



The Children of Heaven, on Earth: Neorealism, Iranian Style

Most of the best films about children—*Shoeshine* (1946), *Germany, Year Zero* (1947), *Bicycle Thieves* (1948)—were made by Italian neorealists, or by directors following their example, such as Buñuel with *Los Olvidados* (1951) and Clément with *Forbidden Games* (1952). The essential theme of the neorealist film was the conflict in the wake of World War II between the common man and the immense societal forces that were completely external to him, yet completely determined his existence. The most pitiful victims of such forces, because the most innocent, are children, and therefore it is no accident that important neorealist films featured them. Iranian films made in the wake of the 1979 Islamic Revolution often feature them, too: in addition to Jafar Panahi's *The White Balloon* (1995) and *The Mirror* (1997), as well as Samira Makhmalbaf's *The Apple* (1998), Amir Naderi's *The Runner* from 1984, Abbas Kiarostami's *Where Is the Friend's House* from 1987, and Ebrahim Foruzesh's *The Jar* from 1992 deserve mention.

But Iranian movies have child protagonists for a different reason: to avoid the mine field of Islamic restrictions on the portrayal of adult male-female relationships by cloaking grown-up themes in the metaphorical raiment of children's stories. Actors portraying a married couple, for instance, cannot touch each other on screen in theocratic Iran unless they are also married in real life because it is a violation of Islam for unrelated men and women to touch. And actresses, like all Iranian females over the age of nine, must cover all the hair and curves of the body, even in scenes depicting private moments at home where, in real life, every woman sheds her Islamic coverings. In addition, there cannot be any extended close-up of an attractive actress, because such a shot might be construed as an exploitation of female beauty; indeed, Iranian actresses deemed too seductively beautiful are forbidden to appear on screen at all. With female children, of course, none of these restrictions are an issue. What is an issue in the censorship-bound Iranian cinema, however, even in films featuring children—whom Iranian *auteurs*, like the Italian neorealists before them, use partly as emblems of innocence in a world under internal as well as external siege—is sociopolitical