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Practice of Indecisiveness

Knowledge often breaks into pieces when put into practice, with each piece taking one to the most unlikely places.

At the time of Iran's 1979 revolution, the Iranian filmmaker Abbas Kiarostami made a documentary film called *First Case, Second Case*. The film was originally shot just before the revolution and completed only after the declaration of its victory. The film, itself divided into two opposite moral takes on its subject, later faced the same fate, that is, first winning an award for what was interpreted as a parable on the Shah's secret police, and later banned for addressing issues politically too sensitive for the post-revolutionary government.

The film is about a boy not owning up to having misbehaved in the classroom. The teacher, who does not know who the guilty party is, sends a group of pupils out of the classroom. 'First case' involves the pupils refusing to name the guilty party, and as a result, remaining expelled from the class. In the 'second case' one pupil from the group identifies the culprit and returns to his seat. School inspectors, the education minister and other newly appointed political figures from the post-revolutionary government are filmed commenting on the two cases. Some believe the students should not name names as this undermines the model of moral character, while others agree with the second case as being principally correct. Throughout the whole film we see either the pupils standing in a row against the corridor wall outside the classroom, or the talking heads of the commentators. At the time the film was banned, the political climate was quite similar to what this film depicts. One reason for its later ban was because some of the commentaries were coming from members of political parties that had been declared illegal in the few years after the revolution.

First Case, Second Case operates within the gap between the two moral poles: enouncing (naming) the name of the guilty boy and complying with the principles of the school system, or remaining silent and renouncing one's place in the classroom for the sake of the other. In both cases, however, the 'name', in its exposure and concealment, is just an instrument for a moral arrangement. What is truly sacrificed, either way, is the boy's 'real' name.

The film avoids taking sides. Nor do the comments by the established figures offer a way out either. On the contrary, they only increase and widen the gap between the two points of view. In simply documenting both cases, the film seems to offer two differing options. But what it truly shows is that there is in fact no real third way, not as an alternative discourse, and this is exactly what makes this dilemma unbearable. In remaining inconclusive, i.e. neither depicting the group as 'heroes' nor the fellow pupil who named the boy's name as a 'traitor' (or the other way around), the film leaves us simply in the midst of its dilemma. What the film unfolds is the symptom in each discourse. Both are undermined in the face of this impasse of choice/sacrifice. One either favours one 'case' over the other, or eludes both and is left with nothing—the non-discourse of the third option that the film is about. This is exactly why this film can only be misinterpreted if one remains within the fields of one of the two options; this is why it was first given a prize and later banned, on the basis of two opposing interpretations.

What Kiarostami seems be saying with this film is that we are relentlessly entangled in these discourses of social posture, outside of which is

nothing but the very place the film itself occupies: the ambiguity of social and political being.

In a place like Iran, where most of life evolves between speculative relations to history and vague notions about the future, cultural production has to a great extent become a volatile and impulsive endeavour. If there is any political or cultural indecisiveness in Iran, it is the consequence of the discrepancy between social reality and its political representation: this essentially irreducible gap between the multiplicity of social logics and its totalising representation by the ruling force acting in the name of the society as a whole. Rulers and governments in Iran have been explicitly concerned to close this gap with symbolic and imaginary identifications to implement the illusion of a unified and sovereign society. With these identifications, the society is offered false knowledge of itself.

The period of the war with Iraq provided the best chance for the Iranian government to reinforce the symbolism on which it had based itself during the revolution. The war was represented as an ideologically collective event, articulated with historical references and rhetoric, mobilising a national force for what was called 'the sacred defence'. To this day, these representations are revived and reformulated at every possible opportunity, in order to maintain the illusion of social uniformity and continuity. However, symbolic representations start to lose their context when every experience hints at their inconsistency with reality. In being compelled to repetition, discourses of power are permanently at risk; in other words, the social and cultural conceptions they repeatedly institute run the risk of becoming de-instituted at every interval. It is exactly in these intervals that the society engages in producing substitutive discourses and representations of and about itself. It is no surprise that only after the end of the war was it possible to disseminate other political views, slightly moderate in their approach, in the ruling elite. During the years after the war, the number of newspapers with different political views increased enormously. During and before the war, any idea of a reform within the existing political establishment was unthinkable. However, it is appropriate to say that the idea of reform has given way to disappointment, even among some of those who promoted it in the first place.

What is interesting is the way these socio-political inconsistencies condition the production of indecisive discourses, from one moment to the next, in variations, and sometimes in contradiction with one another. Rumours are good examples of this, always suspended between belief and disbelief, falsity and truth, pointing to the very ambiguity of knowledge. Recently, after a report on an explosion heard near a nuclear plant in the south of Iran, rumours started spreading about an American bombardment. Newspapers started reporting contradictory explanations. These varied from 'explosives used for road expansions' to 'a military training plane having to discharge its explosives due to technical problems'. The total destruction of a building and the firing of anti-aircraft missiles near where the sound was heard were also reported. Although the truth has not yet been clarified, and most probably it never will be, the rumour did temporarily affect the price of oil that day when the New York oil market opened. (The reality rumours entail does not lie in the truth about an event but exactly in the rumours' very indecisiveness, for they will always return to their true source in spite of being a lie. The source of the sound of the explosion may never be located, but it did reach the 'true' instigator of the rumour, that is the New York oil market.) By pointing out the

representational gap in the totalising articulations of reality, rumours as indecisive discourse undermine discourses of power. Yet they remain hesitant and speculative. What would be the radical yet productive equivalent of such a subversion?

At this juncture cultural practice may take on a double-edged role, at once occupying the space of this gap and rearticulating it into a space for dialogue. Always involving this gap between social representation and pure difference, cultural practice attests to the irresoluteness of political identification, encircling the very ambiguity of discourse. Cultural activities are political in the way they relentlessly reinscribe a split in the heart of any discourse, opening it for negotiation. To give in to this ambiguity is to keep open the possibility for constant rearticulation and negotiation. This is exactly what Kiarostami's film is implementing. It is as if it reconsiders the corridors between classrooms as the place where discourses meet to collide, to be diluted and split into two, a place where the 'real' lessons are picked up.

Pursuing the Indecisive Beyond Locality

Cultural vocabularies change rapidly, as do the contexts upon which they reflect. Today's discourse on the social and political currents of a place may be dated tomorrow. There are always multiple flows of discourse in a society, crushing and cross folding unto one another. Therefore any totalising symbolisations are bound to fall short of this complexity. Cultural projects attempting to pursue a critical flow of discourse are successful only to the extent of escaping symbolisation of any sort. It is the internalising of the very intricacy of conditions that is challenging and constitutes complex articulations.

First Case, Second Case was one of a few films in Kiarostami's oeuvre that did not receive enough recognition outside of Iran. The reason is obviously that most festival viewers and critics do not know of the distinct political—and now historical—context the film refers to. When these historical distinctions enter localities other than their own, they can affect them in the most direct manner —for one thing, they are no longer mere narratives of a far-off place. To welcome complexities of other conditions, i.e. to re-insert them into one's own representational discourses about the 'other', may not only de-certify our subjective position, but also render certain estrangement into the 'reality' of our own condition.

Recent trends in the art world in depicting cultural and artistic practices from various localities have often resulted in simplified articulations and presentations. What should be accounted for is not merely the differences between cultures, or conformist categorisations of conditions, but rather the difference within each and every locality. The latter is of course a more time- and mind-consuming effort and would require certain sacrifices were it to be taken seriously. In coming close to 'real' difference, one is exposed to a kaleidoscopic inconsistency against which all prescribed knowledge is bound to break into pieces. The hardest venture is then to pick up the shattered bits and pieces of fragments and to renegotiate them into alternative configurations.

Here, reconfigurations of meanings are pursued always in regard to the 'other', to other meanings and configurations; in a sharing of knowledge based on its ambiguity, its suspension between (in)comprehensiveness and discord. In other words, to share knowledge is to produce and de-produce it together in a network of enunciations and of localities. This conditions an approach beyond