



Realism, Morality and Care in *Where Is the Friend's House?* (Abbas Kiarostami, 1987)

👤 Sandra E. Lim 🕒 July 2020 📁 CTEQ Annotations on Film 📖 Issue 95

Kahne-ye doust kodjast? (*Where is the Friend's House?*, 1987), is the first of three interrelated films in Abbas Kiarostami's "Koker trilogy", named after the northern Iranian village where the films are set. The film draws its title from a mystical poem by the venerated Iranian poet and painter Sohrab Sephehri (1928–1980), and echoes the equivocal journey undertaken in the poem.¹ In doing so, *Where Is the Friend's House?* also reveals a Piagetian universe in which children are seen to navigate the rules and authority of adults, out of a sense of obedience and fear of punishment. Yet, Kiarostami also constitutes the children of *Where is the Friend's House?* with an overriding sense of morality, as evidenced in the figure of eight-year-old Ahmad (Babak Ahmadpour), who mistakenly takes his friend Mohammad Reza Nematzadeh's (Ahmed Ahmadpour) notebook home after school one day. The revelation of this mistake subsequently fuels the imperative to save his friend from the fate of the overly strict teacher's (Kheda Barech Defai) harsh punishment, setting him in motion on an obstacle-laden journey to return the notebook, zigzagging through landscapes, maze-like alleyways and a host of unhelpful people along the way.

While the hero's journey is a simple premise, Kiarostami's style of realism is characterized by an economy of form, which is deceptively simple — especially in the structuring device of asking for directions, the answers to which are never straightforward. In this way, Kiarostami asks the viewer to interact with the narrative, to pick up and weave its threads. For example, near the beginning of his search Ahmed comes upon a classmate named Morteza, who he enlists for directions and help. Earlier in the day, the boy was scolded for being under a desk and not paying attention, and when the teacher asked why, the boy simply replied that his back hurt. The character is soon forgotten until Ahmed encounters his classmate again in Poshteh, the village where his friend is said to live. Morteza is seen retrieving heavy containers laden with milk, and the puzzle of why his back hurt is immediately apparent. Although Morteza cannot accompany Ahmed, as the milk must be tended to, he offers help in the form of unconventional directions to Nematzadeh's cousin's neighbourhood: "...in Khanevar, up the hill, there's a staircase in front and a blue door right by a bridge." Through this exchange, we also infer about the lives of the children, and the difficulty of doing homework — a subject picked up in Kiarostami's subsequent documentary, *Homework* (1989).

In fact, the Iranian film scholar Hamid Naficy attributes Kiarostami's idiosyncratic style of realism to a confluence of personal, historical/political and institutional factors.² For example, the personal observations of Kiarostami's son Ahmad reveal that his father's method of realism was not informed by knowledge of film or copying other directors, but instead by everyday life, and in the case of *Where is the Friend's House?* through his own interactions with his young son Bahman. Kiarostami also developed a style of non-acting, in which he enlisted children from the village of Koker to improvise and react to real situations "as a living thing." As Ahmad Kiarostami details, the scene where Nematzadeh gets into trouble for not doing his homework was a result of the boys being given a photograph, which was placed in Nematzadeh's notebook, and told that the teacher would be very mad if he found it. When class begins and the teacher starts checking homework, Nematzadeh (or perhaps Ahmed, the boy who plays him), breaks down into tears under the real-life pressure of failing to produce his homework for grading, having to conceal the photograph that is hidden within the notebook.³ In this way, Kiarostami's style of realism also moves between documentary and fiction.

While *Where is the Friend's House?* is not an overtly political film, it was made during Kiarostami's early- to mid-career, spanning the turmoil of two political regimes: the rule of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi (1919–1980), and the Iranian revolution of 1979, which brought the Shia Islamic cleric Ayatollah Khomeini (1902–1989) into power. Under the secular monarchist and authoritarian rule of the Shah, and the Westernization of Iranian culture, Kiarostami got a start in commercial art and advertising, becoming known for his "slick and stylish" TV commercial productions.⁴ It was in advertising, the Iranian film scholar Hamid Naficy observes, that Kiarostami acquired "brevity and precision of expression."⁵

Moreover, the Iranian filmmaker Mehrnaz Saeed-Vafa remembers first-hand that, while many of his contemporaries went into exile during 70s and 80s, Kiarostami stayed and "kept a low profile."⁶ During this period, Kiarostami helped set up and establish the government film production unit known as the Centre for the Intellectual Development of Children and Youths, or Kanun. The development of Kanun was a rich period of output in Kiarostami's career. As Rosenbaum observes, Kanun became a breeding ground and film school for experimental filmmakers. In this context, Kiarostami helped train a new generation of artists, both women and men, and it was also during this time that Kiarostami developed a pedagogical style of filmmaking around the subject of children, as epitomized in *Where is the Friend's House?*, which promoted didactic messages such as loyalty and "cooperation over conflict" — and in the case of *Where is the Friend's House?*, the difficulty of doing the right thing.⁷

According to Naficy, Kiarostami worked in the film unit for more than two decades as a "civil servant" and was not particularly well regarded by his more politically charged contemporaries, who condemned his output as politically "compromised," in working under the aegis of the Islamic regime. Nevertheless, Naficy asserts that the films of this period offered artful and implicit "critiques of Iranian culture and society."⁸ Adding to this, *Where is the Friend's House?* can also be regarded as a simple antidote to authoritarian rule, in promoting the practice of morality and care towards and for one another.

...

***Kahne-ye doust kodjast?* (*Where is the Friend's House?*, 1987 Iran 83 mins)**

Prod. Co: Janus Films and The Institute for the Intellectual Development of Children **Prod:** Ali Reza Zarrin **Dir:** Abbas Kiarostami **Scr:** Abbas Kiarostami **Phot:** Farhad Saba **Mus:** Amine Allah Hessine **Ed:** Abbas Kiarostami **Snd Ed:** Changiz Sayad **Snd Rec:** Jahangir Mirshekari, Asghas Shahverdi, Behrouz Moavenian **Art dep:** Reza Nami **Cos:** Hassan Zahidi **Prod Ass:** Nasser Zeraati

Cast: Babak Ahmadpour, Ahmad Ahmadpour, Kheda Barech Defai, Iran Outari, Ait Ansari, Biman Mouafi

Endnotes:

- Jonathan Rosenbaum & Mehrnaz Saeed-Vafa, "A Dialogue Between the Authors" in *Contemporary Film Directors: Abbas Kiarostami*, second expanded edition, ed. James Naremore, Justus Nieland and Jennifer Fay (Urbana: University of Illinois Press), p. 90. ↩
- Hamid Naficy, "All Certainties Melt into Thin Air: Art-House Cinema, a Postal Cinema," in *A Social History of Iranian Cinema, Volume 4* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2012), p. 178. ↩
- The Criterion Collection, "Ahmad Kiarostami," *Through the Olive Trees*, Disc 3, DVD. Directed by Abbas Kiarostami, 1994 (New York: Criterion Collection, 2018). ↩
- Rosenbaum, *Abbas Kiarostami*, p. 101. ↩
- Hamid Naficy, "All Certainties Melt into Thin Air: Art-House Cinema, a Postal Cinema," in *A Social History of Iranian Cinema, Vol. 4: The Globalizing Era, 1984–2010*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), p. 179. ↩
- Mehrnaz Saeed-Vafa, "Abbas Kiarostami" in *Contemporary Film Directors: Abbas Kiarostami*, second expanded edition, ed. James Naremore, Justus Nieland and Jennifer Fay (Urbana: University of Illinois Press), 47. ↩
- Rosenbaum, *Abbas Kiarostami*, pp. 8–10. ↩
- Naficy, p. 179. ↩

SHARE ON:



"Reality Is Always Magic": *The Experience*
(Abbas Kiarostami, 1973)



Lying About *Homework* (Abbas Kiarostami,
1989)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sandra E. Lim

Sandra E. Lim currently lectures on Politics and Film at Ryerson University in Toronto, Canada. She holds a PhD in Art and Design for the Moving Image, from the University of Brighton in the UK. Her writing on films and art can be found in the journals *Screenworks* and *Reconstruction*. Additionally, her moving image work is distributed by the Canadian Filmmakers Distribution Centre (CFMDC) Toronto.

RELATED POSTS

'YOU KNEW, OF COURSE, HE WAS A HOMOSEXUAL': DIRK BOGARDE IN *VICTIM* (BASIL DEARDEN, 1961)

👤 Joanna Di Mattia 🕒 April 2021

SERGEI EISENSTEIN

👤 Dan Shaw 🕒 February 2004

Senses of Cinema

Established in Melbourne (Australia) in 1999, *Senses of Cinema* is one of the first online film journals of its kind and has set the standard for professional, high quality film-related content on the Internet.

Senses of Cinema was founded on stolen lands. We acknowledge the sovereignty of the Wurundjeri and Boon Wurrung people of the Kulin nation and support all Aboriginal people on their paths to self-determination.

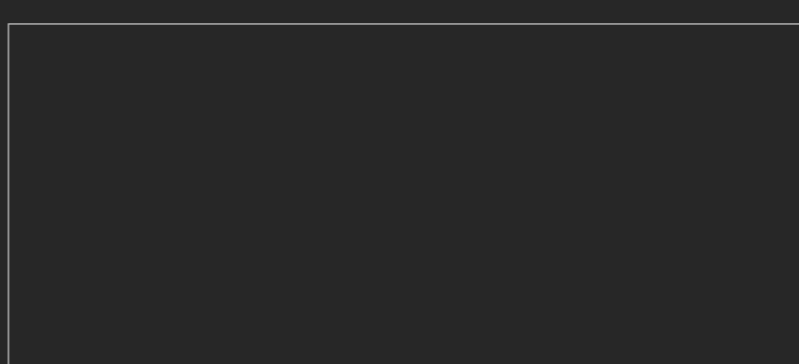
© Senses of Cinema 2019

STAFF MEMBERS

Editors:

César Albarrán-Torres • Amanda Barbour • Tara Judah • Abel Muñoz-Hénonin • Fiona Villella

CONTRIBUTING PARTNER



DONATE TO SENSES

[Click here](#) to make a donation. If you are an Australian resident, any donations over \$2 are tax deductible.

SEARCH

