

Article

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Cinema: The Dialectic of Reality and Fiction with the World of Abbas Kiarostami

The question I want to start with is a philosophical one: What is reality? Everyone's reality changes with their surroundings and perception. But here we are more concerned with the concept of reality in cinema. Cinema is a medium whose reality seems like our experience of regular reality. We see the same mountains in front of the camera we had witnessed in life, we see the same people moving around, and we hear the same sound of motorbikes. Generally, cinema creates a world where we experience the things as we experience it in our lives. Despite knowing that the story, characters, and its set up is fictional, it serves the story in a way which creates that illusion of reality. Therefore, our own existing reality ceased in front of a big screen, we entered into a new realm of experience. The cinema started exhibiting its own truth. Is cinema truthful? Does not it lie to us? Does the sound of a motorbike emerge from a sound box is identical of the original sound? What is the notion of original? Is not the notion of original a construction? Once Kiarostami told to his students, "Cinema is fakery. It never depicts the truth as it actually is"¹. I don't know whether my essay can answer all these ques-

tions or revelations, but it would be a search on the dialectics of truth and falsity in cinema specially focusing on Abbas Kiarostami's works.

The idea of truthful representation of reality in an artwork started emerging with the Realism Movement of 19th century Europe. Realist artists have the intention to depict reality intricately. They always want to reproduce reality in their art. Realist painters painted in a way which intensely follows up every line, every curve and every minute detail of objects and textures. Their true appreciation lies in the statement: "Oh! They look so real!" They have an intense desire of constructing verisimilitude or making an exact copy of an object with their brushstrokes. Modernist painters are more interested in their personal version of reality. They create artwork with the way an individual is looking into a thing with his idiosyncratic ideas. Therefore, their perspective or interpretation of reality becomes personal and different. Modernist paintings do not reproduce objects from the real world, so in their artistic expressions a human face doesn't look like a real human face or a tree does not look like an actual tree. Their artwork started revolting against the accepted conventions

1 Page:6, 'Lessons with Kiarostami' (Edited by Paul Cronin)

of realism and therefore they fermented their own world of representation and celebrated their free will.



Realist Painting(Gustave Courbet)



Modern painting(PabloPicasso)

Cinema comes with Modernism. But, through ages it thinks and rethinks over the idea of realism in various ways. Cinema itself has a very direct connection with reality. A camera can reproduce a thing or a person exactly in their own way with a single click, moreover it can capture motion. People got frightened after their first experience of observing motion on a screen; they flew off when Lumiere Brothers show them *The Arrival of a Train* (1896). They took the moving train on screen for real.

Later, studio system emerges in America which is named after Classical Hollywood and it started constructing the conventions of realism in cinema. Classical Hollywood constructs stories in a method which gives the perfect illusion of reality. They invent the storytelling methods and techniques which construct this illusion perfectly. They can be compared with realist painters and their narrative strategies became a standardized protocol. Meanwhile, Surrealist filmmakers in France were trying to articulate an alternative expres-

sion of reality which surpasses the notion of perceptible real. In *Un Chien Andalou* (1929) Bunuel distorts the realistic idea of time and space. He places a dead bull head on a piano, shows numerous ants coming out of a human hand and a multi -storey building in a city whose door ended up on a beach. Surrealist filmmakers intentionally deformed reality and shaped it by their personal deliberation. So, cinema has every kind of possibilities from the very beginning. Although camera usually reproduces images and sounds from real life, the cinematic reality is always dubious, complex, and interesting.

Here, I would like to place Abbas Kiarostami within the history of films which opens the discourse of reality and its representation. Very comfortably he chooses the documentary mode and creates fiction with meticulous playfulness. He invites us into his world and the layers of reality start unfolding like the petals of roses.

In *Close Up*(1990) Abbas chooses a character (Hossain Sabzian) from his country who has been accused of fraudulence for pretending himself to be the famous filmmaker Mohsen Makhmalbaf. Sabzian has been sentenced; magazines started publishing sensational news about him, society started considering him with reproach. At this very moment Kiarostami appears with his sensitive camera, started looking at Sabzian with different eyes. We know, camera has a malpractice of intruding into reality and exploiting it. But Kiarostami uses the same camera magically which

involves itself with compassion and empathy. The close ups of Sabzian in Kiarostami's camera opens a new space for him where Sabzian is a neurotic film enthusiast and that neurosis leads him playing the role of Makhmalbaf. In the prison Kiarostami went to meet Hossain Sabzian in person. In the courtroom he keeps one of the cameras in front of Sabzian where he can express himself. Eventually Sabzian spoke about his poor economic condition as well as his passion for cinema. He admits he had told lie to the Ahankhah family and made himself acceptable as Makhmalbaf. But slowly we understand this lying is not for committing a burglary or breaking someone's heart, rather this lie is for creating an illusion of truth where the passionate film-buff Sabzian can be happy by thinking himself as a reputed filmmaker. So, Sabzian's falsehood approaches a greater reality and so does Kiarostami's camera. In *Close Up*(1990) Sabzian becomes a hero, whereas in society he was only a fraud. Kiarostami's film widens the horizon where this accusation of falsehood can be rethought and Sabzian can be discovered with a new light. So, here we see cinema constructing a truth which is more real than a confusing reality. When reality is cruel Kiarostami appears with absolute empathy and summons us to investigate another version of reality with cinema which is insightful and compassionate.



Hossain Sabzian in Close Up

Now, if we watch the film it feels like the courtroom trial has been documented and the events depicted by Sabzian and the Ahankhah family has been shot later at the house of Ahankhah. But Kiarostami admits to his students in a workshop that in the courtroom his camera got disrupted, that is why he has to reshoot the entire sequence with Sabzian after the trial ends and in some of the places Sabzian was asked to speak particular dialogues given by Kiarostami. "We ended up recreating most of the trial in the judge's absence"² Moreover Sabzian and Makhmalbaf started speaking too much at the end and that doesn't fit with Kiarostami's idea of the film. For that matter he used his intuitions in editing table and cut off the actual conversation between them on their bike ride and inserted music instead. Here he pushes us towards the idea of reality again. Which is real? Is reality a unidirectional entity or is it multilayered? Sometimes Kiarostami's cinema must tell lies for reaching a greater truth, so does Sabzian. Here, they both celebrates cinema. Here, they became one.

"If a filmmaker told me there was a lie in his work and I couldn't work out what it was, I would congratulate him"³

This probably sums up the idea of reality in cinema which is intelligently constructed. Kiarostami opens this concept of construction

² Page:8, 'Lessons with Kiarostami'(Edited by- Paul Cronin)

³ Page:10, 'Lessons with Kiarostami'(Edited by- Paul Cronin)

towards his audience. He tells a narration but never anchored on the make-belief system of Classical Hollywood Cinema. Reality and its conscious construction go hand in hand in his cinema. Also, he knows where to leave the camera, where to leave the artifice and let the life flow in their ways. In his film *And Life Goes On* (1992) an old man from his previous film, *Where Is the Friend's Home?* (1987) appeared and started talking about himself and the character he has played there. The filmmaker entered his house for some water and noticed that it is a different house from the previous film. That man responded too cunningly. He said that this was his house for the previous film and this is his house for the current film. His actual house has turned into debris after earthquake and he lives in a temporary tent.



And life goes on

Firstly, Abbas Kiarostami points out that cinema is a manufactured reality. Although it

looks real, this reality is intricately made up. Secondly, this construction of reality gives birth to the 'cinema truth' and through this 'cinema truth'; the truth of the real life can be healed. A homeless gets a home, an admirer of Makhmalbaf finally meets Makhmalbaf. Yes, cinema fabricates its own reality and that reality can be bigger and wider than the actual one. Kiarostami broaches on this idea throughout his career. In his cinema onscreen space started conversing with the off-screen space and his philosophy of film becomes eternal. He has the perfect intuitive intelligence of leaving the camera and let the audience think about the rest. So he left us in the middle of the road in *And Life Goes On* (1992) where we do not get to know whether the director could find Ahmad or not. A similar thing happens in *Through the Olive Trees* (1994) where camera started observing the characters from a distance and would not let us know if the girl has accepted the boy's proposal or not. Abbas Kiarostami is empathetic. His camera is empathetic. He constructs reality as well as talks about the construction- he tells us lies as well as sets off for a greater exploration of truth.

Kiarostami's camera juggles with documentary footages and convention of fictional narratives. He never associates himself with any of these schools and questions both. He never lets the audience understand which one is original and which one is fictional. Rather his works makes us believe that reality is a fiction as well as a fiction can be reality too. He is critical with the absolute idea of truth

claim accepted in the documentary film practice. In 1929, Robert Flaherty made *Nanook of the North* which is considered as the first documentary film. He went to Canadian Arctic and documented the lives of the Eskimos for his ethnographic project. During shoot he asked the people to hunt walrus with a harpoon but they stated that they have shifted from that primitive kind of hunting. Flaherty pushes them to do it in his ways. So, here we see the perception of a documentary filmmaker becomes pivotal than the actual reality and their idea of documenting the actual truth falls apart. Jean Rouch in *The Chronicle of a Summer* (1961) made a discourse on this reality of cinema which questions the absolute truth claim of ethnographic and documentary film practice. Kiarostami's idea of dealing truthfulness of cinema is more inclined to Rouch's cinema-verite. In *Through the Olive Trees* (1994) the manager Shiva insisted a village girl Tahere to wear some peasant dress where Tahere claimed young girls no more wears that kind of dresses. Kiarostami intelligently puts this scene in his film which incorporates the criticism of documentary convention.



Through the Olive Trees

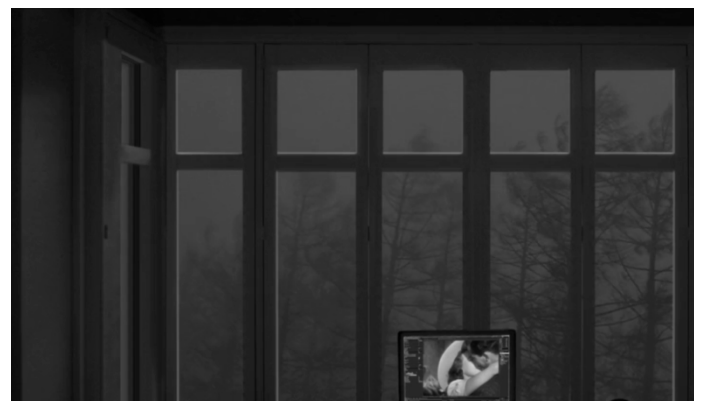
Moreover, he wants to proclaim that there cannot be an ideal documentary because a documentary is also a different kind of fabrication. In his short film *Seagull Eggs* (2014) he keeps the camera static in front of a seashore and let the sea takes away the seagull eggs one by one. It seems that there is no intervention. This fifteen minute film looks like a single shot film but it took two days and multiple shots has to be combined. Here I am quoting Kiarostami's words: "An exact imitation of life, if such a thing is even possible, cannot be art. Some measure of control is necessary, otherwise the filmmaker is little more than a surveillance camera in the corner of a room or a camera affixed to the horns of a bull in a field, blindly recording. But even then, which room and which bull? Choices must be made, and by so doing essential truths are revealed."⁴

His search for truth in art is eternal. This search becomes more poignant in *Certified Copy* (2010) where the characters keep on debating over the idea of original and copy- eventually their relation turns out to be enigmatic. Beginning as strangers, suddenly they started role playing as separated husband wives. Their conversations regarding the question of originality evaded into their relationships. We

could not understand what part is truth and what part is performance. Again, Kiarostami left us unanswered and exhibits multiple possibilities on the dialectic of reality and fiction.

Kiarostami's quest for truth of life and cinema-truth leads us to another kind of dimension that is the truth of the audience. After a film is done, it is left open for the viewers. They watch cinema from their own reality and everyone's repercussion over a film keeps on changing. A director like Kiarostami left a broader space for the audiences and they can use their imaginations to interpret it. If not interpret, they got a room to expand their imagination and every imagination keeps on varying from the other. Every spectator has a definite kind of worldview, sense of reality and beliefs. When a person is observing an open-ended film from his own perspective- it becomes his personal film- and it gives rise to multiple versions of a single film. After digital age most of the audience can watch a film in their personal digital devices and they have got the opportunity to pause or rewind a film at any moment. This choice is also revolutionary. Before the digital era, this idea was out of

the question and one must watch a film on a big screen at a single sitting. This active participation of the spectators stretched out new possibilities. The two kind of truth- which is truth in real world and truth in cinema, widens up the space for a third kind of truth- that is the truth of the audience. The very presence of the audience constructs this truth. Final shot of Kiarostami's last film hints this like a prophet. *24 Frames* (2017) ended with the image of a girl who has fallen asleep over her desk in the middle of a film which she was probably editing. In the last shot of *24 Frames* (2017), we see the presence of an editor as well as a spectator and the presence of cinema on digital editing software within a single frame. The frame itself alludes the truth of the spectator as well as it sums up Kiarostami's entire vision of art and artistry.



The final frame of 24 Frames

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