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## The Gaze and a Sufi Ethics of Vision in Majidi's *The Willow Tree*: Form, Meaning, and the Real

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## The Gaze and a Sufi Ethics of Vision in Majidi's *The Willow Tree*: Form, Meaning, and the Real

### Abstract

In his 2005 film *The Willow Tree* (*Bīd-i Majnūn*), Majid Majidi offers a complex moral commentary on the faculty of sight. To do so, the filmmaker draws from Sufi theories of gazing, in which desire must be for ultimate meaning (*ma'nā*), as conveyed through the vehicle of perceivable form (*ṣūra*), a distinction with both metaphysical and ethical implications. Majidi presents sight, when devoid of contemplation, as a sort of voyeurism, especially in contrast to the privacy and immediacy of speech and especially within the context of the modern city. Moreover, his use of a blind protagonist whose sight is suddenly restored makes Jacques Lacan's (d. 1981) psychoanalysis an especially useful tool for understanding the implications of Majidi's film: In Majidi, much as in Lacan, the gaze undoes barriers and a sense of self-mastery, arousing the protagonist's obsession with the void and an insatiable desire. Through references to Sufi ethical writings and a protagonist morally defeated by the image-centric media of contemporary urban Iran, *The Willow Tree* explores problems of representation and commodity fetishism. The resolution is a response to what might be called "moral voyeurism" that highlights and laments the artificiality of modernity's objects of desire.

### Keywords

Majidi, Iranian Cinema, Lacan, Sufism, Feminist film theory, Islamic ethics

### Author Notes

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## Introduction

This paper considers Sufi theories of vision, especially Sufism's metaphysical and normative distinction between form and meaning, to offer a reading of the gaze, using Iranian director Majīd Majīdī's 2005 film *Bīd-i Majnūn*, or *The Willow Tree*. While the film presents vision from the perspective of Sufi moral psychology, drawing on Sufi theories of perception (or "witnessing" divine beauty, *shuhūd*), this presentation becomes further informed by Jacques Lacan's (d. 1981) psychoanalytical theory of the gaze. Indeed, the film seems to answer to both models. Sufi psychology—as will be discussed in this paper—appears explicitly and throughout the film. Specifically, observations about the soul made by the Sufi ethicist and poet Mawlānā Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī (d. 1273) frame *The Willow Tree*. Rūmī's historical and literary presence abides throughout the film, in a number of ways, including in the fact that the protagonist is a professor of Persian Sufi literature specializing in the poetry of Rūmī. Lacanian psychoanalysis provides at the very least an incredibly useful means by which to understand the film's protagonist's arc, his conflicted relationship with sight, and the implications his moral downfall have ethically. Above simply its utility, Lacanian psychoanalysis seems to be referenced in a few of the film's key scenes, not expressly, but by way of an uncanny resemblance to metaphors in Lacan's writings and lectures. By highlighting image-centric media foregrounded in contemporary experience, Majīdī (Majidi) locates a classical Sufi-Islamic ethics of gazing in urban Iranian life. More specifically, Majidi's depiction of voyeurism—contrasted with the privacy and immediacy of speech—comments on the artificiality of modernity's objects of desire. On one hand, the film's ethical commentary falls within the Persian literary and Sufi traditions, evoking a rich and longstanding debate about gazing within Islamic ethical texts and Sufi treatises. On the other hand, Majidi's concern with modern,

urban settings yields a commentary on the embodied experience of modernity, an ethics of vision within the trappings of the city.

### **The Narrative of *The Willow Tree*: Descent into a World of Forms**

The very narrative of *The Willow Tree* brings sight and its limits front and center: It is the story of a blind man who, through a miracle of science, regains his sight, only to lose it again at the film's conclusion. Yūsuf, a professor in Tehran, was first made blind by an incident with fireworks when he was eight years old. At the start of the film, he lives with his attentive wife Ru'yā and their daughter Maryam in the north of Tehran, near the mountains. Ru'yā cares for him dotingly, typing his articles for him, managing almost every detail of his life, tending to their daughter, and generally showing an altruistic sense of concern for him. She volunteers at a school for the blind and has a range of emotions that might be called saintly, for she never shows anger, only disappointment, when it comes to Yūsuf's later turning away from her.

The film begins with only the sound of Yūsuf's voice humbly addressing God. He has learned of a tumor in his eye that might be malignant, which causes him to fear losing his life. In total darkness, the sound of his intimacy with God surrounds us, a privacy and immediacy that represents Yūsuf's degree of *ma'rifat*, that is, his "cognizance" of the Real (that is, God, called "the Real" often in Sufi literature). It is followed by a visual metaphor: Two pieces of wood racing downstream. The one representing him becomes trapped midway through, portending the events that will unfold in which he—in the middle of his life—will suffer from a regression that disturbs his intimacy with God and disorients him. That the film begins only with words, (words spoken to God) followed by an image of failure, foretells Yūsuf's moral failing. It captures, moreover, the theme of the film that it is in meaning (or language) and not form (or images) that one finds solace

and contentment. As the scene shifts from blackness and the sound of Yūsuf's voice to a scene of rushing water, Majidi is careful to increase the sound of the water, thereby giving us a sense of both the visual and aural dimensions of the scene, that is, both the scene from the perspective of the omniscient cinematic viewer and the scene as it is for the visually-impaired Yūsuf. Thereby, he presents us with a problem—the gap between Yūsuf's experience and ours—that will be resolved temporarily in the film.

The disorientation that Yūsuf experiences begins on his return home to Tehran from Paris, where treatment for the tumor in his eye has led to a discovery that his retinas have remained sensitive to light. A corneal transplant restores his sight. Now back in Tehran, walking down a hallway and into the airport's greeting area, Yūsuf sees a large crowd. Family, friends, strangers, as well as blind individuals, give Yūsuf the sort of welcome usually reserved for returning sports champions. The decisive problem at this reception is that Yūsuf cannot identify his wife in the crowd. Majidi here uses a succession of close-ups, from the perspective of Yūsuf, to convey his reasoning process, as his eyes move from face to face. As he had previously, when blind, referred to her as an "angel," because of her virtuous traits, it only makes sense, then, once granted sight, that Yūsuf's eyes seek out a woman who is angelic in form. He has not yet discovered that, in this visible world outside of his mind, form and meaning do not correspond: His angelic wife, whom he cannot recognize, appears to be a random, plain-looking woman. In this climactic scene, his eyes land instead on Parī, the young sister to his uncle's wife. Her name means "fairy," or a female benevolent counterpart to the demon. It is a word that derives from a more ancient Iranian term for a category of demonic figures akin to the "sorceress, witch, or enchantress."<sup>1</sup> In Rūmī's poetry—always center-stage in *The Willow Tree*—the *parī* is often a bewitching, coy beauty, never far from being the female counterpart to the demon or *dīw*. The *parī* has an especially relevant role in the

poetry of Farīd al-Dīn ‘Aṭṭār, a major Sufi Persian poet, Rūmī’s main source of influence poetically, and a source of allusion in Majidi’s *Color of Paradise*.<sup>2</sup> In ‘Aṭṭār’s long narrative, the *Ilāhī-nāma*, a prince becomes enamored with marrying the daughter of the king of the *parīs*. She represents the pinnacle of natural beauty, and the prince’s yearning for her occasions an extended warning not to become overpowered by lust. Likewise, for Majidi, Parī seems to represent the allurements of form, especially female form, over meaning. We would say that Yūsuf prefers her physical beauty to the moral beauty of his wife, but in the terms used by Rūmī and other Sufi metaphysicians, Yūsuf’s preference is for form over meaning.

Yūsuf’s preference of form over meaning becomes exceedingly clear in a scene where Ru’yā discovers her husband’s clandestine desire for Parī. Yūsuf obsesses over not just Parī, but, at one point in the film, over a mere picture of her, a two-dimensional object. That is, his attention is not just on her form, but a *depiction* of her form. This very picture appears intermittently in the film, each time shaming Yūsuf for his desires, until, in one of the film’s final scenes, Yūsuf sets fire to all the documents and books in his library, and this picture appears charred, sinking to the bottom of his pool. Even his volume of Rūmī’s master narrative poem, *The Spiritual Couplets (Mathnawī-i Ma’ nawī)*, cannot escape his wrath. Having regained his sight, his dissatisfaction has gone from mere ennui to a rejection of everything from his former life, including his post at the university and even, in a momentary tantrum, his beloved mother, who ends up heartbroken and in the hospital. His wife has, after all, left him: While Ru’yā’s shock might be common to any spouse who has experienced infidelity, it is also a commentary on infidelity. That is, Yūsuf’s lack of gratitude, his lack of loyalty, and his failure to love result from a preference of form over meaning. Eventually, Yūsuf, now all alone, loses his sight again and wanders Tehran in anger. The film ends with his repentance.

Significantly, the last object that Yūsuf sees before his blindness returns is a letter from a wise friend, along with a picture of Yūsuf next to a willow tree when he was still blind, an image from which the film draws its name. The letter from his friend, Murtaḍā, and his subsequent loss of sight, begins a return to meaning for Yūsuf, which he lost the ability to perceive during his narcissistic crisis and his yearning for (and even worship of) form. Murtaḍā, the friend who has written letter, is a mysterious figure who spent time with Yūsuf while both were in hospital in France. He is the voice of wisdom and the spiritual guide, akin to Rūmī's legendary friend Shams-i Tabrīzī (d. ca. 1247). Throughout the film, Murtaḍā repeatedly offers walnuts to Yūsuf. His insistence on Yūsuf's eating walnuts captures the metaphor of spiritually informed perception, the film's pivotal metaphor: Yūsuf must seek the kernel (the flesh of the walnut, representing meaning), in place of the shell (representing form). The walnut has a shell that must be cracked to get to what matters, its flesh. Rūmī himself compares the form of words to "a peel," and the meaning of those words to "the pith," or, using an alternate metaphor, form as "a drawing" that lacks life, while meaning is "the soul."<sup>3</sup> This scene seems to imply that Murtaḍā has preternaturally willed Yūsuf's return to a state of blindness which begins his redemption. From the perspective of disability studies, Murtaḍā's antitherapeutic act results in a twofold message about Yūsuf's blindness. On one hand, it presents blindness as the best and most suitable state for our protagonist. To imply that those who can see, should see, and those who cannot, should not, seems to me to be an ableist apologetics. On the other hand, as Emily Jane O'Dell has observed, the film, along with other Iranian films with themes of disability, offers "a protected space" for "existential, theological, and spiritual questions" about human suffering and disability.<sup>4</sup> O'Dell's observation might be extended by saying that the problem of blindness is secondary to the film. Its use of a

blind protagonist is mainly a vehicle for contemplating an ethics of gazing informed by Sufi moral psychology.

### **Majid Majidi's "Spiritual Cinema" and *The Willow Tree***

What has separated Majidi from other major Iranian filmmakers is his use of religious allegory, a thematic difference that affects the visual and stylistic features of his films as well. Like Muḥsin Makhmalbāf (Mohsen Makhmalbaf), in whose film *Boycott* (1985) Majidi began his cinematic career as an actor, and like 'Abbās Kiārustamī (Abbas Kiarostami), Majidi usually employs a style of filmmaking that makes use of a poetic sensibility, a slow pace, and long takes.<sup>5</sup> While Kiarostami's long shots have rightly been described as assuming a "secular nature" and a lack of transcendent significance, Majidi's long shots often indicate nature's silent ability to attest to God's presence and beauty.<sup>6</sup> This religiously allegorical dimension of Majidi's filmmaking, classifying his work as "spiritual cinema" in Iran (*sīnamā-yi ma'nāgarā*), has meant that his productions not only remain in distinction from other well-known and mostly secular Iranian directors, but also have met with the distaste of certain critics of Iranian cinema.<sup>7</sup> Despite his interest in the philosophical dimensions of Iranian cinema, including Majid Majidi's films, Farhang Erfani sees Majidi's "sentimentality" as an artistic apologetics for the ideology of Islamic governance, an "ideologically appeasing and reassuring" production of a state-driven religious patriarchy.<sup>8</sup> More conclusive is Hamid Dabashi's dismissal of Majidi's filmmaking—particularly the films *Children of Heaven* (1997) and *The Color of Paradise* (1999)—as "a mediocre imitation" of a high Iranian cinematic style.<sup>9</sup> Dabashi's statement results from his disfavor for therapeutic cinema, which is to say, film that presents a meaningful (and in this case religious and allegorical) response to the modern human condition, as opposed to film stripped of "any trace of verballity"



that is “post-ideological.”<sup>10</sup> My response to such criticisms has been that, in fact, Majidi’s films go beyond Dabashi’s poststructuralist expectations to present a theodicy of modern life in Iran, a theodicy that no particular political ideology can claim, despite Erfani’s refusal or inability to distinguish between Islamic metaphysics and Islamic governance.<sup>11</sup> As will be seen here, beyond theodicy, Majidi’s *The Willow Tree* teaches the modern subject how to see meaningfully, that is, how to perceive a secularized world in a spiritually meaningful way. When we consider the manner in which, as Talal Asad has argued, changes in language to suit the needs of modernity have altered “not only the way of life [for modern Christians] but also the body and its senses,” Majidi’s interpretation of the senses as measured by their ability to perceive meaning seems to offer a language for a modern, Muslim, Iranian mode of being.<sup>12</sup>

Aside from his two latest productions, Majid Majidi’s films—again, like those of Makhmalbaf and Kiarostami—focus on life in Iran for those whom mainstream urban Iranian life usually ignores, that is, children, the enslaved, ethnic minorities, and refugees. *The Willow Tree*, with its blind protagonist, is no exception to such spotlighting of the underprivileged. Since *The Willow Tree* is Majidi’s second film with a blind protagonist, one can point to a symbolic correspondence between blindness itself and spiritual vision. Majidi’s *The Color of Paradise* depicted a young boy, Muḥammad, who reads God’s presence in all things, despite his blindness. His sense of hearing, along with his sense of touch and belief in a metaphysical universality to braille, allows him to see what others cannot. This “cannot” is especially true for Muḥammad’s father, whose ingratitude for life’s beauties and spite toward his son leads him to become a tragic, fallen figure. Such spiritual insight becomes lost and regained in *The Willow Tree*. It is lost when sight is gained and our blind protagonist becomes neglectful of God. It then becomes regained when his sight is once again lost. One significant difference between *The Willow Tree* and *The*

*Color of Paradise* is that *The Willow Tree*'s blind protagonist is an adult, which lends itself to not only a somewhat more profound verbal reflection upon his state, but also the visual temptations of sexual attraction, crucial to the film's themes. In accordance with Iran's "Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance" (*Wizārat-i Farhang wa Irshād-i Islāmī*, or "*Irshād*" for short), such sexual attraction is usually intimated in the film, represented by Yūsuf's long glances and interest in the faces of young women.

### **The Philosophical Context of Sufi Theories of Gazing**

The gaze, in Majidi's film, leaves the viewer unfulfilled, such that desire engenders desire. In Sufi gazing practices, such desire must be spiritual, contemplative, and one might say "Platonic" in nature, even if it is conveyed through the vehicle of human beauty. In Lacanian theory, the gaze undoes barriers and a sense of self-mastery, for underlying it is the threat of an encounter with the real. Indeed, *The Willow Tree* presents sight itself, when devoid of contemplation, as a form of voyeurism. Sight allows for distance, and distance allows for a freedom from culpability. Within the field of that freedom, the subject's selfishness reigns, leading to an outlook that might be called moral voyeurism, as the subject becomes increasingly isolated, and the gaze cannot be satiated. The protagonist of *The Willow Tree* comes to realize that sight, while a medium for beauty, can also be a vehicle of ingratitude, an ingratitude that tears apart his life. It is this theme of sight as gratitude that is most relevant to Sufi theories of beholding divine beauty, not only because of the salience of gratitude as a virtue in Sufi moral psychology or in the Qur'an.<sup>13</sup> Through gratitude, ultimately, the protagonist realizes that perception must acknowledge the metaphysical superiority of "meaning" over "form," terms considered below and described in detail by Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī.

The terms “form” (*ṣūra*) and “meaning” (*maʿnā*) have their roots in the psychology of Abū ʿAlī Ḥusayn ibn Sinā (d. 1037), known in the Latin West as “Avicenna,” who forged his model of the faculties by refining Aristotle’s (d. 322 BCE). For Aristotle, imagination, or *phantasia*, differs from perception, as well as from the mind. It is the faculty that produces mental images, whether one is dreaming, thinking, or remembering. Later heirs to Aristotelian conceptions of the inner senses—such as Galen, Plotinus, and Nemesius—advanced the relationship between the senses, the body, and perception, which again became reinterpreted by philosophers writing in Arabic.<sup>14</sup> Avicenna added to imagination a faculty shared by animals and humans, namely, estimation (*wahm*), an internal sense that complements the external sense of sight. While sight perceives forms, estimation perceives that which has no form, or that which is separate from matter. It perceives intentions or what we might call “meaning” (*maʿnā*). To describe the distinction between form and meaning Avicenna offered a now famous example: the sheep’s encounter with a wolf. On one hand, the sheep perceives the wolf’s form, that which requires matter and can be called a body. On the other hand, the sheep perceives the wolf’s intention to harm, which is its “meaning.” From the sheep’s perspective, the wolf’s form tells the sheep where the wolf is, where it is going, its color, shape, and size. Yet the wolf’s meaning or intention tells the sheep to flee.

Avicenna’s idea that sensory and non-sensory meet in a human faculty became a critical point of discussion within Sufism, which adopted and reimagined much of Avicennan psychology, though often within a framework that better suited Sufism’s focus on the states and stations of the “heart” or human spirit. In Sufi writings, Avicenna’s observations became combined with a tradition of contemplating divine beauty through the senses. This provided a vocabulary to some for a specific variety of such contemplation, which focused on divine qualities in human form, usually the faces of beardless young men, a practice called *shāhidbāzī* in Persian. Some Sufi

ethicists advocated *shāhidbāzī*, and others (such as Rūmī) opposed it.<sup>15</sup> To prohibit licentious gazing, especially that which might have led to pederasty, classical Sufi texts condemned gazing that goes no further than form. The gazer who appreciates merely form appreciates beauty on the level of the basest animal instincts within each human being. Conversely, one who gazes upon form as a bridge to meaning, discerning divinity within the object of sight, hits the mark, so that a person is embodied and yet perceives through the senses that which transcends the body. For many Sufi writers interested in such a mode of contemplation, the non-sensory came to indicate the supersensory. To this effect, “intention” or “meaning,” are not sufficient translations for the word *ma'nā* that appears in Sufi writings, such as those of Rūmī. *Ma'nā* signifies the supersensory reality, the divine effusion, that has assumed some sort of form for the human perceiver. This model of form and meaning appears in countless classical Sufi texts, especially during the high period of Sufi cosmology, that period often subject to later commentaries, during which prominent figures made claims about witnessing human beauty. Such figures included Rūmī, Muḥyī al-Dīn ibn al-‘Arabī (d. 1240), Fakhr al-Dīn ‘Irāqī (d. 1289), and Sa‘īd al-Dīn al-Farghānī (d. 1300).

Rūmī’s views on form and meaning function as a backdrop to *The Willow Tree* (where Rūmī’s person and poetry receive frequent explicit and implicit mention), and hence deserve some discussion here. In an extended passage of the *Mathnawī*, Rūmī declares that gazing upon the sensory beauties around us was meant to be a reminder of the Divinely Beautiful. To become obsessed with form is to prefer that which is ultimately unreal to the Real. Instead, one must see the unreal as a means to perceiving the Real. He makes his point by alluding to extra-Qur’anic narratives about Joseph (of the Book of Genesis), whose master’s wife, Zulaykhā, has become infatuated with him. To seduce him, she has filled her quarters with beautiful images of herself “so that Joseph might gaze upon her accidentally”:<sup>16</sup>

In order to have Joseph look in her direction,  
she made the house replete with depictions of herself, deceptively—  
such that any way that gorgeous-faced young man might look,  
he would see her face, involuntarily.  
God made for those whose sight has light  
six directions as places of realization for His signs,  
so that when they behold each living and visible thing,  
they gaze within the meadow of Lordly comeliness,  
which is why He—with such an army—commanded:  
*Anywhere you turn, there is His face.*<sup>17</sup>

The effect that this realization has on the knower of God is a sense of divine omnipresence, allowing him or her to gaze upon human beauty, while simultaneously seeing that beauty's origins. Such a person “sees the comeliness of the Real in the face of a heavenly girl.”<sup>18</sup> Rūmī's vision of the inner human world—what seems to be the imagination—is one which creates manifold forms from sensory knowledge, a multiplicity and variegation that should lead the seer back to the unchanging source from which everything comes:

In that fortress of the goodly essence of all forms  
five doors lead to the sea [of the unseen] and five to the land [of the seen]:  
Five of them correspond to senses leading to color and smell,  
while five of them correspond to inner senses, seeking secrets.  
from these [external and internal senses], one thousand forms, pictures, and images  
started dancing happily from one end to the other.  
Try not to get too drunk from these goblets of form,  
lest you become an idol-maker and idol-worshipper.<sup>19</sup>

The danger, according to Rūmī, is that one become a worshipper of form, missing the significance that form represents—namely, the spiritual, or what he and his contemporaries called “meaning”:

Pass by the goblets of form, do not stop there!  
Yes, the wine is *in* the cup, but it is not *of* the cup.<sup>20</sup>

Form is a medium by which one encounters meaning, or, if one prefers, it is the seed or kernel one seeks in the husk of any plant. Rūmī uses the metaphor of the seed and husk once again, this time extending it to a miraculous extra-Qur’anic account of rocks having become flour for Abraham miraculously. To Rūmī—borrowing from Ash‘arī theologians—this change shows that even something as essentially related as cause-and-effect is merely a playground for God’s will, much in the way that form has been granted its status as form merely in order to convey formlessness:

“O Adam, seek out my heart-enchanting meaning—  
speak of abandoning the husk-and-form of the wheat kernel.”  
Since rocks miraculously became flour for Abraham, God’s friend,  
Know that wheat has been deposed from flour-making, o intelligent one!  
In existence, form comes from formlessness,  
just as smoke comes to us from fire.  
Even the most minor flaw in the traits of a form-given thing  
will lead to weariness, when you see it over and over again.  
But formlessness will leave you completely bewildered—  
creating one hundred different instruments from its instrument-less way.<sup>21</sup>

To become bogged down by form, infatuated with it, unwilling to move beyond it is to miss the message of existence. It is like the person so obsessed with the sound of words that he or she fails to listen to their meaning and cannot understand them.

This problem of interpretation is hinted at in the names of the film’s characters. Yūsuf (the Biblical “Joseph”) is Islam and the Qur’an’s most well-known dream interpreter, considered to be the father of dream interpretation.<sup>22</sup> The protagonist’s wife’s name, Ru’yā, means “dream-vision,” suggesting that his wife, in terms of “meaning,” possesses divine beauty, through her character. Her name thus indicates that she is not only the appropriate direction for Yūsuf’s heart, but also for his divinely-granted ability to interpret the world. He is, after all, a skilled interpreter of the mysterious, a scholar who comments on mystical poetry, before his moral downfall, after which he relinquishes this pursuit.<sup>23</sup> The larger significance of dream interpretation within this cultural

sphere should not be missed. In her ethnographic study of dreams in contemporary Cairo, Amira Mittermaier tells us that reading dreams is an initiatic tradition for contemporary Muslim dream interpreters, where even the greatest of Muslim dream interpreters, Ibn Sīrīn (d. 729), is said to have inherited his abilities from a dream of Yūsuf/Joseph.<sup>24</sup> This initiatic tradition extends beyond dreams to the interpretation of God's signs in general, and, in the famous narrative of Rūmī's life, describes the poet's relationship with his beloved friend Shams. The film presents such a relationship with the dreamlike character of Murtaḍā, who knows facts about Yūsuf's life without ever being told them, who recites love poetry in moments of anxiety, and who offers words of wisdom to Yūsuf, including lines that are quoted in the film's title, *The Willow Tree*. Yūsuf had mentioned to Murtaḍā that, were he ever granted sight, he would want to see a willow tree, which brought him luck as a child. After he gains sight, Yūsuf shows disdain for planting saplings (which appear to be willow saplings) at a school for the blind. He receives a letter from Murtaḍā—toward the end of the film, immediately before Yūsuf's blindness returns—asking him if he ever even bothered to look for a willow tree. He had not, pointing to the simple appreciation he had for nature before his moral downfall, an appreciation that has since been lost. This indicates that Yūsuf has ceased to be an interpreter of the natural world. He has forgotten his ability to read the signs of God in nature, as one would interpret a dream (and as Majidi's other blind protagonist, Muhammad, does in *The Color of Heaven*). Instead of being an interpreter of beauty, Yūsuf has become its consumer.

### **The Gaze, The Real, and Majidi's Resolution**

One can hardly discuss gazing in the context of film without considering Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytical theory, to which Majidi seems to nod at critical moments in his film. Voyeurism,

such an integral theme within *The Willow Tree*, has particular relevance to Lacan's view of the relationship between the subject, the other, and the gaze that links them. For Lacan, voyeurism is an act of the subject looking for the absence of the phallus. He tries to see the "object as absence," but experiences a "conflagration of shame" when he realizes that he himself is an object of the gaze as well.<sup>25</sup> Like the moment of being caught in the act of ogling, the voyeuristic gaze ends up making the subject the object of his own gaze. The weight of his gaze falls on himself. Since the gaze in Majidi's film is most often directed toward women—women that Yūsuf finds attractive—Laura Mulvey's work on the topic of the Lacanian gaze in film helps us see how Majidi's depiction of a voyeuristic subject, lying firmly in Sufi theories of gazing, might benefit from and even allude to a consideration of the Lacanian gaze. (Whether this correspondence results from Majidi's own intentions as a filmmaker is impossible for me to determine at this point, and, considering the pertinence of Lacanian theory to film studies in general, perhaps moot.)

While Mulvey's insights are, to a degree, useful, they must be seen within the context of Sufi theories of form and meaning to be applied to *The Willow Tree*. Mulvey uses Lacanian psychoanalysis to uncover the manner in which "the unconscious of patriarchal society has structured film form" in gratification of the male gaze.<sup>26</sup> She argues that woman—or the female form—serves a twofold purpose for the patriarchal unconscious. The female form symbolizes the fear of castration and her maternal ability to nurture the male child transcending that fear.<sup>27</sup> As an object in film, the female form becomes a "bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning."<sup>28</sup> "Meaning," for Mulvey, carries a sense much different from what it has in Rūmī's metaphysics. In the latter, meaning is not made. Rather, it emanates and can be observed through the vehicle of form. For Mulvey, however, meaning signifies one's agency in a narrative; the female form is but an instrument in a patriarchal fantasy. Within Sufism, theorists located the problem with such



gazing not in the element of harm or the solidification of patriarchy, but rather in the disservice to oneself to achieve complete human potential. The lustful gazer remaining on the level of form abandons the completion of higher attributes—that is, virtues—in favor of responding to animal passions. Yet Lacanian analysis does help us understand a pivotal scene in the film, a mirror scene that seems to differ in significance from mirror scenes in another of Majidi's films.<sup>29</sup> At a climactic point in the film, moments after Yūsuf has gained sight for the first time in his adult life, he leaves his room in curiosity and jubilation. He stops when he encounters his reflection in a glass.

Jacques Lacan's theory of the gaze places a crucial stage of formation at a child's self-viewing at a mirror, where he or she first internalizes the gaze and experiences a sense of being an object of sight. It is a stage of production for the self-image, creating the reinforced ego, because the reflection allows the child a simulated mastery over the body.<sup>30</sup> In this case, the encounter with his reflection begins a change within Yūsuf that will eventually lead to his narcissistic treatment of others, including his wife and daughter. It precedes everything, including his return home to Tehran and his gradual fall into despair. That fall is marked by a proclamation to his mother, made before he destroys his library in a fit of rage, which makes it clear that Yūsuf's self-regard, beginning with his glance into the mirror, began a descent in which Yūsuf must absolve himself of what Julia Kristeva calls the original "feeling of emptiness" at the heart of all neuroses.<sup>31</sup> Kristeva, in her reading of Lacan, argues that the subject's self-recognition creates *ab-ject* (that aspect of subjectivity that must be repulsed) and a void; the void must be met with something, and so begins the process of producing signifiers. This happens, of course, in the infantile stage, but Majidi has capably replicated the process in adulthood, by having Yūsuf gain sight as an adult. His first gaze is at himself in the mirror, as has been mentioned. The first person he recognizes is his mother. His father is completely absent throughout the film, as if he does not exist, in a manner

similar to the “Name of the Father” in Lacanian psychoanalysis, wherein the Father exists as law, guiding toward himself by his absence. As Yūsuf struggles to fill the void, he begins to turn away from anything resembling his mother, the *ab-ject*, including his own wife (whom he accuses of playing the role of his mother). Thus, when Yūsuf’s mother asks why he shows little concern for his wife, who has left him, and she spots the picture he cherishes of himself standing next to Parī, he exclaims:

I don’t need anyone anymore. I want to have the life I deserve... I want to live the way I please. Yes, I want to live the way I please. I want to live the way I please.

The gaze—Yūsuf’s first instance of sight in the film, and his first moment of sight during his adult life—begins a life that promises Yūsuf pleasure, yet also revolves around himself. This new life leaves him agitated, wandering, and often engaging in voyeurism.

A number of moments in the film indicate that Yūsuf has become a voyeur, or even a scopophile, considering that he eventually makes little effort to curb or cover up his voyeuristic desires.<sup>32</sup> Upon his arrival, Yūsuf seems unable to control his long stare, gazing upon his uncle’s wife’s sister, Parī. Indeed, every time she enters a scene, Yūsuf becomes visually fixated. Later in the film, on the metro, he stares at a young lady. Each of these cases has something in common. Younger, their beauty enhanced by artificial adornments such as hair-highlights, jewelry, and nail polish, the women at whom Yūsuf stares stand in contrast to his wife, to whose natural look Yūsuf reacts with an indifference bordering on revulsion. To use Mulvey’s language, Yūsuf takes women as objects and subjects them to a patriarchal gaze, but is particularly interested in a certain artificial female aesthetic associated with urban, “Tehrani” women, an aesthetic most manifestly explored in the art of Shirin Aliabadi.<sup>33</sup> From the perspective of Islamic norms, the immorality of his glares is underlined by the wedding ring on the finger of the young lady in the metro. From the perspective of Sufi psychology, Yūsuf’s shortcoming is in seeing human beauty as its end,

underlined by his interest in artificial beauty. Beauty should propel the gazer beyond itself, to a sense of bewilderment. In the terms used in Sufi writings on gazing, one must look at form in order to look beyond it. Gazing must end in witnessing divine qualities, the very qualities called “meaning.”<sup>34</sup> What Mulvey calls an “object” of the male gaze might, in terms of Sufi psychology, be called “form” lacking all appreciation for meaning.

While Mulvey's Lacanian analysis of the male gaze provides some useful entryways into Sufi conceptions of gazing, and gazing as a theme in Majidi's film, recent developments on Lacan's gaze are even more helpful. For Mulvey, a Lacanian analysis of the gaze contributes to the breaking down of patriarchal structures, such as those in Hollywood cinema, because—as she states—“analyzing pleasure, or beauty, destroys it,” which would allow us “to make way for a total negation of the ease and plenitude of the narrative fiction film.”<sup>35</sup> While this has truth, it falls short of offering us a moral alternative to gazing—as an act of male mastery—more broadly, beyond film. Moreover, traditional Lacanian theory, the basis for Mulvey's argument, has lost its place of privilege in film studies because of the lack of empirical evidence supporting it.<sup>36</sup> Yet such dismissals of traditional Lacanian theory often react to an interpretation of the gaze at variance with Lacan's own formulation of the gaze. “The gaze is not,” according to Todd McGowan, “the look of the subject at the object, but the point at which the object looks back,” bringing the spectator into the image and disrupting the spectator's sense of power.<sup>37</sup> The gaze is what McGowan calls the “site of a traumatic encounter with the [r]eal,” where the word “real” signifies Lacan's conception of some experience beyond human symbolic comprehension.<sup>38</sup>

It is Lacan's “real” that is missing from traditional Lacanian theory, according to McGowan. Thus, traditional Lacanian film theorists, such as Mulvey, identify the gaze with the perspective of the camera and that of the male protagonist, so that gazing means the subject's

mastery of an object and the patriarchal domination of both narrator and viewer over an object. Lacan's theory before its adoption into film theory, however, was bereft of a Foucauldian and Nietzschean conflation of desire with power.<sup>39</sup> The gaze, for Lacan, is not mastery but rather an encounter with a void so disconcerting that the subject loses his or her sense of mastery.<sup>40</sup> Kaja Silverman also contends with understandings, such as those of Mulvey, in which cinema is spectacle, where the camera's perspective stands for that of the spectator's perspective. For Silverman, the camera's perspective represents something else: the "grave" of the eye, the other, or the view of some "nonliving agent," an awareness of camera as camera.<sup>41</sup> She differs from Lacan in that Lacan's definition of the screen was an ahistorical one, one where the camera told us something timeless about the psyche.<sup>42</sup> Instead, the camera as "a representational system and a network of material practices" changes the way we see the screen, as well as the gaze represented by the screen.<sup>43</sup> While Silverman agrees that human vision is always mediated, she makes a compelling case that our socially embedded relationships determine that mediation. This helps us see Majidi's camera as positioned within contemporary Islamic norms, norms that contend with the artificiality of modernity. The gaze, informed in part by a metaphysics in which God is the Real, is met with a moral resolution. The gaze's disorientation and danger, in *The Willow Tree*, become resolved by the comfort of words, the very words that Yūsuf speaks to God when blind, or those that his mentor and friend writes to him in letters, or—and it is this that frames the film most—those words by which spiritual masters such as Rūmī have communicated realities beyond those that can be seen.

In Sufism and other strands of Islamic thought, the "Real" signifies God as the Absolute, abstracted from conceptions of Him and from His relationships to creation. Majidi's film reconciles Sufi conceptions of the "Real" with a Lacanian "real": the metaphysical Real, that is,

the objective of all appreciation of beauty, lies in wait for those willing to move beyond form, and yet Yūsuf becomes inhibited from such a traversal because of his encounter with the Lacanian real, his glance at the mirror that begins his descent into an obsession with the void. Worded in terms of desire, the gaze elicits a desire that engenders more desire, desire that cannot be satiated or appeased. *The Willow Tree* depicts this conundrum in one of its final scenes: Murtaḍā asks Yūsuf, in a letter, if his eyes have become “satiated from watching.” Of course, the eyes cannot become satiated; satiety does not apply to sight, and it is this that makes Yūsuf suffer. In film, fantasy usually offers a resolution to the desire engendered by the gaze. Hollywood films mollify the irreconcilable gaze through fantasy narratives, but still have value because—McGowan asserts—there remains the possibility of “an encounter with the gaze that would otherwise be obscured in our experience of social reality.”<sup>44</sup> Majidi's film does not offer a resolution through fantasy. Rather, *The Willow Tree* resolves the gaze theologically—focusing on a more logocentric sense than that of sight, namely, hearing. Yūsuf, at the end of the film, returns to a world of darkness and sound, which is also a world of intimacy and speech with God. Yūsuf's salvation lies in speech, in his discourse with God, that is in, words, where meaning and form—for him and for most of us—are inseparable. Put differently, Majidi's resolution is to provide language as a means to circumventing form, pursuing meaning, and encountering the Sufi conception of the Real.

Perhaps no scene represents Majidi's understanding of the aforementioned problem of form and meaning better than Yūsuf's visit to his uncle's jewelry store. Delighted to have his adult nephew see his business, Yūsuf's uncle takes him into his boutique, which is clean and well-furnished. In it, wealthy, well-dressed customers sit selecting merchandise from a catalogue. The uncle invites Yūsuf to follow him to see where the jewelry is made, and they enter a private elevator that descends into a basement. Here Majidi has the camera assume Yūsuf's field of sight.

In stark contrast to what was above, Yūsuf sees—and we see—a dark, cavernous area, lit only by the fires of the smiths who melt gold and forge the jewelry. They never look at Yūsuf. Their lack of acknowledgement to his presence lends to their work an aura of something constantly ongoing, natural, or even cosmic. Majidi then shows us Yūsuf's face, in a close-up, both mesmerized and, to a degree, horrified. One of the fires bursts, and the sparks cause Yūsuf to panic momentarily, brushing his clothing to ensure that no part of him has been lit. He then notices a smoldering drop of gold, on the ground, as the scene draws to a close. Looking at the scene from the perspective of Sufi poetics and cosmology, the upper level of the store seems to represent mediated creation. That is, its luxurious and visually-appealing setting corresponds to human expectations: It is the shell of things, what we see and encounter as reality, but what we must move beyond to reach the kernel. The basement, however, corresponds to the strange and indeed barely comprehensible manner in which meaning takes on form, or words emerge to try to convey the real/Real, even if they ultimately fail.

This scene, in other words, points to a way in which one might read Sufi conceptions of form/meaning in light of Lacanian psychoanalysis. For Lacan, the real represents all that which precedes words, that is, human experiences as of yet unsymbolized.<sup>45</sup> Human experiences become bound by language, and it is then that they properly “exist.” Lacan's real, then, is outside of existence—existence as a field of human awareness subject to being known. In the earliest stages of human development, unsymbolized experiences take on symbolization, as they become tied to words. Those words are the tongue of the Other, or even the tongue of the central “other” in most children's lives, the mother, because—at this stage—there is really no self, no subject, but rather a subject in formation.<sup>46</sup> From this formation comes desire, a desire that can neither be expunged nor satiated. It cannot be expunged because everything known is symbolized; to efface desire

would mean to efface everything the subject knows, or, rather, subjectivity itself. Desire cannot be satiated by its objects of desire because there will always be a distance between the words that shape our desires and that which brought them into creation. There is a similar dynamic at work here, in this scene of *The Willow Tree*. The futility of longing for form appears in the protagonist's encounter with glitter itself—arguably the most salient representation of the superficial nature of human desires, namely, gold. To the customers upstairs, seeing the gold as having been given shape and made into precious objects, this gold has worth. Yet, descending into the basement of that gilded jewelry's creation, Yūsuf witnesses the process by which desire is formed, a process frightening in its barbarity, unsettling because it is so far removed from the finished product. In the language of Rūmī, Yūsuf has had a glimpse into the placement of the kernel in the shell, while the customers upstairs enjoy merely the shell. Or, more precisely, what Yūsuf has come to see is the transience of worldly beauty—the *dunyā*, or “lower world,” which is disparagingly compared to gold in the Qur'an, as gold has only relative value, while the afterlife has real value.<sup>47</sup>

It is, in fact, the theme of *perspective* that ties together the film's major concerns: sight, the meaninglessness of form, and proper awareness of one's relationship with God. These become bound to an image that appears twice in the film, namely, the ant crawling in darkness. It is likely that I have pinpointed the passage of Rūmī's *Mathnawī* to which Majīdī alludes in centering this image of the ant. It is an image that serves both as the film's final scene (walking across a braille letter that Yūsuf keeps in his copy of Rūmī's *Mathnawī*) and, earlier in the film, as the first object that Yūsuf is able to see (walking across his hospital bedroom windowsill). Majīdī is careful to use a close-up shot, magnifying the ant, and portraying its slow movement in real time. As one can see in the translation below, Rūmī interprets an ant's crawling as a matter of limited perspective,

relating it to the problem of human vision, both vision in the metaphorical sense (as “insight”) and in the literal sense (as “sight”):

The ant bearing grain becomes apprehensive,  
because she is blind to the [mound of] dried husks,  
dragging that grain in worry and fear,  
for she never actually sees the rest of that plentiful chaff.  
The True Owner of the chaff then says, “Woe!  
May you cease to exist because of being blind to what’s next to you!  
Of all our grain you’ve only seen that one  
because your soul is all wrapped up in [wanting] that one grain.”  
O gazer on the form of a speck of grain! Notice Saturn instead!  
You’re like a hobbling ant. Go gaze upon [the guiding prophet] Solomon instead.  
You are not this body. You are that ability to see.  
You’ll be rescued from body once you see (only) the soul.  
A human is all vision; the rest is meat and skin.  
Whatever one’s eyes have seen—that is what one is.  
A vat can cause a mountain to be submerged through its moisture,  
that is, if its passageway opens to the ocean.  
Since a way has opened from the very soul of the vat to the Amu Darya river,  
the vat will rise up forcefully with that running body of water.  
For that reason, God’s command, “Say!” was spoken by the Ocean [of Divinity],  
even when those words were uttered by Muhammad.  
The [Prophet’s] words were all pearls in the ocean,  
for his heart had influence over those waters.  
Since the ocean’s watery bequest can be found in our little vat—  
What wonder is it, really, to find the whole ocean in a fish?  
The eye of sense is fixed upon constant movement:  
you see it all moving, while [in reality] it is still.<sup>48</sup>  
Such duality comes from the sight of a cross-eyed person;  
were that not the case, the first is just as the last, the last just as the first.<sup>49</sup>

The description of an ant carrying grain mirrors what is shown in the pivotal hospital bedroom scene in Majīdī’s film, which precedes the protagonist’s moral downfall. Rūmī asserts that obsession with a particular form, with that which is in our immediate range of sight, comes from a failure to recognize the larger, more universal perspective: God masters all. Rūmī redirects the listener’s view from the perspective of the “ant,” carrying a single grain, to one who gazes upon the stars, or “Saturn.” Then comes his most relevant observation of all, namely, that a human chooses to identify with the “body,” the basic drives of the body. Instead, one can and should



choose to see “soul,” that is, to make use of a vision that sees beyond mere form and appreciate the sense of infinity beyond it and conveyed by it. “A human is all vision,” Rūmī asserts, “the rest is meat and skin,” meaning that proper vision—a vision of the reality beyond and behind things—is the purpose of human existence. Those who choose to see superficially become superficial beings; their sight affects their existence: “Whatever one’s eyes have seen—that is what one is.” In the context of our film, Yūsuf’s character, his very being, becomes altered as he gains sight and misuses it. We watch him descend from being a saintly man (that is, a person in constant conversation with God), to a wrathful and selfish one. All this comes to fruition because of the choices he makes with his eyes, choices lacking proper perspective.

### **Conclusion 1: An Ethics of Gazing**

Perhaps what makes the marriage of Sufi literature and Lacanian psychoanalysis most valuable is that it renders Majidi’s film an able vehicle for moral deliberation. The film borrows from Sufi texts in which gazing has dangers and moral ends, and yet seems to do so using images that resonate with Lacanian psychoanalysis as enriched by studies in feminism. The film, then, becomes an opportunity to contemplate the relationship between the imposing eyes of men and the objectified female form. Beyond that, sight becomes a metaphor for action that seems to have no effect on the outside world, but culminates in potentially harmful moral effects on the subject.<sup>50</sup> As I have argued, this becomes clear in the film’s depiction of the ant crawling through Yūsuf’s field of sight. The ant, as the first and last object of sight, represents the fragility of creation, including human life. Its bearing the difficult weight of a flake of food represents the difficulties that we must endure merely by living. Its subtlety and smallness represents the subtlety of Yūsuf’s moral flaw, which becomes increasingly magnified as the film moves on. Indeed, Majidi seems to

be evoking a metaphor—the ant representing the subtlety of good or bad intentions—as found in the Hadith traditions and celebrated by Muslim theologians and writers. “[The sin of] associating partners with God (*al-shirk*) is more hidden than the crawling of an ant on a stone in the tenebrous night,” the Prophet is reported to have said, “and the smallest [instance of] this is to love some part of oppression and to hate some part of justice.”<sup>51</sup> Rūmī references this famous saying in commenting on God’s power to know the minutest of actions and intentions, in his *Seven Sessions*, a collection of his sermons:

[Be wary of] that all-knowing deity who sees the black ant on a black stone, with its narrow legs, in the dark of night, as the ant falls and rises, runs. That Absolute Seer—Exalted and Holy—can see how that ant in the tenebrous night, in its actions, goes quickly or slowly, or something between the two, whether headed home or to get the grain....<sup>52</sup>

The last part (“whether headed home or to get the grain”) indicates that God’s awareness extends not only to subtle actions, but also to intentions. Sight and gazing might seem to the gazer as an innocuous activity, but its dangers accumulate as they lead to a change in character. In the language of Sufi psychology, as appears in the writings of Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī, such gazing leads to “many diseases of the heart.”<sup>53</sup> The gazer will certainly become an oppressor, at the very least an oppressor toward himself or herself. For this reason al-Ghazālī comments on Islam’s long tradition of enjoining people—especially men—to avert their eyes from those to whom they might be attracted but with whom they have no lawful relationship. The Quranic phrase for this is “lowering one’s gaze.”<sup>54</sup> Al-Ghazālī clarifies that the gaze is a gateway for more insatiable kinds of desire and subtle ethical ailments, supporting this view with a saying of the Prophet Muhammad: “The gaze is one of Satan’s poisoned arrows, may God curse him. To one who avoids the gaze, doing so out of fear of God, God gives belief the sweetness of which he will find in his heart.”<sup>55</sup> Sight as moral responsibility is indeed a major theme of *The Willow Tree*. Yūsuf’s acts of

voyeurism involve a degree of shame, as his facial expressions after being seen gazing convey—eyes downcast, often with an embarrassed frown. Again, this corresponds to the “conflagration of shame” that results from voyeurism as described by Lacan.<sup>56</sup> Even more conspicuously, we see Yūsuf on the metro witness a pickpocket steal a wallet and keep silent. The thief, once the pilfering is done, winks at Yūsuf, implying that he has been an accomplice: Yūsuf's wrongdoings are silent and seemingly passive acts of sight, and yet oppressive nonetheless. Yūsuf becomes aware of sight as an activity, what Kaja Silverman calls a “self-conscious *subjectivity*” as opposed to a “self-conscious *objectivity*,” and certainly something more than merely passive viewing.<sup>57</sup> In Majidi's cinematic world, sight carries with it moral injunctions: That which should not be seen, and that which should be performed when seen. The pleasure that Yūsuf derives from gazing—whether at women's faces or at an act of crime—leads to his final repentance.

Thus, the gaze, as a moral act, harms not just the object of the gaze, but also the gazer, the subject of the gaze. This becomes clearest when Yūsuf's fixation on form leads to a degeneration of his sensibilities. Once Yūsuf's family has left him, for example, we begin to see how gazing can become a fixation: While his uncle tries to help him salvage his marriage, career, and life, Yūsuf cannot help but stare at a mannequin being carried on a motorcycle. Yūsuf's preoccupation with form leads him to his immersion with a sculpted and bare depiction of the human form. Likewise, when walking along the streets of Tehran, Yūsuf finds himself mesmerized by televisions, especially when, in one case, a television connected to a camera serves as a mirror and shows him his reflection. In this, Majidi asks his audience to consider ways in which fixation on form can alter and corrupt not just the individual, but also society. The downtown area of the city is always depicted as a place of confusion and loss for Yūsuf, in opposition to his home in the hills, on the outskirts of the city, a location with pastoral resonances. One can observe this contrast

between idyllic scenes of nature as opposed to grey and sometimes desperate scenes of city life in Majidi's other films as well, especially *Children of Heaven* and *The Color of Paradise*. The city is a place of images, while Yūsuf had once lived in a world of words, whether in his study of Sufi poetry or in his monologues directed at God. Among words, Yūsuf was protected from the divorce of form from meaning that images offer to him. To some degree, Majidi's valorization of words over images has a long history in Islamic metaphysics: Medieval Sufi writings often mention the visual arts—especially drawing—in mostly disparaging contexts, because they facilitate a type of perception bereft of meaning. For example, Ibn al-‘Arabī describes the colors and lines of wall paintings as “devoid of spirit,” as opposed to poetry, which has both form and spirit.<sup>58</sup> Yet Majidi has clearly recognized a phenomenon conspicuous and easily recognizable as “modern,” namely, the image-centric media foregrounded in contemporary experience. Such depictions of city life, inspired by Sufi texts, clearly share a perspective offered by Marxist criticisms of commodity fetishism.

### **Conclusion 2: The Gaze as Traditionalist Critique**

The latter half of *The Willow Tree*, in representing Yūsuf's indifference to his family and to his study of Sufi poetry, shows us a man who has redefined the ends and pursuits of his life: He seeks a sort of beauty that can only be found among the artificially decorated younger women of Tehran.<sup>59</sup> As a commentary on an ethics of sight, this change in Yūsuf is a critique of representation and image-centric desire, the sort of critique one finds in the writings of Guy Debord. Debord presented Marxist theory with a special focus on representation, the manner in which direct experience in the form of sensory perception of the natural world loses its place of privilege to idealized, perceptible, and yet absent images—most specifically, the commodity. In the

commodity, and in the commodity fetishism of late capitalism, “the perceptible world is replaced by a set of images,” which are both easily grasped and more perfect.<sup>60</sup> For Debord, commodity fetishism redirects the powers of traditional ways of life—religion and family structures—toward worldly ends, encouraging the seeking of gratification in what is produced, directing dissatisfaction toward acquisition.<sup>61</sup> This results in a pacification of the subject, who faces a world that is both present and absent, present in its being desired, but absent in that it is an ideal and ultimately unattainable. The subject succumbs to a cycle of wanting and being thwarted in fulfillment, and so is “driven into a form of madness in which, by resorting to magical devices, he entertains the illusion that he is reacting to this fate;” that is, while the subject sees himself as a free and willing actor, he has become a machine.<sup>62</sup> Yūsuf’s interest in “artificial” women leaves him with no interest in helping the blind, planting trees, playing at the creek with his daughter, contemplating God, or indeed any of the pursuits that once absorbed his attention. He seeks images, everywhere he goes, but spirals into a rage of discontent when he gains nothing. Whether Yūsuf represents a modernizing Iran, the middle-aged man, or the embodied human soul, in all cases, he is a victim of a shift toward representation and away from traditional modes of human engagement with the natural world.

Beyond Yūsuf, the object of his gaze is, of course, a victim as well, fetishized and objectified, and hence deprived of “meaning,” or, if one prefers, “humanity.” Enduring his gaze, the unknowing object of the gazer’s assault, the object of that gaze, becomes less bound by the actual reality of humanity and more idealized, more of a mannequin than a human being. (Indeed, as mentioned, Yūsuf’s gaze eventually falls on mannequins too.) With the film’s critical depiction of modernity and the city, nothing seems more fitting to describe the artificiality the gazed-upon object as Talal Asad’s observation, building on the work of Alain Corbin, that engagement with

sensory stimuli has changed after the onset of modern, urbanized life. Asad argues that more traditional ways of seeing, hearing, smelling, touching, and tasting have been altered or replaced.<sup>63</sup> As an example, while perfumes, such as musk, in the eighteenth century complemented the natural scents of perspiration, modern fixations on cleanliness and even sterility have brought us to dislike natural body odors, preferring instead perfumes and soaps that “disguise body odor” while offering some alternative presented as clean and feminine.<sup>64</sup> This resonates with the theme of degeneration that appears in *The Willow Tree*, which, perhaps more than anything else, offers a view of the artificiality of our objects of desire. It is ironic that such criticism of modern perception occurs in film, considering film’s place of privilege in the exaltation of images. After all, Walter Benjamin famously identified film’s role in human perception as a “training ground,” one that acclimates its viewers to a new, technological reality of “distraction.”<sup>65</sup> In this regard, Majidi’s critique of image-centeredness indicates the culturally subversive potential of postcolonial cinema.

The gaze in *The Willow Tree* represents more than the same gaze men have imposed upon women throughout history. The gaze becomes tied to modernity and to technology, and, in this, becomes a means to interpret modern ways of living. The abstraction of form from meaning occurs within a context of distance, the sort of unprecedented distance that only modern life allows. Of course, human technologies have always by their very nature allowed for distance. Interactions are mediated, and that mediation is the very nature of technology. It is the distance that I have between me and the task, or between me and the idea on paper, or between me and the destination or instance of communication. In other words, while humans have always created means for distance, they have, of late, done so more successfully and with more ubiquity.<sup>66</sup> As such, humans have created means for separation between the sense of doing something and actually doing something. We have created a propensity to consume without feeling appropriately consumptive. The assault

of the eyes does not seem to be assault, and yet “seeing immorally”—if the film is to be believed—leads to an outlook of insatiability, consumption, narcissism, and frustration that has no resolution. To use Sufi terminology, if “meaning” underlies all “form,” then there can come a point when one seeks form for the sake of form, image for the sake of image, and loses access to meaning. In a philosophically different but remarkably pertinent context, we might think of Plotinus’s declaration to his friend Amelius, who wanted to have a painting or sculpture made of the philosopher: “Why, really, is it not enough to have to carry the image in which nature has encased us, without your requesting me to agree to leave behind a longer lasting image of the image, as if it were something genuinely worth looking at?”<sup>67</sup> It is not that—at least, in the context of Sufi literature—the body presents a moral danger to the viewer, but rather the body abstracted from contexts of meaning, the human form as idealized by the gazer’s desire, divorced from the meaning (the spirit as a sense of borrowed divinity) it conveys. To me, this is the most pertinent theme in Majidi’s film, and a point for further exploration. Forms as objects of longing and perfection lend themselves to artificiality because—whether in Lacan’s system or Sufi metaphysics—humans choose the controlled symbolic as a means of escape from the uncontrollable real. It is as though sight itself can become a mode of blindness, and, perhaps for this reason, Majidi presents blindness as a mode of vision.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Siamak Adhami, “Pairikā,” *Encyclopædia Iranica* (2010).

<sup>2</sup> Cyrus Ali Zargar, “Allegory and Ambiguity in the Films of Majid Majidi: A Theodicy of Meaning,” *Journal of Religion & Film*, 20, 1 (2016), 10, accessed February 25, 2020, <http://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol20/iss1/3>.

<sup>3</sup> Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī, *Mathnawī-i Ma’ nawī*, ed. Muḥammad Isti’ lāmī (Tehran: Zawwār, 1996), 1:57, l. 1105. References to Rūmī’s *Mathnawī* are made with volume, page, and line numbers, in that order. All translations are mine.

<sup>4</sup> Emily Jane O’Dell, “From Leprosy to *The Willow Tree*: Decoding Disability and Islamic Spirituality in Iranian Film,” *Disability & Society*, 30, 7 (2015), 1126.

<sup>5</sup> Shohini Chaudhuri and Howard Finn, “The open image: poetic realism and the New Iranian Cinema,” *Screen*, 44, 1 (2003), 40-42. Also see Rosa Holman, “‘Caught Between Poetry and Censorship:’ The Influence of State Regulation and Sufi Poeticism on Contemporary Iranian Cinema,” *Senses of Cinema*, 41 (2006), accessed February 25, 2020, <http://sensesofcinema.com/2006/film-history-conference-papers/poetry-censorship-iran/>.

<sup>6</sup> Yasco Horsman, “The Sound of Frogs at Night: Kiarostami’s Philosophy of Cinema,” *Conflict and Development in Iranian Film (19-30)*, edited by A. A. Seyed-Gohrab and K. Talattof (Leiden: Leiden University Press, 2013), 21.

<sup>7</sup> Nacim Pak-Shiraz, *Shi‘i Islam in Iranian Cinema: Religion and Spirituality in Film* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2011), 94.

<sup>8</sup> Farhang Erfani, *Iranian Cinema and Philosophy: Shooting Truth* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 78-9.

<sup>9</sup> Hamid Dabashi, *Close Up: Iranian Cinema, Past, Present and Future* (London and New York: Verso, 2001), 276.

<sup>10</sup> Dabashi, *Close Up: Iranian Cinema, Past, Present and Future*, 277.

<sup>11</sup> Zargar, “Allegory and Ambiguity in the Films of Majid Majidi: A Theodicy of Meaning.”

<sup>12</sup> Talal Asad, *Secular Translations: Nation-State, Modern Self, and Calculative Reason* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 90.

<sup>13</sup> I follow Atif Khalil in using the phrase “Sufi moral psychology” as a descriptive term for what is called the Sufi “science of the soul,” which traces the soul’s “states” (*aḥwāl*), or temporary micro-developments, as well as its “stations” (*maqāmāt*), or more lasting disposition and capacity for awareness of God. In most later treatises, the soul changes in nature, resembling, as it improves, its pure spiritual core (the *rūḥ*, or spirit), mediated by the fluctuations of the organ of spiritual vision, the “heart” (*qalb*). See, for example, Atif Khalil, “Contentment, Satisfaction and Good-Pleasure: *Rida* in Early Sufi Moral Psychology,” *Studies in Religion / Sciences Religieuses* 43, 3 (2014), 372. See also, Abū Naṣr ‘Abdallāh ibn ‘Alī al-Sarrāj al-Ṭūsī, *Kitāb al-Luma‘ fī al-Taṣawwuf*, ed. Reynold Alleyne Nicholson (Leiden: Brill, 1914), 24. Regarding gratitude in Sufi Islamic thought see Atif Khalil, “The Embodiment of Gratitude (*Shukr*) in Sufi Ethics,” *Studia Islamica* 111 (2016), 159-178. Also see Bilal Yorulmaz, “The Presence of the Qur’an and Hadith in the Films of Majid Majidi,” *The Journal of International Social Research (Uluslararası Sosyal Araştırmalar Dergisi)*, 7, 35, (2014), 383-393.

<sup>14</sup> Muhammad U. Faruque, “The Internal Senses in Nemesius, Plotinus and Galen: The Beginning of an Idea,” *Journal of Ancient Philosophy*, 10, 2 (2016).

<sup>15</sup> For those in favor of this practice, the *shāhid* was a “testimony” to God’s presence made through human beauty, a phenomenon expressed as a matter of “witnessing” meaning via form. See Lloyd Ridgeon, “The Controversy of Shaykh Awḥad al-Dīn and Handsome, Moon-Faced Youths: A Case Study of *Shāhid-Bāzī* in Medieval Sufism,” *Journal of Sufi Studies* 1 (2012), 12-13. Landing on and ending at form, that is, failing to use it as a vehicle to meaning, became a blameworthy matter among Sufis, who engaged in this practice, quite famously Awḥad al-Dīn Kirmānī (d. 1238), whose quatrains on the topic are quoted widely.

<sup>16</sup> Rūmī, *Mathnawī-i Ma‘nawī*, 6:165, l. 3651.

<sup>17</sup> Rūmī, *Mathnawī-i Ma‘nawī*, 6:165-6, ll. 3652-3656. The Qur’anic verse in italics corresponds to Q 2:115.

<sup>18</sup> Rūmī, *Mathnawī-i Ma‘nawī*, 6:166, l. 3660.

<sup>19</sup> Rūmī, *Mathnawī-i Ma‘nawī*, 6:168, ll. 3718-3721.

<sup>20</sup> Rūmī, *Mathnawī-i Ma‘nawī*, 6:168, l. 3722.

<sup>21</sup> Rūmī, *Mathnawī-i Ma‘nawī*, 6:169, ll. 3724-3729.



<sup>22</sup> Amira Mittermaier, *Dreams That Matter: Egyptian Landscapes of the Imagination* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, California, and London: University of California Press, 2011), 58

<sup>23</sup> His erudition is shown in the many letters he receives from his university, asking him to return, as well as Parī's awe and admiration for him as a scholar.

<sup>24</sup> Mittermaier, *Dreams That Matter: Egyptian Landscapes of the Imagination*, 68.

<sup>25</sup> Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Book XI, The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller and tr. Alan Sheridan (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1981), 182.

<sup>26</sup> Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*, ed. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen (New York: Oxford University Press: 1999), 833.

<sup>27</sup> Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," 833-4.

<sup>28</sup> Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," 834.

<sup>29</sup> For Majidi, the mirror does have a sense inspired by Sufi presentations of subjectivity and morality: In the mirror one views oneself with a sense of separation, in a manner similar to how God sees himself in creation, famously elaborated upon by Ibn al-'Arabī. See Muhyī al-Dīn Ibn 'Arabī, *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam*, ed. A. E. Affifi (Beirut [Cairo]: Dār al-Kitāb al-'Arabī, 2002 [1946]), 48-51. The mirror view, for Majidi, can be a godly yet humbling view of oneself, in which one stands in judgment over oneself. This is clear in two mirror scenes in Majidi's *The Color of Paradise*, in which the father, Hāshim, becomes momentarily aware of himself as a moral actor by seeing himself (1) doubled, yet still smiling, in his reflection at a jewelry shop window and, later, (2) as multiple "broken" faces, representing the further fragmentation within himself, his struggle between paternal service and infantile selfishness, in a shattered mirror. The difference here is that Yūsuf's gaze into the mirror has an antecedence to his moral change, occurring before his turn away from God and family and as a near first event after gaining sight.

<sup>30</sup> Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema": 836-7. See also Todd McGowan, "Looking for the Gaze: Lacanian Film Theory and Its Vicissitudes," *Cinema Journal*, 42, 3 (2003), 28.

<sup>31</sup> Julia Kristeva, "Within the Microcosm of 'The Talking Cure,'" *Interpreting Lacan, Vol. 6*, ed. Joseph H. Smith and William Kerrigan (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1983), 44.

<sup>32</sup> Mulvey argues that scopophilia—pleasure in "taking other people as objects, subjecting them to a controlling and curious gaze," the very sort of pleasure in which Yūsuf indulges—is the foundation for the patriarchal male gaze in film. In the voyeuristic fantasy, the female form exists only to satisfy—to resolve the threat of castration, as within the framework of the narrative, or as fetishized. See Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," 835 and 840.

<sup>33</sup> Shirin Aliabadi, *Miss Hybrid*, Photography series (Dubai: The Third Line, 2008).

<sup>34</sup> In Lacanian terms, as interpreted by McGowan, the gaze is meant to remove "safe distance" and undo "assumed mastery" to facilitate an encounter with the Real. See McGowan, "Looking for the Gaze: Lacanian Film Theory and Its Vicissitudes," 29.

<sup>35</sup> Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," 835.

<sup>36</sup> McGowan, "Looking for the Gaze: Lacanian Film Theory and Its Vicissitudes," 27.

<sup>37</sup> McGowan, "Looking for the Gaze: Lacanian Film Theory and Its Vicissitudes," 28-9.

<sup>38</sup> I have modified the capitalization here to correspond to my differentiation between the Sufi conception of the “Real,” as opposed to Lacan’s “real,” or “le réel.”

<sup>39</sup> McGowan, “Looking for the Gaze: Lacanian Film Theory and Its Vicissitudes,” 32.

<sup>40</sup> McGowan, “Looking for the Gaze: Lacanian Film Theory and Its Vicissitudes,” 33.

<sup>41</sup> Kaja Silverman, *The Threshold of the Visible World* (New York and London: Routledge, 1996), 130.

<sup>42</sup> Silverman, *The Threshold of the Visible World*, 134.

<sup>43</sup> Silverman, *The Threshold of the Visible World*, 136.

<sup>44</sup> McGowan, “Looking for the Gaze: Lacanian Film Theory and Its Vicissitudes,” 43, 36-7.

<sup>45</sup> Bruce Fink, *The Lacanian Subject: Between Language and Jouissance* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1995), 25.

<sup>46</sup> Fink, *The Lacanian Subject: Between Language and Jouissance*, 7.

<sup>47</sup> Qur’an 43:33-35.

<sup>48</sup> Rūmī here plays on a verse of the Qur’an (27:88), flipping the verse’s wording: “You see the mountains, reckoning them fixed, but they move like the flowing of the clouds.” While he reverses the metaphor (so that humans see movement where there is stillness), the failure of human perception remains the same, as do many of the words, such as Rūmī’s *absurd* for the Qur’an’s *jāmida*, or his *mamarr* for the Qur’an’s *tamurr marra*. Moreover, this passage interweaves numerous images from the Qur’an’s chapter in which this image occurs, namely, “The Ant.” Rūmī here comments on creation as abstracted from time, one might say from the divine perspective, wherein all change is anticipated, included, and hence made void. This seems to have been a double-line that has caused difficulty for commentators and translators. See Karīm Zamānī, *Sharḥ-i Jāmi’-i Mathnawī-i Ma’ nawī* (Tehran: Ittīlā’āt, 2009), 6:252, as well as Reynold A. Nicholson, *The Mathnawī of Jalālu’ddīn Rūmī* (E.J.W. Gibb Memorial. London: Cambridge University Press, 2001 [1926]), 6:303.

<sup>49</sup> Rūmī, *Mathnawī-i Ma’ nawī*, 6:45, ll. 811-824.

<sup>50</sup> As mentioned above, the film does not have a satisfactory response to its implication that visual impairment and even other disabilities are somehow in the best interest of the person who has that disability.

<sup>51</sup> ‘Abd al-Raḥmān Ibn al-Jawzī, *Talkhīṣ Kitāb al-‘Ilal al-Mutanāhīya*, ed. Abū Tamīm Yāsir ibn Ibrāhīm ibn Muḥammad (Riyad: Maktabat al-Rushd, 1998), 299, no. 901.

<sup>52</sup> Rūmī, *Majālis-i Sab‘a (Maktūbāt)*, ed. Jawād Salmānī-zāda (Tehran: Iqbāl, 2000), 5.

<sup>53</sup> Abū Hāmid Muḥammad al-Ghazālī, *Iḥyā’ ‘Ulūm al-Dīn*, ed. Badawī Ṭabāna (Cairo: Dār Iḥyā’ al-Kutub al-‘Arabiyya, 1957), 3:103.

<sup>54</sup> Qur’an 24:30.

<sup>55</sup> al-Ghazālī, *Iḥyā’ ‘Ulūm al-Dīn*, 1:235.

<sup>56</sup> Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Book XI, The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, 182.

<sup>57</sup> Silverman, *The Threshold of the Visible World*, 168

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<sup>58</sup> Ibn al-‘Arabī, *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkīyya* (Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 1968), 2:394.

<sup>59</sup> There are certainly scenes, after Yūsuf regains his sight, that show him playing with his daughter or worried about her wellbeing, but they gradually fade away until his family leaves him—and, tellingly, leaves the big city, Tehran, altogether.

<sup>60</sup> Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, tr. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1995), 26.

<sup>61</sup> Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 38.

<sup>62</sup> Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 153.

<sup>63</sup> Asad, “Thinking about religion, belief, and politics,” *The Cambridge Companion to Religious Studies*, ed. Robert A. Orsi (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 51.

<sup>64</sup> Asad, “Thinking about religion, belief, and politics,” 52.

<sup>65</sup> Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility” *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility and Other Writings on Media*, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty, and Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2008), 26-28, 40-41.

<sup>66</sup> This process is much like what sociologist Georg Simmel called “externalization.” See Georg Simmel, “Tendencies in German Life and Thought Since 1870,” tr. W. D. Briggs, *The International Monthly*, 5, 1 and 5, 2 (1902).

<sup>67</sup> Eyjólfur K. Emilsson, *Plotinus* (London and New York: Routledge, 2017), 12.

<sup>68</sup> Here by “vision” I allude to Yūsuf’s ability, when blind, to interpret Sufi poetry and speak candidly to God. It is not unusual in Sufi texts, and in world literature more broadly, to see an emphasis placed on the uncanny perception of the otherwise blind individual. As an example, Ibn al-‘Arabī describes a blind man who is able to sniff out Satan, after the latter furtively made his way into a gathering of Sufis reciting musical poetry. See Ibn al-‘Arabī, *L’Esprit de Sainteté dans le Conseil de l’Âme (Rūḥ al-qudus fī munāṣaḥat al-nafs)*, ed. with a French translation by Sakhr Benhassine (Paris: Geuthner, 2018), 103-104 [Arabic portion].

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