A year before Abbas Kiarostami was born on 22 June 1940, a prominent Iranian poet, Farrokhi Yazdi, was brutally murdered in one of Reza Shah’s prisons. The strong-willed Reza Shah had ascended the peacock throne in 1926 and subsequently inaugurated a brutal campaign of state-sponsored “modernization” that had no room for liberal, let alone radical, dissent. Just a year after Kiarostami was born, Iran was invaded and occupied by the Allied powers, who were wary of the old patriarch’s flirtation with the Nazis. Reza Shah was forced to abdicate in favor of his young son Mohammad Reza Shah in 1941, and in the confusion of the Allied occupation, the Tudeh (Communist) party was founded, and a decade of unprecedented freedom in Iranian polity commenced. Foreign powers had occupied the land, the old monarch had abdicated, the young king was powerless and inexperienced, and there was no effective government. Published also a year after Kiarostami’s birth was Sadeq Hedayat’s *The Blind Owl*, by far the most brilliant indication that Persian literary modernism had commenced in earnest.

Kiarostami was born in the glorious age of modernist Persian poetry and grew up to wed that poetry to the best in Iranian cinema. The cinematic career of this Iranian filmmaker is the history of one festive celebration of artistic modernity giving ebullience and energy to another, the chronicle of the Persian poetic imagination giving rise to a visual attendance on reality.

Kiarostami was a child of postwar Iran, an Iran temporarily occupied by the Allied forces, an Iran abandoned by an old dictator and yet to be effectively ruled
Abbas Kiarostami, with the Lumière camera, making a one-minute short on the hundredth anniversary of cinema.
by his successor, an Iran of the new Tudeh Party, where the daily details of the political culture were charged with a new force of anxiety and expectation. Kiarostami was a child of the Mosaddiq era, a time of temporary relief from the frightful claws of absolutist monarchy, an era in which the active memories of the constitutional revolution of 1906–11 had once again come to color the hope for a tolerant society and a democratic state. When Kiarostami was born, the generation of his parents and his teachers could still vividly remember the revolutionary euphoria that at the turn of the century had mobilized a huge orchestra of sentiments, power, and ideology to awaken an ancient land to the realities of its colonially militated modernity. The revolution of 1906–11 had resulted in at least the theoretical changing of an absolutist monarchy into a constitutional democracy. The constitution had been drafted by a generation of Iranian liberal humanists, firmly grounded in both their traditional learning and their European education. It stipulated to limit radically the power of the monarch, establish a parliament with sole power to legislate, enable the formation of political parties, put a prime minister in charge of the administrative apparatus of the state, and create an autonomous judiciary system to interpret the laws. Kiarostami's parents were among the first generation of Iranians who could recognize themselves as “citizens” of a modern nation-state, and not “subjects” (ra‘iyyat) of a monarch.

The discovery of oil in the north and south of the country soon intensified the colonial rivalries between the Russians, the French, and the British, and the outbreak of World War I (1914–18) brushed aside every illusion of liberal democracy latent in the nascent nation-state. The civil and political maturity of the new country became evident in 1921 with the formation of the Iranian Communist Party, while the publication of Mohammad Ali Jamalzadeh’s *Once upon a Time* in 1922 marked the birth of modern Persian fiction. In the same year, Nima Yushij had published his long narrative poem *Afsaneh*, revolutionizing Persian poetics and aesthetics. Kiarostami was thus born into a nation-state that had become conscious of its political and cultural identity through a century-long process of secularization of its political culture, a semibourgeois revolution, a foreign occupation, the bloom of literary and poetic self-awareness, and a series of catastrophic and debilitating colonial interventions.

Two years before Reza Shah came to power, we witness the completion of one
of the greatest achievements of European Orientalism, the magisterial *A Literary History of Persia* by E. G. Browne. Whatever Reza Shah lacked in the literary and cultural symbolics of nation building, Browne’s *A Literary History of Persia* provided in full detail. Fascinated by Mustafa Kemal of Turkey (as he later was by Hitler), Reza Shah presided over a massive and brutal program of “modernization.” But his project was interrupted in the late 1930s by the Allied occupation and his forced abdication and replacement by his son. The occupation of Iran during the war ended Reza Shah’s dictatorial reign. The Tudeh Party was established in this period, and scores of Iranian intellectuals joined the progressive movement. Mohammad Reza Shah became the Iranian monarch in 1941, and throughout the 1940s exercised only a nominal rule over the country. Much political and cultural development occurred in the 1940s that the monarchy was in no position to oppose.

There was not much of a cinematic industry in the Iran of Kiarostami’s childhood. During the war, Iran could not enjoy the luxury of film production. Whatever was available was along the lines of Allied propaganda documentaries. From 1945 onward, a pioneer in Iranian cinema, Esma’il Kushan, began to introduce European and American films into Iran. He dubbed these films in Turkey and Egypt and screened them in Iran. They were well received in Tehran. This success prompted Kushan to make his first film, *The Tempest of Life* (1948), which ended up a commercial failure. Kushan’s next two films, one of which, *The Prince’s Prisoner* (1948), had a pro-monarchy theme, also failed at the box office.

As much as the Iranian cinema of Kiarostami’s childhood was poor and primitive, the poetry of the time was rich and revolutionary. Rooted in its ancient tradition, modernist poetry had begun, as early as during the constitutional revolution of 1906–11, to respond swiftly and effectively to cultural modernity. But the publication of *Qesseh-ye Rang-e Parideh* (“The Story of the Paled Color,” 1920) by Nima Yushij announced the emergence of whole new vistas in the art. Nearly 500 lines long, this poem exploded onto the Iranian cultural scene like thunder and revealed a phenomenally rich language in harmony with the anxieties of modernity. Two years later, Nima published his *Afsaneh* (“The Myth,” 1922) and *Ay Shab* (“O Night!,” 1922), consolidating his status as the founder of a new movement in Persian poetry. By 1937, when Nima published *Quqnus* (“The Sphinx”), he had
carefully cultivated an entirely new form in Persian poetic diction. The language of *The Sphinx* is at once poetic and political, iconoclastic and revolutionary. Nima was in full control not only of the rich Persian poetic legacy but also of European romanticism, realism, and symbolism.

By 1939, Parviz Natel Khanlari, a prominent member of the literati, had translated Rilke's letters into Persian and written an introduction to them. The result was a major poetic manifesto which was to influence generations of poets. Khanlari's own poem *Oqab* ("The Eagle," 1942) was a valiant attempt to modernize the language and diction of Persian poetry, although it never achieved anything like the significance of Nima's work. By 1943, Khanlari had emerged as a major theorist and advocate of the modernist movement in poetry. His journal *Sokhan* ("Logos") became a forum for young poets. Although Khanlari's erudition was quintessential in the poetic learning of his generation, his political conservatism and identification with the Pahlavi regime prevented him from becoming anything more than a typical learned scholar. Nima, however, was the voice of a generation of hope and aspiration.

By far the most popular poetry of Kiarostami's early childhood, which *ipso facto* defined the culture of his upbringing, was a watered-down versification of constitutionalist nationalism that, under thedictatorial reign of Reza Shah, had lost much of its courage and imagination. But in the poetry of Farrokhi Yazdi and Abolqasem Lahuti, constitutionalist nationalism embraced Soviet socialism, a fact that led to incarceration, torture, and death for poets like Farrokhi Yazdi. The kind of nationalism that Reza Shah tolerated and indeed encouraged was a racist chauvinism directed principally against what it categorically and indignantly called "the Arabs," while "the Turks" also were not spared its biting sarcasm. A weak and weakened working class was evident in the almost total absence of poetic imagination organic to the proletariat. Meanwhile, the growing petty bourgeoisie, in tandem with its jaundiced comprador counterpart, was entertained by a brand of "romanticism" which celebrated solitude and individualism in pursuit of private romance.

The situation changed radically in the post-Reza Shah period. Kiarostami grew up during this period of revolutionary change in the Iranian political and poetic culture. Radical ideas, social realism, and anti-colonial sentiments flooded the creative imagination. Nima continued to dominate the most revolutionary
poetry. His work combined a radical departure from classical prosody and the most progressive ideas. He became a cultural institution in himself. Nimaic poetics germinated a mode of subjectivity in which the very constitution of Iranian modernity could be re-focused beyond its colonially received mandates. Deeply rooted in the material realities of its time, Nima's poetry transformed those actualities into the aesthetic possibilities of emancipation. “In their relation to empirical reality,” Adorno observed, “artworks recall the theologumenon that in the redeemed world everything would be as it is and yet wholly other.”² Nima's poetry became that “redeemed world,” in which Iranians could hope for a mode of being at once rooted in their historical realities and yet “wholly other.”

THE 1950s

The first thirteen years of Kiarostami’s life was a period of relative freedom in Iran. Political parties were flourishing: socialist, nationalist, Islamic. It would not be until 1953 that this period of relative democratic effervescence would come to an abrupt end through the CIA-sponsored coup in which Mohammad Mossadiq’s democratically elected government was toppled, the Shah was returned to power, all major political parties were banned, and the institutions of a brutally repressive regime took root.

There was nothing in the Iranian cinema of the 1950s to anticipate the phenomenal developments that were to take place during the next decade. A few commercial filmmakers established film studios and hired actors from the theater to act in utterly inane movies. But the culture of the cinema was nevertheless taking firm root in the country. In all major cities there were now a number of movie houses. Cinema had emerged as the leading form of popular entertainment. There were still no television sets. Of course, radio was paramount among all social strata, from urban intellectuals to peasants in the field. But cinema occasioned a fascination beyond anything experienced before. Its sister art, theater, was far more limited in reaching a mass audience. Traditional forms of popular entertainment, such as Naqqali (public storytelling), Ro-bozi (popular theater), Shamayel-gardani (illustrated public storytelling), Ta’ziyeh (passion play), etc., were still current in Tehran and other parts of the country.
But the rapidly growing Iranian petty bourgeoisie found this new form of entertainment particularly attractive.

In the 1950s, Kiarostami was a teenager and the cinema available to him was imported from India, Hollywood, and occasionally Europe, or produced locally. The indefatigable Esma'il Kushan still dominated Iranian cinema and continued to explore the possibilities of a commercially viable industry. His *Contrite* (1950), in which he explores the themes of an active transformation of Iranian society from a rural to an urban environment, became a trendsetter for much of the later Iranian melodrama and was a commercially successful film. A major development in the melodramatic films of Kushan was his casting of women in leading roles. Two distinguished Iranian vocalists, Qamarolmoluk Vaziri and Delkash, acted in one of Kushan’s films, *Mother* (1952), guaranteeing its success. Vaziri and later Delkash were pioneering women who revolutionized Iranian music by singing publicly, despite the cultural inhibitions of their time. This was a period of gradual technical and aesthetic improvement and adjustment in Iranian cinema. Actors and actresses, many of them from religious and ethnic minorities, particularly Armenian, began to be drawn to cinema. Famous writers like Hejazi started writing scripts for films. Popular vocalists like Vaziri or Ruhbakhsh acted. The first 16 mm film, *The White Glove* by Parviz Khatibi, was made in 1951. More powerful projectors were purchased to show Khatibi’s film. Equally important in this period was the critical awareness of cinema as a medium in which, as one contemporary critic put it, “the eyes give a person much more pleasure than the ears.” The target of these technical improvements, however, remained mainly an audience of petty bourgeoisie with limited tastes and expectations. A characteristic scene of song and dance, the most famous performer of which was for years Mahvash, became the crucial staple of all Iranian films of the 1950s. The audience was so mesmerized by these scenes that even foreign films, American or European, were interrupted halfway through to cut in a song and dance routine by Mahvash.

A crucial development of the 1950s was serious improvement in professional acting. Jamshid Sheybani established an acting studio in which speech, acting, theories of aesthetics, the history of theater and the cinema, make-up, and music were taught. Films produced in the latter part of the 1950s reflect this greater attention to acting. But unfortunately, the most popular films still had as their
leading actors rather talentless mannequins. Shapur Yasami’s *Amir Arsalan* (1955) was a phenomenally successful film of this period. But nothing came even close to the success of Musheq Soruri and Samuel Khachikian’s *Banquet in Hell* (1957), which featured Arham Sadr, a veteran comedian from Isfahan, as the lead character. Arguably, these two films were principally responsible for popularizing cinema as the dominant form of entertainment in Iran. This popularization soon took a nasty turn with Majid Mohseni’s *Lat-e Javanmard* (“The Valiant Vagabond,” 1958), which glorified a lumpen as the central character. Naser Malak Moti’i emerged in the 1950s and continued well into later decades as the most famous *Lat* in Iranian cinema. The *Lat*, a lumpen character feigning a degenerate version of chivalry, became a major figure in popular cinema. Amidst this vast sea of mediocrity, one occasionally notices a gentle wave such as Farrokh Ghaffari’s *Downtown* (1958), which gave promise of a crucial change in the next decade.

None of these developments in Iranian cinema could compare in significance with the far more important events in the poetry of the period. The “children” of Nima were now coming of age. Nima’s own early romanticism had branched out in the poetry of Fereydun Tavalloli and had resulted in the work of Nader Naderpour. But the politically far more important social realism of the more mature Nima now continued not only in his own poetry but also in that of Mehdi Akhavan Sales and Ahmad Shamlu. Although her poetry of the period had very little in it that anticipates her revolutionary blossoming in the 1960s, Forough Farrokhzad was also among the prominent voices of the time. Forough’s poetic voice became a major force in the formation of the Iranian individual subjectivity. In the words of the distinguished Iranian literary historian and critic, Mohammad Reza Shafi’i Kadkani:

Gradually, the universality of the beloved in lyrical poems, which was one of the endemic diseases of our classical poetry, diminishes. In this period, the features of the beloved become more evident and more specific. Poets abandoned the amorphous image of the Beloved and turned to more tangible matters about love and the relations between two human beings. When you read the poems of this period, whether it is a woman who speaks about her beloved (Forough), or a man who speaks of his beloved (Shamlu), you notice that this beloved is no longer that imaginary and abstract Beloved of the classical period. The relations between a lover and a beloved
The feudal Beloved abandons the realm of Persian poetry, and that condition of universality and non-individuality that defined the Beloved of the lyrical poetry of the previous period disappears. The lyrical poetry of this period reflects the realities of the age.\(^8\)

**THE 1960s**

As Kiarostami emerges from his teenage years and begins his adult life in the 1960s, Iranian cinema still has not much to offer him or any other member of his generation. An average of twenty-five films are being produced every year, but each one as bad as another in their hackneyed images and ideas. Samuel Khachikian establishes himself as the master of the Iranian thriller with conventionalism written and pictured all over his screen. The thriller and the melodrama are the two principal genres of filmmaking in this decade. The Iranian middle class is increasing in size and the general population getting younger because of the decline in the infant mortality rate. There is a massive influx of migrants from the remote rural areas into major metropolitan centers. The most successful among these migrant workers join the petty bourgeoisie, whereas a sizable number end up in shanty-towns on the outskirts of the capital. The increasing size of the petty bourgeoisie provides a constant source of income for Iranian melodramatic cinema.

Society at large was on the brink of great upheaval. The death of Ayatollah Boroujerdi in 1961 created a major power vacuum in the Shiite clerical establishment. In a conference convened immediately after his death, the leading clerical and lay authorities began to address the issue of who would lead the Shiites in an increasingly complicated and hostile environment. The Pahlavi regime’s official recognition of the state of Israel in 1960, which the clerical authorities opposed, was one clear indication that the state and the ayatollahs were at odds. The Shah had initiated major land reform in 1962, putting the clerics on the defensive. The placing of Iran on the American side in the world order had particularly agitated the clerical establishment. Even among the secular intellectuals of the left, this identification with the US and Western Europe was seriously challenged. The publication of Jalal al-e Ahmad’s *Westoxication* in 1962 is perhaps the best
indication of this dissatisfaction. Notwithstanding such discontent, and his cues coming from the Kennedy administration, the Shah launched his “White Revolution” in 1963. The religious establishment was caught off guard. Converging under the leadership of Ayatollah Khomeini, it countermobilized against the regime. The revolt of June 1963 was widespread and rather extensive, but it failed to destabilize the country. Khomeini was forced into exile and the insurrection subsided.

The Iranian intellectual scene was agitated; a renewed, albeit muffled, expectation was in the air. The Iranian cinema finally started to respond to these changes. The first sign of a radical departure from the nightmare of 1950s commercial cinema was Farrokh Ghaffari’s Shab-e Guzi (“The Night of the Hunchback,” 1964). A contemporary critic, Hazhir Daryush, jubilantly proclaimed the serious commencement of Iranian cinema with the making of this film, based on a story from The Thousand and One Nights.\(^9\) This and two other major films, Forough Farrokhzad’s Khaneh Siyah Ast (“The House Is Black,” 1962) and Ebrahim Golestan’s Khesht va Ayeneh (“The Brick and the Mirror,” 1965) proved that indeed a whole new cinematic tradition was in the making.

But in the same year, by far the most famous and popular film in the history of Iranian cinema, Ganj-e Qarun (“The Treasure of Qarun,” 1965), illustrated the continued taste of the Iranian mass audience for the melodramatic celebration of lumpenism, a plague that has never lost its influence and continues to perpetuate the worst traits of Iranian patriarchy. The commercial success of The Treasure of Qarun was such that the year after its production the number of Iranian films per annum increased from thirty-nine to fifty-two, the majority of those following the formula of this film, and thus giving rise to a whole genre of Iranian cinema called “à la The Treasure of Qarun.”\(^{10}\)

The catastrophic consequences of these films was more than compensated for by much more significant developments in literature that matched the best of the 1960s cinema. Nima Yushij died in 1960, but his poetic offspring—Ahmad Shamlu, Mehdi Akhavan Sales, Forough Farrokhzad, and Sohrab Sepehri, chief among them—were defining the moral and intellectual atmosphere of the time. The publication of Farrokhzad’s Another Birth in 1964 marked the most significant event in the history of modern literary creativity in the language. Before her tragic and untimely death in 1967, Farrokhzad would radically change the
poetic disposition of her culture beyond anything before achieved. In the realm of fiction, no less significant events were taking place. The publication of Ali Mohammad Afghani’s *Abu Khanom’s Husband* in 1961 was universally celebrated as a milestone in Persian literature. Sadeq Chubak’s *Patient Stone* was published in 1966. Houshang Golshiri’s *Prince Ebtejab* came out in 1969, as did Simin Daneshvar’s *Savushun*. In film, fiction, and poetry, Iranian achievements in the 1960s would leave nothing for Kiarostami to regret.

A new wave of serious filmmakers was rising. Soon after the successes of Ghaffari, Farrokhzad, and Golestan, Davud Mollapour directed *Shobar-e Abu Khanom* (“*Abu Khanom’s Husband*,” 1968). Based on the original novel by Ali Mohammad Afghani, *Abu Khanom’s Husband* steered clear of all the nauseating clichés of Iranian popular cinema, seeking a realistic portrayal of urban life. It was received with great critical acclaim and demonstrated that Iranian cinema could gradually escape entrapment in catering to the basest instincts of a mass audience. The year after that, Daryush Mehrju’i’s masterpiece, *Gav* (“*The Cow*,” 1969), based on a story by Gholamhossein Sa’edi, the leading Iranian playwright, became the defining moment of the Iranian cinema. With Ezzatollah Entezami’s unforgettable performance as a man so obsessed with his cow that he goes mad upon its death, dawned a new age in Iranian cinema. Mehrju’i achieved for Iranian cinema what no one before him had been able to do: give it character and direction, articulate its potential, and bring it to global attention. Mas’ud Kimiya’i’s *Qeysar* (“*Qeysar*,” 1969) pales in comparison to *The Cow*, though it, too, attracted considerable praise. But *Qeysar*, despite its technical and directorial brilliance, did nothing for Iranian cinema except to glorify further the rampant lumpenism of the 1950s and 1960s. Central to *Qeysar* was still the lumpen machismo of the *film jaheli* genre in which the “honor” of the patriarch is vested in the chastity of his female relations.

The coming to fruition of the best in Iranian cinema in the 1960s coincided with the most glorious moments of modernist poetry: Forough Farrokhzad, Sohrab Sepehri, Ahmad Shamlu, and Mehdi Akhavan Sales defined the specific achievements of this poetry. Forough Farrokhzad emerged as the most eloquent voice of her generation, speaking not only of suppressed femininity but a whole spectrum of forbidden thoughts. Sohrab Sepehri cut through the thick politicization of his age to grasp a primal moment of wonder in the world. Shamlu’s
poetry celebrated a revolutionary pride in the very fact of being human. Akhavan Sales expressed the rising chorus of a whole nation’s suppressed anger and search for dignity. No other period in the history of Iranian modernity is so rich with the metaphoric tremors of emancipation. Volatility became the theme of the age. The world was unstable, people were rootless, reality was amorphous, relations were changing, and ideals were mutable. But in the midst of all this fluidity of atmosphere, a certain consistency was in the air, a congruity between what the prophetic poets proclaimed and what their readers dreamed. In the poetry of Forough Farrokhzad and Sohrab Sepehri, in particular, there was a transmutation of the historicized person that Nima had made possible into an impatient realization of the self-transparency of one’s presence in the world. The whole metaphysics of representation, from classical poetry down to its vestiges in the Nimaic revolution, Sepehri and Farrokhzad took gracefully to task by radically rejecting the aesthetic objectification of being. Their poetry is an active insurgency against that objectification in reaching for the immediate experience of the world before its mediated modulations. Theirs was an instrumental intrusion into the immediacy and facticity of that form of being wherein the world is de-worlded, life is de-experienced, reality becomes no longer self-evident, and the self-transparency of life is no longer inaccessible.

THE 1970s

In the 1970s, the film division of the Institute for the Intellectual Development of Children and Young Adults (Kanun-e Parvaresh-e Fekri Kudakan va Nojavanan), or Kanun for short, became the focal point of a major movement in Iranian cinema. Abbas Kiarostami and an entire generation of young filmmakers were its pioneers. The establishment of Kanun was part of a general pattern of cultural development that the Pahlavi regime had initiated to engage the Iranian youth in politically harmless entertainment. But, as usual, Kanun turned out to be a Trojan horse for the government. From the poetry of Ahmad Shamlu to the fiction of Samad Behranghi, some of the most subversive works of literature were sponsored and distributed widely by Kanun.

The Shah, however, had much bigger fish to fry rather than to worry about the
symbolically subversive counterculture under his nose. The position of Iran in OPEC had been strengthened in the early 1970s and revenue from oil reached unprecedented figures. The Siyahkal uprising in northern Iran and a host of similar guerrilla movements were brutally suppressed. Ayatollah Khomeini was in exile in Iraq and effectively cut off from his supporters inside the country. The monarch was in complete control. The Iranian economy was more than ever predicated on the export of oil and the import of just about everything else: wheat from the United States, potatoes from Pakistan, rice from Thailand, onions from India, oranges from South Africa, cheese from Denmark, chicken from the Netherlands, eggs from Israel, sheep from Turkey, and frozen meat from Australia. This catastrophic economic counterdevelopment meant astronomical wealth for the royal family and its cohorts, a massive increase in the size of the Iranian petty bourgeoisie, the spontaneous enrichment of the comprador bourgeoisie, the total devastation of the national economic infrastructure, the retardation of the growth of the working class, the totalitarian erasure of civil society, the cessation of all institutionalized and grass-roots political activities, the radicalization of religious and secular insurrectionary movements, and, ultimately, the generation of a politically muted group of isolated intellectuals. By early 1975, the Shah's megalomaniac proclivity had resulted in his finally abandoning all pretense to democracy and establishing the Rastakhiz ("Resurrection") Party as the only legal political organization in the state. The monarch ordered everyone either to join the party or leave his country.

Against the background of these brutal realities, Abbas Kiarostami was meticulously engaged in an entirely different domain. He was busy trying to teach us how to see the world differently. Like his kindred spirit Sohrab Sepehri, Kiarostami sought a re-reading of reality from a tabula rasa that would make the world once again meaningful and trustworthy. Kiarostami's cinema has always explored from a slight angle otherwise hidden from ordinary sight. In Nan va Kucheh ("Bread and the Alley," 1970), we see the earliest formation of Kiarostami's cinematic sensibilities. Having just bought a fresh loaf of bread, a young boy is heading home when a stray dog approaches him. First a moment of great fear, anxiety, and perplexity sets in. He then tries to follow a grown-up, who leads him astray and takes him off in unfamiliar and aimless directions. Then comes the intuitive solution of simply giving the dog a piece of the bread and going home.
The film's execution is typical of Kiarostami in its precision and clarity. The camera work is extremely smooth and perceptive (though occasionally flawed in its point of view) with both the young boy and the stray dog. Any "moral" to the story is so tacit as to be almost unnoticeable. If there are any "lessons" to be learned, they are almost immediately subverted when we see the young boy safely reaching his home, and the stray dog sitting comfortably at his door plotting its move against the next boy who approaches with a handful of groceries. The baffling predicament of the first boy is now compounded in the second, who has no obviously handy solution such as a piece of bread to help him negotiate his way past the menacing dog.

In studying the world of children with de-cultured eyes and a penchant for irony, Kiarostami detects momentous occasions wherein binary oppositions collapse; when, for instance, punishment can become pleasure. In *Zang-e Tafrih* (*Recess, 1972*) he narrates the story of a young boy who, having broken a window with his ball, is punished by being forced to stand in the hallway while his friends are still in class. On his way home he first witnesses a soccer match and then wanders off to the outskirts of the city. This adventurous day in the otherwise boring routine of school life quietly insinuates rebellious possibilities. From the playful smashing of the window, to the exhilarating athleticism of the soccer game, and finally to the uncharted outskirts of a restrictive urbanity, the narrative is colored by the initial transgression that occasioned this "recess." In *Recess*, we thus witness some of the earliest experimentation with the disquieting limits that Kiarostami's deceptively simple camera can reach. It will not be until the Rostam-abad Trilogy, and perhaps most significantly in *Zendegi va digar Hich* (*"Life and then Nothing,"* 1992), that this particular feature of Kiarostami's cinema is fully charged and developed.

With *Tajrobeh* (*"The Experience,"* 1973), Kiarostami began his remarkably muted but unbearably moving treatment of love in young adults. A young errand-boy working and sleeping in a photography shop falls in love with a young girl living in a middle-class neighborhood. In hopeful anticipation he goes to her home to offer his services as a servant. He leaves with some prospect of working there, but his hopes are dashed that evening when he receives a definitively negative response. With this film of not more than sixty minutes, Kiarostami managed to subvert the genre of poor-boy-meets-rich-girl that
plagued mainstream commercial cinema *ad nauseam* in the 1960s and 1970s. To be sure there is not the slightest sense of rancor or parody about *The Experience*. Rancor, in fact, has never been a feature of Kiarostami’s cinema. An effusive love radiates from his camera and embraces everything in its sight.

In the simplicity of his narrative and the courage to dwell deliberately on the innocuous, Kiarostami is remarkably similar to his contemporary, Sohrab Shahid Sales. Shahid Sales, who died in 1998 in self-imposed exile in Chicago, appeared suddenly in Iranian cinema. His *Yek Ettefaq-e Sadeh* (“One Simple Incident,” 1973) is considered by many a turning point in Iranian cinema. In “One Simple Incident,” Shahid Sales taught his camera patience and serenity in order to observe the life of a poor boy from northern Iran, evoking the composure and forbearance of a saintly disposition. Soon it became clear that there was something far more important at stake in Shahid Sales’ opting for a simple narrative. The deceptive simplicity of his work began patiently to probe the nature of reality beyond its metaphysically mediated signification. In *Tabi’at-e Bi-Jan* (“Still Life,” 1975), Shahid Sales observes the unbearable monotony of the life of a railroad worker whose sole function is to signal the passage of a train at the same time every day of the year. Here, what we see is not even the perceptible things themselves but things *before* their metaphysically mediated perceptibility—*before* they are perceived, understood, analyzed, judged. The sheer physicality of being, prior to any attribution of meaning and significance, is what begins to surface in his cinema. Shahid Sales soon left Iran for Germany, where he made *Dar Ghorbat* (“In Exile,” 1975). He remained in Europe and then in the United States until his early death in 1998. He left an indelible mark on the narrative technique of Iranian cinema.

Kiarostami took this deliberation on the nature and aspect of reality much further. In *Mosafer* (“The Traveler,” 1972), his sense of irony assumes one of its harshest and most self-effacing turns. A young boy from the provincial town of Malayer, Qasem is mad about soccer. When he learns that the national team is to play at the capital, he determines to see the game at any cost. Robbing his parents, swindling unsuspecting schoolboys by pretending to take their picture with an old, broken camera, and finally cheating his fellow fans by selling their soccer gear, he raises enough money to go to Tehran to watch the match. The overnight trip wears him out, but he does manage to get to the stadium in time,
In *The Traveler* Kiarostami explores with masterly understated irony the world of young children with a "misplaced sense of achievement" only to fall fast asleep just before the game starts. In narrating the life of a young boy, Kiarostami is at his best. The film ends with a bizarre and inexplicable sense of resolution. There is a matter-of-factness about Kiarostami’s form of irony, a kind of conspicuous carnivalesque in his weaving reality and romance together. We feel neither sympathy for nor indifference to Qasem. Instead, for the first time, we see him in the web of a fantastic reading of the world which is at once beautiful and inevitable. As a filmmaker, Kiarostami’s principal contribution has been this ability to show inevitability and beauty simultaneously. We begin to see through his camera the distinction between reality as sheer physicality and reality as it is perceived via the legitimate and the legitimizing
epistemics of a culture. How exactly it is possible for Kiarostami's camera to detach itself from the reality it thus de-sediments has probably something to do with his uncanny ability to use metaphor, mutate metonymy, upturn synecdoche, and imply irony, all in visual modification of the narrative. Irony is chief among the many such innocuous "optics," as we may call them, that are the instruments of de-sedimentation without constituting a metaphysics, or even an aesthetics, let alone a culture, of their own. It is his camera's ethereal ability to remain on the verge of abandoning a culture without entering another that ultimately defines his vision. This is the principal mechanism of aesthetic signification in Kiarostami's cinema, whereby art generates its own, materially anchored, reality. Kiarostami's cinema is thus a perfect testimony to Adorno's assertion that "if artworks are answers to their own questions, they themselves thereby truly become questions." We are Kiarostami's audience by virtue of our inability to evade such queries. In that inability, then, resides our subjectivity beyond a colonially constituted modernity.

Kiarostami has not always been successful in keeping clear of the potential pitfalls that threaten his carefully balanced distance between reality and its undoing. In Do Rab-e Hal bara-ye yek Mas'aleh ("Two Solutions for One Problem," 1975), one of his weakest short films, we see him falling victim to one of the most dangerous threats to his cinema: moral sentimentalism. By and large, Kiarostami has controlled this threat and kept it at bay with remarkable ingenuity—perhaps intuitive, perhaps cultivated, one can never tell, and that is a powerful aspect of his cinema. But in Two Solutions for One Problem we see what a slippery road Kiarostami has traveled. Two classmates face the dilemma of one of them having inadvertently torn the other's notebook. With the first solution, the "victim" would have his revenge but he prefers the second, his cooperation with the "perpetrator," which resolves the problem and preserves their friendship. Oddly enough, in retrospect, one develops a greater admiration for Kiarostami's cinema when one notices such occasional setbacks. For it is in films like Two Solutions for One Problem that one sees the relentless pursuit of a cinematic language in which Kiarostami emerges triumphant. Despite its structural failure and its aesthetic collapse into moral sentimentalism, Two Solutions for One Problem still bears the marks of the same type of experimentation in uncharted realms of sensibilities. What Kiarostami questions in this film—the nature of revenge as a human trait,
one of the most enduring features of human hostility—he approaches through the perspective of children. Kiarostami has always sought to experiment with alternative modes of progression from identical moments of crisis. In a sense he is trying to recapture moments in cultural infancy in which tension and aggression have resulted in a particular course of action, while other modes of response have been left perilously unattended.

Taking issue with Hegel's idealist dialectic, Adorno, in his *Theory of Aesthetics*, accuses Hegel of having confused "the representational or discursive treatment of thematic material with the otherness that is constitutive of art." The "otherness" of art is invariably evident in its dialectical relationship with reality, a relation that ultimately forces reality to reconstitute itself. Consider the following example from the work of Kiarostami: as part of renegotiating reality in alternative possibilities, Kiarostami has often looked at the boundaries between human and animal lives. A particularly brilliant illustration is his short film, *Manam Mitunam* ("So Can I," 1975), which is crafted with impeccable precision and brevity. Here, in less than four minutes, we see him crossing the transformative boundaries of three interrelated spaces. Two little boys are watching a cartoon. One of them interrupts every scene in which an animal performs an action by saying, "I can do it too," and then imitates that action. When two birds are shown flying, both boys are dumbfounded. The exemplary world of art (the television, the cartoon, the very magic of "cinema") and the internal logic of nature (the animals depicted in the cartoon) affectionately embrace the "real" world of the two children, prompting them to emotive and demonstrative responses. The two conflating realms of nature (animal) and nurture (art) have continually attracted Kiarostami, an inclination that again inspires artistic creation in the Rostam-abad trilogy, though, in the case of *Life and then Nothing* (1992), with the added twist of the devastating power of nature in an earthquake. In the latter case, it is the earthquake and television antennas that, as powerful symbols of nature and art, embrace reality as it is. The two realms of nature and nurture, or animality and its sublimation in art, are thus the two strategic toeholds that embrace and thus radically compromise our received conceptions of reality, forcing reality, in effect, to yield to art.

The kind of innocuous optics with which Kiarostami had been engaged extended visually what Sohrab Sepehri had already achieved poetically. Within
both Kiarostami’s cinematics and Sepehri’s poetics, hitherto uncharted horizons of sensibility were discerned, so that a whole project of material resignification of the world was made possible or even self-evident. Consider “Plain of Color,” a poem Sepehri composed in 1966:

The sky bluer than ever.
The water bluer even than ever.
I am in the courtyard.
Ra’na is by the pond.

Ra’na is washing the clothes.
The leaves are falling down.
Just this morning my mother was saying
That it is a sad season.
I said: “Life is like an apple.
We must bite into it skin and all.”

The neighbor’s wife is weaving a bride’s veil
By her window,
While singing.
I am reading the Vedas,
And occasionally sketch something,
A stone, a bird, a patch of cloud perhaps.

The sunshine is dot-less.
The sparrows have come.
The nasturtium has just blossomed.
I seed a pomegranate and think to myself:
“Wouldn’t it be wonderful if people’s hearts
Were transparent like these seeds?”

The juice of the pomegranate gushes into my eyes.
I cry.
My mother laughs.
Ra’na too. \(^{14}\)
Here we have a narratively explicit appropriation of time and being-in-time as a mode of countermetaphysically accessing the pre-interpretative moment of the world. This becomes exactly the mode of operation in Kiarostami's cinematics. Consider his *Rang-ha* ("Colors," 1976), in which he extends the limits of his experimentation with the nature of reality by reaching for the particular parameters of its sense perceptions. *Colors* is an experiment with non-narrative cinema. Here, under the innocent guise of teaching children the names and designation of colors—red, green, yellow, blue, etc.—the particular properties of objects are given a renewed sense of significance. Again, the operation of the thematic unfolding of colors is rendered legitimate by the presumed targeting of young children. But at the same time, and with the innocent and yet vigorous energy thus generated, the proportions and properties of those real objects begin to assume unfamiliar closeness to our eyes. Defamiliarizing the familiar thus becomes the effective strategy of resignifying the world.

In *Lebasi bara-ye Arusi* ("Suit for a Wedding," 1976), Kiarostami begins to succumb to the temptation to compare the world of children to that of adults, a comparison potentially very damaging to his cinema, due precisely to the same trap of moral sentimentality into which he fell in *Two Solutions for One Problem*. What usually saves Kiarostami's cinema whenever he lapses into sentimentalism is his cultivated intuition to let his camera be guided by the jagged logic of the child's world. In *Suit for a Wedding*, a young boy is taken to a tailor by his mother to have a new suit made for his sister's wedding. While the tailor and the mother negotiate the terms of their transaction, the young apprentice of the master tailor and the boy have their own little business to attend to: how to get the boy to try on the suit the night before it is due without getting the young apprentice fired.

Whatever the technical errors of *Suit for a Wedding*, it marks a transition in Kiarostami's view of the world of adults. For Kiarostami adults are finished realities, children realities in the making. In *Gozaresb* ("The Report," 1977), Kiarostami experimented for the first time with the world of adults, while maintaining his fascination with the nature of reality. In *The Report*, Mohammad Firuzkuhi, a bureaucrat in the ministry of finance, is entangled in a corruption charge. At home, his situation is not much brighter. His landlord is evicting him and his family because he has not paid the rent for some time. He has all
kinds of petty fights with his wife. In one of these quarrels, he beats her badly and leaves the house with his infant child. On his return home, he finds that she has attempted to commit suicide. He manages to get her to the hospital in time. Early the next morning, having been assured that his wife will live, he leaves the hospital.

In the same year that Kiarostami made *The Report*, Parviz Sayyad made *Bonbast* ("Dead End," 1977). A brief comparison between *The Report* and *Dead End* makes the deliberate nature of Kiarostami's camera more pronounced. In *Dead End*, Sayyad portrays quite successfully the brutally sad irony of a secret police officer, pursuing a political activist, who is mistaken for a suitor by the sister of that activist. The fierce loneliness of the young girl, the numbing solitude of her life in a desolate house with her mother, the symbolic location of a *Dead End*, and, finally, the sad turning of a potential love affair into one of violence are all portrayed with a melodious numbness by Sayyad. But the narrative never lifts itself beyond its still sadness into a negotiating position with reality. Given the prior givenness of the real, no theoretical understanding of it can remain outside, or, as Adorno puts it, “Art negates the categorical determinations stamped on the empirical world and yet harbors what is empirically existing in its own substance.” What Kiarostami’s camera manages to do is to make us conscious at once of the fact that the being-there of the real is pre-theoretically “there,” and that, even more troublingly, we *are* that being-there. Thus, the being-there of the real is the furthest away from us by merely being always already theoretical, i.e., culturally militated. What Kiarostami manages to do, however, is to constitute the pre-theoretical givenness of the real in relation to “the world.” But this “world” is no longer theoretically implicated by and in the culture. Thus, it can function as a horizon, pre-metaphysical grid, against which reality can at once be felt, sensed, and grasped, and in a way that is impossible through the always pre-established culture of understanding that reality. I will demonstrate later that in *Ta’m-e Gilas* ("Taste of Cherry," 1997) Kiarostami reaches the pinnacle of this resubjection of his audience to a negotiating position vis-à-vis reality. In *Taste of Cherry*, he does that via a turning to reality through a being-toward-death.

Finding alternative resolutions of moments of crisis with their received solutions carved on their faces is one recurring theme in Kiarostami’s cinema. In *Rah-e Hal* ("The Solution," 1978), we see a young man trying to hitchhike back to
his car with a tire he has just had repaired. When nobody gives him a lift, he simply starts walking after his rolling tire, which leads him to beautiful countryside with scenes and experiences he would not otherwise have had. He reaches his car with a fresh and unforgettable awareness of his surroundings. The particular aspect of these sorts of Kiarostamiesque diversions from the ordinary is that they emerge naturally from the situation itself, without the slightest sense of being concocted. This is where Kiarostami’s choice of young boys (the conspicuous absence of young girls in his films until just recently is a serious problem) in most of his films helps him to explore an almost natural condition of curiosity, accidentality, and serendipity, and an almost snowball accumulation of events leading from one to another. The experiences that result, such as the boy’s adventures in *The Solution*, thus appear to be almost unintended consequences of natural curiosity and accidents. What these apparently innocuous “accidents” do is quietly shatter the routinized matter-of-factness of the real. The being-there of the real is, as we can now begin to see through Kiarostami’s camera, in and of itself the nearest to its ipseity, while its theoretical understanding is furthest from it, and yet not alien to it. By this counterintuitive, countercultural move, Kiarostami constitutes a horizon for sensing that reality without committing a violent metaphysical act to compromise its sensuality. Kiarostami’s aesthetic countermetaphysics is thus constitutionally thing- and act-oriented, and not idea-oriented. Of Godard, Gilles Deleuze once said, “as someone who works a great deal, he must be a very solitary figure. But it’s not just any solitude, it’s an extraordinarily animated solitude. Full, not of dreams, fantasies, and projects, but of acts, things, people even. A multiple, creative solitude.”¹⁶ Kiarostami’s cinema, from its very inception, is an aesthetics of the real, a countermetaphysics of the factual. It is there to filter the world and thus strip it of all its cultures, narrativities, authorities, and ideologies.

**THE YEAR OF THE REVOLUTION**

The period between 1977 and 1979 was one of shattering events in modern Iranian history. Anti-Pahlavi sentiments across a range of social classes ultimately coagulated under the leadership of Ayatollah Khomeini, a Shiite cleric with a
lifelong history of antigovernmental activities. On 1 February 1979, Ayatollah Khomeini ended his fourteen years of exile and returned to Iran in triumph. The Shah had already left. His prime minister, Shahpour Bakhtiar, was in no position to halt the revolutionary march to overthrow the Pahlavi regime. On 30 and 31 March, Khomeini ordered a national referendum, in which the overwhelming majority of Iranians were reported to have officially chosen to have an “Islamic Republic.” On 4 November, student activists occupied the American Embassy and took the American diplomatic corps hostage, a crisis that lasted 444 days. By the time the hostages were released on 19 January 1981, the constitution had been drafted and ratified by the representatives of the clerical establishment. As of 15 November 1979, Abbas Kiarostami, like thousands of other Iranian intellectuals and artists, and millions of other Iranians, was living in an Islamic Republic.

As Iran became wrapped up in a colossal revolutionary zeal, Kiarostami was concerned with an entirely different issue. In Qaziyeh Shekl-e Avval, Qaziyeh Shekl-e Dovvom (“The First Version, the Second Version,” 1979), he examined how children and adults deal with the issues of secrecy, commitment, and honor. Seven young boys are expelled by their teacher because one of them has disrupted the decorum and order of the classroom. The six innocent boys refuse to squeal on their friend, and accept the consequences of their camaraderie. Kiarostami shows a video of this incident to a group of adults and asks for their opinion. One of the boys tells on his friend after a week of expulsion from class. The same group of adults is asked to reflect on this incident. A variation on the nature of the Platonic “noble lie,” this film sustains its narrative energy by examining the nobility that youthful conceptions of honor create. The adults cannot but pontificate and admonish on the basis of categorical imperatives, while an inarticulate sense of propriety holds the seven boys together. The “difference,” always a subtextual Kiarostami-esque fixation, is the moral transformation of innocent nobility into aggregated prudence. This is by far one of the most subversive interventions into the ahistorical modulation of morality across time and space. A different kind of “morality,” a “countermorality,” emerges here that is entirely contingent on the reality of the event itself and not on abstract ethical imperatives. This dwelling on the pre-theoretical moment is what remains constant in Kiarostami’s cinema. In that pre-theoretical moment, reality exudes its own manner and mode of propriety. Through such quiet and subdued erosions of the violence of the metaphysics,
Kiarostami has gradually established a counterculture within which things can at once mean and signify without the otherwise inevitable commitment of the innocuously real to the blatantly conjectural.

THE 1980s

The mood of the land in the wake of the Islamic revolution can be inferred from the voice of Ali Musavi Garmarudi, a leading poet, in “The Time Is Short,” a poem he composed in autumn 1978:

The time is short.
We have to get going.
We have to say hello
To all the plants,
One by one.

We have to stay awake
By all the fountains
Of the world,
And clean our faces
In the mirror of their purity.

We have to get up.
We have to pray
By the height of the waves in the sea.

We have to learn humility,
And spend every night
In the modest handbag
Of a snail.

We have to slide into
The bosom of the seashell,
And endure our solitude
In the beam of the pearl’s light.
We have to,
Along with the caravan leaders,
Drink the night
Of the desert
All at once.

We have to kiss
Millions of callous-covered hands
At the brick-making factories
With the humility of the clay.

The time is short.
We have to get going.
We have to crush
Thousands of leeches
Upon the Silk Road.
We have to cleanse the rice paddies
Of all the leeches.

We have to,
Every once in a while,
Return
And put in order
The poles of the fences around the garden,
And collect the fallen fresh walnuts.

We have to plant.
We have to resume planting the asparagus,
And we have to throw away the magical marbles.

We have to learn
How to fly
From the migrant birds,
From the robins.
We have to learn.
We have to take away the ornamental feather
Of the crane
From the helmet of all the world conquerors
And with it rewrite
A good book.

We have to chop many heads
Off and spit the mucus of hatred
Onto its latrine.

We have to have an operation
With a cry
On the narrow throat of the early dawn.

We have to send the early dawn to Africa,
And we have to force into exile
The white.

The time is short.
We have to get going. \(^{17}\)

The time is violent. It is a time of high promise. Souls are agitated. Men are in arms. Women are afraid. Brutality is running amok. A whole nation has opened its wounds. Revenge is the order of the day. The custodians of the sacred hold a saber in one hand and the holy book in the other. Men speak on behalf of God.

How in the midst of all this madness could people like Kiarostami think about a toothache?

In *Dandan-dard* ("Toothache," 1980), Kiarostami experimented with an ironic reading of pain. While the grandfather and father of young Mohammad Reza have long since passed the age of having toothaches and now enjoy the benefits of dentures, the boy suffers from a bout of toothache which results in his being excused from school and sent to the hospital, where he is given expert advice by a dental hygienist. The convenience of the father and grandfather's dentures renders the young boy's toothache quite paradoxical. Wouldn't he be more
comfortable with a pair of small dentures? The narrative also rests on a typically Kiarostamiesque pondering on the relationship of constructed reality (dentures) to reality (teeth). Here the artistically re-created make-believe (dentures) is privileged over the naturally created reality (teeth). *Toothache* was made for *Kanun* and has all the appearance of a documentary to be shown around the country to teach children the benefits of oral hygiene. There are charts, cartoons of little devils working their nasty business on teeth, and the rather supercilious seriousness of the chief dentist at the hospital explaining the benefits of oral hygiene while the poor boy suffers under his gesticulating arms.

The rest of the country might have a revolution to worry about. In Kiarostami's world, however, the convenience of a set of fantastically clean-looking dentures is contemplated and contrasted with the sufferings of natural teeth. But why?

There is a story of a medieval calligrapher who lived in the city of Shiraz. One day a devastating earthquake reduced the city to ruins. After the tremors were passed and the extent of the destruction was clear, the neighbors of the calligrapher went to find out what had happened to him. They went to his house, which was in ruins. They began arduously to sift through the rubble in the hope of finding him. When the whole house had been searched brick by brick, the neighbors descended to the basement to look for any signs of life. Deep in a corner of the basement, under the debris, they saw the man bending over a piece of paper with his reed pen and ink in hand. "Are you all right?" they asked. "I have just perfected the letter N," was the reply. "No one has ever written a more perfect N than this."

The kind of redrafting of reality in which Kiarostami has been engaged, his persistent attempt to show us how to look differently, sketches out a mode of being that survives all the pains and promises of a revolution. What did the revolution promise? What did it achieve? Where is the place of Iran in the predicaments of modernity, neocolonialism, and the sharp response of "Islam" to all of these? Kiarostami's has been an entirely different kind of agenda, an agenda of liberation from the received mandates of the culture of death and negation, metaphysics and mysticism, concealment and doubt. His cinema is the vision of life on earth, certainty in the real, a celebration of the transitory, the festive embracing of being-toward-now. Let us now turn to the rest of his story.
One of the most subversive short films by Kiarostami is *Beh Tartib ya Bedun-e Tartib* ("With or Without Order," 1981). In this film, under the calm appearance of a simple exercise, the depth of the authoritarian motifs of obedience is revealed. In a series of short sketches performed by pairs of actors, Kiarostami demonstrates the peculiarities of "order." The film crew, however, finds trying to organize order quite difficult. Disorder defies the imagination and the skill of any "ordinary" person's will to organize. Disorder, in effect, defies ordering, organizing, managing, staging. The question this brilliant short film profoundly poses is how the received patterns of obedience can be subverted, if at all. Or, even more seriously, how can art be subversive? To be subversive, art must not collapse into despair: we are always on the edge of a suspicion that Kiarostami's sense of paradox and irony may lead him to pessimism and hopelessness. From his later films it is quite evident that he is too life-affirming and delighting in the senses to give in to despondency. But there are moments in his work where irony does border on a sense of quiet despair. In *Hamsarayan* ("The Chorus," 1982), he depicts an old man who is hard of hearing. On his way home, the street noise becomes unbearable for him, so he turns off his hearing aid. He arrives home in blissful silence. Next his granddaughter comes home from school, in vain ringing the doorbell in anticipation of her grandfather opening the door. Finally, her schoolmates sing in chorus to alert the old man. Here the hearing aid as a symbol is quite reminiscent of the dentures in *Toothache*: a concocted reality substituting for the real thing. But the same device that can help the old man hear his granddaughter come home or the song she and her friends sing is a source of aggravation and anxiety in the middle of a busy street. Just as art is a kind of construct, *concocted* reality is the experimental means of getting to know the *nature* of reality. What we ordinarily call "the nature" of reality is the thematized object of our observation, objects that have been *cultured* to be understood. Art denatures and dethematizes reality so that precisely its culturation and thematization become self-evident. Once thus dethematized and denatured, reality can reveal the metaphysical foundation of its appearance as significant, a feature of reality ordinarily concealed from our eyes by virtue of our being part of the same thematized reality.

In his strategy of denaturing "reality," Kiarostami can make the thematized reality as much anxiety-provoking as comic. *Hamshabri* ("Fellow Citizen," 1983), a satirical reading of Tehran traffic, is a peripatetic reflection on the nature of
human relationships once people imagine themselves concealed in moving boxes. The brilliance of this, as always, paradigm­documentary meditation on the nature, function, and ever-changing efferves­cence of social interactions is that it can very easily be read as a subversive examination of how human societies operate on the verge of total collapse into anarchy. The presence of a moving box obstructing people’s full public view of each other can so easily lead to anarchy and confusion that one wonders how the formation of the social contract was ever possible. Unlike E. M. Cioran, however, who was constantly in a perplexed fear of the impossibility of social agreement, Kiarostami can laugh at its sheer presence. Particularly when it comes to “social reality,” we can see the complete erasure of the distinction between “nature” and “art” that, at least since Aristotle, we have categorically accepted. “For things come into being either by art,” Aristotle maintained in his Metaphysics, “or by nature or by luck or by spontaneity.” “Luck” and “spontaneity” ultimately collapse into nature and art, because Aristotle further maintained that “art is a principle of movement in something other than the thing moved [whereas] nature is a principle in the thing itself . . . and other causes are privations of these two.”18 By an aesthetic dethematization of “the real,” Kiarostami has persistently demonstrated the precisely metaphysical presupposition at the root of “nature.” “Nature” thus emerges as perhaps the most successfully thematized reality presumed beyond any inquisitive inroad.

Made some four years after the Islamic Revolution, Fellow Citizen can very easily be taken as a political allegory. For any other filmmaker, such a temptation would be irresistible. But the nature of Kiarostami’s cinema defies simplistic allegorization. The bizarre confluence of concealed sentiments and social actions in a traffic jam does appear remarkably similar to the social psychology of the revolutionary crowds that began to gather under Khomeini’s banner. But Kiarostami’s gentle, comic camera never allows such political implications to get out of hand and become realities sui generis. Any resemblance of this traffic jam to the social psychology of revolutionary crowds ultimately leads to more satirical commentary on the very nature of humans as social creatures. The temptation to read Kiarostami politically is equally strong in his Avvali-ha (“First-Graders,” 1985). Its release coincided with a period of gut-wrenching soul-searching by secular intellectuals who, having thought that the revolution was theirs, were now utterly disgusted by its theocratic turn and were blaming everything and
everyone from the heavens and stars to the CIA, the KGB, Mossad, and the British intelligence service for their political predicament. In *First-Graders*, we see a group of young students who for one reason or another are sent to the school principal for disrupting their class. They initially deny any responsibility for the mischief, but the principal's persistent questioning finally forces them to admit their guilt. These scenes of confusion, disruption, denial, interrogation, and confession are periodically interrupted by orderly scenes of morning exercises in the school. The camera's sympathy is neither with the confusion of disruption nor with the maintenance of order. Instead, Kiarostami seems to be particularly concerned with the nature of denial and the process of confession.

By the mid 1980s, the Iranian political scene is preoccupied with much harsher realities. The Iran-Iraq war rages, with catastrophic consequences for both nations. In Iran, the reign of theocracy is in full swing. Under the cover of the American hostage crisis and the Iran-Iraq war, the ideologues of the Islamic Revolution ratify a constitution in which the organs of civil society are entirely incorporated into the state apparatus. Civil liberties are systematically and constitutionally eradicated. Thugs and hoodlums are officially employed by the Islamic Republic to attack innocent people and impose a medieval code of conduct. A succession of terrorist acts by the Mojahedin-e Khalq organization shakes the foundations of the Islamic Republic. In retaliation, the Islamic Republic brutally crushes not only the Mojahedin but every other kind of political opposition to their rule of terror. Hundreds of thousands of the Iranian middle class immigrate to other countries. Those who remain are subjected to the daily violence of a revolutionary, war-torn, brutally militant regime. Revolutionary leaders are either discredited and forced to flee for their lives, like President Bani-Sadr, or else assassinated, like President Raja'i, Prime Minister Bahonar, and Chief Justice Beheshti. An average of 100 executions per day is reported during these barbarous years.

"What is poetry for," Hölderlin is said to have asked, "in a time of despair?" Kiarostami's cinema has always been the furthest from the political, and yet it remains "political" in the most subversive sense of the term. Whether intentionally or not, his cinema is actively engaged in teasing out the hidden assumptions underlying the constitution of the Iranian subject. By aiming at the heart of the very conception of "reality," Kiarostami effectively confuses the subject who
claims to know it. As an effective strategy of resubjection, the confusion of reality with the object of knowledge problematizes both the subject and the object and opens their constitution up for renegotiation. This is by far the most revolutionary implication of Kiarostami’s cosmovision. His vision is simple and simply countercultural. But it is not countercultural in the sense of proposing an alternative culture: Kiarostami always stops short of any culture and thus celebrates the pre-cultural alterity of reality. “Only by conceiving of works of art in their negative relationship to everything that is not art,” as Christoph Menke puts it in his The Sovereignty of Art, “can the autonomy of such works, the internal logic of their representation and of the way they are experienced, be adequately understood.” In Kiarostami’s case, an alert awareness of the fictive transparency of the real is constitutional to his way of making the world yield to alternative modes of signification.

By the late 1980s, Kiarostami was ready to make one of his masterpieces, the first in what later became the Rostam-abad trilogy, Khaneh-ye Dust Kojast (“Where Is the Friend’s House?”, 1987). The story cannot be any simpler: a young schoolboy, Nematzadeh, is admonished by his teacher for not having written his homework in the appropriate notebook. One more such offense, the teacher threatens, and he will be expelled from school. As fate would have it, Nematzadeh forgets his notebook that day, and his friend and classmate Ahmad, puts it in his bag by mistake and takes it home. As he sits down at home to do his homework, while being constantly interrupted to do various chores for his mother, Ahmad realizes that he has Nematzadeh’s notebook in his bag. What follows is Ahmad’s relentless quest to find his friend’s house and return his notebook. The challenges the young Ahmad meets on his way and the story’s beautifully surprising end mark the maturity of Kiarostami’s craft.

Paramount in the character of Ahmad, the protagonist, is his solitude and stubbornness. As Kiarostami’s alter ego, Ahmad is different in the strongest sense of the term. Ahmad differs from just about anybody, from his teacher and his petty-dictatorial mandates and rules, from his mother and her numbing insistence for him to do his work, from his grandfather and his idiotic conceptions of etiquette and propriety. But, ultimately, Ahmad is distant from the house in which his friend dwells and which refuses to surface on the face of the earth. Ahmad is the child of a different future, of an altered destiny, of a revised
Kiarostami’s *Where Is the Friend’s House?* visually translates one of Sohrab Sepehri’s greatest poems in unanticipated terms: how far will a young boy go to protect his friend from certain punishment?

vision of reality, of a redefined reason for being. Ahmad is the Adam of an Eden yet to be created, and even if it is never created Ahmad is already there. The mode of Kiarostami’s resubjection never collapses into yet another metaphysics. All figures of authority—teachers, mothers, grandfathers, neighbors—are not so much defied as ignored. So Ahmad’s manner of differing from others is never confrontational, violent, or based on principles. In Kiarostami’s Eden, there is not so much “truth” as reality, not so much “morality” as manner. Ahmad’s character is inherently noble not so much because he does the “right thing” as because he *just* has to return his friend’s book. The return of the book remains
always in the vicinity of that just an act. It never claims to rise to the metaphysic­
ical haughtiness of an act of “kindness.” Kiarostami is the master not so much of
destroying the metaphysics of morality as of ignoring it, rendering it irrelevant.

THE 1990s

By the early 1990s, the Islamic revolution was more than a decade old, and
Kiarostami turned his attention to the nature of routinized violence via a brilliance and, as always, paradocumentary study of “homework.” Mashq-e Shab (“Homework,” 1990) is a collection of interviews with schoolchildren in which they reflect on the difficulty, redundancy, and futility of homework. Whether one uses the word mashq (literally, “exercise”) or taklif (literally, “duty”) for “homework,” there is a sense of violence in Kiarostami’s grasp of the nature and function of education. What emerges from Homework is a frightful, yet perfectly innocent, indictment of the routinized violence imbedded in all systematized “education.” The so-called process of “socialization” emerges here as a paradigm of the command-and-obedience nexus that becomes constitutional to man as a social animal. The power of Kiarostami’s examination is that he scarcely touches on the all-important issue of the political uses of “education.” While the Pahlavi government had an imperial reading of Iranian history piped into its educational apparatus, the Islamic Republic prompted the most radical Islamization of that same history. But what Kiarostami targets, as always, is something much more serious than such variations on the theme of indoctrination. What he does, through the perfectly pitched dialogues of the children themselves, is to uncover narratively the metaphysics of violence as normatively transubstantiated into matters of ethics, morality, responsibility, and literacy. The children’s innocent references to television cartoons thus assume a splendidly subversive intonation, pointing to “film” as a countermetaphysics of alternative modes of being. Homework thus emerges as one of the most cogent deconstructions of dictatorship at the elementary level—that of children being “educated” in a culture in which “punishment” is perfectly understood and instantly associated with being beaten with a belt by a father, while “encouragement” has absolutely no meaning or significance whatsoever. By far the most disturbing sequence of the
film is its last interview with a seven-year-old boy named Majid who is petrified at the sight of Kiarostami and his camera crew. With a paradoxical twist, Kiarostami’s own rather scary face, with dark glasses, staring at these innocent children sitting in front of a monstrous apparition formed by the camera and the camera crew, becomes part of this apparatus of fear that he is obviously trying to undo. Majid is inconsolable except in the presence of his young friend Mola’i. At the end, Kiarostami manages to liberate himself and the audience from this abyss into which he has cast everybody by having Majid recite a beautiful hymn in which God is thanked for the beauty of the world and for giving us eyes to see it. The camera freezes on the faces of Majid and Mola’i while the same song is sung by a chorus. The geography of fear mapped on these innocent faces is the most enduring image of \textit{Homework}, rendered even more fearful when seen against the background of routinized indoctrination, the “Islamic ethics” drilled into them every morning as they form obedient rows to go to their classes. As the virtues of the Shiite saints are being recited to them, the children evince a restless, jubilant, and fidgety resistance, which at one point becomes so pronounced that the Islamic censor forces Kiarostami to cut off the sound, at which point the subversive power becomes even more evident.

In the same year, Kiarostami took advantage of the true story of an imposter to achieve one of his most successful analyses of the nature of reality, before the completion of the Rostam-abad trilogy in 1994. \textit{Nama-ye Nazdik} (“\textit{Close-Up},” 1990) is the fictive recreation of the real story of a man named Ali Sabzian who so admired Mohsen Makhmalbaf, one of Iran’s leading filmmakers, that he pretended to be him. Ali Sabzian even convinced an unsuspecting family that he was Makhmalbaf and that he was going to make a film in which they and their house would be prominently featured. The family, an elderly couple and their children, fell for the impostor “Makhmalbaf” and agreed to act for him. Sabzian was finally recognized for the impostor that he was and taken to court by the family for his deception and on suspicion that he was planning to rob their house. Kiarostami heard this story and immediately seized upon it. He found Sabzian and the family he had fooled and persuaded them to reenact their encounter. In the meantime, Kiarostami repeatedly asked Sabzian to explain his actions. The result was a sustained examination of the nature of reality in the face of its simulation.\footnote{In \textit{Close-Up}, Kiarostami contemplates the interaction of fact and fantasy in the}
story of Sabzian/Makhmalbaf. One could begin with either fact or fantasy. It would not make any difference, and therein lies the power of the film. Makhmalbaf is a filmmaker, a real man who creates fictional worlds. Sabzian fictitiously enters the real world of Makhmalbaf by pretending to be him. Or we can say that Sabzian physically enters the fictitious world of Makhmalbaf. He becomes so successful in his fantasy that he convinces a perfectly respectable family to cooperate with him, thinking that he is Makhmalbaf. Sabzian’s fiction finally unravels and he is taken to a real court where he receives a real jail term. But this all happens before Kiarostami enters the scene. Kiarostami now subjects everything to a double erasure by asking the real people involved in the event to “reenact” for him what happened. But by doubly negating the real, Kiarostami’s erasure confirms a reality: Sabzian now actually does act and direct for Kiarostami, the family does feature in a movie, and Kiarostami ends up making a film. The spectator is thus put in the bizarrest of situations, a succession of fact and fantasy, in which one knows one is watching a fiction (Kiarostami’s Close-Up) that is based on fact (Sabzian’s real story) that is based on fiction (Sabzian pretending to be Makhmalbaf) that is based on fact (Makhmalbaf as a leading Iranian filmmaker) that is based on fiction (Makhmalbaf making fictional stories in film) that is based on fact (the reality Makhmalbaf transforms into fiction).

The translucent nature of fact-as-fantasy thus becomes the diaphanous lens through which Kiarostami begins to show us ways of looking we never knew existed. In his next two films, Zendegi va digar Hich (“Life and then Nothing” [or “And Life Goes On”], 1992) and Zir-e Derakhtan-e Zeytun (“Through the Olive Trees,” 1994), Kiarostami brings this particular angle in his work to perfection. And there are traces of this fascination with the nature of reality in many of his earlier films. But Close-Up is the first consistent instance of this distinctive feature of Kiarostami’s cinema. By thus aesthetically subverting the metaphysics of “the real,” Kiarostami has opened the way to radical dismantling of the structural violence of “meaning,” upon which is predicated such metaphysical surrogates as “history,” “tradition,” “identity,” and “piety.” A pellucid reading of reality-as-fantasy begins to replace the opaque metaphysics of objectivity at the roots of all violent claims to truth. The fictive transparency of the real that thus emerges begins to eat into the legitimacy of any and every absolutist claim to truth, reality, veracity, having-been-there, having-seen-it.
The fictive lucidity of the real is the strategic attendance upon the reality otherwise concealed behind the metaphysics of presence, the culture of the significant, the ideology of the victorious, the politics of truth. Here, Kiarostami takes his aesthetic cues from the first poet of this transparency, Sohrab Sepehri:

By the sunset,
In the midst of the tired presence of things,
An expectant gaze
Looked at the hollowness of time.

Upon the table,
The noisy presence of a few fresh fruits
Was flowing towards a vague intuition of death.

And upon the carpet of idleness, the wind
Had graced the soft border of life
With the aroma of the little garden.

And just like a fan unfurled, the mind
Had held the bright surface of the flower
And cooled itself with it.

The traveler
Descended from the bus:
"What a beautiful sky!"
And the continuity of the street
Carried his loneliness away.²²

In the poetry of Sepehri, reality becomes translucent. It is stripped of all its accumulated layers of metaphysics. Thus cleared of its historically accumulated burdens of "meaning," reality reveals itself as the object of mere observation. But this time around, the very act of observation is the result of a set of fresh eyes, eyes cleansed of all the dust of metaphysics, culture, ideology, politics.

In 1990, three years after Kiarostami had made Where Is the Friend's House?, a devastating earthquake struck northern Iran. Among the areas affected was the
village of Koker in the Rostam-abad region, where Kiarostami had filmed Where Is the Friend's House? in 1987. As the entire country and the international community mobilized to help the victims of the earthquake, Kiarostami assembled his camera crew and technical support and traveled to the site of the tragedy to see what had happened to the people who had acted in his film. Zendegi va digar Hich (or Zendegi Edameh Darad) (Life and then Nothing [or And Life Goes On], 1992) was the result of this trip.

In a post-screening appearance on 26 April 1996 in New York, Richard Peña, the Programming Director of the New York Film Festival, and Abbas Kiarostami offered two complementary explanations of why the first title of this film, Life and then Nothing, was subsequently changed to And Life Goes On. When the film was premiered at the Cannes Film Festival in 1992, there was another film with the same title. In order to avoid confusion, Kiarostami changed the title of his film to And Life Goes On. He also added that the first title, Life and then Nothing, was probably offensive to those deeply involved in religion, who might feel that he was denying the existence of the afterlife. For this reason also he decided to change the title. As should become evident in any close reading of Life and then Nothing, Kiarostami has no metaphysical concern whatsoever, one way or another. The pun on Life and then Nothing leans much more heavily on "Life" than on "and then Nothing." The "and then nothingness" of the pun collapses everything other than life, not just the metaphysics of it, into "life." I also think that perhaps in the back of Kiarostami's mind, when giving this title to his film, was the Persian translation of the Italian journalist Oriana Fallaci's Vietnam memoir, Zendegi, Jang, va digar Hich ("Life, War, and then Nothing").

What Kiarostami achieves in this film is so daring, so brutally and beautifully naked, nude, revelatory, and rambunctious that it brought him as much praise and admiration as it did violent condemnation and rebuke. What Life and then Nothing demonstrates, with characteristic simplicity, elegance, and matter-of-factness, is the boisterous, unruly nature of life, the fact that living is good, that death is just there, and that life in its bizarre accidentality has a logic and rhetoric, a twisted irony, entirely its own. Life is riotous and rowdy; no morality, history, culture, habit, manner, or propriety can hold it together, define it, narrate it. So disorderly and unruly is life, and yet so joyous and jubilant, that no earthquake, no calamity, no revolution, no coup d'état, no exile, no heartaches
Kiarostami's *And Life Goes On* is a magnificent homage to life in the midst of a misery untouched by theology or theocracy—a visual poem in praise of grace and beauty in the most unlikely circumstances of dreams turning into nightmares, no emblems of hope becoming insignia of despair, can alter its enduring enchantment. Kiarostami showed children delighted by discussions of the soccer World Cup, young couples preparing for their wedding night, old men putting up television antennas, and all of these in the midst of the most brutal destruction of life and landscape. His camera, caring and caressing, intrudes with the gentlest presence, always knowing where to stop, when to look, how to gaze, why to turn. Iranian critics committed to “Islamic ideology,” “revolution,” “social responsibility,” “moral standards,” and, above all, to the metaphysics of fear and mourning were up in arms against Kiarostami after the release of this film. His entire oeuvre was ridiculed. He was accused of not knowing the fundamentals of filmmaking. Detailed readings of his films focused on his technical errors. “Foreigners” were accused of all
kinds of plots, designs, and hidden agendas to give Kiarostami prizes in international festivals. But he also had supporters, admirers, and critically positive viewers of his films. What was certain after Life and then Nothing was that Kiarostami had touched something primordial, a raw nerve in Iranian politics, something visceral, subterranean, gut-wrenching, forbidden in Iranian culture. What was also evident was that in postrevolutionary Iran, cinema was effectively replacing poetry, plays, short stories, and novels as the most significant cultural medium. Whereas from the 1950s through the 1970s it was the poetry of Nima Yushij, Akhavan Sales, Ahmad Shamlu, Forough Farrokhzad, and Sohrab Sepehri; the plays of Gholamhossein Sa‘edi, Akbar Radi, and Bahram Beiza‘i; and the short stories and novels of Sadeq Hedayat, Ebrahim Golestan, Sadeq Chubak, Simin Daneshvar, Houshang Golshiri, and Mahmoud Dolatabadi that defined the terms of aesthetic engagement with matters of society and polity, in the 1980s and the 1990s, Kiarostami’s films figured markedly in a movement that included Daryush Mehrju‘i, Amir Naderi, Bahman Farmanara, Mohsen Makhmalbaf, Rakhshan Bani-Etemad, Samira Makhmalbaf, and by far the most visually learned of all of them, Bahram Beiza‘i. Through Kiarostami’s films, and because of the global audience he began to attract, the aesthetic apparatus of a remarkably rich literary culture cast its long critical gaze on Iran and its problems of cultural modernity.

And Life Goes On thus turns into a quest of its own, while articulating another version of Where Is the Friend’s House?—a kind of unlearning of a whole culture of signification, an entire hierarchy of order. In Iranian mythology, civilization originates with King Kiyumars (Gayomartan or Gayomard, in the Avesta), who is considered to be the “first man.” Kiyumars is the initiator of law and order, the state, and monarchy. He introduces order, commands the first army, leads the first community, establishes borders, demands obedience. Kiyumars’ son Siyamak is killed by demons, the divs, and his grandson Hushang (the Avestan Haoshanha) continues his grandfather’s civilizing mission. He develops agriculture and invents the crafts. It is finally left to Hushang’s son Tahmuras (Takhma Urupi of the Avesta) to confront the divs. Among the deeds of Tahmuras is the capture of Ahriman (or Angra Mainyu) and riding on his back around the world. It is finally from the divs that Tahmuras, and with him humanity, learned the art of writing.
The captives bound and stricken begged their lives.
“Destroy us not,” they said, “and we will teach thee
A new and fruitful art.”

The art of writing, the ultimate end of civilization, so that the glories of culture could be recorded, was thus given to primordial man by his fiercest enemy; it was born out of hostility and anger, come into being from fear and dread, taught by the demons. This ambivalence is at the heart of culture, according to the Persian myth of creation. Kiarostami’s visual renarration of all manner of being always has a vividly antmythological bent, a matter-of-factness that denies the intrusion of any thematic metaphysics, or aesthetics even, into the non-sensicality of the sheer force of being. Kiarostami is not even the last metaphysician. He is an antimetaphysician, but only by completely abandoning the metaphysical project, not by opposing it. Abandoning metaphysics, and with it also aesthetics, culture, ideology, and politics, Kiarostami does not erect an alternative canopy. His is the open air of the absolutism of reality, to use Hans Blumenberg’s term, and yet there is no fright on the face of that absolutism. All that is thrives in celebration. Here, Blumenberg’s assertion that “[c]ultures that have not yet achieved mastery of their reality continue to dream the dream and would snatch its realization away from those who think they have already awakened from it,” needs to be radically reconsidered. Because of Kiarostami’s reconfiguration of reality in such an awakening way that always stops at the border of dreaming a dream, we can now imagine a mode of being beyond false and falsifying fantasies.

Among the rubble of the earthquake in Koker, Kiarostami noted a budding love between two of the young residents whom he had filmed in Life and then Nothing. It was a play on the on-screen/off-screen variations on that love story which became the content of Zir-e Derakhtan-e Zeytun (“Through the Olive Trees,” 1994), the third of the Rostam-abad trilogy.

What Through the Olive Trees did was to confirm and bring to a dramatic climax Kiarostami’s perennial fascination with the nature of reality, with the fictive transparency of the real. Through the innocent act of role-playing by two non-professional “actors,” the mere reality of fiction makes an impossible love possible. Kiarostami’s gentle and unobtrusive gaze is fixed on the borderline of
In *Through the Olive Trees*, Tahereh Ladania's prolonged silences and Kiarostami's long takes map out uncharted territories in human emotion that (im)possibility where fact and fiction, reality and fantasy, wish and fulfillment, negotiate the terms of their respective enchantments. Through this gaze Kiarostami has succeeded in teaching us the infinite possibilities concealed beneath the received impossibilities of cultures as violent metaphysics.

Finally, in *Ta’em-e Gilas* ("Taste of Cherry," 1997), Kiarostami carried his fascination with the nature and disposition of reality to an examination of being-unto-death, an antimetaphysical examination of suicide. In an interview with Kiarostami in New York, when he was making *Taste of Cherry*, he was asked why he had turned to the subject of suicide. He replied that he had become interested in the matter when he read the aphorism of E. M. Cioran: "[h]ad it not been for the possibility of suicide, I would have killed myself a long time ago." The
difference between Kiarostami's *Taste of Cherry* and Cioran's *The Trouble with Being Born*, his frighteningly gloomy reflection on the absurdity of life, lies precisely in Kiarostami's ability to turn that absurdity into a tolerable, one might even say celebratory, reflection. Cioran's brilliance rests on his morbid disposition: "Nothing is a better proof of how far humanity has regressed than the impossibility of finding a single nation, a single tribe, among whom birth still provokes mourning and lamentation."25 Kiarostami, however, does not dwell on actual lamentation. He can manage to bring a character into a suicidal man's car who will sing the most beautifully accented song in praise of life, as evident and palpable in the taste of two pairs of cherries. He can have his camera dwell on the motionless face of the same suicidal man so long, deliberately, and persistently that the screen oozes with the whole might and majesty of life. "I endure myself," Cioran replied to the man who asked him, "What do you do from morning to night?"26 This is not what Kiarostami would answer. "I make films," he would probably say. There is a manifest plainness about Kiarostami's reading of life, a kind of tangentiality to all philosophies and all metaphysics, that cannot suffer the consequences of too much self-reflection as a prelude to volumes of self-pity.

Even at the most disquieting moments of despair, Kiarostami, like Sohrab Sepehri, his poetic counterpart, sees beauty in the benign brutality of being:

The sun was setting.
The sound of the intelligence of all
Vegetation could be heard.

The traveler had arrived
And had sat upon a comfortable chair
By the lawn:

"I am sad.
I am terribly sad.
On my way here all I could
Think of was but one thing.
The color of the pastures
Was so dazzling
And the lines of the road
Were lost in the sadness of the prairies.
What strange valleys
And the horse, do you remember,
Was white
And just like a clean word
Was pasturing on the green silence of the meadow.
And then the colorful strangeness of the village by the road,
And then, the tunnels.

"I am sad.
I am terribly sad,
And nothing
Not even these aromatic minutes
That are dying on the branches of the orange tree,
Nor the sincerity of the word
Exchanged between the silence
Of the two leaves of this wallflower,
No, nothing can relieve me
From the attack of the emptiness of my surroundings.
And I believe
That this harmonious melody
Will be heard for ever." 27

Inheriting this lyrical gift to see beauty and life in the midst of the unbearable inevitability of being, Kiarostami is the first visual poet of his nation.