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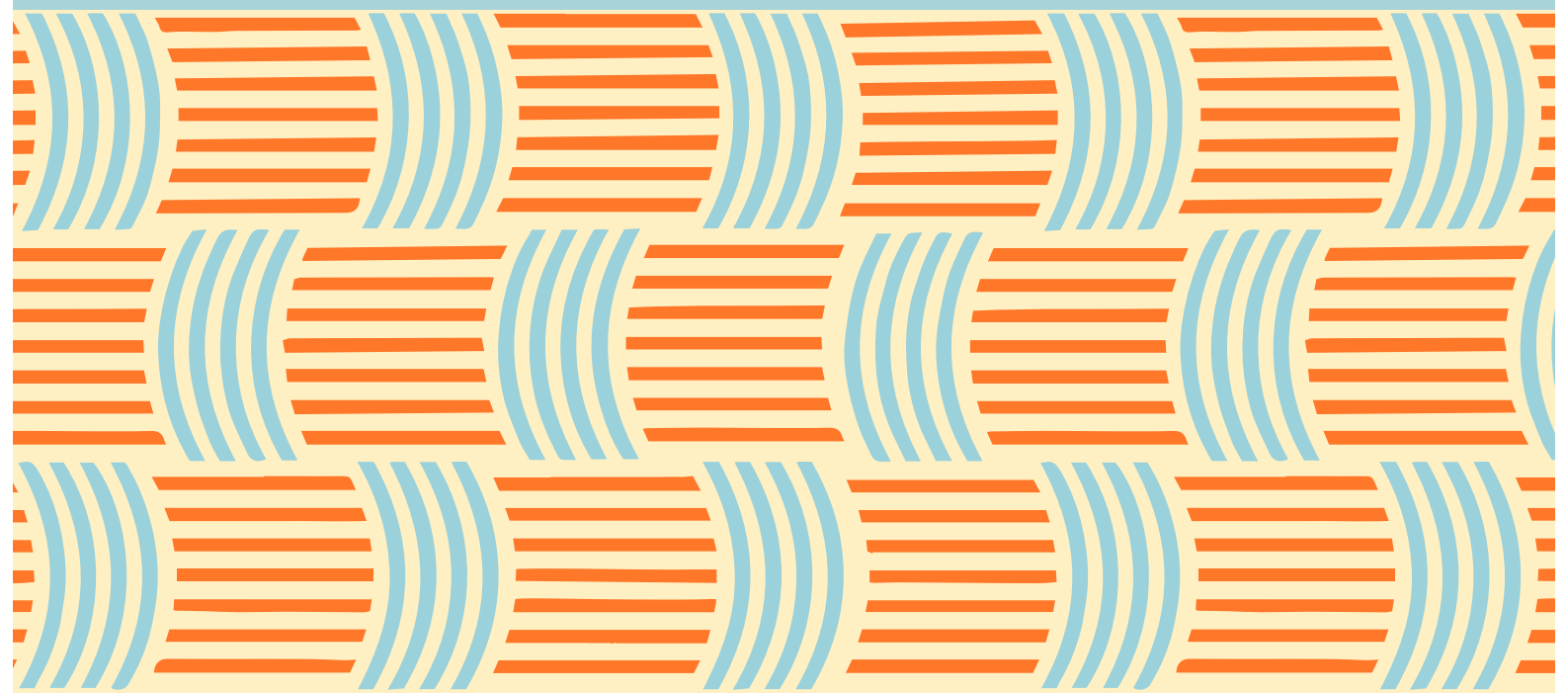
Borders

Itineraries on the Edges of Iran

edited by
Stefano Pellò



Edizioni
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Stefano Pellò (edited by)

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نه خاور No East
نه باختر No West
نه شمال No North
نه جنوب No South
همين جا كه من ايستاده ام Just this place where I am standing

(Abbas Kiarostami, 1940-2016)

7 Mirrors and beyond

Borders

Itineraries on the Edges of Iran

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The Thin Line between Original and Original

Marco Dalla Gassa

(Università Ca' Foscari Venezia, Italia)

Abstract The window and the mirror have often represented, in the history of cinema theories, two different ways to deal with the nature of vision: the first pledging to be the instrument to point to reality and the world, and the second appearing as a magnet, attracting, absorbing and redoubling individual subjectivities. In two short but meaningful sequences of *Copie conforme* (*Certified Copy*) Iranian director Abbas Kiarostami resolves this dicotomy, depriving both objects of their primary function: the window does not show and the mirror does not reflect. Dealing with the theoretical and practical consequences of this choice, which is read through the critical lenses of scholars such as Metz, Deleuze, Eco and Merleau-Ponty, the boundary spaces which separate and unite on-screen and off-screen, filmic and non-filmic, diegetic and non-diegetic, screen and theatre, copy and original are explored, especially when the camera takes the place of the mirror.

Summary 1 Two Twin Shots. – 2 Windows, Frames, Mirrors. – 3 Mirror, Mirror on the Wall... – 4 the Absent Mirror. – 5 *Conformed Copy*.

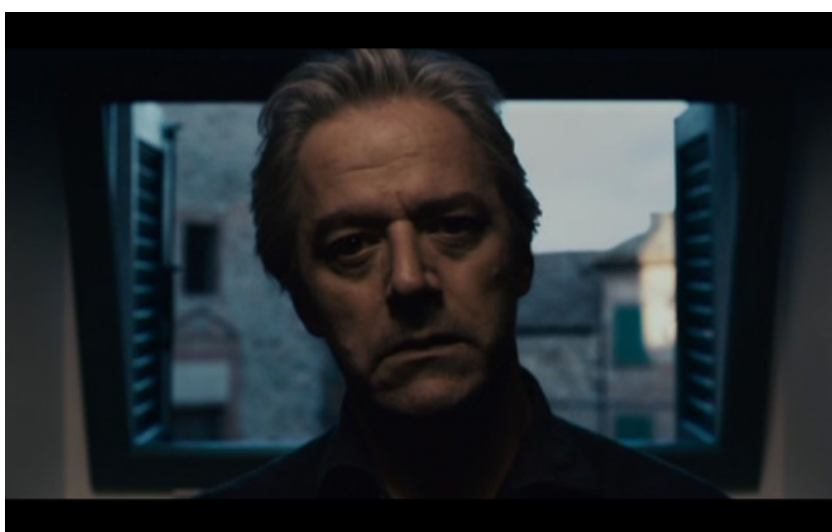
Keywords Abbas Kiarostami. Mirrors in Movies. Philosophy and Film. Iranian Cinema.

Les miroirs feraient bien de réfléchir un peu plus avant de nous renvoyer notre image

(Jean Cocteau)

1 Two Twin Shots

A woman looks in the mirror and smartens herself up. She is in the bathroom of a restaurant. She puts on lipstick. Then she is distracted by music coming from the little square outside the restaurant. She moves away from the mirror to a closed window behind her and peers through the slits in the shutters, looking at the scene for a moment. With a smile, she returns to gaze at herself anew; she adjusts her hair, chooses which earrings to wear, better defines the contour of her lips, and finally leaves the bathroom (fig. 1). A few hours later, a man looks in the mirror. He is in the bathroom of a hotel room. He turns on the light, turns on the faucet, and washes his



Figures 1-2. *Certified Copy*

hands, automated. He is absorbed in his thoughts with an absent stare. The tolling of the bells from a nearby church, a summons to the churchgoers, seems to wake him. The man resumes his self-examination. He fixes his hair with a hand and leaves the bathroom. A slight zoom puts the window behind him in focus: the roofs of the houses and, in the distance, the church tower producing the ringing of the bells. The film credits start to roll (fig. 2).

These are two 'twin' shots from Abbas Kiarostami's *Certified Copy* (*Copie conforme*, 2010). Separated by some twenty minutes, found in the second part of the film, they capture the two main characters – one an antiquarian, the other a writer – in two rare moments of 'solitude', looking themselves in the mirror, perhaps caught off guard in a self-reflective state, in a flash of self-consciousness. Conversely, for the rest of the story, the pair is engaged in continuous dialogue, full of reflections on life, art, and romantic relationships, commemorations of the past, or claims and reciprocal accusations. If



Figures 3-4.
The Wind Will Carry Us

one is not pontificating, the other is complaining, asking for reassurance, advancing theories or doubts, or soliciting and goading the partner in a procession of arguments that revolve around the (true or feigned?) crisis in their relationship. In contrast, in the two close-ups described above, it is the silence (or rather the background sounds), and especially the (inward-looking?) looks of the characters, to take the lead role.

The two narrative segments described here are provided elements of 'isolation' by the configurative strategy chosen by Kiarostami, which 'simulates' the presence of the mirror and never puts it in the pro-filmic space, thereby denying the characters 'company' with their own reflections. As can be seen from the frames published here, it is the actors who pretend to look in the mirror, acting as if it were there, when in fact their eyes are evidently facing the lens of the camera (and therefore the viewers). It is a solution that Kiarostami had used before, but of a less schismatic variation. I refer to *The Wind Will Carry Us* (*Bād mā rā Khāhad bord*, 1999) and, more

specifically, to a sequence in which the main character – a photographer from Tehran on a visit to a village in Iranian Kurdistan – shaves himself in the early morning on the balcony of a house. It is a recurring gesture, which the man repeats several times during his stay (and thus which we see represented other times), and which, in one instance, is presented through the point-of-view shot of a small mirror hanging next to the entryway of the house (fig. 3). In that film, however, the mirror appeared in other shots, contributing to an altogether consistent and logical diegetic universe (fig. 4).

In our case, however, as mentioned earlier, a more rigorous solution with more significant theoretical implications is adopted: in the two narrative segments described, no other shots or camera movements are made. We are only permitted to observe the reflected image of the two characters, without ever seeing the mirror that reflects it. I add that another object – of equal speculative importance – makes an appearance in the background of the two shots, once again convened without the ability to fully achieve its scopic function. I speak, of course, of the window that appears in the background of both shots. In the first occurrence it is closed with shutters that do not allow us to see what is happening in the square adjacent to the restaurant. In the second – while showing a glimpse of the roofs of a Tuscan country town – it becomes a kind of framed, neutral surface, above which the end credits roll.

2 Windows, Frames, Mirrors

It takes only a glance through any historical volume on cinema theory to realize that windows, frames, and mirrors are not only common objects that frequently inhabit cinematic diegesis, but are also favoured symbols in the determination of specific prerogatives of the moving image. Thomas Elsaesser and Malte Hagener identify them as among the earliest and most relevant metaphors to have characterized the evolution of discourse on the seventh art, united in the tracing, through an image-concept, of a range of possible relationships between the viewer and the film, and between the film and a certain time period and/or particular theoretical orientation (Elsaesser, Hagener 2015). Echoing the positions of Charles F. Altman (1977), Elsaesser and Hagener affirm that the first two allegorical objects – frame and window – are comparable with one another, despite the disparity in the respective experiences to which each alludes, for at least three reasons: 1) they are models (one constructivist and other realist) which require perceptive practices that are exclusively scopic, leading to a clear distance between seer and seen; 2) they pose the image as a fact and shift the viewer's attention to the film and its structures; 3) they maintain a separation between the experiences of production and reception.

«In other words the cinema as window and frame [...] is ocular-specular (i.e. conditioned by optical access), transitive (one looks at something) and disembodied (the spectator maintains a safe distance)» (Elsaesser, Hagener 2015, p. 15).

If a look into the frame or through the window poses little hermeneutic problems - continue the two Dutch scholars - a look into the mirror determines more questions, because it relies on psychoanalytically based approaches, and begs questions of identity and otherness, recognition, and alienation, in more stringent ways.

A look into the mirror necessitates a confrontation with one's own face as the window to one's own interior self. Yes, this look at oneself in the mirror is also a look from outside, a look that no longer belongs to me, that judges or forgives me, critics or flatters me, but at any rate has become the look of another, or 'the Other'. (Elsaesser, Hagener 2015, pp. 64-65)

For Dudley Andrew too, in his *Concepts in Film Theory*, window and mirror represent two essential metaphors, if one wishes to reconstruct - with any degree of order - discourse on cinema:

In classical film theory two metaphors of the screen had vied for supremacy. André Bazin and the realists championed the notion that the screen was a «window» on the world, implying abundant space and innumerable objects just outside its border. But to Eisenstein, Arnheim, and the formalists, the screen was a frame whose boundaries shaped the images appearing on it. The frame constructed meaning and effects; the window displayed them. [...] Jean Mitry holds that cinema's particular advantage and appeal lies in maintaining the implications of both these metaphors. The cinema is at once a window and a frame. Classical film theory could go no further. Only by shifting the discourse to another plane and invoking another system could modern theory develop. A new metaphor was advanced: the screen was termed a *mirror*. On the force of this coinage, new relations suddenly came to light and were for the first time open to systematic inquiry. Questions about the connections cinema maintains with reality and with art (window and frame, respectively) were subsumed under the consideration of cinema's rapport with the spectator. A new faculty, the unconscious, instantly became a necessary part of any overarching film theory, and a new discourse, psychoanalysis, was called upon to explain what before had been of little consequence, the fact and the force of desire. (Andrew 1984, p. 134)

In other words, in the window/frame and in the mirror two different ways of interpreting the cinematographic apparatus are put in contrast. On one hand, cinema as a vehicle for transparency: a «window open to the world»,

in the Bazinian sense – a real place that emphasizes itself, and an ideal observation space; on the other, cinema as a «mirror for the unconscious», a privileged place of subjectivity, of specularity, of fission and desire, a surface across which the viewer comes to terms with the mechanisms of (non-)recognition, with the image of reflected ‘self’, and, at the same time, the familiar and inexorably distant image of the ‘other’.

Within this apparently aporetic horizon, what do these two shots from *Certified Copy* tell us, and how do they relate to the theme of the double, and the relationship between copy and original, developed over the course of the film, and in this section of the book? Moreover, what are the points of contact between a film that mixes cultures, looks, heteroclitic sensitivity,¹ and the question of otherness and individual/cultural recognition? What role is assumed by the mirror and window, if any, in the dynamics of ‘confinement’, namely, in those procedural places of liminality inhabited by crossings, junctions, no entry borders, checkpoints, and identification protocol? To some of these questions, I will try to offer answers in this essay, after better clarifying the importance of the figure of the mirror in the literature of cinema (and more).²

3 Mirror, Mirror on the Wall...

The most famous mirror-centred film theories are undoubtedly those of Christian Metz and Jean-Louis Baudry (Metz 1977; Baudry 1970 and 1975). Although they present different nuances and various degrees of intensity, the two French theorists agree that there is a kind of similarity between the experience of the mirror and that of the screen – found on the face of the construction of the scopical subject. In their writings there is a strong focus on cinematographic apparatus – the dark room, the seat, the projector, light beams, the screen – within which the viewer would live out a kind of controlled regression to the so-called «mirror stage» theorized by Jacques Lacan (1966, pp. 793-827). With this noted expression, we refer generally to that stage of the developmental process – between six and eighteen months – in which children begin to construct their own identity, (also) thanks to the ability to look at their own reflection. Still unable to fully manage the movements of their bodies and conceive of themselves as an object autonomous from the mother, children observe themselves in the mirror and, says Lacan, identify themselves, for the first time, as an

1 It is worth mentioning that, even though Kiarostami is an Iranian director, *Certified Copy* was shot in Italy by an Italian crew and produced by a French-Belgian-Italian-Iranian co-production, and its intended audience were cinéphiles and festival goers.

2 For a historical introduction to the significance of the mirror in Western culture, see Melchior-Bonnet 1994.

object in and of itself, thereby projecting a self that is ideal, imaginary, and narcissistic and allows for entrance into symbolic order, and therefore into the surrounding social structures. This same stage, as reinforced by both Metz and Baudry, is relived also by the movie-going audience who, having entered the dark room and sat down in an armchair, relives the same infantile lack of motor capacity, accompanied by marked visual hypertrophy and a narcissistic dimension of recognition of the ideal self.³ Almost without knowing it, the viewer interacts with the images on the screen with the same ambivalence of disbelief and destabilization that tests the new-born before his or her reflected image of self.

The cinematographic apparatus distances itself, however, from the mirror, due to another equally significant phenomenon: that of removal, delimited more precisely by the writings of Metz. Unlike what happens with the mirror, on the silver screen everything can be reverberated except the face and the body of the viewer in the room. If to Baudry such removal targets a 'phantomization' of the subject and a transparent and idealistic naturalism of the story (especially in Hollywood movies), to Metz it causes a genuine cognitive and psychological misunderstanding, because the cinema spectator believes that he or she recognizes, in a Self, something truly other than self, without registering that the all-seeing, omniscient faculties assigned to him or her lead him or her to a primary identification with the same reproductive apparatus which shares both optical and ideological points of view. Without delving further into theoretical texts of relative interest in this study, it is, in any case, good to preserve their volition to reason – even through the metaphor of the mirror – around certain cultural paradigms. Obviously, I think of the topic of the 'double', on which we will reflect in a moment, but also I think, more generally, of those polarized categories – subjectivity/objectiveness, individual/social, real/illusory, actual/virtual – that find, in specular refraction, a place to interact and negotiate. In other words, psychoanalytic approaches teach us that the mirror is not only an object/metaphor that 'reflects' slices of Self or of the world, but is also a tool that allows one to see the work of some of the models of operation of what exists, while being forced – before a reflective surface – to dissolve contradictions in specular (and social) practice.

The latter position is advocated philosophically by Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who, by virtue of his studies on the phenomenology of perception, often looked into the inferences between apparently irreconcilable dualities, by no accident identifying, in the mirror and in artistic practice, two places privileged with their disambiguation. Endorsing the careful reconstruction of Merleau-Pontyan thought by Pietro Montani (Montani 1999,

³ For other psychoanalytic studies contemporary to Lacan approach devoted to the relations among cinema, mirror, and specularity, see Kristeva (1975) and Mulvey (1975).

pp. 63-80), I'd like to point out that in *The Eye and the Spirit*, for example, the French philosopher argues that the experience of looking in the mirror allows the individual, as in few other everyday instances, a clear understanding of the proximity between the being and the entirety of the world, or to use two of his famous definitions, between one's 'own body' and the 'flesh of the world'. The reason lies in the fact that those who look in the mirror live the exceptional condition of simultaneously 'being seen and seeing', an ego in contact with a me/other-than-self.⁴ In *The Invisible and the Visible* he specifies:

I the seer am also visible. What makes the weight, the thickness, the flesh of each colour, of each sound, of each tactile texture, of the present, and of the world is the fact that he who grasps them feels himself emerge from them by a sort of coiling up or redoubling, fundamentally homogeneous with them. He feels that he is the sensible itself coming to itself and that in return the sensible is in his eyes as it were his double or an extension of his own flesh.

Despite having an approach quite distant from the phenomenological one, Gilles Deleuze too identifies a similar dualism that, before the mirror, tends to translate into proximity, or better, «coalescence». In his celebrated *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, Deleuze entrusts to the mirror the task of configuring what he calls «the crystals of time», or two-faced images in which an actual image and a virtual image coexist and are reconciled. Without ever merging, the two aspects interact in a movement of «mutual presupposition» and «reversibility». According to the French philosopher

there is no virtual which does not become actual in relation to the actual, the latter becoming virtual through the same relation: it is a place and its observe which are totally reversible. [...] The indiscernibility of the real and the imaginary, or of the present and the past, of the actual and the virtual, is definitely not produced in the head or the mind, it is the objective characteristic of certain existing images which are by nature double [...] The most familiar case is the mirror. [...] The mirror-image is virtual in relation to the actual character that the mirror catches, but it is actual in the mirror which now leaves the character with only a virtuality and pushes him back out-of-field. [...] Distinct, but indiscernible, such are the actual and the virtual which are in continual exchange. When

⁴ In *Eye and Mind* he writes: «Mirrors are instruments of a universal magic that converts things into spectacle, spectacle into things, myself into another, and another into myself. Artists have often mused upon mirrors because beneath this 'mechanical trick' they recognized just as they did in the case of the trick of perspective, the metamorphosis of seeing and seen which defines both our flesh and the painter's vocation» (Merleau-Ponty 1993, p. 130).

the virtual image becomes actual, it is then visible and limpid, and in the mirror or the solidity of finished crystal. But the actual image becomes virtual in its turn, referred elsewhere, invisible, opaque and shadowy, like a crystal barely dislodged from the earth. The actual-virtual couple thus immediately extends into the opaque-limpid, the expression of their exchange. (Deleuze 1989, p. 69)

For Deleuze there are other objects and conditions of reciprocity – par-amnesia, recollection, the making of an artwork within a film, even ships (Deleuze 1989, pp. 68-97) – that allow the coalescence between actual and virtual manifestation; it is nevertheless indicative, at least here, that it is the mirror to assume, before other elements, a performative specular scope that hosts, without exclusion, ideal and material or, if it better serves, metaphorical and corporeal. And it is cinema, just as painting was for Merleau-Ponty, to be tasked with putting these inferential dynamics to a process.

In this sense, it can be said that the contributions of both Merleau-Ponty and Deleuze confirm – albeit indirectly – the most compelling passages of another renowned essay devoted to mirrors, by Umberto Eco. For the Italian scholar, in fact, before wondering whether the mirror was an object able to illustrate the functioning of semiosis, it was necessary to clear up a big misunderstanding, according to which the refractive object inverts images and reverses them in an expression of inverse symmetry. Contrary to common belief, says Eco, mirrors place reflected objects exactly where they ought to be, with the parts on the right to the right, and the left to the left, and it is due only to the ingenuousness of the observer, who imagines himself in place of the reflected two-dimensional profile, that the perceptive ambiguity can sustain itself continuously.⁵ According to this reasoning, which has its philosophical counterpart in the earlier mentioned Deleuze and Merleau-Ponty, the domain of the vision, emotions, and interpretive skills of an observer sets itself against a dynamism easily reconstructible by the laws of physics, and is, in fact, the individual habit and social whole in which the short circuit of sense produced by an object, otherwise peaceful in its behaviour, is realized. Without a subject placed in front and (thereby) mirrored, significant dualities, in other words, could not be produced: the virtual and actual would not form crystallizations, and the exceptional condition of «visible-seer» would not be realized in the absence of an active scopic regime. For Bertetto, this centrality of the gaze relies

5 Eco writes: «A mirror reflects the right side exactly where the right side is, and the same with the left side. It is the observer (so ingenuous even when he is a scientist) who by self-identification imagines he is the man inside the mirror and, looking at himself, realizes he is wearing his watch on his right wrist. But it would be so only if he, the observer I mean, were the one who is inside the mirror (*Je est en autre!*)» (Eco 1984, pp. 205-206).

on the fact that the mirror determines the realization of a «simultaneous and complementary objectivity and subjectivity of identity». The subject

sees himself as he wishes, but simultaneously sees how he appears to the world due to the reduplication of the mirror-camera: he is visible, but in the way a subject is visible to himself, and therefore is seen subjectively in an objective configuration that is invested by the gaze of the subject. It is the subjectivity of the objectivity of a character-subject. (Bertetto 2007, pp. 153-154)

Cinema, in this respect, allows discourse to take a step forward. As with any other visual system, the cinematographic apparatus indeed serves to show us that the look in action is not always merely that of the subject standing before the mirror, but could also belong to a third party observer. There is a group of more recent, exclusively cinematographic studies, which proves the accuracy of this assumption, thanks to the decision to keep issues of symbolic, philosophical, and/or declaratory order in the background, with a focus, instead, on the morphological dynamics that can be triggered with the introduction of a reflective surface to a particular environment. As recalled by Dario Tomasi in a book devoted to the models of representation of some typical dramatic situations, the presence of a mirror in a shot, in fact, offers increasingly «new horizons to cinematic representation [because] it shows more and more of what it might represent without it» (Tomasi 2004, p. 278). In other words, the specular device conveys a surplus of information, not only with respect to character psychology or possible variations of the narrative path, but also to the optical-visual aspect of a film – to its formal configuration. The reason is simple: because shots that contain a mirror always exhibit a part of the diegetic space that, in its absence, would be relegated outside the scene. It follows that its presence induces a multiplication of perspective planes and escape routes, an enrichment of the dynamics between on- and off-camera or even a redefinition of the logic of the construction of the *cadrage*. In their essays on mirrors, Dario Tomasi (2004, pp. 278-324) as well as other scholars such as Antonio Costa,⁶ Alessandro Cappabianca (2011), or Paolo Bertetto⁷ (to

⁶ Costa essentially analyses three cases: labyrinthine mirrors, the image *in* the mirror vs. the image *of* the mirror, and the non-existent mirrors (which I will return to later) (Costa 2014, pp. 199-216).

⁷ Bertetto identifies eight possible specularities: 1) specular images that fill the entire field of vision; 2) images of one or more characters reflected in a mirror that doesn't use up the entire field of vision; 3) images of one or more characters looking their reflection(s) in a mirror; 4) images multiplied by a number of mirrors; 5) images vaguely reflected in a mirror or in some other reflective medium; 6) images in a mirror that you can go through; 7) images reflected in a mirror where the character's reflection is missing; 8) virtual images reflected in an invisible mirror (Bertetto 2007, pp. 134-153).

remain within the manageable scope of Italian literature), analyse various case studies with the objective of highlighting the wide range of expressive possibilities, formal and hermeneutic, offered by reflective surfaces. Unifying these works beyond a certain taxonomist temptation is the decision to select sequences from generally acknowledged masterpieces of cinema history (*Mulholland Drive*, *The Shining*, *Persona*, *Senso*, *Taxi Driver*, *The Lady from Shanghai*, *The Circus*, *Vertigo* and many others) in which the mirror is always found in-frame, and is always shown to the viewer while 'in action', i.e., in the act of refracting the rays of light that hit its surface (characters, rooms, other mirrors, etc.). It is a less obvious and generic lowest common denominator than it might appear at first glance because it indicates, indirectly, how the presence of the mirror is assiduous in movies, not only in its status as an everyday object, but because it triggers scopic dynamics that are often sophisticated, centred around the only person - to recall Metz - that can never be reflected there: the cinema spectator. In other words, the viewer who sits before the screen is the final - and possibly the only - terminus of the phenomena of a shift of the light produced by the cinematographic mirrors - phenomena that, often, would not take on the same expressive 'spectrum' or visual configuration were they seen from other perspective angles or, above all, by other eyes.

The 'specular' sequences that attest to the scopic centrality of the viewer are so numerous that, in the absence of adequate space, we can refer to them only summarily. Consider, as an example, certain sequences in which the mirror reveals some information to the viewer about the storyline, in advance or subsequently to the foresight or knowledge of a character. Moreover, there are cases wherein the movements of the camera or the optical dolly reveal the specular nature of certain images which previously seemed to be 'objective', generating genuine *trompe-l'oeil* effects, but only for those in the theatre, sharing the viewpoint of the camera in motion. Furthermore, there are rarer, though no less emblematic, cases in which the mirror does not reflect the characters or objects adjacent to it, but images that are unlikely (such as invisible characters, fantastic or oneiric images, etc.), deformed (when the mirror is knurled or curved), or virtual (in comedic gags, when a character pretends to be the mirror image of another individual, symmetrically repeating his or her movements). All of these instances deal with visual-narrative situations in which the refractive phenomenon, real or pretended, is freed from the constraints of *mimesis* to become a pure optical effect, capable first and foremost of causing the viewer to feel basic and thymic emotions (and not, therefore, abstract or complex speculations) such as fear, anxiety, enjoyment, and so on.

4 The Absent Mirror

This overview of cinema theories and studies devoted to mirrors may help demonstrate why I am so drawn to the two aforesaid shots from *Certified Copy*. First, unlike those analysed in the volumes mentioned above, there is no mirror ‘in action’ or, rather, there is but it is not seen; we see no refractive surface, we see no reflected images, and we do not perceive any shifting of light. Tempering this with the earlier reported cases, we see that we are dealing with an extreme case of specular ‘expressivity’ – extreme because it implies the possibility to overturn Tomasi’s definition as well as the claims of most studies on the subject. In Kiarostami’s film, the mirror offers «new horizons to cinematic representation» not because it shows more, but because it shows less «of what might be represented without it». In fact, in adopting any other mode of representation – with the juxtaposition of shots, camera movements, pairings, scale shots, etc. – we would certainly have seen the bathroom (including the shape of the mirror), the entryway, the furniture, the characters’ clothing, and much more. Conversely, in the two static shots, without dialogue or cuts, no information is presented to the viewer to help him understand the plot points, nor any ensured, iconic, sophisticated conformation to the pleasure of his gaze. We can see how unusual the representational strategy is because it succeeds in the difficult undertaking of excluding the mirror from the pro-filmic space (i.e., everything presented in-frame in the course of a film), rendering it a cardinal parallel subject of the diegetic world (i.e., the narrative world in which the characters find themselves). As commonly happens in films by the Iranian director, the fundamental operation through which the viewer can and must relate to the film is that of subtraction (of narrative information, expressive articulation, and perceptive possibilities).⁸

Second, it should be noted that in the two close-ups under examination here, the mirror is not ‘trivially’ placed out of scene, as sometimes happens, or to the right or left of the shot (usually expected to be seen with a dolly or subsequent take). On the contrary, we observe a genuine substitution of the specular device with the cinematographic apparatus. The rectangular surface of the mirror collimates, in other words, with one created by the ‘matte box’ of the camera, and this happens not only with regard to its surface, but, above all, inasmuch as its edges are concerned. Thus, the rectangular mirror becomes a liminal space, a border-land, itself appointing, as usually happens to the matte of the camera, the boundaries that separate and unite the in-shot and the off screen, the filmic from the non-filmic, diegetic from non-diegetic, the screen from the theatre, and

⁸ On the ‘subtractive’ dimension of Kiarostami’s cinema see, among others, Elena 2005, Oubiña 2000, Ugenti 2013.

so on. The formal choice seems to contain an implicit theoretical subtext: borders, perimeters, and even frames and 'windows' – note that in Italian the matte box is called *quadrucchio* (lit. 'little square section'), as well as *finestrino* ('little window') – return a significant 'depth' (the 'depth' of the mirror), deeper than the reflected image itself, and not only due to the absence of the latter. We witness the paradox of a reflective object that delegates part of its structural sense to its edges – the parts of the mirror that do not reflect. Those that, at the beginning of essay, I had presented as antithetical theoretical objects become, in configurative practice, perfectly complementary: the mirror is a window (or better, a *finestrino*) and the window is a mirror, enabling a first movement of 'coalescence' (with others to come) by way of hermeneutical consequences that are not irrelevant. Put another way: in *Certified Copy*, window, frame, and mirror are never metaphors for anything (else) – that is, they offer no information that might be read in figurative or metaphorical sense – but are limited to establishing a 'free port' in which refractive and non-refractive coexist, closed window and window open to the world are reconciled, 'own body' and 'flesh of the world' are indistinguishable.

The gaze of the protagonists into the camera/mirror produces further interesting short circuits. It is, at the same time, an inquisitive look, directed (also) to the cinema spectator, who, being statutorily invisible, according to Metz and Baudry, even becomes the convergence point of the eyes, found, as it happens, in place of the mirror. What the viewer sees on the silver screen is thus the image of an actor/character who seems to want to see his own reflection in him. The virtual effect is alienating and paroxysmal. In this way, the identification processes inherent to specular phenomena are overturned: it is not the viewer to recognize himself in his hero, but, conversely, the hero to seek his reflection in the viewer. On the other hand, by ideally looking each other in the eyes, spectator and character would not register any mutual resemblance (excluding the case, albeit interesting, in which the leading actors, Juliette Binoche and William Shimell, find themselves among the audience). Inversely, those at the mirror find themselves irremediably different, at least from a physiognomic perspective. The right side is not where the right side is, nor the left side where the left side is, for the simple fact that there is no right side or left side to be collimated. It seems to me that the consequently activated theoretical horizon, in this case too, is evident: although sharing an extension of the surface as well as a point of view, there is a correlation between mirror and screen only in the recognition of their diversity. It follows that the viewer cannot be (like) the child who recognizes his own image in the mirror/screen, because he himself is the mirror, involved in his role as speculative agent, subject/object/apparatus 'in action'. He finds himself within a mechanism that does not produce doubles, does not generate projections, does not create specularity, and does not bring developmental 'stages' to revival. He simply is.

I support such a hypothesis also being comforted by the fact that, in the two sequences mentioned, a decisive role is played by the performative dimension of the actor. Inasmuch as is the subject on-camera, the viewer too is evidently aware that there is no specular image on the set of the two performers. The woman who puts on the lipstick and earrings – as well as the man fixing his hair – simulates gestures that both would make were they observing their own reflections. They simulate; they do not do it ‘for real’. As Hajnal Kiraly would say, «the protagonists are playing that they are playing» (Kiraly 2012, p. 57). The exhibition of this kind of acting, present not only in these two scenes but at other points in the story as well, takes us back to previous features by Kiarostami. As those who have seen it will remember, the film *Shirin* (2008) consists of a succession of shots dedicated to a group of female spectators attending a performance of *Khosrow and Shirin*, a famous twelfth-century traditional Persian poem written by Nezami Ganjevi. We see them seated next to each other in a kind of cinema (or theatre), shot steadily in close-up, without the ability to see the object of their gaze (the show), of which we hear only the sound. In juxtaposition one *next* to the other (in the pro-filmic space) and one *after* the other (in diegetic time), female characters of *Shirin* are shown in the foreground while they cry, laugh, and are moved to the beats of the actors on scene (figs. 5-7). European viewers may not know it, but the actresses involved in Kiarostami’s project are all stars of Iranian film and television (Mahnaz Afshar, Katayoon Riahi, Hedieh Tehrāni, Leila Hatami, Mahtab Karamati, and many others). They are a group to which only one foreigner is added: French actress Juliette Binoche (fig. 8).

It follows that the acting role-play, in *Shirin* as well as in the two examples from *Certified Copy*, becomes an essential element of the narrative device employed by Kiarostami, although the consequences, in both cases, seem to lead to faraway lands, and not only for a disparity in the number of occurrences. In the first film it is unknown whether the women, as spectators, are moved ‘for real’, or rather, as actresses, play the role of those who are moved in the attendance of a show. The film is presented as a kind of filmofanic documentary, wherein the ‘real’ actors are those who tread – out of frame – the boards. The actresses/spectators, in other words, do not have to do anything but watch the performance of others in their enactment of a drama. Herein lies the ambiguity of their role. In the second case, however, the gestures of the performers target the camera/viewer and are therefore manifestly artificial. I add that in the first case, as said, the actresses do not speak, but recite with their eyes and facial expressions, all but renouncing the instrument of their craft – the voice –, whereas in the second

Juliette Binoche’s way of acting is especially full of mannerism, as she seems to be continuously looking into a mirror, ‘matching’ her face to the



Figures 5-8. *Shirin*

given situation [...]. Her being the only professional actor of the film, this can also be interpreted as a self-reflexive statement about acting or, more specifically, method-acting that still holds very strongly in European and American cinema. She is evidently playing herself as an actress, when, just like a chameleon, she is deliberately changing her well known 'film faces' as well: the Hollywood star, the dramatic actress of European art movies and the almost unrecognizable, everyday face without makeup from Kiarostami's previous film, *Shirin*. (Király 2012, p. 57)

No smaller is the interference created by another formal antithetical choice: if in *Shirin* the women's gaze is directed mainly out of frame, towards the stage,⁹ in *Certified Copy* - not only in the two sequences in reference, but also in others - the lines of sight are directed towards the centre of the frame, searching for an invisible viewer, signalling another significant reversal of roles on the scopic level: in *Shirin*, the actresses interpret the audience in attendance of a love story that has been performed time and time again (the one between the Sasanian emperor Khosrow and the Armenian princess Shirin), while in *Certified Copy*, the actors 'are' the protagonists of a love story that has been lived out time and time again.

⁹ On gaze and close-ups in Kiarostami's *Shirin* see especially Grønstad 2012-2013.

Nevertheless, the two films share the same absence of the mirror, i.e., the absence of the object being viewed, or if it serves, the absence of the double, for those involved in the film, but especially for the viewers. The mirror of the two bathrooms in *Certified Copy* and the stage of *Khosrow and Shirin* are equally virtual objects – conceptual spaces that, far from producing similarity and recognition, determine distances and misunderstandings. For viewers of *Shirin*, ninety-two minutes of close-ups of women may be slow and tiresome, *a fortiori* if presented with the faces of film stars that simulate the emotions they themselves wish to feel, fictionalizing life in the theatre. As for *Certified Copy*, the direct interpellation aims to a reflection that, as we have seen, is in fact impossible, if not only by virtue of that actorliness that feeds the degree of separation between the poles of communication and recognition, rather than diminishing them. And it is no paradox that the greatest possible distance between audience and screen is calculated in devices that produce the greatest possible proximity.

5 *Conformed Copy*

Misunderstandings sometimes become the space wherein cultures are explained, compared, and found to be different. Misunderstanding is boundary that takes form. It becomes a neutral zone, a *terrain-vague*, wherein identity, respective identities, can establish themselves, remaining quite separate by precisely a misunderstanding. [...] But misunderstandings also provide a space for explanation. [...] The misunderstanding is, then, a chance for translation – an area in which the incommensurability between persons or cultures has been come to terms with. [...] The management of the misunderstanding has to do [...] with ‘practices’, with expertise in relations, with a cultural ‘knowing’ with respect to other and to otherness, with an art of living and living together in spite of, or indeed because of, the misunderstanding. (La Cecla 1997, pp. 9-10)

The theses of Franco La Cecla, summarily presented in the citation above, offer me some decisive interpretative keys to lead the proposed argument to its conclusion, finally addressing the question of the relationship between ‘copy’ and ‘original’, which we know to be – even from the title – the central theme of Kiarostami’s film. The narrative pretext by which to start this reflection is known: James Miller (the male protagonist) is an English writer who lives in Tuscany and has published an essay entitled *Certified Copy*, devoted to the importance of copies in art history. At the presentation of the Italian translation, among the audience is also a middle-aged antiques dealer who finds a way, after the event, to see the man again and ask him to account for some of the theses presented in the book. These

are not particularly original or articulate theories (in a nutshell, a copy can be more beautiful than its original and is in equal possession of an artistic statute of its own), but they are juxtaposed with a plot that involves, first, a series of wanderings by car through the Tuscan hills where the couple got to know each other and began courting, then, in the middle of its development, an unexpected and original twist that overturns the situation completely. As a result of the misunderstanding of an elderly bartender who mistakes the writer and antiquarian for husband and wife, at a certain point the two relinquish the professional clothing worn until then (also putting an end to the implicit ongoing courtship) to dress as a couple in crisis. In other words, having deliberated aloud on the meaning of a 'certified copy', the two suddenly become the embodiment of a 'certified couple'. This is the most intriguing moment in the film, at least in my opinion. Having become something other than themselves, the two characters begin, in fact, to play out (in feint, but to what extent?) some common dynamics between partners who have come to find themselves in a marital crisis: anger, vindication, reproaches, longings, memories, and above all, mutual misunderstandings. Their behaviour and feelings appear, thus, both trite, having been experienced dozens of times by dozens of couples before them, and original, lived out by the spouses as if they were new, exclusive, and authentic. In a certain sense, one might say with a *calembour* that the two characters demonstrate the originality of a copy of an unoriginal couple.

With this wordplay, the importance of misunderstanding in action can be gathered. Meanwhile, the narrative twist is generated through a misunderstanding - an exchange between people - that nevertheless helps the two characters to intensify their relationship. For all the argument and accusation, the two are brought closer together - they do not turn away. I note further that the Kiarostami's copy of a couple in crisis - just as with false reproductions of original paintings - is not meant to solve old misunderstandings, but generate new ones, above all in those who watch the story detached and from afar, as a viewer. This viewer will continue to wonder whether and to what extent they pretend, whether and how they reproduce dialogues already delivered elsewhere, and whether and how much of their love story can be considered authentic. The misunderstanding that informs the change of pace in the story satisfies, in other words, the need to build new, if unstable, 'spaces of explanation' - in this case not only internal to the couple, but also between the film and viewership.

Coming to the two sequences analysed in this study and examining them with an attentive approach to the productivity of misunderstanding, they might assume one last hermeneutical function to be added to those already identified. In previous paragraphs, I have 'unfolded' the two shots explaining them as extensions that identify the boundaries between the in-shot and the off screen, the screen and the seat of the viewer, diegetic

and non-diegetic space; then, as moments exhibiting acting that tries in vain to reflect itself in the viewer; and finally, as subtractive configurations of environments, narratives, psychological traits, metaphors, and allegories. Now, it seems to me that the close-ups of Juliette Binoche and William Shimell may also be understood as combinations through which the dialectic between original and copy lives – thanks, above all, to the presence/absence of the mirror – a condition of unpredictability that conflicts with the ‘normativity’ of the rest of the story. It seems to me, in fact, that the two ‘own bodies’, without reflections, doubles, or identifies, left alone with themselves before a mirror that does not exist and an audience that is unseen, realize that they are living the fate of the copy, in (temporary) absence of an original. In other words, like a picture whose original is momentarily lost, the two take on a statute of originality, albeit knowing themselves to be a copy of something else – a copy of two actors delivering a performance, a copy of spectators attending a show, a standardized copy of couples in crisis. The originality of the reflected images acquires, to further paraphrase, a temporary condition that may be dissolved at any instant, that is, when the model of reference reappears: the actor in the flesh, a more multi-faceted character, a line of sight that unmasks the absence of the mirror and the presence of the film crew.

Awaiting this occurrence, the copy/couple without original becomes the bearer of its own time-limited originality, reason and result of a comparison that has yet to be put in place and then eventually solved through a more or less authenticating act. The misunderstanding – whether potential or actual – becomes a construct that not only creates spaces, but also times for explanation. It tills the dialectical fields, but also reaffirms the limit of their chronological order. The face in the mirror is, from this point of view, an anachronistically ‘plastic’ demonstration of what I am trying to say. It captures a physiognomic conformation, briefly containing its slow and continuous process of transformation. Yet it can never be a certified copy, because meanwhile its original (the face that is reflected), as in a Zeno’s paradox, has undergone, if imperceptible, a morphological change. It is a copy that does not conform, therefore, in an original, if not necessarily authentic, way. Reflections – and in particular those analysed here, as they are deprived of their object – sanction, in other words, that each original is original to the extent that it has its own temporality, more or less limited, more or less inclined to being corrupted. It is a time, however, that is decisive, because, as said ironically by Cocteau, it is what the mirror needs (and in this case, what the viewer needs, who *is* the mirror) to «réfléchir un peu plus avant de nous renvoyer notre image».

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