

# A Study of Video Narratives in Iranian Children's Cinema

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**Abstract:** As a secular and religious country, Iran has always been subject to strict religious and governmental restrictions on the selection of film themes. Since the 1970s, a group of young Iranian filmmakers have been exploring groundbreaking video narratives, focusing on children and recounting the social realities and customs of the country from their point of view. Since then, child-oriented filmmaking has gradually become a feature and strength of the Iranian film industry. In this paper, we will take *Children of Heaven* directed by Majid Majidi as a case study to analyse the uniqueness of children's film narratives and draw on the successful experience of Iranian children's cinema to provide new perspectives and ideas for the development of children's cinema in China.

**Keywords:** Iranian children's films; video narrative; *Children of Heaven*; Majid Majidi

## 1. Introduction

Children's film is one of the most important subjects in the research of video art, and there is no absolutely clear concept of children's film in the academic circles, but according to the current research on children's film, children's film in a broad sense can be broadly classified as a film that takes children as the main body, shoots for the sake of children, and looks at things from the children's point of view. However, it is worth noting that the audience of some children's films is not limited to children, that is, the expression content of the film does not focus on the educational purpose of children, and this kind of film uses the perspective and emotional experience of children to provide the audience with a unique insight into social issues, forming a special narrative technique that reflects social reality, so as to give the audience some new thoughts and concepts.

<sup>[6]</sup>Iran's socio-cultural background is unique in that due to a series of technological, religious and political constraints, the Iranian film industry was slow to develop in the early 20th century until the 1970s, when the Islamic Revolution was won and Iranian cinema finally entered a period of rapid development under the support and protection of the new government. Although the state's policy towards the film industry was relaxed after the Islamic Revolution, the strict religious constraints led to a drastically limited choice of subject matter for Iranian films. Against this backdrop, a group of filmmakers, led by Abbas Kiarostami and Mohsen Makhmalbaf, turned their cameras to children, gently reflecting on their country's social situation from the children's point of view, transmitting Iranian national culture as well as the director's personal reflections, and effectively circumventing the harsh censorship and religious precepts of the cinema. In 1988, Abbas Kiarostami's *Where Is the Friend's Home?* achieved great acclaim in the international film industry and opened the door for Iranian children's cinema to the international arena. Since then, Iranian children's cinema has been active in the international cinema scene, forming the present spectacle of Iranian children's cinema.

Majid Majidi, known as the 'Iranian Spielberg', is one of the most iconic Iranian directors in the field of children's cinema, and his film *Children of Heaven* is considered a classic of Iranian children's cinema. The film *Children of Heaven* tells the story of a brother who loses his sister's shoes and the brother and sister have to share a pair of shoes to go to school. The director uses simple camera language and introspective emotional expression to portray the national culture and social reality of the Iranian people. The aim of this thesis is to explore the unique value and social significance of children's film narratives through an in-depth analysis of *Children of Heaven*. Through the observation of Iranian children's films, it provides new perspectives and thinking paths for the creation of Chinese children's films.

## 2. Choice of subject matter rooted in reality

### 2.1 Rooted in local life scenes

The diversity and complexity of real life provide rich story materials for film creation, and film, as a cultural product, has the role of reflecting social reality. Iranian director Majid Majidi tends to focus on the real life of native Iranian people in his choice of film subjects. The choice of subject matter gives Majid Majidi's works a strong personal style and national colour, and his works also promote the audience's discussion and understanding of Iranian social issues by showing the problems and contradictions in the real life of Iranian society. [3] André Bazin, one of the most important theorists of the New Wave movement in French cinema, put forward the theory that 'cinema is an asymptote to reality' in his book *What is Cinema?* In his book *What Is the Cinema?*, he put forward the theory that cinema is an asymptote to reality, and his theory of realism stresses that the essence of cinema lies in its direct connection with the real world. According to Bazin, cinema is able to capture and reproduce reality through its special image technology, and this reproduction is not only an external copy of physical reality, but also the inner truth of reality. The choice of realistic themes in *Children of Heaven* is in line with André Bazin's theory of realism. The scenes in *Children of Heaven* are set in Iranian slums, which are themselves a true reflection of the daily lives of the local people. The streets, markets and interiors of the homes in the film are not artfully processed and retain the original appearance of life, reflecting the principle of realism's authenticity. The film's realistic reproduction of the Iranian slums is not only a physical copy of the living environment of the local residents, but also a true record of their way of life and state of living, and this realistic reproduction enables the audience to experience the authenticity of the local life in Iran. The delicate details of daily life of the actors in the film form the basis of reality; the 'fragments of reality' portrayed in the images construct the social value of the film as a 'relic' that preserves the reality.

### 2.2 A warm and bitter upbringing

Tightly integrating the relationship between plot setting and character growth is a key challenge in film creation. In the film *Children of Heaven*, the relationship between plot setting and characterisation is closely linked, and the director has successfully portrayed the character of Ali, the main character, through the presentation of a specific plot, and has perfectly integrated the plot into Ali's warm and bitter personal growth experience. [2] 'Characters are the driving force of the plot', in Robert McKee's *Tales*, he emphasises the close connection between characters and plot, and he believes that the development of the plot should reveal the inner character of the characters, while the characters' decisions and actions are the main driving force for the development of the plot. At the beginning of the film, Ali accidentally loses his sister's shoes, and this plot setting directly triggers a series of subsequent events that bring Ali's character to the fore. 'Plot is the unfolding of character', the development of plot should be driven by the character's decisions and actions, and the character's intrinsic motivation and growth goals should be the main force driving the plot development. In *Children of Heaven*, the plot develops precisely through Ali's decisions and actions to show his characterisation. In order to solve the problem of his sister's shoes, Ali decides to take part in a long-distance running race in the hope of winning the race to get a new pair of shoes. This decision demonstrates Ali's tenacity and perseverance, as well as his love and sense of responsibility for his family. The 'internal change and growth of the character over the course of the story,' or 'character arc,' illustrates the coherence and consistency that should be maintained in a character's character development. At each stage of the plot, the character's reactions and behaviours should be consistent with his or her character and growth trajectory. Each of Ali's decisions in the film is based on his mature and responsible character. From the initial inadvertent loss of his shoes to the later active search for a solution to the problem to the final participation in the competition, each step of Ali's actions demonstrates his inner growth and change. At the same time, children's films should also pay attention to ensure that the actions and growth of the characters in the narrative consist of the interplay between inner motivation and outer conflict, and that the inner desires and needs of the protagonist should match the obstacles and challenges in the plot. In the film, Ali and his sister, after discovering that the blind man had picked up his sister's shoes, faced with the temptation to retrieve the shoes, the two of them maintained the goodness that is characteristic of Iranian ethnicity, and chose to find another way on their own. In addition, the director has implanted the Iranian national spirit and culture in the plot setting and character development experience of the film. The resilience and perseverance of the protagonist in the face of adversity, as well as his deep love and sense of responsibility for his family, are all embodiments of the Iranian culture's emphasis on family and respect for traditional values.

### 3. The simple and minimalist narrative tone

#### 3.1 *A childish narrative perspective*

In video narrative, narrative perspective involves the angle and way of the film's narration, including who is telling the story, how the story is presented, and how the audience interacts with the content of the narration. In children's films, the choice of narrative perspective is crucial to the conveyance of the story, and how to make clever use of narrative perspective to take into account the perception of both children and adult viewers is one of the issues worth pondering by children's film creators.<sup>[1]</sup>In his theory of narratology, Gérard Genette proposed a 'trichotomy of perspectives', which divides narrative perspectives into three basic types: zero perspective (no perspective), internal perspective and external perspective. Zero point of view, also known as omniscient point of view, is an unrestricted narrative point of view; internal point of view means that the narrator starts from the point of view of a certain character within the story, and can only observe what the character thinks and feels. This perspective restricts the scope of knowledge of the audience, keeps the audience at a certain emotional distance from the main character, and at the same time enhances the realism of the story; the external perspective, which means that the narrator observes the story from the outside of the story, can only observe the character's behaviour and outward appearance, and is unable to enter the character's inner world. Children's films usually use a limited third-person point of view that focuses on the main character's perspective. This point of view limits the audience's knowledge and keeps the audience at a certain emotional distance from the main character, while also enhancing the realism of the story. The film *Children of Heaven* makes extensive use of internal focus for its narrative, the film shows what Ali and Zahra feel and think through their eyes, this approach can effectively enhance the audience's empathy for the film's protagonists, and a better sense of making the audience feel the inner world and emotional state of the protagonists. As the film focuses mainly on Ali and Zahra, the audience can only see what they see and understand, and this restricted perspective deepens the realism of the story, reinforcing the exploration of innocence, growth and family values through the children's perspective. The contrast between the simple aspirations of the children and the complex realities of the world is cast as the subtlety of the children's film narrative. It is worth noting that in the narrative perspective of *Children of Heaven*, the narrator (the director and screenwriter) is different from the focus (the children). The narrator chooses to tell the story through the children's perspective, but the narrator is not limited to the children's perceptions, that is to say, the director and the screenwriter want to make the audience think more deeply about the core content of the whole film and the creative intention through the children's perspectives and actions, so that 'children's film' is not only a 'children's film', but also a 'children's film'. 'A children's film is not just a film for children. While telling the story through the perspective of the children's protagonists, film creators should also pay attention to the fact that the plotting and characterisation of the film should not only be in line with the level of understanding of the children's audience, but also have a certain degree of complexity and social significance, so as to take into account the sensibilities of the adult audience.

#### 3.2 *Use of open endings*

<sup>[5]</sup>Open ending has narrative unfinishedness in video narrative, which does not provide a clear ending to the story, but leaves unresolved issues or ambiguous endings for the audience to imagine and interpret. This kind of ending usually triggers the audience's discussion and thinking, increasing the appeal and artistic value of the film. At the end of the film *Children of Heaven*, the brother Ali participates in a long-distance running race, hoping to win third place to get the prize sneakers. But Ali ends up unexpectedly winning first place, missing out on the prize of sneakers that he had been waiting for in his heart. Ali goes home and sits by the sink in despair, and the film ends abruptly when the camera focuses on a pair of women's shoes on the back of his father's bicycle. The use of open endings in children's films is different from that of American Hollywood films, where open endings are used mainly to lead to sequels in the series, but open endings in children's films play a key role in guiding audience participation, reinforcing the film's themes, and balancing artistic and realistic narrative expression. The open ending encourages the audience to participate in the narrative process of the film. As the ending is not clear, the audience needs to interpret and speculate on their own, and this sense of participation can enhance the audience's viewing experience; at the same time, the use of open endings can also strengthen the realism style in children's films; in real life, many stories and problems do not have clear answers or endings, and films with open endings embody the uncertainty and complexity of this reality. *Children of Heaven*, when Ali and his sister are frustrated because they didn't win the sneaker prize, they don't know that their father will bring back new shoes. This kind of narrative plot

with twists and turns, combined with the ending of the story, can effectively balance the narrative expression of artistry and realism in children's films.

### **3.3 Harmonious rhythm of the narrative**

Narrative rhythm plays a crucial role in video expression, which influences the audience's viewing experience and emotional response by controlling the pace and speed of the story. Constructing an excellent narrative rhythm requires a wonderful storyline, subtle audio-visual language and superior editing techniques. The film *Children of Heaven* adopts a simple and clear single-line narrative in its narrative structure, and the director creates a rhythm of tension and relaxation in the elaboration of the story. The film as a whole is led by Ali's loss of his sister's shoes, and the rhythm of tension and relaxation strengthens the narrative tension of the film, which provides a strong support for the twists and turns of the story to attract the audience's attention. The narrative pacing of *Children of Heaven* can be broadly divided into the following sections: 'the slow start - the experience of finding the shoes, either sharply or slowly - the climax of the race - the soothing conclusion of the open-ended ending - the soothing finale of the open-ended ending'. At the beginning of the film, the director shows the living environment of Ali and his sister Zahra through delicate camera and scene descriptions, and this slow and delicate narrative rhythm provides time for the audience to enter the story and understand the background of the characters; as Ali accidentally loses his sister's shoes, the pace of the film gradually speeds up, and the children begin to do everything they can to prevent their parents from knowing that the shoes are missing, and the rhythm of this part is more tense and urgent, reflecting the children's anxiety and urgency. This part of the film has a more intense and rapid pace, reflecting the children's anxiety and sense of urgency, and the rhythm of the narrative ebbs and flows with the children's hopes and disappointments. The race but fails to get the shoes in the episode, the pace slows down again. This slow pace allows the audience to immerse themselves in the complexity and variability of real life, while also creating space for the film's emotional conclusion.

## **4. Author's style and social value**

### **4.1 Hidden authorial attitude and humanistic care**

Hidden authorial attitudes in film refer to the way in which a director or screenwriter communicates their personal views and feelings about a story, character or theme in a subtle or indirect way through the language and techniques of film. This attitude is usually not stated directly, but indirectly conveyed to the audience through narrative, characters, visual and auditory elements, etc. The fact that authorial attitudes in Iranian children's films are generally hidden is the result of a combination of factors: the Iranian culture favours introversion and subtlety, a culture that makes Iranian directors more introspective about the expression of their personal views in their narratives, and the fact that children's films tend to have an educational purpose, aiming to convey positive social values and moral concepts. In order to achieve this, Iranian children's films tend to adopt a more moderate authorial attitude. Iranian children's films not only entertain and educate children, but also provide the audience with a deeper understanding and reflection on Iranian society and culture. Through the language and techniques of cinema, the director or screenwriter conveys their views and emotions in a subtle and indirect way, leading the viewer to deeper thought and reflection. Majid Majidi's work is known for its deep humanistic concern and subtle expression of emotions. His films usually explore social issues, family relationships and human emotions, and his authorial attitude is reflected in his films in the form of sympathy for the underprivileged, respect for traditional values, and an emphasis on common human emotions. Through the story of Ali and Zahra, a brother and sister, the film shows their plight and inner world of life in a poor family. Through delicate narrative expression and emotional portrayal, the director expresses his sympathy and understanding for the underclass, as well as their resilience and hope in the face of adversity. 'Hope' is the central theme of the film. Despite their poverty, the characters in the film maintain an optimistic and hopeful attitude, through which the director conveys the idea of hope and perseverance in the face of adversity. Through the life experiences of Ali and Zahra, the director also hopes to draw the audience's attention and thoughts to the underprivileged, as well as their care for the underprivileged. Director Makid Makidi has implanted a humanistic concern for children, families, life in poverty, and educational issues through a hidden authorial attitude in *Children of Heaven*, while also expressing an appreciation for the resilience of people in these difficult situations to remain hopeful.

#### 4.2 Demonstration of national spirit and national culture

Cinema as a pivotal contemporary art form, plays an important role in transmitting the national spirit and promoting national culture, and is an important vehicle for promoting cultural heritage and development. Cinema is an important window to show the charm of Iranian culture, through which Iranian filmmakers can show the world Iran's history, traditions, customs and modernity, and promote understanding and respect between Iranian and other cultures. [4]Iran's national spirit and national culture are deeply influenced by its long history and cultural traditions. Iran is a country with a rich history in which it has experienced the rise and fall of several dynasties, and these historical changes have left a deep imprint on Iranian culture. Moreover, as a religious country, religious beliefs have also had a profound impact on its national spirit, with the Shia emphasising sacrifice and justice, which occupy an important place in Iran's national consciousness, and the mysticism of Sufi Islam adding a layer of transcendence and introspection to the Iranian national spirit. Iran's national spirit and culture are complex and multifaceted, not only blending ancient traditions and modern developments, but also demonstrating the Iranian people's deep understanding of beauty, knowledge and spiritual pursuits, the diversity and depth of which not only make Iran unique in the world, but also are an important part of its cultural appeal. Iranian children's films often endow their protagonists with goodness, integrity, bravery and other outstanding qualities, depict Iranian social realities as well as social problems from a child's point of view, and incorporate elements of Iran's rich cultural heritage and traditions to show the values emphasised in Iranian culture and religion. Many scenes in the film *Children of Heaven* are a reflection of the Iranian national spirit and culture, for example, when the siblings discover that their shoes are being worn by a poorer girl, they choose not to recover the shoes; and the siblings decide to take turns wearing Ali's worn-out shoes to school, etc. All of these scenes show the resilience, honesty, and goodness in the face of adversity, as well as the sympathy and care for others, which are emphasised in the Iranian national spirit. In the film, the main character wears a pair of worn-out shoes to school. The traditional Iranian dresses worn by the main characters, the distinctive Iranian costumes and architecture, and the daily habits of the Iranian people are all expressions of the director's focus on the Iranian national spirit and culture.

#### 5. Conclusion

Iranian filmmakers have cleverly coped with the harsh censorship by making children's films that hide deeper morals behind their stories and satisfy the tastes of different levels of audiences. Iranian children's films, with their unique artistic style and deep social allegory, have distinguished themselves on the international film scene and have become an important part of global film culture. Iranian director Majid Majidi is particularly good at exploring social realities from a child's point of view in his films and giving the images a poetic narrative style. *Children of Heaven* has won many awards in the international arena, and the narrative method and style of the film are of great significance for the creation of Chinese children's films. Through the analysis of Iranian children's films, this paper explains the success of Iranian children's film narratives, hoping that by learning from the successful experience of Iranian children's films, Chinese children's film creators can create more good works with depth and breadth.

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