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A Talk with the Artist: Abbas Kiarostami in Conversation

by **Shahin Parhami**

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Iranian-Canadian filmmaker Shahin Parhami was born in Shiraz, Iran. After his arrival in Canada in 1988, along with contributions of his poetry and essays to local Persian and English cultural/art journals, he pursued film studies and production, first at Ottawa's Carleton University and later at Concordia University in Montreal. He has directed several award-winning short films and videos—among them are YOUR ABSENCE (1995) and NESSIAN (2002)—which have been screened in festivals, art galleries and universities. Since 1997 he has been working on a trilogy: NASOOT (1997); LAHOOT (1998); and JABAROOT (2003). The last part of the trilogy is a 60-minute unconventional poetic documentary on Iranian classical music. It has been selected by many prestigious international film festivals such as Thessaloniki, Hot Docs, and Montreal International Festival of New Media and New Cinema.

Shahin Parhami: Let's begin with your first experiences in the field of filmmaking, for instance, your title design for the Iranian new wave film, QUESAR (1969). Was it your intention to make your way up to directing films?

Abbas Kiarostami: No, not at all. Back then I was involved in painting and later on graphic design for ads and commercials. In those days title design was very fashionable and Saul Bass' work in particular was very much in style. His titles influenced many graphic artists and filmmakers of the time. I already had some experience working with a 35mm camera through some commercials that I had made prior to that. From the perspective of a graphic artist it was an attractive challenge. QUESAR was my second film and I believe I worked on four or five other titles after that until I started directing films. So I can say that title design was a bridge between graphic art and cinema in my case. These days I prefer that others make titles for my films since I don't have the patience and also I believe that that particular style and approach to title design is very much passé.

S.P.: Can we say that your first film, BREAD AND ALLEY (1970), demonstrates your technical and aesthetic approach to filmmaking? And the script of this short film, which was written by your brother, did it in any way contribute to the structure of the film?

Kiarostami: Yes, the writer was my brother. (I used past tense since he lives in North America!) During the time that I was working for the Institution of Intellectual Development of Children and Young Adults in late 60s, I read many scripts, but this in particular caught my eye. Particularly the unified timeline was attractive to me. The story itself is only twelve minutes long, so there was not much need to break up the time. But I was also aware that breaking up a time frame in order to show the passage of time makes filmmakers submit to clichés and conventions. Therefore it was an interesting challenge for me to bring cinematic time and real time close to each other as much as possible without employing those conventions.

BREAD AND ALLEY WAS my first experience in cinema and I must say a very difficult one. I had to work with a very young child, a dog and an unprofessional crew, except for the cinematographer, who was nagging and complaining all the time. Well, the cinematographer in a sense was right because I did not follow the conventions of filmmaking that he had become accustomed to. He insisted that we break up the scenes. For instance, he wanted to get a long shot of the kid approaching, a close up of the kid's hand and then when the kid enters the house and closes the door, a shot of the dog as he goes and sleeps at the door, etc. But I believed that if we could get both of them (the kid and the dog) in one take, that is, walking into the frame, the kid entering the home and the dog going off to sleep at the door, then it could have deeper impact.

I think that was the most difficult long take that I have ever shot in my life. For that particular shot we had to wait forty days; three times we changed the dog (one of them even had rabies). Despite all the problems that we faced it finally happened or clicked. In a way this film is due in large part to my lack of knowledge when it comes to cinematic conventions. Now, when I think about it, I come to the conclusion that I made the right decision. I believe that breaking the scenes—although it can contribute to the rhythm of the film—can easily harm the reality and the content of the film.

S.P.: How have your distinct style of narrative, cinematic gaze and sense of rhythm evolved over time?

Kiarostami: Well, I really don't know. This is a kind of question that requires a great deal of contemplation and I don't think we have enough time for that. But I think all of these are produced by fear: the fear of incompetence when you are on the set with a camera and the whole crew, when you are questioning your technical knowledge and ability. In such moments of doubt and fear you challenge yourself and that makes you grow and mature.

After making your film you can sit back, watch it as a spectator, and judge your ability in expressing your story or its content. It takes a while for one's gaze to become a style, however. I don't think anyone can predetermine a specific style before actually experiencing an artistic medium. As for my sense of rhythm, I've never been a fan of commercial cinema with its fast pace and its excitement. My own life doesn't have a very fast rhythm, I live slowly and my films reflect my life's pace and rhythm.

S.P.: Throughout the production and post-production of your films, at what point do you finalize the use of sound elements, like music? Is it during the editing stage or is it all predetermined beforehand?

Kiarostami: I never think of sound during the editing stage. There might be some minor changes during the editing, but sounds are finalized before that stage.

S.P.: Even the music?

Kiarostami: Definitely music. I never have a musical soundtrack on my films. If I use music it is at the end and in those cases I even know what instrument needs to be used. If I choose a piece or elect to commission a musician, then I must have total control. I never dare to give my film to musicians and tell them "now compose a soundtrack for it." This is more dangerous than mail-order marriages. When you edit out the slightest of sounds, like a fly or a bird hovering over your microphone, how can you let someone else impose a whole soundtrack on your film?

S.P.: One of the characteristics of your cinema—present even in early films like THE TRAVELER (1974)—is the effective use of non-diegetic and off-screen sounds, particularly monologues and dialogues. I personally believe that in THE WIND WILL CARRY US (1999) in particular that you use the technique rather extravagantly. Is it possible to go even farther than that in employing such a device to convey your narrative?

Kiarostami: Of course, I certainly intend to do so. I believe that when we don't see things in their full details that their impact is stronger; their impressions last longer. It also gives the audience an opportunity to use their imagination: by just hearing the sound they can see the images in their creative mind without actually seeing them on the screen. This is actually an invitation for the spectators to participate in the creation of a work.

I envy people who read novels since they have much more freedom to use their imagination than a film audience. If a film could be structured like the layout of a book it would be ideal. For example, the last four lines of a chapter could end at the top of a page with the rest of the page blank and the following page sitting next to it. The new chapter then starts with a short title. This kind of format gives you an opportunity to pause and think. It often surprises me when people say, "I picked up a book and I couldn't put down until I finished it." How can one see that as a positive quality for an artwork? It's the same superficial excitement that the mainstream cinema imposes on their audiences. Sometimes, as I'm editing my films, I like to insert a black leader instead of an image (like that blank page of the novel) and say, "that's it for now!"

Cinema should be able to provide this kind of a freedom both for artist and the audience. While making THE WIND WILL CARRY US, I was aware of how boring it could be seeing the same man climbing up a hill repeatedly. But what I found challenging was figuring out how to express the fact that I want that boredom—I want to bore you. Characters in the film are also bored. Nothing is happening, just some mundane activities and some scenery. Even the main character in the film—all he does is wait for something to happen. The very fact that nothing is happening creates some sort of expectation. Therefore, a small incident like the well's landslide becomes a big deal in this narrative. Sometimes you need those empty spaces to make your audience more receptive and sensitive. This is perhaps like those different chapters in novels.

One who writes a novel might write it from the very first letter to the end but later he or she divides them into different chapters in order to create desired moods and atmospheres. But conventional cinema doesn't do that since its legacy is to take the audience hostage and dictate to them. In other words, it gives them a pre-packaged deal with determined message and a closed ending. That is why it cannot tolerate open, simple and uneventful moments. And audiences are conditioned by this kind of a cinema! They get lost and confused when they face an open-end. Sometimes you hear them say, "I could understand the film until the end, but I could not understand that very last scene." But I believe even if for some reason you can't watch the film to the end (for instance because of a black out) you should feel content. A sequence should be self-contained. Back in the days when I used to watch films, after an impressive or moving scene or sequence I would leave the theatre. Those particular moments could make my day and I felt no urge to see the ending. I didn't expect any conclusion or judgment on the characters, whether good or bad.

S.P.: I don't think you believe in a cinema that contains a particular message.

Kiarostami: Exactly, cinema is not a place for propagating messages. An artist designs and creates a piece hoping to materialize some thoughts, concepts or feelings through his or her medium. The credibility of great Persian poets like Rumi and Hafiz comes from the very fact that they are composed in such a way that they are fresh and meaningful regardless of the time, place and conditions in which you read them—and this means reading them while doing divination or simply as literature. This is also true in the case of some of our contemporary poets like Forough Farukhzad.

When we are in front of an abstract painting, we have the license to interpret in any way we want. Or music—music is a medium that we might not understand, but that we feel and enjoy. But in the case of cinema many expect to receive a clear and unified message, but what I'm suggesting is that a film could be experienced as a poem, a painting, or a piece of music.

S.P.: As an author, how open are you to different interpretations of your own work? For instance, one can read the opening sequence of TASTE OF CHERRY (1997) as containing homoerotic overtones. What would be your thoughts on that?

Kiarostami: I know people who have read the entire film with a queer subtext. I believe anyone has the right to read my film in any way they understand or like to understand. I remember after making WHERE IS THE FRIEND'S HOME? (1987) someone told a friend of mine that this film is very political. When my friend asked him why, he said because of the name of the character, Mohammad Reza Nematzadeh. He added that his first name is the name of the last Iranian king, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, and that his family name is Nematzadeh, which means roughly "God's gift." Later on, I found out that this man used to work for Iranian National TV and he was fired after the revolution. A film should be multidimensional with many layers that any spectator from any orientation and background could be able to relate to it. Who has the right to say "no" and deprive them of the way they like to see or read the film?

S.P.: Now when you look at your old films, how do you feel about them? Let's say THE TRAVELER, which is your first feature.

Kiarostami: A few years ago, twenty years after I made it, I watched THE TRAVELER at some festival in Japan. I found it still fresh and that the audience can still get along with it. But, no, my films are never perfect: they always have problems. And I should say that this is not only the case for my earlier films. But these flaws are unavoidable, and it is not because you do not know your job. Especially when you working with non-actors and in their everyday environment you cannot have absolute control over everything.

These imperfections can be counted as flaws or as virtues of the film. If I were to have made THE TRAVELER today, I might have been able to correct some moments, but, for sure, the film would have lost some great moments, too. These films were made in the past and they belong to those moments.

S.P.: How much art, philosophy, sociology, and political theory are involved in your creative process?

Kiarostami: Whatever theories had to offer me, they should have offered it long before I stood behind the camera. One should already have digested what he or she has read or learned before starting an artistic project. If one has really understood some theories, concepts or philosophy, they will appear in his/ her work in a subtle way. A fast and emotional reaction against social and political issues reduces the film to newspaper with an expiry date. And when those particular social intricacies change or end, the film becomes worthless. If the filmmaker creates a work with some raw and undigested ideas in his agenda, the film becomes an animated slogan.

I believe true art should be timeless. In a country like Iran, where social and political issues are constantly shifting, the artist should focus beyond these mundane issues, on more fundamental realities like humanity itself, which is more universal.

S.P.: So an artist unconsciously lives ahead of his/ her time?

Kiarostami: It must be that way. It's the journalist's job to collect news until 4 a.m. in order to print it in their newspapers the following day. But for an artist, that news should have been received months and years before.

This interview took place in the August 2000 during the Montreal World Film Festival.

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