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Looking Without Buying: The Shop Window, the Purchasable Relation, and Two Cinemas of Iranian Consumerism

Javad Nematollahi

nematollahij95@gmail.com

Tarbiat Modares University

Research Article

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Abstract

Between 1960 and 1974, Iranian popular films repeatedly placed characters before shop windows where goods promised more than material possession. Through close readings of *Bīm o omīd*, *Behesht dūr nīst*, *Kāfar* and *Mīram bābā bekharam*, this article examines how dolls, mannequins, flowers and clothing give visible form to parental care, companionship and recognition. These films do not consistently endorse the purchase of relationships. Rather, they make commodity display a familiar language for expressing attachments whose fulfilment depends on money, knowledge and other people's intervention. The article develops the administered gaze to describe the separation between a character's capacity to look and imagine and their authority over how desire is represented or pursued. It distinguishes the narrator's framing from the actions of guardians, readers and gift-givers, placing these arrangements within Tehran's uneven consumer modernization. Comparisons with *Āqā-ye Hālū*, *Balūč* and *Sobh-e rūz-e chahārom* reveal different objections to consumer culture, including gendered anxieties about autonomy and a less restorative criticism of cinematic spectacle. The comparison challenges the hierarchy between an unreflective popular cinema and a critical New Wave without treating either as a uniform position.

1. Introduction

1.1 Four windows

In 1339/1960, a Tehran clerk whose salary is months overdue stops before a doll in a shop window. When he returns, his daughter appears in its place. In 1348/1969, a girl on a birthday outing sees a bridal mannequin beside a smaller display figure and wishes that her own mother were with her. In 1351/1972, a domestic servant looks at flowers behind glass and wonders why nobody remembers her enough to send her any. In 1353/1974, a boy crosses a busy street to ask a male mannequin to become his father, offering the single toman he has saved.

The objects differ, but each encounter turns a commercial display into an image of a relationship. The doll offers Ahmad a picture of his daughter's happiness; the bridal mannequin makes an absent mother imaginable; flowers stand for another person's attention; the male mannequin occupies the place of a missing father. These are not equivalent acts of buying a relation. A gift can express an existing attachment, a display can supply an image of an absent person, and a child can take the promise of purchase literally. What joins the scenes is the use of commodities to give an intimate wish a visible form, while leaving its fulfilment uncertain.

1.2 The problem

Studies of consumer modernity have developed a rich vocabulary for these encounters. Friedberg (1994) connects window shopping to a mobilized and virtual gaze; Schivelbusch (1995) and Ward (2001) examine the visual effects of plate glass and electric illumination; Campbell (2018) locates consumer pleasure in anticipation; and Bowlby (1985) considers the shop window as a surface on which

consumers imagine themselves. These approaches explain why looking can be an activity in its own right, even when it leads to no purchase. The Iranian films considered here add a particular narrative problem: who is entitled to say what the person looking wants, and who can turn that wish into action?

This question also bears on Iranian film historiography. The critical tradition that named popular Persian-language cinema *filmfārsi* often dismissed it as formless and derivative. Parviz Davā'i objected that the phenomenon had been analysed a fraction as much as it had been insulted (cited in Naficy 2011, 151). The evaluative distinction between popular cinema and the New Wave has sometimes assigned serious reflection on Pahlavi modernization to the latter. Naficy (2011) and Rekabtalaei (2019) provide grounds for reconsidering that division. Shop-window scenes offer a precise way to pursue the comparison: different films encounter similar displays, but do not always locate the difficulty in the same place.

1.3 The argument

This article asks how shop-window sequences turn commodities into images of personal relationships, and how their narration distributes authority between the person who desires and those who interpret or pursue that desire. Its principal cases are *Bīm o omīd* ('Fear and hope', Gorji Obadiah, 1339/1960), *Behesht dūr nīst* ('Paradise is not far', Esmā'il Riāhi, 1348/1969), *Kāfar* ('Infidel', Fereydun Goleh, 1351/1972) and *Mīram bābā bekharam* ('I am going to buy a dad', Aman Manteghi, 1353/1974). Each gives consumer display a place within an otherwise familiar demand: to care for a child, to have a parent, to receive affection or to be remembered.

I call the separation between looking and authority the *administered gaze*. The term identifies two related questions, not two powers that must always belong to the same person. One concerns representation: who frames the encounter and makes the desire intelligible? The other concerns action: who can provide money, supply information, deliver a gift or pursue the desired relationship? A character may speak and imagine quite clearly while depending on somebody else to act. Conversely, a narrator may direct the spectator's attention without controlling anything within the story. The distinction is essential to the comparison.

The films organize these relations differently. A newsreel-style voice introduces Ahmad's deprivation, while an employer controls the wages he needs. Jamāl buys a doll and invents its maternal provenance for his niece. Men read Suri's stolen diary and undertake to satisfy wishes she has already expressed for herself. A mother explains fatherlessness to her son through a story about buying fathers, though she cannot provide the person he wants. The problem is therefore not simply an obstacle between an isolated viewer and an object. Desire passes through relationships of dependence, care and unequal knowledge.

The comparison with *Āqā-ye Hālū* ('Mr. Gullible', Dariush Mehrjui, 1349/1970), *Balūč* ('Baluch', Masoud Kimiai, 1351/1972) and *Sobh-e rūz-e chahārom* ('The morning of the fourth day', Kamran Shirdel, 1351/1972) places this pattern beside other criticisms of consumer culture. Mehrjui and Kimiai connect urban consumption to troubled masculine authority; Shirdel asks what happens when experience itself

takes the shape of cinematic spectacle. These works do not constitute a single New Wave answer. Nor does the principal corpus accept commodification without irony. What differs is what each film finds most troubling: barriers to care, the moral terms of a proposed relationship, or the images through which an attractive life is imagined.

1.4 Corpus, scope and prior work

The selection is purposive rather than representative. The four principal films connect a window encounter with another means of presenting desire: a narrating voice, a gift, a diary or a parental explanation. Their dates allow comparison across changes in Tehran's consumer landscape, but four cases cannot establish a linear evolution. *Kāfar* is particularly important because it crosses the division under examination, joining popular dramatic conventions to formal concerns associated with the New Wave. Popular cinema and the New Wave name intersecting practices, not sealed production categories. The three counter-readings test the argument against different treatments of consumption rather than supplying a second representative sample.

Earlier studies have examined window shopping as an experience of Pahlavi urban modernity and the representation of family relations within consumer culture (Nematollahi and Sayyad 2025; Nematollahi et al. 2026). The present article builds on those findings, including the discussion of *Āqā-ye Hālū* and *Mīram bābā bekharam*, but asks a different comparative question: how does a wish expressed through a commodity pass between the person who experiences it and the people or voices entitled to explain and act upon it? The diary in *Kāfar*, the attributed gift in *Behesht dūr nīst* and the narrated display in *Bīm o omīd* make that question especially clear.

The analysis follows shot order, framing, camera position, transitions, spoken dialogue and the relation between image and voice in circulating digital copies. The readings distinguish a character's beliefs from the film's presentation of them. Translations of dialogue are given from the Persian. The reproduced film frames are AI-enhanced because of the poor quality of the available copies. Analysis rests on the footage rather than on fine detail produced by enhancement.

2. Window Shopping, Desire, and Who Is Permitted to Look

2.1 Consumption before purchase

Window shopping names an engagement with commodities through looking and imagination that need not result in exchange (Friedberg 1994, 5). Friedberg situates it within a history connecting arcades, department stores, panoramas, travel and cinema. These spaces and media offer different kinds of mobility, including the possibility of seeing places and lives without physically entering them (1994, 65–67). The shop window makes such a distinction ordinary: the body remains on the pavement while imagination moves among the things on display. This is a useful starting point for the films, whose characters often gain an image of another life without obtaining the means to live it.

Campbell (2018, 147) places much of the pleasure of modern consumption in anticipation. The consumer imagines an object and a self transformed by its possession, enjoying a scenario before any purchase takes place. Acquisition can disappoint because the object cannot sustain everything that has been imagined around it. The Lacanian account developed by Žižek (1991, 5–13) approaches the problem differently: desire cannot be reduced to a deficit that the correct object would finally repair. These perspectives help explain why an object can promise more than its acquisition delivers.

The window's materials and arrangement help produce this experience. Framing, illumination and arrangement separate an object from its ordinary surroundings and make it the centre of a look (Gunning 2000, 232). Ward (2001, 197) treats display as a mise-en-scene of consumer desire. Large sheets of glass permit close inspection while preventing touch, and electric illumination gives goods a visibility different from that of the surrounding street (Schivelbusch 1995, 146–48; Ward 2001, 220). A shop window therefore offers more than a view of what a merchant possesses. It gives the commodity a setting, an audience and a possible story.

Benjamin's phantasmagoria, as discussed by Gilloch (1996, 172), directs attention to this dreamlike appearance of commodities. Its force does not depend on every observer being deceived. The arrangement itself invites a relation between goods and imagined possibilities. Beller's (2006) account of the cinematic organization of attention further connects visual experience with the commodity economy. In the films examined here, that connection is particularly tangible: the camera shows a character looking, then gives the commodity enough time and visual prominence to become a possible answer to the character's difficulties.

Bowlby's *Just Looking* (1985) supplies this article's title in paraphrase. The phrase can decline a transaction while retaining the right to inspect and imagine. Her readings show how the consumer may find a projected version of the self among displayed goods, while remaining subject to the social judgments organized around them. The Iranian cases often make that projection relational. The imagined self is a cared-for child, a capable father or a woman who matters to somebody else. What the display promises cannot be separated from another person's presence or recognition.

The films require a distinction between commodities through which people express relationships and relationships actually offered for sale. In Marx's account, commodity fetishism concerns the appearance of social relations between producers as relations between things (Marx [1867] 1887, ch. 1, sec. 4). A doll associated with motherhood or a flower associated with affection is not, by itself, proof of that entire process. I use *purchasable relation* for the more specific proposition dramatized by these films: that obtaining an object might also secure the care, recognition or companionship attached to it. Sometimes the proposition is explicit; sometimes it remains a fantasy that the narrative both sustains and exposes.

2.2 Who is permitted to look

The question of who can occupy the position of the consumer has an important gendered history. Wolff (1990, 34–50) argues that the literature of nineteenth-century modernity privileges male experience. The

anonymity, purposeless movement and freedom of encounter associated with the flâneur were not equally available to women. The absent flâneuse names a historical restriction in the formation of this ideal observer, rather than a claim that women never entered a street or looked at goods.

Nava (1996, 40–53) shifts attention towards the expansion of mass consumption around 1900. Department stores and related commercial spaces gave women socially acceptable reasons to enter the city, linger and look without an immediate obligation to buy. This was a real change in access to public life. Yet being welcomed as a consumer did not erase the conventions through which women were seen or the economic inequalities that limited their choices. Bowlby (1985) similarly shows the woman consumer occupying both sides of the display: she watches commodities and is herself evaluated as an appearance.

Wolff and Nava address different historical circumstances, but their disagreement helps distinguish access to consumer space from authority within it. A woman may earn a wage, walk unaccompanied and speak about what she wants, yet remain dependent on others to obtain it. *Kāfar* makes precisely this combination available for analysis. Suri is neither absent from the consumer city nor fully in command of what follows from her encounters with it.

2.3 Narrating desire and acting on it

The administered gaze draws on this distinction. It names a narrative arrangement in which the person who looks does not have equivalent authority over the account of that looking or the action it prompts. The term applies when the telling of a wish is bound to an imbalance of knowledge or practical power, not merely whenever a narrator describes somebody looking. Imagination itself remains active. Suri's diary, Parvāneh's dream and Mamal's conversation with a mannequin are active attempts to give desire a form. Their vulnerability appears when those expressions enter relations they cannot fully direct: a guardian's explanation, an unauthorized reading or the unequal exchange of money and gifts.

Two levels must remain distinct. At the level of film narration, a voiceover, cut or camera position can organize the spectator's access to a character. Within the story, a guardian or benefactor can intervene in the character's life. A voiceover is not a shopkeeper, and an uncle is not a narrator merely because he tells a child a story. The films become interesting when these levels reinforce, complicate or contradict each other. *Kāfar*, for example, introduces male readers but also lets Suri speak in her own voice; their access to her words does not give them complete possession of their meaning.

Across the corpus, looking is bound to speech, knowledge, money and action in different ways. The films also differ in what they find troubling. One may sympathize with a character excluded from a display while presenting the guardian who intervenes as caring; another may make that intervention itself uneasy. The following readings attend to those differences rather than assume that every barrier is economic or every gift liberating.

3. Tehran's Commercial Surface, 1336–1353

3.1 A new retail setting

The department store filmed in *Bīm o omīd* gives the first window encounter a specific urban setting (Fig. 1). Forushgāh-e Ferdowsi opened on 22 Azar 1336/13 December 1957 as a conspicuous experiment in modern retailing. Its West German-designed premises brought large areas of glass, open displays and an escalator into a coordinated shopping environment (Hoseini 1399/2020, 101; Jamshidnezhād 1400/2021). The camera's attention to these features is part of the film's account of the city, not simply a convenient backdrop for Ahmad's purchase.

Jamshidnezhād's retrospective history connects the project to ambitions for concentrated retailing, price supervision and easier taxation. The store's advertised fixed prices and standardized presentation offered an alternative to bargaining across dispersed shops. Chaney's (1983) account of the department store as a cultural form helps explain why this mattered beyond administrative convenience. The setting organized movement and comparison: customers could circulate among goods, assess a public price and imagine themselves as participants in a new kind of retail public.

The chronology nevertheless matters. The store's early sponsorship should not be confused with all its later institutional functions. Historical accounts place the government's purchase of its shares in 1340/1961, after *Bīm o omīd*. A proposal in 1344/1965 concerned coordinating the store with the Foreign Transactions Company, which purchased goods for state institutions; later reorganization occurred in 1351/1972 (Safarnevis 1394/2015; Jamshidnezhād 1400/2021). These developments concern government procurement, not a monopoly over Iranian imports, and they postdate the film's setting.

Like European department stores, Ferdowsi had proprietors, rules and exclusions. What distinguishes this case is not the mere existence of a proprietor, but the combination of state sponsorship, imported retail arrangements and unequal purchasing power. Lerner's (2015) history of the German department store shows how commercial spaces could become objects of anxiety about foreignness and moral change. It offers a comparative question for Iran, not evidence that Tehran followed the same path or that the films simply reproduce an institutional programme.

Accounts of Ferdowsi describe visits as occasions for dressing up and the escalator as an attraction that required an attendant to guide customers and keep clothing clear of the mechanism (Jamshidnezhād 1400/2021). Such details show visitors learning how to use an unfamiliar commercial space. The accommodation of chadors indicates women's participation rather than their incompatibility with modern consumption. The department store could invite that presence while organizing it through its own routines. In *Bīm o omīd*, this invitation is visible in the women who shop and serve behind the counters.

3.2 Changing economies, unequal access

The corpus spans different economic circumstances. Hoseini (1399/2020, 101) places *Bīm o omīd* within the difficulties of the late 1330s/1950s and early 1340s/1960s, reading its indebted, vulnerable protagonist against later representations of assertive masculinity. By the time of *Kāfar* and *Mīram bābā bekharam*, the expansion of the oil economy had made the contrast between visible abundance and uneven consumption increasingly consequential. Katouzian (1981, 250, 264) describes the pursuit of higher incomes and conspicuous expenditure alongside substantial differences in access to consumption. Ejlali (1395/2016, 276) situates popular cinema within the experience of the growing urban population, including migrants from the countryside.

The films do not directly measure these inequalities, but they give them narrative scale. Ahmad confronts a stated price and wages that have not been paid. Suri can enter the commercial street, yet cannot turn employment into the purchases she imagines. Mamal learns to account for the absence of a father as a shortage of money. Each scene brings an economic distinction into a relationship that is not exhausted by economics. What matters is not simply that the characters possess less than others. They must make that lack intelligible to a child, a prospective lover or themselves.

Katouzian's term *pseudo-modernism* names a tendency to treat the visible apparatus of modernization as an achievement in itself (1981, 103). The window is a useful place to examine the discrepancy between such visibility and everyday capacity, but it should not be reduced to an illustration of the term. The glass offers beauty, curiosity and imaginative pleasure as well as exclusion. Popular films can criticize deprivation while continuing to value those experiences. Their characters do not necessarily want the display removed; they want its promises to bear some relation to what they can do.

The specificity of location matters most clearly in *Bīm o omīd*. Its views of Tehran connect commercial spectacle to recognizable streets and squares, including Eskandari, Toopkhaneh and Lalezar (Hoseini 1399/2020, 101). Ferdowsi belongs to that geography. The store does not stand for every institution in the film, but it gives Ahmad's predicament a concrete setting: he can move through an impressive modern interior while remaining unable to purchase the object that has caught his attention.

4. The Purchasable Relation: Parents and Children at the Glass

Three films place family attachments before shop windows. One follows a father trying to please his daughter; the others show children imagining an absent parent in the form of a mannequin. The differences between a gift, a substitute and an actual person make the comparison revealing. Though the displays resemble one another, the wishes they stage are not the same.

4.1 From the aerial view to the plate glass

Bīm o omīd does not begin at street level. It opens above Tehran and descends by stages through monumental spaces, statues and fountains towards crowded pavements, vendors and shopfronts. The city becomes a succession of displays: dresses on mannequins, a bridal figure, toys and the window

containing the doll that will draw Ahmad's attention (Fig. 2). The movement makes shopping part of the city's public appearance before it becomes one man's difficulty.

A voice accompanies the descent, naming the city, enumerating its amenities and turning from the general preparations for Nowruz to a particular person who cannot share their apparent happiness. Ahmad is selected from the street rather than allowed to introduce himself. The voice exercises the authority over the image that Chion (1999) associates with some forms of unseen speech. It knows more than Ahmad and gives the spectator a place from which to understand him: the public abundance has an exception, and the camera will follow that exception.

The connection to broadcast authority returns later in the plot. The radio announcer Taqi Rowhani appears as himself, and a warning broadcast contributes to the effort to prevent Ahmad from taking mistakenly prepared medicine (Hoseini 1399/2020, 100–01). The opening description and the rescue thus give public communication complementary roles, first presenting the individual to the spectator and later making his danger known within the city. The public voice can mobilize help when Ahmad's life is in danger, but it cannot secure the wages he needs to keep his promise to Nāzi.

That account is sympathetic, but it is not Ahmad's own. He supplies a face and a predicament to the narrator's city. The difference between being publicly represented and being able to act is already visible: the voice can explain his exclusion immediately, while he still has to find the money that would alter it. The administered gaze begins here at the level of narration. Its material counterpart appears elsewhere, in the workplace and at the price card.

4.2 Inside the store

The film also goes inside Ferdowsi. Ahmad crosses a floor whose lighting, counters and circulation receive sustained attention. Goods lie in open display rather than remaining entirely behind a shopkeeper, and the escalator is shown from several positions, including a view down its well. The sequence invites the spectator to inspect the infrastructure as well as follow the customer. A new interior becomes available to cinematic looking.

Women shop and work behind the counters. Their participation in this commercial interior is presented as ordinary, not as a disruption requiring explanation. Its immediate problem belongs to the man who can circulate through the store but cannot make the purchase he imagines. Spatial admission and purchasing power have already come apart.

4.3 The television, the doll, the dress

Another commodity makes the stakes clearer. Ahmad (Mohsen Mahdavi) has promised his daughter Nāzi (Googoosh) a television for Nowruz. The film was made in the early years of Iranian television, and her performance of an imaginary broadcast brings that new medium into the household without bringing in the apparatus itself (Hoseini 1399/2020, 101). Her playful imitation gives the family a way to enjoy what Ahmad cannot provide: she becomes the source of the entertainment he has promised to buy.

The doll extends that pattern through the shop window. Ahmad's encounters with it recur around his attempt to obtain money. In the later passage, the film alternates his face with the display and lets Nāzi appear where the doll stood, adopting its position and pose. The return to the inanimate figure ends the fantasy, restoring the distinction between daughter and doll. Nāzi is already present in his life. The doll instead gives Ahmad a picture of the happiness he hopes to provide—and cannot yet afford.

The price card makes that appearance expensive: 4,500 rials, or 450 tomans. Following the refusal of an advance on unpaid wages, Ahmad sells his watch. He eventually buys a dress for 450 rials rather than the doll, reducing the imagined purchase to the clothing that can be transferred to a living child. The tenfold difference gives the fantasy a precise financial scale. What begins as a wish is measured against two prices and the cost of surrendering his watch.

The repeated looks matter because the window changes meaning without needing to change its contents. Before and after his attempt to obtain money, the same display remains available, while Ahmad's prospects narrow. Once Nāzi has occupied the doll's place, buying the dress becomes a compromise between the fantasy and his circumstances. He cannot deliver the entire promise, but neither does he simply abandon the attempt to please her. Ahmad comes to picture a good father’s care through what the shop can sell, though neither he nor the film treats Nāzi herself as something for sale.

His watch introduces another exchange. An object used to measure his time becomes the means of buying a gift, while payment for time already worked remains beyond his control. The film puts the sale and the purchase in sequence. His capacity to provide for his daughter depends on a wage that has not arrived.

Nor does the film leave Ahmad’s deprivation entirely unresolved. Alongside the medical rescue, a colleague eventually brings news that his overdue wages have been obtained (Hoseini 1399/2020, 100–01). The film recognizes economic vulnerability but also imagines its repair through the intervention of others. The narrator and the rescuing institutions are not enemies; public communication helps save him from immediate danger. Yet he still depends on other people's decisions to receive the income needed to keep his promise to Nāzi.

4.4 The excursion and the falsified gift

Behesht dūr nīst approaches the display from the child's side. Parvāneh (Fariba) is separated from her biological mother, Effat (Shahla Riāhi), who has been institutionalized, and is cared for by her uncle Jamāl (Fardin). She believes that Ātefeh (Frouzan), a performer, is her mother. The child thus directs her longing towards a woman who is not her biological mother.

On her birthday, Jamāl takes Parvāneh past a shop display containing a bridal mannequin beside a smaller female figure. The child reads the arrangement as a mother and daughter and wishes that her own mother were with her (Fig. 3). The display has not advertised motherhood in words. Parvāneh supplies that relation, using the difference in size and the figures' proximity to construct a scene of

companionship. Unlike Ahmad, who projects a person he knows into the place of a doll, she takes a grouping of objects as a picture of something missing from her daily life.

Parvāneh supplies the comparison; Jamāl's decisive intervention comes with the doll he buys and later attributes to her mother. The gift acquires a false origin, and with it an emotional meaning that its purchaser knows to be invented. He can supply the object and determine the story that accompanies it, while the child lacks the knowledge needed to distinguish the two.

Here purchase and explanation fall into the same hands. Jamāl supplies both the doll and the account of its origin. He may intend to console rather than hurt Parvāneh, but good intentions do not remove the imbalance. She believes that the doll is evidence of her mother's attention because Jamāl tells her so. The spectator knows what she cannot: the affection attached to the gift has been invented.

4.5 Palms against the glass

The dream that follows returns the purchased doll to the world of the display. Parvāneh lies down beside it, their heads sharing the frame. A transition from her sleeping face leads back to the bridal mannequin. She then stands outside the glass, presses her palms against it and asks the figure she calls mother to let her come close: 'Let me come to you ... hold me' (Fig. 4). Sleep does not simply remove the obstacle. Even in the dream, she cannot turn a visible maternal presence into an embrace.

Baudrillard's account of glass as simultaneous proximity and distance is especially apt here: 'we see, but cannot touch' (1996, 41–42). The film makes that condition bodily through the child's hands. The pane permits an encounter while preventing the form of contact she requests. She wakes in tears and telephones Ātefeh. The mannequin and the doll have given her images of maternal affection; now she reaches for someone who might actually answer.

The scene draws its emotional force from the distance between a maternal image and a mother's presence. Jamāl's gift consoles imperfectly because a bought object cannot establish the maternal provenance he assigns it. Yet the film still uses the shop display to formulate the wish. Commercial imagery supplies a scene of togetherness against which her own separation becomes painful.

Across these films, the mannequin is useful because it can hold a place without securely filling it. Gronberg's (1997) account of the mannequin's effaced and fashioned body helps illuminate that availability. Here, however, it is not only an idealized feminine body: the figure can stand for a daughter, a mother or, in *Mīram bābā bekharam*, a father. The commodity display offers a human arrangement into which the character can project a desired relation. The projection is powerful precisely because the object cannot reciprocate it.

4.6 The premise stated aloud

Mīram bābā bekharam makes the language of purchase explicit. Mamal (Shahram Saminipour) lives with his mother, a domestic worker, and wants a father like the fathers of other children. When he presses the question, she explains that a father must be bought and that they will obtain one when they have enough

money. This is a parent's account of deprivation, not an objective statement about how kinship works. For the child, however, it makes an absence seem remediable through saving and shopping.

The street gives the account visible support. Other children walk with their fathers and receive ice cream or toys. Mamal stops opposite a window containing a male mannequin, but reaching it first requires crossing a busy road. His unsuccessful attempts make the approach itself a problem. He finally crosses alongside a boy accompanied by his father. The comparison joins possession to mobility: another child already has the relationship that appears to make both the street and the consumer world easier to enter.

Reflections initially interfere with Mamal's view. When the camera moves inside the display, the spectator sees him from among its contents. A male mannequin holds the hand of a smaller figure resembling a child, and Mamal asks it to become his father, offers his toman and asks about the child already beside it. He is not imagining the ownership of an isolated object. He is looking for a place within the grouping. The display already contains that place, but someone else appears to occupy it.

The fantasy grants entry. The showman Reza (Reza Beyk-Imanverdi) replaces the mannequin, and Mamal appears inside beside him. Reza agrees to be his father, opens the display and steps towards the street, where he can stop the traffic that defeated the boy (Fig. 5). The scene joins two wishes: to be admitted to the paternal group and to have someone whose authority makes the city negotiable. The return to Mamal alone on the pavement cancels the imagined accomplishment without cancelling the need that produced it.

The domestic sequence carries the substitution further. Mamal's mother has obtained a mannequin and installed it in a father's place at home. He judges its appearance and asks for a better one; she postpones the improvement until she can afford it. Choice, price and upgrading become ways of talking about family life, while the mannequin's silence makes the inadequacy of the substitution plain.

The ensuing dream of a father store makes that insufficiency comic and disturbing. Paternal figures are displayed with differentiated prices, while other displays break fatherhood into goods and parts. The staging exaggerates the mother's explanation until it becomes a world of stock, classification and purchase. The fantasy does more than illustrate the mother’s explanation. By stocking fathers as interchangeable goods, it exposes the absurdity of expecting a purchase to meet a child’s need. The comedy does not lessen Mamal’s loneliness.

The mother is an important intermediary, but she is not the proprietor of the world she describes. Her explanation gives Mamal a way to imagine fatherlessness, while her limited means prevent her from supplying what he seeks. Narrative authority and material capacity are divided even within one person. Her purchased substitute is an attempt to respond to him from inside that limitation. She can give Mamal a story about finding a father more readily than she can secure the relationship that story promises.

4.7 What the comparison establishes

These films connect affection to commodities without making the same claim about their exchangeability. Ahmad tries to express care through a purchase. Jamāl gives a purchase a misleading history of care. Mamal takes a parental explanation literally and imagines care as something stocked for sale. The differences are revealing, but the four films do not trace a steady historical discovery that relationships have become commodities.

What recurs is a discrepancy between the visible promise and the means of securing it. A displayed body can resemble a daughter, stand beside a child or extend a paternal hand, but the relation depends on more than that resemblance. Wages, guardianship, explanation and reciprocal attention remain decisive. The films use the window to make those dependencies felt. They do not need to abandon consumer imagery in order to expose the fragility of the relationships imagined through it.

5. The Textual Vitrine:

5. The Textual Vitrine: *Kāfar*
Kāfar brings the problem into the life of an adult woman. Goleh combines the dramatic materials of popular cinema with a generational unease and formal experimentation that complicate the boundary with the New Wave (Hoseini 1399/2020, 515–16). Its principal narrative follows Mehdi Kāfar (Saeed Rad), released from prison and drawn back into conflict with Hasan Tala. Alongside it runs the story of Suri (Puneh), a domestic servant pressured towards marriage with her predatory landlord, Taqi Khan. Her diary records a life that the men around Mehdi eventually enter without her invitation.

Suri's position differs from the children's. She works for wages, moves through Tehran and describes her own wishes. These capacities make it especially important not to confuse her dependence with an absence of agency. The film's question is what becomes of a desire she has already articulated when other people discover it and take responsibility for its fulfilment.

5.1 The diary as textual vitrine

The window-shopping passage belongs to a sequence framed by the reading of Suri's notebook. Her voice accompanies images of her movement through the city, recounting fear, loneliness and small hopes; the film also shows men listening while a younger reader goes through the diary. The notebook has passed into their possession after a theft. Its circulation gives them knowledge she did not choose to share with them.

The edited sequence does not require us to treat every image as something literally imagined by Mehdi. Suri speaks in her own voice, but the men who have read her notebook without permission now control its circulation within the story. The film keeps her perspective audible even as it shows how others may put her words to use.

The diary becomes a textual vitrine when Suri's private account is opened to people who were never meant to read it. A shop window invites public inspection; her notebook does not. The analogy lies in

what follows the breach: men who learn what she wants can present themselves as the people capable of providing it, while she does not know how they acquired that knowledge.

Suri's account also locates danger within the home. She describes the landlord's harassment and the restrictions on listening to music. The home is not an intact refuge from corrupting modernity. Even the place where she can conceal herself to listen to the radio belongs to the environment in which she is threatened. The contrast matters to the later New Wave comparison: consumer desires emerge here partly from the inadequacy of the existing domestic order, not simply from an attractive street that destroys a secure household.

5.2 The flower and the dress

Suri's passage through the commercial streets is organized through pauses and discontinuous views rather than presented as an uninterrupted walk. Images of flowers and clothing appear as she approaches the displays. The editing gives the goods a prominence that exceeds a strictly continuous record of her movements, then brings her into relation with them. Looking is anticipated by the montage before it is completed at the window.

At the florist's, her narration makes the emotional demand explicit: the city has flowers of every kind, but nobody remembers her enough to buy and send her any. The problem is not reducible to the money required for a bunch. Flowers received from somebody else would mean that she had been thought about. Buying them for herself could supply the object without supplying that assurance. The scene gives an ordinary commodity the task of carrying a relation whose value depends on its origin.

The camera's position among the plants places the spectator on the opposite side of the display from Suri (Fig. 6). Leaves occupy the foreground, while her face and body are seen beyond them. The arrangement lets the viewer inspect the person who is looking, rather than simply share her view of the flowers. The foreground plants give that separation a spatial form. The spectator looks out from among flowers nobody has thought to send her.

The dress introduces another relation to possession. Suri explains that she looks at it whenever she passes, but can only imagine wearing it. She then makes a sharper distinction: 'It is only mine until somebody buys it. Once it is bought, its memory gradually fades with time.' Her complaint is more specific than the disappointment that often accompanies consumer desire: even her imagined possession has an expiry date. Her imaginary possession lasts at the discretion of an unknown customer with the means to turn looking into ownership.

Campbell's (2018, 147) emphasis on anticipatory pleasure helps explain why the dress can matter before purchase. Suri's speech gives that pleasure a class-specific limit. She can make an imaginative use of the object but cannot secure its continued availability. The shopkeeper need not expel her for the exclusion to operate. Another buyer can end the encounter simply by completing the transaction that remains unavailable to her.

The two windows should therefore not be collapsed into one undifferentiated longing. The flowers promise attention from another person; the dress offers a possible appearance and a temporary imaginative possession. Both make deprivation visible, but in different ways. Suri draws the distinction herself; what the men gain through her diary is the power to act on her words, not to originate them.

5.3 The glass named, and the walk repeated

The window also gives Suri a way to describe separation itself. Glass keeps the desired world near enough to inspect while preserving the difference between visibility and access. In Ward's account, such transparency can make social distinctions acutely perceptible (2001, 226–27). Suri recognizes that distinction in the course of an ordinary walk and gives it a voice.

The later repetition changes the situation. Mehdi and a companion follow Suri through the streets and observe the windows at which she stops. Her route becomes a means of identifying the objects she has described. Reading and watching now supplement each other: the diary tells the men that the dress matters, while following her helps them locate it. Their concern is presented as assistance, but it depends on access to a life she has not knowingly opened to them.

Class limits affect Mehdi as well as Suri. He cannot simply meet her wishes through ordinary purchase and turns to theft. Yet this similarity should not erase the gendered difference. He can translate knowledge of her desire into a plan, enlist a companion and take action; she does not initially know that her recorded wishes are directing his movements. The same display gives them different narrative positions. She is the person whose want is known, and he becomes the person whose response moves the plot.

This arrangement refines rather than resolves the flâneuse debate. Suri is visible in the city, economically active and capable of reflection. Her white chador does not exclude her from consumer looking, nor does the film treat her presence at the window as a scandal. But mobility is not equivalent to authority over the consequences of being seen. Her place in the consumer city is real, but it does not prevent others from claiming the right to act on her private wishes.

5.4 Gift by theft

Mehdi sends flowers and, with assistance, steals a dress for Suri. The gestures answer wishes she has expressed, and their attentiveness is part of their appeal. They nevertheless change the conditions under which those wishes might be fulfilled. A commercial object reaches her outside an ordinary purchase, and a personal gift reaches her without a reliable account of who has sent it. The desired thing and the desired relation do not arrive together.

Suri mistakenly identifies Farrokh, the son of her employer, as her benefactor. When he takes her to the Miami cabaret to hear Googoosh, several of the experiences she has wanted appear to be available. Yet she cries and cannot give a clear explanation for her distress (Hoseini 1399/2020, 516). Hoseini reads this moment through the wider disorientation of a generation. Within the present argument, the scene

also reveals a limit to the men's practical solution: supplying an item on a list does not guarantee the recognition or intimacy that made the item desirable.

Her unexplained tears leave her response unsettled, but the spectator can recognize a precise discrepancy. She receives flowers, clothing and entertainment while misunderstanding the relationship that has brought them to her. Her dissatisfaction can therefore be read without deciding that either the goods themselves are worthless or their arrival necessarily cures her deprivation.

Googoosh creates a suggestive connection with *Bīm o omīd*. There she plays the daughter whose performance compensates for an unaffordable television; here her singing belongs to the entertainment for which Suri longs. Without establishing an intentional reference, the recurrence places a popular performer at two different points between imagined enjoyment and accessible consumption: as the child producing pleasure at home and as an attraction encountered in the commercial city.

Mehdi's death in a later robbery, amid the film's wider criminal conflicts, closes down the possibility of his promised assistance. The more consequential pattern is the dependence of Suri's possible relief on a precarious male intermediary. His intervention offers something the wage and the household have failed to provide, yet cannot establish a secure basis for it. *Kāfar* exposes this difficulty without denying the generosity of the attempt.

6. The Counter-Corpus: New Wave Responses to Consumer Modernity, 1970–1972

The comparison is contemporaneous: *Āqā-ye Hālū* precedes *Kāfar* by two years, while *Balūč* and *Sobh-e rūz-e chahārom* share its year. These films do not discover a consumer landscape that popular cinema had failed to notice. They put pressure on different aspects of it. Nor are all three organized around identical window scenes. *Balūč* is included for its treatment of consumption and masculinity, which makes a useful contrast with the economic and familial dilemmas of the principal corpus.

6.1 Looking for a wife: *Āqā-ye Hālū*

Mehrjui's protagonist (Ali Nasirian) comes to Tehran to find a wife. His encounters with the city pass through commercial images of women: advertisements, erotic material at a newsstand, lingerie and mannequins in wedding clothes. The sequence leads into a dream in which a female figure assembled from the day's impressions enters his hotel room through a window onto the city. As in the popular films, looking provides material from which a desired relationship can be imagined. Consumer display helps him picture the person he wants to meet.

The difficulty is more than restricted purchasing power. The protagonist seeks to bring a woman encountered in the commercial city into the position of a respectable wife. Mehri's association with the wedding image encourages that projection, while her refusal of his proposal and her position in the city's sexual economy expose the inadequacy of his reading. Here the display is misleading not simply

because he cannot obtain its contents, but because an image of marital availability conceals a relationship he cannot make conform to his expectations.

Mehri's predicament invites sympathy, while her refusal exposes the limits of the protagonist's assumptions. Yet the contrast between the desired wife and the commercially available woman makes marriage and masculine protection central to the narrative's account of a satisfactory relation. Talattof's (2011, 82) discussion of the association between female independence and sexual suspicion in Pahlavi discourse helps identify the pressure within that contrast. A criticism of commodification can coexist with a restricted account of the choices available to women.

The comparison with *Mīram bābā bekharam* is therefore not between endorsement and rejection of buying people. Both films reveal the inadequacy of a commercial image when it is asked to supply a relationship. Their emphasis differs: Mamal's fantasy gives a poor child's need for paternal care an absurdly literal market form, whereas Mehrjui brings the search for a wife into conflict with the social and sexual arrangements of the metropolis. The latter asks whether the relation can be made acceptable, not merely whether the desired person can be reached.

6.2 Consumption and masculine authority: *Balūč*

In *Balūč*, the protagonist (Behrooz Vosoughi) travels from Baluchestan to Tehran to avenge the assault on his wife. Farangis (Irene), an affluent woman, shelters him and changes his appearance. Clothing and grooming become more than possessions: they recast the avenger as someone maintained and fashioned by another person. His dependence reverses the authority associated with his original task. The commodity enters the story through a makeover rather than through a window he cannot afford to cross.

Hoseini (1399/2020, 465) reads Kimiai's treatment through the discourse of a return to the self. The film's association of urban luxury with compromised masculine purpose supports that interpretation. Its account of the wife's vulnerability also gives restored male protection a privileged place in the answer to urban violence. Consumption threatens more than cultural appearance; it threatens the protagonist's capacity to occupy the role through which the narrative defines his responsibility.

The contrast with Ahmad is instructive. Ahmad sacrifices a possession to meet an obligation to his child. Baluch risks losing sight of an obligation when possessions and comfort become readily available. Neither film treats commodities as politically neutral. The difference is that lack obstructs paternal provision in one, while abundance compromises protective masculinity in the other. This is a more precise distinction than assigning acceptance to popular cinema and rejection to the New Wave as a whole.

6.3 Living through cinematic images: *Sobh-e rūz-e chahārom*

Shirdel's film makes the relation between consumer and cinematic images especially explicit. In its window-shopping passage, Amir (Saeed Rad) is seen approaching from a camera position inside the shop. Views of the goods include images of women whose apparent movement as he changes position animates the display. The arrangement combines objects with an invitation to look at bodies, making the shopfront an experience of visual attraction rather than an inventory of useful things.

Amir's subsequent thefts, stolen cars, movement and fights extend that attraction into a way of living. He pursues sensations and recognizable images of action as much as objects. The film's freeze-frames are crucial: his early presentation and the repeated arrest of his dying body make him available as a cinematic figure. At the end, movement and adventure yield a spectacular image, but no secure social position from which to enjoy it. What has been pursued as a life becomes a pose.

This can be read alongside Al-e Ahmad's account of *gharbzadegi*, in which imitation and the pursuit of imported appearances dislocate the subject from the conditions of an independent cultural life (1982, 13–15). The parallel does not establish that Shirdel drew directly on Al-e Ahmad. Shirdel's formal treatment also resists a simple restorative answer. Amir's visit to his mother's home offers respite without providing a viable return to an untouched social world.

The difference from Mehrjui and Kimiai is consequently important. Shirdel does not make the recovery of male guardianship the remedy for consumer spectacle. The women in Amir's world also experience deception and unstable attachment. The problem spreads across the available images of a desirable life. Read beside *Kāfar*, the film makes the boundary between cinemas still less secure: both associate consumer aspiration with unequal or precarious relations, but Shirdel directs more of the criticism towards the cinematic forms through which aspiration becomes recognizable.

7. Conclusion: Looking, Dependence and the Promised Relation

7.1 What the window offers

The principal films make the shop window a setting in which a material object can carry a relational wish. A dress offers Ahmad a means of expressing paternal care; a bridal mannequin gives Parvāneh an image of maternal presence; flowers promise Suri that she has been remembered; and a male mannequin gives Mamal a father he can approach. These are different uses of commodity display, not four literal sales of kinship. Their recurrence shows how ordinary attachments become imaginable through the public arrangements of consumer culture.

The films also make the substitutions fragile. A doll cannot establish the maternal attention falsely assigned to it, a mannequin cannot answer a child's question, and a dress cannot identify the person who has sent it. Commodity imagery supplies a language for affection without guaranteeing that goods can perform everything asked of them. This is why the principal corpus cannot be described either as an innocent endorsement of consumption or as a consistent rejection of its promises.

7.2 What the administered gaze explains

Questions of authority run through these encounters as insistently as the objects in the windows. Looking and imagining do not give the protagonists equal control over how their desires are represented or pursued. Ahmad's need enters through a narrator's account and encounters an employer's decision. Jamāl combines purchasing power with authority over the gift's supposed origin. Suri's words become actionable knowledge for men she has not authorized to read them. Mamal's mother supplies an explanation whose material promise exceeds her capacity to deliver it.

The administered gaze names these separations. The term distinguishes the power to speak from the way one is represented, and both from the capacity to act. It does not assign every obstruction to one custodian. It also distinguishes dependency from simple passivity. Suri writes; Parvāneh compares and dreams; Mamal questions the display; Ahmad improvises a gift. Their activities matter, even when other people determine what follows. A film can make such dependence visible while presenting assistance as loving, necessary or generous.

7.3 What the comparison changes

The New Wave counter-readings shift the emphasis without producing a uniform opposite. Mehrjui connects commercial femininity to the difficulty of forming a socially acceptable marriage. Kimiai makes access to luxury a danger to protective masculinity. Shirdel questions a life modelled on spectacular images without supplying a stable traditional refuge. These distinctions complicate any equation of New Wave criticism with a single progressive politics.

Popular cinema, meanwhile, can register the costs of consumer modernity without imagining that family life stands outside it. The historiographic consequence is not a reversed hierarchy in which popular films become more advanced. It is a different basis of comparison: what difficulty does each film make visible, whose perspective explains it, and what kind of remedy can its narrative imagine? *Kāfar*, with its combination of popular conventions and formal experimentation, is a reason to keep that comparison open rather than police its borders.

7.4 Limits of the pattern

Other window scenes establish the limits of the argument. In *Janjāl* ('Commotion', Reza Safaei, 1354/1975), a ring gives Reza Qoli's wish to marry Golnar a visible focus; the return from his fantasy to his lack of money is not organized around an equivalent appropriation of his account by another reader. In *Khānum delash motor mikhād* ('The lady wants a motor', Jamsheed Sheybani, 1355/1976), Rana openly describes her desire for an outboard motor, imagines travelling in a powered boat with her father and eventually obtains it after recovering stolen savings. Her object has a practical use in her labour as well as an imagined future attached to it. Neither case requires the full arrangement described by the administered gaze.

These differences also qualify the gender argument. The principal films admit women and girls to looking, speech and fantasy, but do not thereby free them from guardianship or dependence. Nor is the New Wave uniformly hostile to female presence in the city. Across these films, public visibility can coexist with dependence. Neither pattern belongs exclusively to one branch of Iranian cinema.

7.5 Looking without buying

Tehran's new commercial settings made goods and possible ways of life visible on terms that were not equally available to those who encountered them. The films give that inequality a personal form. A price, a wage, a gift's provenance or a privately written wish can determine how a person participates in the world displayed before them. Ferdowsi's institutional history anchors the first encounter in a specific commercial setting; the later films carry related questions of dependence into homes and streets.

To look through the glass is to imagine an attachment in the shape of something displayed: a gift for a daughter, a mother close enough to touch, a flower sent in remembrance, a father who could walk beside a child. Yet the wish does not remain between viewer and object. It passes through the knowledge, money and decisions of employers, guardians, readers and parents. Here lies the force of these shop-window scenes. Their characters can look and imagine for themselves; they cannot always determine what follows from what they see.

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Author Contribution

This is a sole-authored article. The author was responsible for the study's conceptualisation, research, analysis, and manuscript preparation, and has read and approved the final version.Edit November 10th: I added my name to the uploaded manuscript. I also added declaration of funding.

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Figures



Figure 1

Ferdowsi Department Store, Tehran, in a historical photograph reproduced by the 'Panjerehei be dirooz' Facebook page. The image shows the entrance and extensive display glazing.



Figure 2

Toys and dresses in the opening display montage of *Bīm o omīd* (1339/1960). The voiceover situates these windows within Tehran's preparations for Nowruz. Source: YouTube copy; AI-enhanced film frames.



Figure 3

Parvāneh beside the smaller display figure, with the bridal mannequin partly visible to the left, in *Behesht dūr nīst* (1348/1969). The grouping prompts her comparison with a mother and daughter. Source: YouTube copy; AI-enhanced film frame.



Figure 4

The bridal mannequin and Parvāneh pressing her hands against the glass in the dream sequence of *Behesht dūr nīst*. Source: YouTube copy; AI-enhanced film frames.



Figure 5

In Mamal's fantasy, the paternal figure moves through the opened display towards the street in *Mīram bābā bekharam* (1353/1974). Source: YouTube copy; AI-enhanced film frame.



Figure 6

Suri seen from among the displayed plants in *Kāfar* (1351/1972), during the passage in which her voice connects flowers with being remembered. Source: YouTube copy; AI-enhanced film frame.