

Allowing and Denying Accidents:
The Hybrid Cinema of Abbas Kiarostami and Caveh Zahedi

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Thesis Declaration of Authenticity

This is to state that the attached thesis entitled, *Allowing and Denying Accidents: The Hybrid Cinema of Abbas Kiarostami and Caveh Zahedi*, was composed solely by the candidate, Pirooz Kalayeh. The thesis has not been accepted in any previous application for a degree and the work has been done solely and independently by the candidate, Pirooz Kalayeh.

All quotations have been distinguished by quotation marks and all sources of information have been appropriately cited and specifically acknowledged.

Pirooz Kalayeh

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“All great fiction films tend toward documentary, just as all great documentaries tend toward fiction . . . He who opts wholeheartedly for one necessarily finds the other at the end of his journey.”

—Jean-Luc Godard

Introduction

Are the spaces between juxtapositions where we meet the sublime? If this is the case, then is what's real or authentic something beyond believability? Are viewers transported by cinema like a time machine? Is it a mechanism for a total experience that can transport a person to the sublime?

When a person meditates, they are given a window into their psyche and thought patterns: mental rundowns of wants and desires pollute the information wheel and go around and round without end. Over time, this discursive hiccups and slows-down to allow for certain revelations in being, where thoughts have either been thought too many times to be engaged again, or they have simply not held up under scrutiny because of repetition. Likewise, cinema can operate as a meditative function for audience members. Audiences can engage into the theater and constraints offered by the containment unit and either become invested in the vocabulary of this universe and form a space outside the cinema – a place where the contemplation of what's happening is running concurrently to the narrative. This narrative is also running with a viewer's personal narrative as well. In order for the cinema to effectively eradicate the audience's knowledge of self within the actual world of habitation, they must be so mystified by the artificial reality created in the cinema that they become fully engaged.

This engagement comes at a certain cost. There are those who would watch the cinematic spectacle and have a natural proclivity to dive into the material as easily as one falls into a dream state. There are others whose understanding of the walls of containment allow for them to move in and out of reality: they notice the chairs around them, a spectator, the taste of popcorn in their mouths.

Think of a painting. Its engagement is traditionally a two-dimensional experience. The audience can only interact with the elements presented within the flat frame. To offer a deeper sense of reality or authenticity, the artist can use various illusory techniques to have a viewer believe the painting is a window into reality. This could be by shading, using light, and potentially, making the elements within the frame have a sense of depth and space similar to what viewers experience in their three-dimensional worlds. These representations along the Z-axis allow for the viewer to contemplate the scenario presented by a painter, and then parallel this scene with their lives and form opinions about the narrative, or potentially create further extrapolations based on the artist's story, the title of the painting, and so on.

Of course, what makes a painting a place that one can lose themselves is not only from a "realistic" nature. The engagement can become a question of craftsmanship: *how did they do this?* Or it can be conceptually engaging: *what does this mean?* It can also just create confusion, and from this confusion is another form of authenticity. In essence, whatever is created must communicate in some fashion by its "doing" or

“not doing” that will then offer a viewer an opportunity to make sense of what has been presented.

So why wouldn't a heap of trash be authentic? Well, this is absolutely the case. To notice our day-to-day realities as authentic is simple because this is exactly what's at play. There's arrangement. This montaging of elements creates an authorship that changes ordinary trash into an assemblage or readymade. Even if only one element of arrangement or creation is inserted, then it no longer resembles the ordinary and becomes something illusory. The space between these worlds – the juxtaposition between creator and object – can be examined. This relationship between the negative space, reality, and art object is a third level of perspective. Like Brecht, this becomes one's awareness of the process at play, where we see the mechanism: gears and computer chips behind the curtain.

Our engagement with the cinema stage has changed because the distribution model has changed. Films being played in the palm of our hands changes our relationship to the screen. Media can be started or stopped at whim. It can be changed to another value. It can even be manipulated. Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter are the artistic devices of engagement presently. Unlike a painting, the viewer can now add or subtract elements as well as view. This makes the separation between the stage an audience seamless. In fact, the audience in this case is both spectator and spectacle.

If Facebook muddies the separation between spectator and spectacle, then the only way to provide separation again is to make the audience cognizant of their relationship with the medium. Contemporary cinematic reality is now an acknowledgement of the spaces of habitation. If we show the screen, audience, and then the process of creation, the audience is suddenly pulled outside of the natural state of watching. This creates a heightened sense of engagement: the audience is both in the fantasy and outside it simultaneously. This creates a mirroring for the child that helps the viewer recognize themselves within the game at play.

Jean-François Lyotard has discussed this process of awareness as the moment through which sublimation is possible. By creating a friction between what is seen and unseen, like a child playing peekaboo with a toy, spectators are given a glimpse into the void of their conception. This is not unlike the poetic enjambments of Sufi poetry, which are said to contain seven layers through which a student can remove the rust from their minds and enter into an ecstatic state. These verses are often placed in a paradoxical equation, where the sudden shock or confusion the reader experiences, sends them into a moment of non-thinking. An experience that is also similar to the tenements of Zen Buddhism, whose *koans* and *ensos*, offer similar mental gymnastics that allow the student to enter into a relationship with the unknown that is not based on any absolute or conceptual ideology. Rather, it is the containment of two possibilities that result in a third.

Iranian cinema after the Islamic revolution saw various evolutions into a type of cinema that would mirror this equation by placing fictional and nonfictional elements together. Although there are many auteurs who have done similar re-framings of information that were part of the Iranian New Wave, such as Jafar Panahi, Behram Beyzai, and Mohsen Makhmalbaf, this dissertation will focus primarily on the works of Abbas Kiarostami and his tools for juxtaposing fictional and nonfictional elements together to help audiences question the various levels of containment he experienced through censorship by the Iranian Ministry, but also how his interests in framing the natural world against the backdrop of the illusion of cinema, helps propel viewers towards the sublime and lack of identification with any nationality, religion, or creed.

In addition to the examination of Abbas Kiarostami's works, this dissertation will also explore the recent hybrid cinema of Caveh Zahedi, an Iranian-American auteur, and how his films provide further countermeasures against traditional cinema to provide the sublime with dramatic reenactments within his nonfictional narratives that often explore relationships and their penchant to provide honest exchange through confrontations and admissions of secrets that are also juxtaposed between a fiction and nonfiction blurring, so that audiences are left without a clear answer, but a truth in examination and process towards honesty that helps them enter the sublime.

Finally, in the conclusion of this dissertation, I will examine how Kiarostami and Zahedi have influenced my artistic practice and understanding of cinema, by looking at how their countermeasures align this cinema beyond the natural worlds and relationships of Kiarostami and Zahedi, respectively, and more towards the cerebral function of thinking, itself, and how the mind can allow for gaps in thinking when it is overrun by information, tricked into believing a hoax, and given all the tools for cinema's manipulation in clear view, so a spectator can form its own questioning that will help them go beyond thinking itself to the realm of "only don't know" mind that Zen Master Seung Sahn extols in his book of the same name. For, if we are able to do everything 100%, without thinking, then we have an opportunity to grasp both the levels of misinformation that are given through all the possibilities of media, whether through cinema, Internet, journalism, governments, individuals, or ourselves.

Deep Focus

Aziz: What's the show?

Caveh Zahedi: This show.

Aziz: What show?

Caveh Zahedi: This show.

Aziz: I don't understand.



(Please click pic or [here](#) to view [The Show about The Show](#))

The dialogue above is from Caveh Zahedi's web series *The Show about The Show*, which details multiple plot lines through dramatic re-enactments, man-on-the-scene (MOS) interviews, and then actual documentary footage of the making of the show itself. These disparate entities seem like material that would instantly be lost on luddite viewers born before the Internet's hyperactive, multitasking environment. In fact, several reviews of *The Show...* (2015), expressed confusion at how such "ostensible cinéma vérité footage, staged re-enactments of events and re-enactments of re-enactments" could be lodged

together in such a “dizzying” fashion (Kenny, para. 3). These detractors were often at odds with the film’s shifting back and forth between narrative and documentary elements. Prior to 2015, when *The Show...* was released – and whose quotes from a lukewarm review in *The New York Times* you just read – there were very few films that qualified as hybrid cinema. Many were quick to point fingers and call the work “mockumentary” and compare it to other films that were specifically making comments on cinema or entertainment production, such as Rob Reiner’s *This Is Spinal Tap*.

Unlike Reiner, Zahedi’s films are not operating in a traditional narrative model. Their non-linear morphing from one element to the next is something that often mirrors the type of exchange one would have surfing the Internet, where the idea of the Long Tail and Amazon’s notion of “if you liked this, you’ll like this” is often echoed in the film with cinematic, poetic enjambments, such as the above discussion from *The Show* where the confusion about the making of a web series that would entail what happened prior to each filming would be the contents of the very next episode suddenly signals a hard cut, as the film jumps to a confessional camera of Zahedi explaining what has just transpired.

The resulting shift is now operating on three layers of narrative. There is the 1) confessional camera of Zahedi explaining what happen prior or after in a typical documentary fashion; 2) the actual interaction that occurred which is unseen; and 3) the re-enactment of what transpired with professional actors.



These layers may be difficult to ascertain for viewers who are not familiar with Zahedi's previous films that operate in the same way as for those whose focus becomes one or the other of the three layers of presentation offered. Some may read

the texts and barely notice the painting or talking trees, and vice-versa. Either way, the choice of focus is left to the audience's discretion. Similarly, Orson Welles's *Citizen Kane* offers viewers three focal points, where the actors are positioned in various levels of topography within the frame: 1) mother and lawyer in foreground; 2) father in mid-ground; and 3) the child Kane playing in the snow through the window frame in the background.

Welles's deep focus allows viewers to choose the edits they would make. The convergence is thus on the mise-en-scène and staging, rather than the edit. We are not given quick cuts to coverage, as we would in films made in the new millennium. Tony Zhou's video essay on Joon Bong-Ho, pokes fun at this very nature in *Avengers*.



According to Zhou, *Avengers* is solely focused on the edit to direct the audience's gaze. If we are to depict a specific emotion, the edit typically shifts from "close-up to close-up to close-up" (Zhou). If we are establishing a location, the film will begin with an exterior shot. If we are shifting between characters, the camera rarely holds on a wide frame with staging to reflect emotional intensity. Instead, as Samuel Jackson complains in Zhou's essay: "So, now you're going to be a mechanic...shoot master, close, close, closer, over, over, over..." The film thus proceeds in a paint-by-numbers equivalent of wide shot, close-up, close-up, wide shot – ad infinitum. Very little is actually done in terms of framing, mise-en-scène, or movement.

We would be hard-pressed to view such mechanics as reality. The contract with the audience who attends a screening of an *Avengers* film is pure fantasy. For this purpose, a direction that is controlled by the edits, would correlate with the ease at

which one would consume the media. Since there is no heavy lifting required to choose where one looks, the film can go down rather easily. It is, in essence, a controlled experience.

Unlike *Avengers*, *The Show...* offers a modern take on how three levels of information can be edited at an audience's discretion. Zahedi's shift from monologue to re-enactment, mirrors the hyper-kinetic, multi-tasking Facedown Generation of America's youth. In essence, the dual sequences act as multi-leveled suspense similar to how Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* puts audience's in a nervous state of mind to match the character's gaze for whom viewers now see through: the deranged killer in Hitchcock's film; and the multi-tasking Avatars in Zahedi's.

And it is no accident that Zahedi's films parallel the Internet – or that the Internet itself is often used as a narrative tool to further embody audiences into the jarring sensation of watching themselves – or we could say a version of themselves. But, before we get too deep into Zahedi's cinematic countermeasures, it is important to see how these shifts from Welles to Whedon to Zahedi have transpired.

Aesthetic Evolution

Deep focus allows viewers the freedom to edit within their own minds. This sense of freedom is not unlike our ordinary waking life. When we look upon the world, we

choose which elements need to come into focus. This makes images that are shot in deep focus more realistic for viewers, but what other elements help us read reality? In order to deconstruct contemporary cinema as realistic, it is necessary to see how aesthetics have shifted. For brevity and to keep our discussion within cinema as a medium, let us skip beyond the Renaissance's birth of perspective and shading within art history and use David Lean's directing style as a springboard.

Filmmakers often reference David Lean's *Lawrence of Arabia* as the catalyst for their own desire to work in the art form. His meticulous attention to detail, framing, and lighting have made many of his films a how-to on narrative storytelling. America's own Steven Spielberg has gushed about how *Lawrence* so captivated him as a young adult – that he “couldn't comprehend the enormity of the experience”, so he purchased the soundtrack on record and listened to it over and over, trying to figure out how the film was made (Spielberg).

Spielberg's fascination is situated within the techniques used to create the illusion. For example, he cites how in one shot as the camels are moving along the desert, the camera pans back to reveal the tracks made by the animals. Immediately, in reaction, he questions how many takes it must have taken to create the illusion: “Was it take five? The first take?”

His inability to tell suggests that this could have been either. But, if it were created in the first, would this be an actual reality? Have we moved outside of narrative into

an experience of non-fiction? For Spielberg, this sense of being unable to decipher the magic trick, helps transport him outside of the traditional aesthetics of cinema he was used to. The same can be said when an audience member views a film and is so transported by an actor's performance, that they, too, are left stunned – and can only assume the reality of what has transpired.

The tricks David Lean used to make *Lawrence* seem more believable from an aesthetic perspective are not unlike the same attention to detail that Orson Welles had in *Citizen Kane*. His films are shot in deep focus with symmetry in the frame, with lighting added for another dimension of depth. Take for example the opening desert shot when Lawrence (Peter O'Toole) first encounters Sherif Ali (Omar Sharif). Lawrence is positioned to the left of the frame equidistant to the actor on his right, the two men wait for the rider dressed in black in the distant background to approach.

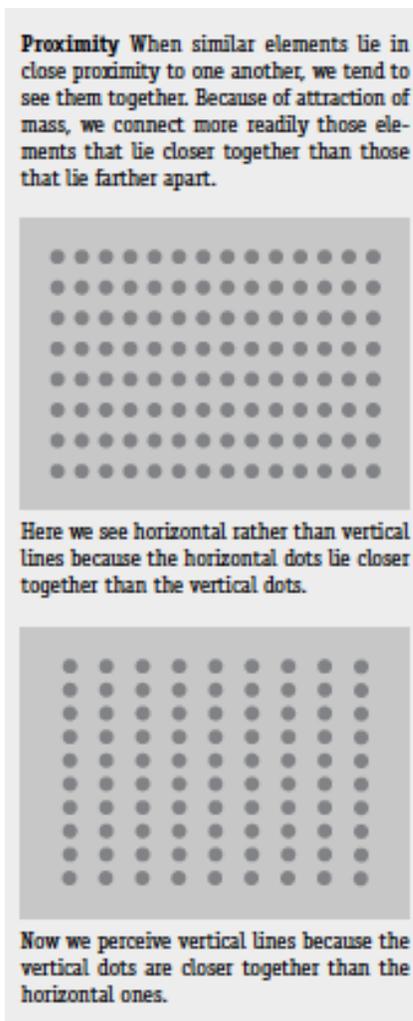


Our eyes naturally gravitate in the direction the actors are looking. In this case, the graphic vector (of eyes looking) is complimented by two elements: 1) the shape that is created by the three characters together – a triangle; and 2) the vector lines the actors in waiting represent in the foreground. This latter element is not unlike a pair of railroad tracks stretching into the distance. If a director puts an actor in the center of the frame on railroad tracks – with the vectors (tracks) – leading up to the main character – this puts an additional charge onto where an audience will be looking.



David Lean adds to the symmetry, graphic vectors (eyes looking), and traditional vectors by also creating a triangle with his actors positioning that immediately puts the audience at

ease, because the human brain has a natural proclivity to see everything in patterns. This is why if we have a group of dots inched closer to one another on a single plane, our eyes will naturally read this proximity and see the lines of dots as either horizontal or vertical. Lean uses this in his rule book on aesthetics and always makes sure that every scene has a clear focal point and framing that will elicit a certain magnetism to the elements within it (Zettl, 120).



Like a painter, Lean also uses light to create a sense of depth. During the filming of *Lawrence*, he would place a series of lights throughout the desert to help viewers perceive each section – foreground, mid-ground, and background – as wholly different and a progression into the space. If we add to this his use of an 800 mm lens and a 70 mm filmstock, then the way we read the image becomes identical to how the human eye might perceive the same scenario in real life. In essence, the long lens helps us still see Sherif Ali in the distance without effecting the depth of field – and it captures the mirage effect that would also happen in real life – a camera trick that is not a CGI experience like *Avengers*. And, finally,

the wide film format, allows us to see more of the image and in greater detail.

Therefore, the camera, lighting, and final viewing of the film in 70 mm, all work together to offer an experience that is believable.

Hybrid cinema can use all of David Lean's tactics to create an illusion. At the same time, what qualifies as realistic is not going to be the same from one epoch to another. Spielberg may be spellbound by *Lawrence*, but modern moviegoers, who have had countless experiences at the theater have set before them new criteria in which to deem a film "real". This is mainly because the way we consume media has changed from Spielberg's era. Now, online distribution and the advent of streaming services, such as YouTube and Netflix, provide a radically different movie going experience for viewers. First, they are not seeing *Lawrence* in a 70 mm theater. In most cases, audiences are streaming content on laptops and other smart devices, which makes the scope of the wide filmstock moot. Viewers are also not watching the film at the same resolution, which further detracts from the experience. Finally, acting performances from Lawrence's time have also shifted, so let's begin there before we move into documentaries as a medium.

Acting & Kazan

Elia Kazan's *On the Waterfront* provided a new style of acting that had yet to be seen by cinemagoers. Marlon Brando's performance as dockworker Terry Malloy revolutionized the way in which actors could elicit emotions. Gone were the days of Hollywood's Golden Era, where acting was a facsimile of two-dimensional

storytelling. “Brando cut through decades of screen mannerisms and provided a fresh, alert, quirky acting style that was not realism so much as a kind of heightened riff on reality” (Ebert, *On the Waterfront*).

Suddenly, performances began to take shape that peered into the inner dimensions of a character from James Dean to the countless method actors that would be inspired by Brando, such as Robert De Niro, Ellen Burstyn, Al Pacino, Harvey Keitel, and others. Kazan, himself, often remarked on Brando’s influence, citing that “if there [was] a better performance by a man in the history of film in America, [he didn’t] know what it was” (Ebert).¹

It was Stanislavski who first introduced the framework by which “the Method” was employed to Kazan and others at the New York Actors Studio. Its foundation centered on three guiding principles: “‘emotional memory’, a focus on the actor’s ‘circle of attention’ and a search for a ‘through-line of action’ in which the actor pins down key objectives” (Billington, Para. 2). Stanislavski often asked actors about motivations, to help them understand why an action would be taken. These motivations, or what Stanislavski named *objectives*, could be as simple as what the actor wants in a given scene – or extend to their ultimate desires (super-objective) within the entire scope of a performance. Stanislavski’s system also asked actors to

¹ This new style’s birth coincided with a disillusionment within American society. *On the Waterfront*, itself, was a call to action by Kazan, who had been put on trial during the HUAC hearings and *Waterfront* represented his defiance against those who named names: “Every day I worked on that film, I was telling the world where I stood and my critics to go and ---- themselves” (Ebert, para 2).

develop roles by careful observation of their natural world and then to inhabit the unique, physical mannerisms they witnessed. Stanislavski, himself, would often dress as a peasant or “an old man, and interact with the townspeople to see how well he could fit in” (Bradford, Para. 8).

Stella Adler, the only American student of Stanislavski, took his teachings and infused his memory recall with imagination – in order to create a greater sense of detail. Brando, who studied and lived with Adler, even penned the introduction to her book, *The Art of Acting*, where he extols her for imparting the most valuable information: “how to discover the nature of our own emotional mechanics and therefore those of others” (Adler and Kissel, 3).

In addition to Adler, Lee Strasberg and Sanford Meisner were both eminent figures for taking Stanislavski’s teachings and developing reactions to his material. In respects to the former, Strasberg – with whom Kazan ran the Actors Studio – encouraged actors to intensify their connection to the material by creating their characters’ emotional experiences in their own lives” (Wright, Para. 3). While Meisner birthed a system where repetition would help actors understand the tone and nuance inflected into a line of dialogue and to “react” accordingly, whether it was the same piece of dialogue simply said in a different manner. For example, if an actor were to say, “You are wearing a blue shirt” – and thereby acknowledging a “real” attribute of the acting participant – the responding actor would simply parrot back in agreement, “Yes, I am wearing a blue shirt.” This game would shift based on

inflection, allowing actors to play a tennis match that would refine their listening skills, offer presence to the “live” moment being played, and inform them – or we could say propel them with information that would then be integrated when actors went back on script where they could build upon each subsequent line to form a new and original performance in each take.



Although Brando never studied with Meisner, his ability to infuse each moment with nuance and subtlety in *On the Waterfront* remains steadfast. Kazan offers an example of Brando’s ability to stay focused during the famous

“dropped glove” scene between Terry (Brando) and Edie (Eve Marie-Saint).

Typically, Kazan would call cut if such a mishap would happen, but Brando continues with the take, picking up the glove, sexually putting it on, and then continuing with his dialogue. For Kazan, this moment of brilliance was something better than he could have ever imagined. It was in his words “an answer as to why she stays with him” (Kazan). The near fight in the church when Terry saves Edie provides an opening for their courtship and the long walk, but Kazan was at a loss for why Edie would stay with him afterwards. Brando’s performance made everything possible:

“He wants to keep her with him, but he doesn’t want to exert any force. He wants to approach her gently. That was a time when Brando saved me. Eve dropped her glove by accident, and he picked it up and put it on his own hand. I could never have thought of that. When she reached for her glove, he got there first so she had to stay with him. At the same time, he could play it cool, as though he didn’t know he was keeping her. Also, there are all kinds of sexual overtones implicit in the gesture” (*Marlon Brando and Eva St. Marie’s Glove*, Para. 9).

For Kazan, and within the scope of Method Acting as a whole, what is deemed realistic is when a performance is able to capture something new – and we could say – unique – for the first time. This unexpected event is unplanned and infuses itself within the narrative. In essence, we can see this improvisational style as a moment of nonfiction coupled with fiction. Thus, we have the beginnings for what is being explored by hybrid auteurs.

Abbas Kiarostami offers several countermeasures against Kazan’s Method style with his actors. He will often puzzle piece scenes by having professionals in action side-by-side with non-professionals. If we were to think about how this might work in terms of the scene just discussed by Brando, we could think of the “glove” as the non-professional actor. Everything that is said or conducted by the glove – or non-professional – will force a reaction from the seasoned performer. If the professional

is complicit in this exchange, they will continue with their rehearsed dialogue or find a way back to it, regardless of what the non-professional may say or do.

There is no better example of how Kiarostami uses puzzle piecing and the accident to his advantage than in *Taste of Cherry*. Instead of using a professional to react to a non-professional. Kiarostami uses himself as a bouncing board for the characters throughout the film, filming all his non-professionals from one side – while he questions them on the other – and then cutting the resulting footage together without him. In addition to this skillful move, he also spends months with his non-professionals to establish a point of trust and understanding. He will then use what he has learned about each person in how he directs the action once filming takes place.

This is most apparent in his interaction with the male lead Homayoun Ershadi in *Taste of Cherry*. According to Kiarostami, he had been looking for someone to play the role of Badii for close to a year before he happened upon Ershadi at a traffic light, knocked on his car window, and asked him to act in the film. As soon as he did so, Kiarostami noticed that he agreed without much enthusiasm – a factor he thought would serve well for the dour character he plays. What transpired afterwards are what we could call Kiarostami's hybrid rehearsals. Instead of discussing the film, Kiarostami just talked about mundane subjects, only mentioning his character as a brief aside from time to time. Once the six months had completed and shooting began, Kiarostami noticed that Ershadi's performance was not quite as

sorrowful as he hoped. This is when he pulled his sound mixer aside and asked him to record a series of concerns he expressed about Ershadi's performance, complaining that he did not make the right choice with him and that he had "a good face but no talent" (Sani, 19) Then he asked the sound mixer to play this audio back to Ershadi.

"That was simple enough to have him play the whole movie in a state of total depression; he felt useless. Of course, he became a professional actor later on, but still he is not as good in any other movie as he was in *Taste of Cherry* (Sani, 19).

Kiarostami defends this type of manipulation as a necessary tool to elicit the proper emotions from actors, and even cites that its first use – that he was aware of – was done by Fellini, when the latter yelled at his then wife, Giulietta Masina, in public to help with her performance as the naïve prostitute in *Nights of Cabiria*. "Naturally [Fellini] hugged and kissed her later on with many apologies that it was just a way to have her do the best acting" (19).²

² This type of manipulation for the illusion of cinema can be seen as exploitative and severe to those outside of filmmaking – or we could even say – hybrid cinema – since this is one of the major tenets of how hybrids operate. Caveh Zahedi, the Iranian-American filmmaker most well-known for *I Am a Sex Addict* – who we will discuss later – received harsh criticism for his hybrid piece *The Sheik and I*. So much so, that the film was first banned in Sharjah, where it was funded by the art council, and then, once the film was set to screen at South by Southwest in America, Thom Powers, the head of the Toronto Film Festival, also tried to have it blacklisted.

In addition to Kiarostami's manipulation of the male lead in *Taste of Cherry*, he also pulled an equally clever move by hiring a laborer, Afshin Khorshid Bakhtari, to play the soldier in the film – who, after hearing the news that Badii needs someone to bury him after he commits suicide runs away from Badii in the film. In order to set the stage with Bakhtari to play the soldier, Kiarostami hired him to do various laborer type jobs around his house, fixing the car, “clean[ing] up the house and water[ing] the garden” and so on (Cronin, 96). He would occasionally mention that he wanted to involve him in the film, but always kept the details under wraps. Finally, when shooting began, Kiarostami sat in the driver's seat and filmed Bakhtari in the passenger seat. Instead of using Badii's lines about the request for suicide, which are what we hear in the film, Kiarostami started barking orders at Bakhtari to make him seem frightened and then asked him to retrieve some chocolate in the glove compartment. When Baktheri looks in the glove compartment, he sees a knife placed there and is absolutely stunned. This is when Kiarostami tells him to get out of the jeep and start running.

“I then told him to open the dashboard and give me a piece of chocolate. But inside the dashboard was a knife. He saw the knife and said, ‘There is no chocolate.’ I said, ‘OK, close the door.’ He was completely nervous now, anxious to know where we were going and for what reason. You can see in the movie how real his feelings were” (Sani, 18).

The final scenes in *Taste of Cherry* are thus shot entirely in singles, hiding the fact that it was actually Kiarostami who plays the professional actor in this hybrid puzzle piecing. When filming was complete, Kiarostami simply cut each disparate performance character to give the illusion of a reality being exchanged by actors who actually never saw one another.

If we compare Kiarostami's direction to Kazan's, we can see there is a similarity in forming an idea of reality within the performances. For Kazan, this meant rehearsing with the actors more from a theatrical standpoint, where he dealt with trained professionals who could activate their imaginations and memories to inhabit a scene. When it came time to filming, Kazan's hope was for the unexpected to occur, and often used props, such as the "glove" or "kitten" to signal a defining detail for the character or to help move the story forward. For Kiarostami, the idea of dealing with professional actors was as far from reality as he could imagine. He is even famous for acknowledging that if the villagers in his Koker trilogy had not wised up to his antics and fame, he would have probably made all his films there for the rest of his life.

Kiarostami's focus with performance is firmly set on achieving results. The way he got there was to pull from reality itself and morph it ever so slightly with various tricks to both deceive the actor into a real reaction, which would then be read by audiences without artifice.

In contrast, Caveh Zahedi, an Iranian-American making films in the United States purposely makes artifice the exterior of his style to create a separate sense of reality. Where Kiarostami is still trying to lean towards the cinematic, Zahedi's style is more closely aligned with documentaries. Take for example, an early scene in *I am a Sex Addict*, when Zahedi acknowledges to the camera that he does not have enough funds to actually fly to Paris, he's actually much older than what the dramatic re-enactment he's about to act in will be, and then just as quickly as he has introduced the constraints – he launches into the scene. An unseen hand lifts off a beret from his head, sprays some black hair make-up on his graying, receding hairline, and he begins walking into the cinematic reality he's portraying.



The move here is not unlike Kiarostami's. Instead of using himself as the professional actor that is unseen like Kiarostami did in *Taste of Cherry*, Zahedi

places himself right at the forefront of the action. This provides a curious shift for the audience. They are not only informed about what is about to happen, but they also get to witness the very director who is making the film, participate in the action. This is not like J.D. Salinger's use of Holden Caulfield as the unreliable narrator in *Catcher in the Rye*, proclaiming his distaste for everything "phony" only to engage with a curiosity and sensitivity for the world around him.

I was sixteen then, and I'm seventeen now, and sometimes I act like I'm about thirteen. It's all really irrational, because I'm six foot two and a half and I have gray hair. I really do. The one side of my head – the right side – is full of millions gray hairs. I've had them since I was a little kid. And yet I still act sometimes like I was only about twelve. Everybody says that, especially my father. It's partly true, too, but it isn't all true. People always think something's all true. I don't give a damn, except that I get bored sometimes when people tell me to act my age. Sometimes I act a lot older than I am – I really do – but people never notice it. People never notice anything (Salinger 9).

Zahedi offers contradictions as to how the character will operate – then when we see the actual play within the scene, we are provided an alternative nature of the person. This shock or shift into what we expect can be seen as a similar move to the “glove” effect for Kazan. Each time Zahedi addresses the audience, he leaves them unsure about what might actually take place. Therefore, the play continues to surprise and elicit a sense of reality for the viewer.

Zahedi continues to play on this motif, when he addresses the audience later, and acknowledges that although he didn't originally have funds to go to Paris that he somehow has now gotten new funds – and thus the additional dramatic re-enactments transpires with him in Paris.

Unlike Kiarostami's cinematic viewfinder, Zahedi pokes fun at the seriousness of narrative cinema. By revealing himself and his mistakes, the viewer is offered a window behind the curtain of the stage. *The Wizard of Oz* is seen naked – and for this baring – we consider the moment to be more real than Kiarostami's *Taste of Cherry* in comparison – where we never get to see the machinations of the director.

Of course, it was Kiarostami who said that all cinema is illusion. Zahedi is still at the wheels in his formulation of the documentary event, so its result is an obvious fabrication of reality – just by its very nature to do a dramatic re-enactment in the first place. The re-enactment may contain flaws, such as the hairspray and his age – or that it is not Paris – but this does not make it more real than another type of cinema. It just offers a different vantage point. Instead of seeing the action from the typical objective perspective in Kiarostami's films, we are given an additional layer. Some may find this type of cinema to be more real in a sense because it does just this action, but Zahedi offers us another element beyond the shift in layers or accidents. This is his genuine emotion in reaction to what is transpiring, the anger and outrage of his participants, and the reality of his story as a sex addict.

Zahedi's cinema confronts questions about human existence and the crippling condition of sexual addiction *I Am a Sex Addict* encompasses. Consequently, this move to form the spine of the film as documentary rather than fiction, creates a believability because of our relationship to documentaries as a medium. The film does not use *mise-en-scène*, perfect framing, lighting, or professional actors. There

are the elements of the film that are actual documentation and then the dramatic re-enactments that serve as a comedic re-telling of the narrative that might be done with voice-over and animation in another documentary. Therefore, it makes sense that he abandons the traditional tools of narrative storytelling used by Lean or Welles, in favor of documentary cinema. But what are the tools that are common to all documentaries? In order to form a clearer understanding of how these cinemas meld together, let us review the documentary form with two films that offer us a progression through its conventions in cinema history: Dziga Vertov's *Kinopravda* (literally "Film Truth") and Jean-Luc Godard's *Breathless*.

Documentary to French New Wave

Documentary storytelling has become the most popular within the cinematic medium in recent years. Initially, the form was a collection of the raw footage of daily life. This is evident in the first film ever constructed by the Lumière Brothers, "Workers Leaving the Lumière Factory ("La Sortie de l'Usine Lumière à Lyon" Lumière Brothers 1895). The entire film's content is apparent from the title: workers are shown leaving a factory in a single 35 mm static shot. For historians, the film is simply an illustration of the tool invented by the Lumière Brothers and a marker for the birth of cinema, but for Dziga Vertov, the ability to document reality as exactly as it was without embellishment, provided him an opportunity "to show the truth about how things are and how people should live together on the planet" (Carrier). Vertov proclaimed the superiority of the camera itself (the 'Kino-Eye')

over the human eye to document without bias or “superfluous aesthetic considerations” (Dawson). This coincided with his Marxist beliefs and his support of the burgeoning Soviet state in the early Twentieth Century. The bulk of Vertov’s early films are much like the newsreels of today, with the addition of “strange camera angles, fast cutting, montage editing, and experimentations like split screen, multi layered supers, and even animated inserts” (Dawson). Critics of the time were quick to point to these very elements as detractors to the aesthetic viewing pleasure itself, and called them “jarring”, but today these very elements are seen for pioneering movies from the *cinéma vérité* style of the French New Wave towards the experimental works of Stan Brakhage – and even further into Lars Von Trier’s politicized tenets with Dogme 95.

However, before we move into Vertov’s political motivations for capturing reality, let us understand the cinematic techniques created by his concept of the Kino-eye.

Vertov’s *Kinopravda* was a laboratory experiment of 23 films to capture the unseen, whether this was “the microscope and telescope of time, [the negativity] of time; or the possibility of seeing without limits and distances” (Michelson, 41). To these effects and its expansion,³ Vertov employed the use of archival footage, shooting

³ “Kino-eye is understood as ‘that which the eye does not see’; as the microscope and telescope of time; as the negative of time; as the possibility of seeing without limits and distances; as the remote control of movie cameras; as tele-eye; as X-ray eye; as ‘life caught unawares,’ etc., etc” (Michelson, 41).

people and locations without permission, re-enactments, animation, moving titles,



and staged sequences

(*Dziga Vertov*).

At the series's onset, Vertov,

like Kiarostami, was

untrained in cinema

techniques. There were also

certain conventions – what Vertov describes as “unshakeable clichés”, which he wanted to break. Therefore, the initial newsreels within the series, were “experiments in assembling chance film clippings into more or less ‘harmonious’ montage” (Michelson, 42). The first *Kinopravda* proceeds through images of poverty and toil of Soviet life after the revolution, depicting children eating grains of rice from floors; a group of authors reviewing documents; workers in a factory; a pilot flying over Moscow; and the ground below. Critics and audiences enjoyed the films, and after receiving further critical praise for subsequently similar explorations, Vertov and his fellow *Kinoks* began to push the boundaries of convention further in the fourteenth *Kinopravda*, which did not follow a connected tissue between elements, but jumped from one section to the next without traditional shifts in convention. As a result, Vertov found himself confounded at the refusal for camera operators to work on further films or censors refusing to pass the film forward.

“I myself was perplexed, I must admit. The film’s structure seemed simple and clear to me. It took me a while to learn that my critics brought up on

literature, under the force of habit, could not do without a literary connection between the different items” (44).

Vertov’s thematic organization of newsreels from a political vantage point was lost on critics, who were used to narrative conventions abroad and critiqued him for what they assumed was a “random” assemblage. Yet, for Vertov, his organization by theme rather than by a writer’s scenario, helped “observe and record life as it is” and aided “each oppressed individual and the proletariat as a whole” (49).

Here, we can acknowledge that there are several conventional methods of employment by modern documentaries that were missing from Vertov’s films. Chief among them was the lack of sound and the voice-over to provide any explanation or narrative through-line. Since these initial works were prior to the advent of sound – and Vertov’s incorporation for an added layer of contextualization – much of what was happening could not be deciphered without the conceptual framework of intellectual montage upon which the films operated. Vertov, therefore, had to change tactics in the eighteenth *Kinopravda*, where the progression in Soviet thought could be properly reflected through the Kino-eye, by having camera operators rush through the terrain between Paris and Moscow to depict the shift between capitalism and Marxist thought. It was only after this film that the audience, who was previously unaware of the contextual representation Vertov’s

films depicted, could now view the previously unsuccessful films with a thorough understanding.⁴

“Don’t think I’m bragging, comrades, but several people felt compelled to tell me that they regard the day they saw the eighteenth *Kinopravda* as the turning point in their understanding of Soviet reality” (Michelson, 46).

This is not unlike our initial discussion with Zahedi’s *Show About the Show* whose movement between documentary and fictional elements creates a jarring effect for some viewers. In fact, many who saw the series were so outraged by its non-conventional breaks that they began responding with trolling comments that Zahedi then used as another tangent for the series in Episode 5, *Fan Mail*, inviting those who had both negative and positive comments to film themselves, which would then be incorporated into the next episode. By juxtaposing a touching confessional of a young woman expressing her realization about issues with her own relationship from watching Zahedi’s issues in his marriage directly against a negative review that describes the self-same actions as being “pathetic” and “disgusting”. Zahedi is able to further blur the line between reality and fiction both within the series, but also

⁴ An additional layer of interpretation was introduced by Sergei Eisenstein’s films, particularly *Battleship Potemkin* (1925), which made use of his five methods of montage, and corresponded with Kuleschov’s experiment to show that two images juxtaposed to one another could produce a third idea. Eisenstein took this several steps further by including metric, rhythmic, tonal, over-tonal, and intellectual montage as possibilities in his films – a concept that complimented Vertov’s films to have a lasting effect, since later *Kinopravdas* were operating within Eisenstein’s intellectual montage and showed images of Soviet life juxtaposed with their obvious lack, such as in *Kinopravda*’s eighteenth installment and its images of the Eiffel Tower and capitalist society.

outside of it, as fans realize that their interaction on the Internet will also be included. This willingness to include both positive and negative reviews allows for the conversation about his ethical practices to film him and his wife's issues and make public her mother's suicide leave the judgment of right and wrong in the viewer's hands and further align his intentions to make public that which is concealed in hopes that it will actually offer healing for those watching and the participants in the play, itself.

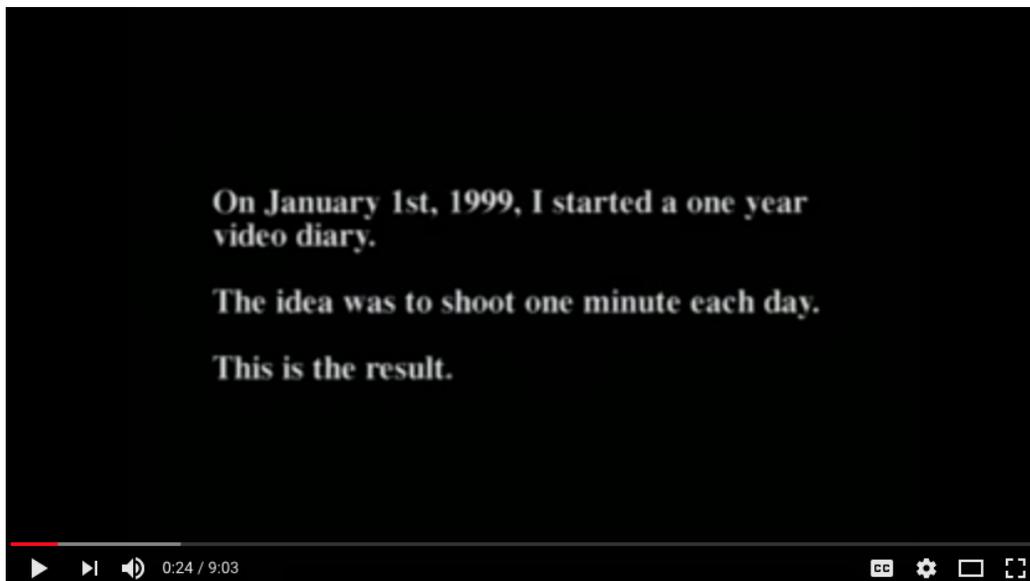
"I was watching your TV show, and it made me realize that I was being dishonest with someone I care about very much. And...and...this huge lump developed on my thigh, and I believe it had to do with some blocked energy. And the person I was being dishonest with loves you and loves your work. And we watched your show again together, and we were able to look at each other and tell each other that maybe we shouldn't be together anymore (Episode 5, "Fan Mail", The Show About the Show).

By extending the discussion outside the show itself and into the Internet, Zahedi offers both an understanding for his intentions, but it also provides the language for how the cinema will operate. Like Vertov's moving camera across the French countryside that gave viewers an insight into his movement from capitalism to Marxist thought, Zahedi's shift between the apparatus of the series into the comment sections on YouTube, allows for a witness of how the movement between

these shifts in viewing are operating that allows viewers an understanding of all perspectives present. This creates an empathy both for the confessions of the Internet participants, the intention of the work to confront through honesty, and a further insight into Zahedi's methods and approach that mirror Vertov's. Those already familiar with Zahedi's previous works already know the game at play, and can therefore proceed with the new variables at play, but it is through these asides and continual re-framing and re-enactment – that also includes viewers presently watching – that the shift between audience and stage is further blurred, so that the separation between audience, stage, behind the curtain, and outside the theater itself, are now eradicated into one continual morphing of possibility. Therefore, audiences previously unfamiliar are now offered clarity into the cinema by becoming part of the show as well, and their previous inability to understand the non-traditional approach Zahedi traverses is simply a lack of familiarity with form – that Fan Mail's inclusion of the audience now makes a moot issue in a similar fashion to Vertov's experiences. Zahedi's *The Show About the Show* is operating within a conceptual framework that is not necessarily apparent unless one experiences multiple episodes. It is only after watching a series that viewers begin to understand the game at play. Thus, an education into form over content is necessary to make comprehension possible. It is only after this epiphany that Vertov employs camera movement to serve as the narrative thread by which the symbolic images of the Eiffel Tower, which are shown at the onset of the eighteenth *Kinopravda*, can be understood as a representation of capitalism and Paris, when it

is then juxtaposed by the actual movement through Soviet terrain and the daily toil of factory workers to represent – as Vertov describes – “blood of the times”.

If we compare Vertov’s *Kinopravda* with Zahedi’s oeuvre, it becomes apparent that they are both operating with the same cinematic conventions often employed in all documentary films. Zahedi, like Vertov, uses animation, dramatic re-enactments, staged interactions, quick edits, and the use of text to inform the audience of the elements at play. However, the separation between the two arises usually at the opening of his films. Take for example Zahedi’s *In the Bathtub of the World*: “On January 1st, 1999, I started a one-year video diary. The idea was to shoot one minute each day. This is the result.”



Zahedi spells out the contract of the film right from the onset. By telling the audience, how the film will operate, he gives viewers the tools to digest the content. This is the opposite of Vertov, who never actually introduces how the concept is

operating, or Kiraostami, whose illusions about how the film will proceed are part and parcel to the imaginative experience outside the frame he hopes to elicit by keeping the contract a mystery. Zahedi, on the other hand, makes his objectives implicit in every film.

In *I Don't Hate Las Vegas Anymore*, Zahedi addresses the camera directly, notifying us that the documentary corresponds with his faith in the universe that everything has a certain order, and that the film will be a document to interpret signs from God. This is the same move he employs in his most recent feature *The Sheik and I*, which goes a step further, since he uses the opening confessional as a narrative device and conductor through whom the audience can disseminate throughout the film:

“So, I got this e-mail, and it was asking me to make a film for the Sharjah Biennial in the United Arab Emirates. It’s ruled by this guy, the Sheik of Sharjah” (Zahedi, *The Sheik and I*).

In each opening, Zahedi purposely stumbles over explanations. For example, in *I Don't Hate Las Vegas...* he starts and stops an explanation of how the film has transpired up to this very moment, using jump cuts to get him to the conclusion quickly. These verbal mistakes are made in plain sight and become the narrative form for his unreliability, as well as an introduction that when things are not going as planned, the film will shift into a new moment of play. Therefore, the unreliability, stumbling performances, and jump cuts help us read and anticipate a

shift which becomes a progressive educational framework for how we move through the film.

Jean Luc Godard's *Breathless* also employs an unreliable narrator, uses jump cuts, and breaks the fourth wall to create a framework for how the film will proceed and elicit uncertainty. When we first meet, Michel (Jean-Paul Belmondo), he is reading a girly magazine and smoking, reminiscent of a Humphrey Bogart or another pseudo gangster within film noir. In the very next scene, we see him steal a car and hit the road. Then we're given asides on his opinions of the countryside he drives through: "Nothing like the countryside. I really like France" (Godard, *Breathless*).



Throughout this exchange, Godard employs fast edits and jumps frames, even shifting music diegetically to correspond with the tonal shift from urban streets to countryside and Michel's ultimatum on Paris: "If you don't like the shore, if you don't like

the mountains, if you don't like the city...then get stuffed!" (Godard, *Breathless*). The whole set-up offers us the artifice of a cinematic narrative, because Godard's technical limitations prevented him from making a true film noir piece as he originally intended. In addition, his awareness and then use of countermeasures to cover these limitations, made *Breathless* a meta-narrative on cinema history itself.

His tongue in cheek asides to noir and melded narrative and documentary tools offer a “get stuffed!” attitude towards conventional cinema – and a starting point for Zahedi⁵.

If we compare Godard’s vérité approach with Francois Truffaut’s in *400 Blows*, the reliance on mise-en-scène over montage in the latter, aligns Truffaut more with the cinematic attributes found in Kiarostami’s films. Both Kiarostami and Truffaut rely heavily on performance to drive narrative, specifically by puzzle-piecing non-professionals to create certain realities. Take for example *400 Blows*’s opening scene set in a classroom: students are shown in real time, poking fun of the instructor behind his back, passing a girly magazine, and finally, revealing Antoine Doinel (Jean-Pierre Léaud) – a non-professional actor – getting caught with the magazine. This parallels Kiarostami’s opening in *Where Is My Friend’s House*, where

⁵ As if the jump cuts and unreliable hooligan isn’t enough to put viewers into a state of surprise, Michel’s final address in the opening that tells them to “like Paris or else”, puts viewers at the end of their ropes. This is a strange, exciting moment in the film and quite revolutionary for its tactics. The shaky camera pointed at him, the jump cuts, and personal address – all work together to put us in a position of the unexpected. Anything could happen. Zahedi’s version of himself in any of his films is thus a variation on the wild abandon of Michel in *Breathless*. He not only employs the same documentary and cinematic techniques as Godard, but also a version of the Michel character in the cinematic alter-ego of himself on screen.

Therefore, it may come as no surprise that Zahedi was so influenced by Godard that he traveled to Switzerland after graduating from Yale and tried to convince him to sponsor his films. In an interview with Anna Karina for filmmaker Magazine, Zahedi announces that “he [Godard] was the biggest influence...and so important” (Zahedi, “Be Beautiful and Shut Up”). The exchange was not a mutual one. Zahedi managed to find Godard’s number and ring him in the middle of the night. Something he discusses in *I am a Sex Addict*, until finally “Godard stopped answering the phone” (Chonin).

“Later, Zahedi moved to Paris, where he tried to woo backers, including the French government, for films about poets Arthur Rimbaud and Stéphane Mallarmé and photographer Eadweard Muybridge. Deflated but undaunted, Zahedi returned to the United States and enrolled in UCLA’s film school. There he and collaborator Greg Watkins made *A Little Stiff*, in which Zahedi chronicled his unrequited love for an art student” (Chonin).

we go through the daily rhythms of classroom life in the northern Koker village where the film is set, until our hero, Ahmed (Babek Ahmedpour) mistakenly takes his friend's homework in his knapsack.

Besides using non-professionals, both auteurs also employ composition and landscapes within the character's natural worlds to construct visual metaphors for each hero's internal struggles. In *Blows*, the film moves between subjective and objective perspectives to show Antoine's daily life from his exploration of his mother's vanity dresser to an amusement ride when ditching school. In the latter, Antoine is first shown spinning on the ride from an objective point-of-view, before Truffaut offers a view of the center, spinning pole within the ride, and then the onlookers looking down upon Antoine. Like his dysfunctional reality, the world has gone topsy-turvy from his lack of engagement from his parents and their focus on his mother's affair and its resulting domestic unrest. This leaves Antoine little solace other than to pull the covers of his small bed over him to drown out his metaphoric and literal shouting parents in the adjoining room. Truffaut escalates this need and reflection for escape by taking Antoine on a series of outings through the middle of the film that uses the natural landscape of Paris as a backdrop: Antoine ditches school, smokes cigars, drinks wine, steals a typewriter, watches a puppet show, and goes to an amusement park. Each excursion results in temporary relief, as he eventually returns home, stays with a friend, and finally, gets himself arrested for the stolen typewriter. His physical actions lack any real lasting power and are met with quick retribution at the hands of his step-father and uncaring mother, which all

become doubly difficult, as Truffaut shows Antoine subjectively peering at his mother's new hat in contrast to the boy's home he is now imprisoned within.



Kiarostami, like Truffaut, displays emotional struggle with the use of lines and natural terrain that Ahmed must physically run

through, back and forth between his village and his friend's home. The very obstacle of finding and saving his friend becomes the various twists and turns, Kiarostami provides from a wide shot of Ahmed running. The journey thus becomes an even wider metaphor for the same labyrinthine choices viewers must make on their journeys through life, as Ahmed's simplicity echoes humanity's, where the viewing of such a simple plot, humbles viewers into a meta-perspective on their own lives – and pushes them out of a contemplation of their struggles as anything but the self-same task Ahmed has before him – as the audience's imagination is engaged outside the frame – as is Kiarostami's cinematic objective – and they are returned to the innocence of youth to do right by a friend, rather than the complexity of motivations societal expectations and adulthood often inhabits.

Finally, there is the joint reliance on displaying narrative time within Aristotelian unity: “the idea that a drama should only encompass the time span it would take to enact it” (Stenudd, Para. 10). Kiarostami’s *...Friend’s Home* takes place in one continuous movement from the day the notebook is found to the next morning when it is returned. There are no jumps to move the character from Point *A* to *B*. Instead, we are shown the running, discussions with his grandfather, and the exchange in the neighbouring village with the old man who requires Ahmed’s help in a slow pace that would relatively match the same experience in waking reality. Truffaut’s *...Blows*, similarly holds on Antoine’s quotidian reality to allow the audience to reflect on the puppet show, classroom antics, and Antoine’s daily chores. These documentary-like moments to show reality as it is without adornment, align both filmmakers within Vertov’s hopes for the future of cinema. Yet, both auteurs reliance on composition and camera movement over montage, separate them from Vertov, Godard, and Zahedi, whose construction is more visible from a jumping assemblage within the editing room with voice-overs, titles, animation, and other techniques – that pull us more towards documentary than narrative storytelling.

Our journey through cinematic history has offered us a distinction between the two forms and their reliance on composition, performance, and montage to shape cinema in either documentary or narrative tendencies. Before we move into how the blend between both differs in more detail between Kiarostami and Zahedi, let’s look now at how the advent of television, and specifically reality television has changed cinema’s techniques and expanded hybrid cinema as an art form.

Reality Television



Documentary form, as a medium, has been supersized in the digital age. The advent of liveblogging in the early 2000's democratized media and allowed participants to engage viewers

without sponsorship or political control. Simultaneous to the Internet's birth of both bloggers and vloggers, was the explosion of reality television programming. MTV's *The Real World*⁶, and subsequent reality-based production companies, such as Home and Garden Television (HGTV) or the Do-It-Yourself Network (DIY), allowed for a greater diversity in both programming interests and media tools. Writers, who were previously decision makers and major players in how a show was produced, were put into positions of pseudo-editors⁷, where information was now collected via outlines with minor text, usually specifying points of narration, location shifts, or organizing raw text generated from dub loggers – large cattle droves of writers, who transcribed hours of raw footage for producers. The final products of shows were, therefore, mainly generated by the raw data collected and producers' editing

⁶ "The Real World's second season, set in Los Angeles, was arguably a bigger hit with audiences, and by season three, when a San Francisco home was populated with cast members like the irrepressible bike messenger punk-rock and HIV activist Pedro Zamora, the show really hit its stride as the new gold standard for youth-oriented reality programming" (Devollo, 14).

⁷ Also, sometimes referred to as the story producer or story editor: the job "typically consists of...composing story outlines and compressing source material for time and content into a coherent story" (Devollo, 29).

choices. Shows, such as *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*, *The Bachelor*, and *Bachelorette* – were variations on a similar outline. With the latter game shows, a narrator would often direct viewers or contestants through various constraints or set-ups, usually chosen by show runners to generate the most conflict and subsequent viewership. Likewise, shows like the ...*Kardashians*, *Basketball Wives*, and *Shahs of Sunset*, also put together exposés on families or selected groups that would provide the most drama for viewers. Many of these reality programs were an amalgamation of *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous*, with the added benefit of dysfunctional families or incidents to proffer attention. Other shows have since followed suit, using “uniqueness” as the major criteria for what contestants or family members will be chosen as a focus for a reality program i.e. “shows that deal with little people, gold miners, octuplets, families in arctic conditions,” and so on. The “uniqueness” in these cases, replaces the “wealthy” quotient in shows like ...*Kardashians* and ...*Sunset*, or even its predecessor, *MTV Cribs*.

Although reality television has often made programs out of the “unique” or “unusual”, there has also been an equal trajectory for early shows to show plainness and the quotidian for viewers to form heroic self-reflections in themselves, or as Vindicen Kajabika remarks in the *Fictional Power of Reality Television...*, “as allusions of [their] pseudo-heroism” (4). This reliance on reliving daily life for consumers does not exclude celebrities as a point of reflection, especially if these stars are seen to have clear weaknesses in judgment or skills, because they activate

a sympathy from audiences, especially if their negative attributes coincide with confessionals or other types of intimate portraits:

“Eve Angeli is an artist-musician who, in 2004, had participated in the first edition of reality TV *La Ferme Célèbrités* (TF1). This show is based on the exploitation by celebrities on a farm in the countryside far away from the center of town. Known for her clumsiness and slow reasoning, she was usually distinguished by her weak general knowledge and uncommon naivety. But instead of her defects and weaknesses...displeasing the public, it became an asset to attract viewers’ sympathy” (Kajabika, 5).



Eve Angeli went on to reach the semifinals of *La Ferme Célèbrités* (TF1), whose voting was done by the viewing public, and coincided with her agreement to do intimate exposés

about her life. This type of magnification on the hardships a celebrity faces in the French countryside in 2004 are not unlike the countless Kim Kardashian and Kanye West mishaps that have littered both American television sets and magazine racks for decades.

This tendency for reality television to expose the quotidian of celebrity or non-celebrity life in exposés to form sympathy is not unlike a literary or cinematic

narrative tool to form empathy with a character. If we are a screenwriter or novelist, then it's no difficult task to come up with a character who exhibits certain character flaws that can be examined in detail, along with an overarching objective to accomplish a task or commit some internal or external change on themselves or their environments.

Troy DeVold, a writer on *Rescue 911* and executive producer of *Big Brother*, describes in detail the writer and producer's ability to shape narrative in *Reality TV: TV's Hottest Market*, by breaking down the outline for home improvement shows and exemplifying how each follows a formula – regardless of the show's actual “reality”. For example, in his outline of a basic home improvement program, there are elements titled “First Hurdle” and “Second Hurdle”, whose move into each new scenario can be triggered by a voice-over narration that guides the viewer's perception:

- “Termite damage means the cost of the project could triple. It's the beginning of the end for Ted's dream project.
- The good news is the termite damage is confined to a small area. Ted's lucked out this time” (4).

Therefore, story editors can direct viewers and still adhere to a specific format, by allowing the written narration to either demonstrate a “hurdle” or the “overcoming of a hurdle”. This slight amendment marks reality television as a pseudo-reality at

best, where writers are still adhering to the demands of cinematic storytelling. Something DeVolld reaffirms in his announcement that “premise alone is not the show” and what is actually required is engagement through the delivery of “backstories, opinions, and motivations for [a character’s] actions”. All elements that need to be “laid out with the same care that screen storytelling demands with story arcs, turning points, and gratifying resolutions” (9). DeVolld then goes on to decipher reality programs into seven different types that must a) setup a problem; b) build stakes; and c) eventually offer resolution just like a traditional narrative⁸.

DeVolld’s description and adherents is classic storytelling. For all intense purposes, it doesn’t seem reality television is doing anything different. That is, until we examine the level of control placed on the real subject. If a celebrity is revealing the inner workings of their lives, as Kajabika’s example with Eve Angeli, then she would be remiss to expose untruths. Therefore, the realities exposed within this format would have to be truths. These could not be bent or changed by a writer’s pen.

Therefore, if we look back at our example with Godard’s *Breathless*, it is clear that Michel is an artificial creation with the pseudo-reality of being a documentary

⁸ According to DeVolld, Reality television can be broken down into seven groups:

- Docuseries
- Reality Competition: Elimination
- Makeover / Renovation
- Dating
- Hidden Camera / Surveillance / Amateur Contest
- Supernatural
- Travel / Aspirational

subject with the breaks in the fourth wall, jump cuts, and other techniques at play. While Zahedi, himself, as a director, navigating a film whose title is *I Am a Sex Addict*, would be committing a series of untruths if the entire conception of the film were not a reality. At the same time, the film folds back on itself to reveal how certain re-enactments are not up to par – such an admission of falsity – while it does bring viewers closer to a sense of reality – can be equally detracting, since it is very likely possible that these re-enactments, although real, are controlled accidents that also work for the film to have a sense of conflict, move the story forward, and match Zahedi's super objective: to finish the film. This means Zahedi can move in and out of the process of filmmaking at whim. He can either pull back the curtain whenever the story needs a jarring comic cut – or simply move the story forward to the next beat, since he is also the progenitor of what will be as the narrator of the film.

If we add Kajabika's idea that audiences develop sympathy with reality contestants who offer intimate portraits into their lives, regardless of their particular skills to accomplish the actual contest in which they are participating, then Zahedi's parallel move to be seemingly unknowing and make mistakes – only further aligns himself with a deepening sympathy with his audience. Their hopes for him to accomplish his goals become synonymous with a traditional narrative where the end zone may have any number of variations around getting the girl, trophy, and so on. In a Zahedi film, the ultimate prize is aligned with him as the narrator to finish the project. Anything that happens in the process of this end result is simply a series of reflections for the audience to consider: *Was it okay for him to film participants in*

Sharjah and potentially have them lose a job or face prison? Is making art subversive a criminal act? Is making a film and finishing one grounds for its existence at all costs?

Each of Zahedi's films, thus, push an internal reflection on making art in general. The pulling back of the curtain is mainly operating as a narrative tool to either push the story forward, provide a comedic aside, have the audience sympathize, or re-emphasize the larger question at play: *Can making art align both creator and viewer with the sublime?*

This last question may seem a grander leap in the scheme of things. If Zahedi is simply questioning the making of art, then what does this have to do with spirituality at all? Like Kiarostami, Zahedi's interest in revealing the inner workings of process behind the curtain pushes the narrative outside the frame. Where Kiarostami relies on cinematic gestures to push audiences into what he describes as "imaginative states" – unseen character reactions, puzzle-piecing actors to create realism, slowing pace for meditative wanderings, and the actual illusion of certain scenes, such as in *Seagull Eggs* – Zahedi uses the exact opposite, relying on the audience's need for a lack of illusion to create a similar state of contemplation. By using documentary techniques and elements of reality television, such as character empathy, purposeful accidents, and intimate exposés into his own life, Zahedi allows viewers to parallel his experience, making his metaphysical questions about existence and experience theirs as well.

Before we move into Zahedi and Kiorastami's views on the sublime and artistic creation, it is important to notice the emphasis both have on the allowance and making of art in general. To better understand how this comes into play, it will be helpful to understand how freedom of speech has affected both artists born into a country full of political unrest, such as Iran, and how these same cultural undercurrents have shaped their work.

Iranian Cinema

On February 22, 2018, the University of Southern California hosted a private screening for students of Malek Akkad's *Not Without Nerve*. Akkad's personal documentary traces his father, Moustapha Akkad, as he faces various difficulties with financing, production locations, and protests while making *Mohammed: Messenger of God* (1977). To this day, *The Message* – it's official international title – is the only depiction of the Prophet that has been made and sought to bridge the divide between East and West. The film is still banned in six countries but has been seen by over 500 million people worldwide, and is often used as an instructional video on Islam for governments, educators, and Muslims, themselves.

During the Q&A, Akkad expressed confusion about why the film would still be faced with such scrutiny when it had been such a success with all faiths worldwide, and that it would ultimately lead to the tragic bombing of his father and sister when they

visited Jordan in 2005 for a celebratory retrospective of the film. As was depicted in the documentary, Moustapha Akkad is shown as a savvy, diplomatic American transplant who is able to maneuver around earlier death threats – and even a hostage crisis when the film opens in New York City, by allowing his detractors to view the film and see that it never actually shows the Prophet in the flesh but relies on a subjective camera angle so that it would not insult those who were opposed to any depiction of idolatry.

Although the younger Akkad did not go into detail on the Islamic tenets his father's persecutors felt he violated in making the film, it is important to our discussion to understand how gravely severe it is for artists to operate within Islamic countries, and the paradoxical nature that forces them to conceal within cinema. Consequently, we can identify four major philosophical and doctrinal objections to any mode of visual representation within Islam:

1. A person's imaginative faculties will overcome one's reason by watching any kind of creative visual representation.
2. Sustained reflection on the visual representation of real things prevents us from examining the realities they represent.
3. The historical opposition of the Prophet of Islam to idolatry.
4. Any act of creation which simulates the original creation of God is blasphemous.

Given these basic tenets, the creation of any visual image within an Islamic state would seem an impossibility – and the sheer “nerve” of Akkad to attempt such a film that reframes Islam and bridges cultures is nothing short of a miracle. Yet, cinema continues to be made in Islamic countries, and their discretion as to what is considered blasphemous has shifted to allow certain windows into creation. Currently, there are several blockbusters coming out of the Middle East, and specifically Iran, where the budgets are as large as their Hollywood counterparts: “*He Who Said No* (2015), an Iranian film about the Battle of Karbala (a Sunni-Shia clash in 680AD) had a rumored budget of \$70m” and Majid Majidi’s *Muhammad: The Messenger of God* [not an adaptation of Akkad’s] (2015), also made in Iran, had a budget of \$40m (Ramallah). Although the films are meant to entertain and turn a profit, there is still a certain element of proselytizing amid the backdrop of continuing Sunni-Shi’I tensions in the region. For example, when Majid Majidi was questioned about his version of *Muhammad*, he said his film “should promote Islamic culture”. Something A.V. Ramallah points out in *The Economist* as revealing for the current state of Iranian cinema, since “the Middle East is burning with a brutal Sunni-Shi’I conflict, fuelled by Saudi Arabia and Iran respectively”, so it is “inevitable that cinema would be heaved into this battle too” (Ramallah).⁹ Of course,

⁹ Nacim Pac Shiraz illustrates another viewpoint in *Shi’I Islam in Iranian Cinema*, whereby the shifting, governmental powers in place throughout 20th Century Iran were also operating with a further demarcation between Sunni and Shi’I factions throughout Iran’s history – and that many films were created to either support the ruling powers that be and their religious framework, which either supported Shi’I claims that Ali was in fact the successor of Mohammad versus the Sunni belief that he wasn’t – a positionality that she says was more aligned for Shi’I followers to express a national identity as Iranian in the face of Arabic invasions that Islamicized the country. In fact, the writing of Ferdowsi’s famous poetry volume the *Shahnameh* and its details of Persian mythos was a return to

this leaning toward proselytizing and censorship by clerics and ruling governments in Iran, has been at play well before the Islamic Republic came into power. In fact, as governmental power has shifted from the Qeyser Dynasty, Reza Pahlavi, and now the Islamic Republic, so has permissibility within Iranian cinema followed the mandates set by each ruling power and their ultimate objective to shape the medium as propaganda for their own agendas.

For Iranian artists, censorship and adhering to governmental guidelines have been commonplace from the banning of Ta'zyieh, the first Persian-language sound newsreel in 1932, well into the forced propaganda-infused cinema of Reza Shah's reign, and thereafter under the Pahlavi monarchy and the advent of Iranian New Wave cinema, beginning with Daryush Mehrjui's *The Cow* (1960), and then into the more recent films of Abbas Kiarostami, Mohsen Makhmalbaf, and Jafar Panahi – who all suffered under yet another totalitarian regime of censors within the Islamic Republic. Each reigning government, from the first Iranian film in 1904 by Mirza Ebrahim Khan Akkas Bashi until today, has chosen to use cinema for their particular agendas¹⁰.

In *Closeup: Iranian Cinema Past, Present, and Future*, Hamid Dabashi illustrates how the evolution of Iranian cinema was a direct reaction to Reza Shah's enforcement of

Persian language, which was outlawed for 200 years prior to the *Shahnameh's* arrival in the 10th Century.

¹⁰ See Appendix A for timeline of Iranian literary and cinema history.

modernity in the face of colonialization and an inability for Iranians to collect a national identity in the ever-changing leadership and colonial powers of British, Russian, and American forces that manipulated different regions in hopes to gain control of a growing oil trade. He specifically cites the Enlightenment and Immanuel Kant's edict of the "categorical imperative", as an example for how the rest of the world had turned away from biblical morality in favor of the individual – and that Iran – whose Islamic tenets outweighed such independence – countered any hope for modernity, relegating cinema to become either propaganda for the reigning despots, *jaheli* films¹¹ that promoted a certain male chauvinism, musical numbers for singing stars, or biopics that re-examined accepted poets of old.

Nacim Pak-Shiraz in *Shi'I Islam in Iranian Cinema* echoes Dabashi's claims that Iranian films in the 20th Century had become propagandist, but she also cites that attitudes which originally saw the art form as "morally corrupt and against the Muslim doctrines" had broadened specifically because of Reza Shah's banning of Ta'ziyeh (passion plays) – which were the main form of public entertainment – and "the banning of the veil in 1936" (Shiraz, 41), which resulted in a unique and popular social experience for moviegoers, who now had a desegregated opportunity to sit next to one another without concealment. Consequently, clerics proclaimed the cinema as "dangerous" and "un-Islamic". In addition to clerical

¹¹ "Qeyser (1969), despite its technical and directorial brilliance, did nothing for Iranian cinema except to glorify further the rampant lumpenism of the 1950s and 1960s. Central to *Qeyser* was still the lumpen machismo of the film jaheli genre in which the "honor" of the patriarch is vested in the chastity of his female relations" (Dabashi, 43).

objections, there were also leading intellectuals, such as Jalal Al-e Ahmad, who turned against cinema and its associated modernization because it was too Westernized – what he “dubbed *Westoxication* (*gharbzadegi*, literally West-struckness)” – and he called for a return to Self that was also reflected among some of the New Wave film-makers of the 1960s, whose films departed from the mainstream and reflected this “return to Self through nativism” (Shiraz, 42).

Although Shiraz’s qualification of how Reza Shah’s bans led to social openness and definitely helped theaters gain popularity, Dabashi’s claims that the literary hotbed upon which Kiarostami was born into allowed for new artistic approaches that challenged the hegemony that many authors and auteurs lived within. In particular, Dabashi points to Iranian art’s championing of poetry and literature over other such popular art forms, such as Naqqali (public storytelling), Pardeh-dari, Ta’ziyeh (passion play based on the martyrdom of Houseein), or Rohozi, that helped Iran form its movement into modernism, specifically with Sedeq Hedayat’s novel *The Blind Owl* and poets Forrough Farrokhzad, Ahmad Shamlou, Mehdi Akhavan Sales, and Sohrab Sepehri¹². It is through their work – an artistry that was permitted more freely because of its association with Islam, specifically Sufi poetry – that a national identity emerges outside of monarchical control and included realistic portraits of love, an anxiety towards modernity, and a relegation to art over form.

¹² “Nima Yushij died in 1960, but his poetic offspring – Ahmad Shamlou, Mehdi Akhavan Sales, Frough Fookhzad, and Sohrab Sepehri, chief among them – were defining the moral and intellectual atmosphere of the time” (Dabashi, 42).

Along with the burgeoning literary movement of the 1960s, came the Shah's confidence in his social and political success, which led to an opening towards cinema and the building of The Institution for Intellectual Development of Children and Young Adults, where Abbas Kiarostami worked and made films for over 20 years, and where many other prominent directors got their start, such as, Bahram Baizai, Amir Naderi, Reza Alamzadeh, and Sohrab Shahid-Sales (Parhami, Para. 39).

“The seventies saw the height of the Shah's confidence in his social and political successes. Deluding itself into believing that it had grown unassailably stable, the regime now allowed the making of a few films with critical social themes” (Parhami, Para. 40).

Although the Shah's reign seceded to Ayotollah Khomeini's Islamic Republic in 1979, The Institution for Intellectual Development... continued to flourish, albeit with new guidelines that adhered to Khomeini's opposition of cinema's “misuse” and his appropriation of the art form to “became an ideological tool to combat Pahlavi culture” (Shiraz, 136). As a result, “cinema has been strictly codified and monitored by the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance (MCIG) to ensure its compliance with the Islamic Republic's aspirations” (42), which includes a ban on any films that

1. Weaken the principle of monotheism and other Islamic principles, or insult them in any manner;

2. Insult, directly or indirectly, the Prophets, Imams, the guardianship of the Supreme Jurisprudent (velayat faqih), the ruling Council or the jurists (mojtaheds); and
3. Blaspheme against the values and personalities held sacred by Islam and other religions mentioned in the Constitution¹³.

Given these guidelines set by the MCIG, Iranian auteurs are hard-pressed to offer cinema with the same afforded freedoms as their western counterparts. In fact, many have either been banned or arrested for creating works deemed un-Islamic and are seen as a potential threat to the government. Those who have been able to manoeuvre within these constraints are often doing so by either adhering to the guidelines and making pro-Islamic cinema or operating within the symbolic and metaphoric. It is this latter element that many Iranian New Wave filmmakers, such as Abbas Kiarostami, Mohsen Makhmalbaf, and Jafar Panahi have been cited as possessing. This has led to a new categorization for cinema that utilizes these techniques. Shiraz points out that after 2005, the Farabi Cinema Foundation created a *sinama-ye ma'nagara* category for the Fajr International Film Festival that outlined "spiritual" cinema to be films that offered a pathway from the material – something that can be taken from the two different meanings of the root-word 'ma'na' in Persian:

¹³ MICG regulations taken from Nacim Pak-Shiraz's *Shi'I Islam in Iran*.

In the [Persian] dictionary, *Dehkhoda*, one of the meanings of “*ma’na*”, which has a philosophical aspect, is that it is the opposite of “form”. “*Ma’na*” in the cinema of *ma’nagara* does not apply [to the other meaning of *ma’na*] as meaning. Instead, it is passing from form and appearance to the other side of the material world, [it is] a path that passes through the material world (Shiraz, 37).

This codified attempt to point towards a cinema that exuded an otherworldliness was vehemently objected to by clerics and intellectuals, who saw the categorization as a moot point when any film created and adhering to the Ministry’s guidelines would have to be by their very nature Islamic, and therefore, already spiritual. However, the attempt by the Farabi Cinema Foundation posits an interesting paradox within Iranian cinema itself: *Can film be spiritual in politicized Iran?*¹⁴

Along with the shifts within cinema and governmental powers that saw a growing Shi’I contingency that opposed the modernization of Reza Pahlavi, and then his son, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, came a burgeoning interest in Heidegger as a philosophical tool against modernity that could help intellectuals in their castigation “[of] the West” (Shiraz, 46). Intellectuals, such as Mohammad Maddadpur, used

¹⁴ If cinema is deemed “spiritual” only if it exudes a sense of unconcealment and a removal of the Self, as defined by Mohammad Maddadpur, and that an auteur’s responsibility is to represent Heidegger’s sense of *aletheia* (truth), then how is such an act possible if the constraints artists are living under precede with the very opposite, especially when artistic freedom is paramount to overcome the societal and psychological constructs that activate this very ego in the first place?

Heidegger's notion of *techne* to outline how cinema is a technological process produced by the West, so its ability to exude "religious truth" is null and void, leaving it to only to deal with "the worldly side of human beings" and is little more than entertainment (46).

According to Maddadpur, true art is a way of truth gained through the unveiling of the physical world. The "unveiling" that Maddadpur refers to is in fact derived from Heidegger's definition of *techne*. Heidegger states that "what is decisive in *techne* does not at all lie in making and manipulating, nor in the using of the means, but rather in the revealing, not manufacturing, that *techne* is bringing-forth" (Shiraz, 48).

Along with Heidegger, Maddadpur framed art within Islamic theology, outlining that its struggle was between *jihad-e akbar* (a greater struggle against one's ego) and *jihad-e asghar* (a lesser struggle against unbelievers). Thus, his version of a cinema that would reveal truth, would be one where an auteur does not impose themselves upon such cinema. This notion is not unlike our previous discussion with Vertov and his *Kinopravda*. Where Vertov asserts that the Kinoeye (camera) is the mechanism of truth, Maddadpur cites Islamic theology and an auteur's ability to suppress their egoic notions while still adhering to faith. As an example, Maddadpur points to Morteza Amini who documented the frontlines of the Iran-Iraq war for being a true *shive-ye ishraqi* (Illuminationist), where the "veil of technique and technology were torn apart and the truth disclosed" (Shiraz, 50). Maddadpur's use of truth again

echoing Heidegger's assertion that *techne* is "a dimension of truth (*aletheia*): unconcealment, unhiddenness, disclosedness" (Shiraz, 50).

Like Vertov, Maddadpurs's notion that the removal of the Self and projection of the apparatus as the ultimate purveyor of unconcealment is a paradoxical impossibility given that both thinkers political agendas constrain and conceal rather than make the truth known. It is this ideological covering throughout Iranian cinema that prevents true depictions of reality from being seen. Therefore, it is no wonder that Kiarostami, operating within these constraints – and cited as adhering to the guidelines of spiritual cinema – does so by eliminating any propagandist nature that would extol a national or religious identity, by allowing his subjects a hyper-reality, often achieved by either puzzle-piecing actors, holding on tangential moments outside the narrative, or layering realities upon one another. All these techniques – produced as a result of the constraints by Iranian cinema to conceal – have actually brought together the ingredients for hybrid cinema to be born. Therefore, Zahedi, who is carrying his birthplace and culture of Iran forward into his subjective experiences in the United States, is also hyper-aware of the politicized backdrop and constraints placed upon him as a child of the Revolution and has sought to overturn a life of concealment that is born of Iranian culture, but also extend beyond such national identities, like Kiarostami, to include a revealing both of the emotional and psychic conditions he now finds himself, along with the other constraints placed by either funding, distribution, and now, censorship within social media.

Yet, given that Kiarostami has operated within the Ministry's constraints to produce a cinema devoid of a propagandist viewpoint, the question remains as to how he was able to do this and have it both be accepted initially by the Ministry (later films were banned) and also be considered "spiritual" within the guidelines set by the Farabe Cinema Foundation. Dabashi offers us an answer to this question by again referencing Heidegger in his approach to the work of Mohsen Makhmalbaf, and how the latter first operated from the context of creating Islamic cinema, but whose push for a further truth found him leaving his previous Islamic viewfinder in favor of the poetic. Thus, for Dabashi, Makhmalbaf and Kiarostami were able to circumvent any Islamic ideologue by placing a focus on art, and echoing Heidegger's view that "the closer we come to the danger, the more brightly do the ways into the saving power begin to shine" (Shiraz, 51). Therefore, we can identify, as Shiraz points out, that Dabashi sees Makhmalbaf's films as a vehicle for transformation, where the "site of resistance moves from the merely political to the poetic" (51). It is this reliance on art over form, and its specific nature to conjure the poetic within cinema that allows for certain frictions to occur in Kiarostami's work that breathe new spaces for understanding – a product that is only possible through a confrontation with technology, which, in a colonial site, such as Iran, is a resistance against Islamism itself.

Before we go further into art as a form of resistance against Islamism that has affected Kiarostami and Zahedi, let us take a moment to go further into this conception of the poetic and how it has helped shape Kiarostami's cinema.

Poetry and Kiarostami

Kiarostami often cites how poetry and cinema are operating in similar fashions, and even goes into detail about a visit with poet, Mehdi Hamidi Shirazi, where he recites entire passages of his books from memory on his deathbed.

“The most extraordinary thing happened as I began to speak his lines. The poet wept, and my friend was similarly moved to tears. Even I experienced intense feelings as I recited those verses, all those years after turning my back on them” (Cronin, 18).

For Kiarostami, Shirazi’s poems had such a deep impact that they caused an anxiety that led him to turn his “back on them” in his youth. It is only after this recitation and his own maturation as a filmmaker that he began to understand poetry’s inexplicable nature, as the same open-ended construct at play within cinema and approached Shirazi’s verses in a different fashion. This shift from apprehension to comfort is something Kiarostami explains is paramount to poetry and cinema’s operation that is often misunderstood:

“We all have our own comprehension of things, our own threshold where understanding blurs, where perplexity sets in. With poetry, an immediate and full understanding cannot be expected. Such things have to be worked

for. In the case of cinema, too many films are spoon-fed. Audiences have been led to expect a constantly clear and unified message. (Cronin, 19).

Kiarostami explains that contemporary viewers are confounded by open-ended cinema and are “uninterested in discovering things for themselves” (19). Unlike commercial films, Kiarostami desires to create cinema that elicits questioning and a basking “in temporary confusion” (19). In fact, he believes open-ended narratives are more believable “than one with a sealed resolution...where the audience is forced to make up its own mind” (19). In this way, Kiarostami includes open-ended stories to increase believability and forgoes any specific message in favour of unexpected tangents throughout a narrative, which both surprises viewers and allows them to take the experience as another view on reality itself.



(Please click pic or [here](#) to view [So Can I](#))

Kiarostami's *So Can I* is a prime illustration of how this shift operates. The short film begins with animated segments illustrating the way an animal moves, while a teacher's voice-over is heard: "This is how a kangaroo moves." The film then cuts to a classroom of listening students, who respond by saying, "I can do that, too!" This then leads to an image of a child imitating the hopping movement of the kangaroo. The series continues like this – first showing a kangaroo, mouse, worm, monkey, and so on — until the film bookends with a flying bird. When the film cuts back to the listening students, they are left confounded by this last image. Likewise, audiences, who have been given the subjective framework to see the illustration through the child's eyes, are given a similar disorientation between the natural world of a "bird flying" versus the child's capability to do so. The resulting realization propels the viewer outside the frame and allows them a third type of assessment that is neither within the child's reality in the classroom or the audience's reality of viewing the film – but something wholly outside both perspectives. It is this shifting nature in Kiarostami's cinema to move between cinematic reality and the actual natural laws that govern reality outside of the cinema that renders Kiarostami a visual poet. Something Dabashi also echoes by paralleling Sohrab Sepehri's poetry with Kiarostami, and signaling that both echo a truth beyond cultural identity or politics:

"By thus aesthetically subverting the metaphysics of "the real," Kiarostami has opened the way to radical dismantling of the structural violence of

“meaning,” upon which is predicated such metaphysical surrogates as “history,” “tradition,” “identity,” and “piety” (Dabashi, 67).

Like a poem, Kiarostami’s cinema offers a way of looking that shifts between a micro and macro level at key points in a character’s evolution. These shifts move us away from an understanding of the narrative within a traditional, linear or non-linear film, because the elements we are moving between are not moving the narrative forward, but simply allowing the audience to perceive the world in its natural state outside the constructed reality of the cinema. For Kiarostami, this move to follow the tangential meandering of a can rolling down the middle of the street in *Close-up*, or to move into a superwide view of the child running along the natural landscape of *Where Is My Friend’s House*, allows viewers to experience the natural beauty of what is being presented outside the narrative itself – a window into a world before cinema – or better yet – the Eden between the cinema of humanity. The windows into looking are, therefore, meditative moments, where the beauty of the natural world supersedes any inherent meaning to the narrative at all. They can be taken as superfluous or given an extrapolated meaning by viewers – but, for Kiarostami, the meaning is inconsequential. By moving us into an investment of what is happening, and then pulling us out of this relationship, Kiarostami offers a shift in perspective and looking. Suddenly, the world is not filled with the same tension. The audience can relax and simply appreciate what is being shown. This moves viewers outside the reality of the cinema and the theater itself – much like a poem that highlights a way of looking on itself, and then breaks to allow the reader or viewer, to reflect on

their personal views of a “moving can,” “car moving along a highway,” or “a beautiful street.”

Kiarostami’s cinema, therefore, operates much like a poetic assemblage, where interconnected elements often give rise to an idea outside the reality of the cinema itself. Dabashi discusses how this shifting friction between characters’ actions often supersedes moralistic sentimentalism, because Kiarostami places emphasis upon this very action rather than the delivery of any didactic message. It is this reliance on the shift between the reality of what is being presented versus a character’s physical actions that often place his films in a realm of contemplation of the natural world, and thus, offers viewers a *tabula rasa* context for viewing that is outside any cultural or national identity. In this way, Kiarostami’s focus on movement develops a language for seeing and contemplation that is not unlike the poetry encountered by Sohrab Sepehri:

By the sunset,
In the midst of the tired presences of things,
An expectant gaze
Looked at the hollowness of time.

Upon the table,
The noisy presence of a few fresh fruits
Was flowing towards a vague intuition of death.

And upon the carpet of idleness, the wind
Had graced the soft border of life
With the aroma of the little garden.

And just like a fan unfurled, the mind
Had held the bright surface of the flower
And cooled itself with it.

The traveler
Descended from the bus:
“What a beautiful sky!”
And the continuity of the street
Carried his loneliness away.

The opening stanza from *The Traveler*, identifies a viewer gazing expectantly upon humanity. She notices living beings moving towards “death,” while the “wind’s aroma” allows a shift to contemplate the beauty of a flower amid violent ends. When we are returned to the natural reality of the traveler, the “gaze” witnesses the traveler’s acknowledgement of the beautiful sky. Like Kiarostami’s tangential shifts outside narrative – such as in *Life and Then Nothing*, where the harsh realities of an earthquake and its devastation are shown alongside a fictional love story and the daily happiness of quotidian life in spite of the natural disaster – Kiarostami extends

to a basic truth of existence beyond the Koker countryside, Iran or any national identity. It is the face of humanity and its sense of the “continuity of the street” as in Sepehri’s poem that aligns viewers together as a species:

In the poetry of Sepehri, reality becomes translucent. It is stripped of all its accumulated layers of metaphysics. Thus cleared of its historically accumulated burdens of “meaning,” reality reveals itself as the object of mere observation” (Dabashi, 68).

Therefore, Kiarostami’s cinema is not presented for direct mass consumption or a change in consumer choices, but rather contemplation. In fact, Kiarostami is often very much at ease with the negative reactions he faces from audiences and critics alike:

“I am a filmmaker who asks audiences to make more effort than usual, to bask in temporary confusion, and by so doing express themselves, which is why I lose some viewers along the way. For me, film is about enticing people to look and ask questions, to take the trouble to consider cinema as something other than just entertainment” (Kiarostami, 19).

It is easy to take this statement at face value and simply assume that Kiarostami is indifferent to the reception of his films. And, for all intense purposes Kiarostami is as he says interested in audiences “asking questions” more than anything else, but it

becomes necessary to further contextualize his statement within the development of Iranian cinema and its politicized backdrop by offering a comparison between Kiarostami's approach and his contemporary, Bahram Beyzai.