

On Location:

Kiarostami`s Landscapes and Cinematic Value

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“For landscape is the freest element of film, the least burdened with servile, narrative tasks, and the most flexible in converging moods, emotional states, and spiritual experiences”. (Sergei Eisenstein, 1946)

«Beyond good and evil / the sky / is blue»
(Abbas Kiarostami)

It is generally agreed that films are windows on human experience and emotions. Since its very beginning, cinema provided a particular view of life, either of history and time or their vivid spaces and memories. Its stories frequently open doors to other worlds, to both outer and inner spaces as different levels of perception and imagination. That is to say that cinema is not just a ‘Screen Scape’ showing people what it is like to be human, but films are confrontation pieces of art performing what I would like to call ‘Land(E)Scapes’: (im)material bridges between reality and poetic inmost spaces. Besides, filmic spaces are also specific sites of meaning, giving spectators critical perspectives of human experience and shared values. The most common and familiar places of the world, once mediated by the camera and the screen, become complex, crossover and hybrid places with multiple layers. The complexity of cinematic spaces depend on films’ historical contexts and political dimensions, and may refer to physical locations, but also to their haunted pasts or even futures.

In a sense, every cinematic space is a “possible world”. Sometimes the space is real and sometimes it is a mental or spiritual image, depending on the bias towards reality/fiction approaches. In any case, the cinematic possible world can be said to be a true-life-story. Of course, I am acutely aware of the ambiguity of the expression. For that reason, I would like to introduce the concept as described by Daniel P. Nolan in his book *Topics in the Philosophy of Possible Worlds* (2002). There, the author describes

two conceptions of ‘possible worlds’: the first refers to pre-theoretic talk about possible situations; the second is most used in discussions about the ontology of possible worlds. According to Nolan, “possible worlds might be made up of propositions, or are perhaps set-theoretic constructions”, and do not correspond necessarily to any geographic space or physical time (2002, p. 7). Sometimes, they might be even identical to “highly abstract entities” (Nolan, 2002, p. 7). The subject of modal logic is too complex to be discussed here, but, in the light of the possible worlds’ commonsensical conception, we might consider films as possible situations that audiences take at face value. For instance, we accept cinematic spaces and narratives for what they appear to be, just because they are made on location. In short, movie pictures belong to an inclusive “actual world” as a whole. They refer to both concrete and abstract situations, and they surely influence the very meaning and values of any geographical space or place, since the interpretation of the movie by the spectators is based on their own language, knowledge, imagination, remembrances and experiences.

Movies are more than the imagination’s windows to ‘escape’ from Kansas and run through a ‘real’ place; “the place [itself] can never be reduced to the site. [Because] the site is characterized by the delimitation of land” (Martin, 2000, p. 63), and despite the framing, the filmic space has no physical limitations at all. So, my claim is that film is sometimes a “Land(E)Scape” or a “possible world”. One should also recognize that any film has the ways and means to produce its own poetic and meaningful space, such as the messianic movement of new “promised lands” or the premonition of “cursed ones”, which can be either accepted or condemned by audiences.

After World War II, cinema began disseminating the ruins of wars and conflicts and their correlative dark “interior landscapes” created by human fears and the mind-blowing experiences of the century. There is no doubt that films are connected with important or trivial human events and pasts, including people’s personal experiences, memories and imagination. As such, it is not surprising that the classical positive values of moving pictures, offered earlier by the screen –e.g. hope,– are now haunted by the shadows of an unknown “ghost land” shaped by the 20th century’s multiple events and geopolitical movements. As a consequence, films become *loci* for keeping the records of both an (in)significant and (in)visible world, and as ‘cultural objects’, films also ‘collect’ and provide sensitive human portraits and life’s narratives.

To understand some of the values of cinematic space, as well as their influence on our perception and cultural shaping of the world, I will briefly discuss Abbas Kiarostami's film *The Wind Will Carry Us* (باد ما را خواهد برد, 1999). By analysing some sequences within, I will clarify how the common locations become "other (hybrid) spaces". Once dipping into film's places, audiences can easily transform any constructed and cinematic reality into the real, everyday life beyond the stories, and vice-versa. In this way, one can assume that Kiarostami deals with spirals of life and memory, (re)presenting both real places and their inmost poetic "different spaces", or heterotopias, which I will discuss later.

My thesis is that Kiarostami's cinema is deeply rooted in history, which allows me to unfold the proposal that his stories, villages and landscapes are –like heterotopia– spaces that do not only refer to real and local places, but also pertain to a powerful theoretic construction or semantic dimension by the global influence of knowledge and the agency of contemporary devices. In "Different Spaces", Michel Foucault's lecture presented to the *Architectural Studies Circle* on 14 March 1967, the philosopher talked about history as "the great obsession of the nineteenth century [...]: themes of development and arrest, themes of crisis and cycle, themes of accumulation of the past, a great overload of dead people". He concluded that "the present age may be the age of space instead. We are in an era of the simultaneous, of juxtaposition, of the near and the far, of the side-by-side, of the scattered" (1998, p. 175). The fact is that Foucault's words could also easily apply to the 21st Century, but this time both history and space would assume serious political positions on arts and, particularly, on contemporary cinema.

On Location: Landscapes, Hybrid Spaces and Memory Places

Produced in 1999, Abbas Kiarostami's film *The Wind Will Carry Us* was as controversial as its director. According to Alberto Elena, the film was "the first of his full-length features that had the benefit of foreign investment" (2005, p. 148) during the troubled years of the post Islamic Revolution. This was probably one of the reasons why the filmmaker was accused of being distant from the Iranian political situation and masking people's life conditions. Filmed on location in the Kurdish village and hills of Siyah Darreh, the movie's screened space hardly corresponds to the social and political

reality of a country that has been at war for years. Instead, it is a complex inner space, an expression of Kiarostami's world. At first sight, the film's opening long shot is a panoramic view of a bucolic and peaceful countryside – a landscape. It is also an idyllic depiction of a small remote village on the top of the hill, overlooking the green valley – how green was this valley?– where life goes on, despite the wars, and apparently without any unpleasant surprises, as if there were neither a violent past nor the dark shadows of history haunting it. But, in the end, the landscape might be seen as an abstraction, wresting land out of its natural context in order to approximate it to an ethical value. There is an ambivalent in-between stage of the film and its narrative, transforming those landscapes into both poetic and political places: a “physiognomy” of the present.

Discussing the idea of “different spaces”, Michel Foucault noticed “the enormous work of Gaston Bachelard and the descriptions of the phenomenologists [that] have taught us that we are living not in a homogeneous and empty space but, on the contrary, in a space that is laden with qualities, a space that may also be haunted by fantasy” (Foucault, 1998, p. 177). That is why the mythic, sometimes even hostile opposition between inside and outside, the poetics of this picture of a “no man's land”, offers an unexpected meaning of otherness to the film. According to Gaston Bachelard, “when confronted with outside and inside, [philosophers] think in terms of being and non-being. Thus, profound metaphysics is rooted in an implicit geometry which –whether we will or no– confers spatiality upon thought” (2000, p. 151). ‘This side and beyond’, ‘here and there’, ‘me and the other’ are additional expressions of the dialectics of outside and inside frequently applied to territorial aspects and political issues.

Given the range of language's common meanings, it is no wonder Hamid Dabashi underlines the promises and perils of this film vis-à-vis globalization, especially for Iranian Cinema (2001). The author recognises the film as an exercise of universalization of “the Iranian particular”, arguing that “with this film he [Kiarostami] showed that when he achieved the universal he did not know quite what to do with it, and he failed in the face of a global deauthorization of the real, of which, alas, he has not a clue” (Dabashi, 2001, pp. 252-253). The negative focus of Dabashi's analysis also includes strong critics to Kiarostami's cinematic options, such as the visual dimension and the *mise-en-scène* – “a brutally accurate picture of dehumanization [...], voyeuristic camera” (2001, p. 253), etc. Additionally, the author considers the film an offensive

remark to Persian Poetry itself: “[...] Kiarostami chooses this hideous instance to introduce one of the most glorious poems in modern Persian poetry. Never has Forough Farrokhzad’s ‘The Wind Will Carry Us Away’ sounded so silly, so graceless, as in this recital by a vulgar man intruding into the private passions of a young woman” (Dabashi, 2001, p. 253). Although for different reasons, Dabashi actually reduces the plot line of the film to a simple ‘map’: the routine of the lead character that repeatedly climbs a hill just to be able to use his mobile phone, while waiting for the moment to shoot the funeral of a woman who is actually still alive. In a sense, this is the search for real life – a ‘real story’ in the ‘real space’ for a specific documentary in an unstable and changing world and its correlative landscapes.

The *New Yorker*’s critic Richard Brody put forward the contrary point of view. He refers to this film as “Abbas Kiarostami and the Winds of change”, which seems to be an interesting and accurate title for a newspaper report. Like the wind, the political dimension and the very changes at the heart of Iranian society are almost invisible to Kiarostami’s films’ spectators. But one can feel those ‘winds of change’ blowing deep on his characters’ inner spaces and actions, even if they are impossible to see. The spectator follows the protagonists’ movements and embodies their experiences. Ultimately, *The Wind Will Carry Us* is the experience of a future audience observing and judging the small community’s life from ‘God’s viewpoint’– from an outer space, which is in fact, the cinema’s point of view and its philosophical –e.g. aesthetical and/or ethical– value.

Rudolph Arnheim’s essay about “Outer Space and Inner Space” (1991) helps us understand the relevance of the point of view and how it can express a political or cultural idea, once framing the space. The author underlines the relevance of human perception on experience, and emphasizes the idea that when people first saw Earth’s picture, it was not “the physical distance, but the visual detachment” that made the real difference (Arnheim, 1991, p. 73). According to Arnheim, the idea of visual detachment “should remind us that when we talk about spaces, about outer space and inner space, we are not referring primarily to physical facts. What we are dealing with is the psychological experience of our senses” (1991, p. 73). Arnheim’s passage helps to sustain the belief that within contemporary cinema, space goes far beyond the surface of reality and its framing; *i.e.* its geographical and geometric representation. Therefore, my approach to the issue is defined by the following questions: Are these specific filmic

landscapes inner or outer spaces? Are their spectators in front of windows looking at the geographic spaces of Earth? Or is cinema the framing of land(e)scapes of the soul(s), opening up to human condition and life's vanities? What kind of space is constructed by the spiritual achievements of art itself? Where do the films carry us? These questions could also lead us to the Aristotelian problems of "whether places exist or not", "how they exist" and "what they are", but these specific philosophical points are not our focus here.

As mentioned above, Kiarostami's films were shot on location in the Iranian hills. Yet, what makes them real and powerful is not the land's view, as it might seem at first sight, but something else generated by cinema itself, a specific site: "Space is [...] essential to film" (Sesonske, 1974, p. 54), but "the essential fact about the space of a film is that it is *created*; there is not simply a determinate dimension waiting to be instantiated" (Sesonske, 1974, p. 55). From now on, it is possible to discuss film and filmmaking as models for deep experiences of places as memories and emotions – inner worlds, souls' landscapes. Such dynamics occurs because the film form enables vivid spaces to become expressive materials, shattering all the illusions about the existence of "a real unique physical space" or a linear lifeline. By means of cinematic process, audiences find themselves in front of other possible spaces: odd ones, intimate dimensions and affective portraits, whose influence on feelings and thoughts, by the agency of perception and representation, might be disruptive, disquieting and disorienting.

In addition to the previous claims, one could say that film's places are virtual spaces, in the very sense of Gilles Deleuze's philosophy: *i.e.*, far more real than reality itself. Thus, it is in the light of film forms, between both close-up and long shot, shaping places and non-places, that I propose Kiarostami's landscapes and places as hybrid spaces, crossroads. These geographical, but also mental places, take the sense of the cross-paths which interfere with life and death – including the director's path through life, otherwise expressed by his poem: "What a difficult path it is / the passage from night, from day, / from good, from evil, / from silence, / from tumult / from hatred, / from anger, / from love, / from love" (Kiarostami, 2005, p. 163). Mirroring his words, the film is another mark of his lifelong passion, revealing the deep wounds of life. Elena underlines that "the film undoubtedly deals with the [...] reflections about life and death

[...]” (2002, p. 151). Besides, Kiarostami’s obsession with the process of losing - a friend, a relative, a dream, a home(land) - it is quite clear.

Based on a short story by Mahmud Aydin, the original project was about the journey of a group of journalists who wanted to film a specific funeral. However, while the crew was waiting for the woman’s death, Kiarostami decided to film what he “saw and found at the shooting location” (Elena, 2002, p. 151). Therefore, the film is “about waiting, a waiting consisting of brief meetings which do not, however, overcome the loneliness of its protagonist, who, despite this, undergoes – like most of Kiarostami’s characters [...] – a profoundly life-changing experience in the Kurdish village of Siah Darih” (Elena, 2002, pp. 150-151). Kiarostami’s poems also reveal his resilience to loneliness and the resignation to an eternal and irreversible cycle of life leading to an end. Unlike his filmic landscapes, whose points of view are commonly objective –views from outside–, his poetry digs deeper into his soul, bringing back memories and fears: “When I returned to my birthplace / I could not find / my father’s house / nor my mother’s voice” (Kiarostami, 2005, p. 90). On the one hand, as argued by John Dewey, art is self-expression and poems and pictures come from both personal experience and the real world (1980, p. 82). On the other hand, by looking at films and reading poems, people become acutely aware of life’s limits and human joy or suffering under natural and historical conditions.

In this way, with the purpose of understanding the idea of ‘land(e)scape’ as self-expression, we will first briefly analyse the word “landscape”. If we think about the French word *paysage*, it immediately recalls the idea of territory –*pays*– which certainly has everything to do with the notions of culture and civilization; whereas the German word *Landschaft* refers to the land itself, a region or open space; and the English ‘landscape’ implies both a physical space and its pictorial –that can be also symbolic– representation. The meaning of ‘landscape’ became a common place through its usage by artists in the 17th century, when a particular genre of scenic view or painting – *landskip*– became popular. In short, the concept of landscape compresses a specific way of regarding the environment, but it also defines the (dis)connections with human activities, such as the aesthetic or contemplative dimensions and their ethical or ecological issues.

So, film as land(e)scape holds all these different etymological meanings, but it ultimately comprises the glazed surface of a free dimension that goes beyond the notion

of land and its cinematic vision, as well as the pictorial and the photographic representation. Thus, the filmic land(e)scape metonymically refers to reality itself; a paradoxical picture of both characters' imprisonments and directors' liberation from any kind of control. In this framework, there is a high correlation between landscape, space, place and memory, as conceived by Iván Villarrea Álvarez, in the sense that "subjective spatial history depends on the feelings, emotions and experiences that we associate with certain places, which may ultimately become our places of memory" (2015, p. 2). In this context, *The Wind Will Carry Us* is a film on History and Memory. Nevertheless, in the end, just like hundreds of films we have seen before, it becomes the spectator's affective imaginary 'land', mirrored worlds and places where everyone could live or die.

Where Does Cinema Carry Us?

We know that every country is simultaneously a natural territory and a political unit with borders between states, but also frontiers between what is known and not known. Giving this separation, and in light of contemporary political and social contexts, including wars, globalization, etc., one can ask "where does this cinema carry us?" The title of Kiarostami's film is meaningful; the Persian Poetry and its political dimension; the messianic picture of a country and a revolution's past and future. Indeed, Kiarostami's film is the hidden story of "an inexplicable wind which suddenly gets up in one shot, [but is certainly, the revelation] of the invisible man in the underground passage of *The Wind Will Carry Us* (1999)" (Bergala & Balló, 2006, p. 17). It is the wind of History, a sudden blow of its Angel towards the future, whilst looking at the past. As already mentioned, the title is the direct quotation of Forough Farrokhzad's poem, and the fact that her poetry was censored for more than one decade after the Islamic Revolution in 1979 is absolutely relevant. Her ghost feminine 'voice', a political and controversial one, is thus the matrix of the cinematic dimension of Kiarostami's landscape-spaces. Coming from the past, but also from the grave, Farrokhzad's words are, indeed, recited in an ordinary moment of life, so that Poetry is the director's powerful instrument to mention some of the most important changes of the country, but above all, his way of telling the story of the resistant artwork: Poetry, Cinema *et al.* In fact, the film traces the very condition of many women through the portrait of that

character who refuses to talk to her husband, though recognizing her fate and servitude. It is a picture of her 'inner space', and a huge screening of all oppressed women's land(e)scapes.

Graeme Harper and Jonathan Rayner described cinema's landscapes as "deterritorialized" emotional spaces, but also "places of memory;" I will say more: Augustinian *loci*. They refer to cinematic landscapes as geographical, but also as metonymic and metaphoric dimensions; conscious and unconscious symptoms of life experience: "Cinematic landscapes can therefore be landscapes of the mind, offering displaced representations of desires and values, so that these can be expressed by the filmmakers and shared by audiences" (Harper & Rayner, 2010, p. 21). Talking about her film, *The Beaches of Agnès (Les Plages d'Agnès, 2008)*, Agnès Varda would say almost the same: she referred to the "landscapes of [her] soul". Maybe we could compare these "landscapes of the soul" with the very idea of Michel Foucault's heterotopia, which is close to the ideas of mirror and labyrinth. Certainly, there are similarities between heterotopia and Kiarostami's spaces. His landscapes are road maps, but villages are labyrinths and mirror places, portraits of someone's soul. As stated by Foucault: "the mirror functions as a heterotopia in the sense that it makes this place I occupy at the moment I look at myself in the glass both utterly real, connected with the entire space surrounding it, and utterly unreal - since, to be perceived, it is obliged to go by way of that virtual point which is over there" (Foucault, 1998, 179). More precisely, heterotopia has qualities that involve at least two relevant philosophical approaches that are also possible for cinema and space: it refers to specific worlds and existence, but sees beyond, into the abstract possible worlds –states or conditions–, which lead to the ontological question of images.

Finally, this particular film takes us somewhere between the village and the surrounding hills, to "*loci* [that will] remain in the memory and can be used again by placing another set of images for another set of material, [...] like the wax tablets which remain when what is written on them has been effaced, and are ready to be written on again" (Yates, 1966, p. 6). That is, the surfaces of *The Wind Will Carry Us* are exterior landscapes but interior *loci*, too; projected and reflective places, spaces in-between, as filmic 'any-space-whatevers'. As Gilles Deleuze foresees, there is an affective dimension of space, which is absolutely evident essentially in the close-up. Pointing out the specific value of this shot, once mediated by montage, Deleuze expresses his point

quite clearly: “it [any-space-whatevers, the close-up] can include a space-time, in depth or on the surface, as if it had torn it away from the co-ordinates from which it was abstracted: it carries off with it a fragment of the sky, of countryside [...]. It is like a short-circuit of the near and the far” (Deleuze, 1987, p. 104). He mentions Pascal Augé’s term ‘any-space-whatevers’ to describe a cinematic space that is neither abstract nor universal. ‘Any-space-whatever’ is not a place “in all times, in all spaces” (Deleuze, 1987, p. 109). It is a specific space, which is not immediately –i.e. visually– connected to the real world, and for that reason, audiences can link it to infinite possible worlds: “it is a space of virtual conjunction, grasped as pure locus of the possible” (Deleuze, 1987, p. 109).

Let us use an example. The village of *The Wind Will Carry Us* is an ideal place; a *locus*. We can say that almost all of Kiarostami’s films have memory places as pictures as well as real ones. His hybrid spaces are identity’s places. Speaking about *Close-Up* (نما، 1990), Kiarostami once said that a title is an identity card for the film. In fact, his films talk about identity, original locations, lost places and their memories, like the Koker Trilogy films –*Where Is My Friend’s Home* (خانه دوست , 1987), *Life and Nothing More...* (زندگی و دیگر هیچ , 1992), *Through the Olive Trees* (زیر درختان زیتون , 1994)– and *The Taste of Cherry* (طعم گیلاس... , 1997). All these films are signatures of the real, and perhaps subversive artwork, or visual essays on the political consequences of wars and conflicts. They are maps of places-no-more-spaces playing with the audience’s gaze, knowledge, imagination and thoughts. Harper and Rayner had already compared maps and films and considered film directors as map-makers: “Both maps and films assume and position audiences, ideologically as well as geographically” (2010, p. 15), and spectators as pilgrims moving around and (re)discovering either familiar or odd landscapes.

Land, non-crystal spaces and a conclusion

The Wind Will Carry Us takes us through the Persian territory: the ancient, magical one. Nevertheless, what we find is a truly disenchanting landscape, for, no matter how beautiful these almost ‘natural’ places are, one no longer believes in the magic value of their landscapes. Though the land is still there, arid and nude, sometimes green, the screen makes it distant and colourful, calm and quiet but full of ghosts, with

no borders. And cinema will reveal the very deep level of this landscape –an *incognitae* land– which belongs to both reality and film, as well as to the audience’s experiences and (lack of) associated memories. The cultural landscape, shot as a map of human spirit –a poem, a portrait and the language– is the same as the Aryan’s land –e.g. Irān (Aryan)–, but it is also a historical and tormented space with no signed truce. As Kiarostami writes: “Bodies / on the ground / feet / In the mud, / hearts / on fire / heads / gone with wind” (2005, p. 158). Referring to Kiarostami’s films, Jean-Luc Nancy underlines the power of his cinema lying on the fact that these are not fascinating images. For Nancy, every captured image of the world is an ethos, since it shapes and mobilizes the spectator’s gaze. In that sense, Kiarostami’s films are “eye openers” (Nancy, 2001, p. 16). This cinema is about reality and “the reality of the images is the access to the real itself, with the consistency and the resistance of death, for instance, or life, for instance” (Nancy, 2001, p. 16). As a contemporary filmmaker, he explores the double condition of modern images – i.e. as facts and fiction. His characters are frequently caught in a double bind, for whatever action they decide to take, they cannot escape unpleasant results. One would say that Kiarostami cannot avoid his own experience and deep innermost feelings about life’s cyclic movement to meet its end: “I have come along with the wind, / on the first day of summer. / The wind will carry me along / on the last day of the fall” (Kiarostami, 2002, p. 225).

The fact is that after Cinema, Death Valley, the Universe, or even the Human Mind – the concept of space itself, either inner or outer would never be the same. With the movie pictures, the image(s) of space(s) would change forever, as well as the memories of mankind’s near or distant pasts, and the quite (un)predictable fictions of the future. And, all those spaces are true and co-exist(ed) in real time and space, as well as in people’s imagination, or at any fourth dimension.

Kiarostami’s films represent realistic spaces through travelling shots and unexpected silences, punctuating landscapes, villages and roads. His plots gather layers of time and meaning, transforming pictures into complex inner intra-extra-filmic spaces. They are ‘places-non-spaces’ of affection and knowledge, where spectators find images, sounds, memories, stories, history, art, reality and fiction; a melting pot of ideas, mixing and producing something quite new - a new land(e)escape.

«The more I think

the less I
understand
why the Milky Way
is so distant».
(Abbas Kiarostami)

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