

# **SURFACES OF DESIRE: A PORTRAIT OF THE CINEMATIC EXPERIENCE BASED ON *SHIRIN*\***

PEDRO ALVES

## **INTRODUCTION** ---

The cinematic experience involves a meaningful dialogue between a filmmaker and a group of viewers, through the sound and vision of a film. Based on a specific proposal, film spectators access a set of information offered for their personal perception, understanding and interpretation. Moreover, the development of a subjective and original understanding of the film also influences the definition and potential of the film itself since it (re) configures the pragmatics and the effects of its materiality and capacity for meaning. Jauss (1982: 116) emphasises that reception processes are necessarily selective, depending on encapsulations and appraisals that simplify the stimulus of the film but at the same time complicate its signifying character. In this way, a film takes shape as a proposal but is reconfigured as an experience, thus involving diverse and complex influences and shifts between the poles of film creation and enjoyment.

Portuguese filmmaker and researcher João Mário Grilo argues that “[t]o really know what a spectator is, take a child to the cinema for the first time. Instead of watching the film [...], watch the child’s face. You will then bear witness to the birth of that ghost, which will reappear [...] every time that child returns to the cinema” (Grilo, 2006: 54). With these words, Grilo seems to foresee the film that Abbas Kiarostami would make two years later, set in this context of *dialogue* between filmmakers and spectators through a film narrative. In *Shirin* (شیرین, Abbas Kiarostami, 2008), the Iranian director presents the tragic love story of a princess, based on a 12th-century tale by Nizami Ganjavi (Khosrow and Shirin, 2020). However, Kiarostami tells the story exclusively through sound, thanks to his choice of an unsettling visual strategy: throughout the narration, we see only the faces of spectators<sup>1</sup> who, in a (simulated) theatre, are watching the film (supposedly) projected on the screen in the diegetic space. As spectators

of *Shirin*, we bear witness to the reception rather than the enunciation of the princess' tragic tale. The faces of the female spectators (all actresses) thus offer a phantasmic mirror for the story we imagine and the inner effects we intuit, in response to something we never see. *Shirin* represents an exercise in fiction involving processes of spectatorship that allow us to explore our relationship with films and our bodies, faces and minds as surfaces on which the longings of our existence are expressed. As Gronstad (2013: 30) observes, this film reveals the visceral, intimate, empathic and imaginative dimensions of a collective ritual. It therefore constitutes a necessary and pertinent reflection on the individual and collective processes associated with the cinematic experience and the bidirectional influences that shape them in a particular, subjective way.<sup>2</sup>

### **THE INTENTIONALITY OF AN IMAGE AND ITS ABSENCE(S)**

The configuration of the narrative components of a film reveals part of what the filmmaker is and what he or she wants to say or suggest. A film, like a text, carries the "shadow" of its author: "A bit of ideology, a bit of representation, a bit of subject: ghosts, pockets, traces, necessary clouds" (Barthes, 1975: 32), reflecting "the introspection, cultural concerns, references of its director" (Gutiérrez San Miguel, 2011: 174-175). However, a filmmaker is also defined by the place attributed to the spectators in his or her film, based on different possible types of participation (real, ideal or implicit spectator, defined by the concreteness or abstraction of the cinematic experience). The narrative experience is therefore constructed according to reception processes that filmmakers take into account and mould according to their expressive intentions, requiring spectators to understand, interpret and attribute meanings to the film in accordance with their personality and subjective perspective. Monteiro, invoking Jauss' interac-

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### **THE NARRATIVE EXPERIENCE IS THEREFORE CONSTRUCTED ACCORDING TO RECEPTION PROCESSES THAT FILMMAKERS TAKE INTO ACCOUNT AND MOULD ACCORDING TO THEIR EXPRESSIVE INTENTIONS, REQUIRING SPECTATORS TO UNDERSTAND, INTERPRET AND ATTRIBUTE MEANINGS TO THE FILM IN ACCORDANCE WITH THEIR PERSONALITY AND SUBJECTIVE PERSPECTIVE**

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tionist paradigm, suggests that "the work does not exist, the work occurs in each interaction with the receiver" (Monteiro, 1996a: 135). Casetti (1989: 35) argues that each film "sketches" a spectator (type of receiver), assigns that spectator a "place" (discursive perspective) and makes him or her follow a "path" (critical assimilation of the story and the succession of filmic events and elements).

The *spectatorial* path in *Shirin* is particularly complex, split between the female spectators (characters) it portrays and the spectators (us) who observe them. This path is mapped through diegetic and extradiegetic layers that explore the spectator's place and importance in the configuration and reconfiguration of a film, always based on the way Kiarostami develops the scenes with his actresses (the process is almost as important as the result itself). *Taste of Shirin* (نیش معط, Hamideh Razavi, 2008), the "making of" for the film analysed here, shows us several moments in which the director gives instructions to his protagonists on how to interpret and represent the moments of a non-existent film to which they have no access (visually or audibly).<sup>3</sup> Kiarostami carefully handles the moments of this imaginary film, asking his actresses for light-heartedness or indifference for the opening scenes (Image 1) and sadness for the final scenes (Image 2), depending on a result that only he knows and imagines.<sup>4</sup> He



**Image 1. A spectator's indifferent expression in *Shirin* (Abbas Kiarostami, 2008)**

also indicates to the actresses where to look, what to do with their facial expressions, and what type of posture they should adopt, constantly correcting and adapting the physical and emotional behaviour of his protagonists. In this way, Kiarostami stages the reactions that every film director tries to elicit, based on the work he orchestrates, sketching out his ideal spectator and reception process. However, the Iranian director does so in the context of a film which, since it does not exist, relies on what each actress carries within herself, in order to create the images necessary for our enjoyment of *Shirin*: the images we imagine of the story and the actresses' expressions. Baudry (1970: 395) suggests that cinema establishes a paradox between the reflection of images on the screen and the reflection that comes from those images, originating not in reality understood as the physical world of human existence or the physical filmic apparatus, but in the reality arising from the inner world of the spectator. During the film experience "we are not aware of the emptiness of the screen or the source of the light that illuminates it. We only see the projection of our mind merging with the cinematographic phantasmagoria, turning the illusion into an experience with the conflation of emotions that we will subsequently reflect on" (Portillo, 2011: 112). This is



**Image 2. A spectator's expression of sadness in *Shirin* (Abbas Kiarostami, 2008)**

why *Shirin* offers such an interesting combination of actor direction in the context of a fictional story and an invocation of the real inner qualities that define the actresses involved, not only as artists, but also as spectators, women and people.<sup>5</sup>

The film presents an interesting dialogue between image and sound, established through painstaking work with the off-screen space. The idea of the image as a privileged point of contact with a particular story is subverted, since the events of the triangle between Shirin, Khosrow and Farhad are narrated exclusively through the sound; the image only follows the reception of that story by the 114 spectators (113 Iranian actresses and one French actress, Juliette Binoche). In this sense, two types of off-screen space emerge. One, more obvious, is the result of the story's absence from the film frame. The other, also relevant, explores the protagonists' off-screen space: based on their visible expressions and behaviour, we guess at their internal responses (both rational and emotional), gaining access to their private world based on what their public appearance suggests. In this way, the screen offers a partial view of the narrative, allowing the filmmaker to play with "the entire cinematic space, including the soundscape, and the off-screen space where all the misunderstandings, all the apprehensions, and all the



**Image 3. Different reactions of spectators in *Shirin* (Abbas Kiarostami, 2008)**

desires that cinema cultivates take root” (Bonitzer, 2007: 79). *Shirin* fulfils the idea that “the image communicates only one movement, the movement of the spectator,” where “emotion is motion” (Mondzain, 2015: 289). We participate in a guessing game to discern the ideas, emotions, desires, fears, frustrations and other traits of each spectator, based on her facial expressions and body gestures in reaction to the story being told. We imagine the origin and the meanings of a fixed or averted gaze, a trembling or open mouth, a furrowed or relaxed brow (Image 3). The film tells the tragic story of Shirin, but above all it shows us who sees, hears and interprets that story. Over the course of an hour and a half—and maintaining the aesthetic that characterises many of his films (close-ups, fixed camera angles, slow cutting)—Kiarostami gives us the time necessary to observe, intuit and imagine the internal responses of the spectators he portrays. At the same time, the proximity of the camera to their faces allows

us into their inner worlds and contributes to a blurring of the mental geography of the cinema where the film is being shown.<sup>6</sup> If “the condition of the spectator is that of a subject who incessantly changes location” (Mondzain, 2015: 246), in *Shirin* that location is at once physical and metaphysical. The female spectators (and the few males) are constantly repositioned without the need for spatial continuity (there are no wide-angle views of the film theatre). In this way, the space is expanded as a symbolic field big enough for all the variables and variations of film reception.

Of particular significance is the way the Iranian director uses and enhances the film’s soundscape, the only channel through which we can determine what events the spectators react to. The sound makes use of the space beyond the limits of the screen to contribute to the orientation of the action and to the protagonists’ experience of the fictional world. It is worth recalling that “a focus on the ear and sound directly emphasises the spa-

tiality of the cinematic experience: we can hear around corners and through walls, in complete darkness and blinding brightness, even when we cannot see anything” (Elsaesser and Hagener, 2010: 131). While we, as spectators of the film, are relatively blind to the narrative action viewed by the spectators within the film, the sound not only facilitates anticipation or auditory suggestion of the invisible images, but also confirms the reality of those images responsible for the visible reactions of the on-screen spectators. Moreover, the sounds become symbols of the presence of the characters, regardless of whether there is dialogue or not, serving to reinforce the presence of narrative elements in a visual field that is always withheld from us.<sup>7</sup>

Music is also of particular importance to make up for the absence of images to Shirin’s tragic story. The film begins with the pages of an old manuscript on which the opening credits appear, linking words, painting and music as elements that seem to give the film a more classical character.<sup>8</sup> On the one hand, the aesthetic used evokes the medieval origin of the story to be told (Image 4), recalling Muhammed ibn Mulla Mir al-Hosseini’s illustrations included in the 1591 manuscript (Khosrow

and Shirin, 2020). On the other, the music reflects the epic and romantic character of the narrative, with a tune that establishes the emotional and psychological tone of the story and in turn reinforces what is shown (or will be shown) in the filmic representation (Sánchez Viedman and Blanco Trejo, 2012: 16-19). As the story unfolds, the music plays an important role in the representation of the emotional states of the spectators we watch, encouraging a single interpretation due to its literalness and to the fact that the music is always in keeping with what we hear from the narrated action. The musical compositions evoke feelings like love and emotions like fear or anger, generating narrative suggestions based on structures and codes familiar from past film experiences, shared as part of the cultural knowledge that defines us as spectators. When we watch a film we are not *tabulae rasae* onto which the film narrative freely inscribes its rational, sensory and affective content. Our internal construction of the film (visual and sound) is always conditioned by our past experiences, our sociocultural environment and our life history (Tripero, 2011: 36-37). Spectators “make meanings from texts on the basis of the specific assumptions and knowledges that they

Image 4. The manuscript used in the opening credits of *Shirin* (Abbas Kiarostami, 2008)



bring to their encounter with them” (Jancovich, Faire and Stubbings, 2003: 7). This means that our background and our individual and collective context influence our perception, reconfiguration and interpretation of a film, decisively determining the cinematic experience and the meaning of the work. There is no innate interpretation of a film, and therefore, making use of the openness that a film offers for a subjective experience (Eco, 1976), each of us creates one possible life for the film, based on our particular perspective and interpretation, conditioned by everything that has inevitably informed our worldview at the moment of reception and throughout our lives (Staiger, 2000: 193).

### **THE SPECTATORS ARE THE FILM**

In the film reception situation presented in *Shirin*, Kiarostami has the on-screen spectators perceive the imaginary film as a surface onto which to project much of what defines them. At the same time, he leads us, as spectators, to understand the imaginary film according to the reception processes that we intuit in the spectator-protagonists. They are required to appropriate a fictional world, someone else’s creation, and transform it into a familiar universe, with personal resonances and inferences. The (non-existent) images capture the attention of the on-screen spectators, not only as a simulation, imitation or duplication, but above all as a “world subjected to the stories that we have in our heads, where we make sense of the characters by comparing their cognitive environment with ours, a world, above all, that we interpret based on the intentions that we attribute to the person responsible for the narrative communication” (Jost, quoted in Monteiro, 1996b: 88). The interpretation of the film also establishes a mediation and provides its protagonists with an understanding of themselves, fostering a subjective appropriation of the narrative universe according to their life situation (Babo,

205: 36). *Shirin* thus becomes a context for a personal and subjective reconfiguration of narrative relationships, states of mind, participants and situations for the on-screen spectators who use the film as a space for self-recognition. In an intimate way, they project their existential qualities onto an external entity that invites them to assimilate its cognitive and affective signs. In this sense, *Shirin* establishes two levels of participation. On one level, it requires an act of projection that allows the protagonists to enter the film, to abandon their individual traits and form part of a shared experience that *objectifies* their subjectivity. On the other level, it establishes a process of identification, pointing towards the inner worlds of the on-screen spectators, who embrace the fictional world and its narrative elements (or at least some of them) and, in this way, adopt the position of an imaginary subject of the action itself (Elsaesser and Hagener, 2010: 37).

The aforementioned projection of the conscious or latent inner world of the protagonists onto the narrated story is not exclusive to the process of a cinematic experience. As Morin (1996: 107) suggests, every human being tends to project aspirations, desires, obsessions or fears onto all things and entities in the definition of a real identity. The organisation of events and elements involves a direction (adopted by the filmmaker) that allows the projection of the subjectivity of the spectator, who accepts the text as his or her own and reconfigures its meanings. It is therefore not surprising that the on-screen spectators of *Shirin* should experience a situation of film reception that offers privileged conditions for the emergence of latent or hidden qualities of their personalities and identities. Although they remain aware of the fictional nature of the film, they immerse themselves in it and are transported to a position closer to the filmic events, allowing a more intense projection of their capacities and qualities—conscious or unconscious—onto elements of the narrative.

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**IT IS THEREFORE NOT SURPRISING THAT THE ON-SCREEN SPECTATORS OF *SHIRIN* SHOULD EXPERIENCE A SITUATION OF FILM RECEPTION THAT OFFERS PRIVILEGED CONDITIONS FOR THE EMERGENCE OF LATENT OR HIDDEN QUALITIES OF THEIR PERSONALITIES AND IDENTITIES**

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If the projective movement can be explained in light of the need to deal with desires, ambitions or frustrations that it has not been possible to resolve in real life, this potential also arises in identification, although directed at an affective proximity to something that is close to who we are or what we long for. Sorlin argues that the (secondary) identification process entails “spectators reclaiming what they see as their own, ‘putting themselves’ in the place of the characters” (Sorlin, 1985: 123), while Mitry suggests that “the spectator’s identification (which is like an enhanced belief in the reality of the film) constitutes a kind of renunciation of the self, if only for the duration of the film, to identify with the ‘Other’” (Mitry, 2002: 211). The on-screen spectators in *Shirin* follow the narrative journey of a medieval princess who faces timeless problems (love, jealousy, death), easily transferable to or reconfigurable in the real lives of the protagonists. This also facilitates the identification process and the affective movements between the film and the spectator-protagonists, revealing or suggesting their inner qualities. However, identification can also occur in the equivalence between the (visual and/or sound) perspectives of subject-enunciator and subject-spectator. This (primary) identification is associated with a point of view that is neither controlled nor defined by the film receiver, determining the point of access to a universe presented to our senses, which nevertheless limits our participation in the development of the events of the story. As subject-spectators, we identify ourselves from a perspective

of projection and reception, thus identifying with the filmic apparatus (Metz, 2001: 63-65). In *Shirin*, the spectators (us) and the protagonists are both witnesses to the same story, but with two fundamental differences: we have access only to the sound of something that the protagonists can also see, and we can only observe them and connect their physical behaviour to the story being told. With the visual aesthetic of *Shirin*, Kiarostami enhances the secondary identification of the on-screen spectators with the characters of the imaginary film, but also our identification with the visible protagonists. The primary identification (with the camera) is also split between the gaze of the women at the imaginary screen and our gaze at the faces of the spectators watching that screen. There are thus two types of projection (diegetic and extradiegetic) of a film on the surface of a screen; two kinds of spectators fix their gaze and project their senses onto a surface, giving rise to the different types of identification. Just as each screen receives the projection of the events and elements that compose the imaginary story and the journey through the filmic universe, spectators use their consciousness as a receptive surface for everything they perceive, understand and interpret, thereby engraving them on their retina and in their understanding and sensibility.

**THE CATHARSIS OF REALITY IN FICTION**

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Near the end of the film, Princess Shirin addresses the protagonists directly in a monologue, after Khosrow’s death at the hands of his son (Shiroyeh) and moments before her own suicide (the monologue will serve precisely to communicate her fatal decision to “her sisters”, the spectators). Shirin declares: “And here we are, Khosrow and I, and you, my grieving sisters. You look at his dead body and you cry. You listen to my story and you cry. Through these tears, I see your eyes. Are you shedding these tears for me, Shirin? Or for the Shirin that hides in each one of you? Shirin who,



Image 5. Two spectators crying in response to the tragic events of the narrative (*Shirin*, Abbas Kiarostami, 2008)

through her life, received neither any favour nor any attention. She was in love, a love that was never returned. She was lonely and no one believed her loneliness. Upon her death only, they would remember the young girl in love with games, rain and sunshine, a rainbow in her eyes, and tears of seven colours falling on her cheeks.” This final monologue of Shirin’s is the moment when Kiarostami seems more clearly to acknowledge the whole process of a connection of identity between Shirin, her story, and the women who follow both in their cinematic experience. However, although this relationship is only explicitly acknowledged at this time, the reflections between the film and the on-screen spectators mark the film’s development from the very beginning.<sup>9</sup>

The Iranian director also seems to be looking for an experience of representation that will offer film viewers a degree of catharsis and affective fulfilment based on the reality of the protagonists. This raises the fundamental question of the film: which is the true story of *Shirin* (the film)? The story of a princess in search of her love? Or the invisible, incomplete stories that the actresses/spectators hint at in their expressions, looks and gestures (Image 5)? The nature of cinema (and more specifically, of the subjective and emotional experience it provides) possesses certain qualities that bring out unexplored regions of the human heart. The absence of film content (characters,

actions, contexts and other elements present in the film) allows the spectator to establish a safe distance from the universe experienced. However, the film replaces the spectator with other characters who act and suffer in our place, so that we can enjoy the narrative journey without any real consequences and without excessive involvement. This is just what Žižek argues, that “by delegating to the other that which exists in the depths of my being, including my dreams and my desires, I open a space where I can have the freedom to breathe; [...] when the other is sacrificed in my place, I have the freedom to continue with my life with the awareness of having paid for my guilt” (Žižek, 2006: 23). *Shirin*’s on-screen spectators seem to be struggling with complicated problems, unspoken frustrations and desires, finding a way to confront and solve them by accepting or rejecting them. The film, “with its true (external) sounds and images, [...] contributes to the development of the phantasmal flow of the subject with a supplementary, imported substance, to give life to the figures of the subject’s desire,” thereby becoming a “practice of affective fulfilment” (Metz, 2001: 109). *Shirin* suggests the experience of hints of elements that form part of the actresses’ lives, but that would rarely have found the opportunity to come to light. In this sense, the film would represent an exercise in freedom and liberation in which the protagonists acknowledge and experi-

ence the full intensity and corresponding emotion of important aspects of their existence.

This type of process of participation in the cinematic experience necessarily evokes the political and sociocultural context of the on-screen spectators. It is a context that influences what Teixeira Lopes (2000: 313) defines as the “affective disposition” of the film receiver; i.e. the state and form whereby we, as individuals, (subjectively) receive a film, mobilising certain attitudes, conventions, norms and perspectives that form part of our identity and are also the result of our belonging to a certain social environment. At different moments in the film, the princess addresses the audience (directly or indirectly) regarding a variety of themes associated with her story: love, hope, fear or discontent. Her words and appeals to the audience do not refer exclusively to the narrative context of the film but are also potentially applicable and relevant to the political and sociocultural environment of the on-screen spectators. Several dialogues and monologues in the film evoke ideas and situations related to the context of women in Iran,<sup>10</sup> giving rise to reflections on its patriarchal family structure (Moradiyan Rizi, 2016: 50), where women are often oppressed by power relations that assign different responsibilities and privileges to men and women. Saljoughi (2012: 519) observes that *Shirin* draws attention to the failure of the Iranian Revolution of 1979 to safeguard the role of women in a collective vision of their society and culture. Moradiyan Rizi (2016: 49-50) suggests that many of the representations of heterosexual love stories in Persian literature and Iranian cinema impose feminine ideals such as invisibility, chastity and silence on women, but *Shirin* highlights female individuality through the filmic apparatus, bringing spectators closer to the subjectivity, desire and identification behind the face of each woman. The women watching the imaginary film, with their idiosyncratic and contextual differences, seem to project themselves onto the same story and from that same story they

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**SHIRIN'S STORY, AS A NARRATIVE MODEL WITH AN UNDERLYING VALIDITY FOR THE PERSONAL NARRATIVE OF EACH ON-SCREEN SPECTATOR, ACQUIRES SIGNIFICANCE AS A SUPPORT TO THE SEARCH FOR MEANING UNDERTAKEN BY EACH PROTAGONIST IN HER RELATIONSHIP WITH HER INDIVIDUAL AND SOCIAL REALITY**

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extract a variety of vital resonances and transferences. We follow the narration of the events on the soundtrack, but what the visuals provide is the interpretation of what we hear transferred to the lives of the spectators we observe. Moreover, the gaze of each protagonist seems to reflect a struggle to overcome what prevents her from making her own decisions based on her personal needs and desires (Gyenge, 2016: 138). For this reason, within Iranian culture and society, the experience of Princess Shirin's story offers an affective fulfilment of aspects of life that are yet to be realised, a release of accumulated tensions or a conferral of meaning upon events, facts and elements of the real world that may seem illogical according to the a priori understanding of each on-screen spectator. The positioning of women as protagonists pushes at cultural, social and political boundaries, questioning the factors of female oppression in Iran and providing a catharsis for the woman's condition.

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**CONCLUSION**

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*Shirin's* story, as a narrative model with an underlying validity for the personal narrative of each on-screen spectator, acquires significance as a support to the search for meaning undertaken by each protagonist in her relationship with her individual and social reality. Beyond the direct correspondence with facts of each personal reality, Shirin's story

provides the different life stories of the on-screen spectators with structure and significance. What we hear of adventures and misadventures in Shirin's narrative journey we imagine in the situations and life journeys of the women watching her story. In this sense, the women perpetuate and multiply the princess' narrative into multiple versions, taking it as a model for different meanings. Between what the protagonists observe and what we observe of them, *Shirin* establishes a dialogue between two surfaces that define the pragmatic impact of a film: the screen and the spectator. The yearnings of the filmmaker, characters and spectators coexist in the space of an experience that represents the very definition and potential of what it means to *watch a film*. At one point in *Taste of Shirin*, Kiarostami makes this point clear to his actresses, while preparing them for filming: "Now, as spectators, you are going to look at yourselves as actresses." The stories and personal qualities of the actresses, evoked by the Iranian director's *mise-en-scène*, set up a game between the personal and the collective, the public and the private, but also between the simulation of fiction and the documentary record. Fiction and reality are combined in a sense that is not limited to revealing their differences or to highlighting merely metaphorical similarities. *Shirin* exposes the importance of shared narratives and the capacity of cinema to invoke different realities beneath the same surface. In this way, Kiarostami's film helps demonstrate that the entire exercise of cinematographic creation is also always a place attributed to the spectators, who collaborate in the construction of the meanings of a film and of new traces and shadows that create it anew with every viewing. ■

**NOTES**

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- 1 Occasionally, male spectators appear in the frame, but always in the background. Thus, the main focus is clearly on the role of female viewers as protagonists of the film.
- 2 This text is based on the author's unpublished doctoral thesis, *La ficción 'realizada': implicaciones y transferencias entre ficción y realidad en la pragmática del cine narrativo* (2015).
- 3 The soundtrack that tells the story of Shirin was made in post-production; at the time of filming, the sounds used for the final version of the film had not yet been recorded.
- 4 Kiarostami explores the interpretive significance associated with the Kuleshov effect, exploiting the fact that we always interpret an image in relation to the visual information that precedes or follows it (and also the sound that accompanies it). It is thus particularly significant that Kiarostami directs the performances of his actresses arguing, among other things, that "the expression of indifference is better suited to the film," as he suggests in *Taste of Shirin*.
- 5 The use of the inner lives of his actors or actresses during the filmmaking process is a characteristic feature of Kiarostami's directing style and previous filmography (marked by a constant attempt to approximate reality and to uncover the truth of the environments and situations that their narratives explore). In *Taste of Shirin* (2008), Kiarostami confirms this intention several times, when he tells his actresses: "It is up to you to define the film for yourself"; "the more you are yourself, the better it will turn out"; "the best way [to act] is to screen a personal film in your head. If the sadness is something internal, personal, coming from yourself, something that hurt you a long time ago, then your performance will be more genuine."
- 6 Kiarostami filmed all the shots in the living room of his house, rearranging the space and the extras for each shot of the actresses.
- 7 When Farhad dies in *Shirin*, we hear crows and wind before the confirmation of what has happened; these sounds also lead us to intuit his probable death. Similarly, the sound of a chisel carving out stone suggests

Farhad's presence in the narrative frame before the narration or dialogue clearly announces it.

- 8 This classical character, contrary to Kiarostami's usual aesthetic, is defined by the use of matching visual and sound codes, which articulate univocal, non-polysemic and non-dichotomous meanings.
- 9 At around the fourth minute of *Shirin*, we hear a group of women (characters from the imaginary film) crying over something tragic that happened in the universe of the story. However, we observe the neutral, as yet indifferent expressions of the on-screen spectators, who at that moment are only beginning to enter the fiction world of the film they are watching. The dialogue between the sound and image described provides a natural (and perhaps even inevitable) bridge between the feelings of the women crying (fictional narration) and the women we see (fictional reception). While initially this relationship arises from the novelty of this gap, later it will take on contours of constant emotional proximity between the on-screen spectators and the characters of the film they are watching.
- 10 At one point, Shirin remarks: "Men get warmed by love. Women get burned. They are the first victims of that fire." A little later, in relation to Shiroveh's violence against his father (Khosrow) and his brothers to seize the throne of the kingdom, Shirin again appeals to the female spectators on this point: "You, my sisters, know this story better than I. This is one more men's game."

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## **SURFACES OF DESIRE: A PORTRAIT OF THE CINEMATIC EXPERIENCE BASED ON SHIRIN**

### **Abstract**

A film contains signs of its director's intentionality, determining what spectators can see and hear, but also what is kept hidden from their senses. This entails an idealised conception of the film's reception based on those decisions, decisively influencing the viewer's relationship with the film and the level of engagement with it. The evocation of desires, frustrations and tensions in the individual and collective lives of spectators creates an opportunity to deal with, confront or even resolve real-life issues through the cinematic experience. Thus, in its signifying nature, a film contains the polysemy necessary for new pathways to be revealed for the film and for those who experience it with each viewing. *Shirin* (Abbas Kiarostami, 2008) is a paradigmatic work for this inquiry into the processes and impacts inherent in film reception. Combining the soundtrack of a mythological tale and the performance of spectators (actresses) who relate emotionally to the narrative, *Shirin* offers an open journey through the ghosts of the implicit and explicit realities of its protagonists. Based on an analysis of Kiarostami's film, this article aims to identify and relate different aspects, proximities and distances that comprise the complexity and personal involvement of watching a film, exploring the film screen and spectators as sensory surfaces where the codes for unveiling unfulfilled desires emerge.

### **Key words**

Film; Spectator; Reception; Experience; Face; Screen; Shirin; Kiarostami.

### **Author**

Pedro Alves is an invited assistant professor at Escola das Artes (Universidade Católica Portuguesa, Porto), where he teaches screenwriting and film production. He is also a researcher at CITAR (Research Centre for Science and Technology of the Arts). He has published several articles on film, narrative and education and is the co-author of *Aprender del cine: narrativa y didáctica* and *Oficios del cine: manual para prácticas cinematográficas*. Contact: pmalves@porto.ucp.pt

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## **SUPERFICIES DEL ANHELO: UN RETRATO DE LA EXPERIENCIA CINEMATOGRAFICA A PARTIR DE SHIRIN**

### **Resumen**

Una película evidencia marcas de la intencionalidad de su director, determinando lo que el espectador puede ver y escuchar, pero también lo que permanece escondido de sus sentidos. Eso presupone idealizar la recepción fílmica a partir de esas decisiones, influyendo decisivamente en la relación del receptor con el filme y los grados de su involucramiento con él. Convocar deseos, frustraciones y tensiones procedentes de la vida individual y colectiva del espectador conlleva la emergencia de una oportunidad de manejar, confrontar o, incluso, solucionar cuestiones reales a través de la experiencia cinematográfica. Así, una obra fílmica encierra, en su carácter significativa, la polisemia necesaria para que, en cada visionado, nuevos caminos se revelen para la película y para quien la vivencia. *Shirin* (Abbas Kiarostami, 2008) constituye una obra paradigmática en lo que concierne a esta indagación de los procesos e impactos inherentes a la recepción fílmica. Mezclando la escenificación sonora de un cuento mitológico y la performance de espectadoras (actrices) que se relacionan emocionalmente con la narrativa, *Shirin* entabla un trayecto abierto por los fantasmas de las realidades implícitas y explícitas de sus protagonistas. A partir del análisis de la película de Kiarostami, este artículo pretende identificar y relacionar diferentes aspectos, proximidades y distancias que conforman la complejidad e implicación vital de ver un filme, indagando la pantalla y los espectadores como superficies sensibles donde asoman los códigos-clave para desvelar anhelos por cumplir.

### **Palabras clave**

Cine; Espectador; Recepción; Experiencia; Rostro; Pantalla; Shirin; Kiarostami.

### **Autor**

Pedro Alves (Porto, 1984) es profesor auxiliar invitado en Escola das Artes - Universidad Católica Portuguesa, donde imparte clases de guion y producción audiovisual. Es también investigador de CITAR - Centro de Investigación en Ciencia y Tecnología de los Artes. Ha publicado diversos artículos sobre cine, narrativa, creatividad y educación y es coautor de los libros *Aprender del cine: narrativa y didáctica* y *Oficios del cine: manual para prácticas cinematográficas*. Contacto: pmalves@porto.ucp.pt

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