Monstrum

MONSTRUM

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Volume 4, october 2021

URI : https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1102259ar
DOI : https://doi.org/10.7202/1102259ar

Aller au sommaire du numéro

Éditeur(s)

Montréal Monstrum Society

ISSN

2561-5629 (numérique)

Découvrir la revue

Citer cet article

Bledstein, M. (2021). Allegories of Passion: *Ta'ziyeh* and the Allegorical Moment in Shahram Mokri's *Fish and Cat*. *Monstrum*, *4*, 104–121. https://doi.org/10.7202/1102259ar

Allegories of Passion*: Ta'ziyeh* and the Allegorical Moment in Shahram Mokri's *Fish and Cat*

Max Bledstein

An image in *Fish and Cat* (Shahram Mokri, 2013) immediately catches the eye: a patch of blood (Figure 1). Although it may seem minor, the blood illustrates the Iranian film's unique combination of well-trodden traditions in Iran's national cinema with surprising and unexpected novelties. It appears on the shirt of Babak, who, like his friend Saeed, works as a cook at a restaurant adjacent to a campground outside of Tehran. *Fish and Cat* tells the story of a group of university students who participate in a kite-flying competition held at the campground, and who interact with Babak and Saeed throughout the film. A title card at the beginning contextualizes these interactions: in 1998, a restaurant had been shut down due to a health code violation. The chefs were later imprisoned for serving inedible meat, rumoured to have been human flesh. This information suggests impending doom throughout the film. As the viewer watches, she wonders if and when the characters will die. Images such as the blood on Babak's shirt intensify this morbid affect, as do menacing set pieces in which he and Saeed pursue the students. Although no acts of violence are shown onscreen, these intimations of death more than earn *Fish and Cat* its designation as "Iran's first slasher film."[1] However, the lack of graphic violence also troubles generic categorization. This troubling continues through the tension between the film's single, unbroken take, which suggests the linear passage

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[1] The phrase appears in the following profile of Mokri: Ben Sachs, "Meet Shahram Mokri, Director of Iran's First Slasher Film," *Chicago Reader*, Feb 19, 2015. https://www.chicagoreader.com/Bleader/archives/2015/02/19/meet-shahram-mokri-director-of-irans-first-slasher-film. However, an earlier example of an Iranian slasher can be found in the film *Girls' Dormitory* (Mohammed Hossein Latifi, 2004). For more on *Girls' Dormitory,* see: Pedram Partovi, "*Girls' Dormitory:* Women's Islam and Iranian Horror," *Visual Anthropology Review* 25.2 (2009): 186-207.

of time, with the repetition of images and dialogue, which suggests circularity. Dialogue occasionally overlaps with voiceovers, which seem to inhabit a different time period.

Figure 1: Blood on Babak's shirt.

These temporal conflicts exemplify the "allegorical moment," a term Adam Lowenstein coins to describe the operation of temporality in horror films that engage in sociocultural commentary or critique. Lowenstein defines the allegorical moment "as a shocking collision of film, spectator, and history where registers of bodily space and historical time are disrupted, confronted, and intertwined" (Lowenstein 2005, 3). For Lowenstein, the allegorical moment is "situated at the unpredictable and often painful juncture where past and present collide" (Lowenstein 2005, 5). Horror films with allegorical moments, in other words, present intersections between their filmic texts, historical context, and the viewers experiencing the connections between the two. Past and present interact fluidly, unburdened by the restrictions of linear temporality. The sociocultural commentary of *Fish and Cat* concerns the divide between Iranians of what Shahram Khosravi calls the First and Second Generations, who were between the ages of early adolescence and their twenties at the time of the 1979 Iranian Revolution, with those of the Third Generation, born just before or after the revolution (Khosravi 2005, 5). The allegorical moments of *Fish and Cat* put this conflict into dialogue with the film's complex temporality, inextricably entangled with Babak's blood-stained shirt and other suggestions of the students' deaths.

While *Fish and Cat*'s uses of elements of the horror genre (which does not appear frequently in Iranian cinema, with a few notable exceptions, including *Girls' Dormitory*) highlight the film's novelty, it also has important

points of continuity with the arthouse cinema which has been the focus of the vast majority of Western scholarship on Iran's rich filmic tradition.[2] Director Shahram Mokri even makes explicit references to the films of Abbas Kiarostami and Asghar Farhadi, two of Iran's most well-known auteurs, whose bodies of work have been the subject of much of the literature.[3] *Fish and Cat* continues traditions of artistic practice in Iranian cinema by using aesthetic traits reminiscent of the *ta'ziyeh*, a traditional Iranian passion play mourning the martyrdom of Husayn (though the plays themselves tell a range of stories). Kiarostami has cited the influence of the *ta'ziyeh* on his work, as has the filmmaker Bahram Bayza'i. Alongside these connections to Iranian art cinema, Babak's bloody shirt and other comparable images remind the viewer of Mokri's affinity with the horror film.

This juxtaposition exists within the lineage of Iranian films such as Kiarostami's *Taste of Cherry* (1997), which Kiarostami himself and critics have described as containing transfigurations of qualities of the *ta'ziyeh* into cinema. Indeed, Mokri himself has acknowledged the influence of the *ta'ziyeh* on his follow-up film *Invasion* (2017) (Fahim 2018). The approach to time in the *ta'ziyeh* connects the performances of the present with historical figures of the past, which disrupts the audience's sense of chronological temporality. The sense of disruption also marks the allegorical moment, evoked throughout *Fish and Cat*'s destabilizations of temporal continuity, themselves rooted in gruesome images such as the blood on Babak's shirt. I argue that the interaction between the single take, formal elements of the horror film, and the *ta'ziyeh* in *Fish and Cat* engenders a unique example of allegorical horror.

Ta'ziyeh Time

The aesthetics of *Fish and Cat* evoke the *ta'ziyeh*, which re-enacts the martyrdom of Husayn and related events. In 680 CE, Husayn and his

[2] For more on Iranian horror, see: Laura Fish, "The Disappearing Body: Poe and the Logics of Iranian Horror Films," *Poe Studies* 53 (2020): 86–104; Farshid Kazemi, *Interpreter of Desires: Iranian Cinema and Psychoanalysis*, PhD diss., University of Edinburgh, 2019, 186-226; Zahra Khosroshahi, "Vampires, Jinn and the Magical in Iranian Horror Films," *Frames* 16 (2019), https://framescinemajournal.com/article/vampires-jinn-and-the-magical-in-iranian-horror-films/.

[3] Some notable examples of scholarship on Kiarostami and Farhadi include: Mathew Abbott, *Abbas Kiarostami and Film-Philosophy* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017); Alberto Elena, *The Cinema of Abbas Kiarostami*, translated by Belinda Coombes (London: Saqi, 2005); Mehrnaz Saeed-Vafa and Jonathan Rosenbaum, *Abbas Kiarostami* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003); Michelle Langford, *Allegory in Iranian Cinema: The Aesthetics of Poetry and Resistance* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2019), 193-233; and Daniele Rugo, "Asghar Farhadi: Acknowledging Hybrid Traditions: Iran, Hollywood and Transnational Cinema," *Third Text* 30.3-4 (2016): 173-187.

followers were killed in battle against the caliphate in Karbala, a key moment for the divide between Shiite and Sunni Muslims (Mottahedeh 2008a, 17). Shiites saw this incident as "the ultimate example of sacrifice" (Chelkowski 2005, 16). Accordingly, Michael Fischer describes the event as having inspired the "Karbala paradigm," which consists of "models for living and a mnemonic for thinking about how to live…to which almost all of life's problems can be referred" (Fischer 1980, 21). The *ta'ziyeh* is arguably the most prominent cultural manifestation of the Karbala paradigm (Aghaie 2005, 46). *Ta'ziyeh* plays tend to show Husayn as a weeping man who proclaims his innocence, which encourages audience members to ruminate on their own woes (Gaffary 1984, 368). Audience involvement is a fundamental aspect of *ta'ziyeh* performance, as spectators' identification with Husayn codifies their religious and ideological commitments (Beeman 2011, 150-5).

The *ta'ziyeh* can be understood as a lens through which elements of Iranian culture, particularly cinema, become clear. Into the present day, the *ta'ziyeh* continues to show values and ideas fundamental to "the essential Iranian moral order" (Beeman 2011, 142). These themes revolve around a Manichaean conflict between good and evil (Ale-Mohammed 2001, 56). The juxtaposition of past and present temporalities also central to the *ta'ziyeh* has cultural resonances beyond the drama itself (Dabashi 2005, 95). Reza Ale-Mohammed describes the *ta'ziyeh* as "fused with literary tradition, mythical action, legend, and religious hagiography" (Ale-Mohammed 2001, 54). In addition to these elements, Negar Mottahedeh has identified the influence of the *ta'ziyeh* on formal aspects of post-revolutionary Iranian film (Mottahedeh 2008a, 15-88). Filmmakers have staged *ta'ziyeh* plays themselves; for example, Kiarostami directed an Iranian troupe in Rome in *The Martyrdom of Husayn* in July 2003 (Chelkowski 2009). Focusing on the work of Bayza'i, but intending the argument to be applicable to other Iranian filmmakers as well, Mottahedeh suggests that the *ta'ziyeh*'s non-linearity and chronological collision present "the spatial and temporal tropes for Iranian cinema's post-Revolutionary address" (Mottahedeh 2008a, 20). The temporality of *Fish and Cat* results from the contact between these tropes and generic properties of the horror film.

A prior example of cinematic inspiration from the *ta'ziyeh* appears in the final scene of *Taste of Cherry*. For most of the film's running time, a man named Baadi drives around Tehran, looking for someone to bury him after he commits suicide. Once he finds someone willing to help, the film's closing moments depict Baadi sitting in the hole he has dug for himself. Following a lengthy blackout, *Taste of Cherry* ends with grainy camcorder footage showing Kiarostami, lead actor Homayoun Ershadi, and the crew shooting the film. An interviewer asked Kiarostami if the ending was inspired by

Brecht, to which he responded that the real influence was the self-reflexivity of the *ta'ziyeh* (Pak-Shiraz 2011, 159). An example of that self-reflexivity can be seen in the play's director, known as the *ta'ziyeh gardan*, who appears onstage and narrates for the audience (Dabashi 2005, 94). *Ta'ziyeh* actors traditionally use a stylized form of acting, in which they distance themselves from the characters they portray, to the point of reading lines from crib sheets (Chelkowski 2005, 21). The stages have minimal decor, instead relying on actors and the *ta'ziyeh gardan* to convey the setting to the audience (Chelkowski 2005, 17). Thus, the self-reflexivity and foregrounding of subjectivity seen in the final scene of *Taste of Cherry* and a number of films by Kiarostami and other prominent Iranian filmmakers evidence the influence of the *ta'ziyeh* on Iranian cinema.

Taste of Cherry specifically evokes the *ta'ziyeh*'s use of such self-reflexivity to tell a story about death. Although the film does not make Baadi's morbid fate as apparent and inevitable throughout as the *ta'ziyeh* does with the death of Husayn and his followers, Kiarostami's narrative shares the centrality of death with the play. Furthermore, Michael Price argues that the final scene links Baadi with martyrdom: "If an Islamic martyr lives forever, Baadi's cinematic existence comes into play. Like an Islamic martyr, in the form and body of the film, he does not technically die and his existence transforms from a physical embodiment to some sort of image intended for interpretation" (Price 2001). The scene's overt artifice thereby functions, like similar methods of depiction in the *ta'ziyeh*, to show death. The influence Kiarostami describes is evident not only in the film's self-reflexivity, but in the use of that self-reflexivity to depict the protagonist's death, within a film focused on death in a manner comparable to the *ta'ziyeh*.

A similar convergence between self-reflexivity and death reappears in *Fish and Cat*'s final scene, albeit transformed in accordance with contrasts between the two films. The sequence begins with the handheld cinematography seen throughout the rest of the film, now showing for the first time a conversation between Hamid, another cook, and Maral, one of the students.[4] Both characters have been referenced in earlier dialogue. Babak and Saeed refer to Hamid in their first conversation, in which they discuss him being shot. The discussion is one of several repeated word for word throughout the film, but the final interaction with Maral and the moments immediately prior show Hamid's visual appearance. In contrast, she is only referenced in one prior conversation between two of the students,

[4] Here and throughout this essay, I distinguish individual shots, even though the entire film appears as a single shot. For example, I note the clear crane shot here, although Mokri mostly uses handheld cinematography earlier in the unbroken take. This method of description allows me to differentiate individual moments in the film, which, I argue, do distinguish themselves.

Mina and Kambiz. Mina informs him that Maral has gone to a restaurant for lunch and not returned. Mina jokes, "About Maral," a reference to the film *About Elly* (Asghar Farhadi, 2009), in which the titular character also goes missing. Mokri finally shows Maral when Hamid approaches her reading under a tree. She gives him one of her earphones to listen, at which point a voiceover from Maral begins, in which she narrates her murder at Hamid's hands. As she explains, the song heard in the earphones is "Fish and Cat" by the band Pallett, and it begins to play as Hamid pulls a knife from his sleeve, presumably to carry out the killing. The camera then pans 180º to show Pallett in long shot playing the song, followed by a crane out showing kites flying over their heads (Figure 2).

Figure 2: A performance by Pallet.

The overt artifice of this sequence contrasts with the naturalism of the rest of the film, much like the contrast created by the final scene in *Taste of Cherry*. But *Fish and Cat* reverses the two sides of the contrast: whereas *Taste of Cherry* proceeds for most of its running time as perhaps Kiarostami's least self-reflexive film and ends with a declaration of authorship, *Fish and Cat* initially appears documentary-like in its handheld cinematography and casual dialogue, ending with the stylization of the crane, band, and kites. However, the stylization similarly acknowledges artifice; although Kiarostami's visual appearance distinguishes *Taste of Cherry*, a clear authorial presence can likewise be discerned through the explicit constructedness of *Fish and Cat*'s conclusion. The twin authorial endings also both follow the implication of a character's death, which, in the case of *Taste of Cherry*, has been linked by its creator with the *ta'ziyeh*. Regarding the reference to *About Elly*, moreover, Michelle Langford likewise discusses the film in dialogue with the *ta'ziyeh*. Langford links the association between *About Elly* and the

ta'ziyeh with Iranians' capacity for "appropriating these signifying systems—symbols, slogans, iconography—and using them for their own purposes" in opposition to the government in the 2009 Green Movement protests (Langford 2019, 237). I suggest that a connection between the traits of the *ta'ziyeh* and the depiction of death similar to *Taste of Cherry* can also be seen in *Fish and Cat*.

The artifice acknowledged through the ending builds on the self-reflexivity of the preceding voiceovers. After an opening voiceover reads a title card explaining the rumours around the cannibalistic restaurant owners, audible narration disappears to instead show the conversations between the chefs and their interactions with the students. But after Kambiz's father finishes a phone conversation, we hear Kambiz's voice discussing his relationship with his parents before we have seen him onscreen. The voiceover says, "My father always calls," after which the father calls out: "Kambiz, Kambiz!" Once Kambiz enters, we hear their discussions, but the voiceover also reappears sporadically, offering commentary on the interaction. In a particularly striking moment, the voiceover overlaps with both Kambiz's voice in the conversation and that of his father, suggesting that the Kambiz speaking in the voiceover already knows what him and his father will say to each other. The use of voiceover, both with Kambiz and Maral, implies the audience addressed by that voice: an acknowledgment of the spectator, much as the artifice of the final scene recognizes the film's authorship. Like the narration of the *ta'ziyeh gardan*, the voiceover speaks directly to the viewer.

The different voices show the intermingling of temporalities characteristic of the *ta'ziyeh*. From the *ta'ziyeh*'s high point of popularity in the nineteenth century into the present, the passion play has re-enacted a historical event from the seventh century in the present day (Mottahedeh 2008b, 11). As William O. Beeman explains, audience members "are both on the plains of Karbala, representing symbolically the forces surrounding Husayn and his followers, and simultaneously in the present-day world mourning on the occasion of the event" (Beeman 2011, 150). The *ta'ziyeh* chronology thereby engenders the unity of disparate time periods. Mottahedeh states that the "integration of time and space, of past and present, of here and there, sets the tone of a performance in which the blurring of eras and spheres ensures the blurring of the differences...that establish an actual historical happening as separate from the time of its performative transformation" (Mottahedeh 2008a, 18-19). I contend that the convergent time periods evoked by the voiceovers in *Fish and Cat* suggest a similar blurring. As Kambiz's voiceover clashes with the conversation, the film disrupts the dialogue's ostensible present tense with the voiceovers' more ambiguous temporality. Throughout *Fish and Cat*, the present of the

dialogue and the ambiguous chronology of the voiceovers cannot be disentangled with ease.

The film's entanglements blur boundaries between life and death. Mokri introduces the concept of communicating with the dead in the initial discussion between Babak and Saeed. He explains that Hamid's nephew has recorded a disc of classical music, and offers to share headphones for listening. Babak responds in confusion: "Do you know that Hamid's nephew is dead?" Prior to this question, the score's strings enter as Babak stops walking at Saeed's mention of the nephew, again suggesting the significance of the moment and emphasizing Babak being taken aback. Although he agrees to listen, he continues to ask how Saeed could have received the music from a dead person. Saeed then agrees that the nephew is dead, says that it explains the whispering sound on the recording, and implores Babak to listen once again. The camera moves from long shot to medium close-up as the two men share the earphones, again highlighting the importance of the exchange (Figure 3). As they listen, we hear a faint whooshing sound, and Saeed continues to ask Babak if he hears it, to which he responds that he does not.

Figure 3: Babak and Saeed listen to music

This exchange, although inconclusive, brings to the film the theme of communication between the living and the dead. Mokri does not reveal whether or not Hamid's nephew truly is dead, nor does he explain how Saeed could have gotten the disc from a dead person. Hamid's appearance onscreen in the film's conclusion plays with this ambiguity but does not clarify it. He confirms for Saeed that the nephew has recorded the disc, but does not address the death. This suggestion of communication influences the viewer's understanding of the voiceovers, which, although not explicitly

labelled as the voices of the dead students speaking from the afterlife, have a ghostly affect due to the implication of their fate at the start of the film. The ambiguity evokes the "blurring of eras and spheres" Mottahedeh associates with the temporality of the *ta'ziyeh* (Mottahedeh 2008a, 18). Mottahedeh also links this blurring with the relationship between the living audience members and performers and the dead historical figures being represented:

> The *ta'ziyeh* structure, in reflecting on the past in the present, redeems the past in light of the cultural variables of its time. The *ta'ziyeh*'s structure, its temporal and spatial modes, more than its historical contents, produce this effect. While casting the audience as the mourners, mourning the events of the past, the eulogies' temporal and spatial tropes fit the *ta'ziyeh* participants into the mould of the supporters of Imam Husayn in the present and everyday. (Mottahedeh 2008b, 134)

The *ta'ziyeh* chronology thereby evinces a direct connection between the living and the dead, much as the suggestion of listening to music from the dead nephew links the present of the characters on screen with a possible death in the past. The possible death of the students, in contrast, would presumably occur after the events seen in the film. But Mokri avoids clear delineations of temporality, instead allowing the suggested time periods to blend together in a manner reminiscent of the temporal approach Mottahedeh attributes to the *ta'ziyeh*.

Death thereby looms throughout the film, feeling inescapable. After the opening title card's suggestion of the students' morbid fate, the inevitability of this fate colours everything we see. A key example lies in the patch of blood on Babak's shirt. The image corresponds with a bag containing a red substance Babak carries throughout the film. Although Mokri never clarifies the contents of the bag or the source of the shirt stain, the suggestion of cannibalism leads the viewer to suspect that Babak bears the mark of his victims. Mokri perhaps most explicitly plays with the suspicion in a scene in which Babak chases another of the students, Parvaneh, through the woods. The encounter begins with Babak sneaking up on her as she sits in her car, scaring her and establishing an ominous mood between them. He asks her to go into the woods with him to fix a valve; she cannot understand how she could possibly help, but ultimately agrees with reluctance after he continues to insist. She walks behind him, presumably hoping to keep her distance, but this becomes its own source of fear: after Parvaneh tells her friends that she will be right back, a medium shot shows her looking around, disturbed to find no one else in sight (Figure

4). She yells out, "Excuse me sir, where did you go?" His lack of response emphasizes the dread of the exchange. A following shot shows her looking for him with trepidation, and he finally reappears in a manner equally disconcerting to his introduction of himself to Parvaneh: we hear his heavy breathing, and only after Parvaneh's gasp at the sound does the camera move to show him in medium close-up. Although she leaves unscathed, dread permeates the encounter, furthered by the initial suggestion of the chef's murderousness.

Figure 4: Parvaneh in the woods.

This sequence thereby juxtaposes the inevitability of death suggested in the *ta'ziyeh* with the suspense of a horror film. As Ale-Mohammed explains, the performers and viewers' knowledge of the fate of the figures being portrayed alleviates tension: "Since both the actors and audience are aware of the events of Karbala, and are united in their condemnation, there is no illusion, suspense, or dramatic tension" (Ale-Mohammed 2001, 58). A similar foreknowledge of death shadows the viewing of *Fish and Cat* and leaves the viewer expecting the students' death throughout the film. The relative inconclusiveness provides the space for the tension of a horror film, most heavily emphasized in the scene between Parvaneh and Babak. Her statement to her friends that she will return recalls a similar line in the meta horror film *Scream* (Wes Craven, 1996), in which the character Randy notes the use of the line "I'll be right back" immediately before a character's death as a cliché of the genre, as well as the many similar moments in slasher films *Scream* parodies. In *Scream*, reporter Gale Weathers says this line, and does encounter the killer Ghostface afterwards. In one of the film's many inversions of horror conventions, however, she survives the exchange. Likewise, Parvaneh survives her interaction with Babak, much as Baadi returns in the coda of *Taste of Cherry* after the implication of his suicide. In

both of these cinematic evocations of *ta'ziyeh* aesthetics, then, the filmmakers use the feeling of death's inevitability and the expectation of death to strong dramatic effect.

Mokri further emphasizes the inescapability of death through circularity. Mottahedeh describes how the circular stage characteristic of the *ta'ziyeh* leads to circular movement by the performers: "To go from one place to another, the actor merely announces his intention to travel and often walks or rides on horseback once around the circular stage to arrive at 'the new location'" (Mottahedeh 2008a, 18). Circularity appears in *Fish and Cat* in several ways. The narrative itself loops, as seen in the repetition of conversations. The campground in which the conversations occur is a semicircle of sorts. Mokri uses the circular "stage" of the campground for a film in which characters move not forward but circularly, repeating actions and dialogue in ostensible perpetuity. Mokri brings the circularity of *ta'ziyeh* staging to cinema.

Horror Time

The circularity of *Fish and Cat* engenders evocations of Lowenstein's allegorical moment. Each chapter of Lowenstein's monograph examines films from a different national cinema as case studies of manifestations of the allegorical moment. The film Lowenstein uses to exemplify the allegorical moment in American cinema, *Last House on the Left* (Wes Craven, 1972), resembles *Fish and Cat*'s own relationship with its sociocultural context. Although the narrative of Craven's film closely follows that of *The Virgin Spring* (Ingmar Bergman, 1960), Lowenstein associates the violence of *Last House* with American intergenerational conflict in the Vietnam era, and particularly the 1970 killing of student anti-war demonstrators at Kent State University (Lowenstein 2005, 113-29). Indeed, *Last House* opens with teenage protagonist Mari being scolded by her parents for not wearing a bra, an evocation of disparaging attitudes towards the sexuality of American young adults of the era from older generations. After Mari tells them the name of the band she is going to see ("Bloodlust"), and her father reads aloud from a newspaper article about violence at their concerts, her mother responds in horror: "I thought you were supposed to be the love generation!" The scene ends with Mari's parents giving her a peace sign necklace, an important symbol of opposition to the Vietnam War amongst Americans of Mari's generation. This exchange leads the viewer to read the violence that follows in relation to the Vietnam era.

Fish and Cat illustrates comparable relations between a fictional film and its sociocultural context. *Fish and Cat* situates its own primary cultural issue, the conflict between Iranians of the first and second generations and those of the third, approximately at the time of the film's 2013 release. Indeed, the students belong to the third generation, which, according to

Khosravi, "has been totally formed under the rule of the Islamic regime" (Khosravi 2008, 5). In contrast, the cooks, who belong to the first and second generations, share the experiences of the Iranian Revolution and eight-year war with Iraq (1980-88). The intergenerational discrepancy becomes particularly apparent in the references to Hamid serving in the war, a conversation repeated throughout the film. Indeed, Langford argues that the film's many repetitions represent how "Mokri's film paints a picture of a generation wishing to transcend a world trained by the actions of an older generation, but instead being caught up in ever-repeating cycles that lead nowhere" (Langford 2019, 11). Langford thereby likens the film to the depiction of the third generation in *About Elly*, a film *Fish and Cat* explicitly cites through Mina's quotation. Mokri himself has emphasized the centrality of the generational divide to *Fish and Cat*: "People of that generation who were of fighting age during the war, they think that Iran is their place. The bad guys in *Fish & Cat* fought in the war, so they think of the woods as their zone. They don't understand why the students want to be there" (Sachs 2015). As with *Last House*, the ensuing violence is emblematic of the generational conflict of the film's milieu.

Furthermore, just as Lowenstein links the violence of *Last House* to the particular tragedy at Kent State, the violence of *Fish and Cat* can be associated with violence against the protestors of the Green Movement, which followed the 2009 re-election of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. This marks an important point of contrast with *About Elly*: although Farhadi's film likewise depicts the experiences of the third generation, it was released in Iran days before the 2009 election (Langford 2019, 235). Thus, while *About Elly* does seem to foreshadow the generation's mass participation in the protests, they occurred after the film had already been completed and released. In contrast, Mokri explains that censors had asked him to edit Maral's voice-over "because it invokes an image of a girl who was killed in the protests following Ahmadinejad's reelection" (Sachs 2015). Mokri has confirmed elsewhere that the girl referred to is Neda Agha-Soltan, a twenty-six year old whose murder by state paramilitary *basij* was recorded in a viral video (Mottahedeh 2015, 4).[5] Mottahedeh explains the significance of this incident: "An injustice had been done. Hundreds of thousands of people watched the video online and reposted it. The video of a young Iranian woman's agonizing death went viral in a matter of hours. Her name…became the rallying cry for the Iranian opposition" (Mottahedeh 2015, 4). Whereas *Last House* alludes to Kent State, Mokri's film captures the injustice Mottahedeh describes.

Fish and Cat's relationship with its source material further evokes the allegorical moment. The film's opening title card explains the narrative's link

[5] My thanks to Mahsa Salamati for bringing this to my attention.

with the rumoured story of a restaurant having served human flesh. As a result, the film is "based on a true case," as the title card tells us just before providing the basics of the story with the restaurant. This explanation again links *Fish and Cat* with *Last House*, as Craven's film likewise begins with a declaration of authenticity: "The events you are about to witness are true. Names and locations have been changed to protect those individuals still living." Lowenstein correctly links this statement with the tradition of purported relationships to real events in exploitation films, regardless of the accuracy of the claims (Lowenstein 2005, 123-9). Yet Lowenstein argues that the film's most tangible connection to real events is not with any incidents closely aligning with the brutal murder of Mari and her friend Phyllis, around which the narrative revolves, but rather to Kent State. Similarly, the story of the restaurant provides *Fish and Cat* with its narrative impetus, but the connection to the 2009 post-election protests is perhaps more central to the film's significance.

The juxtaposition between the references to Iranian arthouse cinema and the nods to slasher movies likewise illustrates the allegorical moment. Lowenstein's interpretation of *Last House* calls for "a full consideration of the interconnections between art and exploitation that simultaneously produce and destabilize their distinctiveness. These interconnections contribute to the shock of the allegorical moment by implicating the spectator within and between the discourses of art and exploitation" (Lowenstein 2005, 137). This quotation refers to the contrast between *Last House*'s graphic violence and low budget and the esteem of its inspiration, *The Virgin Spring*, due to it having been directed by one of cinema's most acclaimed auteurs and having won the 1960 Academy Award for Best Foreign Film (Lowenstein 2005, 137). As Lowenstein points out, Robin Wood has also taken up this disparity: "*The Virgin Spring* is art; *Last House* is exploitation. One must return to that dichotomy because the difference between the two films in terms of the relationship set up between audience and action is inevitably bound up with it" (Wood 2018, 185). However, Wood also suggests that "it is the work of the best movies in either medium to transcend, or transgress, these limitations," and reads *Last House* as being emblematic of such transgression (Wood 2018, 185-6).

I argue that *Fish and Cat* functions similarly. Mokri constantly alludes to Iranian cinema's most internationally well-known auteur: Kiarostami. *Fish and Cat*'s characters repeatedly describe struggles to get cellphone reception, which recalls the similar issues of protagonist Behzad in *The Wind Will Carry Us* (Abbas Kiarostami, 1999). The words of Kiarostami's film's title, itself being a line from the Iranian poet Forough Farrokhzad, reappear in the song played over *Fish and Cat*'s closing credits. The Kiarostami allusions align with the reference to *About Elly*, a film by Iran's first Academy Award winner.

The references to arthouse cinema collide with Mokri's evocations of less respected horror films.

Mokri's artistry can also be seen in the references to intergenerational conflict in contemporary Iran. He describes the overlap of social commentary and generic influence in *Fish and Cat* as being "two circles, one circle being the slasher movie and the other one being Iran today" (Sachs 2015). In a different interview, Mokri emphasizes his understanding of the longstanding relationship between horror cinema and sociocultural criticism: "I also believe that horror films refer to political and social conditions and the social approach is very important to me… I deliberately chose the horror genre due to Iran's political and social condition" (Ganjavie 2015). Where Bergman and exploitation meet Kent State in *Last House*, Kiarostami, Farhadi, and the slasher film meet the 2009 protests in *Fish and Cat*.

The different collisions enabled by the allegorical moment illustrate Walter Benjamin's concept of *Jetztzeit*. Benjamin defines *Jetztzeit* as "time filled by the present of the now" (Benjamin 1999, 261). Lowenstein argues that *Jetztzeit*'s "ability to arrest time, to reorganize relations between past and present, charges each moment with a potential future inflected by the politics of historical materialism, where the oppressed past no longer languishes unrecognised," and sees these abilities as being illustrated by the allegorical moment (Lowenstein 2005, 14). The allegorical moments of *Fish and Cat*, like those of *Last House*, exemplify the capacity of *Jetztzeit*. Barriers between genre and arthouse get transgressed. Distinctions between truth and fiction become questionable. Narratives about ostensibly unrelated subject matter speak to sociocultural conditions. In the *Jetztzeit* of the allegorical moment, mobilized by Mokri, the boundaries of linear temporality evaporate.

Mottahedeh likewise uses *Jetztzeit* as a theoretical framework for understanding temporality in the *ta'ziyeh*. According to Mottahedeh, "the ta'ziyeh stage sets up a situation in which the time and space of the past and the present coincide in a kind of *Jetztzeit*…so that the 'audience' become both the troops supporting Husayn in Karbala, and his mourners, mourning his death in the present" (Mottahedeh 2008b, 17). *Fish and Cat* evokes the situation that Mottahedeh describes in a number of ways. The circularity of the *ta'ziyeh* stage reappears in both the semi-circle of the film's campground and the circular narrative structure, in which events repeat. The deaths of the students become, like the death of Husayn, not finished moments in the past; rather, they return in the present through the actions of the performers and the audience. As with the allegorical moment, history becomes current, and *Jetztzeit* becomes the temporal perspective.

Fish and Cat presents this perspective through its unique combination of the allegorical moment with the aesthetics of the *ta'ziyeh*. Mottahedeh describes the effect of these aesthetics on post-revolutionary Iranian films,

which, she argues, "rely, sometimes exclusively, on a known tradition of temporal and spatial convergence that takes its cues from the ta'ziyeh's distinct and distinguishing mourning rituals" (Mottahedeh 2008a, 68). The collisions of dialogue and voiceovers throughout *Fish and Cat* illustrate the convergence Mottahedeh finds in the films of Bayza'i, borrowed from the *ta'ziyeh*. As the sounds interact, Mokri makes clear that *Fish and Cat* operates via a fluid logic. According to Mottahedeh, similar logic in Bayza'i's cinema, engendered by the convergences, offers the optimism of the future: "The collusion of times and spaces without prejudice in this tradition makes every moment in time an imaginal time in which a wished-for future arrives to redeem the wrongs of a lived past" (Mottahedeh 2008a, 68). Mokri's use of cinematic aesthetics comparable to those of Bayza'i, appropriated from the *ta'ziyeh*, suggests a future rife with possibilities for Iran's third generation. Where the events inspiring *Fish and Cat* tell the gruesome story of students falling victim to cannibals, Mokri's allegorical moments offer hope.

While the intimation of Hamid's murder of Maral, itself an allusion to the brutal slaying of Neda, might not seem hopeful, I would argue that the means by which Mokri depicts this act (or, rather, does not, as the killing does not actually appear onscreen), does offer optimism. As befits an essay on *Fish and Cat*, I will support this point by returning to my discussion of the final scene. I will also return to the conclusion of *Taste of Cherry*, which I likened earlier to the ending of *Fish and Cat*. In Kiarostami's film, the intimation of Baadi's death, followed by footage of actor Ershadi alive and well, suggests a resurrection: the film implies a suicide, but Baadi still lives on. The kites flying overhead, shown in the tender final moments of *Fish and Cat*'s closing crane shot, function similarly: we see the implication of Maral's death through the voiceover, but the kites suggest an afterlife for the students. Although Mokri implies their murders at the hands of the cooks, he follows this suggestion with signs of their ongoing presence in the kites. Both the crane shot and the appearance of Pallett mark a clear break with the rest of the film: in contrast to the handheld cinematography and naturalistic dialogue seen earlier, Mokri here emphasizes the artifice of the sequence. This emphasis enacts the students' rebirth—the artifice suggests a new temporal plane, in which the dead can be reborn. Mokri builds towards this suggestion throughout the film through the implications of communication with the dead via sound. Likewise, characters constantly defy death, such as in the scene with Babak and Parvaneh in the woods, in which Mokri leads the audience to expect her murder, but she escapes. The crane shot most fully realizes these implications by ascending skyward, showing a place for the students beyond the present. Although they die at the hands of the cooks in the present, Mokri's cinema, like Kiarostami's coda to *Taste of Cherry*, stages a resurrection.

The juxtaposition of Maral's voiceover and the kites thereby embodies Mokri's approach to temporality. After Maral describes her death for the viewer, the kites suggest her rebirth. We see that her death is not the conclusive end to a linear narrative, but rather a fluid moment in the circular *ta'ziyeh* stage evoked in *Fish and Cat*. The circularity thereby presents viewers with the hope Mottahedeh sees in the films of Bayza'i, in which the approach to death, influenced by the *ta'ziyeh,* likewise resists finality. This resistance provides hope by presenting possibilities for those limited by the barriers of the present through the voice-offs of Maral and the other students throughout the film. In the camera's final ascension, then, Mokri visualizes the defiance of death.

This visualization stems from the sense of *Jetzeit* seen in *Fish and Cat*, dually evoked through the mobilization of the allegorical moment and the *ta'ziyeh*. Mokri's evocations establish a cinematic temporality in which the past and present are inextricable. Indeed, even the most surface level reading of *Fish and Cat* would note that non-contemporaneity abounds in the film. As dialogue repeats, images reoccur, and voices overlap, Mokri unhinges the slasher film conventions he also suggests. In doing so, Mokri offers a plea for justice for the students, and Neda and Iran's third generation in the process. The allegorical moments of *Fish and Cat*, put into dialogue with the *ta'ziyeh*, depict the possibility of a rewriting of historical wrongs.[6]

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[6] As part of our commitment to developing scholars doing original work in horror studies, *MONSTRUM* is pleased to collaborate with the Horror Studies Scholarly Interest Group (SIG), part of the Society for Cinema and Media Studies (SCMS), in the selection and publication of this annual prize-winning graduate student essay for 2021, selected by a jury of SCMS-SIG scholars and the *MONSTRUM* editors.

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- 2021 -
MONSTRUM is Published in Montréal, Québec by the Montréal Monstrum Society.