

Dear Haifaa Al Mansour, dear Solmaz Panahi,
you are here in lieu of your father Jafer Panahi,
a very warm welcome to Germany and of course congratulations for
being awarded the Kant World Citizen Prize 2016.

The Kant Foundation asked me to speak some laudatory words to
you for a very simple reason, which is, that I have made films both
in Saudi Arabia and Iran. Not as beautiful ones as yours, of course.
I am a journalist and producer, also making documentaries and
reportages.

But in many ways our work is similar. We have to deal with
the board of film censors or the Islamic religious police, and, of
course, respect local cultural customs, to name but a few.

Believe me, when I say, that I do know one thing or the other about
the challenges you as filmmakers have to face in your respective
homelands, and I have been asked to talk today about my
experiences.

You come from two very different countries. The Sunnite Kingdom
of Saudi Arabia and the Shiite Islamic Republic of Iran have little in
common, but for the fact that they both are regional power brokers,
currently fighting for predominance in the Middle East.

But as different as your countries might be, the circumstances,
under which you work there as film directors, are very similar.

Both Saudi Arabia and Iran grant their citizens only limited freedom which manifests itself in different ways. In Iran women have considerably more possibilities and rights than women in Saudi Arabia, to name but one example.

But those who want to make films that do not meet the strict censorship laws, religious regulations or social codex, have to be quite ingenious – in Saudi Arabia as much as in Iran.

One needs to circumvent bans, and one needs the courage to violate or re-interpret rules, and to fiddle with red lines. Red lines, no one can ever be absolutely sure about where exactly they run.

Because the boundaries of what is forbidden and what is tolerated are frequently shifted, depending on the political situation at home and on a shift of power.

Who has the upper hand, the more liberal forces or the conservatives? What does this mean for the arts? When is it wise to take some risk, and when to stay put?

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It is indicative that your most recent films "Wadjda" and "Taxi Tehran" were banned from being screened in your respective homelands.

In Saudi Arabia for the simple yet absurd reason, that there are no movie theaters.

In Iran, because Jafar Panahi has been banned from filmmaking for 20 years and because his films are on his country's blacklist.

But none of this can stop you. You want to tell stories. The stories of ordinary people. Ordinary people who have dreams, yearnings, goals, and who often have to face considerable difficulties pursuing them.

And there is another parallel: In both films the leading roles are rebels in their own right. They refuse to accept to let cultural habits or the courts respectively sabotage their dreams and goals: a young girl's desire to ride a bike in Saudi Arabia and a critical filmmaker's determination to make films in Iran.

"No one can force me to be happy in his way (according to how he conceives the welfare of other human beings), rather each may pursue happiness in the way he sees fit"¹, Kant says.

This is the key message of your films in a nutshell.

¹ https://books.google.de/books?id=KLnfCgAAQBAJ&pg=PA330&lpg=PA330&dq=kant+no+one+can+force+me+to+be+happy+in+his+way&source=bl&ots=qYcDmXmNGg&sig=nfegbH1ELEjilDyZsLAWcJUW6j8&hl=de&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwiZ_Zi50J3PAhVHxRQKHUdUD4EQ6AEIHjAB#v=onepage&q=kant%20no%20one%20can%20force%20me%20to%20be%20happy%20in%20his%20way&f=false

The Kant Foundation awards you, Ms Al Mansour, the Kant World Citizen Prize: "Out of respect for your brave and gentle enlightenment employing the artistic means of filmmaking to foster an equitable, humane and empathic coexistence of all people."

Jafar Panahi is being honoured: "In recognition of the sincerity, courage and creativity he shows in his educational filmic arts works for a peaceful and respectful coexistence of all people regardless of their differences."

And indeed, it is quite a mix of people that get into Jafar Panahi's taxi. Panahi lets them talk, he does not judge them, he treats them with respect. "Taxi Tehran" is the portrait of a whole country captured in a couple of rides. What is fascinating is that your father, Ms Panahi, does not rage against the regime, but rather acts with serenity and humour. In his own words: "We are not trying to fight against anybody or challenge anybody with our films. All we want to do is raise a social issue. We want to tell those in government that there is this problem so at least they can think more deeply about it. We want to persuade them that there are more rational ways of tackling and dealing with these problems than sheer restriction or ignoring them."²

² <http://lakukac.blogspot.de/2011/02/offside.html>

Ms Al Mansour, you chose a similar approach, as you explained in an interview with the German news magazine "Spiegel": "I have always tried to look upon my film not so much as a critical voice of liberation or indictment, but as a film that treasures and accepts the culture of Saudi Arabia. I did not want the film to clash with the culture and values of my homeland, I did not want it to be loud and offensive."

We, i.e. the European World Citizens, still have to learn a great deal about the culture and values of Saudi Arabia and Iran. Your films teach us that the world only seems to be what it is at first sight. That the world is a much more complex, diverse, and richer place than we in Europe generally perceive it to be. And it is exactly for that reason that your films are of such great importance for us abroad, too. They allow insight into societies too many Europeans know little about.

Of this many Iranians and Saudis are painfully aware. I can hardly count the times, when Iranians have come to me asking me – deeply concerned – to tell my audience in Europe that they are not religious fanatics.

Of Riyadh one of my memories has a more cheerful note. While being stuck in one of those endless traffic jams on the city motorway there was a car in front of me with a great big sticker of a white camel on green ground. Written underneath it was: "Hey! I am a Saudi. And, by the way, we do not get to work on camel-back."

One reason why we in Europe know little about Saudi Arabia that goes beyond politics is that it isn't easy to get there in the first place. To get hold of a visa is hard work and requires infinite patience – unless you're planning a pilgrimage to Mekka that is. Saudi Arabia puts almost all its money on religious tourism. Foreign journalists and filmmakers are not what you would call welcome guests. At least not in the eyes of the authorities, secret services and ministries. By ordinary citizens – and it is very important for me to make this very clear – I have always been made most welcome.

When I want to make a film in Saudi Arabia – and I assume it's the same for you, Ms Al Mansour – I have to state in painstaking detail what the project will be about. Who are my protagonists, where and when exactly will I shoot, what is the message of my film. Actually, this would be quite alright, if you were given the chance to answer truthfully. But this chance you are being denied.

If I want to look into issues, the authorities disapprove of I will not be given a visa. Try to get a permission to shoot a film about poverty in Saudi Arabia – and you are sure to grow a long beard before you get a reply – which will be negative.

That leaves you with two options: You can lie, pretending to make a film about some unobtrusive subject, and then shoot something completely different whilst being there on location. You can do this – as long as you do not intend ever to work in Saudi Arabia again.

The second option is to ask permission to film regarding a subject you believe you will stand a chance with. Then, once you are on location, you'll try to inconspicuously add some aspects you thought wise not to mention beforehand. Sometimes you'll be chased away by suspicious locals. Sometimes you'll be checked out by even more suspicious plain-clothes officials. While constantly pondering on the question: How far can I go? Will I get caught? And what would be the consequences?

I can imagine, that you, too, Ms Al Mansour, had to weigh one thing against the other, that you had to check and re-check many things while making "Wadjda". I can also imagine that it wasn't that easy to get all crew members – some of them foreigners – into the country.

But I can equally imagine that your non-Saudi crew members experienced much the same I did while being on location. That is that in Saudi Arabia a lot of things might be complicated and prohibited, but that in end – surprisingly – a lot of things will work out in one way or another. And nobody knows, why. Let me give you two examples.

Saudi Arabia – and at least this is something most people in Europe do know – is a country that fiercely observes the segregation of the sexes. Its customs and regulations go way beyond what the strict headmistress in "Wadjda" teaches her girl pupils. In public buildings there are separate entrances for men and women. Why – on the other hand – the exit may often be used by both men and women is a contradiction no one in Saudi Arabia could explain to me.

And another example: In Iran social media like Facebook and Twitter is actually banned. Yet the first thing Iranians will explain to visitors from abroad is how to easily gain access via VPN Apps. This – strictly speaking illegal – method seems to be also used by president Rohani as well as by numerous ministers and mullahs. At any rate all of them have Facebook or Instagram accounts.

Therefore: Which rules will be observed and implemented and which ones won't, cannot be answered by the standards of logical thinking.

Sometimes a ban can easily be bypassed with no one taking any offence at all. Many others, however, seem to be set in stone and can't be rocked one inch. And sometimes it takes a lot of patience and a lot of small steps of dissent to dispose of absurd regulations or social injustices. Which is something else your films tell of.

Dear Ms Haifaa Al Mansour, what you did is exemplary. In Saudi Arabia it is unthinkable for a woman director to be outside in the street giving directions to an all-male crew. Does this mean that women can't make films? Quite clearly, the answer is: No.

Ms Mansour, while shooting in the street all your crew members would have headsets, so that you could direct them from inside a car. Saudi women are not actually allowed to drive a car. Saudi women have to be accompanied by a male guardian when they want to start a business or apply for a passport. But so far nobody has thought of denying you the right to make films. Even the mullahs haven't thought to declare this to be indecent. Maybe because before you no other woman ever thought of doing this. And something that isn't done simply cannot be forbidden.

For many of the bans, restrictions or regulations there isn't even a law.

Or as you, Ms Mansour, put it in an interview with the German weekly "ZEIT": "Most of the rules aren't based on written law, but on social codices. Our constitution does not say that women aren't allowed to ride a bike. That's just a custom."

Some years ago in an interview for the website "open democracy" Jafar Panahi stressed that the situation in Iran is quite similar: "When the authorities want to restrict something or implement a restriction this should be based on the law. But the Iranian Parliament never passed a law forbidding women to go to a football stadium and see a match. This has become some kind of unwritten law. And the police and soldiers also have to follow and enforce this unwritten law, because they have to account for it to their superiors."

At this point it should be said that the unwritten law forbidding women in Saudi Arabia to ride a bike has been lifted in the meantime. The religious police now allow women to ride a bike, though there are some restrictions. I.e., women may only ride a bike in recreational areas, they have to be accompanied by a male relative and be dressed in full Islamic body coverings.

It would be wonderful if I could say that "Wadjda" had its share in all this. But this wouldn't be correct. Both the relaxation of this strict custom and the shooting of "Wadjda" happened at the same time. But, and at this point I would like to quote Ms Mansour once again, this time from an interview with the German daily "Tagesspiegel":

"It is important to celebrate even the small steps. As they will pave the way for the bigger ones."

And who knows, talking about optimism, maybe "Wadjda" will contribute to movie theatres opening up once again in Saudi Arabia in the near future. After all until the late 1970ies there were plenty of movie theaters in Saudi Arabia. It was only in the 1980ies that cinemas became a thorn in the eye of religious people and were ultimately closed down.

Earlier this summer the royal family announced some changes including the creation of some kind of authority for entertainment. Something many Saudi commentators believed to mean nothing else but the introduction of a film censorship board, and by implication, that there will soon be movie theatres in Saudi Arabia once again. Who knows?

In Iran there are many movie theaters, showing both foreign and Iranian films. When you stroll down the esplanade in Isfahan on a Thursday evening, the beginning of the Iranian weekend, you will see people queuing up in front of the movie theatres. Many Iranian film directors enjoy cult status at home. But for all of them making a film means quite a bit of maneuvering before it will finally make it onto the big screen.

On the occasion of one of his earlier films "Offside" Jafar Panahi explained how this works: "In Farsi we have a saying: 'If you can't get in through the door climb up through the window.' This is what we have to do to find a way of achieving our aims. For each film this method can only be used once, and for the next one obviously we have to find an alternative way of doing it."³

The film tells the story of a group of young girls trying to go and see a football match, even though women in Iran aren't allowed to visit a stadium. "What's all this nonsense? Even at the movies' we are allowed to sit next to men, and it's dark there", one of the girls says when she's caught and arrested.

³ https://www.opendemocracy.net/arts-Film/offside_3620.jsp

To get permission for "Offside", Jafar Panahi told the censors that the film was about some boys and a football match. For this he got permission to shoot. But then the censors demanded, that he would submit the final cut and comply to all the changes requested of him to be made. This Panahi refused to do. "Offside" won the Silver Bear at the 2006 Berlin Film Festival, but back home the film was never officially screened.

In 2010 Jafar Panahi was banned from making films, but continued to shoot. Like Haifaa Al Mansour he found ways to make the impossible possible. For "Taxi Tehran" he would equip a car with small, unobtrusive cameras allowing him to shoot out in the open while at the same time in secret.

In one scene Panahi's real-life niece gets into the car, taking a camera from her school bag, telling her uncle, the famous director, now sitting behind the wheel, that her schoolteacher wants her to shoot some kind of film.

It should be "distributable", adding: "My teacher said, in filmmaking the following rules need to be observed. Wearing the Islamic headgear is compulsory. Ties are forbidden. So is any kind of contact between man and woman.

No conspiracies or violence must be shown, no political or economic issues raised, no Persian names used, but the names of the prophets of Islam whenever possible. Use your common sense and focus on minor problems."

Jafar Panahi does all that, thus treading on very thin ice whenever he makes a film. For ignoring the ban he could be arrested any time. His comment: "You have to break this atmosphere of fear. And this is only possible by making films. I have to do something. I simply cannot keep quiet about the circumstances in my homecountry."

Dear Mr Panahi, dear Ms Al Mansour, today you are being honored with good reason. Not only do you show how important individual rights and freedom are for people all over the world. But you also show the world the richness of both Saudi Arabia and Iran. Their richness in creativity, in extraordinary individuals and in cultural diversity.

Ms Al Mansour, as you once said: "Be positive. Don't be a victim. It is easy to give up hope and put up with your place within the system. It can be discouraging to turn against what is expected from you and to act differently from everybody else. But it's worth to stand up for what you believe in. The world, and especially the Middle East, needs stories that give us hope. We need films that inspire us to set a good example and change the world for the better. We are witness to a great many tragedies in this part of the world. We don't need films that will even further intensify this ever present feeling of despair and desperation."

Dear Haifa Al Mansour, dear Jafar Panahi, you are encouraging. You set an example. For this and for being awarded the Kant World Citizen Prize: Congratulations!