



# Hit the road

**Director:** Panah Panahi

**Country:** Iran

**Date:** 2021

A review by Peter Bradshaw for *The Guardian*:

Great child acting is rare: so is great adult acting, and so is great directing of children and adults. But they all come together in this lovely, beautifully composed debut feature drenched in a subtle but urgent political meaning. It comes from 38-year-old film-maker Panah Panahi, son of the Iranian director and pro-democracy activist Jafar Panahi, who has this month been sentenced to six years' imprisonment for criticising the Iranian government.

It takes the form of a road movie, though that Hollywood term doesn't really cover *Hit the Road*, which is part of Iranian cinema's entirely distinct genre of films shot semi-covertly in a car, and has evolved to avoid Iranian state snooping. It is a mode of film-making using the interior possibilities of the car, which is both prop, symbol, mobile location and means of transporting cast and crew about without attracting attention during filming. Abbas Kiarostami's *Taste of Cherry* and Jafar Panahi's *Taxi Tehran* are other examples.



In *Hit the Road*, a family is making a tense, hot, uncomfortable road trip in a borrowed car through remote north-western Iran, heading apparently for the Turkey/Azerbaijan border. The elder son (Amin Simiar) is at the wheel, a quiet young guy who says little but often seems in the grip of an intense, suppressed emotion. Pantea Panahiha is excellent as his mum, sitting in the front passenger seat, bantering drily with her husband (Hasan Majuni) in the back: a shambling, grumpy bear of a man with a broken leg in a plaster cast and a consistent need to smoke. Next to him is a wacky 8-year-old boy, played by Rayan Sarlak, who gives a glorious performance: always clowning around, winding down the window and winding everyone up. Their ailing dog, Jessy, in the back, keeps needing to be taken out for calls of nature.



There is an elephant in the room, or rather the car. The family are lying to this kid about why they are on the road. They have told him that his elder brother is leaving the country temporarily to get married. It is a tale that makes the grownups tense and the little boy hyperactive. The film shows us that he does not really believe it, and that goofing around is at least partly a symptom of his unease at this explanation. Is their journey a strange sort of game? Or a surprise? A lark? At any rate, he knows that something is off, and he is testing their lie to destruction with bad behaviour.

Meanwhile, the mother panics when she thinks they are being followed (in fact, the motorist behind wanted to alert them to coolant leaking out of their air-con unit) and also panics when her younger son confesses to bringing a mobile phone along, against her instructions, which she confiscates, destroying the SIM card. This is criminal activity. Or possibly antigovernment activity?

It's also about displacement activity: about all the things that the adults do to distract the child and themselves from the awful truth. The mum lip-syncs to an Iranian pop song on the radio and suddenly the film has a rush of Bollywood energy, or maybe Tollywood energy, straight from Tehran. The film brings back in its final moments an uproarious and oddly moving lip-sync spectacular in which the fate of Jessy becomes a marker for their unspoken anguish and grief.

Cinephilia is an important part of this film, and the elder son has a scene where he explains to his mum why he loves Stanley Kubrick's 2001: A Space Odyssey, which inspires a woozy, visionary moment of intimacy between father and younger son. Incidentally there is a similar scene in Richard Linklater's Apollo 10 ½ – perhaps the Space Odyssey explanation is going to become a rite-of-passage for all film-makers.

Running through it all is a streak of sadness and even terror: something they are not quite facing up to. The family is heading for a grim farewell and loss involving not just the elder son, but maybe also the parents who could get into serious trouble and be taken away from their adored younger boy. This family could be blown into pieces. And yet an irrepressible defiance and comic energy bubbles under every scene.

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