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Non-visibility and the politics of everyday presence: A spatial analysis of contemporary urban Iran

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Non-Visibility of Everyday Presence

This dissertation focuses on the recurrent times, spaces, performances, practices, and behaviours that shape a significant part of everyday lived experience, but remain largely understudied. It is concerned with those unpretentious and embodied modes of spatial inhabitation that are so enmeshed in the habitual routines of the everyday that they ordinarily escape notice and remain unmarked and unexceptional – hence, non-visible. In examining the quotidian social practices, the project seeks to unravel the tactics people use to tackle everyday problems and create possibilities for self-realization and the fulfilment of their needs and desires. This project is therefore concerned primarily with the “transitions and mediations between the repetitive and the creative” (Lefebvre, 2002, p. 239) in everyday life, with “the art of living” (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 199).

Everyday creativity in this sense is not only about finding ways to adapt and survive in everyday circumstances, but is also about resisting subjugation under the dominant structures of power that regulate everyday modes of behaviour and interaction. The art of everyday is about appropriation and a ceaseless “struggle against the forces that oppose appropriation” (Sheringham, 2006, p. 149). Resistance in this sense emerges not only from creative uses of everyday times and spaces, but also simply from excessive energies and affects that emanate from bodies and embodied lived experiences (Simonsen, 2005). This project is therefore concerned with apprehending the workings of the insignificant and ordinary practices of the everyday, and teasing out the creative and transformative forces contained in them.

A conflict exists in everyday practices between concerns over anonymity and unmarkedness on the one hand – to run daily errands without being noticed or bothered by strangers or the police – and aspirations for visibility and display on the other hand – to connect to others by making oneself seen, heard, and felt. If invisibility is celebrated as a tactic on the basis of which everyday forms of creativity and resistance escape the totalizing eyes of the power (Certeau, 1988), it is the visibility of non-conformist ways of being and doing that is commonly thought to be necessary for the creation of collective sentiments and the formation of social and political struggles. This project is therefore concerned with the conjunction of

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unobtrusiveness and conspicuousness, anonymity and discernibility, visibility and invisibility, in everyday life and urban cultures.

Such a paradox of visibility runs deep in the ideas about urban cultures. The city, on the one hand, is an agglomeration of people who are not known to each other but live next to one another and pass by each other on a daily basis. In this sense, city life is fundamentally about “the being together of strangers” (Young, 1990, pp. 227-237). Urban life in this sense entails a certain level of non-disclosure of strangers to one-another, of people remaining anonymous to each other and making associations only with the groups and people of their choice – where the conditions of being exposed to one another are controlled and mutually agreed upon. To live next to strangers also requires a certain level of downplaying the visible markers of difference, the highlighting of which would risk reinforcing and naturalizing all sorts of meanings and stigmatizations (such as race and ethnicity) based on the differences in bodies and behaviours (Alcoff, 2006, p. 192), and would then lead to different sorts of segregation and division in cities – of strangers being kept separate from each other.

But, on the other hand, the city is crucially a public realm where collective ideas and sentiments are made, voiced, discussed, and judged. It is a space for the gathering of bodies and minds, and a stage where actions are performed, ideas discussed, and identities revealed. The city is therefore a space of disclosure and visibility, a “space of appearance”, a stage “where I appear to others as others appear to me, where men exist not merely like other living or inanimate things, but to make their appearance explicitly” (Arendt, 1958, pp. 198-199). The anonymous public interact in the public realm and appear to one another as players and spectators, performers and observers.

The interrelations between everyday life, public presence, visibility, and anonymity are therefore at the centre of my examination of urban living and the possibilities for resistance that run within everyday life. My analysis focuses on the multiple non-visibilitys that constitute everyday living in Iran. The context of Iran is particularly significant because of the strong distinctions that are held between its realms of public and private, and orders of visibility and invisibility. Everyday modes of presence in the Iranian public domain, I explain in the following, reflects strong aspirations for non-visibility, non-conspicuousness, and non-vociferousness. The conjunction of aspirations for active presence and invisibility in public, I argue,

results in the creation of liminal conditions of non-visibility. In the following, I will first describe the creative force of everyday life in Iran by focusing on Asef Bayat's (Bayat, 2010) conceptualization of the 'art of presence'. Then, I will further examine the intricate relation between absence and presence, visibility and invisibility, by analysing street photographs of Tehran. My introduction ends with a short description of my case studies in chapters 2-5.

The Art of Everyday Presence

In *Life as Politics: How Ordinary People Change the Middle East*, Asef Bayat (2010) advocates the 'art of presence' as the multiplicity of cunning yet quotidian methods by which ordinary people of the Middle East strive, in their daily lives, to assert their physical, social, and cultural presence despite social constraints. Focusing mainly on Iran and Egypt, Bayat's thesis concerns the ordinary citizens at large, who are structurally dispossessed of institutional means for forcing significant social change. It entails creative ways of circumventing constraints by making use of every possibility available in one's immediate domain, discovering new spaces and generating new conditions within which to make oneself "heard, seen, felt, and realized" (Bayat, 2010, p. 249). Rather than confronting the authorities in demand of immediate change, the art of presence entails covertly deflecting the attention of the disciplinary apparatuses so as to appropriate the everyday circumstances for slightly different ways of being and doing. Under the strictly defined and policed regime of publicness in Iran, Bayat envisions prospects for gradually yet assertively achieving sustained social change in Iran through the mundane practices of the everyday – the art of presence.

The art of presence in Bayat's rendition involves a certain sense of actively participating in the making of personalized segments of time and space in everyday circumstances that are otherwise carefully outlined and policed. Such nonconformist positions require the active citizens' conviction, aptitude, and audacity in their creation and upholding. But to function on the level of the everyday, they also presuppose humbleness, modesty, and ordinariness of attitude and modes of presence. Bayat's concept functions on the level of the ordinary and the familiar, and concerns the immediate domains in which people live, work, and perform in their daily lives. Rather than receding into exterior domains of counter-culture or oppositional politics, the art of presence is crucially about "refusing to exit from the social and political

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stage controlled by authoritarian states, moral authority, and neoliberal economies” (Bayat, 2010, p. ix). The power of non-conformist modes of everyday presence lies in the way that, over time, they “may recondition the established political elites and refashion state institutions into their sensibilities” (Bayat, 2010, p. 250). Among the examples of the art of presence that Bayat studies are: the urban poor’s politics of informality (squatting and the use of street sidewalks for commerce), women’s increasing participation in the traditionally masculine public domains (studying in universities, doing sports, establishing NGO’s and public centres) and the urban youth’s determination in keeping alternative appearances in public (with deviant hairstyles, clothing, and bodily attributes).

Even though Bayat acknowledges that such politics of presence encompass a wide range of times and spaces, he sees them best shaped and articulated on the street. This is because the street signifies a domain where the everyday use of space is a matter of perpetual contestation between the powers that structure and control it – state, market, and societal ethics – and the ordinary citizens who “in the modern states, are allowed to use it only passively – through walking, driving, watching – or in other ways that the state dictates” (Bayat, 2010, p. 11). Bayat sees potential for contentious modes of presence in the unending dynamism of the busy streets of Tehran and Cairo, in the “the presence of so many people operating in the streets – working, running around, standing, sitting, negotiating, driving, or riding on buses and trams” (2010, p. 12). The everyday street therefore forms a “theatre of contentions” (Bayat, 2010, p. 11), a breeding ground for new visions, feelings, and identities to be performed and shared amongst the anonymous public.

The street, writes Bayat, is “a medium through which strangers or casual passers-by are able to establish latent communication with one another by recognizing their mutual interests and shared sentiments” (2010, p. 12). In short, Bayat believes that

The street is the chief locus of politics for ordinary people, those who are structurally absent from the centers of institutional power. Simultaneously social and spatial, constant and current, a place of both the familiar and the stranger, and the visible and the vocal, streets represent a complex entity wherein sentiments and outlooks are formed, spread, and expressed in a remarkably unique fashion. (Bayat, 2010, p. 167)

Such a take on the everyday street, as the space where social norms and identities are reproduced – and also contested – on a daily basis, corresponds with a common trope in a vast array of studies and practices that are concerned with the everyday (Ross, 1996). However, Bayat's concept of the everyday street also suggests a convenient visual field of interaction and perception that is open and accessible to eyes and senses, where the implication of visual communications pays little regard to risks of misapprehension, or indeed unintelligibility. This notion seems to disregard the theoretical and methodological complexities of the notion of the everyday as implicative of a vast and shapeless field of enquiry that does not lend itself easily to interpretation, and therefore poses a question as to how it could be approached, interpreted, and studied (Highmore, 2002). "The everyday will necessarily exceed attempts to apprehend it", writes Ben Highmore, firstly because any attempts to capture it by extracting some elements from it would betray and transform "the most characteristic aspect of everyday life: its ceaseless-ness" (2002, p. 21). Furthermore, as everyday practices are embedded in habits, and all that becomes familiar out of daily repetition, attempts for understanding the everyday are hindered by its characteristic invisibility, inconspicuousness, and unobtrusiveness (Highmore, 2002, p. 1). Building upon the transiency and invisibility of the practices of everyday life, Michel de Certeau famously states that they remain ungraspable and perform "below the threshold at which visibility begins" (1988, p. 93). As a result of its clandestinity, taken-for-grantedness and pervasiveness, everyday life could be said to remain "one of the most overlooked and misunderstood aspects of social existence" (Gardiner, 2000, pp. 1-2).

The history of photography shows a great deal of interest in capturing the furtive moments of expressivity in everyday life. Registering the way people act and perform in public, street photographs have provided an invaluable resource for both social and historical analyses. In particular, the tradition of street photography has brought to light the familiar and unfamiliar in the everyday and has therefore contributed significantly to shaping collective understandings and imaginaries of urban public life around the world. In short, street photographs are "telling objects, portraying how individuals perform their identities in public: how they inhabit public spaces and situate themselves in relation to class, cultural, and gender norms" (Hirsch & Spitzer, 2009, p. 14). Street photographs seem particularly appropriate for the study

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of the everyday street, because the range of performative practices that go into their production seem to be in concert with the practices they depict. In order to depict the everyday street, the photographers need to immerse themselves in its rhythm, synchronize with its pace, and partake in its ceaseless flow by walking alongside their subjects.

In the following section I want to study the art of presence in Iran by looking at a collection of street photographs of Tehran. By means of this short investigation, I wish to tease out the interrelatedness of the concepts of urban space, everyday life, presence, and visibility. Rather than looking for revealing evidence or candid illustrations of ordinary lives in Iranian cities, my goal is to disclose contradictions inherent to the ideas of everyday life and public presence in Iran, which stem from overlaps and conflicts between the people's, the photographers', and the state's conflicting aspirations for visibility and exposure. I will argue that, far from exposing those moments of assertive presence, these photographs attest to aspirations for absence and invisibility.

Presence and Absence in Photographs of Streets in Tehran

The collection of photographs that I have chosen to present in this chapter (Figures 1.1-7) do not claim to be comprehensive in covering the field of Iranian photography, but they are representative of a common trope in Iranian contemporary photography that is concerned with the city and urban public space at large. Although the street is not strictly the subject matter in many of these photographs, I see in their approach towards the city and the medium of photography a confluence with the tradition of 'street photography' (Jacobs, 2006). These photographs I believe uphold the tradition of street photography, firstly, in favouring street-level and non-topographic views over distant, elevated, or panoramic gazes that characterize the more general field of urban or landscape photography (Jacobs, 2006); and, secondly, they reveal a strong appeal to art and poetry which distinguishes itself clearly from documentary or journalistic photography (Scott, 2007).

In exploring these photographs, I do not wish to question the relevance of the genre of street photography to the study of everyday life in Iran, nor to question its definition and application in the age of digital and smartphone photography. Rather, aligning these photographs with the customs of street photography helps me in discerning their contradictory attitudes towards visibility and presence. One can think

of street photography as crucially concerned with capturing the human condition and the associations people make in their daily lives with space, buildings, tools, animals, and other people around them. However, in the type of street photographs that I discuss in this introductory chapter, one cannot help noticing that what is missing from the view are the people themselves. Not celebrating the city's density, dynamism, chaos, and everyday activity, what is felt most emphatically in these pictures is the emptiness of the spaces and the absence of people.



Figure 1.1. Shahab Fotouhi, *Internal Affairs*, 2007.



Figure 1.2. Ehsan Barati, *The Other City*, 2012-2013.



Figure 1.3. Bahnam Sadeghi, *Ekbatan, West of Tehran*, 2010.



Figure 1.4. Shahriar Tavakoli, Night.



Figure 1.5. Mohammad Ghazali, *Where the Heads of the Renowned Rest*, 2009-2011.



Figure 1.6. Mohammad Ghazali, *Tehran a Little to the Right*, 2010-2013.



Figure 1.7. Mehran Mohajer, Tehran Undated, 2009.

To be clear, I am not arguing that pictures of Iranian streets that depict people do not exist. In fact, one could also recognize a different trend in photographing the vibrancy of Iranian streets, particularly in reportages on Iran created by professional correspondents or accounts of life in Iran uploaded to the Internet by independent bloggers, where emphasis is put onto either showing the huge crowd of people on the streets or singling out individuals with distinct looks. Rather, what I am trying to point to is that, contrary to such journalistic accounts, the cohesive trend in absencing people from the street that I detect in a great number of twenty-first-century Iranian art photography is indicative of a collective sensibility towards invisibility, and therefore makes different types of social and political statements.

Rather than seeing in these photographs the material elements that fill in the space and shape its contours – such as walls, buildings, urban furniture, trees, vegetation, and asphalt – I notice in them the absence of that which is meticulously avoided. I see the choice of environments, lighting, and aesthetics of these images oriented towards the fulfilment of the photographers' more basic ambitions for the depiction of the absence and inaction. Whereas the typical street photographer carefully waits for the right moment to arrive to make visible, through photography, that particularly fleeting moment of human interaction that constitutes the everyday but remains mostly unnoticed in daily life, in the cases that I have examined the photographers seem to be capturing the moment of effacement, erasure, and disappearance. A very particular process of engaging with the everyday and acquiring its rhythm has gone through the production of these images that works quite strangely

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to capture the disappearance of human-subjects and to highlight the non-human. It is as if the photographer has waited patiently for this rare moment of emptiness and tranquillity to appear in a densely populated, busy, and congested city (all the images are from Tehran).

To find their desired emptiness, the photographers have, by and large, sought to find quiet places and times for photographing the city. They have also paid particular attention to their framings, as one could imagine people appearing in the frame had the camera tilted just a little upwards or sideways (particularly in Figures 1.1, 1.2, and 1.5). To crop out people from their frames, they have made crucial choices in positioning the camera to face the façade of the street rather than its length (Figure 1.5), and in closing their frames onto corners (Figures 1.2 and 1.4). Using high contrast black-and-white photography to depict the modern architecture of iconic sites, with broad white walls contrasting the wide black asphalt of the street, has helped in exuding a feeling of desertion and abandonment (Figure 1.3). Sometimes retouching techniques are used to blur the image and to exude a nostalgic aesthetic where the emptiness of space stands out (Figure 1.6). And occasionally, with the use of very long exposure times, the photographers have opted to literally clear off cars and passers-by from the images and reduce their effects of presence to ghostly traces on the streets (Figure 1.7).

Particularly effective in inciting contradictory effects of presence and absence are Mehran Mohajer's square formatted pictures (Figure 1.7), which, in a balanced composition, draw the attention to the materiality of the urban walls and the emptiness of the streets. These pictures are taken with an outmoded pinhole square-format camera, with very long exposure times. Mohajer's idiosyncratic use of such a camera indicates his time spent in stillness on the street, where he has had to take time in setting up the equipment on a tripod and waiting for the duration of the exposure. His own stillness in time and space contrasts with the speed of the street around him, and corresponds to the sense of suspension of time and space that the images exude (the sense of timelessness is also alluded to in the title of the project: *Tehran, undated*). In his photographs, while the light shop windows and the traces of cars and people speak of the flow and action of the lively city, one associates coldness and blankness with seeing the emptied streets and monotone walls that extend into the horizon. Therefore, I believe Mohajer's practice highlights the complex relation between absence and presence, between liveliness and inertia, on the streets of Tehran.

One might say that purely artistic considerations could be held accountable for the emptiness that these photographs depict. In fact, in their treatment of the urban as nature morte, these pictures parallel a great number of contemporary photographs of the city worldwide. As Rosemary Hawker points out, in the history of photography, “a strange binary inversion of the city as trope” can be detected where the familiar dynamism of city life, as depicted in early modernist street photography, gives way to comparatively still and empty street views in more recent decades (2013, p. 343). In the era of the expansion of photography and the proliferation of user-friendly digital photographic devices, such a move could be explained on the basis of “disciplinary relations internal to photography as an art form” (Hawker, 2013, p. 341). To distinguish itself aesthetically from “vernacular representations of the city”, art photography in recent decades has largely avoided such widely embraced and artistically acknowledged characteristics of the tradition of street photography that highlight the drama of the street and its chaos (Hawker, 2013, pp. 341-343). In pursuit of new aesthetics that apply to the contemporary everyday street, Hawker states that many street photographers have revamped the idea of staging the performance of the street, whereby they create a detailed choreography of the scenes they aspire to depict, rather than remaining susceptible to its otherwise chaotic and free floating performance (2013, pp. 341-343).

Nevertheless, in spite of their allusions to poetics of stillness and the phantasmagorias of the emptied city, one cannot disregard the wider implication that these pictures pose of the city as a “problematic place”, which is, “at the very least, in a state of suspension, and at worst hostile and disabling” (Hawker, 2013, p. 346). The photographs that I present in this chapter refer to an unease of being in space. If staging techniques are applied, this is done to accentuate the uncomfortable emptiness of space and to transmit the awkward intensity of the disappeared subjects. In the absence that besets the city in these photographs, allusions could be made to the wider social, political, and cultural implication of everyday life in Iran. To be precise, these photographs make statements about the inconvenient interdependency of presence in everyday urban living in Iran and conditions of non-visibility.

The absent and ghostly presences that haunt these photographs strike a chord with Masserat Amir-Ebrahimi’s conceptualization of Iranian women’s modes of being in public as “absent presence” (2006, p. 459). To actively engage in public in Iran, she writes, women “want to or should be invisible but present” (2006, p. 460). In a society

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in which for many women and young people “being seen” is considered the same as “being subjected to judgment by others, attracting danger and increasing their feeling of insecurity”, Amir-Ebrahimi believes, people get recourse to ways of being in public that “could not be felt or seen” (2006, p. 459). Amir-Ebrahimi relates this feeling of insecurity in being visible in public to the fear of being singled out in a system that does not accept diversity, where being in public feels as “being subjected to constant control by others (moral police, neighbors, community, at work, at university and so forth)” (2006, p. 456).

The origin of the homogenizing processes that so drastically affect the public presence of women in Iran, Amir-Ebrahimi (2006) indicates, dates back to the decade after the revolution of 1979, when the Iranian society was reconstructed to embrace the Islamic ideal of unity (*Vahdat*). In the homogeneous society that followed, men’s and women’s appearances and ways of being in public were disciplined according to strict patterns of behaviour and codified dress codes, deviations from which were subject to correction and penalization. Examples of such codes of appearance in public are: keeping a distance from, avoiding bodily contact with, and curtailing the intensity of looks between opposite sexes; keeping down female voices and avoiding loud laughter in public; avoiding frivolous behaviours or suggestive bodily movements such as dancing; wearing a compulsory veil which would entail fully covering women’s hair and bodies, and avoiding applying extensive make up; keeping a general tendency towards wearing dark-coloured, loose, and unrevealing dresses for both sexes; and avoiding dress codes and hairstyles which would be suggestive of Western styles (Amir-Ebrahimi, 2006, p. 458; Bayat, 2010, pp. 142-3). It is as a reaction to such a state of corporeal control, where the slightest deviations from strictly defined norms are not to be tolerated on the basis of their visible manifestations in space, that people get recourse to strategies of absent presence and look for ways of being actively present while keeping out of sight.

Visibility, then, as is implied in Amir-Ebrahimi’s analysis and in the way I am employing it in this dissertation, pertains to modes of marking and registration, “a property that can be used to divide marked and unmarked persons” (Brighenti, 2007, p. 334). Visibility therefore carries force since the disciplinary apparatuses rely on “politics of treatment for visible differences” (Brighenti, 2007, p. 334). As Foucault’s influential thesis indicates, in disciplinary society, the visibility of subjects is essential for the hold of power and for the continuation of its mechanisms of subjugation and

objectification: “It is the fact of being constantly seen, of being able always to be seen, that maintains the disciplined individual in his subjection” (Foucault, 1977, p. 187). Visibility, in other words, fuels the institutions and systems of control in their quest for “subjugation, imposition of conducts, means of control” (Brighenti, 2007, p. 336). Far from embracing the emancipatory promises of recognition and acceptance in otherwise negligent or discriminatory societies that visibility could offer to minority groups and dispossessed identities (as identity politics suggests), I am concerned with the disempowering effects of visibility and the serious repercussions of being identified as ‘the other’ (Fraser, 2000; Steinbugler, 2005; Stella, 2012). More specifically, I am concerned with the intimidating consequences of the visibility of subjects whose bodies, desires, and ways of being carry negative feelings within the dominant discourse, the public exposure of which would in fact consolidate – rather than challenge – the hegemonic assumptions and views regarding those very identities and desires (Ghorashi, 2010).

I employ non-visibility in this dissertation to apply to those states of appearance that withstand the subjugating and disempowering effects of visibility. The concept does not stand in contrast to visibility in the sense of that which cannot be seen by the biological eye: the dark, the hidden, the unknown, or the immaterial (although it can contain such states). Rather, I am using the term non-visibility to account for those conditions which, despite their possible partaking in the constitution of the visual field, resist being singled out and registered. It covers various tactics to run unnoticed and operate under cover, multiple ways for disclosure and shelter from public scrutiny. It entails unmarkedness and unobtrusiveness, so as not to interrupt the flow of everyday life and not to arrest undesired attention. Non-visibility entails anonymity and familiarity in order either to deflect the attention of the apparatuses of control or to confuse their systems of identification. It entails camouflage and “impression management” (Goffman, 1959) to control the weight of emotions and affects one receives and emanates in public. It therefore functions within discourses and varies in different times and spaces, responds to culturally constructed and historically sedimented “ways of seeing” (Berger, 1972). It entails heightened awareness of the systems of surveillance and the societal protocols within which one appears.

Amir-Ebrahimi (2006) indicates that people in Iran take refuge in creating impressions of anonymity and non-visibility in order to counter the unsafeties of

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public visibility and to enable active public presence. She describes how Iranian women are able to overcome the obstacles to their participation in the public sphere by conforming to the visible and corporeal codes of conduct, which opens up a huge amount of manoeuvring room by guaranteeing them a certain level of anonymity and unmarkedness. Wearing black in Iran, Amir-Ebrahimi indicates, is one such strategy for anonymity, a camouflage of otherness, a way of passing ceaselessly and unobtrusively in public. In his study of fashion in Tehran, Alexandru Balaşescu (2007) provides a similar description for strategies of non-visibility in the unwelcoming streets of Tehran:

Dressing down, in faded colors, or in conformity with the Islamic moral rules, grants women the liberty of passing through places without being noticed, receiving impolite comments from passers-by, or the risk of being stopped and questioned by the pasdarha. Thus, invisibility gives a general feeling of security, necessary to the freedom of movement for women in different regimes of dress in Tehran. (Balaşescu, 2007, pp. 156-7)

Some commentators have even argued that the compulsory veiling in Iran has had the paradoxical effect of boosting the presence of women in public, exactly by curtailing their bodily visibility (Bayat, 2010, p. 113). Especially for many women from traditional families, for whom unwanted male gazes in public pose an extra burden for religious belief, the homogeneity of the veil suggests possibilities for comfortable presence and mobility in public. This could explain the otherwise contradictory argument of many sociologists that, despite the overwhelming inhibitions on women's rights and prohibitions on their access to particular spaces, the participation of women in public life in Iran has generally improved after the Islamic revolution (Bayat, 2010). In short, it could be said that, by ways of absent-presence, Iranian women have learned to keep a delicate balance between the protective veil of invisibility and the desire to lay claim to the public space.

To return to street photography (Figure 1.1-Figure 1.7), I believe that, by satiating a desire to unsee the people, these photographs also seek to remain faithful to the human subjects' quest for invisibility. I am suggesting to take notice of the corporeality of the practice of taking photographs on the streets, and the interactions it entails between the photographers and their subjects. Such interactions are fraught

with the racial, sexualized and class-inflected gaze of the rude photographer, cast upon the passers-by on the moment of taking the photograph, and the subsequent prolongation and fixation of that imbalanced position of power in the photographic image and its display in art galleries (Tucker, 2012, p. 12). To put it differently, I am suggesting to think about what these photographs reveal about the “social and/or political identities that are mobilized” in their production (Rose, 2001, p. 21). Given that all these photographs are taken by male photographers, I take the absence of people as indicative of the photographers’ repudiation of the masculine underpinnings of the celebrated character of a tough photographer, who rudely casts his photographing eye on any subject of his desire on the street (Rose, 2001, p. 22).

In addition, emptying the picture of human figures functions as a way of granting invisibility to the photographers themselves. Street photographers constitute a different type of urban spectacle in their practice of taking pictures, “stopping for views, unpacking equipment, focusing the lens, and attracting attention from passersby ranging from curiosity to irritation” (Tucker, 2012, p. 12). Emptying the view from people could function as a strategy for invisibility on the part of the photographers, whose own mode of practice on the street entails strategies for non-visibility in order to remain unnoticed. Street photographers have historically shown a desire for invisibility. In the blind subjects that have appeared in so many street photographs of the twentieth century, Geoff Dyer sees “the objective corollary of the photographer’s longed-for invisibility” (2005, p. 13). In the instances of taking photographs of blind subjects, Dyer suggests, “the photographer who is always on the move, who ‘sees on and on’, is confronted with his opposite: someone unmoving and unseeing” (2005, p. 15). I claim that, just like the blind subject that lacks eyes to look back and notice the photographer in his action, clearing the field of vision from human subjects grants the photographers invisibility. Rather than staying aloof from the everyday, the photographers engage with it in a fashion that is more attuned to the non-visibility of presence.

Ultimately, the experience of walking in the streets in Iran does not register easily within the photographic medium. I want to conclude this section by pointing to another photographic project which I believe, in a self-aware manner, affectively discloses the unnerving experience of the street and of photographing in it. The female photographer Mehraneh Atashi’s series of photographs, *Tehran’s Self-Portrait*, registers the discomfort with which the female subject, as the photographer

and the photographed, confronts the shock of her exposure in space and on the photographic image (Figure 1.8).

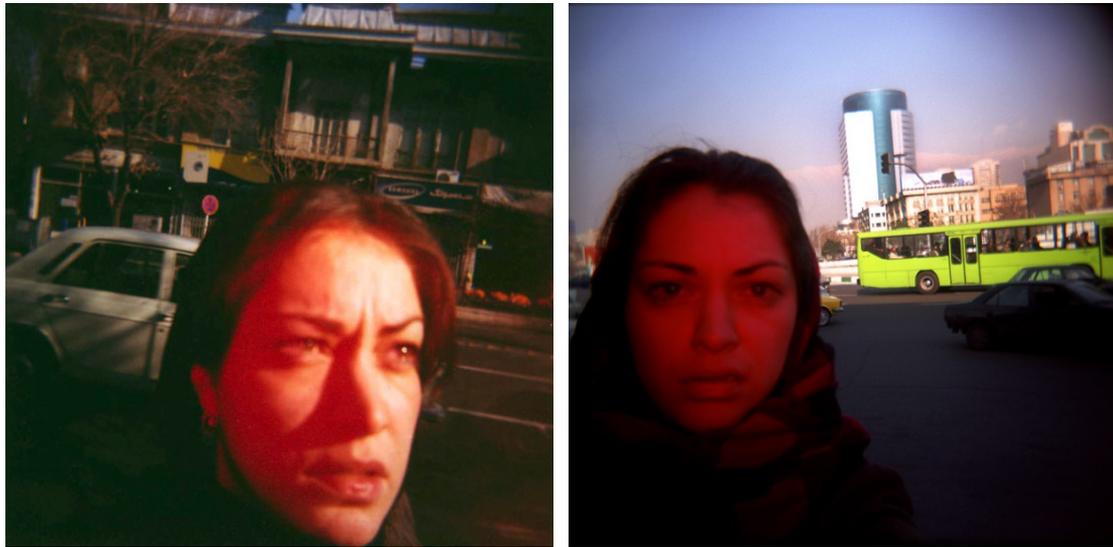


Figure 1.8. Mehraneh Atashi, *Tehran's Self-Portrait*, 2008-2010. Photography project.

The facial expressions on the oversized face of the photographer, the red hue in lighting, and the imperfect composition of the image allude to the swiftness and furtiveness of her photographing practice on the streets. While the view to the street is mostly blocked by the clumsily lit face of the photographer in the foreground (a kind of analogue selfie), what could be detected in the background exudes a feeling of emptiness and void that suggests parallels with the previously discussed photographs. The choice of self-portraiture also corresponds closely to the ethical position of those photographs, of the non-disclosure of anonymous subjects on the street. However, although the human subject has left a visible mark in front of the camera in this series of photographs, she does not exude a sense of sustained presence, as the viewer feels discomfort by reading her body language in front of the camera and imagining her behaviour at the time of photographing.

Non-Visible Modes of Presence

The photographs that I have discussed in this introductory chapter communicate the absence, disappearance, disembodiment, and discomforts of the everyday modes of presence in everyday life in Iranian cities. In the following chapters, however, I look at modes of cultural production that convey embodied modes of presence and action. In pursuit of such moments and spaces, I examine ways of interacting with the

everyday and occupying space that are widely practiced and woven into the fabric of everyday lives in Iran. My analysis engages with those social and cultural forms that over time have come to shape people's orientations towards the everyday, "structures of feeling" (Williams, 1977) which could be said to characterize the lived experience of the contemporary Iranian city. Drawing on Asef Bayat's conceptualization of the art of presence, I will suggest artful ways of cultural practice and social interaction that pertain to non-visible modes of presence: intricate ways of less-visible, yet sensible and affective, engagement with the everyday that are feasible and effective so long as they sustain certain levels of familiarity, anonymity, inconspicuousness, and ordinariness.

In each of the four chapters that follow I conceptualize one particular spatio-temporality in terms of the possibilities for non-visible but embodied modes of presence that it fosters. Similar to my reading of the street photographs of Tehran, my analysis in the following chapters is concerned with modes of being in space, and will also take into account modes of cultural production and the reception of that spatiality. My analysis concerns the relation between visibility and modes of practice; ways of being in, and bodily interacting with, space; ways of moving in space; ways of presenting oneself and observing the performance of others in space; and ways of seeing and being seen. I examine affective registers through which people engage with the everyday, and conceptualize liminal conditions in modes of cultural production.

Chapter two, *Cars: Kiarostami's Embodied Cinema of Mobility*, is about mobility, cars, and Iranian cinema. It studies the common (but largely understudied) practice of driving as a desirable mode of moving in space and being on the streets in Iran. The chapter studies the relational sense of place that the mobility of the car creates, and the possibilities for inhabitation and co-presence in the relatively secure space inside it. It argues that the assemblage of the driver and the car forms an embodied social unit that joins the everyday street and remains unobtrusive to its multiple rhythms. To study the car, the chapter turns to Iranian cinema, which is replete with car scenes, and focuses on the cinema of Abbas Kiarostami in particular. The chapter argues that Kiarostami exhausts the possibilities that the mobility of the car grants in the creation of his embodied cinema of mobility.

Chapter three, *Rooftops: The Invisibility and Ambiguity of Leftover Space*, is about the urban possibilities for non-visibility that the rooftop makes possible through

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its locational isolation and visual inaccessibility from the street. First, the chapter studies the recurrent motif of the rooftop as a safe haven in Iranian memoirs and describes how, despite the spatial and temporal escapism attributed to rooftops in such accounts, a sensory connectedness between the rooftop and the everyday city could be envisaged. Subsequently, the placement of satellite dishes on rooftops will be studied in connection to the way they complicate the spatial parameters of rooftops as leftover spaces within the discourse of neoliberal urban planning. In the final and more elaborate section of the chapter, the practice of shouting from rooftops at night as a form of protest will be analysed. The argument follows that such practices simultaneously join the everyday and disrupt the orders of the visible by having recourse to tactics of anonymity and inconspicuousness.

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Chapter four, *Shopping Centres: The Ambivalent Scopic Regime of the Stroll*, focuses on shopping centres in Iran as one of the rare spaces that propagate leisurely walks. The chapter considers strolling in shopping centres as a way of spatial inhabitation that stimulates paradoxical aspirations to both exhibitionism and invisibility. By exploring intricacies in place in the scopic regime of the shopping mall, this chapter argues that a tension resides between regimes of visibility that the shopping centre nurtures and those public orders of the visible that it functions within and is designed to fulfil. Focusing on a number of fictive and visual accounts of the experience of shopping centres in Iran, the chapter argues that, despite descriptive and analytical accounts that purport to define it in one way or another, shopping centres remain ambiguous, uncertain, and difficult to grasp visually. The chapter argues that the experiences of the shopping mall poses possibilities for critique in the way that it suspends the orders that define what can be heard, said, seen, and looked at in the shopping malls.

Chapter five, *Sports: The Unrelenting Visibility of Wayward Bodies*, is about the sphere of sports as it is interwoven in the everyday lives of Iranian citizens in its mediated forms. It considers the interrelation of the geography and visibility of sports as creating multiple contradictions, ambiguities, and possibilities. The differences and contradictions between the regimes of visibility that pertain to the practices of doing

sport and watching it are analysed in this chapter. The complicated relation of women's sports with visibility in Iran, both in terms of the visibility of female sporting bodies to male spectators and the female spectatorship of male sporting bodies, is examined in detail in this chapter too. The chapter argues that, in the realm of sports, bodies and subjects find settings for asserting their presence in recalcitrant ways. It argues that instances of critique are stimulated in the enhanced visibility of bodies doing and watching sports that the magnifying lens of televised sports perpetuates.

Each of these interrelated spatial, temporal, visual, and performative conditions will be introduced and analysed in detail in the four chapters that follow. Through these case studies, I wish to cover a wide range of practices and cultural formations that make up the familiar and ordinary everyday experience in Iran. They encompass such diverse cultural forms as film, photography, television, new media, novels, short stories, art, and architecture; and they relate to such diverse everyday practices as driving, shopping, and watching sports. These cases do not cover all aspects of everyday life in Iran, however these conceptual formations, as addressed within cultural and social spheres, do represent a comprehensive overview of the modes of presence that I call non-visible: the non-conformist ways in which people strive to make themselves seen, heard, and felt.

Non-conformities are lived, I argue, in the everyday practices of driving on the streets, shouting from rooftops, strolling in shopping centres, and watching sports on television. Non-conformities are also practiced and asserted in the modes of production and dissemination of the cultural formations that pertain to these spatio-temporalities. The politics of presence that the social and cultural formation of cars, rooftops, shopping centres, and sports pertain to, is about creating liminal conditions of non-visibility, in order to bypass the apparatus of control and to withstand their domination. Within this liminality there exist potentialities for radical social critique and resistance to the dominant orders of the visible, for rearticulating the relation between visibility and invisibility, between what is seen and how this is interpreted.