Waves of Stasis: Photographic Tendency and a Cinema of Kindness in Kiarostami’s Five (Dedicated to Ozu)

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Abbas Kiarostami has often been described as a ciné-poet, an artist who moves between the visual and the lyrical to create a cinematic experience that moves away from “understanding” and dwells in the abstracted space of poetic reflection. His visual poetry is very much linked to a slowness, and often a stillness, that gives time to images rather than stories. While many of Kiarostami’s films feature the qualities of slow cinema, minimalist mise en scènes, long takes, and little to no narrativity, none have been quite as slow as his 2003 documentary, Five Long Takes: Dedicated to Ozu (hereafter Five).¹

The film consists of five long takes, four of which are set on the shores of the Caspian Sea, and one on a beach in Spain. For the most part, Kiarostami’s camera remains still, with periodic movement steered by surrounding winds. The film’s actors include passersby on

¹Five Long Takes: Dedicated to Ozu directed by Abbas Kiarostami (New York: The Kimstim Collection, 2003), DVD.

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a boardwalk, a piece of driftwood, a swarm of ducks, a herd of dogs, and several croaking frogs under the moonlight. If seen in its entirety, *Five* can be experienced as a time compression of a full day, with each take passing from sunrise, morning, afternoon, twilight and nightfall. Each take can be experienced as an extended or moving version of a series of photographic landscapes, each prolonged by the stasis of the camera, allowing the spectator to become attuned to moments that might otherwise be passed over in narrative cinema. Together, these takes compose a poetic reflection that yields no conclusive message or interpretation; instead, sound and images flow with time, some lost to memory, and others more enduring in our frame of consciousness. In this respect, Kiarostami’s spectators are not bound to the director’s intentions, but can link what they have seen or heard to their own dreams, and to creations of their own imagination. This is made possible through the power of Kiarostami’s filmic style, which incorporates sophisticated editing techniques while also remaining open to the contingencies of natural elemental forces. As rightly articulated by Alain Bergala, *Five* should be seen as “the very essence of the power, of all the powers, of cinema, of those which are used in pursuit of the revelation of reality and equality of those which seek to manipulate it.”² The boundaries of illusion and reality are further complicated by Kiarostami’s own receptiveness to the world’s chance opportunities. In *Five*, Kiarostami is particularly attuned to the temporal motions of the sea, as it poses an alternative temporal arrangement from the experience of narrative forms. By embodying the chance-driven temporality in the making of this film, Kiarostami’s final product is anything but final. *Five* offers viewers an open-ended temporality that invites reflections on the continuities of life and death, as well as those other vital patterns, unpredictable and hidden.

*Five* takes a hybrid form that hovers between experimental art cinema and media installation. Kiarostami intended the film be viewed both

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as single projection as well as a media installation in five distinct parts. Experiencing the film in both of these registers offers distinct spectator experiences, and yet the fundamental sense that narrative events do not dictate the film’s enduring affective presence remains true to both forms. With no dialogue or human characters, the film instead offers a set of images. How one appreciates these images, at what pace, and in what order, is wholly left to the spectator. What is more, Kiarostami himself rescinds totalizing power from his role as director and opens the film’s making to the unpredictable, the chance-like, and elements that are outside of our anthropocentric dominions of control. The resonances of these five long takes, still and in motion, make up the progression of the film. What is more, the non-diegetic music that emerges between each take stresses the passage of time and expresses the impermanence of the temporal moment that preceded.

Furthermore, the dialectical play between motion and stasis invites a probing of the fixed frame and the representation of photography within the moving image. The movement between the photographic and filmic blurs the boundaries between the two and reflects the porosity of both media, particularly as they relate to the passage of time. The aesthetic of Kiarostami’s moving landscape shots both participate in the temporality of the photographic and subvert

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3While I will not be exploring the experience of *Five* in its museum form, it is worth noting that viewing the film as an installation piece might prompt a different reading of the film. Specifically, focusing on the piece as an installation might provide an alternative experience for the relationship between material and viewer. MoMA acquired *Five* in 2004 after its world premiere at Cannes Film Festival and showed it as a part of a Kiarostami retrospective entitled: “Abbas Kiarostami: Image-Maker.” At MoMa, it was screened as a single theatrical projection as well as a media installation. As a media installation, the film was divided into five segments and projected in a continuous and synchronized loop onto five separate walls, with the audio of each take blending slightly together. MoMA describes this work as: “beautifully min[ing] the potential of digital imagery and sound while playfully investigating the fluid limits of documentary art practice.” It can be argued that as video installation, *Five* elicits what Alain Bergala calls the “re-education of the gaze,” with the spatiality of the museum adding its own way of looking for the spectator and his/her mobility within the space. See Elena, *The Cinema of Abbas Kiarostami*, 153.
readings of these images as purely past tense, even while maintaining traces of loss. This gesture defies narrative structure and allows the film to affect the viewer beyond the temporal constraints of both film and photograph. The experience of watching *Five* creates a dialectical movement between the conscious and the unconscious, and thus, extends the temporality of the filmic image, beyond the film itself. Moreover, the film posits a contemplative gaze towards the sea, a space whose movement carries its own cyclical, yet smooth temporalization via flowing movements. The sea offers its own flow of temporality and allows for a counter-spectator experience from conventional narrative structures. By approaching this space as an image of its own making, *Five*’s photographic attunement allows the spectator to evade normative experiences of representative cinematic time, and enter a space of meditation open to change, as well as the ebbs and flow of life, and of death.

1. Non-narrativity and a Kind Cinema

Kiarostami’s narrative slowness follows a lineage of filmmakers before him, most notably Yasujirō Ozu, to whom he dedicated *Five*. With a sense of reverence, Kiarostami once remarked on Ozu’s cinematic style, “Ozu’s cinema is a kindly cinema. He values interactions, natural relationships, and the natural human in all his films. His long shots are everlasting and respectful.” Embodying the kindness he cherished in Ozu’s films, Kiarostami’s films are at once poetically layered and still porous to the world. Therefore, they are amenable to a multitude of spectator interpretations. As such, Kiarostami’s filmic grammar does not believe in narrative structures that seek to manipulate or provoke his spectator’s vulnerable and receptive sensorium, instead he offers images imbued with profound kindness. The “kind” cinema Kiarostami espouses is one that trusts his spectators with gaps, and even moments of empty time within the unfolding of the film.

To think further about the landscape images Kiarostami offers his viewers and the ways in which they relate to perception, it will be
helpful to explore the narrative compositions Kiarostami is working against. In a discussion regarding the dialectical structure of film, Walter Benjamin evokes the structure of cinema as a dialectic between production and consumption. The consumption of film is a part of the industrial process to the extent that the viewer is operating on a conveyor belt to process a succession of images. In this mode of film spectatorship, the viewer is hitched to the mechanical apparatus of cinema. This mode of filmic experience binds the spectator to character movement and plot development (these gestures are themselves tethered to the apparatus) and likely unfolds in the same way other films of its kind have before, thus producing a shock experience that is both predictable and totalizing. For Benjamin, this relationship to the image on the screen is experienced simultaneously as comfort and as anxiety, comforting because it affirms our normative experience of film viewing and relies on the predictable unfolding of action, as well as anxiety ridden because our heightened sense of impending action relies on a relationship to temporality that constantly anticipates what is next before even fully digesting what preceded it. This mode of narrative storytelling entails staccato movements that leave the viewer anxiously anticipating the next move, bound to the screen, and wholly unaware of, yet manipulated by the film’s temporality. Kiarostami’s films, and Five in particular, free the viewer from such an oversaturation of images and movements of the cinematic event. The concept of the Event carries a multitude of meanings in narrative discourse. For the purpose of this paper, the Event is to be understood as a structure of time that captures the viewer and binds them to the narrative unfolding. Namely, the Event constitutes what ends and begins a series of sequencing connected to the temporality of reception. The Event itself evokes grand tropes


5Mary Ann Doane, The Emergence of Cinematic Time: Modernity, Contingency, and the Archive (Harvard University Press, 2002).
condensed in time in order to elicit shock and fantasy. Often, linear narrative structures rely on Events to determine what happened in a text or a film. This understanding foregrounds the Event both within the narrative as well as in the reception, thus affecting and homogenizing the phenomenological experience of film viewing. Mary Ann Doane complicates the concept of the event by suggesting; “the event is on the cusp between contingency and structure, history and theory.” Within the structure of cinema (the indexical recording of time), Doane identifies a destabilizing potential imbued with the contingent and the inassimilable. This background is useful to further understand Kiarostami’s defiance of narrative logic and his gravitation towards images, poetic, and static in their form. In turn, Kiarostami’s shift from narrative emplotment offers a sense of respite from the screen and gives significance to the collective experiential participation of his spectators.

Shifting focus from narrative to image permits the spectator to encounter images without preconceived frames of narration. Images become approachable on one’s own affective terrain and sensory experience. By thinning narrative distance, film has at its disposal the capacity to give images a quality of eternal presence, and therefore center spectator experiences. Theodor Adorno takes a hopeful tone in articulating the potentiality of film in his essay “On the Transparencies of Film,” where he explores film as the coalescing of technology and technique. Here, Adorno investigates the use of the photographic in the filmic and more interestingly, the movement of objects through the provocatively static character of certain films such as Antonioni’s La Notte. Kiarostami, like Antonioni, is a filmmaker who makes room for and further invites a spatial and temporal distancing from the continuous flow of images on the screen. This opening of temporality, however, is not as heavily reliant on the Event or pseudo-

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1Doane, _The Emergence of Cinematic Time_, 140.
2Doane, _The Emergence of Cinematic Time_, 141.
realism\textsuperscript{9} as Adorno has described it. Instead, by creating a “\textit{real}” realism in making time more salient, the pace of the film allows the audience to doze off for a moment and not feel completely alienated upon return. In a reflection on his aversion to the logic of narrative structure, Kiarostami stated:

I don’t like to engage in telling stories. I don’t like to arouse the viewer emotionally or give him advice. I don’t like to belittle him or burden him with a sense of guilt. Those are the things I don’t like in the movies. I think a good film is one that has a lasting power and you start to reconstruct it right after you leave the theater. There are a lot of films that seem to be boring, but they are decent films. On the other hand, there are films that nail you to the seat and overwhelm you to the point that you forget everything, but you feel cheated later. These are the films that take you hostage. I absolutely don’t like the films in which the filmmakers take their viewers hostage and provoke them. I prefer the films that put their audience to sleep in the theater. I think those films are kind enough to allow you a nice nap and not leave you disturbed when you leave the theater. Some films have made me doze off in the theater, but the same films have made me stay up at night, wake up thinking about them in the morning, and keep on thinking about them for weeks. Those are the kind of films I like.\textsuperscript{10}

Here, Kiarostami’s declarative statements aspire to a vision of cinema committed to the spectator’s power to veer off course, precisely because no experiential course has been prescribed. As Kiarostami has himself characterized them, these are the films that allow for

\textsuperscript{9}By pseudo-realist, Adorno refers to films that claim to be realist in their heightened and exaggerated interpretation of human action through an uncritical use of technology. These are films that reify commodity culture and fetishize their means. They do not truly represent reality because they debase our sense of time and capture the spectator through shock-like effects and images, as though they are coming through a conveyor belt. Instead, Adorno calls for a meaningful relationship between technique, material, and content. See “Transparencies on Film,” 184.

\textsuperscript{10}Abbas Kiarostami, video interview, https://youtu.be/uSDWdJKrG0.
deeper and more active contemplation, perhaps throughout the actual viewing of the film, or even days later. In accord with Adorno, such filmic experiences might resemble more precisely the experiences of listening to music or looking at a painting, where the spectator is made conscious of temporal structure, but is not conscripted to mirroring it. Looking back at *Five*, Kiarostami echoed a similar sensibility in regards to a cinematic experience that “can in some ways form a relationship with poetry or with painting, and thereby free itself from the narrative obligation and the servitude of the director.”\(^{11}\) It appears that Kiarostami and Adorno share a vision of cinema that simulates and prioritizes a phenomenological experience between spectator and image, rather than merely a relaying of stories (though as Alain Bergala has underlined, stories may very well surface in this type of cinema).

By prioritizing the *experience* of cinema, Kiarostami’s careful depiction of a day at sea does not determine how the viewer should experience the film. In an interview on the making of *Five* Kiarostami declared: “I can confidently say that you would not miss anything if you had a short nap. The important thing for me is how you feel once the film is finished, the relaxing feeling that you carry with you after the film ends.”\(^ {12}\) Thus, in experiencing *Five*— as in the experience of a short nap— the spectator is invited to give into its soothing tranquility. Kiarostami’s emphasis on *feeling* foregrounds the phenomenological aspects of cinema rather than features of narrative structure or storytelling. As such, the viewer’s ability to seek respite does not suggest the films passivity, but rather a generosity attuned to the world’s contingent and mediated patterns. Alberto Elena has called Kiarostami’s filmmaking “a radical call for a contemplative cinema.”\(^ {13}\) I would agree with this sentiment and also add that

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while Kiarostami invites contemplation in relation to his films, he also emphasizes the temporal duration of feeling that exceeds the cinematic frame. This is a feeling that you may take with you as you approach and attune yourself to the world outside of the film.

Contemplative cinema offers a relationship to temporality unbound from narrative events, therefore images are not limited to the confines of the film screen but are opened to the outside world. Adorno suggests that the power of film lay in its “uncinematic” capacity to “express, as if with hollow eyes, the emptiness of time.”¹⁴ In order to go against its technological origins and to channel the “uncinematic,” film must go outside and against its own medium through a consciousness of other mediums, and an opening of the unconscious, as advocated by the surrealists. The image of hollow eyes to which Adorno refers is found both in the artistic expression of filmmaking and its subjective mode of spectator experience. Such a surreal image brings to mind darkness, emptiness, and a seeing without sight. This is the image of dreams and the world of the unconscious. It is such a state of perception that pushes the limits of film’s technique and technology, carries a filmic quality that is interdisciplinary at its core (with a sensibility towards the photographic, the literary, the painterly and the musical), while also expanding the realm of realism from consciousness to the realm of the unconscious.

For film to become a liberated work of art, it should “wrest its a priori collectivity from the mechanisms of unconscious,”¹⁵ and in doing so it will better attune itself to a subjective mode of experience. This type of perceptive experience, untethered to a constraining narrative structure, can be compared to one’s personal experience of the sublime in nature. Reflecting on the dream-like images that surface from this experience, Adorno imagines:

“A person who, after a year in the city, spends a few weeks in the mountains abstaining from all work, may unexpectedly experience

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¹⁴Adorno, “Transparencies on Film,” 180.
¹⁵Adorno, “Transparencies on Film,” 183-184.
colorful images of landscapes consolingly coming over him or her in dreams or daydreams. These images do not merge into one another in a continuous flow, but are rather set off against each other in the course of their appearance, much like the magic lantern slides of our childhood.”16

Adorno, like Kiarostami, approaches the image of landscape as a consolatory space of refuge that escapes the continuous flow of narrativity. But the landscapes that turn into dreams for Adorno are not unmediated by the technological qualities of the filmic. Rather, through a meditation of experiences that resist representation Adorno, envisions a radical contemporary cinema that can expand its own technique and relieve its spectator, or even propel her into the realm of the unconscious. In interlacing the literary, the cinematic, and the musical, the experience of viewing a film can open spatio-temporal conceptions of realism.17 As a result, in becoming an interdisciplinary medium, film can bring to light its various movements and fragmentary images. Adorno’s ideal filmic experience seeks to escape the conventional mimetic impulse and instead enter the collective unconscious, making greater use of formalistic techniques to revivify the discontinuous flow of movements as is intimately tied to the experience of nature.

2. Between Reality and Mediation

Kiarostami has reflected that Five is a film that performs a real realism. In his book on slow cinema, Ira Jaffe writes that in the making of Five, “Kiarostami rehearses his own death as auteur by going to sleep after setting his camera on an empty seashore.”18 While this is true for one of Kiarostami’s takes, it is important to remember that although Five gives the illusion of being untouched

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16Adorno, “Transparencies on Film,” 201.
17Adorno, “Transparencies on Film, 183.” For Adorno, the interdisciplinary constellation of film is expressed most powerfully in Mauricio Kagel’s television film, Antithese.
by the filmmaker, it is in fact, deeply and intricately labored upon. Even as Kiarostami’s filmmaking process is entangled in chance elements, the final production is no mere depiction of naturalism or mimetic transparency. In fact, the film is rather elaborately edited. In a documentary about the making of *Five*, Kiarostami mentioned that this might have been one of the most difficult films he has ever made— but it doesn’t show on the surface.\(^5\)

While each of the film’s long takes gives the illusion that Kiarostami himself pressed play and then went to sleep, as he allegedly did in the third take (Dogs, which features a pack of dogs sitting on the beach), the reality is far more complex. The pure and pristine depiction of nature we believe to be consuming is in fact carefully mediated by the filmmaker himself. For instance, in the first take (Wood) the camera undulates with the waves (this is the only take where the camera is not in complete stasis) and as spectators we are led to follow the continuous motions of the waves hitting a piece of driftwood, back and forth. The motions of winds that surround the wood magnificently possess the camera. This plasticity leads spectators to embody these very same winds and waves, and thus gives the false perception that the push of waves is what breaks the driftwood apart. It was in fact Kiarostami who manipulated this seemingly natural phenomenon by placing a small explosive in the driftwood to have it break apart by the end of the long take. Perhaps this “event” is so uneventful that it does not affect our perception of the movement to discover its mediation, though nonetheless it shows us that through film, even a non-event can be mediated. In take four, which is comparatively lively compared to the other takes, the camera returns to a midrange frontal angle of the shore, and we are bombarded by noisy ducks who cross the frame from left to right, and then from right to left across the screen. Kiarostami artfully manipulates the scene beyond the frame, and guides the ducks to move back and forth, as though unprovoked. In take five (Moon and Swamp), the final image appears as a single long take that depicts the reflection of the moon. This

\(^5\)Kiarostami, *Around Five.*
28-minute sequence was in fact filmed more than 20 times over the course of several months, and each take was superimposed onto the others with invisible cuts. Interestingly, the final night sequence, which underwent the most amount of technological mediation, obscures the image and privileges the soundtrack. This sequence is by far the least reliant on visual change. The temporality is thus most felt through the rhythms and cadences of sound. The take carries the unbearable sound of frogs, or toads croaking, so harrowing, it suggests an indifference to human presence; what is more, it suggest that perhaps the film is not made for us.\textsuperscript{20}

Akin to the detailed mediation of that which we do not see on the surface of the film, \textit{Five} also contains a carefully crafted soundtrack. The use of music is noteworthy for a filmmaker like Kiarostami, who like Adorno, has often commented on music’s ability to distract from the filmic image. The film juxtaposes amplified diegetic sounds from various takes during a four-month mixing process. Music is used at the end of each long take, which itself signifies a sense of conclusion and transition to the next take. Overlaying the seemingly tranquil and self-contained visual images of the film, the soundtrack creates a hyper-sentient abundance that unsettles the natural backdrop. Thus, while Kiarostami’s active role in artfully configuring each take might seem to undermine the film’s non-anthropocentric nature, both the rich composition of sounds and the cloaked darkness of the final sequence exposes the growing impenetrability and esoteric quality of the vivid locality that Kiarostami conjures. Thus, while the film

\textsuperscript{20}For more on \textit{Five}’s non-anthropocentric nature and its object-oriented ontology, see Selmin Kara’s essay, “The Sonic Summons: Meditations on Nature and Anempathetic Sound in Digital Documentaries” in \textit{The Oxford Handbook of Sound and Image in Digital Media}, ed. C. Vernalis, A. Herzog, and J. Richardson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 582–97. There, Kara argues that \textit{Five}’s aesthetics provide an alternative to “human centered vision.” Instead, Kara writes, “Kiarostami’s sound and image editing in \textit{Five} sets duration as a relative, matter- or object-oriented (instead of subject-oriented) term, deflating assumptions about continuity. His long-take night is a rhythmic assemblage, one that takes into account the temporal patterns, superimpositions, and cadences that might be observable among various nights on the Caspian shore, without privileging the linear logic of human perception.”
gives the impression that it expresses the emptiness of time through five uninterrupted long takes, it is in fact only a semblance of such an experience, since each take is heavily edited. The seemingly uninterrupted flow of images is in fact heavily fragmented in that it includes layers of images filmed at various points in time. Thus, it is through arduous labor that Kiarostami crafts the “realist” patterns of sound and movement in the shores of the Caspian Sea. It is upon reflection of these formal and perceptive qualities that the film puts forth its ultimate capacity to reveal clarity and abstraction and new relationships between nature and technology in the digital age.

Benjamin reflects on the possibilities within technology in his seminal essay, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproducibility,” where he focuses on the potentiality of film outside of the limited structure of the studio film. He writes:

In the studio the mechanical equipment has penetrated so deeply into reality that its pure aspect freed from the foreign substance of equipment is the result of a special procedure, namely, the shooting by the specially adjusted camera and the mounting of the shot together with other similar ones. The equipment-free aspect of reality here has become the height of artifice; the sight of immediate reality has become an orchid in the land of technology (my emphasis).21

Five’s use of digital film allows Kiarostami to give the illusion of reality and of the natural world as a space untouched by technology. Yet it is ironically through the technological apparatus, “the height of artifice,” that he brings to light an “orchid” in immediate reality, in the real world of the technological. For this reason, while Kiarostami’s films do approach nature as a space of reflection, they do not intend to portray this space as one that is dialectically unimpeded by the effects of the modern urban space or its inhabitants, and of course, they cannot. His cinematic signature of mediation followed by an act of self-reflexivity, gestures to the encounter between these two worlds.

3. Kiarostami’s Photographic Tendency and Cinema of Stasis

Those who are familiar with Kiarostami’s photographic oeuvre know that most of his photographs are composed of landscapes devoid of human presence. Equally, many of his earlier films include moments of repose to meditate on the vast landscapes that carry and envelop life’s minutiae. Kiarostami has attributed his fascination with rural spaces and natural landscapes as refuge from the day-to-day patterns and shock experiences of the city. As a culminating artistic creation in Kiarostami’s career of minimalist aesthetics, Five presents the boundary between his photographic and cinematic oeuvre. The film is attuned to the temporality of both mediums, and blends them to fluidly move between the antinomies of stasis and motion. In Five, time is measured by the flow of waves reaching the shore, constant yet ephemeral. Objects are both centered in their disruption of the constant flow of water, yet recede as the waves take precedence, visually and audibly, through each take. Amidst the empty time of the film, the breaking of a piece of driftwood can feel cathartic. In the following take, passersby and birds are only fleeting objects amidst constant sound of waves, arriving at shore, like an actress emerging center-stage. In the third take, a pack of dogs is abstracted as distant specks. Instead, the object of our gaze becomes the ripple of waves that move swiftly from the left of the frame to the right. As time passes, the image fades, like an old photograph might throughout time, culminating in total whiteness. All that remains are the wave’s
sonic cadences.

In *Five*, each long take inherits integral qualities of the photographic, including stillness as well as the meditation that comes with it. This is in part because each passing moment does not make up a progressive succession in a narrative arc; instead it carries the continuous temporal flow of waves hitting the shore, a movement that is as eventful as it is mundane. Each passing moment is similar in its rhythm, perhaps even unidentifiable with what proceeds or follows. Thus, even with the composition of a singular long take that does account for changes and temporal flow, Kiarostami’s photographic landscapes preserve traces of the photographic to sensitively illuminate the mysterious patterns of the everyday. *Five* unfolds through the temporality of the earth’s everyday movements, predictable and yet, all the while, unpredictable.

Kiarostami’s work escapes the dichotomy of stasis and moving-image; instead they are presented as two interrelated poles, between which a complex pictorial process can unfold. *Five* is not the only film that exposes Kiarostami’s investment in uniting still and moving images. Many of the shots he has taken in his films are reminiscent of stills from a road movie. For instance, in *Like Someone in Love* (2012), one long take looks out at the protagonist during a car ride from the outside. The glass of the car window that covers her face appears as a picture frame and separates the external world, dividing the moving image from a windscreen that makes visible the image of the cityscape through the glass. This image brings to the fore both Kiarostami’s compositional interest in stasis and motion, as well as his acute and thoughtful treatment of landscapes and human action. This has allowed him to take a step back from the scene he is shooting, snap a shot, and reflect on the space that engulfs him. This cinematic gesture permits his films from fluidly moving between the photographic and the moving image. Other films in Kiarostami’s cinematic oeuvre such as *Close-up* (1990), *Taste of Cherry* (1997), and *The Wind Will Carry Us* (1999), to name a few, incorporate the long take to follow the movements of small objects.
as they traverse the earth’s windy landscapes. In these instances, our perception is oriented towards objects that would otherwise occupy the narrative’s background. Furthermore, Kiarostami’s camera is intimately bound up with the flow of nature and gravitates towards meditations of landscape shots, or close-ups, as moments of repose from the already slow narrative style. Unlike this style of moving long shots (commonly used in neo-realist cinema) that impress upon the viewer a sense of distance and empty expanses from place to place, Kiarostami’s long takes in Five are in stasis. The world of Five invites us to meditate in the harmonious cacophony of the sea, to enter its rhythm, with all its hidden creatures and chance patterns.

4. The Spectator and the Sea

While I previously discussed Kiarostami’s ability to create a visual space of serenity oscillating between the still and moving image, I would now like to discuss the specific temporal configuration of the sea as it presents a counter-narrative to Evental cinema. By reflecting on the phenomenological experiences of this space, we will be able to better consider how the particular temporal structure of the sea opens itself up to new modes of spectator experience. Kiarostami makes the sea visually and audibly prominent; all other actors (including passersby, dogs, ducks, etc.) are only extras in the continuous and chance operated patterns of the waves. Waves themselves become central characters, like sea creatures, with each emerging and pushing into the other. By creating a film that has little to no external action, the ceaseless murmur of the sea as it ebbs and flows seemingly replaces any linear narrative flow, and introduces its own mode of temporal experience. In particular, the sea in Five produces a radically non-anthropocentric experience, not only because only one of five of the long takes includes people, but also because its temporal pattern and rhythmic assemblage do not privilege the linear logic of human perception. As such, the film bears witness to moments of a day from which an anthropocentric gaze might turn away. Though still mediated by the presence of both auteur and spectator, the film’s non-evental rhythm invites us to move in and out of it. Such a motion
affirms its ability to go on without us (while, of course still being mediated by the filmic gaze). And at times, it does, just as the flow of the world’s oceans continues day after day, night after night, whether we are there to bear witness, or not.

In reflecting on the phenomenological experience of watching waves, Sean Cubitt interestingly notes: “The experience of watching water is of a now that extends indefinitely. The precise configuration of light in the frames that pass by is irreplaceable, but another, infinity or infinitesimally different, will always supersede it so that its timelessness is not of the philosophical absolute, but of an endlessly differentiating repetition."\(^{22}\) *Five*’s non-narrativity unfolds within the endlessly undifferentiated repetition of the sea’s waves. The experience of watching *Five*, emphasized by the slow and static nature of its images, submerges the viewer into a cinematic experience that does not progress towards an ending or narrative arc, rather its progression is felt as a loss of time passed and at once a recognition of its salience. Still, *Five* is not a film that seeks continuous or unchanging repetition. Rather, each take signifies the motion of time, with light as the index that time has in fact passed. No scene carries the weight of light as much as the final scene, which would remain invisible to the human eye if it were not for the radiant force of the moonlight reflected onto the water. Here, Kiarostami lends a nod to another worldly pattern. Nonetheless, Kiarostami’s vital meditation of both audible and rhythmic forces of nature, allows the natural flow of the sea to take the place of narrativity.

As each long take from *Five* is filmed at the boundary between land and sea, we are positioned to embody the gaze of our auteur as he shares his refuge in the open expanse of the sea. In a thoughtful reflection on “Water and Dreams,” Gaston Bachelard writes that matter can disassociate itself from form and can be given value either through deepening (with mysterious, unknowable layers) or elevating (appearing as an inexhaustible force). In each case, he

\(^{22}\) Sean Cubitt, “Watching Waves,” in *Eco Media* (Amsterdam, Netherlands: Rodopi, 2005), 49.
writes, meditation on matter cultivates an open imagination. The sea thus symbolizes a liquid materiality that can incite our imagination.\textsuperscript{23} Certainly, this was true of Kiarostami’s own experience. Kiarostami viewed the landscapes he captured as oneiric experiences. In a 2000 interview conducted in Tehran about his photographic impetus, Kiarostami remarked, “my photographs are made of the same substance as my dreams.”\textsuperscript{24} What are these substances, material and dream-like? This remark is perhaps attuned to the open flow of photographic landscapes, both vast and ephemeral. Through the stilled images of the sea, and the glaring light impressed upon the pond at nightfall, moments of beauty are experienced, reactivated, and at times they enter the unconscious, to emerge again, in a delayed state, outside of the temporality of the film itself. The illumination of these images through dream contributes to the spectator’s non-linear experience of the narrative, but further illuminates the importance and the recurrence of the fixed image in our perception of the moving-image. Furthermore, each long take points to the calm flow of another worldly pattern and gives the spectator the agentive power to construct his or her own subjective spectatorial experience.

Kiarostami is not the first to push the limits of slow cinema by meditating deeply on continuous and repetitive actions or space. Some might be prone to draw comparisons between Kiarostami’s cinematic style and other slow films such as Andy Warhol’s exhaustive anti-film in \textit{Sleep} or Chantal Akerman’s tedious use of a kitchen in \textit{Jeanne Dielman}. And while these films do embody a temporal slowness, I’m inclined to suggest that these films are not as sympathetic to their viewer, particularly in the experience of empty time, as in a Kiarostami film. His overall sensitivity to human action and even his deep meditation on the non-anthropocentric space of the sea offers his spectator a redemptive, versus a punitive,

\textsuperscript{24}Interview with Abbas Kiarostami, published in \textit{Abbas Kiarostami, Photo Collection} (Tehran: Hunar-i Īrān, 2000), not paginated.
experience. Kiarostami’s filmic style does not seek to exhaust his viewer with excesses either in length or impenetrable visuals. Even while inviting his viewers to take a short nap, his film is meticulously designed to include only that which is absolutely necessary. For this reason, *Five* is successful in presenting each part of the day, sunrise, morning, afternoon, twilight, and dusk; all the while, each of *Five*’s long takes only last about 12 minutes, thus condensing a whole day to a little over an hour. Thus, it is important to reiterate that while *Five* certainly shares the company of others forms of slow cinema, its singularity lies in Kiarostami’s kindness that shares images made of dreams and invites an endless and bountiful imagination. His is a type of cinematic intimacy that stays with you.

**5. Cooperating with the Earth: Auteur as Spectator**

In a reflection on the making of *Five*, Kiarostami articulated the operative force of chance in his work, “There are moments in my film that I must confess are not of my own making.” Kiarostami humbly rescinds his authorial power (including the technical logic of cinematic design) to allow his films to be propelled by contingent elements beyond his control. As such, Kiarostami himself shares his own spectatorial experiences with life’s accidental and hidden course. In the process of creating *Five*, Kiarostami cooperated with the hidden powers of the earth including the rhythms, vibrations, and cadences of the earth, wind, and water. The cooperative nature of Kiarostami’s filmmaking comes from a consciousness and curiosity for factors out of his control. This refers both to the creative force

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25In his documentary film, “Around Five,” Kiarostami beautifully recounts an old story to tell the difference between chess and backgammon, or logic and chance. He says: “It is said that in old times, a philosopher in India invented chess after much pondering, and presented it as a gift to the Maharajah of India. The Maharajah was so impressed with this logical and mental game of war, that he presented it to the Iranian emperor as a symbol of Indian intelligence. In doing this, the Indian Maharajah was delivering a philosophical challenge. Bozorgmehr, the wise vizier of the Iranian king, Anowshirvan, deciphered the secrets of this complicated game and the logical warlike thought behind it. He decided to respond to the Indian philosopher in the same way. Therefore, in return for chess, he invented backgammon, with two small cubes called dice. This game takes full control from the player and show him that there are other factors
of spectator experiences as well as life’s unpredictable chance formation. Kiarostami guides us to watch *Five* with an awareness to the power of the accidental and to contemplate what we cannot know. To see the assemblage of images in *Five* as both creations of chance and mediation illuminates and intertwines the chance patterns of the mundane with that of the mediating apparatus. As auteur, Kiarostami cooperates with the earth and embodies the notion of participatory cinema even prior to the relationship of auteur and spectator through the operative powers of chance within the earth itself.

Kiarostami’s films call for a collision of worlds; in a first gesture, they share his own imagined experience. And like the flow of water, his films are receptive to elements outside of it. He invites his spectators to add to the depth of the world he has created, and to see beyond it, to take it with them. To see Kiarostami’s images is not to acquire knowledge, or even a story (even though many times, we do) but to affect one’s way of looking at the material world. Kiarostami’s slow and often-static shots compel us to be attentive to objects, elements, and other worldly patterns. His filmmaking is generous with its gaze and kind in its style, a filmmaking whose current will continue to leave its traces. Like the image of ripples in each of *Five’s* long takes, it constantly expands our way of seeing, transforms our gaze from the linear, or logically causal, and opens ourselves and our dreams to the felt rhythms of the earth.