concept of the mirror stage, arguing that the spectator's narcissistic identification with the on-screen character creates the illusion that the spectator is in control of the image.[26] Lacan described how the moment when a child recognizes its own image in the mirror is crucial to the constitution of the ego. From Mulvey's perspective, the formation of the child's self is in some ways comparable to the pleasure generated by the feeling of identification between the spectator and film characters.[27] Just as the child recognizes itself in the mirror correctly or incorrectly, the film spectator sees themself correctly or incorrectly on the cinema screen.

In this context, the voyeuristic gaze is the most important form of pleasure. Within this particular form of pleasure, the spectator experiences gratification by gazing at an image, typically of a woman. Here, the male gaze is an active and curious one, and the woman plays the role of an object that grants the voyeur a controlling and dominant position.[28] Under such circumstances, the spectator – by imitating the process in which the child, during the mirror stage, discovers its image – casts their gaze upon their on-screen substitute.

[18] Ruth Doughty and Christine Etherington-Wright, *Understanding Film Theory*, 2nd ed. (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), 181.

[19] Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," 19.

[20] Annie D. Tregouet, "The Male Gaze Subverted: Germaine Dulac's LA Belle Dame sans merci," *West Virginia University Philological Papers* 48 (2001): 43+.

[21] Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," 25.

[22] Buckland, *Narrative and Narration*, 73.

[23] Douhgty and Etherington-Wright, *Understanding Film Theory,* 181.

[24] Kaja Silverman, *Male Subjectivity at the Margins* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 266.

[25] Stam, *Film Theory: An Introduction*, 174.

[26] Douhgty and Etherington-Wright, *Understanding Film Theory,* 181.

[27] Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," 17.

[28] McCabe, *Feminist Film Studies*, 29.

https://doi.org/10.1017/irn.2024.24 Published online by Cambridge University Press

As such, the power of the male character and his control over events coincides with the active power of the voyeuristic gaze; a powerful combination that creates a satisfying sense of authority in the spectator.[29]

Mulvey also raises castration anxiety in discussions of the dominance of the male gaze. In the semantic system of classical cinema, the image of woman is not only a symbol of male desire, but also a signifier of castration anxiety. As Mulvey posits, "in psychoanalytic terms, the female figure poses a deeper problem. She also connotes something that the look continually circles around but disavows: her lack of a penis, implying a threat of castration and hence unpleasure."[30]

In such conditions, the film narrative must ultimately present the woman to the male viewer in a manner devoid of doubt, using two primary strategies. In the first strategy, the male gaze is linked to sadism, with the narrative revolving around attempts to decode the woman. However, this linkage can also be interpreted as a manifestation of the desire to control, punish the (hypothetical) cause of castration anxiety, and even destroy the woman.[31] Thus, the result of this type of narrative is the woman's punishment, devaluation, or moral salvation (by the man).

Each time the man tries to take control and punish the woman for arousing his forbidden desires, we encounter women who are the subject and subordinate of the male gaze. Mulvey considers the film *Vertigo* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1958) to be a prime example of this effort. Mulvey sees the sadistic attempt of Scotty Ferguson (James Stewart) to transform Judy (Kim Novak) into Madeleine as an attempt to dominate her image. As McCabe has stated, it is Judy who is considered guilty, and she is killed for it.[32] According to Mulvey, the man's initial trauma can only be resolved through either the humiliation, punishment, or salvation of the guilty object (the woman).[33]

Mulvey, however, subsequently revised her initial perspective on *Vertigo* from the 1970s, acknowledging that the film's complexity and self-awareness exceeds her earlier understanding. As she stated, "Rather than reflecting the prevalence of the female star as signifier of sexuality and object of the voyeuristic gaze, *Vertigo* reflects on her fabrication, on the imbrication between femininity, illusion and film to the point of self-reflexivity."[34]

The second strategy of presenting the woman to the male viewer employs fetishism. Based on Freudian analysis, Mulvey concludes that the transformation of the female image into a male fetish is a mechanism of obscuring castration anxiety. Here, the woman is idealized as a complete being rather than a symbol of lacking. According to McCabe, by attributing heightened significance to the flawless female body, or at least a specific part of it, the male gaze compensates for the lack the woman inherently represents.[35] This second approach, the fetishistic one, elevates the object's physical beauty beyond its actual existence. Mulvey mentions that, as a result of the process of becoming a fetish, the woman transforms from a threat into a source of reassurance.[36]

Over the years, Mulvey's theory has faced numerous criticisms, leading her to reassess. In an article initially published in 1981, Mulvey stated that she stands by her original article, but added two key points to her initial view of the male gaze in light of such criticism.[37] The first point pertains to a group of female spectators who may secretly, even unconsciously, derive pleasure from control over the diegetic world provided by identification

[29] Ibid., 30; Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," 20.
[30] Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," 21.
[31] Hayward, *Cinema Studies*, 370.
[32] McCabe, *Feminist Film Studies*, 30.
[33] Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," 21.
[34] Laura Mulvey, *Afterimages: On Cinema, Women and Changing Times* (London: Reaktion Books, 2019), 20.
[35] McCabe, *Feminist Film Studies*, 31.
[36] Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," 21.
[37] Laura Mulvey, "Afterthoughts on 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' inspired by King Vidor's 'Duel in the Sun' (1946)," in *Visual and Other Pleasures* (London: Macmillan, 1989), 29.

https://doi.org/10.1017/irn.2024.24 Published online by Cambridge University Press

with a hero. The second point relates to melodrama, as Mulvey revisits a specific category of melodramatic films in which the protagonist is a woman unable to achieve a stable sexual identity and caught between passive femininity and regressive masculinity.[38]

Another point Mulvey later added to her initial theory concerns the impact of the changing conditions of film spectatorship. According to Mulvey, the advent of VHS in the 1980s led to a complete transformation in film spectatorship. Consequently, the 1970s became the last decade in which films could only be viewed by the public collectively, projected in a darkened theater.[39] Through the use of electronic or digital devices for film viewing, the spectator could now delay the film or fragment it from linear narrative into their favorite moments or scenes. In such conditions, the spectator is able to "hold on to, to possess, the previously elusive image."[40]

This shift both strengthened and weakened certain aspects of Mulvey's argument in "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." In short, if the spectator now has the ability to control a film's flow (for example, by skipping some scenes and repeating others), the narrative drive tends to weaken and, as such, the process of identification loses its hold over the spectator. With the weakening of narrative and its effects, a film's aesthetics are feminized as the power of the spectator moves towards the poses, stillness, lighting, and choreography of the characters and camera. Mulvey attempts to articulate this using the vocabulary of her article, highlighting how the aesthetics of pleasure in this new form of the spectator's encounter with cinema tends towards fetishistic scopophilia. This "fetishistic spectator," as Mulvey denotes, is more attracted by the image than the plot.[41]

Domination of the male gaze in Iranian cinema

The two films examined in this article were produced in two entirely different periods of Iranian cinema. *The Crow* was made shortly before the Islamic Revolution of 1979, while *Maybe Some Other Time* was produced just over a decade after the revolution. Although cultural norms and cinematic conditions before and after the revolution appeared to be drastically different, they did share common ground: the dominance of a patriarchal approach.

Cinema, as a symbol of modernity, entered Iran at a time when Iranian women, after a period of neglect and silence, were striving to shake off the heavy burden of tradition and assert their rightful place in society. In such circumstances, cinema could have played a significant role in assisting women achieve this goal. However, the Iranian film industry's portrayal of Iranian women was nothing but an endorsement of reactionary and prejudiced attitudes that regarded women as second-class citizens whose duties were to stay at home, take care of their husbands, and reproduce.[42] In the majority of mainstream Iranian cinema, this perspective prevailed not only before the revolution (especially in works known as "filmfarsi") but also after, as evident in the works of some modernist and intellectual filmmakers. Like a chronic illness, this perspective persisted in the cultural landscape of Iranian cinema after the 1979 revolution.[43]

The definition of filmfarsi has always been subject to debate. For instance, Lahiji describes filmfarsi as a "genre of lumpen-cabaret films."[44] Jahed, however, points out that there is no precise definition for the term, but mentions that it has increasingly been used to refer to

[38] Ibid., 29–30.

[39] Laura Mulvey, "Introduction: 1970s Feminist Film Theory and the Obsolescent Object," in *Feminisms*, ed. Laura Mulvey and Anna Backman Rogers (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2015), 18.

[40] Laura Mulvey, "The Possessive Spectator," in *Death 24x a Second: Stillness and the Moving Image* (London: Reaktion Books, 2006), 161.

[41] Ibid., 165.

[42] 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), 216.

[43] Ibid., 216–217.

[44] Ibid., 218.

https://doi.org/10.1017/irn.2024.24 Published online by Cambridge University Press

technically and artistically inferior Iranian works, distinguishing them from superior Western films.[45] If we consider filmfarsi to include the majority of mainstream popular films in pre-revolutionary Iranian cinema, many critics agree that such films presented a generally derogatory portrayal of women, to the extent that someone solely familiarizing themselves with Iranian films featuring Iranian women might believe Iran to be a land of dancers, wandering singers, and prostitutes.[46]

Similarly, Ejlali, when discussing the recurrence of rape and deception as popular themes in pre-revolutionary Iranian popular cinema, notes that such deceived female characters, like most female characters in filmfarsi of that era, are passive and inactive. They are neither capable of protecting themselves against deceitful, rapist antagonists nor able to find a solution to their problem. Typically, such female characters often resort to suicide, which they fail at in most cases, and the male heroes save them from death.[47]

According to Ejlali, this approach was consistent with Iranian society's general mentality at the time. In those years, a girl who was raped or deceived by lustful men usually had little choice beyond death or leaving her family, and women living independently had no precedent and was not considered respectable. Consequently, many deceived women were forced into a kind of immoral and corrupt life, unless taken under a man's protection. However, being protected by a man would be a rarity in such cases, as men were generally conservative, not forgiving or trustful of a misguided girl.[48]

It is worth noting that, in recent years, a group of historians and cinema experts have attempted to reevaluate the portrayal of women in filmfarsi. For instance, Khanlarzadeh refers to a prevalent subculture of popular music in the 1950s–1970s called Lālehzari. While performing, several popular female singers of this subculture rejected general standards regarding women's bodies and lifestyles, instead demonstrating resilience, singing freely about their desires, and taking pride in their subversive lifestyles.[49] Given that many filmfarsi movies used and emphasized Lālehzari performances, Khanlarzadeh believes such films also challenged the traditions imposed on women by depicting behaviors typically seen in men.[50] Nonetheless, the generally offensive portrayal of women in filmfarsi works seems to be a widespread opinion among Iranian cinema critics.

In the 1960s and 1970s, a transformation occurred in Iranian cinema, as a group of filmmakers attempted to draw inspiration from contemporary global cinematic movements instead of adhering to popular filmfarsi patterns. This movement – generally referred to as the Iranian New Wave – began in the 1960s with films such as *Brick and Mirror* (*Khesht va Ayeneh*, Ebrahim Golestan, 1965) and *Night of the Hunchback* (*Shab-e Quzi*, Farrokh Ghaffari, 1965), reaching its peak in the 1970s with the production of ambitious films and the showcasing of world cinema at the Tehran International Film Festival.[51] During this period, a group of prominent Iranian cinema figures challenged the prevailing thematic and aesthetic principles of the filmfarsi tradition. These filmmakers' attention to new narratives, themes, and genres influenced not only arthouse but also popular cinema in Iran. Some features of filmfarsi, such as studio shooting, highly exaggerated acting styles, and

[45] Parviz Jahed, "Film Farsi as the Mainstream Cinema," in *Directory of World Cinema: Iran*, ed. Parviz Jahed (Bristol and Chicago: Intellect, 2012), 67.

[46] Shahla Lahiji, *Simā-ye Zan dar Āsār-e Bahram Beyzaie, Film-sāz va Filmnāmeh-nevis* (Tehran: Rowshangaran, 1988), 8.

[47] Parviz Ejlali, *Degarguni-ye Ejtemā'i va Film-hā-ye Sinamā'i dar Irān: Jāme'e Shenāsi-ye Film-hā-ye Āmeh Pasand-e Irāni (1357–1309)* (Tehran: Farhang va Andisheh, 2004), 218.

[48] Ibid., 219.

[49] Mina Khanlarzadeh, "More Champion than the Champions: Female Masculinity in Lālehzari Music and Filmfarsi," *Popular Music and Society* 46 (2023): 1.

[50] Ibid., 2.

[51] Kaveh Askari, *Relaying Cinema in Midcentury Iran: Material Cultures in Transit* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2022), 117.

https://doi.org/10.1017/irn.2024.24 Published online by Cambridge University Press

happy endings, were replaced by location shooting, the use of non-actors or actors from theatrical traditions, and much grittier narratives.[52]

Despite these transformations, some historians of Iranian cinema argue that the emergence of Iranian New Wave had no significant impact on the status of women in Iranian cinema. For instance, Lahiji has pointed out that, although this transformation occurred and better films were being produced, women's social worth was still disregarded in many of these works, with their role remaining confined to the margins by predominantly male-oriented scripts.[53]

This perspective, of course, does not encompass all Iranian New Wave films. For instance, Ejlali refers to a few films from the 1970s, including *Morning of the Fourth Day* (*Sobh-e Ruz-e Chāhārom,* Kamran Shirdel, 1972), in which illicit relationships are not considered catastrophic or major problems, unlike in more typical Iranian cinema. According to Ejlali, these films attempted to be more intellectual than standard filmfarsi productions, drawing more inspiration from European and American films.[54] This explanation clarifies that Ejlali is referring to a subset of films within Iranian New Wave. Nevertheless, the depiction of women in these films remains a contentious issue.

Iranian filmmakers' emulation of American cinema is what links the trajectory of Iran's pre-revolutionary commercial cinema industry to Laura Mulvey's views. Indeed, under the influence of Hollywood, Iranian filmmakers began incorporating violence and sex as cinematic staples into their works.[55]

This influence was not limited to so-called filmfarsi works, which most critics considered to be of low technical quality. For example, Iranian critics have noted that Samuel Khachikian – the most prominent director of crime thrillers in Iran in the 1950s, with significant impact on the Iranian film industry – utilized the language of world cinema in his films. Due to his interest in thrillers and efforts to elevate the status and credibility of directors in an industry with little interest in authorship, he was named "the Hitchcock of Iran."[56] The success of Khachikian's films led to a wave of similar films in the early 1960s. However, some critics accused Khachikian of imitating American crime films, as many of his films (and subsequently, the imitating works) included elements of cynical brutality, gramophone jazz, criminal underworld, femme fatale characters, and location shooting of Tehran at night, entirely attributable to the influence of contemporary American crime cinema.[57]

The prominence of femme fatale characters in Iranian crime films of the 1950s and 1960s exemplifies Iranian filmmakers' emphasis on women's sexual allure from a predominantly male perspective, influenced by American cinema. But this discussion can be even further expanded. For instance, while the use of sex in Iranian films reached its peak in the 1970s, pre-revolution commercial cinematic portrayals of women's sexual aspects were not only limited to the direct portrayal of sex.[58] Women who sang and danced in cafes and cabarets in many filmfarsi works were essentially depicted to attract male spectators. Naficy describes this trend as follows:

> These often performed sexually suggestive numbers for a delighted diegetic, usually male-only, audience. A leering, voyeuristic, male-driven camera gaze filmed their performances, which either isolated their legs, breasts, and faces into fragmented fetish objects or tilted and panned across their scantily clad bodies as though caressing them by hand.[59]

[52] Parviz Jahed, *The New Wave Cinema in Iran: A Critical Study* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2022), 6–7.
[53] Lahiji, *Simā-ye Zan dar Āsār-e Bahram Beyzaie,* 11–12.
[54] Ejlali, *Degarguni-ye Ejtemā'i va Film-hā-ye Sinamā'i dar Irān*, 219.
[55] Shahla Mirbakhtyar, *Iranian Cinema and the Islamic Revolution* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2006), 27.
[56] Askari, *Relaying Cinema in Midcentury Iran*, 119.
[57] Ibid., 131.
[58] Mirbakhtyar, *Iranian Cinema and the Islamic Revolution*, 31.
[59] Hamid Naficy, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema, Volume 2: The Industrializing Years, 1941–1978* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011), 208.

https://doi.org/10.1017/irn.2024.24 Published online by Cambridge University Press

The cinematic portrayal of this image of women also perceived modernity and individuality as a threat to family integrity. Modern, self-reliant women aroused male hysteria and panic. Naficy regards this type of perspective as stemming from the Middle Eastern honor-shame complex, where male honor is dependent on female sexual shame. In filmfarsi works, therefore, men were expected to protect women's sacred realms not only from other men, but also from their own sexual desires.[60] With these explanations, one can see how a significant portion of Iranian cinema before the 1979 revolution was constructed using the same patriarchal rules Mulvey questioned in "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema."

After 1979, laws regarding dress code and relations between men and women underwent significant changes. Adherence to Islamic laws mandating the concealment of women's bodies from all men, except a select group of close relatives, led to women's compulsory veiling in public and the prohibition of any physical contact between individuals of the opposite sex in film. Filmmakers' confusion around how to portray women on the screen led to a noticeable reduction in women's roles and agency in films of the early 1980s.

Clearly, this approach differs in some ways from the male gaze described by Mulvey. As Mottahedeh explains, the male spectator's gaze at the female body in Iranian cinema after the revolution could no longer be an act of voyeurism or arise from fetishism.[61] New regulations gave rise to a gaze termed by Naficy as the "Islamicate gaze theory," which he considers radically different from Western feminist gaze theory.[62] Naficy grounds the semiotics of the veil in four principles. First, eyes are not passive organs, they are active, even invasive, likened to arrows in Persian love poetry. Second, women's sexual desires and appetites are insatiable and, if not curbed by modesty, lead to the corruption of men and society. Third, women are deemed exhibitionist, a trait manipulated by both men and women in the culture industry to stimulate men's sexual urges, movie sales, and capitalist consumption. And finally, men are perceived as weak in the face of powerful female sexuality, as their gaze on unveiled women has an immediate and destructive impact.[63] In Islam, instead of a gaze, an averted look is recommended. For instance, men and women were prohibited from looking at the naked body, or even body parts, of unrelated individuals (except for faces and hands). Likewise, men were prohibited from looking at women's hair, and women were compelled to cover their hair.[64]

Considering the above, it seems Iran's confrontation with women after the revolution contrasts with the characteristics of classic American cinema, which Mulvey criticized. However, if we consider the male gaze as a precursor to a form of male control over the portrayal of women, it does not seem far from the dominant gaze of Iranian films of the 1980s. For example, if the male gaze was defined considering a heteronormative male audience, the commandments for looking in post-revolutionary Iranian cinema also "inscribe[d] the projected subject within the film text as male and assume[d] that a non-familial heterosexual male [was] always present in the audience."[65] The Islamic rules enforced in Iranian cinema in the 1980s resulted in outcomes similar to the male gaze: male control over cinematic narrative and women's predominantly passive presence in most films. These rules initially led to the structured absence of women in early 1980s Iranian cinema, and by the mid-1980s, when *Maybe Some Other Time* was made, women were present only in the background.[66] As Naficy describes, women returned to Iranian cinema in the mid-1980s, but "either as ghostly presences in the background or as domestic and domesticated subjects in homes (often as

[60] Ibid., 231.

[61] Negar Mottahedeh, *Displaced Allegories: Post-Revolutionary Iranian Cinema* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2008), 9.

[62] Hamid Naficy, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema, Volume 4: The Globalizing Era, 1984–2010* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2012), 106.

[63] Ibid.

[64] Ibid., 107.

[65] Mottahedeh, *Displaced Allegories*, 9–10.

[66] Naficy, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema, Volume 4,* 111–114.

https://doi.org/10.1017/irn.2024.24 Published online by Cambridge University Press

housekeepers, daughters, and mothers)."[67] Lahiji also depicts a similar portrayal of women in those years: "they were neutral creatures engaged only in household chores, sitting by the samovar and feeding fathers, husbands and young sons – all of whom ordered them about."[68] Additionally, due to the assumption that unrelated male spectators were always present both behind the scenes and during screenings, female directors were compelled to accept a male perspective, including a male gaze, when depicting women.[69]

While noting the points Mulvey later added to her theory of the male gaze, her original theory appears sufficient, and perhaps even more appropriate, for evaluating the distinctions between *The Crow* and *Maybe Some Other Time* from the majority of other films from those years, given the general conditions of Iranian cinema fin mid-1970s and mid-1980s. In both periods, it seems the mainstream portrayal of women was done with the aim of pleasing a particular category of male viewer. This approach exhibited many of the same characteristics that Mulvey critiqued in her article "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" on classic American cinema.

Perhaps the connection between the portrayal of women in Iranian cinema after the 1979 revolution and the portrayal of women in American cinema during the early feminist theory era can be summarized by a description proposed by Laura Mulvey herself. According to Mulvey, after the 1979 revolution, Iranian cinema abruptly distanced itself from American films and cultural works while simultaneously adhering to principles of Islamic modesty. In such circumstances, "the image of woman emerges in a reversal of the Hollywood excess."[70] However, Mulvey had previously pointed out a key similarity between the two systems in terms of how femininity is perceived: "femininity is, in both cases, understood as a signifier of the sexual."[71] Subsequently, the cinematic languages that materialize in such conditions primarily "indicate the shifting and unstable nature of the signifier and then confirm the centrality of female sexuality in a society that attempts to repress it as well as in one where it is commodified as spectacle."[72] As a result, in terms of the position of women, the similarity and difference between Hollywood during the early feminist theory era and Iranian cinema after the 1979 revolution can be summarized as follows: "Her significance as a signifier of sexuality persists, but raises very different aesthetic questions about how these 'signs' were to be managed and their meanings to be translated into the language of cinema."[73]

Feminist perspective in Bahram Beyzaie's films

Bahram Beyzaie's entire oeuvre has a traceable female-centric perspective. This is true to such a degree that, amongst all Iranian New Wave filmmakers of the 1970s, Beyzaie concentrated the most on the problematics of female concerns and subjectivity. This is evident not only in his works addressing contemporary society, but also in those portraying ancient history.[74] In Beyzaie's cinema, women's prominence is heightened; he depicts them as stronger than men. Male representation, conversely, diminishes in significance, becoming weaker. In fact, Beyzaie's work reaches a point where his female characters consistently initiate a perilous game with men, culminating in the latter's defeat and humiliation.[75] While women in Beyzaie's films may dwell in the shadows, appearing hesitant, fearful, despondent, and even face defeat, these circumstances are all depicted as stemming from external factors and

[67] Ibid., 114–115.
[68] Lahiji, "Chaste Dolls and Unchaste Dolls," 222.
[69] Ibid., 216.
[70] Mulvey, "1970s Feminist Film Theory," 23.
[71] Ibid., 22.
[72] Ibid.
[73] Ibid., 23.
[74] Naficy, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema, Volume 2*, 367.
[75] Mirbakhtyar, *Iranian Cinema and the Islamic Revolution*, 80.

https://doi.org/10.1017/irn.2024.24 Published online by Cambridge University Press

societal behavior rather than the intrinsic qualities of women. Thus, it is the external world that should be ashamed, not women.[76] As such, gender identity in Beyzaie's films does not conform to the norms of Iranian cinema, as gender and power relations deviate from the Iranian cultural system in terms of masculinity and femininity, gender dominance, subordination, and resistance.[77]

With these characteristics, Beyzaie not only stood out as a distinctive figure in pre-revolution Iranian cinema, but he also defied some of the constraints dictated by the dominant official gaze of post-revolution Iranian cinema. For instance, his film *Bashu, The Little Stranger* (*Bāshu, Gharibe-ye Koochak)* was one of the first works to disregard the prohibition on a direct relay of the female gaze dictated by new cinematic regulations.[78]

However, there is one significant aspect differentiating *The Crow* and *Maybe Some Other Time* from Bahram Beyzaie's other works, making these two films more suitable for analysis of the pattern of the male gaze. This difference can be seen in both film's narrative style, with their first halves structured in a way that anticipates the viewer's engagement with a narrative consistent with Mulvey's critique. Men's active role and women's passive role, the judgment of female characters from a male perspective, and even male characters' subtle forms of castration anxiety are some of the features of *The Crow* and *Maybe Some Other Time* reminiscent of the works Mulvey critiqued. In both films, however, we witness a gradual shift in the filmmaker's stance and the empowerment of a feminine narrative that marginalizes all the features present in the films' first halves. In fact, we are confronted not only with a feminist perspective but also the gradual collapse of the male gaze.

Although all of Bahram Beyzaie's films are amenable to analysis using feminist paradigms, the playful narrative style of the two films under discussion here cannot be found in all his films. For example, with regards to the film *Bashu, The Little Stranger*, Rahimieh appropriately points out that, while the title places the male character at the center of the story, the film itself gives equal attention to the female character, Na'i.[79] Moreover, if Bashu succeeds in finding a place in his new society, it is primarily due to Na'i's agency.[80] In most of Beyzaie's other films, little time is needed to understand we are witnessing a feminine narrative and feminist perspective. However, their narrative style places *The Crow* and *Maybe Some Other Time* in a different position in Bahram Beyzaie's cinematic repertoire.

The collapse of the male gaze in *The Crow*

The narrative of *The Crow* centers on a newspaper advertisement about a girl who has gone missing. Immediately after the opening newsreel about the missing girl, we see two men, one of whom is Mr. Esālat (Hossein Parvaresh). The second man sarcastically tells Esālat, "Everyone is looking for something, except you and me." But then we see Esālat's attention drawn to the advertisement, as he notes that the girl's face appears familiar, as if he has seen her somewhere. Esālat's attention to the girl marks the beginning of the story.

The opening sequence of *The Crow* (which is subsequently repeated in a similar manner at the beginning of *Maybe Some Other Time* ten years later) evokes specific impressions in the audience. The missing female character only becomes important in the fictional world of *The Crow* after the male character gives her attention. Prior to that, she is simply another individual who has gone missing, much like the others referenced throughout the film.

[76] Lahiji, *Simā-ye Zan dar Āsār-e Bahram Beyzaie,* 19.

[77] Khatereh Sheibani, "Film as Alternative History: The Aesthetics of Bahram Beizai," in *Familiar and Foreign: Identity in Iranian Film and Literature*, ed. Manijeh Mannani and Veronica Thompson (Edmonton: Athabasca University Press, 2015), 231.

[78] Mottahedeh, *Displaced Allegories*, 21.

[79] Nasrin Rahimieh, "Marking Gender and Difference in the Myth of the Nation: A Post-revolutionary Iranian Film," in *The New Iranian Cinema: Politics, Representation and Identity*, ed. Richard Tapper (London: I.B.Tauris, 2002), 238.

[80] Ibid., 240.

https://doi.org/10.1017/irn.2024.24 Published online by Cambridge University Press

The use of such an opening strengthens the notion that the male character assumes the role of the subject, while the woman is relegated to a position of objectivity.

This pattern continues until the film's midpoint. We first encounter Āsīyeh (Parvaneh Masoumi), the female lead, when she is reading a newspaper while simultaneously listening to her husband, Mr. Esālat, delivering the news on television. In the opening minutes, she appears to be a passive woman. Beyzaie's deliberate choice to introduce her in a shot aligned with the news broadcast, and her husband's presence on television, further strengthens the feeling that her life is under Esālat's intellectual control. Even after Āsīyeh's introduction, we return to Esālat, who is explaining his frequent on-camera speaking errors to his colleague, attributing them to his internal struggle with the image of the missing girl. Through these signs, it seems Esālat's concern for the missing woman is more important than Āsīyeh's identity and concerns. Furthermore, we understand that Āsīyeh is supposed to accompany Esālat to a party, of which, according to Āsīyeh herself, she does not even know the location. What we and she know is only that Esālat's office colleagues will be at this party. This is another indication that, apparently, Āsīyeh's identity is solely tied to her position as Esālat's wife.

While we even witness Āsīyeh examining and defining herself through the male gaze, the first traces of the female gaze are also observable in these moments. For example, in the same scene in which the discussion of the party arises, the following conversation takes place between Āsīyeh and Mother (Anik Shefrāziān):

Āsīyeh: He [Esālat] thinks I'm damaging his social status.
Mother: He buys you things. Why don't you wear better clothes?
Āsīyeh: Better clothes don't fit me.

In this conversation, we are presented with a description of a man who is trying to shape a woman according to his preferred ideals. This example, along those previously mentioned, emphasizes the presence of male gaze in the first half of *The Crow*. This gaze prevents Āsīyeh from pursuing the case of the missing girl, as Esālat does in the second half of the film, due to the similarities between Āsīyeh and the missing girl, which have the potential to facilitate Āsīyeh discovering her lost sense of self.

This situation undergoes a gradual transformation. In the first half, we are confronted with the predominance of the active male gaze, but, throughout the course of the film, a shift towards the close bond between the two main female characters, Āsīyeh and Mother, gradually occurs. Changes in point of view particularly emphasize this transformation, the peak of which is observed in a lengthy sequence in which Āsīyeh and Mother embark on a psychological exploration in old Tehran. This sequence is narrated entirely from a subjective perspective, depicting women's efforts of looking for their forgotten past.

The exploration of such a theme is not without precedent in Beyzaie's films. In fact, the depiction of individuals in search of their own identity can be seen as Beyzaie's most consistent preoccupation.[81] However, what sets *The Crow* apart is the filmmaker's deliberate focus on Esālat's quest to find a missing girl at the start of the film. This false focus can even be misleading to a viewer aware of Beyzaie's recurring themes, evoking the perception that the search for identity this time will be from a man's perspective.

As the film progresses, we even observe a merging of Āsīyeh and Mother's points of view, which can also be read as a kind of generalization (to show the common characteristics of Iranian women from different generations). As an example, in one of the scenes depicting Āsīyeh and Mother's journey through old Tehran, a young girl is observed playing in the street. Given that Āsīyeh had not yet been born when such images were common in old Tehran, we assume we are witnessing Mother's mental view and memories. Nevertheless,

[81] Bijan Khorsand, "Kalāgh," in *Majmu'e-ye Maghālāt dar Naghd va Mo'arrefy-e Āsār-e Bahram Beyzaie*, 3rd ed., ed. Zaven Ghokasian (Tehran: Āgāh, 1999), 320.

https://doi.org/10.1017/irn.2024.24 Published online by Cambridge University Press

a few moments later, the camera slowly pulls back and reveals Āsīyeh and Mother simultaneously in the frame as they observe the scene. It seems as if this shared subjective point of view is becoming objective, addressing these women's similar concerns despite their significant age difference. A few minutes later, the same shot is repeated, but this time, following the camera movement, we see Āsīyeh alone in the frame. She alone is now considered the inheritor of the suffering of lost identity. The legacy has been transferred from one generation to the next.

Given the frequent reference to the disparity in social status between Āsīyeh, Esālat, and his mother, the gradual shift in perspective highlighting the similarities between the two female characters assumes more significance, showing how women in Iran, despite stark differences, endure shared concerns:

> The woman [Āsīyeh] is from a lower social class – we only understand this through a brief acquaintance or her family – she is an external element that penetrates the nest of the aristocracy. [...] The old woman loves her [Āsīyeh] very much and considers her similar to her [Mother's] youth. It is natural that she [Āsīyeh] does not have a good relationship with her husband. The giant of society threatens her very much, and it is from here that she becomes attached to the values and dreams of the old woman. She [Āsīyeh] takes note of the old woman's memories and takes her to see the old neighborhoods, to help her find her lost youth.[82]

Sheibani argues that Āsīyeh feels alienated from her surroundings. Her disgust toward the upper class draws attention, especially evident in the party scene in which the host searches guests' pockets for a lost jewel and Āsīyeh objects, abruptly leaving the party.[83] Although the class difference between Āsīyeh and her husband is clearly highlighted in the film, it seems that Āsīyeh's disconnection from her surroundings cannot be solely attributed to this gap, as Mother also struggles with a similar issue, feeling she has lost her past. Sheibani's description of the portrayal of Āsīyeh as a woman striving to redefine her identity in a society on the brink of massive change provides a more comprehensive justification for the connection between her and Mother.[84]

Additionally, Beyzaie provided a description of the similarity between the two characters:

> These two women have understood each other; or they are trying to understand. Āsīyeh unknowingly exhibits a sense of curiosity about her future within the mother, and the mother seeks some moments of her past in Āsīyeh.[85]

Even in the film's concluding scene, when the secret is revealed (that the image of the missing girl is, in fact, a representation of the mother herself and a symbol of the time she lost), the similarity between Āsīyeh and Mother is emphasized. According to Beyzaie, this scene can be explained as follows:

> Although in *The Crow*, the mother's weekly routine and the television colleagues' weekly gatherings indicate the passage of time, Āsīyeh only truly grasps this when, in the final shot, she looks upward and seems to realize that the time which has passed for the mother during this search has also been passing for herself.[86]

[82] Bahar Irani, "Kalāgh: Ziāfat-e Ashbāh," in *Majmu'e-ye Maghālāt dar Naghd va Mo'arrefy-e Āsār-e Bahram Beyzaie*, 3rd ed., ed. Zaven Ghokasian. (Tehran: Āgāh, 1999), 328.

[83] Khatereh Sheibani, "The Outcry of the Crow: Localizing Modernity in Iran," *Canadian Journal of Film Studies* 20/2 (2011): 102.

[84] Ibid., 100.

[85] Zaven Ghokasian, *Goft-o Gu bā Bahram Beyzaie*, 2nd ed. (Tehran: Āgāh, 1999), 138.

[86] Ibid., 166.

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By following this trajectory, women – initially portrayed as passive objects affirming the dominance of the male gaze – gradually advance the narrative, with the point of view progressively introducing them as the main actors. In fact, it is the concept of agency that gradually shifts throughout the film. As Hayward explains, agency "refers essentially to issues of control and operates both within and outside the film. Within the film, agency is often applied to a character in relation to desire."[87] As such, if a character has agency over their desire, they are able to act in accordance with and to fulfill that desire. The first half of *The Crow* portrays Esālat as the character in control, but the latter half highlights Āsīyeh's independent actions and pursuit of her own desires, despite Esālat's wishes.

When considering the comparison between the male and female gaze from Mulvey's standpoint, we also observe a similar shift in the second half of the film, as the perspective gradually shifts to Āsīyeh's gaze. Āsīyeh's interest in the story of the missing girl can be attributed to a specific motive at the surface of the narrative. In one scene, Āsīyeh unintentionally finds herself in a stranger's car and is confronted with the danger of being kidnapped. This event, if it happened, would have potentially resulted in Āsīyeh's permanent disappearance. From this point on, Āsīyeh gradually becomes more interested in finding the woman, in contrast to the path her husband takes.

However, the similarities extend further than just this event. After the scene of the unknown man's attempt to kidnap Āsīyeh, we observe a blurring of reality and fantasy in her perception, accompanied by a heightened awareness of the concept of time. This is why, after escaping the man, we see Āsīyeh in a watchmaker's shop. Her quest to find traces of the missing girl is also a quest to find the boundary between past and present. It seems the girl's discovery will also help Āsīyeh, whose life is divided in two and who lives in an unfamiliar environment, find her own identity.

This scene can also be interpreted as an example of the display of male dominance. As Talajooy points out, by directing the camera's gaze to Āsīyeh's moving body from the driver's point of view and showing the man's hands on the gearshift and steering wheel, this scene shows how toxic masculinity uses modern vehicles to pursue women as bait.[88] It can be said that this scene is also Āsīyeh's first direct and explicit encounter with a powerful and controlling male gaze and, from this point on, her point of view gradually receives more attention from the filmmaker. Sheibani has indicated that, in a scene where a stranger attempts to harass Āsīyeh, techniques such as swish pans are employed to depict her anxiety and confusion.[89]

Āsīyeh is, herself, a lost girl, and this similarity is perhaps so bothersome that she sometimes thinks of how to rid herself of this thought. In one scene, Āsīyeh requests that her maid burn all newspapers with published news of the girl's disappearance. Shortly thereafter, however, Āsīyeh accidentally encounters the same advert in another newspaper and regrets her rush to dispose of the rest. This inner conflict reflects the confrontation between two distinct types of gaze.

The first gaze resembles Āsīyeh's description of her husband: a gaze that wants her to wear clothes irrelevant to her real identity and make herself look different. This gaze is in favor of Āsīyeh accepting herself as is, and her desire to throw away the newspapers is an extension of this. Although the film does not explicitly refer to the similarity between Esālat's male gaze and the repressive gaze Āsīyeh endures within herself, the same description of Esālat is sufficient to understand that these are both manifestations of the male gaze and pursue the same goal; to the point where perhaps even inner doubt could be the remnants of the same male gaze consistently imposed on Āsīyeh. She can hardly free herself from the burden of these expectations.

[87] Hayward, *Cinema Studies*, 17.

[88] Saeed Talajooy, *Iranian Culture in Bahram Beyzaie's Cinema and Theatre: Paradigm of Being and Belonging (1959, 1979)* (London: Bloomsbury, 2023), 211.

[89] Sheibani, "The Outcry of the Crow," 104.

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The second gaze, which exists within Āsīyeh and becomes increasingly visible throughout the film, encourages her to continue investigating the case. In contrast to what we imagine at the beginning of the film, and alongside Esālat's insistence on pursuing the case, Āsīyeh and Mother represent this gaze in *The Crow*. This is why Āsīyeh's relationship with Mother is much better than her relationship with her husband, as well as why, in one particular scene, Mother expresses that Āsīyeh "represents my younger self."

As the film progresses, Beyzaie increasingly emphasizes the authenticity of the second gaze. This emphasis is ironic, as the male character's surname in Persian means "authenticity." Esālat has only a limited understanding of the issue of disappearance and the passage of time, even though his job relates to missing persons. He sees everything in terms of physically finding a missing person. But Āsīyeh and Mother understand that every missing person has a past and being lost is more than just a physical absence. They recognize that even living, healthy individuals can experience a sense of being lost. It is for this reason that, in the end, it is Āsīyeh who uncovers the secret of the missing girl, not Esālat. He, by virtue of his profession, is supposed to be searching for the lost, but shows himself incapable of finding such in his personal life.

The discussion of castration anxiety in the *The Crow* and *Maybe Some Other Time* is more complex than other aspects of Laura Mulvey's theory of the male gaze, as neither film really involves the sexual aspect Mulvey referenced, making it challenging to identify the fetishistic element. This difference lies in the fact that the *The Crow* does not lend itself to issues of sexuality to the extent that such discussions could arise. In this regard, the film operated in direct contradiction to the fetishistic patterns of mainstream Iranian cinema in the years leading up to the 1979 revolution. In *Maybe Some Other Time*, on the other hand, there could have been opportunities for such discussions. Nevertheless, due to the strict regulation of cinema after the establishment of the Islamic Republic, there was not much room to address this aspect. Both films, however, exhibit the pervasive theme of male attempts to dominate and control women. This characteristic, metaphorically speaking, can be interpreted as a manifestation of some form of castration anxiety.

In *The Crow*, as mentioned, Esālat initially demonstrates a keen interest in the missing girl's case, even exhibiting obsessive behavior in pursuit of identifying the perpetrator. However, as Āsīyeh's involvement in this enigma deepens, Esālat's commitment to resolving the case wanes, culminating in him impeding Āsīyeh's efforts to unravel the mystery. What compels Esālat to undergo this drastic shift throughout the film?

The film's plot implies that, as the investigation into the missing girl becomes more complex, Esālat gradually recognizes his own limitations and becomes increasingly worried about Āsīyeh's psychological involvement in the case. *The Crow* contains a multitude of events that can be metaphorically interpreted. As an example, it is important to remember that Āsīyeh's job entails teaching deaf-mute children to develop a unique form of communication, while Esālat's profession requires a more conventional and repetitive type, evident in the reports he generates throughout the film.

However, this distinction is also hinted at through other means. For example, in a scene featuring Āsīyeh's students' performance of a play, Esālat explicitly expresses his inability to comprehend this style of performance and leaves the ceremony before its completion. This scene serves as an allusion to the insurmountable divide between Āsīyeh and Esālat in terms of their capacity for interpersonal communication.

During the search for the missing girl, it becomes apparent that Esālat is focused solely on the superficial layer of her story. He is only in search of the woman's physical form, as his journalistic duty requires, while Āsīyeh and Mother are pursuing something deeper: an identity that has gradually faded away. The way that Āsīyeh, Mother, and the missing girl (i.e., the mother's youth) communicate is similar to the play Esālat cannot understand. His job is to write reports on individuals reported missing who have now been found, yet he demonstrates his own incompetence by failing to find the missing person living in his own house. Hence, as Āsīyeh and Mother continue their journey, Esālat's internal vulnerabilities become

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increasingly apparent, providing justification for his restraining behavior in the latter part of *The Crow*.

The collapse of the male gaze in *Maybe Some Other Time*

The opening scene of *Maybe Some Other Time* bears clear resemblance to the initial sequence of *The Crow*. This time, we encounter a filmmaker known as Mr. Modabber (Dariush Farhang), who is currently engaged in voiceover production for a documentary. His effort to complete the film is shown in parallel with the efforts of his wife, Kian (Susan Taslimi), to take her parents to the doctor. However, Modabber is the one who controls the narrative in this scene. It seems that, while his working on a documentary does not bother Kian, Kian's activities disrupt his profession. A clear example of this disruption occurs when Kian calls Modabber in the middle of work and he continues to speak the documentary's narration while responding to his wife.

Sound and visual effects also emphasize Modabber's agency in these moments. An example of this can be seen in the same section of Kian's phone call to Modabber. In this scene, we see Kian in a phone booth but do not hear her voice. However, when the image transitions to Modabber, there is no barrier (e.g., a phone booth) separating us from him, and we clearly hear his responses. The mise-en-scène of this scene seems to highlight the disparity in these two people's status in the film's narrative. So far, Modabber appears to have a superior position in the narrative of *Maybe Some Other Time*. The camera is positioned closer to him, and his concerns are so important that we hear them, while Kian's concerns are withheld.

The story adopts a different complexion as Modabber notices, among the recorded images, an image of Kian in a vehicle with another man. Apart from the obviously voyeuristic aspect of this narrative theme, Modabber's awareness of Kian's presence next to a strange man further solidifies the sense that Modabber is in the position of subject and Kian is an object for him to evaluate. In this moment, we specifically see the woman through the eyes and mind of the man; It is a perfect example of the male gaze. Modabber's repeated review of that section of recorded images emphasizes the dominance of the male gaze.

However, the opening of *Maybe Some Other Time* has one key difference from the initial moments of *The Crow*. If two women's search for lost identity is difficult to detect in the first half of the previous film, we are faced from the outset of *Maybe Some Other Time* with subtle, dual markings that, especially on second viewing, draw our attention to Kian's concerns and show that Beyzaie has not tried to completely mislead the viewer. An example is the same view of Kian's phone call. Beyzaie places great emphasis on the phone booth that encloses Kian and the people constantly asking her to come out. This not only serves to create a sense of distance between us and Kian, but also highlights her being trapped and besieged. Even parts of the narration Modabber reads for his documentary have dual meaning. For example, one part of this narration says: "Everyone in their lives has come across traffic scenes in which each driver thinks the other is to blame. But no one thinks of the helpless pedestrians who are certainly not responsible for the traffic." Another sentence is more specifically applicable to Kian than Modabber: "Woman or mother, among the masses of smoky cars, only gets smoke and dust." Such expressions specifically relate to others ignored in the realm of the dominant gaze.

Jahanbakhsh Nura'i describes Beyzaie's subtle attention to the main female character in the opening minutes of *Maybe Some Other Time* as follows:

> Kian is introduced through the old photos of the city. When she calls her husband Modabber for the first time from a public phone booth, while he is in the studio preparing the voiceover for his documentary, and apparently talks about her parents' illness, the old photos appear in the middle of their shots and practically replace Kian. After seeing a photo of his wife with a strange man, Modabber distractedly flips through the papers containing the voiceover and, in response to his colleague's question of what

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> he is looking for, answers "I'm looking for a cure." This phrase is heard over the image of the old photos. In this way, Beyzaie, from the very first step, hints at the destination Kian has in mind to recover her past.[90]

In the subsequent part of *Maybe Some Other Time*, we also observe a trend comparable to that of *The Crow*. As the film progresses, Kian's gaze and point of view become more important, playing a more active role in the narrative. In *Maybe Some Other Time,* we are faced, in particular, with the contrast between the male and female gaze.

The overall trajectory of the movement from the initial male gaze to the independent female gaze in *Maybe Some Other Time* is similar to that of *The Crow*. The major difference between the two films lies in Beyzaie's deception: in the first half of *Maybe Some Other Time*, the director deceives the viewer by emphasizing the dominance of the male gaze. At the beginning of *The Crow*, the male character appears to be the dominant narrative figure, but we do not define the female character based on Esālat's gaze. The situation in *Maybe Some Other Time* is different, however.

In the first half of *Maybe Some Other Time*, although the narrative is not limited to Modabber, he appears to be the focal point. Modabber is the one who takes action, while Kian consistently exhibits passive behavior. The crucial point, however, is that even going beyond the narrative from Modabber's point of view only amplifies skepticism towards Kian, or at least hardly reduces our doubts about her. For example, when, during a phone conversation, Modabber asks Kian about her whereabouts in recordings that suggest she was in a vehicle with an unfamiliar man, Kian is unable to provide a conclusive response. Following the call, the camera remains with Kian, assuring us that she really does not know where she was that day. At the end of the scene, a sudden beam of light shines on Kian's face (a light with a seemingly subjective origin), and we subsequently see her in a ruin. It is indeed true that Kian displays indications of a form of amnesia or cognitive impairment; nonetheless, she still seems to be concealing information from her husband.

The most striking example showcasing the influence of the broader narrative on intensifying our uncertainty arises when Modabber finally finds the owner of the vehicle in which Kian was seemingly present. Following a phone call between the two men, the camera stays in the room instead of following Modabber, and finally shows the face of a woman present in the room. We still do not know that the woman in the car on that particular day was Vida, Kian's twin sister. Therefore, it is not strange that we think the woman is Kian. When we realize a little later that Kian arrives home only moments before Modabber, with a worried look and furtive glances, the fact that the narrative is not confined to Modabber's point of view allows us to better empathize with him. In all of these instances, the narrative constantly transforms the woman into an object not only from Modabber's perspective, but also from the viewer's perspective, leading us to judge Kian in a manner similar to Modabber.

In summary, the narrative of *Maybe Some Other Time*, up until around minute ninety, confirms and reinforces the male gaze. However, in the second half of the film, the scenario undergoes a transformation, presenting compelling evidence of the existence of distinct characters. Moving forward, we establish a closer connection with Kian and witness her complaint of being under pressure from the male gaze. At a certain point, in the middle of a long nightmare sequence, Kian expresses this pressure to her doctor: "I am under the gaze. It is impossible to escape."

Despite Modabber appearing as the more active character in the remainder of the film, the narrative's deceptive approach brings heightened focus to Kian's gaze. This trend reaches its peak at the climax of the film. In one particular scene, Modabber, under the pretext of making a documentary about antiques, arranges a meeting with the antique dealer (who

[90] Jahanbakhsh Nura'i, "Rishe-hā," in *Majmu'e-ye Maghālāt dar Naghd va Mo'arrefy-e Āsār-e Bahram Beyzaie*, 3rd ed., ed. Zaven Ghokasian (Tehran: Āgāh, 1999), 502.

https://doi.org/10.1017/irn.2024.24 Published online by Cambridge University Press

owns the same car that caused all the trouble) and his wife at their house. Naturally, all of this strategic planning is part of Modabber's scheme to uncover the truth. Upon witnessing Vida's undeniable resemblance to Kian, he invites his wife to join him there. Through the confrontation between Kian and Vida, we are transported to the past, where we witness the two characters' childhood separation. It is revealed that their mother, facing difficult circumstances, was forced to keep only one of her children.

However, an important question arises at this point: from whose point of view is the past narrated? The narrator cannot be the mother, who passed away a long time ago. Kian, as repeatedly mentioned throughout the film, only remembers vague images of the incident, when the mother was forced to make a tragic choice between her children, leaving one behind while taking the other. Vida also cannot be the narrator due to her absence from the scene. Even if we assume that the mother informed Vida about the events of that day, it appears reasonable that Vida would not remember the details after such a long period.

In fact, the point of view in this scene is constantly shifting. In some instances, as Mottahedeh points out, we see through Kian's eyes; for example, when Vida is recalling her story and Kian looks towards the camera. The reverse shot shows that the space previously occupied by the camera and sound recording equipment for the documentary in the antiquarian's apartment has transformed into the imaginary space of the antique shop. This change of setting shows us precisely what Kian is "seeing" at that moment.[91]

Despite occasional changes that momentarily align our point of view with Kian's, this is not the scene's dominant pattern, and limiting our understanding to such instances might lead to misunderstanding how the point of view changes. Mottahedeh provides another example, which outlines Beyzaie's pattern more precisely, involving the moment the mother realizes the carriage is empty. In this moment, a shot of the mother running towards where she had placed the child cuts to a medium shot of the empty spot, and the reverse shot shows Kian in the present time "looking down, as if looking at that empty space, and turning in despair." Here, Beyzaie uses a conventional reverse shot to place Kian filmically in the time and space experienced by the mother: "Kian's recognition of her own absence in the place where her mother left her as a child happens before her mother's recognition, as if to drive home the filmic meditation of time and space."[92]

Therefore, as Mottahedeh demonstrates in the second example, this scene's shift in point of view does not equate to prioritizing the perspective of one character (such as Kian), but rather creating a shared point of view between Kian and the mother. It is as if their actions are aligned. However, it is essential to note that both examples refer only to moments within this scene. If we consider the scene as a whole, in addition to the instances mentioned above, we must also acknowledge Vida's role as the story's primary narrator. Hence, we are confronted with a narrative that integrates all three women's point of view.

At this point in the film, the narrative assumes a completely feminine perspective. Throughout *Maybe Some Other Time*, we encounter two types of searches: one conducted externally and revolving around the character of Modabber, and the second being Kian's internal quest for the origins of the unusual images in her mind and answers to the questions that have bothered her throughout her life. Nonetheless, at the film's climax, a third narrative emerges that places the mother, Vida, and Kian in the same position. This is the why Susan Taslimi, the actor, portrays all three characters in the film. It appears these three women are united through their experiences of loss. Sheibani correctly points out that Taslimi's makeup design makes it easy for the audience to identify her as a single person, aiding viewers' critical distance from the narrative layer in which she appears in three different roles.[93] Further, as Mottahedeh has noted, the use of the same actor is not the only indication of the similarity between the three characters. The use of double images, such as

[91] Mottahedeh, *Displaced Allegories*, 54.
[92] Ibid., 55.
[93] Sheibani, "Film as Alternative History," 221–222.

https://doi.org/10.1017/irn.2024.24 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the "doubling of the image of Mother in the antique cellar, and the doubling in the door frame sequence in which the sisters encounter one another," are among other signs.[94]

Even Sheibani's description of the film's expressionist images attest to the Beyzaie's deliberate emphasis on the resemblance between these three women. One such image is present in a flashback scene where we see Kian and her shadow on the wall, but the shadow/parallel shot is not consistent with Kian's position in the room. In fact, this shadow depicts Kian's mother in her routine activities.[95] As Sheibani points out, this is a key moment for the film's twins, as it reveals the past.[96] This moment is also significant because it emphasizes the connection between the women and their unification. It is as if, throughout the duration of the sisters' meeting and narrative of their past, we are witnessing the story of one woman, not three. Thus, a film initially presented as solely influenced by the male gaze undergoes a transformation, adopting a narrative with a distinctly female gaze narrated from a perspective beyond the point of view of any of the story's characters.

Another aspect in this sequence highlights the shift in the film's dominant gaze, exemplifying Laura Mulvey's notion of countering the prevailing forms of the first and second male gazes, i.e., the audience's perspective of the characters and the camera's viewpoint. Following the confrontation between Kian and Vida, the videographer, who was present at Vida's residence with Modabber, activates the camera and documents the confrontation between the siblings. This marks the precise moment of the third narrative's emergence from the core of the preceding two narratives, assuming the role of the film's primary storyline. This arrangement not only directs the audience's attention towards the shift in perspective, from the male to female point of view, but also highlights Beyzaie's emphasis on the change in camera perspective throughout the film. It is important to remember that the camera was originally intended to document the conversation between two men, but transformed into a device capturing the interaction between two women.

Beyzaie's clever strategy of cultivating trust in a narrative centered on the dominance of the male gaze, followed by its subversion, seems to align with Mulvey's objective. As Bloom explains, Mulvey believed that the way in which women are presented on screen to create pleasure in the male audience both reinforces male fantasies and enables the male gaze viewer to take control and ownership of women.[97] Beyzaie's strategic entrapment of both the male characters and viewers with an attachment to the male gaze creates an illusion of control over the story's world, but this illusion is then dismantled, thereby undermining the foundations of the male viewer's control and possession.

When discussing castration anxiety, the trajectory followed by Modabber in *Maybe Some Other Time* bears some resemblance to that of Esālat in *The Crow*. In *Maybe Some Other Time*, as we continue to advance, the male character's fear becomes increasingly pronounced. As previously noted, even scenes in the first half of the film that shift away from Modabber and focus on Kian enhance our empathy for Modabber. Consequently, the more enigmatic Kian's persona becomes, the more we understand Modabber's internal anxieties. For example, when we observe Kian's childhood photo album in a disordered sequence of images early in the film, everything appears suspicious. The mysterious soundtrack, reminiscent of collaborations between Alfred Hitchcock and Bernard Herrmann, amplifies the intensity of this emotion. Beyzaie's emphasis on image inserts of Kian's childhood and adolescence (the significance of which remains unknown) further enhances this emotion. In fact, despite the fact that this scene shows Kian's privacy, it portrays her as a mysterious character who needs to be controlled. While it later becomes evident that Beyzaie's focus on this scene's eerie atmosphere is in line with the portrayal of Kian's internal loss and distress, our immediate reaction is fear, akin to Modabber's fear upon seeing a figure resembling his wife in a peculiar

[94] Mottahedeh, *Displaced Allegories*, 60.
[95] Sheibani, "Film as Alternative History," 219.
[96] Ibid.
[97] Bloom, *Reading the Male Gaze*, 17.

https://doi.org/10.1017/irn.2024.24 Published online by Cambridge University Press

car. Therefore, such scenes (with an emphasis on certain actions by Kian, such as concealing the undisclosed test results) can be interpreted as a manifestation of the anxieties experienced by the male viewer.

Generally speaking, in the initial portion of *Maybe Some Other Time*, it seems we are presented with a film depicting a man who has lost control over his marriage and seeks to restore his masculine authority. In the scene where Modabber attempts to persuade Kian to put on a coat similar to the one he saw the woman who looked like her wearing, Beyzaie employs an additional Hitchcockian concept – reminiscent of Mulvey's example from the film *Vertigo* – to accentuate the male exertion of control over the female character. Although Scotty was trying to make Judy into his ideal woman and Modabber has no such intention, they both try to exert control over the perception of the woman to overcome their mental confusion and fear, ultimately objectifying women to manifest their cognitive constructs. With such provisions, Beyzaie conveys the main male character's castration anxiety so that we, like Modabber, will also be surprised.

Conclusion

Behram Beyzaie employs similar techniques to subvert the male gaze in *The Crow* and *Maybe Some Other Time*. In the first half of both, the audience experiences films that appear to embody the same patriarchal gaze criticized by Laura Mulvey. In both films, women are clearly portrayed as objects of male satisfaction, using the dominant male gaze, and the attempt to control women sexually is a reflection of the fear of castration. But there is a gradual shift in circumstances as Beyzaie depicts, through this narrative play, the authenticity and depth of the female gaze, contrasting it with the fearful male gaze that strives to maintain control at any expense.

Beyzaie had the option to construct both films' narratives in a manner preventing us from participating in the task of discerning the conflicting extremes, and we gradually discover that we have been misled by the filmmaker. Through the utilization of such devices, Beyzaie enhances the films' dramatic weight and presents a thought-provoking experience for the viewer. Our involvement in the imagery depicted by Beyzaie in the initial portion of these two works can be interpreted as evidence of our inadvertent entrapment within the very patriarchal perspective being scrutinized. Therefore, both *The Crow* and *Maybe Some Other Time* are films that challenge both the male characters portrayed and a specific subset of the audience.

Ultimately, both films align closely with Mulvey's intent to challenge the prevalent male gaze, revealing that confronting this gaze is not solely about avoiding any elements that perpetuate it, but rather, that the male gaze can be profoundly and provocatively disrupted by manipulating conventional devices that typically strengthen it.

Competing interests. The author declares none.

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Cite this article: Ghoreishi SA (2024). The Collapse of the Male Gaze in the Cinema of Bahram Beyzaie: *The Crow* and *Maybe Some Other Time*. *Iranian Studies* 1–21. https://doi.org/10.1017/irn.2024.24