

## Transcending Cinema: Kiarostami's Approach to Filmmaking

**Maryam Ghorbankarimi**

Born and raised in Tehran, Iran, Maryam Ghorbankarimi (mg91@st-andrews.ac.uk) completed her PhD in film studies at the University of Edinburgh and her dissertation was published as a book entitled *A Colourful Presence: The Evolution of Women's Representation in Iranian Cinema*. As well as a scholar, Maryam is a filmmaker and has made some award-winning short films in both formats of short documentary and fiction.

As an artist, photographer, and filmmaker, Abbas Kiarostami masterfully continued experimenting with medium, style, and storytelling throughout his long and fruitful career. This paper will look at his film oeuvre as a whole and will focus on his style of filmmaking, which can be characterized by the osmosis of formalist and realist elements and his move beyond the restrictions of genre.

When watching Kiarostami's films and considering the vast amount of scholarly literature about his work, we come across one unifying theme: the use of realism. He has been described as the master of bridging fact and fiction, walking the thin line between documentary and fiction storytelling.<sup>1</sup> Realism in film can be explained as a style of filmmaking that attempts to duplicate the objective reality by using authentic locations, long shots, and lengthy takes. Some of the most significant elements of realism in cinema evident in Kiarostami's films are the use of natural lighting, location shooting, employing non-professional actors, and minimal editing, which are all employed in an attempt to convey the illusion that the constructed film world is a mirror image of the real world. His first and most iconic film that commanded the

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<sup>1</sup>For some of the main discussions on realism in Kiarostami's work, see Hamid Naficy, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema, vol. 4* (Durham, N.C.; Chesham: Duke University Press; Combined Academic 2012), Richard Tapper, ed. *New Iranian Cinema: Politics, Representation and Identity*, (London: I.B. Tauris, 2006), Jean-Luc Nancy, Mojdeh Famili, and Abbas Kiarostami, *L'evidence du Film: Abbas Kiarostami* (Bruxelles: Y. Gevaert, 2001), Gilberto Perez, "Where Is the Director? Abbas Kiarostami's 'Koker Trilogy' Is Exquisitely Poised between Fiction and Real Life, Opening Film to New Formal Experiences. It's His Greatest Work, Argues Gilberto Perez," *Sight and Sound*, 15, no. 5 (2005).

critical analysis of his oeuvre as neo-realist is *Where is the Friend's House?* (*Khāneh-ye dust kojāst?*, 1987), a simple narrative, shot in and around Koker, a small village in northern Iran, employing non-professional actors.<sup>2</sup> This film is the first of three, now known as the Koker trilogy. Kiarostami revisits Koker after the 1990 earthquake in the film *Life and Nothing More* (*Zendegi va digar hich*, 1992) in search of the two main actors of the film. Among the characters he visits in *Life and Nothing More*, Kiarostami spots a blossoming love story, which creates the basis of the third film, *Through the Olive Trees* (*Zir-e Derakhtān-e Zeytun* 1994). It is the simple narrative, minimalist structure, and lyrical tone of these three films that confirm Kiarostami's fascination with the nature of reality.<sup>3</sup>

In opposition to realism, formalism in film can be explained as the style of filmmaking in which aesthetic forms take precedence over the subject matter, as the content's emphasis is usually placed on symbolism and composition. Formalist works are often lyrical: "formalists stressed a 'poetic' use of film analogous to the 'literary' use of language they posited for verbal texts.... just as plot is subordinate to rhythm in poetry, [...] plot is subordinate to style in cinema."<sup>4</sup> As Khatereh Sheibani argues, Kiarostami achieves a poetic realism in his films "by employing minimal plots and non-narrative stories, based on lyrical moments set in rural areas."<sup>5</sup> For instance, the plot in *Where is the Friend's House?* is very simple. The protagonist, Ahmad, wants to return his friend's notebook so that he can do that night's homework. During his journey to find his friend's house, Ahmad meets different characters. In between each encounter he is depicted as running along different winding roads and alleys

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<sup>2</sup>André Bazin and Bert Cardullo, *André Bazin and Italian Neorealism* (London: Continuum, 2011), 27.

<sup>3</sup>Hamid Dabashi, *Close Up : Iranian Cinema, Past, Present and Future* (London: Verso, 2001), 72.

<sup>4</sup>Robert Stam, *Film Theory: An Introduction* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishing Inc., 2000), 49.

<sup>5</sup>Sheibani Khatereh, "Kiarostami and the Aesthetics of Modern Persian Poetry," *Iranian Studies* 39, no. 4 (2006): 531.

accompanied by non-diegetic music. These memorable sequences work like caesuras separating each chapter in his coming-of-age journey.

At first glance, the principles of realism and formalism may seem contrary to one another and even mutually exclusive. In spite of these differences, however, they still share some common ground, which has paved the way for Kiarostami to retain his control and artistic vision while presenting the audience with a realist film, and venture in and out of both styles or employ both styles at the same time. Throughout his career, he experimented with both form and medium, creating a transcended cinema unique to him, which earned him the title of “author”, and yet is so diverse that his films cannot be easily and exclusively categorized within one genre or another.<sup>6</sup> He also made short and long documentary, fiction, and docu-fiction films. He used both film and digital formats and was one of the pioneer directors who decided to use digital format for the feature-length film *Ten (Dah)*, (2002), having completed his feature-length documentary *ABC Africa* digitally in 2001.

The sense of time and continuity of action, and creating coherence and meaning by juxtaposing two images, one after the other, is achieved through editing. In film school, one of the first lessons of “conventional” editing we were given was that each shot should run as long as necessary and should cut to the next shot before the viewer feels and realises it is needed, or the edit is too loose. The edit always has to be one step ahead of the viewers and keep them alert or their attention drifts, which would

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<sup>6</sup>For some of the discussions on Kiarostami as an “auteur”, see: Christopher Gow, *From Iran to Hollywood and Some Places in Between : Reframing Post-Revolutionary Iranian Cinema* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2011), Seung-hoon Jeong and Jeremi Szaniawski, eds. “The Global Auteur : The Politics of Authorship in 21st Century Cinema,” (London: Bloomsbury Academic: 2016), Devin Orgeron, *Road Movies from Muybridge and Méliès to Lynch and Kiarostami* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), Yvonne Tasker, *Fifty Contemporary Filmmakers* (London; New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2002).

defeat the purpose of editing. This drifting or detachment is, however, the key to innovative “art house” films and when skilfully employed, it can create a masterpiece that urges the audience to participate rather than being a passive observer.

In order to prevent the “death of the audience and the film”, Kiarostami argues for the need for the audience’s creative involvement in the development of the plot and asserts: “a story... requires gaps, empty spaces like in a crossword puzzle, voids that it is up to the audience to fill in.”<sup>7</sup> I would argue that the gaps, empty spaces, and silences that he uses in his narrative structure, and which are commonly attributed to realism, are evidence of his style and formalist approach to filmmaking. Unlike what might be considered as the most distinct element of a formalist film—heavy reliance on editing—Kiarostami’s films often use long takes and very subtle editing. Nevertheless, all these slow cuts and lingering shots are meticulously rendered and juxtaposed with calculated gaps. These planned “crossword-like” scenes keep his films alive and guide the audience’s perception towards a multitude of possible interpretations.

André Bazin believed that realist cinema was a more democratic form of film as it did not manipulate the spectator and allowed them to enjoy “the freedom to scan the multi-planar field of image for its meaning.”<sup>8</sup> Similarly, Kiarostami believed that spectators should not be captives of the filmmaker but rather be active participants. He famously achieved this stylistically in his Koker trilogy by employing long takes and minimal dialogue to give the viewer space and time to fill in the gaps and add to

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<sup>7</sup>Abbas Kiarostami, “An Unfinished Cinema,” text written for the Centenary of Cinema, Paris 1995, and distributed at the Odeon Theatre. Reprinted in the DVD release of *The Wind Will Carry Us*. For an online reproduction see “An Unfinished Cinema” by Abbas Kiarostami,” wordpress.com, <https://jyothisnay.wordpress.com/2008/02/13/an-unfinished-cinema-abbas-kiarostami/>.

<sup>8</sup>Stam, *Film Theory: An Introduction*, 76-77.

the film through his or her own experience. In *Where is the Friend's House?* he introduced scenes and actions into the plot that do not add much to it except a meaningful gap to entice the audience to participate. In between the many scenes following Ahmad up and down the alleys in the village, and entering the shot from one side and leaving from the other, Kiarostami added quasi-subtle pauses. For instance, when Ahmad passes a certain house, a woman on the balcony off screen is hanging her wet laundry and a sheet falls to the ground at his feet. He tries to throw the sheet back up to her a couple of times. The neighbour comes out and says that Ahmad cannot throw it that high and asks him to bring it to the bottom of her balcony instead; she takes the sheet from him to pass it on to her neighbour. At the end of this little delaying interaction Ahmad takes this opportunity once again to ask for his friend's address; he receives the same unhelpful, repetitive and nonsensical reply that he gets throughout the film.

Kiarostami coined the term “unfinished cinema” for this approach to filmmaking: “a project being created constantly” and a cinema that considers the spectator as a creator, not as created.<sup>9</sup> Bazin's democratic attribute to realist films is not necessarily in opposition with the formalist's point of view, and even the purpose of Eisenstein's montage is not to dictate a special meaning of reality onto the spectator:

In fact, every spectator, in correspondence with his individuality, and in his own way and out of his own experience [...] creates an image in accordance with the representational guidance suggested by the author, leading him to understand and experience of the author's theme. This is the same image that was planned and

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<sup>9</sup>Mohammad Jafar Yousefian Kenari and Mostafa Mokhtabad-Amrei, “Kiarostami's Unfinished Cinema and Its Postmodern Reflections,” *The International Journal of Humanities* 17, no. 2 (2010): 29.

created by the author, but this image is at the same time created also by the spectator himself.<sup>10</sup>

The sense of realism in Kiarostami's films is not only achieved through his "documentary" style of filmmaking but also through the use of formal and stylistic techniques that create the illusion of realism. Editing is one of the main tools that Kiarostami employed to convey realism; for example, the car conversation in *The Taste of Cherry* (*Ta'm-e Gilās*, 1997) in which the film's realism is generated by its spontaneous conversations, non-professional actors, and conveying real time.<sup>11</sup> Kiarostami edited the conversations between the driver and the passengers in a way that gives the "illusion of face-to-face encounters."<sup>12</sup> He filmed each side of the conversation separately and then edited them seamlessly into a conversation creating the illusion of realism, in contrast to his later film *Ten* in which he placed two cameras, one facing the driver and the other facing the passenger.

In order to understand Kiarostami's treatment of realism while retaining a formalist style, I chose to adapt the neo-formalist film analysis offered by Kirstin Thompson. According to her, realism is better understood as realistic "motivation" than as style alone. It can either appeal to "our knowledge of everyday life gained by direct interaction with nature and society" or "our awareness of prevailing authentic canons of realism in a given period."<sup>13</sup> Realism can be "radical and defamiliarizing if the

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<sup>10</sup>Sergei Eisenstein, *Film Form [and] the Film Sense; Two Complete and Unabridged Works*, Meridian Books, Mg10 (New York: Meridian Books, 1957), 33.

<sup>11</sup>M. Gail Hamner, "Abbas Kiarostami: The Face of Modernity; Alienation and Transcendence in Taste of Cherry (1997)," in *Imaging Religion in Film: The Politics of Nostalgia* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 81.

<sup>12</sup>Hamner, "Abbas Kiarostami: The Face of Modernity," 73.

<sup>13</sup>Kristin Thompson, *Breaking the Glass Armor: Neoformalist Film Analysis* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 2010), 17.

main artistic styles of the time are highly abstract and have become automatized.”<sup>14</sup> Therefore, arguably what is seen as realism at one time is not necessarily perceived as realism at a later time, and as a result, realism in films appears and disappears in a similar way to other styles over time. After employing defamiliarization techniques for some time, what was considered as realistic will become “automatized” through repetition and less realistic qualities will take their place.<sup>15</sup> In each period a new sort of realism will emerge through defamiliarization and employing different devices. For example, it is argued that Italian neo-realism emerged after the Second World War because post-war trauma demanded a new and fresh cinematic language, unlike the established styles commonly employed in the time preceding it.<sup>16</sup>

According to Thompson, neo-formalism also posits the viewers as active participants.<sup>17</sup> As David Bordwell argues, it is the “film form” that guides the audience’s activity and therefore its response or reaction to the film.<sup>18</sup> Through the director’s choice of what to include and what to leave out, he or she can try to make the audience perceive things anew, shaking them out of their accustomed habits and suggesting fresh ways of hearing, seeing, feeling, and thinking.<sup>19</sup> Kiarostami invites the audience to take part in the film and contemplate further by repeating some of the long takes, such as the famous winding roads in *Where is the Friend’s House?* In a similar way, he leaves the conversation between Makhmalbaf and Sabzian in the closing sequence of *Close-up (Kelosāp, Namā-ye Nazdīk, 1990)* partly incomplete—admittedly due to initial technical difficulties—and conceals the rest of the

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<sup>14</sup>Thompson, *Breaking the Glass Armor*, 198.

<sup>15</sup>Thompson, *Breaking the Glass Armor*, 199.

<sup>16</sup>Laura Mulvey, “Repetition and Return,” *Third Text* 21, no. 1 (2007): 24.

<sup>17</sup>Thompson, *Breaking the Glass Armor*, 29.

<sup>18</sup>David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, *Film Art : An Introduction* (Princeton, N.J.: Recording for the Blind & Dyslexic, 2007).

<sup>19</sup>Bordwell and Thompson, *Film Art : An Introduction*, 57.

conversation by adding non-diegetic music. Another strategy he employed is to leave important plot information out of the narrative structure; for example, in *Taste of Cherry* he never reveals why Mr Badi'i wants to end his life.

Another literary device for defamiliarization Kiarostami employed in most of his films is the notion of reflexivity, subverting “the assumption that art can be a transparent medium of communication, a window on the world.”<sup>20</sup> As Robert Stam argues, referring to Balzac’s *Lost Illusions* (1837–1843) and Godard’s *Numéro Deux* (1975), reflexivity can exist simultaneously along with realism in the sense that they both represent everyday realities while reminding the audience of their constructed nature.<sup>21</sup>

Kiarostami has employed reflexivity in all his films but to different degrees; at times it is more obvious, at others less so. Sometimes the reflexivity is in harmony with the realist approach of the film, and in some instances it is used to subvert the constructed realism. In some of his documentaries the presence of the camera and the crew is felt either because of their location and angle or because the camera and the interviewee are both captured on camera. In the documentary *Fellow Citizen* (*Hamshahri*, 1983), he employed the candid camera method, observing the traffic controller’s conversations with passengers of cars pleading and trying to convince him to allow them to enter the traffic-controlled zone without a permit. The zoomed-in shots create a distance from the subjects, and this voyeuristic gaze reminds the audience that it is watching a film. On the other hand, in the documentary *Homework* (*Mashq-e Shab*, 1989) the crew, including Kiarostami himself as the interviewer with the sound

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<sup>20</sup>Stam, *Film Theory: An Introduction*, 151.

<sup>21</sup>Stam, *Film Theory: An Introduction*, 152.

engineer and the camera operator behind him, is cut back and forth with students and the occasional parent interviewees. The tight shot of just the camera operator behind the camera is sometimes used as the reverse shot cutaway juxtaposed with the tight shot of the interviewee talking on camera, thus making the film overtly reflexive. The static close-up of the camera situates the audience in the same place as the interviewees, turning them from the observer to the observed. Kiarostami employed this reversal of the gaze most notably in his stylistic and formalist film *Shirin* (2008). Here, we watch the reaction of 114 Iranian actresses and Juliette Binoche watching a theatrical representation of the famous love story of Khosrow and Shirin in a small cinema. In *Shirin*, he employed a film-within-a-film reflexivity. Butler argues that when the character Shirin is heard saying “listen to me, my sisters” at the beginning and end of the film, apart from the women we hear with her on the soundtrack, she is also addressing the women in the theatre whose faces we see. He also adds that *Shirin* has adapted the style of storytelling employed in *One Thousand and One Nights* and that it is possible to turn Shirin into an allegory of the self-reflexive framed storytelling.<sup>22</sup> It is argued by Jean-Luc Nancy, however, that Kiarostami is not only interested in the “mise-en-abyme”<sup>23</sup>; rather, he is investigating the constructed nature of reality, and in the above-mentioned documentaries, he has employed reflexivity to add to the realism of the films.<sup>24</sup>

Kiarostami’s defamiliarization sometimes takes a more Brechtian tone by suddenly revealing the process of the production in the narrative.<sup>25</sup> As was mentioned as an example, the distancing effect was achieved in the final sequence of *Close-up* when

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<sup>22</sup>Rex Butler, “Abbas Kiarostami,” *Angelaki* 17, no. 4 (2012): 74.

<sup>23</sup>Nancy, Famili, and Kiarostami, *L'evidence du Film : Abbas Kiarostami*, 27.

<sup>24</sup>Zsolt Gyenge, “Subjects and Objects of the Embodied Gaze: Abbas Kiarostami and the Real of the Individual Perspective,” in *Acta Universitatis Sapientiae, Film and Media Studies* (2016), 128-29.

<sup>25</sup>Stam, *Film Theory: An Introduction*, 53.

Makhmalbaf picks up Sabzian and they go to Ahankhah's house. In this continuous shot the crew is in a mobile unit across the street following Makhmalbaf. Suddenly we hear the voices of Kiarostami and his crew talking about how Makhmalbaf did not hit his mark, which is why the camera does not initially capture him well and they cannot repeat this shot a second time. After this, the audio starts cutting out and we hear them discussing the technical difficulties with old cordless microphones from the 1970s (adding a social commentary about the current state of technological equipment in the 1980s) that resulted in parts of their conversation being left out. This method of revealing the existence of the crew is also used in a scene in *Life and Nothing More*, where Mr Ruhi cannot open the door to his house; he asks the crew for help, thus acknowledging their existence, and for a moment the script girl walks into the shot. The most effective of these alienation techniques is the closing scene of *Taste of Cherry* after what the audience assumes is the final scene of the film and Mr Badi'i is lying in the grave in the dark. While we can only hear the sound of the rain on black, the sound of soldiers fades in and the scene cuts to the wide stark video shot of the hill with the small figures of soldiers marching up the hill along a winding road. In the next shot of this concluding video sequence, we see Homayoun Ershadi, the actor portraying Mr Badi'i, walking towards Kiarostami and smoking. Although the long black shot with the sound of rain can be considered as a space he has provided for the audience to write their own ending, the cut to behind-the-scenes video footage really takes the spectator out of the built-up drama of Mr Badi'i's supposed death. These shots subvert the realism that was achieved by the Kiarostamiesque minimalist narrative, and by revealing the production process they create uncertainty in its realism.<sup>26</sup> According to Mathew Abbott it is also through his signature shots of

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<sup>26</sup>Mulvey, "Repetition and Return," 22.

winding roads, a familiar view in several of his films, that Kiarostami reminds us in a self-reflexive way that we are watching one of his films.<sup>27</sup>

Kiarostami's forays into digital cinema opened the door for him to develop his interest further and focus on cultural truth and minimalism in the intersection between fact and fiction. The digital format also facilitated much more experimentation with the medium, allowing him to fine-tune his formalist style of filmmaking. Kiarostami did not start experimenting with the medium until after he began to work with digital format; his enthusiasm and willingness to experiment with form and medium are already evident in his early works. He came from a visual arts background and before he began his career in cinema in the 1970s making short films; he made some title sequences and posters, an activity he continued throughout his career. One the most memorable title sequences is for Masud Kimiai's film, *Gheisar* (*Qeysar*, 1969). Lasting 2 minutes and 45 seconds, it consists of high-contrast static close-ups of body parts: arms, shoulders, torsos, etc., each containing black and white body art against a black backdrop. The body art depicts characters and scenes from *Shāhnāme* (Ferdowsi's *Book of Kings*), conveying the heroic epic tales that it tells including but not limited to the depiction of the hero *Siyāvosh*, and the iconic rescue of *Zāl* by the magical bird, *Simorgh*. The body art consists of outlined black and white figures coming out of coffeehouse-style paintings and the underlying heroic topos sets the mood of the film very well. The titles appear in the negative space created in juxtaposition with the figures and against the black backdrop. The film's title appears in the same frame as the scene of a hero holding up the severed head of his defeated enemy. The framing, playing with the contrast of black and white, and the movement

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<sup>27</sup>Mathew Abbott, "Kiarostami's Picture Theory: Cinematic Skepticism in *The Wind Will Carry*," *SubStance* 42 (2013): 165.

created through the curved lines of the edge of the bodies against the black backdrop, are very much reminiscent of Kiarostami's much later signature photographs and shots of winding roads, hills, and single trees. We can observe today that the visual sensibility evident in this minimalist title sequence is close to his final film projects, and pervades through his other films as well.

Another famous and minimalist title sequence by Kiarostami was created for Reza Mirkarimi's film, *As Simple as Hat* (*Be hamin sādegi*, 2008). Kiarostami's hand is shot from underneath a light box writing out the credits with his unique handwriting superimposed on a textured cream-coloured sheet. Each credit dissolves into the next and when the names are written out, the sound is heard of a pencil on paper under the diegetic sounds of the main character washing dishes and humming a song.

His first venture into the digital world was a documentary film about AIDS, *ABC Africa* (2001). He shot research footage on location using two digital cameras, with the intention of returning to make his film, but he realized that the intimacy and immediacy of the digital camera was more suited for this project and he edited the film from the research footage.<sup>28</sup> He said about his decision that, "I felt that a 35 mm camera would limit both us and the people there, whereas the video camera displayed truth from every angle and not a forged truth."<sup>29</sup>

Digital production and post-production techniques due to their low cost and portability added a sense of intimacy and closeness to the subjects, creating a certain

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<sup>28</sup>Kathryn Millard, *Screenwriting in a Digital Era* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 146.

<sup>29</sup>Scott Krzych, "Auto-Motivations: Digital Cinema and Kiarostami's Relational Aesthetics," *The Velvet Light Trap* 66, no. 1 (2010): 32.

“cinematic realism”.<sup>30</sup> The low cost of digital filmmaking gives much more freedom to the filmmaker than the film format. For example, an independent director such as Kiarostami would use a much higher shooting ratio when shooting digitally. A high shooting ratio allows for experimentation and improvisation while shooting. Moreover, the camera and equipment for digital filmmaking are cheaper and much more portable. When making a digital film he often made use of two cameras, providing multiple angles and representation of the same subject. Digital filmmaking has transformed the traditional organizational structure of film production by enabling all stages of production from pre-production to post-production to take place at the same time.<sup>31</sup>

Digital filmmaking provides a platform for the filmmaker to break away from conventional filmmaking and storytelling. As Kiarostami admitted, there is an expectation to tell stories with 35 mm film, while with digital film the viewer is more open to accept new styles of filmmaking.<sup>32</sup> *Ten* is a great example of the way Kiarostami used this new technology to his advantage. He compared his hands-free experience of directing *Ten* to managing a football team.<sup>33</sup> The actors in each scene were given the dialogue but they could improvise and individualize it during the performance, creating believable and realistic conversations. The film has a very specific form: it is made up of ten scenes and ten conversations between the main protagonist—the driver Mania—and her passengers, shot through two fixed cameras facing them. At first sight this film is quite different from Kiarostami’s previous

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<sup>30</sup>Eliza Hansell, “A New Cinematic Aesthetic: The Effect of the Digital Revolution on the Construction of the ‘Real’,” *Journal of Digital Research & Publishing* (2010): 131.

<sup>31</sup>Adam Ganz and Lina Khatib, “Digital Cinema: The Transformation of Film Practice and Aesthetics,” *New Cinemas: Journal of Contemporary Film* 4, no. 1 (2006): 24.

<sup>32</sup>Ganz and Khatib, “Digital Cinema: The Transformation of Film Practice and Aesthetics,” 29-30.

<sup>33</sup>Ganz and Khatib, “Digital Cinema: The Transformation of Film Practice and Aesthetics,” 32.

narratives, but a close reading reveals many of his prominent traits are also present in this film. Each scene is driven forwards through heavy and at times very deep and emotional conversations, with very few pauses. There is no sign of those gaps and silences that Kiarostami used to employ for the audience to fill in, but he has also kept this film open-ended, and with the limited devices available he has controlled the audience's access. For instance, for about 16 minutes at the beginning of the film, we only hear Mania while the camera stays on her son the entire time; and in the sequence with the prostitute, the camera for the most part stays with Mania and we barely see the prostitute getting out of the car. Through this kind of unpredictable editing of the conversations, Kiarostami has retained his unique style of filmmaking by leaving out certain key reactions and responses.

Before concluding this paper, it should be mentioned that Kiarostami experimented further with the medium and reduced the narrative structure of his films, giving way to a more formalist structure towards the end of his career. I have yet to see his last film *24 Frames* (2017) that was completed posthumously and previewed at the Cannes Film Festival in May 2017, but Geoff Andrew described it as “mementos of the late master's increasingly minimalist poetics, these short experiments in animating photographs and a painting teem with life's magic and mysteries.”<sup>34</sup> In similar fashion, Kiarostami's last short film *Take Me Home* (2016) is a minimalist and an experimental film using CGI to bring his photographs from southern Italy to life. This 15-minute black and white film with no dialogue begins with a fixed shot of a door at the end of a flight of steps. A young boy holding a football runs up the steps and leaves the ball by the door before disappearing behind it. As soon as he disappears,

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<sup>34</sup>Geoff Andrew, “24 Frames Review: Abbas Kiarostami's Living, Parting Miniatures | Sight & Sound,” (2017), [www.bfi.org.uk/news-opinion/sight-sound-magazine/reviews-recommendations/24-frames-abbas-kiarostami-living-parting-miniatures](http://www.bfi.org.uk/news-opinion/sight-sound-magazine/reviews-recommendations/24-frames-abbas-kiarostami-living-parting-miniatures).

the ball starts to roll and falls down the steps, one after the other and several at a time. The boy twice comes to collect the ball from the steps but the third time the ball rolls down and takes us on a journey through the static but beautifully composed still photographs. Apart from the animated ball, there are wandering cats that walked into Kiarostami's frame in some of the static shots, which he must have decided to film after setting up his photographic shot in order to add a layer of constructed reality. The film depicts beautiful Italian alleys and steps and the journey of the animated football through this winding and mysterious terrain is accompanied by music and the sound of the ball hitting the steps. *Take Me Home* is very reminiscent of the shots from *Where is the Friend's House?*, more specifically when Ahmad is walking into the empty shots as he comes down the winding alleys of the village, walking to one side of the shot and disappearing down another alley. Here, Ahmad is replaced by a ball, and the winding alleys of northern Iran are replaced by the alleys and steps of a village in southern Italy. Even the presence of the cats in *Take Me Home* is a reminder of the chickens or the stranded cow that Ahmad comes across on his way to find his friend's house. Yet again Kiarostami has constructed a vivid and lively realist world through minimalist, still frames and a computer-animated football; perhaps by naming this film *Take Me Home*, he has added one more layer of self-reflexivity to his fascinating work.

After watching Seyfolah Samadian's insightful but unimposing documentary *76 Minutes and 15 Seconds with Abbas Kiarostami* (2016) and witnessing snippets of Kiarostami working behind the scenes over the years on various projects, it is evident that to him the medium is secondary to his vision. This is why, compared to some other filmmakers of his generation, he did not hesitate to make the shift to digital

format. We may think of him first and foremost as a filmmaker but he was in the fullest sense of the word an artist, who was constantly creating, irrespective of the medium he used to express his ideas. His choice of medium was based on what he intended to do. In one scene of the documentary, it is touching to witness how Kiarostami drifts from the ongoing conversation in a car driving through the rain, and continues to take photographs through the windscreen and to share his genuine happiness with the other passengers whenever he is satisfied with the results.<sup>35</sup> It is deeply saddening that there will be no more innovations by this true artist who lived to create.

Throughout his career Kiarostami found different ways and devices to reproduce and reinterpret real-life events into his filmic representations. His films often adapt a simple and minimalist narrative and invite the spectator to be an active participant rather than a passive observer. Despite the theme of realism always present in his films and the self-reflexive nature of his oeuvre, he continuously experimented with medium and style. In particular, his foray into the world of digital filmmaking facilitated much more experimentation with different media, allowing him to fine-tune his formalist yet realist style of filmmaking in his own unique way. Although he quite often walks a thin line between documentary and fiction or adapts a documentary style of filmmaking, it is through the subtle use of formalist devices such as editing, the employment of defamiliarization techniques, or simply omitting elements of the narrative structure that he managed to preserve the illusion of realism.

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<sup>35</sup>I believe two of the photographs taken that day (Rain (23), Rain (27)) have made it to his “Roads and Rain” exhibition in London. See [www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/gallery/2009/may/19/abbas-kiarostami-photography-exhibition](http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/gallery/2009/may/19/abbas-kiarostami-photography-exhibition).