

# The Films of Abbas Kiarostami and the Evolution of the Third Cinema

by Doug Gritzmacher

In *Taste of Cherry* (1997), a man, Badii (Homayoun Ershadi), drives around the countryside outside Tehran looking for someone who will help him commit suicide. His plan is to overdose on sleeping pills that night and lie down in a hole he has dug on a hillside. He wants his accomplice to come to the hole in the morning, throw a couple rocks at him to make sure he is not still alive and, if he isn't, to shovel dirt on top of his corpse. In return for the accomplice's help, he will leave a large sum of money in his car. He explains his plan to three different passengers he picks up throughout the day. It is the third passenger who finally agrees to help him, only because he needs the money to help his sick daughter.

Badii gets his wish, but the death act is actually not the thrust of the film. It was the course Badii took to get there and, most of all, the conversations he had with his passengers that are the real concerns of the film. These dialogue passages are mostly simple and unexciting, such as this passage he has with the first passenger, a young Iranian soldier:

*"What did you do before you joined the military?"*

*"I was a farmer."*

*"A farmer? Did you study? Where you at school?"*

*"Not for long."*

*"Well, you gave up—why?"*

*"You know how it is."*

The banality of this conversation is intentional and is an illusion for more profound statements. In the above passage we learn about one side of life in Iran. The boy grew up on a farm and was unable to get much of an education, probably because he needed the time that would normally be spent in school to work to make money. This isn't specifically stated, but "You know how

it is" is not meant to be specific, it is meant to be suggestive.

It is this kind of suggestiveness that distinguishes Kiarostami from most of his contemporaries. It has also captured the favorable attention of many critics who characterize his suggestive, subtle style as poetic. Kiarostami finds profound meaning in the simple reality of life, a reality he works to replicate in his films through, in addition to the use of dialogue, the use of long shots, long takes and sounds. There are several long shots in *Taste of Cherry* that are simply of Badii's truck driving along the dirt roads carved into the hillsides outside Tehran. Some of these shots run several minutes without a cut. Layers of ambient sounds texturize the shots: Birds chirp, wind rustles through the grass on the hillside and the dirt crunches under the weight of the truck.

All these elements work together to create an environment that transcends the border of the frame and make the viewer feel as if they are actually standing on that hillside watching the truck. But this replication of reality is imperfect. In reality, a person standing on that hillside has choices that the viewer in the theater does not. The person on the hillside does not have to watch the truck. They can look at the sky, look behind them or even leave the hillside. Their gaze within that environment is not limited to one choice, but the gaze of the viewer



Abbas Kiarostami

in the theater is—to that by the placement of the camera. *In Taste of Cherry*, that placement is on the truck. But Kiarostami shows that he sees this imperfectness as not an obstacle to the replication of reality; but instead as means to create poetry.

When a viewer's gaze is restricted to one choice, their undivided attention is focused on that one image. In the case of the truck driving up the hillside, the viewer is forced to watch and listen to the truck. When a viewer's attention is focused in this way, they may begin to notice that the characteristics that make up the scene, such as the crunching sound of the tires as they roll over the dirt road, are interesting entities on their own, that is, they cease being merely a supporting characteristic of a larger whole and become independent whole elements with characteristics of their own. The crunching sound ceases to be just the sound of a car driving on dirt and becomes a sound with its own distinct characteristics.

This phenomenon is not unlike the infamous plastic bag scene from *American Beauty*. In that film there is a scene of a plastic grocery bag floating in the breeze. That's the entire scene. Because the camera is focused on the bag, it provokes the viewer to reexamine and see it as something other just a plastic bag. The viewer may begin to see the grace in the shapes that form from the wind hitting the plastic, or the liberating and care-free feeling the bag gives as it floats

effortlessly above the ground. The bag has become poetic because it has taken on a meaning beyond its literal sense.

This difference with Kiarostami is he doesn't just do this with one scene, he does it with the whole film, which has been the case from his first feature—*Where is the Friend's House?* (1987)—to his most recent—*Ten* (2002). This brand of storytelling is in stark contrast to the brand of storytelling found in Western cinema, which dominates the international film scene.

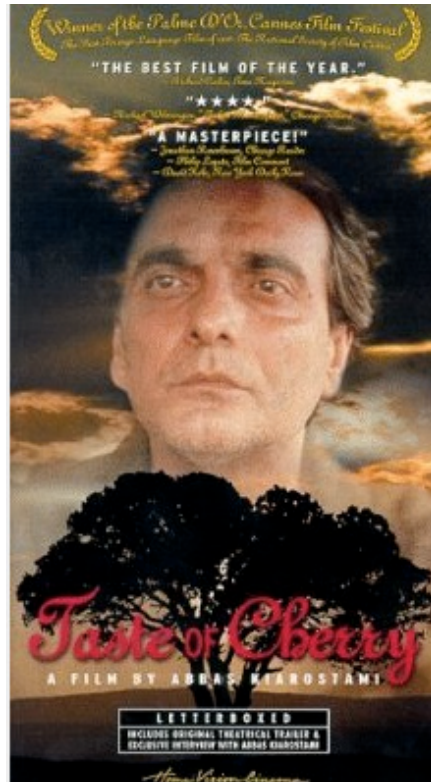
Western films, for the most part, are heavily edited. An edit is a disruption and each time it happens, the viewer's gaze is redirected and the viewer must spend several moments re-orienting themselves. This takes away from the time the viewer could spend taking in the image and so they end up never looking at something any longer than they would outside of the theater, thus preventing these films from achieving any kind of poetic existence.

Emphasis on the edit dominates Western filmmaking be-

cause there is a plethora of media competing for the attention of Western audiences that frequent and rapid disruption, which edits offer, has become the dominate means to gain viewers' attention. To this audience, Kiarostami's films may seem dull. But Kiarostami is from Iran, a country that has had a ban on Western media for more than 20 years. To Iranian audiences, his films are highly entertaining.

And they are becoming increasingly interesting to Western audiences. Western media has become so dominated by the edit that in recent years even audiences accustomed to Western style

filmmaking have come to receive Kiarostami's work as a breath of fresh air; they are attracted to the poetic rhythms of human existence that Kiarostami captures so well. "These issues are real issues that all of us in our own way face in our own lives and so rarely are they treated on film: the sense of crying out to others, of needing others, of trying to create a bridge to others," said Richard Pea, chairman of the New York Film Festival's selection commit-



tee before the screening of *Taste of Cherry* in that festival. “So few works are able to express that with any percentage of the power that I think this film reaches so simply” (Cheshire, [www.iranian.com](http://www.iranian.com)).

Before its screening at the New York Film Festival in 1997, *Taste of Cherry* screened Cannes International Film Festival where it won the Palme d’Or award, the festival’s highest honor and effectively launching Kiarostami into the international film scene. Today, he is widely considered by many film critics and scholars as one of the most important filmmakers of our time (Cheshire, [www.pbs.org](http://www.pbs.org)).

They admire him for showing a film can still be interesting, meaningful and entertaining without special effects and fervent editing. His style has become so distinct and well known that even established Western filmmakers are being compared to him rather than the other way around (Rosenbaum and Saeed-Vafa, 2002).

**H**ow Kiarostami came to develop the realism style that has become his trademark and impressed and influenced so many is in large part because of practicality. The average cost of making a film in Iran is \$150,000, most of which is used to cover the cost of purchasing and developing the film stock (Akrami, [www.zeitgeistfilm.com](http://www.zeitgeistfilm.com)). But Kiarostami keeps additional costs low by becoming a master at getting the most out of simply what is available around

him. He uses non-actors, relies on ambient sounds to fill out the soundtrack, uses natural settings for his sets and nearly eliminates reverse shots.

There is a scene in his film *The Wind Will Carry Us* (1999) where the protagonist drives by a couple of farmers walking down the road. He stops to talk to them, but Kiarostami never shows the farmers during the whole conversation. Instead, he keeps the camera trained on the protagonist. It is not until the protagonist drives away that we finally see the farmers through the back window of the truck as they continue on their walk. By eliminating the shot of the farmers, and thereby any edits, Kiarostami only had to shoot the scene once. To include a shot of the farmers, he would have had to shoot it twice. Kiarostami, however, does not see this entirely as an economic choice. His decision not to include the farmers is part of the film’s message. This is what he had to say about his film:

“There are 11 people in [*The Wind Will Carry Us*] who are not visible. At the end you know you haven’t seen them, but you feel you know who they were and what they were about. I want to create the type of cinema that shows by not showing. This is very different from most movies nowadays,

which ... show so much that they take away any possibility of imagining things for ourselves. My aim is to give the chance to

create as much as possible in our minds, through creativity and imagination.” (Sterritt, *Film Comment*).



Kiarostami’s “Where is the Friend’s House?”

Obviously, Kiarostami is utilizing his imagination to work within budgetary limitations. But Kiarostami must also deal with an even greater limitation: censorship, which could be said to have had the most influence on the development of Kiarostami’s naturalistic, poetic filmmaking style.

All films in Iran must go through a four-step approval process by the Iranian government (Akrami, [www.zeitgeistfilm.com](http://www.zeitgeistfilm.com)). The Iranian government has tight control over cultural and social practices and seeks to ensure filmmakers have broken no laws in their films.

Two of these laws in particular would seem to have a profound impact on filmmakers. They include requiring women to cover their hair at all times when outside of their home and forbidding men and women, unless they are married, to touch each other (Akrami, [www.zeitgeistfilm.com](http://www.zeitgeistfilm.com)).

Since a large number of films are about romance and relationships, this presents a special chal-

lenge to Iranian filmmakers who are, in a sense, forced to find other topics to base their films on. Kiarostami not only rises above this obstacle, he prefers it:

“Overall I don’t pick subjects that involve husbands and wives in their apartments because when you make a movie you have to believe the story itself. We put a series of lies together to reach a higher truth. We don’t have to use a real family. We may get the husband from somewhere, the wife from somewhere else, borrow a child and rent an apartment . . . .

“But what if I looked through my viewfinder and realize that this is not a real family? They don’t have any real relationship to each other . . . . So I won’t be able to define a

family when I realize that I can’t show it the way I’ve lived it. This is a family I don’t know and so I won’t touch it. Maybe this is why I keep going to the villages to make films.” (Friendly Persuasions, 2000).

Kiarostami’s suspicion about

his motivation for setting his film in Iranian villages is in line with his realism technique. He prefers the villages to the apartment because in reality the villages are

rience outside the realms of the movie theater.

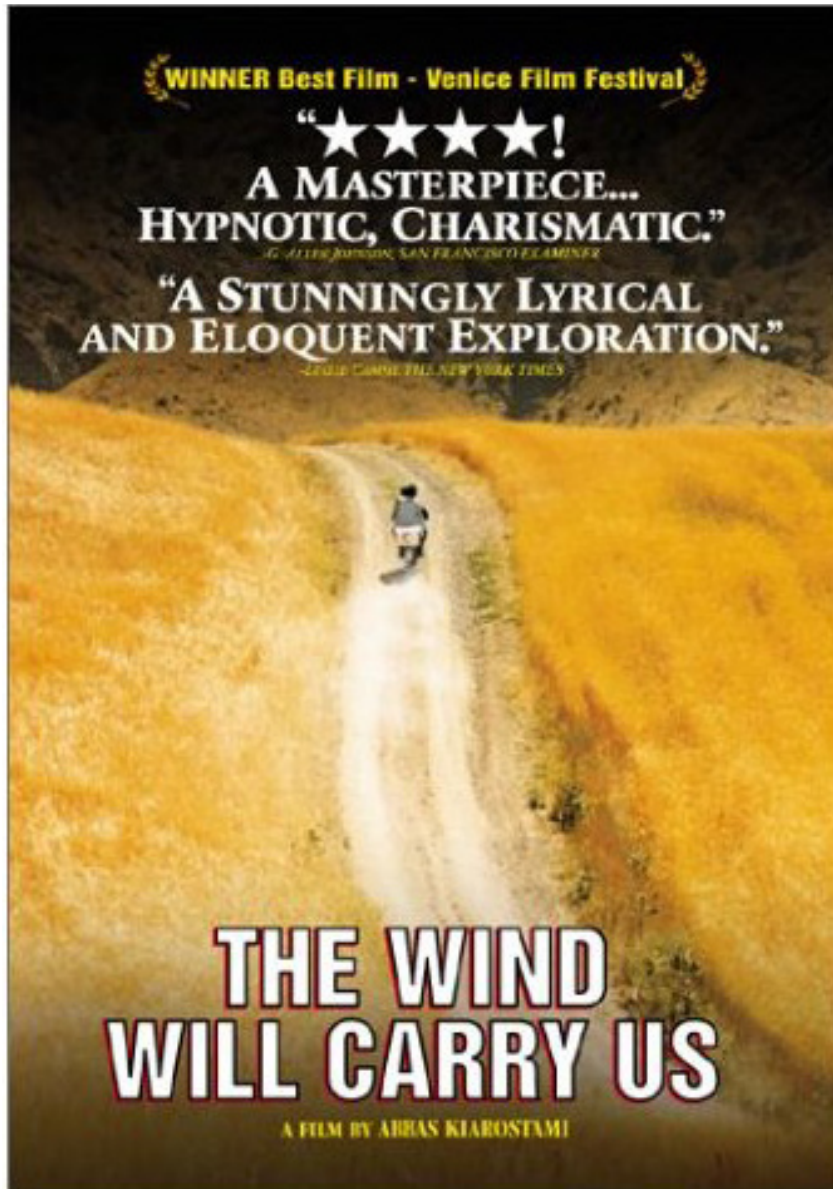
Again, Kiarostami is demonstrating his profound creative potential to work within the limitations set by the Iranian government.

Kiarostami, however, is not the first Iranian filmmaker to work around censorship creatively. The realistic filmmaking style that Kiarostami is known for was actually first seen in the 1969 film *The Cow*.

In *The Cow*, a village’s only cow dies, causing the village enormous anguish. The owner of the cow takes it especially hard. So much so that his sanity begins to slip as he is shown

to increasingly embody the cow in mind and spirit (Downing, p136).

*The Cow* was written and directed by Dariush Mehrjui, an Iranian native and also a UCLA film graduate. At the time of the film’s making, Iran was ruled by the Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi regime,



in the public domain so, conceivably, anyone is free to observe and experience it. This isn’t the case with a private setting like the apartment of a family. His films seem real in part because they show experiences that the viewer would be free to view and expe-

a government propped up by the United States in an effort to keep Iran from falling under Soviet influence. Western melodramas and foreign song and dance films dominated Iranian media at the time (Naficy, p674). There was almost no support available for local filmmakers, who were shut out by the Shah's ambition to Westernize Iran (Naficy, p674).

Despite these conditions a few local filmmakers managed to create films about Iran, which collectively became a movement that came to be known as the New Wave, with *The Cow* being the most successful of these films. These filmmakers were subject to government censorship, which automatically banned anything that criticized the government. The New Wave filmmakers, who wished to make films that spoke out against the increased centralization of power within the government, were forced to bury their messages through subtle symbolism in an effort to escape government censors (Downing, p137).

The story of the *The Cow* may be about how the death of a cow impacts a village, but it also happens to illustrate the poverty that was resulting from the Shah regime's neglect of its people. The story and the realistic style in which it was told was merely a disguise for this message.

This movement coincided with other like-minded movements across the globe that collectively became known as the "Third Cinema".

**T**hird Cinema films are characterized by being non-Western and by their polit-

ical and social themes. The films of Iran's New Wave were also characterized by their political and social themes, but the context of those themes differs from that of other Third Cinema filmmakers (Parhami, www.horschamp.qc.ca).

The political and social themes expressed in the films of Third Cinema filmmakers, such as Glauber Rocha in Brazil and Sembene Ousmane in Senegal, were within the context of colonialism. These filmmakers sought to liberate their country's native culture, which had been oppressed by colonialism (Armes, p255-267, p281-292).

Iran, however, was never colonized, at least not directly. The dominance of Western media in the culture was an indirect form of colonization, but New Wave Iranian filmmakers were more concerned with the censoring of films by, for and about Iranians. Still, New Wave films were motivated by politics just as those made in colonized nations, so it seems safe to classify their movement as being a branch of the Third Cinema.

This is an important distinction because it is within the concept of the Third Cinema that Kiarostami's films fully express their value to not only international cinema, but also humanity.

In 1978, Iran underwent an Islamic revolution spearheaded by Iranians against the Westernization practices of the Shah's regime. Ayatollah Khomeini installed himself as the new ruler of Iran and immediately banned any further importation of Western and foreign media (Naficy, 675).

This gave local filmmakers more opportunity to make their films, but the Ayatollah also instituted strict Islamic codes, which included how men and women and sex could be portrayed. Filmmakers were still limited by censorship, just of a different sort. The continuation of censorship in Iran means that Kiarostami must deal with limits imposed on his artistic freedom just as Mehrjui. We have seen that Kiarostami continues the Iranian realism film traditions begun by Mehrjui's *The Cow*, and even to new poetic heights, but does he also continue the traditions of the Third Cinema?

Kiarostami would probably say "no." Mehrjui and his New Wave contemporaries were speaking out against the government censorship. Kiarostami, on the other hand, not only is not speaking out against censorship, he is almost embracing it:

"When I think about [censorship], I realize that we've always had to face the problem of censorship not just as filmmakers, but even as citizens of Iran. We've always had censorship. It starts in our families when we can't speak our minds because our parents decide what's right and wrong for us. All that continues until it finds its place in our professions. So in my mind, censorship is not something that bothers me terribly because we find our ways to counter it. This is a reality ... With respect to films or art in general, it's true that art is born of difficult or unfavorable circumstances for the artist." (Friendly Persuasions, 2000)

Kiarostami is first and fore-

most concerned about universal humanness, not political and social concerns, so it would seem that Kiarostami's goals do not fit those of Third Cinema's. But the Latin American definition of the Third Cinema suggests that there may still be room for him.

In his essay, *The Third Cinema Question: Notes and Reflections*, Paul Willemen writes the Latin American definition of Third Cinema is "the insistence on its flexibility, ... a cinema forever in need of adaptation to the shifting dynamics at work in social struggles. ... [The] only stable thing about Third Cinema is its attempt to speak a socially pertinent discourse which both the mainstream and the authorial cinemas exclude from their regimes of signification." (Willemen, p.10).

As we have seen, Kiarostami is not speaking in an intentional "socially pertinent discourse" with his films, but that is only if we see it through the traditional definition of a socially pertinent discourse.

The Third Cinema movement was started by political and social concerns born inside of borders, that is, they were mostly of national concerns. But in an age of increasing globalization and homogenization of communication,

economics, and politics, borders are being rendered toward a state of irrelevance. As such, the lines between cultures are becoming increasingly blurred and people from different cultural backgrounds are finding themselves in increasing contact with each other. As this happens, they find that they are more similar to each other than they may have previously thought and that the only thing separating them from each other is their past cultural experience. The more these cultures melt into one another, the more people will need to be equipped for socializing and communicating with people from different cultural backgrounds.

The means by which they do that is the backbone of Kiarostami's films. He recognizes being human is universal. That his films touch so many people outside of Iranian culture is proof that the universal commonality of being human is enough to bond people across cultures.

So in a sense Kiarostami is not only socially pertinent, but also more so than any of his contemporaries. He does not, at first glance, appear to be continuing the Third Cinema tradition begun by those filmmakers of the

New Wave, but that is because he is adapting the definition of the Third Cinema, which the Latin American definition allows, to fit modern times. Ultimately, Kiarostami is forcing the Third Cinema to evolve. His ability to touch the fundamental human qualities in each of us with his poetic filmmaking style has positioned him as the ideal filmmaker for doing so. Kiarostami puts it this way:

"All the different nations in the world, despite their differences of appearance and religion and language and way of life, still have on common thing, and that is what's inside all of us. If we X-rayed the insides of different human beings, we wouldn't be able to tell from those X-rays what the person's language or background or race is. Our blood circulates exactly the same way, our nervous system and our eyes work the same way, we feel pain the same way. The teeth we have in our mouths—no matter what our nationality or background is—ache exactly the same way. If we want to divide cinema and the subjects of cinema, the way to do it is to talk about pain and about happiness. These are common among all countries." (Sterritt, Film Comment).

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