

Blu-Ray Review: Iranian Classic 'Close-Up' Dissects Cinema From the Inside

Submitted by [mattmovieman](#) [1] on July 1, 2010 - 9:26am

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CHICAGO – Abbas Kiarostami's 1990 masterpiece, "Close-Up," is the type of cinematic landmark guaranteed to infuriate audiences and exhilarate film scholars. Yet adventurous viewers willing to look beneath the film's perplexing and rather stilted surface will discover a multi-layered mind-game of endless fascination that's more provocative and relevant than ever.

Any viewer unschooled in the history of Iranian cinema shouldn't be frightened away from exploring this picture, especially since the Criterion edition of "Close-Up" includes a wealth of informative and addictive special features (we'll get to those later). It's difficult to over-estimate the film's importance in post-revolution Iran, where the work of auteurs like Mohsen Makhmalbaf was largely ignored by the mainstream public. Kiarostami's real-life human subject, often filmed in probing yet mystifying close-ups, is Hossein Sabzian, a devout film lover who passed himself off as the director Makhmalbaf.



Blu-Ray Rating: **5.0/5.0**

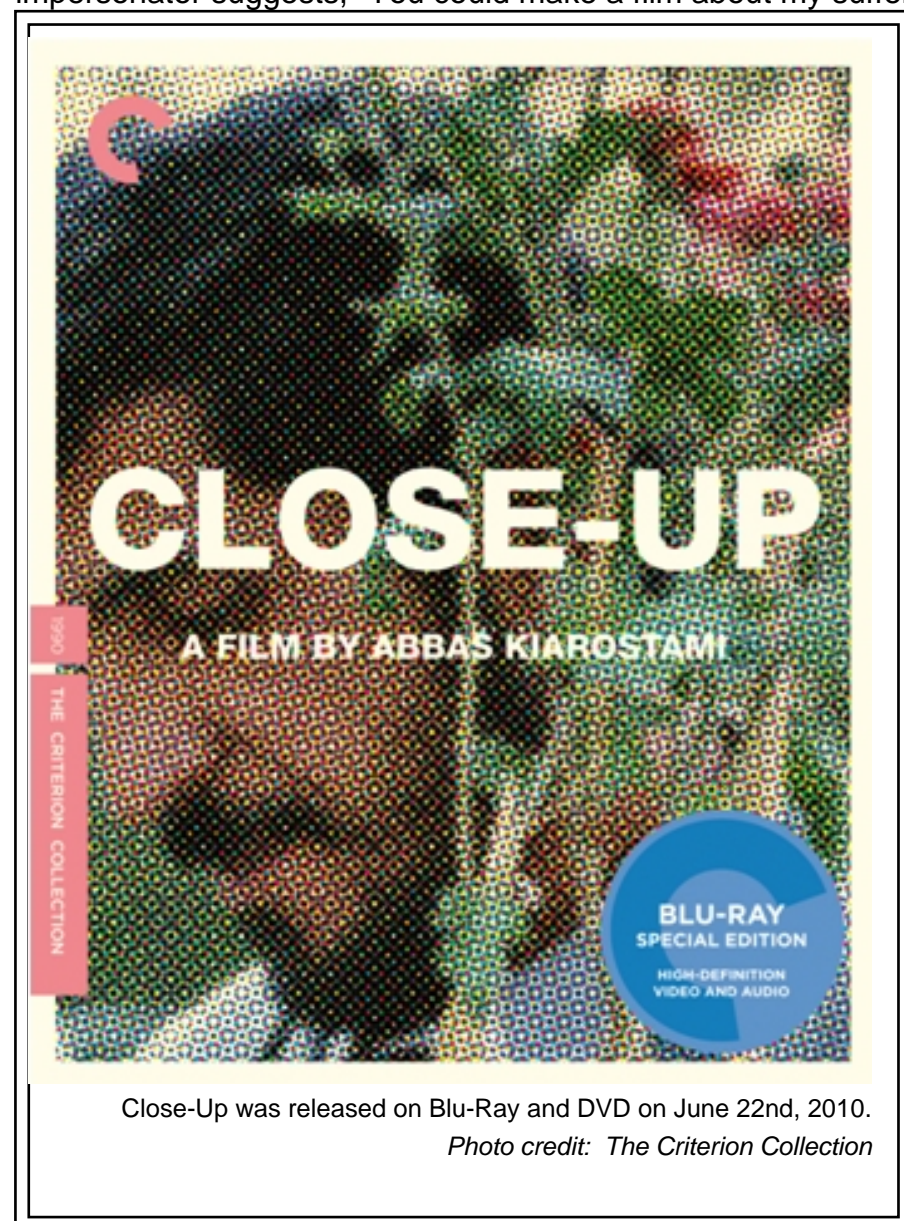
Though this true tale of trickery would seem to be a diverting yet inconsequential subject for feature-length analysis, Kiarostami's extraordinary approach to the material defies all expectations. He doesn't cast actors to play the characters or interview the subjects as in a traditional documentary. Instead, he enlists the real people involved in the story to play themselves, including Sabzian and the members of the family he duped. It's especially tantalizing to see these individuals re-enact past encounters with each other, since their recollections of what actually occurred often differ (in a style somewhat reminiscent of "Rashomon"). Kiarostami proves to be a master manipulator, as he constantly causes the audience to shift identification with his characters. Sabzian identifies with the humanist views of Makhmalbaf's post-revolution cinema to such a powerful degree that he has essentially taken on the director's identity as a way of championing his beliefs.



Iranian filmmaker Mohsen Makhmalbaf gives a ride to the man who impersonated him, Hossein Sabzian, in Abbas Kiarostami's 1990 masterpiece Close-Up.

Photo credit: The Criterion Collection

The film's tangled levels of deception become all the more dizzying when Sabzian, arrested on fraud charges, has his court hearing in the presence of a film crew. Somehow, Kiarostami managed to acquire the judge's permission to not only schedule the trial according to his shooting schedule, but allow him to question Sabzian at various points during the trial. Though the rest of the film was shot in 35 mm, the court sequences were shot in a grainier 16 mm, as if to accentuate their staged authenticity (Kiarostami even prefaces the first sequence with a clapperboard, as if to suggest there were multiple takes of the trial). "Close-Up" ultimately illustrates the absurdity of a documentary that purports itself to be objective, since every work of art is a mode of self-expression. Since Sabzian couldn't express himself, he literally became consumed by the films that reflected his own beliefs and struggles. When Kiarostami first meets Sabzian in prison, the impoverished impersonator suggests, "You could make a film about my suffering." Boy has he ever.



"Close-Up" is presented in 1080p High Definition (with a 1.33:1 aspect ratio), and comes equipped with improved English subtitles that bring added clarity to dialogue delivered during the climactic encounter between Sabzian and the real-life Makhmalbaf. In an enlightening new 27-minute interview with Kiarostami, the filmmaker reveals that he cut the sound during that sequence because Makhmalbaf was talking about himself, which prevented the moment from achieving its intended poignancy. Kiarostami also points out that his initial meeting with the imprisoned Sabzian was included in the film. When asked how he was able to reign over a court hearing with an authority that even seemed to supersede the judge, the director begins his answer by saying, "Our country is the land of the impossible." In the 31-minute documentary profile, "A Walk with Kiarostami," the filmmaker's love of nature seems to parallel that of Sabzian, as he spends an afternoon taking snapshots of a garden.

The disc also includes engaging audio commentary from critic Jonathan Rosenbaum and Columbia College Chicago film professor Mehrnaz Saeed-Vafa, who co-authored the book "Abbas Kiarostami." Rosenbaum's tireless analyses and anecdotes are well complimented by Saeed-Vafa's expert knowledge of Iranian cinema and culture (their commentary is the equivalent of a first-rate film course). They amusingly discuss how the fractured structure of "Close-Up" was partly influenced by an early screening in which the film reels got mixed up, resulting in a more experimental version that Kiarostami ended up favoring over his intended cut. Perhaps the most essential and unforgettable extra is the 43-minute documentary "Close Up Long Shot," which features an interview with Sabzian six years after the film's release, in which the haunted man admits, "I let my love of cinema destroy my life." Yet the biggest treat offered on this disc is Kiarostami's 1974 feature debut "The Traveler," which can be accurately described as a masterwork of Iranian neorealism.

'Close-Up' is released by The Criterion Collection and stars Hossein Sabzian, Mohsen Makhmalbaf, Abolfazl Ahankhah, Mehrdad Ahankhah, Monoochehr Ahankhah, Mahrokh Ahankhah, Nayer Mohseni Zonoozi and Hossain Farazmand. It was written and directed by Abbas Kiarostami. It was released on June 22nd, 2010. It is not rated.



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By [MATT FAGERHOLM](#) [14]

Staff Writer

HollywoodChicago.com

matt@hollywoodchicago.com [13]

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