

The Relationship between Art and Life in the Feature Film *Gabbeh*, by Mohsen Makhmalbaf: The Bakhtinian Perspective on the Scene / A relação entre arte e vida no longa-metragem *Gabbeh*, de Mohsen Makhmalbaf: a perspectiva bakhtiniana em cena

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ABSTRACT

This article aims to conduct an analysis of the feature film *Gabbeh* (1996), by Iranian director Mohsen Makhmalbaf, promoting reflections that may, to some extent, contribute to the deepening of questions that involve the field of art and life. The theoretical-epistemological bases that support this analysis are the Bakhtinian studies in dialogue with the Vygotskian perspective. The analysis starts from some scenes of the film and seeks to establish a relationship between some Bakhtinian concepts, such as *dialogism*, *chronotope*, *polyphony*, *outsideness*, and the cinematographic art in question. **KEYWORDS:** Cinematographic art; Dialogism; Polyphony; Life

RESUMO

*Este artigo tem como objetivo realizar um ensaio-análise do longa-metragem *Gabbeh* (1996), do diretor iraniano Mohsen Makhmalbaf, promovendo reflexões que possam, em alguma medida, contribuir para o aprofundamento de questões que envolvem o campo da arte e da vida. As bases teórico-epistemológicas que sustentam esta análise são os estudos bakhtinianos em diálogo com a perspectiva vigotskiana. A análise parte de algumas cenas do filme e busca estabelecer uma relação entre alguns conceitos bakhtinianos – como dialogismo, cronotopo, polifonia, exotopia – e a arte cinematográfica em questão.*

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: *Arte cinematográfica; Dialogia; Polifonia; Vida*

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Art is too selfconfident, audaciously self-confident, and too high-flown, for it is in no way bound to answer for life. And, of course, life has no hope of ever catching up with art of this kind. “That’s too exalted for us”—says life. “That’s art, after all! All we’ve got is the humble prose of living.”
Mikhail Bakhtin



Figure 1 – Initial and final snapshots of the movie *Gabbeh*¹
Source: Adapted from Mohsen Makhmalbaf (1996)

From the epigraph that initiates this analysis essay – a genre not defined, but oriented to reflection – we can understand, based on the Bakhtinian perspective, that art

¹ The snapshots of the film *Gabbeh* (1996) presented in this article were authorized by Makhmalbaf Film House, by email, on September 17, 2019.

is not a mirror of the real; it does not coincide with life as it is configured. If so, there would be no reason for poetry to exist; prose would suffice. Nor would people listen to music and watch movies, for such activities would merely be a repetition of what is real, a replication of what is said and lived. Art, by contrast, seems to be what Vygotsky qualifies in *The Psychology of Art*: “[...] art relates to life as wine relates to the grape. [...] art takes its material from life, but gives in return something which its material did not contain” (VYGOTSKY, 1971).² Art, in this sense, can be seen as a transformative power of life.

From the Bakhtinian point of view, in Ponzio’s words (2010a, p.89), “art considers [...] [the] double of the real. It does not represent reality, but [...] taking one of Bakhtin’s expressions, it *figures its double*,”³ so that there is the recreation of reality, a *representation*. On the other hand, according to Voloshinov “*the poetic work is a powerful condensor of unspoken social evaluations*” (1983, p.19; author’s emphasis).⁴ Thus, it is worth considering that, although they do not coincide, art and life and life and art are in constant dialogue. As Bakhtin noted, “art and life are not one, but they must become united in myself — in the unity of my answerability” (BAKHTIN, 1990, p.2).⁵

Despite this introduction that seeks evidence of what *art* is for the authors mentioned, my goal here is not to try to define what this activity means, nor to bring any considerations about the reasons for its existence. Within the limits of such a genre, I propose to bring an analysis of some scenes from Iranian director Mohsen Makhmalbaf’s feature film *Gabbeh* (1996). For this, as the title of this paper indicates, the discussion will be based on the Bakhtinian perspective, bringing brief considerations about the concepts of polyphony, dialogism, chronotope, outsideness, among others, with the basic purpose of prompting reflections on the process of experimentation and analysis of the film. I know, however, that there could be several paths. *Gabbeh* is a

² VYGOTSKY, L. *The Psychology of Art*. Translated by Scripta Technica Inc. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1971. Also available at: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/vygotsky/works/1925/index.htm>. Accessed on: 18 Oct. 2019.

³ In Portuguese: “a arte considera [...] [o] duplo do real. Ela não representa a realidade, mas [...], para tomar uma expressão de Bakhtin, figura seu duplo.”

⁴ VOLOSHINOV, V. Discourse in Life and Discourse in Poetry: Questions of Sociological Poetics. Translated by John Richmond. In: SHUKMAN, A. (ed.). *Bakhtin School Papers*. Oxford: RTP Publications, 1983. pp.5-30.

⁵ BAKHTIN, M. Art and Answerability. In: BAKHTIN, M. *Art and Answerability: Early Philosophical Essays*. Edited by Michael Holquist and Vadim Liapunov; translated by Vadim Liapunov. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1990. pp.1-3.

film in which aspects of artistic composition are effervescent, and diverse themes could also be discussed for the production of this text. It would be relevant, in this sense, to choose different approaches, such as: reflecting on *chronotopic* aspects of the work; thematizing *memory* in the constitution of the subject-character; addressing the constitution of the character Uncle as a teacher-mediator; relating this movie to the films *The Silence* and *The Gardener*, part of Makhmalbaf trilogy. Finally, the possibilities would be many, but in view of this space-time in which I find myself, I take responsibility for preparing a text that aims to open a way for possible reflections on the work, without being exclusively attached to these themes.

Although Bakhtin has elaborated on art studies focused on the literary field, I understand that some of his concepts can be used for the analysis of other artistic manifestations.⁶ Thus, in using the Bakhtinian perspective to analyze aspects of *Gabbeh*, I will try to do it knowing this specificity. Moreover, it is worth noting that although art, such as literature, uses concept words and art, such as cinema, uses concept images, they have substantial differences in the processing of ‘reception’: both are *art of action* (ECO, 2016).

The novel says, “this happens and then that, etc.,” while the film sets before us a series of “this + this + this, etc.,” a series of representations of a present, which can only be ranked in the editing phase. [...] The treatment of temporality introduced by the film certainly had no effect on contemporary culture: it proposed, in such a violent way, a new way of understanding the succession and simultaneity of events (ECO, 2016, p.191; author’s emphasis).⁷

Thus, while still explaining the writing process and before starting any considerations about *Gabbeh*, it is worth noting that a genre is always oriented to a third party, to an *other*. Thus, in order to think about filmic production, it is important to understand that it presupposes an author and a recipient: the one who produces it, signs

⁶ Works by the authors Amorim (2006) and Spinelli (2005) show that the discussions of the Bakhtinian perspective are not limited to literature. Such authors, for example, brought cinematographic examples to elucidate Bakhtinian concepts such as *outsideness* and *chronotope* in their texts.

⁷ In Portuguese: “O romance diz “acontece isso e depois aquilo etc.”, enquanto o filme coloca diante de nós uma sucessão de “isso + isso + isso etc.”, uma sucessão de representações de um presente, hierarquizáveis apenas na fase de montagem. [...] O tratamento da temporalidade introduzido pelo filme certamente não deixou de provocar efeitos na cultura contemporânea: propôs de um modo tão violento um novo modo de entender a sucessão e a simultaneidade dos eventos.”

it, and the one to which the work is addressed: the “spectator.”⁸ According to Bakhtin (1986, pp.126-127; emphasis in original),⁹

Each dialogue takes place as if against the background of the responsive understanding of an invisibly present third party who stands above all the participants in the dialogue (partners). [...]. The aforementioned third party is not any mystical or metaphysical being [...]; he is a constitutive aspect of the whole utterance, who, under deeper analysis, can be revealed in it. This follows from the nature of the word, which always wants to be *heard*, always seeks responsive understanding, and does not stop at *immediate* understanding but presses on further and further (indefinitely).

In this sense, although the filmmaker, the author¹⁰ of a filmic work, directs his or her production to an *other*, this other is not only the immediate other, but an other that may be beyond. The artistic work does not tend to remain in the immediate plane; it tends to settle in the ‘never’, in the great temporality so that it escapes the limited time and orients itself to the other that is also history, culture (MIOTELLO, 2011).

And from here, in the West, I, as a spectator, with my view, occupy the *other's* place in relation to *Gabbeh*, the 1996 work by Iranian Mohsen Makhmalbaf. The aesthetic objectification assumes, according to Bakhtin (1990b, p.31),¹¹ “a powerful *point d'appui* outside itself; it requires some genuine source of real strength out of which I would be capable of seeing myself as another.” Thus, in the attempt to finish this author's work – albeit provisionally –, I dare (I repeat) not analyze it under some thematic focus, but under the magnifying glass of Bakhtinian concepts in some aspects

⁸ I consider *spectator* not in the passive sense that the word carries. I understand it in the light of Pereira's (2012) notion of ‘aesthetic attitude’: as someone willing to live artistic experience, in a way he or she actively contemplates it, *being available for it*.

⁹ BAKHTIN, M. The Problem of the Text. In Linguistics, Philology, and the Human Sciences: An Experiment in Philosophical Analysis. In: BAKHTIN, M. *Speech Genres & Other Late Essays*. Translated by Vern W. McGee. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1986. pp.103-131.

¹⁰ “The author must be understood [...] from the event of a work as a participant in that event and as an authoritative guide for the reader in that event [in the case of cinema, the spectator]. To understand the author in the historical world of his time, to understand his place in a social collective, his class position [...]: For the reader, the author inside a work is the sum total of the creative principles that have to be actualized; he is the unity of the transgredient moments of seeing that are actively referred to the hero and his world” (BAKHTIN, 1990, pp.207-208). For reference, see footnote 11.

¹¹ BAKHTIN, M. Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity. In: BAKHTIN, M. *Art and Answerability: Early Philosophical Essays* by M. M. Bakhtin. Edited by Michael Holquist and Vadim Liapunov; translated by Vadim Liapunov. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1990. pp.4-256.

of the movie that, considering my uniqueness and artistic experience, I think deserve some prominence.

According to Xavier, in *O Olhar e a cena* [The Gaze and the Scene], in the cinema,

[...] the relations between visible and invisible, the interaction between the immediate datum and its significance become more intricate. The sequence of images created by the editing process produces new relationships all the time, and we are always driven to make connections that are not really on the screen. We infer that editing makes suggestions. Meanings are generated less by virtue of isolation and [...] more by contextualization, for which cinema has an enviable freedom (2003, p.33).¹²

The camera's eye, from the author's point of view, leads the spectator to the perception of the images, suggesting interpretations. Although there is a subject presupposed in the process of creation of the film, this subject is not passive. He or she, from their singularity and historicity, interprets the succession of images in a unique way in their human existence, finishing the work. Xavier (2003) comments on the process of filmic experience:

Faced with the image-making apparatus, my interaction is of another order: it involves an eye that I do not see, and it does not see me. It is an eye because it replaces mine, because it willingly leads me to its place to see more... or maybe less. An inalienable aspect from my experience, the manufactured gaze is a constant offering of points of view. Looking more effectively, without refusing it, implies discussing the terms of that gaze. It is observing the world with it but also putting the spotlight on it, refusing the condition of full identification with the apparatus. It is looking more closely and being aware of the visible as well as what, out of the field, makes it visible (p.57).¹³

¹² In Portuguese: “as relações entre visível e invisível, a interação entre o dado imediato e sua significação, tornam-se mais intrincadas. A sucessão de imagens criada pela montagem produz relações novas a todo instante e somos sempre levados a estabelecer ligações propriamente não existentes na tela. A montagem sugere, nós deduzimos. As significações engendram-se menos por força de isolamentos [...] e mais por força de contextualizações para as quais o cinema possui uma liberdade invejável.”

¹³ In Portuguese: “Diante do aparato construtor de imagens, minha interação é de outra ordem: envolve um olho que não vejo e não me vê, que é olho porque substitui o meu, porque me conduz de bom grado ao seu lugar para eu enxergar mais...ou talvez menos. Dado inalienável de minha experiência, o olhar fabricado é constante oferta de pontos de vista. Enxergar efetivamente mais, sem recusá-lo, implica discutir os termos desse olhar. Observar com ele o mundo mas colocá-lo também em foco, recusando a

Following the camera with our eyes is not, therefore, having the same point of view of the object that guides us; nevertheless, from this image offered to us we are able to interpret the (un)established conditions, the implicit meaning, the spoken and the unspoken, the given and not given, and finally, the details that make up the totality of the work. In Bakhtin's words

In the realm of culture, outsideness is a most powerful factor in understanding. It is only in the eyes of *another* culture that foreign culture reveals itself fully and profoundly [...] A meaning only reveals its depths once it has encountered and come into contact with another, foreign meaning: they engage in a kind of dialogue, which surmounts the closedness and one-sidedness of these particular meanings, these cultures (1986, p.7; emphasis in original).¹⁴

Therefore, I seek, from my observational purview, to bring my aesthetic experience, my *finishing*, my experiences to the work in order to multiply the possible understandings.

The movie *Gabbeh*¹⁵ starts with the image of a carpet on a river (1min.22s), while the still camera shows it being carried along the current. Later, the spectator will realize that this same carpet is the representation of the story told in the movie. After this initial scene, the camera focuses on the design of another carpet (1min.54s) that is submerged in the river: this is when the narration of the story begins. On this carpet, however, there is a drawing of a couple on a white horse. This initial scene, though brief, may hint at the representation of *time*, *history*, which marks the whole unfolding of the narrative. The current that carries the carpet is the same that renews water: here we may be faced with a metaphor that refers to the very movement of life, this *continuum*, this process of unrepeatable experiences that is life.

After this scene, there is one in which, at first, it seems to me the most enlightening to understand the focus given to the feature film: the still camera focuses

condição de total identificação com o aparato. Enxergar mais e estar atento ao visível e também ao que, fora do campo, torna visível.”

¹⁴ BAKHTIN, M. Response to a Question from Novi Mir Editorial Staff. In: BAKHTIN, M. *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*. Edited by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist; translated by Vern W. McGee. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1986. pp.1-9.

¹⁵ In Persian, *Gabbeh* means carpet.

on a field landscape and, far off, an elderly couple arises, discussing about who will wash the carpet that the old woman carries on her back. At this moment, the old woman spreads the carpet on the floor (the same carpet of the beginning of the movie, which has the image of a couple mounted on a white horse), and she asks her husband:

Old woman: May I wash the gabbeh?

Old man: My pretty lady, who else but you is to wash it, after all?

Old woman: (touches the gabbeh) My pretty gabbeh, why are you blue? Why are you silent? Why won't you tell me who that horseman is? Let me know at least who has woven you.

(A gentle breeze blows. A girl in blue appears through the gabbeh. A canary flies off a branch. The old man raises his gaze from the fire. He is astonished.)

Old man: Fantastic! She is as beautiful as the full moon.

Old woman: What is your name, my young lady?

Girl: Gabbeh. (She puts her hand in and out of the limpid water of the spring. Drops drip from her fingers.) What a clear water! Won't you wash me?

Old man: Whom we'd wash if not you, Gabbeh Khanum?

(The blue gabbeh is immersed in the transparent water of the spring. Now the old woman is alone, scrubbing it with her feet.)

Old woman: May I rest my arms on your young shoulders? I'm old. I no longer have the energy.

Girl: (Who is again there, takes the old woman's hands and puts them on her shoulders) You are welcome.

Old man: You seem so familiar to my eyes. What is your father's name?

Girl: His name is warp. His name is warp and weft. There he is.

(Insert of nomads on the move. The girl's father, on horseback, is leading the caravan.)

Girl's voice: That's my father. He is a nomad. We are Qashqais. We can't feel at home anywhere. Even if we did, my father would set out a caravan so that we'd stop falling in love with any place. I fell for a loved one, a rider, a strange voice, someone like an illusion, who was following our caravan like a shadow so to take me away with him.

Box 1 - Extract from Gabbeh (3min.33s-5min-35s)

Source: Script: Gabbeh (<https://www.makmalbaf.com/?q=article/script-gabbeh>)

According to Bakhtin (1986 p.160),¹⁶

A work's author is present only in the whole of the work, not in one separate aspect of this whole, and least of all in content that is severed from the whole. He is located in that inseparable aspect of the work where content and form merge inseparably, and we feel his presence most of all in form. Literary scholarship usually looks for him in content excised from the whole. This makes it easy to identify him with that author who is a person of a particular time, with a particular biography and a particular world view. Here the image of the author almost merges with the image of a real person.

¹⁶ BAKHTIN, M. Toward a Methodology for the Human Sciences. In: BAKHTIN, M. *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*. Edited by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist; translated by Vern W. McGee. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1986. pp.159-172.

Considering Bakhtin's words, although we should not look for the author in *Gabbeh*, we know that the motivations for making this film come from a historical subject dated in time and space. The outcomes, the image sequences and the theme derive from someone who has goals with his art, even if they are diverse, without specificities, just for the spectator to experience it, nothing else. According to Bourriaud, "a work of art has no a priori useful function [...]; [it] is available and flexible" (2002 p.42).¹⁷

Thus, what we can see in Makhmalbaf's work is that he brings very symbolic cultural issues in the movie. The landscape itself, the colorful clothes, the sheep, the wool, the poetry and gabbeh itself are indications of an immersion in Iranian culture. By bringing to the core of the film a Persian carpet made by the nomadic tribes of Northern Iran, he seems to invite the spectator to establish an aesthetic experience with elements that are part of that culture. Moreover, throughout the film, we can consider that the director directs us to see the carpet not only as handicraft, but as art. The film, therefore, seems to indicate a constant metalanguage about cinema itself as an activity of the artistic field and the carpet as a Persian art that tells the story of a people.

Many steps are needed to make a Persian carpet and many people are involved in each of these steps, from choosing the material, the paints, the pattern design, the loom making, the carpet weaving itself, to marketing. The most commonly used materials in the manufacture of Persian carpets are sheep's wool, cotton and silk. These materials can be combined, and generally the warp and weft (longitudinal and transverse threads) are cotton. In carpets made by the nomadic tribes this part can be made of wool only (PÓLA; MACHADO, 2013, p.4).¹⁸

The film, which, in a way, tells the story of a nomadic tribe, brings all these aspects mentioned about the production of the Persian carpet. It consists of many threads, many colors and many hands. And many steps are also needed to make a

¹⁷ BOURRIAUD, Nicolas. *Relational Aesthetics*. Translated by Simon Pleasence and Fronza Woods. Paris: Presses du réel, 2002

¹⁸ In Portuguese: "Muitas etapas são necessárias para se fabricar um tapete persa e muitas pessoas estão envolvidas em cada uma dessas etapas, desde a escolha do material, das tintas, do desenho do modelo, da fabricação do tear, da tecelagem do tapete em si, da comercialização. Os materiais mais usados na fabricação dos tapetes persas são a lã de carneiro, o algodão e a seda. Esses materiais podem ser combinados, sendo que geralmente a urdidura e a trama (fios longitudinais e transversais) são de algodão. Nos tapetes feitos pelas tribos nômades essa parte pode ser feita apenas de lã."

movie: sound, image, costumes, scenery, characters, light. How many gazes, how many contributions to making it a meaningful whole! Moreover, beyond the film and the carpet, many hands are also needed for a life. Makhmalbaf, therefore, in offering us his work, invites us to reflect on the very constitution of the art of tapestry, the art of film, as well as art in life and life in art.

In analyzing a particular work, whatever it may be, we cannot fail to think about its context of production. In light of Bakhtin, “the work also includes its necessary extratextual context. The work, as it were, is enveloped in the music of the intonational-evaluative context in which it is understood and evaluated” (1986, p.166).¹⁹ Thus, assuming that the director brings relevant images and situations from Iranian culture is a way of understanding his work as constituted in a given *chronotope*, revealing, thus, his individuality as an author both in style and in his worldview. This mark of individuality “creates special internal boundaries that distinguish this work from other works connected with it in the overall processes of speech communication in that particular cultural sphere” (BAKHTIN, 1986 p.75).²⁰ Understanding, for example, the use of the Persian carpet as central to his film is a way of also understanding it as the millenary art of this culture and, therefore, of reflecting on how this handicraft, which is also on the art plane, enters the world of Iranians’ life.

Apart from these considerations, it is also worth mentioning that the director, by bringing the speech of the elderly, questioning his wife about who, besides her, could wash the carpet, can, in a way, lead us to a critical reflection on the family structure of Iran, or the world itself, in which women are placed as the only possible domestic workers in that country. The possibilities are many and open the way for other interpretations. In this regard, I again use Bakhtin’s words [which refer to literary works] to allude to the cinematographic work:

The work, like the rejoinder in dialogue, is oriented toward the response of the other (others), toward his active responsive understanding, which can assume various forms: educational influence on the readers, persuasion of them, critical responses, influence on

¹⁹ For reference, see note 16.

²⁰ BAKHTIN, M. The Problem of Speech Genre. In: BAKHTIN, M. *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*. Edited by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist; translated by Vern W. McGee. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1986. pp.60-102.

followers and successors, and so on. It can determine others' responsive positions under the complex conditions of speech communication in a particular cultural sphere (BAKHTIN, 1986, pp.75-76).²¹

Still in Box 1, which brings the speeches that start the film, the elderly woman, who talks to the gabbeh, the carpet, which, therefore, appears in the image of a young woman, can lead us to understand the film as a fable that makes reference to other texts, such as Grimm's *Snow White*, when the witch talks to the mirror; or the Arabian tale *Aladdin*, when the character rubs the lamp and a genie appears. The word is not adamic; therefore, a work always talks to other works. Even if it was not the author's goal to make such references in this part of the film, it, by itself, is a constant dialogue with the very cinematic language, created by other directors at other historical times. That said, it is important to consider that

[...] every reading of an image is the production of a point of view: that of the observer not of the "objectivity" of the image. This is the condition of image effects. In particular, the effect of the simulation rests on a construction that includes the angle of the observer. Because of a point of view, simulacrum looks like what it is not; the subject is therein presupposed. Therefore, the simulation process is not that of the image itself, but that of its relationship with the subject (XAVIER, 2003, pp.51-52).²²

Moreover, what appears in the scene elucidated earlier is precisely the fact that, in addition to the camera narrator, another narrator emerges: the carpet, called gabbeh. It is not, however, a talking carpet, but a representation of a girl who is drawn on the threads that interweave the craft (or art). The girl, in turn, tells her story recorded on the carpet. This same girl – as we will see later and as registered in the figure that opens this text – is the old woman herself. In short, there is the account of a story on the carpet, the story of the elderly couple, told by the young woman.

²¹ For reference, see footnote 20.

²² In Portuguese: "toda leitura de imagem é produção de um ponto de vista: o do sujeito observador, não o da "objetividade" da imagem. A condição dos efeitos da imagem é essa. Em particular, o efeito da simulação apóia-se numa construção que inclui o ângulo do observador. O simulacro parece o que não é a partir de um ponto de vista; o sujeito está aí pressuposto. Portanto, o processo de simulação não é o da imagem em si, mas o da sua relação com o sujeito."

Given these “others” who tell the story, we can bring what Bakhtin emphasizes about the role of the narrator:

[...] is not I myself as produced through the agency of the other, but the valued other himself in me, another human being in me. The one who governs me internally is the lovingly authoritative other within me, and not I myself, by way of reducing the other to a means [...] there is no parasitism here. The hero and the narrator can easily change places in this case: whether it is I who tell of another, of someone close to me [...], or whether it is the other who tells of me, in either case I am still woven into the narrative in the same tones and in the same form as he is (1990, pp.153-154).²³

Although the language philosopher discusses, in this selected passage, questions concerning autobiographical-biographical literary works, we may, perhaps, make a supposed allusion to the role of the camera-narrator: depending on his or her chosen planes, he or she is capable of producing different effects and different points of view about the *other*. The same happens to the narrator-gabbeh, who tells the story of the old woman – when she is younger – from her *evaluative purview*. The young gabbeh, in performing this role of narration, is often confronted and questioned by the elderly woman. In this role, we can think, therefore, about a possible exchange of positions between the one that enunciates by taking the place of the ‘present’ – the elderly woman – and the one that enunciates by taking the place of a ‘recent past’ – the young gabbeh. In this sense, the story is narrated from a dialogical position between this self and the other. The young-gabbeh is, thus, invited to respond to her story in an incessant dialogue between herself and the elderly couple.

Based on the excerpt from the previous scene, we can infer that there is an invitation to a response, because when the young gabbeh is asked by the elderly man who her father is, she answers, “His name is warp.” From this moment, the telling of her story, her life, the old woman’s life begins. The threads that plot the story are the same threads that weave the carpet. The father, in turn, as the family patriarch, seems to guide these threads, dictate the rhythm, colors, shapes, the way the young woman should lead her life, constitute herself as a *subject* of the plot. Throughout the film, the old woman, as if confronting herself as a young girl, asks young gabbeh about her life

²³ For reference see footnote 11.

choices. In this process, based on Bakhtinian assumptions, we can take into account the concept of *excess of seeing*, which, according to him,

[...] is the bud in which slumbers form, and whence form unfolds like a blossom. But in order that this bud should really unfold into the blossom of consummating form, the excess of my seeing must “fill in” the horizon of the other human being who is being contemplated, must render his horizon complete, without at the same time forfeiting his distinctiveness. I must empathize or project myself into this other human being, see his world axiologically from within him as he sees this world; I must put myself in his place and then, after returning to my own place, “fill in” his horizon through that excess of seeing which opens out from this, my own, place outside him. I must enframe him, create a consummating environment for him out of this excess of my own seeing, knowing, desiring, and feeling (BAKHTIN, 1990, pp.24-25).²⁴

The elderly woman, therefore, wants to hear her own story in her voice and memory as a young girl. She summons up her past view, a view she no longer seems to have, a view that is not remembered in the same way perhaps because she has been through so many other experiences. She summons, thus, her vision from when she was still in love, when she was still in the thrust of life. This vision *refracts* what she was, completes her story, her choices. It also attributes other meanings to her experiences. Who is she anyway? Who is Gabbeh? Who is the girl? The elderly woman, therefore, seems to want this *other* to tell her who she is *to herself* and *to the other* so that she is subjectively constituted: “I cannot manage without another, I cannot become myself without another; I must find myself in another by finding another in myself” (BAKHTIN, 1984, p.287).²⁵

In a subsequent scene, we can clearly see this *excess of seeing* that I discuss in this paper: upon hearing the young gabbeh speak, the husband praises the girl, commenting on her beauty. The old woman, then, is jealous of his comment. He then suggests that the wife is jealous of herself. At this moment, we can understand that, even in the same body, our relationships, our experiences become an *other*; time makes us different. She is no longer the young girl. Being an individual in the world is being

²⁴ For reference, see footnote 11.

²⁵ BAKHTIN, M. Appendix II: Toward a reworking of Dostoevsky’s Book (1961). In: BAKHTIN, M. *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*. Edited and translated by Caryl Emerson. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1984. pp.283-302.

constituted in the relationship with the *other*; it is to be inconclusive and inexhaustible, to be another at every moment, at every *encounter*.

It should also be noted that, when narrating her life, the young woman invites the couple to watch her and, in a play of images, the plot begins. Then, there is another *chronotope* which, from the young *gabbeh*'s narration, begins the story of the very carpet from which she 'came out.' This carpet records the story of the elderly couple. Thus, as in the threads that weave the carpet, the actions of the characters intertwine and affect their lives so that the threads meet and form a plot in time and space. As in our life, history is not so linear, nor is it as simple as it seems. In order to reinforce the weaving between content and form, proposed by the author, the work is constituted as an artistic production in a constant relationship between art and life. Therefore, the focus of the film does not seem to us to be the story itself, but the way it is told and how its threads are aligned, transformed into a unique, singular plot in the field of cinematic art.

In the subsequent scenes of *Gabbeh*, the young woman tells the couple that, according to her father's orders, she could only marry the man who followed her tribe when her uncle returned to the tribe from the city. However, as soon as he returns, other setbacks happen, and her father sets new obstacles again: she could only marry when her mother gave birth. The narration, both in the young woman's voice and in the camera's eye, aims to recount these mishaps until the young woman finally runs away with her lover. The climax of the work, however, is not in the conquest of the young woman, but in the process, in the experiences that the young woman tells. It is in the way the story is established, how relationships are placed in the face of life situations, in a poetic link between form and content.

The second scene I will discuss from a Bakhtinian perspective corresponds to the time when the young *gabbeh*, while narrating her story to the elderly couple, tells that her uncle had found an admirer in a river spring. Although in different *chronotopes*, the scene is set side by side, as if in dialogue with each other, in order to be constituted in story.

The old woman, sitting by the river, washes her carpet with her feet and listens to young *gabbeh* narrate her uncle's meeting with his future wife. Her uncle, in another *chronotope*, talks to his prospect wife as she does the dishes. Upon hearing that she

agrees to marry him, her uncle goes out to help her with her chores. At this point, family members await their uncle's return and fill a water bag for his trip back to the tribe. The young gabbeh, watching the event with the elderly couple, starts to dialogue with the narrated scene, trying to fill the water bag with them in order to speed up the action and, therefore, the marriage. Fig. 2 is a sequence of snapshots from this scene.



Figure 2 - Snapshots from *Gabbeh* - Scene: 28min24s-28min55s

Source: Adapted from Mohsen Makhmalbaf (1996).

In this sequence of snapshots (Fig. 2), the image of the bag being filled with the help of a person's hand corresponds to the *chronotope* of the story told while in the

sequence of subsequent snapshots, the images correspond to the time-space where the story is being told: by the young gabbeh and the elderly couple. In this scene, the focus is only on the old woman, but the old man is next to her as we can see in the other snapshots. We can see that while the old woman asks the young woman to be patient – the scene suggests that as people are filling the bag, life is happening –, the young woman says that even in the face of the event, they ‘take too long’ in the process. Then, the old woman, on the other hand, comments that the young one does not have enough patience and shares her experience. She says that she has fallen in love and understands her affliction and that she will help her to speed up the process of filling her bag of water.

As we take this scene into consideration, many questions arise. They could be an invitation to question and reflection by the spectator. The first question is precisely how the director used the creativity of cinematographic resources to construct the narrative. Using two time periods and spaces on the same cinematic plane, in which the narrator and the narrated story are in dialogue, is a very curious way to create the filmic work. I will call them different *chronotopes*. In Bakhtin’s words (1986, p.84),²⁶ the concept of *chronotope* refers to “intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature.” It is conceived of as an architectural form of narrative that configures ways of life in specific contexts of temporalities (MACHADO, 2010). In this sense, “spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole. Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history” (BAKHTIN, 1986, p.84).²⁷

Although this is an audiovisual analysis, not a literary one, we can understand that, according to the concept of *chronotope*, “the experimentation of an artistic manifestation is overdetermined by a space and a time that can change at any moment,

²⁶ BAKHTIN, M. Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel: Notes toward a Historical Poetics. In: BAKHTIN, M. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* by M. M. Bakhtin. Edited by Michael Holquist; translated by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1981. pp.84-258

²⁷ For reference, see footnote 26.

as they constitute elements that correspond to infinite and unfinished meanings that dialogue among themselves” (SPINELLI, 2005, p.36).²⁸

Many directors set their movies in two different time periods and spaces, as when someone is telling a fact. In cinematic jargon, this kind of image composition is called *flashback*. Films such as *Fried Green Tomatoes*, by director Jon Avnet, *Mister Nobody*, by Jaco Van Dormael, and the Iranian *Close-up*, by Kiarostami, showcase this chronotopic take for the purpose of ‘remembering’ a moment lived by the character. Storytelling within the story is not a novelty. It is rather very common, especially in action movies in which, for example, crimes are portrayed and the objective is to reassemble the facts to find out who the killer, kidnapper, etc. is. However, what makes this kind of cinematic production different from Makhmalbaf’s film is precisely the fact that the director conducts, in his aesthetic form-giving, the search for dialogue between the narrators (camera + character) and the narrated scene. In this sense, the young gabbeh’s wish to help the characters fill the water bag demonstrates the peculiarities of the plastic-pictorial composition of the work and the suggested dialogical place between past and present, in relation to the narrated story.

Maybe it is not possible or coherent to carry out a type of dialogical analysis between the images, as the subjects of the different chronotopes do not seem to interact with each other. The interaction per se seems to come from the camera’s planes: while the bag appears to be full, the young gabbeh, on another plane, helps to fill it. The scene narrated by the young-gabbeh’s voice seems, however, excluded from this encounter of voices, since the ‘past’, i.e., the story told or the characters that are on that plane, is not aware that it is being ‘observed.’

Thus, if we pursue this any further, we can understand that the scene resembles an attempt of dialogue: it is the ‘present’ that seeks, through the action of the young gabbeh, to ‘modify or hurry’ the directions of the past rather than the ‘past,’ the narrated story, that establishes a dialogue with the ‘present.’ Although we know that the past cannot, in theory, ‘hear’ the future, but only make possible projections of it, in the scene the ‘past’ does not seem to have been summoned to the dialogue. Therefore, “the

²⁸ In Portuguese: “a experimentação de uma manifestação artística é sobredeterminada por um espaço e por um tempo que podem mudar a todo instante, por constituírem elementos correspondentes a significados infinitos e inacabados que dialogam entre si.”

secondhand words of a third person which as a matter or principle the hero himself cannot hear, cannot understand [...] would lie beyond the dialogic whole” (BAKHTIN, 1984, p.296).²⁹

Therefore, perhaps we could also question a possible functional relation of this scene. The young gabbeh does not want to help people fill their bags with water due to her compassion, empathy for the subjects in the spring of the river who are doing this task. However, by contrast, her action demonstrates self-interest, is part of a ‘self-serving subject,’ of a *relative otherness* (PONZIO, 2010a),³⁰ of the plane of functionality. She wants to quickly fill her bag so that the story will finally happen and she can marry the man who follows her tribe. In this context, the word demonstrates a type of non-openness to the other, when, in fact,

[...] the living word, inseparably linked with dialogic communion, by its very nature wants to be heard and answered. By its very dialogic nature it presupposes an ultimate dialogic instancing. To receive the word, to be heard. The impermissibility of *second-hand* resolution. My word remains in the continuing dialogue, where it will be heard, answered and reinterpreted (BAKHTIN, 1984, p.300; emphasis in original).³¹

Apart from this brief reverie of the possibilities of understanding a work and, still with the purpose of finishing the scene in question, we can, moreover, infer an *encounter* of subjectivities between the elderly woman and herself: the young gabbeh. At the moment the elderly woman uses her experience to say that the young one has no patience, we can certainly understand her gaze at her former self and, therefore, the perception of her constitution as a subject. Like the carpet, we weave our lives from relationships, encounters that we have throughout our existence. The young gabbeh sought to ‘fill her bag’ on a plane of relative otherness, thinking about the ‘self’; in contrast, the old woman seemed to assist the young one by placing herself in her place in order to establish an *absolute otherness* (PONZIO, 2010b),³² which is on the plane of non-functionality, at a time of listening to the *other* word. In this scene, the old woman responds to the young woman’s actions with her life, helping her in a possible

²⁹ For reference, see footnote 25.

³⁰ In Portuguese “alteridade relativa.”

³¹ For reference, see footnote 25.

³² In Portuguese “alteridade absoluta”

recollection of the future. ‘Have patience’ is what she can say, offer, according to what she has already experienced.

My *memory* of the other and of the other’s life differs radically from my contemplating and remembering my own life. Memory sees a life and its content in a different way formally: only memory is aesthetically productive [...] Memory of someone else’s finished life [...] provides the golden key to the aesthetic consummation of a person. [...] Memory is an approach to the other from the standpoint of his axiological consummatedness. In a certain sense, memory is hopeless; but on the other hand, only memory knows how to value – independently of purpose and meaning – an already finished life, a life that is totally present-on-hand (BAKHTIN, 1990, p.107; emphasis in original).³³

Here, we may be in an interchangeability of roles, in which memory, at this moment, does not come from the words of the young woman, but from the old one who, when recognizing herself in the eyes of the other, contributes to the young gabbeh’s subjectivity and finishing in a way that there is also refraction of her own subjectivity. In addition, as mentioned before, by proposing to assist the young woman, the elderly one shows she is ‘open’ to dialogue by placing herself in the place of the *other*. Then, she establishes a *non-indifferent difference* (PONZIO, 2010b)³⁴ towards a “[...] unique [subject] that exists in relation, in the relation with the other, [...] unique in the living word, in the other word that relates to an *other* word” (PONZIO, 2010a, p.23).³⁵

It is important to emphasize that, throughout the film, scenes such as these enlighten dialogical aspects of the main characters who watch and/or tell a story: the elderly couple and the young gabbeh. Moreover, if I have previously suggested a chronotopic non-dialogicity between the narrative scene and the narrated scene, in other moments of the film dialogism seems to happen more explicitly. To elucidate this event, I choose the scene in which the young gabbeh narrates the death of her sister. In this scene, the focus is on the hands of the female weaver and the carpet being woven, as she removes the colored wool and chooses the black wool in the process. Death, in this sense, seems to be woven into the rug, symbolized by the black wool. The roll of wool

³³ For reference, see footnote 11.

³⁴ In Portuguese “diferença não-indiferente.”

³⁵ In Portuguese: “[...] único existindo em relação, na relação com o outro, [...] único na palavra viva, na outra palavra que se relaciona com uma palavra outra.”

is on the rug and is thrown into the scene. It is in the hands of the young gabbeh, from where the story is told. She, in turn, mentions, “It’s my fault,” referring to her sister’s death. She finally throws the roll into the spring of the river, and it is carried by the current. The following snapshots illustrate what I tried to describe.



Figure 3 - Snapshots from *Gabbeh* – Scene: 50min08s - 50min20s
Source: Adapted from Mohsen Makhmalbaf (1996).

This scene seems to establish a dialogue between two *chronotopes* – the past and the present. If it was not possible to foresee the counterword of the ‘past,’ here, when young gabbeh throws the roll of wool into the spring of the river, this dialogue seems to be laid out and visible. In addition, other questions arise before this moment of the film: the very symbolism of black wool, representing death. The fact that it was thrown into the river can lead us to an in-depth reflection on time and, therefore, on the cycle of life. The work of art, in the words of Vygotsky (1971),³⁶ “never reflects reality in all its fullness and real truth, but it is a highly complex product of the elaboration of the elements of reality, of incorporating into that reality a series of elements wholly foreign

³⁶ For reference, see footnote 2.

to it.” From the Bakhtinian point of view, we could say that such a work implies *representation*.

Representation is constituted in the relation between the artistic text and the representation of concrete life in the dialogical tension between artistic form and contents of life, between artistic value and extra-artistic values. Artistic representation, by penetrating into life as it is and with all its values, conveys a point of view external to it. The otherness and specificity of the artistic form is constituted by this point of view. It is the otherness from the point of view of the artistic text, its ‘being outside,’ its ‘outsideness’ (*vnenachodimost* – BAKHTIN) in relation to the represented life (PONZIO, 2017, p.33).³⁷

Gabbeh is, therefore, a film that, although developing a simple plot, a kind of ethnic fable, brings to its narrative and composition a complexification of human experiences and a demanding reflection on the relationship between art and life. Regarding this aspect, it is also important to bring the concept of *polyphony*, characterized by the composition of voices in discourse, as a possible element of the film composition. Although Bakhtin used this concept in relation to the novel, I venture to correlate it with the camera shots of the film.

According to Bakhtin,

[...] the voices [in polyphony] remain independent and, as such, are combined in a unity of a higher order than in homophony. If one is to talk about individual will, then it is precisely in polyphony that a combination of several individual wills takes place, that the boundaries of the individual will can be in principle exceeded. One could put it this way: the artistic will of polyphony is a will to combine many wills, a will to the event (1984, p.21).³⁸

In one of the scenes of the movie, *polyphony* becomes quite evident. It refers to the moment when a sheep, when giving birth to her cub, begins to lick it and subsequently scratch the ground constantly in rhythmic steps. The scene is cut, and the

³⁷ In Portuguese: “A figuração se constitui na relação do texto artístico com a representação da vida concreta, na tensão dialógica da forma artística com os conteúdos da vida, do valor artístico com os valores extra-artísticos. A figuração artística, por penetrar no interior da vida como ela é e com todos os seus valores, veicula um ponto de vista externo a ela. Tal ponto de vista constitui a alteridade e especificidade da forma artística, a alteridade do ponto de vista do texto artístico, o seu ‘encontrar-se fora’, a sua ‘exotopia’ (*vnenachodimost* – BAKHTIN) a respeito da vida representada.”

³⁸ BAKHTIN, M. *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. Edited and translated by Caryl Emerson. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1984.

focus turns to the weavers. They are finishing the carpet: with a specific tool, they align its lines to cut the threads. The two scenes are repeated a few times and both follow the same rhythm: the sheep's paws scratching the floor simultaneously with the tool that scratches the carpet.



Figure 4 - Snapshots from *Gabbeh* – Scene: 1h03s-1h3m33s

Source: Adapted from Mohsen Makhmalbaf (1996)

What many filmmakers call visual ‘rhymes,’ that is, the scenes that talk to each other, following the same movement and sound, can be suggested, by using the Bakhtinian perspective, as a possible polyphonic discourse in the scene of Fig. 4. Both shots take place in dialogue with each other: each one responds to the other in a constant play of counterword, albeit through images. Given this interpretation, this specific moment of the film can lead us to a dialogue that is beyond what is visible. We may give another meaning to it: this is a discourse of the very symbolism of life and the birth of art – while the sheep prepares the cub for life by licking it, the weavers finish the carpet, which is made from the wool of the sheep, throwing it to the world as well. Given these possible interpretations that life is woven in the carpet, I decided to analyze

the scene in which the young abbeh's brother is born. This birth seems to be portrayed by the egg that falls in her hand. Here is the sequence of snapshots.



Figure 5 - Frames from *Gabbeh* - Scene: 42min-42s
Source: Adapted from Mohsen Makhmalbaf (1996)

In this scene, the young gabbeh reaches out to receive the egg from the top of the screen. After this first take, a woman's hand takes red wool out of the cauldron (where they were being dyed) and throws them on a rock. Finally, we focus on the image of a child woven on the carpet. The scenes are shot with the cry of a newborn in

the background. This artistic configuration can also connote what we have been discussing: the representation of life in art; the baby is born, the placenta is expelled; art is born. *Gabbeh* seems to establish this continuous dialogue between art and life not only in the scenes mentioned in this text but also throughout the film, which tells the story of love materialized in and told by a carpet. As daily situations occur, the weavers, in parallel, choose the threads of wool that can materialize the story of their people and this love in a dialogue that continues until the completion of the works of art: carpet and film. The threads, therefore, are not chosen randomly. There are social and cultural implications in their choice, just as it happens in our lives, from usual to complex situations.

In addition, the director himself, by making the color of the carpets, the flowers in the fields, the Iranian landscapes themselves more tangible, enables new relationships and image suggestions that can make us produce different meanings. In a scene of the movie, the characters shout, “Life is colour! Love is colour! Man is colour! Woman is colour! Love is colour! Child is colour!” That cry, at that moment, seems to be an appeal to art that enters life and life that enters art, just as the designs and shades of colors materialized in the threads of Iranian carpets.

And threads are also needed to compose the analysis of a work of art. Thus, similar to what Geraldi (1991, p.166)³⁹ wrote on the process of reading texts, we can allude to ‘reading’ works of art. In this process, “the plot takes the ends of the threads of woven embroidery to always weave the same and another piece of embroidery, because the hands that now weave bring and trace another story. These hands are not tied [...], and are not free [...]. They are full of threads.” They take up the threads in an encounter between author and interlocutor, contributing to the meanings of the work.

Final Considerations

Finally, it is worth noting that I did not intend to delve more deeply into the various possibilities of interpretation that the work suggests. I wanted, however, to bring

³⁹ In Portuguese: “a trama toma as pontas dos fios do bordado tecido para tecer sempre o mesmo e outro bordado, pois as mãos que agora tecem trazem e traçam outra história. Não são mãos amarradas [...], não são mãos livres [...]. São mãos carregadas de fios.”

some of my gaze to the ‘movie appreciation’: that which seemed strange to me, which enticed me, and, in a way, which brought constant ‘defibrillation.’ “The aesthetic experience creates a very sensitive attitude towards later acts and, of course, never goes without leaving traces for our behavior” (VYGOTSKY, 1975).⁴⁰ It was the traces that I sought to thematize in the textures of this text.

As Zanela & Vargas (2008, p.1588) point out,

Listening/reading the work of art is not a simple task, since dialogy also presents itself in it. Several voices are objectified in artistic production, characteristics of a time period and a space, and many others can be presented through the contemplator/recreator. It is difficult to listen to these voices, but the exercise of pursuing some of them – chosen by the artist – can contribute to the proper listening to the work of art and the process of its creation.⁴¹

Taking into consideration what Zanela & Vargas (2008) show us, I am aware of the limitations of this analysis. But apart from this declaration of *mea culpa*, I must mention that *Gabbeh* (1996) is a film in which the complexification of human relations becomes evident when we see the junction between form and content. By thematizing facts of reality, such as the death of the child and the birth of the baby, Makhmalbaf does not use a sense of verisimilitude, in a pure representation of reality. However, by using these themes in the plot of the film, the director, as an artist, sought *representation*. He sought to approach these issues metaphorically and artistically.

Thus, *Gabbeh* does not seem to reflect reality as a mirror in which we look ourselves, but it refracts it, disturbs everyday life because it breaks monotony. In the words of Ponzio (2017, p.62), “the artist does not look at life directly, immediately, frontally. He distances himself from the already given world and, without remaining indifferent, puts himself in the condition of being able to overcome everything that would otherwise confirm, circumscribe, reduce the strength, the expressive creativity.”⁴²

⁴⁰ For reference, see footnote 2.

⁴¹ In Portuguese: “A escuta/leitura da obra de arte não é tarefa simples, posto que também aí a dialogia se apresenta. Vozes várias se objetivam na produção artística, características de um tempo e espaço, e outras tantas podem se apresentar, através do contemplador/recriador. Difícil auscultar essas vozes, mas o exercício da procura de algumas delas – eleitas pelo artista – pode contribuir para a própria escuta da obra de arte e do processo de sua criação.”

⁴² In Portuguese: “o artista olha a vida não de maneira direta, imediata, frontal, mas distanciando-se do mundo já dado e, sem permanecer indiferente, põe-se na condição de poder vencer tudo aquilo que, de outro modo, homologaria, circunscreveria, reduziria a força, a criatividade expressiva.”

Unlike the scientist, who sees life from the point of view of the means and methods for mastering it, the artist “organically places life as he sees it into the plane of the work” (MEDVIÉDEV, 1991, p.135).⁴³

In short, we saw, in *Gabbeh*, this sideway look, a look that does not coincide with the real. It, incidentally, demonstrates a constant constitution of the subjectivity of the elderly couple and brings to the fore the art manifested by the threads that weave the carpet, the lives of the characters, and the film itself. Like wool threads, I have tried here to align discourses, to braid possibilities, in a continual challenge of seeking coherence that does not result in ‘knots’ but in other senses. The text, like the threads that weave a carpet, claims choices, points of view, planning, among other prerequisites for being established, emerging and, finally, being finalized. I know that much could be mentioned about the film that I sought to analyze here, but as the purpose is not for the exhaustion of the object, this analysis ends here.

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⁴³ BAKHTIN, M. M.; MEDVEDEV, P. N. *The Formal Method in Literary Scholarship: A Critical Introduction to Sociological Poetics*. Translated by Albert J. Wehrle. Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991.

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