

An interview with Jafar Panahi, director of *The Circle*

David Walsh
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The film seems to have an angrier and bolder tone and subject matter than your previous works. Is this the result of the development of the situation in Iran, your own personal development or both?

Jafar Panahi: The truth is that in the previous films, I still tried to show the crucial difficulties, the problems of children. Those films also represented my maturation. They were homework. But the question is: these two children, who tried so hard to achieve what they were after [in *The Mirror* and *The White Balloon*], as they grow up, will they keep the same kindness? The actual result is, as we know, that society has them within a circle. And for them to go beyond the boundary of this circle, they will have to pay a certain price. I'm not angry about the situation. The film shows anger in the society, but I'm not angry.

DW: Can you discuss the media and official government response to the film in Iran?

JP: Not too many people have seen the film in Iran. But those who have seen the film, from the intelligentsia, liked it very much. However, when I showed it to a group of members of parliament, they objected to it.

DW: On what basis?

JP: They didn't really specify what part of the film they objected to.

DW: Was there an eight month hold-up?

JP: I always really try to avoid this subject. I don't really want to think about the two to three years of difficulty that I endured to make this film. It's been very difficult giving birth to this film. But now that the film is being shown, now that the baby is born, I'm enjoying it, and I don't really want to talk about that.

DW: The technique of following one character after another—the circle, *La Ronde*—suggests a process that is pervasive in society, that operates as a closed circuit.

Was this your intention?

JP: Yes, exactly, and it shows that the characters are trying to get out of the circle also. It's like a relay race. When you're running around the track, and you want to pass the baton to the next. In this film, if one succeeds they all succeed, if one fails, they all fail.

DW: Would an audience in Iran realize before we did that it was a prison hospital in the opening scene?

JP: The new Iranian cinema generally leaves many things up to the viewer, to their knowledge and their thinking, as to how to interpret the film. In this case, some people would realize it very quickly and others wouldn't. It's up to the individual and the knowledge and thinking that they have. This is not specific to Iran. It would be the same everywhere. There are some who would pick things up very quickly.

DW: I meant was there something obviously identifiable?

JP: No, it could have been any kind of hospital.

DW: Nargess says her town is paradise, like the Van Gogh painting. The other woman perhaps knows it is not paradise. Does art present an element in life toward which life must aspire?

JP: In the film, as you see, each new character that's introduced shows a higher degree of experience and a deeper view of life. And so Nargess is very idealistic and not worldly. When she looks at the painting, she doesn't have a real sense of the geography, she just believes it's a beautiful place. Yet the person beside her who is more experienced realizes that that place must have its own problems too.

Art gives hope. Iranian cinema, as well as other forms of art, have been acknowledged internationally and have helped revive national pride and hope.

DW: Is there a progression both in the technique and in the character of the women? Is the final woman a

kind of finished product?

JP: There are two ways of looking at this individual. It could be in the first place that she is the sum of all the other characters who've ended up at a dead end. Or she's a person who's accepted the reality, who's acknowledged the truth about society, whereas the other characters are still trying to escape from the circle. So it depends on how one looks at the character.

DW: Just so there is no misunderstanding—I don't think that the metaphor of the world as a prison is just appropriate for women, or only for Iran. I don't see it as a film merely about Iran, but about conditions everywhere. Such a metaphor does suggest that the world needs to be changed. Would you like us to draw that conclusion?

JP: In my view, everyone in the world lives within a circle, either due to economic, political, cultural, or family problems or traditions. The radius of the circle can be smaller or larger. Regardless of their geographic location, they live within a circle. I hope that if this film has any kind of effect on anyone, it would be to make them try to expand the size of the radius.

DW: While the film treats women, what are the consequences for the men in their lives?

JP: Iranian society, particularly in comparison to this part of the world, is a man's world pretty much. The radius might be marginally larger for men. The purpose of this film was not to be against men or to be a feminist film—it's a film about humanity. Men and women are part of humanity. In the film I never showed any kind of maltreatment or anger from men. For example, we see the women afraid of the police. This may or may not be real. When the police are shown in long shot, they're menacing. However, in medium shot, you can see the policeman has a kind face. And he asks the woman: 'Do you need any help?' And also in the scene when the woman was buying a shirt for her fiancé, the store owner measured it against the soldier's chest. And at the end of the film, when they're in the paddywagon ... throughout the film, every single woman wanted to have a smoke. Once they're in the paddywagon, there is this humanitarian atmosphere.

Joanne Laurier: Is your point that the army and the police are just made up of ordinary people?

JP: In all my films, you never see an evil character, male or female. I believe everyone is a good person. It could be the result of social difficulties. Even the most

dangerous criminal has that sense of humanity. At the bottom he's still a human. It doesn't mean that a criminal shouldn't be punished just because social difficulties have driven him to it. He's guilty because he didn't try to expand the radius of his circle.

DW: This view, which is very rare, is one of the major contributions of the Iranian cinema. Can one sometimes sacrifice a little art in the interest of protest or in the face of injustice? Or is it even a question that arises?

JP: I think this is a little idealistic. History shows many times when artists have sold out to the authorities in order not to show what the social difficulties were. Or on the other side of the coin, an artist sacrifices himself in order to show what the truth is. And if that happened then it was necessary.

DW: If you want to make a deep impact on people you need art, no?

JP: The impact of art is not instantaneous. If art is extremely successful, then it just touches the society and makes people think about the issues. Art needs people who need art. There is a give and take. There's an exchange. If the society needs the sacrifice of the art and the artist, then that is going to happen.

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2000 Toronto International Film Festival--Part 3

Why are these women escaping?

The Circle, directed by Jafar Panahi, screenplay by Kambozia Partovi, based on an original work by Panahi



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