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Dialectic of Revelation and Concealment: A Representation of the Face as an Aesthetic Landscape in the Film Shirin (2008)

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Abstract

In *Shirin* (2008), Abbas Kiarostami places several of Iran's female cinema stars in the position of spectators and records their reactions to a hypothetical film through predominantly close-up shots. Kiarostami transforms these distinctive faces into objects of aesthetic contemplation and artistic reflection through his approach. This descriptive-analytic study, draws on the discussions of Tom Gunning and Giuliana Bruno regarding the significance of physiognomy in early cinema, and then examines the invocation of this aesthetics in *Shirin*. The research asserts that by positioning the film star as the audience of an imaginary film, and giving *Shirin*'s audience the opportunity to reveal her personality by means of reading her face, the film demystifies the status of the cinematic star. However, this relationship doesn't remain one-sided, since both the mere fact that these close-ups, portray not the ordinary viewers but the film stars, as well as the recollection of cinematic memories associated with the films and characters they have shaped, once again ascends these stars to the status of myths. Moreover, the depiction of individuals who possess a high skill in adopting roles and masks, complicates the audience's confidence in interpreting and penetrating their visual space, both in this instance and in the cinematic memories that are conjured. The interplay Kiarostami orchestrates between the viewer and these stars, alongside revealing and dismantling their previous relationships, compels the viewer to construct *Shirin* in their mind through a montage of fragmented moments encountered in this museum-like space and the collective-individual cinematic memories evoked. This mental film becomes a personal and distinct history of Iranian cinema, underscoring the importance and the impossibility of excluding Iran's female cinema stars.

Keywords: *Film Shirin (2008), Abbas Kiarostami, Landscape of the Face, Physiognomy, Cinema and Museum.*

Introduction

The (imaginary) geography of *Shirin* (2008), a film by the renowned Iranian director Abbas Kiarostami, is a cinema hall where a group of Iranian cinema's female stars appear to be watching a film about the love story of Khosrow and Shirin, projected on the screen of a

cinema. The viewer of *Shirin* does not see the scenes of Khosrow and Shirin's story depicted on the screen but hears them through the film's audio track. The film's duration roughly matches the runtime of the Khosrow and Shirin film being shown on the imaginary screen.

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Throughout *Shirin*, Kiarostami turns his camera towards the audience in the hall (the female stars of Iranian cinema) and captures their reactions to the events of the imaginary film. As Hamid Naficy points out, Kiarostami forces “the spectators to watch for 92 minutes close-up images of the faces of 140 beautiful Iranian actresses and one French actress (Juliette Binoche) looking directly at the camera while they watched an opera about the famous Persian love story, Khosrow and Shirin” (Naficy, 2011). With this approach, Kiarostami directly confronts his audience with the visage of the female stars of Iranian cinema, faces that, according to David Bordwell, “all are stunningly beautiful, whether young or old. We get an encyclopedia of expressions—neutral, alert, concentrated, bemused, amused, pained, anxious... . The film is an almost absurdly pure experiment in facial empathy” (Bordwell, 2009).

Focusing on the face, reading, and recognizing it, especially in close-ups, has been a distinctive characteristic of this medium, particularly in early and silent cinema (Koch, 1987; Balazs, 1952). Today, in line with the renewed interest in early cinema due to the continuity and presence of its techniques in post-classical narrative cinema (Hansen, 1993), focusing on the face and close-ups of the face has once again become significant (Elsaesser & Hagener, 2015). Moreover, Kiarostami’s cinema, in general, aligns with the return to non-narrative techniques and a direct relationship with the audience found in early cinema, particularly in *Shirin*, where he explores cinema’s ability to reveal character by focusing on the face and its expressions as if it were a landscape.

This study aims to analyze the distinct cinematic spectatorship experience Kiarostami creates in *Shirin*, examining how the strategies he employs and his invitation for viewers to directly confront the visage of Iranian cinema’s female stars in the film relate to, cinema’s capabilities and limitations in unveiling faces and expressing emotions, the mythical status of film stars, and the relationship between the audience and the female stars of Iranian cinema. This research endeavors

to trace the importance of the face and its exploration in the development and emergence of cinema as a medium, drawing from the ideas of Tom Gunning and Giuliana Bruno, and to highlight the significance and place of Kiarostami’s work in relation to this cinematic capability. It investigates how Kiarostami transforms the face into an aesthetic landscape, an object for reflection, and invites the viewer to watch “the drama enacted on the face” (Balazs, 1952). Thus, *Shirin* can be seen as a film that re-centers the importance of the face in art and cinema, inviting its audience into a museum of faces and their study. By placing film stars, who have been significant in the collective cinematic memory of Iranians, on the same level as the audience, Kiarostami humanizes them and demystifies their aura. However, this relationship does not remain simple and one-sided because the very selection of these particular faces for viewing, their inherent appeal, and the reminder and evocation of cinematic memories each has shaped, re-endows them with a mythical status, complicating the relationship between the audience and the film’s stars. This complexity increases because these present faces, precisely because they belong to film stars skilled in maintaining their “mask” and adopting new and numerous ones, can never remain mere spectators; in *Shirin*, they “perform” the role of the audience. The impossibility of reading and penetrating the visual space of the stars in this film exposes the illusion of penetrating and understanding these stars in narrative films, which fosters such an illusion through the suspension of disbelief. Kiarostami, by orchestrating such a play between the viewer and the film star, shapes a dialectic of revelation and concealment, myth-making and demystification in the relationship between the viewer, star, and director, and creates tension in the interpretive power of the audience, the mythical status of the star, and the (im)possibility of excluding them and their cinematic memories. Alongside this deconstruction and questioning of relationships, *Shirin* compels the audience to wander through the museum-like space of the film, engaging with phenomena encountered in this

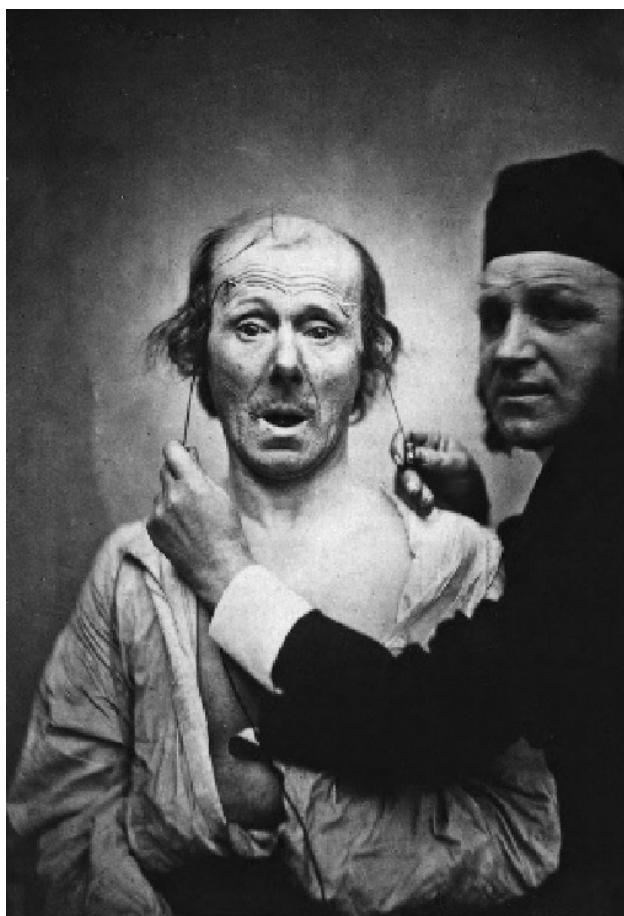


Fig. 3. Mechanism of human physiognomy, Duchenne de Boulogne. Source: Steimatsky, 2017.

exploration, and the individual-collective memories they evoke, to montage a different narrative of the history of Iranian cinema in which these female stars are an inseparable part.

Literature Review

Georg Simmel, a prominent German sociologist, regarded the face as an “aesthetic object” and believed that the human face holds unique importance in the fine arts. In his article *The Aesthetic Significance of the Face*, Simmel argues that in the tangible world, no other structure combines “such a great variety of shapes and surfaces into an absolute unity of meaning” as the human face does (Siegel, 1999). According to Simmel, encountering the immense onslaught of psychic energies, the face acts as a plasmatic shell that embraces this influx of energy and, through changes in

its composition, represents this influx to others while simultaneously concealing it. Thus, Simmel describes the face as a site for both “veiling” and “unveiling” the psyche; it simultaneously discloses and conceals (*ibid.*). Similarly, the German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer writes about the fascination with exploring the human face, stating: “Every human face is a hieroglyph which can be deciphered, indeed whose key we bear ready-made within us. Everyone is worth looking at, even if everyone is not worth talking to” (Davis, 2003).

The significance of the face and the unique power of cinema in physiognomy crystallize in the film theory of Béla Balazs. Having been a student of Simmel for a while, Balazs does not overlook the influence of Simmel’s ideas while discussing the importance of the face in cinema (Koch, 1987). Balazs believed that film directors must have considerable expertise in physiognomy (*ibid.*). He mentions that the language of cinema (especially silent cinema) closely relates to the face: “In the silent film, facial expression, isolated from its surroundings, seemed to penetrate to a strange new dimension of the soul. It revealed to us a new world, the world of microphysiognomy which could not otherwise be seen with the naked eye or in everyday life” (Balazs, 2019). Balazs claimed that human faces on the cinema screen have the capacity to form a new language, one that is free from the constraints and “isolating walls of language differences” (Balazs, 1952). Influenced by Balazs, Gilles Deleuze also examines the close-up in relation to the affection-image, writing: “The affection-image is the close-up, and the close-up is the face” (Deleuze, 1986). Deleuze also notes the distinctive de-territorializing characteristic of the affection image (*ibid.*). Contemporary film theorist Noa Steimatsky, in her discussions on the importance of the face in cinema, points out that, unlike verbal language, the language of the face cannot be suppressed or controlled. She argues that the ability of film images to create and convey ambiguous and indefinable states holds greater significance than the possibility of creating systematic interpretive systems (Steimatsky, 2017). In recent

decades, researchers like Gunning (2004) and Bruno (2002) have highlighted the significance of facial depiction in cinema in their studies on the techniques, arrangements, and objectives of early cinema.

The inherent importance of the face in cinema gradually fades with the establishment of narrative rules and the emergence of classical sound cinema but continues to appear in works of alternative and non-narrative cinema. Furthermore, Miriam Hansen explores how early cinema relates to post-classical and non-narrative cinema, and how the specific direct and non-narrative relationships of early cinema reappear in different types of cinema from classical Hollywood cinema, such as avant-garde cinema, art house cinema, or national cinemas; she suggests that new and different social contexts, akin to those of the early twentieth century, necessitate such a return (Hansen, 1993).

Research Methodology

The research methodology in this study is descriptive and analytical. Additionally, library resources and film scenes were used as the main tools for gathering and analyzing information. Initially, the research aims to trace the importance of the face and physiognomy in the emergence of the cinematic medium by drawing on the discussions of Gunning and Bruno. Subsequently, it will examine Kiarostami's film, *Shirin*, in relation to this capability and the arrangements of pre-classical and non-narrative cinema. Under the umbrella of this aesthetic, the study will analyze the objectives and relationships it seeks to establish with the audience.

The Physiognomic Genealogy of Cinema

"The face is a map" (Deleuze, 1987), and it reveals secrets from "an inner life, of subjectivity" (Steimatsky, 2017). As Michael Taussig discusses, the Greek word for face, *prosopon*, or mask, possesses an etymological ambiguity, simultaneously implying the concept of representation and mask. The face is perceived as something that, while revealing the hidden reality within, also concurrently conceals it (Davis, 2003).



Fig. 1. Della Porta's Physiognomic Analyses. Source: Bruno, 2002.

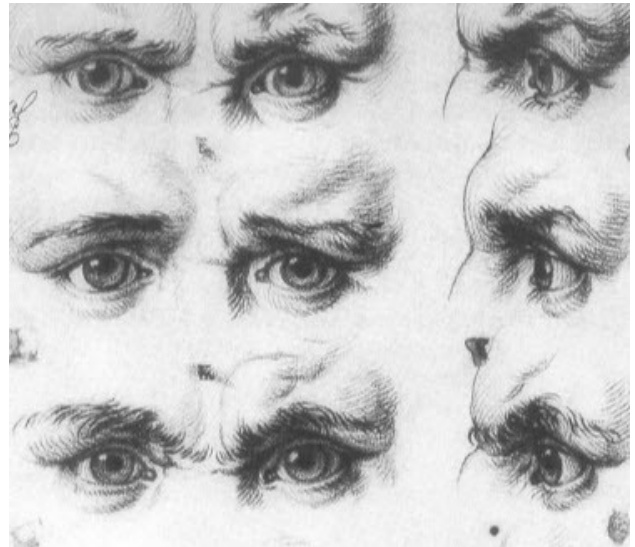


Fig. 2. Le Brun's Effort in Compiling an Atlas of Facial Expressions. Source: Bruno, 2002.

Thus, the face acts like a Möbius strip (Steimatsky, 2017) and has the characteristics of a symptom (Hake, 1997). Alongside what it reveals and exposes, it also draws attention to what is hidden.

The roots of physiognomy trace back to ancient Greek texts, especially the writings of Aristotle and Pythagoras, who examined the relationship between the external appearance of the face and the internal nature and personality (Gunning, 2004; Davis, 2003). In the sixteenth century, one of the most important and influential discussions related to physiognomy was presented by Giovanni Battista della Porta (Fig. 1) (Bruno, 2002; Gunning, 2004). Later, in the seventeenth century, Charles Le Brun synthesized the principles of physiognomy as a method for painters to depict emotion and personality through facial expressions, gathering "a dictionary— an atlas—of facial expressions" (Fig. 2) (Bruno, 2002). In the eighteenth century, Johann

Kaspar Lavater published a three-volume work on physiognomy. For Lavater, the face became a revealer of the accumulated history of the individual (Gray, 2004), considering it a “moving emotional topography” where the ebb and flow of internal emotional geography leave their mark and transform its landscape (Bruno, 2002).

In the nineteenth century, Duchenne de Boulogne, a brain and nerve specialist and one of the founders of neurology in France, distanced himself from traditional physiognomy through a scientific approach and the use of modern technologies in his *Mecanisme de la physionomie humaine*. He stimulated his patients’ faces by directly applying electrodes to induce muscular reactions and demonstrate the role that muscles play in conveying different emotional states (Bruno, 2002; Gunning, 2004). Gunning believes that Duchenne’s emphasis on the phenomenon of emotion in his studies around the face grants him a special place in the trajectory of modern scientific inquiries leading to the invention of cinema (Gunning, 2004). He recorded the facial expressions of his subjects using a camera, aiming to create a “photographic archive” of “human emotions” (Fig. 3) (Bruno, 2002). His method of using photography to capture facial emotion and expression was further developed by his student Jean-Martin Charcot in relation to treating hysteria. Charcot stated, “In truth, I am absolutely nothing but a photographer; I inscribe what I see” (Gunning, 2004). Charcot adopted a new approach, using hypnotism as an alternative tool to stimulate patients. Gunning notes that while studies on film often recognize Muybridge and Marey as pioneers in the formation of cinema, the focus on chronophotography of the face owes much to the experiments and inquiries of George Demeny, Marey’s assistant (ibid.). Demeny brought the camera close to his subjects, studying them in medium-close-up. He called his invention the Phenakistoscope, which fundamentally could record moving images of the face (ibid.).

The emergence of cinema as the art of moving images transformed the perception experience of the face, which is itself “a moving image” (Steimatsky, 2017), and

provided the possibility of direct engagement with it. It’s occasionally noted that “the face was rediscovered with the advent of motion pictures” (ibid.). As Gunning mentions, “close framing of human faces appear at the origin of cinema” (Gunning, 2004). In the early years of cinema, films that were entirely focused on close-ups of faces formed a main genre of early cinema known as the “facial expression” genre. Films like Edison’s *Facial Expressions* (1902) and Gogo’s *Eyes* (1903) were early and prominent examples of this genre. These films clearly demonstrate the early cinema’s inclination and focus on the aesthetics of the face (ibid.). Gunning believes that these works had a confrontational quality to them and that the use of close-up framing filled them with a “sense of physical proximity” (ibid.).

The Confrontation of the Audience with the Physiognomic Landscape of the Cinematic Stars in Shirin

In *Shirin*, the predominance of close-up shots that capture the facial reactions of female stars shapes the visual landscape for the audience, as these stars appear to be watching a fictional film projected on the screen. Thus, *Shirin* re-centers the significance of the face’s landscape in art and cinema.

However, how can studies by Gunning or Bruno, which largely focus on early cinema’s specific relationships of direct engagement and wonder with the audience—a connection this cinema establishes with its viewers—be applied to a film like *Shirin*? In this context, Miriam Hansen’s studies on the commonalities and similarities of the collective sphere of audiences in early cinema and post-classical cinema can be utilized. Hansen writes, “As classical forms of consumption and spectatorship seem to be unraveling on a worldwide scale, the situation offers a certain *deja vu* effect. In several ways, contemporary forms of media culture evoke the parallel of early cinema early cinema differs from classical cinema above all in the conception of the relations between film and viewer, Specifically, early cinema is distinguished by aesthetics of astonishment and display a presentational

style that addresses the viewer directly (rather than indirectly, through diegetic absorption)” (Hansen, 1993). Other features of this early cinema, such as direct film references to extratextual relations, the new existing conditions, etc., appear today in cinema distinct from classical narrative cinema (Gunning, 2018). Both these forms of pre-classical and post-classical cinema possess characteristics of profound changes in the domain of representation and reception, and the instability of the relationship between the audience and the work. Both diverge from classical cinema, which attempts to control reception and experience through strong diegetic mechanisms and conceal the conditions of film production and presentation, offering more opportunities for reader-audience interaction with the text film. Both types of cinema signify crises, developments, and possibilities created by visual culture in influencing, manipulating, creating, and destroying individual and collective relationships and experiences (Hansen, 1993). Kiarostami’s cinema is globally renowned for creating narrative disruptions and deviating from the norms of classical Hollywood cinema. In *Shirin*, the diegetic narrative portion of the film is the story of Khosrow and Shirin, which is presented in the auditory periphery, and the audience never directly witnesses the images of this story but instead sees its reflection in the expressions and emotions on the faces of the stars who are seemingly watching the film of Khosrow and Shirin. In *Shirin*, the narrative is not the focus but rather serves as a backdrop to a form of early cinema that Gunning calls “cinema of attractions,” aimed at directly presenting wonders, and if there is any narrative, it is not of intrinsic importance but serves the purposes related to the direct relationship of the film with its audience (Gunning, 2018). The narrative of Khosrow and Shirin is employed merely to play a role in the game that the filmmaker sets up between the audience and the star viewers of Khosrow and Shirin. In an interview with Khatereh Khodai, regarding the relationship between the narrative-auditory line of the story of Khosrow and Shirin and the shots of the women’s faces watching it in an imaginary cinema hall, Kiarostami

mentioned that this film is in fact, “a combination of both freedom and restriction. I suggest that you watch another world which is more attractive than the story. I believe if you let go of the story, you will come across a new thing which is the Cinema itself. In fact, I suggest you let go of the story and just keep your eyes on the screen” (Saljoughi, 2012). Kiarostami, in numerous works such as *Life, and Nothing More* (1992), *Under the Olive Trees* (1994), and *The Wind Will Carry Us* (1999), has also focused significantly on presenting visual landscapes as the main points of attention and interest. In these works, the filmmaker decentralizes the narrative throughout the film and approaches a landscape that unfolds in front of the audience, traversing the border between the audience’s physical space and the inaccessible pictorial space, bringing the landscape palpably into the audience’s sphere. However, in *Shirin*, instead of natural or architectural spaces, the human subject becomes the focus, and it is the people’s faces that appear as a tangible and open landscape in front of the audience. Naficy notes that due to the intense emotional state and emotionally charged faces of the actors, the viewer of *Shirin* undergoes a “sensual and haptic spectatorial experience” (Naficy, 2011). As the etymology of the Greek term “haptic” suggests, this sense relates to the ability to make physical contact (Bruno, 2002). From this perspective, the experience of encounter in the movie, *Shirin*, can significantly resemble the experience based on the physical proximity mentioned by Gunning. The sensory intensity of this encounter leads to the loss of visual dominance and disorientation in the hieroglyph of emotions emitted from the feminine fabric of the image. The specific socio-cultural context in which such direct encounter and non-narrative treatment of faces occurs in *Shirin*, as Hansen identifies in the need to return to pre-classical cinema techniques in post-classical cinema, is the crisis relationship between the audience and the media (Hansen, 1993). In the case of *Shirin*, the mentioned crisis relationship is the problematic relationship of the audience with the cinematic star performing a role. Benjamin, in *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical*

Reproduction, writes: “The film actor’s feeling of estrangement in the face of the apparatus is basically of the same kind as the estrangement felt before one’s appearance [Erscheinung] in a mirror. But now the mirror image [Bild] has become detachable from the person mirrored and is transportable. And where is it transported? To a site in front of the public. The screen actor never for a moment ceases to be aware of this. While he stands before the apparatus, the screen actor knows that in the end, he is confronting the public, the consumers who constitute the market. This may contribute to that oppression, that new anxiety which grips the actor before the camera” (Benjamin, 2006).

In the realm of cinema, actors, who cannot see their audience, must predict the audience’s expectations and reactions to gain acceptance. They must perform in alignment with these expectations, while the audience delves into the sanctity and secrets of this role, deciphering it. However, cinema devises a strategy for these commodified performers to ensure that the power dynamic with the audience is not always top-down. Cinema addresses the reduction of the actor’s power by “artificially building up the “personality” outside the studio. The cult of the movie star, fostered by the money of the film industry, preserves that magic of the personality which has long been no more than the putrid magic of its own commodity character” (ibid.). Film studios, producers, and the culture industry elevate the actor from a product to a fetishized commodity, endowing them with an aura of unreachability, similar to a luxury item behind a shop window, appearing close yet separated by a transparent layer from the dreamy, pictorial world of the commodity and the material world of the consumer on the other side of the window. Thus, becoming a star restores power to the actor.

The relationship between the spectator and the cinema star in Shirin intertwines with the film’s distinct Iranian context. The general relationship with female cinema stars in Iran, from the country’s first female cinema star, Roohangiz Saminejad in *The Lor Girl* (1933) to post-revolution cinema, has been a mix of the cinema stars’

popularity, especially female stars with their sexual aura, and traditional reactions against such figures (Talattof, 2011; Naficy, 2011). These stars have had significant influence and popularity among Iranian audiences, representing a modern form of Eastern eroticism through their Iranian beauty, fashion, and hybrid Eastern-Western behaviors. The Iranian audience’s voyeuristic relationship with this mythic beauty, reminiscent of a modern representation of the mythical beauty like Shirin in the story of Khosrow and Shirin, has been coupled with defensive and rejecting reactions. Alongside their dual roles of the traditional angelic woman/modern seductive and tempting woman on the cinema screen, their personas as cinema stars have also been fixed in the dichotomy of angelic beauty/devil (Talattof, 2011). Kiarostami places these Iranian cinema stars, each belonging to a different era of Iranian cinema history, and whose images have individually contributed to the creation of memories, fantasies, conceptions, and awareness of modern Iranian womanhood, in the position of the audience; on the cinema seat. He presents them as fragile humans, traversing the divide created between the audience’s physical space and the cinematic stars’ pictorial space induced by the star-making industry. The viewer of Shirin acts as a flâneur, compiling a mental inventory of characters based on their physical attributes (Gilloch & Benjamin, 1996), navigating through the diverse and varied geography of faces, interpreting them as texts of personality and emotion.

The similarities of this process with the efforts of Duchenne and Charcot cannot be overlooked. Just as they each, in their own way—Duchenne through the application of electrodes to facial regions and Charcot through hypnosis—sought to capture emotions and facial expressions, Kiarostami, too, connects with the internal emotional energy of the stars, documenting the onslaught and flow of this energy across the landscape of their faces. Kiarostami also creates a cinematic archive of the stars’ faces and their emotions, akin to what Della Porta, Le Brun, and Lavater aimed for in their studies. Thus, if Kiarostami’s work is considered in relation to

this pre-cinematic historical trajectory and the efforts and achievements of these forebearers of physiognomy that led to the emergence of the cinema medium, borrowing from Bruno's discussion on Le Brun's achievements, it can be said that Kiarostami too compiles "a dictionary—an atlas—of facial expressions" (Bruno, 2002).

Furthermore, Kiarostami's achievement can also be linked to Duchenne's efforts to create a "photographic archive" of "human emotions" (ibid.). This photographic archive turns Shirin into an exhibition, a museum, and the viewing experience can be likened to visiting a museum. It's important to note that the relationship between cinema and museums, focusing on the "museographic genealogy of cinema," has emerged as a key topic in film studies in recent years, arguing that films can provide an experience similar to a museum visit (Bruno, 2014). Both museum and cinematic experiences invoke "journeys of memory" (ibid.). Both museums and cinemas are spaces for wandering and meandering between the present and the past. Similarly, Shirin evokes the connection between cinema and museum, where the faces of the stars become exhibited phenomena. In this museum, the viewer is invited to a disjointed tour of the stars' faces, sparking an eagerness to read and decode these faces. Kiarostami himself considered this museum and exhibition aspect of his work, stating in an interview that watching Shirin is like "visiting an exhibition filled with numerous portraits, leaving the viewer with a feeling unlike any experienced from visiting any other exhibition" (A look at Kiarostami's Shirin, 2008). Borrowing from Benjamin's discussion in *A Short History of Photography*, Shirin can be regarded as a "physiognomic gallery" (Benjamin, 2005).

In the museum-like experience of Shirin, a noteworthy aspect arises: museums, by extracting phenomena entwined with myth from the original context that granted them a mythical status, demythologize these phenomena. Similarly, Shirin demythologizes its stars by removing them from the narrative context that elevated them to stardom. Yet, there is a complexity here that should be addressed before delving deeper: as

previously mentioned, while faces are expressive and revealing, they also possess the power to conceal. "The face is naked: it expresses, it is open, it opens. But it is also a mask," simultaneously concealing and covering, acting as a barrier to the inner self (Steimatsky, 2017). This is particularly true for faces seen on the cinema screen, where, as Jacques Aumont notes, "the face in film is double because the film actor represents both himself and another" (Aumont, 2003). The actor's skill in role-playing, concealing real emotions, and adopting a mask, extends to Shirin, ostensibly presenting a direct encounter with cinematic stars as if they were audience members. During the making of Shirin, Kiarostami encouraged his stars to explore "their own memories, dreams, and fantasies" (Gronstad, 2016) as well as their cinematic memory archive (Utterson, 2008). The characters here perform their emotions and feelings as "reality," but these cinematic stars are always assessing how their image is perceived by the audience. As Benjamin notes, the actor, "never for a moment ceases to be aware of this" (Benjamin, 2006). This aspect of the cinematic actor's face in relation to Shirin is crucial. The audience encounters stars who seem to present their true selves, yet this authenticity cannot be separated from their acting nature, which grants them a high level of proficiency in masking and concealing themselves, inviting the audience into a complex game of continuous revelation and concealment. The viewer can never be sure how to interpret the vista before them or how accurate their interpretation is, as the concept of a "correct interpretation" becomes ambiguous when facing cinema stars

Moreover, related to this theme of the audience's uncertainty in interpreting and relating to the stars, which Kiarostami's staging in Shirin reveals, lies another layer complicating the viewer's relationship with the subjects of observation. This relates to the characteristic of museums which, while demystifying, by presenting these phenomena as exhibit-worthy wonders, grant them a renewed mythical status. Museums, in demystifying phenomena by extracting them from their original fabric

and context, confer upon them a state of redemption and immortality (Stead, 2004). Cinema shares this aspect of deathliness with museums. According to Bruno, “the cult of death” is inscribed in the cinematic space, ultimately embodying the technology of death (Bruno, 2002). It’s essential to consider André Bazin’s belief, a prominent Italian cinema theorist, that cinema fulfills the most significant function of the arts: the desire for mummification (Bazin, 2005). Thus, Shirin becomes a museum of the dynamic vistas of the faces of Iranian female cinema stars, immortalizing them by archiving these faces, cementing them as indelible moments in the personal and collective memory of Iranian audiences as stars potentially relegated to the collective or individual unconscious are summoned to consciousness, even if socially, politically, or by aging they have been ostracized.

Shirin acts as “a site for remembrance” (Utterson, 2016), invoking the cinematic pasts, films, and moments the stars have partaken in, oscillating the audience between disjointed pasts and the present. Watching each star’s face, the viewer recalls the masks they donned in roles they previously played, also stimulating the viewer’s cinematic memory of Iranian cinema’s history. An archive of moving faces, each evoking memories etched in the cinematic memory of the viewer, the audience gazes at stars whose faces and presence bring memories of past films in which they performed. The viewer navigates and excavates within their cinematic memory archive, recalling cinematic scenes and emotions. By watching a star’s face, the viewer edits and montages recalled scenes and emotions, essentially creating the film in their mind. This final film, as Kiarostami suggests, is made by the viewer, an archival film composed and edited from scenes of Iranian cinema history marked by these female stars. Each viewer, based on their cinematic memories, recreates a different film through the montage of different recalled scenes. Kiarostami highlights this point best: “Even if viewers do not like this film, I have no doubt about it. The viewers of this

film are as creative as the director. They have the quality to use their imagination” (A look at Kiarostami’s Shirin, 2008). Therefore, viewers can expand the imaginary space of the film by envisioning spaces beyond the frame boundaries and times outside the delineated segments, akin to the museum experience where the viewer constructs their narrative of history through the linkage of separate pieces and imaginative connections. The viewer of Shirin experiences a state of in-betweenness, between presence and absence, constructing a history based on ruptures, voids, silences, erasures, and reappearances. In this way, the geography of faces in Shirin transforms the viewer into a narrator of a different, silent history of Iranian cinema (Fig. 4).

Conclusion

The examination of Shirin in relation to cinema’s ability to present faces as landscapes awaiting exploration, and the physiognomic possibilities of this medium particularly exploited during its early and pre-classical era, indicates that Kiarostami deliberately employs this cinematic capacity in his non-narrative work to orchestrate a scenario that challenges the presumed relationships between the audience and the cinematic star in narrative films, positions the cinematic star as an ordinary viewer, and especially, interrogates the tumultuous relationship between female stars and the audience in the history of Iranian cinema.

The film places influential female stars in the memory of Iranian cinema in the position of viewers, presenting their reactions as those of an ordinary audience in close-up shots. By doing so, the film becomes akin to a museum that separates these individuals from the context that made them stars, namely their cinematic image, and through the intimate intrusion and revelation of close-ups into emotions and feelings, demythologizes the inaccessible and mythical status of these stars, bringing their visual space into the physical space of the audience with a tactile quality. However, just as a museum, with its exhibitory nature,



Fig. 4. Shirin acts as a museum of the faces of female stars of Iranian cinema. Source: Frame captured from the film.

re-mythologizes what it has demythologized, Shirin also reinvigorates the importance and roles of these stars and their cinematic memories, some of which may have been rejected and pushed to the recesses of minds, by recalling them. The mere fact that we see not images of ordinary viewers but stars whose experience of being an audience is significant, reminds us of the impossibility of equating the positions of the audience and the cinematic star

On the other hand, this point, namely the expertise and skill of these stars in performing, always casts doubt on whether they are currently performing a role. This doubt is intensified by the awareness that Kiarostami actually does not show them a film but asks them to refer to their cinematic memory archive and then records their “honest” and “real” reactions; these stars, while being genuine and “themselves,” are compelled to perform a role. Consequently, the viewer can never be certain of

their interpretation of these intimate and close images, and the face becomes a Mobius strip, both revealing and concealing. This difficulty in interpretation leads to skepticism about the closeness and personal character interpretation in works they have previously performed. The game Kiarostami sets up between Iranian female cinema stars and the audience reveals the ambiguous and complex relationships between the two. On the other hand, what transpires in this game is not just about doubting relationships and dismantling assumptions, as the act of recalling roles and personal-collective cinematic memories, and personal interpretations and perceptions, also leads to the revival and immortalization of these women, whose identity and “reality” are intertwined with their profession and image, and the viewer personally constructs Shirin in their mind by editing the present images and recalled cinematic memories; this work, made by and for the viewer, constitutes a

personal-social history, distinctly different from official histories of Iranian cinema. Kiarostami thus creates a museum-like space for the viewer, who wanders without any particular guide, reaching a personal and internalized history by connecting disjointed moments encountered in this space. Accordingly, Kiarostami, who has been noted for not utilizing Iranian women as major characters in his films, provides a work that leads its audience to recognize the importance and impossibility of excluding women from the history of Iranian cinema.

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The author declares that there was no conflict of interest for her in conducting this research.

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