

Unseen Voices in Abbas Kiarostami's *The Wind Will Carry Us*

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One of Abbas Kiarostami's greatest strengths and idiosyncrasies as a filmmaker was his commitment to offscreen space: the unseen reality existing outside the parameters of the image. What remains on or off the screen is largely determined by a filmmaker's *mise-en-scène* choices. To organize the *mise-en-scène* is also to organize what is not to be seen, a process of selection and arrangement as much as a process of reduction and omission. In Kiarostami's films, which always involve a complex interplay between sound and image, the *mise-en-scène* often emphasizes an absence, where what is missing takes on equal or greater importance to what is shown.

Consider the opening sequence of *The Wind Will Carry Us* (1999). It begins with a series of extreme long shots – what Jonathan Rosenbaum calls the “cosmic long shot,” a signature he identifies in many of the director's films – to show a four-wheel drive containing a TV crew of three men as it winds through the countryside of Iranian Kurdistan (Fig. 1). If the sound were to be recorded from the position of the camera, we would perhaps hear little more than the distant hum of the motor and the natural sounds of the landscape. Instead, Kiarostami foregrounds the voices from inside the car; the men are trying to find a village.

The practice of foregrounding distant sounds in films is not unusual, but in fact, entirely conventional. For example, it would be typical for a conversation within a crowd to be recorded separately and raised in the mix, so that it can be heard comfortably above the ambience (films do not simply overhear conversations; they create an impression of overhearing them). More generally, a filmmaker may use sound to draw attention to a section of the image so that it will be noticed and prioritized



Fig. 1: The opening shot of *The Wind Will Carry Us*.



Fig. 2: A tall, single tree.

among the *mise-en-scène* – a strategy often taken to comical extremes in Jacques Tati’s films, to which Kiarostami’s work has been compared (Saeed-Vafa and Rosenbaum 22-23).

What is unusual in this sequence is the sheer contrast between aural and visual distance: the clarity and closeness of the conversation, which functions almost like a voice-over, paired with the depth and openness of the landscape image. There is a visual referent for the men’s voices but it is merely a blip on the scenery, obscured and abstracted by distance. The disjunction between sound and image creates a paradox: the shot is simultaneously distant and intimate, realist and noticeably constructed. Additionally, an onscreen image (a car driving through the countryside) is transformed into a quasi-offscreen space (the inside of the car, whose occupants we can hear but not see).

As the men read out directions to their destination, the viewer is prompted to scan the scenery for signposts in the same way as they do. But the seemingly vague directions – they are looking for a “tall,

single tree,” which is nowhere and everywhere – maintain a comical incongruity between sound and image. Then in a quietly stunning moment, what we see corresponds directly with what we hear. A lone tree atop a hill – far bigger and more magnificent than the others – comes into view from the right of frame. As the camera pans, the lens is just wide enough to capture the car passing at the bottom and the tree passing at the top. Both elements align at approximately the centre of frame, in a rare moment of symmetry (Fig. 2). Until now, the randomness of the landscape and the road’s arbitrary path through it had been stressed, with the camera panning along matter-of-factly to follow the car’s journey. Suddenly the image appears highly aestheticized, the scenery carefully and artificially arranged as part of the *mise-en-scène*.

The sequence shifts to a shot from inside the car, looking out of the side window (Fig. 3). It would appear that the image has finally caught up with the sound; the distance between camera and microphone has been bridged, allowing us to see



Fig. 3: The view from the car.

and hear from the same position. Yet Kiarostami still refuses to reveal the crew, their visual absence becoming all the more pronounced because of their proximity. The sound continues as it has, divorced from the image. The crew stop and ask a woman for directions. Looking up to face the camera,

which has assumed briefly the role of a collective point-of-view of the men, she obliges (Fig. 4).

If one pays attention to the images in isolation, it is easy to notice that the sequence has followed a fairly conventional trajectory for a dramatic film opening, with the emphasis shifting from setting to



Fig. 4: A woman gives directions.

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character, and from wider to closer shots, as the narrative develops and characters are introduced. Other *mise-en-scène* elements are advanced accordingly: the colour of the scenery evolves from red to green, the relative stillness of the earlier long shots progresses to the lateral tracking movements from inside the car, and the trees dotting the landscape are replaced by human figures dotting the fields. As the crew stop again to discuss directions, a boy (Farzad Sohrabi) approaches the car, asking, “Hello, why are you late?” He catches the distracted men unaware, but not the camera, which no longer represents their perspective. This shot also follows its own internal, dramatic trajectory. The boy is framed initially in wide shot on the edge of frame, sitting on a mound. As he gets up and walks forward, the lens pulls focus, and he settles into a close-up a few feet from the car (Fig. 5).

Finally, a human face, with all the clarity of a close-up, isolated in sharp focus! But why *this* face and not the faces of the men whose banter we have been privy to for the last four minutes, and who

seem to be the protagonists of this film? By refraining from turning the camera around, Kiarostami creates another paradoxical effect: the close-up simultaneously emphasizes what is shown (its conventional function) and, because of its position at the end of a chain of images that raises certain narrative and formal expectations (that the protagonists will finally be revealed), emphasizes what is *not* shown. The closer we get, the more we are made aware of the absence. At first we simply could not see the crew; now it is clear that they are being withheld from us. It is precisely their hiddenness that is emphasized: the crew remain unseen but we know they are there, just as Kiarostami and his crew are there.

This reflexive approach is consistent with Kiarostami’s broader use of narrative and visual omission in this film and others. As we will learn later, with the exception of Behzad (Behzad Dourani), the protagonist, we never see the other crew members, although we hear them frequently. A character that Behzad chats to at various points in the film is a labourer digging a hole on a hilltop, whom we



Fig. 5: The first close-up.

also hear but do not see. Similarly, we never glimpse the old woman whose impending death is the reason for the crew's visit (they intend to record the subsequent mourning rituals). Elsewhere, dialogue scenes are filmed so that a character is partially obscured by lighting or framing, or else left entirely offscreen, to be imagined by the viewer.

Writing about Kiarostami's earlier films, Gilberto Perez argues that the director's celebrated realism is one that "declares its artifice, vividly depicting a reality but not allowing us to forget that we're watching a film, which a film-maker has put together in this way . . . a representation of life and a reflection on how life is represented on the screen" (18). *The Wind Will Carry Us* is also a vivid representation of life, in all its grandness and smallness, its mysteries and banalities. But it is also a profound reflection on how this life is represented, and it begins with the opening frames of the film. Come in from the city, meet the locals, film them, and leave when the job is done – this is what the TV crew hope to do, and what Kiarostami did for much of his career. Embedded in and around the narrative of *The Wind Will Carry Us* is an oblique, parallel commentary of the film's own making, and a reflection of Kiarostami's own role and responsibilities as a filmmaker, as one who comes and leaves.

Works Cited

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