

We are saved by light.

A theological review of THE COLOR OF PARADISE, the 1999 **** Iranian film by Majidi (known also for "The Children of Heaven," "God Shall Come," & "The Father").

JESUS says "I am the **light** for the world! Follow me and you won't be walking in the dark. You will have the **light** that gives life."--Jn.8.12; 9.5 ("I am the **light** for the world.") CEV (9.5: TEV also has "for.").

STORY-LINE: Blind boy whose father wants to be rid of him without damage to him. Son loves everybody unambiguously & is loved ambiguously by the father and unambiguously by everybody else.

SETTING: Rural Iran, breathtakingly beautiful landscapes; brief city-scenes, where the father goes (1) to fetch the son, who has just completed a blind-school term, & (2) to sell two small home-industry rugs.

PREPARATION: Loree & I go to the movies almost never, but on personal recommendation went to this one soon after its opening two years ago; then, a few days ago in our home, saw it again in video form. Last night, for 1½ hours in our livingroom, 12 of our church film-group discussed it: each-one-teach-all.

The film discussions always astonish everybody: "why didn't I see/get that?" Reminds me of Northrop Frye's saying, "The author brings the words, the reader brings the meaning."

1 When at the discussion's midpoint I asked "What's the film's dominant **mood**?"--no convergence: Majidi's art here focuses on what's behind the viewer's eyeballs (compare Stanley Fish's "reader-response criticism": a text's meaning is not in the text or the author's intention but in the reader, whom the author wrote to influence). Analogy: Debussey's "tone poems" have titles, but their meaning is in the ears of the listener.

The film's **tone**? The group's offerings: (1) subjectively meditative; (2) objectively "ominous" (the succession of scenes builds up threat-tension; the word is used by the two male members of the bride's family in explaining why the marriage to the boy's widowed father is off--possibly because the blind son has reappeared after having been apprenticed to a carpenter [the father having fetched the son home, for no apparent reason]); abandonment (a persistent fear in the blind boy, & in the viewer for the blind boy: 1st scene, at the blind school the boy waits so long for the father that by the time the father appears, the boy has concluded that nobody loves him: "I thought you would never come"); indecision (father "in the sandwich generation," torn between obligations to his widowed mother & his motherless son); bleak pathos (except for the boy's two sisters, none of the story's personae is ever far from sorrow from the past & worry for the future).

2 Transcendence? Almost everything's natural, ordinary, much even banal. But we are lifted up out of that dailiness by:

(1) The boy's uplifted, radiant face when he becomes aware of something he experiences as extraordinary, especially the sounds of birds. In the 1st scene, he hears the distressed cries of a nestling fallen out of the nest; &, feeling for & finding the unfledged tiny creature, he climbs the tree, feels for & finds the nest, & returns the bird to its sibling. PARADOX: The "light" in Muhammad's blind eyes when he's having an ecstatic experience of hearing or feeling.

(2) Birds appear also, in a barnyard scene, as providers of feathers, which in all cultures symbolize transcendence, as they provide earth-transcendence for the only creatures not earth-bound. At first we see what we'd expect, a few floating feathers as chickens scurry around. But gradually we realize that so many feathers are floating around that if provided by those few chickens would have left them featherless! The sky full of feathers is Majidi saying "Please don't think this film is only about a poor blind boy & his distraught father."

(3) The unnatural light on dead (drowned) Muhammad's little hand on his father's back as his father in deep, wailing grief hugs his lifeless son. As the light intensifies, the fingers begin to move! (Compare, in Jn.8.12 [above], Jesus as "the light that gives life.") Not resuscitation, which would require the agony of Muhammad's getting the water out of his lungs.

3 Religion? On the surface, Islam. The 1st words on the screen are the formula preceding Islamic utterances: "In the name of God, THE COLOR OF PARADISE." But the gripping ending (Majidi is famous for such), the dead boy's fingers moving, suggests resurrection, not resuscitation (which the Qur'an says happened to the supposedly dead Jesus). Did Majidi intend this film to appeal to Christians abroad as well as to Muslims at home? I'd like to ask him.

Chief Analyst

309 Lake Elizabeth Drive
Craigville, MA 02632
Phone/Fax 508-775-8008 520 per year
e-mail vandell@tottedmediaone.net

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4 Shame? Especially in tight, high-taboo societies, shame is a powerful negative sanction, dissuasive from attitudes & behavior deviant from the community norms. The film's web-blurb is "A father crippled by shame. A son with lessons to teach." The father's ashamed of having a blind child; ashamed to have him come home (so he appeals to the blind-school administrator to keep him: "I can't take Muhammad back"); ashamed when the boy's grandmother, the father's mother, runs away ("Come back. I'll lose face"); ashamed (we by this time assume) to let his son drown (though he hesitates before jumping in & trying [unsuccessfully] to rescue him).

But the **darkness** of the father's shame-driven life with outer eyes that can see but inner eyes that can't is offset by the inner **light** of the son, who (though his outer eyes can see no light) says "How beautiful the world is!" & radiates joy in spite of sorrow & the precariousness of his movement through the world & even of his existence.

5 Now let's look at the nouns in the film's **title**, "The Color of Paradise":

COLOR: Not some particular color, but colorfulness--let's rename as "The Colorfulness of Paradise." The family's (unpictured) cottage-industry is so common in Iran that many rugs (including the one around which we 12 sat last evening) are called "Persian" which are not made in Iran (our "Persian" was made in India). So, sheep. Then, carding. Then, dyeing (we see vats of four colors, with the wool being dipped in). Then, spinning (the wool in my sweater, for a "leaf-peeping" trip to NH with house guests two days this week, was spun by my best friend of 63 years). Then, weaving. Then, selling (which we see the father do in the city). Again, in each scene we see the son wearing a shirt of a different color.

PARADISE: While Hebrew roots have three consonants, Persian-Farsi have four: here, prds, paradise--the NT's only Persian word, lit. meaning an enclosed (walled) garden--metaphor. an ideal environment--transcend. heaven, which Jesus announced as an immediate death-gift to the penitent thief (L.23.43: "Today you will be with me in Eden": the Gk. wd. in Gn.2.8 is transliterated into Eng. as "paradise" [CEV: "a garden in a place called Eden"]). (The wd.'s other NT occurrences are 2Cor.12.4 & Rev.2.7.) (Irony: Persia seems to have been the sourceland of both crucifixion & the hope of resurrection.)

6 The closeness of **hearing** & **touch**, both of which obtrude in the son's experience: we hear when sound-waves touch our eardrums. When at film's beginning we see M. taking blind dictation in Braille, the sounds are unnaturally loud. When M. hears woodpeckers, he says "The birds are talking." When the father puts M. in a rural school, his classmates are fascinated by his use of Braille without any apparent prejudice against him for his impediment (PC, being "optically challenged"). Often we see M.'s hands, feeling. Under sea-water. Under creek-water. On trees & flowers. On faces. The blind "see" not only through their fingers with Braille but through their whole hands, indeed whole body.

Apprenticed to a caring carpenter, M.'s first lesson is to feel woods. When his father leaves him, he says "Nobody loves me." But the blind carpenter says "God loves the blind, though He is invisible to everybody." Trusting, M. responds "I'll tell Him all the secrets of my heart."

7 Miracle? That the father finally learns to love after the deaths of his mother & son--& through their deaths. He's gone through a Shakespearean inner struggle over the question How do I get rid of this obstacle (the blind child)?--but the real question he might have been asking himself is How do I learn to love? In Christian terms (though Majidi is Muslim), light-life-love comes to the father through death, the death of his Christ-figure son.

The triangulation of light-life-love in the gospel (esp. in the NT's John literature) was foreshadowed in Zoroastrianism, the Iranian religion preceding that country's Islamic take-over. See the three in the last scene: the child's dead hand becomes illuminated by a supernatural light & his fingers move with life as the wailing father, hugging his dead child, is overwhelmed with love & sorrow. A breathtakingly poignant, purgative, redemptive moment.