Taste of Cherry, a new film from Iran: Despair, hope, life

David Walsh
11 April 1998

Film review: Taste of Cherry, *written and directed by Abbas Kiarostami*

First things first. I would strongly urge the reader to find out whether *Taste of Cherry* is currently playing in his or her locality, or if it will be at any time in the near future. The appearance of a film by Iranian director Abbas Kiarostami is a major international cultural event.

Kiarostami is arguably the finest film artist at work in the world today. He has said in an interview that the age of cinema as a storytelling medium is over and "The best form of cinema is one which poses questions for the audience." Whether one accepts the first proposition or not, the director has certainly accomplished the latter in *Taste of Cherry*.

Born in 1940, Kiarostami won a painting competition at the age of 18 and left home to attend Tehran University's Faculty of Fine Arts. He helped set up a filmmaking department at the Institute for the Intellectual Development of Children and Young Adults, an organization founded by the Shah's wife in 1969. Since then he has made some 24 films, including numerous short and full-length documentaries and five feature-length fiction works. He first gained widespread international recognition with his trilogy of films about an area north of Tehran devastated by an earthquake: *Where is my friend's house?* (1987), *And life goes on...* (1992) and *Through the Olive Trees* (1994). (See the review of the latter film and the interview with Kiarostami from the 1994 Toronto film festival.)

Assuming that many readers will not be in a position to see *Taste of Cherry*, I think it is worthwhile to give some idea of the film's content and feeling. The story is simple. A man, a Mr. Badii, drives around the outskirts of Tehran asking strangers to do him a favor. That night he plans to swallow every sleeping pill he has and lie down in a hole he has dug for himself beside a tree. Will you come to the spot, he asks of the various people he meets, at 6 a.m. and call out my name? If I reply, help me out of the hole. If I don't, cover my body with 20 spadefuls of dirt.

He speaks to six men. The first, a laborer, tells him to clear off before he can make his meaning plain. The next man he speaks to collects plastic bags to sell. He must make just enough, one thinks, to keep his head above water. "What do you do with the money?" Badii asks him. "I send it to my family," he explains. How does such a man survive?

The third encounter is a longer one. Badii offers a lift to a young soldier on his way back to the barracks. He suggests a drive, the soldier agrees. He turns out to have been a farmer in Kurdistan. He left school because "You know how it is." He comes from a family of nine, but he can't stay with either of his two brothers who live in Tehran because they have no room for him. The pay is not good in the army, he observes.

Badii takes him to the site of the hole; explains his request. The young soldier is appalled, frightened. "I'm not a gravedigger, I don't bury people." Badii offers him a sum of money equivalent to six months' pay. A Kurd must be brave, he says, there have been so many wars, your people have suffered so much. "Pretend that I'm manure spread at the foot of a tree." The soldier refuses and, at the first opportunity, runs off.

Badii drives on. He sees a group of laborers, some of them resting in the undergrowth. Absorbed with his problem, he accidentally drives his car off the road. Immediately a group of men in blue overalls lift his car out of a rut and set it right again, without a word.

The unhappy man comes to a guard shack outside a cement plant. The guard invites him in for tea. He is a refugee from Afghanistan. Badii: "It's nice here." The guard: "Nice? It's nothing but earth and dust." Badii suggests they go for a drive. No, the man says, he has to guard the place. No one can carry off the machinery, Badii points out. Still, he has to stay. His friend, another Afghani and a seminary student, has come to visit. Badii goes off in search of the friend and offers him a ride. We see the security guard's face for the first time; he is alone once more and perhaps jealous too.

In the car with the seminarian Badii explains his situation. "There comes a time when a man can't go on," he says. There's no point in explaining the situation, he continues, "You can't feel my pain." The seminary student explains that according to the Koran suicide is a sin. God gives you this body, you must not torment God's gift, he says calmly. Badii becomes impatient, he doesn't want a lecture. "Being unhappy is a sin too," he says. No, killing is killing, replies the religious student, although he too could use the offered money.

Badii has now reached a new depth of despair. He parks his car by some kind of processing plant, quarry, or God knows what, where stones and dirt are being sorted and sifted. He looks at the rocks and earth for a minute, then sits by the road. A workman goes over to him: You have to move your car. Would you like some tea? Are you sick? The worker looks like a foreigner too. He is wearing a mask; no one can breathe here. Badii closes his eyes, then he stands and walks toward his car.

The film makes a sharp transition. Badii has apparently found someone willing to perform the task. "So, no more questions?" We hear an older man's voice: no, he has no more questions, but he still doesn't like the situation. "If we all chose this solution, there'd be no one left." We see his face. He recounts his own brush with suicide. Decades earlier he'd decided "to end it all." He got up one morning and headed off down the road, with a rope in his hands, until he came to a grove of mulberry trees. When he tried to throw the rope over a branch, it kept slipping off. So he climbed up into the tree to secure the rope. But then he tasted a mulberry and it was delicious. The sun came up. A group of children came along and asked him to shake the tree so they could get some berries too. This small thing, a mulberry, had saved his life. He asks Badii, do you never want to see the sunset, the stars, the moon again? What about the fruit the seasons bring and the taste of cherries? Badii is adamant. The old man needs the money because his child is ill with anemia, so he promises to carry out Badii's request.

Badii leaves him at the gate of the museum of natural history. He drives off. Suddenly he makes a U-turn and goes back. He tracks down the man, whose name is Bagheri, at the museum's taxidermy department. Look, he says anxiously, I might just be sleeping tomorrow morning, so bring two stones with you and throw them at me to see if I wake up. I'll bring three, Bagheri replies. And shake me by the shoulders, Badii insists. Yes, yes,

© World Socialist Web Site

the older man responds.

It's nighttime. From the street we see Badii pacing his apartment floor. Has he taken the pills? It's impossible to tell. A taxi comes and takes him to the spot on the hillside. He lays down in the hole. Clouds drift across the moon. Thunder, lightingâ€"finally, rain. Badii closes his eyes.

Then a final sequence, apparently on video. It's afternoon. We see the actor, Homayoun Ershadi, who plays Badii, smoking a cigarette and walking up a hill. We see Kiarostami directing a sequence in which a group of soldiers chants while marching up the road in double-time. "The shoot is over," the director says into his walkie-talkie. The film ends with a famous blues tune, *St. James Infirmary*, over the credits.

In considering *Taste of Cherry* the spectator is naturally tempted to theorize as to the precise source of the central character's unhappiness. What does Kiarostami show us?

Badii drives an expensive car, a Range Rover; he seems to have money and a pleasant place to live. The men he asks to help him are poor, some of them very poor. The film's first sequence shows Badii driving past crowds of laborers looking for work. Kiarostami's latest work takes place in a world of dry brown soil and rocks, a desert; one almost chokes on the dust. Life is harsh. People are lonely.

There are two essential elements in *Taste of Cherry*, social deprivation and one man's anguish. Let's assume then that one of two general causes has driven Badii to such a desperate act: the pitiable state of the world itself, or a terrible personal problem. If the former accounts for his decision to take his own life, the film suggests, this can only be the response of a middle class person, an intellectual. Ordinary people go on struggling, suffering. "Life is, life goes on" the director told an interviewer, "That is the most important thing." If the latter possibility explains his action, the film asks: is it permissible to feel such a private anguish in the face of wholesale wretchedness?

But Kiarostami's film is complex. He is not in the business of moralizing. Nothing in the film suggests that Badii's despair is put on, overdone, faked. The film accepts as a given that the world as it is arouses such feelings. But what, it asks, is one to make of them? On what basis does one go on?

Many critics have taken the safest reading of the film. It is complacently described as "humanist," as if humanism meant accommodation and resignation. Bagheri's story about the mulberries is interpreted by some to mean that the film simply invites audience members to open themselves to the rudimentary pleasures of life. That element is undoubtedly in the film, but if that were all, the film would be fairly innocuous.

Taste of Cherry is a serious and complex work. It advances certain truths and then undermines them, or suggests others just as compelling. It is true that Bagheri makes a speech praising the virtues of life and nature, a sentiment with which no one could argue. But is that the whole story? First, there is nothing complacent about his own attitude to reality. Yes, he says, I decided not to commit suicide. Did that mean, however, that everything was fine after that? No, he says, one must change one's outlook *and change the world*. Also, Bagheri seems to be a simple man, a "man of the soil," when we first see him in Badii's Range Rover. But the next time we encounter him, inside the museum grounds, he is dressed in a lab coat and has a quite different appearance and demeanor. He is a man of science, or at least a technician. Far from being satisfied with life as it presents itself immediately to the senses, he is engaged in teaching taxidermy, a practice that involves literally going beneath the skin.

"Change the world." This is a film that any existing regime would find disturbing. In response to an interviewer's question about the relationship between film and politics, Kiarostami had this to say: "I think that any work of art is a political work, but it's not party political. It doesn't approve one party and attack another, and doesn't support one system over another.... But no film which is any good can at the same time be apolitical. After all, when one talks about a being in the here and now, in a way one somehow gives a precise humane image of that character, and one way or another he or she has a relationship with the politics of the day in one's own country, or the world. I think, surprisingly, that those films which appear nonpolitical, such as poetic films, are more political than films known specifically as 'political' films. I don't say whether my films are poetic or not."

We, however, can say it. Kiarostami's films are among the most poetic being made. Indeed where does conscious thought end and intuition begin? With an extraordinary artist these are two poles between which a current always flows. Was it Kiarostami's plan, for example, to examine and criticize the society's institutional pillars? Badii encounters first a soldier, then a seminary student, then an employee at the museum of natural history. The army, religion, science. But the three could be looked at in another wayâ€"a youth, a young man, an elderly man: son, brother, father.

Taste of Cherry is perhaps the most visually audacious of Kiarostami's works. At first glance his films seem almost documentary-like. But, in fact, scenes may be composed of individual shots that one cannot connect from the point of view of mundane spatial logic. Consider, for example, the scene at the guard shack. In the first shot we see Badii in his car, looking up to his right, speaking to the security guard, who is out of the frame. In the second, a long shot, we see him climbing a ladder to the shack; the car is nowhere in sight. In a third, we see Badii from inside the shack pacing back and forth along a deck that runs the length of the structure. Behind him, in the frame, a hillside or mound of earth with falling rocks suddenly looms, suggestive perhaps of his feeling that he is being buried alive.

Pictures of everyday reality, considerations about life in general and criticisms, veiled or otherwise, of Iranian society are joined organically in Kiarostami's film. Is it an accident, for example, that a number of women appear, for the first time, just at the moment that Badii has apparently succeeded in convincing the old man to carry out his request?

Women make up half or more of the human race, so there is nothing unusual about their presence. But this sudden appearance at a critical moment in the film is suggestive. Is Badii suffering from the consequences of an unhappy marriage or relationship? He tells the seminarian that it is a sin to hurt others, as he apparently has done. Does the sight of the young women, and the flowers and trees that suddenly appear in the landscape, suggest the possibilities of life to a man who has just arranged the details of his own deathâ€"or should they, at least, to those viewing the film?

And, at the same time, Kiarostami's films always make a silent protest about the conditions women confront in Iran. We see a woman with a camera, women entering the science museum and women studying taxidermy, all of them wearing head scarvesâ€"it seems natural to ask why they should be obliged to accept such an absurd and demeaning state of affairs on the verge of the twenty-first century.

The film poses many questions. Can any sane person entirely lose his attachment to life? Badii is determined to die, but he worries about an unsteady ladder he's obliged to climb to reach the guard shack; he tells the seminarian, who invites him in for an omelet, that "eggs are bad for me"; and he carefully shuts off all the lights in his apartmentâ€"in fact, he goes back to turn one offâ€"on his way to his appointment with death. Or does all this simply demonstrate the force of habit?

More questions. Is it true, as Badii suggests, that no human being can feel another's pain? Certainly, *Taste of Cherry* implies, modern society inures people to the suffering of others, tends to render them callous and indifferent. The Afghani security guard explains that he came to Iran because of the war in his country. But what about the war Iran was fighting?, Badii asks. The Afghani war was far more painful to us, the guard explains. And the film makes clear that the Iranians for their part are quite capable of ignoring or forgetting about the suffering of the

© World Socialist Web Site

Afghanis. But is this condition in which human beings are walled off from one another inevitable? The film provides evidence that it is not. Bagheri responds directly and movingly to Badii's pain. Kiarostami's film itself, and our response to the plight of its characters, is proof that human beings can grasp, and not merely as a mental concept, the anguish of others, and feel it as deeply as their own.

And what does the 'epilogue' signify, this sequence showing the director and his crew filming a group of soldiers? In an interview, Kiarostami explains that many who see his work "believe my films are documentaries, as if it just happened that there was a camera to record them. I think if the audience knows they are watching a performance, something which has been constructed, they will understand it more than they would in a documentary film." He says this is the opposite of the current Hollywood method. Commercial filmmaking at present "is brainwashing the audience to such an extent that it strips them of any imagination, decision-making or intellectual capacity, in order to captivate them for two whole hours. In my films, there are always some breaks.... This gives the audience time to breathe a little and stops them from becoming emotionally involved and reminds them that, 'Yes, I'm watching a film.'"

The final scene is suggestive in many ways. First, it has the shimmering, slightly unreal character of a typical film dream sequence, except that here it is theoretically the only bit of "real life" footage in the film. Kiarostami does not show Badii's death. Or perhaps he doesn't die. But even if he were to, the film could not show it. It is like the human being who cannot dream of his or her own death. The finite creature cannot imagine a state of nonbeing.

And there is the content of the scene itself: a group of soldiers standing in a verdant, lush setting, joking, holding blossoms or flowers. Badii has explained that his days in the army were his happiest. Here he had made friends, enjoyed the camaraderie. But an army is not simply a group of friends, it is also a killing machine. Life and death, dream and everyday existence, joyous times and unbearable realityâ€"here it all is. The entire film is constructed like this, without straining for effect. An old man who cuts up animals and deals with death on a daily basis preaches the value of life. Children, smiling broadly, play in abandoned, rusted-out cars. This desolate scene, this virtual desert seethes with life. Reality is composed of conflicting elements, so *Taste of Cherry*, which conveys this, must be an eminently "realistic" film.

Like the greatest novels, or paintings, or pieces of music, Kiarostami's films have an intellectual weight, an emotional intensity and a truthfulness that give them almost an intimidating quality. Rigorous, but lively, austere, but not ascetic, his films are both of the world and apart from it, accepting of what is beautiful in life and critical of everything false and cruel. The experience of *Taste of Cherry* does not end when one exits the cinema, as is the case with the majority of films, even many so-called art films. The work continues to inspire thoughts and feelings, to challenge one intellectually and morally, for days, perhaps forever. This is the sort of film that changes people.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site