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KIAROSTAMI'S *THE TRAVELLER*: A CINEMA OF THE SEER

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ABSTRACT

This essay offers a fresh perspective on Kiarostami's cinema by exploring *The Traveller* (1974) using Deleuze's time-image model. I define the film as consisting of three parts: 1) the Malayer part where Qassem (the protagonist) is able to act 2) the bus sequence which actually metaphorically represents the transition from tradition to modernity and 3) the Tehran part where 'the link between man and the world breaks' and the character becomes a 'seer' confronted by the 'intolerable' which is represented in the film by an empty stadium. Through close textual analysis of the *mise-en-scène* of the film, my goal here is to consider the formal and structural elements used to deliberately engineer the memorable 'feel' of the evacuated stadium sequence in the last scene.

Abbas Kiarostami's first feature film was shot before the Iranian Revolution of 1979. Although Kiarostami's films have been the subject of many studies, *The Traveller* (1974) has rarely been mentioned in the literature. The previous studies mainly investigated his films made after the revolution and hardly dedicated a paragraph to *The Traveller*. The aforementioned film is of significance because it has many characteristics, which were later developed to the perfection by Kiarostami and re-emerged in his later films. Moreover, in general the philosophical analysis of Iranian films can be hardly found in the previous studies. The aim of this article is to uproot these characteristics and analyse them through a philosophical lens, namely time-image model, provided by Gilles Deleuze. To analyse *The Traveller* I will use the cinematic characteristic that Deleuze identified as 'the cinema of the seer', namely 'pure optical situations' in Italian neorealism, in which the situations do not extend into actions and hence are 'fundamentally distinct from the sensory-motor situations of the action-image in the old realism'.¹ This study is a complementary study to the previous ones, which mainly studied Iranian cinema socio-politically, and tends to fill this gap, i.e. the lack of analysis of Kiarostami's films (in particular) through a philosophical framework.

As mentioned above, *The Traveller* was filmed in 1974 when the Iranians experienced many socio-political and economic changes, i.e. an economy upheaval and social changes with Reza Shah's program of modernisation in the 1950s and Mohammad Reza Shah's westernisation plan during the 1960s and 1970s, which resulted in a shattered and pluralised identity. I believe that the modernisation of Iran led to a shift in Iranian identity that made Iranians rediscover the world again and Iranian films were one of the immediate mediums for this purpose. *The Traveller* provides a visual glimpse of Iranian life in the 1970s, an era when revolution was in the air and the westernisation of Iran was happening rapidly.

Abbas Kiarostami's films are notable for his use of children as the main characters, where they are put in situations and struggles that adults can hardly face. Here a discussion of *The Traveller* entails a broader exploration of the role of child in Kiarostami's cinema, and the emergence of this type of character in a new form of optical drama. My concern is to explore Kiarostami's first feature film and to bring Gilles Deleuze's theory of cinema into conversation with Iranian cinema. In this essay, I discuss in what ways Kiarostami's *The Traveller* presents Deleuze's notion of the cinema of the seer. I discuss how *The Traveller's* character becomes a seer rather than a doer, and propose that this film is the beginning of raising a new type of character in Kiarostami's cinema. I draw on Deleuze's definition of modern cinema and its role to make us rediscover and believe in the link between man and the world when the link is broken, in order to address the function of Kiarostami's cinema – a modern cinema in Deleuzian sense – in the process of forced modernisation in Iran.

Deleuze devoted two major works to cinema: *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image* (1893)² and *Cinema 2: The Time-Image* (1895).³ Since their publication, these cinema books have held an influential position in film studies. During the last few decades, Deleuzian theory has been

¹ Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (London: Continuum, 2005), 3.

² Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (London: Continuum, 2005).

³ Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (London: Continuum, 2005).

applied to various cinemas from different regions and with different themes.⁴ David Martin-Jones expertly employed Deleuze's philosophy in order to analyse various national cinemas and reconsidered Deleuze's writing on cinema in the context of 'world cinemas'. He proposed a hybrid model where movement-image and time-image are simultaneously in operation in films considering varied examples including the earliest days of cinema in France, Bollywood blockbusters, European spaghetti westerns, Argentine melodramas, South Korean science fiction films and Hong Kong action films. Martin-Jones provides a constructive critique of what he perceives to be Eurocentric conclusions drawn by Deleuze in his cinema books. Furthermore, cinemas from other nations are described using Deleuze's ideas such as the discussion of Ousmane Sembene's *Borom Sarrett* in Rodowick's Gilles Deleuze's *Time Machine* (1997), and Patricia Pisters's attempts to highlight the challenges of Deleuzian analysis of political films examining contemporary African Films.⁵

During the last few decades, Deleuzian theory has been applied to various cinemas from different regions and with different themes.⁶ In the case of Iranian cinema, there are a few published works available in which Deleuze's time-image model has been used to formally analyse Iranian films.⁷ In an elaborated study, *Iranian Cinema and Philosophy: Shooting Truth*, Farhang Erfani employs the Deleuzian notion of 'national cinema' to analyse a more popular film such as Majid Majidi's *The Colour of Paradise* (1999) –made after the Iranian Revolution of 1979. He proposes that the Iranian Revolution shattered the narrative fabric of society and opened up a world of possibilities for Iranian artists to explore, so that it makes sense to talk also about the more popular and conservative films in the context of Iranian national cinema. Iranian cinema from its introduction until 1969 -which is considered the start of Iranian new wave- was mostly an imitation of Indian and Egyptian cinemas, 'nothing worthy of being called "national cinema"'.⁸ Government and religious authorities have always tried to control elements related to politics, religion, and national culture.⁹ The censorship in cinema

⁴ For instance, see David Martin-Jones, *Deleuze and World Cinemas* (London: Continuum, 2011). Patricia Pisters, "Arresting the Flux of Images and Sounds: Free Indirect Discourse and the Dialectics of Political Cinema", in *Deleuze and the Contemporary World*, ed. Ian Buchanan and Adrian Parr, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006).

⁵ Patricia Pisters, "Arresting the Flux of Images and Sounds: Free Indirect Discourse and the Dialectics of Political Cinema", in *Deleuze and the Contemporary World*, ed. Ian Buchanan and Adrian Parr, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006).

⁶ For instance, see David Martin-Jones, *Deleuze and World Cinemas* (London: Continuum, 2011). Patricia Pisters, "Arresting the Flux of Images and Sounds: Free Indirect Discourse and the Dialectics of Political Cinema", in *Deleuze and the Contemporary World*, ed. Ian Buchanan and Adrian Parr, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006).

⁷ See for instance: Shohini Chaudhuri and Howard Finn, "The Open Image: Poetic realism and the New Iranian Cinema", *Screen* 44,1. (Spring 2003): 35-57, and Vared Maimon, "Beyond Representation: Abbas Kiarostami's and Pedro Costa's Minor Cinema", *Third Text* 26 (3), May (2012): 331-344.

⁸ Richard Tapper, "Introduction", *The New Iranian Cinema, Politics, Representation, and Identity*. (London: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd. 2002), 4.

⁹ Ibid.

has existed before and after the 1979 Iranian Revolution and many argued about the positive and negative aspects of it.¹⁰

Kiarostami's career as a filmmaker started with making short films for the state-funded Centre for the Intellectual Development of Children and Young Adults (CIDCYA), which Iranians simply call Kanun. Kanun was founded in the early 1960s to publish books and build libraries and to make films for and about children. In 1969, he accepted the proposal of his friend, Firuz Shirvanlu, to collaborate in setting up a film unit within Kanun. In 1970, Kiarostami made his first short film *Nan va Kucheh* (Bread and Alley) in Kanun. Kanun turned out to be a major centre for the new-wave filmmakers of Iranian cinema, of which Kiarostami was one of the pioneers. Cinema was industrialised during the second Pahlavi period (1941-79) producing over 90 films per year. Film production consisted of two major cinemas: the commercial tough-guy genre (filmfarsi), popular with low-quality films, which often juxtaposed Iranian traditions with modern Western traditions, and the new-wave films which had a critical approach to Pahlavi authoritarianism and were very successful at film festivals. Almost all of the new-wave films had a fear-driven narrative and were produced by the collaboration of modernist dissident writers and westernised directors who were constantly exposed to the best of literatures and cinema.¹¹ Most existing studies on Kiarostami's films focused on the films he directed after the Revolution which made him 'possibly the best-known post-revolutionary Iranian filmmaker'.¹² By 1995 his films had already been presented at international film festivals such as Chicago and New York film festivals. He won several awards including Bronze Leopard for *Where Is the Friend's Home?* at Locarno International Film Festival in 1989, Best Film Award of Un Certain Regard for *Life and Nothing More...* at Cannes in 1992 and Silver Hugo for *Through the Olive Trees* at the Chicago International Film festival in 1994. However, it was the 1997 Palme d'Or for his *Taste of Cherry* that brought Kiarostami an international reputation and made him one of the major renowned Iranian filmmakers. Yet, Kiarostami's films had already attracted the attention of Iranian festivals and critics as early as in 1970, when he won the Jury special award at the 5th Tehran International Film Festival for children and young adults for his first short film *Bread and Alley* (1970).

This convinced me to examine his earlier films formally and aesthetically, so as to understand whether Kiarostami's formalism –its associations with non-professional actors, contemporary social topics dealing with ordinary people, combining fictional drama with documentary, self-reflective character, and location shooting– was already in place and applied to those films. I would like to examine in particular his debut, *The Traveller* (1974), in order to know Kiarostami's films beyond international recognitions. I believe that

¹⁰ Hamid Reza Sadr, "Children in Contemporary Iranian Cinema: When we were Children", in *The New Iranian Cinema, Politics, Representation, and Identity*, ed. Richard Tapper (London: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd. 2002). Saeed Zeydabadi-Nejad, *The politics of Iranian Cinema: Film and Society in the Islamic Republic*, (London: Routledge 2010). Richard Tapper, "Introduction", *The New Iranian Cinema, Politics, Representation, and Identity*, ed. Richard Tapper (London: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd. 2002), 1-26.

¹¹ Hamid Naficy, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema, Volume 2: The Industrializing Years, 1941-1978*. (Durham: Duke University Press 2011) and Hamid Dabashi, *Close up: Iranian cinema, past, present and future*. (London: Verso 2001), xxiii.

¹² Negar Mottahedeh, *Displaced Allegories: Post-Revolutionary Iranian Cinema*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 90.

Kiarostami's films made from 1974 to 1999 fit perfectly in Deleuze's time-image framework: the role of the child seer in the time-image, the loosening of sensory-motor connection, the emergence of a pure optical situation or any-space-whatever, and the broken link between man and the world becoming an object of belief. By choosing *The Traveller*, I intend to show that all the diegetic and non-diegetic components of Kiarostami's cinematic styles had already been initiated in his filmic debut.

Using the concept of time-image to interpret Kiarostami's films, I argue that for Iranians, Iranian cinema became a particular place to rediscover the world in its 'immanence' in the process of an inorganic transition from tradition to modernity. I argue that, in representing the modernity crisis in Iran, Kiarostami's *The Traveller* (1974) presents what Deleuze terms 'the cinema of the seer', forming a new kind of 'optical drama' to replace 'traditional drama', in which the paralysing effect of cultural alienation has created an impotent character that 'sees' rather than 'acts'.

In the preface of the English edition of *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, Deleuze explains that the Second World War resulted in an 'any-spaces-whatever', a term by which Deleuze refers to the spaces in the course of 'demolition or reconstruction' to which European people 'no longer know how to react' or how 'to describe'.¹³ The experience of living in such spaces necessitated the European to rediscover the world. Cinema was a privileged location for this communal reflection. For Deleuze, the need for the communal reflection to rediscover the world led to the emergence of Italian neorealism and the French new-wave. Thanks to the 'any-spaces-whatever', a new type of characters appeared. The characters were 'seers' rather than 'doers', and they saw rather than acted. A new type of characters (mutant characters) also appeared, such as 'a child in the ruined city, a foreign woman in the inland, and a bourgeois woman who starts to "see" what is around her' in Rossellini's trilogy: *Stromboli* (1950), *Germany Year Zero* (1948), *Europe 51* (1952).¹⁴

We can define cinema, according to Deleuze, 'as the system that reproduces movement by relating it to any-instant-whatever'.¹⁵ This 'any-instant-whatever' is unique to cinema, making it distinct from other art forms such as ballet and mime, which need movements to function. Unlike ancient philosophers, Deleuze favours the world of 'Becoming' over the eternal static 'Being'.¹⁶

Most studies consider that the Revolution of 1979 created unusual situations (it changed Iranian Islamic identity and created a space for Iranians to rediscover their identity as Muslims) that were influential in Iranian films,¹⁷ but I doubt that it was merely the Iranian Revolution that caused such a radical shift in Iranians' image of themselves (as instead did the Second World War in Europe), as many other crucial factors also contributed to this. The country suffered from an identity crisis after the Reza shah's forced modernisation. The process of modernisation and development was traumatic for Iranians, which resulted in

¹³ Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, xi.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Deleuze, *Cinema 1: the movement-image*, 6.

¹⁶ Deleuze, *Cinema 1: the movement-image*, 6.

¹⁷ For example see Farhang Erfani, *Iranian Cinema and Philosophy: Shooting Truth*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan 2012).

'rural unemployment and an acceleration of the movement of people from the villages to the cities'.¹⁸ The Shah's strategies benefited the cities more than the villages. The self-conscious urban middle-class found it rather difficult to be reconciled with their often-rural background.

I believe the abrupt transition from tradition to modernity was the main reason that displaced the Iranians' identity. This transition includes historical events such the Constitutional Revolution 1906-1911, the 1953 CIA engineered coup that overthrew the democratically elected government of Mohammad Mosaddiq and the subsequent period of brutal dictatorship that overwhelmed Iranian intellectual and artistic life,¹⁹ and the rapid modernisation of Iran during the reign of Mohammad Reza Shah starting from the 1950s. The Islamic Revolution itself could be considered a natural reaction to this inorganic rapid modernisation. According to Dabashi, the project of modernity ultimately failed due to several reasons:

[...] among them the colonial prevention of the formation of a self-conscious national bourgeoisie and the catastrophic consequences of the economic placement of Iran in a disadvantageous position in the productive logic of global capitalism. But equally important in the contour of this failure was the moral collapse of any successful formation of individual subjectivity.²⁰

This may have caused the cinema to become a place for rediscovery of the Iranians' shattered self, since 'this cinema has succeeded in resubjecting the Iranian self where the project of modernity has failed'.²¹ Although the Iranian Revolution of 1979 was profoundly influential in Iranian films, it was not the only historical event that caused Deleuze's favoured type of character to appear in Iranian cinema. There are more historical events, most importantly the 'inorganic' and fast modernisation of Iran that led to the emergence of the new kind of characters. For this, I turn to Kiarostami's *The Traveller* (1974), which well predates the Iranian Revolution of 1979. By examining this film, I intend to show that the 'cinema of the seer' was already in place in his film before the Revolution.

THE CHILD SEER IN *THE TRAVELLER*

The story of *The Traveller* takes place in two cities in Iran in 1974: Malayer, a small town in the west of Iran, and Tehran, the capital. The protagonist (Qassem), a schoolboy from Malayer, travels to the capital, the modern Tehran, to see a football match in a stadium, and he is determined to overcome all obstacles in his way. Here, I focus on Deleuze's notion of the 'cinema of the seer' to examine the depiction of the experience of modernity through a child's eyes, who becomes a 'seer' when he suddenly encounters modern environments. The first 40 minutes, in which the protagonist is able to act since his 'link' to the world has not been broken yet, still relies on the world of the subject. The second part begins with

¹⁸ Michael Axworthy, *Revolutionary Iran: A History of the Islamic republic*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 74.

¹⁹ Hamid Dabashi, *Close up: Iranian Cinema, Past, Present and Future* (London: Verso 2001).

²⁰ Ibid. 11.

²¹ Ibid. 13.

Qassem's bus journey to Tehran, which metaphorically represents the shift from tradition to modernity. The third part begins when the protagonist comes to the modernised Tehran and finds himself trapped in a space in which he no longer knows how to react.

Deleuze's transition from *Cinema 1* to *Cinema 2*, from movement-image to time-image, is caused by the crisis of the 'action-image'²² in the aftermath of the Second World War. The situation and action unity can no longer be achieved in the tattered remnants of the post-war world. The action-image as the dominant form of the movement-image (classical Hollywood) was replaced by time-image. At the start of the first chapter of *Cinema 2*, Gilles Deleuze argues that a 'pure optical situation' originated in Italian neo-realism creating a 'cinema of the seer and no longer that of the agent',²³ in which 'the character has become a kind of viewer'.²⁴ In this pure optical situation 'perception struggles to progress to action'.²⁵ The sensory-motor, which links the action-image in traditional realism, has been loosened by the rise of situations in which the character faces 'something too powerful or too unjust'.²⁶ In such an intolerable situation the character does not know how to respond and 'records rather than reacts'.²⁷ The seer becomes an observer of the time passing.²⁸ From the pure optical situation the time-image, thus comes into being along with the seer.²⁹ Deleuze considers the role of the child as a witness extremely significant in the emergence of time-image. Deleuze states that:

The role of the child in neorealism has been pointed out, notably in De Sica (and later in France with Truffaut); this is because, in the adult world, the child is affected by a certain motor helplessness, but one which makes him all the more capable of seeing and hearing.³⁰

Kiarostami's frequent use of children as his main characters is one of the characteristics of his earlier cinema. Kiarostami worked for the institute for the *Intellectual Development of Children and Young Adults*, or Kanun for short. Kanun turned out to be a major centre for the new-wave filmmakers of Iranian cinema, in which Kiarostami was one of the pioneers. Many previous studies of Iranian cinema suggest that one of the reasons behind the frequent use of

²² Deleuze's *Cinema 1* deals with the different movement-images of classical cinema: perception-image, affect-image and action-image. The movement-image describes a quality of cinematic images that existed from early on, from 1895 to 1945, when motion was the essence of cinema. Movement-image is based on action and connection with the viewer through sensory-motor schemata. The action-image is produced when the movement is translated into actions. According to Deleuze after World War II, the action-image faced a crisis and the movement-image gives way to time-image. In time-image duration no longer translates into action. Deleuze considers Italian neorealism as a moment of crisis in movement-image. For an in depth analysis of the movement-image and time-image see: David. N. Rodowick, *Gilles Deleuze's Time Machine*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997).

²³ Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, 123.

²⁴ Ibid. 3.

²⁵ David Martin-Jones, *Deleuze and World Cinemas*, (London: Continuum, 2011), 72.

²⁶ Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, 17.

²⁷ Ibid. 3.

²⁸ David Martin-Jones, *Deleuze and World Cinemas*, 72.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, 3.

children as the main protagonist in the aftermath of the Revolution is a direct consequence of censorship imposed by the government.³¹ Thus, directors' fascination for children character has been widely interpreted as playing around regulations and limitations. Although this argument is plausible, it may not be entirely true because children were already favoured by most of the films produced in Kanun in the 1970s (before the Revolution). However, especially in the case of Kiarostami, who learned his art particularly by making films for and with children, children have a different function.

There is a shift in the child's point of view in *The Traveller* as the child doer transforms into the child seer when Qassem reaches Tehran, where he is overwhelmed by the experience of encountering modernity, loses his function in the new situation. Then, the visit to the pure optical situation of the child occurs in the streets of Tehran and the football stadium, where Qassem ceases to function due to his lack of control over his circumstances and his environment in the modernised Tehran, whereas he had effectively functioned in his small town. The film is a meditation on the social and cultural experience of the Iranian modernity and its troubled situation. *The Traveller* foregrounds the national experience of disintegration, contradiction, ambiguity and anguish by focussing on the child's experience in two different cities through a journey.

This journey functions as a metaphor for the Shah's unpopular 'modernisation' projects. The small town of Malayer, where Qassem lives in, is the situation in which he knows how to react in order to overcome all obstacles in his way, whereas Tehran becomes the limit situation in which Qassem is incapable of acting. Through Qassem's journey to Tehran, *The Traveller* explores the pure optical situation, which is at once an adventure in a modern environment and a threat to his identity.

The bus journey to Tehran takes place at night. Qassem sits on the bus, watching the scenery passing by; he keeps his attention on the road whilst heading toward his goal. This 3 minute scene is the initiation of a system of the cinematic element –an observer character in a car–, which is consistently used by Kiarostami in his later films such as *Life and Nothing More*, *Taste of Cherry* and *Ten*.

In *The Traveller*, the wandering route through the mutating city of neorealism takes place in and around the Amjadiyeh stadium. Although the character has a goal to achieve (watching the football match), as soon as he enters the stadium, there is a sense of an aimless journey. When Qassem arrives in Tehran, he has to join an endless queue for tickets. After a long wait, he reaches the box office but the tickets are sold out and he is pushed out of the area. He wanders around the stadium trying to find a way in. Finally, he was able to buy a black market ticket at double price and by this decision he puts his return journey at stake. He has a conversation with a man in the stadium seating area and he realises that the match will start in 3 hours. Now inside the stadium, he aimlessly wanders. In these standout

³¹ Hamid Reza Sadr, "Children in Contemporary Iranian Cinema: When we were Children", in *The New Iranian Cinema, Politics, Representation, and Identity*, ed. Richard Tapper (London: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd. 2002). Saeed Zeydabadi-Nejad, *The politics of Iranian Cinema: Film and Society in the Islamic Republic*, (London: Routledge 2010). Richard Tapper, "Introduction", *The New Iranian Cinema, Politics, Representation, and Identity*, ed. Richard Tapper (London: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd. 2002), 1-26.

moments inside the stadium, there is a sense of a journey³² and a limit situation in response to which Qassem is unable to react.

Qassem's walk through different spaces in the arena (running section, shot put field, a boxing venue under construction and a swimming pool) reveals Kiarostami's interest in exploring the relationship between bodies and space, which is another hallmark of his cinema. For Kiarostami, the body is closely integrated into the space in which it is held. The interest in the relationship between bodies and space constitutes the central part of his film *The Wind Will Carry Us* in which the body is so deeply intertwined with the space that the film becomes an indecipherable union of the two. Instances are the protagonist's wandering through the narrow streets of the village, or the girl milking a cow in a dark grave-like cellar whose face is not shown to us. However, this relationship between body and space is a feeble one in *The Traveller*, as the character's endeavour to bodily inhabit the space is constantly interrupted by the space itself. For example, in one scene, Qassem tries to communicate with a boy on the other side of the window through the swimming-pool glass window. He knocks at the window and persistently encourages a reluctant Tehrani boy to come close to the window. Qassem asks: "how deep is the pool?" But he cannot be heard because the glass window divides the space into two: the interior, which represents a modernised mutant space where the Tehrani children are diving and swimming, and the exterior where Qassem stands. The window itself acts as an obstacle that prevents Qassem from identifying himself with a Tehrani boy. The window can be interpreted as the broken link between Qassem and his surroundings. This relatively resistant space to integration indicates that the modernised capital has become an unwelcomed space for the bodies which inhabit other cities. The intolerable situation the child-seer witnesses in this respect is the modernity crisis and the gap between rich and poor.

Qassem is so tired after his overnight journey that he lies down on the grass and takes a nap. He has a terrible dream of his punishment witnessed by his close friend Akbar, his mother and other classmates. This dream can be seen as indicative of his tormented state of mind about the moral consequences of his wrongdoings (stealing money from his own mother, deception of school mates by taking photos with a camera without film and selling the football goals which belonged to his local football team). He only wakes up when the game is over, and runs down the empty stadium.

³² This is similar to what we see in the Italian neorealist's films such as *Rome the Open City* in which the characters aimlessly move from one location to another and from one situation to another, just to rediscover the space that they inhabited.



Abbas Kiarostami, six stills for *The Traveller* (1974), black & white thirty-five-millimetre film, seventy-one minutes, © Kanun-e Parvaresh-e Fekri Kudakan va Nojavanan.

The film shows that a new type of character was needed in the grip of a mutation, a mutation of a modernised Iran, 'a new type of character for a new cinema'.³³ The reason for the emergence of this type of character, who is a seer, is 'because what happens to them does not belong to them and only half concerns them'.³⁴ Deleuze claims a pure optical situation 'makes us grasp, [...] something intolerable and unbearable'.³⁵ The rapid development led to the formation of a strange city of Tehran in the 1970s. The juxtaposition of old and new, rich and poor and rapid development resulted in a trauma for those involved. In Tehran newcomers from the small cities encounter a city of concrete with its ugliness and beauty. They 'discover something unbearable, beyond the limit of what they can personally bear'.³⁶ In this respect, the film functions as a purely visual situation in which the breaking of the sensory-motor connection leads to a break in the link between man and the world, man becomes a seer confronted by something intolerable in the world.

KIAROSTAMI'S BELIEFS: THE CRISIS OF THE 'BREAK IN THE LINK BETWEEN MAN AND THE WORLD'

Deleuze in chapter seven: 'Thought and Cinema' of *Cinema 2* explores the relationship between thought and cinema trying to answer how thought concerns cinema. He considers the experience of thought in modern cinema as a result of the change in the image. The basic difference between movement-image and time-image in Deleuzian philosophy is that sensory-motor is in operation in movement-image or in other words the situation extends to actions, whereas in time-image the causal links are broken and thus the sensory-motor connection between stimulus and response is suspended. In time-image, image represents something that is too strong to reduce to what happens or what is seen, felt or perceived: 'the

³³ Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, 19.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid. 17.

³⁶ Ibid. 2.

image is ceased to be sensory-motor'. When the sensory-motor connection breaks in an image, it leads to a break in the link between man and the world. The resulting image gives rise to 'any-spaces-whatever' which becomes a pure optical and sound situation. The break in sensory-motor connection between situation and action 'makes a man seer who finds himself struck by something intolerable in the world, and confronted by something unthinkable in thought'.

Kiarostami's realism cannot be merely interpreted as its commitment to record reality. All those characteristics, which define his cinema –the use of non-actors, contemporary social and political events dealing with common people, the mixture of fiction and documentary and location shooting– must be linked to something else.

For Deleuze, neorealism was the space for rediscovering the world in its immanence. In Deleuzian philosophical landscape, neo-realism is not simply a matter of style but its real concern is the status of reality itself. Unlike neorealism, classical realism had a naive approach to reality and at the ontological level it failed to appreciate temporality and change. In neorealism as the paradigm of time-image, characters on screen are no longer acting based on a simple cause-and-effect system, but rather the reality they face is more ambiguous and complex. The sensory-motor perception is not merely a purely empiricist perception but rather it follows the Bergsonian emphasis on impression (sense perception), responsive movement (motor).³⁷

Kiarostami's setting in *The Traveller* retains its reality but it no longer represents the situation in which the image reveals actions. What Qassem encounters is not a 'serious injustice but the permanent state of daily banality'.³⁸ Kiarostami takes this daily banality further in his later films *Taste of Cherry*, in which a middleclass man without any given reasons decides to commit suicide, or in *The Wind Will Carry Us*, in which the middle class filmmaker goes to an isolated village apparently to shoot a mourning procession following the death of an elderly woman whom we never see.

In *The Traveller*, the viewer is simply presented with the lack of causal links, and the sensory-motor break that stops the character from reacting. Qassem can see better that he can react to the intolerable situation he faces in Tehran. He starts to wander and what he feels or perceives does not expand to actions. The camera constantly remains at the boy's height, representing events from Qassem's point of view and keeping the viewer at this diminished perspective, forcing them to share in the dynamics of various onscreen interactions, whether between Qassem and people in Tehran or Qassem and space. We are also invited to observe the everyday and insignificance along with Qassem. We are prevented from seeing any long shots of the football field when Qassem enters the stadium. Instead, what the film shows us is Qassem's wanderings and his constant attempt to find a connection to the modern environment whether it be his excitement when he enters a boxing stadium under construction or his curiosity about the depth of a pool. All these create a psychic situation within him that result in his dream about the punishment awaiting him at school. Here, as

³⁷ Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image* and Valentine Moulard-Leonard, *Bergson-Deleuze Encounters: Transcendental Experience and the Thought of the Virtual*, (Albany: State university of New York Press, 2008).

³⁸ Ibid. 164.

described by Deleuze, 'the "psychic" situation which replaces all the sensory-motor'³⁹ and the break in the link to the world makes him a child seer who 'in the adult world...is affected by a certain motor helplessness'.⁴⁰ The most striking sequence is the high angle shot in the last scene of *The Traveller* showing only a quarter of the stadium's seating section; Qassem enters the stadium only to find it empty, he pauses for a second and runs through the empty stadium. Here, for the first time, the camera distances itself from Qassem but not enough to see the whole stadium –we only see a quarter of the stadium– to capture the impossible, unthinkable and intolerable that makes Qassem to run as fast as he can. Deleuze draws on Artaud's perspective of cinema and its relation to the thinking, and his conclusion that modern cinema gives rise to a different experience of thought by the recognition of powerlessness: 'What cinema advances is not the power of thought but its "impower", and thought has never had any other problem'.⁴¹

The Traveller reveals this powerlessness of thought. Incapable of achieving his thoughts with a logical deduction, Qassem bears witness to the impossibility of his own thinking. Kiarostami reveals this powerlessness at the heart of thought or the 'figure of nothingness' in this film by creating a pure optical and sound situation. He achieves this by not showing the scenes that the viewer logically or habitually expects to see in films. For example, after a long journey full of obstacles, when Qassem finally arrives in the stadium, there is no shot of the football field and at the end of the film there is not even a football match.



Abbas Kiarostami, three stills for *The Traveller* (1974), black & white thirty-five-millimetre film, seventy-one minutes, © Kanun-e Parvaresh-e Fekri Kudakan va Nojavanan.

Viewers simply intuit the shift in the film's atmosphere when Qassem reaches the stadium. The main components of *mise-en-scène* that evoke a certain mood are music, framing and the pacing of the film. The wandering sequence is shot with a low-angle camera and is accompanied with a musical score composed by Kambiz Roshanravan.⁴²

Kiarostami creates meaningful structural relationships between different elements of the film. Within the wandering scene, the mixture of framing and the ambient sounds construct an intermediate and insular unsafe space within the diegesis. But one specific arrangement occurs only once: during the shots after Qassem's unsuccessful attempt to talk to a Tehrani boy in the pool.

³⁹ Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, 165.

⁴⁰ Ibid. 3.

⁴¹ Ibid. 161.

⁴² Although Kiarostami rarely uses music in his films, for his first feature film he asks Kambiz Roshanravan to compose music. He later uses the same musical score for *Close-Up*.



Abbas Kiarostami, eighteen stills for *The Traveller* (1974), black & white thirty-five-millimetre film, seventy-one minutes, © Kanun-e Parvaresh-e Fekri Kudakan va Nojavanan.

After the nightmare sequence, a wide pan shot features Qassem in the middle of the frame running toward the lit entrance to the stadium. This sequence is shot again with a low-angle camera (at the boy's height) to assign a monstrous character to the huge structure of the stadium while Qassem is running up the stairs.

The lit entrance itself can be a metaphor for Qassem's hope and of a gate to his dream, which is to watch the football match. In terms of *mise-en-scène*, this arrangement functions to establish the environment as a discrete, bordered space: the low-angle shot partly showing the stadium structure deemphasises the space's geographical connections to its surroundings and creates 'any-spaces-whatever'. Lighting also provides an unrealistic environment and implies that Qassem's hope is still alive. But as soon as we are shown the other side of the lit entrance, we realise that his hope is dead as we encounter an empty stadium. The increasingly realistic last shot suggests that his dream is now corrupted by its return to reality. The focus on the evacuated space leads to what Deleuze calls 'pure optical and sound situation', in which it is no longer possible to separate Kiarostami's mode of filming from its objects of depiction. The empty stadium does not function as a setting that presupposes or

promotes a specific action that Kiarostami's films then captures. Instead, what is filmed is the very crisis of action, the inability to act or respond in situations that overwhelm Qassem's capacities.

In a sequence consisting of 58 cuts, Qassem acts amorally to collect enough money for his journey to Tehran by deceiving his schoolmates and pretending to take a photo of them using a camera with no film. This sequence recalls the self-reflexive character of Kiarostami's films: Qassem actually represents Kiarostami himself. The sequence consisting of repetitive shots of children's portraits, Qassem's camera, Qassem's hand while putting money in his pocket and Qassem's friend, remind us of Kiarostami as a filmmaker who is employed by Kanun to make films for children. He does call for questioning the role of a filmmaker: am I doing something morally wrong by being paid to make films for children? Am I making a positive contribution to society? Can we arrive at truth by fabricating lies in cinema?⁴³ This method is not to eliminate fiction, but as Deleuze argues: 'to free it from the model of truth which penetrates it, and on the contrary to rediscover the pure and simple story-telling function which is opposed to this model'. The character of Qassem represents Hassan Darabi in 'another order of time', to which he simultaneously belongs and does not belong. By this mixture –a non-actor playing himself and the self-reflective character of Qassem– Kiarostami achieves a new mode of story-telling, which reaches its peak in *Close-Up*, where it shakes the very detachment between fiction and reality, real and imaginary, actual and virtual, and past and present. His mode of filmmaking manifests 'the power of the false' in Deleuzian terminology:

... what is opposed to fiction is not the real; it is not the truth which is always that of the masters or colonisers; it is the story-telling function of the poor, in so far as it gives the false the power which makes it into a memory, a legend, a monster.⁴⁴

The sequence depicting Qassem's act of deception insists on 'the power of the false', where the false ceases to be a lie or appearance, but allows the character to cross a limit and become another. This sequence transforms Qassem 'in an act of story-telling which connects him' to a Qassem past or to come.

The film gets its title from its concept, the journey from tradition to modernity, from act to rediscovery. The film's structure does not only highlight the crack in the film's time-space as opposed to the chronological structure of the film, but also adds a solid sense of 'before' and 'after' in the character of Qassem. What the film prompts is not, thus, a chronology of events, but an 'incessant passage from one state to another'.⁴⁵ an act of becoming in which Qassem constantly transforms and oscillates between what he no longer is and what he is in the process of becoming. In Kiarostami's films we are invited to go on a spatial journey through the line of time.

⁴³ Kiarostami in one of his interviews addressed this question: "we can arrive at the truth. In cinema anything that can happen would be true. It doesn't have to correspond to reality; it doesn't have to 'really' be happening. In cinema, by fabricating lies we may never reach the fundamental truth, but we will always be on our way to it. We can never get close to the truth except through lying". Quoted in Christopher Gow, *From Iran to Hollywood and Some Places In-Between: Reframing Post-Revolutionary Iranian Cinema*, (London: I.B. Tauris, 2011), 101.

⁴⁴ Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, 145.

⁴⁵ Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, 148.





Abbas Kiarostami, eighteen stills for *The Traveller* (1974), black & white thirty-five-millimetre film, seventy-one minutes, © Kanun-e Parvaresh-e Fekri Kudakan va Nojavanan.

The Traveller projects movement as duration, as the whole; it puts everything into a dynamic, heterogeneous relation, and is capable, in Giles Deleuze's words, of providing an 'immanent analysis of movement'.⁴⁶ Generally speaking, in Kiarostami's films no direct path exists for protagonists to follow.

As Deleuze described, the break in the sensory-motor connection resulted in a break in the link between man the world. The powerlessness of thought, then, is given rise to the man who sees better than he reacts. This situation in which the seer is struck by 'something intolerable in the world and confronted by something unthinkable in thought',⁴⁷ is where the

⁴⁶ Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*, 6.

⁴⁷ Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, 164.

powerlessness of the thought functions to reveal the thought. Deleuze elaborates on how the experience of thought functions in modern cinema.

The socio-political indications are also considerable. In *The Traveller*, Kiarostami consciously reacted to this flux of Becoming, to grasp the actual meaning of immanence and change. It was the transition from tradition to modernity that rapidly and inorganically altered 'the whole' and everything in the whole. It was this transition that changed an agent who 'does' to an agent who 'sees'. The rapid transformation from one multiplicity to another makes the world ungraspable for Qassem. If Kiarostami's films are the cinema of the seer, it is because we need to see everything again.

Deleuze argues that in a modern world, we no longer believe in the world and we lose our faith in love, life and death. When the link between us and the world is lost, it is the link itself that becomes an object of belief. In a pure optical and sound situation, we have been dispossessed of reaction in the world. We now need something to reconnect us to what we 'see and hear' and this is the belief in the link that replaces our reaction. The function of the image is, thus, precisely to reconnect what we can see and hear with its exteriority. Projecting alternative spaces, modern cinema can retrieve the lost link between us and the world and elevate our soul to the level of belief. 'The cinema must film, not the world', Deleuze states, 'but belief in this world, our only link ... [r]estoring our belief in the world - this is the power of modern cinema'.⁴⁸

In modern times, we need reasons to believe in this world. This is the function of image-concept (modern cinema) to replace the model of knowledge with belief. During the modernisation of Iran, *The Traveller* served and still does serve this function of image-concept: i.e. Kiarostami recognises this modern fact that 'belief can only replace the model of knowledge only when it becomes the belief in this world'. To restore our link to this world is the main theme in almost all of his films during the period of 1974 to 1999. Confronted by forced, inorganic modernisation, revolution and war (between Iran and Iraq –September 22, 1980–August 20, 1988), Kiarostami's characters' (adult/child) link to the world constantly breaks in the face of the intolerable. His later films explore the break between man and the world in 'a permanent state of daily banality' by focusing on the insignificant and unimportant. Kiarostami shows us that the way out of this is to believe in the very link between man the world; to believe in friendship in *Where is the Friend's House?*, or in life and death in *Life and Nothing More*, *The Wind Will Carry Us* and *Taste of Cherry*, or in love in *Through the Olive Trees*.

What he seeks in his films is thus the 'reasons to believe in this world'. In the last part of *The Traveller*, Kiarostami searches for a link to this world, a belief. His character must find the link to this world within this world. Qassem tries to find his link to the transformed world: modern Tehran. He is not successful since the link does not become 'an object of belief'.

The aim of this article was to demonstrate the philosophical themes, which formally and aesthetically construct Kiarostami's first feature film *The Traveller*. I have attempted to bring a Deleuzian philosophical framework into conversation with this particular film; an attempt that has been rarely made in the previous studies on Iranian cinema. I argued that the socio-political situation of Iran and the influence of modernisation on Iranians necessitated the

⁴⁸ Ibid. 166.

creation of a new type of character: a character (Qassem), who observes to rediscover the space he inhabits. Deleuze calls this new type of character the child seer. This character does not take action in any situation because he does not understand the situation itself. Rather, he wanders around to find a new way, a new link to the world. At the end, I would like to mention once more that I have tried to carry out an analysis that is complimentary to the previous studies in order to fill a gap that I felt exists in the research on Iranian cinema: a philosophical investigation that analyses Iranian cinema thematically and aesthetically.

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After completing my BA in Visual relations at Art & Architecture University in Tehran, I came to UK where I studied a master degree in Graphic Design & communication at UCA. After spending a year as a freelance artist and graphic designer, I took a PG diploma in History of Art at UCL. During my time at UCL, I developed my curiosity in the relations between Western philosophy and Eastern modern arts. This led me to enter SOAS for my second master degree in History of Art & Archaeology.

Awarded the competitive Kamran Djam PhD scholarship, I have started my PhD under the supervision of Dr. Tania Tribe at SOAS in 2012. My PhD thesis is a philosophical reading of Kiarostami's cinema in which an effort has been made to identify philosophical positions, themes and questions that are being revealed through his films.