

# Kiarostami and Love on the Iranian Screen

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The thinking of love, so ancient, so abundant, and diverse in its forms and in its modulation, asks for an extreme reticence as soon as it is solicited.

Jean-Luc Nancy

For me the beauty of art resides in the reactions that it causes.

Abbas Kiarostami

Production and Censorship Codes are challenges that any Iranian filmmaker has to deal with. Naturally, cinematic representation of love within such limitations becomes more challenging. Some avoid it and some deal with it with less satisfactory outcomes. Kiarostami, however, turns it into an art by not only overcoming the limitations, but by creating a new aesthetic language that traverses borders, nations, and races to reach us all and effect us all fundamentally. It is a tall claim that he achieved, gradually but masterfully in ways that left his viewers at awe and in admiration for his *Homework* (1989), *Where Is the Friend's Home?* (1987), and *Through the Olive Trees* (1994).

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In his earlier works such as *Homework* and *Where Is the Friend's Home?*, his perspective of love seems to be more embedded in a philosophical notion of love that Jean-Luc Nancy acknowledges as “shattered love”<sup>1</sup>, which is more concerned with how love affects us at its societal level and then manifests itself in various ways within each of us individually. That effect, however, as Nancy argues, and as Kiarostami’s screen validates, nuances our attitude towards one another differently. I argue that Kiarostami is deeply interested in those nuances, which inform our love at various levels, and not just between lovers. Kiarostami explores the ways in which love (or lack there of) functions in tangible terrains such as treatment of school children, the reaction of children, and the solution that the children find on their own. These solutions, on Kiarostami’s screens are all informed by that fundamentally philosophical notion of love.

*Homework* may be a philosophical *apology* on the absence of love where it’s most expected, either communal—in case of pastoral love towards primary school children—or within domestic sphere. The lack, the viewers will come to discover throughout the course of the film, is filled with beating or physical punishment for not being able to finish their homework properly. Yet parents and students both attest to the fact that the assignments are excessive and expectations are beyond reason. Often children fall short of giving any example of reward when Kiarostami asks them if they have ever been rewarded. But they all know punishment means beating, most often by means of a belt, and sometimes a slap on the face. And punishment is for the boy who has not finished his homework.

When putting his subjects in front of the camera, Kiarostami normalises the dire atmosphere by asking them various questions, which in their reticence reveal deeper emotions of fear, anxiety, and love, surprisingly! In such moments, there is no editing, hardly any movement of the camera, nor much of cinematic techniques to

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<sup>1</sup>Jean-Luc Nancy, “The Inoperative Community,” in *Theory and History of Literature*, ed. Wald Godzich and Jochen Schulte-Sasse 76 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 76.

manipulate the shot. There is of course the perturbing gaze of the camera and the questions that come from Kiarostami. Towards the end of the documentary, when the viewer by now understands that the students are all overwhelmed by the sheer weight of their homework, and parents helpless and confused in supervising their children's progress, one interview attracts attention more than the rest:

What do you want to be when you grow up?

A pilot!

Why?

To kill Saddam!

Why?

He is brutal, he ruins houses.<sup>2</sup>

When he is asked what he would do if by the time he grows up Saddam is dead, the child responds he would cure those who have heart problems and need heart surgery. Compassion and communal love are the only alternative in his imagination. At once, and at the presence of an alternative to war, he expresses the love that informs fraternity. The child testifies as a lover, yet who can also be a killer of the one who shatters love. Just by positioning the camera without any interruption in front of the boy, and by allowing him to project his wishes, Kiarostami peels away complex layers that stand as hindrance to the manifestation and flowering of love. There is a reticence here in thinking of love, of the possibilities of love. "To think love would thus demand a boundless generosity towards all these possibilities"<sup>3</sup> as Nancy argues and perhaps this reticence yet yielding towards exploration of it in *Homework*, becomes its informing drive.

Kiarostami seems to seek the generosity of the fraternal love that is absent in schools.

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<sup>2</sup> *Homework*, directed by Abbas Kiarostami (1989), DVD, min. 56.

<sup>3</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, "Shattered Love," 83.

[I]t is this generosity that would command reticence: the generosity not to choose between loves, not to privilege, not to hierarchies, not to exclude. Because love is not their substance or their common concept, is not something one can extricate and contemplate at a distance. Love in its singularity, when it is grasped absolutely, is itself perhaps nothing but the indefinite abundance of all possible loves, and an abandonment to their dissemination, indeed to the disorder of these explosions.<sup>4</sup>

The testimonies of children one by one stand witness to the fact that love is missing from the very place it is prescribed, and remains absent from the heart of being. Conglomerated in the final testimony of a little boy who is visibly, painfully, and psychologically shattered, is the lack. The lack is ironically juxtaposed by the poem he recites. He is a nervous 2<sup>nd</sup> grader who cannot bear to stand in front of the camera all by himself and breaks into hysteric reaction demanding the presence of his classmate, Mowlayie, for that is all he has to hold on to, to feel secure. Kiarostami edits the child's testimony with an interview with the boy's father, which reveals that he works with the child on his homework in a room with closed door. The father is critical of the care and protection of the mother shielding the child from what the father thinks as "educating his son". Cutting to a brief interview with the classmate, Mowlayie, separately, he reveals to us by way of the camera that when they were in 1<sup>st</sup> grade, the teacher had broken a ruler while beating the frightened child. Since then he had shown anxiety when feeling insecure, hence he became dependant on the presence of his classmate. The editing and the interview with the father together seem to suggest that domestic and educational spheres both are devoid of the love that the investigating camera of Kiarostami is looking for. In the final sequence of the film and the last shot of the shattered boy, when feeling comfortable having his classmate present in the room, he volunteers to recite a poem:

Oh Lord of the beautiful stars/ Oh Lord of the colourful cosmos/  
Oh Lord who created the Venus/ The Moon and the Sun/ All

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<sup>4</sup>Jean-Luc Nancy, "Shattered Love," 83.

the mountains, hills and oceans/ The beautiful blooming trees/  
Beautiful wings for the butterfly/ Nests for the birds/ Happiness,  
games and abilities/ Eyes for us to see/ The Snow, the Rain, the  
Heat and the Cold/ Were all created by you, Lord/ Grant me all  
that I asked from you/ Fill our heart, you Lord, with joy.

This is where Kiarostami ends his *Homework* and the boy recites gloriously, devoid of all love that he counts so masterfully in his recitation of aspects of God's love. The film is the very representation of the lack, the absence, the absolute void of the communal love where it is expected most, and found least. This is the love, shattered.



Figure 1 from *Homework*

In an interview with Jonathan Rosenbaum, Kiarostami reminds us about why and how he made *Homework*:

That's when I first thought about writing a different kind of documentary, where the audience put the pieces together on their own... The film should allow that to happen, make room for that interaction... [T]he audience invent their own close-ups without me providing any because of their own attentiveness to what's happening. They furnish the meaning of the event.<sup>5</sup>

And he does allow that freedom in his other works too.

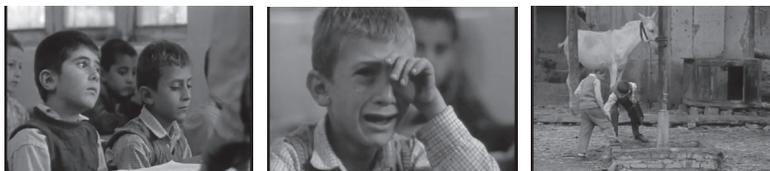
On *Where Is the Friend's Home?*,

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<sup>5</sup>Jonathan Rosenbaum and Mehrnaz Saeed-Vafa, "Interview with Abbas Kiarostami," in *Abbas Kiarostami* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 107-8.

I believe that love is indeed what I call in my own philosophical jargon a ‘truth procedure’, that is, an experience whereby a certain kind of truth is constructed. This truth is quite simply the truth about Two: the truth that derives from differences as such.<sup>6</sup>

Babak Ahmadpour and Mohammad-Reza Nematzadeh are primary school children who share the same desk. Nematzadeh has left his notebook at his cousin’s house, which is why he has written his homework on a piece of paper. An extreme close up shows the worried face of his classmate, Ahmadpour. There is a series of cut-reverse-cut from the close up of Nematzadeh’s tear-covered face to sick-worried face of Ahmadpour. The teacher tears the assignment and threatens to expel him if this happens for the third time. Later when leaving the school, we find them together again in an establishing shot. The camera moves with them in a long shot without any cut. The narration is simple, unsophisticated, and honest. Nematzadeh falls. The camera follows Ahmadpour who collects Mohammad-Reza’s belongings for him, takes him to the water fountain, and cleans up his trousers for him. The scene ends. The camera re-invents a friendship. The compassionate love is present. Its un-named presence is very similar to the silent support of the last two classmates in *Homework*. Here, in developing this unique aspect of love, Kiarostami seems to pick up in *Where Is the Friend’s Home?* where he left off in his documentary. The quest begins when Ahmadzadeh realises that he has, by mistake, put Mohammad-Reza’s notebook in his bag. That worried look is returned in a few medium close up shots. And that is when his quest to look for his friend’s house begins.



Figures 2, 3 and 4 from *Where Is the Friend’s Home?*

<sup>6</sup>Alain Badiou, “The Truth of Love,” in *In Praise of Love* (London: Serpent’s Tail, 2012), 38.

Kiarostami renders his films as quest for truth, but what kind of truth? He aims to find it in relation to something very precise. That is evident in his choice of location, the dialogue that the *mise-en-scène* immediately initiates with the viewer, in his selection of non-actors, and of course the way in which he treats the subject of his film. *Where Is the Friend's Home?* in ways more than one, points to all the above-mentioned elements and how they illuminate his quest for the truth. As Badiou suggests, Kiarostami questions what the world is like when it is experienced and lived from the point of view of difference, of the two and not one. “That is what I believe love to be.”<sup>7</sup> His camera challenges our lives from the perspective of the other. It follows the young boy in search of his classmate in more than one attempt. The quest of the boy is an experience in which he forgets himself—and by way of him, we do too—on behalf of the other. But he does not dissolve in the other. Kiarostami makes him go back to Poshteh (the neighbouring village where Nematzadeh lives) twice, and each time he either sends him to a wrong address or makes sure his protagonist arrives late, to delay the encounter of the two. Nonetheless, his camera follows Ahmadpour through the olive trees, over the hill with zigzag path, and the uneven back alleys of Poshteh every time. The gnarled branches constantly cut through our vision, creating a sense of speed editing while the camera dollies most of the time.



Figure 5 and 6 from *Through the Olive Trees*

Kiarostami constructs a world from a decentered point of view which denies any reaffirmation. Ahmadpour runs through the olive trees. The pace of editing is slightly faster, cutting through alleys of Poshteh, then a cemetery, leading to the olive trees. These are the same trees that years later we get to see again in *Through the Olive Trees*, where the lovers,

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<sup>7</sup>Badiou, “The Truth of Love,” 22.

on a different quest, traverse at a slower pace. In a long shot, Kiarostami sends Ahmadpour uphill through a zigzag road. This has become one of the most famous scenes in film history. The long shot of the boy running down and up the hill twice is the very representation of the decentered point of view from which we access his narrative of love.

The camera values the experience over the construction of the plot. Perhaps that is the informing factor for the aesthetic choice Kiarostami makes to repeat the same location in his future film. The locations, which are constantly consisting of up and down narrow alleyways, uneven stairs, and asymmetrical windows that frame extremely meticulous geometrical shapes, all weave the *mise-en-scène* to reinforce the decentered quest to avoid *the* encounter. Yet the boy encounters many other characters who in their own turn display aspects of love, the love that is mainly informed by the community within which they live.

Those same people—his mother included—however, cannot see the driving force of love that feeds the boy’s worry for his classmate. He is misunderstood by his father who punishes him for arriving home late, for he thinks his son was out playing. Badiou observes that the “Lover, particularly over time, embraces all the positive aspects of friendship, but love relates to the totality of the being of the other,”<sup>8</sup> which explains why Ahmadpour is so obsessively focused on finding Nematzadeh. He cannot bear the possibility of his friend’s repeated pain. Witnessing him being punished for not having done his homework in his notebook is an unbearable responsibility on the beating heart of the child. “Love isn’t simply about two people meeting and their inward-looking relationship: it is a construction, a life that is being made, no longer from the perspective of One but from the perspective of Two.”<sup>9</sup> Perhaps for this reason he decides to write two homework assignments, one for himself and one in Nematzadeh’s notebook, for him.

The editing speed and techniques create tension in the construction

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<sup>8</sup>Badiou, “The Construction of Love,” 36.

<sup>9</sup>Badiou, “The Construction of Love,” 36.

of such dual perspective of Two. By doing that, Kiarostami distances himself from the melodramatic or even romantic conception of love and thus renders a liminal space where the quests become the very notion of love. He re-invents a quest. He creates the desire for an unknown duration and renders that duration the truth. It is this truth which is projected on Kiarostami's screen in *Where Is the Friend's House?*. “[L]ove is a re-invention of life. To re-invent love is to re-invent that re-invention.”<sup>10</sup> This explains why Kiarostami sends the boy to Poshteh more than once, why he misled his character to different addresses, why he creates two different households by the name of Nematzadeh, why he delays the boy with the chance encounter with the window-maker. He is an old man who can barely walk, and the only one who makes wooden windows; this is the last chance of connecting Ahmadpour to his friend, for he has made windows for their house. Alas, we still have to wait. He takes Ahmadpour to the wrong window of the wrong house.



Figure 7 from *Where Is the Friend's House?*

The next day the teacher is about to check Nematzadeh's homework, when Ahmadpour arrives rather late. When his teacher asks him to explain his tardiness, he says he is coming from Poshteh. The audience does not see his morning journey, but we know where and how he has gone. “[T]he viewer can imagine what's beyond the reach of his eyes. And viewers do have creative minds... The viewer always

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<sup>10</sup>Badiou, “The Construction of Love,” 33.

has this curiosity to imagine what's outside the field of vision; it's used all the time in everyday life."<sup>11</sup> We take the journey in our head, as Kiarostami wanted us: "[...] the audience put the pieces together on their own... The film should allow that to happen, make room for that interaction..."<sup>12</sup> Ahmadpour takes out both notebooks and hands them to the teacher while telling Nematzadeh that he has completed the homework for him. There is a flower dried between the pages of his friend's notebook. We now are seeing from the perspective of the Two and not One. We are in love. We have experienced love. We have traversed alongside love. Badiou believes "in love, the other tries to approach 'the being of the other.' In love the individual goes beyond himself, beyond the narcissistic. ... You go to take on the other, to make him or her exist with you, as he or she is. It is a much more profound conception of love than the entirely banal view that love is no more than an imaginary canvas painted over the reality of sex."<sup>13</sup> Within a span of 24 hours, fraternity and communal love manifested in Ahmadpour's quest tells the tale of a love that cannot be limited to one simple explanation. The search is for that house, the house of that friend, the lover who is not bound by gender, sex or mere desire.

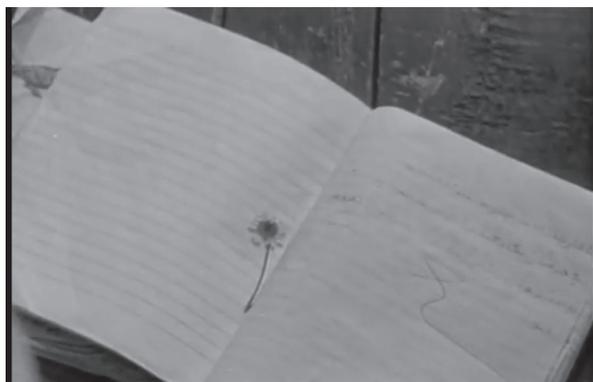


Figure 8 from *Where Is the Friend's House?*

<sup>11</sup>Rosenbaum and Saeed-Vafa, "Interview with Abbas Kiarostami," 114.

<sup>12</sup>Rosenbaum and Saeed-Vafa, "Interview with Abbas Kiarostami," 107.

<sup>13</sup>Badiou, "Philosophers and Love," 19.

## On *Through the Olive Trees*



Figure 9 from *Through the Olive Trees*

It is through meandering on such rocky roads that Kiarostami finds his way in *Through the Olive Trees* and celebrates the ever presence of love that brings young hearts together despite the shattering effect of a deadly earthquake. It is in the absolute depth of chaos where the master finds absolute love. His editing techniques and speed, his camera angles, his meticulous selection of location, and his sharp taste in finding that gem in non-actors together create the symphony of love that surpasses any blade of censorship and silence. Here, I endeavour to explore such techniques in revealing how Kiarostami becomes the master of Love in his masterful cinema that will continue to inspire generations of filmmakers to come. Kiarostami finds it imperative to go back to the scene of his former film, *Where Is the Friend's Home?* after the devastating earthquake that apparently ruined Poshteh. He finds the two brothers who played the roles of Ahmadpour and Nematzadeh. They are alive and provide flowerpots for the shooting. Having seen *Where Is the Friend's Home?*, and knowing about the earthquake, one cannot help but being moved emotionally when the two brothers, now much older, appear in front of the camera. That is the moment when Kiarostami's viewers realise that they have lived with the boys, they have carried their love within, and have anxiously waited to see if Kiarostami has found them alive. As Badiou reminds us, "in love, the other tries to approach 'the being of the other.' In love the individual goes beyond himself, beyond the narcissistic. ... You go to take on the other, to make him or her exist with you, as he or she

is.”<sup>14</sup> Kiarostami’s screen had made us, his viewers, philosophers of love. We have approached “the being of the other”.

Kiarostami is making *Life and Nothing More* when he notices that three days after the earthquake a young couple got married. That becomes the nucleus of the idea for *Through the Olive Trees*. It is the power of community that draws him to the subject. As Badiou argues, if you love each other deeply “the whole of this loving community will approach the ultimate fount of all love that is divine transcendence itself.”<sup>15</sup> It is here that the lovers accept the experience of the other, the lover, the gaze that is towards the other, and that is through the investigative lens of Kiarostami’s camera. He looks for the collective love that at once initiates and emanates from the community.

However, his film is not a testimony to any fixed definition of love. The notion that is crystallised in the last few sequences of *Through the Olive Trees*, where he leaves the conclusion to the audience: “When the woman stops walking in the last sequence of *Through the Olive Trees*, the audience invent their own close-ups without me providing any because of their own attentiveness to what’s happening. They furnish the meaning of the event.”<sup>16</sup> The Lovers are and are not a part of the community that is created around them at two levels simultaneously. They both belong to a village that is levelled by the devastating earthquake. They both are touched by death. In the case of the boy, 27 deaths in his family, and in the case of the girl, her parents. The other layer is the constructed community of the film (film crew and the film scripts that define them as an already married couple). Both are real as much as unreal; the film defines them as an already married couple while their actual community does not consent to the young man marrying the girl. Yet, our Lovers expose above all the “unworking” of both of these communities. “Unworking is what they show in their communal aspect and intimacy. But they expose it *to* the community, which already *shares*

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<sup>14</sup>Badiou, “Philosophers and Love,” 19.

<sup>15</sup>Badiou, “Philosophers and Love,” 65.

<sup>16</sup>Rosenbaum and Saeed-Vafa, “Interview with Abbas Kiarostami,” 108.

*their intimacy*,<sup>17</sup> in this case through the camera that records them at both levels at once. “For the community, Lovers are on its limit, they are outside and inside, and at this limit they have no meaning without the community” yet, Kiarostami renders a layer to it that goes beyond the limitations of the community that concerns Nancy or Badiou.

Love does not *complete* community. There is a communion, a marriage. But even that is investigated through his lens. The actors who are acting for the camera, within the world of the film, are actually in love in real life. But the film they are shooting tells the story of them as a married couple. The young man takes advantage of every opportunity to criticise the character he is to play, if he finds that character not fair to his *sujet* of affection. Through him, Kiarostami observes the complexity of the notion of communal love. A love that although depends on the constitution of marriage, goes beyond it in the way the young lovers re-live it. “[L]ove, provided it is not itself conceived on the basis of the politico-subjective model of communion in one, exposes the unworking and therefore the incessant *incompletion* of community. It exposes community *at its limit*.”<sup>18</sup>

The last few sequences, which are the focus of this part of the present essay, begin with the film crew prepping the scene. The two young lovers on the balcony are left alone. The boy starts talking to the girl, while serving her a cup of tea, picking two stems of flowers, placing them gently on the tray, and telling her that this is the meaning of life: sometimes I serve you tea, sometimes you serve me tea. They do not touch. He touches the flowers.



Figures 10 and 11 from *Through the Olive Trees*

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<sup>17</sup>Badiou, “Love and Politics,” 40.

<sup>18</sup>Nancy, “The Inoperative Community,” 38.

When “the ego roots itself in its divine source” as Nancy states in his reading of Kierkegaard’s notion of ultimate love, it moves beyond seduction and “through serious meditation of marriage, becomes a way to accede to the super-human.”<sup>19</sup> This super-human is the poetry of images that Kiarostami projects on his screen. The young man, the lover, becomes the vehicle of such a notion. After a few more takes of another sequence the film crew decides to wrap up. Later, when the filming session of that day is ended, the young man carries on clearing the empty cups. He picks up her half-empty cup of tea, pours it onto the flowerpot gently, yet empties the other cups onto the earth. Her lips, by way of her half-drunk tea, touch the flowers. He places the two stems of flower previously picked by him, for her, in his pocket.



Figures 12 & 13 from *Through the Olive Trees*

On the same balcony where the two lovers were located, we find the two brothers from *Where Is the Friend's Home?* returning to retrieve the flowerpots they brought for the set. The two who manifested the love, now reappear at the place of love, where the young man has confessed his love. The continuation of *Where Is the Friend's Home?* in *Through the Olive Trees* is not an accident. Kiarostami is reminding his viewers of the multitude of the possibilities to love on his screen.

<sup>19</sup>Nancy, “The Inoperative Community,” 38.

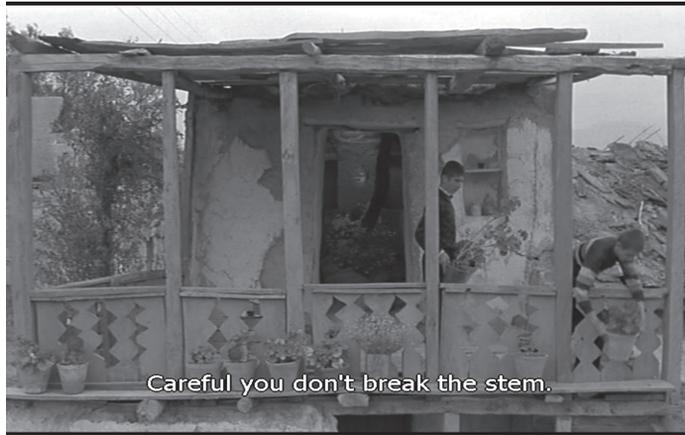


Figure 14 from *Through the Olive Trees*

The absence of touch on Kiarostami's screen turns into a poetry of touches. Editing is minimal and the speed is gentle. Whenever possible, the camera simply follows the young lovers. This "unleashing of passions confronts lovers with community not because it would place them at a simple remove from community" as Nancy indicates.<sup>20</sup> Kiarostami exposes the Lovers "at the limit, the exposition of singular beings to one another and the pulse of this exposition: the compearance, the passage, and the divide of sharing" surpasses the limitation of a censored society. "In them, or between them-this is exactly the same thing-ecstasy, joy *touches* its limit"<sup>21</sup> manifest itself in poetry of cinematography.

In this series of sequences, the girl does not reciprocate his love in front of the camera. We, the spectator, have to wait a bit longer, until they disappear as the boy is following her through the olive trees—the same olive trees through which Ahmadpour ran in search of his friend's home—up the hill through the zigzag path—the same that we have seen in *Where Is the Friend's Home?*, to see them re-emerge on the other side of the olive trees. Now they are just two distant figures engulfed by the enormity of a lush pastoral landscape. And it

<sup>20</sup>Nancy, "The Inoperative Community," 38.

<sup>21</sup>Nancy, "The Inoperative Community," 38.

happens, suddenly. The two who are reduced to two white moving dots suddenly stop. The girl stops. There is a pause. It is a wide angle establishing shot. There is a contact; if you blink you may barely miss it. The music changes, the young man runs back the distance which he covered to follow her. His joyous run can only indicate the positive answer of the girl. His dreams come true. She must have said yes! The girl, by way of Kiarostami's direction, defied the communal limitations of both communities (the village and the film). Yet again, the absence of touch becomes the largest symbolic presence of the ecstasy, the *jouissance* which had already become the poetry of movements of tea, flower, and flowerpots.



Figures 15,16,and17 from *Through the Olive Trees*

## CONCLUSION

None of the stories Kiarostami recounts in any of the films are new, yet he shows them as the very experience of love in its varieties and degrees, as universal and as unique they can get:

What is universal is that all love suggests a new experience of truth about what it is to be two and not one. That we can encounter and experience the world other than through a solitary consciousness: any love whatsoever gives us new evidence of this. And that is why we live to love; as St Augustine says, we like to love, but we also like others to love us: simply because we love truths. That is what gives philosophy its meaning: people like truths, even when they don't know that they like them.<sup>22</sup>

Kiarostami tells us those truths we long to know, truths that are at times impossible to recount on a Persian screen, truths of lovers who

<sup>22</sup>Badiou, "The Truth of Love," 39-40.

find life and continuum amidst destruction and devastation. Truths that young school children tell without knowing of their telling, the truth about the absence of love. The truth of the quest to find the friend, to protect the friend from the unbearable weight of a possible punishment. Kiarostami's universe of truths renders the re-invention of love a re-lived experience anew.