

The open image: poetic realism and the New Iranian Cinema

SHOHINI CHAUDHURI and HOWARD FINN

When Mohsen Makhmalbaf's *Safar e Ghandehar/Kandahar* was screened at London's Institute for Contemporary Arts in Autumn 2001 it drew sell-out audiences, as it did in other European and North American cities. The film's success, partly due to its timely release, also reflects an enthusiasm internationally for Iranian films which has been gathering momentum in recent years. This essay focuses on one characteristic of 'New Iranian Cinema' which has evidently intrigued both critics and audiences, namely the foregrounding of a certain type of ambiguous, epiphanic image. We attempt to explore these images, which we have chosen – very simply – to call 'open images'. One might read these images directly in terms of the political and cultural climate of the Islamic Republic which engendered them, as part of the broader ongoing critical debate on the relationship of these films to contemporary Iranian social reality. Our intention, however, is primarily to draw structural and aesthetic comparisons across different national cinemas, to show, among other things, how a repressed political dimension returns within the ostensibly apolitical aesthetic form of the open image.

The term 'image' encompasses shot, frame and scene, and includes sound components – open images may deploy any of these elements. Open images are not necessarily extraordinary images, they often belong to the order of the everyday. While watching a film one may meet them with some resistance – yet they have the property of producing virtual after-images in the mind. Although their effects are ambiguous, the images exhibit identifiable signs and techniques, and this essay provides a classification of the open image drawing on

concepts from Pier Paolo Pasolini's theory of poetic realism, Paul Schrader's notion of the arrested image – stasis – as a cinematic signifier of transcendence, and Gilles Deleuze's theory of the time-image. We will sketch out the historical emergence of the open image in Italian neorealism and its reflexive turn in the French new wave, and then apply our account of the open image to particular films drawn from the New Iranian Cinema.

Pasolini: poetic neorealism

The influence of Italian neorealism and the French new wave on Iranian cinema is commonly asserted – and hotly contested. Within Iran, this trend in critical debate might appear as another 'injection' of cultural imperialism, which the revolutionary regime has sought to resist by curtailing imports of first world cinema and actively promoting appreciation of films from the developing world.¹ However, we will argue that it is with reason that critics invoke Italian and French antecedents, because of the crucial role these cinemas played in the historical formation of the open image.

Those who oppose the 'hackneyed' references to neorealism in discussions on Iranian cinema tend to over-emphasize neorealism's so-called 'realist' aspects.² This use of reality as a yardstick to measure neorealism, whether it be in terms of its social content or its aesthetics, has resulted in the dominant framing of the middle and late works of Luchino Visconti, Federico Fellini and Michelangelo Antonioni as 'post' neorealist. We prefer to emphasize a poetic conception of neorealism and, consequently, argue that these directors do not represent a break with neorealism; rather, they bring forward poetic qualities which were inherent in neorealism from the beginning.³

This poetic conception is articulated in Pasolini's essay 'The cinema of poetry' (1965) Pasolini claims that filmmakers imbue the 'image-signs' they use with their personal expression as well as giving them general meanings.⁴ These signs can eventually acquire conventional meanings (as they have in Hollywood codes), constituting a 'cinema of prose'. At the other extreme is the 'cinema of poetry', made possible by the cinematic counterpart of free indirect discourse in literature: the 'free indirect subjective'. Here, the filmmaker's viewpoint becomes one with the character's, Pasolini refers to instances in *Deserto Rosso/Red Desert* (1964), in which Antonioni's viewpoint merges with that of the neurotic heroine Giuliana. The colours and objects around Giuliana are transformed in accordance with her psychological state – a cart of fruit turns grey to reflect her uncertainty, an industrial workshop dominated by the colour of bright red plastic directly materializes her sense of danger. We no longer have the objective shot (which corresponds to indirect

1 General Department of Cinematographic Research and Relations, *Post Revolution Iranian Cinema* (Tehran: Ministry of Ershad-e Eslami, 1982) p. 8

2 See Mir-Ahmad-e Mir-Ehsan Dark light', in Rose Issa and Sheila Whitaker (eds) *Life and Art: the New Iranian Cinema* (London: British Film Institute, 1999) p. 113

3 Sam Rohdie makes a similar point when, tracing connections between Rossellini and post neorealism, he argues that the 'reality' Italian neorealism reflects is the 'reality' of film language: its experimentation with language implies concerns beyond the merely representational. Sam Rohdie, *The Passion of Pier Paolo Pasolini* (London: British Film Institute, 1995) pp. 15–16

4 Pier Paolo Pasolini, 'The cinema of poetry' in Bill Nichols (ed.) *Movies and Methods: an Anthology* Volume I (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1976), p. 544

discourse) nor the subjective shot (direct discourse), but *a vision which has liberated itself from the two* – the free indirect subjective.

Pasolini traces the free indirect subjective (and with it the cinema of poetry) from Roberto Rossellini and the founding works of Italian neorealism. Compared to the overdetermined narrative image-sign system of the cinema of prose, the images that constitute the cinema of poetry are infinite in possibility, but can be identified in terms of the cinematic style or means by which they are achieved. Pasolini notes a few of the characteristics of these free indirect subjective images under the heading of ‘obsessive framing’ the close juxtaposition of shots showing slightly different viewpoints of the same object, the static shot of a scene in which characters enter and leave the frame, the stillness of a shot upon an object. The free indirect subjective image is rooted in the diegesis (the character and narrative perspective) and the obsessive vision (psychology/aesthetic) of the filmmaker, yet such images cannot be straightforwardly deciphered as a revelation of either a character’s psychological state or that of the filmmaker.⁵ Instead the unresolved tension between the two viewpoints – character and filmmaker – creates an ambiguity, a space in which the image appears to emerge from somewhere other. This ‘other’ perspective is often, as in Antonioni’s films, felt to reside in the camera itself, particularly in those scenes where the camera continues recording empty reality after people and identifiable human consciousness have departed – the camera as the uncanny eye of surveillance. Commenting on Pasolini’s theory of the free indirect subjective, Deleuze refers to this emphasis on a ‘reflecting consciousness’ distinct from that of both character and director as a ‘camera consciousness’ – a properly cinematographic *Cogito*.⁶ However, we would prefer to stress not an imagined source of subjective or subjectless viewpoint, but rather the otherness of the images as objects, as intrusions of the real – having taken on a degree of autonomy from all identifiable viewpoints.

⁵ Ibid., pp. 552–3

⁶ Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: Movement Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (London: Athlone Press, 1992), p. 74

Schrader: images of stasis

A common characteristic of the open image is stasis. An obvious indication of this in several of the Iranian films to be discussed is the use of the long-held freeze-frame as closing image: *Nun va Goldun/Moment of Innocence* (Mohsen Makhmalbaf, 1996), *Nama-ye Nazdik/Close-Up* (Abbas Kiarostami, 1989) and *Sib/The Apple* (Samira Makhmalbaf, 1998) all end on a freeze-frame and they all freeze characters mid-action – that is, in overt movement. As a cinematic device this can probably be traced back to the influence of the famous closing freeze-frame of Antoine running towards the sea in François Truffaut’s *Les quatre cents coups/400 Blows* (1959) – the new wave film closest in sensibility to New Iranian Cinema. One

of the few attempts to elaborate an aesthetic of stasis remains Schrader's *Transcendental Style* (1972). Among the key characteristics of what he calls 'transcendental style' are the following

- The everyday: a meticulous representation of the dull, banal commonplaces of everyday living, involving understated acting and dedramatization.
- Disparity: an actual or potential disunity between man and his environment, which culminates in a decisive action
- Stasis, a frozen view of life, which does not resolve the preceding disparity but transcends it.⁷

7 Paul Schrader, *Transcendental Style in Film: Ozu, Bresson, Dreyer* (New York: Da Capo, 1972), pp. 39, 42, 49.

What Schrader calls the 'stasis shot' within his stylistics of the transcendental style is close to our conception of the open image within the stylistics of neorealism, insofar as they both involve the fracturing of the everyday by something 'other' (Dedramatization and disparity, too, have a bearing on the production of open images, as we shall see.)

An aesthetic of stasis appears paradoxical given that an essential component of cinema is movement. Cinema can be seen as opposed to the photograph: even though it is constituted by still photographs, these are not perceived as such in the act of viewing, although they may be extracted (as distinct frames). As Jean Mitry, among others, has noted, the photographic image has a melancholy relationship to its referent:

The photograph of a person retains the impression of his presence. It constantly refers back to him. His going away merely reinforces the impression that this image is the only testimony of what his physical appearance was at a particular moment in his existence.⁸

8 Jean Mitry, *Semiotics and the Analysis of Film* trans. Christopher King (London: Athlone Press, 2000), p. 31.

In the cinematic image this 'testimony' is desired yet paradoxical, out of reach (because the moving image is always moving beyond the particular moment). We would argue that the stylistics of 'transcendental' stasis common to the open image is, in part, an attempt to imbue the moving image with the photographic aura. Following Henri Bergson and William James,⁹ we can presume that it is inevitable that the moving image of real-time duration will be broken down by memory into discrete images of moments and then synthesized or reconstructed into a privileged static image or a series of quasi-static images. Memory privileges the fleeting motionless image over direct visual representation of duration.

9 Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory* trans. N.M. Paul and W.S. Palmer (New York: Zone Books, 1991); William James, *Principles of Psychology* Volume I (London: Macmillan, 1890).

The photographic aura accrues to the cinematic image of stasis as an 'always already' recollected image. The image from a film that impresses itself upon our consciousness constantly refers back to its *presence*. Echoing Mitry, the fact that we are no longer watching the film, the fact that we saw it five hours or five years ago, 'merely reinforces the impression that this image is the only testimony' not

only of the 'appearance' of the film, but of *our experience* of watching the film 'at a particular moment' of our existence. The static image thus finds itself embroiled in notions of presence, absence and death, especially when it is experienced in cinema – that is, in relation to moving images, and to duration. It is the aura of the fixed, static image which throws the passing of time, of existence, into relief; and all these existential terms suggest that the religious underpinning of Schrader's 'transcendentalist style' – an anathema to most film theorists – is impossible to repress.

In the examples from Iranian cinema to be discussed, stasis (arrested images, the fixed long-shot, the freeze-frame or images of empty spaces) will be seen as auspicious for open images, but not invariably so. Although Schrader equates stasis, austerity and what he terms the 'sparse' with transcendental style, he points out that the long-take stasis films of avant-garde art, usually depicting objects in real time (the minimalist cinema of Michael Snow or today's video installations), fail to evoke the transcendental effect – such an effect is only produced by stasis as a break within 'realist' narrative: for an image to be 'arrested' it must previously flow.¹⁰

Likewise, we contend that the open image only has meaning as a deferral of an otherwise implied narrative closure. It is this context that gives rise to viewer resistance to stasis, experienced as boredom, though boredom might be an integral part of the aesthetic experience – for the diachronic arts, especially film, the occasional 'space' of boredom is a way in which real-time duration is defamiliarized and then made retrievable to the reconstructed imaging of memory. It may be the *longueur* that facilitates the 'opening' of image in narrative. The experience of resistance, of boredom, may be transformed into the experience of the transcendental, of ecstasy. In Schrader's words: 'When the image stops, the viewer keeps going, moving deeper and deeper, one might say, into the image. This is the "miracle" of sacred art.'¹¹

Deleuze: the time-image

Deleuze's writings on cinema, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image* (1983) and *Cinema 2: The Time-Image* (1985), investigate the opening out of the image in direct images of time, not external, chronological time, but the time of concrete duration. These direct time-images are characterized by a lack of causal links. Movement-images, on the other hand, are defined by causal links. In Deleuze's neurological terminology, movement-images show 'sensory-motor' connections between stimulus and response. Something is seen, for example, and an action, perception or feeling is given as a reaction.¹² The time-image is created when such sensory-motor links in the image are suspended or broken. When the situation no longer

¹⁰ Schrader, *Transcendental Cinema* p. 160

¹¹ *Ibid.* p. 161

¹² Deleuze, *Cinema 1* p. 70

extends into action, films give rise to pure optical and sound situations. Something has become 'too strong' in the image, something which cannot be reduced to what happens or what is perceived or felt (by the characters).¹³ The break between movement-images and time-images is not clear-cut, but generally time-images belong to cinema's 'postclassical' phase. Time-images are connotative rather than denotative, imbuing objects with a number of associations. Deleuze suggests they might have political implications: 'It is precisely the weakness of the motor linkages, the weak connections', he writes, 'that are capable of releasing huge forces of disintegration', producing images of process, of transformation, such images are not an obscurantist turning away from the political, but the open-ended politicization of the image.¹⁴ This argument has become relevant again in the light of the controversy surrounding the (a)political trajectory of the New Iranian Cinema.¹⁵

In Deleuze's account, Italian neorealism is the film movement that most epitomizes the break between the movement-image and the time-image. This break came about, he claims, for reasons both internal and external to cinema. External circumstances were provided by postwar devastation, reconstruction and diaspora. As cities were demolished and rebuilt, wastelands (such as derelict and disused out-of-town sites) proliferated, and people became displaced from their settings, the determinate environments associated with the movement-image became blurred. After World War II, circumstances internal to cinema made it ready to respond to these external conditions, particularly in postfascist Italy. The sensory-motor links between motivation and action gave way to new forms, such as the meandering journey, which accorded more with the transformed landscapes. Cinema gave rise to images of indeterminate settings – 'any-spaces-whatever'¹⁶ which became pure optical and sound situations.

When we turn the emphasis from neorealism's 'realism' to its poeticism and its production of pure optical and sound situations, the ground on which the common view of neorealism stands begins to shift. No longer can we see it simply in terms of its commitment to record 'reality'. All those features which justified that view – its association with nonprofessional actors, contemporary social and political topics dealing with ordinary people, combining fictional drama with documentary, and location shooting – must be put into contact with something else. The settings retain their reality, but they are no longer situations that disclose actions as they would in traditional realism. Instead, they open onto thought, dream, memory and feelings of *déjà-vu*, as the action 'floats' in the situation. Viewers no longer perceive a sensory-motor image to which they respond by identifying with the characters. Instead, they undergo 'a dream-like connection through the intermediary of the liberated sense organs'.¹⁷

13 Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image* trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (London: Athlone Press, 1994) p. 18

14 *Ibid.*, p. 19

15 Controversy over the politics of internationally successful Iranian films reflects ideological tensions amongst intellectuals in Iran and in Iranian exile circles. For criticism of Kiarostami and the 'festival film' see for example, Azadeh Farahmand, 'Perspectives on recent [international acclaim for] Iranian cinema' in Richard Tapper (ed.), *The New Iranian Cinema: Politics, Representation and Identity* (London: IB Tauris 2002) pp. 86–108. This debate has also had some impact amongst non-Iranian critics. The often unenthusiastic reviews of Iranian films in *Sight and Sound* during the 1990s tended to characterize the films as sentimental and apolitical. See for example Simon Louvish's review of *The White Balloon*, *Sight and Sound*, vol. 6 no. 1 (1996) p. 57 and subsequent responses in the letters pages vol. 6, no. 3 (1996) p. 64 vol. 6, no. 4 (1996) p. 64.

16 Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, p. 5

17 *Ibid.* p. 4

18 Ibid. p. 48

19 Ibid. p. 54

20 Ibid., pp. 54–5

21 Ibid., p. 6

Rather than extending into movement, the pure optical and sound image enters into relation with a virtual image, and ‘forms a circuit with it’, as if it has linked up with an image we recall from somewhere else.¹⁸ But it is most effective when our memory falters and we cannot remember: as Bergson realized, ‘attentive recognition informs us to a much greater degree when it fails than when it succeeds’, and the same applies to cinema.¹⁹ When the present optical perception fails to make a link with either a motor-image or a recollection-image, ‘it enters into relation with genuinely virtual elements, feelings of *déjà-vu* or the past “in general” (I must have seen that man somewhere . . .), dream images (I have the feeling that I saw him in a dream . . .).’²⁰ This opening-out of the image seems to occur regardless of the content – the images may be of ‘everyday banality’ or ‘exceptional limit-circumstances’, but their predominant optical and sound situations, Deleuze writes, are ‘subjective images, memories of childhood, sound and visual dreams or fantasies’²¹

Neorealist location: disconnected spaces

The discussion so far is pertinent not only to work that is generally termed ‘post’ neorealist, but also to the key neorealist films such as Rossellini’s war trilogy, Vittorio De Sica’s *Ladri di Biciclette/Bicycle Thieves* (1948) and Visconti’s *La Terra Trema/The Earth Trembles* (1948). There is a formalism and a penchant for aestheticized stasis in Visconti’s vision – and a corresponding deployment of devices that would come to be associated with the poetic postneorealism of Antonioni and Pasolini (such as fixed shots as characters enter and exit the frame). Thus, *La Terra Trema* exploits the effects of documenting social reality and combines this with fictional (re)construction by way of a formalist aesthetic, a combination prefiguring – amongst much else – the most widely-recognized strategy of the New Iranian Cinema, from Kiarostami’s *Close-Up* to Samira Makhmalbaf’s *The Apple*.

The ‘reality effects’ in *La Terra Trema* would be nothing without the visual stylization and theatrical staging that characterizes each shot. The film makes striking compositions out of the natural surroundings – with views of the rocks which enclose the harbour and the image of the women, their black shawls billowing in the wind, standing on rocks, straining seaward for the brothers’ return. The film keeps returning to the view of the rocks, which might be seen as an attempt to anchor the story in a specific locale – the rocks being signs of a distinctive, recognizable place. However, silhouetted in the dusk they become ambiguous and, in our associations, break free from their geographically-specific moorings and also from their symbolic moorings (where they represent the isolation of the village from the outside world). They are no longer the rocks of a particular

harbour in Sicily, but (to adapt the Deleuzian term) 'any-rocks-whatever'.

This brings us to another aspect of neorealism's break with traditional realism. While the latter is characterized by determined spaces, neorealism loses the specific geospatial coordinates of a given locale and rearranges the references. Deleuze contends that one can refer to 'Riemannian spaces' in neorealism, where the 'connecting of parts is not predetermined but can take place in many ways'.²² Landscapes or cityscapes attain a hallucinatory, crystalline quality that looks forward to later Antonioni (the trilogy, *Red Desert*, *Zabriskie Point* [1969]) or the Zone in Andrei Tarkovsky's *Stalker* (1979). Such spatial indeterminacy is a feature of the New Iranian Cinema, in which a character's quest traverses the labyrinthine pathway of either city streets (*Badkonak-e Sefid/The White Balloon* [Jafar Panahi, 1995], *Dayereh/The Circle* [Jafar Panahi, 2000]), the tracks of villages/rural areas (*Khaneh-ye Dust Kojast/Where Is My Friend's House?* [Abbas Kiarostami, 1987], *Zir-e Darakhtan-e Zeytun/Through the Olive Trees* [Abbas Kiarostami, 1994], *Bad Ma-ra Khahad Bord/The Wind Will Carry Us* [Abbas Kiarostami, 1999]) or passes over barren mountainous landscapes (*Takhteh Siyah/Blackboards* [Samira Makhmalbaf, 1999], *Zaman Baraye Masti Asbha/A Time for Drunken Horses* [Bahman Ghobadi, 2000]). Alternatively, characters may navigate the labyrinthine topology of the liminal space where equally barren city and rural environments meet (*Ta'm-e Gilas/A Taste of Cherry* [Abbas Kiarostami, 1997]). The circuitous quest makes even the most concrete places fleetingly uncanny – both for the character and for the viewer.

Deleuze refers to the 'dispersive and lacunary reality' in Rossellini's *Paisà* (1946), where locales fragment into unstable configurations.²³ This feature is carried further in Antonioni, where the Deleuzian 'any-space-whatever' is constituted from geometrical blocks of whites, shadows and colours – starting with almost empty urban riverbank shots in *Nettezza Urbana* (1948), and the deserted stadium in *Cronaca di un Amore/Chronicle of a Love* (1950), going on to the final scene showing the rendezvous point devoid of protagonists in *L'Eclisse/The Eclipse* (1962) and the industrial landscapes of *Red Desert*. These emptied or disconnected spaces obtain a relative autonomy from the surrounding narrative, enabling them to become open images.

The neorealist locations inspired by the indeterminate environments created by the postwar situation attract a new type of protagonist who – because images no longer obey sensory-motor rules – tends to see rather than act. For this reason, as Deleuze suggests, the role of the child, who mostly looks on in wonder or confusion while unable to intervene, becomes significant.²⁴ In this development, where the child's gaze and the pure optical and sound image meet, neorealism is clearly the crucial turning point (for example, Rossellini's

²² Ibid., p. 129

²³ Deleuze, *Cinema 1*, p. 212

²⁴ Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, p. 3

Germania Anno Zero/Germany Year Zero [1947] and De Sica's *Bicycle Thieves*). It is a development which will be vital for some of the most powerful open images in New Iranian Cinema and helps to explain its many child protagonists (*Where Is My Friend's House?*, *The White Balloon*, *The Apple*) in terms other than those of sentimental humanism.²⁵

²⁵ There are, of course many reasons for the predominance of child protagonists in Iranian film censorship codes relating to the depiction of women, as has been extensively discussed elsewhere, the long-standing role of the Centre for the Intellectual Development of Children and Young Adults (associated most notably with Kiarostami) the important crosscurrents between Iranian and Indian film – the impact of neorealism in Iran undoubtedly bears the influence of Satyajit Ray (especially *The Apu Trilogy* [1955–9])

²⁶ Deleuze *Cinema 2* p 248

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p 69

²⁸ *Ibid.* p 71

²⁹ *Ibid.* p 69

French new wave: the reflexive turn

The French new wave adapted much of the image repertoire created by neorealism, but gave the images a reflexive spin, an effect that can also be seen in New Iranian Cinema. The French directors specialized in images of movements that falsify perspective, taking further a tendency already assumed by neorealism (and which gave rise to its disconnected spaces). With reference to a Deleuzian analysis, two salient characteristics can be briefly noted here: firstly, the 'irrational' cuts (which have disjunctive rather than conjunctive value), typified by Godard; secondly, the 'crystal image', which recurs across the French new wave films, but is best typified by Alain Resnais.²⁶

As already mentioned, the pure optical and sound situation, instead of extending into movement, enters into relationship with a virtual image (thought, dream, memory or *déjà-vu*). A crystal image occurs when an actual optical image and a virtual image form a circuit and coalesce or exchange places.²⁷ The most familiar instance of the crystal image is the mirror. A famous example is in *Citizen Kane* (Orson Welles, 1941) where we see Kane passing between two facing mirrors; as the mirror images recede infinitely, the actual and the virtual become indistinguishable. Alternatively, the crystal image may have what Deleuze calls 'an internal disposition', like 'a seed in relation to the environment'.²⁸ Here the crystal image has a mise-en-abyme structure, where the seed is the virtual image crystallizing the environment ('environment' denotes both the physical landscape and the diegetic reality of the film). The paperweight that falls from the dying man's hand as he utters the word 'Rosebud' in the opening of *Citizen Kane* is an example of such a crystal image, the paperweight being the 'seed' or mise-en-abyme of the environment, Xanadu (and also the uncertain 'seed' of the story itself).

Deleuze argues that the crystal image is the true 'genetic moment' of pure optical-sound situations, which 'are nothing but slivers of crystal-images'.²⁹ In Resnais's film *L'Année Dernière à Marienbad/Last Year in Marienbad* (1961), the hotel (indeed the whole film) is a crystal, maze-like, mirroring infinite probabilities. The film-within-a-film (characteristic of so many Godard and new wave films) is a type of crystal-image, including the film which takes its own process of making as its object – but, as Deleuze implies,

this work in the mirror must be 'justified from elsewhere' if it is to succeed (that is, the self-reflexivity must not be in and for itself).³⁰ It is no surprise therefore that the film-within-a-film should so often provide the context for open images in New Iranian Cinema (*Close-Up*, *Through the Olive Trees*, *Salaam Cinema* [Mohsen Makhmalbaf, 1995], *A Moment of Innocence*). The overt reflexivity of Iranian cinema is not merely a borrowing of Brechtian devices via Godard and the French new wave, but rather something integral to its form and always 'justified from elsewhere' by the neorealist diegesis

In the following sections, we will show how Iranian cinema has developed for its own purposes elements drawn from the stylistic theories and practices discussed above, resulting in a recognizable aesthetic structured around the privileging of open images. Some of these elements correspond very closely to what we have already seen in (post)neorealism, while others develop the stylistics of the open image to a new degree, bringing into being new distinctive types. By refocusing existing debates in terms of the open image, we ensure that the cinema's 'poetic realism', so often obscured, is kept in view.

Disconnected spaces

The majority of recent Iranian films are structured by a 'quest' through a realist location. But such classical neorealist locations are stylized – naturalistic specificity of location giving way to poetic universalism. Moreover, as the quest becomes a meandering circular itinerary so location breaks down into disconnected spaces: *A Taste of Cherry*, *The Wind Will Carry Us*, *The Circle*, even *The White Balloon* and *The Apple*, display variations of this process. In Kiarostami's *Where Is My Friend's House?*, schoolboy Ahmad mistakenly takes his friend Mohammad's homework book. Knowing that the teacher will expel Mohammad if he does not do his homework in the correct book, Ahmad sets off to return it, although no one can tell him where Mohammad lives. The quest will never be completed, Ahmad running up and down the zigzag path between villages stands for the whole structure of the film, the meandering, or indirect, journey form. The film's cinematography has the effect of erasing the precise co-ordinates (the villages Koker and Poshteh in Northern Iran) and instead gives rise to disconnected spaces in which the various sensory-motor linkages begin to come apart.

The way in which characters become lost in the liminal zone between disconnected spaces takes on an overtly political aspect in Samira Makhmalbaf's *Blackboards* and Ghobadi's *A Time for Drunken Horses*. In these films the narrative is driven by its characters' attempts to cross the border between Iran and Iraq, but

31 Samira Makhmalbaf, interview with Jahanbakhsh Nouraei *Iran International* vol 8 no 1 (2000) p 17

32 For the neorealist exposition, see Giuseppe De Santis 'Towards an Italian landscape' in David Overby (ed.) *Springtime in Italy: a Reader on Neorealism* (London: Tantivy Press 1978) p 126

the landscape gradually dissolves into disconnected spaces' 'border' ceases to be an identifiable, recognizable place and instead signifies a nightmarish unstable zone of inexplicable military atrocity. The idea for *Blackboards* began with the landscape when Samira Makhmalbaf was walking in Kurdistan with her father, she was struck by the harsh infertility of some parts of the landscape, and selected these for her film's location.³¹ They give an overwhelming impression of inhospitality, with red, stony, steep ascents; a hint of menace is underscored by the film's use of offscreen sound to indicate helicopter surveillance and border patrols. The treatment of landscape in the film places a neorealist emphasis on the relationship between characters and their lived-in surroundings, where characters are 'moulded' in the image of the environment.³² The recalcitrance of the landscape rubs off on the characters: the obdurate, weather-beaten old patriarchs and the hardy boy smugglers. The itinerant teachers are out of place in this landscape – and they look it, ungainly with their blackboards, searching for pupils, when nobody wants to be taught. As a result of this 'free indirect' relationship between character and landscape (where the vision of the landscape is filtered through that of the character), poetic open images are possible in every scene. But it is not only the teachers who are displaced; eventually, as they near the border, all the Kurdish characters in the film become 'lost', 'disconnected' from the landscape, and the landscape itself dissolves into disconnected spaces of desolation.

This disconnection is reflected in the editing of *Blackboards* as well as in its mise-en-scene. Whereas Hollywood editing ensures spatial continuity from shot to shot, the editing in this film tends to present a given scene as disconnected fragments of space. This, too, highlights the instability of space, spatial disruption and disorientation. For example, in one conversation scene (between a teacher and an old man who asks him to read a letter), the camera alternates from one character to the other, with each character occupying a separate frame; but unlike the Hollywood shot/reverse-shot structure, there is little common space from shot to shot. This kind of spatial system is characteristic of the House of Makhmalbaf films discussed here. Instead of cutting from a spatial whole to a part, sequences are often entirely constructed from parts, especially in the many scenes taking place before closed (or partially-closed) doorways. Here the doorway functions as an internal frame, marking the barrier to our vision, and emphasizing the selectiveness of what we see. There are closeups of disembodied women's hands giving directions, handing out soup or watering flowers (*Moment of Innocence*, *The Apple*) from behind doors that are barely ajar. Thus, the disconnected spaces of Iranian cinema also gesture to concerns about the limits of what can be shown (from a non-Iranian perspective, it is tempting to read this allegorically as referring to censorship restrictions).

The fixed long-shot/long-take

Both the fixed long-shot and the long-take are typical components of an aesthetic of 'stasis' as outlined by Schrader and typical vehicles for the open image. The zigzag path on the hill between villages in *Where Is My Friend's House?* is an exemplary open image. We see Ahmad's tiny figure running up and down across the hillside three times in the film, mostly in a static framing and in long shot. The distant view and length of the take in the absence of any conventional action force us to concentrate on the image and absorb the abstraction imposed on the environment. Kiarostami had the path specially built for the film (and planted a tree on the top of the hill), which reflects his concern for not just recording reality, but making it carry certain poetic resonances. Some of these are symbolic (aside from resonances specific to Persian culture, the tree on the top stands for friendship, while Ahmad's zigzagging symbolizes the hurrying-around in modern life, Kiarostami says)³³ However, the static long-shot frame and its duration give the cinematic image an openness in excess of its closed symbolism, allowing it to connect with virtual images in the mind.³⁴

Kiarostami's *Through the Olive Trees* concludes with a long-take showing a young peasant, Hossein, following the girl, Tahereh, to whom he has proposed marriage. The two figures wend their way through an olive orchard and along zigzag paths across a valley, finally disappearing into almost invisible dots in the distance. Because of the real-time, fixed point-of-view determination of the scene, making us strain to follow the two speck-figures on a path, we scrutinize the moving image as if it were a photograph containing the sublime object, the veiled secret. This is an important quality of the open image and an aspect of its residual photographic aura.

As discussed earlier in relation to Schrader, in a film where every image is equally open there can be no openness, the term becomes meaningless due to the lack of distinguishing qualities and contrast. This is also true of the individual image: the open image must contain a level of closure, of limitation, which enables the openness to reveal itself and, by the same token, allows the play of universality and particularity to show forth. This seems to be how Kiarostami approached, technically, the universalizing of Hossein and Tahereh in the final scene of *Through the Olive Trees*: by holding the viewer in an extreme way to the image, both temporally (four minutes) and spatially (long- and wide-shot of one scene), the eventual release of interpretative desire is all the more pronounced. Kiarostami comments:

The film-maker has carried the film up to here, and now it is given up to the audience to think about it and watch these characters from very far away. I like the last shot because of its

33 Abbas Kiarostami interview with Robert Richter, *Kinder und Jugendkorrespondenz* no. 42 (1990), p. 24.

34 David Bordwell sees Kiarostami as ironizing his own practice of using static images in the film-within-the-film of *Through the Olive Trees* gently mocking this minimalism with shots that activate angular depth and offscreen space and 'throw into relief the static planimetric images in the film that the characters are shooting. David Bordwell, *On the History of Film Style* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), pp. 262–3.

openness. Until that moment social differences were dividing these two people, but as human beings they were equal. The class system separated them, but in nature and in long shot I felt that these two could get closer to their real selves, that is to their inner needs, without giving any value to the social norms³⁵

35 Kiarostami interview with Nassia Hamid, *Sight and Sound*, vol. 7 no. 2 (February 1997), p. 23

In the process of becoming extra-diegetic archetypes, Hossein and Tahereh continue to be inflected with what seem to be, for Kiarostami, the three primary levels of being: the personal level of love; the social level of class difference; the existential level of nature. The universalizing never loses sight of the particular.

Child's gaze

When Ahmad undertakes his quest in *Where Is My Friend's House?*, many obstacles and detours are put in his path, mostly by interfering or unhelpful adults. The bewilderment of the child in the world of adults is key to the film's emotional power. Kiarostami has said that the actor was chosen because of his gaze, a decision which revives the child's role as a witness in neorealism³⁶. One might have expected him, therefore, to exploit this by having many facial closeups expressing precisely this bafflement; but although the image of Ahmad's startled face is one we are likely to take away from the film, there are not many closeups. Instead Kiarostami prefers medium closeups, moving out to extreme long-shots, blocking direct identification with Ahmad's gaze and instead making the viewer work through a 'free indirect subjective'³⁷ (Pasolini) relation between the gaze of the character and a given image, between the child's gaze and the gaze of the film.

36 Kiarostami talking after the screening, National Film Theatre, London, 21 June 1999

37 Pasolini, 'The cinema of poetry', pp. 551–3

The most bewildering sequence in the film, both for Ahmad and for the viewer, is the wander through the narrow streets of Poshteh. The set is a labyrinth, a crystalline or Riemannian space, but one which creates more anxiety than those in Italian neorealism, for here the meandering structure of the film in general, and this sequence in particular, directly confronts what Deleuze calls the child's motor-helplessness in the adult's world. The anxiety and helplessness of the child lost in the forbidding labyrinth is encapsulated in the film's title, a plea to which nobody has a proper answer. Everyday signs become mysteriously ominous: a man, dwarfed and bent over by the bundle of twigs he is carrying, looks like a walking bush, brown trousers on a washing line are a false sign (Ahmad believes, mistakenly, that they belong to his friend). Ahmad stumbles from one dead-end to another, following the ambiguous and imprecise directions that denizens of the village give him; meanwhile we hear off-camera sounds – the sudden mewing of cats, a dog barking, the distant clacking of a passing train, all the more puzzling and

ambiguous for their absence in the scene. When, finally, Ahmad encounters an old carpenter, his quest is suspended: the carpenter takes him on a tour of the doors and windows of the village. Sensory-motor linkages in the image come utterly apart here. Not only is there no extension into action *per se*, but the scene itself ceases to make sense. Dream-like sensations descend on the viewer as the narrative enters this extraordinary lull. What takes hold instead is optical play, teasing glimpses of kaleidoscopic projections of light on the walls of the old houses. These, supposedly, are all cast through windows and doors from lit interiors, but the bizarre positioning of some of this shadow-play gives the lie to such a rational explanation. This image of the play of light is not reducible to realism, but is a reflexive motif on the technology that projects the images that we see.

Dedramatization/unsympathetic characters

In classical Hollywood narrative the protagonist becomes the moral yardstick against which we measure all the other characters in a film; he is the character with whom we most identify, and we can do this because he is presented as sympathetic, despite his foibles. The presence of unsympathetic characters, central to many Iranian films, marks a divergence from the Hollywood norm but connects with a development out of neorealism represented especially by Antonioni. In an added self-reflexive ambiguity many of these central characters are film directors: seemingly insensitive and aloof manipulators of their casts – Mohsen Makhmalbaf taking this even further by ‘playing himself’ as the manipulative director in *Salaam Cinema* and *A Moment of Innocence*. This blocking of identification relates to the muted performances Iranian directors draw from their actors, especially from adults, an ambiguity of acting register closer to neorealism and Rossellini than to the uniform flatness of Bresson or Ozu, a dedramatization that creates space for the intensification of images. In Deleuzian terms, when identification with characters does take place, the sensory-motor arc remains intact – there is a connection between what is seen and a motor reaction (our identification with that character in that situation). The failure of identification with characters snaps the sensory-motor chain, and liberates the senses – we become more receptive to other aspects of the film. In particular, it facilitates connections with virtual images which will return in the viewer’s memory.

In Kiarostami’s *The Wind Will Carry Us*, the unsympathetic central character is the film producer protagonist, Behzad, who is insensitive and irresponsible in his attempts to exploit the rural village he has come to film. In a disturbing scene, Behzad on a hillside kicks over a tortoise – there are some conventional reverse-

shots of the character looking down on the back of the tortoise, though it is the tortoise and its movement which is the dominant real-time image (filling the image-frame), beyond any conventional point of view or narrative requirements. Behzad loses interest and walks off but we (to our relief) see the desperate tortoise managing to right itself and continue on its way. As with similar scenes in Antonioni, a reductive explanation is possible: when Behzad kicks over the tortoise he gives expression to the way in which his individual alienation (bourgeois, urban) necessarily alienates him from existence itself (nature). Such alienation (at the three levels of personality, class and the existential) is manifest in the very arbitrariness of his cruelty and the fact that it is unthinking curiosity rather than intentional cruelty – he does not stay to extract sadistic pleasure from the upturned tortoise's plight. But Behzad is not hero, villain or victim; identification with him and his act remains disconnected, open, as does the image of the tortoise – obsessively framed in excess of the narrative requirement – or to put it in Pasolini's terms, a poetic image infuses a prosaic narrative with its ambiguity.

Open image/crystal image

Open images are a feature of film endings, closing scenes which try not to close down a narrative but rather open it out to the viewer's consideration, to 'live on' after the film itself has finished. A striking example is in Kiarostami's *A Taste of Cherry*, where the central character, Mr Badiei, plans to commit suicide in the evening, but must find someone who will come the following morning to bury him. Towards the end of the film Badiei takes an overdose and lies down in his self-dug grave. The screen goes completely black for a few seconds. Suddenly the film cuts from darkness to light, from film to grainy video stock. Characters that we saw earlier are now seen waiting around, like actors on a film set, while motifs from the film (marching soldiers counting in unison) are repeated verité-style.

This change to grainy video stock to give a verité effect is a common feature of New Iranian Cinema. An early example is Kiarostami's use of video for the real trial scene of the 'fake Makhmalbaf' case in *Close-Up*. In *A Taste of Cherry* the documentary effect is subverted. The verité coda does not assert, in Brechtian fashion, that the foregoing film is just a representation, because the fuzzy imaging of the video reality seems far stranger than the tangible diegetic reality of the preceding narrative, instead, the intrusion of this uncanny real marks a shift to the poetic. The switch from night and death to day and life, far from resolving the narrative, creates an ambiguity, an openness, as if we are now watching images of life after death – whether or not our central

character actually died or not. Following the blacked-out image, the temporal relation between the coda and the preceding narrative is thrown into confusion, as is the relation between diegesis and meta-diegetic documentary. The coda – evoking dream or *déjà-vu* – is not a recollection or flashback but a merging or short-circuiting of past and present, forming a crystal image.

While *A Taste of Cherry* ends with ‘documentary’ in video, Samira Makhmalbaf’s *The Apple* uses videocam for its documentary beginning, thus setting up the whole film as a Deleuzian crystal image. The film follows the adventures of two girls who have spent most of their lives locked up at home under their father’s watchful eye. The first image shows an outstretched hand watering a plant. This shot documents the everyday, yet makes it abstract – the stationary camera waits for the hand to enter the frame. The shot composition is austere, almost abstract – flat, with the camera axis perpendicular to the background. It is a form of abstraction which does not remove the everyday, but opens it into dimensions other than the everyday. It raises possible symbolic meanings relating to the narrative – the plant is in the open, receiving the sun, unlike the housebound girls. Yet the image resists any one-to-one correspondence between the sign and meaning.

The story for *The Apple* is taken straight from Tehran television news, and uses the family members concerned to act as themselves – but the director introduces significant props, such as the dangling apple and mirror, into her reimagining of the events. Several open images in this film come from scenes which make use of these symbolic props. This is because their intrusion into the reconstruction of events that took place in actuality only a few days before produces an uncanny effect: the irreducible quality alluded to above never vanishes. Makhmalbaf began filming even as the events were happening – her documentary section, using video, shows the girls at the welfare centre while the reconstruction of the girls’ release into the outside world started only four days after it happened. As a result, the whole film becomes a crystal image, but one in which the work in the mirror is put in the scene in a peculiarly uncanny fashion, for not only are the symbolic props a constant reminder that this is a fictional reconstruction, but they directly materialize the twins’ process of coming to terms with the outside world. They, like the film, examine themselves in the mirror (given to them as a present by the social worker). Even the apple, which is such an overdetermined symbol in the Judaeo-Islamic-Christian cultural inheritance, becomes detached from those particular moorings to configure the twins’ curiosity about the world.

Mohsen Makhmalbaf’s *A Moment of Innocence*, a film which films itself in the process of its own constitution, contains particularly intricate crystalline open images. Makhmalbaf plays himself as the (unsympathetic) director of a film which looks reflexively at his own

past – and might be said to reconstitute that past. For there is a significant disparity between the past as it happened and the past which is recollected in the film. In the former, Makhmalbaf, an Islamic revolutionary, aged seventeen, tried to disarm one of the Shah's policemen, was shot by him, and subsequently imprisoned in a Pahlavi jail. By contrast, the film (made long after Makhmalbaf renounced his revolutionary fervour) represents the policeman as a sensitive man, in love with a mysterious woman who seemed to ask him for the time, or for directions, at every opportunity. It also tells us that this woman was Makhmalbaf's cousin and accomplice (whose flirtation is merely to distract the policeman while Makhmalbaf stabs him with a knife), the two revolutionaries are in love with each other, and together they want to save the world using any means – including violence. In the film's reconstruction of history, the ideal of saving the world through love is contrasted with the means of violence – this is the version that the youngsters are asked to reenact, but their failure to reenact this version introduces yet another alternative (nonviolent) reality, which calls into question Makhmalbaf's attempt to reconstitute – and manipulate – the past. The young actors do not wish to take up arms against each other – the 'Young Makhmalbaf' repeatedly sobs and throws away the knife that he has been directed to thrust into the policeman's side. The 'Young Policeman' refuses to draw his gun. In the climax of the film-within-a-film, the 'Policeman', on impulse, offers the woman the flower which he had been instructed not to give her, and 'Makhmalbaf' in turn donates to the policeman the flatbread under which he was supposed to conceal the knife, the film closes with this image of exchange, the veiled woman caught in between, arrested in a freeze-frame.

The fusion of reality and its poetic remake in *A Moment of Innocence* develops into a very complex crystal image, in which no component is entirely independent from any other – this has the antirealist consequence that characters who have never met before act as if they knew each other intimately. For all the film's intricate design, the components in the film do not just slot neatly inside each other – they open onto each other, overlapping. In this respect the film, like so many Iranian films (*The Circle*, *The Wind Will Carry Us*, *A Taste of Cherry*), structurally resembles the musical round – which, according to Deleuze, is an instance of a crystal – with its rhythmically-modulated repetitions. In *A Moment of Innocence*, the first scene of the policeman strand ends when a woman happens to come by and asks him the time. 'It happened just like that!' exclaims the policeman as she walks away. We then cut to the Makhmalbaf strand, where the part of the cousin is allocated to the young actor's own cousin. When, finally alone, she calls into a shop where the clocks have all stopped, then walks towards the rehearsing policemen, the encounter we saw before is repeated. This time we

recognize the woman, and realize that the two scenes/strands have not been taking place in sequence (which is how we have experienced them), but simultaneously. The narrative then takes up the policeman strand from exactly where it was left before, but the repetition has underlined the words 'It happened just like that!' with a new ambiguity.

There are political implications in this use of the crystal image as a round, which, Deleuze writes, describes 'the rising and falling back of pasts which are preserved.'³⁸ As the round progresses, more and more alternative realities are negotiated and put into contact with the past 'as it happened'; the actual images are made to confront virtual images, generating multiple fictional possibilities. As such, *Moment of Innocence* utilizes the properties of the open image (crystalline ambiguity, indeterminacy) in a way that subtly undermines the Islamic regime itself. That regime, which temporarily banned the film, states that there is only one reality, but even in the one, the film points out, there are many.³⁹ The shop where the clocks are frozen signals the arrest of linear time, the severing of sensory-motor links, and the release of subjective possibilities.

Freeze-frame

The freeze-frame which ends *Moment of Innocence* suspends within its single image the competing determinants of Islamic fundamentalism, revolutionary idealism, terrorism, law and order, adolescent romance, unrequited love, revenge and pacifism. The freeze-frame 'arrests' the precise 'moment' where history and its attempted re-enactment interpenetrate – that is, the past (the original terrorist act of the young Makhmalbaf and accomplice) is transfigured by the present (the actors' refusal to repeat the original violent act). The original terrorists' act, the original lovelorn policeman's naive response, the actors' spontaneous refusal of violence, and the middle-aged protagonists' witnessing of this refusal in the re-enactment, are no longer separate moments in time but all joined to constitute the moment of innocence. Although there is a synthesis of past and present and of the competing ideologies in this moment, this image, there is no resolution, no closure. Instead the viewer is left to read the freeze-frame tableau and the contradictions held within it as an open image.

It might be argued that the tendency towards the allegorical evident in New Iranian Cinema pulls the films' open images towards narrative determinism. *The Apple*, for instance, can be read in terms of feminist allegory. In the concluding scene, the blind, chadored mother wanders out of the house, into the alleyway, and reaches for the dangling apple. The final shot freezes her with the apple firmly in her grasp (an allegory about women seizing opportunities). The

³⁸ Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, p. 93

³⁹ The religious underpinning of these images referred to earlier does not, in our view, compromise their dissident potential. That religious underpinning is not synonymous with state religion or any other hegemonic versions of reality.

imprisonment of the girls may be a code, enabling the film to pass the censor, for the restrictions imposed on women in Iran. Nonetheless, neither the allegorical-symbolic nor the documentary elements/codes have hegemony, and the closing freeze-frame of *The Apple* is an open image in that it 'suspends' interpretation between competing narrative codes.

A groundbreaking Iranian film in terms of popular (commercial) international success was Panahi's *The White Balloon*. This is the story of a seven-year-old girl, Razieh, meandering around a few Tehran streets, on her way to buy a goldfish for New Year, and losing her money. It displays all the characteristics we have come to expect – a play with real-time duration, natural locations, a repetitive, cyclical structure, and a child protagonist on a quest. Because of its popularity in the West, critics – inside and outside Iran – have taken issue with the film, alleging that it does not reflect Iranian political reality (claiming that it provides propaganda for western audiences instead). This often bitter debate has been replayed with almost every subsequent Iranian film (more recently, critics have been charging that the films are too negative). In terms of our classification of the open image, *The White Balloon* suggests that even in a film that appears to be completely apolitical, there is in fact a political aspect, and this relates to the forms we have been discussing. At the end of the film Razieh and her older brother, Ali, recover their 500-toman banknote with help from an Afghan balloon seller. Razieh and Ali then, without thought, abandon their saviour, buy the goldfish and return home. The film ends with the clock ticking down to the New Year, an ominous offscreen explosion, and a freeze-frame: the Afghan refugee boy with his white balloon.

The Afghan boy is in every sense 'marginal' to the narrative – this is, of course, the point. He has barely figured in the film, neither has the white balloon. And, one might add, neither have the Iranian political situation nor the question of Afghan refugees in Iran. Yet *The White Balloon* is the title of the film and this is the final image – one that, by its very unexpectedness and the fact that it is a long-held freeze-frame, announces itself as the crucial image of the film, a static image we are given the necessary time to 'read'. Identification with (the now unsympathetic) Razieh's quest is called into question; the implication is that the Afghan refugee will not be going home to celebrate the New Year – he has no home. But the image is too ambiguous, too 'strong', to be reduced to one level of interpretation. The freeze-frame of the Afghan boy and his white balloon feeds back into and modifies the whole preceding 'charming' narrative, the entire chain of images. The best open images 'open up' the films in which they appear (turn the films into crystal images) and open films 'out' to the world, rendering the absent political reality present.

We would not argue that ambiguity or indeterminacy are inherently radical – indeterminacy can itself be politically determined

in opposing ways – but that Iranian filmmakers have utilized the open image to circumvent a particularly strict form of censorship and point to the plurality of truth and experience in a political context where a repressive notion of one truth is imposed by the state. The dogmatic constructions of reality associated with the Iranian state have, of course, their equivalents elsewhere. The appeal of New Iranian Cinema in the West may have less to do with ‘sympathy’ for an exoticized ‘other’ under conditions of repression than with self-recognition. The open images of Iranian film remind us of the loss of such images in most contemporary cinema, the loss of cinema’s particular space for creative interpretation and critical reflection