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TRUTH IN FICTION

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Abstract

The aim of this thesis is to explicate how the films of Iranian film director Abbas Kiarostami enable one to find what is real, due to their mode of intertwinement between reality and fiction.

In a 1995 interview Kiarostami stated: *"In cinema anything that can happen would be true. It doesn't have to correspond to a reality, it doesn't have to 'really' be happening. In cinema, by fabricating lies we may never reach the fundamental truth, but we will always be on our way to it. We can never get close to the truth except through lying"*.

Traditionally there is a clear distinction between reality and fiction in film. There is an assumption that documentary represents reality and relies on factual data, interviews, experts and witnesses used to present reality 'as it is'. Contrary, all other forms are to some extent a play of fiction, which refers to something opposite of truth, intertwined with 'lies' and imagination. Whether it is his poetry, photography, fiction films or experimental documentaries, Abbas Kiarostami breaks the boundaries between reality and fiction and by doing so actually comes closer to truth itself.

His films are educational and eye-opening in terms of his view on the world and the role of the spectator, which is reinvented over and over again.

Abstrakt

Cílem této práce je vysvětlit, jakým způsobem filmy íránského filmového režiséra Abbase Kiarostamiho umožňují člověku najít to, co je skutečné (v životě), přes prolínání reality a fikce v jeho filmech.

V rozhovoru z roku 1995 Kiarostami prohlásil: *"Všechno, co se může stát v kině, může být pravdivé. Nemusí to odpovídat realitě, nemusí se to, skutečně "odehrávat. V kině, vytvořením lží možná nikdy nedosáhneme základní pravdy, ale vždy budeme na cestě k ní. Nikdy se nemůžeme přiblížit pravdě kromě přes lži"*.

Ve filmu tradičně existuje jasný rozdíl mezi realitou a fikcí. Existuje předpoklad, že dokument představuje realitu a opírá se o faktografická data, rozhovory, experty a svědky používané k prezentaci reality 'tak, jak je'. Naopak, všechny ostatní formy jsou do jisté míry hranou fikcí, která odkazuje na něco opaku pravdy, propletené s 'lžemi' a představivostí. Ať už jde o jeho poezii, fotografii, hrané filmy nebo experimentální dokumenty, Abbas Kiarostami překračuje hranice mezi realitou a fikcí a tím se vlastně blíží samotné pravdě.

Jeho filmy jsou poučné a otevírají oči, v souvislosti jeho pohledu na svět a roli diváka, která je znovu a znovu znovuzrozená.

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Introduction

Through the thesis I will try to substantiate Kiarostami's statement formulated in the abstract and draw attention to all the different ways in which he creates truth and at the same time calls it into question on the other side. I will focus explicitly on Kiarostami's films. Through their analysis, I will point out examples of the themes he is trying to convey that run throughout his art.

I will begin with the notion of the undefined boundary between reality and fiction and support it with examples from *Close-Up* (Klūzāp, nemā-ye nazdīk, 1990), *And Life Goes On* (Zendegi va digar hich, 1992), and *Through the Olive Trees* (Zire darakhatan zeyton, 1994). In all these films, Kiarostami questions the documentary form and its honesty by showing the audience how he constructs a documentary in such a way that it becomes fiction.

In the second chapter, I will discuss how he reflects on his role as a director and his technique of filmmaking. An important aspect of Kiarostami's films is his questioning of the fictionality and artificiality of any documentary and the effect of a camera on the social environment and its potential for violence. Among other films discussed, I will discuss *The Wind Will Carry Us* (Bād mā rā khāhad bord, 1999), in which the main character is the best example of Kiarostami's critical self-portrait. According to Kiarostami, there are eleven absent or otherwise veiled characters in the film. I will explore how exactly the absence of information and the 'veiling of characters' stimulates the audience's imagination and raises questions of representation. There are hidden and at the same time present aspects in his films where the director questions his role or the artificiality of the film at different levels of the film structure.

Last but not least, in the third chapter I give an example of how the use of absence in the films *Taste of Cherry* (Ta'm e guilass, 1997) and *Certified Copy* (2010) challenges the notion of a director as an author of meaning. Through absence and thus ambiguity, Kiarostami comes closer to the truth. In fact, I will discuss what I think is the consequence of using fiction in combination with all the other methods mentioned above to get closer to the truth. It is the role of the spectator that is rediscovered, and it is the subjective truth of each spectator that leads one to accept fiction.

Chapter 1: Between Reality and Fiction

“Documentary can be much more of a lie than fiction, because people believe it is the reality and it is not more of a reality than fiction. Documentary can lie and fiction can sometimes tell the truth.”¹

In film, there is usually a visible distinction between reality and fiction. It is believed that everything you see in a documentary is captured reality and all other forms of filmmaking are fiction. Kiarostami once said that whether in a documentary or a feature film, everything is a big lie told to the audience. He referred to his art as lies told to make the audience believe them. He does not claim that lies are real. However, he stresses that they still lead to the truth if the audience is aware of the fictional nature of his art.² In other words, he supported the idea that we as viewers, should be aware of the fact that we are watching a film. Even in moments that feel real, he would have wanted the audience to not forget that what they are seeing is not real. He felt that if we remain independent of the ‘emotional exploitation’ in films, we gain control of ourselves and the world around us as we also become a more educated viewer. Kiarostami's words—believing lies, but at the same time being aware of their artificiality—may sound contradictory, but his idea crystallises in examples of his films and thus, above all, in his way of approaching the audience.

The documentary part of his films could be the landscape, the people, the way they speak, etc., but despite the realism of the images in Kiarostami's films, they always have an abstract way of analysing life, as they are constructed in a way that makes the viewer try to make sense of what he sees. The self-reflexive part of his cinema begins with *Close-Up* (Klūzāp, nemā-ye nazdīk, 1990). The crucial part would be the reflection on the medium, which became a part of the attempt to distinguish truth from lies, with his emphasis actually on the truth. The film is based on a true story, with real characters in real places, which in theory would be called a documentary, but since the director restaged everything in the film, nothing is really real, but instead very cleverly manufactured. *Close-Up* also talks about the human need to dream, a subject that fascinates Kiarostami and perhaps explains his choice for the kind of filmmaking where traditional narrative structure is absent—as in dreams, where we only get reflective glimpses of our lives. Kiarostami considers the ability to dream to be the most important human quality, and calls imagination one of the most

¹ Abbas Kiarostami: *The Art of Living* (2003), accessed March 7, 2021, <https://vimeo.com/173519394>.

² Abbas Kiarostami - *Verités Et Songes*, 1994.

extraordinary gifts humans have. Sabzian, the main character of *Close-Up*, is a reflection of the escapism that dreams provide from his suffering. He literally made his dreams come true by pretending to be someone else, someone he saw as his ideal self. Kiarostami once said that the reason for dreaming is to escape one's own unhappiness—which reflects Sabzian's character. The director's fascination with dreaming is evident in his films, which through their visuality ask questions rather than provide answers. He compared the cinematic experience to opening a window in a stuffy room. *“You let the air come in and then you breathe. In my mind, our dreams are windows in our lives and the significance of cinema is in its similarity to this window.”*³

Somehow, despite the absence of children in the film *Close-Up*, they are present in the main character Sabzian. Kiarostami admittedly learned how to live and interact with people from children. He thought that there is a certain fullness around them that we lose once we gain unnecessary knowledge and know less and less of what we want. Perhaps that is why Kiarostami immediately decided to make a film about a story of Sabzian Incident after reading about it in a weekly magazine. Sabzian in *Close-Up* is, after all, a 'child'. He pretended to be what he wanted to be. As a bookbinder and film lover, he claimed to be the famous filmmaker Makhmalbaf when he sat next to Mrs. Ahankhanh on a bus in Tehran in 1989. She invited him to her home, where he met the rest of her family and offered to cast them all in his next film, using their house as a location. When he couldn't pay back the money he borrowed from the family, he was exposed as a fraud and arrested. Kiarostami restaged everything for the film; from his visit to Sabzian in jail, to the meeting between Sabzian and Mrs. Ahankhanh, to the subsequent arrest. The judge at Sabzian's trial even let him film the trial for ten hours. In the very first scene of the film, we see a reporter from a weekly magazine and two policemen riding in a taxi to Ahankhanh's house, after learning that Sabzian would be arrested. When they reach there, we as the audience, are left outside with the taxi driver. He picks flowers from the top of the pile and kicks an aerosol can across the road so that it rolls down the hill. Kiarostami commented on the scene, saying he needed that 'nothing' there and was constantly looking for scenes where 'nothing happens'. We almost don't see Sabzian as he gets into the taxi and the can being kicked again by the reporter has more camera attention. The scenes described have no documentary value. In a classic

³Kiarostami - Interview, YouTube (YouTube, 2008), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uSDWtdJKrG0&t>.

documentary, the camera would follow the reporter and the police officer as they arrest Sabzian. Instead, there is a creative aesthetic that creates a distance from the supposedly captured reality. Later in the film, we see the same scene of the arrest from the perspective of the Ahankhanhs and Sabzian in the house. There is a great shift in perspective, especially when we know the character and his motives. Nothing in the film is accurate and the closer we think we are getting to Sabzian, the further away we get from the story as a whole. In the end where usually we would already figure out what the film is trying to say, we are still just a distant observer, exposed to the scenes where nothing seems to be happening. There are many elements in the film that expose its reconstruction of reality. Overall, the film is interwoven and composed of documentary material, interviews, 'Sabzian's flashbacks' and the scenes filmed from different perspectives. At the end of the film, we see a scene where Sabzian comes out of prison and meets the real Makhmalbaf for the first time. The repetition that reminds us of the first scene with the flowers happens when Sabzian picks up a bouquet of flowers for the Ahankhah family. One could say that the repetition was intentional, as quite a bit of screen time was devoted to the two flower scenes. As Sabzian rides on the back of Makhmalbaf's motorcycle, and after Sabzian picks up the flowers and they continue on their way to the Ahankhah family, some sort of technical problem seems to arise. The scene from afar would arguably suggest a reconciliation between the real and fictional Makhmalbaf. But as Kiarostami and his crew follow the motorcycle, their equipment starts to fail and we can hear them complaining. There's also a fragmentation of the image shot through the cracked windshield. Jonathan Rosenbaum suspects that the refraction of sound and image was meant to have a deliberate effect: "*An invitation for the viewer to step back from a climactic scene and reflect*".⁴ What may have been a mistake at first, but was later used intentionally, became one of Kiarostami's trademarks in later films. Namely, when Kiarostami has captured 'the truth', the soundtrack begins to fail, which I think says more than a narrative explanation could. "*Lies carry a kind of truth,*" Kiarostami once said in an interview. He believed that the shortest path to truth is a lie. In the end, Kiarostami could start with either fact or fiction, and the powerful thing about the film is precisely the fact that the order doesn't really matter. In a blog post for Cinea, Tom Paulus compares Kiarostami's cinema to Nietzsche's philosophy of art and language. He states that language relies on concepts which do not

⁴ Mehrnaz Saeed-Vafa and Jonathan Rosenbaum, *Abbas Kiarostami* (Urbana: University of Illinois press, 2018), 15.

correspond to reality, and calls truth a mere illusion. *“What art does is reveal the truth about the illusion of truth”*.⁵ Art, in other words, makes us rethink our assumptions about what we believe to be the truth, and *Close-Up* represents a turning point in Kiarostami's cinema towards this kind of art. Makhmalbaf, the filmmaker, is a real man who created fictional worlds. Sabzian enters his fictional world through imagination, by pretending to be him. He then convinces the family he is the real Makhmalbaf. Later his fiction is exposed as fraud and he is taken to a real court where he gets a real jail sentence. In a book about Iranian cinema, Hamid Dabashi takes a close look at all the twists and turns in *Close-Up* where the audience is 'forced' to re-examine the truth of what they are seeing. *“Kiarostami subjects everything to a double erasure by asking the real people involved in the event to “reenact” for him what happened. But by doubly negating the real, Kiarostami's erasure confirms a reality”*.⁶ Dabashi calls *Close-Up* a succession of fact and fantasy, a fiction based on facts. These facts, namely Sabzian pretending to be the famous director, are based on the real Makhmalbaf, who is also a fact. This back and forth between fact and fiction could be expanded and continued.

But that's not what *Close-Up* and Kiarostami's cinema in general is about. It doesn't matter what's fact and what's fiction. What is valuable is that Kiarostami shows the audience how a documentary is constructed to become fiction. Furthermore, he creates a space in the film where information is missing, thus making the audience aware that they are not seeing documentary truth, but at the same time making them take a step back and think about what they are actually seeing. In conclusion, *Close-Up* was a milestone in the cinema of Abbas Kiarostami, the beginning of a new stage in the relationship he had with the truth and the audience.

Another turning point for his life and career was when a devastating earthquake hit Northern Iran in 1990. Among the areas affected was the village of Koker, where he had filmed the 1987 film *Where is the Friend's House?* When the earthquake hit, he really realised that the people, these children he had been working with, might have died in that earthquake, so he set out to find these children to see if they were dead or alive. It struck him to see the devastation from the earthquake and the way life went on. One of the things he always comes back to is the shock of seeing that life was all around, even though such a tragedy had happened. It made him think a lot

⁵ Tom Paulus, Truth in Cinema: The Riddle of Kiarostami - Photogenie, Cinea, February 27, 2018, <https://cinea.be/truth-in-cinema-the-riddle-of-kiarostami/>.

⁶ Hamid Dabashi, *Close up: Iranian Cinema, Past, Present, and Future* (London: Verso, 2001), 67.

about the relationship between life and death, and that later became an important element in his films. After *Close-Up* and the earthquake disaster, he made two films: *And Life Goes On* (*Zendegi va digar hich*, 1992) and *Through the Olive Trees* (*Zire darakhatan zeyton*, 1994). As in *Close-Up*, Kiarostami challenges the documentary form and shows the audience the fictional nature of these films, which at first glance would probably be classified as documentaries. In both films he uses his own voice, as well as that of the director's character, who is there as a stand-in for Kiarostami. In *And Life Goes On*, set two years after the earthquake, a director and his son drive through what appears to be the aftermath of the earthquake. They are in search of two young actors from Kiarostami's previous film, *Where is the Friend's House?*, which tells a story of a boy who accidentally took his friend's notebook where he was supposed to do his homework until the next day. Worried that his friend might be expelled from school, he runs from his home village to his friend's village to find his friend's house and return the notebook. The strangers and landscape he encounters along the way are all metaphors to show his bravery. From dead ends, long staircases, narrow paths to maze-like spaces with stepped architecture. The boy's journey becomes one of self-discovery, leading to a friendship symbolised by the lone tree that reappears in all the films of the Koker trilogy. Kiarostami actually visited the villages affected by the earthquake. He and his son went around the day after the disaster. The film left unanswered the question of whether the actors from *Where is the Friend's House?* are still alive, because that would be sentimental, as he once said in an interview. "You can't forget that over 20,000 children were killed in that earthquake. My two heroes could have been among them"⁷. His point is also supported by the visuals of the film, in which the camera constantly switches between close-ups of people and long shots of landscapes. The film's visuals translate many more clues for the viewer that raise questions. This is not only because of its use of offscreen space, where the doors to the imagination are left completely open, but also because of its use of sound. The soundtrack is not only there to illustrate in addition to the image, but also becomes a contrast to the narrative line. In an explicit example, this would be Kiarostami's foregrounding of a conversation from a car as the camera pans away from the car and roams the landscape, looking for other clues that intertwine with the narrative of the conversation. In a book on Kiarostami, Mehrnaz Saeed-Vafa brought attention to the

⁷ Mehrnaz Saeed-Vafa and Jonathan Rosenbaum, *Abbas Kiarostami* (Urbana: University of Illinois press, 2018), 20.

scene before the last one, which he believes is indicative of loss. His example is interesting precisely because it says a lot about how open to interpretation his films generally are. The moments described come from a dark scene in which the protagonist looks at his mother in the wind. Saeed-Vafa suggests that this might express fear of death, the unknown, the night, or that his friend might be punished if he doesn't bring him his notebook. As mentioned earlier, the end of the film omits the discovery of the actors from *Where is the Friend's House?*. In *Through the Olive Trees*, a romantic ending is also left out. In both films, the situations would otherwise probably conform to more conventional film expectations. With the way the film is made, Kiarostami also lets us know that it is impossible to frame such a tragedy (the devastating earthquake) in a film. There is indeed a gap between the reality of a tragedy and the attempt to portray it, which is a recurring theme of the film. Likewise, the film could never be a documentary because it is practically built on lies. First, the film is a re-enactment of Kiarostami's journey with his son. Second, the man behind the wheel could not have been driving at all, so the footage with him at the wheel is fake. Third, the film was shot months after the earthquake and therefore could not depict the immediate aftermath. Sound is vital to the film because it connects us to the tragedy. We hear radio reports of the tragedy, information from motorists, grieving villagers, helicopters, ambulance sirens, etc., but the origin of the sound is not visually present. Kiarostami reminds viewers that they are watching a film on multiple occasions, and so he also tries to emphasise the gap rather than close it. Laura Mulvey writes that the reality of tragedy is translated through fiction. "*The search for the two boys is delayed by blocked roads, and the repeated stories of tragedy and survival actually force the film to slow down to a stop as it tries to register and inscribe the transition between disaster and the way that 'life goes on'.*"⁸ She continues, noting that death provides a link between the aesthetic and the psychoanalytic and represents an ultimate 'unspeakable'. Mulvey then connects Kiarostami's films to Deleuze's concept of the time-image, saying that the past in his films fills the content of the image in the form of traces and ruins. Indeed, Deleuze wrote that post-war cinema was confronted with the emergence of situations to which one can no longer react and situations that no longer expand in action or reaction according to the demands of the movement-image. This would apply to Kiarostami's films after the tragedy. According to Deleuze, these are situations in which the

⁸ Laura Mulvey, *Death 24x a Second Stillness and the Moving Image* (London: Reaktion Books, 2015), 126.

character 'fails' to react and experience, and becomes vaguely indifferent to what happens to him... With regard to the character, Deleuze continues: "*But he has gained in an ability to see what he has lost in action or reaction: he SEES so that the viewer's problem becomes 'What is there to see in the image? (and not now 'What are we going to see in the next image?')*".⁹ I would argue that the spectator's inability to respond these days remains the same. In conventional cinema, films are adapted to a mode of representation in which there is only the question 'What comes next?' because it aims to make the spectator feel that time is passing without him noticing, or in other words, that there is no time for contemplation. That's why it's important that what Kiarostami aims for in his films is that the viewer is actually aware that he's watching a film, that he's actually seeing and not being sucked into a flow of the plot. "*The shock of the earthquake and its aftermath redirected Kiarostami's realism towards the difficult question of reality that challenged adequate representation.*"¹⁰ Mulvey goes on to say that not only was Kiarostami not on location to film the earthquake, but that the trauma required a new recognition of the gap between a middle-class filmmaker and the reality of shattered lives. The film is a complete reenactment, and Kiarostami distances himself even further from reality by actually distancing the film from the tragedy, from the aftermath. But unlike *Close-Up*, there is nothing in the film to betray its fakery, as it ends up looking more like a documentary shot immediately after the earthquake. However, the 'fakery' is built in the story of the film, so it ultimately brings out the same effect. Kiarostami namely in a self-reflective way portrays a director, who, on his way, encounters actors from the first film of the Koker trilogy. These actors reveal, how the director character, as then also Kiarostami constructed the first film, leading to the fact that the second film is a construction as well. In the next film Kiarostami again reveals his 'deception' of the previous film. Long shots in the film replace an associative editing, which invites the viewer to reflect. Mulvey suggests that it seems as if a traumatic event has allowed a return to the past, which is then subjected to reinterpretation and contemplation. *And Life Goes On* was also a turning point for Kiarostami in relation to nature. In an interview, he said that nature had an almost magical influence on him. As Alberto Elena wrote: "*In its own way, Life and Nothing More ... also seems to reflect this*

⁹ Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2 the Time-Image* (London: Continuum, 2009), 272.

¹⁰ Laura Mulvey, *Death 24x a Second Stillness and the Moving Image* (London: Reaktion Books, 2015), 128.

process of reconciliation with nature, even in the tragic context of an earthquake."¹¹ The film's closing sequence is a 3-minute shot of the director trying to drive up a steep zig-zag road—another of Kiarostami's 'signatures' (from the zig-zag path in *Where is the Friend's House?*, to the kicked spray can in *Close-Up* and *The Wind Will Carry Us*). As for the ending of *Life and Nothing More*, Alberto Elena writes: "Once again, in a Kiarostami film, a path opens up [before the protagonist], which becomes first and foremost a mirror held up to self-recognition. What matters is no longer the goal to be attained, this is not merely a physical movement from one place to another, but the trial in itself that the journey represents, together with its consequences for the man's life."¹² By the end of the film, the delayed frames not only lead to reflection and displace the longing for the end, as Mulvey suggests in her book, but more importantly they prove to be a personal experience for each individual, rather than achieving a particular idea or state of mind. I will write further about the subject of the spectator and the effect of such cinema in the last chapter. In the book on cinema by Abbas Kiarostami, Elena writes about the final sequence of the film in which the protagonist tries to drive over the hill and ignores a man carrying gasoline on his back and continues driving. When his car can no longer handle the zigzagging path, the 'director' backs up and picks up the passing man. Shortly after, the movie credits begin to roll. Elena writes: "This final sequence is highly valued by the director himself, who points out the way he deliberately made the cylinder hide the face of the man carrying it at all times, wanting to 'take the generalization of the character to extremes'."¹³ This expresses how Kiarostami presents his characters. He does not elaborate on the characters, so we do not see the face of the man passing by. What we do see are the characters as archetypes and a change in the scene that would otherwise be an echo of a previous scene where the character ignores the man walking by. The decision to pick him up primarily reflects a change in the character, and the viewer is left in ambiguity of the reasons for that decision. In Elena's opinion, *And Life Goes On* shows life in all its unruly nature by focusing on life and considering death as something that is just there. He goes on to list all the human characters Kiarostami shows that point to the continuity of life. However, the most important thing is not the specifics of what he shows. These specifics could be summarised as evidence of the continuity of life after a terrible tragedy, but what I

¹¹ Alberto Elena, *The Cinema of Abbas Kiarostami* (London: Saqi, 2005), 99.

¹² Alberto Elena, *The Cinema of Abbas Kiarostami* (London: Saqi, 2005), 102.

¹³ Alberto Elena, *The Cinema of Abbas Kiarostami* (London: Saqi, 2005), 102.

think is crucial is how he translates the 'unspeakable' through the absence of 'tragedy imagery' and also through ambiguity, which goes hand in hand with his later revealed deception in *Through the Olive Trees*. This revealed deception tells us that it is impossible for anyone to grasp such a tragedy, and even if the first film shows 'the truth', the second exposes it as a fake, thus saying that the truth of such a tragedy cannot be portrayed, which I think is paradoxically the truth of the two films. The delay in finding the two boys points to the loss that cannot be brought back, but is overtaken by the continuity of life.

Through the Olive Trees explores the space between reality and fiction in the making-of the previous film. Each film documents the previous one and becomes the fictional basis for the next. Therefore, they are connected to form a so-called Koker trilogy (*Where is the Friends House?*, *And Life Goes on*, *Through the Olive Trees*).

In *Through the Olive Trees* a director, played by Kiarostami's friend, has returned to the Koker region to work on a new film (*And Life Goes On*). He notices a young woman named Tahereh, instructs his assistant Mrs. Shiva to take down her name and address, and the next day she is cast to play a new bride. The first shots of the filming seem to be a disaster, so Shiva brings in a replacement for the lead role—Hossein. Tahereh refuses to talk to Hossein and the director sends the actors home. Hossein tells the director that he has proposed to Tahereh several times, but her family refuses to give their consent. In the final sequence, Hossein follows Tahereh through the olive trees and they live the village, moving further and further away into the green countryside. He keeps talking to her about his reasons for marrying her and she just listens. When they are already just two white dots on a green screen, we hear a brief conversation that is unrecognisable, and then they each go off in their own directions. The film leaves the ending open, leaving the viewer to find the clues and answers on their own. The long shot of Tahereh could imply that she has rejected him. In contrast, the olive trees and green landscape at the end of the sequence could imply an 'optimistic' ending, in contrast to the ruined landscape that accompanies her at the beginning of her walk. "A perfect example of metaphor in Kiarostami's cinema, also common in Persian poetry and the work of other Iranian filmmakers, is the use of ruins as an image of depression, an image that can be historical as well as personal—that evokes a collective memory of destruction brought about imperialistically and internally as well as a sense of despair and loss."¹⁴ The sequence is filmed as a long shot from high above. Kiarostami does not

¹⁴ Hamid Dabashi, *Close up: Iranian Cinema, Past, Present, and Future* (London: Verso, 2001), 59.

invade the couple's private space with a close-up. His gaze is distant and uncertain. Like the ending, the film hovers between fiction and documentary, between the 'real' and the 'filmed'. Kiarostami invites the viewer to participate in the story.

In the eighth chapter of her book *Death 24x a Second Stillness and the Moving Image* Mulvey discusses the concept of delay in cinema. She distinguishes between a need for delay in narrative cinema, noting that sometimes delay is essential to the desire for the ending, while in other cases it opens up alternative narrative possibilities that actually displace the desire for the ending. "*In Abbas Kiarostami's trilogy, delay leads to a cinema of deferral, looking back and reinterpreting the past in the light of later events.*"¹⁵ She explains that a scene is removed from the flow of narrative development. The scene is further divided into frames that can be delayed, repeated, or resumed. Mulvey then quotes Rancière, who cites Godard's praise of Hitchcock. Godard basically said that we don't remember the plots of Hitchcock's films. What we remember are the details, simple objects that detach themselves from their narratives and linger in the collective memory. When frames are slowed down, repeated, delayed, etc., the image allows for the reflection and interpretation of meanings that would otherwise remain hidden in the narrative flow. In Kiarostami's cinema, the delayed frames contain 'misleading' clues that allow him to lead the audience down unanticipated paths that constantly shift between meanings.

In *And Life Goes On* Kiarostami implies that two people are married. In *Through the Olive Trees* the 'truth' changes to the fact that they are not really married, but that the boy has feelings for the girl. Neither version of the love story is really 'true'. Tahereh and Hossein play out different possibilities of the same story, while Kiarostami shows us scenes behind the camera that are also contrived. Anything that could happen would be true, as cinema has its own reality. In a blogpost for Cinea, Tom Paulus compares Kiarostami's cinema to the words of Robert Bresson: "*To create is not to deform or invent persons and things. It is to tie new relationships between persons and things which are, and as they are ...Bring together things that have as yet never been brought together and did not seem predisposed to be so.*"¹⁶ In a sense, then, Kiarostami brings things together to manipulate with the possible meanings. However, the possibilities are endless and do not lead to an emotional 'exploitation' of the spectator.

¹⁵ Laura Mulvey, *Death 24x a Second Stillness and the Moving Image* (London: Reaktion Books, 2015), 142.

¹⁶ Tom Paulus, Truth in Cinema: The Riddle of Kiarostami - Photogenie, Cinea, February 27, 2018, <https://cinea.be/truth-in-cinema-the-riddle-of-kiarostami/>.

To sum up, the form between reality and fiction is most evident in Kiarostami's interventions in what appears to be documentary reality in his films. In *Close-Up*, he uses his voice and appearance on camera when he meets Sabzian in prison. In the Koker trilogy, each film marks the previous one as a deception. Kiarostami uses director characters and presents their deceptions in a documentary, questioning the form itself and thus his role as 'truth teller'. He manipulates the documentary and fictional parts so that they become indistinguishable. In doing so, he is not concerned that viewers should be able to tell which part of the film is true and which is fake, and that they should be 'aware of the deception'. Rather, he does it to make the viewer aware that it is a construction that he is showing. The constructed form is of even greater impact when combined with absences, gaps, incomplete narratives, and delays that recur throughout the films. As Mulvey wrote, Kiarostami acknowledges the gap between the tragedy and the filming of the aftermath of the earthquake, rather than trying to erase it. So Kiarostami incorporates all these strategies to make the viewer curious about what there is to see in the image. The search for what there is to see behind the 'reality' that Kiarostami shows leads the spectator into an awareness of the passing of time, which in turn confronts him with himself and leads him to reflect, thus making sense of what he sees.

Chapter 2: Creating as Subtracting

In the early 1980s, after the Islamic Revolution, Kiarostami had made a series of documentaries, but it was not until 1988, when he screened *Homework* (Mashgh-e Shab, 1988), that his view of the form changed. An audience member suggested that he rely less on his personal experiences and think more about the film as a way of documenting, where the audience could use it as a kind of reference. *Homework*, a feature-length documentary shot on 16mm, was therefore the starting point for a period of documentaries of a different kind that would allow the audience to put the pieces together themselves. The documentary was also a step forward in the sense that it questioned the artificiality of form and the effect of a camera on the observed environment. In the film, Kiarostami and his crew visit a public school in Tehran and film a series of interviews with the students. Kiarostami asks them questions such as: “*Why haven’t you done your homework?*” or “*What do you want to be?*” Many of the students lie that they like doing homework as much as they like watching cartoons. This raises the question of the reason they are lying. The children in the film are intimidated by the camera and very aware that they are being recorded. Therefore, even though the film is just an observation, it has some similarities with the authoritarian regime and its power, which is why the children lied. One child wants to be a pilot to kill Saddam Hussein, while otherwise he wants to be a doctor to save lies. Another says he will slap his future son seven times to discipline him, the same number of slaps he gets from his own father. Almost all of them know and have experienced punishment, while few of them understand what ‘encourage’ or ‘praise’ means. The last child cannot stop crying and apologising for no reason while holding up his arm as if asking for permission. He understands that Kiarostami belongs to the adult world, which involves punishment for homework not done. The following sequence shows students beating their chests in the schoolyard while reciting religious war chants. Kiarostami makes an off-screen comment that their performance is ‘wrong’ and so decides to turn off the soundtrack out of respect. The elimination of sound lends a distancing effect to the sequence, which consequently gives the viewer space to reflect. From here on, Kiarostami’s presence will play a crucial role in the films that follow. The children’s lies reveal to us a different story of what they think and feel from their parents, school and society. The crucial difference that distinguishes *Homework* from his previous work is precisely his presence and,

consequently, his absence. “*Kiarostami begins to foreground some of the implicit contradictions of his own deceptiveness in the pursuit of documentary truth.*”¹⁷

Homework comes close to the standard documentary form by focusing on real characters and examining their real lives. Kiarostami himself once said in an interview that he personally cannot define the difference between a documentary and a narrative film. He questions the mere objectivity of expression and claims that with every choice—from the choice of lens to the choice of scenes, etc.,—one intervenes in reality. He prefers to make an almost non-narrative cinema through which the spectator is not 'emotionally abused'. Moreover, he does not want to give advice to the spectator or make him feel guilty. He once said: “*I think a good film is one that has a lasting power and you start to reconstruct it right after you leave the theatre... there are films that nail you to the seat and overwhelm you to the point that you forget everything, but you feel cheated later. These are the films that take you hostage.*”¹⁸ In the interview, Kiarostami addresses an important theme that is prevalent in most of his films. Namely, he does not want to emotionally drain the viewer, which is reflected in the film's choice of protagonists. We rarely get to know their point of view and therefore cannot identify with them. Moreover, the main characters in his films are always authority figures of some sort, with whom the viewer finds it difficult to identify and therefore becomes a detached observer. Starting from a journalist/filmmaker in *And Life Goes On*, a director in *Through the Olive Trees*, a person looking for someone to bury him in *The Taste of Cherry* (Ta'm e guilass, 1997) and a tourist/reporter in *The Wind Will Carry Us* (Bad ma ra khahad bord, 1999). It is not because of their profession that the audience cannot identify with the protagonists, but because the director deliberately does not reveal details about their personal life stories, which gives the audience a distance. A good example is the character of Badii in *Taste of Cherry*. We never learn the reason behind his decision to commit suicide.

Both *Taste of Cherry* and *The Wind Will Carry Us* deal with the theme of a character's isolation from those around him. They can be seen as self-critiques that examine the problem of privileged filmmakers filming poor people.

It could also be said that the characters reflect the director himself and are there as his reflection on his own practice as a "media person" who exploits poor people. In

¹⁷ Mehrnaz Saeed-Vafa and Jonathan Rosenbaum, *Abbas Kiarostami* (Urbana: University of Illinois press, 2018), 14.

¹⁸ Kiarostami - Interview, YouTube (YouTube, 2008), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uSDWtdJKrG0&t>.

The Wind Will Carry Us, the protagonist asks another character, a young boy, Farzad, "Do you think I'm bad?" Kiarostami has confessed that it was indeed he who asked the boy this question when he was behind the camera. Behzad, the protagonist, is perhaps the closest thing to Kiarostami's critical self-portrait. "Kiarostami is critiquing the whole premise of his own filmmaking and implying that there's no ethical difference between a TV director making a documentary about an old woman's funeral and a celebrated filmmaker-artist like himself entering a village to make a feature."¹⁹

In an interview, Kiarostami commented on the technique of asking questions behind the camera during filming, admitting that he had always done it that way, except in scenes where two people are talking in the same shot, or when the person is on the phone while in reality listening to Kiarostami and then repeating his words. This tells us a lot about Kiarostami's way of making films, which is an important aspect in the film's consistent form and another factor that blurs the distinction between documentary and fiction. Indeed, Kiarostami almost always worked with non-professional actors, with whom he himself was in conversation, creating the dialogue and therefore not really using a script. Kiarostami usually films each of the actors in separate shoots and then edits the results together, leaving out his own lines. He gives the actors the freedom to choose their own words, but at the same time influences their behaviour and reactions. He once said: "...there is nothing coincidental in my films, even if there is no script. You have to achieve that the actors themselves believe in the dialogs, so that they can feel the emotion of the sentences they have to say."²⁰

Another of Kiarostami's trademarks, and an example of how his films deviate from a traditional documentary form, is the staging of his presence in his films. There are several ways in which his presence is expressed. From his presence as Abbas Kiarostami, whether on screen or off, to his presence in fictional characters in his films. As for his presence as Kiarostami himself, he appears at the beginning of *Homework* when we hear his voice explaining what the film is about. He also makes a brief appearance in *Through the Olive Trees*, when the film crew shoots several takes of a scene, in *Taste of Cherry* he appears with his own crew at the end of the film, and again in *A.B.C. Africa*, in which he appears several times. Mehrnaz Saeed-

¹⁹ Mehrnaz Saeed-Vafa and Jonathan Rosenbaum, *Abbas Kiarostami* (Urbana: University of Illinois press, 2018), 36.

²⁰ "Kiarostamijev Svet," *KINO!*, 2017, 11.

Vafa points out that he appears off-screen as well as on-screen in *Close-Up*. We hear his voice when he inquires about Sabzian at the police station, when he speaks to the Ahankhah family, to the judge in the courtroom, and in the final sequence with his camera crew as they follow Sabzian and Makhmalbaf. He also appears on screen when he visits Sabzian in prison. *"In all these situations, we are reminded that he's filming and become aware of the filmmaker's power, both as a judge and as someone who intervenes in reality"*²¹ Kiarostami appears through fictional characters in *Life and Nothing More*, *Through the Olive Trees* and *The Wind Will Carry Us*. Most of the time his presence indicates self-criticism, and when it takes shape in a fictional character, it is usually a middle-aged, middle-class man. In one of the interviews, Kiarostami made a statement about his presence in the fictional characters after being asked if *The Wind Will Carry Us* was a reflection of himself: *"Yes, but you have to look for this image in the main character. I also see myself in the little boy. In Close-up I find myself in the character of Ali Sabzian and in the Ahankhah family who are deceived. I'm like the character who lies, and at the same time I'm similar to the family who's been lied to. In all films, some characters are like the director, and in The Wind Will Carry Us, the woman in the café is like me, although she's a woman."*²²

The advent of the digital camera brought Kiarostami's cinema even closer to the ideal of transparency. The film *Ten* (2002) was filmed with two small video cameras attached to the dashboard of the car. It consists of ten parts, conversations between a young artist (whose character breaks the Western stereotype of an Iranian woman) and her passengers (her son, her sister, a bride, a prostitute, and an old woman on her way to prayer). The digital camera allowed Kiarostami to get even more spontaneous reactions out of the characters, with his usual method of being the one talking to the "actor" and trying to get their specific reactions out. It also allowed him unlimited duration and staging of the shot. Kiarostami commented on his film by saying: *"The film was created without being made as such. Even so, it isn't a documentary. Neither a documentary nor a purely fabricated film. Midway between the two perhaps... A scene occurs and I decide that it suits me. Later, I realize that*

²¹ Mehrnaz Saeed-Vafa and Jonathan Rosenbaum, *Abbas Kiarostami* (Urbana: University of Illinois press, 2018), 65.

²² Mehrnaz Saeed-Vafa and Jonathan Rosenbaum, *Abbas Kiarostami* (Urbana: University of Illinois press, 2018), 54.

one particular element was vital for the integration of the whole".²³ The film brings out the problems women face in Iranian society. In the film, the main character says, "To get a divorce, a woman has to say that she is being beaten or that her husband is on drugs." Her son, on the other hand, embodies the attitude of Iranian culture towards women who decide to get a divorce. The entire film is shot in a car, a very typical location for Kiarostami. The car setting creates an intimate atmosphere where the actors can either look at each other or not, they can talk or not, and there is no room for a camera crew, making the pressure on the actors much less intense. Though *Ten* differs in many ways from Kiarostami's earlier films, his principles are still there. Since he believes that ambiguity is what draws us to a work, and not understanding the subject or the story, the film is made up of absent spaces, as usual. In his 'master class' *10 on 10*, Kiarostami quotes Bresson, who said that we create not by adding but by subtracting. He goes on to say that the principle is just the opposite, like resorting to symbols and allegories. Kiarostami believes that by omitting, one can find out more about the power of cinema, which is clearly reflected in *Ten*. In the film, camera angles and number of shots are kept to a minimum. Also, we don't see the driver until her son drives away. We only see her son's reactions as she speaks, putting us in her point of view. There is a discontinuity not only in the shot-reverse shot, where reverse shots are absent, but also in sound and image, where the sound (of the main character talking, for example) creates an image in our minds. Other almost invisible characters are the old woman and the prostitute, whom we only see when they leave the car.

In the end, the combination of the filmmaker's and the viewer's thoughts creates a film that will be more original than a film that only aims to tell a story and impress the viewer.

The film mentioned earlier that perhaps comes closest to Kiarostami's critical self-portrait is *The Wind Will Carry Us* (*Bad ma ra khahad bord*, 1999). I will discuss how he uses absence and invisibility to not only create space for the viewer's imagination, but also to create an awareness that certain things should not be caught on camera. Also, how he uses camera distance, props, interrogation, and 'incomplete narratives'—all of which involve absence—to better translate this idea.

One of Kiarostami's common signatures in the film is the use of long takes, which invite the viewer to complete the narrative while giving them more time to really take

²³ Mehrnaz Saeed-Vafa and Jonathan Rosenbaum, *Abbas Kiarostami* (Urbana: University of Illinois press, 2018), 124, 125.

in the scene. *The Wind Will Carry Us* begins with a landscape shot that follows a car and the foregrounded voices of a Tehran film crew. They are searching for a specific Kurdish village where they plan to wait for a woman to die, so they could film a secret ritual of mourning women scaring themselves as a sign of grief.

The lack of information important to the story stimulates the viewer's imagination. Early on, we see only one person from the film crew - Behzad - arriving in the village Siah Dareh. Mehrnaz Seed-Vafa refers to Behzad's character as an embodiment of the universal, modern, alienated, anxious and preoccupied man. His guide is a young boy named Farzad. He leads Behzad up a steep hill that leads to the village. Meanwhile, we see the rest of the film crew struggling with their broken car. Due to the long camera distance, they are not visible. Behzad and the rest of the film crew position themselves at a high point in the village from which they can observe the house of the dying woman - Mrs Malek, who is another unseen figure. They want the reason for their arrival to remain secret, which is evident from Behzad explaining to Farzad that if anyone asks, the reason for their arrival is to find treasure. Not shortly after arriving, Behzad gets a phone call from his boss and later from his wife, both of whom we never get to see. The telephone prop is used as a metaphor for the distance between Behzad and the villagers. Each time he receives a phone call, he transforms into a paranoia of the modern world and heads up the hill in search of connection, while ironically getting further and further away from the village and its people. Behzad behaves ignorantly from the moment he arrives and shows a lack of respect. Some of the metaphorical props used to show this are his camera, which signals intrusion, and the act of taking a human bone found buried on the hill—signifying that he is taking possession of something intimate—signifying the abuse of filming the secret ritual and the search for something 'forbidden'. Behzad's visits to the hill take place repeatedly and are shown with long distant shots tracking his path. The next 'veiled' person who appeals to the viewer's imagination and who appears in the film is a man digging a ditch to aid in future communications, as he says. We catch only a glimpse of a girl turned away from us who has brought milk to the digger. Behzad wants to track her down, too. He finds her in an almost completely dark basement of a house. Her absent presence is another indication of Behzad's irresponsible actions. Despite her desire not to reveal herself to Behzad, he repeatedly invades her privacy, unaware of his transgressions. To arouse her curiosity, he repeatedly recites a poem by Forugh Farrokhzad, from which the film takes its title. In the book on Kiarostami, there is an interesting remark at Mehrnaz

Saeed-Vafa that refers to Behzad in the scene described earlier: “*And in the cellar he cites the poetry of Forugh, the film’s most important invisible woman, to the milkmaid in a mechanical way, knowing that she may not know the poet or even understand what he is talking about. All these invisible women are related to death or absence: Forugh died young in an accident, the poem that the milkmaid listens to is about death, his boss speaks to him about dying woman, and his wife speaks to him about a family funeral that she wants him to attend. Both conversations take place in the cemetery.*”²⁴ Meanwhile, the anticipation of Mrs. Malek's death is growing. When Behzad is not busy making his phone calls, he spends his time nervously asking for an update on her health and predicting her imminent death. After weeks of waiting and eating strawberries, the film crew leaves the village and Behzad behind and heads to the city. Another scene that signals the protagonist's carelessness takes place on the hill where Behzad is again on a phone call. He sees a slow turtle, which is a metaphorical prop for how his situation is evolving. He kicks it and drives away. Another important scene that also takes place on the hill is the falling of earth into the hole where the invisible digger is working. Behzad can be translated to the situation of the digger as a metaphorical warning of 'earth falling on him' as he continues to 'dig' into something that does not belong to him. According to Kiarostami, there are eleven absent or otherwise veiled characters in the film. Most obvious is the absence of the central female characters in the *mise-en-scène*. Everything to do with death seems veiled and hidden from curious eyes, something not to be intruded upon. Death is treated not only as a physical passage into nothingness, but as something unknown to the mind. The concept of death seems to be present in the film to make us aware of the things in life that we take for granted. The poem Behzad reads, which contains the title of the film - *The Wind Will Carry Us* - signals the inevitability of death. As in *And Life Goes On*, where Kiarostami shows how it is impossible to show the real truth of tragedy, *The Wind Will Carry Us* shares this quality. Kiarostami shows us that intimate moments associated with life and death should not be captured on camera, not only for moral reasons, but also because they cannot be truthfully portrayed. The reality of destroyed life after the earthquake or the grieving process of the women in *The Wind Will Carry Us* cannot be truthfully portrayed. In conventional cinema, these themes would normally be portrayed with an effect that makes the audience cry, for example. But Kiarostami does not want to use the audience in this

²⁴ Mehrnaz Saeed-Vafa and Jonathan Rosenbaum, *Abbas Kiarostami* (Urbana: University of Illinois press, 2018), 69, 70.

way. Rather, he creates these gaps and absences that go much deeper than the reaction of crying. It is a state that would come before the relief of tears. But in his films, the 'state of tears' doesn't happen. We are only confronted with a prolonged state of emptiness that connects, for example, with the subject of death on a much deeper level than an attempt at representation would. After a conversation with a doctor who brings Behzad down from the hill, his perspective begins to change. Then later, the doctor takes the protagonist to buy painkillers for the dying woman. During the ride, the doctor sparks something that wasn't there in Behzad before. The Doctor: *"When you close your eyes on this world, this beauty, the wonders of nature and the generosity of God, it means you'll never be coming back."* Behzad: *"They say that the other world is more beautiful."* Doctor: *"But... who has come back from there to tell us, if it's beautiful or not?"* Behzad abandons his project and leaves the village, though he cannot resist taking several shots of the women beginning their ritualised mourning. Apparently he realises deep down that he doesn't really want to film the intimate ritual. This is also indicated by the fact that he throws the bone into the water. It's his gesture, a metaphor for not taking something that doesn't belong to you (filming the ritual) and letting life take its course.

A key feature of the film, then, is a content that is excluded from the explicit narrative, something that is missing. In other words, something that is excluded from reality and makes us accept the reality of the film as reality. The missing is precisely the traumatic real to which Žižek refers in the next words: *"Lacan's distinction between reality and the Real: we cannot ever acquire a complete, all-encompassing, sense of reality—some part of it must be affected by the 'loss of reality', deprived of the character of the 'true reality', and this fictionalised element is precisely the traumatic Real."*²⁵ The Real²⁶ is the state of nature from which we have been forever cut off by our entrance into language and to which we were close to only as newborn children—a state in which there is nothing but need and no sense for separation between oneself and the external world. The Real continues to appear throughout our adult lives whenever we are made to acknowledge the materiality of our existence, a usually traumatic acknowledgement, since it threatens our very 'reality'. Kiarostami supplements the intimate moments of real life with fiction. Indeed, Žižek believes that

²⁵ Slavoj Žižek, *The Fright of Real Tears: Krzysztof Kieslowski between Theory and Post-Theory* (London: British Film Institute, 2009), 66.

²⁶ Guide to Literary and Critical Theory, accessed April 1, 2021, <https://cla.purdue.edu/academic/english/theory/>.

the way we approach reality is always within a fantasy framework, or in other words, how we approach reality in our daily lives is never direct. He says that reality cannot exist without the gaps that are filled with fiction—echoing Lacan who said that there is no reality without fantasy. So in order to truly perceive the reality of a film, as one perceives life, there must be something that is excluded from it. The absence or 'gaps in reality' in Kiarostami's films are there to underline the fiction and incompleteness of our sense of reality and to let us consciously fill those gaps with our own imagination. The truth of his films seems to lie in our coming to terms with the incompleteness of our own reality and the fact that some things cannot be 'truthfully' represented. *"At the most radical level, one can render the Real of subjective experience only in the guise of a fiction"*²⁷ The Real as the aspect of human experience that is beyond the grasp of language, is thus concealed in absence, which we can compare to Kiarostami's representation of death, which as something ungraspable, needs to be represented through absence.

What Kiarostami does, is to stage his absence instead of his presence. This absence has a presence, he calls it 'being without being', which for him is the main theme of *The Wind will Carry Us*. The absence of all the missing characters in the film allows the audience to create their characters from their own experience. Kiarostami explained that he wants to create the kind of cinema that shows by not showing. He wants the audience to create as much as possible in their minds, through creativity and imagination. To discover something that they weren't aware of before. *"We have a saying in Persian, when somebody is looking at something with real intensity: "He had two eyes and he borrowed two more." Those two borrowed eyes are what I want to capture—the eyes that will be borrowed by the viewer to see what's outside the scene he's looking at. To see what is there and also what is not there."*²⁸ The viewer is the one scanning the reaction of the other. Kiarostami once said; *"the gaze is important, not the subject matter"* and *"what is on the screen is already dead — the spectator's gaze breathes life into it."*²⁹ In other words, the role of the spectator is reinvented, he is heavily involved in the films.

²⁷ Slavoj Žižek, *The Fright of Real Tears: Krzysztof Kieslowski between Theory and Post-Theory* (London: British Film Institute, 2009), 72.

²⁸ David Sterritt, "With Borrowed Eyes: Abbas Kiarostami," *Film Comment*, April 1, 2021, <https://www.filmcomment.com/article/with-borrowed-eyes-an-interview-with-abbas-kiarostami/>.

²⁹ Jean-Luc Nancy, Mojdeh Famili, and Abbas Kiarostami, *L'evidence Du Film: Abbas Kiarostami* (Bruxelles: Y. Gevaert, 2001), 84.

It is not only the crossing paths, the games of chance and fate, the exposure of the surface of our common humanity and the blurring of fact and fiction that are iconic to the film. His commitment to unseen reality is dependent on the choice of mise-en-scène. In addition to what is visible in the mise-en-scène, what is not visible is of far greater importance in the film, as it not only 'reinvents' the role of the spectator, which will be discussed in the next chapter, but also critiques the camera as an apparatus of potential abuse, as well as the role of the director in relation to 'proper' representation.

Chapter 3: Cinema of Ambiguity and the Role of the Spectator

Taste of Cherry (Ta'm e guilass, 1997), a film that opened conversations about missing narrative pieces and their importance in Kiarostami's films, will be used in this chapter as the first example of how Kiarostami approaches the subject of death and, furthermore, gives the spectator a place to imagine himself.

Mr. Badii, the central character of the film, is a middle-aged man about whom we never learn much. As the story unfolds, we find out that he is driving around the outskirts of Tehran to find a person who would bury him in the event of a successful suicide attempt, or in another case, help him get out of the hole he has dug near a lonely tree. One could argue that Badii is still mulling over the idea of suicide and hasn't made up his mind yet. After all, he doesn't want to take just anyone. In fact, Kiarostami himself shared a similar opinion in an interview with Rosenbaum and Saeed-Vafa published in their book on Kiarostami: *"There are signs in the film that sometimes made me think that the man didn't really want to kill himself, that he was looking for a kind of communication with the other characters. Maybe that's one of the ruses of his loneliness, to engage people with his own emotional issues. He doesn't pick up a couple of workers at the beginning who would be willing to kill him with their spades; he chooses other people whom he probably thinks he can have a conversation with. So that gives us a signal that he's probably not searching for someone who would help him to kill himself."*³⁰ Badii's method is that he first tries to strike up a conversation with one person, whom he then invites to ride around with him. He picks out three passengers, whom he asks to help him, as mentioned earlier. Each of them represents a different age group and profession. The youngest is gripped by fear, the other two try to change Badii's mind, and the third person, a taxidermist, is finally the one who agrees to take on the task because he needs money due to his child's illness. They agree that the taxidermist will come to the site of the grave by the lone tree in the morning, call Badii's name twice, and help him out of the grave if Badii responds, or in the other case, cover his body with dirt. At the end of the day, Badii takes a taxi to the spot and lies down in the designated grave. We see Badii's face staring up at the sky, and then we see the sky crying in thunder, and the moon mentioned by the taxidermist when he argued that life is worth living for small pleasures like the taste of the cherry. What is strong here is that it is the man who looks at life with such poetry that will help Badii die. Then the screen goes

³⁰ Mehrnaz Saeed-Vafa and Jonathan Rosenbaum, *Abbas Kiarostami* (Urbana: University of Illinois press, 2018), 110.

completely black. Mulvey quotes Kiarostami as saying: “*One is aware that there is nothing there, says Kiarostami. But life comes from light. Here, cinema and life merge into one another*”.³¹ The next scene (epilog) we see is shot in the same location during the day. We see Kiarostami and his crew filming running soldiers. The actor playing Badii lights a cigarette and hands it to Kiarostami. Kiarostami announces the end of filming and the beginning of sound recording. Then we hear the sound of St. James Infirmary, which accompanies the camera lingering over the soldiers resting on the hill, the crew, and finally a car driving off into the distance, just before the credits roll. With the epilog shot in raw footage, Kiarostami again reminds us that we are watching a film. We are placed outside the narrative, away from the main character, towards our reflections on the film. What happens, in my opinion, is that everyone is given space to reflect. It's similar to the way Kiarostami used mirrors in *Certified Copy* and *The Wind Will Carry Us*. We find ourselves in the same position as the three passengers. They know as much about Badii as we do. So we are the fourth passenger, looking and reflecting on the darkness that surrounds Badii as he lies in his grave. But we can only guess what he's thinking, what brought him to the decision and ultimately what is his fate. The closest we get to Badii's inner life is when he tries to justify his decision by saying that when you are unhappy, you hurt other people, and hurting other people is a sin. It seems as though his inner emotions are conveyed through the landscape, the outskirts of Tehran full of construction sites, where the earth is constantly shown falling to the ground in great clouds as Badii contemplates his life, all leading to the metaphor of the storm in the end. Mortality and death represent an important theme in the film. However, it is the way in which Kiarostami deals with these themes that differs from conventional cinema. By showing the epilog after the supposed death of the character, after the black screen, he leads us to accept the continuity of life. Indeed, for Kiarostami, life is a movement without end, a constant search for something that keeps the movement going even within oneself. The theme of death is reciprocal to the theme of life, as one refers to the other. So there is a cycle present, also in the circles of Badii going around and always coming back to that spot by the lonely tree, which is a point in the circle where life turns into death, but where in return death points to life. We are ‘forced’ to recognise the inevitable truth of time. Jean-Luc Nancy's words reflect on this continuity: “*There is no resurrection: there is only one life, and nothing but life, and*

³¹ Laura Mulvey, *Death 24x a Second Stillness and the Moving Image* (London: Reaktion Books, 2015), 122.

that it continues and discontinues continuously... Existence resists the indifference of life-and-death, it lives beyond mechanical 'life', it is always its own mourning, and its own joy."³²

Many critics had claimed that the film is a hymn to life and to the message, referring to the one scene (with the taxidermist who wanted to commit suicide himself but then tasted a mulberry and decided not to) in which life and its small pleasures are praised. But that would lead to reducing the film's message to that one scene alone. Constantine Santas takes a different view, suggesting that Kiarostami's focus is primarily on the theme of suicide as taboo. "*Badii is relentless in not revealing his specific reasons for wanting to end his life. What is important to him is not his reasons for committing suicide, but his desire to do so... He is determined to carry out his plan though the viewer still hopes he will change his mind at the last moment.*"³³ Lastly, the epilogue could be seen as another world, a place of otherness, of another time, where the soldiers hold flowers instead of rifles, where the land is bright green and the trees are full of leaves, a world where Badii would still be alive. Kiarostami namely once said, discussing the film, that: "*hopefully, as I show in my films, a time will come when soldiers will have flowers in their hands as opposed to guns. I go on with that hope*".³⁴

Kiarostami tries to keep the main character at a distance from the viewer. Therefore, we do not learn much about Badii, nor about any other of Kiarostami's characters. He doesn't want to exploit the viewer's emotions. In the end, it all boils down to Kiarostami's typical attempt to pique the viewer's curiosity. The curiosity we seem to lose when we sit in a movie theatre and are told the 'truth,' what is real. We stop imagining, and that's what Kiarostami wants to change with the missing information, with signs that address the viewer, not directly through signs, but at the same time in a really direct way, basically trimming the reality of the film and letting the viewer realize that it's a movie they're watching, and that life goes on.

Another film in which absence serves as a technique of ambiguity is *Certified Copy* (2010). It is very different from Kiarostami's previous cinema, but the concern of the

³² Jean-Luc Nancy and Abbas Kiarostami, *L'évidence Du Film: Abbas Kiarostami = The Evidence of Film* (Paris: Klincksieck, 2007), 74, 76.

³³ Constantine Santas, Constantine Santas is Professor Emeritus at Flagler College, and Acquarello, "Senses of Cinema," Senses of Cinema, June 9, 2011, <https://www.sensesofcinema.com/2000/abbas-kiarostami-9/taste/>.

³⁴ "THE IRANIAN: Iranian Film, Abbas Kiarostami, Interview," THE IRANIAN: Iranian film, Abbas Kiarostami, interview, accessed April 10, 2021, <https://iranian.com/Arts/Aug98/Kiarostami/index.html?site=archive>.

idea of fiction and lies versus truth, reality and originality is further interwoven with ideas of truthfulness versus falseness and the search for originality, its illusions and imitations. The themes covered also connect to art, authenticity, perception and memory. It seems as if all these themes cover the essence of Kiarostami's cinema, considering that he seems to acknowledge how a person's experience, not just a film's, is at its core made of individual perception. Accordingly, the film is structured to allow a viewer to create their own individual meaning. *Certified Copy* is also different because it does not look like a documentary, and the question of authenticity and lies transcends the connection of documentary to truth and fiction to lies. The film jumps right into a search for truth in complete fiction. In it, we follow two main characters—James Miller, a British art critic, and a woman referred to as 'She' in the credits, as they wander around Tuscany, Italy one afternoon. As the film unfolds, we begin to have doubts that they are just strangers. The film doesn't tell us anything specific, so they could either be strangers pretending to be a couple, or a married/former couple pretending to be strangers. Their words and memories are contradictory and cause confusion. If this were a sign that they are not together and therefore have different memories, one could argue the opposite, considering that their individual memories would differ in any case (even if they were a couple). Ultimately, 'the truth' does not really matter. We, as viewers, must acknowledge the subjectivity of their 'truth'. In the scene where she is having lunch with her son, we get the idea that perhaps she once had a relationship with James, as she gets annoyed when her son says she is in love with him and asks why she didn't want James to sign the book with the boy's last name. On the contrary, the boy doesn't seem to recognise him, which would distract us from the fact that they might be married until the situation goes in the opposite direction. The meaning behind their words could always be interpreted differently. We can't tell if they are referring to the antiques/copies or their relationship, for example. James visits her in her underground room with little light where she sells copies and original Roman antiques. He tells her that they certainly have a mutual interest there. She replies that she just happened to end up there, in the middle of all things, without really caring about them—to which he agrees, but adds that she should keep her distance, as 'they' can be bad for her. He goes on to associate 'them' with copies. He says: *“Actually at home I prefer practical things, I only keep an antique in the house, if it fits with everything else I’ve got, otherwise it goes.”* Their words hold many meanings and the viewer is drawn into the journey into the labyrinth of meaning. The scene described holds another interesting part in which James is surrounded by

antiques and behind him is a mirror in which 'She' is reflected. Her reflection merges with all the antiques around James. The 'turning point' happens in a café scene when Miller tells of his earlier encounter with 'them' (a boy and a mother) near the famous copy of Michelangelo's David in Florence's Piazza della Signoria. James says that the mother had not told the boy that the statue is a copy, so he considered it a true original. 'She' is visibly moved by his story, as tears run down her cheeks when she remarks: "*Sounds quite familiar*". As they leave the restaurant, they begin to speak only French, which so far only she had spoken. The change of languages goes hand in hand with the change of emotions of their characters towards more affection. The language change in the film is another metaphor for the inability to truly identify with another person, to fully understand someone. 'She' supposedly has a sister whose name is Marie. In her words, Marie is a simple person who thinks a good copy is better than the original and likes to wear fake jewellery. She goes on to say that it is acceptable for Marie to think this way (unlike James Miller as an art critic who has written a book on the subject) because she is not trying to convert anyone and does not have a point of view, but lives in her own little world. This could apply to Kiarostami's role as an author and the question of his influence on the audience. At one moment James comments to Marie with the words: "*The way that she looks at her husband, changes his value*". His words could be interpreted in the context of how Kiarostami's films are only complete with the viewer and also in the context of the general perception of art. Later, James takes her to see the so-called 'original copy'—a painting called Musa Polimnia. Among other information in the film, this is also an invention of Kiarostami. In fact, the painting is in Cortona (where the film was also shot) and not in Lucignano as claimed in the film. Moreover, the painting is an original and not a copy. These little lies are an example of how they serve Kiarostami to reach a greater truth, they question the opposition between an original and a copy. In his book *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981), Jean Baudrillard quotes what Walter Benjamin said about the development of work of art in the age of mechanical reproducibility: "*The most advanced, the most modern form of this development, which Benjamin described in cinema, photography, and contemporary mass media, is one in which the original no longer even exists, since things are conceived from the beginning as a function of their unlimited reproduction.*"³⁵ This ties in with *Certified Copy* and the topics it deals with. Indeed, it does not matter to what theme of the film we apply these words, whether it is the search for the original that, say, 'She' is

³⁵ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* (University of Michigan Press, 1995), 68, 69.

looking for in James, the original she may have once fallen in love with, or whether we apply it to originality in art or truth. If things are already copies from the beginning, there is a certain originality in every copy. So these replicas or copies have a truth of their own. It does not matter in which part of the film the characters are 'fake' and in which real. What matters is the meaning behind each version of themselves. Art has changed, and so have the characters, and so it is pointless to embark on an endless search for originality, but rather to look for meaning in the copy itself. The latter can also be said for the search for meaning in fiction in Kiarostami's films. As James says in the film while referring to the writing of his book, but which could be applied to art and life in general, "*There are no immutable truths to fall back on.*" Kiarostami leaves it up to the viewer to create their own truth based on their individual interpretation of the story. As the narrative develops, memories and symbols are repeated in different versions, such as mirrors, or the different possible versions of the characters' story, which at first seem like pieces of a puzzle, but in the end nothing fits together perfectly and each truth chosen leads to a completely different conclusion. Another crucial scene is when 'She' and James meet an elderly French couple on the street near a statue of a couple in a caring pose, which in turn is reflected in a mirror in one scene. In a way, the statue, which we don't know if it's a copy or an original, has replaced her reflection from the beginning of the film. At first, the French couple looks like they are arguing. Only moments later, we are revealed that the man is actually screaming into his phone. The situation could be a visual metaphor for how Kiarostami changes meaning by revealing and concealing information. After James receives advice from the French man to simply put his hand on her shoulder, he takes the advice, and for a short time we think the situation is improving. They go to a restaurant where 'She' puts on a pair of custom jewellery and bright red lipstick. This seems to be a copy of what her sister Marie (if real) would do in her 'simple loving relationship'. We see her reflection in the mirror. This mirror scene is mirrored in the final mirror scene where Miller looks at himself. When he disappears from the screen, we are presented with the highest view of Lucignano so far—the last thing we see in the film is this view from the bathroom of the hotel where she and Miller might have spent their wedding night together 15 years ago. We see and hear two bells ringing, they are the same, but they ring differently. The window is open, as is the ending of the narrative, which is left to us. Accordingly, the ending presents itself again as one typical of Kiarostami, who never gives the viewer the 'satisfaction' of closure. Both art and reality are held together by individual memories, which in turn means that they

are always somehow constructed, copied, and varied. Fiction itself is a copy, and therefore the lies from which fiction is constructed form a copy, and copies are all we have left, which brings us back to Baudrillard who stated that value lies in representation, not originality. All of this brings us back to the title of this thesis and why I believe that in fiction lies truth. The idea of *Certified Copy* is also carried through its mise-en-scène. The most obvious metaphors are mirrors and reflections, reminding us not only of the issue of originality in art and in life, but also of the individualistic perspective that is the only way we look at things and the only way the characters in the film look at each other. So in the two scenes where the characters stare into a mirror, they are looking directly at us because the camera is there instead of the mirror, which is another metaphor for cinema. The scenes also emphasises their place between reality and fiction, as the roles are reversed and we as the audience are the ones being watched and become a part of the film. These moments are perhaps Kiarostami's most direct message to the audience, inviting them to partake in the film's meaning. The role of the spectator is therefore reinvented. Kiarostami's aim is to create believable illusions through cinema. He "holds up a mirror" to himself and shows how cinema can be our mirror. What appears at first glance to be reality—the reflection is in fact only such as the viewer sees it. The truth we receive from cinema, from reflection, depends heavily on ourselves. The mirror effect is achieved not only through the use of 'actual' mirrors in scenes, but also through the structure of the film, which holds up a mirror to the viewer through phrases said by the characters and other visual cues that make us aware of ourselves and what we expect to happen, which in turn never happens and actually makes us reflect again. The way he uses documentary and fiction also has the same quality. They become a mirror for each other, and the same goes for cinema and reality. His cinema serves as a mirror through which reality takes on meaning. When you watch a film, you create your own world. Based on everything that appears on the screen, the viewer creates his own universe. So the film doesn't speak to us about one reality, but about many realities.

Kiarostami believes that art should inspire the viewer to enter into another reality and therefore believes that a film should be so multi-layered that anyone, regardless of background, should be able to relate to it in some way. In an interview with Jean-Luc Nancy, Kiarostami said: *"At times I'm thinking: how can I make a film in which I wouldn't be saying anything? ... When we tell a story, we tell but one story, and each member of the audience, with a peculiar capacity to imagine things, hears but one*

story. But when we say nothing, it's as if we said a great number of things. The spectator is the one empowered."³⁶ Kiarostami's thoughts tell us something about what he is aiming for when creating a film. He rejects narrative cinema and the traditional belief that the auteur should be the ultimate 'sense-maker'. In his opinion, the only way to create a new cinema is to pay more attention to the role of the spectator. One could consider Kiarostami's cinema meaningless if one were not aware of this intention, since his films are made with a strong intention of ambiguity. The cinema of ambiguity, that is, an unfinished, incomplete cinema in which the spectator becomes active in order to fill the 'gaps'. He does not aim for his audience to be in agreement when they leave the cinema, but rather for diversity in thought and reaction.

According to Kiarostami, the filmmaker is only responsible for half of the experience. The filmmaker's films therefore complete themselves with the audience's thinking, with each individual recreating a different version of the film, thus completing it. As mentioned earlier, Kiarostami facilitates this interaction between the film and the viewer through the use of ambiguity, which is felt at different levels of a film's construction. Firstly, Kiarostami constructs his films in such a way that he constantly reminds the viewer that this is a film they are watching and that they should not mistake it for reality. In this way, he wants to say, firstly, that reality could be quite different and thus leaves the audience the space to think about its own meaning. Secondly, he avoids any possible emotional identification between the audience and the characters in the film. He does this by not giving the audience any information about his characters that would involve the audience emotionally, and so the audience becomes more involved when they think about the character and their characteristics. By drawing certain conclusions about them, the audience also reveals more about themselves, because you can't see something in others if you don't already have it in yourself. Distance therefore allows the viewer to project themselves onto the film. The lack of information about the characters is part of my third point, which is the gaps that Kiarostami leaves for the viewer. These gaps, which include inconclusive endings, are not meant to remain gaps, but to be filled in by the viewer.

In a conversation with Jean-Luc Nancy Kiarostami expressed his belief that cinema should be allowed to remain misunderstood if it is to be considered a great art form.

³⁶ Jean-Luc Nancy and Abbas Kiarostami, *L'évidence Du Film: Abbas Kiarostami = The Evidence of Film* (Paris: Klincksieck, 2007), 84.

“But, increasingly, cinema has become an object, an instrument of entertainment, which one has to see, understand, and judge. If you really consider it an art, then you cannot do without its ambiguity, it’s mystery.”³⁷

³⁷ Jean-Luc Nancy and Abbas Kiarostami, *L'évidence Du Film: Abbas Kiarostami = The Evidence of Film* (Paris: Klincksieck, 2007), 88.

Conclusion

As discussed throughout the thesis, Kiarostami violates the conventions of traditional cinema and therefore encourages viewers to find their own individual truth, which they assemble from the various layers of his films.

He blurs the line between fiction and reality through the technique of cinematic construction, which he first demonstrated in *Close-Up* (1990). He challenges the notion of documentary truth by showing the audience how he himself, as a director, shapes reality and makes a documentary fictional. In doing so, he makes the audience aware that they are watching a film that is actually constructed from lies. This is in contrast to the documentary form in which a documentary supposedly portrays reality that we as viewers are supposed to believe. Kiarostami believes that lies lead to truth when the viewer is aware of the fictional nature of his cinema, as this leads them to reconsider the truth of the reality they see, which then leads to the truth itself. "...an art that calls attention to its means wants us to recognise it as a construction, a matter of choice rather than necessity..."³⁸ It is important that we are aware that nothing in his films is accidental and that everything is a matter of choice and has its meaning or allows meaning to emerge through absence, discontinuity, detachment of sound from image, etc. Moreover, Kiarostami stages his presence or absence as a director in order to be self-critical of his role. He does this by including either only his voice, himself in person in front of the camera, or through characters in his films. In doing so, he focuses not only on himself and his role in portraying the truth, but also on the camera and its potential misuse. The first film in which it is clear that Kiarostami emphasises what should be excluded from the lens of a camera is *Taste of Cherry* (1997). He does this by creating absences or gaps in cinematic reality to make the viewer aware that some things are not representable, or rather should not be represented. In *Taste of Cherry* (1997) and *The Wind Will Carry Us* (1999), the absence has to do with death, which has played a crucial role in Kiarostami's film since the 1990 earthquake in Iran and is already significant in the last two films of the Koker trilogy, made after the earthquake. By revealing the constructed nature of the second film, he shows us that the truth of such a devastating tragedy can never be truthfully represented, just as, for example, Badii's reasons for committing suicide cannot be truthfully represented. Another purpose of absence in Kiarostami's films is to allow the audience to create their own individual

³⁸ Tom Paulus, Truth in Cinema: The Riddle of Kiarostami - Photogenie, Cinea, February 27, 2018, <https://cinea.be/truth-in-cinema-the-riddle-of-kiarostami/>.

meaning, truth, behind the absence. They are to project themselves into the film or let their imagination create forms and meanings. This principle is most evident in the film *Certified Copy* (2010). To achieve this effect, he uses not only absence, but also open endings and partial absence in the sense of missing information, which also makes it impossible for the audience to identify with the characters, as he sees this as emotional manipulation. The characters tend to be archetypal, which in turn invites the audience to imagine rather than become emotionally attached.

*"In every thing one creates, there's a part of reality one doesn't show. But you have to make it tangible."*³⁹ Tangibility is achieved through Kiarostami's techniques of using absence, incompleteness, gaps, and missing information—using cinema as a mirror for each individual's reality. Through these techniques, Kiarostami brings us into contact with something within ourselves that reveals a truth to us that is only revealed through this interaction. In *Close-Up*, when Sabzian and the real Makhmalbaf reconcile, sound problems seem to emerge. By the deliberate use of sound failure, when seemingly the most real scene takes place, Kiarostami is telling us that it is impossible for him to capture the truth. Makhmalbaf, the real director, and Sabzian, who pretends to be him, are an echo of reality and fiction, between which reconciliation—as a kind of achieved ultimate truth—is equally impossible. Just as sound interruption functions in *Close-Up*, distance in Kiarostami's films functions as a passage for self-reflection, merging cinema and the spectator's imagination, and thus ending in the confirmation of the spectator's truth.

³⁹ Jean-Luc Nancy and Abbas Kiarostami, *L'évidence Du Film: Abbas Kiarostami = The Evidence of Film* (Paris: Klincksieck, 2007), 92.

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