

An interview with Jafar Panahi, director of Crimson Gold

David Walsh

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Jafar Panahi, Iranian director of Crimson Gold, was interviewed at the Toronto film festival by David Walsh.

David Walsh: This is an Iranian film with an obvious international significance. In the US such tragedies happen everyday. Unfortunately, one almost becomes accustomed to them. What was it about this particular incident that caught your attention?

Jafar Panahi: It's true that when you live in a society like ours things like that happen all the time, but there are certain times, certain moments, certain days, when you hear what happens, the pain hits you so hard, you think about it seriously. It's like when you take the same route from home to work every day and one day you notice for the first time something that was always there. You focus on it. It causes you pain and you think you have to do something about it.

So as a filmmaker, when I heard what happened it struck me and I had to do something about it. We were going to [director Abbas] Kiarostami's photographic exhibition. When he told me what happened, I could not stay at the exhibition any longer and I felt I had to do something. I can't even remember what kind of emotional feeling I had that day.

The party scene in the movie [the police raid] happens all the time, and young people are always struggling with the problem and they get arrested, and their parents sign papers that they won't do it again. Three weeks ago, something happened in Tehran...although it was a very sad thing, I felt pleased that I had exposed this in my movie. Three weeks ago, after a party, the police followed a boy and girl, and fired at them, and the boy was killed. As a social filmmaker, I respond to whatever is happening in our social life.

Although the people living in that society are totally

used to what happened at the party, it is necessary to expose it and show it again as a real problem.

Because the Iranian government is based on religion, any relationship between boys and girls—if they're not married, if they're dancing together at a party—is a crime. So they have to do something about it. Sometimes they have the proper papers and they have permission to raid the house. And sometimes they wait outside for people to come out—they can also catch more people like that.

DW: Is the question of social inequality a subject that is discussed by filmmakers, journalists and politicians in Iran? It is a major fact of life in the US, but hardly anyone talks about it or makes films about it.

JP: Inequality exists in every country of the world. But a certain point can be reached...there is no middle class anymore, because of wrong political decisions or economical problems. And then the gap between poor and rich gets bigger, and that's how it is right now. That causes violence and aggravation. And the various people who are struggling with this problem react differently. Hussein was not a thief; if he had been, he would have stolen from the rich man. He wanted to defend his humanity against humiliation. We don't want to say whether it's right or wrong. But we say that's how it is.

DW: The film showed me many things about Iran for the first time. We have never seen such wealthy homes before. Was that deliberate, to show such wealth?

JP: Yes, and that's the way it is because of the gap that's getting bigger between rich and poor. And the characters in the movie don't even compare to the really wealthy people in Iran.

DW: There is not simply the economic effect, but the psychological and emotional impact, and not only on the poor. Did you also want to speak about the

consequences for those with money?

JP: I want to show people at every level of society, and I want to show their problems. I don't want to say that people at one level of society are better or worse off. We have about 4 to 5 million Iranian people who live outside Iran; they left the country after the revolution. Most of them were children when they fled the country, and they don't have any real knowledge about what's happening in Iran now. But as they love their country, they always want to go back and try to live there. But when they come back, they can't relate to people and they suffer. That's why he invited Hussein in, so they could talk about the problems. And we feel as bad for the rich guy as we do for Hussein.

DW: Hussein seems terribly injured, both by war and the economic situation. Do you feel that many Iranians have been wounded in this fashion?

JP: There is a saying that we think insane people are more fortunate, because they don't really see what's happening around them. But if you really see what's going on around you, it's going to make you suffer deeply. And that's Hussein's situation; he hardly talks, but he sees much, and when he sees something, he really sees deeply into it. And he is ill, and he suffers both physically and emotionally.

DW: Yesterday at the public screening, you described yourself as independent filmmaker. That is often a misused term in North America. What do you mean by "independent"?

JP: Independent from any kind of dependency and coercion anywhere in the world. Independent from any belief I think is not right. Refusing self-censorship and believing any movie that I make is, in the end, exactly what I wanted to say. A lot of times, when you say you're independent, it means economically, that you don't get paid by other people. But where we are, independent means more like independence from politics. That's why I don't make political movies. Because if I were a political filmmaker, then I would have to work for political parties and I would have to go along with their beliefs of what's wrong and what's right. But what I say is that art is much higher than politics. Art looks like politics from a higher end. You never say what's wrong or right. We just show the problems.

And it's up to the audience to decide what's wrong or right. A political movie becomes dated, but an

independent artistic film never gets old and is always fresh. Although I'm making my movies in Iran as a geographical area, my voice is an international one. That's what I mean by "independent." Whenever I feel pain, I'm going to respond, because I'm not dependent on any party, and I don't take orders, and I decide independently when I make my movies. I try to struggle with all the difficulties and make my movie. If I weren't independent, I would say yes to anyone. But when I want to make a movie, I'll do anything it takes. And that's not what government officials like. And the pleasure is much greater.

DW: I congratulate you on your criticism of the situation in Iran and your refusal to come to New York because of US government policy. What is your attitude toward the invasion of Iraq?

JP: People in the Middle East aren't really optimistic about America. And all the ordinary people think that everything America does is to suit itself. And to serve its own self-interest, the US government disregards international opinion and law. We were in a war with Saddam for eight years, and America was supporting him the whole time. Saddam bombarded us with chemical weapons. But suddenly, when America saw its own interests threatened by Saddam, then they attack. We saw this in Afghanistan. When they wanted to invade Afghanistan, we had to laugh because we knew they would never find bin Laden. There is always going to be a scapegoat that American can use.



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