

Abbas Kiarostami's *The Wind Will Carry Us* *in a Biblical Context*

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After outlining the state of research, the article presents an interpretation of Abbas Kiarostami's film *The Wind Will Carry Us* (1999), made using the concept of mythic narrative developed by the author two decades ago. The author reconstructs the deep structure of the story and the mechanisms inscribed in it for the transformation of the main character, and his transition from the state of inner death to life. Taking advantage of its narrative openness and symbolic universality, he inscribes it in a close biblical context. He also considers this procedure legitimate because of the concept of "unfinished cinema" repeatedly presented and affirmed by the director.

KEYWORDS: Abbas Kiarostami, *The Wind Will Carry Us*, Iranian cinema, religious cinema, Bible in cinema

Over two decades ago, when preparing my dissertation on Kazimierz Kutz's Silesian films, I cited *The Wind Will Carry Us*, a cinematic piece by Abbas Kiarostami dating back to 1999. My citations were contextual and notably extensive. This fragment was omitted from the book version of the dissertation[1] as too digressive. I also never returned to Iranian cinema in my research thereafter. It is only now, prompted by the initiative of the editors of this volume, that I have revisited that intellectual venture and chosen to re-examine it, particularly in the light of its now distant temporal context. The film has ceased to be new; it has become overgrown with film studies; it has become part of an oeuvre already closed by the author's death. I, in turn, have gained experience, and have been able to re-evaluate my interpretative and methodological approach of the time.

I realised, of course, that good intentions were not enough. Before deciding to step into the same river, I still had to familiarise myself with the state of research and answer the question of whether someone had already articulated the thesis and carried out the analysis I wanted to undertake. The response proved inconclusive, albeit inherently encouraging. While the thesis has ostensibly surfaced, there is a potential for the refinement and concretization of its justification, lending itself to a new and nuanced "interpretative costume."

[1] A. Szpulak, *Kino wśród mitów. O filmach śląskich Kazimierza Kutza*, Wydawnictwo Fundacji Collegium Europaeum Gnesnense, Gniezno 2004.

Four Methods of Seeing

The analysis of the state of research shows that reflections on the film, often intricately interwoven with the reflection on the director's complete oeuvre, follow several directions. However, these directions are not only rarely complementary but sometimes even turn out to be contradictory. In fact, this should not come as a surprise when one considers the creative method and views of the famous Iranian director, who in this period of his artistic work strove with full awareness for a formula of his cinema that was as open as possible to various readings.

The first distinguishable direction consists in reading *The Wind Will Carry Us* within a socio-political, ideological discourse, in marked opposition to the post-revolutionary and contemporary realities of Iran. From this standpoint, the film, by eschewing direct engagement with these issues, appears as an expression of escapism, excessive enigmatisation, an empty universality sanctioning cultural uprooting, or even simply as a desire to simply replicate the success of previous works at Western festivals – as a consequence, an artistic (arguably also ethical) regression.[2] Hamid Dabashi's critique goes as far as to claim that the sequence of the main character's encounter with the 16-year-old Zeynab in the dim confines of the byre, which is discussed in more detail later in this article, is "one of the most violent rape scenes in all cinema." [3] Scholars are eager to invoke this thesis, only to promptly distance themselves from it. [4] Its appearance, however, testifies to a radical – no longer aesthetic but axiological – rejection of Kiarostami's proposal. [5]

Within this way of looking at the work of the director of *Through the Olive Trees*, interpretations less critical of it have also appeared. Mathew Abbott, for example, saw the scene incriminated by Dabashi as a form of playing with censorship around the theme of male-female relations, and considered the fragment showing the protagonist's conversation with a local teacher inside a car to be the most important. In the course of this conversation, the pragmatic underside of a long-lasting and at the same time spectacular funeral ritual is revealed, involving, among other things, the mourning women scratching at their faces. It is this moment that, according to the researcher, is supposed to constitute the film's significance as an exposure of the newcomers' utopian misconceptions about the authenticity of forms of existence in a traditional rural community. Kiarostami becomes convinced that the

[2] H. Dabashi, *Close Up: Iranian Cinema Past, Present and Future*, Verso, London and New York 2001, pp. 255–256; A. Farahmand, *Perspectives on Recent (International Acclaim for) Iranian Cinema*, [in:] *The New Iranian Cinema: Politics, Representation and Identity*, ed. R. Tapper, I.B. Tauris, London and New York 2002, pp. 99–100.

[3] *Ibidem*, p. 254.

[4] Ch. Lippard, *Disappearing into the Distance and Getting Closer All the Time: Vision, Position, and Thought in Kiarostami's The Wind Will Carry Us*,

"Journal of Film and Video" 2009, no. 61(4), p. 33;

G. Devi, *Humor and the Cinematic Sublime in Kiarostami's The Wind Will Carry Us*, [in:] *Humor in Middle Eastern Cinema*, eds. G. Devi, N. Rahman, Wayne State University Press, Detroit 2014, p. 170; M. Abbott, *Abbas Kiarostami and Film-Philosophy*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh 2017, p. 40.

[5] The fact that his next film, *Ten* (2002), was made in a different way, with a greater commitment to socio-political issues, may indicate that the filmmaker listened to these critical voices.

realm of tradition, and even myth, is a fantasy, and that the people in the conditions of Siah Dareh, the secluded village where he has arrived, grapple with similar problems to his own. So it is meant to confront the illusion of a less detached and disintegrated world, to confront the belief that others believe, and to confront the desire to believe. It is meant to be an apotheosis of the mundane, the ordinary, and the secular.[6]

The second strand of research into *The Wind Will Carry Us* has been to use, above all, the cultural context in interpreting the work, its rootedness in the centuries-old and multilayered Persian tradition. Admittedly, this is justified by, for example, two very significant direct poetic references (Farrokhzad[7] and Khayyam[8]) or the creation of an extremely elaborate and intense sphere of the unrevealed. And the relation of the hidden and the represented is the basic opposition of that world, constituting its imagination. The need for this kind of thinking has been most clearly expressed by Godfrey Cheshire, identifying Kiarostami as a continuation of 20th-century modernist Iranian poetry, i.e. that of Forugh Farrokhzad.[9]

Both of these strands of reflection are outside the realm of my interest – the former because of the different perceptions of the basic meanings of the work, the latter because of my rather superficial knowledge of Persian culture, and my conviction that a more in-depth one is not necessary in this case. What succours me is the director's strategy of semantic openness, so many times explained by the director and consistently worked out in subsequent works (*The Wind...* is a peak achievement here), about which more below. It was this strategy that allowed him to take his place as a prominent figure in world cinema.

It is also what is reflected in the third strand of reflection on the work – an examination of its formula and its many implications. This is where the tension arises. For Dabashi, the openness of *The Wind Will Carry Us* is a measure of Kiarostami's decline, his escapism and artificiality.[10] On the other hand, according to Cheshire, it leads to a falsified perception of the Iranian director as an heir to the Western model of *film d'auteur*.^[11] The former discredits it, a point with which one may or may not agree, while the latter considers it illusory, again which is worth debating. It seems, however, that some of the contradictions can be weakened to some extent. Kiarostami, adapting the existing authorial model to his artistic search and needs, was able to show a specific perception of reality, so far almost alien to world cinema, connected with the place of his birth, everyday existence and work.

One might expect that since the object of his interest is a symbolic universe so culturally distant from the Western experience, ad-

[6] M. Abbott, op. cit., pp. 35–41.

[7] Forugh Farrokhzad (1934–1967), a prominent Iranian poet, also a short film maker, who died tragically in a car accident.

[8] Omar Khayyam (1048–1131), a prominent Persian scholar and poet from the school of Avicenna.

[9] G. Cheshire, *How to Read Kiarostami*, "Cineaste" 2000, no. 25(4), pp. 8–15.

[10] H. Dabashi, op. cit., p. 256.

[11] G. Cheshire, op. cit., p. 10.

ditionally represented in *The Wind Will Carry Us* by a small Kurdish village in the remote Iranian countryside, most European or American audiences would indeed back away from such otherness. Let us recall, for example, the mature cinema of Sarkis Parajanian (Sergei Parajanov), which, although undoubtedly intriguing, it is so often enigmatic, puzzling, only partly comprehensible for a Western audience.

It appears, however, that this is not the case here. The poetic strategy, which is relatively rarely brought to life but which is not unfamiliar to this audience and is based, among other things, on the guise of verism, tends to reduce the problems with the clarity of the message. What is decisive here is the externality and distance from the presented world. The medium through which the cosmos of the small village is viewed is a visitor from a distant city, a completely alien and indifferent person, a television documentary maker by profession, and therefore a professional intermediary in the epidermal and casual voyeurism of the environment, devoid of the ability to see hidden things. Such a creation of the subject implies the absence, within the film world, of any fantastic elements and of the whole sphere of folk imagination, so rich, after all, in the works of Parajanian. The observation of ritualised forms of life, which function as a phenomenon inaccessible in the depths of its meaning, although also undermined from a rationalist point of view (the conversation with the teacher), is also limited and very discreet. The protagonist roams on the fringes of local everyday life, recording only detached, individual facts, from which a blurred outline of the whole is assembled. In the end, he finds the primordial images in a very simple and universal form. This is why – in my opinion, and at the same time in agreement with the author's intention expressed in the following quotation – the message can be successfully penetrated by means of the tradition that is nevertheless most alive for contemporary Europeans, especially Europeans from Poland, and which carries the biblical text as one of its dimensions, although, of course, the work does not explicitly refer to this tradition.

The interpretative openness of Kiarostami's film has, apparently, been consciously programmed by the filmmaker. In his manifesto *An Unfinished Cinema*, drawn up on the occasion of the centenary of the 10th Muse shortly before the making of *The Wind Will Carry Us*, the director remarks:

I believe in a type of cinema that gives greater possibilities and time to its audience. A half-created cinema, an unfinished cinema that attains completion through the creative spirit of the audience, so resulting in hundreds of films. It belongs to the members of that audience and corresponds to their own world.[12]

[12] A. Kiarostami, *An Unfinished Cinema*, Sabzian, 15.05.2019, <https://www.sabzian.be/text/an-unfinished-cinema> (accessed: 7.04.2023).

He develops and repeats this thought in many more statements and interviews. Most importantly, however, in his creative practice he hones his poetics of understatement based on hiding specific characters and events from the eyes of the audience, on the elliptical nature of the narrative, on the small extent to which the viewer is informed about the details of the story, on the autonomy and emancipation of the auditory sphere, on the distance determined by the camera settings, etc. In *The Wind...* he achieves its most perfect expression. This has been referred to and analysed in greater or lesser detail by many authors, including Chris Lippard,^[13] Elżbieta Wiącek,^[14] Gayatri Devi^[15] and Jonathan Rosenbaum.^[16] Clearly, in the case of Kiarostami, there can be no question of complete freedom of reception, but rather an active and creative susceptibility to explicit authorial suggestions. In the case of the cinema conceived in this way, however, when deciding on a particular interpretation, one must always remain aware of the provisional nature and a certain hypotheticality of one's rationale.

The last strand of research contradicts the first one, especially Abbott's interpretation, and in alliance with the third one. According to it, one can regard Kiarostami's work not only as an expression of universalism, of humanism (even if it is humanism in bad faith^[17]), but also as a medium of metaphysical search. This vision is closest to my approach of two decades ago, today modified but not rejected.

Given the conspicuous verism and even quasi-documentary character of this representation, an interpretation aiming to extract the symbolic essence from the image, to reconstruct the mythical story contained in it, or to identify the manifestation of transcendence, could be considered an abuse. It would seem that Kiarostami's work is first and foremost an affirmation of nature possessing the ability to revive a dying human existence, a praise of simple rural life, survival instinct, fertility and motherhood, and finally a direct, non-intellectual contemplation of the beauty of the world, landscape, light, and the human being. The strict consistency of the quasi-documentary stylisation very effectively masks the symbolic references of the individual images and the story as a whole. After all, perhaps not a single frame directly reveals myth-making energies; each is explained by some kind of reality. However, when, amid visual and narrative understatement, the symbolic dimension of the image becomes clear, the opening to transcendence immediately defines the essence of the message. In my opinion, interpretations that omit it turn out to be partial and minimising in this situation.

Such themes appear in the works of Elżbieta Wiącek,^[18] Stanley Kauffmann,^[19] or Godfrey Cheshire^[20] – in the latter's case, tran-

[13] Ch. Lippard, op. cit., pp. 32–36.

[14] E. Wiącek, *Filmowe podróże Abbasa Kiarostamiego*, Rabid, Kraków 2004, pp. 188–212.

[15] G. Devi, op. cit., pp. 163–169.

[16] M. Saeed-Vafa, J. Rosenbaum, *Abbas Kiarostami*, University of Illinois Press, Chicago 2018, p. 11.

[17] Such a supposition is referred to with some distance and even some irony by G. Devi, op. cit., p. 169.

[18] E. Wiącek, op. cit.

[19] S. Kauffmann, *A Momeland*, "New Republic" 2000, no. 223(7), pp. 28–29.

[20] G. Cheshire, op. cit., pp. 12–14.

scendence is only potential (one can agree with this), and its proper understanding requires appropriate cultural competence, relating, for example, to the Sufi tradition. However, they are most fully expressed in Gayatri Devi's text.^[21] After reading it, I had to think deeply about the point of writing this article. The author has convincingly depicted the main character's spiritual journey from death to life, indicated the key moments of this journey, interpreted the symbolic layer of the work in this context, and outlined the metaphysical dimension of the story. It seems to me, however, that my vision – from the perspective of my own culture – is even more specific in this respect, which is why I have decided to present it anyway. In the full knowledge that this concreteness is only one of the potentialities, I have decided to take advantage of the author's invitation to creative reception, which I believe is also possible within the framework of academic film studies.

The Time of Dying

To proceed, I must once again go back to my doctoral thesis. In it, drawing on reflections inspired by Eliade and Jung, I extensively outlined the specifics of the narrative structure of a film that reproduces a mythical story in its integral form. And this structure consists of creating a symbolic path followed by the main character, and presents itself quite simply. It consists of four elements: birth (as an optional element), initiation, sacrifice (death or its proximity) and re-birth (resurrection). Abbas Kiarostami's film is one of those works in which this structure is at least partially realised. Partially, because we are introduced to the protagonist as a mature man in a state of inner lethargy and perhaps even spiritual death. If this is the case, then the first two elements become inherently problematic.

In *The Wind Will Carry Us*, the present day, in the form of an anonymous protagonist devoid of really deep characterisation, is reflected in the very archaic forms of everyday life in a rural community. Having come from a metropolitan melting pot, the Engineer – as the villagers called the protagonist – has to find his feet in the face of the otherness present at every turn. This is all the more painful because the final reckoning is unexpected: death triumphs there, renewed life here.

Such a purely external perspective does not, of course, allow the film to reproduce any specific symbolic code rooted in the existence of the portrayed community, any sacred history of its own, which is why this symbolic cinematic story, built at the interface of two different worlds, turns out to be at once so universal, interpretively open, clear without any connection to the ideas specific to one or another religious system, one or another culture. It activates archetypal images in the most basic form possible, situated in the depths of common consciousness.

The Engineer becomes the protagonist of this story, which is unexpectedly subject to the order of myth, and thus acquires the

[21] G. Devi, op. cit.

status of a representative of the human species at the centre of the world – a species defined by a specific moment in time, but at the same time a species invariably identical in its spiritual predispositions. He arrives in Siah Darih to film, with the help of an accompanying team of several people, a funeral ceremony that has been practised here for centuries, an ethnographic and customary rarity and, as already mentioned, a visually attractive one. His task, therefore, is to observe one of the local rituals, manifestations of the living link between man and the supersensuous world, and to exploit as effectively as possible this phenomenon of spiritual life stripped of its meanings and removed from its full symbolic context. The work he has been commissioned to do, which he treats with indifference and a sense of inertia, consists, in a deeper sense, in instrumentalising and penetrating a fragment of the sacrum, in taming and depreciating a mysterious element.

Paradoxically, however, it is this very element that takes possession of its would-be conqueror, successively exerting an every greater influence on him, so as to finally bring about his inner transformation and bring him life instead of death. During these days of waiting for the old woman's death, his perspective reverses completely, so that when the longed-for moment comes and the old Mrs Malek dies, the Engineer departs, without even filming or observing the funeral rite, which for him becomes a sign of the past.

The protagonist's metamorphosis, his re-birth, is not contained in any particular tradition. He is deprived of his identity. The Engineer is a middle-aged man, an inhabitant of a big city, where the individual path of life seems to have no meaning in the face of an innumerable collection of anonymous human destinies, where official religiosity and generally accepted moral principles demand only routine in response, where family ties also loosen and cool. Thus, a lonely and energy-deprived person arrives in the village, a person on the verge of death, despite having all the physical strength at his disposal, a narcissist who is blind to reality (and literally short-sighted). Everything he does, including his waiting and diligently following up on news of the old woman's condition, gives the impression of something that is only seemingly happening. This also works the other way round: the disregard, camouflaged mockery and paternalism that constitute the newcomer's relationship with the locals do not seem to affect anyone, apart from the schoolboy who serves as his guide. He exists in the centre of the film frame but on the margins of the depicted world.

The initial, very long part of the film can be called a contemplation of the image of death. Right from the very first shots, a car with a television crew is shown breaking down near its destination, the aforementioned Kurdish village, and thus, as it were, falling into a state of fatal numbness. Such symbolically explicit images appear repeatedly. For example, Youssef, a man invisible from the surface, digging a deep hole needed to install a mobile phone antenna, finds a long human bone. The protagonist takes this bone from him like a talisman and hides it

in his car, thereby taking on the hidden mark of death. He can also be seen when, in a grotesque scene repeated several times, he rushes to the top of a hill near the village so that, in this exposed place, he can communicate by telephone with his Tehran-based boss, the television producer Mrs Godarzi. The place eternally serving man's lonely contact with God, marked by special proximity to heaven and metaphysical potency, is used by him to make hopeless attempts to engage in an unimportant conversation with people who are indifferent to him, including his wife. The Engineer remains spiritually blind, seeing nothing in the reality beyond its tactility. He is thus surrounded by a landscape of a rather monochromatic, sandy-ground colour, devoid of water, abounding only in shrivelled, scorched vegetation.[22]

Death, which becomes the content of these images, in addition to representing the protagonist's slowly emerging state of soul, his confinement and apathy, also reveals its predatory face, its contagious destructiveness. Stimulated by the impatience of his bored companions and the instructions of the producer, the crew chief increasingly enquires about the course of the old woman's illness and reacts with poorly disguised dissatisfaction to the news that she has improved and may not die at all in the near future, and thus, solicited by demons hidden in the shadows (only the voices of the crew members can be heard, no faces or even silhouettes are visible) unaware of the significance of this fact, he begins to desire the death of another person.

Man in Darkness

From the outset, however, this image of death is accompanied by an at-first very tenuous but ever-growing sense of proximity to a hidden, although very close, image of life pulsating with a regular heartbeat and existing in its inalienable fullness. The intensity of such a sensation is, to a large extent, connected precisely with the particular clarity of the pre-mortal gaze.[23] The signs of fullness are mainly the characters of the indigenous people, who lead their everyday existence in a fixed and inviolable way, working hard, giving birth to children, hospitable but also not imposing, discreetly hidden in the interiors of their homes, and ultimately, even elusive and somewhat mysterious. In any case, *The Wind Will Carry Us* constantly emanates hidden but indefinable anxiety and uncertainty, even in its poorly developed storyline. After all, almost until the end of the film, it is unclear why the visitors from Tehran have actually wandered into this small village and why they are so interested in the fate of an old, dying woman without visiting her at all. It is this uncertainty and this anxiety that break the static nature of the image of death, leading to an opening that by its very nature leads to isolation and a loss of the ability to see the state of becoming oblivious to the inspirations and signals coming from the environment.

[22] On the importance of landscape in the transformation of the protagonist and its visualisation – G. Devi, op. cit., p. 180.

[23] T. Sobolewski, *Chwilowy raj*, "Gazeta Wyborcza" 2011, no. 86 (14.04.2011), p. 15.

This opening is marked to a large extent by the creation of space. As the protagonist strolls through the village, he discovers its unusual and, for him, completely new quality. This peripheral place, lost in a desolate, undulating countryside, begins to appear to him as a vast, almost infinite space, open in every part and in every direction. Horizontally, it is a labyrinth of small streets and narrow passages, well known only to the locals, but not leading anyone astray.^[24] As it transpires, there are different ways to reach the chosen destination from any point. Indeed, when explaining the way to the school, the child shows two contradictory directions. In this space, everything is mysterious, but also possible, to some extent depending on who moves in it and how. It is fluid, stretchy and, despite the slow pace of the narrative, very dynamic. After all, constant movement also continues in the vertical plane. The buildings are spread out on several levels on the mountainside and the protagonist constantly has to climb or descend to get anywhere. One pole of this vertical spread of space is the top of the hill, the other is the interior of the underground byre. These profoundly symbolic places turn out to be the points at which key events in the protagonist's inner story take place.^[25] In this way, the space created in the Iranian film reveals its spiritual meaning. The order of nature, with its immutable laws, and a human being, with their own inner experience, meet there. Nature opens up to the supersensuous sphere and thus undergoes a certain pneumatisation, while, on the other hand, man leaves his confinement and limitation and enters into a relationship with the universe. Nothing here is either accidental or insignificant anymore. Over time, the small village and its immediate surroundings become more and more clearly the focal point of the world, the place for the full and final renewal of long-broken ties. In the final shots, the space already becomes completely open and united with the human being. Riding a motorbike, the people move amidst the vast fields that stretch to the horizon, blending into the landscape and contemplating it at the same time.

The process of the protagonist's rebirth, or rather the peculiar period of opening up of his inner self, is at first very subtle and lasts for most of the film almost unnoticed, unconfirmed by any specific event. However, being thrown into a new, unusual place and a situation of stillness and expectation generates an undirected stirring. Talking to Farzad, the boy who became his guide and intermediary during his stay in the village, he asks a surprising question: "Do you think I am a good person?" This question testifies to the perplexity of his own weakness, his non-obviousness, clearly displayed to him in his encounter with this otherworldly space-time and its transcendent dimension. The

[24] The image of the labyrinth can be read as a symbol of pilgrimage, D. Forstner, *Świat symboliki chrześcijańskiej*, transl. W. Zakrzewska, P. Pachciarek, R. Turzyński, Instytut Wydawniczy Pax, Warszawa 1990, p. 63.

[25] This strict coincidence is also noticed by G. Devi, *op. cit.*, p. 183.

affirmative answer can be seen as the voice of a caring angel referring to the questioner's buried inner potencies rather than to the condition in which he currently finds himself. It thus constitutes a declaration of unwavering faith in man and the hope of his transformation. Here there is a definitive rejection of a purely veristic view. The seemingly most ordinary villagers prove to be the opposite of Tehran's demonic underlings; they turn out to be the signs of the reality to come.

The breakthrough in the Engineer's spiritual journey, the threshold of real maturity and the moment that brings him closer to reintegration, comes in the form of a mythical journey into the depths of the earth. It can be seen as a belated act of initiation, born out of a mid-life crisis. For a member of the contemporary human community, the successive stages of initiation into the supersensuous reality and the symbolic vision of fullness are not an obvious consequence of development, for this development, if it occurs at all, is usually highly individualised, primarily internally motivated, unpredictable in its forms and irregular. Thus, these phenomena may manifest themselves in various ways, often in the simplest and most common symbolic images, they may also activate themselves in the most varied moments of life, they may recur, although, as is precisely the case with the Engineer, they usually appear in critical states of mind. In his case, the journey through the underworld, and thus, on the one hand, the touching of the mystery of death, because they symbolise, after all, the land of the dead, and, on the other, finding oneself again in the womb and being spiritually born, turns out to be the abolition of the boundaries of previous existence and the placement in a world infinitely wider, multidimensional, full of mysteries, subject to the workings of the Spirit.

An agonised Tehran man, who almost from the beginning of the film wanders among the local people and animals in search of milk and, not knowing why, cannot get any, finally arrives at the right address. In one of the farmyards, he is to find what he is looking for with such strange persistence. A woman sends him to her daughter, who has entered an underground byre^[26] to milk a cow. Crossing the threshold of the cellar corridor, the protagonist suddenly finds himself alone amid absolute darkness. Wading blindly through a narrow tunnel, he reaches a patch of underground space illuminated only sparsely by a small portable lamp standing on the floor. The girl is just getting down to work: you can hear the drink coming out of the cow's udder, filling the vessel in a steady, pulsating rhythm. Meanwhile, he speaks the words of a poem. It is a poem by the aforementioned Forugh Farrokhzad. The poem begins with images of death and absolute doom, images that correspond to the protagonist's spiritual condition symbolically submerged and condensed in the impenetrable darkness of the tunnel:

[26] This type of architecture is common in this part of Kurdistan. See M. Kalari, *Wyreżyserowana natura*, "Czas Kultury" 1999/2000, no. 6/1, p. 139.

In my night, so brief, alas
 The wind is about to meet the leaves.
 My night so brief is filled with devastating anguish

and further on

There, in the night, something is happening
 The moon is red and anxious.
 And, clinging to this roof
 That could collapse at any moment,
 The clouds, like a crowd of mourning women,
 Await the birth of the rain.
 One second, and then nothing.

However, as the words continue, the reality of barren dying flows into a not-yet-very clear vision of a loving union:

You in your greenery,
 Lay your hands – those burning memories –
 On my loving hands.
 And entrust your lips, replete with life's warmth,
 To the touch of my loving lips
 The wind will carry us!
 The wind will carry us! [27]

In this poetic image of love, the sharpened perception of the senses flows into a spiritual union with the cosmos. After all, in a great many religious, mythical and even linguistic traditions, [28] the wind appears as a symbolic evocation of the Spirit. [29] This kind of feeling and seeing of the world, in which supernatural reality is discovered through an intense sensory experience, is reflected in the metaphors that has characterised Eastern poetry for millennia, leading from the image of this very experience towards symbolic content. An unrivalled example of this construction of meaning – and here I am already beginning to fulfil the promise of an unconventional interpretative path – is the biblical *Song of Songs*. One of its verses is even very clearly associated with the final fragment of the Farrokhzad's poem, which is in fact its unconscious reflection and transformation:

Awake, O north wind,
 and come, O south wind!
 Blow upon my garden,
 let its fragrance be wafted abroad.
 Let my beloved come to his garden,
 and eat its choicest fruits. [30]

[27] F. Farrokhzad, „The Wind Will Carry Us”, Goodreads, <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/7268595-the-wind-will-carry-us-in-my-night-so-brief> (accessed: 7.01.2024).

[28] The Hebrew word *ruach* (feminine), translated in the Greek Septuagint as *pneuma* (neuter), simply means 'wind,' 'air in motion' or 'breath inherent in living beings.'

[29] J. Tresidder, *Słownik symboli. Ilustrowany przewodnik po tradycyjnych wyrażeniach obrazowych, znakach ikonicznych i emblematkach*, transl. B. Stokłosa, Wydawnictwo RM, Warszawa 2005, p. 237;

D. Forstner, op. cit., p. 71.

[30] Song 4:16.

The whole scene of the Engineer and the girl meeting in the deep dimness of the byre evokes the inspired Jewish poem in its atmosphere. Visible in a small circle of light emanating from a lamp, he utters a song of death, which transforms, however, into a song of love. Like the Bride, then, she remains on the move towards perfection and ultimate love fulfilment in the proximity of the Bridegroom. She, on the other hand, invariably remains in her focused, open silence, fully formed, like the Bridegroom. She utters only a few insignificant words. Nor can she be seen, for she is always shrouded in darkness, like the Lord around whom is cloud and darkness.^[31] Only a patch of her predominantly red patterned robe remains visible. This colour definitely stands out in the rather monotonous colour scheme of the entire film, one could say that it burns with intensity, evoking further associations with the image of Yahweh. Moses, passing through the darkness, after all, sees the Lord in the fire of the burning bush.^[32] Then Isaiah sees Him “sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and his train filled the temple.”^[33] And finally, He comes in “a gentle whisper” – this is the meeting of Elijah.^[34] These three images may describe the protagonist’s mystical journey up to the moment when the girl hands him, in a silent gesture full of calm gentleness, milk that is still warm, food that is not processed in any way, that protects and strengthens the newborn life,^[35] food of the purest love, a foretaste of the Promised Land^[36] in the temporal plane of mortality and a foreshadowing of paradise^[37] in the eschatological plane. He receives it in the most secret place, precisely in his mother’s womb, from which he is yet to emerge into the world, born again, as it were.^[38]

It is not, however, a figure of ultimate transformation, just as, in fact, the final transformation was not brought about by the evoked visions of the patriarchs and prophets. The scene presents the motif of initiation in its deepest essence. In Kiarostami’s work, the emphasis has shifted from the most frequently exposed motif of sacrifice to the motif of initiation. This is probably because the protagonist is created in a different way, as has already been mentioned, as a modern man for whom being born spiritually means something particularly unexpected, dramatic, and even in the ordinary course of things, often beyond his capabilities.

The symbolic meaning of this mysterious and highly significant scene, which culminates in the protagonist’s journey back through the darkness towards a new vision of the world, poses many difficulties of interpretation. For it is not lacking in contradictions, ambiguities and surprises,^[39] although obviously very far from Dabashi’s insights. The evoked elements of the biblical context are neither, quite obvious-

[31] Ps. 97:2.

[32] Exod. 3:2-4.

[33] Isa. 6:1.

[34] 1 Kgs. 19:12.

[35] D. Forstner, op. cit., p. 46.

[36] Exod. 3:8.

[37] Song 4:11, 5:1.

[38] John 3:1-21.

[39] G. Devi, op. cit., p. 171; E. Wiącek, op. cit., pp. 191-192.

ly, objects of conscious reference, nor do they correspond to the film images in a straightforward and unambiguously clear manner. The Song of Solomon shows the Bride moving towards the Bridegroom, an arrangement opposite to the screen image in which the man approaches the woman, who occupies the position of the centre of spiritual space and the ultimate point of arrival. And if we refer to the threefold vision of God by Moses, Isaiah and Elijah, we have to conclude that in the scene analysed here, the mountain, as the place of God's manifestation, is transformed into its opposite, the interior of the earth. This incompatibility of images, however, is all the more indicative of the nature of symbolic representation, and especially of such mysterious representations, in which the threads are inexplicably and obscurely linked, leading into areas that cannot be penetrated completely. This situation also has the merit of freeing us from the danger of an interpretative routine, which manifests itself in a race to find the numerous symbolic motifs and their various cultural representations, developing into an erudite juggling act with them. The adoption of a biblical context is one possible route and, as I said, also stems from the author's programmed incompleteness of the work, seeking completion in the process of active reception. Consequently, by following this somewhat arbitrary path, without looking for exact parallelisms, and sometimes even by contradiction, one can arrive at a fully universalised vision of the scene in question.

Here, then, the protagonist walks towards the most mysterious of the many personal beings he encounters in this place, towards the one who manifests himself as a simple emanation of the Absolute, towards the Personal God. The Engineer, communing with him, cannot see his face. The anti-anthropomorphism very evident in Eastern traditions, sometimes even in Christian traditions (vide: iconoclasm), is manifested here. One can clearly feel, however, that this peculiar Envoy bears irresistible feminine qualities. She exists, after all, in the person of a young girl. She bestows her quiet, focused attention on the protagonist in order to ultimately, with a gentle, fully maternal gesture, bandage his inner being with a spiritual gift.

God has thus allowed himself to be touched, in a small, secluded, darkened room in the womb of the earth, which gives the encounter a character of extraordinary intimacy, even physical proximity. The image of such intimate contact between man and the reality of God as a Person may have occurred because there was no mediation of tradition, ritual or symbolic imagery between the protagonist and the supernatural world. Modern man, existing outside the spiritual community, oblivious to the signs of another reality, must search alone for the mystical presence of the Unknowable. To begin this search, he needs the stimulus of an individual, directed gaze. On the summit of the mountain, at the place of the manifestation of God in His original masculine form, he remains fully closed. He only opens up in secret, in contact with the gentle element of femininity.

Death Defeated

Once he comes to the surface, the world around the protagonist has not changed much; everything goes on with its own rhythm, both in terms of the plot and the manner of narration. However, the image undergoes a certain dynamisation, mainly by breaking its deep monochromes and thickening the symbolic motifs. The landscape gently, without showy ostentation, becomes saturated with greenery and water and becomes more varied and animated. The crew's companions – demons of death – hide or become lost in the changing world. One vision imperceptibly turns into an extremely different one, the space widens, multiplies,[40] loses the characteristics of a labyrinth. There are still paroxysms of the old world when the protagonist quarrels with the boy, his guide and guardian angel, or when, with a kick, he knocks over a turtle that is passing by, so that the animal, unable to move, would die in the scorching sun. The camera, however, carefully follows the struggling reptile, which after a while returns to its normal position and continues its march. This is a discreet sign that death is beginning to lose its power.

The cosmos is being reborn, and in this process the motif of sacrifice, which is less spectacular than the initiatory one but at the same time necessary and conclusive, plays a decisive role. This sacrifice takes place on the same hill on which the Engineer held his meaningless telephone conversations, on the same hill on which he received a human bone – a fragment of a long-dead body, a symbol of decay, on the same hill, finally, on which he wanted to deprive the little turtle of its life, i.e. on a profaned place, clearly imbued with the image of death. This sacrifice has a special character. Usually in these kinds of storylines it is the protagonist who is the subject, who pays the price for which he acquires a new life, whereas in *The Wind*... it happens in a different way. Instead of him, it is someone else who does it – young Youssef, digging a hole at the top of the mountain, the fiancé of the girl from the underground byre, and therefore, as it were, her accomplice, another key person with the face hidden in the darkness,[41] a “twin” and complement of that Envoy, also a complement in terms of gender. He gets buried in this pit. He does not die only because the Engineer, who notices the accident, brings help. After the intervention of the local doctor, who says that the buried man will survive, the men, detached from their fieldwork, drive him unconscious to the hospital. It could be said that the motif of vicarious sacrifice, known primarily from Christianity, appears here. In this case, it is hidden from the eyes of the viewer, discreet and mysterious. Its effect turns out to be the protagonist's transcending of the framework of solipsism, opening himself up to the influence of the vital energy of the external world, deep yearning, brought into play at little cost, to save another human being.

[40] G. Cheshire calls Kiarostami “a poet of space *par excellence*,” and points out that from the scene in the byre the main character gains access to its vertical dimension (byre-hill); G. Cheshire, op. cit., pp. 14–15.

[41] K. Jabłońska, *Perski dywan*, „Więź” 2001, no. 9, p. 163.

When the buried man is taken to a hospital in the city, the Engineer moves away and, invited by the doctor, rides with him on a motorbike amidst a world already completely transformed. For the transformation effected in the man affects the entire cosmos. This is expressed very well in the words of the prophet Isaiah: "(...) for waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert; the burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water; the haunt of jackals shall become a swamp, the grass shall become reeds and rushes."^[42] There is no shortage of similar visions of a flourishing desert both in the biblical text and in the poetry of the Middle East as a whole.^[43] Their prevalence is, of course, conditioned by the climate of the area, but they do not, after all, remain at the level of a realistic representation of the world. Here, the vision manifests itself in a multi-faceted symbolic form. The Engineer and the doctor travel amidst an exuberance of grasses and grains of soft green-yellow colours, rippling gently in the wind which, without dematerialising the space, gives it a spiritual character. "The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know whence it comes or whither it goes"^[44] – these words, taken from the Gospel of St John, can be used to describe the situation in which people and their surroundings find themselves, the situation of being on the threshold of something completely new and unknown. The green colour, which begins to dominate the scene, evokes the archetypal image of the Garden of Eden or the abundant pasture where the Lord will allow man to rest.^[45] There is no dynamism in this colour, but a sense of harmony and peace.^[46] Through its growing presence, a mystical *apatheia* can be born, i.e. a final abandonment of passions, feelings and desires. The green of the grass is accompanied by the blue of the clear sky, the colour of contemplation, mystery and longing for transcendence.^[47]

Nevertheless, one must bear in mind that such a reading of the ending is neither necessary nor unquestionable. *The Wind Will Carry Us* does not at any point compromise its quasi-documentary style, revealing symbolic meanings in the image of the material world rather than in creative metaphors. The ending of the film, interpreted above as a vision of paradise, has a more rational justification, which is also manifested in the verbal sphere of the film. Here, in the words of the poet Omar Khayyam, the doctor-sage encourages the Engineer to contemplate the image of this world, to see its extraordinary beauty, and to abandon all hopes and expectations related to posthumous existence, as the future life in paradise is shrouded in mystery and great uncertainty.

[42] Isa. 35:6-7.

[43] Ps. 65:10-14; 147:8-9.

[44] John 3:8.

[45] Ps. 23:1-2.

[46] W. Kandyński, *O duchowości w sztuce*, transl. S. Fijałkowski, Państwowa Galeria Sztuki, Łódź 1996, p. 89.

[47] J.W. Goethe, *Nauka o barwach*, transl.

T. Namowicz, [in:] idem, *Wybór pism estetycznych*, Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, Warszawa 1981, pp. 299–300; W. Kandyński, op. cit., p. 88.

However, the interpretation of the quoted poem is by no means as clear-cut as it might seem. Using specific references to the traditions of Persian philosophy and art, Cheshire concludes that the reality of the represented world does not have to be at odds with its symbolic perception:

Certainly, the poem's sense of "reject belief in the hereafter and enjoy the moment" gives us a clear outward meaning that, like Kiarostami's own 'modernist' meanings, doesn't require any additional interpretations. Yet anyone familiar with mystical interpretations of Khayyam's work (e.g., Paramhansa Yogananda's) can easily read the doctor's words to mean: "Look beyond orthodoxies that say paradise lies out there – realize that it exists within every soul and every moment." If the first of these readings might be called the exoteric and the second the esoteric, a third reading, call it poetic-philosophical, is one that encompasses both of the preceding meanings, seeing their 'higher' truth not as a case of 'either/or' but 'both/and'.^[48]

And when one further considers the reality of the cinematic image described above and more readily apparent to the Western viewer, it can be seen that both the present and the transgression of its clearly defined framework gain a profound justification. The natural world itself becomes imbued with spirit,^[49] while the pneumatisation of the entire space makes it fully open to the metaphysical order, but does not invalidate it as a record of the moment. The division between the temporal "here and now" and the unknowable after death, so sharply delineated by the doctor, seems to weaken and is finally abolished. It is difficult to discern here, as the critic wishes, a purely stoic attitude which, in the face of a conscious, inevitable and imminent death, makes one accept earthly existence as the highest beauty and ultimate fulfilment.^[50] Rather, we are dealing here with something greater. It is about the transcendence of death, its symbolic rejection and ultimate victory over it, most profoundly recognisable in the gesture of immersing the human bone in the flowing waters of a stream. Even before this gesture, which concludes the protagonist's story, there were already signs of the final transformation. He is not, after all, filming the old woman's funeral for which he has waited so many days. He leaves the site of the ceremony, leaving the image behind, as if it were an unwanted memory of a departing form of the world.

The doctor comments on the people there that they hardly ever get sick, but, living to be old, they just die, and adds that man's greatest illness is death. But after all, there are no more mourners, and with the remains of the human body, the last sign of death sinks into the water, which symbolises the powerful, unlimited and imperishable, thriving life. A small flock of sheep drinks water from this river in the final shot. This most terrible human affliction – but also the affliction of all creation – disappears, and with it the stigma of time also disappears.

[48] G. Cheshire, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

[49] G. Devi, *op. cit.*, p. 179.

[50] T. Sobolewski, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

The ending of the film may be read as the realisation of St Paul's eschatological vision, which is summed up in the words: "The last enemy to be destroyed is death."^[51]

The possibility of a biblically based reading of *The Wind Will Carry Us*, which I have attempted to present, confirms the practical effectiveness of Abbas Kiarostami's efforts as an advocate of a formula of open, unfinished cinema, oriented towards a particularly active, co-creative role of the viewer. A cinema in which the author does not so much create meanings as arranges spaces and conditions for them.^[52] The film's ending, in particular, lends itself to various, though not arbitrary, interpretations. Let us once again give the floor to Cheshire:

(...) the mode described here invites a musical analogy: Each surface event is like a struck chord on a stringed instrument. The artist knows where the other strings lie and their capacities for vibration, but how – and if – they are heard will depend on how 'attuned' the auditor is. The symbolic meanings, while real, register not as the 'real' events but as significant resonances.^[53]

If one were to agree on this metaphor, however, a caveat must be made: resonance, while only reflecting real sound, can balance and even dominate it.

In the present text, the biblical context is invoked precisely as resonance and only outlined. Many more elements of it could be evoked, such as the image of Pentecost or Ezekiel's prophecy of life breathed by God into dead bones. The deliberate abandonment of its extension and deeper functionalising is intended to avoid the instrumentalisation of the cinematic work which, apart from anything else, comes from a related, because it has the same roots, but nevertheless different religious tradition. It is much better – especially in the spirit of Kiarostami's aesthetics – to refrain from excessive concreteness, which raises the suspicion of over-interpretation. Allow the reader to possibly make additions.

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