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Soft Epiphanies: The Multilayered Narratives in Abbas Kiarostami's Film *Close-Up* (1990)

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(Received 8 March 2023; revised 4 June 2023; accepted 9 June 2023)

Abstract

As part of the collective endeavor to explore the modalities and challenges of the narrative in the Persianate world, this article reconsiders Abbas Kiarostami's *Close-Up* (1990), a film characterized by a special cinematographic feature. While accounting for what appears to be a story of swindling and identity theft, Kiarostami keeps the viewer in a state of uncertainty about the nature of what he sees, blurring the boundaries between documentary and fiction, truth and lie, through particular narrative and cinematographic choices. Previous scholarship has focused mainly on the aesthetic implications of the staging and its effects on the viewer. The present study proposes a different type of analysis by discussing specific narrative devices from the perspective of cultural anthropology, with particular attention to the recurrence of the *zāher/bāten* paradigm, suggested as a cipher by Kiarostami himself early on in the film. The examination of the discursive and aesthetic mobilization of these notions brings to light a subtle game of back-and-forth between the desire to disclose deeper meanings and the will to preserve ambiguity and intimacy, allowing for “soft epiphanies” to arise.

Keywords: *Close-Up*; Kiarostami; Iranian cinema; narrative devices; *zāher*; *bāten*

Introduction

As part of the collective endeavor to explore the modalities and challenges of the narrative in the Persianate world, we were inspired to reconsider Abbas Kiarostami's *Close-Up* (1990), a film characterized by a specific cinematographic narrative. This film, which brought the director international recognition, holds a special place in his work and the history of modern Iranian cinema as it were.

Close-Up's storyline is based on an episode in the life Hossein Sabzian, a destitute young man, divorced and unemployed, with a passion for cinema; he is arrested and detained for posing as the famous Iranian director Mohsen Makhmalbaf. Under this false identity, Sabzian promised the Ahankhahs, a family of Tehran's petty bourgeoisie, to shoot “his” next film in their home and use them as the actors, while extorting a small amount of money from one of the sons. While working on a different film, Iranian director Abbas Kiarostami comes across a news article of Sabzian's arrest, which describes him as a crook. Intrigued by the case, Kiarostami goes to meet Sabzian in prison and obtains permission to film.

Through reenacting certain scenes with the protagonists, alongside other scenes seemingly shot on the spot (with a different image texture), Kiarostami recounts the entire

story: from Sabzian's initial encounter with Mrs. Ahankhah on a bus until his release from prison, where he is greeted by the real Mohsen Makhmalbaf, with whom he pays a last visit to the Ahankhah family. At first glance, *Close-Up* is a legal and cinematographic reenactment, but its narration keeps the viewer in a state of constant uncertainty about the nature of what they are seeing: was this scene shot on the spot or reenacted? This hesitation appears to in many ways echo the principle of uncertainty that stands at the heart of the exercise of justice.

Furthermore, *Close-Up* also challenges the boundaries between documentary and fiction, truth and lie, as it both conveys a special notion of the spectator and provides a space where the viewer is free to interpret what they see. Studied in major film programs and schools across the world, this film prompted important discussions in journals, academic monographs, and other books on Iranian cinema.¹ This rich scholarly output highlights several ways in which the film contributed to the renewal of cinematographic narrative forms. As we hope to show, the film also innovated narrative strategies grounded in the director's own deliberate, culturally-informed play on specific, anthropological dynamics at work within Iranian society.

While re-viewing the film in preparation for this study, some elements of language—seemingly anecdotal at first glance—caught our attention. Such elements are found in three sentences exchanged by the film's two main protagonists. The first, identified by Naficy, occurs when Kiarostami goes to meet Sabzian at Qasr prison and inquires what can be done to help him. In response, Sabzian asks: "Could you make a film about my suffering?" The defendant was clearly very concerned about appearing as a crook. Although he did confess to his deeds, Sabzian explains to Kiarostami: "What I did looks like fraud from the outside (*zāher*)." "Then what is it really (*bāten*)?" Kiarostami asks. And Sabzian replies, "Truly, I am interested in art and cinema." As Naficy notes, "Sabzian had made a distinction between manifest reality and latent meaning," but does not expand further on this point.² In this dialogue, two words are of crucial importance: *zāher* (the apparent), which refers to the visible and obvious aspect of things, and *bāten* (the hidden, or inner reality), which designates hidden implications and elusive meaning. Sabzian asks Kiarostami to make a film that both expresses his suffering and suggests other interpretations of his actions, looking beyond the appearance of fraud. This *bāten*, as Sabzian explains, is his love of cinema in particular. This scene, the only one both shot in a single take and unscripted, invites us to imagine an altogether different reading of the film.

Thus, our study of the narrative processes mobilized in *Close-Up* follows the tenuous thread of the dialectics of "the apparent" and "the hidden," not only in the above sequence, but in the film as a whole. These processes must be contextualized within their usage in Iran, where they refer to a specific cultural understanding of the complex and multilayered aspects of reality. Complementing the extant corpus of analyses on the film, we expand on Naficy's points by departing from the "distinction between manifest reality and latent meaning." Through the *zāher/bāten* paradigm, which both the director and protagonists explicitly hint to as an interpretive key, we hope to enrich understandings of the film and its special interweaving of multiple narratives. Ultimately, our discussion aims to understand Kiarostami's work as an "open work" (*œuvre ouverte*)³ that requires, by its very structure, multiple readings and approaches.

¹ For journals, see Tesson, "Body Trouble." For monographs, see Dalla Gassa, *Abbas Kiarostami*; Saeed-Vafa and Rosenbaum, *Abbas Kiarostami*; Barbera and Resegotti, *Kiarostami*; Bergala, *Abbas Kiarostami*, Devictor and Frodon, *Abbas Kiarostami, l'œuvre ouverte*; Cheshire, *Un cinéma de questions, conversations avec Abbas Kiarostami*. For other books on Iranian cinema, see Dabashi, *Close-Up. Iranian Cinema Past, Present and Future*; Naficy, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema*.

² Naficy, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema*, 201.

³ Devictor and Frodon, *Abbas Kiarostami, l'œuvre ouverte*.

The cinematographic narratives and political stagings of *Close-Up*

A film rooted in the history of Iranian cinema

To some extent, *Close-Up* is part of a lineage harkening back to the start of fiction cinema in Iran. Indeed, Avānes Ohāniān's *Hāji Āghā, Aktoṛ-e Sinemā* (Haji Agha, the Cinema Actor) employed the *mise en abyme* narrative device in 1933, which remained in wide use thereafter. This film's subject is a director making a film and the fascination exerted on his contemporaries by cinema as such. Thus, upon seeing his own image on screen, an actor changes his mind: after initially declining the director's offer, he agrees to do the film. However, *Close-Up* relates more directly to a movement traced to the 1960s in Iran, which closely corresponds to what is defined as "modern cinema" in the West.⁴ The defining features of this movement include: a break with the codes of romance-inspired narrative cinema, which was linear in nature and intent on hiding its devices; a greater freedom in filming methods, with a tendency to exchange studios for outdoor locations and their unexpected occurrences; a less codified relationship with the actors' bodies, as they were filmed not as movie stars but with the aim of capturing their "ordinary" seductions (resorting at times to non-professional actors); and, inciting the spectator to partake in the story's construction and develop their own relationship with the images and subject filmed.

Although typically associated with Western cinema of the post-war era, this approach is visible from almost the earliest stages of cinema and remains very productive today. From this standpoint, Iranian cinema is by no means an "imitation" of Italian Neorealism or French New Wave. In fact, Iranian cinema developed its specific character by drawing on contemporaneous developments in Iranian poetry, which was experiencing a profound deconstructing of its rhythms with the advent of *she'r-e now*, and exploring the more quotidian aspects of life. In cinema, it was mainly documentary filmmakers who initiated the movement and embarked on this aesthetic modernity, taking hold of the camera to capture the unseen aspects of Iran, such as the daily lives of the underprivileged or lesser-known popular religious practices—issues deliberately hidden by the shah's regime. Non-traditional forms of cinematographic narrative in which editing took on a central role were also introduced. Ebrāhim Golestān, Nāser Taqvā'i, and Forugh Farrokhzād—herself a famous poet—are the main early representatives of this movement.

In 1967, the young director Kāmṛān Shirdel made *Ān shab ke bārun āmad* (The Night it Rained), one of the first films to radically question the nature of reality and truth in cinema. Based on a news story, the film portrays a young boy from a village near Gorgan who reportedly set his shirt on fire one night under a heavy rain, waving it at arm's length to warn a train driver of danger ahead, after a bridge was washed away by floods. Shirdel questions the press owners, villagers, the boy himself—who is either a hero or a liar manipulated by journalists—and the railway workers: everyone tells a different story, each holding their "own truth." Shirdel builds his narrative on a specific editing process meant to contrast his protagonists' different "truths" almost shot-by-shot, with the on-screen presence of the clapboard. Thereby, he challenges the categories of "real" and "true," alongside the concepts of documentary and fiction, to show that, in the context of the authoritarian regime of the imperial era and cinema itself, truth is not "one."⁵ The dialogue and subject matter of this film are not political *per se*. Instead, the film's political bearing is conveyed through its staging, which emphasizes that there is no absolute truth, be it in real life or in cinema. *Close-Up* takes up this legacy in its own way. By disturbing the spectators' viewing habits and questioning what they see, the narrative requires their participation and appeals to their freedom of judgment. *Close-Up*'s narrative also includes a host of minute details of daily life in Iran, documenting this period very accurately.

⁴ Naficy, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema*; Omid, *Tārikh-e sinemā-ye Irān: Peydāyesh va bahrebardāri*; Haghghat and Sabouraud, *Histoire du cinéma iranien 1900-1999*.

⁵ Devictor, *L'Iran mis en scène*, 46–47.

Construction of the Real, emergence of a Truth, quest for the Just

In *Close-Up*, Kiarostami takes on a new role, questioning and disturbing the spectator while revealing that the expression of truth does not necessarily correspond to tangible facts. Kiarostami discussed the idea as he spoke of his work more generally:

Whether in documentary or fiction, what we tell the viewer is all a big lie. Our art consists in telling this lie in such a way that the viewer believes it. What part is documentary and what part is reenactment only depends on our working method; it is of no concern for the viewer. The most important thing for them to know is that we are lining up a series of lies to reach a greater reality...⁶

Regarding *Close-Up*, Kiarostami confided in an interview how close he felt to Sabzian: “He knew how to create beautiful lies. I prefer his lies to the truth of others because his lies reflect his inner reality.”⁷ Lies, in this sense, are merely a means to attain another kind of reality. It could be argued that, in this film, the staging also seeks to account for *haqq*, a manifold and complex notion that encompasses the “true,” the “real,” and the “just,” in addition to being one of the names of God in the Quran. According to Botiveau, Shiite law is determined by the successful synthesis of these three components.⁸ Thus, by adopting a multiplicity of approaches, *Close-Up* builds a cinematographic response to translate this notion.

In the film, Sabzian’s in-court questioning exposes the stakes of the debate: separating what is legal (in accordance with written law) from what is legitimate (i.e., what society considers fair based on its perception of *haqq* at a given time). If Sabzian committed a crime, then he must be punished according to the law. However, for justice to be served, simply proving the facts does not suffice; fraud must also be attested to from a moral standpoint. In this case, Kiarostami plays the role of a mediator, allowing this social reality to be disclosed, by asking Sabzian to address the camera to express “things that seem unacceptable to [him] from the perspective of a court of law ([*ānce*] *mahkameh-pasand nist*).” Such an angle creates the conditions for the expression of what may be otherwise unbelievable, and falls outside the scope of a court’s ordinary affairs.⁹ Here, the camera creates its own alternative court, turning cinema into an alternate space for the expression of deeper, critical reflections on matters reaching beyond the legal sphere, termed a “filmic judgment.”¹⁰

To capture these different aspects with his camera, Kiarostami had to manipulate the judicial system, and therefore reality, to allow enough time for a multilayered truth to unfold. First, he interferes with the ordinary course of justice by arranging a trial, even though such cases are typically dealt with in brief court hearings.¹¹ Then, as the film shows, after easily obtaining authorization, he places his two cameras in the courtroom. But Kiarostami also distorts the reality of the trial, particularly by extending the protagonist’s hearing by some nine hours (without the judge present). The editing process allowed for the judge to be inserted in sequences in which he was not present, while still giving the viewer an impression of continuity. By resorting to forgery, Kiarostami endeavors to come closer to a certain idea of fairness. “So was born one of the greatest lies I ever told,” he explains; a lie that sought to enable the expression of a more complex truth by constructing a certain reality—a reality of justice—and thereby, we believe, the conditions to possibly

⁶ Limosin, *Cinéma de notre temps*, television broadcast by Jeannine Bazin and André Labarthe.

⁷ Barbera and Resegotti, *Kiarostami*, 177. The filmed interview of Kiarostami is available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nFbHBN0UqO4> (in October 2019). It is partially transcribed in Italian in Barbera and Resegotti, *Kiarostami*. The English translation is our own.

⁸ Botiveau, *Loi islamique et droit dans les sociétés arabes*.

⁹ Erfani, *Iranian Cinema and Philosophy. Shooting Truth*, 93.

¹⁰ Fischer, *Mute Dreams, Blind Owls, and Dispersed Knowledges. Persian Poesis in the Transnational Circuitry*, 229–230.

¹¹ Cheshire, *Un cinéma de questions*, 130.

access *haqq*.¹² *Close-Up* thus constitutes a deep meditation on the relation between the law and the medium of film, unveiling two possible legal and cinematic approaches to the subject.¹³

The trial must lead to a pardon not limited to a mere deliberation or prison sentence. Kiarostami seeks to achieve the pardon in a deeper way, as a form of redemption. This is accomplished through the encounter between Sabzian, Makhmalbaf, and the Ahankhahs, even if such entails a high degree of intervention—to the point of extending Sabzian’s incarceration so that Makhmalbaf can be present on the day of his release and join Sabzian in asking the Ahankhahs for forgiveness. The entire reconciliation process, it should be noted, was scripted by Kiarostami himself.¹⁴ In addition, Kiarostami extends the decision-making through a staging that requires the parties’ cinematographic reconciliation in reenacted scenes. Such scenes were necessarily shot after the end of the trial, when plaintiffs and defendants could agree to collaborate for the shooting, in shared acceptance of the fiction. In this respect, the most disturbing sequence remains Sabzian’s arrest, everyone having agreed to reenact this moment of dramatic tension, Sabzian included. *Close-Up*’s staging thus seeks to develop a synthesis between the True, the Real and the Just, while respecting the “uncertainty principle” essential to administering justice and offering a cinematographic response.

The spectator’s share

The “uncertainty principle” inherent in justice finds a cinematographic response in the unsettling of the spectator, a central principle for Kiarostami throughout his work.¹⁵ Such unsettling does not stem from the way facts are narrated or the trial is filmed, but from the spectator’s uncertainty regarding the nature of the images they see, the non-linear reconstruction of the case, and the diverging viewpoints presented for a single scene. Thus, the film—like the trial—becomes a place of uncertainty. Perspectives vary, and temporalities are unstable. For instance, the scene of Sabzian’s arrest is first shown at the opening of the film from the point of view of a taxi driver, and then from the view of the person who brings Sabzian face-to-face with the Ahankhahs. This is quite a disturbing moment, as the spectator witnesses the arrest twice, in a different light each time.

While the spectator identifies some scenes as necessarily reenacted (such as the bus scene), others seem to be shot on the spot (i.e., the trial), as attested by the difference in image grain. Other scenes, however, retain a very uncertain status (such as the interviews and Sabzian’s release): Are they staged? Scripted? Shot using a hidden camera? For Kiarostami, it is a matter of pedagogy based on the unsettling of the viewer and visual and sound discomfort. Such is the case in the sequence of Sabzian’s release and encounter with Makhmalbaf; one needs to constantly be on the lookout and listen attentively. This dynamic forestalls the spectator’s passivity, putting them to the test in reconstituting their visual and hearing field in order to understand the stakes at play between the two “Makhmalbafs.” It is up to the viewer to fill in the gaps, as Kiarostami leaves them grappling, without the guidance of special effects, music, audio of Sabzian crying, or a close-up of his face overwhelmed by emotion.

As such, *Close-Up* tears down the classical cinematic narrative. Films are often designed to make the viewer forget they are watching a movie, owing to a false narrative coherence, with a beginning and an end, and causal relations following one another seamlessly to convey the illusion of transparency. In Kiarostami’s work, the spectator finds themselves in a precarious state. Such staging decisions break away from the classic conventions of cinema and may be considered as much a source of discomfort as one of freedom for the viewer, called on to partake in the construction of the narrative. While it is the director’s decision to share

¹² Barbera and Resegotti, *Kiarostami*, 176.

¹³ Vatulescu, “The Face to Face Encounter of Art and Law: Abbas Kiarostami’s *Close-Up*,” 174–175

¹⁴ Cheshire, *Un cinéma de questions*, 131–132.

¹⁵ Devictor and Frodon, *Abbas Kiarostami, l’œuvre ouverte*, 87.

his powers in this way, there is no guarantee the spectator will take responsibility for their freedom, accustomed as they are to a comfortable passivity.

It could be argued that the narrative is also endorsed in part by the characters themselves, given their transcendence or distortion of their assigned roles. One is left wondering to what extent this was anticipated in Kiarostami's script, as claimed in the credits, or attributable to the actors-protagonists as they took hold of the drama.¹⁶ Indeed, each character displays several facets and resists to some extent the identity imposed on them by society, where everyone is assigned a set place and mobility is difficult to achieve. *Close-Up* testifies to a shared desire for fiction in order to escape one's condition. Thus, Farazmand, the journalist from *Sorush*, pretends to be a colleague of the famous Italian journalist Oriana Fallaci and the idle Sabzian becomes Mohsen Makhmalbaf, gaining consideration by momentarily escaping the constant humiliation attached to his social condition. The judge enjoys playing the actor in his own courtroom, requesting a few cushions be stacked on his chair to better match his (cinematographic and social) role as justice. The young unemployed engineer fantasizes of himself as an artist and actor. Even Kiarostami acts as a lawyer, losing some of his directorial power in accounting for the unpredictability of Sabzian's acting and intervention in the direction of the film.

When politics hide in the details

As we have seen, *Close-Up*'s staging is its most striking political dimension, bestowing more freedom on the viewer. In addition, Kiarostami sprinkles a series of pointed clues in reenacted scenes, as well as live scenes such as the trial, that give shape, like the pieces of a puzzle, to a political and social portrait of Iran in the late 1980s. In the opening, a seemingly irrelevant conversation takes place in a taxi between the driver, the journalist, and the two soldiers tasked with making the arrest. Here, we learn that military service, which lasts thirty months, is an opportunity for Iranians from both Tehran and the provinces to experience some geographical mobility. One of the two conscripts will be sent to Baneh on the border with Iraqi Kurdistan, an area of smuggling and political tensions, especially in the aftermath of the Iran-Iraq war. The taxi driver is a retired airline pilot, suggesting his pension does not suffice for a decent living. When Kiarostami interviews the Ahankhahs, we learn that the two sons, both engineers, have difficulty finding jobs to match their qualifications: the younger son has been unemployed for six months and the eldest sells bread in the Mazandaran province. Iran's economic slump is blamed on "factories that do not provide employment, due to the lack of raw materials," as one of the sons explains. While the revolution was carried out in their name, the underprivileged have not seen their condition improve significantly since 1979. Sabzian, who works intermittently in a printing house, lives in great poverty. After his marriage, he was given a room in his mother's small house to stay with his wife and two children. Stalled by the lack of prospects, his wife left him. Sabzian experienced hunger. This is one of the reasons he pretended to be Makhmalbaf on the bus: he was hoping to be invited to lunch. If he extorted money from the Ahankhahs, it was to get his son a present, as he explains in the course of the trial.

As in many of his films, Kiarostami is also intent on portraying the diversity of languages spoken in Iran, as traces of a multi-ethnic national construction. While the Ahankhahs speak Azeri Turkish amongst themselves, Kiarostami asks them to speak in Persian so that they may be understood (by himself and the spectator). Sabzian's use of language reflects yet another reality of Iran: it is a country with a high literacy rate, where both oral and written culture play an essential role. Though destitute, Sabzian went to school and later acquired solid cultural capital and rich, precise expression through reading. He quotes not only the Quran, but also Tolstoy. While the narrative is free from any specific thesis or ideology, *Close-Up* documents with impressionistic touches the Iran of the late 1980s. The film reel

¹⁶ Kiarostami recounts that he wrote the script at night during the shooting, but had to give up most of his ideas because Sabzian and the Ahankhahs refused to play the scenes. Barbera, Resegotti, *Kiarostami*, 176.

and soundtrack reflect an array of elements from everyday life, weaving together the fabric of the country's economic and social reality.

The discursive and aesthetic mobilizations of the *zāher/bāten* binary: reflecting the complexity of the self and a multilayered reality

The multiple realms of zāher and bāten

The narrative devices employed by Kiarostami also resonate with a specific instrument of discourse, which is based on a distinction between two realms: that of *zāher*, the realm of worldly appearances in their socio-cultural dimension and sometimes misleading superficiality; and that of *bāten*, the inner and invisible dimension of reality or individuals. *Bāten* may also refer to the truer meanings, intentions, or feelings hidden behind appearances.¹⁷ In Iran, such a distinction has a complex genealogy traceable to pre-Islamic concepts and cults, while also playing an important role in classical Shia theological and philosophical thought, where God, the Imam, the Quran, and all aspects of reality are considered to have both an exoteric and esoteric dimension.¹⁸ In its philosophical dimension, the distinction is reminiscent of the Platonic dualism that draws a strict divide between the illusory world of the senses and the world of Ideas, which are purely intelligible and constitute a reality independent of the material world. Yet, the distinction also differs from the Platonic binary in more ways than one. Firstly, because *bāten* and *zāher* maintain a relationship of interdependence and identify the various modes, or aspects, of a single reality. Far from referring merely to deceptive appearances, *zāher* is simultaneously that which hides the *bāten* and the indispensable medium that enables it to appear. *Zāher* is thus an integral part of Reality and Truth, the main challenge of which is not to confuse or reduce them to one another. Moreover, far from a strict binary separating reality into two monolithic and impervious realms, the distinction rather aims to identify multiple, porous layers within reality. In this regard, the dialectic can be declined *ad infinitum* to convey the presence of further layers of meaning, as suggested by the phrase “the esoteric of the esoteric” (*bātin al-bātin*) in Shiite thought.¹⁹

From an anthropological perspective, it is notable that this distinction is also heavily mobilized in daily communication practices in contemporary Iran. It appears in popular idioms such as the injunction not to “swallow the deception of appearances” (*farib-e zāher khordan*) or to “preserve one's *zāher*” (*hefz-e zāher kardan*)—i.e., to maintain a civilized, dignified appearance in all circumstances, considered an essential social skill. It is also implicit in the expression *dar bāten-e amr* (literally: at the bottom of the affair), meaning “in reality,” with the understanding that the truth is not necessarily opposed to some falsity calling for refutation. Instead, these expressions suggest that appearances can be overcome using a deeper gaze, without their visible manifestation being effaced.²⁰

At this point, it is important to emphasize that we do not consider the apparent/hidden binary to be a monolithic, essentialist divide inherent to Iranian culture. Rather, it functions as a couple of polysemic, ambiguous notions and allows for a variety of nuances to trigger curiosity, suggest alternative interpretations of a fact, or challenge a given assertion. The distinction may also be used by interlocutors to negotiate some degree of freedom for one another in conversation, based on the right not to disclose everything they have in

¹⁷ Beeman, *Language, Status, and Power in Iran*, 11; Eickelman, *The Middle East and Central Asia: An Anthropological Approach*, 229.

¹⁸ Amir-Moezzi, Jambet, *Qu'est-ce que le shī'isme*, 31.

¹⁹ Amir-Moezzi, *La Religion discrète*, 212.

²⁰ A similar idea is found in Shiite Quranic exegesis, where truth is understood not as a progression toward esoteric levels of meaning that render the literal meaning obsolete, but rather as the achievement of a subtle balance between these two dimensions. On this basis, appearances in their own right are an integral part of the Truth, conceived as a unique reality declined in degrees of intensity. See Corbin, *En islam iranien, aspects spirituels et philosophiques. I. Le shī'isme duodécimain*, 1971.

mind, and even to cultivate a form of opacity, preserve a certain distance, and leave open the field of interpretation. In this regard, performative uses of the *zāher/bāten* binary also play out in Iran as part of an elaborate, impersonal etiquette reliant on the appearance of generosity, love, and humility to avoid the inherent tensions of social relations.²¹ It is, likewise, mobilized as an instrument of self-staging and a tool for interpreting the behavior of others. As such, the binary maintains a heuristic distinction between one's inner being, as the seat of emotions and desires, and the polished—if at times misleading—outward appearance one takes on in society, where sincere feelings should not be expressed publicly. Thus, while often valued as a place of “inner purity” (*saḡā*) protected by appearances, the *bāten* is also considered to be the locus of hidden vice under a refined appearance.²² A similar ambiguity lies in the concept of *zāher*, used to refer to the uncertain, possibly deceitful realm of social relations—where an action's underlying intentions may be different than it appears—or the shield one develops to preserve one's intimacy.

The dynamics of *zāher* and *bāten* are at times presented as two opposite ideals: the spiritual emphasis on sincerity and harmony between *zāher* and *bāten*; and the pragmatic need to protect one's inner self from the intrusion of others.²³ From there, it follows that the value judgments attached to both *zāher* and *bāten* are often deeply ambiguous, and that sincere expression and tactical dissimulation may not always be easily told apart. Far from conforming to strict definitions, the realms of *zāher* and *bāten* are, to a large extent, determined by the individual's intention or strategic use of the distinction, based on what they wish to hide or show in a given context.

Ultimately, the *zāher/bāten* binary relates to the tragic worldview expressed in Shiite thought, where the *bāten* or deeper meanings of the Quran—alongside the secret of the Imāms—is constantly threatened by the powers of the visible that seek to destroy it or too mired in the superficiality of worldly affairs to see beyond its literal signification.²⁴ In this specific context, the *bāten* seems fated to remain hidden, preserved only among a narrow elite. Following the doctrine of Twelver Shia Islam, the official majority denomination in Iran, justice can thus also be understood as the fragile endeavor of restoring balance between the *zāher* and *bāten*, avoiding one's suppression by the other. In current Twelver Shia eschatology, this can only be fully achieved through the manifestation (*zohur*) of the hidden—identified with the twelfth Imām currently in occultation—at the end of time. Thus, despite the diversity of its contexts of expression, the versatility of the *zāher/bāten* distinction highlights the fact that any text, speech, or event is a potential locus for the manifestation of hidden meanings, and therefore prone, through various resources and devices, to a form of hermeneutics.

Close-Up and the manifold expressions of *bāten*

In *Close-Up*, as explicated above, the distinction between *zāher* and *bāten* is not only explicitly mentioned, it serves as a starting point for the cinematographic quest initiated by Kiarostami. At the beginning of the film, when the director visits Sabzian in prison and offers help, Sabzian begs the director to portray his suffering (*dard*). In an Iranian context,

²¹ Vivier Muresan, “Le code de politesse iranien (*ta'ārof*) ou la fiction du lien social,” 130.

²² For the *bāten* as a place of “inner purity,” see Beeman, *Language, Status, and Power in Iran*, 63. For it as the locus of human vice, see Vivier-Muresan, “Le code de politesse iranien (*ta'ārof*) ou la fiction du lien social,” 124.

²³ Vivier-Muresan, “Le code de politesse iranien (*ta'ārof*) ou la fiction du lien social,” 124. This ambiguity is reflected in the tension between the expression “*zāher-o bātenash yeki-st*” (his/her appearance and reality are one), used to praise someone's sincerity, and the injunction to preserve one's *zāher* and hide one's true feelings and intentions, to avoid being at the mercy of others.

²⁴ Regarding the secret of the Imāms, this is a notion central to Shiism, where secrecy (*sirr*) refers to the hidden dimension of the revelation embodied by the Imām, both as a hermeneutist of the true meaning of the Quran and the most eminent divine epiphany. The twelve Imāms, acknowledged in Twelver Shiism as the legitimate successors to the Prophet, are thus simultaneously the “guardians” and “content” of the Secret. Amir-Moezzi, *La Religion discrète*.

dard is often associated with the notions of “inner purity” (*safā-ye bāten*), “conscience,” and “responsibility.” The opposite, *bidard*, denotes superficiality and frivolity.²⁵ Suffering also plays an important role in Shiism and certain currents in Iranian literature and arts, where it is considered a key experience on the path to achieving one’s full humanity.²⁶ Concerned about the press’s representation of him as a crook, Sabzian insists this is not so. This is where the binary comes into play, identifying the case as a set of tensions between the apparent and the hidden and bestowing it with particular significance. As we have seen, Sabzian, who confessed to the scam, inflects his confession substantially by claiming that his action was merely the “appearance” (*zāher*) of fraud. “Then what is it really?” Kiarostami asks in turn, using the word *bāten*. In an interview on the making of the film, Kiarostami pointed out that, during this exchange at Qasr prison, Sabzian was unaware he was being filmed.²⁷ Thus, it is really Sabzian who leads Kiarostami to this interpretation of the case, prompting him to take the spectator on his quest for the cinematic disclosure of the truth.

Ultimately, the *zāher/bāten* binary and the idea of moving beyond appearances to reach the deeper substance of the case orients the content and form of Kiarostami’s narrative quest. On this basis, the film’s challenge is no longer primarily to showcase visible facts, but to make visible what is not visible: an inner pain and mad love for cinema against the backdrop of personal and social drama, as well as a yearning to escape one’s social condition to experience the respect and admiration of others. Rather than testimonies assessed against the criteria of truth and falsity, the protagonists’ claims—in all their diversity—constitute distinct interpretations within one and the same continuum of truth between multiple layers of *zāher* and *bāten*. With no intention of ranking them along the scale of truth, it can be argued that the journalist in the film sets forth one of the most “apparent” interpretations of the case, while Kiarostami, the Ahankhahs, the judge, and Sabzian offer more *bāteni* approaches to the events manifested in the film. The visible/invisible binary thus allows us to reconsider the strict divide between truth and falsity and conceive of the truth as a complex unfolding of unseen intentions, emotions, and interpretations in the making.

In this regard, the *zāher/bāten* binary also leaves its mark on the film’s narrative devices. From the beginning, when Sabzian’s arrest is filmed from the taxi driver’s point of view, the latter remains at the door, together with the camera, his long wait filmed over several minutes. The temporality and marking of distance between the two spaces, the inside (*andaruni*) and the outside (*biruni*), suggest that the *bāten*—identified by the threshold of the house—cannot be accessed without a pause, a moment of contemplation to extract oneself from the tumult of the world. A time to welcome beauty and become aware of that which otherwise seems worthless—faded roses thrown on a pile of dead leaves, or an empty can of insecticide spray. As Kiarostami explained, commenting on this scene, “We are not allowed to enter the house, so let us waste some time *outside* to see what is going on *inside*.”²⁸

Subsequently, reenacted scenes translate an “apparent” meaning of the affair. This is true for the scene of the meeting on the bus, where Sabzian introduces himself as Makhmalbaf, signs the script of “his” film *Bāysikelrān* (*The Cyclist*), which he is reading, and gifts it to Ms. Ahankhah, who seems willing to believe him.²⁹ In all appearances, Sabzian is stealing Makhmalbaf’s identity. The same holds true for the scene before the arrest, when Sabzian, returning from a mountain walk, explicitly plays at being Makhmalbaf in front of the camera. There is every indication that the case is one of identity fraud. Yet, several elements cast doubt around who is lying and who is telling the truth, disturbing this first reading of the case: as they become aware that Sabzian is a fake Makhmalbaf, the Ahankhahs in

²⁵ Khosravi, *Young and Defiant in Tehran*, 10.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 82–83.

²⁷ Barbera and Resegotti, *Kiarostami*, 139.

²⁸ Barbera and Resegotti, *Kiarostami*, 176; emphasis ours.

²⁹ *Bāysikelrān* is a film by Mohsen Makhmalbaf, released in 1989.

turn start playing a role in order to avoid arousing his suspicion as they arrange for his arrest. The arrest itself looks very much staged. As everyone starts playing their role, Sabzian himself is drawn into an imbroglio he is unable to escape.

To guide the audience to the “invisible” and uncover the suffering of one man’s doomed love for cinema, Kiarostami resorts to a cinematographic tool seldom used in his previous films: the close-up, the most obvious explanation for the title. It is during the trial, in Kiarostami’s approach to filming, that the *zāher/bāten* distinction is most clearly mobilized at the formal level. At the beginning of the hearing, Kiarostami explicitly alludes to the binary,³⁰ itself materialized by the presence of two cameras: the “court” (*dādghāh*) camera, captured in a wide shot, which addresses empirical facts (extortion and identity theft, pertaining to the realm of *zāher*); and the camera capturing “our” (*mā*) viewpoint, i.e., the director’s vision as the embodiment of a different perspective. The latter camera films in close-up, its presence required if, as Kiarostami explains in the film, “some point calls for a specific explanation and cannot easily be assessed by appearances.”³¹ This framing allows Kiarostami to lend subjective reception a tangible form and grant access to another level of meaning not by widening the field of investigation, but by deepening it, in the manner of an exegesis. The expression of this truth he finds on Sabzian’s face, filmed as a scene in which the passion and pain become apparent through the emotions, the timbre of the voice, the gaze, and the inclination of the head. At the border between cinema and icon, the face becomes the locus of an epiphany. The mode of filming provides a possible key to the *bāten*, a reality inherently invisible and often deliberately hidden. To access it, one must move past the social constraints hindering its sincere expression and surrender to the gaze of he who acknowledges the possibility of a different interpretation—in this case, the director. This is the condition for the viewer to extract themselves from the regular temporality of the hearing, which falls short of the *bāten* of the case. Kiarostami needed all that time (the extra nine hours), in this specific place, for Sabzian to tell his story in front of the camera.

Still, the other camera filming the trial in a wide shot and offering the most apparent dimension of the case has its *raison d’être*. The alternation between wide and close shots assembled in the montage resonates with an exegetical practice according to which truth emerges through the back and forth between *zāher* and *bāten*, rather than the elimination of one by the other. Such a truth also emerges from the story in its global, dynamic dimension, in particular in the circulation of such vehicles as taxis and motorcycles, which simultaneously underline its labile and elusive character. The articulation of different planes and the blurring of the categories of reality and fiction in which they partake thus allow for a different interpretation to emerge and a complex truth to unfold.³² By associating the case’s *bāten* with the protagonist’s intimate pain—his multilayered self and complex humanity—the film sides with a particular definition of the truth. A truth that may only be fathomed when the outward appearance of the facts is weighed against an assessment of the intentions and desires that produced them.

The expression of the invisible: bāten in art

With all its ambiguity, *Close-Up* also questions cinema’s ability to capture the complexity of truth, including the deeper layers of the protagonist’s self and intentionality. It interrogates the means by which staging can cause such truth to appear, by creating the conditions for the expression of vibrant emotions. Can the camera grant access to a hidden level of reality by creating a space of intimacy conducive to the expression of the *bāten*? Or, does it exacerbate the playacting of the person filmed, making signs all the more misleading, as they

³⁰ As Kiarostami tells Sabzian in *Close-Up*, “In prison, you said ‘I am guilty,’ but this is only the apparent dimension (*zāher*) of the case; this is no easy question to examine, and one unlikely to be understood by all.”

³¹ Kiarostami uses the adverb *zāheran* to refer to this dimension.

³² Erfani, *Iranian Cinema and Philosophy. Shooting Truth*, 104.

have every appearance of sincerity? The question is especially significant in the Iranian context, where art, particularly poetry, is the ultimate locus of expression of the *bāten*, granted its ability to disclose parts of the mystery without exhausting in literalism.

In a context where one's *bāten* should not be disclosed to others, it may be that acting, or roleplaying, is a convenient medium to reveal part of one's intimacy without compromising safety. *Close-Up* is exemplary in this regard, as it maintains an ambiguity around the fictional and factual, creating an intermediate space between the two, where trivial details and poetic quotations intertwine. The camera allows Sabzian to display the turmoil of his inner self while still maintaining distance. As is shown by Erfani, Kiarostami's art may be considered Lacanian to the extent it does not seek to cover up Sabzian's lack; on the contrary, the camera's gaze serves to reveal and expose it.³³ It also allows the protagonist to hide behind the appearance of fiction, just as lyric poetry offers a space for burning love to be expressed while its very essence—whether mystical, allegorical, or physical—remains concealed.

The protagonists in *Close-Up* share a common fascination with cinema and acknowledge its power to represent the invisible: Sabzian claims that his love for cinema stems from its ability to reveal the sufferings of those who are *not seen*—those who, like himself, are invisible in the eyes of society. In this regard, Sabzian can be said to be a *mise en abyme* of Kiarostami himself, who chose to shoot *Close-Up* to make what he considered Sabzian's complex and multilayered self visible to the world. Sabzian's passion for cinema is inseparable from the figuration of an invisible intimacy, which implies that the subject is, literally, inhabited by another person. Sabzian alludes to the fact that he "lives" with the *Cyclist*, while, following the discovery of Sabzian's case, Kiarostami proclaims: "What I had just discovered had taken possession of me."³⁴

Yet, far from merely "capturing" a few sparks of a hidden truth, the camera participates in the actualization of this truth, contributing to making it true: while lifting the veil on some layers of his *bāten*, the film fulfills Sabzian's promise to make the Ahankhahs play as actors in their own house. This performative dimension reinforces the ambiguity of truth and falsehood, an aspect purposefully highlighted by Kiarostami. While declining to enter the Ahankhahs' home for filming, he addresses Sabzian in the following terms: "You didn't lie, you told a truth (*haqiqat*) that is beyond reality (*vāqe'iyat*); you told them you were a director (...) you said that one day, you would bring in your team to shoot a film here. (...) We are your team."³⁵ Beyond the classic antagonism, reality and cinematographic fiction both contribute to the construction of a single, more complex truth. In addition, the distortion of reality and the new arrangement of the visible through staging and manipulation paradoxically allow for reconciliation and justice to be achieved. As it calls for an unrestrained commitment on the part of the protagonists, the actualization of such a truth is inseparable from their transformation: at the end of the film, Makhmalbaf declares that Sabzian is no longer the same person.

At the same time, cinema in its material dimension may also shield and hinder access to the invisible as such. In an interview, Kiarostami expressed regret that, in one of the film's last scenes, Makhmalbaf could not see "Sabzian's condition as a bashful lover," suggesting Makhmalbaf may have been disturbed by his microphone and the echo of his own voice. Commenting on the scene of their encounter and the sabotage of the soundtrack,³⁶ Kiarostami emphasized the ambiguity of cinema which, while aspiring to make truth visible, also contributes to its veiling: "I often think how intrusive sound can be in relation to [the depiction of] truth (*haqiqat*) (...) and how much closer we can get to the image by removing

³³ Ibid., 107.

³⁴ Barbera, Resegotti, *Kiarostami*, 141.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ It was only during the sound editing process that Kiarostami decided to deliberately ruin the soundtrack. He explained that Sabzian, unlike Makhmalbaf, did not know he was being filmed. As a result, "one person worked for the camera and the other for himself. (...) Leaving the dialogue between the two unchanged meant giving a new direction to this film that was coming to a close." Barbera and Resegotti, *Kiarostami*, 177.

the sound. (...) Removing the sound and even at times removing the image can procure a new experience in cinema.”³⁷

Close-Up as indicative of the *bāten/zāher* binary in social interactions

In its narrative devices, *Close-Up* also mirrors complex logics of communication. The ambiguities of these devices and the questions they raise resonate to some degree with daily interactions in Iran, specifically in the play of the *zāher/bāten* distinction: how sincere are the characters and to what extent are they acting or practicing *ta‘ārof*? By highlighting this constant uncertainty, the film partakes in a political questioning of whether a group can achieve a common and unambiguous horizon of signification. While opening a space of freedom, the film simultaneously conveys the notion of a failed sense of community, as the plurality of interpretations seem to belie the possibility of a shared vision and, even more so, a communion around some invisible reality: is the protagonist a bashful lover, a deceiver, or a madman? The characters fail to agree what most accurately constitutes Sabzian’s *bāten*, even within the same family. As such, adverse interpretations mirror the two main social and mystical-religious perspectives of Sabzian’s inner self: is identity theft the sincere expression of a burning love and a tragic quest for harmony between *zāher* and *bāten*, or merely a clever cover to abuse others? Is Sabzian a mystical lover, a *majnun* and a *darvish*, as Mr. Ahankhah suggests ambiguously, or a clever crook, the social type of *zerang*?³⁸ Sabzian himself points to the porous borders between these types: while aspiring to give free rein to his love for cinema, even if this means sacrificing his honor and family, Sabzian also mentions the loans, the free meals at the Ahankhah house, and the social recognition he enjoyed. As Fischer noted, this role enabled him to experience actual moments of power.³⁹ Here, spiritual elevation seems inseparable from the possibility of social ascent. Sabzian’s desire to hike in the mountains, cast as a manifestation of his inner effort to “remove the rust from his heart,” could just as easily have been sparked at the Ahankhahs’ house, from which the heights of Tehran can be seen. Again, we are faced with the fundamental ambiguity of *zāher* and *bāten*, themselves reflexive of the complexities of a man steeped in his own paradoxes and contradictions. Sabzian’s use of poetry to suggest that his true face remains hidden to himself, together with his hesitation during the court hearing around the part of roleplay and deeper sincerity in his own existence, show that the *bāten* somehow always remains concealed, even to its own bearer.

Faced with man’s inherent ambiguities and tensions, the common fascination of cinema’s protagonists—in writing as much as filming and viewing—relates to the medium’s ability to create a different, if fictitious, reality that is both social and simultaneously intimate. Thus, both Sabzian and the Ahankhahs’ enthusiasm for the shooting seems motivated by the prospect of a temporary suspension of social boundaries more than purely artistic reasons. The shooting evokes the possibility of a community based on sincere friendship, in which *ta‘ārof* no longer has a say. One of the Ahankhah sons recounts how moved he was by the humble (*khāki*) behavior of the supposedly famous director when he asked for a loan without resorting to formal courtesies. As for Sabzian, he values the friendly respect he enjoyed among the Ahankhahs, though his status and artistic “project” bridged the social abyss that would otherwise separate him from this bourgeois family. An ideal capable of disrupting the social boundaries of *zāher* and *bāten* for a while, to allow a stranger to enter a family’s intimate space, is a powerful one; powerful enough to explain everyone’s difficulty returning to normal life after a simple trial and the protagonists’ willingness to reenact scenes of this unsettled social order in an attempt to recapture the promise of a journey beyond the confines of

³⁷ The filmed interview of Kiarostami is available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nFbHBN0UqO4> (accessed October 2019).

³⁸ “Your appearance (*zāher*) shows that you are a dervish,” Mr. Ahankhah says, implying that his inner self might tell otherwise. He thus uses this distinction to challenge Sabzian.

³⁹ Fischer, *Mute Dreams, Blind Owls, and Dispersed Knowledges*, 229.

their condition. Beyond the apparent contention between victims and offender, *Close-Up* stages and brings to light a common yearning for a different social experience, crystallized around cinema as embodying the power to override the visible. As Vatulescu aptly suggests, it also reveals that Sabzian and the Ahankhahs share the same aspiration to play a role in order to overcome, even temporarily, their inability to fit into society as they would like and improve their own self-image.⁴⁰

A game of hide-and-seek

Beyond the mere desire to show the complexities of reality and a person's psyche, these narrative devices and their articulation with the *zāher/bāten* binary appear to carry specific values that shed light on major issues at stake in the film. One statement in particular appears to have made a profound impression on Kiarostami when he discovered the case: commenting on the press article presenting him as a crook, Sabzian claimed to have become "like a piece of meat hung from a butcher's hook, at everyone's mercy."⁴¹ This feeling of decay seems to have motivated Kiarostami to meet Sabzian with a specific idea in mind: initiate a hermeneutical process and uncover that which lies within the body to reveal a presence and overcome a distance,⁴² as reducing someone to their most superficial appearance amounts to denying their human condition.⁴³ Rather than the seeker of a hidden reality, the director is he who decides to bring this "piece of flesh" back to life, by allowing for new perspectives to be unveiled. He aims not to unfold the mysteries of his soul so much as to suggest its innate complexity, thereby allowing some kind of redemption.

In this regard, *Close-Up* reflects the ambiguity of the director's relation with the invisible (in this case, Sabzian's inner self), between the desire to distinguish sincere intentionality from acting, and a consideration for privacy, to the point of looking away when what appears to be its more intimate contours are revealed. The scene where Sabzian comes out of prison and expresses what seems to be sincere emotion—thus offering access to his intimacy—remains hidden from the spectator. After a sequence of close-ups, the camera is positioned at a distance, as though refusing to frame the characters, who escape in a traffic jam. This way of filming preserves an element of indeterminacy, keeping the core of the *bāten* out of reach and underlying the limits of perception. It also represents a vision of reality as fundamentally "in motion," and therefore always elusive. More generally, the director continuously manipulates and blurs boundaries throughout the film, so as to construct an architecture of meaning aimed at "showing by hiding."⁴⁴ Therefore, a tension is made apparent between two opposite desires: revealing a deeper truth and preserving the protagonist's intimacy as a condition for both dignity and freedom. Kiarostami is careful to avoid exposing the viewer to the emotional overload that direct access to Sabzian's intimacy could provoke. In this way, the narrative devices relay the values underlying the distinction between *zāher* and *bāten*, present in religious exegesis as much as in social interactions. The interpretive process does not aim to achieve an ideal of transparency by tearing the veils of a multiplicity of *zāher*; rather, it seeks to expose the richness of significations surrounding a mystery that ought to be preserved. As a consequence, the function of the *zāher/bāten* binary is to suggest a presence rather than expose it. In *Close-Up*, it helps restore one person's humanity not by making him transparent, but by considering him as the repository of something secret and ineffable, with the capacity to sustain an infinite variety of interpretations, in the manner of a sacred text.

⁴⁰ Vatulescu, "The Face to Face Encounter of Art and Law: Abbas Kiarostami's *Close-Up*," 180.

⁴¹ Barbera and Resegotti, *Kiarostami*, 141. See the English translation of Hassan Farazmand's article about the case in *Soroush*: "Now I'm nothing more than a piece of meat with which any butcher can do anything." (sic) <https://www.sabzian.be/article/bogus-makmalbaf-arrested>

⁴² Ricoeur, *Le conflit des interprétations. Essais d'herméneutique*, 40.

⁴³ As he explains in the interview, "After reading this, I spent the whole night thinking about it, wondering what story lay behind it (*che mājerā-y poshtesh ast*)." Barbera and Resegotti, *Kiarostami*, 141.

⁴⁴ Ricoeur, *Le conflit des interprétations. Essais d'herméneutique*, 34.

The refusal to show the intimacy of a conscience also manifests in the film's last scene, when the director distances himself from his protagonist, filming him from afar and from behind, thus refusing the viewer access to Sabzian as he tries to hold back tears. At the end, we remain at the threshold of the Ahankhah house. As in other films such as *Taste of Cherry*, Kiarostami stays back and keeps us at a distance, denying the viewer access to his characters' intimacy when they experience the most profound upheavals. In so doing, therefore, the director allows only for "soft epiphanies."⁴⁵ Maintaining opacity and horizons of virtuality further enables collective forgiveness and reintegration of the offender in the community. Thus, the Ahankhah son agrees to withdraw his complaint at the end of the trial because, in his opinion, Sabzian can make it onto "the right path" (*be rāh-e rāst*) if he finds a job.

One of the director's aims in eliciting a different vision and allowing the individual to be transformed by this new perspective is expressed through the voice of Makhmalbaf in the final scene. As Sabzian is about to enter their house again, Makhmalbaf tells the Ahankhahs, "this Hossein Sabzian is no longer the Hossein Sabzian of late," inviting them to "consider him with fresh eyes (*cheshm-e digar*)." This transformation, akin to a rebirth, is not devoid of a mystical dimension: the flowers blooming in the pot Sabzian holds at the end of the film contrast with the bunch of faded roses dumped on dead leaves at the beginning. Thus, the film makes it possible for Sabzian to again cross the threshold of the Ahankhahs' private space, this time as his own self, that is: as Sabzian and Makhmalbaf simultaneously, rather than a deceptive appearance. In this way, Sabzian achieves a fragile and elusive equilibrium between *zāher* and *bāten*. In the end, forty days have passed since Sabzian's first visit to the Ahankhahs, a period corresponding to the spiritual temporality necessary for the inner transformation elicited by the filming process. However, the ambiguity surrounding his "own self" is again suggested when, after presenting himself as "Sabzian" upon ringing the Ahankhahs' doorbell and not being recognized, he concedes to introducing himself as "Makhmalbaf."

As previously suggested, the *zāher/bāten* binary is also ultimately consistent with a notion of justice that exceeds the mere legal dimension of this case. This prism allows us to bring the analysis a step further. As a hermeneutic process, justice cannot be accomplished without the unfolding of a novel horizon of meaning and an effort to locate each element of truth at its own level: the legal truth of justice and the complex truth of Sabzian's *bāten*. On this basis, justice can only fully be achieved when multiple *zāher* and *bāten*, each shedding light on one another, collaborate in the emergence of a truth that art seems particularly worthy of approaching.

Conclusion

This reading of *Close-Up*'s narrative form shows how Kiarostami's film achieves a kind of universal cinematic perception within the elements of a typically Iranian context. The narrative mode marked by uncertainty prevents the storyline from generating a single, one-sided meaning. Instead, it opens a horizon of freedom as much for the spectator, who is invited to interpret, as for the protagonist—the object of interpretation—who thus escapes essentialization. Drawing on the complex relations between multiple *zāher* and *bāten*, cinema also participates in an ontological and moral reflection on the invisible, alongside what can and cannot be shown in life and on screen. It reveals the existence of a fertile dialectic of art and life, reality and fiction, the boundaries of which must be blurred for its own ultimate mystery to be preserved; a space where apparent simplicity becomes the token of deeper and thicker meanings. In so doing, cinema upholds a vision receptive to the beauty of the unexpected and "unthought" of life.

⁴⁵ Bergala, "De l'épiphanie dans le cinéma de Kiarostami et de Rossellini," 199.

Close-Up relies on the potentialities and complexities of the visible/invisible binary to establish unknown connections and redefine boundaries. Instead of keeping characters at a distance to emphasize their strangeness, it prompts a sense of familiarity by allowing the protagonists' intimacy to unfold without claiming a final truth or lapsing into voyeurism. Kiarostami thus succeeds in giving this banal affair a deeply human dimension, one likely to be experienced by everyone as something that concerns, and even affects, them—potentially initiating an infinite *mise en abyme*. In this regard, the film partakes in the concrete actualization of the intricate dynamics of the *bāten* in the viewer, arousing unexpected resonances and affinities beyond the diversity of appearances. This comes with a set of uncanny emotions, such as a sudden feeling of empathy, even a sense of community, with a young unemployed Iranian man passionate about cinema; an ineffable affinity of a universal kind.

Disclosures

None.

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Cite this article: Devictor A, Neuve-Eglise A (2023). Soft Epiphanies: The Multilayered Narratives in Abbas Kiarostami's Film *Close-Up* (1990). *Iranian Studies* 56, 685–700. <https://doi.org/10.1017/irn.2023.42>