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'Close-Up'

Abbas Kiarostami, Iran, 1990

Strange as it may seem, fundamentalism has been good for film in Iran. While the cultures that have retained a cozier relationship with the great gods of global trade have seen their regional industries die hard under the weight of action adventurism, places like Iran, where U.S. is an ugly word, have been able to build



on artistic traditions that predate Columbus. Abbas Kiarostami, this year's Akira Kurosawa Award winner, is a filmmaker who, unlike many, stayed in post-shah Iran in spite of censorship fears, and profited from it — enjoying ovation on his home turf but even more so in neighboring European countries, where his mix of documentary fiction and poetic fact has reminded audiences at Cannes and beyond that any "newer waves" will not necessarily be arriving courtesy of Hollywood. Films in Iran have grown weedlike, developing in surprisingly beautiful ways almost because of limitations imposed by government and religious censorship; stories often get told through the eyes of children, which may make them feel innocent even while dissecting an entire social system. Kiarostami made a reputation with child-centered but not "children's" films like *The Traveler* and *Where Is the Friend's Home?*; and he also wrote Jafar Panahi's Cannes-winning *White Balloon*. With *Close-Up*, Kiarostami went in another direction. In the 1990 film about a man who impersonated Iranian director Mohsen Makhmalbaf, the director gets up close and personal with how important — even absurdly important — film as art is to Iran. The impersonator tells his story directly to Kiarostami's camera as well as to the judge: He so admired directors like Makhmalbaf and Kiarostami, who reveal the passions of means-free people like himself, that he wanted to feel what it was like to be one. So when he met a wealthy woman on a bus one day and insinuated himself into her life under the false pretense of location scouting and casting his film out of her house — getting her to believe him — he couldn't willingly give up the ruse. He even asked the family to go see one of his most worshiped Makhmalbaf films, *The Cyclist* — creating a kind of cine club by force. But when the cops and Kiarostami finally catch up with him — something about having the wrong hair color — the director feels for the guy. Rather than making a simple sensational doc at the impersonator's expense, he reassembles the "criminal," his "prey," and the man he tried to be in order to get to another level of fiction and a more entertaining level of truth. The impersonated director finally meets the impersonator in one of the film's prearranged, docu moments, and Makhmalbaf tells him, "I'm tired of being Makhmalbaf myself." Werner Herzog famously called it "the greatest documentary on filmmaking" he'd ever seen, and it's easy to see why. Asked for what reason he continued with the subterfuge, the faux director says it was the only time he could get everyone to obey him. "I earned their respect, and they did everything I told them." What more needs to be said? (Gerhard)