



Abbas Kiarostami and a New Wave of the Spectator

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Abstract. Western references of Kiarostami's work are often over-estimating the influence of the Western Cinema – especially Modernism, the New Waves, Godard, Bresson – on his films. But self-reflexivity and minimalism here have more to do with the eastern ornamental mode, symbolic iconography and tradition of deconstruction. A close analysis of the issue of spectatorship (and, moreover, that of the woman as spectator) in this self-effacing cinema will show how gaps and even a lack of visual stimuli are turning the image into a mirror reflecting the spectator 'written into' the very texture of these films.

“The only way to envision a new cinema is to have more regard for the spectator's role.”¹

Abbas Kiarostami

In 1995, to celebrate the one hundredth anniversary of cinema, a great number of film directors from all around the world – among them Abbas Kiarostami – engaged in a historical, yet symbolic project: making short movies with the camera of the Lumière brothers.² On this occasion, they were all asked about the future of the cinema and they all agreed that cinema is mortal. And yet, the spirit of the cinematic paradigm represented by the Lumières seems to be carried on by the so called “World Cinema.” Neo-realism, Modernism and the New Waves – both French and national ones – are all “waving” towards the Middle and Far East: Iran, China, Hong Kong and Korea.

At first sight Abbas Kiarostami can be easily mistaken for a late modernist, with existential questions at the core of his first movies. But, as the in-depth monograph

¹ Abbas Kiarostami and Jean-Luc Nancy in *Conversation*, 2001, 88.

² *Lumière & Compagnie* (1995), directed by Theodoros Angelopoulos and Vicente Aranda. Original idea from Philippe Poulet. 41 directors were challenged to create short movies of less than 52 seconds, with the restored original camera of the Lumière brothers. Only three takes were allowed and no use of synchronized sound.

of Alberto Elena is revealing it, this relationship to the European tradition of cinema is rather confusing – a feature that all representatives of the Iranian New Wave share (cf. Elena 2005, 42), that might as well be rooted in the paradoxical relationship of Iran to tradition and modernity or what Jean-Luc Nancy calls 'Occidentosis' (Nancy 2001, 16, 26).³ Kiarostami claims to be a disciple of Ozu and Bresson, but his characters are not alienated from a society in which they are drifting without a reason. They can't be named 'outsiders' because the community of 'insiders' is missing or not represented thoroughly enough. They don't even enter the world of action, they are drifting on the edge of it, as mere spectators often in a car, a 'shell of solitude,' in the *Taste of Cherry* (1987), or trying in vain to establish contact with it, as in *The Wind Will Carry Us* (1999), where the character fails to use his mobile phone in a remote place. Typically, the Western approach is attributing a double, self-referential meaning to the car itself, a recurrent object and subject in almost all his films. It is a motif through which – according to the 'in depth' analysis of *Life and Nothing More.../...And Life Goes On* (1992) by Jean-Luc Nancy – plays on two registers. One is that of interrupted continuation, of movement, of displacement: "The automobile carries around the screen or the lens, the screen-lens of its windshield, always further, and this screen is precisely not a screen – neither obstacle, nor wall of projection – but a *text* (écrit), a sinuous, steep and dusty trace." The other is "the passage through the image, or to the image" (Nancy 2001, 66).

Kiarostami's original interpretation of modernism consists of this 'double framing,' which always includes the gaze of the spectator, who often happens to be a character (sometimes the director) of the movie. This principle is plastically represented in Kiarostami's *Five, Homage to Ozu* (2004), a very long shot taking a distant view of one of the main existentialist symbols, the sea. It is where the *La Dolce Vita* (1960) ends and this is what the elderly couple of *Tokyo Story* (1953) is facing in one of the most memorable scenes of the movie. *Five*, originally presented as a video installation, is not only a thematization of the 'looking' or the gaze of the modernist outsider, but also, due to the new frame added by the museum environment, that of the spectator and its changing position. In this respect – as Alberto Elena is pointing it out – can we talk about Alain Bergala's idea of 're-education' of the gaze, as applied to the whole Kiarostami corpus, through a 'distancing' between the film and the audience (Elena 2005, 188).

The Iranian director is not primarily preoccupied with the existential problems of the individual in a given socio-cultural context, but rather with varied 'poetical'

³ This duplicity is also reflected in the structure of Elena's book (2005): the chapters dealing with the Kiarostami's movies have the titles of prominent pieces of European cinema: *La regle du jeu*, *The Eclipse*, *Zero de Conduite*, *Journey to Nowhere*, *Ashes and Diamonds*, *All about my Mother*.

resources, possibilities of cinema to convey contents related to human existence. Thus, his main characters are not the non-actors playing the different roles, but rather key cinematic concepts like The Cinematic Space, The Camera, The Director and The Spectator. Or, more precisely, Use of Space, Use of Camera, Directing, Acting and Viewing. The best example for this is the so-called 'Koker trilogy' – *Where is the Friend's House?* (1987), *Life and Nothing More* (1992) and *Through the Olive Trees* (1994) –: the second one about the journey of the director back to the place where the first one was shot, looking for the main character, and the third one about the making of the second one. This 'zoom in' is not, however, a well calculated self-referentiality, but rather a matter of Method, meaning the path or way of looking for something (see Nancy 2001, 54).

As he often pointed it out, Kiarostami has no professional training and had never worked as a director's assistant before he started making his own films. This might be the secret of his completely fresh, innocent eye on cinema: it is not, I would say, a well-calculated return to the basics and minimalistic stylization, but rather a *re-invention*, or even more, a rediscovery of a medium inseparable from its socio-cultural-political environment. This was even more true in the post-revolutionary Iran, where, according to Elena, "cinema was effectively replacing poetry, plays, short stories, and novels as the most significant cultural medium" (2005, 105). As Stephane Goudet points it out in his article called "Retake: The Films of Abbas Kiarostami" published in *Positif*, this is a "cinema of intervention," playing a role of a third party, who was not originally involved in legal action, but appears to take part in it. It is the case of *Close-Up* (1990), where it appears as an advocate of the case of a detainee accused of lying about his identity (saying, he's the filmmaker Mohsen Makhmalbaf) to commit a fraud. In Goudet's words, "the filmmaker tries to make all his protagonists' dreams come true." Similarly, in *Through the Olive Trees*, the director intervenes to bring together the two non-actors playing in his film and separated by a social restriction. The closing shot of *Taste of Cherry*, about the filming process, all in bright morning light, appears as redemption of the protagonist, moving desperately forth and back in an inferno-like, red light and space. In this respect are these films, according to the same Goudet, "anti-*Contempt*." Godard's film is an allegory of 'film as Art' with symbolic characters like The Director Fritz Lang, the American Producer, the Intellectual Screenplay Writer and a Star Actress. Against this over-aesthetized view on major issues of filmmaking concerning an adaptation classic, distant literary work, the *Odyssey*, Kiarostami proposes a third party, the medium, meant to ease communication between the eye and reality, by

eliminating the distance between them. It is worth, in this respect, to compare the final shots of either the *Taste of Cherry* or *Through the Olive Trees* with that of *Contempt* (1963). In this latter, we see Fritz Lang *contemplating* alone the endless sea, while in *Through the Olive Trees* director Jafar Panahi is *witnessing* the unfolding of a *real event*. Or rather, an *evidence*, as Nancy calls it: “Evidence refers to what is obvious, what makes sense, what is striking and, by the same token, opens and gives a chance and opportunity to meaning [...] Something is seen distinctly from far away because it detaches itself, it separates – like the two shapes or the double shape we see of Tahereh and her beloved.” (2001, 42.) (Godard himself, we must add, is treating ironically this kind of distant aestheticism – just remember the decadent musical score of the film – hence one possible interpretation of the title *Contempt*. And he’s also using, but just as one of his many stylistic solutions, the method of intervention: the director/camera interfering with the lives of his characters, characteristic for the socio-political standpoint of New Wave directors).

The socio-political reactivity and sensitivity might also seem a heritage of the French and National New Waves. However, Kiarostami is not representing the socio-political issues, but a medium, its concepts and whole apparatus put in the service of these.⁴ Thus, a film presented as installation or thoroughly minimalistic is perfectly susceptible to show how a medium works, its basic rules and mechanisms. In the approach of Rosalind Krauss, the re-invention contains ‘redemptive potentialities for a medium when it loses popularity: the obsolete medium is re-created by the unveiling of its expressive means (Krauss 1999, 296). This re-discovered, exposed, re-framed cinema appears to be – according to Ji-Hoon Kim – “the last modernist medium to confirm and simultaneously implode the idea of the medium as a coherent physical substance for creating artistic forms and examining their effects” (2009, 116).

Kiarostami’s re-discovered cinema is taking up the line of the Lumière-brothers and rejects all the rules of transparency and fiction. First of all, by his choice of locations and space: it’s often a place of non-action, the desert, a courtroom, a village after earthquake and, most characteristically, the inside of the car. Especially this latter is, as the director himself is telling us in his *Ten on Ten* (2003), suitable to generate tension: the suffocating closeness of the other generates an emotionally overcharged situation, and the most vulnerable spots are revealed, see, for example *The Taste of Cherry* and *Ten*. The rule of transparency is broken by the non-use or

⁴ Although he is fully aware of the expectations of the Iranian people: “In a country like Iran, people don’t just want their artists to show the issues, they want them to resolve them. But it is not the artist’s function to resolve issues.” (Elena 2005, 193.)

inconsistent use of the shot-counter shot rule in dialogues. ‘The suture’ is torn up: people can talk for minutes without seeing the reaction of the Other. Or, alternatively, they listen to the off-shot voice as if ‘exposed’ to it – it enters their private sphere, invading it. They are not actively searching for (eye)contact, they are rather passive, submissive. There is no permanent eye-contact, as the speaker is driving. Amazingly, people left alone in this awkward situation seem to show their feelings more freely, as there is no director who could criticize their ‘acting’. And this is where the spectator, sitting on the other side of the screen and seeing it all, is being attracted into this game: it is only her/him who’s reading the reaction of the other, when the counter-shot is finally happening. Spectatorship appears here as a key medium specificity – film depends on the spectator, only exists “if the subject becomes Other:” “Just as music can produce a dancer in an individual, so film can produce a spectator in a cinemagoer,” writes Rob Lapsley in his essay *Cinema, the Impossible, and a Psychoanalysis to Come*, appeared in the *Screen’s* 50th anniversary issue, and also “the spectator is at once receptive and form-giving.” “In the co-creation that is the filmic event, the spectator appropriates the text but is, in turn, expropriated by it. In the process, he comes to know what would otherwise remain undisclosed” (Lapsley 2009, 16). In his conversation with Jean-Luc Nancy, Kiarostami is relying on André Gide and Godard to reinforce his attitude about the increased importance of the spectator in the creation of a work of art, saying that “the gaze is important, not the subject matter” and “what’s on the screen is already dead – the spectator’s gaze breathes life into it” (2001, 84). This is why he prefers gaps and open questions – in his view not being understood is the only possibility of cinema to become a “major art form.” His principle is plastically represented by the increasing minimalism of his latest films, especially *Ten* (2002) and *Shirin* (2008), his two words and one-word statements:⁵ the first on the Character and Spectator, the latter on the Character/Spectator.

Towards a Film of the (Female) Spectator: *Ten* and *Shirin*

As the already mentioned 50th anniversary *Screen* issue is also proving it – being a summing up of the main theoretical directions hosted by this journal – the psychoanalytical discourses of spectatorship, closely related to the feminist approach, have been one of the most original and specific directions of film theory. Again, willingly-unwillingly, Kiarostami seems to fit in the Western

⁵ Kiarostami himself calls *Ten* his two-words statement, after telling the anecdote about Kundera’s father, who at the end of his life ended up repeating two words: ‘How strange!’ At the same place he anticipates his next film: “A one-word film perhaps” (see Elena 2005, 179).

theoretical mainstream, which often recognizes its own concepts in the Iranian director's work. But it is not Kiarostami's intention to create a counter-cinema with his female characters and thematization of spectatorship. These are for him, as already said, simple means to access and represent reality. Theoretical "trendiness" is only a by-product of his preoccupation to represent women differently: not as 'objects of desire', but as holders of reality and truth.⁶ Their faces left visible – all their body is covered and they are wearing scarf – are, in fact, an *inter-face* where reality (about man's world, their wars, fights for power, culturally coded relationships between man and woman) becomes visible.

The question is, then, how can a woman spectator relate to these characters? Neither the narcissistic, nor the masochistic ways, defined by leading feminist film-theoreticians, seem to be fully working here: with the increasing prominence of the so-called world-cinema, and especially the Muslim-world cinema, the issue of the woman spectator and in general the theory of *scopophilia* and *fetishism* has to be rethought. This is an old preoccupation of the theories of the spectator and feminist film theory: in 1991 Mary Ann Doane is talking about an increasing necessity for a theory of the female spectator, while Teresa de Lauretis is pointing out the need of a *re-vision*, the need to transcend the history or 'herstory' of the Western woman, as 'there are women who are wearing masks or veil, who are invisible in the male society or even for other women.'⁷ Almost two decades later, in the next to last sequence of *Ten*, Kiarostami seems to answer this call: he realizes a representation of empathy, a distant yet participating presence of the female spectator, not possible according to the mentioned feminist theorists. While the two women – the driver and her friend – are just chatting, there is a shot-counter shot rhythm. When her client is revealing her shaved head (an outrageous gesture according to radical Muslim rules), the car stops, the camera focuses on her face and the driver's comforting words are coming from off-screen: she's *in* and she's *out*, here and there at the same time, which is the essence of empathy. This detached understanding is even turned into an aesthetic distancing, when she finds her friend with the shaved head beautiful. The woman with the shaved head is not an object of desire, but, as her friend is pointing it out, an "icon of loss." Her face and veiled head – as well as that of the 113 actresses in *Shirin* – is showing a great similarity with the religious icons, holding a transcendental value. According to Paul Schraeder, the reserved,

⁶ *Ten* marks a turn in Kiarostami's views on using female characters: before he used to excuse himself on the grounds of censorial issues regarding the representation of female characters (see Elena 2005, 176).

⁷ She's commenting on an essay of Barbara Smith (1982).

expressionless faces in the icons are the 'sites' of the transcendental, as everybody fills them up with her/his own faith and beliefs (1972). In both *Ten* and *Shirin* these Madonna-like faces function – in accordance with Kiarostami's principle regarding the spectator's role – as *gaps*, which will be completed by our individual interpretation. This poetic manoeuvre proves to work very effectively in *Shirin*, where we are actually projecting our feelings about the off-screen drama onto their faces (as we know that they are watching something completely different).

In Kiarostami's films a female character's face has an iconic value, more related to the surface of the picture, while his male characters are freely discovering, mapping up the space, the third dimension. This passive-active duality is even represented in the minimalistic setting of *Shirin*: women's faces are always shown in a close-up, while male spectators appear always in the second row, thus in a medium shot, from the waist upwards, so that their hands are also visible. In Kiarostami's films the male character's gaze is never returned by its passive object (only in the male character's stories, e. g. in *Through the Olive Trees*) – thus the lack of shot-counter shot in these encounters – which, again, stops women being an 'object of desire.'

In his two latest films – *Ten* and *Shirin* – the thematization of the woman as a witness/spectator/bystander or outsider is, in fact, a powerful allegory of women's – Eastern and Western – socio-cultural condition. In *Ten*, the taxi-driver divorcee is almost never stepping out from her cab, is listening to the stories of the female clients and is having repeated fights with her teenager son, who's moving freely between the cab and the outer world. Here, like in *Shirin*, we are watching women on the other side of the mirror – in both cases, the 'real world,' the action/history is unfolding on the other side of the screen, or 'off shot.' In *Ten* we see fragments of it and in *Shirin* it is only present as off-shot sound. The camera is given equal time to show the faces of 113 Iranian actresses, watching, apparently, a representation of the tragic legend of Shirin, Queen of Armenia, a victim, a helpless outsider, as she's repeatedly pointing it out, of *history*, the monstrous wars and intrigues of men.

As Kiarostami is revealing it in an interview, these actresses are, in fact, watching a blank screen with three dots and are instructed to imagine, to 'project' on it their own love stories. The use of these two early cinematic tools is, again, part of Kiarostami's preoccupation with representation, even through lie, of reality, and the involvement of the spectator in its decoding. The spectator's subjectivity is thoroughly decentralized: I can't identify with one of these women, only with all of them and, through them, with Shirin. In this 'gallery' of female spectators, watching a melodrama (a par excellence feminine genre) also appears the glamorous Juliette Binoche, as the only Western actress, but this time in a scarf

and without any make-up (while all the Iranian actresses have a heavy make-up), again, as a gesture disqualifying visual pleasure and opting for a revelation of basic mechanisms of the medium and spectators. Another ‘tear’ in the texture, a woman with a scar (a broken nose?), which, again, makes our identification problematic. In fact, in this double-framing we are witnessing *immersion* (the body-genre of melodrama is entering the space of the audience, even their bodies) while we’re *absorbed* by what we’re watching (we’re one of the audience, knowing, at the same time, that we cannot be there), (cf. Richard Rushton 2009, 50).

Beyond the representation of the ‘woman as spectator,’ doubling the legend, the lack of visual representation of the show these women are watching is also a metaphor of the forbidden visual representation – especially that of the human body – according to radical Muslim rules. This *iconophobia* appears here together with a predominant *iconophilia* of the Western World and Christianity, a promoter of which the legendary Shirin herself was. The whole legend – unfolding only acoustically after the original miniatures of the story are shown – is built around these contradictory relationships to the image: Shirin is having a recurrent nightmare since childhood, waking up screaming from it; Shirin and Khosrow are falling in love with each other’s pictures (Shirin finds it while she’s playing blindfolded in the garden); as they set off to find each other, Khosrow sees Shirin bathing in the moonlight; the stone carver is carving Shirin’s face over and over again; Shirin leaves her throne and country to see Khosrow, married to another woman; Shirin recognizes with terror her nightmare in the gaze of Khosrow’s son and the unfolding tragic events.

Hamid Dabashi speaks about four philosophical objections of Muslim theoreticians to any visual representations, some of them actually influenced by Platonic philosophy: imagination overcomes the reason; sustained visual representation prevents the contemplation of the real; the historical opposition of the Prophet of Islam to idolatry; any simulation of God’s creation is blasphemy (2001, 14). Besides evoking all these multiple layers of cultural fears and attractions, Kiarostami excels in the apparently paradoxical representation of reality through imagination, or through the lack of its visual representation. Instead of this he’s completely relying on the acoustic, auratic dimension: there is a constant echoing effect of the presence of water (a par excellence feminine principle), surrounding us, dripping and flowing, as if in a cave, another archetype of the eternal feminine. It is tempting to speculate on the similarity between Plato’s Cave allegory – often used as an allegory of cinema – and the spectator’s position modelled by Kiarostami: people facing a blank wall and attributing forms to shadows projecting from behind them and thus getting to see reality.⁸ But against the platonic views, in Kiarostami’s

films reality and truth are held by the acoustic sensation, the auratic, off-screen dimension of sounds. In fact, Kiarostami regards sound more essential than pictures: “it’s the sound that gives depth as the third dimension to that image. Sound, in fact, makes up for this shortcoming of pictures” (see Elena 2005, 36). Once again, the Iranian director is not giving in to any philosophical standpoints or interpretations, choosing his own ‘poetic’ way to involve the audience in the decoding process, even generating discrepancies between their views.

Instead of Conclusions

Western references of Kiarostami’s work are often self-satisfied, over-estimating the influence of the Western Cinema – especially Modernism, the New Waves, Godard, Bresson – on his films. Kiarostami’s approach to cinema is completely different: he is not conceiving cinema as art, but a medium, a ‘third party’ ready for intervention, a rather poetic tool revealing, through gaps and lies, a socio-cultural reality and truth. Thus it is useless to talk about self-reflexivity in the case of his cinema, at least not about one in the “western”, playful or narcissistic sense of the word, but rather – as Elena is revealing it – about an eastern tradition of deconstruction, multiple narration and ornamental mode, symbolic iconography of Persian miniature painting, ensuring the poetic effect of his films (2001, 186–187). From a western point of view, all he’s doing is experimenting with original, powerful cinematic effects: the documentarism of the Lumière brothers, the Kuleshov-effect, the close-up and offshoot sound, and, first of all, re-discovering the role of spectator, deprived though of visual pleasure, but intensely involved, ‘built in’ the texture of his films.

“Film on film or film in film is not something he is interested in: his work does not revolve around any *mise-en-abyme*. In it, the theme of lies leads only to the truth, and appearances intervene only to underscore the manner in which looking and the real together are mobilized” – writes Nancy in his essay on *Life and Nothing More* (2001, 26). Further on, he even anticipates *Shirin* as a possibility of the self-reflexive mode: “Since Kiarostami has not yet shown (as far as I know) the inside of a movie theatre in his films (...) we may think that he is unconcerned with the rhetoric of a ‘show within a show.’ Indeed, the ‘filmic’ element is present in a much more intimate way, in the very texture of his images and his work, so to speak” (2001, 48).

As it happens after every single release of his films, the usual debates with

⁸ Jean-Luc Nancy finds the whole cave-allegory inaccurate when used to cinema: “With film, the wall becomes an opening cut in the world into this very world. [...] [Film] does not reflect an outside; it opens an inside onto itself. The image on the screen is itself the idea” (2001, 44).

Kiarostami, hosted by prestigious western film journals are on again, trying to decipher exactly the western and eastern influences in his latest film. There is a double concern in this feverish preoccupation: after this one-word statement, what's next? Will this self-effacing, withdrawing cinema save The Cinema?

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