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Persepolis, 1960-1971: Material Culture, State Ideology, and Melancholic Contemplation on National Identity

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Abstract

The ruins of Persepolis, the ceremonial capital of the Achaemenid Empire (559–330 BCE), are celebrated as a cultural heritage site and national monument in Iran. In 1971, these ruins became the setting for the Celebration of the 2,500th Anniversary of the Founding of the Persian Empire, orchestrated by Mohammad Reza Pahlavi. The Pahlavi regime aimed to fabricate a monarchical lineage that positioned the Pahlavi dynasty as the pinnacle of an uninterrupted historical continuum beginning with the Achaemenids and Cyrus the Great. The ceremonies featured a grandiose military parade with soldiers in historical costumes symbolically reenacting the processions of foreign emissaries depicted on Persepolis' walls, emphasizing the glory and grandeur of Iran's imperial past and its uninterrupted history. Conversely, a decade earlier, Iranian filmmaker and poet Fereydoun Rahnema's short documentary captured Persepolis in a starkly different light, presenting it as enigmatic ruins devoid of grandeur, prompting reflections on their lost original meaning. Utilizing Walter Benjamin's concepts of natural history, melancholia, and allegory, this article explores the allegorical implications of Rahnema's film. It argues that the documentary signifies the disintegration of the sublime image of Iran's imperial origin, marking a shift where the imperial past becomes too eclipsed a signifier to serve as a cornerstone of national identity.

Keywords

Persepolis, Fereydoun Rahnema, Walter Benjamin, Melancholia, Allegory, National Identity, Persian Empire, Pahlavi (regime), natural history, cultural heritage, national monument

Persepolis, 1971: State Ideology on the Stage of Material Culture

In the afternoon of October 15th in 1971, the ruins of Persepolis, an ancient capital of the kings of the Achaemenid dynasty, was the stage for a majestic military parade which was to symbolically reenact the procession of foreign emissaries before the Achaemenid kings within the ruins of Persepolis, drawing inspiration from similar processions depicted on the stone walls of Persepolis.¹ Over the course of two hours, hundreds of soldiers dressed in historical costumes, designed by a committee of art historians, archeologists, and military museum curators over a 12-year-long scholarly study,² marched before the eyes of hundreds of dignitaries, heads of states, cultural figures, academics, and journalists from all around the globe who came at the invitation of Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi to celebrate the 2,500th Anniversary of the Founding of the Persian Empire by Cyrus the Great. The parade was only one part of a whole series of state-sanctioned and state-sponsored events in Iran including a ceremony at the tomb of Cyrus at Pasargadae, an international congress of Iranology, a *son et lumiere* at Persepolis, the inauguration of the Shahyād Tower and Āryāmehṛ Stadium in Tehran, and a wreath-laying ceremony at the tomb of Reza Pahlavi the founder of the Pahlavi dynasty.³

The spectacular quality of the ceremonies and their elaborate staging has made some scholars call it a ‘political theater’.⁴ As far as the foreign invitees from all around the globe were concerned, this political theater was a power display meant to impress them and earn their reverence, and was supposed to become a big step in rebranding Iran as an emerging power in the region and beyond. In terms of domestic policy, as Hamid Naficy noted, the ceremonies were the most conspicuous part of a new discursive and ideological strategy

¹ Hamid Naficy, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema, Volume 2: The Industrializing Years, 1941–1978* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011), 137.

² Robert Steele, *The Shah’s Imperial Celebrations of 1971: Nationalism, Culture and Politics in Late Pahlavi Iran* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, I.B. Tauris, 2021), 48.

³ Steele, 1-2.

⁴ Steele, 1.

adopted by the Pahlavi regime to deal with the new circumstances in which the second Pahlavi was starting to find itself in the 1960s. This was marked by widespread westernization, rapid industrialization, extensive rural emigration, enormous increase in oil income, etc. — all of which released such disruptive and dislocating energies, that defying them demanded a major ideological and discursive rejuvenation. Syncretic in nature, the rejuvenated ideological face of the state was embellished mainly through ‘re-archaization’, which although it was not new for the Pahlavi dynasty, it was nevertheless carried out on an unprecedented scale, culminating this time in creating what Naficy calls grandiose ‘national spectacles and rituals’. Each and every effort within this strategy of re-archaization revolved around fabricating a ‘monarchic genealogy’, placing the Pahlavi dynasty as the apogee in an uninterrupted historical continuum that began with the Achaemenids, founded by Cyrus the Great.⁵ Some scholars have suggested that in organizing such ceremonies, the Pahlavi regime aimed at creating what the French historian Pierre Nora defined as *lieux de mémoire*, as sites where memory crystallizes and secretes itself.⁶ The state-sponsored 2,500th anniversary of the Persian Empire celebrations can indeed be considered a site of memory, following Pierre Nora's definition of *lieux de mémoire*. Nora posits that *lieux de mémoire* arises from the recognition that memory is not spontaneous, leading to deliberate creations such as archives, anniversaries, and ceremonies. These sites carry a symbolic aura, becoming objects of ritual that aim to disrupt temporal continuity. Crucially, they embody a will to remember.⁷ Nora distinguishes between dominant and dominated *lieux de mémoire*, with the former being grand, triumphant, and imposed by national authorities.⁸ Thus, an official ceremony like the 2,500th anniversary celebrations, exemplifies a dominant *lieu de mémoire*. The choice of a ruined monument for the parade underscores this, as it aligns with Nora's idea that sites of memory exist in a liminal space between life and death,

⁵ Naficy, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema*, 136-7.

⁶ Steele, *The Shah's Imperial Celebrations of 1971*, 13.

⁷ Pierre Nora, “Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoire*,” *Representations*, No. 26 (1989): 19.

⁸ Nora, *Between Memory and History*, 23.

memory and history.⁹ Ruins epitomize this threshold, situated between life and death, culture and nature, presence and absence.

Organizing the 2,500th anniversary of the Persian Empire was not the only move the Pahlavi state made to create *lieux de mémoire*. Another was changing the official calendar from the Hijri calendar to an 'Imperial Calendar' in 1976, marking the 50th anniversary of the Pahlavi dynasty. The new calendar started from the reign of Cyrus the Great. Prime Minister Hoveyda explained this decision as, "indeed the reflection of the historic fact that during this long period, there has been only one Iran and one monarchic system".¹⁰

Regarding the 2,500th anniversary ceremonies, a major instance of creating a *lieu de mémoire* by the Pahlavi government occurred when, as Robert Steel noted in 1971, "the Shah's regime sought to establish the tomb of Cyrus as an important site of collective remembrance for all Iranians."¹¹ Cyrus the Great, founder of the Persian imperial lineage, was central to the ceremonies, clearly aiming to associate the Shah with Cyrus. Cyrus was celebrated as a benevolent, just ruler, a father to his people, the author of the first allegedly 'humanitarian code,' and a peacemaker.¹²

Efforts to introduce Cyrus to the Iranian public intensified in early 1971, with press articles, radio and television programs exalting him as crucial to the government's ideology. The Shah declared the new Persian year to be the year of Cyrus the Great.¹³ The Cyrus Cylinder, with its allegedly humanitarian message, was adopted as the symbol of the ceremonies. The glorification of Cyrus at Pasargadae, highlighted by the Shah's speech at Cyrus's tomb, was the opening event on the 12th of October.¹⁴ Thus, as Steele noted, a whole 'Cyrus narrative' had been devised and bolstered by the regime before and during the 2,500th anniversary of the Persian Empire ceremonies.¹⁵

⁹ Nora, *Between Memory and History*, 12.

¹⁰ Ali M. Ansari, *Modern Iran Since 1797: Reform and Revolution* (New York: Routledge, 2019), 292.

¹¹ Steele, *The Shah's Imperial Celebrations of 1971*, 23.

¹² Steele, 1.

¹³ Ansari, *Modern Iran*, 276.

¹⁴ Steele, 43.

¹⁵ Steele, 14.

As noted by historians and scholars, in the context of the 2,500th anniversary celebrations, the image of Cyrus the Great was evoked to forge an origin for a long and uninterrupted royal, imperial, and monarchic lineage. It stood for the moral and even spiritual quality of the monarchy as a sacred and indispensable institution in the past as well as the present life of the nation, and for the unmatched military power of the ancient Persian Empire. The intended idea was to present Mohammad Reza Shah as the heir and spiritual successor of Cyrus the Great.¹⁶ To sum up, two points should be noted. Firstly, considering that the past in the context of a nationalist ideology and politics gains importance as ‘origin’, the ‘presence’ of this origin becomes the most urgent concern of the sovereign power. The origin must be rendered present, and accessible so to speak. In the case of the Pahlavi government’s 2,500th celebrations project, the meticulous and deliberate manner in which the theatrical reenactments were carried out in the long preparation for the ceremonies, and especially during the parade, bespeaks the rather obsessive concern of the Pahlavi government with re-presenting, presentifying the past. Thus, the memory work involved in the entire celebration was intended to defy and undo the transient, decaying the impact of time and history, making the past present ‘as it once was.’ One might argue that this concern goes hand-in-hand with the well-known Rankean historiographical doctrine of demonstrating the past ‘how it actually was’ (*wie es eigentlich gewesen ist*).¹⁷ Therefore, when it comes to the past and relating to it, ‘absence’ could be regarded as the most unbearable thing for all ideological nationalist projects which desperately seek to forge an origin for their emergence. Second, is the idea of continuity: the present state is the continuation of the glorious past, its rightful heir and successor, and the idea of a lineage (in this case a monarchic and imperial one) already implies the continuity of an uninterrupted line. The whole history of the nation in the nationalist monarchic ideology of the Pahlavi regime was an uninterrupted succession of dynasties and Kingdoms which one after another came and served the ever-lasting institution of monarchy. In this sense,

¹⁶ Steele, 26.

¹⁷ This is the guiding principle of true historiography according to Leopold von Ranke (1795-1886), the leading German historian of the 19th century.

again, the sovereign imagination has no tolerance for any rupture or disturbance (and hence absence, again) in the course of history.

As Historians have noted, during the 2,500th anniversary celebrations, Cyrus the Great was invoked to forge an origin for a continuous royal and imperial lineage, portraying the monarchy as a sacred and indispensable institution and emphasizing the Persian Empire's military power. The aim was to present Mohammad Reza Shah as Cyrus's heir and spiritual successor.¹⁸

Two key points should be emphasized here. Firstly, nationalist ideology emphasizes the past as an 'origin,' making its presence crucial for sovereign power. The Pahlavi government's meticulous preparations and theatrical re-enactments reflect their obsession with re-presenting and presentifying the past, aligning with the Rankean historiographical doctrine of showing the past *how it actually was*. This effort aims to counteract the transient impact of time and history, making the past present and overcoming its absence. Secondly, the idea of continuity is vital. The present state is seen as the rightful heir of a glorious past, an unbroken monarchic and imperial lineage. The Pahlavi regime's nationalist ideology portrayed history as an uninterrupted succession of dynasties serving the monarchy, intolerant of any rupture or absence in this historical continuity.

Persepolis, 1960: A Melancholic Image of the Imperial Ruins From Iran's Cinematic Archives

The ancient palace of Persepolis was practically transformed into a theatrical stage during the celebrations of the 2,500th anniversary of the founding of the Persian Empire, portraying a state-sponsored narrative of national identity on the stage. In this portrayal, the splendor and glory of the Iranian monarchy were not portrayed as something lost, but rather highlighted as enduring and uninterrupted until that day. Thus, the longstanding question of national identity found its answer in a fabricated genealogical narrative. However, about a decade prior to that, Persepolis, in its deliberately pronounced ruinous appearance was captured in a short documentary film, not as a stage on which a definitive answer to the question of national identity was performatively reenacted, but rather as a space for contemplative

¹⁸ Steele, 26.

pause amidst the tumultuous currents of authoritarian modernization that increasingly alienated Iranians from their familiar lifeworld, rendering them disoriented.¹⁹

Like the painting *Angelus Novus* by Paul Klee, which was regarded by Walter Benjamin as an allegory for the confrontation of a genuine historical materialist with the irresistible storm of progress, in which the angel of history desires to stop and awaken the dead.²⁰ The 20-minute documentary *Persepolis*²¹ by Fereydoun Rahnema (1930-1975), the Iranian, French-educated filmmaker and poet, was an attempt to tarry, look backward, and reflect on that part of the ancient past that has been passed down to the Iranian people of the 20th century. The fundamental difference between the cinematic representation of Persepolis in this film, and its use as a political and ideological theatrical stage by the Pahlavi government, lies not only in their different intended messages, but also in the fact that Rahnema's representation in his film fundamentally arises from an unhappy consciousness born out of the uprootedness of Iranians, their relationship with their historical past having fallen into crisis.²²

The filmmaker, in an interview conducted approximately a decade after the film was made, points out that "the ruins of Persepolis are not merely ruins, but a place of contemplation... the ruins prompt us to reflect".²³ Turning to the filmmaker's comments about the film in interviews conducted with him after the film was made does not greatly assist in finding a way into the world that the film depicts. In

¹⁹ See Youssef Ishaghpour, "Bar Mazar-e Hedayat," trans. Bagher Parham, *Iran Nameh*, no. 39 (1992/1371): 420.

²⁰ Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Concept of History," in *Selected Writings Vol. 4, 1938-1940*. Edited by Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings. Translated by Edmund Jephcott et al. (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006), 392.

²¹ *Persepolis (Takht-E Jamshid)*. Directed by Rahnema, Fereydoun. Iran: 1960. YouTube video, 19:29 min, uploaded by (بنیاد ایران) (خونیرث), December 23, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qboUBdRic8k>

²² Ishaghpour, *Iran Nameh*, no. 39 (1992/1371): 420.

²³ Fereydoun Rahnema, "Interview with Fereydoun Rahnema." By Nasib Nasibi, *Sinema-ye Azad*, (Tehran: National Iranian Radio and Television Publication, 1975/1354) previously published in *Negin*, no. 82 (1972/1350): 21-24 & 72-73.

most interviews, the filmmaker settles for general and mostly ambiguous responses. For example, in another interview, Fereydoun Rahnema says that the ruins of Persepolis gave him the opportunity to express thoughts he had about life and art. Questions that, according to the filmmaker himself, motivated him during the filmmaking process, and do not clarify the defining problem of the film. Rahnema says:

In Persepolis, issues were raised that have always fascinated me. It is a ruin built thousands of years ago. We are drawn from a concrete reality to all kinds of ideas and phantasms. What were these? What were they like? How much of what we see today is real? And what is the reality? ... What connection do all these have with us?²⁴



Figure 1. Screenshot: Ruins of Persepolis. *Persepolis (Takht-E Jamshid)*. Directed by Rahnema, Fereydoun. Iran: 1960. YouTube video, 19:29 min, uploaded by (خونیرث بنیاد ایران) December 23, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qboUBdRic8k>

Elsewhere, in another interview Rahnema tried to distinguish his cinematic approach to the ancient ruins from other ways of relating to the cultural past:

Ultimately, everything becomes historical. We are always beings of today and of yesterday at the same time, and the boundary between today and yesterday is just a hypothetical boundary... These ruins become postcards. They turn into tourist attractions... or rather, a

²⁴ Quoted in Hamid Shoai, “*Namavarān-e Sinema dar Iran, vol. 2, Fereydoun Rahnema*” (Tehran: Herminco, 1976/2535): 76.

means of consumption. And this is neither good nor bad. This is simply how things are.²⁵

However, perhaps the most important point that the filmmaker emphasizes in abovementioned interview becomes apparent when he explicitly defends his subjective intervention as a filmmaker in the representation of historical reality, and reminds us that realism does not mean reporting on reality as if we are recording the proceedings of a meeting. Here, Rahnema sets a definitive boundary between his approach and the naturalist-realist approach to artistic representation, and insists on the artist's right to reconfigure reality.²⁶

An interesting point to note is that Rahnema, in justifying this form of subjective authorial intervention in historical reality, not only refers to the theoretical and historical failure of 19th century naturalism, but also relies on the epistemological significance of personal experience. He asserts that, for him, the most real things are the most personal things – those that go through the filter of personal experience and knowledge.²⁷ With these characteristics, Rahnema's poetic and lyrical representation of the ancient ruins of Persepolis in a documentary film is justified solely by referring to the subjective and personal perspective of the filmmaker. However, this is precisely where one can demonstrate, by relying on theory, how beyond personal perspective, what determines the form of this film is the transpersonal phenomenological implications of the ruin as one of the fundamental forms of appearance of the historical past.

In what follows, through a brief, digressive reference to Walter Benjamin's ideas on melancholia, allegory, ruin, and natural history (*Naturgeschichte*) as expounded in his seminal work, *the Origin of German Tragic Drama*, I aim to demonstrate how melancholia, functioning as a mode of consciousness intertwined with allegorical imagination as its privileged mode of expression/interpretation, influenced the filmmaker's portrayal of the ancient ruins of Persepolis in the film.

²⁵ Rahnema, *Interview*.

²⁶ Rahnema, *Interview*.

²⁷ Rahnema, *Interview*.

The idea of Natural History, Melancholic Gaze, and Allegorical imagination

As Benjamin discussed in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, the perception of history underwent a radical change during the Baroque era. This change resulted from several social, political and intellectual factors, including the emergence of Lutheran theology, which diminished the significance of good deeds in salvation by introducing the doctrine of *Sola Fide*,²⁸ and the Thirty Years War that plagued the lives of millions of Christians with endless violence, calamity, and death. As a result, history, which once was perceived as a path to a unifying redemption and thus transcendence, became marked by mere transitoriness, death, dispersion, and thus absolute immanence. To describe this way of experiencing and perceiving history, Benjamin uses the term ‘natural history’ (*Naturgeschichte*), a historical experience or consciousness that is characterized primarily by transience. In other words, natural history marks a condition wherein history as the realm of meaning and transcendence is submitted to the repetitive and endless cycles of natural existence, which is the realm of mere transitoriness and decay. Thus, in a sense, history becomes indistinguishable from nature.²⁹

For the baroque imagination, no transcendence — no *beyond* the repetitive cycles of violence and death — was imaginable any longer. Benjamin argues that this situation produced melancholia in the minds of the great men of this epoch.³⁰ Melancholia as discussed by Benjamin is far from merely a pathological state of mind. It was rather a form of consciousness and a way of experiencing the world which had emerged out of a concrete historical context. In this sense, although melancholia is marked with a sense of loss and certain mournfulness over that loss, it is more characterized not by an inwardness, but on the contrary, by an outwardness. The melancholic subject of the baroque is a brooding figure immersed in thought, irresistibly inclined toward contemplation and reflection on earthly matters. This subject seeks knowledge through an orientation toward

²⁸ Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (London and New York: Verso, 2003), 138.

²⁹ Benjamin, *The Origin*, 177-178.

³⁰ Benjamin, *The Origin*, 138.

the external world, including nature and history. Experiencing the course of history as an absolute immanence goes hand-in-hand with the desire for knowledge in the melancholic subject. Discussing the doctrine of Saturn that has long been associated with melancholia in Renaissance-Baroque astrology, Benjamin writes, “Everything Saturnine points down to depth of the earth...the downward gaze is characteristic of the Saturnine man, who bores into the ground with his eyes”.³¹ For the melancholic imagination no transcendence, no beyond, no sublime is accessible anymore: “For all the wisdom of the melancholic is subject to the nether world; it is secured by immersion in the life of the creaturely things”.³² It could be said that the melancholic subject is in pursuit of a lost meaning; a lost totality (of experience and life) that has been lost by the advent of the natural history as a world-historical situation. As a result of experiencing the melancholic loss, Benjamin argues, under the melancholic gaze the object becomes allegorical. The object is emptied of life and left behind as something dead. However, it is precisely through being emptied of life (and of the meaning associated with it) that the lifeless object turns into the best raw material for the allegorist.³³ This is because in allegory, the once essential and necessary relation between words and objects, is lost.³⁴ Allegory can only function when meaning undergoes a crisis and thus becomes problematic; a crisis characterized by the loss of meaning, the disappearance of the meaningful totality of experience.³⁵ Benjamin hints at this crisis by noting that in a ‘profane world’ of absolute immanence left behind from the rule of natural history, “the detail is of no great importance”. Therefore, an allegorical relation to the world, argues Benjamin, entails that,

Any person, any object, any relationship can mean absolutely anything else...all of the things which are used to signify derive,

³¹ Benjamin, *The Origin*, 152.

³² Benjamin, *The Origin*, 152.

³³ Benjamin, *The Origin*, 183-184.

³⁴ The idea of a necessary and essential relation between words and objects in a prelapsarian time is rooted in Benjamin’s theological understanding of language. See his article *On Language as such and on the Language of Man* (1916).

³⁵ Benjamin, *The Origin*, 176.

from the very fact of their pointing to something else, a power which makes them appear no longer commensurable with profane things, which raises them onto a higher plane, and which can, indeed, sanctify them.³⁶

Allegorical activity is nothing but an incessant effort to impart meaning to the meaningless fragments of the world in the condition of natural history. The objects in the hands of allegorists are constantly transforming into something else and accepting different connotations.³⁷ Through separating the objects from their original context and placing them within other constellations, the allegorist constantly strives to rediscover the lost meaning and totality mourned by the melancholic subject. According to Benjamin, allegory is in search of a hidden knowledge, the objects of melancholic gaze being the key to accessing it.³⁸ In Benjamin's discussion of Baroque allegory, the ruin occupies a central place as it embodies the merging of history (human-made artifacts) into nature. Furthermore, what they both share is their fragmentary and dispersed nature. As Benjamin noted, "In the ruin, history has physically merged into the setting... Allegories are, in the realm of thoughts, what ruins are in the realm of things."³⁹

Benjamin's idea of natural history and his theory of allegory have been interpreted by some scholars beyond its original context in the baroque era. In such an interpretation, the allegorist works with past symbolic forms and signifiers the original meanings of which have been lost. Emptied out of their original meaning and life, these past symbolic forms transform into 'hieroglyphs' which now only carry enigmatic meanings. What gives rise to melancholia in the subject is that these enigmatic symbolic forms still address the subject, affecting its psychological dynamism.⁴⁰ Furthermore, in this reinterpretation of Benjamin's, natural history is linked to another of his concepts,

³⁶ Benjamin, *The Origin*, 175.

³⁷ Benjamin, *The Origin*, 184.

³⁸ Benjamin, *The Origin*, 184.

³⁹ Benjamin, *The Origin*, 177-178.

⁴⁰ Eric Santner, *On Creaturely Life: Rilke, Benjamin, Sebald* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 17.

namely the ‘mythic violence’,⁴¹ and is thus bestowed with a new political implication. Mythic violence, which characterizes all ‘legal violence’ for Benjamin, refers to the repetitive rise and fall of empires, states, rulers, and ideologies.⁴² Mythic violence shares this repetition compulsion with natural history and thus is conceived as a natural-historical cycle.⁴³ Allegory was the preferred mode of expression and interpretation for the Baroque mind that was experiencing life in 17th century Germany as a life exposed to natural-historical violence because it totally fitted a situation which was characterized as man's thrownness into the bad infinity of natural-historical progression. Allegory could provide a sense of life devoid of any assured reference to transcendence — a way out of the repetitive cycles of natural history.⁴⁴

Ruins of Persepolis under the Melancholic Gaze

The film is shot in black and white, and from the very beginning, we hear the voice-over narrator speaking in French with a poetic tone. Considering the era in which the film was made and the technical capabilities of cinema at that time, shooting in black and white was more a result of technical limitations and necessities imposed on the filmmaker rather than an intentional aesthetic choice. However, now as we look at the film, the black and white cinematography, along with the poetic tone of the narrator and the added sound effects, intensifies a nocturnal ambiance that dominates a significant portion of the film's imagery (Fig.2). The time of the night, and midnight in particular, as Benjamin noted, had long been regarded by the baroque dramatists as the only appropriate time in which the dramatic actions of mourning plays occur, and thus had found an affinity with the melancholic mood of the dramatist. The reason for this, argues Benjamin, “lies in the widespread notion that at this hour time stands still”. Midnight, according to Benjamin, is a narrow frame, an opening in the passage

⁴¹ Benjamin developed this concept in his essay *The Critique of Violence* (1921).

⁴² Santner, *On Creaturely Life*, 65.

⁴³ Santner, *On Creaturely Life*, 76.

⁴⁴ Santner, *On Creaturely Life*, 17-18.

of time.⁴⁵ The film begins in daylight, with the camera lens moving from the ground, ascending to briefly capture the ruins of Persepolis within its frame, then continuing its circular motion upwards to depict a partly overcast sky, dark yet luminous. Despite the presence of daylight, it remains dim and gloomy. This image is reminiscent, above all, of the metaphor of the "black sun," first coined by Gérard de Nerval in his poem *The Disinherited*, as an expression of his melancholic temperament, and later became ingrained in the imagery of melancholia within European culture. The "black sun," as Julia Kristeva describes it, signifies a discordant combination of visibility and invisibility: "darkness flashes as a solar light, which nevertheless remains dazzling with black invisibility".⁴⁶



Figure 2. Screenshot: Persepolis in a nocturnal ambience. *Persepolis (Takht-E Jamshid)*. Directed by Rahnema, Fereydoun. Iran: 1960. YouTube video, 19:29 min, uploaded by (بنیاد ایران) بُنَوْدِ اِیْران, December 23, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qboUBdRic8k>

It is interesting that this nocturnal ambience didn't escape the notice of some film critics and was emphasized in one of the critiques written about the film:

In every image or footage we've seen of Persepolis in the film, the sun was always glaring and dazzling, the sky was clear with the sun

⁴⁵ Benjamin, *The Origin*, 134-135. Fate is a central category in German baroque mourning plays according to Benjamin. For him, fate is the "true order of eternal recurrence," an ominous force whose manifestations, like ghostly apparitions, find proper temporal expression in a liminal time such as midnight, an hour of threshold. For an elucidatory account of the nocturnal ambience of baroque mourning plays, see Ilit Ferber, *Philosophy and Melancholy: Benjamin's Early Reflection on Theater and Language* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2013), 108.

⁴⁶ Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 147.

shining in the midst of it, and the columns, stairs, and masses of stone were highlighted in the brightness. It's as if no cloud has ever dared to cast a shadow upon it, and no night has passed over this structure, and its ancient inhabitants, all so robust, sorrowless, and sleepless. But in Rahnema's film, mostly, we see this structure in the darkness of the night... Ultimately, this manifestation of the world-conquering era of ancient Iranians was not immune to the relentless passage of time.⁴⁷

However, this description, as mentioned by the critic himself later, is only true for a part of the film. In fact, it can be said that the film was deliberately and intentionally divided by the filmmaker into several relatively distinct parts. The first part, filmed in daylight, narrates the story of the construction of the Persepolis palace by Darius the Great. This is followed by a focus on the bas-reliefs depicting the soldiers and delegations sent to the court of Darius the Great, narrating the glorious era of this monument. This part suddenly cuts to the second part, where the well-known invasion of Persepolis by Alexander the Great and its destruction is recounted. Most of the narrative work in this part is done by the added sounds to the film; the sound of clashing swords, of soldiers symbolizing war. Until this point, whenever we witness a long shot of Persepolis, this monument has been portrayed in a daytime setting. Only after the narration of Alexander's invasion and the destruction of this magnificent structure do we enter the nocturnal ambiance.

This part of the film is where the filmmaker's allegorical interventions become evident for the first time. If before this we were dealing with the narration of history 'the way it actually was,'⁴⁸ — with the narrator-director as historian attempting to separate us from our situatedness in the present and place us within the temporal horizon of the past — in the second part, the situatedness of the filmmaker's gaze in the here and now is not only no longer concealed, but is explicitly emphasized. Here, we encounter scenes which portray the classified objects discovered through archaeological explorations of Persepolis

⁴⁷ Jamal Omid, *Tarikh-e Sinema-ye Iran, 1279–1375* (Tehran: Entesharat-e Rowzaneh, 1995/1374), 856.

⁴⁸ Benjamin criticizes this Rankean view of the historian's task in his *Theses on the Concept of History* (Benjamin 2006, 391).

with written codes and numbers labeled on them, and the voice-over's explicit mentioning of the museum deliberately depicting the processes of the production of archeological knowledge and museumification through an embedded critical distance. In this way, the filmmaker's gaze highlights the institutionalized ways of attending to (and engaging with) the past, and at the same time subtly distances his gaze and his point of view from them. This is evidenced by the juxtaposition of archeological ordering operations with the accentuated portrayal of the figure of death's head that makes an ironic impression. Here, Fereydoun Rahnema reveals one of his strongest and most explicit allegorical interventions by adding three shots from three different angles of human skulls, likely obtained through archaeological explorations of Persepolis. These shots, showing skulls from different perspectives, indicate death, destruction, and the transitoriness of history in the most condensed form possible.

Benjamin noted that the 'death's head' is a favorite image in Baroque culture, allegorically signifying the 'transience' of 'natural history'.⁴⁹ It represents humanity's inevitable surrender to nature's 'cycles of decay and death', depicting remnants of existence devoid of historical significance — a transient state without spirit or meaning. This merging of history into nature parallels Georg Simmel's concept of ruin, where the balance between nature and spirit shifts in favor of nature. Here, nature, by inducing the decay of human creations — what Hegel termed 'objective spirit', encompassing culture, laws, and social institutions — takes its revenge on the human spirit.⁵⁰

Describing the fragmented columns, gates, stair halls, and stone slabs dispersed all over the Persepolis ruins, a film critic once said about the film that, "it is as if history were expressed in this film in abbreviated letters".⁵¹ This statement evokes several interconnected Benjaminian themes, including allegory, ruin, natural history, and the idea as a 'monad'. For the allegorist, various historical phenomena come together to form constellations which represent ideas. Every idea is a 'monad', containing and reflecting, in an 'abbreviated' form, an

⁴⁹ Benjamin, *The Origin*, 166.

⁵⁰ Georg Simmel, "The Ruin" in "Two Essays," trans. David Kettler, *The Hudson Review*, Vol. 11, No. 3 (1958): 379.

⁵¹ Shoai, *Namavarane Sinema dar Iran*, 79.

image of the entire world which is composed of other ideas.⁵² Elsewhere in *The Origin*, Benjamin writes, “The word ‘history’ stands written on the countenance of nature in the characters of transience... Allegorie are, in the realm of thoughts, what ruins are in the realm of things”.⁵³ We can ask, what kind of history is it that its abbreviation takes the form of broken, scattered stony fragments? The melancholic imagination responds: That history which is the constant spectacle of a single catastrophe. The dominant and evident disposition of Rahnema’s camera towards close shots which capture stony fragments of Persepolis and other excavated things embodies the downward, earthbound gaze of the melancholic man described by Benjamin. Particularly, the close-up shots highlight the stony texture of the ruins. Furthermore, the opening credits at the beginning of the film are displayed as engraved on the surface of stones (Fig.3). The highlighted stony imagery in the film could be elucidated in light of Benjamin’s discussion of the Renaissance-Baroque semiotics of melancholic emblems. Benjamin introduces several of these emblems in Renaissance art, among which the stone holds crucial significance. It was used to signify the dry, cold earth and was associated with the melancholic acedia. Other such emblems include the figures of the dog and the sphere.⁵⁴



Figure 3. Screenshot: Displaying the opening credits of the film as if they are engraved on a stony texture. *Persepolis (Takht-E Jamshid)*. Directed by Rahnema, Fereydoun. Iran: 1960. YouTube video, 19:29 min, uploaded by (بنیاد ایران) (خونیرث), December 23, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qboUBdRic8k>

⁵² Benjamin, *The Origin*, 48.

⁵³ Benjamin, *The Origin*, 178.

⁵⁴ Benjamin, *The Origin*, 154-155.

The third part of the film begins with the sunrise of a new day. As sunlight bathes the ruins of Persepolis, there is a stark absence of grandeur, glory, or even horror. Instead, everything appears excessively ordinary, mundane, and prosaic. Ordinary people — children, students, workers, tourists, and their guides — are depicted wandering around the ancient site. Perhaps the true melancholia sets in just now, under the boredom of daylight. The voice-over narration in this part of the film, shot entirely in daylight, primarily recounts archaeological facts and architectural details about the structure. When the film depicts the image of a cypress tree⁵⁵ engraved on the petroglyphs, the narrator briefly touches on some Zoroastrian ideas about the battle of light and darkness, good and evil. The film culminates with rain and images of birds' presence amidst the ruins, interpreted by many critics, and the filmmaker, as a sign of life's resurgence and the dawn of a new day. For them, this relatively pleasant and uplifting ending contrasts with the bitterness that characterized earlier parts of the film. However, as shall be demonstrated further, this allusion to nature reveals its allegorical meaning when viewed in light of the peculiar relation of nature to history in the idea of natural history.

Natural History Embodied: The Stone Relics of Persepolis as an Allegory of Iran's Imperial Past

Fereydoun Rahnema made the documentary *Persepolis* at a time when Iran was undergoing rapid and authoritarian modernization. Old classes were being destroyed, and new classes — mostly urban, composed of a middle class and a déclassé poor mass drawn from villages and brought into cities — were emerging. Iranians were exposed to tumultuous currents originating from the modern West. Rapid growth of capitalist production relations, consumer economy, expansion of mass media, and new administrative and social institutions were shaking the traditional foundations of the pre-modern lifeworld. Thus, the position, function, and meaning of tradition and

⁵⁵ The cypress tree has been a sacred symbol in ancient Iranian culture. In the pre-Islamic sources, including the Zoroastrian teachings, this tree has always been a symbol of various concepts, including eternity, life, and freedom.

the pre-modern lifeworld, with all its material and spiritual elements, had undergone crisis; the past itself had become a crisis indeed. Hence, the ruins of Persepolis, as Rahnema explicitly stated, were “a place for contemplation” for him, making him think.

When the past *qua* tradition, like any phenomenon fulfilling specific functions, operates smoothly, it seldom prompts deliberate reflection, as such making contemplation seem unnecessary. It's only when tradition fails in its familiar role, disrupted by internal or external causes, that humans begin to reflect upon it. As historical remnants from the past, ruins uniquely serve as contexts for such contemplation, reflecting crisis in a dual manner. The ruins, as fragmented remnants of an artifact once part of a meaningful totality within a specific form of life, lose this integrity as that form of life decays. Thus, ruins, like other relics of the past, deprived of their original context, become problematic. Through their particular physical form, namely in their incompleteness, deformity, and fragmented state, ruins could give the crisis of tradition a material and embodied expression. This is why ruins, particularly ancient ruins like those of Persepolis, appeared to the filmmaker as an allegorical space, allowing for reflection on the historical-mythical past. As shall be demonstrated, the implications of such allegorical reflection on the ruins of Persepolis will transcend the confines of aesthetic or cinematic representation, proving to hold political significance.

Persepolis, the ceremonial capital of the Achaemenid Empire, was destroyed by Alexander's invasion around 330 BC. A noteworthy segment of the film is dedicated to a narrative representation of this military assault on Persepolis and its destruction, enhanced by special audio effects. Therefore, the ruins of Persepolis also serve as a monument of war, destruction, the fall of the Iranian monarchy, and its replacement by another dynasty. The recurring cycle of the rise and fall of empires as socio-political institutions — these being symbolic forms as well — is a manifestation of a violence that repeats itself throughout history and appears as fate due to its incessant repetition in every epoch and era. Could we assert that the film's depiction of the military invasion and destruction of Persepolis by Alexander the Great alludes to a mythic violence, entangling the entire imperial history of Iran under its numerous monarchic rulers? Or is it, instead, merely illustrating an isolated incident, a particular incident whose significance and implications does not extend to the entire history of

the nation? The meaning of such a portrayal of the military destruction of an imperial monument could be fully revealed if we view it juxtaposed with the immediately following depiction of human skulls in three consecutive shots. This occurs as the film narration enters a nocturnal ambiance. We should interpret the image of those human skulls in light of baroque aesthetics of melancholia and the semiology of natural history, specifically considering the figure of death's head which signifies the element of transience in history (Fig. 4). As Benjamin noted:

In allegory the observer is confronted with the *facies hippocratica* of history as a petrified, primordial landscape. Everything about history that, from the very beginning, has been untimely, sorrowful, unsuccessful, is expressed in a face-or rather in a death's head... this is the form in which man's subjection to nature is most obvious... This is the heart of the allegorical way of seeing, of the baroque, secular explanation of history as the Passion of the world.⁵⁶

These human skulls depicted in the film are likely to have been discovered during archaeological excavations around Persepolis. However, even if this is not the case and the skulls are merely artistic additions by the filmmaker to symbolize death and destruction resulting from war and massacre, their allegorical value becomes even greater. Thus, the shots, which depict the human skulls raise allegorically the fate of Persepolis and its destruction to the status of a verdict rendered on the entire course of Iran's imperial history, portraying it as entangled in baleful cycles of mythic violence. Where the Pahlavi regime's sovereign gaze sees an eternal and glorious continuity of the monarchy, deducing from it the everlasting necessity of the institution of monarchy in Iranian politics and society, the melancholic, allegorical cinematography of Fereydoun Rahnema only recognizes death, transience, decay, and destruction.

⁵⁶ Benjamin, *The Origin*, 166.



Figure 4. Screenshots: Three consecutive shots of human skulls.
Persepolis (Takht-E Jamshid). Directed by Rahnema, Fereydoun. Iran: 1960.
 YouTube video, 19:29 min, uploaded by (بنیاد ایران) خونیرت, December 23, 2018,
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qboUBdRic8k>

Concluding Remarks: A Cinematic Presentation of an Eclipsed Origin

Contrary to other cinematic representations of the ruins of Persepolis, Rahnema's short documentary barely shows any discernible signs of nostalgic pleasure or a romantically projected vigor that exalts the past for its wholeness. While classical ruins commonly evoke lamentation in romantic discourse, the representation of the ruins of the Persepolis in the film notably lacks any indication of lamentation over the nation's lost glory. Rather, it is filled with a sense of loss, which fuels a melancholic imagination to

which the relics of the ancient monument appear as enigmatic signifiers, the original meanings of which are lost.

The boredom as the dominating affect of several shots of the film is in line with the melancholic mood of the rest of the film as they both share a common root, namely *acedia*.⁵⁷ The scenes where Rahnema's camera captures ordinary people, excavation workers, children, students, and loiterers at the ancient site all reflect the deep boredom characterizing the filmmaker's gaze. In Benjamin's constellation, boredom is associated with the repetitive monotony of a machine-like time in capitalist modernity.⁵⁸ It is the malady accompanying the disintegration of traditional forms of experience,⁵⁹ and thus could be understood as closely tied to the loss of the meaningful totality of past symbolic forms discussed earlier. Whereas in the 25th anniversary celebrations, the glorious ancient site was filled with political dignitaries, in the film it is depicted as a rambling area for ordinary (mostly lower class) people. Thus, another characteristic feature of Rahnema's portrayal of Persepolis is revealed: the camera's gaze is not the gaze of the sovereign, and the filmmaker does not empathize with the victors of history.⁶⁰

To conclude, as mentioned before, the image of the morning rain and the bird in the concluding shots of the film has been interpreted by some critics and even the filmmaker himself as allusions to the invincible power of life as a new beginning. The underlying presumption of such an interpretation is that nature is the force of life, as opposed to the violence of history. However, the terms of the equation should be redefined according to the implications of the idea of natural history. History, devoid of its totality, meaning and telos, is

⁵⁷ For a detailed discussion of the relation between melancholia and boredom in Benjamin's works, see: Carlo Salzani, "The Atrophy of Experience: Walter Benjamin and Boredom," in *Critical Studies*, vol. 31, *Essays on Boredom and Modernity*, ed. Barbara Dalle Pezze and Carlo Salzani (Amsterdam: Editions Rodopi, 2009), 127-154.

⁵⁸ Salzani, *The Atrophy of Experience*, 132.

⁵⁹ Salzani, *The Atrophy of Experience*, 130.

⁶⁰ In Thesis VII of his 'Theses on the Concept of History,' Benjamin criticizes what he calls 'Historicism' for empathizing with the victor, a stance in historiography which, according to him, benefits current rulers (Benjamin 2006, 391).

merged into the decaying dynamism of nature. Thus, the signs of nature's presence at the end of the film do not so much promise hope for rebirth and resurrection from the ashes and ruins as to signal a bleak end, in which nature silently devours the sublime grandeur of the ancient monument of Iran's imperial origin. What was recorded on the negatives of Rahnema's film was an image of Iran's imperial past as an eclipsed signifier, which can no longer efficiently signify an origin for the idea of national identity.

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