

Godfrey Cheshire on Close-Up (Abbas Kiarostami, 1990)

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Few figures in the history of movies leap from screen to become not just characters but paradigms, beacons that illuminate the paradoxical nature and power of the medium even as they exercise their own unique fascinations. The Little Tramp, Charles Foster Kane and a handful of others: these are the cinema's resonant, iconic Quixotes, whose significance surpasses even the films that contain them. At the end of the 1990s we can add another name to their select company of unforgettables: Hossein Sabzian.

This review, the last I will write for publication in the year that marks the end of the century of cinema, concerns Abbas Kiarostami's *Close-Up*, a 1990 Iranian feature that I recently named the most important film of the last decade and one of the 10 most important of the century. That estimation certainly reflects my own ongoing fascination with Iranian cinema, but it's hardly idiosyncratic. In 1990, when few in the film world were cued to the growing potency of Iranian filmmaking, *Close-Up* was passed over by high-profile festivals including Cannes and New York, but won prizes in Montreal and Rimini. Its renown has grown exponentially since then. After being voted the best Iranian

film in history in a worldwide survey of critics published by the Iranian magazine *Film International*, the film has ranked at or near the top of critics polls regarding movies of the 1990s conducted recently in Canada and Europe.

And now comes a signal honor: Having previously appeared locally only in festival and retrospective settings, *Close-Up* at last has an American distributor (Zeitgeist Films) and will begin its first New York theatrical run on Fri., Dec. 31, at The Screening Room. Is it cause for chagrin that such a celebrated movie has taken a nearly a decade to reach our theaters? Say, rather, that we're lucky it took *only* a decade, considering the steadily declining appreciation of truly adventurous foreign films, as well as the still-pervasive resistance to the cultural *difference* that Iran represents.

Can any slight, relatively little-seen film live up to the kind of reputation that increasingly surrounds *Close-Up*? Perhaps it's inadvisable to introduce the movie with superlatives, which risk creating burdensome expectations. On the other hand, it is my experience that *Close-Up* tends to win out over whatever impressions audiences bring to it. Sure, it is extremely simple on its surface, rough-hewn and relatively nondramatic by conventional measures. Uninitiated viewers may find themselves restive and underwhelmed early on. But the film so subtly transmutes our normal sense of what movies can do that we are ultimately left defenseless against the extraordinary power of its final scenes, which are as transcendent—and as shrewd—as anything in cinema.

An unusual mixture of found reality and fictional elaboration, *Close-Up* documents the case of Hossein Sabzian, the Makhmalbaf impersonator. The film began with a story in the Tehran weekly *Sorush* which said that a man had been arrested for pretending to be Mohsen Makhmalbaf, one of Iran's most famous film directors, to a middle-class family. The ruse apparently was somewhat innocent at first. The family, the Ahankhahs, invited the supposed Makhmalbaf into their home after the wife met him on a bus. He regaled them with tales of his career and offered to put them in his next film.

But the deception soon began to unravel. "Makhmalbaf" didn't know anything about an international award the papers said he had won. More crucially, he borrowed money from the family and didn't return it. Suspecting they were being set up for a bigger rip-off, Mr. Ahankhah contacted the authorities. The ersatz auteur was picked up soon after at the Ahankhah house; *Sorush's* reporter witnessed the arrest. Once his story was printed, Kiarostami entered the picture.

The film opens with the *Sorush* reporter, a cabbie and two soldiers talking as they drive to the Ahankhah house for the arrest. The reporter ebulliently hopes that this scoop will make him as famous as Italy's Orianna Fallaci; one of his interlocutors expresses puzzlement that anyone would imitate a film director. The events depicted here, of course, happened before the film began; what we're seeing is the first of several dramatic re-creations that Kiarostami staged and filmed after the fact, using the actual people rather than actors. These sequences he intermixes with real documentary footage (although this concept grows ever more problematic, as we shall see), shot as the case of the Makhmalbaf impersonator unfolded.

As *Close-Up* recounts it, Kiarostami's involvement—as both a chronicler and a de facto participant in the case—begins in earnest when he goes to the authorities and asks permission to film Sabzian's legal ordeal. Receiving that, he visits the defendant in prison to obtain his agreement. Sabzian, who seems nervous and abashed by his surroundings, recognizes the filmmaker and speaks approvingly of Kiarostami's first feature, *The Traveler*. Kiarostami next applies to the cleric-judge assigned to hear the case, who seems bemused and mystified that anyone would want to film such an odd, unimportant incident; but he gives his permission nonetheless.

The heart of the film is Sabzian's trial. Although Kiarostami occasionally cuts away to dramatic re-creations of some of the events alluded to (the wife meeting Sabzian on the bus, events in the Ahankhah house before Sabzian was arrested), the movie's human drama remains gravitationally centered on the courtroom. For symbolic as well as practical reasons, Kiarostami used two 16mm cameras (the other sequences are in 35mm) to provide different perspectives on the action. Wide angles show us Sabzian with his accusers arrayed behind him, and, occasionally, the judge at the other side of the room. The close-up camera, meanwhile, gives us an intimate view of Sabzian during his appeals for justice and understanding.

Addressing a turbaned magistrate of the Islamic Republic, the trial's antagonists argue passionately about cinema. Or perhaps it is more accurate to say that they argue about passion *for* cinema and what it can entail: solidarity, wishfulness, magnanimity, deceit, obsession, theft, rage. Obviously embarrassed as well as angry, the Ahankhahs (late-middle-aged father and mother, grown children) assert that Sabzian intended to defraud them. They shared with him their very sincere love of cinema, which he played upon and manipulated with devious, malign intent.

Sabzian is a thin, bearded man in his late 30s, though his age is hard to determine by appearances: called young by some, he admits to dyeing his hair. He has worked as a bookbinder, but appears impoverished; in fact, this is essential to his defense. It seems he was once married with two children, but has lost his family due to his obsession with movies. Evidently a successful autodidact, he quotes Tolstoy and speaks with a taut, pressured, sometimes very moving eloquence, saying such things as, "Ill will is the veil that covers art."

Explaining his deception, he describes an arduous but liberating simulation of artistry. "It was difficult enacting the role of director, but it gave me confidence and I gained [the family's] respect," he says. "They did everything I told them. I would for instance tell them to move a cupboard from a certain place and they would do it. Before that, I had never succeeded in making people accept my views; they would obey me hesitantly. But in that house and under the guise of that assumed personality I could make everyone obey me. But when I left that house and had to accept money from them in order to buy something for my child and pay for my way home to the suburbs, I realized I was the same poor man who could not provide for his family—that I still had to accept my lonely lot among the poor."

"That was why," he continues, "when I woke up the next day, I still wanted to go back and play that role. It was very difficult, but I still wanted to do it because of my love for the cinema and also because they respected me and gave me moral support. So I went about the job very seriously. And I had come to believe I really was a director. I was not acting anymore. I was that new person."

Cinema loves dramatic transformations like the one just described, but the Ahankhahs don't buy it for a second. They reject Sabzian as an imaginary director, saying he was only a lying actor, and still is. At this point, the film has our sympathies in its cross-hairs.

If virtually every filmgoer is a cinephile to some degree, few will readily sympathize with the duped, polite cinephilia of the bourgeois family. This despite (or perhaps because of) the likelihood that the Ahankhahs resemble us far more than we resemble Sabzian, the poor man who carries cinephilia—cinemania—to dark, Dostoyevskan extremes. *Close-Up* likewise casts its lot with the accused; which is to say that it identifies with Sabzian rather than that it necessarily believes him. It wants to give him the benefit of the doubt, perhaps to redeem the guilty obsession it finds in (and shares with?) him.

It is impossible not to be touched by Sabzian, in any case. He refuses to be reduced to a "case," a pitiable member of the class where poverty's desperation and mental disturbance so often converge. As he maintains his stoic dignity and appeals to a justice beyond the grievance lodged against him, the court in its way comes around to him. The judge maneuvers Sabzian and the family away from their hostile stances, toward reconciliation and forgiveness.

The film's remarkable final sequence begins as Sabzian is released from prison. As he emerges from the gates, he is met by Mohsen Makhmalbaf, and breaks down weeping. Kiarostami's camera observes the scene from inside a van some distance away; the hidden mic Makhmalbaf wears breaks up, providing fragmentary sound throughout. Then Makhmalbaf takes Sabzian on his motorcycle and sets off through the Tehran traffic; the theme music of Kiarostami's *The Traveler* comes in. The two men stop to buy flowers. They are heading for the Ahankhah house—and the epiphanic meeting that ends the film—yet the most exultant image of all is simply the director and his admirer pressed together on the motorbike, removed from suffering and indignity, united, for once, in friendship and art.

The image of improbable union recalls something that Sabzian said during his trial, in that strangely poetic way of his: "I asked the Muse why he was hidden. He answered, 'It is you who are hidden. We are slaves of a selfish part behind which is hidden our real being. If we get rid of the selfish part, we can behold the beauty of truth.'" *Close-Up* shares that mystical dedication to unveilings and beauty. It also knows that at times truth can't be had through the facts, but must be approached indirectly, by way of deception.



In every way imaginable the film stresses duality; extremes and contradictions; mirror-ideas which are innumerable but begin with art and nature, or perhaps God and creation. The fact that its themes touch on our notions of identity and role-playing and such is largely incidental, though important to the film's transnational appeal.

It's almost impossible to encounter *Close-Up*, I would say, without in some way being startled by it. It was one of the first Iranian films I encountered, in 1992, and I recall my lingering surprise that it seemed more deeply sophisticated than any contemporary American or European film. What possible viewership could it have been made for? The Iran it conjured appeared somehow both medieval and postmodern—and little in between. (Visiting Iran later only bolstered this impression.)

When I met Kiarostami for the first time, in New York in the fall of '94, I told him straightaway that *Close-Up* was my favorite of his films. He said it was his own favorite, and that it seemed to have a growing following, though in Iran it had initially been misunderstood and derided; someone he'd just met, he said with mild wonderment, had compared it to *Citizen Kane*. This last remark typifies the filmmaker's exquisite tact; its veil of bemused modesty covers Kiarostami's astute and healthy sense of his own artistic worth.

The comparison obviously shouldn't be stretched too far, but *Citizen Kane* and *Close-Up* both adapt the techniques of documentary to fiction, suggest multiple paths to "the truth," and focus on men whose final quality is their unknowability. Most of all, the films are anomalies that somehow became paradigms of their respective eras, and that now bear reputations which encompass not only the works themselves but also the auras of opinion that have grown up around them. *Kane*, after all, is not just a major Orson Welles creation but "the greatest film of all time," a largely mythic accolade that took over two decades to coalesce and that had a lot to do with the emotional and intellectual buttons

the movie happened to push in France in the post-WWII period. *Close-Up's* still-coalescing renown has a similarly international basis, since it reflects, in part, the West's evolving view of Iran's cinema.

That cinema began emerging from the systemic ruin of revolution in 1983, following a shrewdly conceived government initiative aimed at reviving the once-thriving Iranian film industry. By 1990, the program's most notable successes—including Amir Naderi's *The Runner*, Bahram Beyzai's *Bashu, the Little Stranger* and Kiarostami's own *Where Is the Friend's House?*—had begun attracting serious international attention. All of these films lyrically, compassionately depict children in impoverished circumstances, a similarity that came to suggest a noble but confining stereotype: Iranian films, like some others from the Third World, it was said, were basically Italian Neorealism redux, full of radiant urchins and the glow of humanistic concern.

Close-Up, being essentially a *Bicycle Thief* in which the stolen "vehicle" is not a bicycle but a film director's identity, instantly complicated that definition in the most useful possible manner. Suggesting a direct line from Rossellini to Godard to Kiarostami, it seemed to recombine the social concern of Neorealism with the French New Wave's cerebral self-expression and formal idiosyncrasy, and to project the whole into the vitalizing context of a post-revolutionary Islamic culture. The film's key innovations—the unorthodox mix of documentary and docudrama; the self-reflexive musing on cinema and its impact; the simultaneous exaltation and questioning of the auteur—were not entirely new to Iranian movies, but *Close-Up* presented them so forcefully as to establish a couple of new trademarks. Thereafter, Iranian cinema meant not just "films about poor children," but also "films about film" and "films that explore the line between fact and fiction."

If a movie's importance is measured by its influence, *Close-Up's* is there to be seen in numerous Iranian movies of the 90s, including several by the two directors at its center. Kiarostami's *And Life Goes On* (1992), *Through the Olive Trees* (1994) and *The Wind Will Carry Us* (a 2000 release in the U.S.), and Makhmalbaf's *The Actor* (1993), *Once Upon a Time, Cinema* (1992), *Salam Cinema* (1995) and *A Moment of Innocence* (1996) all foreground filmmakers and filmmaking, and creatively intermix reality and fabrication. Together these films comprise a uniquely poetic and staggeringly complex set of reflections on (and, in effect, inter-artist conversations about) the meanings and potentials of cinema. Beyond Iran, meanwhile, *Close-Up* seems to have anticipated a decade when "artistic" filmmaking increasingly equated with cinematic self-consciousness, the late-inning kind that sums up and deconstructs rather than inaugurates: if you look hard enough, you can see the Kiarostami film's shadow stretching all the way down to *American Movie* and *Being John Malkovich*.

Yet *Close-Up* is never ironic or glib, as those films sometimes are. And it attains a kind of mastery, as they do not, by surpassing cleverness with profundity. Its deepest attractions in fact antedate anything that might be called fashionable. The theme of the imposter, for one, is old enough to give the film a constant hint of the uncanny; it evokes doppelgangers, twins, the supposed supernatural powers of mirrors, even the belief among Muslims that the figure crucified on Calvary was not Jesus but his double. Here

we skirt the territory of Borges and Calvino, Jung and the brothers Grimm, where caution must be exercised. To suggest that the essentials of *Close-Up*'s story, including the fascination with film directors, are universal would be to miss half of the equation.

This occurred to me recently when I reread the transcript of an interview I did with Kiarostami in Iran about *Close-Up*. At one point, the translator interjects the comment (to me), "Only in Iran would you find someone like Sabzian." Indeed, and here we glimpse the paradoxical alchemy that connects *Close-Up* to much great art: on the one hand, Sabzian *is* as universal as Quixote or The Little Tramp, while, on the other, he's absolutely specific to Iran. Perhaps in other nations—though not many, surely—you will find eloquent, reflective paupers who are up on their Tolstoy, but where else is there one who is fixated on the artistry of his country's film directors? This belongs to Iran alone, because only Iran effectively walled itself off from the world in 1979, thereby sealing under glass, as it were, a great '70s film culture, which it then revived, privileged and released back into the world in the 80s.

In 1996 Susan Sontag published a famous essay bemoaning the decline of cinephilia, meaning the cinephilia of her youth. I thought at the time, and still think: she should see Iran. There one finds cinephilia as perhaps existed in Paris in the mid-'60s. People are movie mad. Filmmaking has the kind of cultural cachet once reserved for poetry and novels; directors are intellectual icons. TV is still a faint glow that no one pays much attention to (except when it shows old American movies like *Shane*) and cinephilia is very much tied to literacy; newsstands are festooned with film magazines of every description. In other words, the culture that produces a cinematic renaissance like the one including Kiarostami and Makhmalbaf is the same culture that, almost ineluctably, will produce a Sabzian.

It should be added that when *Close-Up* was in the making—halfway between Iran's 1979 Revolution and today—that culture was in a period of crucial flux. In July of 1988 the eight-year-long Iran-Iraq war, which had cost a million lives, ended in a bitter stalemate. The cessation of hostilities meant that many Iranians began to focus on the failure of the Revolution to achieve its high-flown goals, especially among the still-suffering urban poor—like Sabzian. It also prompted certain hardliners to shift their hostility from the Iraqis to the liberals who dominated the Islamic Republic's cultural bureaucracy, including Minister of Culture (later President of Iran) Mohammad Khatami, whose ministry had effected the revival of Iran's cinema. Then, in February of 1989, Iran's culture wars went global when the Ayatollah Khomeini—who would die in June, ending Iran's revolutionary decade—issued a death sentence against the author Salman Rushdie for alleged heresy against Islam.

You get distant hints of both of these currents in *Close-Up*: the fading of revolution's glow perhaps prompted one poor man to transfer his allegiance to the figure of a film director, just as the chilling of the cultural climate may have increased Kiarostami's tendency to speak metaphorically about the links between cinema and society in Iran. It was a time of growing divisions, including those represented by the two directors we see in *Close-Up*.

Kiarostami, who was nearing 50 when he made the film, had grown up in a comfortable middle-class family, studied art in college, and had made two features and a number of shorts prior to 1979. When the young intellectuals working under Khatami set about creating a cinema of quality for the Islamic Republic, he was one of a number of pre-revolutionary directors they entreated to begin working again.

Makhmalbaf, who was just over 30 at the time of *Close-Up*, was his opposite number in almost every respect. Self-educated, he had grown up devout and poor in Tehran's lower-class southern district. At age 17 he participated in a terrorist action against the Shah's police, was wounded and captured, then imprisoned under torture for four years. Released by the Revolution, he became a fundamentalist polemicist and playwright before turning to filmmaking. His first films were relatively crude exercises in post-revolutionary orthodoxy. But as his skill as a director increased, he also became more independent-minded, questioning his former certainties and scrutinizing the inequities of post-revolutionary society.

The three films he made in the mid-'80s—*The Peddler*, *The Cyclist* and *Marriage of the Blessed*—were works of stinging social criticism that propelled Makhmalbaf to the front ranks of Iranian filmmakers. They also made him an admired figure across a wide swath of Iranian society, as *Close-Up* shows. Sabzian's deception begins when he is on a bus holding the screenplay of *The Cyclist*, a woman asks what he is reading, and he impulsively claims to be the book's author. Behind that ruse, quite evidently, is an identification that borders on worship: for Sabzian, Kiarostami is a filmmaker, but Makhmalbaf is a hero of extraordinary proportions.

Our own cinephilia never approaches the extremity of emotion Sabzian gives voice to in *Close-Up*. "Unfortunately," he says haltingly, "I have not been able to practice the Koranic injunction that says, 'Remembering God is the best consolation for a troubled heart.' And whenever I am depressed or overwhelmed by troubles, I feel a strong need to cry out the anguish of my soul, the sad experiences of my life, which no one wants to hear about. And then I find a good man who shows my sufferings in his films and makes me want to see them over and over again. A man who dares to expose the people who trade on other people's lives—the rich people who are heedless of the simple needs of the poor, which are basically economic needs."



Although it goes against the film's aura of good will to point this out, Kiarostami and Makhmalbaf actively detest each other, and have through much of the last two decades. *Close-Up* marks a brief and curious respite in their mutual loathing. The hostility evidently began with Makhmalbaf, who spent part of the '80s vituperatively denouncing pre-revolutionary directors, including Kiarostami, as decadent, bourgeois remnants of the old regime.

Then, after 1988's *Marriage of the Blessed*, Makhmalbaf underwent another of his chameleon-like changes of mind and began making nice with his former adversaries, whose artistry, it seems, he had begun to admire. Kiarostami says that he met Makhmalbaf for the first time in a movie theater just prior to the genesis of *Close-Up*, when the younger director approached him and asked him to take a look at a script he had written.

What happened next is, appropriately, a matter of dispute. In the summer of 1997 I interviewed the two filmmakers separately and they gave me very different accounts about the origins of *Close-Up*. Both versions begin with the directors meeting in Kiarostami's office. Where they diverge is over the issue of who had the crucial copy of *Sorush* magazine, and who first thought of making a movie about the strange case of the Makhmalbaf impersonator.

Makhmalbaf claims that he'd already had the idea to make the movie, and that he was holding an advance copy of *Sorush*, which had not yet hit the stands, rolled up in his fist as he talked with Kiarostami. After Kiarostami asked to see the magazine and scanned the article, Makhmalbaf says, he began enthusing, "This is fantastic, this is unbelievable," and immediately started to argue that Makhmalbaf couldn't be the one to film the story because he was part of it. Kiarostami, naturally, says that the initial concept was his.

In his version, the magazine is already out and a copy lies on his desk as he talks to Makhmalbaf. Kiarostami doesn't think much of the script Makhmalbaf has shown him (one can imagine him nervous at Makhmalbaf's presence), so he turns the subject to the *Sorush* article, and the idea for *Close-Up* sparks. Kiarostami then convinces Makhmalbaf to borrow a car with him so that they can make a little expedition to explore the idea. They go first to the police station where Sabzian is being held, and learn more details about his case. Then they drive to the Ahankhah house, where a droll scene unfolds.

Kiarostami goes to the door and announces himself. The daughter of the family asks skeptically for some ID. They have just gotten rid of a fake Makhmalbaf, she says, they certainly don't need a fake Kiarostami. Kiarostami doesn't have an ID, but he says he has something just as good: Makhmalbaf, who is sitting in the car. He produces Makhmalbaf and the family—one can imagine their initial befuddlement—admits the two filmmakers. Tea is served and the conversation runs late into the night. By the end of the evening, as Makhmalbaf tells it, Kiarostami has very adroitly bamboozled everyone concerned, including him, into playing roles in the film.

Bamboozlement of various sorts dominates the film's legend from here on. Although Zeitgeist's publicity surely won't stress it, *Close-Up*, a film about a double, has its own double. The version of the film shown the first two times in New York (at the Human Rights Watch Film Festival in 1991 and the Walter Reade Theater in 1992) differs from the one currently in circulation. The earlier version was more chronological, beginning with the incident of Sabzian meeting the woman on the bus. Kiarostami changed the movie, he told me, after seeing it projected at a festival in Munich where the projectionist accidentally mixed up the reels. Rather than being offended, he decided he liked the scrambled chronology better and reedited the film accordingly. When I expressed surprise at this, he replied matter-of-factly that a movie is good or a movie is bad, and neither fact is affected by the order the reels are shown in. (Godard is one of the few filmmakers who would surely agree.)

If Sabzian is deceptive, *Close-Up*, it turns out, is even more so. Very few scenes in the film that appear to be documentary actually are. The trial scenes, in fact, are elaborate fakes (and the use of 16mm thus is one of the film's stylistic tricks). Kiarostami himself orchestrated what happened in the courtroom, including the family's forgiveness (they actually wanted Sabzian to be locked up). Kiarostami also scripted much of Sabzian's testimony, although, as he carefully pointed out to me, it was all taken from things actually said by Sabzian, whose speech really is clogged with literary references, mystical aphorisms and cinephilic jargon. In fact, Kiarostami conducted much of that testimony; seated beside Sabzian, he asks most of the questions we hear coming from off-camera during the trial.

The film's amazing conclusion depicts Sabzian's actual release from prison, as I understand it, and his tears are genuine. But much that surrounds the incident is deceptive. Makhmalbaf's appearance, of course, was arranged by Kiarostami. Kiarostami's camera being "hidden" is an unnecessary device that slyly converts a documentary technique to dramatic purpose. And there is this: the "sound problems"

caused by that bad mic on Makhmalbaf are also fake, applied to the soundtrack after the fact (Kiarostami does something similar in his documentary *Homework*). This little trick, it would seem, is crucial to the film's final impact. After straining against the annoyance caused by the in-and-out sound, the viewer inevitably experiences an emotional surge when the beautiful theme of *The Traveler* suddenly overwhelms the mechanical dissonance.

Perhaps most remarkable is that the judge in this case was somehow bamboozled into turning the trial over, in effect, to Kiarostami. This alone is weighted with more symbolism than any non-Iranian can parse, yet one of its implications must be read as favorable to the Islamic Republic. Virtually every serious Iranian feature from before the Revolution, including Kiarostami's, exudes a dark, cynical, fatalistic mood. Post-revolutionary features, even when strongly critical of certain aspects of society, are far more positive and bouyant. That *Close-Up* is easily one of the most exultant of all can't help but testify to the society that produced it; in effect, the film shows the Revolution's aim of a society transformed by faith being achieved, at least in one instance. The qualifying irony is that the real "just ruler" here—like Keats' unacknowledged legislator—is an artist, and the transforming power is the belief that we invest in art's beneficence.

Close-Up invites endless interpretation, but Kiarostami is clear about his reading of it. He says it is about the power of imagination, and of cinema as a vehicle of dreams. As he put it to me: "With the help of dreams you can escape from the worst prisons. Actually, you can only imprison the body but dreams flee the walls and without visas or dollars can travel anywhere. In dreams, you can sleep with anyone you want. Nobody can touch your dreams. In a way dreams exactly embody the concept of freedom. They free you of all constraints. I think God gave human beings this possibility to apologize for all the limitations he's created for them."

Kiarostami has also said, "We can never get close to the truth except through lying," a prescription that can easily be misread. We might well place the emphasis on the lie, but Kiarostami places it on truth. Though truth is real, he implies, it is not a given but is created through will and the ethical sense—the *intent*—that links artist and viewer. In the end, *Close-Up* turns cinema's mirror back on us, asking us to see that Sabzian's escape and reconciliation are constructed of our own compassion.

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