

Cinema, Systematic Terror, and the Aesthetics of Passivity

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Synopsis

My presentation explores the aesthetics of passivity in *Chronicle of a Disappearance* (1996) by the Palestinian director Elia Suleiman and *Taste of Cherry* (1997) by Iranian film-maker Abbas Kiarostami. Both films employ non-actors, unconnected scenes, and disjointed narrative and discontinuous editing. They both employ similar cinematic and narrative techniques as by-products of wide-spread terror executed on social, political, and cultural levels. My presentation investigates the political and social restrictions in the late 1990s in Iran and the West Bank to show that similar forces under the reign of terror resulted in the aesthetics of passivity, muteness, and uncertainty in these movies. In both films the “seemingly” peaceful state and the absence of aggression are satirically contested.

Biography

Khatereh Sheibani is assistant professor of Persian language and literature York University, Canada. Khatereh completed her doctorate degree in comparative literature at the University of Alberta, Canada in 2007. She has written articles on modern Persian literature and Middle Eastern cinemas in journals such as *Iranian Studies* and *Canadian Journal of Film Studies*. Her first book entitled *The Poetics of Iranian Cinema: Aesthetics, Modernity, and Film after the Revolution* is released in by I.B.Tauris in London, UK.

Essay

My presentation explores the aesthetics of passivity in two films produced in societies that are subject to systematic terror. My discussion examines *Chronicle of a Disappearance* (1996) by the Israeli/Palestinian director Elia Suleiman and *Taste of Cherry* (1997) by Iranian film-maker Abbas Kiarostami. I argue that while the two films are produced in two different geographical places, they both employ similar cinematic and narrative techniques as by-products of wide-spread terror executed on social, political, and cultural levels.

Before exploring the films, I would like to shed light on the notion of systemic and systematic terror and the way it resonates in social, artistic and cultural vistas. There are many residents in countries ruled by undemocratic, totalitarian, or

apartheid regimes who experience terror and insecurity in their every day activities. For these people, daily activities, such as going from one location in a city to another become aggravating tasks and a cause for fear and insecurity. Please note that in this introduction I am using the term “resident” not “citizen” because most of the inhabitants of these countries are not entitled to the rights and privileges of a freeman, hence could not be called “citizens” in my view. The level of fear and insecurity embedded in these societies is to the point that the sense of terror becomes a systematic and domestic fact in people’s lives. Fear is regularly and methodically present in their lives when they are dressing to go out in Tehran or when they greet a new neighbor in Nazareth. In a way, we could say that terror is naturalized and internalized in people’s minds¹. Besides, fear is systemic. While people might try to distance themselves from the cause of fear, it is entrenched in their minds; hence, it is an integral part of social existence and has lost its shock value. The secular Iranians who are oppressed by a theological regime that privileges Islamic ideals (or their own interpretation of Islamic ideals) and non-Jewish residents of the occupied territories experience this sense of terror on a daily basis. It is no surprise that the aesthetics of terror appears in cultural forms of expression such as cinema. In fact, one could argue that cinema as the most popular artistic mode is the most suitable platform for depicting societal problems and anomalies.

It is true that the representation of awe and fear is a significant element in cinematic narratives, regardless of their national or political background. The Aristotelian *catharsis* is particularly important in many western cinematic traditions including Hollywood and British cinemas. For instance, the narrative structure of psychological horror movies such as Hitchcock’s *Psycho* (1960) projects humans’ worst fears. But there is deference between a cathartic moment that the viewer experience when watching horror films with the projection of fear and terror in movies such as *Taste of Cherry*. The evil and monstrous characters such as Norman Bates in *Psycho* are viewed by audiences as fictional, and if exist outside the narrative frame, as exceptional. The terror and fear in Iranian and Palestinian films that we study here are shockingly natural and quintessentially linked with everyday life. Even the cause of terror is not represented in these films. The source of evil forces is oblivion but the aesthetics of terror is visualized. Local viewers of these films could easily pinpoint the cause

¹ Terror in democratic countries is not sponsored by governments or socially significant institutions. Terrorist acts are practiced by fanatic minority groups sporadically and are not considered as a part of life; hence it is not naturalized or internalized. The 9/11 terrorist attacks in the United States left a mark in the public psyche, albeit seasoned by huge media and government attention, which, in a way, mythologized the victimizing of innocent people who lost their lives in the twin towers. This is why the terrible loss of lives in the US is remembered and commemorated every year. It is worth bearing in mind that in comparison, the loss of more than 1,000,000 lives in Iran/Iraq war does not get the same level of national attention in Iran. (I am not talking about the state-sponsored commemorations but the way the public perceives the war). Iranians, so tired of experiencing constant fear, try to forget about the atrocities and wrongdoings and observe governmental war commemorations with a sense of mockery and at times indifference.

of terror and relate with the character's experience of apprehension. Unlike psychological horror movies, here the audience is not led to the unconscious and the implications of evil and dream. The sense of terror in characters like E.S. (*Chronicle*) and Badi (*Taste*) led them not to take action (as we might expect) but to remain inactive and passive.

Chronicle of a Disappearance starts in Suleiman's birth place Nazareth² and ends in Jerusalem. The film is a witty, semi-autobiographical comedy that shows Suleiman's character, E.S. as a static figure and a socially passive man who feels alienated in his hometown. Using himself as a silent protagonist named E.S., Suleiman treated the film as a fictional diary.³

Chronicle of Disappearance does not contain a story line in a conventional sense. It is a rather disjointed narrative that depicts the life of an Arab Christian man returning home from self exile to lead an idle life in Nazareth, where the main body of the Christian Arab minority lives. From the empty tourist shop to the deserted streets we witness the mundane life of a people who are apathetic to the political issues but still are being suspected for terrorist acts. The sound editing in this film is a testimony to their passivity and apathy. The muted character, E.S. does not deliver even one single line in the whole movie. He was about to speak when invited to deliver a presentation in a conference on Arab cinema, but as soon as he intends to talk, the microphone begins feeding back, which makes him leave the podium. The lack of trust among people, which is a result of terror and insecurity, is portrayed when we see the Arab woman looking for a rental place being declined by a Jewish family and an Arab landlord. Arabs do not rent to a lone woman and the Jews do not rent to a Muslim.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0aGdNTmqW6o>

The film is told in a nonlinear form as the scenes are not connected in a conventional sense. The marginalized second-class citizens live like ghosts in a surreal environment. While the narrative is not poetic, the montage creates a poetic yet satirical aura. The director employs a blending of narrative genres of fiction, poetry, documentary, and memoir. The fusion of genres along with using a static camera enhances the disjointed structure of the film. Like an avant-garde documentary it depicts a tourist shop in which falling a souvenir item could become an amusing and involving event for the shopkeeper. In another instance, a fight occurs between two men. The scene is purely absurd and ironical. There is no logical explanation given for the fight. We realize that the residents remain still when their homes are stormed by Israeli soldiers but a seemingly peaceful or suppressed city could burst into anger and agony very easily. At times, the film becomes fictionally amusing like when the Arab girl ends up in police custody.

² Under the 1947 UN Partition Plan, Nazareth was allotted to the Arab state. Later on the city was occupied by the Israeli forces.

³ In many ways, *Divine Intervention* is a close follow-up to *Chronicle of a Disappearance*. Once again, Suleiman stars as E.S. and remains silent.

The disjointed narrative evokes instability and transience. The young characters are feeling a sense of liminality and transition. E.S. moves from one place to the other because he does not have a sense of belonging. The Arabs in Nazareth and Jerusalem are represented as strangers at home. *Chronicle of a Disappearance* is the story of the people who are “disappeared” in their homeland. He is passive as everybody else is. Even the leader of the nation, Yaser Arafat is reduced to a useless picture, a cartoon rather than a realist one, set ironically beside a deserted swimming pool.

What Hamid Dabashi has stated about Palestinian cinema as a whole describes Elia Suleiman’s aesthetics adequately:

“The paramount feature in Palestinian cinema is a subdued anger, a perturbed pride, a sublated violence ... a mutation of that repressed anger into an aesthetical violence – the aesthetic presence of a political absence.” (11) Elia Suleiman observes the absurdity and the sense of nonsense-ness in the lives of the people who are humiliated by the colonizer. This absurdity turns into a unique frivolous yet passive cinematic sensibility in the first feature by the Palestinian filmmaker.

In *Taste of Cherry*, a man tries to seek assistance in his committing suicide by random people whom he encounters on a road trip in the isolated outskirts of Tehran. During his conversations, we witness the man’s uncertainty regarding his decision to commit suicide. Like Suleiman, Kiarostami does not show his main character in a state of harmony and stability yet evades implicating a political message. The suburban location is probably chosen deliberately in order to elude depicting social problems in a post-war Tehran in the hopes of evading censorship. Like E.S., Mr. Badi, the main character in *Taste of Cherry* is a middle class urban man. But we barely see him in his private or public urban life, instead he is framed in the outskirts of the city. He is an outsider in his home and shares the sense of liminality and transition with E.S. who leaves in the West Bank. What he sees (and we see) is mediated through a window. He barely leaves the comfort of his car, because he is afraid to face social reality. Even the three men who ride in his car are chosen by him. The movie, like *Chronicle of a Disappearance* does not portray any action nor does it have a firm narrative structure. The editing here is not as choppy but the camera work is static and the scenes are disconnected (staged in three major parts); and the life Badi leads is just as static and idle.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r9GTeQ0EuCU&feature=related>

Taste of Cherry explores the notions of life and death and opens a dialogue about the possibility of choosing to die, what is banned according to fundamentalist Muslims. The depiction of this is a courageous act in its own right and a good excuse for *Irshad* (Ministry of Islamic Guidance) to ban the public screening of the film. But Badi’s hesitations, his lack of power to make an executive decision, and his fear of being left alive in the grave shows a passive yet frustrated man in an insecure society from which he tries to flee (either

through ending his life or through taking refuge in isolated suburban areas). Although I think his contemplating of the possibility of suicide brings a refreshing sense of freedom in a suppressive situation. This is highlighted when we are introduced to the third man (a taxidermist) whom Badi has chosen to help him with his plans. The taxidermist's words reveal his poetic worldview. It also echoes a sentence by the Romanian-French philosopher E. M. Cioran: "Without the possibility of suicide, I would have killed myself long ago" (qtd. in Fischer 241). This is the inspiring idea that motivated Kiarostami in the making of *Taste of Cherry* (Fischer 241). From his perspective, the world is far from being perfect but there is still a lot of promise to be discovered even in the simplest things, such as the taste of cherries:

TAXIDERMIST. Have you lost all hope? Have you ever looked at the sky when you wake up in the morning? At dawn, don't you want to see the Sun rise?...The night at the full moon?... Refusing them all, you want to give up the taste of cherry?

In this film, the disjointed narrative, depth of composition, lack of editing, and the characters' improvisation creates a story with multilayered meanings. The idea of freedom and the concept of having choice in life and death are uplifting and inspirational to the viewer, but in the actual film, we constantly see a man who is confined by a society that dictates morality to its people. He is depicted as a paralyzed and passive man who could find no good reason to live any more. The last person whom Badi seeks help from reminds him of the simplest pleasures in life, such as watching the sun set or the change of seasons. He asks him if he is ready to give up the taste of cherry. This dialogue would enhance the poetic structure of the film. In another article I have shown Kiarostami's embracing of the philosophy of mysticism and the concept of *rindi* in *Taste of Cherry*. A *rind* in Sufism is a man who sets aside rationalism, drinks and enjoys earthly life but remains apathetic towards his society. His main goal is to discover the meaning of existence and the universe but immediate social or political issues do not concern him. Badi's character shows resemblance to the idea of *rindi* that has been criticized by many for being inert and unconcerned towards social issues. The sense of passivity could be a result of living under constant terror in a country that experienced a bloody revolution and a war with more than 1,000,000 victims, not to mention the massive executions of the dissidents of the Islamic government right after the war.

Both films employ non-actors, un-connected scenes, disjointed narrative and discontinuous editing. Suleiman's choppy editing and lack of dialogue is in line with avant-garde aesthetics while Kiarostami's long takes, lack of editing, and depth of composition is closer to the realist films that was praised by the *cahier de cinema* group. In both cases, however, the political and social restrictions in the late 1990s in Iran and the West Bank had an impact on the aesthetic choices the two directors made. In both films, similar suppressive measures reinforced under the reign of terror resulted in the aesthetics of passivity, muteness, and

uncertainty. In *Chronicle of Disappearance* and *Taste of Cherry* the “seemingly” peaceful state and the absence of aggression are satirically contested.

Filmography

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