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# Allegory and Ambiguity in the Films of Majid Majidi: A Theodicy of Meaning

## **Abstract**

This paper explores the place of traditional metaphysics in Iranian cinema through an analysis of three films by Majid Majidi. Countering evaluations of Majidi's films as tritely patriarchal or heavy-handedly logocentric, this paper considers images and allegories in Majidi's films as responses to the pains of modernity. Majidi's films, specifically, *Children of Heaven*, *Baran*, and *the Color of God*, draw on Sufi and Shii theologies to locate meaning in a world changed by war, modernization, economic disparity, and nationalism. The result is a sense of ambiguity that aims at both realism and transcendence.

## **Author Notes**

Cyrus Ali Zargar is an associate professor of religion at Augustana College in Rock Island, Illinois, and the author of articles in the *Journal of Arabic Literature*, the *Muslim World*, and *Iranian Studies*. His book, *Sufi Aesthetics: Beauty, Love, and the Human Form in the Writings of Ibn 'Arabi and 'Iraqi*, was published in 2011 by the University of South Carolina Press.

The films of Majid Majidi, a contemporary Iranian writer and director, have certain identifiable socially-relevant themes: the lives of children, the struggles of the disabled or the enslaved, the marginalization of ethnic minorities, and the discovery of wonder in places that are dilapidated or poverty-stricken.<sup>1</sup> It is perhaps on account of these themes, commenting on life in contemporary Iran, that his films have achieved critical acclaim in France, the United States, Canada, and elsewhere. Yet Majidi's films—especially *Children of Heaven*, *Baran*, and *the Color of God*—also present a world in which images, such as fish, birds, rain, and clouds, indicate religious allegory. Characters, moreover, receive names that connote sacred narratives, sometimes from Shii Muslim history, and often from Sufi readings of the Qur'an or Persian poetry. These characters, from the margins, tend neither to overcome nor to surrender to adversity, but rather to struggle, thrive, and thus embody a permanent state of human suffering. The difficult circumstances of these characters highlight their virtuous and sometimes even saintly qualities; it is not that Majidi's characters necessarily become *better* through suffering, but rather that their beautiful human qualities become *known*. A theodicy, one distinct in many respects from John Hick's soul-making theodicy, pervades Majidi's films in which God is everywhere, whether the slums of Tehran, or the camps of Afghan refugees. In this sense, the hardships of life in Iran become allegorized as a declaration of the omnipresence of spiritually infused beauty and the human realization of that omnipresence. Suffering becomes a matter of ambiguity; it is permanent and undesirable, yet somehow beautiful because of the human perfections it brings to light. Majidi's presentation of suffering certainly borrows from traditional Shii and Sufi theodicies, as Nacim Pak-Shiraz has discussed

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<sup>1</sup> The transliteration style throughout this paper is a modified version of that used in Encyclopædia Iranica.

(Pak-Shiraz, 2011: 101-110). By highlighting social issues relevant to Iran and the world today, however, Majidi's productions do what film arguably does best: Majidi's films reapply traditional theologies to a world changed by war, modernization, economic disparity, and nationalism. Standing in contrast to the films' settings, in which ambiguity and pain dominate, Majidi's allegorical representations locate meaning in what is ostensibly meaningless.

### **Majidi and his Films**

Majid Majidi is among Iran's best-known contemporary directors, having won a number of international awards and having been the first Iranian filmmaker to be nominated for an Academy Award for his *Children of Heaven* (1997) in 1999, for Best Foreign Language Film. Three of his films—in fact and quite by accident, the three discussed in this paper—have won “Best Film” at the Montreal World Film Festival, one of them (in 2001) a shared award (Majid Majidi, 2001-2; Montreal Film Festival, 2015). Born in 1959, Majidi had his start in cinema as an actor, playing in three films by the celebrated Mohsen Makhmalbāf (Pak-Shiraz, 2011: 94). His debut as a feature-film director was *Baduk* (1992). Majidi has himself recognized the American director John Ford (d. 1973) as having influenced his directorial style, an influence that can be seen in his use of long shots (Erfani, 2012: 24). Like the films of other prominent art-house Iranian directors, such as those of Abbas Kiarostami, Majidi's films also exhibit some features of neorealism that have been (with much dispute) linked to Italian neorealism: These include underprivileged protagonists, ambiguous endings, long shots, subtle social critique, and delimited geographical boundaries (Naficy, 2012: 4:187-8). In the case of Majidi, it might be more fitting to consider his work as having elements of a “poetic conception of neorealism” that Shohini Chaudhuri and Howard Finn have attributed to New Iranian

Cinema, in which the director's point of view merges with that of the character depicted, as would occur—in literary terms—in free indirect speech (Chaudhuri and Finn, 2003: 39). Thematically, Majidi's films deal with the difficult lives of Iran's underprivileged, but the director has also acknowledged the influence of classical Persian poets on his film, specifically the poets Ḥāfez, Sa'di, and Rumi; the Sufi-metaphysical worldviews of those poets underlie his films, often (though not always) subtly, and usually while maintaining a sense of realism (Pak-Shiraz, 2011: 95; Holman, 2006). Qur'anic references also pervade Majidi's films, as Bilal Yorulmaz has discussed (Yorulmaz, 2014).

The film *Children of Heaven*, or, in Persian *Bacha-hā-ye Āsmān* (1997), tells the story of a young boy named 'Ali who loses his sister's shoes, while trying to have them repaired. Wanting to avoid burdening their poverty-stricken father with buying her a new pair, which 'Ali imagines is impossible, 'Ali and his sister Zahrā carefully time their school-day, running back and forth, such that they can share 'Ali's one pair of shoes. When 'Ali sees an opportunity to win a pair of shoes as a prize for third place in a local race, he enters, but does not win the shoes—because he, through a miscalculation, actually comes in first place. The film is rich with allusions to the saintly, sacred family of the Prophet Moḥammad (who include, prominently, his daughter Fāṭema or “Zahrā” and her husband 'Ali, from which these two children derive their names) and their tribulations, as remembered in the Shii mourning ritual of *'azā-dāri*, as depicted in the film.

A second film, *The Color of Paradise*, or, as I prefer to translate it, *The Color of God* (*Rang-e Khodā*, 1999) tells the story of a blind child named Moḥammad Reżā, who attends a special school in Tehran, far from his family's rural village. His father, a widower named Hāshem, must take Moḥammad home for the summer, though he is clearly reluctant to do so. In fact, he wants to be relieved of his son, so that he can more conveniently begin his new life

with a woman from his village whom he plans to marry. The child's love for his grandmother and sisters is of central importance in the film, because it highlights his ability to love deeply and sincerely, despite his feelings that he is not loved. The father tries to have his son trained in carpentry, but after his own mother passes away and, consequently, his fiancée's family calls off the wedding, he is overcome by despair. The film ends with the drowning (or, depending on how one interprets the film, near-drowning) of his son.<sup>2</sup> Religious, and specifically Sufi, imagery pervades the film, especially in its title.

Lastly, the film *Baran* (2000) is the most expressly poetic of the three discussed here, because of its thematic marriage to classical Persian love poetry. This film tells the story of a young laborer named Laṭif who resents the hiring of an Afghan worker named Raḥmat, whose father has been injured at work and for whom Raḥmat serves as a replacement. Laṭif does all he can to make Raḥmat's job at the construction site difficult, until he discovers that Raḥmat is actually a young woman named Bārān, who has been disguising herself as a man. He quickly falls in love with her and becomes willing to sacrifice everything for her wellbeing, even following her to faraway locations inhabited largely by displaced Afghan refugees. The film ends with the departure of Bārān and her family for Afghanistan, after Laṭif has sold his own identity card to give money to her family, as the lover stands alone watching the family leave. Words of love are never exchanged.

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<sup>2</sup> My reading of the film's ending is that Moḥammad does indeed die, despite the glow that appears on his moving hand. The final depiction of that hand, in my view, veers from the realism found throughout most of the film, much as we see in the death of the grandmother, whose last moments are depicted (contrary to the film's usual sense of realism) as a joyful awakening. Parallel also to her death is a specific birdcall that occurs after Moḥammad's drowning. Lastly, the image of a solitary bird flying across the skyscape immediately as the father awakens trying to locate his son seems to indicate the moment of the child's death; the bird is a common symbol for the soul in Persian literature, here Moḥammad's soul. Nevertheless, the ambiguity of that final scene reinforces what will be observed more generally about Majidi's films.

## The Theodicy of Meaning

Nacim Pak-Shiraz's analysis of suffering in the films of Majidi through the lens of the Sufi "science of the heart" is so comprehensive and well-done, that only part of it can be summarized here. My discussion builds upon hers. Pak-Shiraz discusses ways in which the theme of suffering and responses to the problem of suffering inform classical Sufi writings, which, in turn, inform Majidi's films. Rumi, for example, gives the example of chickpeas frying: As they try to hop out of the pan to avoid the burn of the fire, the chef pushes them back down, so that they might absorb flavor (Pak-Shiraz, 2011: 105-6). Without suffering, the soul will not acquire the "flavors" of perfection and virtue. One's response to suffering, and not the suffering itself, qualifies a person as fortunate or unfortunate; while we might perceive a person who suffers as unfortunate, in Sufi readings of Islamic theology, those who distance themselves from God experience true misfortune, and to reject suffering and be ungrateful in the face of it will distance one from God (Pak-Shiraz, 2011: 106). Indeed, fleeing from suffering can bring on more tribulations, according to Rumi and exhibits an unawareness of God's wisdom. Majidi's film *The Willow Tree* (2005, *Bid-e Majnun*), for example, explores how God's wisdom becomes manifest, when a blind man regains his sight, but in the process loses his spiritual insight and moral center, only to achieve greater self-awareness as he loses his sight once again; in other words, his visual impairment had been intertwined with his spiritual perfection, though he had been unaware of it (Pak-Shiraz, 2011: 110). God reveals himself to human beings through their trials. Thus, for example, the protagonist of *Baran* experiences a lifting of the veils of ignorance (allegorized as the lifting of a curtain that reveals the gendered identity of Raḥmat), so that a difficult journey of the self can begin in which he

yields to an inward transubstantiation, overcomes his ego, and even transcends his own identity, as allegorized by the sale of his national identity card (Pak-Shiraz, 2011: 114-6).

Much of this resembles John Hick's "vale of soul-making," a phrase he borrows from the poet John Keats to describe his theodicy. Hick acknowledges that his theory of soul-making is nothing new, for its origins can be found in the writings of the early church father Saint Irenaeus (d. ca. 202). For Irenaeus, human existence is an ongoing process (Hick, 2010: 254). Life, with all of its pain and suffering, allows for the "development of moral personality" (Hick, 2010: 333). Indeed, suffering specifically sets the stage for God to lead humans from *Bios* ("biological life") to *Zoe* ("personal life of eternal worth"), because it allows for responses moral in quality (Hick, 2010: 257). Hick makes an appeal to the "positive value of mystery" in justifying suffering: On the one hand, suffering despite an omnibenevolent deity boggles the mind; on the other hand, it brings out character traits of "sympathy" and "compassionate self-sacrifice" (Hick, 2010: 335-6).

While one might see these themes in Majidi's films, the realism and ambiguity therein changes things: Some characters grow; more often, however, his films are not about the self-discovery of his characters, but rather the audience's discovery of his characters. Ambiguity lies in the twofold highlighting of suffering and meaning. It is not that meaning is there because of or even in spite of suffering, but rather simply that both are there, unapologetically. Moreover, while Hick's soul-making theodicy assumes a Christian worldview, so that the relationship between evil, pain, suffering, and God's will has been "revealed in Jesus Christ" (Hick, 2010: 261), the term "meaning" has specific significance in hylomorphism as conceived by Muslim thinkers, and especially in Sufi and Shii metaphysics. Thus, the word *ma'nā* in the title of Mawlānā Jalāl al-Din Rumi's (d. 672/1273) narrative poem, *Mathnawi-e Ma'nawi*, usually becomes rendered as "spirit," so that it might be translated as the "Spiritual Mathnawi

Poem.” Yet, as Rumi himself describes it, *ma‘nā* (meaning) indicates the inner reality of all things:

What is the peel? Multi-colored words

Like lines drawn on water, not lingering.

Think of this speech as a peel, meaning (*ma‘nā*) as the pith;

This speech as a drawing, meaning as the soul.

(Rumi, 2005-2006: ll. 1:1104-1105, 1:144)<sup>3</sup>

As Rumi has done here, many Sufi thinkers compare all things to words, which have grades of manifestation, such that the lowest or most material form of a word is the ink on a page, which goes back to a voice or a breath, and ultimately to an immaterial meaning. “Meaning” (*ma‘nā*) is opposed to “form” (*ṣurat*) and must often be translated as “spirit” because it is meaning with which all forms are imbued and from which all forms draw life, volition, and beauty.

Interestingly, some have attempted to classify Majidi’s cinematic style as *sinamā-ye ma‘nāgarā*, which can (and should) be translated as “spiritual cinema,” but makes use of the word *ma‘nā* or “meaning.” It does not seem, however, that—in this case—the sense of “meaning” has been retained: Majidi rejected the label because he felt that it would isolate many in his Iranian audience, specifically his secular viewers, which indicates that the term *ma‘nāgarā* is, in some ways, a more publically palatable code for “religious” (Pak-Shiraz, 2011: 94). His rejection of such a category also tells us that Majidi values the ambiguity in

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<sup>3</sup> The character of Morteżā in *The Willow Tree* seems to be in reference to these lines. His insistence on offering walnuts to the main character Yusof captures the metaphor: He encourages Yusof to seek the kernel (the flesh of the walnut, representing meaning), in place of the shell (representing form). See next note.

his films, which are *meaningful* but not necessarily “religious,” focused in many ways on modern secular life. Meaning, in classical Sufi thought, does not need to be brought into things; it is simply there, waiting to be found. So too do Majidi’s films present life, volition, and beauty as omnipresent and subject to the gaze. It is in this sense of “meaning” that Majidi’s films offer not a theological argument concerning human suffering, but rather a rejection of the meaninglessness, anger, or malaise that one might locate in human suffering. The soul is not made; it is put on display, as a soul, a spiritual being suffering the pains of modern life, even if “soul” and “modern” ring of paradox.<sup>4</sup>

Perhaps the best place to begin my own discussion of allegorical theodicy in Majid Majidi’s works is the conclusion of his film, *The Color of God*. Washed up on the seashore, the protagonist, the blind child named Moḥammad, appears to have drowned. His father has followed the son downstream, unable to pull the boy from the tide, and yet there was a point when the father might have at least tried to save him. His hesitation, which lasts forty-four long seconds onscreen, is the culmination of an outlook that the father has revealed sometimes subtly throughout the film, which, immediately before the bridge breaks beneath his son, has come to a crescendo of anger and despair: The father sees his blind son as a curse, as an unfair hindrance to the life of happiness he seeks and has been denied all his life. As he finds his now dead son on the banks of the sea, embracing him, birds pass overhead. A glow

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<sup>4</sup> My observations here apply to the three films I have mentioned. Majidi’s *The Willow Tree* (2005) is much more overtly allegorical and less ambiguous, drawing heavily from Persian literature (especially Rumi) and even more heavily from the Qur’anic narrative of Joseph (or Yusof, which is also the protagonist’s name). Still, however, the film is largely a narrative of a blind person—given sight—who becomes obsessed with form. Form (*surat*) is, in traditional Sufi metaphysics, a receptacle for meaning but should never be confused with meaning or made an end. After he is healed (and he begins his spiritual fall), Yusof stares at beautiful women, one of whom (on the metro) is even married. He gazes upon mannequins or upon a statue being transported in the streets. What Yusof has lost, more than anything else, is the ability to perceive meaning, so dire is his desire and even worship of form.

appears on his son's hand and fingers, which begin to move almost as they did when he would read Braille.

The allegorical references almost could not be clearer. The child's name is Moḥammad, and, like the prophet, he receives revelations of God's beauty despite his blindness, or, rather, because of that blindness, much like his eponym received revelation despite and perhaps in part because of his being unlettered. The messages given to both the prophet and the child emphasize God's immanence within natural phenomena (e.g., Q 67:19). Indeed, I would argue that the film is thematically grounded in Sufi readings of two separate Qur'anic verses. The first is the origin of the film's title, which has been unfortunately lost in its English translation. The title (*Rang-e Khodā*) would quite literally be translated as "The Color of God" and not "The Color of Paradise," and alludes to a phrase used in the Qur'an, "the coloring of God" (*ṣebghat Allāh*, Q 2:138). In Sufi readings of this phrase, the coloring of God refers to a person's propensity to take on God's beautiful attributes, much in the way that the child Mohammad displays ethical perfections—a sort of borrowed godliness—in his interactions with the world around him and thus sees the color of God in the world. The famous Persian poet, Farid al-Din 'Aṭṭār (d. 618/1221), refers to the verse in question, often interpreted as an allusion to the practice of baptism, in his *Moṣibat-Nāma* or "Book of Affliction." Here the phrase serves as praise for Jesus, the "Spirit of God," and also as a reminder that all of God's servants should, like Jesus, discover God's coloring internally:

You bring *God's coloring* (Q 2:138) from within  
 drawn up from the vat of oneness  
 you've let it in—*God's coloring*—to yourself  
 given pigment to the leper and vision's light to the blind.

('Aṭṭār, 2006-7: ll. 5860-1, p. 390)

It is, of course, possible that Majidi's title is an allusion to these very lines, because of the reference both to the verse of God's coloring and to blindness. The lines come from a long didactic poem that presents the Sufi path of Islam, including its rigorous ascetic practices and ethical objectives, as the one way out of the turmoil that besets the soul, a message close to the "theodicy" of Majidi's films. Majidi's films differ, however, from 'Aṭṭār's presentation of suffering insofar as 'Aṭṭār emphasizes human weakness and God's seeming fickleness, as has been discussed by Navid Kermani (Kermani, 2011: 112-113). 'Aṭṭār makes use of irony and even humor to lay bare the ridiculousness of human weakness in the face of God-given turmoil; characters in 'Aṭṭār's narrative poem, especially the unordinary, the saintly, the foolish, and the prophetic, challenge God (Kermani, 2011: 163). In contrast, Majidi's films maintain a somber tone devoid of such ironies, even though his characters do at times challenge God. Majidi presents locales plagued by poverty and pain, but finds in those very places characters able to transcend their circumstances, lofty in character—almost saintly, and able to discover beauty around themselves. In the film *the Color of God*, Majidi's cinematographic style focuses on the natural world, that is, the external world, but one as a place of display for the film's theme of the visionary quality of innocence contrasted with the blindness, loss, and bitterness of ingratitude. The blind, innocent child Moḥammad can see the color of God; his jaded, ungrateful father sees only misery. The landscape and phenomena they observe are often the same, differing only in terms of evaluation, but the film—in its title and celebration of Moḥammad—maintains that the world is indeed beautiful. Interestingly, Majidi himself has commented that he aims for the "color of God" to dye his films, as opposed to using overtly Islamic themes (Yorulmaz, 2014: 383).

The film's second major Qur'anic reference is less of a verse than a reoccurring theme best represented by a particular verse, because of that verse's emphasis on the verbal nature of all created things despite the inability of humans to decipher such speech:

Constantly glorifying him are the seven heavens, earth, and what is in them. There is nothing that does not proclaim his praise, but you do not understand their glorification. Indeed, he is tender, forgiving. (Q 17:44; see also Q 13:13, 21:79, 24:41, 57:1, 59:1, 61:1, et al.).

If everything praises and glorifies God by its very essence, then human evaluations of meaninglessness in the world are indeed failures of perception. In the thought of the 13<sup>th</sup>-century Sufi theorist and "greatest master," Moḥyi al-Din ibn 'Arabi (d. 638/1240), the speech of all things can indeed be heard by some, namely, those who are the "folk of unveiling" (Chittick, 1998, 285). While even most believers live in a veiled state, unable to see or hear the praise of all things, their mere acknowledgement of a speaking, glory-proclaiming world leaves them more aware of reality than those who have no hope or expectation of a supreme deity that they might know and meet, who are heedless of God's signs (Q 10:7), such that God has allowed them to become "deaf, dumb, and blind" to reality (Q 2:18).

This idea is not only prevalent in Islamic texts, it is common to a Neoplatonic view of God, in which God's perfection permeates all of creation and appears as beauty. Thus, the Neoplatonic Christian philosopher, Augustine of Hippo (d. 430), considers, in his *Confessions*, an aesthetic argument for God, one based on the all-pervasive beauty of the divine object of his love:

And what is the object of my love? I asked the earth and it said: “It is not I.” I asked all that is in it; they made the same confession. . . . And I said to all these things in my external environment: “Tell me of my God who you are not, tell me something about him.” And with a great voice they cried out: “He made us.” My question was the attention I gave to them, and their response was their beauty. (Augustine, 2008: 10:6, p. 183).

It is this principle—the idea that sensory objects make proclamations of ultimate meaning—that persists in Majidi’s films. One might have in mind the birdcalls that echo at moments of heightened conflict in *the Color of God*; at times they proclaim the innocence of the boy Moḥammad, and at other times they cast judgment on his father, taking on a shrill and haunting sound. Early in the film, Moḥammad saves a nestling (which he locates using its chirps) from a nearby cat. Moḥammad’s alignment with nature represents his alignment with the created order; thus, it represents his alignment with divine approbation and even divine attributes. Moḥammad expresses wonder at what surrounds him; he appreciates the beauty of the things he cannot see and endeavors to put things back in place. Despite his blindness, Moḥammad discerns beauty in everything. His father’s relationship with nature is one of animosity. He subjugates animals, often riding upon a horse or pulling one along. He exhibits rage by splashing water. While Moḥammad has planted a tree a year before the film takes place, his father is more interested in human construction; his father labors to refinish his house in preparation for his remarriage, and he encourages Moḥammad to learn carpentry. The father is depicted often failing in his attempts to alter the natural order; he falls from his horse; he cuts himself while shaving (that is, trying to refashion his natural facial hair). His gaze into a broken mirror calls upon a motif in Persian poetry and Sufi thought, in which the mirror is the

soul itself (Holman, 2006; Ghazāli, 2010: 32). Moḥammad’s father’s misalignment with nature represents his misalignment with the created order; thus, the father is opposed to God. He rages against a deity who has left him without a father, more recently without a wife, and yet with a blind child: “Why does that God of yours, Who is Great, not help me out of this misery? What should I be grateful to Him for?” (Majidi, 1999; Pak-Shiraz, 2011: 105). His most salient characteristic—ungratefulness for what he has—is a central (and arguably *the* central) vice of the Qur’an, for “ingratitude” is one possible translation for *kofr*, which is usually rendered as “disbelief” (Izutsu, 2002: 119-121).

One might also have in mind the concluding scene of *Children of Heaven*, when a school of goldfish kisses the feet of ‘Ali, the young boy who has run throughout the film—running to share shoes with his sister, running to prevent his father’s embarrassment, and, later, running to win a prize pair of shoes to solve their problem forever. The actions of the fish mirror the implied praise of the created order for a boy whose self-sacrificing nature (one that qualifies him as a “child of the sky,” as the film’s title implies) testifies to a perfection beyond the imperfections of Tehran’s slums. If ‘Ali’s shoes have been worn to the point of near disintegration (and a final shot of those hole-filled shoes precedes the goldfish’s adulation of ‘Ali), the feet within those shoes serve as extensions of an almost godly soul. There is no hint that circumstances will improve materially. In fact, Majidi expressly avoids ending the film at a moment of resolution; we, the audience, know that ‘Ali’s father has just bought his children two new pairs of shoes. Instead, our last encounter with ‘Ali is in a state where he imagines his dilemma might persist forever, because his poverty almost certainly will persist throughout his childhood. Majidi presents simultaneously, however, a recognition on the part of the created order—here the fish in their fountain—that ‘Ali and his sister’s suffering matters and that their loving and noble reactions to that suffering receive praise.

Majidi's films, then, present a world that might properly be called "creation," a creation that yearns to speak. That neither the forest in *the Color of God* nor the fish in *Children of Heaven* can speak indicates not muteness, but a signifying silence, much in the same way that the sky and the earth's failure to weep for the drowned Pharoah and his retinue in the Qur'an is more than silence—it is itself a sort of speech; "the sky did not weep over them," the Qur'an says, "nor the earth," which ascribes to the sky and the earth the ability to weep in its very negation (Q 44:29). Film, in Majidi's interpretation of the medium, would seem to qualify as what Walter Benjamin has called "thing-languages." According to Benjamin, sculpture and painting differ from poetry insofar as they, as "thing-languages," are processes of translation that transform the muteness of matter, but—unlike poetry—still do so by creating things, serving as "nonacoustic languages" (Benjamin, 1996: 73). Yet Majidi's films occupy a strange place in the context of Benjamin's theory of symbol and allegory. Allegory, according to Benjamin, compresses meaning; instead of allowing the image to resist definition, as symbol does, allegory combines history and nature such that images lead to a conclusion, instead of resonating with ambiguity (Ross, 2015: 56-60). The problem here, of course, is that Majidi's images are both allegorical and ambiguous; they are not allegorical in the way that Benjamin considers, because, unlike the medieval everyman or the gods of Olympus, Majidi's images do not represent an underlying system; rather, they represent the one and only underlying system possible in classical Islamic metaphysics, namely, the descent of being itself. Majidi's images are not allegorical in the traditional sense of the word. They are allegorical in the sense that *all* things are allegorical, as creation itself is allegorical, because all things exist to communicate meaning. Majidi's images are not symbols, either, because such images do indicate truth; for Benjamin, as Alison Ross explains, symbol has the power to justify the world "in complete indifference to truth" (Ross, 2015: 53). Ambiguity—endless ambiguity—

characterizes Benjamin's symbol, while allegory derives meaning from the allegorist (Ross, 2015: 59). Ambiguity in Majidi's films arises from the endless suffering—a family's abject poverty or a refugee's desperate sense of displacement—that stands in contrast to a panoply of meaningfulness and beauty. The suffering and even perhaps injustice of a blind child drowned before the eyes of his negligent father could not be more glaring, and yet all signs point to something else; the child dies reading the color of God and has achieved a perfection of virtue that comments on the cruel circumstances of his death. In this sense, Majidi's allegories share an ambiguous or even symbolic quality of contemporary art but maintain a traditional Islamic-metaphysical framework.

### **Modernity in “Islamic” Cinema? Exploring Possibilities**

At stake here is a more general question about Iran, Islam, modernity, and the medium of film: Does classical Islamic metaphysics have a place in contemporary art? Majidi's films serve as a reply in the affirmative, for if not, if the descent of being and virtue to the human plane has no place in cinema, then for many Iranians and for many Muslims modernity must be equated with meaninglessness. Farhang Erfani's discussion of Majidi in *Iranian Cinema and Philosophy: Shooting Truth*, in some ways, considers this very question by rejecting the artistic plausibility of Majidi's approach.

Erfani devotes all or most of two out of six chapters of his book to films by Majid Majidi, indicating that Majidi's film are ripe for philosophical contemplation, even if—in Erfani's case—that contemplation leads Erfani to deem Majidi's films as underpinned by trite images (Erfani, 2012: 37) and driven by an ideological, patriarchal framework (Erfani, 2012: 79). Erfani considers Majidi as a filmmaker contributing to what Adorno has called a

“Culture Industry” (Erfani, 2012: 79). While acknowledging Hamid Dabashi’s claim that censorship has actually contributed to the artistic success of post-revolutionary Iranian cinema (Dabashi, 2007: 308), Erfani considers Majidi’s *Children of Heaven* to be an example of a film in which censorship “brings attention to itself and undermines its own goals” (Erfani, 2012: 89). Majidi, who in Erfani’s estimation uses child protagonists to circumvent censorial restrictions in telling his story, falsely imposes adult perspectives on children, and, more seriously, presents a poor family in Tehran in a narrative context that minimizes real social criticism and reinforces the existing ideological framework (Erfani, 2012: 82 and 79). While Erfani brings some convincing evidence to support the claim that Majidi’s films serve as pacifying buttresses of mass Islamist culture, the claim probably assumes too much. On the one hand, Erfani cites Majidi’s choice of a song at the start of his film *the Color of God*, which uses a poem written by Gholām-‘Ali Ḥaddād-‘Ādel, a member of Iran’s Islamic political elite, and does indeed seem to support his claim (Erfani, 2012: 29). On the other hand, Erfani cites certain themes from the film and from the life of its writer and director, which seem to conflate Islamism, Islam, and even more nebulous and loosely Islamic moral themes: He mentions, for example, that the family in *Children of Heaven* are both poor and religious, tying poverty and religiosity together in a manner that would (presumably) curtail the discontent of Iran’s poor; moreover, they are religious in a particularly Muslim and Shii way; lastly, according to Erfani, Majidi himself has undertaken (and now completed) a biographical film about the Prophet Muhammad as a child (Erfani, 2012: 85). One wonders if the Prophet Muhammad is merely a political symbol.

One wonders, moreover, if Islam, even in the Islamic Republic of Iran, is *merely* an ideology. Certainly, one could imagine the virtuous boy ‘Ali from Majidi’s film praised by the medieval Muslim and Persian-speaking poet Rumi for virtues of self-sacrifice, bravery,

sympathy, and love. In his *Mathnawi*, for example, Rumi tells of a boy who weeps when a Sufi sheikh cannot reimburse him for the sweets the sheikh has put to use in placating his creditors; when a sum of money miraculously appears, including the small amount the sheikh owes the boy, the sheikh reveals that the sincere cries of the boy were needed to provoke God's mercy, because "until the halva-selling child has not yet cried / withheld is the sea of mercy's churning" (Rumi, 2005-2006: ll. 2:445, 2:28). 'Ali's tears feature prominently in *Children of Heaven*, and even—at one point in the film—move his physical education instructor to bend the rules for him. We could imagine the poor boy 'Ali, sharing his shoes with his sister so as not to burden his father, briefly mentioned in 'Aṭṭār's didactic poetry, or Sa'di's, for that matter. If references to various virtue systems, scriptures, poets (premodern and modern), and an array of narratives that we identify as "Islamic" place a film in the category of "majority" culture, then what do we do about those "minority" cultures, in Iran itself, that draw from these elements while simultaneously rejecting the ideology that Erfani considers, while also rejecting the larger "majority" culture that dominates mainstream film and media, namely, multinational capitalism? To purge Iranian cinema from all that carries Islamic significance might indeed purge it from much that is distinctively and culturally Iranian. This is despite the fact that the "Islamic" in much of Iranian cinema (especially the films of Majidi) has already in many ways been secularized, reconfigured as an Iranian humanism. Hamid Naficy has discussed ways in which humanism dominates films such as those of Majidi, despite self-proclaimed mystical or even messianic themes; it is the combination of humanism and realism found in Iranian cinema, Naficy argues, that has led to its worldwide popularity (Naficy, 2012: 213-4). That which is praiseworthy in these films—"kindness, compassion, empathy, and self-sacrifice," as Naficy says—has reframed the peculiar messianism of Shii Islam (in which one hopes for the return of a just and final imam) in the form of a child or hero who embodies secular values shared

more generally by all moderns (Ibid.). Majidi himself acknowledges “two sides” to the thematic core of his film *The Willow Tree*: On one side, Iranian spiritual metaphysics, but on the other side, European philosophical existentialism (Pak-Shiraz, 2011: 108). Moreover, is it not possible that, despite Majidi’s “overt adherence to Islam—albeit a more humane and humanist one” one that “makes him a majority filmmaker,” the scope of his films is wider than any ideological or religious adherence we might attribute to him personally?

I would argue that the scope of Majidi’s films is as wide as the audience itself. Erfani has been able to interpret Majidi’s *Color of God* using Gilles Deleuze’s conception of minor literature (Erfani, 2012: 28). It would seem possible, too, for us to interpret Majidi in a philosophical context that, like that of Spinoza, finds meaning in the world through ontological premises, and even a gradation of being, as well as a corresponding system of virtue. By that, I mean the popularized and poeticized counterparts to the thought of premodern Muslim metaphysicians, such as Ibn ‘Arabi and Mullā Ṣadrā, and, more broadly, that Sufi thought influenced by Islamic Neoplatonism. The relevance of such metaphysics eclipses the ideology of any nation state, even if they share resemblances. For example, the metaphysics of “uncovering meaning,” or rather *unveiling* meaning, indicates a shared cultural value in Iran—namely, concealment (concealment of not merely human beauty, but also family affairs, inner thoughts, true intentions, and esoteric significance)—that appears in Iranian art, society, and culture; Hamid Naficy has discussed ways in which practices of veiling, including modest dress, private/public spaces, high walls, camouflaged language, and furtive glances, have shaped contemporary Iranian cinema (Naficy, 2000: 561-3).<sup>5</sup> As Nacim Pak-Shiraz has

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<sup>5</sup> I thank Rosa Holman for drawing my attention to this point.

shown, moreover, Majid Majidi's films can be interpreted according to classical Sufi theories of *ḥāl* and *maqām*, or inner "states" and "stations" (Pak-Shiraz, 2011: 101-121). For many Iranians, those states and stations correspond to what we would call "virtue ethics," and virtue-based art must—it seems—have some place in modern Iranian cinema. Perhaps there is even a place for virtue-based art in other cinemas, considering Majidi's popularity in America and Europe. To some degree, Erfani acknowledges the possibility that the artist—Majidi—might reach beyond his own ideological framework; as Erfani mentions, "the revolution has sufficiently displaced, if not torn, the narrative threads of Iranian identity, so that even a conformist effort cannot, at times, avoid addressing the collective experience of abandonment and loss" (Erfani, 2012: 33). Certainly, Erfani's observation holds true; Majidi's films, despite their general conformity with the cultural aims of Iran's revolution, nevertheless cannot help but reaffirm a certain sense of public despair. The problem, though, is that Erfani sees the revolutionary ideological framework in terms that do not seem to correspond to the allegorical settings of Majidi's films.

Consider, for example, Erfani's assertion that a contrast exists between the religious ideology that Majidi seems to support and the life-affirming symbolism that enriches his films. Erfani asserts that "it is not the Allah of the Iranian regime that is in the bird's songs or the wind's chime; it is the vitalism of life" (Erfani, 2012: 33). If one removes the modifier "of the Iranian regime" there need not be any contradiction between "Allah" and "the vitalism of life," for—in the religious-philosophical tradition that serves as the allegorical language of Majidi's films—Allah/God is indeed the very principle of life. Thus, for example, returning to the concept that all things speak God's praise, Ebn 'Arabi asserts that all things possess speech because the "mystery of life" permeates "the existent things," all as a result of God's constant attention upon them (Chittick, 1989: 157). As Rosa Holman has argued, by

overemphasizing the role of the state (and, I would add, state ideology) readings of Iranian film tend to overlook the influence not only of Sufism but also of lyricism, particularly Sufi lyrical poetry, on the “poetic realism” of much of Iranian cinema (Holman, 2006). Holman indicates a parallel between the blind child Moḥammad and the Persian poet Shams al-Din Ḥāfez (d. 792/1390) who compares his longing for God to the sound of a lute held at a distance from its player; like the lovelorn poet, Moḥammad reaches out “everywhere for God till the day my hands touch him, and tell Him everything, even all the secrets in my heart” (Holman, 2006). It is not that “God” or “Allah” as a distinct authoritative element is imposed upon the film. Rather, God, nature, and Moḥammad’s evaluation of beauty are virtually indistinguishable.

### **Multiple Narratives: Mythologizing the Mundane**

Majidi’s ability to create allegorical situations in his films that still retain a modern sense of ambiguity derives, in part, from his ability to draw together manifold narrative paradigms, both classical and contemporary. Omid Tofighian’s deft reading of Majidi’s *Baran* discerns multiple classical narrative structures that act as “chameleon elements,” that is, they appear as interwoven facets of the master narrative, depending on the perspective of the viewer (Tofighian, 2013: 104). Laṭif, the protagonist, might alternatively be (1) a lover in rescue of his beloved, or (2) a possessor of intellect in pursuit of absolute wisdom, or (3) a moral agent in an ethically instructive situation, or (4) a soul in search of union with the divine (Ibid.). Each of these narrative paradigms featured prominently in classical Persian literature, as Tofighian mentions, and each has symbolic correspondents in Majidi’s film. Yet, in addition to these classical paradigms, Majidi adds a social element: *Baran*, Tofighian argues, is also a

consideration of discrepancies, both ethnic and financial, since the lover is an Iranian (albeit Azeri-Turkic) national, and the beloved is an Afghan-Hazara refugee (Tofighian, 2013: 105).

Concerning the Neoplatonic narrative, namely, the soul in search of union with the divine, Tofighian does an especially able job of interpreting *Baran* in the context of classical philosophical readings of Qur'anic narratives, especially that of creation: The film begins in darkness, and then in a bakery, with the creation of lumps of dough equally sized; it ends with the powerful image surrounding the beloved's exit, the footprint she has left in the rain-soaked mud, gazed upon adoringly by the forever-abandoned lover. Tofighian sees in these images a shift; the first image—the molding of dough—represents the creation of Adam in the Qur'an, which is indeed described as a craftsman's molding of clay to be baked (Q 55:14); here is the human in potential and in prototype form, lacking variance, lined up in mounds. The second image—the footprint in the mud—represents the creation of an individual human imbued with character; here the footprint is an individual instance of creation, much like the individual human soul; it is left by a female creator, the beloved Bārān (Tofighian, 2013: 108). In the opening bakery scene, the lover Laṭīf is in a crowd, while in the concluding footprint scene Laṭīf stands alone, a contrast that underlines the film's theme of a shift from the non-identity of mass createdness to the unique identity created by love (Tofighian, 2013: 111). Bārān is, as Tofighian says, a “liminal” figure because of her status as an Afghan refugee, and hence able to function as a catalyst for constant change and development in the lover's character; unlike the baker, she creates by deconstructing and recomposing the lover (Tofighian, 2013: 108).

Extending Bārān's allegorical divinity, we might say that Laṭīf's love of Bārān is a religion, if we adopt John Hick's understanding of all religions as sharing the potential to transform a person from a state of self-centeredness to one of "Reality-centeredness" (Hick,

1992: 23). This “religion” is a spiritual or meaningful rendition of an apparently “secular” love, the love of one human for another, a telling commentary on Majidi’s ability to mythologize secular narratives. In the course of the sacrifices he makes trying to save Bārān and her family from poverty, Laṭif becomes *laṭif*, that is, he acquires the character traits implied by his name, which means “kind” and “subtle.” While I see Tofighian’s point that Laṭif acquires individuality, he also loses his identity; indeed, he sells one of his last remaining possessions, his valuable national identity card, in order to give the money to Bārān and her family, since Bārān has been working a grueling job of lifting rocks after the injury of her father. In a sense, he loses that which has made him superior to all others at his place of work; while others are working at the construction site illegally, as non-nationals, Laṭif, as a national, holds himself above them and at one point enjoyed the least taxing job of buying and preparing food supplies for the workers (before Bārān enters the story). The loss of his card, much like the loss of identity found frequently in Persian poetry, from Nezāmi’s *Layli o Majnun* to the depiction of the night visitor rejected for identifying himself in Rumi’s *Mathnawi*, has both mythic and social implications. In terms of myth, Laṭif’s illegal selling of his national identity card is the penultimate stage in the soul’s union with the divine. As Tofighian indicates, Majidi does not end with Laṭif’s sale of his identity card, even though self-annihilation is, in the Persian poetic mystical-allegorical framework, a final stage (Tofighian, 2013: 113). This, in my opinion, reflects Majidi’s ability to maintain the integrity of the film’s thematic genre; it is, in the end, despite its allegorical references, a narrative from the ‘*odhri* tradition of unfulfilled and unconsummated love, a contemporary everyman’s *Layli o Majnun*, and the conclusion must consider the situation of lover and beloved, even if highlighting their permanent separation. In terms of social context, Laṭif’s selling of his card is the renunciation of an arbitrary national identity that perpetuates discrimination and injustice; he

has rejected his card, the manufactured instantiation of a self-other dichotomy that love has allowed him to transcend. As Tofighian argues, the non-realist elements of the film highlight Bārān as an agent of change in Laṭīf that allows him to realize the value of all that is liminal, including women and ethnic minorities.

Majidi's accomplishments in representing allegorically narratives from Sufi cosmology are particularly commendable, especially since he does so in the course of exploring complex themes about social justice. Take, for example, the name of the female beloved, who, like a silent and besought deity, has not a single line in the entire film. When presenting herself as a man, so that she can take her injured father's place at work, she is "Raḥmat," the divine attribute of mercy. When she is revealed as a woman, she becomes "Bārān," meaning "rain." The two words—"mercy" and "rain"—are closely related in the Qur'an; God revives the earth via the effects of his "mercy," his *raḥma*, which can also mean "rain" (Q 30:50) (Ebn 'Abdallāh 1:78-81; see also Pak-Shiraz, 2011: 118). The change is significant: In Sufi cosmology, as laid out by Ebn 'Arabi, the initial principle of creation is male, but it results in a female proponent of creation from which comes all multiplicity (Ebn 'Arabi, 1968, 1:139). In other words, the *principle* of creation becomes *actual* creation. Ebn 'Arabi describes this creative process as the intellect becoming the soul, or the pen writing the many words of existence on the tablet (al-Ḥakim, 1981, 1069-71). In the case of Majidi's film, God's hidden mercy, which becomes manifest as creation, is captured in Bārān's hidden beauty, which becomes manifest as the unveiled apparition of the beloved. In both cases, that is, in the case of God's mercy and in the case of Bārān's beauty, the revelation effects change in the admirer, who moves from non-existence to existence (in the case of God's admirers), and from self-centeredness to beloved-centeredness (in the case of Bārān's admirer). Laṭīf's search for the beloved is a search for himself, in much the same way as Ebn 'Arabi and other Sufi thinkers

of his day encourage discovery of God via a discovery of oneself, an idea found in the hadith attributed to the Prophet Muhammad, “He who knows himself knows his lord” (Chittick, 1989: p. 396n22).

That this shift occurs in the bleakness of a construction site captures the theme of beauty and meaning in the mundane; Bārān’s shimmering black hair first appears in the kitchen of their working quarters, in a place of only men, dust, and an unfinished building. This appearance transforms not only the protagonist, Laṭif, but the film itself, which shifts into a mode of self-discovery and love. Much of the film also takes place in settings of sheer poverty, the dire conditions of Afghan refugees. The liminality of these places certainly highlights Iran’s current social order; it is a story that features those who are often invisible in Iranian popular culture, and one that sheds light on their humanity and inherent worth. These are the underpaid, overworked, and often migrant laborers who build and suffer silently, and yet there is meaning, in the form of love and narrative, in their lives. Yet Majidi grounds the liminality of these spaces in a classical Persian allegorical context, one that evokes its audience’s deepest sense of poetic recognition. By this I mean that Majidi’s choice of an unconstructed building on the outskirts of the city parallels the *kharābāt* in classical Persian poetry. Ḥāfeẓ describes the *kharābāt* or “ruins” as a place of brazen religious transgression in which one can fully surrender to passionate love:

My cloak of asceticism—the water of the ruins (*kharābāt*) has washed it away,

The house of my intellect—the fire of the tavern has burned it down.

(Ḥāfeẓ, 1983-4: #18, p. 52)

The water of the ruins (wine) and the fire of the tavern (passion) have revealed to Ḥāfez something truer than pious worship and sober rationality, namely, ecstatic love. Such can only occur in the ruins, a space of contrariety to convention and norms. In Ḥāfez's poetry and in Majidi's *Baran*, love holds much in common with suffering: It is irrational and even painful, and it requires self-loss, a breach of social conventions, and, ultimately, personal transformation. While, in Persian poetry, such as that of Ḥāfez, the *kharābāt* might have been abandoned and dilapidated buildings in which rakes, drunkards, and gamblers rejected predominant religious cultural mores, mores that poets associated with self-righteousness and ostentatious pietism, here the *kharābāt* present a more contemporary counterculture. This liminal space houses those who have no standing in the dominant Iranian national identity, and as such also represent a rejection of egoism and self-conceit. The allegorical nature of these spaces and the characters within them allows Majidi to construct a narrative that inverts human suffering, discovering in the lives of refugees and paupers the truest of human pursuits, the pursuit of self-knowledge and love of the other.

### Conclusion

Majidi's films, by holding suffering and meaning in juxtaposition, present not only an alternative view of the possibilities in contemporary cinema, but also an alternative view of modern life. The significance of that view exceeds the boundaries of Iranian culture or even, more broadly, the myriad of Muslim-majority cultures. Indeed, Majidi's cinematic worlds present a human situation in which everything *means* something, in which "meaning" prevails over "signs." In using "meaning" and "signs" I conclude this essay by referring to Hamid Dabashi's discussion in his compelling overview of contemporary Iranian cinema, *Close*

*Up: Iranian Cinema, Past, Present and Future.* If Hamid Dabashi is correct, that is, if the medium of film in contemporary Iran presents the “visual possibility of seeing the historical person (as opposed to the eternal Qur’anic man) on the screen,” and if this is to be desired, then, certainly, Majidi’s films fail, for they do not offer the artistic possibility of replacing the eternal with the historical (Dabashi, 2001: 15). Majidi’s particular skill lies in the combining of the historical and eternal human, and the characters in his films represent an immanent transcendence. They live and suffer in a world all-too-real, and yet they come from the sky; they are grounded in the poverties of Iran’s liminal spaces, and yet they tower above their situations ethically and in their allegorical significance.

In Majidi’s films, the “universalizing metaphysics” that Dabashi sees as a “violent disease” of Iranian art serves the express purpose of translating the pains of modernization into a meaningful and even sacred narrative (Dabashi, 2001: 255). The Iranian director Abbas Kiarostami, at the height of his creative powers according to Dabashi, was able to allow “the *sign* simply to *signate*, palpitate with its semiotic sensuality, without ever collapsing into habitual modes of *signification*” (Dabashi, 2001: 252; emphases are Dabashi’s own). In his consideration of “sign” and “signate,” Dabashi applies terms from Jacques Derrida’s language of deconstruction, especially from his essay “Violence and Metaphysics,” to Islam’s intellectual history (Derrida, 1978). Offering an alternative to an Islamic metaphysics that is logocentric, he advocates art that aims not at the “name,” but rather at the “sign” (Dabashi, 2000: 166-7). By “name,” Dabashi means a “hermeneutic center” (identified in Islam with God’s name or names) that serves as an axis for a framework that diverts from experiencing the present and the sensory (Dabashi, 2000: 128 and 137). By “sign,” he means that which is perceived by the senses, intelligible, and yet not necessarily bound by fixed systems of representation. One does not find signs signating in Majidi’s films unadulterated by

signification; and yet one does not find signification in an arbitrary sense, either. What prevails is meaning, a realization of something beyond the apparent. One might compare this phenomenon, as I have alluded to in this essay, to the concept of “names”—not as Dabashi has re-envisioned the term, but from within the classical Islamic systems subject to Dabashi’s critique. Names, in the thought of Ebn ‘Arabi and Islamic metaphysical thought more broadly (and, in a somewhat similar way, in the thought of Walter Benjamin), are the divine sources for human words. They are absolute meaning qualified by variation. Because all things are words derived from names, Moḥammad can “read” the signs of God around him using Braille; he indeed names the things he hears and senses using his fingers. For this reason as well, reading and writing feature prominently in Majidi’s films, and such logocentric images are almost always juxtaposed with signs of life—birds, trees, water, and fish. In this way, Majidi reminds us that creation serves as traces of divine acts: God’s names have become words, and those words are marks of beauty, traces left on creation. Consider, in illustration of this, how Bārān’s shoe has left a footprint, so that her will becomes an action, and her action becomes a lingering form arousing Laṭif’s enamored contemplation. This declaration of meaning underpins Majidi’s films, so that the opposition in those films is not between authority and plurality, nor between (in Dabashi’s words) Signifier and sign. Rather, the opposition is between meaningfulness and meaninglessness, between transcendence and despair. His celebration of meaning is not a mere advocacy of authority, but rather a celebration of a more traditional view of human significance in modern terms. It provides a response, when modernity seems to offer humanity little more than empty promises.

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