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**A Poetic Battle: Metaphorical Strategies used in Iranian Cinema
to Bypass Censorship**



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Abstract

This paper studies the metaphorical strategies used in Iranian cinema to bypass censorship. The paper aims to find out how a story can be told in a limited cinema and to help viewers of film understand how Iranian cinema is shaped by its political background. It contributes to the broad understanding of the unique quality of Iranian films, by providing a textual analysis of the elements for which Iranian cinema is known. Even though the different metaphorical strategies used to bypass censorship have been studied briefly before, they have never been brought together and studied as a whole to provide a comprehensive grasp of the political influence on Iranian cinema.

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Introduction

Ever since Iranian cinema came into existence, Iranian filmmakers have been in an arduous battle with the censors. The power and authority given to the censors by their headquarters— the Iranian state— leaves them almost impossible to overthrow, making the battle extremely long, brutal, and never-ending. However, Iranian filmmakers have not capitulated or retreated. Rather, they have found a way to fight back using their innate creativity as a sword. They have managed to create a metaphorical shield that protects them from the incessant attacks of the censors and allows them to advance in the battlefield. By turning to metaphors as a means of expression, Iranian filmmakers have created a smokescreen to cover their sociopolitical attacks. This paper analyzes the most recurring metaphorical strategies used in Iranian cinema to bypass censorship. It begins with an introductory chapter on post-revolutionary film censorship in Iran that gives information not only about the specific censorship regulations after the revolution, but also the subsequent political state of Iran. The paper moves onto the second chapter, in which the poetical and literary background of Iran is very briefly discussed; figurative language and poetry date back to Iran’s early history and brief information about them is beneficial in understanding why Iranian filmmakers turn specifically to the use of metaphors for fighting the censors. The third chapter of the paper scrutinizes the nature of metaphors, which is critical in comprehending their capability to be used against censorship in Iranian cinema. The fourth chapter, which is the main, thoroughly examines some of the most common metaphorical strategies used by Iranian filmmakers to circumvent censorship by analyzing several different films in each subchapter.

1. Post-Revolutionary Film Censorship in Iran

In 1979, an Islamic Revolution took place in Iran, resulting in the termination of “more than 2,500 years of monarchy.”¹ The revolution not only caused intense “political and social changes” but also transformed Iran’s “cultural and aesthetic discourses”, such as its film

¹ Sadr (2006), 166

industry.² According to Blake Atwood, a media historian from the American University of Beirut, “nowhere has the relationship between cinema and revolution been more evident than in the Islamic Republic of Iran.”³

The leader of the revolution, Ayatollah Khomeini, believed that cinema was used formerly to “corrupt” the “youth”.⁴ Therefore, the revolutionaries also thought of cinema as “a cultural consequence of Mohammad Reza Pahlavi’s ties to Europe and the United States” and sought out to disrupt what they also thought was a “corruptive force”.⁵ However, just days before the Islamic revolution became successful, Khomeini said that he was not against cinema, but believed it should be used as a medium for “educating the people” rather than corrupting them.⁶

On the first day of February 1979, he declared: “We {The Islamic State; k.k.} are not opposed to cinema. . . It’s the misuse of cinema that we are opposed to, a misuse caused by the treacherous policies of our leaders.”⁷

After Khomeini’s words on the matter, the revolutionaries no longer considered cinema as a medium through which to embrace “American values”. In their eyes, film was no longer the “embodiment of Pahlavi corruption” or just a “mode of entertainment.”⁸ It was then that the new Islamic government started using cinema as “an ideological and propagandist tool” that

² Sheibani (2011), 1

³ Atwood (2016), 2

⁴ Khomeini (1981), 258

⁵ Atwood (2016), 2

⁶ Khomeini (1981), 258

⁷ Khomeini (1981), 258

⁸ Atwood (2016), 3

encouraged the Islamic culture.⁹ To bring power for the new republic, the state wanted to use cinema to show the society how it would be like to live in an idealized Islamic society.¹⁰

Alongside using cinema as a tool to promote an Islamic state, a process began in the hopes of purifying Iranian cinema, which included burning down movie theaters.¹¹ Half the cinemas of the country were burned down “in the name of morality and cultural independence”.¹² *Etella’at*, a prominent newspaper in Iran, claimed in June of 1982 that only 313 out of 524 cinemas “remained intact” and *Kayhan* newspaper wrote in April of 1983 that only 400 cinemas “remained operational in Iran.”¹³

Additional steps in purifying Iranian cinema included cutting down the import of foreign movies and censoring the local ones.¹⁴ The Islamic government of Iran controlled the import of foreign films since they did not comply with Islamic standards and banned *film farsi*, a genre of films made in the Pahlavi regime that dealt strongly with “comedy, melodrama, action, and ‘charm.’”¹⁵ Furthermore, the revolution caused many of the directors, actors, and producers to go in exile, obstructing the “chain of production”¹⁶. Other events such as the eight years of war between Iran and Iraq, which broke down the country’s relation with the United States, also “threatened to destroy national film production”.¹⁷ To aid a “national film culture”, the government of Iran put forth a “range of taxes, subsidies, and quotas”¹⁸.

⁹ Sheibani (2011), 6

¹⁰ Atwood (2016), 3

¹¹ Naficy (2002), 30

¹² Gaffary (1991), 567-572

¹³ Sadr (2006), 169

¹⁴ Naficy (2002), 30-33

¹⁵ Akrami (1991), 574

¹⁶ Gaffary (1991), 567-572

¹⁷ Devictor (2015), 14

¹⁸ Gow (2011), 15

Even though the government was helping to provide financial support, the severe censorship laws still made it difficult for Iranian filmmakers to produce films. Before 1984, the state had not yet “formulated” the allowed and the forbidden regarding Iranian films. However, a form of censorship existed regardless¹⁹ ; this was because the people in the film industry knew that censorship would require the films to stick to “Islamic norms.”²⁰ That being said, “there was no agreement as to where the ‘new cinema’ should be heading”.²¹ The written documents about censorship were at first vague and later became “more detailed about what was allowed rather than what was forbidden.”²²

Between 1984 and 1996, “regulations concerning the production, distribution, and exhibition of films were published and updated annually.”²³ The policies allowed the government to control “every aspect of the film industry, from the training of filmmakers and access to equipment to the oversight of scripts and control over exhibition”.²⁴ Two types of censorship were placed on Iranian films: religious and political. The religious censorship prohibited anything that opposed the rules of Islam. For instance, exclusive close-ups of women and scenes of them applying makeup or wearing tight and colorful clothing were forbidden. Additionally, men were not allowed to be shown wearing ties or shirts with short sleeves unless they represented an evil character in a film. Moreover, western music was prohibited and “intimate lights” were also banned. ²⁵ The political censorship interdicted any “criticism of the government” or the “ideology of the regime”.²⁶ Overall, films would be censored for their

¹⁹ Sadr (2006)

²⁰ Devictor (2015), 20

²¹ Sadr (2006), 169

²² Hojjatoleslâm (1997), 8-21

²³ Devictor (2015), 20

²⁴ Atwood (2016), 3

²⁵ Devictor (2015), 20

²⁶ Dabashi (2008), 14

“ideological confusion, irreligious themes, communistic influence, darkening of reality and treating revisionism.”²⁷

The censorship process were divided into the following stages:²⁸

1. The film must be submitted to the censorship board.
2. Upon initial approval, the film must go “back and forth” between the producer and censorship board so that every detail of the production is scrutinized.
3. An “unofficial control” must be placed on set to make sure the Islamic codes are followed, “at least until 1997.”
4. The finalized film must be shown to commission to get the “censor’s certificate” after approval.

Not only was the censorship very severe, but its duration was also very long, sometimes lasting for years. This fact made it even harder for the filmmakers to work, since a film that was previously approved could potentially be banned with the regulations that were set to change annually.²⁹

Many films were made between 1979 and 1983 that “never saw the light of day” because of the harsh censorships. *Mofsedin (1979)* by Aman Manteghi, for example, is a film about the experiences of a circle of people who favor the Shah as they attempt to leave Iran “by boat.” The film depicts the characters’ struggles on their way and eventually shows their wish to kill each other, leaving only two people alive at the end of the film. *Mofsedin (1979)* was censored and banned for “the misinterpretation of the Islamic resistance; misinformation; the promotion of violence; and the legitimization of corrupt and sinful activities under the guise of humanitarian concerns.” It should be noted that the censors’ decision behind banning the film could also very

²⁷ Sadr (2006), 185

²⁸ Devictor (2015), 20

²⁹ Devictor (2015), 20

likely be linked to the fact that Aman Manteghi, the director of the film, was a renowned “commercial practitioner” connected with the era before the revolution.³⁰

Other films such as *The Ballad of Tara (1979)* and *Death of Yazdgerd (1982)* by Bahram Bayzai were also banned. Both the films involved a reflection on contemporary Iran with “reference to the past” and showed their actresses performing “without scarves or veils”, something that the Islamic state could not accept. Additionally, *Death of Yazdgerd (1982)* was based on a theater piece that told the story of the demise of the precedent King of Persia and “boasted strong performances from a female cast that included Susan Taslimi”, which are other factors that might have riled up the censors.³¹

After the Islamic Revolution occurred, the viewers of film and the professionals working in the film industry “were worried about the future of cinema in Iran.”³² Many people believed that the strict restrictions placed on Iranian films after the revolution would “kill off Iran’s cinema.”³³ The strict censorship rules brought about an uncertainty regarding what was allowed or forbidden to show, which “jeopardized” the creativity of filmmakers in Iran.³⁴ However, “Iranian cinema has survived” and is thought of as “one of the most innovative ... in the world”³⁵. Also, it must be mentioned that Iranian cinema’s success is not in spite of the Islamic Revolution but because of it.³⁶ Even though Iranian cinema has dealt with censorship ever since it was “born”³⁷ and censorship existed prior to the revolution, the “critical acclaim” that Iranian films have gotten after the revolution is incomparable to that of the films produced before it,

³⁰ Sadr (2006), 185

³¹ Sadr (2006), 187

³² Gaffary (1991), 567-572

³³ Mir-Hosseini (2001), 26

³⁴ Gaffary (1991), 567-572

³⁵ Mir-Hosseini (2001), 26

³⁶ Dabashi (2008), 12

³⁷ Gaffary (1989), 225-235

which “were almost never distributed abroad.”³⁸ After the revolution, Iranian filmmakers had to employ enigmatic and metaphoric devices to address ideas that would be censored by the government if addressed directly. Therefore, to “evade censorship”, Iranian filmmakers made abundant use of “enigmatic and allegorical sensibilities” to tell stories in their films.³⁹ As film theorist Azadeh Farahmand puts it: “Tight circumstances often have the ironic blessing of further motivating artists to invent indirect means of expressing their ideas and (...) to seek metaphors and allusions.”⁴⁰

2. A Brief Poetical and Literary Background of Iran

There is absolutely no doubt that the censorship placed on Iranian films after the revolution “sparked creativity”⁴¹ among Iranian filmmakers. However, the Iranian state and its outrageous laws were not the only factors that caused filmmakers to turn to enigmatic devices. A lot of other countries also tolerate freedom of speech violations when it comes to art, yet “not every censored milieu has led to such creativity”⁴² as that of the Iranian filmmakers. Therefore, to understand why Iranian filmmakers turn to metaphorical and allegorical strategies to bypass censorship on a deeper level, one must acquire brief knowledge of Iran’s poetical and literary background.

Persian literature is one of the most ancient in the world, dating back to as early as circa 522 BCE with *the Behistun Inscription* of Darius I, and has “influenced the literary works of many other cultures.” According to historian and literary critic, Homa Katouzian, it was in the time of the Samanid Empire (819-999 CE) that “Persian literature and culture began to flourish”

³⁸ Devictor (2015), 20

³⁹ Sheibani (2011), 14

⁴⁰ Farahmand (2002), 92

⁴¹ Erfani (2012), 3

⁴² Erfani (2012), 3

and “the foundations of classical Persian literature were laid”.⁴³ One of the most infamous works of Persian literature written during this era between 977-1010 CE is the *Shahnameh*, also known as *the Persian Book of Kings* by Abolqasem Ferdowsi. ⁴⁴ *Shahnameh* is known to be “the longest work, written by a single author, in the history of world literature at a length of 50,000 rhymed couplets, 62 stories, and 990 chapters relating some of the most famous stories from Persian myth, legend, and history.”⁴⁵

That being said, it was “the poetic form” that was thought to be the “highest form of expression”, reaching its pinnacle in the 12th to 15th centuries CE. As Ali Asghar Seyed-Gohrab states, “metaphors are at the heart of Persian poetry.”⁴⁶ During the 14th century, allegory and transcendental language became “distinctive features of mystical poetry.”⁴⁷ The poets at the time took great inspiration from “the traditions and symbols of Sufism” and “the power of Divine and human love to give meaning to one’s life.” Some renown poets from the time include Saadi, Omar Khayyam, Hafiz Shirazi, and Rumi.⁴⁸

Sufism is a mystical belief in Islam that aims to guide people to find “the presence of divine love and wisdom in the world”⁴⁹. The practice played a key role in the development of metaphorical language in Persian literature. “One of the Sufi-trends” that emerged in Persia was that of Hamdun al Qassār, who brought forth a type of “devotion” called *malāmatī* that “pursued self-blame as a form of abstinence.” According to Bahman Solati, Professor of Near Eastern Studies at University of California, Berkeley, it was this trend that influenced “Persian Sufism

⁴³ Katouzian (2010), 84

⁴⁴ Mark, Joshua J. "Persian Literature." Ancient History Encyclopedia. Last modified May 14, 2020. https://www.ancient.eu/Persian_Literature/.

⁴⁵ Mark, Joshua J. "Shahnameh." Ancient History Encyclopedia. Last modified May 22, 2020. <https://www.ancient.eu/shahnameh/>.

⁴⁶ Seyed-Gohrab (2012), 4

⁴⁷ Solati (2015), 9

⁴⁸ Mark, Joshua J. "Persian Literature." Ancient History Encyclopedia. Last modified May 14, 2020. https://www.ancient.eu/Persian_Literature/.

⁴⁹ Schimmel (2019)

and its literary creation.” An example of this trend can be seen in the works of Hafiz. Hafiz uses allusions to talk about “sin and erotic pleasure” in his poems which “are read as unvaryingly metaphorical” and could be viewed as “a sumptuous code of symbols.” Therefore, even though Hafiz was not Sufi himself, his works could be viewed as “symbols of the malāmatī trends in Sufism.”⁵⁰

Acknowledging the wide use of metaphors and allegories in the long-standing history of Iranian literature and poetry provides a better understanding of why Iranians are impelled to use the metaphorical language in all their arts and cultural discourses— in this case, in their cinema—to bypass censorship.

3. The Nature of Metaphors

It is crucial to study the nature of metaphors and the characteristics they have before looking at examples of their use for the purpose of circumventing censorship in Iranian cinema. The word *metaphor* has a Greek origin and is made up of the two words *meta* and *pheiren*, the former meaning “over, beyond” and the latter “to carry, transfer”. Therefore, the word metaphor itself means quite literally “to carry a word over and beyond its original meaning by applying it to something else.”⁵¹ As the American Heritage Dictionary defines it, a metaphor is “a figure of speech in which a word or phrase that ordinarily designates one thing is used to designate another, thus making an implicit comparison”⁵². The device is usually employed to present “one idea in terms of another, belonging to a different category, so that either our understanding of the first idea is transformed, or so that from the fusion of the two ideas a new one is created.”⁵³ The power of the metaphor is that just for a moment, one thing transforms into another and can be

⁵⁰ Solati (2015), 9

⁵¹ Grothe (2008), 9

⁵² *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*. "Metaphor." Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2020. Accessed September 30, 2020. <https://www.ahdictionary.com/word/search.html?q=metaphor>.

⁵³ Whittock (1990), 5

seen and understood from another perspective, which “stimulates a torrent of new thoughts and associations, almost as if a mental floodgate has been lifted.”⁵⁴

Metaphors are considered as “one of the most fundamental structures in language and cognition”⁵⁵. As cognitive metaphor theory suggests, “our ordinary conceptual system {...} is fundamentally metaphorical in nature”⁵⁶. Therefore, humans make use of the metaphorical language in many aspects of their lives to make sense of one experience in terms of another with which they are more familiar.⁵⁷ Metaphors can be seen not only in artistic fields, but also in day to day figures of speech such as “your claims are indefensible”, which can be seen as a comparison related to battling. ⁵⁸ They are also widely used in the philosophical realm by renowned philosophers such as Plato and Sartre to “propel the reader’s understanding towards insights that could be gained only by transcending the series of statements presented in the form of a discursive {, metaphoric; k.k} argument.”⁵⁹

Before their use in films, metaphors were extensively used in literature and theater to tell stories. An example of one of the oldest metaphors in literature is seen in the work of Homer, the eminent Greek poet. In his book *Odyssey*, he uses the expression “rosy-fingered dawn” to compare Odysseus’ warmth of personality at the beginning of his journey to a dawn that is rosy-fingered.⁶⁰ William Shakespeare also made great use of metaphors throughout his works, the most widely known being the “All the world’s a stage” metaphor in his play *As You Like It* through which he compares the world to a stage that is filled with players that act out different roles:

⁵⁴ Grothe (2008), 10

⁵⁵ Goatly (2007)

⁵⁶ Lakoff, Johnson (1980), 3-4

⁵⁷ Goatly (2007)

⁵⁸ Lakoff, Johnson (1980), 3-4

⁵⁹ Hausman (1975), 94

⁶⁰ Hausman (1975), 99

**All the world's a stage,
And all the men and women merely players.
They have their exits and entrances,
And one man in his time plays many parts...**

In this particular example, Shakespeare *carries* the initial “metaphor further by referring to exits, entrances, and many parts played in a lifetime.” The moment that Shakespeare decides to compare the world to a stage, all the “attributes” of the stage could be “applied back” to the world to which he is comparing it.⁶¹

Metaphors are considered primarily as devices used in the context of linguistics and literature. Therefore, their ability to exist in films needs to be investigated further. According to German film theorist, Siegfried Kracauer, film does not have the ability to express in terms of metaphors, since it is a realistic medium that creates a replica of the objects in front of the lens.⁶² Additionally, it is claimed that literature is more suitable for the use of metaphors in comparison with film, since it uses language as its means—a “system of abstract notions, which are symbols of objects, feelings, and ideas”—and therefore provides a more suitable ground for the metaphors to blossom. Since the visual form of an object is more direct than its written form, the argument suggests that only literature—the written form—can aptly abstract the object to its fullest capacity.⁶³

Kracauer considered the medium of film to be concrete, literal, and realistic. Since metaphors themselves are devices that do not have literal, concrete, and realistic qualities, Kracauer proposed that the literal medium of film would be incapable of producing abstract devices such as metaphors. However, Rudolf Arnheim, German film theorist and psychologist,

⁶¹ Grothe (2008), 9

⁶² Kracauer (1960), ix

⁶³ Giannetti (1972), 49

questioned the idea proposed by Siegfried Kracauer in his book *Film As Art* by refuting the proposition that films are different from other forms of art such as literature. According to him, the human eye and the camera lens are very different “mode(s) of perception” and since the camera lens cannot capture the world precisely as the human eye perceives it, “the art of film is possible.” Arnheim abandons Kracauer’s idea by suggesting that film, like other forms of art such as literature and painting, has many distortions and does not provide a copy of reality. His idea, therefore, provides a ground for the existence of metaphors in film.⁶⁴

Both John Searle, an American philosopher, and Trevor Whittock, author of *Metaphor and Film*, believe that metaphors are employed to “express things literal utterances cannot.”⁶⁵ Therefore, when the subject one wishes to address is forbidden and at risk of censorship when communicated directly— which is often the case in Iranian cinema—metaphors can serve as powerful and safe tools of expression.

4. Metaphorical Strategies used in Iranian Cinema to Bypass Censorship

After the Islamic revolution, the severe censorship placed on films meant that ordinary topics dealing with “sex, singing and dancing”, along with many other subjects containing political or religious critique of any kind, were forbidden to be shown on camera. Iranian films after the revolution embody these limitations, but at the same time, work to provide “a faithful reflection of social reality” through the use of metaphorical strategies that allow the indirect portrayal of such topics while avoiding censorship.⁶⁶

4.1 Use of Children

⁶⁴ Giannetti (1972), 50

⁶⁵ Whittock (1990), 139

⁶⁶ Sadr (2002), 228

One of the most frequent and well-known metaphorical strategies that Iranian filmmakers use to bypass censorship is the use of children. In most post-revolutionary Iranian films, the child figure metaphorically portrays the Iranian society, while the parental figures represent the Iranian authorities. In the same way, the conflicts experienced by the child metaphorically depict “all the issues characteristic of {Iranian; k.k.} society at large”, while the oppression shown by the parents could be seen as a metaphor for the “established values of {...}repressive and hierarchical relationships” produced by the Iranian state. ⁶⁷

The reason children are used as stand-ins for adults is that their age and innocence allow them to portray themes that adults would be forbidden to portray. Moreover, it is usually non-professional child actors who are utilized in Iranian films; this is because they have “an existence in the world independent of their film appearances” which enables the viewer to connect and relate to them on a deeper level as well as consider them “more real than other characters”. The “reality of the values” the non-professional child actors represent during the film would therefore be taken more seriously by the audience. Unlike professional adult actors, children who are part of the real world allow the film to be “politicized” since they encourage “a mass consciousness in the audience”, pushing them to personalize the message of the film. ⁶⁸

One film in which a child is employed as a metaphorical strategy is *The Key* (1987), a film directed by Ebrahim Forouzesh and written and edited by Abbas Kiarostami. *The Key* (1987) is about a four-year-old boy who is locked in his house, left responsible to take care of his infant brother, as his mother goes shopping. Throughout the film, he is challenged by one disaster after another, leaving him desperate for the extra key to the house that hangs on a place too tall for him to reach.⁶⁹ The audience is stuck at home with the little boy as he faces the conflicts that he is clearly too young to face. Hamid Reza Sadr, an established Iranian film critic, believes that “every event and situation” that the boy comes to face in the film is “considered as

⁶⁷ Sadr (2002), 233

⁶⁸ Sadr (2002), 236-237

⁶⁹ Cheshire (1993), 41

a part of a puzzle which exists in Iranian society.”⁷⁰ The film contains an extended metaphor, comparing the troubles of the four-year-old Amir-Mohammad to “troubles with authority” that Iranian society faces every day. In the film, the troubles are all caused by a “self-absorbed” mother, who acts in the film, as a metaphor for the Iranian power figures. The film uses the hardships that the child goes through to show the “discreet but resonant emblems of the abuse that power invites.”⁷¹

Another notable film that employs the strategy of using children in producing metaphors to bypass censorship is *The Runner (1984)* by the infamous Amir Naderi. Even though the politics in Amir Naderi’s cinema is unforgettable, it cannot be considered as a major part of his cinema⁷²; this is because his political messages are embedded in metaphorical expression. *The Runner (1984)* is one of Naderi’s most well-known films and is considered as “the hallmark(s) and turning point(s) of Iranian filmmaking”⁷³. The film is about a boy called Amiro, an 11-year-old orphan, who is facing the world alone. He comes across many challenges during the course of the film, but remains hopeful despite the harsh circumstances. Amir Naderi uses his main character, Amiro, as a metaphor for the whole Iranian society and reflects “the troubled world of his nation”⁷⁴.

As previously mentioned above, the main extended metaphor in the film compares Amiro to all the people of Iran who have to cope with difficulties caused by the state. To help build and highlight this extended metaphor, Naderi scatters countless other metaphors throughout the film. For instance, the child protagonist Amiro is literally and metaphorically surrounded by fences in the film⁷⁵, which implicatively point to the limitations existent in Iran. Moreover, the city of

⁷⁰ Sadr (2002), 230

⁷¹ Cheshire (1993), 41

⁷² Dabashi (2007), 223

⁷³ Dabashi (2007), 18

⁷⁴ Dabashi (2007), 223

⁷⁵ Gadassik (2011), 478

Abadan in which the film is set is filled with wind and dust that also act as metaphors for turmoil, making the villagers look like “ghostly apparitions” in the midst of the isolated desert.⁷⁶ Also, Amiro is shown throughout the film to have an obsession with airplanes, getting “awestruck” every time he sees them flying high above him in the sky. With the little money he earns, Amiro purchases magazines with airplane photographs and hangs the images on his walls. The film also shows him running after airplanes as they are taking off, “jumping and waving his hands with joy and laughter.” The airplane acts as a metaphor for an escape from hardship and his love for them suggests his desire for “movement, a permanent change, a shift to a better and more peaceful atmosphere.”⁷⁷

Another metaphor that aids in the creation of the main is that of the abandoned ship in which Amiro lives. The ship is “stuck in the mud, far from the sea, abandoned, forgotten, left to ruin, home to no life, the castle of a solitary soul.” Here, the ship is a metaphor for Iran, which “still lacks the most basic principles of a free, democratic, and just society—stuck in mud and going nowhere.” Even though Naderi makes this critique, however, he still shows Amiro as he enjoys his day, resting on the ship while devouring his watermelon peacefully⁷⁸, through which he intends to push viewers to look at even the darkest situations with a “positive outlook.”⁷⁹

As the title of the film suggests, another recurring metaphor in the film is that of running. Running makes up a big part of Amiro’s identity⁸⁰ and he takes it very seriously, considering it far more than “just a hobby”. During the film, he is shown to be running constantly, racing his friends even when its too hot outside to do so. For him, running is not about beating his opponents but himself; this is highlighted especially in one scene of the film (Naderi 1984, 0:40:30 to 0:44:44) when *Amiro* is having a race with his friends behind a moving train. Despite

⁷⁶ Naficy (1995), 556-557

⁷⁷ Tilakan (2019), 33

⁷⁸ Dabashi (2007), 222

⁷⁹ Tilakan (2019), 33

⁸⁰ Gadassik (2011), 480

the fact that another person wins the race, he keeps running. When his friend asks him why he is running despite the fact that the race is over, he says that he wanted to see how much he could run. It is clear that running in the film acts as a metaphor for empowerment. Each time Amiro runs, “he shows great improvement in general outlook” which shows the “power and force of his legs and the importance of movement” despite the obstacles in his way. For instance, in one scene of the film, Amiro’s ice block is stolen from him by two grown adults. He races them and eventually gets his ice block back. Even though the ice had decreased in size due to heat, he is filled with happiness solely because he has managed to defeat the men. In another scene, Amiro sells cold water to a man on a bike, who ends up cycling away before making a payment. Amiro runs after him, catches him, and “demands his payment.” He gets the money he was after, but his happiness also stems from being able to catch the cyclist.⁸¹ Since Amiro metaphorically represents the Iranian society and the act of running represents empowerment, the scenes involving running all point to one metaphorical message for the viewer: to remain positive and hopeful despite the difficult circumstances in Iran posed by the harsh government, which in the film, is represented through antagonists such as the ice stealers and the cyclist.

In one of the last scenes of the film, the children race each other for a piece of ice that is “placed on a barrel”. The race ends with Amiro making his way to the top, eventually grabbing the block of ice in victory. As the ice melts in his hands, he decides to use the water to mend the thirst of the other competitors instead. *The Runner (1984)* was created during the years of war between Iran and Iraq that lasted from 1980 to 1988. Taking this fact into account, Amiro’s struggles throughout the film could metaphorically represent “the collective struggle of the people during the war,” who hoped that they would “eventually overcome” their hardships. Following this trail, the last racing scene uses certain metaphors to make a political critique regarding war. The ice trophy in the scene acts as a metaphor for natural resources in the world and its melting shows its ephemerality. At the same time, Amiro’s victory is metaphorically compared to a countries’ victory at war. Through these subtle metaphors, Naderi wants to show that “war, no matter who wins or loses, brings destruction and devastation to life and property”

⁸¹ Tilakan (2019), 34

and “instead of waging wars, nations should put their resources to better use”, as Amiro does in the film. ⁸²

Overall, by using the child figure to form the main extended metaphor and employing smaller metaphors to aid its creation, Amir Naderi makes political critiques regarding the Iranian state and gives a message to his fellow Iranian people to be more positive and hopeful despite the circumstances of their country. He closes the film on that note by bringing back the airplane metaphor, “reminding them {the audience; k.k.} that with a positive attitude, a wish to excel and the defiant outlook that allows the person to look beyond current limitations, one can eventually overcome” the harshest situations. ⁸³

Because of the rising censorship regulations in the early 1980s, woman were becoming more and more absent in films. It was simply much easier for directors to avoid casting females at this time, since their representation in films could cause many problems with the censors. However, with the “absence” of women on screen came the dominance of children. In many of the films that used children as their main protagonists, the girls would be “placeholders” for women. ⁸⁴ A well-fitting example of a child taking the place of all woman in the Iranian society is in *The White Balloon (1995)* directed by Jafar Panahi and written by Abbas Kiarostami.

Even though his later films dealt with heavy censorship due to his straight-forward and bold approach to making political criticism, Jafar Panahi's *The White Balloon(1995)* successfully avoided the censors by using metaphors to deliver a political message. The film is about a seven-year-old girl called Raziieh who goes on an adventure to retrieve the money she has lost, with which she had planned on buying a goldfish to celebrate the Persian New Year. ⁸⁵ Ayatollah Khomeini highly advised against the celebration of the Persian New Year because he wanted to

⁸² Tilakan (2019), 35-36

⁸³ Tilakan (2019), 36

⁸⁴ Naficy (2012), 114

⁸⁵ Sadr (2002), 232

put more emphasis on the Islamic holidays. The fact that the whole film takes place in the time of the New Year already suggests a slight poke at the authorities.⁸⁶ Also, the fact that the film unfolds in ‘real-time’—meaning that “the film’s duration parallels diegetic time”⁸⁷— makes the audience question how fictional the story could be; in this way, the audience is forced to step into the metaphorical realm that Panahi proceeds to unfold. The audience is introduced to the world of the film through the dull colors of the town in which the film is set. The color of the city alone could act as a metaphor for the “quiet desperation born of financial worry, social isolation, and political uneasiness” that haunts the Iranian society.⁸⁸

In the film, Razieh metaphorically embodies all Iranian woman; this is especially evident in her encounters with the snake charmer, when Razieh is “tempted” to do things that Iranian woman are discouraged to do. The first encounter Razieh has with the snake charmer is when she is walking home with her mother. As they are walking, they happen to pass through an all-male crowd gathered around a snake charmer. Razieh is deeply intrigued by the scene and wants to stay, but her mother hurries her along, reminding her that it is “no safe place for girls.” Despite her mother’s warning, Razieh finds an opportunity when she is alone and “not only observes but gets involved into the tricks of the ‘idlers’.” In her third encounter with the snake charmer, Razieh is warned again, this time by the old woman that is with her, about the dangers of the place. In general, Razieh gets herself into situations which are forbidden by her parents. For instance, despite the fact that her parents specifically forbade her to communicate with strangers, Razieh engages in a conversation with a soldier on the streets and gets told off by her older brother for doing so.⁸⁹ Razieh is the embodiment of all Iranian woman and the limitations they have to face in the society. However, since she is only a little girl, the limitations that are forced upon her in the film could easily be blamed on her young age and not particularly on her gender; because of this, the overall feministic message Panahi wants to get across is protected by a

⁸⁶ Cardullo (1996), 476

⁸⁷ Schenk (2019), 11

⁸⁸ Cardullo (1996), 478

⁸⁹ Schenk (2019), 16-17

metaphorical shield, becoming less visible and threatening from the viewpoint of the censors. In addition, Aida Mohammadkhani, the actress playing Razieh in the film, is more capable of freely showing “physical and verbal contact” towards male characters in the film because of her age, which helps Jafar Panahi get his message across to viewers.⁹⁰

To bolden the main extended metaphor, Panahi uses the adults in *The White Balloon* (1995) as metaphors for the Iranian government, portraying them as people who rarely help out and constantly force limitations and boundaries upon the child. For instance, Razieh’s father is never seen by the audience yet his constant dissatisfaction and grumble is heard off-screen, which produces an “almost ominous presence”⁹¹. The fact that only his voice is heard enhances the dominant nature he portrays in the film.⁹² Additionally, there are signs throughout the film that suggest that Razieh and her brother live in an abusive and violent atmosphere. For example, there is a scene where a bruise is evident on Ali’s face that he does not want to talk further about⁹³, which only shows how intimidated he is by his parental figures.

Razieh must “forge her way through a sly, treacherous world of adults” to get her goldfish.⁹⁴ She comes across many adults during the film from whom she asks for help in getting her money back. Other than one elderly woman who helps her track down the money all the way to the bottom of a sewage system, the other adults in the film seem not to assist her at all.⁹⁵ Razieh and her brother view the adults as “fuzzy, fascinating creatures; they’re frightening strangers one moment, tender angels the next.”⁹⁶ The lack of genuine care presented by the adults in the film could suggest that they also act as metaphors for the Iranian authorities. Jafar Panahi

⁹⁰ Schenk (2019), 17

⁹¹ Cardullo (1996), 477

⁹² Schenk (2019), 14

⁹³ Schenk (2019), 16

⁹⁴ Bear, Panahi (1996), 10

⁹⁵ Cardullo (1996), 477

⁹⁶ Martin (2001)

uses both the parental figures and the adults in the film to metaphorically “comment on {...} dominant social values, hinting at the ‘dark side’ of {...} society.”⁹⁷

The metaphorical value of the goldfish that Razieh is persistent on buying also plays a key role in the formation of the main extended metaphor. For the Persian New Year, it is tradition to set a table full of symbolic objects, one of which is a goldfish.⁹⁸ In an interview with Liza Bear, Jafar Panahi said that the goldfish is a “dynamic symbol for life” in the Persian New Year’s traditions.⁹⁹ During the film, all Razieh wants to do is to buy a bigger, better fish than the ones she already has at her house. She insists on getting the goldfish she saw behind the window of a pet shop in their town.¹⁰⁰ At the end of the film, the goldfish that Razieh successfully purchases is given to her in a fishbowl. Since the goldfish symbolizes the joy for life and Razieh is a metaphor for all Iranian woman, the goldfish in the bowl could be interpreted as a metaphor for the entrapped joy of Iranian woman in the society.¹⁰¹ With the use of a child in *The White Balloon (1995)*, Panahi was able to “give voice to ongoing social and national issues” that Iranian woman face “without officially crossing any restrictions”.¹⁰²

4.2 Mix of Documentary and Fiction

Other than the use of children, another metaphorical strategy used in Iranian films to bypass censorship is the mix of documentary and fiction. The strategy is considered as an “artistic trademark of this national cinema” and Iranian directors often use it as a means to tell controversial stories despite censorship. To be able to address issues that censorship does not allow, directors could fictionalize the reality which they want to address. By mixing fact and

⁹⁷ Schenk (2019), 16

⁹⁸ Cardullo (1996), 476

⁹⁹ Bear, Panahi (1996), 13

¹⁰⁰ Cardullo (1996), 476

¹⁰¹ Cardullo (1996), 478

¹⁰² Schenk (2019), 18

fiction, Iranian filmmakers “create a hybrid cinema that addresses the nation’s social and political issues”¹⁰³

A notable example of a film in which this metaphorical strategy is used is *The Apple* (1998) by Samira Makhmalbaf. The film depicts the brutal, real event of the twelve-year incarceration of two young girls in their house by their over-dominant father. To re-construct the events, Makhmalbaf uses the actual girls involved in the incident and follows them on their journey to becoming free at last. However, the film is far more than just a documentary depicting an intriguing case. The confinement of the two girls is compared to that of all Iranian woman. Since this message is highly feministic and sensitive, Makhmalbaf mixes fact and fiction during the whole film to build a metaphoric state in which the sensitive topic becomes addressable without risk of censorship. It is the fusion of documentary and fiction that allows the story of the girls to give metaphorical insight into “a nation still trying to overcome the constraints of tradition and religion”¹⁰⁴ without being censored.

Another film that blends fact and fiction to create a metaphoric state in which to address political issues is *Close-Up* (1990) by Abbas Kiarostami. *Close-Up* (1990) is a “semidocumentary” about the court case of Sabzian, a man who manages to falsely convince the Ahankhah family that he is Mohsen Makhmalbaf, a prestigious Iranian filmmaker. When Kiarostami hears of his arrest, he asks Sabzian and the real family involved in the case to reenact what had happened between them so that he could document it.¹⁰⁵ In the film, Kiarostami uses the fusion of fiction and documentary not only “in aesthetic terms” but also “as a strategy with which to deal with censorship.”¹⁰⁶

¹⁰³ Landesman (2006), 45

¹⁰⁴ Landesman (2006), 46

¹⁰⁵ Erfani (2012), 8

¹⁰⁶ Sadr (2006), 235

In the opening scene of the film, the boundaries between documentary and fiction are blurred to make a metaphorical commentary on the sensitive topic of authority. The scene recreates a conversation that a taxi driver is having with a reporter and two policemen, who are on their way to arrest Sabzian at the house of the Ahankhah's. Normally, a pure documentary aims to capture truth as fully as possible. However, Kiarostami deliberately makes use of the *shot-reverse-shot* technique to keep a point of view from his viewers at all times, so that they don't get complete access to reality and truth.¹⁰⁷

A point of view is kept from the audience yet again in the following scene, when the car reaches the Ahankhah's. The policemen and the reporter go inside the house and all the audience wants to do is to follow them and see the arrest of Sabzian. Instead of granting the viewer's wish, however, Kiarostami decides to use his power to withhold the full information, instead focusing on the cab driver who remains parked outside and serves no documentary purpose to the story of Sabzian.¹⁰⁸ By blurring the lines between fact and fiction in these scenes, Kiarostami prompts the viewer to think about "why a particular story is being told from a particular perspective." In the opening scenes, Kiarostami shows authority over the viewer by shifting from one story to another when and whenever he wishes to do so. By presenting his authority in this way and making himself very present in the film, he shows the audience that the camera and the director always have the power to present the story they prefer out of the numerous stories from which they could choose. As Rahul Hamid perfectly puts it, "this might appear to be a kind of art cinema navel-gazing, but in the context of post-revolutionary Iran, it is a poke at the idea of official stories and sanctioned texts."¹⁰⁹ Therefore, Abbas Kiarostami blends the documentary and fiction forms to be able to metaphorically compare himself — the authority figure of his own cinema—to the authority figures of Iran and their control over media and news.

¹⁰⁷ Finnegan (2018), 23

¹⁰⁸ Saeed-Vafa (2003), 55

¹⁰⁹ Hamid (2010), 60

Additionally, by fusing fact and fiction in *Close-Up (1990)*, Abbas Kiarostami becomes free to reveal a lot about the politics and society of Iran. The film highlights the truth about topics such as unemployment, showing that, in Iran, “unemployment and menial work are a disgrace for the well-to-do, not merely the poor”.¹¹⁰ Moreover, the importance of cinema and its role in the lives of the Iranian people is also emphasized throughout the film, which is a topic that the Iranian state does not admire.¹¹¹ The film also explores the “possible benefits and benevolent motives of imposture and deceit” in regards to the characters in the film and to cinema itself, which again, is a topic that does not conform to Islamic standards.¹¹² However, since the film stands somewhere between documentary and fiction, sociopolitical themes such as the ones mentioned above become less threatening to the censors and gain the potential to be metaphorically explored.

4.3 Use of Freeze-Frames

Iranian filmmakers often use freeze-frames at the end of their films to establish metaphors that intend to make subtle social or political statements. A freeze-frame is a type of “open image” that has the capability of creating metaphoric “after-images” in the viewers’ thoughts. It also has a “transcendental” quality that allows the viewers to be transformed.¹¹³ The power of freeze-frames to create metaphors comes from their ability to bring about an “impression of { ... } presence” of the contents within the frame, creating an everlasting effect for the viewer.¹¹⁴ This everlasting effect calls upon the viewer to look at the contents of the frame in a different way and to ponder about possible metaphoric meanings which could be at play. However, it should be noted that the freeze-frame is metaphoric only when it is the “deferral of

¹¹⁰ Saeed-Vafa (2003), 67

¹¹¹ Saeed-Vafa (2003), 63

¹¹² Sadr (2006), 235

¹¹³ Chaudhuri, Finn (2003), 38-40

¹¹⁴ Mitry (2000), 31

an otherwise implied narrative closure.”¹¹⁵ Therefore, the metaphor must be implied subtly throughout the film for the ending freeze-frame to catch its essence and make it detectable.

As Shohini Chaudhuri and Howard Finn describe in their account of the open image, “Iranian filmmakers have utilized the open image to circumvent a particularly strict form of censorship and point to the plurality of truth and experience in a political context where a repressive notion of one truth is imposed by the state.”¹¹⁶ An Iranian film in which a metaphorical freeze-frame is used to bypass censorship is *The White Balloon* (1995) by Jafar Panahi, which was also analyzed earlier for its use of a child figure to embody all the women in Iranian society. The main narrative of *The White Balloon* (1995) revolves around Razieh and her journey in finding her lost money. However, the story does not begin or end with the the main storyline about her. In fact, the film begins with an Afghan boy who is standing in the middle of a busy crowd and holding a stick full of colorful balloons that he is selling to people. The Afghan boy is not seen again until the very end of the film, only when he serves the purpose of helping the main protagonist, Razieh, get her money back. Since the Afghan boy is rarely shown and the audience is fully invested in the story of Razieh, he is completely overlooked and forgotten about until later stages; this exact fact adds to the metaphor that Panahi proceeds to set up with his freeze-frame at the end of the film.

The closing sequences of the film show Razieh looking for assistance in dragging her lost money out of a sewer grate. Meanwhile, her older brother, Ali, is sent by the family to look for her. When Ali finally finds Razieh, he tries to help her with the money. It is then that the Afghan boy reappears in the film with his stick of balloons. When Ali sees the boy, he attempts to grab his balloon pole to use it to pull the money out. At first, the Afghan boy thinks that Ali is a thief and starts a fight with him. However, when Razieh tells him the story of their plight, the Afghan boy patiently joins them and tries to solve their problem. Eventually, they end up sticking some chewing gum on one end of the pole so that the money becomes retrievable. Ultimately when

¹¹⁵ Chaudhuri, Finn (2003), 42

¹¹⁶ Chaudhuri, Finn (2003), 57

they succeed, Razieh and Ali both run off to get the goldfish Razieh was after, paying no attention to the Afghan boy who had just helped them. The boy remains in the frame on his own, with only a single white balloon left on his stick. The camera stays on him for a while as people come and go out of the frame temporarily, again paying no attention to his existence. A few minutes later, Razieh and Ali re-enter the scene— this time with their goldfish bowl— and overlook the Afghan boy again before running home. ¹¹⁷

The film ends with a freeze-frame of the boy with his white balloon, which allows the audience to reflect on the metaphor being shown to them. The white balloon in the Afghan boy's hands is a metaphor for himself. ¹¹⁸ Just like the white balloon that is disregarded by all of the buyers and is the only balloon left unsold, the Afghan boy is ignored by almost everyone around him. In the social context that the film was made, there were a lot of Afghan refugees in Iran who had escaped the Soviet-Afghan war. They were highly ignored in the Iranian society and were not treated equally to Iranian citizens. Jafar Panahi makes his social critique through the metaphor of the white balloon, since his direct critique would not be appreciated by the Iranian government who were trying to present Iran in the best way possible using cinema. Metaphorically, the film is about “outsiders.” In the beginning, the outsiders are the children and in the end, Jafar Panahi shifts “our intention to an outsider among outsiders”: the Afghans. ¹¹⁹The freeze-frame at the end of *The White Balloon (1995)* therefore allows the audience to understand the importance of the image and gives them “the necessary time to ‘read’” the white balloon metaphor at play during the whole movie, of which they were unaware despite the title of the film. ¹²⁰

4.4 Use of Rural Locations

¹¹⁷ Cardullo (1996), 478

¹¹⁸ Schenk (2019), 15

¹¹⁹ Rapfogel (2001)

¹²⁰ Chaudhuri, Finn (2003), 56

Another metaphorical strategy for addressing sensitive topics without the risk of censorship is the use of rural locations. Since “Islamic fundamentalists” have much less control over rural locations than the city, films that are created in the former are much more free and “tend to be more metaphorical and indirect in their social or political content.” Additionally, as Rahul Hamid acknowledges, “Iranian filmmakers, who at first moved from the city to the country to more easily explore controversial themes, are today going further afield to present fresh perspectives on Iran.”¹²¹ An example of an Iranian film that is filmed outside of Iran and metaphorically addresses social or political issues without risk of censorship is *Blackboards* (2000) by Samira Makhmalbaf.

Blackboards (2000) takes place on the borders between Iran and Iraq and portrays the Kurdish refugees that have had to flee due to the chemical bombing prompted by the Iraqi government to get rid of them in Halabia, a town in Iraq.¹²² The film shows a group of unemployed Kurdish teachers as they wander around the Iran-Iraq border with blackboards on their backs and look for students in a time of crisis and danger.

The film is filled with metaphors that make subtle sociopolitical observations and criticisms and Makhmalbaf uses the location to expand these metaphors even further. It is therefore crucial to analyze the metaphors throughout the film before looking at the broader metaphor, since they are key to the creation of the latter. The opening scene of the film shows the group of men with blackboards on their backs as they “negotiate their arduous way through the mountain passes.”¹²³ Here, the men are metaphorically compared to “a flock of surreal black birds.”¹²⁴ The metaphor is established using the *montage* technique, in which the frame with the men and their blackboards is immediately juxtaposed with a flock of birds flying in the sky. What makes the birds suitable metaphors for the men is not only their visual similarities but also

¹²¹ Hamid (2006), 48

¹²² Fischer (2004), 293

¹²³ Dabashi (2001), 273

¹²⁴ Fischer (2004), 301

their nature: both the men and the birds are ‘migrating’ aimlessly. The men, with blackboards for wings, look like “birds preparing for flight.” However, just a few moments later, the blackboards are used as shields to cover the men against a potential Iraqi helicopter attack.¹²⁵ The men, who were compared to birds seconds ago, are stuck on the ground despite their efforts to fly, with their blackboard wings keeping them back.

Throughout the film, the blackboards act as metaphors for knowledge. In a documentary made by Makhmalbaf’s brother about the making of *Blackboards* (2000), Samira Makhmalbaf said that even though knowledge usually gives man the ability to fly, in the film, knowledge acts as a burden.¹²⁶ In the middle of a crisis, no one is looking for knowledge; they are looking to survive. Therefore, knowledge is rendered pointless and the teachers have to carry it, literally and metaphorically, on their backs throughout the film. The uselessness of knowledge is shown and highlighted in many scenes. For instance, when the teachers “split up” to find students, the camera follows Saïd and Reeboir who also eventually take different routes. Saïd meets a crowd of old men and a woman as they are making their way back home to Iraq while Reeboir takes “a higher mountain trail” and meets the mules, a group of boys smuggling drugs to Iraq. Since Reeboir is thrilled to find so many “potential students”, he stops them midway using his blackboard as a barrier, resulting in “the gateway to learning becoming an obstacle.”¹²⁷ The children tell him that knowledge is useless and that they have to work to survive. However, after a while, one boy in the crowd of mules, who is also called Reeboir, shows that he is “willing” to learn. Reeboir senior writes Reeboir junior’s name on the blackboard so that he could learn how to read and write it.¹²⁸ In one scene of the film, Reeboir junior stands behind Reeboir senior who has a blackboard attached to his back, and attempts to write his name on the board with a white chalk. At the same time, the teacher is kneeling down in front of a young girl milking a goat and is waiting for some milk. The camera moves back and forth, comparing the white chalk to the

¹²⁵ Combs (2002), 76

¹²⁶ Fischer (2004), 300

¹²⁷ Combs (2002), 76

¹²⁸ Combs (2002), 76

milk, which allows the viewer to grasp the metaphor at hand: The milk here resembles life and the chalk resembles death, which metaphorically points to the fact that “the teacher takes in fresh life while he gives dead knowledge to the boy.” To take this metaphor to a more extreme level, the boy is suddenly killed by an attack the moment he joyfully mentions that he has learned how to write his name. Here, “the teacher is revived by his drink” while “the boy dies the moment he learns to write his name.”¹²⁹

Even though both the teachers— Saïd and Reeboir—constantly try to pass on or force their knowledge onto others using their blackboards, no one shows particular interest to “what’s written on them.” Knowledge is constantly tested in *Blackboards (2000)*; this is metaphorically revealed through the drastic changes the blackboards experience during the film, from the way they “function” to the way they appear.¹³⁰ In the film, the blackboards are used for anything but learning. They are used as stretchers, splints, and even as a religious curtain placed between men and women when they wed.¹³¹ In a way, the blackboards are “learning tools that are put through their own learning process, or re-learning-to-be”; this is “a key to the metaphors” at play in the film.¹³²

As Reeboir is having interactions with the mule children, Saïd meets a crowd of old men and a widowed woman who has a child. After a while, Saïd ends up marrying the woman since he desires a companion and the woman’s father has the dying wish of marrying off her widowed daughter. The family is thus created as a result of “desperation” and is utterly “virtual”. It is “placed at the center of a tale that is no longer just in Kurdistan. It is the visual evidence of humanity at large.”¹³³ In the midst of portraying the hardships of life after war, Samira Makhmalbaf adds a metaphoric, feministic message through Saïd and Halaleh’s relationship. As

¹²⁹ Dabashi (2001), 274

¹³⁰ Combs (2002), 76

¹³¹ Combs (2002), 76

¹³² Combs (2002), 76

¹³³ Dabashi (2001), 273

Halaleh and Saïd are going through with the impromptu wedding ceremony, the blackboard is used as a curtain for religious purposes to divide the couple that have not been formally introduced as husband and wife yet. As they are marrying, each on one side of the board, Halaleh is holding her child who is urinating. Unlike Saïd, who seems to be taking the wedding very seriously, Halaleh seems indifferent; this is because she is used to viewing marriage as a duty. Hamid Dabashi describes Halaleh's viewpoint and the scene as follows:

“She is *ipso facto*, agreeing — is she not?— to yet another man's right to piss into her. She is consenting to this, as her son, the result of someone else's having pissed into her, is pissing in the air. The picture is perfect, brutal in its banality.”¹³⁴

Saïd desperately desires Halaleh and wants to make love to her. Even the group of old men around them are trying to arrange for the couple's privacy and rooting for them to be intimate with one another. However, Halaleh shows indifference yet again. She even calls Saïd *blackboard* at times, which could suggest that in her view, Saïd “is only his profession, the source of sustenance for her and her child.”¹³⁵ She even claims to the fed-up Saïd that her heart is like a train from which men get on and off at different stations. (Makhmalbaf 2000, 1:01:32 to 1:01:48) Halaleh's perspective towards marriage and towards her husband reflect on the standing point of similar woman in marriages in third-world societies.

In his book called *Mute Dreams, Blind Owls, and Dispersed Knowledges: Persian Poesis in the Transnational Circuitry*, Michael M.J. Fischer connects the theme of *Blackboards(2000)* to “larger sociopolitical and historical events.” In his view, *Blackboards (2000)* portrays the post-war struggles of people all “throughout the region”. He considers the film to “subtly criticize political repression and address social ills.”¹³⁶ Makhmalbaf found the story of the wandering

¹³⁴ Dabashi (2001), 273

¹³⁵ Dabashi (2001), 273

¹³⁶ Karimi (2006), 136-137

Kurdish teachers “an appropriate one in which to relate a political tragedy.”¹³⁷ Furthermore, as Hamid Dabashi suggests, *Blackboards (2000)* is “a film against culture and for life.” The group of teachers desperate to find students acts as a metaphor for culture and tradition, while the mules who are drug dealing to survive act as metaphors for life.¹³⁸ The film criticizes the need for traditional knowledge, especially in times of crisis when it adds no value to survival.

Now that the metaphors throughout the film have been established and analyzed, the use of location to expand and broaden these metaphors can be explored. Samira Makhmalbaf’s use of location in *Blackboards (2000)* is very particular. As Carl von Clausewitz notices, war creates “a kind of twilight, which like fog or moonlight often tends to make things seem grotesque”.¹³⁹ Makhmalbaf makes use of a similar foggy-like atmosphere to metaphorically represent the state of mind of those affected by the oppressive war.¹⁴⁰ Additionally, the deserted border of Iran-Iraq is used in a way which transforms it into a “virtual ground”, giving it a “universal” characteristic. Hamid Dabashi beautifully describes the feeling the location paired with the narrative gives:

“We are not in Iran. We are not in Iraq. We are in Kurdistan, a nonstate. We are nowhere. We are everywhere.”¹⁴¹

The universality of the film, which is achieved through the use of location, allows the metaphoric narrative to make “a universal parable”¹⁴² that applies not only to the Kurdish, but also to Iranians and all the people in the world. Overall, since the location of the film is far from the

¹³⁷ Combs (2002), 76

¹³⁸ Dabashi (2001), 272

¹³⁹ Clausewitz (1984), 140

¹⁴⁰ Fischer (2004), 299

¹⁴¹ Dabashi (2001), 272

¹⁴² Dabashi (2001), 272

urban cities of Iran—where the censors have more control—and on first glance, the messages of the film apply only to the Kurds, the censors have no possible reason to be alarmed.

4.5 Use of Film Components

Another metaphorical strategy of which the Iranian filmmakers take advantage to avoid censorship is the particular use of film components such as image, camera movement, and sound. One film in which the use of this metaphorical strategy is especially evident is *Baran (2001)* by Majid Majidi. *Baran (2001)* is a film about Latif, an Azeri-Iranian adolescent boy who works at a construction center that also illegally employs Afghan refugees. One day, an Afghani ‘boy’ called Rahmat begins working there as a substitute for his father who was hurt on site. Latif despises Rahmat until the day he finds out that the boy is actually a young girl called Baran. From that day on, he begins falling in love with her and protecting her at work. He also eventually sells his own identity card to financially help Baran and her family move back to Afghanistan. ¹⁴³ *Baran (2001)* is a very sensual film, which might sound surprising considering the fact that the censors do not approve of such topics. However, since censorship regulations discourage the depiction of overt “male-female” relations, the film approaches the subject in a more metaphorical manner and successfully bypasses censorship.¹⁴⁴

As mentioned previously, Majid Majidi creates his metaphors with the aid of film elements such as image, camera movement, and sound. American neurologist, Richard Cytowic, believes that the “metaphor is experiential and visceral, an irrational transfer of connotations from one thing to another.”¹⁴⁵ Majidi uses the elements of the film to transfer metaphors from the screen onto the viewer. Michelle Langford immaculately phrases Majid Majidi’s use of the filmic form to create a metaphoric state:

¹⁴³ Zargar (2016), 4

¹⁴⁴ Nurcahyo (2007), 104

¹⁴⁵ Cytowic (2003), 206

“Majidi deploys complex cinematic techniques (sound, editing, camera and character placement) and stimulates our sensory organs (through evocative sounds and images) in order to weave the viewer into the very texture of the film. In doing so, he effectively allows the viewer to experience that which cannot be literally represented on screen. Our bodies effectively fill the gap imposed by censorship between the characters’ bodies.”¹⁴⁶

The film opens up with a black frame, which causes the “other senses” of the viewer to be “awakened.” Accompanying the dark, black screen is the sound of what seems “like a hand gently rubbing and slapping against bare flesh”; this image is heightened in the mind of the viewer by “the sound of breathing, which is pushed to the very front of the soundscape.” Moments later, an image appears on the screen that reveals the true origin of the sound: A baker’s hands as he is kneading dough.¹⁴⁷ Thus, a metaphor arises from the particular usage of film components, which compares the dough of bread to human flesh. Later on, Latif is shown taking a few pieces of bread from the bakery, which could suggest his physical desire for woman.

Latif’s longing for women is shown throughout the film, even before he discovered that Baran is actually a girl. In the beginnings of the film, he stops to admire “the sound of a woman giggling suggestively” off-screen. With a *shot-reverse shot*, Majidi shows that the giggles are, in fact, coming from an innocent couple in the park. Again, the shot turns to Latif, who is eating his fresh bread as he smiles to himself. Following the metaphor set up in the beginning of the film, Latif’s act of eating the “fleshy” bread is a metaphor for his “burgeoning desire to connect with another body.” Michelle Langford skillfully explains the effect of sound and image on the creation of the bread metaphor:

“The unusual configuration of sound and image attunes us to the inherently fleshy qualities of raw dough and predisposes the viewer to understand the sensuality expressed by Latif’s absent-minded consumption of it.”¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁶ Langford (2019), 160-161

¹⁴⁷ Langford (2019), 154-155

¹⁴⁸ Langford (2019), 156-157

Moreover, the colors that are used throughout the film—from the “cloudy skies” to the atmosphere of the construction site— tend to be very cold, which metaphorically represents hardships.¹⁴⁹ The cold and wintery atmosphere also helps highlight the visual metaphor of fire in the film, one which is used to suggest the “awakening of Latif’s romantic, even sexual, desire.” The fire alters visually, at times being fairly steady and controlled, and at others causing “violent outbursts”; this visual alteration further suggests Latif’s raging sexual desire firing up.¹⁵⁰

Another visual element used in the film to create a metaphoric state is “mist or shadow”, which tends to visually cover Baran throughout the film and “limit her appearance”. The use of the mist or shadow could work to depict the limited presentation of women in Iranian cinema and also create a metaphoric “distance” between the lovers.¹⁵¹

The film relies not only on “evocative visuals” but also on “natural sounds” to produce metaphors and tell its story¹⁵². For instance, in one scene of the film, Latif is moving in the direction of the camera as he carries a “heavy bag of cement”. Suddenly, a wind comes his way which causes his eyes to hurt, “momentarily” making it hard for him to see. It is the enhanced sound of the wind which makes it resemble “a kind of energy” which attracts Latif to the workplace of Rahmat— who is, in fact, Baran. The sound builds up, slowly mixing and mingling with other sounds, and the frame switches to a shot of the wind pushing a curtain to the side, revealing Baran’s shadow. As the sound keeps increasing, Latif stares at the shadow, “the camera zooming towards him to indicate the sharpening of his vision.” Moments later, the film shows the curtain blowing aside again, this time revealing Baran’s shadow as she is brushing through her hair and humming.¹⁵³ The use of sound, paired with the movement of the camera, cooperates

¹⁴⁹ Purrezaian, Khoshnevis, Hashemi, Esfandiary, Ayatollahi (2016), 713

¹⁵⁰ Langford (2019), 158

¹⁵¹ Nurcahyo (2007), 102

¹⁵² Deb (2020), 40

¹⁵³ Langford (2019), 158-159

in the creation of the metaphor that reflects on Latif's urge to see what lies behind the curtain.¹⁵⁴ The "unusual sounds" could also metaphorically represent the "strange state" in which Latif is situated.¹⁵⁵

It should be mentioned that silence is used as much as sound to create metaphors throughout the film. The love between Latif and Baran is expressed in silence.¹⁵⁶ Throughout the film, Latif and Baran—the lover and beloved—rarely engage in verbal conversation. Rather, their feelings and affections are captured metaphorically with the use of image and sound, allowing their communication to gain "great poignancy."¹⁵⁷

Majid Majidi also frequently uses the repetition of frames to create metaphoric meaning in a sequence. For instance, a shot of Baran feeding the birds is later on repeated, only this time with Latif feeding the birds. This repetition gives the latter scene a heightened metaphoric meaning, showing Latif's love for Baran and his interest in bonding with her.¹⁵⁸

Another metaphor in the film is formed when Latif is helping Baran and her family get ready for their ride back to Afghanistan. As Baran is walking towards the car, the basket she is carrying falls onto the ground, causing the colorful fruits and vegetables inside it to scatter everywhere.¹⁵⁹ This spill could metaphorically suggest the "explosion" of her secret feelings for Latif. Additionally, her basket includes fruits and vegetables that are fueled with sensual undertones, such as "bright red tomatoes, and some dried figs". The metaphor of the fruits is heightened through a slow-motion close-up showing Baran and Latif's hands as they pick up the sexual fruits. Even though the censorship regulations do not allow the physical touching of

¹⁵⁴ Langford (2019), 161

¹⁵⁵ Purrezaian, Khoshnevis, Hashemi, Esfandiary, Ayatollahi (2016), 712

¹⁵⁶ Nurcahyo (2007), 104

¹⁵⁷ Nurcahyo (2007), 95

¹⁵⁸ Purrezaian, Khoshnevis, Hashemi, Esfandiary, Ayatollahi (2016), 713

¹⁵⁹ Nurcahyo (2007), 102

opposite sexes in films, Majid Majidi somehow achieves it by isolating their hands in a tight, closed space using a close-up shot.¹⁶⁰

Bringing the whole film to a close, the last scene of the film is highly metaphorical. When Baran drives away with her family, a close-up of Latif perfectly portrays his expression as he looks towards the ground at Baran's footprint in the mud.¹⁶¹ The footprint is next to a puddle that carries Latif's reflection. Slowly, it begins to rain and in a crescendo manner, the footprint and the puddle fill up with rain, the droplets tenderly washing over Latif's reflection. The entire scene suggests that despite Latif and Baran's physical separation, "lover and beloved become finally entwined in a pool of rainwater."¹⁶² Additionally, even though Latif's love for Baran remained "unfulfilled", he metaphorically makes love to her as he stands beneath the rain—which means *Baran* in Farsi—that hits his skin rapidly.¹⁶³ The shot of the footprint and puddle lasts for a few minutes with the increasing sound of rain, and the film finally fades to black. However the sound of rain remains on the black screen, which suggests Baran's remaining presence and gives the audience the chance to feel Baran and Latif's metaphorical collision even after the film has ended.¹⁶⁴

Conclusion

Through elaborate study and analysis, the paper concludes that metaphorical strategies are used in Iranian cinema as a means to bypass censorship. Metaphors have an ambiguous and figurative nature that gives them the capacity of implication, rendering them as exemplary vehicles for Iranian filmmakers to indirectly transport their sociopolitical critiques. Additionally, the paper suggests that the use of figurative devices such as metaphors is in the nature of Iranian

¹⁶⁰ Langford (2019), 164-165

¹⁶¹ Deb (2020), 40

¹⁶² Langford (2019), 166-167

¹⁶³ Deb (2020), 40

¹⁶⁴ Deb (2020), 40

artists, since it is embedded deeply in their poetical and literary history. Therefore, the motive for employing metaphors in Iranian cinema to bypass censorship stems from the poetical roots of Iranian filmmakers. Moreover, the paper analyzes metaphorical strategies that are most common among post-revolutionary Iranian films: the use of children, the mix of documentary and fiction, the use of freeze-frames, the use of rural locations, and the use of film components. The films that the paper scrutinizes in each subchapter have all successfully circumvented censorship by using an enigmatic language formed through metaphors. However, many to most Iranian films get banned, at least for a few years, despite their use of metaphorical strategies as an effort to avoid the censors. That is to say, even though the battle between the censors and Iranian filmmakers has often resulted in the defeat of the latter, the true victory resides with the Iranian filmmakers who, through their attempts of bypassing censorship, have formed one of the most distinctive, poetic cinemas in the world.

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