

The Circle

PARISA VAZIRI

In the beginning, there was nothing.

The screen is pitch black—if not quite in a state of lifelessness, then in one of mild anticipation, silently awaiting that inevitable, graceless moment of emergence. We, the consenting observers, have formerly entered art's waters—little by little floating away from the shores of reality into the mystic unknown as the opening credits roll. We are seafarers without prescribed destinations, and it is heretofore utterly hopeless to predict where we shall land at the end of this 90 minute venture. The echoing screams of a woman giving birth ricochet off the steely blackness of the screen. *The Circle*, Iranian filmmaker Jafar Panahi's treasured creation, is being born to history, to the pre-fabricated, anticipating world of observers.

Although it shall remain a deeply dark film, subsequent to the opening credits, *The Circle* moves away from its frighteningly black depths; the screen grows suddenly white with illumination, revealing a small, white window with a sliding door, which glides open to reveal the mild-mannered, illuminated visage of a woman in a white *chador*—presumably a nurse—who announces with levity the gender of Solmaz Gholami's newborn baby: a girl. As action begins, the pure white glow of the screen assumes a slightly perceptible greener tint, and, through the streams of unconsciousness, Panahi steers the viewer to Oz, where ever since 1939, Dorothy has been immensely disappointed time and time again upon her arrival to the Emerald City. The sliding square window, the greenish glaze that washes over the entirety of Panahi's screen is all too reminiscent of the moment when Dorothy knocks on the window of the great palace in Emerald City, and is first rejected by the guardsman waiting to greet her. So why this subliminal and seemingly irrelevant reference? Because *The Circle* floats upon a pool of disappointment's tears. Iran itself, a wobbling ancient ship, its magnificently crafted paint slowly eroding and chipping off the flanks, floats stolidly upon the tears of its Hosayn-mourning constituents, sometimes cruising successfully through ages of golden prosperity, sometimes sinking, swirling into the cyclical abyss

of its own past greatness. It isn't just ironic that green symbolizes the color of the Prophet Muhammad, the color of paradise, and the color of Husayn—the idealized martyr who died at Karbala in the name of Shiism, a highly revered presence in the whole of this unorthodox sect of Islam. Ever since the seventh century, Shiites have been guilt-laden with his death, mourning it as Solmaz Gholami must mourn the arrival of her baby girl into a world of female oppression—the way Dorothy mourned her separation from Auntie Em in *The Wizard of Oz*. And Iranians know better than anyone: *there's no place like home*.

Following the lives of seven women, who are loosely connected to each other through vague and incidental path-crossings in the corrupt streets and alley-ways of modern Tehran, *The Circle's* politically-hostile message is cast through the misogynistic lens of contemporary Iran's Islamic regime. Comparable in scope to the French Revolution of the eighteenth century or that of the Bolsheviks in 1917, the 1979 Iranian Revolution turned the whole of Iranian society into something unrecognizable by previous generations. The conclusion of Mohammad Reza Shah's reign signaled the end of an epoch of mass-westernization and, as the outspoken intellectual Jalal Al-e Ahmad had it, *gharbzadegi* ("West-sticken-ness"), so imminent in 20th century Iran. The return to deep-rooted Islamic ideals (naturally Shi'i in nature—Shi'ism existing as Iran's state religion since the occupation of the Safavid Empire in Persia during the 16th through 18th centuries) meant a vast number of changes in the state of everyday affairs for the occupants of Iran. Women were particularly affected by this windstorm revolution, now obliged to cover themselves (with the exception of the face and hands) in all public places. As a returning gesture to Panahi's 2000 critically acclaimed film—winner of the Golden Lion at the Venice Film Festival—*The Circle* was banned in Iranian theaters, ultimately rendering the film something like an artistic peephole through which uninformed and curious westerners might peek into the reality and politics of a misfit nation lodged inexplicably between a family of middle eastern countries—each dissimilar in race, culture, religion and politics from its surrounding neighbors, the Land of the Lion and Sun, the Golden House of Sorrows formerly known as Persia: Iran.

As a startlingly stark contrast to the white brightness of the opening scene, an elderly woman in a black *chador* soon appears in front of the Emerald City window and knocks again. The nurse reappears and repeats the gender of Solmaz's newborn baby. The woman in black—presumably Solmaz's mother—is deeply distressed at the re-utterance of the news of a

granddaughter; her son-in-law's family had promised a divorce if the child was not born male.

Already, a western viewer is shaking his head in disbelief while a horrified Iranian viewer seems to know exactly where this movie is drifting. Panahi is taking a violently extreme route to reveal the terrors of the Islamic Republic, or perhaps Islam itself, and in doing so, defacing the name of Iranian society. This becomes even more evident when a woman laments to an old friend that her husband has taken another wife while she was in prison. The Iranian viewer seems to know: this movie is not going to unveil the complete truth; rather, this is food for the curious power-fuelled western mind, which loves to feed on the weaknesses of "lesser" nations. Such nourishment makes the west conceptually stronger. Only extreme tragedy is of interest.

So is Panahi a sell-out? Indeed, *The Circle* is extreme in nature, but even the sadistically extreme can be truth. The fact that the Gholamis are displeased with the birth of a girl is entirely plausible, though not particularly normal, because not all Iranians—even the hardcore traditionalists—are so spiteful. As the great 10th century Islamic jurist and thinker al-Ghazzali cautioned, "Men should not express glee over the birth of sons, or show sadness over the birth of daughters: 'there is no way of knowing who will prove to be good'" (Mussallam 22). And while polygamy is still permitted in modern Iran, and it is a fully accepted—yet still somehow controversial—aspect of Islam, this doesn't mean that the western obsessions and idealized perceptions of eastern eroticism constitute reality.

But—one hopes, anyway—that Panahi is not concerned solely with pandering to his western audience. He certainly isn't striving for political correctness; rather, Panahi is making a point: that the newborn girl, from the moment she emerges screaming into the world, is disadvantaged—even despised, worth nothing. We see this notion of unwantedness develop as the film progresses. Later, a woman abandons her four-year-old daughter in the midst of a street, hiding behind a car to ensure that the girl is taken home by a better-endowed family. All this takes place at night, and in one of the few moments of illumination sprinkled like powdered sugar over the imbued bitterness of the film, we see under a florescent streetlight the image of the innocent, frightened little girl—clad in a bright, colorful, flowery dress, searching for her lost mother who has suddenly disappeared.

Then there is the never-ending saga of Arezou and Nargess, two ex-cons on the run, whose crimes remain ambiguous. The girls are attempting to accumulate enough money for a bus ride to Nargess' hometown—Raziliq—where they might escape the disillusionments of city life (and the police).

Nargess, the more rambunctious and cynical of the two, performs a number of unnamed and indecent acts to obtain the fare needed for the journey. Stopping at a Van Gogh painting in a small bazaar shop, the girls momentarily suspend their action-filled trip to reflect on their destination. Nargess likens the picture to paradise. The painting depicts a beautiful empty field with assorted flowers: a garden-like atmosphere. (And, most likely due to the rarity of green nature in that part of the world, the garden *is* considered paradise in Iranian tradition).

When the girls are ready to board the bus, Arezou suddenly hands the hard-earned money to Nargess and kisses her friend goodbye, revealing that she can't make the trip, and she walks away. This exact scene is repeated, as Nargess then gets off the bus and follows Arezou in pursuit of an explanation. Arezou reassures Nargess, and, physically following a circular path, leads her confused friend back to the bus, where she kisses her once more and utters another goodbye, in an exact reenactment of the happenings played out minutes before. With this repeated sequence Panahi is reminding us of what lies at the heart of his film—the inevitable cyclical nature of time, the constancy of tradition, and the impossibility of transcending these difficulties.

Iranian films are notorious for their slow-paced action and seemingly dragging storylines. Panahi's films, and plenty of other Iranian cinematic works, possess a sort of Persian-flavored neo-realism, which Stephen Teo discusses in an interview with Panahi himself: "The Iranian cinema treats social subjects. Because you're showing social problems, you want to be more realistic and give the actual...the real aesthetics of the situation," Panahi says. "We talk about small events or small things, but it's very deep and it's very wide—things that are happening in life. According to this mode, it has a poetic way and an artistic way. This may be one of the differences between Iranian movies and the movies of other countries: humanitarian events interpreted in a poetic and artistic way" (Panahi 3). Indeed *The Circle* overflows with idle moments of redundant everydayness. For the average western viewer, such action might seem boring, mundane, or useless; still, one cannot deny the inherent depth in such instances of monotony. The ordinary, the mundane, the everydayness of life is life itself—our lives are filled with this apparent and often cumbersome circularity.

In practically every scene of *The Circle*, there is the repetitive reference to cigarettes. Each of the main characters makes her fruitless attempt to light one up, and in the end is prohibited from doing so—most likely signifying the absurd lack of freedom that Iranian women possess as second-class citizens, unable even to smoke when they please. (And of course, the cigarette, a sim-

ple but effective symbol of dominance, is the perfect way to represent this power void). In one of the final scenes of *The Circle*, a dark-eyed, ruby red-lipped prostitute is arrested, and an extensive side shot of her intriguing plump face lingers on screen during her van ride to jail. The period of suspension isn't subtle. After about 30 seconds, the viewer becomes quite aware of a strange stagnation. But, assuming that the artist is more aware of his art than the onlooker could ever claim to be, one might conclude that by dwelling on certain moments for so long, Panahi is emphasizing their significance. To add to the intrigue of this enduring shot of the prostitute in contemplation, there is poignant and mournful music playing a diegetic role in this scene; the man sitting next to her is singing some traditional tune. Persian music is known for its sorrowful, suffering quality, a characteristic decidedly associated with Shiism—and mysticism, another Iranian element of Islam. The prostitute is the embodiment of this suffering. Still, she is the only character who is eventually able to smoke. She is the most aloof of the women, indifferently chomping on her gum as a policeman harasses her about her occupation. "My love," she replies, blatant sarcasm dripping from her cynical voice, "will *you* pay for my bills?" Is it that this woman, a final product of the system, has been transformed by the unnatural social climate in which she has been living? Or is it, rather, that she has simply transcended it; is her lack of moral concern a virtue for which all the women in the movie should aspire? In the last scene of *The Circle*, the prostitute ends up in a jail cell, and the camera makes a circular round of the room, revealing the huddled bodies of various female characters from the movie (including Arezou and Nargess). Is this before they have escaped, or have they been recaptured? What exactly were their crimes anyway? Such details remain ambiguous, and for good reason; they are irrelevant. To us, the characters in the movie shall remain innocent despite their crimes. How could they be anything but? Time, also, bears little significance; it winds and winds forever, following its ordained circular path.

As with all art, there is more sparkling luminosity to be drawn from the deep dark well that is *The Circle*. Nargess's struggle to make it (in this case, make it on time to the bus that will take her home) is her everlasting imprisonment. She, the post-revolution Iranian, like Dorothy, is searching for an escape—could that perpetually winding yellow brick road possibly lead to a better place? The Van Gogh painting is the illusionary paradise for which Nargess strives—Dorothy's Oz: "A place where there isn't any trouble. Do you suppose there is such a place, Toto?" Dorothy whispers before breaking out into "Somewhere over the Rainbow."

Iranians too thought that by abandoning Auntie Em (the Shah) they could design a world “where troubles melt like lemon drops...” But a violent and sudden windstorm cast a hazy veil over the whole of their society, and the blinded Iranians soon realized they weren’t in Kansas anymore. But where they were, they wouldn’t find out for some time. The Wicked Witch of the East was dead, and all seemed fine and well at first. But they hadn’t imagined that another, perhaps greater, evil—the Wicked Witch of the West—might soon emerge.

Just as the people in Dorothy’s life manifest themselves as different characters in her dream, the oppression that the Iranians struggled with before the Revolution re-manifested itself, Panahi subtly suggests, in the new Islamic Republic. Perhaps Professor Marvel—the strange man who wore a jeweled turban and claimed to be a psychic (Dorothy encountered him upon running away from home)—the man who played the Wizard of Oz in her dream, was Ayatollah Khomeini. “They don’t understand you. They don’t appreciate you,” Professor Marvel told Dorothy regarding Auntie Em and Uncle Henry, luring her in with his false claims to clairvoyance: “It’s like you knew exactly what was inside of me,” Dorothy gasps, entranced by the man’s seemingly magical abilities. Dorothy might be likened to some of the desperate and disillusioned Iranians who were momentarily cast under Khomeini’s binding spell, latching on to his claim of supposed greatness. But just as Dorothy would discover by the end of her dream, the Wizard was just a mirage—an illusion disguised as yet another illusion. He was not a great man, nor a great wizard, and in the end, she was very unimpressed with his abilities.

Dorothy’s Oz proved to be a sham. And it was not until after she had witnessed what lay at the other side of the rainbow that she realized what home truly meant. Similarly, *The Circle*’s portrayal of the Iranian Revolution suggests that it wasn’t until after Iran had slithered out of its monarchical skin that it saw what it had lost; although, it wasn’t so much what it had lost that was distressing, it was the things it had not gained. There was no Auntie Em now; she had long disappeared from Kansas. Iranians simply had no need for her anyway; they needed to get back home; the eminent question was where that home lay. And, it seemed, no amount of heel-clicking would lead to a solution.

In the last scene of *The Circle*, the warden speaks to the prisoners through a window similar to the one that appeared in the first scene of the movie. He asks for Solmaz Gholami, and we realize that the woman at the beginning of the movie was giving birth in the maternity ward of a prison. The warden slams the steel window shut. And we are left again with the utterly silent dark-

ness that came before the initiation of the film's action—again waiting in that space between life and nothingness. Jafar Panahi's cinematic style of circular storytelling is inextricably linked to his message about the nature of life.

Arezou, the cynic, didn't accompany Nargess home because she couldn't bear to see that her best friend's paradise didn't actually exist—that it was all just a contrived dream, that there was no rainbow, and that hell never ends. Similarly we each have our doubts about life after *the circle*, for our circular lives are not perfectly true to form; they are open-ended. And at any moment, swiftly and without warning, we might slide out the side. The plush Van Gogh painting that we trust will catch our fall after that sudden slip may or may not exist, but for Nargess, and the rest of Panahi's estranged characters, believing is the only guiding torch in a world full of hopelessness. The women of *The Circle* are strong. "Come celebrate with me that everyday/something has tried to kill me/and has failed," the poet Lucille Clifton writes, and the women of *The Circle* unwittingly harbor such a feeling in their souls. They must rejoice daily in the possibility of an unlikely victory over life. Like us, cruising, whirling around and around in the same strange waters, all of us hope, nevertheless, that we are traveling toward *something*. The women of *The Circle*—the post-revolution Iranians—still sail on, and one day may find their true home Raziliq, the real Emerald City, or even a Van Gogh paradise.

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