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### Original Research Article

## The Capacities of Haptic Perception in Persian-Islamic Art and its Function in Cinematic Expression The Case of “The Green Fire”

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### Abstract

**Problem statement:** Recently, in contrast to the hegemony of optical-based approaches to cinema, a new mainstream in film studies has emerged that its focus is on the capacities of tactile perception in cinematic experiences. Based on haptic ideals, this approach is a kind of tendency toward generating senses and evokes emotional responses. In opposition to the dominant paradigms of film theories based on distance and perspective (optical visualization), haptic visualization provides a theoretical context in which the dynamics of the experience of watching a film could be analyzed. The main question of this study is how the haptic perception is emerged in Persian-Islamic Arts and what are the effects of this emergence on the viewers' perceptions? Here, it is presumed that the Persian-Islamic Arts, with the haptic features embedded in, have the quality of presenting a different manner of seeing to their onlookers.

**Research objective:** Seemingly the paradigms of the haptic perception are inherent to the Persian-Islamic Arts and this special feature can lead to new entries in cinematic expression for Iranian film industry. The objective of this essay is to attain the methods in which the haptic visualization is represented in Persian-Islamic Arts and to understand how it is appeared in films created in this context.

**Research method:** The following essay is compiled by using library resources and tries to define the notion of “haptic perception” by the aid of descriptive-analytical method. Furthermore, the haptic capacities of Persian-Islamic Art are explored by evaluating the case studies.

**Conclusion:** This study shows that according to the haptic visualization characteristics in Persian-Islamic Art, the filmmakers have the opportunity to use it in order to elaborate their narratives. Regarding this objective, *The Green Fire* (2008), directed by Mohamad Reza Aslani, is analyzed as an Iranian film that has been successful in stimulating viewers' haptic perception by cinematic techniques.

**Keywords:** *Haptic visuality, Iranain art, Laura U. Marks, Optical vision, Mohammad Reza Aslani.*

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## Introduction and problem statement

Perspective-related approaches trace back to the ancient Greek's optical theories. The principal concept in this theory highlights the distance between the observer as the subject and the object being looked at (Pérez-Gómez & Pelletier, 1997, 10-13). The optical theory stabilizes the status of the human as the criterion to evaluate the universe and simultaneously offers a visual ideology of confrontation in which the viewpoint of the subject becomes the core of the spatial perception. The emphasis on the human subject in the optical theory in order to stabilize the status of the human is directly related to the perspective system that could be regarded as the spatial-architectural interpretation of Renaissance humanism. Quoted by Albrecht Dürer and argued by Erwin Panofsky, "perspectiva" is a Latin word meaning "look through" something. In the perspective-based system, the whole picture or object that is being looked at turns to a window that the viewer can see the world through it (Panofsky, 2019, 33). Underlining the word "window," the definition marks the status of the viewer, which was mentioned before. Nevertheless, it seems undeniable that insisting on the perspective system as a wise manner of seeing, gradually resulted in the suppression of other senses like olfactory, auditory and gustatory. David Michael Levin notes "the will to power is very strong in vision. There is a very strong tendency in vision to grasp and fixate, to reify and totalise: a tendency to dominate, secure, and control" (as cited in Pallasmaa, 2012, 21). During the Renaissance and due to the hegemonic features of the visual sense, the five senses were categorized into a hierarchic system based on their priority: from the superior visual sense to the suppressed tactilesense (ibid., 19-21). It became a decisive and proven paradigm in Descartes' theory and profoundly influenced the modern consideration about the superiority of reason. As Descartes observes, no certainty is resulted through sensational experimental cognition, primarily through the extrinsic sensational perception. He declared that

there is no need for corporal senses to obtain the truth. (Beheshti, 2006, 71-74). In this way, he separated the mind and body and turned them into two distinguished essences. Descartes believed the only way to reach cognition and truth is relying upon a mind that has no body, as body and physical senses might mislead the one who seeks perception.

## Literature review

Optical approaches were dominant in cinematic theories for a long time. For instance, in psychoanalytic film studies that are based on looking from a distance in the perspective system, watching a film is solely an optical act that has no relevance to other senses like tactile, olfactory, and gustatory. Recently and in response to the optical-based approaches to cinema, a new mainstream in film studies has emerged that its focus is on the capacities of corporeal-tactile perception in cinematic experiences. Impressed by the evolution of discourses and paradigms of the twentieth century (Jay, 2011, 26), these new theories have disputed the high status of eye and the act of seeing in Western philosophy and culture. They insist that seeing is not a sheer optical act, and it can be simultaneously haptic, sensational and embodied. The term "haptic" was first used by Alois Riegl, the art historian of Vienna School. The word is derived from the Greek term "Hapteshai," which implies the sense of touch or contact. In The Late Roman Art Industry, Riegl regards the haptic as a sense of touch devoted to "gaze." For Riegl the Egyptian art is the first example of the haptic art formed by straight lines and a pure flatness (Dalle Vachhe, 2003, 5). In contrast to the magnificent optical compositions in Western art that strengthen the subject's gaze and its distant stabilized status, in haptic art we usually encounter a meticulously detailed picture that can establish a sensational intimate contact and recall the embodied viewer (Marks, 2002, xii-xvi). Haptic is the sense of empathy, intimacy, contact, sensational contribution and tactile connection

(Paterson, 2007, 8-14). In other words, the concept is a kind of tendency toward generating senses that involves all senses, refuses the distant gaze and evokes emotional responses. Despite the dominant psychoanalytic paradigms based on perspective distance, immobility, and separation (optical visualization), the haptic visualization provides a theoretical context in which the experience of watching a film could be analyzed dynamically and by reference to the corporeal stimulations.

### Theoretical Bases

#### • Haptic visualization as a substitute perceptive approach

Influenced by Alois Riegl's debate on the distinction between the optical and haptic space, Deleuze and Guattari in "A Thousand Plateaus" argue that Capitalism and Schizophrenia that the rhizomatic flat space is a haptic space. A rhizome is an extraordinary topography that is established on connected chains rather than locations and objects. The idea refers to a tactile-haptic situation that flies far beyond the visual condition. The changeability and polyphony of the rhizomatic routes are two principal features of the rhizomatic flat space (Deleuze & Guattari, 2004, 382). Optical space or uneven space is defined by one-point perspective and Euclidean geometry, while the haptic space or flat space is essentially anti-perspective and is created by several fragmented changing parts that never develop a stabilized status for the subject. Otherwise stated, as the embodied subject attend the haptic space, all senses interact with each other in order to reflect a corporal experience of the space.

Laura U. Marks, who admits the impressions of the discussions in A Thousand Plateaus by Deleuze and Guattari on her theory (Marks, 2000, xiv), is a theoretician who plays a crucial role in creation and development of the haptic visualization concept in cinema. She believes that the haptic paradigm is a visual-sensational experience in which the eye gets as much close to the object it is looking at, as to

be able to touch and make contact: in "In haptic visuality, the eyes themselves function like organs of touch" (ibid., 162). Haptic perception combines the touch sense, kinesthetic sense (related to movement sense), and proprioceptive sense (related to self-movement and body position) (ibid.). Marks notes about the cinematic experience that the haptic visualization "A sense of physical touching or being touched engendered by an organization of the film image in which its material presence is foregrounded and which evokes close engagement with surface detail and texture" (Kuhn, 2012, 201). As she remarks, the haptic look is a kind of flexible and unstable way of seeing that seeks movement and fluidity rather than concentration. It looks for intimacy, generating senses and unity, before looking from a reasonable distance and taking control of the situation.

### Research method

The following essay is compiled by using library resources and tries to define the concept of "haptic perception" by the aid of the descriptive-analytical method. Furthermore, the haptic capacities of Persian-Islamic art are explored by evaluating case studies.

### Haptic capacities of Persian-Islamic art and recalling tactile contribution of the viewer

During the nineteenth century, the theories of Islamic philosophers on embodied perception extensively affected Western philosophy. Reviewing the writings of Islamic thinkers and theoreticians, we see that in contrast to the classical Western philosophy, perception is a multi-sensational process to them. In "The Book of Optics", Ibn al-Haytham describes his theory on visual and optical perception. He presents a different reading of the visual perception process by combining Islamic and Greek philosophy. Perception is a completely embodied process formed by cooperation and interaction between a series of senses (Marks, 2007). As Persian-Islamic art was not separated from the Islamic intellectuals' ideas,

the theories of Islamic philosophy penetrated into art. In works of calligraphers like Mir Emad Hassani and Darwish Abd al-Majid, we explore an unusual structure and in the same way, experience a distinct motion perception and tactile sense (Roxburgh, 2008, 275-284). In Islamic calligraphy, lines are spread in different and sometimes divergent directions and obey none of the principles in the Cartesian method. Until the viewers maintain a fixed viewpoint, many lines and words seem upside down, and the viewers have to move physically or change the position of lines and images in their minds in order to align them with their eye axis (Osborn, 2008, 1-10). This dynamic feature of Islamic calligraphy is also appeared by changes in the size and scale of fonts and phrases. When words and lines overlap each other, a figurative movement between the surface and inner layers is shaped in the eyes of the viewer that makes the two-dimensional picture a multi-dimensional layered image (Fig. 1). Introspecting in Islamic calligraphy not only provides the onlooker with visual pleasure but also results in the formation of a non-optical visualization, a visualization that recalls the tactile contribution of the viewer in the perceptive process (Roxburgh, 2008, 290-292).

In regard to composition and pictorial structure, image-making in Islamic art and especially in Persian miniature schools is fundamentally different from representation methods in Western art. Here we meet some unique qualities like unclear relation

between foreground and background, irrelevant color surfaces, fragmented identity, irregular scales, several diverse viewpoints, and lack of a centric approach that all together leave the viewer with an exotic atmosphere. Compositions in Persian painting seem flat and spread out both in horizontal and vertical directions. (Leaman, 2014, 247). Persian miniatures present an exceptional world to the viewers and through framing multiple spaces, make them imagine an unreal mapping in which one can build up an imaginary connection between separated parts. Therefore and in regard to forming a kind of connection and continuity, a sense of “motion and dynamics” is transferred through bizarre temporal-spatial adjacencies. “Event is nothing except an element in Persian miniature. There is no hierarchy of meaning, and all details are equally significant. Thus the very function of the miniature is to evenly distribute the acute look of the observer on numerous details of the image” (Eshaqpour, 2018, 21). There is no fixed status for the viewer, and he/she establishes a sensational relation with the painting through multiple viewpoints. It is that while seeing a Persian painting, the viewer “experiences both the spiritual condition of objects and the physical condition of souls” (Akhgar, 2012, 207). The adjacency of irrelevant parts in the pictorial structure of Persian paintings invites the viewers to an active contribution and offers them the opportunity to develop meanings and build up connections.

The essence of Islamic art and particularly its pictorial structure that displays interactive capacities for multi-sensational and embodied representation attracted artists from the West. Some individuals like William Morris, Henri Matisse, Paul Kleé and Wassily Kandinsky have always admitted that they were inspired by Islamic art (Graber, 2006, 81-87; Marks, 2007). What was enchanting for a modern artist like Matisse in observing decorative motifs and patterns of Persian paintings, is that there was no mimesis of the natural or real-world in the structure of those



Fig. 1. Formation of the non-optical visualization in Islamic calligraphy. Source: Roxburgh, 2008, 294.

frames (Daftari, 1991, 187-188). Exploring the visual possibilities of Persian imagery, Matisse started to illustrate his feelings and emotions in an unconditional way that was thoroughly different from the rational logic of the Western perspective system. He believed that despite the flat surface of Persian paintings, they imply a sort of three-dimensional illusion. By applying the pictorial characteristics of Persian miniatures, he tried to create a visual-spatial system consisting of classified structures with connected and separated units and provided the viewers with an anti-perspective perceptive system (Shojaee, 2003, 154-56). Matisse accomplished to use decorative motifs and arabesque patterns in an innovative way. As we can see in *The Red Room* (Fig. 2), he attempted to reach the dynamics and fluidity of Persian paintings in his style.

The arabesque patterns are vivid manifestations of the will to abstraction, motion, and spatial fluidity in Islamic art. Kandinsky mentions in an essay that while the arabesques consist of orderly regular forms, they show such motions, angles, and curves that are in bold contrast with any limitation and framing. Hence the arabesque pictorial structure suggests “like a world of total freedom” for Kandinsky (Barasch, 2000, 346). One of the most significant analyses about the arabesque patterns’

features was made by Riegl and later was revised frequently. As Riegl observes, simultaneously, there is a persistent struggle and tension within the arabesques to find a position as natural or geometrical forms, and this struggle is the source of the apparent energy and fluidity of the patterns (ibid., 346-348). The point is that the dynamic arabesque motifs spread out along the surface and create a kind of haptic structure by moving toward the margins and expanding to infinity (Marks, 2007, 272-281). In the structural strategy of Islamic art, unlike the stabilized structure of Renaissance, the plurality of lines and patterns that tend to move toward one point and at the same time are extending to different directions, suggests a sense of boundlessness and each part recreates itself recurrently in connection with other parts. Facing with such a pictorial structure, the onlooker is motivated to move in diverse directions along with lines and paths that are converging and diverging at the same time. So the viewer is left free to pass through several different routes without any limitation. Highlighting the viewer’s role in unfolding the hidden layers of an artistic work, the Persian-Islamic art turns the perception process into a narrative. Meeting each part of the Persian-Islamic decorative motifs, the observer feels an obligation to predict the previous forms and the possible subsequent patterns. He/she can imagine distinct sorts of motifs and patterns by following each path. This interactive aspect of Persian-Islamic art results in the successive appearance and fading of multiple invented images in the viewer’s mind. Accordingly, the meaning and capacities depend not only on the artistic work itself but also on how the subject-observer finds the directions and their different emotional conditions can bring about miscellaneous meanings and implications. Laura Marks discusses that the characteristics of the modern art like abstraction, the plurality of pixels, synchronic narratives, and fragmented identities are considerably indebted to and inspired by the structure of Islamic art and



Fig. 2. The Islamic art’s effects on Matisse in studying an anti-perspective structure, in *The Red Room*. Source: Gardner, 2010, 624.

architecture (Marks, 2010, 25-65). In this regard, she calls Islamic art as a pre-cinematic art: an art that nurtures the potential for emergence and formation of cinema.

## Discussion

A few number of Iranian filmmakers have tried to apply some Persian-Islamic art's qualities in their works along with the impressions of Western art. These attempts are restricted to some individuals because most of the Iranian filmmakers, like their counterparts in other countries, just enjoy the American and European patterns, and their productions exhibit no significant formalistic and structural difference comparing to their Western colleagues. We are not evaluating the values of works, and there is no will to underestimate the artistic values of such productions since it is an obsolete reducing approach that disregards the intermixed essence of cinema. We are just discussing a possibility: seeing differently and appreciating it. Directors influenced by Persian art will be able to expand their cinematic expressions according to the artistic context of their homeland and depict their personal experiences. Regarding the haptic visualization's attributes in Persian-Islamic art discussed before, a filmmaker can apply this method in order to develop his/her work. In what follows, The Green Fire movie, holding the characteristics of Persian-Islamic art, is studied to evaluate how the haptic approach has been used in favor of cinematic expression.

### • The Green Fire as an eastern touching eye

There is a scene in the movie where the priests start a dialogue with one of the characters called Háft-Vaad in order to build a new city. In this scene, the characters maintain a fixed spatial situation, and they are set in a linear stage setting with an equal distance from the camera. The priests standing on the right, Háft-Vaad in the center and his wife and daughter on the left, resemble a circular composition. Some noticeable features catch the eye at once: the location of the scene displays a

background covered with a huge wall of a castle, and therefore the depth of field is deliberately diminished to the lowest level possible. Moreover, the characters are either placed next to each other or exposed to each other in different layers (Fig. 3). By means of this technique, the characters of the priests have mingled and interwoven just like the figures in a miniature, and it generates a conspicuous bodily sense in viewers.

The mentioned issues make the scene described above looking like Persian paintings, and the lack of depth of field works in favor of this fact as well. The spatially flat setting of the stage in this scene is not limited to the points discussed and is also highlighted by the camera movements. Switching from panning to traveling, the camera moves consistently from right to left, and no movement is seen in depth. As a result, the spectator cannot choose a stable point of view and should observe what happens from diverse positions. Thus we are encountering a primarily centrifugal scene, and the state of being centrifugal is one of the specifications of Persian miniatures (Eshaqpour, 2018, 25), which is recreated here in the movie by the director. In addition, the whole scene takes place in one sequence, and the dialogues between the characters are recorded without cuts. Aslani intentionally refuses to use cuts, while the continuous dialogues of the characters offer an adequate situation for using cuts. In fact, the haptic visualization is intensified by applying no cuts in this scene. Due to the sequential continuity, the



Fig. 3. The priests are set either next to each other or on each other. Source: selected scene from The Green Fire, directed by M. R. Aslani, 2008.

camera movement turns into a Persian-Eastern eye who is investigating the surface of the image and does not tend to go in depth. Flying over the image-like scene, the eye has the chance to contemplate on nuances and subtleties and feel every single detail on the scene. Thereby the specifications of seeing a Persian miniature with its developing sense of touch will become apparent: a kind of look spreads all around the image (in the absence of depth of field and by staging the priests in layers), moving vertically and from right to left and vice versa (linear camera movement). In an interview with Film magazine, Aslani implicitly admits that the camera movement is, to some extent, replacing the viewer's eye in looking at a Persian-Islamic piece of artwork: "The camera is an explorer and enters the image along with sounds. I want to say that for sure, a sound has been heard before the camera turns to capture the image we want. For the scene where the priests are talking about building a new city, I did not tell my cameraman what to record and just asked him to follow the sounds" (Rasteen, 2008, 79). His words show that the cameraman was by no means aware of what he was intended to record. The experience cannot be organized and holds a particular dynamics, just like the process an eye undergoes while observing an image based on Persian miniature's elements.

• **Touching the Persian Carpet and the bodily objects**

Another example of emphasizing on the tactile sense in the film is when Moshtaq (the main character of the third episode) and the beloved girl see each other. Moshtaq talks about the difficulties of this love and confesses that he has been suspended between being her master or her lover. In the midst of the sequence, both characters, passionately loving each other, stoop down in an unusual stage setting and put their hands on a Persian carpet on the floor. Touching the carpet, their hands gradually get closer (Fig. 4). At the very first, the stage setting seems unfamiliar to a romantic scene in a film. Putting stress on touching the Persian carpet by

the characters' hands, the filmmaker highlights the tactile sense in the most visual way possible and simultaneously tries to reveal their love through a bodily act (touching the carpet). As the story goes on, Moshtaq, who is a master of teaching Setaar, is blamed by people and subsequently killed because of his love for the girl. In the middle of this sequence and as the story is discontinued, some moments are shown utilizing long, complicated camera movements. The moving sequences focus on many details such as natural environment, trees, and architecture and are designed to discover the inner personality of the main character. The camera wanders around a huge tree and focuses on the branches, leaves and the trunk's texture (Fig. 5-a & 5-b). The scene is such palpable that the spectator feels as if he/she is touching the tree. Seemingly the camera, as an onlooker, is recording the visual details of a tree from different points of view and is trying to precisely reconstruct its body and texture before the viewers' eyes. The camera, as a moving eye, is attempting to establish a bodily connection with the tree's texture. In this way, the reducing function of the camera (seeing through the eye) is replaced by a new opportunity (touching the objects with the camera).

• **The architectural body of architecture in The Green Fire**

Continuing the scene above, the camera advances into a mosque and demonstrates the Persian architecture and its textural body by multiple movements in diverse directions (Fig. 6-a & 6-b).



Fig. 4. Touching the carpet by hands. Source: selected scene from The Green Fire, directed by M. R. Aslani, 2008.

The camera insists on discovering the prominent attributes of the Islamic architecture. Getting prolonged shots of the tree and the Persian architecture in absence of any human figure, the camera movements are illuminating the natures of those elements and attempting to accentuate the very existence of objects (here the tree and the architectural texture). This is what Victor Shklovsky calls the main purpose of art: generating a sense of the object or the Stone Stony (Shklovsky, 2007, 778). The tree and the architectural textures are shown in order to display their natures and reveal the forgotten specifications of these objects. The camera movement in this scene of the film is used to disclose the bodily state of the objects and tends to create a full-touching condition in which the process of seeing goes beyond the eyes. As we see, the cinematic expression is serving as a tool for exhibiting the bodily condition of objects and things: the tree-being of a tree and the architectural body of an architecture. As Moshtaq passes

different places and experiences every corner of the mosque, he becomes mutually involved with the place. It is as if he's been intertwined with the tree and the architecture of the mosque he's stepping in and cannot be separated from them. In other words, Moshtaq is not distinguishable from the tree, and architecture and his body has become a part of them in a tactile manner. On the other hand, the camera is consistently observing the things from different positions, and since it works as a window to the cinematic world, the viewer looking at this scene turns into an active voyageur that is not passive. That's exactly what Giuliana Bruno explains in describing the haptic looking. According to her idea, in a film, the process of looking couldn't be defined with optical patterns and perspective systems that divide the eye and the observed object. The cinematic context is not a central classic homogeneous space that could be seen without any movement and just with one eye. But it's a complex of diverse and moving points



a



b

Fig. 5. The camera sliding on the tree's trunk in order to emphasize on the haptic visualization. Source: selected scene from *The Green Fire*, directed by M. R. Aslani, 2008.



a



b

Fig. 6. Highlighting the architectural texture and attempting to ascribe some bodily attributes to it. Source: selected scene from *The Green Fire*, directed by M. R. Aslani, 2008.



of view. When a film is studied under haptic-based theories, the notion of “voyeur” in classic film theories can be substituted by “voyageur.” “Such an observer is not a static contemplator, a fixed gaze, a disembodied eye/I. She is a physical entity, a moving spectator, a body making journeys in space” (Bruno, 2002, 56). It is like what the viewer experiences in that scene of *The Green Fire*.

## Conclusion

The presented study shows that the Persian-Islamic art holds some instinctive haptic features, and this would be a possibility for seeing in another way and perceiving differently. Contemporary ideas offer such theoretical frameworks in which the process of seeing has been behaved as something beyond the eyes. The point is that these theories are as well applied on artistic works from the western world. Whereas the haptic visualization that brings about a distinct sort of seeing, is manifest in several aspects of the Persian-Islamic art, studying the works created in this context might lead to a new understanding of its capacities. Regarding this point, the potential capacities of the Persian-Islamic art propose a context in which the art of cinema can be understood differently, and the perceptive process of the viewer can undergo significant transformations through various paradigms. The essay proposes another kind of seeing based on haptic approaches that its unique quality is inspiration from Persian-Islamic art's patterns. Moreover, it can be regarded as a starting point to reach new capacities in cinema that are far beyond the standard accepted patterns.

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