

Document Citation

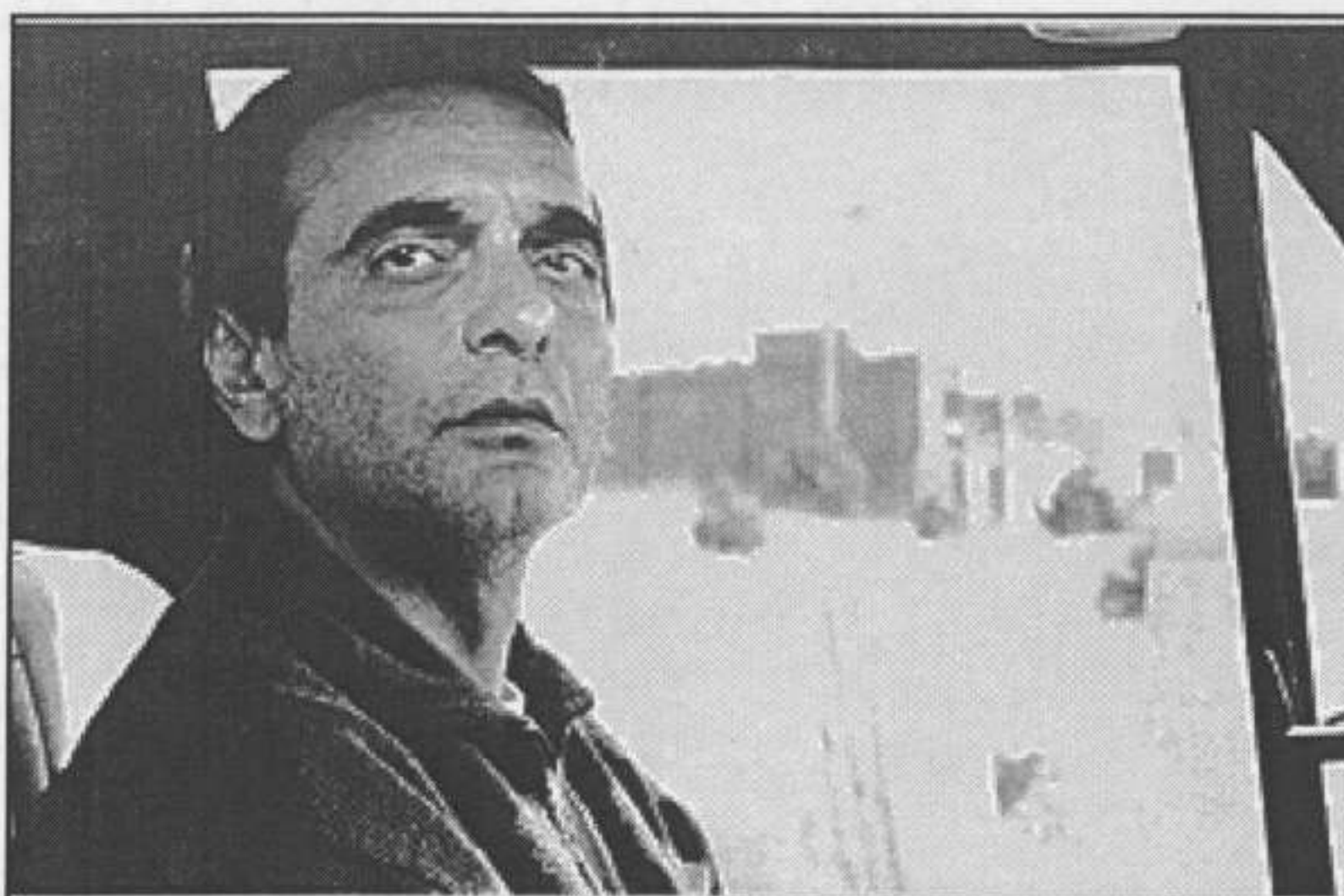
Title	Fill in the blanks
Author(s)	Jonathan Rosenbaum
Source	<i>Reader (Chicago, Ill.)</i>
Date	1997
Type	review
Language	English
Pagination	
No. of Pages	9
Subjects	
Film Subjects	Ta'm e guilass (Taste of cherry), Kiarostami, Abbas, 1997



On Film

Archive Brief Reviews Critic's Choice Showtimes

Fill In The Blanks



By Jonathan Rosenbaum

I want to give the audience a hint of a scene. No more than that. Give them too much and they won't contribute anything themselves. Give them just a suggestion and you get them working with you. That's what gives the theatre meaning: when it becomes a social act. --Orson Welles, 1938

<http://www.chireader.com/movies/archives/1998/0598/05298.html>

Taste of Cherry

Directed and written by
Abbas Kiarostami

With
**Homayoun Ershadi, Abdolhossein Bagheri,
Ali Moradi, Hossein Noori, and Ahmad
Ansari.**

Rating
* * * *
Masterpiece

Much of what's been called innovative in the art of movies over the past half century has at first been seen by part of the audience as boring or as representing a loss--usually because it has somehow redefined the shape and function of narrative. When Jean-Luc Godard introduced jump cuts in *Breathless* (1959) some viewers saw a loss in continuity; and when he got actors to spout literary quotations--which sometimes undercut the verisimilitude of his characters and plots--many thought he was opening the door to chaos. The next year Michelangelo Antonioni made the apparent heroine of *L'avventura* disappear about a third of the way through the picture and never explained what happened to her; the audience at Cannes, where the film premiered, responded with angry catcalls, insisting that the emperor had no clothes.

Because Robert Bresson refused to use actors and trained his "models" to perform without expression, he was labeled a specialist in boredom, a poseur who presided over clunky, pretentious ordeals. Jacques Tati, who filmed almost everything in long shot and concentrated on everyday events more than exceptional ones, had less trouble finding a worldwide audience, but many critics called him dull just the same. And Jacques Rivette--who dissolved many of the usual distinctions between "good" and "bad" acting, spectacle and narrative, real time and film time--quickly became a standing joke among mainstream commentators, who spoke about his long, unriveting movies.

In different ways all these artists were expressing what it meant to be alive in their times and worlds. But for them to offer us something new, it was necessary to take something away--something familiar about storytelling that got in the way of fresh perceptions. If the major additions to film art offered by Antonioni, Bresson, Godard, Rivette, and Tati--as well as by Chantal Akerman, Carl Dreyer, Hou Hsiao-hsien, Abbas Kiarostami, Andrei Tarkovsky, and Bela Tarr--are at times perceived as subtractions, this is because we tend to bring old habits with us when we go to movies. New habits are unlikely to be formed without some conflict, during which various kinds of seduction and frustration will vie for supremacy. Some viewers never get past this stage. Other viewers simply want to keep going to movies to forget their lives and their troubles--including more than a few prestigious reviewers and distinguished scholars--so they hang on to their old habits and ignore the issue.

There's no getting around the fact that the movies of Abbas Kiarostami divide audiences--in this country, in his native Iran, and everywhere else they're shown. Even in France, where his work has probably been celebrated longer than anywhere else, a couple of his earlier features reportedly flopped, though subsequent ones gained a passionate following--a pattern that resembles my own mixed reaction when I first encountered his work about five years ago at the Toronto film festival. I can no longer recall which film of his I saw first, but one that I now regard as profound and mysterious, *Where Is My Friend's House?*, initially struck me as bland and pedestrian, a comedy about schoolchildren that seemed to be aiming for the charm of minor Truffaut--cute at best. And it wasn't until a few days after I saw *Life and Nothing More* that the full richness of it began to settle in. Lately I've come to realize that what I regard as the most wondrous thing to happen in cinema in many years, Kiarostami's movies, strikes a few friends and colleagues as boring and empty, even predictable--enough of them to make me realize that recognition of Kiarostami's greatness can't be taken for granted, even though his *Taste of Cherry* shared the Palme d'Or at Cannes last year. And some colleagues who share my reverence for *Taste of*

Cherry part company with me over its startling final sequence--which they see as a blemish on an otherwise masterful work and I see as the element that makes it a masterpiece.

I've gradually come to think that these disagreements revolve mainly around the issue of why what seems to be essential information in Kiarostami's narratives is missing. Parts of the sound track in some of the latter portions of *Homework* and *Close-up*, for instance, have been suppressed (openly in the first case, and surreptitiously--by faking a technical glitch--in the second). Audience expectations about where the camera goes--and what it finds--are deliberately flouted in *Close-up*, *Where Is My Friend's House?*, and *Life and Nothing More*. And we're kept so far away from pivotal bits of action in the closing sequences of *Life and Nothing More* and *Through the Olive Trees* that we have to imagine part of what's taking place--the sound as well as the images. In each case, we're forced to fill in the blanks as best we can--an activity that isn't merely part of Kiarostami's technique but part of his subject. In the most literal and even trivial sense, we are what Kiarostami's movies are about.

In *Taste of Cherry* the narrative omissions are even more radical and more elemental. To explain why, I'm going to have to discuss everything of consequence that happens in this movie, including the ending.

The film's central character wants to commit suicide, and we don't know why. After a day of deliberation and preparation, we don't even know whether he succeeds. It could be argued--and *has* been argued by some of my colleagues--that Kiarostami omits this kind of information because he has nothing to say. I would counter that because Kiarostami is speaking with and through us--inviting us to share in a collective, common narrative--we have to share part of the burden of whether the film is saying anything. If we don't want to play in and with his comedies, such as *Where Is My Friend's House?* and *Through the Olive Trees*, we can't expect to have any fun. If we don't want to think about our own deaths and what they might say about our lives--or about the possible suicides of strangers and how we might respond to their appeals--*Taste of Cherry* can't have anything to say to us.

The hero in *Taste of Cherry* is a 50ish man named Mr. Badii, who's driving around the hilly outskirts of Tehran in search of someone who will bury him if he succeeds at committing suicide--he plans to swallow sleeping pills--and retrieve him from the hole in the ground if he fails. Over the course of one afternoon he picks up three passengers and asks each to perform this task in exchange for money--a young Kurdish soldier stationed nearby, an Afghan seminarian who's somewhat older, and a Turkish taxidermist who's even older. The soldier runs away in fright, the seminarian tries to persuade him not to kill himself, and the taxidermist also tries to change his mind but reluctantly agrees to the plan because he needs the money to care for his sick child. The terrain Badii's Range Rover traverses repeatedly is mainly parched, dusty, and spotted with ugly construction sites and noisy bulldozers, though the site he's selected for his burial is relatively quiet, pristine, and uninhabited. They arrange that the taxidermist will come to the designated hillside at dawn, call Badii's name twice, toss a couple of stones into the hole to make sure he isn't sleeping, and then, if there's no response, shovel dirt over his body and collect the money left for him in Badii's parked car.

Later that night Badii emerges from his apartment, drives in the dark to the appointed spot, and lies down

<http://www.chireader.com/movies/archives/1998/0598/05298.html>

in the hole. We hear the sounds of thunder and rain and the cries of stray dogs, then the screen goes completely black. In an epilogue we see Kiarostami at the same location in full daylight, with his camera and sound crew filming soldiers jogging and chanting in the valley below. Homayoun Ershadi, the actor who played Badii, lights and hands Kiarostami a cigarette just before Kiarostami announces that the take is over and they're ready for a sound take. The shot lingers over the wind in the trees, which are now in full bloom, and over the soldiers and filmmakers lounging on the hillside between takes, before the camera pans away to a car driving off into the distance. To the strains of a Louis Armstrong instrumental version of "St. James Infirmary," the final credits come on.

The ending of *Taste of Cherry*, unlike everything preceding it, is shot on video--which is part of what makes it startling. When Kiarostami was in town for a preview screening at the Film Center three months ago, one of the first questions he was asked was why he shot the ending on a different kind of film stock. I expected him to respond by explaining that the film stock was the same, that it was only the raw texture of the video image that made the image look different. But Kiarostami chose instead to answer the question as if its assumption were correct.

Perhaps his reason lies in a statement he made three years ago at a conference in Paris: "I believe in a cinema which gives more possibilities and more time to its viewer--a half-fabricated cinema, an unfinished cinema that is completed by the creative spirit of the viewer, [so that] all of a sudden we have a hundred films." Speaking to Kiarostami the next morning, I discovered that he'd meant this literally, so seeing the ending of *Taste of Cherry* as something shot on a different stock was perfectly legitimate as far as he was concerned.

Kiarostami seems to feel the same way about the false rumors surrounding the film after it was made, most of them having to do with its treatment of the theme of suicide. He'd had to wait about a year for spring to come again before he could shoot the film's ending, and this delay had led to much speculation in the press. The film arrived toward the end of the Cannes festival last year, after stories circulated that it might not turn up at all because Islamic law prohibits suicide and Kiarostami was having problems with the Iranian government--which proved to be only half true. Because of a law prohibiting premieres of Iranian movies prior to their showing at an Iranian film festival--a law that has since been repealed--Kiarostami *was* having trouble getting his film to Cannes, but it had nothing to do with the suicide theme.

This didn't prevent the *New York Times* and several reviewers from reporting that the film's arrival at Cannes represented a triumph over Iranian censorship. (If one wants to see Kiarostami as a martyr in relation to the Islamic state, one could more correctly cite the resentment of his popularity in the West and his focus on poverty that forced him to edit

most of *Taste of Cherry* in the middle of the night--the only time editing equipment was made available to him.) When I brought up the false reporting to Kiarostami, he said, "Actually, I like to have this kind of interpretation in conversations and dialogue around my films....When this interpretation is in the hands of the mass media, who can control it anyway? And sometimes they want to misunderstand." I

responded, "Maybe this happens more often with your films because of the missing pieces in your narratives. Instead of audiences filling these empty spaces, publicists and journalists fill them." He replied, "In any case it's better to be deceived by these others than by the filmmakers. There's always a chance that audiences will think about those parts and find their own solutions."

Kiarostami generally receives credit for producing, writing, directing, and editing his features. But as I discovered during our conversation, none of his last several features was scripted. The dialogue was generated mainly by Kiarostami working alone with his nonprofessional actors, yet none of them had a clear sense of the overall film--so a great deal of manipulation was involved, on several levels.

Most of the dialogue in *Taste of Cherry* occurs between Badii and his three passengers, but none of the actors ever met during the filming, apart from Ershadi and Abdolhossein Bagheri, who plays the Turkish taxidermist (they have a brief second meeting outside the museum where the taxidermist works). Kiarostami filmed each actor alone, sometimes without any of his crew present, sitting in the passenger seat while Ershadi drove or himself driving with one of the other actors as a passenger. Like a novelist inhabiting each of his characters, Kiarostami thus "played" all these people offscreen, soliciting on-screen dialogue and reactions from each actor through a series of ruses; when he wanted the actor playing the Kurdish soldier to express amazement, he told me, "I started to speak to him in Czech. At another point, when I wanted him to look afraid, I placed a gun in the glove compartment, and asked him to open it for a chocolate." There's a troubling ambiguity about such methods that interferes with the image of Kiarostami as a "simple" humanist--which generally means a blood brother of Vittorio De Sica or Satyajit Ray, two other middle-class directors who worked with impoverished actors--though I hasten to add that a feature-length French documentary about Kiarostami shows many of his former actors greeting him with obvious respect and affection. In *Taste of Cherry* one clear if subliminal effect of his working with each actor in isolation is the creation of a powerful sense of solitude that's felt throughout the film prior to the exhilarating camaraderie of the epilogue, regardless of whether Badii is alone or with someone else. Yet Kiarostami's determination to set this film exclusively in exteriors, in terms of what we hear as well as see--refusing to enter the museum or Badii's flat and leaving the windows of Badii's Range Rover wide open--inflects this sense of solitude with an equally strong and continuous sense of being in the world. Consequently, though the film unfolds inside the most private space imaginable--the dark recesses of an individual consciousness bidding farewell to life--it perceives life itself almost exclusively in terms of public and social space. This places viewers on the same existential plane as the hero, contemplating the prospect of their own solitary death in the public space of a theater. It also places them on the same plane as each of the passengers, contemplating the question of how they might respond to such an entreaty from

a stranger.

Most of Kiarostami's plots are illustrations of simple ideas--especially apparent in his wonderful didactic shorts for children such as *Two Solutions for One Problem* and *Regularly or Irregularly?* but no less evident in the parablelike stories of most of his fiction features. In films as diverse as *The Traveller* , *Where Is My Friend's House?* , *Life and Nothing More* , *Through the Olive Trees* , *Taste of Cherry* --and even Jafar Panahi's *The White Balloon* (which Kiarostami "scripted," again without setting pen to paper, by recounting the action into a tape recorder)--one invariably finds a central character mulishly obsessed with accomplishing some mission and needing the help of others, who respond with bemusement, indifference, or some manner of assistance. Each mission becomes a kind of fool's progress, and the hero's persistence is usually viewed in comic terms. In *Taste of Cherry* --where the mission is the hero's extinction, and the comedy is subtler, apart from a few lines of the Turkish taxidermist--the tone is atypically somber.

Prior to the epilogue, the action is limited to a single day and evening, but gradually this brief span of time comes to represent the expanse of an entire life, with Badii's passengers representing three successive stages in that life. (Their professions are equally evocative, and their nationalities, like the Armstrong number at the end, help to spell out how multicultural and international this Iranian movie is.) Few films are more attentive to the poignancy of time passing and the slow fading of daylight, so that everyday details over the day's progress--from field workers cheerfully lifting Badii's car out of a rut to a bulldozer emptying dirt and rocks, from a plane's wispy exhaust trail in the sky to a glimpse of schoolchildren running around a track--register increasingly as small signs and epiphanies in an existence that's about to be extinguished.

The closest thing Kiarostami has to a visual signature might be termed the cosmic long shot--used to humorous and philosophical effect in the closing sequences of *Life and Nothing More* and *Through the Olive Trees* , where our distance from the characters and what they're saying turns their destinies into abstract puzzles, spaces to be filled by our intuition and invention. *Taste of Cherry* is punctuated throughout by shots of this kind, including distant overhead shots of Badii's car moving across the hills, usually while he's conversing with a passenger--but the sound of their dialogue always remains in the foreground, recalling long-shot-like panels in comic books accompanied by dialogue bubbles. Like the coexistence of private and public space or the frequent framing of landscapes through car windows, this fusion of distance with proximity is part of the way Kiarostami gives enormous weight to the simplest everyday moments.

During his conversation with the soldier Badii says, "I had fun when I did my military service. It was the best time of my life. I met my closest friends there, especially during the first six months." He recalls getting up at four in the morning, polishing his boots, going out on maneuvers with the major, who got him and the others to count--and he begins to count in a fond, tight whisper. It's the closest he ever comes in the film to a personal confession, and when we see the soldiers in the epilogue they're counting

too. An Iranian friend informs me that one of the words they're also chanting is "revolution."

During his conversation with the seminarian, who disapproves of the suicide plan for religious reasons, Badii replies that when you're unhappy you hurt other people, and hurting other people is a sin. It's the closest he comes in the film to justifying his decision to end his life.

During Badii's conversation with the taxidermist--which Kiarostami cuts to in medias res, eliding how they met and how their conversation began--it's the taxidermist who does most of the talking, explaining how close he came to suicide himself back in 1960, after a fight with his wife. Deciding to hang himself, he carried a rope to a mulberry-tree plantation, but before he could complete the deed he decided to taste a mulberry, then a second and a third. He looked at the scenery, heard the voices of children, and decided to live. A little later he asks Badii, "Do you want to give up the taste of cherries?"

Despite what I said earlier about Antonioni and Tati--the two filmmakers Kiarostami's work most reminds me of--*Taste of Cherry* has more to do with the taste of cherries than with the taste of cinema. I've never met a filmmaker who qualifies as less of a cinephile than Kiarostami. Though filmmaking recurs as a subject throughout his work, this has more to do with his relation to the world as a filmmaker than to his relation to cinema per se.

The history of Iran can't be matched up precisely with the history of the West, however much we may wish to establish points of contact and convergence. For that matter, the state of the Western world at mid-century reflected in the innovations of Bresson, Tati, Godard, Rivette, and Antonioni can't be matched up precisely with the state of the planet at the century's end reflected in the innovations of Kiarostami and others. Insofar as *Taste of Cherry* is a response to the 90s more than a response to the history of cinema, it has more in common with Hou Hsiao-hsien's *Goodbye South, Goodbye* and Jean-Marie Straub and Daniele Huillet's *Cezanne* --two other beautiful recent films about the obliteration of the landscapes of urban outskirts--than it does with *L'avventura* or *Playtime*, which deal respectively with the loss of values and the renegotiation of public space. Kiarostami's narrative elisions and his sense of time passing remind me of those films only because those films are part of my world and my vocabulary for understanding it.

A friend who rented *Life and Nothing More* at my suggestion reported that he liked it all except for the film's refusal to reveal whether the mission of its hero was ever accomplished. This mission--Kiarostami's own prior to making the film--was searching villages in northern Iran to discover if the two lead child actors of *Where Is My Friend's House?* had survived a massive earthquake. Asked about this in an interview, Kiarostami explained that his desire to find the boys was purely personal and to resolve that issue in a film would be sentimental--which probably would have made his film a hit in Iran but would have betrayed his intentions. "You can't forget that over 20,000 children were

killed in that earthquake. My two heroes could have been among them." His allegiance, in other words, was to life as he saw it, not to the dictates of commercial cinema or the facts of his own life. A colleague who finds *Taste of Cherry* "excruciatingly boring" objects in particular to the fact that we don't know anything about Badii, to what he sees as the distracting suggestion that Badii might be a homosexual looking for sex, and to what he sees as the tired "distancing strategy" of reminding us at the end that we're seeing a movie. From the perspective of the history of commercial Western cinema, he has a point on all three counts. But Kiarostami couldn't care less about conforming to that perspective, and given what he *can* do, I can't think of any reason he should care.

If Kiarostami had wanted us to empathize only with Badii's suicidal impulses, he might have told us more about the man. But this would have interfered with his desire to have us empathize as well with Badii's three passengers, who know as little about this stranger as we do--the film is concerned with their dilemma as well as his. The possibility that Badii might be cruising for sex isn't lost on one of the first pedestrians he addresses from his car (who threatens to bust his face); whether this occurs to Badii is less clear, but he's plainly a man so deeply sunk in his own grief and so alienated from others that the question is academic.

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, and a tree is where the Turk almost hung himself. Kiarostami is representing life in all its rich complexity, reconfiguring elements from the preceding 80-odd minutes in video to clarify what's real and what's concocted. (The "army" is under Kiarostami's command, but it is Ershadi--an architect friend of the filmmaker in real life--who passes Kiarostami a cigarette.) Far from affirming that *Taste of Cherry* is "only" a movie, this wonderful ending is saying, among other things, that it's *also* a movie. And we don't have to remember all of the lyrics of "St. James Infirmary" to know that death is waiting for us around the corner.

A final word about this ending. Last November, after hearing rumors that Kiarostami had deleted it from the version opening in Italy and fearing he might do the same thing in the U.S., I wrote him a panicky letter pleading with him to reconsider. I was thinking of the recutting of *The Apostle* and *Waco: The Rules of Engagement* that had happened after reviews of both in the trade press had suggested these films might benefit from some pruning (which yielded a version of *Waco*, the only one shown in Chicago, that bordered on gibberish). I was particularly alarmed because some intelligent American and Iranian critics had told me that *Taste of Cherry* would be "improved" artistically and commercially if its video coda were removed. It struck me as extraordinary that critics who see a film once or twice could wind up as final arbiters of works that filmmakers spend years working on; and even if these weren't the same critics who thought *Life and Nothing More* would be better if the child actors had appeared at the end, I thought I saw the same disturbing mentality at work.

Two days later Kiarostami faxed me back, assuring me that the ending wouldn't be cut anywhere except in a few theaters in Italy, where he'd shown the two versions as a kind of playful experiment and publicity stunt, as a way to see the different audience reactions. (The version without the ending did "test" better, but he had no intention of showing it anywhere else.) It was yet another false Kiarostami rumor--put together this time out of a parable I was composing in my mind as I filled in the missing pieces--and once again Kiarostami seemed to be enjoying the results.