



Fergus Daly, *The Mirror of Possible Worlds*
Introductory text by Nicole Brenez

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An Analytical Fiction by Nicole Brenez:

Fergus Daly's *The Mirror of Possible Worlds*

He specialises in two forms of essay film:

- a portrait of the artist or the work (*Welcome to Our Battle of Images: Armand Gatti*, 2009; *Melmoth the Wanderer 1820-2020*, 2020; *Outliving Dracula: Le Fanu's Carmilla*, co-directed with Katherine Waugh, 2010; *Crimson: An Irish Trakl*, 2020; and so on);

- a focus on a concept or notion (*Matter & Memory*, 2010; *The Art of Time*, co-directed with Katherine Waugh, 2009; *The Book of Voluntary Death*, 2011, etc.)

In 2020, with *The Mirror of Possible Worlds: Kiarostami on Aran*, he invents a synthesis of these two dynamics.

In 1998, he published an article entitled 'Abbas Kiarostami: The Mirror of Possible Worlds' (Film West 32). Here he posits the idea that, contrary to the usual reception of Kiarostami as an Iranian heir to Italian neo-realism, the extensive preparatory work undertaken by the filmmaker with his actors prior to filming places him in the tradition of the artists of *trompe l'œil*: Alfred Hitchcock, Orson Welles, Raúl Ruiz. He writes: "In this universe, a character's uniqueness is an effect of his multiple reflections, the singular point of view that he maintains (or *is*) in the hall of mirrors in which he stands. (...) It is as if the narrative unfolding before you was simultaneously doubled by a possible narrative."

In 2003 he directed the documentary *Abbas Kiarostami: The Art of Living* (with Pat Collins). In it Kiarostami was filmed on the island of Aran in July 2001, and later interviewed at the Cannes Film Festival (May 2002). Kiarostami's own perspectives alternate here with specialists in the director's work: Mohammad Atebbai, Jonathan Rosenbaum, Alain Bergala...

In 2020, with his film *The Mirror of Possible Worlds: Kiarostami on Aran*, he returns again to this material and in doing so transforms the conventional documentary into an essay film displaying an extreme sense of freedom, in which he is able, on the one hand, to dramatise his 1998 proposition: Kiarostami as the master of the illusion of reality; and on the other hand, and perhaps above all, to further develop his conception of cinema, the reasons why he himself, Fergus, devotes his life to thinking about art.

To do this he plunders his archives: colour super-8 reels, digital files, photographs taken on this trip to Inis Mór. He decides to celebrate, through Kiarostami, all the analogue and digital instruments that a 21st century human finds at his disposal to interrogate the world. No tool, no image will ever be sufficient to account for the complexity of the smallest landscape, the briefest moment, the simplest living being, the most ephemeral sensation. So, since his film is a tribute to the infinite character of phenomena, he will use them all, varying their speeds, their formats, their forms of appearance. His film will make the plastic states of cinema sparkle.

He immediately finds the process that can hold this ontological and plastic diversity together without diminishing it: the same 'free indirect discourse' that was so dear to Pier Paolo Pasolini.

He decides that, in this film, each evocation will become a thread that unwinds towards a moment in the history of forms, towards a particular aesthetic, even towards a mysterious yearning. Alongside the famous residents or travellers to the Aran Islands – John Millington Synge, Antonin Artaud, Robert Flaherty – an essential moment of the film will be the evocation of the ‘Rebel School’ of Cork filmmakers, devotees of James Joyce and Sergei Eisenstein. It will be up to viewers to check whether or not these filmmakers existed - along the way they’ll learn about a history of Irish cinema.

Keeping in mind the horrified reels shot by José Val del Omar of his beloved Alhambra overrun by tourists, as well as Yervant Gianikian and Angela Ricci Lucchi’s film Images d’Orient – Tourisme Vandale/ Images of the Orient – Vandal Tourism (2001), he knows how to put the tourism problem to one side and focus on the nature of the speculative pilgrimage made to Inis Mór on that July day. The work of Flaherty, of Kiarostami and his own essay, each in its way, dialectises mise-en-scène and documentary capture. Whereas his predecessors sculpted reality during pre-production on their way to accessing a “Poetic Truth”, a truth unfaithful to exactitude, he, now, will transform a real and well documented filmmaker into a fictional character in a laboratory of questioning: falsification as exactitude. Because the terms of this questioning are indeed those of Kiarostami: truth does not come exclusively from fact but from the power of elucidation a proposition shows itself capable of, whatever its provenance. Thus, in *Close-Up* (1990) the ‘actor’ Hossein Sabzian is within the film playing a false variant of the director Mohsen Makhmalbaf but he is also a true revealer, since his imposture sheds light on injustice and violence suffered by the underprivileged classes in Iran: being poor is to be unable to become an artist, denied the right to culture, or to respect, nor even to an identity other than a fragmented one. In this sense, the Sabzian of the film does not make films as a director, but he does the work of cinema itself.

Hossein Sabzian in *Close-Up*: “Nature is a mirror in which we can look at ourselves”.

In *The Mirror of Possible Worlds*, he sums up Sabzian’s question in this way: what is the nature of this reality where we have to invent crazy stories to support it? He then asks himself in feed-back, “and mine?”. Wouldn’t it be this Western world where in-depth reflection struggles to garner respect, and if so then only in bastions as ruined but much less solid than the Fort of Aengus (the Universities, the Cinematheques, etc.), and especially not in audiovisual forms, which in principle could reach a large audience? He then decides to put everything in his film, well, everything, you can’t really do everything, so it will be more than everything: not only the world, but the possibility of worlds.

So as not to lose his way, he rereads the poems of Abbas Kiarostami translated in 2001 under the title *Walking with the Wind* (Harvard University Press).

“The mirror breaks
in a plain woman’s hand -
a hundred streams welling up
in the dead of a dark night.”

He tells himself that the sea is never more beautiful than at sunset, when it shines with a thousand lights, and that on such shots one can hang thoughts that sear the heart.

The experience of editing is a concrete confirmation of his intuition about multiple worlds: in each image, there are many films.

Like both Abbas Kiarostami and Hossein Sabzian, he is well aware that there are two realities: material reality and psychic reality. And with them, he considers the cinema as this revolving door which moves ceaselessly between these two worlds, brewing up a flux of shadows and ghosts.

A further spectre will haunt his film, that of another island filmmaker:

“Cinema constitutes the most faithful and complete technique of expression for transmitting mental images with a character of reality.” (Jean Epstein, IDHEC, ‘The role of cinema in human culture’, 1950, unpublished)