

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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Jafar Panahi's latest film, *The Circle*, earns the Iranian filmmaker a place as one of the world's most courageous artists. As Panahi indicated in an interview with the WSWs, also posted today, the film was created in the face of official disapproval. It has not been shown publicly in Iran, although it won the Golden Lion as best film at the recent Venice film festival. Meeting the director, described by an associate as someone who makes no compromises, one immediately recognizes a man of deep, even painfully deep conviction and feeling. His previous works, *The White Balloon* (1995) and *The Mirror* (1997), are beautiful, sensitive films which, like many products of the Iranian cinema, circumvented the censor by speaking through children.

The Circle is a different matter. Panahi sees the new work as an artistically more mature piece. It is his examination, as he indicated to us, of the fate of his child characters, so to speak, when they grow up. The difficulties of childhood now assume quite different proportions. In any event, from our perspective, it is hard not to see the film as a product also of the changing political and social landscape in Iran.

The social dilemma announces itself immediately in the film's pre-credit sequence: a mother's moans from birthing pain. A child arrives, a joyous occasion? It is a girl; the anguished grandmother flees the maternity ward. The sonograms, which prognosticated a boy, were wrong. Her son-in-law's family will abandon her daughter. The grandmother runs away as the in-laws arrive.

Outside the hospital, two women are also on the run.

One older, Arezou, one younger, Nargess, are trying to get bus fare. They must get away. They must get to Nargess' village, that is the solution to their problems. They pass a stall offering a reproduction of a Van Gogh landscape for sale. Nargess excitedly identifies this as a depiction of her village, their safe haven and repository of hope. The less naive and more experienced Arezou says nothing. But later, after obtaining money by questionable means, she won't get on the bus: "I couldn't handle it if your paradise didn't exist." It's a moment that breaks your heart.

After putting Nargess on the bus, Arezou runs off. As it turns out, much to the dismay of the spectator who wishes she would get on the bus and escape, Nargess can't bear to leave the tangible Arezou for her intangible dreams about which she may have her own doubts, and disembarks. She is eighteen, with a bruised face, growing older by the moment, and there is no paradise.

Always on the run and fearful, Nargess and Arezou are apparently escapees. Or, as the production notes suggest, are they on work release? It's a matter of indifference. Their dress is that of prison inmates. One is viewing, not criminals, but victims, not prison walls, but social reality. What are the crimes and who is committing them?

After being separated from Arezou, Nargess goes to enlist the help of a fellow former inmate, Pari, who has escaped and needs to obtain an abortion. The baby's father has been executed "three or four months ago." Again, the reasons for Pari's incarceration and her lover's execution remain unknown. Pari seeks out

another former inmate. Now working in a hospital and married to a doctor who might desert her if he became aware of her past, the woman cannot help Pari. Respectability and safety have been too hard-won.

Back on the streets, Pari encounters a mother who is forced by economic circumstance to abandon her little girl. Obviously devoted to the child, the distraught woman leaves her daughter in front of a hotel. Crouching behind a car as she watches her child, she tells Pari: "This is the third time I've tried to leave her." What kind of condition would drive a woman to take such a course of action? It's almost unimaginable. Pari cannot have her child, this mother cannot keep her child.

The mother dejectedly starts walking away and is offered a ride. She knows what it means, but she accepts. The man who picked her up is a policeman, on the look-out for prostitutes. The cop drives to a checkpoint where other officers have arrested a jaded prostitute and her client.

In the final sequence, the principal characters are reunited in a jail-cell. The guard asks for the woman whose name was called out in the film's first scene. One suddenly realizes that the opening sequence took place in the maternity ward *of a prison*.

In or out of jail, all the women, and men, are inmates. The simplest desire, for example, to have a cigarette, is continually suppressed by the women themselves in fear of an unseen authority. The desire for a smoke binds them and brands them as outcasts. No relief is permitted them. Only in the end, when the women are in custody, is the proscription lifted.

All the segments are incomplete in themselves, but by the end the circle is formed. No questions are answered, only posed: who are the real criminals and where do prison boundaries begin and end? The look of the film, dark with the occasional splash of color (the Van Gogh and the little girl's dress), tells us as much about the state of things as the dialogue.

The relationship of the camera to its subjects is markedly different in *The Circle* than in Panahi's two previous films. Particularly in *The White Balloon*, and to a lesser degree in *The Mirror*, the characters tend to be shot from a distance. In *The Circle*, the pain and anguish which afflicts the characters, is unabashedly shown by the close-ups. The medium shots allow for moments of recovery, and at all times the filmmaker's

commitment to his subjects is total. The pervasive and deliberately 'ugly' or raw quality, in an inverse aesthetic, makes any attempt by the viewer to find solace difficult.

See Also:

An interview with Jafar Panahi, director of The Circle

[2 October 2000]

2000 Toronto International Film Festival - Part 1

Who makes up the artistic vanguard today?

[25 September 2000]

2000 Toronto International Film Festival--Part 2

Without flinching

Bye Bye Africa, written and directed by Mahamat-Saleh Haroun

[28 September 2000]



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