

Documentary Aesthetics and International Communication of Iranian Films from the Perspective of the Third Cinema -- Taking the White Balloon as an Example

Chuyi Han

Beijing Technology and Business University, Beijing, 100102, China

Abstract. The Iranian film represented by *The White Balloon* includes a series of elements such as colonialism, class, race, sex and gender in the third cinema. Religious culture makes Iranian films not only contain humanitarian concerns, but also become the representative of ideology. The description of women's survival dilemma and the displacement of Hazara reflects the complexity of the social environment. Under strict censorship, Iranian directors cast their eyes on the lives of children at the bottom. Long shots, single-line narrative logic, circle narrative structure and open ending constitute an important part of the documentary aesthetics of Iranian films. As the representative of the third cinema, the Iranian film is facing various difficulties in reality, breaking through in the context of globalization, and providing a development road of combining nationality with the world and individuality with localization for other countries' films.

Keywords: third cinema; Iranian film; *The White Balloon*; documentary aesthetics; international communication.

1. Introduction

The artistic practice of the third cinema is different from the emotional manipulation of Hollywood films. Instead, it focuses on showing the trauma caused by the reality and history of the nation and concerns for the suffering of ordinary people in a turbulent society, as well as the richness of national traditions. However, Iranian films consciously or unconsciously practice the third cinema theory, which embodies the themes of anti-imperialism, anti-feudalism, anti-racial discrimination and anti-exploitation and oppression. Jafar Panahi and other new-generation directors record their social thinking and concerns for human nature from unique children's perspectives and documentary aesthetics.

The film *The White Balloon* was directed by Jafar Panahi. It mainly tells the story of a girl, Raziieh (Aida Mohammadkhani), who asked her mother for money to buy goldfish, but accidentally dropped the money into a ditch, hoping for help from passers-by. Finally, a little boy selling balloons successfully took out the money with the last white balloon in his hand. Taking the Iranian film *The White Balloon* as the research object, this paper explores how the Iranian film presents the cultural texture of the third cinema, and how it shows the humanistic feelings with the realistic character from the perspectives of Iranian realistic shackles, narrative aesthetics, international communication and so on. The present study also further examines how it combines nationality with globalization under the constraints of religious laws and social morality. The documentary aesthetics and breakthrough strategies of Iranian films are important for other films.

2. Social Background, Realistic Shackles and Aesthetic Concepts

The first thing that can be noticed is the religious elements in Iranian films as the representative of the third cinema. As Iran is close to the Arabian Peninsula, the place where Islam was born, it quickly absorbed its culture in the flourishing stage of Islam's spread abroad. Today, Islamic teachings have been localized in the long-term historical development, and they are deeply buried in the Iranian way of life and rules of conduct. Islam teaches Muslims to be honest and kind. Under this infiltration, the Iranian people have formed a kind, friendly and strong national character. However, due to Iran's political system of the unity of politics and religion, along with religious alienation and the emergence

of religious extremism, Islamic countries have left an extreme and horrible impression on western countries, and the views of the “Islamic threat” and “clash of civilizations” are very popular. Therefore, how to use cultural communication to reshape the country’s image and improve international relations against western stereotypes is an urgent problem for Iran.

The requirements for female groups in Islamic law are more stringent. There are special chapters in the Qur'an (Arabic: "Recitation") that restrict women. In the teachings, women are not only required to keep their bodies healthy and energetic, but also have many restrictions on the freedom of marriage, childbirth and travel. The *Global Gender Gap Report 2021*¹ shows that the gender gap between men and women in Iran ranks 150th out of 156 countries, which suggests that Iranian women are always in a weak and marginalized position. Under such circumstances, a group of directors with courage and conscience in Iran turned their attention to the vulnerable group of Iranian women, recorded their life course in the way of the third cinema, and spread it to the world. For example, the films like *The Circle* and *Ten* show the plight and struggle of Iranian women to the international community calmly and objectively, and reveal the cruel reality in the plain.

As a marginal group in Iran, the Hazaras people often appear in movies. “Since the mid-18th century, when Afghanistan is now a nation-state, Hazaras have been persecuted by Pashtuns, the largest ethnic group in Afghanistan, and many Hazaras have been forced to flee from all parts of Afghanistan to the mountains in central Afghanistan.”² Living in Iran, Hazara people are still discriminated and displaced. Iranian films focus on the inner feelings of indomitable individuals, which contain multiple elements of the third cinema such as race, society and culture behind them.

Iran’s strict censorship is also a difficult problem that the third cinema faces in international communication. Specifically, “first, the script must pass the censorship; second, declare the list of actors and crew, and apply for filming permission; third, the sample film is submitted for trial, which determines the fate of the film: passed, modified or banned; fourthly, the directors and producers apply for the screening license, and the films are divided into three levels: A, B and C to determine the distribution channels and publicity methods of the films”.³ In addition, Iran has also incorporated the teachings of Islam into the film censorship system: in films, women must cover their faces and hair with veils and their body curves with wide costumes; actors who are not couples in reality are not allowed to have physical contact in movies; miserable life and violent elements are forbidden in films. Due to the reality that what Jafar Panahi reveals in his films about Iran's reality is not suitable for external display, many of his films are banned from being shown in Iran. In 2010, Jafar Panahi was sentenced not to produce or direct any film or script, not to be interviewed by domestic and foreign media in any form, and not to leave Iran within 20 years, and he was sentenced to six years in prison.⁴

In the mid-1980s, Jafar Panahi graduated from Teheran Film and Television Academy. During his study, he received professional film training in the school, and was exposed to a large number of excellent films and ideological theories. As early as the 1960s, French *New Wave* movies took root in Iran. Jafar Panahi was influenced by *New Wave* movies during his studies, and out of reverence for Abbas Kiarostami, the representative of the second Iranian *New Wave* movies, he became Abbas’s assistant after graduation and participated in the production of many movies. Jafar Panahi once said that he never made a deal with censorship⁵, and he tried his best to show the reality in the film, rewriting the script on the spot without sticking to any pattern, and making adjustments at any time according to the immediate situation in the filming process. He is also keen to use non-professional actors as the protagonists of movies to achieve the documentary effect. In the film *The Mirror*, in the face of the temporary strike of the unknown actors, he chose to respect the choice of the unknown actors, and finished the film by tracking the shooting. The depiction of the documentary of the bottom-level characters is representative of the third cinema, which is an indispensable factor for Iranian films to step out of the country.

3. Children's Perspective, Long Shots and Narrative Structure

Under the censorship system of Islamic tradition, Iranian directors use children's films as carriers to convey the customs and social realities of the third world to the international community. Movies such as *The Color of Paradise* and *Willow and Wind* aim the lens at the simple and beautiful minds of children, to arouse people's reflections on the goodness and evil of human nature. *The White Balloon* also uniquely mirrors the real looks of children. In many movies, the simple recitation of lines makes children's language expression fluent and dexterous. However, in *The White Balloon*, children's sense of awkwardness, which is manifested in the repeated and reversed talking, is deliberately retained, and even makes some audiences feel bored. Childhood experience has a great influence on Jafar Panahi's expression in movies. His family background is also reflected in *White Balloon*—this house composed of a couple and an elder boy a girl looks empty and humble. When the little girl Razieh asked her mother and brother to buy another fish, their first reaction was whether it was cost-effective to buy a fish for 100 yuan. The childish thinking and perseverance of children also contain the infinite connotation of society, reflecting the difficulties faced by many families struggling for survival. On the other hand, Razieh took the audience through the streets of Iran. Snake tamer and bustling onlookers added more mystery to this Islamic country. Cyclists singing Iranian folk songs showed the aesthetic taste of the Iranian nation. Razieh's persistence and optimism in buying a fish, her honesty in getting the money back and selling the fish, and the love between brother and sister in helping each other are all portrayals of the Iranian people's tenacity and integrity. In addition, some sensitive social issues that are rejected by censorship also subtly collide with children's world. Everywhere in the film, the authority dominated by the male discourse can be seen, such as the snake tamer who was repeatedly emphasized by adults. In Islam, snakes are evil incarnations, and their legends are often combined with sexual elements. Therefore, when Razieh's grandmother who brought her money told her vaguely that the street where snake tamer and a large number of men gathered was "a place where children and women should not go", it also implied the strict restriction of women in Iranian society and the low status of women. The third cinema, represented by Jafar Panahi's *The White Balloon*, touches on the life of the bottom-level children full of bitterness and illusion from a poetic perspective, which maps the adult world and triggers international thinking.

The extensive use of long shots is also a major feature of *The White Balloon*. Andre Bazan once said, "Photography is not like art to create eternity. It just paints time with spices, so that time can avoid its own decay." He believes that the original feature of film art is documentary. A long shot can maintain the integrity of events over time, and it also exists as a film language close to reality. Iranian directors are good at seeing through human nature with long shots. For example, the films Abbas's *Where is the Friend's Home* and Bahman Ghobadi's *A Time for Drunken Horses* show Iranian society and life with delicate long shots. In the movies, Jafar Panahi can not only use the long shots to restore every detail in reality, but also break through the narrative function by using the long lens to adjust the narrative rhythm and mobilize the audience's emotions. At the beginning of the film, a two-minute-long shot was used, which included songs and dances in the barbershop, passers-by and cars. And the main characters in the film appeared in turn. A crowded street is just a vivid social genre painting, and the Iranian cultural tradition and social appearance are concentrated in this lens. At 1:27 in the movie, the background sound explained the time premise that "New Year is only one hour, twenty minutes and thirty seconds later". From the beginning of this sentence to the end of the movie, it was exactly one hour, twenty minutes and thirty seconds. This exquisite design makes the film seem to have no editing, and the documentary function of the film is further highlighted. In the process of the brother and sister trying to get money, the camera faithfully recorded the long process of the children squatting on the manhole cover to see the money and the wrangling conversation waiting for the tailor shop owner to handle the dispute. With the prolongation of the waiting process, the audience's worry about 500 yuan gradually deepened. At the same time, this anxious urgency was soothed by the slowdown of the camera rhythm, which kept the overall rhythm in a delicate balance all the time. The use of the long shots and the unintentional scene scheduling reflected the simplicity

and directness peculiar to Iranian movies. The use of a long lens not only connects characters and events from the large narrative frame, but also leads the audience into an atmosphere and impression similar to a documentary, which more truly shows the reality of the third world, thus arousing the audience's emotional resonance in international communication.

The White Balloon has a linear narrative structure, without concentrated dramatic conflicts, or complicated and tortuous bizarre stories. It is a story with simple characters and single clues to urge the audience to pay attention to the cruelty and truth, ordinary and kindness that have been neglected for a long time in life. The little girl, Razieh, as the protagonist, connects all the elements appearing in the film in the series. This kind of single-line narrative structure often appears in Iranian films, such as *The Silence*, *Willow and Wind*, *The Stepfather* and so on, all of which show the simple life with the hero's one-way narration. On the other hand, Jafar Panahi also tentatively tried the circular narrative structure. Starting from the time of the movie "The New Year is coming" and ending with the arrival of the New Year. The Hazara boy, the colorful balloons on the wooden pole in his hand and the selected balloons used as locks, which run through the whole movie, end to end, and lock the story into a closed loop. In Jafar Panahi's follow-up films, he constantly explored and tried this narrative technique. In the film *The Circle*, whose title shows the cycle of life, women live generation after generation, and their tragic fate of social oppression is also constantly circulating. This is not just the repetition of a character or an image, but starting from the fate of the characters, linking the fates of several women from birth to imprisonment, shouting the sadness of Iranian women. In addition, Jafar Panahi also prefers an open ending. In *White Balloon*, the Hazara boy who sells balloons, after giving vital help to the brother and sister who lost their money, watches other children celebrating the New Year happily, and sits in the same place alone. He holds his own white balloon, which was picked up by others. The film ended abruptly here, leaving the audience with an unlimited imagination. None of the scenes in the film directly shows the prejudice and rejection of the native Iranian people against the foreigners. At the end of the story with "buying fish" and "losing money" as the main contradiction, the little girl successfully got her money back and bought the fish she wanted. It seems to be a bright and happy ending, but the image of the white balloon arouses the audience's infinite reverie. It is the conscious pursuit of the new Iranian film to truly describe the original ecology of life. The scenes of ordinary people's daily life can also release the elegance of life and the brilliance of human nature in the director's delicate lens language. As the elements of Jafar Panahi's films, the single-line narrative logic, the circular narrative structure and the open ending have accumulated the energy of documentary aesthetics for the third cinema to better spread in the international community.

4. Dilemma, Breakthrough and Globalization

The third cinema, represented by Iranian films, "came into being under the combined force of many special factors, both from the political and economic aspects and from wars, social changes, religious conflicts and other fields"⁷, which also provides difficulties for international communication. In Iran, it is of great difficulties to create a film that conforms to the traditional ideas of Iran and objectively reflects the concepts of freedom, equality, and fraternity. In the new wave of Iran in the late 1960s, the movie *Cow* (1969) described a poor mountain village in Iran. Because of the death of a cow, the owner of the cow went insane. This film was an early feature film funded by the state, but it was banned because of its negative description of Iran. Later, it was released because it won an award at the Venice Film Festival and was well-received, which attracted worldwide attention. When Iranian director Mohammad Rasoulof was filming *There Is No Evil*, "in order to bypass the censorship, he split the film into four short films and submitted them to different producers for review. To hide his intention, he only shot indoor plays and remote country plays, while all outdoor plays in the city were handed over to assistant directors for shooting"⁸. Even if the film was successfully released after breaking through many obstacles, Iranian directors still have to face public criticism from the domestic government and the public. "Abbas mentioned in an interview that there

are accusations and criticisms in Iran, because he is filming for foreign film festivals. Mussen Makmabaf also said that he has always been accused of being too westernized in Iran and a foreigner who worships foreign things”⁹. Under this background, Iranian filmmakers always take circuitous ways, persist in exploring human nature, and impress audiences with simple and quiet thoughts. Jafar Panahi chose to record the fragments in life and express his attitude silently. In the family of *White Balloon*, the father is the absolute authority. There is no father’s face in the film, but the character of the father is outlined by his yelling at his wife and children. For the father’s requirements, the whole family only obeys absolutely, and when there is a little mistake, all they get is endless abuse. In the film, Jafar Panahi did not lash out at this social phenomenon that men are superior to women, but chose to present this trivial life to the audience unreservedly and provide the audience with the standard of moral evaluation. Since the Islamic Revolution in 1979, Iran’s social culture has changed a lot. Some film companies disappeared, and some directors left Iran because of the political environment. The remaining filmmakers faced the constraints and censorship of religious and moral laws. How to survive in the harsh cultural environment is a problem that Iranian filmmakers have to face. Asghar Farhadi’s film *A Separation* tells a series of stories about a couple who are preparing for divorce. Apart from the description of the difficult situation of the characters at the bottom, it can be noticed that only at the beginning of the film, the theme of the couple preparing for divorce at the divorce registry and the wife taking her husband to court seriously violated the Iranian red zone. Because of the aforementioned problems, this film was banned. The film was released after Asha apologized. In the face of Iran’s strict censorship, Iranian directors either use children as protagonists to reflect on real problems, or evade censorship, apologize, etc., so that films that touch the restricted area of censorship can be released. These actions present the dilemma faced by the third cinema in the cracks.

“As a model of the national film and the third world film, the new Iranian films, with their unique reality and humanistic feelings, embarked on a creative road of combining nationality with the world, globalization with localization”¹⁰. Iranian filmmakers do not stop their steps under censorship, but keep exploring under the boundaries of censorship, even at the expense of their personal freedom. Just as Jafar Panahi was still thinking about the way of Iranian film after he was sentenced in 2006. Mohammad Rasoulof’s film *There Is No Evil* won the Golden Bear Award, the highest honor at the Berlin Film Festival. However, he was unable to arrive in Berlin to receive the award in person because his passport was revoked by Iran. He was arrested by the local police three days after the end of the film festival and sentenced to one year’s imprisonment. He was forbidden to film for two years. This is also a choice that many third cinema directors, represented by Iranian films, have to face: if they want to convey new ideas in their films, they must first find a way to skillfully arrange elements involving sensitive content in the films so that the films can pass the censorship. The life elegy of seven women of different ages and backgrounds in *The Circle* who were forced by their lives to be imprisoned one after another in one day, or the serious psychological barrier of ordinary soldiers involved in *There Is No Evil* because they were required to execute the death penalty or the huge conflict between soldiers and jailbreak which is not in line with positive values are all examples of burdens on films. The third cinema, represented by Iranian films, actively “responds to the repressed political phenomenon through superficial non-political aesthetic forms”, and “uses open images to evade the particularly strict censorship system, and finds out the truth and the diversity of experience under the special political background”¹¹.

Iranian films have not been widely welcomed in Iran, but they have won international awards frequently at the international film festivals. *The White Balloon* won the Golden Camera Award at the 48th Cannes International Film Festival, and *Taxi, Closed Curtain* and *Offside* also appeared in the Golden Bear Award and Silver Bear Award many times. The academia in Europe and America turns their attention to these films with unique contents and novel forms, and at the same time, because of the special situation in Iran, they also pay attention to the ideological trends in Iran. When Jafar Panahi was imprisoned, filmmakers all over the world voiced that they hope the Iranian government would release him. Iranian movies have touched audiences all over the world with their return to

humanism, deep emotional experiences, and warm humanistic discourse. In the documentary style rooted in the history and culture of the nation, the artistic quality of Iranian films has gained international recognition. The success of Iranian films in the international film industry from a global perspective is also worth learning from China. For a long time, if the third cinema wants to break through the encirclement and gain international recognition, it must first satisfy the western preferences as the core of international communication. However, Iranian films do not blindly show the dark side of Iran, nor do they lose their unique style in order to cater to it blindly. The Iranian films have adopted the expression of mirror image reduction under the accumulation of several generations of directors, thus making the film gain plain and simple but shocking power. For example, the plump characterization and simple plot setting in *White Balloon* show the world the innocence and kindness of the Iranian people deeply rooted in their hearts, and break the visual special effects, primitive temptation, and fatalism that American commercial films are keen on. These films are highly praised for their real and sensible life tension.

Under the context of globalization, the realistic dilemma and spiritual demands faced by Chinese directors are similar to those of the third cinema represented by Iran. They are all faced with the contradiction between the realistic system and their individual artistic pursuit, and bear the discord between the western discourse and the local presentation. While Iranian films are breaking out of the shackles of reality, Chinese films are also seeking a strategic path in the collision with globalization. Early Chinese films can see similar successful templates of Iranian films. Zhang Yimou's *Red Sorghum*, *Ju Dou* and Jiang Wen's *The Sun Also Rises* are full of the unique primitive vitality of Chinese villages, showing a unique Chinese film style in international film circles. In recent years, a large number of commercial films influenced by the western value system have appeared, which also indicates that "in the era when Asian films are being pushed forward, the driving force is economic. Culture is transferred to the economic level for production, and culture becomes the output of the economy"¹³. For example, there are a lot of western elements such as cruise ships and the colosseum in *Animal World*, and the God who dominates the fate of everyone in the movie is also the capitalist of the western image. Even some movies that are widely praised in China, such as *Dying to Survive* and *Our Shining Days*, have western elements everywhere. Under the impact of western ideology and concepts, it is also worth thinking about how China can better tell Chinese stories in the international communication arena. When the third world countries are baptized by globalization, they are also faced with the erosion of local culture by western ideology and film technology. The third cinema, represented by Iranian films, developed on the international stage in the cracks, which provided a reference for other third cinemas in embarrassing situations.

5. Conclusion

Gabriel adopted Fanon's idea of three stages to national culture to films and divided them three types, among which "the third cinema can reproduce the life of people in the third world in detail and sincerely"¹³. As the representative of the third cinema, Iranian film has broken through in the context of globalization because of its unique realistic character, emotional expression and narrative art, and has become a national landscape. The Iranian film, represented by *White Balloon*, embodies realistic reflection and concern for human nature in its content. Under the harsh censorship system and complex social background, it constructs a rich and rich artistic world. The documentary aesthetics of Iranian films not only relates to the times and society, but also reflects the thoughts of Iranian directors. Long lens, the theme of children, narrative structure and other angles, as unique windows, reflect the multiple pressures imposed on ordinary people. The present situation of Iranian film communication reflects the ethical thoughts and artistic treasures of the Iranian nation inherited from history, religion, and culture, and also shows the pursuit of beauty and hope, as well as the struggle against the reality of the third world which is not free and equal. Under the shell of the Iranian film represented by *White Balloon*, the Iranian director's aesthetic consciousness, creative wisdom, perseverance, and attempt are revealed. They bear the discords between the western discourse and

the local presentation, and show the rift between the realistic system and personal aesthetics. They embody the unique inspiration of Iranian directors, glow the unique charm of the third cinema on the world stage, and open a road that combines realism and criticism, nation and the world and other multiple elements for the cultural expression and international communication of other countries' films.

References:

- [1] <https://www.weforum.org/reports/global-gender-gap-report-2021>.
- [2] Li, Min. Afghan Hazaras' Historical Circumstance and Current Situation: From the Fringe to the Center. *Indian Ocean Economic and Political Review*, vol. 05, pp. 109-121+159, 2014.
- [3] Gao, Li., & Ren, Xiaonan. *Mirror the East-Documentary Doctrine: From New Iranian Movies to Chinese New Voice Generation*. Bashu Press, 2009.
- [4] Ma, Lirong. *The Marginal Narrative Research of Jafar Panahi's Films*. Qufu Normal University, 2021.
- [5] Evgenii, Gushakinsky., & Luo, Jiao. Jafar Panahi: Invisible Reality. *World Cinema*, vol. 04, pp. 167-171, 2009.
- [6] André Bazin. *What is the film?.* (Translated by Cui, Junyan). Culture Art Publishing House. 2008.
- [7] Xiong, Wenzuixiong. *The Study on the New Iranian Cinema*. China Radio Film and TV Press. 2017.
- [8] Renren video: The release was blocked, and the director was imprisoned. This film is too dare to shoot!, *Tencent News*, Jan. 26th, 2022.
- [9] Xu, Qi. *Beauty in Distress —A Study of Iranian Film Phenomena*. Henan University, 2005.
- [10] Shi, Keyang., & Kang, Siqi. Realistic Characters of Iranian News Films. *Ethnic Art Studies*, vol. 04, pp. 11-17, 2019.
- [11] Shohini Chaudhuri., & Howard Finn. *The Open Image: Poetic Realism and the New Iranian Cinema*. *Film Art*, vol. 06, pp. 25-32, 2020.
- [12] Li, Tianduo. The Situation and Dilemma of Asian Films in the Globalization Trend. *Journal of Beijing Film Academy*, vol. 01, pp. 25-26, 2006.
- [13] See Teshome H. Gabriel. *Third Cinema in the Third World: The Aesthetics of Liberation*. Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press. 1982.