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» Corriere della Sera > Italian life > Kiarostami: "I went to the streets to see the truth"

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Kiarostami: "I went to the streets to see the truth"

The Iranian film-maker, winner of major awards at the Cannes and Venice film festivals, talks about his country

Abbas Kiarostami's brown eyes are barely visible behind the sunglasses which he never takes off. He sits in the hall of the "Grand Hotel de Milan". One of the masters of contemporary cinema, he won the Palm d'Or in Cannes for "Taste of Cherry" (1997) and the Silver Lion in Venice for "The Wind Will Carry Us" (1999). He has come to Milan for «In & Out», an exhibition showcasing Iranian artists: some of them live inside the country, others belong to the Diaspora. The exhibition opened on February 23 at Project B gallery (<http://www.projectb.eu/>). His documentary Roads is being screened. It is based on his photographs: over the past 25 years he has taken 1,000 pictures of roads. It is a passion that started in the 1970s, and which stems from his love for nature and movement. While other Iranian film-makers such as Mohsen Makhmalbaf and Bahman Ghobadi have chosen exile in order to escape censorship, Kiarostami has remained in Tehran even though none of his films has had a screening license in the last dozen years. In June, many film-makers entered the political fray, supporting Mousavi against Ahmadinejad. Kiarostami said that he would not vote. He has been accused of escapism, and of not caring about the Iranian public. Excerpts from this interview were published in Italian on February 24th, in the paper edition of the "Corriere della Sera".

You have said that you will never participate again in any political events, whether it's a vote or a revolution, because it's irrational and the outcome is different than what people think. But when you were 15, and even later when you participated in the 1979 revolution, didn't you feel different than you do today?

"I didn't have the same opinion when I was 15. My experiences getting to adulthood showed me that I can make no difference in the outcome and destiny of this nation. When I was younger, of course I was more idealistic and more excitable. Now I am more pragmatic. I know that I can never make a difference in the outcome, so I don't get involved. Our country has very particular and distinct circumstances. Among the individuals for whom I can vote, there is no one whom I believe in. How can I vote for someone I have no confidence in?"

During the protests against the government in June, your picture circulated on Facebook. It was shot in the streets and people were saying: "Kiarostami is in the street!" Did you ever go to the streets, even as an observer? What did you think?

"Yes, of course I was there. I don't ask the government for any financial support of help. I don't ask the government for any permission to film. My films are independent, and I use my photography to promote and to sustain that independence (by selling the pictures he can finance his movies, ed.). But as a person who lives in Iran, I don't just want to watch Iranian state TV and not know what's really going on. I want to have a broader picture. It's my profession. It doesn't mean that I want to film it or make a movie about it. As a person, I want to see what the people are saying, how many people there are, what they are doing, what they're saying. It's my right to do that, to know that. In my opinion, the government of Iran was faced with the true degree of dissatisfaction of the people. Everything was controlled very well and effectively. The government showed its power, but now we need to see how the government can handle this extensive dissatisfaction that was shown to them, how they can react to that. Now it is very clear to the government that there is a huge amount of dissatisfaction".

The image of Iran coming from your movies and photography is very different from

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the image foreigners get from other sources. Why?

"The image you have is that of the mass media, which is tainted to an extent by the political interactions between the various countries. The image of my homeland reflected in my movies and photography is the emotional connection I have to my beloved country".

When there are so many negative images of Iran, do you ever feel compelled as an artist to give a more human and natural-life picture?

"No. People who have followed me for four decades will see that I have always had the same thematic approach. If you jumble it up, you won't know what was done when. So it's not that I was compelled some day to wake up and say, 'I will do something positive.' Today's current events do not influence me. My view is deeper. I look inside the human psyche. I am still re-living my childhood. There are others who create art influenced by current events, but my view is more long-term. In the last twelve years I haven't even approached the authorities for film-making. I have my own ways. I do not screen my movies in Iran, although my movies are not problematic per se. But this is how it is. There are other ways to get your point across".

Is cinema a way for you to escape from reality?

"The art of filmmaking is one I have a lot of respect for. It is an art that has the potential to be extremely important and extremely influential, maybe much more than other media, precisely because of how it is logistically. You are in a cinema, in a dark room. You sit down, and you become subsumed into the film itself through the participants. While journalistic filmmaking might not have great longevity, good and proper politically-themed films can have long life and great influence... Of course, each film-maker has his or her own way".

What do you mean by "good and proper politically-themed film"?

"One that gives you information, and one that reflects back a person's own information. True information about the country he lives in. Deep information, with proper means. A good political film is a poetic film, because it will last for a long time. For example, in the rich Iranian literary tradition, we had many poets who were active during the constitutional movement at the turn of the previous century, and their poetry was very germane during that time of political upheaval. However, it does not necessarily live forever. We also have poets like Hafez from several hundreds years ago. He was very political, but because he wrote true poetry, it has stood the test of time. It is as relevant today as it was several hundreds years ago. Some poets from 200 years ago became popular during the time of the revolution, but they are not so important, because they do not give true information. They give the excitement of upheaval. Personally, I am always suspicious of people who provide excitement, and I do not try to provoke excitement with my films. I try to provide information and my own personal and emotional experiences".

Last October, at the Abu Dhabi film festival, you had an argument with Ghobadi. You said that you think Iranians who leave the country cannot really be successful, and he said that he was forced to leave Iran. Afterwards, when you were invited to be the chairman of the jury at the "International Film Festival of Marrakech", you said you would only do it if no Iranian movies were in the competition. Why?

"I was the head of the jury in Abu Dhabi. Ghobadi did not get one vote. The prize was cash. For some reason, maybe Mr. Ghobadi thought that as head of the jury I had the power to tell the other members to vote for a certain person. Of course, this is not possible. If the vote had been split, then maybe I could have used mine to decide the outcome, but since there was no vote, there was not much that the chairman could have done. He reacted with an anger that was illogical, and sent an open letter to me that was very painful and very unfortunate. I've never talked about this, and have never given any explanation. I kept silent, and hoped that you wouldn't ask me this question. At the time of the festival in Abu Dhabi, I had already agreed to be the chairman in Morocco. Afterwards, I told the organizers in Morocco that it would be difficult for me to go as chairman if there were other Iranian movies, because I didn't want to be at the receiving end of another illogical reaction. Unfortunately, this post-revolution system, in the last 30 years, has influenced all of us. But I am not the Islamic republic. After this, I never want to be on a jury again. Even before being an artist, a person has to be independent. You cannot say to yourself that you are the best and ask that everybody says that you are the best. Once you are in an artistic competition, you have to accept that there are no objective criteria. You have to be prepared to win or lose, you cannot attack someone else and hold him responsible. So I will not be on a jury again. Enough. *Basta così?*".

What do you mean when you say that all Iranians have been influenced by this system and that you are not the Islamic republic?

"What happened is that absolute power was vested in one person. So in the film world, another movie director thinks that by being the chairman I have absolute power, and can decide for someone to win or lose. I just have one vote. People have forgotten the notion of democratic process. It happened in the last 30 years, or maybe even before".

Makhmalbaf's and Ghobadi's movies are banned in Iran. Your movies are not critical of the political and social situation in Iran like theirs, and yet they are also banned.**What is it the problem?**

"It may be independence that is frowned upon by the authorities. Naturally, when the government

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helps fund a project, they expect some cooperation. That's why maybe there is no love lost for me, because I am independent and do my own thing. My films and I have nothing in common with the art of the gentlemen that you mentioned. Maybe the commonality is the independence: of thought, of behavior, of mind, of person. I am certain that they have no issue with my films per se, but the problem is with me wanting to be under no one's influence, wanting to be independent, wanting to be my own man".

Iranian film-maker Jafar Panahi is in a really bad situation (he was arrested on March 1, ed). Do you ever fear you could be in the same situation?

"His situation is unique and it should be expected that there would be such reaction, but it can happen to anyone. If there was no reaction to someone like Mr. Panahi, Iran would be heaven".

Viviana Mazza

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