

Documentary and Fiction in Kiarostami's *Homework* and *Close-Up*

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Close-Up (1990) and *Homework* (1988) were completed one after the other and bear similarities that are notable and mark Kiarostami's style, which often transgresses limited definitions of documentary and fiction. These films employ the documentary mode extensively, though Kiarostami resisted the label. They are about very different topics, but they share the director's personal interest and curiosity in uncovering the motivations that lead the main characters, real life people who have acted against normative expectations. *Homework* (1988) was even defined by the director as a documentary report. It appears as a straightforward educational film about the problem of homework in elementary schools in Iran. It focuses on one school in a working-class neighborhood of Tehran and features interviews and statistics of parents' involvement in their children's nightly homework. However, the film is also reflexive and highlights the

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filmic process and Kiarostami's presence and role in shaping it. Kiarostami's patient and incisive questioning takes the film beyond the objective documentary stance to an engaged and interactive one. His acclaimed film *Close-Up* (1990) focuses on real characters and a real legal case. Hassan Sabzian was charged for impersonating the famous Iranian director, Mohsen Makhmalbaf and deceiving an upper middle-class family. Kiarostami approached this case after reading about it in *Soroush* magazine and was immediately intrigued.¹

Close-up defines the complex way in which Kiarostami employs the real and gives it fictional elements to investigate the deeper meaning behind the characters' motivations. Kiarostami was moved by this working-class man's dreams of cinema, which led him to deceive a family and brought about his arrest. Through dramatized and controlled reenactments, the director intervenes to recreate Sabzian's story. This paper examines the two films and explores how Kiarostami employs reality and the documentary form extensively, even while insisting his films are works of fiction.

The two films employ practices of documentary film, such as focusing on real characters and examining their real lives. The definitions and practices of documentary film have evolved over time from the strict observational mode practiced in the 1960s by Ricky Leacock and the Maysles. This kind of documentary required filmmakers to be invisible "flies on the wall." As Iranian filmmaker and theorist Pirooz Kalantari explains it, documentaries no longer have to use realism stylistically. Documentaries are not defined by their portrayal of pure reality without intervention. They are defined by the interactions of the filmmaker with the real world, making that the main subject of films.² In *Close-up* Kiarostami manipulates the characters' actions on film and recreates certain events that happened and at least one that did not take place in the historical world. However, his main

¹Mehdi Sahabi, "Reenacting Reality, In Search of Reality," (interview) *Film Magazine*, 88 (1990), 66.

²Pirooz Kalantari, "A Longshot and a Close-up: A Glance at Kiarostami and Documentary Film," *Film Magazine*, 513 (11 September 2016), 21.

subject is a real man and a real case. Sabzian is enamored by cinema and deceives a family in order to live out his dream. For Sabzian and the family, the simulacra of cinema is just as real as real life. Consequently, the film becomes a tangle of the real and the creative in the hands of Kiarostami. In the concluding scenes, Kiarostami and Makhmalbaf advise Sabzian that by performing the deception, he actualized his promise to the family – to have them participate in a film and meet the famous director.

The relationship between documentary and fiction has been addressed by many documentary theorists. Bill Nichols claims that documentary offers the viewer access “to a shared historical” world, not a constructed one, but “*the* world,” where bullets really kill and decisions can carry life and death consequences.³ What distinguishes documentary films from reality itself is that *not* everything in the world that a documentary creates is discursive, “even if their meanings and social values are.”⁴ The historical world extends beyond the filmed world and it is the director who shapes it and gives it meaning, whether by using interviews, observational footage, or reenactments. Michael Renov points to the problems of reproducing reality in documentaries, “The duplication of the world, even of what we know most intimately – ourselves – can never be unproblematic.... Mimesis (even as photographic representation) means producing simulacra which are the equivalent of their historical counterparts. Signifying systems bear with them the weight of their own history and materiality.”⁵ This awareness of the gap between reality and its reproduction has led documentary filmmakers in recent years to move away from purely observational or expositional documentaries to freely use artifice and reflexivity in order to recount the historical world. Jay Ruby proposes that documentarians employ reflexivity to grapple with the problems of objectivity and the presence of the

³Bill Nichols, *Representing Reality* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1991), 109.

⁴Nichols, *Representing Reality*, 109.

⁵Michael Renov, *Theorizing Documentary* (London: Routledge, 1993), 26.

camera, as well as presenting the reality of their own understanding and feelings.⁶ In both films Kiarostami foregrounds the cinematic process to present the viewer with his interpretations of reality. In *Close-up*, he recreates certain events and places the characters in those situations. He intervenes in actuality in order for the viewer to understand and contemplate the character's complex motivations. Jonathan Rosenbaum labels some of Kiarostami's films, "controlled documentaries."⁷ He argues that in *Homework* and *Close-up* Kiarostami was deconstructing the documentary form.⁸

Is *Close-up* any less a documentary than Flaherty's *Nanook of the North*, in which a pristine Inuit life, which had already been transformed by Western trade, was recreated for the benefit of audiences in the 1920s? When Kiarostami visited the Island of Aran where Robert Flaherty shot *A Man of Aran*, he commented on the gap between the reality of the island and how it is represented in Flaherty's film. His statement also sums up his outlook on the role of the director:

When we visit places where they have shot the films in, we are often surprised, and find it hard to believe the film was shot there... [In films] we are subject to the power of storytelling that offers us a reality much different than its true reality... We see it from the director's point of view, his frame. Left on our own we tend to look around freely, and lack the kind of concentration we have in movie theatres. While encountering reality we are not concentrating and we are not guided. That's why we roam around, and fail to see what we need to see...⁹

Kiarostami utilizes the documentary form but intervenes in it

⁶Jay Ruby, "Reflexivity and the Documentary Film," in *New Challenges for Documentary*, ed. Alan Rosenthal (University of California Press, 1988), 71.

⁷Jonathan Rosenbaum, "From Iran With Love," *Chicago Reader* (1995), www.jonathanrosenbaum.net/1995/09/from-iran-with-love/.

⁸Jonathan Rosenbaum & Mehrnaz Saeed-Vafa, *Abbas Kiarostami* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 15.

⁹Jamshid Akrami, *A Walk with Kiarostami* (video-recording, 2005), <https://vimeo.com/214245067>.



extensively to present his questions or perspective. He includes some observational elements in *Homework* – the images of children arriving at school or during their break. For most of the film he uses a formal interview set-up, a dark room with lights and the cameras. It makes the students quite aware of the filming process. However, by also including shots of the camera and himself and his voice, he signals viewers to be aware of the reality of the filmmaker's process and presence.

Early in *Homework* Kiarostami explains to a bystander off-camera that the film is a visual exploration of children's homework because his own kids have difficulty completing their work each evening. In *Close-up* (1990) the director or his voice is often present and visibly directs the events. He tells the judge presiding over the case that he is interested in the case because it is about cinema. There are shots of the rolling camera, the clapboard, and discussions about the cameras, which increases the visibility of the process. In the court scene in *Close-up*, he informs the accused that one of the cameras is framing him to record his explanations, establishing his own presence as director. The reflexive mode shows the viewer how the camera and the director intervene in the process of representation. Rather than letting us focus solely on the story or the topic of the film, it highlights the encounter between the filmmaker, the subject, and the viewer and allows us a space of awareness in relation to what we are watching.¹⁰ This strategy serves a political function as well, since it casts doubt on the process of representation and the authenticity of documentary sound and image by calling attention to the intervention of the filmmaker.¹¹

In the two films the social actors who play themselves are deemed guilty by those around them, but their stories are retold through the director's examination of the underlying meaning behind their acts. The court scene in *Close-up*, for example, appears as a documentary

¹⁰Nichols, *Representing Reality*, 60-61.

¹¹Nichols, *Representing Reality*, 61.

scene, but was created by the director as a documentary style sequence to dramatize the accuser and the accused's points of view.¹² In actuality, there was mediation between the family and Sabzian, where the charges were dropped and there was no need for a court appearance. In this way *Close-up* extends beyond the historical world to present the fleeting truth which Kiarostami seeks.

Nichols defines the interactive mode in documentaries as when the director is no longer just an observer behind the camera, but acts as instigator, provocateur, participant or mentor in the film.¹³ There are ethical issues regarding how far the presence of the filmmaker provokes or interferes in the revelation of the truth. There is an inherent inequality between the director and the social actors, particularly if they are young children. In *Homework*, the interactive and reflexive modes remind the viewer of the filmed process and highlight the imbalances that the children endure when they are questioned by adults. In *Close-up*, the reflexive mode makes us aware of how cinema has intervened in Sabzian's life, changed it, propelled it towards a cinematic resolution.

Homework

Homework is ostensibly a documentary about the problem of homework in a public boys' school in Tehran that mainly uses children's testimonials. Kiarostami makes his presence and intervention prominent in repeated shots of his face and voice, of the camera, and cameraman. He listens to the school boys and guides them to explain the difficulties they face in completing their work. A range of first and second graders, nervous and teary, bold and shy, explain in interviewed examinations, why they have not completed their assignments. Kiarostami asks them about their home life after school. They are distracted by their chores, siblings, television, or family visitors. Most do not get adequate help in completing their

¹²Ahmad Talebinejad, "Memories of Kiarostami: Elegy for a Heavyweight," *Film Monthly*, 513 (11 September 2016), 26.

¹³Nichols, *Representing Reality*, 44.



work, as many of their parents are illiterate.

During this period Kiarostami was working for the state funded Kanoon (Center for the Intellectual Development of Children and Young Adults), which produced many documentaries. Hamid Naficy explores the counterhegemonic tendencies of those who worked at the Kanoon, including Kiarostami. These filmmakers often made films about children, with underlying messages about the ills of society.¹⁴ The scenes of children in the school yard reciting slogans in support of the Iranian forces fighting Saddam or a young boy's thoughts regarding the fighting at home, which Kiarostami likens to war, point to this analogy. The film also includes elements of a traditional documentary; it incorporates a montage sequence, where a female voice-over narrates the results of hundreds of questionnaires that were distributed among parents. It shows that in the late 1980s in that school, 37% of parents were illiterate and could not help their children and a large number were overworked and tired and requested the school to exempt them from having to help their children with homework.

From the first shots of *Homework* reflexivity is established as a dominant trope. On their way to school the children playfully address the camera and comment on being filmed. A group of them approach the director and ask what the film is about. Then the off-screen voice of a passerby is heard who questions the director on whether the film is documentary or fiction. Kiarostami responds that the film is not fictional and unlike his earlier film, *The First Graders* (1986) which was scripted, this film has no script and is based on an idea. He wanted to make it because he had difficulty with his own children regarding their nightly homework. It is not clear if the question was presented to him or if it was scripted.

A series of establishing shots show the start of a school day with the children lined up to sing anthems praising Islam's Imams and

¹⁴Hamid Naficy, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema*, vol. 2 (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 404.

supporting the Iranian war against Iraq's Saddam Hussain (1980-1988). We then witness a series of formal interviews in which young boys speak directly to the camera and answer questions from the director. In the first interview set-up, an establishing shot shows the director, the interviewee, the camera, and lights, in a room prepared for the interview. Kiarostami comments about the lighting and gives directions to his cameraman. It is an unequal set up, where the director and his crew appear on one side of a typical teacher's desk and a young, vulnerable boy stands or sits on the other side. Some answer shyly, some are reticent, some are outspoken, and a few are terrified. Kiarostami speaks gently with the boys and sometimes teases them about how much cartoons they watch. He addresses them like adults and for the most part does not interrupt their responses. Many of the interviews are long scenes that give us a full picture of the boy's responses.

The director pursues the theme of punishment in several of the interviews, exposing the underlying problem for the children. As Naficy states, it is a counterhegemonic strategy to let the children confess their pain of facing punishment by their parents or teachers.¹⁵ A few boys cannot even define the meaning of "encouragement" or "praise", but they all know the meaning of punishment. A traumatized teary-eyed child claims his brother doesn't let him study and no one helps him. Following that interview an engaged parent appears in front of the camera and says he wants to express his views regarding this problem. He speaks for the director in stating the unreasonable pressures that parents and teachers place on the kids. During recess, a sequence of children is seen chanting slogans and beating their chests with religious songs. These scenes point to the institutionalization of physical pain and suffering in Shia Iran.

Documentary's association with the observational or *verité* style is a strong element of the documentary form, where actual events are recorded in an unscripted and uncontrolled manner. However, most

¹⁵Naficy, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema*, 75.

documentaries, even observational ones demonstrate the director's control in shaping the film. In particular, the interview process is a set-up common to documentaries, where the director or interviewer poses the questions and directs the flow of the exposition. In this film, Kiarostami mainly uses the interview process to capture a number of testimonials from young children to distill several of the problems of the Iranian educational system in the late 1980s, only a few years after the Revolution and in the midst of an eight-year war with Iraq.

After several scenes of interviews with students posing similar questions, a pattern emerges of the difficulties students face with all the expectations placed on them. Following a few such interviews, Kiarostami pauses on Majid's case. Kiarostami's slow and methodical examination prepares us for the final revelation that clarifies why Majid cannot do well in school. It is not for a lack of effort, but because of the crippling fear of punishment. Majid is a traumatized young boy who can barely speak to Kiarostami. In the midst of his sobs he asks that his friend stay with him during the interview.

Kiarostami tries to calm him and persists to understand what the source of his anxiety is. Majid's father is interviewed separately and he explains the troubles of his young boy, who may have learning difficulties. His young friend is also interviewed and explains that the teacher has punished Majid often and that is why he is terrified. After the boy finally calms down, with his friend by his side, he explains that he is upset because he has not prepared for his religion class. Kiarostami asks him if he can remember any of his lessons. He volunteers to recite a poem he has learned for the class. Surprisingly, Majid delivers the poem eloquently. With his friend close to him, in a strong voice he praises God's beautiful creations – the stars and the universe, nature, the trees and the sky, and hearts full of joy. The film ends with a freeze frame of Majid and his friend. A choral soundtrack emerges singing the same poem over the closing titles. This musical emphasis shows the director's belief that young people need to experience joy. Majid's transformation on camera is a moving revelation.

Over the course of his career Kiarostami has shown his genius in recognizing and resting on small stories and their power to uncover universal human themes. His complicated approach merits further examination regarding the relationship between the director and subject and the treatment of reality in films. Ziegfried Kracauer defines a strategy that Kiarostami seems to use. “Found stories” are important sources for documentaries – stories that are found in the material of actual physical reality. “When you have watched for long enough the surface of a river or lake you will detect certain patterns in the water which may have been produced by a breeze or some eddy. Found stories are in the nature of such patterns.”¹⁶

Closeup

In *Close-up* the character of Sabzian, who impersonated the famed director Makhmalbaf, fascinated Kiarostami. He read about him in a magazine article and set out to research the story. In the course of the film, Sabzian emerges as a complicated imposter, a fallen hero, who with his confessions and actions makes us think deeply about cinema and the widespread desire to get close to and emulate a celebrated director. Kiarostami’s focus on this “found story” and Sabzian’s behavior point to a common human condition: the need to be seen and be counted. The film moves between documentary set-ups, as the director inquires about Sabzian and his case, and reenacted sequences in which all the people involved in the story play their own parts.

The film starts with a dramatized reenactment. The journalist who wrote the original story in a magazine takes two soldiers to arrest the accused Sabzian. In the taxi the journalist tells the driver the story of the man’s deception. Though we don’t know if the story happened in this precise manner or not, the reenactment has many elements of the real. All the characters play their own roles. Some of the conversations are improvised as they ask passersby for directions to the house of the plaintiffs, the Ahankhah family. When the police and the journalist go in to arrest the culprit, the camera remains

¹⁶Ziegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 245.

with the taxi driver instead of following the main action. The bored driver walks around aimlessly, then kicks a spray can down the slope and the camera stays on a long shot of the can until it stops rolling. The lengthy shot which digresses from the main story points to the director's lack of interest in showing what is obvious, but is rather interested in following the subtle details, which allow the underlying truth to emerge.

The sequences that follow feature Kiarostami himself researching the story in several reenacted or documentary scenes, including a police station, at the home of the Ahankhah family and in prison where Sabzian is held. In the home of the Ahankhahs, they complain that the magazine article showed them as a gullible family, and that various people like the journalist (and possibly the filmmaker) have come to them to gain something from their misfortune. They want to defend themselves and tell their side of the story. Kiarostami asks them where Sabzian is held and they guide him to Ghasr prison.

The camera is not allowed inside the prison visiting room and we watch through a window frame as Kiarostami meets Sabzian for the first time. Rosenbaum claims this scene was also recreated, though its framing, the characteristics of the location, and Sabzian's behavior point to its documentary nature. There is a lot of activity going on in the background and Sabzian seems to be unaware of the camera. The director who is mic'd asks him if he can do anything for him and Sabzian responds that he wants his pain to be visualized. The camera zooms in to give us a closer shot of the two of them talking. We only see Kiarostami's back and Sabzian's face. As Rosenbaum states, Kiarostami's approach throws the veracity of all scenes into uncertainty, which is the point.¹⁷ Because truth is elusive.

Sabzian says he admitted to embezzlement but his motivation was his love for art and cinema. He asks Kiarostami to give his message to Mohsen Makhmalbaf – that he lives with the director's film *The Cyclist* (1987). During this period, Makhmalbaf was Iran's most

¹⁷Rosenbaum and Saeed-Vafa, *Abbas Kiarostami*, 17.

famous director. He had emerged from a humble background, became a revolutionary filmmaker, and then a critically acclaimed cineaste, who made dramatic and surreal films about the plight of returning war veterans and the poor. *The Cyclist* is an allegorical film about a poor and desperate Afghani immigrant, who raises money for his ill wife's medical care by riding a bicycle non-stop for a week. In the prison encounter, Sabzian is established as pensive and modest character that rises above his petty crime. Kiarostami's deep study, the accused's awareness of his motivations, and his identification with *The Cyclist* make us see him as he sees himself, in the role of a tragic hero of a neorealist film.

The next scene is in the offices of the judge, as Kiarostami requests that they expedite the proceedings. The judge doesn't see the significance of the case for a film and explains that they deal with more interesting criminal cases that the filmmaker could use. He agrees to let Kiarostami film in the courtroom once he obtains the right permits. This scene is also devised by Kiarostami, since there was no actual trial. An Iranian film critic who accompanied one of the participants in the trial scene, explained that it was conducted just like a trial, with the presiding judge and the participants speaking from their own convictions.¹⁸

Bill Nichols, in his discussion of the documentary form explains that the objective world or reality is neither a text nor a narrative. In order for it to be defined or shaped it needs a system of signs, language or discourse. Both documentaries and fiction are texts that share "formal, ideologically inflected status."¹⁹ However, fictional worlds, even if they have a realist style, remain metaphorical. He states that both are constructs, but they differ significantly in their representations of the historical world. Nichols claims that in documentaries representation works with rhetoric and persuasion rather than with likeness or reproduction.²⁰ There are many indexical signs present in *Closeup* that

¹⁸Talebinejad, "Memories from Kiarostami," 26.

¹⁹Nichols, *Representing Reality*, 110.

²⁰Peter Wollen, cited in Bill Nichols, *Representing Reality*, 66.

problematic it as a work of fiction. In both *Homework* and *Close-up* something different happens. The social actors play themselves and the director engages them to participate in retelling their stories in a way that illuminates a deeper truth. He transgresses the documentary form when the real characters reenact a scene that did not take place, but perhaps had happened metaphorically. Kiarostami creates the courtroom scene, not to dramatize, but to force the characters into a space where they would speak their intentions.

The courtroom scene begins with the clapboard marking its fictional nature. It is also reflexive, signifying that we are indeed watching a film. The light stands are visible and Kiarostami appears to be more in charge of this scene than the judge. His voice intervenes in the beginning by explaining that two cameras are placed there to record the judge and the accused. He directs Sabzian to address one of the cameras when he explains his reasons behind his acts. The judge asks Kiarostami's permission to begin and the session starts. Later in the sequence, the director interrupts to ask his own questions.

As discussed earlier, reflexivity in works of art challenges cinematic conventions, whether it is documentary or narrative, to bring awareness to the form itself, as well as to the inner "workings of society."²¹ By bringing attention to the position of cameras, including the director's off-screen voice that interjects in the proceedings, the viewer becomes aware of the reality of the filmmaking process and the power of the medium. In a film about the main character's love for cinema, the director aptly brings our attention to the artifice of film and makes us question whether Sabzian is any more duplicitous than a film director, in presenting an imaginary world and passing it on as real.

In the courtroom, the camera pans the faces of the attendants, the plaintiffs, the journalist, and the accused. The younger Ahankhah explains the family's charges against Sabzian, whom they believe

²¹Jamshid Akrami, "Kiarostami Interview in Cannes" (video recording, 1997), www.youtube.com/watch?v=F9l_KD96E_M.

had plans to embezzle them. The courtroom sequence cuts to a dramatized flashback of Sabzian and Mrs. Ahankhah on a bus, when they first met and the deception began. In this scene, they sit next to each other on the bus and Mrs. Ahankhah asks Sabzian if he is the famous director and tells him about her son's interest in cinema. Back in the courtroom Sabzian reiterates that his psychological motivation was his love for cinema, not money. For him Makhmalbaf's films expressed his pain and he also sees himself as the main character in Kiarostami's film *The Traveler* (1974). *The Traveler* is about narrative film about a child who is so passionate about football that in order to buy tickets to a game, he deceives his classmates and charges them for photographs taken with his fake camera. However, he falls asleep and misses the game. Sabzian says that he has also missed out in life.

After the plaintiffs state their complaint, again Kiarostami's voice intervenes and asks Sabzian to explain more clearly why he took their money to pay for his taxi. Sabzian recounts that being Makhmalbaf empowered him. People responded to his requests. Then at the end of the night he would have to go home and be the same unemployed, desperate man who could not even afford to buy a bag of chips for his child. Navigating the two worlds was painful for him, but he was encouraged to continue because he felt empowered.

In another reenacted scene that reflects back to the first scene, we watch from inside the house as Sabzian is found out and arrested. He is talking to the family in the living room, but they appear distracted. The father leaves and talks to the journalist outside. The camera remains on Sabzian, while the journalist and the Ahankhahs leave to bring in the police. Sabzian remains alone in a long shot that emphasizes his loneliness. In a closer shot Sabzian pulls the curtain and watches helplessly and with apprehension what is about to take place. Once again, the camera remains not on the dramatic interchange, but on the trapped man. He paces the room, but is unable to leave. Kiarostami's main concern is Sabzian's psychological state and his behavior. In this reenactment Sabzian plays himself and convincingly shows the

anguish he had experienced.

Later in the trial Kiarostami asks him pointedly if he prefers to act or to direct and Sabzian responds that he prefers acting. Kiarostami follows up to ask if he is acting now in the courtroom. Sabzian responds resolutely that he is speaking from the heart and it is not an act. Though the scene is set up by the director, Sabzian's response is based on his real motivations – his inner experiences. Here through a fictional scene the director arrives at documentary truth.

Sabzian's confession and his questioning by the judge and Kiarostami resemble the interviews Kiarostami conducted with the children in *Homework*. Sabzian responds to the questions that the judge and Kiarostami put to him, and the director prods him to go deeper to the source of his motivations for deceiving the family. Like the children he is in the hot seat and has to explain himself. Kiarostami often said that *Close-up* was his favorite film and explained in an interview that he could see that the children in *Homework* would grow up to be like Sabzian because they were all the products of the same society and system.²² In this way Sabzian also takes on universal characteristics that we can identify with and becomes a tragic figure whose passion leads to his downfall.

The final sequence of the film features Sabzian's release from prison. Kiarostami has arranged for Makhmalbaf to greet him and give him a ride on his motorbike to go to the Ahankhah home and apologize. Sabzian is so moved that he cries and can barely talk. We watch the encounter from inside the car where Kiarostami and his cameraman record the interaction. The sound is cuts off intermittently, presumably due to technical difficulties. Later in an interview Kiarostami admitted that he did not want to include all the banal conversations that Makhmalbaf and Sabzian were having, so he came up with the idea of cutting off the sound.²³ Kiarostami's car follows them; the

²²Geoff Andrews, "Abbas Kiarostami," *The Guardian* (28 April 2005), www.theguardian.com/film/2005/apr/28/hayfilmfestival2005.guardianhayfestival.

²³Rashmi Doraiswamy, "Abbas Kiarostami: Life and Much More," *Cinemaya: The Asian Film*



camera frames their motorbike from behind the cracked window of their car. The crack is another reminder that accentuates the viewer's separation from the main action and heightens the awareness of the filmmaking process.

Reality, Fiction, Documentary

Kiarostami approaches the documentary mode not as an end, but as a means to uncover reality; he uses it and goes beyond it, making the viewers aware of his interventions and his interpretations of reality. Several of the scenes in *Close-up*, including the police station, are difficult to define as reenactments or documentary sequences. Regarding *Close-Up*, Kiarostami said that he attempted to "reach fiction through the documentary."²⁴ In another interview he said, "Reality is not particularly interesting to me. Its value is in bringing us closer to the Truth... that humans are ultimately alone – they ultimately have to face their issues alone. This is not selfishness, quite the contrary, it is with this lonesome self that one understands others."²⁵ Sabzian's act that brought him to trial and Majid's refusal to cooperate with his teachers and parent exemplify our human condition – our predicament to ultimately face life alone.

In several interviews Kiarostami has declared that the documentary mode does not exist, but that we can approach reality through his interventions. His definition of documentary was restricted to recording pure reality, which is not the function of documentaries. His body of work mainly features fictional works that explore the relationship between films and reality. Many of them use reflexivity or borrow from the documentary mode. In *Through the Olive Trees* he foregrounds the process of filmmaking. In the endless takes and repetitions of the film within the film, the characters live their

²⁴Quarterly (Summer 1999), 18-20.

²⁵Sahabi, "Reenacting Reality, In Search of Reality," 66.

²⁵Stephen Holden, "Film Festival Review: Blurring Truth and Fiction in Rural Iran," *The New York Times*, 24 September 1994, www.nytimes.com/movie/review?res=9C04E1D6153AF937A1575AC0A9629582607.

lives in between the takes. The non-professional actor, Hossein Rezai proposes to Tahereh while they wait for the filming to begin.²⁶ However, those scenes were also set up and shot, as did the shots of the camera crew. They are no more documentary than the rest of the film. In *Ten* (2002) a woman drives her car in Tehran. She is going through a divorce and argues with her real-life son and picks up other women in her car. They confide their difficulties in their relationships to her. The entire film takes place inside the car – it was shot with two digital cameras that were fixed on the driver and her riders. Once again, its simple structure and long shots and improvisations give it the appearance of the documentary mode. *Shirin* (2009) is a conceptual film with a simple design that subverts our expectations of documentary truth. The entire film consists of close-ups of faces of more than fifty actresses, as they presumably watch an Iranian epic tragedy. We do not see the film, but hear it on the sound track. The film is purely artifice; it was not shot in a theatre and the actresses were not watching the epic. However, it is significant that he was using real actors, whose job is to perform. In *Shirin*, we are watching the reality of their acting.

In *Certified Copy*, the two leading characters discuss the differences between a real work of art and its copies as they drive in the Italian countryside. The female character, played by Juliette Binoche, takes a writer to see a famous work of art that is not an original, but a copy. Their discussion harkens to Walter Benjamin's ruminations about the original work of art, its authenticity and *aura*, which is lacking in reproductions;²⁷ the writer declares that copies are no less valuable as they point us to their original and lead to self-inquiry. This brings us back to Kiarostami's thesis, that his films are copies of reality but they are no less real. They push us to a focused examination of the nature of reality. In *Close-Up*, Sabzian's act and Kiarostami's

²⁶Walter Benjamin, "Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1995), 217-252.

²⁷Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2006), 144.

intervention make us reexamine if his pretense was not the result of a society that values cinema very highly and where media have taken hold of our reality. We are led to conclude that both Sabzian and the boys in *Homework* are not guilty of anything, except for being vulnerable members of their society who are punished when they fail.

The two films are not confessional nor do they operate like “Reality TV”, which may share some of the same motivations. Using the documentary mode extensively, they do not simply divulge what happened in the past, but build up to the conflict and the truth of the story within the diegesis of the film. In *Homework*, the climax of the film is presented in the last interview when the upset young boy is prodded by Kiarostami. He carefully prepares the stage for the boy and for us by interviewing the boy’s father and his friend, in order to uncover the difficulties at home and in the classroom. The educational documentary is transformed into a drama as the boy is inconsolable and breaks down, then relaxes and shows the director and the viewers that he is actually quite capable of doing good work, but only with support and encouragement. The film does not cross the boundaries of documentary, as their reality unfolds in front of the camera.

In thinking about the slippage between the real and the copy, Baudrillard asserted that reality is disappearing to make room for images. Simulation is what is left, as our mediated society dissolves the borders further and further with each movie, TV show, game, and technological innovation. Sabzian became entangled in the simulacra of films rather than in his problem-ridden life of struggle and unemployment and invented a new identity that attracted the Ahankhah family. Kiarostami uses Sabzian’s story to express how reality and a story about the real event are inextricably entangled. The film is designed to help us see the contradictions in punishing a powerless man of a crime for posing as a powerful director. Here, as James, the character in *Certified Copy* declared, the copy becomes more valuable than the original.