

# **Who's afraid of Iranian Cinema?**

## **Women, Life, Freedom and the power of the film**

Shiva Rahbaran

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### Abstract

This paper discusses the detainment of Iranian progressive filmmakers Mohammad Rasoulof and Jafar Panahi through the lens of the 2022 women's uprising against compulsory hijab and as an expression of a deep-rooted quest for modernity in Iran, whose suppression has been at the heart of the Islamic Republic's ideology since its founding in 1979.

The imprisonment of the internationally renowned film directors during the May 2022 uprising will be positioned in a broader context of social and political movements in Iran and discussed as a prologue to the recent woman's revolutionary uprising that has become an existential threat to the regime. Censorship and repression as tools to maintain the status quo clearly showcase Islamic Republic's fears of modernity and freedom of expression.

To gain a more comprehensive understanding of this complex and ongoing process the article positions the detainment of the two Iranian progressive filmmakers and women's protest in a broader historical context of Islamic Republic's repressive ideology. Amongst other sources the argument builds mainly on interviews from 2010 and 2022 with Jafar Panahi and his colleagues, who asked for anonymity as they fear persecution by the Islamic regime.

*'Ladies and Gentlemen [...] they throw me into exile, but I am the one who belongs to this place. They have no right to do this to me. I want everybody to know that we are the sand at the bottom of the stream. We stay where we are and those who have violently confiscated our dwelling and think that they have thrown us into exile are doomed to go away – like the stream, they too will pass. The secret of our success is that we have not severed our connection with this land and the people that live in'*<sup>1</sup>

A couple of days after they took Mohammad Rasoulouf away, we all accompanied Jafar Panahi to Evin Prison to ask what he had done to deserve this. We were told to wait at the gates, and, after a while, a young soldier came out and motioned Panahi to follow him. There was an almost friendly exchange between the two. It looked like they had asked Panahi to come in for some kind of negotiation with the authorities regarding Rasoulouf's arrest. We were getting hopeful and even joked about the guards' good manners and reckoned that they were going to offer Panahi the obligatory [Iranian] tea and sweets! The gates closed behind them. We waited for a long time, but Panahi never came back.<sup>2</sup>

This is how a colleague of Panahi (name withheld) witnessed the arrest of his internationally renowned colleague Jafar Panahi, winner of the Golden Bear at the Berlin Film Festival for

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<sup>1</sup> This what Jafar Panahi told me he wants the world to know every time his films are presented at international festivals or screened abroad. See Shiva Rahbaran, *Iranian Cinema Uncensored: Contemporary filmmakers since the Islamic Revolution*, London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2016, p. 181.

<sup>2</sup> Telephone interview, 10 August 2022.

*Taxi Tehran* in 2015, the Cannes Film Festival prize for Best Screenplay for *3 Faces* in 2018 and most recently the Special Jury Prize at the Venice Film Festival for *No Bears* in 2022, amongst others.<sup>3</sup> In the meantime, despite his lawyers having successfully challenged Panahi's unlawful detainment, the regime refused to release him until he went on hunger strike in early February 2023 and forced his release on bail.<sup>4</sup>

Only three months after Panahi's detainment, many more of his colleagues ended up in jail due to their staunch support for a new wave of protests.<sup>5</sup> The death of a young Iranian-Kurdish woman in police custody, Mahsa Amini, who was arrested due to 'improper' wearing of her scarf, has sparked one of the biggest uprisings in Iran since the 1979 revolution and despite brutal clampdown doesn't seem to abate.<sup>6</sup> Some observers have started to see these protests as an existential threat for the Islamic regime – France's president Emmanuel Macron has gone as far as calling it a 'revolution'.<sup>7</sup>

In fact, the detainment of Panahi and Rasoulof itself was preceded by another wave of protest that had taken place about six weeks earlier. Jafar Panahi and several other filmmakers had signed an open letter in which they implored the security forces to lay down their arms and join the people's protests that they had been ordered to oppress. This action was initiated by the director Mohammad Rasoulof, winner of the Golden Bear at the Berlin Film Festival for *There is no Evil* in 2020. He had published the letter on his Instagram account under *#Tofangat\_ra\_zamin\_bogzar* (*#Lay\_down\_your\_guns*).<sup>8</sup> The letter was published the wake of the uprisings triggered by the collapse of a ten-floor office building in the southwestern

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<sup>3</sup> David Gritten, 'Jafar Panahi: Acclaimed film maker held in Iran amid crackdown on critics', *BBC News*, 11 July 2022. Scott Roxborough, 'Winners of the 2022 Venice Film Festival', *hollywoodreporter.com*, 10 September 2022.

<sup>4</sup> Patrick Wintour, 'Film-maker Jafar Panahi begins hunger strike in Iranian prison', *Guardian*, 2 Feb 2023 and 'Iranian film-maker Jafar Panahi released on bail after hunger strike', *Guardian*, 3 Feb 2023.

<sup>5</sup> 'Eterazat e Iran: Saf arai e chehreh hayeh mashhoor e cinema dar barabar e hakemiyat chera in bar bessyari amadand?' *BBC Persian*, 28 September 2022

<sup>6</sup> Jedidajah Otte, "'Something big is happening': the Iranians risking everything to protest", *Guardian*, 24 September 2022.

<sup>7</sup> John Irish, 'As EU sanctions come, Macron says Iran 'revolution' harms nuclear deal prospects', *Reuters*, 14 November 2022.

Iranian city of Abadan at the Persian Gulf, which, according to the official toll, left at least 43 people dead and many more injured. The Metropol Complex, which came crashing down on 23 May 2022, had been constructed by the kleptocratic cronies of the local authorities in Abadan. Those responsible had flouted building regulations.<sup>9</sup> When locals rushed to the site, there was little sign of rescue services. Instead, it was ordinary civilians who clawed through the rubble with makeshift tools or even their bare hands to save those trapped.<sup>10</sup> The authorities failed to send adequate help or even words of condolence to the bereaved for several days. As a result, the grief of the people of Abadan gave way to angry protests and demands for accountability. When civil unrest broke out, however, the authorities were very quick to send soldiers with orders to suppress the protests and shoot the demonstrators if necessary. It was the regime's total lack of empathy with the people and the prolonged suppression of protests over several weeks that led to the publication of the open letter entitled 'Lay Down Your Guns', which was addressed to the security forces.<sup>11</sup> In that letter they asked the soldiers to remember their roots, to remember that they too are 'the people', and implored them to lay down their arms and change sides, to abandon the side of the oppressors and take the side of the people. More than a 100 filmmakers and actors and actresses signed the letter and expressed their solidarity with the people of Abadan.<sup>12</sup>

The letter and the arrests had global resonance. Actors, directors, and festival directors around the world expressed their concern and horror. Zar Amir-Ebrahimi, winner of the Palme d'Or in the Best Actress Category at the 2022 Cannes Film Festival used the ceremony as an international platform to call on the world to sympathise with the people of Abadan and

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<sup>8</sup> Abbey White, 'Berlin Golden Bear winner Mohammad Rasoulof arrested in Iran over social media posts', *The Hollywood Reporter*, 9 July 2022.

<sup>9</sup> Babak Dehghanpisheh, 'Corruption cases tarnish image of Iran's hard-line president', *The Washington Post*, 13 July 2022.

<sup>10</sup> Abbey White, 'Berlin Golden Bear winner Mohammad Rasoulof arrested in Iran over social media posts', *The Hollywood Reporter*, 9 July 2022.

<sup>11</sup> 'Ezafeh shodan-e 70 Cinemagar-e digar beh bayanieh-ye "Tofangat ra Zamin Bogzar"', *Radio Farda*, June 1, 2022.

Iran and condemn the brutal suppression of the protests by the Islamic Republic's regime.<sup>13</sup>

The managing director of the Berlin Film Festival, Mariette Rissenbeek, declared that the film community was 'appalled'<sup>14</sup> at the suppression of the protesters. Similarly, in a press release the Cannes Festival declared that 'the Festival de Cannes strongly condemns these arrests as well as the wave of repression obviously in progress in Iran against its artists' and demanded the immediate release of Mohammad Rasoulof, Mostafa Aleahmad and Jafar Panahi.<sup>15</sup>

A few weeks after the arrest of Jafar Panahi, I called a colleague of Panahi to get a clearer picture of the situation. During our conversation, I tell him that the collapse of the Metropol building in Abadan is truly heart breaking. However, I add, it's extraordinary that this one incident in Abadan has had such resonance amongst the people and the artistic community and has led to such an exaggeratedly harsh clampdown on filmmakers by the regime. Compared to the 2009–2010 uprisings that were sparked by the fraudulent re-election of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the Abadan protest was smaller. In response to Ahmadinejad's re-election Panahi protested openly both in Iran and abroad – most famously at the Montreal Film Festival 2010, where he wore the colours of the Green Movement and openly condemned the engineered election and the ensuing wave of oppression<sup>16</sup>. It was then that Panahi was first detained and placed under house arrest and his work was banned in Iran. Panahi's colleague is aware of that and calls Panahi's detainment a sad case of '2010 reloaded'. When Panahi was detained for the second time, his colleague tells me, the authorities had the cheek to say that now Panahi would be sitting the 'rest' of his original sentence of 2010, which he had served already. 'The whole thing is a lie; sad joke,' he tells me. 'They say that they've detained Panahi, Rasoulof and the other filmmakers for

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<sup>12</sup> Maryam Sinaee, 'Actress who won at Cannes says her heart is with people of Iran', *Iran International*, 29 May 2022.

<sup>13</sup> Interview with Kamran Safiarian, *ZDF: Heute Journal*, 19 July 2022.

<sup>14</sup> 'Cannes Film Festival calls for release of Iranian filmmakers', *Iran International*, 11 July 2022.

<sup>15</sup> Ian Black, 'Iran arrests top film-maker Jafar Panahi for supporting Green movement', *The Guardian*, 2 March 2010.

“incitement to violence”. In truth they detain these filmmakers whose concern is the pain and problems of the people.’<sup>17</sup> Only two and a half months after this conversation ‘The pain and problems of the people’, as Panahi’s colleague calls it, manifest themselves in the brutal murder of Mahsa Amini, who was arrested for wearing her hijab ‘improperly’ in custody.

Panahi’s colleague’s observation of the sad situation brought to my mind what Jafar Panahi himself had told me in an interview less than two years before he was detained for the first time, i.e., when he protested against the rigged re-election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in 2009-2010. Back then I’d wondered why both the mouthpieces of the Islamic regime and the media that support it brand people like Panahi an ‘enemy of the Iranian people’ and ‘a darling of the West’ whenever they attack him. ‘So, the more they call you a “festival filmmaker” the more you become a “people’s filmmaker”?’ I asked Panahi during the interview. He nodded.

This is one of the tactics [that] the Ministry of Islamic Guidance [use] to isolate us both from our people and from the international community. As soon as they realised that the interest [in] Iranian films is growing worldwide, they started to produce such labels for internationally renowned filmmakers. They did not know of any better way to confront us. So, they started to denounce us by playing the nationalism card. The irony of this tactic is that nationalism is at odds with the Islamic ideology of the regime! You see, a regime for [which] Islam has a much higher place than the nation of Iran starts to abuse the national feelings of the people and not their religious ones as soon as it decides to throw an artist into exile and [thus sever] its connections with this country. So, they label us [...] ‘anti-Iranian filmmakers’ and ‘Festival filmmaker’ etc. But we do not give in. We use all our wits and tricks in order to smuggle our films out of this country and

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<sup>16</sup> Telephone interview, 10 August 2022.

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show them to the world. If we do not do that, they ban our films and stop them from being seen. All my banned films are available in my country on pirate copies and on the internet, because I could smuggle [them] out of Iran and have [them shown at film festivals]! The films are being sold all over by underground traders because of the international attention that [they receive]. There is [a] huge underground network that satisfies our people's thirst for our films. So, of course the regime tries to [sever] our contact to our real audience by way of [sticking on] us such labels.'<sup>18</sup>

Re-reading this interview after ten years, I can only agree with Panahi's colleague, who calls the new clampdown on the filmmakers a 'reloaded' sad joke. It does indeed seem like the regime has not learnt anything from the 2009–2010 protests, which led to the Green Movement.<sup>19</sup> On the contrary, the regime seems to have become even more brutal in its response to uprisings. The ongoing suppression and killing of demonstrators and the detainment of filmmakers and actors who support the demonstrators is a glaring example of this.

I tell Panahi's colleague that the Islamic regime's governing strategy is not only immoral, but also politically unviable. The regime must surely realise that they can't go on like this. Even if only for their own sake, they must seek solutions. He laughs bitterly: 'They are completely bankrupt – on all fronts! They have no solutions!'

Even a superficial glance at the news coming from Iran proves him right. Forty-four years after the Islamic Revolution, which promised Islamic solutions to all of Iran's problems,

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<sup>17</sup> Shiva Rahbaran, *Iranian cinema uncensored: Contemporary film-makers since the Islamic Revolution*, London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2016, p. 182.

<sup>18</sup> The Green Movement was perhaps the most significant anti-government uprising in post-revolutionary Iran. It was sparked by the fraudulent re-election of the incumbent president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in 2009 and was brutally clamped down by the security forces. See Navid Pourmokhtari, *Iran's Green Movement Everyday Resistance, Political Contestation and Social Mobilization*, (London: Routledge, 2021).

as well as to deliver Iran from the wickedness of Western influence, the revolution is now devoid of any ideological, political and economic justification. In fact, the small circle of family, friends and cronies huddled around the Supreme Leader and his Revolutionary Guards are only interested in holding onto power, no matter what it takes.<sup>20</sup>

To achieve this, the regime has adopted a governing style that aims to divide and isolate the country and its people. On the international front, the regime's agenda features endless talks about Iran's nuclear programme that seem forever to be on the brink of collapse,<sup>21</sup> supporting with logistical and military aid Russia's assault on Ukraine<sup>22</sup> and fuelling proxy wars to uphold terrorist groups and regimes in the Middle East.<sup>23</sup>

Within Iran, the regime tries to divide and oppress the people in a number of ways. The most recent example is the war the regime has started waging on women and their dress code, for the upkeep of which the morality police was prepared to kill young women – the most prominent one being Mahsa Amini – and enforce draconic punishments. The regime's brutality has caused a wave of protests that is the most serious threat to the regime since the 2009 Green Movement.

The government has failed to enforce on women the strict Islamic hijab dress code they have been envisioning for the past forty years. Especially in large cities such as Tehran, the government has failed to break women's opposition to the strict hijab dress code, despite persistent efforts. Recently, however, the regime has opened this battlefield again: Hojat ol-Islam Mohammad Hassani, the newly appointed head of the army's 'Organisation of Political Faith' proclaimed the obligation to wear the hijab 'God's decree' and warned that if that battle

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<sup>19</sup> For a substantial study of the nepotistic governing system of the Islamic Republic see Mehrzad Boroujerdi and Kourosh Rahimkhani, *Postrevolutionary Iran: A Political Handbook*, (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 2018).

<sup>20</sup> Patrick Wintour, 'Iran nuclear deal: Iran accused of making "maximalist demands" in nuclear deal talks', *The Guardian*, 30 June 2022.

<sup>21</sup> Steve Rosenberg, 'Russia's Putin finds keen ally in rare trip to Iran', *BBC News*, 20 July 2022.

<sup>22</sup> Sarah Dadouch, 'Iran is putting down roots in eastern Syria, outcompeting Assad's regime in signing up fighters', *The Washington Post*, 28 January 2022; Matthew Levitt, 'Hezbollah's regional activities in support of Iran's proxy networks', *mei.edu*, 26 July 2021.



is lost to the ‘soft power’ of the enemy, all of the other battles the Islamic Republic has been fighting will also be lost.<sup>24</sup> The regime have no mercy even on the dead, as the authorities have taken to removing photos of women without a hijab from their gravestones.<sup>25</sup> Mahsa Amini’s death in custody was as the saying goes, the straw that broke the camel’s back. The ensuing protests that have engulfed the country are gaining momentum by the day and have sparked huge protests outside of Iran as well.<sup>26</sup> This time the uprising seems to seriously threaten the survival of the regime.<sup>27</sup>

‘Is there hope?’, I ask, quoting the 12th-century Persian poet Nizami Ganjavi: ‘There is much hope in hopelessness/The end of the black night is white’. Panahi’s colleague pauses and then says, ‘hope or no hope, there is nothing you can do but make films, as a filmmaker. Why do you think Rasoulouf and Panahi are in jail?’<sup>28</sup>

The fate of filmmaking is very similar to that of the women’s dress code. Both Iranian cinema and Iranian women’s freedom of choice regarding their public appearance embody the modernisation of the Iranian society. This process started in the last years of the Qajar period<sup>29</sup> and rapidly gained pace when the founder of the Pahlavi Dynasty, Reza Shah I, ascended to the throne in 1926. The sweeping social and political reforms that took place under both Reza Shah Pahlavi I and his son, Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi (1926–1979), completely transformed Iran’s Islamic traditional society to such an extent that they paradoxically led one of the most modern and secular Muslim societies in the world to

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<sup>23</sup> ‘Risheh – yeh badpooshi- e barkhi dokhtaran az nazar-e raiis-e saze-man-e aghidati-e siyasi-e artesh: “hejab hokm-e khoda ast”’, *Hamshahrionline.ir*, 21 Tir, 1401 (12 July 2022).

<sup>24</sup> ‘Hejab ejbari barayeh mordegan: sang e ghabr e motoofian bihejab jam shod’, *Deutsche Welle (dw.com)*, 27 July 2022.

<sup>25</sup> ‘Clashes, global protests flare over death of Iranian woman Mahsa Amini’, *CBCNews*, 27 September 2022.

<sup>26</sup> ‘The paraiah state’s regime is not invincible. If it doesn’t free its people, they will free themselves – sooner rather than later’, *The Observer*, 25 September 2022.

<sup>27</sup> Telephone interview, 10 August 2022.

<sup>28</sup> The Qajar Dynasty ruled over Iran from 1794 to 1925, which marks one of the most turbulent periods in modern Iran. The Qajar dynasty unified a country that was scared by decades of wars and civil unrest. In these 140 years Iran made the transition from feuding tribal confederations to centralised monarchy and, finally, to constitutional parliament. See ‘Qājār dynasty, Iranian dynasty. Qājār dynasty, the ruling dynasty of Iran from 1794 to 1925.’, *Encyclopaedia Britannica, Britannica.com*.

regress. The 1979 Revolution, which was started and dominated by left and centre-left groups, was soon taken over by Islamists. The latter proceeded to exploit the fear that had grown out of the Cold War<sup>30</sup> and that not only Western powers but also many Iranians shared; namely, that if Marxist sympathisers steered the Revolution and turned Iran 'red', the country would become hostile towards Western interests in the Middle East.<sup>31</sup>

The first thing that the Islamists did, however, was to target the deeply westernised and secular manifestations of culture. Women's appearance in public and Iranian cinema epitomised this culture. The 'culture war' on modern Iranian society took different forms, depending on the administration in power at any given time. In the 1980s – the first decade following the Revolution – Khomeini's administration was brutally suppressive. In the 1990s and early 2000s, especially after Khomeini's death, Rafasanjani's Culture Minister Mohammad Khatami tried to foster a non-secular form of Islamic modernity that created some breathing space both for women and filmmakers.<sup>32</sup> These groups of Iranian life and art pushed back against restrictions and created pockets of freedom for themselves and the broader society.

The filmmakers I interviewed for my book say that, from the beginning, the regime was against filmmakers and considered filmmaking an anti-Islamic activity.<sup>33</sup> It was, in fact,

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<sup>29</sup> The Shah's anti-Marxist policies consisted not only of oppressing leftist groupings, but also of providing financial support for Islamic organisations, which he thought served as a bulwark against atheist, Marxist ideals. One could say that the Shah fed the Islamists that turned against him and ousted in the 1979 revolution. 'What gave the Islamists the upper hand over the secular opposition was their access to a vast network of mosques and religious institutions across the country. Unlike the secular groups forced underground by the Shah, the organised structures of the clergy enabled Khomeini and his followers to control the revolutionary narrative.', Ali Ansari and Kasra Arabi, 'Ideology and Iran's Revolution: How 1979 Changed the World', *Tony Blair Institute for Global Change*, 11<sup>th</sup> of February 2019.

<sup>30</sup> Various books and articles were written on the Iranian revolution after classified papers started to be published in the 2010s. The declassified papers documented the worry of American and European powers that left-wing groups would dominate the Revolution, as well as the intense correspondence between Ayatollah Khomeini and those countries, whose aim was to make sure that the new Islamic order would be friendly towards the West. See, for example, Kambiz Fattahi, 'Two weeks in January: America's secret engagement with Khomeini', *BBC Persian Service*, 3 June 2016; Kambiz Fattahi and Dariush Bayandors, *The Shah, the Islamic Revolution and the United States*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018.

<sup>31</sup> Michael Axworthy, *Revolutionary Iran: A History of the Islamic Republic*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 268-324.

<sup>32</sup> Shiva Rahbaran, *Iranian cinema uncensored: Contemporary film-makers since the Islamic Revolution*, London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2016.

the burning down of Cinema Rex in Abadan – the site of the recent protests against the regime<sup>34</sup> – by the followers of Ayatollah Khomeini that marked the culmination of Islamist violence in the 1979 revolution.<sup>35</sup> From the beginning, cinema was considered *haram* (i.e. forbidden by Islamic law) by the Islamists all over the Middle East and beyond. Islamist hostility towards the cinema grew relatively late in Iran. In Saudi Arabia, for example, cinemas were closed in the 1970s as supposed dens of immorality and anti-Islamic activity and were only reopened in 2018.<sup>36</sup> In contrast, in 1973 Iran was celebrating the art of cinema as the first international film festival to be held in the Middle East opened in Tehran under the aegis of Farah Dibah, then Queen of the Imperial State of Iran.<sup>37</sup>

By the time the Islamic Revolution erupted, filmmaking had already become such an important element in the fibre of Iranian culture that the new regime was unable to stop it from advancing onto the national and global stages. As the great master of New Iranian Cinema Bahram Beyzai told me during an interview, cinema in Iran grew *despite* and not because of the Revolution.<sup>38</sup> One of the reasons why Iranian cinema survived was that Khomeini saw its potential as a tool for Islamic propaganda.<sup>39</sup> Indeed, film was sometimes used as a means to project the smooth face of ‘friendly’ Islamic modernity and at other times as a means of propaganda for ‘radical’ Islam. At the same time, the regime barred many filmmakers from working and banned their films within the country.

As Bahram Beyzai pointed out in his interview with me, more often than not, it was the authorities’ ‘business sense’ and their awareness that festivals provided not only entertainment, but also served as platforms for the regime to show its ‘friendly’ face, and thus

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<sup>33</sup> The city of Abadan became a symbol of resistance, both to Saddam Hussain’s regime during the bloody eight-year war with Iraq and more recently to Iran’s oppressive Islamic government.

<sup>34</sup> Daniel L. Byman, The rise of low-tech terrorism, *Brookings.edu*, 6 May 2007.

<sup>35</sup> Smita Nordwall, ‘After 35 years, first cinema to reopen in Saudi Arabia’, *VOA*, 4 April 2018.

<sup>36</sup> Hamid Reza Sadr, *Iranian cinema: A political history*, London: I. B. Tauris, 2006.

<sup>37</sup> Shiva Rahbaran, *Iranian cinema uncensored: Contemporary film-makers since the Islamic Revolution*, London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2016, p. 41.

<sup>38</sup> Ruhollah Khomeini, *Islam and Revolution: Writings and declarations of Imam Khomeini*, Hamid Algar (trans.), Berkley, Mizan Press, 1981, p. 258.

secure business opportunities with the West, that made it possible for Iranian films to be shown at international festivals.<sup>40</sup> The late, globally celebrated director Abbas Kiarostami felt that this was a case of good coming out of evil.<sup>41</sup> On their part, Iranian filmmakers exploited those shifting boundaries and pushed against them as much as they could. Whether they managed to make their films or not depended on the attitude of the administration in power at a given time, as already mentioned.

The new administration in Iran seems to resort to increasingly oppressive measures. As a result, the scope of possibilities is becoming narrower and narrower for Iranian filmmakers. I ask Panahi's colleague why he doesn't leave Iran as some directors and actors have done lately.<sup>42</sup> He says that there are not that many who choose to leave Iran because, despite all the hardship, it's in Iran that they get sustenance for their art and profession.

It might be possible to reconstruct some scenes in cities that are somehow similar to Tehran – like in Amman, or Athens – but how can you reproduce the smell, the atmosphere, the *sense* of Iran? Besides, you need a network that can catch you and work with you. Kiarostami had that; Farhadi has managed to get that too, but the majority don't. Panahi and Rasoulof were both on the blacklist and banned from working, but they still stayed in Iran; in the environment that was crucial to their films, the land that they belong too. Of course, they were lucky to have connections and smuggle their films out and get the attention that they deserve.

But most directors can't do that.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Shiva Rahbaran, *Iranian cinema uncensored: Contemporary film-makers since the Islamic Revolution*, London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2016, p. 41.

<sup>40</sup> Shiva Rahbaran, *Iranian cinema Uncensored: Contemporary film-makers since the Islamic Revolution*, London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2016, p. 75.

<sup>41</sup> Iranian actresses Golshifteh Farahani and Zar Amir-Ebrahimi are two of the more prominent cinema figures that left Iran in the past 15 years. See Fiachra Gibbons, 'Golshifteh Farahani: Exile from Iran is like death', *The Guardian*, 6 Sept 2012; Mohammad Abdelbary, 'She had to flee Iran. Now she's won best actress at Cannes', *cnn.com*, 3 June 2022.

<sup>42</sup> Telephone interview, 10 August 2022.

‘So, leaving Iran is like a Kierkegaardian leap into the darkness?’, I joke. He laughs and says it’s not so much a philosophical as a practical dilemma. In fact, it’s scarier than marrying:

I can get a divorce, if the person [I’ve married] turns out to be the wrong choice,

but I won’t be able to come back and work [here], if I fail to make it outside Iran.

I know a few people who helped produce films about Iran [made abroad], such as

Abbasi’s *Holy Spider*<sup>44</sup> and now they’ve gone underground.<sup>45</sup>

‘So, what is to be done?’, I ask. He says ‘it’s not as though we stop living a normal life. The difference between us and our colleagues outside of Iran is that we ‘observe’ ourselves living a normal life in a place where living a normal life is not normal! We laugh, we love, we go out, we meet people and, most important of all – we make films. And all the while, we’re waiting for them to descend on us and finish us off.’<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Peter Bradshaw, ‘Holy Spider review – Iranian crime thriller takes real case and makes it implausible’, *Guardian*, 22 May 2022.

<sup>44</sup> Telephone interview, 10 August 2022.

<sup>45</sup> Telephone interview, 10 August 2022. It is worth noting that when I talked to him recently to ask how Panahi was doing, he said he is doing everything he can to leave Iran. ‘There isn’t the tiniest space left for independent filmmakers. The regime has cemented everything and only give funding and permission to their own vetted filmmakers. As an independent, you either leave or you go underground.’, Telephone interview, 10 Feb 2023.