

JANUS FILMS PRESENTS

CLOSE-UP



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Director: Abbas Kiarostami

Country: Iran

Year: 1990

Run time: 97 minutes

Color / 1.37 / Mono

JANUS FILMS

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SYNOPSIS

Internationally revered Iranian filmmaker Abbas Kiarostami has created some of the most inventive and transcendent cinema of the last thirty years, and *Close-Up* is his most radical, brilliant work. This fiction-documentary hybrid uses a real-life sensational event—a young man arrested on charges that he fraudulently impersonated well-known filmmaker Mohsen Makhmalbaf—as the basis for a stunning, multi-layered investigation into movies, identity, artistic creation, and life itself. With its universal themes and fascinating narrative knots, *Close-Up* continues to resonate with viewers around the world.

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ABBAS KIAROSTAMI on *CLOSE-UP* (2009)

Interviewed by Tarik Benbrahim for the Criterion Collection

Close-Up was a film that I could say I didn't really make. It wasn't my doing. Because if the definition of director is someone who controls everything, fortunately or unfortunately, I didn't have any control over this film from the start. The elements were not within my control, behind the scenes or in front of the camera.

The story is that I wanted to make a movie for children, about children, about pocket money - money they usually get from their parents. Everything was ready for us to go to a school and start filming on a Saturday morning. I remember that I'd read an article in the newspaper that Thursday, an interview with someone who had impersonated a filmmaker. It was a very short story - one or two columns. But I was deeply affected by it and became very curious about it. Because at the end, this man said, "I'm like a piece of meat in the butcher shop" - meaning, "You've hung me up on a hook and there's nothing I can do."

This story really had me preoccupied, so I called my producer that Friday afternoon and told him I'd found an issue that had greatly affected me. "If possible, let's postpone the production of *Pocket Money*. I'll pay a visit and see what I can gather in this regard." And since we have a good relationship, they said to go ahead, and instead of taking the camera and crew to the school to shoot, we went to see Hossein Sabzian in prison. The encounter I had in the jail, which is part of the movie, is real. We set up a camera behind the window of the cell, and I went inside and spoke with him. That's why the sound isn't very good. We couldn't control everything. And that was the start of the film.

I didn't know what path the film would take. I just went step by step. I never thought this would be a subject involving other actors. The thing that pushed me to move forward with the story was my curiosity about Hossein Sabzian's personality, and also the family that was conned by Sabzian. Both were very intriguing for me. And one very important thing was the fact that they agreed to re-enact the story in front of the camera.

I tried to remain faithful to the reality of the scenes as much as possible, considering that each of them had a different interpretation. Sabzian told one version of the story, the Ahankhah family told another, and much of the time their versions didn't match. For example, they'd say, "We were sitting on this couch, in this room, and I followed him to the door." The other would say, "He never followed me to the door." Something very insignificant. But what was important was for me to try to grasp the structure of the story of their relationship.

I think even part of that reality is worth watching, a reality that I knew, after reading about it in the paper, couldn't have been a scam. Because they weren't

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the type to be scammed. A retired sergeant, a very cultured family, with nothing that would lend itself to a scam. And according to Sabzian himself, he was not the type to scam anyone. There was no scheming, no briefcase. Ultimately this case was nothing like a scam, and that's why I thought it would be a good basis for a film, in order to gain psychological proximity to these characters and understand what went on in Hossein Sabzian's head.

In my opinion, he was at his best in places where he had to talk about himself, especially in the courtroom, because there were cameras in the courtroom, along with a prosecutor, and an audience. That's where he would express things about himself, which would be followed by a blink of an eyelid. His anxieties, his darting eyes, the effects of malnutrition - all completely convincing. When he'd say "I had nothing to do. I thought I'd go to Mr. Ahankhah's house. Perhaps I could get a bite to eat," it was very convincing because you could tell from his complexion he wasn't getting enough to eat, among other things.

As for the courtroom, I can say that it was both real and a setup. The prosecutor was real, the atmosphere was real. The only setup was our presence and the camera. The deal we'd made that day with the prosecutor was that he'd be in charge of the courtroom, and I'd ask Hossein Sabzian any question that came to my mind. So we actually both ran the courtroom.

Sabzian was one of the most difficult people to work with. There was no way for me to get information from him so I could find a solution or a better relationship, or find a way to work with him. He was very stubborn, very suspicious and distrustful. At first this really bothered me, but when you look at his life, you see that things never really worked out for him. He had unrealistic dreams that would prevent him from trusting anyone. And he didn't trust us either. I can't recall for sure, but I can say that during my filmmaking career, Hossein Sabzian was the one who caused me the most grief during the 40 days of shooting.

We'd work during the day, and I'd write at night, and the next day, much of what I'd planned was unusable, because both Sabzian and the family would say "We won't say this. We won't do that. That's not how it happened." And they'd say things, some of which I think they made up, because they always imagined this film to be a continuation of their trial. And though they were diametrically opposed, there were times when they were exactly the same. Neither was living in reality, and both were looking for a dream as a pretext to spend a little time with, that is to say, so they could distance themselves a bit from the realities in Iran after the revolution and thus tolerate their bitterness a little better.

When we were going to enter the Ahankhah residence on the very first day of filming, the guys had arrived early in the morning and taken the camera, cables, rails, and all inside. Hossein Sabzian and I had stayed outside. It was time for us

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to go in and start filming when Sabzian started crying. He said, "I can't go inside. I came to this house as a different character. I came respectably. I came to this house as a filmmaker. How can I come back now? I lied to them, and I'm ashamed of it. I can't work with them." It was very difficult to convince him. I said to him, "No, you didn't lie. You told a truth that is beyond reality. You told them you're a filmmaker, so you didn't lie. You said that one day you'd bring your crew to make a film here. Well, we're your crew."

When Sabzian was still in prison, we decided Makhmalbaf would go there and create a scene where they would see each other quite suddenly, without prior agreement. The day Makhmalbaf was to come, he couldn't make it, and so I went to Sabzian and asked him if he could stay in prison one more day. He said he'd stay, but when Makhmalbaf came on his motorcycle, he didn't appear. Finally, I yelled "Cut!" and we asked, "Where's Mr. Sabzian? Why doesn't he come out?" They said, "We released him last night. He said, 'I'm not staying any longer. I'm not a prisoner anymore, so it's against the law to keep me here. You must now that'. We realized this man might get us into trouble."

Then we saw Sabzian coming toward us from the other direction. We set the scene up again, and these two met, and as you saw, Sabzian reacted quite emotionally. He was crying. He was like a person who'd embraced his idol. He could perceive nothing else. We'd been worried he might see the camera, but he didn't see a thing.

But we had another kind of problem, in that the microphone was in Mohsen Makhmalbaf's control, and he was unfortunately just spouting lines that would greatly reduce the emotion of our scene. Maybe it was because he couldn't see Sabzian. He was on the motorcycle with his own headset and his own voice. He would hear the echo of his own voice and didn't notice that a man had actually embraced him, and so he was only talking about himself. So when we saw all the rushes, we realized we couldn't keep even one line in the film. I kept the film up to where he says "Makh-" and erased the rest. Believe it or not, later on I heard many directors, even outside Iran, saying they were jealous of this incident. I should thank Mr. Makhmalbaf for the opportunity he provided to experience it without sound.

Sabzian went on to be in another film. I'd sometimes hear that he'd impersonated other people again, said he was a filmmaker - not necessarily the same one as before, but somebody else. I have a memory dating back to three or four years later. I remember that *Color of Pomegranates* was shown at an Iranian film festival. I couldn't go in because I didn't have a ticket. Sabzian was inside, and he came out and tried to get them to let me in. He introduced me to the manager, and they let me in. So he'd become more famous than me.

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He'd call sometimes, or he'd stop by to see me. Then I lost track of him for a few years, until one day I ran into the manager of the Pusan Film Festival. He said, "You know I'm a huge fan of *Close-Up*. I always look for a reason to screen it. I wanted to wait until the 20th Anniversary, but this is the 19th year, and I'm being removed from this position. Let's find a solution so we can show it again."

I said, "Show the film, and invite him, but if you do, I won't accompany him, because taking care of him is too great a responsibility. And I don't know how I'd get him to go back to Iran." I said, "Let's make a documentary about him." He got a small budget from a university and gave it to me. I called Sabzian and told him we were going to make a new film. We decided that I'd ask two film students to come and we'd make a "documentary fiction" about Sabzian.

Talking on the phone that day about the new film, we decided he should come to Enghelab Square at 7:00 a.m. so these students could pick him up and start work on the film. But they came back around 11:00 a.m. and said, "Sabzian didn't show up." Based on things he'd said, I thought he was holding out for a better contract. Then his son called and said, "My dad's in the hospital. He had an asthma attack this morning on the way there. He's in the hospital. He fell in the subway, and now he's in the CCU." Sabzian was in a coma from the very day when we were to start shooting the new film. He passed away after four months at the age of 52.

When the film was shown in Paris, they sent me a *Cahiers du cinéma* in Tehran. I browsed through it and saw Sabzian's picture. They'd also printed the picture of Mr. Ahankhah's wife. I focused on that for a while. I thought that the picture was real - on a day when there was no camera, and we weren't there, those two met on a bus, and this gentleman told this lady that he was a filmmaker. Nobody knew that the lies exchanged between these two would become the seed for a film. Not only a film, but a new direction in filmmaking for me. It showed me how to reach a fictional story through the actual facts.

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ABBAS KIAROSTAMI FILMOGRAPHY

Bread and Alley (1970) [s]
Recess (1972) [s]
The Experience (1973) [m]
The Traveler (1974)
So Can I (1975) [s]
Two Solutions for One Problem (1975) [s]
Colors (1976) [s]
The Wedding Suit (1976) [m]
The Report (1977)
Tribute to the Teachers (1977) [s]
How to Make Use of Leisure Time: Painting (1977) [s]
Jahan-Nama Palace (1977) [s]
Solution No. 1 (1978) [s]
First Case, Second Case (1979) [m]
Toothache (1980) [s]
Orderly or Disorderly (1981) [s]
The Chorus (1982) [s]
Fellow Citizen [m]
First Graders (1984)
Where Is the Friend's Home? (1987)
Homework (1989)
Close-Up (1990)
And Life Goes on... (1991)
Through the Olive Trees (1994)
À propos de Nice, la suite (segment: "Repérages") (1995)
Lumière and Company (segment: "Dinner for One") (1995)
Birth of Light (1997) [s]
Taste of Cherry (1997)
The Wind Will Carry Us (1999)
ABC Africa (2001)
Ten (2002)
Five (2003)
10 on Ten (2004)
Tickets (segment) (2005)
Roads of Kiarostami (2006) [s]
Rug (2006) [s]
Chacun son cinema (segment: "Where Is My Romeo?" (2007)
Shirin (2008)
Certified Copy (2010)

[s] = short film

[m] = medium-length film

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CREDITS

CAST

As themselves

Hossein Sabzian
Hassan Farazmand
Abolfazi Ahankhah
Mehrdad Ahankhah
Nir Mohseni Zanoosi
Ahmadreza Mohseni
Mohsen Makhmalbaf

CREW

Director/Screenwriter/Editor
Producer
Cinematography

Abbas Kiarostami
Ali Reza Zarin
Ali Reza Zarindast