CHAPTER 4

Five: Artifice and the Ordinary

In the press kit released with *Ten*, Kiarostami invokes a story by Milan Kundera:

> Kundera tells a fascinating story that genuinely impressed me: he relates how his father's lexical range diminished with age and, at the end of his life, was reduced to two words: "It's strange!" Of course, he hadn't reached that point because he had nothing much to say anymore but because those two words effectively summed up his life's experience. They were the very essence of it. Perhaps that's the story behind minimalism too . . .[1]

Kiarostami must be referring back to this when, in the 2005 film *Around Five: Reflections on Film and the Making of* Five, he refers to *Five* as a 'one-word film': if *Ten* was an example of 'two-word cinema', *Five* takes its minimalist tendency even further. If in the spirit of this we were to give the five episodes titles, we might end up with something like: 'wood'; 'esplanade'; 'dogs'; 'ducks'; 'moon'. The first episode follows a piece of wood floating on small waves, which alternately push it up onto a beach and drag it back down into the shallow water. The second presents an esplanade littered with puddles of rainwater backgrounded by a distant beach where larger waves break; over the course of the episode, we watch a number of people (plus the occasional pigeon) walking past, and observe a conversation between a group of four old men. The third episode gives us another seaside scene, this time with a number of dark shapes – eventually revealing themselves as dogs – silhouetted in front of the waves. The fourth stands out for its comedy: here hundreds of ducks – proceeding in a long queue – waddle across a beach, only to turn around and come back again. The final episode offers a view from above of water at night reflecting a full moon, the sounds of toads, birds, a rooster, and a dog, the slow brewing of a thunderstorm, and eventually dawn. The movie is more than an ode to calm, the beauty of nature, and the dignity and drama of the ordinary (even if it is also that): it opens beguiling problems of cinematic truth and artifice.

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Five's full title is *Five Long Takes Dedicated to Yasujiro Ozu*. What is the significance of the dedication? Though it might not have been especially obvious before the release of *Five* (especially seeing as Kiarostami is typically quite coy about his influences, tending to dodge the question in interviews), it's possible to see an influence from Ozu on much of his filmmaking. Both are interested in modernity, tradition, and the interplay between them, and in particular with tracking the effects of importing a 'Western' model of the modern into a non-Western context; both are concerned with human alienation, separation, loneliness, etc.; both are renowned for their recording of the quotidian. Yet these are common enough themes. In any case, even granting that Ozu's influence on Kiarostami's cinema is clear (such that, at the very least, we could explain why the director might wish to dedicate a work to him), it would be something of a stretch to locate these themes in *Five*, which has no characters, dialogue, or narrative (at least in the usual senses of these terms). Kiarostami himself makes a few connections when asked about this in *Around Five*: the use of the long shot; simplicity; respect for the audience and its intelligence, which in Kiarostami's terms means something like restraint, the avoidance of emotional manipulation (as he says, "[*Five*] is in contrast with the kind of cinema that Ozu strictly avoided" – by which I take him to mean Hollywood). And these three factors do combine in Kiarostami's movie to produce something like the kind of calm many associate with Ozu: a calm that, by its nature, goads the viewer into contemplation and reflection. More speculatively, we might also point here to that crucial scene in *Tokyo Story*, where the old man and woman finally admit – to each other and themselves – that they want to go home. Part of what drives their admission must be the dawning acknowledgement that the seeming generosity of their children – who paid for them to be sent to an expensive seaside resort – is artificial: more an attempt at getting their parents out of their hair than an expression of their love. And of course, all this happens at the beach, with the old couple sitting on a sea wall, taking breaks in their talk to gaze out toward the water. With its understated but merciless unveiling of the unhappy flimsiness of daily life in modernity, this is paradigmatic Ozu territory – and perhaps it is possible to read *Five* in similar terms. But what is the role of artifice here?

At the start of *Five*'s first episode a piece of mottled wood, less than a foot in length, sits on a beach at the edge of the water, lapped by the tips of breaking waves. There are three rough zones apparent: the drier sand of the beach at the bottom of the frame; the shallow, choppy sea at the top; and the intermediary strip of wetter sand in-between which, reflecting an overcast sky, disappears and reappears as the waves roll over it. After just over a minute a larger wave nudges the wood hard enough to start it rolling down

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toward the water; another comes and picks it up; soon it's floating (here is when it first becomes obvious that the camera is handheld, as it follows the moving object). The wood is buffeted by the waves like this for another few minutes, rolling up and down the beach, in and out of the water. Then it breaks. This happens not, as we might have expected, as it is hit by a wave, but as it rolls down toward the ocean (perhaps the weight of the wood causes the break, putting pressure on an edge as it rolls a bit lopsidedly). We thus end up with two bits of wood – one much smaller than the other and probably best described as a chunk – each with a yellowy-white fleshy interior exposed on one side. The larger piece is quickly pulled into the water by a wave while the chunk – not the right shape for rolling – remains on the shoreline. The two are separated like that for roughly thirteen waves, when the piece is swept completely off screen, leaving us alone with the chunk for about seventy-five seconds. When the piece appears again, it is fully afloat in the top right corner of the frame. This lasts for just under two minutes, then the piece floats out of the frame, exiting from the top. We watch the mostly stationary chunk for thirty more seconds, low strings introduce a synthesised woodwind melody, and the image dissolves to black.

At first blush, the episode appears to add weight to a certain rather canonical account of Kiarostami's cinema, where the filmmaker's primary concern is taken to be the dignity and, to some extent, the drama of the everyday. On such a reading, the episode is meant to draw our attention to the kinds of quotidian detail that, perhaps due to the deadening effects of habit, we tend to fail to register. The reading is supported by some of Kiarostami's own statements in *Around Five*: "If I was going to invent another title for *Five*," he says there, "maybe it would be *Watch Again*, or *Look Well*, or simply *Look*." Or, earlier: "I think we should extract the values that are hidden in objects and expose them by looking at objects, plants, animals and humans, everything. In my opinion, *Five* is the result of this way of looking at things." From this perspective, we could perhaps describe the intended effect of the movie as a cinematic version of Roland Barthes's *punctum*, which term he uses to describe the small detail of a photograph that, in virtue of its minor status relative to the *studium* (which is something like the overall meaning of a photograph, what draws one to it in the initial instance and calls out for interpretation), "rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces me".[2] On this account, Kiarostami would be trying to draw our attention to the details of everyday reality, which we are only too likely to miss – the happy accident of the breaking of the wood being exactly the kind of 'event' one might, on strolling down a beach, fail to so much as notice.

On second blush, however, we need to complicate this account, for it does

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not address the questions the movie continually raises about its own status. In relation to the driftwood episode, we have to ask: was Kiarostami simply lucky enough to stumble across a piece of driftwood and start videoing it before it reached breaking point? Are we expected to believe the same thing about the second 'event' in the episode, when the larger piece separates from the smaller chunk and floats away, leaving the chunk on the shore? What about when the piece returns, only to disappear once again? Questions of this nature must be asked of the other sequences in the movie too: why did the old men who meet and converse on the esplanade happen to stop just *there*? Why distract the viewer from the remarkable actions and interactions of the dogs in the third episode with a progressive dissolve to white? Why do the ducks waddle past in such an orderly line, and what made them return in the other direction? Was Kiarostami simply in the right place at the right time to catch a full moon, partially obscured by passing clouds, reflected in a body of water surrounded by such an impressive range of creatures on the night of a thunderstorm (which, moreover, built slowly and dramatically over the course of his shoot, climaxing at the perfect point)? Note that I am not suggesting we raise these questions from an *external* perspective on the movie, as though they might puncture the cinematic illusions *Five* wants to establish, spoiling our suspension of disbelief. On the contrary: on any attentive reading of the film, these questions raise themselves; they are *internal* to its aesthetic effect and its philosophical significance.

The problem rearing its head just now is a familiar one: the relationship of human intention to the aesthetic and epistemic capacities of photographic media. On Barthes's classic account, some photographic images have a particular aesthetic power. Unlike (say) paintings, photographs will sometimes capture seemingly insignificant details, features of reality that have little bearing on the overall meaning of the image but which can nevertheless have an overpowering effect upon the beholder. He names the effect *punctum* for its poignant piercing quality. One of his examples is a 1955 photograph of children in New York City's Little Italy taken by William Klein: the grinning, perhaps blind boy on the right of the frame has a (we presume toy) gun at his head, pointed by a woman whose face we cannot see. Part of the power of the image, for Barthes, stems from one very particular detail of it: the grinning child's "bad teeth", to which the theorist "stubbornly"[3] keeps returning. Crucially for Barthes's account, a detail achieves this effect in virtue of how it exceeds human intention, in the fact that it has been captured *accidentally*. "[T]he detail is offered by chance", Barthes writes, "the scene is in no way 'composed' according to a creative logic";[4] "[c]ertain details may 'prick' me. If they do not, it is doubtless because the photographer has put them there

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intentionally";[5] "the detail which interests me is not, or at least is not strictly, intentional, and probably must not be so".[6]

In emphasising these aspects of *punctum* I am following Fried who, in *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before*, tries to claim Barthes for the anti-theatrical tradition he traces back to Denis Diderot (and in which he places his own sixties art criticism). Theatricality, on Fried's Diderotian account, is the condition of artworks that have failed to manage successfully "the primordial convention"[7] that they are made for beholding. As he shows, the necessity of managing beholding was a determining force in the development of French painting in the eighteenth century, when painters such as Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin were celebrated for their convincing portrayals of subjects so intensely absorbed in idle pursuits that the viewer's very presence before the painting was effectively denied. The idea is that by depicting intense absorption, Chardin (and certain of his contemporaries) was able to suspend the beholder's sense that she is viewing an artwork, and so her sense that she is viewing an artefact designed to elicit a response. A convincing depiction of absorption checks the fact that paintings are made to be beheld, and the potentials for staginess and manipulation it introduces. As Pippin writes:

> No one in these Chardin genre paintings appears to be acting for effect, taking account of how they look to others, looking to normative acceptance by an audience, aiming to please or entertain an audience, conforming to the 'normalising gaze' of an audience; and in just that sense too, *neither is the painting*.[8]

Crucial to Fried's account – and this is something that critiques of his 'formalism' miss – is that theatricality is emphatically not a timeless or ahistorical category; rather, it emerges out of a field of tensions that develops dialectically, such that what appears as perfectly untheatrical at one point in time may suddenly appear painfully contrived at another (this is how Rococo painters such as Jean-Antoine Watteau appeared to Diderot). By claiming Barthes as an unknowing representative of this anti-theatrical tradition, Fried makes an advance on those who understand *punctum* in a purely subjective fashion, in terms of how a particular detail engages a particular beholder in a particular way. It is not that Fried denies this subjective aspect of *punctum*, but he shows that this is not all there is to the concept, which turns just as much on the beholder's sense that the relevant detail – "that accident which pricks me",[9] as Barthes puts it – must not have been intended by the photographer. This is why Fried wants to claim Barthes as anti-theatrical:

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> *punctum* is seen by Barthes but not because it has been shown to him by the photographer, for whom, literally, it does not exist . . . This is in keeping with Diderot's repeated injunction that the beholder be treated as if he were not there . . . that nothing in a painted or staged *tableau* be felt by the beholder to be there *for him*.[10]

Drawing its very power to prick or pierce a particular beholder from the fact that it is unintended, *punctum* is a guarantee of anti-theatricality.

This is the register in which my 'first blush' account of *Five* might have proceeded. And indeed, in *Around Five*, Kiarostami himself seems to invite a reading of his film in such terms when he comments: "There are moments in all my films that I must confess are not of my making. This is not humility. In my opinion, *Five* should be watched with this in mind . . .". Yet this statement only complicates matters further. It comes directly after a series of amusing and ambiguous statements about the piece of driftwood, in which Kiarostami gives (only partially to retract) an explanation for his apparent 'luck': the breaking of the wood was achieved with a small, remote controlled explosive hidden inside it, and the separation of the chunk from the larger piece by tugging the piece off screen and out to sea with an unseen thread! On the one hand, then, Kiarostami seems to affirm the role of contingency, implying that the events captured in *Five* really were lucky finds;[11] on the other, he also affirms the fundamental role of design and creative control in the making of the movie, implying that the events it captures were the result of cinematic contrivance, indeed special effects.

It may seem Kiarostami is simply being incoherent here, but he is intensifying the problems of artifice and contemplation that *Five* raises. By asking us, on the one hand, to watch *Five* in the knowledge that his films contain moments that are not of his making, while on the other drawing our attention to the possibility that the whole thing is highly controlled, Kiarostami forces a crisis in metaphysical notions of intention and contingency, the fake and the real, the artificial and the natural (in passing it is worth noting that *Around Five*, by refusing to resolve these matters, effectively extracts itself from the 'making of' genre, such that we cannot really regard it as an external commentary on the film either: it is itself a problem, rather than a solution to any problem).

Let's try accepting the latter reading of the movie, in which the events it captures were not the result of luck or patience on Kiarostami's part but instead were carefully contrived. On this account of the film, the breaking of the driftwood was planned from the start, and if Barthes is right about *punctum*, this would seem to disqualify the event from achieving it. But how much can we put down to planning here, even if we grant that Kiarostami

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exploded the driftwood by remote control? Here are just three significant elements that turn up after the break which it is difficult to regard as intentional: the way the first wave pushes both bits up toward the viewer, splitting them in either direction to reveal the striking colour of their interiors; the way the smaller chunk sits steadfastly on the beach, refusing to be pulled into the sea; how the chunk ends up marking the border between the middle and bottom zones of the frame, while the piece rolls up and down between the borders of the middle zone.

Let's now try to accept that Kiarostami did not explode the driftwood, and was simply lucky enough to start videoing it before it broke. Surely the mere fact that Kiarostami's camera follows the wood means we nevertheless have to regard his capturing the event as intentional in an important sense; surely the fact that the scene opens before the break and concludes after the disappearance of the larger piece – which grants it a certain structure – cannot be regarded as an accident. Regardless of which way we read the breaking of the wood, then, Kiarostami's film troubles any attempt at drawing a clear line between the intentional and the accidental, the planned and the contingent. If there is *punctum* in this film it is not the sort that Barthes had in mind: here the aesthetic effect of the movie is bound up not only with how it captures small contingent aspects of reality that could never have been intended by the director, but also – and more fundamentally – with how it forces us to question the metaphysical assumptions underlying our desire for access to a pure, unmediated chance event.

This questioning really is that: it is not a denial that chance events exist, or that there is a reality antecedent to human intentionality, or whatever. It is also not to deny that film possesses what Diarmuid Costello and Dawn Phillips call 'epistemic privilege': a special capacity for recording reality, held in virtue of its being "mechanical, mind-independent, agent-less, natural, causal, physical, unmediated".[12] It is to ask whether we really know what we mean when invoking these terms in a full-blown philosophical register. For this is what is presupposed by both affirmation and denial, and exactly what Kiarostami's film should lead us to hesitate before committing to. His strategy in *Five* works something like this: first, instil in the viewer – through the use of a highly minimalist, restrained, and contemplative aesthetic, and by recording events that, at first blush, seem very 'ordinary' – the notion that she is viewing unadorned, unmediated, everyday reality; second, goad the viewer – by employing little tricks designed to get her questioning the status of what she sees, and giving her plenty of time and space to contemplate them – into asking whether or not the events that unfold really are unmediated after all; third, press the viewer – by complicating her notions of intention, control,

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artifice, and reality – into acknowledging that she did not really know quite what she meant when she started asking after unmediated reality in the first place. It is not that there is no distinction between intention and accident (no difference between setting up a piece of wood to break or having been there to catch its breaking), but that, once we abstract away from our practices and conventions and their applications to individual cases, our words start to lose purchase. Kiarostami's film indicates that, try as we might, we are unlikely to find a general account of the epistemic privilege of photographic media. Or more accurately, it is not quite that we'll never find a general account, insofar as this implies we are *lacking* something. Kiarostami's achievement in this film is to have identified – and worked to undo – a certain fantasy: the notion that, for something to be regarded as really real, it has to be unmediated by human intention; the intuition – which in certain frames of mind can feel unshakable – that the presence of the human disturbs a reality which, were it not for the incursion, would have remained pristine. The demand for reality at work here turned out to be a paradoxical one: if the real is set up in this way, we can never be in touch with it, because touching it will spoil it.

At the same time, I want to say that the effect of the film is more than 'merely' deflationary: as well as undoing a fantasy, it *does* grant a certain access to a transfigured ordinary. Consider again the passage from Wittgenstein I invoked in the last chapter, where he speaks of the uncanny and wonderful effect of seeing life itself. Now Wittgenstein acknowledges that we often come across people unaware of our presence and thus unaware of being observed, and it does not have this effect. But as he says, "we do not see it from *that* point of view".[13] He goes on to compare works of art to "insipid photographs" of scenery, which are only interesting to the photographer who took them. He writes: "without art the object is a piece of nature like any other".[14] This is the distinction I think Kiarostami is trading on, though perhaps in a more fraught and heightened way than does Wittgenstein's passage: the difference between presenting the ordinary as it is in itself (whatever that would mean), and presenting it in or through an artwork. As Fried argues, perhaps what is crucial about Wittgenstein's thought experiment is the presence of "the theatre and its curtain",[15] the fact that art and indeed artifice are built into the very structure of this experience of the ordinary.

Thus I want to say that Kiarostami's ability to grant a kind of access to ordinary reality is in no functional way distinct from how he undoes a particular realist fantasy. He takes the acknowledgement of artifice so far that he forces a crisis in the very distinction between the real and the artificial, but in doing so he demonstrates something quite surprising: that this procedure is not opposed to, but actually a condition for this authentic experience of

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life itself; that a radical acknowledgement of a depth of artifice may be what it takes, now, for cinema to defeat the flimsiness I spoke of earlier, if only for a few moments. Again it is worth comparing Kiarostami's procedure with reality television: it also purports to go for life itself but – in claiming to bypass all artifice and all mediation – actually produces images and sequences that are unbearably contrived (Kiarostami's own point of reference here is Hollywood, which he tellingly denounces in *Ten on Ten* for being *pretentious*). The presence of the director and his camera on the scene in *Five* is no transgression of the fourth wall, and it does not simply distance us but complicates our absorption. As in *Taste of Cherry*'s infamous coda, Kiarostami is part of the world he records in *Five*. But how could it be otherwise?

Notes

1. Kiarostami, 'Kiarostami on TEN', 3.
2. Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 26.
3. Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 45.
4. Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 42.
5. Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 47.
6. Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 47. It should be said that Barthes develops the concept in relation to photography, not cinema which – he notes in passing and without fully explaining himself – lacks the capacity for *punctum* because of its greater propensity for artifice (as he writes: "in the cinema, no doubt, there is always a photographic referent, but this referent shifts, it does not make a claim in favour of its reality" (76)). Yet *Five* is, of course, a highly 'photographic' film, in that it does away with precisely those aspects of cinema that Barthes more than likely had in mind here, including both montage and narrative. I return to the issues of cinema, photography, and medium specificity in the next chapter.
7. Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality*, 93.
8. Pippin, *After the Beautiful*, 84.
9. Fried, *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before*, 97.
10. Fried, *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before*, 100.
11. Barthes uses the term *trouvaille* (see *Camera Lucida*, 33).
12. Costello and Phillips, 'Automatism, Causality, and Realism', 2.
13. Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, 6 (original emphasis).
14. Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, 7.
15. Fried, *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before*, 80.

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