

The Narrative Style, Aesthetic Principles, and Exploration of National Identity in the Films of Majid Majidi

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Abstract: Majid Majidi is a prominent figure among the third generation of Iranian filmmakers, whose children's cinema holds significant influence within global film circles. His works are renowned for adopting a child-centric perspective, exhibiting strong realist undertones, and manifesting deep humanistic care. Employing case studies and comparative analysis, this paper investigates the narrative style, aesthetic tenets, and national ethos within Majidi's films, while synthesizing their broader implications for the creation of national and children's cinema against the backdrop of globalization. First, by utilizing a narrative mode characterized by both simplicity and depth, Majidi's films successfully depict the tight-knit connection between individual destiny and social reality, thereby offering the audience a space for profound reflection. Second, the convergence of documentarian realism and poetic expression constitutes the core of Majidi's cinematic aesthetics, allowing the films to transcend mere socio-political observation and attain a heightened artistic allure. Finally, by rendering a multidimensional tapestry of national culture, Majidi conveys the spiritual essence of the Iranian nation, showcasing the rich connotations inherent in its cultural heritage.

Keywords: Majid Majidi; Narrative style; Aesthetic tenets; National identity; Children's cinema

Introduction

Majid Majidi is one of the most renowned contemporary Iranian film directors. Infused with a profound solicitude for children, his works have earned him the moniker "the father of Iranian children's cinema" [1]. In 1998, his film *Children of Heaven* was nominated for the Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film and grossed nearly one million US dollars at the box office in the United States. This milestone marked the first time an Iranian film achieved an Oscar nomination, while simultaneously setting a box office record for Iranian cinema at the time [2]. Following *Children of Heaven*, his subsequent feature, *The Color of Paradise* (1999), generated 1.7 million dollars at the US box office, further consolidating his status within the global cinematic hierarchy. Since the turn of the new century, Majidi has remained steadfastly dedicated to the care and representation of children, successfully directing films such as *The Willow Tree* (2005), *The Song of Sparrows* (2008), *Beyond the Clouds* (2017), and *Sun Children* (2020). These films not only focus on the lived

experiences of children but also probe the deeper strata of human nature, garnering widespread recognition and acclaim in the international film arena.

Majidi's films frequently place ordinary, unexceptional children from daily life at the nexus of the narrative, utilizing their vantage points to unveil the socioeconomic realities of the lower echelons of Iranian society, while consistently manifesting the subtle and delicate emotional bonds between individuals. Eschewing Hollywood-style massive budgets and grand spectacles, his cinema employs a pure, rustic narrative approach and cinematic language to demonstrate the inner purity and benevolence of children. In characterizing Majidi's cinematic style, one can synthesize it as emphasizing minimalist production, low-cost investment, a focus on micro-level subject matter, and the delineation of ordinary personas. These elements of "the mundane and ordinary" converge to generate a profoundly moving "transcendent affect" within his films. In terms of narrative configuration, aesthetic tenets, and the exploration of nationality, Majidi's unique insights and masterful execution offer vital rev-

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elations and reference values for contemporary children's film production.

A Narrative Style Harmonizing Simplicity and Depth

Grand narratives are rarely found in the films of Majid Majidi; instead, the director exhibits a heightened focus on the material realities of the lower socioeconomic classes and the lived experiences of individual, sentient subjects. By training his lens primarily on these perceptible, concrete lives, Majidi manifests a fundamental humanistic concern through this focused observation. Simplicity constitutes a defining characteristic of Majidi's cinematic narratives. However, this simplicity is by no means simplistic; rather, it is a product of meticulous refinement that excises superfluous plots and redundant details, thereby rendering the story more compact and lucid. Against the backdrop of escalating cinematic commercialization, Majidi steadfastly adheres to his creative principles and upholds the artistic distinctiveness of indigenous cinema. Textually, this is manifested in his strict adherence to the classical dramatic principle of the "three unities"—the unfolding of a single action within a unified timeframe and geographic locale. Furthermore, his plots eschew secondary digressions, uniformly adopting linear narrative structures while rejecting mutated spatio-temporal treatments such as non-linear, cross-cutting, or multi-perspective temporal disruptions. In his cinema, audiences are not required to exert cognitive effort deciphering convoluted plotlines; instead, they are permitted direct access to the core of the narrative, facilitating immediate empathy with the characters.

The storytelling techniques employed in short stories, novels, dramas, or films typically rely on a robust dramatic structure—that is, the artistically logical arrangement of plot components designed to achieve optimal emotional, intellectual, or dramatic effects. Within his minimalist narrative frameworks, Majid Majidi skillfully constructs an inherent plot tension. Taking *The Willow Tree* as an example, although the film utilizes a single-threaded narrative, the plot is far from monotonous; the story of the blind professor, Youssef, manifests a unique internal conflict. Having been blind for 49 years, a successful surgery restores his sight, which, paradoxically, poses a novel challenge. Plunged into a world of light, Youssef experiences disorientation and isolation; he begins to question his self-worth and even attempts to evade reality. Ostensibly, the compelling nature of Majidi's cinema does not derive from tumultuous plot twists or thrilling spectacles, but rather from the textual tension generated through the conflicts within the characters' inner worlds. Furthermore, the simplicity of Majidi's cinematic narrative is exemplified by his ingenious utilization of open endings. Closed, traditional happy endings are rarely seen in his oeuvre. Conversely, the director prefers to suspend resolution at the film's denouement, leaving room for audience reflection and imagination, thereby prompting spectators to construct a reality beyond the screen. At the conclusion of *Beyond the Clouds*, after enduring numerous trials and

tribulations, Aamir chooses not to flee, but instead resolves to stay and confront his responsibilities. However, the film eschews a definitive resolution, concluding instead in an open-ended format. The final shot captures Aamir standing on a railway platform with his back to the camera, gazing into the distance; as the train slowly recedes from view, the narrative continues to extend within the imagination of the audience.

Despite the structural simplicity of Majid Majidi's plotlines, his films frequently embody profound philosophical underpinnings and rich emotional resonance. As Majidi once remarked, "I am particularly interested in the world of children. My own childhood serves as the fountainhead of my creative ideas; I, too, experienced a childhood akin to that of the 'children of heaven'... Innocence is the most captivating attribute of the child's world." Positioning children at the nexus of his cinematic narratives is neither a pursuit of novelty nor a vehicle for didactic moralizing. Rather, Majidi's films adopt a serene and objective vantage point to illustrate children's struggles in the face of adversity and their steadfast pursuit of their dreams. Through a narrative mode that is poignant yet fundamentally hopeful, his cinema illuminates the warmth and benevolence inherent within the world of childhood.

Benevolent intentions and virtuous deeds facilitate a transformative process within the characters' souls, marking a transition from concealment to unconcealment (disclosure)—a persistent leitmotif embedded throughout Majid Majidi's entire narrative corpus [3]. Through his nuanced delineation of characters' inner worlds, Majidi prompts the audience to engage in profound reflection regarding human nature, society, and culture. In *Baran*, upon discovering that Baran's true identity is that of a woman trapped in precarious circumstances, Lateef unhesitatingly exerts every effort to extend a helping hand. Similarly, Maimar possesses a benevolent disposition; despite facing his own financial constraints, he remains willing to offer monetary assistance to Lateef. Furthermore, when Najaf finds himself unable to return to Afghanistan, he chooses to entrust his compatriot Soltan with the money to visit his wife, thereby demonstrating that Najaf likewise harbors a deeply compassionate heart. "Goodness" constitutes a value pursuit at the ethical dimension of artistic creation. While artistic creation reflects life through the lens of aesthetic realism, it simultaneously encompasses a moral scrutiny and ethical judgment of the world, life, and humanity itself—the standard of which is defined by "goodness" [4]. The *Song of Sparrows* delineates a young boy's relentless struggle to sustain his household amidst severe adversity. Throughout the film, whether confronted with the crushing weight of subsistence or subjected to various setbacks and challenges, the protagonist consistently maintains a serene disposition to accept and navigate his reality. The film serves not merely as an authentic depiction of the living conditions of the lower socioeconomic strata in Iranian society, but also, at a deeper level, maps the optimistic and open-minded philosophy toward life upheld by the Iranian people, thereby transmitting an emotionally

resonant chord that transcends cultural boundaries.

Furthermore, the director ingeniously employs symbolism and metaphor, imbuing the superficial narrative of his films with deeper strata of meaning that await discovery by the audience. Moving from the vast rural fields in *Children of Heaven* to the bustling urban streets in *The Willow Tree*, and further to the fluid shuttling between rural and urban spaces in *The Song of Sparrows*, Majid Majidi's cinema is consistently permeated by a profound lamentation over the loss of innocence amidst the process of urbanization. *The Song of Sparrows* aims to re-establish a forgotten, rustic innocence from within the family—the fundamental unit of society. In the film, seemingly inconspicuous elements such as goldfish, ostriches, and sparrows carry symbolic weight as avatars of bygone innocence. Goldfish swimming in a tank symbolize the carefree childhood of the youth; the sprinting of the ostrich represents the flight of freedom and dreams; while the chirping of the sparrows serves as the most melodious music of those uncomplicated days. Rather than functioning merely as narrative props, they represent the director's collective nostalgia for the past and his reminiscence of an uncarved, natural, and pristine world. However, as the film reveals, these beautiful symbols depart from us one after another. Through these symbolic elements, the director conveys anxieties regarding the erosion of childhood innocence within contemporary society. Similarly, in *Sun Children*, Majidi masterfully utilizes object-based metaphors to convey the deeper connotations of the film through rich symbolic meanings. The mine serves as a pivotal setting in the film; it is not merely a physical space, but also a metaphor representing the lowest echelons of society and its forgotten corners. The children's labor within the mine reflects their marginalized status in society and their yearning to alter their destinies. Together, these symbolic and metaphorical elements—the sun, the mine, and water—constitute the film's profound humanistic concern and social critique, which precisely forms the core intellectual value of *Sun Children*.

An Aesthetic Proposition Fusing Documentarian Realism and Poetic Expression

Throughout the history and developmental trajectory of Iranian children's cinema, a documentarian aesthetic style has consistently remained a vital principle upheld by Iranian directors. In particular, the evolution of the Iranian New Wave film movement rendered this documentarian aesthetic sensibility, at one point, the most favored mode of expression among Iranian children's filmmakers. This shared aesthetic inclination originates, on one hand, from Eastern poetic aesthetics, and on the other, from local Iranian religious culture and national psychology. Within Majid Majidi's filmography, one can discern these common aesthetic sensibilities characteristic of Iranian children's cinema. The cumulative overlay of these shared aesthetic preferences has en-

dowed Iranian children's cinema with branded communication characteristics. This branded dissemination serves both as a hallmark distilled from the collective aesthetic traits of Iranian children's films and as a crucial pathway for generating the brand equity of Iranian cinema. It is precisely because Iranian filmmakers continuously inherit and evolve this specific aesthetic disposition that Iranian children's cinema consistently leaves audiences with a distinct impression of documentarian stylistic realism.

Majid Majidi adheres to the documentarian aesthetic paradigms of world cinema and synthesizes them with Iranian history and culture, thereby forging a unique visual expression that captures the rustic realities of Iranian life. The reality depicted in his films is not a simplistic mimesis of daily life; rather, it is infused with profound humanistic reflection, constructing a more emotionally compelling, artistic reality. These aesthetic characteristics distinguish his oeuvre from Hollywood genre films, forming a unique cinematic texture. André Bazin, the founder of long-take theory, posited that "the objectivity of photography confers on the image a quality of credibility absent from any painting" [5]. In stark contrast to the dizzying special effects and convoluted editing techniques prevalent in Hollywood cinema, Majidi's films ubiquitously employ documentarian shooting techniques, improvisational performances by non-professional actors, continuous long takes, and scene capture under natural light conditions, thereby presenting authentic life settings and raw, unadorned natural landscapes.

The deployment of the long take is highly ubiquitous within Majid Majidi's cinematic corpus. As an ontological language of cinema, the long take preserves the spatio-temporal integrity of events throughout their duration, functioning as the cinematic idiom closest to objective reality. Harnessing this ontological language, Majidi integrates ancient Persian civilization and the authentic features of contemporary life into the poetic milieus constructed by the long take, thereby delineating the subtle emotional shifts within his characters' psyches. In *The Color of Paradise*, as young Mohammad plays alone in the forest, the camera fluidly tracks him, elucidating his interaction with nature and his unique sensory perception of the world. Throughout the film, running motifs reappear frequently, captured mostly through smooth, continuous long takes. Utilizing an aesthetic approach akin to traditional *baimiao* (line-drawing technique), the director masterfully intertwines his philosophical inquiries with Iranian folklore and customs within a single, continuous shot, thereby evoking a deep emotional resonance among indigenous spectators. Majidi is also adept at utilizing muted, somber color palettes, typically exemplified in films such as *Baran* (2001) and *The Willow Tree*. In these works, whether depicting urban, rural, or desert topographies, the landscapes are enveloped in a soft layer of gray, stripping away the vibrant hues and flamboyant luster habitual to modern commercial cinema. This somber tonal palette harmonizes with and reinforces the melancholic atmosphere of the narrative itself, enabling the audience to perceive the tragic destinies of the protagonists more acutely.

Furthermore, Majidi demonstrates a signature style in his sonic design, frequently employing lyrical music to intensify the depiction of his characters' internal emotional states. The score in *The Color of Paradise* is thoroughly infused with a poetic sensibility; particularly when delineating the young protagonist Mohammad's perception of the world and his communion with nature, the lyrical music not only accentuates the aesthetic beauty of the visual imagery but also profoundly articulates the rich emotional interiority of the child protagonist.

The films of Majid Majidi are also renowned for their distinctive poetic aesthetics. Through a poetic visual grammar and profound emotional expression, he interrogates the interior world of children and their psychological growth amidst adversity. In *The Color of Paradise*, Majidi trains his lens on the inner world of a blind boy. Employing sophisticated narrative techniques, he delves deep into the psyche of a child who must rely solely on sound and touch to perceive the universe, composing an ode to the vital force and resilience inherent in children's lives. The film adopts a serene and objective vantage point, meticulously portraying the children's steadfastness in the face of hardship and their tenacious pursuit of their aspirations. Although the overarching tone of the film reveals a subtle melancholy, every shimmering ray of hope within it allows the audience to sense the tenacity of life and an inextinguishable optimism. *The Color of Paradise* artfully unfolds the poetry and tenderness within the world of childhood, presenting a profoundly moving aesthetic beauty. Furthermore, existentialist philosophical thought runs as a central thread throughout Majidi's cinematic corpus, profoundly revealing the essence and meaning of human existence. Taking *The Willow Tree* as an example, the protagonist's exploration of life following his loss of sight serves not only as a deep reflection on personal circumstance but also as a profound inquiry into the broader meaning of human existence. Through the protagonist's internal monologues and his interactions with the surrounding milieu, the film delicately delineates his profound meditations on freedom, choice, and responsibility. This exploration of the individual's position within the vast universe imbues the film with a profound existentialist poetry, prompting audiences to reflect upon their own existence and the meaning of life during the viewing experience.

While Majid Majidi's cinema is highly esteemed for its lyrical tone and aesthetic depth, beneath these poetic visuals lies a profound critique of social injustice and class disparities. Baran delineates the arduous life of an Afghan refugee girl in Iran and her unexpected, profound bond with a young Iranian man. Through his unique vantage point, Majidi interrogates critical issues such as gender equality and the refugee crisis. In the film, Baran struggles for survival on the fringes of Iranian society; her presence serves as a silent scream, unveiling the plights and challenges encountered by displaced refugee populations. By exposing the indifference and prejudice directed toward vulnerable groups by society, the film calls attention to systemic injustices, transmitting a deep solicitation for equality, respect, and humanitarianism.

Similarly, in *Beyond the Clouds*, Majidi employs a nuanced visual grammar to sketch a portrait of life among slum dwellers, providing comprehensive representation to those marginalized faces and neglected voices. This socio-political critique constitutes another vital dimension of his cinematic poetic aesthetics, imbuing his films with intellectual depth and topical relevance that extend beyond mere artistic beauty. Ultimately, Majidi's films function not only as visual and emotional feasts but also as a solemn invocation of social conscience and moral responsibility. His cinema compels audiences to confront the injustices and disparities embedded within society, thereby stimulating a yearning and pursuit for a more just and egalitarian social order.

A Multidimensional Rendering of the National Cultural Tapestry

In *The Philosophy of Art*, Hippolyte Taine posits that race, epoch, and environment constitute the three primordial elements that influence art. The impact of the racial factor on art is manifested not only within content and form but also within a profound aesthetic rhythm [6]. It is precisely because a unique race possesses a distinct art that different races frequently engender divergent spiritual connotations and artistic temperaments. Historically, Iran gave rise to the once-prosperous Persian Empire, which commanded one of the world's most expansive territories, nearly encompassing three centers of ancient civilization: the Tigris-Euphrates, Indus, and Nile river valleys. As an ancient civilization, Iran not only possesses a proud legacy of Persian civilization but has also preserved the Persian language and its cultural characteristics [7]. It is precisely the glory of ancient Persian culture and the Islamic faith that have shaped the steadfast, sincere, and benevolent national character of the Iranian people.

Any art form, once severed from the socio-historical and cultural soil that engenders its vitality, will inevitably lose its rich palette, becoming pale, hollow, and ultimately reduced to a vacuous existence. Cinema, as an artistic medium that synthesizes narrative and documentation, is even more deeply rooted within the humanistic terrain that nurtures its development. In *Children of Heaven*, Ali, whose sole intention is to win the third-place prize to secure a new pair of sneakers for his younger sister, accidentally clinches the championship. Enveloped in a sense of despondency, he gently removes his severely worn shoes and submerges his blistered feet into a clear pond. Subsequently, a school of vibrantly colored goldfish slowly swims over, gently nibbling at his toes. This scene was a deliberate cinematic choice by director Majid Majidi, seizing an opportunity to showcase Iranian customs and culture to the world. In an interview, he noted: "The goldfish is a vital element in Iranian culture, symbolizing life and vitality. During the Iranian New Year rituals, we always arrange the Haft-sin table, and one of the essential components is the goldfish. Incorporating the goldfish into the film is a way to embody this beautiful wish."

What the director seeks to articulate in this film is precisely his conceptualization of heaven: heaven is nothing other than a spiritual state that preserves purity and beauty even when confronted with adversity—a realization that constitutes the profound depth of the film. Furthermore, in *Baran*, Majidi interrogates critical issues such as gender equality and the refugee crisis. These themes function not only as a direct depiction of contemporary Iranian social realities but also as a manifestation of the inclusivity, compassion, and humanitarian spirit inherent within Iranian culture. The film is deeply embedded within Iranian history and culture, serving as a profound encapsulation of the director's philosophy regarding cultural inheritance and humanistic concern.

Majid Majidi's cinema not only profoundly delineates Iranian social realities but also ingeniously integrates indigenous cultural elements. For instance, Islam advocates the philosophical concept of the *Wasat* (the "Middle Way"), which requires individuals to utilize moderation as a foundational point of departure for all actions, striving to construct a just, equitable, and peaceful social environment while pursuing a state of tolerance and harmonious coexistence [8]. In *The Song of Sparrows*, this philosophical tenet is masterfully translated into cinematic grammar, as the director intertwines Karim's narrative with Iranian social reality and national culture. After enduring the tribulations of deception and theft, Karim ultimately returns to benevolent intent, receiving a spiritual recompense through his virtuous deeds. This karmic cycle of goodness begetting goodness maps the values of justice and equity championed by the "Middle Way" ideology. Moreover, the film repeatedly captures moments of Karim's devout prayer alongside his demonstrations of friendliness and tolerance toward others, thereby reflecting the propagation of Islamic doctrines concerning faith, benevolence, and forgiveness. Similarly, in *Children of Heaven*, while the family of four sits gathered at home working, the father requests his young daughter to pass him some sugar cubes. The daughter unthinkingly points to the sugar directly beside the father's hand, only for the father to solemnly correct her: "This sugar belongs to the mosque; we are merely keeping it in temporary safekeeping." In another instance, when the father recites scriptures at home, this man—who appears as unyielding as iron in daily life—breaks down and weeps disconsolately like a child. These nuanced narrative details profoundly unveil the Iranian people's devout faith in Islam and their steadfast devotion to Allah.

As a medium of cultural transmission, cinema serves as a vital indexical marker of a nation's existence within the civilized world. The value of Iranian children's cinema lies in its ability to masterfully integrate into the international cinematic arena through its distinctive national characteristics, thereby imbuing world cinema with a unique palette. The fundamental reason underpinning the robust vitality of Iranian children's cinema is its creative ideology and conceptual framework rooted in indigenous consciousness, drawing momentum from its own national culture. This primal dynamism frequently and delicately permeates the films,

manifesting through narratives saturated with humanistic solicitude and cultural perspectives that observe the local milieu. Precisely in order to remain embedded within the soil of national reality and attract a broader domestic audience, Majid Majidi focuses on the world of the child, utilizing the child's vantage point to refract the adult world, thereby providing enlightenment and impact. In *The Willow Tree*, Majidi employs the innocent perspective of children to demonstrate the pivotal role of education in personal growth and social transformation. While appreciating the film, audiences not only perceive the power of education but are also prompted to reflect upon their own developmental trajectories and social responsibilities. Similarly, *Children of Heaven* interrogates the relationship between the individual and society through a child-centric gaze. Via the children's experiences, Majidi unveils the structural inequalities and competition inherent within the adult world, while simultaneously reflecting fundamental human emotional needs through the children's pure sentiments and simple desires. The adversities experienced by the children in these films function, in actuality, as a microcosm of society at large, through which Majidi instigates broader socio-political discourses.

The success of Majid Majidi demonstrates that national cinema can still achieve prominence within the global cinematic arena, while simultaneously reaffirming the axiom that "what is national is universal." Under the sweeping tide of globalized communication, the trend toward cultural homogenization has become increasingly pronounced; Hollywood cinema, along with its embedded ideologies, has inundated the global film market, constructing a distinct and pervasive Hollywood cultural landscape and phenomenon. Against this backdrop, Majidi has successfully navigated a novel trajectory for cinematic creation—one that preserves the unique allure of indigenous culture while adroitly accommodating the aesthetic demands of international audiences. Furthermore, due to divergences in culture and religious faith, the alternative ways in which identical human dilemmas are resolved in his work serve to amplify international spectators' exoticizing curiosity and sense of anticipation regarding Iran. It is precisely this interplay of familiarity and alterity (strangeness) that allows Iranian children's cinema to preserve and defend its nationality in form, while exhibiting internationalism and universality in terms of thematic selection and content. Majidi's cinematic trajectory represents both a resistance against cultural monoculture and a fervent endorsement of cultural diversity. By virtue of their idiosyncratic artistic style and profound humanistic solicitude, his films demonstrate that cinematic art capable of transcending cultural boundaries can achieve magnificent brilliance, thereby contributing invaluable weight to the rich, pluralistic development of global cinematic art.

Conclusion

Within the international film arena, Majid Majidi has garnered widespread respect and acclaim from global audi-

ences by virtue of his unique narrative artistry and profound aesthetic pursuits. His films serve not only as a microcosm of Iranian cinematic culture but have also injected renewed vitality into the advancement of Iran's film industry. On a narrative level, Majidi's films present complex emotions and intellectual thoughts through a concise yet meaningful approach. He masterfully weaves these elements into clear, coherent plotlines, ensuring that each work embodies profound metaphors concerning human nature and society. On an aesthetic level, Majidi successfully synthesizes documentary realism with poetic romanticism, forging a distinctive audio-visual grammar. Through nuanced visual language and poetic compositions, his cinema not only elevates its own artistic value but also enables the audience to achieve a deep emotional resonance within their visual experience. On a cultural level, Majidi's filmography functions as a rich tapestry of national culture, delineating Iranian history, heritage, and daily life from multiple perspectives. Through his focused observation on the lived experiences of ordinary individuals, he showcases the diversity and complexity of Iranian society, transmitting profound social insight and humanistic care. Overall, Majidi's creative output constitutes not only a precious asset to Iranian cinematic art but also an indispensable component of world cinema culture. Through his unique narrative configurations and aesthetic endeavors, he has influenced global audiences and demonstrated an enduring pursuit of humanity, love, and hope through his profound thematic inquiries. Ultimately, Majidi's films have not only added intellectual depth to Iranian culture but have

also made significant contributions to the diversification and enrichment of global cinematic culture.

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