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DON'T LOOK AT THE CAMERA: JAFAR PANAHİ AND HIS SELF-REFLEXIVE CINEMA

All art is autobiographical - the pearl is the oyster's autobiography.

-Federico Fellini¹

After Panahi's 2015 movie *Taxi* received a Golden Bear Award at Berlin Film Festival the head of the government funded film organization of Iran Hojattollah Ayubi offered somewhat a mixed response towards the movie. While obviously criticizing the movie about spreading "misunderstanding" about the Iranian society he also was somehow "delighted to announce that the director of *Taxi* continues to drive in the fast lane of his life, freely enjoying all of its blessings."² This remark at once celebrates and criticizes Panahi's filmmaking ventures. It seems as if the government of Iran is deliberately restricting and simultaneously giving Panahi access to certain limits of freedom so as to draw out certain cinematic misadventures which could or couldn't have been possible otherwise. But this binary trajectory as such gives more power to the authorities than to the artist and hence can be flawed if not insignificant.

Since his ban by the Iranian government in his alleged involvement about making a documentary against the re-election of the President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in 2010 and his open support for the Iranian Green Movement Panahi has been banned from making, writing and directing movies for 20 years. This paper will try and analyse his movies, pre and post censorship, in which he tries to tell the Iranian narratives by using techniques which are unprecedented yet innovatively relevant to the Iranian reality. This paper will specifically concentrate on Panahi's three movies - *The Mirror* (1997), *Closed Curtain* (2013) and *Taxi* (2015) and shall try to show how his experiments and innovations with his medium in general present the problems of Iranian society in a different light than his contemporaries.

¹ Quoted in Hamid Dabashi's *Masters & Masterpieces of Iranian Cinema*.

² The Guardian article by Ben Beaumont-Thomas can be traced here:

<<http://www.theguardian.com/film/2015/feb/17/jafar-panahi-golden-bear-taxi-iran>>

The point to make here is to understand the movies that Panahi has made pre and post official ban by the government and to access them with the changing circumstances from within the Iranian context. The subtle premise of most of Panahi's post-censorship movies, and thereby the self-censorship which follows it, is the idea that if you won't let me make movies as finished products, as aesthetic ends, watch me and my ordinary life as art itself – the idea of 'survival by cinema.'

One of the most important playwrights of the 20th century Bertolt Brecht while discussing his epic theatre points to its most important feature in which he states that “the one who shows . . . shall be shown.”³ The act of showing must therefore be shown so that the audience don't start relating/identifying themselves with the characters but should rather maintain a critical distance so as to understand the ramifications of the play. What Brecht was suggesting was to turn literature or literary plays into turning consciousness onto themselves. Moreover, in the late 1960s, in America we see a new genre of Metafiction coming into focus whereby a fictional writing “self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality.” Metafictional fictions therefore “tend to be constructed on the principle of a fundamental and sustained opposition: the construction of a fictional illusion (as in traditional realism) and the laying bare of that illusion.” (Waugh 6)

In almost the same vein we see a lot of movies projecting what novelists were trying to write in their literary works. While as “Traditional cinema”, writes William Siska, “does not expose the process of production to alienate us from the story that's being told; rather the camera, lights, and technicians are used as icons to authenticate the notion that we are enjoying a behind the scenes look at how the industry 'really works'.”⁴ Traditional Cinema takes into account the act of representation by creating a reality in itself which takes no recourse towards the act of breaking the logic that all reality is just a human construct. Reflexivity/Self-reflexivity/Self-referentiality means the very act of breaking the barriers between illusion and reality “making unclear the distinction between imitating and imitated” (Hobson 78) so as to show how the constructedness of a particular thing itself can inform us about the fictionality of our own life.

Self-reflexive movies therefore are those movies “which call attention to themselves as cinematic constructs.” (Siska 285) In the west, one can draw an endless reference to movies as early as Charlie Chaplin's where the protagonist is aware of being filmed within the movie itself. Movies like *Annie Hall* (1977), *Being John Malkovich* (1999), *High Fidelity* (2000),

³ Quoted in Walter Benjamin's *Undersanding Brecht*. Page 11.

⁴ Quoted in Jay Ruby's article “The Image Mirrored: Reflexivity and the Documentary Film.” Page 6.

Adaptation (2002), *Synecdoche New York* (2008) etc. all make references to their formal elements as constructs. To name just a few, personalities like Jean-Luc Godard, Woody Allen and the movies of Charlie Kaufman can be easily referenced as directors who experiment with the traditional narration of cinematic movies. Woody Allen's 1985 movie *The Purple Rose of Cairo* quite humorously breaks 'the fourth wall' and directly addresses the audience so as to build a kind of relationship with the audience as well as the protagonist of the movie. While as in the West, Self-reflexivity used in most of the movies is used to parody the narration of the cinematic or to break the traditional narration, in Iran Self-reflexivity lies deep within the psyche of the directors due to the harsh censorship issues at hand.

The Mirror (1997)

Panahi's pre-censorship movie, *The Mirror* gives us a deep insight into his filmmaking career. It is because of this movie that we come to an understanding that Panahi's vision of movie making from the very start had this self-reflective tendency. A tendency which he obviously has inherited from his mentor Abbas Kiarostami under whom he worked as assistant director for many movies. The movie concerns a first grade girl (Mina) whose mother has not come to pick her up from the school and thereafter she decides to go home on her own. The girl has a fractured left arm which has been plastered with a cast. The first half of the movie is concerned with her travails to reach home. Throughout this part of the movie, the camera work is quite as simple and steady as any other child protagonist Iranian movie can be. But the whole simplicity of the movie is subverted in almost the middle of the movie when the child protagonist by now traveling in a bus looks directly towards the camera, declares that she doesn't want to act anymore, doesn't want to be a part of this movie and wants to go home. At this point, the stable camera shifts to a hand held one. The director of the movie Panahi is himself seen requesting the girl to work in the movie as it is their last shot for today. A movie which had so far (successfully) put up an innocent character in a desperate setting, in a flash parodies the feelings and aspirations of the audience. As the crew realizes that the microphone is still with their protagonist they therefore decide to go on filming her.



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The moment when Mina looks directly in the camera

The latter part of the movie deals with the girl's attempts to reach her real home. Panahi's movie thus plays with the notion of the real and the imaginary. Which is her real home the one she was going towards in the first part or the one she is searching to reach in the latter part or is there a home at all? In one of his interview Panahi says the movie was "meant to show how "reality and imagination are intertwined, [and that] they are very similar."⁵ Contrary to her expectations, her going home – the real home – turns out to be as tiresome as the home in the movie. He asks a lot of people about her home by giving them references to places nearby but all in vain. It seems as if the notion of going home for the character and for the girl playing it in the real life has some uncanny mirroring towards each other. This mirroring of the 'made-up' against the 'real' or 'mock' turns out to be as similar and dissimilar at the same time. This act of going home twice within the narrative of a single movie destabilizes the traditional/clichéd Iranian movie making whereby the child/Character kidnaps the whole direction of the movie. As we know, in the latter part of the movie as the girl walks off the 'set', it is the camera, the director and the whole crew which constantly keep on finding the girl through the busy set of Iranian capital Tehran. Unlike his master Abbas Kiarostami's 1987 film *Where is the Friend's Home?* in which the child protagonist is trying to find his friend's home in the nearby village to return his notebook, so that he won't get expelled, Panahi's movie parodies the whole notion of finding home – a metaphor for the arduous search of meaning. In addition to this, many other issues find way through Panahi's narrative - the first and the foremost being the problems of Iranian women among them. Later when Mina is in a taxi there's a couple fighting over the rights of women – an issue which can be found in almost all of Panahi's movies. Regarding the movie, Bert Cardullo writes:

⁵ Jafar Panahi's *The Mirror* (1997). The article can be traced here: <[http://alchetron.com/The-Mirror-\(1997-film\)-112266-W](http://alchetron.com/The-Mirror-(1997-film)-112266-W)>

. . . *The Mirror* has its fun with us, but it keeps its promises, too, one of which is not only to examine the nature of cinematic illusion, but also to suggest that the invention of plots to make reality palatable or spectacular is a flight from the richness of real life. (656)

Regarding his early movies like *The Mirror*, *The Circle* and *Crimson Gold*, Hamid Dabashi has this to say about Jafar Panahi:

. . . the filmmaker, as a visual artist, no longer works with symbols, but with signs . . . They do not signify. They mean nothing. They are made (as in forced) to mean, in some formal symbolic order, against their defiant will. That will is inherently anarchic, subversive, and anxiety-provoking. The counter-will to make signs signify is a repressive measure to incarcerate their defiant energy. (Dabashi 400)

Closed Curtain (2013)

Closed Curtain takes Jafar Panahi's movie making to a different level. Although the movie is fraught with elements of frustration and despair, it nevertheless makes a formidable point about living and striving through the politics of Iran. On a simpler level the movie concerns a screen writer, Kambuzia Partovi (who actually is the screen writer of the movie Closed Curtain) and his dog (whom he has cleverly concealed in his bag due to a ban on all canines in Islamic Iran) as he arrives to a sea side cottage in order to write. As he enters the cottage, he puts black curtains all around the house because of which we as audience get the idea that he is hiding from something and can be on a run. He also makes a hiding place within the corner of the house.

The normal yet abnormal life of the paranoid screenwriter is disrupted when all of a sudden two people barge into the house while fleeing from the authorities. While the male member sets out to get help the writer is thereafter left with suicidal, depressive, garrulous girl who does everything to make his life miserable. As the movie progresses we some glimpse that the girl would be nothing but the figment of his own imagination – a character he is writing about. At one point in the movie, the girl rebukes the writer by saying: “You think you can capture reality especially in here?” while forcibly tearing all the curtains down. As the curtains are brought down Jafar Panahi himself enters the movie gazing nostalgically at the huge posters of his earlier movies. Thereafter, both the plots (including one of the writer's and Panahi's) progress simultaneously without intermingling with each other. Both the plots of the screen writer and Panahi himself are overlapped in such a way that we as audience are not able to differentiate the movie making from the movie maker – a formidable technique of self-reflexive movies.



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Panahi Film Production

Scene from the movie Closed curtain when the director Panahi himself steps into the narrative of the movie

It seems that the “real-life Panahi is making a movie about a fictionalized Panahi purposefully not making a movie, even though inspiration is hovering around him all the time.” (Merry) The movie thereof takes on a Pirandelloesque stature where “his [own] characters comment[ing] on his lose control over their existence.” (Kohn)⁶ On a deeper level the cottage can be taken as a metaphor for Panahi’s detained life where his only chance of survival is through the lens of his own camera and nothing else. The travails of the screen writer within the movie can easily be compared with the problems that Panahi faces - a place where everything else outside/inside become places of fear - a Panopticon of sorts. As Panahi himself puts it, “In prison, I had some peace of mind because I couldn’t do anything. I was limited to the confines of the prison, but when you’re out and you’re not allowed to work, it’s like you’re in a larger prison”⁷ - a place where the sea can never bring peace to the mind and heart but instead offers an opportunity for committing suicide itself. As one reviewer puts it: ‘Closed Curtain’ touches on similar meta-artistic themes as ‘This Is Not a Film’. Panahi once again appears as a version of himself, and his entrance is breathtaking in the way it both shatters and reconfigures the story we thought we were watching. This is the tale of a man – the writer – who lives so completely with his muses and characters that he slips between reality and fantasy without an anchor to hold him. He’s not even necessarily played by the same person from scene to scene: identity is one of this bracing movie’s most malleable

⁶ The review can be retrieved here <<http://www.indiewire.com/article/berlin-review-haunted-by-his-characters-jafar-panahi-defies-iranian-government-again-with-cryptically-self-referential-closed-curtain>>

⁷ Jafar Panahi in an interview with Vadim Razov.

facets. The journey is often challenging, but the rewards – heady, emotional, provocative and invigorating – are endless. (Uhlich)⁸

Taxi (2015)

There's a particular scene in the movie *Taxi* when Jafar Panahi advises an aspiring young director who can't find a subject for his movie. He says:

Those films have already been made; those books have already been written. You have to look elsewhere. You won't find it by staying at home. (Jafar Panahi from *Taxi*)

This statement at once strikes a chord with John Barth's statement of the exhaustion of literature whereby he talks of the “. . . used-upness of certain forms or the exhaustion of certain possibilities. . . ” (162) Panahi is deliberately, in a way, criticizing his own vocation as a director whose last couple of movies were shot 'at home' within the confines of four walls and who now has come out into the very streets of the capital to find a new subject for his new movie – a movie which he is simultaneously shooting. Thus Panahi is not only criticizing those Iranian directors who rely on traditional storytelling but is also debunking restrictions levied on him by the authorities and looking up for different possibilities so as to continue his adventures of 'survival by cinema.' In this connection a critic writes:

Oppression has transformed Panahi's art. Under the pressure of circumstances, he has turned from a classicist into a modernist, while at the same time transforming the very codes and tones of his frame-breaking aesthetic. He puts his face, his body, his voice, his own life into his film as an existential act of self-assertion against his effacement by the regime. Panahi turns the kind of reflexive cinema that, in the United States, would risk critical dismissal as narcissistic into a furious act of political defiance. (Brody)⁹

While as in other movies Panahi breaks the narrative of the movie, disrupts the frame story and himself enters the body of his own work, in *Taxi* however he is there from the very first scene as an ordinary driver driving through the busy lanes of Tehran. In this movie, there's no frame-story to break as such, no narrative to disrupt - in a way we can say that the narrative has already been disrupted from the very start because of the issue of censorship.

⁸ Closed Curtain Review by Keith Uhlich in TimeOut. The article can be retrieved here:

<<http://www.timeout.com/london/film/closed-curtain>>

⁹ Richard Brody's review: "Jafar Panahi's Remarkable "Taxi". The review can be retrieved here:

<<http://www.newyorker.com/culture/richard-brody/jafar-panahis-remarkable-taxi>>



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Film Production

Jafar Panahi as the driver in the movie *Taxi* (2015)

This film does not require an *In medias res* focal point like *The Mirror* or *Closed Curtain* to be interrupted so that the illusory and the reality are brought into a tussle. In fact, *Taxi* does the opposite of this. It presents a paradox. The taxi driver is just a driver to those who don't recognize him and Mr Panahi to those who know him through his work. Here Panahi plays with his celebrity status. The camera is mounted to the dashboard of the taxi and most of the movie is shown through it. *Taxi* presents itself as a joke, a way of ridiculing his own affairs if not the people – his status from being a celebrated director to that of a driver. The movie, through its central point a moving vehicle, gives the audience an insight into the ordinary lives of the Iranians without being critical. Rather than presenting a particular 'made-up' situation, the director (if there is any of this movie) makes the whole of Teheran in front of our eyes as his location and the people living in it as his characters. When Panahi leaves the lady whose husband has been brutally injured in the emergency ward of the hospital, the DVD seller sitting in the front seat quite humorously has but this to say about the whole affair while Panahi smiles and keeps on driving: You believe I really don't realize that was all staged, do you?

What is common in almost all of the movies Panahi has made after his ban since 2010 is the reference he makes to his earlier movies. Whether it be *This is not a Film*, *Closed Curtain* or *The Taxi*, his cinematic oeuvre makes his movies not only self-reflexive in its truest sense but it also gives him an opportunity to make a point about his choice of themes, subject matter and their execution. However, what is to be understood is the fact that Panahi's self-reflexivity should not be treated as a direct result of the censorship levied upon him but has to be understood as the gaze of the authorities/censors on the whole Iranian cinema. Had Panahi not been banned he would have still continued with his reflexive tendencies (*The*

Mirror being an early example) firstly, because he is one of the most ardent followers of Abbas Kiarostami, his mentor – the one who in the first place developed the genre in early 90s and secondly, because of his inherent zeal to experiment with the narrative techniques and pushing the boundaries of movie making.

In an interview, while making his stand clear together with keeping the issue of censorship in mind, Panahi states:

. . . We have to risk pushing the limits for those kids who are just starting off. Those who are making their first films are forced to do whatever they are told; they allow the censors to mutilate their films. If we do not stand up to the censors the conditions will be worse for the young filmmakers . . . (Zeydabadi-Nejad 151)

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