
THE DESCENT INTO SHAME

Joan Copjec

Studio Art Magazine no. 168, February-March 2007

Iranian films are an exotic experience for audiences accustomed to Hollywood-dominated cinema. Not just for obvious reasons, but because the obvious – the foreign locations and people, everything we actually see on screen – is produced by a different distribution of the visible and the invisible and an alien logic of the look.

One of the most spectacular heralds of Iran's 1978-1979 Islamic Revolution was the torching of spectacle. Movie theatres – in one horrific case, with the audience still in it – were set on fire, incinerated by fundamentalists. Fittingly, in this respect, Khomeini spoke, in his very first public appearance as Iran's new leader, not only of his intent to restore the authority of the mullahs and purge the country of all foreign influences, Eastern and Western, he also directly addressed the question of cinema. As might be expected, he vehemently denounced it as "prostitution," as the "Shah's cinema," but he deliberately refrained from banning it outright as a wicked modern invention. For, even he could recognize the value of film, the potential for mobilizing it for his grand scheme of re-educating the people in the ways of Islam. Post-revolutionary Iran witnessed the flourishing of a heavily subsidized and officially promoted cinema, though one strictly regulated by the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, which explicitly forbid the smallest details betraying foreign influence – such as the wearing of ties or bow ties, the smoking of cigarettes, the drinking of alcohol, and so on – and, more globally, any infraction of the Islamic system of *hejab*. In its strictest sense, *hejab* is a veil or cloth covering for women that obscures them from the sight of men to whom they are not related; but in its widest sense it is the entire "system of modesty" that conceals the very shape of women, which always risks being revealed through gesture and movement. Indeed, *hejab* seems to be motivated by the belief that there is something about women that can never be covered up enough and thus the task of veiling is buttressed by

architectural design and rigid social protocols that further protect women from exposure.

The impact of *hejab* regulations on cinema was massive.¹ Not only the figure and movement of the woman, but the very look directed at her needed to be veiled. Strictures against the eros of the unrelated meant that not even religiously allowed forms of erotic engagement between men and women could be represented, since filming exposed women to the extra diegetic look of the director, crew, and, of course, the audience. Thus the look of desire around which Hollywood-dominated cinema is plotted had to be forsaken, along with the well-established system of relaying that look through an alternating pattern of shots and counter-shots and the telling insertion of psychologically motivated close-ups. Besides restricting narrative situations and tabooing the most common style of editing, the system of modesty also obliged any filmmaker committed to maintaining a modicum of realism to shoot outdoors. Although in real life Iranian women need not and do not wear head-scarves at home, in cinematic interiors they were forced to don them because of the presence, once again, of the extradiegetic look which exposed them to the view of unrelated men. Incongruous images of headscarves in scenes of family intimacy were more than unrealistic, they were oftentimes risible and thus filmmakers tended to avoid domestic scenes as much as possible. Ultimately, then, interiority was one of the most significant cinematic casualties of *hejab*. Iranian cinema came to be composed *only* of exterior shots, whether in the form of actual spatial exteriors – the improbable abundance of rural landscapes and city streets, which is a hallmark of Iranian cinema – or in the form of virtual exteriors – interior domestic spaces in which women remained veiled and isolated from desire, outside the reach of any affectionate or passionate caress. The challenge facing all Iranian filmmakers, then, is to make credible and compelling films under these conditions, namely: the censorship of interiority, of intimacy.

Revelations of American torture of Iraqi prisoners at Abu Ghraib brought to light an abusive misunderstanding of the Islamic system of modesty. It turns out that *The Arab Mind*, a book first published in 1973 and reprinted only a few months prior to the invasion of Iraq, got into the hands of pro-war Washington conservatives and became, in the words of one academic, “the bible of the neo-cons

on Arab behavior.” Of special interest to these conservatives was a chapter on Arabs and sex which argued that, “The segregation of the sexes, the veiling of women... and all the other minute rules that govern and restrict contact between men and women, have the effect of making sex a prime mental preoccupation in the Arab world.”² It was this sort of speculation which was responsible for planting the idea that shame would be the most effective device for breaking Iraqi prisoners down psychologically. According to a report in *The New Yorker*, two themes emerged as “talking points” in the discussions of the strategists: 1) “Arabs only understand force” and 2) “the biggest weakness of Arabs is shame and humiliation.”³ In brief, shame was chosen as the method of torture precisely because the torturers believed that Arab culture made the prisoners particularly vulnerable to it.

This belief was nourished on the banquet of that crude, and one would have thought, thoroughly discredited sociological division of the world into “guilt cultures” and “shame cultures.” The distinction classifies guilt as an affect characteristic of advanced cultures, whose members have graduated to the stage where they possess an internal principle of morality, and shame as a “primitive” affect characteristic of cultures forced to rely, for want of such a principle, on the approving or disapproving gaze of other people to monitor morality. Let me focalize my criticisms by offering my own curt and contrary thesis: *the affects of shame and guilt are improperly used to define kinds of cultures; for, what they define, rather, is a subject’s relation to her culture*. I use *culture* here to refer to a form of life that we inherit at birth, to all those things – such as family, race, ethnicity, and national identity – we do not choose, but which choose us. Call them gifts of our ancestors. The manner in which we assume this inheritance, and the way we understand what it means to keep faith with it, are, I argue, what determine shame or guilt.

Distancing herself from this dubious correlation of affects with stages of cultural and moral development, Eve Sedgwick offers an alternative to the neo-conservative view of shame while reflecting on her own experience of shame in the aftermath of another violent confrontation between America and Islam, the attack of September 11. Sedgwick tells us that she was suddenly overcome by shame whenever she happened, after September 11, to catch a glimpse of the void that now occupied the site where the Twin Towers once stood.³ This odd example of the

affect is well suited to her argument, first because it effectively illustrates the point that shame is not caused by prohibition or repression. If the occasion of shame is the surprising of my own look by another that “overlooks” it, this second, alien look must not be construed as one of condemnation, disapproval, or prohibition. My look is deflected or disarmed, not by any (negative) judgment, but in response to the rupturing of an interpersonal bridge, the interruption of the comforting circuit of recognition by which my look sends back to me an image that confirms my identity. My look is interrupted by a blank stare, a voided vision. Like most New Yorkers, Sedgwick no doubt relied on the reassuring sight of the Towers to orient herself in the city; their absence then represented a disappointment of expectations and a loss of familiar coordinates. The blush or, “betraying blazon of an interrupted narcissistic circuit,”⁴ that arose in response may have represented a bruise to her urban identity, but this bruise was not accompanied by any sentiment of rejection or abjection. Rather, a kind of group feeling, a feeling of solidarity with others arose along with the wound. This paradox has often been commented upon: shame is at once the most isolating of feelings *and* a basic social response, a movement “toward individuation *and* toward uncontrollable relationality,” or social contagion.⁵

The challenge to understanding shame lies in interpreting this paradox. The one unfortunate error Sedgwick makes is to insist that the shame she felt after 9/11 was not for herself, but for the missing Towers; that is, she interprets the social sentiment as a feeling of shame for or on behalf of something other than herself. In so doing she gives shame an object, the missing edifices. The effect of this error was to permit a whole literature on shame to sprout within queer theory whereby queers take themselves as the despised objects of shame and in a second, compensatory movement convert the common trait of their abjection into a badge of honor and the basis of group feeling. Shame in other words is here thought to bind individuals into a group by becoming that which they share: they form the group of all rejected or excepted from the larger group of the “normal.” This disastrous misunderstanding can begin to be challenged by making it clear that the phrase “shame for” is, strictly speaking, a solecism. I feel shame neither for myself nor for others because shame is intransitive; it has no object. Shame is there in place of an object in the ordinary sense (though, as we will see, shame is “not without object”

or, in the Lacanian vocabulary, it concerns the object a). To experience shame is to experience oneself not as a despised or degraded object, but to experience oneself as a subject. I am not ashamed of myself, I am the shame I feel: shame is there *in the place of* an object. Giorgio Agamben puts this clearly when he designates shame as the “proper emotive tonality of subjectivity,” as “the fundamental sentiment of being a subject.”⁶ The entire thrust of Sedgwick’s argument, in fact, goes in this direction; shame she says is the sentiment that “attaches to and sharpens the sense of who one is.”⁷ The searing pain associated with shame is not one of being turned by another into an object, of being degraded; it has to do with the fact that one is not “integrated”⁸ with oneself, one is fundamentally split from oneself. (But isn’t this the very definition of a subject?)

Let us delay for a bit the full explication of the paradox of shame to turn once more to the Islamic system of modesty which we will view through the cinema of Abbas Kiarostami, one of the most famous directors to make films under this system. What gives the neo-conservative association of shame and *hejab* its legs, of course, is the fact that they both involve veiling. In the modesty system and in shame a barrier is erected, a curtain drawn, looks are averted and heads bowed heads. On first approach, then, no director would seem to be more in tune with the *hejab* system than Kiarostami, for his is a cinema of respectful reserve and restraint. This reserve is expressed most emblematically in his preference for what can be described as “discreet” long-shots. In moments of dramatic intimacy, especially – a skittish suitor’s approach to the girl he loves; the meeting between a man who impersonates another and the man he impersonates – Kiarostami’s camera tends to hold back, to separate itself from the action by inserting a distance between itself and the scene and refusing to venture forward into the private space of the characters. So marked is the tactfulness of his camera that Kiarostami sometimes seems a reluctant filmmaker.

In light of this overall filming strategy, one sequence from *The Wind Will Carry Us* (1999) stands out as an aberration. In this sequence, Behzad – a documentary filmmaker who has traveled to the Kurdish village of Siah-Darreh with his crew to film the ceremony of scarification still practiced by mourning villagers after someone from the village dies – Behzad, biding his time as he awaits the imminent

death of Mrs. Malek, the village's oldest inhabitant, amuses himself by attempting to purchase some fresh milk from Zeynab, a young village girl and the fiancé of a grave digger he has befriended. Hamid Dabashi, author of a book on Iranian cinema and normally a great admirer of Kiarostami, excoriates the director for the utter shamelessness of this sequence in which, in Dabashi's view, an Iranian woman's privacy and dignity are raped by a boorish Iranian man, whose crime is all the more offensive for being paraded before the eyes of the world.⁹ This is what Dabashi sees: Behzad descending into a hidden, underground space, penetrating the darkness that protects a shy, unsophisticated village girl from violation, and aggressively trying to expose her, despite her obvious resistance, to the light from the lamp he tries to shine on her, to his incautious look, his lies, and his sexual seduction.

Anxiety and the "Inexpressible Flavor of the Absolute"

Before offering an alternative reading of this sequence, I want to set out the background that allows me to distinguish my reading from that of Dabashi. His disdain for Behzad is heavily informed by his assessment of the protagonist as simply a Tehrani interloper adrift in rural Iran. This reading of the puzzled and sometimes combative disorientation of Behzad – a characteristic he shares with many of Kiarostami's protagonists, who are almost all screen doubles of the director – is a common one: geographically and culturally displaced, the modern urban sophisticate finds himself at a loss amidst rural peoples and traditions. One is obliged to note, however, that it is as much the peri-urban character of these rural areas as their pristine primitiveness, notably in decline, which catches Kiarostami's eye. Cell phone reception may not always be good in the villages, but new telecommunications systems are already being installed and the sight of random television antennas on thatched roofs assure us that no one in this part of the world need miss a simulcast soccer game. Regarding the traditional ceremony of scarification, for example, we learn in the course of the film that it has been retrofitted, turned long ago into a means of advancing oneself on the professional ladder. Whenever a relative of one of the bosses dies, the workers compete for the distinction of being the most loyal mourner, exhibiting their self-scarred faces and

bodies in hopes of impressing their boss and being rewarded with a promotion. Incipient capitalism is here in bed with traditional culture, exploiting rather than eliminating it.

This abbreviation of the distance between Behzad and the villagers does not exonerate his insensitive behavior, but it does suggest that we need to look elsewhere for an explanation for his disorientation, which is more profound than the narrative alibi implies. Like other Kiarostami protagonists, Behzad behaves, I will argue, less like a rootless or de-territorialized modern man, than like one who has been uprooted from this is unrootedness to become riveted to a culture, a land, an ethnicity that is opaque to him and which he tries, without much success, to understand by engaging in a quasi-ethnographic exploration of them. That modernity melted everything solid into air is an exaggerated claim, but it was expected to soften at least all that had been solid to the consistency of clay, to render everything, including the subject, infinitely pliable, manipulable. Contrary to expectations, however, modern, supposedly malleable, man found himself stuck to something, to a bit of reality that tore him from the free-flowing current of modern life. It is as if a drain hole or counterforce were inexplicably opened in the modern world, lending our fleeting “temporal existence...the inexpressible flavor of the absolute...[and giving rise to] an acute feeling of being held fast.”¹⁰ That this riveting or reterritorialization is a confounding fact of modern life and no mere theoretical abstraction is evidenced most notably in all the stubborn outbreaks of national, ethnic, racial, and religious loyalties at a moment when such loyalties could have been expected to dissipate.

As is known, modernity was founded on a definitive break with the authority of our ancestors, who were no longer conceived as the ground for our actions or beliefs. And yet this effective undermining of their authority confronted us with another difficulty; it is as if in rendering our ancestors fallible we had transformed the past from the repository of their already accomplished deeds and discovered truths into a kind of holding cell of all that was unactualized and unthought. The desire of our ancestors and thus the virtual past, the past that had never come to pass, or was not yet finished, weighed disturbingly on us, pressing itself on our attention.

The theorization of this unfinished past is concentrated, in the West, around the concept of anxiety.¹¹ If it seemed necessary to come to terms theoretically with anxiety – as it did to Kierkegaard, Freud, and Heidegger, among others – this is surely because this affect bore witness to this new relation to the past. The assumption that modern man would become pliable – to market forces or the force of his own will, depending on the starting point of one's argument – rested on the belief that the break with an authoritative past placed a zero in the denominator of our foundations, rooted us in or attached us to – nothing. Anxiety, the affect that arises in moments when radical breaks in the continuity of existence occur, belies this assumption. Strangely, anxiety often overtakes revolutionaries immediately after a revolution, which seems not to free the hand that would draft a new constitution, but to paralyze it. How to understand this curious phenomenon? While many psychoanalytic thinkers conceived anxiety as the affective response to loss or abandonment, Freud insisted that the proper response to loss would be mourning – not anxiety. Like Freud, the philosophers mentioned conceived anxiety as dependent not on an actual condition, albeit one of loss, but rather on “a condition that is not.” Kierkegaard offered a clarifying illustration of the difference: the feeling of anxiety is not captured, he said, by the complaint, “My God, why hast thou forsaken me?” but rather by the entreaty, “Whatever you are going to do Lord, do quickly!”¹² Anxiety is the experience not of a loss that has happened but the experience of awaiting some event, something that has not happened.

The break instituted by modernity did not cause the past to become effectively dead to us, its retreat turned out to be modal (that is, it became a matter of the virtual, not the actual past) rather than total. We were thus not left simply alone in a cloistral present cut off from our ancestors, but found ourselves alone with something that did not clearly manifest itself. Anxiety is this feeling of being anchored to an alien self from which we are unable to separate ourselves nor to assume as our own, of being connected to a past that, insofar as it had not happened, was impossible to shed. Our implication in the past was thus deepened. For, while formerly a subject's ties to her past were strictly binding, they were experienced as external, as of the order of simple constraint. One had to submit to a destiny one did not elect and often experienced as unjust. But one could – like Job or the heroes

and heroines of classical tragedies – rail against one’s destiny, curse one’s fate. With modernity this is no longer possible. The “God of destiny” is now dead and we no longer inherit the debts of our ancestors, but become that debt. We cannot distance ourselves sufficiently from the past to be able to curse the fate it hands us, but must, as Lacan put it, “bear as jouissance the injustice that horrifies us.”¹³ What does this mean?

We can answer this question by returning to the hand paralyzed by anxiety. If, stricken by anxiety, my hand goes on strike, refuses to write, it is because it has become saturated with libido or gripped by jouissance. My hand behaves, Freud explains, like a maid who, having begun a love affair with her master, refuses to continue doing her household chores.¹⁴ In the moment of anxiety, we are gripped by our own jouissance as the very object-cause of our actions, but the experience is of being parasitized by an alien object so suffocatingly close that we cannot discern what it is. In his essay on Melville’s *Bartelby* – the scrivener who goes on strike because he prefers not to fulfill the tasks he was hired for – Agamben unintentionally suggests a way to push Freud’s argument further.¹⁵ The essay is not about anxiety but about potentiality and Agamben’s primary argument is that if potentiality were only a potential to be or do something, we could not experience it as such, since it would dissolve into the experience of actually existing or doing something. But because we do experience a potentiality distinct from actuality, we must then suppose that there exists an *impotentiality*, a potential not to be or do, that precedes potentiality. *Bartelby* becomes the exemplary figure of this impotentiality, the first manifestation of a subject’s power or capacity. Psychoanalysis, we well know, names this capacity libido (or jouissance) and it, too, acknowledges that this capacity must first be the power to not be or do when it posits the existence of the death drive. If one is committed to the existence of libido or jouissance, it is necessary to believe in the speculative notion of the death drive. Anxiety can be understood as the affect that registers our encounter with the death drive – or our own capacity as such. This capacity is not at the behest of autonomous will, however, but attaches us, rather, to the ontologically incomplete past into which we are born, or: jouissance is the affective result of our relation to ancestral desire.

That Kiarostami’s films are haunted by such an inexplicable attachment to

the past is clear enough. Cemeteries are a characteristic topos of the films. In *The Wind Will Carry Us*, for example, one of the primary locations of the film is the cemetery in which Youssef, a gravedigger, digs continuously throughout the film. Youssef thus remains underground for most of the film and is thus invisible to us, as are several other characters. Asked by an interviewer what these curious visual absences signified, Kiarostami replied that the film was about “beings without being.”¹⁶ Eventually the ground caves in on Youssef, who has to be dug out. The unsteadiness of the ground is not, however, unique to this film, it is a constant in Kiarostami’s work, where the earth is always caving in, buckling, heaving, quaking. Scarred by cavernous pits, filmed at angles that suggest they might at any moment swallow up built structures and people, the ground continuously throws up rubble and forces inconvenient detours. In other words, the ground, like the past buried in it, turns out to be in these films a very unsettled affair. It is as if the past itself were constantly under construction.

In *Where Is the Friend’s House?* (1986) this disturbing, anxiogenic surplus takes the form of a notebook which a young school boy is sure is not his own, though it appears in all particulars exactly like his. He spends the majority of the film trying to return it, unsuccessfully, mysteriously deciding in the end not to give it back to its ostensible owner but instead to write an original composition in it. In *Taste of Cherry* (1997), this strange surplus fails to take a concrete form and instead infuses the film with a perplexing textual opacity. The film follows a middle-aged man, Mr. Badii, who has no discernible reason for discontent (far from it) and yet spends the entire film trying to find an accomplice to his suicide, one who will promise to cover him with twenty shovels-full of dirt and double check to make sure he is really and truly dead. From this we suspect that Mr. Badii is bothered by a fear of being buried alive. It is as if he were trying not simply to suicide himself but to extinguish some excess of self that does not respond to his wishes and thus impresses him as capable of surviving even his death.

Speaking in an interview about *Taste of Cherry*, Kiarostami offered this comment: “the choice of death is the only prerogative possible...because everything in our lives has been imposed by birth...our parents, our home, our nationality, our build, the color of our skin, our culture.”¹⁷ Though Mr. Badii has no personal

complaint, the thick presence of militia, the oppressive evidence of poverty, and the dust of industrialization visible in the urban perimeter through which he drives suggests choking. His suicide is thus readable as an attempt to escape the suffocation brought on by a world where one's identity is laid down by authorities who leave no room for freedom. And yet this sociological reading – of the film and Kiarostami's statement about the film – can only be experienced as insufficient insofar as it neglects the "absolute" dimension to which the film bears witness. What Mr. Badii cannot abide is being stuck to the opaque *desir* of his ancestors. He seeks through suicide not just the actual restrictions his culture imposes, but the restrictive space in which he finds himself bound to its unreadable imperative.

The Affective Tonality of Capitalism

In his seminar on anxiety Lacan protests against the time-honored distinction between fear and anxiety which maintains that anxiety is without object as opposed to fear, which is always transitive. He insists instead that anxiety is "not without object." This is a restatement not a denial of the distinction of the original distinction, for Lacan does not negate the negation of anxiety's object, he qualifies it. Replacing the absolute negation, "without object," with a conditional negation, he makes anxiety a matter of what does not now or not yet objectively exist. This qualification brings Lacan closer to Kierkegaard's "condition which is not" and acknowledges that if anxiety has no actual or realized object, it is nevertheless not pure delusion either. What grips us in anxiety is not nothing, even if it has no objective existence.

I have lingered so long on anxiety because our primary topic, shame, is almost incomprehensible if we do not start out from a consideration of it. What is fundamental to both affects is this non-actualized, unassumable object which sticks to us like a semi-autonomous shadow. In his early work, *On Escape*, Emmanuel Levinas in fact scarcely distinguishes between these affects except to characterize shame as the dashed hope of escape from the alien object that uproots us in anxiety. Like others, including Freud and Lacan, Levinas characterizes anxiety as a kind of state of emergency, the experience of a signal or imperative to Flee! Escape! In his account, however, it is only when the hiccup of hope sustained by this imperative

bursts that we finally enter into shame. With shame I am forced to accept that I am that, that object which sticks to me, even though I do not know what that is and cannot figure out how to integrate it. My question is this: is it hope really hope which is dissipated in shame or is rather the imperative to escape? And if it is the imperative, what becomes of it?

In Levinas the imperative experience of anxiety is thought only as one that compels escape *from* the unintegratable object. We would ask, however: into what can we escape? Anxiety is rarely experienced in the raw; something like the “stem cell” of affects, it is more often encountered in another form, in one of the “social affects” of guilt or shame, which we can describe as two socially differentiated forms of anxiety accompanying two different organizations of our relation to our potentiality and to our past. In brief, anxiety can best be understood as the imperative to (escape into) sociality. Unable to discern our own desire, to know who we are, we feel compelled to flee into sociality in an attempt to find there some image of ourselves. The society of others serves a civilizing function not, as is usually said, because it tames primitive animal instincts, but because it colonizes our savage, inhuman jouissance by allowing us to acquire some self-image.

Now, it is against this backdrop that we will approach the “shame sequence” in *The Wind Will Carry Us*. The problem I have with Dabashi’s reading has nothing to do with the revulsion it expresses toward Behzad, whose actions are inexcusable. As he hangs around Siah-Darreh waiting for Mrs. Malek to die, he occupies himself not only by bothering Zeynab, but also by trying to take photographs of villagers who do not want their pictures taken. The film indicts him for his rudeness and indiscretion, but in what precisely do these crimes consist? If every subject needs to escape anxiety in order to find out who he is, to appear on the public stage whence he can return to himself some self-image, why is Behzad’s attempt to offer the villagers photographic images of themselves counted as an act of rudeness or malice, rather than an act of kindness? One of the villagers in *Life and Nothing More* answer this question when he complains to Farhad, the film director in that film, that the images of the villagers his camera captures make them appear worse than they are.

In what way can images make us appear worse than we are? Behzad and Farhad

both travel to the villages to document what is there to be seen, ultimately in order to archive phenomena on the verge of disappearing. Their mission is to capture a world in the midst of fading, people about to die or presumed lost, ritual practices on the edge of extinction. This archival ambition licenses their rudeness, justifies in their minds their indiscreet attempts to find out what the villagers prefer not to disclose. The *fundamental* problem, however – which is nevertheless related to the conviction that all phenomena are merely transitory – is that these nosey archivists believe that what is being hidden from them is something which discloses itself to those who try to hide it. In other words, what the diegetic directors disregard while making their images is the very jouissance or unrealized surplus of self which makes each villager opaque to herself. The directors rob them of that and thus reduce them to disappearing phenomena.

If we admit that Behzad behaves, as Dabashi believes, in an obscene fashion, we must be prepared to say in what this obscenity consists. The same goes for the charge as it is leveled against the Abu Ghraib photographs. It is often said that the photographs invaded the prisoners' privacy, exposed it to the eyes of the world. But this claim does not go far enough. The obscenity of the Abu Ghraib photographs as with those taken by Behzad consist in their implicit assumption that there is no obscene, no off-screen, that cannot be exposed to a persistent, prying look. The two sets of photographs result from the same obscene denial: they deny that the prisoners and the villagers *are* exposed to their own otherness to themselves. This otherness to ourselves is what constitutes the only interiority we have, it is our privacy. Thus the ultimate crime of the photographers is to proceed as if the prisoners and villagers have no privacy to invade.

At the close of the twentieth century, Nietzsche expressed his scorn for his contemporaries' stupid insistence on trying to "see *through* everything." He protested the lack of reverence and discretion which fueled their tactless attempt so "touch, lick, and finger everything."¹⁸ The phenomenon Nietzsche decried is the frenzied desire we still see all around us, the desire to cast aside every veil, penetrate every surface, transgress every barrier in order to get our hands on the real thing lying behind it. We seem to have installed in the modern world a new "beyondness," a new untouchable, or a new secularized sacred; one that inspires a

new desire for transgression. This secularized sacred does not originate in a belief in the existence of another world, but from the belief that what we want in this world always lies behind a barrier which prevents our access to it.

The rough desire to brush aside barriers and veils arises through a specific structuring of our relation to our culture which we can call guilt. Common to the affects of anxiety, guilt, and shame is our sense of an inalienable and yet unintegratable surplus of self. In guilt this surplus no longer weighs on us as the burden of an unfinished past, but as the unfinished business of the present. The sentiment of our opacity to ourselves is disavowed and in its place arises the sentiment of being excluded from ourselves by exterior barriers. In short, we treat ourselves with the same measure of obscenity as we treat others, denying ourselves any privacy in the true sense. The mechanisms of this conversion of anxiety into guilt are the social and ego ideals which relieve us of the responsibility of having to invent a future without the aid of rules or scripts. Ideals give our actions directions, goals to strive for, and thus alleviate the overwhelming sentiment of anxiety. But because ideals are unattainable, by definition, the (bitter) taste of the absolute is still discernible in them through the experience of the elusive beyond they bring into existence.

The Kurdish villagers are not only submitted to Behzad's indiscretions but also to their own obscene desire to expose another layer of themselves, to cut deeper into their own skin in order to obtain the kind of recognition for which they have begun to thirst. Siah-Darreh seems poised to participate not only in capitalist development, but also to develop a new relation to their cultural past. The unbearable question of who we are was no sooner raised by modernity than resolved by capitalism as a matter no longer of being, but of possessing an identity. Like all possessions, identity turned out to be susceptible to measurement. One could have more or less or it, better or worse forms of it, but one cannot fully acquire it. Around this insufficiency a traffic in identity grows up and the value of modesty recedes drastically.

Exposure

It is the expansion of capitalism and the prevalence of the structure of guilt

supporting it which has made the all-but-extinct affect of shame seem primitive. It is also responsible for making the Islamic system of modesty, with its volatile disdain for the modern, capitalist passion for exposing everything, seem anachronistic, as it did to the author of *The Arab Mind* and it does to Behzad. Thus we return to the sequence in which he attempts to penetrate the darkness of the improbable grotto where Zeynab spends her days. My reading will focus not on the shamelessness of Behzad (which stoops to its depths here), but on the awakening of shame in Zeynab.

As Behzad crosses the threshold of this dark place, the screen goes completely black for several seconds. A long, dark corridor lodges itself between the sunny exterior where a young, unveiled girl plays and the inside. As we watch the empty screen we are given ample time to experience the darkness in which Zeynab will be found. Like a prosecutor who counts out for the jury the seconds – “one one-thousand, two one-thousand, three...” – it took to strangle the victim, Kiarostami holds on the black screen for an uncomfortably long time. Meanwhile, the voice of Behzad inquires, “Is there anyone here?” This is a profound question answerable in the negative. There is no one here, no “I,” only the milking of a cow, the action Zeynab is performing, substantivized, lacking a subject.

Surely one of the most famous scenes of shame is the one presented in *Being and Nothingness* where a voyeur is startled while peering through a keyhole by the sound of rustling leaves. Sartre makes the point that it is only at this moment when the voyeur feels himself being observed by another that he acquires the sentiment of self. Sartre insists also on a point Sedgwick later emphasizes in her discussion of shame: the gaze of the Other does not judge, condemn, or prohibit; the voyeur is *not* made to feel shame *for* himself nor *for* his act of lascivious looking. The gaze functions, rather, as an “indispensable mediator” between the voyeur and himself, the condition necessary for precipitating him out as subject from the act of looking in which he has until this point been totally absorbed.¹⁹ Without this intervention there would be no subject, only peering through a keyhole. The meeting between Behzad and Zeynab invites us to reconsider Sartre’s point in the fullness of its political implications. Zeynab requires an intervention, the presence of others as such, in order to emerge from the milking, from the gerundive form

of her impoverished existence, as a subject. In the absence of this intervention she remains something less than that.

In the standard reading, Sartre's shame scenario is made to seem a bathetic drama in which a supposedly abstract and sovereign act of looking is forced to confront its anchorage in the vulnerability of its bodily foundations. The rustling of leaves functions as a kind of index finger that picks out the voyeur, rendering him painfully conspicuous, a body too much, in a scene where he thought himself bodiless and unobserved, a spectral spectating instance. The emperor of seeing is abruptly laid bare. If this reading of the shame scenario is so unshakeable it is because it captures the squirminess of shame, the feeling that something of ourselves which "ought to have remained hidden" is suddenly exposed, and exposed as belonging to us *undeniably*. And yet however vividly the exposure of one's nakedness, of one's body, evokes the feeling of shame (the sight of the cow's udders as they are being milked by Zeynab is meant of course to evoke this uncomfortable feeling in the film sequence), shame is obviously not reducible to an experience of being seen without one's clothes, of being seen literally naked. Nor is it an experience of being anchored to the dead weight of one's own body, to one's body as object. In shame one finds oneself attached inescapably to the nonobjectifiable object of one's own *jouissance* and thus to one's lived body. What is it then that distinguishes the feeling of anxiety from the feeling of shame, given that they can both be described as the sentiment of being riveted to this same unintegratable excess? The difference lies not, as Levinas would have it, in the vanishing of all hope of escape but, rather, in the vanishing of the imperative to escape. That imperative is replaced by another: to hide, conceal, or refuse to disclose in order to protect and preserve that inalienable and yet unassumable excess which designates me rigidly, that is, in my uniqueness.

There is no denying that shame is not only an experience that transgresses the pleasure principle, but often one of excruciating pain. The same can be said of anxiety. With anxiety, however, our own self-distance and self-opacity are sources of pain insofar as they threaten to annihilate us totally, while with shame the threat is aimed at this opacity whose exposure would, annihilate us. We therefore seek to preserve this opacity at all costs, even though its presence brings its own pain.

What accounts for this alteration in our relation to the troubling excess that distances us from ourselves? We described anxiety as the sentiment of a negative capacity to not be which we flee by choosing social existence, where we appear not only to others but also to ourselves. A problem arises, however, if the realm of social appearance seems to offer a poor reflection of who we are, if in gaining an appearance we seem to lose ourselves. When among all the images of myself and others, I remain absent; when the cost of appearing in the world is the loss of my own gaze, of the “I” who sees myself in my public image, then that passion we earlier associated with guilt is aroused: to break through the façade of appearances.

The sentiment of shame is occasioned, on the contrary, when in the exterior space of social existence, of public appearance, I suddenly appear *in the flesh*. I see not only the public images I ordinarily see, but alongside them, as if momentarily granted a slightly wider peripheral vision, the red patch of my own cheeks. I appear there in the flesh alongside – at a slight distance from – my own image as the gaze with which I look at the world appears in the world, gazes at me and locates me there at a remove from myself. *This* is the radical point: the gaze under which I feel myself observed in shame is my *own* gaze. Lost in guilt, it is found in shame, in the space of publicity.

Now, since this gaze is not an object in the ordinary sense, is not an eye but the jouissance of the eye, the very potentiality of sight, it cannot and does not appear as an object. Yet that which, strictly speaking, cannot be seen, can and does appear or assume a sensible presence in the movement by which “all the perspectives, the lines of force, of my world” begin to shift in relation to the felt presence of my gaze.²⁰ My gaze appears in the world as a shape-changer, as the shapeability of the forms of social existence, which I – through my jouissance, my potentiality – have the capacity to transform.

Here we must recall the paradox of shame whose explanation holds the key to understanding this affect. Shame is a feeling of one’s isolation or uniqueness at the same time as it is an intensely social feeling. While shame delivers an experience of our interiority, of a reserve of potentiality or jouissance which sets us apart from all others, it at the same time makes this interiority appear outside us, in the midst of the world. Our interiority is thus exposed as an event in the world; it is revealed as

an exposure to others. This is another way of saying, in part, that our own jouissance or potentiality is not felt to be at the disposal of our will, that it does not disclose to us its secrets. But nor do we have, in shame, the urge to disclose these secrets. Though it is often said that shame paralyzes desire, it is not usually specified which desire is targeted. Our argument makes clear that shame puts an end to the desire to turn our jouissance into a weapon we can possess and wield against the social order. Shame seeks rather to preserve the secrets of jouissance's complicity with others, with the unknowable desire of our ancestors, in order then to realize that jouissance on behalf of the society of others among whom we dwell.

In Dabashi's reading of the encounter between Behzad and Zeynab, it is Behzad who brings shame to Zeynab. This misreading depends on the reduction of shame to the product of a simple intersubjective relation in which the belittling or degrading look of another person is sufficient to ignite shame. I would argue, however, that it is not Behzad who occasions shame in Zeynab, but the erotic poem by Forough Farrokhzad, "The Wind Will Carry Us," which Behzad recites to Zeynab in his clumsy attempt to seduce her. Forough's words have an effect on Zeynab unintended by Behzad and it is they, not the lamp he tries to shine on her, which pluck her out of the darkness, set her apart from the act of milking that absorbs her. She is visibly fascinated and surprised by the poem. As Behzad tries to manipulate the situation by drawing some purely external connections between Forough and this unlettered village girl, the poem in fact gives Zeynab not a borrowed identity but a sentiment of self. That is, Zeynab does not identify with Forough, as Behzad invites her to, but experiences on hearing it the sentiment of self, precisely: the sentiment of shame that allows her to experience the relatedness of her own intimacy to the fate of others.

Sunk in darkness, Zeynab remains invisible not only to others, but also to her self. She does not exist merely for herself but for nobody. In order to experience herself as a subject, she requires an outer dimension, a visibility outside herself. The poem, a significant article of her own culture, gives Zeynab access to that outer dimension. We often hear it said that modesty is a cultural phenomenon; one can only feel naked, they say, under our clothes. But what is usually meant by this is that culture inhibits us sexually, makes us self-conscious of our nakedness. Forough's

erotic poem can by no stretch of the imagination be conceived as censorious of sexuality, nor does it make Zeynab feel self-conscious before Behzad, quite the opposite. If modesty is, in fact, a product of culture (and Zeynab's modesty a product of the poem), it is because shame makes visible the impossibility of self-consciousness. It exposes the unobjectifiable object which decenters me from myself; but it exposes it as sandwiched between, or framed by, the forms of my culture. The framing of the object in shame can thus be thought as a taming of the violence that ravishes me in anxiety. The gaze imagined by Zeynab on hearing Forough's words sees nothing, or sees the nothing-to-see, that which has no likeness, no image, because it has no like.

We are now prepared to confront directly the thesis put forward in the book, *The Arab Mind*, namely that the Islamic system of modesty makes Muslim people susceptible to shame. To the extent that the *hejab* system encourages subjects to experience their interiority, their privacy, as being in tact even while they are in a public place, as many Muslims attest, then it certainly safeguards shame in the sense we have spoken of it here – but definitely not in the sense implied by that book. To the extent, however, that the *hejab* system forbids or impedes any of its citizens access to publicity, it strips them of the possibility of experiencing shame. Under these conditions no architectural barrier, no veil, or chador will suffice to protect a citizens' modesty. Rather than protecting women from exposure, the limitation of their access to public forums can only turn them inside out, externalize them completely. .

Perhaps it is the image of Behzad running around throughout the film trying to pick up a clearer signal for his cell phone that calls to my mind the debates over wire tapping in the U.S. In these debates privacy became an issue because telephone conversations necessarily traversed public space and thus problematized the relation between the public and the private. During these debates the Supreme Court entertained the argument that privacy could not be localized in a delimitable *space* that might then be ruled out of the reach of the State. Privacy is attached to the *subject* and is inviolable no matter where a citizen may be, in public or private space. But if the subject's sentiment of self, her feeling of shame, intimacy, privacy depends fundamentally on her relations with others as such, her freedom to engage

in society cannot be curtailed without damage to her privacy.

The question Kiarostami's reserved cinema raises is this: how can there be any modesty, any shame, for women such as Zeynab if they are prohibited by custom, costume, or legal restrictions from appearing, from entering public space and engaging in the relations they choose? The system of modesty, I began by saying, obliged all Iranian filmmakers to limit themselves to exterior spaces. What makes the cinema of Kiarostami uniquely interesting is the way he introduces interiority, privacy, into this all-exterior world, into the public spaces he almost exclusively films.

This essay is dedicated to the memory of Toshikatsu Murayama.

- 1 The regulations aimed at "Islamicizing" Iranian cinema were ratified and the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance instituted in February 1983. Hamid Naficy provides the most comprehensive and cogent analysis of the impact of these regulations on Iranian films. See, in particular, his "Veiled vision/powerful presences: women in post-revolutionary Iranian cinema," in *Life and Art: The New Iranian Cinema*, ed. Rose Issa and Sheila Whitaker (London: NFT and BFI, 1999).
- 2 The source of my information about the relation between Raphael Patai's *The Arab Mind* and the strategy of "shaming" adopted by the U.S. at Abu Ghraib is Seymour M. Hersh, "The Gray Zone: How a Secret Government Program Came to Abu Ghraib," *The New Yorker*, May 24, 2004.
- 3 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003). See also, Lisa Cartwright and David Benin, "Shame, Empathy, and Looking Practices: Lessons from a Disability Studies Classroom," in *Journal of Visual Culture*, vol. 5, no. 2 (2006) for an interesting use of the work of Sedgwick and Silvan Tomkins.
- 4 Ibid., p. 41.
- 5 Ibid., p. 37; on this paradox, see also Stanley Cavell, *Must We Mean What We say?* (Chicago; Chicago University Press, 1976): "Shames is the most isolating of feelings but also the most primitive of social responses...simultaneously the discovery of the isolation of the individual, his presence to himself, but also to others," p. 286.
- 6 Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (New York: Zone Books, 1999), p. 110; p. 107.
- 7 Sedgwick, p. 37.
- 8 Ibid.

- 9 Hamid Dabashi's otherwise highly informative *Close-Up: Iranian Cinema, Past, Present and Future* (London and New York: Verso, 2001) explodes into an unfair (to my mind) rant against *The Wind Will Carry Us* in its final chapter, pp. 251-259.
- 10 Emmanuel Levinas, *On Escape*, trans. Bettina Bergo (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), p. 52. See my "May '68, The Emotional Month," in *Lacan: The Silent Partners*, ed. Slavoj Žižek (London and New York: Verso Press, 2006) for further discussion of Levinas and shame.
- 11 My implication is that we should look also to Islamic philosophy for a theory of the "unfinished past." See, for example, Henry Corbin's "Prologue" to his study of Islamic philosophy in *Spiritual Body and Celestial Earth: From Mazdean Iran to Shi'ite Iran*, trans. Nancy Pearson (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977): "Our authors suggest that if our past were really what we believe it to be, that is, completed and closed, it would not be the grounds for such vehement discussions. They suggest that all our *acts of understanding* are so many recommencements, *re-iterations* of events still unconcluded," p. xxix.
- 12 Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety: A Simple Psychologically Orienting Deliberation on the Dogmatic Issue of Hereditary Sin* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), p. 155.
- 13 Jacques Lacan, *Le séminaire: livre VIII: Le transfert*, text established by Jacques-Alain Miller (Paris, Seuil, 1991), p. 155.
- 14 Sigmund Freud, "Inhibitions, Symptoms, and Anxiety," *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1959), vol. XX: "Analysis shows that when activities like...writing...are subjected to neurotic inhibitions it is because...the fingers...have become too strongly eroticized. It has been discovered as a general fact that the ego-function of an organ is impaired if its erotogenicity – its sexual significance – is increased. It behaves, if I may be allowed a rather absurd analogy, like a maid-servant who refuses to go on cooking because her master has started a love-affair with her," pp. 89-90. Note that it is the "ego-function" which is impaired; the eroticized fingers, in becoming eroticized, are endowed with pure potentiality.
- 15 See, especially, Giorgio Agamben, "Bartleby, or On Contingency," in *Potentialities*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), pp. 243-271. Interestingly, Agamben's essay makes note of the important contribution of Islamic philosophers to the concept of potentiality.
- 16 "Taste of Kiarostami," David Sterritt in interview with Abbas Kiarostami, <http://senseofcinema.com/contents/00/9kiarostami.html>.
- 17 Abbas Kiarostami, "Une approche existentialiste de la vie," interview with Michel Ciment and Stéphane Goudet, published in *Positif*, no. 442 (December 1997), p. 85 and cited in Stéphane Goudet, "Le Gout de la cerise...et la saveur de la mure," *L'Avant Scene*, no. 471 (April 1998), p. 1.

- 18 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil* (Chicago: Henry Regnery Co., 1965), p. 263, p. 213.
- 19 Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1956), p. 369.
- 20 Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, trans. Alain Sheridan (London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1977), p. 84.