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# FEMINIST IRANIAN CINEMA: THE COUNTER-CINEMA OF ABBAS KIAROSTAMI AND FEMALE SPECTATORSHIP

**ABSTRACT** The quintessential characteristic of Iranian art film is its heavy politicization, achieved by addressing social and women's issues. Stylistically, influenced by distinctive Persian literary tradition, New Iranian Cinema is known for blurring lines between documentary and fiction, thus exploring new film forms and genres. This paper primarily calls into question the veiling discourse and censorship of Islamic government as an unsuspecting instrument of enhancing the authentic style of film authors, after which it continues with an examination of the role of aesthetics in terms of redefining the politics of gender representation in film and the process of spectatorship. This article is mostly an homage to Abbas Kiarostami, a world-renowned Iranian director, who passed away recently. His cinematic style will be examined through the prism of representational politics of feminist film theory. Specifically, two of his films will be analyzed, a film *Ten* (2002) which is completely shot in the inside of a car, as a woman picks up passengers and drives them through Tehran, and another one, *Shirin* (2008), a film which consists of many close-ups of actresses watching a film scene, as a unique way of representing female spectatorship and the process of identification with the images on screen.

**Keywords:** New Iranian Cinema, hejab, censorship, Kiarostami, counter-cinema, gender, representation, female gaze

Ever since the 1990's, when the first public in western countries had a chance to see artworks of quite exceptional Iranian post-revolutionary cinema, Iran's films have gathered much of the international interest, not just by winning prizes at renowned film festivals, but also by exemplifying stylistically unusual and yet visually stunning pieces of cinema. Unfortunately, in July this year, the best known Iranian director Abbas Kiarostami passed

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away, at the age of 66. He was one of the pioneers of the new-wave cinema in Iran, and until this day his cinematic aesthetics has left its trademark not only on Iranian film but the history of cinema, as well.

Still, in order to understand how social and political conditions in modern Iran have shaped its cinema (and vice versa), especially towards gender practices, female sexuality, and spectatorship, it is of the utmost importance to give a general insight into the turbulent history of Islamic Republic of Iran as we know it today. But in order to do so, we must deal with certain stereotypes regarding Iranian social and cultural politics. It has widely popularized the image of Iran as a country with many restrictions and brutal violations of fundamental human rights due to its prevailing religious influence on every aspect of society. In that respect, many consider that feminism is "bound to be politically constrained by Islamic religious and socio-cultural context" (Zeydabadi-Nejad 2010, 105). Nonetheless, in the field of film theory, paradoxically, and even unintentionally, Islamic revolution, mostly by inducing strict hejab politics towards appearance of women in public and because of its heavy censorship, especially in terms of women's representation on screen, has brought out the necessity of exploring new ways of filming, even to the level of reinventing the film itself.

## SHORT HISTORY OF NEW IRANIAN CINEMA AND THE VEILING DISCOURSE

In the prerevolutionary period, from the 1950's to the Islamic revolution, under the reign of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, who was supportive of the influence of western visual and cinematic culture, *Cinema el Farsi* (Persian cinema) was popularized amongst Iranian public. Those films featured erotically charged, urban stories of men and women acting freely from any religious or societal rules, drinking lavishly at parties and behaving recklessly. The main characteristic of this cinema was its dominance of "male gaze"[2]. At least according to Naficy, actresses of film-e Farsi usually appeared

2 A very influential concept, not only in the feminist film theory, but also in the broader field of media and visual art in general; the male gaze implies specific way of positioning the camera which puts the spectator

> "in lightweight roles in which they danced and sang, sometimes, in cafes and cabarets (so as) a leering, voyeuristic, male-driven camera gaze filmed their performances, which either isolated their legs, breasts, and faces into fragmented fetish objects" (Naficy 2011, 207).

The representation of women and their sexuality was one of the main concerns of the revolutionary Islamic establishment. In fact, much alike feminist film theory in the same period, sexual objectification of woman on the screen became the focal point on the agenda of the Islamic government. The scenes illustrating female body, direct male gaze or heterosexual desire were to be forbidden from then on. Instead, women should be head-scarfed and wearing loose clothing to hide the silhouette of their body line. Joan Copjec, an influential feminist film theorist, analyses this practice in her essay "The Object-Gaze: Shame, Hejab, Cinema" by claiming that

> "hejab seems to be motivated by the belief that there is something about women that can never be covered up enough, and thus the task of veiling is buttressed by architectural design and rigid social protocols that further protect women from exposure" (Copjec 2006, 11–12).

The Islamic code of modesty and chastity is represented by compulsory veiling since women are obliged to wear a hejab in the presence of unknown men, but not in domestic sphere when surrounded by male relatives or other women. The very hejab set of rules has highlighted already existing divide between public and private, and, cinema, belonging to the public sphere, has become painfully aware of its spectatorship, making it impossible to succumb to the filmic code of realistic representation dominant in mainstream film, thus having no other option but betraying the conventional principle of transparency typical for Hollywood cinema production (Naficy 1994, 134). All these are the general outlines leading to the reasons of why Iranian art film has become such an impressive example of alternative film and an

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in the perspective of a heterosexual male, so that the pleasure of looking is achieved by identifying with a male protagonist whereas a female on screen is in passive position of being an object of male desire. This concept is attributed to Laura Mulvey, a feminist film theorist, who used it for the first time in her ground-breaking essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" published in *Screen* journal in 1975 (cf. Mulvey 1975).

outstanding specimen of national cinema. Drawing from the long tradition of Persian poetry, using subtle means of allegory and symbols in story-telling as indirect ways of communicating the message, along with following the main idea that all artistic endeavors are to be overtly political, by addressing important and pressing social issues, are the key components that have made Iranian cinema so thematically and visually distinctive.

## ISLAMIC CENSORSHIP AND POLITICS OF LOOKING

In the earliest period of the Islamic revolution, as cinema was still perceived as the product of "westoxication" (*Gharbzadegi*),[3] film theaters were massively burned throughout the country. However, as soon as Ayatollah Khomeini, the spiritual leader of Iranian revolution, in his first public speech upon his arrival in Iran spoke in defense of cinema, and even praised the political potential of such a medium, mainly because of its "capacity to influence society" (Zeydabadi-Nejad 2010, 5), the actions toward purification of westernization were abandoned to some extent, and ironically, cinema became the most popular art form within Iranian public and, more importantly, along with Persian poetry, one of the most influential socio-cultural medium.

Still, every new film project has to be accepted by the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance and pass its censorship. As a result, many of the acknowledged Iranian directors (like in the controversial cases of Jafar Panahi and Tahmineh Milani) were severely punished for making films that did not coincide with the hejab's rule of modesty and Islamic codes of representation. Even though this practice is in huge discrepancy with the western principle and right to free expression, Hamid Naficy argues the repressive system of interrogation and molesting film directors by putting them in jail for producing films that are in conflict with the convictions of Islamic establishment has the counter-effect leading to a paradox, as it only means that they have been heard and that their art has succeeded to convey

3 Film production in Iran is one of the strictly regulated activities by Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, which explicitly forbade using even the smallest details revealing the western influence in films - such as the wearing of ties or bow ties, smoking of cigarettes, drinking of alcohol, etc. Cf. Copjec 2006.

the message to the audience (Naficy 2001, 11). In fact, the system of censorship forces filmmakers to develop authentic authorship, and even more so, offers them an opportunity for creating a space of potential social transformation and making an impact by working under the totalitarian regime, even though they are being punished for it (ibid.). In this regard, the role of using a rather indirect language of allegory (as stylistic figure borrowed from rich Persian literary tradition) is often discussed as one of the potent means of avoiding censorship. Although it may work to a certain extent, Zeydabadi-Nejad states that excessive use of symbolism is not nearly as effective as it is commonly presented (Zeydabadi-Nejad 2010, 6).

Indeed, the question of how can a country with such a repressive authoritarian political system and so many restrictions on freedom of expression produce so many high-quality films remains. The fact that main characteristics of New Iranian cinema are its political content and having gender representations at the focus seems quite shocking in that respect. Another paradox surrounding New Iranian cinema is its rising number of female directors, keeping in mind that most of the western countries still have the trouble of not having enough women working in the areas of filmmaking and production. Women's entry into motion picture industry temporally coincides with the Islamic revolution. This is how Zeydabadi-Nejad describes this historical point in time:

> "In sharp contrast to the pre-revolutionary period, when there were hardly any female directors, in the 1980s filmmakers such as Tahmineh Milani, Rakhshan Bani-Etemad, and Pouran Derakhshandeh began making films and later joined by others such as Samira Makhmalbaf, Marzieh Meshkini, and Manijeh Hekmat, making films about female experience as well as taboo subject of women's romantic love" (ibid., 109).

The question of how cinema is used as a fruitful feminist platform by female directors after the Revolution definitely seems worthy of a further study, but let me just mention the importance of having female authorship in the domain of cinema, especially in case of Muslim women, who are usually portrayed by the media as too submissive or oppressed by being deeply rooted in religious tradition, as it stirs up the question of new forms of representation of authentic

female experiences on screen as the way of saving them from invisibility. On this very same guiding principle the idea of counter-cinema was based, as well.

## COUNTER-CINEMA OF ABBAS KIAROSTAMI

The notion of counter-cinema as using "radical or alternative media framework" (Zeydabadi-Nejad 2010, 6) dates back from the first feminist filmmakers in the early 1970's (cf. Johnston 1973). The main idea of this project is finding new alternative ways of using the eye of a camera and manipulating the film narrative in order to escape dominant representations of women as sexualized objects of desire. Avant-garde aesthetics of counter-cinema has a role of subverting the codes of the mainstream narrative film, which is viewed as a medium which fundamentally supports the patriarchal order (Erens 1990, 251). Put in the context of the young post-revolutionary republic of Iran, still scarred by the long fought war with neighboring Iraq for the most of the following decade (1980-1988), the "controversy for going against hegemonic, repressive order" (ibid.) was a two-way street. Firstly, and most visibly, the majority of Iranian films go blatantly against Hollywood conventional codes of filming, and secondly, they must avoid any possibility of a ban or, even worse, severe censorship.

Abbas Kiarostami started his filmmaking career with no previous training since he never attended any kind of a film school, which might be the reason for his fresh approach to cinema. Laura Mulvey even claims that his innovative cinematic style renders to Andre Bazin's question "what is cinema?" (Mulvey 2002, 259). Most of the critics of his work argue that foreign, namely European influence on his highly experimental and minimalistic style is overestimated. As Zeydabadi-Nejad and Elena reveal, Kiarostami's approach to filmmaking is so unique, not because of the influence of French new wave and heritage of Italian neo-realism, but rather because it draws from "an eastern tradition of deconstruction, multiple narrations and ornamental mode, (and) symbolic iconography of Persian miniature painting, ensuring the poetic effect of his films" (Elena 2005, 186–187).

He is most famous for his Koker trilogy made up of *Where is the Friend's House?* (Kiarostami 1987), *Life and Nothing More* (Kiarostami 1991) and

*Through the Olive Trees* (Kiarostami 1994). All three films take place in the village of Koker, located in the northern Kurdish part of Iran, after the earthquake which completely devastated the area in 1990. The thematic interconnection between the films lies in relating subjects and themes, which introduces the postmodern concept of self-reflexive cinema. Briefly explained, the main topic of the second film is about searching for the character from the first one, and the third movie is about making the second one. This way, by referencing previous films, he makes the intertwined cinematic world where films possess a memory of their own. After the Koker films, he shot a semi-documentary *Close-Up* (Kiarostami 1990) which brought Kiarostami and Iranian cinema international recognition. It follows the course of a real trial of a man who stole the identity of famous Iranian director named Makhmalbaf, and now is pretending to plan to make a new film. Kiarostami's next film *Taste of Cherry* (Kiarostami 1997), which won *Palme d'Ór* at the 1997 Cannes Film Festival, is considered to be his masterpiece and one of the world's most beautiful films. Taste of cherry represents will to live, which the main character lacks since he's driving through Tehran seeking for an accomplice who will help him bury himself after committing suicide. In both of these movies Kiarostami and his filming crew make a presence at the end of the films, instead of finishing the story, leaving the end open and making audience create their own ending.

As an echo of neo-realism, most of Kiarostami's films belong to the genre of docu-fiction, since he is known for blurring the distinction between reality and fiction. Hence, he is shooting in real locations, mostly rural areas of the country, using non-professional actors and children in main roles, focusing on ordinary, everyday life events. In most of his films, the stream of fiction interrupts "reality" in a seemingly accidental way as if saying that the "reality" is not enough by itself, but rather another stance should be imposed upon it to give it its meaning. It is usually the role of fiction to inspect and critically evaluate "reality" taken in the form of a true, historical event. Having two or more narrative lines and using unusual camera angles and movements as a way to rethink and reposition the film as a medium is one of the most prominent traits of his cinematography. Yet, another signature of his, serving as an ode to postmodernist resistance to clear, coherent narrative, is the already

mentioned openness of his film stories, especially the endings. In *The Taste of Cherry*, for instance, the whole story unfolds about a man named Badii, who drives around the streets of Tehran, unsuccessfully convincing his passengers to cover the hole of the grave he has already dug, after ensuring that he has been lain in it dead, but instead of conventional ending, Kiarostami leaves his spectators questioning, as the final takes are filmed with digital camera showing the film crew, denouncing cinema's transparency. By choosing to end the film showing how the film was made, he breaks the very "suture"[4] of the film, creating a notion of meta-film in the moment of the film itself realizing it is just a film, a piece of fiction. This method, which is vaguely present in all of his films, irresistibly reminds of Bertolt Brecht's distancing technique as a "radical political strategy of representation" (Doane 1991, 35). It implies self-reflexivity achieved by a sudden critical intrusion of "reality" in the work of fiction and breaking the stitches of a filmic text.

Fundamentally, what altered Kiarostami's cinematic style and distinguished it from many others is omnipresent ambiguity in the narrative, staging and his use of the camera, or rather what Mulvey refers to as "the uncertainty principle" (Mulvey 2002, 260). She defines this cinematic rule as an invitation to a spectator to join the cinematic process, as it is of vital importance in his films. She states:

> "To ask a spectator to think – and to think about limits and possibilities of cinematic representation – is to create a form of questioning and interrogative spectatorship that must be at odds with the certainties of any dominant ideological convictions – in the case of Iran, of religion" (ibid.).

Kiarostami abandoned conventional rules of cinema, not just by returning to the basics and minimalistic stylization, but rather through a "re-invention, or even more, a rediscovery of a medium inseparable from its socio-cultural-political environment" (Elena 2005, 186–187).

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4 The suture (literally meaning "stiches") describes relations between a film and a spectator; it is a set of techniques by which a spectator is absorbed into a narrative and encouraged to identify with characters. Cf. Branigan and Buckland 2015.

Among the major criticism of Kiarostami's cinema, especially from expatriate Iranians, is that "he is making movies for an international audience by not adding a political dimension to his cinematic achievement" (Zeydabadi-Nejad 2010, 127). Moreover, his films do not feature strong and articulate women, or at least they never appear to be in the main roles. Even before making his last two films in the territory of Iran, specifically addressing the issues of women, *Ten* (Kiarostami 2002) and *Shirin* (Kiarostami 2008), which will be analyzed in following chapters, Mulvey intervenes by explaining why "films with little or no overt political content may still raise important issues in politics of cinema" (Mulvey 2002, 260). By alluding to the special use of counter-cinema by Kiarostami as not at all accidental, she argues that, as a logical extension of his shooting style which tends to avoid conventional rules of cinema, he changes the way spectator interacts with images on screen, implementing novelties in the process of looking, identification with characters on screen and structuring the new role of spectator (ibid.). The key elements of shot formation, including editing, lighting, camera angles and movements, sound and framing, have a major impact in determining audience's relation to the subject of a film. By his innovative approach, reposing the question "what is cinema?", Kiarostami renders "a new visibility of gender on screen" (ibid.), Mulvey argues. Furthermore, Joan Copjec, who also wrote a lot on Kiarostami's cinema, claims that the absence of women in Kiarostami's films is not a sign of Kiarostami's sexism or misogyny, but actually a "structural or structuring absence" (Copjec quoted in Khosrowjah 2011, 61) or what Khosrowjah calls a "self-conscious highlighting of the general problems of representation under the Islamic codes" (ibid.).

To conclude, even though Kiarostami has often been criticized for being apolitical, not all of film theorists agree with this statement. In fact, many of the well-known feminist film scholars argue that his cinematic style actually raises the issues of the representation of women in cinema. The increasing interest in feminist film theory in the West turned to Kiarostami's work proves the point of one's approach to filming expands beyond the mere question of aesthetics as it discovers the hidden layers of its political rootedness.

## TASTE OF FREEDOM (*TEN*)

Film *Ten* can be defined as Kiarostami's experimental cinematic feminist project, shot completely with a digital camera in the interior of a moving car. The film follows a young, recently divorced, urban woman, Mania Akbari who, like Kiarostami's main male character in *Taste of Cherry*, drives around Tehran and randomly picks up passengers, with a sole difference that the movie set is restricted to only what is inside the vehicle. It consists of ten episodes, with the camera focusing on medium close-ups of, mostly female, characters, purposefully avoiding any of the traditional camera angles or movements typical for filming in a car interior, especially shot and counter-shot filming technique, which is central to achieving the suture of the filmic text. This primarily means dominant use of minimalistic cinematic style characterized by mainly stationary camera – it focuses only on one speaker at the time, without giving away any of the visual reactions of another, even though each episode features a dialogue between Mania and her passenger. It is particularly noticeable in two cases: firstly, in the opening scene in which Mania's son, Amin, criticizes his mother for leaving his father and lying in court so she could get a divorce, shouting at her for putting herself first instead of being completely devoted to him and his needs, so we can only hear Mania's arguments without matching them to her image, and secondly, in the sequence with a prostitute as a passenger.

Interestingly, what Kiarostami has been criticized for before, as being prone to structural avoidance of filming in interior places and featuring women in main roles, is made to be the focal point in this film. Using a car driven by Mania as the movie set enables him to show interpersonal relations between women on screen, without giving away the "falseness of representation" (Naficy 1994, 136) by filming a woman wearing a hejab in the privacy of her own home. It is one of the striking characteristics of Kiarostami's films – using "car as a medium for looking" (Nansi 2005, 74), giving glimpses of the vivid and busy traffic of Tehran life (in *Ten*) or lengthy scenes presenting the hilly landscape of the outskirts of the city (in *Taste of Cherry*). It raises a question of duality, between inside and outside as a difference between private and public sphere, which is undoubtedly present as women's vs. men's space of belonging,

especially in Iran being a theistic republic with Islam as a state religion. The interior of a car represents a space in between – it is public enough for women not to be allowed to take their headscarves off, but it can be more private than home, which is why it is so attractive for a filmmaker interested in human nature and showing the inner world of his characters. As the director himself reveals in his *10 on Ten*, which consists of ten lessons of filmmaking while driving through the locations where some of the most famous scenes from his movies take place, an interior of a car is a space "suitable to generate tension: the suffocating closeness of the other generates an emotionally overcharged situation, and the most vulnerable spots are revealed" (Kiarostami 2004). The symbolism of a car and driving in *Ten* is, however, much different from his other movies. In *Ten* Kiarostami clearly shows no intention to "use car's windows to double the screen" (Nansi 2005, 74), as a refugee from typical narrative structures we find in mainstream films, as he had done in his previous films to expose psychological complexity of his (male) protagonists, by overlapping of two or more storylines, or creating a film within a film. In *Ten*, by choosing a female to be the main character, the car serves not just as a medium (for transporting, looking, etc.), but it gets another role, of being a place of, at least, hypothetical transgression. The possibility of excessive enjoyment of freedom found after a painful, traumatic event is well illustrated in the sequence in which Mania picks up a young woman near a shrine where she has prayed for her beloved to fall in love with her, but in the later episode we find out that her beloved loves another and does not want to marry her. Learning this left her utterly sad, which is strongly felt by the spectator, not just by the visibility of sorrow on the young woman's face, but also in the emerging tension surrounding her presence and stifling sensation of what seems to has become even tinier space of car's interior. Moreover, the woman's white headscarf was tightly tied whereas Mania was left loose, which gives out an impression of a sad woman clinging to what has been already lost. During their conversation Mania brings up this observation of her unusually tighten hejab and at that moment, she let her scarf slip, revealing her recently shaved head. This is less of a moment of shock as much as it is, fittingly to the ending of the woman's unrequited love story, representing release. Although caught off-guard, Mania repeatedly tells her she looks beautiful as she has become the icon of loss. When tears start falling down young woman's face, space

feels liberated from the heavy veil of sadness we have witnessed, and she starts smiling shyly, calmly accepting Mania's encouragement.

This scene, even though specific to the socio-political context of today's Iran, is not the only one contesting to the prevailing feminist discourse of *Ten*. In some of the scenes, Mania takes up a role of women's rights defender tackling women's issues directly. In the episode shown early on, where Mania is in the car with a women crying because her partner who she had been with for nine years left her suddenly, Mania not only tries to console her but also gives a speech in which she criticizes women for being weak, too dependent on their husbands and partners and overly conforming to their wishes. Mania's sharp monologue with an aim to raise women's awareness by disapproving a woman's role in society as being closely tied to a man, with little or no possibility for independence, is symbolically underlined with sounds of other woman's groaning and weeping, but is no different in meaning from any western radical feminist speech. Recurrence of stating typical feminist opinions by Mania throughout the film reaches its climax in the introductory scene where she has an argument with her son, Amin, who gives a very articulate and arrogant talk – blames her for being selfish, divorcing his father, not paying enough attention to him nor to family life (like cooking for him, cleaning, etc.). Furthermore, as soon as Mania starts to defend herself by, for instance, saying that in this country woman cannot divorce without being beaten or harshly molested by her husband or without him being a drug addict, so she lied in court about the second one, Amin starts shouting at her, acting like a spoiled child, covering ears with his hands, saying that he doesn't want to listen to her excuses, visibly aggravated by the tone of her voice. Being the only man in the film, he surely acts like one. As an "archetypal chauvinist male in miniature" (Zeydabadi-Nejad 2010, 127), he follows up a rhetoric of a man who talks intelligently, but arrogantly, occupying all the oratory space, not respecting his interlocutor's turn to speak and diminishing their arguments. For all of the 16 minutes this episode is taking, Amin is the only person *en cadre,* and we are being shown his agitated body language while verbally harassing his mother. Zeydabadi-Nejad argues that "Kiarostami's emphasis on Amin's presence appears to have opened up the film to patriarchal readings" (ibid.).

Stylistically speaking, one of the following sequences in which Mania picks up a prostitute is designed in a similar way to the opening one with Amin. However, this episode is visually distinctive in two more ways from the rest of the movie: firstly, it is the only night drive, and secondly, the prostitute is the only Mania's passenger we never get a chance to see. She is represented only through her husky voice, uneven in intonation, talking about her job and hypocrisy of men, explaining to Mania that sometimes she overhears her customers saying to their wives they love them over the phone while they are already in bed with her. She calls Mania one of those "stupid women" for trusting men. The question here raises itself - why did Mania even pick her up? The prostitute gets in a car by mistake; she has thought Mania was a man. Soon after that, she wants to get out, but Mania tries to make her stay. She even says to her "Pretend I was a man". But this question is followed up by another, more complex one, which is in the center of the whole film - why does she offer a ride to all these women, even if she doesn't know them at all. Obviously, Mania is curious about prostitute's experience; she wants to know why she chose that particular vocation and what are her thoughts, but clearly, she doesn't enjoy hearing the answers. It seems that the roles have swapped and now, the prostitute gives a speech criticizing women for being overly trusting and dependent on their men, including Mania herself.

Representation of a woman solely through her voice is not the first one we encounter in this film - we are used to this filming technique from the start - when the screen was completely occupied by Amin and his childish, nervous body language, while Mania is remaining in the space off screen. This is how we get to know Mania, the central character - through her voice, dealing with her spoiled son shouting at her. Why did Kiarostami choose *mise-en-abyme* for a prostitute is clear (she didn't want to be filmed, and the tone of her voice is clearly exaggerated for not being recognized, which suits the conversation well), but why did he opt for the same *off* space for Mania in the opening scene? This technique is known as voice-off in film theory and is in sync with feminist counter-film which tried to liberate female voice from her body. In addition, disembodied voice can "blur all distinction between diegetic interiority and exteriority, and to redefine the relationship between spectator and spectacle" (Silverman 1988, 142). It is already mentioned that Kiarostami's main intention

was to offer a critique to a patriarchal society and to show the role of women's dialogue in bearing conditions they are supposed to live in, to raise important women's issues and feminist consciousness amongst the Iranian public. Visually, he points out the lack of visibility of women, especially Muslim women on screen, and breaks down the stereotype of representing them as passive victims, figures without vital roles in carrying the film narrative, for Mania is particularly outspoken and determined to change the status quo.

Some authors, like Khosrowjah, go even further and argue that Mania's character transgresses dominant ways of women's representation by being "neither a victim nor a crusading heroine" (Khosrowjah 2011), but considering Mania's symbolic quest of transporting women to wanted destinations and transforming them by collecting their confessions and encouraging them, she seems to play the role of women's rights activist. Zeydabadi-Nejad points out that Kiarostami does not offer clear distinction between the role of a victim and an oppressor (Zeydabadi-Nejad 2010, 127), which builds onto what Mulvey refers to as Kiarostami's "uncertainty principle" (Mulvey 2002, 260), keeping in mind his main goal to redefine cinema, and in particular, to transform a role of spectatorship.

## THROUGH THE FOURTH WALL (FEMALE SPECTATORSHIP)

The barrier that separates the spectators from a performer on stage is known in the philosophy of theater as a "fourth wall". It is a practice used in a conventional theater play, and the fourth wall should be treated as virtually nonexistent, so the play would appear more realistic. "Breaking the fourth wall" is any act by which a scene from a play or a film realizes itself it is only a work of fiction. It denounces itself by suspending conventional codes of realism and creates a piece of meta-theatre. In film theory, going through the fourth wall translates to breaking the suture of a film.

As it has been shown, Kiarostami is known for breaking the suture in almost all of his films, but this does not mean he forgets to invest in spectator's pleasure of looking and inviting them to identify with characters. On the contrary, his main objective is to reinvent the role of a spectator, frequently

depriving them of the synchronization of image and voice of a character, but inscribing them deeply into the texture of his films. Kiarostami himself confesses this mission of his in the interview with French philosopher, Jean-Luc Nancy when asked to what changes cinema should be aspiring to:

> "The only way to envision a new cinema is to have more regard for the spectator's role. … [We should] weaken the film structure and encourage the spectator to active and constructive presence" (Nansi 2005, 74).

As Alberto Elena is pointing out "we can talk about Alain Bergala's idea of 're-education' of the gaze, as applied to the whole Kiarostami corpus, through a 'distancing' between the film and the audience" (Elena 2005, 188). Not only did Kiarostami break the fourth wall, in *Shirin* (2008) he went even further by filming the audience and thematizing the mere notion of spectatorship.

*Shirin* is the last film in Kiarostami's corpus filmed in Iran. It is his most innovative project, featuring 100 actresses watching a film based on a 12th-century Persian romantic tale of Shirin, Armenian princess, and her two lovers, a Persian prince, Khusrow and a sculptor, Farhad. It is a well-known epic poem in Persian literary tradition talking about tragic love and female sacrifice in love, but it is completely placed in the place off-screen. Therefore, we do not get a chance to see it, for we only hear the soundtrack of it and the way it is reflected on the faces of the women in the audience. The entire film consists of close-ups of head-scarfed women with their looks fixated to the imaginary screen showing the visual power of their emotional response. As it is already demonstrated, the betrayal of the rule of synchronization recurrently present in his previous movies, in *Shirin* it is mastered to perfection. Image and soundtrack are not in any conventional correlation but are related to each other. In many ways, this film represents the experimental peak of Kiarostami's concept of cinema and his cinematic aesthetics, exemplifying many of the key elements of his work. He is known for his road sceneries, for instance, using double frames of car's windows, in which occasions we are often only given the dialog of people who are not exactly present on the screen because the camera is focused on landscapes they are driving through instead. In *Shirin*, he boldly takes a step further and does not bother to show the main reference, in this case, the simultaneous narrative of a film featuring

actual Shirin, but presents a series of intimate and highly emotional portraits, as complex interior landscapes of many Shirins in the audience. A film within a film is not what interests Kiarostami, but multilayering of filmic texts gives him a framework for exploring the role of spectatorship, their investment in the film shown on screen and the process of identification with the characters. The intensity of overlapping of these two registers, one fictional and one "real", belonging to the spectators, is manifested in the scene in which the male voice of the movie character asks the women in the audience whether they are moved by Shirin's fate because they find Shirin in them. So, the film speaks to the female spectators directly, even though men are also shown sitting in the movie theater – they are not excluded from the cadre in any of the individual scenes.

Obviously, there is a hierarchy within the film structure, Shirin, as a film about the princess who is a fictional archetype, is the sub-film, belonging to the genre of melodrama, which is usually categorized as feminine, and the film about the multitude of women spectators identifying with her is the central one. It seems that Kiarostami reversed the classical postulate of "the image orchestrating the gaze" (Doane 1991, 20) given that the gaze, female gaze to be precise, is in the position of privilege. It is in their looking we find the dramatic effect of the film shown on screen – their gazes are intimidatingly intense and heavily emotionally charged. They are inscribed in the image texture but do not operate as "the surface of the image … associated with woman's beauty and desirability" (ibid.). Their gaze offers the vital subversive effect of representing depth to a virtual story placed outside of the screen field. We are visually deprived of it. Hence, their gazes possess the power to transmit and control its storyline even beyond the fourth wall. Female gaze serves as a signifier, an instrument of mediation between us as spectators and the reference, the signified, which is the actual film of Shirin as Armenian princess.

However, the active female gaze recreating the missing motion picture brings us to another vital question. It is the issue of the censorship of female gaze, which Mary Ann Doane, a feminist film theorist, points out by analyzing the photograph by Robert Doisneau *Un Regard Oblique*. At first glance, she argues, the central place of a photograph is taken up by female gaze, as the

picture shows a woman and a man next to her, both looking at the window-shop filled with paintings. Nevertheless, the object of her gaze is hidden from us whereas the male gaze is directed to a picture of a naked woman which is completely displayed. Doane cleverly notices that

> "the faint reflection in the shop window of only the frame of the picture at which she is looking serves merely to rearticulate, *en-abyme*, the emptiness of her gaze, the absence of her desire in representation, which stands in sharp contrast to the object of the male gaze, which is vividly present" (ibid., 29).

This remark of hers aligns with Kiarostami's placing Shirin as the sub-film in the realm off-screen, but the huge difference is made by not opposing male to female gaze. He is not interested in showing the binary differentiation of the gender modes of looking as much as his main goal is to put the female gaze in the sole center of this film. According to Doane

> "the female spectator is given two options - the masochism of over-identification or the narcissism entailed in becoming one's own object of desire, in assuming the image in the most radical way" (ibid., 31).

At first glance, the notion of nearness in terms of feeling close to the object of looking, over-identification and masochism, all culturally assigned to the female identity, seems to go along with the melodramatic flair of the epic narration of the Shirin's tragic story. This is further accentuated by using close-ups as dominating filming technique, as the woman's relation to the camera is extremely close and the distance between them is minimal. Still, knowing that Shirin as the signifier, is not only *mise-en-abyme* but is literally non-existent, changes the interpretation of the represented female gaze. It is no secret that Kiarostami made this film by asking the actresses to look at the black dots above camera while reminiscence their own love stories. As Doane would put it, the object of their gaze is truly coming from an empty place, in fact, it is completely absent, and what we are told to be a film is actually a voice-over, a tape of a radio play. The female gaze, therefore, is not a masochistic indulgence of over-identification nor a narcissistic desire of becoming one with a character, but it is a glimpse of introspection we are given, a gaze directed into thyself.

## CONCLUSION

After the Islamic revolution of 1979 cinema has become one of the most influential socio-cultural mediums and, along with the poetry, one of the favorite art forms within Iranian public. Given the fact that cinema is considered to be the key metaphor for identity construction, by encoding specific representational politics and diverse systems of looking, it seems that it stands in opposition to veiling discourse and censorship of Islamic establishment. However, an increasing amount of stylistically authentic films, yet very politically engaged, and a high number of female film directors prove otherwise. In fact, Iranian revolution forced filmmakers to abandon dominant codes of filming and to come up with innovative personal filming styles, in some cases to the point of reinvention of the medium itself.

There are many renowned Iranian film directors who have positioned representation of women and their experiences in the focal point of their cinematography, the majority of which are female filmmakers. Why, then, choose to write about Abbas Kiarostami, who has been praised for making visually outstanding and interesting films (in terms of narrative construction, positioning the camera and, most prominently, making audience an important part of the film), but who has also been heavily criticized for being quintessentially apolitical? It takes a special kind of perceptive subtlety to notice that his aesthetics, in fact, raises important issues in the politics of cinema. It belongs to a long tradition of counter-cinema, but put in use in the context of Iranian socio-political conditions, it successfully attains a deconstructive relationship with conventional codes of western filming style, but also with the dominant religious ideology of theistic Iranian establishment. With his shooting style tending to avoid conventional rules of cinema, he changes the way a spectator interacts with images on the screen, he not only structures the new ways of representation but also reinvents the role of a spectator.

Two of his latest films, *Ten* (Kiarostami 2002) and *Shirin* (Kiarostami 2008), that have marked Kiarostami's feminist turn, were analyzed as they are his first experimental projects openly devoted to women's issues. In *Ten* he takes a step further with the minimalistic technique of shooting by using

dashboard camera and the inside of a moving vehicle as the *mise en scene*. The simplicity of this film focalizes the role of women's dialogue as a mean of articulating their opinions, offering mutual support and raising feminist consciousness. *Shirin* is another of his experimental movies, and it features peculiar thematization of female spectatorship. The entire film is made of close-ups of women watching another film so that the female gaze takes up a form of self-reflection.

The aim of Kiarostami's corpus is demonstrating how it is possible to influence the politics of looking and provoke critical thinking without directly addressing pressing political and social issues, which may offer a methodical paradigm that can play a crucial role in the field of visual politics and feminist film theory.

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# Feministički iranski film: kontra-film Abasa Kijarostamija i žensko gledalaštvo

**Marija Antić**

**Sažetak:** Suštinska odlika iranskog umetničkog filma jeste njegova pregnantnost političkim sadržinom, postignuta direktnim upućivanjem na društvena i ženska pitanja. Stilski pod uticajem prepoznatljive persijske književne tradicije, novi iranski film je poznat po relativizaciji jasnih granica između dokumentarnog i igranog filma, na ovaj način istražujujući nove filmske forme i žanrove. Ovaj rad prvenstveno dovodi u pitanje diskurs vela i cenzure islamske vlade kao neočekivanog sredstva unapređenja autentičnog stila filmskih autora, posle čega nastavlja sa preispitivanjem uloge filmske estetike u smislu redefinisanja politike rodne reprezentacije i procesa gledalaštva. Ovaj članak je velikim delom omaž Abasu Kijarostamiju, svetski poznatom iranskom reditelju, nažalost nedavno preminulom. Njegov filmski stil biće ispitan sa stanovišta politike reprezentacije feminističkih filmskih teorija. Dva njegova filma biće posebno analizirana, film *Deset* (2002), koji je u potpunosti snimljen unutar automobila, dok žena prevozi slučajne putnike kroz ulice Teherana, i drugi, *Širin* (2008), film sastavljen od velikog broja snimaka žena u krupnom planu dok gledaju scene drugog filma, kao jedinstvenog načina reprezentacije ženskog gledalaštva i procesa identifikacije sa slikama na ekranu.

**Ključne reči:** novi iranski film, hidžab, cenzura, Kijarostami, kontra-film, rod, reprezentacija, ženski pogled