


ABBAS KIAROSTAMI, THE TASTE AND POETRY OF IRANIAN CINEMA: WITH A TASTE OF CHERRY, THE WIND WILL CARRY US AWAY

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ABSTRACT

Jean-Luc Godard's statement that "Cinema begins with D. W. Griffith and ends with Abbas Kiarostami", demonstrates such importance and genius of the Iranian director Abbas Kiarostami. In this article we will reflect on Kiarostami's filmic narrative and his poetic cinema of "unfinished" style, as he himself states: "whenever we have the opportunity to include scenes in which we can solicit the viewer's imagination, we offer him the effective possibility of creating the film with us". Two great films, Taste of Cherry, from 1997, and The Wind Will Carry Us, from 1999, were chosen to come into focus in the discussion about how Kiarostami diligently seeks his truth as a human being in a perspective of poetic simplicity.

Keywords: Iranian cinema, Abbas Kiarostami.

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INTRODUCTION

Iran knew cinema at its dawn, with the arrival of the first cinematograph, at the beginning of the twentieth century. Over half a century, Iranian cinema has gone through important twists and turns, ups and downs, as well as attempts to experiment in confronting the dominant Hollywood model, as has occurred in several countries. However, in the late sixties, a new wave of Iranian cinema was launched as a response to ordinary or popular cinema, which failed to reflect the culture and artistic taste of the Iranian people.

The new wave celebrated a series of international cinematographic movements, such as the *French nouvelle vague* or Italian neorealism — two of the most influential movements in the history of cinema. For a decade until the Iranian Revolution in 1979, films and a series of directors emerged who brought different and modern characteristics to the history of cinema in that country, such as Dariush Mehrjui, Nasser Taqvaei, Massoud Chemie and Bahram Bayzai, soon Mohsen Makhmalbaf, Amir Naderi and Abbas Kiarostami joined them. With the transition in Iran from the rule of the last Shah Muhammad Reza Pahlavi to the era of Ruhollah Khomeini, many filmmakers fled abroad, but Kiarostami stayed, simply because "when you take a tree rooted in the ground and take it somewhere else, it will not bear fruit again, and if that happens, the fruit will not be good enough. I was afraid that I would be like this tree if I left my homeland."

Abbas Kiarostami was born on June 22, 1940 and died on July 4, 2016, after spending much of his life in love with the image. He started as a painter, wrote poetry and screenplay, also worked with photography and soundtrack for more than forty films, including fiction, documentaries and short films, many of which have won international awards, being critically acclaimed, in addition to occupying important places in lists of fundamental films and opinion polls.

Aesthetically, Kiarostami proposes that existence means more than just life. We see this since his first short film, *The Bread and the Alley*, from 1970, a sensitive ten-minute story, in black and white, in which we follow the journey of a boy sent by his family to buy bread, when, on the way home, a hungry dog intercepts his path. Beyond the plot and the story, Kiarostami moves with the ease of a specialist, cutting out times, characters and events from the solidity of existence, giving them the kiss of life, mixing the documentary, the imaginary and the realistic with magic, with a remarkable degree of mystery, an unusual combination concomitant with simplicity and complexity.

Scene of the boy and the dog, in *The Bread and the Alley*, from 1970.



The French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy considers Kiarostami's film *And Life Goes On* (1992) not a representation or a story, but a cinematographic guide. For Nancy (2008), the art of the Iranian director represents the crystallization of a profound movement that characterizes the cinema of our time and that goes beyond the notions of fiction, document or representation. This cinema would then be a direct opening on what Nancy defines as the world: a contingent space, devoid of any predetermined meaning, which necessarily appeals to our own responsibility, as builders of all stories.

In his narrative construction, Kiarostami repeatedly staged the illusion of confusing the real with the imaginary, so that fragments of his biography as a director were scattered in more than one film. In *Close-up* (1990), he gives more space to the cinematographic community, Iranian directors are characters themselves. The film tells the true story of Hossain Sabzian, a cinephile who posed as director Mohsen Makhmalbaf to convince a family to be the protagonist in his new film. It's the desire buried in us for diagnosis, representation, and passion for the dream of stardom. This particular film is an example of Kiarostami's artistic style, which claims a taste for cinema, or when "the film is made", as he puts it.

With a spirit that mixes experimentation with passion, the director formed most of his artistic experience, dressing in several nuances at the same time, taking into account a consistency, where the identity and simplicity of the poet are arranged with the refined vision of the specialist. Kiarostami likes the uncertainty of novelty, he always mentioned that

the public can see things in his films that they did not know, this is the beauty of indirect meaning, because everything is open to multiple interpretations. In his art, behind the simplicity of the image, hides a light for a new and continuous birth, evoking psychological levels that yearn for a comfort of his aesthetic thought.

FOR THE *TASTE OF CHERRY*

In 1997, Abbas Kiarostami presented to the world the film *Taste of Cherry*, winner of the Palme d'Or at the Cannes Film Festival, generating an endless debate between critics and audiences due to its open ending. The film revolves around the character Badii, played by Homayoun Ershadique, who drives her car through winding labyrinths in the mountains in search of a man to establish a strange existential agreement. Badii will swallow all his sedative pills and sleep in an empty hole. The man who accepts his agreement must go the next morning at six o'clock to check it in his hole. He will call him twice, if Badii answers, the man will help him get up and leave, if he does not answer, he will be covered with dirt, and in both cases, the man will return home with a bundle of money. The film goes through several characters and extensive dialogues. After Badii strikes a deal with one of the men, the film ends with an open-ended ending.

Kiarostami states that we accept abstraction and ambiguity in arts such as music, poetry, and painting, but we have a hard time accepting them in cinema. He tries not to make his films stories with a beginning, middle and moment of enlightenment, which reveals the mystery and tells the fate of his characters, but creates a story that resembles poetry or an intriguing painting, an aesthetic work that awakens in us the desire to fill our ambiguity, under the focus of personal interpretation. Attempts to explain the meaning of René Magritte's paintings, for example, will always bother, as well as to determine Badii's fate, in *Taste of Cherry*. Kiarostami stands by Magritte's side to tell viewers that the puzzle is the goal, not the solution.

The Iranian director's films depend on dialogue. In *Taste of Cherry*, we see a man looking for strangers to talk to. Whether they accept or reject it, it will never fade from their memories. The car and road film provides the appropriate medium for such a story, a recurring theme in Kiarostami's work — cinema is his car, and drama is his road. The passengers that the road offers him, in his films, there is always a car that welcomes strangers, or rather, welcomes stories. It is unusual for the dialogue to be born smoothly in

the encounter with strangers, so the filmmaker makes the car an aesthetic trap. A metal can that forms a siege: two passengers so close cannot help but talk.

Badii drives his closed car and, by blocking it, can create a dialogue with strangers he meets along the way. The sequences are filmed inside the vehicle. Whether in the *close-up* image or in the open shots, we find Badii driving his car in curves through solid, heavy, non-moving mountains. The metaphor of the life that Badii cannot bear, a weight that cannot be carried, he must circumvent it, through a death agreement. We follow the character's car in long shots and wide frames, like a prey in a maze, trying all the ways while the hard enigma of life is firm and does not move.

Scenes from *Gosto de cereja*, from 1997.



The choice of a setting, with dirty, pothole-ridden places and construction sites with workers, sums up Iran's ongoing recovery work. The country has been trying to rebuild since the 1980s, when the wars with Iraq took place. This environment is suitable for the film, as it is there that Badii tries to find the man with whom he will make the death agreement. Badii contemplates the digging machines, as they fill the holes with earth, their shadow reflected in the rock wall. He hopes that one of these holes will digest his own life. In a country that is trying to rise up and seek life at the hands of its workers, we find Badii, looking among them for a man who will provide him with the scene of his condemnation.

The spatial framing of the film is done with care. They will be repeated throughout the narrative, with the purpose that the viewer creates a map of the place to be better kept in

their memory than the dialogues between the characters, The place is a complete portrait of the film's objective, while the dialogues are an evolutionary work that only achieves its purposes at the end. The places in *Taste of Cherry* tell us the story of the person trapped in the mystery of living in a circular prison, in the middle of a mountain or a dense reality, like a rock in the middle of the room that we are afraid to face. What you avoid will return to the same starting point, and that is the suffering of Badii, who does not have the courage to take his own life. Then, he should look for someone who understands his idea of death and convince him to be an accomplice in it, emphasizing that he examines him carefully the next day to be sure of the realization of his intent.

The "hero" is caught between the weight of life and the desire for death, but wants to purge his personal tragedy into the task of a strange man who has no compassion or weakness, not questioning him with questions about the act. In his dialogues, Kiarostami hides the story of the "hero". We know nothing about his motives or what prompted him to make the decision of the strange death deal. Why doesn't he just kill himself? What is your intention? If the director gives a background to the story of his "hero", the whole film will become just the story of Badii.

The path of a great artist will always be taken by the abundance of his poetic experience, but the legacy of poetry is not established in the author. The poetic end takes over its flourishing in the relationship with the public. A poem read at different stages of life will always be open "to the eternal newness of the world", as Pessoa teaches us. If Kiarostami wished simply to tell Badii's story, he would print it as if it were the text of a novel, with a beginning, middle and end. But he "tells" a poetry that captivates forever and asks: if Badii came to you one day with a death agreement, would you have a reason to bring him to life and dissuade him from the funeral wish? What story would you tell him? It is enough to feel the *Taste of cherry* once for these questions to remain, obtaining differentiated answers over time, like the taste of poetry that is renewed.

At the end of *Taste of Cherry*, Badii, having apparently taken his sleeping pills, finally lies down in his ditch—he bodily entered the earth, the imaginative box. The earth darkens around him, suggesting a situation similar to darkening in a theater setting, as if Badii had settled into some inner meditation. The viewer's access to Badii disappears, his vision of his own world is undone by closing his eyes. The character and the viewer are left with the darkness. Although Badii lies down to sleep, it is possible to speculate whether as a character he lives or dies, as if he were abandoning his acting role and dissolving into the

film. Perhaps he will also become a role model for Kiarostami's ideal audience, closing his eyes to express his dreams, letting himself go, abandoning the specifics of the film, such as plot and concrete logic. A constant idea in Kiarostami's work is that we don't need to see to know: by closing his eyes on purpose, while in his box, Badii may be suggesting the ending of the film that follows, or creating it together with us. In the interview given to Michel Ciment and Stéphane Goudet, in Paris, on May 29, 1997, the great filmmaker states:

I didn't want there to be, in the last part of the film, the slightest reference to death and I refused to show whether the "hero" was dead or alive. I wanted to abstract this question and, above all, avoid the happyend, the cute and superficial ending, which would have created the following question in the viewer's mind: why not make a film about a successful suicide? With the ending I have chosen, it is up to the viewer's imagination to decide. Statistically, out of eighteen cases of suicide, seventeen attempts fail. Therefore, what interests me most is success, it is what I most want to talk about. But I didn't want to make a tragedy. [...] But the darkness had to be prolonged, so that the viewer was confronted with non-existence, which, for me, refers to the symbolization of death. So that he would look at the screen so he wouldn't see anything. When the green of spring returns, it is, at the same time, the resurrection of life and of the image. Almost always, when a person dies, our first gesture is to close their eyes. We act as if we put the lid back on the lens of a camera. (KIAROSTAMI, 2016)

Indeed, the subsequent shots that complete *Taste of Cherry*, in the broader context, may suggest that the moment when one sneaks in search of the darkness of the scene, to receive images or help create them, becomes a kind of death, that is, a transition, a closing of one's eyes to one world and one opening to another. Part of the reason the film ends in a "renaissance" is the closing of the distance between these seemingly disparate worlds, encouraging those who observe it to get to know them, imaginatively and experientially. Thus, blurring the lines between beginning and end, actor and non-actor, life and death, all worlds merge into one. If all these realms become one, why should there be an answer, a conclusion, an end to the experience? Why should there be, then, an image? A black screen takes over Badii and nothing is left but sound — rain that rises and disappears. The film leaves the viewer with this image of darkness for an extended period, effectively bringing one with oneself, aware of oneself, watching nothing, expecting everything, projecting everything. The absence of an image creates an empty and dark space that liberates. It is a pause for contemplation. The distance between images, like the space between the lines of a poem, requires the viewer to make a connection, to engage, to take an imaginative leap.

AND SO THE WIND WILL CARRY US AWAY

Acclaimed at the Venice Film Festival in 1999, where it won the Golden Lion, the film *The Wind Will Carry Us* borrows its title from the Iranian poet Forugh Farrokhzad. As in *Taste of Cherry*, the protagonist character drives a car along Iranian roads. Unlike the lifeless, barren landscape of the previous film, *The Wind Will Carry Us* has stunning cinematography, lingering in lush landscapes, with its colorful mountain ranges and cultivated fields, all illuminated with bright splashes of sunlight. The grainy yellow, olive green and rolling hills seem to want to recite the poetry of *Van Gogh's Wheat Field with Crows*.

The narrative begins with an aerial view of the car winding through hills in a sequence of colors and tranquil landscapes. There is no realistic aridity here, as in *Taste of Cherry*, which focuses in a claustrophobic way on the driver. The camera stages the beauty and vastness. Advancing along the horizon toward Siah Dareh, a remote Kurdish village about four hundred miles from Tehran, a three-man film crew arrives in anticipation of the death of an elderly woman, whose ceremonial burial and mourning rituals will make up a television documentary. However, she does not die in the first few days, showing signs of recovery, so men are forced to wait for what would be inevitable. The wait causes frustration not only in themselves, but also in their bosses and the locals, who see these outsiders, identified as "engineers," as nothing more than opportunists. Most of the film focuses on the anonymous producer, played by Behzad Dourani, who is in charge of the impending filming and his day-to-day explorations of the village. It is led, most of the time, by a boy, who seems very happy to keep up with the stranger, as long as it does not interfere with his studies.

One of the beautiful scenes from *The Wind Will Take Us*, from 1999.



There's little traditional drama in *The Wind Will Carry Us*. Unpretentious moments with humor and irony are allowed without much fanfare, emerging from the routine activities of visitors and villagers. The wait for the lady's death drags on, seeming that death wanted to oppose the recording of scenes, just as the capture of images is not well accepted in the community. "No pictures," the tea seller said, when the protagonist wanted to document an argument between her and her spouse over a third job. However, the film creates landscapes with images characterized by photographic explosion, thus finding itself, from an aesthetic point of view, in a peculiar self-contradiction with its theme. There is a surplus that competes with the absence of desire of that people to register their cultural image. This is less dialectical than it may seem, for Kiarostami is not concerned with forcing a totality of pictorial presence, nor does he want to divide the world of beautiful images with the conflict of their absence.

The juxtaposition of presence and absence seems to be important to the director, an unresolved contrast that becomes part of his "unfinished" cinema. There are characters in the narrative who do not show themselves, of whom we only hear the voices in the dialogues, as happens with the rest of the team of the protagonist "engineer". What is not shown leaves part of the film with an enigmatic presence. The plot is told only in fragments, in narrative excerpts, refusing to make a transparent statement about its outcome. Although *The Wind Will Carry Us* prolongs the waiting time in the narrative and in the viewer, causing a ritualistic repetition in the action, it is one of Kiarostami's busiest films and with the

greatest comedy spirit. It can also be said that it is one of the most didactic. The presence of the school that the boy attends, the question of good and evil, the boy's withdrawal at a certain moment, everything seems to give the film a clear moral direction. However, in the end, all that is revealed is the persistence of the contradiction – the constructed moral suggestion has not been fulfilled.

Kiarostami's visual style is characterized by poetically engaging the viewer. In his films, his photographs have wide shots of a panoramic background or with the art of parallelism. This style, several times, is reproduced mainly in landscapes that escape from still life in its strict sense, such as photographing some fruits or household items. It seeks the transformation of nature into scenic focal points. This is the clear challenge to the gaze of visual decoding: not to understand it as mythical, but to bring to the scene an aesthetic charge that pulsates with a poetic charm that is not consumed. The horizon of interpretation remains and its poetic flavor has no room for coincidences, as it is characterized by strangeness and endless delight in its minimalist simplicity. It brings us back to the haiku philosophy of capturing the most accurate moments, which are formed before the viewer's view in a moment of time. It is originally an incessant search for a poetic truth that manifests itself in the diverse compositional forms of the human, animal, and spatial world.

The wind will carry us remains as an inexhaustible gaze that seeks, in the form of childlike curiosity, artistic and aesthetic methods and expressions. He moves between *design* and photography, composition and cinema, as if renewing the tools of his search for the secrets of consciousness through a moment, a transitory time. Artist Abbas Kiarostami always seeks unification and solutions to his theme, transcending the material to become immaterial and the visual to become invisible. Thus, your characters are always in search of something or some meaning.

Kiarostami diligently seeks his truth as a human being in a poetic perspective, projecting his intellectual and aesthetic concerns outside and onto the subjects of the image-scene. The scenes themselves become means to carry their deep connotations in the codification and multi-signified visual condensation. The scenes framed with great care in *The Wind Will Take Us*, combining the areas of the earth with the trees and winding paths, which are completed with the masses of clouds and the sky, can be transformed into objective equations for the characters in their search for an exploration of a circle of encounter between the ego and the world through the auditory or visual medium. In this

process, the poet-director (Kiarostami also wrote poetry) acts as an observer of nature in its integration with moving images. May the winds carry away his verses:

The night
The sea
winter.

The flash of the first autumnal moon
at the window
shakes the windows.

The quince tree
Flourished
in an abandoned house.

The aroma of walnuts
The fragrance of jasmine
the aroma of rain on the earth.

(KIAROSTAMI, 2018, p 13)

It is known that the aesthetic sensibility of the filmmaker, in general, is not only based on how much he responds to the mechanisms of the cinematographic language itself, but also and decisively on his intellectual and artistic references, which derive from all branches of art. Photography, painting, poetry, dance and theater are some of its components and energies. Kiarostami remains influenced by Persian poetry in his personal inclinations, when dealing with Iranian nature. Persian poetic writings are often referred to in excerpts from his films, as in the films of Tarkovsky or Godard, where poetry finds a place in the artistic and verbal construction of the narrative. It is natural that this aesthetic extension is to educate the gaze about the geometry of the universe, translating the impact of colors, sounds and subtle sensations and their brilliance into the awareness of words, phrases, images or scenes of extreme delicacy and precision.

A FINAL FOCUS

Abbas Kiarostami's cinema has always been humanitarian, but not in the often condescending and conventional sense of the word. His work carries the utmost respect for the public as a collection of thinking and intellectualized individuals. He never resorts to devices designed to openly arouse the emotions of the public, edit didactically to make a political point, or instruct through an obvious narrative structure. Its sparse narrative economy, composed of spaces and ellipses, chains episodes and presents experiences that require the audience to leap imagination or understanding. In *Taste of Cherry*, for example, a sweeping volume of sensory perception, triggered by multiple sounds—laughing children playing in a valley, the noise of distant construction vehicles, or the screeches of strange animals hidden behind a hill—suggests worlds beyond the frame. There is a continuous use of car horns, generating a greater awareness of the Doppler effect when they pass. Sounds that expand the main character's world and ours.

Complex and disconcerting, the director's films are often described by almost contradictory adjectives: poetic, neorealist, intellectual, mental, cerebral, etc. Kiarostamian cinema is rarely based on realistic descriptions, but rather on poetic suggestions and philosophical commentary. In other words, "an image does not represent, it does not present itself in the representation, but announces its presence, invites the spectator-reader to discover it". It is a cinema that is sensitive and attentive to the fine vibrations of life, ranging from existential anguish in the face of death to fascination with the beauty of the world. A cinema, sometimes minimalist, but deeply human, full of beautiful enigmatic characters, often torn between the desire to live and love and the obsession with dying and disappearing.

In addition to being a filmmaker, Kiarostami is also the author of poetry collections, photography books and painting exhibitions. "Being a filmmaker, photographer, poet, all at the same time, all this is motivation to live, to do something every day, whether it's cinema, photography or poetry." It is not a choice, it is a fatality. The result is an imposing, poetic and homogeneous production. Kiarostami's literary and visual works are, therefore, a profound journey into the world of words and the universe of images.

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