



PARTWAY THROUGH *This Is Not a Film*, HIS 2011 ACT of defiance after being banned by the Iranian authorities from making films for 20 years, Jafar Panahi changed tack. After recording himself on his cell phone in his Tehran apartment, talking to his lawyer about the prospects of a reduction in the ban (and the six-year jail sentence that went with it), Panahi invited another filmmaker, Mojtaba Mirtahmasb, to come over with his camcorder. Mirtahmasb then filmed Panahi going through a screenplay he had previously been prevented from filming about a young girl locked in her apartment by her parents to prevent her registering for university.

Panahi didn't just read from the unproduced screenplay, he blocked it out. Down on his hands and knees on his living-room carpet, he measured out the spaces of the girl's apartment, and pictured the six-minute take that would open the film, shot through her bedroom window. Thus Panahi hoped to "create an image" of his lost film (on the DVD commentary track, Jamsheed Akrami muses that the filmmaker is "acting like a human storyboard"). In the end, Panahi says: "Perhaps the viewer will see the film that wasn't made."

With his latest film, *Closed Curtain*, the subject remains confinement, and the cost that has been exacted in Panahi's personal and professional life by that court judgment. But if *This Is Not a Film* was a record of the process by which he had been confined, and his response to it, *Closed Curtain* broadens the picture through both allegory and psychodrama. There's no one film behind the film that we're supposed to see here, but what could be behind it, in a sense, is Panahi's entire filmography, his creative enterprise, his relationship to his own subject matter (which, in one way or another, has been figured for a while now as confinement). The irony is that if the curtain has been closed by the authorities on Panahi's creative life, that locked-in situation is anyway the one that most identifies him, that has most nourished him.

PANAHI'S RECOURSE TO THESE SITUATIONS—AFTER HIS EARLY films were so vigorously out-and-about in the city—had both a political and an aesthetic dimension. All the gates and grilles, the police and hospital hatches, which framed the progress of the women in *The Circle* (00)—and the police pen that fenced in the girls outside the football arena in

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Offside (06)—supplied the imagery of social oppression and a satisfying cinematic form. But those images of confinement also seemed to lead Panahi to greater containment, to self-restriction as both a dramatic and a production tactic. There was a strong practical motivation to this: as Panahi explains in *This Is Not a Film*, using a single, contained location would hopefully enable him to avoid too much official oversight.

Apart from the script he acted out, based on a Chekhov story, Panahi has scripted an adaptation of *Death and the Maiden* that would have taken place "in a holiday home by the sea" (is there an echo of that in *Closed Curtain*?) and would have been shot in one continuous take. Panahi was shooting another film in his own apartment when he was arrested in 2010. In the long opening shot of *Closed Curtain*, the camera sits behind a locked grille across the glass doors of a house by the sea. A taxi draws up and a man takes his luggage inside, where he draws flimsy curtains and then releases the dog he has brought with him in a bag. The man, it turns out, is a scriptwriter, played by Kambuzia Partovi, who is also credited as the film's co-writer and co-director.

The writer eventually seals up his makeshift cell by covering all the windows with blackout curtains and shaving his head. A TV news program suggests a reason for his paranoia, a political threat not against himself but his dog: "Because dogs are impure in our Islamic society, they will now be banned in public." Events quickly overtake the writer's closeted project. A young man and woman, claiming to be brother and sister, get into the house, apparently having fled the police. The man announces: "They've arrested everyone" (their crime seems to be some illicit partying on the beach). He goes for help and leaves the writer to look after the woman, Melika (Maryam Moghadam), warning him that she has "a knack for suicide" (she has arrived dripping wet, and drowning, both as threat and invitation, figures later in the story).

>> IN FOCUS: *Closed Curtain* opens July 9.



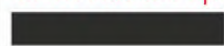
And if Melika has this knack, it could be transferred to the writer—and through him, to Panahi, who in becoming the maestro of cloistered cinema might have created a specialty that, with a little help from the Iranian authorities, has now trapped him. When the writer later blocks Melika from what he thinks is another drowning attempt, her first mocking response—“If I wanted to die, there are many ways”—then shifts, as if all the foregoing were a sham and there’s another reality to confront. Abruptly she tells him: “I wrote tons of reports on guys like you,” and then, “Suicide is your only way out.” (The Chekhov project included a character, a boy who seemed to be a suitor for the girl, but who turned out to be a police agent.)

Later, when the writer complains about her interrupting his work, she dismisses this too. “Is your writing so important? A man, a dog, a villa... You write it and he shoots it. Then what?” If the “he” in this sentence is Panahi, the writer and Melika have a more troublesome, slipsliding reality. They are like dueling spirits, eruptions from Panahi’s consciousness. But Kambuzia Partovi is a writer, working on a script for Panahi, and his troubles in this film reflect Panahi’s own. “I don’t want any trouble,” the writer says when first confronted by the young couple—a declaration repeated by Panahi himself when he enters the film in the second half.

MELIKA COULD BE ANY ONE OF THE FEMALE CHARACTERS from Panahi’s films—going back to the youngest in his first two—a representative of the subject matter he can no longer deal with, or dare approach too closely (leaving him with “a man, a dog, a villa...”). Despite all the early talk of suicide, its shadow really enters when Panahi walks into the film, stepping over the broken glass of the doors we saw in the opening shot. There has been a break-in—burglars, perhaps (the writer hides out when he hears them ransacking the place), but these might just be the ghosts of another reality, the one that burst into Panahi’s apartment in 2010. Melika represents a temptation to give in to the despair that the arrest and sentencing have caused him: “He’ll let the melancholy of dusk take him away,” she pronounces.

Closed Curtain at this stage moves into a quotidian reality, a familiar enough mode for Panahi and Iranian cinema. Friends and

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neighbors drop by; one tries to reassure him (“You’ll be able to work again”), and concludes: “There’s more to life than work.” Panahi’s reply—“Yes, but those things are foreign to me”—pairs him again with the frustrated writer. In Panahi’s limbo world, somewhere between total shutdown and a strange samizdat freedom, smuggling out his last two missives to international film festivals, it’s not surprising if even the quotidian seems totally self-referential, self-reflexive.

But the self-reflexive in Panahi is really part of a different kind of double-track cinema, and in this respect *Closed Curtain* still sits within an earlier aesthetic. Panahi likes to pivot on a moment when a film will turn back on itself, take a different dramatic or narrative route out of the problem it has set up. This was first apparent in his second film, *The Mirror* (97), when the child actor apparently decides she’s had enough of acting and hops off the narrative bus. But the break, the return to zero and setting forth again, also occurs in *This Is Not a Film* when Panahi tires of his initial diary format (“It’s turning out to be a lie”) and reframes the second part with Mirtahmasb.

Closed Curtain follows the same double routing, with the initial dueling of phantoms overtaken by a more pragmatic, everyday explication of Panahi’s situation (not until the very end do the two levels come together). What has begun to happen, in this second chapter in Panahi’s post-ban cinema, is that the aesthetic itself is in danger of breakdown, attempting a refinement and restatement that must eventually overcomplicate it to the point of obliteration. Is there a way out? That’s not in Panahi’s hands, obviously, though at least the “melancholy of dusk” is overcome. “What is he thinking?” “About renovating the house” goes one of the final exchanges between the writer and Melika, before Panahi packs up and, in another long sequence shot, closes the grille over the glass doors and starts to drive off. At the last moment, he backs up to pick up the writer and his dog. □

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