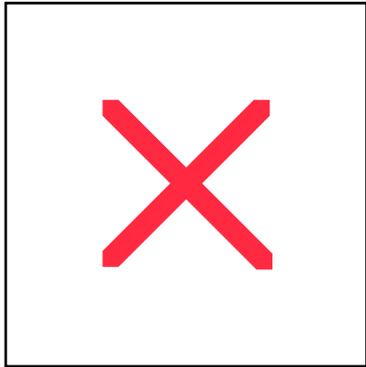


# Five to Ten: Five Reflections on Abbas Kiarostami's 10



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December 2nd 2003



## 5. Countdown

One of the well-worn gestures of avant-garde cinema was the inclusion and foregrounding of the countdown leader *within* the body of the film. It was to be recognised as a signifier in its own right, not only as a standard sign pointing to the commencement of a film. For the so-called structural/materialist tradition of avant-garde practice, the leader's foregrounding was a reaction against that other, so-called illusionist cinema. Abbas Kiarostami has never shied away from showing the artifice of cinema. *10* is structured around the leader. Ten episodes counted down; when *that*

film is over, paradoxically, *the* film is about to commence. How so? Because once Kiarostami's film is over he hopes another richer, fuller, more imaginatively creative film will begin un-spooling in the spectator's head. The spectator will complete what the screen leaves incomplete. A very democratic kind of cinema that leaves a lot of space and freedom for the spectator's engagement. Yet a risky one also, for if the spectator's imagination is not up to the task, the film can only cave in on itself.

#### 4. The Talking Cure

At a recent Melbourne International Film Festival forum, Kiarostami provided an insight into *10's* genesis. Initially, the episodes centred on a psychologist who due to renovations to her office was forced to carry on sessions with her patients in her car. As the idea unfolded it was at some point deemed unfeasible and the resultant film took on a different shape. Yet not to the extent that the imprint of that original idea hasn't left a trace on the finished film. There is still that sense that we bear witness to very private moments between individuals, though that would have indeed been intensified if the relationship were between therapist and patient. Though in no way does Kiarostami present these women as case studies for clinical analysis (though one could see the danger of that happening with the earlier idea) they do talk their way through some troubling ideas about identity, desire, sexuality, religion and so on. In some sense their talk is indeed therapeutic for it gives a *voice* to issues that are troubling both at an individual, private level, and at the public level of cultural ideology. The question of the *voice* and its varied formal uses and meanings in and for this film is particularly emphasised in the episode with the "prostitute". According to Kiarostami's account he could not convince an actual prostitute to partake in the film and

thereby resorted to casting an actor who would perform the part as scripted. In as far as the body of the actor remains off-screen, the performance is rendered at a purely vocal level. The pattern of “on-screen figure/off-screen voice” is one of *10*’s evolving formal tropes. This episode is structurally similar to the opening one, yet with the roles reversed. In the former, the driver is the on-screen figure and the passenger the off-screen voice. In the latter, opening episode, however, Kiarostami withholds the image of the woman, the mother to the boy, until the very last instance, so that for the episode’s duration we imagine her via the vocalisation of her voice – its pitch, timbre, intonation and grain. When the image finally comes, it’s a revelation, both in the sense that it confounds our expectations about what she may possibly look like, and, in the sense of an unveiling of someone being exposed to public scrutiny. This is after all a film dealing with the image of woman within an Islamic culture. Between what is heard and what is seen, between voice and body, *10* plays an elaborate game of ventriloquism. Are these pure voices – the driver initially, the prostitute, the holy woman – examples of what film theorist Michel Chion terms the *acousmêtre*? That is, the not-yet-seen voice, the voice without a face. If so, when the voice is finally pinned to the visual field – a mouth, a face – Chion argues, in a suggestive phrase, it “is always like a deflowering” (1). We never do see the faces of the prostitute or the holy woman. There is of course a literal unveiling also in the much commented upon episode in which a young woman jilted by her boyfriend removes her head scarf to reveal that she has cut off her hair. More intriguing, I think, is the opening of episode two in which the driver’s sister, alone in the car, fans herself while occasionally lifting her veil to allow the air to caress her flesh. It is at moments like these that the spectator is made aware of both the implicit voyeurism and our own intense curiosity about the limits of what can and cannot be

shown. A decade ago, the critic Farah Nayeri posed this question to Kiarostami: “It is possible to make films about women who live in the city, who work, who drive cars, as they also exist in reality?”<sup>(2)</sup> *10* is his long awaited answer.

### 3. About a Boy



Close to a third of the film's length is devoted to conversations, or more accurately, the verbal sparring between the boy Amin and his mother. He appears in episode ten, the first and lengthiest of the episodes; in episode five, the middle point of the film; in three; and in one, the briefest of the episodes in which the boy merely enters the car and demands to be driven to his grandmother's. These episodes or scenes are the spine of the film around which the others slot in. If there is a plot to *10* it can be said to be this evolving duelling dialogue between mother and son. Episodes ten and one give the film its symmetry; at the end of *10* the audience is right back where it started. The circle closes, yet another is about to open. Life has its repetitions and its replays. For the boy, entering the car has become a spiralling nightmare, it keeps coming back to haunt him. Episodes ten and one perfectly merge together like two ends of a circle finally meeting. Nothing gets

resolved between the two of them, and therefore one almost anticipates another spin at the wheel. This time round, though, Kiarostami has left the wheel in the hands of the spectator. Aside from the emotional intensity of the exchanges between mother and son, these episodes are the richest in terms of story information. We learn about the troubled marriage of Amin's parents, their divorce, her lifestyle and work (she is a photographer and this often kept her away from home), much about Amin's father's habits (he watches porn videos), and the boy's dislike of his mother's current partner. Sometimes the mother's words have the ring of social commentary, no more so than when Amin accuses her of having lied about his father in the divorce proceedings and she retorts that women are forced into such positions because under Islamic law women are allowed so few avenues for divorce. Not surprisingly, some critics have taken the boy to be "an embodiment of adult masculine oppression in embryonic form" (3). Like father, like son. Fair enough, yet this makes of the boy too much a cipher for ideological meaning. Kiarostami is too much the humanist, too sensitive to the maternal drama at the heart of the struggle to allow Amin to be that kind of sitting target. However, Amin maybe a new type in Kiarostami's cinema: middle-class, highly educated, arrogant, and perhaps most importantly, aggressive in the face of a parental figure. He would look decidedly out of place in *Homework* (1990) wherein the many boys depicted are respectful, polite, docile, tentative and fearful, or *Where is the Friend's House?* (1987) – what with all the obstacles thrown in the boy's way he accomplishes his goal with a quiet, almost passive determination. Amin goes head-to-head with his mother, often giving back as good as he gets. At one point when she prefaces her remarks by saying that she wants to make only *two* points, Amin points out that she has in fact made *three*, and, her lack of consistency, of not sticking to what she says

is precisely what frustrates him about her. Some reviewers have been unfairly harsh on the boy – yes, there is much to dislike about his attitude – yet critics haven't noted that for all their differences, mother and son are not altogether temperamentally dissimilar, *both* are rebellious and argumentative. And then, observe their body language, the sometime similar way they use hand gestures. There is a genuine battle of wit and nerve between adult and child. Rarely does the cinema give us moments such as these.

## 2. Baby, you can drive my car...

Great filmmakers create their own cosmologies. Screen worlds invested with privileged objects, motifs, figures and landscapes that repeat and return from film to film. At the heart of the Kiarostamian cosmology is the automobile. Cars are prevalent enough in cinema, especially road movies, yet unlike others Kiarostami doesn't fetishise the object, doesn't load it with symbolism – freedom, existential mobility, alienation, social escape – as in many of the great car cult movies, like, say, *Week-end*, *Two Lane Black-top*, *Vanishing Point*, or, *Eat My Dust*. In and of itself it is never anything special, just a vehicle, mostly non-descript and prototypical in design. It stalls, overheats, breaks down. The wind may carry us yet it is the car that does the hauling of characters from place to place. There is a fascination in watching from film to film the trajectory of these vehicles as they journey along a myriad of straight, curvilinear, inclining, zigzagging paths. The cars, together with the paths and landscapes they traverse, accrue specific iconographic value. Often, Kiarostami will trace an initial movement of a car and retain it as a recurring spatial motif. As in the opening circular movement of the driver in *A Taste of Cherry* (1997), like the film itself as it circles round and round the idea of suicide. Or the image of a steep incline in the road in *And Life Goes*

*On...* (1992) that finally results in one of the most sublime concluding shots in film history as the car slowly yet persistently inches its way up that seemingly impossible incline in its attempt to get to the hill top. A perfect visual correlative to the title and spirit of the film...and life goes on. What seems of importance to Kiarostami is not the journey's destination but rather how a character traverses the space between two points. The road taken, whether it is linear or circuitous, up or down, zigzagging or straight, seems of metaphysical significance. *10* is the first of Kiarostami's films that doesn't allow for any *external* shots of the car as it makes its journey. Here, the car is purely a container of the characters and their dramas, important though they be. Thus, *10* denies us – at least for this spectator, though in return it does provide us with other rewards – one of the great pleasures of his cinema.



## 1. Digital Cinema at the Crossroads

Speaking of pathways, it brings to mind the moment in Godard/Gorin's *Vent D'est* (*Wind From the East*, 1968) where the late, great Brazilian director Glauber Rocha – like Kiarostami today, the pre-eminent Third World filmmaker of his generation – stands at a forked path and speaks about the two directions open to the cinema at that particular

historical juncture: “That way is the cinema of aesthetic adventure and philosophical enquiry, while this way is the Third World cinema – a dangerous cinema, divine and marvellous, where the questions are practical ones...” More than 30 years on, the choice may not be so stark (or starker, depending on your reading of the state of contemporary world cinema) though the metaphor of the crossroads is worth restating. It may be only an effect of having seen the two films in relative proximity, yet with the arrival of the digital film age, Kiarostami’s *10* and Alexander Sokurov’s *Russian Ark* – both made in 2002 – are worth thinking about as the most recent manifestation of twin signposts pointing to opposite directions at a new cinematic crossroad. *Russian Ark* has the Hermitage Museum as its setting, several thousand costumed actors, one hundred years or more of Russian history, a single choreographed, incessantly mobile stedicam shot. Sokurov’s vision is expansive, operatic, and baroque. *10* has at its disposal a car, a driver, five or so figures who alternatively take the passenger’s seat and engage in some form of conversation with the driver, and two digital cameras fixed to a restricted angle of vision. Both films eschew montage, but in radically different ways; more obvious, of course, in the Sokurov given the sweeping single shot (though there is a form of montage *within* the shot and a general, vaguer process of intellectual montage experienced by the spectator as a result of Sokurov’s layering of history). *10* also adopts the single take yet within an overall episodic form. There are marked temporal interruptions and ellipses between the episodes; there are edits but they are kept to a minimum. Both are experimental films. And, problem solving films: they adopt digital technology to overcome perceived limitations with more “conventional” film technology. Unlike Sokurov though, Kiarostami uses digital technology as a means to return cinema to a degree zero, to wipe the slate clean, and thus

renew the terms of dialogue between spectator and screen. A final point: for decades, classical film theory pondered on the appropriate metaphor to explain the screen: a window or a frame? Was the screen a window on the world, therefore reality captured, or, a frame, reality constructed, a painting and its frame? In some ways Kiarostami is the finest dialectician of these two metaphors.