Jafar Panahi: THE CIRCLE (2000, 90 min)

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Directed, produced and edited by Jafar Panahi
Written by Kambuzia Partovi (story idea by Jafar Panahi)
Cinematography by Bahram Badakhshani

Nargess Mamizadeh...Nargess
Maryiam Palvin Almani...Arezou
Mojgan Faramarzi...Mojgan - Prostitute
Elham Saboktakin...Elham - Nurse
Monir Arab...Monir - Ticket Seller


An Open Letter from Jafar Panahi (by indieWIRE February 12, 2011)

Jailed Iranian director Jafar Panahi took center stage as the 2011 Berlin International Film Festival launched Thursday. Jury president Isabella Rossellini read an open letter from the dissident filmmaker who was sentenced to six years in prison and forbidden from making a film for two decades after a court in the Islamic Republic of Iran found him guilty of “producing anti-Iranian propaganda.”

Panahi was invited to participate in this year’s jury and is a shadow member with his absence. During the jury press conference, an empty seat with his name sat along side the other sitting members of this year’s jurors in addition to an empty seat at the opening night film, “True Git” by the Coens. Additionally, the Berlinale is hosting a retrospective of Panahi’s work during the fest. For the complete video of Rossellini reading the letter and the audience’s reaction, visit the Berlinale website here.

The world of a filmmaker is marked by the interplay between reality and dreams. The filmmaker uses reality as his inspiration, paints it with the color of his imagination, and creates a film that is a projection of his hopes and dreams.

The reality is I have been kept from making films for the past five years and am now officially sentenced to be deprived of this right for another twenty years. But I know I will keep on turning my dreams into films in my imagination. I admit as a socially conscious filmmaker that I won’t be able to portray the daily problems and concerns of my people, but I won’t deny myself dreaming that after twenty years all the problems will be gone and I’ll be making films about the peace and prosperity in my country when I get a chance to do so again.

The reality is they have deprived me of thinking and writing for twenty years, but they can not keep me from dreaming that in twenty years inquisition and intimidation will be replaced by freedom and free thinking.

They have deprived me of seeing the world for twenty years. I hope that when I am free, I will be able to travel in a world without any geographic, ethnic, and ideological barriers, where people live together freely and peacefully regardless of their beliefs and convictions.

They have condemned me to twenty years of silence. Yet in my dreams, I scream for a time when we can tolerate each other, respect each other’s opinions, and live for each other.
Ultimately, the reality of my verdict is that I must spend six years in jail. I’ll live for the next six years hoping that my dreams will become reality. I wish my fellow filmmakers in every corner of the world would create such great films that by the time I leave the prison I will be inspired to continue to live in the world they have dreamed of in their films.

So from now on, and for the next twenty years, I’m forced to be silent. I’m forced not to be able to see, I’m forced not to be able to think, I’m forced not to be able to make films.

I submit to the reality of the captivity and the captors. I will look for the manifestation of my dreams in your films, hoping to find in them what I have been deprived of.

Jafar Panahi, from Wikipedia:

Jafar Panahi (Persian: جعفر پناهی; born July 11, 1960 Meyaneh, East Azarbaijan) is an Iranian filmmaker and is one of the most influential filmmakers in the Iranian New Wave movement. He has gained recognition from film theorists and critics worldwide and received numerous awards including the Golden Lion at the Venice Film Festival and the Silver Bear at the Berlin Film Festival.

On 20 December 2010, Jafar Panahi was handed a six-year jail sentence and a 20-year ban on making or directing any movies, writing screenplays, giving any form of interview with Iranian or foreign media as well as leaving the country.

Panahi was born in Mianeh, Iran. He was ten years old when he wrote his first book, which subsequently won the first prize in a literary competition. At the same age, he became familiar with film making. He shot films on 8mm film, acting in one and assisting in the making of another. Later, he took up photography. During his military service, Panahi served in the Iran–Iraq War (1980–88) and made a documentary about the war during this period.

After studying film directing at the College of Cinema and Television in Tehran, Panahi made several films for Iranian television and was the assistant director of Abbas Kiarostami's film Through the Olive Trees (1994). Since that time, he has directed several films and won numerous awards in international film festivals.

Films

Panahi's first feature film came in 1995, entitled White Balloon. This film won a Camera d'Or at the Cannes Film Festival. His second feature film, The Mirror, received the Golden Leopard Award at the Locarno Film Festival.

His most notable offering to date has been The Circle (2000), which criticized the treatment of women under Iran's Islamist regime. Jafar Panahi won the Golden Lion, the top prize at the Venice Film Festival for The Circle, which was named FIPRESCI Film of the Year at the San Sebastián International Film Festival, and appeared on Top 10 lists of critics worldwide. Panahi also directed Crimson Gold in 2003, which brought him the Un Certain Regard Jury Award at the Cannes Film Festival. During that time Panahi was detained in the JFK airport, New York, while taking a connection from Hong Kong to Montevideo, after refusing to be photographed and fingerprinted by the immigration police. After being chained and waiting for several hours, he was finally sent back to Hong Kong.

Panahi's Offside (the story of girls who disguise themselves as boys to be able to watch a football match) was selected for competition in the 2006 Berlin Film Festival, where he was awarded with the Silver Bear (Jury Grand Prix).

Imprisonment and international response

On 30 July 2009, Mojtaba Saminejad, an Iranian blogger and human rights activist writing from inside Iran, reported that Panahi was arrested at the cemetery in Tehran where mourners had gathered near the grave of Neda Agha-Soltan. He was later released, but his passport was revoked and he was banned from leaving the country. In February 2010 his request to travel to the 60th Berlin Film Festival to participate in the panel discussion on "Iranian Cinema: Present and Future. Expectations inside and outside of Iran" was denied.

On 1 March 2010, Panahi was arrested again. He was taken from his home along with his wife Tahereh Saeidi, daughter Solmaz Panahi and 15 of his friends by plainclothes officers to Evin Prison. Most were released 48 hours later, Mohammad Rasoulof and Mehdi Pourmoussa on 17 March 2010, but Panahi remains in ward 209 inside Evin Prison. Panahi's arrest was confirmed by the government, but charges were not specified. …

On 8 March 2010, a group of well-known Iranian producers, directors and actors visited Panahi's family to show their support and call for his immediate release. After more than a week in captivity, Panahi was finally allowed to call his family. On 18 March 2010 he has been allowed to have visitors, including his family and lawyer. Iran's culture minister said on 14 April 2010 that Panahi was arrested because he "was making a film against the regime and it was about the events that followed election." But in an interview with AFP in mid-March, Panahi's wife, Tahereh Saeedi, denied that he was making a film about post-election events, saying: "The film was being shot inside the house and had nothing to do with the regime."
In mid-March, 50 Iranian directors, actors and artists signed a petition seeking Panahi's release. American film directors, Paul Thomas Anderson, Joel & Ethan Coen, Francis Ford Coppola, Jonathan Demme, Robert De Niro, Curtis Hanson, Jim Jarmusch, Ang Lee, Richard Linklater, Terrence Malick, Michael Moore, Robert Redford, Martin Scorsese, James Schamus, Paul Schrader, Steven Soderbergh, Steven Spielberg, Oliver Stone and Frederick Wiseman, signed a letter on 30 April 2010 urging Panahi's release. The petition ends with “Like artists everywhere, Iran’s filmmakers should be celebrated, not censored, repressed, and imprisoned.” He was named a member of the jury at the 2010 Cannes Film Festival, but because of his imprisonment he could not attend and his chair was symbolically kept empty.

On May 18, 2010, J. Hoberman at VoiceFilm.com reported that an unconfirmed announcement indicated the Iranian regime would release Panahi to coincide with the public screening of another Iranian film at the festival, Abbas Kiarostami's *Certified Copy*. However, it was instead announced at the screening that Panahi's prison sentence had been extended. Hoberman reported that the leading lady of Kiarostami's film, Juliette Binoche, cried upon hearing the news.

On May 18, 2010, Panahi sent a message to Abbas Baktiari, director of the Pouya Cultural Center, an Iranian-French cultural organization in Paris. Panahi wrote that he has been mistreated in prison and his family threatened, and as a result has begun a hunger strike.

On 25 May 2010, Panahi was released on $200,000 bail. On 12 November 2010, Panahi was back in court for his hearing. In a lengthy statement he defended himself and told the court that "I am Iranian and I will remain in Iran."

On 20 December 2010 Panahi, after being prosecuted for "assembly and colluding with the intention to commit crimes against the country’s national security and propaganda against the Islamic Republic," was handed a six-year jail sentence and a 20-year ban on making or directing any movies, writing screenplays, giving any form of interview with Iranian or foreign media as well as leaving the country.

On 23 December 2010 Amnesty International announced that it was mobilizing an online petition spearheaded by Paul Haggis and Nana'ni Boniadi and signed by Sean Penn, Martin Scorsese, Harvey Weinstein and others to protest the imprisonment of Panahi.

Cine Foundation International, a "non-profit film company and human rights NGO aiming to 'empower open consciousness through cinema'" announced on 3 January 2011 that they are launching a campaign of protest films and public actions calling for the release of Panahi. "The campaign will include protest films that speak to human rights issues in Iran and throughout the world, six of which are commissioned feature-length, plus twenty shorts. Participating filmmakers may act anonymously or through pseudonyms as voicing their stories can be dangerous. The films, which will address themes of nation, identity, self, spiritual culture, censorship and imprisonment, will be aimed for public, web and various exhibition media." Later in January, CFI deployed a video protest mechanism called WHITE MEADOWS (named for the Mohammad Rasoulof film, which was edited by Panahi) and developed by Ericson deJesus (of Yahoo! and frog design) at the request of the foundation. The video mechanism "allow(s) anyone in the world to record a short video statement about Panahi and Rasoulof. There will be an ESCAPE button at top, allowing quick exit for those in countries where recording a statement would be dangerous. There will an option to have the screen black, and soon, voice distortion. The video statements will be recorded as mp4s, giving them maximum transmedia capacity, which essentially makes them broadcastable from any device that can show video". Users can also use the mechanism to comment on how they would "like to see as an international response by the film industry", comment on the state of human rights in general, or to "report a human rights abuse to the world".

Style
Panahi's style is often described as an Iranian form of neorealism. Jake Wilson describes his films as connected by a "tension between documentary immediacy and a set of strictly defined formal parameters" in addition to "outcry expressed anger at the restrictions that Iranian society imposes". His film *Offside* is so ensonced in the reality that it was actually filmed in part during the event it dramatizes – the Iran-Bahrain qualifying match for the 2006 FIFA World Cup.

Where Panahi differs from his fellow realist filmmaker Abbas Kiarostami, is in the explicitness of his social critique. Stephen Teo writes that "Panahi's films redefine the humanitarian themes of contemporary Iranian cinema, firstly, by treating the problems of women in modern Iran, and secondly, by depicting human characters as "non-specific persons" - more like figures who nevertheless remain full-blooded characters, holding on to the viewer's attention and gripping the senses. Like the best Iranian directors who have won acclaim on the world stage, Panahi evokes humanitarianism in an unsentimental, realistic fashion, without necessarily overriding political and social messages. In essence, this has come to define the particular aesthetic of Iranian cinema. So powerful is this sensibility that we seem to have no other mode of looking at Iranian cinema other than to equate it with a universal concept of humanitarianism."

Panahi says that his style can be described as "humanitarian events interpreted in a poetic and artistic way". He says "In a world where films are made with millions of dollars, we made a film about a little girl who wants to buy a fish for less than a dollar (in *The White Balloon*) - this is what we're trying to show."

In an interview with Anthony Kaufman, Panahi said: "I was very conscious of not trying to play with people's emotions; we were not trying to create tear-jerking scenes. So it engages people's intellectual side. But this is with assistance from the emotional aspect and a combination of the two."
It is hard to appreciate *The Circle* (*Dayereh*) today in quite the same way as in 2000. Since 2008, popular protest has become commonplace in Iran. But back in 2000, one could barely see this reflected in Iranian cinema. Like many other Iranian films of the last two decades, Jafar Panahi’s earlier feature films, *White Balloon* (1995) and *The Mirror* (1997), used children as their main subjects. While *White Balloon* was well executed, and nicely captured the feel of the city around Nowruz (New Year), I was tiring of the somewhat saccharine fable of a child getting her way. In contrast, *The Circle* captured the city streets in an atmosphere of pervasive fear and oppression. Never before had a movie made in post-revolutionary Iran captured what we all knew to be Iran’s reality in such stark terms. The political indictment was bold, unveiled, and uncompromising. Overnight, Panahi became the conscience of Iranian cinema.

*The Circle* opens with credits running over the cries of a woman going through labor. The woman—Solmaz Gholami—has just given birth to a baby girl. The first frame in the film is the door of a hospital’s maternity ward, all white with small sliding window—an image to be revisited at the end of the film along with Solmaz’s name. We can see the profound disappointment of Solmaz’s mother at the news of a baby girl—the father had expected a boy. After repeating her inquiry to make sure, she lies to the father’s relatives who come in and ask for the baby, feigning ignorance as to the baby’s gender. To her own close kin, she says there will be trouble, perhaps a divorce; time to call on Solmaz’s uncles for help.

No joy or merriment attends this birth: only threats of trouble. The cycle of woes, biological at first (labor pains), is quickly overlaid by the social oppression. The birth initiates the circle, Panahi’s term for the trajectory an individual forcibly follows, constrained by the totality of social restrictions and limitations.

The remainder of the film moves out of the hospital to follow this circle of trouble through the ordeals of several women. The camera uses the point of contact of each woman with the next for transition, following the new subject for a while. Each story is told only partially; inviting the viewer to fill in the blanks. In the order of appearance, the women we follow on the screen are:

Solmaz— the new mother in the maternity ward (Solmaz Gholami)
Arezou— the enterprising one of the threesome (Maryam Parvin Almani)
Maedeh— the member of the threesome who is immediately arrested (Maedeh Tahmasebi)
Nargess— the young recently released prison homeward bound (Nargess Mamizadeh)
Pari— the pregnant escapee from prison (Fereshteh Sadre Orafaiy)
Monir— ticket seller at the movie house (Monir Arab)
Elham— the hospital nurse married to the Pakistani doctor (Elham Saboktakin)

Nayereh— the mother who abandons her child, Negar (Fatemeh Naghavi)
The Prostitute wearing heavy makeup (Mojgan Faramarzi)

The first encounter is at the phone booth where Solmaz’s relative tries to place a call, we encounter three young women, just released from the prison: Arezou, Maedeh, and Nargess. Solmaz’s story is now left unfinished as the camera follows the three women. They are trying to come up with money for the bus ride to Nargess’s home village. Maedeh is immediately arrested, as she tries to pawn a gold chain. Arezou eventually finds enough money to get Nargess a bus ticket, but the two of them separate.

Nargess manages to purchase the ticket but can’t get on the bus; a soldier is searching passengers and she does not have the necessary documents. She tries to locate Pari—another prisoner—who escaped from prison on that day. Pari’s father tells Nargess to get lost, she is better off in prison, he says, and then repeats the same thing to Pari. As Nargess leaves, Pari’s two brothers ride in on a motorcycle, they are furious over Pari’s return and seem intent on punishing this disgrace to the family. Fleeing the house, Pari hails a cab barely escapes their wrath.

**The Force of Restrictions**

In Newtonian physics, circular motion is governed by constraining forces, as in orbits. For the orbits in this film, Aristotle’s term “violent motion” would be apt. The women in this film move in orbits or circles that severely limit their freedom and most basic rights. This theme is visually reinforced by choosing locations in which the women follow circular arcs. Also, by tracing women who have shared the common experience of prison, Panahi stresses how the restrictions continue beyond prison. With almost equal force, the entire city serves as a prison for these women.

The most obvious restriction placed on all (adult) women is the *chador* (hejab or veil), creatively used as a means of concealment at times in this film. Women can’t enter a hospital unveiled; unattached women cannot travel or check into a hotel; they cannot smoke in public, or even purchase bus tickets. Pari needs the permission of her deceased husband’s male relatives to get an abortion. Panahi is also intent on showing the ongoing daily propositioning unaccompanied women face. Early in the film, Arezou is greatly offended by the lewdness of a passerby who shouts: “why are you alone?” Later in the movie, unaccompanied women are constantly offered “rides” by male drivers.

While restrictions on unattached women loom large, the film also comments on the restrictions married women face. Solmaz’s husband can divorce her for failing to produce a son, Monir’s husband woos a second wife while Monir is in jail, Elham needs to conceal her past from her husband, and the soldier’s mother in the phone booth scene is obviously restricted in her movements. Only Nargess seems to be hopeful about marriage. Early in the film, we see her interest in the groom getting out of car, and her purchase of a shirt very much like the groom’s for her 20-year old beau. For Panahi, however, marriage is far from blissful. He makes his point wistfully by juxtaposing weddings with
marriages gone awry: Adjacent to the hotel where Pari and Nayereh meet, a wedding celebration is going full blast. We hear the congratulatory wedding song known to every Iranian much before the bride’s entrance. Too bad that this joyous celebration (and the music) serves as the backdrop for a mother who is abandoning her child and a pregnant widow who seeks to abort.

Progression of despair

_The Circle_ starts with hopeful youth, in broad daylight, in the heart of the city. Most hopeful among the newly released youth is Nargess. She wants to return to her home village Raziliq (in Western Azerbaijan, the Iranian province in the northwest where Panahi himself was born), the village of her childhood memories, which she equates with paradise. Arezou, on the other hand, is doubtful if her family would ever take her in again. There is a touching irony in the scene at the paintings storefront. The store sells the kind of decorative paintings that the lower middle class often use to decorate their walls. There, Nargess shows Arezou a landscape painting in a store as her beloved Raziliq, faulting the painter for not being fully faithful in capturing the scene. The viewer, however, can identify the painting as a crude reproduction of Van Gogh’s _Wheat field with cypresses_.

As the movie progresses, we move into the night, the arc of the circle tightens, everything becomes darker, the camera itself slows down, and despair gains the upper hand. By the end, we witness the total eclipse of Hope. With great economy, the movie also comments on changes and how relationships change. Arezou sacrifices her own chances to help Nargess get her wish, but these two friends have just been out. Over time, the friendships formed in prison are weakened and altered by pragmatic considerations. Thus, Elham refuses to help Pari as she is concealing her prior incarceration from her husband. With poignant rancor, Pari notes how much Elham has changed. On the other hand, Panahi does recognize a certain bond among women in distress without romanticizing it. The bond between Monir and Pari is touching and uplifting, the viewer can see how genuine Monir’s offer of help is. Similarly, shunned by her male kin, Pari still receives help from her mother through a young girl (sister?). Finally, in spite of her own critical challenges, Pari takes an active interest in Nayereh who is abandoning her young daughter.

For me, the darkest and most moving part of _The Circle_ is the scene in the police bus. The arrested prostitute shares the ride with a few men. One of these asks another man to sing. This variety of lament or dirge is known as a Faez song in southern Iran. A more significant example is Nargess’s curiosity as to what misfortunes have compelled a mother to abandon her child? Such a long one and why he

Filling in the blanks

Panahi deliberately leaves much to the imagination: the story of each woman is told only partially, and often very tersely, with no evident closure. For the Iranian viewer, Panahi’s silence is well-placed. Apart from censorship concerns, Panahi knows that his audience can fill in the blanks as they continue to hear and witness, daily, hundreds of similar tales of woe. To take one instance, the viewer familiar with the Iranian scene is not surprised to see a soldier take a bundle of newspapers away from a newsvendor at a street kiosk.

In this way, the viewer is free to imagine where the bruise on Nargess’s face might have come from, why Pari’s sentence is such a long one and why her husband was executed in prison, and what misfortunes have compelled a mother to abandon her child? A more significant example is Nargess’s curiosity as to what Arezou transacted to get her the bus money. Arezou’s silence on whether the source was a relative is very telling.

Some other scenes present conundrums: Why does the Haji pick up Nayereh and why does she accept the ride? (From the car radio, we find out that the time is past 2:00 a.m.) Moreover, as the Haji turns out to be part of the police force, is this entrapment or an aborted lustful episode? (Not surprisingly, the Haji is more tolerant of the male client, who is released, than of the prostitute, who is sent to jail). What is the story behind the call the soldier asks Pari to make in the public phone booth. The Iranian viewer would know the taboo about a man calling a woman, but in this case, the woman is the soldier’s mother. Evidently, the stepfather has ruled out any contact between Zahra and her son!

Beyond Subtitles

The film is deliberate in reflecting Iran’s geographic and linguistic diversity. First, we encounter different languages or dialects. Nargess is Azeri from northwestern Iran. This is why she takes such an interest in the trio of street musicians singing in Azeri Turkish. Later, she speaks with the bus driver in Azeri, the subtitles capture none of this. Her friend Arezou is from the North. The two soldiers in the garment store are from Tabriz and Khorramabad. The passengers in the police bus are from Southern Iran (Abadan and Khorramshahr). As these characters appear on the screen, we also hear different accents or dialects of spoken Farsi.

In Bahram Beizai’s well-known movie _Bashu, the little stranger_ (1986), we have a more direct clash of languages, but there the linguistic diversity of Iran is used as a vehicle for stressing the country’s ultimate unity. In _The Circle_, the linguistic variety seems to suggest that the circles of restrictions and oppression are pervasive, encompassing all of Iran.

Using a quasi-documentary style, _The Circle_ admirably captures the feel of the streets, not just through images, but also through sounds and music. Throughout the film, we hear the kind
of things an Iranian would encounter in any major city. Someone offers pedestrians dollars or marks reflecting the ubiquitous currency black market. Familiar and popular songs are often heard in the background. The police or military are often present even when they have no direct role in the film's narrative: a good example is the way we hear the obnoxious commands issued by the traffic cops in the background.

Subtitles also fail to consistently capture certain keywords that occur in the film. One such word is behesht (paradise). This word is used by Nargess to describe her village, by Arezou in doubting whether her paradise can be regained (her two-year-old would not even know her), and by Nayereh as her wish for the child she is abandoning. Repeatedly, the hopes for paradise are thwarted until the circle of hell in film’s final scene negates the construct altogether.

Finally, while this might be a minor point, it is worth noting that the women in this film all have nonreligious names. In Iran, religious names (of the Prophet’s kin or descendants) are quite common among men and women. With the exception of Zahra (whom we never see), none of the women in this film are so named. Instead we have names that mean Angel (Pari), Hope (Arezou), Luminous (Monir), and so on. Curiously, Solmaz means undying flower in Azeri Turkish. Undying flower, indeed!

David Walsh: “An interview with Jafar Panahi (World Socialist Web Site)

DW: 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.

JUST ONE MORE IN THE SPRING 2011 BUFFALO FILM SEMINARS XXII:

Apr 26 Ridley Scott BLADE RUNNER 1982

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