

“This is not a film” by Jafar Panahi: denunciation against censorship by metanarrative language

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Abstract

This article discusses metanarrative as Jafar Panahi’s strategy of narrative articulation and denunciation, who was banned by the Iranian government from making films. It aims to reflect on how the production “*This Is Not a Film*” radicalizes the tension the boundaries between fiction and non-fiction, denouncing the injustice in which the director is a victim of. The analysis comes from three categories: a) the camera as an intradiegetic and metanarrative element; b) the *mise en abyme*, and c) the director as a character. It is concluded that the film is a production of contemporary aesthetics, stamped by narratives where meaning proposes problematic access to the real, in the supposed rupture with canonical rules of cinema when breaking the fourth wall, making the alleged concealment of the marks of enunciation an important narrative articulation, in order to transgress and also make it visible to the censorship imposed in the country, by incorporating the backstage to the main plot, in a movement of the film to turn back to itself.

Keywords: Metanarrative language. Postmodernity. Censorship. Iranian movies. Jafar Panahi.

The narrative that looks into itself

One of the most evident implications of contemporary over the artistic expressions concerns the strong sense given to self-reflection. In an opposite direction to the neutrality imposed by Modernity, the works are characterized as enunciations, underlining the inevitable subjectivity which is currently explicit. In other words, while modern art carried a strong criticism regarding merchandising, as well as an effort to transcend it, the postmodern culture tends to become a product that speaks mostly about itself, from a metanarrative perspective.

Since popular culture and erudite art became closer, as Jameson (1997) explains, new types of texts impregnated with forms, categories and contents emerged from the so-called cultural industry, once rejected by the ideologues of Modernity, integrating aesthetic production to the production of merchandising in general. Therefore, once becoming

associated with a commercial system, aesthetic production is provoked to “deliver” novelty faster and faster, which ends up stimulating aesthetic innovation and experimentalism (JAMESON, 1997). As a consequence, what has been observed over the past decades is the emergence of artistic expressions that experience, question and expand the presumed boundaries concerning genres and the art itself. (HUTCHEON, 1991).

According to Hutcheon (1991), postmodern art deliberately attacks modern principles such as value, order, meaning, control and identity. Universal questioning is replaced with a greater emphasis on local and private issues - culture becomes “cultures” - and public agreement is questioned by the acceptance of differences in artistic works. The author argues that this means questioning any totalizing or homogenizing system. As a result, postmodern art, following Hutcheon (1991), is intensely self-reflective and aware, therefore, in this emerging society, access to reality occurs through a mediated way, structured by multiple discourses, demanding self-examination as well as its own production conditions. Accordingly, pretentious neutral representations of the world associated with Modern aesthetics fall apart, being replaced with expressions that are conscious and explicitly assume that what they represent is filtered by the author’s subjectivity. The representation crisis, therefore, according to the author analysis, leads to the conclusion that the so far usual effort to separate art and life tends to be no longer valid.

Thus, according to Hutcheon’s (1991), even though postmodernism is not necessarily a modernism denial, and neither contemporary texts replace truth, problematizing the referent nature and its relationship with the real and historical world is a present feature in contemporary narratives through metafictional self-reflexivity. Or as Jameson (1997) states, from this new awareness, historical novels, for instance, can no longer intend to represent the historical past, but to represent ideas and stereotypes about the past.

Considering the art awareness towards the impossibility of straight access to reality, except through discursive mediation, fiction is no longer understood as opposed to reality and becomes an alternative for knowledge about the world. The concept of “truth”, once defended and preached in Modernity, is abandoned. The differences between fiction and history, which have been studied since classical tradition, acquire new perspectives in terms of comprehension in postmodern art and theory. Both become identified as linguistic constructions, being able to offer, not an objective truth, but a verisimilitude (or resemblance) (HUTCHEON, 1991).

Within this context, there is an enhancement of manifestations that challenge traditional notions of perspective, being suspicious about the concept of art itself and gaining a multiple character through which it is hard to locate the narrators and their fictions. Among the exponents of this phenomenon lies the historiographic metafiction - works that appropriate historical characters and/or events by problematizing the facts conceived as “true” -, which were extensively analyzed by Hutcheon (1991).

The author uses the term “paraliterary” for works that challenge the concept of “work of art”, considering what is usually called “desecration”. According to Jameson (1997), the

old language of “work” has been displaced by the language of “text” and “textuality” since subjectivity is assumed as a mediating instance for accessing reality, everything can be considered as a text - everyday life, the body, political representations. The author comments (JAMESON, 1997, p. 101): “The autonomous work of art - and the old autonomous subject or ego -, seems to have disappeared, to have become volatilized.” Thus, postmodern art is contradictory as there is no longer a horizon of satisfaction in prospect, it does not offer an alternative to what it disproves. It is also observed from the field of culture, that Postmodernity cannot be assumed as a new paradigm, because although it questions liberal humanism, it does not replace it. Postmodern works focus on what is being contested but accepting its provisional character. Therefore, postmodernism suggests “[...] no search for transcendent timeless meaning, but rather a re-evaluation of and a dialogue with the past in the light of the present” (HUTCHEON, 1991, p. 39).

Metanarrative as self-reflection

As a result of this process of self-awareness, postmodern art movements that, in some cases, turned to themselves emerge, justifying the metanarrative processes in the set of aesthetic experiments and innovations as part of the transition from Modernity to Postmodernity. As Andrade (1999) and Logde (2011) observe, self-reflection is one of the most striking characteristics of art in the 20th century, being conceptualized as “metafiction” which is present in works that represent itself, drawing attention to its fictional status as well as its own construction method.

In contrast, Bernardo (2010, p. 9), defines the self-referential aesthetic phenomenon as something “[...] *através do qual a ficção duplica-se por dentro, falando de si mesma ou contendo a si mesma*”¹. Chalhub (1986) reminds us of the Greek etymology from the prefix “meta”, which means “change”, “posteriority”, “beyond”, “transcendence”, “reflection”, “criticism about”. For this reason, the author explains that, “metalanguage” is nothing more than “the language about the language”, which is extended to the concept of metanarrative as “the narrative about the narrative”.

Hutcheon (1980) considers metanarrative works that propose to make the process visible and explicit to the receptor as “textual narcissism”. The narratives, therefore, pursue the idea of being offered in this process, through explicit language limitations, truths and authenticities, aiming at reducing mediations as much as possible. Thus, proposing, in the name of this explicit character, to win over the audience by complicity. Among the terms that, according to Vaugh (1984), have already been used to define metafictional works are “introverted romance”, “unrealism”, “sub fiction”, “self-generating novel” and “fabulation”, indicating precisely, the idea of becoming aware of the work’s own condition, not of reality, but limited to a discourse on reality. These are works that invite the audience to realize that

1 “[...] through which fiction duplicates itself from within, talking about itself or containing itself”.

what is in front of them does not mean a direct reproduction of the world, but it is a message organized as a system of signs (language) that enhances and problematizes this message. Therefore, it is not a matter of “the world”, but a possible interpretation of the world, by explicating that subjectivity is inseparable from any message and it needs to be a current concern for those who enjoy the work.

In the same perspective, Hutcheon (1980) states that the connection between art and life is not denied in metanarrative. It is reinforced on a new level, the level of the imaginative process - the story’s elaboration - instead of the product - the story told. According to the author, metafiction is, therefore, a consequence of a cultural phenomenon that concerns the growing interest on how art is created, and not only in what is created. In other words, the interest in art only as a product is left behind in order to be understood as a process, which can be exciting as well.

Accordingly, the metanarrative breaks the old “illusion contract” between the author and the viewer, which guided art until modernity. According to Bernardo (2010), this relationship acquires a more complex dimension, going through three processes. The first is the traditional “suspension of disbelief”. When reading a book, watching a movie, or appreciating a painting, it is necessary to do it “as if” what has been read or seen is real - exactly what traditional realism suggested. In a second moment, however, there is a “suspension of the suspension of disbelief”, when reading and observing art becomes a job, that means understanding the process that leads to the suspension of disbelief. The third moment is the “suspension of belief”, which subverts all traditional logic. It is the moment when the confidence in systems and theories - in “solid structures” is abandoned and, especially, in the power of art as a representation of reality, that is, in the postulates of Modernity.

Although metanarrative is evidenced in the contemporary, especially intending to capture the viewer in this process, Hutcheon (1980), Vaugh (1984) and Bernardo (2010) remind us that this is not a new phenomenon. Metanarrative resources have been tried by literature for before, in a practice as old (or older) as the novel itself, being constituted as a tendency or as an inherent function in all novels.

In the same direction, Bernardo (2010, p. 16) states that recognizing fiction in truth does not make it any less true, on the contrary - it makes it our truth, the one that was made by us. Recognizing fiction in truth, therefore, is a movement of getting and giving responsibility. Accordingly, in postmodern metanarrative, reality does exist beyond the text, but it can only be achieved through it, reaffirming the idea of “transparency” turning into “opacity”. Thus, the only difference between fiction and reality, is that the first is entirely built with language, which allows it certain freedom. Fiction, therefore, simply admits the existence of multiple realities (VAUGH, 1984).

Vaugh (1984), in an attempt to define the ontological status of fiction, explains that theorists have traditionally divided it into two currents. The first was based on the premise that fictions are clearly lies, since there would be no direct correspondence with material reality. The second involves non-referential theorists, who did not consider appropriate discussing

the status of “truth” in fiction. A third current emerged from Postmodernity, not denying that fiction finds its references in reality, assuming that fiction offers, not representations of reality, but “possible worlds” - where the metanarrative is located.

Panahi and the metanarrative and militant cinema

Jafar Panahi’s film production has been marked for the recurrent adoption of metanarrative resources, playing a double role concerning both aesthetics and language, for proposing meanings of authenticity and analysis on his own filmmaking procedures, as well as in terms of constituting a strategy of denunciation and political militancy, insofar as it problematizes the cinema production process. This legitimized the choice for one of his productions “*This is not a film*”, as an example of this movement identified in the contemporary regarding metanarrative strategies in the cinema, so that it was taken as material for discussion and analysis.

Panahi is a film director who is not allowed to make films due to the punishments imposed by the Iranian justice for having arisen controversial themes regarding the country’s culture in his films, in addition to being known as an opponent of the current political regime. After the post-Islamic Revolution, a political cinema emerged in Iran in parallel to the commercial currents and endowed with a symbolic language, which aimed mostly to escape from the repressive state apparatus, which remains today. Thus, while “official” cinema reproduces Islamic messages, the militant cinema has given voice to the claim for reforms and changes (MELEIRO, 2006).

Considering the increase in co-financing with foreign producers, these filmmakers have intended to portray the complexities of Iranian society, which remain hidden in the government’s political propaganda. These narratives aim to denounce and combat the stereotypes associated with the country that are spread around the world by international information systems.

Jafar Panahi is one of the most prominent authors in this current. After starting his career as an assistant to Abbas Kiarostami, he debuted as a feature film director with “*The White Balloon*” (1995). In 1997, he directed “*The Mirror*”, a work in which he began to experiment more deeply the unclear boundaries between fiction and non-fiction, as well as to adopt metanarrative strategies with the function of blending backstage with the plot of the film itself.

Panahi’s success with acclaimed films such as “*The Circle*” (2000), “*Crimson Gold*” (2003) and “*Offside*” (2006), lasted until 2010, when he went to prison shortly after the presidential election in which he had openly supported the opposition candidate. Panahi was accused of conspiracy against the regime and his arrest reverberated around the world, mobilizing the international film community.

Panahi was released by the end of May but suffered a harsh sentence of six years under house arrest in addition to twenty years prohibited of making films, leaving the country, or

granting interviews (AMARAL, 2015). Despite this, he kept producing films clandestinely, with discreet support of colleagues. In 2010, he released “*This is not a film*”, a documentary about his imprisonment and prohibition of making films. The film had its world premiere at the Cannes Film Festival, to where it was taken by the co-director, Mojtaba Mirtahmasb, in a USB flash drive hidden inside a cake.

Three other films, also shot clandestinely, have already been released during his arrestment period when Panahi is serving his sentence. “*Closed Curtain*” (2013) was filmed in the director’s beach house on the Caspian Sea. In the work, Panahi appears once again, but this time interacting with fictional characters who represent the persecutions imposed by the regime - as a writer who hides with his dog after animals are banned, accused of being unclean under the Islamic law.

The restriction to Panahi at the current stage of his career leads to deepened language experiments, especially about blending fiction and non-fiction in his most recent works. In the film “*Taxi Tehran*” (2015), which received the Golden Bear at the Berlin International Film Festival, Panahi pretends to be a taxi driver riding passengers around Tehran, and it is a work full of metanarrative passages. The situations, apparently “spontaneous”, recorded by a camera installed on the vehicle’s dashboard, end up offering a portrait of the country’s political condition. In his latest production, “*3 Faces*” (2018), which premiered at the Cannes Film Festival last year, Panahi also appears on the screen, raising women issues over again. The plot narrates he and a film actress, who also plays herself, traveling to a village on the border with Turkey in search of a young woman who had written to Panahi, announcing her suicide intentions because of her family’s pressure against her artistic will.

The meta-narrative response to censorship

Aiming to proceed with the analysis of “*This is not a film*”, we adopted categories resulting from repeated patterns observed throughout the initial exploratory analysis, and which are in line with the theoretical proposals in this paper. Thus, the film is analyzed from the following categories: a) the camera as an intradiegetic and the metanarrative element; b) the *mise en abyme*, c) the director as a character.

The camera as an intradiegetic and the metanarrative element

The choice for analyzing “*This is not a film*” in this study was based on the fact that the plot results directly from the constraints and penal sanctions imposed to Panahi. Being banned from shooting, the filmmaker turned interdiction into the language of the film, aesthetically legitimizing, therefore, the adoption of metanarrative strategies in possible making plots and, through the opportune “blending” of the film and its backstage. Thus, “*This is not a film*” presents a rough record of a day in house arrest - suggestively, amid the

traditional fireworks festival in Iran, when there are fireworks and large bonfires on the streets to celebrate the New Year according to the Persian calendar.

The film takes place, mostly, inside Panahi's apartment. It starts when he calls a friend and invites him over. The aim, in the face of his conviction, is to present a film that he would like to make, but he is not allowed to. Then, in front of the camera carried by his friend, he reads the script banned by censorship, describing what he had imagined in terms of scenarios, plans, dialogues, acting movements, etc. Meanwhile, Panahi talks to his lawyer on the phone about legal proceedings (he was still awaiting the trial for a judicial review in the Court of Appeal), reporting on his previous films, feeding a pet lizard and greeting his building neighbors, among other actions. Part of the images were captured by a cell phone camera.

The camera that registers the images displayed on the screen is an intradiegetic element, which means that it is part of the text, composing the situation portrayed in which the characters are, in general, aware of it and often interact with it. Aumont (1995) called the diegetization phenomenon, when an external element is incorporated into the narration. However, in *"This is not a film"*, this feature is not evident in the opening minutes. In the first scene, Panahi is having breakfast and talking on the phone, but he does not turn to the camera. This recognition occurs in the second sequence, when the image shows an empty room, an unmade bed and he listens to a message on the answering machine left by his wife and his son. At a certain point, his son says²:

“- Daddy, listen, I turned on the camera and put it on the chair. But I think there isn't much charge left. The battery might go dead soon”.

Panahi then appears, turns to the camera, walks towards it and leaves the room holding the equipment in his hand. It is assumed, therefore, that the camera left on the chair, according to his son's message, was the exact camera recording that image, as well as all the following passages. Interactions with the camera continue throughout the film. Along the following sequences, it becomes clear that who is directing the camera is Panahi's friend - who, initially, is not nominated and does not appear on the screen -, with whom the filmmaker maintains a dialogue. At various moments - such as when Panahi reads the script he would like to shoot and when he talks about his previous films - he turns directly to the lens, making eye contact with the viewer, breaking the traditional fourth wall and establishing complicity between him and his audience (Figure 1).

² Our translation (all dialogues and excerpts from *"This is not a Film"* we translated by us).

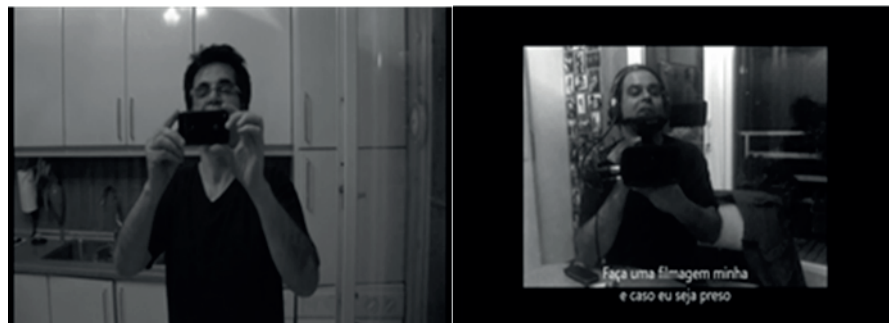
Figure 1 – “*This is not a movie*” sequence



Source: “*This is not a film*”, Jafar Panahi, 2010.

There are passages in which the audience view is shifted, while other cameras enter the scene, expanding the phenomenon of diegetization. This is evident in the film when Panahi decides to hold a cell phone and interchange images from the main camera with the images captured by the phone camera. Even the main camera appears in the scene, as well as Panahi’s friend who conducts it (Figure 2).

Figure 2 – “*This is not a movie*” sequence



Source: “*This is not a film*”, Jafar Panahi, 2010.

The rule played by these characters is what Gaudreault and Jost (2009) call delegated narrators or second narrators. Conducting the narrative remains the director’s responsibility, which means that the characters are immersed in a sub narrative. There are different narrative levels overlapped: the characters’ point of view, however, subjugated to the point of view given by the director.

Therefore, Panahi uses several resources that emphasize the filmic enunciation in his works. When it is suggested that Panahi’s friend is the one who is leading the camera followed by the moment when Panahi himself starts directing the narrative with his cell phone and then with the main camera in “*This is not a film*”, what happens is a movement in which the

characters' point of view becomes the viewer's point of view. Thus, there is no intention for any neutrality, since it is known that there is someone behind the image on the screen.

Introducing the camera as an intradiegetic element implies the recognition of language and the adoption of metanarrative resources par excellence. What is pursued is the opposite of the "classic" cinema, which, according to Metz (1980), Aumont (1995), Furtado (2005), Gaudreault and Jost (2009), intended to erase all enunciation marks in the films, by making the characters ignore the camera. As the camera composes the situation and the characters often refer to it - even looking directly at it several times - the films expose their codes, recognizing themselves as films. In other words, as discourses, despite proposing to offer interpretations of reality.

While the camera is present, the process of elaboration is no longer covered up. As Bernardo (2010) explains, in metanarrative processes, the focus is not only on the portrayed situation, but also on the construction method, which is evident, for example, in the passages in which the characters deliberately manipulate the direction of the camera. The film being made is even more exposed when the characters use other cameras to shoot from other perspectives, composing the films simultaneously. Subjectivity, therefore, is explicitly "asking" to be identified.

In fact, by simply merging images that, notoriously, were captured by multiple cameras is a signal for subjectivity and its implication onto the editing work. Thus, despite an apparent "purity" in the films' aesthetics, the incidence of editing presupposes some level of reframing, since after being captured, the images were reorganized by the director. That is why Gaudreault and Jost (2009) claim that editing is one of the means through which the filmic enunciation is recognized. In this case, the coexistence of intradiegetic cameras is one of the keys.

More than subverting a cinema tradition, this strategy breaks with the pretension of the realistic project to offer direct representations of social reality, as analyzed by Jaguaribe (2007) and Margato (2012), and is combined with a tendency in postmodernist art to problematize the relationship between the work of art and the real and historical world. As previously mentioned, it seems clear that Panahi does want to express information about reality, but by adopting this strategy, he assumes that what is on the screen is not reality itself, but a possible observation of it.

Regarding the passages in which other cameras enter the scene, the strategy also seems to have an ideological and denunciative nature. While Panahi holds his cell phone in "*This is not a movie*", he and his friend have the following dialogue:

“Friend - Great. You recorded it, too.

Panahi - What is it for? The quality is very low.

Friend - Listen, Jafar, I believe that what really matters is what is being documented”.

Clearly, Panahi did not include “subnarrations” in the film without a purpose. By explicating the value of a phone camera, despite its low quality, the author not only challenges the restriction imposed by his conviction and the norms to which film production in Iran is subordinated, since the directors depend on prior state authorizations to using equipment for filmmaking, as he assumes his militant character, questioning the concept of a work of art. The postmodernist movement opposes the formalism and traditional values involving chronology and meaning, based on the acceptance of subjectivity as well as the idea that everyday life and the prosaic can also be text.

The *mise en abyme*

Following this self-referential movement, the film contains numerous references to Panahi’s previous works, including characters direct mentions and even the reproduction of excerpts from those works, leading to an ultimate idea that all films can also be seen and comprehended as one. This can be called *mise en abyme* (MOUSINHO; OLIVEIRA, 2017). The technique, which is also applied to other artistic expressions, such as painting, consists of “place into the abyss”, the work within the work, the film within the film, occurring when there are different narrative layers overlapped on the image and a character watches or references another film, as a typical metanarrative movement.

In “*This is not a film*”, these occurrences are quite explicit. For instance, in the opening sequences, Panahi appears talking about “*The Mirror*”, while an excerpt from the film is being played on a television in front of which he stands and looks directly at the camera, commenting on the situation experienced by the protagonist. There are two other similar passages. Panahi watches excerpts from two other films showing on the same TV, “*Crimson Gold*” and “*The Circle*”. In these cases, he comments on the film’s production process, exposing, thus, once again, the cinema language codes. Regarding “*Crimson Gold*”, he discusses the use of non-actors and the protagonist’s spontaneous interpretation in a specific scene, elements that reinforce the idea of authenticity and organicity in his work. “With an amateur actor like Hossein, the details will not be predictable. You write some things, but when you are on location and the actor enters, he directs you” (PANAHI, 2010).

When referring to “*The Circle*”, the director enhances the importance of location through a specific scene, in which a desperate character runs inside a building structured by vertical lines. “Here, the location is directing. There was no need for actress to effort in showing her anxiety. Those vertical lines in the location ... Those lines supplied her mental state” (Figure 3).

Figure 3 – “*This is not a film*” sequence

Source: “*This is not a film*”, Jafar Panahi, 2010.

Furthermore, Panahi verbally endorses some of the theoretical basis that underlie the *mise en abyme*. When stating, for example, that “the actor directs you”, he simply confirms the existence of sub narrations in his work, in line with Gautreauld and Jost (2009) who state the characters also lead the narratives, although they are subordinated to the director. The same happens when Panahi says that “the scenario directs the scene”, in an attempt to underline subjectivity again, indicating the existence of narrators behind the filmic enunciates as well as drawing attention to the complexity generated from the different narrative levels present in his own films. There are numerous references in “*This is not a film*”.

The director as a character

The strategies adopted by Panahi when making a film about the film he was not banned to make, using the metanarrative process of *mise en abyme*, also relies on the director’s own idea as a character playing himself. In “*This is not a film*”, Panahi not only takes the lead in the scene, but brings his personal drama into the center, giving the film an autobiographical character. This is evident from one of the initial sequences, in which he is on the phone talking to his lawyer about the progress of appealing against the conviction sentence. The lawyer tells him that it will be difficult to reverse the conviction and only internal and external pressures might soften the sentence. She also suggests that the process is under political interference: “I should simply say the decisions are 100% political and not legal or judicial. Everything depends on current social conditions as well as the pressures and reactions”, she states.

In the following scenes, when he explains his intention to present the plot for the film that he is not allowed to shoot, he mentions directly his well-known conviction sentence: So far it says: 20 years ban from film-making, 20 years ban from writing screenplays, 20 years ban from having interviews. Performance and script reading were not mentioned. In

that same excerpt, Panahi reports his script rejection by censorship agencies: “I was told to make changes to the script and to sweeten it up a bit to see if I could get permission, but still I couldn’t get it and I wasn’t allowed to work”. In another moment, he tells about a film that was banned while it was being shot. Only a work that assumes subjectivity can put the creator in evidence - since, in an opposed movement, the intention would be to “mask” his interference in the name of a supposedly faithful reproduction of social reality. In this case, it is assumed that the author is also an instance part of the text itself (BERNARDO, 2010).

Moreover, by directly addressing the process of which he is the target and that was reported all around the world, Panahi expresses the political purpose of his works. By challenging the ban on making films, using the technology available nowadays that affects the state control over audiovisual production, and showing his story in his works that have reached the most important international film festivals and even Western commercial circuits, Panahi intends to manifest his militant vocation, denouncing to the planet an abusive coercion and constraining a regime that insists on authoritarianism and silence dissenting voices.

Self-referential resource, therefore, is the instrument through which the director escapes from the censorship and, when speaking of himself, he draws attention to all injustice caused by a restrictive political system and the fact that there is still deprivation of liberty in the contemporary, claiming the power of arts and cinema for resistance. This position is based on the postmodernist movement, in which institutions are questioned, old references are lost and, with an increasingly evident communicational component, the power of regulation moves from administrators to autonomous, and authorities, although still existing, can no longer impose their speech. (ANDERSON, 1999, LYOTARD, 2004).

Through “*This is not a film*”, Panahi, without allying himself to any traditional force (left or right wings, for example), questions the power of both, the regulating bodies of Iranian film production and the entire state apparatus, since he transgresses the judicial decision. Although blending fictional and non-fictional elements is a hallmark of contemporary Iranian cinema and, even though it has already been explored in previous works by Jafar Panahi, the productions made during his house arrest raised this tension into a new level of complexity. When the films are shown in commercial and festival circuits, they disorient the audience due to their nature. This is clear in reports and journalistic reviews that refer to them as documentaries, evidencing a belief that they are raw records of situations not staged by impartial cameras. Being referred to as “false documentaries” indicates a recognition that the works have a fictional character, but they appropriate naturalistic codes as a strategy.

In addition to not giving clear signs of his claims regarding correspondence with social reality, Panahi wants to instigate thoughts on the boundaries between fiction and non-fiction into the films. In the first dialogue with his friend in “*This is not a film*”, the director reports that he recorded himself with the camera and those correspond to the opening images of the film, but he says he was not satisfied, because they seemed fake:

“- This morning, after we talked on the phone, I sat and watched what I had already filmed. I realized that, in some way, it looked pretense. This is turning into a lie. It seems that, somehow, it’s not me”.

Later, even with the camera under the supervision of his colleague, Panahi finds himself facing the same problem:

“- Maybe I’m wasting time. I feel that what we are doing here is a lie, like the first sequence we saw. What is coming next, will certainly become lies, no matter how you proceed”.

Panahi seems to admit, again, the inevitability of fictionalization. Despite his intention to offer access to reality, reducing filters and intermediation, the narrative itself exposes the impossibility of absolute objectivity, resulting in a conflict towards what is being filmed that, ironically, it is no longer known if it is spontaneous or conceived.

In “*This is not a film*”, for instance, there are long passages showing Panahi feeding his pet lizard, watching television, answering the door to a neighbor who asks him to take care of his dog for a few hours and a long dialogue inside the elevator with a young man who comes to his apartment to collect the garbage. All these apparently spontaneous situations, although not providing any important information about the plot, seem to aim at offering a sense of authenticity to the film, since they happened “for real”.

Final considerations

The complexity involved in Panahi’s filmmaking is related to the fact that, using the codes and techniques associated with documentaries, therefore, supposedly a narrative of “real”, problematizes precisely, through metanarrative resources, its fictional character. When assuming subjectivity and its inexorability, with the clear purpose of offering information about reality, Panahi conceives the fiction as an alternative of knowledge about the world, by admitting that nothing that is on the screen is, in fact, spontaneous. Therefore, it is through fictionalization that “truths” are revealed.

The different narrative levels overlapped in “*This is not a film*” causes the narrator’s position to shift throughout the film. Thus, the audience point of view becomes, temporarily, the point of view of characters who conduct intradiegetic cameras. Likewise, when the film exposes its creative codes, by showing characters manipulating cameras, discussing filmmaking and making direct references to the director, who is also a character having his private story as a theme, the narrative levels become more complex and the instance of the enunciation (the film being made) added to the instance of the enunciation (the film itself) start coexisting on the screen.

Thus, it is observed that the director chooses a certain narrative language according to his ability to, when offering a view on a non-filmic reality that concerns the political context of the country, denounce the censorship imposed on cinematographic production and the arbitrariness of his judicial conviction and ban from filmmaking. Recognizing the fictional status and the impossibility of directly apprehending the non-filmic reality, put in evidence, ending up weakening the reality/illusion dichotomy.

In “*This is not a film*”, the classic fictional structures are broken, therefore, insofar as the films respond to the contemporary demand for expressions and products that offer “appearances of non-subjective intermediation”. In the same proportion, Panahi seems to joke, through the irony language, evoking the inevitability of fictionalization and the possibility of direct access to non-filmic reality. The metanarrative movements make the director’s presence (enunciator) explicit and ostensible in the film, guiding the viewer to perceive his subjective interference, denying the neutrality of the image as well as the appearance of reality offered by the aesthetic options. Although it portrays a specific political context in Iran and refers to Panahi’s particular trajectory, promoting comments and discussions on all these circumstances, the film is, mostly, a film about cinema.

By radicalizing the narrative potentialities of the so-called seventh art, tensioning the boundaries between fiction and non-fiction, the films shed light on these limits to the viewer, instead of concealing them. Panahi also makes fun of the ban imposed on his activity as a director, denying that he is making the film and taking advantage of breaches in the legal text to prove that what is expressed in the image is not a fictionalization, but a direct record of the non-filmic reality. As Panahi himself acknowledges the inevitability of fiction, “*This is not a film*” is nothing more than an audacious “dissimulation” for censorship. A film is made without saying it.

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