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Where is the Revolution: An Interview with Abbas Kiarostami

by Shiva Rahbaran Sep 07 2016

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[Abbas Kiarostami. Image by Mohammad Hassanzadeh via Wikipedia]

Abbas Kiarostami agreed to give an interview only reluctantly. I reminded him insistently that the absence of a filmmaker with whom film is supposed to end (see below), would be catastrophic for a project whose subject is post-revolutionary New Iranian Cinema. Eventually, he agreed. Sitting across from me, he grins ironically. Kiarostami says that ever since Alberto Elena decided to quote Jean-Luc Godard, “Film begins with D.W. Griffith and ends with Abbas Kiarostami,” on the cover of his monograph *The Cinema of Abbas Kiarostami*,[1] that remark is mentioned every time someone says or publishes anything about Kiarostami. He is at pains to point out that Godard made this statement only in relation to *Life, and Nothing More* (1992), also known as *And Life Goes On*, the second part of Kiarostami’s *Earthquake Trilogy*, which is also known as the *Koker Trilogy* (the other two parts being *Where is the Friend’s Home? (1987)* and *Through the Olive Trees* (1994)). However, Kiarostami explains, the statements that Godard has made about him in the last ten or fifteen years clearly show that Godard no longer believes that film ends with Kiarostami.

I ask him what he means by that. He just smiles, waves his hand and says, joking aside, that talking about New Iranian Cinema is quite difficult for him. First and foremost, he has a problem with discussing the idea of a New Iranian Cinema “after the Islamic Revolution,” because this is tantamount to accepting the wrong thesis (from his point of view) that the revolution played a crucial role in the development of Iranian cinema. From him, this theory is a falsification of history. The Iranian New Wave had already arisen before the revolution. He is convinced that those who earn their daily bread in government and quasi-governmental film institutes spread rumors about the benefits of the revolution for fear that they might lose their jobs if they did not. For Kiarostami, the revolution actually delayed the growth of a very fruitful artistic movement that had already started decades before the 1979 Iranian Revolution. One could even say that Iranian art cinema grew *despite* and not because of post-revolutionary censorship, nepotism, and dogmatism. The only positive side of the revolution for Iranian cinema (and any form of art and literature in Iran today) is its ability to advertize films in the West and the rest of the world. Although Kiarostami sees this as a "negative phenomenon.”

Kiarostami believes that the revolution had no influence whatsoever on his art. Although he sees himself very much as an Iranian citizen, he cannot relate to post-revolutionary cinema and does not see his films as part of a post-revolutionary cinematic movement. The revolution did not create a favorable artistic or intellectual environment in which he could make his films; the revolution was just an event—a historical event—that passed him by, and he does

not regard himself as part of a genre that is sold as “post-revolutionary Iranian cinema.” In other words, he is neither a “revolutionary” nor a “post-revolutionary” filmmaker. He knows that he is often accused of “escapism,” of not reflecting the reality and the zeitgeist of post-revolutionary Iran in his films. He attributes this to the fact that he strives not so much to understand the phenomenon of the revolution as to get closer to the reality that surrounds him. In pursuing this goal, he “depicts” life in Iran sometimes in a very realistic and sometimes in an otherworldly, poetic manner.

This milieu is vital to his art and, in a way, his reason for staying in Iran. In his view, many important filmmakers such as Golestan, Shahid, Saless, and Naderi have been unable to make the films that they deserved to make precisely because they left their native country and were unable to establish roots in exile. This is why Kiarostami, despite much hardship, has stayed in Iran.[2]

His beginnings as a filmmaker, he reminds me, go back to the 1960s and 1970s—the years in which he worked with the Kanoon (Institute for the Intellectual Development of Children and Young Adults) under the management of Lili Arjomand and the auspices of Queen Farah Dibah. I tell him that I am aware that his pre-revolutionary films from these decades, such as *Nan va Koucheh* (*The Bread and Alley*) and *Gozaresh* (*The Report*), made respectively in 1970 and 1977, introduced him to the world as an important filmmaker of the Iranian New Wave. However, it was only after the revolution that he became known as a world-class cineaste: he was awarded the *Palme d’Or* for his *Taste of Cherry* twenty years after the making of *The Report* and eighteen years after the 1979 revolution. Kiarostami reacts to this observation with his unique sense of humor. Who knows, he muses, he might have won the *Palme d’Or* just the same without a revolution. There is no way of proving whether the revolution facilitated, however arbitrarily, his success at the Cannes Film Festival, since the revolution had already taken place by then. From his point of view, the purported connection between the revolution and his films has been fabricated by people who secure their living through close ties to the government and its “so-called” cultural institutions. These fabrications, Kiarostami says, are enhanced further as universal “truth” by the naive post-rationalizations of scholars, critics, and academics in the West. They have, however, no connection whatsoever to reality.

I seize on the clues I discern in this remark and invite him to help me find out the truth or myth behind statements about his role in New Iranian Cinema. He replies that reality is itself a fabrication and I am reminded of his frequently quoted aphorism: “Lie. The shortest way to truth is to lie.” After a short pause, he politely agrees to be interviewed by me and contemplates my questions with artistic and intellectual curiosity, in the hope of getting closer to the truth.

A Note about the Interview

The interview with Kiarostami took place during three long sessions between January 2008 and May 2009 in his house in north Tehran—a house filled with old Persian rugs, glass and ceramic ware, modern European furniture, Kiarostami’s own photographs and books, and, most importantly, as Kiarostami proudly points out, two prints on the living room wall by Kurosawa—dedicated to Kiarostami by the master himself.

Initially Kiarostami was not very keen on giving an interview and said that in the last ten years or so he had not given any inter- view for publication in Iran—on account of the shameful treatment he had received at the hands of the Iranian press after winning the *Palme d’Or* for *Taste of Cherry* in 1997.[3] He first suggested giving me a photograph as an answer to each of my questions (Kiarostami is a celebrated photographer whose work was shown at a major exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 2007). He said that he distrusted words as a means of expressing the truth and felt he was “clumsy” with them. I reminded him that, his own assessment notwithstanding, he has quite a reputation among the connoisseurs of Persian poetry as someone who knows how to work with words.[4] We finally agreed that I would not record his interview. For this reason Kiarostami’s answers to my questions are not presented as direct quotations.

The Interview

Shiva Rahbaran (SR): I start by explaining to Kiarostami that the aim of this project is to understand the influence of the Islamic Revolution on New Iranian Cinema and the influence of this cinema on the post-revolutionary society in which it is produced. I want to approach this question from the viewpoint of those filmmakers who live and work in Iran. Iranian film, I suggest, has turned into an alternative identity card for a country that is mainly represented in the Western media by angry, chador-clad women and bearded men burning flags in front of Western embassies in Tehran. My first question is, how do filmmakers in Iran see their role in changing the rules of the game in Iran itself (and thereby creating pockets of freedom), on the one hand, and changing the perception of Iran in the West (and the rest of the world), on the other?

Abbas Kiarostami (AK) does not deny his Iranianness at all. He says that he can only work so long as he lives in Iran, in the framework that he has created for himself in this corner of the world. During the interview he refers to this framework as his own self-made paradise. However, he cannot see any relation between his films and post-revolutionary cinema. He believes that the revolution has passed him by.

SR: How could he claim such a thing, I object, when his films are mostly highly realistic and, like a delicate seismograph, record the psychological and emotional condition of individual Iranians within their social and

natural surroundings?

AK says that the films he made before the revolution had exactly the same quality. Neither the revolution nor the war changed his way of filmmaking. This does not mean that he as a citizen did not come into contact with these disturbing events. He too had to stand in long queues in the early years after the revolution to get milk-rationing coupons for his young children. Like hundreds of thousands of Iranians, he too had to leave Tehran in haste with his family for the Caspian shores in search of the shelter that the Alborz Mountains offered during Saddam Hussein's missile offensives against the capital. However, none of these experiences forced him to make a film about the revolution or the war.

SR: I ask him whether he therefore denies the importance of the 1979 revolution for the development of Iranian cinema and its popularity internationally.

AK clearly believes that the theory that the revolution promoted the international success, progress, and appeal of Iranian cinema is an instance of post-rationalization—an academic myth that has been created by so-called "intellectuals" and "scholars" both inside and outside Iran who are dependent on the regime for their livelihoods and for funding their research and symposia on Iranian cinema. It is very difficult to undo the myth of the usefulness of the revolution for the progress of Iranian cinema. Too many people make a living by promoting the myth. They want us all to forget that the Iranian New Wave had actually started two decades before the revolution and was highly regarded internationally. No one can say for sure that the revolution was the catalyst for the attention that Iranian cinema enjoys today. Kiarostami is convinced that the revolution has, in fact, distanced him as a filmmaker from his Iranian audience, or severed the ties between his Iranian audience and his films. The official and unofficial means of censorship have hindered his artistic activity and damaged his relationship with the people of Iran. He jokes that perhaps the only positive thing that could be said about the usefulness of the revolution to his films was that it honed his ability to turn a negative situation into a positive one. Good can come out of evil, God willing. The revolution forced him to use his imagination and turn a bad situation into a positive one by taking refuge in his paradise--his house and studio in the breezy outskirts of northern Tehran, his peaceful retreat amidst the hot, unstable, and easily excitable Iran, where he could live, paint, take photos, make films, and write poetry. In this paradise he can turn what he witnesses in society into art. The revolution has not influenced his filmmaking but it has *accidentally* (as it has no *will*, despite the claims of the revolutionaries) produced a climate in which he's been able to use his imagination and make his films. But for that, he concludes, he must thank himself and not the revolution!

SR: But, I persist, he cannot deny that this event—be it an accident or "the will of history" or that of Allah—was a very good PR agent for Iranian cinema worldwide and especially in the West. The most important festivals in the West are very eager to show Iranian films, perhaps because Western audiences have always been very curious about the fact that such wonderful productions can come out of such a "monstrous" country.

AK does not deny that the West, with its insatiable appetite for sensation and "news" from post-revolutionary Iran, has always been influenced by publicity and propaganda. However, he insists that one should not confuse the attention that Iranian films receive at Western festivals with the progress and quality of this cinema since the revolution. That applies especially to his films, where the revolution had hardly any influence on their development and style.

SR: I challenge this assertion: how can he ignore the influence of this global attention—which he attributes to the attractiveness of the revolution to the sensation-addicted West--on his artistic development?

AK clarifies that he does not ignore at all the influence of global attention on the development of his films, because this attention has spared him to a great extent from the sanctions and restrictions that many Iranian filmmakers in Iran are forced to grapple with. Unlike the majority of his colleagues, he does not have to get "permission" from the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance in order to make a film. He jokes that, now that he has turned into a "world-class" filmmaker, partly thanks to the negative perception of the revolution, he can make his films in Iran but have them produced and distributed abroad.[5] However, he explains, this does not mean that the revolution as a historical event has affected his *style* of filmmaking. He is not a revolutionary filmmaker whose style was revolutionized after 1979. It was not the revolution that enabled him to make good films. His first feature film *Zang-e Tafrih* (*Breaktime*) was screened in 1972—seven years before the revolution. The film's realist and minimalist style, together with its poetic flights, was admired by international critics. This small example, he argues, shows clearly that it was not thanks to the revolution that he has become what he is today.

SR: So, in a way, I ask, the revolution "freed" him from the revolution and its constraints by attracting the attention of the West—albeit unintentionally—to Iranian cinema in general and his films in particular?

AK reminds me that the Iranian New Wave started in the 1950s and 1960s. Mehrjui's *The Cow*, released in 1971, for example, won the International Critics' Award at the Venice Biennale some seven or eight years before the revolution.[6] He also reminds me that his own taboo-breaking film *The Report* (1977), which contained explicit bedroom scenes, was made three years before the revolution. In the early years of the revolution the films of important Iranian cineastes were not only subjected to censorship, but some were burnt in their entirety and there are no surviving copies. So one could say that the revolution did not help our cinema to progress but in fact put it back by

about seven or eight years. It took more than seven or eight years, he explains, before he could make a film such as *Where is the Friend's Home?*. Many such films spent years in the vaults of the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance before being screened.

SR: I go on to say that many of his successful films were made during the years that Mohammad Beheshti was in charge of the Farabi Cinema Foundation. Several critics and scholars believe that this institute played a considerable role in the promotion of New Iranian Cinema both in Iran and internationally. In the interview he gave me for this book, Beheshti claims that the Farabi was like a gardener that prepared the ground for art films by weeding out Hollywood films, shallow foreign films, and cheap Film Farsi productions.

AK replies that many scholars and critics are responsible for the "Farabi Myth." An institute such as the Farabi is interesting to an academic researcher who has to examine Iranian cinema in a political or historical or sociological framework. People who can get their academic teeth into this subject will find it enlightening. On the other hand, we have the "exile" critics, who may well denounce those Iranian filmmakers who depended on the Farabi as accomplices of the regime. And last but not least, he adds, the Farabi offers regime-friendly critics and scholars the evidence that New Iranian Cinema is one of the many fruits of the "Glorious Islamic Revolution."

SR: I counter that the Farabi acted as a sort of mediator between the fanatics at the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance and the filmmakers. I ask whether he does not think that the Farabi was quite successful in modifying the ministry's policies and making it possible for people like himself to make good films in a hostile environment.

AK replies that the Farabi did not owe its existence to the revolution. The Farabi's role model, he explains, was the Kanoon (Institute for the Intellectual Development of Children and Young Adults), an organization under the excellent management of Lili Arjomand, who was a true mediator between the royal court and art film-makers under the shah. Of course, the Farabi did try to take on a similar function under Muhammad Beheshti, who had a genuine interest in cinema. He did try to be a good "gardener," as he claims, weeding out immoral, decadent foreign and home- grown films and preparing the ground for art films to flourish. However, he was not as successful as the Kanoon. The reason for this, he suggests, was mainly the ideology of the post-revolutionary regime. The majority of the mullahs and Islamic functionaries had a fundamental problem with cinema per se and believed it to be a decadent Western art form at odds with Islamic values.

SR: I put it to him that, despite Islamic censorship, many good films that broke a lot of Islamic taboos were made in those years.

AK explains that censorship in Iran is very different from that in other Islamic countries. In Iran it is a personal thing; the rules are made according to the tastes of the person in charge, not according to a clear set of rules and regulations. One censor might allow something that another censor had strictly banned a couple of years ago—or vice versa. In Kiarostami's eyes, the Farabi did not really succeed in moderating most aspects of censorship. It hardly had any influence on the wheelings and dealings of the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance. All the Farabi ever did was give funding to some filmmakers, while other films had to stay for years and years in the vaults of the ministry before being either destroyed or given screening permission, but only after numerous scenes had been cut out. This alone is evidence enough that the Farabi had little inf luence on the mechanisms of the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance.

SR: Even though he may not agree that the Farabi contributed to the development of New Iranian Cinema after the revolution, I ask whether he will admit that it had considerable influence in introducing it to the world. I tell him that Muhammad Beheshti recalls the difficulties he faced when Iranian films were sent to foreign festivals. According to him, the restrictions of the regime were not too bad compared to the "censorship" he had to grapple with in Western countries, namely, the quiet "sabotage" of Iranian films owing to the political sentiments of the festival coordinators. They would either delay the screening of the films for a variety of reasons—he remembers that "Iran" was spelt "Iraq" on quite a few occasions—or they would say the film was of poor quality. All in all, he remembers that he had to fight for years after the revolution before a few independent minds realized the high quality of these films and could force them through the barriers of censorship and nepotism.

AK does not really think much of this. He remembers the difficulties Iranian films faced at festivals but that, he says, was not because the coordinators were negatively inclined towards Iran but because of the poor quality and technical shortcomings of the films themselves. Many of the audience left the cinema soon after screening began, either because they could not make out what was being said or because the old and substandard celluloid kept melting in the projectors. He believes that the most important reason for the miraculous survival of Iranian film is the exact opposite of what Beheshti claims; it only survived because of the few curious Western viewers who watched the films in their entirety, perhaps because of their curiosity about the negative aspects of the revolution. They asked themselves, how could such films come out of a country in the grip of an anti-Western revolution? The revolution had turned Iran into a land of mystery for them.

SR: I ask him whether, apart from this negative perception of the revolution, which made Iranian films interesting to Western viewers, Iranian cinema also benefited from post-revolutionary censor- ship, in the sense that regulations and restrictions encouraged creativity—in other words, that necessity was the mother of invention.

AK repeats that the Iranian New Wave started more than two decades before the revolution and was not created by it. He also notes that cinema had to grapple with censorship under the Shah too—although back then censorship was not directed against cinema per se. He agrees that censorship benefited creativity but only to a very limited extent. For example, architects might say that they built their best houses on a very difficult piece of land or with very limited financial means. However, the censorship that post-revolutionary Iranian cinema had to grapple with went beyond "restrictions." It had and still has a very strong ideological streak that is fundamentally against art in general and cinema in particular. As far as he's concerned, he never benefited from the policies of the post-revolutionary art and film institutions. They neither encouraged him nor gave him financial help nor promoted his films. Not only were his films not subsidized but they were restricted, in the sense that they were granted only very short-term screening permission and therefore were unprofitable for large cinemas that could only cover their costs by showing the films for longer periods. He would go so far as to say that the policies of the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance and the mediations of the Farabi even managed to distance his Iranian audience from him. Maintaining his sense of humor, he declares that the great favor that these institutions did him was to promote him—inadvertently—outside the country as an "underground" Iranian filmmaker! Such a promotion brought him a lot of attention from real cinephiles, such as Gilles Jacob,[7] who never wavered in their enthusiasm for his films.

SR: Changing the subject, I tell him that one of the most obvious facets of censorship in Iran concerns the image of women. Some critics believe that post-revolutionary censorship had a positive effect on the image of Iranian women in cinema; that the new parameters freed Iranian actresses—and thus women —from their role as sex-objects. In other words, I suggest, these scholars believe that "cutting out" the decadent, sexual dimension in films enabled female actors to portray themselves as complete human beings.

AK does not agree. He believes that "cutting out" the sexual aspect of female characters has had an adverse influence on viewers. This policy—whether it is applied on the big screen or on the streets of Iran--has led society to pay even more attention to the sexuality of women. He believes that women today are looked at and look at themselves much more voyeuristically than under the Shah, where they themselves could decide how to convey their sexuality. In his view, post-revolutionary censorship has made it much harder for filmmakers to approach the imagery of womanhood in a realistic, authentic manner.

SR: I tell him that he is often accused by his critics of being uninterested in women's issues at all. Some, I add, even say that his lack of interest is calculated because by concentrating on showing children and men in the lovely Iranian countryside he has been able to maneuver himself away from the attentions of the Islamic censors.

AK finds this view very unfair. He protests that he does not like to display the wounds that Islamic censorship has inflicted on his films and on his soul just so as to be celebrated by the Iranian diaspora as a martyr! He completely disagrees with the idea that he is a calculating and self-promoting filmmaker. His interest in children as protagonists goes back to his work with the Kanoon in the 1960s and 1970s, where he was one of the founding members of its filmmaking department. As far as his interest in women goes, films such as *The Report* (1977), *Ten* (2002) or *10 on Ten* (2004) testify to his intensive preoccupation with what it is like being a woman in today's society. However, he is not too bothered by such accusations; he knows that sensitivity to women's issues in Iran can be partly traced to Islamic censorship after the revolution but has its roots in the private and unofficial censorship that overshadows all relationships between men and women in this country. To a large extent, the problem of portraying women stems from a deep lack of knowledge of the female sex among most male filmmakers in Iran. Most filmmakers grew up in very traditional, religious families, where, as the saying goes, "even the bare heel of a woman" is taboo. Although he does not believe that this justifies the severity of official censorship, to some extent it can account for the difficulties that even "liberal" filmmakers like himself face when it comes to showing—despite official censorship—erotic scenes. He and his colleagues in Iran could never do a convincing nude scene à la Bertolucci!

He goes on to explain that, aside from that, what preoccupies him with relation to the image of the female sex in films is the fundamental question: what does it mean to be an Iranian woman? What is the common factor or the difference between an affluent, Westernized Tehrani woman and a Baluchi woman with a *niqab* covering her face? As far as he can judge, the uptown Tehrani woman identifies more with what she sees in a Hollywood film than with the cinematic image of a nomadic woman.

SR: This brings me to the issue that is central to this project, namely, the role of the Iranian filmmaker as an "identity maker" for Iranians outside Iran. After the revolution, I explain, the Western media started to create and satisfy the permanent thirst of audiences for sensationalist news from hostile Iran by simplifying the complex political, social, cultural, and historical issues facing the country. They did this by showing images of angry black-clad Iranian men and women punching the air and Western f lags being burnt in front of

embassies in Tehran. At the same time, Western festivals provided a platform for Iranian films that showed the image of "the other" Iran to the world, thus projecting a different Iranian identity. Does he consider himself part of this group?

AK replies that he can agree with this observation only to a degree and goes on to answer my question with another: what is Iranian identity? He points out the enormous gaps between urban and rural Iran, between affluent, modern northern Tehran and the brutally poor slums on the peripheries of the cities and the deserts. Furthermore he cannot measure his own influence on shaping the identity of Iran, since the very idea of shaping an identity presupposes social engagement, being an *engagé* artist, and he confesses that he does not see himself as *engagé* in the traditional sense of the word.

SR: I put it to him that when one thinks of films such as *Where is the Friend's Home?* or *Taste of Cherry* one is not really convinced by this answer. In those films, I argue, pain and hope are shown in a very poetic but realistic manner. Watching these films one is convinced that the filmmaker definitely does not subscribe to the principle of art for art's sake.

AK explains that, from his point of view, a socially engaged artist makes films according to a political or social ideology. For such a filmmaker the film is only the medium for sending a message. He admits that, having chosen not to leave his country, despite numerous opportunities, he cannot be ignorant of what happens around him. However, when he depicts the reality in which he lives, he only does so because the aesthetics, dynamics, and logic of his work force him to do so. No meta-structure or ideology is involved. In *engagé* cinema, in the classical sense, the exact opposite is true: ideology dictates the filmmaker's path. On second thought, he says, perhaps he does have an indirect or incidental obligation towards the society in which he lives because he feels emotionally obliged to defend people's aspirations--he feels the pain, the happiness, the sadness of those among whom he lives. However, he does not seek to educate his audience as an *engagé* filmmaker would do. The greatest risk that politically committed filmmakers run is that of making propaganda films. He, on the other hand, feels committed only to the truth and nothing but the truth. Some accuse him of "selecting" his audience, of approaching only "elitist" viewers, but the reaction of audiences in Iran has proved the exact opposite. He has been approached by so many "ordinary" people because of his films that he cannot accept the allegation of being elitist. The public love his films because of their portrayal of human suffering and human happiness, and it is these things that determine his artistic path.

SR: I go on to say that some of his critics and fellow filmmakers claim that his modern and experimental films are made according to European tastes. In the West, I add, he is regarded as a world class cineaste, but in Iran few cinemas show his films at all and even if they do, then only for a short period because they do not enjoy the same popularity in his own country and are therefore unprofitable.

AK is well acquainted with these critics and often asks himself how it is they do not see the contradictions in what they say. On the one hand, they accuse him of artistic dishonesty and of applying self-censorship in order to sidestep the policies of the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, and on the other they see him as a filmmaker who has sold out to the West!

SR: Yes, he is accused of having his cake and eating it, I say.

AK retorts that this must be the biggest compliment he has ever received. In that case, he adds, he is tempted to think of himself as a world class magician.

SR: I add that from the beginning, filmmakers were accused of being magicians.

AK is aware that such accusations are directed not only at him. He tells me that most filmmakers, artists, and writers who work in Iran and enjoy a certain degree of success must endure such negativity. This is what artists and intellectuals of every country in political turmoil or under revolution have to endure, whether in their own country or abroad. This situation has now reached a peak in Iran and especially within the large Iranian diaspora. Those in exile seem to accuse any Iranian filmmaker working and living in Iran of betraying democratic values, while for many Iranian critics, artists, and scholars, a filmmaker who enjoys success abroad has sold out to the decadent West. His own message to critics on the right and on the left, in or outside Iran, is that art does not have any borders. Artists must first and foremost be committed to themselves, to what they consider the truth. Only in this way can artists be original.

SR: I move on to a different point. His films are extremely "meta-fictional," I suggest. The viewer is constantly aware that he or she is an observer. His actors constantly show that they are only acting a part. This is especially obvious in films where he uses real people—such as the Koker Trilogy. In other words, his films project an awareness that these are only films. I ask whether such self-consciousness hinders the viewer from "getting into" the film, from being immersed in the story. Is he not obstructing the emotional reaction of the viewers?

AK answers this question with another: why should he turn his viewers into hostages to their emotions? Immersing viewers in their emotions is something that he and his comrades-in-arms have been trying to fight against from the

beginning of their careers. They have always fought against—not all that successfully it seems —the Hollywood and Film Farsi productions that lulled the consciousness of cinema goers by appealing to their emotions. He wants to free the viewers by liberating them from their addiction to emotionalism. He wants to force them into observation and self-observation and to ask questions instead of drowning them in sentimentalism.

SR: I also query the seeming liberation of his films from the narrative framework, of the story with a plot.

AK replies that he does not want to tell stories. He wants to write poetry. Poetry, in contrast to a novel, needs neither a hero nor time nor space nor a storyline. He remembers how Lili Arjomand, the head of the Kanoon, talked about his first feature film, *Breaktime*, before the revolution in the early 1970s. She called it a *poème*, he says, using the French word that apparently she used at that time. He personally finds that his *Where is the Friend's Home?* is a poetic response to the great poet Sohrab Sepehri, just as his *Life, and Nothing More* was a contemplation on Forough Farrokhzad's poetry.

SR: I say that I find it interesting that Kiarostami, the most modern, or as some (such as his colleague Hatamikia) believe, Francophile filmmaker, locates the roots of his films in Persian poetry.

AK says that having roots in a traditional Iranian art is at once at odds with modernity and necessary for achieving modernity. He repeats that he does not feel that he belongs to post-revolutionary Iranian cinema. However, this does not mean that he has no connection with Iranian heritage and tradition. The Iranian heritage is his fate. His main preoccupation in his own poetry is this tradition—the works of poets such as Saadi and Hafez. He experiments with form while keeping an eye on these masters of the genre. At the same time, he says, the art and cinema of Europe, America, and Asia are also part of his personal heritage. Without them he would never have been able to make his own films.

SR: I point out that the interesting aspects of his heritage are his Iranian roots, his focus on contemporary Iranian society and his radical modernity. The difficulties that this society has had to grapple with ever since the revolution and Kiarostami's very "French" take on modernity lend these aspects an even greater significance. Exile is a keyword for modern Iranian artists and filmmakers, I suggest. The great Iranian avant-garde filmmaker Ebrahim Golestan, for example, found both the Iranian authorities and Iranian viewers not mature or modern enough for his works and left Iran over a decade before the Islamic Revolution.[8] Artists such as him often believed that contempt and exile are an inevitable precondition for being modern artists —especially in countries such as ours.

AK replies that every artist has his or her own unique sensitivities, but he cannot deny that Sadegh Hedayat, the most important scholar, researcher and writer in modern Iranian history, chose to leave his motherland and live in Paris, where he took his own life in 1951. Especially in Iran, avant-garde art has never been welcomed with open arms, but, still, exile is often unwelcome to Iranian artists. Golestan, Shahid, Saless, and Naderi stopped receiving due attention when their inner exile was transformed into actual exile, compelling them to leave Iran for good. What he can say for sure is that contempt for and separation from the environment in which an artist lives—whether because of political shenanigans, censorship, or the artists' own emotional inclinations—reduces creativity and that is exactly what the authorities have been trying to achieve since the revolution: force the artist into inner—and preferably actual—exile.

SR: I point out that judging by his persistence and prolific output since the revolution, he cannot say—as he did at the beginning of this interview—that the revolution just passed him by.

AK explains that when he says that the revolution passed him by he means that the political and social climate—the sensationalism and ideological excitement of it—had no effect on him. He is neither pro- nor counter-revolutionary. He is not committed to a revolutionary idea. Unlike many artists, poets and intellectuals, he did not "lose" himself and his grip on art in the hurricane that struck Iran after 1979. His job, he says, is to observe and show what he sees, without a social or political agenda. People should remember that art—whether realist, or poetic, or surrealist—is always about constructs and artifacts. In other words, art is always a "lie" through which the artist and the recipient of art attempt to get closer to the truth. The most important aspect of artistic work is honesty, not the subject matter or the style. Revolutions emotionalize things, from whence artistic honesty can perish and that is most dangerous for the quality of art.

SR: I remind him that he is seen both as highly "realist" and highly "escapist." His film *Through the Olive Trees*, about the earthquake in Roodbar (northern Iran), depicted the natural beauty, dreams, and hopes of the victims instead of their sufferings and the problems caused by the catastrophe. Furthermore a number of critics and some of his colleagues (such as Hatamikia) accuse him of not having been interested in the eight-year war between Iran and Iraq and of having turned instead to the idyllic scenery of rural Iran.

AK is once again astounded by the contradictory nature of these accusations. He appears amused by the labels "realist" and "escapist" because, in his view, these are mutually exclusive. His answer to these critics is decidedly Platonic: art must show beauty. Beauty is the only "idea" that the human eye can see. The only thing that compels him to take photographs or make films or write poetry, he says, is beauty; for example, the beauty of an old man who

prepares for Noruz (New Year) by planting violets in the ruins of his devastated street after an Iraqi missile attack.[9] The reality is the bombarded town but the truth is the old man planting violets in the middle of this reality. What is more, he adds, making films about the "reality" of the Iran–Iraq War is futile in Iran. First, in comparison with, say, Hollywood, there are hardly any film production companies with sufficient financial and technological means to make an interesting war film. War scenes in Iranian films are embarrassingly "amateur" when compared to those of international productions. Therefore, he reasons, the only thing that an Iranian filmmaker can do is to try to turn this shortcoming into an advantage, which is hugely difficult.

Second, he explains, Iranian viewers are not interested in war films. They are too painful to watch—the war is still part of their reality. Even in Europe people needed a decade or two before coming to terms with their war "as it was." That is to say, Europeans were ready to see the misery of war depicted on the screen only after they had achieved a certain degree of national peace and welfare. In his eyes, the distance in time and space from the event of war is necessary to the artist—otherwise the end result is either propagandistic or just plain boring! That is why he treats the subject of war only indirectly in his films, like Michael Curtiz did in his masterpiece *Casablanca*.[10] That film, he explains, was made while the war was raging in Europe, but it completely refrained from showing war scenes. *Casablanca* was successful because it was honest art. That is to say, it showed that the truth of life is living it. And all true art exists because of the human hope for survival. It is the duty of art, he concludes, to show this "beauty," especially in times of war and destruction.

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1. Alberto Elena, *The Cinema of Abbas Kiarostami* (Saqi Books, 2005).

2. It is important to bear in mind that I started interviewing Kiarostami about two years before his film *Copie Conforme* (*Certified Copy*) was made in 2010. After making *Like Someone in Love* in Japan (2012) it became obvious that making films outside his 'natural surroundings' was becoming routine—especially considering that critics and viewers received both films very positively.

3. Catherine Deneuve kissed Kiarostami while presenting him with the *Palme d'Or* trophy. The press in the Islamic Republic reacted violently to this, as the Sharia strictly forbids all physical contact between unrelated men and women.

4. Kiarostami is also a well-known poet; his poetry, which draws on both traditional Persian verse and Japanese haiku, has been translated into several languages. The English translations include the collections *Walking with the Wind,* translated by Ahmad Karimi- Hakkak and Michael Beard (Harvard University Film Archive, 2002) and *A Wolf Lying in Wait* (Tehran: Nashr-e Sokhan, 2005), translated by Karim Emami and Michael Beard to great acclaim. As a poet he sees himself as a 'modern nonconformist' who is all the same acutely aware of the millennium-old tradition and heritage of Persian poetry. In his two books *Hafez According to Kiarostami* (Tehran: Nashr-e Farzan, 2006) and *Saadi According to Kiarostami* (Tehran: Nilufar, 2008) he shows an imaginatively modern understanding of the works of these masters of Persian poetry by framing a selection of their lyrics in a form based on haikus and thus presenting them in a new light. His latest poetic work, which was published after this interview took place, is *Atash (The Fire). Selection of Shams Sonnets by Abbas Kiarostami* (Tehran: Chap va Pakhsh-e Nazar, 2011).

5. It should be noted once again that the situation has changed in the past two years even for Kiarostami (thanks to the anti-government Green Movement in 2009). He made his latest films, *Copie Conforme* (2010) and *Like Someone in Love* (2012), in France and Japan respectively.

6. The film was banned for one year and had to be smuggled out of the country in order to be shown at the Venice Film Festival in 1971. See "Dariush Mehrjui. Filmmaker, producer, and scriptwriter," *Iran Chamber Society* (http://www.iranchamber.com/cinema/dMehrjui/dariush_Mehrjui.php).

7. Gilles Jacob began managing the Cannes Film Festival in 1977. He became the festival's president in 2001. Jacob is one of the most influential men in world cinema.

8. Film critics often refer to Golestan's speech at the 1969 Shiraz Festival in which he did not hide his contempt for both Iranian viewers and Iranian cultural institutions.

9. Flowers, such as violets, daffodils, hyacinths and tulips, are planted in Iran during the Noruz festivities on 20 or 21 March (equinox), at which people celebrate the New Year and welcome the spring.

10. *Casablanca* was produced by Warner Bros and released in 1943. It is important to bear in mind that as an American production it was not made amidst the war in Europe but in the United States, which, with the exception of Pearl Harbor, did not suffer attacks or invasions. This difference makes Kiarostami's comparison a little problematic: Iran didn't merely participate in a geographically distant war as the United States did. The lives of Iranian civilians were directly affected by warfare and therefore the social context for making war films was different from that in the United States in the 1940s.

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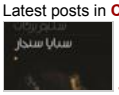

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