Where Is the Friend's House? (خانه دوست کجاست, *Khane-ye doust kodjast*, 1987)

Lorenz Engell

dir. Abbas Kiarostami; prod. Ali Reza Zarrin; screenplay Abbas Kiarostami; photography Farhad Saba; music Amine Allah Hessine. 35mm, color, 83 mins. Farabi Cinema Foundation, distrib. Facets Multimedia Distribution.

Where Is the Friend's House? was filmed in 1987 in the remote village of Koker, in northern Iran. The film, like many melodramas, is primarily about futility. More precisely, it explores the temporal structure of vainness. In doing so, it simultaneously investigates the rules of melodrama itself. This is especially, but not only, true of its temporality. A genre, if one follows Stanley Cavell, is just that: the negotiation among the films of a genre about the rules that constitute that genre (Cavell 1978, 29-36; Cavell 1982; see also Engell 2019). Every film that participates in this negotiation belongs to the genre. It does not matter, however, what substantial or functional characteristics it shows from a conceivable list of features or from a more orthodox definition of genre that, however, always seems lacking.

Narrated in a strictly linear fashion, the film—which was awarded the Bronze Leopard at the Locarno Film Festival and led to high acclaim for its director, Abbas Kiarostami—unfolds a very simple plot of just over twenty-four hours. At the village school in Koker, Iran, eight-year-old Ahmad Ahmadpour has accidentally pocketed the notebook of his friend Mohammad Reza Nematzadeh, who sits next to him in class and lives in the neighboring village of Poshteh. In order for Mohammad to do his homework, Ahmad now has to bring the notebook to him in the afternoon. Ahmad must first sneak out of his house, then evade the surveillance of the omnipresent elderly people in his village, and finally ask his way through the completely unknown, labyrinthine village to get to his friend's house. Until darkness falls, Ahmad does pursue his quest. In the end, however, he fails. All the effort was in vain. But unlike in other melodramas, here the sense of futility is given yet another twist. Overnight, Ahmad com-

pletes the assigned homework in Mohammad's notebook, which he brings to school the next day and thereby spares his friend the threat of expulsion.

Despite its simplicity and linearity, the film exhibits a highly idiosyncratic temporal structure, full of diversions, changes in intensity, condensations, and lapses. It is characterized, first of all, by duration: by sheer persistence without acceleration, frequently in one-shot sequences. Dialogues and individual events are seen and heard for as long as they last, without jumps in time. The passage of time as a coherent continuum therefore stands out, as does the seclusion of individual actions. The washing of laundry in the courtyard, Ahmad's way up the stairs to the upper floor and back down again, or the grandfather's narration of his being disciplined by his father and later his foreman at the construction site: All of this is presented in full extension without any abbreviation. This gives the film a thoroughgoing slowness. Only in the one-shot sequence, says André Bazin, do we experience the real extension of events in time and time itself (41-52).

According to Bazin, the same applies to simultaneity. The simultaneity of two processes can exclusively be experienced in the uncut one-shot sequence, because it can show two processes at one time in the same image. In contrast, edited synchronization always means that two incidents that take places at one time are shown one after the other. In this case, synchronicity is a conclusion we are brought to by means of montage. Not so in the one-shot sequence, where it becomes immediately apparent. Simultaneity hence forms the second feature of the temporal arrangement in Kiarostami's film. While the mother does the laundry, Ahmad does his homework in the background. While the old man rants, Ahmad runs to get his cigarettes (again unsuccessfully, as the old man has them and only wanted to humiliate Ahmad).

Mostly, though, Ahmad is just there: watching while something happens. Repeatedly we see his face in close-up, more or less expressionless, completely occupied with the mere registration of what is. This passivity, endurance, and experience to which Ahmad is subjected forms another basic trait that allows us to see in Kiarostami's film a melodrama. His persistent willingness to act is based on what he undergoes, what he hears and sees, and is also entirely infused with it. Ahmad is thus an observer, and in this he does not so much represent us, the spectators, in the image, but rather doubles the camera that makes the image and can never be seen. In the image, the figure appears here as a metonymy of the camera. Like the camera, Ahmad moves incessantly and always aims at something, but is at the same time completely receptive and passive, and this is precisely what creates his possibility of action in the first place.

Then again, as a third feature of the film's time structure there are the countless interruptions and distractions that repeatedly divert Ahmad from what he is up to: not because he is unfocused, but because he is helplessly at the mercy of the authoritarian command of adults, especially his mother and grandfather. Instead of continuing to walk, he has to go out for cigarettes. Instead of being able to do his homework, he has to give the baby a bottle and fetch the laundry. He must hand over his notebook so someone can take notes, and he waits to get it back. These interruptions are complemented by the odysseys he is repeatedly sent on in the strange village of Poshteh. Here, one is reminded of the time structure, episodes, and interruptions in Vittorio di Sica's *Bicycle Thieves* (1948; another film that discusses melodramatic structures and is therefore a melodrama). In general, *Where Is the Friend's House?* is deeply indebted to the aesthetics of Italian neorealism in the postwar period.

This is also evident in a fourth feature: repetition. Right at the beginning, the teacher repeats everything he says several times, as do all other characters up to the old carpenter towards the film's end. Ahmad also takes three attempts to—unsuccessfully—explain to his mother that he has to bring Nematzadeh his exercise book. The household chores are repeated. Ahmad runs to Poshteh and, due to a mistake, back to Koker, and then again to Poshteh. In addition, many things are also doubled or multiplied in space. For example, there are two carpenters, the boastful one and the melancholic one, and Nematzadeh is the name of half the village. Last but not least, there are two exercise books—in which there is incessant leafing, back and forth and back again. Cesare Zavattini named repetition—which, after all, profoundly characterizes everyday life and its routines—as a domain of neorealism, which would be eradicated in American film in favor of the straightened and accelerated story.

A fifth element of the time regime, then, are sudden accelerations and the gradual increase of time pressure. The route between Koker and Poshteh is always shown exactly the same in its course: Even on the third journey it is unabbreviated—up the hill, along the crest of the hill, down again on the other side, branching off into the olive grove, past the animal cages into the neighboring village, back and back again. But in spite of this strenuous course, Ahmad is able to keep up his pace. He mostly hurries when he is not standing and watching. The more the film progresses and time runs out, the more Ahmad hurries. When the old carpenter, who finally leads him to his friend's house (but, because it is already dark, Ahmad does not dare to enter), is so unbearably slow, Ahmad becomes seriously impatient and runs away—again in vain. And finally—as the last important temporal element of futility—the »too late« must be mentioned: Several times, Ahmad is a little too late to meet his friend, or someone who Ahmad thinks might lead him to him.

Towards the end, when it gets dark, contours—and with them reified matter—retreat almost completely. Only the beautiful and differentiated light and shadow of the window ornaments on the walls of the village remain: that is, images of pure projection, small insular light effects without semantics. But even they still reveal, like things, their »madeness« and history: The old carpenter made them, a long time ago.

That leaves perhaps the most impressive image of the film. This image also occurs twice, almost identically. It stands out because it is the only image with a musical background. It shows the beginning of the path from Koker to Poshteh, steeply uphill in Z-shaped, zig-zag serpentines, which Ahmad chases up (Ishagpour 67). The Z, the Zigzag, says Gilles Deleuze, is the beginning of everything—not the Big Bang. It is the flight of the fly (and the way of Ahmad)—but also the lightning, the fulguration between singularities, the invisible remaining points not marked as such at all. It is the sudden lighting up of the connection of the »dark preceding potentialities,« says Deleuze (disc 3, chap. 26). As thought and as creation, it is the beginning of a possible world.

Where Is the Friend's House? is the first part of Kiarostami's so-called Koker trilogy. The second part, *Life, and Nothing More*, sets out in 1992 after the devastating earthquake in the region to search for the two main actors of our film, the Ahmadpour brothers. Here, too, the search will be in vain. In this respect, the central theme of *Where Is the Friend's House?* is continued. At the same time, however, guiltlessness, fate, and entanglement are also explored, and the negotiation of what is a tragedy in the dimensions of the cinematic universe is taken up. This attempt, however, also ends not in the downfall that stands at the beginning but in affirmation. Finally, in 1994, comes

Through the Olive Trees, which—with the Ahmadpour brothers reappearing—is about the shooting of a film in Koker after a devastating earthquake (Engell 2014). However, this film is a comedy. Like all comedies, it combines the negotiation of what a comedy is with the levelling of hierarchies (here: of film and reality). In doing so, it succeeds in the characteristic distancing of humor, not through reflection and superiority, but through dislocation and distribution, through repetition and deviation, and again through the back and forth, through the zigzag between singularities (Engell 2010).

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