

Interview with Pooya Abbasian (by Clémentine Gallot)

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Based in Paris, Pooya Abbasian collaborates with Jafar Panahi on a regular basis. Pooya Abbasian, a 32-year old video artist, has directed a number of animation shorts. Friend and collaborator of Jafar Panahi, he supervised the post-production in France of Panahi's last three films.

How long have you known Jafar Panahi?

Five years. The situation is complicated because he cannot work with many people, he needs to be discreet. For *Closed Curtain*, I received a non-definitive version for which we had to modify the edit before doing the colour grading. It was a strange experience because the internet does not work well in Iran, so we could not use Skype, YouTube or Vimeo. Jafar did not have access to this new version of the video, he could only listen to it without seeing the image. He hadn't even seen the version sent to the Berlin Film Festival.

What has happened in regards to his condemnation since 2010?

At the time, he was shooting a new film and was counting on going to Hollywood to direct an adaptation of Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, produced by Sony Pictures. During the shoot, the entire team, about 10 people in total, together with Jafar Panahi's family, were arrested. They stayed in jail for three days. He was kept there several months and was only able to get out after starting a hunger strike. He was sentenced to six years in jail and banned from leaving the country, directing films, writing scripts and giving interviews for twenty years.

He has since made three films. He therefore didn't follow these injunctions and continued to work. He co-directed the two first post-2010 films with filmmaker friends, who both encountered problems afterwards with their passports, or were imprisoned. It becomes increasingly difficult to make films when your collaborators are harassed.

Were there retaliations after these three films?

He took a risk in shooting *This is Not a Film*. We were aware he was doing it but he was not saying it out loud. Filming took place in the intimacy of his flat, it reflected the state of shock he was in after his conviction. He was asking himself, facing the camera, how to continue working. It was an artist's self-portrait. He made the second, *Closed Curtain*, after going through a depression. Then he took photographs of clouds for a year – we are in fact trying to put together an exhibition of these images in Paris. *Taxi Tehran* signals a return to Jafar Panahi's way of looking at the world. It is important to know that Iranian media, in their festival roundup articles, always leave his name out. When the film won the Golden Bear in Berlin this year, we were faced with very critical articles on the "director who is against the regime", who had made "a political film". There was no reaction from the government, except for a minister who threatened him orally but for the time being, he has not been sent to jail. Iran embodies this paradox, his conviction was a symbolic gesture directed towards other artists, a demonstration of strength.

What influence did the international mobilisation in favour of Jafar Panahi have?

When members of government saw the unanimous reactions emanating from foreign film festivals and the Western media, they were surprised, they realised they had made a mistake. They don't want to take back anything they said or make the situation worse. As far as the future is concerned, everything is possible coming from them; we can't know for sure as there is no precedent.

Is there a sense of solidarity with the Iranian cinema community?

Jafar has friends who are independent directors. He is present in the art world even if he does not attend the Tehran Film Festival. His inner circle has evolved since his arrest, but he nevertheless stays well surrounded.

His films, which are not released in cinemas, do they circulate illegally?

Of course, like a whole section of cinema. It is a very common practice.

How are Jafar Panahi's spirits today?

When he works, he is very well. One can see it in *Taxi Tehran*, which is a comedy. He was hurt but he continues to live and to laugh. He is even at peace with his detractors.

How did the idea of filming while in a car come about?

When someone lacks inspiration, Jafar usually says: "take a taxi and you'll come up with many ideas." He came up with the idea of using three very small cameras, the Blackmagic Cinema Cameras. They are high definition (2K). Jafar is a terrible driver and, for this film, he had to drive, direct and act all at once!

How was the shooting?

It took place over two weeks. The film was produced with his own money, based on a script inspired by his own experience, with people he knew. This film is a fiction based on documentary material. There are no professional actors, the film's protagonists are people who know Jafar and are very devoted to him. We don't name the technical collaborators in the credits section to avoid creating issues for them.

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Is there a possibility that Jafar Panahi might go into exile?

No, at some point it was strongly suggested to him but he loves his country and decided to stay. He simply wants to continue making his films. The media largely contributed in creating an image of Panahi as being a "filmmaker against the government."

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Translated by Diane Gabrysiak