

Michael Powell's *The Thief of Bagdad* and Abbas Kiarostami's *A Taste of Cherry*: Two Faces of Orientalism

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Abstract. British director Michael Powell (1905–1990) and Iranian director Abbas Kiarostami (1940–) share several technical similarities in their film-making, most notably an interest in the visual language of still photography, painting and other visual arts, specifically light and colour. They also often comment on the art of film-making and the subject position of the audience as voyeur within their films. With respect to Orientalism – the philosophical and cultural construction that the West overlaid on the East – Powell and Kiarostami can be profitably compared. Powell appears to have accepted uncritically the notion that the East could be characterized by exotic and sensuous otherness, an attitude that is revealed in his approach to *The Thief of Bagdad* (1940) as escapist fantasy and *Black Narcissus* (1946) as a farewell to India. Kiarostami, on the other hand, a “real Oriental,” not only rejected the Orientalist paradigm (while simultaneously drawing on its original language and symbols), but also refused to respond to it in the way that other Muslim artists, particularly in the post-Iranian Revolution period, consciously attempted to build a non-western cinematic art. His *Taste of Cherry* (1997), however, does draw on some of the same cultural elements that were borrowed and distorted by the European intellectuals who promulgated the Orientalist and postcolonial world-view.

Keywords: Orientalism, Michael Powell, Abbas Kiarostami, post-colonialism, painting and film.

Introduction

Michael Powell's 1940 fantasy film *The Thief of Bagdad* and Abbas Kiarostami's *A Taste of Cherry* (1997) are two seemingly incongruous films originating in different cultures and different time periods. Powell's work, noted for its advanced special effects, is sensational in stereotypical Hollywood

terms, propelling the viewer to emotional highs and lows through rapid action, special effects, panoramic camera shots and angles, and Oriental exoticism. Kiarostami's muted and introverted masterpiece, on the other hand, although eschewing plot twists and narrative movement, appeals to the senses also, but in a strikingly different manner. Juxtaposing these two films illuminates several facets of Orientalism: Powell's film participated in constructing an unproblematic 20th century British Orientalism, while the famous negative critical reaction of Chicago film critic Roger Ebert to *A Taste of Cherry* revealed western Orientalist misconceptions about eastern and Muslim concepts of time, death, place and suicide. Both films, however, share a profound interest in two aspects of "otherness:" the *Thief's* transportation of the audience through history and physical space (a de-centred fantasy world of "long ago" with flying genies and flying carpets, based on the imaginatively transfixing power of the *1001 Nights*; and Kiarostami's portrait of the alienation of spirit of a man who has chosen to no longer live in the world). Both films draw on a complex symbolism of sensuality. Also, the films are linked stylistically and technically by the self-reflexivity of the directors and a distinct interest in the framing techniques of still photography and painting: these technical aspects in both filmmakers are intertwined with the semiotics and semantics of their art.

Development of Powell's Orientalism

Powell began his film career in 1925 working for Irish director Rex Ingram (not to be confused with the American actor of the same name who stars as the genie in *The Thief of Bagdad*) after a brief unsuccessful career in banking. In 1924, Ingram filmed *The Arab* in North Africa, a work that may have influenced Powell. The hero Jamil, a soldier in the war between Syria and Turkey, learns he is the son of a Bedouin tribal leader. He defends a mission school of orphans from being handed over by a fearful village leader to the Turks who want to slaughter them. The film draws on one aspect of imagined Arab identity common in films of the time: the "noble savage" stereotype of the hero Jamil. Also the portrayal of Turks as bloodthirsty and cruel harkens back to the English proverbial saying "as cruel as a Turk." In these Orientalist films of the 1920s–40s, historical, documentary, or cultural realism was never considered, and the plots are often simply romantic Western narratives transposed to eastern settings. As Michalak observes, "this genre includes movies such as *The Thief of Bagdad* (1924), *Kismet* (1920, 1930, 1944, 1955), and *The Wonders of Aladdin* (1961), which present the Arab world as a fabulous land of snake charmers, monsters, great wealth, half-naked women, harems, flying horses and

the like. In this genre, "Bagdad" is a projection of American fantasies, a place where Western taboos are violated and where even the laws of physics are suspended for flying carpets, magical ropes and cloaks of invisibility" (Michalak 2002, 12).

Michalak's analysis is complicated by the fact that both Arabic story-telling and lyric, such as the *Alf layla wa layl* (1001 Nights) and the *ghazal*, have had a profound impact on western literature and narrative structures. These films were often, as was the case in Douglas Fairbanks's earlier *Thief of Bagdad* (1924), accompanied by lavish and expensive props and thousands of costumed extras. The sets for Fairbanks's *Thief* were estimated to have cost 2 million dollars, an enormous sum for the time. Thus the nexus of East/extravagance/fantasy/otherness/sensual beauty is clear throughout these films shot in mythical eastern settings, primarily highly ornamented indoor sets [Fig. 1]. The art form of film itself in the early part of the 20th century, due to its novelty, communicated otherness by its very nature, especially considering the rarity of international travel at the time for the average person. Film *could* transport audiences to the exotic East. The wildly popular Rudolph Valentino film *The Sheik* (1921) also reinforced Orientalist visions of the East and racial taboo: the lusty Sheik abducts a white woman, but is depicted with sympathy for his bravery and nobility. We learn at the end of the film, however, that he is in fact the son of a British father and Spanish mother and was adopted by an Arab tribe after his parents' death. Thus racial barriers and stereotypes are left intact instead of being violated. The film enacts a subtle emotional movement in the audience from unease and mild shock at the vibrant, colourful and violent Sheik, to growing sympathy and tension, and then an affirmation of western identity and western values when the Sheik's origins are revealed.

During the first period of Powell's career, he occupied himself in various roles as actor and stills photographer, a position that clearly influenced the way he viewed the art of film itself, as a moving tableau. In 1928, he met Alfred Hitchcock and was hired to produce the still photography for Hitchcock's silent film *Champagne*. Powell's later Hitchcockesque production *Peeping Tom* (1960) would have seriously damaging consequences for his later career. The film narrates the crimes of a video-voyeur who films his victims as he murders them, continuing Powell's interest in the filmic eye that first arose in *The Thief of Bagdad*. As Roger Ebert points out, *Peeping Tom* shocked both viewers and critics because "it didn't allow the audience to lurk anonymously in the dark, but implicated us in the voyeurism of the title character" (Ebert 1999). Similarly Powell in the *Thief of Bagdad* draws the audience in to create the narrative, in the sense of Coleridge's "willing suspension of disbelief:" the director asks the

audience to participate in the fantasy, colours, exoticism and otherness of Powell's imaginatively constructed Bagdad.

A strong parallel between Powell and Kiarostami is the self-reflexiveness of their art: both directors signal to the viewer in some way that they are consciously making film and that the audience is a voyeur. Powell's *Peeping Tom* showed this very explicitly, much to the chagrin of its critics. A favourite technique of Kiarostami, which he used in *A Taste of Cherry* and *Ten* (2002), involves dual-mounted cameras inside a car recording the points of view of driver and passengers as they observe one another. In another of his films, *Shirin* (2008), the entire action involves camera cuts to the faces of famous Iranian actresses as they themselves are in a movie theatre watching the scenes of the classic Persian love story *Khosrow and Shirin*.

Light, Colour and the Orientalism of Powell

The Thief of Bagdad (1940) was produced by Alexander Korda and directed by Michael Powell, Ludwig Berger, and Tim Whelan. The cast included Conrad Veidt as Jaffar, Sabu as Abu, the Little Thief, June Duprez as the Princess, John Justin as Ahmad, and Rex Ingram as the Djinni. The plot is told in flashback (in the recursive narrative style of *The 1001 Nights*) by the blind King Ahmad, whose kingdom has been seized by his evil Vizier Jaffar. He befriends Abu the Little Thief and together they experience a series of adventures. Due to wartime interruptions, production of the film was transferred to Hollywood for finishing by Alexander, Zoltan and Vincent Korda, as Ludwig Berger had been effectively sidelined due to disputes with Alex Korda. Unfortunately, Powell did not speak at length about the production of the film in the two volumes of his autobiography, but the production values and vision of the film can be reconstructed within the context of his other films, specifically *Black Narcissus* (1947) and *A Matter of Life and Death* (1946).

Powell came to age and maturity during the period of two world wars and a devastating financial depression which greatly sapped England's financial and spiritual resources, creating several "lost generations" of men. The first half of the 20th century, interrupted by a brief "roaring twenties," was a time of austerity and rationing which necessitated a stoicism and denial that has become a stereotype of the modern British character ("keeping a stiff upper lip"). Thus to provide psychic balance in British society, some form of escapism was needed, and the motion picture fulfilled this role well. Thus Oriental themes, themselves a form of British escape from the puritanical Victorianism of the 19th century, collided felicitously with a desire to forget about war,

casualties, and the lack of material goods. Interestingly, *The Thief* was one of two films sent to then U.S. ally Russia during WWII to entertain children. Russia even more than its western European allies was suffering food shortages and massive casualties from the Hitler offensive.

The basic thesis of Edward Said's seminal work *Orientalism* (1978) posited a constructed binary between East and West – Orient and Occident – pervasive in western literature, art and politics, which always situated the West in a superior ontological position. While the West was vigorous, intellectual, disciplined, ordered and moral, the East was feminine, sensual, corrupt, exotic and always "other." For Sir Richard Burton, who translated both erotic and pornographic eastern works such as the *Kama Sutra*, *Arabian Nights*, and *The Perfumed Garden*, Orientalism resided in imaginative discourse, fantasy, and the sensuality of the harem and seraglio. For European visual artists such as Goodall, Ingres, and Hunt, Orientalism was embodied by rich saturated colour, intricate costumes and sensual female nudes [Fig. 2]. It is this last facet of Orientalism which most impacted Powell and the set designers and art directors with whom he worked, such as Alfred Junge, many of whom were specifically trained as painters and graphic artists.

Powell claimed credit for the enormous eye that appears on the bow of the ship that enters the harbour in the opening scene of *The Thief* (Christie 1994, 33), mimicking the standard film countdown symbol and announcing wittily the motif of the visual [Figs. 3–4]. Other related themes of seeing and eyes include the blindness of Prince Ahmad (both literal and metaphorical, as he doesn't see the treachery of Jaffar until it is too late), illusion and reality with the appearance of the Djinni, Jaffar's hypnotic powers, and Abu's theft of the All-Seeing Eye.

Powell lived before the CGI special effects revolution where action and movement, such as in *Star Wars*, *Dune*, and more recently *Lord of the Rings*, would become a central feature of fantasy and science fiction film; yet Powell made extensive use of special effects in *The Thief* and *Black Narcissus*. Just as today the purpose of special effects is to create other worlds, Powell and Korda were aiming at a completely fantastic experience, a world that the British mind associated specifically with the Orient. Powell's description of the prop created to film Abu within the Djinni's large palm provides some hint of the extravagance of the set properties: "When Abu is seen in the hand of the Djinni, that hand was a model of a real hand and was some forty feet from the wrist to the tips of the fingers. This required seven tons of clay to manufacture and was made in sections to fit over the machinery which allowed the hand to open and close in a realistic manner. When the whole hand was completed, it was sprayed with over a hundred coats of rubber

cement which took the place of the skin and masked the joints as it opened and closed” (Powell and Pressburger 2012).

In Powell’s *A Matter of Life and Death* (1946), heaven is portrayed as a black-and-white efficient and humourless bureaucracy devoid of love by using a special Technicolor Monochrome process, while scenes shot on earth appear in full Technicolor. Through an error, the main character, airman Peter Carter, who has been marked for death, ends up on earth and falls in love instead of being conducted to heaven by the French psychopompus “Conductor 71.” When Conductor 71 returns to earth to retrieve Carter and bring him to heaven, he looks around and says “One is starved for Technicolor up there. What a night for love.” The quip clearly establishes the connection between colour, love and earthly pleasures. In the 1940s, black and white film held its own against Technicolor in part because it was an expensive proprietary process: Technicolor could add up to 25% to an entire film budget. Thus a director needed to make a considered and conscious choice to use Technicolor, and therefore it became a significant film element in and of itself; this is how Powell approached the use of colour in his films, as another tool in the expressive toolkit. What Powell did in *The Thief*, and this is more evident in the luxurious colour tableaux of *The Red Shoes* (1948) and *Tales of Hoffman* (1951), was to heighten and direct the narrative through emotions created by colour, and also in part through music [Figs. 5–6]. Thus Technicolor was by its nature perfectly suited to the earlier visual arts tradition of Orientalist painting, which equated rich colours with the sensuality of the East.

Director Martin Scorsese, who has been strongly influenced by Powell, has made a similar observation: “there was something very special and unique about the English use of Technicolor [...] and that became something else, and that had to do a lot with emotion; it had more to do with painting”¹ [Figs. 7–10]. Scorsese also pointed out elsewhere that “Michael [Powell] always felt that the only true authentic genius of film making was Walt Disney” (*Black Narcissus*, DVD Commentary). One of Powell’s favourite films was the richly animated Disney film *Fantasia*. *The Thief*, according to Powell’s autobiography, represented an important watershed for Powell and Pressburger (The Archers): “the Archers thought in colour from the *Thief of Bagdad* onward” (Powell 1992, 39).

1 The source of the quotation is a documentary by Craig McCall: *Painting with Life* (2000).

Orientalism in *Black Narcissus* (1946)

Black Narcissus (1946) tells the tale of an Anglican nunnery established in the Himalayas housed in a former harem. The British nuns fight against a non-Christian culture represented by the sensual Indian dancing girl Kanchi (Jean Simmons). The local British agent Dean (David Farrar) delivers the line: "they're like children" when speaking of the Indian villagers, without any irony whatsoever. The same line is echoed later by Sister Clodagh (Deborah Kerr), who tells Dean: "We all need discipline. You said yourself, they're like children. Without discipline we should all behave like children." These lines again represent a standard British colonial view that Europe represents a more disciplined and advanced state of development than eastern nations, and that eastern peoples are impulsive and child-like. The title of the film derives from the name of the perfume that the foppish young Indian General (played by Sabu) wears, emphasizing the frivolity and narcissism of the native ruling classes. The whole film, in fact, can be interpreted as a study in the differences between East and West, since it appeared in theatres only a few months before Britain withdrew entirely from the Indian continent in 1947. As the nuns leave the nunnery in the final scene, the audience feels that two distinct cultures that could never meld together or understand one another have finally parted ways.

Viewers are often surprised to learn that *Black Narcissus* was made entirely in England, using an indoor and outdoor set at Pinewood studios as well as one English botanical park containing Himalayan plants and trees. The stunning vistas are all mattes, glasses and backdrops painted by a talented team of landscape painters directed by Alfred Junge [Figs. 11–12]. Powell commented on the role of colour in the symbolism and narrative structure of *Black Narcissus*: "Our mountains were painted on glass. We decided to do the whole thing in the studio and that's the way we managed to maintain colour control to the very end. Sometimes in a film its theme or its colour are more important than the plot" (Powell 1986, 42). Powell also noted that "in my films, images are everything" (Powell 1986, 169).

Jack Cardiff won the Academy Award for Best Cinematography and Alfred Junge won the Academy Award for Best Art Direction for *Black Narcissus*. Cardiff, the subject of two documentaries by Craig McCall (*Cameraman: The Life and Work of Jack Cardiff* [2010]; *Painting with Life* [2000]) was very much interested in painting, particularly the artists Vermeer, Rembrandt and Van Gogh. Powell equally appreciated the interconnections between painting and film: "I had learnt from Vincent Korda on *The Thief of Bagdad* the value of a painter's eye" (Powell 1986, 407). Powell's team was actually known for

introducing and developing new Technicolor techniques (despite the objections of the Technicolor company, which was sometimes dictatorial about the use of its process), because “in the early days, [Technicolor] had been talking down to technicians, art directors, and cameramen who worked in black and white [...] but now they were dealing with painters, which was a very different thing. The painters knew enough about the technical possibilities of the process, particularly people like Jack Cardiff [...] and they were able to tell Technicolor where to get off” (Powell 1986, 668).

Thus Powell’s *floruit* coincides with an instrumental period of film history in which black and white and colour film were nearly on the same terms before colour would come to dominate modern mainstream film production. Clearly Powell and his associates Jack Cardiff and Alfred Junge were pushing the technical boundaries of the Technicolor process and colour schemes in general to create a film element that elicited meaning and emotion and that could compete in importance with acting, dialogue, music score and narrative. In Powell’s “Orientalist” films *The Thief of Bagdad* and *Black Narcissus*, these colour elements as well as spatial techniques borrowed from the graphic arts, could simultaneously convey a sense of the otherness of film itself, and its escapist and fantastic dimensions, as well as a thematic and philosophical vision of the profoundly “other” Orient. Powell’s Orientalism was probably not a conscious stance, but merely a product of his social environment, especially in the light of the many pro-British films verging on propaganda that he made during and after the WWII period (*49th Parallel*, 1941; *The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp*, 1943; *Battle of the River Plate*, 1956). Although he drew some ire for sympathetically depicting a Nazi deserter in the *49th Parallel*, these films never question fundamental British values, or call into question Britain’s sense of cultural superiority.

The Neo-Orientalism of Abbas Kiarostami

Abbas Kiarostami was born in Tehran in 1940, the year that the *Thief of Bagdad* appeared in theatres. Similar to Powell’s interest in photography, Kiarostami’s interest in form, light, and colour led him to study graphic design and painting at the Tehran University College of Fine Arts. He is also a noted still photographer. His first work involved making television commercials in the 1960s. His first film *Bread and Alley* (1970) featured a child protagonist, a recurrent feature of his work. He directed a number of films in the 1970s and 80s including the Koker Trilogy films (1987–94), which are set in the northern Iranian town of Koker, the site of a devastating earthquake in 1990. Kiarostami

himself, however, did not conceive of the films as a trilogy. Kiarostami is sometimes grouped with a set of directors who created what is dubbed the Iranian New Wave Cinema. His work first achieved notice by European audiences at Locarno in 1989 and *A Taste of Cherry* (1997) won the Palme d'Or at Cannes.

Kiarostami's *A Taste of Cherry* appears to ignore the Orientalist viewpoint altogether in that he does not sentimentalize, or romanticize his main character Mr. Badii, or set him in opposition to western values or norms – Kiarostami clearly does not want to make political film through this particular narrative. There is no pandering to western tastes in the way that, for example, Orhan Pamuk has been skewered by Turkish intellectuals for telling the West in his novels what the West wants to hear. A great deal of postcolonial art in the Arab-speaking world has been plagued by this burden of emphasizing specifically what is unique and non-western about Islamic culture, instead of simply presenting the fullness of the fabric of Muslim life as it exists in lived experience.

Kiarostami, however, does draw on a native tradition of sensuality in Persian love poetry for his symbols and set of signs which the 19th century French and British Orientalists would also appropriate, distort and magnify, and apply to all of Eastern culture itself – i.e. Sir Richard Burton's interest in eastern pornography, Omar Khayyam's *Rubaiyat* as a *carpe diem* masterpiece, or the Cordoban courtly love manual *The Dove's Neck-Ring* by Ibn Hazm. However, these works were clipped deliberately from the complex cloth of medieval Islam and displayed as evidence of the East's addiction to pleasure and the harem, and the East's feminine weakness in the face of the West's superior military technology and intellectual resources. They also provided an erotic escapism from the sexual repression of Victorian society. Specifically, the cherry of the title of Kiarostami's film symbolizes the Old Turk's reconnection to worldly existence and pleasure after an attempted suicide much like Badii's desire to end his own life.

The sensuality of Kiarostami's cherries forms an undercurrent in classic Persian and Sufi poetry, particularly Rumi, who would be well known by most educated Iranians. There are also references in Kiarostami's work to the Persian poet Omar Khayyam, made famous in English by FitzGerald's translation of the *Rubaiyat*. The critic Dissanayake has pointed out the concern that both Rumi and Kiarostami share about the act of making art, which Powell also signals to the viewer of his films: "One important point of similarity between Rumi and Kiarostami, to my mind, is the fact that both of them comment reflexively on their chosen media even as they communicate experiences through them. In

other words Rumi's poetry shows signs of meta-poetry while Kiarostami's films show signs of meta-cinema" (Dissanayake 2012).

Cherries appear numerous times in Kiarostami's poetry, and can symbolize youth, sexuality, and freedom from restraint, as in his *Poem 28*:

The old nun
dispenses advice
to the young nuns
amid cherry trees (2001, 28)

and *Poem 180*:

The little bud
announced itself loudly
from inside its hard sheath of cherry wood (2001, 180).

Light and Colour in Kiarostami's *A Taste of Cherry* (1997)

Interestingly, Kiarostami suffers from hypersensitivity to light and can often be seen wearing sunglasses in public. *A Taste of Cherry* contains numerous scenes that have obviously been composed solely around the organizational motif of a myriad of finely gradated shades of colour, shadow, and shape. Moreover, colour in Kiarostami, as in Powell, establishes mood, emotion and a unique symbolic language. For example, most of *A Taste of Cherry* was shot in the hills surrounding Tehran in autumn producing a dry, spiritually parched and end-of life nuance which parallels Badii's own weariness with his condition. Elena alerts us to the significance of the pervasive brownish yellows in the shots: "an ochre, yellow earth – the colour of desperation and depression in Persian tradition—is ever-present as a recurring motif that constantly suggests the idea of burial, or the burial sought by Badii, a simple minute figure, shut inside his car, crossing these lands" (Elena 2005, 128). Critic Laura Mulvey believes that Kiarostami was in essence attempting to cast the landscape as another character in *A Taste of Cherry*: "the landscape is both bleak and beautiful. Kiarostami shot the film in autumn to take advantage of the metaphorical significance of the season of dying, but the terrain has its own distinct character, almost like a constructed mise en scène" (Mulvey 1998, 5).

A constantly used shot in *A Taste of Cherry* consists of dusky sunlight bouncing off Badii's car windshield, which reflects colours of dry dirt, dead leaves, rust, a gravel pit, and faded washed-out longshots of the city. The consonance of these colours is so striking that the director is clearly asking us to reflect on a world that for Badii is inexorably turning towards the colour of

earth [Figs. 13–16]. During the film Badii appears to fade in and out of existence through the interplay of direct sunlight with reflected or translucent light as his connection to life grows more and more tenuous. These are not the rich and dark primary colours of Orientalist painting. The washed out effect, which is also paralleled by shots of Badii seen through the hazy reflections of a window, in essence distances the viewer from Badii; we are not allowed to feel pity for him or ever to know the reason for his quest of self-annihilation [Fig. 16]. That this is all a conscious and crafted technique becomes obvious in the much criticized final scene, in which Kiarostami the film maker and the actors (including the soldiers) are revealed filming in the hills where much of the action has taken place, but in the green of springtime. In the final scene, bright colours in the blue-green spectrum appear, in shocking contrast to the dominant earlier earth tones [Fig. 17]. Also, the appearance of the soldier/actors joking and playing around recalls Badii's fond reminiscences of his time in the army, when he felt connected to his fellow man and part of a bigger whole as opposed to his current state of alienation which pursues him throughout the film.

Kiarostami's interest in light and colour as the dominant elements of the landscapes in both his films and still photography, which convey a non-romanticized and non-Orientalist realism, has been perceptively analyzed by Ishaghpour: "The cinematography of Kiarostami is essentially stark – without choice of expression, emphasis, virtuosity or gesticulation on the part of the photography, and without the picturesque, effect or strangeness of nature. All signification (imaginary, poetic or symbolic), all romantic reverie or egotistical impulse is removed from his work in the face of a nature which has nothing of the sublime, of the resplendent, of the surprising, the sombre, the abysmal, the horrible, the terrible or the grandiose or incommensurable. His is not a wooded nature, a land in gestation, fat and chthonian, but the dry land of the Iran of the high plateaus with their immensity, the grey of the mountains, and rarity of the vegetation, its dry air and without atmosphere and clarity which accents the brevity of contours of the abstract and immaterial" (Ishaghpour 2000, 17).

Kiarostami himself has explicitly spoken about the importance of light in *A Taste of Cherry*. In the penultimate scene of Mr. Badii in his self-dug grave, the moon rises and his face is illuminated by lightning flashes: "But life comes from light. Here, cinema and life merge into one another. Because the cinema, too, is only light [...]. The spectator has to confront this non-existence which, for me, evokes a symbolic death" (Kiarostami, quoted by Mulvey 1998, 8). Kiarostami thus reveals his belief in the centrality of light as existence – and the parallel between the image on the screen and life itself – both the entire film and the individual scene of Badii's death make it clear that Kiarostami's statement is not a superficial metaphysics, or a stylized profundity tossed off for critical

consumption, but a deeply held conviction of an artist who has mastered so many genres of visual art.

A Critical Misinterpretation of *A Taste of Cherry*

American film critic Roger Ebert seems to have got it terribly wrong, and his misinterpretation of *A Taste of Cherry* is instructive. He appears to be disturbed by the lack of plot or action (despite his protestations to the contrary): “I am not impatiently asking for action or incident. What I do feel, however, is that Kiarostami’s style here is an affectation; the subject matter does not make it necessary, and is not benefited by it [...]. The film is such a lifeless drone that we experience it only as a movie” (Ebert 1998).

Paradoxically, the film is tense at times (for example, as the Kurdish soldier trapped in Badii’s car attempts to divine Badii’s possibly sinister intentions), but not driven by dramatic tension or the type of Hollywood-style action that Ebert yearns for: the film is emphatically not about suicide, even though the entire story revolves around Badii’s search for someone to cover over his grave after he has killed himself with pills. For Western audiences, “will he or will he not commit suicide” is a real question that could propel the plot or subplot of a movie. However, this is not a real question for a Muslim audience, since suicide is strictly haram and not a subject for debate since in Islam it represents one of the questions that has long been resolved by *ijma’* or consensus, and therefore is no longer open to further legal reasoning. A Muslim knows that Badii’s three Muslim passengers (the Kurdish soldier, the Afghani seminarian, and the old Turk) will be expected to dissuade him from his deed, and the audience will even know what arguments they will use on Badii. Therefore, the film cannot be “about suicide” for a Muslim audience, so instead they are left with a powerful portrait of a man driven beyond despair, intent on his mission of self-harm, and the inexorableness of his will. Thus the drama strikes at some of the most primal emotions of the audience witnessing pure human disintegration since in the end they learn nothing about Badii the individual or Badii as a Muslim in crisis. This purity of emotion is again neatly presented contrapuntally in light, landscape, and form in the same way that Powell manipulated these visual elements on the screen.

Conclusion

Powell in *The Thief of Bagdad* and *Black Narcissus* presents an unproblematic and traditional British Orientalism replete with 19th century notions of the East as sensual, feminine and exotic. Powell could not bridge East and West in his oeuvre due to his historical and cultural circumstances (the East would always remain exotic for him), but Kiarostami does seem to homogenize and blur life and art, and not so much counteract or respond to the cultural constructions imposed on his society by Orientalism, but merely to create an Iranian art situated within traditional Persian culture, and to suggest the similarities between his characters and a universal everyman. This impulse, to see his Iranian subjects and characters as both products of culture and history and simultaneously as archetypes, flies in the face of Orientalism which insists on difference and racial stereotyping.

One seemingly conscious anti-Orientalist feature of Kiarostami's films (including *A Taste of Cherry*) is the choice of male protagonists, and the lack of gratuitous sexualisation or sensualisation of his female characters. The two major roles that women could play in western Orientalist film circa 1920–1960 were either thinly clad seductresses (harem and seraglio girls) or beautiful objects of the male protagonist's desire (also dressed in revealing clothing). Kiarostami's *Ten*, on the other hand, a film which revolves around a female taxi driver and her female passengers, presents a wide range of non-sexualized "every woman" types, including the taxi driver's sister, a pious old woman, and a prostitute. Kiarostami has been praised for his daring reinterpretation of Iranian women in his films by providing portraits of the full breadth of female experience, including the other roles they play outside of family and child-bearing.

Ironically, a stark realist in one sense, Kiarostami plays with some of the same Orientalist discourse and semiotics that Powell could not transcend, in his use of colour and light as a medium to explore the ethereal (avoiding the richness, saturation, and density of colour that Orientalism would employ as shorthand for the senses and fleshly worldliness). Both Powell and Kiarostami demonstrate a fixation with both colour schemes and fixed visual elements, such as form and framing, as a source of meaning, a recognizable feature in many of their films probably ultimately related to their mutual interest in still photography, painting and graphical arts.

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List of Figures

Figure 1. Douglas Fairbanks's *Thief of Baghdad* (1924) was noteworthy for the cost of the lavish sets and costumes, and certain special effects (flying horses, flying carpets) were imitated in Powell's *Thief of Bagdad* (1940). **Figure 2.** Typical British Orientalist painting: possibly Thomas Malton, 1748–1804.



Figures 3–4. The eye of the opening scene of *The Thief of Bagdad* prepares the viewer for a visual feast of Technicolor and special effects.



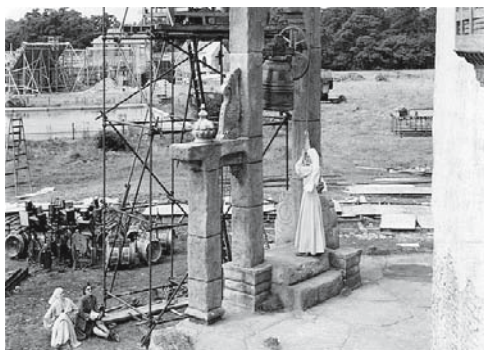
Figures 5–6. Emotion created by colour in *The Red Shoes* (1948) and evidence of Powell's visual imagination rooted in still photography framing techniques (i.e. visual S-curve recommended in standard photographic manuals).



Figures 7–10. A sequence from the *Thief of Bagdad* (1940) seen as a series of Orientalist tableaux. A comparison of **Figure 9** from the *Thief* with the Orientalist painting (circa 1880–90) in **Figure 10** by French artist Philippe Pavy reveals the similarity of Powell's procession with the common Orientalist motif of the colourful entrance of a notable person on an animal accompanied by elaborately dressed attendants.



Figure 11. The outdoor backdrops in *Black Narcissus* were paintings. The landscape paintings are so realistic that even modern viewers are astonished when they learn that it was not filmed in the Himalayas. **Figure 12.** The actual set used in **Figure 11** at Pinewood Studios, London.



Figures 13–16. Consonance of earth tone colours in *A Taste of Cherry* suggesting spiritual dryness and death. **Figure 16.** Typical shot of Badii in *A Taste of Cherry* alienated from himself and the viewer – slowly disintegrating into shades of light and mirroring the colour of earth.



Figure 17. Kiarostami and cast in *A Taste of Cherry* revealed in the final scene in spring colours.

Figure 18. Another symbolic use of colour in *A Taste of Cherry*: Badii spiritually trapped in his monochrome car looks outward to a brightly coloured garden while photographing a happy couple, establishing psychic distance between the two worlds.

