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The Post Banishment Films of Jafar Panahi

Jafar Panahi is a criminal. For the past six years he has not once, not twice, but three times intentionally violated the law handed down to him by his own government, after being sentenced for propaganda against the Iranian regime. Panahi is also one of the best and most important filmmakers in world cinema today. He has received numerous awards from festivals across the globe, for his films that highlight as well as critique contemporary Iranian life. Over the past six years, under immense censorship and political interference, he has directed three exceptional films that serve as both artistic achievements as well as acts of political protest.

The films *This is Not a Film*, *Closed Curtain* and *TAXI* were all made illegally after the Iranian government banned Panahi from directing, writing or producing films in 2010. Under these dire circumstances – where the practice of his art can lead to prison or worse – most filmmakers would either try to escape or give in to their sentencing. Panahi has chosen to do neither. He has continued to direct films not just in spite of the ban, but also because of it and though the ban has kept him and his camera off the streets of Tehran, it has lead him to adopt new techniques to tell the stories he wants to tell. With the release of each film post 2010, it has been a treat to see him attempts to both defy the ban, while complying with it enough to avoid prison. In their attempt to silence him, the Iranian regime has actually cause Panahi to up his game creatively. With each passing year, the films become more than just political statements; they function as a shining example of how under the strictest censorship and political interference, a great artist can continue to make great art.

Panahi's career as a feature filmmaker began in 1995 with the release of *The White Balloon*, which won him the Cannes Camera d'Or, the award given to a first time filmmaker. He went on to make four more features before his imprisonment; only one of them, 1997's *The Mirror*, was released in Iran. His other three features: *The Circle* (2000), *Crimson Gold* (2003) and *Offside* (2007), did not meet the requirements set by the Iranian Ministry of Culture and Guidance, which forbids any critique of the country or its laws, something that he has made a career of doing. Because he chooses not to meet those requirements, those three films were banned from being shown in Iran. Along with being shown in films festivals worldwide, his films were shown at secret screenings around Iran, which could not have pleased the Iranian theocracy. Throughout his career, Panahi has done just enough to keep himself out of the grips of the authorities, until July 2009, when he was arrested after he attended a gathering at the grave of Neda Agha-Soltan, the female protestor whose death during a demonstration against the 2009 reelection of President Mahmoud

Ahmadinejad went viral. He was released eight hours later. It would sadly not be the last time he would be detained for supporting an anti-government movement publicly.

In Sept. 2009, in Montreal as the head juror of the Montreal Film Festival, Panahi had his fellow jurors wear green scarves in support of the green movement. Six months later, on March 2010, he was arrested and charged with “propaganda against the government” and put in detention in Evin Prison in Tehran without trial. He spent 86 days in prison, and was released after pressure from the international film community and news that he was undergoing a hunger strike in prison. In December of 2010, the Iranian government sentenced him to six years in prison and a 20-year ban on producing, writing and directing films. Since then, he has not served one day behind bars thanks to an appeal. He is, however, unable to leave the country and the ban is still in place, forbidding him from directing a film till 2030, when he is 70 years old. It would be a blow to the world of film if Panahi let something like a government ban stop him from working. So putting his personal freedom at risk, he went to work, creating a direct response to his legal and creative difficulties.

In 2011, a few months after Panahi received his sentence, the Cannes Film Festival premiered his newest feature, *This is Not a Film*. Reports of the film being smuggled out of Iran in a cake were later debunked, but nonetheless brought more attention to a film that everyone should have taken notice of anyway. The 76-minute “documentary” takes place inside Panahi’s apartment in Tehran on Fireworks Wednesday, the day of the Persian New Year. Panahi – in his first starring role – is waiting to hear back from his lawyer about whether his appeal of the six-month prison sentence and two-decade ban on filmmaking will be approved. While he waits, we see him talk about filmmaking with a friend and fellow filmmaker, Mojtana Mirahmasb, who is supposedly filming a documentary on Iranian filmmakers out of work. Mirahmasb films Panahi performing a daily routine: watering the plants, making tea, having numerous conversations with his lawyer and feeding the family iguana. Panahi talks to Mirahmasb about the ban and how it has made him rethink what exactly a film is, showing scenes of his previous work on his television to emphasize his points. He also tries and fails to act out the opening scene of the film he was working on before his arrest using some tape, objects around the apartment and his living room rug as props

.Later, Panahi takes hold of the camera to follow a young man picking up the trash from him and the other residents. The film ends outside the gates of his apartment building, with the young man telling him not to go any further for risk of being caught. Panahi films anyway as the young man goes through the gate and the film fades to black as he leaps over a small fire.

This is Not A Film is a departure from the work we’ve come to expect from Panahi, for two reasons. First, *This is Not A Film* takes place in just one location. In his previous work, Panahi has always offered us a very broad view of Tehran. He’s

showed us the shops, homes, major streets and alleyways of his hometown. Because of the ban he would put himself at tremendous risk if he were to film on a bus like he did in his second feature *The Mirror*, about a lost little girl trying to find her way home. Or film outside a soccer stadium in broad daylight, as he did in *Offside*, about a group of women being kept from seeing a soccer game because of the regimes laws prohibiting women from attending male sporting events.

Second, Panahi is in front of the camera. The ban has made Panahi the director, becomes Panahi the actor. This is explained in *This is Not A Film* during a conversation between him and Mirtahmasb. Panahi, sitting on his kitchen table, right before he tries to unsuccessfully show his friend how he was going to film the opening scene of the film he was working on before his arrest, tells him the terms of his ban. After listing the many things he is now barred from doing, he tells Mirathmasb that “acting and reading screenplays were not mentioned.”

Panahi exploits this loophole and one of the most fascinating things about watching *This is Not A Film* is seeing how in trying to silence one of their most respected filmmakers, the Iranian government has actually turned Panahi into a symbol of free speech, a living example of how to subvert artistic censorship. Panahi could have used his newfound position to do speeches, or write a blog, however, he is a filmmaker, so, instead of trying to lead protests through the streets of Iran, where he can be ignored by state run media, he instead is spreading his message from his apartment to darkened theaters around the world.

Symbolism is not new in Panahi’s cinema. It’s one of the aspects of his work that has survived the transition from pre to post-banishment. Take for instance the scene in *The Circle*, a film shot in the style of Richard Linklater’s *Slacker*, which follows ten women trying to navigate through modern day Tehran. In one scene, one of the women is running down a long hallway at a bus station, the long bars separating the windows, a clear symbol of imprisonment and oppression; Panahi runs through that scene in *This is Not A Film*, saying that it is the location that is doing the directing, not him, as he contemplates filmmaking now that he is no longer legally able to practice it.

Panahi’s continued use of symbolism in *This is Not A Film* that raises it from being just a film about an artist unable to make art to one about artistic defiance and bravery. Panahi could have just sat down on a chair and talked for 76 minutes about how terrible it is to be a director unable to make films. People would still see it, because the immense courage Panahi conveys just making a film like this, knowing that he is putting his personal freedom in jeopardy is commendable. However, that version of *This is Not A Film*, while important, would also be boring. Film is a form of entertainment and Panahi knows this as much as anyone. He wants to entertain and he succeeds by his use of mise-en-scène, which comes off as puzzles he wants the audience to piece together.

One scene where he does this is one where Panahi is trying to describe the opening of the movie he was unable to make. Mirahmasb, standing on a desk, films Panahi as he uses duct tape to make a box on top of his rug that's intended to represent the bedroom of his protagonist, a girl unable to go to college because she is confined to her room. The camera pointing down on Panahi, with the angle of this shot showing Panahi inside the box in a box he has created. This is done purposefully; he is testing the audience, wanting us not to envision the scene he is discussing, but to see through the text to what he's really trying to convey and that is Panahi discussing his imprisonment. Panahi has never spoken publicly about what happened to him while in prison and he doesn't do so in any of the films he's directed post-2010; doing so could possibly lead the authorities to once again barge through his front door. So he shows us visually what he went through. It's a moment when you realize what's truly going on makes you want to look back and see what other messages you may have missed. Once you figure that his hand is in every moment in *This is Not A Film*, you start to notice the directors' true intentions, that with every movement, shot and line of dialogue, he is directly addressing his oppressors, letting them know that he will find a way to continue his passion. Going so far as to film entire scenes off his iPhone. If this were truly going to be the last Jafar Panahi film, it would be a really high mark to end out on. Thankfully for Panahi, the people of Iran and lovers of film around the world, he continued.

This is Not A Film was praised upon its release and two years later, Panahi would once again defy the government ban by releasing a new film. One that not only touched on current political events but also took us deeper into the mindset of the director. *Closed Curtain* premiered at the 2013 Berlin Film Festival, where it won the Silver Bear for Best Script. In *Closed Curtain*, we are introduced to a character only known as the writer (played by Kambuzia Partovi, the co-director of the film), who is hiding out in a villa with his dog, named Boy. The writer blocks all the windows, not wanting anyone to see him and more importantly his dog. We find out later that the writer is hiding the dog because he is protecting him from a countrywide purge of man's best friend. The ban on dogs is not symbolic, but an actual event happening in Iran at that time. The theocracy declared dogs immoral and had authorities round up dogs from the street and even from the hands of their owners. Later, while stepping out to empty out the dog's litter – the writer doesn't want to risk the dog going outside for fear of being seen and taken – the writer does not close the front door all the way when he returns, which leads to two young people, a brother and sister entering his space. The writer wants them to leave immediately, but the two are also hiding from the authorities; the man eventually steps out to find a friend, leaving his sister Melika behind. Not wanting to attract attention, the writer allows Melika to spend the night. In the morning she disappears, only to return again, later in the film seemingly out of thin air.

One of the most important scenes in *Closed Curtain* happens when the writer and Melika meet for the second time. The writer questions Melika, asking when she left, where she went and how she got back in. She says a few words then proceeds to rip down the black curtains the writer has placed on all of the windows of the villa. The

writer, confused, demands to know why Melika is doing this. At one point, Melika pulls the large curtains beside a staircase, revealing large posters for *The Mirror* and *The Circle*. Almost an hour into the film, it's revealed that this villa belongs to Panahi and a few seconds after that, the writer and Melika walk past the view of the camera, where Panahi himself appears. What we have been watching: a quiet film about a man trying to write in seclusion, while keeping his pet out of sight from authorities, is actually a fantasy taking place inside Panahi's own head, one we later find out is struggle between two forces in the form of a man and a woman. The writer is meant to represent Panahi's creative side, which like the director, is in hiding. Melika, dressed in all black, is "desperation itself" according to the writer. The two of them fighting for control of the director's mind: the writer wants him to keep writing, while Melika wants him to succumb to desperation, perhaps to the point of suicide.

This second act of protest by shows us what the ban has done to Panahi on a mental level. Again, he chooses to channel those feelings into a film, with the final shot of him ignoring Melika and leaving her locked in the villa being a strong statement that his creativity will always win out in the end. *Closed Curtain* is his most existential film. It's also a much cleaner film than *This is Not A Film*. There's still a lot of handheld camera work and shots that make it seem as if they were filmed on Panahi's iPhone, a call back to *This is Not A Film*. The cinematography, with lots of wide-angle shots, excellent use of shadows and a 90-degree panning shot that happens right after Panahi makes his first appearance is breathtaking and stands out as one of the best single shots of his career. *Closed Curtain* is likely to be the prettiest film Panahi has filmed in his career. It's a film that serves as a refresher on Panahi's life since the making of *This is Not A Film*, another puzzle that Panahi wants us to figure out and another stance against artistic censorship.

Right after the release *Closed Curtain* Iran's government went through some changes. The biggest change was the election of Hassan Rouhani to the presidency. Rouhani, a moderate, encouraged personal and political freedoms, a drastic change from his predecessor, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. This turn of events inspired Panahi to be a little more drastic with his next project. Filming all over Tehran, using many different cameras, he once again delivered a film to the Berlin Film Festival in protest of the ban still placed on him. *Taxi* premiered at the 2015 Berlin International Film Festival winning the Golden Bear at the festival. The film finds the director, a familiar face in world cinema working as a cab driver. Using a variety of cameras, two in the cab, his smartphone and a point-and-shoot digital camera, films himself and his interactions with the passengers that enter his cab. He refuses to accept money from anyone to the surprise of some passengers; others pay him anyway. *Taxi* is the first film since he was officially banned that finds Panahi filming around Tehran. Once again we see the streets and alleyways of Tehran through his eyes. And, most importantly, *Taxi* is the closest we've gotten to a pre-2010 Panahi film, as the people who enter the cab and conversations we get to see thanks to Panahi's cameras give us a snapshot of contemporary Iran.

Panahi introduces us to a man who brags that he's a thief after arguing with a woman that Iran should continue to hang prisoners for even minor crimes; a bootlegger who, like Panahi, is defying not following the rules of the regime by offering citizens a chance to see TV programs that would never get played in Iran, like *The Walking Dead*. The bootlegger and Panahi later drive a husband and wife who have just been in an accident (the husband asking the bootlegger to record his last words over his wife's screams) the video message is recorded on Panahi's iPhone, a reference to *This is Not A Film*); two old women, one carrying a goldfish in a bowl; Panahi's own niece, an old friend with something awful to show Panahi and a human rights activist on her way to meet the family of a woman currently in prison undergoing a hunger strike, like Panahi did. Whether any of the people who enter the cab are people Panahi purposefully put there in his cab, reading lines he came up with is unclear. There are no credits, for their own safety. Panahi is sticking his neck out further than ever, so he does not want anyone to take the fall for him by being associated with his film. Panahi, quiet, smiling and reserved throughout the film, is quietly enraged six years into his ban. He shows his anger through the people entering the cab; all saying what Panahi wishes he could say on camera.

The film is playful, funny and fast paced. It still touches on serious subjects, such as Panahi protesting his censorship and critiques of current Iranian society. But from the long shots of him driving to Tehran, to the many moments of comedy, such as the interactions between the old women and his aggressive, smart-mouthed niece, it's seems that Panahi is enjoying himself. He even takes a moment to poke fun at himself, when the bootlegger questions Panahi's intentions while in the cab. He asks Panahi whether certain passengers are actors that Panahi has planted, trying to get an answer from the quiet, smiling cab driver. What's amusing about this interaction is that the entire time the bootlegger is questioning Panahi, we're also questioning the bootlegger. Is this short man carrying a large bag full of pirated DVDs an actual bootlegger or an actor? It's all a part of the game Panahi is playing with us, which fits into the playful nature of the film. Those familiar with Panahi's work by now will figure it out eventually, but it wouldn't be surprising if for a moment people allow themselves to get lost in the game.

Taxi, while enjoyable, also comes off as the saddest film Panahi has directed since his banishment at first viewing. Each time a passenger left Panahi's cab, you get a sense that Panahi was watching another great story slip through his fingers. Multiple viewings however offer rewards. Seeing how *Taxi* connects to his previous two features. The way Panahi uses space, symbolism, with the cab symbolizing a mobile prison cell and technical craftsmanship makes *Taxi* a more fascinating experience. It's comforting to see that he is getting closer and closer to his older style, while not abandoning the new tricks he has been forced to learn since his banishment from filmmaking.

There is a scene in *Taxi* where Panahi's niece recites the rules the school has placed on her for an assignment where she has to make a short film. The entire rundown

describes the many censorship barriers filmmakers in Iran have to wade through. It's very much a trumped up version of the Hays Code Hollywood dealt with in the 1930s to late 1960s, which prohibited sex, nudity, homosexuality, violence against women or children and more restrictions. The Hays Code doesn't exist in today's Hollywood and the movies are better for it. However, despite those restrictions, directors like Billy Wilder, Ernest Lubitsch, Howard Hawks, Alfred Hitchcock, Douglas Sirk and others found ways to subvert them. They accomplished it through their use of mise-en-scene, costume, set design and the blocking of the actors on screen.

Panahi faces a much stronger prohibition than those classic Hollywood directors and faces more stern punishment. The way he has subverted those restrictions are similar to the way Wilder, Hawks and others fought against the Hays Code. Artists, no matter the time or location will continue to find ways to innovate with their art, always trying to stay one step ahead of the people who wish to keep their work from being shown. In film schools around the world, people with dreams of becoming film directors or scholars learn how classic Hollywood directors performed under heavy restrictions. With the banishment on Panahi, now they can see in real-time how an artist fights back against censorship and artistic repression. The banishment has been a detriment to him creatively. The sooner that ruling can be reversed and he can go back to making films freely, the better he and world cinema will be for it. However, if the ban that has stripped him from so many resources can be good for anything, is that it's caused a strong director to push himself, to break the chains that bind him, a link breaking with every new film he makes.