

Inside the Frame

Ali Asgari on *Divine Comedy* and Filmmaking in Iran

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Fig. 1 | In conversation with filmmaker Ali Asgari via Zoom.

Director Ali Asgari lives and works in Tehran, where he has built a reputation for sharp, understated films that expose the quiet absurdities of life under Iran's cultural bureaucracy. His 2023 feature *Terrestrial Verses*, co-directed with Alireza Khatami, premiered in Un Certain Regard at Cannes and later found an audience through informal community screenings inside Iran. His new film, *Divine Comedy* (2025), follows a fictional director named Bahram who smuggles his banned movie into private homes. The film, so far, debuted at Venice, took the Special Jury Prize and Critics' Prize at Antalya, and has since traveled to Hamburg, Tallinn, Marrakesh, Doha, Frijorn, and AFI Los Angeles.

Iranian cinema has long turned restriction into resource. In October 2025, Martin Scorsese told Iranian filmmaker Jafar Panahi at the New York Film Festival that post-war Italian neorealism and contemporary Iranian films share a common mission: To restore humanity after ideological collapse. Scorsese urged streamers to make these works "available everywhere—especially in the U.S. and Canada" (Scorsese and Panahi).

I spoke with Asgari over a crackling video line from New York to Tehran. What follows is a condensed, technical Q&A drawn from that hour-long conversation.

AKARCESME: How did the concept for *Divine Comedy* first emerge, and what led you to revisit Dante's vision at this moment?

ASGARI: The title isn't decoration. Dante gave me a way to think about thresholds—doors, counters, corridors—and a person moving through them toward a fragile kind of light. I'm not recreating the poem; I'm letting its structure sit under a very ordinary story. You watch a man pass from one circle to another, judged at each stop, and you start to feel the weight on his shoulders.

AKARCESME: Let's talk about two specific shots. First, the table scene: Bahram sits opposite a government representative, but the official never appears on screen. Why keep the voice off-camera?

ASGARI: I never show the official's face. The system is the monster, not one man. The sweets and flag are polite theater; the voice from nowhere is the real power. I wanted the audience to feel the same claustrophobia Bahram feels—trapped by invisible rules.

AKARCESME: Second, the dog: Shila. The image is striking, and the symbolism is rich. The film ends with Sheila staring into the lens. How did Shila enter the film?

ASGARI: Dogs are "impure" in official ideology. If a script mentions a dog inside a home, the Ministry demands cuts. Sheila opens the film by barking at the projection and closes it by staring at us, judging the human stupidity. She's my Cerberus, my she-wolf from Dante's hell, guarding the gate of absurdity.

AKARCESME: How does working inside Iran shape authenticity, cultural responsibility, and audience connection?

ASGARI: Authenticity comes from proximity—to the streets, the accents, the way people touch a cup or lower their voice. That proximity creates responsibility. You can't exoticize the people you live among. Practically, shooting inside Iran keeps me honest: Fewer tricks, more attention to faces and rooms. And in recent years many of us decided to change how we work. Oddly,



Fig. 2 | Bahman vs. the off-screen official at the table from *Divine Comedy* (00:55:20). Salt For Sugar Films, 2025.



Fig. 3 | Shila in the entryway from *Divine Comedy* (00:42:10). Salt For Sugar Films, 2025.

the films became more connected to daily life when we stopped designing them to satisfy forms.

AKARCESME: Do you use allegory, symbolism, or metaphor to address sensitive issues? How effective are these techniques?

ASGARI: They are trying to... to cancel this animal. And it's a little bit like a metaphor, and it isn't camouflage for me; it's precision

at another frequency. A closed door, a voice from outside the frame, a dog waiting at the edge of a room—these are concrete things that carry ethical weight. If you respect the reality, the symbolism comes naturally and audiences feel trusted rather than lectured.

AKARCESME: Your film often carries a realist—at times almost documentary—quality, especially in the still-image sequence



Fig. 4 | The twins mirror gestures from *Divine Comedy* (01:07:33). Salt For Sugar Films, 2025.

featuring the twins, Bahram and Bahman. That section really captivated me. What creates that distinctive sense of realism?

ASGARI: We earn it in blocking and sound. I like longish takes that allow behavior to build. The camera respects the geometry of a real room; the mics pick up edges fiction usually polishes away. Rehearsals give the actors freedom to surprise me without breaking the scene. With the twins, I leaned into mirroring gestures—two bodies calibrating the same space, as if the frame itself was testing reality.

AKARCESME: There's a wonderful looseness to these scenes, especially in how the twins keep returning to *The Matrix* (Drs. Lana and Lilly Wachowski 1999). It made me wonder—was improvisation a major part of your process?

ASGARI: We rehearsed for weeks in their apartment. I recorded their real conversations, then built dialogue from those tapes. On set we shot fast—ten days—but the rhythm came from months of listening.

AKARCESME: Speaking of *The Matrix*, I'm curious what films or filmmakers have inspired or influenced you?

ASGARI: I started with the American classics—Huston, Hitchcock, Ford. Then Scorsese, Woody Allen. Later the Dardennes, Haneke, Angelopoulos. Now slow cinema: Weerasethakul, Tsai Ming-liang. But if I name one film that changed me, it's Fellini's *8½* (1963)—it shows a filmmaker lost in his own imagination, trying to finish a movie that may never exist.

Also, I learn from American rigor with point of view and rhythm, from Italian Neorealism's attention to ordinary bodies, and from Iranian poetry. *The Matrix* came up because twins and mirrors invite viewers to test reality's seams. My films probably live in those seams, frames within frames.

AKARCESME: How have political, social, or institutional constraints influenced your process—muting or cutting parts of the film, for instance?

ASGARI: I try to keep the courage at the writing table as I don't think about "authenticity" when I write. And that's why I don't want to censor myself, because if I wanted to censor myself, I would go to the Ministry of Culture and ask for the permission of the shooting, or permission for anything. So, in this case, now that I decided to not, but limits exist, and not only local ones. Certain topics ripple beyond our borders. Sometimes you trim for survival; sometimes you keep a line and accept the consequence. I design the scenes so that the political is inseparable from the domestic. That tends to pass through filters because it looks small even when it says something large.

AKARCESME: Who is your intended audience?

ASGARI: First, the people at home. If a family in Tehran recognizes its daily negotiations with power and love, I've done my job. But I also believe the films should travel. That's why I appreciate anyone who argues for real access abroad. If viewers in Canada or the U. S. can actually find the work, the conversation widens.



Fig. 5 | Two-up on a scooter seeking light from *Divine Comedy* (01:28:51). Salt For Sugar Films, 2025.

AKARCESME: You often talk about a matrix of performance—fixed camera grammar with room for discovery. How do you calibrate that?

ASGARI: I fix the shot's grammar—height, axis, where the scene must begin and end. Inside that, I let timing breathe: overlaps, where the eyes land, when someone sits or stands. It isn't improvisation in the comedy sense; it's controlled discovery. The twins' scenes depend on it. Their mirroring only feels alive if the room teaches them how to move.

AKARCESME: Your films rely heavily on dialogue, family dynamics, and deep characterization. What drives this choice: Budget limitations, industry pressures, or cultural influences?

ASGARI: All three, but mostly culture. Dialogue is a living art here; people listen closely. Family is where rules become intimate—

who can marry, who can keep a dog, who controls movement. If you center the family, you can stage politics without slogans. Budget and pressure then push you toward what matters most: eyes, hands, thresholds.

AKARCESME: How would you define *Creative Freedom* as a filmmaker living in Iran?

ASGARI: I keep crews small, avoid flashy set-ups, and write lines that carry more than one reading. That way I can keep filming at home and keep faith with the audience. Sometimes the bravest move is to hold a shot and let silence do the work. I decide what interests me and accept the consequences. I avoid self-censorship on hijab, dogs, or politics. My next script touches religion—not to attack, but to explore. That's the line I walk. ■

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