Contemporary Literary Criticism

CLC 292

Volume 295

Contemporary Literary Criticism

Criticism of the Works of Today's Novelists, Poets, Playwrights, Short Story Writers, Scriptwriters, and Other Creative Writers

Jeffrey W. Hunter
PROJECT EDITOR

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Gale
27500 Drake Rd.
Farmington Hills, MI, 48331-3535

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Contents

Abbas Kiarostami
1940-

Iranian director and screenwriter.

The following entry presents criticism on Kiarostami's career through 2009.

INTRODUCTION

One of the most widely respected filmmakers of the twentieth century, Kiarostami is credited with bringing the cinema of Iran to the world stage. Influenced by Forugh Farrokhzad and other directors of the Iranian "new wave" of the 1960s, he has imbued his films with a neorealist style that blurs the boundary between documentary and fiction. His movies frequently focus on the struggles of children or a questing protagonist, combining minimalist plot structures and spare dialogue to create a poetic portrait of humanity that subtly critiques the political realities of modern-day Iran. Although his films have become increasingly experimental in technique, they continue to appeal to a global audience that has grown to admire and anticipate his artistic progress.

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Kiarostami was born in Tehran, Iran. He obtained a degree in fine arts from Tehran University and then worked for several years as a graphic designer. In the late 1960s he was appointed co-director of the cinema department in the new Center for the Intellectual Development of Children and Adolescents, popularly known as Kanun. His first short film, *Nan-o kucheh* (1970; *Bread and Alley*), features many characteristics that would become trademarks of his subsequent work, such as child protagonists, non-professional actors, extended takes, and very little dialogue. In 1969 Kiarostami married Parvin Amir-Gholi. The couple had two sons before divorcing in 1982. His first full-length film, *Mosafer* (*The Traveler*), was released in 1974. After the Iranian Revolution in 1979, during which Islamic fundamentalists seized control of the government, Kiarostami continued to make films for Kanun until he secured independent financing for his breakthrough work, *Khaneh-ye dust kojast?* (1987; *Where Is the Friend's House?* or *Where Is the Friend's Home?*). The film earned three of the major awards at the Locarno International Film Festival in 1989. Over the next few years, his work became increasingly popular at international film festivals. Miramax Films purchased the rights to distribute *Zir-e derakhtan-e zeytun* (1994; *Through the Olive Trees*) in the United States, establishing Kiarostami as the voice of Iranian cinema in the West. Acclaim for his work continued to grow during the 1990s, with *Namay-e nazdik* (1990; *Close-Up*) winning Best Film at the Montréal Festival of New Cinema, . . . *Va zendengi edameh darad* (1992; *Life and Nothing More . . .* or *And Life Goes On*) receiving the Critics Special Award at the São Paulo International Film Festival, *Tam-e gilas* (1997; *Taste of Cherry*) garnering the Palm d'Or at the Cannes Film Festival, and . . . *Baad mara khahad bord* (1999; *The Wind Will Carry Us*) taking the Grand Jury Special Prize at the Venice Film Festival. Over the next decade, Kiarostami's body of work earned him the Akira Kurosawa Award at the San Francisco International Film Festival, the Gold Leopard of Honor at the Locarno International Film Festival, and the Lifetime Achievement Award at the Yerevan International Film Festival.

MAJOR WORKS

Kiarostami's films are marked by an understated simplicity and a lyrical evocation of ordinary life. At the same time, Kiarostami is considered a formally challenging filmmaker who carefully calculates his naturalistic aesthetic and boldly experiments with the technical aspects of the medium. The first part of what is known as the Koker Trilogy, *Where Is the Friend's House?* features Ahmed, a boy from the northern Iranian town of Koker who sets off on a quest to retrieve his friend's school notebook. The spare technique and attention to mundane detail featured in the film recalls the work of neorealist directors Vittorio de Sica and Satyajit Ray. After the filming of *Where Is the Friend's House?* Koker was devastated by an earthquake. The second part of the trilogy, *Life and Nothing More . . .* dramatizes Kiarostami's return to the village in search of the lead performers from the earlier film. The role of Kiarostami is played by a local non-actor, and many of the townspeople portray themselves, a casting choice that highlights the film's concern with the representation of fiction and reality. Set during the filming of *Life and Nothing More . . .*, *Through the Olive Trees* focuses on the romantic relationship between two local actors who have been

hired to play a betrothed couple. This peculiar premise facilitates a charming love story that also serves to offer a new perspective on the preceding two films. Furthering the director's inquiry into the often intertwined nature of fact and fiction, *Close-Up* reenacts the actual trial of aspiring filmmaker Hossain Sabzian after he was arrested and charged with impersonating celebrated Iranian filmmaker Mohsen Makhmalbaf. In Kiarostami's film, both Sabzian and Makhmalbaf play themselves (as do Kiarostami and Makhmalbaf's family members), allowing the director to turn the piece into a meditation on cinematic embellishment and documentary storytelling.

A return to simple, straightforward filmmaking, *Taste of Cherry* follows a middle-aged man, Mr. Badii, as he roams the barren Iranian countryside attempting to find someone who will bury him after he kills himself. The film is more about the man's journey than about his death, and the frequently occurring imagery of cars crossing long roads adds to the hypnotic and transcendent sense of detachment that the movie establishes. The quest at the center of *The Wind Will Carry Us* concerns the attempt of a man (known simply as the Engineer) to track down a dying old woman in a remote Kurdish town. His reasons for doing so are left vague, as is the character himself. This abstract aura allows the Engineer's quest to take on a mythic, poetic quality as the filmmaker employs the details of ordinary life to carry the viewer out of a mundane mindset.

Shot on digital video, *Ten* (2002; *10*) consists of ten scenes taking place exclusively in a car as shot by two cameras—one focused on the driver's seat, the other on the passenger's seat. The episodes detail the interactions of the unnamed female driver and her son, and feature a series of female hitchhikers with whom she engages in conversations about male/female relationships, sex, and death. *Ten* is notable for being Kiarostami's first film to concentrate on the lives of women. Women also take center stage in *Shirin* (2008), which comprises a series of close-ups of female audience members in a movie theater as they react to an emotionally charged film that is heard but remains off-screen. What seems like an authentic filmic experiment is revealed to be an illusion as recognizable actresses are featured as the "anonymous" observers. Kiarostami also admitted in interviews that he did not show an actual movie to the women, and that he added the sound of the off-screen movie during postproduction. Kiarostami's first feature shot outside of Iran, *Copie conforme* (2009; *Certified Copy*) is about a middle-aged English writer and art-forgery expert and the French art gallery owner who playfully pretends to be his wife.

Kiarostami has also directed a number of acclaimed documentaries and short films. In the documentary *Mashgh-e shab* (1988; *Homework*), the filmmaker follows a group of schoolchildren throughout their daily routines and interviews them about their experiences at school and at home. The film quietly raises questions about the state of Iranian education and the power of the camera over the subject. His first piece filmed outside of Iran and the first to be shot on digital video, *A.B.C. Africa* (2001) is a documentary about the grim living conditions of orphans in Uganda, where AIDS, poverty, and war are rampant. Made on behalf of the United Nations, the film exposes the devastating social conditions under which the orphans live, but also demonstrates their resilience and indomitable creative energy. Kiarostami's body of masterfully executed short films includes *Be tartib ya bedun-e tartib* (1981; *Orderly or Disorderly* or *Regularly or Irregularly*), a pseudo-instructional film that teaches students proper codes of behavior; *Hamsorayan* (1982; *The Chorus*), in which a group of children try to alert their hearing-impaired guardian that he has accidentally locked them out of the house; and *Dandan-e dard* (1980; *Toothache*), which treats dental hygiene as a political allegory for modern Iran.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

While some critics have faulted his films for evading female characters and for being specious or tedious, most view Kiarostami as an indispensable artist. A number of reviewers have highlighted his investigation into the power of the image, whether it relates to the dominance exerted through the gaze of both the human eye and the mechanical lens, or the influence of movies on the lives of his characters. With regard to Kiarostami's style of image-making, critics have extolled his employment of lingering camera technique as an opportunity for audience participation. According to scholar Chris Lippard, "One of Kiarostami's formal signatures in film is the long take/long shot . . . where it serves both to leave incomplete (or to disguise) the narrative and, as a consequence, to invite the audience either to complete it according to their own desires or to leave it incomplete." In addition, commentators have lauded the inventive and circuitous layering of time, reality, and fiction in the Koker Trilogy, and have interpreted the director's use of sound in *Close-Up* as an attempt to draw attention to the manipulative aspect of cinema. Likewise, they have commended his use of digital video in *Ten* for closing the gap between the director and the audience. A commonly noted effect of Kiarostami's technique is the transcendent elevation of ordinary detail. As critic Jean Michel Frodon articulated, "Under the gaze of

Kiarostami's camera, every corner and object reveals an unsung beauty. Everything is worthy of being filmed when the filming itself is carried out with such dignity. The attention to facial features and bodily silhouettes, the insistence on stretching time, and the emphasis on each frame coalesce to construct senses and emotions."

Critics have studied both the reflection of Iranian culture in Kiarostami's films and the reception of his work by Western audiences. For example, they have recognized his short films as documents representing the changes in Iran's political climate since 1970, and have commended *Homework* for its understated admonishment of the country's educational system. Reviewers have also cited evidence of post-revolutionary Iran's intensified social strictures in the Koker Trilogy. At the same time, scholars have linked the general lack of interest in the Islamic backdrop against which Kiarostami's films take place to his overwhelming success with the Western critical establishment. Commentators have attributed his enthusiastic acceptance in the West, in part, to a sense of distance that the director creates between his audience and the social milieu that surrounds his protagonists. "A structural composition common in Kiarostami's filmic style is the insertion of a mediating character through whom the viewer disavows an equal exchange and a compassionate involvement with others in the film," asserted commentator Azadeh Farahmand. "This makes Kiarostami a yet more powerful figure for the Western intellectual and the distant observer. The closest the viewer comes to the subjects (children, villagers, labourers, the disaster-stricken) is sympathy, not identification." Western critics, on the other hand, have applauded Kiarostami for providing an alternative to the shallow ideological pretensions of such middle-brow fare as *American Beauty*. Regardless of cultural perspective, most film scholars have concurred with Frodon's claim that "Kiarostami is one of the most influential filmmakers today."

PRINCIPAL WORKS

Nan-o kucheh [*Bread and Alley*; director and screenwriter] (short film) 1970

Tajrobeh [*The Experience*; director and screenwriter; co-written with Amir Naderi] (short film) 1973

Mosafer [*The Traveler*; director and screenwriter] (short film) 1974

Do rah-e hal baray-e yek masaleh [*Two Solutions for One Problem*; director and screenwriter] (short film) 1975

Rangha [*The Colors*; director and screenwriter] (short film) 1975

Lebasi baray-e arusi [*The Wedding Suit*; director and screenwriter] (short film) 1976

Gozaresh [*Report*; director and screenwriter] (film) 1977

Rah-e hal [*Solution*; director and screenwriter] (short film) 1978

Qazih-e shekl-e aval, dovom [*Case no. 1, Case no. 2*; director and screenwriter] (documentary) 1979

Dandan-e dard [*Toothache*; director and screenwriter] (short film) 1980

Be tartib ya bedun-e tartib [*Orderly or Disorderly* or *Regularly or Irregularly*; director and screenwriter] (short film) 1981

Hamsorayan [*The Chorus*; director and screenwriter] (short film) 1982

Hamshahri [*Fellow Citizen*; director and screenwriter] (short documentary) 1983

Kelid [*The Key*; screenwriter] (film) 1986

**Khaneh-ye dust kojast?* [*Where Is the Friend's House?* or *Where Is the Friend's Home?*; director and screenwriter] (film) 1987

Mashgh-e shab [*Homework*; director and screenwriter] (documentary) 1988

Namay-e nazdik [*Close-Up*; director and screenwriter] (film) 1990

*. . . *Va zendengi edameh darad* [*Life and Nothing More . . .* or *And Life Goes On*; director and screenwriter] (film) 1992

**Zir-e derakhtan-e zeytun* [*Through the Olive Trees*; director and screenwriter] (film) 1994

Badkonak-e sefid [*The White Balloon*; screenwriter] (film) 1995

Tam-e gilas [*Taste of Cherry*; director and screenwriter] (film) 1997

. . . Baad mara khahad bord [*The Wind Will Carry Us*; director and screenwriter] (film) 1999

A.B.C. Africa [director] (documentary) 2001

Ten [*10*; director and screenwriter] (film) 2002

Five [*Five Dedicated to Ozu*; director and screenwriter] (documentary) 2004

Tickets [director and screenwriter; co-directed with Ken Loach and Ermanno Olmi; co-written with Olmi and Paul Laverty] (film) 2004

Shirin [director and screenwriter] (film) 2008

Copie conforme [*Certified Copy*; director and screenwriter] (film) 2009

*These films make up Kiarostami's Koker Trilogy.

CRITICISM

Abbas Kiarostami and Pat Aufderheide (interview date February 1995)

SOURCE: Kiarostami, Abbas, and Pat Aufderheide. "Real Life Is More Important than Cinema: An Interview with Abbas Kiarostami." *Cineaste* 21, no. 3 (July 1995): 31-3.

[In the following interview, Kiarostami comments on his sources of inspiration and his work process. The filmmaker also addresses the positive reception of his work in the West.]

Iranian director Abbas Kiarostami had been the filmfest maven's trump card for some time when Akira Kurosawa gave him a world-class wink: "When Satyajit Ray died, I was quite depressed, but after watching Kiarostami's films, I thought God had found the right person to take his place."

Historically aware filmgoers might find the comparison faintly alarming. After all, at the time the great realist director Satyajit Ray won a special achievement Oscar in 1993, not a single one of his films was in distribution. But the comparison is esthetically apt. Ray, whose esthetic heroes included the Bengali philosopher Rabindranath Tagore and the French master of realism Jean Renoir, once defined his filmmaking goal (as quoted in Andrew Robinson's biography) as "to find out ways of investing a story with organic cohesion, and filling it with detailed and truthful observation of human behavior and relationships." Kiarostami, who sees himself in a centuries-old tradition of Persian artists and whose heroes also include Rossellini and Truffaut, has the same eye for telling detail, the same fascination with the thick integrity of experience, the same refusal to confine oneself to narrowly national cultures or ideologies.

And he may now have better luck with distribution than Ray had for many years. At least Kiarostami's latest film, ***Through the Olive Trees,*** Iran's entry for the 1994 Academy Awards, has become the first Iranian film to receive major distribution in the U.S., by Miramax.

While on its own ***Through the Olive Trees*** functions as an offbeat, whimsical love story, it is also the third in an improbable and accidental series of films about a mountainous corner of rural Iran. Within that sequence, it can be seen as developing and intensifying ongoing themes about image and reality, social inequities, and the role of the storyteller in society. Furthermore, it is only one facet of a career that has evidenced a delicate, ideological tightrope walk.

The series began with a classically neorealist 'little film,' ***Where Is My Friend's House?*** (1987). The plot revolves around a young boy's attempt to return a friend's school notebook before the teacher finds out it has been misplaced. In the second, ***And Life Goes On*** (1992), the director of the first film and his son return to the town, after an earthquake, to look for the stars of the first film. Although they never find them, they do stumble across touching, wry dramas of death and survival. ***Through the Olive Trees*** tells the story of a film crew making a key scene from ***And Life Goes On.*** *Each film is documentary-like, based in real-life events, features nonactors, is unscripted, but is fully fictional.*

While a new talent for most American viewers, Kiarostami is a veteran filmmaker with his roots in documentary. As Miriam Rosen noted in the introduction to her interview with him in *Cineaste* (Vol. XIX, Nos. 2-3), Kiarostami has been making films since 1969 through the Institute for the Intellectual Development of Children and Young Adults, which he helped to found. Among his six features, he counts as his special favorite ***Close-Up*** (1990), which also reveals Kiarostami's obsession with the interpenetration of fact and fiction in daily life. The film, a combination of documentary and re-enactment, reconstructs a bizarre real-life scandal in which a nonentity deceived a dazzled middle-class family into believing he was a famous Iranian film director.

With his wryly angled vision and expansive interest in the intersection between individual ingenuity and social possibility, Kiarostami has weathered various ideological storms. He is exceedingly careful, in this interview as in others, to position himself outside familiar categories, and adeptly avoids direct commentary on the current regime.

This director's work comes out of a well-established film tradition and industry. The Iranian film industry, which last year produced about sixty films, has an entrenched national moviegoing public and reputation. The national cinema has changed character over time in ways that conform to trends worldwide. In the 1930s, filmmakers cranked out crowd-pleasing melodramas and musicals; in the 1960s, Iran's art films won international kudos; in the 1970s, with state support (and censorship), the industry produced dozens of films a year, some socially critical in a realist style, by directors who became the veterans of today's industry.

In revolutionary Iran filmmaking was at first under attack; films and theaters were burned and production shriveled. But now the audience is larger than it ever has been, and production has risen to former levels. That is largely due to the efforts of the Farabi Film Foundation, which, until 1992, when economic austerity forced cutbacks, had state funds and funded about a third of Iranian features. It continues to offer technical facilities and promotional help. The Foundation has script approval for films it aids, and still has absolute control of international distribution.

Farabi was formed in 1983 by a group of intellectuals who combined their concern for the endangered art of film with impeccable Muslim religious credentials.

They argued that the revolutionary society needed to use and not suppress mass media; Khomeini enthusiastically supported them. Farabi's promotion of 'family' films, which would offer wholesome entertainment for easily offended religious filmgoers, has also provided a vehicle for creative artists to explore sensitive themes. The national audience for Iranian films is now at an all-time high, since a new viewership of religious families has been successfully recruited.

The cream of the resulting crop, which circulates internationally, suggests that a genre is emerging out of Farabi's delicate ideological brokering. It is realist, broadly humanist, and often features children. Films by artists such as Kiarostami, Mohsen Makhmalbaf, and Dariush Mehrjui seem almost to crusade for tolerance and an appreciation of human foibles, and they often feature social commentary, even including topics such as the Iran-Iraq war, women's social position, and poverty.

This kind of work, while not overtly political, nonetheless directly engages with the intellectual's and artist's challenge of shaping the social imagination. It may be this quality to which Jean-Luc Godard responded in a letter he wrote earlier this year to The New York Film Critics Circle. Regretfully declining to appear to receive a special award, he made a list of his life disappointments, including failure "to force Oscar people to reward Abbas Kiarostami instead of Kieslowski." Certainly the outlook of the dour and cynical Polish director contrasts sharply with the sober, low-level optimism of Kiarostami.

Kiarostami spoke with *Cineaste* in February 1995, during a retrospective of Iranian cinema at The American Film Institute in Washington, D.C.

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[*Aufderheide*]: *Akira Kurosawa's likening you to Satyajit Ray places you in a group of people who—mostly in an earlier era—trusted that a film about 'the human condition' could speak for and to everyone, across borders. How did you come by the self-confidence that allows you this conviction?*

[Kiarostami]: This is the first time anyone has ever spoken to me of self-confidence in my films. I have heard it in a different version, with a negative connotation. I have been told, "You underestimate the cinema," and "Who do you think you are to make a film like this and expect people to go to it?" Critics say this is not enough, that cinema should be like *Pulp Fiction,* with a strong story including sex and violence.

Someone told me, "If I want to see this kind of film, I can stay at home and look out my window. I can see this kind of thing anywhere. In the cinema I want to see drama, exaggeration." You know, special effects. People also accuse me of being naive.

What then makes you persist in the face of such objections? What kinds of filmmaking inspired the choices you make in your own films?

I have hundreds of small sources of inspiration throughout the day, just watching people in daily routines. I think what happens in real life is more important than the cinema. My technique is similar to collage. I collect pieces and put them together. I don't invent material. I just watch and take it from the daily life of people around me.

Also, I'd rather look at the positive side of daily life than the negative, which makes me sleepless and nervous. So I look around and select the things that seem to me the best. I collect and put them together as a package and sell it. I'm not the only one who does this, you know. Florists do the same thing. They don't make the flowers, they just find the best arrangement.

People choose their own work. Some people go after beautiful things. And in cinema it's been made easy for us. We have this camera, which is very sensitive and registers all the details. All that's left is for us, the film directors, to decide when to register them. There's also a personal satisfaction in it—we are the first consumer of what we tell. Positive stories make me feel good.

Would you tell me about an image from daily life that connected, for you, with the kind of cinema you make?

I can't put out of my mind an image that was formative for me—it haunts me. One snowy day I was going to work and saw a mother walking down the street, holding a small child, a baby really, wrapped up in her *chador.* The baby was clearly burning up with fever, and its eyes were nearly shut.

I happened to be walking behind them, and I was staring at the child and waving my hand, the way you do to little children. I thought he couldn't even see me, his little eyes were so swollen up. And the mother didn't even know I was there. When we got to the intersection, I saw to my astonishment that the child, with great effort, pulled out his hand and waved back at me. Well, it shocked and touched me, and it also struck me that nobody was around to see this scene. And I thought, there should be a way to show this moment to people.

Then, this is what happened. That moment was repeated in the second part of the trilogy [***And Life Goes On***], with the child with the broken arm. I waved at him, and this scene happened again—he waved back.

I think what goes around, comes around; you get what you give. I enjoy so much watching good films with a human touch and emotions, and I don't get that kind of pleasure when I see violent movies.

The way you describe your work process sounds like the Italian neorealist screenwriter, Cesare Zavattini, when he said that the point of storytelling in the movies wasn't to invent but to discover.

I can understand and empathize with that, although I don't recall ever hearing it. Of course, I began watching movies by watching Italian neorealism, and I do feel a kinship with that work. But it's more a question of congruence of taste than it is a decision to follow their example.

I think the most important and obvious reason why there is a similarity is the similarity between the present situation of Iran and of postwar Italy. Italy then was under the pressure of the postwar situation, and we have similar circumstances.

Another similarity that may provoke parallels is that I don't adapt from literature or mythology. I get my stories from daily life, like they did. I also don't have big, expensive sets and elaborate production values and special effects. My films are low budget.

Italy's commercial film industry had been quite developed before the war, of course.

And so was Iran's. Iran still has a flourishing commercial film industry. About sixty feature films were made last year, and about eighty-five the year before that, with many more shorts. We have a vigorous entertainment industry. But my style is distinctive within it—I'm not part of a trend that way.

As well, the Italian neorealists tended to have leftist sympathies or commitments and goals for their films. Now, I am aware that you have been extremely careful in all interviews to avoid discussion of politics . . .

No, no, that's not true. Well, I'm not political in the sense of belonging to any political party or leading a revolutionary charge, wanting to overthrow anyone. I don't work for anyone. But if you mean by political that you talk about today's human problems, then for sure my work is political and even strongly so.

Through the Olive Trees carefully explores the personal problems of [*its protagonist*] Hossein, which are grounded in real social problems. He belongs to today's Iran. He's illiterate. He wants to get married, and he doesn't want his children to be poor and illiterate. He expresses these problems very simply, but they're very real.

When you get involved in someone else's suffering, and you try to convey it so that other people can feel it and understand, then this is political. When you're talking about Hossein, that cannot be far from politics, because you're showing something about social issues that politics must deal with.

So if you had to describe what you want to say in **Through the Olive Trees** . . .

It would be that this is a statement for decency, for humanity. I want to let viewers see into the real lives we lead.

In the U.S. our images of Iran are colored by the barrage of negative news coverage. Recent films from Iran often seem calculatedly apolitical. Is that a consequence of censorship or intimidation?

You know, your view of Iran is skewed inevitably and understandably by the press coverage you get. We don't have heavy political confrontations and discussion every day. When you hear bad news about Iran in the morning, you carry that image with you all day. We hear the news at seven in the morning and don't think about it again until the evening news. We're busy with our lives, whether it's going to rain, and so on. Life in Iran is not as gloomy as you think.

You've been criticized for using Western classical music in your films.

Yes, and what I say is that classical music belongs to the world. It's like the sky, and everyone can partake of it. My aim is to create unity between worlds that are usually apart. It is the duty of the police and immigration officers to create borders, and it is the duty of artists to lessen or eliminate them.

How does the Farabi Film Foundation work?

The Farabi Film Foundation was established after the revolution by religious people who had a passion for film. They were afraid that without support in a tough economic situation, the cinema would die. Even now, with the trade embargo, we pay fifty times the normal price for a reel of film.

It is a private foundation but receives help from the government, which approved it because it trusted the religious people who started it. If the Foundation approves your script, they provide labs and equipment on a deferred payment basis. There are other places to get labs and equipment, but you would have to pay cash. So they're very important. I get less financial help than other filmmakers, because I don't need as much, but the Foundation helps me and others with

international distribution, and that's the really essential help. No film is distributed overseas without the imprimatur of the Foundation.

They were crucial at the beginning of the revolution. Now they are under pressure by religious radicals. The radicals haven't taken it over, but they have slowed it down, and in 1992 the government cut its subsidy to filmmakers.

Do filmmakers avoid political subjects in order to get the support of the Foundation?

No, I don't believe that's the case. I think that government financing makes it possible for filmmakers not to have to worry about the box office, or about using violence to attract crowds. I think that's why the result is better, too.

The Iranian films we see in the U.S. at festivals seem almost pointedly humanistic. Is it fair to read these as statements by the artists not only for mutual awareness and tolerance but also against dogmatism and fundamentalism in Iran?

I think that's a fair conclusion to draw, but it is yours. You can't praise me and then ask me to endorse your praise.

Why do so many Iranian films we see feature young children, especially young boys?

Well, we have mediocre films that are about grown-ups, but you don't see them here. They're not distributed internationally. I would say that about ten percent of the films made are any good, and most of those are about kids.

Your films also feature children.

I love children but I don't use them as a means to an end.

Are there also violent action films produced in Iran?

Yes, although they're not funded by the Foundation. They are very popular at the box office. There's violence, but no sex.

Your films are superbly produced. How do you get such excellent technical support?

My crews are always in love with cinema. Sometimes they have experience on commercial films. On my last film I had a superb cameraman and soundman, and we had enough time to do the work.

Have your films been distributed in the Middle East and Asia?

Primarily it is the West that has been interested in Iranian films. I believe there has been some interest in the Pacific Rim, for instance Taiwan. But I think there is an affinity in the West for our films.

The domestic audience for Iranian films has grown impressively since the revolution.

Yes, thanks mostly to the work of the Foundation. Before the revolution, religious people didn't go to the movies because they didn't feel safe there. They now can go to see movies that don't have sex and violence in them, as much as before, and they can relax. They are just discovering the attraction of the cinema.

Consider the scene in ***Close-Up*** when the camera goes to court. Well, it was the love of cinema that permitted it. The *mullah* in charge of the court loved cinema and particularly the films of Mohsen Makhmalbaf.

In **Through the Olive Trees,** *how much of the central story—Hossein's tangled love affair with the girl—was true?*

The reality was totally different from what you see. Furthermore, the last sequence transformed during the last twenty days. It originally ended with them walking away. At the last moment I decided to make the ending more upbeat, idealistic, and more in harmony with the scenery.

I think the trilogy really shows, as it develops, that in small towns everyone is always acting, because the world there is very small and you have to play several roles.

Yes, they were good actors. In the next film, everyone plays a role opposite to his character!

But doesn't working with nonactors create special problems?

One big issue for us was that we realized we were not responsible for the rest of their lives. We were just making one film. We do have an emotional responsibility to them, not to make them feel like celebrities and stars, because we weren't promising them a career in film. We kept them as much as possible within their own environment, and didn't emphasize the acting. Hossein, for example, worked as a gofer, he worked in construction, and he worked in front of the camera.

Working there has changed me, though. I have worked for eight years in this area, and I feel so close to the people and the landscape that I would like to make the rest of my films there.