

RETRIBUTIVE MINDS

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ABSTRACT

“Qisas”, an Islamic term meaning "retaliation in kind", "eye for an eye", or retributive justice, is the subject under scrutiny in my thesis film, *Retributive Minds*. The making of this film serves as an examination into my urgency for telling such a story, as well as my motivations, challenges and artistic approach as the director of the film.

In traditional Islamic law (sharia), the doctrine of Qisas provides for a punishment analogous to the crime. In the case of murder, Qisas gives the right to the next of kin to take the life of the killer, if the latter is convicted and the court approves. *Retributive Minds* utilizes this law to explore the validity of one’s moral values in a fundamentally problematic situation. In this narrative short film, Javid, an Iranian immigrant, arrives in his home country to mourn the sudden death of his sister. Throughout this film, we understand that his sister has been the subject of an ideologically-motivated murder. It is the law in Iran; he is now responsible to make the decision on the perpetrator’s ultimate punishment. The phases of the making of the film: writing, pre-production, production, and editing, each posed their own set of challenges and opportunities for learning.

These include my own experiences in Iran and the process of international filmmaking that ultimately resulted in an evolution of the film to its final product.

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To my parents for being amazing examples on how to be an observer and a thinker. Their constant support and understanding are beyond my capability to describe. They have always been the source of reason, safety, and inspiration in my life.

To my partner in crime, Chelsea Smallwood, for keeping me in line with my truth. She is the wise best friend that I have always been searching for to help me understand and bear this cruel world. Finishing this project is the true representation of her remarkable influence in my life. To put it simply, without her, I would have still felt lost and blind.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	ii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	iii
TABLE OF CONTENTS	iv
INTRODUCTION	1
Qisas Defined.....	1
Conceptual Framework and Background	1
Origin.....	4
SCREENPLAY	6
Drafting in Toronto	7
Locations/Scenes.....	8
Characters	9
Drafting in Tehran.....	10
‘Revised’ Drafting.....	11
PRODUCTION	13
Pre-Production in Toronto	13
Changing Plans	14
Pre-Production in Iran	15
Selection of Actors.....	16
Filming.....	17
EDITING	20
CONCLUSION	23
WORKS CITED	24
APPENDICES	25
Appendix A: Behind the Scenes.....	25

INTRODUCTION

Judiciary systems influenced by religion pose serious ethical and personal dilemmas. The intention of this film was to utilize a specific Islamic (Sharia) law in Iran to explore this point. The intention was not entirely to draw focus and attention to the existence of such a strange notion, rather it was to consciously use it as a tool to pose a fundamental question to the audience; a question that requires the viewers to dive deep into their belief system, re-examine and test the strength of those beliefs alongside the main character of the film.

Qisas Defined

In the penal code of modern day Iran, which is an adaptation of the traditional of Shia Islamic jurisprudence, the doctrine of Qisas provides for a punishment analogous to the crime. Qisas is available to the victim or victim's heirs against a convicted perpetrator of a crime (including intentional bodily injury). In the case of murder, Qisas gives the right to the next of kin to take the life of the killer, if the latter is convicted and the court approves. Those who are entitled to Qisas have the option of receiving monetary compensation (Diyya) or granting pardon to the perpetrator instead. *Retributive Minds* utilizes this law to explore the validity of one's moral values in a fundamentally problematic situation.

Conceptual Framework and Background

With this film, I attempted to be as concise as possible, with an acute focus on my main goal of provoking the audience to think about the question that they are presented with. Therefore, I have intentionally avoided a strong emotional element in this film. In a feature length film, this story would have the capacity to elicit an empathetic response, as it takes

time and context to draw out such an emotional relationship. In a short and concise story, it was essential to avoid a replacement of empathy (identifying with another person's emotions) with sympathy (experiencing pity for another person's emotions), a distancing of the emotional connection. It was important that the audience not necessarily hold a strong connection to the emotional turmoil of the character, rather just be aware of such emotions but in a distant and ambiguous form.

In order to achieve this outcome, a small neighborhood is at the center of the structure of the screenplay. This community functions as a symbol of the current Iranian society; a society in which tradition and modernity are in constant battle, and where contrasts and disparities in ideologies are evident across different generations as well as social status. The residents of this neighborhood represent archetypes that are embodiments of these contrasts. The archetypes include: a) self-identified outcasts who have withdrawn from that society to live in the Iranian diaspora, b) the new open-minded generation in conflict with their religious upbringing, c) the young religious generation that has become marginalized, d) the older generation holding onto tradition, and e) authoritative figures who have become desensitized amidst constant chaos and upheaval.

The young religious generation finds itself losing the battle of religious rigidity vs. modernity and liberalism. They respond with anger and frustration. In the case of *Retributive Minds*, that response of frustration escalates to violence. These individuals feel superior because the governing body of the society that shapes their education and common beliefs teaches them that these ideologies are divine and the answers to life's challenges. Therefore, the individuals who are not part of the governing body itself and are living amongst the fabric of society observe an extreme contrast between their own beliefs that are aligned with the government, and the beliefs of their more liberal peers. Not only do they see no benefits in the

liberal values, they also feel hated by the rest of Iranian society. The authorities have become numb and out of touch with reality to a level that they almost appear inhumane. This is not because of their inherent lack of compassion, but rather because they are a product of the society that they are put in place to tend and protect.

I was influenced while writing *Retributive Minds* by Asghar Farhadi's work and his representational portrayal of society. He tends to play the part of an outside observer who tries to find a place for as many different points of view among different members of a society as possible. He chooses topics that can be perfect examples of the aforementioned contrasts within the Iranian society. Subsequently, on behalf of his audience, he tries to identify as many responses to the questions in his films as possible. He makes sure that all attitudes associated with those answers are represented in the story. I believe this approach provides the perfect set up for the audience to identify with characters in the story and helps us to draw our own analogy for every character's approach to a situation. A great example of this approach can be found in "About Eli" (About Eli). In this film, Farhadi goes a step further and, rather than simply portraying the society, he taps into individuality and the differences between each personality, as well as the method by which individuals respond to the same situation, regardless of their society.

Of note, Farhadi also explored the topic of Qisas in his second feature film, "Beautiful City" (Beautiful City). In this film, Farhadi explicitly criticizes the religiously motivated law and all of its nuances, and touches on the conflict between mourning and forgiveness in the wake of death. Importantly, he highlights the difficult nature of the decision for the next of kin. Farhadi tackles all of these complexities in a delicate dance between right and wrong. By comparison, *Retributive Minds*, while also emphasizing the burden of the decision of Qisas, does not explicitly criticize the law, rather it utilizes the law to expose deeper conflicts that exist within an individual and between societies. *Retributive Minds* is a poignant exposition of how

society can shape one's orientation in decision-making, and a subtle inquiry into how attitudes toward religion factor into the fabric of society.

Origin

The origin of *Retributive Minds* goes back all the way to when I was a 14-year-old teenager. As always, I was lingering at one of my parents' gatherings with their social circle, curiously listening to the conversations and the stories that were being told. At this particular gathering, the topic of conversation was focused on an incident that happened to a friend of my parents from university who had just returned to Iran from a 2-year hiatus in Canada. He had returned to deal with his older sister's sudden death. I recall that he was very disturbed by the incident. An intruder had entered her house, and out of fear and panic had killed his sister. One might think that dealing with the fact that your sister had been murdered in her own home is troubling enough, but in a country like Iran where the justice system is based on Sharia law, he was now obliged to decide on the murderer's death penalty as well. My parents' friend had decided to not pursue the death penalty. He was disturbed that this decision was forced upon him and had triggered, in him, some unnecessarily traumatizing thoughts and pains.

I remember that night vividly, learning of the pain he was feeling when he was put in charge of someone's fate. Even though he hated the murderer, he couldn't help but to also feel pity for him. He said one sentence that I will never forget: "How can I take someone's life". This sentence might sound mundane, but it somehow stayed with me. It made me think about how a law so fundamentally simple, (an eye for an eye, a life for life), can turn a society into a vengeance-seeking community and nourish hatred among its own people; how a law like this can halt society from progress and evolution. These thoughts over the years pushed me to

write a screenplay that examines the effects of a society's collective morals on an individual. Inspired by stories of Fyodor Dostoevsky and his method of studying human nature through unique incidents and situations, I opted to use this law as a tool to help me examine how a society can play with people's own beliefs and ideologies, and even transform people in a way that they can no longer discern their own ideologies from the ones of society.

This story became even more urgent when I moved to Canada, a place where social structure, its ideologies and its culture were of extreme contrast to the place in which I grew up. The more time I spent in Toronto, the more I thought about the reasons behind these contrasts.

As a filmmaker who has carried these thoughts in my mind, I felt the urgency to write a screenplay that expresses these thoughts and emotions in the only form I know.

SCREENPLAY

Writing screenplays has always been exciting for me. Through this period, I can fully start to envision the story, shot by shot, in my head and find a uniform structure to the story. An idea usually takes a few months of brainstorming and preparation before I feel ready to put anything down on paper. During this preparation period, I try to clarify the sense of urgency that a particular idea holds for me, and to think back on the reasons that brought me to the idea to begin with. There have been many ideas over the years that have never passed this initial stage. I could debate whether holding ideas accountable to this level of scrutiny in their infancy is a good practice or not. It could be argued that sometimes the initial excitement about an idea is what translates into a good and exciting screenplay. A good example of this method would be the work of a young Canadian filmmaker, Xavier Dolan, with his film “Mommy” (Mommy). In the question period after the screening of his film at the Toronto International Film Festival, he described how the idea for his film originated from a simple scene in his head. He contemplated a thought he had about a daydreaming mother who imagines a happy and normal life for her troubled child. This single thought became a scene in “Mommy” during which the mother imagines the future of her son while she is stopped at a red light. Consequently, the rest of the film was written around that one exiting and emotionally packed scene. I may have a more concrete answer to this question further in my career, but for the purpose of this screenplay, concepts explored during the drafting of the script end up being the ideas that survive passed this stage and are deemed worthy of further development.

Drafting in Toronto

Structuring the story is the next phase after the concept stage. This stage for *Retributive Minds* was defined by finding mechanisms to fit the perfect and economical narrative for the idea in a short format. The main urgency to tell this story was to express my own questions evolving around ethics and moral dilemmas that occupy a person when faced with a difficult decision. The main challenge I encountered was being able to portray the core of this struggle in a short format without weakening its impact by drawing too much focus on elements that a short film simply does not have the time to fully explore. Therefore, I decided not to put too much emphasis on elements such as the events that result in my protagonist's decision, rather to make a film that is quick in its delivery and simply leaves the audience with the same dilemmas forced upon the main character (JAVID). This format for the story might leave the audience with nothing more than that dilemma, with no emotional connection or challenge or particular memory of any of the characters. Perfect execution of a short and swift delivery is the one key element at work elucidating the dilemma, and was the most important to me, taking precedence over making a longer film that combines various emotional and psychological elements together and runs the risk of losing its focus. That is not to say that I deprived the film or its characters of *any* emotional appeal. I trusted that the incident itself, the ideologically-motivated murder, and my choice of actors and directing style would convey enough emotional and psychological connection to the audience that it was not necessary to inject such elements into the structure of the story.

After making this decision, the scenes which were already conceptualized were prioritized, and the narrative structured around them.

Locations/Scenes

It was important that the opening scene start in the courthouse, with the subsequent scenes comprising the sequences that led to that location. Meeting Javid for the first time in a place where he is under pressure to make a decision, even though the audience does not know what this decision is, would shape the ideal atmosphere to see my protagonist's on-going internal conflict. This setting would also provide a clear format in which the subsequent scenes would not feel like flashbacks for the sake of providing the audience with information, but rather a visualization of what Javid is thinking in order to make his decision and a more seamless and natural format for flashbacks. The courthouse would provide the ideal place to leave the audience alone with Javid in order to set up the intensity needed for the film. The ambiguity was also critical surrounding what has taken place, and that the motivation behind events was an element that I chose not to reveal until the very end of the film. This was important to keep the audience engaged until the end. Slowly revealing hints about the motivation behind the murder might keep the audience guessing and have our attention focused until the very end. Meeting the murderer only at the end of the film, withholding his real motivation and his lack of remorse, was intentional to be the final element that I reveal as a shock to the audience.

I chose the childhood house for where the incident takes place, and I knew that I would like to use a tight neighborhood as a symbol of the society that I set out to portray. The location for some other scenes, such as the location for the introduction of the murderer (in prison) and the police chief (police station), were already clear to me early on, as well.

It was essential that the structure and connections between the characters be strong enough to justify the existence of each scene in a manner that would be smooth and uncoerced.

Additionally, I decided to take advantage of the small neighborhood as well as the investigative procedures that take place after a murder to connect the scenes together without forcing any scene on to the other.

Characters

Each character is intended as a portrayal of a different Iranian archetype to symbolize a different mentality in Iranian society. The main character [JAVID] represents the self-identified outcasts who have chosen a life in exile. However, no matter how far away and distant, their life still gets directly affected by their mother land. His murdered sister is the representation of a mentality that openly rejects the norms of the traditional society, but as a result she faces annihilation. The murderer character exists to represent a young generation for whom, all their lives, have been told to be proud of their superiority and ideologies but now find themselves marginalized in society. I was aware that it was almost impossible to fit all my desired and relevant archetypes of the Iranian society in a short film. By narrowing down the most important characters to this compact story, I created the murderer's BROTHER, the laundry man [KARIM], and the police CHIEF. The murderer's brother symbolizes the new generation at odds with the old, Karim represents the judgmental eyes of the Iranian society and the Chief is the authority figure who has become numb to the society that he serves.

The younger brother is part of a new generation that, despite his rigid traditional and religious upbringing, has a hard time accepting his purported ideological superiority over the non-traditional members of the society. He still unconsciously follows the rules of his nurture-based beliefs, but at the same time is involved in an internal battle over the justification of these rules. The laundry man [KARIM] is the representation of the older generation who attempts to stay neutral in this battle; a generation that is aware of the passage of time and the

ever-changing society, but still cannot help holding dear to old traditional values. He is judgmental as if it is his social duty to hold society accountable. The police officer in the film is the portrayal of authority in a dysfunctional society. Their constant dealings with respect to extreme matters have lessened their perceived severity of these issues.

I took this initial draft of the screenplay with me to Iran, and it would end up being nothing more than a faded guideline for the shooting script. Therefore, the final draft is very different from the original script written in Toronto, in part due to the contrast between the society that I have called home for the last eight years, and the country I arrived in, with my screenplay.

Drafting in Tehran

I knew from the day that I started the final draft of the script that it was going to be filmed in Iran, a country with a whole different set of challenges and restrictions for filming. One such challenge is the censorship that the government imposes on every film. Regardless of genre or film length, all filmmakers must apply for a permit with their script in order for the government to determine whether the script is “aligned with the societal values” or not. The permit is required for shooting; thus, it is only with the permit that filmmakers are even allowed to have a camera in the street without being stopped by the police.

One of the other main challenges was the fact that I had not been back to Iran since I moved to Canada eight years ago. I was removed from the society of my homeland that I was criticizing, and while Iran has always been part of me, I had not participated in that society or its day-to-day struggles for too long. This meant that no matter how much research I was conducting or how deep I was searching my memory, I failed to identify every potential challenge. As such, I had to be prepared to adapt the script to these issues.

One of the main challenges that I was not expecting to face was the drastic change in people's attitude towards each other and towards Iranian society as a whole. The sense of compassion and warmth that I remembered has somehow disintegrated from the fabric of Iranian society. It seems that the financial downturn caused by years of sanctions and corruption was showing its true ugly effect. This was not the society that I remembered. I reflected this observation and changed the script by removing the original friendly relationship between the main character [JAVID] and the chief of police. I stripped away any feeling of warmth, welcome and friendliness from the script to express this unanticipated change of behavior in the society; Javid was not to be welcomed in any shape or form. I wanted him to accurately feel estranged and ever so more distanced from the Iranian society he left behind.

'Revised' Drafting

As I mentioned in the section above, government restrictions which apply to the content of a screenplay is a bitter reality that every filmmaker needs to learn to navigate while working in Iran. As someone who never "officially" made any films in Iran prior to this experience, I was not particularly equipped to write a script that would pass the censorship board without any difficulty. An intentional absence of any clear written guidelines affords substantial latitude to the government to be able to reject any script without any legal liabilities.

I came face to face with this particularly Iranian problem when my producer sent my script to the Ministry of Culture and Media to apply for the shooting permit. After three weeks of waiting, the Ministry replied to our request with a rejection letter. This news was not particularly a shock to me, since I was cautioned by my producer to mentally prepare myself for this possibility. However, I did find their reason for such rejections, both sad and shocking.

I have copied their written answer to my producer below:

- *The screenplay does not have an ending.*
- *The story does not convey a positive message.*
- *It advocates depravity.*
- *It crosses some redlines.*

As seen above, I felt the Ministry's rationale was not persuasive. Not only did they fail to deem the story aligned with their regime's values, they also appeared to criticize the structure of the story as well. I found this particularly amusing.

My producer, who has more experience with this process and has a few past permits in his portfolio, proposed a solution to this problem. He recommended that I write a whole new story that takes place in the same locations as my original story, remove anything potentially controversial and re-apply for the permit. So, I did exactly that, and sure enough, the permit was issued three weeks later.

I have a permit issued by the Ministry of Culture for a short film about a noble and honest Iranian police officer who refuses to do any favors for his family members which we never made. I always wonder whether the people responsible for these permits understand what we did.

PRODUCTION

My perspective on the production phase of filmmaking can be likened to applying the paint to a canvas over the sketched drawing. It is during this phase when one can slowly watch all of one's ideas come to life. I find this phase of filmmaking either extremely gratifying or unbearably challenging, with the determining factor for these outcomes being the pre-production stage. A smooth and successful pre-production can directly translate into a dreamlike filming experience for the director. By choosing the right crew and fostering the ability to practice and prepare before the filming stage, one can experiment and improvise during the filming period. As Ingmar Bergman mentions in *The Images* "You cannot improvise on an improvisation. I dare to improvise only if I know that I will be able to go back to a carefully constructed plan. I cannot trust that inspiration will strike when I get to the set" (Bergman, 1990). The production stage of *Retributive Minds* was entangled with its own set of unique issues and challenges.

Pre-Production in Toronto

A brief expansion on the scheduling and production timeline of *Retributive Minds* is warranted here to outline how changes to scheduling impacted the final resulting film. The final draft of the screenplay was completed at the end of September 2019, and after receiving approval from the supervising committee, planning for production was initiated immediately. The first step was to find a producer who could help me navigate the obscure path of making a film in Iran. This process initially turned out to be easier than anticipated, though later turned out to be more of a curse than a blessing (more details in the next chapter). Through previous contacts in Iran, I was able to find a producer who was willing to come on-board to help make this relatively low budget short film. Formerly an Assistant Director, he

transitioned into producing four years ago. After finalizing the initial logistics and scheduling, it was decided that I would go to Iran in mid-November to start filming at the beginning of December. We estimated that the filming would not take longer than four days which would leave me enough time to also finish all the post-production in Iran and return to Canada before the winter holidays. But, of course, this is not what happened and unforeseen circumstances delayed this timeline.

Changing Plans

Instability is a word that is almost synonymous with Iran. Economic sanctions, a corrupt government and a fundamentalist regime along with many other factors resulted in frequent social uprisings, protests and economic turmoil over the last few decades. This unpredictability directly affects the day-to-day lives of Iranian people and the way that they conduct business and plan for even the near future. It is almost impossible to draft a long-term plan with certainty for any type of work as societal circumstances and laws can change in a matter of days.

Even though I was already aware of this dynamic when I started planning remotely with my producer, I did not expect to be forced to push my plans by a whole month. As stated in the previous chapter, my travel arrangements had been made for me to arrive in Iran in November. The shot-list was prepared while my producer was working to secure the filming permits. However, two weeks before my departure, Iran witnessed its most violent and deadliest uprising to date. After an unannounced overnight hike in gas prices, the nation erupted into a country-wide protest which triggered a week-long internet blackout by the government as well as weeks of violent confrontations between the state forces and protesters. Needless to say, it was not the most ideal time to travel to Iran and attempt to make a film. Subsequently, I had to postpone my trip to Iran by a month. This meant adapting the script to a

winter setting as well as facing the difficulties with finding crew for the production during the high season for filming in Iran - the largest Iranian film festival takes place in winter with all filmmakers working to finish their films by then. I arrived in Iran at the end of December.

Pre-Production in Iran

I arrived in Iran with a return ticket booked for exactly six weeks after my arrival. After spending three days at my childhood home to adjust my sleep and reminisce about the past, I met with my producer for the first time in person. This meeting was not what I hoped for.

As I stated in the previous chapter, the choice of producer might turn out to be the biggest regret that I have for this production. At the time he seemed like a good choice and perhaps the only choice I had to help me make my first film in Iran, however his lack of organization and management skills made for a difficult production process. Multiple factors contributed to my decision to stay with him despite the disappointing first meeting:

- a) The restricted amount of time that I had in Iran to finish the film,
- b) The filming permit procedure that was already initiated by my producer, and
- c) Simply my lack of experience in dealing with producers in Iran pushed me to disregard his lack of preparation and progress up to the date of my arrival, and our first meeting.

Anticipating the fact that circumstances in Iran would limit the flexibility of my time in Iran further, from the first day of planning the production phase in Toronto, I pushed my producer to assemble the crew and secure the permits as quickly as possible to avoid any other unnecessary delays in the pre-production phase in Iran. Unfortunately, in that meeting, I discovered that little progress had been made, and some plans changed entirely without my knowledge.

The decision to continue the project with my producer meant that things had to move at a rapid pace. He arranged an office space for me so that I could help drive the planning alongside him. Pre-production lasted three weeks, which was one week longer than what was originally planned.

Selection of Actors

One of the obstacles that I had to overcome in casting actors was the difficulty my producer had in understanding each of the main characters' essence, or at least view it in the same way that I envisioned it. This issue became particularly prominent in the search for the main actor.

I was not able to book any of my first two preferred choices for the main part. Even though they both loved the screenplay, one had a scheduling conflict and the other one did not love the screenplay enough to waive some of his fees for a low budget short film. Despite my disappointment, I was positive that I would still be able to find the ideal actor in Iran's large pool of acting talent. However, for the reason stated above, all the producer's recommendations were far from being the right choice for the part. This resulted in losing precious time that could have been spent on rehearsing and developing the character with the actor. We managed to book the main actor for Javid's part only a week prior to the shoot. Ahmad Sa'atchian plays the part and is a theater actor with enormous talent and deep acting range who had a great understanding of my main character. Working with him and Farid Sajaddi Hosseini, who plays Karim in the film, was one of the most valuable experiences of my career. Ahmad's age and looks might have not be the perfect match for Javid's part, but his vast acting capabilities and his firm grasp on the essence of my main character truly compensated for those shortcomings. I was also lucky that Farid loved the script and agreed to

take part in this project, as Karim. His presence brought an atmosphere of excitement and appreciation to the whole crew.

Filming

We spent four days filming the script with only four different locations to shoot. The location manager was able to find an abandoned building (see Appendix A) which was regularly rented out to film crews. The prison scene, the courtroom and the police officer's room were shot in that same building, with no time lost to transporting the production. This presented us with a great opportunity to try to have more relaxed shooting days with more time to try new things and be adventurous. However, I must admit that I did not take advantage of this opportunity to its full potential. Various elements played their part in this lost opportunity nonetheless, as it was said best by Ingmar Bergman, "The distinct advantage, as well as its disadvantage, of being the director is that you have nobody to blame but yourself." (Bergman 1990)

The plan was to spend two days in the abandoned building location and shoot two scenes per day. On the first day, we managed to finish the first two scenes by the afternoon. Therefore, it was suggested by my producer to film the prison scene that was scheduled for the day after on that same day as well as avoiding coming back to that building for another day, since it was an hour's drive away from our accommodation in town and thus could provide more time to shoot the dry cleaning scene which was a more difficult location. Unfortunately, the outcome of this decision was not having enough time to shoot all of the shots that I had planned for the prison scene, which later had an impact during editing.

The dry-cleaning scene was the most exciting day of the filming stage for me. It was the day that I had the opportunity to work with an actor who fitted the part perfectly and was

able to take the character in a direction that added the necessary depth to my plans. The small space in the dry-cleaning shop also provided an interesting challenge for the cinematographer, which I believe enabled him to take direction and be more flexible in his approach, for example being more dynamic with his camera movements. This is the best scene that we shot for this whole project. Even though the multiple long takes for each shot proved difficult for the crew, I believe if I could have maintained the momentum from this day forward, I would have accomplished a more successful filming process.

Unfortunately, the producer's lack of management interfered with the momentum of the film and cost us half a day of filming on our last two days of shooting. He did not book the location for the house of the SISTER through the right person. As a result, the crew was forced out of the location. Thus, we spent half of the day filming just the exterior shots of the location rather than the planned interior location.

Even though this was a big set-back and the cause of a very stressful day, it was not the only reason behind my sour memories of those two days. Thanks to a vigilant location manager, a new location, almost right next to the original one, was quickly found and the owner gracefully agreed to let us film inside. However, with this disruption in our shooting schedule I accepted the cinematographer's suggestion to shoot the scene for the first encounter of Javid and the murderer's family in one shot. This was an exciting idea and I was very intrigued by the proposal, especially since we were short on time. Shooting the whole scene in one shot could add great fluidity to the scene and present the action with more dynamism. However, the excitement of this endeavour blinded me to the fact that neither I, the cinematographer, nor the actors had the skills to execute such a scene without any rehearsals. The lack of preparation for this shot forced us to shoot fourteen takes with almost no satisfying result. This mistake in addition to some of the acting disappointments that occurred for this

sequence resulted in a very weak scene that not only did not save us time for the shooting period, but it also created immense problems for editing.

EDITING

Editing is a crucial part of filmmaking as it not only provides the opportunity to construct the rhythm and flow of a film, it can also offer one last opportunity to re-write the story. This notion turned out to be particularly applicable for *Retributive Minds* as its structure was almost entirely recreated in the editing phase.

At the conclusion of the shooting phase I knew that I had made some crucial mistakes. Despite aiming to follow the guidance of Claudia Llosa (I took a workshop with her in Italy one year prior to this film) to shoot the maximal amount of coverage for every scene, I was not able to implement this strategy during my shooting days. Due to aforementioned challenges throughout the filming, I was unable to shoot extra coverage. In fact, I did not manage to shoot all the required shots for many of the scenes, which served as an important lesson to be learned in editing.

After finishing the shooting phase I signed the footage off to the editor, whom my producer recommended. I strongly believe that a talented editor can be as valuable to the outcome of a film as the director. As such, in most cases I try to stay out of the editor's way to allow for creative freedom and a fresh perspective on the film to be offered. However, this is an approach that can only work if the editor has a good understanding of the story and shares the same stylistic perspective with the director. Unfortunately, this was not the case for the first editor of *Retributive Minds*.

My editor followed the exact structure in the screenplay despite the clear lack of footage to support that structure. She offered no changes or imaginative thinking to the film. As I had guessed at the end of the shoot, the story seemed flawed, the flow of the film was broken, and the film simply presented as weaker on screen than in the screenplay. This is not to say that it was truly a bad film. With a few modifications to the edit as well as the sound

design, the final cut turned out to be acceptable. However, I was not satisfied with just an acceptable film.

The results pushed me to search for a solution. One of the positive signs of the original editing process was the presence of the main message and the urgency in the film, based on how the screenplay was written, which inspired me to overcome my disappointment. I spent two days re-watching the edit many times over to look for how to reconstruct the film while maintaining the core foundation of the story. I decided that by removing some of the scenes and hyper-focusing on the core message, I could provide a much smoother structure to the film. This approach might eliminate some of the emotional transformation that the main character goes through in his journey, but I believed that it was going to make the film as whole a stronger piece. It could be argued that this decision has made the film into a piece which lacks audience emotional connection to the character and lacks sufficient portrayal of the internal psychological transition of the main character, however, I believe that with this new structure, the whole seven minutes of the film can be considered solely a portrait of a mental state of mind. From the beginning to the end, the audience follows the psychological journey of the main character by only observing the key elements and reminders that pass through Javid's thoughts, without any unnecessary lingering on any portion of the events. The viewer follows the string of thoughts in Javid's head exactly in the same order that they penetrate his mind at that one moment, in the courtroom. The final structure of this film might not be an adequate execution of the story, however, I believe that it still carries the most fundamental values of the concept behind the film.

Following this decision to change the structure of the edited film from the original screenplay, I knew that I needed to collaborate with a new editor to be able to execute my idea effectively. I needed someone who, in addition to understanding this new structure, could

elevate the idea in its execution. My collaboration with the new editor was one the most rewarding experiences throughout this whole project. We both agreed that it would be better for him to not see the existing and available version of the film before starting the new edit without any preconceived idea of a structure or visuals in his mind. Three days later, he delivered the result which is the final cut that shapes *Retributive Minds*.

CONCLUSION

Retributive Minds was more than a film for me. It is the representation of a thought that has been simmering in my head for eighteen years. I have learned that this film was an unconscious representation of my feelings towards the country that shaped me. It offers a conscious criticism of the society that made a fourteen-year-old think about the responsibility of taking someone else's life. This story is the depiction of the anger that I bear towards the society that was incapable explaining its fundamentalist values to a teenager, a society that pushed me to choose a life in exile at a young age which thrust me into the battlefield of a fight against depression with empty hands.

Any time I watch this film I can only see its flaws; however, it still delights me for the invaluable lessons that it thought me as well as the chance it offered me to regain my confidence in filmmaking. Ultimately, this film helped me make peace with my home country again. It reminded me that communicating through a cinematic language that connects to the soul was the reason that I chose filmmaking to express and explain myself to others.

This film was the final curtain of my life at York University, with all its ups and downs. I am forever in debt to the people I met at this school who helped me become a better filmmaker and rather a better individual. Not only have I fulfilled a lifelong desire to participate in the community of an inspiring school, something I yearned for as an undergraduate student in Iran, but this thesis film and York's MFA program also played the part of being the safe haven that I was looking for all those years. And for this I will forever be grateful.

WORKS CITED

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Beautiful City. Directed by Asghar Farhadi, Neshane, 2004

Bergman, Ingmar. *Images*. New York: Arcade Publishing, 1990.

Mommy. Directed by Xavier Dolan, Mata films, 2014.

APPENDICES

Appendix A: Behind the Scenes



1- Our very first shot of the film- Courtroom that was designed in the abandoned building



2- At the courtroom- Due to the cold weather we had to have a heater right next to our actor



3 - The abandoned building which was used for three scenes.



4- I am giving directions to Ahmad who plays Javid in the prison scene



5 -I am giving directions to Farid who plays Karim



6 - Farid at the dry-cleaning shop



7 - Interior shot