

Contemporary Neorealist Principles in Abbas Kiarostami's Filmmaking (1997 – 2005)

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Filmmaking (1997 – 2005)

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Abstract

Iranian film has in recent decades comprised an increasingly important and influential cinema. The Iranian Islamic Revolution of 1979 paved the way for freedom of artistic and literary expression, communicating a new generation of unheard voices in Iranian society. More specifically Iranian cinema has progressed in maintaining an identity that reflects both a contemporary nation and auteuristic cinematics. Abbas Kiarostami is one of the more recent and leading film directors rewarded with critical and filmmaking acclaim out of Iran, producing contemporary snapshots of society and culture. His filmmaking methods and ideals are very much reflective of the style of post Second World War Italian Neorealism. In context and filmmaking principles Kiarostami adapts the conventions of Neorealism in exploring contemporary Iranian socio-cultural problems in a similar manner. This project aims to explore the relationship between the style and context of his filmmaking in terms of mise-en-scène, themes and socio-cultural concerns. It shows how Kiarostami creates a distinctive form of Neorealist filmmaking to get at the ‘truths’ of contemporary Iranian life in a particular way. In doing so an emergent strand of a modern-Neorealism becomes apparent.

Introduction

There are a number of shared stylistic and thematic traits evident within the filmmaker Abbas Kiarostami's work and that of certain Italian directors of the latter 1940s and 1950s. The link comprises the cinematic movement of Neorealism¹. Neorealism is a form or style of cinema that has been and still is used to portray the hardships of everyday people struggling with contemporary socio-cultural problems. Neorealist films are distinctive as they use a specific set of cinematic conventions, filmmaking ideals and narrative forms. They turn the lens on reality, combining poetic style and documentary techniques, reaching towards the 'truthful' representation of national concerns through film art. Neorealism is a style of cinema that addresses and explores certain social, cultural and economic issues from the perspective of the everyday person. With a unique vision and set of aesthetic traits, Neorealism has been continually used throughout world cinema with regards to the exploration of varying contemporary issues. Within different contexts and countries this style of cinema investigates core issues in light of environment and surroundings, grounded through the ability to create immediate resonance with its audience by means of portraying indigenous lifestyle, culture and everyday formalities they themselves take part in.

As an Iranian filmmaker Abbas Kiarostami has adopted and adapted the Neorealist style of cinema incorporating new ideas and preoccupations of his own. Through an exploration of original Neorealist filmmaking principles, the shifting dynamics of Neorealist style and content over time and across different national cinemas will become apparent. After discussing and then grounding Neorealism within an Iranian context, comparative analysis of original Italian Neorealism and the more modern trends in Kiarostami's films will be undertaken across three chapters. The project will chart the style's progression, adaptation, contemporary usage and specific expressive interrogation

¹ There have been various spellings of Neorealism from the 1950s onwards. I have favoured the use of the unhyphenated, one word "Neorealism". However, in all cases, I have respected the author's original spelling for their referenced work.

of Iranian society. The use of western European film theory and key theorists of the Neorealist era will assist in establishing the context and conventions of Neorealist cinema.

Existing literature and film criticism on Kiarostami focuses mainly on his first critically acclaimed film: *Through the Olive Trees* (1994). Academic writing about Iranian cinema thereafter generally focuses upon this initial accredited example of Kiarostami's filmmaking along with examples of emerging Iranian directors such as Mohsen Makhmalbaf and Jafar Panahi, among others. Biography-based literature tracing the steps of Kiarostami into filmmaking, such as that presented in Mehrnaz Saeed-Vafa and Jonathan Rosenbaum's *Abbas Kiarostami* (2003) and Alberto Elena's *The Cinema of Abbas Kiarostami* (2005), highlight background work on and about Kiarostami with critical readings of his earlier films.

To develop the critical literature about this director's work I have decided to approach and analyse a collection of Kiarostami's films from the period 1997 – 2005. During this time period Kiarostami was making films much attuned to original Neorealist filming traits and ideals. Under discussion is, therefore, a group of films that both demonstrate the use and the adaptation of Neorealism in style and thematics, and that bind as a set or 'cycle' through their application of particular formal strategies. Post-2005 Kiarostami moved away from a naturalistic, vérité style of filmmaking. With *Tickets* (2005) we begin to see Kiarostami's change of direction, in terms of film content and style. Concentration on the period 1997 – 2005² via the prism of Neorealism affords a fresh perspective on a singularly delineated set of films.

Another text that attempts at linking various stylistic, cultural and social contexts with changes in Neorealism across various nations' cinema is Laura E. Ruberto and Kristi Wilson's *Italian Neorealism and Global Cinema* (2007) collection of essays. They typically explore connections of Neorealist traits

² Leaving out more recent films such as *Shirin* (2008) and *Certified Copy* (2010) - these later films continue to establish his move into bigger budgets, scripted filmmaking, and use of professional actors among other factors. But this is not to say certain aesthetic and thematic links to his previous work and development of directing style are lost. For example the use of Iranian women in *Shirin* reminds us of the continual iconography and aesthetic signifiers of his work.

of filmmaking, showing evidence for various stylistic and thematic links to other countries and directors' use of the style. A focus on linking contemporary attitudes from indigenous, everyday people with personal anxiety about the social and political environments about them is also explored. Contemporary attitudes upon cultural etiquette and religion are examined, shifting in light of globalisation and foreign influences. Through expanding on these topics, modernised aspects of Kiarostami's cinematics arise from the consideration of modern filmmaking technologies to reworking the directing role.

The article *Neorealism, Iranian Style* by Stephen Weinberger³ connects Neorealism and Iranian film through one primary example of Italian Neorealist filmmaking, *The Bicycle Thief* (Vittorio De Sica: 1948), with three Iranian directors and one of their films respectively. Drawing from and advancing these observations, this project explores Kiarostami's cinema in close detail, its relationship to Neorealism and the director's adaptation of the movements' particular filmmaking strategies. His use of recurrent themes, stylistic traits and filmmaking technologies will be explored in his films building towards the impact this selection has upon the identity of Iranian cinema (within the context of World Cinema). The films selected for close analysis are: *Taste of Cherry* (1997), *The Wind Will Carry Us* (1999), *ABC Africa* (2001), *Ten* (2002), *10 on Ten* (2003), *Five* (2003), and *Tickets*.

Chapter One considers Kiarostami as a filmmaker and reflects upon the inauguration of Neorealism in Italy. Then, through relating historical context, various contemporary issues and stylistic strategies of Neorealism, the linkage to Kiarostami's films will be highlighted with particular attention paid to its adapting form and handling of mise-en-scène. Addressing the combination of vérité, realist and documentary traits will also be explored in connection with Kiarostami's directorial authorship. The complexities of authorship within film studies is, in its own right, a leading topic in the categorisation of individual filmmaking approaches and stylistic demeanours.⁴ The manner and techniques in which

³ See *Iranian Studies*, 40:1 (Routledge, February 2007), pp. 5 – 16.

⁴ See for example: David A. Gerstner and Janet Staiger's (eds.), *Authorship and Film* (New York and London: Routledge, 2003), a title that makes good connections with identity and culture regarding national authorship.

Kiarostami falls into this spectrum of filmmakers will emerge later. Arising from the film's narratives and concerns, the significance of censorship, and the use of children and women in Iranian cinema will form leading topics into the discussion of Kiarostami's mise-en-scène.

Chapter Two is split into sub-sections exploring all parts of Kiarostami's mise-en-scène: for example, lighting, camera work, acting, sound, costume, colour, setting, and cinematography. Each particular point of style is directly linked to its use and function in traditional Italian Neorealist films and then examined, in the case of Kiarostami, as a modernised or adapted element of the earlier form. These points are analysed closely with specific instances and examples from the selected collection of Kiarostami's films.

The role of mise-en-scène analysis is well-established, used by numerous film scholars and has played a crucial part in the development of film as an academic discipline, becoming an important part of formal film criticism. Stemming from journals in France and Britain (*Cahiers du Cinéma* and *Movie*) this type of close textual analysis binds very specific parts of filmmaking with the context and manner in which it is received. This perspective, through focusing on particular elements of film style, aims to gauge a film's meanings through a process of close textual analysis, interpretation and evaluation. One of the most articulate definitions of mise-en-scène, published in the early 1960s journal *Definition*, was by Robin Wood; one that encouraged much further debate.⁵

Also in Gibbs' book, *Mise-en-scène: Film Style and Interpretation*, are a combination of many good examples of mise-en-scène readings/analysis and associated definitions of their place in film. For example the section titled "Context and content" in chapter 4 begins an interesting debate on the application of how these factors inform a film's mise-en-scène. Another section titled "Coherence"

More broadly, C. P. Sellors, *Film Authorship: Auteurs and Other Myths* (London and New York: Wallflower Press, 2010) has a particular interest in the analysis and theorisation of authorship and the film auteur from across the world.

⁵ See Robin Wood, 'New Criticism?', *Definition* 3 (Winter 1960/1961), pp. 9 – 11. This account was part of a 'furious battle about the significance of film style and the weight which it should properly be accorded in film criticism.' See John Gibbs, *Mise-en-scène: Film Style and Interpretation* (London and New York: Wallflower, 2003), p. 56.

in the same chapter Gibbs discusses the links between each specific part of a film's form and the importance of this in constructing a meaningful film as a whole (and is later used in Chapter 2). The specific application to melodrama's is discussed in chapter 5, 'mise-en-scène and melodrama', considering various approaches to a film genre that 'demonstrates par excellence the ability of Hollywood film and popular cinema more generally, to express things visually rather than verbally.'⁶ Furthermore, another key figure in the development of mise-en-scène analysis and directorial authorship, V. F. Perkins, proposes the idea that a film's quality is grounded in its mise-en-scène, claiming that the director is the only logical artist responsible for making a film and not the screenwriter.⁷ These briefly covered examples highlight merely the surface to a method of film analysis that demonstrates its applicability to all genres of filmmaking in various types of discussions; whether it be around areas of authorship or deeply contextualised readings of a film's meaning. However, as the above ideas demonstrate, we have to acknowledge that this method of analysis has a significant subjective element. Therefore it is important to note that, to provide detailed criticism, I am guided by my own critical intuition on this collection of films; thoughts which are then shaped by a skilled application of critical vocabulary and evaluative criteria.

Furthermore these readings are formed through the understanding of the relationship between the film's meanings and its social context, and through detailed reading and research of the film's themes, concerns and, where relevant, other factors such as production.⁸ Additionally writing from André Bazin will be considered within this thesis together with a similar application of close reading methods used by Gibbs and Douglas Pye in *Style and Meaning: Studies in the detailed analysis of film*.⁹ Taking this on board, the second chapters' concerns provide a sound structure for

⁶ Gibbs, *Mise-en-scène: Film Style and Interpretation*, p. 67.

⁷ Ibid, pp. 56 – 64. Additionally see, V. F. Perkins, 'Moments of Choice', *The Movie* (1981, Ch. 58, pp. 1141 – 1145), reprinted in A. Lloyd (ed.), *Movies of the Fifties* (London: Orbis Publishing, 1982), pp. 209 – 213.

⁸ See Alex Clayton and Andrew Klevan (eds.), *The Language and Style of Film Criticism* (UK, USA and Canada: Routledge, 2011), Introduction – especially pp. 3 – 4 about subjectivity and intersubjectivity.

⁹ See various articles by André Bazin, such as 'Bazin on Neo-Realism', *Screen* 14:4 (1973), pp. 61 – 68, or 'Bazin on Post-Neorealist Rossellini, De Sica, and Visconti: Three Original Reviews', *The Massachusetts Review* 43:1 (The Massachusetts review, Inc., Spring 2002), pp. 89 – 103 and Bert Cardullo, (Ed.) (translated from the French by Alain Piette and Bert Cardullo), *Bazin At Work: Major Essays and Reviews From The Forties and*

demonstrating a particular, active form of filmmaking style within Iranian cinema that has up to now been under-appreciated.

The third and final chapter explores two other ways in which Kiarostami's style reflects a modernisation of Neorealism: recurrent themes and the works' application of technological advancements. Topics to be explored here include Kiarostami's use of digital cameras; use of children and narration; use of dialogue and environment; and accessibility, in terms of access to filmmaking tools/technology and to foreign (Western) audiences. These seemingly disparate topics cohere as they are seen to emerge out of Kiarostami's consistent cinematic style: analysing the modern world through modern signifiers. These can be identified through the relationship between maintaining a traditional identity, use of advanced technology and through the explored opinions of women in a patriarchal society.

By means of theory and analysis, the methodology consists of a combination of different forms and approaches. This is, foremost, a historical piece, taking a look at both contemporary socio-cultural circumstances in Iran and the generic stream of Neorealism. It is supported and furthered through a combination of close textual analysis (explained above) and therefore a mode of stylistic interpretation centred on Kiarostami's adaptation and evolution of the Neorealist tradition. It will also draw on aspects of authorship theory.

This dissertation aims to explore and demonstrate the adaptive use of the Neorealist style in another country, addressing contemporary socio-cultural issues in a different context. It will establish its roots in the fundamental need for change in various economic areas of society and culture, explored through a specific aesthetic and set of thematic concerns. These topics are built upon over the course of Kiarostami's filmmaking further politicising the need for change with evidence from the selected films. In considerations of Kiarostami as an auteur, the thesis will demonstrate how he has

Fifties – André Bazin (New York and London: Routledge, 1997). Also Gibbs and Pye's (eds.) book, *Style and Meaning: Studies in the detailed analysis of film* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2005) is extremely applicable here considering the nature of film interpretation and analysis.

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incorporated older inherent/indigenous Persian and later Iranian traits of literary and filmic influences with Neorealist conventions. Combined with the core signifiers of original Neorealist filmmaking, a tailored, modern-Neorealism will become evident through the exploration of style and themes in the selected films. The application of this methodology and these questions allows us to develop the scholarship around Kiarostami and modern forms of Neorealist filmmaking, opening up the films under scrutiny in new and illuminating ways.

Chapter One

Abbas Kiarostami the Filmmaker

Kiarostami began his filmmaking career at a time of 'great creative effervescence, severe economic crisis and high political tension'¹⁰ with the film *The Report* (1977) which echoed these contemporary factors. Kiarostami himself recognised the need to 'make a kind of chronicle of life in Tehran in the years before the Revolution, about the extraordinary pressures people felt, their financial problems, [and] the black job market'.¹¹

Abbas Kiarostami was first introduced to international film audiences in the 1990's with two films that announced his presence as a creative and influential Iranian filmmaker: *Close-Up* (1990) and *Through the Olive Trees* (1994). These two films tread thin lines between morality and philosophy, fiction and reality. In them Kiarostami uses a form of realist and naturalist filmmaking that would become the archetype for his later films. If one is willing to look to biographical details as informing an artist's output, then Kiarostami's filmmaking ideas and techniques can be seen as developing during his earlier work as an advertiser.¹² Similar realist attitudes in form and style are evident in this work, as well as a thematic interest in everyday events, parts of society, children, and the environment.

During Kiarostami's seven to eight year period at the leading Iranian advertising film agency in the 1960s, Tabli Films, he made between one hundred and one hundred and fifty advertisements for many Iranian and Persian productions. After these years, building his artistic reputation, he decided

¹⁰ Alberto Elena, *The Cinema of Abbas Kiarostami* (London: SAQI in association with Iran Heritage Foundation, 2005), p. 43.

¹¹ Ibid, p. 43.

¹² Ibid, pp. 14 – 15.

to leave due to 'overriding commercial pressures'.¹³ This factor played a key role in what was to become of Abbas Kiarostami the filmmaker and the part he was to play in the generation of filmmakers establishing the New Iranian Cinema.

In discussion with Philip Lopate, Kiarostami recalls,

'how his real interest began... with the arrival of neo-realist Italian films in Iran. These came as a breath of fresh air to the anxious adolescent used to seeing only commercial American films: for the first time he could see on the screen people who were recognizably like those he saw in everyday life.'¹⁴

It was these early interactions with the Neorealist style in his teenage years that began his interest in films that depicted "real-life" scenarios. Subsequently he and other writers/directors came together in what was to become the New Iranian Cinema in the 1970s as, primarily, the production group named the Centre for the Intellectual Development of Children and Young Adults (Kanun).¹⁵ Kanun served as a catalyst for the expression of artistic freedom for these creative minds to produce work in an environment around peers who held similar values and expressions in various forms of art.

Directors such as Sohrab Shahid Saless¹⁶, Forugh Farrokhzad,¹⁷ and a combination of poets and

¹³ Laurent Roth (ed.), 'Le Monde d'A. K.', in *Abbas Kiarostami: Texts, entretiens, filmographie complète* (Paris: Editions de l'Etoile/Cahiers du Cinéma, 1997), p. 26.

¹⁴ Elena, *The Cinema of Abbas Kiarostami*, p. 15. Also see comments made to Philip Lopate, 'Kiarostami Close Up', *Film Comment* 32:4 (July-August 1996), in particular p.37.

¹⁵ Other important agencies that helped the growth of film production were the state-run Iranian National Television, the Ministry of Art and Culture and the Company for the Development of the Iranian Cinema Industry.

¹⁶ Further ideas and information on Sales' influence can be found in Hamid Dabashi's essay 'The Making of an Iranian Filmmaker: Abbas Kiarostami', section 'The 1970's', in his collection of essays, *Close Up, Iranian Cinema: Past, Present and Future* (London and New York: Verso, 2001), pp. 44 - 54, and other information in 'Before the Revolution' in Elena's, *The Cinema of Abbas Kiarostami*, pp. 13 – 47.

¹⁷ Mohsen Makhmalbaf considers her and her film *The House is Black* (Farrokhzad, 1962): “the best Iranian film [to have] affected the contemporary Iranian cinema” in Jonathan Rosenbaum's essay 'Abbas Kiarostami', in Mehrnaz Saeed-Vafe, and Jonathan Rosenbaum, *Abbas Kiarostami* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003), p. 2.

writers of fiction such as Ahmad Shamla and Samad Behrangi¹⁸ acted as importantly influential countrymen to Kiarostami.

Kiarostami began shooting his first short films in the 1970s. Admired by Kiarostami at this time, and what was to shape the beginnings of the New Iranian Cinema, films such as *P for Pelican* (Parviz Kimiavi, 1970), *Saless's Still Life* (Sohrab Shahid Saless, 1975), and *The House Is Black* (Forugh Farrokhzad, 1962)¹⁹ impacted the director. These three films in particular held a personal resonance for Kiarostami due to their use of narrative, artistic filmmaking and methods of symbolism reflected later in his own ideas and style.²⁰

According to an interview with Kiarostami in 1990, films such as another by Sohrab Shahid Saless, *A Simple Event* (*Yek ettefagh-e sareh*, Saless, 1973), *The Mongols* (*Mogholha*, Kiamiavi, 1973) by Parviz Kiamiavi, together with specific aspects from Dariush Mehrjui's *The Postman* (*Postchi*, Mehrjui, 1973) proved to have a significant impact on his use of imagery. It was 'the contemporary films of Massud Kimiai or the early films of his friend Amir Naderi [that] should [also] be recognised as Kiarostami's real cinematographical references.'²¹ A photographer too, as well as advertiser and writer, it has been suggested that Kiarostami fell into film-making by chance, by no real conscious move, personal desire or intuitiveness to make films.²² However there is a strong argument that after leaving advertising his ideas were better adapted to filmmaking. So began his career with Kanun in the early 1970s.

This organisation was a major movement for Iranian cinema allowing a generation of pioneering filmmakers the ability, resources and minor funding to create films. As well as films, poetry and literature were sponsored and distributed by the organisation. Historically poetry was an integral

¹⁸ See footnote 11 for further reading on the impact of Shamla and Behrangi's literature.

¹⁹ Saeed-Vafa and Rosenbaum, *Abbas Kiarostami*, p.46.

²⁰ Elena, *The Cinema of Abbas Kiarostami*, p.16.

²¹ Ibid, pp. 16 – 17, but for the full interview see, Francesco Bono (ed.), 'Intervista con Abbas Kiarostami', *L'Iran e i suoi schermi* (Venice/Pesaro: Marsilio Editori/Mostra Internazionale del Nuovo Cinema, 1990), pp. 159 – 162 for specific reasons by the director.

²² Saeed-Vafa, and Rosenbaum, *Abbas Kiarostami*, p.46.

part of developing Kiarostami and his generation and continued to be a major force in driving the intellectual renewal of Iran. As Alberto Elena writes, it is 'therefore perfectly logical to find a poetical base, a source of nutrition that is essentially lyrical, in the work of Kiarostami and the other leading film-makers of his generation... it is 'Persian poetry that nourishes and guides the visual thinking' of this country'²³. The relationship with past dominant forms of literature then is indubitably established and evident in the language and poetical image of Kiarostami's films. Its presence continually calls to our attention, especially with Kiarostami's ability to turn a poetic lens on politicising contemporary socio-cultural issues, to the development of his filmic image.²⁴

Additionally, at the time, the organisation was intended to engage the youth of Iran in an environment away from political overseeing and censorship.²⁵ However, as it was set up a few years before the Iranian revolution, this organisation became a scapegoat for the government. During these times films produced by his contemporaries such as Bahram Beyae and the above mentioned Amir Naderi, also part of Kanun, continued the struggle.²⁶ Many other influences came from directors across Europe, namely Neorealists Vittorio Di Sica and Roberto Rossellini, French filmmaker François Truffaut and further afield the Swedish director Ingmar Bergman. Their use of cinematics, predominantly in areas of cinematography, narrative and auteuristic styles, coupled with notions of avant-garde filmmaking, gave Kiarostami further examples and avenues for his cinematic creations.²⁷

Following the period after the Islamic Revolution²⁸, during the 1980s and 1990s, Kiarostami continued making films within Iran. It was not until the beginning of the 1990s that his films became

²³ Elena, *The Cinema of Abbas Kiarostami*, p. 190.

²⁴ Ibid, for further reading on poetical influence and importance of Persian literature to modern Iranian filmmakers, p. 190 – 195.

²⁵ Again, see footnote 11 for further reading in the same essay.

²⁶ See footnote 16 for further reading on the influence and effects of these directors and the Kanun organisation. Also see 'Before the Revolution', pp. 13-47, in Elena's *The Cinema of Abbas Kiarostami*, for various references on these two directors.

²⁷ Mainly in Kiarostami's use of poetic realism, characters, cinéma vérité, symbolism, and intuitive camera use.

²⁸ For further reading on previous and post key information regarding the relationship with Iranian arts (and filmmaking in particular), see 'Chapter Two – The Making of an Iranian Filmmaker: Abbas Kiarostami – The 1950s – The 1960s – The 1970s – The year of the revolution – The 1980s – The 1990s' in Dabashi's, *Close Up, Iranian Cinema: Past, Present and Future*, pp. 33 – 75.

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accessible to foreign audiences. Continuing his passion for photography and writing, Kiarostami adds to his cinematics a fluent and poetic sensibility. It is in the period between 1997 and 2005 that a stark cinematographical 'look', comprising recurrent imagery, evolving themes, and philosophical ruminations on the everyday and the common man, began to develop and cultivate resonance with the international audience.

Neorealism and Iranian Cinema

A highly distinctive and individual filmmaking discourse sets Kiarostami's films apart. Iran's cinema grew substantially in the period following the Islamic revolution in 1979 and yet also adheres closely to traditional Persian filmmaking techniques and methods of storytelling. Kiarostami draws together aspects of national heritage and an international take on Neorealism with the new freedoms the Islamic revolution represented.

Origins of Neorealism

In post-war Italy Neorealism was regarded as a counter-cultural, anti-fascist form of cinema – drawing most notably from French Poetic Realism – as it was a new development within the genres of realism and *vérité* filmmaking. This style of filmmaking was and is indisputably tied to contemporary moral, cultural and social issues. As Mira Liehm states while discussing the 1950s films of Italian filmmaker Roberto Rossellini, Neorealists were not so much concerned with true imitations of life as with the impact of these depictions upon its audience. Liehm proposes that Neorealism was

'a moral weapon aimed at the artistic conventions of the past,'²⁹ and reinforces the notion that Neorealist films were ineluctably tied to serious moral and social issues within contemporary society. Equally, Mark Shiel notes how other scholars have viewed Neorealism as a 'revolutionary cinema... [one that grew] Italian cinema [out] of the fascist era [and] was dismissed as vulgar propaganda or decadent entertainment'³⁰ because fascists used cinema, particularly the documentary form, 'in building and maintaining political power.'³¹

There are further, important critical influences at work, extending beyond (and yet connected to) the origins and impulses of Neorealism. André Bazin was a leading theorist on Italian Neorealism and contemporary writer/filmmaker until his early death in 1958 of leukemia at the age of forty. The Frenchman contributed to numerous French periodicals, most notably co-founding *Les Cahiers du Cinéma* in 1951. The journal grew under his direction into 'Europe's most influential, and one of the world's most distinguished, film publications.'³² As Bazin's biographer Dudley Andrew has claimed, Bazin's significance and impact on film, both as theorist and critic, 'is widely considered to be greater than that of any single director, actor, or producer in the history of the cinema. He is credited with almost single-handedly establishing the study of film as an accepted intellectual pursuit.'³³ By means of interpretation and evaluation, Bazin took film criticism away from preconceived aesthetic and sociological principles. His attitudes to analysis and film theorisation focused on 'aesthetic dissection... [A] true filmmaker attains his power through "style," which is not a thing to be expressed but an inner orientation enabling an outward search.'³⁴ This perspective leads Bazin to consider the objectivity of cinema, stating that the 'general idea was to discover in the nature of the photographic image an objectively realistic feature, and... the concept of objective reality as a

²⁹ Mira Liehm, *Passion and Defiance: Film in Italy from 1942 to the Present* (Berkley: U of California P, 1984), p. 71.

³⁰ Shiel, *Italian Neorealism: Rebuilding the Cinematic City*, p. 26.

³¹ Ibid, p. 21. Furthermore they would use this style of cinema in the creation of a pseudo-propaganda elective.

³² Bert Cardullo, (Ed.) (translated from the French by Alain Piette and Bert Cardullo), *Bazin At Work: Major Essays and Reviews From The Forties and Fifties – André Bazin* (New York and London: Routledge, 1997), p. X.

³³ Ibid, p. X.

³⁴ Ibid, p. XII.

fundamental quality of the cinematic shot in fact become[s] the key to his theoretical and critical work.³⁵ It was the representation of reality, an objective observation into real life that was most interesting, and according to him ‘the camera is the objective tool with which to achieve it.’³⁶ Aesthetically the use and continuation of visual signifiers of Neorealism, such as long-shots, long-takes, fluidity of camera movement and the use of off-screen space together with philosophical themes (for example, the notion that the cinematic medium can “record death”, or through relaying everyday anxiety) maintains the relationship of past and present forms of Neorealist films; traits highlighted through Bazian theory. It was the evidence for an overwhelming natural or realist predisposition to filmmaking in post-World War Two Italy that encouraged the theorisation and embodied the traits and movement of Neorealism.

Neorealism: Theory and Filmmaking Traits

Neorealist filmmakers and key theorists³⁷ alike argued that Neorealism depicted the individual’s struggle against contemporary social reality and examined the everyday attempts to function within such constraints. Film writer and critic Bert Cardullo brings attention to the claim that 1950s ‘cinema [was] in bad need of a realistic revolution. This revolution just broke out in Italy, and Italian filmmakers have done so much... [that their films] already constitute the classics of the neorealist movement’³⁸. Through the late 1940s and early 1950s Italian film directors such as Roberto Rossellini, Vittorio De Sica and Luchino Visconti were emblematic of this movement, putting together a set of realist filmmaking traits to stylistically represent contemporary socio-cultural problems endemic across a war-torn country in need of social reformation.

³⁵ Ibid, p. XIII.

³⁶ Ibid, p. XIII.

³⁷ Such filmmakers as Jean Renoir, Robert Bresson and François Truffaut; theorists such as André Bazin and Jean-Luc Godard.

³⁸ Cardullo (Ed.), *Bazin At Work: Major Essays and Reviews From The Forties and Fifties – André Bazin*, p. 108.

The core or central concern of Neorealist directors was to convey through the eyes of the every-day man the various struggles surrounding society and culture. Addressing these issues politicised their film style, a style viewed as a ‘historically and culturally-specific manifestation of the general aesthetic quality known as ‘realism’ which is characterised by a disposition to the ontological truth of the physical, visible world.’³⁹ One of the most useful ways to consider Neorealism, writes Mark Shiel, ‘has been to see it as a moment of decisive transition in the tumultuous aftermath of world war which produced a stylistically and philosophically distinctive cinema’⁴⁰. The movement not only turned the film lens onto reality but also turned upon the dominating forms of classical cinema structures in Hollywood (which had, up to the late 1940s, previously dominated Europe). It opened the window to the modernist art cinemas in countries such as France, Sweden, Great Britain, Czechoslovakia and of course Italy (as represented in films such as *The 400 Blows* (François Truffaut, 1959), *Le Petit Soldat* (*The Little Solider*, Jean-Luc Godard, 1963), *Lancelot du Lac* (*Lancelot of the Lake*, Robert Bresson, 1974), *Through a Glass Darkly* (Ingmar Bergman, 1961), *Här har du ditt liv* (Here is your life, Jan Troell, 1966), *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* (Tony Richardson, 1962), *Lásky jedné plavovlásky* (*The Loves of a Blonde*, Milos Forman, 1965), *Ostre sledované vlaky* (*Closely Watched Trains*, Jirí Menzel, 1966), *La Dolce Vita* (Federico Fellini, 1960), *8 ½* (Federico Fellini, 1963) and *Blow-Up* (Michelangelo Antonioni, 1966)).⁴¹

From this perspective and series of influences emerged a distinctive set of filmmaking conventions. Neorealist films were characterised by a search for the “truth”. This representation of ‘truth’ is, as in all cases of filmed recordings of reality, subject to measures of artificial construction (accounting for its assignation of inverted commas). For example, the use of some scripting and narrative direction, together with the nervousness a camera can impose on its filmed subjects (who are not professional actors, we must remember) can arguably alter or distil the overall purity of the intended natural,

³⁹ Shiel, *Italian Neorealism: Rebuilding the Cinematic City*, p. 1.

⁴⁰ Ibid, p. 1.

⁴¹ For further reading see András Bálint Kovács, *Screening Modernism: European Art Cinema* (USA: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

truthful depictions of contemporary everyday life in both Italy and Iran. Additionally Mark Shiel comments in his introduction to Neorealism how the style is ‘known as ‘realism’ ... thinking of it as a cinema of ‘fact’⁴² – issuing a similar use of inverted commas to this particular realm of recording the truth, as it were, via filmmaking style. These factors that may pose a hindrance on the overall truthful representation of the everyday through the film medium exist but, as we shall find, are continually and artistically effaced/eliminated by the directing style and filmmaking methods employed, together with the continual adaptation of original Neorealist filmmaking traits.

Directors representing contemporary, everyday life eschewed studio spaces, moving into the streets, creating low-budget films on location. Filming on location with untrained, non-professional actors was widespread. The avoidance of enhancing or even changing the place or environment they were filming in was equally important. Natural lighting was used whenever possible. The same principle went for sound, ideally with no non-diegetic sound, however most films had to be dubbed due to the poor quality of the recorded sound. However, ‘the dubbing of films had been compulsory under the fascist regime, [and therefore] most neorealist films were shot without sound and all dialogue was added to the image’⁴³ thereafter. This did pose a problem, an “anti-realist” effect to the films, however with years of practise under this regime, ‘Italian filmmakers had become quite expert in the technique by the 1940s and, in most cases, any loss of realism due to dubbing was compensated for by the distinctive mobility and expanded field of view which relatively lightweight silent film cameras afforded the cinematographer.’⁴⁴ As we shall see later, Kiarostami also uses the digital camera to similar affect; small, lightweight, unobtrusive, with the ability to film where-ever and when-ever (overcoming issues of the accessibility), however capturing diegetic sound at the same time. A free-moving, observational-documentary style of filming was favoured, or to use Bazin’s term,

⁴² Mark Shiel, *Italian Neorealism: Rebuilding the Cinematic City* (London and New York: Wallflower, 2006), pp. 1 – 2.

⁴³ Ibid, pp. 11 – 12.

⁴⁴ Ibid, p. 12.

'reconstructed reportage'⁴⁵. Narratives were simple and even at times improvisational, complementing the natural, untrained acting style. Unresolved or open endings were used to further engage audiences after viewing, thinking and considering the ending for themselves, and therefore mediating upon the subjects raised. The avoidance of complex editing and limited post-production processes were employed thereafter.

Kiarostami has inherited and adapted the above Neorealist traits to explore contemporary socio-cultural problems in Iran. As noted by Richard Corliss, one of the defining attributes of Neorealism (from Italy and later through other cinemas such as the French Nouvelle Vague, the Czech New Wave⁴⁶ and aspects of realist cinematics in the British New Wave and post-World War Two Scandinavian cinema⁴⁷) is the 'creation of a space by and for film-makers to account for the ethical freedom of the individual in the face of the overwhelming reality of globalization.'⁴⁸

Neorealism for Italian filmmakers and audiences alike was a cinematic language through which to counter and debate the problems of rebuilding a broken country after the Second World War. Establishing immediate resonance with their audiences, the most influential Italian filmmakers of the time such as Visconti, Rossellini and De Sica produced films that highlighted the interpersonal lives and struggles of common people trying to make ends meet using Neorealism as their platform. In terms of a major event that initiated the emergence of such an impacting and influential European film movement, the Islamic revolution of 1979 sparked something similar in Iran.

⁴⁵ Ibid, p. 2.

⁴⁶ See Richard Corliss's article "The Kids Are Alright" in *Time* 153:10 (1999), p. 85.

⁴⁷ Directors such as Ken Loach and Ingmar Bergman continuing particular aspects of the Neorealist tradition of filmmaking – see Chapter IIIV in Ian Atkin's, *European Film Theory and Cinema: A critical Introduction* (Eastbourne: Edinburgh University Press, 2001), pp. 203 - 227.

⁴⁸ Lubica Učník, "Aesthetics of Ethics? Italian Neorealism and the Czechoslovak New Wave Cinema", in, Laura E. Ruberto and Kristi Wilson (eds.) *Italian Neorealism and Global Cinema* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2007), p.55 – also see Corliss's article "The Kids Are Alright" for further reference.

Kiarostami the Auteur

Having asserted Kiarostami's inherited use of Neorealist filmmaking traits, it is also necessary to explore his status as an auteur. The "auteur" in film again stems from French film theory, largely through the writing of André Bazin in *Cahiers du Cinéma* alongside the critics and filmmakers of the New Wave including Truffaut, Godard, Rohmer and Rivette. While acknowledging the complexities of this theoretical and conceptual term, for the purposes of this thesis, the most salient aspect and defining feature of authorship refers to, in the context of cinema, the discernment of a director's distinctive creative vision.⁴⁹

If film authorship is necessarily understood as the development of a unique directorial signature, then Kiarostami's close relationship with Neorealist filmmaking principles may problematise his status as an auteur. This thesis takes the following stance. His admiration for Neorealism is indeed prevalent but Kiarostami adapts and evolves the core ideals and techniques of Italian directors from the 1950s. His vision of realism and vérité filmmaking draws from the substance of earlier Neorealist films and reshapes their stylistic choices in a way most fitting to explore socio-cultural issues in Iranian society. Kiarostami continues to develop the relationship between Neorealist style and contemporary factors of a particular nation.

Through exploring the selection of Kiarostami's films between 1997 and 2005 the linkage between Italian Neorealism and modern-Neorealism in Kiarostami's cinematics will be made evident. By means of establishing this relationship, through a scrutiny of the historical context and the exploration of contemporary socio-cultural concerns within the films, a particular modern emergent

⁴⁹ That is to say the film is created solely in their image. Film authorship is celebrated in film with filmmakers such as Alfred Hitchcock, John Cassavetes, Jean Renoir and Robert Bresson associated with the position of an auteur.

strand of Neorealism will become evident, illuminating Kiarostami's own auteuristic advancements upon Italian Neorealism.⁵⁰

By analysing various stylistic elements, themes and modernised aspects of Kiarostami's films, evidence for the emergence of modern-Neorealism in Iranian cinema will become evident. Also the binding between style and context in terms of mise-en-scène and socio-political concerns will be demonstrated as crucial to the films and to the thesis' methodology.

Censorship

Censorship in Iran is largely informed by religious and cultural practise. As Hamid Dabashi documents:

'The first objection is the supposition that through any kind of creative visual representation the imaginative faculties will overcome one's reason. The second objection is based on the assumption that sustained reflection on visual representations of real things prevents us from examining the realities they represent. The third objection stems from the historical opposition of the Prophet of Islam to idolatry. Finally, the fourth objection is based on the belief that any act of creation which stimulates the original creation by God is blasphemous.'⁵¹

So it was destined to be a cinema reflecting as much uncertainty in Iranian society as to the ambiguity of its reception upon its creation. Before the Islamic Revolution Iranian films of the '1960s and 1970s were political films that criticised the government and its social systems... [in a mix of styles that] targeted issues of cultural identity and alienation by employing a dramatic structure and

⁵⁰ It is important to mention at this juncture that this project does not offer a compendious perspective on Iranian cinema; that is to say many genres and auteuristic notions of filmmaking are always going to be evident in any national cinema, and there is not the space to address them all here. Rather, this project is a close, analytical study of one Iranian director and his style of filmmaking that roots its ideals and traits of filmmaking in those of Italian Neorealism.

⁵¹ Dabashi, *Close Up, Iranian Cinema: Past, Present and Future*, p. 14.

a realistic style rich with rituals.⁵² The reception and willingness to incorporate Neorealist filmmaking traits then comes as no surprise. It increasingly became a time in which, because of censorship and political content, the audience was prepared to read between the lines. Censorship is an issue, or should I say a subject under dispute, within all areas of the Iranian arts as 'during the initial period of revolutionary zeal and then the war with Iraq, social and cultural critique was effectively suppressed. Government organizations like the cinema office of the Ministry of Culture, which has been supportive of feature films, did not support documentary cinema....'⁵³ Only television programmes that served the state's political interests were allowed, while documentaries featuring any kind of 'political or social subjects relevant to contemporary Iranian society were almost completely absent.'⁵⁴

To circumvent censorship, Iranian cinema becomes (as we shall see) politically adept in its use of symbolic allegory. After the revolution the view from religious and cultural perspectives continued to grow. Cinema was considered by the clergy to be 'a form of Western exploitation, equal to prostitution, which promoted the corruption of youth by importing Western culture to Iran'.⁵⁵ In 1982 the Ministry of Islamic Guidance published a set of film "standards and values", among them banning sex, violence and any violation of Islamic and revolutionary values. Such content would not be tolerated and therefore would not be produced. Together with this the government put a ban on films from Hollywood and limited the importing of other Western countries films. Such as the comment regarding authorship these "standards and values" (and later, censorship guidelines) are too broader subjects to discuss here further. Suffice to say there is not the space to address the

⁵² Saeed-Vafa and Rosenbaum, *Abbas Kiarostami*, p. 57.

⁵³ Persheng Vaziri, 'Iranian Documentary Cinema Between Reality and Fiction', *Middle East Report*, no. 225 (Winter, 2002), pp. 53 – 54.

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, pp. 53 – 54.

⁵⁵ Saeed-Vafa, and Rosenbaum, *Abbas Kiarostami*, p. 62.

intricacies and specific details but point the reader to other, more engaging literature on brief historical accounts and “the motions” of Iranian Cinema⁵⁶.

Kiarostami was making films throughout this entire period and has noted the sense of creativity and artistry induced by these formalities, rather than their hindrances. Evident from the narratives in Kiarostami’s films, cinema is a place of deliberation, a place to learn through interaction and one that is located between the vision of life and death. Such themes are evident across much if not all of his work to date. For example, in *The Wind Will Carry Us* cinema is referred to as a medium to “record death”. Similarly, concealed and controlled by religious law and order, the personal anxieties of Mania (Mania Akbari) in *Ten* reveal a film concerned with the morality of leading a constrained, domesticated life. The first starts to show the beginnings of Kiarostami’s engagement with Neorealist filmmaking and later in *Ten* a very bold and distinguished evolution of this original style and thematics emerges.

In *The Wind Will Carry Us* a filmmaker and his team endeavour to record an ancient traditional ritual enacted upon the death of an elder woman in a remote Iranian village called Siah Dareh. A film that lends its narrative explanation to that of a young boy, the disguised filmmakers (as engineers) recurrently discuss his exams, life in the village and the declining health of his grandmother who they intend to film. These cyclical conversations are intermittently punctuated with shots of Iranian landscape and the village itself as the camera wanders around the natural settings. Again, in a philosophically-minded film, the emergence of particular themes and stylistic traits begins to take shape. Tying itself with realist filmmaking and nurturing the use of Iranian literature and allegory, *The Wind Will Carry Us* shows Kiarostami embarking on another journey for his characters and audience alike, further questioning fundamental aspects of life, death and our impartial existence on this earth. Exploring traditional rural life through a modern lens, Abbas Kiarostami explores the banes of combining traditional cultural lifestyles with modern technology and filmmaking

⁵⁶ Se Farrokh Gaffary, *Le cinema en Iran* (Tehran: Le Conseil de la Culture et des Arts et Centre d’Étude et de la Coordination Culturelle, 1973) or Mohammad Ali Issari, *Cinema in Iran* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Pr, 1989).

techniques. Winning the Grand Jury Prize (Silver Lion) at the Venice International Film Festival, this film furthers Kiarostami's critical filmmaking acclaim since winning the *Palme d'Or* (Golden Palm) award at the Cannes Film Festival for *Taste of Cherry*.

Later, in *Ten*, Kiarostami creates a film featuring ten individual long takes during which the audience experiences the day-to-day journeys of Mania, her son, and her passengers about Tehran. Navigating the busy streets of Tehran in her taxi, Mania takes us on another journey too; one that observes the philosophical conversations around contemporary society and culture from the perspective of women. This film again features the use of the digital camera in a film where the artifice of directing is completely effaced. As she drives about the city the conversations that are held steer around various freedoms women long for, their stance in society, political standing in terms of marriage, education and working, aspects of prayer and religious activity, women's attire, and other forms of suppression in a society run largely by men and religious rule.

Thematically, the film explores the need for ideological changes regarding the domesticity of women, their place and role in the economy and society, lack of sustained help with education and finding work. Their functioning in a patriarchal society is recurrently explored from the perspective of various female characters: one elderly lady, Mania's sister, a prostitute, and other women. Mania's son also features as a subsidiary protagonist in the exploration of young male roles. Their conversations, registered mainly through argument, express feelings about divorce, various Islamic freedoms, Mania working, the importance of education, foreign television, and other foreign influences on both their lives. The search for change is again boldly explored through Mania and the conversations in her car from the very heart of Iranian society, their capital, Tehran.

The general nature of these films begins to display this interrogation of life in Iran together with a specific aesthetic and contemporary debate. Going back, and amid the negativity censorship seems to possess, there are however ways in which the parameters of censorship encourage particular forms and modes of creativity. It is Kiarostami's belief that art is born "of difficult or unfavourable

circumstances to the artist", out of the necessity to express significance without overstepping the "rules"⁵⁷.

Narrative and Narration

Traditionally Neorealist narratives comprised difficult personal situations which the protagonists would overcome by the end of the film. In light of fascism, plots would mainly consider various contemporary social, cultural and political explorations, and the necessity for reformation in the development of a broken nation in post-World War Two Italy. Working class characters would deal with the lack of jobs, various social problems such as housing, lack of education, lack of government or institutionalised help to the smallest of day-to-day factors of life such as eating, drinking and finding somewhere to sleep. Italian directors such as Rossellini, De Sica, Visconti and De Santis feature children in their plots to draw these connections together. Through the eyes of the young and innocent, the problems become further humanised and encourage thoughts on the impact on next generations.

The Neorealist Narrative Agency of Children

Children are used for a number of reasons as characters in Iranian cinema, such as for representing relationships and other taboo subjects that would otherwise be allowed as forms of narrative content. Both the narration of Kiarostami's films (in terms of points of style) and narrative (the structure of the plot) are, traditionally speaking, reworked through his use of children's roles.

⁵⁷ Quotes from Extras on *Taste of Cherry* (1997) DVD.

Described by Gilles Deleuze under his approach to Neorealism as a new “cinematic image” (rather than paying attention to political content or filmmaking techniques), children possess a passive nature of powerlessness reflecting contemporary time.⁵⁸ As agents in the world (and in the film’s world), they hold less expectation regarding their ability to act, and to understand scenarios properly, and therefore an inability to help themselves and/or these external factors. In Neorealist cinema, children exist as subsidiary protagonists that reflect a purer way of visualising and understanding what their father, often the leading protagonist, may actually have to overcome.

Examples of such can be found in two quintessential Neorealist films: *The Bicycle Thief* and *Rome, Open City* (Roberto Rossellini, 1945). The male protagonists of both films are followed or watched by



1.1

The 'gaze': Farzad looking up to Behzad.

the gaze of the male child during times of unrest, deliberation and moral upheaval. This gaze ‘becomes a cipher for the social order to judge the actions of the male: a vigilant agent of the social order... is imposed between the spectator and the masculine hero.’⁵⁹ This rerouted gaze becomes what the audience identifies in conclusion to these films, the characters and fate of the various issues explored.

⁵⁸ For comments made by Gilles Deleuze see: Elena, *Abbas Kiarostami*, p. 193. Also see, Stephanie Dennison, and Song Hwee Lim, *Remapping World Cinema: Identity, Culture and Politics in Film* (London and New York: Wallflower Press, 2006), pp. 25 – 26, and Thomas Stubblefield’s essay ‘Re-creating the Witness: *Elephant*, Postmodernism, and the Neorealist inheritance’, pp. 238 – 240 in Ruberto and Wilson’s (eds.) *Italian Neorealism and Global Cinema*.

⁵⁹ Ruberto and Wilson (eds.), *Italian Neorealism and Global Cinema*, p. 37.

In turn, in *The Wind Will Carry Us* there are many repetitive conversations between Behzad and Farzad, the film crews' young guide from the small town.

The recurrent conversations between Behzad and Farzad concerning the "invalid" (Farzad's ailing grandmother), school, and exams, reflect repetitions and preoccupations that inform this local



1.2

Behzad and Farzad: recurring conversations and environment.

environment. Similarly in *Ten* there are recurring conversations between Mania and Amin, her son, and with the women she talks to driving about Tehran.

Behind such discussions between children, guardians, and (notably) female characters lie crucial tensions of repeated articulations for social change in the repeated setting and confinements of a moving car. The car, or similarly the train in *Tickets*, acts as a vessel in which to move and observe the outside world around them; remote from governing eyes and ears, exposing critical expressions and counter-cultural debate. The recurrent narrative traits highlight the cyclical notions of the problems in life and society. Similarly, using children as narrators in the exploration of Iran's milieu both links Kiarostami's plots with original Neorealist films of the 1950s and, more precisely, all of these films' interest in the evocation of innocence in times of internal conflict. Ensuing ideological changes in society and culture leads ultimately to a change in the governing of Iran and their people. Such as the fascist regime in the 1940s,⁶⁰ here central parts of everyday life and the economic

⁶⁰ That however was not explored in terms of realism at the time: 'With respect to cinema, they [(Rossellini, De Sica, Zavattini, Visconti, Lattuada and Antonioni)] do not properly consider the appearance of realism under

functioning of contemporary times are questioned. In doing so, the vehicle is a mode by which to literally and philosophically navigate these issues through the lesser understanding of the child. By these means there is much evidence supporting Kiarostami's commitment to addressing contemporary socio-cultural problems in Iranian society through various guises.

The general questioning orientation of his characters creates a cyclical atmosphere of ambiguity and hopelessness about the environments and locations they are placed in. These are the devices that Kiarostami uses to explore political and ideological opinions through the places closest to us in the world; for Iranians, through their homes, their towns, their life styles, and the culture they live in. He uses the solitary nature of his characters in their various stages and forms of philosophical questioning to address this; whether through Mr Badii's anger and despair regarding his fate and the fate of the country around him, or Behzad's turmoil and preoccupation with death and innocence that is lost in his life, craved through the boy who shows him around. Behzad and Mr Badii embody Kiarostami's ability to be political through the aspects of life that are not generally politicised in film. Through personal conversations, emotions, and imagery emblemising the younger generations unknowing and innocent questioning, these expressions are formulated through the closest, genuine examples of indigenous peoples. In expressing modern forms of political alienation and social fragmentation through film style and imagery, Kiarostami continues to further the political intentions of Italian Neorealism and exploration of social and cultural issues politicised through the things that are closest to them; through questioning within their environment, their lifestyles, their cultural traditions and social structures.

In *Ten* Kiarostami goes further in the linkage of the younger characters as narrative agents with the cinematic landscapes and contemporary themes they inhabit. The audience is once again presented with the familiar setting of a car, filmed on location in Tehran city. As Mania picks her son, Amin, up

Italian fascism within its full historical and international context' due to its own internal contradictions and military action originating outside of Italy that also, at the time, rendered filmmaking extremely difficult. It is important as it 'reminds us to maintain a distinction between conservative and progressive forms of realism' – see, Shiel, *Italian Neorealism: Rebuilding the Cinematic City*, p. 26.

from school, and after a less than harmonious exchange we are exposed to a conversation threading both characters' personal battles with wider implications towards their place in society and attitudes



1.3

The setting of the car and conflicting debate between Amin and Mania.

about culture. From the instant Mania picks Amin up we are presented with levels of hierarchy (for a young male) through the context and tone used by Amin towards his mother: (Mania) 'Lower the window. Let some air in. I'll buy you an ice cream, if you want?' (Amin) 'We're late, get going!'⁶¹ Deciding to tell him of a conversation she had with a friend the night before, her softly spoken words are again suppressed as Amin's response crescendos: (A) 'What do I care whether she calls or not?' (M) 'I'm talking to you. Let me finish. When I talk, you raise your voice.' (A) 'So what?' (M) 'It's impolite. Let me finish and you'll understand.' (A) 'I don't want to hear what she told you.' (M) 'To bad. You listen to everyone, but you refuse to listen to your own mother.'⁶² Soon after the conversation threads more personally their family situation, in particular detailing how she had to lie in court in order to get a divorce: (A) 'I knew you'd say that. You mean it's good that you divorced dad, that he was the one in the wrong. Say what you like, I don't believe it. I don't believe it.' (M) 'Don't believe it then. You only talk to fight...' (M) 'You see, Amin, if we lived to 100 we'd still argue (as he puts his hands over his ears and closes his eyes). Unless you listen to me and start thinking.'

⁶¹ First minute of *Ten* (2002). Translation via DVD subtitles.

⁶² 2 – 3 minutes, *Ten*.

You must have your own experiences to understand life. You're like your father. He shut me away, destroyed me. He wanted me only for himself...' (A) 'I don't want to listen! I don't have to...' (M) 'You're obstinate. You're full of rage. You want revenge. You're angry like that because you refuse reality.'⁶³ Interestingly here Mania states how the realities of her life are steadfastly not acknowledged by her son, and before that, by her husband. Having discussed a similar situation with her friend later in the film, in which the contrary happened (her friends parents stayed together with many, many problems that negatively affected family life), signifies in more broader terms males unwillingness to comprehend, let alone accept, the realities of women's lives in Iran. Establishing this further, later Mania exclaims (M) 'It was a good way of getting a divorce, the rotten laws in this society of ours give no right to women! To get a divorce, a woman has to say that she is beaten or that her husband's on drugs![...] A woman has no right to live!'⁶⁴ Thereafter Amin brings up another recurring issue of his mother working; another reason for his father leaving. The very fact she decided to try and make a career out of her artistry goes against the very inner workings of their religion and culture: issues concerning idolisation, freedoms found in artistic expression, and purely the factor of a woman at work rather than at home.

Kiarostami boldly addresses perspectives largely unheard in Iranian cinema throughout this film from both youths and women. After Mania's discussions she poignantly says, 'I feel fulfilled now like a flowing river. I was a stagnant pond. My brain was devastated.'⁶⁵

The contemporary exploration of social and cultural issues through the view of children is also distressingly illuminated in *ABC Africa*. Unsurprisingly Kiarostami was specifically asked to film abroad in Uganda, capturing the distressing realities of contemporary life in an incredibly resonant aesthetic. The raw footage intended only for research became the films realist platform through which the punitive realities of Uganda life are explored. Kiarostami's key focus is, primarily, the

⁶³ 4 – 5 minutes, *Ten*.

⁶⁴ 16 minutes, *Ten*.

⁶⁵ 6.30 minutes, *Ten*.

discussion and filmed evidence of the Ugandan civil war, disease epidemics, AIDS, and hundreds of thousands of orphaned children in their communities. Through filming and speaking to the



1.4

Narration concerning the problems in Uganda together with the visual of an orphaned baby.

indigenous people that these issues affect the most, a true, *vérité* depiction of contemporary life here is relayed through the quiet and unobtrusive lens of a small DV camera which, in turn, enables Kiarostami to capture the everyday.

The use of the DV camera is something Kiarostami began to incorporate in his filmmaking thereafter



1.5

The young faces of Uganda.

for the qualities of realism it allowed. In many areas of mise-en-scène, directing and in terms of the cost of producing films, this adoption of the digital camera largely informs the nature of his work following this film.

Throughout this film the audience is recurrently reminded of the dreadful position Ugandan children are often born into. Repeatedly, close-up shots of young children are placed together with the discussion of AIDS, civil war and orphan rates.

In the most recent of films considered in this project by Kiarostami, *Tickets*, child protagonists highlight (and encourage empathic involvement in) personal situations generated by a lack of institutionalised help. This is important as in one of the three specific storylines of the film the children have the most profound impact in creating cross-cultural generosity in scenarios which otherwise would have turned sour: an act of kindness (after argument) allows an escape from the country to live with their father. Furthermore *Tickets* is a film in which Kiarostami teams up with Ken Loach and Ermanno Olmi in the creation of a film that constructs three story-lines on one particular train Journey from Austria to Rome, highlighting the importance that one ticket can hold. This collaboratively directed film provides observations of three sets of very different travellers in very different situations. A professor embarks on a major pharmaceutical deal and in his fast attempts to get home ends up waiting on a delayed train. In this time his reflections on his day and combination of money, knowledge and young beauty play out in his thoughts, relayed through a letter he stars to write. Another concerns an Albanian family, during which their personal situation is rather more fragile than it may appear on the surface; the significance of what just one ticket can hold links them with three Scottish football fans that are embarking on an entirely different journey of their own. The other narrative sees the freedoms of being a young man conflicting with obligatory duties tying him to this journey that opens up an interrogation of respect and childhood nostalgia. On these three dissimilar journeys the directors explore the characters' awareness to class, nationalism, disrespect and the opportunity for kindness. A film again that has no clear ending or coming together of all of the characters concerned yet for the end of the train journey, Kiarostami demonstrates, in the last of the films considered in this dissertation, his continual adaptive style and intuitive filmmaking constructs with two European directors.

Elaborating further on narrative direction, Kiarostami combines Neorealist narrative tropes and structures with signifiers from Persian and Iranian writing. In the latter, ‘metaphors and symbols as well as allegory, codes, and signs.... abstraction and metaphoric language conceal meaning and talk about larger issues.’⁶⁶ Through recognisable constructs national audiences are receptive to recurrent formats that scribe history, cultural myths, fictional literature, and theatre. In the modern world these constructs are reworked through filmic adaptations. Kiarostami’s fragmentary, non-linear narrative structures also show how they challenge the integrity and structure of traditional storytelling methods, and in doing so, reconstruct the framework of narrative discourse. For example in *The Wind Will Carry Us* Kiarostami formulates a story within a story in which nothing really happens (on the level of ‘plot’). His lack of narrative closure, or even narrative expansion, leaves the film’s ‘point’ to the audience’s imagination, and reorients our understanding of what is significant in a film’s narrative and world. Elements of narration supersede those of narrative, particularly the camerawork.

The Camera and The Gaze

Throughout his films, Kiarostami allows the camera to wander halls and alleyways, disassociating itself from the characters’ conversations. In turn, Kiarostami plays with camera angles, framing, and blocking, as a means of eschewing or counterpointing dominant forms of film technique and narrative. This creates an “averted gaze” with characters placed, at precise points, out of shot as the camera wanders. This leaves the audience knowing the characters are there without seeing him/her ‘even if he’s only sensed, felt, or heard.’⁶⁷ The “averted gaze” is typically used by Kiarostami via the formation of post-revolutionary censorship regulations ‘prescribing visual modesty.’⁶⁸ Negar

⁶⁶ Saeed-Vafe and Rosenbaum, *Abbas Kiarostami*, p. 58.

⁶⁷ Ibid, p. 115.

Mottahedeh reflects on Hamid Naficy's explanation that as the "direct gaze" was prohibited in Iranian cinema after the Islamic Revolution, the averted and unfocused depiction of relationships became a feasible expressive alternative.

Ian James extends thoughts on these particular variations of the cinematic gaze and "non-representational realism" articulating the specific manner in which Kiarostami's images are imposed upon the spectator. James highlights how the distance and separation between image and dialogue allow wider meanings about the nation to accrue about them. That is to say, via the impact of detaching voice and imagery (whether from backgrounds, foregrounding environments or landscape shots), Kiarostami reminds the audience of the broader implications to these contextual conversations. It is 'once again the being of that "something that is" is not one of immediate presence, but of a presence, presented yet withdrawn.'⁶⁹ Furthermore as James writes, it is 'in its very evidence, the image does here not 're-represent' a given and determined reality; it does not offer a copy or resemblance of that reality. Rather, it opens onto, or gives access to, the real of an existence itself.'⁷⁰

The vérité style that finds particular ways of relaying the world and its 'truths' is of core concern to both original Neorealism and the modern-Neorealism of Kiarostami's films. Evidence for this too lies in *Five*, a film better described as a poetic, experimental film, shot around the southern area of the Caspian Sea in North Iran, again with the DV camera. There are five individual shots in this film that have the feel of a moving photograph. These qualities demonstrate Abbas Kiarostami's directorial signature, especially when filming landscapes and different environments. During the film we watch a piece of wood drift in from the sea, breaking up on the shore, with part floating back out to sea while the other remains on land. Other shots depict passers-by, two young boys on the beach, a

⁶⁸ Negar Mottahedeh, *Displaced Allegories: Post-Revolutionary Iranian Cinema* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2008), p. 121.

⁶⁹ Ian James, 'The Evidence of the Image', *L'Esprit Createur* 47:3 (The John Hopkins University Press, Fall 2007), p. 73.

⁷⁰ *Ibid*, p. 73.

group of dogs residing near the sea's edge and a collection of ducks walking across the screen as the waves brush the shore in the background. The final scene captures the Caspian Sea coast-line during the night amidst a thunderstorm. Again a film that lacks any real narrative thread, Kiarostami links these shots through the natural sounds and images. This films' vérité attitude to filmmaking also adds to the 're-education of the gaze,'⁷¹ demonstrating how the use of the camera, distanced from dialogue, coupled with natural aesthetics, creates underlying meaning, giving much more substance to the vision of the continually adaptive artistic image.⁷² The same can be said for the raw "research" footage that became the film in *ABC Africa*.

Seen and Unseen

Thoughts on 'the averted gaze' lead to considerations of the importance of what we see and do not see in Kiarostami's films; what is left unseen or unstated.⁷³ Consider, for example, in *The Wind Will Carry Us*, the recurrent shots of narrow alleyways in Siah Dareh. We listen to Farzad, the young boy



1.6

The alley and the unseen.

⁷¹ Alain Bergala, 'L'Os et le pare-brise: A propos du film *Le vent nous emportera* d'Abbas Kiarostami', *Cahiers du Cinéma* no. 541, (December 1999), p. 36.

⁷² Jean-Luc Nancy, *L'Evidence du film: Abbas Kiarostomi* (Brussels: Yves Gevaert Editeur, 2001), p. 45.

⁷³ Chris Lippard, 'Disappearing into the Distance and Getting Closer All the Time: Vision, Position, and Thought in Kiarostami's *The Wind Will Carry Us*', *Journal of Film and Video* 61:4 (University of Illinois Press, Winter 2009), p. 31.

acting as guide in the film to Behzad, as the camera drifts off or stays in the same place as characters



1.7

Conversation continues as the camera drifts.

move off elsewhere whilst continuing talking. Kiarostami 'seems to be interested in developing a cinematic grammar, a language, and a filmic technique'⁷⁴ that allows him to explore social and cultural matters while staying within Iranian state censorship guidelines. Yet there is more to this strategy than subversion. Kiarostami's films are philosophically and reflexively concerned with how we see things and why, and how over the course of the narratives such images as this embody particular meanings and attitudes in relation to Iran's society and culture. In *Ten* these are women that we as an audience engage with, in vision and dialogue, yet women out of shot act as integral narrative devices, who in some instances, such as the ailing old woman we never see in *The Wind Will Carry Us*, control the narrative layout without even being seen.

These factors are also encapsulated, in *The Wind Will Carry Us*, in the scene where Behzad is sent to collect milk. Illuminated only by lamp light, Behzad begins reciting the poem "The Wind Will Carry Us Away" by Forough Farrokhzad. His audience in the film's world is a teenage girl so timid she can't answer, veiled by the shadows of a dully lit cellar. The protagonist and Kiarostami fill the confined space with poetry, and poetic association.⁷⁵ Preservation of life is symbolised by the milk. A

⁷⁴ Mottahedeh, *Displaced Allegories: Post-Revolutionary Iranian Cinema*, p. 129.

⁷⁵ Reference for Forough Farrokhzad's poem "The Wind Will Carry Us Away" see, Mottahedeh, *Displaced Allegories: Post-Revolutionary Iranian Cinema*, pp. 92 – 91.

shadowed face is emblematic of the circumscribed position of women. All of this is disclosed within a scene of the everyday.

A similar, charged handling of close and closed environments is also found in *Taste of Cherry* and *Ten*. Like *Ten*, *Taste of Cherry* is a philosophically navigating film that concerns matters of morality in contemporary Iran, however from a male perspective. The film focuses on one main character, Mr Badii, to explore questions of life and death, and the consequences of both. In midst of his personal problems Mr Badii navigates the issues that arise in front of him on his travels. Picking up various people along the way, numerous issues arise from a cross-section of men in contemporary Iran. Having already dug his own grave, Mr Badii, like the problems that surface throughout the film for particular people, searches for someone willing to bury him the morning after he has carried out his suicide. A naturalistic film aesthetic that holds many characteristic cinematographical signifiers of the director, *Taste of Cherry* is a film that combines beauty yet despair in the landscapes about them and for the people inhabiting them. But for one man, one day the simplest “taste of cherry” kept him from committing suicide. Will something so simple be enough for Mr Badii? Or will his end relate to and signify the consequences of life in contemporary Iran?

In both aforementioned instances, these moments with occur when the protagonist steps out of the car; stepping out of their safe zone. In doing so the audiences' gaze has lost a physical presence (of the car), but has left behind the space in which we are reminded of a contemporary presence of anxiety about society, culture and politics. Their outward expression is lost when leaving this safe-zone for contemporary debate. Even with placing his characters outside of this comfort zone Kiarostami has the ability to convey the atmosphere of the car, and through the same character emotion and expression, and also the same environment, takes these opinions into uncharted, denser surroundings where their implications are more obvious. We as an audience are left in this space, given time to reflect upon the issues raised without being distracted by other visions, even

though we know they exist (in the context of the film's world) and are probably happening out of shot.

By drawing together the nature of Kiarostami's biographic details and progression of Neorealist adaptation, a new redefined focus of modern-Neorealism becomes evident in his work. Contextual consideration of aspects of authorship, Iranian censorship, and the narratives and narration of Kiarostami's films allows and leads us to, in turn, detailed analysis of the films.

Chapter 2

Mise-en-scène

The following chapter examines various elements of mise-en-scène informing Kiarostami's version of modern-Neorealism. Mise-en-scène is a term that consists of the various parts of a film that the audience can see and hear such as costume, acting, settings, lighting and colour. According to John Gibbs, mise-en-scène 'is used in film studies in the discussion of visual style. The word is French... and has its origins in the theatre.... For the student of film, a useful determination might be: 'the contents of the frame and the way that they are organised'... [Moreover mise-en-scène] encompasses both what the audience can see, and the way in which we are invited to see it.'⁷⁶ Further to the list above, Gibbs also refers to action and performance, décor, props, space, framing and the position of the camera as their own disciplines as parts of mise-en-scène; I have chosen to combine these with other main parts of mise-en-scène. Lastly, this thesis also follows Gibbs' take on the "interaction of the elements": the combination and relationship of these individual parts of the visual construct to filmmaking. By deconstructing these areas of filmmaking the correlation with Kiarostami's cinematics and original Neorealist characteristics will be established together with his distinctive handling and integration of stylistic elements.

So far the discussion of Neorealism has concentrated upon the image of Kiarostami as an auteur and filmmaker who creates and displays a "poetically political" nature to his films. Now we can begin to envision how this nature, this ideologically challenging style of capturing the contemporary world can better be understood through considering each filmmaking point of style individually. This will shed light on just how important each part of Kiarostami's filmmaking is and how it adds to a modernised version of Iranian Neorealism.

⁷⁶ Gibbs, *Mise-en-scène: Film Style and Interpretation*, p. 5.

Together with an auteuristic visual style, Kiarostami also (as we have seen) creates a particular political sensibility throughout his films, creating a close and careful socio-political topography of Iran: from its major cities to its rural peaks. This idea is recurrent in Kiarostami's films and reflected in the images and cinematography presented to the audience. There exists a "cynical poeticism" about the visual and linear explorations of different regions, places, attitudes and opinions throughout Kiarostami's work. By examining the various areas of mise-en-scène these relationships can be better identified.

Actors/Acting Style

Following the Neorealist ideal, untrained actors appear throughout Kiarostami's films in scenarios of 'the everyday'. This method adds significantly to an apparently unmediated, naturalistic form of filmmaking. Such performances are untrammelled by the mannerisms of cinematic acting traditions (such as those of Expressionism, melodrama, and 'the method').

In the close-ups and conversations of *Ten*, the stark realism in *ABC Africa*, or child's perspective of Farzad, the little boy in *The Wind Will Carry Us*, we delve into the protagonists world of thoughts, deliberations and uncertainties through performances placed in the centre of Kiarostami's synthetic arrangements of film style.

Largely untrained actors in his films help to establish a naturalistically inflected tone and atmosphere amidst allegoric and metaphoric compositions. From the young army and farm worker in *Taste of Cherry*, the female prostitute in *Ten*, the shy yet curious younger women in *The Wind Will Carry Us*, the struggling family in *Tickets*, unaccredited passers-by in *Five* to the many, many people portrayed in *ABC Africa*, Kiarostami captures the day-to-day life of people working in the desert, city and more rural farm lands. Yet, alongside the natural flow of filmed improvisations, intense or pivotal

moments do have casted structures. Pivotal characters appear at the 'right' time (which, of course, is not necessarily what happens in real life). Equally, these characters such as the doctor in *The Wind Will Carry Us* discussing the virtues of life and goodness of nature, or the taxidermist in *Taste of Cherry* who turns up with his out-of-the-blue philosophical story about the taste of cherries that has kept him alive to this day, appear for a reason. These characters have an orchestrated narrative function. They embody and combine aspects of 'unplanned' natural performance and contrived narrative purpose; they exist to mirror particular poetic ideas (from inherited narrative traits) about life and death.⁷⁷

Setting

Kiarostami uses the same principal method of filming on location across Iran. His decision to use a digital camera allows Kiarostami to film where and when he wants. It gives him the ability to capture something phenomenologically unique, providing his work with a visual cross-section of Iranian geography.

Furthermore, through return to the same or similar places, his films chart and analyse the iconography of the natural landscape. Wide, panoramic shots of landscape feature in all of the discussed films. Images of being 'on the road' also comprise a regularly occurring trope (carrying established resonance of being 'on a journey' to find answers). It is in the organisation of such views that Kiarostami masterfully ties the natural imagery in his films with contextual dialogue and contemporary expression. Above all, his films are acutely expressive of the perspectives of the people who reside in the local environments of the works' settings.

⁷⁷ Subjects deviating from Persian narratives and that play a part in guiding the protagonist at a particularly intimate and integral part of the films narrative.

More precisely, expressive patterns emerge of particular kinds of landscape features, such as natural ruins. Instances in his older films are evident, however the sense of depression, alienation yet longing for change surface more rigorously in his later films. The stark, dilapidated, desolate but lived-in buildings in *ABC Africa*, bulldozers shifting rubble in the desert in *Taste of Cherry* and the excavation that takes place in the cemetery in *The Wind Will Carry Us* are but a few poignant examples from the selection of films. There is a particular set of moments in *Taste of Cherry* that emblemise this connotative and expressive use of setting, presenting workers in the desert.

As manmade land masses of rock and debris are added to, a certain irony is created by the landslides



2.1

Cascading rubble...

cascading down the rubble mounds in the background, over-seen by the protagonist, Mr Badii, in the



2.2

Witnessed by Mr Badii.

foreground. Predominantly a natural occurrence, this act of manmade destruction becomes a particularly powerful and poignant image. The use of natural devastation, however here created by man, gives the audience a feeling of helplessness as the destruction and upheaval to natural land continues. As this is happening, Mr Badii and a security guard talk of loneliness, of working to support a family elsewhere in another country.⁷⁸ This dialogue coupled with the imagery behind them as they speak becomes a subjective depiction of life and society in an old, crumbling Iran.

Another instance in the film, when the protagonist is again placed upon the backdrop of these manmade landslides represents the uncertainty regarding the future of the land with his impending destiny. He becomes further disjointed from the land through filming the silhouette of this shadow



2.3

Silhouette upon the rocks and machinery.

upon the rocks. This frame creates a feeling whereby his actual being is pulled away from the scenario, made insignificant, creating an air of melancholic anonymity. This further signifies the detached relationship between ordinary Iranians and knowledge of the country's future and relationship of manmade problems in Iranian society.

⁷⁸ Similar discussions are evident in *Tickets* and attitudes towards helping lesser families in *ABC Africa*.

Sound

A film with no obvious plot or linear narrative, the observational, experiential film *Five* uses sound to create patterns of meaning. The film comprises five fragments which, in turn, are made up of static shots (i.e. the camera is placed, and remains, in one location). French director Maurice Pialat's theory between the relationship of photography and art is particularly salient here. Pialat demonstrates how photography does not create eternity, as art does; it preserves time as a stationary image or memory. Art on the other hand possesses an everlasting quality, subjected to timeless appearance and interpretation⁷⁹. The combination of these ideas demonstrates how Kiarostami also uses photography-like-filming to create a distinctive affect. Here Kiarostami's filming of still images creates a feeling and tension of animosity and yet nostalgia, a living picture; aesthetics that evolve; photographs that move.⁸⁰ The experimental cinematography becomes the embodiment of his poetic qualities and meaningful images in this film with seemingly no plot, linear narrative, or apparent meaning without such interrogation and analysis. Pialat goes further in explaining how the everyday interaction between the individual and environment becomes paramount in our standing towards the conceit of a film.⁸¹

This way of filming also becomes a signifier, a link, between shots. Together with the recurrent theme of water, the way in which it is filmed also creates a certain continuity of narrative. During the film it takes the use of diegetic sounds, most notably that of the waves, upholds this film's relationship to the Neorealist use of 'found' and natural sound when (in Italy) it was possible to do so. Kiarostami however goes one step further in using non-diegetic sounds (music) to link each sequence. He does this to simply link the end of one scene with the beginning of another. Through and between each scene, sound is not used for dramatic effect, but rather to convey and link specific changes in mood or tone. The texture of natural sounds (such as waves of water) highlights how Kiarostami's handling

⁷⁹ Atkin, *European Film Theory and Cinema: A critical Introduction*, pp. 209 – 210.

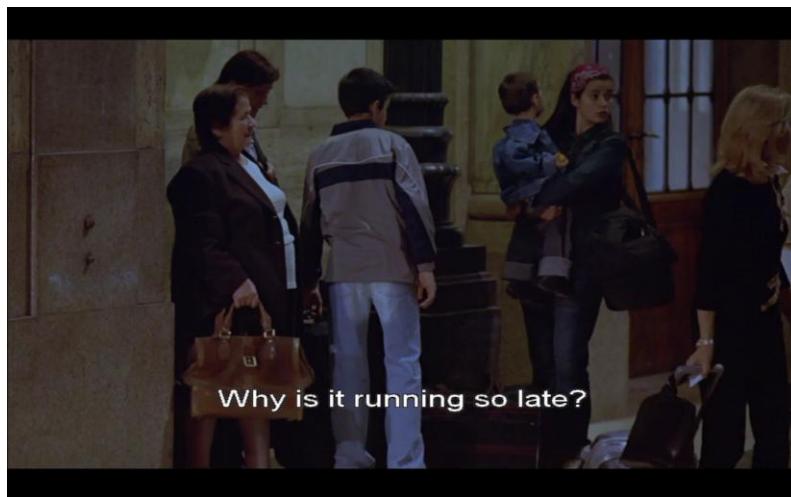
⁸⁰ Such as the example tying all parts of mise-en-scène will later demonstrate.

⁸¹ Atkin, *European Film Theory and Cinema: A critical Introduction*, p. 210.

of the environment becomes integral to the links to contemporary context through aesthetic representation.

Through this distinction we as an audience cannot just relate the natural scenes through the use of sound, but also carry the atmosphere of the previous scene. As noted earlier, Kiarostami employs a similar technique when using modes of transport in his films and the spaces within them. There is an eternal quest in his films for answers, and this film, like the others, through the adaptive nature of his own filmmaking, the mentality of our own fragile mortality is questioned regarding what is happening in the environments around us. There is also an embedded commentary on the nature of aesthetic synthesis here. Crucially, *Five* makes most sense in relation to the other films. Singularly it may just look like five rather stagnant shots during which nothing happens, but binding the contextual explorations of his other films informs these five natural shots through the adapted stylistic elements and recurrent thematic use in Kiarostami's filmmaking.

Equally, *Tickets* relates sounds with imagery and atmosphere in particular ways. The distorted sounds of trains and other such everyday elements of business in the station are reflective of the looks of animosity, unknowing and uncertain hopes of the family trying to leave the country. This is



2.4

Unity: Distortion of sound and characters' uncertainty.

representative of the way that Kiarostami handles and brings together aspects verisimilitude and abstraction to create a particular poetic reflection of social commentary. Kiarostami is not just

drawing on Italian Neorealist filmmaking conventions but is also drawing on a rich heritage of Iranian art and literature. It is this particular combination, this fusion, of verisimilitude, artifice and abstraction that brings out these particular qualities of social commentary and filmmaking.

Natural Lighting

In Italian Neorealist filmmaking it was of paramount importance, within their prescribed aesthetic principles gravitating towards notions of ‘truth’, for natural lighting to be used. The conventions of Neorealism dictated that lighting was unenhanced, banning the use of filters, dimming or methods of unnatural blocking, or the creation of shadows apart from those occurring naturally. These guidelines were originally established with other original Neorealist principles of filmmaking and are evident in Kiarostami’s films. But Kiarostami’s use of light is adapted and more intricately connected to strategies of symbolism. Furthermore, it is in his use of lighting that Kiarostami links particular themes and ideas in his films, again binding environment with feelings in contemporary society and culture.

Referring back to the scene in which the “undercover engineer” (in order to film in the traditional village), Behzad, goes to fetch some milk in *The Wind Will Carry Us*, the effect of natural shadowing here is a prime example of how natural lighting conveys symbolic meaning. Here, in the dark, dingy cellar Behzad greets the young girl but receives no response. A flicker of light momentarily illuminates her veiled face. The minimal natural light from the candle suggests the restrictive place of women in society, echoed by the enclosed, natural, everyday atmosphere of the environment she is in.

In other instances, Kiarostami employs the natural light of the weather to convey feelings of uncertainty and anxiety. Again Kiarostami uses the environment in an expressive manner, related to

socio-cultural circumstances. In particular natural phenomena such as those of lightning and thunderstorms reflect the contemporary milieu; not just in Iran but also when filming abroad. In *ABC Africa* while filming one particular family in their desolate, bleak, windowless house, a thunderstorm is in full swing. Cinematically established connections between mood and storm (as in Douglas Sirk's melodramas for example) are noted and made complex by the authors' authenticity.

This type of moment is also echoed in a moment from *Taste of Cherry*. During one particular conversation in the film when Mr Badii discusses his impending fate with one of his passengers, he emphasises how he "wouldn't understand", but it is "not because you don't understand, but you can't feel what I feel."⁸² This is another example of Kiarostami using dialogue to develop the film's contextual social examination. It is Kiarostami's exploration of social concerns via the film's various characters and their individual problems that create generalised "feelings" about the place. It is again this "feeling" created through the combination of cinematography, dialogue and recurrent camera work that upholds the film's integrity in addressing social issues in a Neorealistic manner. Mr Badii continues to say: "You can comprehend, sympathise, understand, show compassion for my pain, but you can't feel it. No. You suffer. I suffer."⁸³ This statement encourages the conceit of the film. From numerous discussions and Mr Badii's attitude that appears to take on not just personal, but many external problems subsequently tying the fate of the protagonist to the various social issues about his travels, Kiarostami creates an atmosphere so that as an audience we can only "comprehend, sympathise, understand, show compassion". Mr Badii's fate and the fate of the issues explored in the film are brought together in a symbolic ending in which the character sits, staring aimlessly into the nights sky, as thunder erupts, rain patters his face, and lightning flickers. It is a moment in which Kiarostami uses lighting to create 'flashes of illumination in the midst of total uncertainty'⁸⁴ surrounding both the character and, more broadly, areas of society.

⁸² 47 minutes, *Taste of Cherry* (1997).

⁸³ 48 minutes, *Taste of Cherry*.

⁸⁴ Saeed-Vafe, and Rosenbaum, *Abbas Kiarostami*, p. 76.

In *Five* Kiarostami ends with a long take filming a lake at night, sporadically lit by intermittent lightning. Lost in the darkness and the sounds of the surrounding wildlife, Kiarostami again ends his film with a sense of unknowing and alienation. In a displacement from mainstream life, the camera captures a natural sequence of sounds and light that again moves into poetic allegory. An open ending that also has a shared relationship with water and lighting. Water is symbolic of life yet the sight and sound of lightning disrupts this meaning, complicates notions of purity in such contemporary unstable times.

Colour and Costume

In light of the various social issues raised in Kiarostami's films, such as problems with the economy, health and civil unrest, constraints of marriage and womanhood, there are moments of liberation and joy. Colour is used both to reinforce atmospheres of uncertainty through bleak, dark hues found



2.5

Use of darker colour: open landscapes.

in all areas of urban and rural life; and moments of hope and beauty are made vivid through the use of lighter, warmer colours. As we have discussed, throughout Kiarostami's films the audience is



2.6

Use of darker colour: rural.

recurrently presented with wide, long shots of various landscapes. In all areas the mood and tone of his films are inflected and informed by this overwhelmingly large aesthetic representation: one of



2.7

Use of darker colour: characters.

extensive grey, sandy colours in the countryside and dark buildings in both towns and cities.



2.8

Recurrent imagery: passing landscape in *Tickets*.



2.9

Recurrent imagery: dogs on the beach in *Five*.



2.10

Recurrent imagery: landscape of Uganda in *ABC Africa*.

Like other areas of filmmaking practices and their relationship with particular themes or stylistic traits, colour can be linked with Kiarostami's characters' internal feelings, external emotions and socio-cultural predicaments. Colour is thematised in the sense that particular colours become synonymous with certain emotions, moods and atmospheres. They complement Kiarostami's questioning narratives. Main characters in Kiarostami's films become related not only to the space they themselves navigate but also with the recurrent colours within the landscapes. Whether we see

Mr Badii at any point in his quest for answers, Mania on her numerous personal and philosophical



2.11

Character relationships with background colour: Mr Badii.



2.12

Character relationships with background colour: Mania.

journeys, Behzad finding his way about Siah Dareh, various people in Uganda, or the various



2.13

Character relationships with background colour: Behzad.



2.14

Character relationships with background colour: Ugandan woman and baby.

characters on their journey in *Tickets*, the same colours reappear in these differing settings. From these shots the recurrent use of dark, earthy colours become synonymous with their blank expressionless faces mirroring the despair of the social issues explored in the places which they live and work.



2.15

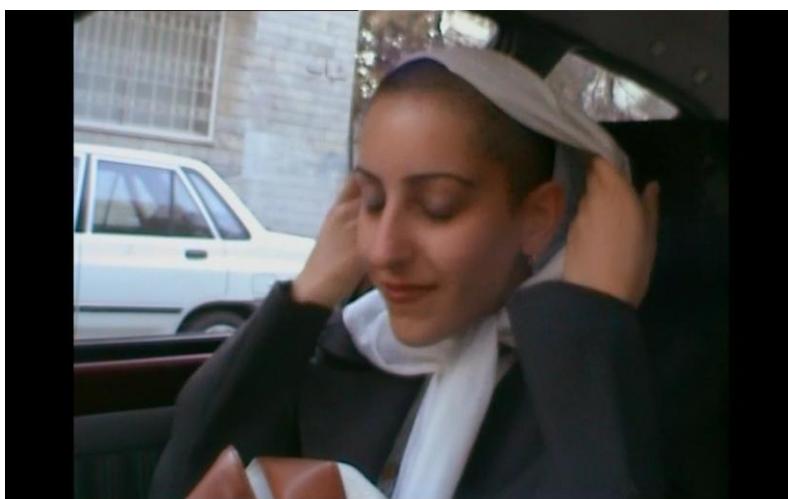
Character relationships with background colour: passenger on the train in *Tickets*.

In contrast, the emergence of brighter colours in Kiarostami's films typically represents the "overcoming" or "alleviation" of particular restraints of culture or society that hold specific characters back for various reasons. For example, Mania's friend wears bold make-up, a white head scarf, and shaves her head in a highly symbolic, dramatic, and literal unveiling in *Ten*.



2.16 – 2.18

The unveiling in *Ten*.



After conversation about the joys found in obscure places and after so much imagery of sandy roads and dark hillsides, *Taste of Cherry* employs brighter colour and lighting to amplify moments of

personal liberation. These brighter colours are used elsewhere in moments of joy, forming again an



2.19

Use of brighter colours: a particular moment after telling the “taste of cherries” story.

aesthetic alleviation from the harsh surrounding environment and the problems found within it. In both *ABC Africa* and *Tickets* these moments demonstrate how rich, warmer colours can be used as a



2.20

Use of brighter colours: moments of joy in *ABC Africa*.

form of escapism in specific moments of joy and reflection. For Kiarostami colour has its place in vividly representing moments that hint towards new freedoms in society and culture.

Mise-en-scène and Meaningful Relationships

The following reading of *Five* shows how Kiarostami synthesises these various elements of mise-en-scène for meaningful effect. There is a particularly vivid scene in which a piece of drift-wood, on the sea shore, bobs in concert with the movements of the waves. This governing or overseeing body that controls this piece of wood is also combating with the suggestive, whispering sounds of the sea and wind in leading it back on to the shore or out to sea. In the context of Kiarostami's body of work, this natural occurrence is expressively bound to feelings in society, suggesting a certain alienation, issues of identity, and a breaking apart from the mainstream.

In debate about the film Kiarostami talks of a feeling of alienation this piece of driftwood must have, experiencing its life at sea, returning to a shore with other pieces of wood that have not had the same experience as it. He considers and calls such piece of wood a "body", and conceives how it was 'covered with marks of different experiences it had gained in the sea. It looked like a sea creature...' He ponders, 'in my opinion, this sea life had shaped it something beyond a simple piece of wood'⁸⁵; made it into something new due to its experiences and changed environment. The act of placing this piece of wood outside of its usual environment, its habitual reality on land, marks it with ethereal yet tangible qualities that relate its past, its life, in both fantastical and normal ways. It was once part of a normal construction of reality (on shore), but placed outside of this (at sea) has given it experience and different qualities to it than those from its original environment. In filming a piece of wood in the waves Kiarostami manages to find a mode of poetic symbolism that ties the existence of the wood to environment, and thus to other cultures and ways of life.

Kiarostami captures the changing environment around us and without assertions of declamatory 'meanings', connects ideas and aspects of the natural flow of things to Iran's contemporary place in the world and identity as a nation. To pull away from forms of resistance such as those suggested by

⁸⁵ From 'Making-of: *Five*'.

Contemporary Neorealist Principles in Abbas Kiarostami's Filmmaking (1997 – 2005)

the waves, Iran jostles to and fro continuously between the past and the future; but will it finally break in submission to abiding one or the other, or both (such as the wood breaking in the film demonstrates as one piece drifts off into the distance)?

2.21 – 2.24

Series of shots depicting the wood breaking up on the shore of the Caspian Sea in North Iran.





Here as elsewhere, Kiarostami explores the nature of *contender-ship* with our environments; for example, what is acceptable and what is not in certain places and certain milieu in society and culture. Kiarostami demonstrates this across all of the discussed films, and it is especially evident in the long estranged shots in *Five*. He builds upon this from his earlier work, signifying his artistic connection with the environment, exploring its metaphorical uses and continual involvement. As Hamid Dadashi suggests: 'By an aesthetic dethematization of "the real," Kiarostami has persistently

demonstrated the precisely metaphysical presupposition at the root of “nature.” “Nature” thus emerges as perhaps the most successfully thematized reality presumed beyond any inquisitive inroad.⁸⁶

Collectively the cinematography of Kiarostami’s films creates these readings; a collaboration of visual and audible elements, that when brought together express in deep and intricate ways, inform the real, expressing contemporary socio-cultural issues concerning every-day people in Iran. Remaining true to the principles of Neorealism and drawing on the poetic symbolism of Iranian cinema, Kiarostami links style, context and imagery to create a distinctively philosophical and yet politically assertive film style.

⁸⁶ Dabashi, *Close Up, Iranian Cinema: Past, Present and Future*, p. 61.

Chapter 3

Themes and Technology

Having considered the historical relationship between Neorealist filmmaking and Kiarostami's cinema, and examined the various parts of mise-en-scène that reflect and convey patterns of meaning, this chapter takes a closer look at various thematic preoccupations and developments of the Neorealist tradition in Kiarostami's work. It concludes by considering Kiarostami's expressive use of modern filmmaking technologies.

This chapter draws on examples in *10 on Ten*, an autobiographical reflection on the film *Ten*. In this self-documenting film Kiarostami discusses the various applications of his filmmaking traits, mulling over the themes and stylistic aspects of his work and filmmaking processes. Where appropriate, his comments on particular themes and aspects of style discussed in this chapter will be noted (as *10 on Ten* draws mainly on the filmmaking of *Ten* but does address other works too).

Uncertainties

Iranian critic and essayist Mir-Ahmad-e Mir-Ehsan deems Kiarostami as the 'inheritor of an eastern art tradition which foregrounds deconstruction and multiple-narration.... This magical terrain is the real source of his fascination with non-linearity and multi-spatial narration.... Hidden meanings, symbolic iconography and intertextuality are mediating mechanisms by which the private and public spheres are regulated'⁸⁷ and explored in his films. In doing so, Kiarostami creates an aesthetic charged with forms of *uncertainty*.

⁸⁷ Elena, *The Cinema of Abbas Kiarostami*, pp. 186 – 187.

In the essay *Neorealism and Contemporary European Immigration*, Laura E. Ruberto explores the links between the fate of Neorealist protagonists and contemporary societal uncertainties. Just like the discussions on contemporary societal problems held in Kiarostami's cars, and the unknowing yet seemingly bleak fate of the protagonists disposition within such, Ruberto demonstrates how in 1950s Italian Neorealist films the binding of contemporary social context and the fate of the main character become one.⁸⁸ Contemporary social issues of finding work, "being on the road", grinding poverty, lack of money, lack of institutionalised help, and the absence of important resources are quickly established. These themes along with the cultural domination in Iran are discussed in Kiarostami's films, and are evident from the very first shot of films such as *Taste of Cherry*, *The Wind Will Carry Us*, *ABC Africa* and *Ten*.

Bringing these uncertainties to light immediately makes them become such a part of the characters that they carry and embody the burden of these issues until/if they are resolved. Consider how in *Taste of Cherry*, it seems Mr Badii's quest to explore these problems around him, tying his fate with such issues in his inability to properly address and deal with them, are both personal and endemic to the rest of Iranian society. It is this sort of deeply embedded relationship between the individual and collective (and their uncertainties for the future) that is emblematic of Neorealist films, tying their protagonists with the fate of the 'bigger' issues within society. Even from the outset of the film as labourers ask Mr Badii for work while he drives through a small town, the recurrent bleak outlook of the characters throughout this film are not just mirrored in the cinematography but also through the fate of the main character as the cyclical and monotonous lives they lead in society are not changing; as too is the inevitability of his death.

These fatalist notions hint towards the consequential endings in Kiarostami's films; of inevitability and, in some cases, hope. Tying his characters to notions of potential change partially relieves the audience from some of the problems explored in his films. However these endings are sparser than

⁸⁸ Laura E. Ruberto, 'Neorealism and Contemporary European Immigration', in *Italian Neorealism and Global Cinema*, Ruberto and Wilson (Ed's.), pp. 242 – 256.

negative ones. His films' core focus is upon the issues at hand, with such story lines not paying particular attention to other, more predominant narrative forms or events such as the portrayal of a romantic relationship for example. This tension was nowhere more evident than in Visconti's *La terra trema* (*The Earth Trembles*, Luchino Visconti, 1948) examining the exploitation of impoverished Sicilian fishermen by an unjust, fascist economic system.⁸⁹ Critics at the time alleged a compromise in Visconti's films; a compromise that pulled substance from the main focus of social criticism, tending towards the inclusion of a more light-hearted romanticism of rural life⁹⁰. Kiarostami has been more inclined, and more interested, to capture something special or unexpected, in a visually vérité manner; staying 'truthful' in his filmic image. Pushing forward, the evidence for the relationship of evolving themes and use of technology arises in Kiarostami's films as both have become fully integrated with his aesthetic, and therefore his stylistic and socio-cultural concerns.

Modernity

In 1950s Italy Neorealism was formulated as a specific set of filmmaking principles, both aesthetically and thematically, that addressed the need for ideological social and political reformation in a broken nation following the end of the Second World War. As we have seen, in Kiarostami's films the context has shifted to the reception of modernity and its affects and influences upon cultural orientation, views upon religious activities, social structures and the political running of a country governed by entrenched cultural and religious doctrine. At their heart, Kiarostami's films address the matter of maintaining a meaningful national identity in the modern world amidst these ideological changes (in society, culture, and ultimately, politics). Many of these

⁸⁹ This film is 'recognised as one of the most artistically sophisticated examples of neorealism.' – See, Shiel, *Italian Neorealism: Rebuilding the Cinematic City*, p. 82.

⁹⁰ Moving into the 1950s, industrial expansion, and other areas that pushed economic growth, gave ordinary Italians a 'new sense of economic security.' Moving themselves with the times, directors such as Visconti moved away from Neorealism, moving 'toward historical melodrama' – See, Shiel, *Italian Neorealism: Rebuilding the Cinematic City*, p. 122 and p. 94 respectively.

factors claw at the core of Iranian culture, society and politics in which change needs to be addressed carefully in the continuation of an individual nation that is so 'culturally, economically, and feministically underdeveloped.'⁹¹ It can be said that the effects of modernity, of modern lifestyle, communications, media and materialism have created a significant loss in the individual traits of particular nations that set them apart from others. I believe Iran's focus, and core exploration in Kiarostami's films, is to withhold and retain a certain cultural presence from wider, Western factors of influence during the transition into their own modern era. These influences are largely placed on younger generations through modern forms of communications and media that older generations are less willing to be receptive of, communicate with, and ultimately integrate within the functioning of a Persian nation. The country engages in a careful negotiation between traditional cultural heritage and orthodoxy with the incorporation of the traits of a modern world.

This negotiation is evident in a number of ways across the selection of Kiarostami's films. The "simple" idea of capturing traditional death rituals in *The Wind Will Carry Us* took more of a focus on the town and environment, rather than the event itself (that in fact does not actually happen). Iconic



3.1

In Siah Dareh: Elder woman exclaims, "Don't take any photos."

of Kiarostami's films, the imagery and the lead role become bound with observations of the villagers' lifestyles and working environment. Through the use of cinematography Kiarostami addresses the border between the modern and traditional world. This is demonstrated through acts of travelling to

⁹¹ Bert Cardullo, 'Still Life' *The Hudson Review* 55:2 (The Hudson Review, Inc., Summer, 2002), p. 283.

and about the town (Siah Dareh) that, in turn, raise issues of accessibility (evident across all films under discussion) and the distance between his characters and their world, between the traditional villagers and “technological new-comers”, between himself (Kiarostami) and the filmed ‘subjects’, and between the film and its audience.⁹²

Later in this film the visual recording and use of photography in the documentation of the village and its people is brought to a halt by one of the elder women from the village. The modern form of filming is not permitted by the indigenous peoples of the town. Here tradition, culture and religion literally stop the accessibility that modern technology has created. This is important as it challenges several assumptions, demonstrating the powerlessness of Behzad and his team when it comes to recording or filming the everyday business of the villagers. To put it another way, with particular reference to Taj Dawlat's coffee shop scene, the power of the female villager overrides both the desire of Behzad to film and the technologies that would enable him to do so there.

There is a role reversal here whereby the modern is thwarted by cultural and religious rule. The power of the urban male is stumped by the authority of a female elder. This scene complicates the



3.2

At Taj Dawlat's coffee shop: Elder woman continues, “Your work isn’t all that counts,” regarding Behzad’s photography and filming.

assumed superiority of modern technology and of the modern male behind the camera with this woman's traditional desire to not be photographed. Here the camera becomes the concern in

⁹² Jason Anderson, 'The Wind Will Carry Us' *eyeweekly.com* (April 12th 2001), available at <http://www.eyeweekly.com/archived/article/51737>

dialogue between Taj and her husband, highlighting this difficult relationship between the modern and the traditional. Now because the modern technology has come under threat, and again the camera subverted to filming scenery (rather than people), Kiarostami demonstrates the frail relationship not just between contemporary issues and traditional culture, but also how modern technologies thwart any attempts at integration. There is also a certain irony when Behzad uses his phone which only receives a signal at the highest point of the town, and this just so happens to be on their burial ground. Through binding these issues of power, tradition, and modernity in both forms of social stature and technology, a contentious relationship between the modern world and locations in Iran arises.

Elsewhere, evidence for the effects of modernisation impacting Iran's jobs and economic cycle is found in *Taste of Cherry*. There is an immediate indication that there is no work as men flock to Mr Badii's car asking if he is looking for employees. Later, we see one individual seek refuge by joining the army, and (later still) another man collects rubbish around the bottom skirts of huge hills and nearby quarries. Here Iran's lack of internal sustainability towards their own functioning society and economy is questioned in snapshots caught on camera.

In *Ten* we, as a contemporary audience, are confronted with the challenging position of women in modern day Iran. Through the context of the film, highlighting various modernising parameters in many areas of everyday business for modern Iranian women, the characters assert a need for change. Their discussions are explored by the character Mania as she physically and metaphorically navigates the capital city Tehran, and these contemporary expressions in Kiarostami's environment of the car. Dialogue and debate focuses on their opinions concerning cultural dress, women's rights, their place in society, issues of individuality, work, and other freedoms stemming from changes since the Islamic Revolution. The overwhelming expressions of pressure, seclusion and suppression communicate many contemporary anxieties from the women of Iran.

In Kiarostami's earlier films women are idealised as innocent, strong, and in tune with nature. Such is the case with rural women in *The Wind Will Carry Us*, hanging out their washing and carrying out domestic duties. In his previous films there is a discernible absence of women which, in turn, becomes emblematic of the works' interest in registers of emotional absence or despair. The lack of women in *Taste of Cherry* for example can be interpreted as the source of Mr Badii's romantic despair. Also in *The Wind Will Carry Us* the minor engagement and short dialogue with women could possibly again instigate an absence in the protagonist's life. Observing women from such a literal, physical and symbolic distance over the course of Kiarostami's films highlights the importance of *Ten* as overcoming these restraints in both filmmaking and through contemporary real life social examination (with the symbolic overhauling of these constraints in one particular scene discussed later).

More progressive, challenging and demanding women spring up as Kiarostami's filmmaking builds. The presentation of primary female characters broadened his film narratives and enabled a careful exploration of social and cultural issues from the largely unheard voice of women. It also enabled Kiarostami to place the narrative techniques such as binding his male protagonists with the fate of the contemporary issues explored, to that of a fatalist notion in women. There could be a strong argument pertaining towards this narrative technique relating more to female characters as they, potentially, have to deal with more constraints upon them; such as the life of a domesticated mother, devout wife, controlled under a patriarchal society of clothing, working and educational restraint. There is not the space here to chart the intricacies of this debate; it is enough to state in this thesis that the treatment and inclusion of women as main characters forms a fundamental feature in Kiarostami's distinctive exploration of Iranian society, culture and politics.

Ten is the first film in which Kiarostami uses a woman as a lead role, featuring discussions around family life, law, divorce and women's rights in the enclosed space and comforted security of the car. These discussions with her son and other women convey both positive and negative feelings,

attitudes and emotions. The car presents an environment of conflicting compassions, the ambiguities of maintaining tradition with modern life influences from the “unheard” contemporary social examination by women. These are women that as an audience we engage with, in vision and dialogue. However, Kiarostami’s platform for women out of shot is an integral narrative device. In some instances, such as that of the ailing old woman we are never permitted to see in *The Wind Will Carry Us*, act as an underlying force, even though not visualised or necessarily heard, manifests and holds together the infrastructure of family life. This can be observed more broadly in terms of the woman’s role in Iranian society; one that, under its current restrictive demeanour, holds together the larger infrastructure and inner workings of Iranian societal, domestic and economic environments.⁹³

Technology and Travel

Two of his films from the selection produced outside of Iran highlight further important traits regarding the modern world in terms of foreign aid, and, in succession, ideas around transient cultures. In *ABC Africa*, Kiarostami was specifically asked to produce a film with a certain aesthetic: to capture social problems through a stark, documentary-realist approach⁹⁴. In this film the call for basic human needs in terms of education about diseases and sexual intercourse, the destruction resulting from AIDS and how civil conflict has left a population of orphaned children throughout the country is explored. In a certain paradoxical irony this film, like many other of Kiarostami’s films, is made using the modern technological invention of the DV camera; the handheld, cheap, unobtrusive object that creates a “personalised aesthetic”, permitting immediate resonance with its audience. This type of camera, for the cameraman, affords a particular kind of filtered reality. When filming

⁹³ How a change in their circumstance, image and place in Iranian society would have a knock-on effect throughout many areas of society, economy and politics.

⁹⁴ See the first minute of the film for combined voice-over and panning shot of the letter specifically asking Kiarostami to take on this project.

with this type of camera, lightweight, unassuming, events and conversations are caught in a relaxed and 'truthful' (let us say normal, habitual) manner⁹⁵. This enables a Neorealist authenticity to be achieved, unenhanced and raw. But it is ironic for this technology to capture so intimately something so distantiated from more 'modern' ways of life, and for more economically and socially developed countries and cultures.

In *Tickets* the notion of travelling and of conflicting cultures comes to the fore. Kiarostami's idea behind the use of another type of vehicle (a train) again becomes synonymous with the metaphorical exploration of one's existence. Here, in *Tickets* Kiarostami is able, with other directors, to explore what happens when different cultures are mixed. The exploration of transient cultures becomes evident in the story of one family's migration for a better life in another country. In opposition to this the film also presents one man travelling for monetary gain. Ideas around the reasons why people want to travel between countries for quintessentially different reasons becomes obvious, yet what is not so obvious is why these three different storylines are depicted in one film, on one train journey.

There is no one unitary answer for this question. 'How different people deal with different situations' may be one; 'deciphering languages and difficulties of communication,' another. But this film, like many Neorealist films, does not have a conclusive ending; not even one that brings together the people or their situations. The only evidence of closure that brings them together is the end of the journey, the end of a voyage that changes their ideas, aspirations, attitudes and realisations about other peoples, cultures and histories.

Yet, the access to foreign influences and their effects have more of a demoralising than positive meaning for his characters. The incorporation of various foreign attitudes largely fall on deaf ears. Among all the themes covered in his films the awareness of foreign influences is a frustrating one for his characters. Challenging and changing the dominant ideologies or religion and political rule in Iran

⁹⁵ But once again remembering, to a certain extent, some filmic constructs and narrative direction.

is explored in all of his films. In a Neorealist manner they are covered more metaphorically and furthered through Kiarostami's filmmaking and heritage with philosophy and poetry. As discussed these methods of exploration, together with the cinematography, are central to exploring personal and wider, endemic themes in his films. Iranian filmmaker, screenwriter, editor and producer Mohsen Makhmalbaf also addresses these attitudes in *Kandahar* (2001)⁹⁶. In an interview with Hamid Dabashi, he comments on the restrictive cultural consequences of the country that stems from political law (and 'lore'). He talks of a nation of 'self-aggrandizement... pretence and hypocrisy... sexist... But in my opinion Iran's greatest problem is our belief in absolute truths.'⁹⁷ He continues, 'We can't achieve democracy because everyone sees himself as being *the holder of the truth*'⁹⁸. Feeling his films challenge these dominant ideologies Makhmalbaf also comments that this 'fundamentalism distracts us from perceiving the reality, and leads us down the path to fascism.'⁹⁹ It is these oppositions towards dominant constructions, social and political structures, and mass ideology that perpetuate his films with a convincing directive of Iranian representation and social culmination for change in light of the rest of the world.

He continues to say that the 'government should take the initiative in addressing this...as the world moved on from the classical era, we did not progress. We are still in a state preceding humanism, much less modernism.'¹⁰⁰ This point illustrates the seemingly condemned existence of all Iranian people, suppressed from modern growth through religion and politics, but also implies the ingenuity/naivety and fragility of Iran in the context of the global age.

Referring back to *The Wind Will Carry Us*, the impact of technology; the countering of status; the conflict of tradition with modernity are all prominent contemporary issues best explored by Kiarostami. *The Wind Will Carry Us* asks, above all, where modern life take us, and on what grounds?

⁹⁶ A film in which the female protagonist travels from Iran in attempt to find her sister somewhere in Kandahar, Afghanistan.

⁹⁷ Dabashi, *Close Up, Iranian Cinema: Past, Present and Future*, pp. 204-205.

⁹⁸ Ibid, p. 205.

⁹⁹ Ibid, p. 205.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid, pp. 204 - 205.

What may become of places such as the townships of the film? If such places are to become merely nostalgic fragments of the past, what of and how will an Iranian cultural national identity remain in the global age?

Similarly Mania, during discussion with her sister in *Ten*, decides it would be a good idea for her ex-husband to take care of Amin, their child. In another instance of role-reversal (as we saw in *The Wind Will Carry Us*), here Kiarostami reverses the traditional roles of parenthood, giving Amin's father full control over his son. Jokingly Mania thinks her son will stop swearing as much due to the consequences of swearing in front of his father and would treat possessions with more respect. Immediately after this conversation Mania stops and insists for an old woman to get into her car instead of walking up the busy street. The old woman continually thanks her for her kindness and hopes that her prayers will be answered. It is interesting then that the topic of conversation with the elderly lady should then be parenting troubles. Coupling the previous example of role-reversal with her ex-husband looking after their son alongside preceding dialogue about parenting troubles, are these intermittent references thanking Mania for her kindness. It seems that Kiarostami could be presenting the audience with a general social and family moral ordeal: that it would be an act, or more than an act, of kindness to relieve women of some of these "statutory" duties, functions and image in society?

Aside from the obvious sense of freedom that being on the road instils, in *Ten* the physical, philosophical and symbolic navigation of Tehran addresses and counters the very day-to-day notions of society and female lifestyle. Mania being a religious sceptic, questioning the point of religion and reasons for praying at numerous points in the film, and the fact that she left her own marriage, demonstrates her personal ambiguity about Iranian society and culture in modern day terms. How all the issues in the film finally culminate with one of her previous passengers, who has shaved off her hair, goes beyond anything really considered in the film; it is the boldest reformation and poignant image against all that has been discussed throughout the film (see screenshots 2.16 –

2.18). Aspects like her job and not being at home enough, adhering to male expectations, instigating divorce for freedom, the nature of her work and how photos and artistry hold freedoms of expression and creativity in a job far far unreflective of her supposed lifestyle and cultural orientation under a male patriarchal society are all visually relayed through this image.

Kiarostami ends the film in a way that entices further questioning from the audience. How all of these factors and events demonstrate Mania's questioning and ambiguity around the modern day functions of society and how she/women fit into a modern day life. Mania can't seem to fit it in, or sees the need to. How these personal changes in her life, personal vendettas for a better life with opportunity, being who she wants to be with the freedom within society to do as she pleases, bring to the fore how and why these modern counterparts to a life of new ideals of how to live her life are cherished. Discussions with all her female fares focus on how aspects of modern day living, away from traditional lifestyles within Iran, have shadowed the religious, cultural, and societal functions and traditions from past generations. She has overtaken the indigenous formation of intended existence and female functionality in Iranian society with the acceptance and exploration of a more personal life affiliated with and influenced by modern day living.

The poignant ending of *Ten* idolises the ridding of "shackles of oppression" and of socio-cultural constraint and expectation. This symbolic unveiling is boldly demonstrated as one woman removes her head scarf not only showing her make-up but also the fact that she had cut off all her hair (again, see 2.16 – 2.18). Such an image demonstrates the difficulties of living in a modern way but while retaining traditional values. Kiarostami relates the films individual issues through narrative dialogue, use of technology and relationship of cinematography with the wider impact upon society at large. Furthermore, Kiarostami focuses debate with the bigger issue at hand, highlighting difficulties between moving on as a nation, becoming a more globalist, economically open country, susceptible to change, while still maintaining cultural and social identity. This film, along with the others

discussed, has broadened horizons and has evolved Kiarostami's themes, style, and largely on attitudes towards the use, and subsequent meaning, of the camera work.

Kiarostami has evolved many aspects of Neorealism in his work with *Ten*, this film being exemplary of his auteurist take on the stylistic movement. *Ten* is lucid in detailing how, through the sheer ability to pick up a camera and record what is going on around them, Iranian filmmakers can express social and culturally related concerns through filmic narratives in a more "accessible" (both in production and viewing) and accepted dominant medium across the modern world. This, the film appears to suggest, alongside a more reformist government with expanding the limits and boundaries of filmmaking guidelines, advocating methods and modes of free expression, will both promote the nation and demonstrate key contemporary social and cultural concerns.¹⁰¹ As such, *Ten* 'reflexively reveals in formal terms, Kiarostami's films' attempt to allegorize the restraints and the possibilities of cinematic enunciation under the stringent laws dictating modesty in the Islamic Republic.'¹⁰²

¹⁰¹ Vaziri, 'Iranian Documentary Cinema Between Reality and Fiction', pp. 53 – 54.

¹⁰² Mottahedeh, *Displaced Allegories: Post-Revolutionary Iranian Cinema*, p. 139.

Conclusion

Reworking the Directing Role

In a twist, despite a self-reflexive acknowledgement of film authorship in his works, over the course of the selected films Kiarostami's presence as a director can be seen as continually and purposefully effaced. For Kiarostami, this act provides a further, final development of the conventions and goals of Italian Neorealism. Consider then *10 on Ten*, a self-reflective, semi-autobiographical analysis of *Ten*, Abbas Kiarostami discusses various elements of his filmmaking constructs and themes that arise throughout his filmmaking career to date. From the director himself we can observe his thematic and stylistic preoccupations, thoughts on his career, status in Iranian cinema and personal attitudes to his films and the process by which they came to be shot, edited and produced. He does this while in an iconic setting of his films. Talking and driving about the Iranian landscape, Kiarostami contemplates his filmmaking decisions and style in the comfort of his 4x4; a setting we become familiar with in his films. This film, like *Ten* and *Five*, is cut into 10 sections during which the audience engages in a very frank and personal discussion between the filmmaker and his digital camera, strapped to the dashboard as in *Ten*.

During *10 on Ten* Kiarostami talks of how directing was spontaneously and unconsciously eliminated. In doing so his role as a director is reformed. His directing style is most noticeably distinctive, unique and yet controversial in *Ten* and similarly mirrored in *Five*. In *Ten* Kiarostami fully integrates this notion of "non-directional" filmmaking by means of leaving the camera running in the secluded, closed environment of the car. Filming in this manner detracts from conventional narrative and filming structures, eliminating the artifice of most forms of cinema, however loosing directing and the director does not eliminate the auteur and this way of filmmaking. Traditions of filmmaking are

turned on their head, paradoxically bringing Kiarostami closer to the heart of the Neorealist quest for the truth.

These methods, in removing the 'middle-man' of the director, also encourage a more direct and complicit alignment of the audience with the fate of the protagonist and themes explored in the respective film. For example, in *The Wind Will Carry Us* Kiarostami raises many questions throughout the film without answering many of them. The same is evident in *Five*, a film that lacks any real narrative yet through the sequence of shots a rather abstract or emotional narrative surfaces that brings about more questions regarding filmmaking, narrative, and style. Kiarostami explores moral, social, and cultural themes through a style of filmmaking that is evolving with every shot he makes. It is these methods and new modes of aesthetic interpretation, used to explore contemporary issues, that pulls an increased degree of involvement out of the audience.

Another factor that adds to his reworked directing style is the use of digital cameras. In doing so Kiarostami gets rid of clichés, traditions, imposed forms and pretentious aesthetics. He manages to free cinema from forms of censorship, the clutches of various tools of production and funding. He elaborates in *10 on Ten* how it almost becomes a quest or liberation for the director in finding an ideal beauty. It permits the experimental methods of new filmmaking technologies, pulling away from a conventional, structured format to general filmmaking; iconic too of his directing. Interestingly Kiarostami demonstrates how he had a part in constructing the basis to the narrative flow in *Ten*, but had little input, direction or say thereafter as the scenes were being played out in the car. In cinema everything can be seen in an abstract way. In *Ten*, this style of direction is particularly apparent.

Later during filming of *Tickets*, the interweaving story lines also demonstrate this capacity for reworking the directing role with the incorporation of two other directors – Ken Loach and Ermanno Olmi – successfully interlinking narrative through three very different stories. Together on the train, the close atmosphere and nature of travelling help tie together the sparse links of narrative here.

Past childhood memories bring together two people, a scientist reflects on his emotionally sparring day, whilst Scottish football fans have an encounter that turns out to be a bit of bother with a foreign family who are using the train for more than just travelling. Here Kiarostami reworks his directing style in conjunction with two other directors again, displaying his adaptive yet still natural directing style.

At the same time Kiarostami's name becomes synonymous in the Western world with achievements in Iranian cinema and contemporary cinema in general. Shohini Chaudhuri and Howard Finn conclude an article on New Iranian cinema in *Screen* with these words about Kiarostami's cinema:

'The appeal of [these films] in the West may have less to do with an exoticized "other" under conditions of repression than with self-recognition. The open images of Iranian film remind us of the loss of such images in most contemporary cinema, the loss of cinema's particular space for creative interpretation and critical reflection.'¹⁰³

Kiarostami's films can be seen as both refreshing but yet intolerable by some Western film critics who are fixated with being entertained by more dominant, mainstream narratives and "fantastical" or visually spectacular films. Yet, sequentially, a resonant aesthetic, contextual relevance and personalised visualisation created in the journalistic-documentary style in a *vérité*, adapted modern-Neorealism, Kiarostami created a film style that would create and manage a sustained reference to contemporary society and exploration of culture to audiences the world over.

Internally Kiarostami has also received contending reviews. The response to his films was 'divided. Some Iranians call Kiarostami's work uncinematic, journalistic, and unworthy of all the international attention it has received.'¹⁰⁴ Regardless of this Kiarostami's presence in Iran has nourished many other filmmakers and colleagues such as Panahi, Ghobadi, Farmanara and Makhmalbaf. In terms of Iran's image and relationship to the wider world, 'a time when Iranians had such a negative image in

¹⁰³ Shohini Chaudhuri, and Howard Finn. "The Open Image: Poetic Realism and the New Iranian Cinema." *Screen* 44.1 (Spring 2003), p. 57.

¹⁰⁴ Saeed-Vafa and Rosenbaum, *Abbas Kiarostami*, p.50.

the West, his [(Kiarostami's)] cinema introduced a humane and artistic face.... His unique style and humour are simple but radical, poetic, and philosophical.¹⁰⁵

There exists a conflicting paradox with Kiarostami's work. He becomes internationally recognised for erasing the role of the director, and also as an auteur. The similar can be said for Lars Von Trier and his relationship with Dogme 95 filmmaking; another stylistic movement that was based on traditional values, 'truths' of the everyday, and the exclusion of certain kinds of technology and special effects.

This study has aimed to show how Kiarostami's approach and remoulding of the principles and combination of stylistic and sociological preoccupations of Italian Neorealism lead to a particularly powerful form of creative interpretation. As the progression of Kiarostami's films has shown, the works are as much evident of a process of making films in post-revolutionary Iran as they are modern-Neorealist adaptations exploring contemporary society and culture in twenty-first century Iran.

We have seen how censorship and Kiarostami's film narratives have adapted the use of children from 1950s Neorealism, exploring contemporary life through an unimpeachable lens. An aesthetic that reflects the searching for 'truths' of everyday life, through everyday people, Kiarostami's style also becomes modernised through the use of technology, the exploration and growth of themes, and by specific stylistic elements transposed from original Neorealism.

Kiarostami brings together Neorealism with a certain poetic extraction supported by the rich heritage of other practices in literature and art in Iran and past Persia. An emergent strand of a modern-Neorealist style and the contemporary exploration of society are bound through the formation of his characters and the philosophical nature to their continual searching in his films.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid, p. 51.

Iran's relationship with the wider world is an unstable one, but their filmmakers attempt at a certain stability in the representation of their nation. Yes, one that is continually searching for answers. It is also one that is steeped in socio-cultural and broader political 'unknowing'. However the cinema that radiates from Iran is presented as gentle and humane, acquiring a reception that too mirrors these qualities. If, in this quest for the 'truth', it does become a "nostalgic" fragment of the past, Kiarostami's philosophically navigating yet politically bound stories ultimately ask: where will this journey take them? And in this pursuit, will it be a 'truth' worth battling to find?

3.3

The possibilities of new beginnings...



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