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A Research Compendium

Taste of Cherry (1997)

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In the film Taste of Cherry (by ʿAbbās Kīyārustamī, 1997), Mr. Badīʿī (played by Homayoun Ershadi), a middle-aged Iranian man, decides to take an overdose of his sleeping pills at night and then fall asleep in a grave he has dug for himself at the foot of a tree in Tehran's suburban foothills. But there is one remaining detail to be sorted out. Badīʿī is looking for someone to sprinkle twenty shovelfuls of dirt on his body after his death in exchange for reasonable financial compensation. In order to find his suicide assistant, Badīʿī picks up three passengers in his car on his drive to his planned final resting place. Two of these passengers, a young Kurdish soldier (Safar ʿAlī Murādī) and a young Afghan seminary student (Mīr Husayn Nūrī), he starts a series of conversations with about life, death, money, morality, belief, and sin. The soldier and student picked up by Badīʿī both reject his request; however, his last pick-up, Mr. Bāqirī (ʿAbdalrahmān Bāqirī) a Turkish taxidermist, unenthusiastically agrees to assist him because he needs money for his child's medical bills. Badīʿī asks him to come to the designated hillside at dawn, call him twice, toss a couple of stones into the grave to make sure he is not asleep, and if he does not respond, throw the twenty shovels of dirt over his body and collect the money left for him in his parked car. During his conversation with Badīʿī, Mr. Bāqirī recites a similar personal anecdote in which he was deterred from committing suicide by enjoying the taste of the mulberries from the very tree which he had decided to hang himself. Later and in line with this theme, Bāqirī intro-

duces the idea of the taste of cherries as life's most vital reason for living. Despite this, Badī'ī inevitably takes all his pills and lies back in his grave, looking at the full moon which then fades into a blackout. The final camcorder coda sequence is a shocking twist in the plot that breaks up the illusion of cinema at the expense of the celebration of life and renewal.

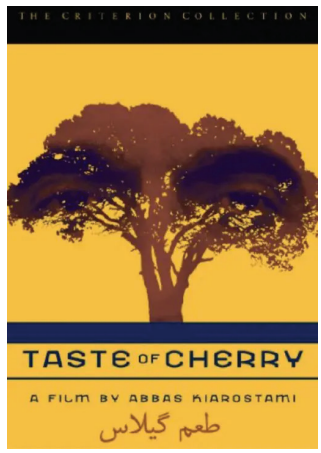

Figure 1: Poster for the film Ta'm-i gīlās (Taste of Cherry, 1997)

The cliché journey of a depressive, suicidal middle-aged protagonist on dusty dry roads seems too dull to make for an entertaining film; however, Kīyārustamī's simple-yet-impossible minimalistic plot, characterization, setting, and the universal theme of suicide amuse the audience, most especially fans of Kīyārustamī's thinking about life and its many meanings.

The international recognition of Iranian alternative cinema had already begun in the 1960s with films such as Furūgh Farrukhzād's Khānah sīyāh ast (The House is Black, 1962), Ibrāhīm Gulistān's Khisht va āyinah (Brick and Mirror 1964), Dāryūsh Mihrjū'ī's Gāv (The Cow, 1969), Masʿūd Kīmīyā'ī's Qaysar (Caesar, 1969), Nāsir Taqvā'ī's Ārāmish dar huzūr-i dīgarān (Tranquility in the Presence of Others, 1969), and Bahrām Bayzā'ī's Ragbār (Downpour, 1972). However, Kīyārustamī was the first Iranian cineaste who won the Palme d'Or at the Cannes Film Festival

(shared with Shohei Imamura's The Eel), which made Iranian cinema globally distinguished in 1997. In the introduction to his book Iranian Cinema: A Political History (2006), Hamid Reza Sadr explains how in the 1990s, Iranian filmmakers made one of 'the most ambitious" groups of films in the world, enabling Iran to break out of "a cultural cocoon" through its cinema.[1] Taste of Cherry placed Kīyārustamī as a significant figure in what is now known as world cinema. The universal themes of Kīyārustamī's film and the cosmopolitan-looking nomad represented by Badī'ī spoke beyond geographic borders, granting Taste of Cherry success at both transnational and international levels. Meanwhile, the depiction of usually underrepresented people such as Kurdish and Afghani refugees and soldiers, in addition to the use of the song "Khudā būvad yārat" ("May God Be Your Protector") by the late Afghan singer Ahmad Zahir at the thirty-eight-minute mark in the background of the film on a radio, connects Taste of Cherry to global issues such as the crisis of refugees and other displaced communities.

[1]Hamid Reza Sadr, Iranian Cinema: A Political History (I.B. Tauris, 2006), 2.

Perhaps Kīyārustamī's success should not be entirely surprising. His background in graphic design helped him find employment at Kānūn (Center for the Intellectual Development of Children and Adolescents) in the 1960s and 1970s. At Kānūn, Kīyārustamī was given the opportunity and freedom to experiment with the medium by making educational films for children. At the same time, he worked as a designer of book covers as well as film posters for the Nigārah advertising firm. Ultimately, Kīyārustamī's exceptional talent in minimalism, coupled with his skillful cinematography, helped him cultivate his humanistic filmmaking vision to the point of becoming one of the masters of meditative cinema.

Much has been said about Kīyārustamī's cinema, however, there is little to no discussion about the significance of humor and taste in Kīyārustamī's Taste of Cherry. Thus, the first section of this article offers an overview of the visual atmosphere in Taste of Cherry, Kīyārustamī's use of humor, as well as a discussion of the

meta-ending. The second section then offers a discussion on taste and cherries and how these relate to Kīyārustamī's film overall.

Atmosphere, Humor, and The Meta Ending

By the 1990s, Abbas Kīyārustamī had already built a strong career in filmmaking with years of experience in the art, craft, and industry of the visual arts, including graphics, photography, and filmmaking. Kīyārustamī's skill in quasi-documentary, complemented by his graphic compositions and expertise in the use of light and color, aids in his creation of realistic cinema with minimal use of fiction. For instance, the natural lighting and landscapes, with a palette of often dull colors in most parts of Taste of Cherry, create a gloomy and introspective atmosphere that perfectly captures the film's theme until the concluding, self-reflexive camcorder sequence. The minimalist composition and dry landscape in which Badī'ī, the contemporary nomad, wanders evoke an external expression of the character's impression of life's emptiness. Taste of Cherry can be thus understood as a visual equivalent of T. S. Eliot's long and difficult poem The Waste Land (1922), which coincidentally opens with a section titled "The Burial of the Dead."[2]

[2]Eliot's poem is available on the Poetry Foundation's website: www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/47311/the-wasteland

Figure 2: The empty impressionist landscape in Ta'm-i gīlās (Taste of Cherry, 1997). ʿAbbās Kīyārustamī (00:22:36)[mfn]All images employed in this text are screenshots (under fair use) taken from different moments throughout the film on YouTube. All the rights of these visual elements belong exclusively to the film's owner/creator/producer. ʿAbbās Kīyārustamī, "Taste of Cherry, 1997," YouTube, May 27, 2023, retrieved 04/09/2024, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6NvDTuHQXrk[/mfn]

By relating the "impressionist" sadness and loneliness of Kīyārustamī's characters to their "modern subjectivity," Hamid Naficy adds that in such circumstances, companionship and pleasure of the senses work as "the antidote." Naficy writes:

> The idea that the phenomenological world, synesthesia, and aesthetic pleasure are worth living for and making films about is counterhegemonic to the dominant ethos of the Islamic Republic, which emphasizes postponing corporeal pleasure in the here and now over metaphysical pleasures and the reward in the hereafter.[3]

Indeed, modern Persian poets such as Suhrāb Sipihrī and Nīmā Yūshīj have had a strong impact on Iranian art-house filmmakers. The pleasure of the senses that inspires Persian poetic sensibilities has influenced many Iranian filmmakers' uses of symbolism and non-human and natural elements such as fruit and animals as the reference point in the titles of their films. From Hazhīr Dāryūsh's short Jild-i Mār (Serpent's Skin, 1964), Masʿūd Kīmīyā'ī's Gavazn'hā (The Deer, 1974) and Dandān-i mār (Snake Fang, 1990), Saʿīd Ibrāhīmīfard's Nār va nay (Pomegranate and Cane, 1989), Samīrā Makhmalbāf's Sīb (The Apple, 1989), Kīyārustamī's Zīr-i Dirakhtān-i Zaytūn (Through the Olive Trees, 1994) and Taste of Cherry, and Dāryūsh Mihrjū'ī's Dirakht-i gulābī (The Pear Tree, 1998), to Bahman Qubādī's Zamānī barā-yi mastī-i asb'hā (A Time for Drunken Horses, 2000); Lākpusht'hā ham parvāz mīkunand (Turtles Can Fly, 2004); Masʿūd Bakhshī's Tihrān Anār Nadarad (Tehran Has No More Pomegranates!, 2006); Sāmān Sālūr's Chand kīlu khurmā barāyi marāsim-i tadfīn (A Few Kilos of Dates For A Funeral, 2006) and Sāmān Muqaddam's Nahang-i 'anbar (Sperm Whale, 2015), these filmmakers have produced fruitful films.

Kīyārustamī's love of non-human and natural elements such as wind, sky, dogs, cows, trees, cherries, olives, and bread can be seen in the titles of his other films as well, including Nān va kūchah (The Bread and Alley, 1970), Through the Olive Trees

[3] Hamid Naficy, A Social History of Iranian Cinema. Vol. 4, The Globalizing Era, 1984-2010 (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2012), 219.

(1994), and Bād mā rā khvāhad burd (The Wind Will Carry Us, 1999)—which is also the title of a poem by the modern Iranian poet, Forough Farrokhzad (1934-1967). Kīyārustamī's use of the non-human as visual elements helps create evocative impressions in his films, photography, and installations. Examples of these include: an airplane that leaves a white trace on the sky (Taste of Cherry); a tin rolling down the street (Close-Up); a cow that passes in front of Kīyārustamī's camera (Through the Olive Trees, 1994); doors (Photography: Doors Without Keys, 2015); trees (Installation: Haft Chinār/Seven Sycamores, 2003) and crows (Film: Taste of Cherry, 1997; and photography: Snow White, 2010).

Being a poet himself, Kīyārustamī's filmmaking and unique vision can hardly be separated from his personality; his films are sincere, often peopled with lonely characters that are primarily clever and, more importantly, playful, interwoven with undertones of boredom in the face of contemporary life. In the fourth volume of his magnum opus on Iranian cinema, A Social History of Iranian Cinema, The Globalizing Era (1984-2010), Hamid Naficy explains that "His [Kīyārustamī's] films are so intricately and intimately tied to his own existence and subjectivity that it is difficult to conceive of his life without his films and of his films without him."[4]

Kīyārustamī made Taste of Cherry in 1997 when he was fifty-seven years old, that is, middle-aged—a stage of life similar to that of the central character Badī'ī. Naficy further argues that

Although not strictly speaking autobiographical, his movies are tightly interwoven with his own life story. His first fiction film, The Report (1977), about a disintegrating nuclear family (consisting of parents and two children), echoed the crumbling of his own family, while his later films featuring lone, and in some cases, as in Taste of Cherry (Ta'm-e Gilas, 1997), very lonely, males echoed his post-revolutionary marital and emotional status.[5]

[4]Naficy, A Social History of Iranian Cinema, 183.

[5]Naficy, A Social History of Iranian Cinema, 183.

However, the semi-autobiographical flavor of some of Kīyārustamī's films usually transcends such particular and personal overtones toward a more collective level in his works, especially Taste of Cherry. In Kīyārustamī's type of cosmopolitan film, his protagonist Badī'ī experiences a kind of existential mid-life crisis that challenges his outlook and course of action in life. In response, Kīyārustamī's clever humor helps him and us to settle more calmly into these situations of crisis and makes the experience more tolerable by thinking and laughing through them. In Taste of Cherry, Kīyārustamī's playful humor goes so far as to make a joke about his movie and the audience's perception of it through radical cinematic self-reflexivity at the film's end.

In the final sequence, after taking his sleeping pills, Badī'ī lies back in his grave and looks up at the night sky and moon while waiting to die. The sound of pouring rain follows a blackout. We then see the actor Homayoun Ershadi rise in the middle of shooting the film's ending, breaking the fourth wall. In the ending, not only are the trees blossoming, but the symbolic seed that Kīyārustamī planted in his film also begins sprouting in the form of a shaky, grainy, amateur-like video of the making of the film behind the scenes (see figures 3 & 4). Interestingly enough, the name "Badī'ī" has strong denotations of newness and innovation in Farsi and Arabic languages; Badī'ī is symbolically a seed (of newness) that Kīyārustamī implants in the grave (and the film) that sprouts a kind of do-it-yourself digital cinema for future generations of film viewers and makers.

Figure 3 (left): The meta-ending that reveals the behind-the-scene production of the film. Ta'm-i gīlās (Taste of Cherry, 1997), ʿAbbās Kīyārustamī (01:36:33)
Figure 4 (right): Irshādī exchanging a cigarette with Kīyārustamī in the same meta-ending. Ta'm-i gīlās (Taste of Cherry, 1997), ʿAbbās Kīyārustamī (01:36:07)

In this (digital) film-within-the-film, we see Kīyārustamī and his crew, a group of soldiers with flowers in hand, the shining sun, and the blossoming trees, flavored by Louis Armstrong's 1929 tearful jazz trumpet adaptation of "St. James Infirmary Blues." Unexpectedly, the ending outdoes humor to the point of joking with the film itself and the audience. The ending raised mixed feelings and reactions from audiences and film critics. Some, like Dan Schneider and Roger Ebert, detested the ending, the former believing that it ruined the film, while other critics, like Jonathan Rosenbaum, consider the film a "masterpiece."[6]

One of the greatest anti-suicidal films of all time, Taste of Cherry seeks to inspire the depressed to stick to life-friendly Epicureanism and seize the moment. The ending conceptually distances Kīyārustamī's protagonist and audience from the dark atmosphere of cinema and death (displayed by Badī'ī's sleep in his grave) and frees his and our own death drives in the face of joyful, simple activities such as recording behind the scenes of a film, sharing a cigarette, or, like the soldiers, simply enjoying the spring's scenery and flowers. Once Kīyārustamī faked a technological glitch in his sound recording at the end of Close-Up (1990); In Taste of Cherry, he makes a fake conceptual glitch at the end of his film (and perhaps in cinema at large) that opens the window to the blossoms of digital filmmaking. Is this a kind of Dogme 95 film that foresees the future of cinema?[7]

[6]Jonathan Rosenbaum, "Fill in the Blanks," The Chicago Reader, May 28, 1998. accessed February 2, 2024. https://chicagoreader.com/film/fill-in-the-blanks/

[7]The Dogme 95 Manifesto was originally written by Danish filmmakers Lars von Trier and Thomas Vinterberg. It was not published in a traditional book format but circulated as a set of guidelines and principles for filmmaking. The manifesto was presented publicly on March 13, 1995, at a screening of Thomas Vinterberg's film The Celebration (Festen) in Paris, France. It marked the official launch of the Dogme 95 movement. The manifesto aimed to challenge the conventions of traditional filmmaking and promote a more raw and authentic approach to cinema.

In his interpretation of the "distancing effect" created at the end of the film, Rosenbaum makes connections between elements of the film with its antidote ending:

The most important thing about the joyful finale is that it's the precise opposite of a 'distancing effect.' It does invite us into the laboratory from which the film sprang and places us on an equal footing with the filmmaker, yet it does this in a spirit of collective euphoria, suddenly liberating us from the oppressive solitude and darkness of Badii alone in his grave. Shifting to the soldiers reminds us of the happiest part of Badii's life, and a tree in full bloom reminds us of the Turkish taxidermist's epiphany—though the soldiers also signify the wars that made both the Kurdish soldier and the Afghan seminarian refugees.[8]

Figure 5 (left): Badī'ī trying to convince the soldier to bury him who eventually runs away. Ta'm-i gīlās (Taste of Cherry, 1997), 'Abbās Kīyārustamī (00:26:09)
Figure 6 (right): The Soldier. Ta'm-i gīlās (Taste of Cherry, 1997), 'Abbās Kīyārustamī (00:27:17)

Alongside this "spirit of collective euphoria," Kīyārustamī's ending also achieves a compelling "haunting mysticism"[9] that blurs the boundaries between cinema and life, provoking contemplation among viewers regarding Badī'ī's decision. Kīyārustamī adeptly manipulates this decision to address the nature of existence and its significance. Alternatively, some believe that Kīyārustamī finished his film with the meta ending to avoid censorship because suicide has been a major taboo in Iran, and, therefore, its depiction is illegal in Iranian cinema.[10]

For all the talk of self-reflexivity around which discussions of

[8]Rosenbaum, "Fill in the Blanks," https://jonathanrosenbaum.net/2024/06/fill-in-the-blanks/

[9]Matthew Lucas, "From the Repertory," Front the Front Row, November 09, 2020, accessed 05/14/2023 http://www.fromthefrontrow.net/2020/11/from-repertory-november-2020.html

[10]Naficy, A Social History of Iranian Cinema, 215.

the film's ending tend to center, Taste of Cherry's humor is just as memorable. Everything from Badī'ī's conversation with the plastic collector from Lorestan wearing a T-shirt with UCLA's insignia to the implied homoerotic undertones in some of his encounters is sensitively humoristic (see figure 7):

Badī'ī: Nice shirt! Where did you get it? Where are you from?

The plastic collector: Near Lorestan. Are you from Lorestan too?

Badī'ī: You could say that! (00:10:28)[11]

Figure 7: Badī'ī commenting on the plastic collector's T-shirt. Ta'm-i gīlās (Taste of Cherry, 1997), ʿAbbās Kīyārustamī (00:27:17)

Although the humor is latent for the non-Iranian audience, the UCLA logo on his T-shirt speaks for itself. For an Iranian audience, however, Badī'ī's exchange with the plastic collector refers to Iranian ethnic and geographical jokes in which stereotypical simplicity and lack of sophistication are attributed to people from the Lorestan region in Iran.

Later on, when Badī'ī picks up the Afghan seminarian student, it seems that Badī'ī preaches to the man about the benefits of

[11]This and all further quotations from the film have been translated by the author.

suicide instead of the seminarian preaching to him to stop his deed! Badī‘ī remarks, “You see, the word ‘suicide’ isn’t only made for dictionaries” (48:49). When Badī‘ī drops the seminarian off at his desired location, the man invites Badī‘ī to share the omelet that his friend has made. The seminarian states: “My friend has cooked an omelet, and it smells good. Let’s eat. You will find a solution” (54:48). Badī‘ī humorously turns his offer down, saying: “Thank you. I know he’s made one, but eggs are bad for me!” Similarly, at another point, when Badī‘ī decides to leave the security cabin, he is so concerned about the shaky wooden ladder at the security guard’s door that he suggests the guard “mend it” as “It’s dangerous!” Badī‘ī tells the man that he “can mend it by wrapping fuse wire around it!” (44:28).

Figure 8: The Afghan seminarian student that Badī‘ī picks up to try and convince him to help with his suicide. Ta‘m-i gīlās (Taste of Cherry, 1997), ʿAbbās Kīyārustamī (00:49:11)

After approaching the Turkish taxidermist, Mr. Bāqirī, to help him with his suicide, Mr. Bāqirī makes his promise to help Badī‘ī and leaves for work. Next, we see Badī‘ī display uneasiness, doubt, and desperation, and he then decides to go back to the museum to make sure that Mr. Bāqirī will keep his promise. When Mr. Bāqirī comes out with his white uniform on, Badī‘ī’s immediate reaction is humor, followed by a brief question-and-answer session on the killing of birds by the taxider-

mist. Their final exchange is darkly funny. Badī‘ī instructs Mr. Bāqirī: “When you come in the morning, bring two small stones and throw them at me. I might just be asleep and still alive. Shake my shoulders too, perhaps I’m still alive!” (1:23:40).

The obscurity of Badī‘ī’s motivations for his decision to commit suicide creates an excellent sense of suspense in the film, which might also be seen as a hole in the plot. The only relatively straightforward motivation is found when the Afghan seminary student warns Badī‘ī against suicide as a sin. Badī‘ī’s response does not offer any details about his decision except when he admits: “When you’re unhappy, you hurt other people, and hurting other people is a sin” (51:25). However, the obscurity of Badī‘ī’s motivation for suicide, deployed with subtle skill by Kīyārustamī, plays well on audiences’ and critics’ perceptions of the film.

Some believe that Badī‘ī’s initial motivation is his desire for and struggle with homosexual companionship.[12] These homoerotic speculations are based on a couple of scenes in the film, including Badī‘ī’s way of requesting random male strangers to help him in exchange for money. For example, when Badī‘ī first approaches a man who works at a tombstone store, his request seems to have such solidly taboo connotations that the worker threatens to beat him.

Badī‘ī: If you have money problems, I can help you.

Worker: No.

Badī‘ī: You don’t have money problems?

Worker: No.

Badī‘ī: I can help you!

Worker: Clear off, or I’ll smash your face in … get lost (00:07:20).

[12]Roger Ebert, “Taste of Cherry,” Roger Ebert.com, February 27, 1998. accessed 08/09/2023. https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/taste-of-cherry-1998

Figure 9: The worker that threatens Badī‘ī to leave as he feels uncomfortable about Badī‘ī’s request. Ta‘m-i gīlās (Taste of Cherry, 1997), ʿAbbās Kīyārustamī (00:07:32)

Next, Badī‘ī goes to the security guard’s office at a construction site and starts a conversation about Afghanistan, the security officer’s friend, the seminarian student, and the war. Briefly, Badī‘ī later asks the security guard to join him for a ride. Badī‘ī states: “Today’s a holiday, so why are you here alone? You feel sad. So do I. Come for a drive. We can get a change of scenery and talk” (00:43:15). However, the guard politely turns him down as the security guard cannot leave his post.

Through these uses of humor, Kīyārustamī encourages us to think more about Badī‘ī’s longing for connection, his decision to die, and, more specifically, the act of suicide itself. This subtle humor extends to the most serious part of the film in which the Turkish taxidermist agrees to help Badī‘ī in his suicide plans, juxtaposed against the fact that the taxidermist’s job is to fill the skin of dead animals with a particular material to make them look as if they are alive! Ironically enough, Kīyārustamī’s taxidermist fills Badī‘ī’s emptiness with his sweet stories of how the taste of mulberries rescued him from his intended suicide to the point that Badī‘ī seemingly becomes doubtful about his decision.

Thus, the most crucial and humoristic question of Taste of Cherry becomes: what does it matter to be buried after death once one wholeheartedly decides to end their life? Who cares what is going to happen to one's dead body if one is so desperate that one decides to finish their life?

The Significance of Taste and Cherry: Aesthetics, the Sacred, and the Erotic

Gūyand kasān bihisht bā hūr khush ast,

Man mī-gūyam ki āb angūr khush ast,

Īn naqd bigīr va dast az ān nisyah bidār,

Ki āvāz-i duhul shinīdan az dūr khush ast.

They say heaven is a nice place with its angels

I say that grape juice is nice

Take the one at hand and stop borrowing

Because the drum sounds nice

(only) from afar.

—Omar Khayyám (1048 – 1131)[13]

Persian classical poetry, especially the poems of Omar Khayyám and Hafiz, is full of references to grapes and to grape juice, both suggesting wine. The religious get drunk on the wine of 'irfān (the knowledge of God), while for the bohemian, mystical wine reinforces the wisdom to seize the day (i.e., carpe diem). In comparison, one of the very few references to cherries is found in the influential modern Iranian poet Forough Farokhzad's poem "Tavalludi Digar" ("Rebirth"). Farokhzad's poem is charged by

[13]This is a commonly known quatrain by the famous poet Omar Khayyám and translated by the author.

the symbolism and association of the cherry's feminine innocence and bloom:

Gūshvārī bi du gūsham mīyāvīzam,

az du gīlās-i sūrkh-i hamzād.

I wear earrings in my ears,

From two identical red cherries.[14]

A Sense of Taste, Tasting the Sacred

While the motif of cherries may be rare in Persian poetry, exploring the symbolism associated with taste and cherries helpfully expands the horizon for understanding different perceptions of Kīyārustamī's film. In addition, alongside taste as a sense of the gustatory system, taste is also a powerful metaphor for aesthetics. That is, to have a "sense of taste," as it were, means to be able to perceive aesthetic qualities in things. In his long conversations with his various temporary companions, Badī'ī displays that aesthetic taste is important to him, and he sincerely expresses his aesthetic judgments in his comments to others, especially on their outfits (which, one might argue, adds to the film's homoeroticism).

One such comment appears in Badī'ī's encounter with the Luristānī plastic collector. Badī'ī remarks: "Nice shirt. Where did you get it?" and "Nice color. It suits you" (9:49). Similarly, when Badī'ī desperately goes back to see Mr. Bāqirī, the first thing he does is compliment him on his white uniform, saying: "That white coat suits you" (01:23:15). Badī'ī's sense of taste is further evidenced while on his way to leave the museum when a young woman asks him to take a photo of her and her partner (as the only female character in the film, I discuss her significance further below). Badī'ī agrees to do so, even though it might be the last photo he ever takes. Even while faced with

[14]Furūgh Farrukhzād, "Tavalludī Dīgar," ["Rebirth"], in Furūgh Farrukhzād, ed. Muhammad Huqūqī (Tehran: Nigāh Publication, 1997), 252.

his oncoming demise, Badī'ī demonstrates his care for aesthetic detail, rolling down his car window so that he can take a clear picture of the couple. Meanwhile, Kīyārustamī's subtle dramatic force depicted via Badī'ī's obsession with finding someone who will meticulously cover him with a few shovelfuls of dirt does not seem to have religious significance but is rather a manifestation of his compulsive obsession with orderliness and perfectionist aesthetic tendencies. Similarly, Badī'ī's attention to detail extends to his choice of refined attire, whose neatness and simplicity exude an air of cosmopolitan urban elegance reminiscent of solitary flâneur.

Regarding taste as a gustatory system, some believe that the activities and senses connected to eating have been traditionally considered "lower senses" and, therefore, not worthy of analytical consideration.[15] On the other hand, the metaphysics of taste and eating are embedded in popular religious ceremonies that consider food as a ritual medium of remembrance and reenactment. The physical and perceptual sense of taste itself, while usually thought of as one specific sense, is a series and combination of several different sensations perceived by the tongue but also evoked by smell, texture, and the temperature of the edible. Like the sense of smell and touch, our sense of taste is also closely related to our emotions because it is connected to the autonomic nervous system and our access to memories. For example, Marcel Proust's magnum opus, In Search of Lost Time (À la recherche du temps perdu, 1913-1927), encapsulates the evocative portrayal of smell and taste. Within the novel, a mere spoonful of madeleine and linden-flower tea acts as a transformative gateway, unleashing a flood of long-forgotten memories. For Proust, the intertwined senses of smell and taste possess a delicate yet enduring nature, capable of preserving fragments of the past far more effectively than tangible remnants.

Indeed, taste engages almost all of our other senses and asks for participants' synesthetic sensory responses, especially in religious rituals. For instance, the ancient associations of tasting

[15]Carolyn Korsmeyer, Making Sense of Taste: Food and Philosophy (Cornell University Press, 2002), 30.

the "forbidden fruit," outside of its Biblical context of Original Sin and the Fall of Man, invariably associates itself with life and "fecundity." Fruit and food have always encouraged a particular embodiment of joy, health, and pleasure. On the other hand, in Islamic Iranian cuisine tradition and culture, the folk rituals of tasting have shifted their address to rather spiritual and religious allusions.

For instance, the eating customs associated with Ramadan, Muharram, and Thanksgiving are good examples of appropriate ritualistic occasions in which participants grow a deeper and more immediate interaction with the holy through the senses of touch, smell, and taste. The making of certain foods and offerings, such as shulizard (saffron rice pudding dessert with rose water) and inscribing the name of the holy through the use of pistachio, almond, and cinnamon powder on the pudding's surface is a kind of appreciation and immediate remembrance of the Imams and their households. In addition, Nazri (gift food) is the food ritual of the Holy Day of ʻĀshūrā in the month of Muharram in which Imam Hussain's mourners make, eat, and share Nazri and believe it will bless their life. The ritual of food and fasting is an immediate medium to relate to the holy and ask for bliss, forgiveness, and good luck. In this way, Nazri is also an act of performing and showing love for the Ahl al-Bayt (literally meaning the Imams' family members). Although the act is to bless the foods and offerings with the name of the Innocent Imams, there are certainly undertones of sacred rituals in the very act of devouring these holy names. This is, of course, similar to the Christian ritual of Holy Communion: to become one with what one eats; to become what one eats; to participate in a phenomenon that cannot be rendered and mediated so intimately by any sense other than by taste.

Relatedly, within the vast realm of film history, numerous instances can be found where food and taste serve as powerful vehicles for conveying a variety of such underlying themes. Notably, the works of Welsh filmmaker Peter Greenaway and

Swedish filmmaker Lasse Hallström provide compelling examples of this symbolic use of eating. In Greenaway's film The Cook, the Thief, His Wife and Her Lover (France/United Kingdom, 1989) and Hallström's Chocolat (2000), the act of consuming food becomes a rich tapestry of symbolism, representing elements such as connection, temptation, sexuality, love, revenge, and religion.

The Sensual and Erotic Associations of Cherries

In a cuisine culture that is tightly connected to the ritualistic attributes of the edible, however, Badī'ī's rejection of food (e.g., the omelet) and drinks (e.g., tea) is not simply the expression of distaste for worldly pleasures. Kīyārustamī's contemporary take on taste brings us back to the various meanings evoked by cherries to the point of being the sole motivation for living. For example, Mr. Bāqirī asks Badī'ī: "Do you want to give up the taste of cherries?" (01:12:53)

Figures 10-11: Mr. Bāqirī the taxidermist vividly recounts the pivotal moment when he altered the course of his life just because he incidentally ate a few "deliciously sweet mulberries" from the very tree that he decided to hang himself from; a tale that seems to captivate the undivided attention of Badī'ī. Ta'm-i gīlās (Taste of Cherry, 1997), ʿAbbās Kīyārustamī (01:04:26)

Indeed, as a minimalist modern allegory, the title of Kīyārustamī's film is charged with two meanings of taste: the aesthetic (i.e., to have a "sense of [aesthetic] taste") and erotic overtones (i.e., the word "cherry" and its allusions to the sexual). Cherries are ripe with symbolism and have different significations depending on what historical context we look at them. That said, the cherry most often embodies and perpetuates positive associations of

feminine love. Furthermore, cherries have been used as symbolic elements in poetry, novels, and various forms of literature, serving as vehicles for conveying diverse themes and evoking various emotions.

The significance ascribed to cherries in literature and art encompasses a broad spectrum, ranging from expressions of disdain and sacredness to themes of sexuality and spirituality. Cherries stand out as a unique fruit with a shape that can be associated with both masculinity and, more commonly, the "intact" feminine organs (i.e., the hymen). In Gordon Williams' A Dictionary of Sexual Language and Imagery in Shakespearean and Stuart Literature, the cultural influences and connections of cherries as a euphemism for erotic body parts and representations of women's sensual organs are explored. These associations can be traced back to the sixteen- and seventeenth centuries, thanks to the cherry's aphrodisiac-like qualities and its erotic shape. Williams explores the historical significance of cherries, uncovering their cultural impact during the English Renaissance. He explores how Europeans ingeniously employed this delectable fruit to symbolize the indulgence in carnal desires. Accordingly, he highlights the poetic works of Josuah Sylvester and Robert Herrick, who skillfully likened cherries to tantalizing "niplets" and enticing "teates" in various literary compositions.[16] However, in A Midsummer Night's Dream, William Shakespeare takes a different approach and associates cherries with intimacy and unity. In the play, cherries symbolize the intimate bond between Helena and Hermia, likening their connection to a "double cherry"—two cherries sharing the same "stem."[17]

Conversely, the spiritual meanings of cherries in Christian texts center primarily on the miraculous and the divine. The 16th-century painting known as Madonna and Child with Saint Joseph or Madonna of the Cherries with Saint Joseph by the Italian Renaissance painter Tiziano Vecelli or Vecellio, known in English as Titian, depicts the Virgin Mary holding the infant Jesus, with Saint Joseph standing beside them.[18] The cherries

[16]Gordon Williams, A Dictionary of Sexual Language and Imagery in Shakespearean and Stuart Literature, Vol 1 (London: Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Athlone Press, 1994), 233.

[17]William Shakespeare, A Midsummer Night's Dream, eds. Barbara Mowat and Paul Werstine (Washington, DC: Folger Shakespeare Library, 1993), 97.

[18]For the painting, see the following link: https://www.1000museums.com/shop/art/titian-madonna-of-the-cherries-with-joseph-st-zacharias-and-john-the-baptist-panel/

in the painting are often interpreted as a symbol of the Christ child's innocence and sweetness and of Paradise

Cherries can also embody themes of youth, innocence, and the pursuit of simple pleasures in life. For example, "cherry blossoms" floating on the water are fleetingly depicted in Sylvia Plath's The Bell Jar. In Anton Chekhov's play The Cherry Orchard, the very orchard itself assumes symbolic significance, embodying the transient nature of existence due to the ephemerality of cherries' blossoming period.

During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the ripe cherry became a synonym for juvenile femininity. From the nineteenth century on, the erotic symbolism of cherries became even more direct. In modern times, pop-culture and women's cosmetics take advantage of such erotic implications of cherry symbolism emphasizing youth and innocence while also alluding to sexual allure. In this way, the cherry's emblematic expressions have been replicated to the point of a rampant fantasy of erotic femininity. And although cherries are sexually spun around male pleasure, they are also paradoxically pure and innocent.

Amid these many and varied associations, it is plausible to interpret the symbolism of cherries in the film as referring to female eroticism. Meanwhile, the ironic contrast between the predominantly masculine characters and the typically dull and arid landscapes depicted in Kīyārustamī's work encourages a masculine overtone and, thus, also works as a foil to the feminine. As I have previously mentioned, the only presence of a female character in Taste of Cherry comes near the end after Badī'ī's conversation with Mr. Bāqirī. On his way, Badī'ī stops on the street where a young, joyful girl (herself a direct reference to the feminine and youthful associations of cherries) with a camera in hand comes to Badī'ī's car window. She asks him to take a photo of her and her partner, and Badī'ī agrees to do so. Before letting Badī'ī drive off, she smiles at the camera, which is to say both at Badī'ī and the audience (see figure 12).

Figure 12: The only representation of a woman who asks Badī‘ī to take a photo of her and her partner. Before letting Badī‘ī drive off, she smiles at the camera; perhaps adding a cherry on top of Badī‘ī’s frustrating condition. Ta‘m-i gīlās (Taste of Cherry, 1997), ʿAbbās Kīyārustamī (001:18:12)

Kīyārustamī’s exclusion of any otherwise overt human elements of femininity (except this young stranger) leaves it to the audience to elaborate upon the meaning of the film through the symbolism of cherry in the title and cherries as a key reference in the film through Mr. Bāqirī’s conversation with Badī‘ī. We can therefore interpret Badī‘ī’s search for female companionship and empathy as a yearning for emotional connection. Perhaps, the frustrated, middle-aged Iranian male (possibly virgin) bourgeois seeks solace in the celebration of feminine culture, which emphasizes interpersonal bonds and emotional support as a means of countering the oppressive nature of death.[19]

Considering that the reference to cherries enters the film through a car conversation between two male characters, it is equally important to note that Mr. Bāqirī, who recalls his own attempted suicide, plays a crucial role in challenging Badī‘ī’s decision. This conversation is consequential enough to cause Badī‘ī to revisit his request by going back to the taxidermy museum to meet Mr. Bāqirī with increasing desperation and trepidation. This particular dynamic between Badī‘ī and Bāqirī raises severe doubts for Badī‘ī regarding his original decision,

[19]Jacques Lacan, the renowned French psychoanalyst, proposed a unique perspective on the drive of life and its connection to death through erotic pleasure which he ambiguously termed jouissance. Departing from Sigmund Freud’s ideas of the Life Drive (Eros) and the Death Drive (Thanatos) in his work Beyond the Pleasure Principle (1920), Lacan introduced the notion that all other drives are subordinate to the death drive, which he referred to as “the drive.” This drive, according to Lacan, pulls us back to a time when we were united with our mothers (or in the case of Badī‘ī, Mother Earth) before our birth. Interestingly, Badī‘ī, during his conversation with the Afghani security guard at the construction site, holds the belief that “Earth gives us all good things” (39:39), while simultaneously preparing for his own death. By intertwining Lacan’s ideas with Badī‘ī’s contemplation of life and death, one can explore the complex relationship between pleasure, desire, and mortality. It prompts us to question whether the pursuit of jouissance ultimately leads us towards our own demise, as Lacan suggests. Additionally, Badi’i’s acknowledgment of the Earth’s generosity raises the possibility that even in the face of death, there is still beauty and goodness to be found in the world.

[20]In addition, the narrative raises intriguing considerations about the implications of masculinity and homoeroticism. Considering the male approach to friendship in Iranian culture,

suggesting that his return to the museum was not simply about seeking reassurance and reaffirmation.[20]

On a general note, Mr. Bāqirī's suggestion of cherries and their association with taste within the film can be interpreted as a tribute to the tangible aspects of existence, particularly the experience of sustenance in the form of sensational pleasures of the edible, especially fruits. The taste of cherries resonates with individuals' shared recollection of the immediate sensory experience associated with cherries' flavor. Notably, this immanent sensation remains rooted in the corporeal realm, devoid of any explicit allusions to transcendental elements. Instead, it serves as an embodiment of life itself and its inherent pleasures—gustatory, erotic, or otherwise. Overall, the presence of cherries symbolizes the materiality of existence, emphasizing the significance of sensory engagement and the enjoyment derived from earthly delights in the present as envisioned by Omar Khayyám in his famous quatrain.

it seems that the resonance of masculinity within this context takes the form of "brotherhood," surpassing a mere request or the incorporation of potential homoerotic undertones. It is important to acknowledge that the concept of brotherhood among many Iranian males, in its ideal form, is characterized by immediacy and sincerity in helping other brother humans—qualities that are commonly encouraged by mythical Persian chivalry (Javānmardi) in addition to Islamicate morals.