

# **Geology of Ideas, Hydrology of Matter: Nature and Space in Abbas Kiarostami's Cinema**

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## **Geology of Ideas, Hydrology of Matter: Nature and Space in Abbas Kiarostami's Cinema**

By Alborz Mahboobkhah

### **Introduction**

Abbas Kiarostami's second film, *Recess* (1972), is a short film that follows a schoolboy who, after kicking a group of children's ball, is chased and forced to take an unfamiliar route home. He ends up on the outskirts, eventually reaching a highway. Already in this early film, the themes of getting lost, the struggle to find one's way, and the broader significance of space and place emerge as central concerns in Kiarostami's cinema – later explored masterfully in the Koker trilogy, *Taste of Cherry* (1997), and *The Wind Will Carry Us* (1999). The Koker trilogy is anchored in northern Iran's rural landscapes, beginning with *Where Is the Friend's House?* (1987), which follows a child's urgent journey along zigzagging mountain paths to return a notebook – a quest that unfolds as an ethical odyssey. Its sequel, *And Life Goes On* (1992), follows a filmmaker navigating the devastation after an earthquake in the region, as he searches for the two young actors from *Where Is the Friend's House?* *Through the Olive Trees* (1994) presents parallel quests: a director pursuing cinematic truth and an actor yearning for love, expanding a minor detail from *And Life Goes On* into its central narrative. Beyond the trilogy, *Taste of Cherry* follows a suicidal man on his circular drives through dust-choked construction sites as he searches for someone to assist in his suicide. Finally, *The Wind Will Carry Us* documents a journalist's failed attempt to film a village mourning ritual, where labyrinthine alleys and the serpentine access road interact with the psychological space of the protagonist, challenging the very notions of centre and periphery, as well as on-screen and off-screen space – categories shaped by his

initially limited gaze. Key figures such as the dying woman and the unseen ditch-digger remain off-screen throughout, drawing attention to what lies beyond the frame and prompting a gradual reorientation of the protagonist's way of looking – an aspect that will be examined more closely in the following parts of the article.

Through the network of roads and paths that traverse them, spaces – whether natural, rural, or peripheral – acquire aesthetic and ontological significance in these films, foregrounding themes such as the relationship between nature and art and life as a journey. As Jonathan Rosenbaum observes, “[t]he difficulty of finding one’s way to a given location, which in *Where Is the Friend’s House?* is equated with the difficulty of being and remaining ethical, [...] and because of the way Kiarostami’s heroes repeatedly ask themselves, ‘Where am I?’ or ‘Where am I going?’ the more existential questions of ‘Who am I?’ and ‘What am I doing?’ are never far away”. [\[1\]](#) This paper maps the spatial regimes and structures in these films to show how Kiarostami’s ontological aesthetic foregrounds the continuous creation and de-creation of space of being. It begins by examining the interplay of interiority and exteriority, with particular attention to the car as a *dispositif* that frames the gaze and mediates between psychological and physical space. The analysis then turns to Kiarostami’s use of nature – both as landscape and narrative space – to interrogate the relation between art and nature. To do so – and as a necessary detour – it first examines the visual discourse of his films through the question of gaze in its multiple layers, a question inseparable from the art-nature dynamic, since in Kiarostami’s films landscape and nature are first approached as components of a visual discourse, reflecting art, before becoming materially entangled with the narrative, reflecting nature. Building on this, the analysis engages with how winding paths in Kiarostami’s films function to superimpose art onto nature and fiction onto

documentary, a process explored through Gaston Bachelard's notion of graft. The article then considers the motif of ruins and treasures, showing how spatially destructive event of the earthquake in Kiarostami's cinema, creates cracks and fissures that are not just obstacles but necessary generative voids within his aesthetic. Finally, drawing on Bachelard's material imagination, these threads are synthesised through an examination of liquification – a process enacted by the protagonists' repetitive, labyrinthine journeys that erode their rigid, earth-like fixations. This transformative shift towards the fluidity of water culminates in a Bachelardian roundness of being, a state achieved through the recursive, spiraling movement between interior and exterior, self and world.

### **Interiority and Exteriority**

As an art of movement, cinema inevitably engages with space, both as a precondition and a product of motion. This dynamic relationship gives rise to diverse spatial forms within cinematic expression. In the introduction to his book *Negative Space*, Manny Farber outlines the three most important types of cinematic spaces, arguing, "There are several types of movie space, the three most important being: (1) the field of the screen, (2) the psychological space of the actor, and (3) the area of experience and geography that the film covers." [\[2\]](#) Entangled together, these three types of spaces assume a formative role in the narratives of Kiarostami's films, becoming a primary focus. First, there are the films' locations: vast and open spaces ranging from cultivated rural landscapes to barren wastelands. Second, there is the psychological space of the characters; self-contained, closed, and secretive spaces that are often figuratively and cinematically externalised through serpentine paths as traces of the interaction between interior and the material spaces. Third, and most significantly, there is the interior space of the car that functions as a liminal space –

physically embedded within the expansive landscapes (the first type), yet simultaneously encapsulating and shielding the psychological realm of the characters (the second type). Kiarostami's avoidance of interior spaces in these films finds a counterpart in the interior space of cars. The car's recurring presence in these films does not merely reflect a stylistic *dispositif* of Kiarostami's cinema, but a narrative and spatial necessity. He does not make home movies but moving homes – a mobile interiority within exteriority. These closed, transitional spaces restrict the gaze while opening up to external landscapes, framing them through windows and mirrors, much like cinema itself. By focusing on this interplay between interior and exterior in the car, I aim to show how such spaces carry both narrative and stylistic weight in Kiarostami's work, moving beyond prevalent socio-spatial readings that frame the car as a site of negotiated publicness and privacy. [\[3\]](#)



**Figure 1**—Still from *And Life Goes On*



**Figure 2**—Still from *And Life Goes On*

In his interview with *Cahiers du Cinéma*, Kiarostami explains the idea of using cars in his films:

The car is quite simply a beautiful idea. It's not just a means of transportation to go from one place to another; it also represents a small house, a very intimate space with a large window whose view changes at every moment. You will never find such a house in real life, because the view from a house's windows never changes. It is condemned to show the same view forever. Whereas the window of a car is large and, moreover, like a widescreen cinema screen, it reflects movement. [\[4\]](#)

This notion of moving views, in contrast to static ones, introduces one of the fundamental differences between space and place as explored by Yi-Fu Tuan, who writes: “The ideas ‘space’ and ‘place’ require each other for definition. From the security and stability of place we are aware of the openness, freedom and threat of space, and vice versa. Furthermore, if we think of space as that which allows movement, then place is pause; each pause in movement makes it possible for location to be transformed into place.” [\[5\]](#) While traversing space, cars create a dialectic: their static cabins offer place-like stability amid spatial flow, even as their movement perpetually reconfigures the very space they traverse, resolving

Tuan's duality of movement and pause. In Kiarostami's films, the moving vehicle thus functions as a double agent, simultaneously producing space and place through its movement. On the other hand, there is the psychological space of the characters – or what might be called the mental space – which reveals itself through extended dialogues within moving cars. Literally and figuratively speaking, cars possess no memory – they continually forget the paths they traverse. Roads and paths, by contrast, become the earth's engraved memories of journeys taken. It could be argued that, thanks to cars, Kiarostami's narratives simultaneously move in two opposite ways; they tend to retain the traces of a story while constantly erasing them. This is explicitly portrayed in two opposite narrative regimes coexisting in his films: the main spatio-temporal movement of the narrative, presented through the main character's search for someone or something, and the minor events/impasses/detours they encounter – acting like a countercurrent in a river that hinders and erases traces of the main movement, pushing it back and forcing it to repeat itself. In this regard, cars take on another figural function as they constantly open onto new perspectives through the windshield while preserving traces of taken paths in their rear and side mirrors – a duality frequently visualised in his films.



**Figure 3**—Still from *Through the Olive Trees*



As Maria Irene Aparício observes, “one can assume that Kiarostami deals with spirals of life and memory, (re)presenting both real places and their inmost poetic ‘different spaces’, or heterotopias.” [6] These “heterotopias” – a term drawn from Foucault to describe spaces that are simultaneously real and symbolic, grounded and transgressive – help name the dual nature of Kiarostami’s settings. This spatial duality is also stylistically respected in his trilogy, where each film’s story is taken up in the next one – either as follow-up or closer examination of neglected minor stories that remained off-screen. Underlining these hybrid spaces, Aparício writes: “These geographical, but also mental places, take the sense of the cross-paths which interfere with life and death – including the director’s path through life.” [7] This observation crystallises the films’ spatial paradox: Kiarostami’s landscapes function simultaneously as physical terrains and metaphysical thresholds, and their artistic blending inevitably raises broader questions about the relationship between nature and art.

## **Nature and Art**

The notions of space and landscape bring forth the much-discussed idea of the gaze in Kiarostami’s films. While scholars such as Negar Mottahedeh have read the rural spaces in post-revolutionary Iranian cinema as a strategic response to censorship – enabling the depiction of women in outdoor spaces without violating the modesty code – the focus here is not on the socio-political rationale for such settings, but on the aesthetic and conceptual possibilities they open up in Kiarostami’s work. [8] In this sense, his artistic preference for natural and rural settings appears rooted in two fundamental principles related to perceptual and spatial possibilities. First, nature and landscapes inherently embody the question of gaze



– they are not passive backdrops but active participants in visual discourse, constituting a reciprocal relationship between observer and environment. Second, by reducing settings to elemental forms (earth, sky, wind, paths) and presenting a primordial vision, Kiarostami strips away distractions that obscure visual perception. This minimalism lays bare – both literally and figuratively – the fundamental tensions between art and nature. To properly examine this relationship, we must first explore nature’s stylistic significance in his films – an importance that prevents its reduction to mere backdrop or setting. In his *Letter to Serge Daney*, Gilles Deleuze outlines various historical conceptions of the relationship between art and nature and traces their logical reverberations throughout the history of cinema. Drawing on art historian Alois Riegl’s categories of beautification, spiritualisation, and competition with Nature, Deleuze identifies a shift in cinema’s function. He suggests that classical cinema asked “What is there to see behind the image?” – a visual mode in which meaning unfolds through successive images forming an organic whole. After the Second World War, this gave way to a new question: “What is there to see on the surface of the image?” – a transition that “changed all the relations between cinematic images.” [\[9\]](#) This transition, marked by the Second World War, profoundly altered not only cinematic form – including the shift from movement-image to time-image – but also the spectator’s relation to the image, shifting the emphasis from discovery to endurance, from relational depth to exposed surface, and from mere seeing to a critical engagement with the act of looking and its modalities.

*What is there to see on the surface of the image?* Kiarostami reimagines this secondary function of the image in a singular way. I turn briefly here to the question of gaze because I contend that it is through these modes of looking that Kiarostami redefines what the image can reveal or withhold, including the spatial configuration of his films, onto which these

images open and through which the discussion of art and nature will be pursued in detail. His films stage three distinct gazes: the goal-oriented gaze, the gaze of narrative, and nature's gaze. The goal-oriented gaze is fixated on endpoints, blind to what lies between – a forgetful and negligent gaze (e.g. the gaze of urban characters in rural spaces, like Behzad in *The Wind Will Carry Us*; and the filmmaker's gaze in *And Life Goes On*). On the other hand, the gaze of narrative is attuned to preserving traces, one that – aligned with the narrative movement discussed earlier – compels the prior gaze into cycles of repetition and self-correction, ultimately *educating* it. And lastly, nature's gaze, existing beyond the standard shot-reverse-shot structure, appears in long shots where car passengers converse while the camera observes from a hillside (e.g. *Taste of Cherry* and the opening of *The Wind Will Carry Us*). In *Through the Olive Trees*, this perspective becomes the director's gaze from the first scene, later mirrored in the POV shot of the director character watching Hossein follow Tahereh along the zigzag path. Kiarostami portrays the interplay of these three gazes at least in three ways. In *Through the Olive Trees*, he makes off-screen space the film's central subject: what was previously unseen in *And Life Goes On*. In *The Wind Will Carry Us*, Kiarostami reflects on his own gaze as a director through the character of Behzad, whose way of observing others exposes the limits and implications of such a narrowly focused perspective. In *Taste of Cherry*, set against dust-choked construction sites – barren, anti-productive spaces – the gaze, deprived of its object, gives way to a new mode of looking through narrative repetition. Emerging amid spring blossoms, the latter breaks from the primary camera's perspective – elevated yet mediated by an intimate video image.

Indeed, Kiarostami transforms the question “*What is there to see on the surface of the image?*” into an inquiry about the gaze itself – *or rather, about how to look*. He spiritualises

not only nature but also the act of looking. As Deleuze puts it, this is “a visionary cinema that no longer sets out in any sense to beautify nature but *spiritualizes* it in the most intense way. How can we wonder what there is to see behind an image (or following on from it . . .), when we can’t even see what’s in it or on the surface until we look with our mind’s eye?” [\[10\]](#) [author’s emphasis] As noted earlier, Deleuze’s reflections are rooted in the historical context of the Second World War; I argue that Kiarostami rethinks and extends those questions by interweaving art and nature through the mediating act of looking. Jean-Luc Nancy highlights how Kiarostami’s films often present the screen as a look onto the world – whether through the recurring motif of doors left ajar in *Where Is My Friend’s Home?*, or the framing of car windows in *And Life Goes On* and *Taste of Cherry*, which mark his emphasis on film as a way of looking – taken as a verb as well as a noun implying the subjective and objective essence of the act. [\[11\]](#) As Nancy writes: “In the cinematic box that looks, the gaze no longer faces a representation or a spectacle from the outset, but first (and yet without suppressing the spectacle) it fits into a way of looking: the filmmaker’s. Along those lines, at the beginning of *Through the Olive Trees*, the actor who plays the filmmaker introduces himself and gives his name facing us and looking at us. Our gaze matches his as if it followed in his steps.” [\[12\]](#) Nancy’s insight clarifies how Kiarostami foregrounds the gaze as both a structuring device and an ethical position – initially aligned with the filmmaker’s own act of looking.

Likewise, the French film critic Alain Bergala highlights an important moment at the end of *The Wind Will Carry Us* when Behzad, the main character, throws a bucket of water onto the windshield of his car where “only after two hours of film, [...] do we realize that Kiarostami, contrary to his habit, has not filmed the road a single time through that

windshield, from the driver's point of view.” [13] Referring to Behzad's near-sightedness, Bergala calls this act “a re-education of seeing”, which reflects the act of bringing the edges into the visual field. [14] However, the relationship between art and nature in Kiarostami's films is not solely a matter of the gaze – specifically its limitations and eventual re-education. The very act of looking establishes a distance between the viewer and what is seen, reinforcing a separation between subject and object that the films subtly question. As the famous zigzag paths in his films suggest (especially in the Koker trilogy), this relationship goes beyond the simple interaction between a fabricated, imagined world and a natural one. These paths, carefully carved into the hills by the film crew, reflect the blending of documentary and fiction in Kiarostami's films, suggesting the documentary quality of nature and the fictive nature of the film art. It is as though fiction becomes superimposed upon documentary – both literally and figuratively – in a dialectical interplay where each layer exposes rather than obscures the other. In his book *Water and Dreams* (1983), about the material imagination of water, Bachelard uses the botanical term of “graft” to explain the internal relationship between nature and human imagination. As he succinctly phrases it, “art is grafted nature.” [15] He goes on explaining that “[t]he *graft* seems to be a concept essential for understanding human psychology. In my opinion it is the human stamp, the specifying mark of the human imagination. In my view, mankind imagining is the transcendent aspect of *natura naturans*. It is the graft which can truly provide the material imagination with an exuberance [sic] of forms, which can transmit the richness and density of matter to formal imagination.” [16] [author's emphasis] This notion resonates deeply with Kiarostami's own understanding of his practice. In a letter to Kamran Shirdel, the Iranian filmmaker best known for his documentary work, Kiarostami writes: “For years I have been grafting my fictional cinema to the documentary cinema so that I may benefit from its humanist prestige.” [17] Fiction and documentary in his work do not merely coexist – they generate a

third space in which the real and the imagined are mutually implicated. The concept of grafting thus becomes not only a metaphor for aesthetic hybridity, but a structuring principle through which Kiarostami navigates the intersection of natural reality and artistic invention.

Along the same lines, in her study of Kiarostami's zigzag paths, Joan Copjec argues that Kiarostami's artificial landscape in the Koker trilogy echoes a 14th-century Shiraz miniature, *A Paradise Garden* (Persian miniature, c. 1300, unknown artist), depicting a winding, serpentine path cutting through a yellow-toned hillside, leading to a solitary flowering tree.<sup>[18]</sup> According to Copjec, Henry Corbin, the influential Iranologist, celebrated this miniature as the quintessential representation of "visionary geography", a concept central to his notion of the "imaginal world" as an intermediary space. Unlike natural geography, this intermediary realm exists between abstraction and sensory reality, where "matter is immaterialized and spirit corporealized".<sup>[19]</sup> The imaginal world in Kiarostami's films is not another world above this one, but, in Copjec's terms, "the imaginal world names the 'other world' within this one."<sup>[20]</sup> The superimposition, the graft, and the imaginal world all suggest that the primordial natural settings in Kiarostami's films, in a sense, pose the question of art and nature in regard to the notion of imitation (i.e. art imitates nature) as the predominant philosophical idea in antiquity.<sup>[21]</sup>

Indeed, it can be argued that Kiarostami's films suggest that the relationship between art and nature is one of interiority, not exteriority. Art neither imitates nature nor beautifies it any more. In this regard, apart from superimposing the two worlds of nature and art, he incorporates this very question of copy and original in his films' narratives and figural

imagery. Towards the end of *And Life Goes On*, the principal character, Farhad, picks up two boys on his way to Koker, who bear all the signs of the two boys he is searching for – yet they are not the ones. In *Through the Olive Trees*, Hossein, before winning Tahereh's heart, plays the role of her husband in the film-within-the-film. In *Taste of Cherry*, Mr. Badii witnesses his own burial when he sees his shadow cast on the wall where the loaders dump dirt. He then sits beneath the falling dust, moments before a worker calls out to him twice – exactly as he had imagined in his planned suicide. Given that the final narrative resolutions always remain off-screen (as we never know what Tahereh's final answer to Hossein is, we never get to see whether Farhad gets to find the two children he is looking for, or whether Mr. Badii successfully commits suicide, etc.), they are all examples of the process of prefiguration in his work which reflect the question of original and copy, difference and repetition, both as a narrative *trompe-l'œil* and a figural strategy. This brings the two supposedly distinct fields onto one single layer. That is, the imaginal world – or the aesthetic activity as described by Friedrich Schelling, a 19th-century German philosopher – ultimately identifies the unconscious activity of nature and the conscious activity of human being. Camilla Flodin, drawing on Schelling, describes this unity as a process “through which art is created, and which can also be experienced by the recipients of the created artwork. Art is thus the medium joining the conscious and the unconscious activities, and the artwork as manifest object is able to reflect something that otherwise remains inaccessible.” [\[22\]](#) This reflection is embedded in the twofold structure of *And Life Goes On*, when in a revealing moment, Mr. Ruhi (the elderly man from *Where Is the Friend's House?*) protests being portrayed as older than his actual age in the previous film. Later, he further destabilises cinematic truth by revealing that neither the house shown in the current film nor the one featured previously was his actual residence. Farhad's ironic retort – that the house's survival of the earthquake is itself a factual reality – perfectly encapsulates Kiarostami's complex

interplay between artifice and actuality. This exchange brilliantly demonstrates how the director negotiates the dialectic of interiority between artistic representation and natural reality.

## **Ruins and Treasures**

In the Koker trilogy, nature frequently blocks the way – both literally by obstructing roads and paths, and figuratively by impeding the narrative’s movement. The film *And Life Goes On* engages most directly with the nature-art dialectic, where natural forces physically obstruct progress – through earthquake-induced road cracks, dislodged boulders, and steep hills that interrupt the car’s movement – thereby reinforcing the separation between art and nature. As Graig Uhlin observes, this film is as much about the elemental earth as it is about the director’s visit to the village of Koker, writing “elemental earth asserts its primacy by unsettling socio-cultural forms that assume this earth as a stable background condition. Seismic movement rattles or even ruptures the narrational frames that separate the fictional from the real, as well as art from nature.” [\[23\]](#) Once more, art is literally superimposed upon nature in this film as in a famous scene, we see a wall-mounted picture that is torn by the earthquake precisely along the same fissure line as the wall’s crack. As Uhlin points out, the earthquake “makes representation falter. [...] By means of this crack, earth juts through the image, and since it runs through both picture and wall, it disrupts the separation between figure and ground, between an image (the print) and its material support (the wall). Elemental earth acts as a vortical force breaking free from the stability of form.” [\[24\]](#) Kiarostami has often mentioned his taste in making works of art that are not fully accomplished. He has shown distaste towards films with a seamless structure that have no empty spaces, no doors left ajar for the spectator to step in and collaborate to sew the pieces of film together. In an

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interview with *Cahiers du Cinéma*, Kiarostami states “For the centenary of cinema two years ago, I gave you a text that you published, in which I said that filmmakers should leave their films unfinished so that viewers could complete them and bring their own imagination to them.” [\[25\]](#) Accordingly, the ruins and rubble left by the earthquake, particularly in *And Life Goes On*, and other related motifs in his following films (the dream of a house and the collective homelessness in *Through the Olive Trees*, the dusty construction site in the outskirts of the city in *Taste of Cherry*, as well as the excavation in *The Wind Will Carry Us*, etc.) assume a double function: they not only obstruct narrative progression, compelling characters to find alternate paths, but also provide the structural cracks and holes in the body of the films, necessary for a Kiarostami film to be made. Indeed, the crack in the earth creates a crack in his aesthetic, reopening – at yet another level – the perpetual interrogation of nature and art. In her co-authored book with Rosenbaum, Mehrnaz Saeed-Vafa examines Kiarostami’s deployment of ruins – tracing their cinematic significance to their enduring presence in Iranian visual and literary traditions – noting:

These are not only images of devastation but also sites where treasures might be found, whether these are the valuable objects retrieved from the wrecked village or the thighbone dug out of the cemetery. These images are staples of Iranian cinema and literature [...] these ruins are set against a fantasy of heaven or the promised land embodied in the village and the surrounding landscape. Behzad [in *The Wind Will Carry Us*] even jokingly alludes to this when he suggests the fantasy of buried treasure as an expedient cover story. [\[26\]](#)

This treasure could aptly describe the work of art as conceived through Kiarostami’s stylistic interplay of creative and destructive forces of nature within his aesthetic vision. As Uhlin puts it, these forces “repeatedly upsurge to trouble his characters, to propel but also block their movements, to provide shelter to them but also to crush them under its weight. These agencies are both world-ordering and world-destroying – bearing ontological significance. In an intermedial encounter, film is brought down to earth, and the earth is rendered

cinematic.” [\[27\]](#) In this light, the ruin becomes a privileged site in Kiarostami’s cinema – where art, like buried treasure, is unearthed not in spite of destruction but through it, paradoxically entwining the destructive force of nature with the creative impulse of art.

## **Self and Nature**

Kiarostami’s films frequently centre on characters driven by an *idée fixe* – often a search for someone or something – that remains ultimately unattainable within the temporal bounds of the film. Instead of fulfilling this quest, the characters encounter a host of seemingly marginal people and situations, initially perceived as trivial or irrelevant to their plan. This detour from the primary objective becomes central to the narrative, suggesting that the off-screen space in Kiarostami’s work is not merely a spatial notion but functions as a narrative principle, where narrative emerges from what lies beyond the immediate frame of intention and visibility. It seems like what François Truffaut once wrote about Jean Renoir applies word for word to Kiarostami, despite the two being very different filmmakers with entirely distinct styles and aesthetics. Truffaut writes “Renoir does not film ideas, but men and women who have ideas, and he does not invite us to adopt these ideas or to sort them out no matter how quaint or illusory they may be, but simply to respect them.” [\[28\]](#) In Kiarostami’s films – particularly those under discussion – two spaces, embodying opposing forces that pull the narrative in divergent directions, remain in constant tension. The filmic space (where the narrative unfolds: nature and serpentine paths) actively disrupts the psychological space of ideas, the latter often retreating into the shelter of cars. These detours are imposed by the former, with the two spaces alternately circumscribing one another in a struggle for narrative control. This is epitomised literally in the road blockages discussed earlier, and figuratively in car scenes (in *And Life Goes On* and *Taste of Cherry*) where characters converse while the camera

frames their winding path in high-angle long shots – their voices seeping through the image as if ideas overcome physical space. This suggests a narcissistic subjectivity in Kiarostami's protagonists, at times bordering on solipsism. Mr. Badii, in *Taste of Cherry*, obsessively seeks someone to assist his suicide. Farhad in *And Life Goes On* focuses solely on finding his former child actors. Hossein and the director in *Through the Olive Trees* mirror each other – one pursuing Tahereh's affection, the other his film. Behzad, in *The Wind Will Carry Us*, is clearly near-sighted – a subtle marker of his limited perspective – and stubbornly seeks documenting village mourning rituals. All treat their surroundings as mere objects – sometimes obstacles, sometimes paths – to their fixed goals, remaining oblivious to their surroundings. Highlighting the qualitative distinction between these two spaces in an interview with Rosenbaum and Saeed-Vafa, Kiarostami says:

Things seem to be losing those specific characteristics they used to have that separate one area or nation from another. The only exception to that rule, luckily, is human nature. Certain rules govern the growth of trees; they need light, water, dirt, and air. By the same token, there are things that all people need. It's our good fortune that all the superficial things have become so superficial that only human nature provides us with a refuge that has any depth to it. [\[29\]](#)

The rigidity of ideas and obliviousness that define the psychological space of human beings in these films stem from a particular view of nature, one that, as Bachelard, citing Marie Bonaparte, a French author and psychoanalyst, writes, "For each of us, nature is only a prolonging of our own primitive narcissism which, in the beginning, annexed the nurturing, protecting mother." [\[30\]](#) Yet in Kiarostami's films, this narcissistic space transforms through struggle with nature. Their self-absorbed vision yields to an ethical one as nature – forcing difficult paths and revealing its destructive power – compels characters to reconsider their plans. Throughout *And Life Goes On*, the father perceives the landscape in a deeply subjective, almost solipsistic way. He remains a detached observer amid disaster, and towards the end of the film hesitates to help an injured man carrying a gas canister. However, as

Stephen Bransford observes, this changes in the final scene when the father struggles to climb the hill and must rely on help from others. At this moment, the landscape transforms from a mere nostalgic idealisation of the past into a dynamic, social space – one that demands interaction and ethical engagement. [\[31\]](#) In the following section I examine the process of this transformation.

### **Liquification, Labyrinths, and the Roundness of Being**

In his seminal film *Close-Up* (1990), Abbas Kiarostami reconstructs the true story of Hossein Sabzian, a man who impersonates a famous Iranian filmmaker and engages with the family he deceives. Alain Bergala notes how Sabzian's radical identity shift – from unknown worker to celebrated filmmaker – proves contagious, affecting everyone in the film, even Kiarostami, who consistently resisted letting his fiction or characters solidify into fixed forms. This collective dream of self-reinvention fascinates the director as it embodies a fundamental human freedom, as Bergala writes: "[...] the freedom not to be locked into a fixed identity. The liberation of one's own self-image." [\[32\]](#) I contend that this transformative freedom – whether as re-education, ethical engagement, or identity shift – is never given but earned through what I will term (following Bachelard) a process of "liquification." [\[33\]](#) As Uhlin argues, drawing on Bachelard, *water, fire, and air – unlike earth – spark imagination through their dynamism and fluidity*. He writes: "The imagination of earth – the profusion of images it gives forth – arises from this 'struggle against the solidity of matter'. Elemental earth requires a protracted and laborious engagement, and Kiarostami's characters routinely contend with a lithic agency that refuses to be mastered." [\[34\]](#) Building on this observation, I argue these films stylistically and narratively depict earth itself imagining water and fluidity. In a sense, Kiarostami's films often stage transformation not as sudden change but as a slow, resistant

process shaped by the material qualities of the landscape. This dynamic unfolds through material tensions between geological solidity and hydrological movement – between what is fixed, heavy, and dry, and what seeks to flow, soften, or dissolve.

Amidst the often dry and rocky landscapes of these films, there persists a latent desire for liquidity – sometimes directly referenced, sometimes existing off-screen, and at times conspicuously absent. In *The Wind Will Carry Us*, this manifests in the milk squeezed from a cow underground in darkness. In *And Life Goes On*, it appears through recurring motifs: the son and later the father urinating, the warm Coca-Cola the boy spills through the car's window before sharing some with a woman on the bus next to their car in a traffic jam, the words the boy exchanges with a laundress about spring versus tap water, and the droplets that fall on Farhad's head as Tahereh waters flowers. *Through the Olive Trees* hints at water only indirectly – women boarding a truck, returning from a bathhouse outside Koker. *Taste of Cherry* stands apart as the only film where water is wholly absent; the protagonist refuses tea several times when it is offered to him, as if surrendering entirely to, and absorbed by, the earth.



**Figure 4**—Still from *And Life Goes On*

Beyond these explicit references, the serpentine trajectories of cars and characters across these landscapes evoke formal resemblances – most immediately to the movement of snakes, earthbound creatures navigating terrain akin to Kiarostami’s winding paths. Yet, narratively these routes operate in films less through formal resemblance than through what, in Bachelard’s terms, is *material imagination* – “one that gives life to the material cause [of imagination]” – in contrast to the formal imagination, defined as “one that gives life to the formal cause [of imagination]”. These trajectories articulate material imagination precisely through their destabilising function – resisting fixed identities or structures by physically enacting shifts in perspective, relationships, and even narrative ontology. Bachelard draws a distinction between these two types of imagination, stating, “when forms, mere perishable forms and vain images—perpetual change of surfaces—are put aside, these images of matter are dreamt substantially and intimately. They have weight; they constitute a heart.” [\[35\]](#) In this sense, the twisting dirt roads in Kiarostami’s films function like the courses of rivers or springs – what Paul Claudel describes as “[...] the liquification of the earth’s substance; it is the eruption of liquid water rooted in its most secret folds, of milk under the sucking of the Ocean which is nursing.” [\[36\]](#) In these films, this liquification process unfolds in two key ways. First, figurative liquification: the cars’ struggle to traverse rocky paths mirrors water flowing through obstructions. Second, figural liquification: the repeated traversal of these routes reflects the mental and psychological liquification of protagonists – those gripped by rigid, obsessive ideas (the “imagination of earth”), transitioning them from a petrified, earth-like state (fixed ideation) to fluidity (the “imagination of water”).

This structural duality – between the geological and the hydrological – underscores Kiarostami's preoccupation with transformation, where the process of transformation occurs in an interaction between resistance (stone/earth) and motion (water/flow), akin to Paul Claudel's assertion that "everything the heart desires can always be reduced to a water figure." [37] Evoking material imagination, Nancy connects this imagination of liquidity in Kiarostami's films to the materiality of film itself – a medium that transitions from physical form to immaterial perception, writing "a ribbon (like the roads travelled), a gel, pane of glass and water, all at once, it is a sort of capturing fluid that grips the living and holds it in twenty-four discrete pictures each second, only to fluidify their sequence instantaneously in a continual look." [38] In *And Life Goes On*, the earth persistently obstructs movement. Early in the film, just as Farhad's car emerges from the tunnel, the elemental earth continually impedes progress through obstacles – rockfalls, road cracks, steep uphill paths, etc. Yet Farhad's car moves like water, constantly finding ways to flow around these barriers. In *Through the Olive Trees*, Hossein repeatedly points to Tahereh's heart of stone and her emotional hardness – a heart he stubbornly tries to penetrate, much like water seeping through cracks in rock. Thus, as previously noted, the figuration of the imagination of water takes shape precisely in opposition to such obstructions. Referring to the final shot of *Through the Olive Trees*, Uhlin writes: "If we read the final shot as signaling the union of the couple, then the marriage plot resolves the petric drama (the aversion to masonry, the heart of stone), and the narrative and formal blockages of the second and third film of the trilogy are finally released." [39] In this sense, the elemental tension between earth and water not only structures the films' visual and narrative rhythms but also becomes the very medium through which the possibility of emotional and cinematic movement – of resolution, release, and renewal – is imagined.



Returning to the protagonists' rigid quests – their linear journeys towards presupposed goals – a contradiction emerges: the narratives force them into circular paths, superimposing destination on origin, the elsewhere onto the same. Figuratively speaking, the protagonists' psychological space (their world of ideas) initially appears either smaller (in *And Life Goes On*, *Taste of Cherry*, *Through the Olive Trees*) or larger (*The Wind Will Carry Us*) than the narrative's experiential space. Through repetition, this mental space undergoes *liquification* – expanding or being milled – until it fits within the narrative's dimensions. Thus, these cyclical journeys mirror life and death's coexistence – the dead inhabiting the same spaces as the living, as powerfully depicted in *And Life Goes On* where carpet washing occurs alongside corpse washing. The idea of repetition suggests a labyrinth in these films – the protagonists retrace the same paths without ever reaching their initial goal, as if lost. This labyrinth operates on two layers: the physical (roads and obstacles, the “hard labyrinth”) and the mental, which constitutes the “soft labyrinth”. The latter manifests through extended dialogues – asking directions, guiding conversations – or recalling memories from previous films in the trilogy, as well as the repetitive attempts to convince passengers to assist the protagonist's suicide in *Taste of Cherry*. Kiarostami fuses both labyrinths, trapping protagonists in journeys where paths and guides promise direction yet only distort their original goals. As Aparício observes, in these films Kiarostami operates a subtle superimposing of outside and inside: “[C]ertainly, there are similarities between heterotopia and Kiarostami's spaces. His landscapes are road maps, but villages are labyrinths and mirror places, portraits of someone's soul.” [\[40\]](#) This is best portrayed in *The Wind Will Carry Us* in which the secretive manner and tricky methods of Behzad is set against a labyrinthine village and spiralling roads. Implying the process of *liquification* in this film, Bergala notes that “little by little, however, this man – who begins by asking questions before taking the time to look and understand – will allow himself to be disturbed by the enigmas of all kinds,

including visual ones, that this village sets against his (bad) interpretive habits. He will gradually detoxify from his (focalizing) way of looking at and listening to others.” [41] We might recall that this act of detoxification – as Bergala puts it – is visually enacted towards the end of the film, when Behzad throws a bucket of water onto his car’s windshield and casts the thighbone into a stream – both gestures finding their proper figural place within this context of *liquification*.

Furthermore, by superimposing two spaces onto each other, the dialectics of inside and outside in Kiarostami’s films assumes an ontological meaning as there is a constant circular – eventually spiralling movement – between these two spaces of being, a winding path of recurrences. As Bachelard vividly captures it: “Entrapped in being, we shall always have to come out of it. And when we are hardly outside of being, we always have to go back into it. Thus, in being, everything is circuitous, roundabout, recurrent, so much talk; a chaplet of sojournings, a refrain with endless verses. But what a spiral man’s being represents! And what a number of invertible dynamisms there are in this spiral! One no longer knows *right away* whether one is running toward the center or escaping.” [42] [author’s emphasis] The roundness implied here finds proper figural imagery in Kiarostami’s films. Beyond his stylistic use of fundamental elements, there is a certain recurring image in his films that is as thematically and poetically important as the serpentine roads. This image is the solitary tree that, besides its symbolic value as a sign of durability and solitude, not only differentiates the landscape and marks hills’ summit and the end of the serpentine road (as in the Koker trilogy) but also identifies key spatial markers: the grave’s location in *Taste of Cherry*, and the village’s location in *The Wind Will Carry Us*. Furthermore, in terms of material imagination, a solitary tree is a form of being that attributes a certain form of roundness to the

landscapes by marking both the starting and the ending point of the recurring journeys in the films. “A poet”, as Bachelard writes, “knows that when a thing becomes isolated, it becomes round, assumes a figure of being that is concentrated upon itself. In Rilke’s *Poèmes français* this is how the walnut tree lives and commands attention. Here, again around a lone tree, which is the center of a world, the dome of the sky becomes round, in accordance with the rule of cosmic poetry.” [\[43\]](#) The solitary tree’s enduring presence (a vertical being) in these films materially enacts what the recursive horizontal journeys perform narratively – both redefining the space and limits of being in terms of cosmic centre and periphery.



**Figure 5**—Still from *The Wind Will Carry Us*



**Figure 6**—Still from *Where is the Friend’s House?*

In closing, it may be said that what emerges from Kiarostami's recurrent *dispositif* – the serpentine paths, elemental motifs, and solitary trees – is a staging of material imagination that unfolds through spatial dialectics: inside and outside, enclosure and expanse, the car interior and the open landscape. His cinema negotiates the tension between the very small and the very large – mirrored in long shots of vast terrain and close shots of confined interiors – rendering transformation not as resolution but as a slow, circuitous interplay between solidity and fluidity, difference and repetition, earth and water, self and world.

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## Notes

[1] Mehrnaz Saeed-Vafa and Jonathan Rosenbaum, *Abbas Kiarostami* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 19.

[2] Manny Farber, *Negative Space* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1971), 3.

[3] See Pedram Dibazar, "Wandering Cars and Extended Presence: Abbas Kiarostami's Embodied Cinema of Everyday Mobility," *New Review of Film and Television Studies* 15, no. 3 (2017): 305, Accessed July 7<sup>th</sup>, 2025, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17400309.2017.1308156>.

[4] Abbas Kiarostami, "Le goat du cache" [interview], *Cahiers du Cinéma* no. 518 (1997): 68, my translation.

[5] Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977), 6, cited in Stephen Bransford, "The Rural Space of Abbas

Kiarostami,” *Senses of Cinema* no. 29 (December 2003), Accessed May 6<sup>th</sup>,

2025, [http://www.sensesofcinema.com/2003/abbas-](http://www.sensesofcinema.com/2003/abbas-kiarostami/kiarostami_rural_space_and_place/)

[kiarostami/kiarostami\\_rural\\_space\\_and\\_place/](http://www.sensesofcinema.com/2003/abbas-kiarostami/kiarostami_rural_space_and_place/).

[6] Maria Irene Aparício, “On Locations: Kiarostami’s Landscapes and Cinematic Value,” in *New Approaches to Cinematic Space* (London: Routledge, 2018), 156.

[7] Ibid., 160.

[8] See Negar Mottahedeh, *Displaced Allegories: Post-Revolutionary Iranian Cinema* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 99.

[9] Gilles Deleuze, “Letter to Serge Daney: Optimism, Pessimism, and Travel,” in *Negotiations*, trans. Martin Joughin (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 68–69.

[10] Ibid., 70.

[11] See Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Evidence of Film*, trans. Christine Irizarry and Verena Andermatt Conley (Brussels: Yves Gevaert Publisher, 2001), 14.

[12] Ibid., 16.

[13] Alain Bergala, “L’os et le pare-brise”, *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 541 (1999): 34, my translation.

[14] Ibid., 34.

[15] Gaston Bachelard, *Water and Dreams: An Essay on the Imagination of Matter*, trans. Edith R. Farrell (Dallas: The Pegasus Foundation, 1983), 10.

[16] Ibid., 10.

[17] Abbas Kiarostami, quoted in Hamid Naficy, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema*, vol. 4 (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 89.

[18] See Joan Copjec, “The Imaginal World and Modern Oblivion: Kiarostami’s Zig-Zag,” *Filozofski vestnik* 37, no. 2 (2016): 21, Accessed May 7<sup>th</sup>, 2025, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/15840.003.0006>.

[19] Ibid., 22.

[20] Ibid., 38.

[21] See A. J. Close, “Commonplace Theories of Art and Nature in Classical Antiquity and in the Renaissance,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 30, no. 4 (1969): 469, Accessed May 12<sup>th</sup>, 2025, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2307/2708606>.

[22] Camilla Flodin, “Adorno and Schelling on the Art–Nature Relation,” *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 26, no. 1 (2018): 181, Accessed May 16<sup>th</sup>, 2025, DOI: [10.1080/09608788.2017.1349648](https://doi.org/10.1080/09608788.2017.1349648).

[23] Graig Uhlin, “Abbas Kiarostami, Global Art Cinema and the Material Imagination of Earth,” *Studies in World Cinema* 3 (2023): 26, Accessed May 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2025, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1163/26659891-bja10027>.

[24] Ibid., 27.

[25] Abbas Kiarostami, “Le goût du caché: Entretien avec Abbas Kiarostami,” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 518 (1997): 67, my translation.

[26] Saeed-Vafa and Rosenbaum, *Abbas Kiarostami*, 59-60.

[27] Uhlin, “Abbas Kiarostami,” 25.

[28] François Truffaut, *The Films in My Life*, trans. Leonard Mayhew (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1985), 47.

[29] Abbas Kiarostami, interview by Jonathan Rosenbaum and Mehrnaz Saeed-Vafa, in *Abbas Kiarostami* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 115.

[30] Bachelard, *Water and Dreams*, 62.

[31] See Bransford, “Days in the Country”.

[32] Alain Bergala, “Kiarostami et le kaïros,” *Cahiers du cinéma*, no. 725 (2016): 83.

[33] See Bachelard, *Water and Dreams*, 123.

[34] Uhlin, “Abbas Kiarostami,” 28.

[35] Bachelard, *Water and Dreams*, 1.

[36] Paul Claudel, *Connaissance de l’Est* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1945), 251, quoted in Gaston Bachelard, *Water and Dreams*, 123.

[37] Paul Claudel, *Positions et propositions*, vol. 2 (Paris: Gallimard, 1928-1934), 235, quoted in Gaston Bachelard, *Water and Dreams*, 148.

[38] Nancy, *L’Évidence du film*, 50.

[39] Uhlin, “Abbas Kiarostami,” 31.

[40] Aparício, “On Locations,” 162.



[41] Bergala, “L’os et le pare-brise,” 35, my translation.

[42] Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), 214.

[43] Ibid., 239.

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## **Biography**

Alborz Mahboobkhah is a PhD student at Freie Universität Berlin, researching French post-Nouvelle Vague cinema with a focus on Philippe Garrel under the supervision of Prof. Matthias Grotkopp. His thesis examines the autobiographical turn in French cinema following the May '68 events, analysing the melancholic, temporal, and figural effects and dimensions of autobiographical filmmaking in the works of Jean Eustache, Maurice Pialat, Guy Gilles, Chantal Akerman, and others. He is a co-founder, writer, and editor of *Vitascope*, the Farsi-language online journal dedicated to cinema. He has translated and published Serge Daney's book *Persévérance* from French to Farsi. His work has also appeared in *Sabzian* and *Senses of Cinema*, where he has written about repetition in the films of Ozu and temporal *mise-en-abyme* in the cinema of Abbas Kiarostami.