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An 'Islamic' reading of Kiarostami's *Close-up*

ARCHIVES > ONE > | REVIEW | BY KAZ RAHMAN



Close-Up (1990) by the internationally renowned Iranian director Abbas Kiarostami is a seminal work that has been recognized by prominent film critics in the U.S. and Europe as exceptional in its subject matter, characterization and style. It is interesting to examine the varying, sometimes banal and sometimes inaccurate conclusions about the film. First is the ever-present association with politics under which most Iranian films are placed to some extent by critics in the West. As Godfrey Cheshire reports,

'Mr. Kiarostami's films don't so much avoid political concerns as subsume them in broader investigations, often concerning the ways obsession, compassion and art intertwine...' (Cheshire, *New York Times*)

Second is the label 'Iranian Neo-Realism' to describe *Close-Up* and other Iranian films and 'Iranian New-Wave' to describe its 'auteurs'. Mr. Cheshire goes so far as to sketch out an analogy of Francois Truffaut and Jean-Luc Godard as easier-to-understand 'celebrity' replacements for Makhmalbaf and Kiarostami for readers pruned on 60's European 'Avante-Garde' films.

'... Paris, 1963. One day on a bus a woman strikes up a conversation with a young man, asking about the book he is reading. The young man shyly reveals that he is, in fact, the book's author the noted filmmaker Francois Truffaut. One conversational thing leads to another and soon enough the man has been welcomed into the woman's upper-middle-class household and a family that reveres the cinema. The self-described Truffaut embraces that reverence, promises to involve the family in the next film, and holds rehearsals; he also borrows money he does not return. Eventually, the ruse fails. The young man, a poor nobody, is arrested and scheduled for trial. At this point enter (the real) Jean-Luc Godard, who wins permission to bring his cameras into the courtroom and even re-enacts certain scenes, involving in his docudrama the family, the young man, and (the real) Truffaut...' (Cheshire, *Film Comment* April '93, p.38)

A very tight summary of *Close-Up* but is the analogy stretched to this extreme really necessary? American critic Jonathan Rosenbaum takes a cynical angle in discussing *Close-Up* and the idea of representation (or misrepresentation).

'Beginning with one lie, Sabzian's impersonation, Kiarostami proceeded to generate several other lies- or at best half-truths- by getting all of the people to impersonate themselves... the reporter, Sabzian and Kiarostami are playing three different versions of the same game, each capitalizing on the awe and intimidation ordinary people feel about movies; by the time the film is over, every participant...has agreed to become an active part of the boondoggle.' (Perez, p.182)

Gilberto Perez theorizes about Western ideas of realism and Modernism being opposite and how contrary to this notion they are in fact two sides of the same coin. He deconstructs *Close-Up* in a sometimes interesting but often endlessly clinical way.

'...in Kiarostami's hands that aerosol can becomes remarkably expressive. It becomes expressive not so much within the story as in what it tells about the telling of the story, as a representation of the means of representation: expressive in the characteristic manner of Modernism. The detail of naturalism is treated with the self-consciousness of Modernism and turned into a metaphor for the means of Art...' (Perez, p.176)

This analytical treatment of *Close-Up* with every gesture producing symbolism is again off the mark. As Kiarostami himself says,

'...that nothingness I wanted to include in my film. Some places in a movie there should be nothing happening, like in *Close-Up*, where somebody kicks a can (in the street). But I needed that. I needed that "nothing" there.' (Lopate, p.38)

Finally even the greatest of praise can be off the mark; the great German filmmaker Werner Herzog is often quoted as calling *Close-Up*,

'The greatest documentary about filmmaking I have ever seen.' (Cheshire, *Film Comment*, July/Aug. '96, p.42)

But what if it's not a documentary about filmmaking but instead something much deeper? A work of 'fiction' which continues the Islamic tradition of Persian and Sufi Poets probing the questions of beauty, art, life and death.

Placing *Close-Up* beside the aesthetic protocols of the classical Hollywood style concerning subject matter, narrative, characterization, style and ideology may seem like comparing apples and oranges- however it is useful in both distancing the work from the predictable associations with French and Italian films from the 60's and in discovering other more authentic sources the film has been informed by.

The subject matter for *Close-Up* begins with a real incident Kiarostami read about - a man named Sabzian is arrested for impersonating director Moshen Makhmalbaf and gaining access to the home of a bourgeois family in Tehran. This in itself is not entirely incompatible with the classical Hollywood style. The story begins with a reporter walking out of Police Headquarters and into a cab with two policemen. The audience quickly learns the situation - the reporter recounts to the cab driver the impersonation and fraud (the cab driver doesn't know who Makhmalbaf is) and then the conversation switches to the policemen who turn out to be two non-threatening young men who are presumably doing their military service. The reporter stresses the importance of 'the story' to be revealed and the cab pulls up to the house - from here however the audience remains outside the 'action'- the reporter goes in, comes out, and then the two 'policemen' go in and come out with the arrested. But what would be the 'important' subject matter in the classical Hollywood style is quickly toyed with and discarded for seemingly less significant things. The cab driver watches an airplane float above the sky (we learned earlier that he was in the airforce) and then picks out some flowers which sets a can loose- rolling down the street. The viewer watches the can and then follows the reporter as he searches for a tape recorder - the cab long-gone and filled with what the audience believes is the important 'story' the reporter described. The opening credits roll as an image of the article 'Bogus Makhmalbaf Arrested' hits the press.

The opening sequence does in some ways follow the classical narrative of setting up the situation and story - but in other ways it diverges greatly. The reporter who at the beginning seems to be taking the audience into the story abruptly disappears and has little of consequence to add for the rest of the film. The poetic use of seemingly minor concerns (the plane, the search for a tape recorder, an exchange of money) and the flowers are part of the subject matter and will prove more important than the rest of the characters in this sequence except for Sabzian whom we barely see. There are similarities to the work of the 12th Century Persian Poet Sa 'di who recounted the experiences of travel and life and usually gave the mundane priority while understating the dramatic. (Levy, p.116-126)

...Without any doubt when he tugged at the chord,
the idol would raise both hands in devotion.
Abashed stood the Brahman at seeing me thus;
disclosure brought shame on all happenings there.
He fled, but I followed close on his heels and headlong I threw him down into a well.
-Sa 'di (Levy, p.122)

Sa 'di (recounting travels in India) is both humorous and understated as he justifies the 'crime'- it was the Priest's life or his. Sa 'di also gives the modern cinema-goer insight into the flirtations with 'Documentary' Kiarostami stamps on *Close-Up*. The major portion of the film is the actual trial which immediately separates it from classical narrative film where actual 'footage' would never embody the main portion of the film. But to call the film a documentary is incorrect. Kiarostami is interested in telling a story as well as creating a poem and the actual trial is gritty visually and endlessly interesting orally- which gives the film a life of its own. Persian Miniature paintings often documented and retold stories, events, happenings with an accompanying text- images and figures often spilling out of borders and pages in a way which was self-reflexive and simultaneously beautiful - more than just a formal 'device'. *Close-Up* uses film along the same lines- the 'real' footage and Kiarostami and his crew making themselves apparent throughout the film- of course a certain level of artistic sophistication is required on the part of the viewer of the Miniature painting (who see figures climbing out of a 'frame' and onto words) and *Close-Up* requires the same.

The narrative can be broken down into three parts like a classical film. The first part continues past the opening credits to Kiarostami and crew visiting Sabzian in prison and then going to the judge and various authorities to get permission to film the trial. The second part embodies the trial and various 're-enactments' of the meeting on the bus and later the suspicious father and son waiting for the police as Sabzian is offered an omelet. The structure is similar to classical film structures when shooting a trial- flashback to how it happened- the difference being the trial is real and the actors (who are all visible as spectators at the trial) are playing themselves in these 're-enactments'. This middle part also takes on a life of its own and virtually everything which is said at the trial is left intact- this changes the pace of the film. The great 12th century Persian poet Farid ud-Din Attar wrote three major mystical mathnavis (a kind of long poem- often the size of a Western novel)- *The Conference of the Birds*, *The Book of Saints* and *The Book of Travail*.

'...(they) consist of a framework poem that carries a story, with anecdotes inserted at frequent intervals to illustrate points that arise...these anecdotes in themselves make a storehouse of Persian folklore, ranging from the grim to the comic, with any number of gradations in between but all directed towards conveying a moral.' (Levy, p.98)

The 'trial' seems to work in much the same way. The characterization in *Close-Up* is markedly different from the Hollywood style where actors and actresses are big celebrities and often bring a persona to the marketing of the movie. In fact the first remarkable (and refreshing) aspect to *Close-Up* is the dominant place directors are given as artists and 'celebrities' in Iranian society. In contrast the actors are all people involved in the real story that happened and play themselves. Sabzian, of course, is the star of the film playing Makhmalbaf as well as performing like a philosophical poet at the trial. As Kiarostami notes:

'The reason you like this character is because he's an artist. That's why he can make up beautiful lies. And I like his lies better than the truth that the others have, because his lies reflect his inner reality better than the superficial truth that the other characters express...' (Lopate, p.39)

Stylistically *Close-Up* is just that- the trial is essentially a close-up of Sabzian. Kiarostami explains the technical aspects of the zoom lens to Sabzian and then the audience sees his head and members of the family such as the eldest son and the mother in the background. It is gritty and direct and sets up a contrast with the third and final part of the film. Sabzian is free and Kiarostami arranges the real Makhmalbaf to meet him. Sabzian had earlier played the part of Makhmalbaf and convinced the family of his idea for a film - two men on a motorbike, one loses his wallet- the other lends him money and they become friends. This turns into a kind of 'reality' when Makhmalbaf picks Sabzian up on his motorcycle, they stop for flowers (Makhmalbaf's money) and they ride back to the infamous house. Kiarostami shoots this all in long-shot and the visuals are bright and beautiful after the courtroom - the microphone on Makhmalbaf goes in and out, the film crew speaks out-loud of the technical problems and finally serene music (for the first time) can be heard in what is a visually stunning ending. All of these elements differ drastically from the classical narrative film where there is a mix of shots (long, medium and close), clear audio and usually music interspersed regularly throughout - and of course nary a trace of 'the crew'.

In terms of Ideology the film continues the Islamic tradition of Poets exploring both beauty and tougher philosophical questions about life. The classical Hollywood narrative film reflects the general mainstream culture (and often propagates this) of America in any given period; in contrast *Close-Up* offers little in the way of politics or cultural propaganda. The trial itself is simply part of 'Islamic Law' (something which is 1400 years old - yet still compatible with contemporary notions of Democracy) and something which is also part of 'Iranian Law'.

'Mr. Kiarostami proceeds the way the Greek philosophers like Heraclitus do, or Chinese figures like Laotzu, or Japanese Zen poets like Basho- the poetry is completely linked with the philosophy.' A French distributor who handles Kiarostami's work (Cheshire, *NY Times*)

Again the praise is off the mark and Kiarostami and *Close-Up* proceed the way Islamic and Sufi artists and Poets like Sa 'di and Farid ud Din Attar proceed. Kiarostami notes:

'(my films) without doubt have very deep roots in the history of Persian culture. Where else could they have their source? I also understand why the West finds this politically problematical...' (Hamid, p.22)

Whereas the classical Hollywood film sources age-old Western cultural ideas, *Close-Up* comes from Islamic and Persian sources.

'What happened in *Close-Up* reminds me of one of our Poets. He was a homeless guy with old, torn clothing. He was just passing by a religious school and he heard some people reciting from the Koran, in a beautiful voice. So he stood there listening for awhile, and then he was so fascinated that he banged on the door. They opened the door and he told them he had really enjoyed their recitation. "How did you learn to sing so beautifully?" When they looked at him they thought this guy's nobody, so they tried to kid him saying "It's not a problem, all we did was go over there to that icy pool, we broke the ice and dove in. When we reemerged, we could recite like that." He actually followed what they told him and dove into the water, and when he came out they were worried that he was going to catch a cold or die. As they were drying him off, he said, "Okay, now you can bring me the Koran." He started reciting just as beautifully as they had. This is such a wonderful story, and I think something like that happened in this movie, in the sense that everybody got what he wanted.' - Kiarostami (Lopate, p.39)

FOOTNOTES

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