

## How Abbas Kiarostami Turned Film into Poetry

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*“In the total darkness, poetry is still there, and it is there for you.”*

- Abbas Kiarostami



Poetry is of unique significance to Persian culture, and has been for thousands of years; where the Ancient Greeks had philosophy, and the Ancient Egyptians architecture, Persians have always focused on poetry as their main cultural vector. Poetry’s tendrils probe into every other facet of Persian civilization – Persian rugs, for instance, often have poems woven into their very fabric. It should come as no

surprise then that when Iranian artists started making forays into cinema, they did so with a decidedly poetic touch. The greatest of all Iranian filmmakers was Abbas Kiarostami, and it was by his hand that film and poetry started to merge entirely.

Born in 1940 to a large family from Gilan (a small province in Northern Iran), Kiarostami endured a lonely and unhappy childhood. As a teenager, he developed a

talent for painting, going on to win a painting competition at age 18. After a period of studying painting at university, and briefly working as a graphic designer, he found himself gravitating towards cinema. At the time, the Iranian New Wave was in full swing, inspired by films such as *Serpent's Skin* (1964) and *The Cow* (1969). During this frenetic period, Kiarostami helped set up the Institute for the Intellectual Development of Children and Young Adults (commonly known as 'Kanun'), an ostensibly youth-focused film studio that would go on to produce most of his career's work, even when he started to lean away from children's cinema.

Afforded an uncommon degree of artistic freedom by Kanun, Kiarostami spent the next twenty years making a series of wonderful, but decidedly *realist* films. For the most part unobtrusive renderings of the Iranian working man's struggle, these films were indicative of an era where the artist's most crucial priority was to cry out against the Shah; there was not much room for aesthetic nuance. However, this was all to change with the Islamic revolution. This brief wave of class equality disrupted Kiarostami's immediate inspiration (misery porn) and forced him to consider his own medium more deeply.

This was when Kiarostami's poetic compulsions coalesced. In 1987, he directed what was to become his international breakthrough: *Where is the Friend's House?* Ostensibly, this film was like all his previous: the fairly basic plot is

that a small boy must try to return a schoolbook he has erroneously taken from a friend – standard neorealist fare. However, Kiarostami defied convention completely by displaying Ahmad (our protagonist)'s quest not as an aimless and gritty slog through the cruelty of modern society, as one would expect, but as an idealised spiritual journey.

The first indicator of the film's content was in its title. *Where is the Friend's House?* This is in fact a quotation from the famous poem *Address* by Iranian writer Sohrab Sepehri:

In the false-dawn twilight  
The rider asked,  
'Where is the house of the Friend?'  
[...]  
You go to the end of that lane  
Which appears behind adolescence  
And you turn  
Towards the flower of solitude  
[...]  
You see a child  
Who has climbed up a pine tree  
To pick up a chick  
From the nest of light  
And from the child you ask:  
'Where is the house of the friend?'

Sohrab Sepehri was one of the great Iranian poets of his generation. A man deeply intrigued by mysticism and Sufism, he was also considered to have brought modernism to Iranian poetry. In *Address*, he immediately alludes to a central 'friend' – in the Persian tradition, this would be none other than God.<sup>1</sup> The 'house of the friend'

is, by extension, a spiritual goal; in most cases this would be to actualise oneself with God.

The poem is thus a depiction of spiritual journey, and this is in turn paralleled by both the plot and the imagery of the film. For instance, Ahmad finds his very own ‘flower of solitude’ in a rose given to him by an elderly carpenter, one of the few adults sympathetic to his strife. Roses are common metaphors for altruism and innocence in Persian poetry<sup>2</sup>, showing a first layer of clear symbolism; Kiarostami goes one step further by subverting its role as something ‘solitary’. Ahmad unintentionally gives his friend the rose, tucked into the school book's pages, at their reunion during the film's finale (when Ahmad's perilous odyssey has finally concluded). Kiarostami thus juxtaposes the loneliness necessary for Ahmad's spiritual journey with the resultant fellowship, which is all crystallised by the transfer of a rose.

Though there's not the space here to explore them all, connections and subversions like these are knotted throughout *Where is the Friend's House?*, leading some to wonder whether the film could be conceivably considered an adaptation of the poem. Kiarostami's unconventional but passionate takes on the imagery and conventions established in Persian culture mean that the film is simultaneously a progression beyond, and deeply enmeshed within, poetry. *Where is*

*the Friend's House?* was only to be the first of such developments, though.

Kiarostami's next film, 1989's *Homework*, was made two years after *Where is the Friend's House?* Far less fundamentally concerned with poetry, *Homework* was superficially a documentary about primary school boys' attitudes to homework. A far more political, and in many ways angry film, *Homework's* primary nuance is its surreptitious analysis of the education system of Iran, and its mobilisation as a tool to indoctrinate and control students. Throughout the film, the school is depicted as more akin to an army barracks than a place of education – this is most pertinently echoed by the menacing playground chants which permeate through the school halls:

One, two, three and four  
Two, three, four and five  
Victory to our warriors  
Three, four, five and six  
Curses on the followers of Saddam.

Frequently, the children being interviewed by Kiarostami allude with pride to their assiduous patriotism; one even seems crestfallen after Kiarostami suggests that Saddam Hussein might die before the child has the chance to assassinate (him) Hussein himself. It seems the students are being educated in war, not wisdom or freedom. Kiarostami, with poetry clearly still fresh in his mind, decides to upset this process in the film's powerful final scene. He interviews his most fearful student yet, a young boy in paroxysms of fear – afraid of both the imposing Kiarostami and the

infinitely worse prospect of being late for his Religion lesson. To calm him down, Kiarostami asks him to recite a prayer from the Qur'an:

Oh, Lord of the beautiful stars,  
 Oh, Lord of the many-coloured universe,  
 Thou, who hast created Venus,  
 Thou, who hast created the Sun and the Moon,  
 The mountains and the oceans,  
 The lovely colours of the trees,  
 The tiny wings of the butterflies,  
 And the nests of the birds,  
 Eyes for us to see them,  
 Rain and snow,  
 Heat and cold,  
 Thou, who hast made all these things,  
 Thou, who hast granted all my wishes,  
 Fill our hearts with joy and happiness.

The boy reads the poem and is profoundly affected; indeed the film ends with a freeze-frame of his startled face. It's clear that Kiarostami intends to further complicate the relationship between poetry and film by adding education as a point of interest: the appearance of the final poem displays his deep cynicism with an education system that doesn't teach its children how to love art and beauty, nor see the true wonder in religion. Instead, the boy's foremost divine concerns are whether he's late to his Religion lesson or not. This poem also contextualises the complete

brutality of the playground chants, its beauty making the harsh words of the other children all the harder to listen to. Kiarostami is completely masterful in his utilisation of poetry to reveal these truths in a completely unique way.

*Homework* thus stands as a ferocious condemnation of Iranian education, and shows Kiarostami dealing with poetry in a completely different way to *Where is the Friend's House?* - it's more of a tool than a structural basis. It nonetheless holds equal weight as a powerful vehicle for his artistic message to shine through.

It would take Kiarostami another fifteen years to create a third distinct engagement with poetry in film. In 2002, while staying on the shores of the Caspian Sea, he started to film brief moments of insignificance around him: for instance lapping waves or birds in the sky – in his words “things which nevertheless if observed at enough length, reflected a whole world”.<sup>3</sup> After a summer of this process, and a period of gestation, he salvaged five long takes from the hours of ephemera he had recorded, and compounded them into one long film he called *Five*.

Significantly beyond *Where is the Friend's House?* in extremity of execution, *Five* is so narratively inscrutable and visually arresting as to be considered in the realm of ‘poetic cinema’.<sup>4</sup> Poetic cinema is to narrative cinema what poetry is to the novel; it represents a purer and more succinct mode of artistic (and emotional) communication. Where the narrative film

must establish plot and characters in an attempt to tackle ideas, the poetic film remains unconstrained. Typically, musical and visual storytelling are used to a far greater degree in order to facilitate a far more direct emotional experience.

Very little actually happens in *Five*; its five scenes are a piece of driftwood floating through waves, a group of people wandering along the seaside path, a band of dogs roaming on the beach, a group of ducks going about their business, and a moonlit pool being serenaded by the croaking frogs. The strength of the film lies in its unpretentious appreciation of life; a pious love for the ‘little things’ in the world which echoes right back to the prayer in *Homework*. Kiarostami insists that these images can be enjoyed without need for understanding, and that the resultant experience is thus far closer to that of poetry or music.

Perhaps the most famous example of poetic cinema, and an interesting point of comparison, is *The Colour of Pomegranates*, an Armenian film directed by Sergei Parajanov which reconstructs the poet Sayat-Nova’s life through a number of highly symbolic vignettes. Though history doesn’t relate whether Kiarostami ever saw the film<sup>5</sup>, *Five* seems to follow a very similar philosophy; the crucial distinction is that Parajanov must create his symbolism with actors and sets, whereas Kiarostami *finds* his images in the world around him (none of his shots were constructed). Kiarostami’s inclination to play the

observer, and seek more meaning from nature, is yet further evidence of his fundamentally Iranian attitude to art – a cultural angle where the depiction of the human being is often discouraged. Thus *Five* can be linked right back to Kiarostami’s intimate connection to his culture, and its state of purely visual expression allows it to transcend that to a universal language of imagery. In the words of Alberto Elena (in 2005), “Whatever course Kiarostami’s film-making takes in the future, *Five* will surely remain as the beautiful Utopian vision of a solitary poet holding tight to his small digital camera.”<sup>6</sup>

In 1990, Kiarostami claimed to have only seen 50 films in his life,<sup>7</sup> a number confoundingly small given his mastery of the artform. It’s safe to say, then, that the vast majority of his influences come from literature and other ‘higher’ arts; as he himself admits, “Without doubt they [his films] have very deep roots in the heart of Persian culture.”<sup>8</sup> The effect this has had cannot be understated: though not always his most famous, his films which entertain true engagement with poetry transcend to a level of true art; I would hazard calling them ‘modernist poems’ in their own right. Kiarostami was a true genius of cinema, and I urge anyone with even a passing interest in film to investigate his sublime creations themselves.

*For footnotes and references, click [here](#).*