

The promise of Iranian cinema

Close-up, directed by Abbas Kiarostami (1990)

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The availability of Iranian director Abbas Kiarostami's 1990 film, *Close-up*, on DVD and VHS is a welcome event. It offers those not residing in a handful of large cities or able to attend film festivals the possibility of viewing this remarkable work.

Kiarostami (born 1940) was inspired to make the film when he came across a news item about a young man, Hossein Sabzian, who passed himself off to an upper middle class family in Teheran as the well-known film director, Mohsen Makhmalbaf. Sabzian gained the family's confidence and convinced its various members that he wanted to make a film with their participation. After his exposure and arrest, Sabzian was accused of setting the family up for a burglary.

Kiarostami's film is an extraordinary mix of documentary and fiction. He won permission to interview Sabzian in prison and to film his trial. But, most remarkably, he was also able to convince all the participants to reenact the encounters between the impostor and the family members. The family gets to star in a film after all, and so does Sabzian!

The truth emerges in the courtroom. Sabzian had no criminal intent. He is an unemployed printer whose life is very difficult. As his mother movingly explains at the trial, Sabzian's wife left him because of his inability to earn a decent living. Sabzian loves cinema, he follows the careers of the Iranian filmmakers. Makhmalbaf, he declares, is "a man who portrays my sufferings."

His imposture was an attempt to gain some self-esteem. Sabzian discovers that as a film director people treat him better. As he explains in court with a small smile, the family members did what he asked them to do. "As a famous person, I made them obey me," he remarks. Only by pretending to be a film director, by committing fraud, could he feel that he was worth something. But still, even while he was doing it, "I realized I was still a poor man who could not support his family.... I woke up, unemployed, it was hard to go on playing the part."

As a result of Sabzian's sincere testimony, the family members eventually become convinced that he was not out to rob them. The charges are dropped. As he leaves prison, Sabzian encounters the man he was pretending to be, the film director, Makhmalbaf. He falls on the latter's shoulder, sobbing. The director reassures him. They go off on Makhmalbaf's motor scooter to visit the family, buying a pot of flowers on the way and discussing a possible film. Sabzian knocks on the gates of the family's house holding his pot. He asks forgiveness. The last image, a frozen frame, is of Sabzian's sad, sweet face alongside the flowers. This is a beautiful, heartfelt work.

The world depicted in the film is "out of joint" and Sabzian is not the only "impostor." Many of its participants are not doing what they want or ought to be doing. The pre-credit sequence, which reenacts the events leading to Sabzian's arrest at the house of the well-to-do family, establishes this sense of disequilibrium:

We see a vehicle, apparently a taxi, into which climb a man we suppose to be a police official and two soldiers or members of the paramilitary. The first man turns out to be a journalist, surprising the driver, who turns out to be a retired fighter pilot. "I took you for a cop," says the driver, while the journalist laughingly notes that the driver is "a pilot working on the ground." The journalist doesn't know how to get to the family's house. When he asks directions of a man on the street, the latter says he doesn't know and, turning, asks the car's occupants rather aggressively if they want to buy a turkey.

The house is on a dead-end street. Oddly, the police or soldiers stay in the car while the journalist organizes the arrest. The driver asks them, "Haven't the police their own vehicle?" Later the arrested man tells those in the car, "To you I'm just a crook" (which he isn't). To make sure he fully documents his "great story," the journalist is obliged to knock on all the doors in the neighborhood trying to borrow a tape recorder. He has to borrow cash from the victimized family to pay for the taxi taking the

defendant to jail.

There's more. One of the sons in the family trained as an engineer, but manages a bread factory; the other wants to be an artist, but works for a computer firm. The judge at the trial is a Moslem cleric in full gear. And so on. Everyone and everything is out of place.

Much is made by critics, to the point of being tedious, of the apparent blurring of truth and fiction in *Close-up*. One commentator calls the film "A prime example of Kiarostami's mid-period films, which revolve around cinema itself.... [I]t works in the space between fiction and documentary, raising questions about the nature of truth, knowledge and representation." Another calls it "a brilliant exploration of the nature of cinematic truth and illusion." And a third suggests that *Close-up* is "some kind of postmodern international cinema joke."

Artists have been consciously aware for a very long time of the conflict between aesthetic image and reality and the fact that this conflict poses a specific set of contradictions, difficulties and potential snares. Indeed confronting the latter is one of the ways by which an artist defines him or herself as an artist. The gap between fiction and truth is a legitimate subject matter in itself (as the history of art and literature demonstrates), but the most serious figures do not halt at considering it, but proceed, insisting on the *possibility*, despite everything, of truthfully representing the object. Secondary artists and critics halt there and spend their careers debating whether or not art can reflect reality.

Kiarostami was clear enough. He called *Close-up* "the filmed version of a real story," and continued: "Film is the story of the distance between an ideal self and a real one. The greater the distance between the two, the less a man's mental balance. Everyone keeps trying to bring the two closer to each other to attain some sort of balance.... I create the reality before the camera and then I pull the truth out of it."

The principal subject of *Close-up* is not "cinema itself," but the state of Iranian society and the plight, economic and psychological, of many of its citizens. What sort of society it is that drives people to commit fraud (or absurdly delude themselves) so that they may experience an ounce of happiness and self-worth? Whether or not Kiarostami intended to say all that is difficult to determine; he rather blandly asserts that the film merely reveals the "good" in every human soul. But when Sabzian speaks of "the rich who are indifferent to the simple needs of the poor," or rejects the idea that he is acting in the courtroom ("I'm speaking of my suffering,

that's not acting"), or insists that "A true artist is someone close to the people," or defends his borrowing 1,900 tomans from the family ("I was short of money. I hadn't eaten. I only did it for a meal"), he appears before us as a dignified and eloquent representative of the oppressed, whom the Islamic regime ignores and excludes.

It needs to be the subject of a special study, but a re-viewing of this film convinces me more than ever that the new Iranian cinema reached its high point between 1990 and 1996, including Kiarostami's *Close-up* and *Through the Olive Trees* (1994) and Makhmalbaf's *Salaam Cinema* (1995) and *A Moment of Innocence* (1996). Both directors, along with figures like Jafar Panahi and others, have since done interesting work, but they have not gone beyond those earlier films in critical areas. Iranian cinema as a whole shows significant signs of stagnation. This is not astonishing. The Iranian filmmakers cannot magically avoid the crisis of perspective that besets artistic production as a whole.

Kiarostami and Makhmalbaf remain committed to depicting the conditions of the oppressed, but they have not deepened and, to a certain extent, have retreated from their previous explorations of Iranian life. They have not come to terms with a range of historical and social questions. For example: Why does such a level of popular suffering exist—in fact, it has sharply increased—20 years or more after the Iranian "revolution"? What is the social character of the reactionary, theocratic regime? What is the history of the secular left in Iran?

It is impossible to advance without confronting these issues and others. That the filmmakers exist in precarious conditions and face the constant threat of censorship and worse is no secret. But the impasse reached by Iranian cinema is itself an indication that, in one fashion or another, these are unpostponable questions. The proof, as always, is in the pudding.

Close-up will be available February 19 from Facets Video in Chicago: www.facets.org



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