by HARLAN JACOBSON

Static Motion On Tour with Abbas Kiarostami

Over the past 20 years, the world has watched certain national cinemas with intense interest, none more so than Iran's for its shifting cultural tectonic plates. At 70, Abbas Kiarostami, after some 47 features, docs, shorts, and segments as both screenwriter and director, occupies something more than the first chair of Iranian cinema. He isn't only a voice of opposition to Iranian theocracy, he is an artist of international stature. His filmmaking works with elemental forms—man, woman, child; tree, village, mountain; earthquake; and of course, road, tour, and car—to arrive at something unique to him: static motion. His characters all undertake journeys but don't get very far, if anywhere at all, yet a lot changes inside them.

Kiarostami's stories sit astride various cultural faultlines and they adeptly survey how modern-day Iran deals with the matter at hand. In his masterwork, *Taste of Cherry*, which won the Palme d'Or in 1997, a middle-aged man drives around a dusty mountain asking for assistance with the burying of his body after his planned suicide. This is fairly nuanced territory, allowing the character to propose an outrage while remaining within his comfort zone of modern, secular Islam. As in Frederick Wiseman's documentaries, people drift into a scene, giving us a tour up and down the social ladder—in this case, the military, the mullahs, and the outlander Afghanis, who are confronted by a secular humanist invitation to disobey centuries of law and custom.

So too with Kiarostami's script for *The White Balloon* (95) for his former assistant director Jafar Panahi ("The fact that a filmmaker has been imprisoned is intolerable," Kiarostami says about his recently jailed friend and protégé) in which a girl accidentally drops into a sewer grate the money with which she meant to buy a holiday goldfish. We watch her beseech people from every social group and class to fish the bank note out to no avail, until a passing Afghani refugee kid saves the day—and then, purpose served, is instantly discarded. And in *Through the Olive Trees* (94), a filmmaker touring the countryside post-earthquake gets bogged down in trying to film an illiterate young farmer and a girl, doing endless retakes and repeatedly reworking the script to tailor it to their capabilities, only to underline the larger obstacle: some part of Iran remains premodern, literal as mud, unable to imagine point of view. The mullahs count on this.

Kiarostami sat down in Cannes to discuss his latest film, *Certified Copy*, his eighth to play the festival. It is small in scale, European in milieu, and more elusive in meaning than usual. Juliette

>> IN FOCUS: *Certified Copy* will be presented in this year's New York Film Festival, which runs from September 23 through October 10.

PHOTO BY LAURENT THURIN NAL/MK2

Binoche stars as an antique-store owner opposite English opera baritone William Shimell as a well-known philosopher who comes to Tuscany to read from his new book on "the authentic," a quality he himself doesn't value.

Binoche, who won the Best Actress Prize in Cannes, and Shimell, who proves more operatic than cinematic, meet as apparent strangers, but as they climb into her car, have lunch, and move through the day, their behavior and speech morph ambiguously into that of a couple in the midst of a troubled marriage. As Binoche drives, Kiarostami's camera lingers on their reflections in the windshield; it's the work of a 21st-century painter using technology to indicate the characters' emotional shifts. The director has also broadened his political perspective to hear the female voice. Kiarostami says he finds himself thinking about his parents. "They were two waltz dancers who knew how to move together," he said.

Some years ago in Rome you told my wife how much you liked driving around Tehran and picking people up, as if you were a taxi driver. Cars are clearly a key element of *Certified Copy*; it's not just about authenticity.

I've been quite stubborn about using cars as a location in my films. But I must say that the journalists I meet are as stubborn in asking me, "Why a car?" A car is like this room. We might as well be sitting here next to each other in a car. I just see it as a moving room and nothing more. They would never ask me or any other director, "Why a bedroom or an office?" My next film is going to be shot entirely in a car.

One of the things about shooting in a car is that you very much rely on the two-shot. And in this film, once the couple leave the car and go into the restaurant, you alternate between single shots.

The first reason is the legitimacy of close-ups. In everyday life we don't sit so close to each other, whereas in a car even people who aren't intimate with each other sit next to each other, so I have a reason not to show them in a wider landscape. Another reason is changing backdrop, changing landscape. I love the fixed camera. I want to continue using it, but at the same time I don't want my viewers to get bored.

The thing I like about your use of the car going back to *Through the Olive Trees* and *Taste of Cherry* is the tour. Even the script for *The White Balloon*, which has no car, has the same objective: a tour of all aspects of Iranian society around a central question.

You call it a tour. I call it movement. And movement can be symbolic, though I hate the idea of a symbol. But a car is nothing more than a dynamic room. It's being together, but I don't like showing people together in a static way. I'm sitting here, but I'm not [only in] a chair. I'm moving. Inside me everything is moving.

What role can filmmaking by Iranians play in the life of the culture?

Iran is just like the rest of the world. Cinema and filmmaking can have an impact, but we must consider the nature of this impact. In Iran, there is a repressive, powerful government, but that doesn't make us overlook the power of film. Cultural and

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cinematic [impact] is a long-term process, so we mustn't expect it to change the society or its values, or anything, overnight. But it does have influence. Among the forms of artistic opposition, film is the most powerful [because] its impact is easiest to observe.

What was your thinking in 1979 when you stayed in Iran? Was it clear that Iran was about to become more repressive?

At the time of the revolution I didn't have any idea of what was happening in the country, because I was going through a personal revolution. What was happening in my home drove me away from what was going on outside. Neither of these revolutions was very successful. I wasn't committed to either, I was just undergoing something stronger happening to me.

I have the feeling retrospectively that we didn't bring about a revolution. A revolution was done to us. It happened *to* us. We have the impression that it was spontaneous and growing from within the society. But I have gradually come to believe that it came from elsewhere.

What did your parents want for you when you were growing up?

They were far too simple and far too poor to have these kinds of concerns. It was as if we were born by accident, and it was all about getting by, day by day. They never invested anything in trying to make me a presentable individual.

What did your father do?

He was a painter. But the kind of painter that doesn't exist in Iran anymore—doing frescoes on walls and ceilings. That would make him an uncertified copy of Michelangelo. He was an exquisite man. My parents had many children. And after World War II, even in Iran, surviving was difficult. So they couldn't afford to dream or construct anything for their children or for themselves. But I must say this man was knowledgeable. He was the one who gave me a taste for poetry. He probably didn't do it on purpose, but I learned Persian poetry from him.

The female voice has become more present in your films. *Ten* [02] follows a woman in a car through the streets of Tehran. We hear about her relationship with her children, the problems of everyday life. It's her voice that is most clearly grounded in reality. Do you think that you give voice to some of the things that you observed in your mother?

My mother is 107 years old now. You know, I'm not even sure it's 107. She's over 100, but none of us knows exactly. She had the most beautiful, surprising, complex, and strong relationship with my father. I keep thinking about their relationship, and I realize how incredibly they completed each other.

You're right to say it is a matter of [her] voice: my father wasn't there, he was a hard worker, and she had to deal with all these children. A large family is like a classroom. It's not a face-to-face relationship. It's a matter of power and discipline, and being in power is a matter of voice. And her voice was very present.

Can you tell us about your eye condition?

I had a problem as a child, which made me use too many eye drops. You see the sea there? That's how many eye drops I have put in my eyes in my life. My iris always stays open. It never closes. □