

COUNTER-MEMORIES IN IRANIAN CINEMA

Edited by
Matthias Wittmann and Ute Holl

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Edinburgh University Press Ltd
The Tun – Holyrood Road
12(2f) Jackson's Entry
Edinburgh EH8 8PJ

Typeset in 10/12.5 pt Sabon
by IDSUK (DataConnection) Ltd, and
printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd,
Croydon, CR0 4YY

A CIP record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978 1 4744 7975 2 (hardback)
ISBN 978 1 4744 7977 6 (webready PDF)
ISBN 978 1 4744 7978 3 (epub)

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We would like to thank the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF) for supporting our three-year project 'Afterimages of Revolution and War. Trauma and Memoryscapes in the Post-revolutionary Iranian Cinema' (Basel, Seminar for Media Studies, 2016–19), our graphic designers Caitlin Murphy and Ronny Hunger for the design of our book cover (and conference poster), *Iran Nameh* (especially Gholam Reza Afkhami) for permission to publish Bahram Beyzaie's text, Philip Farah (Beirut/Lisbon) for his critical and meticulous proofreading, Geraldine Lyons for copy-editing the manuscript, Anna Lord for creating the detailed index, and last but not least Gillian Leslie, Fiona Conn, Sam Johnson and Richard Strachan at Edinburgh University Press for their helpful advice, support, and generosity.

6. DIFFERENT TIME, DIFFERENT SPACE: FILMIC FORMS OF COUNTER-MEMORY IN ABBAS KIAROSTAMI'S KOKER TRILOGY

Ute Holl

METAPHORS AND MATERIALITIES

Abbas Kiarostami's film *Khāne-ye dūst kojāst?* / *Where is the Friend's House?* (1987) is structured by two grand metaphors of memory: the pathway and the door. The schoolboy Ahmad, who desperately needs to find his friend living in a mountain village nearby, can run up a zigzagged path without hesitating to ask for the way, because the path itself is a materialized and practical, even if tacit, form of social memory. As past actions made present, the path connects to the boy's body in transferring the information it contains about how to reach the friend's village right into Ahmad's movements.¹ Saving and suspending the knowledge of direction and place, the pathway liberates the physical energies of the boy, who can follow his goal running fast, oblivious to any spatial orientation. Information about the route itself can thus be neglected or forgotten.² The path, then, as infrastructure, is a cultural, collective, and transparent dispositive of memory,³ an unconscious form in terms of psychoanalysis. It is connecting to the physical body and remains a structural form of memory without a subject, subjecting everybody.

The specific door, however, which marks the friend's house and distinguishes it from all other houses in the village, poses an altogether different problem and brings the swift movements of the boy to a sudden halt. To find the door, a singular and explicit form of memory is needed, a specific description which demands an individual form of remembering and the participation of other subjects. Singular traces and fragments of knowledge have to be

assembled. As in the account of Simonides of Keos, the legendary founder of mnemo-techniques, this particular form of remembering relates space and rhetoric, or space and description. Locating the friend's house makes is necessary to communicate in words and gestures. In the Iranian village of Poshteh, where the friend lives, there is no general numbering of streets or houses, no general technique or code of identifying and addressing a person and thus making him or her a subject.⁴ The little boy therefore needs to resort to individual descriptions of the door: apparently it is blue, as some say, but to the dismay of the little searcher many of the doors in Poshteh are blue; they are semi-industrially made, even if they are distinguished by individual marks of climate and usage. The boy has to resort to the friend's family name, which seems to be equally widespread, as are schoolboys' crimson trousers, which initially promise to be a possible trace to the friend's whereabouts. While the path uses tradition to lead the way, the doors are a different matter. They force Ahmad to ask others in order to recollect a memory that was once supposed to be collective and has now faded away and vanished.

Kiarostami's film *Where is the Friend's House?* – as his famous Koker trilogy, including *Zendegi Va Dīgar Hitch*/*Life and Nothing More* (1992) and *Zīr-e Derakhtān-e Zeytūn*/*Through the Olive Trees* (1994), as a whole – confronts collective and culturally stable forms of implicit and tacit memory on the one hand, with forms of remembering that do not have a steadfast institutional or cultural framing on the other. These films do not simply opt for the values of a stable collective memory. On the contrary, they show that culturally stern structures of memory can inhibit curiosity, initiative, and, as in the case of *Khāne-ye*



Figure 6.1 (a–c) While the path uses tradition to lead the way, the doors are a different matter. (Source: Screen grab from *Where is the Friend's House?*, 1987).

dūst kojāst?, even acts of sincere friendship. Cultural memory guarantees that as long as one follows the trodden path one is connected to a past operating in the present. But while the path provides implicit knowledge, it also conveys how difficult it is to get off the beaten track, to rid oneself of the forces of

memory and culture, to include who has been tacitly excluded, for instance, because there is no path to his doorstep and, thus, as a lady says in the last film of the trilogy, 'we don't have an address anymore.' Kiarostami's films focus on moments where memory as a collective or individual cultural technique falters and fails, where it is disturbed or becomes fuzzy and unreliable and where its collapsing undermines culture as a whole. Indeed, Kiarostami's films intentionally produce such moments of imploding memory.

In his considerate portraits of the villagers, the film shows how forces of the past and those of the present are in constant battle, visible in faces, gestures, movements. Rather than delivering accounts of events or morality tales, the film observes the forces at work in people's behavior, actions, and reactions. Kiarostami's aesthetics therefore acquire a status of being neither documentary nor fictitious but in search of a new approach to reality altogether. On the one hand, there is a focus on the materiality of things, at the same time, the filming and editing work is done with stern abstractions. Already the vivid title of the first Koker film is not a quotation taken from the young protagonist, but from a poem by Sohrab Sepehri: 'Address.' Sepehri's poetry, due to his concern with Japanese art, relies on strictly formal composing. Sepehri's poem indicates a path in this way: 'Before you get to the garden tree / there's a garden lane / more green than god's dream.'⁵

Instead of adapting either documentary or fictional forms, Kiarostami's films meticulously examine the strategies of constructing reality or fiction. These strategies are traced and marked in the worlds before the camera as well as in the camera work or editing. One of Kiarostami's own strategies to escape the blunt difference between fiction and document is to formally open his scenes towards the incidental, the aleatoric, the contingent, and unplanned.⁶ In this way, the structural memory of the many zigzagged pathways in his films is shown as inscribed on the surface of his protagonists' bodies: sweating, smiling, blushing.⁷

On the other hand, Kiarostami observes how his actors and actresses – professionals or amateurs – oscillate between presence and performance, between the memory of a script and the memory of the body. In this way, the films form a strong opposition against all aesthetics of representation in favor of making present, presentation. With this strategy, Kiarostami is able to challenge and change the relation of power, narration, and memory in cinema.⁸ Thus, his films counter memory in its basic structures.

While the search for the friend's house will turn out to be unsuccessful, the film *Where is the Friend's House?* itself turns into a negotiation of doors and the knowledge attached to them. Old, handcrafted doors, retaining and displaying the Persian art of woodcarving, *Monabat-Kāry*, are opposed to new industrially made doors about to be exchanged for the village's old doors, which, in turn, as the vendor of the new doors alleges, are traded to Teheran's



Figure 6.2 Structural memory and zigzagged pathways. (Source: Screen grab from *Where is the Friend's House?*, 1987).

museums as memorabilia. The old carpenter and doormaker of Poshteh, who insists in helping the boy in his search, explains that the old doors are singularly beautiful, even in their process of aging and decay, in their cracks and fissures. They indicate individual houses and are themselves a cross-generational form of memory. Their material matters and it marks their singularity. In fact, the singularly beautiful images of the film underline that memory only exists if attached to material things and practices. In its singular images, the film's memory turns self-reflexive.

The new steel-doors, as their vendor maintains, are supposed to last for a lifetime. Some of the elderly men, hanging out in front of the village shop, refuse to buy and object that they know what a door is. But what is a lifetime? Already, their own concepts of education and respect prove to be obsolescent, customs are turning into fading memories. The film, however, does not mourn the decay of these customs, instead showing that this form of embodied tradition is largely based on simple force: Ahmad's grandfather insists that giving the young a good spanking at intervals will teach them to remember manners and obedience and turn them into good citizens. The film in its logic and aesthetics – cast, shooting, editing, sound dramaturgy, and the sparsely used music – is exactly the reversal of this force, even if maintaining the idea of a bodily memory.

While showing two opposing techniques of social memory, general pathways, and particular doors, Kiarostami's film negotiates transitions of memory

techniques. The film may point to an impending loss of cultural knowledge, heritage, and history; however, it is also concerned with the difficulty of getting rid of those structures that impede the young to invent their own ways. Thus, we are reminded that the first image of the film *Where is the Friend's House?* had, in fact, been an extended shot on the door and doorknob of the village classroom. Here, yet another basic form of mnemo-technique is taught: the boys – and obviously boys only – learn to read and write. Scripture – according to Plato the poison of memory and of the truth of the spoken word, and according to Jacques Derrida its disavowed basis,⁹ – opens up a new culture for the boys, unknown to their parents and grandparents. In learning to read letters, they unlearn to read doors. Kiarostami keeps this in balance with emancipation: schooling should liberate the boys from agricultural or artisan work, or household errands, which their elders expect of them. On the other hand, the film unmistakably shows the disciplinary measures involved: the boys have to sit still, write onto prefabricated lines, into notebooks that all look alike, causing the initial trouble of the confounded exercise books. Finally, the cultural techniques of reading and writing not only install a new form of memory, but also a new staff of authorities, blind to experiences that escape symbolization in letters.

The film *Where is the Friend's House?* was made between a series of documentaries on schoolchildren and education, dealing with forms of disciplinary measures and initiation into society at large. These films are touching in that they document the psychological and physical force of educational measures, as well as the utter incomprehension of the adult world towards serious thoughts and considerations of children. Addressing the issue of memory, the *Koker* trilogy takes seriously what philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche discovered about the implementation of memory:

Indeed, there is perhaps nothing more fearful and more terrible in the entire prehistory of human beings than the technique for developing his memory. 'We burn something in so that it remains in the memory. Only something which never ceases to cause pain remains in the memory' – that is a leading principle of the most ancient (unfortunately also the longest) psychology on earth. We might even say that everywhere on earth nowadays where there is still solemnity, seriousness, mystery, and gloomy colours in the lives of men and people, something of that terror continues its work [. . .].¹⁰

While for Nietzsche an enhancement of memory through bodily pain seems inescapable, *Where is the Friend's House?* keeps negotiating the issue. It confronts memory and materiality, and unconscious structures of memory and conscious forms of remembering, but it also poses broader questions:

where is my people's knowledge stored? How is it imprinted or otherwise 'burned in'? Which are the media that form a people's memory, implicitly or explicitly? What kind of materials and practices are involved? In what way is memory connected to media of communication – words, letters, books, pathways, or doors and their carvings. And eventually, how does the memory of cinema interfere?

MEDIA AND MEMORY

Memory is composed of a material complex as well as of discursive systems, signs, practices, action, and behavior. It is neither just technical hardware, nor just infrastructure or procedural rules, but the interlacing of all. Memory is not a stable order of data, as computers, hard-drives, or, in fact, memory sticks might suggest. Much rather, memory is a changing order that forms its content according to historical media as well as cultural techniques and discursive formations. Memories are composed of an intrinsic connection between people, techniques, and practices.

Cinema's memory differs from radio's memory or, in fact, from the computer's and the internet's knotted pathways of remembering. Kiarostami addresses this in the last image of the film *Where is the Friend's House?* While the schoolteacher accepts and appreciates the homework in the exercise books, giving his signature, the boys hold their breath, knowing that the identical handwriting might reveal their deceit. And while the audience – especially those slow in deciphering Arabic letters or in reading Farsi – sees the writing but never really learns what exactly it is about, we all perceive, with a bit of sentiment, the dried flower in the friend's exercise book, a flower that the boy had been given by the old carpenter in Poshteh. This image is proof to a silent alliance between cinema's memory and those visual, tangible, and highly affective experiences that cannot be captured in written words. Cinema can remember what writing cannot: visual forms and figures as well as sounds and noises that literature would have to transfer into symbolic orders to store them. But this is not a one-directional path. In remembering, societies or individuals, communicating through media, mechanical, electronical, or other, may also re-configure memory. This is the precondition of all experience.¹¹

The second film of the trilogy, *Life and Nothing More*, will center around the television and its net of global broadcasting as a medium of forgetting one's present. In the third film finally, *Through the Olive Trees*, cinema itself is examined as a means of producing and reconfiguring memory and memories. Media and memory then are at the core of the trilogy's considerations. It is through this conjunction that Kiarostami addresses the difficulties of cultural and political change in Iranian society. His films are not simply documents of

Iranian history, but much rather negotiate the basic problems of all historiography, namely the question of memory and its reconfiguration of events: 'To be sure, the truths of memory are often in tension with the truths of history.'¹² The cinema of Kiarostami counters conventional structures of memory in confronting documentary forms with images and sounds, movements and voices that transcend expected orders of behavior. A memory based in practices and behavior of course counters a revolution that, although prepared by electronic media, claims to act in the name of scripture.

The virtue of Kiarostami's cinema is then that it defies representation and makes cinema a case of life and death. In a conversation with Jean-Luc Nancy Kiarostami states:

I can't bear narrative cinema. I leave the theater. The more it engages in storytelling and the better it does it, the greater my resistance to it. The only way to envision a new cinema is to have more regard for the spectator's role. It's necessary to envision an unfinished and incomplete cinema so that the spectator can intervene and fill the void, the lacks.¹³

The second part of Koker trilogy, *Life and Nothing More*, is paradigmatic in this reference to discontinuities, missing links, cracks, and fissures. And it makes sure that these aesthetics of discontinuity and intermittence are intrinsic to cinema – and opposed to television. Analog television, with its continuous flow of signals, is adequate for covering news and disaster in a mode of presence.¹⁴ Thereby, television replaces all experience of contiguity (including, as Jean-Luc Nancy reminds us, the haptic quality of film as a small skin, a *pellicule*¹⁵). With its scanning mode of observations taken with utmost immediacy – and, sometimes, indiscretion – then transmitted over long distances, television creates a paradoxical form of vicinity. It represents the immediate. In addition, television in the strict sense does not have a memory. The signals can be kept in constant transition, recording them is an additional feature which is unnecessary for broadcasting the images.¹⁶

In the film *Life and Nothing More*, the two grand paradigms of the first film, pathway and door, are replaced in more than one sense: firstly, the landscapes and buildings of the Gilan region are destroyed by the huge earthquake of 1990, pathways and doors were missing and literally being replaced. Secondly, the new film had to position itself against the excitement and voyeurism of ubiquitous television images. Therefore, doors and paths were replaced with visual iterations of gazes and frames. Thirdly, in its recursions and iterations, the cinematic form itself serves as a mnemo-basis, a structure for Kiarostami's personal memories of his instant trip to the sites of destruction:

In June 1990, an earthquake of catastrophic proportions jolted Northern Iran, killing tens of thousands of people and causing unbelievable damage. Immediately I decided to make my way to the vicinity of Koker, a village where four years earlier I had shot *Where is my Friend's House?* My concern was to find out the fate of the two young actors who played in the film but I failed to locate them. However, there was so much else to see¹⁷

While Kiarostami did travel to the Gilan region, where his family came from, right after hearing of the disaster, and while he did take one of his sons to relocate, retrieve, and literally remember the cast of his first film, he did not shoot *Life and Nothing More* at the time but went back five and then eleven months after the earthquake to restage what he had witnessed or remembered of it: 'it was all a reconstruction, although it looked like a documentary.'¹⁸ What the film shows is what Kiarostami remembers to have remembered – probably based on written notes and photographs – and then recast into filmic forms. Cinematic memory in its characteristics, the recording and montage of images and sounds, thus forms memories that are neither real nor fictitious.

It is central to the notion of medially reconfiguring the forms of memory that we do not confound reconstruction with representation. In fact, the two notions mark the opposite sides of mnemo-technical interventions. Reconstructions actually mark alienated and abstract forms in order to expose the difference between – probably – traumatic and irrepresentable incidents and their cinematic restaging. Representation on the other hand deletes or denies this difference. Cinema has to find its own form of distancing and alienation, lack or fissure, not only in order to avoid sensationalism, reporter's voyeurism, and false solicitousness, but to point towards the traces of the event. The traces are distinguished from immediate experience according to the memory form of cinema. In this process, the filmed layers of events and memories start shifting.

The film *Life and Nothing More* begins with music from the off, obviously broadcast by another medium, either radio or television, eventually interrupted by a female's voice addressing the audiences – the diegetic ones in the film, as well as us, the cinema's audience, far away from the site of the catastrophe and very distant in time – on behalf of the Red Halfmoon, to propose measures of support for children who have lost parents and homes. All the while, the first image, a shot through the window of a toll booth on the highway, shows the windows of customer's cars, intermittently stopping and moving on, and in the background, more booths and more car windows passing by, forming a strange *mis en abyme* of gazes. Dynamically, the cars' window frames are jerking by, intermittently, just like single frames in front of a projection machine. This opening shot also points to the fact that cinema, as opposed to television coverage and electronic images, prompts the audience to consider the *hors-champ*, the

off-space, that film implies but does not show. The alter ego of the director in the film and his fictional son, Puya, travel through the landscapes as in a camera obscura, looking out to all sides to see jammed roads, destroyed houses, and desperate people, all of it framed by the cars' windows. The false immediacy television tends to suggest in its shots from the scenes of destruction is here intentionally alienated by the form of framing as a remediation of the gaze.

This cinematic framing and fragmenting of the gaze is augmented in an extended sequence – ten minutes into the film – of traveling through a tunnel. In the dark, the sleeping boy in the back of the car is, again intermittently, illuminated. While he sleeps or daydreams, only the noise of cars passing by is audible. In this second Koker film, it is mostly the sound that disturbs the imaginary closure of the scenes. This becomes very obvious after the cut which ends the tunnel sequence, suggesting that the car has apparently already reached the mountainous region of Gilan. While the two travelers drive through a city of ruins and rubble, passed workforces clearing up the space, a strange sound montage is heard from the off, mixing a singing voice, transmitted through a megaphone, resembling a muezzin's, albeit sounding like a pop song, with the rhythmical sound of shoveling, as well as strange noises of voices seemingly played backwards. This montage does not really match what is shown in the image and it remains undecidable whether it comes from the environment, the car's radio, or from the imagination and nightmares of the sleeping boy. It is in these frames of multiple references that a subject or an 'author' of the remembrances shifts. Moreover, the difference between perception, or the direct filming of a situation, and memories, reconstruction of former impressions, are indistinguishable. Sounds and images could be the memories of people outside or the travelers in the car, who are shocked by sights and sounds of destruction. Traumatic incidents that cannot be adequately remembered are thus condensed into a cinematic tableau of different time-layers, which radically escapes filmic conventions of representation. Instead, it presents – indeed, it makes present – the situation as a tableau constructing memory against the grain of single impressions and in terms of a compressed time. Thus, the extended overture of the film proposes a third form of highly artificial reconstruction of a disastrous reality.

Only when father and son leave the highway and enter a zigzagged path with an uncertain ending do they encounter singular people with singular objects carried on their shoulders as if to mock the perception in Platon's cave. Here, however, it is not the objects nor ideas that matter but the carrying bodies as Kiarostami's film depicts them in their ascents on zigzagged streets and paths. The man who had played the old carpenter in *Where is the Friend's House?* incidentally shows up carrying a urinal, recalling Duchamp and surreal invectives against representation, complaining that cinema's temporal strategies of making people look older than they are actually compromise all concepts of

time and, thus, of memory. He, too, is inserted into a time of crisis, condensed according to the cinema.

All the witnesses from along the road will stick their heads into the car window and deliver their accounts of events. The film becomes a protocol of injured and hurt bodies. The witnesses complain and mourn, the physicality of their reports is more important than the descriptions of the earthquake itself. Against this physicality, an abstraction is brought into position. The framing of their heads separates them from the surrounding reality, and the role of the witness is underscored as never being immediate but always mediated and remediated to, exactly, create authenticity according to a medium involved; in this case, the cinema. In assembling various forms and sources of information which he had collected during his first trip, Kiarostami abandons the position of a metaphysical, a historian's subject of remembering. While assembling stories of the earthquake's disaster, the film also assembles a discourse of memory as a whole. In this, he leaves the construction of memory to the spectators.

Following Friedrich Nietzsche's concept of analyzing history in reconstructing a discontinuous set of forces instead of assuming a continuous evolutionary development discovered in figures and facts, Michel Foucault listed a set of procedures to ensure the safeguarding of true historical events. These are set against the metaphysical abstraction of a universal truth that, according to Nietzsche, needs itself to be deciphered as a result of violent claims and battles in the past. The notion of truth had only been turned into a universal entity through practical and hands-on procedures or authentication, or, as Foucault puts it, through 'the long baking process of history.'¹⁹ Instead of assuming a single origin of a presumed development in history, Nietzsche and, in fact, Foucault encourage historians to watch out for vast numbers of accounts and numberless beginnings, going back into the ramifications of historical data and documents as a genealogist would. Historiography then should examine evidence like archaeologists do if they study 'passing events in their proper dispersion.'²⁰ Historians should insist on the 'heterogeneity'²¹ of phenomena, where the antiquarian's history imagines a consistency of facts and events. The 'gray, meticulous and patiently documentary'²² work of genealogists then consists in reconstructing forces and media, bodies and passions at work in history.²³ In focusing on the body, as 'the inscribed surface of events,'²⁴ taking sentiments and passions, as well as fear and violence, seriously as symptoms of historical power relations, this Foucauldian genealogy refrains from the assumption of a subject of metahistorical knowledge, and prompts us to look out for 'the reversal of a relationship of forces'²⁵ and most of all for the 'transformation of history into a totally different form of time.'²⁶ It is this procedure that Foucault calls the construction of a counter-memory. And it is extraordinarily surprising how much his description corresponds to how cinematically based historiography operates: recording heterogeneous materials, things, architectures,

light, and sounds as well as actions, bodies, or voices as forms of enunciation; blending and relating different places and times, confusing the identities of actors, actresses, and their roles in scanning their features in close-ups, for instance. Cinema, more than the static images of photography, can register physical symptoms of historical antagonistic forces as they inscribe themselves onto faces and surfaces of the body. However, the parallels between a genealogist's model of history and cinema may seem less surprising if we keep in sight that Nietzsche wrote the relevant texts in this respect exactly at the time when chrono-photography took over proofs and evidences on the fields of psychiatry, physiology, and criminology, experiments from which cinema as a cultural technique and as an entertainment industry eventually emerged. Foucault, quoting from 'Twilight of the Idols,' reminds us that Nietzsche at the time tended to merge 'historical and physiological' arguments.²⁷

Two aspects are important for the analysis of cinematic formations of a counter-memory: the turning of historical perception away from events, decisions, or battles towards forces at work in human and non-human relations; and, secondly, the establishing of a different time form. This is exactly what the many layers of Kiarostami's film in its images and framings, sounds and voices, accounts and silences achieve: they form a time structure that is neither in synch with immediate documentary filming of witnesses and disastrous sights, nor is it a fictitious narration. The bodies of the actors and actresses, their movements and voices, and even the filmmaker's attention towards their thirst and their need to urinate, as Jean-Luc Nancy underlines in his essay on the Koker trilogy, *The Evidence of Film*, counters conventional models of what historical facts are composed of. Filmic memory informs memories differently. Finally, Kiarostami in his film collects evidence not in reorganizing what he found on his first excursion, but in picturing 'passing events in their proper dispersion.'²⁸ The memory of cinema, not the memory of single protagonists is at work in the film.

In this respect, the metaphorical image, which Jean-Luc Nancy sees 'at the center of the film'²⁹ – a washed-out color print of an elderly peasant, sitting at his table with his tea glass, plate and pipe, *chopog* – is probably less emblematic for the film's memory discourse than Nancy wishes it to be. This poster, pasted across a crack in a partially destroyed house, the fissure crossing both poster and wall, rather points to the basic cinematic aesthetics of voids in or in-between images than to a forgotten lore or, as Alberto Elena supposes, 'the image of a picture torn by a great crack in the wall of one of the damaged houses, serves as a last powerful symbol of the stubborn fortitude of the villagers.'³⁰ In fact, Kiarostami had attached the poster, of which thousands were distributed in the villages in the 1980s, to the cracked wall during his filming of the 'reconstruction' of memories, and had himself meticulously applied the fissure to the image.³¹ The fissure is therefore less a reminder of natural forces than emblematic for interventions of the cinema and film directors.

Cinema's memory in the Koker trilogy is exposed as the invisible operative moment of images perceived only as blind spot, or in contrast to other media. Kiarostami deploys the issue of the ubiquitous television and in this case the news of the World Cup soccer games to point out the structure of a memory formed by multiple media, print, radio, or television, but obviously dominated by television. As such it pervades Iranian culture, at the same time connecting it to global communication. When father and son pick up another boy on the road to Koker – who reminds them that he had also had a part in the school scenes of *Where is the Friends' House?* – their conversation is constantly disturbed by a confusion of the reports on the earthquake, which the fictitious film director had asked for – 'Tell us what happened!' – and those of the match between Brazil and Scotland – 'Scotland scored first.' The title of the film itself is also connected to the issue of television. In a conversation with a young man who is busy installing an antenna on the side of the road, the film director asks him if he thought it proper to watch a soccer game in a time of mourning. The man answers: 'To tell the truth, I am also in mourning. I have lost my sister and three cousins. But what can we do? The cup takes place every four years. We can't miss it. Life goes on.' Kiarostami's very cinematic intervention here is to address global communication while it is interrupted, the antenna in construction, the transmission malfunctioning, the people camping outside hoping for the broadcast to take place. His images and sounds focus on the discontinuity and, exactly, the gap between ongoing life and an endless television broadcast that covers it. In this, Kiarostami's admiration for the people in despair has been mistaken for a call to confidence and perseverance. The films propose much rather an essay on a society's self-reflexion with the help of cinema and its aesthetics of discontinuity.³²

MASQUERADES AND SIMULATION

The impact of cinema itself on the construction of memory is the issue of the last of the Koker films, *Through the Olive Trees*, in its self-reflexive turns and double and triple masquerades in the *mis en scènes*. Pretending to be a documentation of the making of a feature film, every shot in *Through the Olive Trees* is meticulously framed, propped, and enacted and as carefully staged as a theater play. Then again, many protagonists speak right across the theatrical fourth wall into the camera, irritating the diegetic illusion.

What might seem to be a play with reality is, however, a serious game: part two and three of the trilogy are concerned with the question of how media, and specifically cinema, might provide a form of memory for an inconceivable and inexpressible disaster, the earthquake that caused between 35,000 and 50,000 deaths and left an estimated number of between 60,000–100,000 people injured. Instead of providing a coherent form of institutional or ritual mourning as a collectively solid form of memory, the films attempt to open

access for all to sincere mourning and, at the same time, invent a different conception of life in its fragility.

The film begins with unfurling the relentless power relations that any feature film shoot implies: the casting of young girls, who admire the director, the transformation of environments into credible filmsets with props and technical paraphernalia, the clearing of the space from people that normally inhabit it, giving actresses and actors false names and finally forcing them to wear costumes they don't like and to say lines that do not match their sentiments to the world, to each other, and towards their self-image and -esteem. On the other hand, the film invests all its possible art and technology into creating an unmediated relation to the environment, things, and people, focusing on the material reality of walls, flowers, or naked feet.

Through the Olive Trees takes up the case of a young man, Hossein, whom the fictitious director in *Life and Nothing More* had interviewed about his wedding. Hossein maintains to have married his bride right after the earthquake, although he claims to have lost sixty-five of his friends and family, explaining that he had taken the advantage of the moment and the chaos to outplay family customs and to accomplish facts. However, and this had found the approval of the director, he had taken care of his wife and found a house for them to live in against all odds. This is one of rare moments in *Life and Nothing More* where Kiarostami had the seemingly documentary soundtrack covered with music, Antonio Vivaldi's solemn *Concert for Two Horns*, thus overtly and obviously drawing on feature film conventions.

That same scene is restaged in *Through the Olive Trees*, at the bottom of the same staircase of the same house, with the fictitious director of the former film, played by Farhad Kheradmand, delivering the same lines, directed by another actor acting as director, Mohammad Ali Keshavarz, in place of Abbas Kiarostami's directing in *Life and Nothing More*, surrounded by a bored film team that in the former film we had not seen. Actually, to augment confusion, the scene is restaged and re-enacted in two versions, first with a young man playing Hossein, who turns out to have a speech impediment, and then by the actor, or amateur player, Hossein Rezai, who had played Hossein in *Life and Nothing More*, now pretending to play himself. In a series of takes, he enters the frame again and again, carrying a sack of plaster or explaining his marriage procedure, exactly as in the 'original' scene, which, as we meanwhile know, was in fact a postponed reconstruction of events remembered in another medium. Foucault's advice for a genealogist's research – to 'push the masquerade to its limits'³³ in order to erase the idea of origin and understand the cultural fabrications of identities, or rather their constitutive fragility, as well as the 'baking' of an absolute truth – is here projected onto cinematic strategies of producing impressions of truthful memories. In playing with masquerades, Kiarostami teaches his audience how authenticity is made

in cinema, but at the same time he provokes emotions and reactions that might stand in for 'life and nothing more.'

In the course of filming, another level of narration is introduced. It turns out that Hossein, who also performs as assistant and caterer on the set, had been trying to court the actress of the protagonist Tahereh, also named Tahereh, outside of the set, against her and her family's will, and the project failed with the earthquake and the death of Tahereh's parents. All this caused Hossein, as he says, to mistake the tremors' origin as caused by his own heart beating. The long account of Hossein's, telling 'the director' about his failed courtship, seems unstaged, real, and sincere. But when he remembers his last encounter with the girl and her grandmother at the village's cemetery, something extraordinary happens: the film cuts into a flashback, music and sounds announcing the transition to a different time and place. The most conventional form indicating remembrance in terms of cinematic fiction, the flashback, now seems overtly staged and an obvious simulation of a filmic return to the past. Also, it crosses out the false immediacy of the former confession. In the cinematically framed past, then, we see Hossein, following him closely trailing the grandmother in a path through the olive trees, again failing in his proposal. Lost in the olive grove he stumbles into another filmset, which we only see from the outside, technicians and crew, but the sound indicates that we have arrived in (a restaging of) a scene from the film *Life and Nothing More*. From then on, the circular movements of endless repetitions of takes on the set, so similar to each other as to make us doubt that they were not simply copied in the lab, and constant references to corresponding scenes in former films make it impossible for the spectator to organize his memories in the time and reality loops of scenes. Even Mrs. Shivas's clapperboard, covering the whole field of the image and pushing the audience into the crew's perspective of watching rushes, only multiplies the levels of recognition and remembering. Caught in the film as if in a Möbius-strip of memory, spectators hope for the redemptive order 'cut!' from the director. But the cuts only add further levels of re-enactment and repetition.

These entanglements and shifts of identities as well as places, times, and tenses, which are so easy for the cinema to engender, are altogether impossible to reproduce in words. Helplessly, one is tempted to revert to punctuation marks: 'Hossein,' 'he,' 'himself,' or [the actor]. Writing has to settle for a certain general description, while film can picture people and things in their individual particularity. Film forms of referencing use indexical traits and traces of materialities to produce identity in terms of photographic media. On the other hand, editing and montage are able to link images across the logics of time and space to produce non-linear, condensed, and contradictory tenses and places. In cinema, therefore, the two models of memory, pathway and door keep returning: the unconscious memory of the pathway in the continuous movement of photographic images, which our perception follows automatically; and the particular

and discontinuous nexus produced in montage, a form or narration which has often been compared to a corridor with many possible doors to choose from. This includes the exit via gap or void.

Through the perception of gaps and voids, through intentional disturbances such as discontinuities, asynchronous sounds, or the confusion of on-set and off-set relations, can the mediality of the medium come into view of the spectators. In pointing to the construction of truth and reality in film, cinematic memory, as an operation of organizing memories in their plural, can be analyzed as contingent and subjected to transformation. Kiarostami's intentional disorganization of any stable basis for remembering past events then turns the spectator's attention towards the tacit order of collective memory, has him stumble across what was thought to be pencil's nature. Kiarostami's films denaturalize the laws and logics of memory. In this, Kiarostami's cinema is blowing the cover of cinematic evidence as such and countering its culture, as Nancy writes: 'Cinema (and with it television, video, and photography: in Kiarostami's films they play a part that is not accidental) makes evident a conspicuous form of the world, a form or a sense.'³⁴ This destabilization of social, mental, and political certitude, usually secured and safeguarded by institutions of the trust in records and archives, must be understood as the effort of genealogical research into a history that negotiates life without the warrant of vitalism: 'the true historical sense confirms our existence among countless lost events, without a landmark or a point of reference.'³⁵

Memory is not content, but a structure, and this structure not only changes with different media but also with the use of a medium and the disorganization of its orders. In Chris Marker's *Sans Soleil*, the female narrator reads from the letters of a fictitious cameraman Sandor Krasna: 'He wrote me: I will have spent my life trying to understand the function of remembering, which is not the opposite of forgetting, but rather its lining. We do not remember, we rewrite memory much as history is rewritten.' And he adds a question that may also have been the outset for Kiarostami's Koker studies: 'How can one remember thirst?' If memory is a matter of translation, it is also a matter of leaving somethings untranslatable, in the realm of the unnoticed, the unperceived, in lacks, breaks, and fissures.

NOTES

1. Cf. Richard Terdiman, *Present Past: Modernity and the Memory Crisis* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press 1993).
2. Cf. Elena Esposito, *La memoria sociale. Mezzi per comunicare e modi di dimenticare* (Roma-Bari: Laterza 2001).
3. Cf. even if the latter is subdivided into communicative, cultural, and political memories according to the structure of their transference, as in Jan Assmann, 'Globalization,

- Universalism, and the Erosion of Cultural Memory,' in *Memory in a Global Age. Discourses, Practices and Trajectories*, eds. A. Assmann and S. Conrad (New York: Palgrave Macmillan Memory Studies 2010), pp. 121–37.
4. Cf. Bernhard Siegert, '(Not) in Place. The Grid, or, Cultural Techniques of Ruling Spaces,' in B. Siegert, *Cultural Techniques, Grids, Filters, Doors and Other Articulations of the Real* (New York: Fordham University Press 2015), pp. 97–120.
 5. Sohrab Sepehri, 'Where is the House of the Friend?,' in Sohrab Sepehri, *A Selection of Poems from the Eight Book* (Bloomington, IN: Balboa Press 2013), p. 131. It was the French distributor that opted for 'My Friend's House,' German and some English translators followed. Hence the variations of the title, *the* or *my* friend's house.
 6. Cf. Ute Holl, 'Mit ohne Ordnung. Kontingenzproduktion als Strategie des Dokumentarischen (zum Beispiel Abbas Kiarostami),' in *Sichtbar machen. Politiken des Dokumentarfilms*, eds. Elisabeth Büttner et. al. (Ed.) (Berlin: Vorwerk 8 [Texte zum Dokumentarfilm]), pp. 111–30.
 7. I thank Matthias Wittmann for reminding me of the vast literature on the figuration of zigzagged paths in the iconography of Persian miniatures. Kiarostami himself, however, in his dialogue with Jean-Luc Nancy Kiarostami, states that 'I've never really felt close to Persian miniature painting.' 'Abbas Kiarostami, Jean-Luc Nancy in Conversation,' in Jean-Luc Nancy, *Abbas Kiarostami. The Evidence of Film* (Bruxelles: Yves Gevaert Éditeur 2001), pp. 80–95, p. 80. Of course, that does not mean that he is not working within a cultural heritage and, thus, cultural memory.
 8. Cf. Alberto Elena, *The Cinema of Abbas Kiarostami* (London: Iran Heritage Foundation 2005), p. 72f.
 9. Cf. Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press 1997).
 10. Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals. A Polemical Tract*, trans. Ian Johnston (Arlington, VA: Richer Resources Publications 2005), p. 45.
 11. Cf. Walter Benjamin, 'Experience and Poverty,' first published in *Die Welt im Wort* (Prague, December 1933), in Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings Volume 2: 1927–1934* (Cambridge, MA and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press 1999), pp. 731–6.
 12. Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory. Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press 2009), p. 14.
 13. 'Abbas Kiarostami, Jean-Luc Nancy in Conversation,' in Jean-Luc Nancy, *Abbas Kiarostami. The Evidence of Film* (Bruxelles: Yves Gevaert Éditeur 2001), pp. 80–95, p. 88.
 14. Cf. Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: Time Image* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press 1989): 'The fundamental idea is that, already in television, there is no space or image either, but only electronic lines: "the fundamental concept in television is time" (Nam June Paik, interview with Fargier, *Cahiers du cinema*, no. 299, avril 1979)' (p. 331, fn8).
 15. Jean-Luc Nancy, 'Evidence du film. Abbas Kiarostami,' in Jean-Luc Nancy, *Abbas Kiarostami. The Evidence of Film* (Bruxelles: Yves Gevaert Éditeur 2001), pp. 9–79, p. 46.

16. Cf. Mary Ann Doane, 'Information, Crisis, Catastrophe,' in *Logics of Television. Essays in Cultural Criticism*, ed. Patricia Mellencamp (Bloomington: Indiana University Press 1990), pp. 222–39. Doane in fact turns the argument around in analyzing that television needs the interruptions of catastrophe and crisis in order to make sense of the permanent flow of information: 'There is a very striking sense in which televisual catastrophe conforms to the definition offered by catastrophe theory whereby catastrophe represents discontinuity in an otherwise continuous system' (p. 232).
17. Kiarostami in the press book distributed by the Farabi Cinema Foundation, quoted according to Elena, *The Cinema of Abbas Kiarostami*, p. 92.
18. From an interview with Laurence Giavarini and Thierry Jousse, quoted according to Elena, *The Cinema of Abbas Kiarostami*, p. 94.
19. Michel Foucault, 'Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,' in Michel Foucault, *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press 1980), pp. 139–64, p. 144.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 146.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 147.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 139.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 144.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 148.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 154.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 160.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 156.
28. *Ibid.*, p. 146.
29. Jean Luc Nancy, *The Evidence of Film*, p. 62.
30. Alberto Elena, *The Cinema of Abbas Kiarostami*, p. 99.
31. Cf. 'Abbas Kiarostami and Jean Luc Nancy in Conversation,' in Jean Luc Nancy, *The Evidence of Film*, p. 82.
32. Cf. the critical reception of the film in Iran, documented and commented on by Elena, *The Cinema of Abbas Kiarostami*, p. 103ff.
33. Foucault, 'Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,' p. 161.
34. Nancy, *The Evidence of Film*, p. 12.
35. Foucault, 'Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,' p. 155.

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