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The Phenomenological Curtain, Paths, and the Face: The Poetic Revelation of Truth in Iranian Cinema

Mehmet Fatih Ünal

Department of Philosophy, Faculty of Sciences and Literature, Afyon Kocatepe University,
Türkiye; mfunal@aku.edu.tr

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Abstract

This article examines the ontological dimensions of Iranian art cinema as a form of poetic resistance against the technological rationality and objectifying gaze of Western modernity. Drawing on Martin Heidegger's critique of technology (Gestell) and his conceptualisation of truth as Aletheia, as well as Jean-Luc Nancy's ontology of cinematographic evidence, this study argues that Iranian cinema transcends mere socio-political representation. Directors such as Abbas Kiarostami, Mohsen Makhmalbaf, and Majid Majidi, who adopt the structural characteristics of classical Persian poetry-particularly the ghazal form-and creatively transcend the constraints of the 'Islamic gaze', employ an aesthetic characterised by ellipsis, simultaneity, and alle-

gory. Through a philosophical analysis of key cinematic metaphors-such as meandering paths, the phenomenological screen, and the ethics of the face-in films such as *The Taste of Cherry*, *Shirin*, and *The Wind Will Carry Us*, this article demonstrates how this cinematic tradition subverts the absolute transparency imposed by modern representation. Consequently, this study concludes that Iranian cinema constructs a poetic sanctuary that invites the audience into a realm of ethical intimacy and existential presence, offering a profound antidote to the cultural schizophrenia triggered by the crisis of modernity.

Keywords: phenomenology, martin heidegger, cinematic ghazal, abbas kiarostami

1. INTRODUCTION: THE CRISIS OF MODERNITY IN IRAN AND THE RECEPTION OF HEIDEGGER

In Iran, modernity was not experienced as an organic outcome of an internal process of enlightenment and industrialisation, as in Western Europe; rather, it was experienced as a top-down, traumatic project of 'syncretic Westernisation' [1, p. 141]. This process, which gained momentum from the late nineteenth century onwards during the Qajar and particularly the Pahlavi dynasties, led to a profound ontological and cultural rift within Iranian society. Caught between traditional ways of life, Islamic-Iranian roots, and the technological rationality of the West, the Iranian subject became an 'ambivalent' bearer of modernity [1, p. 277]. This crisis was not merely a sociological or political issue; it also laid the groundwork for radical philosophical inquiries within twentieth-century Iranian thought. Unlike in other contexts, the Iranian subject experienced modernity not merely as a socio-economic transformation but as a profound ontological wound signifying a severance from their existential roots.

At the heart of the philosophical quest triggered by this unique experience of modernity lies the Iranian intellectual reception of German philosopher Martin Heidegger's criticisms of Western metaphysics and technological domination. Heidegger's critique of technology-as the 'forgetting of Being' (*Seinsvergessenheit*) and the practice of 'enframing' (*Gestell*), which reduces the world to a calculable 'standing-reserve'-provides a unique hermeneutic key for interpreting the crisis of modernity in Iran. Ahmad Fardid, a significant figure in this reception, synthesised Heidegger's philosophy with Islamic thought and introduced it into Iranian intellectual discourse. Drawing on Heidegger's ideas regarding the collapse of Western metaphysics and the way technology obscures the world, Fardid conceptualised Iran's passive and ontologically rootless condition vis-à-vis the West as 'Westoxification' (*Gharbzadegi*) [2, p. 27]. This concept, later popularised by Celal Al-e Ahmad [3, p. 96], posits that Western modernity is not merely a form of economic or political domination but primarily an ontological illness symbolising a severance from the truth of being. Thinkers such as Daryush Shayegan further developed this Heideggerian interpretation initiated by Fardid. This ontological incompatibility between modernity and tradition manifests as 'cultural schizophrenia' and 'new enchantment' (*Afsun Zadigi Jadid*) (Shayegan, 2001, as cited in [3, p. 112]). The Iranian subject no longer belongs to the traditional horizon of being, nor has it become the Cartesian subject of Western modernity; instead, it is trapped in a fragile, 'patchwork' construction of identity. This condition constitutes a moment of crisis in which the presence of being is lost and the 'destitute times' to which Heidegger alludes are experienced. This state of cultural schizophrenia has become a modern tragedy in which truth and belonging are lost, condemning the individual to a perpetual ontological limbo.

Iranian cinema, particularly in the post-revolutionary period under directors such as Abbas Kiarostami, takes shape amidst this profound ontological crisis of 'statelessness' and 'Westoxification'. In opposition to the West's objectifying epistemological gaze-which consumes everything by rendering it transparent-this cinema transcends mere ideological rebellion; it emerges as a realm of 'poetic thought' (*poesis*) aimed at healing the ontological rift highlighted by Fardid and Shayegan. The potential of this cinematic tradition to resist such rifts exemplifies the dialectical nature of art; as critical theory posits, while art can be instrumentalized for propaganda, it inherently retains a liberating potential to challenge dominant ideologies and foster critical consciousness [4, p. 213]. Understanding how the truth of being (*aletheia*) is revealed in Iranian cinema requires first grasping the philosophical crisis for which this cinematic tradition serves as an antidote. Thus, this cinematic orientation seeks to heal the ontological wounds inflicted by modernity through a quest for poetic truth that dwells silently within the frame.

2. POETIC THOUGHT AND THE ONTOLOGY OF CINEMA: FROM THE AESTHETICS OF THE GHAZAL TO MODERN IMAGES

The ontological resistance developed by Iranian cinema in response to the crisis of rationality imposed by Western modernity draws its roots largely from the practice of 'poetic thinking' (*poiesis*), which overlaps significantly with Heidegger's philosophy of art. Within Heidegger's philosophical hermeneutics, art is not merely an object of aesthetic pleasure; it is the active presence of truth (*aletheia*) within the work. At the heart of all arts, from architecture to painting, lies 'literature' (poetry/*Dichtung*), as language is 'the home of Being' and the space where what exists comes to light [5, pp. 42–43]. This perspective, locating the origins of both philosophy and art in the same poetic clarity, resonates profoundly with the historical fabric of Iranian culture. In Iran, where classical and modern poetry have shaped the collective unconscious, the cinema of directors such as Kiarostami constitutes a poetic act that reveals the mystery of being (*Ereignis*) in the Heideggerian sense [5, p. 30]. For these directors, the camera transcends its role as a mere mechanical recording device, evolving into a spiritual instrument that, akin to a dervish's pen, inscribes the silent letters of existence onto the screen. Kiarostami's aesthetic inherits the legacy of modern Iranian poets such as Sohrab Sepehri and Forugh Farrokhzad, recreating it in cinematographic form. This 'poetic realist' approach transcends metaphysical interpretations of reality to interrogate the existential depth concealed beneath the deceptive simplicity of everyday life [3, p. 69]. This poetic quality, however, is not confined to generating a lyrical atmosphere; structurally, it functions as a cinematic translation

of classical Persian poetry, particularly the ghazal form. In a ghazal, each couplet possesses independent meaning; the poem constitutes a spatial whole of non-sequential images and meanings rather than a linear narrative. Functioning as an extension of the ghazal form, Kiarostami's cinema tends towards 'simultaneity over sequentiality' [3, p. 54]. This spatial structure liberates the viewer from a linear perception of time, generating a multidimensional cognitive space where they can construct their own philosophical journey among the images.

The rigid causality of classical Western cinema, predicated on cause-and-effect relationships, reflects modernity's technological rationality, which reduces the world to a measurable, predictable, and consumable 'object' (Gestell). In contrast, Iranian cinema adopts the ghazal structure to disrupt this rationality by fragmenting the narrative, severing causal links, and employing a subtractive visual language. Because meaning is not absolutely fixed, the viewer is removed from the position of a passive, all-consuming observer and elevated to the role of the work's 'preserver' in the Heideggerian sense [5, pp. 33–35]. This active preservation, superseding passive consumption, liberates the cinema screen from the false transparency imposed by rationality, transforming it into a novel domain of ontological resistance. This simultaneous and subtractive cinematic structure corresponds directly to Heidegger's metaphor of 'paths of thought' (Holzwege). A path is not a predetermined highway leading to a specific destination, but rather a state of traversing a forest where being simultaneously reveals and conceals itself, and where one may sometimes verge on getting lost [5, p. 38]. The endless, winding mountain roads and car journeys in Kiarostami's films serve as precise visualisations of these ontological paths. The destination remains perpetually deferred; the true event (Ereignis) resides in the very act of being on the road and in the revelation of truth (Lichtung), much like in a poem. Consequently, rather than replicating the world through definitive representation, Iranian cinema constructs a poetic space for the unveiling of truth (unconcealedness)-a 'language' wherein being takes up residence. This constructive process serves as an aesthetic manifesto of the unshakeable belief that being can only be experienced in the state of being-on-the-way, treating loss and circuitous paths not as deficiencies.

3. THE CLARITY OF THE IMAGE AND ALETHEIA: FROM REPRESENTATION TO EXISTENCE

The 'representation' paradigm, which forms the basis of Western metaphysics and classical cinema, generally codes the image as a secondary and perpetually incomplete copy of reality [6, p. 80]. Iranian cinema, however, structurally subverts this hierarchy through the poetics of Abbas Kiarostami [5, p. 30]. The images in Kiarostami's *Life and Nothing More* are not, in the classical sense, representations or imaginary projections filling the void left by reality [6, p. 80]. Contrary to traditional thought, Kiarostami's camera does not merely offer a substitute for life; rather, the image functions as existential 'evidence' without which life itself could not continue [6, p. 80]. Kiarostami's cinema transforms the viewer's relationship with objects and the world, rather than merely copying the world [7, p. 16]. By reminding audiences-who, in the technological age, have 'forgotten how to look'-how to look anew, this cinematic approach avoids reducing the world to a merely consumable image or picture [5, p. 45]. The image is no longer a pale copy of reality but a vibrant field of presence where the viewer is confronted anew and most profoundly with their own state of being-in-the-world.

The transformation of the image from a mere copy into the presence of being intersects directly, on a philosophical level, with Martin Heidegger's conception of truth [5, p. 21]. Heidegger rejects the traditional interpretation of Western metaphysics, which views truth as a static correspondence between mind and object [8, p. 50]. In Heideggerian ontology, truth is not an absolute and transparent certainty; rather, it is the process by which being itself is revealed by lifting the veil over itself-that is, the process of aletheia (unconcealment) as expressed in ancient Greek [5, p. 13]; [8, p. 51]. A work of art is not merely an ordinary aesthetic object but an ontological event that penetrates the privacy of existence, bringing truth 'into play' and revealing its being [8, p. 50]; [5, p. 14]. Truth is a historical horizon that simultaneously encompasses both openness and concealment; when a work of art establishes the correct relationship with the world, it reveals this truth and thereby gives it meaning [5, pp. 20–21]. Kiarostami's camera fulfils precisely this function; through an act of subtraction and 'silent telling' that resists modernity's objectifying attitude of 'forcibly opening up' the world, it allows truth to reveal itself whilst remaining partially concealed [5, p. 35]. Rather than rendering reality entirely transparent, this cinema preserves its inherent mystery and 'obviousness', thereby bringing to the screen the realm of poetic openness to which Heidegger alludes [6, p. 87]; [5, p. 38]. In opposition to modernity's domineering tendency to illuminate everything intensely, this cinema defends, with philosophical dignity, the idea that mystery and darkness are intrinsic to truth.

At the existential core of the crisis of modernity lie Heidegger's criticisms of technological rationality [5, p. 44]. In the section entitled 'The Age of Images of the World' within *A Question Concerning Technology*, Heidegger posits that in the modern age, humanity has become detached from the world itself, engaging with it solely through a 'framed' and recorded image [5, p. 44]. This objectifying perspective prevents that which exists from revealing its own presence to humanity; whereas in earlier eras, existence possessed a structure that revealed and displayed itself, modernity transforms everything into a framed object [5, pp. 44–45]. Despite utilising digital techniques, Kiarostami's cinema moves in direct opposition to the technological spirit of the age and remains fundamentally non-technological [5, p. 46]. Rather than surrendering art to this objectifying spirit, Kiarostami pursues cinema as a poetic endeavour that preserves the mystery of existence

[5, pp. 46–47]. Through this cinematic approach, the modern subject-alienated by technology-can re-establish a poetic, non-dominating connection with existence.

The most powerful cinematic metaphor for this ontological resistance is the motif of the ‘road’, an indispensable element of Kiarostami’s films [5, p. 53]. Kiarostami’s ceaseless journeys correspond directly with Heidegger’s concept of *Holzwege* (Paths) [5, p. 29]. In Heideggerian philosophy, a path is not a route with a predetermined destination, but rather a meandering walk in pursuit of the thinkable-one that carries the constant possibility of getting lost in the forest [5, p. 34]. These meandering routes suspend the arrogant march of modern reason-fixated on an absolute goal-and enable the audience to heed the forest’s uncanny yet genuine call. Kiarostami’s characters frequently find themselves lost on zigzagging roads, attempting to navigate from within their vehicles [5, p. 34]. These paths create an ontological rupture against modernity’s linear, goal-oriented rationality; the modern meaning of hermeneutics and the essence of the path are predicated on the absence of an absolute endpoint, acknowledging that truth remains perpetually elusive [5, p. 37]. For Kiarostami, the work of art is not a questioning of the journey’s outcome but the act of walking the path itself; though seemingly aimless, this process brings the previously unknown out of obscurity and into the light [5, p. 60]. As the state of being on the path becomes the final destination, the causal links to which the viewer is accustomed give way to a profound ontological anticipation.

Consequently, Kiarostami’s camera refrains from framing the world as an image to be conquered [5, p. 45]. Instead, it transforms the mystery of existence and truth into a cinematographic event (*Ereignis*) through the characters’ individual life experiences (*Erlebnis*) on the road [5, p. 62]. These cinematic paths invite the viewer into a realm of discovery (*aletheia*) where truth is not presented as an absolute conclusion, but reveals itself whilst remaining partially concealed [5, p. 60]. This realm of discovery gradually dismantles the colonial gaze-which views the world as a standing-reserve to be consumed-and persuades the viewer to walk along that humble path where being gently reveals itself.

4. THE PHENOMENOLOGICAL VEIL AND THE ISLAMIC GAZE (*ISLAMICATE GAZE*)

Following the 1979 Islamic Revolution, Iranian cinema underwent a rigorous process of ‘purification’ in which the Western-style voyeuristic gaze and the regime of cinematographic representation were eliminated [9, p. 14]. This new structure that emerged after the revolution is conceptualised not as “Islamic cinema” in the narrow sense-which directly conveys religious dogmas-but as an “Islamicate cinema/gaze”, shaped by Iranian-Islamic culture, sociology, and constraints [9, p. 59]. This new understanding of cinema rejected the pornographic gaze that objectifies women, replacing it with a system of ‘modesty/hejab’, and aimed to transform cinema from an instrument of moral decay into a tool for the construction of national and spiritual identity [9, p. 228]. Thus, the cinema screen transcended its role as a mere vehicle for entertainment, evolving into a socio-political battlefield where the body and the gaze are recoded within a new moral framework.

Because Western feminist film theories-such as Laura Mulvey’s concept of the ‘male gaze’-fall short when analysing Iranian cinema, this regime of vision specific to Iran is termed the ‘Islamicate gaze theory’ [9, p. 106]. This theory centres on the practice of the ‘averted gaze’, grounded in the Qur’anic command to lower one’s gaze, as opposed to voyeuristic peering aimed at seizing and consuming the world [9, p. 107]. Within official theocratic discourse, a gaze directed at an unveiled woman carries the risk of transforming an autonomous and moral man into a corrupted subject; consequently, the veil functions as a shield against this voyeuristic or technological domination [9, p. 110]. This theory positions the veil not merely as a physical piece of fabric concealing the body but as a powerful ontological barrier that deliberately frustrates the spectator’s consumerist desire.

From the perspective of the Islamic theory of perception, censorship and privacy regulations have ceased to be mere passive political constraints in the hands of directors such as Kiarostami and within Iranian art cinema more broadly; instead, they have transformed into an ontological ‘phenomenological veil’ and a creative barrier [10, p. 83, citing Dabashi]. Iranian hermeneutics is structurally founded on ‘not trusting in overt meanings (*zahir*) and concealing or seeking the values at the core (*batin*)’ [9, p. 102]. In this context, practices of veiling that obscure the body, the frame, or the voice create an aesthetic of camouflage and indirection that compels the viewer to seek truth in the depths, in contrast to the deceptiveness of the surface image [9, p. 105]. The veil on screen directly confronts and obstructs the male viewer’s (and the camera’s) consumptive gaze, thereby revealing the film’s very ‘looked-at-ness’ and confronting the viewer with their own passive position [10, p. 83, citing Mottahedeh]. Ironically, these censorship-imposed restrictions have been transformed by directors into a productive philosophical weapon that provokes the truth beyond the visual surface and cleanses the viewer of their voyeuristic habits.

The censorship and veiling rules imposed on Iranian cinema transcend mere constraints within Abbas Kiarostami’s aesthetic, evolving into a cinematographic strategy of subtraction based on the principle of ‘creating by subtraction rather than addition’ [11, p. 27]; [12, p. 153]. In *The Wind Will Carry Us* (1999), Kiarostami transforms invisibility into an ontological possibility by constructing a ‘half-created’ cinema that demands the audience complete the narrative in their minds [13, p. 33]. Although Behzad, the ‘Engineer’, travels from Tehran to the village of Siyah Darreh to film the funeral

rites of an elderly woman on her deathbed (involving women wailing and scratching their faces), the key characters-the centenarian Mrs Malek, Behzad's three-person crew, and the well-digger Youssef-never appear in the frame [14, p. 37]. This deliberate omission from the frame compels the audience to fill the gaps on screen with their own inner thoughts, thereby elevating them from passive spectators to active creators of the film.

The inclusion or exclusion of female characters in the film constitutes the most powerful manifestation of this phenomenological veil and 'creative barrier' [10, p. 83]. The women in the village structurally resist Behzad's colonising and voyeuristic male gaze [10, p. 84]. For example, the elderly café owner Taj Dawlat categorically refuses to be filmed while working, and the young Zeynab, milking a cow in a dark cellar, avoids presenting her face directly to Behzad's penetrating gaze [10, p. 87]. In the cellar scene, the woman's veil and the darkness of the space combine to structurally obstruct the voyeurism found in Western narratives; a sensory, mysterious, and auditory experience accompanied by the poetry of Forugh Farrokhzad replaces the prying, consumerist gaze [10, p. 83]. By illuminating the power of the unseen, this sensory and auditory intensity deals a shattering ontological blow to the West's visual hegemony, which seeks to lay everything bare through illumination.

On a philosophical level, this defiant stance-which rejects the gaze directed at women and unseen characters-constitutes a cinematic embodiment of Heidegger's concept of 'Earth'. In Heidegger's ontology, Earth is the dark foundation that constantly conceals itself, shattering every attempt at illumination and quantification while blocking numerical and analytical intrusions [8, pp. 45–46]. Armed with a camera and modern rationality, Behzad attempts to illuminate the village's private sorrows (the death ritual) and transform them into a measurable, consumable 'World'. However, the village of Siyah Darreh, with its off-frame spaces and invisible women, disrupts Behzad's control over image and knowledge by exhibiting the introverted resistance of the 'Earth' in the Heideggerian sense [8, p. 46]; [15, p. 27]. While the Earth preserves its own truth by resisting the transparency of being, the rules of invisibility and veiling imposed by the Islamic perspective become an ontological advantage that prevents the objectification of being before Kiarostami's camera. Through the aesthetics of subtraction, the viewer is liberated from the role of passive voyeur and assumes the position of a productive witness to Heideggerian truth (the perpetual struggle between openness and concealment). Ultimately, this witnessing transforms into a unique cinematic triumph that pierces the restrictive walls of censorship, allowing an unshakeable existential presence to emerge from the void.

5. BEING-TOWARDS-DEATH AND THE CALL OF THE EARTH: TASTE OF CHERRY

The ontological depth of Iranian cinema reaches its peak in Abbas Kiarostami's 1997 masterpiece *Taste of Cherry*, through a philosophical exploration not of life, but of absolute finitude and death. The film follows Badii, a character who has decided to commit suicide and drives around the dusty outskirts of Tehran in search of someone to bury him-or, should he fail, to save him. This cinematic quest is not merely a psychological breakdown but a radical embodiment of the state of 'being-towards-death' conceptualised by Martin Heidegger in his work *Being and Time* [16, pp. 42–43]. In Heidegger's philosophy, death confronts Dasein (human existence) with its own finitude as that unique and 'impossible possibility' which cannot be transferred to another and belongs entirely to the self [16, p. 43]. In contrast to traditional narrative cinema, Kiarostami meticulously conceals Badii's motivation for suicide from the audience, removing him from the realm of psychological melodrama and transforming him into an ontological agent who questions the mystery of existence [14, p. 109]. Constructed not around the causes of death but around how death itself, as a 'horizon', shapes existence, this narrative compels audiences to silently confront their own mortality.

The three passengers who accompany Badii serve as allegories for the different existential attitudes adopted by humans in the face of death, while simultaneously reflecting Iran's multicultural demography [12, p. 127]. These characters-a Kurdish soldier, an Afghan theology student, and a Turkic taxidermist-enact, in turn, the states of flight, denial, and acceptance described by Heidegger [16, p. 43]. While the soldier flees in fear of death's coldness, the theology student takes refuge behind dogmatic rhetoric arguing that suicide is a religious sin [16, p. 43]. Only the Turkic embalmer, who handles dead bodies professionally, reluctantly accepts the offer to cover the medical expenses of his sick child, recounting how he was once saved from the brink of suicide by the taste of a mulberry [14, p. 109]. When coping with absolute finitude, neither the army, holding a monopoly on violence, nor theology, offering otherworldly promises, proves effective; the sole hope of clinging to existence lies in the small, sensory pleasures offered by nature, such as the taste of a mulberry or a cherry.

This ontological predicament of the human condition finds its echo in the film's use of space and endless car journeys. Kiarostami's camera frames the building sites on the outskirts of Tehran, the dusty hill roads, and the pale yellow, barren autumn landscapes as reflections of Badii's inner labyrinth [12, p. 129]. However, these spaces serve as more than merely an aesthetic or psychological backdrop. Kiarostami presents nature and the landscape, much like Heidegger's concept of 'Earth', as an unpredictable source that cannot be dominated by humans and always conceals itself [16, p. 59]. The endless loops Badii traces in his car along the same dusty roads, without ever reaching a destination, underscore the rootlessness and mechanical repetition of modern humanity [12, p. 126]. By having the protagonist wander through these

unproductive, dust-shrouded construction sites, Kiarostami signifies his loneliness not merely as a psychological crisis but as an ontological cost of the modern experience [9, p. 218]. Consequently, while the car transforms into a private, claustrophobic shell isolating the character from the outside world, the scorching, boundless expanse of earth beyond the windscreen imposes its presence as a great void transcending the limits of the human mind and as the silent call of the earth.

The ontological climax of the film *Taste of Cherry* occurs during the long, harrowing sequence in which Badii lies in his self-dug grave on a stormy night and the screen goes completely black. Contrary to the expectations of traditional cinema, the film does not definitively reveal whether Badii has died; instead, following a prolonged period of on-screen darkness, it abruptly transitions to an epilogue sequence shot with a low-resolution digital video camera [14, p. 162]. In this surprising video recording, the film crew rests on verdant hills, directly projecting the film's shooting process onto the screen while Louis Armstrong's instrumental trumpet rendition of 'St. James Infirmary' plays in the background [14, p. 162]. This 'open-ended' structure removes the film from the realm of a finished, consumable product, demanding that viewers engage with the process through their own imagination and mentally recreate the film alongside the director [17, pp. 1–2]. This radical move, shattering the illusion of narrative right at the heart of death's absolute and dark certainty, pulls viewers out of a passive sense of pity and compels them to actively confront the stubborn continuity of life.

On a philosophical level, exposing the camera and film crew in this manner transcends a mere postmodern alienation tactic; it constitutes a manifestation of truth (aletheia) and artistic 'fidelity' in the Heideggerian sense. For Kiarostami, 'fidelity' to truth in filmmaking sometimes requires not concealing the camera's presence during the production process, as seen in the final scene of *Taste of Cherry* [5, p. 46]. This approach aligns entirely with the theme of life's existential 'evidence' found in Jean-Luc Nancy's ontology; regardless of the severity of death and disruption, life continues its cyclical nature behind the camera and reality. The sight of soldiers on screen walking towards the camera with a smile, alongside the crew going about their ordinary day, demonstrates that even a deadly crisis cannot halt the indifferent yet productive flow of existence. The transition from the darkness of the grave to the awakening of nature-evidenced by greening trees and marching soldiers-constitutes a cinematic triumph of Heidegger's concept of 'Earth'. While death remains, in the person of Badii, a closed, dark, and inaccessible end (nothingness), the Earth continues to sustain the realm of 'Openness' (the World) by constantly renewing and concealing itself. This video epilogue implies that death is not an absolute end that brings everything to a close, but rather a liminal state that gains meaning within the broader framework of life.

6. ALLEGORICAL CINEMA AND THE CINEMATIC GHAZAL

While Iranian art cinema rejects Western classical narrative conventions and dramatic structures predicated on cause-and-effect relationships, it draws inspiration largely from its own historical roots, particularly classical Persian poetry. Abbas Kiarostami's cinematic aesthetic is structurally and philosophically rooted in classical poetic forms, particularly the ghazal format, which reached its zenith between the twelfth and fourteenth centuries [3, p. 29]. Much like the lyrical ghazals of the great Sufi poet Hafiz of Shiraz, the leading directors of Iranian cinema practice an 'abstract poetics' or 'philosophical poetics' rather than merely reflecting the ordinary reality of everyday life [3, p. 34]. Within this approach, the transparent, uninterrupted narrative style of classical cinema is replaced by a visual allegory that constructs meaning through fragmented and indirect paths rather than along a sequential (syntagmatic) line [3, pp. 34–35]. Consequently, the rigid causality of Western cinema-fixated on action and outcome-gives way in Iranian cinema to a flexible, meditative, and poetic void that viewers must complete through their own inner reflection.

The concept of the 'cinematic ghazal' establishes this poetic tendency in Iranian cinema on a theoretical foundation, transforming the thematic material and distinctive structural arrangement of Persian lyrical love poetry into moving images [18, p. 142]. In the classical ghazal form, each couplet (bayt) functions as a self-contained, short poem in its own right, and the poem as a whole presents a fragmented yet philosophical harmony rather than a dogmatic narrative [3, p. 42]. Similarly, in Kiarostami's cinema, each scene or image constitutes a self-contained, autonomous unit; meaning is constructed spatially through the simultaneous and multi-layered use of space rather than through the linear flow of time characteristic of classical cinema [3, p. 47]. Viewed from a Sufi perspective, rather than directly depicting life's 'false reality' (vahn), which is predicated on illusion, the artist aims to reveal the unseen and the truth (batin) through these fragmented and spatial images via the imagination (khiyal) [3, pp. 35–36]. This structural fragmentation constitutes a space of ontological freedom that refuses to confine the truth of existence to a single absolute narrative, inviting the viewer to pause and reflect on the autonomous existence of each individual image.

The concept of the cinematic ghazal also engages in a conceptual dialogue with Pier Paolo Pasolini's theory of the 'cinema of poetry'. Pasolini's proposed 'free indirect point of view' and use of stylistic grammar align perfectly with Iranian directors' efforts to add depth of meaning by obscuring subjectivity [18, p. 142]. Much like Hafiz's poetry, Kiarostami's films transcend specific historical or political constraints by embracing formal ambiguity, posing polysemous universal questions about life and death [3, p. 43]. Furthermore, directors such as Majid Majidi utilise the cinematic ghazal to imbue the image with mystical lyricism and sensory intensity, thereby creating a 'cinesthetic' bodily viewing experience

that brings to the screen both the physical intensity of human love and the ineffability of the divine [18, pp. 142–143]. Ultimately, the cinematic ghazal transcends a mere aesthetic choice, transforming into a philosophical armour of resistance against the domination of modern rationality—which reduces the world to a calculable object-by once again enveloping existence in poetic mystery and spiritual compassion.

The adaptation of these structural features of classical Persian poetry to the screen is highly evident in Mohsen Makhmalbaf's film *Time of Love* (Nowbat-e Asheqi, 1991). The film features a three-part structure of repetition and variation in which the same love triangle is reimagined with different endings, reflecting the rhyme scheme and thematic variations of the classical ghazal form [18, p. 144]. The film's sole named character, Güzel, serves as a personified allegorical embodiment of the ghazal genre; indeed, the phonetic resonance between the words 'Güzel' and 'ghazal' supports this conceptual alignment [18, p. 145]. In the film's first two sections, the depiction of love as perpetually fatal and unattainable points to the very state of unfulfilled desire and anguish that drives the ghazal genre itself [18, p. 145]. Rejecting the linear, resolution-oriented logic of traditional Western narratives, this cyclical structure transforms love and desire from a psychological case into an ontological experience in which individuals repeatedly push their own boundaries. In the film's final epilogue, Makhmalbaf steps outside the narrative through self-reflexive commentary delivered by the judge character, thereby declaring the failure of literal, straightforward 'prose cinema' concerning matters of love and truth [18, p. 156]. Instead, he advocates for 'poetic cinema', which relies on the free indirect subjective point of view and the evocative power of the image [18, p. 156]. For example, the cut from a sensual close-up of Güzel playing with the tassels of her headscarf to the hand of an elderly man touching a gravestone creates an autonomous and complete poetic utterance in its own right, much like an independent couplet in a ghazal [18, p. 148]. Consequently, the camera ceases to function as a mechanical observer recording events from the outside; it evolves into a philosophical brush that redraws the intense truth hidden behind objects and bodily gestures within the profound silence between fragmented images.

In Majid Majidi's films, this allegorical structure of poetic cinema transforms into a 'mystical lyricism' and a sensory intensity that constitutes a bodily (cinesthetic) experience [18, pp. 136, 142–143]. In Majidi's film *Baran* (2001), the unrequited love felt by the young Iranian man Latif for the Afghan refugee girl Baran represents a cinematic culmination of the motifs of self-annihilation/nothingness (*fana*) and self-sacrifice found in classical Persian literature. Latif reaches the extreme of this gesture of self-effacement by selling his own identity card—the only guarantee his family has of being able to return to Afghanistan—knowing he will never see her again [18, p. 156]. Although this story of unrequited love may appear on the surface to be an innocent romance, at a deeper level, it functions as both a spiritual and a national/political allegory of Iran [18, p. 156]. This revelation of love's radical and invisible power offers an unwavering ethic of moral resistance against the selfish calculations of the modern individual—one that dissolves one's own ego in the presence of the other and exalts their mere existence.

Ultimately, this aesthetic—which subverts the classical narratives of Iranian cinema—serves as a poetic shield against the objectifying and domineering gaze of Western metaphysics. A work of art is not merely a copy of what exists; rather, it is an ontological event in which truth (*aletheia*) comes to the fore within the work and lifts the veil from itself [8, p. 50]. From Kiarostami's metaphors of subtraction and the path to Makhmalbaf's cinematic ghazal and Majidi's mystical lyricism, Iranian cinema structurally resists the transformation of the world into a calculable object. In this way, the cinematic screen is completely liberated from being a rationalist apparatus that conquers and consumes reality, becoming a sacred, poetic sanctuary which tenderly safeguards the mystery of the earth and upon which truth silently folds in upon itself.

7. THE POLITICS OF THE GAZE AND ETHICAL WITNESS: THE FILM *SHIRIN* AND THE ONTOLOGY OF THE 'FACE'

Abbas Kiarostami's 2008 film *Shirin* constitutes one of the philosophical extremes of the aesthetic of 'non-showing' and subtraction developed by Iranian cinema in response to censorship. The film focuses on the faces of one hundred and fourteen Iranian women watching a cinematic adaptation of the twelfth-century classical epic of Khusraw and Shirin [11, p. 24]. However, Kiarostami never reveals the screened film to the audience; viewers hear only the narrative's audio track and watch a continuous 'reaction shot' of the women responding to this sound, their faces illuminated in the darkness [11, p. 24]. By decentring the visual narrative, the viewer (the women) and the viewed object (the film) are severed from one another, rendering the 'act of looking' a wholly isolated event [11, p. 29].

In opposition to the voyeuristic and consumerist structure of classical narrative cinema, this strategy creates a 'cinema of ethical intimacy' between the audience and the faces on the screen [11, p. 25]. By excluding all external elements that might distract the viewer's attention (such as action, objects, or moving bodies), Kiarostami leaves the audience alone with the nakedness of the face [11, p. 25]. This radical reduction is in direct ontological dialogue with Giorgio Agamben's concept of the 'face'. The face is not merely a biological appendage but a fundamental space of 'openness' in which the human being radically reveals themselves (Agamben, as cited in [11, p. 24]). In *Shirin*, the narrative ceases to be a consumable object and becomes the bearer of this self-revelation and presence, finding its echo solely in the faces of the female viewers.

This state of ontological revelation finds its philosophical roots in Emmanuel Levinas's ethics. The fundamental and indispensable condition of ethics is the 'face-to-face' encounter established with the face of the Other [11, p. 25, quoting Levinas]. Through his camera, Kiarostami's intense and uninterrupted focus on women's faces draws the viewer away from familiar cinematic identification, compelling them towards an ethical witnessing grounded in empathy and imagination [11, p. 25]. Through the transparency of the face, the viewer comes into direct contact with the existence of the Other. However, the political dimension of this aesthetic choice is profoundly significant. In a country where strict rules render women's visibility in the public sphere contentious and politically ensnared, Kiarostami invites the viewer to gaze unceasingly at the open and compelling faces of Iranian women for ninety minutes [11, p. 32]. In opposition to the rules of objectification and concealment imposed by the Islamicate gaze, the film elevates women from mere 'objects of the gaze' to active subjects who 'look' or 'see'; paradoxically, however, the women performing this act remain simultaneous objects of our gaze [11, p. 32]. Through the sheer clarity (evidence) of the face and the gaze, Kiarostami dismantles the boundaries of censorship that render the body invisible.

The strategy of 'not showing' in Kiarostami's film *Shirin*, which leaves the viewer face to face with the women's faces, aligns perfectly with the fundamental ontological distinction between 'sight' and 'the look' [11, p. 30]. While the act of 'seeing' may be a passive, voyeuristic, hallucinatory, or purely fantasy-generating form of consumption, the 'gaze' is a productive act that opens itself up to reality and brings the viewer into contact with being (Nancy, 2001, as cited in [11, p. 30]). By mobilising 'seeing' in favour of the 'gaze', this cinema revitalises the act of seeing, thereby offering the viewer the possibility of ontological access to reality [11, p. 30]. One of the film's primary aims is to visualise this ordinary yet paradoxically invisible phenomenon-namely, 'the act of seeing itself' (seeing in itself)-and to 'conceptually bracket the look' [11, p. 30]. The infinite variety of subtle emotional states (joy, sadness, shock, empathy, etc.) evident on the faces of the 114 Iranian actresses (and Juliette Binoche) on screen transcends cinematic illusion, opening the door to embodied experience and a deeper authenticity [11, pp. 24, 30]. As the women merge with the fictional film they are watching or with their own cinematic memories and fantasies, a repertoire of the 'emotional/productive gaze'-a rarity in visual culture-is constructed [11, p. 32]. Thus, this act of viewing, which traditional cinema seeks to render invisible, emerges from the film's marginalised centre to appear directly before us as the sole truth.

In this context, *Shirin* functions as a counter-thesis to the 'culture of exhibitionism/striptease'-which renders everything transparent-or to the pornographic visibility of modern performance culture; indeed, it represents an insurmountable extreme of the Deleuzian 'cinema of the seer' associated with post-Second World War cinema [11, p. 29]. While traditional cinema generally positions the woman as an 'object of the gaze', in *Shirin*, 'seeing takes precedence over being seen', and the object of the gaze is radically severed from the beholder [11, p. 29]. This ontological separation transforms the act of looking into an isolated event in its own right, freeing it from serving as a mere instrument of a consumable narrative [11, p. 29]. Before Kiarostami's camera, the face and the gaze represent that uncanny realm where truth (aletheia), in the Heideggerian sense, emerges beyond mere representation. The viewer must develop an 'ethical witness' by risking their own subjectivity and confronting the on-screen image (through the interplay of light and shadow on the women's faces), thereby completing the unseen 'other' film in their mind [11, p. 32]. Considered alongside the concept of 'evidence', these faces in Iranian cinema transcend an ontological crisis of representation; they become the most radical proof of the presence of being and of humanity's openness to the world [7, p. 16]. This cinematic approach reveals a philosophical act that calls upon every individual sitting in darkness to reproduce truth within their own inner self and to silently share in the manifest mystery of life.

8. CONCLUSION

Iranian cinema has emerged as a space of ontological resistance against the technological rationality imposed by Western modernity and the objectifying practices (Gestell) that reduce everything to a calculable 'stock' or 'image' [5, pp. 44–46]. The aesthetics of Abbas Kiarostami and other pioneering directors have dismantled classical regimes of representation, flawlessly translating the fragmented, simultaneous, and multi-layered structure of modern Iranian poetry and the classical ghazal form into a cinematic language [3, pp. 36–37]. In this context, cinema transcends its role as a mere replication of reality or a voyeuristic instrument of consumption, transforming into a poetic act (poiesis) that preserves the mystery of existence and calls upon the viewer to perceive the world anew [5, p. 30]. In contrast to traditional Western metaphysics' endeavour to subjugate everything through violent illumination, this cinematographic approach demonstrates profound respect for those aspects that remain in darkness and uncertainty, thereby exalting life's inherent rhythm.

The rules and censorship mechanisms of the 'Islamicate gaze' in the post-revolutionary period were not merely political obstacles restricting artistic production; in the hands of Kiarostami and his contemporaries, they transformed into a phenomenological veil that rejected the pornographic transparency of reality [9, p. 101]. The deliberate omission of the image and the emphasis on the unseen space (off-screen sounds and cuts) construct not a secondary representation of reality, but the 'evidence' of life's own presence [6, p. 80]. This structure of omission in productions such as *Life and Nothing More*, *The Wind Will Carry Us*, and *Shirin* establishes an ontological ground that liberates the viewer from being

a passive consumer and invites them to an ethical and productive ‘gaze’ (regard) [11, p. 30]. Thus, the necessity to render the body and action invisible-imposed by these constraints-has paradoxically functioned as a creative armour that allows the truth of being (aletheia) to be illuminated not by exposing itself, but by partially withdrawing, much like the earth itself.

Consequently, in an age where modernity has uprooted humanity and transformed the world into an inexhaustible object of technological consumption, Iranian cinema assumes the role of the great ‘poet’ who safeguards the truth of being during ‘destitute times’ [16, p. 40]. A work of art (such as a Greek temple) ensures that truth remains ‘at work’ by sustaining the struggle between the ‘Earth’-which is closed in upon itself-and the ‘World’-which is open [8, pp. 45–47]. The winding paths created by Kiarostami’s camera, the elliptical narratives, and the unique emotional reflections gathered on the women’s faces on screen construct a poetic refuge where being can take shelter from the absolute transparency imposed by a false project of enlightenment [5, p. 38]; [11, p. 32]. Amidst the technological clamour of the modern age, which reduces the world to nothing more than an image to be captured, this cinema serves as a silent yet unshakeable refuge, reminding ethical subjects capable of tolerating darkness, absence, and mystery of their own existential roots.

DECLARATION OF GENERATIVE AI AND AI-ASSISTED TECHNOLOGIES IN THE WRITING PROCESS

In the course of preparing this manuscript, the authors employed ChatGPT to improve the linguistic quality and readability of the content. After utilizing this AI tool, the authors conducted comprehensive review and necessary revisions to ensure the accuracy, integrity, and scientific rigor of the manuscript. All authors bear full responsibility for the final content of the published work, including any errors or inconsistencies that may arise.

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