

**Two Lonely Men:
The Morality of Vittorio de Sica and Abbas Kiarostami**

Cameron Cross

“Now it has been perceived that reality is hugely rich, that to be able to look directly at it is enough; and that the artist’s task is not to make people moved or indignant at metaphorical situations, but to make them reflect (and, if you like, to be moved and indignant too) on what they and others are doing, on the real things, exactly as they are.”

—Cesare Zavattini, *Some Ideas on the Cinema*

“In all, I don’t like to engage in telling stories. I don’t like to arouse the viewer emotionally or give him advice. I don’t like to belittle him or burden him with a sense of guilt. I think a good film is one that has a lasting power, and you start to construct it right after you leave the theatre.”

—Abbas Kiarostami

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As a relatively recent artistic medium, film—especially in countries where it remains a small-scale industry—seems to be more prone to being dominated by specific genres or movements than other, more developed traditions. For example, despite its relatively small share of the market, Neorealism had such a huge impact on both the local industry and international scene in the decade following the Second World War that its presence in Italian cinema can be felt to this day. Decades after Neorealism's passing, Italian directors continued to film under its heavy shadow, knowing that their work would inevitably be compared to the venerable Rossellini, De Sica, and Visconti works of the late '40s—even if they were the esteemed directors themselves. To complicate the matter, having arisen from a region which carried relatively little weight in the international film scene (in comparison to Hollywood), Neorealism, perhaps inescapably, became iconic of Italian cinema as a whole, and still today it the most identifiably "Italian" genre, just as the western became emblematic for American cinema or the martial-arts flick became a symbol of Chinese cinema. However, an important difference between these regions is that the market in countries like the United States, India, China, France, and even Egypt and Russia has been sufficiently large to support the production of a variety of genres and allow for some experimentation on the sides. Such experimentation undoubtedly exists in all regional cinemas as well, but the smaller a region's industry and production, the more vulnerable it was to being pigeon-holed into a specific genre that would come to represent a "national" cinema. For many decades after the advent of Neorealism, this was the case in Italy, and this has currently been the case in Iran.

Genres cannot merely be defined by content. Whether explicitly or no, the development of a genre, school, or tradition requires a certain moral outlook that can bring structure to the events of the film and provide a framework for how they will be presented and resolved. It is difficult to make an action film that doesn't feature the struggle between good and evil. Thriller films implicitly critique the morality of keeping secrets, and usually the struggle is resolved through solving the mysterious and exposing the covert. Romantic and dramatic films find their pertinence through a moral valorisation of human ardour and energy, assuming that the rest of us will somehow identify with such situations even if they could not be farther from our own. Neorealism, too, has an extremely moral dimension, whose existence might surprise those who

are overwhelmed by its sometimes bleak depiction of humanity. It is this moralisation that guides a genre, and I would argue that the stronger the moral message, the more likely it is to leave a lasting impact on the individual viewer and on the cinematic tradition as a whole. Due to its brief presence on the world stage, its small percentage of the market,¹ and its development by a small number of people, Neorealism remained a “regional” movement that was all but over by the mid-1950s. Because it was such a limited movement, the vision that granted it its powerful moral impetus can be distilled from the six or seven masterpieces of the genre.² Even from such a small pool, there is no absolute consensus over what Neorealism exactly is, but there are a number of characteristics that most of its theorists seemed to agree to.

In post-revolution Iran, out of a politically turbulent time similar to post-war Italy, there emerged a handful of talented filmmakers who established a new, wholly innovative approach to the camera. Partially by local success and mostly by international acclaim, the works of these directors have also come to symbolise Iranian cinema itself, overshadowing both their contemporaries and the admirable tradition that had developed in the Pahlavi era of the ‘60s and ‘70s, who have remained “undiscovered” by the international film festivals.³ Unlike the Neorealists, who had been given a moniker⁴ (although only Cesare Zavattini actively embraced it)⁵ and found spokesmen among their ranks to delineate their artistic vision and moral impulse, the new Iranian filmmakers have been decidedly anti-theoretical and leave the task of explication and analysis to the critics. Their movement has no political stance (indeed, it has generally been staunchly anti-political), and they have no particular name to identify their movement; the best critics have been able to come up with are rather self-descriptive phrases like “New Cinema,” “Post-Revolutionary,” “Iranian Cinema of the ‘90s.”⁶ However, there is a distinctively “Iranian” feel to a great many Iranian movies, particularly the ones that do not do so well at the box office but receive great admiration abroad (similar to the Neorealists), that I think indicates a strong moral stance, presented with the same eloquence and conviction, that made the neorealist films so compelling.

1. Only 90 of 822 feature films produced in Italy between the years 1945 and 1953 were considered neorealist. Lawton, “Neorealism,” p. 402.

2. Bondanella, *Italian Cinema*, p. 37.

3. Farahmand, “Perspectives on Recent (International Acclaim for) Iranian Cinema,” p. 87.

4. First by in the 1930 essay by Arnaldo Bocelli. Lawton, p. 399.

5. Bazin, *What is Cinema*, p. 66.

6. The critic Hamid Dabashi has attempted to label Kiarostami’s work as “pre-metaphysical,” but the label has never found wide circulation.

In addition to all this, there is a certain amount in common between many of the neorealist films and these “new” Iranian films, ranging from the themes and the way they are treated to the editing process and actor selection. I found this particularly striking when comparing two films, *Umberto D* by Vittorio de Sica and *Taste of Cherry* by Abbas Kiarostami. Both films have achieved such iconic status, they have been used to define what their respective movements are all about. This is more debatable in the case of *Umberto D*; *Rome, Open City* by Roberto Rossellini or De Sica’s *Bicycle Thieves* are both strong contenders for the title of the definitive Neorealist film, and *Bicycle Thieves* in particular would have also made a good foil to *Taste of Cherry*. *Umberto D*, however, has been praised by one of the leading critics of Neorealism, André Bazin, and by Neorealism’s chief theoriser, Cesare Zavattini, as the film which came closest to realising the neorealist vision. This and the fact that *Umberto D* and *Taste of Cherry* follow remarkably similar plot lines make them prime candidates for comparison. It is my view that Kiarostami brings a morality to his films that is very close to De Sica’s, despite its rising from and being based off of its own unique historical tradition.

De Sica’s Umberto D

What, then, is the moral stance of Neorealism? A good starting point is Cesare Zavattini’s famous essay “Some Ideas on the Cinema” (“*Alcune idee sul cinema*”), published in October 1953.⁷ Zavattini opens his essay with this foundational argument:

The most important characteristic, and the most important innovation, of what is called neorealism, it seems to me, is to have realised that the necessity of the “story” was only an unconscious way of disguising a human defeat, and that the kind of imagination it involved was simply a technique of superimposing dead formulas over living social facts. Now it has been perceived that reality is hugely rich, that to be able to look directly at it is enough; and that the artist’s task is not to make people moved or indignant at metaphorical situations, but to make them reflect (and, if you like, to be moved and indignant too) on what they and others are doing, on the real things, exactly as they are.⁸

Zavattini has presented us with two fundamental views: firstly, that human existence in reality is valuable and noble, and secondly, that the best thing to do with this reality is to portray it, in as holistic a way as possible.⁹ As an example, Zavattini explains that a good film could be about a woman going to buy a pair of shoes, a mundane event that happens millions of times

7. This essay is transcribed in MacCann, *A Montage of Theories*, pp. 216-228.

8. Zavattini, p. 217.

9. Or, to quote Bazin, “Neorealism is a description of reality conceived as a whole by a consciousness disposed to see things as a whole.” Bazin, p. 97.

every day worldwide; yet to grant this event its *real* significance, it would explore the event from every possible angle: how did she get the money? how important are these shoes to her? how does the shopkeeper support his children? how about the lives of the people in India who made the shoes?¹⁰ The camera should not be a device that *filters* or *limits* reality, but rather *broadens* our perception of reality to the extent that we marvel in the simple beauty of its existence. The addition of atypical situations, high drama, and fantasy is nothing less than an insult, for to propose that reality was somehow boring and needed a little spice is to distract viewers from the very beauty that actually surrounds them at all times. Reflecting on this stance, Bazin wrote that “it is Zavattini’s dream to make a whole film out of ninety minutes in the life of a man to whom nothing happens.”¹¹

This highly idealistic stance towards cinema as a venture in morality led to (and probably symbiotically rose out of) the development of certain elements of style that dominated Italian cinema in the post-war years. While filming *Rome, Open City* in the final year of World War II, Rossellini had such a limited budget, he had to cut production costs wherever he could: he used low-grade film stock off the black market, shot on location and dubbed the sound in later, and used entirely non-professional actors for all but the leading roles.¹² These decisions were not necessarily made *a priori* as an artistic stance, but were merely a reflection of the difficulty of the actual circumstances of the time. However, such obvious hardship in the production of the film itself it granted the film’s story, a melodramatic glorification of the Italian Resistance to the Nazi occupation, a grim realism, the grainy images and ruined buildings capturing the human misery of the wartime years more vividly than any studio re-creation could have done. The result was an explosive success that topped the Italian box-office in the year 1945-46 and set the “the ideological and aesthetic point of departure”¹³ that eventually came to encapsulate the artistic vision of Zavattini.

Under the guidance of Rossellini, Visconti, De Sica and Zavattini, the possibilities of Neorealism as an aesthetic approach were refined and developed. The techniques born out of necessity by *Rome, Open City* became the building-blocks of the new genre, which were then theorised by Zavattini as moral statements in and of themselves. Among the most important for this discussion are as follows:

10. Zavattini, p. 224.

11. Bazin, p. 82.

12. Bondanella, p. 37.

13. Lawton, p. 401.

- A rejection of the “hero” and “exceptional personages,” which in turn led to a preference for non-professional actors and the use of local dialect. As Zavattini put it, “the time has come to tell the audience that they are the true protagonists of life.”¹⁴
- A rejection of cinematic resolution, which was seen by Zavattini as the artificial intrusion of the director upon a reality that the audience should be forced to directly confront: “It is not the concern of an artist to propound solutions. It is enough, and quite a lot, I should say, to make an audience feel the need, the urgency, for them.”¹⁵ The director’s mettle would be proven in his ability to disappear the camera, to create what Bazin called “the invisible subject.”¹⁶
- A rejection of the “story” and a celebration of the documentary spirit. Zavattini: “Fictions can be expressive and natural; but neorealism, if it wants to be worthwhile, must sustain the moral impulse that characterised its beginnings, in an analytical documentary way.”¹⁷ Films that relied on cheap production could be counted on to be closer to reality; as Zavattini put it, “The cinema has not yet found its morality, its necessity, its quality, precisely because it costs too much.”¹⁸ Time should also be filmed as it occurs, uncut and unedited. Films that took place in real-time (or Bazin’s term, “life-time”) would be more apt to document reality as it actually occurred. This would necessarily include the filming of scenes that could be seen as “boring.”¹⁹

It is important to keep in mind that very few of these directors entirely agreed with Zavattini’s theories or even called themselves Neorealists.²⁰ Much of the theoretical work that defined Neorealism and turned it into an independent moral statement occurred just as it was petering out. *Bicycle Thieves*, which Bazin called “the ultimate expression of Neorealism”²¹ (which he later retracted when *Umberto D* was released), was released in 1948. In 1952, Zavattini published his manifesto “A Thesis on Neorealism”²² (which was practically identical in content to his later essay, “Some Ideas about the Cinema,” discussed above) and *Umberto D*, widely regarded as the last significant film of the movement, was released that same year. Thus

14. Zavattini, p. 225.

15. Zavattini, p. 223.

16. Bazin, p. 77.

17. Zavattini, p. 220.

18. Zavattini, p. 224.

19. Balais, “The risk of ambiguity.” Article online.

20. Bondanella, p. 34.

21. Bazin, p. 67.

22. Balais, “The risk of ambiguity.”

Neorealism—as a self-declared undertaking—informed very few of the films that came to be known as neorealist, and many of its principle directors, Rossellini for example, candidly contradicted the principles Zavattini laid out.²³ The elements that made *Rome, Open City* an iconic film of the movement, then, were not ontological, but aesthetic,²⁴ that is, Zavattini saw the value in such a mode of production that could open a new moral dimension to the potential of cinema, and thus appropriated it to define his own personal vision for Neorealism. His views thus only came to have a direct affect on films that came late in the movement’s lifespan, most particularly with Vittorio de Sica, with whom he closely worked. It is for this reason that *Bicycle Thieves*, and later *Umberto D*, came to be regarded by critics as the quintessential Neorealist films, precisely because they were written according to the vision Zavattini delineated for the genre, having theorised its unique characteristics and given them an independent moral justification. Thus Neorealism, appropriated and defined by Zavattini, Bazin, and other critics, gradually transformed from a “way of seeing” to a “way of feeling”²⁵ and became “more an ontological position than an aesthetic one.”²⁶

To turn our discussion to the film *Umberto D*, then, is to explore the issue of how De Sica “feels” his story and establishes his moral position *vis-à-vis* the protagonist. This question is best explored through his camerawork, which I believe most closely approximates De Sica’s voice projected onto the screen, and indeed from a purist attitude according to the definitions provided by Zavattini, his technique is highly unorthodox. If the camera is meant to “disappear” and provide nothing more than the “reconstructed reportage” Bazin envisioned,²⁷ De Sica’s work would hardly be exemplary of the Neorealist creed. The film opens with a long-shot from above, overlooking the march of angry demonstrators down the street, who are visually cleaved in half by the oncoming traffic, barely mindful of their presence. The shot through the keyhole of the sobbing lover, mirrored later on by the shot through the gaping hole in the wall of the disconsolate Umberto, are as much about the metaphor of such visual framing as they are about

23. Bazin was a very sensitive writer and very aware of how easy it is for the critic to overwrite the director’s original intentions: “The word neorealist was thrown like a fishing net over the postwar Italian cinema and each director on his own is doing his best to break the toils in which, it is claimed, he has been caught,” p. 66. He nonetheless felt that Neorealism, despite its many flaws as a term of classification, was useful enough to stick with.

24. This is actually a direct reversal of Bazin’s definition of Neorealism. See below.

25. These phrases are quoted from André Bazin, whose unedited statement is as follows: “Rossellini’s style is a way of seeing, while de Sica’s is a way of feeling,” p. 63. I am aware that Bazin sees Rossellini and De Sica both as Neorealists, but I hope that this example may illustrate how, in my view, the works of the earlier post-war Italian directors had to be retrospectively analysed and re-written by later critics and theorists to group them into the same genre as works like *Bicycle Thieves* and *Umberto D*., statements like the one quoted above being the result.

26. Bazin, p. 66.

27. Bondanella, p. 31.

the people within them. The low-angle shot of the foyer to Umberto's apartment, repeated a number of times throughout the film, suggests a psychological dominance that renders Umberto quite small in the face of such pretensions of upward mobility.²⁸ The rapid cuts between Maria, Umberto, and the nurse at the medical ward shatter the scene into a profusion of views, none of them quite telling the full story. The trolley ride across the city, with the buildings of Rome passing by, are visually in sync with Umberto's sentimental farewell to the city he has given up on. The highly-criticised "zoom shot" near the end of the film, which is shot from Umberto's point of view and visually expresses his sudden intention to suicide, is completely out of place in the documentarist ideology of Zavattini. To boot, many of these complex and sophisticated shots were impossible except in a carefully controlled studio environment—only about half of the film takes place outdoors *en scène*.

Despite his withdrawal from—and indeed his rejection of—the neorealist "style," De Sica managed nevertheless to articulate a moral expression that kept, in Bazin's view, "complete fidelity to the aesthetic of neorealism."²⁹ Ironically, this was achieved, as Millicent Marcus argues, by a systematic withdrawal from the authoritative, pan-optical eye of the "invisible subject" that was so highly praised by the Neorealist theorists.

De Sica and Zavattini abandoned the cause of solidarity and the working-class themes of the post-war school, but they have also violated the pretence to objective reportage, which bore witness to the documentary aspirations of the neorealist founding fathers. The predominance of medium shots, the unobtrusive camera movements, and the minimal editing bespoke the fixed, external, neutral point of view typical of neorealist cinema. It is this absolute authority that begins to break down in *Umberto D* as perspectives shift and reality begins to take on a multiplicity of faces, according to its variant contexts and the particular biases of the observer.³⁰

The "multiplicity" that emerges from such varied camera-work may not prolong the illusion of an invisible subject, but they set up the parallel themes of distance and intimacy that allow us to understand Umberto in a more holistic way.³¹ At times, we see him as a carefree, financially well-off pensioner, the image he carefully projects to the outside world. During his private moments by himself, he drops his dignified demeanour and lapses into moments of slapstick humour and miserable self-absorption. His unapologetic devotion to his dog, Flike, casts him as

28. Marcus, *Italian Film in the Light of Neorealism*, p. 110.

29. Bazin, p. 77.

30. Marcus, p. 106.

31. This is carefully unpacked by Marcus in her book, specifically pp. 106-114. I will have to simply paraphrase its basic argument for the sake of brevity.

a gentle, loving old man in private and a self-centred, inconsiderate codger amongst the hospital patients. This is achieved in spite of the fact that the camera relentlessly follows Umberto around as if he was the subject of a documentary. By positioning itself in a variety of angles so that we can see his life, not only from his perspective, but from the perspective of others, the camera allows for—and in fact insists on—our emotional disengagement from Umberto. This distance, as Marcus argues, allows for a critical perspective of his most unflattering moments, which at the same time opens the space for some intimate moments with him in his private environment. It is one of the many innovations De Sica introduced that went against neorealist principles, while simultaneously bringing the genre to a higher level of metaphysical beauty.

While deconstructing the monolithic “documentary” perspective of Neorealism into a kaleidoscope of morally relative perspectives, De Sica was similarly breaking down time into a pre-theoretical, unmoralised series of moments. The narrative unit in *Umberto D*, as Bazin writes, “is not the episode, the event, the sudden turn of events, or the character of its protagonists; it is the succession of concrete instants of life, no one of which can be said to be more important than the other.”³² According to a synoptic rendition of the film’s plot, very little happens: a old pensioner walks around, alienates his friends, refuses to change his living circumstances, and finally attempts suicide. Yet it is the camera’s lingering on these quotidian comings and goings and the miniscule gestures and motions, unconsciously performed every day, that hints at the presence of hopes, fears, and frustrations far greater than the seemingly mundane interactions they animate. This is most visually spelled out in a few famous scenes near the beginning of the film—long, silent renditions of everyday, routine behaviours: Umberto gets ready to sleep. Maria gets up in the morning and makes coffee. The camera’s refusal to edit, to elide, to gloss over these scenes insists that every moment of these people’s lives counts, and even though cutting does of course occur on a grander scale (around four to five days, in fact, go by in the course of a film that is only 89 minutes long), the same tendency to focus on the uneventful and the anticlimactic moments of Umberto’s day fortifies De Sica’s anti-dramatic position throughout the film.

To return to Bazin, this focus on *temps mort* (a phrase he never used himself, but was later coined by Roy Armes in 1971 to describe such “dead” or “down” time)³³ is what realises the documentary aesthetics of Neorealism, even while employing an artificial, polished technique. The “art of ellipsis,” as he puts it, is an abstract, analytical process, one that organises events into a logical chain events with their innate hierarchy, in which the dramatic, or pivotal, moments that propel the story to its resolution take precedence. Of course, the very concepts of “story,”

32. Bazin, p. 81.

33. See Armes, Roy. *Patterns of Realism*. South Brunswick: A. S. Barnes, 1971.

“conflict,” and “resolution” are analytical inventions that moralise our comprehension of time, so that those events that have some significance in the scheme we lay out for them are intrinsically more important and more deserving of representation than the others. To remove this hierarchy and give every moment, great or small, its due time on the screen is to grant an “ontological equality [that] destroys drama at its very basis.”³⁴ As Marcus observes, the writing of the script itself verbally reaffirms the position taken on by De Sica’s camera. Maria’s unsentimental announcement of her pregnancy shocks Umberto, who expects some measure of gravity to accompany such a declaration. Interestingly enough, Umberto himself is extremely attached to, or almost dependant on, such dramatisation to find satisfaction out of his life. I honestly believe that his happiest moment in the film is when the doctors come to pick him up. They lay him down on the stretcher, cover him with a blanket, and at just the perfect moment, his insufferable landlady appears. Umberto’s smug satisfaction over her frightened countenance as he is dramatically carried away, the picture of a dying old man (when in reality he is healthy as a horse), makes me wonder if that was the real reason he had set up his trip to the ward.³⁵

In any case, the argument has been made that the cinematic techniques that were born just as much out of necessity and coincidence as they were by ideology in the early cinema of post-war Italy presented a powerful vision of a new cinema that reflected the times and resonated with its community. This gave rise to a new, self-contained ideology that was oriented along a moral/ontological aesthetic, not a visual/technical one. It became a cinema of “feeling” rather than “seeing,” which indeed allowed for its most successful practitioner, Vittorio de Sica, to actively bend and break the visual conventions of his own movement in order to express its ethical outlook. Two of the principle techniques that contributed to his success were his splintering of perspective into a multiplicity of views, ranging from the highly critical to the deeply intimate, and his transformation of time into a series of self-contained moments, without any overarching systemisation that would imbue certain moments with greater value than others. These tactics remind me very much of a similar set of practices in a recent wave of Iranian cinema during the mid to late ‘90s, with Abbas Kiarostami as its chief representative. I would now like to highlight the visual and thematic similarity between the two films, before finally exploring the possible moral/theoretical positions the two directors share.

34. Bazin, 81.

35. When considering the film, Maria was in fact the only character who did not consistently dramatise her own life to make it look or feel more meaningful. Umberto is just as much a part of this circle of blame, praise, sympathy, and guilt as everyone else. The real cause of his suffering is that he does not get treated as he feels he ought to be, not his financial worries. Maria is the character who faces real physical poverty and danger, but her steadfast refusal to dramatise her situation makes her Zavattini’s ideal spokeswoman.

Kiarostami's Mr. Badii

Kiarostami's 1997 film *Taste of Cherry* (*Ta'm-e Gīlās*)³⁶ revolves around the story of a single man, Mr. Badii, driving around a construction site on the outskirts of Tehran. We don't know what he is doing there, but it is clear from his preoccupied expression and scanning gaze that he is looking for something. When he passes a construction worker, he slows down and studies him carefully through the window of his car. He usually goes on, having made up his mind about something, but two times he actually stops to talk to the workers. He greets them, inquires about their health, makes some chit-chat, and then if things are going well, he invites them to take a ride with him. What for, he refuses to say. The first few times, he is suspiciously rebuffed. He finally picks up a young soldier returning to his barracks. When he learns that the soldier has an hour to spare, he half-invites, half-coerces him into "taking a ride" with him. As they drive along, he inquires about the soldier's finances, which are, unsurprisingly, bad. He begins to talk about a "job" he has for the soldier to do, twenty minutes of work for half a month's pay. Despite the soldier's increasingly visible discomfort, the man insists on driving him to a remote spot on a hill, where he stops the car and shows him a hole that has been dug next to a tree. All the soldier has to do, the man says, is come back at six o'clock the next morning and bury him.

Right from the start, Mr. Badii is a mysterious, inaccessible figure. Like *Umberto D*, all of the parts are performed by non-professional actors (Homayun Ershadi, who plays the lead role, was an architect whom Kiarostami met by chance), and in addition Kiarostami did not even write a script beforehand, preferring to generate the dialogue on the spot with his cast.³⁷ As an object of sympathy, Kiarostami "practically defies" his audience to identify with him, echoing the uncompromising realism of De Sica.³⁸ Mr. Badii's isolation and aloofness, which is maintained through what Laura Mulvey called "the uncertainty principle,"³⁹ the stubborn withholding of even the most basic information from the audience, was Kiarostami's way of establishing the same kind of distance from his subject that De Sica created between himself (i.e., the camera) and *Umberto*. It isn't until the first twenty-five minutes have passed, nearly a third of the film, that the object of Mr. Badii's search becomes clear. In an ironic juxtaposition, he has decided to commit suicide, yet he does not feel comfortable leaving the world without someone to take care of his body. Right from the start, his odd search begs the question, if he is so fed up with the

36. I personally would have preferred to translate the Persian title as "The Taste of Cherries," since the nouns are intrinsically definite and categorical. "Taste of Cherry" sounds too literal and abstract to me as an English-speaker. However, I will stick with the conventional translation for this essay.

37. Saeed-Vafa, *Abbas Kiarostami*, p. 30.

38. Marcus, p. 102.

39. Quoted from Elena, *The Cinema of Abbas Kiarostami*, p. 125.

world, why wouldn't he just kill himself and leave his body to its eventual fate? These ironic "winks," as Alberto Elena describes them, are scattered throughout the film: he refuses to eat eggs because they disagree with him, he takes his temperature, he carefully turns off the lights to his house.⁴⁰ The underlying contradiction of his position is never directly addressed, but it clearly disturbs everyone he approaches. The soldier runs away, an Afghani seminary student refuses on religious grounds, and finally a museum taxidermist agrees, even though he is highly opposed to Mr. Badii's decision; he needs the money for his ailing son.

These three conversations, and the silence that surrounds them, make up the majority of the film, and are indicative of Kiarostami's ethical stance towards time, which is congruous with that of De Sica and Zavattini. As is the case with *Umberto D*, the actual plot of the story could be effectively summarised in a sentence, such as, 'man looks for someone to bury him before committing suicide,' and not very much would be left out. However, it is Kiarostami's emphasis on the time spent in such an unusual quest that speaks volumes on the nature of Mr. Badii's decision. In his systematic study, Marco Dalla Gassa measures 36 minutes of absolute silence (i.e., absence of human speech) in the 90-minute film, which is only interrupted by the three dialogues, varying from 15 to 20 minutes each.⁴¹ The long, uncomfortable periods of silence that rise up between Mr. Badii and his passengers eloquently express the moral impasse that arises between those who seek to live and those who want to die, the same distance that we as viewers must feel inclined to share. For the rest of the film, we are forced to do little more than accompany Mr. Badii on his lonely journey, no noise but the roaring of the engine and the chirping of birds, nobody to talk to, no music, no distractions. The time is never cut to ease our discomfort or keep us interested. In this way, we don't come any closer to a feeling of identification with the protagonist, but we have, to a certain extent, lived his journey. "I prefer the films that put their audiences to sleep in the theatre," Kiarostami once said in an interview. "Some films have made me doze off in the theatre, but the same films have made me stay up at night, wake up thinking about them in the morning, and keep on thinking about them for weeks."⁴² In his own way, then, it is Kiarostami's relatively unedited, unprioritised, and unanalysed time that connects us with Mr. Badii, who, rendered inaccessible through the lack of dramatic devices, can only be "felt" after we become one of his passengers and spend some time riding along, uncomfortable silences and all.

Throughout this section, the camera begins to show the same diversity of shots and angles that De Sica used to fragment *Umberto's* visual positioning. When Mr. Badii is trying to talk the

40. Elena, p. 134.

41. Dalla Gassa, *Abbas Kiarostami*, p. 173.

42. Kiarostami interview on DVD version of *Taste of Cherry*.

soldier into this “job,” the camera adopts the soldier’s point of view and remains parked inside the car as Mr. Badii walks around outside and gestures at the hole he has dug. Later on, Mr. Badii comes across a security guard, sitting in a small shelter overlooking the road. At first, his conversation with the guard is shot from the guard’s point of view, perched above the window of the car. Mr. Badii then climbs up to have some tea with the guard, but refuses to go inside the shelter; thus the entire conversation takes place either off-screen or filtered through the windows as the guard comes outside to join him. Kiarostami uses repeated long-shots of the construction site, reducing Mr. Badii’s car to the scale of a little white insect, slowly crawling across the screen. Near the end of the film, we see Mr. Badii’s silhouette silently walk back and forth in his house, evidently putting his affairs in order before his death. The camera seems most comfortable, however, in its usual spot in the passenger seat along with Mr. Badii. This profile shot of Mr. Badii, emphasising his slightly lifted head, as he scans the road for someone to help him, and the countryside rolling by, is a regular motif of the film that, like the camera’s quiet presence with Umberto in his room, allows the protagonist to relapse into an unaffected state, unobserved and cut off from human interaction. Umberto’s room and Mr. Badii’s car both serve as the stages in which we are “eased into character’s own perspectives, becoming ‘roommates’ in the metaphoric chambers of their minds.”⁴³ In both films, there is no plot development or dramatic storyline to push us towards some kind of personal identification with Umberto, who fails to open up to any of the people in his life, or Mr. Badii, who remains as mysterious and obscure by the end of the film as he was in the beginning, but through the sheer amount of time we spend with these characters via the multiple perspectives of the director’s lens, we have no choice but to be brought face-to-face with mere humanity of these men, complete with all its ambivalence and complexity.

As different as Umberto and Mr. Badii are as characters, there is a moment that align their situations upon nearly identical paths. This is when Umberto makes the decision to commit suicide. At this point, both films become about the two men’s search for a way to bring closure to their lives before they can end them. For Umberto, he needs to be sure that someone will look after Flike; for Mr. Badii, he needs to be sure that his body will be buried. In spite of (or perhaps because of) their loneliness and isolation, they have to find someone they can count on to carry out their wishes after they are gone, and that someone cannot have an emotional attachment with them. Maria would never agree to aiding Umberto’s suicide in any way, nor would Mr. Badii’s family (assuming he has one). This becomes especially poignant when the taxidermist, in an effort to talk Mr. Badii out of his decision, reveals his own story of attempted suicide, in which he tried to hang himself from a mulberry tree. It was only the delicious taste of the mulberries

43. Marcus, p. 110.

that gave him enough time to reconsider his decision and eventually choose to live for the sake of the beautiful things in life. “You want to give up the taste of cherries?” he asks Mr. Badii. “Don’t, I’m your friend, I’m begging you.” This pledge of friendship and solidarity could have led to the establishment of a real connection between the two men, but Mr. Badii does not respond. Friendship with this man could not only jeopardise their agreement, it might jeopardise his motives to kill himself in the first place. This is very similar to Umberto’s repeated truncations of his potential relationships with others, first with his fellow pensioners and ultimately with the serving-girl, Maria.⁴⁴ Despite having accomplished his goal, the taxidermist prepared to come the next morning, Mr. Badii only seems to grow more agitated. He leaves the compound where the taxidermist lives, then changes his mind at the last minute and goes back to confirm that the man really will come to bury him. “Shake my shoulders, too,” he says. “Perhaps I’ll still be alive.” The taxidermist turns away. “Mr. Bagheri, don’t forget you promised,” Mr. Badii calls from behind. The taxidermist calls back in exasperation, “Even if they behead me, I’ll keep my word.”

This is the final line spoken in the film. Another ten minutes remain, where the camera follows Mr. Badii as he watches the sun set, goes back to his house to put his things in order, drives up to the hill, smokes a cigarette, and lies down in his grave. A storm is moving in, and the screen becomes pitch dark as wind and rain swirl through the air. Only the occasional flash of lightning illuminates Mr. Badii’s face, his eyes staring expectantly into the sky, that same preoccupied, dispirited expression on his face. This is the end of the story, but not the film. The screen suddenly lights up again with some video footage of the film being shot. The season is different; the desolate hills, made barren by the autumn, are now covered by the fresh greenery of springtime. Hodayun Ershadi walks up the hill, hands Kiarostami a cigarette, and together the two men observe the soldiers running up the road. The shot is finished, and Kiarostami radios in, “Tell the men to take a break by that tree [the same tree Mr. Badii’s grave is next to]. Next we’ll do sound.” The film finally ends with the camera trained over the soldiers, stretching out on the ground and goofing around with each other, as the sounds of Louis Armstrong’s trumpet playing the “Saint James Infirmary” open the credits.

This ending, as could be expected, was highly controversial, both in Iran and in the international scene. Many critics hated the fact that we never know whether Mr. Badii actually lives or dies. In response, Kiarostami said that he believed in a “half-finished” cinema that is to be “completed by the creative spirit of the viewer, [so that] all of a sudden we have a hundred films.”⁴⁵ Ultimately, life will go on, with or without Mr. Badii in it. The addition of the meta-

44. Marcus, p. 100.

45. Saeed-Vafa, p. 29.

filmic postscript was a decision Kiarostami deliberated over for several months before the film's release, and even in various screenings in Europe, he cut it out to see the audience's reaction.⁴⁶ Ostensibly, his reason for its addition was to remind the audiences of the fictitious nature of the project, thus eliminating any emotional attachment we may have formed with Mr. Badii while watching the film.⁴⁷ However, many critics have read a joyful exuberance in the film's addendum, abetted by the structure of Louie's dirge in the soundtrack (the only piece of music played over the natural ambience in the entire film). Just as the New Orleans classic begins on an elegiac note before erupting into a joyful celebration of life, perhaps this film, so preoccupied with death, completes the cycle and offers the viewer a new, nearly utopian beginning, where the withered countryside has burst into green with the coming of spring, Mr. Badii and Kiarostami share a cigarette together, and the soldiers play with one another, holding flowers instead of guns.⁴⁸ I would like to point to *Umberto D*, which offers its viewers a similar emotional catharsis. Just when things could barely be any worse—Umberto has tried to kill both himself and Flike, who is so traumatised by the event he is on the verge of running away, leaving Umberto truly and completely alone—Flike returns to his human friend, and the two run into the garden, frolicking and playing. The happy scene, rendered even more stirring by the events that preceded it, does not hide the fact that this is only a temporary joy; Umberto's problems are still as far from resolution as ever. It seems to me that behind any such reassurance in life's capacity to endure, Kiarostami reminds us that the problems confronted in the film are not Mr. Badii's alone. Whether he lives or dies, they will remain unresolved.

Taste of Cherry touches on a number of other politically pertinent issues as well, thus revisiting the imperative of Neorealism for social justice. Most neorealist works (*Rome, Open City*; *Bitter Rice*; *Germany Year Zero*; *Bicycle Thieves*) tended to focus on and glorify the sub-proletariat, the marginalised, the down-trodden, what in Italian is called the *popolo*. De Sica's *Umberto D*, which was exceptional in the canon of neorealist films because it did actually deal with a member of the middle class, nonetheless examined the marginalisation of the elderly, who in a production-oriented society have outlived their usefulness, not to mention the case of Maria, who literally is on the brink of homelessness and poverty. The cast of *Taste of Cherry*, outside Mr. Badii himself (who, like Umberto, comes from the middle class but is himself a marginal figure as someone preparing for his suicide), largely comes from the economic and social fringes of Iran. The construction worker from the slums of Tehran, the Luri garbage collector, the

46. Saeed-Vafa, p. 29, and Elena, p. 139.

47. Elena, p. 139.

48. This is more thoroughly explored by Elena, who also examines the heavy religious symbolism within the final two scenes, pp. 140-143.

Kurdish soldier, the Afghani seminary student, the Turkish taxidermist, are all representatives of the marginalised populations (and even professions) in Iran. The fact that Mr. Badii goes to this no-man's-land of a construction site shows not only that he is looking for a convenient place for his burial, but that he knows this is where he can find people who are strapped enough for cash that they will agree to his disagreeable proposition. It is a similar kind of "instrumentalisation" of the *popolo* that Marcus observes in Umberto's self-centred behaviour,⁴⁹ which undermines any hope of solidarity between them. This is visually reconfirmed in a scene in which Mr. Badii, too busy looking around, drives off the road into a ditch. A horde of friendly construction workers come to his rescue and push the car back onto the road, to which he merely replies, "Thanks," and drives away. Similarly, the guard, the seminary student, and the taxidermist all offer support and friendship to Mr. Badii, who brusquely cuts them off. Throughout the film, Mr. Badii's obsession with finding a poor person to bribe blinds him to the numerous overtures of friendship from these very same people.

Due to the visual and moral approaches that the two films share, I think it is appropriate to look at one of the major theorists of Kiarostami and see how he measures up to Zavattini. Let us remember that Zavattini wrote his famous manifesto on Neorealism just as the movement was running out of steam. In a similar way, the critic Hamid Dabashi set out to theorise Kiarostami's work after he had dominated the international film festivals in Europe for at least a decade, culminating in his Palme d'Or at Cannes for *Taste of Cherry* in 1997. In his book Close Up (taking its title from a 1990 Kiarostami film), Dabashi analyses Kiarostami's approach throughout the body of his work and derives an interesting term to describe it, which is the anti-metaphysical impulse of his cinema.⁵⁰ While I am sure that Dabashi would (properly) argue that this is a unique vision that shouldn't be attributed to another filmmaker's innovation, I want to look carefully at the moral impulse that encapsulates this anti-metaphysics. Dabashi says:

What Kiarostami's camera manages to do is to make us conscious at once of the fact that the being-there of the real is pre-theoretically "there," and that, even more troublingly, we *are* that being-there. Thus, the being-there of the real is the furthest away from us by merely being always already theoretical, i.e., culturally militated. What Kiarostami manages to do, however, is to constitute the pre-theoretical givenness of the real in relation to "the world." But this "world" is no longer theoretically implicated by and in the culture. Thus it can function as a horizon, pre-metaphysical grid, against which reality can at once be *felt, sensed, and grasped, and in a way that is impossible through the always pre-established culture* of understanding that reality.⁵¹

49. Marcus, p. 99.

50. See Close Up, Chapter Two: "The Making of an Iranian Filmmaker: Abbas Kiarostami," pp. 33-75.

51. Dabashi, p. 53. Emphasis mine.

In this passage, we see that Dabashi uses almost the same language to describe Kiarostami's cinema as Bazin used for De Sica. The emphasis on feeling and sensing cannot be ignored. Note, too, that both *Umberto D* and *Taste of Cherry* have been shown to create a sort of understanding with their protagonists, even while actively insisting on a de-dramatised distance from them. Understanding is not the same as identification or sympathy, which are achieved through interpretation, analysis, and symbols. Understanding is nothing more than a process of "being," of *spending time* with these people in as natural state as can be captured on film. This is what Dabashi means by the impossibility of pre-established culture to "feel" or "grasp" a subject like Umberto or Mr. Badii. In another passage, he writes that Kiarostami's gift is in creating scenarios that "emerge naturally from the situation itself, without the slightest sense of being concocted."⁵² This is very similar to Bazin: "De Sica is one of those directors whose sole purpose seems to be to interpret their scenarios faithfully...The *mise-en-scène* seems to take shape after the fashion of a natural form in living matter."⁵³ For both critics, what makes these directors exceptional is their ability to exploit the intrinsic interpretation that necessarily occurs in the process of filming to artificially reconstruct a reality that is as unmediated by their own judgement as possible.

Through the simple act of filming, reality is inevitably constricted and distorted by the decisions of the director. In fact, because film is capable of making pretensions of neutrality and objectivity, it is all the more vulnerable to an ideological systemisation of the reality it captures. This is why neither De Sica nor Kiarostami choose a strictly documentary approach. Instead, the directors deliberately pull a variety of tricks, from the multiplying of perspective to extended periods of *temps morts*, which are designed to maintain a deliberate emotional distance from the object of the film. Plot, conflict, suspense, and resolution, the dramatic devices that, to quote Kiarostami, "nail you to your seat and ... take you hostage,"⁵⁴ are categorically rejected. Instead of shooting a documentary and taking cover behind the illusory "naturalness" of the technique, the directors take a moral stand by artistically de-dramatising, de-systematising, and de-theorising their work, so that the viewer's relation with the character is non based upon analysis or emotional identification, but rather upon a mere *witnessing* that comes from simply *being* with them in their state, uninformed by ontology or metaphysics.

A final point I would like to make is that I do not mean to imply that Kiarostami was trying to emulate the cinema of De Sica, that we should not consider him a neo-neorealist. Both De

52. Dabashi, p. 54.

53. Bazin, p. 63.

54. Kiarostami interview.

Sica and Kiarostami rose out of traditions that were very particular to their respective time and place, De Sica in Italy during the troubled aftermath of World War II, Kiarostami during the social upheavals of the Pahlavi regime and its subsequent overthrow. Neorealism was a movement heavily influenced by French Poetic Realism (under such filmmakers as Jean Renoir, Marcel Carné, and René Clair) and set up in contrast to the formalist and didactic tendencies of the Calligraphist and Fascist directors.⁵⁵ Dabashi identifies Kiarostami's work as a visual expression of the same poetic currents that were prevalent at his time, all owing their debt to Nimā Yushīj, the founder of Persian "New Poetry."⁵⁶ However, their both having risen out of such difficult circumstances may have influenced their cinematic roots and contributed to their similar ontological position *and* the moral intensity of it. Both generations of directors learned their trade through making documentaries out of war-time footage, often in the employ of the state.⁵⁷ Both generations of directors were caught up in the historical throes of revolution, rebuilding, and self-discovery. While it is true that Neorealism indeed had a major impact on developing industries throughout the post-colonial world,⁵⁸ and was indeed well-known in Iran, the successful application of its principles could not have happened without the combination of political turmoil, economic constraints, and the artistic milieu that prevailed in Iran at the time and bore such a striking similarity to the conditions that led to the rise of Neorealism.

By challenging the audience to reject its own cultural safety-net of rationalisation, judgement, moralising, and analysis in favour of simply existing alongside another figure, rendered emotionally inaccessible and nonetheless very human, these films represent a moral thrust so electrifying in its novelty and power that they came to define not only a genre, but an entire generation, or indeed an entire country. As noted before, films that have (retrospectively) been come to be known as neorealist only took up 10% of the films produced in Italy between 1945 and 1953, the so-called apex of the movement.⁵⁹ Many of the great classics of Neorealism were complete box-office flops.⁶⁰ The same thing has been observed of Kiarostami's films, which are adored overseas (and heavily financed by foreign investment),⁶¹ but are rather unpopular

55. Bondanella, p. 21-24.

56. Dabashi, p. 37.

57. Bondanella, p. 24, and Varzi, Roxanne. "A Ghost in the Machine: The Cinema of the Iranian Sacred Defence," p. 157.

58. Bondanella, "Neorealism." Article online.

59. Bondanella, p. 35.

60. Lawton, p. 402.

61. Farahmand, p. 94.

locally, even to the extent that he is accused of making films directly for foreign consumption.⁶² One of the problems every Italian director now has to face is how does he or she set up their position *vis-à-vis* Neorealism, and Farahmand argues that Kiarostami's redefinition of "Iranian" cinema has narrowed the international appetite (and sponsorship) to only those films that reflect his own, unique style.⁶³ Even the theorists are aware of this tendency, and do not seem opposed to it; Zavattini, in fact, ended his essay explicitly proclaiming Neorealism as an Italian art form: "I am quite aware that there are Americans, Russians, Frenchmen and others who have made masterpieces...But Italian film-makers, I think, if they are to sustain and deepen their cause and their style, after having courageously half-opened their doors to reality, must (in the sense I have mentioned) open them wide."⁶⁴ The filmmaker Mehrnaz Saeed-Vafa thanks Kiarostami for introducing a "humane and artistic face"⁶⁵ of Iran to western audiences, and Dabashi, for his part, hails him as "the first visual poet of the nation."⁶⁶ It is interesting that even while praising such works for their universalism and pre-cultural stance, the same critics are eager to appropriate them for their own ideological views.

62. Saeed-Vafa, p. 50.

63. Farahmand, p. 102-3.

64. Zavattini, p. 228.

65. Saeed-Vafa, p. 51.

66. Dabashi, p. 75.

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