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## An Iconological Study of the Relationship Between Nature, Meaning, and Form in the Photographs of Abbas Kiarostami Based on Erwin Panofsky's Perspective

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### Abstract


This study examines the natural, semantic, and ultimately formal dimensions shaped by semiotic elements in the photographs of Abbas Kiarostami (1940–2016), a prominent contemporary photographer and filmmaker. In his photographic works, Kiarostami portrays a poetic and contemplative world through the simplification of form and the elimination of superfluous elements. This research, grounded in the necessity of examining minimalist forms in Kiarostami's photographs, aims to explore the multilayered semiotic capacities within his work through Erwin Panofsky's iconological theory (1892–1968), which consists of three stages: pre-iconographical (natural), iconographical (semantic), and iconological (formal). This study seeks to answer the following question: "Through an iconological analysis of the relationship between nature, meaning, and form in the photographs of Abbas Kiarostami, what specific connection can be discovered between their apparent simplicity and the profound underlying concepts, with emphasis on Erwin Panofsky's perspective?" This research employs a qualitative method and, through descriptive and analytical procedures based on Panofsky's perspective, examines, analyzes, and compares the iconological features of purposefully selected photographic samples. The data collection tools include library sources, online resources, and the experiential observation of artistic images. Given that the natural elements, meaning, and form in Kiarostami's photographs, despite their apparent simplicity, possess multilayered dimensions that are subject to iconological analysis, it is expected that there exists a meaningful connection between their visual simplicity and the profound underlying concepts.

**Keywords:** Abbas Kiarostami, Erwin panofsky, Iconology, Image semantics, Form in photography, Contemporary Iranian photography.

## 1 | Introduction

In the contemporary discourse of art, visual imagery and representation function as fundamental vehicles for expressing intricate and multilayered human, social, and philosophical concepts. Photography, particularly in

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its minimalist expressions, offers a medium through which meanings beyond the surface simplicity of form can emerge—prompting the viewer to engage in deep reflection on the surrounding world and the human place within it. Abbas Kiarostami, the distinguished Iranian photographer and filmmaker, employs visual simplification and the removal of extraneous elements to create a form of visual poetry that, despite its simplicity, is imbued with hidden and interpretive meanings. This study aims to analyze the relationship between nature, meaning, and form in Kiarostami's photographs by utilizing Erwin Panofsky's iconology theory. This analysis employs three stages—natural, iconological (symbolic), and formal—to identify and analyze the various semiotic layers in the photographs.

It is through this approach that the connection between visual simplicity and the depth of concepts in Kiarostami's photographs can be understood. In the following sections, through a systematic and analytical examination of selected examples of Kiarostami's photographs, the semantic capacities and latent meanings within the visual forms will be explored. This study can open a new horizon in the iconological analysis of Kiarostami's photographs as one of the fundamental tools of artistic depiction, demonstrating that these photographs have always served as a platform for conveying complex human and cultural concepts. Meanwhile, photography has gained a special position not only as a record of reality but also as a semiotic and meaningful language. One of the prominent figures in this field is Abbas Kiarostami (1939–2016), An artist who, through the simplification of visual elements and the removal of extraneous components, creates a poetic and contemplative world within the frame of his images.

## 2 | Review of the Literature

Erwin Panofsky, a German-born art historian, is one of the prominent twentieth-century theorists in the field of visual studies. Born in 1892 in Germany, he migrated to the United States following the political upheavals of the 1930s and spent the majority of his academic career at the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton University. Panofsky was influential in the field of art history, particularly in the analysis of artworks from an iconological perspective, and his works primarily examine the hidden layers of meaning within art pieces. Panofsky's most important works include books such as *Perspective as Symbolic Form* (1927), *Gothic Architecture and Scholastic Philosophy* (1951), *Studies in Iconology* (1955), *Meaning in the Visual Arts* (1955), and *Pandora's Box* (1956), in which he addresses the iconology of artworks. The aforementioned books have held a significant position in various fields, such as cultural studies, media studies, and art history. Panofsky, emphasizing the relationship between art and its historical, social, and philosophical contexts, did not regard art merely as an aesthetic representation; rather, he viewed it as an embodiment of the intellectual and ideological systems of human societies [1].

Particularly, in his analysis of artworks from the Renaissance and Medieval periods, Panofsky's writings are deeply influenced by philosophical and epistemological thought [2]. Panofsky's scholarly iconological approach, developed in continuation of the Warburg School, aims to describe and analyze the underlying epistemology of visual layers in art—made possible through the examination of intellectual systems and the emergence of relationships and multilayered semantic capacities. In fact, through his analytical method, Panofsky demonstrates how the visual arts—during periods of development—were influenced by shifts in epistemological paradigms and how, once these shifts became institutionalized within the arts themselves, they, in turn, contributed to shaping cultural and social systems of knowledge throughout history [3]. Abbas Kiarostami (1940–2016) is considered one of the most prominent contemporary Iranian artists and filmmakers and a significant figure in world cinema.

He is not only a film director but also a multifaceted artist recognized for his work as a poet, a new media artist, and a photographer. Kiarostami, with a distinct approach to cultural and historical contexts, redefined the language of imagery and proposed a novel, minimalist model of visual representation emphasizing lived experience, silence, and simplicity. His images centrally embody concepts such as poetic realism, the elimination of certainty, a documentary-like engagement with narrative, and the active role of the viewer in shaping meanings. The iconological analysis of the relationship among nature, meaning, and form in Abbas

Kiarostami's photographic works involve selecting samples from four of his notable collections: *Snow White* [4], *The Wall* [5], *A Window to Life* [6], and *Doors and Memories* [7]. The photographs in these collections possess characteristics such as visual diversity, distinctive formal features, and particular modes of representing nature and inanimate objects within the frame. The *Snow White* collection includes images of snow-covered nature and reflects simplicity, purity, and tranquility in Kiarostami's works (Kiarostami, 2004). These images, by eliminating extraneous elements, approach a direct form and offer a profound contemplation of meaning and the presence of nature; *The Wall* collection, focusing on weathered surfaces and anonymous walls, presents a minimalist approach to form and structure. In this collection, the texture, color, and cracks of the walls carry implicit meanings related to time, memory, and oblivion; the *A Window to Life* is one of Kiarostami's lesser-known collections, in which windows appear as intermediaries between private and public spaces [4].

This collection is shaped by an emphasis on light and shadow and the dialogue between interior and exterior, which directly relates to the concepts of nature and form in his works [6]. Additionally, the *Doors and Memories* collection, focusing on old doors and abandoned places, serves as a visual narration of lost memory and identity [7]. These images, through simple and quiet elements, seek to establish a connection between space, time, and memory.

The selection of sample photographs from these four collections was made due to their distinct formal characteristics and the rich spirituality inherent in each, aiming to effectively enable the analysis of the relationship among nature, form, and multiple meanings, with an emphasis on iconological analysis. Panofsky [8] envisions Kiarostami's utilization of multilayered meanings, the audience's role in the recreation of artistic reality, and the interaction between form and content. Panofsky's perspective, by distinguishing between the stages of iconological interpretation, primary (natural), secondary (conventional), and symbolic meaning (ideological or cultural), provides the possibility for an image to be understood not only at the superficial level of visual representation but also in connection with cultural and social traditions [9].

Within this framework, Kiarostami's photographs can be considered a type of visual text that, on the one hand, relies on simplicity and realism and, on the other hand, through intertextual references and meaningful omissions, invites the viewer to reflect on the deeper layers of the image. The focus on Kiarostami's photographs shows that profound and multilayered meanings come together uniquely and transform into a simple form for the formation of artistic concepts. Nature, semiotic conventions, and form in photography—as an intercultural and artistic medium—are used in such a way that they can demonstrate that photographs inherently possess many hidden capacities for representing specific concepts.

In this context, Kiarostami's photographs are not only beautiful and minimalist but also visual texts that, as unique artistic examples, are analyzable and gain importance in the fields of semiotics and iconology. Kiarostami's special perspective on nature, as well as on humans as absent yet observing elements, emphasizes simplicity and rich cultural reflection in the context of interpretation. In Kiarostami's works, simplicity of form is not synonymous with lack of content but rather follows a kind of deep conceptual tendency that, with a precise look at nature and form, returns beyond the apparent shape of the image.

This issue determines the necessity of a semiotic analysis of his works, especially when viewed from the perspective of Erwin Panofsky's iconology (1892–1968). Erwin Panofsky's iconological theory, which refers to three descriptive, analytical, and interpretive layers in understanding an image, provides an effective tool for analyzing Kiarostami's photographs.

### 3 | Research Methodology

The present research is conducted using a qualitative approach, emphasizing the description and analysis of purposeful case studies of Abbas Kiarostami's photographs and a final comparison of notable features based on Erwin Panofsky's three-stage perspective. Each photograph is initially described through six stages, and the significant events in it are identified. Then, these noteworthy events in each image are analyzed based on

Panofsky's iconographic procedures: Primary (natural), secondary (conventional), and form (interpretation) [9]. The stages of analysis are presented in a table, and the characteristics of the samples are compared with each other according to the three iconographic stages.

## 4 | Analysis of Case Studies

### 4.1 | The Snow White Series

The Snow White book by Abbas Kiarostami, which was published in the winter of 2005 (1383 SH), is a collection of black-and-white photographs that were taken during Kiarostami's travels along the roads of Iran, especially on snowy days. These photographs, which were taken between 1376 and 1382 (1997 to 2004), specifically focus on the interactions between snowy nature and the elements within it, such as trees [4]. In this series, Kiarostami, using precise framing and lighting techniques, presents snow as a visual and conceptual element. These works are not only valuable technically and aesthetically but also conceptually examine the relationships between nature and art. Kiarostami, with a poetic perspective, has transformed snow from a natural phenomenon into an artistic symbol and emphasizes its aesthetic and conceptual aspects in this book. The Snow White book has been published in two editions, large and small, in English and is recognized as one of Kiarostami's most essential works in the field of photography. This series not only demonstrates precision and delicacy in photography but also emphasizes Kiarostami's ability to establish a connection between nature and the art of photography.

#### 4.1.1 | Description of the first image sample in the snow white series

In this minimalist image, captured on a winter day, a small bird, probably a crow or a jackdaw, is perched on an electric wire amid a snow-covered plain [4]. The main subject of the photograph, the bird, perches on the wire, depicting the balance between nature and human intervention. This scene takes place in a mountainous area where the ground and horizon are covered with a thick layer of snow. The time the photograph was taken is clearly in the winter season and during the daytime, as indicated by the natural light and the presence of scattered clouds in the sky. The photographer chose this meaningful yet straightforward composition to depict solitude, stillness, and the delicate relationship between humans, nature, and wildlife. The minimalist photography technique, through the use of extensive negative space and limited elements within the frame, conveys a sense of calmness and emptiness to the viewer (*Fig. 1*).



**Fig. 1.** The first photograph.

#### 4.1.2 | Iconological analysis of the first image sample in the snow white series

In the analysis of the image based on Erwin Panofsky's iconological theory, at the pre-iconographical level, we observe the presence of simple and geometric forms: a vertical pole, horizontal and diagonal wires, a small bird, a snow-covered surface, and a clear sky with scattered clouds. The minimalist composition displays a balance between line and empty space, with a visual contrast between the darkness of the wires and the brightness of the snow. At the iconographical level, these elements refer to familiar concepts: the pole and

wires symbolize the presence of humans and technology; the bird perched on the wire evokes coexistence or encounter of living beings with human-made structures within nature; and the white plain represents winter, silence, and anticipation. Ultimately, at the iconological or semantic interpretation level, the image reveals a poetic relationship among nature, meaning, and form; nature, present in the form of the snowy plain and clear sky, gains another layer of meaning in confrontation with human constructions (wires and utility poles). The bird, as a vital element, enlivens this connection.

The sparse and straightforward form of the photograph somewhat represents the existential condition of contemporary humans searching for meaning in the midst of boundless nature. Here, nature is not merely a background but a context for the formation of meaning and the embodiment of human forms; thus, the image reflects the confrontation and coexistence between natural order and artificial order with a poetic and contemplative expression.

**Table 1. Analytical components of the first image in the snow white series.**

Row	Title	Iconic Events
1	Stage One: Natural Signs	Snow-covered plain, clear sky, scattered clouds, bird on the power line
2	Stage Two: Conventional Signs	The power line and electric pole symbolize human intervention in nature; the bird symbolizes life, and the snowy plain symbolizes silence.
3	Stage Three: Form	Minimalist composition, contrast between black and white, horizontal and vertical lines, and the use of negative space to create balance and focus.

#### 4.1.3 | Description of the second image in the snow white series

In this image, composed in a minimalist style and arranged in three vertical frames, there is the trunk of a solitary tree amidst pristine white snow [4]. The main event is the simplicity and stillness of nature in winter. A person is not directly present in the scene, but the artist has perceptively and sensitively captured this moment through photography. The tree is centered in the frame, and the shadows of its branches falling on the snow are seen in a skillful interplay of light and texture. This moment, captured to display the purity of beauty, silence, and the power of natural composition in evoking a profound feeling in the viewer, was achieved through a delicate technique of natural lighting and the use of a camera with deliberate settings to emphasize the contrast between the whiteness of the snow and the darkness of the trunk and shadows in an open environment, such as a park or a quiet forest in winter. It appears that the photo was taken in the morning or evening when the sunlight was angled, and the tree shadows were clearly cast on the snow (Fig. 2).



**Fig. 2. Second photograph.**



#### 4.1.4 | Iconological analysis of the second image sample from the snow white series

In this black-and-white image, a winter scene with a snow-covered ground and a tree trunk at the center of the frame is depicted. The branches and leaves of the tree appear as scattered shadows on the snow, and the entire scene is divided into three parallel sections. This contemplative yet straightforward foreground creates the context for iconological analysis, where the tree trunk symbolizes the center of life's gravity, and the shadows of the branches signify the continuation of life within the stillness and silence of the snow. Snow, as a symbol of stagnation and death, contrasts with the moving shadows that signify life, creating a dual space and profound reflection.

The tripartite division of the image recalls the traditional triptych pattern in religious art, which can refer to the concepts of passage from death to life or existential dimensions between presence and absence. In a deeper iconological interpretation, this image reflects the internal relationship among nature, form, and meaning: nature is embodied in the winter presence of the tree and shadows; Form reveals itself in the black-and-white contrast, and the play of light and shadow, And meaning is manifested in the metaphor of life against the backdrop of death, and the connection of matter and meaning is established on the sturdy tree trunk. The photograph, utilizing precise composition, transforms the viewer's sensory and conceptual dimensions into a cultural-philosophical experience.

**Table 2. Components of the analysis of the second image from the snow white series.**

Row	Title	Iconic Events
1	Stage one: Natural signs	Snow-covered surface, actual tree trunk, shadows of branches on the snow
2	Stage two: Conventional signs	Shadows as symbols of the presence of things in life, snow as a symbol of natural stagnation and death, and the trunk as the pillar connecting earth and sky.
3	Stage three: Form	The tripartite division of the image (Triptych), black-and-white contrast, minimalist composition, and play of light and shadow

#### 4.1.5 | Description of the third image sample from the snow white series

In this image, a simple yet contemplative event occurs: slender, dark plant stems against a bright background. The absence of humans is meaningfully felt; nature remains silent without human intervention: plant lines seem to have remained on the bright background due to thick snow and fog [4]. Kiarostami's emphasis is on the simple, transient, and overlooked beauties of nature, An invitation to the viewer to reflect on moments of purity. It is a deliberate technique where the composition of lines and bright space creates a kind of visual balance and a sense of suspension. A snow-covered plain at a moment when nature is still: winter. (*Fig. 3*)



**Fig. 3. Third photo (cover photo).**

#### 4.1.6 | Iconological analysis of the third image sample from the snow white series

In the pre-iconological description of this photograph, we are faced only with thin, vertical, or slightly inclined dark lines against a bright background, which, due to their form, create a play between lines and empty spaces. At the iconological analysis stage, these visual elements evoke plant stems that are half-buried in winter or a snow-covered environment, and the absence of the rest of the plant bodies suggests a kind of natural fragmentation and decay.

In the iconographic interpretation, this image is more than a mere depiction of nature; Simple and minimal forms serve deeper meanings. Kiarostami, utilizing the strong contrast of light and dark, confronts the symbolic dimension of nature and displays the relationship between death (the silence of nature in winter) and life (the resilience of the stems) against a backdrop of emptiness and silence. Here, form not only determines the aesthetics of the image but also becomes the carrier of meanings: A place where nature, beyond representation, transforms into a reflection on decay, survival, and the connection between being and non-being.

**Table 3. Components of the analysis of the third image from the snow white series (cover image).**

Row	Title	Iconic Events
1	Stage one: Natural signs	Thin, dark, vertical, or inclined lines on a bright background without symbolic interpretation, merely a description of simple natural forms.
2	Stage two: Conventional signs	Simulation of plant stems within the snow, evoking erosion and the emptiness of nature.
3	Stage three: Form	The use of strong contrast, elimination of extraneous elements, and visual minimalism regarding death, survival, and the connection between being and non-being transform nature into a concept for contemplation.

## 4.2 | The Wall Series

The Wall series by Abbas Kiarostami was first published in 2002 (1381 AH) by Nazar Publishing. This collection consists of black-and-white photographs in which Kiarostami specifically portrays walls as the central subject of his work. In this book, walls are presented not only as physical surfaces but also as visual and symbolic elements. Kiarostami, through precise framing and the play of light, explores the relationships between human presence, space, and time [5]. This work is regarded as one of Kiarostami's most significant contributions to contemporary art and photography, highlighting his ability to transform everyday details into poetic and thought-provoking concepts.

#### 4.2.1 | Description of the first image sample from the wall series

This photograph depicts the worn and damaged condition of an old wall, where traces of human presence remain in the form of primitive, triangular-shaped scratches [5]. Moisture has left a deep mark on the wall (*Fig. 4*).



**Fig. 1. First photograph from the wall series.**

The presence of these shapes—perhaps created either accidentally or with a simple intention by an unknown individual—within this decayed space suggests a coexistence between nature and humanity. This scene, captured without any apparent manipulation and solely using natural light, draws attention to the profound yet straightforward details of the environment. The image appears to have been taken in an urban or rural setting, where the traces of time and environmental conditions are clearly evident. Moreover, the photograph—taken during the day under soft natural light—offers a serene portrayal of both decay and beauty, subtly reminding us that all forms of change, whether caused by nature or by human intervention, are part of the environmental process.

#### **4.2.2 | Iconological analysis of the first image from the wall series**

At the pre-iconographical level, the viewer is initially presented with an image of a worn-out wall whose rough texture and visible cracks reflect the impact of natural elements such as moisture, wind, and time. The simple, primitive scratch marks on the wall—such as a triangular shape evoking a tree or a house—emerge within this decaying natural setting. At this stage, nature appears as a raw material upon which the human presence, through minimal intervention, has left only a subtle trace.

At the iconographical level, the marks drawn on the wall take on symbolic meanings; the triangle—commonly representing shelter, stability, or origin in many cultures—evokes a dual sense of hope and decay within the context of a deteriorating wall. It is at this point that the simple form becomes more complex due to the textured natural background. At the iconological level, the photograph can be interpreted as a reflection of Kiarostami's existential and poetic vision: an image of the tension and coexistence between humanity and nature, where form, meaning, and survival continuously intertwine.

Here, nature serves not only as the background for form but—through its own process of decay and deterioration—also becomes a bearer of meaning beyond mere appearance. Form, emerging from a natural material, is elevated into a mental sign. This photograph, beyond being a simple record, transforms into a visual document of the invisible interaction between time, memory, and the imaginary, in which nature, meaning, and form are interwoven in a synergistic relationship.



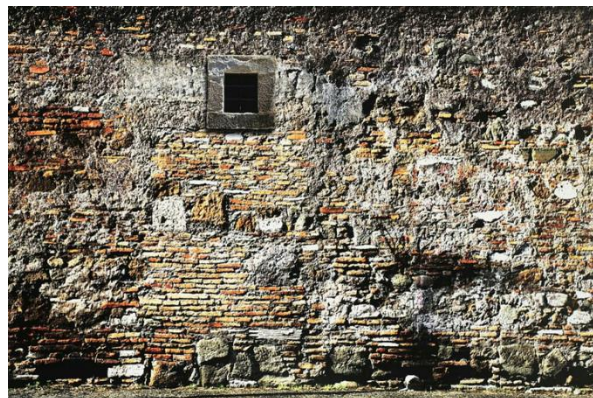
**Table 4. Analytical components of the first image from the wall series.**

Row	Title	Iconic Events
1	Stage One: Natural Signs	Worn textures and wall cracks, moisture faded and gray colors, environmental damage
2	Stage Two: Conventional Signs	Scratched triangular shape on the wall (a symbol of a house or a tree), metal lattice window (a sign of protection or restriction), damaged surface (a symbol of the passage of time and decay)
3	Stage Three: Form	The combination of natural and human-made elements within a single frame, the random arrangement of forms, the balance between vertical lines (pipe, window) and geometric shapes (triangle), natural lighting, and emphasis on texture and form

#### 4.2.3 | Description of the second image from the wall series

In this photograph, we are presented with a view of an old, worn-out wall—one that visibly bears the marks of time and deterioration. Various materials—from partially ruined bricks to scattered stone fragments—have shaped the uneven surface of the wall and created natural lines and textures upon it, each silently bearing its own untold story. The central element of the image is a small window enclosed within a stone frame positioned in the upper part of the composition. This window, with its aged iron bars, evokes a sense of restriction, confinement, or invisible distance.

In the absence of any sign of human presence, the wall itself becomes the primary subject [5]. In terms of subject matter and perspective, the image offers a poetic gaze into a deeper concept: the reflection of impermanence and decay. Rather than depicting direct events or the active presence of subjects, Kiarostami focuses on capturing the traces of time and silent presence. The way light falls, and shadows slowly creep across the surface of the wall adds to the dramatic atmosphere and emphasizes the passage of time. It appears to be one of the older cities or villages where history reveals itself through the cracks and fractures on the surface of the wall. Captured in one of the early moments of the day or the final light of evening, the wall is illuminated by a faint, angled light that accentuates its textures. This photograph is not merely a simple visual record but an attempt to narrate a silent story—a story of stillness, erosion, memory, and the passage of time, readable only through close attention to detail. (*Fig. 5*).

**Fig. 5. Second photograph from the wall series.**

#### 4.2.4 | Iconological analysis of the second image

In Erwin Panofsky's theory of iconology, the understanding of form and meaning occurs in three stages: Pre-iconographical description, iconographical analysis, and iconological–interpretative interpretation. Based on

this framework, the image of the stone and brick wall serves as a clear example of the connection between nature, form, and meaning. At first glance and the pre-iconographical level, an uneven surface is observed—composed of human-made baked bricks, natural stones, and gray mortar. The small iron window embedded within the wall's materials, along with the weathered textures and the interplay of light and shadow, point only to the material aspect of the image. In the iconographical analysis, the bricks—products of human craftsmanship—symbolize the effort to dominate nature, whereas the natural stones recall the earthly origin of the materials. The cracks and erosion on the wall signify the dominance of time and the return of nature. The iron window may symbolize blockage, limited vision, or control.

Thus, the wall represents a synthesis of human construction and natural processes, reflecting the ongoing tension between human creation and the decaying forces of nature. At the iconological–semantic level, the wall serves as an allegory of the fundamental relationship between humanity and nature: an attempt to overcome nature that ultimately proves powerless against the erosion of time. The wall symbolizes both the effort and the failure of human civilization in the face of nature's inevitable transformations, giving meaning to the fusion of form and culture. Emphasizing Panofsky's theory, nature in this image appears both as raw material (stone, earth, light) and as a surface marked by the passage of time, while the human form emerges in a perpetual attempt to impose order upon it. Such an analysis reveals that a profound understanding of the artwork requires moving beyond surface appearance into its deeper layers of meaning.

**Table 2. Analytical components of the second image from the wall series.**

Row	Title	Iconic Events
1	Stage one: Natural signs	Raw bricks, natural stones, uneven texture, and shadows created by natural light
2	Stage two: conventional signs	Combination of brick and stone (human intervention in nature), decay and deterioration (signs of the passage of time and the dominance of nature), small iron window (blockage and surveillance-like control)
3	Stage three: Form	The overall structure of the wall (allegory of the human–nature relationship), the fusion of natural and artificial materials (simultaneous presence of human order and natural disorder)

#### 4.2.5 | Description of the third image from the wall series (cover image).

A worn and cracked wall is placed at the center of the visual focus. The surface of this wall, coated in a dull gray color, displays clear signs of the passage of time and deterioration. The paint has peeled off, the underlying layers have become exposed, and deep cracks have ruptured the body of the wall [5]. Amidst this composition, dry and delicate plant branches hang down from the top of the frame, completing the visual space with a natural rhythm.

Without the need for human figures, the artist turns his attention to the wall itself and the marks left by time upon it. Situated in an abandoned setting, the wall has gradually decayed under the influence of natural forces such as wind, rain, and temperature fluctuations. The framing of the image—with its emphasis on textural details and the use of soft, diffused light—enhances the sense that this moment was captured during a cold and dry season, such as autumn or winter. The stillness and silence that dominate the scene invite the viewer to reflect on the impermanence of human constructions and their eventual return to nature (*Fig. 6*).



**Fig. 6. Third photograph from the wall series.**

#### **4.2.6 | Iconological analysis of the third image from the wall series.**

A weathered wall, coated in gray, dominates the frame, while dry, delicate branches hang into the scene from the top edge. At first glance, the composition appears to simply depict the decay of a human-made structure alongside the subtle yet undeniable presence of nature. Yet beyond these initial observations, the walls and branches carry cultural and symbolic codes. The human-made wall, worn and cracked under the continuous forces of nature and time, stands as a testament to erosion while the dry branches silently and patiently witness this unfolding. This interweaving of artificial and natural forms conveys a deeper notion: the impermanence of human civilization and the prevailing power of nature. The visual form, following a pattern of simplicity and reduction to minimal elements, effectively reinforces the inner meaning of the work. The muted colors, absence of human presence, and uneven combination of surfaces form a visual statement on decay and transience.

Despite its human origin, the wall appears to be on a path toward reintegration with nature, while the dry branches—like natural emissaries—metaphorically complete the process of this return. This profound interconnection between nature, form, and meaning presents a compelling image of the shared destiny of human constructions within the cycle of life. Nature is not only the subject of the image but also the shaper of its ultimate meaning; the wall discovers its natural texture through processes of decay and transformation, while the branches introduce a new form of connection between humanity and the natural world. In this way, Kiarostami's image becomes a clear example of the unity between visual form, cultural meaning, and natural order. Form reveals the fundamental impermanence of existence, and nature, in a subtle yet powerful way, asserts its dominance over human architecture.

**Table 3. Analytical components of the third image from the wall series (cover image).**

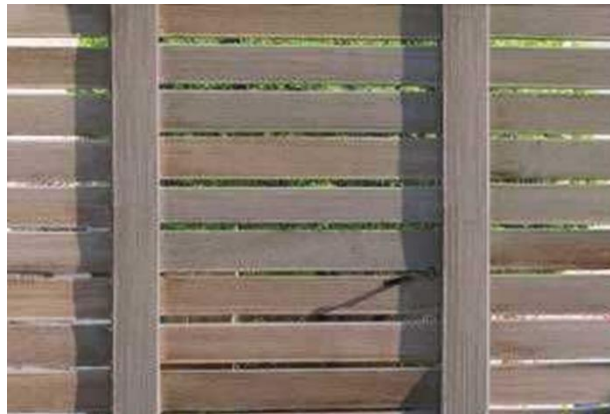
Row	Title	Iconic Events
1	Stage One: Natural Signs	Dry branches, natural cracks on the wall, gray color, and the wall's weathered texture
2	Stage Two: Conventional Signs	Cracked walls as a symbol of the collapse of human-made structures, dry branches as representations of nature and the unstable cycle of life, subtle interaction and tension between nature and civilization
3	Stage Three: Form	Visual minimalism, gray tones, pronounced textures, soft rhythm of lines, and return to nature

### 4.3 | The series a window onto life

The book *A Window onto Life* by Abbas Kiarostami was first published in 2013 (1392 SH) by Nazar Publishing House. This series comprises images of windows and interior spaces, through which Kiarostami explores explicitly the relationships between human beings, space, and time. Through precise framing and artistic lighting, this work [6], as an example of contemporary photographic art, depicts Kiarostami's perspective on simple, everyday details and evokes a profound reflection on the concept of space and its interaction with the human being. This book was published in a square format with a hardcover and 148 pages and is considered one of Kiarostami's prominent works in photography.

#### 4.3.1 | Description of the first image example from the series a window onto life

In this image, horizontal wooden lines are arranged in a precise order before the viewer's eyes: A wall composed of horizontal planks supported by three vertical posts. The regular gaps between the planks allow natural light to pass through, resulting in narrow light streaks illuminating the surface of the wood [6]. The presence of an oblique shadow on one of the planks indicates environmental influences, such as a thin branch or a wire suspended in space, which imparts a subtle dynamism to this static structure (*Fig. 7*).



**Fig. 7.** The first photograph from the series *a window onto life*.

A blurred green texture seen through the gaps behind the wall indicates that this structure is situated within nature or adjacent to a green space. The intensity of the light and the sharpness of the shadows indicate that this moment was captured during the hours of the day when the sun is at its brightest around noon or shortly thereafter. At such times, the light is more vertical, and the shadow lines fall more intensely on the surfaces; the technique of using natural light, symmetrical composition, and attention to visual rhythms all serve to highlight the unnoticed beauties of everyday life.

#### 4.3.2 | Iconological analysis of the first image example from the series a window onto life

This image reflects humanity's inclination toward organizing and controlling the surrounding space. Wood, as a natural material shaped into an artificial structure: human civilization confronting the natural environment. The emergence of nature through this medium signifies its dominant influence within human representations. A narrow shadow cast obliquely on one of the planks evokes the presence of life and dynamism within the stillness of the image. The geometric rhythm of the wooden wall, beyond its functional role, transforms into a philosophical encounter between humans and nature. The human inability to fully control natural forces is not only the result of sensory observation but also unconsciously reflects a cultural perspective in which nature subtly manifests itself in human life. A philosophical reflection on human limitations, as noted by Erwin Panofsky: even the simplest forms carry the most complex cultural, historical, and philosophical meanings.

**Table 7. Analytical components of the first image example from the series a window onto life.**

Row	Title	Iconic Events
1	Stage One: Natural signs	Natural light passing through the gaps of the planks, blurred green background, and oblique shadow on the plank.
2	Stage two: Conventional signs	Wooden wall (symbol of confinement), gaps between the planks (human inability to fully control nature), presence of shadow (life and movement within human order)
3	Stage three: Form	The geometric order of the horizontal planks and vertical posts, the repetitive rhythm of the lines, and the concise composition and spatial balance represent a philosophical concept of the interaction between humans and nature.

#### 4.3.3 | Description of the second image example from the series A Window Onto Life

In an empty and semi-abandoned space, an oblique light beam shines through a gap in the wall [6]; a spectrum of sunlight and a blue-colored beam can be seen on the rough plastered surface (*Fig. 8*).

**Fig. 8. The second photograph from the series a window onto life.**

In a niche recessed in the wall, a small glass bottle is visible. This event has occurred in the solitude of an abandoned place, a location that was once occupied or used by humans, but now only traces of human presence remain in the faded writings on the wall. Light, as an active element in this scene, has entered in a random yet beautiful manner, creating a brief moment of the fusion of nature and human forgetfulness. The time this image was captured is either morning or evening when the angle of sunlight is low and can create this oblique path. The location of this event is an abandoned room in a rural house or a semi-finished building exposed to natural light.

#### 4.3.4 | Iconological analysis of the second image from the series a window onto life

A cracked wall, an empty niche, a glass bottle, and an oblique light at first glance express formal purity; beyond this simplicity, the glass bottle symbolizes the human footprint in a worn space, and the light entering obliquely serves as a metaphor for nature's intrusion into the human-shaped world. The faded writings on the wall are signs of forgotten memory and recollection.

At a deeper level, these elements, in a cultural-historical connection, symbolize the temporal instability and the inevitable defeat of human elements against the force of nature. Light, as the living element of nature, crosses the boundary between life and oblivion and brings the combination of form and visual meaning to philosophical reflection. Therefore, the relationship between nature, meaning, and form in this image



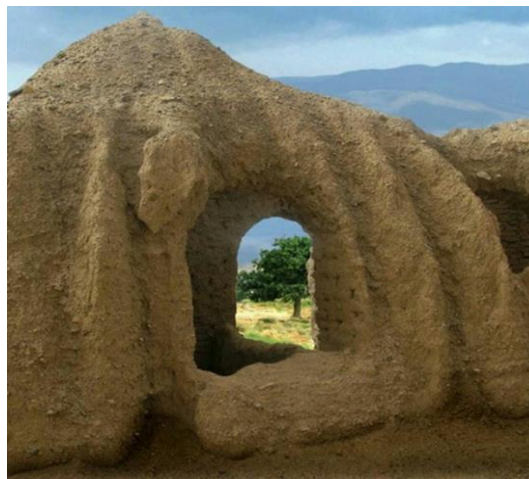
manifests not merely in the representation of objects but in a hidden dialogue between decay, memory, and the continuity of nature,

**Table 8. Analytical components of the second image from the "window to life" series.**

Row	Title	Iconic Events
1	Stage one: Natural signs	Natural diagonal light, the spectrum of white-blue colors, cracked wall texture
2	Stage two: Conventional signs	Glass bottle (trace of life), faded writings on the wall (forgotten memory), light penetration (return of nature)
3	Stage three: Form	The combination of light and shadow, the emptiness of space, the niche, and the dialectic between light and matter in the scene

#### 4.3.5 | Description of the third image from the series window to the life

In this image, we see the remains of an old wall or historical structure [6]. The natural erosion of the wall has occurred due to wind and rain over successive seasons. (*Fig. 9*)



**Fig. 9. The third photograph from the series Window to the Life.**

The rural people of the past built the wall. It is made of natural materials such as soil and mud. The mud wall features a window or an opening overlooking the outside space, with a green tree visible in the background. The need for human shelter against environmental conditions has been met traditionally using primitive tools. The location of this image is a dry, rural area in Iran. This photograph was taken in late spring with green but sparse vegetation, and the sky shows no signs of seasonal changes.

#### 4.3.6 | Iconological analysis of the third image

At the pre-iconological level, the image depicts a worn mud wall with a niche or opening through which a green tree is visible. The rough texture of the soil, curved lines resulting from erosion, and the natural framing of the window are noticeable. At the iconological level, the mud wall can symbolize ancient civilizations, vernacular architecture, and the human connection with the environment, while the tree behind the window signifies the continuity of life amidst decay.

In the iconographic analysis, this image can be interpreted as a metaphor for the passage of time and the survival of nature against the perishability of human structures; a tree is perceived as a symbol of immortality behind the decaying human building. Here, the dominance of natural order over the transient achievements of humanity and a metaphorical depiction of the constant connection and conflict between nature and human culture are noteworthy.



**Table 9. Components of the analysis of the third image from the series window to the life.**

Row	Title	Iconic Events
1	Stage one: Natural signs	Tree, open plain, erosion of the mud wall, integration of the building's form with the environment.
2	Stage two: Conventional signs	Mud wall (collapse of human civilization), open window (return or reconnection to nature), the passage of time (the factor transforming the human form into the natural state).
3	Stage three: Form	The organic combination of the wall and window, the soft and heterogeneous texture of elements, the elimination of formal architectural lines, the visual integration of artificial and natural remnants, and a sense of unity between form and nature.

## 4.4 | The Series Doors and Memories

Doors and Memories by Abbas Kiarostami was first published in 1394 [7]. It is a collection of black-and-white photographs in which Kiarostami documents images of traditional Iranian wooden doors. In this book, the doors are presented as visual and symbolic elements. Through precise framing and artistic lighting, Kiarostami examines the relationships between human beings, space, and time. This work, published in folio format and comprising 140 pages, is regarded as one of Kiarostami's most prominent photographic works and offers a profound reflection on the concept of space and its interaction with human memories and recollections.

### 4.4.1 | Description of the first image from the series doors and memories

The image shows an old, weathered wooden door whose blue paint has peeled over time, revealing a worn and distressed texture. This door, secured with metal nails and a rusty lock, evokes years of neglect and the passage of time. No human figure appears in the image [7], yet the presence of people can be felt through their absence; those who once opened this door are now only remembered in the decayed texture of the wood and paint. This image was captured in one of Iran's historic alleys, where ancient architecture and stone walls still stand. It is a space where past and present intertwine, and the forgotten door carries a silent memory. The interplay of shadow and light, combined with the natural textures of stone and wood, suggests the photograph was taken either in the early morning or near sunset. When the sun reaches a steeper angle, highlighting the textural details more prominently, this photograph is not merely an image of an old door but a fragment of collective memory, an invitation to reflect on what remains of the past within the worn layers of contemporary life (Fig. 10).

**Fig. 10. The first photograph from the doors and memories series.**

#### 4.4.2 | Iconological analysis of the first image from the doors and memories series

At first glance, this door appears as a simple, worn object; however, upon deeper analysis based on Erwin Panofsky's iconological theory, broader dimensions of meaning and form become evident. This door symbolizes the passage and continuity of human memories. The deterioration of the wood and the peeling layers of paint signify the passage of time and the natural changes affecting manufactured objects. Although the blue paint has faded in many areas, it still retains a trace of its original meaning. The central door knocker, a familiar element in traditional architecture, alludes to ancient communication customs, symbolizing the sanctity of the place and social order in human interactions.

The rusty lock is a metaphor for protection against alienation and oblivion; the history and memories hidden behind this door are still valued. The form of the door, utilizing strong lines, conveys a sense of stability and authority. The natural materials used, especially the wood, now decayed and aged, reflect a nature engaged in the cycle of decay and renewal. The sturdy form and the weathered nature create a dual narrative of cultural resilience and material impermanence. A close relationship between nature, form (classical and symmetrical architecture), and the specific meaning of collective memory (authentic values) has been established. This image is not merely an architectural object but a profound manifestation of the history, culture, and collective psyche of a society.

**Table 10. Analytical components of the first image from the doors and memories series.**

Row	Title	Iconic Events
1	Stage one: Natural signs	Wood deterioration, peeling of blue paint, rusting of the lock, decay at the bottom of the door.
2	Stage two: Conventional signs	Blue as a symbol of protection and tranquility, the metal door knocker as a symbol of traditional communication, and the rusty lock as a symbol of safeguarding memories and history.
3	Stage three: Form	Vertical door frame, symmetry of the panels, use of iron nails, sturdy stone frame.

#### 4.4.3 | Description of the second image from the doors and memories series

In the middle of an old, forgotten alleyway, a double door with worn and peeling paint can be seen [7]. A rusty lock stands out between the two door leaves, as if memories and the past are hidden behind this decayed wood. No human or living being is in the frame. The worn door is situated in the heart of an old city or a remote village.

The layers of paint have transformed into random, irregular patches. In the absence of direct natural light, this image could have been captured early morning or near sunset; the low and soft light intensifies the dramatic and mysterious atmosphere. The combination of colors, the worn texture of the wood, and the rusty lock have all transformed into a visual expression of the passage of time, solitude, and abandonment, a story without a narrator that relies solely on the viewer's gaze for its reconstruction (*Fig. 11*).



Fig. 11. Second image from the doors and memories series.

#### 4.4.4 | Iconological analysis of the second image from the doors and memories series

The image of the worn, locked wooden door, according to Erwin Panofsky's iconology, is analyzable as a visual object revealing a complex threefold relationship between nature, form, and meaning. At the first pre-iconographic level, the wooden door with peeling paint, a rusty lock, and a rough, aged texture is a visual form devoid of meaning, merely an objective representation of a physical object. At this level, we encounter the elements of the image: wood, metal, paint, and shadow. At the second level, which involves iconographic analysis, meaning emerges. The door manifests as a cultural and historical symbol, a boundary between inside and outside, past and present. The worn colors bear marks of decay.

Thus, the raw and physical form of the image embodies implicit meanings that the viewer extracts from their collective memory. In the third stage, which is the iconological interpretation, the image is reinterpreted within a social and historical context. This worn and locked door may be interpreted as a metaphor for a place or memory forgotten due to historical, cultural, or social reasons.

The visual form of the work—namely the roughness of the wood, the decay of the paint, and the rusty lock—embodies a raw quality that nurtures a more profound meaning: a sign of historical rupture, the disappearance of the past, and an imposed denial or enforced silence. In this analysis, the objective nature of the image is elevated to a higher level of meaning through cultural and historical symbolic elements. A historical-cultural experience in which raw nature has transformed into a social and cultural symbol.

Table 11. Analytical components of the second image from the doors and memories series.

Row	Title	Iconic Events
1	Stage one: Natural signs	Double-leaf wooden door with peeling paint, rusty lock, rough wood texture, shadows, and low light.
2	Stage two: Conventional signs	The lock as a symbol of passage prohibition, a signifier of entry into the past, fading and antiquity.
3	Stage three: Form	Vertical and symmetrical elements, muted colors, contrast of light and darkness, closed and secure state.

#### 4.4.5 | Description of the third image sample from the doors and memories collection

Nestled within a thick stone wall, an old and worn door rests. This door, made up of irregular and decayed planks, has a small lock barely hanging from a rusty bar [7]. The passage of time, wind, rain, and human neglect have caused the wood to crack and to be stitched together, yet it still stands upright. The scene depicts a remote Iranian village where traditional architecture still breathes in its forgotten corners. It is spring or summer. Small tufts of grass have grown at the base of the wall, and nature has come to life around it (Fig. 12).



Fig. 12. Third photograph from the doors and memories series.

#### 4.4.6 | Iconological analysis of the third image from the doors and memories series

A worn wooden door is seen embedded within a stone wall. The aged wood with deep cracks, planks irregularly fitted together, and a rusty lock that still futilely attempts to serve as protection are depicted in the first layer. This door portrays a composition of decayed wood and metal—a natural combination of weathered elements. In the second layer of analysis, these signs transform into carriers of meaning. From a symbolic perspective, it signifies the gradual dissolution of boundaries and barriers. The erosion of the wood symbolizes abandonment and human incapacity in the face of greater forces of nature and history. Nature is not a destructive agent; rather, the plants that have grown at the base of the wall indicate the presence of life within the devastation. With every form of destruction, they carry the potential for new growth.

At the stage of iconographic analysis and in-depth interpretation of the work, this worn-out door represents not merely an abandoned object but a specific cultural and historical condition. The resistance of traditions to modernization, the gradual forgetting of rural heritage, and the silent yet continuous struggle of collective memory for survival become intertwined. Transformed forms are dialectically interconnected, guiding us toward a deeper understanding of the human condition in the contemporary world [9].

Table 12. Components of the analysis of the third image in the collection doors and memories.

Row	Title	Iconic Events
1	Stage one: natural signs	Worn-out wood, uneven planks, stone wall, plants at the base of the wall
2	Stage two: conventional signs	In the crack, a symbol of decay, a nonfunctional lock (failure); plants (growth amid devastation)
3	Stage three: form	The contrasting combination of hard and soft textures, the irregular arrangement of planks, natural elements

## 5 | Conclusion

The research focused on understanding the relationship between natural elements, meaning, and form in Kiarostami's photographs, based on Erwin Panofsky's iconological perspective. At the core of the study was the question: "How does Kiarostami organize multilayered and philosophical meanings in his works through natural elements, formal structures, and visual signs?" In response, based on the research findings, it can be stated that in the analysis of the Snow White collection, Kiarostami employs snow, trees, and birds as raw natural elements and, through minimalist language, creates a space for reflection on concepts of loneliness, waiting, and stasis.

The empty form and sparse lines in the images have transformed nature into a backdrop for reflecting on existence and non-existence. This collection demonstrates that in photography, it is possible to create a distinctive semantic charge by eliminating details. In the Wall collection, the focus on worn textures, cracked surfaces, and signs of decay has made nature the dominant force governing the image. Walls, which were once symbols of human order and civilization, become, in this collection, the concrete manifestation of humanity's artificial failure against natural forces.

In the Window Facing Life collection, precise composition, the rhythm of light and shadow, and the presence of windows confront humans with natural phenomena. Light, plants, and the visual elements present form a metaphor for human incapacity to control the natural environment. The significance of this collection lies in presenting a poetic image of the invisible boundaries between human order and natural forces. In the Doors and Memories collection, worn doors, rusted locks, and decayed textures carry the unique burden of human memory and signify historical rupture. By capturing these elements, Kiarostami creates a link between the past, forgetting, and living natural phenomena.

The importance of this finding in the artistic representation of decay as part of the life cycle is emphasized by the analysis of case studies from four of Kiarostami's photography collections, which show that he employs minimalist language and the elimination of unnecessary elements, using nature not as a background but as the central axis of the life cycle. Simple forms and geometric relationships in his images, in coexistence with natural elements, have led to the creation of philosophical concepts about presence and absence, transition, and boundaries between humans and nature. The three stages of natural description, iconographic analysis, and iconological interpretation demonstrate that Kiarostami, in photography as in filmmaking, has created a linguistic form with specific meanings, in which natural phenomena are not merely represented elements but rather ontological experiences that provoke contemplation.

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