

The "Aesthetics of Reality" in Abbas's Films

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Abstract

The French film theorist André Bazin introduced the concept of the "aesthetics of reality," which is reflected in a focus on direct realism, an emphasis on the authenticity of film segments, and the promotion of non-performative acting. The "aesthetics of reality" both summarized the creative approach of Italian Neorealism and influenced the subsequent development of the French New Wave, documentary cinema, and film production across different countries and regions. This theory opened new paths in both theoretical and practical realms. It also profoundly influenced Iranian director Abbas Kiarostami's filmmaking. Abbas, through his unique poetic audiovisual language and philosophically rich narrative structure, offers a new interpretation of the concept of the "aesthetics of reality."

Keywords: aesthetics of reality, documentary-style structure, long takes, non-professional actors

1. Introduction

André Bazin's "aesthetics of reality" has had a profound influence on film theory and practice. In subsequent film movements such as the French New Wave, *cinéma vérité*, and direct cinema, we can observe the impact of Bazin's film theory. The "myth of the complete film" forms the foundation of his "aesthetics of reality." He argued that cinema was born from a myth, and this myth is the myth of the complete film[1]. "The myth of complete realism is also the myth of reproducing the world in its original form, where no traces of the artist's arbitrary manipulation are visible, and the image is no longer subject to the irreversible passage of time." For Bazin, the advent of photography was not merely a result of scientific and technological advancement but originated from "a fundamental human psychological need—one that seeks to defy time." Photography, as Bazin saw it, was the way to fulfill this human need, and his film theory, starting with the "mummy complex," built the myth of the "complete film."

Looking at Abbas's filmography, one could say that his works practice Bazin's theory of the "complete film myth." However, Abbas's filmmaking does not merely follow Bazin's theory "as a blueprint." Instead, he brings his own understanding and interpretation to it. Abbas's films are not simply about copying or reproducing reality; they emphasize *truth*. In his autobiography, Abbas mentions that cinema does not need to represent literal truth; rather, it can become apparent and refined through intervention and interference. Therefore, he believes that film is not an exact imitation of life but a display of it, a display achieved through documentary-style frameworks, long takes, and performances by non-professional actors[2].

As a result, Abbas's cinematic language is rich and creatively meaningful. He uses the audiovisual language, which most easily creates "illusions," to emphasize reality, and this is one of the charms of his films. Abbas's films are filled with deep empathy for ordinary people, focusing on children and common citizens in Iran, observing their daily lives with calm and objectivity, uncovering profound emotional worlds. In terms of presentation, Abbas adopts a documentary-style framework, making the visuals feel closer to reality. He uses long takes and depth-of-field shots, emphasizing the recording of the complete space-time and reducing human intervention, granting the audience the right to think actively while watching. By using non-professional actors and capturing their improvised performances, he follows the rhythm of real life and its themes, showcasing his "aesthetics of reality" and taking the concept of "aesthetics of reality" to new heights, while maintaining its essential principles.

2. Unique "Documentary-Style" Framework

In his book *The Taste of Cherry: Abbas on Cinema*, Abbas states, "Cinema is nothing but a lie. It never depicts reality as it actually is. A documentary, according to my understanding of the term, is where the filmmaker does not intrude even an inch into what they are witnessing. They are simply recording. A true documentary does not exist because reality is not sufficient to construct an entire film." The documentary techniques and concepts

appearing in Iranian cinema constitute one of its defining features. The works of contemporary directors such as Mohsen Makhmalbaf's *Long Live Cinema*, Majid Majidi's *The Children of Heaven*, and many of Abbas Kiarostami's films all reflect this documentary characteristic. This feature's formation is partly due to the deep Islamic cultural background in the director's country and also based on the creative realities within that culture, as well as the personal style and unique pursuits of Iranian filmmakers. Abbas, as one of Iran's most renowned directors, creates films with a distinct personal style, infused with the exotic cultural essence of Islam. His works stand out for their understated yet unique poetic and philosophical content[3].

Abbas tends to explore the boundaries of "reality." This boundary is not limited to life itself but is more often presented in visual works. His filmmaking does not follow conventional narrative structures; it often blurs the lines between reality and fiction. This is evident in his unconventional narrative methods and unique documentary techniques, which challenge both filmmakers and audiences. Unlike the intense emotional output of "montage" filmmaking, Abbas's films encourage viewers to engage in self-reflection during viewing, to confront their biases, and actively question their preconceived notions. In *The Taste of Cherry*, for example, the protagonist Mr. Badi's motive for suicide is never clearly explained, and the audience must use their imagination to explore the story behind it[4]. This design reflects Abbas's creative philosophy: during the viewing process, the audience must actively engage their imagination to give meaning to ambiguous events, rather than simply becoming "subordinates" to the director. This method aligns closely with documentary filmmaking, reflecting Abbas's exploration of "reality" and the core of his "aesthetics of reality."

Abbas's aesthetics of reality is about seeing reality through a reflective approach. Documentary-style filmmaking techniques, when used by other directors, may become a tool to create a sense of "realism." In Abbas's films, however, documentary techniques have a dual meaning. The first meaning is the use of documentary-style angles to represent a sense of reality, which is similar to the purpose in many films. Documentaries present reality through the most objective lens, unembellished events, and randomly captured moments of life. When a film adopts a documentary-style technique, the audience unconsciously tends to accept the film's authenticity, a psychological effect of "psychological recognition."

The second level of meaning in Abbas's documentary-style structure is to break down the boundary between the audience and the screen. In *Close-Up*, Abbas deliberately blurs the lines between reality and fiction, making the two indistinguishable. He employs a non-linear structure, disrupting the coherence of the narrative, weakening dramatic conflict, and making the film appear "loose" yet closely tied to real life. This approach gives the audience a unique perspective to observe the film and prompts further reflection. It allows viewers to independently analyze the characters, trace the storyline, and actively reconstruct the plot. In this sense, the audience is not merely a passive viewer but becomes a "participant" in the film. Of course, this participation does not mean involvement in the conception or production of the film but rather in reinterpreting the story based on personal understanding, as the saying goes, "A thousand viewers may have a thousand interpretations of Hamlet."

Abbas's "cinematic experiment" is not limited to this, as evidenced by the ending of *The Taste of Cherry*. The "behind-the-scenes documentary" format at the end of the film breaks the "boundary" between fiction and reality and adds depth to the work, providing more space for the audience to interpret the film. The fading out at the end signals the conclusion of the narrative, but unexpectedly, the DV-shot footage of the director and production team appears, extending the film's duration. This form undoubtedly stimulates the audience to step out of the immersive experience, allowing them to see the "fictional" nature of the film. Abbas uses this method to explain the transition between fiction and documentary, thereby connecting the audience with the screen[5].

Abbas's reasoning behind this is to respect the audience and make them aware that they are watching a film. This is the unique aspect of his "aesthetics of reality." He believes that each audience member should have space for imagination and actively form their own viewpoints. This is the truest form of "realism," one that is built on the viewer's perspective, breaking the traditional relationship between narrative and the screen[6].

3. The "Long Take" Style of Abbas

The theory of long takes was first proposed by French film theorist André Bazin, who believed that the essence of photography lies in its objectivity. The camera, as the sole intermediary between the original object and its reproduced form, objectively recreates external images without human interference. In his view, cinema advances this objectivity in the dimension of time, building upon static photography. Compared to montage techniques, long takes are closer to reality as they present content without selection, offering a comprehensive portrayal of the objective world. The complete depiction of time and space in long takes preserves the ambiguity and multivalence of reality, granting the audience a more active role by allowing them the freedom to think and choose during the viewing process[7].

In alignment with Bazin's philosophy, Abbas's use of long takes similarly emphasizes the temporal and spatial completeness of the image, reflecting his pursuit of cinematic integrity. This stands in contrast to directors like Kenji Mizoguchi, who used long takes to create temporal and spatial dissonance. Abbas often employs extreme long shots and wide shots in his films. By minimizing close-ups, he allows the audience to view the complete subject directly. Close-ups, which exclude other elements of reality, limit the audience's experience. Abbas's approach ensures that all elements remain present in the frame, enabling viewers to focus and interpret freely within the long take. This objectivity is further accentuated by combining long takes with deep-focus shots.

Deep-focus shots are frequently paired with long takes in Abbas's films. Long takes are closely associated with realism, a concept initially systematized by André Bazin in *The Myth of Total Cinema*. Bazin articulated three principles related to realism: long takes, deep-focus shots, and certain compositional strategies. While Abbas incorporates long takes and deep-focus shots, his interpretation diverges from Bazin's. Abbas's view of realism aligns with phenomenological approaches—seeking to restore the essence of things. The realism crafted through long and deep-focus shots in his films often challenges and critiques conventional notions, creating a new conceptual framework[8].

In Abbas's films, the connection between long takes and deep-focus shots is integral. He prefers using deep-focus long takes to depict the real world, imbuing them with a unique aesthetic character. Abbas's long takes are characterized by an absence of stylistic embellishments, emphasizing their raw and unfiltered nature. In *Through the Olive Trees*, for instance, most scenes are filmed from fixed vantage points, but Abbas opens the film with a three-minute moving long take. This take, shot from within a car, follows the vehicle as it traverses a village devastated by an earthquake. The foreground consists of the car's windows, while the background features the ever-changing scenery of the village. This deep-focus long take resembles documentary filmmaking techniques, offering no fixed content to the audience and instead evoking a sense of "searching."

The ending of *Through the Olive Trees* further demonstrates Abbas's mastery of the long take. As the protagonist, Taher, chases a girl through lush greenery, the audience can only make out two tiny moving figures—these are the film's two main characters. Yet the audience's attention remains drawn to these two points, a testament to Abbas's skillful use of deep-focus long takes. The gradual convergence of the two points not only stirs the audience's emotions but also underscores the film's core idea: the pursuit of genuine love in a vast world. Abbas's fluid use of long takes brings the film's imagery closer to life, reflecting his "aesthetics of reality" and illustrating how his cinematic philosophy, much like his long takes, flows continuously[9].

4. Naturalistic Non-Professional Performances

The use of non-professional actors in cinema can be traced back to the Italian Neorealist movement, exemplified by Roberto Rossellini's *Rome, Open City*, which cast an ordinary café worker in a leading role. Prior to this period, professional actors dominated film performances, especially under Hollywood's studio system, where actors underwent rigorous training to master a standardized set of techniques. This often resulted in a uniform style of acting. However, the inclusion of untrained individuals on screen brought an unpolished authenticity and natural emotional expression, allowing audiences to see relatable figures reminiscent of their neighbors or friends. This approach heightened the sense of realism in films, drawing viewers closer to the narrative. The use of non-professional actors became central to both the aesthetic theory and practical execution of Italian Neorealism, perfectly illustrating Bazin's advocated "aesthetics of reality."

In Abbas's films, he consistently selects non-professional actors whose real-life experiences closely align with the characters they portray. Abbas builds genuine relationships with these actors, maintaining close communication and engaging with them on a heartfelt level[10]. He believes that communicating with professional actors requires a formal, commanding approach, whereas interactions with ordinary people demand a more emotional connection. "It's not about instructing them," Abbas asserts, "but about being interdependent with them." While this may appear actor-centric, it is a deliberate choice aimed at achieving an authentic effect that aligns with his "aesthetics of reality."

Abbas's focus on genuine emotional expression leads him to favor non-professional actors for their purity and lack of performative experience. Their untrained state allows raw emotions to be more easily captured on camera, embodying the unique temperament of "non-professional performance." Such performances reflect a raw, unstructured authenticity, with body language naturally mirroring human behavior in social and natural contexts. The absence of performative artifice fosters profound resonance with audiences[11].

For instance, in *Where Is the Friend's Home?*, the performances of two young actors, Babak Ahmadpour (as Ahmad) and Ahmad Ahmadpour (as Mohammadreza), leave a lasting impression. Ahmad's anxious reaction upon realizing he has mistakenly taken his classmate's notebook and his determined solo journey after failing to get

help from his family are portrayed with natural, unembellished expressions and actions. Similarly, in the documentary *Homework*, Abbas himself and a group of schoolchildren are featured, with the film capturing raw and unfiltered reactions to questions about their homework, exploring educational and societal issues. In *Close-Up*, Mohsen Makhmalbaf, a renowned Iranian director, plays himself, further blurring the line between fiction and reality. These organic performances exude an intimacy unattainable by professional actors, forming the cornerstone of Abbas's cinematic aesthetic and embodying the essence of his "aesthetics of reality."

5. Conclusion

Abbas once remarked, "In my entire life, I've watched fewer than fifty films, and I've never watched the same film twice. This way, I'm not influenced by any filmmaker." This philosophy reflects the independence that characterizes his work. Through documentary-style frameworks, unique long takes, and naturalistic non-professional performances, Abbas's films consistently strive for the greatest fidelity to reality, showcasing his distinct "aesthetics of reality." Jean-Luc Godard, a leading figure of the French New Wave, once offered high praise, stating, "Cinema begins with Griffith and ends with Abbas." Bazin's theoretical contributions marked a milestone in the history of film theory, summarizing the realism of cinema, while Abbas provided its finest practical manifestation. His "aesthetics of reality" is evident in his approach to actors, camera movement, synchronous sound, storytelling, and the relationship between films and their audiences.

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