

The 1999 Toronto International Film Festival— second in a series of articles by David Walsh

## A dry bone in a stream

The Wind Will Carry Us, written and directed by Abbas Kiarostami, based on an idea by Mahmoud Ayedin

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I felt that Iranian director Abbas Kiarostami's *The Wind Will Carry Us* was the most complex and intellectually challenging film at the recent Toronto festival. To a certain extent, it was in a category by itself.

The synopsis provided by the film's production notes reads as follows: "A few people arrive from Tehran for a short stay at Siah Dareh, a village in Iranian Kurdistan. The locals do not know why they are there. The strangers wander around the former cemetery and let the villagers think they are looking for treasure. They end up leaving without really giving the impression that they have found what they were looking for."

It's possible to add a few more details. Behzad and two colleagues arrive in Siah Dareh, a village built into the side of a mountain. It would appear they have come to record in some fashion an ancient ceremony that is performed when someone dies, having been tipped off that an old woman lies on her deathbed. They hang around the village and wait for her to pass away. Behzad's principal link to the villagers is a young boy, Farzad, who is nearly always studying or hurrying to school.

Occasionally, Behzad receives a call from his employers on his cellular phone. Each time he answers, but hears nothing. At the top of his voice he then tells his caller to hold on the line while he goes to higher ground. He jumps into his vehicle and drives up to the top of the mountain, where, in an old graveyard, he can carry on a conversation. A man is digging a hole up there, for "telecommunications"; we never see him, we merely hear his half of the conversation with Behzad. One day a girl is seen leaving the hilltop. Behzad asks about the ditch-digger's "Juliet." Eventually, during a quest for fresh milk, he tracks the girl's family down.

Meanwhile Behzad's crew is complaining about the delay; they want to return to Tehran. Across the way from where he is staying, a woman is pregnant with her tenth child. The day after she gives birth, she is back home doing her housework. Forced yet another time to drive to the top of the mountain for a phone call, Behzad is nearby when the sides of the hole collapse on the ditch-digger. Behzad drives off for help. "One of your neighbors is buried alive," he tells those he meets. The man is dragged out of the hole and driven to a hospital in Behzad's car. The latter gets a lift with the doctor who tells him that the man only "needs oxygen. He'll recover." Behzad's crew has abandoned him and, anyway, he seems less keen now on filming the ceremony, even though the old woman has finally died. He takes a few photos of the village women in procession and sets off for the city, dropping a bone the graveyard yielded into a flowing stream.

Kiarostami remarked a few years ago that he was in favor of a "half-created cinema, an unfinished cinema that attains completion through the creative spirit of the audience ..." In other words, one is called on to make

a mental effort.

I take *The Wind Will Carry Us* to be the director's most markedly socially critical film. Given Kiarostami's personal reserve, his restrained aesthetic style and, no doubt, continuing concerns about the censors, the film does not shout its protest. It seems to me, however, that it is not possible to make sense of the film unless one takes as a starting point that the director finds the present social and psychological situation nearly unbearable. After all, his last film, *Taste of Cherry*, dealt with a man who has made the decision to take his own life. The work criticizes and apparently rejects that choice, but the fact of its being raised as a possibility is significant enough.

In a number of Kiarostami's feature films a middle class man from the city, a surrogate presumably for the director or those of his milieu, plays a central role. While the films comment on a whole host of issues, the director returns repeatedly to an examination of the relationship of this intellectual to ordinary people. An element of criticism is generally implied.

The intelligentsia, it seems, is self-absorbed, disoriented. "We're heading nowhere ... going nowhere," is the opening line of *The Wind Will Carry Us*, as Behzad and his colleagues drive through the countryside, looking for the small village. There is also something distasteful about the nature of Behzad's business in the town. He is waiting for a death in order to go to work; he is taking advantage of the local people and their customs presumably to advance his own career. Moreover, he is going about his work in a devious manner, lying to the villagers about his reason for being there. His relations with Farzad come to an end after he angrily scolds the boy, who had been asked some questions about the old woman's health by Behzad's colleagues and replied honestly. "I can't lie," Farzad tells him. Furthermore something blocks Behzad from directly assisting people. It is striking that instead of rushing over to rescue the man trapped in the cave-in, he goes off to find others.

The director, however, does not simply condemn his protagonist. He presents his central character as a series of ambiguities. Although there is something opportunistic and insensitive about Behzad, he seems to care about the villagers. With all his weaknesses, he also brings some degree of culture. He has the potential at least to teach, to be helpful. The film leaves as an open question whether he will choose a concern for the wider issues of life over self-interest and career. His final act sums up his contradictory mental state. Apparently having given up his project, he can't resist the temptation to take a few perhaps inappropriate photos of the village women.

Like every one of Kiarostami's films, *The Wind Will Carry Us* reveals

the difficulties of life in Iran for ordinary people. Everything is a struggle. The landscape is harsh and dry; people eke out an existence. On the eve of the twentieth century, a town like Siah Dareh is almost entirely excluded from the benefits of modern technology, to the point that a call on a cell phone can't even be made within its limits.

It is not merely the physical landscape that is unrelenting. The external difficulties of terrain and climate, although genuine in themselves, seem to make reference to a social and psychological harshness, that is even more devastating. The film's images are principally organized around bringing that out.

There is Farzad, the young boy we see rushing off to school or studying for exams. He has no time for play, for fun. And what is he studying? At one point he tells Behzad he needs help with a certain question on an exam: "What happens to the Good and the Evil on Judgment Day?" Farzad's teacher needs a crutch to get around; perhaps his ability to do his job has been crippled by the need to teach religious dogma.

Behzad's friend in the cemetery—like his two crew members (subordinates, in fact)—is faceless and bodiless. (The only parts of him we ever see are the soles of his feet when he is being lifted into the back seat of Behzad's car.) The man is digging a hole for telecommunications, he says. A hole six feet deep in a cemetery. In fact, a grave. He is digging his own grave, as it nearly turns out. Almost buried alive, he needs air, the doctor remarks; he is in danger of suffocating. Like an entire people.

Among the many strong images in the film, one in particular is unforgettable. I don't know if there is another filmmaker alive today who could dream up such a sequence. Looking for fresh milk, Behzad seeks out the family of the grave-digger's girlfriend. Or perhaps he is intrigued by her, one of the very few younger women or girls we ever see in the village. When he finally finds the proper house, the girl's mother directs him down to the cellar. He descends the stairs into a pitch-black room. By the light of a candle or a lantern we see the girl, whose face is turned away from us, milking a cow. Like her "Romeo," she too works underground, in a tomb. In answer to Behzad's questions, she says she is 16, that she attended school for five years. He then recites a poem to her, a poem which gives the film its title. The scene is breathtaking, frightful, evocative. Everything of value has been driven underground and into the darkness and dust—love, beauty, poetry.

The poem and its author deserve their own separate discussion. Furugh Farrukhzad (1935-67) is one of the most extraordinary Persian or Iranian poets of the twentieth century. Even through perhaps inevitably inadequate translations, one can sense the deep humanity and beauty of her verses. Farrukhzad, born into a middle class Tehran family, came of age in the wake of the CIA-organized coup in 1953 that brought down the regime of nationalist Mohammad Mossadeq and restored the Shah to power. It was an extremely difficult and, in many ways, disheartening period; "eternal twilight," in the words of one of Farrukhzad's poems. She held, according to a biographer, a "popular secular intellectual view" of Iranian society.

One feels different strands of anguish in her writing: as an opponent, overt or otherwise, of a repressive regime (the lover of her last years, Ebrahim Golestan, had been a member of the Stalinist Tudeh Party from 1944 to 1948, apparently quitting in disgust at Soviet intervention in the region); as a woman, in a repressive and patriarchal society; as an intellectual; as a moral being. Obviously a person of enormous courage and unorthodox convictions, Farrukhzad led her life and created her poetry in the face of a great deal of official disapproval and hostility.

After the dissolution of her first marriage, which she initiated, she lost custody of her only child, according to Iranian law. She took an interest in film and theater from 1958 onward, shooting *The House is Black*, reportedly a remarkable documentary, in a Tabriz leper colony in 12 days. She also adopted a boy from his leper parents. She died, tragically, in an automobile accident at the age of 32.

*and a girl who rouged  
her cheeks with geranium leaves...  
ah! now she is a lonely woman  
now she is a lonely woman*

(from *Those Days*, translated by David Martin)

In Farrokhzad's poem *The Wind Will Carry Us* she writes of the "terror of desolation" she feels in the night. The wind, gathering in the darkness, suggests to her an "alien happiness/ I am addicted to my own hopelessness." The wind is growing, "the moon is red restless and uneasy," the clouds "like crowds of mourners/ await to break in rain." Outside the window "an unknown/ something fears for me and you." She begs her lover to entrust his hands to her hands, his lips "to the caresses of my loving lips .../ the wind will carry us with it/ the wind will carry us with it."

People who are sweltering in the heat, people who can't breathe, need the wind. It brings fresh, cooling air. It also sweeps away the old. In Percy Shelley's *Ode to the West Wind*, the current that will "Drive my dead thoughts over the universe,/ Like withered leaves, to quicken a new birth" is the wind of social revolution.

Kiarostami has paid tribute to a great artist. He is a great artist. His own *The Wind Will Carry Us* is about the plight of laborers, women, young people, perhaps the Kurds too, as well as the dilemma of the intellectuals. It is probably about a dozen other things I've missed. It is a work of exceptional grace and beauty. It respects people, even as it criticizes them. It does not shy away from the extraordinary difficulties of the situation, without giving in to easy cynicism and despair. It expresses confidence in nature and life, even as it condemns the way life is presently organized. For those reasons and more, in my view, this is an indispensable work.

**Note:**

Two works in English by or on Furugh Farrukhzad (there are several different transliterations of her name):

*A Rebirth: Poems by Foroogh Farrokhzad*; translated by David Martin; Lexington, Ky.; c.1985

*A Lonely Woman: Forugh Farrokhzad and Her Poetry*, by Michael C. Hillman, Washington, D.C.; c.1987



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