

BASED ON A TRUE STORY

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A THESIS SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES
IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF FINE ARTS

GRADUATE PROGRAM IN FILM
YORK UNIVERSITY
TORONTO, ONTARIO

January 2023

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ABSTRACT

Based on a True Story is a 20-minute minimalist short film set in Tehran, Iran. It is based on the real-life story of an old couple who planned to commit suicide together on March 19, 2007: the woman went through with it, but the man did not. The film's central theme is life and death. Employing minimalist storytelling and a hybrid of fiction and documentary style, which brings it closer to cinematic realism, the film uses long takes and distant camera placements for a distinctive effect. The film places professional actors in real locations; the script features very little dialogue and long silences, illustrating the characters' inner lives and allowing the viewer to fill in their background. These devices help the audience to reflect on the story and connect with the characters.

This support paper takes the reader through my thinking process, and how I turned a story I read in the newspaper into the story of the film. I will justify the changes I made to the former, and explain the storytelling and cinematic language I adopted to bring this story to screen. In addition to demonstrating the importance of research that moved this project forward, I will explore the challenges I faced in making the film.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to thank my Thesis Supervisor, Manfred Becker; I also want to thank my Thesis Reader, Howard Wiseman, and Graduate Program Assistant Kuowei Lee, who supported me from the start. A very special thanks to John Greyson for his kindness and humanity, which encouraged me to start this program and make one of the biggest shifts in my life. To my dear Tereza Barta for her mentorship and advice, as well as her inspiring class in the first year of this program.

I could not have completed this program without the support of my wife and two daughters.

Thank you to my friends Amin Toyouri, Atefeh Khademolreza, Andrea Cohen, Xin Liu, Sabrina Zhao, Karel Malkoun, Tim Dotan, Lena MacDonald, and Samuel Lee.

Thanks also to my writing editor, Jane Warren.

And finally, I would like to thank my great crew for the two short films that I made in the past two years in this program.

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INTRODUCTION

An old couple is packing modest belongings and clothes in a small suitcase, seemingly planning a journey. It is apparent that the couple can no longer afford the rent, so they hand what had been their home back to the landlord. They relocate to a guesthouse and change into some fresh clothes they took from the house. They lie on two single beds, and talk about how Tehran has changed. A dripping tap in the bathroom starts to bother the man. He calls reception to come and fix it, but nothing happens. They have lunch together, enjoying a meal that seems rather heavy for their age.

In the evening, the old couple drinks tea together; there are also two glasses of cloudy water on the table, a few empty pill packets beside them. The woman drinks her glass of water, and tells her husband to wait to drink his until he has tidied up the room.

The old man helps her lie down on the bed and she falls asleep. The man starts to clean up. When the room is tidy, the man sits down on the other single bed and picks up his glass to drink, but the sound of dripping water distracts him. He goes downstairs to the guesthouse reception, borrows a wrench, and after some difficulty fixes the water valve. He smokes a cigarette in satisfaction. Then the man sits beside his wife's motionless body, checking to see if she is still alive. She has died. The man takes a sip from his glass, but he suddenly spits it out, and accidentally spills the rest. He then desperately tries to find more pills, but there are none left. He starts to cry. The film cuts to the man returning the wrench to reception and leaving the building. The final shot is of the old woman lying on the bed in an impeccably tidy room.

Conceptualizing the Film

Based on a True Story was inspired by an article I read in an Iranian newspaper (*Hamshahri*) in 2007. I began to think about how to present this story on film; I was not interested in building the narrative exactly as it happened, but in exploring two questions that arose for me. First, what made the old man choose not to go through with the suicide? And second, can a film get at the truth of something more effectively or profoundly than “reality”? As André Bazin stated, “No matter how much a painter tries to be faithful to the image than the copy, the result will always be mediated by the artist’s hand.” (*What Is Cinema?* p. 55) With these two questions in mind, I decided to explore how this momentous event might have unfolded for the couple.

CHAPTER ONE

Existentialism

“Life is occupied in both perpetuating itself and in surpassing itself; if all it does is maintain itself, then living is only not dying, and human existence becomes indistinguishable from an absurd vegetation.”

- de Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, p. 83

In approaching the story, I first needed to understand why the old man might have chosen not to go through with dying. While researching the philosophy of suicide, I came across the above Simone de Beauvoir quote, which seemed to address this very question. It brought to mind the idea that life is made up of so many moments that mean nothing, until one day, a single moment comes along to define all that comes after. And that spoke to the question of why the old man could not do what his wife did. The answer, it seemed to me, included an existential truth for all of humanity.

Kafka wrote: “Hopelessness and helplessness are one of the greatest features of absurdism and existentialism.” (*The Metamorphosis*, p. 35) While the philosophy of absurdism maintains that life is meaningless, the philosophy of existentialism holds that it is the individual’s responsibility to create meaning in an otherwise absurd world, through the exercise of free will and personal awareness.

The term “existentialism” was coined by Gabriel Marcel in the 1940s (Thomas R. Flynn, *Existentialism*, p. 89); although it was initially rejected by Jean-Paul Sartre, it became the accepted term for the philosophical and cultural movement that included Sartre, de Beauvoir, and Albert Camus. The message of existentialism, unlike many philosophical movements, is fairly straightforward: individuals are responsible for what they have done, for who they are, for how

they confront the world, and ultimately for how the world is. (Christine Daigle, *Existentialist Thinkers and Ethics*, p. 5)

One major film defined by existentialism is *Taste of Cherry* (1997) by Iranian filmmaker Abbas Kiarostami (1940–2016). The film follows the protagonist as he searches for someone to come and check on him after he has committed suicide; after confirming that the protagonist is dead, they would then bury him. One of the candidates is an old taxidermist, who tries to convince the protagonist not to commit suicide by telling him a story that emphasizes the value of life. The candidate tells the story of an old man who was preparing to hang himself from a cherry tree. Sitting on the branch, tightening the rope, the old man suddenly notices the cherries on the tree. He picks one, and cannot stop eating. This one act of enjoying the sweet taste of cherries convinces the old man to change his mind and he does not kill himself.

While I have been greatly influenced by the work of Kiarostami, as I will discuss later in this chapter, I was looking for my answer in something other than savouring life's beauty. In reflecting further on the meaning of existentialism, I came upon the writing of Søren Kierkegaard, the Danish philosopher who is now associated with the school of existentialism (although he predates the coinage of the term). Kierkegaard wrote an early existential text in a letter to a friend, Wilhelm Lund, explaining why the truth was of paramount concern to him:

“I need to be clear about what I am to do, not what I must know, except in the way knowledge must precede all action. It is a question of understanding my destiny, of seeing what the Deity wants me to do; the thing is to find a truth for me, to find the Idea for which I am willing to live and die.”

- Kierkegaard, p. 49

I realized that Kierkegaard's quote could be the answer to the question of why the old man could not go through with his suicide. Rather than being convinced by the beauty of the world, as the old man in Kiarostami's film is, he is convinced by the realization of his usefulness to the world. The meaning that the old man finds is in the simple act of fixing the leak in the sink; he finds satisfaction in having made a small difference in the world. The old man briefly despairs when he realizes he has failed to satisfy the agreement he made with his wife to leave the world side by side, but it is clear at the end of the film that he has found another way to honour her final wishes: the room he leaves behind is spotlessly clean, the glasses washed and put away, as she requested. Existentialism suggests that when we have an impact on the world, we find meaning in our lives.

Suicide in Iran

While the philosophy of existentialism addressed the question of why the old man chose not to go through with his suicide, I needed also to research why the old couple might have made the pact in the first place. Suicide in Iran is a major concern. According to a study (<https://www.iranintl.com/en/202209080535>) the rate of suicide has increased as much 44 percent in the past 20 years. As in the rest of the world, the majority of victims of suicide in Iran are men, although women make up a greater percentage of victims than in most other countries.

Recent suicide data in Iran show that the primary reasons for suicide are family and societal conflicts, followed by love/marital conflicts, and finally financial issues ([https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(15\)01296-9/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(15)01296-9/fulltext)) As I considered my film, I reasoned that the couple's reason for committing suicide would not be solely financial, so I added the feeling of solitariness in both characters to portray them as

lonesome and unable to communicate with other generations. I also added the suggestion that they are estranged from their son—although this is never explicitly stated, it is clear from their dialogue that they do not have a close relationship with him.

Assisted suicide is not permitted in Iran. In the true story that inspired my film, the old man was arrested and imprisoned for helping his wife to commit suicide; although my film does not specifically explore the legal issues that might arise when the old man decides not to commit suicide himself, an informed viewer might extrapolate that there will be consequences for him not following through with the act.

Background, Context, and Inspirations

Based on a True Story is not only a stand-alone short film, but is intended to be part one of a three-part feature film. After reading the story of the old couple, I started writing a script for a narrative feature film with three parts. The first part is the story of the old couple who made an agreement to commit suicide, but only the woman went through with it, which became my thesis film. The second part will be the story of a young theatrical couple who want to perform a play based on the true story they read in a newspaper of an old couple who planned to commit suicide. The third part will be about the young theatrical couple (who direct and act in the play) meeting with the real old man, who has been released from prison and is invited to attend the play's premiere as their special guest. Everyone, including the actors and director of the play, notice a difference between what is presented on stage and what the old man experienced in real life. At the end, we see all the actors (those playing the old couple and the young couple) as well as other cast and crew members at the film's wrap party in a "behind-the-scenes" documentary scene. The fourth wall is broken: this last is the only "real" scene in the film.

The three-part full-length feature film will more fully explore the idea of the impossibility of representing reality through cinema—reality cannot be retold. *Based on a True Story* is focused on the idea that by retelling a story through my own perception, and how I found new meaning. In my thesis film, I used the techniques of cinematic realism to retell the story of the old couple, as I believe it is the most authentic cinematic approach to engage the audience. Cinematic realism is sometimes referred to as “slice of life” cinema, in that it aims to portray life as it is. Cinematic realists propose that films can reflect reality in a way that other art forms can’t.

The cinematic realist film *Tabiat-e Bijan (Still Life, 1974)* by Iranian filmmaker Sohrab Shahid-Saless is one of the greatest minimal absurd films, and it was a major source of inspiration for my thesis film. *Still Life* tells the story of Mohammad Sardari, a veteran employee of the railway services living in rural Iran, whose sole job is to open and close a railway crossing twice a day. He is waiting for a bonus from the railway department that is long overdue. Sardari’s wife supplements their income by weaving carpets and taking on tailoring work; their son has left to join the army. The film uses long, uninterrupted takes to show us the daily ordinariness of Sardari’s life: operating the railway crossing in the morning, returning home for lunch, operating the crossing again in the evening, returning home for dinner with his wife, and so on. Sardari has performed his job diligently for over thirty years, but one day he receives a letter informing him of his pending retirement from the railway department, taking away the only thing of meaning that he has. The film allows us to witness scenes unfolding in real time, but it plays with the chronology of individual scenes, suggesting that the order of these days is essentially irrelevant in the monotony of Sardari’s life. The documentary style, employing minimal dialogue and a stripped-down mise-en-scène, focuses the viewer’s attention on the small

human drama at play on screen. In addition to inspiring my film through its use of cinematic realism, *Still Life* was also an example of a story that showed an old man whose life appears to be meaningless, but who nevertheless continues living.

The other most significant thematic influence on *Based on a True Story* is the work of Kiarostami. Part of an exciting and powerful movement in international cinema, Kiarostami started making films in the 1970s, and his early releases include the twelve-minute *The Bread and Alley* (1970), *Breaktime* (1972), and *The Traveler* (1974). His *Kroker* trilogy, three films set in the northern Iranian village of Kroker, solidified his directorial reputation outside of Iran. He is perhaps best known for his series of films beginning with *Close-Up* (1990), *Taste of Cherry* (1997), which won the Palme d'Or at the Cannes Film Festival, and *The Wind Will Carry Us* (1999) which won the Grand Jury Prize at the Venice International Film Festival. Kiarostami was famous for blending documentary style with fiction, for his minimalist style, and for experimenting with new modes of filming. In his film *Ten* (2002), Kiarostami placed a camera inside a moving car, allowing it to film the actors as they drove around, without the director present.

I first met Kiarostami in 2007, when I attended his private art class for a month with a few friends. As Kiarostami was a filmmaking icon for me, it was a great honour to meet him. During our classes, held in his house, we took photos and made sculptures with different materials. Our relationship was as teacher and student, but we had a lot in common, which drew us close to each other. For instance, we had both started our careers making TV commercials and advertising, where we learned our minimalistic approach, including how to tell a story in a short time.

During those classes, Kiarostami taught me a lesson about not becoming too attached to my work, reminding me that once I had made something, it was no longer mine. We were making a piece of sculpture out of clay. When I showed him my finished work, he touched it very roughly and began to fix some parts. This made me uncomfortable, as the sculpture was still very soft and fragile, so I put out my hand to try to stop him. Suddenly, he purposely broke my piece. He told me not to worry, that I could simply make another one. He reminded me not to become too attached to what I had made, as it would stop me from being creative.

I learned another important lesson about cinema from Kiarostami: “A movie is not a message.” (Cronin, ed., 2015, p. 12) This idea informed my decision to not let my intentions with *Based on a True Story* overpower the aesthetic of the film, but to allow the audience to discover for themselves what has brought these characters to this point. Rather than focusing on the drama of the events by over-emphasizing the details of the plot, I chose to focus on the deeper meaning built by the characters through their actions, their dialogue, and their silences.

Kiarostami’s life philosophy has deeply inspired me. He said, “We can never get close to the truth except through lying.” (Cronin, ed., 2015, p. 12.) Since reality is mediated through our own perceptions, all we can do is tell a story that is *other than* reality, but hopefully closer to the truth—the deeper meaning that the filmmaker can show. While the original newspaper article stated that the old man was simply afraid to go through with the suicide, I changed the “real” story by adding the subtle but important reason for the old man to choose, in that moment, not to die. It was my way of getting closer to the truth as I understand it.

CHAPTER TWO

Cinematic Language and Challenges

One of the challenges of making *Based on a True Story* was that I didn't want to tell the backstory of the character—what happened in their past—to bring them to this moment of choosing to end their lives. Developing these specific characters without revealing too much of their past was difficult, particularly since I don't want to use too much dialogue. The long pauses and silences of the film create the atmosphere that makes their lives become more *visible*. I wanted to let the audience fill in the details of the protagonist's lives, and in doing so sympathize with these characters, and the situation they are in.

This minimalist style is appropriate to the story, but it is also closer to my authentic voice. In my thesis film, I have employed a hybrid fiction style (combining documentary-style filmmaking with narrative elements), mise-en-scène arrangements, long takes, and framing medium long shots with the camera often at eye level, which creates a claustrophobic, haunting atmosphere that reflects the characters' inner emotional state. I wanted the old couple to look like the people we meet in real life. That said, unlike Shahid-Saless in *Still Life*, I ended up casting trained actors to ensure they gave the necessary depth to the characters. I felt the need for professionals to represent the real people: a copy of the old couple. As Kiarostami said: "Keep the copy and appreciate it when you don't have access to the original. We cannot comprehend the original except through the copy." (Cronin, ed., 2015, p. 25)

At the same time, I didn't want to focus on the true story and their background, but to portray them at this specific moment of their life. I let the circumstances, the characters'

reactions, positions, and gestures tell the story, allowing the audience to guess what took place in their past that led to the present day.

Influences and Aesthetics

In addition to Kiarostami, whose influence on my work was mainly thematic, my major filmmaking influences include Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne (Belgian, born 1951 and 1954), Robert Bresson (French, 1901–1999), and Ken Loach (British, born 1936).

I have been greatly inspired by the Dardenne brothers' cinematography and storytelling. Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne began making narrative and documentary films in the 1970s, and write, produce, and direct their films together. They are known for their stark realism and their focus on working-class themes and impoverished characters. The Dardennes brothers won their first Palme d'Or at the Cannes Film Festival for *Rosetta* (1999), which follows a young woman trying to find work. The first time I saw *Rosetta*, I was impacted by the use of long takes, the simple mise-en-scène, and the constantly active camera that, at all times, follows its protagonist, Rosetta, from behind.

Two Days, One Night (2014) is the other Dardenne brothers' masterpiece that I have been most influenced by, and consciously and subconsciously followed its style in *Based on a True Story*. The film follows a woman, Sandra (Marion Cotillard), who suffers from depression. Over the course of a weekend, Sandra travels around the city trying to convince her co-workers to give up their annual bonuses so she doesn't lose her job. It's initially unclear what has happened to Sandra—why she is napping in the middle of the day when the phone rings and jolts her into action—and I used a similar technique in the opening scene of *Based on a True Story*, starting in the middle of the old couple's story, without any preface. Although *Two Days, One Night* has a

simple plot, it is a deeply humane, moving film about the value of community in the modern world.

The Dardenne brothers' use of handheld cameras gives the audience the feeling of observing the events as they are unfolding. Their first-person stories focus on and follow the protagonist; without giving the audience too much information or distracting us with a lot of camera movement, quick cuts, or dramatic action, their films focus on the impacts of event on the protagonist. We are not given any more knowledge of the protagonist than what we see happening in the story, and so the audience moves with the protagonist through the world of the film.

I first encountered Robert Bresson's philosophy fifteen years ago, when I read a book suggested to me by Kiarostami, called *Wind Blows Wherever It Wants* (1986) written in Farsi by Babak Ahmadi, about Robert Bresson's cinematography. The book became a dictionary of filmmaking to me, and I started to watch Bresson's films. Known as a master of minimalism, Bresson defined character through action. His films include critically-acclaimed works like *A Man Escaped* (1956), *Pickpocket* (1959), and *Lancelot du Lac* (1974). Initially I found his work difficult, due to the fundamental difference between his films and what I had understood about cinema and film before. Bresson's films are radically original, and avoid the conventions of entertainment. He cast nonprofessional actors (he called them models), which was a strange idea to me, as a graduate theatre student.

One influence that Bresson had on me was how precise the director is with what he allows the audience to see on screen. He provides them with the opportunity to fill gaps in the storyline with ideas that he only refers to, thus feeling the film more deeply. In *Based on a True Story*, I wanted to do the same: allow the audience to imagine what had happened in the old

couple's past to get them to this point. As Bresson said, "I would rather people feel a film before understanding it." (Bresson, 1975, p. 21)

Bresson also said, "The most important will be the most hidden." (Bresson, 1975, p. 64). This idea is perhaps best illustrated in *A Man Escaped*, a minimalist masterpiece about a young man imprisoned by the Nazis during the occupation of France. At one stage, the protagonist jumps out of a police car and runs away. He is followed by the police, but the camera stays on the empty seats in the car, so that we only hear the officers chasing the man off-screen. Bresson believed that holding off the reveal and letting the audience's imagination linger over what could be happening in scenes they can't see allowed for maximum impact upon its resolution.

One of the most useful takeaways for any filmmaker from Bresson's work is that sound can be more important than the image. In several of my films and particularly in *Based on a True Story*, the audience hears dialogue offscreen: while the old man is taking look at the broken pipe, we hear the old woman asking him to change his clothes. As he does in the scene of the escaped prisoner in *A Man Escaped*, Bresson often lets the audience hear some important event off-screen, instead of showing it, allowing us to imagine what is happening. As Kiarostami said about Bresson: "I do believe in Robert Bresson's method of creation through omission, not through addition." (Cronin, ed., 2015, p. 46)

The other filmmaker who has had a major impact on my work is British director Ken Loach, who is acclaimed for films like *Kes* (1969), *Riff-Raff* (1991), *The Wind That Shakes the Barley* (2006), for which he won the Palme d'Or, and *I, Daniel Blake* (2016). Known for his politically conscious films that explore key social issues, Loach inspired me with his authenticity and simplicity in storytelling.

All of these directors have had an influence on my filmmaking techniques, including long takes, limited quick cuts, and ideally leaving minimal footprint as a filmmaker. I have consciously—or subconsciously—adopted their specific techniques, as they are effective in capturing the realism I want to convey. Ultimately, what the work of the Dardennes, Bresson, and Loach have taught me is the importance of having an authentic voice. As a young filmmaker, my journey is to develop my own unique voice.

CHAPTER THREE

My Background and Artistic Journey

In the summer of 2005, I directed and acted in a stage play that I adapted from *Clown* (1963) a well-known novel by German author Heinrich Böll. The play featured two characters, Schneir (played by me) and his beloved Marie, played by a professional actress. That was my first experience directing and acting in a professional theatre, after graduating from theatre school and having done some amateur student projects. It was an enormous challenge adapting characters from the novel for the stage. Working together with my professional supporting actress was a positive learning experience, analyzing our characters and practicing method acting, the technique founded by Lee Strasberg in New York in 1969. The experience gave me tools that I still use today when I am working with actors in a film, such as improvising scenes that don't appear in the final work.

In 2006, moved from theatre to television production and went on to write and direct more than 150 commercials. This work served as a training ground to learn different ways to tell the story of a brand, teaching me how to convince an audience to buy a product in only 30 seconds. In researching the social and psychological make-up of brand consumers, I learned to recognize different consumers and determine how best to approach them.

In 2017, I made a 15-minute short fiction film called *Upstairs Neighbour*. An old man realizes that the ceiling in his kitchen is dripping. He goes upstairs to let his neighbour know, but no one is in, and other neighbours in the apartment building have no idea where he is. The old man finally decides to open the apartment door to fix the problem. The apartment is a mess. While inside, the old man overhears his neighbour's mother-in-law leaving a message on the

answering machine, and he realizes the neighbour and his wife are getting a divorce. The old man fixes the faucet, cleans the unit, and locks the door again. When he returns to his apartment, he sees that the kitchen's ceiling is badly damaged, but he's satisfied that he helped the young couple.

After making short documentaries and television commercials, *Upstairs Neighbour* was my first experience telling a story for more than two minutes, and working with a renowned actor, Parvis Poorhosseini. The Dardenne brothers' style of filmmaking shaped my practice in *Upstairs Neighbour*, for which I used long-take shots and few cuts, which would become my own style of filmmaking in the future.

One month after completing *Upstairs Neighbour*, I started making a 20-minute film entitled *Mars*. I used an entirely different approach in my filmmaking to examine different styles of storytelling. I employed a similar editing style I had used in many TV commercials, the classic shot/reverse shot montage and continuity editing. *Mars* is about an amateur astronomer who used to be a member of the international Physics and Astronomy Association. He no longer has time for his passion, however, as he is overwhelmed with his job and his wife and son, whom he blames for not allowing him to pursue his dreams. He receives an offer from the association to travel to Mars—his lifelong dream—but ultimately chooses to remain in his hectic, overwhelmed life. In the end, he is not the person he thought he was.

Mars turned out to be a failed experiment, partly due to poor casting. The main actor was not an amateur, but his style didn't fit with the character, and since our shooting time was extremely limited, I was unable to find an actor to replace him. As well, the subject that I chose and the style of directing—the traditional shot/reverse shot to break down a scene—were not compatible. Alfred Hitchcock said: "Perhaps the most significant and individually important

thing about a director is his style. This style is evidenced by both his choice of subject and his manner of directing it.” (Gottlieb, p. 216); I now better understand the importance of being very careful in casting, as well as the importance of the relationship between the film’s subject and theme with the director’s intention.

Despite the creative setback, I got to make my first full-length feature film, *Dressage* (2018): a 16-year-old Iranian girl named Golsa robs a corner shop with her friends, motivated primarily by boredom. While dividing the spoils, the thieves realize they forgot to take the security camera footage, so one of them must return to the crime scene to get it. In terms of directing style, I was again inspired by the Dardenne brothers, as well as by Ken Loach, particularly one of his masterpieces, *I, Daniel Blake* (2016). *Dressage* employs first-person storytelling; the camera is handheld, and the rhythm moves as quickly as the story. Although there is no dramatic camera movement, there are some off-screen events. The camera’s placement is based on the point-of-view of Golsa, the protagonist, and is placed at eye level, reflecting how we see the world in real life. I would utilize these techniques in my thesis film *Based on a True Story*.

We had two months of rehearsal with the cast, a combination of non-professional and professional actors. Negar Moghaddam, who played Golsa “with the determination of Antigone,” according to the *Hollywood Reporter*, was a first-time actor, but her parents (Ali Mosaffa and Shabnam Moghadami) are well-known actors in Iran and internationally. I had learned my lesson in casting: Negar Moghadam was a good fit for Golsa’s character; she was nominated for several awards for her performance and won Best Actress (Asian New Talent Award) at the Shanghai International Film Festival.

Dressage was nominated for and received many awards, including Special Mention at the Berlin International Film Festival, Winner of the Best First Film at the Fajr International Film Festival, and Winner of the Best Screenplay and Special Jury Prize at the CineIran Festival, among others.

I decided to return to university to improve my academic qualifications and, in studying film, develop further confidence in my filmmaking voice and style. I believe after each film, after each story I tell, I need to take time to be quiet and focus on searching and studying. After starting my MFA at York, I made *Ticket to Paradise* (2020), a short drama about a Syrian family struggling with immigration issues and adapting to life in Canada, as a course assignment. My first production in Canada, working with my York classmates, was a great experience. Because it had been a while since the last time I worked with an amateur crew, and it gave me a sense of freedom and creativity in filmmaking. Although I was gratified by the success of my first feature-length film, I wanted to be sure it didn't limit me, keeping me on the same path, which was always my fear. The entire cast of actors was non-professional. One of the challenges we faced was shooting a scene in a restaurant where the Syrian family is having dinner. The scene required continuity, but we didn't have a script supervisor, and the non-professional actors didn't understand its importance.

Ticket to Paradise is told from the perspective of the ten-year-old daughter, which determined the style of directing. I used a handheld camera with mostly medium and medium-close shots, except for wider shots to capture the loneliness of an immigrant family.

CHAPTER FOUR

Pre-production, Production, and Post-production Challenges

In making *Based on a True Story*, I was presented with many unique challenges. When pre-production began in Iran, and was unable to travel there, due to issues with my Canadian visa. I created the first draft of a mood board and shared it with my production team in Tehran, and started online meetings with my production designer. As the production team began scouting locations and designing the set, they would send me photos and videos, and we would communicate through video chat and WhatsApp.

One of the first challenges that arose was in location scouting. My script for *Based on a True Story* intentionally includes minimal details about the couples' life: I didn't wish to give too many details about the background of the characters, allowing the audience to fill those in themselves. In general, Iranian filmmakers often don't establish as many specific background details ahead of filming as Western directors may do, but this meant that my crew had many questions about the couple. Because their social class wasn't communicated in the script, my crew assumed they were lower class, and began scouting shooting locations in downtown Tehran, a typically poorer area.

However, although the real old couple was poor, I decided to make the couple members of the middle class. It seemed to me that one thing that might drive them to suicide would be losing everything—a more difficult adjustment than being poor to start with. Additionally, the old woman's strength and decisiveness seemed to mark her as belonging to the middle class. When I saw the first location options, I asked my crew to find a nicer apartment in midtown Tehran.

Another challenge, also related to my personal filmmaking style, came about in casting the film. Initially I had thought to cast non-professional actors, as I had found non-actors much easier to work with when shooting my first full-length feature film, *Dressage* (2018). However, my producer insisted that I hire professional actors, as our production time was limited, and non-professionals would need more rehearsal time.

For the role of the old man, we decided to hire Saeed Poursamimi, one of the most famous actors in Iran. However, he was travelling to the Cannes Film festival so we would only have five days with him: two days of rehearsals, and three days of shooting. For the old woman, we cast Ehteram Boroumand. Although she wasn't a highly experienced actress, she was a writer and activist for women's rights in Iran, and very familiar with the filmmaking world.

Not surprisingly, I found collaborating with Boroumand, the non-professional, much easier than with Poursamimi, the star actor, who is famously difficult to work with. As a director, I try to get my actors to find something in themselves in the character when performing a role. While Boroumand was open to that, Poursamimi had his own process of preparing for his role, and didn't agree to my suggestions during rehearsal. Since we only had two days of rehearsals, I wanted the actors to improvise scenes together as a married couple, and so come to a deeper understanding of their characters. For instance, I suggested they improvise a scene in which the couple has just returned from a party during which the old man had tried to borrow money from someone. This imagined scenario would not be part of the actual film, but would give the actors an opportunity to merge more deeply with their characters. However, Poursamimi had a difficult time with this, and couldn't understand why I had them playing out scenes that would not be included in the film.

The improvisations proved very useful, however, as I incorporated the actors' improvised dialogue into the shooting script. Based on our rehearsals, I replaced lines in the script that didn't sound natural when the actors spoke them. These and suggested line changes by the actors improved the script immensely.

Once we completed rehearsals, we finally began our three-day shoot, only a week after I had arrived in Iran. The DOP and I decided on wide-angle lenses and framing style, keeping the entire shot focused, regardless of distance. As our rehearsals had been done in my office in Tehran, I hadn't spent time on location and was mostly unfamiliar with them. I found that I had plenty of room to manoeuvre in the first scene in the apartment, so I had the other actors playing the pawnbrokers moving around the old man as he stood in the front room. The camera stays focused on the protagonist, showing him to be just an object in the pawnbrokers' path, someone they move around without compassion for his situation.

The scenes in the hotel room proved to be a challenge, however, as it was so small that it didn't have enough space for the actors and the crew. This limited the mise-en-scène, so I had to design the shoot to take this small space into account. Only the cameraman, his assistant, the sound recordist, and the actors could fit inside the room; I had to observe the scenes outside the room, on a monitor.

Here, I had great help from the lessons I learned from the work of Bresson, who believed that some of the most important moments in a film could happen off-screen, out of frame. I shot the scenes in the hotel room with the focus largely staying on the old man. When he hears the tap leaking, he walks over to the sink, and then to the room phone. I do not cut back to the old woman, but we can hear her speak off-screen. Instead of cutting back and forth between them, the camera stays on the old man, creating a distinctly steady, unbroken rhythm in the film. When

the woman speaks, it is usually off-screen, and the audience just hears the sound of her voice. Like Bresson, I made use of sound to convey the unseen action and thus making it more impactful.

I wanted the film to have a slow, steady rhythm, unbroken by quick cuts back and forth between the actors. It had been my intention to have the old man be the focus for the camera, and of the story, so that the other actors would either be moving around him in space, as in the apartment, or he would be moving around the space, as in the hotel room.

The limitations of the shoot had positive and negative effects on the film. The limitations of time and space meant that I had to come up with creative solutions to problems, forcing me to be decisive when I might otherwise have procrastinated in making a decision.

Censorship

Perhaps the most unusual (at least to a Canadian audience) form of limitation was censorship. In Iran, feature films have to be approved by the Ministry of Islamic Art and Culture before they can be released. Iranian filmmakers are forced to follow strict rules: it is forbidden to show a woman without her veil, any physical contact between a man and a woman, or any criticism of Islam.

I had completed the script for *Dressage* in 2015, but was unable to start filming until 2017, as it took two years to get approval from the government. I was so accustomed to censorship that I made certain choices in filming *Dressage* without even thinking about it. For instance, I wanted to show the protagonist, Golsa, waking up in her bed, but since I could not

show her with her hair uncovered, I had her hiding under the covers, much like any teenager would do, and peaking out at her father as he gets her up.

While short films are generally not subject to the same strict censorship as feature films, some of my choices in filming *Based on a True Story* were made because I am accustomed to having to censor certain things, and so had to be creative.

For instance, after the old woman drinks the medication that's dissolved in the water, she asks the old man to tidy the room, and gently brushes his arm. While I might have wanted to show them embracing, given that she is about to die, I would not have been allowed to show a man and woman embracing onscreen. While making those creative choices, I didn't even realize I was observing the limitations of censorship, because it is so engrained in me not to show physical contact between a man and a woman onscreen. True to the nature of their relationship, and their decades-old marriage, they would likely not embrace, and so the old lady simply brushing the man's arm felt authentic.

Another script adjustment I made because of censorship was when the old man goes over to the woman lying on the bed to see if she is still alive. I wanted him to gently touch her face, but we are not allowed to show a man touching a woman's skin; the woman brushing the man's arm is only acceptable because there is fabric between them. I was limited to showing the man kneeling beside her, shaking her arm under the bed cover.

In an interview in Toronto in 1999, Kiarostami spoke of censorship: "It shapes our work but it doesn't destroy it." (*Toronto Star*, 2015). The limitations of censorship can sometimes lead to better work.

Ethical Challenges

The biggest ethical issue that arose during filming came entirely unexpectedly. On our second day of shooting, a well-known Iranian actress posted on social media an allegation of inappropriate sexual behaviour against Saeed Poursamimi. The actress was married to a man in the government, and so we initially dismissed the accusation as politically motivated. However, two other women then came forward in support of her. Since the following day was our last, my producer convinced me to finish shooting, and to decide during post-production how to respond to the allegations. After we wrapped the shoot, we had further discussions. Although the allegations were of a sexual nature, my production team and I felt sure that Poursamimi would not have been sexually inappropriate with the actress. He was, however, known for being difficult, and it became clear to us that the incident between the Poursamimi and the actress involved bad behaviour on both their parts.

At some point, a group of women working in Iranian cinema questioned both Poursamimi and the actress, and determined that no sexual harassment had taken place. The actress herself admitted that it hadn't been sexual, and the allegations against Poursamimi have been dismissed. Unfortunately, in October 2022, the actress was arrested for supporting the ongoing protests in Iran.

CONCLUSION

In making my thesis film, I was informed by two main questions: why would the old man not go through with the suicide, and how could my film get at the truth of this story? Of course, the answers are closely related; while I could not—and would not want to—tell the real story of the old couple, I could make a film that explored what seemed to me to be a deeper existential question: how do we find meaning in the world?

The old man finds purpose in fixing the drip in the sink, and validation that he is still useful, if only for a fleeting moment. I added this detail to answer my central question, but it also reflects my own philosophical questions about existence, and my own understanding of our place in the world.

In trying to get at a deeper truth, without making the intentions of the film too obvious, I chose to use the techniques of cinematic realism, which were appropriate to the film's subject matter. I was forced, by the limitations of making a short film, to leave out many details that the viewer might expect. This limitation, however, makes for a stronger film: without giving away the characters' backstory, I let the audience use their imagination to fill in the gaps, and thereby come to a deeper understanding of the characters.

In conclusion, I have found truth in the saying that limitations inspire creativity. The limitations of the film's running time, the limitations of my shooting schedule and locations, the limitations of censorship: all of these have helped shape my work, including *Based on a True Story*. In my journey to find my authentic voice as a filmmaker, I have tried to work *with* the limitations of the medium and of my specific circumstances. If every story has already been told,

then the filmmaker's role is to retell stories in their own unique voice, getting at a truth only they can tell.

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