

## Abbas Kiarostami: The Earth Trembles

By [ADRIAN MARTIN](#)

At the beginning of the splendid documentary *Abbas Kiarostami: The Art of Living* (2003) by Fergus Daly and Pat Collins, the master Iranian director remarks:

For me the camera is exactly like a pen. It can be used by the common person, or it can be used by Baudelaire to create a great poem. We have an Iranian saying that if you want to become a good writer, you just keep writing and writing and writing. So in response to the question of how to develop a good aesthetic vision, I can say that you have to keep seeing and seeing and seeing.

But what exactly is this *seeing* in the work of Abbas Kiarostami? A few years ago, in a *Film Comment* poll, I unhesitatingly selected Kiarostami as the person who, for me (and, it turned out, for many others), best and most decisively defined cinema in the 1990s. I appended a few words: "The filmmaker who has used the humblest, most modest elements of life, landscape and cinema to generate the most profound, moving and radical artistic gestures of our time". But the precise nature of the road from simplicity to complexity in Kiarostami's cinema remains enigmatic, hard to get a focus on. There's a problem in over-stressing the simplicity – as if he were a Franciscan child-innocent or a hyper-humanitarian Warhol, 'finding reality' and letting the camera roll as he absents himself as demiurge – and there's equally a problem in stressing the complexity, as if the only good movies today must pass through a filter of baroque artifices and convoluted deconstructive paradoxes. Between the self-reflexive games of *Close-Up* or *Through the Olive Trees* and the bone that just flows down a stream, saying everything in *The Wind Will Carry Us*, something eludes us in this magnificent body of work – which is just as well, because that's a sign of just how great an artist he is.

To my mind, there is a television side to Kiarostami's work – even if, for a long time, he has had nothing literally to do with television production – and a cinema side. And I believe much critical discussion of Kiarostami privileges the television side, or turns him into a kind of tele-artist, and ignores the cinema side. Maybe it's a blind spot generated by the inescapable association and affinity of Kiarostami with Roberto Rossellini, who travelled from neo realism to intimate cinema to television. But where Kiarostami is going – I hope - is not where Rossellini went.

Let me explain. If you take Kiarostami as essentially a 'transparent' filmmaker – if what he is showing are modest 'facts of life' in a simple, unostentatious way, however complex the final effect or vision – then it is easy to watch his films on television and receive them 'whole'. Television reduces aesthetics to mere 'information'. Thus the idea of the film screen as a kind of static or mobile 'tele-window' which informs so much writing on Kiarostami, even the sophisticated rumination of philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy (for whom Kiarostami, in a conceptual twist, is the mediator of an already mediated world). The director



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himself has fallen prey to this slide into the merely televisual: *ABC Africa* – which I have to say is his worst film – is pure television reportage. Like any TV crew, Kiarostami and his assistants are led around by the nose for a couple of days, just tourists on a guided, carefully prearranged stroll. They develop no insight into Africa, pursue no investigation: in that sense, it's bad television reportage, a bad documentary. And Kiarostami embraces there the worst temptation of digital filming – that is, to just walk into a place and instantly shoot whatever is there in front of you, thinking it is somehow going to be expressive or telling because it is a 'virginal vision', a first look at something. But a first look, in itself and in its spontaneity, is worth nothing, guarantees nothing.

We forget that Kiarostami (at his best) makes cinema. While I have experienced a number of his films on video alone, I had the enormous fortune of seeing *Where is the Friend's House* at the Singapore Film Festival in the early 1990s, and *Taste of Cherry*, his greatest film, at the Melbourne Film Festival in the late '90s. These were the formative and essential Kiarostami experiences for me. Because there is a *monumentality*, not just a minimalism, to his work. It is for the same reason that we must always see the films of Tsai Ming-liang (as Jonathan Rosenbaum has pointed out) and Hou Hsiao-hsien on a big screen. The earth just does not 'exist' in Kiarostami, it *trembles*. It is that vibration – the imperceptible aftershocks, as it were, of the earthquake in *Life and Nothing More ...* – married to the stillness of the shot or the steady, gliding car movements, to the duration of the images and their rhythm, to the unstable exchanges between inward feeling and outward pose in his actors, which creates the monumental effect of cinema in Kiarostami. And it is a tension that finally explodes in *Ten* (2002), a film that surprised many of his followers and announced a new, radical turn in his career. The film is, as well as everything else, formally electric: reducing cinema to the absolute essential of a two-point *mise en scène* and the most basic editing, he turns the car into a veritable cinematic apparatus: there is angle of vision (so important to the art of driving!) and a 'cut' cued by every opening or closing of the door, which is like a lightning bolt each time it articulates a scene.

We forget the aura of menace, the fear of the unknown, the threat of death which animate Kiarostami's work, like a subterranean stream. It is there in the boy's journey in *Where is the Friend's House*, there in the fragile, collapsing earth in *The Wind Will Carry Us*. And it is above all there as Badii lies in his makeshift grave in *Taste of Cherry*, a scene that does not survive the TV-video transfer: with its flashes of lightning in the blackout of night, with its sensurround rumbling of thunder, with its unbearably poignant mystery of whether this man will live or die, the scene takes us close to an absolute (and absolutely cinematic) experience of existential negation, more powerfully than any horror movie. It is the breathtaking transition of this cinematic limit-experience, this intimation of a lonely apocalypse, to the airy lightness of a video-in-progress that makes the ending of *Taste of Cherry* so radical - not just the comparison between (or continuum of) fiction and reality.

Without the infusion of cinema, Kiarostami's films can pass over into banality, into United Nations-approved 'message pictures' about world peace or individual compassion (again, the banality of *ABC Africa*). Kiarostami (his interviews make this abundantly clear) is not a specialist in 'cultural difference' or cultural specificity or in much of anything that cultural intellectuals hold dear these days. It is a folly to overload his films with this kind of baggage. He cares only about what it is to be present in the world – the world as a daily and as a philosophical entity – and how to register that consciousness, then the interactions (the Kiarostamian 'stories') that proceed from this consciousness.

He fashions tales of chance interactions, encounters, random conversations that subtly change the course of people's destinies.

The brilliant French critic Alain Bergala comments, in *The Art of Living*, that all Kiarostami's films are about a strange *arrangement*: someone

with a problem stumbles upon someone else who – usually unknowingly – holds the key that will unlock that problem. In *Ten*, for the first time, this process of arrangement takes a bleak turn, because the film addresses the patriarchal conditions of Iranian culture.

In *Ten*, a woman (Mania Akbari) drives to the spot where she will pick up her garrulous son, Amin (Amin Maher). When she parks, we see through her car door a van from which Amin emerges to cross the road. There is a tense, shouted exchange, through the passing traffic, between the woman and her ex-husband concerning how many hours she can have the child and when and where she must return him. The woman drives off. A moment later, the van pulls up alongside the car; more heated words are exchanged in motion, and the van zooms away.

This scene is perfectly keeping with the peculiar, formal constraints that Kiarostami chose for making *Ten*: not a single scene in it takes place outside the woman's car. But it also speaks volumes about modern life, and the role of the car as the 'ultimate private space' - more of a functioning home than anything that has four, solid walls. And, as some commentators have noted, Kiarostami's digital cameras mounted on the dashboard in *Ten* not only capture of the intimacy of life in cars, but also suggest the cold eye of the surveillance camera - in other words, the convergence of what sociologists call the private and public spheres.

It is a curious coincidence that both Kiarostami and Claire Denis in *Friday Night* (2003) should, at the same moment, alight on the car as the central subject of a film. It is another curious coincidence that they happen to be the only filmmakers whom Jean-Luc Nancy has written on at length. Nancy is a commentator whose work obsessively addresses the themes of encountering 'the stranger', and of the difficulties of forming a workable community in a fragmented world – themes that resonate deeply for countries like Australia that are currently grappling with a so-called 'refugee crisis'.

As the Australian cultural theorist Meaghan Morris once argued, the car is, in cultural terms, a curious kind of uncertain 'border space' – it seals in the passengers in their rigidly circumscribed, social roles (*Ten* evolved from a project about a psychoanalyst and her patients), but it also cannot help but let in the multifarious influences of the outside world and its changing history.

This is partly what *Ten* – the most aggressively urban film that Kiarostami has so far made – is about. Everyday day life is portrayed as a small-scale but ceaseless war (each of the ten scenes is introduced with the sound of a boxing-match bell) in which traditional and progressive values duke it out, especially around the role of women in present-day Iranian society. And while there is a heavy pull towards the dour triumph of patriarchy, the bustling world which constantly forces its presence on the characters and us through the car windows suggests other possibilities. Kiarostami finds a simple but brilliant way to express this dynamic: making his actors actually contend with real streets, traffic and strangers takes them out of the interiority of their little lives and stories, and puts them in a constantly surprising relation to the real world.

In light of all this, we can read, in the book *Movie Mutations* (British Film Institute), the statement made by Kiarostami about his time in Africa which is every bit as poetic as his best films, poems or photographs:

I don't think that either I or anyone else who was in that strange atmosphere could remember that he was a filmmaker. They didn't know me and I didn't know myself. We were witnessing scenes that made a deep impression on us. It was something like the Day of Judgement. On that Judgement Day, who can remember what he does for a living?

We forget the tension that constitutes Kiarostami's cinema, and indeed the films of others who have been inspired or influenced by him. An unbelievable tension, arising from that subtle trembling, which always builds to an apparition, a *vision*, in the final moments of his films. What we see in those moments, those final shots, is never quite what we expected to see, and it suspends what we may have thought to see resolved – this is Kiarostami's immense, and immensely sly, storytelling skill at work. Kiarostami's persona can evoke the modest teller of folk tales or a reciter of poems, but in cinematic terms he is a creator of *gestures* as powerful as those in Almodóvar or Lynch. I don't mean the physical gestures of his performers, but the sense of an epiphanic moment that is slowly arrived at, carefully nurtured, and delivered as if with the clarity of an Eastern mystic finally pointing a finger at the appearance in the world of something that has been prepared in the spectator's mind: something amazing and thrilling to behold, a *revelation*, like those plaintive figures walking and wrangling (undecidably) far into the distance at the conclusion of *Through the Olive Trees*.

This final shot is a point-of-view shot (from the director's alter ego) "maybe not literally, but in effect ... because what is not possible in real life becomes possible in film", as Mehrnaz Saeed-Vafa has commented. Isn't this a way of saying that a matter-of-fact ('humble') point-of-view shot can metamorphose, magically and dramatically, into a *visionary* moment - overflowing with all the constitutive tension of the lived, immanent world but also allowing a glimpse or an intuition (as it at last takes leave of the spectator) of a transcendental void?



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