



A Heap of Broken Mirrors: Heterotopia and Exhausted Reflexivity in Jafar Panahi's Post-Ban Cinema

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This video essay traces the collapse of reflexivity in Jafar Panahi's post-ban cinema, where techniques once capable of generating political and creative possibilities have become residues of deferred freedom. As Panahi's cinema folds back on itself, these films create heterotopic spaces that expose the limits of visibility and authorship under systemic control.





Creators' Statement

This video essay, “A Heap of Broken Mirrors,” takes its title from a vivid image by Jorge Luis Borges, which evokes the fragmented nature of perception, memory, and reality. Drawing from Borges’s metaphor, our video essay explores the work of Iranian filmmaker Jafar Panahi, whose post-ban cinema exemplifies a radical form of fragmentation that persistently disrupts cinematic conventions to expose its underlying mechanisms: production censorship and the complex realities of filmmaking under constraint.

Jafar Panahi, a central figure in contemporary Iranian cinema, emerged prominently in the 1990s and early 2000s as a filmmaker whose works, such as *The White Balloon* (1995) and *The Mirror* (1997), were globally celebrated. In 2010, Panahi faced a severe political crackdown when the Iranian authorities banned him from filmmaking, overseas travel, and public speech due to his support of protests against government repression following the disputed 2009 presidential elections. Defying the ban, Panahi produced a remarkable series of films in secret or under precarious conditions, including *This Is Not a Film* (2011), *Closed Curtain* (2013), *Tehran Taxi* (2015), *3 Faces* (2018) and *No Bears* (2022). These works not only marked a transformation in his artistic method but also intensified his critical engagement with cinema’s form and politics.

Our engagement with Panahi’s films foregrounds the concept of heterotopia as articulated by Michel Foucault in his essay *Of Other Spaces*. Foucault defines heterotopias as real spaces that simultaneously represent, contest, and invert other spaces. They are counter-sites that mirror, distort, or critique the ordinary spaces of society. In the preface to *The Order of Things* (2002), Foucault introduces discursive heterotopias as textual spaces that disrupt conventional orders of classification, revealing the underlying arbitrariness of accepted knowledge systems. Similarly, Panahi’s films constitute cinematic heterotopias: fragmented spaces that destabilize established cinematic and political discourses.

The heterotopic quality of Panahi's films emerges in their persistent self-reflexivity. Such gestures recall what Christian Metz (1982) describes as reflexive constructions. They also resonate with what Negar Mottahede (2008) theorizes as displaced allegories, where the formal structures of post-revolutionary Iranian cinema encode the constraints of their production. His cinematic technique does not merely portray stories; it draws attention to the conditions of production. For example, *This Is Not a Film* showcases Panahi confined to his apartment, reflecting on the nature of filmmaking under censorship. Likewise, *Tehran Taxi* foregrounds filmmaking as both act and artifact, blurring lines between documentary realism and narrative fiction and thus fracturing any simplistic reading of Iranian society or cinema. As Michelle Langford observes in her discussion of *The Mirror* (1997), such strategies challenge dominant ideology by prompting viewers to question it, while also, more self-reflexively, interrogating the very nature of representational realism itself (2022: 61). The cumulative effect of these films is a deliberate disruption of the normative cinematic grammar, making viewers conscious participants.

The videographic form we have adopted for this project is particularly suited to exploring Panahi's heterotopic cinema. Unlike written analysis alone, the video essay allows us to directly demonstrate and juxtapose scenes, motifs, and formal strategies across Panahi's films. Our approach to editing has been deliberately restrained, avoiding stylistic flourishes such as split screens or rapid montage. Instead, we have prioritized the careful selection and sequencing of clips to allow Panahi's visual style and thematic preoccupations to emerge clearly and coherently.

This minimalist method facilitates a space akin to Foucault's "heterotopia of indefinitely accumulating time," analogous to a museum, where different temporalities and spatial logics coexist, allowing viewers to reflect deeply on the visual and narrative structures presented (1984: 7). In this sense, our video essay itself becomes a heterotopic site, structured as a museum-like space that compiles and juxtaposes Panahi's distinct but related cinematic moments, creating new meanings through their proximity. Each selected clip is allowed to breathe, encouraging viewers to engage actively with the filmic textures and contradictions that characterize Panahi's cinema. By maintaining a minimalistic editorial approach, the heterotopic nature of Panahi's films is mirrored structurally in the form of our video essay, creating a visual and intellectual resonance that enriches the overall argument.

This project stems from our joint identity as Iranian cinephiles and scholars, deeply familiar with the complexities of Iranian film culture. Through the construction of our video essay, we aim to illuminate Panahi's unique cinematic practice and contribute to the ongoing dialogue about how cinema operates as a medium of resistance and reflection

under conditions of repression. Our video essay thus stands as both scholarly inquiry and creative commentary, offering audiences a reflective, intellectually engaging, and visually compelling entry point into the complexities of Jafar Panahi's post-ban cinema.

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Biographies

Mahsa Salamati is a sessional academic in Film and Media Studies in the School of Art, Communication, and English at the University of Sydney. She received her PhD from the University of New South Wales. Her research explores the sociopolitical and artistic significance of informal practices in Iranian cinema, focusing on how these practices manifest in digital environments and how filmmakers working under restrictions and bans develop alternative modes of storytelling and visual language to craft a poetics of informality.

Bitā Gh Ghanbari is a researcher and videographer. She earned her master's degree in Dramatic Arts from Soore University in Iran, where her thesis examined reflexivity in the New Wave of Iranian dramatic texts (1962–1979). She is currently pursuing a Master of Research in Arts at Macquarie University, Sydney, where her work focuses on a comparative analysis of reflexivity techniques in post-revolutionary Iranian cinema and their impact on the representation of Iranian women.

Review by Kaveh Askari, Michigan State University

For film festival audiences around the world, Iranian cinema and reflexivity go together like potato chips and yogurt. It is difficult for the initiated to imagine the former unaccompanied by the latter. The minimalist films, which began in the late 1980s to win awards at film festivals and to claim space in arthouse cinemas and alternative video

stores, came to be known for the way they turned a mirror on the process of filmmaking and questioned the possibility of cinema itself.

“A Heap of Broken Mirrors” takes on this historical legacy with an important variation. It is not primarily focused on the heyday of Iranian cinema’s turn to cinematic self-reflection but rather its reverberations beginning in the 2010s. Even if some of the films from the past decade engaged similar themes as those from the 1990s, the context of their production and release look very different. These reflexive films did not emerge from the relative optimism of the reform period that introduced Iranian filmmakers, including Panahi and his mentor Abbas Kiarostami, to the world. The video essay shows how the recent cycle of Panahi’s films, created after he had been banned from filmmaking, incarcerated multiple times, and subject to continuous surveillance, use the filmic language of the heyday to respond to current systems of enclosure.

The wisdom of “A Heap of Broken Mirrors” is that it does not necessarily cast Panahi’s new work as a departure. Nor it does cast his cinema’s reflexivity as just a continuation of 1990s reflexivity in compromised conditions. The video essay makes the case for considering the post-ban cycle of films as made on unsettled foundations. The possibilities for a reflexive mode of filmmaking have fundamentally shifted even if the films are somewhat recognizable. In these films, Panahi’s own vulnerability is on display. So is a pattern of gentle political persistence. His reflexivity is different from that of Kiarostami and Nuri Bilge Ceylan, who have made gestures of self-criticism by portraying their artist protagonists (figures for themselves) as partly unlikeable in high profile films including *The Wind Will Carry Us* (1999) and *About Dry Grasses* (2023). In Panahi’s approach to self-representation, a gravely serious but somehow still avuncular persistence, suffuses his post-ban films.

In a press environment that has tended to romanticize the risks of unauthorized filmmaking by Panahi and colleagues, including last year’s award-winning *Seed of the Sacred Fig* (2024), the field is well served by the kind of historically and politically informed analysis on display in this video essay. It looks directly at the ban and its effect on the films’ style, mode of production, and possibility of resistance, but its careful consideration of the system surrounding the ban offers a corrective to the kinds of stories that make for good festival PR: flat adventure narratives about hidden films and the heroism involved in their release.

“A Heap of Broken Mirrors” takes a central metaphor from *The Mirror* (1997) and extends it to an arc of post-ban films including *This Is Not a Film* (2011), *Tehran Taxi* (2015), and *No Bears* (2022). Considering these three films within the same horizon allows the video essay to explore three increasingly uneasy categories of space: the domestic living space, the semi-public automobile interior, and the out-of-range

spaces of rural borderlands. In sequence, the authors read this arc as a decline in optimism for the possibilities of the film about filmmaking. In a bleak conclusion to the cycle, they show how the initial resistance of Panahi's reflective post-ban work eventually gives way to the chronic silence of *No Bears*.

But if we have learned one thing from Panahi's films it is that conclusions are often no more than brief pauses. They have a way of circling back. Panahi's work has just experienced its own return at Cannes. He is no longer the emerging director who broke out with a *Caméra d'or* for *The White Balloon* (1995). After this video essay was completed but just a few days before writing this review *It Was Just an Accident* won the *Palme d'or*. It is fitting for a director who loves circular plots to return, post-ban, to win the main prize at the festival that launched him into the orbit of global art cinema. Careers do endure. Often in critics' eagerness to identify the new or to treat repetitions with suspicion, we overlook enduring formations that take shape over long careers. Some insights can only be gleaned with the help of artists who, when confronted with a foundational shift in the kind of work they can make, ask their core questions once more so that the questions might land differently in the next cycle.

Review by Mazyar Mahan, University of Texas at Dallas

"A Heap of Broken Mirrors: Heterotopia and Exhausted Reflexivity in Jafar Panahi's Post-Ban Cinema" makes a remarkable contribution to both Iranian film studies and videographic criticism. Through a rigorous and theoretically grounded analysis, the video essay traces the transformation of reflexivity in Panahi's post-ban cinema. What once served as a subversive cinematic gesture is here shown to be a structure marked by exhaustion, repetition, and entrapment, burdened by its own aesthetic and political history.

Drawing on thinkers such as Christian Metz and Michel Foucault, the video essay moves beyond familiar accounts of censorship and dissent to examine how Panahi's films reflect, and are shaped by, the very structures they attempt to resist. The reading of *No Bears* (2022) is especially compelling. The film is not approached as another iteration of self-reflexive critique but as a point of collapse, where even the fractured mirror no longer holds. What remains lacks agency and is reduced to residue, a ghost of resistance that lingers without the promise of intervention.

The video essay's strength comes from its engagement with the films' formal logics and its attentiveness to the ongoing changes in authorship and spectatorship. Its treatment of *This Is Not a Film* (2011), *Tehran Taxi* (2015), and *No Bears* (2022) demonstrates a deep sensitivity to the cinematic language Panahi crafts under constraint. The discussion of Omid in *Tehran Taxi* stands out as a sharp and timely intervention. By tracing his

transformation from viewer to participant to cameraman, the video essay challenges assumptions about audience neutrality and foregrounds the informal networks that sustain Iranian cinephilia. Ultimately, the video essay presents these insights while performing them through a formal construction that mirrors its layered argument.

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