

NEITHER A VICTIM NOR A CRUSADING HEROINE

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NEITHER A VICTIM NOR A CRUSADING HEROINE: KIAROSTAMI'S FEMINIST TURN IN *10*

TEN: RUPTURES AND CONTINUITIES

If anyone were to ask me what I did as a director on this film (*Ten*), I'd say, "Nothing, and yet, if I didn't exist, this film wouldn't have existed." (Kiarostami, *10 on Ten*)

Kiarostami's *Ten* barely registered on the art movie theater scene in America, a fact that is more a commentary on the homogenization of this country's domestic market for foreign films than a reflection of the film's redeeming qualities. *Ten* stands at a singular point in Kiarostami's oeuvre, an unexpected turn. It is a logical outgrowth of the previous work, but one that also responds to new social and political realities. *Ten's* experimental formal structure and radical feminist politics signaled contradictorily both a radical departure and a natural outgrowth of Kiarostami's earlier films. As I will argue in this article, Kiarostami's work has always been cognizant of the problems of representation of women in the post-Revolutionary Iranian cinema, despite accusations to the contrary from Western critics whose critique overlaps with a general stereotyping of gender issues in Iranian cinema and Iranian culture. While it is firmly grounded in those earlier concerns, *Ten* represents a clear shift by making visible the gender issues that were expressed in terms of structural absences in the earlier films. It also diverged from the generic conventions of contemporary Iranian family melodramas that address the issues of women's oppression in its refusal to participate in a "victimization discourse," which is often deployed in the Orientalist readings of Iranian films to produce an allegory of Iran as a backward and historically static society. *Ten's* emphasis on the singularity of characters, encounters and locations, as well as its avoidance of conventional narrative strategies resists the above-mentioned allegorical interpretations.

Those film critics and admirers of the earlier work, such as Godard who, following *Ten's* release, criticized Kiarostami for losing his way, were not paying close enough attention to the gradual trajectory of visual and thematic change in Kiarostami's output. There is a perceptible shift from the cosmic splendor and assumed universal humanism of the Koker Trilogy set in the picturesque and lush Caspian Sea region to the suicidal Badii driving around in brown, sun-baked, desolate hills of Tehran's suburbs in *Taste of Cherry* to Behzad's aching loneliness in the Kurdish Village of Siah-Dareh meditating on life and death in *The Wind Will Carry Us*. As I will argue in the next section, these earlier films foreshadowed some of the thematic concerns that characterize *Ten*, but there were also some very unexpected formal—experimental and thematic turns that showed decisive ruptures with some of Kiarostami's 1990s works.

Ten is shot entirely on digital video. While there was some video presence in Kiarostami's earlier films, those video insertions into the 35mm film medium were often used expressively to demarcate fictional and non-fictional spaces of the films. *Ten's* cinematography restricts the entire film action to the interior of the automobile space, avoiding any exterior representation; it restructures the chain of film gazes and restricts the camera framing to just two stationary high-angle 45° positions of *either* the driver *or* the passenger in the car at all times (except for one notable exception in episode 7 with the prostitute). This results in a film composed entirely of close-ups or medium close-ups. It also does away completely with the conceit of narrative dramatic structure by unfolding 10 loosely-related episodes that may or may not take place chronologically. Most importantly and uncharacteristically, it assembles and unifies these episodes around the figure of the urban upper-middle-class female driver, played by the first-time actress, Mania Akbari. Since in Kiarostami's post-Revolutionary films of the 80s and 90s, there is an almost complete absence of central female figures and interior shots, it is quite remarkable that that the both elements are central to *Ten*.

Perhaps the novelty of these formal innovations obfuscated *Ten's* primary achievement, which was to re-locate and re-articulate the family melodrama from the domestic space of home into the automobile space and then watch what happens. I would like to call the claustrophobic and intense atmosphere of the film's actions, dialogues, and encounters "Kammerspiel on wheels." In any case, Kiarostami's intention, and the trajectory here, obviously are not to compensate for melodrama's predilection to dramatize interpersonal relationships, but rather to expose the genre's tropes and

strategies that mediate and manage gender and the social, closing off narrative and stylistic outlets that let the accumulated affective and emotional excesses exit. The automobile space as the scene of unfolding of domestic melodrama produces unexpected results.

Ten starts unceremoniously: A film leader countdown functions as both the title and the chapter heading; the first episode is marked "1" and the last one "10." Because there is no dramatic structure, episodes are not causally linked, and there is no indication that any sort of linear order structures their sequence. Some story elements are carried over from one episode to the next, but their chronology is intentionally left ambiguous. Only two filmic elements return in every episode: the woman and the interior space of the car.

The first episode starts abruptly with Amin, Mania's 10-year-old son, opening the car door and entering the empty frame. Kiarostami's films are dizzyingly self-referential. Those familiar with the Koker Trilogy know that Kiarostami constantly quotes himself in new contexts in order to destabilize and change the meanings of the original reference. Kiarostami's early films, made at the Institute for the Intellectual Development of Children and Young Adults (*Kanoun-e Paravaresh-e Fekri Kudakan va Nojavanan*), or *Kanoun* for short (literally meaning "Center" or, more precisely, "the optical focal point"), were mostly child-centered narratives and documentaries. Kiarostami had started his filmmaking career in 1970 with the establishment of *Kanoun's* film making division and in the same year produced *Kanoun's* and his own first film, *Bread and Alley*. Moreover, the first feature film that established his credentials as a major filmmaker outside of Iran was 1987's *Where Is the Friend's House?*, another film with a strong adolescent male protagonist. Amin's character is a reminder of how radically Kiarostami has moved away from those previous representations of children such as Babak Ahmadpour, the lovable, self-sacrificing and conscientious hero of *Where Is the Friend's House?* Kiarostami's new child character is angry, dislocated and bitter. In a sustained 17-minute long-take, where camera stays with Amin only (there are two or three jump-cuts in the middle, but the effect is the same): the boy throws a tantrum, yells at his mother and is generally spiteful. The mother, Mania, is represented only as a disembodied voice, but this will soon change, and the true extent of *Ten's* radical shifts will be revealed.

This transformation of the Kiarostamian child signals other shifts: in the adult-child dyad the positions of center-periphery have been reversed. Adults played decisive roles in Babak's life, but generally they were pushed

to the margins of the film's universe. Despite the initial long-take of Amin as the sole visually represented subject, at the end of the episode there is a cut, and the woman, as it soon turns out, becomes the center of the film. Except for Amin, who returns several other times, Mania's passengers are all women: in episode 9, a friend advises the woman, Mania, not to give in to Amin's emotional blackmail; in episode 8, Mania gives a devout older woman a ride to the neighborhood's small holy shrine; in episode 6, she picks up and befriends a young woman emotionally suffering in an abusive relationship with her boyfriend. The young woman returns in episode 2 after a breakup with the boyfriend; she takes off her veil, revealing a shaved head, as a gesture of protest against her fortunes, as well as challenging The Islamic Republic's codes of cinematic representation. A prostitute in episode 7 refuses to accept a lecture on morality by Mania, and mocks her pretensions to a respectable life; and finally, a cousin in episode 4 is admonished by Mania for remaining in yet another abusive relation with a cheating husband.

Let us return and re-examine Amin's role as the only male character in the film. He returns in episodes 5, 3 and 1. One wonders how a ten-year-old-boy can sustain such an articulated and pithy attack on Mania's suitability as a mother, deriding her as selfish for privileging her own sexual, professional and emotional desires over his happiness. His onslaught is calculated and strategic. Amin may be expressing his own emotions in rhythms and the tone of his argument, but his language comes from another source, namely the patriarchal discourse. His mother even identifies that source: "Is this what your father taught you?" Amin retorts that he would not be telling her these things if he did not believe in them himself.

This way Kiarostami is making the shrewdest of moves: making the ten-year-old-Amin the speaker and conduit of patriarchy. The post-Revolutionary women's films (those by Mehrjui, Bani-Etemad, Milani) mostly criticized patriarchy by creating monstrous embodiments of patriarchal figures: psychopaths, tyrannical fathers, weak violent husbands, and so on. The problem with attacking the margins is that it legitimizes the center. Instead of exposing patriarchy as a pervasive system that implicates all cultural and social domains, these films only single out the few bad seeds. In *Ten*, the most innocent of all figures, a child, is aware that he can control, even rule, his mother because he is invoking the authority of the patriarchy.

As I pointed out earlier, the presence of compelling female characters and a noticeable absence of adult men is one of the most salient aspects of *Ten*. Enacted in 1983 to ensure artistic conformity to Islamic virtues, Islamic

codes proscribed representation of women without the Islamic veil (*hejab*). In the early years, close-up shots of women, too, were forbidden. The post-Revolutionary Iranian cinema took shape under such regulatory censorial vigilance. Some enthusiastically embraced the code, some looked for strategies of metaphor and symbolism to circumvent a physicality that was legally prohibited, not unlike Hollywood films during the Hays Code, and finally, a few, like Kiarostami, decided not to represent relationships, bodies, and spaces that had to be misrepresented in order to be represented. He would not show a home in which the women had to wear hejab in front of her husband, son, and brother.

PRIVATE SPACES AND PUBLIC EMOTIONS

In all those earlier narratives of individual isolation, the Kiarostamian male protagonist is increasingly alienated socially and culturally to the degree that the car is both a safe haven and a metaphor for uprootedness. This urban, middle-class, male protagonist has lost his home. His anchor, his car, is not a new dwelling, but a sign of his inability to stop, to rest. So to unpack my earlier statement that *Ten* exhibits both a continuation and a rupture, *Ten* retains certain tendencies in Kiarostami's late 1990s work, uprootedness and unceasing movement, and inverts two of the most important elements, the alienated male hero and social isolation into a female protagonist in a hostile, aggressive social milieu. Whereas Badii and Behzad were trying to keep the social world by using their cars to find desolate places, or, more accurately, non-places, *Ten's* female protagonist, Mania, has no such alternative, or, manifestly, no such intention. As Mania is attached to her car in relation to the social, she has to confront and negotiate the social world at the threshold of her car window. The many sides of Mania's personality—aggressive, appeasing, appealing, caring, hurt, and bemused (the encounter with the prostitute)—are in a way the way her private self performs publicly. To use Irving Goffman's notions of a backstage area for preparing the private self and a front area for performing the public self, the car in a way functions as both, the two areas separated by the car window.

It is at this threshold that Mania is able to confront the aggressive patriarchal social world and contain its penetration into the car's space. The phallic metaphor of penetration here is unavoidable, because, literally at every turn, Mania encounters the patriarchal hostility of the social world. However, unlike some of the more conventional female-centered melodramas directed by Milani and by Bani-Etemad, Mania is neither a helpless victim nor

a conquering feminist heroine. Moreover, she is neither typical nor exceptional. Mania's character in *Ten* challenges facile cultural and psychological dichotomies. Instead she is an intelligent individual who has developed the necessary social skills to negotiate the boundaries between her private world and the surrounding public life. Negotiation does not mean keeping the social world only on the outside.

Ten also underscores the fact that the social world occasionally enters—sometimes welcomed and sometimes not—the private space of the car as Mania picks up her son, friends, acquaintances, and complete strangers. Those encounters constitute the emotional core of the film. They are also reminders of how porous and fluid are the boundaries between binary poles such as private/public, feminine/masculine, oppressive/nurturing, and traditional/modern. In other words, *Ten* presents a meticulous image of a dynamic society with its own particular set of interpersonal and institutional conflicts. If patriarchy is ever-present in the film, it is not a foreboding external force that exerts itself only through coercion and physical violence; it rather manifests itself in social relationships and everyday interactions. This reading of *Ten* as a feminist text that situates patriarchy in social networks stands in stark contrast to the following interpretation of another Iranian feminist film, *The Circle*, directed in 2000 by Jafar Panahi, where film critic Harlan Kennedy sees women's oppression a clearly demarcated system of victims and victimizers:

The Circle, Golden Lion winner as Best Film, does a *La Ronde* with its portmanteau picture of persecuted women in the patriarchal new Persia. Little has changed there since Alexander the Great. Men still wage war, make laws, and enact punishments—but a monster religiosity underpins it all...Circularity is the name and game: a camera endlessly panning around to record the impelling, entrapping disempowerments—the rites of non-passage—that are Iranian life for women, the unchosen. (Kennedy 58)

"Monster religiosity underpinning it all"? What does "all" mean? What does "it" mean? Why does Kennedy, a journalist, find it rational to issue grand statements based on a fictional melodrama? What in the circular episodic structure of a film set in contemporary Tehran, portraying a day in the life of several women just released from prison, justifies such universal certainties about a culture, a people and their history? When historical details are left out, terms such as "patriarchal Persia," "laws" and "change" are used as if their meanings are given and self-evident. Kennedy's review represents Iran (anachronistically called "Persia" here for dramatic effect) as always already dominated by a theocratic Islamic state, leaving out some

very important historical details. While *The Circle* may or may not be a typical post-Revolutionary film, at least, according to popular notions of a “neorealist” Iranian cinema, there is nothing in Panahi’s film to support Kennedy’s claim that the narrative’s female protagonists and their ordeal offer a transhistorical representation of women’s oppression in the whole history of “patriarchal Persia.” Insofar as Kennedy paints a transhistorical picture of Iran based on the notion of “religiosity” and a few other fixed characteristics such as “men waging wars, making laws and enacting punishments,” it is easy to explain the ease with which he slips from film analysis (“camera endlessly panning...”) to sociology (“to record...Iranian life for women...”).

Couched in feminist rhetoric, the Persia that Kennedy (re)constructs for his readers in *The Circle* review is a place outside of history. It is somewhere else, a place where “little has changed” in 2300 years, decoupled from temporality. To paraphrase Said’s *Orientalism*, the Persia/Iran of Kennedy is an “invention” and part of an imaginary Orient that has often served as an Other to the Western Self. Far from an aberration, Kennedy’s attitude is typical of some recent readings of contemporary Iranian cinema that recognize its feminist politics, while imposing their own Orientalist allegories as supplementary meanings. Sociologist Rokhsana Bahramitash distinguishes two current tendencies in the West as moments of a convergence of feminism and Orientalism: “Feminist Orientalism refers to Orientalists who used women’s rights as an excuse to legitimate their colonial presence and their modern version such as the current neo-conservatives who raise support for war in defense of women’s rights. Orientalist feminism, in contrast, is a modern project and a type of feminism that advocates and supports particular foreign policies toward the Middle East” (Bahramitash 221).

It would be a stretch to claim that Orientalist feminist views expressed by Kennedy, Paul Arthur (in another review of *The Circle*), or Kevin Thomas (reviewing Dariush Mehrjui’s *Leila* in the *Los Angeles Times*) explicitly advocate particular foreign policies toward Iran; however, they all use the occasion to universalize certain aspects of Iran’s history, traditions, and gender relationships. Unsurprisingly, these Orientalist feminist interpretations of Iranian cinema have little to say about film’s formal and stylistic qualities and focus mostly on allegorical interpretations of contemporary Iranian film narratives. Clearly, there has been a shift of emphasis in general Western attitudes toward Iranian cinema, from an early ’90s liberal celebration of “surprising” universal humanism, simplicity, austerity, and clever stylistic innovations to a sudden discovery of the purportedly dark side of

life in Iran. To be fair, there has been a profound transformation in the attitudes of Iranian filmmakers too; they have constantly pushed the boundaries of the permissible within the framework of a very strict censorial system. However, I believe that it is not just the changing landscape of Iranian cinema that has contributed to the changes in critics' attitudes. There is a more fundamental methodological flaw at work here that approaches an unfamiliar foreign film screening as provisional ethnographies in order to make essentializing generalizations about a film's social, historical and cultural context.

PATRIARCHY AND IRANIAN CINEMA

Overall, I don't pick subjects involving husbands and wives in their apartment or room, because when you make a movie you have to believe the story yourself. We put a series of lies together. For example, to show the truth of a family, we don't have to use a real family. We may get the husband from somewhere, the wife from somewhere else, borrow a child and rent an apartment. But the combination of all these things should give us an exact definition of the family. And the definition is quite clear to all of us. It's a unit in which people have a relationship with total privacy and security with one another. A child would not have any designs on the mother and the husband has no problems with his wife's hair. But what if I looked through my viewfinder? They have no real relationships with each other. We work so hard to say that despite all those "lies" we try to demonstrate a concept, the concept of a family. So I won't be able to define a family when I realize that I can't show it the way I've lived it. I remember that my father could see my mother's hair. As a child I never had a problem caressing my grandmother's hair. So this is a family I don't know, and since I don't know it, I won't touch it. By that I mean to say that I have automatically avoided thinking about relationships between men and women within households. Maybe this is why I unconsciously keep going to the villages to make films. (Kiarostami from an interview in the supplementary materials on the 1999 *Taste of Cherry* DVD/VHS release).

By the time Abbas Kiarostami's *Ten* debuted at Cannes in 2001, the world-renowned Iranian director, who had been making films for over thirty years, had acquired a reputation as masculinist, someone whose cinematic universe excludes women. His 1997 Palme d'Or winner, *Taste of Cherry*, and his 1999 *The Wind Will Carry Us* featured solitary male heroes whose circle of companions included mostly other male protagonists. With a few notable exceptions, such as Razieh in *The White Balloon*, even in his children's quests, the heroes were always boys. While his post-Revolutionary films could hardly be categorized as belonging to any male-action genre, the pres-

ence of women was regularly incidental to the degree that, even in the treatment of family drama, where child characters were central, Kiarostami avoided depiction of interior domestic spaces. This absence of female-centered narratives led some critics to speculate that Kiarostami's films were in a sense a reflection of, or at least aligned with the dominant patriarchal ideology of the ruling Islamic Republic, an ideology whose legal and social realization had effectively led to a certain marginalization and/or exclusion of women from the public sphere. The virtual erasure of women from Kiarostami's films was seen by critics such as Azadeh Farahmand, Elham Khaksar and many others as a rationalization of that theocratic ideology. As often noted by these critics, women occupied only marginal and incidental positions in his films.

Despite Kiarostami's immense popularity in the West, this was also the accepted view of his approach to gender there, where often favorable analogies were drawn between his male-centered cinematic universe and the film's of Akira Kurosawa. This view of Kiarostami as masculinist dominated discussions and evaluations of his work in both Iran and the West. In reality, however, the view was oversimplified, categorically Orientalist and monolithic regarding Iranian society. Kiarostami had always maintained that his avoidance of domestic spaces, prior to *Ten*, entailed an ethical decision to avoid misrepresentations necessitated by legal restrictions, but the resulting, conspicuous absences were misinterpreted by many, especially in conjunction with Kiarostami's principal thematic concerns (male-centered existential quests, self-reflexive meditations on filmmaking and the role of cinema), as either a lack of interest in women as worthy subjects, or a sign of acquiescence to the demands of censorship. This mischaracterization of Kiarostami's films as safe, apolitical and non-confrontational continues to be espoused by some "native" as well as exilic Iranian critics and is often repeated by Western journalists and film critics.

On the other hand, film scholar Joan Copjec has argued 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," what I would call a self-conscious highlighting of the general problems of representation under the Islamic codes. Renowned feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey, too, offers a more sophisticated reading than most Iranian critics of Kiarostami (I am thinking of Farahmand, Khaksar, and Hamid Dabashi) on this matter, when in 2000, two years before *Ten* was even made, in a *Film Comment* poll of the best filmmakers of the 1990s, she observes that Kiarostami "raises the difficulties surrounding the representation of women in cinema" ("The Players"

58). In Kiarostami's prior films, the remarked absence of female characters and domestic spaces is as much part of the filmic meaning as the predominance of male characters and external scenes of movement and transport.

To frame the question in different terms, it is more productive to return to the articulation of the relative absence of female characters as a structuring absence. As Patricia White notes in *Uninvited: Classical Hollywood Cinema and Lesbian Representability*, speaking of Hollywood's Hays Code, censorship "instituted a regime of connotation: if it was intended to structure the movies in ways to instruct the public in middle-class, even traditionally 'female,' morals, in the process they taught the viewers to read in *particular* ways" (xviii), generating visual and narrative codes that structure spectatorial inferences of representational absences. "If [homo]sexuality dares not speak its name, the visual medium allows for other signifying strategies" (xviii). Now, these strategies will often constitute the blind spots of censorship's legalistic interpretation, which fails to see the disjunction between written proscriptions and the visual and film aesthetics. An absence of sexual encounters, lack of physical contact between male and female characters, even negatively portrayed, bearded men within the texts of Iranian films have made them much more noticeable and encourage spectators to see these absences as inferred presences.

At the same time, while I consider the term "spectators" a generalized concept, in reality the reading of "inferred presences" is audience-specific and requires a degree of literacy and training by particular viewers to recognize particular (and encoded) inferences. The tendency among many Western critics to interpret family melodramas by directors such as Milani, Bani-Etemad and Panahi as victim narratives and ahistorical allegories of women's oppression in the East is often a result of those critics' failure to understand cultural specificity, on the one hand, and a powerful ideological mandate to collapse social and historical differences regarding the position of women in Iran in favor of universalized categories of that country and the East, on the other hand. I have identified this tendency as Orientalist feminism, which reduces the oriental subject into a generalized species: you don't see particular women in particular historical situations dealing with restrictions of patriarchy, but rather *Woman* as victim suffering under an eternal system of oppression. *Ten's* narrative and formal strategies resist these allegorical readings and instead offer a complex, realistic and particular moment of a woman's encounter with and resistance to patriarchy. The fact that *Ten* was never received as enthusiastically as some of the more commercial films of Iranian cinema may be a result of those strategies.

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Neither a Victim nor a Crusading Heroine

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