

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

In Iran, One Actor Goes Free, One Director Stays in Jail

Charity Hume · Wednesday, November 9th, 2011

Marzieh Vafamehr's pardon is cause for celebration. The international outcry following her sentencing may well have contributed to her release. There is an enormous sense of relief for her personal safety. But in [Marzieh Vafamehr's story](#), an Iranian actress sentenced to 90 lashes and imprisonment for a year for appearing in a film that did not meet government approval, there is a tragic archetype of many other silenced artists who remain in jail, whose works have been banned, or otherwise destroyed, in a deliberate campaign by their governments, to intimidate, silence and subdue free thinking and creative expression.

Jafar Panahi, the internationally acclaimed director of *White Balloon*, *Offside*, and *The Circle*, is currently imprisoned in Iran for the crime of making films. At the 2010 Cannes Film Festival, he was named a member of the jury, but because he is incarcerated, his place was honored by an empty chair, a symbol of his inability to practice his art and take his place on the international stage. Instead, Panahi is currently serving part of a six year sentence in Evin prison. The current regime has banned his films from being viewed inside Iran for the next twenty years.

Why, one might wonder, does a regime want to brutally intimidate and erase the face of Panahi's art? What is the motive for this behavior? What is so threatening about these films and why are the "idea police" so crazed in their intimidation? In the case of Marzieh Vafamehr, whose sentence stemmed in part from her appearing in a film without a hijab, one asks, what is so frightening about a woman's hair? Why is it wrong? Why is it criminalized? Why are women in this caste system given lesser rights before the law? Why are they regarded as inferiors throughout their culture?

The opening words of Panahi's award winning film, *The Circle*, are spoken from a small opening of a prison door: "It's a girl." The news is devastating to the veiled woman who receives it, as she quickly absorbs the consequences of the child's gender. Giving birth to a girl will mean disgrace for the mother, and probably divorce. The film goes on to depict an interconnected series of stories that surround three women who face incredible obstacles in their attempt to return to a normal sphere of life on the day they have been released from prison, where they have clearly been mistreated and harmed.

On the street, however, they are in the larger prison of Iran, one where facing the everyday challenges of being born a woman is to be subject to harsh authoritarian rule, daily searches, the need to wear the chador and be covered, the immediate potential threat of arrest. Further complicating their first steps toward "freedom" is the ban on being able to travel alone or face being picked up for prostitution, which happens to one of the three in the first hours of their

release. Throughout the film, one senses that the protagonists must hide at every moment from the criminal reading of their existence by the authorities. As women, they are culprits, on the defensive, forced to live under cover, anticipating potential arrest and always in danger. Panahi's film, *The Circle*, bears witness to the subjugation and daily intimidation women face, by being born female, inside fundamentalist Islam. It is the power of Panahi's dramatic witness to the criminalization of women that lies at the heart of his sentence.

A haunting description of the conditions inside Evin during the eighties was written by Soudabeh Ardavan, a political prisoner arrested as a twenty-two-year-old for taking part in demonstrations. Much like the protagonists of *The Circle*, she was a student who was jailed and caught up in the criminal inquisitions that followed the revolution inside Iran in the '80s, and endured the harsh conditions of Evin Prison for eight years. During her prison term, her art was smuggled out to the world, and her drawings of guards, of interrogators, of her fellow prisoners cleaning their cell, gave artistic witness to the intimidation and torture of those imprisoned with her at Evin. After her release, Ardavan described the conditions of her years there:

In the summer of 1988, right after the ceasefire between Iran and Iraq, there were many prisoners whose terms had ended but weren't released. Khomeini had personally ordered the male "infidel" prisoners be executed and the women lashed five times a day according to Islamic law. [Amnesty has reported close to 5000 prisoners were murdered in the prisons of the Islamic regime in 1988.] Death sentences were carried out against those who did not repent and beg for mercy. Twenty-five were taken from our cell alone. So many young men and women were amongst them.

Since Panahi's imprisonment, many directors and artists, inside and outside of Iran, have tried to bring attention to his case, to urge the government to release him. In April 2010, a group of Hollywood filmmakers signed a [petition on Panahi's behalf](#). Their petition ends with the following words: "Like artists everywhere, Iran's filmmakers should be celebrated, not censored, repressed, and imprisoned." The petition has been signed by over 50 luminaries, including Joel and Ethan Coen, Frances Ford Coppola, Robert de Nero, Jim Jarmusch, Ang Lee, Michael Moore, Robert Redford, Steven Soderbergh, Steven Spielberg and Oliver Stone. Panahi remains in Evin.

Before entering prison, Panahi filmed the legal ordeals he faced during months of house arrest. This documentary was shot on an iPhone, and smuggled out of his home hidden inside a cake. The title of the documentary is *This Is Not a Film*. The irony of his title, an allusion to Magritte's *Ceci n'est pas une pipe*, challenges us to witness the drama of his current imprisonment. He does so without the removed filter of art in a museum, but with the urgent knowledge that as a filmmaker who bears witness to gender intimidation inside Iran, he faces brutality in prison, and an active campaign to destroy his work.

At present, the authorities have succeeded in letting Panahi's camera grow dark. Inside Evin, it is unlikely Panahi will get hold of another way to film his experience. While he remains prisoner, the world is denied the maturing vision this artist should be giving us. He has only his mind, his memory, the sounds and voices of those who are tortured and beaten, their stories and the witnessing of their deaths.

An iPhone in a cake, a message in a bottle. Unlike Panahi, who remains in prison, his films have transcended the borders of the political prison constructed by intimidation and repression. Particularly because they have reached us at such a great cost, Panahi's films deserve our

attention. By understanding their value, and distributing them internationally, we may take an important step toward understanding how to attain his freedom. Like Marzieh Vafamehr, and the other filmmakers, writers and actors who have been criminalized for their courage in bringing the world's attention to the repression of women in the fundamentalist regime of Iran, we owe Panahi more than a debt of gratitude. What will the world do with his message, or his ongoing sacrifice for the cause of women, for the cause of free expression, for artistic freedom?

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