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

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#### 4. SHOPPING CENTRES

##### The Ambivalent Scopic Regime of the Stroll

This chapter focuses on shopping centres in Iran and the experience of shopping. As proliferating urban spaces, shopping centres make up a significant part of the everyday lived experience and are indispensable to the physical structures and affective registers of Iranian cities (Kazemi, 2009). Today, huge shopping complexes multiply rapidly in urban centres around the country, attracting middle-class citizens to their big and small retail stores, supermarkets, coffee shops, fast food courts, restaurants, cinemas, art galleries, billiard rooms, enclosed amusement parks, and several other recreational spaces. Increasingly, the Iranian urban middle class frequent these shopping centres and spend their free time in them. Images, posters, and advertisements of shopping malls, both newly built and under construction, proliferate in urban space and the media. This chapter studies the lived experience of shopping centres in Iran by focusing on Saghar Daseri's series of paintings *Tehran Shopping Malls* (Daeiri, 2009), the popular film *Boutique*, and the Novella *Yousefabad, Khiyaban-e Siy-o Sevvom / 33<sup>rd</sup> Street, Yousefabad* (2009).

Even though, in western cities, shopping malls are usually regarded as indicative of the urban condition of postmodernity (Friedberg, 1993, p. 109; Stevenson, 2003, p. 61), the new shopping centres and department stores that emerged in Tehran in the 1970s and that, since then, have steadily grown in numbers and size in major cities around the country – except for a decade of recession following the Islamic revolution of 1979 – symbolize modernity and modern (sometimes western) ways of living. Shahram Khosravi (2008, p. 110) believes that the allure of the new shopping centres – sometimes referred to in Farsi as *Pasazh-ha* (Passageways) – resides in their contrast to the traditional Bazar, in terms of urban geography (periphery versus centre), services (luxurious versus basic commodities), function (leisure versus commerce), temporality (weekends and evenings versus daytime and weekdays), identity (modern versus tradition) and visitors (middle class versus working class). In the twenty-first century, shopping centres in Iran are also places where globalization manifests itself in commodities and youth cultures. Today, to regularly spend time in shopping malls in Iran is a way of embracing the “concept” of “being middle-class global citizens” (Khosravi, 2008, p. 120).

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Iranian Shopping centres are also significant because of the “new forms of *flânerie*” (Kazemi, 2009, p. 81) that they support and give rise to, specifically within the context of an urban condition that is increasingly becoming hostile to walking – physically and psychologically – as more and more parks, plazas, and side-walks are being ruthlessly usurped by roads, cars, and buildings. In major Iranian cities, shopping centres are popular hangouts for fun-seeking youth, “vital spaces in which young boys and girls as well as retired men and women could socialize” (Bayat, 2010, p. 110). The spatial structure of shopping centres, including indoor atriums, plazas, and many corridors, are one of the very few spatial conditions in Iran that accommodate mundane pleasures of leisurely strolls, loitering, voyeurism, bodily display, and unscrupulous social contact – ways of presence in public which are typically deemed immodest and restricted under the orders of public behaviour in Iran. Young people spend time in shopping malls to reach out for and make contact with the opposite sex, as they walk and pass in front of shop windows pretending to do shopping, confusing the morality police that prohibits such contacts in public (Kazemi & Abazari, 2004, p. 108). Shopping centres therefore signify a site of cultural resistance in Iran, where dominant orders of public presence are subverted on a daily basis through the very mundane and playful wanderings in the shopping centre (Khosravi, 2008, p. 168). “In a city dominated by gender-segregated public space”, writes Khosravi, for many urban youths shopping centres are the only places “where they have an opportunity to ‘present themselves’ to the other sex” (2008, p. 112).

This chapter therefore argues for the centrality of leisurely walks and strolls to the experience of shopping centres in Iran. Indeed, as syntheses of leisure and consumption, it is built into the structure of shopping centres to “stress on various forms of *flânerie* (loitering, aimless strolling) and leisure” (Shields, 1992, pp. 5-7). Such a way of inhabiting shopping centres holds an ambivalent position in relation to spatial, temporal, and aesthetic regimes of visibility. I will explain that the stroller in a shopping mall – the maller, as I will call him/her, or the shopping *flâneur/flâneuse* – sets in motion a dynamic relation between his/her mode of mobility and the scopic regime to which he/she is subject. He/she therefore maintains a concomitant position in-between seeing and not seeing, recognition and concealment, transparency and camouflage, attentiveness and distraction, sensitivity and indifference – hence, the liminal condition of nonvisible mode of presence in shopping centres. Underscoring this ambiguous position is the equivocal arrangement of the shopping mall as ordinary

yet luxury, local yet global, real yet dreamlike, festive yet boring, and dominated by the visual yet obfuscated by it. By exploring the intricacies in place in the scopic regime of the shopping mall, as enacted through the everyday practices of shopping flanerie, I argue that a tension resides between the regimes of visibility that the shopping mall nurtures and those visual orders that it is designed to be upholding. The experience of the shopping mall therefore suggests the suspension of the public orders of visibility, and accounts for a non-visible mode of presence in public.

### **Ambiguities of the Shopping Centre**

To begin with, it is mostly the implications of the activity of *shopping*, rather than the connotations of an urban *centre*, that defy clear description. Shopping as purchase entails all the social practices, movements, and times that supplement the pure act of purchase. Shopping is not only about buying, but also about getting out of the house, getting to the shopping centre, walking through the centre, checking out the windows, choosing the goods, negotiating with the seller, buying, paying, walking back through the centre, getting distracted by other goods or people, and so on. Furthermore, people use shopping centres in multiple ways, ranging from targeted shopping to not shopping at all. One can differentiate between two basic orientations towards shopping: the intentional shopping *for* and the recreational shopping *around* (Falk & Campbell, 1997, p. 6). However, a single “shopping trip” is almost never unambiguously about one type of orientation, and it usually contains elements of both (Falk & Campbell, 1997, p. 6). Shopping in shopping centres, thus, is always about ways of being bodily in space and experiencing space (internet shopping excluded). It is therefore not reducible to any certain practice, and suggests a variety of bodily actions and interactions in space.

However diverse the implications of shopping, shopping malls are rather homogeneous in their physical structures and character, as artificially controlled indoors environments that invoke enclosed consumerist paradises (Crawford, 1992). They are aggregations of retail shops, isolated from the surrounding city and kept enclosed in a system where “everything from temperature to merchant displays are rigorously *controlled* in ways that sustain an ersatz world of fantastic images and displays” (Langman, 1992, p. 49). Contemporary shopping centres mostly follow the structures, forms and function that developed in the American shopping malls in the

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second half of the twentieth century, but the nineteenth-century urban environments, such as arcades, department stores, and exhibition halls, could in many ways be seen as their forebears (Friedberg, 1993, p. 109).

In post-war urban development in the United States, shopping malls were specifically designed to artificially create “pedestrian densities” in the “car-based suburbs”, serving as magnet points where the dispersed population of the urban sprawl could come together and, ideally, re-establish “face-to-face communication, community life and culture in a climate protected environment” (Dovey, 1999, pp. 125-6). By creating safe interior spaces for walking, socializing, and being in public, shopping malls therefore cater specifically for those urban conditions that are unsafe or unfriendly, and those social groups whose presence in public (their use of the public street) is additionally inhibited, or heavily regulated, by social and cultural norms. For instance, the presence and engagement of women in public is said to benefit largely from the structure of shopping malls, for whom it “fills a gap between the containment of the home and the vastness – and often hostile foreignness [sic] – of public space” (Backes, 1997, p. 10). It is exactly because of such an embracement of marginal groups and alternative uses of space that contemporary shopping malls in Asia, Middle East and Latin America are often regarded as having democratic effects (Abaza, 2001; Schmidt, 2012; Salcedo, 2003; Stillerman & Salcedo, 2012). Shopping centres are crucial for generating “cross-class interactions” in Santiago, Chile, write Stillerman and Salcedo (2012, p. 309), and they are “ideal places for mixing” in Cairo, writes Mona Abaza (2001, pp. 117-118).

Asef Bayat believes that, in contemporary Iran, shopping centres are among those new urban structures that, by absorbing different social groups, have made the young “extend their horizons” beyond the limits of their homes or neighbourhoods to the city at large, and have therefore had broader effects of “spatial levelling” (2010, pp. 110-111). Kazemi and Abazari (2004) consider the democratic effects of shopping malls on Iranian women’s public presence. They believe that, while traditionally in the urban settings in Iran it was merely within the mosques, public baths, and cemeteries that women were allowed freely to inhabit the public space – albeit segregated from the male in exclusively designated female annexes – in modern times it is in the shopping centres that women’s presence in public is permitted unconditionally, and even promoted and deemed essential to the performance of the space and the profitability of the enterprise.

However, shopping malls could also be seen as carefully designed to control and shape a particular type of population, to foster an ideal community of consumers by keeping out the undesired crowd. Critics also argue that, “while its signifiers are heterotopic the mall embodies the utopian desire for a purified community of social harmony, abundance and classlessness”, “where anything different to the norm of the happy consumer is subtly excluded” (Dovey, 1999, p. 133). What shopping malls do, is create carefully sketched shopping experiences, influenced by phantasmagorical spectacles of dazzling, exuberant, and excessively commodified – and commodifying – imagery. To go shopping, in this sense, is to consume the experience of shopping that the shopping mall offers. Mike Featherstone writes:

Shopping sites such as malls, department stores, theme parks and heritage centres offer various blends and combinations of selling goods and experiences. They sell goods which can be taken away, they sell experiential goods to be consumed on the spot. They additionally offer free experiences (or ones purchased with the general entrance ticket) in the form of the aestheticized and designed environment – a more general ambience, the atria, fountains, mirrored walls, escalators and more elaborate disneyfication effects. The pleasure of shopping mall therefore lies in the simultaneous consumption of commodities, imagery, and the space. Shopping centres, heritage and tourist sites are hence designed to be, and are used as, places of sociability and association; people walk around, look, talk, joke and engage in forms of display. (Featherstone, 1998, p. 917)

Seen this way, shopping malls cater to a distinct character who frequents the malls, wanders in them, and ultimately immerses in the experience of space and seeks pleasure in the spectacle of commodities, imagery, and the crowd. His/her experience therefore varies from a range of “various doings” in the mall to “just being where the action is” (Falk & Campbell, 1997, p. 5). The experience of the mall is therefore intrinsically related to the maller’s mode of mobility in space, and the multiple ways of looking, recognition, and socialization that are enacted through his/her particular way of dwelling in space. Rather than the shopping centres themselves or the

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commodities that are displayed for purchase, it is this figure of the maller – the mall-jammer or mall-rat – that appeals to different groups of people who go shopping.

The motivations of such a character, critics argue, in wandering in shopping malls and his/her ways of relating to and experiencing space, suggest affinities with the classic literary figure of the flâneur, who wandered in the earlier forms of modern enclosed spaces of consumption – the Parisian arcades and department stores – felt at home in them and sought voyeuristic pleasure in their spectacle and crowd (Campbell, 1997; Falk & Featherstone, 1998; Friedberg, 1993; Kazemi, 2009; Kazemi & Abazari, 2004). Just like the classic flâneur, Falk and Campbell write, “the updated version remains primarily a consumer of experiences, someone who enjoys the freedoms offered by urban space, especially the freedom of choice and the freedom to move around freely in the midst of the stimuli offered by people and things” (1997, p. 6). The figure of the flâneur symbolizes the spectatorial position of the urban consumer of spectacles, commodities, and the aura of consumption (Nixon, 1992, p. 152). Most notably, Mike Featherstone suggests to consider the late twentieth century “shopper as flâneuse” (1998, p. 916).

I am not arguing that the maller today is the exact equivalent to the nineteenth-century Parisian flâneur, neither am I suggesting to overlook the geographical and historical specificities of the original figure that was introduced by Baudelaire and theorized by Walter Benjamin. Indeed, new forms of flânerie in shopping centres suggest different interests and sensibilities, some of which might not have been available to the historic figure. For instance, Falk and Campbell, who suggest to read the (post)modern shopper as the equivalent of the flâneur/flâneuse, also imply that “in contrast to his/her nineteenth-century Baudelairean predecessor, however, the modern shopper figure tends to be more interested in things than in people” (1997, p. 6). Furthermore, in today’s cities, where “hotels, office buildings, cultural centers, and museums virtually duplicate the layouts and formats of shopping mall” (Crawford, 1992, p. 29), where “the world of the shopping mall – respecting no boundaries, no longer limited even by the imperative of consumption – has become the world” (Crawford, 1992, pp. 29-30), the shopper can simply be considered as the contemporary urban “passer-by” (Bowlby, 2001, p. 51). Unlike the glamour and singularity of the figure of the flâneur, the shopper as passer-by is “quite simply *unremarkable*, almost defined – not that anyone bothers to stop and define him – by lack of significance. A marginal presence in every period or place but in none

specially, he has tended to pass by, as by nature he must, unobtrusively, without arousing much interest” (Bowlby, 2001, p. 51).

Such a stance on the ordinariness of the habits and practices of contemporary shoppers is pivotal to my analysis of shopping as constituting the everyday. However, as Bowlby is eager to assert, the *flâneur* does not stand as the absolute opposite to the familiar passer-by, but is often a different way of conceptualizing the same character: “the two are often one and the same: you cannot be a *flâneur* without being, from another perspective, a passer-by” (Bowlby 51-52). Unlike the uncomplicated and reductionist implications of the passer-by or the shopper as consumer, the figure of the *flâneur/flâneuse* is complex, rich and full of intricacies. To be precise, it is the conceptualization of the *flâneur/flâneuse* as an urban type, whose identity and practice brings to the fore multiple ambiguities concerning his/her spatial and visual experience, that is helpful to my analysis of the non-visible modes of presence in space. “To talk of the *flâneur*”, writes Mike Featherstone, “raises questions about the relationship between the aesthetic experience of public spaces and the possibilities that these same spaces hold for citizenship” (1998, p. 911).

To start with, Richard Pope believes that, even though this figure has mostly been coded masculine, someone who enjoys the freedom to roam around without escort and enjoys an “assured capacity to gaze on the social and political order according to his will and desire”, his manliness is overshadowed by the non-productive and wasteful way in which he partakes in the public (2010, p. 9). Pope believes that for his “foreignness” to the traditionally masculine “register of use-value and production”, “the *flâneur* can only appear trivial, or feminine” (2010, p. 8). In addition, Pope believes that, since the *flâneur* is mostly alluded to as a literary figure and “there is no agreed on set of actually existing *flâneurs*”, it does not convey a clear-cut identity position, but conveys a “shifty fellow” without a “proper content” (2010, p. 8). Moreover, the *flâneur* maintains a fluctuating “moral constitution”, as Benjamin evokes, since, on the one hand, he is the intellectual and the artist who mingles in the crowd, in order to detect hidden meanings and features in it for the purpose of his own intellectual or artistic production; yet, on the other hand, “the *flâneur* completely distances himself from the type of the philosophical promenader, and takes on the features of the werewolf restlessly roaming a social wilderness” (1999, pp. 417-418).

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The figure's relation to the crowd is also ambiguous from another perspective, as he purports to be gaining enjoyment from mingling in it, yet maintains an aloof, reserved and unnoticed position within that crowd – detached from it yet passionately attentive to it. He is the self-asserted “man of the public”, a “sovereign spectator going about the city in order to find things which will occupy his gaze”, and yet he is an “utterly empty” being who, in order to “satisfy his otherwise dissatisfied existence” and to “complete his otherwise incomplete identity”, needs “to be filled” by losing himself in what he observes – similar to a lover losing himself/herself in the beloved (Tester, 1994, pp. 6-7). The flâneur therefore “develops his aesthetic sensibility in swings between involvement and detachment, between emotional immersion and decontrol and moment of careful recording and analysis of the ‘random harvest’ of impression” (Featherstone, 1998, p. 913).

One consequence is the equivocality of the scopic regime of flânerie, as it is not clear whether the flâneur keeps the spectatorial authority to himself (to gain pleasure from observing his objects), or whether he himself transfigures into a figure in the crowd on display, to be observed by other people, for their visual pleasure. He thus holds a liminal position between recognition and anonymity as he “feels himself viewed by all and sundry as a true suspect” and yet, at the same time, remains “utterly undiscoverable, the hidden man” (Benjamin, 1999, p. 420). Deborah Parson explains the ambiguities of the visual field of the flâneur succinctly, arguing that:

the *flâneur* is frequently described as a personification of spectatorial authority, yet this interpretation overlooks the tensions and paradoxes inherent within the term for, as Benjamin notes, the habitat of the *flâneur* was being destroyed just as he was becoming a recognizable social type, making the *flâneur* by definition someone who is out of place. The urban characters evoked in the work of Charles Baudelaire, which, along with Edgar Allan Poe's ‘The Man of the Crowd’, has become a meta-text for the discussion of ‘*flânerie*’, exhibit this paradox of the scopically authoritative yet wandering and placeless *flâneur*, whose habits result from a mixture of reaction against, dependency on, and anxiety in, bourgeois culture. These complexities are essential to an understanding of the concept of the *flâneur*, and are interlinked with the themes of modernity, spectacle, and gender, implying an instability in his sense of superior, masculine self-identity. (Parsons, 2000, p. 19)

It is exactly such an oblique relation between the intrinsic drift of the wandering figure of the flâneur/flâneuse, the scopic regime to which he/she is subject, and the spatial specificity in which he performs, that suggest the figure as appropriate and helpful for conceptualizing the experience of the shopping mall in this study. Such intrinsic ambiguities conflate the classificatory orders of the visible and go against the systems of control, which need clarity to be able to recognize based on visible codes. Therefore, I claim that the combination of the scopic regime that the flâneur/flâneuse responds to – the spectatorial position and the spectacle that he/she enjoys – and the specific manner of wandering and prowling by which he/she engages in public – attends the crowd and inhabits the space – attest to a non-visible mode of presence. It is to the scopic regime of shopping, and the specificities of walking inherent to it, that I turn in the following sections.

### **The Scopic Regimes of Shopping**

*“Androgynous teenaged mall-jammers, doing more looking than shopping, go to the malls to kill time.” (Langman, 1992, p. 58)*

*“we strolled around to see and to be seen.” (Khosravi, 2008, p. 9)*

The pace and fashion of strolling in the mall responds to, and is constitutive of, a particular scopic regime. The intensity, fixedness, and protraction of the maller’s look is inextricably entwined with the manner, pace, and temporality of his/her walking. Strolls constitute multiple ways of “looking around”, where the body slows down in repose and the eyes wander round the space, over everything that is available to them (Falk, 1997, p. 180). The enigma of the flâneur/flâneuse therefore lies in the way in which he/she, on the one hand, absent-mindedly idles away (wastes time and space) and, on the other hand, meticulously observes and looks around. Important to the perceptive and affective registers of flânerie are the commitments “to stroll and look, to idle and dawdle” (Featherstone, 1998, p. 913).

However, in order to fully comprehend the scopic regime of the maller/flâneur one has to take into account that the aesthetic sensibility of his/her voyeurism – associated with lingering in time and space – partakes of a twofold pattern of

visibility. On the one hand, the flâneur is conceptualized as the figure whose movement in the crowd follows a “high sense of invisibility”, where he enjoys “the masquerade of being *incognito*” (Featherstone, 1998, p. 913). On the other hand, the figure is iconic in that he/she strolls “in order to see and be seen” (Miles, 2010, p. 101). The flâneur/flâneuse not only takes pleasure in scrupulously, but stealthily, observing the spectacle – the space, commodities and the crowd – but also partakes in the constitution of the spectacle and becomes a target of (other people’s) observations. In other words, engrained in the practice of flânerie are two seemingly contradictory agential positions: the looker/observer and the subject of observation(s).

This suggests, first of all, an optical exchange – communication through looks – in which the maller marks objects and people, and recognizes distinct features in the crowd, and gets mutually detected and acknowledged as possessing distinct features himself/herself. However, it also suggests a paradox of being invisible yet visible, which can only be resolved by positioning the lonely wanderer as already part of the crowd of fellow mallers. Although it is the individual maller who observes the crowd, he/she is only recognizable as part of the crowd and inseparable from it as an individual. By being looked at as an element within the crowd, lost in the spectacle, the lonely figure of the otherwise idiosyncratic flâneur/flâneuse becomes non-visible. This is particularly useful for understanding the experience of shopping centres in Iran as being conducive to the creation and dissemination of collective identities and sentiments.

Referring to the youth’s tactics of public presence in Iran, Asef Bayat writes:

identities are formed mostly through ‘passive networks,’ the nondeliberate and instantaneous communications among atomized individuals that are established by the tacit recognition of their commonalities and that are mediated directly through the gaze in public space, or indirectly through the mass media. As present agents in the public space, the young recognize shared identity by noticing (seeing) collective symbols inscribed, for instance, in styles (T-shirts, blue jeans, hairstyle), types of activities (attending particular concerts and music stores, and hanging around shopping malls), and places (stadiums, hiking trails, street corners). (Bayat, 2010, p. 119)

Bayat's description suggests that the cultural specificity of the regime of looks in the shopping experience is intrinsically entangled with the cultural and social meanings, associated with the physical modes of being and traversing in space. The process of recognition of collective interests is not only activated by seeing and detecting shared features, but also, and more importantly, by understanding the commonality of the corporeal way of being in space. Ways of looking and seeing, in this sense, are fundamentally connected to ways of mobility in space. It is the interdependency of looks and modes of mobility in space that convey meaning. For instance, what constitutes 'loitering' as an offence, is the violation of the "unwritten scopic code" that associates the interaction between certain type of walking – or indeed non-walking as hanging around – and a specific intensity and fixedness of the look as misdeed – that which could be described as gazing or staring (Falk, 1997, p. 180). The figure of the flâneur is therefore helpful, as it intricately binds the two issues together: the mobile experience of the flâneur mobilizes a shifting gaze that sees, recognizes, and classifies; while, at the same time, the combination of his/her mobile body and shifting gaze is already constituted within the specific cultural regime of the visible, which indicates specific ways of being 'seen' – and therefore being identified, recognized, and classified.

At first glance, the complexity of such a scopic matrix seems to be overlooked in Saghar Daeiri's series of paintings *Tehran Shopping Malls* (2009) (see Figure 4.1). In these paintings, an exclusively female space is depicted that builds on the stereotypical correlation between shopping and femininity, and suggests female bodies as commodities on display. The consumerist disposition of the shopping mall is stressed by the combination of a huge crowd, gazing at commodities on display, and the abundance of signs of 'sales' in shop windows. Furthermore, the paintings highlight the cliché image of the female exhibitionist attention-seeker, by emphasizing the eroticism of the excessive use of cosmetics (makeups, nail-polish, nose-jobs, and face-lifts) and suggestive dress codes (the combination of colourful and tight overalls and loosely worn scarfs). Yet, the corresponding scopic regime that the paintings suggest is more variegated.

Daeiri's paintings stress the interiority of space and its seclusion from the street. They depict a semi-public space, in which public orders of the visible seem to be suspended. The paintings clearly invoke this distinction, as the women's

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flamboyant costumes and makeups come across as inappropriate for passers-by on the street. In contrast to the heavy exhibitionism and quest for visibility that Daeri's female shoppers show, women's presence on the streets in Iran entails dressing down in dark, faded, or sombre colours – several forms of “dressing for invisibility” (2007, pp. 156-9). By having recourse to tactics of non-visibility, women seek ease of movement on the streets without being noticed.

However, such colourfulness and breaks from the restraints of public dress codes do not strike as liberating. Rather, the paintings give the impression of entrapment in a confined and stifling space, encircled by shop windows, dead-end corridors and artificially lit interiors. In contrast to the wide and endless corridors, spacious atriums, scenic fountains, panoramic perspectives, and shiny surfaces for which the architecture of the shopping mall is known, the space depicted in these paintings is rather tight, dark, and lacks depth of the field of vision. Confined to space, the female bodies in these paintings do not conjure up the figure of the free moving flâneuse who feels a strong urge to see. Unlike the flâneur/flâneuse, whose body escapes being inscribed in space and whose look shifts freely over space, these figures are treated as objects firmly placed in space to be looked at. They suggest a rather abstract and disembodied mode of being in space, where bodies do not interact and eyes do not seem to be looking at anything in particular.

The paintings also present a homogeneous space, where not only all the bodies and gestures look similar, but everything in the space is evenly disposed and distributed too. Rachel Bowlby describes that, in many shopping malls, there exists “no clear demarcation between shop and non-shop” and corridors act as extensions to the shops, as “the controlled temperature means that the shops can do without doors at all, with customers wandering in without that implying any particular intention or interest” (Bowlby, 2001, pp. 76-77). Even shop windows do not serve as punctuations in space, and do not possess aesthetically distinct features, since in most settings they are reduced to a single glass panel and have “no independent life of being lit up and open to view when the shop is closed” (Bowlby, 2001, pp. 76-77).



Figure 4.1. *Tehran Shopping Malls*, by Saghar Daeiri. Painting.

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One consequence of the blurring of the distinction between the spaces for movement (corridors), purchase (shops), and display (window shops), is the conflation between the subject positions of the stroller, the buyer and the commodity itself. Sean Nixon explains that in most contemporary retail stores “the consumer is put on display”, along with the commodities that are distributed in space in a way that invites the costumers to walk in between them and spend time looking at them (by contrast to the older settings in which the spaces for customers and commodities are clearly demarcated) (1992, p. 155). By stressing the transparency of the undifferentiated space within the mall, Daeri’s paintings evoke such a conflation between shoppers and commodities.

Furthermore, Daeri’s paintings call attention to the objectification of female bodies, by suggesting resemblances between them and the mannequins. As real women and soulless bodies become indistinguishable, an image is presented of a body as a commodity on display, that does not have agency of her own. As a result of this conflation, the soulless and polished disposition of the mannequins casts a homogenizing mask on the real women’s faces and bodies. The mask, however, serves not only to fetishize, but also to hide genuine feelings and appearances. It highlights distinctions between the self, its presentation in public, and representation on the canvas. Not only the distinction between shoppers and mannequins is difficult to assert in the paintings, but also the real and represented are conflated, as virtual copies of real bodies and mannequins are reflected through windows and mirrors. Dominating the frame in these paintings are the interchangeably real and reflected bodies, identical figures and faces that gaze into space and blur the distinction between embodiment and disembodiment, between bodies that look and eyes that hover in space.

Such disembodied gazes suggest an experience of shopping that is purely visual and is independent of other forms of bodily interactions in space. Scholars such as Backes (1997), Crawford (1992), Friedberg (1993), Morse (1990), and Paterson (2006) believe that the experience of modern shopping is in fact largely predicated upon such processes of disembodiment. Crawford argues that within the indoor shopping malls “the obligation to buy implied by the active exchange of bargaining”, which is the characteristic feature of markets and more traditional environments for commerce, is superseded by “the invitation to look, turning the shopper into a passive

spectator, an isolated individual, a face in the department-store crowd, silently contemplating merchandise” (1992, pp. 17-18). Morse (1990) and Friedberg (1993) have gone so far as provocatively claiming affinities between the experiences of shopping in a mall, driving on a freeway, and watching TV – indicating the passivity of the subject in the face of the images.

Daeiri’s paintings present an abundance of eyes and convey such an encouragement for “just looking” (Backes, 1997, p. 3). Looks are not cast at objects and do not meet one another in these paintings, but are diffused into space and thrown into the air. Such a one-directional regime of looks is predicated upon a “scopic regime which allows a variety of more or less prolonged looks – gazing, watching and staring – furthermore opening up the possibility of resting one’s eyes” (Falk, 1997, pp. 181-2). Daeiri’s frames are impregnated with such prolonged looks that endure in time and space and rest on objects (commodities, bodies, space). However, such a prolonged and relaxed manner of gazing does not indicate sensorial engagement with the surroundings. After all, Daeiri’s frames are imbued with disaffected, unenthusiastic, indifferent, and dumb looks into the air, conveying an apathetic and dispossessive regime of looks, reminiscent of the zombie wanderers in the mall in *Dawn of the Dead* (1978).

Daeiri’s paintings are exceptional since references to the shopping centre are rather uncommon in visual media in Iran. Within Iranian film and television production, the very few shopping mall scenes in the film *Boutique* (2003), directed by Hamid Nematollah, stand out as quite exceptional. Central to the story in *Boutique* is the relationship between Jahangir, the salesman of a boutique located in an unspecified shopping mall in Tehran, and Etti, whom Jahangir has first met as a customer in the shop and has since developed a crush on. Although the film’s plot develops around concerns raised in the shopping centre, it does not portray a comprehensive picture of it. In contrast to the vibrant and colourful space depicted in Daeiri’s paintings, the few shopping mall scenes in *Boutique* present rather empty and unexciting scenery. This is highlighted in two almost identical scenes (see Figure 4.2), which depict the mall before and during opening hours. Following Jahangir from the escalators to the boutique where he works, both scenes depict an almost empty mall in the background. In spite of the fact that the shops are mostly closed in the first scene, and the space is dimly lit, differences are downplayed in the two scenes. Even though

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the emptiness of the space and its unexciting colours and materials stand in contrast to the lavish shopping environment depicted in Daeri's paintings, both works are similar in the way they use closed frames to convey suffocating feelings of entrapment in space.



Figure 4.2. *Boutique*. The empty mall before (left) and during (right) working hours.



Figure 4.3. *Boutique*. Male figures and mannequins.

One other pressing point in the comparison between film and paintings is that male characters and mannequins in *Boutique* replace their female counterparts in

Daeiri's shopping centre depictions (see Figure 4.3). Although female customers are not completely absent in *Boutique*, the abundant use of male close-ups, combined with the almost exclusively male mannequins, is suggestive of a masculine order. The general rules of depiction in Iranian cinema (Naficy, 2012) that restrict the sexually suggestive presentation of women's body (as in female mannequins) and face (close-ups) could be held partly accountable for this absence of femininity. As the female body is driven to invisibility, the male figure suffuses the frame to fill in that absence, leading to what could be regarded as male exhibitionism (Mohammad Reza Golzar, the actor playing Jahangir, is indeed a male icon in Iran). Nevertheless, rather than stressing male sexuality, the saturation of the field of vision with male prototypes conjures up the absented figure of the female shopper, evoking the violence contained in the processes that enforce such an absence.

Mehrangiz Kar (2006) draws parallels between the restrictions imposed on women's bodies after the revolution of 1979, and the violence exerted on the female mannequins in shops and retail stores. She describes how, after the Iranian revolution, female mannequins were faced with the same restrictions on their appearance as female bodies. To comply with such orders, female mannequins were first disposed of their hair, then of sharp and bright colours on their cheeks, lips, and eyes – so that “the sparkle of cheerfulness” left their style (2006, p. 35). A symbolic act of violence followed, Kar indicates, when the heads of mannequins were cut off and replaced by round flat surfaces, sometimes additionally covered by long scarves. The highlight of Kar's story is an incident she had been witness to in the early 1980s, when armed men had entered a retail store, pointed at the shopwindow, and ordered a few inches to be added to the skirts the mannequins were wearing. Kar writes:

That day, I felt like these armed officials were scratching their sharp claws against the most intimate surface of my own femininity. And yet because of such attacks – which were taking place frequently in cities throughout the country – shop owners began to systematically direct all their anger and frustration at the helpless mannequins. They threw the mannequins in storage rooms or locked them up in dark, foreboding attics. This treatment of the mannequins is how I first came to realize that the feminine identity of Iranian women was being violated. (Kar, 2006, p. 30)

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Faded into the background, the absented femininity brings to the fore a masculine ordering of the space, in which the occasional presence of female bodies stands out as out of place and attracts extra attention. In such a condition of heightened visibility, female flânerie seems impossible. In the only scene in *Boutique* in which Jahangir and Etti are shown to be walking together for a few seconds, on the way out of the poorly populated mall, the shopkeepers' curious observing male gazes from behind are detectable (see Figure 4.4). Being spotted and pointed at, the couple do not enjoy the privacy and anonymity that one would expect from walking in the mall. Either by absenting the feminine body, or by making it look out of place, the shopping mall in the film purports a sense of insecurity.



Figure 4.4. *Boutique*. Jahangir and Etti in the mall.

As if avoiding the shopping mall, Jahangir and Etti meet, walk, and enjoy each other's company in the city in several scenes in the film, rather than in the dull and empty space of the mall (see Figure 4.5). It is suggested that, by being in the middle of the crowd on busy streets, Jahangir and Etti can enjoy the anonymity and invisibility that seems unattainable in the shopping mall. The film avoids intense feelings and serious discussions taking place in the mall. The dull space of the mall is contrasted to the plethora of urban conditions – such as in a car or in the metro – in which the couple are shown as happy and joyful. Even though the viewer is made aware of a first encounter between Jahangir and Etti taking place in the shop, the plot strikingly avoids that crucial moment. The film begins on a random day following that decisive meeting, when Jahangir unexpectedly meets Etti on the street, recognizes her, and makes a reasonable excuse for asking to meet her again. Except for a few short and

awkward confrontations in the mall, throughout the film, the couple either communicate by phone or meet outside.



Figure 4.5. *Boutique*. Jahangir and Etti in the city.

What I want to emphasize is that the regime of visibility of the shopping mall, in all its real and mediated forms, is complicated and difficult to pin down definitively. Although physically segregated from the street, the shopping mall does not construct a specific scopic regime that either stands in contrast or agreement to the orders of the visible on the street; rather, it complicates and suspends those orders. Attesting to the suspension of the regimes of visibility is the way in which *flânerie* in the shopping mall propagates a complex field of visibility, at times to the extent of absencing the visual. Rather than reading the space from a distance, *flânerie* pertains to the embodied practices of walking as inhabiting, enacting and producing space – that which de Certeau identifies as foreign to the visual register. In addition, by inviting couples, friends and groups to walk together in it, the mall suggests forms of togetherness that are not necessarily conditioned on the visual communication through looks. Since walking together is not predicated on a face-to-face communication model (quite similar to driving together, which I examined in chapter 2), it suggests the dispersion of looks rather than intensity and fixity of them – in an extreme case, it even suggests the disappearance of the communication model based on the visual reciprocal interaction. In the next section, I focus on walking in the mall by exploring Sina Dadkhah's novella, *Yousefabad, Khiyaban-e siyo sevvom / 33<sup>rd</sup> street, Yousefabad*.

### Going for a Walk in the Shopping Centre

*“By being constantly on the move through corridors, floors, shops, stairs, we could not be stopped and separated from the opposite sex”*

*(Khosravi, 2008, p. 91)*

In contemporary Iran, shopping centres invite shoppers from all over the city and serve as popular destinations for the youth’s loitering and flânerie. The enclosed and circular configuration of space in shopping malls is integral to the leisurely dawdle and uninterrupted ambulation that they instigate. Unlike the older and more traditional spaces of commerce – such as markets, arcades, passages, and the bazaar – which maintain a close connection with the surrounding urban contexts and let passers-by cross the space, in the indoor shopping malls people are propelled to enter the space and to walk endlessly within it, in isolation from the city and with no other place to go (Bowby, 2001, pp. 76-77). Such a form of mobility is not only crucial to shopping centres’ ambience and sense of place, but is also instrumental in boosting commerce – the more shoppers roam around in the corridors and walk past shop windows, the higher the chances are that they step inside the shops and actually purchase something. In contemporary cities, that are planned to a large extent under the influence of ideals of modernism, according to which “lingering wandering *flânerie* is discouraged as non-utilitarian”, Deborah Parsons believes that shopping malls are one of the few spaces in contemporary cities in which walking is not only permitted, but also celebrated and utilised as integral to the performance of the space (2000, p. 13). By promoting walking, shopping centres also invite different forms of interaction, socialization, and communications that are rooted in, or spin-offs of, walking. In Iran, just like many other places in the Middle east (Abaza, 2001), urban youth increasingly go to shopping malls on dates, to meet up with friends or with opposite sexes, to socialize and to hang out (Bayat, 2010, p. 123).

The capacities and limitations of going for a walk and hanging out in a shopping mall in Tehran are explored in *Yousefabad, Khiyaban-e siyo sevvom* (33<sup>rd</sup> street, Yousefabad)<sup>2</sup>. My focus in this chapter is the first section of the book, which describes a first date between Saman and Neda, which takes place in the *Golestan* shopping centre in Tehran. The shopping centre is not just a random location, but is

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<sup>2</sup> All citations from *Yousefabad, Khiyaban-e siyo sevvom* are my translations.

portrayed as significant to the youth's hanging out and leisure. Saman, who considers himself a professional maller, sees Tehran's shopping centres as magnets that draw young people and couples from all over the city: "Every mall is an ocean; and streets make big rivers that discharge into the ocean" (Dadkhah, 2009, p. 25). The chapter is narrated by Saman, and starts in a cold dark winter evening, as he awaits Neda in front of the entrance to the *Golestan* shopping centre, excited about the dream-like situation that he would soon be in, walking with her in the warm and cosy *Golestan*. As Saman's mind sways back and forth in time, the reader realizes that, even though Saman sees the time he is about to spend with the girl he has been secretly in love with (but has never had the guts to ask out) as a sort of date – a precious opportunity to be out together – it was in fact Neda who had asked him over the phone to accompany her on a shopping trip: "I want to buy a knee-high boot. The one I bought last year is worn out...so let's go to *Golestan*..." (Dadkhah, 2009, p. 8). The date is disguised, so to speak, as a sort of shopping trip, for which Neda has requested Saman's assistance, as someone who knows all about shopping and Tehran's shopping centres.

Throughout their subsequent walk in the shopping centre, which constitutes the rest of the chapter, their mode of presence in space is an unclear and sometimes puzzling combination of shopping as leisurely stroll in the mall, target shopping as looking for the specified pair of boots, and hanging out together on a date. What further complicates the nature of the walk is the deadening silence that endures throughout their walk together in the shopping centre. Neda is self-absorbed and does not speak a word, and Saman cannot find a way to break the ice. Not being able to relate to his surroundings or to Neda in the present, in his mind, Saman reproduces the missing cosiness of the mall and joy of wandering in it by reviewing his past shopping experiences, the excitement he used to get from wandering in malls (alone or with other girls) and the feeling of luxury he used to get by living the "global dream" that the commodities evoked (Dadkhah, 2009, p. 17). In the present, however, this aura that the shopping mall was supposed to create for his time with Neda is completely unavailable to him. The wandering in the shopping centre that the book portrays, is therefore equivocal in generating a sense of place. As a basic mode of sensory experience of space, walking seems not to connect the subject to the environment, but amounts to various forms of inattention and emptiness.

In their analysis of shopping environments in the UK, Degen and Rose (2012) argue that, regardless of the intentions of the designers and planners, the sensory experience of built environments is predicated on two types of mediation. Firstly, “it is mediated by bodily mobility: in particular, the walking practices specific to a particular built environment” (Degen & Rose, 2012, p. 3271). What follows is that “sensory accounts of the city thus have to take account not only of the sensing body, but of how the sensory body is moving through urban space” (Degen & Rose, 2012, p. 3283). Secondly, Degen and Rose add, “sensory experiences are intimately intertwined with perceptual memories that mediate the present moment of experience in various ways: by multiplying, judging and dulling the sensory encounter” (2012, p. 3271). In other words, the immediate bodily experience of place, enacted by physical mobility (walking), is marred by moments of “being carried away” by the invocations of another time and space, a certain “spacing out” or “partial absence of mind”, that could be thought of as “distractions” in the proximate time and space (Morse, 1990, pp. 193-194). Attentive sensory engagement in space therefore incorporates several ways of inattention to the material, visible, and touchable elements of the environment one passes through. Such mental distractions are equally central to the flâneur’s experience of space, who “typically lets associations and memories flow through him which are stimulated by the distractions and impressions of the moment” (Featherstone, 1998, p. 915).

Whether carried away by what lies beyond the physical environment – such as memories – or taken by the sensory stimuli present in the surroundings, the experience of the shopping mall contains multiple ways of not seeing and inattention to the surroundings. Degen et al. (2008) indicate that walking in the shopping mall entails variegated ways of looking – such as manoeuvring, thin unfocused looks or thick more engaged looks – and ways of not looking. The experience of being in the mall is not only about looking, but entails different intense moments in which the visual disappears. Degen et al. suggest that such disappearances occur mostly during interactions in the mall: “we found that when we started talking to each other – chatting, about the project or other things – we simply didn’t see the mall any more.” (2008, p. 1917) Degen et al. write:

we found repeatedly that when we were with somebody else in the mall, we tended to focus our attention on the interaction with that person. Neither

person then seems to pay a lot of attention to other people or the surroundings. This is reflected in the go-along recordings in particular. Often, a more general conversation was interrupted by a moment of recognition or encounter in the mall, a focused looking at a shop or an item of interest. Little scraps of conversation were left and picked up again. A sudden whiff of smell or the sound of a song sparked memories and situated the view in a personal realm. (Degen, et al., 2008, p. 1912)

In Sina Dadkhah's story, however, the characters not only seem to not see the mall and not engage with it, but also seem to be unable to interact with one another. This strong inattention and impossibility of engagement clearly irritates Saman, who keeps telling himself that it is utterly bad to feel void instead of excitement while walking alongside Neda in *Golestan* – an otherwise dreamlike situation. Although Saman seems to be occupied with his thoughts himself, he blames Neda, who seems to not to be interested in anything, who walks with her hands in her pockets and her head facing forward, not even checking shop windows for the pair of boots that she had intended to buy. At some point, she even takes out her iPod and put the earbuds in her ears. After what seems like a long silence, Saman suddenly exclaims: "Look there! What an awesome boot!" (Dadkhah, 2009, p. 20) But, even then, Neda does not show any reactions or signs of interest. Exasperated by the silence that reigns over their walk-together in the shopping centre, Saman remembers that they had not only talked for quite a while on the phone the night before, but they had also laughed a lot. He thinks spontaneity is what is missing in their current situation and is needed for the smooth flow of words. Only a spontaneous interruption, he muses, can change the deadening silence and disengagement they are experiencing: "I hope the electricity runs out in Golestan and you scream out of fear" (Dadkhah, 2009, p. 29).

The moment of interruption finally comes when Neda's phone rings. This incident marks the only time that Saman intentionally and directly addresses Neda, to inform her (who has her earplugs in her ears) that her phone is ringing. Their evening together has to come to an end as Neda is summoned by her mother to go home. Rather than feeling unhappy for the lost opportunity to be with Neda, Saman feels quite relieved that the evening comes to an end. As the taxi moves away, Saman receives, in text form via SMS, the only words that Neda is finally able to utter to him

that night: “Sorry, and goodbye ...” (Dadkhah, 2009, p. 34). Verbal interaction between them takes shape only in the form of a direct notification, rather than mutual communication. Saman and Neda’s shopping experience ends in sadness and despair, as Neda leaves and Saman sits on the curb and reads her message.

The experience of the phantasmagoric shopping centre of Dadkhah’s story is one of failure in communication. Yet, rather than walking around like zombies unaware of what they are doing, the mallers in this story are quite conscious of their situation in the shopping centre. Rather than absent-mindedly roaming the mall, Saman – and, by implication, Neda – are mentally agile throughout their otherwise non-communicative walk-together in the *Golestan* shopping centre. Saman and Neda are aware of what they want to tell to one another, but cannot put it into words. They know exactly what they should do in the mall, but fail to actualize it.

What I want to emphasize is that, in spite of the apparent failure of communication in the mall in Dadkhah’s story, the experience itself is not totally futile. The eerie silence that the characters find themselves lapsing into denotes the inability and difficulty of a moment of transition. It encapsulates the liminal condition in which the normative and already accustomed modes of saying, seeing, and communicating are held at bay, waiting for a new order to be materialized. It also signifies the failure to be productive in moments of intense excitement. After all, in spite of all the disappointments, Saman is thrilled to bits to be walking alongside Neda, as his inner voice confesses: “Neda is here! Boy! Do you believe it? Next to you and shoulder to shoulder to you is she who is walking.” (Dadkhah, 2009, p. 19) Their mutual silence addresses the impossibility of putting into words feelings that are profoundly complicated, intense, and hitherto unknown to the person. Neda and Saman finally get the opportunity to express their feelings towards each other at the very end of the book, for which that initial futile experience in the mall could be seen as a moment of transition. As such, I believe that the experience of the shopping mall presented in *Yousefabad, Khiyaban-e siyo sevvom / 33<sup>rd</sup> street, Yousefabad* persistently defies the reification of the existing norms, and puts relations into a state of liminality. I see value in the way in which the visual, verbal, gestural, and communicative regimes get suspended in this experience.

### Conclusion

In this chapter I have explored the conceptual, experiential, and structural bearings of the shopping mall by focusing on the practices of walking that it propagates and the scopic regime to which it is subject. I have explained that the visual regime of the shopping mall is suggestive of connections between the character of the maller – the stroller who hangs out in the shopping mall – and the figure of the flâneur/flâneuse, who takes pleasure in leisurely walks in order to see and, partly, to be seen. The maller, therefore, is not a consumer of commodities per se, but is someone who consumes the experience that the shopping mall offers, which entails a sensory experience that combines walking and looking. Functioning within the maller's field of vision, I have identified a variety of more or less prolonged looks – gazing, watching, and staring – as well as transient, slippery, unfocused, blurry, and thin looks. On that account, this chapter has in part attempted to respond to the question raised by Sean Nixon: “How are we to think of the incitement and exchange of looks – what can be thought of as a language of looks – that make up a large and often neglected part (within critical commentaries) of the experience of shopping” (1992, p. 153).

By exploring intricacies present in the scopic regime of the shopping mall, this chapter argues that a tension resides between the regimes of visibility that the shopping centre nurtures, and those public orders of the visible that it functions within and is designed to be fulfilling. For instance, unlike the implications of extravagance, shininess, and wholeness of the spectacle that suffuse the critical writing on the topic, fictional and visual works focused on the experience of shopping centres project rather drab aesthetics of everyday indistinctiveness. This chapter claims that the lived, narrated, and visualized experience of the shopping centre neither succumbs to the global tyranny of consumerism, nor does it propose an alternative local appropriation of it; rather, it undermines dominating scopic regimes of shopping, by providing conditions for the suspension – hence absence – of any definitive, normative and commodified visibility. Regarding the tightly structured orders of public presence in Iran, this chapter argues that similar conditions for the suspension of normativity are in place in the hugely popular Iranian shopping experience, rendering it ambiguous, uncertain and difficult to grasp.

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In short, I have argued that the experience of the shopping centre creates a liminal condition that not only rejects fixed positionality in the orders of spatial, visual, and performative, but also defers the moment of fixation and rejects signification. Having analysed the interconnectedness of the visual, spatial, and performative in practices of shopping (walking, loitering, and *flânerie*), I see in the experiences of the shopping mall the suspension of orders that define what could be heard, said, seen, and looked at, and how such communication should be conducted. Fully aware of the vulnerability of this fluid condition to subjugation by alternative yet dominant (fixating) structures of the visible and new normative identity positions, I like to see in it possibilities for the endurance of the condition of suspension itself – a sort of sustained liminality, ripe with unnameable modes of being and performing to arrive.

Asef Bayat finds potential in the practices of everyday life in Iran in the way ordinary people strive for artful and tactical ways of “asserting collective will in spite of all odds, circumventing constraints, utilizing what is possible, and discovering new spaces within which to make oneself heard, seen, and felt” (Bayat, 2007, p. 202). One way of approaching the experience of the shopping mall would then be to consider the maller as the *flâneur/flâneuse*, who self-assertively makes himself/herself ‘heard, seen and felt’ by the crowd in the mall. Rather than overemphasizing the exhibitionist attitudes of the maller, in wandering in order to ‘hear, see, and feel’ others and to be ‘heard, seen, and felt’ himself/herself, I believe that the value of shopping *flânerie* lies in the ways that it complicates the grounds on which manners of seeing, hearing, and sensing are socially constructed and culturally meaningful. Therefore, I argue that the Iranian maller in effect fails to make himself ‘heard, seen, and felt’ in the mall in such a creative way, that it allows for the disarticulation of the framework in which the prevailing forms of identification based on certain normative orders are taking place. By failing to make himself/herself ‘heard, seen, and felt’, the Iranian maller poses critique on the ways in which one is to be heard, seen, and felt within the seemingly contradictory regimes that propel certain ways of hearing, seeing, and feeling, while rejecting others.