



No Bears

Director: Jafar Panahi

Country: Iran

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A review by A O Scott for *The New York Times*:

Why make a movie? Why watch one? As banal as these questions are, they're also unsettling. The world is so flooded with images that making sense of what's already there can feel paralyzing; adding something new can seem like the very definition of absurdity. Sentimentality about the power of cinema — to raise awareness, expand empathy, confront the truth, change the world — mirrors a cynicism that insists on cinema's triviality.

It's only a movie! That's as true of "No Bears" as of anything else, but there may be no living filmmaker who has considered the practical and philosophical implications of the art form — the work of shooting and cutting; the pleasure and anxiety of watching — as rigorously or as insightfully as the Iranian director Jafar Panahi.



He can't be accused of taking movies lightly, or of taking himself too seriously. He has continued to practice his craft, conscientiously and playfully, at the risk of his comfort, his freedom and possibly his life. When in 2010 the Iranian government banned him from directing, he answered with "This Is Not a Film," a feature-length video diary shot partly on an iPhone and technically not "directed" at all.

In the years since, he has continued in that vein of clandestine metacinema, playing himself (in "Closed Curtain" and "Taxi") less as a heroic auteur than as a curious, gentle, sometimes foolish middle-aged family man who can't break the habit of turning life into film (or, to be precise, digital video). His movies are personal and also political, as he aims his quizzical

gaze at the petty hypocrisies and large injustices of modern Iran, as well as at the paradoxes of his own creative practice.

Not long after "No Bears" was completed — it was filmed in secret earlier this year — Panahi was sentenced in Iran to six years in prison. In the months since, mass protests challenging the authority of the Islamic Republic have swept across the country and have been answered with brutal repression.

The movie doesn't explicitly address the unrest or any other public matters; Iranian filmmakers tend to deal with potentially controversial issues obliquely, walking the line between realism and fable and trusting audiences to understand the implications of their stories, subtle messages that censors might overlook. Panahi pioneered this approach in the early 2000s — while also testing its limits — confronting misogyny and class inequality in films like "The Circle," "Crimson Gold" and "Offside." Since the ban, as his work has reflected his own predicament, he has found new ways to combine social criticism with self-criticism.

"No Bears" finds Panahi (again playing himself) occupying rented rooms in a village near the Turkish border, far from his home in Tehran. In a small city in Turkey not far from the village, a film is being shot under his direction — one apparently based on the real-life story of two Iranian exiles, Zara (Mina Kavani) and Bakhtiar (Bakhtiar Panjei), who hope to find asylum in France. Panahi supervises the production on his laptop and his cellphone when he has a signal, which isn't often. His assistant director, Reza (Reza

Heydari), tries to convince Panahi to visit the set, perhaps with the help of the smugglers and human traffickers who control the area. But the border is a line the director won't cross.

Back in the village, he finds himself mixed up in a complicated feud involving a young couple (Amir Davari and Darya Alei) and a bitter romantic rival (Javad Siyahi). It is the belief of interested parties on both sides that a picture Panahi may or may not have taken will have some bearing on the case. The village chief (Naser Hashemi) gets involved, as does Panahi's host, an unctuous fellow named Ghanbar (Vahid Mobaseri).

Compared with the tense drama surrounding Zara and Bakhtiar, what happens to the filmmaker seems at first like comic relief — a fish-out-of-water caper about a big-city sophisticate snagged by rustic brambles. Everyone in the village is unstintingly, ostentatiously polite. Ghanbar never fails to address Panahi as “dear sir,” and Panahi responds with fulsome gratitude, but mutual resentment simmers beneath their interactions, and the rituals of courtesy and deference that govern Panahi's dealings with Ghanbar's neighbors are heavy with mistrust, hostility and even the possibility of violence.

I won't give anything away, except to say that when tragedy arrives — in and behind the scenes of Zara and Bakhtiar's story, and in every fold of the film's constructed reality — it feels both shocking and grimly inevitable. It also seems to be, partially and inadvertently but also unmistakably, the filmmaker's fault.



At one point, Panahi is summoned to the village “swear room,” where he is expected to testify about his suspicious photograph. It isn't a legal proceeding — a sympathetic elder tells him it's permissible to lie — but rather one of many local traditions established to keep up appearances and rein in unruly behavior. Before making his statement, Panahi asks that the Quran be replaced by a video camera, which he believes will endow his words with unimpeachable credibility.

But what if this show of faith — in visual evidence, in the documentary record, in the moral prestige of the moving image — is itself a kind of superstition? That's the uncomfortable question that “No Bears” faces, one that challenges not only its own assumptions but also the piety of an audience eager to embrace the film as a gesture of resistance and to bless itself for recognizing the gesture. Panahi, whose courage and honesty are beyond doubt, has made a movie that calls those very qualities into question, a movie about its own ethical limits and aesthetic contradictions.

Maybe art can't save anyone, or change anything. So why bother with it? I'm tempted to say that “No Bears” answers that question simply by existing, but to do so would be to understate Panahi's accomplishment.

The title refers to an encounter he has on the way to the swear room, a meeting with a stranger that seems like something out of a folk tale. The man cautions that there are dangerous bears lurking in the darkness, and later dismisses his own warning. “Our fear empowers others,” he says. “No Bears!”

That's a good slogan, and a necessary belief in a very scary world, but also, maybe, a consoling fiction. To insist that there are no bears may just be a polite way of acknowledging that the bears are us.

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