Jafar Panahi was born in 1960 in East Azerbaijan Province of Iran. Azerbaijanis make up a significant minority in Iran (16-20%, possibly much more). As a child, Panahi spoke Azeri at home and Farsi outside the home. He began storytelling very young and soon became interested in cinema, including the films made in the 1970s by the Institute for the Intellectual Development of Children and Young Adults. Through these Panahi eventually learned about the work of Abbas Kiarostami who would be an important early influence on Panahi’s filmmaking career. Panahi was conscripted into the Iranian Army and acted as an army cameraman in the Iran-Iraq War. Later he went to film school in Tehran and made documentaries for Iranian TV. In 1994 he was an assistant director on one of Kiarostami’s most celebrated films *Through the Olive Trees*.

Perhaps not surprisingly, given his background and early involvement with Kiarostami, Panahi’s first feature films were both focused on young girls. The two girls were played by two sisters. In the first, *The White Balloon*, in 1995, a rather insistent young girl wants to buy a goldfish in the market (since the fish in the pond in her family’s shared courtyard are “too thin”). The second, *The Mirror* in 1997 turned out to be more ambitious when the young actor decided to head for home in the middle of a scene – turning the narrative into a documentary.

Panahi’s documentary background is obviously very important in his choice of narrative and how he approaches it. Like many filmmakers around the world, and especially in Asia, Africa and Latin America, Panahi’s first encounter with Vittorio de Sica’s *Bicycle Thieves* (Italy 1948) made a big impact on the would-be filmmaker when he first saw the film as a teenager.

It’s astonishing just how many filmmakers cite *Bicycle Thieves* (even some who left film school in the 2000s). In Panahi’s case, the influence is apparent in first his handling of young child actors (he has made this observation himself) and secondly in the location of many of his films on the streets of Tehran. On this score he maintains that Italian neo-realism was very much of its time and circumstances – Italy in the late 1940s/early 1950s when filmmaking facilities were still in recovery after the war. Panahi argues that he has used every modern technique and technology (budget permitting) in capturing his streetscapes. The fluid tracking shots through ‘real’ streets and crowds in all of his films are the markers for this alongside astonishing sound design.

Neo-realism often used non-actors or mixed amateur and professional actors and Panahi tends to follow this policy. Most of all, however, the neo-realist link is in the use of simple narratives involving small incidents that trigger dramatic stories. The ‘simple’ narratives are not necessarily simple in structure so *Crimson Gold* involves a flashback and *The Circle* employs the technique of characters who meet, however casually, and the story follows the ‘new’ character until they too meet someone else who will become the lead for the next story – this is often referred to as the *La Ronde* model after the 1950 film by Max Ophüls.

Like the neo-realists, Panahi’s narratives are often set ‘on the street’. This means most of his characters are working-class or middle-class characters in trouble. He doesn’t often dwell on the lives of the wealthy élite (and it is the rarity of this which provides *Crimson Gold* with one of its most intriguing sequences. Panahi has also pointed out that the censorship rules mean that it is impossible to show the home life of characters without ‘falsification’. Women can only be shown wearing the headscarf, even indoors – but they wouldn’t do that with their husbands at home.

**Social realism and aesthetics**

Jafar Panahi’s films have won prizes at international festivals from the beginning, including multiple prizes at the three most prestigious festivals, Berlin, Cannes and Venice. His creative skills as writer, director and editor are easily recognised by his fellow professionals. For audiences the films are perhaps most memorable in terms of storytelling and the social issues that underpin the emotional dramas.

Because of his social commitment, Panahi would inevitably fall foul of the increasingly conservative
official film authorities. Panahi’s 2000 film *The Circle* which follows the different stories of a group of young women who have been given custodial sentences in Tehran was the first to cause its director major problems but it was after a non-film action – supporting the Green Opposition movement in Iran in 2009 – that Panahi was forced to change his approach. *Taxi Tehran* and *Crimson Gold* make an interesting contrast in representing the change in approach between 2003 and 2015.

**Being a ‘political filmmaker’**

“I have to tell you again that I’m not a political person. I don’t like political movies. But I take every opportunity to comment on the social issues. I talk about the current issues. To me it’s not important what is the reason for what has happened. Whether it’s political reasons or geographical reasons: these are not important – but the condition, the social issues.

“It is important to me to talk about the plight of humanity at that time. I don’t want to give a political view, or start a political war. I think that the artist should rise above this. Political movies have limited time. After that time, it doesn’t say anything anymore. But if the whole thing is said in an artistic way, then it doesn’t have a time limit. So it doesn’t really serve a political purpose. Then it can be everlasting, for always, and it could be for anywhere. But I know that politically, with the film authorities, with any kind of film that has some political background in it, they would disagree with it. And for this reason, that is what the problem is.” (Jafar Panahi in an interview with Stephen Teo in 2001 when his film *The Circle* was shown at the Hong Kong Film Festival. Retrieved from the Senses of Cinema website.)

This thoughtful and eloquent statement was made after Panahi’s first three films. After his fifth feature, *Offside* in 2006, the position of the Iranian authorities hardened even further. Previously they had simply banned his films in Iran, which, although it made access to his films difficult in his home country, didn’t stop the films appearing abroad and winning prizes. Consequently the films were released in several countries and pirate copies made their way back to Iran’s ‘underground’ film market. The authorities arrested Panahi in 2010 and banned him from forming a production group, making a ‘film’, giving interviews and travelling abroad where he might meet foreign critics. These restrictions were to be in place for twenty years and a prison sentence of six years was suspended.

Panahi was for a time put under house arrest and out of this period came *This Is Not a Film* (2011), a film smuggled out of Iran on a memory stick and again shown at international festivals. This film questioned the concept of a ‘film’ with Panahi seemingly shooting scenes himself with a colleague inside his apartment. In 2013 Panahi and his collaborators (all taking a big risk) produced a second chamber piece, related to *This Is Not a Film*. This was *Closed Curtain*. But though this got international recognition again, it didn’t get the same kind of distribution support and some felt it was an unsubtle attempt to fight back against the restrictions.

*Tehran Taxi* resolves these problems by allowing Panahi to get into his car and tour the streets of Tehran. Virtually everything is seen from the viewpoint of mini-cameras positioned in the car. The film was shot secretly with friends. Everyone who appears is a ‘collaborator’ and what we see is a fictionalised (i.e. scripted and organised/choreographed) version of ‘real’ events. It must have been a dangerous project since the team had to ‘remove the roof’ of the car to allow in enough natural light. (I’m guessing this means they removed the sun roof.) They shot for fifteen days and then a rough cut was made which was then post-produced (the roof was ‘returned’ via digital effects) and prepared for release in Paris.

The actual shooting of the film is in itself the work of a highly-skilled and talented filmmaker but the real genius is in the conception of the film narrative. The key sequence is that featuring Panahi’s young niece who has been given a school project to make a short film. If you listen carefully to the instructions she has been given about what constitutes an acceptable film to be completed for the project, you’ll recognise that everything that we see inside Panahi’s car (and through its windows) is a direct refutation of the ‘official line’ on what an Iranian film should be.

*Tehran Taxi* achieves the Holy Grail of filmmaking. It is an intensely political film that is also light as a feather and thoroughly entertaining.
Crimson Gold (2003)
The two central characters of *Crimson Gold* are pizza delivery men working for a relatively large concern that employs several motorcycle riders. Hussein is the older of the two, a large man we later learn is probably suffering from the side effects of cortisone treatment. He was in the Iranian Army, possibly in the war against Iraq (1980-88). Ali is a younger man and the friendship between the two is underpinned by the forthcoming marriage between Hussein and Ali’s sister (though it isn’t clear which came first, the friendship or the engagement). In generic terms the film is a social realist drama with hints of the urban thriller. Panahi undermines any attempt to ‘drive’ the narrative as a conventional thriller by beginning with the final dramatic incident and then offering the rest of the film as a flashback through which we are asked to discover why the final incident arose in the way it did.

It is relatively easy to see what kinds of things have a major impact on Hussein but more difficult to understand exactly why he does what he does. The central issue is the sense that as an ordinary working man, Hussein feels insulted by the way he is treated and that in an unequal society he feels that he is being disrespected by both the wealthy elite and the ‘moral police’ in the post-revolutionary state.

Panahi is careful to present as many characters as possible as believable figures with genuine human qualities – nobody is ‘evil’, even if their actions cause harm. Often, characters are heavily conditioned by their situation and the expectations of their behaviour. (Discussing *The Circle*, Panahi argued we are all caught in a circle of restrictions.) At one point, Hussein is detained by a young soldier. Hussein has done nothing wrong – he’s in the wrong place at the wrong time. The soldier has been ordered to detain Hussein. He’s only 15 years-old and Hussein clearly worries about the boy (and perhaps remembers his own time in the army). There are other similar examples. In showing ‘life on the streets’ Panahi fills the screen, often showing minor characters in the background. In one scene, after an accident involving a pizza delivery man, the camera catches a homeless man, sleeping rough, who takes boxes of pizza from the crash site. These glimpses of the ‘sordid’ side of Iranian life enrage the authorities.

A note on Iranian law enforcement
There is currently a single unified police force in Iran. There is also still a voluntary body forming the ‘morality police’. Known as the Basij this force now comes under the control of the Revolutionary Guards. The Baji is intended to protect the Islamic state and this involves enforcing dress codes and breaking up social gatherings that allow mixing of young men and women. This appears to be the force we see in *Crimson Gold*. Though the ‘morality police’ are still around in 2016, they appear to have a lower profile than previously.

Resources
Most of the material in these notes comes from the following interviews:

https://www.opendemocracy.net/arts-Film/offside_3620.jsp
http://offscreen.com/view/interview_panahi
http://www.newwavefilms.co.uk/assets/1156/Taxi_Tehran_pressbook_updated.pdf

Jafar Panahi Filmography (most short films not listed)

*Closed Curtain* (2013)
*This Is Not a Film* (2011)
*Offside* (2006)
*The Circle* (2000)
*The Mirror* (1997)

Roy Stafford 30 January 2016