CHAPTER 17

Tehran city symphonies: The sounds of conflicted modernities, silent spaces and highway pleasures

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Introduction

> Our taverns and our metropolitan streets, our offices and furnished rooms, our railroad stations and our factories appeared to have us locked up hopelessly. Then came the film and burst this prison-world asunder by the dynamite of the tenth of a second, so that now, in the midst of its far-flung ruins and debris, we calmly and adventurously go travelling.[1]

The 'city symphony' (or 'city poem', sometimes just 'city film') is a particular kind of avant-garde/experimental film that emerged in the period following the First World War, primarily in Europe and North America. Born out of rapid urbanization and industrialization and the ensuing social changes that marked this period, these films have attracted a great deal of scholarly and journalistic attention, including much discussion over whether the city symphony can be considered a genre in its own right, as convincingly argued by Jacobs et al.[2] As they note, there was considerable flux at this time in terms of filmic style and conventions, and the city symphonies drew on elements from experimental, narrative and newly emerging documentary film as well as wider artistic movements. A number of cultural commentators at this time noted interesting parallels between the modernizing city and the relatively new medium of film, most notably Walter Benjamin who believed cinema to be an ideal medium for depicting the realities and intimacies of city life. In this chapter, we explore a number of Iranian short films made in the city symphony style, starting with *Tehran 51* (1972), a ten-minute short by Khosrow Parvizi (1933–2012), the first and only such film made in Iran before the 1979 revolution and that stood as the sole example of its kind for the next thirty years. From the early 2010s, a new interest in the 'city as character' led to a number of films that clearly follow (on from) earlier examples of the city symphony genre as discussed later, testifying to the lasting impact of the city symphony on film aesthetics. We are specifically interested in films about the capital city, Tehran, and in the role of music and sound more broadly, in particular how sound is used to structure films that lack a strong narrative.

There is a fairly substantial literature on the history of the city symphony, a full survey of which lies beyond the scope of this chapter. We will, however, explore some of the central themes

of this work in order to contextualize the discussion that follows. The most comprehensive study to date is the 2019 volume *The City Symphony Phenomenon. Cinema, Art, and Urban Modernity between the Wars* (edited by Jacobs et al.), a collection of writings that includes a substantial introductory overview chapter, a series of shorter chapters focused on individual films or film-makers and a final section offering an immensely useful annotated chronological catalogue of more than eighty films made between 1921 and 1940, some of which are now lost, each with a list of additional reading and references. Other work includes journal articles and book chapters focused on specific themes or films,[3] with *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City* (*Berlin: Die Sinfonie der Großstadt*, Walter Ruttmann, 1927), the first to use 'symphony' in its title, attracting particular attention. In the 1920s and 1930s, films were made about many cities – and specific areas or neighbourhoods within cities – mostly in Europe and North America: Berlin, Paris and New York were particular favourites, but there were also films about Moscow, Milan, Rotterdam, Amsterdam, Ostend, Montreal, Prague, Vienna, Lisbon, Madrid, Nice, Porto, Santa Fe, Stockholm, Liverpool, Amsterdam, Chicago as well as a few outside Euro-America such as São Paulo, Tokyo and Shanghai.

Whilst our focus here is on the city symphony film in Iran, it's useful to summarize the main characteristics of the genre as it emerged in Europe and North America in the 1920s, in order to understand how Iranian film-makers have responded to or resisted genre conventions. Generally speaking, city symphonies are non-fiction films without a narrative structure or narrator (although some early films used intertitles) that seek to capture city life and with the city itself as a living organism and central protagonist rather than simply a backdrop. Such films presented the city as the archetype of modernity and were part of a broader avant-garde exploration of emergent urban modernisms among visual artists, photographers and others in the period following the First World War. The films were often poetic and reflexive in style, characterized by 'loose narratives, episodic structures, mobile camerawork, and swift editing';[4] they occasionally included action sequences and typically, but not always, followed a 'day in the life' structure (that was of course not filmed in a single day) from sunrise to sunset or sunrise to sunrise. What is often considered the first 'city film', *Manhatta* (1921)[5]

> initiated a number of motifs that would become staples of the city symphony film later in the 1920s, including: a dawn-to-dusk structure; a fascination with modern architecture (especially Lower Manhattan's dense concentration of skyscrapers), modern construction, modern industry, modern transportation, New York's 'culture of congestion', and a profound interest in using unusual vantage points and disorienting compositions in order to capture this material.[6]

Often considered a form of documentary and generally filmed on location (in contrast to studio-based fiction cinema that was growing at this time), this style had far-reaching impacts, including on mainstream cinema as well as wider artistic fields. Among the tropes commonly encountered in the city symphony was the urban crowd, the 'unexpected and unpredictable contingencies of urban modernity'[7] and the 'stark juxtapositions: old versus new, light versus dark, rich versus poor, blue-collar versus white-collar, religious versus secular, traditional versus modern'.[8] Above all, 'The city symphony is not only a film *about* the modern metropolis; its formal and structural organization is also the perfect embodiment of metropolitan modernity.'[9] City symphony films often focused on

> celebrating the dynamics of industrial speed and the frenetic pace of modern urban life and its highly fragmented and kaleidoscopic nature, city symphonies take the pulse of the city and quite literally translate it into the rhythm of cinema … The dynamic and fragmented structure of cinema is presented as being an extension of the city itself – the shifting perspectives, the pace of the editing, the special effects are all presented as both expressions and products of modern metropolitan life.[10]

These films, then, were essentially odes to modernity, marking 'a specific moment in urban history: that of the modern and industrial metropolis characterized by centralization and congestion'.[11] We see cities as places of work and of leisure and entertainment – made possible by the 'electrification that had been such an important part of industrialization and urbanization in North America since the 1880s, and that swept Europe in the 1920s'[12] – and as the locus of a new kind of consumer culture emerging in the 1920s:

> Factories mass-produce consumer items, people observe and purchase commodities of all kinds, fashion models parade around in haute couture, streets are lined with shops, meals and drinks are consumed, and the traffic in bodies and vehicles that figures so prominently in so many of these films attests to the commercial dynamism of these cities. Frequently, the camera draws attention to the spectacle of shop windows and the act of window shopping.[13]

The city symphony films of the 1920s and 1930s can justifiably be regarded as an artistic movement and the genre continued to be widely influential for decades, even though fewer films were made in the post-Second World War period. This was perhaps partly due to the perception that such films had become somewhat formulaic, but more importantly, the war changed both cities and film-making practices, the former seen, for instance, in the post-war emergence of the 'suburban' in Europe and North America and serious challenges to the earlier optimism and somewhat romanticized image of the modern metropolis. This is not to say that some earlier film-makers did not use the genre as a vehicle of social critique and to lay bare the 'underbelly' and alienating aspects of the new urban modernities.[14] The last film to be made in this period, *The City* (Ralph Steiner and Willard Van Dyke, 1939; filmed in New York) was an indictment of modernity and the lack of urban planning in the United States made on the eve of the Second World War. Certainly, the small number of later films that can be described as city symphonies or that significantly draw on the city symphony aesthetic stood in a very different and more conflicted relationship to modernity compared with the often celebratory and utopian ideas about progress in earlier films.[15] As Jacobs et al. observe, 'In the US and also in Europe, where urban centers were transformed in landscapes of rubble during the War, the nature of the city definitely changed. The cycle of city symphonies came to an end when the urban landscape itself started to transform and when the city became rather a condition than a well-defined space.'[16] This more ambivalent relationship with modernity is seen clearly in the film *Tehran 51* as discussed later. The influence of the city symphony genre has continued to be felt in many different kinds of film-making. Jacobs et al. finish their introductory chapter by referencing the 1983 film *Koyaanisqatsi* (Godfrey Reggio, 1982) as 'testament that the city symphony form was still alive, but the conditions and the dreams that had brought this genre of filmmaking into existence were now in ruins'.[17]

City symphonies and sound

So what about music, and sound more generally, in the city symphony genre? Whilst there has been some attention to music and sound in the literature, this has tended to focus on the ways in which filmic structures symbolically parallel musical ones, rather than the actual use of sound or implied sounds. This is likely due to the fact that the early films were either silent or (later) set to newly composed or existing scores. Whilst some used intertitles, there is little information on the live music that might have accompanied screenings. Birdsall offers one of the few in-depth studies, exploring the representation of urban sound in a selection of films from the 1920s and 1930s, including the ways in which the symphony metaphor was manifested in film structures and the 'importance of sound in establishing the rhetoric of documentary and its claims to "truth," as well as contributing to the techniques of nonfiction dramatization'.[18] Sound came relatively late to documentary films and there was some resistance to synchronous sound recording and the use of outdoor sounds. In particular, Birdsall discusses the Soviet film-maker Dziga Vertov, director of the now iconic *Man with a Movie Camera* (*Chelovek s kino-apparatom*, 1929), and his interest in and complex relationship with sound. On the one hand, Vertov wanted to record the real sources of sound but was also concerned that the resulting sonic montage should not provide a 'simple synchrony' but rather a 'complex interaction of sound with image'.[19] *Man with a Movie Camera* was originally conceived as a sound film but the score was lost; nevertheless, as Birdsall describes, the film is saturated with implied and imagined sound (an orchestra tuning up, the sounds of bells and so on) as well as reflexively foregrounding the processes of its own making.[20]

From early on, the genre became infused with musical metaphor. As noted earlier, the first film to use the word 'symphony' in the title was *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City* (Walter Ruttmann, 1927), although Birdsall notes that Vertov was also working on similar ideas around the same time.[21] But the reference to music went far beyond metaphor: *Berlin* was structured into distinct movements, explicitly inspired by symphonic form, a feature that was adopted by later film-makers. Ruttman collaborated with composer Edmund Meisel, 'conceiving the film as a collaborative experiment in depicting the polyphony of urban rhythms'[22] and the film is

> divided into 'acts', each one dominated by a certain pace and rhythm as a result of which the entire film can be compared with a musical piece consisting of an allegro, andante, and a presto. Largely based on the rhythmic organization of images through editing, city symphonies took their cue from abstract experimental films that looked to music in order to find form.[23]

This kind of description of film editing as a kind of rhythmic composition is found repeatedly in writings on the genre and is something we hear clearly in the films discussed later. Hielscher cites the work of Alexander Graf according to whom 'city symphonies are characterized by a rhythmic and associative montage, representing "the pace and rhythm of urban life expressed through editing techniques." They internalize the rhythm of the city as their structuring principle instead of dealing with the modern city purely on a pictorial level'.[24] It is interesting how much of the literature reproduces these musical metaphors and analogies, but with curiously little discussion of sound itself. For instance, Jacobs et al. note: 'Shots were treated like musical notes, sequences were organized as if they were chords or melodies, scenes were built up into movements or

acts, and issues of rhythm, tempo, and polyphony figured prominently.'[25] Writing about *São Paulo: Sinfonia da Metrópole* (Brazil, 1929), Meneguello notes that the film is 'a flow of images. Its dramatic effects are determined by the *rhythmic curve* provided by *the orchestrated movements* of dawn, of men in the streets, factories, and urban activities'.[26] She goes on to describe how the rhythm of images compensates for the absence of sound in the film:

> Although a silent film, there is a part entirely dedicated to noise, to the urban sounds that mark the 'vertiginous' growth of the metropolis. Lunch time is described as a musical syncope, as a moment of rest for the nerves and brains. The symphony does not turn into silence, but is marked by a slower rhythm before becoming erratic again with footage of printing presses, schools, and illustrious persons visiting the city.[27]

Similarly, 'city symphonies are often structured according to rhythmic editing, the rapid succession of shots evoking the hectic rhythm of machines and the throbbing activity of the city streets'.[28] Such editing is also used to depict the rhythm of the day and particularly the 'temporal organization of the workday as a mainspring of the urban capitalist economy. Emphasizing the importance of rationalized time for modern metropolitan life'.[29] Writing about *De Maasbruggen* (a film about Rotterdam by Dutch designer Paul Schuitema, 1937), Paalma discusses how Schuitema 'sought for a new form in its representational connection to the city, looking for ways the city could be organized. Sound became an additional factor in that search. Schuitema asked composer Koos van de Griend to make a musical soundscape that emphasized the movements in the film'.[30]

As well as the term 'symphony' that came to be applied to the genre as a whole, many films had musical terms in their titles, such as 'Étude' (*Études des Mouvements à Paris*, Joris Ivens, 1927), 'Mélodie' (*Mélodie bruxelloise*, Carlo Queeckers, 1929) or 'Medley' (*Manhatten Medley*, Bonney Powell, 1931; this seems to have been the first city symphony with sound). As well as the names of films,'musicians abound in city symphonies, a characteristic that underlines the rhythms and musical structures that are so crucial to the genre. Often these scenes take place in night clubs and concert halls, but in some cases, such as Moholy-Nagy's *Gypsies of the Metropolis*, (*Grossstadt-Zigeuner* 1932) and *Barrel Organ*, (*Pierement,* Jan Teunissen, 1931), for instance, we find a focus on street musicians'.[31]

Whilst city symphonies maintained an interesting metaphorical and structural relationship with music, we rarely hear the actual sounds of cities. The films had a variety of soundtracks: many had specially composed scores (some now lost), which were performed live before the arrival of sound film; others used existing music; some started life as silent films and sound was added later; some had multiple soundtracks, as with *Rain* (*Regen* a film about Amsterdam, Joris Ivens and Mannus Franken, 1929):

> In 1932 Ivens asked Lou Lichtveld (also known as Albert Helman) to write a score for the originally silent film that Helen van Dongen partly reedited in accordance with the music. In 1941, a second sound version was made by Hanns Eisler, who titled his composition 'Fourteen Ways to Describe Rain'.[32]

The film *Gypsies of the Metropolis* (about Berlin, László Moholy-Nagy, 1932) was apparently 'originally made as a sound film, but, because of copyright issues, the soundtrack was declared illegal and destroyed'.[33] Even after the arrival of synchronous sound recording, some films

continued to be made and screened without a soundtrack or with live music. Some films were remade with sound, as in the interesting case of *City of Contrasts* (Irving Browning, 1931) which illustrates how sound can change the meanings of film visuals and their reception:

> The film appears to have been released in two versions – a silent version, and a sound version featuring a score, non-synchronous sound effects, and some acerbic narration by Kelvin Keech – and the disparities between the two make for very different viewing experiences. This is most starkly evident during a sequence where Browning documents the grim conditions within one of New York's 'Hooverville' shanty towns with empathy, just as he had in his still photography. But in the sound version the narrator's mocking tone is in full effect, referring to the desperation on view as a desirable example of 'pioneer living', and one that actually embodies the American Dream, for 'each own their own home'.[34]

City symphony films have stood in an interesting relationship to music and sound more broadly, from the lexical and metaphorical, to the use of rhythmical editing, in part compensating for the absence of sound film, to live and recorded soundtracks of various kinds. In the following discussion, we introduce a number of city symphony films focused on Tehran and consider the role of sound in them.

The city symphony in Iran: *Tehran 51*

We now move on to consider a number of Iranian films made in the city symphony style. We are interested in how these draw on established (and by the late 1930s somewhat formulaic) genre conventions whilst also developing their own local flavour and in particular how sound and music are used to structure and give rhythm to the films. As noted, the majority of city symphony films made in the 1920s and 1930s were of European and North American cities, and hence the literature has tended to focus on these. Notwithstanding the decline in interest in the genre from the 1940s, the idea was later taken up by a number of film-makers globally, including in Iran; here we focus on films about the capital Tehran. As far as we have been able to establish, Khosrow Parvizi's *Tehran 51* (1972) was the first film made in Iran that could be described as a city symphony; it is certainly the best known, is often considered to be the most important and was the only example of the genre in Iran for several decades.[35] Then, in the 2010s, a series of independent films were made that indicated a renewed interest in the city symphony genre in Iran. In the discussion that follows, we consider three of these films: *Burial* (Pouya Moradi, 2015), *Tehran, Closed City* (Hashem Shakeri, 2020) and *Tehran, City Symphony* (Kiana Ahmadi and Aydin Karimi, 2020). In the current section, we focus on *Tehran 51* and in particular its conflicted relationship with urban modernity and the role of sound in this.[36]

Notwithstanding the now significant body of literature on Iranian cinema, relatively little has been written on documentary films or experimental cinema and nothing to date on the city symphony genre in Iran. Golbarg Rekabtalaei explores the intimate relationship between early cinema and the city in Iran, particularly Tehran, and Hamid Naficy's early Persian-language book on documentary film includes a section on city symphony films, but none from Iran.[37] His

monumental four-volume *A Social History of Iranian Cinema* briefly discusses what he terms 'wartime city films' (in reference to the Iran-Iraq War), which he compares and contrasts to earlier city symphony films:

> Like these modernist 'city films', wartime city films exhibited a tripartite of place, time and causality, which gave them coherence and impact. Unlike their predecessors, which celebrated urbanity's novelty and industrialization and modernity's sensory overload, these films were primarily eulogies for lost cities, cities that had been damaged, defended, destroyed, or had survived modernity's worst onslaught: mechanized warfare.[38]

However, there is little consideration in the broader literature of the ironies of film – an art form deeply implicated in processes of modernity – serving as a medium to critique such processes.

The relative dearth of films in the city symphony style in Iran – and specifically in the context of our discussion, on Tehran – does not mean that documentary films were not made about Tehran. Quite the reverse, a number of documentaries, many with social realist and critical approaches, focus on Tehran, not to mention the large number of feature films in which the city plays a prominent role. One of the earliest documentaries was *South of the City* (*Jonub-e shahr*, Farrokh Ghaffari, 1958).[39] However, as Zeydabadi-Nejad discusses, citing Golmakani,[40] *South of the City* was consequently prohibited and reissued in a cleaned-up version, and a series of films were also commissioned to portray the capital in a more positive light. Later documentaries in a similar vein include *Tehran Is the Capital of Iran* (*Tehrān, payetakht-e iran ast*, Kamran Shirdel, 1966–79), *The Women's Quarter*, (*Qaleh*, Kamran Shirdel, 1966–80), *Tehran, Old and New* (*Tehrān-e kohne va no*, Bahman Farmanara, 1972), *Impressions of a City, Tehran Today* (Khosrow Sinai, 1978) and *Centralisation* (*Tamarkoz*, Rakhshan Banietemad, 1986), the latter focused on the poorly managed and chaotic expansion of Tehran in the 1980s, largely as a result of rural to urban migration that followed the revolution. Whilst these films did not follow the conventions or aesthetics of city symphonies, they were clearly influenced by them.

Khosrow Parvizi (1933–2012) had a background as a journalist and was already a well-established director of both documentary and feature films in the *filmfarsi* style by the time he made *Tehran 51* in 1972. It's hard to find information on his motivations for making the film and the extent to which he was familiar with earlier city symphony films, although we know from Parvizi's memoires that he was familiar with cinema movements outside Iran. *Tehran 51* was screened at the 5th Sepas Festival (*Jashnvāreh-ye Sepās*) in Iran and Fereydoon Reypoor was awarded the *Diplom-e Eftekhāri* for its cinematography,[41] but there is little information on audience reception and wider screenings in Iran or abroad.[42] Filming took place over the course of twelve days and the sound technician was Galost Goorkian, an Iranian-Armenian sound editor who also worked on Parvizi's 1975 film *The Chandelier* (*Chelcherāgh*, Khosrow Parvizi, 1976); the sound was edited and mixed at Studio Shahab in Tehran by Goorkian and Parvizi.[43] In this section of the chapter, we describe the film and then consider the role of sound in it. *Tehran 51* very much follows in the vein of earlier films as described by Jacobs et al. in not being 'character-based … it is the city's architecture, its technology and machinery, and the collective body of its anonymous population that are the true protagonists of these films'.[44] In true city symphony style, *Tehran 51* comprises a rapidly changing collage of scenes from the modern city. It begins with an aerial view of Tehran seen through a small portal, before zooming in to the city and

offering establishing shots of well-known buildings such as the A.S.P. Towers (among the first high-rise residential buildings in Tehran), the Saman Towers on Elizabeth Boulevard[45] and the iconic Shahyad Tower.[46] Most of these are filmed from unusual angles, including from below, looking up to the towering buildings. The film then cuts to the inside of a bank where we see a teller counting notes for a customer, his dark glasses and cigarette in mouth, suggesting a slightly shady character who puts the money in a briefcase and slips into the congested and chaotic streets of the city. This scene sets up the frame for the film, implying that this ready cash is fuelling everything that follows. From here, the viewer is led through a dizzying array of shots, sequences and semi-staged scenes showcasing modern life in Tehran. From car assembly lines to aerial shots of traffic, from meat factory to television studio, from petrol station to hospital, from zoo to bottling plant. We see a police officer attempting to control traffic and pedestrians struggling to find space to walk. We witness a street fight after a (possibly staged) car accident, a scene that is cross-edited with images of sheep and goats being slaughtered and processed in a meat factory. In a later scene (also staged) set in a service station (from 6:47), we see a petrol spillage as a car is being filled up, leading to a fire. The on-screen image then cuts to the fire station: we hear the siren and see firefighters slide down the pole and a convoy of fire engines set off towards the fire. Note that the petrol pump nozzle is very similar to a gun, and the fire engine sirens are reminiscent of a war siren. Generally speaking, there is a great deal of close-up shooting, creating a sense of claustrophobia. From the starting point in a bank, the film ends with scenes of a modern department store, most likely *Kourosh* store on Pahlavi Street,[47] another representative of capitalist consumerism.

There are a numbers of ways in which *Tehran 51* follows the conventions of the city symphony genre: presenting the modern city as central protagonist, the absence of a strong narrative or narration, the montage of impressionistic sequences and the frenetic pace of city life. Whilst the film includes no dialogue or specific plotlines, there are several mini-vignette sequences, some of which are clearly staged, as noted. But in contrast to many (but not all) of the 'classic' city symphony films, *Tehran 51* offers an almost total indictment of what modernity has wrought in Iran and in particular its dehumanizing and alienating aspects. The overarching narrative is of a hyper-modernizing city and society, one in which industry and mechanization have taken over. In this respect, there are clear resonances with earlier films such a *Impressions of the Old Harbour of Marseille* (*Impressionen vom Alten Marseiller Hafen*, László Moholy-Nagy, 1929)*, Housing Problems* (Elton and E.H. Anstey, 1935), *Houses of Misery* (*Les Maisons de la Misère*, Henri Storck, 1937) and *The City* (Ralph Steiner and Willard Van Dyke, 1939) which displayed a less celebratory, more ambivalent and even critical relationship with urban modernity, although it's unclear to what extent Parvizi would have known these films. Writing about *World City in Its Teens: A Report on Chicago*, also known as *Chicago: A World City Stretches Its Wings* (*Weltstadt in Flegeljahren: Ein Bericht über Chicago*, Heinrich Hauser, 1931), Hielscher observes:

> Though Hauser considered Chicago to be 'the most beautiful city in the world', his city symphony is notable for its critique of the modern American city, and of the United States in general. Particularly in the film's fourth section, Hauser shows the negative sides of the metropolis and the effects of mechanized production and rationalized labor: unemployment, poverty, alcoholism, and crime. His Chicago city

> symphony alternates between fascination and fear, curiosity and critique, enthusiasm and reservation.[48]

Tehran 51 is very much in this mould. The broader context within which the film should be understood is of the rapid drive towards modernization that was promoted by the Pahlavi regime from the 1920s and which had reached a peak in the early 1970s.[49] This in turn generated an intellectual movement that became known as *bazgasht be kheeshtan* ('return to self') and that strongly influenced Parvizi. This movement became a dominant voice in the arts, literature and philosophy in the 1960s and 1970s and centred around a critique of modernity, with a strong anti-colonial dimension, in the face of foreign involvement in Iran. It brought together ideas about 'returning to roots' with leftist ideologies and found its expression in the works of writers such as Jalal Al-e Ahmad (1923–69), Ahmad Fardid (1909–94) and Seyyed Hossein Nasr (b. 1993) and the school of painters known as *saqqakhaneh*.[50] Also influential in such discourses was the prominent writer Ahmad Shamloo (1925–2000) whose poetry characterizes the city as a space of 'alienation and hatred': 'I love her/Because I know her/By her friendship and uniqueness/The city/Is all alienation and hatred' (from the poem 'Shabaneh (Nocturnal)' (*Dustash midāram*… ('I love her…)'))[51] or 'Between the heavy roar of machines and the mixture of azan (call to prayer) and jazz/I heard the song of a little dove/As if the radiation of a single star/Behind the mixed curtain of clouds and smoke' (from the poem '*Rastegārān*' ('The Redeemed')).[52] In line with this intellectual trend, Parvizi presents the city and its new developments as an antagonist that turns people against one another. Those same people are depicted as gullible and compliant: we see sheep in slaughterhouses and meat factories, the carcases torn apart and processed, suggesting that under its sophisticated skin the modern city is a brutal machine that rips apart lives.[53] Parvizi himself wrote about his motivations for making the film:

> I prepared the scheme for filming this ten-minute documentary after overviewing different corners of Tehran from the frame of a cinematograph. Tehran was rapidly expanding during that period. The population was growing more than expected, in a city that still had some traditional characteristics. Economic institutions and various factories were established. Lots of car factories, pasteurized milk and soft drink factories, large chain stores, high-rise buildings, the opening of cinema and theatre salons, numerous restaurants, the city's traffic jams, and hundreds of other cases were a sign that Tehran was reaching bursting point; and undoubtedly needed a plan to be saved from this urban mess. Otherwise, in a not-so-far future, this lovely city would turn into a hideous jungle of meat, iron, carriage, car and crowd, under a roof of smoke … I thought to myself that by making *Tehran 51*, I can stand up to save the chaos and disorder of a city in which its citizens have been stuck in an unbalanced circle of tradition and technology, and are reaching a point of explosion.[54]

What Parvizi chooses to omit from the camera frame is also significant: we see nothing of the spaces of leisure – cafés, dance clubs, cinemas or restaurants – that were an important part of the newly born public sphere associated with the arrival of modernity in Iran from several decades before the film was made and which significantly were also key locations in fictional feature films of the time. What is also missing is portrayal of more traditional infrastructure and architecture

that was still an important part of the urban experience or more traditional industries such as brickmaking or leatherworks.

So what about the role of sound in *Tehran 51*? As in earlier city symphony films, so here sound and music are used to present 'a highly fragmented, oftentimes kaleidoscopic sense of modern life, and they organized their urban-industrial images through rhythmic and associative montage that evoke musical structures'.[55] Similarly, the fast-paced visual editing gives the film a particular rhythmic character and the rapid cutting from scene to scene is mediated through sound. *Tehran 51* is saturated with the fast-paced and relentless diegetic sounds and noise pollution of the industrial metropolis: factories of various kinds (car, textiles, bottling, boots), traffic, whistles, sirens, police radios, medical equipment, typewriters, communication towers, loudspeakers and on and on. At various points, industrial sounds are deployed in a highly rhythmic and quasi-musical way, bringing to mind Birdsall's 'polyphony of urban rhythms', for instance, the sounds of the newspaper print room (5:43) or the bottling factory (7:36). Above all, sound is used to represent the ways in which urban industrialization has come to control human beings and in particular to enforce and regulate regimes of labour and centralized power. But the film actually begins with quite different music: the aerial view of Tehran is accompanied by a sweeping harp solo such as had become commonly used in Euro-American cinema to introduce dream or fairy-tale sequences. It's hard to know whether it was Parvizi's intention to set the film up as a 'dream' and then ironically present a nightmare instead. The harp solo leads into a dramatic 'epic' orchestral underscore for the images of iconic buildings.[56] The music then stops for the bank scene, which is eerily quiet other than the sounds of paper banknotes being counted and the clink of the metal coupon. Once the man leaves the bank, we are unleashed into the chaotic sounds of the Tehran streets and the disciplining sounds of industry. The latter starts at 1:20 and the relatively long siren (1:25 to 1:51) indicates this sonic disciplining of bodies and a source of anxiety. The sounds of machines alternate and are overlaid with non-diegetic sounds such as the military drumming that accompanies a group of car assembly workers as they literally march into work, as if heading into battle and dressed from head to foot in full factory (military) regalia (3:00–3:26), conveying a strong sense of military mission and order. This segues into a sequence showing different areas of the assembly plant, with the attendant deafening noises of machinery, welding, spraying and so on. At 4:02, the film cuts to the final product: a key being turned in the new automobile's ignition and we are back on the streets of Tehran. A traffic warden attempts to establish control through his whistle, but the cars are revving their engines and raring to go as if at the starting line of a race, and as soon as he gives the signal off they go (4:06). The overall ambience is one of conflict and competition. The passage that follows is an interesting sonic collage of car horns, accompanied by images of traffic and congestion. The military theme returns briefly at 4:42 as the camera cuts to the sky above Tehran and we see and hear helicopters hovering above the traffic chaos below. Back on the streets, the inevitable car crash happens at 4:54, followed by the fight scene mentioned earlier, interleaved with shots from a slaughterhouse and meat factory; there is some playful parallel editing here between strings of sausages and people rolling on the ground fighting (5:30–5:37). The choice of these images and in particular the use of animal sounds – the loud bellowing of sheep and cows – seem to imply the control, corralling and ultimately the destruction of humanity. Following the fire engine passage described earlier, there is a stark sonic contrast at 7:38 as the film cuts to the relative quiet of a hospital clinic, with the soft humming and light clicks of equipment overlaid by a non-diegetic heartbeat: the sounds of

human and machine fused together. From a hospital drip, the images segue into various factory scenes of bottling of different liquids, with the clinking of bottles mixed with the sounds of liquids and machines and ending with milk bottles and an image of a cow (8:44) linking us back to the earlier bellowing. This leads straight into more animal sounds, with a close-up of a roaring lion starting a passage filmed in a zoo (most likely Tehran Zoo), with the implication that modern Tehran is like a zoo. Mirroring the earlier playful visual editing, there is some humorous word play here, with the image cutting from 'milk' to 'lion', which share the same name in Persian – *shir*; we hear the roar of the lion just after seeing the milk bottle. There follows a series of images of other wild animals – a bear, a rhinoceros, a leopard before a sudden shift as the camera zooms out by rapid jerks to the sound of what could be camera clicks or gun shots, to the original aerial view over the city from where the film started. A full two seconds of complete silence lead into the final department store scene (from 9:05). As we follow the camera travelling up an escalator, the film cuts back to earlier images of factories, making the connection between industrialization and the consumerist end point of the department store, all set to a sombre and tragic-sounding orchestral score, the same music with which the film started. Reaching the top of the escalator, we see a throng of people in the modern shop, almost like ants. The music continues for the final credit sequence which returns to aerial vistas over Tehran, including the backdrop of the dramatic Alborz mountains, perhaps as a reminder that there are more powerful forces and historical spans that transcend modernity and capitalism.

Overall, *Tehran 51* offers a somewhat bleak and dystopian image of modernity in Tehran, one in which ordinary citizens have lost control to a capitalist system in which machines reign supreme. This is a modernity that allows citizens limited agency: urban industrialization is something that happens to them and that they have little choice about. There are also questions of national agency here, since this drive to modernity was largely fuelled both financially and literally by the oil that made Iran so geo-strategically important to external powers such as Britain and the United States and for whom by the early 1970s she was also serving as a military power in the region. The same oil was responsible for an overinflated public sector and the expansion of Tehran in the 1960s and 1970s as well as the growth of an oil rich elite. We might even suggest that this film is ultimately about 'petrosonics': the sounds of oil.[57] Unlike some of the documentaries mentioned earlier, *Tehran 51* does not focus on the widening gap between rich and poor; we don't see the slums and poverty-stricken areas as we do in *South of the City*. Here the focus is on how industrialization and modernity have dehumanized the city. And sound is an important part of this, conveying a sense of tension and chaos on the one hand, and on the other the order and control to which humans are subject, whether through machines or the centralized state.

Tehran, Closed City

As far as we have been able to establish, *Tehran 51* was the first and for a long time the only Iranian city symphony film. There then followed a long hiatus when only one film was made: *Symphony of the City* (*Samfoni-e shahr*, Mohammad Afarideh, 2000, fourteen minutes, thirty-seven seconds).[58] However, in the last twelve years or so, there has been a renewed interest in the city symphony concept, with a number of films that take the genre in new directions.

One of the most interesting is *Tehran, Closed City* (*Tehrān, Shahr-e Khāmush*, Hashem Shakeri, 2020, nine minutes, six seconds), which was filmed in the spring of 2020 and is a chronicle of life in Tehran in the early months of the Covid-19 pandemic.[59] One of the most striking features of this film is its reduced sound palette and in particular the absence of the sounds (or implied sounds) of industry and other aspects of mechanized modern life that was such a focus of critique in *Tehran 51*. From a sonic perspective, *Tehran, Closed City* brings to mind a certain style of Iranian art-house cinema that emerged in the 1980s and gained success on the international film circuit and was often set in rural locations with untrained actors and featured a pared down sonic aesthetic. In the case of *Tehran, Closed City*, the sparse sound might have indicated some kind of pastoral idyll were it not for the signs of an apocalyptic event – the closed shops, empty highways, shuttered market stalls and silent queues of people – the full implications of which are only understood in the knowledge of events that swept the world in early 2020. In stark contrast to the relentless, dehumanizing and noisy modernity of *Tehran 51*, *Tehran, Closed City* is saturated with a sense of space and distance: it is the same city but life has slowed right down and sound with it. There is in fact an interesting double meaning in the film's title, since *khāmush* in Persian means both 'closed' and 'silent'. In line with its genre predecessors, *Tehran, Closed City* is a montage of quite ordinary scenes of life – exercising in the park, dog walking, riding on a bus, queuing outside a shop, drawing cash from an ATM and so on, but in quite extraordinary times. People still do things together – play chess in the park, knock about a basketball and wait at a bus stop – but all in silence.

In contrast to *Tehran 51*, then, humanity is at the centre of the film, but it is a strange kind of humanity with little communication between people who navigate the city in their personal silent bubbles. We see many individuals on their own: sitting, standing and waiting. This is not a peaceful silence, but an uneasy and unnatural one borne of enforced human segregation, a silence of fear, uncertainty and dealing with the unknown. This is a silence that brings to mind Azar Nafisi's description of Tehran as a 'ghost town' during the 1980s' Iran-Iraq War when many sought safety from missile strikes by leaving the city.[60] Whilst dialogue is not generally part of the city symphony aesthetic, in films such as *Manhatta* (Charles Sheeler, 1921) or *Berlin, Symphony of a Great City* (1927) we are able to imagine the sounds of people interacting, working and talking, the constant movement and bustle reflecting the dynamic nature of the modern city. In *Tehran, Closed City*, the lack of even implied dialogue represents a void and an absence of human relations. In this symphony, the city of Tehran itself recedes into the background and there are only a few distinguishing markers such as the iconic entrance to the University of Tehran. Instead 'silence' arguably becomes the central character. Or perhaps the central character is the unspoken, unseen and unheard microscopic virus that has at least temporarily halted the seemingly inevitable march of modernity. One passage that beautifully encapsulates this halting is a young man playing guitar and singing, perched on the edge of a flat rooftop, with an imposing backdrop of a building site at a standstill and silent (Figure 17.1). The sounds of voice and guitar blend with a light background drone of traffic and birdsong. This scene is dominated by the concrete skeleton of a half-constructed building, with the singer a tiny figure in the lower right-hand corner.

There is a great deal of symbolism packed into this one scene which juxtaposes the iconic flat Tehran rooftop – a public-private space which often serves as a site for activities which are prohibited in the public domain – with the equally iconic construction sites that have dominated the city since the post-war reconstruction of the 1990s. From this time building sites represented

Figure 17.1 *Tehran, Closed City* (Shakeri, 2020) © Hashem Shakeri – 6:09–24.

the uncontrolled expansion of Tehran that had been critiqued in earlier documentary films such as *Centralisation* (1986) as well as the rise of a new property developer class, as Pak-Shiraz notes:

> The encroachment of construction sites are not simply symbols of a changing landscape, workforce and community, but more importantly a symbol of shifting values. The upsurge in property development has brought forth a class of nouveau riche who have little regard for anything other than financial gain, and which comes at the expense of culture and knowledge.[61]

In this particular passage, the sounds of (human) music-making endure, whilst the industrial noise of capitalist expansion has been forced into silence. A similar juxtaposition of human solitude and silenced urban noise, although still with a low-level hum of background traffic, appears towards the start of the film (Figures 17.2 and 17.3). We first see an aerial view with the skyline of Tehran and an empty three-lane highway which would normally be packed with vehicles. After a few seconds a lone cyclist appears.

These lone figures – guitarist and cyclist – exemplify one of the interesting visual aspects of the film: a focus on individual Hopper-esque characters. Even where there is more than one person, each is often looking in a different direction or absorbed in their own silent world: two young men play basketball (6:32), a woman and two children stare out of an apartment window (Figure 17.4), a group of young men wait at a bus stop (Figure 17.5), people queue, socially distanced, outside a shop (3:06).

Figure 17.2 *Tehran, Closed City* (Shakeri, 2020) © Hashem Shakeri – 0:50–1:01.

Figure 17.3 *Tehran, Closed City* (Shakeri, 2020) © Hashem Shakeri – 0:50–1:01.

Notwithstanding the implied double meaning of 'silence' in the title, the film is saturated with sound, with both fragmented ambient diegetic sounds and a rather unsettling non-diegetic underscore that is heard at two points in the film.[62] The film opens with a burst of birdsong and a man exercising in a park. In a subtle ironic play, the equipment that he is using looks very much like a car steering wheel (Figure 17.6), offering a premonition of what is to follow in the film and another sonic contrast between the 'silent' exercise wheel and the silenced traffic of Tehran. At 1:50, we hear the eerie underscore as the camera shows an empty park and playground where we would normally hear the laughter and shouts of children. The music continues over aerial shots of night-time Tehran, with the snow-capped mountains in the distance. The city lies unnervingly quiet and still, a stark contrast with its regular busy hive of nocturnal life, the stillness exemplified by a stationary 'Fast Food' van (Figure 17.7).

Figure 17.4 *Tehran, Closed City* (Shakeri, 2020) © Hashem Shakeri – 0:50–1:01–7:57.

Figure 17.5 *Tehran, Closed City* (Shakeri, 2020) © Hashem Shakeri – 6:43.

Figure 17.6 *Tehran, Closed City* (Shakeri, 2020) © Hashem Shakeri – 0:19.

Many of the human-made sounds in the film affirm loneliness, separation and death: the strains of a radio broadcast with news of the Covid-19 response in the United States and fatality numbers in Spain (1:35), mourning vocals in a cemetery (4:24),[63] ambulance sirens (5:54), a policeman urging a driver to move on (5:42) and echoes of footsteps in an empty bazaar (7:09). Many of the 'normal' sounds of Tehran's busy lives have stopped. Gone are the crowds, and places that are usually bustling with activity such as the entrance to the University of Tehran (5:50), bazaars

Figure 17.7 *Tehran, Closed City* (Shakeri, 2020) © Hashem Shakeri – 2:49.

(4:02), building sites (6:25) and playgrounds (2:13) lie empty and silent. But we are also invited to listen in on the intimate 'unsounded' sounds that we only see: a man praying outside, using a piece of cardboard as a prayer mat (5:57), and elderly men playing chess in the park with plastic mats and pieces that move silently, rather than the satisfying click of pieces on a wooden board (7:01). In the absence of usual city noise levels, and as reported elsewhere globally during the Covid-19 pandemic, the sounds of nature are heightened: rain, wind (or perhaps distant thunder 3:43), birds (pigeons, crows, sparrows, doves) and the mewling of cats in an abandoned bazaar (3:55).

Although *Tehran, Closed City* is largely a collage of visual-sonic fragments that convey a sense of disconnection, there are a few quasi-narrative passages. We see a close-up over-the-shoulder viewpoint of a man driving a car, wearing what seem to be medical gloves and listening to rap music (from 4:04).[64] This segues into someone in full protective clothing carrying a stretcher in a cemetery (perhaps the car has been carrying a body), to the background strains of religious chanting, most likely a mourning ceremony. In the passage that follows, the camera moves along the cemetery avenue to fifteen seconds of actual silence (from 4:42), the only part of the film devoid of any sound and symbolically marking the ultimate silence that is death; significantly, this comes right at the 'heart' of the film at the almost exact half-way point. Note also the interesting juxtaposition between the (still officially prohibited) rap music in the private space of the car and the religious sounds that have dominated Iran's public sphere since the 1979 revolution.

Whilst there are few sounds of industry or people working, not all labour has stopped. As well as cemetery workers, we see others who are carrying on even in the harshest times of quarantine: shop workers (1:28), garbage-seekers (6:50) and police. At 3:53, we hear the sounds of a traditional broom made from twigs and branches as a cleaner sweeps the floor of the shuttered and silent bazaar (Figure 17.8).

All of these fragmented scenes are woven together with a slow flowing backdrop of 'silence' that beautifully conveys the experience of living in the COVID city in the spring of 2020. Towards the end, we see a long-shot distant view of Tehran through the mist, a mist that is almost audible.[65] We hear the distant sounds of the city, indicating that life goes on despite all. In the final scene, the camera follows a man from behind as he walks through the abandoned bazaar: we hear his footsteps and the sounds of doves and then the clattering of shutters being drawn down as he locks up his shop (7:26). The music underscore returns, emphasizing once again the eerie

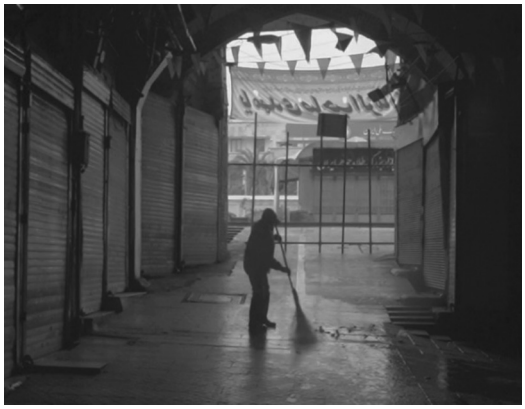

Figure 17.8 *Tehran, Closed City* (Shakeri, 2020) © Hashem Shakeri – cleaner sweeps the floor of the shuttered and silent bazaar.

Figure 17.9 *Tehran, Closed City* (Shakeri, 2020) © Hashem Shakeri – dystopian Benjaminian arcade.

quietness, in this case of the bazaar. We might almost imagine the man as a post-apocalyptic flâneur in a dystopian Benjaminian arcade (Figure 17.9). The camera stops moving and the man disappears into the distant light at the end of the tunnel.

Made almost fifty years apart, it would be hard to find two more contrasting portrayals of the city than *Tehran 51* and *Tehran, Closed City.* And sound is an important part of this. The slow editing of the later film contrasts with the insistent and relentless rhythm of *Tehran 51* and indeed many earlier city symphony films: the harsh mechanized and industrial sounds of *Tehran* 51 are almost entirely absent, temporarily suspended and opening up space for the sounds of nature and animals, and just emptiness. The sounds of *Tehran, Closed City* are of a city on pause, holding its breath to see how this story will unfold.

Highway pleasures and in-between spaces

In the final section of this chapter we consider two films that bear witness to an aspect of urban development that has dominated Tehran for decades and that was also a focus of critique in

Tehran 51: the car-based lifestyle. Tehran is a city of highways and traffic jams, only slightly alleviated in recent years by the new metro system and restrictions on driving into the city centre. Pedestrians are forced to navigate poorly maintained and unsafe pavements which they often share with motorcycles and other small vehicles that invade pedestrian space; crossing the roads of Tehran is something of an art. The curiously titled *Burial* (2015, no Persian title), a film in the city symphony style by Pouya Moradi, is a dawn-to-dusk cameo of the everyday life of motor vehicles in Tehran.[66] Unlike the two films discussed earlier, we don't hear any actual city sounds: rather, the entire film is set to a track from the album *Uniko* (2011), a collaboration between the US-based Kronos (string) Quartet and the Finnish duo Kimmo Pohjonen and Samuli Kosminen.[67] The music starts slowly, as the camera pans over empty roads at dawn, gradually building volume and speed and eventually leading to fast cuts between scenes, following the rhythms of the music (2:06–2:39). In the course of the film, we see cars being looked after – tended to, washed thoroughly (7:36–8.29), resting in mass carparks (from 3:43) and being 'fed' at petrol stations (from 8:25). But we also see car graveyards – scrapyards (from 6:06) – and the insides of cars (from 6:56), almost like the intestines of animals going to slaughter (cf. *Tehran 51*), interleaved with images of super expensive cars, pointing to the deep social inequalities in Tehran. The overall effect is of a quasi-idyllic and romanticized filmic ode to the internal combustion engine and the mobility that it allows and to the many highways that make that mobility possible. We see few side roads; rather, almost all of the footage is of the highways (and occasionally tunnels) that criss-cross the city. We also see few people, except in the service of cars. The cars that are moving almost seem to be driving themselves. Whilst the central focus is on cars, we also see other vehicles, although not as many motorcycles as might be expected given their ubiquity in Tehran. From time to time, the iconic Milad Tower acts as a place marker for Tehran. The evening passage starts at 8:30, with lengthening shadows indicating the end of another day, at which point vocal sounds are mixed with the string quartet – an alternative evening *azān* (call to prayer) perhaps? The final, night-time sequence starts at 9:15 with a dramatic switching on of car lights rather like the footlights of a theatre stage, followed by fast-cut passages of flowing white and red rivers of light (front and rear car lights on highways). The music gains momentum and becomes more percussive as the film builds to a climax, with rapidly changing visuals and musical rhythms. The piece ends at 11:31, filmed from inside a car as it emerges from a tunnel, a curiously similar ending to *Tehran, Closed City*.

Burial offers a contrast to both *Tehran 51* and *Tehran, Closed City*, particularly in the use of sound. We see cars gracefully moving around the city – almost dancing – in ways that bring to mind spaceships waltzing to *The Blue Danube* in Stanley Kubrick's *2001:A Space Odyssey* (1968). *Burial* is all about flow and movement, and the music fits this perfectly. But ultimately it isn't clear whether the film's apparently romanticized and positive tone is intended to be ironic. The title suggests so: What does 'burial' refer to? The burial of people at the high altar of cars, perhaps. The film certainly resonates with observations made in relation to earlier city symphonies of the 1920s and 1930s that celebrated the new mobilities made possible by motor vehicles at that time, as 'another prominent symbol of urban modernity … the sheer movement of the chrome and metal surfaces of automobiles, streetcars, and trains alone is sometimes enough to create an impressive visual spectacle'.[68] Such a spectacle is just what we see in *Burial* and contrasts both with *Tehran 51*'s lament to industrialization, dominated by the brutal sounds of machinery and other aspects of modern life, and with *Tehran, Closed City*'s silenced traffic and

industrial sounds. We also see what Jacobs et al. describe as the 'floating streets and multi-layered cities celebrated by many utopian urban planners of the era (1920s and 30s)'.[69] In *Burial*, we don't actually hear the cars, coaches or motorcycles, nor do we get any sense of the many impacts of traffic on Tehran such as air and sound pollution.[70] We see slow moving traffic but not the stationary jams that at times paralyze the city; we don't see the effects of stress and road rage as we did in *Tehran 51* or a city that pedestrians struggle to navigate. Above all, we would suggest that it is the music that arguably allows for an airbrushing of these negative impacts and for a pure romance of the motor car.

Another recent city symphony film that focuses on motor vehicles and mobility is Kiana Ahmadi and Aydin Karimi's *Tehran, City Symphony* (2020, seven minutes and forty-six seconds),[71] a pre-dawn to night-time portrayal of the city made just before the Covid-19 pandemic in early 2020. It begins with the blurred lights of cars and street lamps that gradually come into focus as Tehran starts to wake up. The first minute is set to an instrumental passage from the 2016 song 'Bandar-e Tehran' ('This Port Called Tehran') by the band Bomrani, with a section on accordion suggesting the sound of fog horns from ships passing each other in the night. After a short silence at 1:01, the rest of the film is set to the popular 'Tehran Waltz', a light-hearted piece for accordion and viola by Mehrdad Mehdi and Aso Kohzadi which has featured in a recent series of nostalgic images of Tehran on Instagram.[72] In a similar way to *Burial*, the music establishes a romantic and poetic mood, and as in the earlier film we see images of roads, bridges and tunnels, again with usually flowing – quasi-dancing – traffic.

In contrast to *Tehran 51* and *Tehran, Closed City*, the viewer has to imagine the implied city sounds. Whilst the central focus is on the social life of the motor vehicle, we also see glimpses of the darker side of city street life: a child vendor dodges the highway traffic (1:51) and a woman unsuccessfully attempts to cross the road (3:01). The film is not entirely focused on the motor vehicle as it is in *Burial*: at 2:21, we see an empty schoolyard before cutting to the same space full of girls during break time, and we see aerial views over Tehran and shots of city landmarks including the Azadi Tower, Milad Tower and Pol-e Tabiat (Nature Bridge). But beyond these few scenes, *Tehran, City Symphony* is entirely filmed in the highways that most Tehranis are obliged to negotiate on a daily basis: travelling to work on highways, returning home on highways and as depicted in the second half of the film even spending their leisure time on highways. Of particular interest in terms of implied sounds is a passage in the second half of the film. At 4:26, the sun sets and this is really when the social life of cars begins. As has been discussed elsewhere, Tehran's car-oriented culture took on new significance after 1979 when it became one of several semi-public liminal spaces in which it was possible to some extent to circumvent official restrictions on public behaviour, in particular offering an alternative space for listening to music that was limited or prohibited in public.[73] More recently, this has given rise to a leisure activity which we term 'highway flâneuring' and which is beautifully portrayed in *Tehran, City Symphony*. Tehran's streets are not particularly suitable for the kind of pedestrian flâneuring with which the term is more commonly associated, and given the restrictions on outdoor music performance – and since 1979 a ban on nightlife, clubs and discos – as well as the censure of public displays of romantic affection, highway flâneuring offers an alternative to these absences. Lovers have a secure and private space behind car windows, whilst at the same time listening to loud music and enjoying the urban landscape. As a result, the highways are often the liveliest parts of Tehran at night-time.[74] Between 5:34 and 6:25, we see cars parked on the Amirabad Bridge, which has

become a gathering spot where young people can smoke, listen to loud music and eat food purchased from mobile vendors. However, this is no ordinary bridge: it sits at the intersection of two highways – Kordestan and Hemmat – and offers stunning views over Tehran's nightscape, no doubt an important reason for its popularity. Like similar alternative spaces such as Laleh Park,[75] this bridge has become an informal space for activities which contravene official norms and which are sometimes disrupted by the police or municipal authorities but still somehow manage to continue.[76] The general lack of dedicated space for people to gather[77] has led to certain practices in which the car becomes one of several 'in-between' public-private spaces of sociality. As a number of commentators have noted, such spaces – car interiors, shopping malls, rooftops, basements and so on – are some of the most critical spaces in post-revolutionary Iran with their own codes of behaviour, allowing people to effectively enact De Certeau's 'everyday tactics'. From time to time, officials attempt to bring these spaces into the public coded territory, for instance, by sending text messages to women drivers who flout hair-covering rules[78] or by banning darkened car windows. Although the Amirabad Bridge section of the film lasts for less than a minute, for those who know Tehran it evokes other car-based social activities such as so-called *dor dor* in which (usually) young people drive down a particular street, flirting, talking and exchanging telephone numbers with the occupants of other cars through lowered windows.[79] Compared with highway flâneuring, *dor dor* is more interactive but is also primarily an activity of the middle and upper classes; showcasing expensive cars is an important element in the visual-sonic flirting.[80] It is interesting to reflect on the social practices that were captured in this film but within a very short time were halted due to Covid-19.

In both *Burial* and *Tehran, City Symphony*, the soundtrack offers a somewhat ironic backdrop to an ostensibly affectionate portrayal of the city. In the latter, it becomes apparent that this portrayal masks a deeper story of counterculture in which young people claim back public space through the motor vehicle in various ways. In neither film do we hear the sounds of the city itself.

Concluding thoughts

In this chapter we have explored the use of sound and music in a small selection of films about Tehran in the city symphony style. These films reference conventions of their genre predecessors – for instance, their episodic nature and absence of a strong narrative – whilst also drawing on local signification. They also offer contrasting approaches to the use of sound and music: from the harsh and dehumanizing industrial sounds and rapid editing of *Tehran 51* in which citizens generally lack agency to the somewhat unnerving enforced quiet and slow pace of *Tehran, Closed City*, sound is central to each film's structure and message. *Burial* offers a different approach entirely, devoid of any city sounds, but using a single soundtrack throughout to present an ironically romanticized portrayal of a city in which the car is king. Finally, *Tehran, City Symphony* uses a non-diegetic underscore that masks the city sounds, at the same time visually implying a certain reclaiming of agency via personal mobility and car-based sonic practices that challenge the status quo. The discussion has touched on a number of themes, including conflicted notions of urban modernity and sound as a technology of control, the extraordinary impact on the city's sound and sonic absences due to COVID-19, and Tehran as a car-based city in which the motor vehicle is

not just a means of transport but also an in-between space of (public-)privacy that has significant sonic dimensions. These films all demonstrate the dialectical and entangled relationship between filmic representations of the city and lived urban experience and the centrality of sound to both.

Notes

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1 Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations. Essays and Reflections*, trans. Harry Zohn, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 2007): 236.

2 Steven Jacobs, Eva Hielscher and Anthony Kinik, eds, 'Introduction. The City Symphony Phenomenon 1920–40', in *The City Symphony Phenomenon. Cinema, Art, and Urban Modernity Between the Wars* (London: Routledge 2019): 14.

3 See, among many others, Jiri Kolaja and Arnold W. Foster, ' "Berlin, the Symphony of a City" as a Theme of Visual Rhythm', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 23, no. 3 (1965): 353–8; Scott MacDonald, 'The City as the Country: The New York City Symphony from Rudy Burckhardt to Spike Lee', *Film Quarterly* 51, no. 2 (Winter 1997–8): 2–20; Matthew Bernstein, 'Visual Style and Spatial Articulations in Berlin, Symphony of a City (1927)', *Journal of Film and Video* 36, no. 4 (1984): 5–12, 61; Alexander Graf, 'Paris – Berlin – Moscow: On the Montage Aesthetics in the City Symphony Films of the 1920s', in *Avant-Garde Film*, ed. Alexander Graf and Dietrich Scheunemann (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007): 77–91; Hunter Jefferson, 'James Joyce, Walther Ruttmann, and City Symphonies', *The Kenyon Review* 35, no. 2 (2013): 186–205; Erica Stein, 'Abstract Space, Microcosmic Narrative, and the Disavowal of Modernity in *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City*', *Journal of Film and Video* 65, no. 4 (2013): 3–16; Jon Gartenburg, 'NY, NY: A Century of City Symphony Films', *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media* 55, no. 2 (2014): 248–76; Carolyn Birdsall, 'Resounding City Films: Vertov, Ruttmann, and Early Experiments with Documentary Sound Aesthetics', in *Music and Sound in Documentary Film*, ed. Holly Rogers (New York: Routledge, 2015): 20–40; Eva Hielscher, 'Rewinding the City Symphony: Historiography, Visual Motifs and Structural Patterns of Interwar City Symphony Films', PhD dissertation (Ghent: University of Ghent, 2018); Eva Hielscher, 'The Phenomenon of Interwar City Symphonies: A Combined Methodology of Digital Tools and Traditional Film Analysis Methods to Study Visual Motifs and Structural Patterns of Experimental-Documentary City Films', *Digital Humanities Quarterly* 14, no. 4 (2020), https://www.digitalhumanities.org/dhq/vol/14/4/000495/000495.html (accessed 10 August 2023). There is also a wider literature on the relationship between cinema and the city. See, for instance, Mark Shiel and Tony Fitzmaurice, eds, *Cinema and the City: Film and Urban Societies in a Global Context* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001) and Nezar AlSayyad, *Cinematic Urbanism: A History of the Modern from Reel to Real* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

4 Jacobs, Hielscher and Kinik, 'Introduction', 33.

5 To watch *Manhatta*, see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zVRzfnFg-8U, (accessed 4 August 2022).

6 Jacobs, Hielscher and Kinik, 'Survey of City Symphonies 1920–1940', in *The City Symphony Phenomenon*, 212–13.

7 Jacobs, Hielscher and Kinik, 'Introduction', 23.

8 Ibid., 25.

9 Ibid., 15; emphasis in original.

10 Ibid., 29.

11 Jacobs, Hielscher and Kinik, 'Preface', in *The City Symphony Phenomenon,* xiii.

12 Jacobs, Hielscher and Kinik, 'Introduction', 20.
13 Ibid., 19.
14 This was also the theme of a number of narrative films of the period, perhaps the best-known being the 1936 silent *Modern Times*, written and directed by Charlie Chaplin (https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0027977/).
15 Jacobs, Hielscher and Kinik, 'Survey of City Symphonies 1920–1940', in *The City Symphony Phenomenon*, 320–1.
16 Jacobs, Hielscher and Kinik, 'Introduction', 35.
17 Ibid., 36.
18 Carolyn Birdsall, 'Resounding City Films: Vertov, Ruttmann, and Early Experiments with Documentary Sound Aesthetics', in *Music and Sound in Documentary Film*, ed. Holly Rogers (New York: Routledge, 2015): 21.
19 Ibid., 25.
20 Ibid., 23.
21 Ibid., 23.
22 Ibid., 31.
23 Jacobs, Hielscher and Kinik, 'Introduction', 27.
24 Hielscher cites the work of Graf, 'Paris – Berlin – Moscow', 141.
25 Jacobs, Hielscher and Kinik, 'Introduction', 4.
26 Cristina Meneguello, 'Kemeny and Lustig's São Paulo: *Sinfonia da Metrópole*', in *The City Symphony Phenomenon*, 184, my emphasis.
27 Ibid.
28 Jacobs, Hielscher and Kinik, 'Introduction', 26.
29 Ibid., 24.
30 Floris Paalman, 'Schuitema's *De Maasbruggen*: City and Film as a Process', in *The City Symphony Phenomenon*, 132
31 Jacobs, Hielscher and Kinik, 'Introduction', 20.
32 Von Barsy and von Maydell, 'De Stad Die Nooit Rust: A Port City Symphony', in *The City Symphony Phenomenon*, 253.
33 Steven Jacobs, Eva Hielscher and Kinik Anthony, eds., *The City Symphony Phenomenon: Cinema, Art, and Urban Modernity between the Wars* (London: Routledge Press, 2019), 289.
34 Jacobs, Hielscher and Kinik, 'Survey of City Symphonies 1920–1940', in *The City Symphony Phenomenon*, 278.
35 See https://www.imdb.com/title/tt11101464/. The film can be watched online at https://www.aparat.com/v/Rjefy. '51' refers to the Iranian calendar year 1351 (=1972) when the film was made. For examples outside Tehran, see *Baazgasht* (*The Return*, 2021), a city symphony film about the north-western city of Zanjan directed by Ali Ghasemi. While the director dubs it a city symphony film, it includes many rural scenes.
36 In terms of methodology, we offer a largely text-based reading of these films, complemented by secondary sources where available and a limited amount of viewer feedback. We also sought to talk to the film-makers (with the exception of Parvizi who passed away in 2012), but they preferred not to be interviewed or didn't respond to our requests.
37 Golbarg Rekabtalaei, *Iranian Cosmopolitanism: A Cinematic History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019); Hamid Naficy, *Film-e Mostanad* (documentary film, volume 1) (Tehran: Daneshgah-e Azad-e Iran, 1979/1357).
38 Hamid Naficy, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema, Volume 4, The Globalizing Era, 1984–2010* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012): 22.

39 Blake Atwood, *Reform Cinema in Iran: Film and Political Change in the Islamic Republic* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016): 74

40 Saeed Zeydabadi-Nejad, *The Politics of Iranian Cinema: Film and Society in the Islamic Republic* (New York: Routledge, 2009): 33.

41 'Jāyezeye sepās ʿādelāneh nabud' ['Sepas Awards Were Not Distributed Fairly'], *Etelāʾāt*, issue 14108 (1973/1352): 7.

42 Sepas Festival was the foremost film festival in Iran before the 1979 revolution. Jamal Omid, *Farhang-e sinemā-ye irān* [Encyclopedia of Iranian cinema] (Tehran: Negah Press, 1999/1377). Parvizi emigrated to the United States after the revolution and is said to have established the first Iranian diaspora magazine, *Iran Post* (https://www.facebook.com/ghadimiha/photos/a.106911572789517.15203.104859332994741/246369288843744/). Mohassessi (2020) writes about music and sound in *Tehran 51* in a volume compiled by Parvizi's widow, Mahin Parvizi. Bahman Mohassessi, 'Namāyesh-e mostanad-e *tehrān 51*' ['The screening of *Tehran 51* documentary'], in *Az Bisetārehā tā chelcherāgh khāterāt-e Khosrow Parvizi* [From starless to candelabrum: The memoires of Khosrow Parvizi], ed. Mahin Parvizi (Los Angeles: Ketab Corp., 2020): 150–1.

43 Mahin Parvizi, ed., *Az Bisetārehā tā chelcherāgh khāterāt-e Khosrow Parvizi* [*From Starless to Candelabrum: The Memoires of Khosrow Parvizi*] (Los Angeles: Ketab Corp., 2020): 167.

44 Jacobs, Hielscher and Kinik, 'Introduction', 13.

45 Many streets in Iran were renamed after the revolution. Elizabeth Boulevard (after the British Queen Elizabeth II) was renamed Keshavarz (Farmer) Boulevard.

46 Renamed Azadi (Freedom) Tower after the revolution.

47 Pahlavi Street was renamed Valiasr Street after the revolution (following a brief period as Mossadegh Street). Running from the north to the south of Tehran and with a length of 17.9 km, it is often claimed to be the longest street in the Middle East.

48 Jacobs, Hielscher and Kinik, 'Survey of City Symphonies 1920–1940', in *The City Symphony Phenomenon*, 275.

49 More specifically, *Tehran 51* was made just four years after the government approved and passed into law the Tehran Comprehensive Plan which sought to address the unbalanced growth of the city following the 1963 land reforms that were part of the Shah's 'White Revolution' (however, the Tehran Comprehensive Plan was never fully implemented). Azadeh Mashayekhi, 'The 1968 Tehran Master Plan and the Politics of Planning Development in Iran (1945–1979)', *Planning Perspectives* 34, no. 5 (2019): 849–76.

50 This movement was also known as 'return to the village' (*bāzgasht be roostā*). For further information, see Arash Davari, 'A Return to Which Self?: ʿAli Shariʾati and Frantz Fanon on the Political Ethics of Insurrectionary Violence', *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 34, no. 1 (2014): 86–105 and Farzin Vahdat, 'Return to Which Self?: Jalal Al-e Ahmad and the Discourse of Modernity', *Journal of Iranian Research and Analysis* 16, no. 2 (2000): 55–71.

51 Ahmad Shamloo and Mohammad Hoghooghi, *Sher-e Zamaan-e Maa 1* [*The Poetry of Our Times 1*] (Tehran: Negah, 1998/1376): 167. Poetry translations by Kamyar Salavati.

52 Ahmad Shamloo, *Marsie-hā-ye khāk o shekoftan dar meh* [*Requiems of Soil and Blossoming in the Mist*] (Tehran: Negah, 2005/1384): 84.

53 In Iran, terms such as sheep, dog, donkey and even 'animal' more generally are used as a metaphor for stupidity. The depiction of Tehranis as gullible sheep is seen in the more recent satirical film *Tehran Has No More Pomegranates* (2006, Massoud Bakhshi). There is an interesting parallel here with a well-known passage in Sergei Eisenstein's first full-length feature film *Strike* (1925), which cuts back and forth between a slaughterhouse and police attacking and killing protesting workers (set in Russia in 1903). We have been unable to establish whether Parvizi was familiar with this film but it's likely

that he would have been. There is also a similar passage at the start of Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times* where an image of sheep being herded segues directly into commuters pouring out of a metro station.

54 Khosrow Parvizi and Zaven Ghoukassian (2005/1384), 'Vākāvi-e bargehā-yi farāmoosh-shodeh az tārikh-e sinamā-ye mostanad-e irān (Gofto-gu bā Khosrow Parvizi) [Exploring forgotten pages of the history of documentary cinema in Iran (An interview with Khosrow Parvizi)', *Nāmeye Farhang va Honar*: *The Quarterly for the Culture and Islamic Guidance Administration of Esfahān*, Special Issue for the Third Isfahan Short Film Festival. 135–6, 139.

55 Jacobs, Hielscher and Kinik, *The City Symphony Phenomenon*.

56 We have been unable to identify this piece, which is possibly by a Russian, Armenian or Azeri composer.

57 Laudan Nooshin, ' "More Than Just the Sounds of Traffic" ': The Petro-Sonics of Tehran', *Sonic Tehran blog post*, 2021, https://www.sonictehran.com/post/more-than-just-the-sounds-of-traffic-the-petro-sonics-of-tehran (accessed 24 March 2021).

58 See https://www.imvbox.com/watch-persian-movie-iranian-movies/symphony-of-the-city-samfonie-shahr (accessed 10 August 2023). This film focuses on sound pollution in Tehran.

59 The film was part of a series produced by the *New Yorker* focused on cities around the world during the Covid-19 pandemic and was first published on their website: 'What Social Distancing Looks Like in Tehran', 9 April 2020, https://www.newyorker.com/news/video-dept/what-social-distancing-looks-like-in-tehran; also available at http://www.transfer-arch.com/transfer-next/tehran-closed-city/ and https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UaLypuz-ZsY&t=292s (accessed 10 August 2023).

60 Azar Nafisi, *Reading Lolita in Tehran* (London: Fourth Estate, 2007).

61 Nacim Pak-Shiraz, 'Exploring the City in the Cinema of Bahram Beyzaie', *Iranian Studies* 46, no. 5 (2013): 825.

62 Credited at the end as being by Canadian mixed-media artist Onderwish (Aaron Leroy), but details of the specific music used are not given.

63 Most likely Behesht-e Zahra, Tehran's main cemetery located in the far south of the city.

64 From the album *Mojāz* (*Authorised*) by Iran's foremost rap artist Hichkas. The album had recently been released in the spring of 2020.

65 This may have partly been an effect of the film's visual filter that was the subject of comment, both on YouTube (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UaLypuz-ZsY&t=292s; in English) (accessed 10 August 2023) and during a private screening at the offices of *Dalan* magazine in Tehran (9 March 2022; comments originally in Persian), as follows: 'There was a grey filter all over the film, but I remember the weather was crystal clear and beautiful in those days' (*Dalan*); 'I love how the colouring has obviously been modified. It's as if they want to convey a feeling of hopelessness' (YouTube); 'Why is there a grey colourcast on this footage of Tehran – when compared with that of Milan for example? Hmmm' (referring to other films in the *New Yorker* series; YouTube). It's interesting to consider how visual editing such as this may impact on perceptions of sound.

66 *Vimeo*, 2015, *Burial*, https://vimeo.com/126424487 (11 minutes, 51 seconds) (accessed 10 August 2023).

67 Published by the label Ondine (https://www.ondine.net/index.php?lid=en&cid=2.2&oid=4540) (accessed 10 August 2023).

68 Jacobs, Hielscher and Kinik, 'Introduction', 19.

69 Ibid.

70 Air pollution is the focus of *Tehran Minus 1* (2014, Hamidreza Kouchakinezhad) another city symphony film not discussed in this chapter. Accessible at https://vimeo.com/378983289 (accessed 10 August 2023).

71 Accessible at https://vimeo.com/539535386 (accessed 10 August 2023).

72 Mehrdad Mehdi and Aso Kohzadi, *Dornadeon* track 20 (music album) (Tehran: Khane-ye Honar-e Kherad, 2017). At one time Mehdi and Kohzadi were the best-known street musicians in Tehran,

mainly performing in northern Tehran, notably in the Vanak district where they would offer red flowers to passers-by.

73 See, for instance, Laudan Nooshin, 'Subversion and Countersubversion: Power, Control and Meaning in the New Iranian Pop Music', in *Music, Power and Politics*, ed. Annie J. Randall (New York: Routledge, 2005): 243–4.

74 See Lauren Braithwaite, *The Soundtrack to Mar Bazi: Automobile Protests in the Islamic Republic of Iran*, Masters dissertation (Oxford: University of Oxford, 2016) for discussion of so-called *mārbāzi* ('playing like a snake'), in which young people in more affluent areas of Tehran drive 'fast and recklessly along the city's crowded vehicular arteries and veins, often accompanied by loud, illegal music'.

75 Located in the heart of Tehran and close to the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art, this spot is a favoured meeting place for university students. It provides the relative freedom and privacy of spaces such as cafés, but is socially and culturally more diverse than many other public spaces.

76 Note that not everyone can participate in this alternative leisure activity. Although petrol prices are relatively low in Iran (at the time of writing about £0.08 sterling per litre), cars are significantly more expensive than international prices. For example, a Pride (KIA) car, the most popular economy car in Iran, costs around £2,500 on the Iranian market (the monthly minimum wage in Iran is about £150 (2022–3).

77 Where such spaces do exist, they have been restricted in recent years by being closed, fenced off or access restricted. For instance, on restrictions to the Farhangestaan-e Honar public courtyard and the pedestrian space outside the City Theatre (Teaatr-e Shahr), see 'Farhangestane Honar Jam Shod' ['Farhangestane Honar Has Been Shut Down'], 2017, http://www.ensafnews.com/66996 (accessed 10 August 2023) and 'Olaviat ba Piyadehast ya Savareha?' ['Is the Priority with Pedestrians or Drivers?'], 2018, https://www.ilna.news/fa/tiny/news-697978. (accessed 10 August 2023).

78 See 'Mājerāye Ersāle Payāmakhaye Kashfe Hejab Chist?' ['What Is the Story of Text Messages about Unveiling?'], 2020, https://www.irna.ir/news/84044505.

79 In the 2000s, Jordan Street and Iranzamin Street were the main locations for *dor* in Tehran. More recently, Andarzgoo Boulevard has become popular for this activity.

80 See 'Dor Dor Kardan be Sabk-e Dahe-ye Haftadi-hā ['Dor dor in the Style of the 70s-Born Generation' (i.e. the generation born in the 1990s], *Tabnak*, 2016, https://www.tabnak.ir/fa/news/621405 (accessed 24 February 2022). Officials have tried to restrict *dor dor* in various ways, such as blocking u-turns. See also https://www.tinn.ir/%D8%A8%D8%AE%D8%B4-%D8%AF%D8%B3%D8%AA%D9%87-%D8%A8%D9%86%D8%AF%DB%8C-%D9%86%D8%B4%D8%AF%D9%87-1/55109-%D9%BE%DB%8C%D8%A7%D9%85%D8%AF-%D9%BE%D8%AF%DB%8C%D8%AF%D9%87-%D8%A7%DB%8C-%D8%A8%D9%87-%D9%86%D8%A7%D9%85-%D8%AF%D9%88%D8%B1-%D8%AF%D9%88%D8%B1-%DA%86%DB%8C%D8%B3%D8%AA (accessed 18 May 2024). Similar examples where young people have appropriated 'authorized' spaces include Muharram religious mourning processions, used since the 2000s as an opportunity to flirt and exchange telephone numbers.