

What about the ABC of social understanding?

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ABC Africa, directed by Abbas Kiarostami

The first image of Abbas Kiarostami's 2001 documentary, *ABC Africa*, reveals a fax from a United Nations agency inviting the Iranian filmmaker to make a film about Uganda's AIDS orphans. Newly released on DVD by New Yorker Video, the work, shot over a 10-day period in the African country, is a poetic glimpse of the children orphaned by the AIDS calamity.

"IFAD [the UN's International Fund for Agricultural Development] came up with the idea for the film. If you ask them why they chose me, you'll probably find that it was because I've been working with children for over twenty years," explains the director in an interview in the DVD's liner notes. Kiarostami began his career making documentaries for Iran's Institute for the Intellectual Development of Children and Young Adults.

ABC Africa was Kiarostami's first film shot exclusively on digital video and outside his native country. Also included on the disc is *Abbas Kiarostami: The Art of Living*, a brief overview, providing highlights from his movies, of the acclaimed filmmaker's career.

"Filming was very spontaneous," observes the director regarding *ABC Africa*. "Our camera always preceded us by a few steps and even when things were prepared in advance, reality constantly overtook fiction... I have always believed that the image of suffering must be shown without being transferred onto the viewer. If there is a limit, it is not for me to decide where it is. The camera is a faithful and fair observer, which in any case bears witness to the pain seen or experienced."

Out of a population of 22 million, Uganda has lost more than 2 million to the AIDS pandemic, with another 2 million infected with the virus. Consequently, as the film points out, the country is home to more than 1.6 million orphans. Kiarostami focuses on some of these children who are, in turn, fascinated by the camera. They jump around and clown for the filmmakers, but, in many faces, the painful realities are suggested in their eyes.

The children's raw enthusiasm is balanced by the tragic stories told by the adults who must care for the orphans. The foster caretakers are overwhelmingly surviving widows and grandmothers. One elderly woman describes her personal situation in which 35 children live with her in a single-room house.

Driving through a country of unsurpassable natural beauty, the filmmakers record scenes of terrible poverty. Kiarostami's camera confirms his view that despite overwhelming hardships, Ugandans "possess enormous inner wealth." There are chilling moments: in a bare-bones pediatric clinic, children are withering away in shocking numbers from disease. The camera shows us a dying, ravaged child crying out in distress, while others are disturbingly motionless. A small, lifeless form is wrapped in a sheet and taken away on the back of a bicycle for burial.

Governmental efforts against the scourge include billboards with scantily clad models promoting the use of condoms (in some areas the models' bodies are covered with black cloth). The Catholic Church counterattacks, posting signs that read "Staying a virgin is the best protection against AIDS." Fearing the encouragement of promiscuity, explains a relief worker, the Church opposes the sponsorship of condom use.

During the film crew's stay at Masaka, the electrical power is turned off at midnight, presumably because of limited supply. The screen goes black and the crew's conversation continues in Farsi as the battery-powered camera keeps rolling in the utter darkness.

In one of the film's concluding segments, the filmmakers encounter an Austrian couple shortly after their legal adoption of an orphaned baby girl, who was abandoned at birth and rescued by a nun. These scenes with the couple and child are some of the most personal and moving—the doctor and his teacher-wife make an effort to expose their tiny daughter to Uganda's culture before she begins a new life in Europe.

Uganda's 1.6 million AIDS orphans represent some 18 percent of the estimated 9 million children under 18 years of age. *ABC Africa* provides visual confirmation of the fact that one family out of four in the east African nation looks after children who are not their own.

In a May 2001 interview with *indiewire.com*, Kiarostami states: "They have kept the whole question of AIDS under the rug in Iran; it is like a secret illness. There was an attempt a few months ago to bring it out to the public arena for discussion, but this attempt was aborted. To me, AIDS is an international epidemic and every country can be affected by it. Therefore, it can be discussed on an international level. Unfortunately, AIDS doesn't require a visa."

ABC Africa publicizes the efforts of Uganda Women's Effort

to Save Orphans (UWESCO)—an organization of hundreds of women in the cities and villages who adopt the parentless children. The orphans are doubly penalized because their foster families also come from the most oppressed and vulnerable layers of the population. The film's title derives from what has been dubbed the **ABC** approach—a list of elementary steps to curb the epidemic: being sexual **A**bstinent until marriage; **B**eing faithful to a single partner or reducing the number of partners; and using a **C**ondom, especially with multiple partners.

Kiarostami's heartfelt efforts would have been immeasurably strengthened by bringing to bear an historical and political appreciation of the sources of Uganda's problems. In *ABC Africa's* liner notes, the director lets slip something of the weaknesses involved in his approach: "As IFAD's fax confirms, it all began as an invitation to come and have a look around. But we took our pens [i.e., digital video cameras] with us. To begin with, we didn't think these visual notes would be enough to make a film. But that's pretty well what happened. I have always thought that the 'sketch' contains something more than the finished product."

The director's first instinct was correct—visual notes generally aren't enough to make a penetrating work. In basing the film exclusively on the "sketch," Kiarostami may have forfeited the possibility of undertaking a deeper look at the situation. The truth about things doesn't simply fall into your lap, even if you have great artistic instincts.

That Kiarostami concerned himself with these children and their tragic condition is entirely to his credit. How many filmmakers have turned their cameras on this catastrophe? The Iranian director's humaneness and sensitivity are never in question.

However, the overall effect of the film is quite limited. What is the source of the AIDS crisis in Uganda? How is it possible that at the turn of the twenty-first century such a state of affairs is allowed to exist? The viewer might be forgiven for finding it all rather inexplicable. He or she might conclude that the efforts of relief workers are all that can be done, or even all that needs to be done. There's something a trifle complacent about the film, as though its creators were continually attempting to convince themselves that things were not so bad.

The camera reveals quite objectively the stark contrast between the incredible natural riches of the country, the innate talent and energy of the population, and the social blight that retards any progress. Unfortunately, the filmmakers are prepared to leave it at that.

The faces of the children are remarkable, but they do not, cannot tell everything. We need the facts of social life as well, we need that ABC too.

For example: Africa, including Uganda, is being bled dry by imperialism. The exploitation of the continent by foreign financial institutions surpasses anything achieved during the period of naked colonialism. The poverty exacerbated by the

IMF and World Bank structural adjustment programs has left the vast bulk of Uganda's population vulnerable to disease, particularly the burgeoning AIDS contagion.

Ranking near the bottom of the United Nations Human Development Index, Uganda's life expectancy in 2002 was 45.7 years. The national-bourgeois elements and military in the country (home to Idi Amin, murderous president from 1971 to 1979) are thoroughly corrupt and thuggish, incapable of leading any progressive effort on any front, political, economic or medical.

The first cases of clinical AIDS were diagnosed in Uganda in 1982. Today, it is estimated that 1.1 million Ugandans have HIV/AIDS, with nearly 80 percent between the ages of 15 to 45 years. AIDS has become the leading cause of death for adults, and in some villages the infection rate is as high as one in four. In November 2003, UN Under-Secretary General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator Jan Egeland stated that he considered the humanitarian crisis in northern Uganda to be among the worst on the planet.

In the face of the dimensions of this crisis, Kiarostami's humane but undernourished presentation simply does not make the grade. Fairly conventional in form and content, the film is less than one would have hoped for from an artist of his stature and intelligence. Moreover, by avoiding a larger framework and excluding the possibility of radical change, the film veers dangerously close to making a virtue out of necessity, suggesting at times, "Well, life is beautiful and people are happy, even under these conditions!" Left for all intents and purposes out of the picture is any systematic questioning of a social order that produces such a human catastrophe.

Note: New Yorker Films has also released *Platform* (2000), the remarkable film by Chinese director Jia Zhang-ke, on DVD. Jia is one of the most talented filmmakers currently at work, and *Platform*, a study of the changes China underwent in the 1980s, is a perceptive and sensitive film. For a review and interview with the director, see "Independent filmmaking that is genuinely independent".



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