

ON THE BEGINNINGS OF CONTEMPORARY CINEMA: *CLOSE-UP* BY ABBAS KIAROSTAMI AND *DREAM OF LIGHT* BY VÍCTOR ERICE –THE FRATERNITY BETWEEN DOCUMENTARY AND FICTION AS A SYNTHESIS OF EARLY CINEMA AND CINEMATIC MODERNITY

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The encounter between the filmmakers Abbas Kiarostami and Víctor Erice in *Correspondences* (2005-2007) established a link between their filmographies that was hinted at more than a decade earlier, with the almost simultaneous creation of two films that would become foundational experiences of contemporary cinema: *Close-Up* (*Nema-ye Nazdik*, 1990) and *Dream of Light* (*El sol del membrillo*, 1992). During the round table discussion at the exhibition presentation in Madrid in 2006, Erice used the concept of a “fraternity between reality and fiction”¹ to define his way of understanding the cinematic experience. It is my intention here to analyse this documentary-fiction fraternity as an essential conception in the films that the two directors made in the early 1990s and that turned them into precursors of a contemporary cinema established in opposition to the hegemony of the postmodern image. Both

films represented a new response to the historical, social and audiovisual reality of their time: a postmodernity defined by the crisis of the meta-narrative, the commodification of knowledge, social atomization, individualism, and the principle of otherness that characterise a society headed towards a crisis in historicity, as posited by Fredric Jameson (1991). This crisis determines the historicism of cultural production, understood as “the random cannibalization of all styles of the past, the play of random stylistic allusion,” and based on the concept of the “simulacrum”: “the identical copy for which no original has ever existed” (Jameson, 1991: 18). Such cultural production serves as evidence of a reality crisis: “this mesmerizing new aesthetic mode itself emerged as an elaborated symptom of the waning of our historicity, of our lived possibility of experiencing history in some active way” (Jameson, 1991:

21). Jean Baudrillard defines this simulacrum in terms of the evolution of the image and its hegemony in the postmodern era: “it has no relation to any reality whatsoever: it is its own pure simulacrum” (1994: 6). The reality crisis described by the French sociologist is intensified by the omnipresence, in this period, of new technologies. The technological revolution has created a postmodern space where all distances have been abolished and where the opposition between private space and public space has been diluted. The result is a new existential space where a second-level reality—virtual reality—has effectively destroyed the real: “The virtual is, in fact, merely the dilation of the dead body of reality—the proliferation of an achieved universe, for which there is nothing left but to go on endlessly hyperrealizing itself” (Baudrillard, 1996: 47). Àngel Quintana describes how a *new era of suspicion*² has materialised at this time in audiovisual production as a result of its failure to “convey reality”: “The crisis of television truth, and with it the model for an information utopia, has once again challenged a model of realism understood as an affirmation of objectivity, and has expanded the limits of fiction” (2003: 264). In this crisis of reproduction, cinematic language mimics the language of television, advertising and comics, thus weakening its ties to literary language. Gilles Lipovetsky and Jean Serroy call this cinematic postmodernity *hypercinema*—in correspondence with the concept of *hypermodernity*—and define it as a fourth age of cinema—following early, classical and modern cinema—dominated by an *image-excess* that aims for saturation (2007: 72). It is in this context that Kiarostami and Erice create a filmic experience based on what I have called the fraternity between documentary and fiction: “The hybridisation between reproduction and representation is what marks the signs of the time and what complicates the nature of images” (Quintana, 2011: 81). The aim of this study is thus to offer a comparative analysis of the two films mentioned above, considering both their genetic

aspects and their narratological and semiotic elements, and also including a comparison of the different theoretical studies that have analysed them. My objective in doing so is to define the elements of this “documentary-fiction fraternity” and to determine its functionality, in view of the fact that these films have become recognised as foundational experiences of contemporary cinema and turning points in the careers of both filmmakers.

ELEMENTS OF THE DOCUMENTARY-FICTION FRATERNITY

Alain Bergala defines this fraternity as an *alloy* when describing Kiarostami’s work: “an alloy as yet unknown between documentary and fiction, transparency and device, raw presence of the real and mental cinema, reality and abstraction, physics and metaphysics, tradition and avant-garde, East and West” (2004: 3). François Niney calls it *conciliation* in the case of *Close-Up*: “where the fable and the event are mixed in an extraordinary process of conciliation between the real and the imaginary” (1991: 63). For David Oubiña, it represents an *oscillation* that constitutes a new cinematic gaze: “This oscillation is important because it makes the place of the gaze an ambiguous place. This gaze captures the film on the threshold of indeterminacy” (2008: 201). On the other hand, Frédéric Sabouraud defines it as “a form of *syncretism*” that “proposes to us a conjugation of opposites, an articulation of past and present modes of thinking and representation, a cohabitation” (2010: 26). All these concepts referring to Kiarostami’s work could equally describe Erice’s film. Filmic creation is thus geared towards a new approach to reality that defines contemporary cinema, as Erice puts it: “*Dream of Light* [...] has provided me with something precious that could be decisive for the future of my work. It is direct contact, without mediation of any kind, with reality” (quoted in Pérez Turrent, 1993: 15). The doc-

umentary-fiction fraternity is born of “an ethics of form that means that their films have an unmistakable aesthetic kinship” (Bergala, 2007: 284), whose elements, evident in both films, I will now turn to identifying and analysing.

Both films arose out of an impulse, out of what might be described as a call of the cinematic content concealed in reality that needs the filmic experience to be able to reveal itself. In Erice’s case, after having observed the work of the painter Antonio López for weeks, the two men decided to part without having come up with an idea for a joint project. The filmmaker explains how the project was then born: “Antonio’s plan was very clear: he told me he wanted to get straight to work painting or drawing a quince tree he had planted in his garden. That was how, suddenly, the impulse necessary to make a film emerged” (Erice, 1992). Kiarostami, meanwhile, read the news of Sabzian’s arrest in the newspaper and could not resist the appeal of the character and his potential story. The filmmaker expresses that same impulse of the desire for knowledge: “When I read this case in the newspaper I went to bed with that idea and I got up with the same idea. The subject appealed to me very much. So I wanted to meet that man, Sabzian” (quoted in Limosin, 1994). These were thus not films planned in advance. Erice had to start filming the next day if he wanted to capture images of the beginning of Antonio López’s work; Kiarostami had to make up his mind to visit Sabzian before his legal proceedings went any further. Erice wanted to understand the relationship between Antonio López’s dream and his artistic activity; Kiarostami wanted to know a man’s motivations for impersonating the filmmaker Moshen Makhmalbaf. The method for acquiring this knowledge is the same in both cases: the cinematic approach to that reality, the filmic experience understood as an adventure of knowledge: to paraphrase Comolli, “filming to know” (1997: 47). If an honest approach to reality is sought, it cannot be subordinated to any kind

of preconceived idea. A fixed work plan cannot be designed because it is the filming itself that establishes its own needs day by day. In this way, both Erice and Kiarostami place the device above the *mise-en-scene*, turning the former into an instrument of liberation from film conventions: “It is life itself that the device tries to capture, without the reductive arrogance of the *mise-en-scene* that tries to bend reality to its will” (Bergala, 2004: 49). In both films the characters are real people, thus also eliminating the element of the professional actor, leading Erice to speak of *presences*. These two omissions thus bring to life one of the maxims of Robert Bresson: “No actors [...] No parts [...] No staging. But the use of working models, taken from life” (1997: 14). The classical conception of the actor’s work is thus abandoned to produce the first synthesis between early and modern cinema, that of *character-presences* who leave scripts and their *mise-en scenes* behind to approach the filmic device as a means of capturing reality.

Waiting is an essential notion in both films, unfolding on two levels: that of film making as a creative attitude, and of capturing this dimension of human experience in the film. Erice describes the first of these levels as: “the time taken by the observer when he casts his gaze over the world: that attentive, humble disposition [...], which is necessary to capture a particular event, and which sometimes allows us to grasp a truth that we did not know beforehand” (1998b: 86). Kiarostami says of this attitude: “Sometimes, reality itself tells you that you do not need to cut the film and that to get close to people you don’t necessarily have to bring the camera closer. You have to wait, take your time to see things well and discover them” (1995: 83). An example of the second level, of capturing such waiting as an essential human experience, is the opening sequence of *Close-Up*, where the taxi driver and the policemen wait in the car and engage in small talk. Later, when the taxi driver is left alone, he picks some flowers to

fill in the time and kicks an empty can. Portraying this waiting, these moments when the narrativity of our lives stops, is one of the essential elements of contemporary cinema that has the effect, firstly, of de-automating the perception of the spectator, who is then confronted with the mundane passing of time, recovering the empty moments and impasses eliminated by the audiovisual market of postmodernity. Kiarostami explains about this beginning: "Some places in a movie, there should be nothing happening, like in *Close-Up*, where somebody kicks a can [in the street]. But I needed that. I needed that 'nothing' there" (quoted in Elena, 2005: 89). In *Dream of Light*, López has this same experience of waiting next to the tree because of the weather: waiting for the rain to stop or for the parting of the clouds that are changing the light he wants to capture on the fruit. And it is precisely this waiting attitude that facilitates the appearance of chance, also associated with the "policy of slowness" of both filmmakers: "Both consider that time is their raw material and that they must neither force nor brutalize it, but on the contrary humbly espouse its meanderings, accept its rhythm, stases, blockages, and accelerations, without which the work would have no chance of inscribing itself in the *longue durée* of art and transcending the fashions of cultural

consumption." (Bergala, 2007: 286). The conception of chance and its relation to the "significant instant" (Quintana, 2003: 209-210) becomes essential in this contemporary cinema, in opposition to what Noël Burch defined as the "*banishing of the accidental*" (1981: 110): the omission of all elements derived from the random to achieve the transparency of representation in classical writing. This experience of chance is essential for both filmmakers: "The opening of cinema to chance can be considered a form of resistance against the closed universes of the image, which deny any possibility of epistemological exploration of reality" (Quintana, 2003: 223). Kiarostami visits Sabzian accompanied by a camera that can capture the unexpected, that significant instant in which chance materialises. Sabzian turns out to be a great lover of cinema and of the filmmaker Moshen Makhmalbaf, whose film *The Cyclist* (*Bicycleran*, 1987), he confesses, "is a part of me." In response to Kiarostami's request to film him, Sabzian reveals to us one of the essences of cinema: "Could you make a film about my suffering?" That significant instant, that moment of truth, reveals to Kiarostami the reason behind his impulse to seek out this man and his story, the purpose of his cinematic quest. On the other hand, Erice can capture, in this case through reconstruction, the



Close-up (Abbas Kiarostami, 1990)



Dream of Light (Víctor Erice, 1992)

chance fact of López's decision not to finish the painting. The significant instant is thus revealed by showing how the expected solemnity of the ritual of resignation actually materialises in the natural acceptance of the vicissitudes of his work by the painter, who will simply put the painting away in his studio. The filmmakers know how to interpret and convert the significant instants generated by chance into aesthetic elements of the discourse: "I have great faith in the aesthetic solutions that are generated spontaneously by the material conditions of a film shoot" (Erice, 1992).

Both reconstruction and intervention are key procedures in these two films. Both filmmakers trust in the cinematic art and understand the need to find the truth through the use of the lie, of artifice. Kiarostami decided to reconstruct the events prior to Sabzian's imprisonment: the meeting with the mother of the Ahankhah family on the bus and the moment of the arrest narrated from two points of view, inside and outside the house. Erice would reconstruct, among other moments, the moment of giving up on the painting. In both cases, the *mise-en-scène* "rejects 'narrating'", and instead carries out a "restoration of 'reality', not of a 'story'" (Ishaghpour, 2007: 36). In both cases, the authors achieve this restoration through intervention: "not even for a second Kiarostami does let us forget that it is the power of intervention in reality that cinema gives him that allows him to be sensitive to it and to make us sensitive" (Bergala, 2004: 62). We see such intervention during the trial, when Kiarostami makes us believe that the questions asked by him were asked during the proceedings, when in fact they were filmed after the trial was over. We see it in the final encounter between Sabzian and Makhmalbaf, when the filmmaker cuts the soundtrack of the conversation between them, inventing a non-existent sound problem. And in Erice's film, there is the continuous intervention in the different visits and conversations that take place in relation to the painter's work.

The elements described so far involve a central role for the speech produced by the *presences* in the films. This respect for filmed speech, equally absent from postmodern audiovisual productions, is not the product of a previous writing: "That does not mean that cinema does not paste it, does not cut it, does not reorganise it, does not arrange it in another proportion and another relationship from those it had or could have had in the as yet unfilmed moment of its existence [...] There exists the field of 'destroyed speech', represented by most mass media operations. There exists the field of speech reconstructed after the destruction, which



Close-up (Abbas Kiarostami, 1990)



Dream of Light (Victor Erice, 1992)

has always been that of cinema” (Comolli, 1995: 18-19). This *reconstructed speech* is a defining feature of contemporary cinema, as opposed to the *destroyed speech* of postmodern audiovisual discourse. The confession-speech of Sabzian’s dream is reconstructed thanks to Kiarostami’s presence at the trial and, particularly, to the later footage edited into the film: “I think that my experiences of hardship and suffering can give me the grounding I need to be a good actor. That way I act well and I express my inner reality [...] Playing the part of a director is a performance in itself. To me, that’s acting.” The revelation-speech of López’s dream is reconstructed thanks to the footage created by Erice: “I am in Tomelloso, in front of the house where I was born [...] All around us, on the branches, the ever softer, wrinkled fruit hangs. [...] Nobody seems to notice that the quinces are rotting beneath a light that I can not really describe.”

Referencing the cinematic mechanism as an integral part of the narrative is a decisive necessity of this contemporary cinema. Kiarostami will do this at two key moments: the trial scene, by letting us see the clapperboard and the crew working on the film; and the encounter between Sabzian and Makhmalbaf, by allowing us to hear the conversation between the filmmaker and the sound engineer about the filming in process. The device appears during the filmmaker’s intervention in reality, generating a metalinguistic discourse aimed at the spectators, intended to make them reflect on their involvement in the filmic experience and their relationship with the cinematic artifice that defines it. Kiarostami explains: “I prefer my audience to be always aware that what they are seeing is a movie [...] to remind the spectators that what they have before their eyes is not real life, but a film based, in a certain way, on reality” (quoted in Elena, 2002: 283-284). Erice, on the other hand, shows us the cinematic device in the ending to the film, as a revealing agent of López’s dream. To pass from the reality of the document to the fiction of the dream, the presence of the

cinematic apparatus is essential. “It is not the light of the night, nor is it of twilight. Nor of dawn”; it is the filmic light that *destroys* the quinces of the painter’s dream, creating a beautiful metaphor for the passage of time and the process of capturing it on film: “*Dream of Light* ultimately questions the very nature of the filmic creation and its relationship with reality” (Thibaudeau, 1998: 15). The metalinguistic discourse, in this case, manifests itself in a *mise en abyme* of the dream reconstruction, as a poetic metaphor for the power of the cinematic experience.

Fiction and documentary are brought face-to-face so that each becomes the reciprocal mirror of the other, revealing their correspondences and connections. The truth that emerges from the fiction of the encounter between the mother and Sabzian is fed by the document of Kiarostami’s



Left: Close-up (Abbas Kiarostami, 1990). Right: *Dream of Light* (Victor Erice, 1992).

interviews with both, in the same way that the document of the encounter between Sabzian and Kiarostami in prison feeds on the fiction created by Sabzian. The document of Antonio López’s work is fed by the quest for a story that will be revealed to us at the end of the film. Fiction is made possible by the documentary approach to the painter’s reality. This documentary-fiction relationship, which has its correspondence in the reality-cinema dichotomy and is explored through the presence of the device, finds its metaphor in the mirrored object. We will see Makhmalbaf and Sabzian, on a motorcycle, through the side mirror of the truck from which the camera is filming them, in the only possible frontal image, albeit in-

verted, of the characters. We will see López working on the sketch with a mirror, which facilitates a dialogue with its inverted image. These *fictionalised* images of reality effectively de-automate the spectator's perception and turn the mirror into a metaphor for the nature of cinema: "And what else does cinema do but make images real and make reality virtual?" (Thibaudeau, 1998: 13). Cinema is capable of giving meaning to the real: "cinema as a mirror [...] as an open door, a place of passage and a means of giving sense to reality and of recognising its existence in all its value" (Sabouraud, 2010: 266).



Close-up (Abbas Kiarostami, 1990)



Dream of Light (Víctor Erice, 1992)

The factor motivating the actions of both protagonists is the same: their dreams. Behind Antonio López's mysterious need to "accompany the tree" is a vivid dream associated with his childhood: "The images are clearer and sharper than those of memories of real experiences. They have such an absolute veracity that they are the encapsulation of something prodigious" (Arocena, 1996: 313). Behind Hossein Sabzian's incomprehensible crime we find his frustrated dream to be an actor who could play Makhmalbaf, the filmmaker he admired so much. This is how he explained it when giving his permission to film the trial, arguing for its nature as a performance while being filmed: "Yes, because you are my audience." The dreams imply the presence of fiction as part of the *truth* that the filmmakers seek to capture: the fiction of the reconstruction of Sabzian's *performance* for the Ahankhah family and the fiction of the interpretation of López's dream. These dreams also become a bond between the two artists—the filmmaker and the painter in *Dream of Light*, the filmmaker and the actor in *Close-Up*—to explore the theme of otherness, a defining theme of the postmodern era, which Paul Ricœur (1992) divides into a triad: the otherness of the flesh, or of one's own body (associated with selfhood); the otherness of the foreign; and the otherness of the conscience. This formulation implies the differentiation and interrelation between one's own otherness and that of the other, which would explain the disappearance of the modern subject and the appearance of the postmodern one. In this sense, both films explore this interrelation between alterities, which generates both recognition in the other and discovery of oneself. The filmic experience thus becomes a mirror through which the filmmaker and the protagonist are reflected in each other.

Both filmmakers use the 1.33: 1 aspect ratio as a statement of intentions about the type of approach to reality that their works propose, starting with opposing propositions that ultimately

converge. Kiarostami begins his journey from the documentary perspective, which positions him as a character-presence behind the camera questioning the different protagonists of the story, and that requires him to appear on screen only at the first meeting with Sabzian, in prison. For the reconstructions, however, he uses the objective and invisible narration of fiction. The editing alters the chronological order of the sequences, developing Kiarostami's uncertainty principle analysed by Laura Mulvey (1998). Erice, on the other hand, approaches Antonio López's reality using that same invisibility and fictional objectivity, choosing to become an invisible portraitist: "he chooses to register his presence only as a trace in the discourse, with the semblance of his instruments. With this renunciation of information, he manages to maintain himself in the symbolic register of metaphor" (Palao, 1998: 26). From this position of absence, the filmmaker portrays, intervenes in and reconstructs reality. But the work is enunciated in diary form. It is an audiovisual diary of the painter's portrait, in which each image is dated, giving it the quality of a document. The respective presence and absence of the filmmakers in the narrative will determine the degree of visibility of their reconstruction and intervention strategies. From both perspectives, the films are constructed using fixed shots, in which the framing acquires crucial importance. In this sense, Caroline Renard analyses what she calls the "method of the prolonged shot" in Kiarostami's work, which can also be identified in Erice's film, and which I consider a new element of this documentary-fiction fraternity: "The variety of prolonged shots in *Close-Up* suggests a dialectical movement that seems to resolve the real-fiction opposition [...]. On the one hand, [there is] a genuine fidelity to reality: prolongation of shots, attention to detail, attachment to places, to beings, and respect for continuity. On the other hand, these elements are combined in the interest of distance, caution and a

genuine desire for control that sometimes goes as far as domination" (Renard, 2008b: 93-94). Each film presents another element that further enhances the documentary-fiction fraternity: the shot-countershot in *Close-Up* and the cross fade in *Dream of Light*. These are internal and external elements, respectively, in relation to the shooting and in correspondence with the initial perspectives, documentary and fictional, described above. Kiarostami uses the shot-countershot for the dialogues in the reconstructed scenes, in keeping with the postulates of classical fiction films. However, in the trial sequence, the shot-countershot is transformed into a revealing bond between documentary and fiction. As the filmmaker himself explains at the beginning of the scene, two cameras are used to film it, one aimed at Sabzian and the other showing the court and taking wide shots, thereby establishing a new *documentary shot-countershot* technique. However, this technique, designed to capture reality, is hybridised with fiction at the moment when Kiarostami alternates the shots of Sabzian's statement to the judge with those of the answers addressed to him, the latter filmed after the end of the trial, thus making us believe that they are part of it. The direction of Sabzian's gaze towards his two interlocutors thus becomes the mark of this documentary-fiction fraternity, in which the two spaces become indiscernible. On the other hand, Erice uses the cross fade to achieve this same fraternity, as analysed by Santos Zunzunegui: "they serve to pass from one image to another through a sliding in time that takes place, in most cases, while keeping the framing fixed (or with minimal variations). This brings into play an operation intended to suspend the opposition that exists between the concrete time of filming and the 'abstract, imaginary and intellectual time of editing' (in Víctor Erice's words) and that has the effect of suturing the aforementioned 'Lumière/Méliès' dichotomy by establishing a genuine 'aesthetic of disappearance'" (2001: 71). The cross fades thus

effect temporal ellipses. This elision technique is also used by Kiarostami in the conversation between Sabzian and Makhmalbaf at the end of the film, with the invention of a nonexistent sound problem. Again, fiction seeps into the documentary image to conceal information, which thus enriches the interpretative task of the spectator. In both cases, the use of ellipsis responds to what Oubiña explains about Kiarostami's work: "The omitted action [...] is not intended to advance the action, but to dramatically boost what is shown; it does not try to lighten the narrative: it is an absence that keeps pressing on the image." (2000: 181). With regard to the sound, it is worth noting, even if it is obvious, that both directors dispense with the voice-over as a discursive tool for their films (with the exception of the dream narrated by López). It is the images, and their direct sound, that must speak for themselves, without imposing demiurgic interpretations. The sound has to be able to provide the image with "its third dimension" (Kiarostami, 1995: 84) without renouncing its manipulation for the benefit of the film, as in the aforementioned final sequence of *Close-Up*. Finally, both filmmakers associate music with the poetic revelation that we will analyse below, introducing it extradiegetically. Erice includes it, among other moments, in the sequence of the abandonment of the painting and in the narration of López's dream; Kiarostami introduces it in the final encounter between Sabzian and Makhmalbaf.

A NEW REFLEXIVE AND SELF-REFLEXIVE GAZE

All the elements analysed above respond to a desire to redefine the filmic gaze. For Bergala, in his discussion of *The Wind Will Carry Us* (*Bad ma ra khahad bord*, 1999), it is a *re-education of the gaze*: "It is a new gaze on the world, freed from all impurity in its intention and from all utilitarianism, open to anything that can happen unpredictably in

THE CINEMATIC ACTIVITY BECOMES A SPACE OF REFLECTION THAT SHIFTS THE WORK INTO THE REALM OF THE ESSAY

the uncontrollable periphery of vision, accepting the enigma of alterity" (2008: 217, 225). For Jean-Luc Nancy: "Kiarostami *mobilizes the look*: he calls it and animates it, he makes it vigilant. First and foremost, his films are here as *eye openers*" (2001: 16). These affirmations are equally applicable to Erice's film: "Erice could have taken on the beautiful expression of Abbas Kiarostami apropos of his film *Five*, which he says has the effect of 'washing the gaze'" (Tessé, 2007: 17). This "axiomatics of a way of looking" operates on two levels: "the evident certainty of a cinematographic gaze as *regard* for the world and its truth" (Nancy, 2001: 12,14), which at the same time impregnates the gazes of the *character-presences* and of the spectator. This new gaze of these filmmakers—that of the documentary-fiction fraternity analysed here—entails a reflexivity and self-reflexivity in their work: "It is a film about cinema. Not only a reflection, in the dual sense of reflected image and thought, on the strange and complex reciprocal relationships between cinema and reality, but also on the effect of cinema, in the case of *Close-Up* during its own filming, on that same reality" (Ishaghpour, 2007: 35). The cinematic activity becomes a space of reflection that shifts the work into the realm of the essay: "cinema as the place of meditation, as its body and its realm, as the taking-place of a relation to the sense of the world" (Nancy, 2001: 44). In this respect, and not merely coincidentally, in 1992 Kiarostami himself remarked: "I am firmly convinced that today's film-maker must question himself about images, and not just produce them" (quoted in Elena, 2005: 188). This reflexivity gives rise to a kind of cinematic self-awareness in both films and represents a turning point in the work of both filmmakers, turning them into pioneers of contemporary cin-

ema: “Between reality, similarity and simulation, *Close-Up* provokes an ambiguous effect in which the spectator perceives the consciousness of cinema in its process of materialization [...]. This encounter with reality constitutes a turning point in Kiarostami’s work” (Renard, 2008a: 2). The work of self-reflection, of cinematic meditation, would lead both filmmakers to use digital technology as a means of facilitating these processes.

POETIC REVELATION OF A CERTAIN TRUTH

This fraternity is developed through overcoming the documentary-fiction, reality-cinema, cinematic truth-lie dialectic. Erice observes: “When making a film, one of the big problems today is how to introduce something of truth to its images” (Erice, 1998a: 9); Kiarostami explains: “The most important thing is that we arrange a series of lies in order to come to a greater truth. Lies that aren’t real but are somehow true [...]. Everything is completely false, nothing is real, but the whole suggests the truth” (quoted in Limosin, 1994). The documentary-fiction fraternity thus becomes a working method for revealing a truth encoded in reality, without giving up the artifice: the reconstruction and intervention analysed above. The importance of filming as a *revealer* of a truth is made explicit in both works by the appearance in the frame of the cinematic tools: “The camera appears at the same time as an instrument for reproducing reality and as a forceps of that reality, a way of looking for a meaning, something more, a possible truth” (Arocena, 1996: 312). It is therefore a matter of extracting the extraordinary-truth from the ordinary-reality: “the search for the extraordinary in the ordinary” (Zunzunegui, 2001: 69), enabling a filmic revelation “that always has a poetic nature” (Quintana, 2016: 31). It is the poeticity of both films that makes the revelation possible: “poetry appears on the screen in an unforeseen, unplanned way, interrupting the performance or the story’s flow, in order to make place for one of those mo-

ments when language is simultaneously an arrow and a wound. An arrow capable of breaking the veil—the illusion—of reality, a wound that touches our hearts because it succeeds in showing what is not seen at first glance, but what we have caught a glimpse of at times, as in a lost dream—our earlier life” (Erice, 2007: 265). Erice attributes to Kiarostami this filmic poetics, understood as a suspension of meaning to “thus be able to see the world”: “the gaze of Abbas Kiarostami is, above all other considerations, that of the poet” (2008: 28-29). The poetic expression of the oneiric narrative of Erice’s film allows the revelation, the interpretation of the painter’s dream by the spectator. “A poetic language of cinema [...] that does not even consider whether it is fiction or not, but that approaches the abstract from absolute concreteness” (Marías, 1992: 123). The cut in the conversation between Sabzian and Makhmalbaf on leaving the prison and the introduction of music succeed in creating the necessary gaps so that the spectator can delve into the poetic dimension of the discourse: “Kiarostami’s fundamental purpose, therefore, is to make the audience participate in his films: films that are for this very reason ‘incomplete’ and which only in this way can hope to come close to the elusive mystery of poetry” (Elena, 2005: 189). These poetic revelations revolve around the most intimate identity of the two protagonists: the one recovered by Sabzian after the trial, beside Makhmalbaf, whose elusive image resists being captured on film; and the one encoded in López’s dream, his desire to capture the ephemeral, through the image filmed by the camera that captures the irremediable process of the rotting fruit.

PROBLEMATISING THE CONCEPT OF REALISM

Both films problematise the concept of realism, both that of *the representation* and that of *the represented* (Quintana, 2003: 107), to assert the documentary-fiction fraternity as a kind of method-

ology that facilitates the revelation of a certain truth. This endeavour represents a new filmic yearning in the postmodern *era of suspicion*. The purpose of films is not to *record* or *represent* reality but to *reveal a certain truth* through a film-



Dream of Light (Victor Erice, 1992)



Close-up (Abbas Kiarostami, 1990)

ic experience that entails an overlapping of the notions of fiction and documentary. Carlos F. Heredero and David Oubiña agree in their analysis of both films in this regard. While for the former “*Dream of Light* is not a documentary, and its true condition would have to be placed in the territory of early and avantgarde cinema at the same time;

simultaneously, in a stage prior to documentary and beyond fiction” (Heredero, 1992: 26-27), the latter argues: “the key film is *Close-Up* [...] while, on the one hand, the documentary slides towards fiction, on the other, the fiction constantly borders on testimony. There is something ineffable that the image allows us to perceive through this game of dislocations” (Oubiña, 2003: 111). The concept of realism, therefore, is no longer useful for the analysis of these works, as Kiarostami explains: “Realism has no value in itself [...] We bend to reality only until we reach that exceptional moment in which all the conditions are there to capture a moment of truth” (quoted in Elena, 2002: 280-281). This problematising of realism defines contemporary cinema and has the effect of de-automating the spectator’s perception and dismissing the notion of verisimilitude: “the narration is always the result of a contamination that shifts the system of verisimilitude towards a territory of the undecidable” (Oubiña, 2000: 177).

SYNTHESIS BETWEEN EARLY CINEMA AND CINEMATIC MODERNITY

In view of the above, *Close-Up* and *Dream of Light* are revealed to be foundational works of contemporary cinema through their establishment of a new cinematic gaze, in response and opposition to the postmodern image, which gives rise to the fraternity between documentary and fiction and represents a synthesis between primitive innocence and modern self-reflexivity, in search of a revelation—of a poetic nature—of a certain truth: “Both, finally, are primitive filmmakers in the best sense of the word; namely, that in their cinema they rediscover the infancy of their art yet at the same time are the most radically modern filmmakers” (Bergala, 2007: 287). This synthesis between early cinema and cinematic modernity responds to the description given by Ishaghpour in relation to Kiarostami, which I believe is equally relevant to Erice’s film: “For Kiarostami, the ideal, if there

is one, would be the consummation of reality, through artistic creation, in the singularity of the reproduced image itself. By intervening in it to allow its hidden part to manifest itself, cinema does not transfer reality to a fictitious universe but, by making use of fiction in the transition, restores to reality a fullness which, without cinema, it would not have achieved by itself. The lie of art serves as a means of returning to the open and to the world" (2007: 29). Again in relation to Kiarostami, Sabouraud defines it as a cinematic *revisitation*, both artistic and pedagogical, through the exploration of the two opposing concepts that constitute it: "manipulation and its denunciation, two apparently contradictory notions used in the name of a search for truth" (2010: 274). Once again, this assertion perfectly describes both films analysed here. This synthesis, a defining feature of contemporary cinema, pushes beyond the concept of realism in its quest for a certain truth and to this end makes use of the cinematic device as its tool: "Kiarostami's devices are not those of an initial naive experimentation, they do not repeat the beginnings of cinema on the basis of a reconstitution; [...] rather, they integrate a complexity already acquired and transform these primitive devices into a means of examining the nature of cinematic representation" (Bretèque, 2008: 76). In this way, Kiarostami "reinvents a new correspondence of the aesthetic times, articulating and reinterpreting the different poetic references in a personal way" (Sabouraud, 2010: 178). This contemporary cinema believes in a revelation-image of the truth that only reality can offer, also overcoming that historical division, as Erice would write after Kiarostami's death: "his works were carriers of a breath that dissolved the old dichotomies between reality and abstraction, tradition and avant-garde, documentary and fiction, East and West; even the distinction—of Bazinian roots—between filmmakers who believe in the image and those who believe in reality" (Erice, 2016: 28). *Close-Up* and *Dream of Light* believe in

the truth that the filmic image is able to extract from reality, which makes them precursors of the contemporary cinema that followed them, both in their respective countries and internationally, and that would give rise to the encounter between the two filmmakers more than two decades later, through an epistolary correspondence that would respond, once again, to this fraternity between documentary and fiction. This fraternity could be considered a new experience of the postmodern otherness discussed above, where the alterities of the two spaces confront and interact with one another to transform an otherness of conscience that redefines and relocates them in relation to each other. ■

NOTES

- 1 An expression used by Víctor Erice in an interview appearing in *El Cultural* on 15th May 2002: <http://www.elcultural.com/revista/cine/Victor-Erice/4789>. The concept was also explained by the filmmaker in the round table at the presentation of the exhibition *Erice – Kiarostami: Correspondencias* in La Casa Encendida in Madrid on 5th July 2006.
- 2 A term used by Ignacio Ramonet in *La teoría de la comunicación* (1998) drawing on the literary concept outlined by Natalie Sarraute in 1956 in the essay of the same title.

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ON THE BEGINNINGS OF CONTEMPORARY CINEMA: CLOSE-UP BY ABBAS KIAROSTAMI AND DREAM OF LIGHT BY VÍCTOR ERICE – THE FRATERNITY BETWEEN DOCUMENTARY AND FICTION AS A SYNTHESIS OF EARLY CINEMA AND CINEMATIC MODERNITY

Abstract

This article offers an analysis of the common characteristics of two foundational experiences in a new *contemporary cinema* that challenged the postmodern audiovisual hegemony of the early nineties: *Close-Up* (1990) and *Dream of Light* (1992). To this end, my starting point is the definition offered by Víctor Erice of his way of understanding the cinematic experience, which I also consider to be the defining feature of this contemporary cinema: *the fraternity between reality and fiction*. The analysis of the different elements of this fraternity between documentary and fiction shows how both filmmakers establish a new gaze that makes the film a poetic and self-reflexive work. These cinematic experiences achieve a synthesis between early cinema and cinematic modernity capable of problematising the notion of *realism* in a quest for *the revelation of a certain truth*, contained in reality, which only cinema can attain.

Key words

Abbas Kiarostami; Víctor Erice; Contemporary Cinema; Documentary; Fiction; Realism; Self-reflexivity; Filmic Analysis.

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SOBRE LOS INICIOS DEL CINE CONTEMPORÁNEO: PRIMER PLANO DE ABBAS KIAROSTAMI Y EL SOL DEL MEMBRILLO DE VÍCTOR ERICE. LA FRATERNIDAD DOCUMENTAL-FICCIÓN COMO SÍNTESIS ENTRE EL CINE PRIMITIVO Y LA MODERNIDAD CINEMATOGRAFICA

Resumen

El presente artículo pretende analizar las características comunes de dos experiencias fundacionales de un nuevo *cine contemporáneo* que se enfrenta al audiovisual posmoderno hegemónico a principios de la década de los noventa: *Primer plano* (1990) y *El sol del membrillo* (1992). Para ello, partimos de la definición que ofrece Víctor Erice sobre su manera de entender la experiencia cinematográfica, y que consideramos también definitoria de este cine contemporáneo: *la fraternidad entre lo real y la ficción*. El análisis de los diferentes elementos de esta fraternidad entre documental y ficción muestra cómo ambos cineastas generan una nueva mirada que hace del film una obra poética y autorreflexiva. Experiencias cinematográficas que logran una síntesis entre el cine primitivo y la modernidad cinematográfica capaz de problematizar la noción de *realismo* en busca de *la revelación de una cierta verdad*, alojada en la realidad, que solo el cine puede alcanzar.

Palabras clave

Abbas Kiarostami; Víctor Erice; cine contemporáneo; documental; ficción; realismo; autorreflexividad; análisis filmico.

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