

Examining the Ethical Implications of Portraying Real Tragedies in Iranian Cinema: A Case Study of 'When the Moon Was Full' (2019)

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Abstract: This study delves into the ethical dimensions surrounding the portrayal of actual tragedies in Iranian cinema, with a specific focus on the film "When the Moon Was Full" (2019). Employing a phenomenological approach coupled with critical qualitative analysis, the research endeavors to establish a concise framework for representing real-life tragedies. This process entails a meticulous alignment of theoretical underpinnings with practical execution, thereby ensuring coherence and fidelity. The central inquiry of this article pertains to discerning the factors that contribute to the ethical complexities associated with depicting genuine tragedies in Iranian cinema. The findings highlight that while such portrayals may potentially raise moral concerns, they also serve as a catalyst for heightened societal awareness regarding pertinent social and ethical issues.

Keywords: Ethical Contemplation, Tragedy, Iranian Cinema, "When the Moon Was Full" (2019)

I. Introduction:

Movies possess a unique ability to vividly depict concepts and events, making them a potent tool for exploring intricate ethical dilemmas and shedding light on critical issues. However, when it comes to translating actual tragedies onto the screen, filmmakers encounter a complex moral terrain. Throughout history, tragedies, as a paramount artistic motif, have captivated the attention of creatives. On one hand, films can serve as a formidable instrument for educating audiences about historical events and the moral quandaries they entail. On the other hand, filmmakers must exercise caution to prevent the exploitation of real tragedies for entertainment purposes or the inadvertent trivialization of human suffering.

Although the terms "ethics" and "morality" are often used interchangeably in colloquial discourse, they bear distinct meanings. Ethics encompasses the principles and values that guide human behavior, delineating the distinctions between right and wrong, and determining what is considered virtuous or reprehensible. It pertains to an individual's character and the dynamics of interpersonal relationships. Morality, conversely, is closely associated with societal conventions, etiquettes, and norms. Ethics, as a specialized branch of philosophy, is dedicated to the systematic examination of moral principles. It probes into the essence of moral values, the theories underpinning behavior, and deliberates on matters of ethical discernment, delving into the discernment of what is morally just, unjust, virtuous, or malevolent. It also grapples with questions concerning the mechanisms driving moral decision-making, the interplay of self-interest and altruism, and the validity of various ethical frameworks.

Establishing moral guidelines can potentially impede the realm of art and cinema, as the aesthetic merit of a work is sometimes constrained by prevailing moral norms. While advocates of moral critique frequently steer clear of the notion of negative causation, which posits that "subpar art leads to moral decay," a substantial number subscribe to a version of the affirmative causation thesis. This perspective contends that "exemplary art fosters moral growth in its audience, contributing to personal betterment." They espouse this viewpoint.

Nonetheless, adopting an overly moralistic stance in appraising art and cinema can be precarious, often entwined with quasi-Puritanism and authoritarian ideologies. Instances such as the incineration of Nazi literature and the censorship of artworks deemed sexually provocative by certain Christian factions exemplify this excess of moralization (Danaher, 2021). While religion may offer a psychological foundation for moral principles, it may not necessarily present a rational or logical basis. Furthermore, an overemphasis on moralizing art can culminate in censorship and constrict the expanse of artistic freedom. The Hollywood Hays Code, which governed films from 1930 to 1968, imposed ethical parameters that led to self-censorship and the avoidance of contentious themes.

Within Iranian cinema, the portrayal of real tragedies often challenges prevailing moral and societal norms. The film "When the Moon Was Full" (2019) serves as an illustrative example of this genre. Through its depiction of a family's tragedy, the movie effectively engages the viewer in a contemplation of morals and societal values. This research centers on an exploration of this phenomenon, with a particular emphasis on the film "When the Moon Was Full" (2019). The ensuing inquiry seeks to address the following questions:

- What are the influential factors contributing to the ethical complexities surrounding the portrayal of genuine tragedies in Iranian cinema?

II. Research Methodology (Aligned with Objectives):

This article undertakes a comprehensive examination of the ethical considerations surrounding the portrayal of genuine tragedies in cinema, delving into the responsibilities incumbent upon filmmakers when addressing sensitive subjects. Additionally, it ventures into the nuanced query of whether the representation of real-life tragedies in film can adhere to moral and ethical standards. Employing a phenomenological approach coupled with critical qualitative analysis, the process of translating an artistic concept into a tangible creation is meticulously examined. This endeavor has yielded a series of comparable and congruent methodologies, meticulously calibrated to ensure seamless alignment between theoretical underpinnings and practical execution in the inclusive depiction of real tragedies. A diverse array of resources has been tapped in this research, encompassing specialized articles on film history, discourses on ethical quandaries within cinema, and critiques of specific films engaging with moral dilemmas.

III. Exploring the Fundamentals of Research

3-1- Problematics

The term "problematics" has found application across diverse fields such as philosophy, education, public relations, and business sustainability. It pertains to the process of identifying and framing a problem or issue in a specific manner, consequently influencing how it is comprehended and approached (Kim & Grunig, 2019). Michel Foucault adopted the concept of problematics to elucidate his method of scrutinizing power dynamics and societal practices. He viewed problematics as a means to interrogate prevailing assumptions and norms, thereby paving the way for fresh perspectives and courses of action. Broadly speaking, the concept of problematics proves valuable for discerning how problems and issues are defined and tackled within various contexts. It serves to unearth underlying assumptions and power dynamics while simultaneously opening up novel avenues for contemplation and intervention (Garrett, 2020).

3-2- Ethical Dilemmas

Ethics, a branch of philosophy, is concerned with the guiding principles and moral values that govern the behavior of both individuals and groups. Ethical dilemmas emerge when conflicting values or principles are at play, and a clear or straightforward resolution is not readily apparent (Donaldson, 2016). Within the domain of ethics, significant matters include understanding the essence of moral principles, grappling with conflicting

values without a readily apparent solution, and recognizing the contextual and historical-cultural dimensions of ethics (Braunack-Mayer, 2001). Additionally, the interplay between personal ethics and professional ethics, as well as the navigation of intricate ethical challenges, represent complex and multifaceted issues. Addressing these concerns necessitates a thorough examination of various values and principles across different domains.

3-3- Tragedy

Tragedy is a literary and artistic genre characterized by the portrayal of a story in a dramatic and impactful manner. It frequently explores themes such as love, betrayal, death, and the struggle for survival. Greek tragedy, originating from the ancient Greek period, often incorporates elements related to gods, power, and courage (Swift, 2016). Within Greek tragedies, we encounter a sense of cosmic justice and destiny that may appear peculiar by contemporary standards. Throughout the entirety of Greek tragedies, a form of inexorable justice prevails, which, by today's norms, may be perceived as unjust and contrary to our modern sense of justice. Engaging with these classical works inevitably leads to an exploration of the ancient Greek conception of what constituted right and just, and, more broadly, the legal framework that these tragedies advocated, which may seem foreign to us.

In the trilogy of Sophocles, comprising "Oedipus the Tyrant," "Oedipus at Colonus," and "Antigónē," numerous interpretations of justice as perceived by the Greeks are expounded upon, interpretations that are distinctive to the Greek mindset and can be comprehended within the philosophical milieu of that era (Abadi and Salmani, 2020).

Tragedy holds a significant position within the realms of art and literature, notably in its portrayal within Iranian cinema. These films often grapple with moral quandaries stemming from the subjects they explore. However, the realistic portrayal of tragic events in Iranian cinema has elicited objections from certain quarters.

3-4- Violence Portrayal in Iranian Cinema

The portrayal of violence in Iranian cinema has long been a subject of discourse and deliberation. It constitutes a multifaceted and intricate matter that can be examined through various lenses. Historically, due to cultural and political constraints, Iranian cinema primarily produced films with content intended to convey social and political messages. However, as societal conditions evolved over time, Iranian cinema underwent transformations, leading to a prevalent inclusion of explicit violence in contemporary Iranian films. In many instances, violence serves as a central element in the narrative, encompassing scenes of sexual, physical, psychological, and political aggression. In certain films, violence is employed as a vehicle to depict the harsh realities of society, while in others, it is gratuitously utilized to capture the audience's attention. Some films have faced criticism for their vivid depiction of violence, particularly against women. It is imperative to acknowledge that explicit violence in Iranian cinema mirrors the societal realities it seeks to portray and should not be dismissed. Simultaneously, it is crucial to exercise prudence and consider the impact of violence on the audience when incorporating it into films. For instance, the unbridled depiction of violence may elicit unnecessary fear and anxiety in certain viewers. Therefore, careful consideration should be given to how violence is employed in films for maximum efficacy. Below are noteworthy Iranian films that have garnered attention for their portrayal of violence:

- "The Paternal House" (2012): Chronicles the story of a family spanning several decades, featuring scenes of domestic violence.
- "Lantouri" (2016): Follows a group of criminals who perpetrate acid attacks on women. The film has faced criticism for its graphic depiction of violence.
- "I'm Not Angry!" (2014): Contains a scene depicting a man slapping a woman.
- "Tales" (2014): Includes a scene in which a man physically assaults a woman.
- "Kupal" (2017): Revolves around a man trapped in his car, experiencing a series of violent and distressing events.



Image 1: Depiction of the violent scene from the movie "When the Moon Was Full" (2019).

IV. Analyzing Cinematic Instances with a Critical Approach: Real Tragedies in World Cinema

4-1- Schindler's List (1993)

Films that portray real-life tragedies, such as the Holocaust, prompt ethical considerations regarding how to depict such events in a manner that is both respectful and informative. One notable example that has received acclaim for handling this matter delicately is Steven Spielberg's "Schindler's List." This film recounts the true account of Oskar Schindler, a German entrepreneur who saved the lives of over 1,000 Jews during the Holocaust. The narrative commences in Krakow, Poland, in 1939, depicting Schindler as an ambitious, profit-driven individual who views the war as an opportunity for financial gain. As the storyline unfolds, Schindler's empathy towards the plight of the Jews intensifies, leading him to employ his wealth and influence to shield them from the Nazis. "Schindler's List" (1993) has garnered praise for its sensitive and reverential portrayal of the Holocaust. It doesn't shy away from presenting the horrors of the concentration camps, but it refrains from exploiting them for shock value, in stark contrast to the approach seen in the movie "When the Moon Was Full" (2019). In the latter film, the director unapologetically portrays explicit violence, seemingly with the sole intention of shocking the audience. An audience already grappling with the impact of harsh socio-economic conditions on their personal and social lives may not require further jolts within the confines of a movie theater. Instead, the 1993 film "Schindler's List" places emphasis on the personal narratives of the Jews saved by Schindler and delves into the intricate character of Schindler himself. The use of black and white cinematography is recognized as an effective means to convey the brutality of the Holocaust. The strategic incorporation of color in select scenes, such as the iconic image of the little girl in the red coat, serves to highlight individual human stories within the broader tragedy. "Schindler's List" (1993) is based on factual events but is not a documentary. It leverages these facts to construct a compelling narrative, while maintaining the overall integrity of the historical truth. Another ethical consideration pertains to the representation of victims of disaster. In "Schindler's List" (1993), rather than presenting faceless victims, the Jews are depicted as multifaceted and unique individuals. This approach has been lauded for its sensitivity and regard for the dignity of an entire people. Conversely, in the film "When the Moon Was Full" (2019), we witness the passivity of the main character and his parents. The film instrumentalizes characters as instruments to further its ideological objectives. "Schindler's List" (1993), on the other hand, stands as an exemplar that addresses a genuine tragedy with sensitivity, respect, and artistic finesse. The film's focus on the human stories of the Jews saved by Schindler, as well as the intricate persona of Schindler himself, serves to convey the horror of the Holocaust while spotlighting the resilience and humanity of those who endured it.



Image 2: Sniper in Position - Employing Monochrome Cinematography - Scene from the Film "Schindler's List" (1993)

4-2- The Pianist (2002)

"The Pianist" (2002) stands as another exemplary portrayal of a genuine tragedy, handled with sensitivity and authenticity. This film recounts the life of Wladyslaw Szpilman, a Polish Jew and accomplished pianist, who miraculously survived the Holocaust. The narrative unfolds within the confines of the Warsaw ghetto, where Szpilman and his family endure harsh and unsanitary conditions. As the situation deteriorates, Szpilman finds himself separated from his family and compelled to evade the clutches of the Nazis. He spends the remainder of the war in clandestine survival, navigating a city scarred by conflict and genocide.

Director Roman Polanski encountered a profound moral and artistic quandary in depicting the horrors of the Holocaust. On one hand, he aspired to present a starkly realistic portrayal of the suffering and loss endured during this period. On the other hand, he grappled with the imperative to approach this objective with utmost reverence for the victims and survivors, eschewing any inclination to exploit their tragedies for mere entertainment. Rather than attempting to encapsulate the entirety of the Holocaust, Polanski adopted an approach that homed in on the singular experiences of Szpilman. This enabled him to craft a more intimate and personal depiction of the tragedy, sidestepping the potential pitfalls of trivialization or sensationalism.

The film is further distinguished by its judicious treatment of explicit violence. One of the film's chief merits lies in its steadfast commitment to authenticity. Drawing heavily from Szpilman's memoirs, the director painstakingly recreated the historical milieu and events. The outcome is a cinematic work that resonates with the lived experiences of the victims and pays tribute to the resilience of those who weathered the Holocaust. It's important to underscore, however, that while this film is grounded in factual accounts, it is not a documentary. This approach invites contemplation on the delicate equilibrium between accuracy and moral considerations in films that grapple with real-life tragedies.

While it is imperative to uphold the integrity of the facts and the experiences of the victims, filmmakers are also entrusted with the responsibility of crafting a work of art that is both authentic and meaningful to its audience. "The Pianist" (2002) is an illustrative testament to the successful portrayal of a genuine tragedy, executed with both sensitivity and fidelity. By centering on the individual's journey and eschewing sensationalism and exploitation, the film delivers a poignant and impactful representation of the Holocaust. Concurrently, it prompts vital ethical inquiries about the interplay between artistic expression and reverence for the victims and survivors of actual tragedies. In light of this, we turn our attention to a film that incorporates a more pronounced degree of violence.



Image 3: Striking a Balance Between Accuracy and Morality in Violent Scenes - a Frame from the Film "The Pianist" (2002)

4-3- "Hotel Rwanda" (2004)

"Hotel Rwanda" (2004) directed by Terry George stands as another poignant portrayal of a genuine tragedy. The film is grounded in the harrowing events of the Rwandan genocide in 1994, a period marred by the loss of approximately eight hundred thousand lives in a mere 100 days. The narrative revolves around Paul Rusesabagina, the manager of a hotel who provided refuge and protection for those fleeing the genocide. Despite being a Hutu himself, Paul leverages his communication and negotiation skills to safeguard the lives of the refugees within the confines of the hotel. The film unflinchingly depicts the atrocities of the genocide, including the unspeakable violence and murders that transpired beyond the hotel's walls. Undeterred by the imminent danger, Paul perseveres in his mission to shield the refugees until their eventual rescue by the United Nations.

Fidelity to historical accuracy is paramount when conveying true tragedies on screen. The film must strive for utmost precision in representing the events and the individuals involved. In this regard, "Hotel Rwanda" (2004) admirably captures the raw brutality and bedlam of the genocide, while also paying homage to the gallantry of Paul Rusesabagina. Another critical ethical consideration is sensitivity, extending not only to the victims and their families but also to the broader cultural and historical backdrop against which the events transpired. "Hotel Rwanda" (2004) exhibits this sensitivity in its portrayal of the genocide's victims as genuine individuals with intricate family lives, resisting reduction to mere statistics or passive figures.

This cinematic work holds significance in that it illuminates a tragic chapter in history often unfamiliar to many. The film serves as a vehicle for raising consciousness about the Rwandan genocide and underscores the imperative of collective action to forestall the recurrence of such heinous acts. It also underscores the valor and heroism exhibited by Paul Rusesabagina and the refugees he sheltered.

In conclusion, films that grapple with real-life tragedies wield substantial potential for educating audiences about historical occurrences and the shared human experience. However, it is incumbent upon filmmakers to navigate ethical considerations, chief among them being accuracy and sensitivity, when undertaking such projects. "Hotel Rwanda" (2004) exemplifies a film that adeptly portrays a true tragedy with both sensitivity and precision, while also celebrating the fortitude and valor of its central characters.



Image 4: Demonstrating Sensitivity to the Cultural and Historical Context of the Events - Portraying Characters as Authentic and Proactive Individuals - a Frame from the Film "Hotel Rwanda" (2004)

V. Findings

To address the inquiry, "What are the influential factors contributing to the ethical complexities surrounding the portrayal of genuine tragedies in Iranian cinema?" and drawing from the sources referenced, we have deduced that there is a necessity to establish boundaries and regulations concerning the extent, manner, and substance of violence depicted in Iranian cinematic productions. With this objective in mind, a framework grounded in the critical thinking methodology has been proposed to underscore the imperative of meticulousness in narrative presentation. This framework holds the potential to offer a well-defined classification system for interventions in the exhibition of cinematic works.

Violent Content	Nature of Violence	Extent of Violence
Depicting a limited number of violent scenes that enhance the film's narrative without being excessively distressing.	Violent scenes presented with suitable formatting and without an excess of graphic details.	Minimal
Incorporating a moderate number of violent scenes that serve the story's progression, though potentially unsettling for some viewers.	Violent scenes displayed with fitting format and a moderate level of detail.	Moderate
Including a substantial number of violent scenes that contribute to the storyline, yet may be highly distressing and discomforting for certain audiences.	Violent scenes showcased with fitting format but with an abundance of graphic details.	Substantial

Table 1: Framework for Incorporating Violence in Alignment with Narrative Precision / Source: Author's compilation from the research studies conducted for this investigation.

In broad terms, the creation of films depicting real-life tragedies serves multiple purposes, including the intent to raise public awareness, address social and political concerns, and champion human rights. Nevertheless, certain

influential factors contribute to the ethical considerations surrounding the portrayal of genuine tragedies in Iranian cinema. These include:

Respecting Individuals' Rights:	When portraying real-life tragedies, it is imperative to uphold the rights of the individuals involved. This entails obtaining proper consent before using people's images.
Consideration for Victims' Families and Friends:	When a tragedy involves an individual, it is crucial to show respect for the families and friends of the victims. Avoiding the use of images that may cause distress to them is paramount.
Adherence to Moral Principles:	Portraying real-life tragedies requires a commitment to ethical and moral principles. This entails refraining from using images that could potentially disturb individuals, particularly those struggling with mental health issues.
Striking a Balance Between News and Entertainment:	Some films may, in the pursuit of audience engagement, depict real-life tragedies in a manner that could be considered unethical. Therefore, it is essential to maintain equilibrium between providing factual information and avoiding sensationalism.
Safeguarding Privacy:	When depicting real-life tragedies, it is imperative to respect individuals' privacy. This involves refraining from using images that may disclose personal information.
Acknowledging Psychological Impact on the Audience:	Real-life tragedies can evoke negative emotions and have a psychological impact on the audience. Hence, it is crucial to exercise discretion when selecting images, avoiding those that may cause discomfort or distress to viewers.

Table 2: Influential Factors in the Ethical Portrayal of Tragedy // Source: Author's compilation from the research studies conducted for this investigation.

VI. Conclusion:

Movies possess the unique ability to elicit profound emotions and leave a lasting imprint on their audience. When filmmakers opt to portray real tragedies, they bear a weighty responsibility to contemplate the moral implications of their choices. The following are pivotal ethical considerations:

Respect for Victims: Filmmakers must approach the portrayal of real tragedies with utmost respect for the victims and their families. Sensationalism and exploiting events for entertainment should be avoided. Instead, the focus should be on providing an accurate depiction of the events and their impact on those involved.

Accuracy and Fidelity to Truth: Filmmakers are duty-bound to uphold accuracy and honesty when depicting genuine tragedies. Distortion of facts or presenting a biased viewpoint must be avoided, particularly in cases where victims or their families are still living and memories remain vivid.

Sensitivity to the Audience: Filmmakers must be attuned to the potential emotional impact of their work on the audience. Gratuitous displays of violence or trauma should be eschewed, with appropriate warnings or disclaimers provided when necessary. Moreover, consideration should be given to the potential effect on vulnerable demographics, including children and individuals grappling with mental health issues.

Artistic Freedom and Responsibility: Filmmakers enjoy the prerogative of artistic expression and should not be unduly censored or constrained. However, this freedom is accompanied by the responsibility to contemplate the moral repercussions of their choices. They should be open to dialogue with critics and the public, and receptive to constructive feedback.

In conclusion, the ethical dimension of portraying real tragedies in cinema is a multifaceted issue demanding thoughtful examination of various factors. Filmmakers must strike a delicate balance between their artistic license and the duty to render a truthful and respectful representation of events and their profound impact. Through such discernment, they can create films that are both impactful and morally sound.

Resources:

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