



FILM: **NO BEARS**

FDG RATING: 3.0 😊😊😊😊😊

Film Discussion Group (FDG) Scale is 1-5 (5 is best)

Jafar Panahi: *director/writer*
Jafar Panahi: *actor, Panahi*
Bakhtiyar Panjei: *actor, Bakhtiar*
Mina Kavani: *actress, Zara*

DATE: May 21, 2023

DISCUSSION SUMMARY: **NO BEARS**

No Bears was filmed in secret by the Iranian director Jafar Panahi, who was forbidden from making films. Soon after its completion, he was arrested for protesting the detention of two fellow filmmakers, who had been critical of the authorities. (He was imprisoned July 2022 and ordered to serve a six year sentence but released Feb. 2023, two days after he went on a hunger strike.)

No Bears is a film within a film with Panahi playing himself as a director who is making a film secretly, directing cast and crew from his laptop as he hides in a small rented room in the rural village of Joban, on the border of Iran and Turkey, (Panahi is legally not allowed to leave Iran) while his cast and crew are located in a larger Turkish city.

We see a young man, Bakhtiar summon his girlfriend, Zara from her waitressing duties to tell her news. he's gotten her a passport—under a different name—and booked a flight for her to Paris. They are both Iranian exiles seeking asylum in France. Upset that he is not leaving the country with her as promised, she causes a scene saying she has withstood torture, imprisonment and arduous waiting so that they would leave together. In the midst of the fracas, we hear the instructions “cut” come from a man in another location at his laptop. We realize we have been watching the filming of a movie.

Questions arise about the ethics of film making, the moral responsibility of the director, and how filming can be intrusive and incite violent repercussions. Directing remotely from his laptop, Panahi is physically detached and at the same time his filming causes disruptions and tragedy. Even as he tried to stay hidden in the rented room, many of the village people were upset about his presence, viewing Panahi as an intruder, a city slicker from Tehran with a nice car.

The plot thickens when Panahi's host tells him of a traditional ceremony he may want to film of an engaged couple performing rituals for their wedding. Wanting to remain as hidden as possible, he loans his camera to the host to take photos for him. But also, perfunctorily takes a couple snapshots of a group of young boys as well as of a young man and woman who are obviously in love. Or did he? That is the incriminating question.

We learn that an archaic tradition of promising a newborn to another in marriage means that another man is engaged to the young woman we saw with someone else. As proof of her infidelity, the boys say they saw Panahi take the couple's photo which he denies. According to village traditions, Panahi must swear on the Quran to his innocence but instead says he will video the traditional inquiry as if that will attest to his innocence in the same way as swearing on the Quran. One discussion participant thought it was a prime example of Panahi's arrogant attitude.

There are no happy endings for the couple being filmed, nor for the young couple in love and Panahi is at the heart of the tragedies.

Several film discussion participants viewed the film as an indictment of Iran's oppressive regime, showcasing oppression and what happens if you stand up to it. Others saw the story as more about his art and whether he is acting as a documentarian of what is happening or is his film-making driving the tragedies. Another perspective was traditions versus modernism. And another insight focused on Panahi's self criticism of movie making.

A favorite scene seemed to poke fun at the obsessive tradition of taking off shoes when entering a room. We see a group of village men take off their shoes as they pass through one room, put them on for a few steps and then take them off again before entering the next room. The traditional politeness seemed a bit extreme as each person asked permission to enter before stepping into a person's residence and Panahi is always called “Dear Sir” by his host.

The title seems obtuse but there is a scene when Panahi encounters a stranger on his way to the swear room. The man cautions that there are dangerous bears lurking in the darkness, and later dismisses his own warning. The meeting seems like something from a folk tale. But one interpretation is that there are reasons to live in fear in Iran even if propaganda says otherwise.

The movie presents controversial political and cultural issues obliquely, as one published critic said, “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). The film maker really was risking his own life to make this film. We confronted our ratings head on, welcoming uncensored scores ranging from 2.5 to 4 resulting in an acceptable 3.0 on our scale of 1 to 5. 5 is the best.



See you at the movies!
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