

Between Past and Present: Men's Temporal Journeys in *I teti në bronz* and *Taste of Cherry*

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Abstract

This paper examines how Viktor Gjika's Albanian socialist realist film *I teti në bronz* (1970) and Abbas Kiarostami's *Taste of Cherry* (1997) both explore men's search for meaning through temporal journeys. Despite their distinct geopolitical and aesthetic contexts, both films employ the road movie trope—featuring solitary or companioned male protagonists—to navigate landscapes of memory, mortality, and existential inquiry. *I teti në bronz* constructs a collective male identity by looking backward through shared chronological memory, while *Taste of Cherry* explores individual existentialism through encounters that oscillate between past recollection and future contemplation. By analyzing their episodic structures and symbolic use of time, this paper reveals how these seemingly disparate films converge in their philosophical meditation on temporality, memory, and the meaning of life.

1. Introduction

Cinema is uniquely equipped to visualize human time. So too is the cinematography of two renowned directors, Viktor Gjika and Abbas Kiarostami, whose works compress, expand, and reorder temporal experience. Cinema allows narratives to navigate the complex relationship between past, present, and future—temporal themes this paper aims to explore through a comparative study of two seemingly unrelated films: Viktor Gjika's *I teti në bronz* (The Eighth in Bronze, 1970) from socialist Albania, and Abbas Kiarostami's *Taste of Cherry* (1997) from post-revolutionary Iran. Despite their disparate contexts, both films use cinematic space in service of temporal inquiry. Separated by three decades and shaped by distinct ideological regimes, they share a philosophical concern: how temporal journeys become vehicles for exploring time and the meaning of life.

In both films, men characters traverse landscapes—Albania's mountainous terrain and Iran's desolate hills—not to reach destinations, but to confront memory, history, and existential uncertainty. These landscapes are not passive backdrops but active temporal agents, bearing the imprint of past sacrifice or the echo of impending absence. Space becomes temporal:

physical roads mirror psychological journeys, imagined or real historical trajectories, and the unfolding of time itself.

Gjika's film memorializes a fallen war hero through the collective, retrospective recollections of his fallen heroic comrades. Kiarostami's film, by contrast, follows a man's forward-looking quest for the unheroic death—a journey that paradoxically compels him to confront the value of life and the weight of lived experience. This analysis will show that their narrative strategies—one grounded in collective history, the other in radical subjectivity—offer parallel explorations of how alternate identities are forged at the intersection of time and space. In both films, men's friendship and encounters with others become the crucibles through which they navigate their temporal alternative identities and confront the meaning of their existence. Sometimes these encounters are with comrades, sometimes with strangers, but as in other Iranian movies [16] they all provide ambiguous intimacies between two men that transcend the borders of male friendship.

The novelty of this comparison lies in looking beyond the films' political and aesthetic disparities to identify a shared underlying structure: a temporal journey mapped onto a physical one. Both films use the trope of a road trip not as an adventure, but as a crucible for memory and meaning.

2. Collective Memory as Monument: Temporality in *I teti në bronz*

On its surface, Viktor Gjika's *I teti në bronz* appears as a tribute to a national martyr, *Commissar Ibrahim Kovaçi*, adhering to the heroic archetypes of Socialist Realist art. The narrative follows seven of his former comrades as they transport his bronze bust to his hometown for a commemorative ceremony [15]. Yet the film's true innovation lies in its temporal architecture. The physical journey through Albania's altered or time-frozen landscapes becomes a framework for a deeper, chronological journey into the past.

The story unfolds through a series of episodic flashbacks, each narrated by a different comrade. This structure forms a layered, yet linear, timeline of their shared wartime experiences. Each memory acts as a narrative milestone, directly tied to the physical progress of their journey. The film's temporality is thus elastic; while the present-day journey moves forward, the narrative focus is overwhelmingly retrospective. Chronology and geography become inseparable, mapping the terrain of collective memory onto the physical world.

While formally socialist realist, the film's narrative approach is surprisingly nuanced. Ibrahim, the hero, is conspicuously absent from the present-tense narrative; he exists only as a bronze effigy and as a phantom constructed from the fragmented memories of others. This narrative strategy—a retrospective montage voiced by multiple speakers—democratizes the hero. He is not an unassailable monolith but a figure shaped and defined by the collective. The act of commemoration becomes an active, participatory process of remembering. This approach may have presented a challenge to audiences unfamiliar with its memory-driven temporal shifts, as it prioritizes subjective recall over a singular, authoritative narrative voice.

3. Existential Drifts: The Individual and Time in *Taste of Cherry*

Nearly three decades later, Abbas Kiarostami’s *Taste of Cherry* presents a journey of a starkly different kind: solitary, philosophical, and steeped in ambiguity. The protagonist, Mr. Badii, drives through the arid hills outside Tehran, searching for someone to perform a single task: to bury him after he commits suicide. His encounters with a series of potential helpers—a young Kurdish soldier, an Afghan seminarian, and an elderly Turkish taxidermist—form the film’s episodic structure. Each interaction becomes a philosophical waypoint, forcing both Badii and the audience to contemplate life, death, faith, and duty.

Kiarostami’s narrative is famously sparse. There is no expository dialogue to explain Badii’s despair and no conventional plot resolution. Instead, the film operates through what can be described as a form of “cinematic free indirect discourse,” where the camera’s perspective merges the subjective and the objective [3]. The long, observational takes of Badii driving are punctuated by point-of-view shots—of the landscape, of the people he speaks to—inviting viewers to inhabit his contemplative state. This technique fosters a profound existential reflection, as Badii’s forward-looking plan—his death—is constantly interrupted by reflections on the past and the simple, sensory details of the present.

The film’s title itself points to this tension. The taxidermist, Mr. Bagheri, recounts how the simple taste of a mulberry once saved him from his own despair, suggesting that sensory pleasure and memory are potent antidotes to existential angst [2]. Badii’s quest, though ostensibly about ending his life, transforms into an inquiry into what makes life worth living. The film’s controversial, self-reflexive ending—where Kiarostami reveals the film crew—further complicates its temporal dimension, reminding the audience that they are witnessing a constructed narrative, an “aesthetic object designed to provoke thought and feeling” [1].

4. Converging Roads: A Comparative Temporal Framework

The profound connection between *I teti në bronz* and *Taste of Cherry* lies in their shared use of a physical journey to structure a temporal one. Both films are, in essence, road movies of men’s soul. Their narrative progression is marked by encounters and landscapes that trigger internal shifts. The following table highlights the parallels and divergences in their approaches.

Aspect		<i>I teti në bronz</i>	<i>Taste of Cherry</i>
Temporal Anchor	An-	The collective past, recalled chronologically by comrades.	An individual’s existential crisis, situated in the present but looking to the future (death) and past (meaning).
Narrative Structure		A linear montage of shared memories, creating a unified history.	An episodic, circular road-trip punctuated by philosophical dialogues and introspection.

Function of Encounters	Comrades reinforce a shared past; locations serve as collective milestones.	Strangers offer divergent philosophical viewpoints, challenging the protagonist's resolve.
Narrative Lens	Shared memory constructs a unified, collective identity and immortalizes a hero.	Free indirect discourse and ambiguity explore subjective truth and question the nature of life's value.
Ultimate Goal	To celebrate a hero and affirm a collective national history.	To find a collaborator for death, but ultimately to question that choice and affirm life's intrinsic value.

In *I teti në bronz*, the narrative is fundamentally backward-looking. The young comrades look to the past to solidify their identity and the nation's ideological foundations. Their chronology is militarized and purposeful, yet it is humanized by the emotional textures of personal memory. In *Taste of Cherry*, the protagonist is ostensibly forward-looking—toward his imminent death—but this forward momentum forces a constant re-evaluation of the past of "the others", or other alternative pasts, and present. The sequence of his encounters represents a philosophical progression and alternative life choices: from duty (the soldier) to faith (the seminarian) and finally to naturalism and experience (the taxidermist).

While Gjika's film literalizes memory through explicit flashbacks and the symbolic bust, Kiarostami channels it through silence, gaze, and landscape. Yet both directors understand that the journey itself—the movement through space—is what unlocks the passage through time.

5. Conclusion

Though separated by decades, geography, and ideology, *I teti në bronz* and *Taste of Cherry* converge in their sophisticated use of time as a central narrative and thematic device. They demonstrate that the road movie genre can transcend simple plot mechanics to become a powerful framework for philosophical inquiry. Gjika uses the journey to build a monument out of memory, constructing a collective past to define a nation's present. Kiarostami uses the journey to deconstruct the self, forcing a confrontation between the desire for oblivion and the persistent, simple beauties of life.

By placing these films in dialogue, we uncover a shared cinematic intuition: that memory is not a static archive but an active, ongoing search. Whether for collective identity or individual purpose, the journey through the temporal landscapes of our lives is framed by the encounters—with people, with places, with ourselves—that guide us through uncertainty.

6. Discussion: Methodological Novelty and Avenues for Further Inquiry

This analysis has sought to demonstrate that a shared narrative architecture—a journey through space that structures a journey through time—connects Viktor Gjika’s *I teti në bronz* and Abbas Kiarostami’s *Taste of Cherry*. By placing these two films in dialogue, our aim was to move beyond conventional geopolitical or aesthetic categories to uncover a deeper, shared cinematic logic in their exploration of memory and meaning. The purpose of this section is to reflect on the implications of this comparative method, acknowledge its limitations, and propose directions for future research.

The primary contribution of this paper, we contend, lies in its unconventional pairing. Juxtaposing a relatively obscure Albanian Socialist Realist film [8, 10, 14, 15] with a canonical work of the Iranian New Wave is a deliberate methodological choice. This juxtaposition is intended not merely as a formal exercise, but as a method to reveal latent structural and thematic parallels that a singular analysis would miss. It reframes *I teti në bronz* as more than a simple piece of propaganda, highlighting its sophisticated temporal structure. Simultaneously, it casts a new light on *Taste of Cherry*, emphasizing the temporal dimension of its existential quest. The value of this approach is its ability to show how disparate cinematic traditions can independently arrive at similar narrative solutions to represent universal human concerns: the weight of the past and the uncertainty of the future.

It is important, however, to acknowledge the limitations of this study. The analysis of *I teti në bronz* is necessarily constrained by the relative scarcity of international scholarship on Albanian cinema from this period. A deeper, more culturally specific reading would require archival research into its production context and domestic reception. Conversely, our interpretation of *Taste of Cherry* builds upon a rich body of existing criticism. The novelty of our argument, therefore, emerges less from a radical reinterpretation of either film in isolation, and more from the new insights generated by the dialogue we have constructed between them.

This comparative framework opens several avenues for further inquiry. First, future research could build upon this foundation by conducting the aforementioned archival work on Gjika’s film, further testing the hypothesis that its narrative structure represents a nuanced application of Socialist Realist tenets. Second, the methodology itself—comparing films across significant ideological and cultural divides based on shared structural principles—could be fruitfully applied elsewhere. One might, for example, compare the treatment of family and social change in a work of the Japanese master Yasujiro Ozu with that of a contemporary American independent filmmaker. Such studies can challenge our assumptions about cinematic influence and reveal the convergent ways in which filmmakers globally use the formal properties of the medium to navigate the complexities of human experience. Ultimately, this paper advocates for a more flexible and imaginative comparative approach, one that finds meaning in the unexpected connections between the world’s diverse cinematic histories.

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