

Real Life is More Important Than Cinema: An Interview with Abbas Kiarostami

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Real Life is More Important Than Cinema

An Interview with Abbas Kiarostami

by Pat Aufderheide



Iranian director Abbas Kiarostami had been the filmfest maven's trump card for some time when Akira Kurosawa gave him a world-class wink: "When Satyajit Ray died, I was quite depressed, but after watching Kiarostami's films, I thought God had found the right person to take his place."

Historically aware filmgoers might find the comparison faintly alarming. After all, at the time the great realist director Satyajit Ray won a special achievement Oscar in 1993, not a single one of his films was in distribution. But the comparison is esthetically apt. Ray, whose esthetic heroes included the Bengali philosopher Rabindranath Tagore and the French master of realism Jean Renoir, once defined his film-making goal (as quoted in Andrew Robinson's biography) as "to find out ways of investing a story with organic cohesion, and filling it with detailed and truthful observation of human behavior and relationships." Kiarostami, who sees himself in a centuries-old tradition of Persian artists and whose heroes also include Rossellini and Truffaut, has the same eye for telling detail, the same fascination with the thick integrity of experience, the same refusal to confine oneself to narrowly national cultures or ideologies.

And he may now have better luck with distribution than Ray had for many years. At least Kiarostami's latest film, *Through the Olive Trees*, Iran's entry for the 1994 Academy Awards, has become the first Iranian film to receive major distribution in the U.S., by Miramax.

While on its own *Through the Olive Trees* functions as an offbeat, whimsical love story, it is also the third in an improbable and accidental series of films about a mountainous corner of rural Iran. Within that sequence, it can be seen as developing and intensifying ongoing themes about image and reality, social inequities, and the role of the storyteller in society. Furthermore, it is only one facet of a career that has evidenced a delicate, ideological tightrope walk.

The series began with a classically neorealist 'little film,' *Where Is My Friend's House?* (1987). The plot revolves around a young boy's attempt to return a friend's school notebook before the teacher finds out it has been misplaced. In the second, *And Life Goes On* (1992), the director of the first film and his son return to the town, after an earthquake, to look for the stars of the first film. Although they never find them, they do stumble across touching, wry dramas of death and survival. *Through the Olive Trees* tells the story of a film crew making a key scene from *And Life Goes On*. Each film is documentary-like, based in real-life events, features nonactors, is unscripted, but is fully fictional.

While a new talent for most American viewers, Kiarostami is a veteran filmmaker with his roots in documentary. As Miriam Rosen noted in the introduction to her interview with him in *Cineaste* (Vol. XIX, Nos. 2-3), Kiarostami has been making films since 1969 through the Institute for the Intellectual Development of Children and Young Adults, which

he helped to found. Among his six features, he counts as his special favorite *Close-Up* (1990), which also reveals Kiarostami's obsession with the interpenetration of fact and fiction in daily life. The film, a combination of documentary and re-enactment, reconstructs a bizarre real-life scandal in which a nonentity deceived a dazzled middle-class family into believing he was a famous Iranian film director.

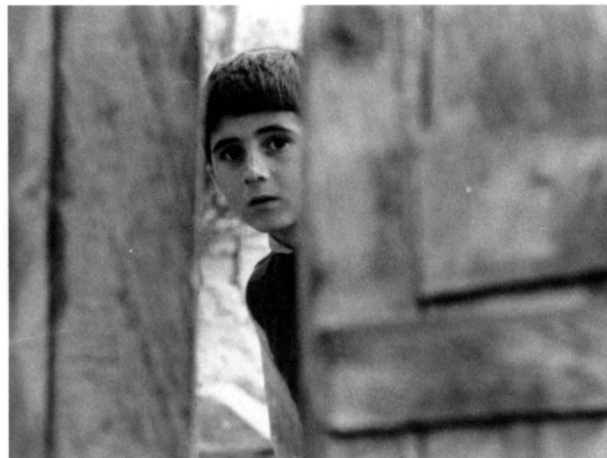
With his wryly angled vision and expansive interest in the intersection between individual ingenuity and social possibility, Kiarostami has weathered various ideological storms. He is exceedingly careful, in this interview as in others, to position himself outside familiar categories, and adeptly avoids direct commentary on the current regime.

This director's work comes out of a well-established film tradition and industry. The Iranian film industry, which last year produced about sixty films, has an entrenched national moviegoing public and reputation. The national cinema has changed character over time in ways that conform to trends worldwide. In the 1930s, filmmakers cranked out crowd-pleasing melodramas and musicals; in the 1960s, Iran's art films won international kudos; in the 1970s, with state support (and censorship), the industry produced dozens of films a year, some socially critical in a realist style, by directors who became the veterans of today's industry.

In revolutionary Iran filmmaking was at first under attack; films and theaters were burned and production shriveled. But now the audience is larger than it ever has been, and production has risen to former levels. That is largely due to the efforts of the Farabi Film Foundation, which, until 1992, when economic austerity forced cutbacks, had state funds and funded about a third of Iranian features. It continues to offer technical facilities and promotional help. The Foundation has script approval for films it aids, and still has absolute control of international distribution.

Farabi was formed in 1983 by a group of intellectuals who combined their concern for the endangered art of film with impeccable Muslim religious credentials. They argued that the revolutionary society needed to use and not suppress mass media; Khomeini enthusiastically supported them. Farabi's promotion of 'family' films, which would offer wholesome entertainment for easily offended religious filmgoers, has also provided a vehicle for creative artists to explore sensitive themes. The national audience for Iranian films is now at an all-time high, since a new viewership of religious families has been successfully recruited.

The cream of the resulting crop, which circulates internationally, suggests that a genre is emerging out of Farabi's delicate ideological brokering. It is realist, broadly humanist, and often features children. Films by artists such as Kiarostami, Mohsen Makhmalbaf, and Dariush Mehrjui seem almost to crusade for tolerance and an appreciation of human foibles, and they often feature social



Abbas Kiarostami's *Where is My Friend's House* (1987). (This and other scene stills courtesy of Museum of Fine Arts, Boston)

commentary, even including topics such as the Iran-Iraq war, women's social position, and poverty.

This kind of work, while not overtly political, nonetheless directly engages with the intellectual's and artist's challenge of shaping the social imagination. It may be this quality to which Jean-Luc Godard responded in a letter he wrote earlier this year to *The New York Film Critics Circle*. Regretfully declining to appear to receive a special award, he made a list of his life disappointments, including failure "to force Oscar people to reward Abbas Kiarostami instead of Kieslowski." Certainly the outlook of the dour and cynical Polish director contrasts sharply with the sober, low-level optimism of Kiarostami.

Kiarostami spoke with *Cineaste* in February 1995, during a retrospective of Iranian cinema at *The American Film Institute in Washington, D.C.*—Pat Aufderheide

Cineaste: Akira Kurosawa's likening you to Satyajit Ray places you in a group of people who—mostly in an earlier era—trusted that a film about 'the human condition' could speak for and to everyone, across borders. How did you come by the self-confidence that allows you this conviction?

Abbas Kiarostami: This is the first time anyone has ever spoken to me of self-confidence in my films. I have heard it in a different version, with a negative connotation. I have been told, "You underestimate the cinema," and "Who do you think you are to make a film like this and expect people to go to it?" Critics say this is not enough, that cinema should be like *Pulp Fiction*, with a strong story including sex and violence.

Someone told me, "If I want to see this kind of film, I can stay at home and look out my window. I can see this kind of thing anywhere. In the cinema I want to see drama, exaggeration." You know, special effects. People also accuse me of being naive.

Cineaste: What then makes you persist in the face of such objections? What kinds of filmmaking inspired the choices you make in your own films?

Kiarostami: I have hundreds of small sources of inspiration throughout the day, just watching people in daily routines. I think what happens in real life is more important than the cinema. My technique is similar to collage. I collect pieces and put them together. I don't invent material. I just watch and take it from the daily life of people around me.

Also, I'd rather look at the positive side of daily life than the negative, which makes me sleepless and nervous. So I look around and select the things that seem to me the best. I collect and put them together as a package and sell it. I'm not the only one who does this, you know. Florists do the same thing. They don't make the flowers, they just find the best arrangement.

People choose their own work. Some people go after beautiful things. And in cinema it's been made easy for us. We have this camera, which is very sensitive and registers all the details. All that's left is for us, the film directors, to decide when to register them. There's also a personal satisfaction in it—we are the first consumer of what we tell. Positive stories make me feel good.

Cineaste: Would you tell me about an image from daily life that connected, for you, with the kind of cinema you make?

Kiarostami: I can't put out of my mind an image that was formative for me—it haunts me. One snowy day I was going to work and saw a mother walking down the street, holding a small child, a baby really, wrapped up in her *chador*. The baby was clearly burning up with fever, and its eyes were nearly shut.

I happened to be walking behind them, and I was staring at the child and waving my hand, the way you do to little children. I

thought he couldn't even see me, his little eyes were so swollen up. And the mother didn't even know I was there. When we got to the intersection, I saw to my astonishment that the child, with great effort, pulled out his hand and waved back at me. Well, it shocked and touched me, and it also struck me that nobody was around to see this scene. And I thought, there should be a way to show this moment to people.

Then, this is what happened. That moment was repeated in the second part of the trilogy [*And Life Goes On*], with the child with the broken arm. I waved at him, and this scene happened again—he waved back.

I think what goes around, comes around; you get what you give. I enjoy so much watching good films with a human touch and emotions, and I don't get that kind of pleasure when I see violent movies.

Cineaste: The way you describe your work process sounds like the Italian neorealist screenwriter, Cesare Zavattini, when he said that the point of storytelling in the movies wasn't to invent but to discover.

Kiarostami: I can understand and empathize with that, although I don't recall ever hearing it. Of course, I began watching movies by watching Italian neorealism, and I do feel a kinship with that work. But it's more a question of congruence of taste than it is a decision to follow their example.

I think the most important and obvious reason why there is a similarity is the similarity between the present situation of Iran and of postwar Italy. Italy then was under the pressure of the postwar situation, and we have similar circumstances.

Another similarity that may provoke parallels is that I don't adapt from literature or mythology. I get my stories from daily life, like they did. I also don't have big, expensive sets and elaborate production values and special effects. My films are low budget.

Cineaste: Italy's commercial film industry had been quite developed before the war, of course.

Kiarostami: And so was Iran's. Iran still has a flourishing commercial film industry. About sixty feature films were made last year, and about eighty-five the year

before that, with many more shorts. We have a vigorous entertainment industry. But my style is distinctive within it—I'm not part of a trend that way.

Cineaste: As well, the Italian neorealists tended to have leftist sympathies or commitments and goals for their films. Now, I am aware that you have been extremely careful in all interviews to avoid discussion of politics...

Kiarostami: No, no, that's not true. Well, I'm not political in the sense of belonging to any political party or leading a revolutionary charge, wanting to overthrow anyone. I don't work for anyone. But if you mean by political that you talk about today's human problems, then for sure my work is political and even strongly so.

Through the Olive Trees carefully explores the personal problems of [its protagonist] Hossein, which are grounded in real social problems. He belongs to today's Iran. He's illiterate. He wants to get married, and he doesn't want his children to be poor and illiterate. He expresses these problems very simply, but they're very real.

When you get involved in someone else's suffering, and you try to convey it so that other people can feel it and understand, then this is political. When you're talking about Hossein, that cannot be far from politics, because you're showing something about social issues that politics must deal with.

Cineaste: So if you had to describe what you want to say in *Through the Olive Trees*...

Kiarostami: It would be that this is a statement for decency, for



Hossein (Hossein Rezai) becomes infatuated with a local girl, who completely ignores him, in Kiarostami's *Through the Olive Trees*.

humanity. I want to let viewers see into the real lives we lead.

Cineaste: *In the U.S. our images of Iran are colored by the barrage of negative news coverage. Recent films from Iran often seem calculatedly apolitical. Is that a consequence of censorship or intimidation?*

Kiarostami: You know, your view of Iran is skewed inevitably and understandably by the press coverage you get. We don't have heavy political confrontations and discussion every day. When you hear bad news about Iran in the morning, you carry that image with you all day. We hear the news at seven in the morning and don't think about it again until the evening news. We're busy with our lives, whether it's going to rain, and so on. Life in Iran is not as gloomy as you think.

Cineaste: *You've been criticized for using Western classical music in your films.*

Kiarostami: Yes, and what I say is that classical music belongs to the world. It's like the sky, and everyone can partake of it. My aim is to create unity between worlds that are usually apart. It is the duty of the police and immigration officers to create borders, and it is the duty of artists to lessen or eliminate them.

Cineaste: *How does the Farabi Film Foundation work?*

Kiarostami: The Farabi Film Foundation was established after the revolution by religious people who had a passion for film. They were afraid that without support in a tough economic situation, the cinema would die. Even now, with the trade embargo, we pay fifty times the normal price for a reel of film.

It is a private foundation but receives help from the government, which approved it because it trusted the religious people who started it. If the Foundation approves your script, they provide labs and equipment on a deferred payment basis. There are other places to get labs and equipment, but you would have to pay cash. So they're very important. I get less financial help than other filmmakers, because I don't need as much, but the Foundation helps me and others with international distribution, and that's the really essential help. No film is distributed overseas without the imprimatur of the Foundation.

They were crucial at the beginning of the revolution. Now they are under pressure by religious radicals. The radicals haven't taken it over, but they have slowed it down, and in 1992 the government cut its subsidy to filmmakers.

Cineaste: *Do filmmakers avoid political subjects in order to get the support of the Foundation?*

Kiarostami: No, I don't believe that's the case. I think that government financing makes it possible for filmmakers not to have to worry about the box office, or about using violence to attract crowds. I think that's why the result is better, too.

Cineaste: *The Iranian films we see in the U.S. at festivals seem almost pointedly humanistic. Is it fair to read these as statements by the artists not only for mutual awareness and tolerance but also against dogmatism and fundamentalism in Iran?*

Kiarostami: I think that's a fair conclusion to draw, but it is yours. You can't praise me and then ask me to endorse your praise.

Cineaste: *Why do so many Iranian films we see feature young children, especially young boys?*

Kiarostami: Well, we have mediocre films that are about grownups, but you don't see them here. They're not distributed internationally. I would say that about ten percent of the films made are any good, and most of those are about kids.

Cineaste: *Your films also feature children.*

Kiarostami: I love children but I don't use them as a means to an end.

Cineaste: *Are there also violent action films produced in Iran?*

Kiarostami: Yes, although they're not funded by the Foundation. They are very popular at the box office. There's violence, but no sex.

Cineaste: *Your films are superbly produced. How do you get such excellent technical support?*

Kiarostami: My crews are always in love with cinema. Sometimes they have experience on commercial films. On my last film I had a superb cameraman and soundman, and we had enough time to do the work.

Cineaste: *Have your films been distributed in the Middle East and Asia?*

Kiarostami: Primarily it is the West that has been interested in Iranian films. I believe there has been some interest in the Pacific Rim, for instance Taiwan. But I think there is an affinity in the West for our films.

Cineaste: *The domestic audience for Iranian films has grown impressively since the revolution.*

Kiarostami: Yes, thanks mostly to the work of the Foundation. Before the revolution, religious people didn't go to the movies because they didn't feel safe there. They now can go to see movies that don't have sex and violence in them, as much as before, and they can relax. They are just discovering the attraction of the cinema.

Consider the scene in *Close-up* when the camera goes to court. Well, it was the love of cinema that permitted it. The *mullah* in charge of the court loved cinema and particularly the films of Mohsen Makhmalbaf.

Cineaste: *In Through the Olive Trees, how much of the central story—Hossein's tangled love affair with the girl—was true?*

Kiarostami: The reality was totally different from what you see. Furthermore, the last sequence transformed during the last twenty days. It originally ended with them walking away. At the last moment I decided to make the ending more upbeat, idealistic, and more in harmony with the scenery.

Cineaste: *I think the trilogy really shows, as it develops, that in small towns everyone is always acting, because the world there is very small and you have to play several*

roles.

Kiarostami: Yes, they were good actors. In the next film, everyone plays a role opposite to his character!

Cineaste: *But doesn't working with nonactors create special problems?*

Kiarostami: One big issue for us was that we realized we were not responsible for the rest of their lives. We were just making one film. We do have an emotional responsibility to them, not to make them feel like celebrities and stars, because we weren't promising them a career in film. We kept them as much as possible within their own environment, and didn't emphasize the acting. Hossein, for example, worked as a gofer, he worked in construction, and he worked in front of the camera.

Working there has changed me, though. I have worked for eight years in this area, and I feel so close to the people and the landscape that I would like to make the rest of my films there.

Cineaste: *Through the Olive Trees did not receive an Academy Award nomination.*

Kiarostami: I think that's a direct result of poor distribution. I am not happy with Miramax, because they did not do any decent publicity on the film. This is a small movie, a low budget movie, but it's not a pathetic movie, and it did not deserve the treatment they gave it. They decided not to distribute it nationally before the nominations. Perhaps the problem is Disney [which owns Miramax—PA]. Big distributors don't pay attention to small films. They were probably too busy with *Pulp Fiction*. ■



Film crew catering, Iranian-style: A scene from Abbas Kiarostami's "Best Foreign Film" Oscar nominee, *Through the Olive Trees*.