

"The Face to Face Encounter of Art and Law": Abbas Kiarostami's *Close-Up*

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Abstract: *The title of this article is taken from Abbas Kiarostami's commentary on his 1990 film Close-Up (Nema-ye Nazdik), one of the most memorable meditations on the medium of film and its relationship to the law. Kiarostami's commentary posits cinema's approach to the human subject to be superior to that of the law in its ability to defer judgment while allowing a close-up approach to the subject—an approach that, he wagers, can ultimately not only just(ly) represent but also transform that subject. However, an attentive reading of the movie itself complicates the easy dichotomy between law and art, nuancing their differences and showing the legal and artistic approaches to the human subject to be entangled, nowhere more closely than in the charged stylistic and ethical choice of the close-up itself. This essay follows the movie's complex interrogation of that encounter between law, art, and its subject. In the process, we see Kiarostami redefine cinema as a medium whose primary task is precisely to mediate: between law and its subjects, as between people and their clashing fantasies. To be able to do this, however, the film itself is transformed by the encounter with the law and its subject, opening the way for a new type of documentary filmmaking—not just antimimetic, but blatantly interventionist, interpersonal, and interactive.*

Keywords: *Kiarostami, Abbas / law and cinema / documentary / close-up / mug shot / freeze-frame*

One day I was asked: "How do you choose your lenses?"

And I responded: "Following the sense of justice."

—Abbas Kiarostami¹

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In *Close-Up*, I describe the face to face encounter of art and law. I think that lawmakers do not have enough time to pay attention to what happens in the interior of the human being. But art has more time. It has more patience. This is why the film relies on two cameras: the camera of the law, which shows the tribunal and describes the trial in juridical terms, and art's camera which approaches the human being for seeing him in close-up, for looking more profoundly at the accused, his motivations, his suffering. It's the work and the responsibility of art to look at things more closely and to reflect, to pay attention to people and to learn not to judge them too quickly.

—Abbas Kiarostami²

What does the choice of a lens have to do with the sense of justice? What does justice have to do with formal artistic choices and with the senses, in particular with the sense of seeing and being seen? How does cinema follow the sense of justice? Through a tracking shot? A camera placed inside a studio car in hot pursuit? Or—if justice is hovering high—maybe through a camera perched on top of a crane? Or maybe we are getting carried away by the moving image: If you agree with Kafka's K that "[j]ustice should be [represented] in repose, otherwise the scales will wobble and a just verdict will not be possible," then would it perhaps be more fitting to follow the sense of justice from a stationary camera, anchored firmly on its tripod?³ Is it by following the sense of justice that cinema comes to its straight-on, face-to-face encounter with the law?

Kiarostami's intriguing words invite these questions while pointing us to one movie—his 1990 *Close-Up*.⁴ In this essay, I will follow that lead, zooming in on *Close-Up*, Kiarostami's most memorable meditation on the medium of film and its relationship to the law. Kiarostami's commentary on the film, cited as the epigraph to this essay, claims that cinema's approach to the human subject is superior to that of the law. Specifically, Kiarostami claims that cinema is superior in its ability to defer judgment while allowing a close-up approach to the subject—an approach that, he wagers, can ultimately not only just(ly) represent, but also transform, that subject. However, an attentive reading of the movie itself complicates this easy dichotomy between law and art, nuancing their differences while showing their legal and artistic approaches to the human subject to be entangled, nowhere more closely than in the charged stylistic and ethical choice of the close-up itself.

LEGAL AND CINEMATIC APPROACHES TO THE SUBJECT

The film that furnishes the occasion for this meditation on cinema and the law is the filmmaker's investigation of a real case of imposture. In *Close-Up*, an unemployed film buff, Hossain Sabzian, is accused of misleading a respectable middle-class family, the Ahankhahs, into believing that he is the renowned Iranian director Mohsen Makhmalbaf. Our movie takes on the case, albeit a bit belatedly—the crime has already been committed and solved when the film begins. The beginning of the movie follows the police and a reporter excitedly pursuing “this sensationalist story, the kind that boosts sales,” as they drive in a cab to Sabzian's arrest. But once they enter the Ahankhah house, where Sabzian is to be apprehended, the camera abandons the police, the reporter, and the promise of a dramatic live encounter with the suspect and the victims. Instead, it stays behind with the bored cab driver, casually following him as he picks up some half-wilted flowers from the trash and kicks an old aerosol can down the road.⁵ The cabdriver, the only person in *Close-Up*'s Iran who declares himself completely uninterested in the cinema or in sensational stories, is only an episodic character in this film, but a prototypical character in Kiarostami's cinema, a cinema often shot from a moving vehicle by the director himself or by his kindredly mobile characters.⁶ The significance of this seemingly minor character is also underscored by his exceptional status in the movie. Kiarostami noted that all the participants in *Close-Up* interpreted their own roles “except for the driver, who acts.”⁷ The driver is the one character whose presence in the movie is not imposed by his actual participation in the events and who does not express himself; instead, the director specifically cast him to act as a medium or carrier of his vision.

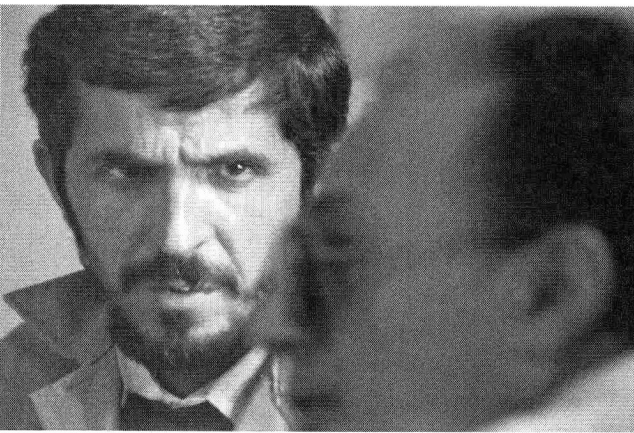
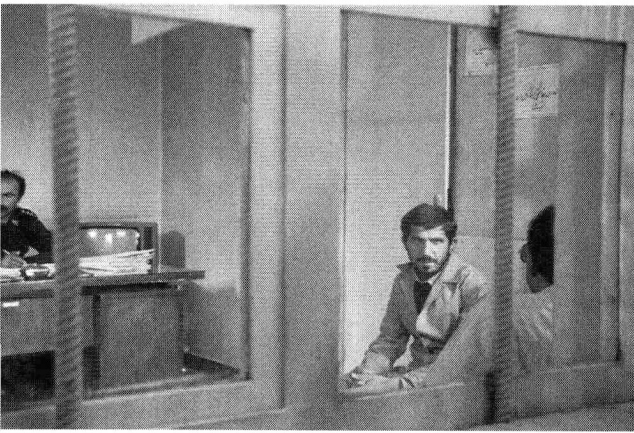
Kiarostami allows this crucial episodic character to derail our expectations and to steer our vision toward the leisurely contemplation of a piece of trash slowly sliding down the same road that we just came up in eager anticipation of the arrest. In this first scene, Kiarostami quietly parts ways with the police as well as with a whole tradition of reporting and filmmaking that excitedly and profitably follows them.⁸ This is a powerful ethical and aesthetic statement, but Kiarostami does not take himself too seriously. He just lets his camera wander away from the action and pick through the trash. This restless and

distracted gaze does not merely tactfully understate the weighty ethical choice made by the camera, but *de facto* drives it.

In time, we will come back to Sabzian and his case from a different angle: Kiarostami's actual approach to his subject marks another self-conscious departure from the framing view of the police. Both Kiarostami as a director and we as viewers first meet Sabzian when the director and his crew visit him in prison. Sabzian enters the prison visiting room and the film in profile, our view of him framed through the corrugated bars of the windows behind which the camera is initially situated (Figure 1).

The shot composition recalls police suspect identification procedures, an association that is reinforced by the policeman's demand that Sabzian identify himself: "Mr. Sabzian?" "Yes." On perceiving Kiarostami, Sabzian turns away from facing the identifying policeman, and thus shifts his profile view closer to a traditional cinematic three-quarter frontal angle (Figure 2).⁹ As Sabzian and Kiarostami start talking, the camera zooms through the barred windows to an extreme close-up shot of Sabzian, framed only by the back or profile of Kiarostami's head, which occupies a significant portion of the out-of-focus foreground (Figure 3). This passage from profile to three-quarter and finally to frontal view, a passage choreographed with the progressive zooming from long shot to medium shot and then to the extreme close-up, marks the progressive turning away from the initial identificatory view of the police and toward Kiarostami's signature close-up approach to his subject. Throughout the film, Kiarostami will further develop these techniques—the careful choreography of point of view and zooming, the repeated juxtaposition between profile and frontal view that structures the shot, as well as the peculiar shot that brings together the filmmaker and his subject. In these concrete artistic decisions, soon to become the particular artistic signatures of this film, we begin to see how in Kiarostami's practice, even more powerfully than in his programmatic statements, the choice of a lens is a question of justice and ethics as much as of art.

As the movie unfolds, we get to meet other characters in close-up, participate in their confrontations during the trial, and watch them reenact the scene of the arrest, which our director demonstratively missed in the opening sequence. We will begin to appreciate how well this case of imposture—which pits the accused and the victims against each other in the legal proceeding, even while both sides share a fantasy about redeeming their lives through cinema—fits a movie about filmmaking and the law. For the critical first fifteen minutes of the movie, however, we keep waiting to meet the main characters.



FIGURES 1, 2, 3: Sabzian enters the movie (Kiarostami, *Close-Up*, frame enlargements)

The first to finally enter the scene are the plaintiffs, the Ahankhah family—or rather, the camera finally enters the forbidding gate of their middle-class residence, installs itself in their living room, and approaches each family member in close-up. The Ahankhahs' first words announce that they want “to be favorably represented in the movie.” The family members are above all interested in projecting the proper image, and they immediately take the opportunity presented by Kiarostami's camera. Within a couple of minutes, we find out that behind the high gates and middle-class accoutrements hides a too-common story of unemployment—having finished their engineering degrees, both sons are unable to find jobs. The elder son has resigned himself to selling bread in a bakery, and the younger, Mehrdad, the family's spokesman throughout the movie, “has chosen art instead of selling bread.” It is this attempt to redeem Mehrdad's professional failure through a career in acting that has left the family vulnerable to the fake Makhmalbaf's promises that he will cast their son in his next movie and use their house as a set. Kiarostami resists the family's attempts to appropriate his camera for their own corrective self-presentation by refocusing the attention on Sabzian, who, in the family's initial assessment, “has attempted at best fraud and at worst burglary.” The question that drives Kiarostami's movie, and that he insistently poses to the Ahankhahs, the police, and to Sabzian himself, displaces the legal preoccupation with what Sabzian did or intended to do and instead asks “What kind of man is Sabzian?”¹⁰

The film's approach to its subject again deliberately diverges from that of the law, but this time it does not stay out of law's way. Instead, the film penetrates inside the initially barred doors of the courtroom and hijacks the legal proceedings. The law's main representative in the film, the judge, first puts up some resistance to cinema's meddling in the trial. He even attempts a little meddling of his own into cinema's affairs when he challenges Kiarostami's decision to make *Close-Up*, claiming that Sabzian's “case of petty fraud” is “unworthy of being filmed,” uninteresting compared to his more serious cases. Kiarostami firmly reestablishes the transgressed autonomy of his artistic domain, pointing out that his choice of Sabzian's case is based on its cinematic rather than legal interest. Having made its way into the courtroom by claiming artistic autonomy from the law, the camera proceeds to sharply defy law's autonomy. Not only does Kiarostami supplement the judge's one hour of questioning with nine hours of his own independent questioning of the subject, but, as he was later to admit, he also stages “one of the greatest lies” of his cinematic career.¹¹ Having “discharged the judge” and “borrowed

the accused” for a session of closed-door questioning, Kiarostami later added previously recorded close-ups of the judge to the footage taken in his absence.¹² The director takes over the courtroom, whereas the judge, who had condescendingly classified Sabzian’s case before the trial even began as “petty fraud,” is either discharged or, through a simple editing trick, made to listen patiently and nod his head through Kiarostami’s careful questioning of his subject. It is not only that the director takes over the trial court, driving the judge out. The film also offers an alternative to the law’s approach to the subject, displacing the main question that drives the trial and imposing its own style of questioning. Indeed, the film supplants the law in its own house, the courtroom. The law is artfully reduced to providing a free set for the film’s questioning of its subject, and to nodding its head in approval.

ACTING AS SOMEBODY (ELSE): THE FRAUD AND THE FILM ACTOR

Relegating the judge to the role of captive audience, the film offers the accused the amplest opportunity to answer its driving question: “What kind of man is he?” Sabzian starts with a negative self-description, “I am not a crook,” and is at a visible loss when Kiarostami prompts him further. He agrees that “what he did looks like fraud,” but when Kiarostami asks him “what it really was” he hesitantly responds: “I am really interested in the cinema.” *Close-Up* takes its time to fill in the gap between the question and the seemingly *mal-à-propos* answer, bringing to light the entangled links that tie this man’s self-definition to cinema. Part of the answer will sound surprisingly familiar to the Ahankhahs: he is, like the younger son, an intelligent, well-read, articulate young man, utterly humiliated by his position in society, who tries to overcome that position and distinguish himself through his interest in cinema. Kiarostami’s patient interrogation of his subjects in fact discloses the deep commonality of their fantasies about using cinema to trade in a humiliated self and instead project themselves as respected cinema actors/directors. The problem is that these fantasies, however similar, clash. Sabzian abuses the Ahankhahs to momentarily satisfy his fantasy, while falsely promising to fulfill their own fantasies about the son’s career as an actor. Instead of helping the Ahankhahs realize these fantasies, he exposes them as gullible. In their turn, the Ahankhahs need to shatter Sabzian’s fantasy about himself and publicly prove him a fraud to restore their blemished self-image.

Close-Up's remarkable achievement is not only that it depicts this clash of its subjects' fantasies about themselves and their relationship to the cinema while shedding light on these fantasies' profound similarities, but that it actually manages to fulfill the warring fantasies simultaneously. Sabzian, as well as the whole Ahankhah family, get to be in a movie, and what is more, they get to play themselves. Both Sabzian and Mehrdad had wanted to act as somebody else to improve their humiliated public personae as well as their own self-images. Kiarostami offers them the chance to more immediately affect that image by acting as themselves. And they both step up to the plate, as if this is the opportunity that they have been waiting for their whole lives. The presence of the camera in fact creates the same reaction in all the characters—like the Ahkankhahs, they want to appear in a positive light. Indeed, it seems that the only thing these people needed to become the people they wanted to be was a camera trained on them.

"A camera" may, however, be too vague. Kiarostami's is a very particular camera, one that does not disguise its presence, but that instead interrupts the trial proceedings to give an exposé on itself, its close-up and zoom abilities. In fact, Kiarostami makes sure that the protagonists are well aware that not only "a camera" but rather *two* cameras are trained on them, and that both cameras are recording them carefully. These are cameras that take the time to clear up misunderstandings, that give their protagonists the time to explain what other people, or even they themselves, might have a hard time understanding. These are cameras whose wielder takes it upon himself not only to record, but to actively shape the show that the protagonists put on.

Indeed, Kiarostami's cinema insistently invites his characters to put on a show—their very best one. It comes as no surprise, then, that by the end of the film Sabzian movingly asks for forgiveness, and Mehrdad, initially ruthless in his indictment, generously forgives Sabzian on behalf of his family in a speech that absolves Sabzian of his crime and traces it to unemployment. Kiarostami shows no qualms about using cinema's power and authority to influence his characters and their stories. All the characters, from the defendant and the policemen to the judge, appear acutely aware of the presence and authority of the camera. Kiarostami does not try to efface his presence or the strong effect it has on the characters. On the contrary, he plays it for maximum effect, openly trying to influence the course of events. As a result of an uncomfortable conversation with Kiarostami, who invokes his busy shooting schedule and addresses him from behind a rolling camera, the judge changes

his condescending attitude toward the case and even agrees to move the trial date ahead by more than a month, thus shortening Sabzian's stay in prison. Kiarostami ends his movie by flaunting the power of cinema to beneficially intervene in people's lives through a veritable cinematic *deus ex machina*. He brings in the real Makhmalbaf, who takes Sabzian from the prison gates to the Ahankhahs' and intercedes to promote their out-of-court reconciliation.

Kiarostami not only accepts but embraces a quality of documentary filmmaking that had long been treated as its dirty little secret: The camera does not simply capture action, but through its very presence affects it, primarily by prompting the filmed subject to act rather than just "be yourself." The epitome of a form of documentary filmmaking that, in Erik Barnouw's influential formulation, is deliberately not a record of events but their "catalyst," Kiarostami's work promotes a blatantly antimimetic, interventionist, interactive, interpersonal, and transformative cinema.¹³ In the process, Kiarostami redefines film as a medium whose job is first and foremost to mediate.

Kiarostami's cinema starts by mediating between an individual and his or her fantasies and self-image, and then moves on to mediate between people and their often-clashing fantasies. To be able to do this, however, cinema itself must be transformed. We have seen how Kiarostami refuses to approach his protagonists from the perspective of the police, of sensational media, or of traditional documentary, as subjects to be apprehended, profited from, or coolly observed from a distance. Instead, Kiarostami first meets his protagonist face to face when he visits him in prison and asks, "What can I do for you?" What he can and will do, of course, is make a film, which is his own way of doing something for someone in pain, like visiting a friend in prison or interceding on his behalf. Jean-Luc Nancy has argued that for Kiarostami, "capturing images is clearly an ethos, a disposition, and a conduct in regard to the world."¹⁴ More pointedly, filmmaking is here a way of being in the world for others, of acting for them while giving them the chance to act their best.

The kinds of acting that Kiarostami and his protagonists engage in push the boundaries of cinematic acting and raise the question of what makes certain acts legitimate and others criminal. Sabzian blames the impossibility of fulfilling his dream of becoming an actor/director, and thus of acting within the legally recognized terrain of cinema, for leading him to fraudulently act the part of a famous director in everyday life. Cinema is the place where playing at being somebody (else) is accepted, but only for the select few. Denied membership in the club, Sabzian enacts the fantasies that he could not safely fulfill through cinema in his

everyday life. The law immediately imposes sanctions for this confusion of the boundaries between art and life, and attempts to reinstate the high gates of art momentarily trespassed by Sabzian, whom it treats as an interloper. For his part, Kiarostami follows the trajectory of Sabzian's banished cinematic fantasies into everyday life, and then uses his press permit to allow the interloper to legally enter the domain of cinema. His cinema appears to refuse the strict gate-keeping that the law protectively provides for it. It shows itself willing to step outside of its own gates and to take a trip through the everyday. Through *Close-Up*, Kiarostami even brings the modest inhabitants of the everyday into the world of cinema. He acts as their fairy godmother by granting their wishes to become actors and by arranging a meeting with the iconic Makhmalbaf.

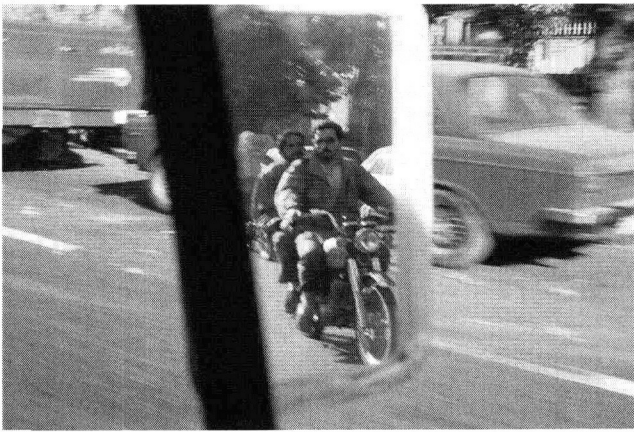
Admittedly, one wonders whether this munificence truly throws open the high gates of cinema that the law so vigilantly polices or whether, against the film's best intentions, it merely reinforces them. After all, when all is said and done and the credits roll on the screen, Kiarostami is the legitimate, powerful director who is in the privileged position of *acting for others*. He makes his film, and thus reinforces his standing within the establishment, by parading his out-of-place guests as they take their trip through the land of cinema. Kiarostami would likely encourage such questions about the unsavory power dynamics of filmmaking, which he himself has repeatedly addressed in his films, maybe most memorably in his encounter with his child subjects in *Homework*.¹⁵ Indeed, it appears undeniable that the boundaries between privileged and underprivileged, between cinema and the everyday, remain, but Kiarostami's encounter with his characters and his peregrinations through their territory have certainly left traces. Uninterested in mimesis, Kiarostami's cinema does not so much represent its subjects and their world as it engages them in a mutually transformative encounter. To say that Kiarostami's cinema is interactive does not simply mean that it actually changes its subjects—which it certainly does—but also that it is open enough to be changed by them.

"THE FILM WAS, IN A CERTAIN WAY, HIS": CINEMA TRANSFORMED BY ITS SUBJECT

Kiarostami's cinema allows itself to be changed by its subjects both with regard to the meaning of acting and with regard to the meaning of directing. We have just seen how in *Close-Up*, acting goes far beyond a traditional cinematic

relationship between an actor and the character he or she temporarily represents, becoming a transfiguration of the actor him or herself, an acting *on* oneself that can open up into an acting *for* others. Furthermore, the encounter between Kiarostami and Sabzian, the fraudulent director, also leaves a definitive trace on Kiarostami's own main "act" in the film—directing. This trace discreetly marks the last sequence of the film, one of the most memorable in Kiarostami's cinema. The sequence starts with Kiarostami's crew following Makhmalbaf as he waits for Sabzian after his trial, a take that, the crew anxiously notes, cannot be repeated, presumably because the repetition would miss Sabzian's spontaneous reaction. It soon becomes apparent that the crew is poorly prepared for the climactic moment. They fuss over Makhmalbaf's old and faulty lapel mike, which indeed intermittently loses sound, and they are positioned so far from the scene that we can hardly discern the characters in the background of a busy parking lot. Sabzian and Makhmalbaf are left in the background while the crew's amateurism gains the foreground of the scene, becoming the main show. We begin to suspect that this amateurism, which the director does not attempt to cover up, but instead flaunts, is indeed a show.¹⁶ Just as we ponder the meaning of this ruse, we are made even more aware of the crew and their camera as it conspicuously starts moving in pursuit of Makhmalbaf's and Sabzian's motorcycle. This sudden movement discloses the position of the camera aboard a bus whose cracked window becomes yet another hindrance to our view of the subjects (Figures 4–5).

Anyone familiar with Kiarostami's cinema recognizes his signature in the self-consciously framed takes from a moving car. For indeed, few filmmakers provide a better illustration of the theory that cinema works as a means of transportation, and that it often uses vehicles as a self-conscious stand in for itself. As the director himself put it: "I work behind my car's wheel. It's my only possible office, a very intimate place, like a small house. One faces an enormous screen—the windshield—that offers us an unending cinematic tracking shot. Like the cinema . . . [the car] is the best place that I know for looking or reflecting."¹⁷ According to Gilles Deleuze, "the mobile camera is like a general equivalent of all the means of locomotion that it shows or that it makes use of—airplane, car, boat, bicycle, foot."¹⁸ Kiarostami's cinema is not, however, the general equivalent of all means of locomotion, but the equivalent of a very particular means of locomotion, the personal car, with the connotations of individualism, closeness, and intimacy that Kiarostami has self-consciously developed throughout his career.¹⁹



FIGURES 4, 5: The bus view of Sabzian and Makhmalbaf (Kiarostami, *Close-Up*, frame enlargements)

As such, the high-angle view from the cracked window of a bus that clumsily moves through traffic in constant danger of losing track of its subjects represents a carefully marked departure from Kiarostami's signature car takes. It is Makhmalbaf who gives us a hint of the significance of this departure. For just as the camera starts moving, thus revealing its position inside the bus, Makhmalbaf asks Sabzian about "that time when he first met the woman in the bus." We are reminded of that first meeting, when Mrs. Ahankhah's doubts about Sabzian's claim to be Makhmalbaf revolved around one question: "How is it that you take public transportation? Famous directors usually have their own personal cars." The view from the bus is thus placed in immediate relationship

with Sabzian's point of view, a point of view that is socially and economically marked. Sabzian retorts that he takes public transportation to look for interesting subjects and then quickly asks whether Mrs. Ahankhah has seen his film, *The Cyclist*.²⁰ *The Cyclist* is a social protest film about a former cycling champion who has been reduced to such poverty that to pay for his wife's hospital bills, he vouches to cycle for seven days without interruption. Makhmalbaf's film moves in the claustrophobic circle described by the man's bicycle, identifying with his view of the world and pitting it against the exploitative view of the betting gangsters, who end up driving off with the cyclist's money.

Thus, for both Makhmalbaf and Kiarostami, cinema is not "the general equivalent of all means of transportation"; instead, cinema's association with particular modes of transportation reveals its economic, social, and political allegiances. By having his camera take the bus in this last sequence, Kiarostami makes another powerful, if characteristically understated, aesthetic and political statement. In the prolonged shots that make up this last sequence, the camera self-consciously follows Sabzian from a moving point of view—the bus—that had been earlier marked as his own. Sabzian's point of view, rooted in a particular social position, or rather traveling according to it, powerfully inflects Kiarostami's signature mobile take, altering its angles and rhythm to create this extraordinary closing scene. Here, Sabzian is no longer just the object but also the focalizing subject of the camera's gaze. He has not merely been ushered into the film as a curiosity that Kiarostami puts on display. "In a certain way," and through a certain mode of transportation, the film becomes his.²¹

FREEZING THE CLOSE-UP: THE MUG SHOT AND THE CINEMATIC POSE

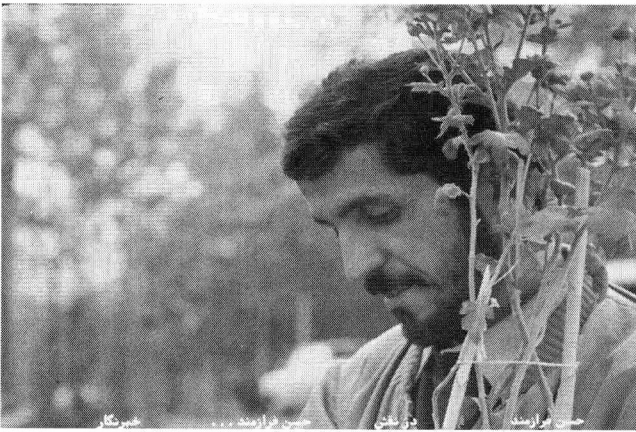
Sabzian's position as the subject of the film, or the question of the film's position toward its subject, is once again revisited in the very last shot of the film. Having arrived at the Ahankhahs' gate, Sabzian receives their out-of-court forgiveness and is declared a changed man, one whom his victims anticipate being proud of one day. Mr. Ahankhah's words project precisely the image of a respected Sabzian that he had fantasized about and attempted to promote through fraud. As if conjured by these words, the next and last shot ceremoniously freezes on a beautifully sunlit image of Sabzian, framed by flowers (Figure 7). The freeze-frame is held for a couple of minutes as serene music seeps into the picture and

the credits roll on. We have come a long way, traveling from the time when the camera refused to approach Sabzian with the police, through its close-up trial questioning designed to find out “what kind of man he is,” to this final image that opens toward a projection of the man that he could potentially become.

This is the end of the road that started with Sabzian’s desire to project a particular image of himself. Through the making of *Close-Up*, filmmaking is redefined as a response to “this desire and need to see one’s image. Because only the image allows us to believe in ourselves and to become conscious of our existence.”²² For Kiarostami then, “The magic of film,” consists in “doing something for people by simply recognizing their existence.”²³ The last freeze-frame shot of Sabzian is the gift that filmmaking can offer him, his image. As the last, and most lasting image of Sabzian that the film has to offer, this freeze-frame is earmarked to cross beyond the limited duration of the film and extend into everyday space by being incorporated into film posters, jacket covers, and pin-ups.²⁴ But as much as the film attempts to hold this privileged image of Sabzian through the freeze-frame, and even to project it beyond its necessary limit—the end of the film—Kiarostami recognizes that “film can only respond to Sabzian’s desires for attention and respect for a short interval,” after which “he might well reassume the role of Makhmalbaf or of someone else, in front of other people.”²⁵ The privileged image cannot hold the character forever, and the possibility of its future replacement by another image, that of Sabzian the fraud, insinuates itself. The fake, misleading, even criminal self-projection hovers at the limits of the idealized cinematic pose, marking both the before and after that frame the short, privileged duration of the film.

At first sight, the frozen close-up appears to be the very antithesis of the criminal image, what temporarily keeps it at bay, the artfully and lawfully authorized fulfillment of the subject’s desire to be represented. But this privileged image is never quite separate from its criminal counterpart, hovering on its margins and sometimes even overlapping with it. Starting from an initial sharp profile shot, the last ceremonial shot is achieved through the slightest turn of Sabzian’s head toward the camera (Figures 6–7).

This striking sharp profile recalls Sabzian’s first appearance in the film, in another sharp profile that was marked as the view of the police (see Figure 1). This closeness in the last sequence between the mug-shot-like profile and the frozen cinematic pose is not coincidental; after all, it is the desire for the privileged image that drives the subject to concoct the criminal, fraudulent image of himself. Although the frozen close-up appears here as the filmmaker’s gift



FIGURES 6, 7: The last sequence culminates in a freeze-frame (Kiarostami, *Close-Up*, frame enlargements)

in response to the subject's desire to be represented, this gift of an image is limited in time, and it comes with some strings attached. Looking closely at this idealized pose might give us some pause.

To start with, what deserves to be examined closely is the close-up. We have seen that Kiarostami programmatically establishes the use of the close-up camera as defining his, as opposed to the law's, approach to the subject. The close-up allows the filmmaker to look beyond the misleading appearance and reveal what the subject is really like. However, this embrace of the close-up might appear surprising in the larger context of Kiarostami's oeuvre. In fact, Kiarostami has expressly criticized the cinematic obsession with close-ups of the face as

being too reminiscent of legal photography: “I abandoned close-ups, preferring the long shots. . . . Cameramen act sometimes like the photographers of identity pictures. They think that they absolutely have to ‘frame both ears.’”²⁶ As Ciment and Goudet noted, and Kiarostami himself confirmed, his cinema usually “defends the image from tracking people, by excluding tracking shots and *inquisitorial close-ups* of the characters.”²⁷ Kiarostami is instead known for a self-conscious preoccupation with “a discreet camera” that he keeps from getting too close to the actor to avoid confronting him too aggressively “with this invasive technology” that takes away “his freedom and spontaneity,” to the point of “killing the subject” and “filming just corpses.”²⁸ Although he views cinema as a gift of images, Kiarostami is also acutely aware of its violence. The gift that the camera offers its subject, her image, can also kill.

Of all images, it is the close-up that Kiarostami deems most lethal. So why does he risk using it on Sabzian? Why film Sabzian in close-up so consistently and programmatically that this technique comes to name the film? Revisiting his decisions to film the trial in close-up and to expand the questioning time from the one hour of the actual trial to ten hours of filmed questioning, Kiarostami explains: “The scenes of the trial were also documentary, but certain things have been changed because I wanted to be closer to my subject. There were thoughts in the interior of this character of which he was not conscious, and it was necessary to make them come out and to make him say them.”²⁹ Kiarostami understands the violence of such an approach toward the subject, but accepts it as a necessity: “It’s necessary to put the knife in the heart and not hesitate to turn it into the wound in order to make what is most profound in the human being come out. This is the only manner in which you can produce an effect, or have an influence.”³⁰

Kiarostami’s assumption of the violence of the close-up when it comes to Sabzian reveals his willingness to carve out or even kill the unsavory parts of his subject and place him in the self-conscious position of coming up with his best self, which is here synonymous with putting on his best show. It appears significant that it is precisely when approaching Sabzian, his most saliently law-transgressing subject, that Kiarostami decides to make full use of both the self-censoring/disciplinary and self-creative/reformatory potential of the close-up. The close-up then might actually signal affinities, rather than a clear-cut divergence, between law’s and art’s approaches to their subjects.

After all, when law approaches the subject to make its own images of her, doesn’t it also create precisely a close-up, or rather two close-ups, one frontal

and one in profile, which together form the mug shot? If Kiarostami's commentary on his film trenchantly distinguishes between the law's and the cinema's approaches to their subjects, the actual film encourages more careful reflection on the relationship between its own rendering of the subject and the prototypical image of the criminal—the mug shot. We have seen that Kiarostami's representation of his subject starts with a blank frame, as the camera averts its gaze from Sabzian during his arrest by the police, refusing to offer us the arresting image of the captured prisoner or to record the police's own image of Sabzian, the mug shot, necessarily taken upon arrest. Banished in the beginning of the film, the mug shot comes back to haunt its most crucial moments.

The last freeze-frame, as my observant students never fail to mention, recalls the iconic last freeze-frame of François Truffaut's *400 Blows*.³¹ There, the freeze-frame is the culmination of a long last sequence through which we followed the delinquent hero as he leaves his place of confinement and runs toward the sea. When he can run no further, having reached the shore, he turns, as if cornered, toward the camera, which intrusively zooms in on him until it freezes on a close-up of his face (Figure 8).

This freeze-frame is the second one in *400 Blows*, and its meaning is derived in relation to the first use of the freeze-frame, which congeals the moving vision of our director's camera into a mug shot. In the police photographer's studio, the camera tracks the various stages of the making of the mug shot, as Antoine's face is framed first frontally, then forcefully turned for the profile close-up (Figures 9–11).

At this moment, the film camera's point of view is subsumed into the police photographer's camera, and our moving image freezes into the still police

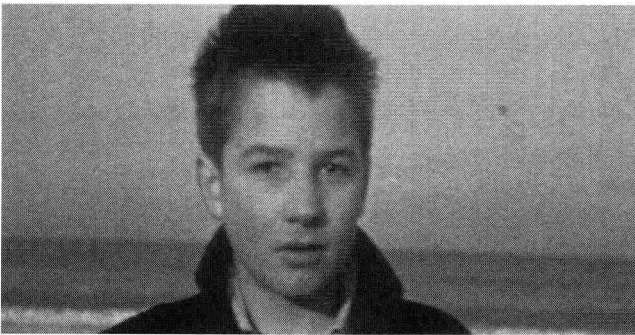
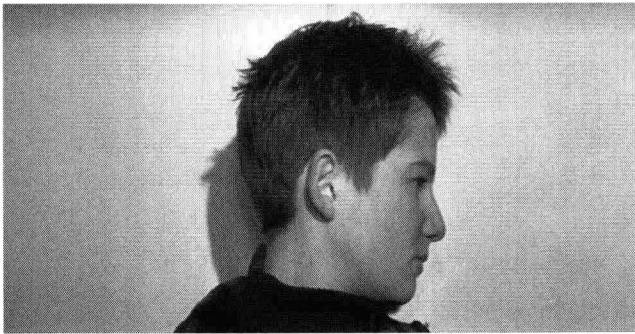
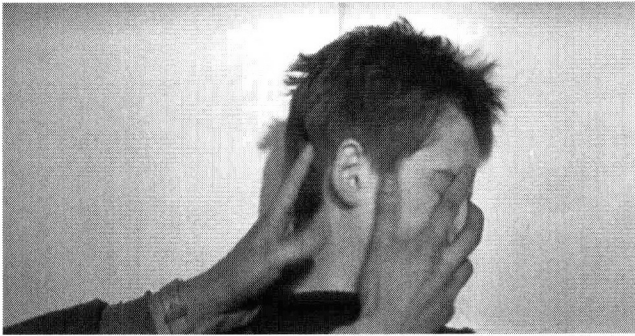


FIGURE 8: Last freeze-frame (Truffaut, *400 Blows*, frame enlargement)



FIGURES 9, 10, 11: In the police photographer's studio (Truffaut, *400 Blows*, frame enlargements)

photograph.³² The lingering profile of this mug shot casts a long shadow on Truffaut's last freeze-frame, a shadow that stretches, intertextually deflected, up to the last freeze-frame of *Close-Up*.

Furthermore, the trajectory of Sabzian's representations in the film is framed between two close-ups, the first one frontal (Figure 1) and the last one profile

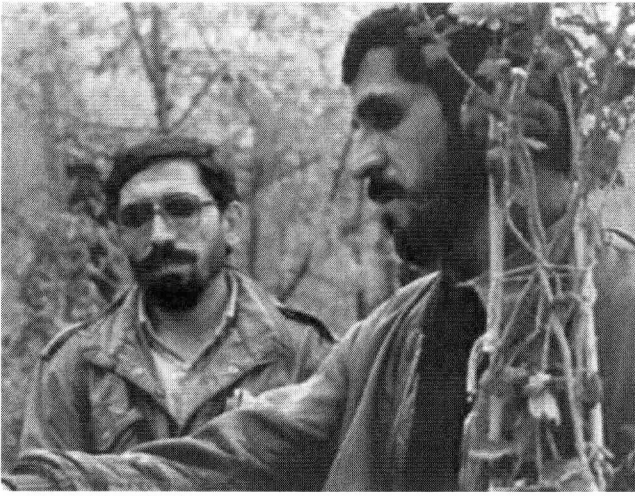


FIGURE 12: Publicity still of Makhmalbaf and Sabzian, *Close-Up*

(Figure 7), which, when juxtaposed, uncannily call to mind the double take of a mug shot. The peculiar juxtaposition between face and profile also structures the film's carefully framed publicity still of Makhmalbaf and Sabzian (Figure 12).

While viewing this still, the audience is bound to replicate the comparison between the two faces that led Mrs. Ahankhah first to suspect, and then to prove, Sabzian's fraud. For indeed, it is worth noting that Sabzian was apprehended precisely because of the identificatory powers of the photographic image, since it was a photograph of Makhmalbaf printed in a film magazine that Mrs. Ahankhah used to uncover Sabzian as a fraud. The image appears forever open to being used for identificatory, policing purposes. To a certain extent, any image has the potential to turn into a mug shot. Indeed, in the absence of actual mug shots, the police often cut faces seemingly snugly nestled in family photos or in graduation pictures and paste them into their records or wanted posters. How, then, could an image of an already-arrested suspect like Sabzian, one apprehended precisely thanks to the identificatory powers of a photograph, completely escape its association with the mug shot? Kiarostami never pretends that it does. While attempting to go beyond the image of Sabzian the fraud, coaxing a new image out of him and projecting it onto the screen, Kiarostami does not completely erase the contours of the initial criminal image of Sabzian that was already well-established at the beginning of the film. Instead, he reflexively alludes to it. The inquisitive close-up lens

paired with the filmmaker's unrelenting ten-hour interrogation of his subject on trial, the repeated use of the strongly marked juxtaposition between profile and frontal shot, and the peculiar use of the freeze-frame in the last shot, all recall the criminal image—the mug shot—that the film attempts to supplant.

Allan Sekula has argued that behind the artistic and ceremonial use of photography in bourgeois portraiture, looms, repressed, the forensic, identificatory, and disciplinary functions of photography.³³ It is his project to reveal how behind each ceremonial portrait looms the shadow of a mug shot, and how the artistic pedigree of photography has long covered up its less savory work for the police. Kiarostami's project also shows the police and the artistic uses of the image to be entangled, nowhere more closely than in the close-up itself. But his achievement seems all the more extraordinary, since the trajectory of his project goes in the opposite direction from Sekula's. He starts out approaching a criminal, his image already pinned down in police records and the popular press, and uses filmmaking to coax out the projection of a different image of and by the subject, an image that, in the last frozen shot, uncannily comes to resemble a ceremonial portrait. This ceremonial portrait never denies its links to the mug shot that precedes it, nor its possible future transformation into yet another mug shot. For cinema can only freeze the privileged image for a precious, short interval. And yet this interval is precious precisely because, rather than coercively fixing his subject in the right pose, Kiarostami's reflexive freeze-frame allows Sabzian the time to slip away from the camera and to join the audience in taking pleasure in his own representation, or else simply to use the time to engage in new self-projections, whether self-corrective or criminal. Assuming the limitations of his privileged image, perishable to the point of requiring freezing, possibly expired or obsolete by the time the film reaches its audience, Kiarostami recognizes his subject's ultimate freedom to outlive his frozen cinematic representation.

1. Michel Ciment, "Entretien avec Abbas Kiarostami: Les possibilités du dialogue," 369 *Positif* 78 (1991).

All translations from French are mine unless otherwise noted.

2. Stéphane Goudet, "Entretien avec Abbas Kiarostami: Manipulations," 442 *Positif* 95 (1997).

3. Franz Kafka, *The Trial*, trans. Mike Mitchell (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 104.

4. *Close-Up*, dir. Abbas Kiarostami (2010; The Criterion Collection, 1990, DVD).

5. For another reading of this episode, which focuses on the aerosol can and interprets it as "the detail of naturalism which is treated with the self-consciousness of modernism and turned into a metaphor for

- the means of art," see Gilberto Perez, *The Material Ghost: Films and Their Medium* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 263–65.
6. Laura Mulvey, *Death 24x a Second* (London: Reaktion Books, 2006), 132.
 7. Goudet, *supra* note 2, at 94.
 8. Jean-Luc Nancy notes that "in the closing shots [of *Close-Up*] the camera appears at first to behave in a policing mode, by investigating with curiosity, in searching for a view, for one more vision to seize of the pretender. . . . In reality it neither spies on anything nor taps it . . . but it opens onto what is real in all of cinema." Jean-Luc Nancy, *L'évidence du film: Abbas Kiarostami*, trans. Christine Irizarry (Brussels: Yves Gevaert, 2001), 22. I believe that this reference to and departure from a policing mode is carefully choreographed from the very first shots of Kiarostami's film.
 9. Thus, commenting on the pervasiveness of the three-quarter frontal shot in mainstream cinema as well as on the significance of major departures from it, David Bordwell writes: "In the late 1910s, mainstream cinema has characteristically positioned characters at a three-quarter frontal angle. (Interestingly, some psychologists have suggested that this is the most informative posture for recognizing faces and tracing eye movements)." David Bordwell, *Figures Traced in Light: On Cinematic Staging* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 162.
 10. Kiarostami has confessed that it is this question that he pursues throughout the movie that had initially stirred his interest in Sabzian. "I had discovered that he was not a criminal and I wanted to know who he truly was." Ciment, *supra* note 1, at 81.
 11. Goudet, *supra* note 2, at 95.
 12. *Id.*
 13. For Barnouw's discussion of catalyst-type documentary, see Erik Barnouw, *Documentary: A History of the Non-Fiction Film* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 253–61.
 14. Nancy, *supra* note 8, at 16.
 15. Jonathan Rosenbaum briefly discusses this self-critical dimension of Kiarostami's cinema in a review of Mohsen Makhmalbaf's work: "[T]he problem posed by both filmmakers about their authoritarian roles as filmmakers in an authoritarian society remains the same. In films as diverse as *Homework*, *Close-Up*, and *Life and Nothing More* . . . , *Salaam Cinema*, *The Actor*, and *A Moment of Innocence*, both artists are either literally or figuratively inserting themselves as characters in their own fictions and documentaries and charting their interactions with working-class Iranian society—an ongoing project of self-interrogation that has few counterparts in Western cinema." Jonathan Rosenbaum, "Tortured Genius: Films by Mohsen Makhmalbaf," *Chicago Reader*, Apr. 10, 1997.
 16. Kiarostami later confirmed the suspicion, which he carefully planted in the movie, noting that the problems with the lapel mike were in fact staged. Goudet, *supra* note 2, at 95.
 17. Michel Ciment & Stéphane Goudet, "Entretien avec Abbas Kiarostami: Une approche existentialiste de la vie," 442 *Positif* 85 (1997).
 18. Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 22. For a fascinating development of the idea of cinema as a "spectatorial means of transportation" see also Giuliana Bruno, *Atlas of Emotion: Journeys in Art, Architecture, and Film* (New York: Verso, 2002), 20.
 19. Further elaborating on the significance of the automobile in his cinema, Kiarostami reiterates his assessment of the car as "a very intimate place" not only for himself but also for his characters: "In the car, people become intimate very quickly." Ciment & Goudet, *supra* note 17, at 85. For further discussion of the role of the car in Kiarostami's cinema, see Nancy, *supra* note 8, at 28, 52.
 20. *The Cyclist*, dir. Mohsen Makhmalbaf (1998; Facets, 1989).
 21. It is Kiarostami himself who "in a certain way" assigns ownership of the movie to Sabzian: "When I went to the house of the rich family for reconstructing the arrest, Sabzian told the son that he never lied to them, that he had indeed told them that he would come with his film crew and that was what he was doing! This moved me very much. What he was saying at that time could have seemed to be a

- lie, but at the same time it was true, the crew was there. After forty days, we arrived with the camera, the projectors, the electricians, and in a certain way we were at his service, this film was his." Ciment, *supra* note 1, at 81.
22. Goudet, *supra* note 2, at 96.
23. *Id.*
24. Mulvey, *supra* note 6, at 170.
25. Goudet, *supra* note 2, at 95–96.
26. Abbas Kiarostami, "Le monde d' A. K.," in *Abbas Kiarostami: textes, entretiens, filmographie complète*, ed. Laurent Roth (Paris: Cahiers du cinema, 1997), 31–32.
27. Ciment & Goudet, *supra* note 17, at 86, my emphasis. In Bazinian fashion, Kiarostami has also blamed the close-up for limiting the freedom of the spectator, and expressed his preference for long shots, which he believes allow the viewer to choose where to focus his gaze within the shot, thus creating his/her own close-ups. Kiarostami, *supra* note 26, at 30–32.
28. Ciment & Goudet, *supra* note 17, at 85; Goudet, *supra* note 2, at 100.
29. Ciment, *supra* note 1, at 80.
30. Ciment & Goudet, *supra* note 17, at 86.
31. *The 400 Blows*, dir. François Truffaut (2007; The Criterion Collection, 1959, DVD).
32. The affinities that these two freeze-frames posit between the forceful hand of the police and that of the director have been noted before by Garrett Stewart in his analysis of *400 Blows*. In *Close-Up*, the last freeze-frame transfigures rather than reiterates the alluded-to mug shot; as such, this sequence cannot be read as a somber critique of filmmaking's arrest of its subject, a critique that Stewart reads into Truffaut's use of freeze-frames. Garrett Stewart, *Between Film and Screen: Modernism's Photo Synthesis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 135–39.
33. Allan Sekula, "The Body and the Archive," 39/4 *October* (1986).

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