

# COLLISION

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Poverty and Asceticism

A new genre of speculative writing created by the Editors of *Evental Aesthetics*, the Collision is a concise but pointed essay that introduces philosophical questions raised by a specific aesthetic experience. A Collision is not an entire, expository journey; not a full-fledged argument but the potential of an argument. A Collision is an encounter that is also a point of departure: the impact of a striking confrontation between experience, thought, and writing may propel later inquiries into being.



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## ABSTRACT

Iranian national cinema is showing the scars of artistic persecution. The aesthetic landscape of this national cinema has become one of stark confines – both in its thematic allowances and its aesthetic possibilities. However, these confinements, both physical and technological, have not merely been passively affected by ideological constraints but have also been active in affecting ideological discourse, answering back as it does within imposed limitations. What we are seeing in contemporary Iranian cinema, I believe, is a complex movement of aesthetic novelty, provoking some important questions regarding the relationship between politics and aesthetics. The relatively high-profile instance of which I am concerned here is Jafar Panahi’s *This is Not a Film* (2011): a work that denies its ontological category and, in turn, furthers its medial possibilities. Panahi’s confinement is an example of enforced asceticism: an asceticism of necessity, groundbreaking in its approach. So much potential arises from this “non-film” – too much to find any answers here. However, this Collision presents the perfect space for briefly outlining some of the questions emanating from a film that is “not a film”. I raise some striking similarities between what occurs with Panahi and the politico-aesthetic ideas of Jacques Rancière in order to contemplate Panahi’s use of asceticism to political effect.

## KEYWORDS

Panahi, Rancière, asceticism, political-aesthetics, Iran

## "Non-Film": A Dialogue between Ranci re and Panahi on Asceticism as a Political Aesthetic

James Harvey-Davitt

The persecution of Iranian artists during Ahmadinejad's regime has been well publicised but rarely dissected in Western journalism. Some striking illustrations of the effects can be seen in its national cinema, the aesthetic landscape of which has become one of stark confines – both in its thematic allowances and its aesthetic possibilities. However, these confinements, both physical and technological, have not merely been passively affected by ideological constraints but have also been active in affecting ideological discourse, answering back as it does within imposed limitations. What we are seeing in contemporary Iranian cinema, I believe, is a complex movement of aesthetic novelty, provoking some important questions regarding the relationship between politics and aesthetics. The relatively high-profile instance of which I am concerned here is Jafar Panahi's *This is Not a Film* (2011): a work that denies its

ontological category and, in turn, furthers its medial possibilities. Panahi's confinement is an example of enforced asceticism: an asceticism of necessity, groundbreaking in its approach. So much potential arises from this "non-film"—too much to find any answers here. However, this *Collision* presents the perfect space for briefly outlining some of the questions emanating from a film that is "not a film". In these few paragraphs, I will raise some striking similarities between what occurs with Panahi and the politico-aesthetic ideas of Jacques Rancière.

Panahi's film begins with the mundane realities of a person in the home. He wanders from his bed to the kitchen (via the bathroom) and makes a call during breakfast. As we will learn from this telephone conversation, he is imprisoned in this apartment: pending trial, awaiting prosecution, fearing restriction from his vocation. The person in question is not a character, and he is not an actor. Moreover, he is not "not an actor" in the sense of the "non-professionals" of his prior films: he is neither the little girl who walks out halfway through *The Mirror*,<sup>1</sup> nor is he the desperate oath of *Crimson Gold*.<sup>2</sup> He is not playing any role other than Panahi himself. What follows is an explanation (many details are omitted with the expectation of prior knowledge on the spectator's part) of the scenario: not the situation of Iranian artists in general but that of the very recent termination of the production of Panahi's latest film. He tells us that he will use this video as a way of telling the story he wanted to make into a film. However, midway through this telling, he exclaims (and this is a major question at the furiously beating heart of this film), "If we could tell a film, why make a film?" The purposes of the images that unfold before the spectator are henceforth undermined. *Why is he doing this?* If the ontological character of "film" has been in question since the title's negating statement, what can be achieved by denying the existence of a film, through a "non-film"?

If *This is Not a Film* is indeed not a film, then what is it? To begin with, it is surely a plea: what Panahi himself refers to as an "effort". In one conversation, he and his camera operator, Mojtaba Mirtahmasb, discuss the importance of making efforts to oppose the persecution of artists. External aid is one such "effort", he claims; but internal "efforts" are vital for progress. In other words, Panahi's video-diary is as much concerned with state-politics as it is with not being a film. This is a useful starting point from which to begin to understand *This is Not a Film*: one that resituates dialogues on the intersection between art and politics. Such a task has been at the heart of Jacques Rancière's work for some time now. Interviewed on the contentious idea of a "suitable political art" (which

fulfils the desires and duties of both politics and art in equal measure without obliteration of either), Rancière states:

Suitable political art would ensure, at one and the same time, the production of a double-effect: the readability of a political signification and a sensible or perceptual shock caused, conversely, by the uncanny, by that which resists signification. In fact, this ideal effect is always the object of negotiation between opposites, between the readability of the message that threatens to destroy the sensible form of art and the radical uncanniness that threatens to destroy all political meaning.<sup>3</sup>

Putting art and politics into dialogue is such a challenge since it concerns two "opposites". Art is a sensible form in danger of didactic communication; politics is an urgent event, potentially undermined by the abstraction of art. Imagining the possibility of such a thing as "suitable political art" without demanding the Brechtian distancing or Artaudian immersion of the spectator necessitates negotiating the binary so that both artwork and politics remain unharmed, complementary, agonistic. What Panahi refers to as a "double effect" is the paradox at the heart of *This is Not a Film*. Simply by making his film, Panahi produces, according to Rancière's logic in *Disagreement*, an instance of politics.<sup>4</sup> The police order, which is in this case an actual police-state, sets up these limitations restricting Panahi from making films. However, acting upon a "heterogeneous assumption" that asserts the fundamental "contingency of the order", Panahi also produces a work of art.<sup>5</sup> It is not that he simply "breaks the law". Rather he shows up the contingency of law, not by making a film but by making "not a film". In other words, Panahi rejects his sentence yet manages to do so within the terms of the sentence.

The politics of art ... is determined by this founding paradox: art is art insofar as it is also non-art, or is something other than art ... There is a contradiction that is originary and unceasingly at work. The work's solitude carries a promise of emancipation. But the fulfilment of that promise amounts to the elimination of art as a separate reality, its transformation into a form of life.<sup>6</sup>

Rancière states that the tension between politics and art too often descends into the outweighing of one over the other. There are three

important points to make on his thesis on “non-art”, which might then inform a thesis on Panahi’s “non-film”. Firstly, the art of “non-art” reconfigures that which is and is not art, and through this reconfiguration, politics is a latent and immanent element of art. Secondly, “non-art” is still art as much as it is also something else – namely, a political discourse. It is not more or less than art, just something else as well. Thirdly, being a political discourse does not destroy its status as art – it merely defines it as a particular kind of art.

In Panahi’s case, his “non-film” is both a political act and a work of art. His negational title is testament to *This is Not a Film*’s status as both more and less than a film. It is more in the sense that it is also a political action. However, it is also less since within it, he is merely “telling” a film. This is the political function of asceticism in *This is Not a Film*. His intention in *This is Not a Film* is to show the scarcity of resources at his disposal, and the violence done unto his agency because of this: he is not able to make a film, or, as is the case in the video we see, he is only able to make “not a film”. By showing “not a film” – by not showing the film he wanted to make, not a film set, not a scripted story – Panahi does nonetheless show *something*: a halfway point between fiction and documentary – at times showing self-consciousness, at times simply recording the quotidian. The spectator is confined to this apartment with Panahi. As others visit, we stay and hear the profound journal entry of the prisoner as he revisits his previous films and gazes from his balcony at the world outside. In this sense, *This is Not a Film* is comparable to Gramsci’s *Prison Notebooks*.<sup>7</sup> Confinement has been enforced from above; a text is made as a necessity in response to the situation; the outcome is a unique new form, produced through and because of these limitations via interaction with the minimal surroundings, memory, and introspection.

The asceticism deriving from the denial of access to the cinematic apparatus from above is both challenged and turned into a style all of its own. The persecution of artists is developing a distinct new cinema, identifiable through its ascetic aesthetic as well as its thematic social urgency. This dialogue between Rancière and Panahi is imperative in this case since *This is Not a Film* demands to be taken seriously as art as much as it does protest. In his accompanying note to the Berlin Film Festival, Panahi spoke of cinema as a dream which he refused to give up. Signalled as early as the publication of his doctoral thesis and its exploration of the working class’s aesthetic intelligence, Rancière has made it his duty to proclaim the egalitarian potential of understanding aesthetic experience as a universal quality.<sup>8</sup> His political-aesthetic writings offer a way of

negotiating this relationship between the idealism of art and the urgency of freedom: a privileged vantage point from which to understand the taut relationship between aesthetic appreciation and political necessity in Panahi's film.

To conclude, while one must hope for the free movement of these artists in confinement, the works that have come as a product of their confinement must not be simply written off as desperate in their enforced asceticism. Rather, I suggest, the limitations within which Panahi finds himself confined actually offer some profound insights into the possibilities of film in general.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Mirror*, directed by Jafar Panahi (Iran, ICA Projects, 1997).

<sup>2</sup> *Crimson Gold*, directed by Jafar Panahi (Iran, Rooz Film, Kino Video, 2003).

<sup>3</sup> Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (London: Continuum, 2006), 63.

<sup>4</sup> Rancière, *Disagreement*, trans. Julie Rose (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999)

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>6</sup> Rancière, *Aesthetics and Its Discontents*, trans. Steven Corcoran (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009), 36.

<sup>7</sup> Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, trans. Quinton Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith (London: Laurence and Wishart, 1998).

<sup>8</sup> Rancière, *The Nights of Labour: The Workers' Dream in Nineteenth-Century France*, trans. John Drury (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989).

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## Filmography • ---

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*The Mirror*, directed by Jafar Panahi, Iran, Rooz Film, Kino Video, 1997.

*This is Not a Film*, directed by Jafar Panahi, Iran, Palisades Tartan (US Distributor), 2011.