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Original Research Article

Representation of Urban Ruins in Films of Iranian New Wave Cinema

Case Studies: The Brick and the Mirror (1964), Strait (1973), and The Cycle (1978)*

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Abstract

Problem statement: Urban ruins, as a result of modernization and urban transformation, are not only able to reveal modernity's inseparable contradictions but also can unfold the existing dialectic between the two acts of creation and destruction within which a developing country develops by maintaining a relationship with the past. However, as much as it strives to advance and astonish, it ignores ordinary city life and its people. Ruins appear as narrators who speak of a city's recent past and justify what happened during the tense periods of a country's political, social, and economic struggles. This article, by studying how these ruins are represented in films of Iranian New Wave cinema, sets out to explain the role and identity of this element in Iran's modernization before the Islamic revolution. Tehran's development during the Pahlavi era is the focus of this study and is discussed in relation to Paris's Haussmannization to thoroughly investigate the significance of urban decay and ruination in each one. Regarding the fact that Tehran appears as the main story scenery for many Iranian New Wave films, three notable features are studied: The Brick and the Mirror (1964) by Ebrahim Golestan, Strait (1973) by Amir Naderi, and The Cycle (1978) by Dariush Mehrjui.

Research objective: This article aims to not only foreground urban ruins' position in disclosing modernization's innate contradictions during the Pahlavi era but show how they are capable of unmasking society's meretricious development.

Research method: This study is descriptive-analytical and draws upon library resources including direct reviews of the three named films.

Conclusion: The article concludes that cinema, besides being a documental tool in recording urban ruins, can have a creative perspective on these places and their residents to challenge the modern city's phantasmagoria and its desperateness for retaining the superficial aspects of modernity.

Keywords: *Iranian New Wave Cinema, Ruin Cinema, Urban ruins, Urban Modernization, Tehran as Metropolis.*

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Introduction

The word “ruin” generally refers to a structure that has been abandoned and has sustained some degree of damage or negligence and is no longer being used for its intended or customary purposes (Whitehouse, 2018, 12). All ruins, from those that are caused by natural and geographical conditions to ones that are consequences of war as well as urban and social alteration, hold a variety of decay and decomposition in the form, nearing again the appearance of their basic components. With the obliteration of ruin’s primary purpose and function, the form will be liberated from architectural rules; therefore, ruin is a “Purifier of the form” (Ginsberg, 2004, 15). As Walter Benjamin has stated, the ruin in the realm of things is parallel to the allegory in the realm of thought, for both speak of a disruption in the relationship between form and meaning (Hell & Schönle, 2010, 7) and emphasize a transitory sense of the world. Ruin functions as a metaphor for modernity’s self-awareness, and encapsulates vacuity and loss as underlying constituents of the modern identity (ibid., 6). Ruins and deteriorated places can point toward a “critical and alternative understanding of modernity” that stands against the “naïve belief in progress and the moral improvement of mankind” (Huyssen, 2006, 14).

The aesthetics of the ruin has always been interesting to artists and writers since ages past, and even in recent years, regarding how it is still quite appreciated in philosophical and cultural studies, the way ruins are represented in Cinema artworks has become a more sensitive subject for cinema theorists and researchers as well. Furthermore, both Cinema and Ruin have common epistemological grounds: they activate ways of knowing the past and its relation to the present and can visualize time and history in modernity (Von Moltke, 2010, 396). In this respect, the phrase “Ruin Cinema” has been used in defining films that depict ruins. Not to mention that the subject of ruin in Ruin Cinema is not exclusive to a specific portrayal of ruination and decay, but rather embrative of various types of ruin.

One of the particular topics categorized in Ruin Cinema is urban ruination, which is a product of the modernization of cities. These films show the destruction and desertion produced for the sake of development, and this article tries to disclose this representation in Iranian New Wave Cinema with a descriptive-analytical method. In some of these films, especially those that can be referred to as New Wave ‘Street Cinema’ – ones in which the core of the drama is in what happens at the heart of the street and the city (Jahed & Karkhani, 2017, 10) – signs of urban ruination can be observed as much as the bold imagery of construction and advancement. This article will first examine Tehran’s modernization along with its similarities to Paris’s Haussmannization during the Pahlavi era to elicit the importance of urban decay and ruination due to the act of progress, and then, taking into consideration the fact that Tehran appears as the main backdrop for many of Iranian New Wave films, three particular films will be studied: *The Brick and the Mirror* (1964) by Ebrahim Golestan, *Strait* (1973) by Amir Naderi, and *The Cycle* (1978) by Dariush Mehrjui. This article aims to demonstrate that the urban ruin representation in these works not only brings out the innate and hidden contradictions of Pahlavi modernization but also reveals the other face of a society’s superficial advancement and challenges it by the characters and their symbiosis with such places.

Research Background

Studies pertinent to this article have mainly focused on the role and identity of the metropolis as well as city modernization in Iranian films; however, despite having overlaps in some aspects, none of them have examined urban ruin directly. By contrast, numerous studies have been conducted outside of Iran’s academia related to Ruins and ruin-gazing; such as “Ruin Cinema” by Johannes Von Moltke which is a chapter of “Ruins of Modernity” (2010) and one of this research’s underlying references. Another example is Nuno Barradas Jorge’s review

on the ruined aesthetics of In Vanda's Room published in "Slow Cinema" (2016), explaining the camera's humble and patient manner in discovering Fontainhas slums and its residents' ordinary life. Corey Nelson Shultz's article "Ruin in the films of Jia Zhangke" (2016) can be mentioned as well; These elements are 'not just the effects of China's fast-paced modernization, but are also symbols of the destruction of Maoist society.'

Theoretical Foundations

• The dialectic of destruction and construction in the process of urban modernization during the Pahlavi period and its representation in Iranian new-wave cinema

Although the emergence of modernity is often associated with the Enlightenment period and particularly with the late eighteenth century, the amalgam of ideas that we associate with modernity evolved over a long period and at least during the last two millennia (Parfitt, 2002, 13). This era was associated with grand scientific discoveries, industrialized production, technological improvements, and new human environments. Such regeneration transmits people through novel aspects of life which eradicates them from their previous habits and lifestyles and makes new social issues as well. These social processes that "bring this maelstrom into being, and keep it in a state of perpetual becoming, have come to be called 'modernization.'" (Berman, 1988, 16). Patently, due to the social nature of these changes, the city would be one of their best attestations, and one of the first examples of the occurrence of modernization in the city is the renovation of Paris by Baron Haussmann in the time of Napoleon the 3rd; a project which made Paris into the symbol of modernity. "Haussmann transformed the city from an organically grown town to a planned metropolis in the mid-nineteenth century. This new Paris took account of modern technology, such as railroads and gas lamps, and enabled the traffic to flow on grand avenues that were linked to the train stations" (Mennel, 2008, 7).

Moreover, with the destruction of the old medieval slums the "self-enclosed and hermetically sealed world of traditional urban poverty" broke down (Berman, 1988, 153). Therefore, the city boulevards functioned as great holes that blast through the most indigent and deteriorated neighborhoods and enabled the poor to discover what the rest of their city and the rest of life is like (ibid., 153). What's more, the design used in these boulevards not just suited pathways for city strollers (flâneurs), but also, by removing the 'barricade-buildings' functional for the protestors, the state vehicles were enabled to swiftly pass toward the protesting mass (Leslie, 2006, 9). Haussmann's replanning of the city, therefore, intended to reduce as well as transport the poor and the labor class from the center to the east and remodel the west with new bourgeoisie ideals; including political means in favor of oppression and control over the people and avoidance of class conflicts. Haussmann assumed this radical break with the past as a tabula rasa that can inscribe the new on itself needless of referring to the past, and even obliterate any obstacles if one appears before it (Harvey, 2003, 1). This process, as David Harvey calls it, is a "Creative Destruction" (ibid., 1). After the Haussmannization of Paris, the old arcades that were an exhibit for goods and marketing trades got devoured by the modern boulevards, went out of sight, and lost direct access to the streets. Thus, these luxurious boulevards became the new exhibit for the capital. Benjamin believed that the arcades turned into an embodiment of being outmoded or old-fashioned in comparison to the new, and "not only do they physically manifest the past in the present, but contain a configuration of past-present relations" (Fraser, 2012, 61). Based on this relation between the present and the transfiguring past, Benjamin suggests the idea of phantasmagoria influenced by Marx. For Benjamin, the very existence of the city is generated through its spectrality; "The city is never one with itself; it is always in a state of non-contemporaneity with its present, which is always haunted by ghosts"

(Andreotti & Lahiji, 2016, XIII). One could argue that Haussmannization – the first example of governmental urban modernization – operates various dualities of old/new, past/present, and destruction/construction within itself inevitably.

In Iran and during the First Pahlavi, a modernization to reduce signs of Qajar domains and stabilize the central government was set out with an oppressing attitude. During this period and between the 1920s to 1940s, the primary steps toward industrializing and modernizing the capital – based on Haussmann's Renovation of Paris – were taken, such as destructing the old neighborhoods, changing Tehran's organic urban fabric into a geometric shape, constructing streets and squares with proper width for vehicles, and using new building materials – such as concrete – which were products of Iran's recently developed factories. Expansion toward northern areas and dividing the city into a north-south dichotomy system was another characteristic of Tehran's urbanization during this time (Haghir & Kamelnia, 2021, 315), which will reorganize Tehran as a main axis in the following years. This also aggravated the class division and resulted in marginal settlement and slum dwellings in central and old parts of the city (ibid., 318). Later approaches by the second Pahlavi were focused on the improvement of the city's infrastructure and people's residency; such as plumbing clean and drinking water, building electric power stations, and widening main streets as well as asphaltting. However, since the early 1940s and due to economic circumstances, emigration from villages to the city became accelerated, and therefore, caused various problems in Tehran and other grand cities' dwellings. The proliferation of sheds and slums, population density – especially in poor unhealthy neighborhoods – and the emergence of delinquency, were only a few of these crucial issues. With the announcement of housing as an occurring issue in the 1960s, house construction prospered, despite being mostly done in favor of the middle class. Furthermore, the unprecedented increase in oil prices in the early 1970s did also

enhance industrialization and customer services and rose to another factor impacting city migration (Sarraf & Reazazadeh, 2017). This would go on intensify the existing gap between different classes of people: while new and modern commercial centers, as well as rich suburbs, proceed toward the northern areas of Tehran, destitute ones are pushed away to southern and deserted parts (Pacione, 2013, 157). This north-south contrast is one of the recurring themes of Tehran's social geography, which not only is representative of “the distinction in wealth and access to power between one class and another”, but speaks of a “wider division in Iranians society between a westernized, technologically-oriented elite and the tradition-oriented mass of population” (ibid., 157). The construction of planned towns such as Ekbatan and Apadana and high-rise buildings like ASP are other projects that can be mentioned regarding the prosperity of investment in housing and urbanization during the reign of the second Pahlavi as well. On the other hand, the generally accurate fact about such developments is the maintenance and reproduction of the previous unjust system in disguise of modern and luxurious urbanization (Emadian, 2019, 74). Therefore, it is arguable that behind these numerous sky-scrappers being built every day on any spot of the city and indicating themselves as symbols of development, the phantom of the ruin wanders around (ibid., 72). In such a state, urban ruins become narrators of the “subconscious, uncorrected and unofficial” aspects of the city (Okhowatt, 2017, 10-14) and speak of a development that appears contradicting in a society; a development that at the same time of desiring for astonishment and advancement, is neglectful toward urban ordinary life and its people. These ruins are allegories of modernity's self-devouring procedure in reinvention and constant self-destruction (Enjuto-Rangel, 2007, 140-157), and also reveal innate contradictions of modernization (Huyssen, 2006, 11).

Iran's Cinema has also been sensitive about the medium's realistic and documentation potentials and

has shown curiosity about the new manifestation of city life since its emergence, without having specific social and political motives necessarily (Habibi, Farahmandian, Pourmohammadreza & Shokouhi Bidhendi, 2015, 21). Gradually, Tehran came to be a place of capital accumulation from oil income, and by implementing construction plans and enhancing the city's infrastructure and industrial investment, turned into a modern megalopolis recruiting professional and unprofessional migrant labor and faced fundamental changes (Haghir & Kamelnia, 2021, 445). Therefore, Tehran became an exciting and adventurous 'grand city' backdrop for many films that aimed to entertain the mass audience. Even though filmmaking at that time – during the 1940s, under political convulsions and dire economic situations in Iran – had its way of depicting reality by having both documental and narrative approaches (Habibi et al., 2015, 27), the demonstration of modern places was mainly for commercial or decorative purposes and most directors used them to show aspects of a consumerist lifestyle (ibid., 32). Among such films, *Junob-e Shahr* (South of the City) by Farrokh Ghaffari can be mentioned which is considered the first film in Iranian Cinema that went out of the studio and filmed real places, and further, used ruined areas and construction sites of Tehran's railway station as a location for the final chase scene. With the improvement of political openness in the 1950s, possible opportunities occurred for artists and intellectuals to have an opposite approach through the mainstream cinema, or "Filmfarsi" and to represent their concerns and sensitivity to Iran's perplexed society and its contradicting modernization realistically. Influenced by Italian neorealism and French New Wave cinema, most of these films brought the camera out of the studios to the heart of the streets. Tehran's transition toward modernism, its emergence as a metropolis, and its state of affairs in which many are affected or caught were the subject of many films in this period (before the Islamic revolution), known as the "Iranian New Wave Cinema". The representation of the ruin and

desertion as manifestations of underdeveloped modernism in these artworks shows how such a society, while endeavoring for the future and the modern city, is haunted by specters of the past and the neglected conditions, and how this illusory 'phantasmagoric' process pushes the unpleasant away, so it can figure out a way for preserving its cycle of construction. By reviewing three notable films from the new wave cinema of Iran – *The Brick and the Mirror* (1964), *Strait* (1973), and *The Cycle* (1978) – it will be demonstrated how ruin can defy oblivion and represent the suppressed aspects of modernization.

Representation of Urban Ruins and Modern Decay in Iranian New Wave Cinema

• The Brick and the Mirror (1964)

Along with the films *Junob-e Shahr* and *The Night of the Hunchback* (both directed by Farrokh Ghaffari), *The Brick and the Mirror* is considered another pioneer film of Iran's New Wave Cinema. Ebrahim Golestan, having a background in making documentaries about Iran's industrialization and modernization, went on with a narrative subject for a feature film for the first time. What the young sees in the mirror, the old sees that in raw brick, which indicates the contrast between the insight of an experienced person and that of an inexperienced one. The title puts the clarity trait of mirror against the smear opacity of brick – bringing a parallel with the represented dualities of Tehran's modern and traditional spaces to mind that can be examined from other aspects. Due to its realistic context and presence of the camera in urban spaces, *The Brick and The Mirror* is considered to be influenced by the Italian neo-realist cinema as well as the French new wave; however, the various metaphorical aspects and its Kafkaesque ambiance indicate an expressionist manner as well. The film begins with shots from modern Tehran's nightlife. The movie's protagonist, Hashem – a taxi driver – listens to the radio while wandering through the city. A broadcaster's voice (Golestan himself) is heard over the shots of the

neonic and artificially-illuminated Tehran at night, reciting “Fear had filled the forest” and “In the dark, there was no one to know who’s hunted, who’s the hunter”. This composition manifests the fear and underlying anxiety from being present in the city and describes an atmosphere that seems unknown and disordered for the wanderer. As a taxi driver, Hashem can be recognized as a new emergence of ‘flaneur’; a stroller that wanders across the city yet remains passive and uncaring towards it. Therefore, the phrase “who’s the hunted, [and] who’s the hunter” expresses two facets of the same situation: Despite having Tehran at his disposal with all its wonders and attractions, it is Hashem who is defeated by the phantasmagoria of modern Tehran (Fig. 1). Later, a woman gets into the taxi and declares Abbas-Abad as her destination. It is worth mentioning that since the early 1960s, the hills of Abbas-Abad came to the government’s attention as a unique location in Tehran’s urban fabric, and thus faced various actions regarding organizing, renovating, and marketing. In the 1970s, preparations were done for the construction of Pahlavi Shahestan in these areas which did not occur due to the Islamic revolution, so the depicted areas – mostly barren and ruined spaces – not only contrast with previous images of modern Tehran but foretell about the primary steps of the vast constructions in the future as well (Fig. 2). After finding an infant child after getting off the woman, Hashem steps out of the cab and goes looking for her. He runs around and sees a staircase down to an unknown place but gets scared and runs back. He encounters an unfinished deserted building and an old lady. He asks about the woman, and the old lady replies every time “This is a ruin, nobody comes here,” which makes Hashem more confused and frustrated. It becomes clear that the old lady has taken shelter in this ruin along with a paralyzed man and a pregnant girl left by her husband. Hashem continues the search. The old lady’s voice over the ruinous building with descriptions of there and the girl’s futile expectance implies a lost hope and a pre-occurring decay, as well as a reduction of the



Fig. 1. Hashem’s point of view while driving: modern Tehran at night. Source: The Brick and the Mirror film – 5’:58”



Fig. 2. Hashem wandering through Abbas-Abad ruins. Source: The Brick and the Mirror film – 2’:33”

residential aspects of these properties, lacking life, and stagnation in development and construction: “Here used to be cropland. It was all sold all of a sudden; while the corps was beginning to sprout, they brought beams, dug foundations, built walls, built walls, everywhere they built walls ... [the founder] did also stop all of a sudden ... so many years ... no pool, no room, no kitchen ... no alfalfa, no grain, no wheat” What the old lady states not only hints at Pahlavi’s rapid urbanization during the 1960s but also connotes the existing dialectic between construction and destruction in favor of development. However, as this protentional for growth is taken away from the previous lifestyle, in the end, no success in progress has been reached either. Such representation of the ruins evokes Benjamin’s statement about the arcades and their ‘posthumous’ manner as remnants of a dream world whose ruins are recognizable even before their collapse (Elliot, 2020, 147). Hashem’s desperate search through the building depicted by slanted and high-contrast shots of the tight interior space of the

ruin, along with the old lady's words, shows him as if he has got stuck in an architectural labyrinth and is enclosed by the walls (Sotoudeh, Sayyad & Sotoudeh, 2022). This depiction of posthumousness and stillborn aspirations is paralleled both on the content and formal level with the two upcoming scenes of the orphanage and then the courthouse. At the orphanage, Hashem meets a head nurse who claims to be the protector of the children, but in a shocking grotesque shot, collections of stillborn fetuses in jars (and a picture of Shah with his wife) is being shown behind her. The presence of an infertile woman who begs the nurse to let her adopt a child also emphasizes death and destructivity, two deeply rooted subjects of the film, expandable to Pahlavi's government and its infertile development (ibid., 2022).

The characters of Brick and Mirror show a certain kind of passivity and irresponsibility, which is a result of the metropolitan lifestyle. In two scenes of the café and the police station, people's reactions toward Hashem's anxiety are superficial, seemingly sympathetic, and contradictory; indicative of their powerless attitude in making a change in the city, and the inevitability of circumstances, even with being part of the system. They all are "defeated by major and greater yet unrevealed forces" (Moosavi, Purrezaian, Shahba & Rouhani, 2020, 83-99), and find themselves insignificant and inescapable before this enormous gigantic metropolis and its system. Despite finding the kid, Hashem tries to adapt himself to the convenient situation again, and at last, persuaded by the spokesman's words at the court and that he is 'only a passerby,' decides to turn back to his passive carefree character. Among all, only the film's heroine Taji does not accept this "darkness" and considers the appearance of the lost kid as a blessing for change and bloom in her relationship with Hashem, however, after encountering numerous babies at the orphanage, she feels defeated as well. The orphanage scene goes on with documental shots from orphans without any dialogue and ends with a long dolly-back of desperate Taji. The bright, calm,

and silent atmosphere of the orphanage contrasts with the chaotic and expressionist space of the ruin at the beginning of the film, yet it is conveyed that Taji is captured the same as Hashem within an invisible labyrinth. Golestan's emphasis on the city's old and decayed texture in the last scenes of the film not based on narrative events can be considered close to Deleuze's interpretation of time-image and "purely optical situations" (Moya Pellierto, 2007, 202): In the scene where Taji and Hashem are having an argument and passing through the old neighborhoods of Tehran, rather than a dramatic movement of the camera, the focus is on the dialogue and the atmosphere surrounding them. The decaying layers of buildings are a reminder that even the current developments will eventually fall apart and turn into ruins. The sudden funeral of a person, a coffin passing between them, and the silence that covers the scene, also foregrounds this urban death and nothingness. Moreover, this scene holds a "disclosing quality," as the regressing layers reveal what's deep within the modern city shown in the film's first scene (Sotoudeh et al., 2022).

In conclusion, regarding the given explanation about modern decay and modernization throughout the film, the title "The Brick and the Mirror" can also be interpreted in a new way: The traditional clay brick (khesht), a classic material in Iranian architecture, contrasts with mirror and its reflecting power; therefore, the innate unclear and complex quality of brick against the clarity and transparency manner of the mirror – along with the glass, both being modern materials used in architecture – emphasizes on dualities of new/old, young/aged, and complex/clear, and manifests itself through nature of these dichotomies. In one scene, Taji is afraid of the dark and turns on a flashlight and leans it onto the wall. Like the camera's manner in Slow Cinema films, the camera here also slowly comes forward to the wall and not only captures the baby but also focuses on the old clay material of the wall and the spotlight. This can be interpreted as a seek through the material, or a foreshadowing of Taji and Hashem's

later arguments in the ruins and even the dolly-back scene from Taji in the orphanage – which reversely, recedes from light to the darkness. Therefore, the ruin is represented during the film visually in two ways: the tight alleys of old towns of Tehran (in contrast to the modern space at the beginning of the film), and the ruinous situation of the unfinished building. While the urban space manifests a decay in the form of destruction that a passing coffin through its alleys makes the death palpable, the other manifestation is indicative of the definite destruction of modernization. The ruinousness of this scene and what is seen later in the scene of the still-born fetuses of the orphanage, confirms the self-devouring process of modernity and Iran's situation, which although takes long steps towards progress, leaves people, places, and hopes behind; the same thing Hashem did with the lost child (Figs. 3 & 4).

• Strait (Tangna) (1973)

"The walls of the strait are made by the accident, and the accident is nothing but man's will, responsible for his own prison's tight walls." With Strait's opening text, cutting to a long shot from a desert (an undeveloped area), and then panning of the camera to show a wide view of the city, it is conveyed that the city is a calamitous element creating a breeding ground for human beings to be tested. The city represented in Strait is not merely a backdrop for a drama, rather, the urban life, its relations, and marginalized people, function as a character itself (Davaei, 1981, 224). If *The Brick and the Mirror* induced a strong sense of modernist anxiety and claustrophobia of urban life (Naficy, 2011, 360), Strait turns this anxiety and fear caused by external factors, and the opening text is a prelude to the upcoming tension and uproar. After the pan, in a deductive manner, the camera goes from the quiet and modern neighborhoods of Tehran with wide streets and newly built buildings, to the lower worn-out neighborhoods. A shot from a flashing traffic light is repeated as well, as if, it's warning the viewer of a danger. As mentioned before, in the urban development of the 1960s, the poorer suburbs



Fig. 3. Head-nurse with still-born collection at her background.
Source: *The Brick and the Mirror* film – 1:28':01"



Fig. 4. The coffin passing through old alleys of Tehran.
Source: *The Brick and the Mirror* film – 1:39':48

of Tehran were attending towards the south and dry desert-like areas; therefore, Naderi evokes the audience about this north-south confrontation in Tehran's social geography from the very beginning of the film, by showing a deserted space that has not yet been immersed in development and construction. A few shots from modern Tehran follow the aforementioned shot, representing the distinction that exists in the distribution of wealth between a prosperous town and another far from technological prosperity. Naderi's camera peeks slightly among the old narrow alleys of Tehran and holds the glance by zooming in on an old billiard club's window. Such calm pace down – which contrasts the further agitated atmosphere of the film – is a survey through different layers of the city reaching its unnoticed neighborhoods deep within worn-out places that have become a delinquent and negligent environment. However, Ali (the film's protagonist)'s habitat does not speak of an intimate neighboring form, and the gambling characters of the film are submerged in the metropolis; they are pool players, rather than classic gamblers playing with bones

(Papoli Yazdi, 2020, 536), and are people born out of this metropolitan abandonment. After a conflict over the betting money and causing a murder, Ali runs away through rainy narrow alleys and tries to escape among the ruins and garbage dumps. Ali is constantly going back and forth through these places, and even his slipping emphasizes his character's lack of place in the city, fear, and inner sense of decadence. Furthermore, his later limping (due to the shot) and dragging of his leg on the ground, puts more emphasis on this loneliness and helplessness as a motif (Figs. 5 & 6).

It is worth mentioning that an important feature of Iran's new wave cinema in representing the emergence of Tehran as a metropolis is the display of wandering and fed-up characters in the heart of urban spaces; with the city's constant transformation, these spaces prevent the formation of urban memories, and will not last long enough to inscribe their presence on generational reminiscence (Habibi et al, 2014, 144). This is shown as well later in Strait, when Ali is in a taxi and shots from modern Tehran are being dissolved with his thoughts and family memories from the past, implying a "lost world" of him (Papoli Yazdi, 2020, 536). The vulnerable and rejected Ali is inevitable of confronting society's aggression as if all parts of the city – from its buildings, cars, and traffic to the police and bothers of the murdered man – are permeated from the core of the city and the evil hidden within, and Ali's abstained voice is being faded in the vast feverish atmosphere of the city (Tousi, 1990, 135). The ruins of the city and the corners of the narrow alleys become the only safe place for Ali and his girlfriend Parvaneh, to take temporary shelter. Escaping together, they're shot by the camera from behind a frame left along other remains of a building, which makes the deserted place seem like a ruined home; the concept of home has been intertwined with infertility of desires, and happiness, in the form of "family" and "shelter", is impossible for them, and the fact that Parvaneh is pregnant, adds another bitter and anxious meaning to their wandering. In contrast to this ruinousness



Fig. 5. A shot from modern Tehran from Strait's opening scene.
Source: Strait film – 1':04"



Fig. 6. Ali's escape through the garbage dumps of the neighborhood.
Source: Strait film – 9':33"

and exhaustion, the couple keeps on wandering through Tehran's various urban spaces and struggles to escape. On the one hand, the juxtaposition of this homelessness and displacement with shots of modern buildings such as Saman residential towers indicates the renewed city's indifference towards them, and on the other, going back to the lower towns, the neighbors' attitude is judgmental and reprimanding of Parvaneh and Ali. Therefore, despite pushing the couple aside constantly, society keeps on observing them; whether it is in a modern place, with a grand view of Tehran, or in narrow streets with tall old walls and people around, merely wanting to watch a criminal running across the roofs. The displacement and alienation of Ali's character not only expand in

the context of the city but also in his relationships with numerous types of people. The car exhibition scene shows his separation from the middle and upper class, as well as his inability to be resolved in this urban financial system and civilization. The other pole of this spectrum of rejection and isolation is demonstrated in the scene of the car cemetery on the outskirts of the city, having a primitive atmosphere far from civilization. In these scenes, Naderi shows aspects of the city of Tehran, which the optimistic views based on progress have ignored and closed their eyes on. The car graveyard is an example of the accumulation of ruined and urban wastes that are produced in the cycle of modernity and industry, but there is no place for them. Such a place, ironically contrasted with the luxurious car exhibition, represents the hidden side behind capitalist thinking –to survive must remove the traces of past events from all corners of modern life. Ali's character appears as another manifestation of the ruin he takes shelter in repeatedly; somewhere deserted that although being a part of the city and a result of it, is not considered a 'place' and has no identity. Strait is a deliberate attempt in following people in their familiar real life and a representation of the life of these street people who have been driven from their homes to the streets, marginalized, and left in a life of chaos and misery (Davaei, 1981, 228). In the last moments of the film, people have gathered around Ali and watch him as he is dying. The shot fades to a photo of Ali and his father with a cross marked on their faces and then fades to another photo with his mother, sister, and brother as if another person from them is going to be reduced as well. With a pan from a wide view of Tehran, the deductive path of the film is reversed, and this time, it sums up the story from part to the whole city. The multitude of buildings and streets as well as the sound of cars, in contrast to the deserted suburbs and then shots of the sleeping Tehran at the beginning of the film, emphasize the devouring and accident-causing power that the city has on its residents. A metropolis that flaunts the illusion of

progress in its various places, but same as ruins in the realm of architecture and civilization, leaves outcasts in the realm of urban people. Ali is just one of the thousands of vagabonds that strive to free themselves from the city's suffocation and tightness; one of the outcasts who will destroy their family as well, and embrace the failure same as the ruins of their neighborhoods (Figs. 7 & 8).

• The Cycle (1978)

Another pioneer of Iran's new wave cinema, Dariush Mehrjui made his 4th feature film in 1974 based on a short story named 'The Garbage Dump' written by Gholam-Hossein Saedi. The movie was banned due to its bold and blatant portrayal of Iran's medical community and marginalized people's life, and after a few years, finally had a short public release in 1978. 'The Cycle' is darkly pessimistic about and critical of the cost of unbridled modernization in Iran (Naficy, 2011, 355) and along with having a realistic documental attitude, embodies the dark side of the national transition from pre-modernity to modernity by showing its anti-hero Ali's metamorphosis through the corrupted blood-bank system (ibid., 355). Throughout the film, the ruin is primarily represented by the barren landscapes and suburbs of Tehran and their contrast with the modern environment. The opening shot of the film shows Ali and his father on their way to the central areas of Tehran, on an unpaved road, with the factory chimneys evident in the background. On their way, they pass industrial and labor sheds and arrive at the site where the ASP residential complex is being built. The sunset has given a bright special shine to the towers, and Ali watches a glass being lifted with a crane, reflecting the light and the body of the semi-finished buildings like a mirror. Ali's indifferent face expresses his general reaction toward the act of development. The mirror can be regarded as a metaphor for the fascinating but superficial power of modernization, its fragility as well as the illusion of its progress, and its manifestation through reproduction and repetition.

After meeting with Sameri, Ali and his father along



Fig. 7. Saman residential tower observing the young couple of the film.
Source: Tangna film– 1:18':53

with a few drug addicts go to a laboratory in which Sameri gets blood from poor people to sell later. At the quiet dawn, Tehran with its skeletal unfinished buildings seems like a ghost town. The theme of devastation in this atmosphere, “reveals the truth in concepts such as progress and development” (Emadian, 2019, 13), and has audio and visual contrast with the crowded ruin people have gathered in to give blood. In the modern era, the ruins do not indicate the glorious era of the past, rather, they exhibit the destruction that lies in the idea of progress (ibid., 44). The desolate ruin in which addicts gather is a collapsing building with rotten walls and tight corridors as well, and since the truck carrying people must pass through the city (the present Valiasr Square) to reach there, the ruin is not only metaphorically, but also objectively within the city and as part of it. This passage of Ali and others recalls the boulevards’ performance in Haussmann’s Urban Development, functioning as grand holes that by crossing through the most ruined and frugal neighborhoods, enabled the poor to attend to other parts of the city and encounter the lives of the affluent classes (Berman, 2021, 227). This representation of the themes of urban decay and modernism transforms the underlying destruction in a developing city into the fundamental paradox of the film (Figs. 9 & 10).

With a commodity-like control over the body



Fig. 8. The outcast Ali at the car cemetery.
Source: Tangna film– 1:21':54”

and the medical issues in such an unsanitary desolate, the ruinousness of the place is connected to the ruined bodies as well as the immorality and decadence of Sameri’s deed. This realistic depiction of the subjects before the camera puts Mehrjui’s representation beyond a mere narrative story about the existing problems. In contrast to the unhealthy environment of the ruin, the grand white interiors of the hospital where Ali and his father go to outstands; however, the hidden systematic problems of health and care beneath them are going to be revealed later. A Kafkaesque characteristic is also evident in the hospital scenes; a complicated bureaucratic treatment system that even the people work in, do not have a clear idea of its overall mechanism, and the system does not care about them either. In contrast to the bright rooms and corridors, other parts of the hospital are dark and full of debris and garbage, therefore, the hospital turns to an allegory of the city which has a dark face behind its disciplined system. It can be said that although ‘The Cycle’ is the most realistic work of Mehrjui until that year, he has implemented his symbolic approach in various aspects of the film. In the scene where Ali and his father are waiting behind the bars of the hospital, some mysterious patients are seen in the darkness of the night, in the forested yard of the hospital; patients who wander like ghosts, and seem to belong to a hospital building that itself has a phantasmagoric and



Fig. 9. Ali and the truck carrying drug addicts pass through the middle of the modern metropolis. Source: *The Cycle* film– 1:11':21"

remote effect on the viewer. With a piece of wood, Ali keeps hitting the bars of the hospital with a wave of dormant anger, as if he's attempting to get rid of these ghosts and make a noise within this illusion and silence. This action, along with his indifference when watching the mirror, can be interpreted as a reaction towards the overwhelming and confusing aspects of the city, and the later dominance he gains over the corrupted urban relationships. Furthermore, in another scene, after showing surplus chickens being buried alive – because the chicken farmer cannot afford them, Ali and another character Zahra take the body of a destitute patient to the basement of the hospital; a basement that has been turned into a garbage dump for dead people who don't even make it to the morgue. These bodies should be reduced like the extra chickens, so similar to the car cemetery in Strait, this is a place to drive the wastes and excesses of modern life away in a corner, and to forget the events that challenge the survival of the system. 'The Cycle' has a back-and-forth approach toward the deserted landscapes of the outskirts of Tehran. Ali, along with one of the hospital's drivers named Ismail, goes to the barren slums near Tehran to illegally sell foods brought from the hospital. On the way, like the shots at the beginning of the film, huge skeletal and half-finished buildings stand out, while the environment of the slum is depressingly impressive. From this scene, Ali's personality starts to slightly transform by using his playful spirit to bargain and sell the food, and then by deciding to take this hungry and poor crowd to Sameri for



Fig. 10. An abandoned building in the heart of the city that is used as a blood laboratory. Source: *The Cycle* film - 16':20"

giving blood. The beginning and end of the "cycle" meet here, and this vicious inhuman cycle repeats itself. Same as the blood pimps at the beginning of the film, Ali puts the addicts in the back of a truck and goes to the laboratory in the early morning. In a shot from above, the passage of the truck and the motorcycle going ahead in the modern streets of Tehran shows the presence of parts of the society that has remained unknown and hidden from view, yet are still associated with the current modernism and metropolitan commodity relations. Mehrjui has depicted this dark metamorphosis from youthful innocence to wily sophistication by staging much of the action at the night or during dawn and dusk (Naficy, 2011, 355). Another manifestation of this transformation can be seen in the symmetry between the two scenes of his presence in the car: When Ali rides in Ismail's car for the first time, Ismail's fast driving and passing among the cars makes him very anxious, however, by the end of the film, we see that Ali has not only overcome the speed and acceleration of the metropolis, but also expanded and managed his merchandise relationships inside the fast car; he can immediately take blood from two people, and take it to the hospital without wasting time. The naturalist text of *The Cycle* depicts the ruin in a silent dialectic with the modern city as a whole, and unlike the other two films, does not present a phantasmagoric effect of the city; even the buildings under construction are not interesting or surprising for these marginalized people (at the beginning of the film, Ali's father urinates on the huge stones of

the building). These characters are neither struggling to survive in the modern city, nor are they involved in moral anxiety, and the overwhelming bitterness of the film can be found in this indifference; an indifference deep within the womb of sterility and underdevelopment, from which follows a cruel and insatiable outburst, and is ready to take on the corrupt relations of the modern city as another realm of the ruin (Figs. 11 & 12).

Conclusion

The films of Iranian new wave cinema, whose subjects were found among the street and the palpable life of people, represent the nature of ruins in different ways to describe the problems of the city and the city-dwellers, as well as their coexistence with such places: by focusing on the phantasmagoric effects of Tehran in the 1960s in *The Brick* and *The Mirror*, becoming a shelter for abandoned people in 'Strait', and showing the dark and chaotic core of the city and modernism of the 1970s in 'The Cycle'. In these films, ruin reveals the hidden contradictions in Pahlavi's urban modernization, and therefore, disenchant the ideal image of a progressing society. These ruins, as representations of underdevelopment modernism, show how much such a society is haunted by ghosts from the past and ignored situations, and how this phantasmagoric process in modernization, while intensifying class divisions, discards the unpleasant aspects and issues to find a way to survive its construction cycle. Therefore, by having such an identity, the ruin refuses this oblivion and represents this oppressed and withdrawn aspect. The medium of cinema, with its narrative besides its documental features, is also a representative of this portrayal, and so, along with the ruins, will narrate about situations that, with all their desires and sufferings, are lost in the promise of an illusory future.

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Fig. 11. Ali and his father go towards the city center, indifferent to the modern and impressive constructions on the outskirts of Tehran.
Source: The Cycle film– 3':56"



Fig. 12. Barren slums and ruins on the outskirts of modern Tehran.
Source: The Cycle film – 1:02':11"

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