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Spatial Narration in Amir Naderi's New York Trilogy

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Abstract

This article is concerned with the relationship of language and city in Amir Naderi's trilogy of films on New York, comprising of *Manhattan by Numbers* (1993), *A, B, C... Manhattan* (1997), and *Marathon* (2002). By dint of a narrative relied on spatiality, he is in fact able to causally link the solitude and the spectral existence of his protagonists to the lack of a common language for reconciliation and integration within the urban landscape. Whereas this narrative approach only minimally uses plot, it brings about an opportunity for sensory perception. Rather than employing narrative as a form of collective daydreaming where the real social conflicts are resolved on a mere fantastical level, Naderi's films highlight the exclusion of the individual from the collective but in doing so they allow for a more totalizing understanding of social existence. Further, this tendency towards spatiality is concomitant with the inadequacy of language (as a fixed set of signifiers and signifieds) for the articulation of the individual's experience within the vaster context of the city. By putting the stress on the cityscape, Naderi appears to be promoting city itself as a discourse whose semantics unravels only through direct physical contact. I wish to examine corporeal communication in these films in relation to the semiology of urban space as outlined by Roland Barthes and Henri Lefebvre.

Keywords: Space in cinema, City as discourse, Bodily perception, Spatial narration, Rhythmanalysis

The city is a discourse and this discourse is truly a language: the city speaks to its inhabitants, we speak our city, the city where we are, simply by living in it, by wandering through it, by looking at it. (Barthes, "Semiology" 160)

Introduction

Amir Naderi's name is often invariably linked to a new wave of young Iranian filmmakers emerging in the 1970s. This generation included such distinct filmmakers as Abbas Kiarostami, Nasser Taghvai, Bahram Beyzai, Sohrab Shahid-Saless and Ali Akbar Sadeghi, many of whom began their career under the tutelage of Kānun (Iran's most renowned cultural institute for intellectual development) and who all later garnered international acclaim for their work. But one can see an immediate and fundamental cut between Naderi's cinema and that of his contemporaries. Kiarostami's films, for instance, have always been celebrated and appreciated for the aesthetic and thematic sensibilities that he owes to Persian poetry, miniature painting (see Copjec, 2016) as well as Oriental spiritualism. Similarly, Taghvai is better known for his cinematic adaptations of Persian literary canon, while Beyzai also had a background in Persian theater both as a playwright and a historian before embarking upon filmmaking. In Naderi's films, on the contrary, one can see an almost flagrant lack of commitment to one's own cultural, national and historical ties. Naderi goes as much to say that Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* had a far greater impact on him as a filmmaker than the whole canon of Persian literature (qtd in Dabashi, 242). Elsewhere, he cites a passion for jazz as one of the reasons he emigrated to the United States (BBC Persian, "Naderi on Naderi").

This dissociation and estrangement is, in fact, an inseparable part of Naderi's cinema: from Amiru in *The Runner* (1985) taken shelter in an abandoned, rusted ship, looking wistfully at airplanes and longing to escape, to many of his

American protagonists in his later films who wander relentlessly in the vast space of the city as if lost or have no direction home, displacement and homelessness are themes that recur in almost all of Naderi's movies. Unsurprisingly, Naderi was among the first directors to leave Iran after the Islamic Revolution in 1979. This self-exile was not necessarily a result of the regime change in Iran and the new regulations for cultural production under the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, but rather the ambitious Naderi had an intention all along to be an international filmmaker. Still, rather than finding a new home in the United States (where he currently lives and works), Naderi, much like his protagonists, has been constantly on the move, having made hitherto eight features in three countries (including Japan and Italy) in the years after his departure. In a sense, then, Naderi's home has always been cinema itself: from the silent Russian films of the 1920s, the Italian neo-realism of 1940s, the golden age of Japanese cinema in the 1950s, to the New Wave cinemas of France and United States in the 1960s and 1970s respectively, and beyond, Naderi's films abound in subtle references to the cinema that has formed his filmmaking style, unbound by time or place. Naderi's influences are arguably as old and diverse as the history and geography of cinema itself.

However, another important aspect that sets Naderi apart from many of his Iranian counterparts is his unique stylistic approach to storytelling. In many of his films, as Emmanuel Levy suggests, "style is inseparable from substance." But more strictly, Naderi's visual approach is marked by a spatial integration. Thus, while admittedly, Kiarostami and Shahid-Saless can also be categorized as Iranian filmmakers who are strongly inclined towards visual narration; in the case of Naderi this narrative style is specifically and predominantly associated with city and urban space. Naderi's films are as much about his protagonists as about their urban backdrop. Through a naturalistic lens, he portrays his characters in an eternal struggle with their locale, relentlessly searching in a world that is

otherwise unsympathetic to them. One can thus argue that *The Runner* is as much about the homeless Amiru as about an “orphaned” Abadan (Naderi’s own hometown, incidentally) in the wake of a ravaging war. *Vegas: Based on a True Story* (2008), likewise, seems equally concerned with the dissolution of an American family consumed by a fantasy to get rich as with Las Vegas itself as the city of greed and desire. In *Cut* (2011), Shuji’s passion for older cinema correlates (albeit inversely) to an apathy to traditional values embodied in Tokyo as the epitome of modern, global city.

While Naderi’s films have been screened and recognized in numerous international film festivals, they seem to remain largely unnoticed by the wider cinematic audience.¹ It is then not so surprising that the critical bibliography on Naderi’s cinema has been rather limited and occasional. The extant literature, however, aptly explores Naderi’s work in a context of diaspora and homelessness. Hamid Naficy accordingly situates Naderi’s films (particularly those made after his exile) in an Iranian accented cinema, which is marked concurrently by a disavowal of any local or national affiliation on the one hand, and a cultural synergism on the other. For Naficy, this is a liminal cinema that hangs between the particular and the universal. It is “both a cinema of displacement and a displaced cinema” (370). Alla Gadassik, similarly, calls Naderi a national filmmaker without a home whose (American) films are located at the crossroad of subjective individuality and the larger landscape of late-capitalist society. Gadassik contends that the compulsive pursuit of self-liberation that defines Naderi’s protagonists “reflect[s] the concerns of a filmmaker working to establish a home in self-imposed exile” (476).

I wish to emphasize after Naficy and Gadassik that it is this liminal position that enables Naderi to draw a more accurate and complete picture of the American life at the turn of the century in a series of films he has made in the United States. By dint of a narrative relied on spatiality, he is in fact able to causally link the solitude and the spectral existence of his protagonists to the lack of a common language for reconciliation and integration within the urban

landscape. My argument will be specifically centered on spatial narration in Naderi's Manhattan trilogy, which comprises of *Manhattan by Numbers* (1993), *A, B, C... Manhattan* (1997) and *Marathon* (2002) as together they remain Naderi's most extensive cinematic rumination on a city. Broadly, each film, in a different way, is a quest for self-identity, and a narrative of loss and absence at the same time. *Manhattan by Numbers* follows a day in the life of the unemployed journalist George Murphy (John Wojda) who, hounded by a 24-hour warrant for eviction, sets out to find the whereabouts of a friend named Tom Ryan as he might be the only person who can help him out of his financial predicament. *A, B, C... Manhattan* recounts the stories of three idiosyncratic women who share an apartment together while each has a crisis of their own: Colleen (Lucy Knight) is forced to surrender the custody of her young daughter, Kasey (Erin Norris) is looking for her missing dog, while Kate (Sara Paull) is trying to pursue her passion for music in the aftermath of an emotional breakup with her brother. *Marathon* revolves around a young woman named Gretchen (Sara Paull) who is determined to beat her own record at puzzle-solving in the course of a day as she gradually approaches nervous breakdown. Further, each story is unfurled against the landscape of Manhattan neighborhoods through a spatial narration. By spatial narration I am simply referring to a narrative style that puts city and space in the foreground of the story and in which "the city becomes a protagonist, but unlike the human characters, it is not a fictional one" (Nowell-Smith, 104). Whereas this narrative approach only minimally uses plot and other conventional storytelling devices, it brings about an opportunity for sensory perception. Rather than employing narrative as a form of collective daydreaming where the real social conflicts are resolved on a mere fantastical level, Naderi's films highlight the exclusion of the individual from the collective—it is a cinema of absence—but in doing so they also allow for a more totalizing understanding of social existence. More importantly, this tendency towards spatiality is concomitant with

the inadequacy of language (traditionally defined as a closed and determined system of signs) for a cognitive mapping of the individual's experience within the vaster context of the city. By putting the stress on the cityscape, Naderi appears to be promoting city itself as a discourse whose semantics unravels only through direct physical contact. For the purpose of this article, I wish to re-read the relationship between city and language in Naderi's New York films in the light of a semiology of the urban space as outlined by Roland Barthes and Henri Lefebvre. It should be also noted that I will deal with the subjective and dialogic readings of the city in Naderi's trilogy rather than with what New York represents symbolically or cinematically.

City as a Discourse

Roland Barthes approaches the relationship between city and language from a poststructuralist angle. For Barthes, then, city is a text but one in which symbolism can no longer be sufficiently defined as a fixed, one-to-one correspondence between the signifier and the signified. In other terms, Barthes believes that creating a parallelism between urban units as signifiers and their respective functions as signifieds would be a false conception for developing an urban lexicon simply because "the signifieds are like the mythical creatures, extremely imprecise, and at a certain point they always become the signifiers of *something else*" ("Semiology" 162). In order to lay out a semiology of the city, Barthes maintains that the semantic aspect of the symbol should give way to its syntagmatic or paradigmatic particularities. Barthes further remarks on the center of the city (its "solid nucleus") as what we may call a master-signifier which totalizes and homogenizes the urban field around itself but which by definition is a site of emptiness rather than plentitude. Each city, therefore, has a center (or a number of centers) that appears as an empty signified—in itself, it is not a space for any particular content or activity—but which nonetheless acts, by necessity, as "a kind of empty 'focal point' for the image that the community develops of the center" (ibid).

For Barthes, then, city is, first and foremost, a discourse based on the homological relation between its signifiers where signification is distributed through the interplay of signifiers among themselves. "There exists in every city... this fundamental rhythm of signification which is the opposition, the alternation and the juxtaposition of marked and unmarked elements" (160). To understand city as a discourse is to accept the *schizophrenia* of its language, which lends itself to multiple interpretations and readings. In this regard, the discourse of the city resembles what Barthes calls (albeit in a different context) a writerly text²: a text that embodies the multiplicity of subjective readings against a rigid and monologic interpretation. In the final analysis, Barthes believes that no objective methodology that aims to delimit the scale of the signification that the city units represent can be adequate for understanding the language of the city, but rather we should multiply readings by different classes of readers—the city inhabitants and visitors—who thus move about, observe and speak the city through establishment of a personal relation.

Each film in Naderi's trilogy explores in its own right the insufficiency of a single linguistic system for the articulation of modern urban existence and the failure of traditional language to encompass the discursive nature of the city. In *Manhattan by Numbers*, for example, the word "numbers" reflects a duality: it denotes both the numerical nomenclature of Manhattan streets that form the background of George's odyssey as well as the telephone numbers that George repeatedly dials in his desperate search for a friend who appears to be everywhere and nowhere. As George's search for his friend Tom Ryan through telephone calls proves to be futile, and as Ryan embodies the presence of an absence (a specter) and as such seems to be a double for George himself, the film is ultimately an attempt to show the gradual disappearance of its protagonist and his exclusion from the urban collective space by revealing the ineffectuality of

numbers as both the referent (space) and reference (map). As Vincent Canby writes in his review of the film:

Naderi's manner of evoking a sense of place overwhelms George's state of mind. The film's images are so pristine, and so perfectly chosen to create a cross section of the city, that poor George... becomes a tiny cipher at the center of the screen.

The same problem in relation to the space/language duality is explored in *Marathon* through the juxtaposition of crossword puzzles—or more strictly, the act of solving the clues by writing down words—and the underground world of subway as another organizing system in New York. In *Marathon*, crossword puzzles can be understood as a metaphor for the rigidification of language as each clue in the puzzle ultimately leads to a single signified. As Gretchen is dependent on the rumpus of trains and the commotion of subway stations to be able to concentrate on her personal marathon, Naderi repeatedly frames his protagonist in spectral moments where the preoccupation with puzzle-solving seems to be concurrent with an oblivion to or negation of the body. With parallel editing that rapidly substitutes words with space in these scenes, Naderi draws attention to a *stasis in motion* at the center of this bifurcation, to a misrecognition of urban life amidst all its hectic movements. As Hamid Dabashi writes “*Marathon* watches Gretchen unravel to the point of complete breakdown, as the meaning of words, phrases, and sentences are reduced to meaningless letters of the alphabet, and as the composite of the city disintegrates into its undecipherable sights and sounds” (247).

What is common in the three films is a stress on the heteroglossia of New York as a megalopolis where sights, sounds and touch are equally integral to the discourse of the city—a discourse which by definition is variegated and chaotic. The connection that as such exists between language and urban space is in fact a leitmotif in almost all of Naderi’s films, including those he directed in Iran. The significance of the sensory aspects of the urban language can perhaps be

investigated more deeply by a comparison between the New York trilogy and Naderi's most important cinematic achievement in Iran, *The Runner*. In the film, Amiru, greatly embarrassed by his inability to read and write, decides to overcome his illiteracy by learning the Persian alphabet. He enrolls in the school and asks a teacher to help him but there still seems to be a profound estrangement with the meaningless letters written on the blackboard. Rather than becoming disappointed or frustrated, Amiru shows a spectacular will and stubbornness for understanding the alphabet: he goes to the sea, stands on a rock and proceeds to recite the alphabet, albeit in a disorderly manner, by shouting the letters to the sea, his voice co-mingling with the roar of the waves as they crash onto the shore. The scene therefore demonstrates that learning the alphabet is not solely a mental activity but one that is accompanied by the explosive movements of the body and incorporation of physical senses that in turn capture the rhythmic and corporeal nature of language. Amiru does not merely learn the Persian alphabet but rather he becomes inscribed in the elementary texture of his environment through this sensuous understanding of language.

Thus whereas Naderi's protagonists both in his pre- and post-exilic films share close affinities in as much as they are solitary creatures who are relentless in their search for self-fulfillment in the confinement of their environs, the origin of their solitude presents a point of difference in comparison. Dabashi rightly calls attention to a scene in *The Runner* in which Amiru is sitting in the cabin of the abandoned ship he calls home, riffling through his favorite foreign magazines while eating a slice of watermelon when a chick playfully interrupts his musing by stepping on the pages of the magazine. He gently puts the chick aside, gives her a bit of his watermelon and continues with his pastime. Amiru is alone yet, as Dabashi phrases it, there is something majestic and blissful about his solitude (222). His youthful imagination keeps him company. In short, while Amiru leads

a solitary life, his existence is by no means indicative of disconnection or separation. It is absorbing and inclusive.

By contrast, Naderi's American protagonists are haunted by a sense of loss. If in *The Runner* Amiru does not have a family, in the Manhattan films the family is inevitably absent or broken. While for Amiru homelessness is not a setback but in fact a piece with his character as a runner (as one who is in constant motion regardless), *Manhattan by Numbers* is a film entirely about the imminence of being homeless as George's quest for saving his home and family ends with an encounter with the real homeless of New York in the streets of Bowery. Moreover, Naderi's American characters have a phantasmal presence. It is not that they are simply absent from the scene; they exist in a spectral and incorporeal form. Parents, spouses and friends have a presence in these films but they are reduced to disembodied voices—voices that are only heard over the phone or through playbacks on the answering machines—or else they are pictured inanimate and distant in the black and white photographs as part of the background of the stories.

In *A, B, C... Manhattan*, Naderi's camera captures such moments of exclusion by restlessly circling around the film's characters in intricate tracking shots, moving back and forth to different rooms and angles in the interiors, and following characters as they wander about the city. Despite this relentless attempt to map out the narrative space, each camera movement indicates the peripheral presence of the characters as their bodies remain invisible and out of sight while only their voices linger on to the new frames. Further, the use of voice-over for revealing the characters' thoughts in the film serves to highlight this spectral presence by showing the disjunction that exists between the mind and body: while Colleen is physically present at Mona's—closest thing to what she calls home and family—her mind constantly strays to distant thoughts about her imminent separation from her daughter Stella. Towards the end of the film, when Colleen meets the new family who are to take over Stella's custody, the camera adopts the bartender's point of view who, standing behind the counter, is

observing Colleen through the window as she inaudibly parts ways with her daughter outside the bar. Meanwhile, a newly-arrived sailor on leave has begun telling a lewd tale over his first beer to one of the bar's patrons at the counter. Such disjunction between the internal gaze of the camera and the physical and spatial immediacy is deeply indicative of a material absence in the narrative space of the film.

City as Lived Space

Despite the centrality of loss, these films are not exactly tragic or without hope. What Naderi achieves in these films is the very depiction of absence, the fragmentation of familial and by extension social relations, in the context of the city. In doing so, Naderi offers an alternate approach in dealing with loss through literacy and authentic communication. What is at stake in the trilogy is precisely the lack of a discursive language for the articulation of a meaningful relationship. To extend one of Barthes' observations on literary texts to Naderi's post-exilic cinema, one can see an immediate link between the New York trilogy and what Barthes calls "text of bliss"³,

[T]he text that imposes a sense of loss, the text that discomforts (perhaps to the point of a certain boredom), unsettles the reader's historical, cultural, psychological assumptions, the consistency of his tastes, values, memories, brings to a crisis his relation with language. (*Pleasure of Text* 14).

One can accordingly detect this dilemma of language in the ending of Naderi's films. In *Manhattan by Numbers*, George's persistent search across Manhattan culminates into an encounter with the famous bronze statue of the Wall Street Bull in the Financial District. Having received a meagre sum of money from a sympathetic acquaintance, George regresses to a childish, pre-

verbal state wherein he begins dancing around and mounting the Bull in what seems to be a moment of madness occasioned by desperation. *Marathon*, likewise, captures Gretchen, after her failure to surpass her own record of 77 puzzles, in a frenzy as she drowns her dictionaries in the bathtub and tears up the newspaper cutouts of her solved puzzles that has decorated the walls of her apartments. Such moments of madness in these films signal the depth of the characters' inarticulate loss at the face of an alienating urban existence.

Consequently, I wish to draw upon Barthes' description as the basis of a further analogy between Naderi's New York films and the mainstream Hollywood cinema as epitomized by the films of Steven Spielberg. The ground that underlies this seemingly false or otherwise far-fetched analogy is the keen interest that both filmmakers show to the problems of American family and its dysfunctionality in the context of patriarchal capitalism. Regarding the importance of family and the restoration of the father in the Hollywood cinema, Robin Wood writes:

One might reasonably argue that this constitutes—and logically enough—the dominant project, ad infinitum and post nauseam, of the contemporary Hollywood cinema, a veritable thematic metasystem embracing all the available genres and all the current cycles, from realist drama to pure fantasy, taking in en route comedy and *film noir* and even in devious ways infiltrating the horror film. (152)

What primarily informs this proposed analogy, then, is the different narrative resolution that each filmmaker develops. Simply, Spielberg's is a cinema of inclusion and reconciliation that uses fantasy for the resolution of conflicts, while Naderi's is a cinema of exclusion embedded in social realism and the neo-realist tradition of filmmaking. The difference between these two types of narrative is emblematic of a bifurcation in the American cinema: a mainstream cinema that endorse the status quo and capitalist values through images of reunification, and an independent cinema that promulgates a subjective yet more

realistic approach to the problems of American ideology. In line with Barthes' definitions, these opposing narratives can respectively be identified as readerly and writerly "texts": films that are site of a fixed symbolic interpretation and films that provide the ground for a dialogic understanding. Through this analogy, then, I hope to bring to fore Naderi's alternate approach to the problems of family representation in the context of contemporary American cinema. Despite the diasporic readings of Naderi's American films by scholars, his films remain deeply embedded in the sociopolitical climate of the American life at the turn of the century. Naderi projects his own experiences as a homeless immigrant⁴ on to his American protagonists who thus undergo a real crisis.

Spielberg (along with George Lucas) is one of the quintessential filmmakers and architects of contemporary Hollywood mainstream cinema and the blockbuster film style. His narrative paradigm after his seminal work *Jaws* (1975) is marked by a type of infantilism wherein the real conflicts of the political culture of the Reaganite era are rather magically resolved through an essentially manipulative and simplified narrative style. Regarding the Spielberg-Lucas collaborations in the 1980s and the films that were subsequently modeled after them in Hollywood, Stephen Prince notes how in these films "narrative resolution hinges on familial reunification and, as in the New Right agendas of the period, this carries a political charge" (69). Spielberg's narratives are structured around the real operation of the American social relations. More strictly, they reconstruct, re-formulate and resolve the social tensions through a symbolic investment in the figure of father as the preserver of the family cohesion. Todd McGowan sums up the ideological workings of Spielberg's films by contending how they "demonstrate again and again that the symbolic father is not dead but alive and well" (138). Taking *Jaws* as the paradigmatic Spielbergian narration, McGowan argues that the role of the father in such films is to stabilize the narrative by creating a coherent world. In short, through the authority of the father

figure and the paternal metaphor, we are guaranteed mastery, freedom and stability in a narrative world that is otherwise grounded on absence and impossibility. For McGowan, therefore, the Spielbergian approach is based on the fantasy of omnipotent father. Nevertheless, it is just as important that we see the failure of the father as he tries to fill in the gaps that threaten the familial reconciliation as we see his ultimate success:

By showing the father who initially fails to protect us and then succeeds in doing so, these films do even more to increase the power of paternal authority. We fantasmatically invest ourselves all the more in this authority because we see the process of failure and recovery. (142)

Naderi's *Manhattan by Numbers*, on the contrary, follows an inverted situation in which the father George Murphy fails to reconcile with his wife and daughter as his quest for borrowing money and saving their home remains unsuccessful. As Wood claims, "within the system of patriarchal capitalism no resolution of the fundamental conflicts is possible" (144). However, if failure and defeat make up the content of this filmic journey, Naderi's formalistic approach succeeds to map out the complexities of the situation by projecting this journey onto the urban backdrop. Throughout his relentless wandering from one place to another, George's presence, rather than having a concrete and fixed manifestation, is spectral and floating. Just like the disembodied voices that guide him through his journey, he is ethereal and misplaced. But in these phantasmal moments, George himself appears to be dissolved into the tapestry of multiple signs that define the everyday experience of the city as a whole: traffic signs, advertisement slogans, the façade of the buildings, the window of stores and shops, graffiti and street art; the commotion of taxis and cars, the rumble of the trains; the bustling of the multitude walking on the sidewalks; all entwine seamlessly in the narrative that the film presents. In short, New York is a

heteroglossia, an amalgamation of visual, acoustic, bodily and linguistic symptoms. It is a *lived* space.

Henri Lefebvre, the prominent Marxist theorist, takes up the issue of space by laying a stress on the production of space, on space as a lived, physical and concrete entity as opposed to a mere geometric construction. For Lefebvre, “concrete space is the space of gestures and journeys, of the body and memory, of symbols and sense” (Elden, 189). As with Barthes, Lefebvre wants to free the analysis of space from the constraints of a closed and predetermined sign system. If city is a writing, Lefebvre contends, then it is just as significant to read it as a text as to understand its context:

What is *below* the text to decipher (everyday life, immediate relations, the *unconscious* of the urban, what is little said and of which even less is written), hides itself in the inhabited spaces—sexual and family life—and rarely confronts itself, and what is *above* this urban text (institutions, ideologies), cannot be neglected in the deciphering. (*Writings on Cities* 108).

Lefebvre thus encourages an analysis that takes into account the physical (real), mental (imagined) and social (lived) aspects of space. In short, an analysis based on bodily sensation and perception—a *rhythmanalysis*. “Within the body itself, spatially considered, the successive levels constituted by the senses (from the sense of smell to sight, treated as different within a differentiated field) prefigure the layers of social space and their interconnections” (*Production of Space* 405). Lefebvre’s rhythmanalysis thereby seeks to reinstate the totality of space by conjoining perception and action in the body. “The restoration of the body means, first and foremost, the restoration of the sensory-sensual—of speech, of the voice, of smell, of hearing” (363). Ultimately, it is through the

repetition of everyday life, and the difference that emerges through such repetition, that the city can be grasped in its totality.

Conclusion

By way of conclusion, Naderi's New York trilogy are films about sensory perception—films in which the everyday living is the action of the narrative. In these films, exploration and searching as the dominant motif of Naderi's works assume a form of corporeality. We see the characters constantly walking, riding and changing trains, gazing around, fighting, listening and talking. These sensory manifestations are not so much used to move the plot forward; they are actions in themselves. They are knowledge in embodied forms. Naficy relatedly borrows the term haptic visuality (see Marks, 2002) to account for the manifestation of embodied forms of knowledge in films of Naderi, maintaining that Naderi's visuals are employed in a synesthetic manner in order to add a corporeal dimension to the relationship between the character and the world where genuine communication seems to be only possible through bodily senses rather than linguistic abilities (509). This tendency in Naderi's films can be best epitomized by a scene featured in *A, B, C... Manhattan* in which a young man named Milo (Jon Abrahams) tells a story about winning the heart of a beautiful girl by having a fight with her jealous boyfriend. Milo does not merely tell the story; he stages it: he proceeds to narrate the story through sudden jerks, gestures and movements of his body, acting it out, showing how he received a punch from the boyfriend and how the kissing of the girl ensued afterwards. His body becomes the space of the story he narrates. In Naderi's films, then, body is the locus whence the social space is perceived and acted out. These films promote an understanding of the narrative as it unfolds through the texture of the city—an understanding that undermines the degradation of space by going beyond the façade and image of the city.

Notes

1. In a quote that is widely attributed to a Washington Post article from 1991, Naderi is described as “the best unknown filmmaker in the world.” While the source of the quote cannot be verified, it aptly sums up Naderi’s underrated position within the international cinematic spectatorship.
2. As Barthes writes in *S/Z*: “writerly text is a perpetual present, upon which no *consequent* language (which would inevitably make it past) can be superimposed; the writerly text is *ourselves* writing, before the infinite play of the world (the world as function) is traversed, intersected, stopped, plasticized by some singular system (Ideology, Genus, Criticism) which reduces the plurality of entrances, the opening of networks, the infinity of languages” (5).
3. In French *texte de jouissance*. Note that *jouissance* inherently carries such meanings as “ecstasy” and “orgasm” as Barthes intended to put the stress on the disruptive and transgressive nature of these texts that break away the flow of consciousness.
4. As Naderi recounts: “I grew up in the streets, subway and bars of New York City. Each year, I had to live three to four months in the subway. I couldn’t pay rent because it was too expensive. I would sleep in the subway so I could spend the money I had on going to cinema. All throughout winter, I would go the same route back and forth from Coney Island to Bronx on the train until it was morning. I would then get off, follow other people through the turnstiles, find a bathroom, wash my face and come out to start working” (BBC Persian, “Naderi on Naderi”).

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