

A poor man pursues love: The Olive Trees, directed by Abbas Kiarostami

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Whether anyone chooses to acknowledge it or not, Iranian director Abbas Kiarostami (born in 1940) is one of the world's most important filmmakers, one of the very few.

When he says, "I think that technique for technique's sake is a big lie as it doesn't answer real feelings and real needs," he effectively reduces the great majority of contemporary directors to insignificance.

Of course, good intentions are not at all the same thing as art. But Kiarostami is not simply an intelligent or compassionate man, he has an extraordinary film sense. "Through the Olive Trees" is beautiful, as well as full of feeling and social insight.

The story is both simple and complex: A film crew is in a village in northern Iran which has been destroyed by an earthquake. Much of the population lives by the highway in makeshift housing. Apparently the government is unwilling or unable to relieve their suffering. The name of the film the crew is shooting is *And Life Goes On...* — in actuality the name of Kiarostami's previous film set in the same village.

In the opening scene, the director (Mohamad Ali Keshavarz) is wading through a crowd of girls, speaking to this one and that one. He's looking for his leading actress. His assistant (Zarifeh Shiva) takes down a few names. From the crowd one girl (Tahereh Ladania) begins to give him a hard time; his last film hadn't even been shown in the region, wasn't it all waste of time? She gets the part. As Kiarostami said in an interview about his own method of choosing his performers, "my choice depends on the person's self-confidence. And the closeness of the person to the character."

Hossein (Hossein Rezai), a young bricklayer, is eventually cast as the film husband of Tahereh, who he has been pursuing in "real life" without success. Her

family disapproves of him because he is illiterate and has no house. Hossein takes advantage of the time between shots to woo the girl. He argues that due to the earthquake now everyone is homeless like him. He persists in his suit, in the face of her absolute silence. As Kiarostami suggests, "In Iran resources are very scarce. Persistence becomes a trait."

In the last sequence of the film, Hossein follows the girl along a dirt road, through an olive grove and across a field, arguing against her possible objections the entire time. He tells her that wealth and literacy aren't the only qualities, "intelligence and understanding are important too. Old women [like the girl's grandmother] only think about rich men who own houses and factories."

The final shot of the film, which lasts several minutes, is taken from the top of a hill. The camera observes the couple far off in the distance. Due to the length of the shot and the distance of the figures, the spectator's own state of mind begins to waver between consciousness and unconsciousness. One enters something of a dream world. Does the girl finally turn and speak to Hossein? Does he run across the field out of joy or unbearable sorrow? The questions are not important, the real point is what happens off-screen, that life is changed "to fit our dreams."

The treatment of social difference and the weight of longstanding traditions, the careful but unequivocal protest against the conditions of life, the simplicity of the narrative and dialogue, the clarity of the acting—this is the stuff of classical filmmaking. One is in the presence of an extraordinary talent.



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