CHAPTER 2

ABC Africa: Apparition and Appearance

In *Ten on Ten*, a 2004 documentary featuring ten short scenes in which Kiarostami speaks in a car on his work in filming 2001's *Ten* – itself a ten-part movie featuring short video sequences shot entirely inside a car – the filmmaker makes a series of highly provocative statements. This occurs in the context of a discussion of the radical possibilities that he claims opened to him when, starting with that beguiling sequence at the end of *Taste of Cherry*, Kiarostami started using digital cameras. Referring to the production of *ABC Africa* – his first feature-length digital production, and which was shot in Uganda – he says:

> I felt that a 35 mm camera would limit both us and the people there, whereas the video camera displayed truth from every angle, and not a forged truth. To me this camera was a discovery. Like a God it was all encompassing, omnipresent. The camera could turn 360 degrees and thus reported the truth, an absolute truth.[1]

I want to take seriously Kiarostami's claim that his move to digital – which resulted in two of his most morally unsettling movies – allowed him to report absolute truth.[2] This is surprising, even shocking, coming from Kiarostami. After all, *ABC Africa* – the only recent Kiarostami feature we can reasonably safely call a documentary – seems to subvert distinctions between truth and artifice, fact and fiction, the real and the fake, the found and the staged, and so on (distinctions on which some definitions of documentary cinema rely[3]). The statements also jar with certain tropes that have become quite familiar in film and documentary theory: tropes which emphasise the constructedness of the film image, the partiality of the documentarian's claim to truth, the power relations silently bound up in the very act of attempting to report the facts 'neutrally', the inevitability of bias in a filmed account of events, etc.[4] Further, the statements sit uneasily with much of the academic criticism of Kiarostami's work, with its emphasis on the categories of uncertainty, partiality, and ambiguity, and which has lauded the director for the complex ways

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in which he draws attention to the tenuousness and contingency of cinematic claims to truth through reflexive formal techniques.[5] There are serious questions, in other words, about what to make of this. Were these critics wrong about what Kiarostami is up to in his films? Is there a way of taking seriously what he says here? Or is Kiarostami himself simply being disingenuous, hyperbolic, impulsive, and/or hubristic? I want to try answering the first two questions affirmatively: it is possible to take Kiarostami seriously here, and doing so will require us to nuance our understanding of the filmmaker's project.

Obviously this will turn on how we understand what 'absolute truth' might mean in this context. As such it is worth turning to the scene in *Ten on Ten* in which Kiarostami uses the phrase. Here we see images not only of the director in his car delivering his monologue to camera, but excerpts from *ABC Africa*. As he speaks of returning to Iran, watching the video footage, coming to decide that the ease and comfort displayed by his subjects could never have been achieved if he had used a 35mm camera, that the medium of video allowed access to absolute truth, we see: a child hiding shyly behind a roll of material; footage of Kiarostami himself videoing children as other children watch the footage as he records it; a group of children who play to the camera, pulling funny faces; more children scrambling about to try to get into (or out of) the frame; a woman's face caught in slow motion as she stares directly into the camera; one child jumping up and down in order to enter the shot. In other words what we see is not quite life 'as it really is' among Ugandan orphans, but rather a series of events that are intimately bound up with – indeed events that are in various ways the direct result of – the presence of the cameras in the village. One is tempted to say that we're not seeing life in this village as it is, but life as it is when it is acting up and showing off, responding to the presence of strangers, and performing for – or hiding from – digital images of itself. Not only is there no attempt to mask the artifice inherent in the act of videoing: in fact it is deliberately emphasised (as when, for instance, a shot of Kiarostami videoing is followed up with a shot of his collaborator Seifollah Samadian videoing Kiarostami videoing). So this truth must not be that of an objective account of the facts, if that means a report of how things stand externally to the reporter.

At the same time, however, I want to say that it really is a truth – and not, for instance, simply an acknowledgement of the irreducibly 'subjective' and/or mediated nature of what it is to screen reality. In that sense, while *ABC Africa* fits in some respects with what Bill Nichols, in his influential taxonomy of documentary styles, called "the reflexive mode of representation",[6] it is nevertheless much more than another attempt at formally enacting a critique

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of "[r]ealist access to the world, the ability to provide persuasive evidence, the possibility of indisputable argument, the unbreakable bond between an indexical image and that which it represents".[7] In *Documentary Film Classics*, Rothman praises the documentaries on which he writes in the following terms: "They do not deny the possibility of revealing reality in the medium of film; they achieve such revelations even as they reflect on the conditions that make their revelations possible."[8] I want to read Kiarostami's achievement in *ABC Africa* in a similar way: not simply as problematising documentary truth, but also as revealing it, and as revealing it in problematising it. In *Ten on Ten*, Kiarostami quotes Nietzsche's *Beyond Good and Evil*: "That which is truly deep needs a mask."[9] It is this marriage of depth and surface, sincerity and masking, reality and artifice that I want to identify as essential to the documentary evidence presented in Kiarostami's movie. Such an identification may also make it possible to clarify aspects of the ethical and aesthetic problems inherent in documentary filmmaking more generally: the relation between fiction and fact; moral feeling and its connection to matters of fact; questions of evidence, rhetoric, and persuasion. If it helped to generalise, I would say that this is one subset of the problems stemming from that separation of fact and value which plagues – but also appears to have provided a condition of the possibility of – modern philosophy. Part of the intellectual depth of Kiarostami's cinema consists in how it can help us think differently here.

ABC Africa opens with a call: a phone rings as the letters A. B. C. are presented red on black, and rings again roughly in time with the appearance of AFRICA. The titles fade and we hear the sound of printing. The first image is of a fax arriving. The content is read in a woman's monotone. The fax from the Assistant President of the UN's International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) confirms an invitation extended to Kiarostami to travel to Uganda to shoot a documentary on the Uganda Women's Effort to Save Orphans programme, an NGO set up in 1986 to provide aid to Ugandan children living in extreme poverty in a country devastated by colonisation, civil war, and AIDS. The idea is to give the plight of these orphans "greater relevance" and "draw much needed international attention" to it. So far, so standard: an internationally acclaimed director with significant festival clout, some experience in taking commissions, and a demonstrated interest in recording the lives of people (and particularly children) facing poverty and disaster is to travel to Uganda to shoot a film in order to raise international awareness about a terrible social, moral, and political problem. And certain early scenes of the movie come across as intelligible in these familiar terms, such as when we hear from an IFAD representative about the extent of the

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Ugandan orphan problem (in 2002 there were estimated to be two million orphans in the country), or when the filmmakers visit a village where they are informed about the organisation's work in teaching local women – many of whom have taken on the burden of care for large numbers of orphaned children – skills relating to financial planning, obtaining an income, and so on. Nevertheless, Kiarostami's personal stamp is obvious from the start: we are treated, for instance, to a series of long takes shot from inside cars, and the movie seems to include more footage of relatively unimportant events than one would expect from a 'standard' documentary (by which I mean, something like IFAD might have been expecting him to make), including many extended takes of women and (especially) children singing, dancing, and playing (as well as some fairly mundane footage of the two filmmakers arriving at the airport, checking into their hotel, chatting to their driver, etc.). In a mainstream expository or observational approach,[10] we might expect that these shots would – if employed at all – be used as background, as a means of establishing setting and perhaps granting the viewer a connection to the ostensible subjects of the film; in Kiarostami's movie, however, the length and sheer quantity of them suggests they are in no way peripheral. Plus with their wobbly handheld framing, the freely associative way in which Kiarostami records them (letting himself be 'distracted'; following whatever turns up), and his use on them of some naff digital effects (including repeated 'snapshot' style freezeframes complete with fake shutter sound effects), these shots are surprisingly unserious, whimsical, and not a little touristic. In other words things are strange: this film is refusing to do what we expect (especially given its subject).

It is worth recognising that the footage presented in the final cut of *ABC Africa* was not originally intended to make it into the film at all. Rather, these images were merely intended as 'travel notes' taken down by Kiarostami and Samadian for the sake of getting an initial sense of their subject; the two were planning on returning to Uganda in order to make the real movie, but on getting home decided that the twenty hours of footage they'd taken was all they needed (with some serious editing work that, as Elena notes, took place over the course of eight months[11]). So this is a movie constructed out of notes for a movie that was never actually made. While this may explain some of the roughness and apparent "artlessness"[12] of the final product, it only raises further questions: why was Kiarostami happy with this preliminary digital footage? Why not go back and complete the original project? More generally, why has Kiarostami largely refused to follow through on the traditional tasks of documentary (presenting facts, gathering evidence, making an argument, persuading the viewer to a certain position, etc.)?

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I want to point to two scenes that effectively transform the movie. They occur in near succession. First, the filmmakers visit a hospital in the town of Masaka (described in the film as the 'epicentre' of the AIDS pandemic). The scene is surreal and disturbing: entering the crude building, we see Catholic posters and a calendar promoting abstinence on the walls as we hear the cries of a sick child off screen; we see a series of terrible images in a ward for children; the crying child then appears for a moment, only to be quickly replaced by shots of a nurse joking and laughing; we get more freezeframes (this time of adult nurses, doctors, patients) with fake sound effects. Having already been made intensely aware of the presence of the cameras – and of the ethical questions surrounding these invasive sequences – we now enter a room where the body of a small child is being wrapped in a sheet. Nurses gather up the body; we follow it outside to see it placed on the back of a bicycle and taken away, we presume for burial. The setting then changes abruptly and we are presented with a long sequence featuring hundreds of singing schoolchildren – back on similar ground to be sure, but after the shift in tone occasioned by the hospital sequence it has been defamiliarised, rendered a bit uncanny.

After another road sequence, Kiarostami and his collaborator arrive at the building that is to accommodate them for the night. Following nightfall, we hear a long conversation between them as we view a thick swarm of mosquitoes gathering around an outdoor light. Now we are surprised: the light goes out as the electricity is cut. So begins the most intriguing sequence in the movie, in which Kiarostami and Samadian make their way toward their rooms by torch- and matchlight, musing on the difficulty of darkness and the problems it must cause each night for the villagers they have been videoing ("I can't think of anywhere in the world where sunlight would be more precious"). As we hear Kiarostami fumbling with and opening a door, there is the sound of thunder. As the rumbling builds the other sounds slowly fade away and the screen, which has been entirely dark (or close to it) for some eight minutes, is lit by a series of flashes of lightning – flashes lighting the silhouette of a tree. The sound of rain builds along with thunder cracks as the flashes continue. Then we are surprised again: this time by a dissolve to daylight, and the tree – accompanied by birdsong – now appears fully illuminated. The whole sequence is fascinating and powerful, and not just for the various ways in which it mimics the final video sequence from *Taste of Cherry*. Coming as it does in the middle of the film – and so shortly after the hospital scene – it signals quite clearly that Kiarostami's interest is not exclusively with the facts of the matter surrounding the plight of Ugandan orphans, but with something more ambiguous. As Olivier Joyard remarks, it is clear at this

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stage that "the deal with [IFAD] is off".[13] This is not to say that Kiarostami ignores the unbearable facts of life for Ugandan orphans, because he does present them; rather, it is to say that he never suggests that they are all he wants to show (even if they are essential to it). The minutes of darkness at the core of the film are connected to this. When the body is wrapped, and when the world reappears in that dissolve to light, the effect is emphatic as well as disorienting.

Kiarostami's question is not how to present the facts in the face of 'information overload' or so-called 'compassion fatigue', of how rhetorics of image and sound can be utilised in order to give those facts emotive purchase on the viewer. Indeed such a model seems to presuppose something that Kiarostami never does: that the viewer, whose sensibilities have been deadened, needs to be prodded and provoked into ethical affectivity. The problem with that model is not so much with the claim that our emotional responsiveness has been mortified, but with the aesthetico-ethical programmes that stem from making that problem central: programmes in which the filmmaker's task is to startle the viewer into responding (as in a certain avant-garde cinema, but also now in the aesthetics of shock sometimes employed in government health and safety campaigns), or to manipulate him, say by attempting to present systemic socio-political problems as moral games of good versus evil (for example, the farce of KONY 2012). These programmes share a commitment to the idea that the facts on their own are not enough, and need to be presented in such a way as to give them weight and punch. Part of the problem with such attempts at resensitisation, of course, is that they are desensitising: perhaps the viewer can be enlivened with shocks or spectacular manipulations, but eventually she will recoil again, becoming deader still (rather like the snail in Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, and which provides, for them, "[t]he true symbol of intelligence"[14]). The other part is with the moral non-cognitivism that may be implicit in that set-up, which takes ethical life to consist in emotional responses to – but which do not provide any rational grounding for making moral judgements regarding – the facts of which the world consists.

Wittgenstein clarified this in his 1929 lecture on ethics. Here he proposed a thought experiment: imagine an omniscient person – someone who knows every fact about the world since the beginning of time – decided to write a big book containing all his knowledge. Such a book would be perfectly encyclopaedic; it "would contain the whole description of the world".[15] Yet such a book, Wittgenstein argued, "would contain nothing that we would call an *ethical* judgment or anything that would logically imply such a judgment".[16] It would seem there is no fundamental difference between a proposition like

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'she saw him' and one like 'she murdered him', no difference between 'the stone fell' and 'the stone killed'. In the world there are simply facts, and the moral distinctions we make between them are projections – or so the experiment may seem to show. But of course, it is not right to say that Wittgenstein rejected ethics or the possibility of a moral life; rather, he appears to have thought that the ethical has a different relation to the facts than many philosophers are in the habit of thinking. As such, this should not have to collapse into J. L. Mackie's error theory[17] or the kind of non-cognitivism espoused by the logical positivists and their inheritors;[18] nor should it force us into the claim that the facts need to be made sensational or spectacular. If a complete description of all the facts that make up the world would contain nothing of genuine ethical significance, then either our ethical life is based on non-cognitive emotional responses to what occurs, or it is bound up with something other than the facts. But what else could it be bound up with? What else *is there*?

I want to forward for comparison two, apparently competing sets of theoretical claims. On the one hand, we have the idea that the world, and the objects and relations it contains, exist independently of the representations we make of them, the truth of which is contingent on whether or not they represent those objects and relations accurately. On this model, one knows a fact if one's belief in its being true is justified by the relevant evidence – evidence which, moreover, will have to be located outside the mind and desires of the knower, if one is to avoid the various kinds of bias to which we can be prone. It isn't hard to see how moral non-cognitivism finds its feet from here: on this picture, the notion that there is a fundamental distinction between fact and value – such that statements about the latter lack robust truth conditions, and so must go without robust justification – seems perfectly natural, indeed inescapable, because it sets up facts as external to moral feelings and sensibilities. Distinguishing between facts on moral grounds will thus appear to tell us more about the person drawing the distinction than about the facts themselves: 'the punishment meted out was death by hanging' is in principle verifiable through objective inquiry, and so easy enough to account for; 'the punishment meted out was barbaric' may express a subjective attitude, but says nothing about the punishment *in itself* (where would we go looking if we wanted to verify it?). Value is something we bring to the facts, something interpreters overlay onto them, who thus *take the facts* in one way or another; as such, successful inquiry into the facts of matters will have to be carried out in 'value free' terms, lest one's view of them be clouded. Wittgenstein gives voice to the metaphysical picture underlying this intuition in the *Tractatus* when he writes: "In the world

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everything is as it is, and everything happens as it does happen: *in* it no value exists . . . ".[19]

The opposing set of claims looks something like this. The very idea of objective inquiry as outlined above is suspect, because it leans on something highly questionable: the assumption that it is possible for human beings to separate their representations of the world from their own subjectivities. Knowing, on this account, can never be pure in the way the claims in the above seem to imply; rather, it is always tainted by the knower's embedment in a political, historical, social, and cultural context. It is impossible for knowers to get outside their own perspectives to see things as they objectively stand (even if natural science must be granted a certain kind of privilege in this regard). Indeed, on this account, any claim to have achieved genuine objectivity is not only misleading, but should itself be regarded as political in a certain important sense. That is because it is an act of subterfuge: the would-be knower shrouds a subjective, politically determined claim in the garb of politically 'neutral' objectivity. Bias is not something we can convincingly claim to have sloughed off, because any truth claim is partly a function of the claimant's particular perspective; rather, the best we can do is to acknowledge our bias, and that our inquiries into the way things stand must always remain relative, to some significant extent, to our own particular epistemic standpoints.[20]

Though these sets of claims are in competition, they both share an underlying commitment to a certain understanding of objectivity. They understand it as requiring us to step out of our own subjective positions in order to view the world dispassionately. Like the description of the world given in Wittgenstein's thought experiment, which would consist of 'just the facts' and so contain no robustly normative content, an objective account is posited here as a neutral report of how things stand externally to the describer. Alice Crary details this notion of objectivity as follows:

> This idea is sometimes formulated in terms of a requirement to survey the world from a maximally abstract (i.e., dispassionate and dehumanized) vantage point . . . [T]o the extent that we take seriously the requirement for an abstract or non-subjective vantage point, we seem obliged to conceive progress toward an objectively accurate view of the world as involving a winnowing process that leaves ever fewer properties with an essential reference to subjectivity.[21]

Crary's metaphor of winnowing is clarifying: this notion of objectivity seems to require that we cast off the subjective elements of our engagements with

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the world in order to come to an accurate view of it. Despite their apparent differences, both sets of the theoretical claims of which I gave rough outlines above subscribe to this notion of objectivity. The difference, of course, is that the former set of claims implies it is attainable, while the latter set implies it is not. In both cases, getting access to the facts is contingent on a casting off of subjective elements: a casting off that, in the latter set of claims, is revealed as impossible.

Consider again the line from the *Tractatus* I quoted earlier, which channels the metaphysical picture underlying this notion of objectivity. It should be striking that the sentence relies on tautologies: everything being 'as it is', and happening 'as it does happen'. One wants to ask: how *could* things be other than they are, or happen as they do not happen? That is what is confounding about the picture Wittgenstein channels (and so about any debate which turns on it): in a certain frame of mind it seems highly intuitive, even inescapable; but when we try to flesh it out it starts to look beguiling. Just what is captured by the proposition that *everything is as it is*? If a determinate answer to this cannot be given, it is difficult to understand how the inference from it to the claim that there is no value '*in*' the world is supposed to work. Here are the outlines of another potential response to the theoretical debate I have sketched: not to say that one side or the other is right, but to say that both sides are beholden to an incoherent metaphysical picture. And this would apply equally to both, despite the fact that the latter set attacks objectivity: if the image of objectivity underlying the first set is incoherent rather than (true or) false, then the claims of the second set have been pitted against something insubstantial. If the picture of objectivity in question is incoherent, in other words, then it is not quite right to say that we cannot get outside our perspectives on the world to see things as they really are, because it is not clear what it would mean to 'get outside' our perspectives in this way, and so not clear what it means to be unable to. If a task requires something incoherent of us, 'failure' means something different – in fact it means much less – than if it asks something of us that we are unable to perform (think of the difference between asking someone without pen or paper to draw a circle, and asking someone armed with both to draw a square circle: in the former case, we know what it would be like to have the relevant means available). One could compare this with Donald Davidson's remark (which McDowell finds "very unsatisfactory"[22] for perhaps this reason) that "we can't get outside our skins to find out what is causing the internal happenings of which we are aware".[23] But what is the force of this 'cannot'? For what would it mean to get outside our own skins? Davidson can't mean it literally, because even a skinless creature would face the epistemic problem he outlines. But how *can* he mean it?

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It is as though we are being asked to see the world without looking at it. And of course, it's not that we *cannot* see without looking. It's that we can give no sense to what it would mean to do it, and so no sense to what it means to be unable to.

In relation to the big book of Wittgenstein's thought experiment, we might ask: will the description of the world outlined in the book contain itself? If so, we fall into an infinite regress of descriptions, as the book will have to describe its own descriptions, and its descriptions of those descriptions, and so on *ad infinitum*; if not, it could never claim to be complete (unless the book itself somehow stands 'outside' the world it purports to describe – but then the world it describes could not be complete). For this picture to cohere, in other words, the act of description must both be included within and excluded from what it thus described. The dilemma I posed earlier between conceiving ethical life as grounded in merely emotional responses to the facts or something other than the facts may be a false one: it only found its feet because it was informed by this incoherent picture of a 'complete description of the world'.

Elena writes that, in *ABC Africa*, "[f]ar from trying to conceal his active role in shooting the film, Kiarostami demonstrates his interference with the real situation around him as soon as he possibly can . . .".[24] While he is right to emphasise Kiarostami's rejection of the procedures of mainstream documentary, there may be reason to doubt the coherence of the metaphysical picture that has nevertheless been presupposed here: that there exists an external realm of facts (what Elena calls a 'real situation'), and which the documentary filmmaker necessarily disturbs with his presence (what he calls 'interference') – a disturbance that is concealed in expository and most observational documentary, but which Kiarostami lays bare. On my reading, Kiarostami is not particularly interested in staging a confrontation between objectivist and anti-objectivist accounts of documentary evidence; his film does not require us to side either with the claim that objectivity is attainable if the filmmaker sticks to mind-independent facts, or with the claim that the act of filming always introduces an angle on the facts, a partiality attributable to the documentarian's own personal standpoint. Though it repeatedly acknowledges his camera, Kiarostami's film is not particularly worried about the stain of subjectivity, some idea that by filming the world, we are fatally altering a pristine or virginal set-up. There are other ways of understanding what it means for a documentary filmmaker to acknowledge the presence of his camera on a scene. For Kiarostami, we might say, the documentary filmmaker is simply part of the world he wants to record. The act of recording is not set up as an act of 'interference', at least if 'inter-

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ference' means anything like 'intrusion' or 'incursion'. The presence of a camera affects what happens around it – how could it not? – but that does not diminish the reality of what is thus recorded. And of course, Kiarostami is fascinated by the effects of his camera on his subjects (effects that, nevertheless, he found to be different from the ones created when he shot with a film camera).

In a sense, then, Kiarostami's is a recording of recording: a recording of the very fact that the world, and the human beings in it, appear. To make appearance itself appear: this is the poetic task of his cinema. Acknowledging the camera does not necessarily entail acknowledging an inescapable partiality: instead it can entail acknowledging the fact that there is no metaphysical distinction to draw between reality 'in itself' and how it appears to a subject, between fact and value, or between knowing and moral sensibility; that value is just part and parcel of human experience, and so part and parcel of any inquiry into facts; but that it is much too much to say that we can therefore never overcome bias or partiality (indeed saying that would effectively undermine their status as meaningful concepts). Understanding Kiarostami's acknowledgements in this way – as acknowledgements of the appearance of his subjects and the world both before and because of his camera – is our best chance of coming to grips with the relationship between documentary evidence and moral persuasion at work in *ABC Africa*, and for making sense of his reference to absolute truth.

Perhaps it also gives a way of understanding the closing images of the film, in which the ghost-like faces of Ugandan children are superimposed onto the clouds we see from the window of the plane taking Kiarostami and his companions out of the country. These images may seem contrived and sentimental if we interpret them in terms of the moral plight of the individual children whose faces turn up: in disconnecting these children from their particular circumstances, such that each appears for a moment only to dissolve into another, the sequence will seem to be melting them into an amorphous mass, calling out for only the vaguest and most self-congratulatory moral affect from the viewer. But they do not have to be understood in this way. I would argue instead that the appeal of the face for Kiarostami comes from something very different; that what, for him, the face reveals, is human appearance itself: the face as *apparition*. In his essay on the face, Giorgio Agamben writes:

> What the face exposes and reveals is not *something* that could be formulated as a signifying proposition of sorts, nor is it a secret doomed to remain forever incommunicable . . . Such a revelation . . . does not have any real content and does not tell the truth about this or that state of being, about

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> this or that aspect of human beings and of the world: it is *only* opening, *only* communicability.[25]

Kiarostami's interest in faces is an interest in faces for their own sake: it is not about what they signify or mean (say, 'suffering' or 'the persistence of the human spirit'), but about their appearance as such before his camera; it is less about what the face expresses than the fact that it does express. Thus the kind of moral feeling he tracks throughout *ABC Africa* does not necessarily arise out of recognition of the hardship undergone by another, from coming to understand that experience, or grasp its meaning and significance – not, that is to say, out of the propositional or factual 'content' of these images (content that may or may not be genuinely moral, or emphatic enough to spur moral affect). Rather, it arises out of recognition that the faces on screen are, before anything else, communicating "pure communicability", the commonly shared "communicative nature of human beings".[26] It may be wrong, then, to name this feeling empathy – which is what distinguishes Kiarostami's imagery of faces from the images of destitute Africans sometimes used, for example, in television commercials for various international charities. Rather than empathy, the images want to establish something closer to solidarity.[27]

If with its roughness and idiosyncrasy *ABC Africa* must remain a minor film in Kiarostami's *oeuvre*, it is also one of his most aesthetically (and perhaps politically) radical. Its philosophical interest consists in how it points to a way out of the metaphysics of objectivity and subjectivity, and so in how it asks us to rethink basic problems of documentary evidence. To say that the documentary filmmaker is part of the world he records is not to say he has no way of truly 'accessing' that world, of viewing it as it is 'in itself'. Nor is it to say he has a way. If we are always already *in* the world – if we are not just spectators – then the upshot is not that we can never attain objectivity. It is that moral claims are made on us regardless of whether our philosophies care to admit them.

Notes

1. Kiarostami goes on:

> Directing was spontaneously and unconsciously eliminated. By which I mean artificial and conventional directing . . . In this way the camera eliminates the artifice so implanted in the industry. It gives you the possibility of expanding the dimensions of cinema, and getting rid of the clichés, traditions, enclosed

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> forms, and pretentious aesthetics. This camera gives the filmmaker an opportunity for experimenting without fear of losing the essential.

2. The Persian phrase translated as 'absolute truth' is 'حقیقت مطلق', which has particular theological connotations of a truth that is all-encompassing, fully developed, complete, etc.
3. And not only in 'naïve' or pre-theoretical models, but also – though of course with more sophistication – in the field of documentary theory, including for instance the classic work by Bill Nichols. In the context of a discussion of Jean Baudrillard's claims about simulacra, Nichols writes:

> Intriguing as these assertions are, I do not accept them. This book is devoted to another set of propositions, ones in which the separation between an image and what it refers to continues to be a difference that makes a difference. Our access to historical reality may only be by means of representations, and these representations may sometimes seem to be more eager to chase their own tails than able to guarantee the authenticity of what they refer to. Neither of these conditions, however, precludes the persistence of history as a reality with which we must contend. (*Representing Reality*, 7)

4. The articles in Renov's landmark collection *Theorizing Documentary* deal with these and similar problems. For example, see Renov's own piece 'Toward a Poetics of Documentary', which asserts that "[o]ur attempts to 'fix' on celluloid what lies before the camera . . . are fragile if not altogether insincere efforts" (26); Brian Winston's 'The Documentary Film as Scientific Inscription', which critiques the scientism of some direct cinema practitioners and calls upon documentary "to negotiate an escape from the embrace of science" (57); and Trinh T. Minh-ha's 'The Totalizing Quest of Meaning', which critiques "the aesthetic of objectivity and the development of comprehensive technologies of truth capable of promoting what is right and wrong in the world . . ." (94).
5. See Cardullo, *In Search of Cinema*, 52–60; Elena, *The Cinema of Abbas Kiarostami*, 170–1; Gow, *From Iran to Hollywood*, 18–39; Krzych, 'Auto-Motivations'; Mulvey, 'Kiarostami's Uncertainty Principle'; Saeed-Vafa and Rosenbaum, *Abbas Kiarostami*, 37–40.
6. Nichols, *Representing Reality*, 56–68.
7. Nichols, *Representing Reality*, 57.
8. Rothman, *Documentary Film Classics*, x.
9. Translated by Walter Kaufmann as "[w]hatever is profound loves masks" (*Beyond Good and Evil*, 240).

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10. For definitions of these styles, see Nichols, *Representing Reality*, 32–75.
11. Elena, *The Cinema of Abbas Kiarostami*, 169.
12. Saeed-Vafa and Rosenbaum, *Abbas Kiarostami*, 39.
13. Quoted in Elena, *The Cinema of Abbas Kiarostami*, 170.
14. Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 256–7.
15. Wittgenstein, 'Ethics, Life and Faith', 252.
16. Wittgenstein, 'Ethics, Life and Faith', 253.
17. See Mackie, *Ethics*. I am referring in particular to Mackie's famous 'argument from queerness', which runs as follows: "If there were objective values, then they would be entities or qualities or relations of a very strange sort, utterly different from anything else in the universe" (38). From this premise Mackie infers that objective values do not exist, such that when we speak or act as if they do, we are in error (see 38–42).
18. See for instance Ayer, *Language, Truth, and Logic*, 106–7. Since Ayer's book was published in 1936, non-cognitivism has been inherited and developed in more sophisticated ways. For example, see R. M. Hare's universal prescriptivism (see *Freedom and Reason*), and the expressivisms of Simon Blackburn (see *Ruling Passions*) and Allan Gibbard (see *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings*). Though these accounts are more nuanced than Ayer's, they all rely on an idea that I take the thinking at work in *ABC Africa* to challenge: that it is impossible for moral judgements to make a justifiable claim to world-directedness and so full rationality, in the robust fashion in which judgements of fact clearly do.
19. Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 6.41 (86).
20. It is notable that claims like the ones outlined in these two paragraphs were deployed in both the manifestos and critical essays put forward in support of the cinéma vérité and direct cinema movements and in the critical and academic backlash against them that unfolded in the 1970s and 1980s. And of course, it is also notable the aesthetic procedures of *ABC Africa* resemble some of those employed in those movements, including its focus on 'ordinary' subjects, its lack of voiceover and general hesitance to make an argument, its interest in social and political issues, its exploitation of new filmmaking technologies, and so on. Making points that echo some of the ones Kiarostami makes in *Ten on Ten*, Peter Graham praised American directors who would later be associated with direct cinema in his 1964 essay on vérité:

> The Americans have made considerable technical advances: handy silent cameras; quick, precise exposure settings; fast film; portable recorders synchronized electronically with the camera. With this equipment they can

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> approximate quite closely the flexibility of the human senses. This opens up whole new fields of experience; they can follow their subjects almost anywhere, and because of their unobtrusiveness (they need no artificial lighting) people soon forget the presence of the camera and attain surprising naturalness. ("'Cinéma-Vérité" in France', 34)

Rhetoric like this soon began to seem highly contentious to many documentarians, critics, and theorists. As Jonathan Vogels writes in his book on the Maysles brothers:

> Theorists held that cultural and artistic bias of all kinds reduced the artist's search for truth to just another search, no more or less pure or authentic than any other. Indeed, authenticity was dismissed as a sociohistorical construct that was itself laden with subjectivity. These theorists argued that because every film and every filmmaker must have a distinct point of view, only films that openly acknowledge their own processes for negotiating these limitations and biases could be considered trustworthy documents. (*The Direct Cinema of David and Albert Maysles*, 142)

Or as Emile de Antonio said in 1982:

> There lies behind cinéma vérité the implication of a truth arrived at by a scientific instrument, called the camera, which faithfully records the world. Nothing could be more false. The assumption of objectivity is false. Filmmakers edit what they see, edit as they film what they see, weight people, moments, and scenes by giving them different looks and values. As soon as one points a camera, objectivity is romantic hype. (Quoted in Zheutlin, 'The Politics of Documentary', 158; see also Vogels, *The Direct Cinema of David and Albert Maysles*, 144)

It is telling that these debates turned on the presence of the camera, its effects on subjects, and then what it meant for practitioners of direct cinema (including the Maysles brothers, who turn up on screen on several occasions in their wonderful 1975 documentary *Grey Gardens*) to acknowledge their acts of recording. As Jay Ruby put it in 1977, in a typical anti-objectivist gesture: "To be reflexive is to reveal that films—all films, whether they are labeled fiction, documentary, or art—are created, structured articulations of the film-maker and not authentic, truthful, objective records" (quoted in Vogels, *The Direct Cinema of David and Albert Maysles*, 147). It is this kind of understanding of what it means to

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acknowledge the camera – and the theoretical commitments undergirding it – that I think Kiarostami's film challenges.

21. Crary, *Beyond Moral Judgment*, 20. Though she makes her case in different terms, I take my argument here to complement the ones made by Crary in her very important book *Beyond Moral Judgment*. As Crary shows, ditching this 'abstraction requirement' should not trouble the notion of objectivity, provided we conceive of objectivity in a sufficiently nuanced way (in her terms, it must be allowed to accommodate what she calls "problematically subjective properties" (15)) (see in particular 20–9).
22. McDowell, *Mind and World*, 16.
23. Davidson, 'A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge', 312.
24. Elena, *The Cinema of Abbas Kiarostami*, 171.
25. Agamben, 'The Face', 92.
26. Agamben, 'The Face', 96.
27. In his reading of *Nanook of the North*, Rothman contrasts two impulses in Robert Flaherty's approach to filming: one which acknowledges the presence of his camera, and through that the humanity of his subjects, and one which denies the presence of the camera and so too its subjects:

> To be worthy of the humanity of his subjects, a filmmaker must acknowledge the revelations that emerge through filming them, through their encounters with the camera. As we have suggested, Flaherty at his most progressive proves willing and able to do so. But *Nanook of the North* also reveals the filmmaker's guilty impulse to deny his human bond with his subjects, to disavow what is revealed by, and to, his camera. (*Documentary Film Classics*, 14)

This is exemplary of another, in my view highly compelling way of understanding what acknowledging the camera can mean: not as an admission of irreducible partiality, but as a way of bringing to light one's 'human bond' with one's subjects.

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