



FILM: **CLOSE-UP**

FDG RATING: 3.0 ☹️☹️☹️⊖⊖

Film Discussion Group (FDG) Scale is 1-5 (5 is best)

Abbas Kiarostami: *director/writer*
Hossain Sabzian: plays himself, *Sabzian*

DATE: August 21, 2022

DISCUSSION SUMMARY: **CLOSE-UP**

The 1990 film by internationally revered Iranian film maker, Abbas Kiarostami, is an obvious hybrid fiction-documentary with actual footage of Sabzian's trial making up the bulk of the film. Scripted reenactments of several scenes before the trial fill in the gaps. The incident took place in the late 1980s. Kiarostami first heard about Sabzian in 1989.

Sabzian is a lower class young man who works as a printer's assistant. He is an avid cinephile, and when sitting on a bus reading a book by his idol film maker, Mohsen Makhmalbaf, the woman sitting next to him comments on the book and says that her son is studying film. Sabzian offers the book to her and autographs it admitting that he is the film maker Makhmalbaf. It's an impulsive opportunistic lie. For a few minutes Sabzian feels important.

The well-to-do woman invites him to their family home in Tehran to meet her son. Sabzian goes, acting the part of a film director, and even engages the family members to star in his new reality film. Suspensions arise. The father has the police arrest Sabzian as a fraud with the intention of robbing them. His trial is scheduled but there is a lengthy wait time. The news of a poor man impersonating Makhmalbaf, is published, catching the interest of film maker, Kiarostami, who meets Sabzian in prison and asks if he can do anything for him. Sabzian says, "Yes. Make a film about my suffering."

Kiarostami gets permission from the judge to have two cameras in the courtroom allowing for full range shots as well as close-ups. The trial footage scenes are gritty reality. Sabzian has confessed to attempted fraud, but is adamant he had no intention of robbing the family. Recounting the incident, Sabzian explains that Makhmalbaf gives voice to his personal pain and suffering, that the films are about him, his frustrations and impoverished life, especially in the film, *The Cyclist*, which was the book he was reading on the bus.

Many of us felt empathy for Sabzian when he says that "Before, no one would have ever obeyed me like that, because I am just a poor man. But because I pretended to be this famous person, they would do whatever I said." For a few days, he lived his dream.

One discussion participant thought the film was absurd and the main character pathetic because he needed to impersonate someone to be seen and heard. She thought the story was sad but also ridiculous and that the court scenes were unbelievably silly and somewhat chaotic. She had no connection with or sympathy for the other characters especially the family who the judge asked if they could forgive Sabzian.

Other discussion participants thought the courtroom scenes were very interesting providing insight into the Iranian justice system. We were surprised at the demeanor in an Islamic court in Tehran. The judge seemed to be a model of fair and thorough investigation practice. Or was the judge also acting for the benefit of the cameras?

Other comments focused on the psychological character study of an impoverished man who for a few days impersonates his idol. Art imitating life, life imitating art. Sabzian seized the opportunity to act like a film director, but the family members also were seduced by the opportunity to act in a film by Makhmalbaf. Sabzian was asked if he would rather be an actor than a director. He answered that he was acting as a director. Reality and art blur. This had a hectic, confusing effect on a few discussion participants. One comment was that the documentary and non-documentary clashed. It wasn't convincing. Others disagreed saying it was a clever merging of actual documentary filmed footage with dramatic staged scenes to complete the story. Another described it as an interesting effort tossed together. But most thought the film was compelling, an ambitious idea, exploring identity, art versus reality or merging with reality. Some of us felt we were missing an important insight since we had not seen the film "The Cyclist". The injustice and social inequities of the Iranian societal systems are implied so we are left to imagine what the director specifically reveals in *The Cyclist* about the silent suffering of lower class Iranians.

An emotional final scene is actual footage when Sabzian is released, since the family decided they could forgive him, and Makhmalbaf meets him and greets him with a warm hug bringing Sabzian to tears.

A lot of compelling ideas are wrapped in *Close-Up* as noted by about half of our discussion participants. Other were left unconvinced resulting in a combined, dubious score of 3.0.



See you at the movies!

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