

Taxi Tehran

(2015, Panhari, Iran)

Component 2: Global Filmmaking Perspectives

Core Study Areas: Key Elements of Film Form Meaning & Response The Contexts of Film

Rationale for study

- *Taxi Tehran* is an interesting film. At first glance it is a gently humorous trek around the Iranian capital, with the director Jafar Panahi at the steering wheel. *Taxi Tehran* interweaves two important elements. Firstly it skilfully reflects on the social context that it finds itself in, albeit at times in a very subtle way. Secondly the film also offers a commentary on the way that film is consumed and in this digital age, how films are being constantly made. In summary it is also a perfect introduction to both the work of Panahi and to Iranian Cinema in general.

STARTING POINTS- Useful Sequences and timings/links

- (00.00-9.08) The opening of the film provides a good introduction to the formal properties and narrative structure of *Taxi Tehran*. The film starts with a static camera on the dashboard of a car. It is facing outwards on a street scene of what appears to be a middle-eastern city. The shot uses a wide angle. The car pulls off and then picks up a man at the side of the road (2.00). He tells the driver where he wants to go and then a second passenger is picked up, a woman in a hijab. The man notices the camera and remarks that it is an anti-theft device. He moves it around so it is facing him in the front seat and the woman in the back seat and they are presented in a two-shot. A conversation ensues around the criminal penalty for thieves, which the opinionated man believes should be hanging. The woman, a teacher, disagrees stressing that

Iran has one of the highest rates of execution in the world but it hasn't solved crime. The man dismisses her out of hand stressing that the law and Sharia have spoken. This side-lining of her rationale opinion could be seen as significant in establishing the marginalisation of female voices in Iran. A third, unseen passenger is picked up (Omid). The debate ends with the man exiting the cab, admitting to the woman that he is a mugger himself. It is only after this that we see the driver, the director Panahi himself.

- (55.00 -103.50) This sequence is in part an exchange between Panahi and his niece Hana and also a reflexive discourse on the nature of realism in filmmaking. Hana has been tasked to make a distributable film for homework. In many respects this highlights the importance of film education in Iran, but also offers a commentary on the conditions of the film's production. A number of rules offer a rather restrictive framework – some are clear – women must wear the Islamic headscarf, there should be no contact between males and females. Some are more oblique, namely the avoidance of 'sordid realism'. At 57.58, the emphasis of the subjective viewpoint shifts to Hana's camera catching her uncle driving. This is extended when Panahi leaves the car and Hana's point of view shots capture his walking away, eventually settling on a newly married couple, who themselves are being filmed. She sees that the groom has dropped some money, which is picked up by a street kid who is collecting plastic bottles to sell. She confronts the boy with the emphasis shifting back to the main camera in the car. His half-hearted attempts to return the money are also captured by the dashboard camera. The filming of the couple continues (with a number of different takes) as this is happening. By not returning the money, Hana's film is unusable as it exposes the 'sordid realism' of Tehran's streets. The lines between what is real and the representation of reality are further blurred here.

CORE STUDY AREAS 1 - STARTING POINTS - Key Elements of Film Form (Micro Features)

Cinematography

- The most startling issue around the cinematography in this film is that it is by and large a single camera set-up. The camera is mounted to the dashboard of Panahi's taxi and captures most of the action. The camera is on a pivot which is able to pan in a very simple way. That said even within the confined space of the car – there is the option to show different characters and situations.
- His niece Hana's film-making is also focused on. She has a small handheld camera and she has been told to make a short film for school. During the first part of her journey with her uncle there is a shift to what she is shooting. It is interesting that she is at one point filming a couple being filmed (see starting point two)
- The camera also pivots to show the driver's point of view. The first shot of the film exploits this to good effect. That said there are some shots in the film (notably when he picks up the injured man and his wife) where it seems that the single camera is not used to capture the unfolding drama on the backseat.

Mise-en-Scène

- The film is entirely shot in the car and this small space exposes the tensions in the film to good effect. The journeys take, like the conversations in the taxi have a meandering quality to them. The 'chance encounters' exploit this confined space to good effect. Using a car as the sole location has been used in Iranian cinema before in Abbas Kiarostami's landmark *Ten*, a female driver's passengers make up a wonderfully fragmented story; his earlier film, *Taste of Cherry*, found the suicidal Mr Badii driving around Tehran in search of someone to help bury him.
- Costume plays a role in that the women have their heads covered by hijabs, which is an unusual sight in Western film, despite sizable Muslim populations. Panahi himself wears a flat-cap and ordinary jacket and there is no attempt to disguise who he is. He is recognised by Omid, a DVD bootlegger and one of Omid's customers –

who happens to be a film student. This gives the film a reflexive quality, which avoids narcissism and instead given the context is an overt political statement about the filmmaker's role in society.

- The spectator sees brief glimpses of Tehran as Panahi drives around the city. It does arguably feel like an insight into the back streets and actual places where people live, rather than just an idealised version of life in the city. This naturalistic on-location approach is of course greatly informed by the restrictions on the director. That said this is also a key feature of recent Iranian cinema.

Editing

- The film is linear and appears to take place in real time. While some of the decisions made by the director to move the dashboard camera to show a particular event, there is also evidence in the film of cutting. This most often occurs between Panahi and the person that he is addressing.
- This works nearly wholly in terms of continuity editing. The vast amount of action is structured around the interactions between Panahi and his passengers, so shot reverse shot is utilised in a number of places to show reactions.
- Long takes of the passengers are also very important in this film to create meaning. A good example is the first conversation between the teacher in the back seat and the mugger in the front seat debating the rights and wrongs of execution in Iran. This is shot as a two-shot possibly to create a direct opposition between the loud, opinionated man and the rational, educated woman.

Sound

- The sound is captured naturalistically, the primary focus being the vocal sounds expressed in the dialogue. There are also the environmental sounds of the street – either through the open windows of the cab or when the car is stationary. The wailing of the injured man and his wife is a particularly powerful motif early on in the film.
- Traditional Iranian music is used at the very beginning of the film. This appears to be diegetic as it seems to be a CD being played in the car. The lack of soundtrack music is important on two counts. Firstly it adds to the

realism of the film and secondly it doesn't direct the spectator to any sort of pre-conditioned emotional response. This is crucial in terms of how each passenger is read and understood within the overall context of the film.

CORE STUDY AREAS 2 - STARTING POINTS - Meaning & Response

Representations

- The most overt representation is that of Iran itself. Even though the direct setting/location of the car is limited – this does give licence for the passengers (and to some extent) and Panahi himself to discuss openly the problems of living in Iran. The taxi acts as a safe space for the expression of these sentiments.
- A major preoccupation for Iranian filmmakers over the past thirty plus years has been to focus on the role of women in Iranian society. Panahi has explored this in the past to good effect – particularly in his 2006 film *Offside*, about the exclusion of women from watching football matches. In this film, the representations of the female characters are diverse. We see the educated teacher as the second passenger arguing about Iran's record of capital punishment. The two elderly women, who have to release a goldfish in a holy place in order to stay alive, can be said to represent the superstitious, irrational nature of religion. Hana, Panahi's niece is a spirited, fiercely intelligent girl who can be seen to represent the future or conversely given the repressive nature of the regime, the loss of potential. One of his final passengers is a real-life lawyer Nasrin Sotoudeh, who is representing a young girl on hunger strike in prison. This reflects the overarching political nature of the struggle for female equality in Iran.
- The placing of the film's director as the main protagonist is also fundamental to the construction of meaning. Panahi himself interacts with his passengers, but is often just listening and letting them tell him their feelings and concerns. Equally, as stated before, this film offers a look at how film itself impacts on a number of the passengers lives. Panahi is at the centre of this – reminding the spectator that film can still have a role to play in terms of activism.

Aesthetics (i.e. the 'look and feel' of the film including visual style, influences, auteur, motifs)

- Obviously this is rooted in the realist style of filmmaking, which in turn has become the main stylistic choice within Iranian National Cinema. This is enhanced by the use of digital technology which gives a high definition finish to place the spectator very much in the cab with Panahi.
- One of Panahi's key visual motifs is the use of restricted location which is used to fine effect here. The action taking place within the taxi and around it is intensified by the reduced setting. This is also seen in *Offside* and also in *This is Not a Film*.
- The key motif of filmmaking as central to meaning in this film goes far beyond Panahi's central role in the film itself. Omid and his bootleg DVDs can open up a number of key debates about distribution but also the censorship exerted by the Iranian authorities. The filming of the injured man's will on Panahi's mobile phone. The advice that Panahi gives to the young Film student. The way that surveillance cameras have exposed a thief in the film. Hana's own filmmaking homework complete with a number of strict provisos from her teacher about the style and content of her film.

CORE STUDY AREAS 3 - STARTING POINTS - Contexts (Two from Social, Historical, Political, Technological, Institutional)

Social

- Obviously this film in its own meditative fashion is trying to expose a number of subtle truths about living in a theocratic society. These unfold in the conversations in the taxi, which acts as a mini mobile film studio, where Panahi is partly shielded from view and can hold public conversations in this semi-private environment.

Historical

- The Islamic Revolution of 1979 established the theocratic state of Iran and the consequences are still being felt today. In terms of a cultural reaction to this, filmmakers such as Panahi have presented a number of challenges against what is seen as the repressive nature of the clerics – especially regarding the role of women in Iran.

Political

- Jafar Panahi has been arrested and imprisoned in the past for his films, because of the critiques that he offers in them of the Iranian political and religious hierarchy. He is also banned from filmmaking, giving interviews and travelling outside of the country. Despite this – *Taxi Tehran* is his third film since his sentencing. His second film *This is Not a Film* was smuggled out of Iran on a flash drive in a cake. The Iranian secret police are referenced at the end of the film when they take the camera off the dashboard and search for a hard drive. Sotoudeh's appearance also re-emphasises the political nature of the film – she has also spent a number of years in prison for defending dissidents.

Technological

- Obviously the access to and use of digital technology is key in terms of how relatively straightforward it is to shoot a film – despite the ban and the restrictions.

Institutional

- It is fascinating that this film was made at all and there is a line of thought that suggests that the Iranian authorities – despite the ban, turned a blind eye to its production. Even though a number of key Iranian filmmakers like Panahi criticise the system – their films are highly regarded abroad and win festival awards (*Taxi Tehran* won the Golden Bear at Berlin 2015). This in turn heightens Iran's profile in the west. This is incredibly ironic, as the films of Panahi and Asghar Farhadi often offer a direct challenge to the state authorities in Iran and yet their films do provide some sense of national pride. The ultimate irony though in the case of Panahi is that his films cannot be seen publicly in Iran. It is up to the likes of Omid from the film to make sure that they reach the general public.