Representations of the Child and Childhood in Iranian Artistic Cinema for Children and Young Adults (1960–1979)

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Figure 1: Still from the film Murād va Lālah (Morad and Laleh), directed by Sābir Rahbar, 1965.

Introduction

This article examines the aesthetic and social representations of the child and childhood in the period leading up to the 1979 Revolution. The research specifically focuses on feature-length narrative films aimed at children and adolescents up to the age of eighteen, which were screened in cinemas.

The relationship between childhood and cinema is interactive, rather than one-sided. Cinema does not merely reflect child-hood; it also has the power to reshape and redefine societal no-tions of childhood, often challenging prevailing expectations. In other words, children's cinema, or films for a general adult

audience featuring children, presents an 'ideal image of the child,' one that both parents and children may adopt as a model to emulate. This dynamic gives rise to two distinct types of childhood: the actual and the ideal.

Throughout its 120-year history, Iranian cinema has frequently explored themes of children and childhood. However, due to the scope and limitations of this study, the focus is specifically on the emergence of artistic children's cinema, which, from the author's perspective, began in 1960. This research is both historical and analytical in nature, with sources gathered through library-based methods, including written documents and the analysis of over seventy extant films.
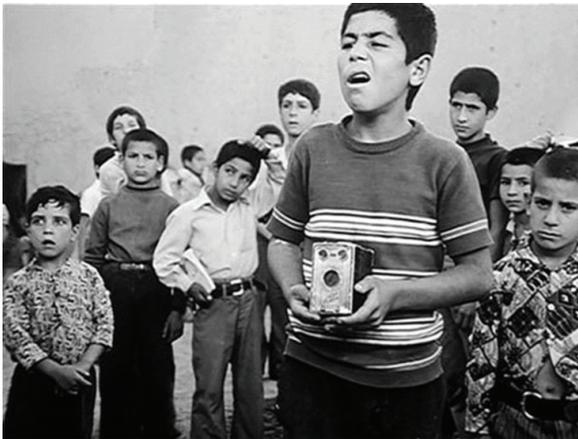

Figure 2: Still from the film Musāfir (The Traveler), directed by ʿAbbās Kiyārustamī, 1974.Figure 2: Still from the film Musāfir (The Traveler), directed by ʿAbbās Kiyārustamī, 1974.

General Considerations

1. Research Type

The research is historical and analytical in nature, with sources gathered through library-based methods, including written documents and the analysis of feature-length narrative films screened in Iran for children and adolescents up to the age of eighteen.

[1]Martin Heidegger, "The Age of the World Picture," in Science and the Quest for Reality, ed. A. I. Tauber (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1997), 81.

2. Research Questions

This article aims to address three key questions:

a. What is the analytical framework for Iranian children's and adolescents' cinema?

b. How are the produced works related to changes in social conditions?

c. In what ways have the concepts of the child and childhood been represented across different periods?

3. Significance of the Topic and its Application

In his essay "The Age of the World Picture," Martin Heidegger highlights one of the defining characteristics of the modern era, distinguishing it from earlier periods like the Middle Ages or Antiquity: the transformation of the world into an image. He writes:

[…] world picture, when understood essentially, does not mean a picture of the world but the world conceived and grasped as picture […] the fact that the world becomes picture at all is what distinguishes the essence of the modern age [der Neuzeit].[1]

Children's initial connection to the world is primarily mediated through vision. For young children, who have not yet developed reading skills, images serve both as a support and a vital supplement, facilitating the development of literacy. Their inherent fascination with images plays a crucial role in sparking interest in picture books and, more broadly, in cultivating a reading habit. Clearly, the earlier visual communication and literacy are fostered, the more enduring their impact will be. Children are naturally more open and responsive to their surroundings than adults, who often become desensitized through repetition.

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The influence of narrative cinema exceeds that of educational media because it engages audiences through art and its various elements: beauty, creativity, innovation, imagination, emotion, and indirect expression. Cinema's ability to evoke mental pleasure and connect with the unconscious ——free from the constraints of practical gain or loss—— highlights the importance of visual literacy and imagery.

Similarly, Heinz Werner has explored children's capacity for 'physiognomic perception,' contrasting it with 'geometric-technical perception.' He notes that when children say the sun is happy, the tree is sad, or a cup lying on its side is tired, they are not making secondary inferences; rather, they are directly perceiving these qualities in the objects themselves.[2]

Ian Verstegen, in his article "The Politics of Physiognomic Perception," argues that "Werner clearly had what could be characterized as romantic beliefs that children and 'primitive' peoples perceived the world in a more expressive way. He called this "physiognomic perception," and contrasted it with the perception of 'geometrical-technical qualities.'"[3]

It is clear that a significant part of human perception of film and artistic imagery is sensory and intuitive. In this regard, children and adolescents possess abilities in this area that may have diminished or been entirely lost in adults.

4. Background and Sources

To identify and assess existing sources on the history of Iranian children's cinema and the representation of childhood, the Cinema Iranica bibliography was consulted. The search yielded a variety of materials, including articles, interviews, reports, conference papers, and press notes, though none directly or comprehensively address the specific focus of this study. Additionally, the search also resulted in the discovery of two Persian-language books, 20 non-Persian books, 14 university

[2]Brady Wagoner, "The Organismic Theory of Development: Romantic Roots of a Vital Concept," Theory & Psychology 34, no. 1 (2024): 136-37.

[3]Ian Verstegen, "The Politics of Physiognomic Perception," Gestalt Theory 44, no. 1-2 (August 2022): 187.

theses, two tertiary sources, and six non-Persian websites, four of which are anonymous. With the exception of two books and one article, none of these sources directly engage with the core subject of this research.

The first book is Tasvīr-i Kūdak dar Sīnimā-yi Īrān (The Image of the Child in Iranian Cinema) by Dāryūsh Nawrūzī(2013). The significance of this work lies in its research-oriented structure, balanced perspective, comprehensiveness, and the importance of the sources it references. However, like any book, it has its limitations. For instance, it occasionally repeats discussions without systematic organization, does not fully address the topic of children's literature, concludes abruptly without a proper closing section, and lacks a thorough analysis of the decline of children's cinema.
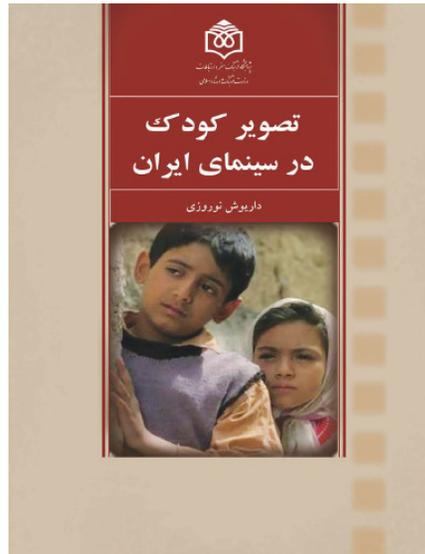

Figure 3: Book Cover of Tasvīr-i Kūdak dar Sīnimā-yi Īrān (The Image of the Child in Iranian Cinema), by Dāryūsh Nawrūzī, 2013.Figure 3: Book Cover of Tasvīr-i Kūdak dar Sīnimā-yi Īrān (The Image of the Child in Iranian Cinema), by Dāryūsh Nawrūzī, 2013.

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The second book is Farhang-i Fīlm'hā-yi Kūdakān va Naw-javānān az Āghāz tā Sāl-i 1367 (Encyclopedia of Children's

and Adolescents' Films from the Beginning to 1988), compiled by 'Abbās Jahāngīriyān (1988). The author provides a concise analytical introduction to the history of children's cinema, followed by a presentation of the films, including production details and brief plot summaries, organized alphabetically rather than chronologically. Given that the work was published in 1988—during a pivotal period in the development of children's cinema—it inevitably omits certain key developments and information.

Figure 4: Book cover of Farhang-i Fīlm'hā-yi Kūdakān va Nawjavānān az Āghāz tā Sāl-i 1367 (Encyclopedia of Children's and Adolescents' Films from the Beginning to 1988), by 'Abbās Jahāngīriyān, 1988.Figure 4: Book cover of Farhang-i Fīlm'hā-yi Kūdakān va Nawjavānān az Āghāz tā Sāl-i 1367 (Encyclopedia of Children's and Adolescents' Films from the Beginning to 1988), by 'Abbās Jahāngīriyān, 1988.

The only article that provides a review of the history of children's and young adult cinema in Iran is 'Alī Dādras's "Tārikh-chah-yi Sīnimā-yi Kūdak va Nawjavān dar Īrān" (The History of Children's and Young Adult Cinema in Iran).

In addition, there are books on Iranian cinema that contain limited and often insufficient sections on children's cinema; these sources have been cited in the present study where applicable.

However, this article explores a subject that has not been examined in such depth before.[4]

5. Scholarly Approaches of the Article

The central theme of this article revolves around the concepts of the 'child' and 'childhood.' A key point raised is the lack of consensus regarding the definition of the child. There is no single, unified understanding of what constitutes the child or childhood; rather, these concepts are interpreted in various ways. Childhood studies have yet to be established as a distinct academic discipline like psychology or economics. Instead, they remain part of the broader humanities, intersecting with a wide range of fields. As a result, childhood studies are inherently interdisciplinary. While they maintain a degree of autonomy, they are closely connected to other domains such as art, literature, linguistics, psychology, education, sociology, religion, and philosophy. This article places particular emphasis on the psychological and sociological perspectives within the diverse approaches to studying childhood.

5.1. The Psychological Approach

Our psychological approach draws on selected theories of Jean Piaget, Laura E. Berk, and Gareth B. Matthews. Jean Piaget demonstrated that the cognitive systems of children function independently from those of adults. He maintained close engagement with children and approached them with deep respect. Central to Piaget's theory is the notion that children's ways of thinking and acting are logical and meaningful within the framework of their own developing logic, rather than being measured against adult standards. His insights, along with those of his followers, significantly advanced the principles of child-centered education.

Building on and at times moving beyond Piaget's foundational work, psychologists such as Laura E. Berk have offered more

nuanced accounts of cognitive development. Berk, in particular, has advanced the view that children possess greater cognitive capacities than Piaget originally proposed.[5]

According to more recent theories advanced by scholars such as Gareth B. Matthews, a specialist in the philosophy of childhood, children engage with complex concepts—such as philosophy, ethics, death, literature, and art—to a far greater extent than traditionally acknowledged in developmental psychology. Indeed, Matthews contends that certain artistic creations by children, such as their drawings, should be regarded as genuine works of art, deserving a place alongside those of adult artists in museums, rather than being treated merely as data for psychological analysis or reflections of a child's inner world.[6]

To outline the characteristics of adolescence, this article draws on Erik Erikson's theory of psychosocial development. Erikson identifies adolescence as a particularly critical and formative stage of life, during which individuals confront the fundamental question of identity. Adolescents strive to define their place in the world with respect to occupation, social roles, sexuality, and interpersonal relationships. This identity-seeking process is inherently challenging and often accompanied by significant anxiety. In attempting to forge a coherent identity, adolescents frequently experiment with a range of roles, perspectives, and belief systems. Erikson refers to this period of exploration as a "moratorium."[7]

Those who successfully navigate this complex developmental stage—achieving a well-integrated and stable sense of self—entering adulthood with competence, confidence, and self-assurance. In contrast, failure to establish a coherent identity may result in a prolonged identity crisis.[8] According to Erikson, the central developmental task of adolescence is to answer the existential questions: "Who am I?" and "What am I doing?" He emphasized that occupation and ideology play decisive roles in shaping adolescent identity. As such, Erikson viewed identity

[5]Laura E. Berk, Development Through the Lifespan, 7th ed. (SAGE Publications, 2022), 491.

[6]Gareth B. Matthews, The Philosophy of Childhood (Harvard University Press, 1996), 39–48, 61–86, 95–117.

[7]James E. Côté, "Identity Formation and Self-Development in Adolescence," in Handbook of Adolescent Psychology, vol. 1, ed. Richard M. Lerner and Laurence Steinberg (New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, 2004), 269.

[8]Fātimāh Kiyānpūr, Jamāl Haqīqī, Husayn Shikarkan, and Bahman Najārriyān, "Rābatah-yi haft marhalah-yi avval-i nazariyyah-yi rushd-i ravānī-ijtimāʻī-i Erikson bā marhalah-yi hashtum-i ān (kamāl dar barābar-i nāʼumīdī) dar sālmandān-i ustān-i Khūzistān [The Relationship of the First Seven Stages of Erikson's Theory of Psychosocial Development to its Eighth Stage—Integrity vs. Despair—among the Elderly in Khuzestan Province]," ʻUlūm-i Tarbiyatī va Ravān-shināsī 3, no. 9, issue 1-2 (2002): 18, 21.

[9]James E. Côté, "Identity Formation and Self-Development in Adolescence," in Handbook of Adolescent Psychology, vol. 1, ed. Richard M. Lerner and Laurence Steinberg (New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, 2004), 269.

formation as encompassing group affiliation, gender, culture, religion, and ideological orientation.[9]

Figure 5: Still from the film Musāfir (The Traveler), directed by ʿAbbās Kiyārustamī, 1974.Figure 5: Still from the film Musāfir (The Traveler), directed by ʿAbbās Kiyārustamī, 1974.

Adolescent psychological disorders are closely related to the confusion or uncertainty around an individual's sense of purpose or identity. Questions about one's place in the world or the meaning of life become central concerns during adolescence, and it is during this stage that individuals begin to seek general answers to these questions. The formation of the 'self' during these years is both complex and fragile. Adolescents often feel lonely, and this feeling, along with other psychological symptoms, comes from focusing inward. Feelings of being misunderstood and occasional self-centeredness in adolescence stem from this process of development.

The stage prior to assuming employment or adult responsibilities is characterized by a persistent uncertainty regarding one's identity. An adolescent vacillates between roles of a child and an adult. During this time, they often identify with various figures of admiration, such as athletes, friends, or teachers. Unlike in childhood play-acting, these identifications are no longer merely symbolic; the adolescent's experiences and actions in

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these roles are profound and impactful. Many of these roles are experienced in extreme forms, as the adolescent attempts to explore and solidify their evolving sense of self.[10]

5.2. Sociological Approach

Let's briefly review some of the definitions proposed for the concept of a child: One definition suggests that a child is a member of society who has not yet acquired the social skills required to fulfill societal roles, and as a result, is not yet able to play an active or effective role within the social organization.[11] This definition of the child has served as the basis for many studies of childhood, and it implies that children are expected to learn and internalize social skills. Article 1 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) defines a child as any individual under the age of 18.

Karin Lesnik-Oberstein, in her book Children in Culture, offers an alternative definition of childhood. She views 'childhood' as a constructed identity that varies across cultures, historical periods, and political ideologies.[12] In classical sociology, the child was viewed as an underdeveloped being—dependent, immature, and incapable—regarded as merely a brief stage in human life. Today, however, the perception of the child has changed. The child is now understood as a member of society with distinctive characteristics, an active agent, and a subject capable of making choices.[13]

6. Limitations of the Article

6.1. The Presence of Mediators

One essential aspect of children's cinema is the unavoidable presence of intermediaries—namely, adults—who produce the films intended for young audiences. Adults may censor a movie, take children to see films of their own choice, or prevent them from watching certain works. Thus, children's films in-

[10]Husayn Lutfābādī, Ravān-shināsī-i rushd, nawjavānī, javānī, buzurg'sālī [Developmental psychology, adolescence, youth, adulthood] (Tehran: Samt, 2005), 134.

[11]Allison James, Chris Jenks, and Alan Prout, Theorizing childhood (Teachers College Press, 1998), 7.

[12]Karin Lesnik-Oberstein, Children in Culture: Approaches to Childhood (London: Macmillan Press, 1998), 2.

[13]Allison James, Chris Jenks, and Alan Prout, Theorizing childhood (Teachers College Press, 1998), 23; For further discussion, see, Mehdi Hejvani, Arkān-i Adabiyāt-i Kūdak [The Elements of Children's Literature] (Tehran: Fātimī, 2023), chaps. 2-3.

variably reach their audiences through various mediators, including screenwriters, directors, actors, producers, licensing authorities, parents, teachers, and school administrators. At times, we assume or anticipate that children have fully comprehended the message of a film, while, in reality, such judgments are made in their absence. Although some festivals employ children as jurors to select outstanding works, this method may not be entirely effective, as it is constrained by two factors: first, the number of children involved is typically small; and second, it is still adults who select children with specific characteristics to serve as judges.

Figure 6: Still from the film Murād va Lālah (Morad and Laleh), directed by Sābir Rahbar, 1965.

6.2. Scope Limitations

The concept of the child and childhood has been a recurring theme throughout the history of Iranian cinema, a topic that merits a thorough study. Due to scope limitations, however, this article focuses exclusively on the period between 1961 and 1979, which, in the author's view, marks the emergence of a serious and intellectual children's cinema. This cinema, emerging from the 'formal recognition of childhood,' developed in contrast to the commercial and melodramatic children's films of the time.

Scope of the Study

The works analyzed in this article can be categorized as follows:

• Feature films, and, in exceptional cases, medium-length and short films (but not television series);
• Fiction films, though semi-documentary works are included in rare instances;
• Films made explicitly for child or adolescent audiences;
Works produced in live-action, puppet, or animation formats;
Films screened in cinemas.
Accordingly, purely documentary (non-fiction) works about children—which are more relevant to inquiries about childhood—may reflect aspects of the child and childhood, but do not fall within the scope of this article.

In 1973, Hādī Payām introduced the distinction between films for children and films about children in an article titled "Children's Cinema and the Question of the Film for the Child and about the Child."[14] Later scholars expanded on these categories and identified additional types. In general, the following classification can be outlined:

—Films for children: Works explicitly produced by filmmakers with children as their intended audience.

—Films about children: Works created with the intention of deepening adults' understanding of the world from a child's perspective, rather than being intended for children themselves. Nevertheless, children may enjoy these films, as they see their own image reflected in them.

—Films under the pretext of the child: Works in which the child assumes a symbolic or allegorical role, rather than representing an actual or conventional childhood. The filmmakers' intent may be to provide an indirect or aesthetic expression, or to veil political or protest-oriented discourse.

[14]Hādī Payām, "Sīnimā-yi Kūdak va Mas'alah-yi Fīlm barāyi Kūdak va Darbārah-yi Kūdak [Children's Cinema and the Question of the Film for the Child and About the Child]," Farhang va Zindagī 13-14 (1973–1974): 32-36.

—Films featuring the presence of a child: Works in which the child plays no significant role, appearing only to enhance the story's setting and contribute to its realism.

Figure 7: Still from the film Sāz'dahanī (The Harmonica), directed by Amīr Nādirī, 1973.Figure 7: Still from the film Sāz'dahanī (The Harmonica), directed by Amīr Nādirī, 1973.

The author proposes a fifth category—multi-audience film: Works that do not target a specific age group, as their characters are mythological, legendary, or archetypal, with no real-world counterparts. Although the characters may appear physically adult, the mythical and adventure-driven structure of these films appeals equally to children and adolescents. Similarly, certain adaptations of classic novels—such as Les Misérables or Gulliver's Travels— though not originally intended for young audiences, they often resonate with children due to the simplicity of their story structure, accessibility, or adventure-oriented themes.

From a different standpoint, it is important to note that the selection criteria for films in this article are based on a combination of four elements: the scholarly approaches adopted in the article, the reception of the films among children and the general public, their recognition at festivals featuring award-winning works, and the author's own assessment.

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The Representation of the Child and Childhood in Cinema

Children's cinema in Iran, from 1961 to 1979, can be broadly divided into two distinct periods:

1. The First Period (1961–1971): The Birth of Artistic Children's Cinema in Contrast to Commercial Cinema

1.1. The State of Iranian Society

—Economic conditions, including the sharp increase in oil revenues, the rise of welfare and consumerism, the development of assembly industries (including the cinema industry), and the growing demand for labor.

—Social conditions, such as migration to major cities, population growth—particularly the increase in the child population—and the expansion of the middle class.

—Cultural conditions, such as the spread and dominance of Western culture, particularly that of the United States; the introduction of television in Iran (1958); and the circulation of various foreign films and television series, which shaped part of childhood within the middle class; the expansion of public and private education and the press; the founding of the Children's Book Council (1962) as Iran's representative to IBBY, which promoted reading and selected outstanding works for children and adolescents; the establishment of the Center for the Production of Reading Materials for New Literates (Markaz-i tahiyyah-yi mavādd-i khāndanī barāyi nawsavādān) in 1964,[15] which launched the Paykmagazine series for different age groups; the founding of the Institute for the Intellectual Development of Children and Young Adults (Kānūn) in 1965, which became the largest state institution dedicated to the production of cultural, artistic, and literary works; and the inauguration of the International Festival of Films for Children and Young Adults by Kānūn, whose influence gradually manifested from the end of the 1960s up until the Revolution.

[15]This center has now been renamed the Office of Educational Assistance.

1.2. The Dominance of Commercial Cinema

The production of commercial and melodramatic films, which began in the 1950s, continued into the 1960s. The quantitative dominance of popular works over artistic productions is a typical pattern across time and place. Examples of commercial and melodramatic films from this period include the following: Murād va Lālah (Morad and Laleh, 1965), Yak Qadam tā Bihisht (One Step Then Heaven, 1966), ʿIshq-i Kawlī (Gypsy Love, 1969), Hasan Kachal (1970), Āftāb Mahtāb (1970), Zilzilah-yi Mahīb (Terrible Earthquake, 1970), Zībā-yi Jībʹbur (The Beautiful Pickpocket, 1970), Māh-Pīshunī (1971), Murgh-i Tukhm-talā (The Golden Egg-Laying Hen, 1972), Shahr-i Qissah (The Tale Town, 1973), and Rāndah Shudah (The Outcast, 1975).

Just as the development of modern Persian fiction began with the translation movement and was later followed by the creation of original works, the trajectory of Iranian cinema started with the importation and dubbing of foreign films, eventually leading to the production of indigenous works modeled after them. For instance, the story of the film Murād and Lālah, written and directed by Sābir Rahbar in 1965, was based on Vittorio De Sica's Shoeshine (1946).
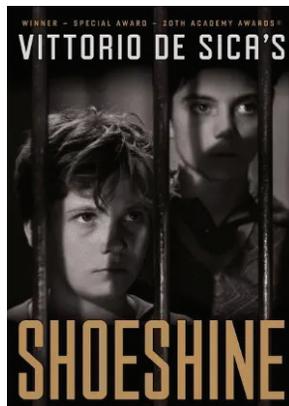

Figure 8: Film poster for Shoeshine, directed by Vittorio De Sica, 1946.Figure 8: Film poster for Shoeshine, directed by Vittorio De Sica, 1946.

Murād va Lālah (**Morad and Laleh, 1965**)

Writer and Director: Sābir Rahbar

A brother and sister lose their parents in an accident and are separated. A wealthy family adopts the girl, while the boy befriends an old peddler. The old man encounters the girl and later takes the boy to see her as she prepares to leave on a journey with her adoptive parents. The old man and the boy rush to the airport, and at the last moment, the siblings are reunited. From that point on, they live together under the care of the wealthy family.

This film focuses more on children than earlier films did. In some cases, the child seems to understand more than the adults—witty, eloquent, charming, quick with responses, and seemingly all-knowing, like a wise figure. This perspective appears to be influenced by modern education; as schooling expanded, children often became more literate than their parents, which led to greater respect for them. The renowned singer Gūgūsh, for instance, had already embodied such a role in the film Bīm va Umīd (Fear and Hope, 1959), while another popular singer, Laylā Furūhar, played similar roles in Charkh u Falak (The Ferris Wheel, 1967) and Sultān-i Qalb'hā (The King of Hearts, 1968). These films suggest that the more a child acts like an adult, the better they are perceived; otherwise, they are seen as incomplete adults, becoming fully human only when they grow up.

Figure 9: Film poster for Murād va Lālah (Morad and Laleh), directed by Sābir Rahbar, 1965.Figure 9: Film poster for Murād va Lālah (Morad and Laleh), directed by Sābir Rahbar, 1965.

1.3. A Cinema Hall Dedicated to Children

In 1966, a movie theater named Cinémonde was established in Tehran. Located at the intersection of Takht-i Jamshīd Street (now Tāliqānī) and Pahlavī Avenue (now Valī-ʿAsr), it was dedicated specifically to screening films for children and ado-lescents. The theater was designed with a child-friendly atmo-sphere and smaller seats. These initiatives reflect a growing rec-ognition of the importance of children and childhood in society.

2. The Second Period (1971–1979): The Emergence of Artis-tic and Intellectual Cinema

The social, economic, and political circumstances in Iran during this decade gave rise to intellectual and religious protest move-ments.

2.1. The Conflict Between Artistic and Commercial Cinema

Figure 10: Logo of the Institute for the Intellectual Development of Children and Young Adults (Kānūn-i Parvarish-i Fikrī-i Kūdakān va Nawjavānān)Figure 10: Logo of the Institute for the Intellectual Development of Children and Young Adults (Kānūn-i Parvarish-i Fikrī-i Kūdakān va Nawjavānān)

As mentioned earlier, following the establishment of Kānūn in 1966, the Kānūn Film Festival for Children was also founded in the same year. From 1966 to 1970, only foreign films were screened at the festival. In 1969, the Kānūn Film Center was established under the supervision of Fīrūz Shīrvānlū and ʿAbbās Kiyārustamī.

Masʿūd Mihrābī argues that the Pahlavī regime, through this initiative, aimed to create a kind of 'showcase' and 'festival commodity.' He also suggests that the government sought to distract dissatisfied intellectuals with non-political artistic projects. Regardless of the initial intent, during Kānūn's years of cinematic activity, more than sixty films were produced, some of which are now considered among the most outstanding legacies of Iranian cinema.16 Evidence supports Mihrābī's analysis

In fact, Kānūn, while in pursuit of the Pahlavī regime's vision of Iran as the 'Gateway to the Great Civilization,' faced a shortage of filmmakers, writers, illustrators, and musicians specializing in works for children and adolescents. As a result, they invited artists who were unwilling to produce commercial works—and

[17]Masʿūd Mihrābī, Tārikh-i Sīnimā-yi Īrān [The History of Iranian Cinema] (Tehran, 1989), 356.

who had no prior experience in creating films for children—to work in this field. Perhaps, at that time, there was no other alternative. Therefore, artists such as ʿAbbās Kiyārustamī, Amīr Nādirī, and Bahrām Bayzāʾī engaged with children's cinema, producing films despite their lack of prior experience in the field, primarily through experimentation. Some of their works, while rich in artistic value, also served as a reaction against the commercial, market-oriented art of the period. However, due to their experimental nature, these works sometimes diverged from the lived experiences of children and even adolescents. Moreover, their approach was occasionally instrumental: children were used as a pretext to express adult concerns, abstract ideas, frustrations, protests, or political disillusionments within works ostensibly made for young audiences. In fact, some of these productions might be better understood as films, stories, or poems 'pretending to be for children.'

Nūraldīn Zarrīnkilk—filmmaker, illustrator at Kānūn during this period, recognized as the father of Iranian animation, and president of ASIFA International (the International Animated Film Association) from 2004 to 2006—outlined several key points, summarized as follows:

—Since filmmakers at the Kānūn Film Center were not burdened by financial concerns, they were able to indulge in creating intellectual and avant-garde subjects as a counter to Fīlmfārsī (the popular, melodramatic, commercial cinema). As a result, their films were so complex and abstract that both young and old audiences had trouble grasping them. In fact, precisely because they were unconcerned with box-office returns, they paid little attention to audience reception.

—In some cases, filmmakers addressed adults under the guise of creating films for children.

—The government aimed to produce 'festival films' and build a cultural showcase.[17]

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Figure 11: Postage stamp commemorating the 10th Children and Youth Film Festival organized by Kānūn.Figure 11: Postage stamp commemorating the 10th Children and Youth Film Festival organized by Kānūn.

Nevertheless, after four consecutive years in which the Kānūn Film Festival for Children and Young Adults screened only foreign productions, the establishment of the Kānūn Film Center in 1969 brought about a remarkable transformation in film production in Iran. Between 1969 and 1978, a total of 115 films were produced in three categories: fiction, animation, and educational. Among the short films produced by Kānūn, one can mention the following examples:

'Amū Sībīlū (Uncle Mustache, 1969)

Writer and Director: Bahrām Bayzā'ī

Children play in a vacant lot next to the house of a lonely, reclusive old man, disturbing his peace. One day, the children's ball breaks one of his windows. Fearful, the children stop visiting the lot, and a hush falls over the area. The old man suddenly becomes aware of his solitude, feels it deeply, and eventually approaches the children to reconcile with them. The story of this film is reminiscent of The Selfish Giant (1888) by Oscar Wilde, in which the giant frightens the children away, causing spring to refuse to come to his garden. In the end, he repents

[18]Oscar Wilde, "The Selfish Giant," in The Happy Prince and Other Tales (London: David Nutt, 1888), 23–34.

and befriends the children.[18] The central conflict and crisis in both works are fundamentally adult in nature. However, the twelve-minute film Bread and Alley presents something altogether different.
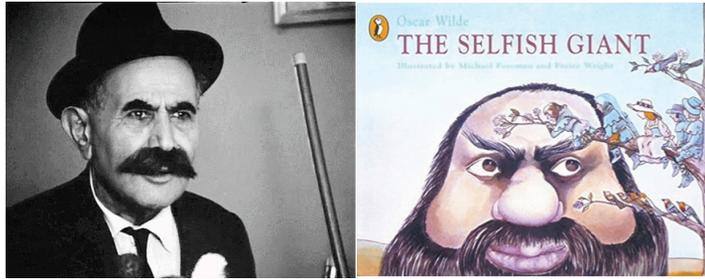

Figure 12 (Left): Character of Uncle Mustache from the film ʿAmū Sībīlū (Uncle Mustache), directed by Bahrām Bayzāʾī, 1969.

Figure 13 (Right): Book cover of The Selfish Giant by Oscar

Wilde (first published in 1888).

Nān va Kūchah (Bread and Alley, 1969)

Writer and Director: ʿAbbās Kiyārustamī

A young boy, having bought bread, returns home only to find a stray dog blocking the doorway. The dog barks, and the frightened child dares not move forward. In the deserted alley, no adult comes to his aid. At last, despairing of help, the boy tosses a piece of bread toward the dog. The animal calms down and follows him. Once the boy enters his home, the dog resumes its place outside the door. Another child then enters the alley, this time carrying a bowl of yogurt, and recoils at the dog's barking. Now, it is his turn to resolve the dilemma. The subject of the film is entirely child-centered. Moreover, through its deliberately long takes and slow rhythm, the film conveys a sense of stark realism. Bread and Alley exerted considerable influence on many later works, even those produced after the

1979 Revolution. Kiyārustamī himself admitted that the film was experimental, confessing that he was unsure whether he had made a good film.[19]

[19]Jamāl Umīd, Tārikh-i Sīnimā-yi Īrān [The History of Iranian Cinema], vols. 1–2 (Tehran: 1995), 1028.

With the exception of four feature films, nearly all of the films produced by Kānūn were short films and, as such, were never screened in theaters. The four notable feature-length films are The Harmonica, The Traveler, Summer Vacation, and The Singer, which will be discussed below.
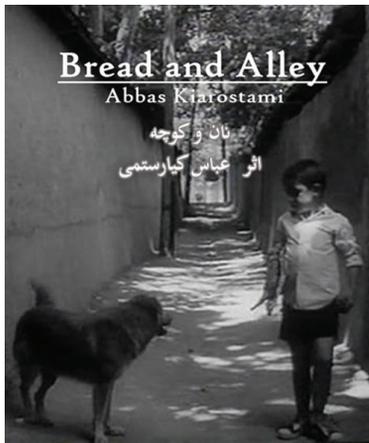
Figure 14: Film poster for Nān va Kūchah (Bread and Alley), directed by ʿAbbās Kiyārustamī, 1969.

Sāz'dahanī (The Harmonica, 1973)

Writer and Director: Amīr Nādirī

A teenage boy owns a harmonica that is coveted by the poor children in the neighborhood. For a small fee, they are allowed to play it briefly. Among them, a boy named Amīru is especially enchanted. He carries the harmonica's owner on his shoulders so frequently that his skin becomes blistered. Amīru's mother grows increasingly upset, and eventually, the children rise up against the harmonica's owner. In the final scene, Amīru throws the harmonica into the sea. While The Harmonica follows a realist narrative structure, it also holds allegorical significance.

On one level, it teaches children to preserve their dignity and avoid becoming anyone's pawn. On another, it serves as a political allegory of cultural imperialism, conveying a distinctly adult-oriented message. The film thus appeals to dual audiences. The Harmonica also shares similarities with John Steinbeck's novella The Pearl (1947).
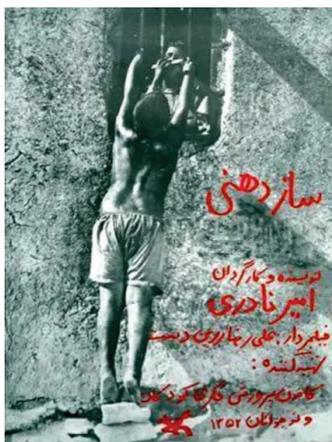

Figure 15 (Left): Film poster for Sāz'dahanī (The Harmonica), directed by Amīr Nādirī, 1973.

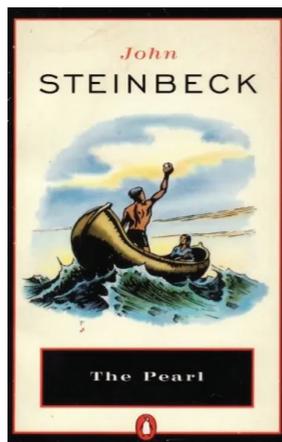Figure 16 (Right): Book cover of The Pearl by John Steinbeck (first published in 1947).

Musāfir (The Traveler)

Writer and Director: ʿAbbās Kiyārustamī (based on a story by Hasan Rafīʿī)

Winner of the Special Jury Prize and the National Iranian Television Prize at the 9th Tehran Film Festival for Children's and Young Adults (1974).[20] The film tells the story of a twelve-year-old boy obsessed with football, who resorts to trickery and petty theft to raise the money needed to travel to Tehran, the capital, in order to watch an important match. Just before the game, he buys an overpriced ticket on the black market and enters the stadium. While waiting for the match to begin, he lies down outside among a group of people resting and falls into a deep