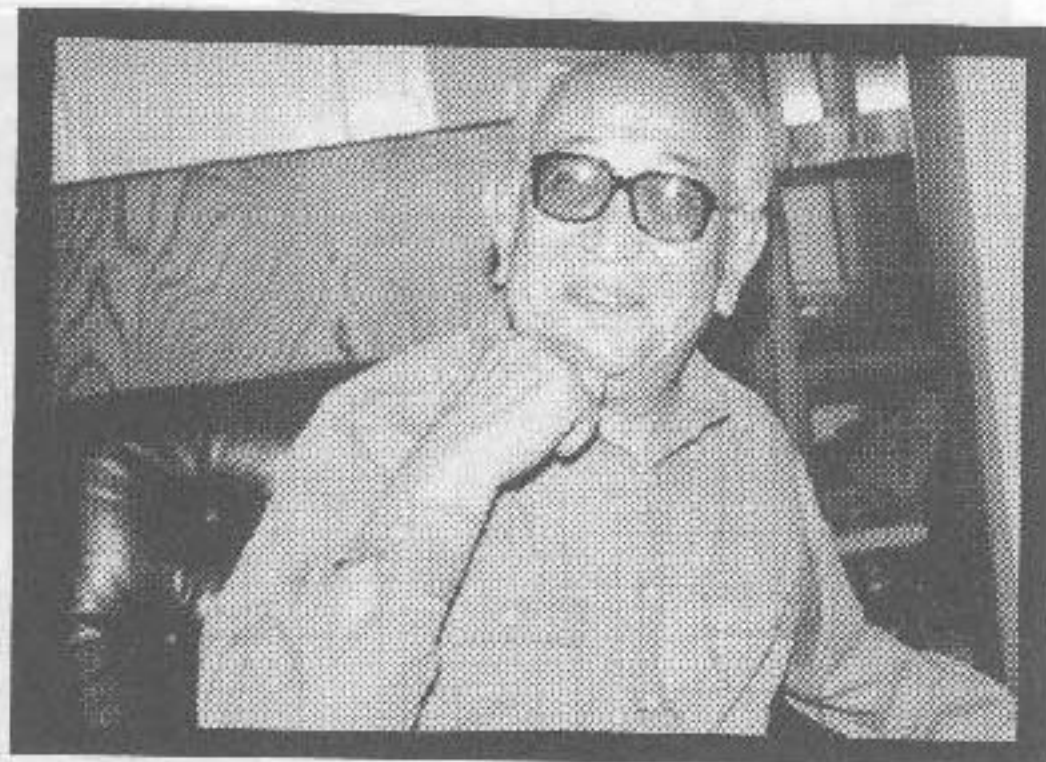


RITUALS OF  
GLOBAL VILLAGE



# THE EMPEROR AND I



4 ABBAS KIAROSTAMI  
MEETS  
AKIRA KUROSAWA

- Kurosawa had written a favorable commentary in the publicity leaflet that accompanied the public screening in Tokyo of *Where Is the Friend's Home?* and *And Life Goes On...*, "I believe the films of Iranian filmmaker Abbas Kiarostami are extraordinary. Words cannot relate my feelings. I suggest you see his films; and then you will see what I mean. Satyajit Ray passed away and I got very upset. But having watched Kiarostami's films, I thank God because now we have a good substitute for him. Recently, in the face of the decline of cinema in developed countries, nations with little experience in the area of filmmaking have produced valuable works; and I have to think about this more seriously after seeing Kiarostami's films." An unprecedented comment by Kurosawa who seldom talks about other directors' films. In fact, during the past 43 years he



has only commented about the works of Andrei Tarkovsky, John Cassavetes, Satyajit Ray and now Abbas Kiarostami.

Late in September, Abbas Kiarostami held a two and a half hour long meeting with renowned Japanese maestro Akira Kurosawa in Tokyo. Also attending the meeting was Film International's correspondent Shohreh Golparian. Here's her report of the talks:

Kurosawa's daughter opens the door and we see a tall and strong Kurosawa approaching in pink and beige. Later on we find out that on the occasion of his meeting with Kiarostami the Japanese master has forgot about his beloved colorful T-shirts and consented to put on a more formal pink blouse.

All of us seem to be overwhelmed by Kurosawa's grandeur when he shows us to the second floor study with its black leather furniture, mild lighting and an Oscar statue. Other decorations in the room are some Iranian copperware, a photo of Kurosawa's wife and a Japanese painting on the wall.

"I was in Cannes when you too, were there," it is Kurosawa who opens the discussion, "of course, I had not seen your films then." And Kiarostami continues, "I had the chance to see your *Madadayo* in Cannes and you were sitting two rows ahead of me. It was a great opportunity to see you and your film at once. You may not know how popular you are in my country. Both the intellectuals and ordinary people like your works. In fact, you and the late Alfred Hitchcock are the most popular foreign filmmakers in Iran. Once one of the officials of the Iranian film industry said that you and Tarkovsky were the only foreign filmmakers whose films complied with the value system of the Iranian arts. I wish I could share the joy of meeting you with others in Iran."

Kurosawa said, "I was a friend of Tarkovsky. Our friendship started during a visit to Moscow. I was twice invited to Iran more than a decade ago to join the jury of the Tehran International Film Festival. But I don't like to judge the films. It's too difficult a job for me. I understand you were a member of the jury in Yamagata, wasn't it difficult?"

"Yes, it is always difficult particularly when there are no certain criteria. Every time I act as a juror, I tell myself that I would never do that again. But any new invitation creates a new temptation... and it is always impossible to resist when you are tempted to set out for a trip. It is always nice to do something contrary to what you are used to; and I won't miss any opportunity," says Kiarostami.

Kurosawa says, "I agree with you, but it is really difficult for me to embark on any trip. My legs are aching and official trips impose limitations on you. You have to accept anything that has been planned for you. In fact you do not travel. They take you from one place to another." says Kurosawa, but Kiarostami promises to plan his visit to Iran the way he likes it, if he ever sets out for the trip; which is quite unlikely. Yet he is curious about Iran. "I'm sure there are other good filmmakers in Iran. However, what I like about your films is their simplicity and fluency, although it is really hard to describe them. One has to see them. It is strange how you work with non-professional actors. How

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Where is the Friend's Home?

do you work, particularly, with children?", asks Kurosawa. "The best answer to your question would be that I simply don't know," says Kiarostami, "I learned this from you and I use it more easily since I first listened to you saying this at last year's Tokyo Film Festival. Sometimes, non-professional actors' performance surprises me. Of course there are certain rules for everything, but what you gain is not always necessarily the outcome of rules."

Kurosawa believes it is very interesting and at the same time difficult. "Although working with professionals, too, is not so easy. You have to crush them with every film and build them anew. That is why working with professional actors is difficult." – he says. Kiarostami says that he has heard how Kurosawa has treated the veteran actor who played in his latest film. "Everyone was obviously worried about the old man's health," he says.

Kurosawa laughs, "I had no other way but to do that. You have to trim an actor's personality if you expect an excellent performance. To do that, I have to be a little bit violent and exert pressure on them. Have you ever worked with professionals?"

"I've had a fresh experience with a professional actor in my latest film. As you said, they stick to their previous roles. A peril that threatens us, too. Sometimes, we tend to use an idea that we have had for our previous films but failed to actualize. As someone has said, one wouldn't get old if s/he could forget her or his experiences. If we could forget our experiences our films may not be flawless, but they will certainly be fresh. Veteran actors are powerfully experienced, but alas, they are no longer fresh; and it is difficult to make them return to their crude human feelings," reasons Abbas Kiarostami.

Akira Kurosawa confirms that he too, has to face the same problem. "In order to grasp this feeling of integrity I take long takes using a theatrical style even when what I really want is a brief piece of action. What makes it difficult in the movies is cutting. Sometimes the problem comes from the fact that two actors cannot act in collaboration with each other. When one of them acts really well, this adversely affects the other's performance. And when the latter improves, the former is too tired. The most serious problem with an actor is that he does not really listen to the person acting in front of him. He is in fact preparing himself for the next line. You usually see no reaction in an actor's face of what he is seeing or hearing. So. I take long takes with several cameras. Actors usually do not know which camera is filming them, so they lose their sensitivity to the camera that is taking a close up. This makes their acting more natural," says Kurosawa.

Kiarostami on the other hand exclaims that many of his films have been harshly criticized for being natural. "Critics believe that the stage and the screen are sacred, so no one should commit anything ordinary there. In their eyes naturalism is commonplace. They say everything must be exaggerated, as they believe your films are."

Kurosawa laughs in surprise. "Maybe my actors' behaviors look exaggerated in your country, but they are definitely natural here. Cultural and traditional differences must not be taken for exaggeration. I have to say that I



honestly enjoyed watching your films. They induce appreciation for your working style. How do you work with children, in particular? They do not feel at home in my films and keep watching me in a discreet way."

Kiarostami explains "Maybe that's because you are Kurosawa. The children that work for me hardly know me. During the actual filming I try to pretend that I'm not the governor. Usually I ask the crew to judge about their acting. Of course, every kid needs a special trick, sometimes it is another story."

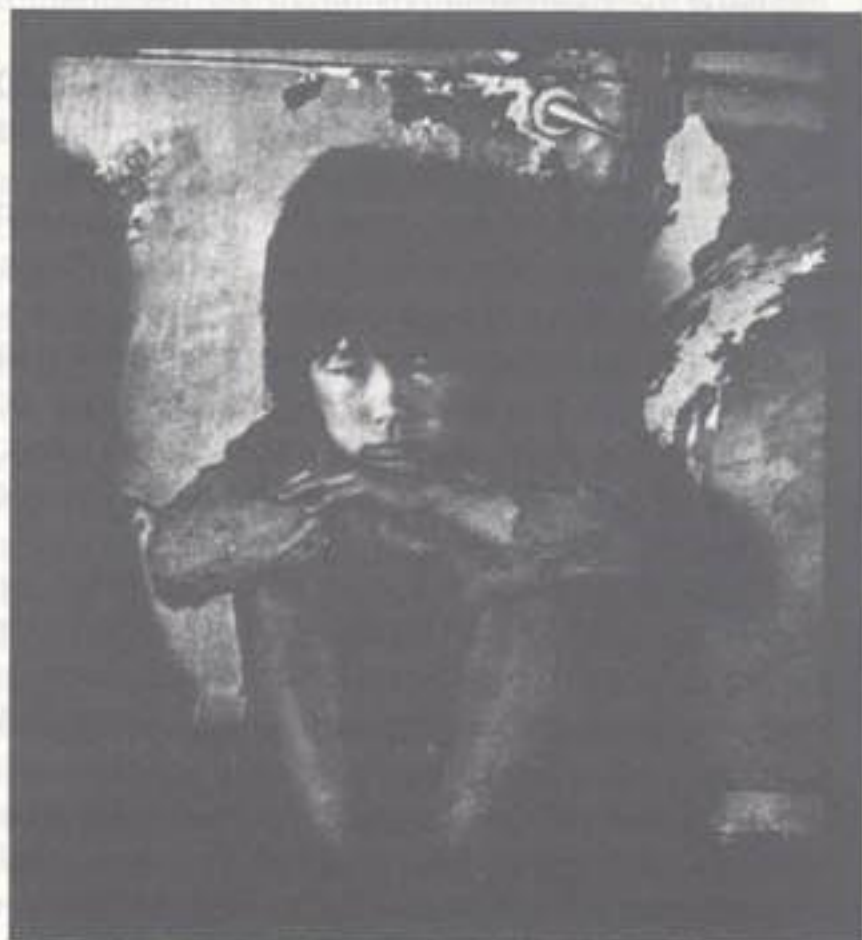
"This is the cinema that must be supported and taken seriously. My children and grandchildren never see American films. They have their own boycotting system which rules out violent films. I wish this humanistic cinema could stand against all that vulgarity," says Kurosawa. He adds, "I'm sure good films are being made everywhere. But, filmmaking in Europe and the States is going backwards while good films are emerging in Asia and finding their way to international film festivals. The global screen is not for the films of only one country. Films make their viewers familiar with the cultural settings of their country of origin. If they are made according to a national culture then they will be welcomed abroad. My grandchildren and I made ourselves familiar with Iran and her people with your films."

"You have said that films must be made with hearts and seen with hearts," says Kiarostami. And Kurosawa admits that "Yes, I did; but unfortunately most of the Japanese people see films with their brains and try to find flaws in it. Sometimes, critics ask questions for which I have no answer, because I have not thought about the matter when I was making the film. Films must be rather felt, but there is little feelings in recent films." Kiarostami says that maybe filmmakers have built up a kind of bad taste among viewers. "They may have misled their tastes," he says, and Kurosawa believes that maybe the offering of old films on laser disks could make viewers familiar with a more healthy cinema.

Kurosawa then talks about the similarity between the opening scenes of his *Madadayo* and Kiarostami's *Where is the Friend's Home?* "Apparently we have many things in common," he observes; and Kiarostami once again stresses that Kurosawa is far more famous. And Kurosawa modestly tells Kiarostami that how he painted the shadows of things in *Dodeskaden* because he was not financially capable of waiting for a brighter day. "Both of us tend to be attached to our locations even after the end of filming our movies," says Kurosawa, "Every time it is so sad to say goodbye to the protagonists of a film that's finished."

Both of the filmmakers agree that those who look for flaws in films deprive themselves of the joy of watching a film, "My painting teacher used to tell me to look at the world with a half closed eye. We have to see everything altogether, it is only then that we will be able to see the truth."

Kurosawa's daughter serves tea twice and we have to bid farewell. Kiarostami is concerned about the Japanese master's health, "I don't want to make you more tired." Kurosawa says he would have taken us to a restaurant if we had time. We hope of meeting him again, as soon as possible.



Dodeskaden