

Naderi's *The Runner*: A Cinema of Hope Amidst Despair

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Abstract

This article aims to read the film *The Runner*, by the critically acclaimed Iranian Director Amir Naderi, in the context of the Iranian Revolution and of the Iran-Iraq War. Naderi was inspired by the aesthetics of Italian neorealist cinema, and this film is a classic example of that influence. The events are seen through the eyes of an orphan boy named Amiro. Consequently, this article seeks to explore the manner in which the director has thrown light on the devastation of war through the prism of an innocent street child. Perhaps a bit surprisingly, this poignant story of struggle, despair and longing has a strong underlying message of hope for a promising future. In light of this, the article aims to show how, in the dialectic between the external environment and the characters' personal, subjective microcosm, the film's emotive content seeks to neutralise the more paralysing aspects of an adverse environment through a strong focus on the protagonist's perspective, allowing the viewers to moderate their objective assessment of the situation with a sympathetic viewpoint that disposes them to form an emotional bond with the characters. In short, it is our sympathy for Amiro that shapes our overall assessment of the events, and as we cheer the characters on, the story rewards our emotional investment by ending on a joyful note.

Keywords: Amir Naderi, *The Runner*, Iranian new wave, neo-realist cinema

Introduction

Iranian film director, screenwriter and photographer Amir Naderi began his career with still photography and turned to directing in the 1970s. He made his directorial debut with *Goodbye Friend* in 1971 and rose to international fame with the films *Waiting* (1974), *The Runner* (1975) and *Water, Wind and Dust* (1989). Naderi was recently honoured by Iran's Fajr (FIFF) International Film Festival (2019), when the official poster of its 37th edition featured the character Amiro from *The Runner*.

Iranian New Wave

Iranian New Wave Cinema emerged during the pre-revolutionary (pre-1979) era. The New Wave emerged as a protest against the melodramatic films that were widely popular at the time, dealing with societal and political issues by employing the techniques and principles of social realism. The film that paved the way for this new kind of cinema was Dariush Mehrjui's *The Cow* (1969), a film that “received the Critics’ Award in Venice (1971) and toured the world festivals. The Cow [...] is now considered a cult film [and] has been selected as the Best Film of Iranian Cinema in 3 different [occasions] by Iranian critics”. (Iranian Cinema and Performing Arts, n.p.). Zeydabadi-Nejad explains how the New Wave Cinema emerged in Iran:

From the late 1950s a number of socially conscious films, both documentary and fiction, were made, many of them by intellectuals including writers and poets who had earlier produced realist literary work and the New Poetry. While in Iran the film movement was named *sinema-ye motefavet* or Alternative Cinema, in the West it became known as the Iranian New Wave. (2010, p. 33)

As stated above, this cinema was profoundly influenced by Italian neorealism. The features of Italian neo-realism, like on-location shooting, the use of non-professional actors, poor and working-class protagonists, long takes, etc. are all elements present in Iranian New Wave films. We can identify the primary characteristics of Italian neorealism in *The Runner*: Naderi has made use of simple yet visually striking narrative, long shots, natural settings, and nonprofessional actors.

Iranian cinema experienced harsh censorship both before and after the Revolution. The filmmakers had to be very cautious, as the film would be banned if it contained any politically explicit theme. Significantly, most Iranian New Wave film directors made use of children as main characters in order to evade such censorship mainly because there are substantial restrictions to the portrayal of male-female relationships (The Characteristics of Iranian New Wave Cinema, n.p.).

Islamic Revolution 1979

The Islamic Republic was declared in 1979, under the political and religious leadership of Ayatollah Khomeini, who overthrew the Pahlavi dynasty founded by Reza Shah Pahlavi in 1925. Thus, the Imperial State of Iran received the new official name of Islamic Republic of Iran. One of the most tragic incidents of the revolutionary period was the massacre of more than 300 people in the Rex Theater in the southern city of Abadan, where they burned to death in a brutal act of arson. The audience was watching Mas'ud Kimiya's *The Deer*. (Dabashi, 2001, p. 31). The revolutionaries associated cinema with western modernisation. The veil was reintroduced, filmmakers avoided having female characters on screen and, if they did, they had

to adhere to the strict codes regarding the representation of women (Derayeh, n.p.) The new regime was initially opposed to cinema, but realising its importance for the dissemination of ideas, started using cinema as part of their own propagandistic agenda. Thus, the government founded the Farabi Cinema Foundation in 1983 (Farabi Cinema Foundation, n.p.). They believed that the right kind of cinema could educate people and the wrong ones would pollute the public mind and habits. So, they imposed restrictions on cinema in the form of censorship. Filmmakers now experienced a new kind of censorship, different from the one that prevailed during the Pahlavi period. Every filmmaker had to follow highly restrictive rules to be able to release their films.

Autobiographical Elements

Born in the southern Iranian port city of Abadan and orphaned at a young age, Naderi was mostly self-educated and learned the art of film making through photography and watching Hollywood movies. Naderi had to leave school at a very young age and had to fend for himself (DreamLab Films, n.p.).

The film's narrative is autobiographical because, like the protagonist, Naderi was an orphan and was very ambitious. He had to struggle in his life because he was not very well educated, but that did not obstruct his way in becoming a global icon of Iranian cinema. Naderi's desire to be taken away to some unknown land for a better future is fully characterised in the young boy through his love for airplanes, ships, and vehicles. They suggest movement, a permanent change, a shift to a better and more peaceful atmosphere. "This protoexilic film presents one of the most graphic inscriptions of the desire to escape to foreign lands. It also foreshadows its maker's own actual exodus from his homeland." (Naficy, 2001, p. 243). Owing to the growing involvement of the government and the strict codes of censorship, Naderi migrated to the United States in the early 1990s (DreamLab Films, n.p.). His last film made in Iran is *Water, Wind, Dust* (1989).

The Runner

The Runner (1985) was a remarkably successful post-revolutionary film that was shown at major international film festivals. The film was "shown in Venice and London and won the Grand Prize at the Nantes Festival of Three Continents" (Wong, 2011, p. 110). It was made under Kanun, the Iranian Institute for the Intellectual Development of Children and Young Adults (Langford, p. 62). Even though it is a film for children, Naderi encourages both children and adults to survive under grim circumstances through the experiences of the young boy Amero, who experiences all that life has thrown at him while keeping a positive outlook.

The Runner tells the struggle and hardship of an 11-year-old orphan boy named Amiro living on an abandoned ship, which reminds us of the director, whose "homes were rusting post-war hulks on the Gulf shoreline, moving from one to the next when older people claimed ownership" (Web, 1991). He does every job he can to survive, such as collecting bottles from the sea, shoe polishing and selling ice water, but not without the danger of having to fight off the older kids who pose a serious threat to the younger ones.

In the opening scene, we see a long shot of the sea, with Amiro (Madjid Niroumand) shouting and waving at the silhouette of huge oil tankers moving towards the port. He is awestruck seeing the airplanes, and the film has visually pleasing scenes of the airport and the ocean. In the next scene we see him picking rags near heaps of garbage along with other people.

We often witness how the older boys bully the younger ones and snatch away the things they have collected. We see Amiro being bullied by older boys for the discarded bottles collected from the sea. They become friends later, but this highlights the violence and the struggle that these children must endure to survive. His love for airplanes is so intense that he saves money to buy magazines with pictures of airplanes that he later hangs on the walls of his room. He has a large collection of these magazines, but he cannot read. An entire wall is covered with such pictures. He even climbs the fence and caresses the airplanes, races against them as they take off and land, keeps shouting, jumping and waving his hands with joy and laughter. When Amiro is not working or racing with his friends he spends his time looking at pictures of airplanes in the magazines.

Running: An Empowerment

For Amiro, running is not just a hobby, but also his life, his passion. He runs regardless of the scorching heat. It seems that, with this character, the director is attempting to teach the viewer to find happiness in every difficult and challenging situation, to fight for their dignity and respect and to keep moving forward in life with a positive attitude and a bright smile. This is evident in the film where two men steal his ice block, but he outruns one of them, knocks him down and retrieves his ice block. He is overjoyed not because he could save his ice block (which has melted to half its size), but because he was able to outrun the man, much older than himself, and thus defeat him in running. There is another instance where a cyclist doesn't pay Amiro for a glass of ice water, and the man rides away without paying any heed to Amiro's requests. He runs after the man, knocks him down and demands his payment. Here again we see his bright smile not because he could get the money but because he could outrun a man on a cycle. Every time he runs, he shows great improvement in general outlook. This indicates the power and force of his legs and the importance of movement.

There are several instances in the film's narrative where Amiro learns the true worth of his legs. One is when, for example, he witnesses the inability of crippled and older people to move. Movement and speed are the essence of his life. Another instance is when all the boys engage in collecting discarded bottles thrown into the ocean and a fisherman alerts them of a shark that's too close. He gets frightened and shocked and swims towards the shore, then looks at both his legs to make sure that he still has them. For him, his legs are no less than a treasure, his most prized possessions. After this incident, we do not see him collecting empty bottles while his friends continue to do the same work. Amiro finds other ways of earning his livelihood. His passion for running suggests his intense desire to better his condition, to have better living conditions, a better job, a good education, etc. These sequences show the importance of movement and change, the energy that can eventually allow him to navigate away from his present situation.

So the film highlights the lives of poor orphan children and their strength and endurance in coping with an inhumane society. Naderi endeavours to depict the cruelty inherent to this society by exposing the manner in which it treats its orphaned children. "In Naderi's Iranian films, the characters struggle against environmental difficulties, social hardships, and their own limitations" (Gadassik, 2011, p. 479). We see how Amiro is accused of stealing at the seaport by a foreigner whose shoes he had polished. They search his belongings but do not find any stolen object in his polishing kit. The people involved refuse to apologize but, Amiro's dignity is offended, so he waits for the foreigner to return at dusk and assaults him with his polishing kit. His self-esteem is as precious to him as his legs (running).

The children are content even though they do not have access to the basic necessities. They indulge in all sorts of play and activities in their spare time. Their favourite sport is chasing trains, riding in trucks, cycling, and running. The boys often engage in chasing a train along the tracks to see who gets to touch it first. This competition is not based on fair play, as the boys push and trip the ones that manage to get ahead of them. In one such sequence in the film, Amiro keeps running even though an older boy has won. The boys are surprised and ask him why he would keep running even though the race was over, and Amiro replies that he wanted to know how far and how fast he could run. For Amiro, these competitions are much more than winning. He sees it as an opportunity to improve his running skills.

Amiro is a very ambitious child; he understands that being uneducated will not help him in any way to improve his life, so he enrolls in a school. He doggedly endeavours to learn the alphabet and become literate. We see him religiously studying after school, during his free hours and when he is at work. We also see him reciting the alphabet standing on the rocks at the seacoast. The sound of the wind, water, and his alphabet recital join to form an organic whole. This is how Dabashi describes this scene.

The alphabet sequence of *The Runner* remains the most glorious lesson in literacy beyond words, and it is one of Naderi's greatest achievements in his virtuoso performances as a sound designer: the noises of water, wind, fire, and dust all collecting momentum to syncopate Amiro's recitations of the Persian alphabet. (2007a, p. 242)

The last sequence is striking, as it brings both the fire and ice elements together in one scene. A block of ice is placed on a barrel with the background of fire from a burning oil well. The children are to compete against each other and the one who gets the ice first is proclaimed the fastest runner and thereby the winner. The group of boys consists of both older and younger ones. The race begins and, just like the previous competition, they begin to hit and push each other to move forward. The boys not only run the race, but also keep an eye on their competitors. Amiro manages to push and knock down other contestants, including the older boys, skilfully disrupting their progress. He rushes towards his ice trophy; ecstatic, he drums on the barrel and then lifts the ice block, which is quickly melting because of the heat from the burning oil wells. He lifts his melting trophy and jumps and shouts in pleasure and excitement. Performing an enthusiastic dance, he looks at his opponents, who are exhausted and are dying of thirst. Amiro rushes towards them with the ice block and they quench their thirst. Dabashi explains this beautiful scene:

What do people see when they see this block of ice near the fire? A Universe. Those two items are insignia of a universe- ice the soul of salvation from the ungodly heat of summer, placed next to a fire whose raging flames exude an elemental violence at once life-affirming and deadly. The visual contrast of the block of ice and the raging fire command the camera's undivided attention. (2007b, p. 84).

Iran Iraq War

Under the leadership of Saddam Hussein, Iraq invaded Iran in 1980. *The Runner* was made during the Iran Iraq war (1980-1988). Iran was isolated in the war as most of the nations supported Iraq. Only Syria and Libya supported Iran. The major powers like the Soviet Union, France, Saudi Arabia, The United States etc. sided with Iraq (Iran-Iraq War, n.p.). This isolation is depicted in the film through the life of the street orphans, who have no support, no care from the outside world. Amiro's struggles in society is the collective struggle of the people during

the war. They wish to escape the situation and are hopeful that they will eventually overcome. Rastegar explains:

The Runner gives significant emotive charge to the self-perception of Iranians as being an isolated and marginalized nation struggling in a nearly cosmological conflict, one of many parentless and self-made children who live in a world where they are compelled to brutally compete against one another (the backdrop of oil fire burning in the field where the boys undertake their race only makes the link between geopolitical concerns and competition over natural resources more clear). (2015, p. 145)

Naderi is from Abadan, a port city in southern Iran that was devastated in the war. He has witnessed his hometown and its people suffer. He alludes to the futile attempt of nations engaging in such kind of mass destruction. The final scene in the film testifies to this fact: The ice trophy in the final sequence of the film is not permanent or real; the trophy melts, pointing to the fact that winning a war is like winning an ice trophy. War, no matter who wins or loses, brings destruction and devastation to life and property. Instead of waging wars, nations should put their resources to better use.

The film ends with Amiro memorising his alphabets and an airplane flying above him. This suggests that his hard work will eventually pay off and he will rise high and reach great heights, just like the airplane soaring above him.

Conclusion

The people of Iran went through hard times during the revolution and the war. The war came immediately after the revolution, creating havoc in the lives of innocent people. *The Runner* represents a country and its people struggling to overcome a very difficult situation. Gadassik analyses the filmmaking of Naderi before and after the revolution:

The films Naderi made before the revolution reflect national outrage about social injustice and political unrest, while the films he made in the country after the establishment of a new regime evoke sadness for a nation damaged by conflict and suggest a brighter future. (2011, p. 474).

Thus, the film promises a bright future for Amiro even though his present circumstances are not favourable. Amiro is self-righteous, cheerful, hardworking, intelligent and optimistic; a great future is certainly in store of him. Amiro, with his innocent smile, determination and inspiring energy is an encouragement to all who struggle to overcome difficulties, reminding them that with a positive attitude, a wish to excel and the defiant outlook that allows the person to look beyond current limitations, one can eventually overcome.

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