

# The life and career of Iranian filmmaker Abbas Kiarostami

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Iranian filmmaker Abbas Kiarostami died in Paris on July 4 from gastrointestinal cancer. He had traveled to France in June for medical treatment. There have been questions raised in some quarters about the treatment he received in Iran. His death has sparked expressions of genuine sorrow from many figures in the film world.

Kiarostami directed a number of striking short films and features before the Iranian revolution of 1979, but he will be best remembered and long honored for the series of feature films, including documentaries, that he made between 1987 and 1997: *Where Is the Friend's Home?* (1987), *Homework* (1989), *Close-Up* (1990), *Life, And Nothing More ...* (1992), *Through the Olive Trees* (1994) and *Taste of Cherry* (1997). He was perhaps the most important filmmaker in the world during those years.

At a time of general intellectual renunciationism and movement to the right within global “left” artistic circles, Kiarostami was one of the few filmmakers who maintained a concern for the problems of the young, the poor and the oppressed and, moreover, addressed those problems in an artistically fresh and innovative fashion. He was a member of a significant trend in Iranian cinema, inspired by the mass revolutionary potential of the 1979 events.

Born in 1940 in Tehran, Kiarostami won a painting competition at the age of 18 and left home to attend Tehran University's Faculty of Fine Arts, a program he eventually failed. He passed at another art school and became a commercial artist. During the early and mid-1960s, Kiarostami made more than 150 television advertisements. In 1969, he helped set up a filmmaking department at the Institute for the Intellectual Development of Children and Young Adults (known as Kanun), an organization founded by the Shah's wife. Although Kiarostami never spoke of it, his various artistic and intellectual endeavors would have brought him into contact in Tehran with left-wing figures, past and present.

Kiarostami directed his first film, *Bread and Alley*, in 1970, a charming 10-minute film about a small boy who encounters a threatening dog on his way home with a loaf of bread. (This work, like many of Kiarostami's other early efforts, is available online.) Many of these films from the 1970s remain worth watching, for their realistic look at Iranian life, within the obvious boundaries allowed by the Shah's censors, and their sharp, careful imagery.

In *Experience* (1973), a 14-year-old boy, who works at a photography studio, develops a crush on a middle class girl he makes sure to pass every day on the street. He slaves away at his job, despising his boss. The boy becomes convinced the girl thinks well of him too, and puts a great deal of effort into applying for a job at her house. His hopes are crushed in seconds. One remembers the boy's attractive but often strained face and the ferocity of his determination.

In 2000, I wrote about Kiarostami's next film, *The Traveler* (1974): “A boy, Qassem, in a small town has a difficult life. His family is not particularly affectionate. His teachers care only about keeping their students in line. (The basis of one lesson is a discussion of ‘discipline’ versus ‘rebellion.’) He loves to play soccer. When he learns his favorite

team is playing in Tehran he resolves to attend the game. This involves a considerable effort, including stealing from his parents, swindling his classmates and selling his own team's soccer nets. In the end, exhausted by the effort of getting to Tehran and obtaining a ticket, he sleeps through the match.”

Two short films from 1975, *Two Solutions for One Problem* (a lovely film about the advantages of cooperation) and *Colors*, are more or less didactic-instructional films, made as part of Kiarostami's work for Kanun.

In *Wedding Suit* (1976), social issues come to the fore. A middle class kid is having a suit made for him. A couple of poor boys get into trouble for borrowing the suit, although things work out in the end. A more complex choreography is at work here, and some of the sequences are in quite rich, spectacular color.

Released in 1977, *The Report* is Kiarostami's first important film, and his first about adults. It has overtones of Akira Kurosawa's postwar films about lower middle class Japanese life. A young, fashion-conscious official in the tax department is accused of taking bribes. His home life is meanwhile falling apart. His wife (played by the soon to be well-known actress, Shohreh Aghdashloo) bitterly accuses him of neglecting her. He ultimately beats her, and when she later tries to commit suicide, delivers her to the hospital. When he is satisfied she is going to live, he abruptly and selfishly leaves.

The film provides no overt social commentary, but its hostile attitude toward the complacent, preening, self-absorbed government bureaucrats, indifferent to the general population, undoubtedly reflected growing discontent and popular alienation.

The pivotal event in Kiarostami's life and career was the revolution of 1979. This, of course, was a critical global event.

The government of the Shah of Iran was central to American imperialist strategy for a quarter-century, acting as one of its principal gendarmes in the region. The regime terrorized the Iranian population from 1953 to 1979. The Shah's infamous secret police, SAVAK, established with the assistance of the CIA and the US military, savagely tortured and murdered large numbers of political opponents. One of its principal early targets was the Tudeh Party, the Iranian Stalinist organization. Its leaders were executed and thousands of its members arrested.

The movement against the Shah's regime in 1978-79 produced some of the greatest popular protests since the Russian Revolution of 1917. Workers took over factories and peasants seized land. As the WSWS noted in 2009, “millions of Iranians streamed onto the streets of Teheran and other major cities to protest soaring unemployment and inflation, the squandering and outright theft of the country's oil wealth by the royal court and its hangers-on, and, above all, the monarchical dictatorship.”

However, power did not pass into the hands of the working class and rural oppressed because there was no revolutionary party in Iran, thanks to the policies of the same Tudeh Party. According to the Stalinist two-stage theory of social revolution, the Iranian working class could not aspire to power, but was obliged to subordinate itself to the “democratic” elements

of the national bourgeoisie. This decades-long policy led to catastrophe.

Enormous numbers of workers and youth in Iran challenged the hated CIA regime of Shah Reza Pahlavi, but, tragically, given the political vacuum that existed, their struggles and sacrifices worked only to the benefit of the populist-sounding Shiite clergy and its “Supreme Leader,” Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. What emerged out of the great revolutionary crisis, as the WSWS wrote, was “a clerical-led bourgeois nationalist regime, an Islamic Republic, that ruthlessly suppressed the working class, restored bourgeois order, and defended capitalist property. By 1983, and in most cases well before, all unions independent of the regime and all left-wing organizations were banned and physically broken up.”

It is impossible to understand the rise and ultimate decline of the “New Wave” of Iranian filmmakers without making these tumultuous events a starting point. The 1978-1979 upheavals provided an immense insurrectionary and democratic impulse to the artists, but the Iranian revolution’s abortion and betrayal, the ongoing theocratic repression, the absence of mass, socialist opposition in the working class to the new regime, as well as the general discouragement of “leftists” following the collapse of the Soviet Union, produced a number of complex and difficult circumstances.

Jumping ahead, the attraction in more recent times of filmmakers like Jafar Panahi (a former collaborator of Kiarostami’s), Rakhshan Bani-Etemad, Mohsen Makhmalbaf, Mohammad Rasoulof and others for the reactionary Green Movement, an expression of discontent with the “Islamic Republic” within the upper middle class and portions of the Iranian elite, is the unhappy product of these specific conditions.

At any rate, in the aftermath of the 1979 revolution (as we commented in 2011), “The most interesting filmmakers, secularists and on the political left by and large, turned their attention to the plight of the most oppressed, the marginalized.” We added, however, that they did so, “whether due to external or internal constraints, or both, within relatively narrow confines—a sparse naturalism, virtually no reference to history or direct comment on the wider society, and narratives that often involved children and other vulnerable figures.”

Kiarostami was the figure (along with Panahi at times) who went the farthest beyond a “sparse naturalism.” His post-revolutionary career as a feature filmmaker (after directing a number of shorts, including the lively *Orderly or Disorderly*, which looks alternately at children’s disciplined and chaotic behavior and the aesthetic implications of that, in 1981) began with *Where Is the Friend’s Home?* (1987), the first of three films about the same region in northern Iran. The slightly awkward title in English comes from a well-known Iranian poem.

Ahmad, a school boy, discovers that he has accidentally taken home his school friend’s notebook. Knowing that his friend has been threatened with expulsion if he does not do his homework, but not knowing where his friend lives, Ahmad wanders the streets and hills in increasing panic as darkness falls. Rebuffed and thwarted by grownups at every turn, Ahmad finally returns home and completes the homework himself.

The film exudes intense empathy for the boy and hostility toward all the indifferent or abusive adults. This theme is further taken up in *Homework* (1989), a documentary in which Kiarostami interviews a series of school boys and adults in a poor neighborhood in Tehran about the country’s educational system. Reviewing the film in April 1995 in the *International Workers Bulletin* (IWB), I wrote, “The boys are overburdened with school work, the teachers are insensitive, oftentimes the kids’ parents are illiterate and cannot help them with their work.

“Kiarostami asks the boys about ‘punishment’ and ‘encouragement.’ They tell him that punishment means being beaten up, encouragement means being praised. They have a great deal of experience with the former, very little with the latter. As if to reinforce his theme, the film director himself wears dark glasses and looms above the boys, looking

very much like an intimidating police interrogator. Near the close of the film, one little boy, terrified of adults, insists on his friend’s presence during the questioning. Demonstrating the power of encouragement, friendship, solidarity, this same child ends the film by reciting a poem he loves from memory while his friend looks on.”

*Close-Up* (1990), a mix of documentary and fiction, is another remarkable work. Kiarostami 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 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.

The scenes in court, where the truth emerges, are unforgettable. We commented in 2002 on the WSWS, when *Close-Up* was released on DVD: “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.’”

In the second part of the trilogy about northern Iran, *Life, and Nothing More* (1992), a father—supposedly the director of *Where Is the Friend’s Home?*—and his young son set out from Tehran in the aftermath of an actual earthquake that killed over 50,000 people to find the two boys who starred in the earlier film. *Life, and Nothing More* records the pair’s encounters with various survivors, many of whom have lost entire families, as they travel about the devastated region.

Many of Kiarostami’s central concerns at the time, the combination of a belief in humanity’s possibilities and doubts about its present conduct, his “pessimistic optimism,” find expression in the extended final shot of *Life, and Nothing More*, which needs to be seen, of course, to be adequately appreciated. This is how I described it in 1995:

“The camera takes this in [from a distance]: A dirt road zigzags up a steep hillside. A man with a heavy object on his shoulder makes his way along the road. Two kids are on top of the hill [who may or may not be the boys the father and son are looking for]. The father and son attempt to make it up in their car. Their first attempt fails. The driver allows the car to roll back, out of the frame, in order to get a ‘running start’ for another attempt. The second time the car successfully meets the challenge, passing the man with the heavy load who gestures for them to stop and give him a lift. But if they stop beside him, they’ll never make it all the way up. When the driver reaches a level spot, he waits for the man. Then they head toward the summit where the two kids are visible.”

The first of Kiarostami’s films that I saw was *Through the Olive Trees* (the third film in the trilogy), at the 1994 Toronto film festival. I wrote about it for the IWB under the headline, “A poor man pursues love.”

The story, set in the same part of northern Iran as before, is simple. A crew is shooting a film named *Life, And Nothing More* in a village that 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. An impudent girl, Tahereh, wins a part in the film from the fictional director, a stand-in for Kiarostami.

Hossein, a young bricklayer, is eventually cast as the film husband of Tahereh, whom 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 suggested in an interview, "In Iran resources are very scarce. Persistence becomes a trait."

I was enormously impressed with the film, which was unlike anything else being made at the time, and with Kiarostami's direction. I made considerable efforts to arrange an interview, not always an easy task at the time for a journalist from the *International Workers Bulletin*. In fact, I recall being told that Kiarostami wanted to see the publication ahead of time, and I supplied a copy. He was apparently satisfied, because the interview took place.

We met in a small office and spoke through an interpreter. He held himself slightly aloof and his answers were relatively brief. I wanted to find out how it was he was bucking global trends in the filmmaking of the 1990s, one of the weakest decades for cinema in history. I remarked, "You are choosing to make films about ordinary people, poor people. That itself is quite rare today."

He replied, "I get my material from around me. When I leave my house in the morning, those are the people I come into contact with. In my entire life I've never met a star, somebody I've seen on the screen. And I believe that any artist finds his material from what's around him. Human beings and their problems are the most important raw material for any film."

The last important film Kiarostami directed, in my view, was *Taste of Cherry* (1997). In the meantime I had made it my business to track down and see as many of his earlier films as I could.

In *Taste of Cherry*, a man, Mr. Badii, drives around the outskirts of Tehran asking strangers to do him a favor. That night he plans to swallow every sleeping pill he has and lie down in a hole he has dug for himself beside a tree. Will you come to the spot, he asks the various people he meets, at 6 a.m. and call out my name? If I reply, help me out of the hole. If I don't, cover my body with 20 spadefuls of dirt.

He encounters and speaks, at varying lengths, to a number of men, including laborers, a soldier, a seminary student, a security guard outside a cement plant and a taxidermist. The last, named Bagheri, reluctantly agrees to Badii's proposal ("If we all chose this solution, there'd be no one left"). He needs the money badly because his child is ill with anemia.

The reader who wants to know more details can consult the extended WWSWS review, posted in April 1998.

In that comment I praised the film highly: "*Taste of Cherry* is a serious and complex work. It advances certain truths and then undermines them, or suggests others just as compelling. ... Kiarostami's films are among the most poetic being made. Indeed where does conscious thought end and intuition begin? With an extraordinary artist these are two poles between which a current always flows. Was it Kiarostami's plan, for example, to examine and criticize the society's institutional pillars? Badii encounters first a soldier, then a seminary student, then an employee at the museum of natural history. The army, religion, science. But the three could be looked at in another way—a youth, a young man, an elderly man: son, brother, father."

And also: "What does Kiarostami show us? Badii drives an expensive car, a Range Rover; he seems to have money and a pleasant place to live. The men he asks to help him are poor, some of them very poor. The film's first sequence shows Badii driving past crowds of laborers looking for work. Kiarostami's latest work takes place in a world of dry brown soil and rocks, a desert; one almost chokes on the dust. Life is harsh. People are lonely. ... This is a film that any existing regime would find disturbing."

Was this overpraise? Perhaps (I was certainly guilty of that in regard to Kiarostami's next film, the murky *The Wind Will Carry Us*, 1999), but I

remain convinced that *Taste of Cherry* has very beautiful and serious elements.

The WWSWS review was apparently translated into Farsi and Kiarostami was gracious enough to write me a letter, which we posted on May 20, 1998. It read, "Dear Mr. Walsh:

I received the piece that you wrote about *Taste of Cherry*. I believe that critics create a new piece of art by looking at another piece. That is what you have done in writing about *Taste of Cherry*. I really enjoyed reading it and I want to thank you for it. Abbas Kiarostami

We spoke at greater length at the 2000 San Francisco film festival, but I must say that by this time the director had more of the air of someone who was being feted and flattered by the international film world. And this is not to make light of the very real pressures exerted on someone who had been struggling to get his films made for most of the previous thirty years.

In our conversation, I pointed out that there was a good deal of interest in his films in the US. I told him, "The American people have been told by the government and the media for years that Iran is a country of terrorists. Do you think that if American people were able to see Iranian films they would have a different impression?"

Kiarostami replied, through an interpreter, "This is a policy that is conducted basically to separate people and create rifts as opposed to bringing peoples together. Through film we're able to see another reality that does not resemble the one being propagated by the media."

I observed that there was "a lot of money and corruption in the film industry, and the artistic results in general are not very good," and asked, "What can we do to oppose this?"

The Iranian filmmaker responded, "You're obviously doing your part because you point out the films that are made with smaller budgets, smaller films. It's not possible to change this situation dramatically because the wheel of film is being turned by industry, by business. Many people are workers who work within that film industry. A lot of people go to see films just to be entertained. That sort of film exists and that is as it should be. And that is the cinema that allows our films to be made because otherwise there would be no reason to show our films. What you do, pointing a finger at the films that are different, is all that can be done."

A certain resignation or passivity was evident, and not for the first or last time. Kiarostami chose to make a virtue out of difficult, repressive conditions when I suggested that a change in the quality of filmmaking was dependent on "an improvement in the social and political atmosphere."

"I don't think we should depend that much on what happens politically," he said. "I actually sometimes think that at least in our country art has grown the most when the social situation has been the worst. It seems to me that artists are a compensatory mechanism, a defense mechanism in those kinds of unfavorable circumstances."

This same sort of resigned accommodation to difficult circumstances emerged in the 2000 interview in regard to his film on AIDS orphans in Uganda. Asked about conditions in Africa, Kiarostami commented, "I saw people who are poverty-stricken but extremely rich within. They're very happy people. Something I've almost never seen. I asked my friend why these people were so happy. He said it was because of the three things these people do not have: pollution, tension and competition."

When Joanne Laurier eventually reviewed his 2001 documentary, *ABC Africa*, she was obliged to comment that in the face of the dimensions of the crisis, two million Ugandans dead from AIDS out of a population of 22 million, "Kiarostami's humane but undernourished presentation simply does not make the grade. ... [B]y 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.”

By the end of the 1990s, in fact, the real limits of Iranian cinema’s “humanism” were making themselves evident. This was not the fault of the individual writers and directors, but all the unresolved issues and contradictions, all the questions that external circumstances and their social milieu and intellectual weaknesses had impelled them to push under the rug, were bound to emerge.

In 2001, we asked from the Buenos Aires film festival, “Can they [the Iranian filmmakers] proceed without grasping how the great mass upsurge of 1979 brought to power a thoroughly reactionary regime? Why was there such a vacuum of progressive political forces at that time? What is the history of the Tudeh party and Stalinism in Iran? What was the impact of the Russian Revolution on Iranian intellectuals and artists?”

A shift away from concern with the conditions of the oppressed made itself felt in Iranian filmmaking in the late 1990s and early 2000s, as film portraits of more self-involved middle class Iranians began to appear. This change reflected growing tensions within Iranian society 20 years after the fall of the Shah, as newly enriched and confident social layers began to look askance at concessions made to the working class and the poor.

Kiarostami’s *Ten* (2002), unfortunately, was typical of this process. The film consists of ten conversations in a car, mostly between a middle class mother and son. It is, as we wrote at the time, “tame and weak. The woman has separated from her husband, much to the boy’s dismay, in an effort to win some degree of independence. Her son will have none of it .... For the most part ... the mother and son are merely irritating, spoiled, in the one case, self-involved, in the other.”

We added: “The Iranians have specialized in intense, intimate and humane dramas, in the particulars of social life. ... In the long run, to portray the particular (the specific human relationship or dilemma) in any depth one must be drawing on some degree of understanding of the universal (the state of society and its development as a whole)—or the portrayal, undernourished, loses strength and purpose. ... It is critical that the Iranian filmmakers address the larger issues.”

The decline, of course, did not take place in a straight line. In *Crimson Gold* (2004), for example, Panahi (as director) and Kiarostami (as writer) collaborated on a powerful story about social inequality in Iran, based on a news item about a thief, trapped by the security system inside a jewelry store, who killed the store manager and then himself.

Kiarostami’s later work bears little resemblance to his earlier, except in secondary matters. *Certified Copy* (2010), despite a charming performance from Juliette Binoche, and *Like Someone in Love* (2012), shot in Italy and Japan, respectively, are simply not important films, by any standard. The historical and social issues that Kiarostami sincerely believed he could sidestep, and in which, I think, he saw nothing but fatal snares and pitfalls, had caught up with him.

On the sad occasion of his death, however, it would be better if we remember, above all, his great intelligence and honesty and artistry when he was at his best. His finest films ought to be viewed and viewed again.

Kiarostami sincerely wanted the world to change, even if he was dubious about any immediate prospects. He would often refer to the fact that the audience needed to rearrange life in accordance with its aspirations. In 1994, he told me, “The biggest impact of cinema on the viewer is that it allows his imagination to take flight. There are two possible results of this. Perhaps it will make his ordinary day-to-day life more bearable. On the other hand, it may result in his day-to-day life seeming so bad that as a result he may decide to change his life. We become more aware of the day-to-day hardships. As Shakespeare says, we’re more like our dreams than our real lives.”

In 2000, I asked him, “Does serious art always create in the spectator the desire for some other reality?” and he answered, “Yes, I believe so, because otherwise art would have no purpose.”



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