Directed, written & edited by Abbas Kiarostami
Cinematography by Ali Reza Zarrindast

Mohsen Makhmalbaf...Himself
Abolfazl Ahankhah...Himself
Mehrdad Ahankhah...Himself
Monoochehr Ahankhah...Himself
Mahrokh Ahankhah...Herself
Nayer Mohseni Zonoozi...Herself
Ahmad Reza Moayed Mohseni...Family Friend
Hossain Farazmand...Reporter
Hooshang Shamaei...Taxi Driver
Mohammad Ali Barrati...Soldier
Davood Goodarzi...Sergeant
Haj Ali Reza Ahmadi...Judge
Hassan Komaili...Court Recorder
Davood Mohabbat...Court Recorder
Abbas Kiarostami...Himself (voice)
Hossain Sabzian...Himself / Makhmalbaf


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Kiarostami, Alberto Elena.

“Film begins with D. W. Griffith and ends with Abbas Kiarostami.” Jean-Luc Godard

“Words cannot describe my feelings about his films….When Satyajit Ray passed on I was
very depressed. But after seeing Kiarostami’s films I thanked God for giving us just the right
person to take his place.”
Akira Kurosawa

“I don’t like giving interviews […], because I am always left feeling that I’ve said nothing interesting. My real aim is to avoid
them; then I do feel very relieved.” Much has changed, obviously, since Abbas Kiarostami described himself in these terms so long
ago, in 1978; but certainly this timidity, laconic style or reserve, this
traditional component of the traditional art of taqiyyé (discretion, dissimulation) have long characterized his career. Even now,
Kiarostami is extraordinarily reserved about many areas that might be termed biographical or personal. He confines himself to
repeating a few facts and basic items of information that have long been in circulation; at times he even offers differing or even
contradictory versions of the same events.….Born in Tehran on 22nd June 1940 into a large family from the
northern region of Gilan, Abbas Kiarostami—of this we can be certain—did not have a particularly happy childhood. The son of a
painter and interior decorator, he may well have inherited from the
latter his inclination towards visual art forms, although he has more
than once admitted that as a child, his paintings mainly served to
combat his loneliness. Abbas was an introverted child with
communication problems, and throughout his basic education he
never talked to any of his classmates. We know from later chance
references that he even ran away from home at sixteen, although it
is difficult to assess the importance of this escapade. In any event,
two years later he left home for good, working in the traffic police
until he succeeded in gaining a place—after one failed attempt—in the
Faculty of Fine Arts of Tehran University. Having to combine
his studies with work, now in the Traffic Management of Tehran, he
took a long time to graduate. Once, when asked whether he really
learned anything at university, Kiarostami did not hesitate: ‘Yes, I learned that I was definitely not made to be a painter.’

Kiarostami’s real discovery during his university years was, however, graphic design, which was also to direct his first professional steps as an artist. At first he worked in designing book covers and advertising posters, and became fascinated by this
‘minimalist aspect of graphic design […]’, an art that communicates
its message to the general public with the minimum of means and
the maximum of constraints’. But then, in 1960 he was employed
by the leading advertising film agency of the time, Tabli Films, and
during that decade he dedicated his efforts increasingly to this area. According to Kiarostami himself, he made one hundred to one
hundred and fifty film advertisements over a seven- or eight-year period, forging a solid reputation; he finally left the profession,
however, dissatisfied with its overriding commercial pressures. Kiarosami’s tangential links with the cinema were reinforced by his
work designing film credits, which he started in 1967.….His affinity
for this kind of work does not appear to have been anything
extraordinary, however, and (although this is often claimed) he did
not join the Centre for the Intellectual
Development of Children and Young Adults in 1969 on the strength
of his cinematographic experience, but on the strength of his
reputation as a graphic designer. In fact, he was actually employed
to illustrate an edition of a children’s book by the great poet Ahmad
Reza Ahmadi.

Some of Kiarostami’s most confusing and even
contradictory statements relate precisely to this area of his film
vocation and training. ‘Apart from a short stay in Prague when I went to see amazing films in a strange language’, he declared in
1990, ‘I don’t think I’ve seen more than fifty films in my entire
life.’ On various occasions he has recalled how his real interest
began only when he was thirteen or fourteen, with the arrival of
neo-realist Italian films in Iran. These came as a breath of fresh air
to the anxious adolescent used to seeing only commercial American
films; for the first time he could see on the screen people who were
recognizably like those he saw in everyday life. However, in his
longest commentary on this subject (a personal article written at the
request of Positif magazine in 1994), Kiersoati expanded on a
previous hint: what really interested him in many of these films was
not De Sica but Sophia Loren… Again, in the same article, he
expressed his admiration for Fellini and La dolce vita, a film that
made a ‘deep and completely different impression’ from any film
he had seen before. Two years previously, however, Kiarostami had
said something quite unlike the above in the same magazine: ‘I often went to the cinema when I was young, and I remember being
deeply impressed by the Italian neo-realisists, especially by
Rossellini’. This (apparent) lack of consistency is nothing unusual in
Kiarostami; it also extends to his judgments and opinions about
filmmakers such as Dreyer, Bresson or Godard, whose influence on
his films one way or another Kiarostami seems equally ready to accept or deny.

Kiarostami’s praise in recent times for various foreign colleagues has been lavish and his recognition of profound cinematic influences marked, yet for most of his career the tendency has been quite the opposite. In an important interview published in the daily journal of the 8th Tehran Fajr International Film Festival in 1990, Kiarostami not only declared his ignorance of cinéma vérité or Dreyer’s work, for example, but also insisted that he does not choose which films to go and see on the strength of the name of the director. He also flatly denied the influence of any foreign film or director. …There are nevertheless two fundamental points to make about Kiarostami’s bursting unexpected into the film-making world on joining the Centre for the Intellectual Development of Children and Young Adults at the end of the 1960s. First, it is quite certain that Kiersostami became a film-make without any particular training (or even motivation), almost by chance, making a virtue of the necessities of his daily work. Second—as he himself finally recognized at the insistence of an interviewer in the oft-quoted 1990 interview—the new Iranian cinema of the time was really his only influence as he began to shoot his first films in the 1970s. A Simple Event (Yek ettefagh-e sadeh, 1973) by Sohrab Shahid Sales, The Mongols (Mogholha, 1973) by Oarviz Kiamiavi, together with certain elements from The Postman (Postchi, 1973) by Dariush Mehrjui, the contemporary films of Massud Kimiai or the early films of his friend Amir Naderi should therefore be recognized as Kiarostami’s real cinematographic references….

The idea of creating a film-making section at Kanun (as the Centre is widely known in Iran, meaning ‘Centre’ or ‘Institute’) arose as an extension of the activities of some of its graphic artists, such as Farshid Mesqali and Arapik Baghdasarian, who were keen to try their hand at film animations. …

To make his first (relatively improvised) film, Kiarostami used a script by his younger brother, Taghi Kiarostami, a children’s writer whose first book, The Hero (Pahlavi), had been published by the Centre in 1967. The script was no more in fact than a simple retelling of one of his own childhood experiences when a large dog frightened him in the alley leading from the local bakery to the family home. Bread and Alley is in the first instance, then, a perceptive and sensitive treatment of that genuine childhood feeling of fear; but of course it goes further than that. As Marco Dalla Gassa has ably pointed out, this modest (but brilliant) short already clearly displays many of the Kierostami topoi that recur insistently in later and better-known works…. For a first film, shot with scant resources and indeed with scant knowledge of filmmaking (a point recognized by Kiarostami on many occasions, remembering his lively arguments with the more experienced director of photography Mehrdad Fakhami), Bread and Alley nevertheless displays a certain unexpected stylistic maturity. This is particularly true of the film’s soundtrack and its use of background music. The film has no dialogue, like many others he made during his years at Kanun, but Kiarostami expertly chooses silence or music to back particular sequences. Silence is used to great effect to underline the dead times, which are the most important decision-making times for the protagonist, when he must discover for himself the solution (a recurring and important word in Kiarostami’s short films) to his dilemma. …

Before Kiarostami had perhaps been able to consolidate his experience with the new medium or even clarify his professional expectations, he made his second short, Breaktime, which in many ways constitutes a loose form of diptych with Bread and Alley, before embarking on more ambitious projects or going deeper into the complex area of didactic cinema. …

With only two shorts behind him and still working with Kanun, Kiarostami embarked in the mid-1970s on two medium-length features, The Experience (1973) and A Suit for the Wedding (1976), and his first full-length feature, The Traveller (1974). All of these more clearly define Kiarostami’s universe and his methods at a period in his career that was crucial yet which for various reasons (including, obviously, the restricted circulation of these films) is too little known and undervalued. …

The Report, Kiarostami’s second full-length feature and the most rigidly censored of all his films after the outbreak of the Islamic Revolution, is for many reasons, a complete rara avis among his films—in the first place, obviously because it was made outside Kanun and was intended for commercial release. Kiarostami certainly enjoyed a comfortable position at the Centre, unconcerned by any financial constraints, permitted a certain license to experiment and to a certain extent protected from the harsh censorship of the Shah’s regime…. Kiarostami’s relative independence also necessarily resulted, however, in a feeling of isolation, and it is therefore quite understandable that the director should wish to venture finally into the stormy waters of Iranian New Wave cinema. The Report would be made with the help of his friend Bahman Farmanara, the film producer and himself one of the most active exponents of the movement. The origins of Sinema-ye motafavet (literally, ‘alternative or different cinema’), or New Iranian Cinema, date back to 1969, when Dariush Mehrjui—a young journalist trained in the United States-made his second full-length feature, The Cow (Gav), which immediately became the flagship of the movement for renewal of the stagnant Iranian cinema. Based on a story by the great Gholam Hossein Saedi, also clearly aligned with progressive politics, the film was banned by the government on the ground of its strong element of social comment; this despite the fact that it was produced by the Ministry of Art and Culture. Mehrjui succeeded in smuggling a copy out of the country and showing it at the Venice Film Festival in 1971, where it was awarded the Critics’ Grand Prize. This success led to the lifting of the ban, two years retrospectively, albeit at the cost of adding a credit situating the action in the past (thereby avoiding any possible perceived reference to the present Shah’s government). Exactly the same fate befell Nasser Taghavi’s first film, Tranquillity in the Presence of Others (Aramaeh dar hozur-e digaran, 1971) an incisive condemnation of the corruption rife in Iranian society, which was not screened until two years after it was made, thus reinforcing a practice that was lamentably common in the last years of the Shah’s reign. …

In the adverse political conditions of the time, and subject to strict control by the censors, the New Iranian Cinema necessarily became somewhat impenetrable, almost cryptic; this, combined with the influence of directors like Godard and Bresson, eventually made it clearly a minority cinema, out of touch with public taste. …With the New Wave suppressed for political reasons and the predominance of commercial films that were coarse and complacent (according to a calculation by the newspaper Kayhan in February 1978, more than half the cinemas in Tehran were then showing films defined as erotic), it is not surprising that the cinema—still protected by the Shah, as evidenced by the policy of co-productions—became one of the favorite targets of anti-government activist groups. The tragically famous torching of Cinema Rex in Abadan in August 1978 has to be seen in this context….
The Report covers four days in the life of a middle-class couple in Iran at the end of the 1970s, four decisive days, which Kiarostami nevertheless presents with no particular emphasis. The director is not so much interested in condemning corruption as in revealing and deconstructing the mechanisms that support it, in showing a closely woven web of shallow and vacuous relationships, with no civic or personal future, like the couple’s own relationship. The Report is without any doubt a film without hope, a film which shows ‘the hell of existence in all its everyday banality’, to use Youssef Ishaqpour’s elegant and accurate expression.

In this sense, it is impossible to ignore the circumstances in which The Report was filmed. These include not only Kiarostami’s personal problems, but also the renewed flare-up of tensions in Iranian society, repression by SAVAK and the intensified activity of the Shah’s political opponents following his creation of a new political party, Rastakhiz (Hezb-e Rastakhiz-e Iran, or Resurgence party of Iran) declared without scruple as the only legal political party. The letter sent to the ruler in June 1977 by Karim Sanjabi, Shalpur Bakhtiari and Dariush Foruhar, all well-known and respected opposition figures, at the time important leaders of the democratic National Front, could not be more eloquent: ‘Since 1953 [the year of the coup d’état that ousted Prime Minister Mohammed Mossadegh] Iran has lived in an atmosphere of fear and terror. All forms of opposition are brutally crushed almost before they begin; but, if the do materialize, they are drowned in a bloodbath. The memory of those days when people could talk openly, when books were sold with no restriction, when, in Mossadegh’s time, demonstrations were legal, has become with the passing of the years an even more distant dream, already blurred in Mossadegh’s time, demonstrations were legal, has become with the passing of the years an even more distant dream, already blurred by the turbulent events of the Islamic Revolution…. Conjuncture aside, the simple truth is that the director returned to the protective environment of Kanun, and there, once again adopting the obligatory and familiar formula of films about childhood, he would continue with his personal career….

In the autumn of 1989, Kiarostami was preparing to shoot a new film, again for Kanun, about the pocket money given to children every week by their parents. However, just a few days before the date that had been set to begin shooting, the director came across an article in the weekly magazine Sorush, about the strange case of a man who had impersonated with dubious motives, another director, Mohsen Makhmalbaf, and who had been unmasked before he could commit his (supposed) fraud. Kiarostami was literally fascinated by the case, and decided to investigate it as the possible subject for a film. He asked his producer at the Centre for the Intellectual Development of Children and Young Adults for permission to cancel the existing project and explore this new possibility. After talking to Makhmalbaf, who agreed to work with Kiarostami on the project, both film-makers went to the prison at Ghasr to have a preliminary interview with the impostor; afterwards they went to see the Ahankhah family, also to negotiate their participation in the film. In the light of their recent experiences, it is not surprising that the family now suspected a swindle by a ‘fake Kiarostami’, and demanded to see both men’s credentials before allowing them into the house.…

While the impostor, Hossein Sabzian, was for various reasons delighted with the idea of a film about the case, the Ahankhah family took much more convincing; their gullibility had been exposed and they did not relish the idea of the affair’s becoming more widely known. However, Kiarostami managed to persuade all parties and even succeeded in obtaining permission from the judicial authorities to film the trial. The well-disposed judge in charge of the case turned out to be a great cinema fan, who particularly like Makhmalbaf’s films; he agreed to the proposal after consulting his superiors and even saw fit to delay the start of the hearing by a few days, so that all the relevant parties could be present to make the film crew’s work easier. Kiarostami filmed the session using two 16mm cameras—which obviously accounts for the differing photographic quality of this sequence in the final cut—without knowing whether the film would turn out to be a viable project. At the beginning of Homework, Kiarostami made the ironic point that he could not tell whether it would be a documentary until it was finished; in this case, he did not even know for certain (and this time there was no irony involved) whether the rushed images he was shooting could eventually be used to hammer out a film. For five weeks, Kiarostami improvised as he went along, slowly constructing the film, Close-Up, from that tremendous (although somewhat random first day’s shooting. ‘This is a film that made itself, ’ the director later declared, ‘which came about completely
naturally […] I shot the film during the day and made notes at night. There wasn’t much time to think, and when it was finished, I watched the film like any other spectator, because it was new even to me. I think it’s something completely different from anything I’ve done before’.

Quite so. ‘Close-Up is undoubtedly a different proposition altogether from the rest of Kiarostami’s films. It has no links or particular relationship with any of his other works, somewhat like a star, which, in the midst of a crowded constellation, shines with its own bright light’. Marco Della Grassa’s enthusiastic appraisal, shared by many critics and specialists in Kiarostami’s work, needs a little clarification vis-à-vis placing the film in the context of Kiarostami’s work, but of course it properly and appropriately highlights the singularity of Close-Up, and helps to explain why it has always been a favorite of the director’s. However, this preference can be understood in its proper terms only by appreciating the deep-seated reasons for Kiarostami’s fascination with the ‘Sabzian case’ and the close, though difficult relationship he came to establish with the protagonist.

When Kiarostami met him in the Ghasr prison in Tehran, Hossein Sabzian was an unemployed print worker, about 35, a member of the large Turkish-speaking minority in Iran (just over a fifth of the population), who had got divorced some years previously and maintained little contact with his very young son. A great film fan, he particularly admired the work of Mohsen Makhmalbaf, a director from a working-class background like himself who during his career had already become known for his unconditional support for the mostazafin (dispossessed, oppressed people). This explains why, when, owing to a chance meeting—the encounter with Mrs Ahankhah on a bus when she was reading the script of one of the director’s most popular films, The Cyclist (Baysikelran, 1989)—Sabzian started to pass himself off as Makhmalbaf. He had no kind of preconceived plan, and was not letting himself be carried away by the conventional glamour of cinema as such, but by a kind of profound identification with the director. ‘Tell him that his last film is my own life’ was the message he asked Kiarostami to convey to Makhmalbaf, as an expression of his admiration and a vague justification for his behaviour. Once he felt at home in the character of Makhmalbaf, respected by each and every one of the Ahankhahs—a comfortably well-off family who nevertheless had their own problems at this difficult time—Sabzian decided to continue the game, promising to shoot part of his next film, supposedly entitled The House of the Spider (Khane-ye ankabut) with their cooperation and in their home.

During Sabzian’s relationship with the Ahankhah family, before his impersonation was discovered, he once borrowed 1,900 toman from them to take a taxi and buy a small present for his son: this would constitute the main charge against him, as an unmistakable indication of his intention to swindle the trusting family. Sabzian never for a moment denied the facts themselves, but he did reject the interpretation they were given. He never questioned his guilt according to the current law, but skillfully deflected the legal issue onto moral ground. Seemingly ashamed and repentant, he claimed that, although his behaviour might have given grounds—technically—to suspect a fraud, he never had such an intention and he was ‘guilty’ only of failing to repay the loan. Sabzian was thus possessed, like so many other Kiarostami characters, by an overwhelming desire, the passion for cinema in his case, which led him to transgress against the rules of society. A complete film buff, it was Sabzian himself who moreover drew the specific comparison between himself and the protagonist of The Traveller during the trial: ‘In a way, I am like the boy in the film, who pretends to take photographs to get the money he needs to go to Tehran and see the match. Then he falls asleep and misses it all, which is what I think has happened to me. From the legal point of view, I know that my behaviour can’t be justified, but I also think that my love for art should be taken into account.’ With this speech, Sabzian fully deserves the right to a prominent place in the ‘hall of fame’ of Kiarostami characters, according to Marco Della Nave: ‘He is, indeed, none other than a grown-up Ghassem, still not cured-for there is no remedy for this sort of disease—of his uncontrollable raptus of desire.

Close-Up not only speaks to us of the human need for dreams and the cinema’s enormous power of fascination; the film also introduces a damaged character, who pretends to be someone else in order to regain his own self-respect. Kiarostami is very clear on this point. ‘The main issue raised by the film is the need that people feel, whatever their material circumstances, for respect and social recognition […] Ultimately, what the film is dealing with is the difference between the “ideal self” and the “real self”; the greater the difference, the more unbalanced the person.’ To want to be someone else—a feeling that the film-maker confesses to knowing well, which undoubtedly justified speaking of the autobiographical elements in the film—has little or nothing to do with playing a game, in this context. Sabzian is a weak and pathetic character who tries to escape the frustrations of his life by making an unusual bid for integration into a society that excludes him. That is why his question (his plea, really) to Kiarostami when the director visits him in prison is simply: ‘Could you make a film about my suffering?’ That is why it is completely incomprehensible to describe the film, unless from lack of knowledge or frivolity, as ‘the comic tale of an impostor who just wants to be a film director’. Sabzian is above all a person who is suffering, to whom at a particular moment the cinema offers a temporary escape. Moreover, Sabzian’s exposure and arrest intensified his feelings of frustration. Kiarostami maintains that his interest in the case was aroused above all by Sabzian’s words reported in the Sorush article: ‘Now I’m just a piece of meat and you can do whatever you like with me.’ Close-Up was therefore inspired by its director’s explicit interest in this character, which went beyond any feelings of identification to include compassion. More than in any other of his films, including his work with child protagonists, Kiarostami tries in an obvious way to make the audience feel a certain identification with Sabzian: the repeated use of close-ups of the latter during the trial sequence not only transparently justifies the film’s title, but is also ‘a way to get close to the character, to understand him; the audience is thus made to take in his humanity and suffering. Kiarostami clearly gives the accused the benefit of the doubt, even though he was already fully aware that Sabzian was a complicated individual, possibly twisted, and not necessarily reliable. But the film persona of Sabzian in unmistakably that of a weak and broken man, a victim who inspires sympathy and fellow feeling.
Sabzian is not only the first of Kiarostami’s characters who declares himself on film to be wretched; he is also the first to refer explicitly to his poverty and problems of integration within society. Questioned during the trial, his mother emphasized these circumstances and maintained—with or without justification—that her son’s failure to find work was one of the factors that contributed to his divorce and restricted his personal development in every way. ‘The criticism of society is very important here’, as it was more or less directly in Kiarostami’s previous films, and now unfolds in new and more complex ways. In reality, the Sabzian of the film has disturbing Dostoeysvkyian qualities, and in his role of impostor and ‘idiot’, he helps to reveal certain traits in the Ahankhah family that its members would perhaps not have wanted broadcast. *Close-Up* constitutes therefore a complex game with mirrors, a film with significant exchanges of looks that speak much more than a simple case of character impersonation. The well-off family that Sabzian deceives is also using him—the famous Makhmalbal—to try to solve some of their own problems and to escape from the tedium of their daily lives. The film gives us no information about Mr Ahankhah (a colonel who had been retired from the service owing to the Revolution, who ‘probably, for the past ten years shut away in his house, has been looking for something to give meaning to his life’) but it does about his sons: Mehrdad, the youngest, is an engineer who has still not managed to find work six months after graduating, and who runs the risk of ending up, like his elder brother, working in a bread factory… Nobody in *Close-Up* seems satisfied with who they are or what they do (the journalist wants to be ‘like Oriana Fallaci’, and is quite prepared to play the card of Dostoeyvskyian qualities, and in his *Close-Up* role of impostor and ‘idiot’, he explodes any linear conception of the story to create in its place a segmental structure based on a wide variety of material: ‘real’ images, later manipulated or not during editing; reconstructions that are made to look like documentary takes; interviews; flashbacks; strange dead time scenes; sequences filmed twice over from different perspectives, etc. The absence of exact references to times and dates means that the audience must continually reorder the scenes that they are shown on the screen, change their perspectives and question their perceptions, in an uncomfortable but productive state of uncertainty. A perfect example of this is the film’s first sequence, even before the credits, when the journalist, accompanied by two soldiers, takes a taxi to the Ahankhahs’ house to arrest the impostor Sabzian, about whom at this stage we know nothing. For some minutes we listen to the desultory conversation between the journalist and the taxi-driver, interrupted only by brief appeals to the soldiers and short halts to ask passers-by (in typical Kiarostami fashion) for directions to the address they are looking for. Once at the house, the audience, which has no more information than this, is left outside with the taxi-driver, watching him pick a flower out of a pile of leaves and kicking a spray can down the road…for 30 seconds!

As Gilberto Perez explains in his excellent analysis of this symbolic sequence, ‘We had expected to go inside the family’s home with the reporter and instead we waited outside with the driver; now we expect to ride with the driver and the policemen and the man they have arrested, the protagonist of the story, and instead we are left behind with the reporter. Our expectation each time is that nothingness I wanted to include in my...’

When, in the middle of the hearing, someone says that ‘some things are more complicated than they seem’, Kiarostami is undoubtedly winking at the audience, who by this time are already fairly disorientated with regard to what they are seeing. In a much more explicit and radical way than in Where Is the Friend’s House?, the director explodes any lineal conception of the story to create in its place a segmental structure based on a wide variety of material: ‘real’ images, later manipulated or not during editing; reconstructions that are made to look like documentary takes; interviews; flashbacks; strange dead time scenes; sequences filmed twice over from different perspectives, etc. The absence of exact references to times and dates means that the audience must continually reorder the scenes that they are shown on the screen, change their perspectives and question their perceptions, in an uncomfortable but productive state of uncertainty. A perfect example of this is the film’s first sequence, even before the credits, when the journalist, accompanied by two soldiers, takes a taxi to the Ahankhahs’ house to arrest the impostor Sabzian, about whom at this stage we know nothing. For some minutes we listen to the desultory conversation between the journalist and the taxi-driver, interrupted only by brief appeals to the soldiers and short halts to ask passers-by (in typical Kiarostami fashion) for directions to the address they are looking for. Once at the house, the audience, which has no more information than this, is left outside with the taxi-driver, watching him pick a flower out of a pile of leaves and kicking a spray can down the road…for 30 seconds!

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The sequence is excellent and testifies to the rigorous investigation of form, that, in an increasingly obvious and daring way, Kiarostami was undertaking in his films. Concerning precisely this opening sequence of *Close-Up*, he explained in a later interview: ‘I was constantly hunting for scenes in which there was “nothing happening”. 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.’
Towards the end of the film, which has, like Where is the Friend’s House?, an obvious symmetrical structure, Kiarostami nevertheless finally allows the audience to witness the scene from which they had been excluded in the brilliant opening sequence. In the film’s penultimate sequence, we witness Sabzian’s arrest from within the house; but this change in the point of view should not be taken simply as a whim or a concession to the audience. When we finally see the arrest, it is now from Sabzian’s point of view, and this implies a profound change of perspective compared to the first time we saw it, when we did not know the character or his motives, The complex mirror game created by Kiarostami, so often short-sightedly seen as a device of a ‘film within a film; consistently breaks away from the mannerist dimension from which these experiments usually suffer. ‘Close-Up’ is not a film about cinema’, Kiarostami stated categorically; it is the portrait of a man who is searching, erratically but desperately, for his place in the world. It is only because his passion, the object of his desire and his source of comfort is the cinema that Close-Up is also about cinema.’

But Close-Up is not in any way inspired by a reflexive or self-referential intention; its discourse is rather that of solidarity and compassion. This is why Kiarostami, in the celebrated final sequence, rewards Sabzian with an unexpected gift; the real Makhmalbaf is waiting for him when he is released from prison, to take him on his motorbike to apologize to the Ahankhah family. Kiarostami has not only played a major part in his release and ensured that in a way he fulfills his promise to the Ahankhahs, to turn them into the protagonists of a film (Close-Up instead of The House of the Spider…); he also gave him a chance to meet his idol, Makhmalbaf. At this point Kiarostami has already abandoned the simple filming of an event and his more or less faithful reconstruction of it using the real protagonists—now, like a real god, he creates reality and makes Sabzian’s dream come true. But, ‘in contrast to the dramatized reconstruction of the arrest, Makhmalbaf’s meeting with Sabzian outside simulates, ironically, a live report’. Kiarostami makes the most of the opportunity to explore a new register; this time he pretends to use a hidden camera and sound equipment, which supposedly breaks down just as Sabzian is coming out of the prison. Using a device that had already proved effective in Homework and also before that in Orderly or Disorderly? (again, we hear, off camera, the film crew’s anxious and disappointed comments about the—fictitious—breakdown of the equipment), Kiarostami no doubt wished to respect the privacy of the meeting. But, as usual, things are more complicated than they seem.

Makhmalbaf takes Sabzian on the back of his motorbike to the Ahankhaj’s house, with the film crew following in a mini-bus: they can’t record the conversation between the two men because of the (supposed) failure of the sound equipment. Kiarostami maintains that in fact the conversation—more like a two-handed monologue, he says, was not very interesting, and therefore cutting out the sound was a good opportunity to resolve this for the purposes of the film. At one point, when Kiarostami finally decides to abandon the pretence, background music starts playing for the first and only time in the film. Significantly, although this seems to have escaped the notice of the critics, he uses here the same musical score composed by Kambiz Roshanravan for The Traveller, specifically the sequence that accompanies the end of the film when Ghassem has his bitter awakening after the football match. Kiarostami thus explicitly highlights and makes his own the connection that Sabzian made during the rial between that film and his own life. Close-Up ends with the following sequence outside the Ahankhahs’ house, which bears all the signs of reconciliation and forgiveness; it ‘melds reality and fiction, reconciles them’, as Francois Niney puts it. A film that is difficult to classify, Close-Up seems to defy the usual critical categories, and forces us to think about ‘the fictive transparency of the real’. This is undoubtedly one of the defining characteristics of Kiarostami’s work. ‘The truth was a mirror that fell to the ground and shattered. Each one picked up a piece, and seeing his own image reflected in it, thought he possessed the whole truth.’ Makhmalbaf used this saying by Rumi as a kind of moral to his splendid A Time to Love (Nobat-e asheghi, 1990), but it could very well apply to any approach to Close-Up, a film that undermines absolute assumptions about truth and reality. Iranian critics have appropriately cited the precedent of The Night it Rained (An shah keh barun amad, 1967), a hilarious and irreverent short feature by Kamran Shirdel, which used the device of a ‘film within a film ‘to ask radical questions about the uncertain dividing line between truth and fiction, not to mention the questionable legitimacy of any so-called authority on the subject. It is not clear, in fact, whether Kiarostami had seen this (strictly banned) film; there is no doubt, however, that Close-Up, seen in retrospect, was an important component in the Iranian cinema tradition of reflexivity, and should be recognized as the direct inspiration for the making of various subsequent films. These included in particular the two well-known productions of Makhmalbaf himself: the disappointing Salam Cinema (Salam sinema, 1995) and the magnificent The Bread and the Vase (NaN va golden, 1996), also known as A Moment of Innocence, which could reasonably be considered one of the great masterpieces of post-revolutionary Iranian cinema.

As usual, Close-Up was given a very poor reception in Iran; Kiarostami maintains (with some exaggeration, perhaps) that he can’t remember reading a single good review after it was first screened. There were critics who condemned the unusual structure as sterile; others denounced the film as a simple publicity caper by Kiarostami and Makhmalbaf; and naturally there were those who decided to see the whole film in political terms… For some, Close-Up was a tendentious film , a deliberate attempt to discredit Makhmalbaf for his known connections with the religious factions, although for others it signalled that Kiarostami, quick to make a pact with the latter, had abandoned his principles. One critic, surprisingly, gilded the lily by suggesting a political interpretation
of the spray can rolling down the road in the first sequence … Once again, as with Where Is the Friend’s House?, the future of Close-Up was decided abroad, basically in France, where it was given an early and warm welcome, which gave rise over time to its international reputation as a genuine cult film; it was even the subject of a beautiful and funny tribute by Nanni Moretti in his short, The Day of the Premiere of ‘Close-Up’ (Il giorno della prima di ‘Close-Up’, 1996).

Epilogue: Intimate Lighting

Not east
not west
not north
not south
only this spot I am standing on
now
Abbas Kiarostami

The model of an aggiornato neo-realism, symbol of the best humanist tradition of the Seventh Art, icon of modern cinema: the work of Abbas Kiarostami seems to defy any generally agreed definition. The question that Cahiers du Cinéma used as the title for its famous monographic dossier about the Iranian film-maker, ‘Who are you, Mr Kiarostami?’, is still relevant today and just as open to argument. Attempts to assign him to one aesthetic or ideological trend or another, to place his work within a recognizable and identifiable framework, in short, to account for his incredibly fertile filmmaking career increasingly meet with the stumbling block of the growing diversity of his latest films and the (apparently) chameleon-like personality that the director is revealing little by little. Writers have split rivers of ink on the subject of Kiarostami’s debt to Rossellini—writers who have concentrated solely on Life and Nothing More…and were virtually ignorant of many of his previous films—and then along came Through the Olive Trees and of course Taste of Cherry, invalidating many of the hasty judgments made up until that point. The excessive insistence on considering Kiarostami’s films from a modernist perspective, based above all on Through the Olive Trees, also drained strength from most of its arguments in the light of subsequent films, although the self-referential element in the director’s work has always been apparent. When some critics had already coined such picturesque expressions as ‘post-modern neo-realism’ to explain the special nature of Kiarostami’s films, The Wind Will Carry Us and Ten began to explore new areas that challenge such definitions. Gone is any trace of the cheerful and optimistic humanism that some thought they had identified in the Kiarostami of the early 1990s…

At this stage it is hardly necessary to remind ourselves that Kiarostami has always kept his distance from the neo-realist tradition, the only common feature being—apart from certain isolated techniques—a vague zeitgeist: ‘If there is any possible similarity between my films and Italian neo-realism,’ Kiarostami was already maintaining in 1992, ‘it must have to do with the social and political characteristics of present-day Iran, which in some ways are similar to those of post-war Italy. But my work should not be seen as pure imitation of Italian neo-realism: imitation in filmmaking is not something that interests me at all, because I think it always involves the risk of producing something very artificial.’ And in a later interview, when he was asked whether he considered himself to be a realist director, he answered: ‘No. And in fact I reject all the ‘isms’ en masse. Including the term ‘humanism’ that some people use about my films: the truth is that I think my films are not humanist at all.’…

The long-standing and widespread overuse of Western references when analyzing Kiarostami’s films (Rossellini, De Sica, Olmi, Bresson, Godard, Murnau, Tati and even eastern maestros such as Ray and Kurosawa, already victims of a similar exercise) has for a long time obscured the deep-rooted Persian influence on his films. ‘Don’t neglect the Iranian context or underestimate its importance’, Godfrey Cheshire suggested very recently as a fundamental piece of advice in his introductory guide on how to interpret Kiarostami’s work. Kiarostami himself had been saying this for some time previously, but his comments fell in general on deaf ears: ‘Without doubt they [my films] have very deep roots in the heart of Persian culture. Where else could they have their source?’ While it is true, as Marco Della Gassa maintains, that the device of repetition, the penchant for digression, the frequent display of the film-making process, the ixing up of different layers of reality and the repeated use of open endings are some of the stylistic features that characterize most of Kiarostami’s films, commonly defined as self-referential or self-reflexive, these do not necessarily have to spring from Western post-modernism For the Iranian critic and essayist Mir-Ahmad-e Mir-Ehsan, ‘Kiarostami is the inheritor of an eastern art tradition which foregrounds deconstruction and multiple narration, features most notably expressed in Close-Up. This magical terrain is the real source of his fascination with non-linearity and multi-spatial narration, not the French and German New Waves […] On the other hand, Persian miniature painting offers a compelling conceptual handle on Kiarostami. Hidden meanings, symbolic iconography and intertextuality are mediating mechanisms by which the private and public spheres are regulated’…

Nothing could be further from Kiarostami’s intentions than the use of this reflexivity as a playful exercise in mannerism or a simple film buff’s memory game: if anything lies behind the use of these devices, it is a profound philosophical concern with the meaning of appearances and, consequently, a reflection on the cinema’s potential to reconstitute a deeper reality by means of its ‘lies’…
Kiarostami’s fundamental purpose...is to make the audience participate in his films: films that are for this very reason ‘incomplete’ and which only in this way can hope to come close to the elusive mystery of poetry. It would be difficult to exaggerate the importance of poetry in the life and work of Abbas Kiarostami, not only because he himself has now had his own poems published—recently translated into Italian, English and French—but also because throughout his life, poetry has been a constant and inexhaustible source of pleasure, comfort and inspiration...’At times of conflict and anxiety, poetry is one of the few things that can give us a degree of certainty, provide us with a little happiness. I know of nothing apart from poetry that can do this. All through my life I have taken refuge in poetry. In my opinion, poetry is much more helpful in times of difficulty than in times of calm; it enables us to find a certain stability, an internal energy. When religion can not fill this void, poetry can do so.’ Elaine Sciolino is probably right when she says that ‘poetry for Iranians is religion, a religion as powerful as Islam’, and certainly in the case of Kiarostami this comment seems indisputably appropriate.

Kiarostami himself has repeatedly insisted on the exceptional importance of poetry in Iran, even among the most deprived and illiterate: ‘Poetry constitutes the spoken language of the Iranian people...Mohsen Makhmalbaf explains it very well: ‘If behind every European film-maker we tend to see a painter, behind an Iranian film-maker there is always a frustrated poet or an unhappy troubadour. Poetry in particular represents for us the very essence of classical art.’...When he was asked recently whether he thought that art should inspire in the spectator a desire to enter a different reality, Kiarostami replied emphatically: ‘Yes, I believe so, because otherwise art would have no purpose. Should religion not prove successful at accomplishing that mission, art can always attempt it. They both point in the same direction. Religion points to another world, whereas art points to a better existence. One is an invitation, an offering to a faraway place, the other to a place that is close.’ The fact is that the director has given his opinions frequently and explicitly about the nature of art and its function within society, and is quick to deny the repeated accusations of being half-hearted in his civic and political stance. When Life and Nothing More ... was first screened, he was already explaining his point of view: ‘I think it is wrong for any one person, be they artist or politician, to decide for everybody. In my opinion, the work of an artist consists solely in presenting issues, and it is each individual’s responsibility to think about them. In a country like Iran people don’t just want their artists to show the issues, they want them to resolve them. But it is not the artist’s function to resolve issues.’

Kiarostami has always maintained an apparently ambiguous stance about the political nature of his films, rejecting each and every demand of conventional political films, while still upholding his more profound commitment to transform reality. In one of his typical pronouncements on the subject he said: 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 [...] 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.’...Life and liberty as inalienable rights of the individual, whatever the situation or circumstances, emerges as a powerful leitmotif in Kiarostami’s films....Kiarostamis films are, above all, about tolerance.

Assad Arjang: Lost in Translation? Notes on Kiarostami’s Close-Up
The purpose of these notes is to list certain observations or reactions of a Persian-speaking viewer of the film. Not intended to offer an interpretation of the film, these notes simply focus on points that may be lost in translation.
(1) The film opens with the conversation between a journalist (Hossain Farazmand) and a cab driver as they are heading towards the Ahankhah family home. This conversation is significant as it relates to a perennial problem in Iranian cinema: the chasm between the artist and his or her public. The fact that the Iranian director can only reach a very small fraction of the population has haunted directors before and after the revolution. In this case, it is curious that the cab driver does not know the popular Iranian director Mohsen Makhmalbaf (is he a merchant, he asks). In fact, due to Makhmalbaf’s background as an active supporter of the revolution, his films were screened more widely than Kiarostami’s, giving him considerable visibility among the general public in the late 1980s. The driver has never heard of Makhmalbaf and states that he has very little time for movies. The journalist also mentions the writer Orianna Fallaci. The cab driver, who does not know her either, quips that she is not among his usual passengers! The journalist’s insistence on mentioning terms unfamiliar to the cab driver (e.g., location) becomes ironic as the journalist’s excitement for having an explosive scoop is juxtaposed against the driver’s total lack of interest. In short, the opening conversation conveys the dilemma of the Iranian director: apart from a very small elite, most people don’t know what the director is all about. This chasm between the artist and his audience assumes a remarkably ironic aspect as the film itself is all about the artist getting close to the people.
(2) The cab driver also mentions that he is a retired officer of the air force (you see him looking at the fighter jets in the sky). This is a direct allusion to another pervasive social issue. To find employment (or to supplement their income), many Iranians seek jobs (or second or third jobs). This is also the case of the sons of the Ahankhah family, as we learn later from the son Mehrdad who serves as the family spokesperson. The fact that Mehrdad is unemployed despite holding a degree in urban planning would not surprise Iranians—many college graduates are unemployed or hold...
jobs that have nothing to do with their formal training. We also learn that Mehrdad’s brother, a mechanical engineer by training, now works in a bakery. The air force officer turned cab driver and the engineer turned baker would be examples of downward mobility in Iran (we are reminded of this when Mrs. Ahankhah objects to Mehrdad’s designation of his brother as a baker). In contrast, we can think of Sabzian, a printer’s assistant impersonating a director, or even Mehrdad’s desire to work in movies as a wishful/imaginal upward mobility.

(3) As part of the cab ride segment, a minor joke goes untranslated in the subtitles. The journalist asks directions from a man who has turkeys for sale. The journalist says that he is not looking for turkeys but for person of turkey’s character. In Persian, turkey has the connotation of a salamander, a creature that changes its character according to the needs of the hour. As a character trait, turkey-like connotes an opportunist. Given that the journalist is in pursuit of an impostor, he thinks he is being clever this with this in-joke.

(4) The film starts by introducing the protagonist Hossain Sabzian as an impostor (this is set up in the journalist’s account of his scoop to the cab driver). But impostors often find willing victims. In this film, it is significant that the entire ruse is set in motion by Mrs. Ahankhah, who notices the book by Makhmalbaf (The Cyclist) that Sabzian is reading in the bus, and strikes a conversation with him. She is impressed that she finds herself next to a director and clearly wants to pursue this wonderful “find” by inviting him into the family!

(5) The cult of celebrity is not limited to any one country, but it is rampant in Iran. Iranians, especially those with some degree of education, love to get close to artists, writers, and other intellectuals. The notion of knowing some such celebrity personally makes them happy and gives them something to talk about. It is in this context that having a great director visiting your home becomes so alluring an event. Mehrdad, the son who is also a film fan, sees this as a unique opportunity.

(6) The most important and striking thing about Sabzian to the Farsi-speaking viewer is the way he speaks the language. The gap between formal and colloquial Farsi (Persian) is vastly greater than in English. The way an Iranian speaks Farsi (Persian) is vastly greater than in English. The way an Iranian speaks Farsi immediately indicates his station in society. Unfortunately, there is no easy way of conveying this in subtitles. A director of Makhmalbaf’s stature is expected to speak a more refined Farsi, just as Mrs. Ahankhah would not expect him to ride the bus and is surprised at that “fact.” Sabzian speaks with eloquence, employing a rather refined and literary language, quite different from the language one would expect of a blue-collar worker in a printer’s shop. He cites Persian verses several times, including a Sufi verse of some complexity. He talks about cinema and society, and mentions Tolstoy, mispronouncing the name in the way common among Iranians who have seen its Persian transliteration. His language is surprisingly literary in form, and occasionally even waxes poetic. As a director, but also as a lover of Persian literature, Kiarostami has always had a special sensitivity to language. It is curious that in questioning Sabzian directly, he adopts the more colloquial tone, with Sabzian responding in a somewhat more formal tone. I would suggest that the literary quality of the “script” Sabzian has “written” for his role as Makhmalbaf is one of several factors that endears him to Kiarostami.

(7) The Ahankhah family suspects Sabzian of using access to their home for an intended burglary. This is raised in the court proceedings by Mehrdad, but rejected by Sabzian and the judge. It is useful to note, however, where the suspicion comes from. In the years after the revolution, the incidence of burglaries rose dramatically. A frequent ruse was to gain access to a residence (as a worker, repairman, municipal worker, etc.) to get to know the layout. (Of course, one would not let a person suspected of such an intention sleep over, a courtesy that the family extends to Sabzian).

(8) saving face: The public persona of an individual or family is a very important consideration in Iran. The Farsi word aberoo (arguably untranslatable) involves not only one’s personal self-respect and dignity, but in a very large way, the public perception of one’s worth and demeanor. The viewer of Close-Up should therefore be doubly attentive to the public persona the various characters (including the judge) seek to present—they know they are being filmed, after all. For example, the Ahankhah family is eager to dispel the impression of having been all too gullible. Mr. Ahankhah (the father) claims that he was suspicious from the very beginning and he played along only to teach a lesson to his children. No Iranian viewer would swallow this: more likely Mr. Ahankhah is just saving face. Mehrdad objects that the reporter’s article in the Soroush publication represents them as overly simple victims, prone to be taken advantage of. In a similar vein, Sabzian is very concerned that the article would introduce him as a swindler (this was how it appeared, he says, not how it really was). Yet, for all of Sabzian’s appeal to the viewers’ sympathies, his explanations do not fully convince. His explanation of soliciting money from Mehrdad sounds lame, and his claim that he returned to the Ahankhah home on the day of his arrest with full knowledge that he would be arrested is, to put it mildly, fantastic. The viewer’s suspicions may be further raised when his previous infractions come to light in the court.

(9) An intriguing segment of the dialogue is the exchange between Mr. Ahankhah and Sabzian just prior to the arrest. Ahankhah, who knows what lies in wait for the impostor, is enjoying himself by using veiled references to a life of deception. For example, when Sabzian complains that he did not sleep well at the Ahankhah home, Mr. Ahankhah says that is natural for one to “sleep badly away from home” (as given in the subtitles). A more literal rendering of the Farsi expression is “one sleeps badly if one sleeps in the place of another,” an expression that much more readily suggests identity fraud. Sabzian, who has sniffed that something is in the air, cagily deflects Ahankhah’s pointed remarks. The entire segment makes full use of multiple valences of the Persian language. Also of interest is Sabzian’s tone, it is one of resigned disappointment as he tries to set up an appropriate end game to the charade he had started.

(10) Whatever suspicions Mr. Ahankhah and his son may have harbored prior to the day of arrest, a ray of hope still remains. A family friend, Mr. Mohseni is invited to join the Ahankhahs. This individual, who knows the film crowd and is acquainted with Makhmalbaf himself, registers the hope that the self-proclaimed director would in fact turn out to be Makhmalbaf. He even offers a possible explanation of why the director may not have known about the film award at the Rimini festival. All of this makes the first encounter between Mohseni and Sabzian at the Ahankhah home very dramatic moment: there is a rather dry and brief exchange of greetings between the two of them. Now, if this were the great director, the Iranian viewer would expect effusive and over-the-top salutations and expressions of respect.

(11) In the court, Sabzian asks for forgiveness, stressing that this is spiritual pardon that he is seeking, not legal indemnity. The term he uses (halal- e-okhravi, literally forgiveness for the other word) uses
the rich concept of halal. The English-speaking viewer may have heard of halal meat (permissible by Islamic law), but in Farsi the expression means the kind of pardon that you give a wrongdoer that washes away all past ill deeds and resentment. This kind of pardon is often sought before an impending major separation, long travels, or possible death.

(12) An emotional high point of the film is when Sabzian finally meets the real Mohsen Makhmalbaf. The Iranian viewer would be especially touched by seeing Sabzian trying to kiss the director’s hand, an act of both great respect and contrition which the director tries to resist. Equally touching is the picture of the two riding on Makhmalbaf’s motorcycle and the director’s kindness towards his impersonator. Again, the theme of closing the distance between the director and his fans comes to mind. Also, when Sabzian has to ask the director for money to pay for the flowers he is buying for the Ahankhahs, we have a parallel to the earlier episode where Sabzian asks for money during a bike ride with Mehrdad.

(13) Makhmalbaf asks Sabzian which he found to be better: being Makhmalbaf or Sabzian? He then starts a sentence that purports to say that he himself has wearied of being Makhmalbaf, although this sentence is interrupted midstream due to the intermittent recording of the sound. At any rate, the irony of this statement is not lost on the Iranian viewer who knows that already in 1989, there were initial signs of the rift between Makhmalbaf and the establishment, as the pro-government newspapers were starting to attack his films and views.

(14) A typically Iranian sentiment is voiced by Mrs. Ahankhah when the police arrests Sabzian. She asks that he be allowed to finish his lunch. It goes against Iranian culture to interrupt someone’s meal, but this also hints at the affection that Mrs. Ahankhah may retain for Sabzian. After all it was she who started the whole charade.

(15) The final visit to the Ahankhah’s home is 40 days after the initial contact. In Iran, the 40th day is traditionally a day of remembrance (usually after a death). The gift of flowers (or sweets) when visiting another home is common practice, and mandatory if there is an element of reconciliation.

(16) In the closing titles of the film, in Farsi, each actor is identified by name and the role in the film. It should not go unnoticed that Kiarostami lists the role of Sabzian as player (bazigar)—not an impostor, or the accused, or the defendant, but a player. To me, this is a very conscious tribute that Kiarostami pays Sabzian.

(17) At various points of the film, Sabzian speaks of social barriers and distances. The key distance is between his love for cinema and the station in society (or as he puts it, lack of capital). He talks about the distance between the director and his public, saying explicitly that a director is not an individual of another cloth than the public. In the end, and through this film, these distances are closed, if only for the duration of this movie. Sabzian’s dream is realized. He is united with his idol (Makhmalbaf) and becomes the actor he always dreamt of. What endears him to Kiarostami is precisely what they share in common: they are both completely committed to cinema and live through it.

The rest of the film is documentary (or what passes for documentary when the subjects know a camera is on them). Kiarostami obtains permission from the court to film the trial (Sabzian is being tried for fraud) and records the testimony of the Ahankhah’s youngest son Merhdad and Hossain Sabzian. Occasionally, Kiarostami interrupts to ask a few questions himself (apparently in Iran this is legal). One of the fascinating aspects of this movie is the glimpse of the Iranian legal system. There is a judge but no lawyers, and both sides tell their stories themselves. Over the course of the trial, Sabzian is questioned persistently about his reasons for impersonating Makhmalbaf. Sabzian says he has always felt like a nobody, someone you wouldn’t think twice about after meeting him, much less approach on the street. He feels empowered when he’s Makhmalbaf—people respect him, they listen to his every word as if genius flows from his lips. Not only is it an ego trip, but it’s a way of making his obsession a reality. Sabzian loves cinema. He watches films over and over again, but he doesn’t experience film until he pretends he is a filmmaker. Ironically, with this movie Sabzian has finally become the subject of a film. His reality has transmuted into celluloid for the whole world to see.

Close-Up is densely packed with ideas and themes, so much so that repeat viewings are probably necessary to appreciate the depth of Kiarostami’s gaze. What impresses throughout the film is Kiarostami’s evident humanism. Sabzian is ultimately a sympathetic character because he loves movies for their ability to speak to him, the average Mo(hammed) on the street. Sabzian’s employment problems and poverty even provide a subtle social critique.. Sound fades out intermittently in these final scenes, when Makhmalbaf’s microphone goes on the blink. Kiarostami didn’t have the ability to reshoot the scenes because Sabzian could only meet his idol for the first time once. Kiarostami also chose not to redub the sound which reminds us that we are not only watching a film, but watching life happen as well.

Close-Up shows how movies can affect our everyday lives. Sabzian’s original impersonation was sparked by his love of film, and his intentions as Makhmalbaf were to make a film. The trial was affected by the filming taking place—certain revelations were brought about through Kiarostami’s presence. The entire story inspired the very movie I just saw. A film about real life experiences inspired a real life experience which in turn inspired another film, and now I’m writing about that film!
PRELIMINARY SCHEDULE FOR BUFFALO FILM SEMINARS XX, SPRING 2010:

Jan 12 Buster Keaton, *The General* 1921
Jan 19 Fritz Lang, *The Testament of Dr. Mabuse* 1933
Jan 26 Albert Lewin, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* 1945
Feb 2 Jules Dassin, *Night and the City* 1950
Feb 9 Charles Laughton, *Night of the Hunter* (1955)
Feb 16 Kon Ichikawa, *The Burmese Harp* 1956
Feb 23 Sam Peckinpah, *Ride the High Country* 1962
Mar 2 Costa-Gravras Z 1969
Mar 16 Peter Yates, *The Friends of Eddie Coyle* 1973
Apr 6 Werner Herzog, *Fitzcarraldo* 1982
Apr 13 Federico Fellini, *Ginger & Fred*, 1985
Apr 20 Michael Mann, *Collateral* 2004

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Buster Keaton in *The General*, 1921