

ON ABBAS KIAROSTAMI'S *CLOSE UP*Bernard Stiegler, translated by Arne De Boever<sup>1</sup>

Like Federico Fellini's *Intervista*, Abbas Kiarostami's *Close Up* stages the love of cinema by putting it on trial: this trial is its staging, and this staging is its trial. As with Fellini's film, *Close Up* is staged through an *analytical presentation of its process* on the stage where, at the same time, *it is passively and unavoidably synthesized*. *Close Up* is a trial of cinema that describes cinema's process: it puts cinema on trial *by* turning it into a work-in-process, and *as* this very work. This happens through the creation of a persistent doubt whose object is undecidable: the narration is construed in such a way that it confuses what one assumes to be archival and documentary forms—that is to say, recordings of “true histories”—with reconstructions, that is to say, with the cinema of fiction.

Watching *Close Up*, and *in Close Up*, one never knows which spectatorial attitude to adopt, if one can call *spectatorial attitudes* the different ways of looking at and considering images: for example, based on whether the images are archival or fictional. If they are archival, are they voluntarily archived, or are they found documents, like for example amateur films, or images of current events, ethnographic films, propaganda films, military intelligence films? Are they images that were received live, or that were edited, etc.? There is variation in fictional images as well, and between authors, places, conditions of production, depending on whether professional actors are involved, etc. Each work thus tends to invent a *new* spectatorial attitude.

*Close Up* mixes these registers and blurs their limits. As a whole, it floats in a halo of indeterminations that sanctify the transgression of its main character, Hossein Sabzian, tearing him away from the “fait divers” in the newspaper where his truly extraordinary story would otherwise have ended.

Doubt is introduced into the status of images, and in particular into the images of the trial, which are presented as an archival document, but are introduced through a “clap” that therefore reveals a totally artificial synchronization, even if, when we are effectively looking at these images, and listening and admiring Sabzian, this doubt does not seem to be allowed. Between these two spectatorial attitudes, which thus become specular

(because they mirror each other), a malaise, or rather a sort of suffering takes over, and in so many ways, a *sweet* suffering. A suffering that is in some ways restorative.

When we see and listen to Sabzian speak to us of cinema and what it did to him, and what it is doing to him, and also of what kind of cinema he'd like to make—because he would like to make cinema—, we hear him tell us that cinema for him “is a joy and a suffering,” as Depardieu says in Truffaut's *Le Dernier métro*.<sup>2</sup>

And Sabzian *is* going to make cinema. But in a way, one could say that he makes cinema *at the moment when he is no longer making it*. Arising from a *fait divers*, like a kind of miracle, Sabzian is the hero of a “true story”—the true story of a lie: an impersonator (Sabzian) plays the role of a film director (Makhmalbaf), and “makes cinema” while making people believe that he is going to make cinema for them. And this works because they themselves “make cinema” and because they all love cinema. It's a true story in which “reality surpasses fiction”, as they say. In this case, however, reality only effectively surpasses fiction by the detour of its own fictioning, or rather, by realizing itself in its fictioning, and this, from the get-go, starting with the fiction or the “feigning” of Sabzian, as Youssef Ishagpour says. Reality only becomes real insofar as it realizes Sabzian's desire as well as the desire of all of the characters, including Kiarostami—as if reality only realized itself fully and *truly* while fictioning.



Let's start by reconstructing the story, that is to say, the film. The film starts with a reconstructed scene, and in a taxi in which we find a journalist and two policemen: they are going to the Ahankhas, where Sabzian is at that moment with the father of the family and a family friend. They are going to arrest him.

After this scene we get the credits, which run over a background of images that show the printing of the newspaper in which one finds the photographs and the story of the “*fait divers*” that Kiarostami is going to read, on a day when he is supposed to meet the director Makhmalbaf.

After the credits, Kiarostami includes a series of interviews: he is asking people about the affair, and is already collecting testimonies. He meets with the policemen who arrested Sabzian and put him in jail. And he is accompanied by Makhmalbaf, if one can believe the story he tells Hormuz Kei. Then he goes to visit the Ahankha family (late at night, if we go with the same story). And then he visits Sabzian in prison (Makhmalbaf is supposedly holding the camera). Finally, he goes to see the judge, whom he asks for authorization to film the trial.

Then comes the trial, which is punctuated by two flash backs. The first flash back happens during the testimony of one of Ahankha's sons: it takes the place of his story, that is to say of the productive imagination of his memory, through a cinematographic and therefore fictional reconstitution of the scene narrated by the witness—through the productive, but also artificial, imagination of Kiarostami.

The second flashback tells the story of Sabzian's arrest, already shown in reconstruction at the beginning of the film, with the same transfers between psychic and artificial imaginations. This time, the arrest is filmed from inside the Ahankha residence. In this scene, the father of the family explains to one of his friends, Mohseni, what he has understood of the whole affair, and also the reasons why he has filed a complaint. Sabzian arrives during the course of this conversation, while the policemen get in position to come and arrest him.

As a consequence, one can therefore see him *lie* in this scene. However, the scene is *also* obviously a *reconstruction*, and therefore in some way a *false lie*. Because here he is playing a part, and playing it *well*; therefore, he does not really lie at this very moment when he actually lies more than ever, since he is reconstructing his lie *so well* that he seems to avow it, and therefore to speak the truth. The *character* can no longer be distinguished *from the one who plays himself*, but must be distinguished from the *time* that has

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passed between *this* character, as he was a few weeks earlier, and the character who *plays* this character. What is this *time* that has *passed*, and has *arrived*, if not the time of the production of the film, and first of all of *this* film that the protagonists of this affair have made in their respective psychic imaginations, and that is *realized* here, afterwards, an affair that will be judged by a tribunal—but also by us, the spectators: by our psychic imaginations determined and indetermined by the artificial imagination that is the image object that we are watching: *Close Up*? What is, I want to ask, this time?

And what is this tribunal, if not another sort of artificial imagination, whose apparatus of production is called the Law, that is to say also, in Iran, the Quran (and in the US, the Bible)? And how not to see the cathartic dimension of the scene of this flash back, its therapeutic dimension to put it otherwise, in one way or another a *catharsis* that is a sort of artificial *anamnesis*: how not to see this dimension when one has already understood that “it is cinema”, but that this cinema shows “that which is not cinema”, and the ways in which only cinema can render that *possible* and *imaginable*?

“To not really [*vraiment*; literally, truly] lie” is one of the strangest expressions. Because how can one *truly lie*? One can see very well that this does not mean exactly the same thing as lying in order to speak the truth. To truly lie: would this be to practice what one sometimes calls a necessary fiction—from the Hauka ritual that Jean Rouch shows in *Les Maîtres fous* (1955) to the fictive ethnicity of which Étienne Balibar speaks,<sup>3</sup> passing through the theology of revelation and Paul Ricoeur in his debate with Bultmann?<sup>4</sup>

Sabzian is an actor, and *here he truly makes cinema*: this act, and this scene, could only be made after the conclusion of this affair, that is to say after Sabzian was released. And this reconstruction is a sort of artificial *anamnesis* that we are having with him without fully understanding it, without fully “realizing” yet what is happening to us. But we can realize it while *watching* the film *several times*, as Sabzian invites the Ahankhas to do with Makhmalbaf’s film *The Cyclist*.

After the long, second flash back, we return to the trial, which will lead to the legal acquittal, and to the apology from the Ahankha family. After that one sees Sabzian come out of jail; Makhmalbaf had come to look for him. They go to the Ahankhas by motorcycle. The father embraces Makhmalbaf on the threshold of his house, and then he also embraces Sabzian.

Ahankha then says to Sabzian:

Please forgive me, Sabzian.

Makhmalbaf to Ahankha:

Sabzian has changed. Please consider him in a different light.

Ahankha:

He is going to make us proud one day, Inch’Allah.

And that’s the end of the film. The credits roll over Sabzian’s transfigured image.

That is the *dénouement*. Let’s return, however, to the trial, which is the trial of cinema, in other words of justice and injustice through the justness and unjustness—if I may say so—of images and of cinema. And let’s start by the flash back that tries to reconstruct how all of this—this film that only talks about cinema—began.

Miss Ahankha, who is with her daughter who does not intervene in the scene, meets Sabzian by accident, on a bus, who is holding *The Cyclist*—that is to say, the scenario for Makhmalbaf’s film—and he takes a seat next

to Mrs. Ahankha.

Whereas Sabzian starts to read, she asks him where he bought his book. The story starts from there, in a totally accidental way. He replies: “in a bookstore”, and then offers her the book. She refuses, saying she can buy it. He offers it to her once more, but while making this offer, and as if to force her to accept this gift, he transgresses—a little transgression, a little lie, as you can see:

Excuse me, where did you find this book?  
In a bookstore.  
Which bookstore?  
I'll give it to you.  
Thanks but I want to buy it.  
It's yours. I wrote it.  
You are Makhmalbaf.  
Nice to meet you.

Whereas he is reading a book that is the scenario of a film he has seen, with his imagination being the seat of an experience he has of a work across another work, something happens in Sabzian's head—something entirely crazy—which consists in the fact that he tries to pass for Makhmalbaf *to see* if by doing so he can *make* Mrs. Ahankha *believe* that he is Makhmalbaf—to see *if he can make cinema*, no doubt to the point of starting to believe in it himself.

What is believing? Is it not always, in one way or another, to make cinema?

Other question: can one do without such cinema? And if not, aren't there technologies of cinema, of belief and make-belief, technologies that one could therefore not do without, and that would be, perhaps even, as techniques or technologies, the origin, or rather the originary de-fault, of this cinema that the imagination has been making forever, insofar as technics is an essential facticity? In other words, is the technical condition not more generally a cinematographic condition?

In *Technics and Time 3*, I have applied Derrida's thesis about writing to cinema, that is to say that in the same way that language can only be written because it is in some way always already a writing (but one must understand this statement from an organological point of view, and through a history of the supplement, thought as a process of grammatization), existence in movement, and the existence of the movement of emotion—such that it is not a simple response to a *stimulus* but a psychic individuation, forming a circuit in a process of transindividuation—can only be cinematographed because it is always already a cinema. And such a movement is first of all that which moves an imagination—with the latter enacting itself or acting itself out [*passant à l'acte*] through a gesture.

That's what I see staged in *Close Up*: that human life is always already a cinema. And this is why in this film, “life seems to come back to itself through cinema.”<sup>5</sup> In *Close Up*, this is revealed in an extra-ordinary way, that is to say: in a way that *steps out of the ordinary*, in the proper sense, literally, and image by image. It steps out of the ordinary in the sense that it emerges from it. That is to say, this *cinema*, which constitutes the existence and imagination of noetic souls, suddenly takes hold of an ordinary life, that of Hossein Sabzian, a poor worker from Teheran, and truly “takes him out of” anonymity, the absence of recognition, and out of jail. Literally, and image by image: out of the bad direction in which life took him, *precisely to the extent that life is a cinema*—and, as it happens, a cinema that Sabzian made, concerning the place of cinema in life, and in his life in particular, through the *effect* that the cinema of a great director like Mohsen Makhmalbaf has had on him.

The problem, but also in a way the beginning of what's wonderful about all this—because this is a wonderful story, literally and image by image—is that Mrs. Ahankha immediately believes in this cinema. And it is thus

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that the story between Sabzian and the family of Mrs. Ahankha begins: she, and then her children—in particular one of them, who has already written scenarios and would like to make cinema, and is rather artistic and literary, and unemployed; but also her husband and her daughter—all loved *The Cyclist*, and they all love and admire cinema. Like Sabzian, who tells them they should see *The Cyclist* again (and who will in fact propose to them to go see it in the cinema later) they are amateurs.

Now, this story, in which Sabzian is going to say unceasingly that he makes cinema, which is very, relatively speaking, true, in this metaphorical sense where he is telling stories, and is telling stories to others,<sup>6</sup> these others are only asking to believe in them, making their own cinema starting from the cinema that Sabzian is making. And this is going to *really* become, in the end, a film by Abbas Kiarostami, an image object, and not only mental images more or less pathological and untruthful—a film that Kiarostami is going to *realize*, and in which, like all the others, he is going to play his own personage of an impassioned amateur of cinema, and in which he is going to make, in his very own and singular way, *his* cinema.

In this way, the film is going to accomplish the process of transindividuation, in which all these amateurs would like to take part:

All those who wanted to make cinema end up in his film. It's not only Sabzian who, after having played the other because he couldn't be himself, ends up speaking his own words and playing himself—and ends up being acknowledged, in the final image of the film, with his flowering plant in his arm, as such and as celebrated by cinema. But the Ahankhas too are, through the reconstruction, making cinema, and their house is the decor of the film and ends even by opening its doors to the real Makhmalbaf. Everything thus becomes real and ends well, but in the repetition of art, thanks to cinema.<sup>7</sup>



Everyone plays themselves and individuates and transindividuates themselves in this way. There is, however, one role that's different in the film, and that is the role of Abbas Kiarostami. Most of the time, he only appears in voice off. One only sees him in a scene that takes place in jail, and from the back, facing Sabzian. He has come to meet him, and interviews him—but can we *truly* say that he comes to interview him? In any case, he is filming him, with the camera outside of the room.

It's difficult to say whether this is a reconstructed scene. People say that Makhmalbaf was holding the camera. But to do what? To help Kiarostami make a reportage, to record a testimony, or else to film a scene, and to stage it for example by doing different takes, with the movie clapper, etc., as is the case at the beginning of the trial? Whatever the answer may be, while watching the film, it is impossible to answer the question. But it is equally difficult to avoid the question. We *believe* that we *know* that we are seeing a man who truly *is* in jail, that Kiarostami has gone to see him while he *is* in jail, and to whom he proposed to film him, and tell his story.

Cinema is staged everywhere in this staging, but this is particularly true in the scenes where Kiarostami himself intervenes—as voice-off. Thus, when the judge tells him that the process will take place January 19<sup>th</sup>, he answers very surprisingly that he needs to advance the date of the trial for technical reasons of filming—and, indeed, we know that he had to make *Pocket Money*. Kiarostami thus *times* justice to cinema: he subjects it to the time of cinema, so that the trial, which is a real event, and the film, which is, in spite of everything, a fiction, will in some way become indissociable—if at least we believe what Kiarostami is telling us. But *how not to believe it?*

Kiarostami also appears—still in voice off—during the course of the trial, and even at the very beginning of the trial; or perhaps we should say *before* the trial, that is to say, before the trial truly begins? Or perhaps even *after* the trial, that is to say, through a filming that is done after the trial? Is this the trial? Must we consider it as

an “additional trial”<sup>8</sup>? Whatever the case might be, in the film, in this sweet lie that a film always is, Kiarostami makes us enter into the court of justice by a clap, and thus he introduces us in the trial as in a scene of filming, thus putting his “cards on the table”, in a way, but by creating an undecidable ambiguity in the status of what we’re watching. Kiarostami explains to Sabzian how the view will be framed, and that he will be his public, that is to say his lawyer. In the same way that the judge explains the procedure of the trial, Kiarostami explains the framing procedure with the camera as the very strange figure of the court clerk—and, as it happens, there are *two* cameras.

It’s in this scene that Sabzian declares for the first time that he is here because of art, cinema, which he will explain in more detail later in the course of the trial, and in the central scene of the film—central at the same time through its position exactly half-way in the film as a temporal object, and also because the essential is said there.

To the judge, Sabzian explains that Makhmalbaf is a great director, because he shows the pains of the poor, those who suffer, like in *The Marriage of the Blessed*. Sabzian also feels like the boy in Kiarostami’s film *The Passenger*, who is capable of fooling his friends.<sup>9</sup>

Here, one sees that Sabzian is truly an amateur of cinema, who identifies with Ghassem, the character from Kiarostami’s *The Passenger*, a soccer amateur who tries to pass as a photographer:

While “giving testimony” during his trial, Sabzian refers to Ghassem from *The Passenger*, who with an empty camera gives the impression that he is photographing people, not to make a profit from it but because of his passion for soccer. Szabian says that, in another way, he himself had played at being someone else because of his love of cinema.<sup>10</sup>

And he will also tell us that when he was very young, he played that he was making films.

There is an “additional trial” in Kiarostami’s film, say Stephane Goudet, Claire Labastie, and MC Bénard. A trial in which Kiarostami plays at making reality through cinema, and turns all the questions around:

From the image of the judge in his office, one moves to Kiarostami’s questions, that is to say to the “additional trial”, which is filmed without the judge.<sup>11</sup>

But what enables the viewer of the film to say that this is an “additional trial”, and to be certain of the fact that it is? A professional would no doubt say that they are not convinced, for such or such technical reason, analytically visible to those who “know”.

When it comes to the *amateur* of cinema, however—even if they “know”, for example because they are themselves professionals, but have stayed *first and foremost* amateurs (or else because they, like Szabian, study the books about techniques of cinema)—: their certainties will be fundamentally suspended.<sup>12</sup> Or rather, those certainties will lose and gain something, and, in a way, this is part of the general costs of production: if the film works, if it works on us, if it produces the aesthetic effect and makes us enact or even act out cinema [*nous fait passer à l’acte*], it is because none of this is clear—except to the philistines. Goudet and Labstie write:

Additional trial. Kiarostami questions Sabzian on the difficulty of being another, on the benefits of making cinema, which gives power to others, confidence to oneself.<sup>13</sup>

This scene then ends before the second flash back begins:

Shot of the entire room, panoramic shot from the judge’s profile on the right side of the frame to the public and back, twice. This panoramic shot also shows the sound person with the light coming from

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behind him as well as a camera on a tripod. It authenticates the scene and the live filming of a “real” trial.<sup>14</sup>

After this flash back, over the course of what can be understood analytically as an “additional trial” (but is for us and *synthetically* the trial), when he is approaching the announcement of Sabzian’s acquittal, Kiarostami asks him:

Do you think you are better as actor or as director?

It’s not up to me to say so. I think that I prefer being an actor. I think that I can express the bad experiences I’ve lived, and all the sufferings that I have felt in the depths of my being. I love to think that I have been able to produce my feelings through my acting.

What is an *actor*, if not the someone who *enacts or even acts out* [*passer en acte*]*—*but enacting what? Acting out what? A text? A film? The text of a scenario? The text of his life, or of life? Or else that which is not simply textual in life? What else? What is the spectator of a film in relation to the reader of a text—in relation to *the act of reading*—and in this organological difference between the book as a spatial object and the film as a temporal object? And how do the one and the other—reader and spectator—enact or act out these image objects, these productions of artificial imaginations in all genres?

If it is correct to say that the reader of a book can only enact or act out [*passer à l’acte*] on the condition of having literalized its memory and its psychic imagination, that is to say also its nervous system as the seat of synaptic connections that are perpetually in evolution, how can Sabzian watch a film in any other way than by cinematographically weaving together his noetic soul, that is to say his suffering soul? That is to say by enacting or acting out [*passant à l’acte*] the making of cinema that is realized wonderfully *in the aftermath of an artificial imagination that is the time of cinema* and with Kiarostami who stages *us*—we, the amateurs of cinema who are watching his film—by giving us motifs to project in the life of Hossein Sabzian, with whom we share the love of cinema, but also so many other sufferings and joys?

How therefore *to be* and *not to be* an actor (to enact or not, to act out or not [*passer et ne pas passer à et dans l’acte*] by *looking at* and *seeing*) of films that one loves? It’s because he is pondering this question that Sabzian begins to buy books on the techniques of cinema, and read scenarios. Because he knows how to read—cinema constitutes itself in relation to the letter here, for example to the book *The Cyclist*. And with respect to cinema and art, he is sufficiently cultivated, that is to say he is equally an amateur of literature, even if he is as poor as can be, to quote Tolstoi.

Thus begins a cinemato-graphical dialogue without equal:

Aren’t you acting in front of the camera now? What are you doing now?

I am talking about my suffering, which is not acting. I speak from my heart. For me, art is the extension of what one feels inside. Tolstoi said: “Art is a sentimental experience that the artist shares with others”. I think that my experience of my trials and of suffering can give me the basis that I need to be a good actor. In this way, I act well and express my interior reality.

Why did you pretend to be a director rather than become an actor?

To play the role of a director is in itself a performance. For me, it’s acting.

Which role would you like to play?

Mine.

You are playing yourself.

It’s after this dialogue (of the “additional trial”) that the film starts to move towards its ending, that is to say starts to move toward the acquittal of Sabzian, then his liberation, and the final scene in which Sabzian’s desire of coincides with reality—as in a tale, the film of Kiarostami coincides completely with the history of Sabzian.

BERNARD STIEGLER

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Sabzian's desire is realized like the realization of Sabzian's desire of the film, "two men on a motorcycle", a realization that goes image by image, "to the letter" of *cinema*, if one can say this.

What did Sabzian want? Not to exit from the cave, like Plato's philosopher, but to pass behind the mirror or behind the camera, like those impassioned ones who will become the New Wave. That is to say, he wanted to stay in the cave's pharmacological milieu, in order to project there good films, good works, good ideas. To pass on the other side of the mirror—that is to say, to deproletarianize, to cease to desensibilize and blind oneself while watching images. That is what digital pharmaka enable today, as part of the therapeutics they require, a therapeutics that the Greeks called politics.

ECOLE DE PHILOSOPHIE D'ÉPINEUIL-LE-FLEURIEL

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### NOTES

1. TN: This text was first delivered as a lecture in Fall 2013 at the West Hollywood Public Library, at the invitation of the MA Aesthetics and Politics program at the California Institute of the Arts. It is published here with minor changes. The translator would like to thank Bernard Stiegler for his feedback on the translation, and for permission to publish it in *Parrhesia*.
2. Belmondo says the same thing in Truffaut's *La sirène du Mississipi*.
3. Balibar, Étienne and Immanuel Wallerstein. *Race, nation, classe. Les identités ambiguës*. Paris: La Découverte, 1997.
4. Ricoeur, Paul. "Préface". In: Bultmann, Rudolf. *Jésus: Mythologie et démythologisation*. Paris: Seuil, 1968.
5. Ishagpour, Youssef. *Kiarostami: Le réel, face et pile*. Paris: Circé, 29. [TN: Translation mine, as in all of the following.]
6. However, what's not metaphorical in cinema, and what is a metaphor (and more generally speaking a figure of speech) other than an artificial imagination from the passive syntheses of the imagination that make language speak, that make it agitate unceasingly in one's mouth?
7. Ishagpour, 31.
8. Goudet, Stéphane, Claire Labastie et MC Bénard, "*Close Up*, découpage en séquences", <http://www.ailesdudesir.com/revue/revue11sup.pdf>.
9. Ishagpour, 31.
10. Ishagpour, 27.
11. Goudet, "*Close Up*".
12. One of the major problems of cinema is its professionalization, which kills cinema, that is to say the love of cinema, by abusing those who make it. That is one of the themes of Kieslowski's film *The Amateur*, a film in which Kieslowski seems to prophesize his own fate as a filmmaker. However, professionalization, which is a kind of philistinization, effects all of those who work with the mind, including scientists, artists, philosophers, as well as filmmakers.
13. Goudet.
14. Goudet.