

# Car Flirting and Morality Cruising: Neurotic Gazes and Paranoid Glances in Contemporary Iranian Art

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## Abstract

Iran's public sphere has been segregated along gender lines since the Islamic Revolution in 1979 and is regularly policed by the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance. This article considers the ways in which the resulting homosocial spaces appear in the works of contemporary artists working in Tehran. Looking at video and photographic works by three Iranian artists, I argue that contemporary art is hyper aware of being under surveillance and addresses itself to multiple viewers. I bring queer viewing strategies as a method of viewing these artworks in order to point to the continuum between homosocial and homoerotic spaces that permeate contemporary Iranian art.

**Keywords:** Photography, gender, Iran, the gaze.

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## Neurotic Gazes

On her visit to Iran in January 2007, the German-based Iranian artist Anahita Razmi attempted to film a group of revolutionary guards on the streets of Tehran. Noticing her camera, the guards asked her to follow them to their headquarters where they erased her footage by pointing her camera at a white wall. Razmi has presented this incidence in her short video titled "White Wall Tehran" (Image.1), which shows nothing other than 27 seconds of a blank wall recorded by one of the guards inside their headquarters. The camera held by the guard in Razmi's video does not pan away from the white wall. It remains fixed on faint shadows that move across its surface. Yet the



Image 1. Anahita Razmi, White Wall Tehran, 2007. Image Courtesy of the artist and Carbon 12.

ambient noise accompanying the image allows for an invisible room to emerge around the lens. We hear muffled sounds of a radio bouncing off the white wall and can decipher the abstract sounds of some objects brushing against other objects. Is someone stirring a drink? Is the faint melody coming from the radio? Is someone typing? Can I distinguish the voices I hear from one another? None of this is clear. Yet there is a distinct sense of place, an invisible room, projected across the blank wall that pushes flat against the lens of the camera.

On Tehran's streets the guards' presence is meant to be known as they patrol the roads but they are not themselves the subjects of surveillance. Razmi's camera, which had attempted to turn the observers into the observed, was guilty of disturbing the balance of power tied to visibility, thus landing her at the headquarters. In Razmi's video, Tehran's revolutionary guards cannot be seen but appear, incidentally, around the blocked view of her lens. Even though there are no visible bodies left on this footage they remain engraved within the video through their muffled voices and the odd sounds that result from their movements around the room. More importantly for my discussion here, the guards are present in the video through the gaze of one of them holding the camera. By presenting the footage as an artwork, Razmi attends to these unintended residues left on her footage. Rather than discarding the erased footage, she presents the white wall, the ambient noise within the room, and the very gaze of the guard holding the camera for 27 seconds, as the subject of her work.

In my reading of "White Wall Tehran", the gaze of the guard announces the presence of a viewer within the structure of the video. While at the initial level this gaze belongs only to the guard who filmed the footage, at the level of reception this gaze can continually be dislocated as each new viewer takes a position in front of the artwork. The repeated semantic shift from erasure to art, anytime someone watches the video, undercuts the power of the guard over the work's meaning. The guard may have controlled the form and content of the image, but its meaning is reserved and deferred until it is produced anew at the level of the viewer. Hence, Razmi's video flips the intended meaning of the white wall against itself. As an artwork the white wall is not a blockage as the guard saw it, but a screen across which other viewing practices can become activated. "White Wall Tehran" therefore makes the gaze of the guard available in order to marginalize it. When viewed as an artwork, the guard's gaze is repeatedly displaced and replaced by multiple audiences, whose very act of watching the video disallows the footage from becoming an erasure. In this way, Razmi breaks down the power of the guard over her footage and shifts the viewer's attention to the very existence of that power.

In this paper I employ "White Wall Tehran" as my theoretical base for analyzing two other artworks made by artists in Tehran. These consist of a photographic series titled "Girls in Cars" by Shirin Aliabadi (Image 2), and a short video titled "Line 1" by Niyaz Azadikhah (Image 3). Approaching these two other artworks through Razmi's lens, I argue that each of these artists incorporates the gaze of Tehran's guards within the structure of their artworks. Furthermore, I point to this gaze in the composition of each work in order to dislocate it and allow other simultaneous viewers to appear around its peripheral vision. When studying these works I note that being seen (rather than depicting) seems to be the aesthetic logic according to which these images are composed. Following this visual cue, I place the question of who is looking, rather than what is seen, at the center of my discussion. I argue that if Tehran's guards are the haunting gaze hovering over these images, other viewers must also be accounted for within their composition. My reading therefore argues for the polysemic structure of these artworks which, I believe, incorporate and address multiple and simultaneous spectators.

In order to make my own viewing position more explicit, in this paper I append the theory drawn from Razmi's video with queer viewing practices elaborated upon in

scholarly works by Afsaneh Najmabadi, Roshanak Kheshti, Nima Naghibi and Gayatri Gopinath. The term “queer” here is not equivalent to LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender) identity politics which replicate imperial narratives by making diverse sexualities adhere to Euro-American models.<sup>1</sup> Casting Iranian sexuality in a Western mold has had a long and complex history in modern Iran. As several studies by Iranian feminist scholars have shown, Iranian modernity (tied to the Constitutional Revolution of 1907 and democratic reforms in the first decade of the 20th century) has expressed itself through a transformation of gender relations and sexual practices according to prolonged conflicts and negotiations with the neighboring Ottoman Empire, Russia, and Western Europe (Afary, 2009, p. 9). Altered institutional practices occurring at the turn of the twentieth century, which included the dismantling of harems, the unveiling of women, and the promotion of heterosocial public spaces, meant a radical shift affecting class and gender alignments. Same-sex relations were amongst those forms of sociability that came under scrutiny in modern Iran. According to Afsaneh Najmabadi, Iranians began to “explain to European visitors that at least some of the practices that the latter read as homosexuality, such as men holding hands, embracing, and kissing each other in public were not so” (Najmabadi, 2005, p. 38). Iranians thus began to demarcate, distinguish, and separate homosexuality (in European terms) from homosocial relations, which resulted in the construction of homosexuality as a distinct category of deviant behavior in need of rigorous policing. The disavowal of homosexuality persisting in Iran today, expressed in the form of compulsory heterosexuality, is thus inherited from imperial interests in the region despite the Islamic Revolution’s attempt at dismantling all Western cultural practices. Repression of homosexuality in contemporary Iran can hence be understood as a residual practice linked to the adoption of European models of sexuality at the turn of the 20th century, which were deemed necessary for Iran’s global recognition as a modern nation-state.

My adoption of a queer viewing practice when looking at Iranian art does not attempt to replicate these imperial narratives by once again framing contemporary Iranian sexuality as the deviant Other, this time paradoxically as the homophobe par excellence pitched against American homonationalism. As Jasbir Puar (2007) has effectively shown, “the frenzied fixation on the homophobia of Iran’s state regime”, feeds into the same anxieties that “fuel the war on terror and the political forces pushing for an Iranian invasion” and calls for military strikes justified by Islamophobic rhetorics (p. xi). Rather, I see the potential of queer viewing in its ability to unsettle these very power structures established due to economic and political interests within the region. The question to pose here is how such a queer viewing can be activated. In other words, how can queer viewing avoid restructuring Iranian sexuality according to Euro-American models and be brought to dismantle this very power structure that has left its hegemonic mark on contemporary practices?

In order to answer this question, I want to turn to Rey Chow’s proposed framework for studying what she calls “post-European” artistic and cultural productions. For Chow (2006), post-European countries live in the aftermath of an “encounter” with the West that is not merely a “meeting, contact or conversation but specifically an encounter with that which is deemed culturally superior” (p. 82). Therefore, for Chow (2006), post-European countries experience the West less as a spatial relationship chartable on a map, but “much more as a memory, a cluster of lingering ideological and emotional

effects” that leave their marks in these countries’ cultural productions (p. 89). I find Chow’s concept of “post-European” more suitable than that of “Postcolonial” for designating Iran’s contemporary relationship to the West. This is because, while Iran has never been colonized, it has been brought into the sphere of the world-system as the supplier of raw materials since the turn of the twentieth century and has pitched its own struggle against imperial hegemony, most recently in the form of the 1979 Islamic Revolution. Within the art and literature of post-European countries, according to Chow, we can find the “imprints of fraught and prevalent relation of comparison and judgment” in which Europe haunts it as the referent of supremacy (Chow, 2006, p. 89). When studying post-European artworks therefore the question to be asked is: how has the internalized West left its residual imprint? According to Chow (2006), a post-European culture “needs to be recognized as always operating biculturally or multiculturally even when it appears predominantly preoccupied with itself” (p. 85). The West therefore can be traced within these artworks as the always already present element with which suppressed histories and practices compete. Thus, when looking at post-European artworks we find cultural narratives that hold on to persisting European ideologies while inhibiting and excluding coexisting histories.

The implication of Chow’s theory for queer viewing of Iranian art is that it allows us to look at “lingering” emotional and ideological impacts of European hegemony within Iran and the ways in which these effects are grappled with in artistic production. As mentioned above, one such “lingering” ideology in contemporary Iran is compulsory heterosexuality which stems specifically from the suppression of alternative sexual practices that were deemed inferior to European sexuality and were thus rendered and policed as deviant. The superiority of the West is hence experienced in contemporary Iran as heteronormativity within which other suppressed forms of gender and sexual expressions exist. In the works discussed here, I point to these foreclosed sexualities which appear in the peripheries of seemingly heteronormative structures within each image. My queer viewing therefore looks to moments when strictly heterosexual representations bear imprints of historical and hegemonic exclusions. Such a viewing method is in direct contrast to those methods that search for visible “gay” lifestyles in Iran, a practice which confirms Euro-American identities as the “grid of intelligibility to which may be added more and more others” (Chow, 2006, p. 89).

I began this section with Razmi’s “White Wall Tehran” in order to supplement my queer viewing with the gaze of the guard incorporated within her video. The supplementary addition that I propose here does not simply add “more and more” queer others to discourses of the center. Rather, the addition of the gaze of a guard to my queer viewing is better understood as a “neurotic” supplement, to borrow Chow’s terminology once again (Chow, 2006, p. 89). For Chow, a “neurotic” supplement is an involuntary attachment. It is an unintentional reflex, or an automatic addition that cannot help but to be there. When describing post-European cultures, Chow sees Europe as the “neurotic” supplement that is always already present within the consciousness and memory of that culture manifesting itself within its cultural production. It is for this reason that post-European cultures are inherently multicultural because there is always an internalized Europe with which they have to contend. In psychoanalytic terms, neurosis is “caused by blocking abnormal sexual feelings including queer feelings towards the same sex” (Ahmad, 2006, p. 78). As a result, according to Sara Ahmad,

“the achievement of heterosexuality is often at the cost of neurosis” (Ahmad, 2006, p. 78). Neurosis as compulsive heterosexuality is precisely why the gaze of the guard is a necessary supplement for looking at Iranian art queerly. The gaze of the guard is the heteronormative fixation that blocks and suppresses aberrant practices. In other words, I add the gaze of the guard to my queer viewing because it is the neurotic, unavoidable, and prevalent gaze of heteronormativity that has to be confronted in the structure of the images I discuss here before other viewing practices can occur. The gaze of the guard is the lingering disciplinary and ideological gaze of compulsive heterosexuality, inherited from Euro-American sexual models in Iran that appear repeatedly in contemporary artistic productions. This gaze should be added to any queer viewing of Iranian art since it is the “lingering” and involuntary supplement enunciating these images and which signal historical absences and exclusions. The methodology adopted here therefore does not look for visible bodies that can fit queerness but to those structural residues that keep such bodies invisible.

The following section brings this theoretical perspective to the study of two other artworks set in Tehran’s public sphere. First, I consider the photographic series titled “Girls in Cars” by Shirin Aliabadi. This series presents snapshot photographs of groups



Image 2a. Shirin Aliabadi, *Girls in Cars 1*, 2005. Image courtesy of the artist and Third Line Gallery.



Image 2b. Shirin Aliabadi, *Girls in Cars 2*, 2005. Image courtesy of the artist and Third Line Gallery.



Image 2c. Shirin Aliabadi, *Girls in Cars 3*, 2005. Image courtesy of the artist and Third Line Gallery.



Image 2d. Shirin Aliabadi, *Girls in Cars 4*, 2005. Image courtesy of the artist and Third Line Gallery.

of women driving around the streets of Tehran. I begin my discussion with this series in order to set the stage for the politics of visibility in Iran's urban centers and to set up the terms of my argument around queer viewing. I follow this discussion with Niyaz Azadikhah's video titled "Line 1". Staged in Tehran's metro Line 1, this animated short focuses on the women's cabin in the underground metro. In her video, faceless women appear in their mandatory *hijab* (veils or scarves) inside the metro but their hand movements place the occupants in erotic relationships to one another.

### Paranoid Glances

In her photographic series titled "Girls in Cars" from 2005 (Image 2), Shirin Aliabadi presents the viewer with closely cropped images of several cars occupied by groups of women. The street lights reflected onto the shiny surfaces of the vehicles in each image and the walls of the highway visible in some of the photographs place these women on the road and the photographer in another car chasing and maneuvering close to their vehicles. The snapshot quality of these photographs expresses a hurried encounter between the artist and the women in these cars. Composed in a hasty manner, chopping and cropping at the rapid rate of the camera's point-and-click, these images document the photographer's pursuit and provide the viewer with a cursory glance into each vehicle through the side windows. The photographer seems to have caught up with each car to take a picture of these women as she was driving by.

If the snapshot quality of these photographs points to a particular manner of encounter between the women and the photographer, it is the women's glances and expressions that pull us, the viewers, into the structure of each image. As the women look back at us through the frame of each photograph with a mixture of curiosity, suspicion, or disinterest, our presence is confirmed alongside each vehicle. We, as viewers, are called into being each time our gaze is returned by one of these women and a play of glances is activated between us and the cars' occupants. These photographs thus herald the viewer within their composition carving a space for us in a car adjacent to those captured within their frames. As mentioned in the previous section, the artworks I study in this paper are all hyper aware of being seen and point to this condition by building their viewers consciously into their compositions. The question I am concerned with here is: who is watching? Basing my interpretation on the framework described earlier, I read the visible elements of this photographic series against its unseen peripheral vision.

In order to provide a context for Aliabadi's images, it is necessary to briefly outline the codes of visibility regulating Iran's urban centers where the artist took her photographs. Since the Islamic Revolution in 1979, Iran's public sphere has been strictly divided along the lines of gender and rigorously policed by the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance armed by the revolutionary guards. Controlling gender identities is among the ministry's primary tasks, enacted in public spaces by the Morality Guidance police who patrol the streets looking for behaviors that breach legal gender codes and for women who are not properly veiled (*bad-hejabi*) (Afary, 2009, pp. 265-270). The focus of the morality police is on restricting contact in public spaces between strangers of the opposite sex through the promotion of homosocial spaces that limit and regulate women's presence in and navigation of the city, marked as the domain of male, heterosexual sociability. Patrolling the streets in their own cars, the morality police (known in Farsi as *gasht-e ershad*, which is better translated as morality cruisers) drive

up and down popular spots, particularly those favored and frequented by young people, watching for signs of unorthodox behavior. Depending on the political mood of the day (which can fluctuate on a weekly basis) the guards may either turn a blind eye to the desiring youth roaming the streets, or rip into the streets arresting them in groups for their inappropriate clothes, trendy haircuts or flirtatious glances. No degree of harsh measures, however, seems to keep away the people, who frequent the street and cause dense traffic jams late into the night.

The mandatory veiling of women in Iran's public spaces, legally enforced in 1983, argued for a "return" to female chastity that had been sullied by the Pahlavi state's "westoxification" and its compulsory unveiling of women in 1936 (Afary, 2009, p. 369). The "invisible shield" of morality that had protected women's unveiled bodies prior to the Islamic Revolution was deemed insufficient and had to become reinforced through a visible protective veil. The contemporary practice of veiling in Iran thus imagines public spaces as the domain of male heterosexual activity and works to curb covetous impulses by shielding their assumed object of desire. Veiling after 1983 therefore did not have the same meaning as it did in pre-modern Iran. During the Islamic Revolution, middle class women (who had become unveiled) took on the veil in solidarity with working class women and in opposition to the Western cultural hegemony enforced under the Shah (Mohanty, 1998, pp. 333-358). Thus the veil took on an oppositional and political importance in Iran for a brief period of time. After the revolution, however, the veil was imposed by the newly instituted Islamic Republic and monitored on the streets by the morality police who suppressed women's demonstrations against compulsory veiling. Urban centers in contemporary Iran have since become sites of continuous contestation between female morality police officers who take on the veil in support of the regime and badly-veiled women who oppose its imposition and show their resistance by pushing the limits of the dress code (Naghibi, 2007, pp. 68-73).

The girls captured in Aliabadi's photographs fall into the category of badly-veiled women. Their loosely thrown shawls, framing their styled hair and make-up, make these women susceptible to being stopped by the morality police. In my reading the raised hand of one of the girls in the backseat of the black car indicates the possible presence of a morality police (Image 2c). Resting just above her forehead, her hand has the familiar motion of reaching for the slippery headscarf that has slid across the crown of her head and onto her ponytail. Her raised hand in this image signals Iranian women's chronic panic, their fear of getting caught unveiled while navigating public spaces. Here I am not suggesting that the morality police is necessarily present in these photographs chasing after the girls' cars (although this is always a possibility), but that the very likelihood of their appearance just around the corner functions as an internalized regulatory force that has women compulsively pulling their scarves down onto their faces as they move around the city. The pervasive gaze of the guards therefore creates an internalized, paranoid atmosphere that punctuates the lives of men and women in Iran's urban centers. As mentioned earlier however, the presence of the guard's gaze within the structure of Aliabadi's photographs signals the incorporation of other viewers within these images to which I want to turn here.

It is important to note that the state-imposed, mandatory veiling of women that turns Iran's public sphere into homosocial spaces organized around the roaming gaze of

male heterosexual desire is not static but is continuously manipulated and subverted by people on the street. Those donning the veil, for instance, have a great deal of control over how the field of vision is arranged around them.<sup>2</sup> Not only does the veil allow a level of anonymity and navigational advantage in public spaces (lending itself with ease to gender crossing), it can also be “fanned open and or closed at strategic moments to lure or to mask, to reveal or to conceal the face, the body or the clothing underneath” (Naficy, 1994, p. 137). The field of vision organized by the veil therefore is not “a panoptic vision in the manner Foucault describes because it is not unidirectional or in the possession of only one side” (Naficy, 1994, p. 138). Rather, it can be pictured as a space activated by a play of glances. “Historically there has been tension,” writes Shahla Haeri (2009), “between the legal discourse that restricts gender relations and regulates the gaze (*ahkam-i nigah*), and the erotic discourse that subverts the very same regulations by encouraging the opposite, the culturally meaningful play of glances (*nazar bazi*)” (p. 114). This sway over how much is disclosed and what remains concealed through the play of glances mobilizes eroticism on the streets of Tehran in ways that exceed the control of the morality police and its heterosexual order.

In this sense, the girls in Aliabadi’s photographs can be read as working around the disciplinary gaze of the morality police. The suspicious blank looks on the faces of some of the girls are turned into enticing glances and luring smiles in others who have caught the eyes of a different viewer. The hand motion pulling up the scarf mentioned earlier can suddenly be read as pushing off the scarf with the same gesture. From this perspective, it may be possible to read these images in relation to Tehran’s car-flirting culture,<sup>3</sup> which in some ways is in direct response to patrolling methods used by the police. In a city where open erotic sociability amongst unrelated people of the opposite gender is prohibited in public spaces, cars allow for a degree of privacy and



Image 3. Niyaz Azadikhah, “Line 1”, 2010.

partial invisibility under direct police surveillance. Cars on Tehran's busy streets enable smoother maneuvering and ensure that cruising spots are not easily locatable on a specific street or a marked location. Due to the fact that meeting spots such as bars and nightclubs have been outlawed since the Revolution, public rendezvous take on more creative forms. Meeting spots in public are thus deliberately elusive, temporary and transient, with cars acting as charged markers for erotic possibilities. Could it be therefore, that these women in Aliabadi's photographs are out cruising the city hoping to get a glance, a smile, or a phone number?

One possible viewer whose approach might have activated the playful glances in some of the women in these cars is of course that of the photographer herself. One might suggest that the photographer's pursuit and the flash of her camera is precisely what has occasioned the amusement of the smiling women. From this perspective, the erotic drive of the photographer herself is what has made these photographs possible. As a female photographer, her pursuit of a car occupied by other women remains covert and can go unregistered under the pervasive gaze of the morality police. She can follow these women around the streets and take their photographs because her act is not perceived as erotically motivated and therefore falls outside of the regulatory codes of the police. The guards' heterosexual preoccupation therefore does not manage to regulate homoerotic relations within homosocial settings such as those depicted in these photographs.

Before considering Aliabadi's photographs further, I want to bring into play another artwork by an artist working in Tehran in order to highlight the continuity between homoerotic and homosocial spaces within artistic representations in contemporary Iranian art. In her short video titled "Line 1" (Image 3), the artist Niyaz Azadikhah depicts a scene inside Tehran's metro. Her animation brings the viewer into the all-women's car of the Tehran metro Line 1. Similar to Tehran's buses and some taxis, the metro system has sections that are strictly reserved for women. It is not mandatory that women utilize these segregated sections, but it is the recommended mode of transportation for those choosing to take public transit. As seen in the still shot from Azadikhah's video, these spaces are also lucrative areas of business for peddlers who present their wares to the thousands that pass through Tehran's metro on a daily basis. In Azadikhah's video, the peddler is shown seated on the ground between rows of female passengers. In front of her is a large, open sack filled with women's undergarments, which she pulls out one by one through the course of the animation. The woman removes bras and underwear from her bag to show to the customer standing in front of her. As she holds up each colorful item in front of her shapeless black body, she runs her fingers across each article's lacy contours, signaling the shape of her own body resting underneath her veil.

The most striking aspect of this animation is that the peddler is not the only figure brushing her hands across her body. Rather, her moving fingers are echoed throughout the car by other passengers who also caress various parts of their bodies in repetitive motions. Seemingly warranted by the titillating performance of the peddler in front of them, the passengers' gestures watching the central activity become responses to each other and begin to transform from bored, restless ticks to synchronized movements in tandem with the bodies of their female companions. As the video loops, the only action

that takes place in this silent animation is the back-and-forth play of the passengers' hands caressing their legs and chests. In fact, apart from the sharp colors of the bras that the peddler holds up across her breasts, the only other element that grabs the viewer's attention are the large, wandering hands of the female occupants moving rhythmically to the vibrating pulse of Tehran's metro.

As with Aliabadi's photographs above, I want to suggest that Azadikhah's animation addresses itself to multiple and simultaneous viewers. When discussing Aliabadi's photographs, I argued that the position of the girls' cars within the urban center signals the presence of Tehran's morality police, whose point of view is neurotically present within the structure of each image. The gaze of the guard, I further argued, is simultaneously displaced as the girls are caught in flirtatious (if still paranoid) exchange of glances with each other and the female photographer looking back at them. Azadikhah's animation, similarly placed in a public female homosocial space, is fully aware of being watched. The composition of this video opens the metro up to the viewer presenting a mundane, everyday scene. The neon light of the metro, so aptly expressed in the flat colors of Azadikhah's animation, creates a sterile atmosphere in a transient public space that can open up at any moment to others at the next stop.

While (in)visibility is as crucial to the erotic charge of this video as it is to Aliabadi's photographs, vision is not the sole organizing principle of this artwork. If anything, this video owes its (homo)erotic charge to the visceral sense of touch signaled by the hands animating the image. Eroticism in this video is not voyeuristic. It does not rely on the viewer's ability to see. Instead, it is directly tied to the viewer's experiential sense of touch and memories of bodily contact. The video underplays the sense of sight by depicting the figures in shapeless forms and featureless faces. When we look around the metro cabin, our gaze is never returned by these faceless passengers whose odd bodies are almost indistinguishable from the lumpy bag of undergarments in the middle of the cabin. Azadikhah's animation does not lure the viewer in through vision but hints at covert, temporary, and ephemeral moments experienced in fleeting and transient urban spaces. The erotic geography of Azadikhah's metro is as elusive as the play of glances activated in Aliabadi's drift around the city.

In my reading, the above artworks are not depictions of sexuality in Iran, but images that can activate various plays of glances if their unifocal view is displaced. Despite the seemingly homosocial and heteronormative settings present in these images, I have alluded to queer possibilities active in our peripheral vision. As recent studies of sexuality in Iran have noted, the heterosexual fixation of the morality police, which has legitimized that desire as the only recognized form of sexuality in Iran's public sphere, has also masked homoeroticism within public discourse. While homosexuality was demarcated and deemed deviant within the heterosocial gender structure of pre-revolutionary Iran, the Islamic Republic has paradoxically provided "homosexuality a homosocial home for masquerade" (Najmabadi, 2005, p. 38). This statement is not meant to suggest that homosexuality is safely hidden within homosocial spaces in Iran, since homosociality is itself at the very roots of homophobia rendering homosexuality abnormal and punishable by law. Rather, homoeroticism has the potential of remaining illegible or camouflaged under the heteronormative

assumptions of the morality police. The paradoxical outcome of police regulation, according to Roshanak Kheshti (2009), is such that “heterosexuality gets policed because it is intelligible to the codified regulations imposed by the state, while gender trespass and homoeroticism remain unintelligible and below the censors’ radar” (p. 164). By evading visibility, homoeroticism ruptures the order of power and avoids the disciplinary bounds of being seen, named, and categorized.

Homoeroticism hence remains unnamed within Iranian visual cultural productions but appear covertly around the periphery of the lens. The gestures and movements of the figures in Azadikhah’s video and Aiabadi’s photographs signal the presence of queer viewers but go unregistered otherwise. In her own queer reading of Bollywood cinema, Gayatri Gopinath defines homoeroticism as the excess that remains unnamed within strictly heterosexual and homosocial cinematic scenes, but which can be discerned through queer viewing. For Gopinath (2005), queer viewing practices “make legible non-heteronormative arrangements within rigidly heterosexual structures” (p. 111). As mentioned earlier, it should be noted that this viewing practice does not intend to pull the shroud, as it were, on homoeroticism by making it “legible”. The search, as Gopinath notes, is not “for characters who are explicitly marked as sexual or gender deviants, but rather to those moments emerging at the fissures of rigidly heterosexual structures” (Gopinath, 2005, p. 103). Queer viewing practices therefore, do not seek to fix sexual categories but to unsettle the dominant structures of power that exert themselves through the control of sexuality. This point is reinforced in Kheshti’s (2009) study of transgender performances in Iranian cinema, where “queerness does not ‘come out’ as such but exists as the residue of narrative devices”, which in the films she analyzes, “enable and exhibit movement and survival for various kinds of protagonists” (p. 160). Gender trespass as a navigational strategy in her study underscores queer potentials of interfering with the dominant order of heterosexuality in Iran’s urban centers by subverting its distribution of visibility.

In Aliabadi’s photographs, the glances of the smiling women who return the look of the female photographer, is the erotic possibility that can go undetected on Tehran’s streets. The homosocial settings depicted in the transient spaces of each car, repeated in Azadikhah’s video where same-sex bodies are pressed in their tight confines, are themselves sites of erotic potentialities that remain unchecked (and are paradoxically promoted) by police regulations. In my reading, these artworks address and incorporate multiple viewers within their structures, where the unsuspecting gaze of the guard becomes queered.

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## ENDNOTES

1. See for instance Scott Long (2009) "Unbearable Witness: How Western Activists (Mis)recognize Sexuality in Iran", *Contemporary Politics*, 15:1, 119-136. Long discusses cases in which LGBT rights campaigns aggravated a number of sodomy cases in Iran.
  2. For a discussion of women's "agency" under the veil see Saba Mahmood (2005), *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and The Feminist Subject*, Princeton: Princeton University Press. Mahmood argues that "agency" in the Western Feminist discourse has been mainly defined in terms of "acts that challenge social norms". Against this definition, she argues for agency in acts such as "piety" that might uphold social conventions. In the case of Iran also see Azar Tabari (1980), "The Enigma of Veiled Iranian Women" *Feminist Review* 5, 1980, 19-32.
  3. I use "car flirting" as a short-hand term for the many ways in which cruising in cars is referred to in colloquial Farsi. I recognize the inadequacy of this term in relation to Tehran's rich linguistic culture of constantly shifting and transforming urban slang. I use "car flirting" rather than a term such as "fer khordan" (literally meaning curling like a screw to imply screwing around) in order to first, acknowledge my own diasporic distance from Tehran's evolving youth culture and to also avoid the stance of cultural ethnography. I see the task of this paper as a study of representations rather than cultural customs and behaviors.
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