ABSTRACT

The Kid with a Camera: Abbas Kiarostami's Cinematic Critique

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This thesis is an exploration of the films of Iranian film director Abbas Kiarostami. It argues that his films constitute a body of work that serves as a self-reflexive critique of cinema. In both documentary and fiction filmmaking, Kiarostami complicates the clear divide between reality and fiction by blending them in his films. Through the use of ambiguity, Kiarostami complicates the authorial claim of a writer/director, implicating the audience in the generation of a film's meaning. Several of his films also explore the apparatus of the camera and the act of filmmaking. In these films he demonstrates how the camera is not a passive, objective observer, but an active tool that shapes and reforms the reality it captures.

The Kid with a Camera: Abbas Kiarostami's Cinematic Critique

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

This thesis argues that the films of Abbas Kiarostami function as self-reflexive critiques of film capturing reality, the nature of film authorship, and the intrusive nature of the camera. It is difficult to give a biography of Kiarostami's life because, as Alberto Elena points out, Kiarostami is not forthcoming about personal details, and the few he gives are often contradictory accounts of the same event. What is known is that his career as a graphic designer and advertiser led to his interest in film. Any formal training he might have had in film, or cinematic influences from other directors, is mired in contradictory accounts from Kiarostami (13–15).

A clearer account can be given of his career as a filmmaker. Kiarostami was initially hired in 1969 by The Institute for the Intellectual Development of Children and Young Adults for his graphic design work. The year in which he was hired happened to coincide with the institute starting a film division, and his graphic design background made him one of the more viable candidates for a position in the division. Kiarostami began making films in the early '70s for The Institute for the Intellectual Development of Children and Young Adults. This period spanned from 1970 to 1989. During this time, his titles focused on the daily lives of children, covering topics of strife among friends, trouble in the classroom, and the ambition of youth to be seen as adults.

Kiarostami is considered one of the primary filmmakers in what is called the Iranian New Wave movement, an outgrowth of Italian Neorealism and cultural upheaval

in Iran. The movement began with Dariush Mehrjui's *The Cow* (1969), which chronicles the story of a man's affection for his cow that takes a disturbing turn when the cow dies and he suffers a mental breakdown that makes him believe he is his beloved cow. As is indicative of this plot, Iranian New Wave films have a tendency to exhibit postmodern attributes. While the film (and Iranian New Wave in general) shares aesthetic similarities to the films of Italian neorealism, it's further distinguished by a deep influence from countryside landscape paintings and Persian poetry. One of Kiarostami's films takes its title from the Persian poem *The Wind Will Carry Us* by the controversial female poet Forough Farrokhzād.

Kiarostami's films are different from many of their Iranian New Wave counterparts because they exhibit a self-reflexive style that fully emerges in Kiarostami's first film after leaving the institute: *Close-Up* (1990). Jean-Luc Nancy says of Kiarostami's films, "I came to understand what there was to grasp: not the genre, the style, the personality, or the cinematic originality so much as an affirmation of cinema—and in a sense, an affirmation of cinema by cinema" (10). And Jonathan Rosenbaum says, "[I]t should be stressed that Kiarostami belongs to that tribe of filmmakers for whom a shot is often closer to being a question than an answer" (*Abbas Kiarostami* 11).

Close-Up represents a new era of Kiarostami's career in which his films are primarily structured and built in such a way that they challenge traditional perspectives on the ethics of filmmaking and the relationship the director has with both truth and the audience. In *Close-Up*, a blend of documentary, reenactments, and fiction, tell the real-life story of Hossain Sabzian, a man on trial for conning the Ahankhahs, a rich Iranian family, into believing that he is the famous Iranian director Mohsen Makhmalbaf. Before

the trial, Kiarostami convinces the judge to let him film the court case. He meets with Sabzian in prison and the Ahankhahs at their home and convinces everyone to reenact the events that happened prior to the court case.

Close-Up embodies the arguments Kiarostami aims at the perceptions of reality in film. The film blurs the line between fiction and reality. It becomes unclear which parts of the film are people naturally interacting and which parts are scripted by Kiarostami. *Close-Up* also constructs an open-ended, ambiguous ending that never confirms whether things have truly been resolved. The conclusion also involves an "equipment failure" that serves as a distancing effect as Kiarostami questions the intrusive nature of the camera as it imposes itself into the life story of real people.

In contrast, Kiarostami's most favorable critics promote his cinema as a self-reflexive support of the apparatus of cinema. Nancy argues that Kiarostami's self-reflexive films make for a body of self-affirming cinema (10). While Nancy is right that Kiarostami affirms cinema, this is only one part of his filmmaking, the part that the overwhelming majority of film critics and academics have explored.

While many critics promote Kiarostami's self-affirming cinema and tout him as an auteur, Nancy is the most explicit proponent of Kiarostami's films as a confirmation of cinema. However, there are a number of blind spots in Nancy's arguments. Besides avoiding almost all the complications Kiarostami's cinema conjures up, as well as his attack on the role of the director, it also becomes clear that Nancy is basing his assumptions on a select number of his films, which leads him to make factual errors about the overall nature of Kiarostami's body of work, such as saying certain scenes and sequences don't exist in his films when such scenes actually do exist in his earlier films.

While this thesis draws on a number of Kiarostami's films, the primary focus will be on *Close-Up*, *Through the Olive Trees* (1994)*, Taste of Cherry* (1997), *Shirin* (2008), *Certified Copy* (2010), *The Wind Will Carry Us* (1999), and *ABC Africa* (2001). These films are the strongest examples of the self-reflexive techniques Kiarostami uses throughout his films. By examining these films and analyzing the works of critics and interviews with Kiarostami, this thesis will demonstrate how Kiarostami enables cinema to critique itself.

Approaching Kiarostami: The Iranian Question

A long-standing debate continues between critics and writers over how to approach Kiarostami's work. Some hold that understanding him as an Iranian citizen is essential to understanding his work, while others believe Kiarostami's cinema exists outside an Iranian context. Farouk Mitha writes that there is a distinct Muslim identity to Kiarostami's films that can be demonstrated through the artistic self-definition, production, and reception of his films. Mitha talks about Kiarostami's need to navigate censors and the way he deals with depicting acts of sin as part of what makes his films definably Muslim and Iranian.

Alberto Elena argues that the Iranian context informs Kiarostami's work. While many writers have skipped or skimmed through some of Kiarostami's earlier films and life background, Elena systematically examines all of them and considers how Kiarostami's circumstances and contexts influenced the content and form of his films. Elena finds a number of threads and connections ignored or missed by many other critics. While Elena argues on the front end that his book is an interpretation of Kiarostami, it is

also the most historically grounded and researched work on Kiarostami available in English.

However, Hamid Dabashi (*Masters & Masterpieces*) rejects the Iranian context argument. He is more interested in examining Kiarostami's conception of reality, explicitly rejecting the Iranian and political view. When he responds to Kiarostami's critics later in the essay, he ends up having to delve into those subjects in order to argue against those critics. To further complicate things, Dabashi (*Close Up*) wrote a comprehensive background on the cultural context that would have informed Kiarostami's childhood, touching not only on his generation, but his parents' generation. Dabashi argues that Kiarostami's films are only tangentially about Iranian identity or politics. While Dabashi gives this rich context, he fails to bring it to bear on Kiarostami's films.

Both sides of the debate are presented in Mehrnaz Saeed-Vafa and Jonathan Rosenbaum's book on Kiarostami. While Rosenbaum places Kiarostami in the context of a global art cinema, Saeed-Vafa argues that he is distinctly Iranian in content and style. Rosenbaum further argues that Kiarostami begins in the context of Iranian cinema but evolves into the realm of world cinema. He claims that the shift begins with *Five Dedicated to Ozu* (2003), which introduces a theatrical sensibility. This ultimately results in *Certified Copy*, a film completely devoid of any Iranian context. Along similar lines, Godfrey Cheshire ("Abbas Kiarostami: A Cinema of Questions") places Kiarostami's career into three distinct categories: the prerevolutionary (1970–78), postrevolutionary (1978–89) and international filmmaker (1989–present).

Since this thesis focuses on how Kiarostami's films challenge cinema, he will be placed in conversation with world cinema and criticism. While the Iranian context may be important to understanding elements of his films and will come up at several points, it is not essential to the argument being made here.

Fiction Criticizing Reality

Chapter two argues that Kiarostami destroys the boundary between fact and fiction in the documentary by considering the role of the director. Kiarostami complicates claims of "truth" made about documentaries by allowing the audience insights into how the director shapes the documentary in such a fashion that it becomes its own fiction. This chapter demonstrates this by exploring techniques within both documentary and fiction films from Kiarostami's filmography. These techniques include the use of Kiarostami's voice in the film—both his own literal voice and the voice of a surrogate director placed in his fictional story—as well as Kiarostami's construction of scenes that draw their honesty into question. The chapter will pull from several films. One of the primary focuses will be on the making of *Close-Up* and behind-the-scenes accounts that demonstrate how Kiarostami was not a passive observer, but an active instigator of the events he filmed. Furthermore, the techniques he uses shape how the audience perceives the characters and how they observe events. These techniques often blend reality and fiction to the point that they are indistinguishable. This chapter will also examine the two films that follow *Close-Up*: *And Life Goes On* (1992) and *Through the Olive Trees*. Both films feature director protagonists who are clear stand-ins for Kiarostami and blur the lines between capturing reality and fiction filmmaking.

Nancy argues that Kiarostami reaches a place where he is able to go to the end of cinema, where he is able to find what is real: "all of cinema" (22). And Hamid Dabashi writes that *Close-Up* is a double negative of reality that ends up affirming reality (*Close Up*, 67). This is a prime example of the perspective on Kiarostami this thesis aims to challenge. Both Nancy and Dabashi seem to ultimately find affirmation beyond the negatives, but both fail to explore how Kiarostami uses *Close-Up*, as well as his other films, as a challenge to cinema.

Azadeh Saljooghi views *Close-Up* as an exploration of a variety of voices, not only the voices of the characters, but Kiarostami's voice, which is heard off-camera in some scenes, dialoguing with the individual(s) on camera. He also examines how Kiarostami reappropriates and reconstructs reality, blending fact and fiction. The central character of Sabzian is also explored from a number of perspectives: imposter, criminal, an unemployed print-worker, and the director he pretends to be. Saljooghi concludes that *Close-Up* is a fiction attempting to interpret facts.

Cheshire ("Prison and Escape") writes that the inception of the project is wrapped up in a plurality of perspectives; both Kiarostami and Makhmalbaf have their own version of the genesis of *Close-Up*. In the same article Cheshire also talks about how much of the film Kiarostami ended up scripting, such as Sabzian's courtroom speech, and how Kiarostami influenced the events that he captured in the film.

Cheshire ("Prison and Escape") writes that Kiarostami mingles both recreations of past events featuring the actual people with documentary footage, placing Kiarostami as both a chronicler and a participant in the case. Characters in the film argue about the negative aspects of a passion for cinema: deception, theft, deceit, and obsession. Even

though the audience should identify more with the Ahankhah family as the victim of the obsession—a clear stand-in for the film audience—Kiarostami aligns the audience with Sabzian. Cheshire argues that the mix of documentary and docudrama simultaneously condemns and exalts the auteur. Cheshire concludes that, if Sabzian is deceptive, the film is even more deceptive. He says very few of the scenes that appear to be documentary are actually documentary scenes. Kiarostami orchestrated the entirety of the courtroom proceedings and even scripted most of Sabzian's testimony. The judge essentially turned the case over to Kiarostami. Even the cutting of sound as a "technical failure" at the end of the film is a ruse for an aesthetic choice.

Kent Jones examines several documentaries that blur the line between reality and film. Jones traces practical reasons for this: the director's ability to be lax in the film's technical elements, but also an ability to take on more structure from fiction filmmaking. He argues that filmmakers recognize that audiences understand that the "reality" presented to them is constructed. He briefly discusses Kiarostami as an essential figure in the early '90s in establishing the rise of ambiguity between reality and fiction in documentaries, citing his ability to construct his own version of real time.

Therefore, the question becomes: Is there such a thing as a "hands off" director? Kiarostami's presence in the film, as well as the behind-the-scenes accounts, demonstrates that Kiarostami influenced the film in such a way that *Close-Up* is not a passive document, but an active fiction that Kiarostami weaves into reality. The courtroom becomes a soundstage for his film production.

In *And Life Goes* On, a director (Farhad Kheradmand) and his son drive through the aftermath of the real Koker earthquake in search of two young actors from one of

Kiarostami's previous films: *Where is the Friend's Home?* (1987). While the quest of the director (a clear stand-in for Kiarostami) and his son is a fiction, it takes place across the backdrop of a real crisis and features footage of the real ruins of the earthquake. Kiarostami follows up this film with *Through the Olive Trees*. It initially appears to be a straightforward film about the making of a film, but as it progresses, it becomes clear that the film being made is actually part of *And Life Goes On*. The layer upon layer of fictions built off of facts blurs the line between reality and fiction.

Hamid Dabashi (*Close Up*) uses Jacques Lacan's distinction between the imaginary and symbolic as an entry point into how *Through the Olive Trees* allows Kiarostami to reimagine his own reality. By using the filmmaking process to explore the ambiguity of the space between reality and fiction, Kiarostami navigates between, and ultimately rejects, Lacan's distinction of the imaginary and symbolic.

Laura Mulvey (*Death 24x a Second*) looks at the Koker Trilogy (*Where is the Friend's Home?*, *And Life Goes On*, *Through the Olive Trees*) as Kiarostami's exploration of the problem of representation. Instead of trying to close the gap between reality and representation, Kiarostami acknowledges the distance. Mulvey uses Lacan's ideas to argue that Kiarostami goes from "the real" to "the symbolic" by translating his film about the aftermath of the Koker earthquake (*And Life Goes On*) into the search for the two lead boys from *Where is the Friend's Home?* The uncertainty of the aftermath of the earthquake is reflected in the film's cinematic uncertainty in trying to find a way to capture this tragedy. Mulvey argues that Kiarostami recognizes the deception of his own film by including an encounter with an actor from *Where is the Friend's Home?* who complains that his role in the film deceived audiences. Mulvey concludes that

Kiarostami is arguing that film can witness the lives of the survivors of the earthquake, but cannot represent the truth.

The Ambiguity of Authorship

In chapter three, the argument is made that Kiarostami challenges the notion of the director as auteur by displacing meaning-making and authorship of a film from the director to the audience by creating open spaces for the audience to fill. This is reliant on the assumption that is often made that one can look to the director for the meaning of the film. David Bordwell ("The Art Cinema") argues that, in the art film, the director as author is a formal part of a film; he or she is the overriding intelligence that makes a film cohesive and comprehensible. He argues that the director/author communicates and expresses his or her themes and style to the audience. Without the familiarity of movie stars and genres, art cinema must look to authorship to unify the text.

The chapter will use *Taste of Cherry*, *Certified Copy*, and *Shirin* to demonstrate that Kiarostami uses ambiguity in film to challenge the traditional understanding of the auteur as the source of a film's meaning. *Taste of Cherry* follows the attempts of Mr. Badii (Homayoun Ershadi) as he drives around trying to find a man to help him kill himself. He finds three different candidates and has three separate conversations with them and each man tries to convince him not to commit suicide. At the end of the film, Kiarostami refuses to divulge to the audience whether Badii kills himself.

In an interview with Bill Horrigan, Kiarostami revealed that he did this deliberately to allow his audience to come to their own conclusions about the film. He wanted to create that emotional distance in order to avoid taking their emotions hostage. It demonstrates that life goes on whether or not Mr. Badii commits suicide. Kiarostami

discusses this as part of his philosophy about how films make meaning. He views himself as no better than the audience in this regard, saying their opinions are just as valuable as his views on the film. Therefore, by making the ending inconclusive, he invites the audience to end the film.

In an interview with Shahin Parhami, Kiarostami talks about cinema as a place to allow multiple interpretations, not a place to propagate a singular message. He argues that every film should have enough layers that anyone from any background should be able to relate to it in some way.

Dan Jones contrasts *Taste of Cherry* with *American Beauty* (1999)*,* proposing that they explore the same themes but in different ways. He argues that Kiarostami gives the audience a temporal emotional training that allows them to relate to other human beings. However, he does not express what Badii is thinking or feeling, unlike *American Beauty* where Lester spills out the emotions of his life in the opening minutes of the film. Kiarostami puts the burden of imagination on the viewers, allowing them to experience Badii, but not telling them what to conclude about what they have seen. In contrast, Lester in *American Beauty* is constantly feeding the audience what they should think and feel. Therefore, *American Beauty* ends with a happy, dead, Lester while *Taste of Cherry* leaves the fate of the protagonist up to the audience.

Shohini Chaudhuri and Howard Finn explore the concept of an incomplete image as a signature of Iranian films. They argue that this is a response to the repressed political culture of Iran, tracing the notion of the open image, an image where the meaning is left ambiguous, through its roots in Italian neorealism. This is not a binary—objective or subjective—but an indirect subjectivity from the point of view of the camera.

They discuss Schrader's image of stasis as another influence, an attempt to gain the presence and aura of still photography. Therefore, the open image is often static. Likewise, the open image can only be meaningful if the film avoids narrative closure. Their article traces how the open image works in Iranian cinema specifically, from the frequent perspective of a lost child to the way it makes characters unsympathetic in order to avoid identification. The ultimate goal is to allow the open image to be a space for audience interpretation and reaction.

While *Taste of Cherry* will be the primary entry point into this chapter, *Certified Copy* is another Kiarostami film that exhibits the same trait. In this film, James Miller, a man who has written a book about the value of art, and a woman only referred to as "She" spend an afternoon together, wandering around Tuscany, Italy, discussing life and art. However, as the film develops, the nature of their relationship becomes ambiguous when they start acting like a married couple. Are (or were) they married? Is it all just a game? Like *Taste of Cherry*, Kiarostami refuses to give the audience an answer to this question, letting them make their own conclusions about the nature of the relationship.

Shirin presents the audience the opportunity to interpret what they are seeing in a different way. The film is made up entirely of the reactions of the female-dominated audience to a film of the Persian story *Khosrow and Shirin*. Here, the audience is only afforded the audio to the film that is being projected on a screen they cannot see. This forces the audience to use the audio and the reactions of the on-screen audience to interpret the film. However, according to Rosenbaum, even though the audience believes that the subjects in *Shirin* are in a theater, in reality, the entire film was shot in Kiarostami's living room and the soundtrack was produced for the film after the fact

(“Shirin as Mirror,” para. 2). Only though the trickery of editing does Kiarostami create the illusion of a communal audience sharing an experience.

Criticizing the Camera

The final major section critiques the apparatus of the camera by examining the films *The Wind Will Carry Us* and *ABC Africa*. In *The Wind Will Carry Us,* an engineer and his crew visit a remote Iranian town to photograph the traditional burial ritual of a sick, elderly woman everyone expects to die soon. Kiarostami uses this plot to explore the exploitative and intrusive nature of the camera in a number of ways. Beside the fact that the entire plot revolves around the ghoulish desire to prey on an old woman's sickness, Kiarostami also uses the camera within his film to comment on the intrusive nature of the camera and to question the ethical bounds of what should and should not be filmed.

Nancy says that the “blind spot” of Kiarostami's cinema, that which exists off-screen, does not deprive the eye, but gives a way of looking. Through this “blind spot,” Kiarostami's cinema exerts the essence of cinema and existence (12). And, while it is true that blind spots play a role in Kiarostami's cinema, this thesis will argue that these blind spots are not only a way of looking, but also a way of understanding what should not be looked at or intruded upon by the camera.

Chris Lippard says *The Wind Will Carry Us* is defined by what is not seen. He discusses the strong female presence that is never seen: the dying woman, the young lady who never reveals her face to the engineer. The engineer also receives phone calls throughout the film from his boss, another woman. By Kiarostami's count, there are eleven unfilmed or briefly glimpsed characters in the story of *The Wind Will Carry Us*.

Michael J. Anderson argues that this technique allows Kiarostami to give things presence without giving them material presence. Therefore, when the protagonist has a conversation with a digger who is left off-screen, there is a presence without presence. In this way, Kiarostami acknowledges the existence of things beyond the material boundaries of the film frame. This allows Kiarostami to convey the immaterial in a distinctly material medium. He is able to express an immaterial world that a director cannot capture with his or her camera.

This technique of not filming characters suggests that certain things should not be filmed. The townsfolk distrust the camera. At the film's end, frustrated at his inability to film the ritual, the engineer begins taking pictures of a line of women who are not pleased at being photographed. This scene demonstrates that Kiarostami is using *The Wind Will Carry Us* as a condemnation of visual exploitation by refusing to intrude into intimate spaces and places. By keeping that distance, he is able to argue that the camera should avoid intruding into private spaces and lives without engaging in this act of intrusion itself.

This idea exists in Kiarostami's most traditional and intimate feature, *The Report* (1977), in which the audience experiences the disintegration of a marriage. While this film captures scenes in the couple's bedroom and living room—areas *The Wind Will Carry Us* deliberately avoids filming, in part because *The Report* was shot before the Iranian Revolution—in the climactic scene, Kiarostami refuses to enter the room where the final blow is struck in this relationship. It is not because of his fear to intrude (he shows a number of scenes in the bedroom, a far more intimate setting); rather, Kiarostami avoids the blunt emotional impact of the moment as well as questions the camera's

intrusion into the lives of these characters. It's the seed of what he fully develops in *The Wind Will Carry Us*.

Scott Krzych examines how the digital shift evolves Kiarostami's style. He argues that the analog films of Kiarostami anticipate the abstract nature of digital code. With the digital camera, Kiarostami is not only able to track movements, but he becomes part of that movement. Krzych uses *ABC Africa* as an example, a documentary Kiarostami made about children orphaned by the AIDS epidemic in Uganda. In this film, Kiarostami not only films digitally, but allows subjects to see what he is filming through the view screen on the camera. Krzych argues that objectivity and subjectivity lose all relevance through this virtual display.

Conclusion

While many critics have touched upon elements of this thesis' focus, what will distinguish this work is that it will look at Kiarostami's films as more complicated and challenging than many of the critics, both detractors and fans. While certain critics tease out the challenges Kiarostami makes to cinema, there has yet to be an in-depth exploration of how his films often function as self-reflexive critiques of the cinema and cinematic ideas.

CHAPTER TWO

Fiction Criticizing Reality

Traditionally, there is an obvious distinction between reality and fiction in film. The documentary film exists in the realm of reality while almost all other forms of filmmaking are fiction. Even at a cursory glance, there are exceptions to this clear divide. Numerous filmmakers have made films based on true events, reenacting historical events, but often with a number of creative liberties. And there are a number of documentaries that contain fictional elements or stories, such as Orson Welles' *F for Fake* (1973). Jackson Ayres says Welles' film challenges assumptions of originality and authenticity and that the film is self-consciously an interrogation of art (7). One of the ways the film does this is through the fictional last act about lost Picasso paintings, which Welles passes off as fact before revealing that the entire story was a sham. But, in general, there's a conceptual divide, the notion that what one sees in a documentary is captured reality, the moment as it happens, or at least a faithful reenactment of reality, while recreations of historical events—even if they have factual roots—are perceived as staged and fabricated.

Documentary filmmaker Jill Godmilow says, "Unconsciously embedded in these forms called documentary is the conceit of 'the real,' which substantiates the truth claims made by these films. These general notions about documentary film produce a fairly limited understanding of what non-fiction cinema can be and do" (as cited in Shapiro, 80–81). Hülya Önal and Meral Özçinar say, "Documentary and fictional films have been

persistently conceived of as two distinct and separate traditions; the cinema of reality (recording of reality) and the cinema of fiction (constitution of reality)" (3562).

The traditional understanding of the documentary is that the camera passively captures the reality in front of it. Likewise, the role of the documentarian is to logistically figure out how to capture this material and to be in the right place at the right time. The assumption is that a film that captures its subject in reality is unhampered by the aesthetics and staging of fictional filmmaking. Therefore, it is assumed that the documentary represents reality while all other films, even if based on fact, are constructed, a play of fiction to some extent.

Abbas Kiarostami's pseudo-documentary *Close-Up* (1990) blurs the divide between documentary and fiction filmmaking. It captures the real-life court case of Hossain Sabzian, a man who gains the good graces of the Ahankhah, a wealthy Iranian family interested in the arts, by passing himself off as Mohsen Makhmalbaf, one of Iran's most famous directors. Kiarostami learns about the case after Sabzian is arrested, goes to meet him at the court, and gets both the courthouse and all members involved in the case to let him film a documentary about the events. Through both reconstructing the meeting of Sabzian and the Ahankhah family and orchestrating a conclusion for the film, Kiarostami complicates traditional conceptions of both reality and the role of the director in documentaries.

Godfrey Cheshire argues that this mix of documentary and fiction is both an exaltation and questioning of the auteur ("Prison and Escape" para. 4), although he also argues that the film exalts Sabzian in order to justify his unhealthy cinematic obsession ("How to Read Kiarostami" para. 16). Hamid Dabashi says that the power of the film is

that it doesn't matter whether it begins as a reality or a fiction and that once Kiarostami enters the equation, he is able to doubly negate the real in order to affirm reality (*Close Up* 67). While it is vague what Dabashi precisely means by "doubly negating reality," it could be interpreted that Kiarostami's fiction, when compounded with Sabzian's fiction, ends up affirming reality. Both critics suggest the same idea: While Kiarostami deals in a quagmire of deceptive fiction in *Close-Up*, he does it in such a way that ultimately affirms cinema. However, this neglects the underlying modes of deception Kiarostami exposes as part of the filmmaking process.

Kiarostami also explores the ambiguities between reality and fiction in the Koker Trilogy. As mentioned earlier, this impromptu trilogy consists of *Where is the Friend's Home?* (1987), *And Life Goes On* (1992), and *Through the Olive Trees* (1994). Each film refers back to the previous film, exposing its fiction. *And Life Goes On* was made in the aftermath of the 1990 earthquake in Iran. In *And Life Goes On*, the director and his son try to find the two lead actors from one of Kiarostami's previous films: *Where is the Friend's Home?*. Filmed in the real ruins of the earthquake, *And Life Goes On* gives the audience a glimpse of the tragic aftermath and appears to take on the form of a documentary even though it was scripted by Kiarostami. *Through the Olive Trees* is about the film crew making *And Life Goes On*. It, too, appears to be a documentary, but once again Kiarostami is not capturing reality as it happens. Through the use of a surrogate director in the narrative, Kiarostami revisits scenes in *And Life Goes On* from the perspective of making the film.

In order to demonstrate how Kiarostami breaks the boundaries between reality and fiction, this chapter will examine *Close-Up* and the Koker Trilogy. It will

demonstrate the difficulty of a true film reality by examining the use of aesthetics, the role of the director, and the technical breakdown at the end of *Close-Up*.

The Fiction of Reality

John Grierson says that "[D]ocumentary was from the beginning…an 'anti-aesthetic' movement. We have all, I suppose, sacrificed some personal capacity in 'art' and the pleasant vanity that goes with it" (as cited in Önal, 2011, 3562).

In *Close-Up*, Kiarostami heightens the art of filmmaking in order to make the audience aware of how the film works as a constructed art. According to Grierson, aesthetics should not be at the forefront of a documentary, but in Kiarostami's documentary, aesthetics override the documentation quality. In *Close-Up*, the audience is given the impression of watching events as they occurred, but Kiarostami includes aesthetic elements that expose how the film is reconstructing the reality of the story.

For example, the film opens on a reporter and two policemen riding in a cab to the Ahankhah home to arrest Hossain Sabzian. En route, the reporter strikes up a conversation with the cab driver about the man they are going to arrest and how he deceived this rich family. This exchange conveniently serves as exposition for the audience. Once they arrive, instead of following the reporter and the police into the house to view the arrest, the camera remains outside and watches the cab driver as he gets out of the car, looks at a pile of yard rubbish outside one of the homes, and picks out several flowers from the top of the heap. He kicks a spray can down the road and the camera follows the can as it rolls down the hill. Gilberto Perez analyzes the purpose of the scene: "The point is not merely to tell us the story but to make us aware of our path to the story" (as cited in Elena, 88).

There is no documentary value to this moment; it's an aesthetically charged moment akin to the long, lingering takes Kiarostami has become known for in both earlier and later films. The cab driver is inconsequential; he plays no significant role in the story. In a more straightforward documentary, the camera would follow the reporter and police officers as they make the arrest, making a document of the moment as it happens. But since Sabzian was arrested before the film began shooting, the sequence is a recreation, at best. Instead of trying to reconstruct this moment, the film stays outside with the cab driver. By lingering on the cab driver as he waits for the reporter and police to come out, Kiarostami creates a space in time that deprives the audience of information and constructs something that is not documentary truth. Through this creative aesthetic, *Close-Up* is intentionally trying to create a distance from reality even while purportedly capturing it.

Furthermore, the actual arrest of Sabzian is shown later in the film. Kiarostami told Cheshire that he got the idea to reorganize the film when at one film festival the projectionist mixed up the reels. He liked the change in chronology so much that he re-edited the film ("Confessions of a Sin-ephile" 7). Alberto Elena says that "When, in the middle of the hearing, someone says that 'some things are more complicated than they seem', Kiarostami is undoubtedly winking at the audience, who by this time are already fairly disorientated with regard to what they are seeing." Elena further elaborates that the director denies any traditional linear storytelling in order to create a segmented structure that mixes real images that may or may not have been manipulated in the editing process, reconstructions that look like documentary takes, flashbacks, interviews, dead time sequences, and the same scene filmed from a different perspective. The lack of clear

references to time force the audience to constantly reconstruct the scenes they are shown, making them question their perspective, which Elena says results in "an uncomfortable but productive state of uncertainty" (87–88).

On an organizational level, Kiarostami disorients the audience by failing to present them with a clear frame of reference in any given moment. Therefore, the distinction between a recreation, an after-the-fact interview, or footage captured as it happened becomes ambiguous to the point that it is difficult to distinguish what is captured as a document and what is constructed. It also becomes uncertain whether or not a valuable distinction can be made. If one is unable to clearly and easily distinguish where recreation ends and reality begins, is trying to call one moment in *Close-Up* real and another fiction a distinction worth making?

All of these elements serve as a prompt to the audience that the film is not a document of truth, but a construction. In many ways, *Close-Up* aesthetically and structurally takes on the patterns of a fictional art film as opposed to a traditional documentary. There are still documentary trappings, such as the spattering of interviews and the filming of the court case, but there are also elements that suggest a precisely constructed moment that could only exist in a fictional film.

Close-Up even has visual bookends. In what Elena would designate as a dead time sequence, the cab driver's small handful of flowers from the rubbish dump are mimicked in the final moments of the film when Sabzian picks up a bouquet of flowers to give the Ahankhah family at the end of the film. One could argue that this is mere coincidence, but given that Kiarostami devotes screen time to both the cab driver and

Sabzian picking flowers, and more than just a fleeting moment, suggests that this is a deliberate inclusion.

The two films that follow *Close-Up—And Life Goes On* and *Through the Olive Trees* (the second and third films in the Koker trilogy)—extend the complications of the relationship between reality and fiction in film. David Oubiña says, "

> Each film [in the Koker trilogy] documents the one before, and, in turn, becomes the fictional motif for the next. In this extraordinary series of palimpsests, where each film overwrites its predecessor, Kiarostami moves constantly between the two poles of fiction and documentary: there is no clear distinction between the two registers, but rather a complex system of permutations. (as cited in Elena, 108–109)

And Life Goes On also deals with Kiarostami's inability to capture reality. Like the events that precede the court case in *Close-Up, And Life Goes On* is unable to capture the real-world event; it is only able to reflect upon the aftermath. In this case, it is an earthquake that devastated the area in which *Where is the Friend's Home?* was shot.

Laura Mulvey writes that instead of trying to close the gap between the missed event and the filming of the aftermath, Kiarostami acknowledges it. The film takes the reality of the tragedy and uses fiction to translate the event. The search for the two boys is delayed by the stories of survival and tragedy encountered along the way. Eventually, the film is brought to a stop as it tries to transition from the disaster to the idea that "life goes on" (*Death 24x a Second* 128–129).

One of the moments in which the idea of life going on is demonstrated is a sequence in which the director has a conversation with a newly married man. The married man says he and his wife swiftly married in the aftermath of the quake and that they have been living in destitute conditions for the past few days. It's a moment that

shows that even amidst the death and destruction of the earthquake, the promise of life continues.

Elena says, “Kiarostami nevertheless rejected the ‘emergency report’ style, and went to exactly the opposite extreme from sensationalism. In fact, not a single shot was filmed during these location-finding trips; instead, everything was reconstructed after the event according to the requirements of the film” (94). Kiarostami even said, “I shot one part [of the film] five months after [the earthquake] and the rest eleven months later […] It was all a reconstruction, although it looked like a documentary” (as cited in Elena, 94).

While *And Life Goes On* appears to be a document about the aftermath of the earthquake, this presents yet another layer on which Kiarostami has distanced the film from reality. Not only is there now a fictional conceit that creates a gap, but also a gap in time. By distancing the film from the tragedy, Kiarostami avoids capturing immediate and sensational images of the aftermath. Instead, the film is a recreation. Yet, the film is presented in such a way that it’s perceived as a documentary, suggesting that what is seen is the true aftermath of the devastation. The rubble and makeshift camps that the audience sees may be part of the aftermath of the earthquake, but they are not the immediate aftermath that is suggested by the fictional conceit that the father and son are searching through the immediate aftermath of the earthquake for the two young actors.

In *And Life Goes On*, Kiarostami manipulates the audience’s perception of space and time in order to present them with something that has the appearance of a real document, shot in the style of a documentary, but is largely a fabrication. Unlike *Close-Up*, there are not necessarily demarcations within the film to make the audience aware of this deception; it is only through his next film that Kiarostami unmasks his deceit.

Through the Olive Trees is a fictionalized account of the behind-the-scenes filming of *And Life Goes On*. Kiarostami casts Mohamad Ali Keshavarz as a surrogate director to stand-in for himself. Keshavarz opens the film by telling the audience that he is "the actor who plays the director" and that they are about to hire actors on location. The female producer comes by and interrupts him, saying that the girls that have come for the audition are ready. Stephen Bransford says in the moment where the producer tells him the girls are getting hungry, the film moves from a self-reflexive pseudo-documentary into a work of fiction. Kershavarz goes from being "the actor who plays the director" into playing the director; explaining the film in one moment and then acting out the film the next moment. Kershavarz says,

> Slippage in this scene occurs on the level of genre as we move back and forth across the boundary between documentary and fiction, but the slippage also involves a temporal component as well, as we shuttle from the acknowledged past context of 'were hired' to the obvious present context of actors 'being hired' before our very eyes. (para. 2)

Elena says, "In reality, from the moment of the first sequence—the presentation to camera made by the actor who says he is the film's director—*Through the Olive Trees* is deliberately situated in 'undecided territory' halfway between fiction and documentary, what is 'real' and what is 'filmed.'" He says this leaves the audience floundering among various levels through which they watch the movements of the film. It invites them to be carried away in the confusion and narrative obscurity, a web that Kiarostami delights in weaving (115).

Dabashi talks about the arbitrary nature in which Kiarostami makes an actual boundary between reality and fiction in *Through the Olive Trees*:

> In a telling scene that captures that circuitous arrival in the really fantastic world that Kiarostami generates, Keshavarz-cum-Kiarostami addresses a

> group of young schoolboys who have been cordoned off in a corner to watch the making of the film and says to them, “children, you are not supposed to cross this line to come over here where we are making the movie. Do you mind if I come to your side?” Then he proceeds to go to their side, thus transgressing the visible line-a rope-that is to separate reality from fiction. The director takes one of the children’s school texts and quizzes them on their knowledge of local geography. Now, at this very moment, and as soon as he has passed beyond the rope, the director is in the land of Oz, in the realm of the (un)real. With that move, the whole fictive borderline between fact and fantasy is visibly and literally crossed. The border crossing is by far the most revolutionary event in Kiarostami’s cinema. With the crossing of that rope, Kiarostami makes a fictive representation of himself, an actor, crosses the border from the fiction of making a film called *Through the Olive Trees* into the actual world of its behind-the-scenes, which is itself the fictional world of making *And Life Goes On,* which was the factual world of finding out what happened when an earthquake destroyed the region that Kiarostami had filmed in his fictional narrative film called *Where is the Friend’s House?* (*Masters & Masterpieces* 310–311)

By designating a physical boundary within the film to distinguish reality from fiction, Kiarostami not only presents the audience with the divide, but also demonstrates that the film is unable to contain itself within the boundaries of fiction. By having the director step over into reality, Kiarostami brings the film into the realm of the real. While the moment in the film is staged, it is endemic to the philosophy of the film, to both draw and maintain a distance from reality in spite of the fact that it too has become part of the movement of what is real.

But, once again, it becomes hard to distinguish what is real and what is fiction. Elena explains,

> The confusion between the various levels of reality and narrative [in *Through the Olive Trees*] is intensified by the absence of any ‘punctuation marks’ (the flashback to the cemetery), the numerous point-of-view shots (from inside vehicles, basically) which nearly always restrict the audience’s view, and the constant use of off-camera (the whole conversation between the teacher and Mrs. Shiva in the sequence that follows the credits). (115)

Through the Olive Trees takes on the structure of *Close-Up*, failing to clue its audience into whether or not the moment they are watching is fact, fiction, a flashback, or from what perspective they may be following. This disorientation makes the distinction between reality and fiction ambiguous, at best. According to Jean-Michel Frodon,

> Cinema is based on recording of actual physical 'objects', including bodies, faces, light, etc. Therefore it documents these objects, whatever fictional use is made of them. And on the other hand, no documentary is 'pure recording of reality," it always depends on choices, which are ways to 'tell the story'. Even video surveillance in a shopping mall needs to choose angles, lenses, frames, etc. The art of filmmaking is always the art of specific combinations of these two horizons. Never a pure fiction, never a pure reproduction of reality. (126)

Actor, Director, Mediator

In separate interviews with Cheshire, both Kiarostami and Makhmalbaf gave contradictory accounts of who came up with the idea for *Close-Up*. Makhmalbaf said he already had the idea to make a movie and showed Kiarostami the news article about Sabzian's arrest. According to Kiarostami, the article was already out on his desk when the two were discussing a script Makhmalbaf had written. Kiarostami didn't think much of Makhmalbaf's script, so he changed the subject to the article and convinced Makhmalbaf they should make a film about it ("Confessions of a Sin-ephile" 6–7). Even from its inception, authorship becomes a complicated subject in *Close-Up*.

Dabashi says that it makes little difference whether or not one starts with fact or fiction; at some point it begins to unravel. Kiarostami steps into this confusion, subjecting everything to double erasure by having the real people "reenact" what happened. This leads Dabashi to conclude that Kiarostami confirms reality by double

negating it, allowing Sabzian to become an actual actor in a film and having the family feature in a film (*Close Up* 67).

And, while Dabashi makes a strong argument that Kiarostami validates Sabzian, there is also an argument to be made that, by double negating reality, Kiarostami is not confirming reality, but reflecting on his role as director in the film and questioning how the director bends reality to his own ends. Kiarostami's role in *Close-Up* is not to document the event, but to ascribe and write meaning into the story, to create a fiction. Furthermore, Sabzian as a fake director also allows Kiarostami to explore the deception of the director.

According to Cheshire, the film should align the audience with the duped bourgeois family, but instead follows Sabzian. He says that perhaps this is because Kiarostami wants to redeem Sabzian's guilty obsession because he shares it ("Godfrey Cheshire on Close Up" para. 16). Aligning the audience with Sabzian cannot be discounted; but, while there is merit to what Cheshire says, it ignores how Sabzian is also portrayed in a negative light. Sabzian deceives the Ahankhah family, and, by making him the subject of the film, Kiarostami is able to explore the role of the director as a deceiver. Sabzian is a perfect embodiment of this idea. He comes into the Ahankhahs' lives and leads them to believe he might put them into a film. He ends up getting money out of the family for a fiction, something that will not happen. By focusing on Sabzian, Kiarostami is able to capture a story in which the director is a fake and a charlatan, a man of deception and tricks, one who is not honest or true. And, in the same way, Kiarostami becomes his own trickster throughout the film.

Cheshire points out that Kiarostami orchestrated most of what happened in the courtroom. Much of Sabzian's testimony is scripted, even though Kiarostami claims it was mostly based on things Sabzian had said. And within the film the audience can hear Kiarostami conducting the testimony, as he is heard asking Sabzian a number of questions in the trial while off-camera ("Godfrey Cheshire on Close-Up" para. 34).

Kiarostami's presence in the film introduces uncertainty about whether the subjects are being truthful about themselves. At one point in the court case, Kiarostami asks Sabzian if he is being honest or if he is just playing another role. After all, Sabzian has already deceived the family in private. With both a filmmaker and camera in the room, is Sabzian only continuing his performance? Therefore, getting to the truth becomes a problem. Is Sabzian being honest? Can the film capture reality or does the presence of the camera make everyone a performer, everyone acting in a way that makes them appear how they want to be perceived? And through Sabzian, Kiarostami draws his own honesty and the honesty of the director into question.

Mehrnaz Saeed-Vafa points out that Kiarostami makes an appearance on camera when meeting Sabzian in prison. His voice is heard not only when speaking to the judge, the family, and Sabzian in the courtroom, but also when inquiring about Sabzian at the police station and in the final moments of the film when talking to his film crew. Saeed-Vafa says all these moments make the audience aware of the filmmaker's power, "both as a judge and as someone who intervenes in reality" (65).

While these reports do not give insight into the extent to which Kiarostami manipulated things behind the scenes, it does make it clear that he is not a passive observer. He is literally a voice in the film, a part of the conversation. Kiarostami has

written himself into the film, becoming part of the story. In a traditional documentary, his role would be to capture reality from a distance, not to enter it. This is not akin to other documentary filmmakers who comment on their films or perhaps appear in interviews; rather, he is making himself part of the proceedings of the court case and becomes a mediator of the events. Not only is he making a film that mediates this story to the audience, but he serves as mediator among Sabzian, the family, and the court, an overseer who orchestrates events.

By developing a story for this film, Kiarostami writes his fiction into reality. By seeking a certain outcome in the court case and by scripting some of Sabzian's speeches, Kiarostami is able to convince the family to drop the charges of the case. Furthermore, the film is able to conclude with Sabzian meeting the man he pretended to be: Makhmalbaf. This sequence makes for a literal reconciliation between the fiction and reality. But, it is with the final sequence that Kiarostami further complicates the idea of a complete reconciliation between reality and fiction.

Observing Sabzian becomes the seed of an idea that Kiarostami uses in his next two films. Both *And Life Goes On* and *Through the Olive Trees* feature surrogate directors that Kiarostami uses to explore the realities of filmmaking. It also allows him to look back at his own deceptions in film. Bransford discusses a scene in *And Life Goes On* in which Mr. Ruhi, an actor from *Where is the Friend's Home?*, talks about his role in the film, complaining about how he was made to look older and points out his house in the film, which was not his actual house. Bransford says this self-reflexive scene exposes the fabricated nature of the film. It also makes the audience aware that what they are watching now is also a fabrication, which allows Kiarostami to remind the audience that

space itself is constructed and cinema is part of that construction. Bransford also develops how filmmakers often make rural space and villagers look more archaic and older than they really are. It's an idea he brings up again in *Through the Olive Trees* when the director insists an actress wear a dress that makes her look more "traditional" even though she complains that no one wears that kind of dress these days. The director and producer insist, and eventually the actress ends up wearing the dress for the scene (para. 62).

While both of these scenes take place within Kiarostami's fictional films, they expose the reality of filmmaking, in this case the director placing his own fictional notion of what is right or what should be represented over reality. Bransford exposes this across the divide of urban and rural people. In both films, the director is an urban outsider, coming into the rural area and being in some ways at odds with what he experiences. In both cases, the directors have portrayed/are portraying the rural environment in such a way as to make it Other. And to do so is to misconstrue and misrepresent reality (para. 14).

In another moment, the director is a stickler for one of the lines over how many people the young man lost in the earthquake. The actor keeps saying the actual number of family members he lost in the earthquake (which may or may not be true), but the director insists on exaggerating the number. It's a scene where it's hard to tell where reality ends—if it begins at all—and where the fiction begins.

Breaking Reality

In the final moments of *Close-Up* Sabzian rides on the back of Makhmalbaf's motorcycle, embracing him. They stop to pick up flowers and continue on their way to

see the family Sabzian deceived. On a narrative level, the sequence suggests a reconciliation between the fictional Makhmalbaf and the real Makhmalbaf and a potential reconciliation between the fictional Makhmalbaf and the audience, a sort of symbolic apology to the audience for the deception of film.

During the sequence, Kiarostami and his crew are following the motorcycle, shooting from a bus. The real Makhmalbaf is wearing a microphone that keeps cutting out as the film is being shot. All the while Kiarostami and his crew are complaining about the equipment failure. There is also a fragmentation of the image as at least a section of the sequence is shot through the cracked windshield. These elements suggest a technical breakdown in capturing the reconciliation. Even though the relationship is symbolically redeemed by the narrative, the aesthetics of cinema override this union with both the sound and the image breaking. While it is possible budgetary or time constraints forced the crew to use a truck with a broken windshield and faulty sound equipment, it is more likely that it was deliberately used in order to further emphasize the technical breakdown that accompanies the concluding moments of the film, a breakdown of the core senses of film: sight and sound.

Rosenbaum says the fiction of failed sound equipment is "reportedly either a half-truth or an outright lie that has the same basic effect as the wry pretext for turning off the sound in *Homework* (1989): it is an invitation for the viewer to step back from a climactic scene and reflect" (*Abbas Kiarostami* 15). And Elena points out that Kiarostami uses the same technique in *Orderly or Disorderly*? (1981), where a disappointed film crew is heard on the soundtrack complaining about the fact that they can't get the orderly take they are attempting to film. "The impossibility of filming in an 'orderly' way triumphs in

the end" (32–33). Elena concludes that, at the end of *Close-Up*, "Kiarostami no doubt wishes to respect the privacy of the meeting. But, as usual, things are more complicated than they seem" (90).

One could argue that Kiarostami suffers an unusual stroke of technical breakdowns, but having three failures in the span of 10 years that coincide with the climaxes of all three films suggests that he is deliberately subverting expectations in order to make the audience reflect on what they have been watching.

Conclusion

It must be reiterated that Kiarostami does affirm reality through these films as well. The narrative reconciliation of *Close-Up* between the fake and the real Makhmalbaf does have weight to it, but this is only part of the scene. To take this interpretation as final and definitive is to ignore the aesthetic techniques through which the film captures this moment. In order to gain a holistic picture of the complexity of Kiarostami's cinema, one must also explore how he critiques and breaks down reality in film. Both *And Life Goes On* and *Through the Olive Trees* offer the potential for reconciliation between the fiction of film and the reality of life, but never quite reach that point.

As this chapter has demonstrated, Kiarostami blurs the line between reality and fiction. In *Close-Up* this takes the form of both the stylistic features of the film that demonstrate an art film sensibility as well as scrutinize the honesty of the subjects of the film, questioning whether or not they are playing roles. In *And Life Goes On*, the presentation of the real aftermath of a real earthquake is married with the fiction of a

search for two young actors. And *Through the Olive Trees* is simultaneously a fiction about making a film and a document of the filmmaking process in *And Life Goes On*.

Kiarostami also muddles this divide by exposing how the director becomes an active part of shaping the audience's perception of reality. Behind-the-scenes knowledge of *Close-Up* demonstrates that Kiarostami scripted certain scenes. Furthermore, he's a voice in the film that begins to shape the reality of the court case and ultimately helps influence the final verdict on Sabzian. The role of the surrogate director in both *And Life Goes On* and *Through the Olive Trees* also exposes how the director exaggerates or stereotypes reality, with both men shaping the audience's perception of the rural world in a way that does not correspond with the reality of rural people's lives.

Close-Up's conclusion demonstrates the nuance of Kiarostami's views on reality and fiction in film. On the level of the narrative, fiction and reality have been reconciled: the fictional Makhmalbaf and the real Makhmalbaf are united. However, as the film attempts to capture this "truth," a truth that was likely scripted, the audio equipment begins to fail and the crew complains as the audience watches the sequence of reconciliation. Furthermore, the image itself is shattered at several points as the camera gazes out of a cracked windshield. There may be a metaphorical reconciliation between reality and fiction, but Kiarostami's film is ultimately unable to capture it satisfactorily.

CHAPTER THREE

The Ambiguity of Authorship

In *Taste of Cherry* (1997), Mr. Badii (Homayoun Ershadi) drives around asking people to help him with a special job. He offers a sum of money that scares away many of the men he asks. The film reveals that he is looking for someone to assist him in committing suicide but never why he wants to kill himself. Eventually, someone agrees to help him. At dusk, Mr. Badii heads to the hole he has dug, climbs in, and lies down. Before the audience can see whether or not Mr. Badii goes through with the act, the film cuts to black.

When the film played at the Cannes Film Festival, it won a Palme d'Or and put Abbas Kiarostami on the world cinema map as a director doing something fresh and distinct, but it was met with mixed response. Roger Ebert infamously declared, "If we're to feel sympathy for Badii, wouldn't it help to know more about him?" and "The film is such a lifeless drone that we experience it only as a movie" (para. 8). Meanwhile, Jonathan Rosenbaum argued, "we're forced to fill in the blanks as best we can—an activity that isn't merely part of Kiarostami's technique but part of his subject. In the most literal and even trivial sense, we are what Kiarostami's movies are about" ("Fill in the Blanks" para. 7).

Kiarostami would continue this structure of filmmaking in two of his later films: *Shirin* (2008) and *Certified Copy* (2010). On a conceptual level, the most literal consideration of the audience by Kiarostami is *Shirin*, a recording of a movie screening

of the Persian tale of Khosrow and Shirin. However, instead of showing the screen, the film is entirely composed of close-up shots of the audience. Furthermore, the subject of each shot is a woman, many of them famous Iranian actresses, as well as international star Juliette Binoche. The audience of the film can hear the sounds of the movie playing behind the camera, but they are never given a glimpse.

However, the entire conceit of the film is an illusion. As it turns out, the audience isn't watching a film at all. Rosenbaum says the audience accepts that the subjects of the film are in a movie theater when Kiarostami actually filmed them all separately in clusters in his own living room. They assume this because of the film's soundtrack, which was produced after the fact ("Shirin as Mirror" para. 2). And Hajnal Király explains that Kiarostami revealed that the actresses in the film was simply watching a blank screen and told to imagine her own love stories. "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" (139).

In *Certified Copy*, Kiarostami's international production with France and Italy, a British writer named James Miller (William Shimell) and a French woman only known as She (Juliette Binoche) spend an afternoon together. What begins as a conversation about art and life, a debate springing out of James' book about which he gives a lecture in the opening scene of the film, turns into something more complex when the couple begins to have arguments and make observations that suggest they've known each other for years and that they might be (or may have been) married. The film presents contradictory information, pieces of a puzzle that never fit together perfectly and that can be arranged into at least two very different understandings of what is happening (or has happened).

Here, Kiarostami does not hold the ultimate meaning of the film. It is left to the audience to construct their own idea of who this couple is and what their relationship means. And the conclusion an audience member makes determines what the film is ultimately saying about art, life, and human relationships.

At the heart of *Taste of Cherry*, *Shirin*, and *Certified Copy* is a challenge to one of the fundamental assumptions of the modern understanding of film: the idea of the director as author. Authorship in film is often attributed to the director through the use of the auteur theory. Talking about the auteur theory is problematic for a number of reasons, the first being that the theory, as developed and popularized in the '60s by Andrew Sarris, is vague as to what constitutes an auteur. He develops a model where a director must exhibit three traits, which he envisions as three concentric circles. The first trait is technical competence. An auteur must be able to make a film that holds up on the basic level of the craft of filmmaking. The second circle is personal style. According to this, an auteur must demonstrate certain characteristics that serve at some sort of signature; the work of the director must be recognizable as his or her own through its style (452).

While these points are clear enough, it's Sarris' explanation of the third criterion, which says an auteur's films must contain an "interior meaning," which makes the theory tricky to dissect. The term suggests a thematic thread that spreads across a work, but then Sarris explains it in vague terms that seem to be more about an intangible cinematic style, saying it cannot be explained in non-cinematic terms. Sarris argues that some directors tend to only congregate at certain levels, saying some only make it to the second criterion and are stylists while other emerge as full-fledge auteurs by achieving all three criteria.

He also says that some directors end up being auteurs by achieving the second and third criteria before becoming technically proficient. Once again, Sarris admits this is all in flux and that it is possible for a director to change and evolve over time (453).

According to Peter Wollen, this ambiguity led to two separate schools of criticism based on the auteur theory: those who sought to reveal the thematic motifs and core meanings of a director's films and those who emphasized the style and *mise en scene* of a director (78). This chapter will be more concerned with addressing the first school of thought, where the themes of the film reside with the director.

Calling a director an auteur—the French word for author—labeles him or her as the author of the work. According to a traditional understanding of art, it is the author who establishes the ultimate meaning of the work. Ascribing authorship is often used as an essential way to understand the meaning of an art film. According to Wollen, before the auteur theory, authorship in cinema took the form of the European director, an individual with artistic drive and complete control over his or her film. This is often the distinction made between art films and popular productions (77). David Bordwell discusses the role of the director as author in the art film, saying that he or she becomes a formal component of the film, the overriding intelligence that makes the film comprehensible. Bordwell continues, "the author is the textual force 'who' communicates (what is the film saying?) and 'who' expresses (what is the artist's personal vision?). Lacking identifiable stars and familiar genres, art cinema uses a concept of authorship to unify the text" (59). It is the auteur who is able to clear ambiguities, express intentions, and clarify what the film is saying. Authorial intent becomes the ultimate arbiter of the film's meaning.

Kiarostami's authorial intent challenges the traditional conceptions of the auteur, for Kiarostami throws the role of meaning making into the court of the audience. One of the troubles in making the argument that Kiarostami leaves meaning making to the audience is that there will be a perceived contradiction. By talking about how Kiarostami challenges authorial meaning, it will be important to establish his intent in making these movies via interviews that paint an interesting picture of how Kiarostami perceives the audience as the ultimate arbiter of meaning for his films. Therefore, one could make the rebuttal that this is the message Kiarostami is trying to convey and that, in a backhanded way, he still falls into the mode of auteur. However, the distinction should be made that, even though Kiarostami has intent behind his films and the way the films function, that intent should be distinguished from the traditional notion of meaning-making of the auteur. In the traditional schema of the art film, the director becomes the final voice of meaning for a film; his or her word is the lens through which the film can ultimately be understood. Here, the lens Kiarostami presents to the audience is not one that clarifies what the film means, what the themes are saying, but only why Kiarostami decided to embrace a cinema of ambiguity. Therefore, while understanding Kiarostami's motives may clear up why his films function a certain way, it doesn't clear up what his films ultimately mean.

This chapter will argue that Kiarostami's films challenge the auteur theory and the director's claim to authorial meaning by demonstrating how *Taste of Cherry, Certified Copy* and *Shirin* leave the ultimate meaning up to the audience. This will be argued through the ambiguity surrounding the films, the use of self-reflexive elements to make

the audience aware that the film they are watching is part of the conversation on art, and the importance Kiarostami places on the audience as the ultimate end-point for his films.

Ambiguity

In an interview with Jean-Luc Nancy, Kiarostami says that if one considers cinema an art "You cannot do without its ambiguity, its mystery. A photograph, a picture can harbor a mystery since it gives little, it doesn't describe itself" (88). According to Rosenbaum, Kiarostami is part of a group of filmmakers who consider a shot to be closer to a question than an answer (*Abbas Kiarostami* 11). Most of Kiarostami's films demonstrate some form of ambiguity. In his first film, a short called *The Bread and the Alley* (1970), Kiarostami ends the conflict for his protagonist: The young child makes it past a mangy dog that blocked his way. But then the end of the film introduces a new character who must face the same problem of getting past the dog.

As expressed by Kiarostami in conversation with Ali Akbar Mahdi, the ambiguous ending of *Taste of Cherry* is a reminder that "life goes on" (para. 40). It's a recurring theme in his ambiguous presentation, conclusions that are not interested in whether or not conflict is resolved, but a reminder that no matter what happens in the lives of the characters of the film, there is a wider world that exists, one that will continue to have its own characters face similar problems that the audience will not watch. While this is the general level in which Kiarostami's cinema of ambiguity functions, *Taste of Cherry*, *Certified Copy* and *Shirin* demonstrate ambiguity in specific ways that create gaps to be filled in by the audience.

Taste of Cherry

Taste of Cherry never gives the audience insight into Mr. Badii's reasons for wanting to commit suicide or any insight into his inner psychology. Kiarostami says he did not want to force an interpretation on the audience. He says he never talks about the character's problems and leaves him as a perpetual enigma in order to avoid creating an emotional link between the audience and the protagonist. Kiarostami explains that his character is "like one of those little figures that architects put in their drawings, to show the scale of the buildings. They are just figures, not people you could have any feelings about" (as cited in Alberto Elena, 124–125).

Indeed, the film offers almost no information about Mr. Badii. Does he have a family? What does he do for a living? Does he believe in the afterlife? Does he have religious convictions? Given the amount of money he offers and the brief shot near the end of the film that gazes into the window of his home, it can be surmised that he is not a poor man, but little information is offered beyond that.

Dan Jones contrasts *Taste of Cherry* with *American Beauty* (1999), a film that also features a protagonist who has lost his will to live. Jones argues that, in *Taste of Cherry*, the burden of imagination is put on the audience, as they have to pay attention to the conversation like they would in real life. But *American Beauty* fills in all the gaps for the audience (through heavy narration), does all the work beforehand, and leaves the audience in a passive role. In *Taste of Cherry*, the audience must fill in those gaps, one of them being what Badii is thinking (21).

Jones highlights a scene near the midpoint of the film where Badii stops at a construction site and wanders around the machinery before a worker shoos him away.

The lack of narration means that no insight is given into the significance of the scene. The problem with interpreting the scene is that everything important about it is happening inside Badii, and the film gives no insight into his interior (19). Jones concludes,

> Maybe people cannot always say what they are thinking and feeling, because words are insufficient. It could be that just being with someone is a way to relate, if one pays attention to them. Badii does not say a word in this scene; he merely shows the viewer his life at its worst. Everything accomplished in this scene would be lost if Kiarostami added Badii's voiceover narration. The point is that one must pay close attention, spend time and ultimately speculate rather than wait to be told. (19)

This scene adds a space for audience reflection. The gaps in the film are not supposed to remain gaps, but are something to be filled. By creating moments where the ambiguity of the character is brought to the forefront, the film carves a space where one becomes aware of the silence of the character and the film's refusal to give insight into that interior. These gaps allow the film to use ambiguity in a specific way.

The ambiguity of whether or not he goes through with the act divided many critics. Elena says some critics are certain Badii dies, even in spite of Kiarostami's vagueness, while others avoid committing to a particular outcome, embracing the ambiguous nature of the ending. Kiarostami has conceded that the most likely outcome is Badii's death, but he insists that's not the important thing, because life will continue with or without Badii (138).

And this debate is only compounded by the ending of the film. The film does not close by cutting to black as Badii lies in the hole that may be his grave. Instead, Kiarostami adds an epilogue shot in video where he shows a moment of filming *Taste of Cherry*. The actor who plays Badii is standing clear in the frame at certain points while the camera pays attention to a group of marching soldiers in the distance when that are

told to stop, sit down, and take a rest as the filming of the scene comes to a conclusion. Why this epilogue exists, and how it functions, will be discussed in a later section of this chapter.

Certified Copy

In *Certified Copy*, the introduction of ambiguity becomes the turning point of the film. When James and She get mistaken by a barista for a married couple, instead of correcting the woman, they act as though they are married. The act continues to the point that it appears that this could be more than just a game; both begin referring to facts that suggest they share intimate knowledge that only a married couple would know about each other. This suggests that the two may be (or may have been) married.

Instead of revealing the nature of the relationship, the film ends without giving the audience any indication as to what is the truth of their relationship. Is it all just a charade, or are they actually married? According to Kiarostami, "[W]hat the reality is doesn't really matter so much. What matters here is that they are possibly a couple. The man does say, 'We make a good couple, don't we?' And as long as the café proprietor regards them as a couple, then in a sense their being a couple is true, regardless of whether they are in reality" (Geoff Andrews, para. 25).

According to Anna Maria McMurray, the audience begins to wonder after the café if they are a real couple role-playing a first meeting or complete strangers performing 15 years of marriage. "Whose reality are we getting here? And does it matter? As the couple share conflicting memories, we are forced to acknowledge the subjectivity of truth" (5).

Certified Copy presents information that can be used as evidence for both lines of argument. Not every piece of information can be read for both cases, but a handful of them are ambiguous enough to support either view. In the second scene in the film, She has lunch with her son after both of them leave in the middle of James' lecture. The son comments that She didn't use his surname when she had James sign her book. This suggests that she is/was married to another man. The son also doesn't seem to recognize James, which suggests that James and She were probably not together five years ago (as will be discussed shortly).

In the pivotal café scene, James tells She the story about a mother and a son he saw five years ago in Italy that inspired his book. The mother would walk ahead while the son would follow thirty feet behind. She tears up at this story and says it sounds familiar. As witnessed in the scene with her son, she has the same relationship, her child tagging behind her from a distance. It could be coincidence that James' anecdote mimics her relationship with her son or he may have actually known her from five years ago.

Both James and She reference "five years ago" throughout the film. It suggests a major shift in their supposed relationship. She says that she lived in Italy for five years, something James doesn't hear, and later James apologizes for "five years ago." He does not state what he's sorry about. It could be chance that both reference five years ago on different occasions, but it also suggests the possibility that they were together until that time.

Another reference to five years ago is the story behind James' book. He says he visited Italy five years earlier and that's where he saw the mother and son who inspired his book idea. It's possible that he saw She and her son and they were his inspiration.

The details are specific enough to the relationship She and her son have that it could be read as more than coincidence, but not enough to prove anything conclusively.

While James is outside taking a call, She tells the barista that he only shaves every other day. Later in the film, She feels James' face and says he didn't shave for their anniversary and he says it isn't the day to shave. It could be coincidence that James only shaves every other day, She could have just made up the story, but it might also be a sign that the two share the kind of intimate knowledge that only a couple would know.

The barista makes the observation that James appears to still be courting She. Up to this point, James does treat She as if he's still getting to know her. He's polite, charming, and civil toward her. While they have had a few disagreements, he has not raised his voice to her. Likewise, She behaves like a girl with a crush, even commenting on how silly she must seem. This is not the behavior of two people who broke up five years earlier, but two strangers who are still getting to know one another.

After leaving the café, James and She get in an argument about their roles as parents. She says he's never there for their son. Instead of giving her an answer about being busy working or something similar, he replies that it isn't fair that she has given him the role of absent parent. This suggests that the shift in the relationship is all an act and that She has given him a role he does not like. In this interpretation, everything that happens after the café is all a game; they are playing in order to try to make a point to the other. She is emulating a relationship in order to show James that his theory is wrong, that a copy of a relationship isn't the real thing. And James is playing along in order to validate his views. Can the two mimic the relationship so well that there's no clear difference between playing house and actually being married? If they can, James is

correct; if not, She is correct. From this perspective, their relationship becomes an embodiment of the film's argument, and the ending leaves the value of the fake relationship up to the audience's interpretation.

In the scene where the barista mistakes James and She for a married couple, James is asked why he doesn't speak the language of his family. James says that he speaks his language and his family speaks theirs. He also denies knowing any French. She says she has lived in Italy for five years and is from France, so if they were married, the language of the family would likely be French. In the next scene, She says something angrily in French and James replies in French, which suggests that James is putting on a ruse. While this doesn't prove that they were married, it's yet another piece of evidence that could be used to argue that they were married, especially since it comes right after the scene where James claims to not know his family's language. What the exchange does expose is that James is an inconsistent character. Late in the film, he changes his stance on art when She argues the merit of a statue he finds gaudy. James' inability to remain consistent presents yet another ambiguity. He is so unreliable that he ends up denying his own theory later in the film after She decides to adopt it. James' constantly shifts his position and perspective on things, which makes it hard to determine his character's perspective and, by extension, his relationship with She.

In the last sequence of the film, James and She go to the hotel where She claims they spent their honeymoon. James says he does not remember this place at all. Is this because James has never seen the place or because he has a bad memory? After all, it has been fifteen years. According to McMurray, James' memory (or lack thereof) fails to match up with her memory. She claims to remember James' scent, but James does not

even remember the hotel location. It may be that he actually does not remember because they are strangers, but it ultimately doesn't matter because the point Kiarostami is making is that, even if they were married, their recollections would be different anyway (5).

Shohini Chaudhuri and Howard Finn say, "Open images are a feature of film endings, closing scenes which try not to close down a narrative but rather open it out to the viewer's consideration, to 'live on' after the film itself has finished" (49). Chris Lippard builds off of Chaudhuri and Finn, saying that one of the signatures of Kiarostami's cinema is the long take/long shot that closes many of his films, and leaves the narrative incomplete. Kiarostami's style invites the audience to contemplate and participate. Lippard says this occurs not only in the closing long takes and long shots, but also through avoiding key scenes in the narrative. Therefore, in *Taste of Cherry*, it is never explained why Badii wants to commit suicide (31–32). Applying this to *Certified Copy*, the nature of the relationship is never revealed, nor what, if anything, happened five years ago. Likewise, the film closes on an open image of two bells ringing, framed through the window of the hotel room.

Kiarostami's images are often ambiguous, as well. In an interview with Nancy, Kiarostami says that he feels more like a photographer. He thinks how to make a film in which he does not say anything. If images give the power to interpret them, to make sense in a way the artist cannot anticipate, then it's best to not say anything and let the viewer's use imagination make his or her own conclusions (84). Kiarostami goes on to talk about his films in relation to poetry. He says he rarely hears someone complain that he or she doesn't understand a poem, but in a film if someone hasn't made a connection, he or she frequently says he or she hasn't understood the film. In poetry,

incomprehension is essential and you accept it. It is the same with music. But cinema is different. People approach poetry with their feeling and cinema with their intellect. By this logic, one shouldn't be able to narrate a good poem, but a good movie should contain a strong narrative. Kiarostami believes cinema should be able to not be understood if it wants to be a major art form. A film should be able to leave different impressions at different points in our lives (as cited in Nancy, 88).

Shirin

Ambiguity arises in *Shirin* (2008) through the fact that the audience is never shown the screen of the film *Shirin's* audience is watching; the audience only hear the audio. Király emphasizes how much of the story is built around images. There is the image of each other that both Shirin and Khosrow fall in love with, Khosrow sees Shirin as she bathes in the moonlight, the stone carver obsessively carves images of Shirin, Shirin witnesses Khosrow marry another woman and realizes this terror within her nightmare (140). All of these are images within the story that the audience is unable to see, they are left only to imagine them.

Self-Reflexive

Taste of Cherry, *Certified Copy*, and *Shirin* employ several techniques in order to make the audience aware of Kiarostami's specific use of ambiguity. One of them is the use of self-reflexive spaces that makes the audience aware that what they are watching is a film and that they are being deliberately shown (and denied) certain elements. Kiarostami says,

> My intention in this film [*Taste of Cherry*] and in my previous films is to show signs of reality that viewers won't necessarily comprehend but will

> nonetheless feel. Basically anything seen through a camera limits the view of a spectator to what's visible through the lens, which is always much less than we can see with our own eyes. No matter how wide we make the screen, it still doesn't compare to what our eyes can see of life. And the only way out of this dilemma is sound. If you show the viewer it's like peeking through a keyhole, that it's just a limited view of a scene, then the viewer can imagine it, imagine what's beyond the reach of his eyes. And viewers do have creative minds. If, for example, we don't see anything but hear the sound of a car suddenly screeching to a halt and then hitting something, we automatically have a picture of this accident in our mind's eye. The viewer always has this curiosity to imagine what's outside the field of vision; it's used all the time in everyday life. But when people come to a theater they've been trained to stop being curious and imaginative and simply take what's given to them. That's what I'm trying to change. (As cited in Rosenbaum, *Abbas Kiarostami* 114)

And one of the key ways in which Kiarostami tries to change this is by making his films self-reflexive.

Taste of Cherry

The video epilogue in *Taste of Cherry* is possibly Kiarostami's most controversial use of self-reflection. By breaking out of the fiction of the film into the process of film production, Kiarostami makes the audience aware that what they have just witnessed is a film constructed by a crew of filmmakers. On many occasions Kiarostami explains the video epilogue as a deliberate way to destroy emotional identification by introducing the artificial nature of what the audience has just witnessed (as cited in Elena, 139).

Kiarostami says he intentionally tries to keep this distance between spectator and protagonist. This is why he reveals little about Badii and why he decided to not end the film with Badii as he laid down in the grave. He wished to avoid taking the audience's emotions hostage. He felt that ending with Badii lying in the grave would leave the audience with too much sadness (as cited in Mahdi, para 37). Kiarostami explains,

> For that reason I decided to have the next episode where we have the camera running as Mr. Badii was walking around. I wanted to remind spectators that this was really a film and that they shouldn't think about this as a reality. They should not become involved emotionally. This is much like some of our grandmothers who told us stories, some with happy and some with sad endings. But they always at the end would have a Persian saying which went like this "but after all it is just a story!" (qtd. in Mahdi, para. 38)

Rosenbaum argues the epilogue is crucial not because it reminds the audience that they are just watching a movie, but because it is saying that it is also a movie. What is more important is what the film is saying. By not letting the audience empathize with Badii and giving them little information about him, the film places them not only in the dilemma of Badii, but also the dilemma of the three passengers who also do not know anything about this stranger (*Abbas Kiarostami* 29). The epilogue also features the song "St. James Infirmary" by Louis Armstrong. Kiarostami says he used the piece because he found it had been used for both happy occasions and funerals. Therefore, the music fits no matter how one interprets the film (Mahdi, para. 42).

Certified Copy

Certified Copy opens with a lecture about the value of a copy. James holds that the copy has value in that it points one back to the original. In this way, Kiarostami is making an argument about the value of art that juxtaposes itself against the Romantic view. According to Edward Buscombe, the auteur theory asserts that the personality of a director is essential, the assumption being that individuality and originality are valuable in and of themselves. These assumptions are rooted in Romantic art theory (80). Kiarostami frames *Certified Copy* as part of this conversation on art. The film takes place in Tuscany, an Italian city that is surrounded by traditional examples of Romantic

art (with the exception of a copy She shows James). Throughout the film James and She discuss art, and James argues that the ultimate value is in one's perception of art. Through the ambiguity employed in the film, the relationship between James and She becomes self-reflexive evidence for the argument.

By interpreting the nature of the ambiguous relationship between James and She, the audience comes to their own conclusions about what the relationship says about the nature of art and life. If the entire relationship is a charade, what are the implications for the value of a copy? Is it just a pale shadow of the real thing, or can a performance of a relationship be just as meaningful as the real thing? After all, art is often a copy of life. If it's a real relationship, does that authenticity bring something that cannot be found in the copy? Instead of just asking the audience questions about art in the film, Kiarostami makes the film in such a way that it reflects the argument and furthermore becomes evidence for what it is trying to argue. The audience must interpret the film in order to make any sense of what has occurred.

Kiarostami uses the camera to directly address the audience. When asked about why he often frames the actors as if they are talking directly to the audience, Kiarostami said he intended to have the actors speak directly to the male and female audience members respectively (as cited in Andrews, para. 22). McMurray says mirrors and full frontal shots destroy the boundaries between "those being watched (the fictional characters) and those doing the watching (us)." Kiarostami uses these full frontal shots in order to implicate the audience in the film's argument (6). So, both the story and the film techniques encourage the audience to reflect upon the intersection of art and life, both in a broader, philosophical sense and in the context of the film.

Shirin

With *Shirin*, the film itself functions as a self-reflective act. The audience of *Shirin* is made to watch an audience in the film. Not only does this allow them to reflect upon the act of watching, it makes them aware that they are part of this same movement. But Kiarostami is not presenting a plurality of audiences, but a single audience of females, all Iranian except the outsider European Binoche. This provides for its own form of reflection, one in which the male and Western audience is the outsider. And the predominantly female audience also allows the audience of the film to reflect upon how gender identity shapes the experience of the film. The title of the film only takes on the name of the female protagonist, Shirin, half of the famous title of the original story of *Khosrow and Shirin*.

Audience

The ambiguous and self-reflexive elements of *Taste of Cherry*, *Certified Copy*, and *Shirin* open them up to be interpreted by their audiences. The films do more than ask the audience to determine the ending, they ask the audience to fill in the blanks, to inject meaning, and interpret. These elements make up Kiarostami's philosophy of the film audience, one where audience members are not passive recipients of authorial meaning, as traditionally understood by the auteur theory, but the active creators and ultimate arbiters of meaning in a film.

Kiarostami says, "once a film is made, its creator should get detached and try to step back and look at it in a way just like any spectator sees it...the filmmaker's comments are less important and valid than those of simple movie fans" (as cited by Mitha, 143). In an interview with Nancy, Kiarostami says that, to see a new cinema, one

must have more respect for the role of the spectator. By creating an incomplete cinema, the spectator is left to fill in the gaps. Instead of an impeccably structured film that leaves the audience in a passive role, one must stimulate the viewers by making their presence an active part of the process. Kiarostami says his view of art seeks to create diversity among people rather than coercing the audience into agreement. This fosters differences in thinking and reactions. Each individual constructs his or her own film, whether or not that fits with or stands in opposition to the film (88–90).

In an interview with Mahdi, Kiarostami outlines his view of the difference between the director and the audience. Kiarostami says he believes the audience is more creative than they are given credit for. He says, "The only difference between my spectators and I is that I have a camera in hand and they don't. I don't see the spectators as any less creative that I am, and believe that sometimes, left to themselves, they can come up with a better ending than I can!" (para. 44). Kiarostami says most audience members expect to be told a story, but he dislikes the dichotomy of the director as storyteller and the spectator as the one sitting and watching the story. He believes the spectators are intelligent and that it's unfair to hold them captive for two hours by telling them a story and ending it in the way he sees fit. By involving them, by leaving the end open, he gives the audience creative credit by allowing them to end the film the way they would want it to end. Kiarostami says this is not limited to the end of the film, that he always has had the desire to make films with spaces inside them that the spectator has to fill like a puzzle. Those spaces allow personalities to engage with one another within in the film, but also leave room for the spectator to connect those personalities in a way they see fit. He says he views perfection as how much the spectator can engage in a film and

that a good movie involves the spectator instead of holding him or her captive (as cited in Madhi, para. 44).

Taste of Cherry

In *Taste of Cherry*, the audience is left to conjecture whether or not Badii commits suicide, as well as why he wants to commit suicide in the first place. The conversations with the three separate passengers ask the audience to consider whether suicide is a good or bad thing. Do any of the three men Badii interact with give a good reason for him not to commit suicide, and does Badii find any truth into what they have to say? Rosenbaum says,

> It has been widely argued that Kiarostami omits this information [whether or not Badii commits suicide] because he has, as the cliché goes, nothing to say. I would counter that because he's speaking with and through us—inviting us to share in a collective voice and common narrative—we have to share part of the burden of determining whether in fact the film is saying anything. If we don't want to think about our own deaths and what this reluctance might say about our lives—or about the possible suicides of strangers and how we might respond to their appeals—*Taste of Cherry* can't have much to say to us. (*Abbas Kiarostami* 26)

Godfrey Cheshire argues that Ebert compliments Kiarostami by suggesting that the film can be transformed by the viewer's interpretation. The value is not in a passive experience, but an active reading of what one is shown. In this process, the viewer's understanding is as important as the film (10).

Certified Copy

Certified Copy presents the audience with an ambiguous relationship and gives them a number of pieces to a puzzle, but instead of it all fitting together, the pieces can be constructed into at least two different images and not every piece can be used to assemble

one picture or the other. Certain pieces contradict each other and cannot fit together in the same picture. Hence, in order for the audience to make any sense of what they are viewing, they must interpret and construct what the relationship is from what is presented to them. Otherwise, the entire film is an array of nonsense.

According to Kiarostami, the idea for the film began with an audience of one. He was telling Juliette Binoche an anecdote in passing, but as he watched her reactions, he began to react to her reactions and made it into a story. This story became the script for *Certified Copy*. Kiarostami said if he told someone else, he'd never have realized that it could be made into a film. Whatever is most interesting about something depends on the listener and his or her reaction. Kiarostami owes the film to the attention Juliette paid to the story he told her (as cited in Andrews, para. 9).

Within the film, Kiarostami makes space for the audience. According to McMurray, Kiarostami makes it hard to identify with either character. She spends a lot of the film complaining, and her need to be affirmed by James comes across as needy. James is arrogant, distant, and self-centered. Therefore, Kiarostami doesn't allow us to get close to either character. The constant framing of the characters in mirrors, doorways, and windows also reminds the audience that the two are being positioned in a performance. "This kind of stylized mise-en-scène emphasizes artificiality and objectifies the characters, reminding us that these are familiar personality types and inviting us to imagine someone else (perhaps even ourselves) in their same position" (7).

Through this distance from the characters, the audience can project themselves into the film, allowing them to bring their own personal view of the value of romantic relationships or art to bear on the film. Does one agree with She and see art as more

established, where authenticity is important, or is James right that the power is in the personal pleasure one gets from art? Likewise, does an audience member identify more with She's desire for James' approval or does he or she identify more with keeping to his or herself like James? This may not sound different from how people usually identify with characters in a story, but, by creating distance between the audience and characters, McMurray says Kiarostami allows the audience a space to fill, this time not simply with their own interpretations, but with themselves (7).

In an interview with Cutler about *Certified Copy*, Kiarostami says the film is not fundamentally about art history, but about the notion that owning an original can be harmful. He says most couples are looking for something original and exceptional. Within the film, the same idea is expressed when James says her brother-in-law's lisp is perceived as an original by his wife (13). This might seem like an authorial claim of meaning. However, as Mitha says, "Even though Kiarostami is inviting us to be producers of meaning rather than passive consumers, this does not absolve Kiarostami from being a co-spectator with us" (143). This is not Kiarostami's claim to the ultimate meaning of the film as a writer/director, but his claim to the meaning of the film as a fellow audience member.

Shirin

Rosenbaum says that *Shirin* is an experiment for Kiarostami. He has always been interested in using cinema to create a primordial experience in which the audience's imaginations are essential (para. 9). In *Shirin*, the audience is presented only images of the audience and the audio of a story. Here, Kiarostami denies the audience a congruence of image and audio. What the audience hears does not correspond to what they see on the

screen. Granted, the visuals are supposed to represent the reactions to the source of the audio. The audience within *Shirin* gives the audience watching *Shirin* visual cues of what the images might be. And, as previously established, the audience in *Shirin* is not even watching a film; it is only an illusion. Therefore, the audience is left to reconcile the audio they hear with the visuals of the audience within *Shirin*. They must construct their own images of the film and interpret the expressions on the faces in order to construct their own *Shirin*. Therefore, the film is closer to an oral tale where one listens and imagines what he or she is being told. In an interview with Khatereh Khodaei, Kiarostami says,

> What I am saying is that the moment an audience is affected by a movie, the creation is that special moment, not the film itself. There is no such thing as a movie before the projector is switched on and after the theatre's lights are turned off. A film which consists of many frames that is placed in a box, or works by a digital system, etc., is nothing like a painting or statue to prompt us to think of it as a mass or an identity. I believe the identity of the silver screen hinges on audiences, in such a moment that it sees its audience. So a production takes shape in the moment we see the audience. In other words, at a certain juncture audiences and the movie become one. (para. 8)

Shirin presents itself as an oral performance. In this way, Kiarostami draws a parallel to another art form. In oral storytelling, each performance will be slightly different. It also leaves much to be inferred and imagined by the audience listening to it. And one cannot have a performance without an audience to listen to it. In the same way, Kiarostami says a film is its own kind of performance, a performance that does not take on life until there is an audience.

If one is to construct a conception of Kiarostami's cinema, the role of audience is paramount. Without that understanding, it becomes impossible to rationalize Kiarostami's choices of presentation. In other words, without understanding

Kiarostami's conception of the audience and the way he displaces authorial control of meaning, his films will be seen as nonsense.

Conclusion

Through the use of ambiguity, the films of Kiarostami reconstruct the relationship between the director and the audience. This new relationship challenges the traditional notion of the auteur and meaning-making in film. It is not only the ambiguous ending and the intentional gaps that allow the audience to construct their own meaning of the film, but also the swath of "evidence" presented to the audience that enables them to configure and construct their own conclusions. From the conversations with the three passengers in *Taste of Cherry*, to the contradictory clues of *Certified Copy*, to the audio of *Shirin*, there is enough data to be used to construct multiple perspectives on what is happening (or has happened) in the film.

The use of self-reflexive style prompts the audience to reflect upon the open nature of the film. The epilogue of *Taste of Cherry* reminds the audience that what they have witnessed is a film, while the conversations about art become part of the movements of *Certified Copy*'s construction in order to make the audience participants in Kiarostami's view of art. In *Shirin*, watching a film audience reminds the "real" audience of their own role as an audience member.

Kiarostami is often referred to as one of world cinema's great auteurs. Yet he deliberately relinquishes creative control, giving the audience more credit than most auteurs, making movies that don't seem to say much of anything, opening up interpretation and meaning-making to the audience. According to Sarris, and others who seek thematic unity among an auteur's work, this is not the way of an auteur. Instead, it's

a cinematic conversation, in which the writer/director prompts the audience with questions and then listens to answers. In Kiarostami's cinema, we find the cinema of an anti-auteur.

CHAPTER FOUR

Criticizing the Camera

In Abbas Kiarostami's first feature film, *The Traveler* (1974), the young protagonist skips school in order to seek funds to buy a bus ticket to Tehran so he can see a football match. He spends part of the film trying to pawn a camera, but the camera is broken and no one is interested in buying it. As children leave school, he gets an idea. He pretends to photograph his friend with the camera and soon gets a crowd of young boys seeking to get their picture taken. Through the apparatus of photography, this young protagonist is able to extort money from his subjects for his own selfish gains.

While the scene surely reflects some of Kiarostami's views on the role of the director, what is of particular interest is how the film apparatus itself is represented. The camera is broken, yet its presence empowers the film's young protagonist to exploit others. While this may not be an overt critique of the camera itself, it is the seed of Kiarostami's philosophy regarding the camera: It is an object often represented as deceptive and manipulative.

In *The Wind Will Carry Us* (1999), the Engineer travels to a remote village (the real-life Siah Dareh) on a discreet mission to photograph a mysterious death ritual. He spreads rumors that he and his crew are looking for treasure. The community looks upon him with distrust, especially when he is carrying his camera. Throughout the film, a number of characters, either heard or mentioned, remain unseen by both the Engineer and

the audience. Through this technique of leaving characters off-screen, Kiarostami explores the boundaries of what should and should not be photographed.

Further developing his views on the camera, Kiarostami's *ABC Africa* (2001) is comprised of footage from a fact-finding trip. Kiarostami was commissioned to make a film about the orphans of the Uganda AIDS epidemic, and he ended up just using the footage he and cameraman Seyfolah Samadian captured on their fact-finding tour. In the final film, the subject comes secondary to the film's interest in how the filmmaking process shapes and transcribes reality. Both Kiarostami and Samadian are often heard and seen in the film as they capture the "reality" of the AIDS epidemic. But their appearance within the frames of the film makes the audience aware of how their presence as men behind the camera, and the presence of the camera itself, is not passive; it changes what is captured on screen.

This chapter will argue that Kiarostami critiques the apparatus of the camera in three distinct ways. The first section will argue that Kiarostami critiques the masculine gaze of the camera by denying and depowering it in *The Wind Will Carry Us*. In this way, Kiarostami condemns the voyeurism of the camera without participating in it. In the second section, the chapter will argue that Kiarostami exposes the camera's ability to sensationalize and misrepresent rural locales for urban consumption. Both *Through the Olive Trees* (1994) and *The Wind Will Carry Us* display an awareness of how urban outsiders attempt to use the camera to reshape and depict rural areas in an untruthful way. The third section will examine the camera's inability to detach itself from its subject. *ABC Africa* demonstrates how the camera changes the way people behave and how it becomes part of the movement it is trying to film.

The Negative Gaze

From its opening scene, *The Wind Will Carry Us* is about looking. As the Engineer and his two cohorts drive down a winding road, they are looking for the landmark (a large tree) that leads them toward the village of Siah Dareh. As they glance around, they comment on the trees that surround the road; perhaps it could be any tree. But then they catch a glimpse of it. One of the passengers says to look, and the driver misses it. For a moment, the audience is unable to see it either, but the camera slowly pans over to a hill with an enormous tree perched at the top. After passing the tree, the passengers continue to comment on the countryside, telling each other to look at the various details that surround them. When they finally come upon the village, the Engineer comments on how it is hidden from plain view.

This sequence establishes that the Engineer is on a quest to expose what is hidden from sight. The Engineer has come to photograph the burial ritual of an old woman who is dying. Bert Cardullo says the protagonist is like a filmmaker who comes with his crew (whom we don't see) from Tehran to film the town's ancient mourning ritual. During the ceremony, women cut their faces as an expression of their sympathy for the bereaved (277). And Mehrnaz Saeed-Vafa observes "What is not possible to capture in film, one sees in the off-screen reality, as with the death of the old women in *The Wind Will Carry Us*…In *The Wind Will Carry Us*, cinema is referred to as a medium to record death (of the old women), which doesn't account for the unpredictability of such an adventure or the impossibility of such documenting" (63).

The Engineer asks to be shown to her house, which he cannot see from the balcony outside his room. He's taken to the roof and still cannot see it. Finally, after

walking through the town, he views the home from the roof of the house across the way. Once again, he has seen that which has been hidden from plain view. But from there, his attempts to gain sight of what he desires to see are thwarted.

Laura Mulvey argues that cinema satisfies a primordial desire for pleasurable looking, going even further by "developing a scopophilia in its narcissistic aspect," which leads to an interest in gaining pleasure from gazing on a person as a sexual object. Human curiosity and a desire to look mingles with a fascination with recognition that leads to an interest in looking at the human form ("Visual Pleasure" 713–714). Therefore, the gaze in this sense is a desire to gain pleasure through objectification. Mulvey elaborates,

> In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gazing projects its phantasy on the female figure which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness…The presence of woman is an indispensable element of spectacle in the normal narrative film. ("Visual Pleasure" 715)

For Mulvey, this means that a displayed woman functions as both an object of eroticism for the male characters in the screen story and an erotic object for the audience. She goes on to argue that the divide of active male and passive female are further perpetuated by audience identification with the traditionally male protagonist who is the force that moves the film forward by making things happen ("Visual Pleasure" 716).

The goals of the protagonist in *The Wind Will Carry Us*, and his ultimate failure to achieve those goals, becomes a means for the film to critique the masculine gaze of the camera and to invert and thwart the male gaze fantasy. Not only is he unable to forward his goals, but also, as a result, he is denied the masculine gaze. In the scene outside Ms.

Malek's home, the Engineer realizes that, while he is the one who seeks to do the watching, he is the one being watched. He notices that the women of the town are gazing at him, and through this visual inversion, the masculine gaze is denied. Bransford notes that this scene demonstrates the way in which the film turns the gaze back upon itself. All the doors and windows of the house are shut, and in that moment the Engineer realizes that he is being watched by the local women. In this moment of visual inversion, the masculine gaze is both deflated and denied (para 73).

By the end of the film, he has not seen the old woman or the burial ritual he came to see. Likewise, when he meets Yoseff, the digger, on a hill outside of town, he is unable to see him inside his dark hole, although Yoseff is able to see him. And when he meets Yoseff's fiancé, Zeynab, in the dark basement of one of the homes, he asks for her to illuminate her face so that he may see it, but she denies him the light to gaze upon her face. Mulvey says, "Traditionally, the woman displayed has functioned on two levels: as erotic object for the characters within the screen story, and as an erotic object for the spectators within the auditorium, with a shifting tension between the looks on either side of the screen" ("Visual Pleasure" 716). Kiarostami denies this desire to display women on both levels: neither the characters in the story nor the audience is allowed to view the woman as an erotic object. According to Bransford, women in Kiarostami's films tend to recognize that they are being looked at and attempt to avoid the objectifying gaze. Zeynab in the darkness of the cellar refuses to show her face to the Engineer, using her invisibility to subvert the power of the gaze (para. 72).

In contrast to a film like *Blow-Up* (1966) or *Peeping Tom* (1959), where the masculine gaze is critiqued through employing it, Kiarostami critiques the masculine

gaze by denying it to the audience. This could also be a response to the reaction of heavy censorship in Iran. The government is particular about what can be shown on film; for instance, a woman cannot have her head exposed in film even though it is customary that women are not required to wear a head covering in their own home. Therefore, Kiarostami may be denying the gaze because he knows he will not be able to show what the Engineer is attempting to see. In any case, Kiarostami is aware of the power of the look as well as the fact that he is restricted in what he is able to show. The film's denial of the gaze brings into question the morality of filming certain subjects.

By extension, the camera as the apparatus of the gaze is denied and criticized. Throughout the film, the Engineer is aligned with technology. Not only is he the man who owns the camera, but he also has a mobile phone and a car. Anna Maria McMurray says that the protagonist of the film encounters obstacles that lead the audience to question both the value of his work and as the intrusion of modernity. Modern technology does not prove reliable as demonstrated by the protagonist jumping in his truck and racing up a hill to get cell phone reception (10). He also complains that the temperature gauge on the car doesn't work. Likewise, the Engineer's technology does not allow him to achieve his goal. He brings his camera, but he never gets the opportunity to capture what he came to witness. When the Engineer finds his camera, he takes a couple of snapshots of the woman running the local café, but she insists that he quit taking photos and put away the camera. And, late in the film, he starts snapping photos of the women of the town, a futile act, perhaps out of frustration more than anything else.

It is not only that Kiarostami denies the gaze, but also that he builds the story around constantly referencing characters that the audience never sees. According to Kiarostami, there are eleven characters in the movie that are never fully visible. By the end of the film, the audience is aware they have not seen them, but they know who they were. Kiarostami says this is his attempt to make a cinema that shows without showing (as cited in Elena, 153–4). While the Engineer has two companions with him, they are only seen from a distance when the car breaks down at the beginning of the film. After that, they remain off-screen, even when the Engineer has a conversation with them later in the film. Likewise, Jahan, the man who gives the Engineer and his companions the hospitality of his home, is never seen in the film, and it's his young nephew who guides the Engineer through the town. Mrs. Malek, the dying old woman, is never seen in the film. The Engineer's boss, Mrs. Godarzi, calls him throughout the film, but also remains unseen. Yoseff and Zeynab remain faceless to both the protagonist and the audience. The audience can see them in the background of certain scenes, but their features are either obscured or out of focus.

Chris Lippard says that *The Wind Will Carry Us* uses the camera to distance and position itself in such a way to advance Kiarostami's cinema of questioning and his incomplete narratives (31). Mulvey argues, "There is also the implication that such things should not be filmed. To see is not necessarily to understand, and—the implication might be—the demand for everything to be seen is simply the other side of censorship's coin" ("The Wind" 63). Mulvey suggests that, while the off-screen space might be both a form of poetry and a way to deal with censorship, the film gives women

a strong presence even while many of them remain off-screen ("The Wind" 63). Alberto Elena observes,

> One of the most daring strategies used by Kiarostami in *The Wind Will Carry Us* is to deny the audience practically any familiarity with the characters. Apart from [the Engineer]…we are hardly allowed to see anybody else throughout the whole film. This is no longer just a matter of avoiding any of the usual devices that identify audiences with the characters, nor of surrounding the characters with an aura of mystery; they are purely and simply invisible, partly or completely. Mamad Haghighat points out, for example, that we have to wait nearly nine minutes before seeing the face of one of the protagonists, [the Engineer] himself, and we do not get to see the other three members of his team at any time in the film. Neither are we allowed to see the old lady who is dying, the gravedigger or the people talking to [the Engineer] on the telephone, and we manage to catch only one or two brief glimpses of the girl who attracts the outsider's interest (153).

By denying the audience this gaze, Kiarostami creates a critical distance between the audience and the subject, one that, much like his use of ambiguity in *Taste of Cherry* and *Certified Copy*, encourages the audience to reflect upon their own role and how their gaze functions in the world of the film.

Another one of the elements Kiarostami leaves off-screen in *The Wind Will Carry Us* is the interior of the houses. Bransford explains that the film rarely gives us a glimpse beyond the thresholds of homes. This avoidance of interiors leaves what happens inside up to the audience's imagination and allows Kiarostami to be up front about what he is omitting in his social examination (para 32).

Therefore, *The Wind Will Carry Us* limits the gaze. Unlike other films that explore the nature of voyeurism and the filmic gaze, it does not use the gaze as part of its critique. It denies documenting that which it thinks it is immoral to document. The masculine gaze, while captured in the reality of the film, is visually denied through

darkness and ultimately reversed when it becomes the women of the town who make the Engineer the object of their gaze.

The Cultural Gaze

Once again, Kiarostami uses the camera to critique his own process as a director. Much like the off-screen presence of characters in *The Wind Will Carry Us*, Kiarostami is often an active, off-screen presence in the making of his own film. Rosenbaum argues *The Wind Will Carry Us* is built around Kiarostami exploring his ethical failings as a media person where he exploits poor people. The scene in which the Engineer asks Farzad, the young boy, to fetch him a bowl even though the boy insists that he must go work in the fields is telling when understood through Kiarostami's shooting method. Kiarostami often interviews his non-professional actors from behind the camera, incorporating their responses into the film ("The Universe" para 17). The implication is that this boy's protest that he must go work in the fields is not part of the fiction of the story, but rather a moment where Kiarostami likely asked him to film a scene.

Rosenbaum continues that Kiarostami critiques the ethics of his filmmaking, implying there's no ethical difference between shooting a documentary about the woman's funeral and shooting a feature in the same village. Rosenbaum says that almost all his semi-documentary films (*Close-Up*, *And Life Goes On*, *Through the Olive Trees*, *Taste of Cherry*, and *The Wind Will Carry Us*) involve the interactions between empowered figures (usually Kiarostami or a Kiarostami stand-in) and disempowered working-class people (his actors or potential employees) ("The Universe" para 20). Here, Kiarostami questions his role behind the camera and how it allows him a privileged status to abuse those on the other end of the camera.

In a sequence in *Homework* (1989), a documentary in which Kiarostami interviews a number of grade school children about the growing problem of children not completing their homework, Kiarostami exposes himself as the man behind the interrogation. According to Hamid Dabashi,

> By far the most disturbing sequence of the film is its last interview with a seven-year-old boy named Majid who is petrified at the sight of Kiarostami and his camera crew. With a paradoxical twist, Kiarostami's own rather scary face, with dark glasses, staring at these innocent children sitting in front of a monstrous apparition formed by the camera and the camera crew, becomes part of this apparatus of fear that he is obviously trying to undo. (65–66)

Cardullo points out that all of the actors in *The Wind Will Carry Us* (except the Engineer) are played by non-professionals, residents of Siah Dareh. Kiarostami does not have to teach them how to behave because this is their natural home. The movie camera frames and moves in a way that makes these unassuming lives a grandeur to behold (282). The camera makes the rural subject a spectacle. Bransford argues, "we are encouraged to reflect on how country space is actively constructed by these urban outsiders. The filmmakers' constructions of country life take on a number of different forms and directives: emphasizing the old and traditional, turning the villagers into exotic Others, demanding that the younger female villagers conform to the male gaze, and viewing the villages through the lens of nostalgia" (para. 58). Bransford discusses how the engineer only seeks the town in order to capture its rural otherness so that he can return these images to the city for consumption (para. 65). Kiarostami is aware that he is perpetuating the exotic otherness of the rural countryside, a relationship built in exploitation and voyeurism. Here, the camera becomes a source of exploitation akin to the scene in *The Traveler*.

However, Bransford also argues that Kiarostami shows these socially marginalized and globally unrepresented areas in order to give them some form of representation. Two-thirds of the world still gains their livelihood through agriculture, but few films show what it is like in such places (para. 39). Bransford points out that, in the opening scene of *The Wind Will Carry Us*, one of the characters says, “We’re heading nowhere.” The term “nowhere” is repeated throughout the film, and Bransford says Kiarostami is emphasizing that these villages and villagers are nowhere to be found on the global map of representation (para. 40).

The Participating Camera

On the drive from the airport near the beginning of *ABC Africa*, we see from Samadian’s perspective the camera in Kiarostami’s hand, and we then cut to Kiarostami’s view. Kiarostami turns the camera on Samadian who is also filming, gazing into the lens of his camera. These two cameras make a makeshift mirror and reflect upon the process of filmmaking. Similarly, there is a recurring technique throughout the film: An establishing shot of the filmmaker capturing the film which then cuts to what is being shot by that filmmaker. Through this technique, the film makes the audience acutely aware of the process of documenting these events.

Unlike the traditional documentary, neither Kiarostami nor Samadian seems interested in maintaining distance from their subjects. Elena recounts that, on the way back, both agreed that the fact-finding trip produced more than enough to make a film, and they decided to concentrate on editing the footage of the fact-finding trip (169). This footage often shows Kiarostami and Samadian in the frame; thus, their presence is not just the men behind the camera, but active subjects in the film. Elena argues,

> Far from trying to conceal his active role in shooting the film, Kiarostami demonstrates his interference with the real situation around him as soon as he possibly can, and he often appears in front of the camera, filmed by Samadian. 'His honesty', maintains Olivier Joyard, 'actually consists in constantly defining himself as the organizer of reality', an ethical stance that probably goes right to the roots of the project and Kiarostami's acceptance of the commission. (171)

While the film is about the AIDS epidemic, Kiarostami is just as interested in reflecting on the nature of documenting an event and how the camera is an active part of reality. When Kiarostami and Samadian capture footage of children, the kids often gather around the camera, gazing into the lens and pointing at it. The subjects are acutely aware of the camera and often become active participants in the film.

One of the ways the film demonstrates how the camera affects its subject is by showing how people's behavior changes in the presence of the camera. There's not only a tendency to look at the camera, but also a tendency to perform for it. Children clap, wave, and dance in front of the camera, following ahead of Kiarostami and Samadian so that they can remain in frame. One man lies down on the ground and strikes a pose for the camera. Other children rush to the side of whoever is holding the camera and gaze into the LCD preview display. Here, the advent of the digital camera closes the gap between those who gaze and those who are gazed upon. While the subjects are never given the camera to control themselves, they are often afforded the same gaze as the cameraman. Rosenbaum observes, "Kiarostami has made it clear that he wanted to switch to digital video for an ethical reason: the desire to interfere as little as possible with the people he shoots" (*Abbas Kiarostami* 39). And the cameramen themselves are often the subject of each other's shots. Here, the gap between filmmaker and filmed is closed, as the two become part of the same moment. In one scene where children are

singing and clapping, we see Kiarostami clapping along with them. He has become part of the same movement he is trying to capture. Kiarostami says,

> I didn't use this new digital camera as a serious work tool. I took it with more like a still camera, to take some notes with it. But when I actually started using it – and when I realized its possibilities and what I could do with them – I realized that I have wasted, in a way, thirty years of my career using the 35mm camera, because that camera, for the type of work that I do, is more of hindrance than communication tool. When I say '35mm camera', I'm not just referring to the machine itself, but to what it brings with it—the whole crew. That's the kind of thing that's not for me or the kind of movies that I make. I like to work with this much smaller camera, which is more intimate and more immediate. For example, for people who appear in front of it, they are not intimidated by it. They are more comfortable in front of the digital camera and so, in every way, it facilitates communication (as cited in Elena, 173–174).

These sequences throughout *ABC Africa* destroy any objectivity of documented film reality. The camera cannot be detached or objective because the cameraman cannot hope to maintain distance from the subject. In this case, Kiarostami becomes part of the movement of life of the people he is filming.

Another reason why the camera cannot remain objective is that the subjects are acutely aware of its presence, and as a result change their behavior. Suddenly, people seek to perform and play before the camera. How is it possible to passively capture the lives of these people if the presence of the camera changes the way they behave and react? In *ABC Africa* it becomes impossible. Only through recognizing the filmmaking process can Kiarostami hope to retain any semblance of truth and ethical filmmaking. Jean-Luc Nancy says,

> Cinema presents—that is to say shares (communicates)—the intensity of a look upon a world of which it is itself part and parcel (as film properly speaking and as video, as television, but also as photography and as music: these motifs will come up again). It is part of it precisely in the sense that it has contributed to its structure as it is now: as a world where looking at

> what is real is resolutely substituting for every kind of visionary seeing, foreseeing, and clairvoyant gazing. (20)

But, in *ABC Africa*, there is the dilemma that what is "real" is not necessarily something that can be represented on film. This horrible crisis cannot be expressed through capturing the lives of its victims. Far from the sad, weary looks of malnourished children in charity commercials, Kiarostami and Samadian use the camera to gaze into the faces of children with bright, exuberant smiles. The film begins to consider how the camera's attempt to gaze at "reality" is not a passive act. The camera becomes part of the movement of *ABC Africa*, more of an actor in the film than conduit for its subjects.

Conclusion

As this chapter has argued, Kiarostami views the camera as an object of deception and manipulation. The camera seeks to gaze upon that which should not be seen and also seeks to objectify both women and rural life. By exposing these elements and leaving some of them off-screen, Kiarostami asks the audience to reflect on how the camera can deceive and abuse those who are not in a position of power. Also, by leaving things off-camera, Kiarostami returns to one of his fundamental filmmaking principles: considering the role of the audience. Kiarostami says, "The viewer always has this curiosity to imagine what's outside the field of vision; it's used all the time in everyday life. But when people come to a theater they've been trained to stop being curious and imaginative and simply take what's given to them. That's what I'm trying to change" (as cited in Rosenbaum, *Abbas Kiarostami* 114).

The camera is not a passive observer, but an active part of the reality it captures. Whether or not this is a negative is debatable. While it certainly complicates the claim of

documentary objectivity in *ABC Africa*, perhaps a filmmaker becoming part of that which he seeks to capture is not a negative. Perhaps it is part of sharing the human experience with his or her subject, as in the moments where the filmmakers are seen alongside the subjects of *ABC Africa* instead of remaining faceless and distant behind the camera.

Regardless, both *The Wind Will Carry Us* and *ABC Africa* once again challenge traditional notions of the filmmaking process. Kiarostami's critique of the camera gets at the most basic process of filmmaking, challenging one's conception of cinema at the level of its inception. It asks the audience to consider the role of the director, his position in relation to his subjects, and how the camera shapes that position. For Kiarostami, the camera is a loaded device and brings with it the means to abuse and misrepresent whatever one might hope to capture with it.

CHAPTER FIVE

Conclusion

This thesis has demonstrated how the films of Abbas Kiarostami function as self-reflexive critiques of cinema. Once again, it must be emphasized this is not to say that there are not also affirmations of cinema within Kiarostami's films, merely that his films often complicate and question cinema. Some of these complications will lead to a more holistic and well-rounded understanding of cinema as a complex and often ambiguous process.

Chapter two demonstrated how the divide between reality and fiction is not clear-cut. By placing traditionally fictional aesthetics atop "reality," *Close-Up*, *And Life Goes On*, and *Through the Olive Trees* makes the audience aware of the role of the director. Coupled with the consideration of the director's role in rewriting reality and the technical breakdown at the end of *Close-Up*, Kiarostami's films muddle the traditional divide between reality and fiction. Furthermore, since the process of filming is its own sort of reality, such as the filming of the court case in *Close-Up*, it becomes difficult to call the camera a passive instrument to capture reality as it becomes part of the reality it is filming.

In the third chapter, *Taste of Cherry*, *Shirin* and *Certified Copy* demonstrated Kiarostami's conception of the audience as part of the process of meaning making in film. In contrast to traditional notions of art cinema where the director is the ultimate arbiter of unified meaning, Kiarostami deliberately constructs films that employ

ambiguities that the audience must resolve. Once again, his use of self-reflexive elements is essential to making the audience aware that these ambiguities are not artistic flair, but an invitation to fill in the gaps. Through this process, Kiarostami places himself and the audience on a level playing field, both able to come to their own conclusions and interpretations as to what his films are ultimately about.

The fourth chapter showed how Kiarostami critiques the apparatus of cinema itself. *The Wind Will Carry Us* is first and foremost a critique of the filmic gaze, a desire to objectify. By denying both the protagonist and the audience the pleasure of the gaze, Kiarostami argues for the ethics of a camera, one that questions what should be shown and what should not be shown. From there, Kiarostami explores how the camera and the urban filmmaker are often prone to sensationalizing and creating a spectacle of rural life. The real-life village of Siah Dareh becomes a point of reflection for Kiarostami as he demonstrates how the film's surrogate director seeks out a town to make it an object of urban consumption. The last section of this chapter used *ABC Africa* as an example of how the camera is not a passive device, but an active part of whatever it seeks to film. The division between the subject and director breaks down as Kiarostami and cameraman Seyfolah Samadian become subjects and participants in their own documentary.

While this thesis explored three of the most apparent areas in which Kiarostami's films critique the cinema, there are more areas to be explored. This thesis has touched upon the use of surrogate directors and the use of the camera as a form of exploitation, both of which could be expanded upon and taken to greater lengths in further analysis. Likewise, Kiarostami's latest films have become more aware of the role of women, and it is likely that as his international career continues and he is free of the restrictions of

Iran's censorship, this will become another pattern of cinematic critique demonstrated within his films. Therefore, much like the ending of many of Kiarostami's films, this thesis recognizes that this is just the extent of one man's effort, and that analysis of Kiarostami's films should (and hopefully will) go on.

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