Absence, an even Greater Presence

MASTER’S THESIS

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This thesis paper investigates my work in relation to Michelangelo Antonioni’s *La Notte* and Abbas Kiarostami’s *The Wind Will Carry Us*. These films are examined in detail in particular in relation to absence and presence, death and life.
Für meine Großmutter, Helen M. Herbert
(Dejan, 1933—Philadelphia, 2008)
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Fields of Study

Major Field: Art
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“If the plastic arts were put under psychoanalysis,” Andre Bazin speculates, “the practice of embalming the dead might turn out to be a fundamental factor in their creation. The process might reveal that at the origin of painting and sculpture there lies a mummy complex” (9). In this assertion, Bazin is concerned with motivations for art making. Fundamentally prior to art is life, which serves as a driving force for making artwork. Death is a certain aspect of life: it is life’s limit. Temporally, death occurs at the end of life; it is the end of a life. The limit of death delineates life. Additionally, a death is an absence, a negative.

Conversely, preservation is a “keeping present.” The “mummy complex” described by Bazin is similar to “preservation” as described by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari:

The young man will smile on the canvas for as long as the canvas lasts. Blood throbs under the skin of this woman’s face, the wind shakes a branch, a group of men prepare to leave. In a novel or a film, the young man will stop smiling, but he will start to smile again when we turn to this page or that moment. Art preserves and it is the only thing in the world that is preserved. (465).

The purpose of mummification is to preserve. Mummification attempts to “defeat
death” through preservation: to freeze time. But life is constantly changing. *Is it possible to freeze life?* A mummy is merely an image of or idea about a thing. This doesn’t stop us from attempting to “defeat death.” By preserving a person, moment, scene, or idea art, like mummification, attempts to overcome time.

The distinction that Deleuze and Guattari make between static arts, such as painting, and kinetic arts, such as film, is astute. Yet, there is the implication that these arts are connected and both “preserve.” A painting or photograph remains the same. It is static: frozen. It is one moment and it is an eternity in that the moment will remain for “as long as the canvas lasts.” In contrast, a film changes from one moment to the next. As a result of its temporal nature, film takes up explicitly the issue of time. It is comprised of many still images, which are sequenced. The secession of stills is interrupted between each still frame by a pause, a gap, which enables the illusion of movement. In either instance, inherent in preservation is a sense of time: the time of making, the time of looking, the duration of the scene depicted, the externalization of a specific moment.

The temporal nature of life is echoed in the temporal nature of art. One lifetime is comprised of a series of moments that follow each other sequentially. A film could also be described as a series of moments that follow each other sequentially. A painting can be seen as a series of events that are now looked back upon as a whole.
While art engages all of the senses, it is often primarily an optical encounter. Preservation is linked to observation. “Preserve” and “observe” share the same Latin root: servare, meaning “to keep.” Since art is “observed,” this connection is paramount. Art preserves and through observation is preserved. In making we are preserving. In looking we are preserving. We are continually “making present” through the creation of images.
There. Not There.

Theodor Adorno in “Transparencies on Film” asserts:

The most plausible theory of film technique, that which focuses on the movement of objects, is both provocatively denied and yet preserved, in negative form, in the static character of films like Antonioni’s La Notte. Whatever is ‘uncinematic’ in this film gives it the power to express, as if with hollow eyes, the emptiness of time. (New German Critique, No. 24/25 200-201)

While in general Adorno is critical of mass media, including film, this statement about Antonioni points out what Adorno finds to be the positive potential of film.

Michelangelo Antonioni’s La Notte (1961) is a slowly paced film that is concerned with relationships between individuals, in particular between Lidia and Giovanni, who are a married couple. From the outset the couple seem distant from each other. Lidia spends a considerable amount of the film wandering alone through Milan. She is not lost, but is distant from her surroundings. Discussing Antonioni’s characters, Bazin asserts, “He [Antonioni] builds all of his effects on their [the character’s] way of life, their way of crying, of walking, of laughing. They are caught in the maze of the plot like laboratory rats being sent through a labyrinth” (66).
The title, *La Notte*, provides a temporal setting for the film and places emphasis on the later half of the film, which takes place during the night. Significantly, for the purpose of this paper, *La Notte* ends with a death.

Tommaso, a mutual friend of Lidia and Giovanni, has been in hospital and dies during the night. The viewer is introduced to Tommaso at the beginning of the film, when Lidia and Giovanni visit him in his hospital room. Towards the end of the film, the viewer learns of Tommaso’s death indirectly. Lidia makes a phone call, the viewer infers from her dialogue that Tommaso has died, but is not privy to the conversation from the other end. Later in the film, Lidia relays to Giovanni that Tommaso died during the night.

For Adorno, “the static character of films like *La Notte*” manifests in the stillness of each scene, the still camera, and the slowness of the events. These contribute to what is “uncinematic” in the film. The events that transpire over the course of the film are filler for the markers of the meeting of Tommaso, who is bedridden, and the moment of learning of his death. Lidia moves, yet goes nowhere, as Bazin says, “as if they are lost in the maze of the plot.” There is movement, yet there is not. Lidia roams the streets, yet is detached from them. She is there and not there. The announcement of Tommaso’s death is also there and no there. There in that Lidia receives the information. Not there because the viewer doesn’t see the event.

Adorno’s statement regarding *La Notte* is applicable to Abbas Kiarostami’s *The Wind Will Carry Us* (1999). *The Wind Will Carry Us* also has a static
character. Kiarostami has asserted that he actually thinks of himself as a photographer. He was trained as a painter, is internationally known as a filmmaker and thinks of himself as a photographer, shooting individual, still images. This emphasizes the slowness, the stillness of the films. The “uncinematic” referred to by Adorno is the stillness. Emptiness is static, but time is in constant motion. Emptiness is linked to what cannot be known (life). Life is both static and temporal as well. A life occupies a given span of time and this span is exists as one unit, one lifespan. A life is static. But within that span exists the temporal.

*The Wind Will Carry Us* also takes up themes of life and death. Similarly to *La Notte*, *The Wind Will Carry Us* ends with a death that is implied. Again the events that transpire in the film take place while waiting for the death. Kiarostami’s film, however, has more positive tones throughout. The first close up shot is of a child, Farzad. In contrast to the adults, who are uncertain of where they are going, Farzad knows the directions. When asked, “What do you think of your village?” Farzad answers, “I’ve lived here since I was born, I know it.” His youthfulness and certainty provides the film with positivity. Furthermore, there is a birth in the film. The birth is also implied. The viewer is introduced to a pregnant woman and later when she is seen again she is no longer pregnant, but has the baby bundled on her back as she hangs clothing to dry. The viewer and the Behzad, the main character, are given a glimpse of the baby’s face, but never see the old, dying woman. In addition, rather than being caught in the maze of
the plot, the characters, while uncertain of where they are going, actually perpetuate the plot. They wander through the landscape, but are not distant from it.

This is evidenced when Behzad sets out to get a bowl of fresh milk for himself and his colleagues. Behzad sets out to achieve a specific goal: get milk. This is how the character leads the plot as opposed to being lost within a plot in which they roam aimlessly. However, Behzad cannot get the milk alone nor can he get it directly. First, he asks Farzad for a bowl “to fetch milk.” Farzad says he has to go to school; “That lady will find you one.” Farzad cannot get the bowl alone either. He looks inside the open doorway. “Mim Hamideh, hello. Do you have a milk bowl for the engineer?” From somewhere inside the house, she replies, “Yes, by the window.” Farzad goes in and brings the bowl to Behzad. Now that Behzad has a bowl, Farzad leaves for school. Behzad sits for a moment seemingly lost in thought. “May God give you pride.” Behzad looks up to see who has said this and the camera cuts to a woman walking by. She is shown from behind and completely covered in black clothing. A few scenes later Behzad arrives at another home, where a woman is working. He queries, “Are you well?” “Yes, thank you,” she replies. Dialogue ensues. “Is Kakrahman’s house here?” “What do you want? Milk?” “Yes, please. I’d be grateful for some fresh milk.” The woman gets up to get some milk. As she enters Behzad compliments her house. After she has entered, he again asks, “Is this Kakrahman’s house?” “No.” “Oh, I’m sorry. I was told to get milk from him.”
Behzad has not reached the destination he had hoped. The woman then guides him next door to the house where he had intended to get milk. There he does so. There is uncertainty along the way for Behzad, for instance in where to get a bowl, where to get the milk, and if he has reached the correct house. Ultimately he achieves his goal of getting milk. The same evidence is seen elsewhere in the film, for example in the opening sequence. The characters have a certain destination. The camera follows them because they aim to get to the village. Thus, they perpetuate the plot. However, they are unsure of the precise directions. In the end, they reach their destination.

Related to Adorno’s notion of the “emptiness of time” and the preservation of the movement of objects in the negative is Bazin’s statement regarding duration and gaps in narrative in relation to neo-realism:

It is perhaps especially the structure of the narrative which is most radically turned upside down. It must now respect the actual duration of the event. The cuts that logic demands can only be, at best, descriptive. The assemblage of the film must never add anything to the existing reality. If it is part of the meaning of the film… it is because the empty gaps, the white spaces, the parts of the event that we are not given, are themselves of a concrete nature: stones which are missing from the building. (65-66)

Positive spaces are defined by negative spaces. Likewise, positive times are defined by negative. Gaps are significant in how they define what is present and
in how they are present through absence. This refers back to death being the limit of life and therefore defining life.
GAPS

In Kiarostami’s films there are gaps in narrative, for instance in the interruption of Behzad’s drive to high ground to answer his cell phone. This interruption results in a divergence from the series of events that are unfolding in the film. Because emphasis is placed on the continual narrative within the film, these non-sequiturs becomes gaps in the narrative. These drives that take Behzad away from the village to a hilltop are the result of gaps in his cell phone reception. The phone is already a device used to fill a gap in space, but now it also leads the viewer outside of the frame to characters back in Tehran. And leaves the viewer unaware of the other end of the conversation. The drive also leads Behzad to Joseph. Behzad has conversations with Joseph. The viewer only sees Behzad. Throughout the film, there are many characters that are seen only from afar and for an instant by the viewer but are heard clearly, such as Behzad’s colleagues and Joseph. Characters are also seen in part, but their faces are hidden, such as the woman at Farzad’s school who carries bushels of grass into a storage area. Furthermore there are characters that are never seen or heard, but are implied through the dialogue, including Behzad’s parents and his boss, which Behzad talks to on the phone.
Throughout *The Wind Will Carry Us*, there are also gaps between what is heard by the viewer and seen by the viewer as well as seen by a character, by other characters and seen by the viewer. For instance, in the opening sequence a male voice questions, “Where’s the tunnel then?” Another voice replies, “We’ve passed it.” “When?” “Where is it?” “We’ve past it, back near Biston.” Here there is a gap between what the viewer sees, a car driving on a road, and what is heard, characters speaking, which the viewer deduces are in the car. Between what each character has seen, clearly one has seen the tunnel and another has not seen the tunnel. In addition the viewer has not seen the tunnel. The dialogue continues, “After the junction, we take a winding road.” “This is the winding road.” “We’re on it.” “After this road, we head downhill.” “Then there’s a
single tree.” “There are a lot here.” “What’s after that?” “Nothing. I know what there is. Nothing.” “Nothing?” “There’s a road near the tree. I’ll tell you what there is.” “Near the tree is a wooden lane, greener than the dreams of God.”

After more discussion about the “single tree” one of the voices finally exclaims, “There, look, a single tree!” The viewer still sees the car on the road and the other characters don’t see the tree either. One asks, “Where?” “Up there,” is the reply. There is cut. Followed by, “I see it…What a big tree! Look at it.” Is this demand being made on the characters, or on the viewer, or both? Still the viewer sees the car. “Jahan, take a look.” “Where?” The camera is panning and accompanying the lines “Too late now, you’ll have to look up through the roof,” in the top right corner of the screen the viewer is finally given a view of the tree. As the camera continues to pan the voice continues, “but you won’t see it.” At the point that the viewer can see the tree, the character is no longer able. This is a precise gap between the experience of the characters and that of the viewer.

Queries in dialogue, such as “Where are we?” and “Where are we going?” exemplify uncertainty. In the opening sequence the character are unsure of where they are. Although we haven’t seen the characters we hear their conversation. Clearly, we hear their confusion. *Have they passed it? Is that the single tree? Or is that the single tree? Where are they headed anyway?* The first character that we are introduced to that “knows” is a child. He is introduced as a “guide” and fulfills this duty throughout the film. Later in the film Behzad to a
woman in the village apologizes, “Sorry, I didn’t understand.” The characters consistently do not understand.

The titling of Kiarostami’s films is at times both self-referential and alluding to something outside itself. The title “The Wind Will Carry Us” is at first a poetic declarative phrase in the future tense. This title phrase is one of the few aspects of the film that refer to the future and one gets the sense that the future implied is the one that takes place in the film. Thus we see the title, and then the action follows somehow related to this phrase. Three quarters of the way through the film, when Behzad descends into a dark basement of a house in the village the viewer hears the title phrase repeated. Behzad is reciting a poem by Forough Farrokhzad:

In my night, so brief, alas/ The wind is about to meet the leaves. / My night so brief is filled with anguish. / Hark! / Do you hear the whisper of the shadows? / This happiness feels foreign to me. / I am accustomed to despair. / Hark! Do you hear the whisper of the shadows? / There, in the night, something is happening. / The moon is red and anxious. / And clinging to this roof that could collapse at any moment, / the clouds, like a crowd of mourning women, / await the birth of the rain, / one second, and then nothing. / Behind this window, the night trembles, / and the earth stops spinning. / Behind this window, a stranger/ worries about you and me. / You in your greenery, / lay your hands- those burning memories-/ on
my loving hands/ and entrust your lips, replete with life’s warmth, / to the
touch of my loving lips. / The wind will carry us. / The wind will carry us!

Now the title phrase, which was describing the future “The Wind Will Carry Us” has become present and refers to the past. This extends the film, which shows only a brief moment in the lives of the characters: Little or no information is given about the characters pasts or futures.

“When we tell a story, we tell but one story, and each member of the audience, with a particular capacity to imagine things, hears but one story,” Kiarostami argues (Nancy, 84). Astutely, describing Kiarostami’s work, Devin Orgeron claims, “that nothing, is something, that absence is simply a more subtle, perhaps more insistent brand of presence” (197). Kiarostami’s uses absence, gaps, to emphasize what is present and to further emphasize that which is not present. He directs the viewer by the filmic clues he provides and it is only apparent to the attentive viewer that “absence” is thoroughly and profoundly at work. Thinking back to the “emptiness of time,” as articulated by Adorno, is becomes significant that time is intangible, entirely absent yet entirely present. In addition, for Adorno there is a strong attraction to the negative that adjectives such as empty and hollow refer to.

For example, in Kiarostami’s The Wind Will Carry Us the opening scene functions as a traditional establishing shot by providing a setting for the characters and plot of the film. Characters and plot are fundamental to narrative. However, Kiarostami repeatedly claims that he is not interested in narrative. In a
discussion with Jean-Luc Nancy, Kiarostami declares, “I can’t stand narrative cinema. I leave the theater. The more it engages in storytelling and the better it does it, the greater my resistance to it. The only way to envision a new cinema is to have more regard for the spectator’s role. It’s necessary to envision an unfinished and incomplete cinema so that the spectator can intervene and fill the void, the lacks” (Nancy 88). In light of Kiarostami’s assertion, one might query, what else does this shot provide the viewer beyond a setting for a narrative? The opening scene determines relationships of scale, movement, and distance. The scene is nearly as still as a photograph. The camera is still. Depicted is a landscape.

Figure 2. Still #1 from opening sequence of *The Wind Will Carry Us*. 
The scene is outdoors. Only the ground is shown, no sky. Yet, one can already tell that the sun is shining. A warm orange color dominates the landscape. A road winds through the frame disappearing at three points as it wraps around a hill. Behind this road a second smaller road is visible. The road closer to the foreground enters at the left of the frame and recedes in space as it wraps around a hill. Behind the hill is the only movement in the shot. Dust is rising and blowing towards the left of the frame, “referencing” the film’s title. This is a subtle movement, which can even go unnoticed. At first, we cannot see the cause of the dust. Then a car enters from behind the hill and we realize that the car was causing the cloud of dust. While the car was not visible to us, it had been in the scene, hidden by the hill. In relation to the scene the car moves quickly through the frame.
Figure 3. Still #2 from opening sequence of *The Wind Will Carry Us*.

Figure 4. Still #3 from the opening sequence of *The Wind Will Carry Us*.
The opening sequence functions as a microcosm for the film as a whole. The camera moves closer with each cut. In the opening sequence the camera begins at a distance gradually moving closer to the characters/ into the landscape until it is finally inside the car looking out. This gradual movement closer also occurs in the travel of Behzad and his colleagues. They begin in a vast landscape, then they arrive at the village, then they are shown inside the village, until finally Behzad is shown inside the basement of a house. This is not the end of the film, but is a culminating point in which the title of the film is revealed to be from a poem that is recited.
DISTANCE. SCALE. MOVEMENT.

The articulated relationships of distance, scale, and movement utilized by Kiarostami in the aforementioned scene are also present in my work. These formal devices are used to investigate alienation in our relationship to each other and emptiness in time and space. For me, film is a significant source of inspiration. The way I think of my work is as stills in a continuous narrative, like a film. But the relationships have become physical, spatial.

*Riding, riding, riding*… is a drawing executed in charcoal, graphite, and two types of ink on a 14 x 16 inch piece of translucent white paper. There is one mark that occurred at one moment with each material. The mark is indicative of a person on a two-wheeled vehicle: a bicycle or motorcycle. The title *Riding, riding, riding*… implies an extended duration of time and a continuous action. Moreover, it clues the viewer into a narrative within the piece. There is no illusion of depth through the device of perspective in the work, but the scale of the figures implies a vast space. In relation to the size of the page the figures are small.

Like the title *The Wind Will Carry Us, Riding, riding, riding*… is excerpted from a poem. The lines begin *The Lay of the Love and Death of Cornet Christopher Rilke*, a poem by Rainer Maria Rilke:

Riding, riding, riding, through the day, through the night, through the day. /
Riding, riding, riding. / And courage has grown so weary and longing so great. There are no hills anymore, hardly a tree. Nothing dares stand up. Alien huts crouch thirstily by mired springs. Nowhere a tower. And always the same picture. One has two eyes too many. Only in the night sometimes one seems to know the road. Perhaps we always retrace by night the stretch we have won laboriously in the foreign sun? Maybe. The sun is heavy, as with us deep in summer at home. (17)

The reference extends the frame of the drawing. Now the frame includes the poem from which the lines first appeared.

Unlike Kiarostami’s title, however, *Riding, riding, riding*… is set in the present tense. It is an endless present, which evokes the “emptiness of time.” In the same way that the figures are small in relation to the page, so the page is small in relation to the wall, the gallery, and the world. The translucency and thinness of the ground lend it a further fragility. The piece is light, delicate. With only the very little weight of the figures on the page holding it down.

Conversely, *Landscape* is visually heavy. Hanging on the wall, there are four irregular, rectilinear, black shapes, which constitute the landscape. It is clear that the forms are hung because a small shadow is visible below each shape. While the top edge and two side edges of each shape has been cut by hand, the bottom edge of each shape is a manufactured, straight edge. The forms are aligned with each other on this edge forming a horizontal. Between each shape is a thin slit through which the wall is visible. This negative space echoes the
negative space of a zoetrope and divides each physical shape into a temporal frame. The size of the piece, as well as the size of the individual shapes that comprise the piece, are large and lack detail. This keeps the viewer at a distance. There seems to be no reason to get close to this landscape.

The relationship of the viewer to the piece takes on a very different role in Untitled and From a Landscape #2. These are pieces in which the wall has been cut. In each piece three cuts were made. With each cut a linear form has been excavated. From a distance, the forms appear to be on the wall. The forms seem to be either painted with black paint directly on the wall or black forms that have been fastened to the wall. As the viewer moves, the forms change; they grow wider or slimmer based on the viewer’s relationship to each form. This encourages the viewer to move closer. Upon moving towards the piece it is revealed that the forms are not on the wall, rather they are in and of the wall. In Untitled, upon looking into the removed area one can see only darkness. In contrast, when the viewer approaches From a Landscape #2 light is visible. Light passes through the negative spaces and the form of the cut space is visible. As the viewer moves, they can see multiple projections of the cut space. In both of these pieces there is a confusion of positive and negative space and form.

The use of absence and presence, positive and negative, which Kiarostami uses are themes that are relevant to my work and practice. Distance in relation to how a thing is visible is of interest to my work. Scale plays a
significant role in portraying distance. Movement in the work occurs through the movement of the viewer and through the implication of movement through titles. The film *The Wind Will Carry Us* has played a significant role in the development of this body of work.
Works Cited


