

Abbas Kiarostami's *Close-Up* (1990)
(Can You Document the Comedic After-Fact?)
(Can You Recreate the Irony in Adulation?)

"I personally can't define the difference between a documentary and a narrative film. For instance, *Close-up*, a movie that's based on a true story, with real characters in the real locations, would seem to qualify as a documentary. But because it restages everything, it isn't a documentary, so I don't know which drawer to put it in. You know, even a photograph can tell a story, and the very fact that you've picked one scene and omitted other scenes, or selected one lens over another lens, shows that you've done something special and told a story with that photograph; you're intervening in reality. One day when I was wondering, What exactly *is* a documentary, as opposed to the other kinds of movies that we make? I finally decided that if you just attach the camera to the top of a bull's horns and let him loose in a field for a whole day, at the end of the day you might have a documentary. But there's still a catch here, because we've selected the location and the type of lens that we want. . . . [JR: And the kind of bull.] And whether it's a cloudy day or a sunny day. In my mind, there isn't as much of a distinction between documentary and fiction as there is between a good movie and a bad one."

—Interview with Jonathan Rosenbaum

Abbas Kiarostami's *Close-Up* is a film that works on multiple levels, but it works to implode those multiple levels:

1. The film is a fictional recreation of a real event using the actual persons who were involved.
2. The real event involved a person, Hossein Sabzian, pretending to be a real filmmaker, Mohsen Makhmalbaf.
3. The real event involves the court proceedings seeking to uncover what actually happened including the motives of Sabzian.
4. The filmmaker Makhmalbaf is known for making fictional accounts of real life and culture.
5. Kiarostami filmed the trial and even became involved before the situation was actually resolved.



Discussion Questions

1. Why do we care about movies? Actors? Directors? Should we treat them as heroes?
2. What actually is the real in such a film as *Close-Up*? Is this cinema vérité? Is this a documentary?
3. How does it change things that some of the events are reconstructed? That the people involved are acting out the past for the camera?
4. How does the culture of filmmaking and film viewing shape Sazian's motives? Was he guilty of fraud? Why and/or why not?
5. Is such a story newsworthy? What motivates the reporter?
6. Why does Kiarostami often let the "key" events take place off camera?
7. Is Kiarostami using the situation to his own advantage? Why and/or why not?
8. How does the class difference between Sabzian and the Ahankhahs shape their responses to each other?
9. How does Kiarostami's presence with two cameras at the trial shape the proceedings?
10. How often do we play roles in life to accomplish psychological ends? Do "human beings hide their true selves"?
11. Which scenes, even while replaying the past, also seem to comment on what happened, as if in retrospect?
12. Why does Sabzian say, "I'm tired of being me."? Why is even Makhmalbaf tired of being himself?

Kiarostami on Subverting the Notions of Sight and Sound in Traditional Cinema

"Basically anything seen through a camera limits the view of a spectator to what's visible through the lens, which is always much less than we can see with our own eyes. No matter how wide we make the screen, it still doesn't compare to what our eyes can see of life. And the only way out of this dilemma is sound. If you can show the viewer it's like peeking through a keyhole, that it's just a limited view of a scene, then the viewer can imagine it, imagine what's beyond the reach of his eyes. And viewers do have creative minds. If, for example, we don't see anything but hear the sound of a car suddenly screeching to a halt and then hitting something, we automatically have a picture of the accident in our mind's eye. The viewer always has this curiosity to imagine what's outside the field of vision; it's used all the time in everyday life. But when people come to a theater they've been trained to stop being curious and imaginative and simply take what's given to them. That's what I'm trying to change. . . .

"The sound is supposed to assume the role of what isn't visible. Throughout this movie it was a challenge to see if we could show without showing, to show what's invisible, and to show it in the minds of the viewers rather than on screen. And there was a desire also to go against what everyday entertainment movies do—the trend of showing an audience everything to the point of being pornographic. I don't mean sexually pornographic, but pornographic in the sense of showing open-heart surgery in all its gory details. I feel that whenever the viewer has the impulse to turn his head or avert his eyes, these are the unnecessary scenes that have been presented. My way of framing the action actually makes the viewers sit up straighter and try to stretch their necks so they can see whatever I'm not showing! There are similar scenes in Hou Hsiao-hsien's movies when he shows a character disappearing from the frame but is still talking, and you know that the character is still there, even if he's only sensed, felt, or heard. Just like someone can be next door in the bathroom; you don't even see them, but you know they're there. It's that feeling that the viewer would sense the presence of a character rather than seeing him that I want to create.

JR: It's like the idea of [Robert] Bresson's that whenever you can, you replace and image with sound.

AK: In fact, I've studied all his films for precisely that reason."