

Chapter 2

The Beverage Drinking Rituals and the Semantics of Alternative Culture: Tehran Cafés

Abstract The café has always been a controversial space in the history of modern Iran. It has somehow symbolised the modernist place in the city: homes to those who challenge traditional and conventional lifestyles. In fact, cafés have always been the place of the other, those whose lifestyles cannot be accommodated within the mainstream or traditional lifestyles: a place for social resistance. In recent years, after a period of relative absence, these cafés are spreading all over Tehran, albeit in a conservative manner. Some of these cafés employ spatial atmosphere-making strategies to create a character of their own. Going to one of these cafés is more like participating in social actions than eating and drinking. Architectural similarities between these cafés, however, have emerged without any planning. Most of them have been designed by their owners. The use of certain sets of certain semiological codes in them appears to be aiming at attracting certain people and repelling others, as well as conveying their messages without disturbing the establishment. This chapter is focused on the genealogy of these cafés and exploration of their exchanged codes and common language.

Keywords Tehran • Café • Social • Resistance • Semiotic resistance

2.1 History

Cafés and teahouses remind us of cobbled alleys of Tehran's bazaar and streets: gateways to the memories of a critical time in Tehran; a time with lasting effects on the Iranian culture and society. Cafés of Tehran evoked the memories of Jomhuri¹ Street and Laleh-zar² (Fig. 2.1) Avenue for so long. In the early Pahlavi era, teahouses were a bridge between the past and the future because they preserved old

¹Formerly Shah Street and a place with many cafés.

²A Tehran street famous for being the symbol of modernity in the end of Qajar era. This street was famous for its bars, cafés, casinos, cinemas and theaters, all shut down since 1979 revolution in Iran.



Fig. 2.1 Old picture from Tehran Laleh-zar Street (Photo: unknown)

relics and passed them on to the posterity. Although poetry reading events and special teahouse painting style were considered as a hobby, they preserved cultural and literary heritages of Iran. Local communities would usually gather in teahouses and created circles of intimacy and friendship in a literary and cultural atmosphere. This was how teahouses have become social and cultural institutions and turned into schools to cultivate literary and artistic talents and teach traditional culture and literature to the public. Due to close links between teahouses and rituals, local costumes and other areas of culture of the time, art could find a home there, and teahouses have played a major role in the history of Iranian art and culture, with *Shahnameh*³ reading, *Pardehkhani*,⁴ and coffeehouse paintings⁵ (Fig. 2.2).

While teahouses have played a key role in social communications, profound social developments have changed people's attitude towards them. This has arguably occurred in the late Qajar era, with its roots going back to the Iran-Russia wars of the time in which Iranian troops heavily lost. Iranian historian Ervand Abrahamian (2008) believes that following this defeat and the imposition by Russia and Britain of a humiliating treaty, Iranian people were surmounted by the power of the West. But this tendency towards the West reached another level during Nasser-al-din Shah's reign. He visited Western countries such as Britain, and was seriously influenced by them, trying to mimic some visible aspects of Western countries (Fig. 2.3):

³The classic Iranian epic written by Ferdowsi.

⁴An Iranian traditional show originating from the previous century. In this show, the narrator tells stories with nationalistic and religious themes in a slang language, accompanied with illustrated screens showing scenes of the story.

⁵A traditional Iranian painting style showing scenes from the wars, religious ceremonies or kings' courts.



Fig. 2.2 An old painting illustrating events and activities in traditional teahouses, such as drinking tea, eating, smoking and listening to the narrator who telling stories from the Shahnameh or tragic myths

Nasser al-Din Shah began his reign in 1848 encouraging contacts with Europe. But by the end of his reign he had grown so fearful of alien ideas that he was rumoured to prefer ministers who did not know whether Brussels was a city or a cabbage. Nevertheless, he continued to send diplomatic representatives abroad and a steady stream of students to France and Belgium. He also tolerated Christian missionaries so long as they limited themselves to medical-educational activities, and proselytised only among the religious minorities. (Abrahamian 2008: 40)

He sent a group of Iranian students to study in Europe. Following their return, and with the King's familiarity with the West and his efforts to secure Western ties with the Iranian community, there came new perceptions in the Iranian society. This can be considered as the initiation of the very first trends towards pro-Western modernisation in the Iranian society. Abarahamian believes that the end of Nasser-al-din Shah period in Iran was in fact the end of the old order in Iran.

In those times, Iran was a traditional society with its communal spaces formed accordingly. But the country was now facing new modes of thought imported from the West due to the relations between Iran and Europe. With the return of the first generation of Iranian visitors from abroad came modernising thoughts, which were in conflict with the beliefs of a traditional society. Roots and manifestations of this opposition can still be traced. Meanwhile, emerging issues regarding law-making and military forces eventually led to the Constitutional Revolution during the next king's (Mozaffar-al-din shah) reign. The Iranian monarchy system was thus changed to a constitutional system. After this time, the Iranian society underwent some changes. For example, according to Abrahamian (2008) the press became more active and grew in their numbers from six to ninety. More importantly, intellectuals rushed to air concepts deemed too dangerous in the previous decades. The emergence of these intellectuals created a new class in the Iranian traditional society, fully shaped during the Pahlavi dynasty, which replaced the Qajar, who

Fig. 2.3 Nasser-al-din Shah Qajar (Photo: unknown)



failed to withstand upcoming crises. Reza Pahlavi initially came up with the motto of creating a republic, but ended up creating a new monarchy (Fig. 2.4):

The new state attracted a mixed reception. For some Iranians and outside observers, it brought law and order, discipline, central authority, and modern amenities—schools, trains, buses, radios, cinemas, and telephones—in other words, ‘development’, ‘national integration’, and ‘modernisation’ which some termed ‘Westernisation’. For others, it brought oppression, corruption, taxation, lack of authenticity, and the form of security typical of a police state. (Abrahamian 2008: 91)

At the time of Reza Shah, the number of modernists increased and with it increased levels of cultural exchanges between Iran and Western countries. The influential modernisers who remained as a sidelined minority during the Qajar dynasty were now serving in the government and rose to high ranks of society with their attitude now popular among the lower classes. Modernism became increasingly popular in the society and gained social momentum due to its imposition from the Court. Meanwhile, the context of Iranian society was traditional and religious and even



Fig. 2.4 Reza Shah Pahlavi (Photo: unknown)

many educated people kept their strong associations with traditions, especially in arts and humanities.

One can witness in this period a divide between traditional and modernist camps. Naturally, each group was trying its best to present its opinion as the dominant ideology capable of leading the society. The traditionalists and conservatives had lived among ordinary people and benefited from the social acceptance and a certain social status. Many of them were teaching in universities and schools as well as mosques and traditional religious schools (*howzeh*) at the time, and therefore recognised as wise. On the other hand, there were educated young people who were familiar with the Western lifestyle due to their residency times in European countries. Considering themselves aware of shortcomings and flaws of Iran's traditional society, they tried to confront people with new concept brought from Western countries and expand their opinion within the society with the aim of establishing a modern lifestyle. Due to the lack of social recognition, the second group was less welcome in the society, and therefore, they never gained a remarkable social status. This is the time when cafés emerge as a cultural space.

Far from 1940s cafés as they were, these cafés importantly create a cultural sphere that represents a Western way of life: a gathering place for people of pro-Western lifestyles. Initially founded by the Armenians who were migrated to Iran after the Great Russian Revolution, these cafés can be considered as the first manifestations of the contrast between tradition and modernism in public spaces. The architectural forms and serving methods of these cafés were like Western ones, and their very first clients were foreign immigrants and ambassadors.

In his book *Those Days of Tehran*, a collection of his sketches from the old Tehran, Khosrow Khorshidi (2013) describes a big teahouse (Fig. 2.5):



Fig. 2.5 An illustration of a teahouse by Khosrow Khorshidi

It was a spectacular huge indoor space. A large samovar was on the counter and a lamp hung from the ceiling. The samovar's magnitude was interesting to me. There was a big tableau with marvellous colours on the teahouse's wall. It was picturing a Shahnameh reading section. Attendants must have been busy eating their lunch at noon and listening to Shahnameh at nights. (Khorshidi 2013: p 37)

Similarly, Mohammad Reza Pouladvand writes about traditional teahouses closely associated with Tehran's working classes:

Ghanbar was another famous teahouse located in Naseri Avenue. Reading newspapers was forbidden in the teahouse at the time. Tanbal (Lazy) Teahouse, located at Souski (Cockroach) junction, was the revellers and villains' haunt. Obviously, each teahouse belonged to a particular group or class. In Iran, teahouses became popular during Qajar era and they used to hold Shahnameh and Eskandarnameh reading sections there along with some narrations and elegy that was quite popular at the time and introduced well-known deans including Master Borzou to the society. (Pouladvand 2011: p 9)

At the same time, cafés, enjoying an entirely Western architecture and cultural base, started their work in Tehran attracting modernists who wanted a place of their own. Khorshidi describes cafés and restaurants in another part of his book and talks about *Adab* restaurant as an example (Figs. 2.6 and 2.7):

Colour blue demarcated interior and exterior spaces of the restaurant. The door opened with a slight push and closed behind your back. A simple beautiful building that was built with early Pahlavi architecture was located in the northern section directing clients into the restaurant. There was a long counter in the salon and an Italian handmade tapestry with an elegant pattern was hung on the wall behind it. Two beautiful candlesticks were on the

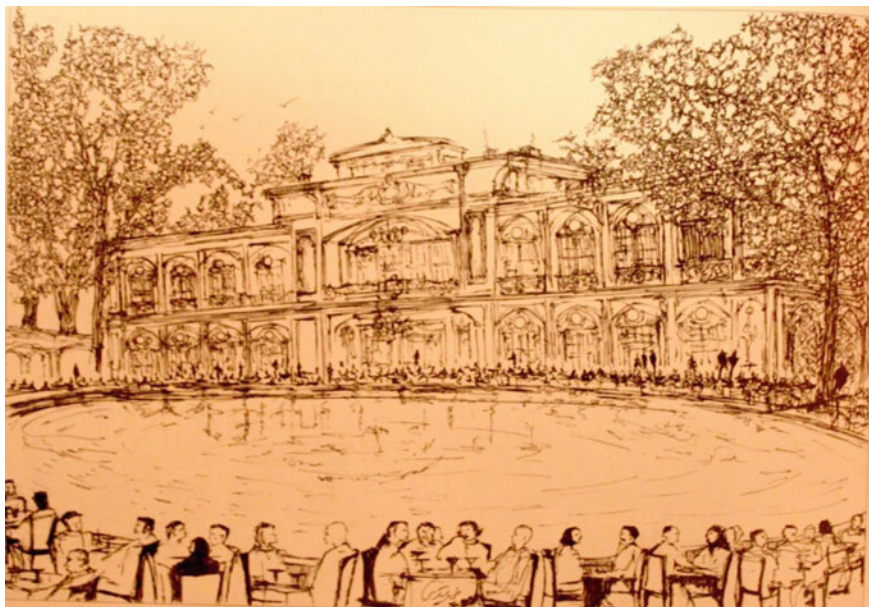


Fig. 2.6 Assessing qualities of the famous Café *Loghanteh*, Khorshidi writes: ‘when I went to Italy for studying, I saw baroque buildings with painted ceilings and walls and Loganteh was as good as any of them’. (Khorshidi 2013: p. 221)

counter along with marvellous Iranian designed containers. The whole space was a fusion of Iranian and European design. (Khorshidi 2013 p: 246)

Such cafés and restaurants represented Western visions in Tehran, while teahouses still had their traditional function. But with developments in communication and media teahouses’ primary function faded away and they turned into relaxing places for workers and lower classes of the society who wanted to drink tea and relax (Pouladvand 2011: 10). So far, the entry of modernism into Iran and its divisive role in Iran’s public spaces have been discussed here. However, how cafés took distance from restaurants and coffee shops, and how they defined a new type for public spaces from the very first years of their presence in Tehran have its roots in the social and cultural aspects of the conflict between tradition and modernism.

Nasser Fakouhi (2012) writes about Iran’s first cafés, particularly those founded in the 1940s:

These limited cafés were based in the cities that have presented the very first models of modernism due to their social and historical diversity including Tabriz, Tehran and Rasht. These cities were the gateways of technology and industry especially in cultural fields like printing. We know that the majority of intellectuals and modernists were from these cities. Such actions have spread to other cities, but they were always a minority even by the time of the Islamic Revolution. On the verge of the revolution snobbism and aristocratic café culture of Europe emerged in uptown cafés and places such as galleries, while its democratic form was in restaurants and delis such as cafés of Laleh-zar Ave. and particularly



Fig. 2.7 The interiors of Hotel *Palace* and its elegant restaurant with German-looking design (Khoshidi 2013: p. 231)

Naderi Café. Initially, such cafés were a place for the intellectuals' discussions on the West's literary and artistic forms, and in its popular form a place to talk about philosophical, political and literal subjects or the 'expected change' that everyone was waiting for.

It should be noted that although vanguard Iranian intellectuals such as Sadegh Hedayat, Mojtaba Minavi, and Bozorg Alavi were not the first café-goers, the name of café and its culture is associated with their names, and Tehran's first cafés including *Naderi*, *Rose Noir*, *Ferdowsi*, *Continental*, *Parande Abi* and *Laleh-zar Avenue* cafés, all among early examples of cafés in Iran, are known by these names. In an interview, Jahangir Hedayat (2011), the cousin of Sadegh Hedayat, mentions that Hedayat's interest in cafés was his Parisian souvenir. He adds that this was rather a special consideration than a planned or ideological matter (Figs. 2.8 and 2.9):

*Sadegh Hedayat headed towards Europe in 1926. ... In Paris, he lived in a single room of a house where he could not host his friends; therefore they followed this French tradition of getting together in cafés. Attending cafés had no serious literary aspect. Europeans did not have the custom of inviting guests to their homes whilst hospitality and serving a guest at one's home has always been and still is quite popular [for Iranians] as they gathered together and enjoyed their moments together with reading *Shahnameh*, listening to narrations and music, drinking tea, eating 'dizi' [an Iranian traditional dish] and smoking while they were abroad. Meanwhile, those without sufficient means would gather in a café and everyone would pay his own share. Hedayat returned to his father's home when he came back to Iran. ... His father was a rich, noble man so he could not invite his friends*



Fig. 2.8 The Iranian writer Sadegh Hedayat, (Photo: unknown)



Fig. 2.9 *Naderi* Café interior view around 1960s (Photo: unknown)

over to his house at all. That was why he continued the French tradition and met his friends in café. ... Before Hedayat the intellectual movement of gathering in a café was not serious. Sadegh Hedayat, Masoud Farzad, Mojtaba Minavi and Bozorg Alavi gathered together every afternoon after work.

The interesting point understood from these quotations is the divide between cafés and teahouses in terms of their visitors. As mentioned before, both cafés and teahouses were places for gathering, eating and drinking. But we must notice that cafés shifted the agenda from being neighbourhood venues to venues for like-minded people, and it is in this respect that café culture is seen as a European souvenir. Before the formation of cafés in Europe, the public used to gather in 'disrespectable' places where no intellectual would go. With the founding of cafés during the eighteenth century, a fundamental cultural development happened in Europe. In the mid-eighteenth and early nineteenth century, the Ottoman Empire conquered Europe and Europeans were fascinated by their bitter beverage, coffee, and coffeehouses' atmosphere. Europe's first coffeehouses were built in Venice exactly following the Turkish model. Charles II ordered the foundation of coffeehouses in England, and the French established their famous cafés from what they had seen in Egypt, the Ottoman Empire and Iran. The smell of Turkish coffee spread all over Europe soon. The French coffee became popular in European coffeehouses. French cafés were a place for intellectuals, artists, scientists and writers to hang out. French young people stood on cafés' tables and gave speeches during the revolution, Venice painters drew portraits in cafés, British folks gathered in cafés to read Shakespeare's plays, and scientists taught their students in cafés: these were all developed from the middle-eastern coffee- and teahouse.

During the next few years, Iranians visited Europe and were fascinated by their cafés and their cafés came to Iran during the Pahlavi dynasty. They considered development and modernism that rooted in Western and especially Parisian culture as in contrast with the tradition; therefore, they had no place in Iranian traditional teahouses; on the other hand, their mind-sets were in conflict with teahouses' clients. In fact, these groups considered themselves as the representatives of modernism in Iran and were in a fundamental conflict with traditional philosophers and thinkers. By choosing cafés as a place for their works and meetings, this group defined a new chapter in Iran's public spaces, which can still be traced in the capitals' cafés. In another part of his interview, Hedayat (2011) says:

Gathering in the café was not merely for visiting friends; they worked there. The most evident example of it is the writing and publishing of Vagh Vagh Sahab. The book was written, read, edited and discussed when Hedayat and Farzad worked together in a café. So many other books and articles have the same story. During their meetings they worked as a team and shared the responsibilities.

Such meetings ended up in the formation of a group called the Four, which was rivals with a group of traditional intellectuals called the Seven. Hedayat (2011) says:

The Seven did not like the Four because they thought of them as a bunch of foreign educated young people with no good knowledge of Persian Grammar. Written in a thoroughly new style, Vagh Vagh Sahab was the Four's reaction to the Seven's criticisms. Great scholars of the Seven thought of the book as a disrespect and Ali-Asghar Hekmat, the Minister of Culture at the time, officially made a complaint against Hedayat on grounds of insult in 1935.

The consideration of the Four as 'a bunch of foreign educated young people' can be seen as the beginning of the isolation of cafés from other urban public spaces as representing certain modes of thought. It must be noted that although both cafés and teahouses were social spaces, cafés were established to form a more 'civilised' public space and were in contrast to teahouses from the beginning. But from this point on these cafés were not merely in contrast to teahouses, but in contrast to the centres of Iran's traditional society, and the clients considered cafés as spaces for intellectual gatherings and representing modernist avant-garde thoughts.

Cafés have always been facing severe ups and downs throughout their history due to their anti-establishment role in the society. The radicalisation of Iran's social and political spheres in the Islamic Revolution era can be considered as one of the most notable downs. Plenty of intellectuals and modernists were sentenced to jail after the 1953 Iranian coup d'état. Those who were known as the new generation of poets and scholars including Ahmad Shamlou, Mehdi Akhavan Sales, Nosrat Rahmani, etc., mostly were Left activists who had formed a radical social space in cafés that faced oppositions from the government and particular figures. Therefore, the political space of cafés moved to 'team houses' and secret spaces. Resistance bases hid away, and unlike 1953, there were no visible oppositions in public spaces and no one like Hedayat expressed his opposition in cafés. This continues and leads to the Islamic Revolution, where one witnesses the closure of these spaces for a period of 10–15 years. The advances of certain ideologies and the government's decisive opposition are among the main reasons why cafés were closed for so long. Urban resistance spaces were abandoned due to the mass migration, purging social and political dissidents and the critical conditions of the revolution and the war. The migration of intellectuals and dissidents who were close to the Left and did not feel safe enough to stay in their country after the revolution, along with the public mood, which was against these dissidents, are among the main reasons for the elimination of such spaces. Notwithstanding the government, the social milieu opposed dissidents and such spaces, which resulted in a lack of safety for the dissidents and intellectuals and confined those who did not migrate to their homes and solitude. During this era, during the 1980s and early 1990s, there was a rise in secret and furtive social activities, and in the mid-1990s, these activities became more widespread and visible, boosted by the spread of virtual spaces later on. The emergence of such underground social activities shifts the focus from migrant dissidents to insiders with invisible activities. With the relaxation of social restrictions from 1997, underground cultural meetings and events took off. Iranian rappers formed bands and created their own style. Inspired by the American protesting music, this style entered the unofficial music market of Iran. The spread of this musical genre heralded the Iranian underground cultural life. Meanwhile,

coffee shops were established. By distancing from teahouses, restaurants and traditional restaurants, coffee shops became suitable places for dates and gatherings. These spaces did their best to become more European in architecture and concept. Coffee shops continued their growth in Tehran and other cities. The function of these social public urban spaces was the bringing together of various people. Coffee shops have developed and changed a lot ever since they have started their work, and developed into a variety of types, some with a luxury and modern attitude and others with more alternative attitudes. The latter have gradually stood out highlighting themselves with their unique architecture, interior design and purposefully selected locations, to distinguish themselves from ordinary coffee shops and thereby targeting selected social classes. What follows focuses on this less conventional type usually known as 'café' as opposed to the more conventional 'coffee shop'.

2.2 Environmental (Spatial) Features (Semiotics of the Café Space)

As time went by and the society took some distance from the post-revolution events and the era's sociopolitical milieu, a development accelerated by the 1997 political changes, there came a wider access to information thanks to the internet and social networks, the press and the media and importantly, the improved political freedoms, which resulted in some previously marginalised people having the chance to reappear in the urban scene shifting it towards new directions. With their presence in the city came spaces that somehow differed from the then commonly recognised types of public spaces: a spontaneous public architecture of difference in which the private space infiltrated into public space or generally the city through spaces such as 'cafés', or as some would say 'coffee shops', during the 1990s and 2000s.

One witnesses, therefore, a renewed demand for cultural environments of resistance, and cafés could offer perfect spaces of the kind. Such spaces, with their introverted cautious nature, try to demarcate a social boundary and create a so-called heterotopia in cities for those activities that cannot be performed or are not accepted in other public spaces. According to sociologist Nematollah Fazeli, the café is a chance for the youth's 'semiotic resistance' against forces of traditionalism and ruling politics. In other words, the café provides a chance for the youth to escape and take refuge from state-owned spaces and traditions. Referring to Michel de Certeau (1984), Fazeli sees this behaviour as the youth's tactic against strategies of power (2013: 221). Thus, we can trace images and moods of cafés or other such public spaces in private spaces too. The presence in a café is more like a lifestyle or point of view in the city more than a hobby or leisure. Elsewhere, Fazeli mentions that a special lifestyle and system of signifiers are constantly being produced and reproduced in cafés, one that challenges the 'cultural hegemony' of the dominant cultural system (2013: p. 209). Modern, universal values overcome traditional local values in such lifestyles and sign systems: the official discourse of the existing

political system's cultural policy has inevitably recognised the existence of cafés due to the social demands and requirements it represents, but looks at it from a pathological point of view (ibid.: 209). What follows is the outcome of observations and presence in more than 200 cafés between 2005 and 2015. It gives a picture of their form, function and environmental concept in recognition of their contribution to Tehran's alternative culture.

As mentioned in the introduction, political, social, cultural and economic conditions of Iran and especially Tehran led the society towards the formation of resistance packets that stand against conventional values and norms. These resisting packets form groups and circles that gradually come out of their reclusion and demand their share from the city by expanding their boundaries. Understanding cafés' political functions demands an understanding of younger generations whose way of political engagement is through choosing their lifestyle instead of organised or partisan political actions. Instead of being an official media or tribune for the political, the café offers a cultural and social chance for the younger generations to express their generational identity and expand their attitude and values by creating and developing their own cultural codes (Fazeli 2013: 221). Cafés and other such places can be known as quasi-public spaces since they are transitional zones between private and public spaces. Although most such places, specifically cafés, are known to be public spaces, they are so socially demarcated that not everyone feels free to go to them. Cafés are generally marked and coded with modern symbols, and their users are familiar with these marks and cultural codes and can communicate with them and decode them. Those who are not familiar with this language and cultural codes find themselves ignored and left out, and are not, therefore, comfortable in such spaces (ibid.: 202).



Fig. 2.10 2014, *Mosofer* Café, Tehran (Photo: Sanaz Khodadad)

What happens within these spaces does not cause social encounters and accordingly social interactions; metaphorically it seems as if individuals live and work in their capsules all day long, and gather around in a café without coming together and forming a mutual capsule. That is why from the typological point of view the so-called designs of cafés are so similar to clients' private spaces including home and work. Understanding cafés' political functions demands the understanding of younger generation who participate in their political destiny through choosing their lifestyle instead of organised or partisan political actions. Instead of being an official media or tribune for political, partisan and institutional dialogues, the café is a cultural and social chance for the younger generation to express their generational identity and expand their attitude and values by creating and developing their own cultural codes. (ibid.: 221)

The following sections elaborate on how cafés develop the alternative language which draws social boundaries and semiotically resist in the official city (Fig. 2.10).

2.2.1 Hide and Seek with the Eyes

The café is an urban phenomenon. It is normal for each city to contain spaces for certain groups of people with ambiances to suite those groups: a commercial or servicing operation would probably attract the passer-by using totally different signs from those employed by cafés. From 2005, Tehran cafés employed more targeted promotional methods including advertising in the cyberspace, direct advertisement and locally targeted advertisements like those in cultural districts such as Enghelab Avenue and the City Theatre of Tehran. Although the majority of these cafés are located in crowded and main streets, their advertising methods conceal them from the public's eye. They all have their own unique ways of confrontation with the city to engage a cautious dialogue with it. For example, their façades are covered with posters of specific theatres and movies and ongoing events held in the city formally or informally. It seems that these façades work as the sign of a window to a new world: the undercover world of urban life, the world of outsiders.

As mentioned before, cafés and other such spaces are transitional zones between the official and the unofficial, with both necessity and image making playing key roles. The fact that cafés tend to remain obscure has its roots in economic viability on the one hand and cautiousness on the other. Due to financial constraints, some cafés cannot afford to acquire suitable commercial properties by main streets. Therefore, they tend to rent old, non-commercial properties (less visible and away from crowds) that lack sufficient business advantage. These financial reasons caused cafés to hide in alleyways and backstreets or in subprime units of shopping centres and also in old and shabby houses, parkings, yards and many other spaces, which can be considered as commercially unprofitable and located in forgotten places. Although this is a disadvantage from a commercial point of view, it is beneficial for their informal status, because due to the mobile nature of cafés and the type of events held in them, it is better for such spaces to hide from the eyes of the establishment and those who are unfamiliar with such environments to avoid raising attention. It has been noted that when a café's popularity rises to the level of becoming an urban symbol,

regulatory authorities, including law enforcement, security or health agencies, shut it down. The internal atmosphere of cafés is totally different from their exteriors and more in line with the values of those who hang out there.

One of the main reasons for hiding in the city could be their isolationist attitude. Generally, cafés are located near cultural centres such as bookstores, theatre houses and youth's community centres; in other words, the café is a single ring of a big chain that is the social and cultural base of the middle-class, metropolitan youth. Such spaces have a special social power, power of the urban youth (Fazeli 2013: 232). In fact, many of these groups have had their own circles in their homes and studios: the so-called underground spaces of Tehran, and in response to all the official and social constraints in urban spaces, they have developed a cautious attitude towards publicity. Anonymity and invisibility are, therefore, the main concerns. The introversive qualities of these groups leave them needles to communicate well with outsiders. Therefore, many cafés try to conceal their inside from outsiders in the capital's alleyways. Paradoxically, some formally recognised artistic works of theatre, cinema and handicrafts are developed inside these informal communities that hide themselves from urban life.

2.2.2 *Blending into the City*

The conservative interconnection between the inside and the outside is one of the major formative influences on the appearance of the café. To understand how the café confronts the city, one needs to look at three main influences: the location of the café, the shape and location of the entrance and the façade setting. A minimal dialogue with the outside is one of the most important features of café façades. Location-wise, cafés can be categorised into three groups. The first includes those in main streets and on busy routes; the second includes those located in alleyways but still recognisable; and the third includes those located inside buildings and are not so easy to find. A demarcation is crucial for the first group. Encountering the outside world, these cafés are more cautious and introversive in order to control their interconnection with the outer world in various ways. The gateway between the two worlds is, therefore, very determining. Cafés with small entrances avoid using neon lights or any other signs. Those with large windows use interior design elements such as curtains, opaque or coloured glazing or more thematic elements such as posters and writings, to avoid the communication with the outer world. This method is somehow practical for the same cafés in alleyways. The majority of cafés have a single door to the street to avoid attracting much attention, although there are some exceptions among those in alleyways.

Overall, the strategy of minimal interconnections with the outside is based on reducing the indoor–outdoor dialogue. A survey of these cafés shows that more than 50% of them have noticeable entrances and are covered up with thematic elements. We can find just a few cafés with highly visible, transparent entrances (Fig. 2.11) and (Table 2.1).

Fig. 2.11 2014, An example of a visible entrance—Café *Visor* (Photo: Sanaz Khodadad)



2.2.2.1 Café *Kargadan*

Café *Kargadan* is hard to find. Not everyone who lives in Tehran knows this place; even those who live in the same neighbourhood do not know its exact location and only would doubtfully point towards a white door in the middle of the alleyway. However, this is not unexpected because this café, and all other similar cafés, is far beyond the common perception of a café as a commercial or service operation. Walking in the alleyway, one cannot find any signs of a café. The only way to find the way is to know that the white door of No. 9 is left ajar for a reason. When we open the door completely, we find what is expected from a café right there: a significant number of people working, relaxing and taking part in discussions in its not so spacious yard and the modest 45 m² building.

Café *Kargadan* is the result of the change of use of a disused old garage, and an architect's effort to create a different space that is both familiar and inexpensive. Using handmade cut-rate accessories, taking maximum use of the existing space and transforming a private space into a public one are their major achievements (Figs. 2.12 and 2.13).

Table 2.1 General façade setting

		Romance	Honar	Godot	Ta'air	Mira	Sepidgah	Tamadai	Shod	Poshtebcon	Lorca	Manena	Javalin	Koucheh
Transparency	Rigid													
	With windows	✓		✓		✓		✓			✓			
Exterior façade	Transparent		✓		✓		✓		✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
	Open (more than 60%)													
	Reducing view	✓			✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
	Curtain				✓									
	Wooden shades		✓											
	Poster		✓				✓			✓				
	Coloured glass	✓				✓								
	Plants			✓							✓			✓
	Very small windows								✓					✓
	Advertisement						✓							
	Objects													
	Blocking view								✓				✓	
	Curtain													
	Wooden shades		✓										✓	
	Coloured glass											✓	✓	
	poster				✓			✓					✓	
	Designed façade													
	Plants												✓	

(continued)



Fig. 2.12 2015, Café *Kargadan* interiors (Photo: Sanaz Khodadad)

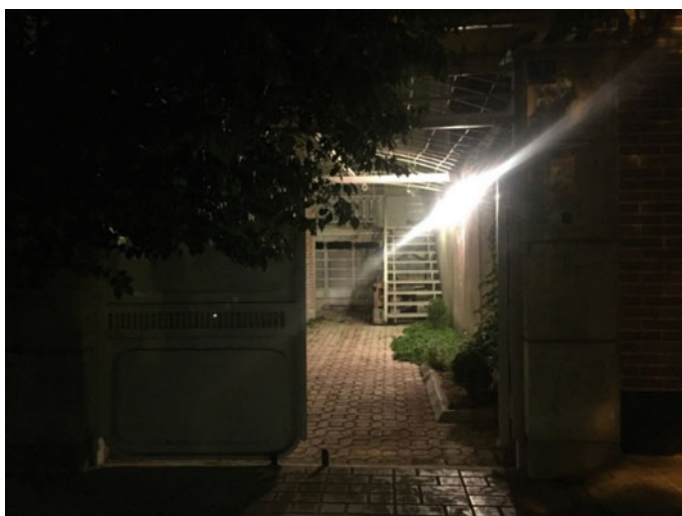


Fig. 2.13 2015, Café *Kargadan* entrance (Photo: Sanaz Khodadad)

2.2.2.2 *Mira Café*

Located alongside one of the most crowded squares of Tehran, Enghelab Square, *Mira* is an almost secret café that one can only find by the word of mouth. On the floor above a clinic, one can find a different café that isolates you from the outside world. However, a blackboard, albeit hardly visible in the crowd, is occasionally put in front of the clinic to attract passers-by. The interesting point about this café is its difference with its surroundings. It is not so much the smell of coffee or any other beverage than is that of alcohol and other medical substances that welcomes the visitor. The ground floor is divided into two parts: one for visiting patients and the other for injections. Occasional long queues of patients on the clinic entrance, crying children coming out of the injection room and resisting children stuck to their parents to avoid entering it, dirty walls and the crowded environment do not give much hope for a special café to the customers. However, just a few steps up, a window and its curtain give the first impression of this very different space. Opening the door, you can hear Bach and Chopin and see someone designing a magazine cover in a corner. Light green walls of the café are so welcoming that detach you from your initial experience. The name of the café (the persian translation of *Mortelle*) is truly interesting, as it has been derived from Christopher Frank's well-known story picturing a resistant city in a society where values and counter-values have been swapped, and everyone smiles at others. In case someone evades smiling, they would perform an operation on them to put masks on their faces, which is absorbed into their real faces and becomes their face. In this society, there are no couples and partnership is an unknown concept, so everyone must hang up together. Society takes precedence over the individual, and others' rights take precedence over the individual's right. These references, thus, construct the café's identity and characterise its customers. The interior is designed with light green colour, Polish chairs and wall-hung writings, completing the café's atmosphere. In their website, *Mira* baristas write: 'Mira is not a café for selling products and services. Mira is a culture' (Figs. 2.14, 2.15 and 2.16).

2.2.2.3 *Theatre Café*

The most important feature of this café is its proximity to Tehran City Theatre (the main theatre at the centre of Tehran). Contrary to the above-mentioned cafés, this café's large windows do not conceal it from the crowd at all. It is on the ground floor of an old building, and has limited its connection to the outer world by curtaining its windows, interestingly created by a wall of posters and announcements, leaving one unable to easily see the inside. Dark and dull colours cover the walls, and tables are so close to each other that in busy times you can barely hear your companions as their voices fade away in the noise of the crowd. Nostalgic elements such as a vintage bicycles and gramophones and other such stuff along with some pictures of Becket, Sartre, Camus, Hedayat and other literary figures are used to create a unique atmosphere that is familiar to their ordinary costumers. The

Fig. 2.14 *Mira Café interiors*

proximity of the café to the City Theatre, in addition to its name, has made this place a great hangout place for theatre fans. The café's library is also filled with theatre books to please the audience (Figs. 2.17, 2.18, 2.19 and 2.20).

2.2.3 *The Glass Eye of Nostalgia*

Cafés of Tehran are the windows that open onto a greater world, a world that seeks another time in its time and tries to connect with a world beyond the contemporary world through its own signs. This characteristic is more evident when a café expresses its intellectual-oriented aspect and attract selected users to its own world. Accordingly, nostalgia or the 'romantic reflection of the past' can be considered as the main aspect of this new world. Of course, we can cite many reasons for the tendency towards such spaces including social, cultural, artistic and even financial reasons, but we can sum up them in the following.

Fig. 2.15 2012, *Mira Café* entrance (Photo: Sanaz Khodadad)



2.2.3.1 Connection to the Intellectual Nexus of Both Iran and the World: Spatial Illustration

Contemporary Iran can be described as a country which overcame so many turmoils in its transition from the Islamic Revolution of 1979, to the eight-year war with Iraq, towards a relative social stability. It seems that the image of the majority of cafés in Tehran indicates a reactionary distancing from such turbulences by way of a recourse to the country's latest intellectual golden era. We can say that cafés of Tehran consider themselves as the followers of the pre-revolution intellectual currents associated with icons like Hedayat, Shamlou and Rahmani, and places like *Naderi Café*, *Firouzeh Café*, etc., which were places of literary, philosophical and political vanguardism exemplifying an internationalist avant-garde. Returning to such intellectual mood or its perception in café users is not merely returning to the old Tehran. It is much more than that. They travel in stories and novels, and the city becomes a memory or an unknown story, like the portrayed Paris of Baudelaire

Fig. 2.16 2014, *Mira Café*: entrance to the unit (Photo: Sanaz Khodadad)



poems and Balzac stories, Woody Allen films or the Russia of Russian literary masterpieces.

The atmosphere of desire and memory in cafés causes a constant referencing, as if they are merely windows to another world and have nothing of their own, like a modern text or novel in which references are ahead of narration. These references are not coherent and resemble a meaningful collage of events that had never come together—a true Foucauldian heterotopia in which time breaks and the signs of the linear course of time vanish. In their flashbacks, cafés of Tehran are not so much a collage of signs as they are a blend made of time, connection, memories and needs.

It is not only references and memories but also necessities which are at work: café owners are not well off, and therefore, the use of second-hand and worn-out objects that are not normally used elsewhere are virtues in cafés. Topsy-turvy values are a characteristic of resistive spaces. Being up to date and using new and modern stuff are associated with commercial values, while in resistive spaces creating a nostalgic image is a virtue. This necessity or mental image has become a model even for cafés without a serious resistive agenda. In fact, this spatial language has grown to be recognised as the sign of being a café, whether involved with resistance or not.

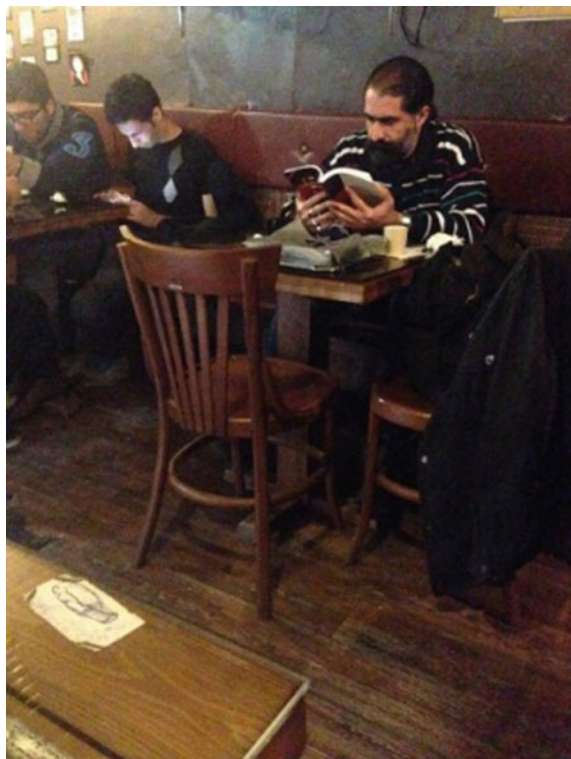


Fig. 2.17 2014, *Theatre Café*: customers using café library books (Photo: Sanaz Khodadad)



Fig. 2.18 2014, *Theatre Café*'s dark, cramped interiors (Photo: Sanaz Khodadad)

Fig. 2.19 2014, *Theatre*
Café: dark, warm interiors
(Photo: Sanaz Khodadad)



Most people attending these cafés consider themselves as intellectuals and followers of leading avant-garde intellectuals being in opposition to the establishment. They consider themselves as global citizens with universal concerns about the humanity, the meaning of life and related grand issues. They try to approach the picture of the Iranian global citizen dating back to the golden age of intellectualism of Tehran around mid-twentieth century. Meanwhile, this generation tends to associate itself with intellectual generations of Paris, Prague, etc. The literary masterpieces of these intellectuals such as Sartre, Camus and Russian authors like Dostoyevsky have been called upon in such cafés. Tehran cafés' many resemblances to European cafés, pubs and clubs are strengthened by the media as well as communications with Europe due to travelling and migration (Fazeli 2013: 233). These associations have turned into paradigms recognised and followed by anyone who attends a café or opens one (Fig. 2.21).

Fig. 2.20 2014, *Theatre*
Café facade: (Photo: Sanaz
Khodadad)



2.2.3.2 Vintage and Worn-Out Stuff

The use of second-hand, vintage and worn-out stuff serves both necessities and mental image making. It strengthens the sense of originality and nostalgia, and works like a play stage in which authentic images owe their originality not to the play but to their histories, and indeed lend this originality to the play itself. Taking advantage of these objects seems anarchistic but also like a way of protesting against current social structures and social value systems. This is not a new way of protesting and, has its roots in the civil protests of other countries such as mid-twentieth century America as well as in many other societies. A refusal of using contemporary photographs instead of exploring the world of vintage monochrome photos can also be seen as a protest by Tehran's café users against the status quo. It is more like a protest against the velocity of changes in the city instead of cherishing the old times. Social and cultural protest also occur in these cafés in their own ways, but the use of old and second-hand stuff can rather be attributed to economic protest. There is also an intentional recourse to the ambience of dark basements of Tehran's old houses, resembling a refusal of new changes in the city and a romantic look to the past: being divorced from the city and becoming a part of a dream for a while (Figs. 2.22, 2.23 and 2.24).



Fig. 2.21 2015, The use of intellectualistic images (Photo: Sanaz Khodadad)

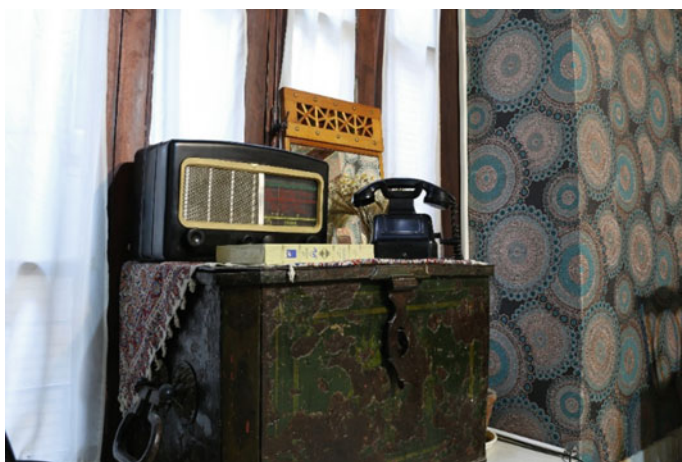


Fig. 2.22 2013, Interior installation, *Romance Café* (Photo: Sanaz Khodadad)

Fig. 2.23 2015, Interior installation, *Mosofer* Café, (Photo: Sanaz Khodadad)



2.2.4 *Making the Atmosphere*

Stimulating a nostalgic feeling is possible by creating a flashback atmosphere: an atmosphere of referring to stories and events that is architecturally obtained in two ways: by using certain materials and textures and certain elements and accessories to evoke a feeling, like a theatre scene. The use of wrong accessories can create a feeling of fakeness and montage that ends up in defamiliarisation. Using dark colours and dull textures and recreating the atmosphere of a vintage photo prepare the environment for accessories that could take us to the past. Many cafés use dark green and brown colours in addition to wood ornaments; so, these colours have become the signature colours of cafés.

Wood and ceramic are frequently used materials in most cafés. Ceramics are much more popular due to their dark colours and affordability. We can find wooden



Fig. 2.24 2014, Interior installation, *Avansen Café* (Photo: Sanaz Khodadad)

elements and utensils in almost every café, albeit with varying degrees of abundance. The majority of cafés take advantage of small artificial lights to scantily illuminate feature areas in a generally dim atmosphere. Each table is illuminated in its own specific way. Normally, ceilings are not very high, and those cafés that have a high ceiling try to make it look lower by lowering light fittings. Most cafés conceive of their main hall as a theatre scene rather than an ordinary space. Every single table is expected to play its role in creating the general feeling of the scene. It must be noted that accessories play the main role in this respect. Utilising accessories and furniture interior design creates a dreamy atmosphere that leads us to an alternative world. The ‘Polish chairs’⁶ in a café are not ordinary chairs, but as much signs of the “café’ness” of the space as the café itself. The Polish chair and its nostalgic nature is the history of old Tehran and its cafés. Apart from Polish chairs, one can find other vintage pieces such as gramophones, abacuses (old calculating devices), old bicycles, clocks, vases and other old pieces like textbooks (from around 1980s) that strengthen the nostalgic feeling of the place. Picture frames with photos of writers, poets and artists, modern-time protesters against the contemporary world order and representatives of art and culture, pictures of old Tehran or Paris, Prague and other romantic cities are other omnipresent elements (Figs. 2.25, 2.26, 2.27, 2.28 and Table 2.2).

⁶An outmoded piece of furniture usually associated with the early modern Iran.



Fig. 2.25 2014, The use of wood and warm colours (Photo: Sanaz Khodadad)

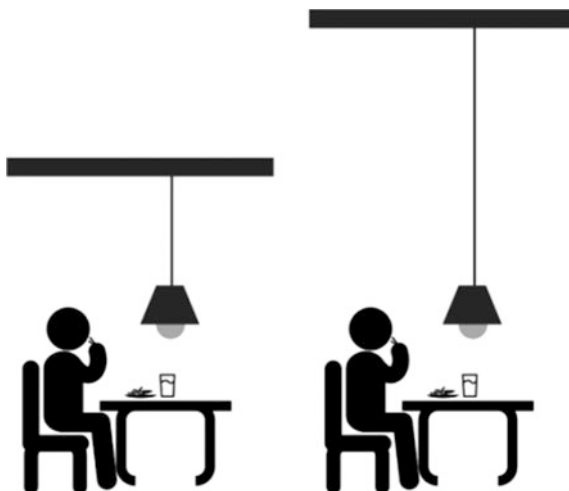


Fig. 2.26 2014, The use of warm colours and pictures of Samuel Beckett on the wall (Photo: Sanaz Khodadad)

2.2.4.1 *Tamadon* Café

Tamadon Café was established in 2005 near the City Theatre of Tehran and became the artists' hangout place. Located in an alleyway, the original café had a truly

Fig. 2.27 The adjustment of light fitting heights to keep the feeling of a low ceiling



different atmosphere with a picture of the 1979 Islamic Revolution on its ceiling and submerged in cigarette smoke. In front of the entrance, there was a table that announced the day's events and occurrences, like a bulletin with posters and notebooks telling the story of that day and the history of the day. A picture of an old man and a few candles on the table created an elusive atmosphere. The café was dark and gloomy, and vintage stuff along with the revolution imagery intensified the nostalgic atmosphere. Pictures of Che Guevara, Marlon Brando, Hedayat and Mohammad-Reza Shajarian⁷ were on the walls, and books by some key Iranian and international literary figures such as Sadegh Choubak, Federico Garcia Lorca, Shamlou and Rahmani were in the library. Ceiling fans, abacuses, cups and saucers on the dark-coloured walls next to old photos of Tehran created a nostalgic ambient in the place. On the menu, there was a curious option called 'nothing' for those who want to sit in the café and take advantage of its atmosphere without drinking or eating. This was the best choice for students or those who could not afford eating or drinking in a café. It shows that the presence in café, and not financial gains, takes precedence, and that both owners and customers see attending cafés as a social momentum. One interesting feature of this café was a second floor of contrasting spatial qualities to its ground floor, with no nostalgic element at all. The design of this floor was truly modern with vibrant colours (white and purple) and brand new furniture reminding uptown cafés of Tehran. Many customers chose, however, to queue for a long time because they preferred to sit in the ground floor (Figs. 2.29, 2.30, 2.31 and 2.32).

⁷The prominent Iranian traditional singer in contemporary Iran.

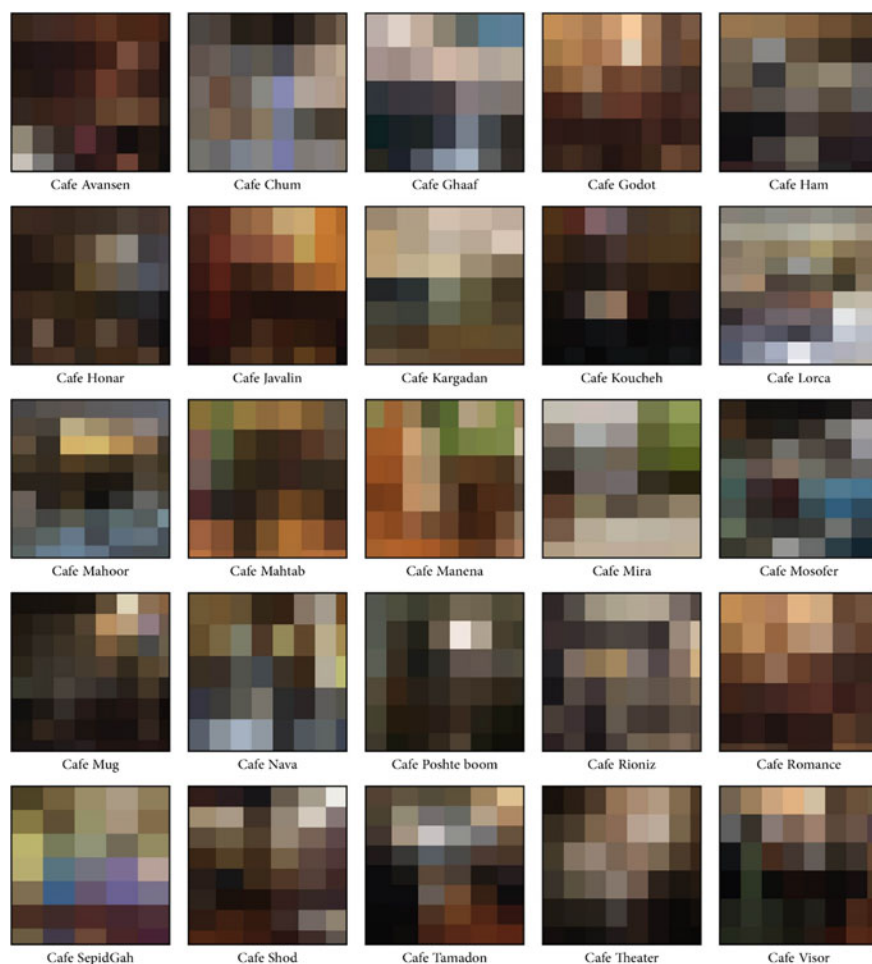


Fig. 2.28 Colour pallets used in some cafés

2.2.4.2 Café *Romance*

Romance is neither Tehran's first café, nor the hangout place of famous authors. It does not have a fabulous building either, but one will surely hear about it from almost everyone in Tehran, even those who are not regular café goers. It is located in the crowded Ferdowsi Avenue: an area packed with authorised and unauthorised currency dealers.

Not unusually, it is not easy to find the café. Although it is located in a main street, the entrance is in an alleyway. It is a humble door that opens to an almost wide staircase. There are no specific signs on the building to draw attention: an almost 100-year-old building with wooden frame windows showing almost nothing

Table 2.2 Vintage stuff in cafés

	<i>Romance</i>	<i>Honar</i>	<i>Godot</i>	<i>Ta'atr</i>	<i>Mira</i>	<i>Sepidgah</i>	<i>Tamadon</i>	<i>Shod</i>	<i>Poshtebloom</i>	<i>Lorca</i>	<i>Manena</i>	<i>Javalin</i>	<i>Koucheh</i>
Old and Nostalgic accessories													
Old radio	✓		✓										
Old phone	✓		✓					✓					✓
Gramophone			✓					✓					
Old TV				✓									
Old camera				✓	✓			✓					
Old clock													
Old lamp	✓		✓	✓				✓			✓		✓
Old utensil													
Checked table-cloth			✓			✓	✓	✓				✓	✓
Suitcase								✓					
Traditional Iranian stuff									✓				
Candle													
Old hat	✓								✓		✓	✓	✓
Polish chair	✓		✓		✓	✓		✓					
Nostalgic plants	✓							✓					
Vintage stuff	✓		✓			✓	✓	✓					

(continued)

Table 2.2 (continued)

	Mug	Mosofer	Avansen	Ghafe	Mahtab	Mahoor	Rioniz	Cham	Visor	Ham	Kargadan	Nava
Old and Nostalgic accessories	Old radio	✓	✓						✓			
	Old phone	✓										
	Gramophone	✓	✓									
	Old TV	✓	✓	✓								
	Old camera	✓							✓			
	Old clock	✓			✓					✓		✓
	Old lamp	✓			✓				✓	✓		
	Old utensil				✓	✓			✓			
	Checked table-cloth				✓							
	Suitcase	✓					✓					
	Traditional Iranian stuff			✓	✓	✓	✓					
	Candle		✓				✓					✓
	Old hat	✓					✓					
	Polish chair	✓		✓		✓			✓	✓		
	Nostalgic plants						✓					
	Vintage stuff	✓	✓						✓	✓	✓	

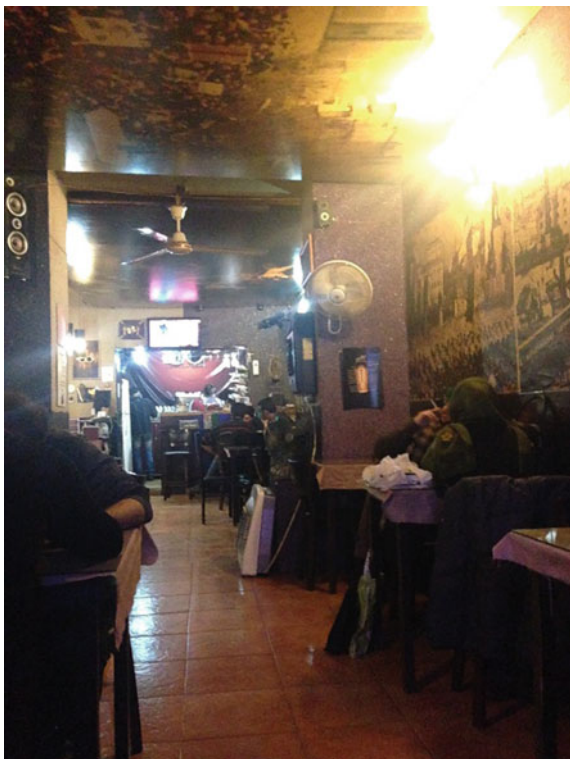


Fig. 2.29 2014, Entrance, *Tamadon Cafés* (Photo: Sanaz Khodadad)



Fig. 2.30 2014, Entrance table with upcoming events' brochures put on display (Photo: Sanaz Khodadad)

Fig. 2.31 2014, An interior view of *Tamadon* Café
(Photo: Sanaz Khodadad)



of the inside. Next to the entrance, a wall of distinct posters from different times draws the attention of passers-by and shows them a very small and simple sign with the café name on it. Entering the café, one may feel the atmosphere of 100 years ago, like a movie or a theatre. Vintage Polish chairs, an old building with wooden frame windows and warm-coloured walls, vintage memorable stuff like gramophones and old pictures, and the sound of old songs all make a truly nostalgic atmosphere. The café does not have a proper view towards the city because the side originally overlooking the city has been completely covered to avoid the city. There is just a window opening towards the old backyard. The café is divided into three parts: the main part on the opening side and two other flanking parts. This building is an accurate example of Tehran's old houses. Smokers' and non-smokers' sections are divided with the former much busier. Another distinguished point about Café *Romance* is that it is a venue for holding unofficial events, making this place a home for small concerts by new bands, play reading, performances and art exhibitions (Figs. 2.33 and 2.34).

Fig. 2.32 2014, Nostalgic stuff (Photo: Sanaz Khodadad)



2.2.5 *Café, a Place for Montage*

A combination of montage and shock can awaken the daydreamers from daily contemplations. In his writings and manuscripts, Walter Benjamin reminds us to pay attention to surrealism in everyday life. Surrealism provides us with an artistic technique of montage or collage to draw the attention to the everyday life. The act of montage, by putting together irrelevant, heterogeneous and scattered elements, causes defamiliarisation from the routine (Kazemi 2013). A montage is an unusual surprising assembly that makes us take a new look at the ordinary. Montage is an appropriate way of recreating the everyday life, i.e. what we considered as means or goals in a life of resistance. Facing the uncanny in the majority of Tehran cafés, in terms of both time and place, becomes a sign. Getting lost in time and space due to paying attention to occasionally popping signs is the scenario in some cafés. Ben Highmore believes that montage is both a way to shock mental habits and somatic improvisations of daily matters, and a proper way to reproduce everyday life (Highmore 2002: 4). These montages aim to rip off capitalism and its dreams that affect the reality of life. Defamiliarisation from what is obsolete outside café and creating additional value for them by redefining them in specific atmospheres is a

Fig. 2.33 2015, An interior view of *Romance Café*
(Photo: Sanaz Khodadad)



form of visual resistance against whatever that happens beyond the boundaries of these cafés (Fig. 2.35 and Table 2.3).

2.2.5.1 *Mosofer Café*

Mosofer café is themed by the dream of travelling, dream of going and seeing and passing by. This café is a comprehensive montage of travelling, from city travels to travelling to the heart of history, geography and memories. It is located at the end of a dead-end alley in a residential neighbourhood, where one would not expect to find such a place. Customers' first encounter with the café is through a glazed wall covered with travel-related and conceptually nostalgic elements. Although the view is completely blocked, the café is a well-lit place. Each table has a specific travelling theme: a ship, an airplane, a car and so on. At the entrance, there is a bicycle as the cheapest travelling vehicle. The 'kitchen' is the body of a vintage Volkswagen van. The café is a montage of all travelling gear: magnifier, compass,



Fig. 2.34 2015, Entrance to *Romance* Café (Photo: Sanaz Khodadad)



Fig. 2.35 2015, *Mosofer* Café interiors (Photo: Sanaz Khodadad)

Table 2.3 Unusual stuff and installations in cafés

Unusual stuff	Romance	Honar	Godot	Ta'atr	Mira	Sepidgah	Tamadon	Shod	Postheboom	Lorca	Manena	Javalin	Kouchelh
Special design			✓			✓		✓	✓				
Street									✓				
Furniture													
Decorative water air cooler													
Street lighting									✓				✓
Accessories									✓				
Street signs													✓
Old car													
Cycles				✓									
Furniture	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓
Accessories	✓		✓	✓			✓	✓			✓		✓
Pictures	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓		
Decor	✓	✓		✓			✓	✓			✓		
Lights													
Special furniture													
Exposed pipe													
مطبخ قهوة كوفي عتيق													
The unfinished appearance of surfaces													
Chain													

(continued)

Fig. 2.36 2015, *Mosofer*
Café interiors (Photo: Sanaz
Khodadad)



backpack, camera, bank notes from around the world, a rudder and so many other things that are all worn out. Instead of picturing travels, the café seems to aim to retell the memories of a few tourists. All these elements are arranged in a particular way to show that they are not usable anymore, but they are the best souvenirs from great travels. We can say for sure that this café is more about travelling memories and that the nostalgic feeling behind them is remarkable (Fig. 2.36).

2.2.6 Café, a Social Base to Live, Work and Hang Out

Most cafés that are located in downtown Tehran are not meant for only spending time and hanging out. Cafés are identity-makers of particular groups, whose city, society and families do not tolerate their norm-breaking attitudes. The café, therefore, acts as these groups' second homes where they spend most of their time. Cafés make sense to everyday life identity of these urbanites; the person who goes to a café tries to label his or her everyday life as modern and young. Sometimes, people can take advantage of cafés as a sociocultural opportunity in order to fulfil their semantic desires and define their territory by choosing a café as their destination as opposed to other destinations they would not choose. This is why they begin working in the café and making it their studio where they produce or complete their works and projects. According to Fazeli, the café is the youth's temple where they produce and reproduce their cultural codes and terminology in the society (Fazeli 2013: p. 214). In fact, the café is a place for events. This makes the café special. It works like a social base



Fig. 2.37 2014, Watching a volleyball match in Café *Nava* (Photo: Sanaz Khodadad)

in the city, where they can work and watch movies and sports competitions together or holding their group meeting. Some artists hold their exhibition in cafés to show or sell their art works. Some start-up artists perform concerts or small plays there. The café is the place for living, working and showing for those who have lower chances of working with official institutions and galleries due to their unrecognised attitudes (Figs. 2.37, 2.38, 2.39, 2.40 and 2.41).



Fig. 2.38 2014, Holding a gallery in the café (Photo: Sanaz Khodadad)



Fig. 2.39 2016, Café as a place to live and work *Poshteboom* Café (Photo: Sanaz Khodadad)

Fig. 2.40 2016, Holding a concert in *Poshteboom* Café (Photo: Sanaz Khodadad)



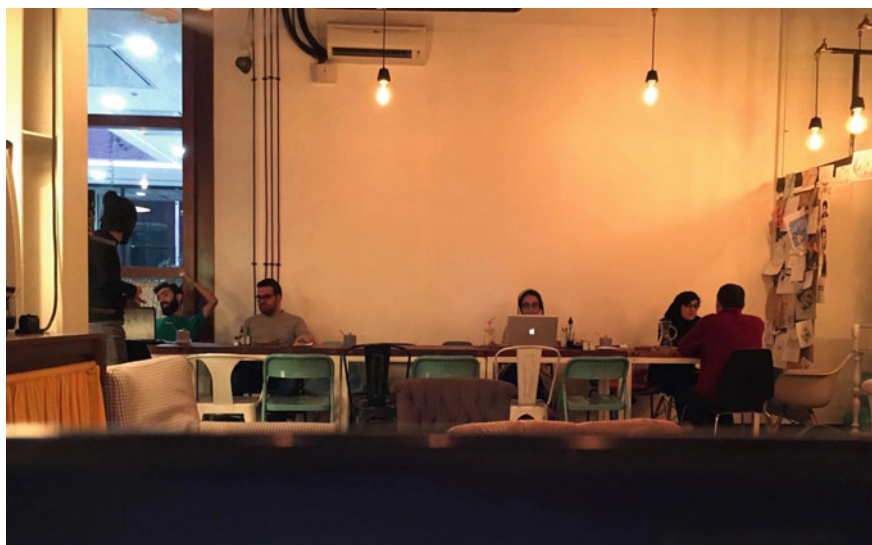


Fig. 2.41 2016, People working in *Cham Café* (Photo: Sanaz Khodadad)

2.2.6.1 *Lorca Café*

A café with different rules, a café with white walls, high ceiling and a good deal of empty space between the tables; the white swan of Tehran cafés was an untypically well-lit open café at the heart of Enghelab Avenue. There was not a single picture of celebrated intellectuals or any cigarette smoke in this café. Recently relocated to its new premises with a new slogan and a different interior design, the most important features of the original *Lorca Café* were the high ceiling, light music and well-distanced tables. Posters were omitted with only a few small flyers placed on a well-organised small table on a corner. The name *Lorca*, its familiarity and nostalgic memories caused the new place to become a hangout place for artists, students and café addicts. But the most important feature of this café is its evolution during the time. After four years, the high ceiling was replaced with a not so high ceiling of a two-storey café; posters and pictures came back on the walls, and one wall was painted in dark green, while the number of tables increased. *Lorca* had to change its language to be able to correspond with other cafés of the city, in other words to comply with its users' norms: users who believe in this place as a community base. *Lorca* has left its bright place, which now houses a new café (Figs. 2.42, 2.43 and 2.44).



Fig. 2.42 The old *Lorca* with high ceiling and bright colour walls (Photo: Sanaz Khodadad)



Fig. 2.43 2013, Café *Lorca*'s original interiors (Photo: Sanaz Khodadad)

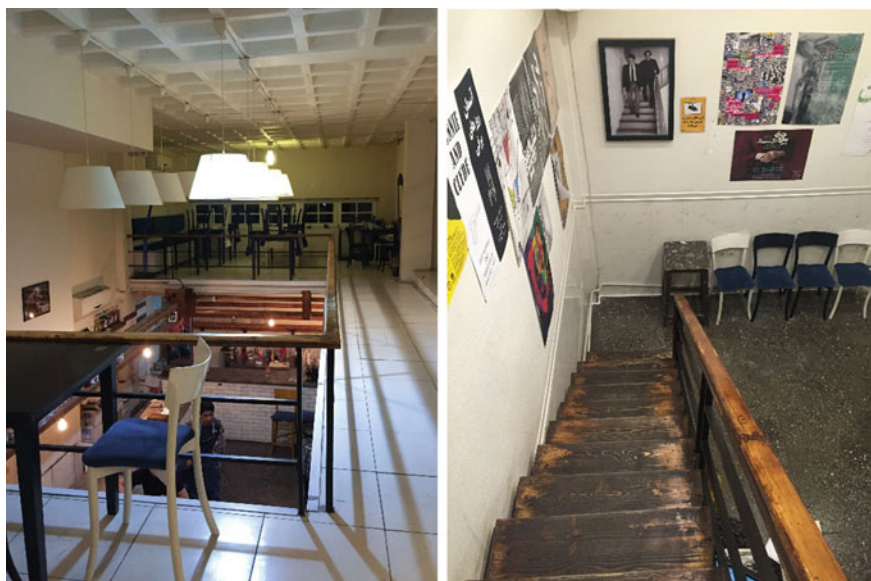


Fig. 2.44 2015, Café *Andeux* (Photo: Sanaz Khodadad)

2.2.7 The Café and its Media

Acting as media is part of a café's *raison d'être*, because it is a vehicle for its users to express themselves. Cafés are somehow full of images like the television and the Internet. From the semiotic point of view, a café resembles a painting that has been created with a coherent taste, even though it is consisted of different images. A café works like a television show creating excitement and fun in audience with its mesmerising lights, sounds and images visualising, in this case, everyday life not only by taking advantage of lights, sounds, and images, but also taste and smell in various forms. It indicates its vision through books, plays, and events, with reflections in the city. Certain groups use the café space and any other associated media to express their ideas and attitudes. Cafés thus employ other media including:

2.2.7.1 Books

Most cafés have a library filled with attractive books; some have been named after these books or their authors. One cannot find every book in café libraries; the majority of their books are those that appeal to intellectuals. They can be literary



Fig. 2.45 2014, Bookshelves in *Manena* Café (Photo: Sanaz Khodadad)

and philosophical books like the works of Kafka, Nietzsche, Balzac, Hedayat, Golshiri, Shamlou and some popular psychology books. These libraries are the semiotic treasures of cafés. Regardless of whether or not these books will be read or not, they would identify cafés and their users (Figs. 2.45 and 2.46).

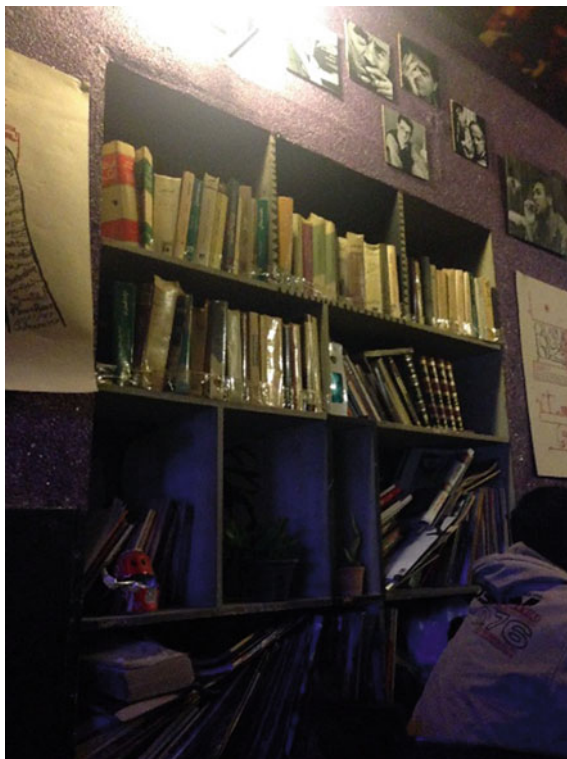
2.2.7.2 Walls, Boards, Photos and Writings

Normally, the walls of cafés are covered with thematic photos, pictures of artists and writers and their works. Some cafés have blackboards or bulletins containing, depending on occasions, aphorisms and statements (Figs. 2.47, 2.48 and 2.49).

2.2.7.3 Posters

Some cafés decorate their walls with posters containing information about artistic, social and cultural events. These walls work like bulletins for café users to update them about ongoing and upcoming events (Fig. 2.50).

Fig. 2.46 2016, *Tamaddon*
Café bookshelf (Photo: Sanaz
Khodadad)



2.2.7.4 Menus and Desk-Writings

Desk-writing is a way for anonymous café users to communicate with each other while expressing their feelings and attitudes. The majority of well-known cafés like *Sepidgah* (formerly *Siah-o Sefid*) owe their fame to their clients' desk-writings. Some cafés use their menu as their media. The diversity of café menus is considerable, and each café, considering circumstances, presents its menu as its media to the clients. *Mira* Café has a menu that suggests books, music, translations and other studies like a small newspaper. Customers are allowed to write on these menus, and these menus will be hung on café walls later (Figs. 2.51, 2.52, 2.53 and Table 2.4).

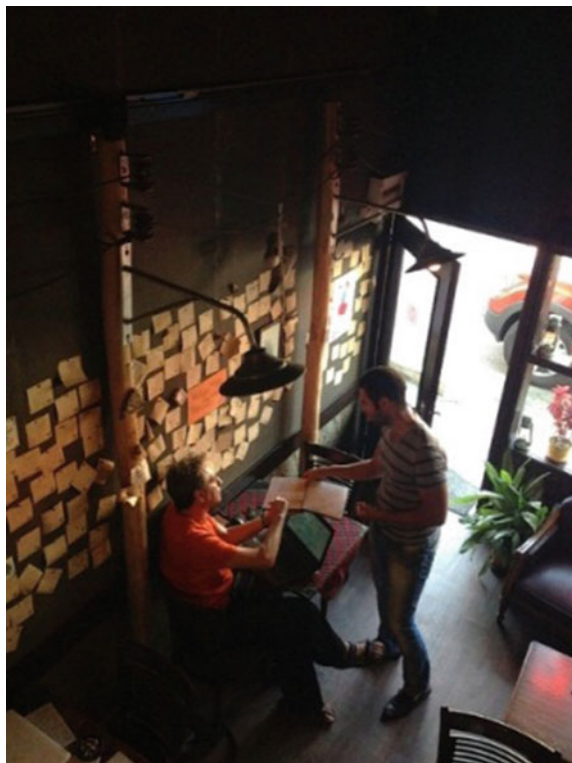


Fig. 2.47 2013, Wall stickers, *Kouche Café* (Photo: Sanaz Khodadad)

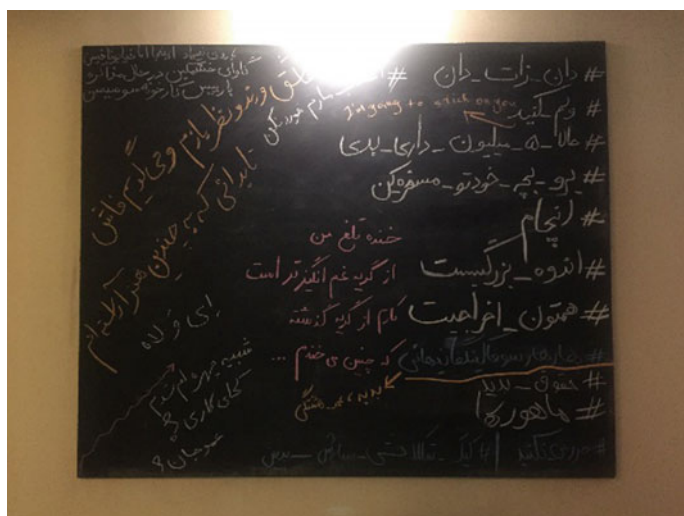


Fig. 2.48 2015, Blackboard writing about everyday life issues—*Café Mahoor* (Photo: Sanaz Khodadad)

Fig. 2.49 2015, Photos of café users on the wall—*Visor* Café (Photo: Sanaz Khodadad)



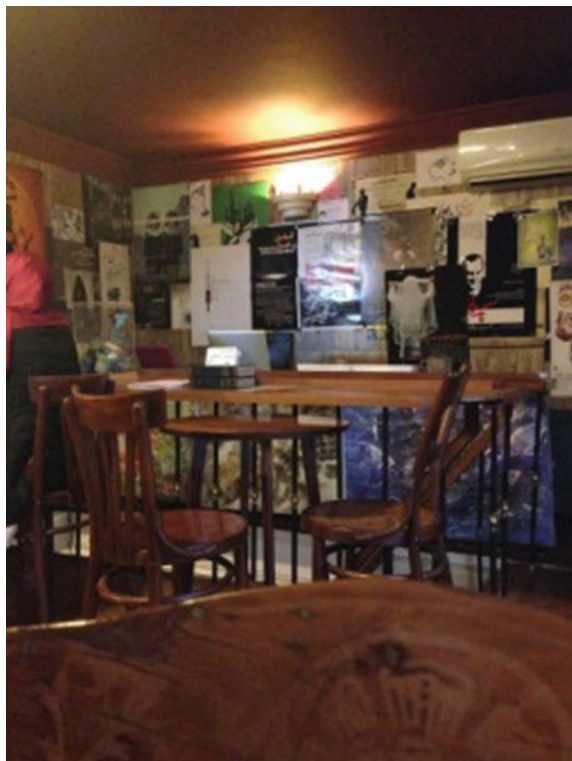


Fig. 2.50 2013, *Shod* Café posters (Photo: Sanaz Khodadad)



Fig. 2.51 2013, *Mira* Café: Customers' writings on display (Photo: Sanaz Khodadad)



Fig. 2.52 Mira Menu on which customers are allowed to write



Fig. 2.53 Menu, Shod Café

2.3 New Café, New Directions

2.3.1 Mobile Café—The Soft Space in the City

One of the newer types of alternative cafés in the city is the type with no specific place. It emerged by using a car instead of a building as a shop. These cars are more like a mobile version of the café in the city. Although the type is not unparalleled elsewhere in the world, the idea of an old shabby Volkswagen van using a blackboard, wooden sink and old-fashioned curtains is an example of following contemporary Tehran café literature and language (Figs. 2.54, 2.55 and 2.56).

Table 2.4 Café as Media

	Romance	Honar	Godot	Ta'atr	Mira	Sepidgah	Tamadon	Shod	Poshtebloom	Lorca	Manena	Javdlin	Koucheh
Interactive	Note books												
	Paper note			✓	✓	✓		✓	✓				✓
	Book on the table												
	Games	✓							✓				
	TV				✓		✓						
	Projector												
	Blackboard				✓						✓		✓
	Interactive Menu							✓					
	Handwrites					✓							
	Beneath tables												
Indicative	On the wall												
	Hanging from ceiling						✓						✓
	Knitting												
	Picture of people and events of café												
	Publication				✓	✓							
	Special table for posters		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓					
	Posters beneath table glass			✓		✓							
	Posters	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓

(continued)

Table 2.4 (continued)

	Mug	Mosofer	Avansen	Ghaf	Mahlab	Mahtoor	Rioniz	Cham	Visor	Ham	Kargadan	Nava
Interactive	Note books											
	Paper note							✓				
	Book on the table									✓		
	Games	✓			✓				✓	✓		
	TV	✓										✓
	Projector		✓					✓				
	Blackboard					✓			✓			
	Interactive Menu	✓										
	Handwrites											
	Beneath tables							✓				
	On the wall								✓			
	Hanging from ceiling											
Indicative	Knitting				✓							
	Picture of people and events of café	✓				✓			✓	✓		
	Publication									✓		
	Special table for posters		✓			✓						
	Posters beneath table glass					✓						
	Posters	✓	✓			✓	✓			✓		



Fig. 2.54 Way Café (Photo: the café's Instagram)



Fig. 2.55 Way Café (Photo: the café's Instagram)



Fig. 2.56 Way Café (Photo: the café's Instagram)



Fig. 2.57 2016, Ham Café (Photo: Sanaz Khodadad)

Fig. 2.58 2016, Entrance, Rira Café (Photo: Sanaz Khodadad)



2.3.2 The Complex Café and the New Style

It has been a while since newer styles of cafés emerged in the city, which are like a complex comprising a gallery, a café and studios. It seems that the new café is a development built upon the earlier types. In the cafés studied before, the café offers much more than just a café. Sometimes, it comes close to being a house, office, gallery, studio, concert venue or a place for discussion sessions, and the selling of things like handicrafts made by café goers, on top of being a café. This ‘café’ is, therefore, also an informal social place for resistance. The new style café of Tehran is a development of these potentials: a complex comprising of café, gallery, shop, studio, theatre, etc. Of course, these cafés cannot be categorised as proper resistance types in the way the previously discussed types are, but they certainly follow a



Fig. 2.59 2016, *Rira* Café (Photo: Sanaz Khodadad)

similar language. In other words, they freely use resistance signifiers without necessarily having resistance in their agenda.

2.3.2.1 *Ham* Café

Located in the vicinity of the University of Tehran, *Ham* represents a newer generation of cafés including *Nazdik*, *Uparteman*, *Rira* and *Rouberou*, communicating with a refreshed language. The café is located in an office complex containing in its ground floor, two cafés with almost identical appearances and literature but slightly different approaches to interior design. *Ham* conveys a mixed mood, between old and new, as well as open and close. Some café walls are not finished in plaster, and exposed bricks remind us of old types, while other walls are plastered and decorated quite neatly and modernistic. Together with this semi-modern, semi-nostalgic setting, the colourful furniture with their various arrangements, the big table suitable for working, as well as a separate smokers' area, complete the picture of *Ham* as a modernised version of the preceding generation. (Figs. 2.57, 2.58 and 2.59).

2.4 Café: Utopia or Heterotopia

Cafés can be considered as ambivalent environments: a simultaneous utopia or heterotopia: a place of sublime goals on the one hand and a refuge for its eccentric visitors on the other. The café can be seen as a free space which obeys social conventions implicitly while rescuing itself from observations and judgments with its specific social boundaries. As Fazeli (2013: 243) declares in his studies, ‘the youth may sometimes think of cafés as the perfect environment for they cannot stand their own society with all its traditions ... The café is their cultural heaven for they find most of their utopian codes there’. On the other hand, the café is a place for the things that are not recognised or tolerated elsewhere. Smoking and the smoky atmospheres, loud music and the like are café norms and attract people, while not accepted in some other places.

2.5 Conclusion: Café, a Mutual Urban Language

In this chapter, we have discussed the café as an urban rather than a services space. To summarise the whole debate in one sentence, costumers, especially in Tehran, do not necessarily go to a café to have a beverage or date someone; the presence in a café is like attending a conversation, more like a social act. Within such a conversation, the ‘nothing’ in the menu means a lot. So does another café’s consideration of itself as a culture, not a space. This conversation questions the recognised value systems and creates the signs of its own which constitute a mutual urban language with its own spatial boundaries. The café is beyond taste and style; it depends on the context you come from or your mentality. This mutual language, just like every common language, is a dynamic and up-to-date language. It will not go stale, but updates and adapts itself. It has a close relation with one’s concerns and develops as needed, knowing how to achieve its goals without losing its structure. All of these are the characteristics of a living language. Tehran cafés of 2016 follow the language of its cafés of 2006, while at the same time they are quite different. Their way of resistance is now more engaging and tends to figure itself out as an urban element instead of avoiding the society and hiding from the world. They manage their connectivity with the city in different ways, and in response to the political and social conditions, they act as bases for their customers in the city and support the wide and varied range of activities besides being a café. They act as media using any means at their disposal. Most importantly, though, they envision and re-envision resistance in the city. It is through their distinct acts of envisioning that they differ from ‘coffee shops’. Cafés are not supposed to just serve coffee but act as social venues. They make this difference clear in the city by using their own distinct spatial language: being nostalgic, being media, using special vintage accessories and many other features are core elements of this language: the language people use to communicate with the city. Cafés have started to communicate



Fig. 2.60 2015, Utopie and Hétérotopie through Time and Space–*Mahtab Café* (Photo: Sanaz Khodadad)

with other urban elements: an articulate communication to demand rights from the city. The city is more gentle with the contemporary café costumers, and cafés are reconciling with the city while using their own language as a symbol. Cafés still resist social class system, capitalism and surveillance, but they have a greater share of cities and streets, and are at times richer, brighter and more optimistic.

The use of the term ‘resistance café’ to summarise Tehran cafés as a type was shown here to be insufficient. The Tehran café is born out of Tehran’s emerging urban discourses, reflecting these discourses not only in the café’s physical characteristics but also in the behavioural patterns of their users. Central to the concept of café, resistance and specifically semiotic resistance are strategies more than tactics. The chapter sought commonalities in producing space, in terms of not just functions and needs, but also mental images: the strategic desire to produce café-goers’ own space with their own modes of consuming space. Table 2.5 focuses on 25 selected cafés out of nearly 200 and how they thematise their space with local or international references, turn into being nostalgic, act as media and also create a second home for certain groups. The table is intended to cover any element, from social and political conditions to building structural considerations. These cafés overcome constraints using original and surprisingly practical and simple solutions. In other words, although resistance cafés use different tactics to create their utopian microcosms in the city and claim their share from the public sphere, they broadly apply similar strategies for achieving their goals. Analysing the semiotic behaviour of these cafés helps us to get deep into their common strategies and elaborate their engagement with the city and power.

Table 2.5 A summary of spatial features of some important Tehran cafés

Location	Location in city	Adjacency	Region in city	Romance	Honar	Gadot	Ta'atir	Mitra	Sepidgah	Tamaddon	Shod	Pashazboom	Lorca	Manena	Javulin	Kouchek
				12	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	1
External physical features	Location in city				✓			✓	✓				✓			
				✓		✓	✓			✓	✓			✓	✓	
	Location hierarchy in city					✓		✓	✓		✓	✓				✓
	Location in building															
		Inside														
				✓				✓		✓	✓		✓		✓	✓
					✓	✓	✓		✓							
External physical features	Function of building															
					✓		✓							✓		
		Change of use														
				✓		✓		✓	✓		✓	✓	✓			
	Entrance															
External physical features	Main space height level from street															

(continued)

Table 2.5 (continued)

			Transparency	Rigid	Romance	Honor	Godot	Ta'atr	Mira	Sepidgah	Tamaddon	Shod	Pashazboom	Lorca	Manena	Javulin	Koucheh
Exterior facade																	
					✓		✓		✓		✓			✓			
				With windows		✓		✓		✓		✓			✓		✓
				Transparent													
			Facade managing	Below the street level													
				Reducing view	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
				Blocking view		✓		✓			✓	✓			✓		
Open space				Yes													
				Yes	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Semi open Space-terrace or etivan				Yes					✓								
Common conceptual Signs	Outdoor	Sign board	Yes	Yes	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
				Clearly visible		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓		✓				
				Not clearly visible	✓							✓		✓			
				Yes					✓						✓		
				Shaders		✓	✓								✓	✓	
				Using plants		✓	✓				✓		✓	✓			✓
				Poster		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓				
				Blackboard			✓		✓		✓					✓	✓
				Chair								✓					
Vestibule	Yes			Using plants								✓	✓				
				Poster	✓				✓		✓		✓				
				Painting													
				Blackboard					✓								
				Unusual Stuff									✓				
				Yes		✓	✓	✓		✓		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓

(continued)

Table 2.5 (continued)

Table 2.5 (continued)

					Romance	Honar	Gadot	Ta'atr	Mira	Sepidgah	Tamadon	Shod	Pashaboorn	Lorca	Manena	Javulin	Koucheh
Lighting				Daylight										✓			
					✓					✓					✓	✓	✓
							✓	✓			✓		✓				
				Artificial													
					✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓		
Space division for smoke											✓					✓	
					✓	✓	✓				✓	✓		✓		✓	
								✓	✓				✓				
Furniture and accessories										✓			✓		✓		
				Kind				✓				✓					
					✓								✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
					✓		✓		✓		✓						
					✓		✓			✓	✓	✓	✓				
				Tables spatial arrangement									✓				
					✓		✓	✓	✓	✓		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
					✓	✓	✓	✓					✓	✓			
					✓												
				Tables distance from each other													
						✓				✓		✓			✓		
				Others	✓	✓	✓		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
					✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
					✓			✓		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

(continued)

Table 2.5 (continued)

Table 2.5 (continued)

c	Function of building												Mug	Mosofir	Avansen	Gluf	Maltub	Mahoor	Riniz	Cham	Visor	Ham	Kargadan	Nova
				Change of use				Purpose built																
External physical features								Café											✓					
								Social																
								Others					✓								✓			
	Entrance							Distinctive entrance									✓							
								Visible				✓							✓	✓			✓	
								Invisible																
	Main space height level from street							Upper than street level			✓											✓		✓
								Same level with Street				✓					✓						✓	
								Below the street level													✓			
	Exterior façade							Rigid										✓			✓			✓
								With windows									✓							
								Transparent			✓								✓					
								Below the street level									✓		✓			✓		
								Reducing view										✓						
Open space								Blocking view				✓					✓						✓	
								Yes																
Semi open Space-terrace or evian								Yes				✓					✓					✓		✓
								Yes																
Common conceptual Signs								Yes				✓					✓							✓
	Outdoor							Clearly visible	Yes				✓				✓							
								Not clearly visible																✓
								Yes									✓						✓	
								Shaders				✓						✓						
								Using plants				✓					✓							
								Poster				✓												✓

(continued)

Table 2.5 (continued)

c												
	Mug	Mosfer	Avansen	Gluf	Mahub	Mahoor	Roniz	Chum	Visor	Ham	Kargadan	Nova
Internal physical features			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓				
	Vestibule		✓							✓		
							✓					
							✓					
			✓						✓			
		✓		✓	✓	✓		✓			✓	✓
	Colour and spatial theme						✓	✓		✓	✓	
		✓				✓				✓		✓
		✓	✓				✓	✓		✓		
					✓		✓					
								✓	✓			✓
	Floors	✓	✓	✓	✓				✓		✓	
		2				✓						
		3										
	Height				✓		✓			✓		
		Medium	✓	✓		✓						✓
		Low							✓		✓	
Area		Double					✓					
	Large	Divided space							✓			
		Open space										
		Average	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
Wall		Small										
	Color	✓		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Wallpaper	✓	✓				✓				✓	
	Brick			✓						✓	✓	
	Wood	✓					✓					
	Ceramics and tiles	✓										
	Stone											✓

(continued)

Table 2.5 (continued)

c					Mug	Mosofor	Avansen	Glaif	Mahnab	Mahoov	Rioniz	Cham	Visor	Han	Kargadan	Nava
				Couches			✓					✓	✓	✓	✓	
				By windows table	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓		✓		✓
Common conceptual signs		Bookshelf		Large					✓							
				Medium				✓		✓	✓		✓	✓		
				Small	✓	✓	✓			✓			✓		✓	✓
		Wall hanging		Photo	✓	✓							✓	✓		
				Painting		✓				✓			✓	✓		
				Intellectuals portrait	✓					✓			✓	✓		
				Empty frame					✓	✓			✓			
				Floral and plants	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
				Nostalgia	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓		✓
		Unusual stuff		Industrial								✓		✓		
				Abnormal	✓	✓	✓		✓			✓	✓	✓	✓	
		Media		Interactive	✓	✓	✓		✓			✓	✓	✓		✓
				Indicative	✓	✓	✓			✓			✓	✓		
				Happening and event			✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓



Fig. 2.61 2015, *Cham Café* (Photo: Sanaz Khodadad)

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