

## SEEING THE UNSEEN: THE INVISIBLE WORLDS OF JAFAR PANAHI'S CINEMA

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Censorship mainly persecuted words in dialogues. And of course, the dialogues had to be limited because of that. On the other hand, images were harder to be defined whether they are okay, or they contained something not acceptable. Films of that time used this phenomenon to communicate their audiences.

— ANDRZEJ WAJDA, Polish Filmmaker on making films in an authoritarian state, in BBC *The Film Programme*

### A CAMERA TURNED ON ITSELF

In 2015's *Taxi Tehran*, Iranian filmmaker Jafar Panahi spends his time driving a taxi around the city, now that he has been forbidden by the government to make films for 20 years. The conceit is a playful variation on Andrzej Wajda's words, because Panahi subverts the limitations on his artistic endeavors by not directing, but acting in a film. Panahi steps in front of the camera after many years as a director and makes visible the machinations of the cinematic world he creates for the audience. By turning the camera on the filmmaker, at a time in his life when he is no longer legally allowed to make films, the film mounts a powerful act of political art in the aporetic moments between the created text and its creative process.

In one of the many colorful encounters that the director has with his passengers, a young passenger, who aspires to be a filmmaker, seeks recommendations of movies to watch as a way of furthering his film education. While discussing some films with Panahi, the young man expresses his difficulty in finding a subject, saying that "[he has] seen many films, and read many novels, but can't seem to find a good subject." Panahi's hitherto indulgent look turns serious as he replies "Those films are already made, those books are already written. You have to look elsewhere, you have to find it for yourself."

Panahi's warning against examining an existing text in search of new subjects is both an iconoclastic gesture and a self-reflexive comment. Considering that Panahi's last three films stand defiantly in the face of the institutional restrictions imposed on them, it is no surprise that he encourages others to resist the extraordinary reliance on existing conven-

tions and seek new ones. His critical attitude towards relying on past texts to find new subjects to articulate our concerns is not a simple rejection of nostalgia. By urging the young filmmaker, and in turn the audience, to seek new modes of viewing and receiving the film, Panahi draws attention to his own new modes of producing and presenting his film without traditional filmmaking tools. The fragility of the film's production permeates our encounter of the film, as it deliberately unsettles the certainty of images and our reliance on visibility to authenticate them. Instead of a cinema built on familiar aspects of plot, character and setting, the film offers the uncertainty and unknowability of the political, social and ethical possibilities of art.

Jafar Panahi moves away from a conventional role as a director and negotiates his officially mandated disappearance from Iran's visual culture by becoming at once a writer, an actor and the subject of the film. In both *Taxi (Taxi Tehran, 2015)* and *In film nist (This is Not a Film, 2011)* we find a blurred space between images of reality and fiction, which calls into question the power and certainty of the images used to demarcate reality and fiction. These films offer clarity about the ethics of witnessing by turning the camera on the filmmaking process itself, and finding new acts of resistance through the prohibition of representation imposed on the director. This paper examines Panahi iconoclastic use of film, which destroys narratives of fixed visual certainty in favor of narratives of ethical possibility. They serve as overtures to conversations about the social responsibility of the artist and her work, rather than providing closure to artful narratives. In light of French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas' views of ethics in art, this paper reads the intersection of ethics and visibility in the two docufiction films made since Panahi's confinement and filmmaking ban.

## THE WORLD OF PANAHİ'S CINEMA

While Iranian cinema has been recognized and celebrated in many film festivals across the world, Iran has had a tumultuous relationship with cinema. Film historian and critic Hamid Naficy points out that like filmmakers working under many authoritarian regimes, Iranian directors always operate between "the state which both supported and banned them; the public which demanded political commitment; and the film industry, which

was bent on maximizing profits.”<sup>1</sup> Initially, the Islamist movement violently opposed to the cinema, evidenced by the destruction of the Rex Cinema in Abadan in 1978 by arson, in which over 377 people died<sup>2</sup>. In his book, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema*, Hamid Naficy recounts how the initial resistance to representational art was abandoned in favor of using cinema as a propagandist tool when the Islamic Revolution took charge of government. He comments that the aim was not the destruction of cinema or modernity – but “[to adopt] cinema to combat the Pahlavi culture and usher in an Islamic culture”<sup>3</sup>. While Islamic art’s evolution avoided pictorial or representative images in favor of textual and geometric patterns, Naficy points out that the redeployment of cinema as an alternative to the Westernized culture of the Shah regime, is not drawn upon lines of religion but upon the distinction of Iranian and foreign; a tendency that clearly reveals totalitarian, if not fascist intention.

Iranian cinema in the 1990s and 2000s had to balance politically engaged viewpoints while avoiding censure from the government. Alice Burgin goes as far as to say that that the films aimed at the festival circuits had an effect of recuperating the Iranian government’s image by creating a “benevolent international image” at the expense of the filmmakers’ “creative excellence”<sup>4</sup>. In this context of filmmaking, where the directors always encounter the uncertainty of whether they would get permission to make their film, Panahi continues to make subversive and critical films that reimagine the lines that separate the legitimate and forbidden, oppressed and dominant, and visible and hidden.

Iconoclastic cinema is not new for Panahi, whose earlier films also featured characters with fierce desires that did not conform to social norms. Panahi’s debut film, *Badkonake sefid* (*The White Balloon*, 1995) follows the indomitable Razieh who is determined to buy a gold fish regardless of the obstacles in her path. Mina, the protagonist from *Ayneh* (*The Mirror*, 1997) is unfazed when her mother fails to pick her up from school and finds her own way back home. The portrayal of women in prison in 2000’s *The Circle* drew the ire of the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance (MCIG). The women in his 2006 film *Offside* repeatedly try to enter the football stadium to watch the World Cup qualifying match between Iran and Bahrain, despite the state’s prohibition of women from attending sporting events. The tenor of these films resonate with Naficy’s view that the socially minded nature of Iranian neorealism called for a cinema with a “moral commitment to reality and to a poetics of realism”<sup>5</sup>. As one of the great directors at the helm of the New Iranian

cinema, Panahi has dealt with important issues of gender, representation, belonging and complicity in an Islamic society. Panahi's rebellious work often left him at odds with those he criticized, who invariably turned out to be those in power. Panahi's career had to endure the looming threat of censorship and prohibition from the MCIG. Despite this precarious situation, he grew more openly defiant of institutional censorship with his films. Saeed Zeydabadi-Nejad observes this shift in his account of *The Politics of Iranian Cinema*. He notes that Panahi increasingly radical attitude towards the MCIG is "[to set] an example for the younger filmmakers to follow, as well as make it possible for them to continue filming."<sup>6</sup>

Panahi's films tend to exceed the frame of fictionality and grasp at the divide between fiction and reality, not only by casting non-actors alongside professional actors, but also in its disruptive exposure of the filmmaking process. *The Mirror* starts as a realist drama of a child with an arm in a cast trying to make her way home, but alters the narrative focus when the protagonist turns to the camera and declares that she will not act any more. The girl removes the cast on her arm and her veil and asks to be let off the vehicle, because she *does* know her way home. Commenting on the film's ending, Panahi says that "reality and the imagination are intertwined [in that scene],"<sup>7</sup> as the protagonist's goals disappear into the actor's frustration. Despite echoing the character's desire to go home, the audience is immediately struck with the disparity in their lives — where the actor can choose to go home at any moment, unlike the character that has to encounter the despair of being lost perpetually.

Practical constraints have also shaped Panahi's need to exceed fictional strictures. *Offside* was filmed during an actual World Cup qualifying football match to capture the celebratory context in which the original act of defiance occurred. Panahi blurs the edges of documentary and fiction and flirts with formal and generic conceptions as a way of remaining truthful to the world he is representing, while questioning its rules and restrictions on the people. These instances of implicitly and explicitly questioning the impositions on women were not taken lightly by the Islamic government that wanted to enforce stricter control on women's rights as opposed to the liberalism and westernization of the preceding Shah Pahlavi's regime. However, Panahi has paid a price for his rebellion as *Offside* was the third of his films to be banned in Iran before its release.

In these films, we see Panahi's blending of contemporary concerns picked from everyday events with a sustained, empathetic outlook. Despite the politically charged nature of the films, his subjects do not engage in polemical grandstanding. Instead, he offers intimate portraits whose struggles may not have national or historical significance, but are central in determining their self-worth and place in the world. This inward-looking tendency in Iranian cinema is attributed to the looming threat of political retribution by an oppressive government. Noted filmmaker Bahram Beyzai comments that Iranians are compelled to "say things without appearing to have said them [...], but in such a way that those who should understand you have said it."<sup>8</sup> Without appearing insincere, Panahi's films use the immediate and personal nature of the narrative world to crystallize the problems of a broader context in a microcosm. These films elide certain narratives while turning visible other struggles and perspectives, not for narrative convenience, but to accentuate the fleeting intervals where the individual can take brief control of their lives in a hostile environment.

Perhaps the most important questions raised in Panahi's films are about the limits of freedom and responsibility. In *Offside*, a group of women are punished for intruding on a territory marked out as the male domain. The desire insinuated by their presence, and the double standards of the restrictions posed on them, is not a mocking critique, but rather a sincere attempt at a conversation. While they are expected to participate in the nation building exercise of cheering their team, and complying with terms that may restrict their personal freedom, they are forbidden from drinking from the same well of national pride. Rather than some trite magical solution to insidious social problems, Panahi leaves the audience with the conflict between the invisibility of the group of women and their indelible presence. Similarly, the very act of attempt at erasing Panahi due to his political views has led to an increased global attention, and in turn, foregrounding the questions of witnessing, reporting, recording and framing narratives in his cinema.

## FILMS IN CONFINEMENT

The late 2000s saw a more conservative turn in the Iranian government with the election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, and film production came under political scrutiny, with many filmmakers facing curtailment of freedom and threat of punishment. Panahi first came into

conflict with the Ahmadinejad government, when he openly supported filmmaker Granaz Moussavi's film *My Tehran for Sale* (2009), which presented the story of an Iranian artist seeking asylum in Australia to escape persecution in Iran. In 2010, Panahi and his family were arrested on the pretext of his attempting to make a controversial documentary about the Iranian elections, leading a 20-year ban from making films by the Iranian Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance. Amidst international uproar from the film community, Panahi continued to make films, which directly reference his inability to make films.

The first of Panahi's films since his arrest, *In film nist* is a video-essay where the director spends his day in his Tehran flat, coming to terms with his impending imprisonment and prohibition to make films. Panahi tries to circumvent the ban on filmmaking by verbally describing the scenes from a film that he was no longer allowed to make. Attempting to find loopholes in the ban, which does not prevent him from writing for or acting in films, Panahi films himself reading from scripts that were not approved by the ministry of culture for filming. Panahi enlists the help of Mojtaba Mirtahmasb as a collaborator and cinematographer, for the documentarian had expressed his intention to make a film that shows "Behind the scenes of Iranian filmmakers not making films." The film's use of ubiquitous digital technology and its shoestring budget both reflect the filmmaker's house arrest and the secrecy in which the film was shot. However, they inevitably draw attention to the absence of the production and technical crew, citing a transformative evolution of cinematic processes arising from necessity. The playful duplicity that Beyzai refers to surfaces here, is both as a tongue-in-cheek reconciling the reality of film production with the political control exercised over the creative process, and a way of seeking creative solutions in desperate times.

In *Taxi*, Panahi extends this trope of examining his exile from filmmaking through filmmaking. As he drives a taxi around the city, he picks up and drops off passengers despite his limited skills as a taxi driver. Film critic Peter Bradshaw calls Panahi, "an anti-Travis Bickle" who "[benignly cruises] the streets, looking for ideas."<sup>9</sup> The scenes seem disjointed and fragmentary, as the characters interact to varying degrees and results. A woman seeks help to rush her husband to a hospital after he was struck down in an accident. In the car, he makes a video testimony on Panahi's phone declaring that he was leaving his property to his wife. The director receives a call from the woman who informs him that her husband is recovering and still requests the video footage he recorded just in case. While the director's

ultimate purpose of driving a taxi is never clearly conveyed, like in this scene, he bears witness to or listens to someone else recounting his memory of an event. Almost in every case, the meaning of the account is altered or heavily influenced by the presence of the camera, even though it is mounted unobtrusively, as if to prevent it from interfering with reality. In contrast to *In film nist*, the narrative is not about Panahi's immediate circumstances, but takes a slightly broader stance on the meaning of creating fiction out of reality and vice versa. This distance from the director's personal concerns does not prevent the film from engaging with him as a character with complicated political, aesthetic and social perspectives. If *In film nist* is a heroic flourish against his oppressors, *Taxi* is his manifesto.

Besides these two docufiction films, Panahi also made the narrative film *Pardé (Closed Curtain, 2013)* during his confinement. The film also treats the problems stemming from a character's visibility and its relationship with government surveillance, as two people literally hide behind closed curtains to keep the persecuting authority at bay. The invisibility afforded by the curtains allows the filmmaker to circumvent the restrictions imposed on him, on his movement and actions. This essay does not discuss this film, due to its overtly fictional and dramatic premise. While its sustained engagement with the question of representing a narrative resonates with the other two films discussed here, this paper focuses on the docufiction films that tread the line between metaphor and fact.

These two self-reflexive films demonstrate the director's vulnerability to the external forces that have limited his participation in his chosen art form. The plotless and discursive nature of the films are laconic due to their filmmaking context. They also respond to a greater legacy of films, which examine the impossibility of representing the unseen and the unseeable. The French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas protests against the closed nature of art as it precludes the ethical question by fixing the image permanently and preventing further interaction. Panahi's subversion of the visual medium to seek the invisible resonates Levinas' call for an art that is incomplete and thus for an art that can question the certainty of the world within which it is set.

#### LEVINAS, ETHICS AND VISIBILITY

At first look, Emmanuel Levinas' ethical philosophy might seem to be the farthest thing to use to discuss cinema. Seemingly in line with the rejection of visual representation in the

Abrahamic religions and the Platonic tradition, Levinas was extremely skeptical of the ethical potential of art. However, the reasons for his skepticism lie more on the totalizing tendency of art, which fixes concepts in time, rather than on a general suspicion of its illusory nature. A Levinasian approach to cinema may seem odd, considering that, while Panahi's confinement changed the nature of the images he presented, his cinema is still strikingly imagistic. In his essay "Reality and Its Shadow," Levinas rejects the idea of an ethically committed art, as he sees it as an unchanging point that cannot truly encompass reality.<sup>10</sup> He draws a distinction between a static image of the art and the abstract concept that always exceeds the art.

Writing about the Levinasian stance towards art, Brian Bergen-Aurand elaborates on the seductive power of the image saying that "the work of art — especially the image — bewitches us and traps us in irresponsibility."<sup>11</sup> For Levinas, art can only create a false idea of "being-in-the-world," as it remains aesthetically interesting without any ethical value or utility. The enjoyment of the beauty of art precludes the possibility of an ethical encounter, because there is something "wicked and egoist and cowardly in artistic enjoyment."<sup>12</sup> However, he argues that when art reduces the concept to an image, criticism "integrates inhuman work of the artist into the human world" and it "detaches [art] from irresponsibility by envisaging its technique."<sup>13</sup> Through criticism, dislodges the completed and closed piece of art and opens it for further dialogue and examination. In this sense, Levinas offers the right approach to Panahi's cinema, as it destabilizes the authority of the image and argues for a self-reflexive if not self-critical mode of filmmaking.

Just as the intellectualism of modern art — which attempts to be its own exegesis, if not criticism — opens the potential for an ethical encounter between art and audience, Panahi's films interrogate the certainty and fixity of the images, even if they fail to completely step outside of the imagistic nature of the form. Levinas believes that language and criticism are the only ways of recuperating art. Panahi's films self-reflexively examine their own construction, as they create a space of introspective questioning of the filmmaking process itself. Most poignantly, these films tend towards an ethical space of incompleteness as they foreground the process of cinema, drawing in terms of both content, from the larger narrative of Panahi's struggles against a totalitarian regime, as well as the form that is subject to his expediencies and circumstances. These films gesture towards an infi-



nite possibility from which they could communicate concepts and evoke affective response rather than offering carefully constructed narratives.

#### THIS IS NOT A FILM

Jafar Panahi's *In film nist* may seem to reduce the distance between fact and fiction, but is in fact a treatise on the irreconcilability between the two. Between mundane activities, like drinking cups of tea, looking after the neighbor's dog in her absence and feeding the pet iguana, Panahi looks at his incomplete works at various stages of development, and contemplates his impending imprisonment and subsequent ban from work. Panahi reconstructs scenes, which have existed only in his mind, and inadvertently exposes the artifice of such a construction. In the simplest way, the film is not a film, because it is about a day in the director's life where he tries to recuperate the memory of a film that never existed. The mental world he attempts to evoke through his words is an abject defiance to the prohibition, which prevents him from representing the physical world. Panahi's action underlines the significance of the tenuous relationship between words and images in Islamic culture as well as critically examines the political complexities of its accompanying restrictions.

Panahi's political and social confinement creates an image of absence instead of the thing that he seeks to represent. However, the absence communicates a new meaning about the power of the image, itself in this confined space. The confinement is not just on his physical corporeality, but also on his mental worlds, as effected by the 20-year ban. However, he finds a way to circumvent the limitations. Early in the film, he comments that, while the judgment against him prevents him from making films, it does not say anything about reading out a script and enacting the drama that he cannot film. This clever manipulation of the system is delivered with a glint in his eye, but is quickly deflated because the images remain incomplete. Like the many unfinished narratives within the film, the image of the absence cannot articulate anything beyond the subject of its absence. The problem of the image and by extension, of cinema, is also that it is impossible to explain something that does not exist. Panahi dejectedly concedes his powerless position when he breaks down saying, "if we could tell a film, why would we make a film?"

This is not a film because it is a compilation of incomplete narratives. Towards the end of the film, he encounters a custodian collecting garbage from the apartment complex, who also happens to be a graduate student in arts research. Similar to the film, Panahi set out to narrate within the film, the custodian's story is also left incomplete. The film has few narrative elements that we are accustomed to in a film, and it does not resemble other stories that Panahi has told elsewhere. The film does not acknowledge the people who have worked on it due to the pragmatic necessity of protecting them. It blends reality of its making as a narrative component. In the simplest sense, it is not a film because it is shot digitally and transmitted by being whisked away on a USB drive. At this level, the film is about the visibility and elusiveness of narrative itself. The stories are incomplete because they evaporate before they can be permanently recorded in film. However, the ephemeral nature of the narratives also evokes the looming threat of persecution that the film insinuates in its construction.

Panahi and Mirtahmasb use a digital video camera and a phone camera to capture the moments in which they shift from documentary subject to documentary filmmaking. In one scene, Panahi uses his phone to record the new year's firework celebration taking place in the streets, when Mirtahmasb tells him that the phone could be a powerful tool, for it could help in recording a lot of important moments if he had left it turned on when he was released from prison. Mirtahmasb stresses the significance of recording things and documenting them, even if there is no possibility of turning them into a film. This brings us to wonder for whom do artists like Mirtahmasb insist that these unseen texts exist? What is the point of a film that no one will ever see? As if to answer this melancholic question, Mirtahmasb asks Panahi to continue filming, telling him to "take a shot of me in case [he is] arrested." The video shifts from the 16:9 aspect ratio of the digital video camera to the 4:3 aspect ratio of the phone camera in a distinctly poorer image quality. That shot seems to suggest that the significance of the image is in the very fact that it exists. Memory is unreliable, and the image is easily manipulated — but in adverse times, these two things create a fragile ecosystem where the events are witnessed and preserved.

The acts of watching and remembering play a central role in this film, as Panahi watches two scenes from his films. He points to a specific moment from *Talaye sorkh* (*Crimson Gold*, 2003) where the character has a devastating emotional response to a humiliating encounter with a jeweler. Panahi explains that that response was created entirely by the actor at the moment, and the details of his emotions did not exist before the scene was shot.

The film is ineffably cinematic, and no words could be used to reconstruct the image. Similarly, he points to the final moments from *Ayneh*, where the character Mina refuses to participate in the film. Again, the question of whether the action was staged is irrelevant because he sees himself in the same position as Mina, and must discard the burden of the artifice to seek a different kind of filmmaking. Panahi's confinement and the accompanying restrictions have led him to a mixing of reality and art, which have become indistinguishable to him.

In effect, this is not a film in the same way Magritte's paradoxical painting is not a pipe. Both reflect on the "Treachery of images" which remains unreliable in terms of offering a detailed perspective. *In film nist* often fails in its proclaimed aim of conveying narratives that were not allowed to be made. However, it makes abundantly clear the inability of accomplishing that aim and constantly draws our attention to its failure. It seeks to grasp at the significance of being visible when one is denied the legitimacy to be seen. The film's questioning stance examines the meaning of a cultural space where a filmmaker is prevented from participating in the cultural world. Ultimately, these questions percolate into a story about defiance and private rebellions, as the warning against celebrating the Persian New Year with fireworks is casually suspended by the everyday reality of the residents who carry on with their lives and practices. In *The Guardian's Film Weekly* podcast, Jason Solomons and Xan Brooks discuss the processes of Panahi's film, wondering how much of control and time did the director have in shooting or editing the film. They wistfully concede to the mystery of the text lies in the fact that "[Panahi] won't be able to tell us. And probably he shouldn't tell us."<sup>14</sup> The film's mystery has been reduced to a shorthand of "smuggled out of Iran in a cake" — a phrase used in many descriptions of the film — and has turned into a novelty. However, the mystery creates a different kind of ethical cinema, whose process opens itself to a world of possibility and struggle.

Panahi's film is a protest because it shows us the limits of the law that tries to confine his artistic impulse. In an interview with Zeydabadi-Nejad, Panahi states that he "does not care what the politicians will say [...] when you are not dependent on the government, then you can say exactly what you want, or what you understand. I have one viewer and that is my conscience."<sup>15</sup> Panahi's commitment to his viewership of one is severely tested when the imposed ban threatens to make it a literal reality. His response is not the apparent virtuoso performance where he seems to be the only figure both in front of

and behind the camera. Instead, his commitment to himself is clearest in the narrative structure that explores his failure to communicate exactly what he wants to say. In the process of acknowledging his failure, Panahi exposes a larger story about the delicate and fragmentary nature of narrative certainties. The narrative failure transforms itself into a defiant artistic strategy, which prioritizes the experience of the text over its structural and aesthetic cohesion. The non-representational and indirect sensibility in Panahi's films are reflective of key aspects of Islamic aesthetics which avoid image-centric to situate human experience in the universal context. However, they draw on the infinity of non-representational forms to reject the restrictions imposed in the name of Islamic austerity. Like many visual artists before him, he uses the symbolic and laconic structures to undermine the established conventions in favor of subjective experiences that connect the author to his audience.

#### TAXI TEHRAN

*Taxi* received the top honor at the 65<sup>th</sup> Berlin Film Festival where it premiered. In the opening scene of the film, two passengers have a dramatic conversation about the nature of crime and punishment under the Islamist regime. At the end of the conversation, a third passenger who recognizes Panahi as the celebrated filmmaker enquires about the authenticity of the conversation that they had just witnessed. The passenger's disbelief over the possibility of such a dramatic argument occurring naturally, immediately undercuts the air of authenticity evoked by the other the realist elements. However, the questioning becomes a basis of asserting the truthfulness of the interaction between the third passenger and the director. While watching this encounter, the audience tends to lapse into a moment of unknowingly suspending disbelief, despite the film's drawing attention to its fictionality. The unobtrusive cameras mounted within the car, and the various narrative fragments each dealing with problems of visual evidence and representation, lead us into different questions of narrative seduction as well as reflections about the inseparability of narrative and reality. Most tellingly, the film demonstrates the impossibility of narrative understanding, by highlighting that our relation to the events is ordered by the presence of the camera, and in turn, limited by it.

The film has multiple callbacks to Panahi's career as a filmmaker. Besides the interaction with a young filmmaker discussed earlier in this essay, Panahi explicitly guides us to the visual frame by moving the cameras and selecting the scenes he wants to capture. One of the important characters in the film is introduced through a humorous reference to the film *Ayneh*, as the director frantically realizes that he has forgotten to pick up his niece from school. The effervescent Hana asks if he suspected that she would have made her own way like Mina from his film. Panahi's conversation with his lawyer (played by real-life human rights lawyer Nasrin Sotoudeh) about the sentence against him, makes *Taxi* a direct sequel to *In film nist*, connecting the films as different stages in his confinement and the ban. Panahi cheekily subverts the trope of franchise building blockbusters sequels constantly increasing the stakes, by expanding the space of confinement from his apartment to the entire city.

In a climactic scene, Panahi's niece Hana reads out rules for a "broadcastable" film that were listed in class. The rules range from those that propose Islamic values such as, "Respect for the veil and the Muslim decency, no contact between man and women [...] no tie for protagonists [...] preference for the first names of Muslim prophets, usage of sacred names of prophets" to more social, political and ethnic restrictions including "no conspiracies, no violence [...] no Persian names for protagonists [...] [and] don't pose political or economical questions." These restrictions are reflective of the "Islamicate values" expressed by Naficy, where the true aim is social control rather than religious or social conservatism. The final rule appeals to the filmmaker's common sense — a rule which seems to sum up the rest — cinema must show reality, unless it is too grim. The listing of the rules in a film which seems to be deliberately disregarding every rule and made by a director whose mere action of filmmaking has been declared illegal by those who framed the rules, questions the limits imposed by the authoritarian regime.

The film's subversion is presented in an ironic and humorous way, as Panahi interrupts Hana's list of rules wondering what would happen to his old neighbor who had just appeared on screen, as he had a Persian name and was wearing a tie. Hana explains "this is real life. These rules, they are for films." Panahi further asks, "what if he becomes a protagonist in a film?" to which Hana matter-of-factly responds, "Then everything needs to be changed." This self-classification within the film further undercuts the film's fictional coherence by distancing itself from typical narrative cinema. Hana's quip about the nature of reality and how it does not satisfy the conditions set out for art goes beyond highligh-

ting the incompatibility of the fiction and reality under an authoritarian government. It calls for a transformation of the filmmaking process to overcome the restrictions. This formal gesture is also a political one, as the author seems to simultaneously concede to the authorities by excusing his text from being a film, and in turn, precludes his participation from an illegal activity. And yet, he is making this apparent apology in a construction that resembles a film in production and reception, openly mocking the government's impositions. Panahi continues to present his work in a space that tends to pair these oppositional values of negotiating his place in society while challenging its limits.

Hana's assertive voice has the power to sway people, but she too is restricted by the limits of what she is expected to do and where she can be. In a different scene, she tries to convince a boy who to return fifty tomans he found on the ground to its rightful owner in return for five tomans that she would give him — only to ensure that her own short film has a broadcastable conclusion. She does not say these words from a place of self-righteousness, but rather, she is simply concerned with the outcome of her own film. The only way she is able to make the boy consider her appeal is by making it in the name of the boy's dead mother. The question of the filmmaker's responsibility in questioning the responsibilities of the others is parodied in this subtle, playful moment of an author directly interfering with her subject. Her plan is thwarted when the boy, who makes a living by salvaging things from the garbage, prefers to keep his profit rather than behave in a manner befitting a protagonist in Hana's film. Panahi also tells another story within this frame, as he captures the encounter with a dashboard camera mounted in his car. He tells a story of a young girl who is confined to her space by both a system that designates her as a secondary citizen, as well as by her loving uncle who is concerned about her safety. While the limitations set the boundary of her presence, they do not restrict her reach and her action.

The roving narrative invites the viewers to encounter multiple worlds through the camera eye, but inevitably prohibits our access to events beyond the frame of the car. In the final scene, Panahi and his niece exit the car to return a purse lost by earlier passengers, and someone steals the camera from the car. The film ends abruptly, as if to signal that the live transmission from the camera has been terminated. The absence of the film's credits reinforces the abrupt ending. The narrative strategy allows us to momentarily disregard the fact that we are watching the entire film, which was shot by the cameras placed within the car. The last moments of the film also illustrate the impossibility of cinema to

show the whole truth. The viewer's eye can follow the narrative only as far as the camera goes. The moment the characters exit the taxi where the cameras are placed, their extended world vanishes as the camera records the absence of information. The final moments remind the audience that we observe the narrative world only as long as the people wielding the camera decides to include us in their journey. The film simultaneously draws us in and keeps us out of the narrative world, teasing us for our willingness to trade our awareness of the viewing frame for narrative enjoyment. The ending also serves a second purpose of preventing the director and his collaborators from being implicated in breaking the law. The constraints faced by Panahi's physical and cultural confinement necessitate his inventive use of cinema.

#### PANAHI AND OTHER INVISIBLES

Other artists have also used their art to reflect the strange tension between their confinement and need to express themselves, in turn transcending the political restrictions imposed on their circumstances. Dramatist Nassim Soleimanpour's 2010 play *White Rabbit, Red Rabbit* has traveled the world despite the playwright himself being denied permission to leave Iran for not completing his national service. Only in 2013, did he witness a performance of his play for the first time in Brisbane after being exempted from military service on a technicality due to his poor eye-sight. Azar Nafisi's novel *Reading Lolita in Tehran* outlines the years following the Islamic revolution, during which she had to reconcile holding on to the humanist values central to her and coming to terms with abandoning a country she was fervently attached to. Both Nafisi and Soleimanpour seek to recuperate their love for Iran while exiting it. Panahi deploys his work to humorously and irreverently undercut the authority that tries to limit his narratives by blurring the lines separating the gulf between fiction and reality. Perhaps the biggest parallel to Panahi's career is his contemporary filmmaker, Mohsen Makhmalbaf, who too had to improvise his filmmaking to circumvent the censure of his government. Ultimately, Makhmalbaf and his family left Iran and have continued filmmaking in exile. Despite their differing geographical positions, the two filmmakers return to the question of the future of Iran as an Islamic space, which allows for pluralistic viewpoints.

While not an Iranian himself, Salman Rushdie had to go underground to avoid threats to his life arising from Ayatollah Khomeini's fatwa against his writings, effectively limiting his freedom. During that period of his life, Rushdie found inventive ways of talking about censorship by offering a fantastic exploration of the significance of stories in a *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, a book dedicated to his son. He demonstrates that the value of arts, fiction and narratives have persisted throughout history as they take political, social and ethical significance in not just the context of their readership but in the mere act of their performance. In this story about a storyteller, one of the characters raises a central question, which resonates with the lives of all these artists who continue their difficult task at high personal cost, "What's the use of stories that aren't even true?" While Panahi's films deal with stories that *are* true, they still press on with similar concerns by examining what about the stories make them real. And yet, the narrative remains a site of resistance, because of this precise potential sway it has over its audience.

In the final confrontation in *Haroun*, the titular protagonist confronts the Cultmaster of the land of silence, Khatam-Shud (literally, "it is finished," but often read as an allegorical representation of Khomeini), asking him why he hates stories so much. Khatam-Shud whose believes that the world was meant not for fun, but to be controlled replies, "Inside every single story, inside every Stream in the Ocean, there lies a world, a story-world, that I cannot Rule at all. And that is the reason why."<sup>16</sup> These lines are persistently relevant as narratives continue to influence people and question the existing order of things. Narratives allow authors to shine a light upon things that others prefer to remain forgotten and hidden. Panahi's lingering attention to the disparity in Iranian society became a point of discomfort for those he criticized, leading to his official erasure from their world. However, instead of fading away, Panahi recorded his attempted erasure, and turned it into another act of resistance. Panahi surreptitiously strikes a match in an invisible world.

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3. Hamid Naficy, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema, Volume 3 – The Islamicate Period, (1978-1984)* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 8.

4. Alice Burgin, "Panahi vs. The State: *This is Not a Film*," *Metro Magazine: Media & Education Magazine* 171 (2012): 48.



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5. Naficy, "Neorealism Iranian Style," 230.
  6. Saeed Zeydabadi-Nejad, *The Politics of Iranian Cinema: Film and society in the Islamic Republic* (London: Routledge, 2010), 151.
  7. Jake Wilson, "A Mirror Under the Veil — and Inside the Stadium," *The Age*, 26 September 2006.
  8. Quoted in Naficy, "Neorealism Iranian Style," 236.
  9. Peter Bradshaw, "Taxi Tehran Review — Jafar Panahi's Joy Ride," *The Guardian*, 29 October 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2015/nov/01/taxi-tehran-review-admirable-jafar-panahi-takes-to-the-streets>.
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  11. Brian Bergen-Aurand, "Ethics," in *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Film Theory*, ed. Edward Branigan and Warren Buckland (New York: Routledge, 2014), 165.
  12. Lévinas, *The Levinas Reader*, 142.
  13. Ibid.
  14. Jason Solomons and Xan Brooks, "The Film Weekly: *This is Not a Film*," *Film Weekly*, 29 March 2012.
  15. Zeydabadi-Nejad, *The Politics of Iranian Cinema*, 152.
  16. Salman Rushdie, *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, (New York: Viking, 1990), 147.