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The Death-Image and the Ethics of Time: Kiarostami's Cinema of Life, Absence and Duration

A Imagem-Morte e a Ética do Tempo: O Cinema de Vida, Ausência e Duração de Kiarostami

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Abstract

This article investigates Abbas Kiarostami's cinematic engagement with mortality, temporality, and ethical spectatorship through the lens of Susana Viegas's "death-image." Unlike conventional depictions of death, Kiarostami stages mortality as an unseen but structuring presence, emphasizing life's duration over narrative closure. Drawing on Deleuze's time-image, Sareh Javid's early-film readings, and Asbjørn Grønstad's concept of biovisual ethics, the study situates Kiarostami's work within a framework in which observing, waiting, and contemplation constitute acts of ethical attention. Two case studies, *Taste of Cherry* (1997) and *The Wind Will Carry Us* (1999), demonstrate how Kiarostami constructs cinematic space and duration to sustain ambiguity and invite reflection. In *Taste of Cherry*, the final sequence enacts the Deleuzian crystal-image, blending actual and virtual registers to destabilize distinctions between life and death, reality and fiction. In *The Wind Will Carry Us*, the village cemetery functions as a locus for observing ordinary life amid the deferred event of death, reinforcing an ethics of attention. Intertextual references to Persian literary traditions, particularly Omar Khayyam's quatrains, underscore a philosophy of impermanence and sceptical reflection on transcendence. Kiarostami's films cultivate an ethical cinematic space where life, death, and temporality coexist in uncertainty, resisting spectacle and closure, and fostering a contemplative engagement with the flow of time.

Keywords

Abbas Kiarostami | death-image | time-image | Biovisual ethics | Persian literary intertextuality

Resumo

Este artigo investiga o engajamento cinematográfico de Abbas Kiarostami com a mortalidade, a temporalidade e a experiência ética do espectador à luz do conceito de "imagem-morte" de Susana Viegas. Ao contrário das representações convencionais da morte, Kiarostami apresenta a mortalidade como uma presença invisível, porém estruturante, enfatizando a duração da vida em vez do fechamento narrativo. Baseando-se na teoria da imagem-tempo de Deleuze, nas leituras dos primeiros filmes por Sareh Javid e no conceito de ética biovisual de Asbjørn Grønstad, o estudo situa a obra de Kiarostami num quadro no qual observar, esperar e contemplar constituem atos de atenção ética. Dois estudos de caso, *Taste of Cherry* (1997) e *The Wind Will Carry Us* (1999), mostram como Kiarostami constrói o espaço cinematográfico e a duração para sustentar a ambiguidade e convidar à reflexão. Em *Taste of Cherry*, a sequência final exemplifica a imagem-cristal de Deleuze, fundindo registros atuais e virtuais e desestabilizando as distinções entre vida e morte, realidade e ficção. Em *The Wind Will Carry Us*, o cemitério da aldeia funciona como locus de observação da vida quotidiana diante da morte adiada, reforçando uma ética da atenção. Referências intertextuais à tradição literária persa, especialmente os quatrains de Omar Khayyam, enfatizam uma filosofia da impermanência e uma reflexão cética sobre a transcendência. Os filmes de Kiarostami cultivam um espaço cinematográfico ético onde vida, morte e temporalidade coexistem na incerteza, resistindo ao espetáculo e ao fechamento, promovendo um engajamento contemplativo com o fluxo do tempo.

Palavras-chave

Abbas Kiarostami | imagem-morte | imagem-tempo | ética biovisual| intertextualidade literária persa

Introduction

The obsession with the theme of death in some of Kiarostami's films merits attention from several perspectives. It is in *Life, and Nothing More...* (1992) that this obsession first emerges. A wandering man, searching for news about whether his acquaintances are dead or alive, becomes central to the narrative. The film masterfully interweaves multiple layers of reality with fiction. First, the figure of Kiarostami himself appears in the film through an actor-surrogate, who is searching for the two non-professional child actors from his earlier work *Where Is My Friend's House?* (1987). Second, the real natural catastrophe — the devastating earthquake in northern Iran in 1990 — structures the fictional narrative. The film opens with the director and his young son travelling by car toward the Rudbar region of northern Iran, where the 1987 film was shot, and which now lies in ruins. Yet the anticipated encounter never occurs; the journey is not completed, as the road to Koker — the village where the earlier film was set — has collapsed. What the travellers to Koker ultimately discover is not a destination, but the road itself: time in delay. In Deleuzian terms, their experience opens onto the ceaseless flow of

time, a temporality that surpasses and destabilises their anxious pursuit of fixed or conclusive knowledge. Time passes, the desired object is never attained, yet the travellers gradually encounter the persistence of ordinary life, resisting death and destruction. The flow of daily existence, in its unadorned materiality, becomes a spontaneous object of attention. This shift from action to reaction, from doing to observing, aligns the film with what Deleuze terms the cinema of the seer (1989, 2). According to Asbjørn Grønstad, it is precisely in this mode that the time-image emerges, "where reaction supersedes action" (2012–13, 22). Here, narrative progression gives way to the experience of duration itself, in which observing, waiting, and perceiving take precedence over purposeful action.

Hamid Dabashi's commentary on the film is particularly insightful in ethical terms. Responding to the sharply divided reception among Iranian critics — many of whom questioned the morality of transforming the suffering of ordinary people into cinematic images that could be celebrated at European festivals — Dabashi emphasizes the ethical dimension of Kiarostami's material vision. He highlights how the filmmaker's attention to everyday life, its rhythms, and its fleeting moments unsettles conventional religious and ideological assumptions, inviting viewers to reflect rather than pass judgment. Dabashi concludes that Kiarostami "has learned his materialism from Forugh Farrokhzad's and Sohrab Sepehri's poetry, but he is material in the most positive and life-affirming sense of the term" (2001, 295), a materialism that foregrounds presence, perception, and ethical attentiveness over spectacle or prescriptive meaning.

Life, and Nothing More... impacts on the Cannes jury in 1992. French critics in particular identified traces in it of an "Oriental Rossellini" (Tobin 1992). The awarding of the honorary Rossellini Prize to Kiarostami at Cannes that year marked the beginning of a highly fruitful international career for the filmmaker. His thoughtful intertextual reference to *Where Is My Friend's House?* also brought retrospective attention to the earlier film, which had gone largely unnoticed during his first appearance at international festivals in 1987, and to the village of Koker where it was set. Kiarostami's subsequent three films likewise explore the dynamic tension between life and death. *Through the Olive Trees* (1994) tells the love story of a couple previously introduced in *Life, and Nothing More...*. It explores the sprouting of affection in the aftermath of disaster, in the midst of ruins and suffering left by the earthquake. The third and fourth films, *Taste of Cherry* (1997) and *The Wind Will Carry Us* (1999), are both masterpieces in which death is a central entity. In *Taste of Cherry*, Badii, a solitary middle-aged man, drives through the hills on the outskirts of Tehran in search of someone willing to bury him after he commits suicide. In *The Wind Will Carry Us*, a television journalist crew wait in a remote Kurdish village for an old woman to die, hoping to document the region's elaborate funeral rites. Yet while in both film death is delayed, displaced, or left off-screen, it is life which is present in its duration and in its biological existence. In Deleuzian terms, these films are not primarily concerned with what happens, but with temporality itself, where the ordinary displaces the extraordinary. The protagonists inhabit *temps mort*, waiting

for a death that remains omnipresent yet unresolved on screen. Following Grønstad, this attentiveness to unfolding moments can be understood as a mode of "biovisual ethics" (2016, 87): the viewer is invited to dwell with uncertainty, observe life and mortality with openness, and engage with the flow of time as an act of imaginative ethical attention.

Kiarostami's style has been approached through diverse frameworks, including "slow cinema" (Romney 2010), "poetic-minimalist realism" (Ghorbankarimi 2018; Sheibani 2011), authorial readings (Ishaghpour 2000, 2012; Elena 2005; Dalla Gassa 2000), and postcolonial or critical perspectives (Dabashi 2025; Raesch 2009; Zahedi 2018). In this study, I build on Sareh Javid's (2017) analysis of his oeuvre through the lens of Deleuze's time-image, highlighting how temporality, waiting, and observation structure narrative experience. This is complemented by Susana Viegas's (2023) work linking the time-image to cinematic representations of death and the ethical stance of the filmmaker. Together with Asbjørn Grønstad's (2016) concept of biovisual ethics, these readings provide a framework to understand Kiarostami's cinema as cultivating an ethical attentiveness: inviting viewers to dwell with uncertainty, attend to life and mortality, and engage with the flow of time as an ethical, reflective experience rather than a conventional narrative outcome.

Viegas's concept of the "death-image" is not merely a literal depiction of dying, "but a temporal phenomenon that provokes thought—death as movement, as absence, and as the passing of time itself—something to be thought through rather than simply seen" (Viegas, forthcoming). This aesthetic emerged as both a reaction to and a contestation of the ideological conditions of post-revolutionary Iran, eventually becoming a hallmark of Kiarostami's authorial signature, especially after his recognition in European film festivals. Examining *Taste of Cherry* and *The Wind Will Carry Us*, this study situates Kiarostami's use of the death-image within Deleuzian theory, the Persian literary tradition—including the poetry of Omar Khayyam—and the socio-historical context of post-revolutionary Iran, with attention to state ideologies and visual propaganda surrounding mortality and martyrdom. Key questions include how the refusal to show death on screen opens space for time to become visible, what it means for death to be unseen yet structuring, and how Kiarostami's formal strategies — long takes, minimal editing, and the use of off-screen space — support a Deleuzian reading.

The term ethics is employed here not in a prescriptive or moralizing sense, but in the sense articulated by Downing and Saxton (2009) and Grønstad (2016), where it denotes an openness of the image that resists interpretive closure. Rather than assigning meaning or value, an ethical cinematic gesture refrains from appropriating death as spectacle or ideological signification. Kiarostami's films sustain ambiguity, allowing life and death, presence and absence, to coexist without resolving into transcendence, narrative finality, or political certainty. In this framework, the films maintain a space for reflection in which the viewer is invited to dwell in uncertainty and hesitation, attending closely to ordinary life, observing mortality without anxiety, and engaging with the flow of time as a form of imaginative ethical attention (Grønstad 2016). This attentiveness

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— what Grønstad calls a "biovisual ethics" — creates an encounter that is both perceptual and ethical, where the cinematic image opens a shared space for reflection rather than closure, encouraging viewers to inhabit the rhythm of life in close proximity to the ever-present but unseen reality of death.

The Death-Image as constructive of duration

Deleuze's *Cinema 2* (1985/1989) marked a foundational transformation in post-war film history. It introduced the concept of the time-image as constitutive of this shift, supplanting the earlier paradigm of the movement-image. The traumatic impact of the war, along with the exhaustion of classical cinema's dominant narrative structures, gave rise to what Deleuze calls a "direct time-image" (1989, xi). This development was the result of the pervasive uncertainty that followed the collapse of pre-war narrative certainties — an uncertainty that manifests in catastrophic situations:

> The fact is that, in Europe, the post-war period has greatly increased the situations which we no longer know how to react to, in spaces which we no longer know how to describe. These were 'any spaces whatever', deserted but inhabited, disused warehouses, waste ground, cities in the course of demolition or reconstruction. And in these any-spaces-whatever a new race of characters was stirring, kind of mutant: they saw rather than acted, they were seers. (Deleuze 1989, xi)

Deleuze identifies the emergence of a modern cinema that, in contrast to classical cinema, seeks to depict time on screen. Time, in this sense, appears in its pure duration, rendered through techniques such as the long take and the portrayal of situations that may be either "extremes, or, on the contrary, those of everyday banality, or both at once" (Deleuze 1989, xi). This modern cinema emerges as a response to an existential crisis, detaching the experience of time from the chronological order of past-present-future. Instead, it renders perceptible "relationships of time which cannot be seen in the represented object and do not allow themselves to be reduced to the present" (Deleuze 1989, xii). This detachment is evident in a cinematic moment filmed in the past, presented to a spectator in the future, but experienced as a continuous present. As this is intrinsic to the medium itself, modern cinema becomes self-aware, revealing temporality in its layered and folded form — what Deleuze calls the crystal-image of time. This break between perception and action opens up a space for contemplation, drifting, listening, and situations in which action is suspended.

The crystal-image also enables the fusion of the actual and the virtual, often through direct references to reality within fiction, or through self-reflexive authorial interventions that expose the meta-narrative structure. For Deleuze, this capacity positions cinema as a powerful philosophical tool, capable of reflecting a world increasingly marked by

uncertainty, ambiguity, and fragmentation. Unlike classical cinema, which maintains a logic of action and consequence, modern cinema depicts hesitation and confusion, serving as a symptom of the breakdown of narrative certainties. Characters in such films contemplate rather than act; they become observers of time rather than agents of change. This new formal mode — hovering between the real and the virtual, fusing multiple layers of time and memory — draws the spectator into a state of doubt rather than resolution. Images become problems rather than answers, compelling the spectator to confront the instability of reality itself and its complex political entanglements.

Readings of Kiarostami's work through the lens of the time-image can be found in the scholarship of Sareh Javid (2017) and Asbjørn Grønstad (2012–13). Javid contends that, even in his early films, particularly *The Traveller* (*Mosafer*, 1974), Kiarostami structures his cinema according to the Deleuzian time-image. According to Javid, he breaks the classical movement-image paradigm by placing characters in situations where the sensory-motor link is suspended: action ceases to be the primary driver, and contemplation, waiting, and aesthetic perception take precedence. This rupture produces what Deleuze terms "pure optical and sound situations" (1989, 19) or "any-spaces-whatever" (1989, xi). Javid identifies these spaces in Kiarostami's cinema as inseparable from its temporal structure: the camera lingers, characters observe, and the on-screen result reflects the filmmaker's meditation on historical and social circumstances (2017, 33).

Within this framework, the protagonist transforms from an acting agent into a "seer" in Deleuze's sense — a subject who looks, waits, and perceives phenomena that cannot be dominated or resolved (2017, 39). Javid further argues that Kiarostami's aesthetic choices — such as employing non-professional actors, blending fiction and documentary, and shooting on location — should not be reduced to social realism. Instead, they constitute a form of "minor cinema" in the Deleuzian sense: politically engaged yet indirect, manifesting politics through temporality, time-images, and uncertainty rather than through explicit representation (2017, 45, 91–112). Javid concludes that Kiarostami develops a poetics of time and perception, in which reality is not an object for action but a field of experience. This poetics persists throughout his oeuvre and forms the foundation of his later works, offering what Javid calls a "clearing where truth emerges" (2017, 127).

Asbjørn Grønstad, in turn, analyses one of Kiarostami's late films, *Shirin* (2008), showing how the time-image can be extended into an ethical encounter. In the film, Kiarostami presents only close-ups of women's faces watching a film that we never see; the object of their gaze remains absent. This formal choice spatialises duration, making visible and tangible the passage of time, the waiting, and the act of witnessing itself, rather than focusing on narrative action. Grønstad terms this a "spatialization of duration" (2012–13, 103): the extended takes of the watchers create a field of attention in which temporality is felt rather than simply narrated. Within this field, the viewer is invited into what Grønstad describes as a cinema of ethical intimacy — a mode of spectating that emphasises empathy, the affective presence of the other, and the responsibility of

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looking. By removing the event-image and presenting faces in sustained observation, *Shirin* foregrounds an ethics of presence rather than spectacle. According to Grønstad, Kiarostami thereby transforms the time-image into an ethical image: one that resists closure, does not dictate meaning, and instead opens an affective zone of uncertainty, openness, and reflection.

Together with Susana Viegas's (2023) interpretive framework on the death-image, these studies provide the theoretical foundation for the two case studies examined in this article. Viegas links this concept to Deleuze's notion of the time-image by examining how cinema stages the coexistence of life and death and the interplay of multiple temporal dimensions. In contrast to the movement-image, Deleuze's time-image emphasises non-chronological time, in which past and present coexist and interact within a virtual, mental space. This philosophical shift enables cinema to represent death not simply as the cessation of life, but as a paradoxical presence that operates within life itself. Viegas further elaborates on this dynamic in her discussion of the Deleuzian cinema of the brain, arguing that "Deleuze's cinema of the brain (the intellectual type of cinema in which the brain and the world are alike) depicts the coexistence of the present and the past (of a present which is passing, and of a past which is preserved) and is grounded in the question of a passing time and a shared meditation on death" (2023, 230).

Drawing on Bazin, Viegas articulates a direct implication of this philosophical framework in everyday life: "Recording something (in a photo or in a film) is a way of preserving the present and [offers] the possibility of bringing it to life again, with the resurrection of these moving images expressing the ontological status of film as such" (Ibid). Yet the death-image becomes especially prominent in films that resist conventional representations of time and memory — most notably in the works of Alain Resnais, such as *Night and Fog (Nuit et brouillard,* 1956), in which the filmmaker uses archive footage of Auschwitz to depict traumatic historical events. Resnais's characters, whom Viegas describes as "beings of thought" (2023, 225), embody a dual relationship to death: "death from the inside or past" and "death from the outside or future" (Deleuze, quoted in Viegas 2023, 228). These figures inhabit a world constituted by memory, where personal recollections merge with depersonalized virtual images. This formulation resonates with Deleuze's notion that time is the only subjectivity and positions the death-image as a manifestation of the split between past and present — a rupture through which time reveals its pure, unmediated form.

According to Viegas, films such as Patricio Guzmán's *Nostalgia for the Light (Nostalgia de la luz*, 2010) exemplify the death-image by engaging with a "forgotten and vanished past and memory, thus creating the idea that they can also resist death and change in a literal way" (2023, 234). This film centres on the fate of Chilean dissidents who disappeared during the Pinochet dictatorship. In contrast to Resnais's cinematic reconstruction of the Auschwitz trauma (which combines archival material and memory fragments to reconstitute history), Guzmán's film is marked by a conspicuous absence of such documentation. There is no archival footage; there are no official records.

This lack of preserved memory becomes the film's central concern, as it renders visible the ongoing efforts of relatives and researchers who continue to search the Atacama Desert for any trace of the murdered political prisoners.

Here, the death-image manifests not as a literal representation of death, but rather as a meditation on mortality, impermanence, and the transience of time. The film functions as a kind of *memento mori*, inviting viewers to contemplate their own finitude through the cinematic experience. Yet it is equally haunted by absence — striving "to show what is invisible and what has been forgotten or is meant to be non-existent" (Viegas 2023, 235). In this sense, as Viegas suggests, the death-image aligns with Deleuze's concept of the time-image by foregrounding non-linear temporality. Death is positioned not as an endpoint, but as something folded into life and time, destabilising conventional understandings of memory, existence, and historical continuity.

From multiple theoretical vantage points, this framework offers new ways of interpreting the work of modern filmmakers such as Abbas Kiarostami. The following section argues that his treatment of death as a structuring absence functions not merely as a *memento mori*, but more significantly, as a way of foregrounding the life that is repressed beneath the imagery of mortality. What is crucial here is that this concept is not solely thematic but also actively informs the filmmaker's formal strategies. In this sense, Kiarostami's filmmaking resonates with what Andrei Tarkovsky (1986) refers to as "sculpting in time": a mode of representing the pressures of temporality through spaces of wandering, uncertainty, observation, waiting, and doubt. At the same time, this aesthetic approach allows Kiarostami to adopt a stance critical of the totalising ideological frameworks of his historical moment, particularly the propaganda films about heroic martyrdom, with images that resist closure, certainty, and representational fixity.

Case Study 1: *Taste of Cherry* (*Ta'm-e gīlās*, 1997)

Geoff Andrew has noted "how each [of Kiarostami's] films develop the themes, motifs, and stylistic tropes of its predecessors" (2005, 31). While this may initially sound like a straightforward auteurist claim, it nevertheless points to the persistent and recursive concerns that critics have identified throughout Kiarostami's career. As discussed earlier, the death-image — using Viegas's terminology — emerges in the Koker Trilogy and is further elaborated in the subsequent films *Taste of Cherry* and *The Wind Will Carry Us*, Kiarostami's thirteenth and fourteenth features (including shorts). *Taste of Cherry*, which Hamid Dabashi describes as "an antimetaphysical examination of suicide" (2001, 73), follows Badii, a middle-aged man who plans to end his life. Driving through the barren outskirts of Tehran, he searches for someone willing either to bury him or to rescue him should he survive the attempt. Eventually, an elderly taxidermist agrees to help, while gently attempting to dissuade him. The taxidermist recounts his own aborted suicide, describing how the taste of a few mulberries revived his desire to

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live. This "sweet taste" becomes a quiet yet resonant metaphor for the fragile, sensorial immediacy of being. The film culminates in an open-ended and deeply ambiguous ending. Badii lies in the grave he has prepared; night falls; thunder echoes; then the film abruptly shifts to grainy colour video: behind-the-scenes footage of Homayoun Ershadi (the actor playing Badii) walking through the natural environment of the location, with Kiarostami directing, accompanied by Louis Armstrong's *St. James Infirmary*, a blues elegy of mourning. The dusty, muted palette of the narrative yields to the lush spring colours of the off-screen real, revealing the cinematic world as both constructed and porous, suspending the viewer between death, life, and the very act of filmmaking itself.

This ending marks perhaps the most striking contribution of *Taste of Cherry* to Deleuzian readings of modern cinema, and particularly Deleuze's concept of the crystal-image — a moment in which the actual and the virtual become indiscernible. The actual refers to what is materially present, existing in the physical world, while the virtual encompasses memory, dream, imagination, and possibility: the real in another register. In the crystal-image, these two dimensions coexist, refract, and fold into one another. The image thus resembles a crystal, capturing multiple layers of temporality and experience simultaneously. This represents one of the most complex forms of what Deleuze (1985/1989) defines as the time-image, an image that no longer organises time through linearity or causality, but presents it instead in its pure, autonomous form. The abrupt cut to video at the end of *Taste of Cherry* — a shift in texture, colour, and tone — destabilises all narrative expectations built up over the course of the film. Will Badii die? Why does he want to die? What might redemption mean for him? None of these questions are answered. Instead, the film exits the diegetic world altogether and enters a liminal cinematic space: we see Homayoun Ershadi, no longer Badii, smiling and walking around the same landscape, now vibrant with the colours of spring. Soldiers mill about. Kiarostami directs. Louis Armstrong's blues melody underscores the scene, evoking death, mourning, and memory, yet the mood is oddly light, even serene.

Though this sequence has often been interpreted as a postscript or a post-credit scene (see Elena 2005, 138–142), a Deleuzian lens allows for a more radical interpretation: rather than existing outside the film, this sequence suspends and interrogates the boundaries of cinematic fiction. It neither clearly belongs to the diegesis nor completely departs from it. Instead, it dwells in a space between, dissolving the distinction between fiction and reality, the actual and the virtual, life and death. The fictional character of Badii appears to cross over into the real figure of Homayoun Ershadi, as if emerging from a dream into waking life — or perhaps vice versa. This ambiguous zone becomes the very embodiment of the crystal-image: a suspended, dreamlike threshold between cinema and the world.

The absence of the death-image, as envisioned by Viegas, does not merely function as a representation of mortality, but also serves to redirect our gaze toward life. However, as Alberto Elena (2005, 189) cautions, this shift should not be mistaken for a simplistic celebration of or hymn to life. Rather, it operates within a more dialectical

relationship between life and death. What emerges in *Taste of Cherry* is not a glorification of existence, but an acknowledgment of its fragile, fleeting, and often banal texture. Death, in its absence, becomes a marker of time — a presence through negation. It is through this absence that the present is revealed: in the stillness of the images, the repetition of gestures, the dusty air of Tehran's hills. This absent death image underscores not the end, but the temporality of being — the way life unfolds not in drama but in ordinary duration.

A Lacanian reading, particularly as filtered through the philosophical reflections of Jean-Luc Nancy (2001), brings further depth to this complex cinematic gesture. For Nancy, death is not merely the cessation of life, but the exposure of being to its own finitude, which he calls *être-avec-la-mort,* being-with-death. In this sense, the absent death-image in Kiarostami's film becomes a space where this finitude is not shown but shared; not represented but implied through the suspension of narrative resolution and the emphasis on waiting, repetition, and presence. Life in Kiarostami's world is always lived in the shadow of an unrepresentable death, and it is precisely this shadow that illuminates the quiet resistance of the everyday: "Death *is neither* the opposite of life *nor* the passage into another life: it is itself the blind spot that opens up the looking, and it is such a way of looking that films life (as it appears at the ending of *Taste of Cherry*), a way of looking through which we have to look but it is not to be seen itself" (Nancy 2001, 18, emphasis in the original).

Louis Armstrong's voice in *St. James Infirmary* accompanies a scene heavy with sorrow, evoking death and loss, yet strangely tinged with playfulness. The song, recounting the death of a loved one, carries a poetic dignity — a feeling of mourning tempered by acceptance. In the film's final moments, this music inhabits the virtual dimension of the crystal-image. It is not part of the scene's diegetic reality but surrounds it, suffusing it with emotion, impersonal memory, and historical resonance. The song lends the behind-the-scenes footage an elegiac tone, layered with irony, distance, and compassion. The spectator is left in a suspended position, never knowing whether this sequence is a postscript or still part of its fictional world. Nor is it clear whether Badii is dead, alive, or somehow resurrected.

But this absence of death — or more precisely, the absence of any final explanation for Badii's desire to die — becomes a structuring principle that informs the film's entire formal architecture. The repetition of Badii's encounters with his passengers, as he drives in circles around the arid, sun-bleached landscape, generates a rhythm that echoes the structure of Persian quatrains (*rubā'ī*). Using long takes, minimal cutting, and sparse dialogue, Kiarostami constructs a cinematic poetics of stillness and duration, an invitation to experience time not as a vehicle for the plot, but as a contemplative condition. Silence becomes the film's dominant mode of communication. As Marco Dalla Gassa has observed, the intervals of silence between the film's sparse conversations follow a rhythm of 5 to 8 minutes of silence for every 10 to 17 minutes of dialogue (2000, 173), crafting a kind of sonic counterpoint that reinforces the visual austerity. These silences

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are not empty; they create a space for reflection, where the spectator confronts the vast emptiness of the landscape and of Badii's internal state. In tandem with the film's visual strategies — long observational shots of the terrain, close-ups on the faces of the passengers and of Badii himself — this rhythm produces an uncanny atmosphere. The presence of non-actors deepens this effect, defamiliarising the film's reality and further suspending the boundaries between the real and the fictional.

What emerges is a temporality that resists resolution, a cinematic space where time, death, and being are held in suspension. There are no clear borders between the real and the virtual, between the narrative world and the world behind it. Laura Mulvey describes this narrative strategy as the "Kiarostami uncertainty principle" (1998), a kind of authorial signature that operates not merely on the level of plot ambiguity, but on a formal and philosophical level as well. This is not ambiguity for its own sake; it reflects a deeper historical and existential concern, a response to the political and cultural conditions in which Kiarostami was working. His cinematic language becomes a gesture of resistance against closure, against the demand for explanation, and instead offers a space for dwelling in the in-between.

In regard to the historical context of the film, Matthias Wittmann's (2024) definition of the culture of martyrdom offers an illuminating framework. Wittmann delves into the complex concept of *shahadat* — a term in Shi'a Islam that encompasses both the act of bearing witness and the status of martyrdom. While the Qur'an frequently uses *shahīd* with reference to witnesses, its later association with voluntary self-sacrifice emerges through the influence of Christian martyrdom narratives and Islamic mystical traditions. This duality marks a historical transformation: witnessing becomes intertwined with the act of dying for a higher truth. Wittmann shows how the Islamic Republic of Iran, particularly after the 1979 Revolution, appropriated this dual concept for ideological purposes, especially within the genre known as the cinema of Sacred Defence, state-sponsored films that sought to monopolise the discourse of martyrdom with idealised representations of the martyr as both the bearer of truth and the figure of ultimate sacrifice.

Cinematic and media strategies rendered martyrs omnipresent, with images of their deaths being repurposed for ongoing testimonies. Wittmann identifies a central paradox in this regime of representation: the martyr, whose body is silenced by death, is nonetheless expected to articulate a transcendent ideological message. As Wittmann puts it, "the martyr has to find a spectacular audio-visual body" (2024, 3), one that can be incorporated into the machinery of media dissemination to make the state's message both visible and persuasive. In contrast to this dominant visual culture, Wittmann also explores what he calls "counter-martyrographies" (2024, 12–20), films that subvert or resist the State's narrative of martyrdom. These films offer alternative perspectives that question the monopoly of the State over the meaning of death, sacrifice, and testimony. Abbas Kiarostami's films can be seen as part of this

countermovement.[1] His films engage deeply with themes of mortality, but they do so through ambiguity, minimalism, and philosophical reflection rather than spectacle. This Kiarostamian counter-martyrography is not merely a modernist cinematic gesture, as it is rooted in a deeper Persian cultural and poetic heritage, particularly in the works of medieval poets such as Hafez, Sa'dī, and especially Omar Khayyam.

The case of Khayyam warrants some discussion, as his work plays a pivotal role in both of Kiarostami's films under consideration. As Alberto Elena observes, Khayyam's poetry had a privileged place in Kiarostami's personal and artistic philosophy (2005, 131- 132), shaping his approach to existential questions, including death, doubt, and the search for meaning in fleeting experience. Omar Khayyam (1048–1131) was a Persian polymath — a mathematician, astronomer, philosopher, and poet. He is best known for his *rubā'iyyāt*, or quatrains, made famous in the West through their English translations by Edward FitzGerald. Behind the popular image of Khayyam as a hedonistic, wine-loving sceptic — a view shaped largely by Orientalist interpretations — was a highly nuanced thinker. Widely recognised for his scepticism in a deeply religious society, Khayyam expressed profound doubts about metaphysical certainties and religious dogma. His poetry frequently questions fate, divine justice, and the narratives assuring the existence of the afterlife. Long before the advent of modern relativism, Khayyam articulated a philosophy that emphasised the limitations and transience of human knowledge. He suggested that ultimate truths remain beyond human grasp and urged a sober acceptance of this mystery. In several quatrains, he reflects on the futility of attempting to penetrate the unknown, instead advocating a clear-eyed recognition of the unfathomable. This stance reveals a deep existential awareness: life is fleeting, the future unknowable, and thus one should seize the day, but not in a reckless way.

Sadegh Hedayat, one of modern Iran's most influential writers, recognised that Khayyam's epicurean attitude is often tempered by a tragic undertone. Joy is beautiful precisely because it is impermanent and exists under the ever-present shadow of death (Hedayat 1934). Khayyam's *rubā'iyyāt* are simple in form — four-line poems with a strong, resonant final line — and explore themes such as time and mortality, the absurdity of life, love and sensuality, and the mystery of existence. Hedayat (1934) describes the poet as a pessimistic philosopher who views nature as chaotic and reality as framed

1 It is worth noting here Kiarostami's video installation dedicated to *Ta'zieh*, presented at the Centre Pompidou (19–22 September 2007). *Ta'zieh* is a form of Persian ritual theatre that reenacts the martyrdom of Imam Husayn ibn Ali — the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad, and the third Chii Imam — and his 72 loyal companions at the Battle of Karbala in 680 AD. Although *Ashura* rituals have deep cultural roots in Iran dating back to the seventeenth century, they have been heavily ideologised by the Islamic Republic's propaganda apparatus since the 1979 Revolution. In Kiarostami's installation, two screens separately display the *Ta'zieh* performances and the spectators' reactions to them. While the piece can be approached from multiple interpretive angles, what stands out most immediately is the filmmaker's attempt to strip the ritual of its state-imposed ideological framing and return it to a more primordial, pre-ideological condition of collective witnessing.

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within a void. One of the most famous examples, in FitzGerald's Victorian translation, reads: "The Moving Finger writes; and, having writ / Moves on: nor all thy Piety nor Wit / Shall lure it back to cancel half a Line / Nor all thy Tears wash out a Word of it" (FitzGerald 1859/2009, 41).

Khayyam's blend of fatalism and beauty, combining resignation with wonder, is evident in the extended monologue delivered by the taxidermist to Badii, when he attempts to redirect Badii's attention toward life and its small pleasures. Within the broader structure of the film's narrative, this moment is much more than a simple *carpe diem* exhortation in the face of the anxieties weighing on Badii's mind. Viewed in light of the historical context discussed above, the taxidermist's response is not merely a hymn to life but the expression of a political stance against ideologies that glorify the idea of transcending death through martyrdom. An important feature of this character is that he is not a spiritual guide in the manner of a Persian Sufi *pir* wise elder. He ultimately agrees to help Badii for money, and he never inquires into the reasons behind Badii's desire to die. Instead, he repeatedly recounts his own past experience, offering what amount to futile or inconsolable pieces of advice. Together with Badii's sustained silence and the arid landscape surrounding them, the extended dialogue between the two men in the moving car exemplifies what Dabashi (2001, 73; 2007, 295) identifies as the unmetaphysical and materialist, yet quietly nihilistic, undercurrent in Kiarostami's thought, an outlook that questions the religious certainties of existence and resonates strongly with Khayyam's writings.

Case Study 2: *The Wind Will Carry Us* (*Bād mā rā khāhad bord*, 1999)

The Wind Will Carry Us resembles *Taste of Cherry* in its direct engagement with death as the key element driving the narrative. The film centres on a man from Tehran, Behzad, who travels with a small television crew to a remote Kurdish village, Siah Dareh, supposedly to prepare a TV reportage. In reality, their purpose is more specific and morbid: to document the funeral rites of an elderly woman, Malek, who is reportedly close to death. These rites are said to involve spectacular ancient rituals that would make for a valuable ethnographic record. However, Malek's agony is prolonged, making long the expectations of Behzad and his team. The days drag on interminably as the old woman lingers on, and life in the village continues with quiet persistence. Behzad, increasingly isolated from his invisible crew (who never appear on screen), is drawn into repeated journeys driven by an anxious desire to find a way out of the symbolic labyrinth in which he finds himself (Elena 2005, 155). He eagerly awaits death, in radical contrast to the villagers and the natural environment, which reveal the incessant flow of life. This counterpoint to his thanatophilic desire compels him — and, by extension, the film audience — to adopt the stance of a bio-observer, in line with Grønstad's conception of biovisual ethics (2016).

To elaborate on the particular biovisuality of the film, Behzad's journeys to the village cemetery emerge as key narrative and spatial opportunities. Situated atop a hill, this topography provides a scaffold for interpreting Kiarostami's vision. It is here that Behzad can communicate with his superiors, as this is the only point where his mobile phone receives coverage. The cemetery, a *memento mori* par excellence, is transformed in the film into a *memento vivendi*: a site where Behzad, professionally tasked with waiting for death, becomes an observer of life. This dynamic is exemplified in his conversations with Youssef, a young worker digging a hole for a telecommunications antenna at the top of the cemetery hill — who never appears on screen, but whose voice is present in dialogue with Behzad. On one occasion, Behzad witnesses Youssef with his sixteen-year-old fiancée, Zeynab, who flees out of shyness at Behzad's sudden entrance. The interplay of life, love, and death here creates a complex experiential texture that, following Viegas's terminology, highlights the value of life within the death-image.

This image is geographically anchored in the cemetery but also culturally and psychologically embedded in the characters' perspectives. As time passes, Behzad and his crew's anxieties intensify, while the cemetery itself becomes a site of ideologically structured thanatophilia — pressures to produce meaning from death-images — which coexists with the multiple life-images present in the flow of time. In Deleuzian terms, this produces a time-image framed by the rhythms of life and the film's biovisuality. The biovisuality is evident in the absence of direct depictions of death until the apparent passing of Malek. Instead, life manifests in multiple small events: a beetle rolling a ball, a tortoise slowly crossing the graves — moments that Behzad interacts with, attempting to invert the tortoise in anger, though it recovers and continue its path. These attentions to the flow of life, in the presence of death, exemplify the ethical and temporal sensibilities at the heart of Kiarostami's cinema.

A pivotal moment occurs when Behzad visits a local doctor. For Ishaghpour, "the doctor seems to be repeating the words of the old taxidermist from the previous film, with this major difference: it is no longer about 'tasting' but rather about contemplating the beauty of the world while moving through the landscape" (2000, 105). During their conversation, the doctor recites a verse by Omar Khayyam. This intertextual moment, subtle yet charged with philosophical significance, marks another instance of resistance to Behzad's professional yet reckless approach to death. It represents a return to life in close proximity to mortality, observed not with anxiety or as spectacle, but unromantically, with acceptance and perseverance: a recognition of the transience of life, the futility of rigid expectations, and the value of attunement to the present. In this moment, the doctor draws Behzad's attention to the immediacy of life, encouraging him to find value in the present rather than in promises of an uncertain afterlife, which remain central to the culture of martyrdom discussed above.

After a conversation about the primacy of life over death, the doctor, riding an old motorcycle through golden wheatfields, recites a verse attributed to Khayyam: "They say Paradise eternal is sweet, with *houris* fair/But I say: sweet is the juice of the grape

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right here/Take this cash (the now), and let go of that credit (the beyond)/For the sound of the drum is pleasing only from afar."[2]

This reference to Khayyam resonates with the film's central themes of mortality, ephemerality, and attention to the present. It also parallels the poem by Forugh Farrokhzad that gives the film its title, as both works confront the inescapability of death and the fragility of life. The inclusion of these literary voices enriches the film with Persian cultural and philosophical heritage, blending Khayyam's hedonistic fatalism with Farrokhzad's melancholic vitalism. Yet, as in *Taste of Cherry*, this engagement with mortality and life can be read as a form of nihilistic reflection rather than a simple celebration of existence or a futile call to *carpe diem*. In this context, Ishaghpour's elaboration on Khayyam's intertextual influence in Kiarostami's oeuvre, particularly through the lens of Sadegh Hedayat, offers a valuable perspective for understanding these philosophical and ethical dimensions:

Hedayat writes that even in Khayyam's celebration of joy, the shadow of death is always present: "One of the characteristics of his [Khayyam's] thought is that it is always tinged with sorrow, sadness, and death. While inviting us to celebration and joy, he arranges for the very word 'happiness' to stick in your throat; for at the same time, with a thousand allusions, he presents you with the Angel of Death, the cemetery, and nothingness. [...] While being a profound advocate of joy, Khayyam always accompanies it with the idea of nothingness. Thus, his roses and nightingales, his glasses of wine, the verdant spaces, and his erotic imagery are merely a façade; it is like a suicidal person decorating their home before taking their own life" (Cited in Ishaghpour 2000, 88–89).

This treatment of the death-image also carries a critical dimension. In a conversation with the village schoolteacher, Behzad learns about the ritual's violent aspect: women injure their faces in performances of grief. The teacher recalls two scars on his mother's face—one from his aunt's funeral, when she sought to show her devotion to her husband through an exaggerated gesture, and another from his father's employer's funeral, where many women, including his mother, performed the ritual with such intensity that they harmed themselves. The teacher concludes, "To me, all this has economic roots, nothing transcendental."

This critical perspective can be understood as directed toward the dominant cultural thanatophilia promoted by the "martyrocratic" policies of post-revolutionary Iran (Wittmann 2024). As Pedram Khosrownejad (2012) shows, these policies are given privileged expression in state-sponsored Sacred Defence cinema. Paradoxically, despite the Islamic Republic's strong anti-Western rhetoric, these films frequently adopt Hollywood-style linear narratives. Aesthetically, they mirror action films, with

2 This is my own translation from the Persian, intended to preserve both the tone and philosophical nuance of the original. However, a different version of the same quatrain can be found in Whinfield (1883, 74)**:** They preach how sweet those Houri brides will be/But I say wine is sweeter — taste and see!/Hold fast this cash, and let that credit go/And shun the din of empty drums like me.

narratives driven by direct death-images that frame death as meaningful, purposeful, and transcendent. These films are didactic in tone, presenting martyrdom as the pinnacle of ethical and spiritual virtue, and they are adorned with heavy visual symbolism: blood, the shroud, the battlefield, tears, and religious icons. As Wittmann concludes, martyrdom narratives were turned into instruments of the State's necropolitics (2024, 5), not only producing meaning but also promoting social cohesion and ideological legitimacy. Through this lens, death is aestheticised and instrumentalised, turned into a productive force in the political imaginary.

In this context, the collective thanatophilia of the village culture can be understood as aligned with the state's necropolitical agenda. Behzad and his team act as indirect agents of these policies in their quest for a specific death-image. Seen in this light, *The Wind Will Carry Us* foregrounds the immediacy of life itself, functioning as a counter-image to the dominant martyrological discourse. There is no martyr in the film, no death explicitly shown on screen, and no glorification of sacrifice. The old woman whose death the protagonist eagerly waits for, remains off-screen, almost a whispered rumour, a ghostly presence. Death does not arrive on time. Rather, the film embraces ambiguity, waiting, slowness, and the persistence of life, to strip martyrdom of its significance, offering instead a space where death is depicted as woven into the ongoing rhythms of life, not as a spectacular event to revel in.

Drawing on Grønstad, the film's slow-paced depiction of time creates the conditions for an ethical encounter, insofar as "the recognition . . . of alterity takes time and because, phenomenologically, duration commands a privileged relation to presence" (2016, 9). This aligns with Grønstad's notion of biovisual ethics, in which spectators dwell with uncertainty, observing life and mortality in their temporal flow rather than seeking narrative closure. In the final scene, subtle signs suggest that Malek has likely died, the moment Behzad has been anxiously anticipating, yet he must leave the village, having presumably received instructions from his superiors in Tehran to abandon the project after it extended beyond schedule. Behzad furtively photographs the women attending the funeral and washes the car window at a nearby stream. These gestures, understood through the lens of biovisual ethics, embody a quiet attentiveness to life, death, and human action, privileging observation and reflection over intervention. For Alain Bergala, they also signify Behzad's transformation and serve as Kiarostami's invitation to "wash our sights" and perceive the world from a different perspective (1999). Yet the film remains deliberately ambiguous: it offers no definitive account of Behzad's psychological shift or departure, leaving his fate unresolved and inviting the viewer to inhabit a temporal space of ethical reflection and attentive engagement.

This ethics of generating questions rather than certainties can also be observed in the very materiality of the film. For Jonathan Rosenbaum, the film's ethical dimension lies in the resemblance of Behzad to Kiarostami himself: a self-portrait in which "Kiarostami is critiquing the whole premise of his filmmaking from an ethical standpoint" (2000/2024). The director openly acknowledged his use of subtle manipulations to

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elicit performances from non-professional actors in this and other films (Cronin 2015). Ultimately, *The Wind Will Carry Us* raises a critical question regarding the material conditions of filmmaking, while the affective and perceptual experience of the film can be understood within a framework of non-metaphysical ethics grounded in duration, openness, and indeterminacy.

Conclusions

Kiarostami's particular attention to the death-image, as argued in this paper, shapes a significant part of his filmography. This focus on mortality — usually off-screen — creates a space to consider life in its temporality. The connection between material life and time is evident across many of his works, exemplified in his posthumous experimental film *24 Frames* (2017), where silence, landscape, life, and temporality form a visual poem that reflects the filmmaker's thought and personality through cinematic form, with tendencies toward ambiguity, opacity, uncertainty, and openness.

In the case studies examined here, organic life — in all its materiality, fragility, and inconsistency — is depicted against a Khayammian backdrop of omnipresent death. Kiarostami refuses to show death directly on screen, instead emphasizing waiting, searching, and the observation of everyday life in all its temporality, absurdity, and banality. The resulting death-image, in Viegas's (2023) terms, foregrounds the Deleuzian perspective of modern cinema: a cinema of the seer, as Javid (2017) underscores, expressed through uncertain narratives and characters who observe rather than act. It is a cinema that dwells in doubt, challenging rather than affirming ideological certainties.

This position is interwoven with an enduring visual ethics and ideological resistance. Kiarostami's films take an ethical stance, neither dramatizing nor anesthetizing death, but revealing its inconsistency, its inseparability from life, and its emptiness as a transcendental illusion. His work resists spectacle and closure, offering instead a poetic meditation where life's fragility and death's inevitability coexist in an open, reflective space. Ultimately, Kiarostami's films invite the spectator to embrace uncertainty and presence, crafting a cinematic ethics that honours the complex interplay of life, death, and time beyond the constraints of hegemonic ideology. As Grønstad notes, this position confers ethical dimensions in terms of biovisuality, creating a shared space between viewer and image as part of "a same ecology" (2016, 87). This space functions not as a moral system but as a mode of interrogation, allowing the experience of seeing these films to add something qualitatively new to the phenomenal and spiritual world, thereby changing the material fabric of reality.

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