Driving Affect: The Car and Kiarostami's *Ten*

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We perform our movements in a space which is not "empty" or unrelated to them, but which on the contrary, bears a highly determinate relation to them: movement and background are, in fact, only artificially separated stages of a unique totality.
– Maurice Merleau-Ponty

Iranian filmmaker Abbas Kiarostami's recent film *Ten* (2002) is notable for its exclusive use of a car as the central site of drama. The film, which features ten emotion-laden exchanges, is shot entirely from two digital cameras placed near the dashboard within the protagonist's car. Pivoting for the most part around the female protagonist and her kin, the conversations in the film are all mediated by the car. The characters' interactions are inflected (and often interrupted) by banal events such as heavy traffic, communication with other motorists and pedestrians, parking, as well as the constant preoccupation of driving itself. The car, however, is not merely the film's backdrop (it is not simply another road movie) but, as Kiarostami argues, is the structuring agent of the film itself, the catalyst of the affectively charged encounters. My concern is to explore the ways in which the body is held and shaped (in its various affective registers) by its physical context. By using the car as the central site of the film, Kiarostami draws attention to the material, and more importantly, immaterial affects of filmmaking: the ephemeral and perhaps under-examined forces that constitute a scene. In this way, he models a mode of *atmospheric sensitivity* in filmmaking. This peculiar emphasis of Kiarostami's is perhaps best understood in light of the corporeal phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty and his notion of the *chiasm*—the enfolded relationship between bodies and space. For Kiarostami, like Merleau-Ponty, the body is not something that acts independently in space in a way distinct from it, but rather, the body inhabits and is thus deeply intertwined with the space in which it is held.

Merleau-Ponty and the film act

My reason for invoking Merleau-Ponty in a discussion of film is rooted in a desire to examine, in greater depth, the consequences of the film act. This question has received the most significant attention from documentary film critics concerned with the direct and often intrusive intervention that the documentary enacts. Much of the writing on this topic, however, has focused primarily on the exclusive effects of the filmmaker and the camera. Michael Renov and Thomas Waugh, for example, have argued that in many cases, the filmmaker's presence (or the effects of their presence) is explicitly inscribed, and hence observed, in many seemingly neutral, observational documentaries. Renov, for instance, observes a point in the film *An American Family* (1973) where a "conspiratorial glance is exchanged with the camera"[1] by one of the film's subjects, while Waugh infers the effects of the camera from the "flamboyant" performances of the subjects in Fred Wiseman's observational films.[2] Kiarostami, instead, draws our attention to the effects of the general atmosphere or site of the filmmaking act itself, effects which for him are as significant as the presence of the filmmaker or camera. Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology is a helpful frame for considering Kiarostami's film methodology since his philosophy emphasizes the body's primal relationship to the world and the contingent totality of experience. In the *chiasm*, we are presented a

model of embodied subjectivity where the body is constituted through an enfolded proximity to the world; it is a body that stretches out toward objects in the world and is simultaneously inflected and shaped *by* those very same objects. *Chiasm* is a concept of subjectivity so immediately and intimately bound to the vicissitudes of the world that "one cannot indeed say of [the] body that it is not *elsewhere*, but one also cannot say that it is *here* or *now* in the sense that objects are."[3] In short, the body is described as a complex field of forces that cannot be simply reduced to psychological interiority. Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology can thus serve to cleave a space in which to speak about Kiarostami's film more effectively, given his unusual emphasis on the dynamic role played by the car in *Ten*.

The affective particularities of the car

A brief survey of Kiarostami's body of work reveals the car not simply as a recurrent backdrop, but indeed as the "heart of the Kiarostamian cosmology."[4] His most celebrated film, *A Taste of Cherry* (1997), famously takes place almost entirely within the protagonist's Range Rover. In the film, the car not only serves as the site of the film's central diegetic action (the protagonist's awkward attempts to solicit various strangers to bury him after his anticipated suicide), but also structures the very rhythm of the film. The car slowly meanders through the streets and hills of Tehran while the camera records the unfolding duration, tracing the geography of the city often in the real time marked by the car. In *Ten*, unlike *A Taste of Cherry*, there are no external shots of the car; the ten vignettes that constitute the film are all shot from within the female protagonist's vehicle: a "container" for the characters and their drama.[5] *Ten* has both a technical and narrative simplicity that give it the sense of an observational documentary, as if the cameras simply happened to capture an unscripted day in the life of a contemporary Iranian woman. This tone is reinforced by the fact that the film has no plot in the conventional sense and is instead composed of short, elliptical conversations that index the daily struggles of women's lives in Iran. For example, three of the vignettes feature arguments between the protagonist and her frustrated son regarding her recent divorce from the boy's father, while other scenes play out the difficulties of marriage and parenting in conversations between the protagonist and her sister.

Much like the Italian neorealists, and Cesare Zavattini[6] in particular, Kiarostami betrays an anxiety concerning the performance of his characters. While he employs both actors and non-actors in *Ten*, he is careful that they do not perform roles in the conventional sense, but that they "act as themselves." Like the neorealists, who are no doubt his artistic kin, Kiarostami's principal filmic concern is for loose, natural expression in his performers, free from the artificiality of acting. Kiarostami describes the structure of his films as unscripted and improvisational, designed to allow space for the performers to act and react without the over-determination of fixed lines or character motivations. In this way, the emphasis

on character performance overrides Kiarostami's concern with plot or *mise-en-scène*; as he puts it, "I can't bear narrative cinema. I leave the theatre."[7] *Ten* is thus quite literally a vehicle for the characters' real everyday fears, needs and frustrations, a fact that retains a trace of Kiarostami's original intention for the film: to portray a female psychoanalyst compelled to treat clients in her car. In other words, *Ten* seems to enact a kind of talking cure. In the tradition of neorealism, the film aims to unearth real emotion from non-actors, emotion drawn directly from the characters' life struggles, and not simulated or "acted" for the camera. However, it is clearly Kiarostami's use of the car that marks his distinct fashioning of the neorealist aesthetic. It is the car that functions as the emotional mechanism *par excellence*, the device that frees the film most decisively from the artifice of acting.

As Kiarostami argues in the accompanying film treatise *10 on Ten* (2004) (also, not coincidentally, filmed entirely within a car), the car is the perfect location for a film since it generates the right atmosphere for natural dialogue, emotion, and behavior. The fact that it is a small and relatively confined space has a relaxing and reassuring effect on the actors, creating "the right mood for dialogue." This is aided by the fact that there is no crew or director in the car with the actors; however, their absence alone does not seem to account for the productive effects of the space. In describing his own experience of being in a car, Kiarostami notes the ease with which it allows him to communicate his inner thoughts: "I imagine my voice getting lost among the noise of other cars...these iron cells give me a sense of security and this facilitates my inner dialogue." This intimacy is reproduced in the design of the car itself; as Kiarostami again remarks:

> A person sitting next to someone else [in a car] might not even pay attention to the other's presence. Each of them narrates his or her own inner world. So the choice of setting is appropriate for addressing the psychological issues of the characters in the film.

The car's seats draw the driver and passenger close to each other physically but simultaneously, by virtue of the front-facing orientation, allow them a certain visual autonomy. Sitting in a car allows a person to drift in and out of conversation, to connect and engage with the person beside them, or to simply fix their attention out beyond the car's window. Indeed, the characters in *Ten* only rarely turn to face the person beside them. It is as if their proximity to the outside gives them the space to more easily reveal themselves, freed of the direct gaze of their fellow passenger.

The other important structural feature of the car, then, is the fact that it binds two heterogeneous spaces—the private interior of the car and the public space of the city of Tehran beyond the window. The city's presence is distinctly marked in the film as it constantly interrupts the conversations inside the car, often injecting itself as punctuation in the dialogue. Kiarostami notes that this intervening presence of the city adds to the charged emotional spontaneity achieved in the film.

Who has not, he asks, been affected, or drawn into an argument, by the noise of traffic and the actions of other motorists? "It's a space that can create emotional or nervous tension because of proximity or because of the discomfort caused by bad traffic." It is thus the combined work of the internal space of the car (its rhythm and privacy) and the public exterior space, represented by passing visual stimuli and random encounters, which make the car an ideal site for natural dialogue as well as private confession.

As a space of private confession, the car also highlights the gender critique central to the film. The fact that it is in the car that the women are able to communicate freely and honestly speaks to an absence of such spaces in Iran, or at least the limited political space afforded to women. This problem is most overtly illustrated by the opening scene of the film, where the protagonist explains to her son the reason for her false testimony against her former husband, in which she accused him of being a drug-addict. In dramatic manner, she defends her accusation as the only way for her to have secured a divorce in present-day Iran, since the "the laws of this country give no rights to women." As a site of security, therefore, the car is symptomatic as much as it is literal; the restricted autonomy of the space reveals the estrangement felt by the female characters beyond the car's boundaries. In the car, at least, the women can safely voice their repressed frustrations, accumulated as a consequence of Iranian patriarchy. To again recuperate Kiarostami's original psychoanalytic intention, the car serves as a confessional space (akin to Freud's analytic couch) whose temporary distance from the dominant male economy permits a more spontaneous emotional purge.

Kiarostami and the chiasm

In the film *Ten*, it is the car's literal dynamic—the affects that it supposedly engenders—that remains the film's most provocative aspect. The relationship between the car, the city, and the actors in the film best expresses Merleau-Ponty's notion of the chiastic bond, and in particular, the determinate role of seemingly ephemeral or atmospheric phenomena. In Merleau-Ponty's description of music, for example, he most eloquently describes how a phenomenon that is not visible in space produces a tangible affect in the way that it "besieges, undermines and displaces that space."[8] Music not only affects the listener's body, but also reconstitutes the very space in which the music is heard. The listeners in a concert hall, "*unaware* that the floor is trembling beneath their feet, are like a ship's crew buffeted about on the surface of a tempestuous sea"[9] (my emphasis). Merleau-Ponty here assigns a particular affect to music that not only destabilizes the perceived boundary between listener and sound (as if we could simply extricate or detach ourselves from the music we are listening to), but also does so surreptitiously; music seizes the listener from "beneath their feet," beyond their conscious recognition of the fact. In this way, Merleau-Ponty suggests the ambiguity immanent to sense experience,

the fact that a given phenomenon like music holds us in a way that is both determinate (it *has* a clear affect on the listener) but also ambiguous (we cannot be sure how or in what precise manner we are being affected). The listeners who are moved by the music, who tap their feet or gently sway their heads, do not necessarily know that they are being moved; there is an uncertainty in the distinction between what the individuals are doing and what is being done to them. It is not the music that strictly determines the listeners' movements, nor is it the listeners who consciously decide to move in sync with the music, but rather, it is an indecipherable union of the two, an *enfolded bond* as Merleau-Ponty would say, where the two are "united at the very instant in which they clash."[10]

This example reveals the ambiguous dynamic at the heart of *Ten*. While Kiarostami's commentary on the film implies a determinate bond between the actors and the car, the car does not simply direct the characters' emotions, as if it were a transparent mechanism with clear cause and effect. The relationship between the car and Kiarostami's characters, instead, is much more *chiastic*. The film shows how the body is shaped and limited by its context, but in a way that is mutually constituted. In *Ten*, the body and the car are bound together like "two halves of an orange."[11] The car is not simply a neutral stage upon which the characters interact, but in a certain way, it is as if the car (and its attendant connection to the city) communicates *through* the characters. We witness the way that the car both subtly and explicitly inflects the characters in the film, allowing them temporary reprieve from a difficult scene via its windows, for example, or further complicating a heated exchange through its proximity to heavy gridlock.

In this way, *Ten* can be read as a comment on the affects of modern urban life as expressed in the car, perhaps the object most symptomatic of the contemporary metropolis. The uniquely interstitial space that the car inhabits (the way that it straddles both public and private space) makes it a particularly sensitive site for absorbing and expressing the dynamic between the subject and the city. In a sense, the car in *Ten* is a privileged site that stages the affective forces (both negative and positive) of the city. It reveals the city not merely as empty ground for human action, but, as Merleau-Ponty suggests, as a site enfolded in our every movement, "as flesh offered to flesh."[12]

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2 Waugh, Thomas. "Acting to Play Oneself: Notes on Performance in Documentary." *Making Visible the Invisible: an anthology of original essays on film acting*, ed. Carole Zucker. (Metuchen, NJ: The Scarecrow Press, 1990), 72.
3 Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *The Visible and Invisible*, ed. Claude Lefort, trans. Alfonso Lingus (Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1968), 147.
4 Caputo, Rolando. "Five to Ten: Five Reflections on Kiarostami's 10." *Senses of Cinema*, (29), 2003 Nov-Dec. (no pagination).
5 Ibid.
6 Zavattini, Cesare. "A Thesis on Neo-Realism." *Springtime in Italy: A Reader On Neo-Realism*, ed. and trans. David Overbey (London: Talisman Books, 1978).
7 Nancy, Jean-Luc. *The Evidence of Film*, trans. Christine Irizzary and Verena Andermatt Conley (Brussells: Yves Gevaert, 2001), 88.
8 Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *The Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge, 2002), 262.
9 Ibid.
10 Ibid.
11 Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 133.
12 Merleau-Ponty, 131.

Films Referenced

A Taste of Cherry. Dir. Abbas Kiarostami. 1997. DVD. Criterion, 1998.
Ten. Dir. Abbas Kiarostami. 2002. DVD. Zeitgeist, 2004.
10 on Ten. Dir. Abbas Kiarostami. 2004. DVD. Zeitgeist, 2004.