



Close-up

From the mid-1990s until his death in 2016, Abbas Kiarostami was widely regarded as one of the most original, innovative and important filmmakers around, an audacious, idiosyncratic artist with a profoundly humane but highly distinctive view of the world. *Close-up* is often seen not only as a turning-point in the Iranian's career – it cemented his confidence in blurring the distinction between 'documentary' and 'fiction' – but as the film most representative of his aims and achievements.

It could have been a straightforward record of the court case of an unemployed print worker accused of impersonating filmmaker Mohsen Makhmalbaf with the intent of fraudulently obtaining money from a well-to-do family. But in relating the story of Hossein Sabzian's encounter with the Ahankhahs, Kiarostami characteristically opts for anything but an obvious linear narrative. Mixing 16mm footage of the trial (in which Kiarostami himself seems to ask as many questions as the judge) with recreations of events performed by the family, Sabzian and others playing themselves, he fragments the story into diverse meandering strands that frequently frustrate expectations while still remaining intelligible and engrossing. 'Important' events may be left unseen; in their place, sequences in which nothing of any clear consequence happens. Re-enactments occur without giving away whose point of view they represent. The more 'information' we're offered about the case, the more we come to realise that there are no easy answers to any of the questions being raised. The plot thickens – except that we do, eventually, understand that the accused, for all his strange, seemingly unmotivated deceptions, is undoubtedly a decent human being, worthy of our attention, sympathy and respect.

Though formally inventive, *Close-up* confirms that its creator is no formalist. The film is driven both by deep, unsentimental compassion and by genuine philosophical curiosity; it explores the fraught relationships between truth and falsehood, film and 'reality', intention and action, and acknowledges, from start to finish, the role and responsibility of the director in his engagement with the people in his film. Also admirably typical of Kiarostami's best work is his admission – indeed, insistence – that the film is incomplete until viewers respond by engaging with its artifice and actively using their imaginations. For Kiarostami, the unshown, the unsaid, the unknown were crucially important; meaning was inextricably linked to mystery.

Geoff Andrew, bfi.org.uk

The jigsaw structure of *Close-up* makes it seem an obvious candidate for inclusion in that diverse and hard-to-define category, the fake documentary. But on closer inspection, it proves to be more of a fake fiction, in which what at first appears to be a piece of tale-spinning – a story *about* a pathological teller of tales – turns out to contain more truth than we expected. Its subject is an apparent no-hoper who briefly mistakes himself for a filmmaker; but Abbas Kiarostami's generous undertaking is to demonstrate that Hossain Sabzian *is* a filmmaker of sorts, or at the very least, has the soul of one.

Close-up allows Sabzian to become the subject of the sort of film he dreams of, an honest chronicle of his travails; and in the final sequence, it lets him realise his total identification with his idol Mohsen Makhmalbaf. (Best known in Britain for *Gabbeh*, Makhmalbaf has long been admired in Iran for such socially involved dramas as *The Cyclist*, Sabzian's favourite in *Close-up*.) Sabzian's adventure recalls John Guare's play *Six Degrees of Separation*, in which a wealthy family is gulled by a man claiming to be Sidney Poitier's son. But if, in the West, fame invariably stands for hollow seduction, the basis of Sabzian's imposture is completely different. For the Ahankhah family, the name 'Makhmalbaf' represents not self-referring glamour but a morally commanding set of values: art and social compassion. The family cannot entirely be blamed for wanting to participate in Sabzian's imaginary project, for it offers the chance to appear in a Makhmalbaf film. Indeed, their real fault consists of suspecting Sabzian of breaking a contract they had freely entered into.

Where the family reneges, Kiarostami steps in with a deal of his own, promising Sabzian that his camera will allow him to make his own testimony to the world, in exchange for his services as an actor playing himself. Both Sabzian and Kiarostami are fortunate in having the trial presided over by a judge who is unusually sensitive to dramatic paradox. 'What part would you have liked to play?' he asks Sabzian. 'My own,' replies the defendant. 'You are playing your own part,' the judge replies.

Kiarostami similarly reminds us that he too is playing a filmmaker's role: he flashes a clapperboard at us and, with breathtaking cheekiness, asks the judge to move the trial date to suit his own shooting schedule. Such interventions oblige us to reach our own understanding of the distinction between imposture and reliable appearance. As far as one can tell, the only reliable documentary footage in the film appears to be of the trial itself, and some of the interviews; more equivocal are those apparently unstaged sections of the coda with Makhmalbaf, in which authenticity is questionably signalled by the apparent technical hitch of the sound cutting in and out.

But for much of the film, Kiarostami's subjects play themselves, reconstructing their original conversations. This gives a particularly fictional feel in the opening with the journalist Farazmand which leads us to expect an investigation story. The blatantly contrived exposition puts the subsequent trial sequences in relief; they derive a particular weight from extended close-ups of Sabzian explaining his motivations: a passion for art in general and Makhmalbaf's films in particular, and a new sense of self-respect gained from impersonating his hero.

Bringing us progressively closer to Sabzian in the court scenes, Kiarostami finally takes a step back, sabotaging his own soundtrack so as to acknowledge how indiscreet it would be to give us the full exchange of confidences between Sabzian and the real Makhmalbaf when they meet at last. For Kiarostami's structural gaming is not mere philosophical formalism, but very much an ethical matter. Questions of intrusion, respect, contractual trust are bound up in the camera's distance from or proximity to its subjects. (Kiarostami investigated these implications at length in the *mise en abîme* of his rural trilogy initiated by *Where Is the Friend's House?*)

Close-up is specifically a moral enquiry into the possible benefits and benevolent motives of imposture, and works overall as a process of redemption: Sabzian is given a chance to vindicate himself by fully acting out

his investment in the dream of filmmaking. Such a process is perhaps no longer imaginable in Western cinema, where the very terms ‘fiction’ and ‘dream’ bear inherent connotations of moral compromise. But the film comes across as a generous gesture on Kiarostami’s part since everyone gets what they want: Farazmand catches a local anecdote that really does turn into a big story; the Ahankhahs get their dose of cinema; and Sabzian gets at once to be ‘Makhmalbaf’ and to be himself in a way he was not otherwise able to be. In what may be a specifically Islamic inflexion on the idea of world as stage, Kiarostami proposes that all living is acting, and that actors have the right to be seen giving the best and truest performance they possibly can, even if truth has to pass through the detour of imposture.

Jonathan Romney, *Sight & Sound*, December 1997

CLOSE-UP (NAMAYEH NAZDIK)

Director: Abbas Kiarostami
Production Company: Institute for the Intellectual Development of Children and Young Adults
Executive Producer: Ali Reza Zarin
Production Manager: Hassan Karimi
Screenplay: Abbas Kiarostami
Director of Photography: Ali-Reza Zarrindast
Camera Operator: Ali Reza Mirzaei
Editor: Abbas Kiarostami
Make-up: Farima Zand-Pour
Title Design: A. Samakar
Sound: Mohammad Haghghi, Ahmad Asgari
Sound (in court): Jahangir Mirshekari, Hossain Zahedi
Sound Editor: Changiz Sayyad
Sound/Vision: Ahmad Kasra

Cast

Hossain Sabzian, Mohsen Makhmalbaf (*themselves*)
Abolfazl Ahankhah (*father of the family*)
Mehrdad Ahankhah, Manoochehr Ahankhah (*family sons*)
Mahrokh Ahankhah, Nayer Mohseni Zanoosi (*family daughters*)
Ahmad Reza Moayed Mohseni (*family friend*)
Hossain Farazmand (*the reporter*)
Hooshang Shamaei (*taxi driver*)
Mohammad Ali Barrati (*soldier*)
Davood Goodarzi (*sergeant*)
Haj Ali Reza Ahmadi (*judge*)
Hassan Komaili, Davood Mohabbat (*court recorders*)
Abbas Kiarostami (*himself*)

Iran 1989©
100 mins

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Fri 10 Mar 19:00; Sun 12 Mar 18:15

Beau travail

Fri 10 Mar 20:45; Mon 13 Mar 18:20 (+ intro by Catherine Wheatley, Reader in Film Studies, King’s College London)

In the Mood for Love (Fa yeung nin wah)

Fri 10 Mar 21:00; Sun 12 Mar 18:30

La Règle du jeu (The Rules of the Game)

Sat 11 Mar 18:05

Do the Right Thing

Sat 11 Mar 18:10

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Playtime

Sat 11 Mar 20:30

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Sat 11 Mar 20:45

Shoah

Sun 12 Mar 11:00

Late Spring (Banshun)

Sun 12 Mar 18:20

Apocalypse Now: Final Cut

Sun 12 Mar 20:00 BFI IMAX

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Mon 13 Mar 20:35

Taxi Driver

Mon 13 Mar 20:40

Seven Samurai (Shichinin no samurai)

Tue 14 Mar 18:40

Singin’ in the Rain

Tue 14 Mar 14:30

Mulholland Dr.

Tue 14 Mar 20:15

Tokyo Story (Tôkyô monogatari)

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Wed 15 Mar 18:10

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Wed 15 Mar 20:40 (with score)

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