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## **Abbas Kiarostami, Family Film and the Techno-cultural Processes of Transcultural Viewing**

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### **Abstract**

In this paper Abbas Kiarostami's films for children are discussed from the perspective of a cognitive studies approach. The crux of the argument is that the visual elements of film are essentially metonymic. *Where is My Friend's Home?* has a *quest-script* instantiated by means of four components drawn on Brown and Babbington. Transcultural viewing is enabled by techno-cultural elements of cinema. Four filmic strategies which when brought together in film enable transcultural accessibility are used to discuss *where is My Friend's Home?* One is the use of common techniques such as zoom, close-up, long takes, and dissolves. The second is the employment of *conceptual metaphors* (or *image schemas*). The third is emotional mirroring and the last is metonymy and metonymic juxtaposition. Ahmad's quest is a quest for well-being, to help his friend maintain a place in sociality in which he might flourish, and this is an action recognizable transculturally.

**Keywords:** Abbas Kiarostami, transcultural viewing, global cognitive process, *Where is My Friend's Home?*

### **Introduction**

Films for children and young adults, as well as family films for a cross-over audience, are produced in many countries, but with the exception of animation films from Hollywood and Japan they rarely penetrate national or cultural boundaries to reach a transcultural audience. Film nevertheless has the potential to cross national boundaries more easily than most media.

Colleagues and I have explored some films from East Asia from this perspective (Lee, Tan and Stephens, 2017) and in this paper I develop and expand the framework and argument of our approach in a consideration of the work of Abbas Kiarostami. I conclude that the same principles can be applied very persuasively to Kiarostami's films, particularly because of their high cinematic qualities. Predictably, I will draw examples from *Where is My Friend's Home?* (1987), the last film Kiarostami made for children and the only one to have found an international audience. In 2005, the British Film Institute conducted a survey to determine the top ten (and top fifty) films all children should see before they turn 14 and argued that the consequent list demonstrates just how diverse a range of classic and world cinema can be made available to children.<sup>1</sup> *Where is My Friend's Home?* appears in the top ten.

There has been little scholarly discussion of films travelling across cultures, and what there is has dealt with films for adult audiences. Patrick Cattrysse (2004) has developed an argument that addresses the limited success experienced by European film makers and the barriers they identify. These barriers – which include those also faced by children's and youth films – are mainly attributed to “the disadvantageous market position” of European as opposed to American films (39). Likewise, the production, marketing and distributing budget of major Hollywood successes is vastly greater than what is available to other makers of family films, and while these films often have excellent production values they lack, for example, the pace, range of special effects and access to exotic locations of big budget films and depend more on solid narrative qualities and quieter introspection. Mike Lorence suggests that *Where is My Friend's Home?* is impelled by no less urgency than a Western film but expresses urgency through naturalistic means rather than assaulting the viewers' senses.<sup>2</sup> Second, it is widely assumed that children prefer to watch films whose characters are ethnically similar to themselves. Third, there are widely held assumptions that cultural boundaries are not permeable

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.bfi.org.uk/education/conferences/watchthis/>

<sup>2</sup> *Khane-ye doost kodjast?* (*Where Is the Friend's Home*, Iran - 1987), <http://www.metalasylum.com/ragingbull/movies/friendshome.html>

enough for films to cross them, and that audiences, especially in English-speaking countries, are unwilling to watch foreign films with subtitles. These factors are exacerbated with family/children's films, since children's ability to interpret cultural codes can be limited, as can their ability to handle subtitles. Films thus need to be dubbed, which involves an additional expense as well as problems of adaptation. On the other hand, Hollywood films travel much more easily and this movement can be attributed to the Disney domination of family films for many decades, the impact of globalisation as Westernisation, and the audience appeal of these glittering, expensively produced films (Fu and Govindaraju). The financial domination of local cinema chains by Hollywood, which limits production and distribution of local films in many countries, is also an obvious factor.

A subtler challenge for transcultural viewing is a common characteristic of creative textuality: words and images, separately and in combination, carry a greater implication of meaning than simple denotative meaning. Key interpretative questions then arise: "how far do meaning implications carry over from one culture to another, and how far does it matter if viewers in another culture substitute local, culture-specific implications?" (Lee, Tan and Stephens 3) My argument here is that the core of meaning is carried from one culture to another by global conventions and standard film techniques. The crux of the argument is that the visual elements of film are essentially metonymic: that is, what viewers see is part of a larger whole; images have a literal meaning but also have symbolic meaning; and images in juxtaposition function to evoke complex metonymies (Lee, Tan and Stephens 3).

Cattrysse develops a complementary argument as to why European film ought to be able to cross cultural boundaries. Concentrating on story and form, he suggests that "the presence or absence of specific rhetorical devices in texts" shapes the choices audiences make with respect to "the relocation of meaning" (40). From the perspective of a cognitive studies approach, which I am taking in this paper, Cattrysse's "rhetorical devices" are better regarded as *scripts*.<sup>3</sup> His primary example is a summary of some basic components of

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<sup>3</sup> A script in everyday life is a stereotyped sequence of actions that is part of a person's pre-stored knowledge about the world. Scripts encompass ordinary behaviour, such as the

drama formulated as *Who wants what very badly and why can't he?* (44), which involves a protagonist, a goal, a strong motive, and an antagonist or obstacles. As Cattrysse observes, this story-frame can be realised in myriad ways. In *Where is My Friend's Home?*, Ahmad (protagonist) wants to find his classmate's house (goal) to prevent him from suffering imminent misfortune (motive) and is thwarted by ignorance and adult disregard. It is thus a *quest-script* of a kind familiar in many narrative traditions.

A script may also be formal and thematic. Another way to describe *Where is My Friend's Home?* is to argue that its *quest-script* is instantiated by means of four components which – and I draw here on Brown and Babbington in *Family Films in Global Cinema* (6) – are a distinctive marker of a film for children. This script appears globally and, in a very broad sense, should facilitate boundary crossing. The four components are:

1. A relatively simple form, wherein the narrative is chronological, consecutive, and linear, with a minimal inclusion of back matter; events are presented as more or less continuous action, but with temporal ellipses which elide unimportant details (for example, characters leave one place and arrive at a destination without the journey shown, or only part of the journey). The spectator is not intended to be made conscious of the temporal ellipses in the film's narrative;
2. A child and the child's perspective are central to the narrative while adult figures are marginalized; adults who occupy minor or antagonist roles, such as Ahmad's bullying grandfather, are often caricatures or melodramatic figures;
3. The child protagonist learns responsibility (Ahmad is in frequent conflict between the responsibility he feels for his friend's future and the responsibilities imposed upon him by adults: to learn to show consideration for others is one of the universal lessons of children's literature and film);
4. Friendship is important both as a narrative function and a theme.

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process involved in catching a train from one place to another, and familiar plot structures that readers call upon to anticipate the unfolding story logic of creative works (Lee 2014, 276).

There are also more subtle, techno-cultural elements of cinema which in principle enable transcultural viewing. Our project identified six key (and overlapping) filmic strategies which when brought together in film enable transcultural accessibility. These elements in themselves also have an important function to articulate a film's thematic ideas, and this function, in turn, makes an important contribution to transcultural understanding. Themes may be spelled out quite overtly in dialogue and voice-over, but their more powerful expression is in the techniques. Kiarostami's themes include family, friendship, home/homelessness, and the economic disparity between the haves and have-nots, and these themes are expressed through verbal and visual narrative, and by an extensive use of metonymic juxtaposition. There isn't space in a brief paper to discuss all six elements, so here I'll deal with the first four.

#### **The use of common techniques**

Zoom, close-up, long takes, dissolves, amongst others, are basic cinematic techniques that function, for example, as cues of emphasis. Viewers in any culture can access these techniques, and meaning thereby is translocated between cultures. would guarantee the conveyance of meaning across cultures. Such global filmic codes and techniques play a key role in the construction of transcultural viewer subject positions. I will refer to several of these while discussing other features, so now I will just give one example. The first close-ups of people in the film appear when the teacher begins to berate Mohammad Reza for failing to do his homework properly. A close-up can be used early in a film to direct viewer attention by what it focuses on and so establish what is important: in this example, the move to extreme close up when the camera cuts from Mohammad Reza to Ahmad, with background characters now entirely blurred makes it clear that Ahmad is the main character.

#### **The employment of *conceptual metaphors* (or *image schemas*).**

Conceptual metaphors are "reiterated patterns of our common physical and perceptual interactions with the world. [They] are commonly employed

figuratively because physical experiences are used as metaphors for abstract phenomena, as Lakoff and Johnson argued in the late 1980s" Lee, Tan and Stephens 6-7). Image schemas such as up-down, in-out, centre-periphery, close-far are applied metaphorically to convey abstract significance to viewers. They are aspects of human cognition, and are not culture bound. Their meanings may vary considerably, however, so audiences still need to develop "text-specific knowledge" to interpret them.

Two image schemas which frequently occur as visual images in family films are *verticality* and *container*:

- *verticality*, or up-down/high-low. The schema metaphorically expresses aspiration and despair, achievement and failure, happiness and sadness, and control and submission. In cinema the schema is expressed through camera positioning, and of course it's quite common to film from child height.
- *container*, or *in-out*. This image schema characteristically expresses belonging and exclusion, safety and danger, and love and rejection. Since *home* is imaged as the core of being, it appears often as a metaphor, and even when literally represented in a film is apt to carry metaphorical significance. *Container* metaphors can also signify confinement, especially if visual images evoke claustrophobic experience.

An important schema that operates in conjunction with these two is the schema of cause-and-effect, a schema which enables viewers to causally link the events of a film, but also to perceive embodied objects or situations and attribute them to a cause. Hence a viewing audience perceives visual schemas and interprets them in relationship to the unfolding experiences of characters within the film. This is an obvious point, but it is a process whereby intersecting schemas comment on the status of characters.

A simple example of the verticality metaphor occurs when Ahmad leaves Koker to run to the neighbouring village. The first obstacle he faces is the zig-zag path up a high hill, a well-known moment from this film. Viewers recognise that Ahmad has already faced some impediments, so their specific-text knowledge enables them to instantiate the aspect of the verticality metaphor which signifies struggle against powerlessness. Meanings

associated with “running upwards” may also include desire, aspiration and ambition, so the meaning a viewer instantiates will depend on context. In this image (Figure 1), the low camera angle and vector pointing toward the mountain-top (which is just within the screen, although the tree at the top breaks the frame) may suggest things out of reach, and “out of reach” in turn is both literal as a physical fact and metaphorical (“something that seems unattainable”).



Figure 1. Verticality metaphor

The *container* schema – expressing positionality inside, outside, or in a border zone – pervades family film, and, once it’s pointed to, is very obvious. Even in its obviousness, however, the schema contributes a conceptual and affective weight to a scene and, like schemas in general, conveys a richness of significance beyond the visual story material. Home is not a place of emotional comfort for Ahmad: he is confined when he is desperate to save his friend from punishment and expulsion from school; as he does his homework and eats, wild weather intrudes by flinging the door open. When he runs from house to house searching, he is often filmed from awkward angles in strange architectural configurations. Having been told he must find a blue door, he is

depicted (Figure 2) as he walks away from a door that has proved to be a false lead. At this point the camera has been moved to shoot the scene from right of centre and from a high angle across a crumbling retaining wall, evoking the conceptual metaphor DOWN. He is contained by the visual confinement created by the wall in the foreground, the uneven stairs, by the way the blank wall behind him forms a corner here, and by the dilapidated path he is walking up. Such effects render the *mise en scène* as incoherent and thereby create a high level of viewer anxiety with respect to the character.



Figure 2. Camera angle and *mise en scène* as sources of anxiety

### **Emotional mirroring**

Another feature which readily crosses cultural boundaries is emotional mirroring. Films often present actions which invoke schemas in the minds of the audience (schemas of love, fear, physical suffering, and so on), and when a cue evokes such a schema, viewers respond project their own schema onto the scene. As Keith Oatley (2013) suggests, this evocation and projection are accompanied by certain emotions in the viewer, based on concern felt for participants or anxiety about outcomes. If viewers are projecting their own schemas onto the action, the implication is that viewers from any culture will experience an emotion relevant to the narrative at this point, even if that



emotion is not the same for all viewers, whether intra-culturally or transculturally.

Emotional mirroring is often flagged within a film by facial mimicry – that is, when the facial expression of a character within the scene reflects the expression of another character, this can be a cue for viewers to replicate the underlying emotion, or at least to evoke their own schemas for such an emotion. As Mesquita and Frijda argue, a schema for a common type of event implies the recognition of a particular, culturally shared meaning to events of that type (180). Further, they point to research which suggests that, “by and large, certain kinds of events elicit emotions in widely different cultures and that they tend to elicit the same emotions in these different cultures” (181). There are, of course, wide variations within an individual culture, but cinematic representation is apt to offer viewers a familiar schema as a ground and familiar techniques, and the “same” scene may produce a different affect. Emotional mirroring is deftly used near the beginning of *Where is my Friend’s Home?* when Ahmad and Mohammad Reza wait in apprehension for the angry outcome of the situation in which the teacher is berating Mohammad Reza for again failing to do his homework in his workbook (see Figure 3). Viewers find it easy to attribute the same emotion to both boys, and hence deduce that Ahmad is capable of high levels of empathy. The incident is the catalyst for Ahmad’s subsequent quest to find and help his classmate.



Figure 3. Emotional Mirroring: Ahmad and Reza

### **Metonymy and especially metonymic juxtaposition**

Meaning in film is often suggested by means of metonymy, to the extent that film tends toward metonymy to a much greater degree than toward metaphor (Ivanov 177), so that film seems to be essentially a metonymic medium. Filmic metonymy is a visual sign in which a part or attribute of something stands for the whole, or the whole might stand for a part. Metonymy is based on a pre-existing relationship between its two components, so cinematic metonymies tend to pass unnoticed but add a thickness of meaning to the text. The homework book Ahmad is striving to deliver is such a metonymy. It has a literal presence and function in the narrative, but also has figurative significance, representing variously the power adults wield over children, the use of education as a means of oppression, and so on. At one point an adult takes the book from Ahmad and tears out a page for his own use, despite Ahmad's protests. The action harks back to the moment near the beginning of the film when the teacher tears up Reza's homework because he has done it on loose sheets, not in the book. Such exercises of arbitrary adult power will resonate with child audiences anywhere. The unobtrusive operation of metonymy has long been recognized

as an aspect of the cinematic close-up. In most cultures of the world an understanding of part-whole relationships is developed in early childhood and is thus available as a skill to be later used when watching a film. This simple cognitive process enables a young viewer to comprehend more complex part-whole relationships in which denotative representations also convey figurative, connotative, and symbolic meanings.

The effectiveness of metonymy is that it carries its extra weight of significance lightly and different audiences – and different members of one audience – will perceive different significances. The visual representation of the hill outside Koker is a good example of such a metonymic effect: the image is intensely metonymic, and the effect of the metonymy is to impart deeper and more complex meanings to ‘ordinary’, literal objects. The zig-zag path is literally the most effective route up such a steep slope, but it also signifies the indirections Ahmad must take. Ahmad appears tiny because he is a long way from the viewer position, but he is also metaphorically small because he is regarded as insignificant in this world. This attitude is later evident in the useless or unhelpful answers people in Poshteh give him in response to his questions.

An important aspect of filmic metonymy which Oatley also comments on is what he refers to as metonymic juxtaposition: “The basis of this mechanism is that a metonym has two terms, A and B, and can imply many different kinds of relationship between them” (2013: 277). In film, metonymic juxtapositions can be between parts of an image, between shots, or between events. They can be effected by cutting from one image to the next or by dissolves. Each unit can already be a metonym, and thus a third metonym emerges from the juxtaposition, or metonym only emerges from the primary juxtaposition. Such a juxtaposition, which we may scarcely notice, occurs during the first nine minutes of the film, which are mostly taken up with the teacher berating Mohammad Reza for not writing his homework in his book. The classroom sequence ends with a long take (37 seconds) in which the teacher lectures on discipline, a theme running throughout the segment and a recurrent motif in the film. Action then cuts to the children running outside to play and soon Mohammad Reza falls and hurts himself. Then

follows another long take (36 seconds) in which Ahmad looks after his friend, which signifies empathy and responsibility. The film is thus structured so that the two long takes are a contrasting pair, each metonymic of how humans relate to one another, and then suggesting a further metonymy, a need for social change toward a more caring and less authoritarian society. A contrapuntal metonymy, also running as a motif through the film, is the trend to replace beautiful old lattice-work doors with sheet-steel doors. Viewers may not even notice these things, but process them in the cognitive subconscious. It is thus not very complicated in family film but is another global cognitive process.

As a concluding comment, I wish to suggest that a further global cognitive process enables audiences to store in memory a schema for developing a cognitive map of the social ecology which permeates a film. Such a map can function as a summary of much I have been arguing here. As I remarked in a lecture given in Shiraz in 2015 (and simultaneously developed as a more detailed argument), the core of social ecology is the concept of flourishing, the well-being of people in their interactions within the surrounding world: that is, interactions with habitation and social, institutional and cultural contexts, and the bearings such interactions have on notions of wholeness, humanness, naturalness and place in the larger order of things (Stephens 143). Ahmad's quest is a quest for well-being, to help his friend maintain a place in sociality in which he might flourish, and this is an action recognizable transculturally. The range of social ecological interactions is embedded in what is *proximal* (the local, personal and everyday) and thence unfolds within more distant environmental contexts and ever widening circles of reference and impact.

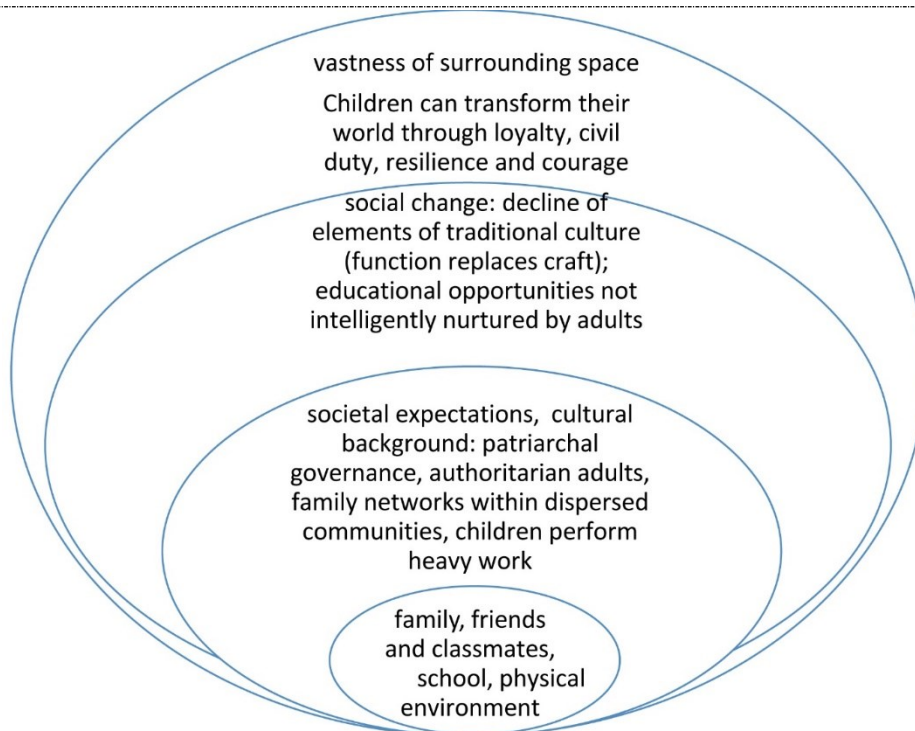


Figure 4. Cognitive Map of Elements of Social Ecology

There is still much to be done in research into processes of transcultural viewing. The simple conclusion at this point is that there is much more about family films that is conducive to transcultural viewing than obstructs it. The problem is not with the films but with economics, adult culture, and the persisting tendency for globalisation to flow only in one direction.

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