

# NO COUNTRY FOR DANGEROUS FACES

Interactive Storytelling . Cinematic Language . Moral Dilemma . Empathy

Hessam Daraei

جایی برای چهره های خطرناک نیست

حسام دارایی



*To my parents,*

*who gave me the best story  
of my life...*

*my life itself.*

تقدیم به پدر و مادرم

که بهترین داستان زندگی‌ام را تعریف کردند

داستان "زندگی"

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# ABSTRACT

The challenge now facing human evolution is how to transfer insight from person to person, nation to nation, generation to generation. If we could transfer our insights more deeply, many problems would not be repeated - such as prejudice, discrimination, racism and worst of all, terrorism.

In this thesis, I transfer the knowledge and insights I have gained from political and social experiences to my audience. I use Dynamic Media as a tool for designing an experience that challenges people's ethics, behaviors, and judgments towards race, nationality, and religion. When we look deeper into these matters, we discover the core issues that lead to stereotypical beliefs which can then misrepresent people and their culture.

I consider racism and discriminatory behaviors to be pronounced disorders in the human ethical system. I use design as a solution to address this very human problem. Art, theater, and cinema have all been used to transfer insight. I use these media, as well as the power of storytelling that focuses on empathy and moral dilemma. I use interactive media to discover possible ways that ordinary people can compose, express, and transfer their intuitive experiences related to these topics.

As an Iranian who has experienced racism first hand and has many stories to tell, I design interactive experiences that bring users into the immediacy of the story that I am creating. These stories will make its audience open their minds, think about important matters in a new way and gain helpful insights about them.





Chapter I

# Let Me Tell You A Story

بزارید یه داستان براتون بگم

# THE JOURNEY OF A STORYTELLER

This is the story of a child who grew up to become me. I was born in the early 1990s in Tehran, Iran and was raised in an open-minded Muslim family along with my older brother and sister. In my culture, the youngest child receives a lot of attention and accordingly is expected to perform to high standards. The richness of ancient Persian culture and history gave me a proud perspective on my life. Reading Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh* (the world's longest epic poem written by a single poet) as a kid, walking through the ancient Persian capital Persepolis as a teenager, and exploring 5,000 years of civilization at the Iran-Bastan museum as an art student all had a profound impact on the formation of my character. I was becoming part of a young generation from Iran who was trying to revive Persian history and its glory while the Islamic Republic government continued to annihilate the past, by doing things like removing the pre-Islamic era chapters from schools' history books. These efforts of the government were not enough to dismantle my complex thinking as a filmmaker, designer, and gamer. How did I become a storyteller? How did my love for Persian culture and history influence my life? To answer those questions, I will dissect my life experiences in three parts.



# CINEMA

## AS A FILMMAKER



My father was in love with cinema and like father, like son. From him, I developed my own deep appreciation of film. When I was a child, every weekend my father came home with three VHS tapes in his hands and we watched old and new films together, from '60s movies such as *Psycho* and *Dr.Strangelove* to '90s movies such as *Seven* and *The Usual Suspects*. Because I was still a kid, watching those films at that age was overwhelming but also inspiring to me.

When I was five, my father bought

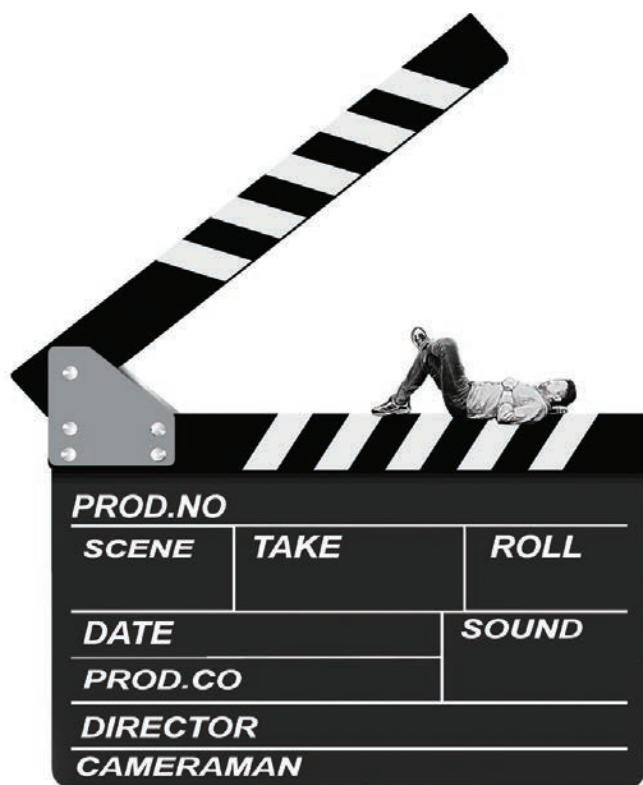
a giant professional Sony video camera which aroused my motivation for filming. I begged my father to allow me to use the camera only for a moment, but he insisted that I was barely able to pick up the camera and hold it.

It was 1999 when watching one particular movie opened a door to a boundless world for me: *The Matrix*. I became entranced by the power of storytelling and images in that movie \_ picturing a new world, with a speculative look at a dystopian future drowned in tech-

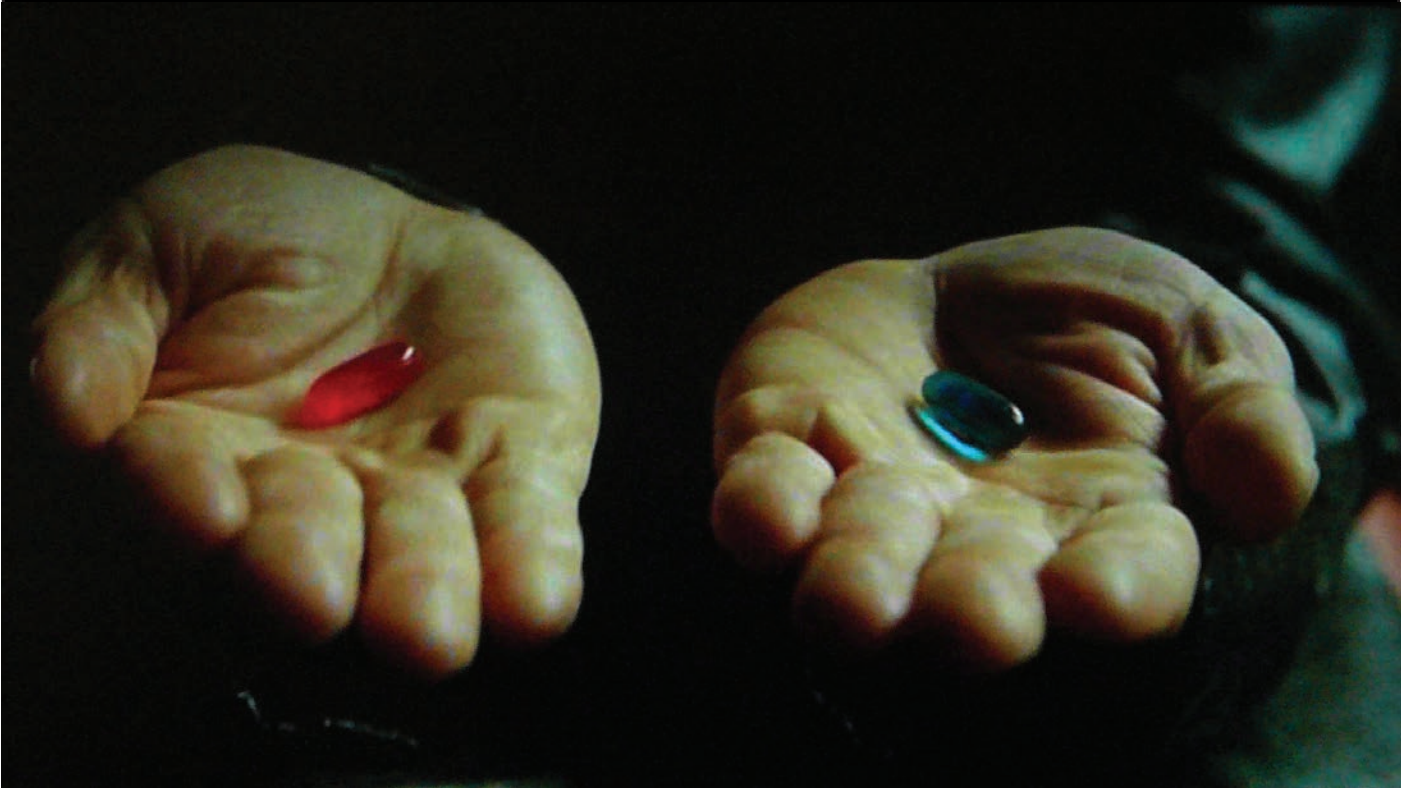
nology, compelling consequential and philosophical questions about human existence. In that peculiar moment, I realized that cinema was the best medium for the stories I wanted to create. I knew I wanted to be a filmmaker one day. I started to make experimental short films while also writing short stories and adapting them into motion pictures. I saw cinema as a miraculous tool for storytelling and

communicating with others and I expanded my knowledge and skills in filmmaking as a storyteller throughout my adolescence.

Soon, it was the time for me to compete with others in the national college entrance exam and go to college. The outcome of the exam was unexpected and it absolutely changed my life forever. It was the beginning of a new chapter for me.



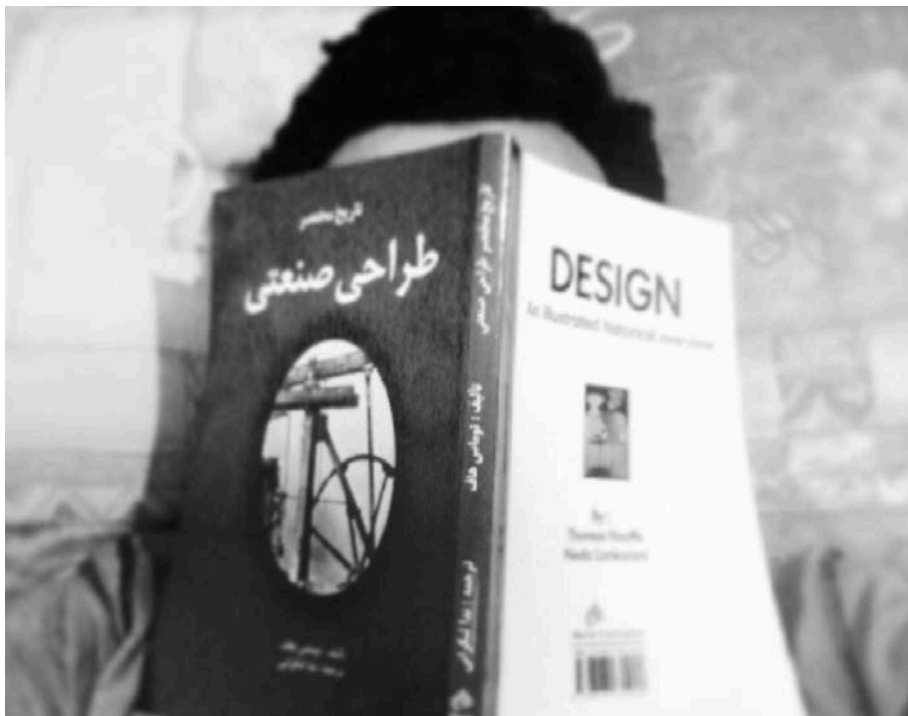
*"This is your last chance. After this, there is no turning back. You take the blue pill - the story ends, you wake up in your bed and believe whatever you want to believe. You take the red pill - you stay in Wonderland and I show you how deep the rabbit-hole goes" - Morpheus*



*Image Courtesy: The Matrix (1999) | Warner Bros.*

# DESIGN

## AS A DESIGNER



In Iran, there are two hard steps in every man's life: mandatory military service and the national exam. Top universities and majors demand high scores. Most of the applicants spend one full year to read, practice and get ready for the exam. I spent that year reading the history of art, photography, cinema, and the fundamentals of visual arts because I had to know about everything I could. Meanwhile, I began to search for a university program that fit my interests. Although initially I thought cinema was going

to be my first choice, that changed when I learned more about industrial design. This program was the most popular among art and design majors in Iran. Industrial design applicants must rank among the top ten students in the national exam to be accepted.

As a result, I began to research and read about the design world. I delved into the universe of creation and creativity. When I looked at an object, I thought about its design. I noticed that behind every design



The results for the national exam were released: I was ranked 7th out of almost 50000 applicants in the art field. I was thrilled and honored. Now, I was recognized as an official elite student by the National Elites Organization. On the one hand, I was excited by my



I selected industrial design as my major and entered the University of Tehran, Iran's top university. I spent four remarkable years learning, sketching, prototyping, user-testing and gaining more knowledge about industrial design and many other design-related fields. At the same time, I produced my own experimental short films. I was always eager to connect my in-

terests in cinema and design—even my final design thesis focused on a movie theater seat for film critics. The seat was equipped with monitors directly linked to social media that allowed critics to share their reviews. However, this crossover between my interests was not adequate for me and I began looking for something different.



*Film Critic Seat | My Thesis in Industrial Design*





*"Design is in everything we make, but it's also  
between those things. It's a mix of craft, science,  
storytelling, propaganda, and philosophy"*

*- Erik Adigard*

*Image Courtesy: Institutional Archive of the American Academy in Rome*

# VIDEO GAMES

## AS A GAMER



I grew up with video games and several generation of game consoles. My older brother already had an Atari 2600 when I was born. We played many arcade games with that console such as *PacMan*, *River Raid*, and *Kaboom*. The next console I had was PlayStation One from the fifth generation of consoles, which revolutionized the world of 3D graphics. Video games were evolving and becoming more realistic. The visuals and graphic elements allowed video games to be more like storytellers.

The sixth generation of consoles was the beginning of a new era in the 20th century. I bought a PlayStation 2 when I was 12. My parents were not strict about what kind of games I was playing. Despite how violent some of them were, video games with cinematic storytelling became the norm by early 2000's. I played dark action video games such as *Max Payne*, realistic open-world series such as *Grand Theft Auto*, and cinematic first-person shooter games such as *Call of Duty*. The line between

video games and the movie industries was becoming narrower and narrower every day. It was one of the reasons I loved video games: they had become well-shot films with interactive storylines.

This development reached a level of greatness in the seventh and eighth generation of game consoles. I had Xbox360 and then PlayStation 4s. Creative and

inventive game developers such as Telltale Games (*Walking Dead*, *Wolf Among Us*) and David Cage (*Heavy Rain*, *Beyond: Two Souls*) emerged. Their approach to storytelling and choice-driven narrative fascinated me. In these games, players could feel as if they were literally the characters in the story. They could change the storyline by their choices and could compel different conclusions in the end.



Image Courtesy: *Max Payne II* (2003) | Rockstar Games



To me, these video games were the best examples of bringing interaction into storytelling. In those days, most games were focusing on gameplay, some on improving graphics and others on the story—I was interested in the third group. I wished that one day I could adapt this approach to telling my stories.



*Image Courtesy: Beyond: Two Souls (2013) | Quantic Dream*

# I AM A STORYTELLER

I grew up with stories. Eventually, I noticed that storytelling was the common thread between my fields of interest – cinema, design and video games. I wanted to be a storyteller, in different media, in inventive ways. My goal was to be an interdisciplinary designer who could cross over multiple fields of art and design. I wanted to bring interaction into storytelling to seek new ways to communicate with my audience. I had a long road ahead of me in order to pursue my dream.

I am Hessam. This story is my story. I came to the United States to make my dream come true. The following pages of this book will describe how I tried to achieve my dream. In the end you will find out whether I succeeded or not.



## IRAN VS. USA

Sometimes history cannot be rewritten. Sometimes it is distortable. Either way, the effects of the past will remain. Our past affects us all whether we want it to or not. The question is: what we will do in the future to correct failures of the past? I grew up in Iran, in Persian culture. I am part of a young generation from Iran who is trying to revive Persian history and glory while the Islamic Republic government continues to annihilate the past.

After the Islamic Revolution in 1979, a succession of ayatollahs attempted to delete any history related to kings and Persian kingdoms. They believed that the era of kings had passed and now was the time for God to rule the country. Under the Islamic leadership, Persia's history and glory began to disappear. Iran became very isolated and lost respect in the world. Many people were part of the revolution (including my father), but they did not have any clue at the time what the ultimate outcome would be.



One year after the revolution they found out that they had made the biggest mistake of their lives.

Every dictatorship requires an enemy for propaganda purposes. Iran and The United States have almost forty years of “enemyship.” In decades of conflicts between Iran and the United States governments, we have seen a history of friction.

The two nations have a long and complicated history of poor decisions and bad blood on both sides.

In 1953, the United States, in conjunction with the UK, organized a coup in Iran. They replaced Iran’s publicly elected Prime Minister with Shah Mohammadreza Pahlavi, who was a military ruler and friendly to the US. The British and American governments did this in part to stifle Russia’s growing influence in Iran and partly to protect British oil interests in the area. The Iranian prime minister at the time, Mohammad Mossadeq, was considering nationalizing Iran’s oil industry. This plan did not sit

*Image Courtesy: Associated Press | Sept. 27, 1951, Iranian Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadeq rides on the shoulders of cheering crowds in Tehran’s Majlis Square, outside the parliament building, after reiterating his oil nationalization views to his supporters.*





*Video Still Courtesy: Getty Images | U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and Iraqi President Saddam Hussein shake hands December 20, 1983 in Baghdad. Rumsfeld met with Hussein during the war between Iran and Iraq as an envoy for former U.S. President Ronald Reagan. Rumsfeld made no reference to Iraq's use of chemical weapons, according to detailed official notes on the meeting.*

well with the West over the course of the next 26 years. The United States provided financial aid, military support and even nuclear technology to Iran and the Shah. It was a period of prosperity for Iran, but there was a growing disconnect and dissatisfaction between the Shah and the people. Various student movements, liberal groups and Islamic organizations resented the influence that the US had over the Shah and the fast pace at which he was westernizing and secular-

izing Iran. They also resented the Shah's increasingly oppressive, corrupt and extravagant government in addition to his mismanagement of assets which led to shortages and inflation. In 1979, the conflict reached a boiling point and the Shah was overthrown.

Power eventually landed in the hands of Ayatollah Khomeini. He established the Islamic Republic of Iran and the relationship with the US has been at a standstill ever



since. On November 4th of that same year, protestors stormed the US Embassy in Iran and held fifty-two Americans hostage for more than a year.

Since then, the US has backed Iraq in a war against Iran by providing them armaments, missiles and chemical weapons. Through this proxy war, the United States has been responsible for attacks on Iranian oil platforms and ships while

also and mistakenly shooting down Iran Air Flight 655 in 1988, which killed 290 civilians. The American government has also conducted numerous covert acts against Iran, including a successful joint cyberattack with Israel that briefly crippled Iran's nuclear program. It has been a forty-year period of lies, distrust, covert actions and open aggression. Today Iran continues to move forward with a nuclear program against the objections of



*Graphic Courtesy: ISNA | Flight 655*



*Image Courtesy: US State Dept. | Secretary of State John Kerry meets with Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif in Geneva over nuclear talks.*



DEPORT  
ALL  
IRANIANS.  
GET THE HELL OUT OF MY COUNTRY

the US. The chances of the United States and Iran working together for a short period against a threat such as ISIS is a possibility. However, considering their history, it would most likely have to be an extremely limited engagement that does not require the two sides to trust each other.

While Iranians had no enmity against any nation in the world, the Islamic government painted the opposite picture over the past four decades. This has been the most disgraceful occurrence for our nation throughout our history. As a representative of the Iranian people, I am attempting to restore our true dignity and show it to the world.

# AN IRANIAN IN THE USA

I came to the United States in 2016 and suddenly found the opportunity that I was always looking for. For the first time in my life, I had conversations with American people about Iran. They knew us from the news. Today, the only thing media cares about is what the Islamic government represents: war, intimidation, and nuclear bombs. The interesting point from the conversations that I had was that there are still some people who hold a grudge against Iranians due to the hostage crisis in 1979. The news is not able to separate people from their governments. We, the people, can. I have always been proud of my culture and history and I would do anything to enlighten foreign people about my country, to show them what the media is not covering.

The 2016 election and its aftermath made me more committed to the path I am walking on. New waves of Islamophobia and anti-Iranian actions made my life very hard here. I experienced racism, discrimination, stereotypical beliefs and ignorance closely. On the 2016 election night I was on my way home walking in the streets and a guy shouted at me "Go back to your country you f\*\*\*\*\* Arab." I was terrified but it was nothing unexpected. The other day one of my classmates gave me a ride home. She told me, "I know you are nervous because a woman is behind the wheel. I am aware that women are not allowed to drive in your country." I just said "You are talking about Saudi Arabia. That is not my country." That was just the tip of the iceberg. I have had these types of experiences many times.

At the same time these situations gave me a great opportunity to stand up as an Iranian through my skills as a designer and filmmaker. I turned my personal experiences into stories and I used them in all of my works.

# WHY DYNAMIC MEDIA?

In 2015, after my graduation from my industrial design program, I struggled to find a master's degree program to continue my education. The journey I described earlier shaped my interests in a much different way than my friends and colleagues. As both a designer and filmmaker, my friends and family always asked me, "Hessam, why don't you just pick one of your interests and pursue it, you cannot follow both?" I had one answer for them: I can and I will.

One day I received an email with a link from one of my friends about a program called Dynamic Media Institute (DMI) at the Massachusetts College of Art and Design in Boston. He suggested that this program was made for me. I opened the link and I read the core concepts of the program and I loved it. I saw keywords in the program's description which I was looking for such as "media, interdisciplinary, designers, filmmakers, diverse backgrounds and narrative". Those keywords were enough for me to apply to the program. I came to MassArt and

DMI with the experiences I had in design and I became part of the DMI family, a place that offered both a philosophical and a practical look at media and communication design.

As a revolutionary tool, dynamic media breaks through the boundaries of several traditional static media and design fields, which range from interaction design, visual storytelling, learning applications, and data visualization to participatory narrative, sound, and video installation. It establishes a way to communicate through interaction and data visualization. This experience stimulates audience senses, from visual and audio to smell and touch. All these first-hand experiences can combine together to create a complex vision of another world, a world in which the audience can interact with the reality we create for them.

Being a filmmaker and designer gave me two paths in my life and my work. Both had storytelling in common, which has always been

my main point of interest. When I came to DMI these interests converged. I started to mix storytelling and interaction to create intuitive experiences with interactive narratives. These experiences could challenge people to question their ethics and beliefs and lead to different narrative conclusions.

I found DMI to be an interdisciplinary place which one can enter from a unique and diverse background and bring one's personal experience and skills into the design process. I believe DMI gave me the power for thinking broadly and creating new experiences that I have always been eager to build.





# AN OVERVIEW OF MY THESIS

My thesis “No Country for Dangerous Faces” is composed of six sections: Abstract, Let Me Tell You a Story, The Mad World, Behind the Scene, Inspirations, and Case Studies.

In the “The Mad World” section, I explore the misunderstandings between different nations in the Middle East and the US, their societies, and their cultures. I expand the definition of stereotyping in our daily conversations and communication. I analyze the roots of racism in today’s world and the ways we can deal with it as a malfunction in the human ethical system. I specifically focus on Islamophobia as a paradigm for racism and discrimination. I show the media’s influence on our daily life and how the media can shape our perception of reality. I connect the dots between media misrepresentation, stereotyping, and racism to find out how I can influence them.

In the “Behind the Scene” section, I discuss the tools of communication that can help me build my ideas. I examine the modern ways of storytelling in the digital age, how storytelling and interaction can create an impactful experience. I investigate the role of cinematic language as a communicative apparatus and powerful tool for affecting the audience. I research moral dilemmas through the concepts of influential philosophers and scholars and explore their significance on human behavior. In the last chapter of this section, I discuss the creation of “empathy” in the audience and how I consider that an influential tool for affecting issues such as racism and Islamophobia.

In the “Inspirations” section, I mention inspiring artists and artworks that helped me find a unique way of creating my projects. Specifically, I focus on three artists: Asghar Farhadi and his unique cinematic language blended with moral dilemmas, David Cage and his choice-driven narrative video games and Wafaa Bilal and his way of using art as a tool for talking

about politics, war, and Islamophobia.

In the “Case Studies” section, my primary task is to discuss new ways to create valuable and influential interactive experiences that can affect audiences as a learning process. These case studies are created in different media, seeking different goals. The *One* trilogy consists of an interactive film *I’m Not the One*, a choice-driven narrative called *and Then There was One*, and an immersive VR experience *The Last One*. This trilogy explores interactive narratives to create challenging experiences and to trigger emotion and empathy in the audience. It revolves around important recent controversies such as the travel ban, extremist terrorism, and media against Muslims. Another case study called *KOOK* is an interface for composing a soundtrack with Persian instruments for a nearly silent film called *Elevators*. *KOOK + Elevators* communicates with its users by building a bridge between sound and visuals. The last case study is *Unusual Suspects*, a video installation that focuses on the stereotype of a criminal, submitted in people’s minds by the media.

At the end of this thesis, I will conclude whether this research and case studies could be considered as a successful path or not, a path for influencing racism and discriminatory behaviors as a malfunction in the human ethical system.



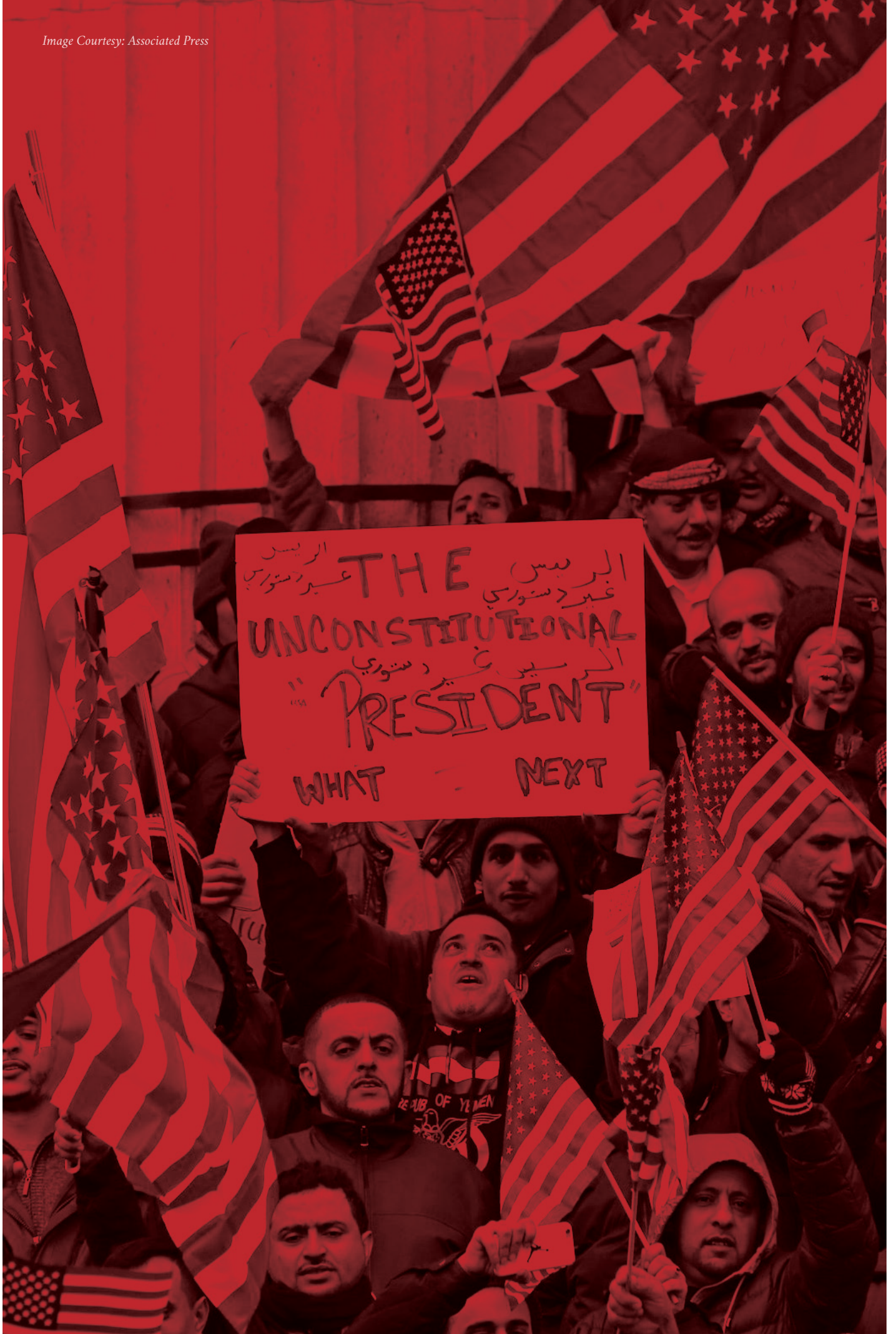








GO BACK TO YOUR COUNTRY  
YOU F\*\*\*\*\* ARAB!



Chapter II

# The Mad World

دنیای دیوانه



Today when we turn on the television or read the news, all we see is war and terror. The world is becoming madder every day. Terrorist groups attack people using fear as a weapon. Governments become friends or enemies based on whether it benefits them. The media covers the news with their own slant. In the midst of this, people of different nations and cultures are being played as if they are on a chessboard—real communication is buried under the ashes of war and fear.

We must restore the connection between people and talk to one another. We must search for the roots of racism, terror, and war. Then we will be able to open the door to reality and face our biases. The key to unlock this door could be hidden in our daily lives, and we do not even notice it.



# CULTURAL AND SOCIAL MISUNDERSTANDING

The world is filled with confusion and misunderstanding between different nations, both socially and culturally. People could know more about each other from history and books or reliable resources—when they are not in the mood for reading, they often only count on the news, internet, or social media for their information. Generally, people do not even seem to care. Either way, people create stereotypes of people from other nations and ethnicities in their minds. In the Merriam Webster Dictionary, the word “stereotype” is defined:

*“An often unfair and untrue belief that many people have about all people or things with a particular characteristic”*

In his book *Dictionary of Psychology*, psychologist Mike Cardwell explains, “A stereotype is an overgeneralized belief about a particular group of people. Although it is often discussed in a negative way, stereotyping is really more of a general cognitive process that does not have to be negative” (Cardwell, 1999). It can even be accurate at times, such as the stereotype that all crows are black and have black eyes, and that happens to be true. On the negative side, someone’s prejudice against Muslims may be rooted in an inaccurate stereotype, such as “all Muslims are Arabs and live in the desert.” Stereotyping

including religion can go too far: in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks in which fifteen of the nineteen hijackers were of Saudi Arabian origin and all were of so-called Islam faith, Muslims complained of increased scrutiny and racial profiling at airports. In a poll conducted by the Boston Globe, 71 percent of Blacks and 57 percent of Whites believed that “Arabs and Arab-Americans should undergo special, more intensive security checks before boarding airplanes” (Donaldson-Evans, 2015). Some Muslims and Arabs have complained of being held without explanation and subjected to hours

of questioning and arrest without cause. Such cases have led to lawsuits being filed by the American Civil Liberties Union. Fox News radio host Mike Gallagher suggested that airports have a “Muslims Only” line in the wake of the 9/11

attacks stating “It is time to have a Muslims check-point line in America’s airports and have Muslims be scrutinized. You better believe it, it is time.” (Shakir, 2006)



Cartoon Courtesy: Khalil Bendib | Muslim Observer

As an Iranian living in the United States, I have had these experiences on multiple occasions—I've been stereotyped about my country and language many times. Once in Winter, my teacher said to me "Are you excited to see snow? Have you seen it before?" Tehran had already had its first snow of the season. Another example: my friend gave me an Arabic article and asked me to translate it for him. I told him my language is Persian, not Arabic. Sometimes I felt it was enough that my friends or companions knew

where Iran was on a map. In the best case, they knew us from the news and what they see on television and movies.

After reviewing the short history of these two nations in the Introduction and above examples, we can see how people on both sides could create stereotypes of the other. A few years ago, an Iranian reporter went to the streets of New York and asked American people this question: "Do you know Iran?" Below are some of their shocking responses (IRIB, 2007):

- *I think it is a food.*
- *It should be a religion I am not sure.*
- *Is it a country? In South Africa?*
- *Of course, it is our enemy!*

To some Americans, Iran seems like an unsafe and unfriendly country. It is difficult for Iranians to be known as someone's enemy rather than by their thousand years of ancient history and culture.

Video stills Courtesy: Comedy Central's *The Daily Show* | Jason Jones in Iran (Jones, 2009)



Around the same time, *The Daily Show* with Jon Stewart sent two of its staff to Iran in the hopes of breaking stereotypes. After almost a year of planning, *The Daily Show*'s senior foreign correspondent Jason Jones and his intrepid producer Tim Greenberg traveled to Iran before the Iranian elections. They did what no other talk show has ever done: they covered Iran by actually going there and they came back with a series of reports. In an interview with *Voice of America*, the producer Tim Greenberg

said, "We were just trying to break some of the stereotypes that had existed up to that point, which was it's a terrifying place; the people all hate us; they're all terrorists and we don't have anything in common with the people of Iran" (VOA, 2009). While their focus was on comedy and politics, they also had moments when they encountered the humanity, kindness, and hospitality of Iranians. They asked the Iranian people this question: "what do you think about America?" Here are some of the responses:

- *I love America and American people.*
- *They are really nice people. I have friends in America.*
- *Do not judge us by watching the news and the government's propaganda. I love America.*



When I came to the United States, I could feel the pressure of people's eyes on me when I told them "I'm from Iran." I could see that they were reviewing pictures of my country in their mind based on the existing stereotypes of the Middle East: American flags on fire, terrorist groups, war, and chaos. I gave up on explaining myself to everyone and tried to bring the dis-

cussion and dialogue into my work. At this moment, two nations are far away from understanding each other. However, it is possible for people to at least try to understand. Enhancing their knowledge, reading more, ignoring the news and creating a connection with no prejudice would be a good start. My work in this thesis uses these approaches for its audience.



*Image Courtesy: Associated Press | Pro-government rally in Iran, the most common picture in western people's minds*

# PREJUDICE, RACISM, ISLAMOPHOBIA

Lack of knowledge of culturally and politically related issues can cause misunderstanding between nations, races, and ethnicities, resulting in prejudice, racism and discrimination.

In the Merriam Webster Dictionary, discrimination is defined as:

*“A (1): preconceived judgment or opinion*

*A (2): an adverse opinion or leaning formed without just grounds or before sufficient knowledge*

*B: an instance of such judgment or opinion*

*C: an irrational attitude of hostility directed against an individual, a group, a race, or their supposed characteristics”*

By definition, prejudice is not the same thing as stereotyping or discrimination, although the three phenomena are intimately related.

In his book *Handbook of Prejudice, Stereotyping, and Discrimination*, Todd Nelson describes this relationship: “Prejudice and stereotyping are biases that work together to create and maintain social inequality. Prejudice refers to the attitudes and feelings—whether positive or negative and whether conscious or nonconscious—that people have about members of other groups. In contrast, stereotypes have traditionally been defined as specific beliefs about a group, such as descriptions of what members

of a particular group look like, how they behave, or their abilities” (Nelson, 2009). As such, stereotypes are cognitive representations of how members of a group are similar to one another and different from members of other groups. Importantly, people can be aware of cultural stereotypes and have cognitive representations of those beliefs without personally endorsing such stereotypes, without feelings of prejudice, and without awareness that such stereotypes could affect one’s judgment and behavior.



Prejudice and stereotyping are generally considered to be the product of adaptive processes that simplify an otherwise complex world so that people can devote more cognitive resources to other tasks. However, despite any cognitively adaptive function they may serve, using these mental shortcuts when making decisions about other individuals can have serious negative ramifications. The horrible mistreatment of particular groups of people in recent history, such as that of religious communities, ethnic groups, women, and

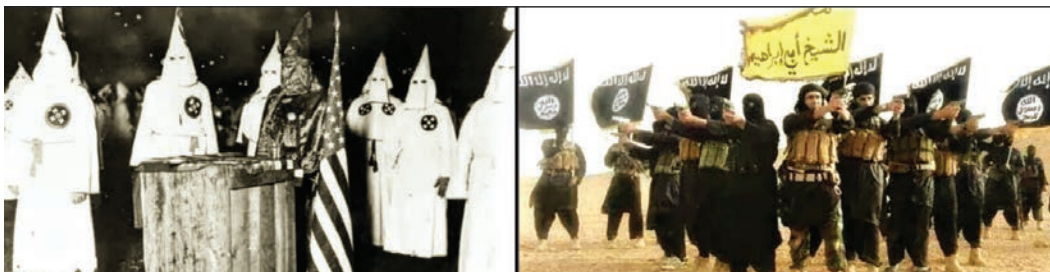
homosexuals, has been the major impetus for the study of prejudice and stereotyping. Thus, the original conceptions and experiments were concerned almost entirely with conscious, negative attitudes and explicitly discriminatory actions. However, with the recent political atmosphere and a divided nation, as the social acceptability of prejudice and stereotypes has changed, the manifestations of prejudice and stereotypes have also changed. In response to these changes, and given that people who reject prejudice and stereotyping can still



unwittingly internalize stereotypic representations, the study of prejudice and stereotyping has recently moved to include beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors that could be considered positive and not obviously or overtly prejudiced.

When stereotypical beliefs combine with prejudicial attitudes and emotions such as fear and hostility, they can drive the behavior called discrimination. “In the absence of any real moral differences, it is the favoring of one group – or a

member of a group – over another group, or a member of it” (Jones, 1997). Who determines these differences? For example, a conservative, right-wing party member who believes that since they are experiencing terrorist attacks by some Muslims (and not a deviant group), that all Muslims must be banned from entering their country. As you can see, these driven behaviors can be dangerously effective on society and on people’s lives. This way of thinking is considered Islamophobia.



*Image Courtesy: Unknown | Does KKK represent Christianity like most western people think ISIS represents Islam?  
Could they also be considered as terrorists?*

Image Courtesy: Bill Pugliano | Getty Images



Islamophobia is when Muslims are the victims of prejudice and discrimination because of their religion. Almost a quarter of the world's population is Muslim and many of them are experiencing it at the moment. Islamophobia can result in Muslims being targeted online or in person. They can be badly treated, insulted or even physically hurt. Some people have blamed all Muslims for terrorist attacks carried out by extreme groups who say they follow Islam. Those extreme beliefs of hatred and violence have little to do with

what most Muslims believe—most people are not aware of that. Consequently, people begin to stereotype and generalize what they see around them or in the media. Terrorist attacks around the world and war in the Middle East are just two typical examples that catch people's eyes and stop them from facing the truth.

In today's world, living as a person of color born in a majority Muslim country could be frightening for some people. In order to be given equal treatment, some people are

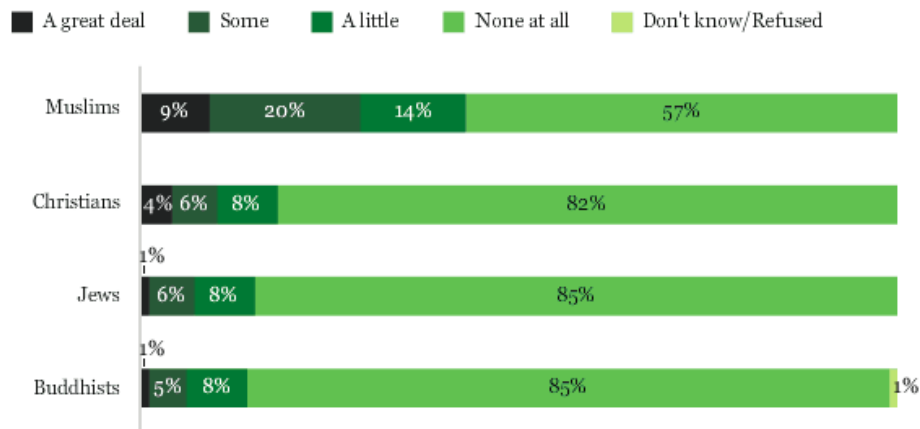
afraid to say that they are Muslim. 9/11 exacerbated this problem. Within days of the attacks, many found a convenient scapegoat. Muslims, Arabs and anyone who remotely resembled the terrorists seen on TV, whether in the feature, dress or accent, became targets of retaliation. That stereotyping exists to this day.

According to research done by *Gallup* in 2010, more than 40% of Americans admitted to having at least slightly prejudiced feelings towards Muslims. That is more than twice the number of Americans who admitted to those same feelings towards Christians or Jewish people. In that same poll, more than 52% of Muslim Americans claimed that government's policy in the US singles out Muslims for surveillance and monitoring (Gallup Center for Muslim Studies, 2010).

*Image Courtesy: Gallup*

#### *Americans Express the Most Prejudice Toward Muslims*

Thinking honestly about your feelings, how much prejudice, if any, do you feel toward each of the following religious groups?





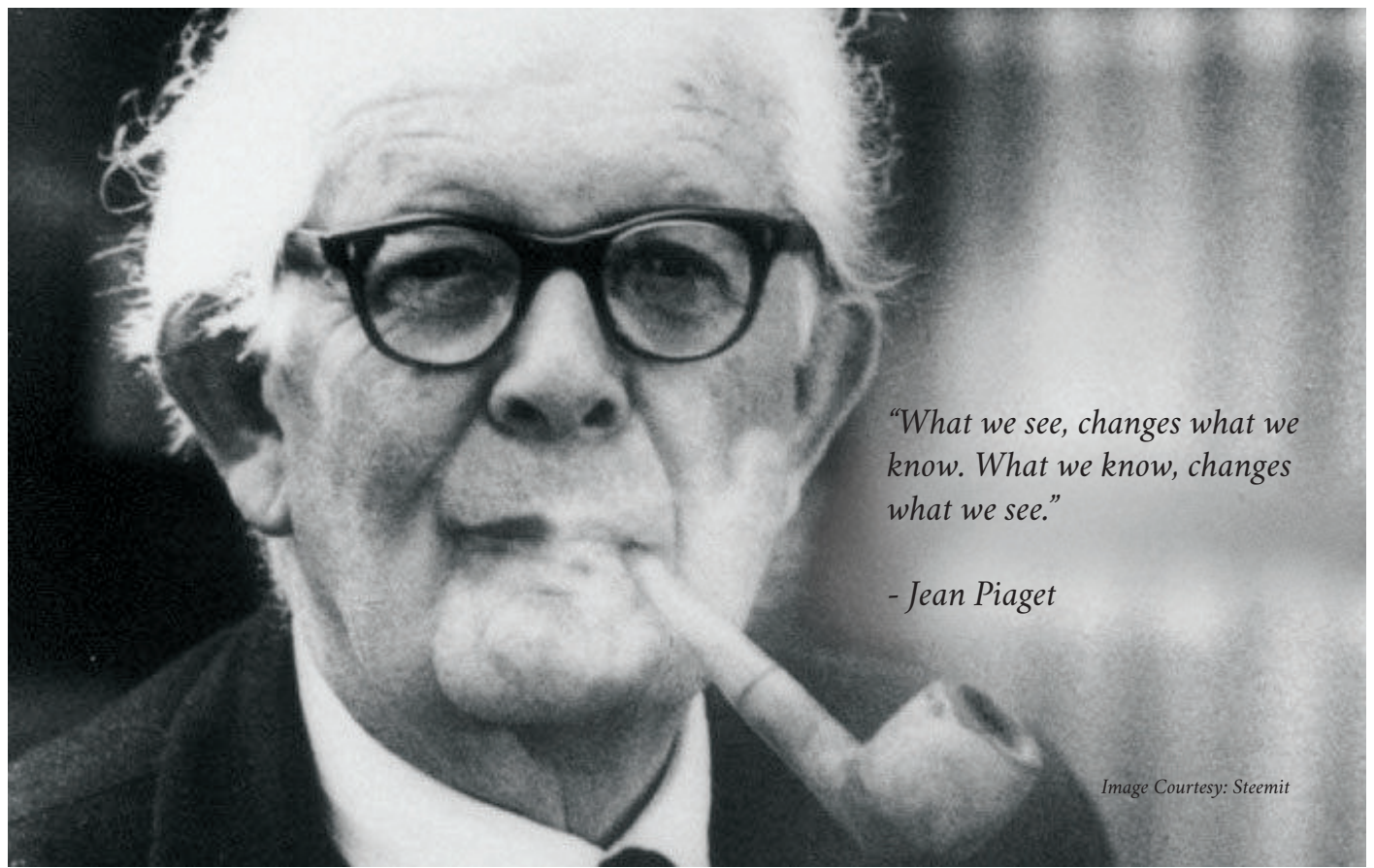


**Less Islam  
Brings  
Less  
Terror  
No Islam  
No Terror**



Humans unconsciously engage in a series of complex cognitive processes that help them cope with their environment and react quickly to incoming information. As an example, when we encounter another human being, we might map perceptions into categories, such as racism and Islamophobia. These cognitive structures are called schemas. Psychology theorist Jean Piaget introduced the term schema, and its use was popularized through his work. According to his theory of cognitive develop-

ment, children go through a series of stages of intellectual growth. In Piaget's theory, "a schema is both the category of knowledge as well as the process of acquiring that knowledge. He believed that people are constantly adapting to their environment as they take in new information and learn new things. As experiences happen and new information is presented, new schemas are developed and old schemas are changed or modified. We draw inferences and make predictions about a new person

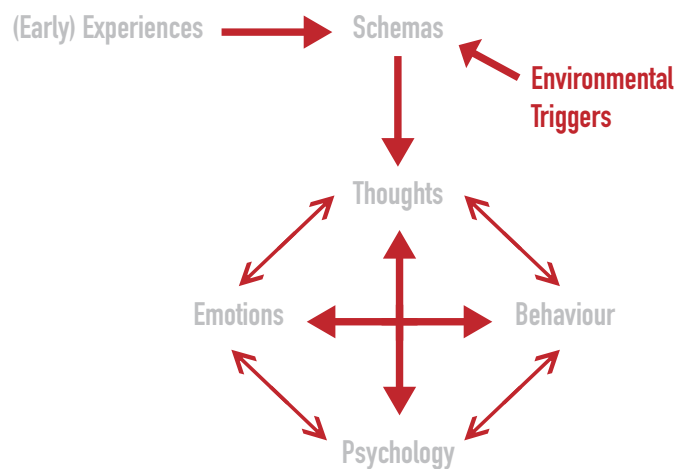


*"What we see, changes what we know. What we know, changes what we see."*

*- Jean Piaget*

*Image Courtesy: Steemit*

*Jean Piaget's Schemas Theory*



we meet through this process. This involves both cognitive beliefs (stereotypes) and affective feelings (prejudices) about the groups with which we associate the person. They happen almost instantaneously and whether we want them to or not” (Cherry, 2018).

People like to see themselves in a positive light and distinguish their groups as more important or significant than others. This is done by looking down on members of other groups, and by holding negative attitudes about the individual

because they belong to a different group. Classic and contemporary research in social psychology such as Illusory Superiority theory by Van Yperen and Buunk (1991) supports the idea as people tend to respond more favorably to others if they share a common identity, religiously, politically, socially, or racially (Hoorens, 1993).

As Vera Hoorens suggests in her article *Self-enhancement and Superiority Biases in Social Comparison* (1993), people who are “high” in a personality trait often engage in

stereotypical thinking and they respond to feeling threatened with prejudicial and even hostile attitudes toward those who are different (Hoorens, 1993). Throughout history, humans have fought over limited resources. Our brains evolved for the world that we were brought up to. Therefore, we must strive to have belief systems that reject what may be a natural inclination to not trust or hold negative attitudes about people who are different than us.

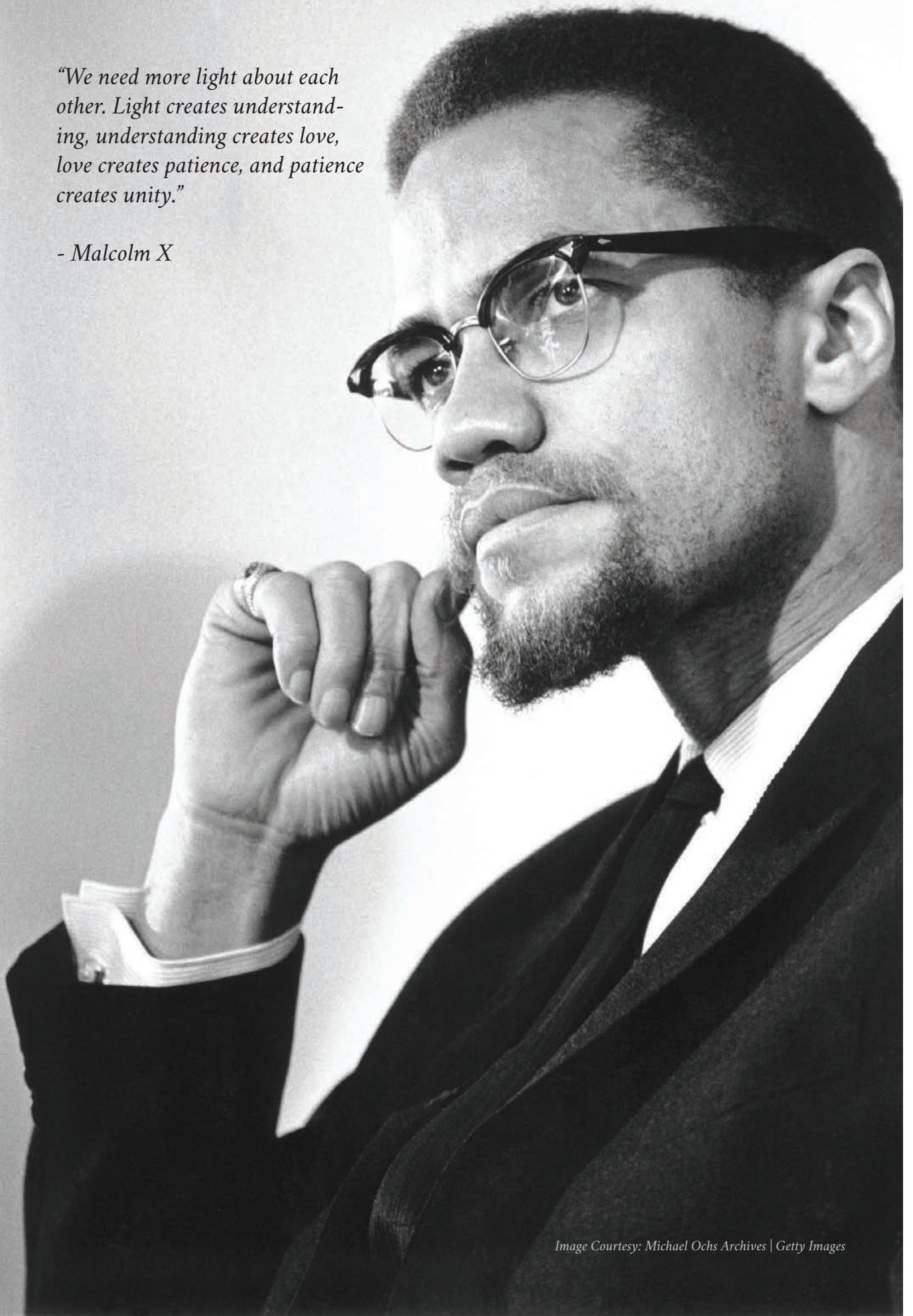
Hoorens adds that “people who are high in dominance tend to be in a profession that promotes hierarchy or in positions of authority. High dominance individuals are more inclined to hold prejudicial attitudes towards members of minority groups” (Hoorens, 1993). Racism provides the means of feeling superior. Humans project their negative feelings outward onto others, especially the weak and vulnerable. In the absence of experiences to widen the horizon, people remain ignorant of the realities of others. People tend to fear what they are ignorant of.

I believe that all these cognitive processes can be influenced. Human conscious can be either defensive or defective. Psychologists and cognitive scientists consider “empathy” as a key to unlock human conscious and influence it. I use this key as the most important communicative tool in my works to affect my audience’s minds and beliefs. I’ll explain more about this helpful tool in the following chapters.



*"We need more light about each other. Light creates understanding, understanding creates love, love creates patience, and patience creates unity."*

*- Malcolm X*



# MEDIA MISREPRESENTATION



How does misrepresentation in the media affect the way people view themselves and misunderstand the world around them? According to a 2007 US Census Bureau “Statistical Abstract of the US”, teens and adults spend an average of five months a year consuming various types of media (US Census Bureau, 2007). How much of this media consumption colors our perception of the real world?

The media plays a vast role in shaping our perception of reality. If the media creates a more unbiased view of minorities, it could possibly erode the stereotypes that are attributed to them and create an atmosphere that is almost free of prejudice. Unfortunately, there is currently no such medium. Based on the study “The Representation of British Muslims in the National Print News Media,” conducted by Cardiff University, two-thirds of



the stories published about Islam and Muslims between 2000 and 2008 contain the idea that Islam is a threat, backward, dangerous or a source of problems. The most common adjective used about Muslims in the press were *extremist*, *militant*, *radical*, *fundamentalist* and *fanatic* (Moore, Mason, Lewis, 2008).

We hear a lot of news about terrorism at the moment and that is mainly because of public interest in the story. The news media reports on topical events that revolve around terrorist attacks. This is frequently the only time

that Muslims appear in the news. It is easy for people to come away from these reports by associating Muslims with terrorism. In many cases, the press talks and writes about Muslims in ways that would not be acceptable if the reference were to any other minorities. If a person who is Muslim commits a crime, news reports label the person by his/her religion. However, if the person was from any other religion they would be labeled by their country's name or city instead of their religion.



Image Courtesy: Philippe Huguén | AFP/Getty Images

The media and the news continue to use terms such as *Islamic Terrorism* or *Radical Islam*. Are these the right terms to use for deviant and dangerous ideologies? Even when former President Obama was avoiding the use of “Radical Islamic Terrorism,” the media and some groups of people were not happy about it. In September 2016 interview with CNN, Obama responded to a question about why he did not use the term. He explained:

*“I have said repeatedly that where we see terrorist organizations like Al-Qaeda or ISIS, they have perverted and distorted and tried to claim the mantle of Islam as an excuse for basically barbarism and death. What I have been careful about when I describe these issues is to make sure that we do not lump these murderers into the billion Muslims that exist around the world including those in this country who are peaceful and responsible. What I learned from listening to some of these Muslim families both in the United States and overseas is that when you start calling these organizations Islamic terrorists, the way it’s received by our friends and allies around the world is that somehow Islam is terroristic. If you had an organization that was going around killing and blowing people up and said we are on the vanguard of Christianity, as a Christian I’m not going to let them claim my religion and say you are killing for Christ. I would say that is ridiculous”*

(CNN Presidential Town Hall, 2016)





The use of the words such as “Islam” and “Muslims” in the media matters. It transfers messages and pictures to the minds of the audience. Based on the 2005 article, “Media has anti-Muslim Bias, Claims Report” by *The Guardian* newspaper, nearly half of the 2,420 people interviewed in the US and western Europe said that TV documentaries had a strong or very strong influence on their views of Muslims. For television news program, the figure was 41%, while 36% of respondents said the same about newspaper coverage. Around

37% of respondents said they had very limited exposure to news and information about Islam, while nearly three-quarters said the media depicts Muslims and Islam accurately only half the time (*The Guardian*, 2005).

The negative portrayal of Muslims in media coverage leads to anti-Muslim hate crimes and injustices such as discrimination, stereotyping and murder. Based on the *American Bureau of Justice Statistics*, anti-Muslim incidents have been rising since 2012, and the

*Extremist*

*Iran* **Terror** *Afghanistan* **Radical** *Middle East*  
*Syria* **Bomb** **Islam** *Oil* **War** *Refugee*  
**ISIS** *Enemy* **Muslim** *Iraq* **Nuclear** **Terrorism**  
**Attack** *Threat* **Terrorist** *Arabs*  
*Sanction*

Image Courtesy: *American Sniper* (2014) | Warner Bros.



*Homeland* (2011) | Showtime



*Argo* (2012) | Warner Bros.



*Alexander* (2004) | Warner Bros.

number of hate crime attacks rose after the Paris terrorist attacks in 2015. There were more than 6000 anti-Muslims hate crimes found in the US in 2014 (Langton, 2017).

Muslims are almost always depicted offensively in movies, television shows, and video games. In his book *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People*, Prof. Jack Shaheen at Southern Illinois University claims that out of 1000 films from 1896 to 2007 that included Islamic references, 12 were

positive, 52 were neutral and over 900 were negative (Shaheen, 2014). This trend has been continuous, and it became worse after 9/11. Television shows such as *24* and *Homeland* are the most evident examples of this. In these shows, we see American heroes who hunt terrorists (who are depicted mostly as Muslims) in order to keep America safe. Also in movies, these characteristics merge with Muslim countries' stereotypes. Specifically, the ones that occur in the middle of a war in the Middle East and

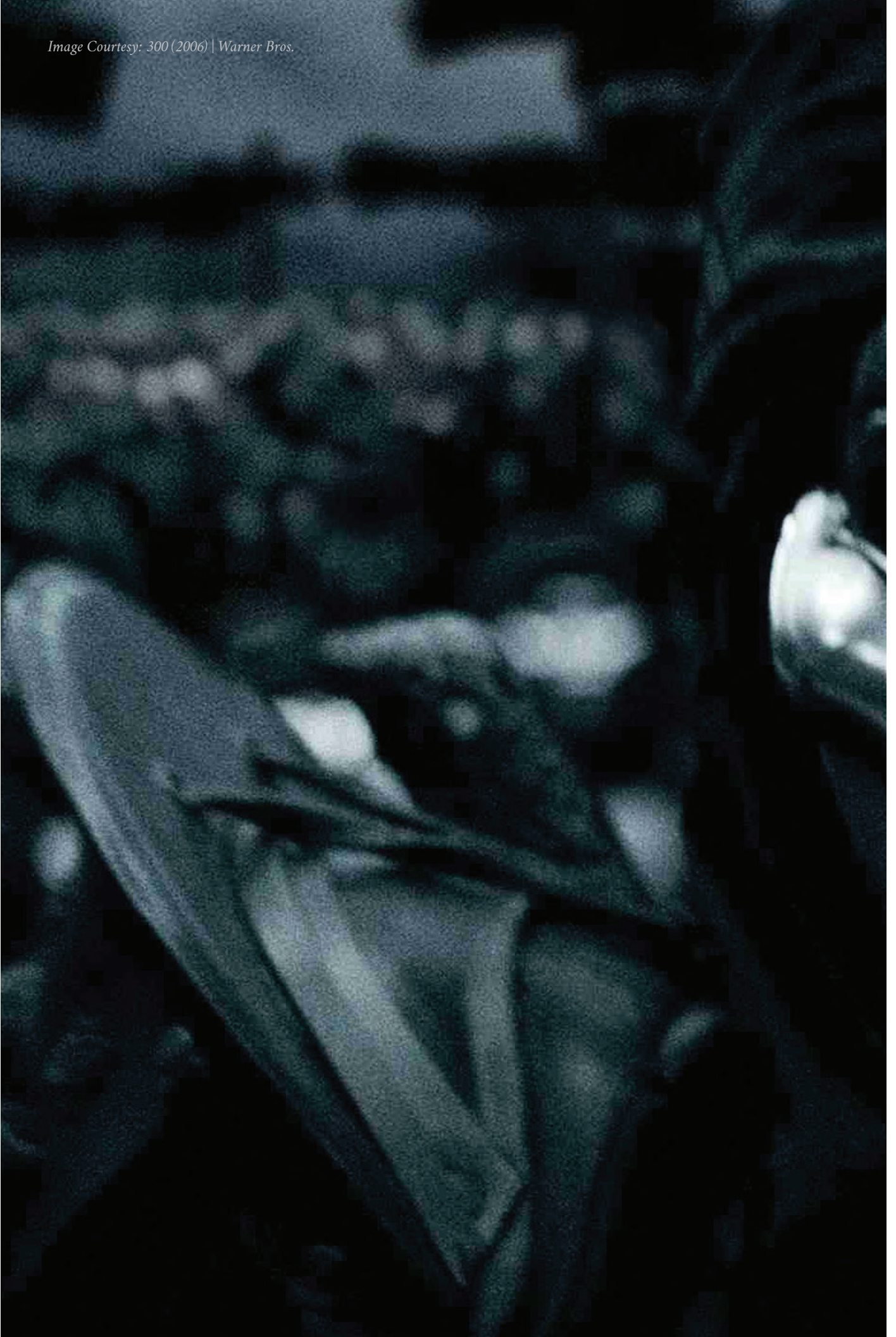
US soldiers are the heroes in their stories. Typically, we see a poor and dirty town filled with people who carry bombs, adults or children. American heroes show up, kill them and save the world. Hollywood produces at least one movie of this kind every year. *12 Strong* (2018), *13 Hours* (2016), *American Sniper* (2014), and *Lone Survivor* (2013) are notable examples.

It is not only about Islam. Iranians and their history have been the subject of these stereotypes as well. The movie *300*, a 2006 adaptation of Frank Miller's 1998 graphic novel, was criticized for its racist portrayal of combatants in the Persian army at the 480 BC Battle of Thermopylae. Reviewers in the United States and elsewhere noted the "Political overtones of the West-against-Iran storyline and the way Persians are depicted as decadent, sexually flamboyant and evil in contrast to the noble Greeks" (Associated Press, 2007). In *Argo* (2012), the American hero

travels to Iran in order to save the hostages after the crisis in 1979. In this movie, Iran is pictured as a hell populated by crazy people. *Argo* was revenge that America could finally get from Iran for the hostage crisis in 1979. Eventually, in that year's political Oscar ceremony, *Argo* could win the best motion picture prize with a special announcement by the first lady Michelle Obama. There are other examples such as *Not Without My Daughter* (1991), *House of Sand and Fog* (2003), and *Alexander* (2004). Since the 1980s, Hollywood's depiction of Iran has vilified Iranians as in television programs such as *24* (2001), *John Doe* (2002), *On Wings of Eagles* (1986), and *Escape from Iran: The Canadian Caper* (1981). Critics maintain that Hollywood's "tall walls of exclusion and discrimination have yet to crumble when it comes to the movie industry's persistent misrepresentation of Iranians and their collective identity immersed in a long thread of history." (Afrasiabi, 2007)



*Image Courtesy: 300 (2006) | Warner Bros.*







Emotions

Audience

Cinematic  
Language

Tension

Interaction

Movies

choices

Dynamic  
Media

Storytelling

Consequences

Video  
Games

Conflict

Judgement

Moral  
Dilemma

Empathy

Choice-Driven  
Narrative

Racism

Islamophobia

Stereotype

Alternative  
Endings

Discrimination

Design

Experience

?

Chapter III  
**BEHIND THE SCENE**  
پشت صحنه

# INTERACTION + STORYTELLING

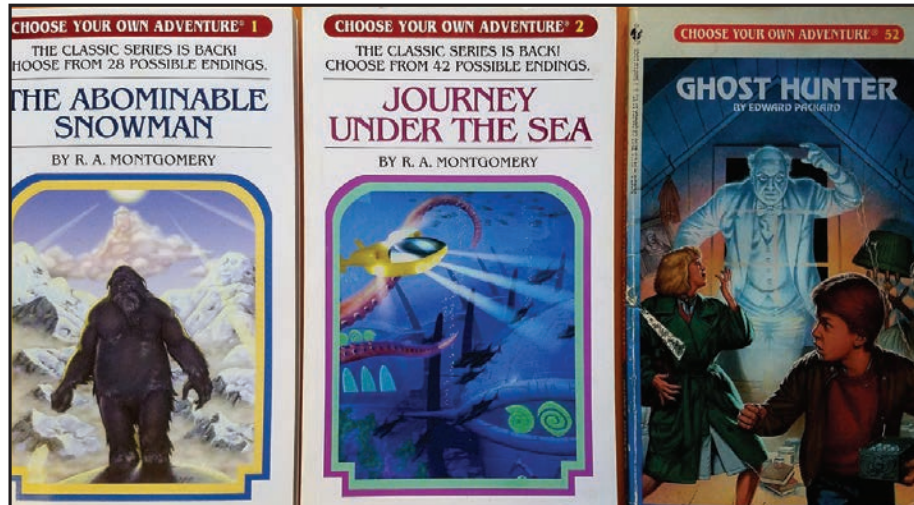
We all grow up with stories. Listening to our parents' bedtime stories, watching cartoons on television, reading books, watching movies, and listening to music all give us the experience of hearing a beginning, a middle, and an end to a story. As we grow up, we become storytellers ourselves. Recounting an interesting incident or a memory to our friends and trying to make it an engaging experience is an example of storytelling that we all have experienced. Although we always have the opportunity to modify our stories and change them however we want to, we never have the chance to interact with other people's stories and change them.

Early attempts at bringing interaction into storytelling led to the creation of *Choose Your Own Adventure* books based upon a concept created by Edward Packard, which were originally published by Constance Cappel's and R. A. Montgomery's Vermont Crossroads Press as the "Adventures of You" series, starting with Packard's Sugarcane Island

in 1976 (Kraft, 1981). It was a series of children's gamebooks in which each story is written from a second-person point of view, with the reader assuming the role of the protagonist and making choices that determine the main character's actions and the plot's outcome. In this format of the stories, after a couple of pages of reading, the protagonist faces two or three options; each of which leads to more options in different pages of the book, and then to one of many endings. The number of endings is not set, and varies from as many as 44 in the early titles, to as few as 8 in later adventures.

After these early attempts, researchers and scholars have been trying to understand and define the term "interactive storytelling" (also cited by some authors as "interactive narrative"). Barbaros Bostan and Tim Marsh, in their 2012 article called *Fundamentals of Interactive Storytelling*, explain that in interactive storytelling, "The author creates the setting, characters, and situation which the narrative must





*Choose Your Own Adventure Books*

address, but the user (also reader or player) experiences a unique story based on their interactions with the story world. The architecture of an interactive storytelling program includes a drama manager, user model, and agent model to control, respectively, aspects of narrative production, player uniqueness, and character knowledge and behavior” (Bostan and Marsh, 2012). The field of research and study surrounding interactive storytelling encompasses many disparate fields, including psychology, sociolo-

gy, cognitive science, linguistics, natural language processing, user interface design, computer science, and emergent intelligence. For me, interactive story design which focuses on creating meaningful participatory stories with aspects of psychology and sociology (and not just entertainment) is the most compelling. I am interested in the psychological processes that will make my audiences think about and consider a social or ethical question more than they do in their daily lives.

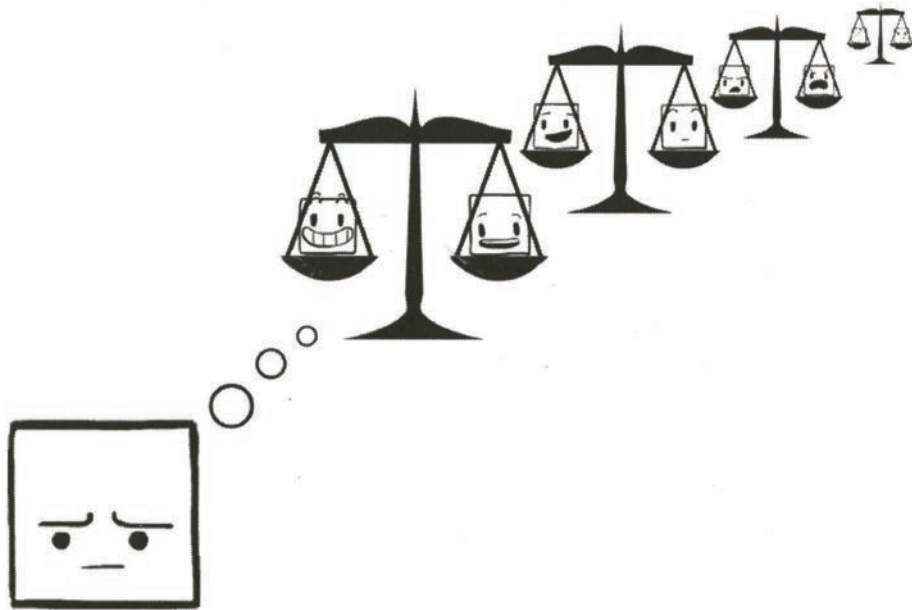
Chris Crawford, one of the pioneers of interactive storytelling, expands his ideology in his evocatively titled book *Chris Crawford on Interactive Storytelling*. He dictates the role of the participator in the interactive process: “Stories have a complex structure, are usually about people rather than things, and involve conflict” (Crawford, 2012). The idea of making decisions and the conflict following them is one of the most important cognitive processes in the human mind. Interactive stories that are psychology- or sociology-centered typically focus on this process. I look for ways to develop this process in my works.

Carolyn Handler Miller is one of the most inspiring people for me in terms of theoretical outlook to interactive storytelling. I had the chance to read her book *Digital Storytelling: A Creator’s Guide to Interactive Entertainment*. She has been a professional new media expert in the world of interactive storytelling, specifically in the field of game design. In her book, she determines

basic and helpful tools for creating a substantial interactive story. One of her tools is “tension.” She writes, “Tension keeps the audience riveted to the story, experiencing a mixture of apprehension and hope, wondering how things will turn out” (Miller, 2014). She also writes, “The risk of losing anything of great value to the protagonist can also produce dramatic tension.” In order to bring tension into my stories, I choose morality and ethics to be at the risk of being lost in my audience.

In order to create a challenging conflict and tension in an interactive storyline, we need to focus on choices we provide for the audience. The choices must be comprehensive, placed in the right points of the story, and balanced in terms of types and difficulty: “The player (audience) should be faced with decisions that are dramatically significant, balanced, and frequent” (Crawford, 2012).

*Image Courtesy: Chris Crawford | Balancing Player Decisions*



In interactive narratives, writers and designers use a branching structure where a single starting point may lead to multiple developments and outcomes, to develop the story and visualize it on paper. If the story includes dialogues, writers use a technique that Miller refers to as the “dialogue tree”, in which the player’s character or user is presented with several lines of dialogue to choose from. Each line will trigger a different response from the branching structure and lead the user or player’s character

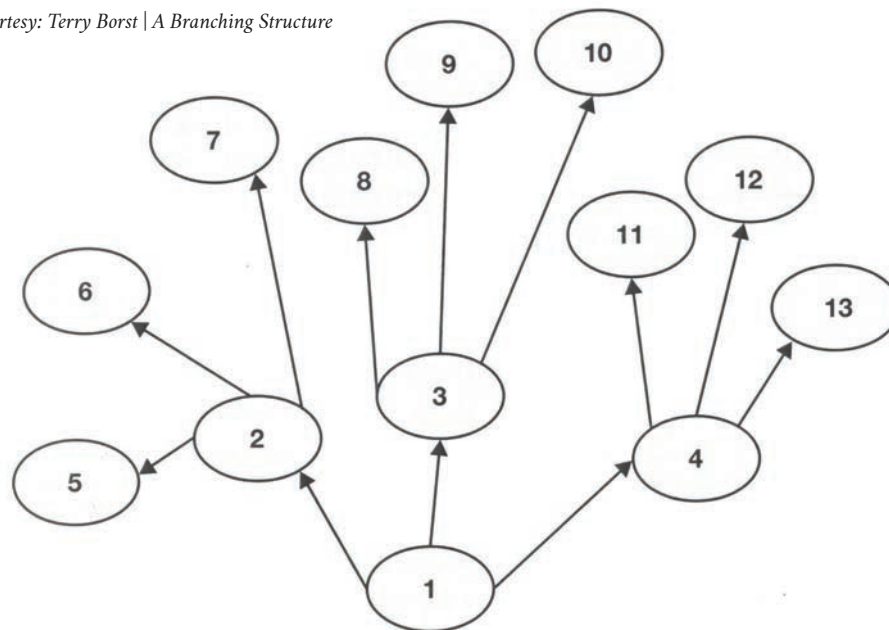
down different narrative paths. After the script is made into a visually accessible format (i.e., filmed into live action segments, animated and/or coded), choices could be depicted as hotspots on the screen (or whatever medium is used to display the story) which the character players could choose to manipulate the direction of the narrative. As for the dialogues, typically they would be represented by a summarized version (containing up to five words) or the mood of the sentence in one or two

words. For example, if the dialogue is: “I don’t believe that you were at the party on Saturday night”, the summarized version would be: “I don’t believe you” and the defining characteristic of the choice would be: “Doubt.” After selecting, the character in the narrative delivers the whole dialogue.

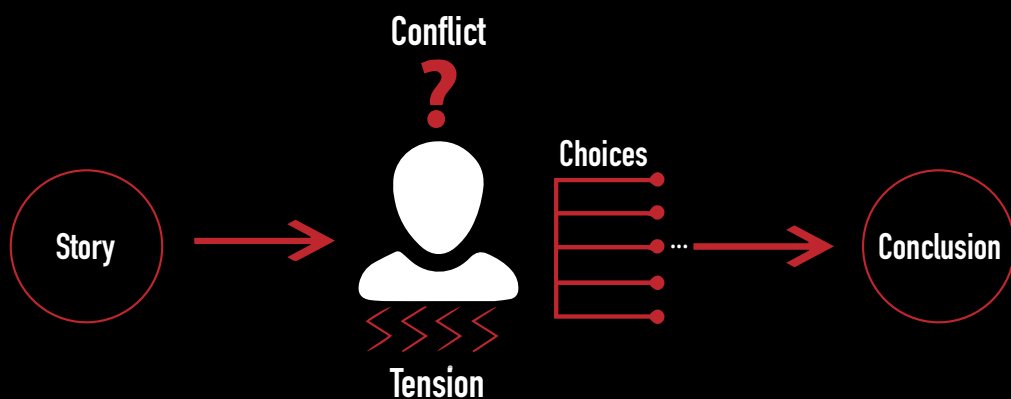
I believe that conclusions and endings of these narratives must be gripping and trigger emotions in the audience, such as feelings of victory, failure, happiness, or anger.

The experience must finish with the audience rethinking the whole story. This demands powerful, but balanced endings. For example, one conclusion could be a tragic ending for the character player, but there must be another non-tragic one that exists in order to make the audience feel that this is not an orchestrated story. Also, it’s possible to bring balance into one ending, where the character player might lose, but gain something in the end. Either way, with a proper conclusion, the sense of conflict must remain in the audience.

*Image Courtesy: Terry Borst | A Branching Structure*



The interactive story structure I use in this thesis and my case studies consists of multiple steps and elements that will be developed through the following chapters. Thus far, I have discussed how the interaction between the story and the audience leads to narrative choices and uses a branching structure. The audience will be impacted by tension and conflict inherent in the story, which will compel them to make specific narrative decisions. Each choice will lead to a different path through the storyline and eventually a different conclusion. In the following sections, I will discuss the triggering elements behinds conflict and tension in my works.





# CINEMATIC LANGUAGE



*Image Courtesy: Archdaily | Jean-Luc Godard films protests in Paris in 1968*

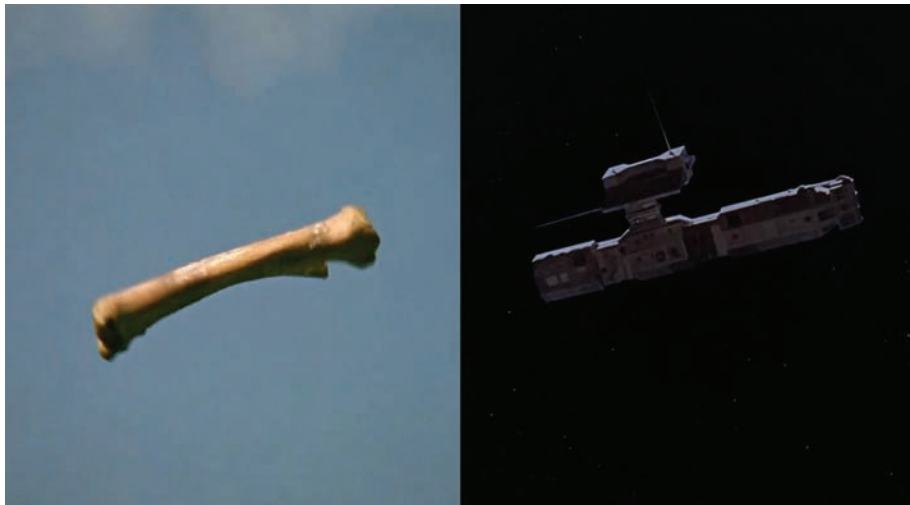
The great French filmmaker Jean Luc Godard once said, “Sometimes reality is too complex. Stories give it form.” The power of storytelling lies in its engaging and comprehensive process—it allows us to communicate with people in a form that we create. Behind every art piece, there is a story. Paintings, photos, sculptures and films all need to build a bridge between themselves and their audience; that bridge is a story. I have talked about how tension in my works can prepare the audience for a gripping and engaging decision-making experience. In this segment, I discuss the primary tool that I use

to provide tension to the audience, which is “cinematic language”. With it, filmmakers convey information to the audience which they are not able to with only words.

Cinematic language is the name given to the conventions of filmmaking that have evolved over time to become something like an overall film grammar. As with spoken language, we often take the conventions and structures of cinematic language for granted, allowing our brains to passively experience them without much, or any, conscious interpretation. The result is a sort of “invisibility” of

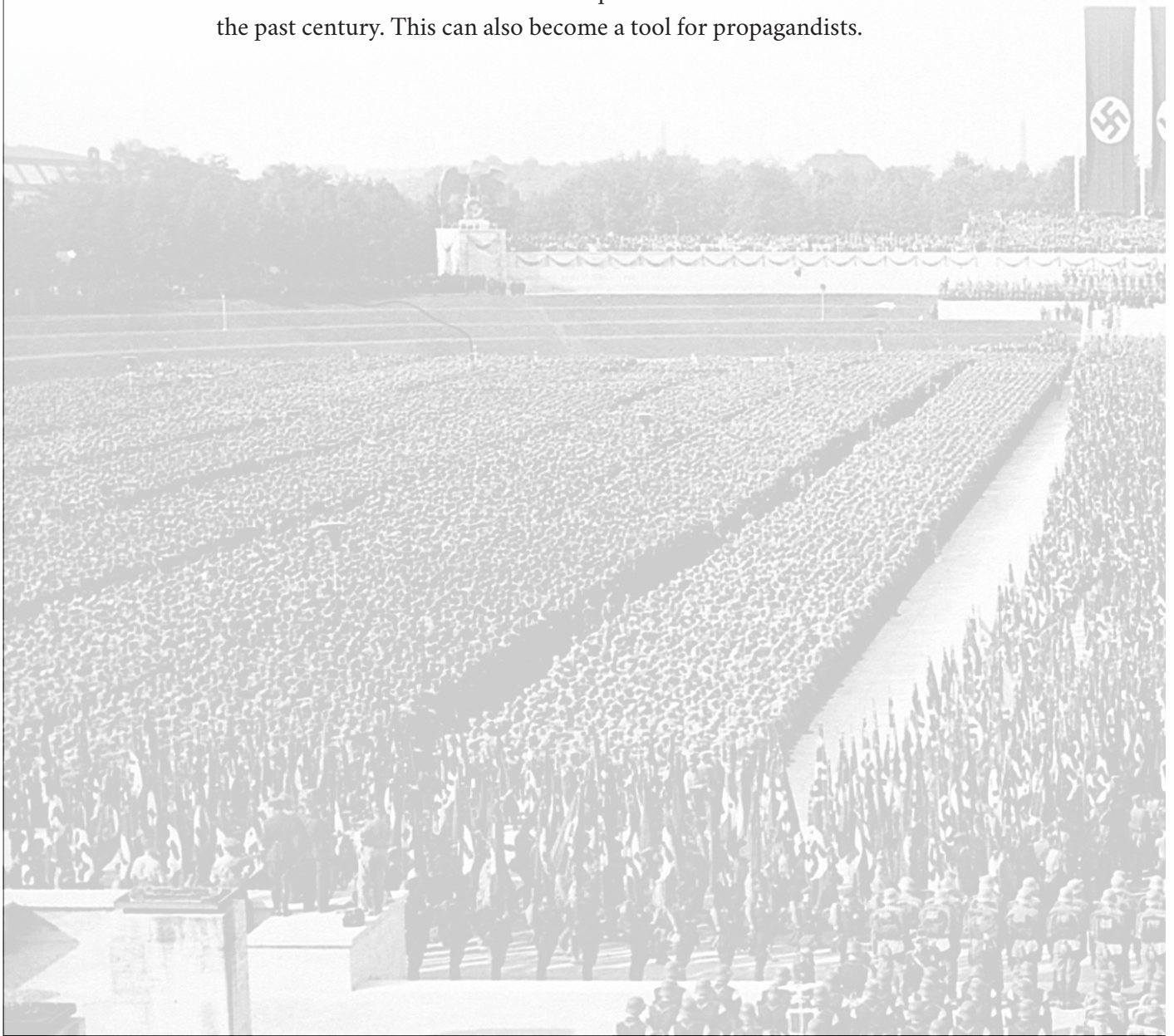
the techniques and strategies for the ordinary audience employed by filmmakers. As one tries to be more alert to all the layers of meaning in a movie, it is important to keep in mind the distinction between explicit and implicit meaning. As William Phillips defines in his 1999 book *Film: An Introduction*, explicit meanings are “general observations” included in the film about one or its more subjects. It is what has been clearly shown in film. An implicit meaning, by contrast, as Phillips mentions, is a “deeper level of interpretation of the content

of the film” and a viewer may use awareness of cinematic techniques (such as sound effects, editing or use of sets), satire, symbols and narratives or stories to help discover implicit meanings (Phillips, 2009). Cinematic language has its own alphabet. One needs to know how framing a shot in a particular way could add a specific meaning to a scene; how one can use sound and music to add an extra tone to the scene, and how editing the shots together in specific sequences could cause an implicit meaning to the story.



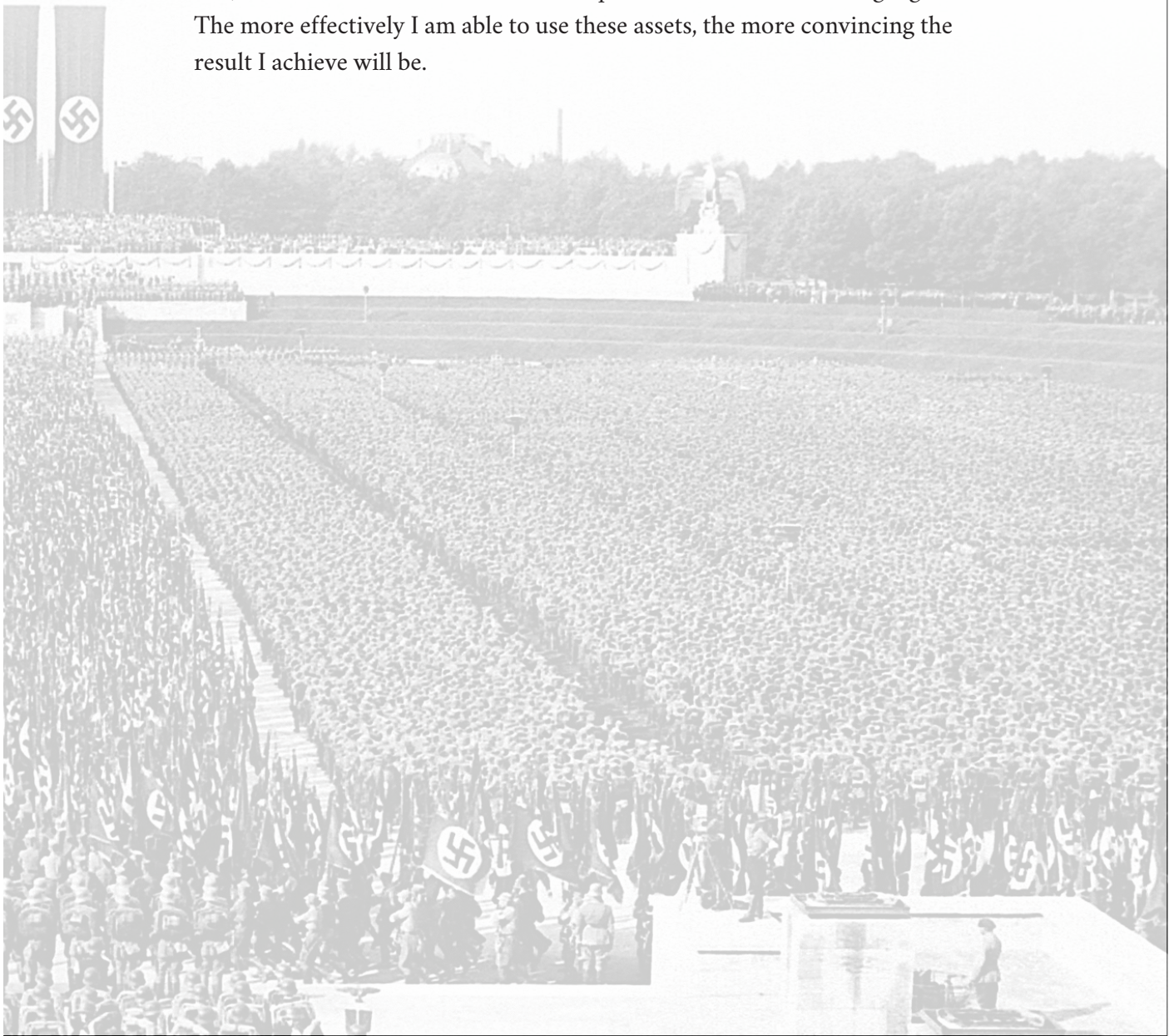
*Image Courtesy: 2001: A Space Odyssey directed by Stanley Kubrick | The sequence of satellites orbiting the Earth gives itself away as a representation of space warfare. The very first one, which we cut to from the flying bone shot, has a bone shaped feature at the top, signifying it as a tool just like the bone.*

As a filmmaker, I have a long history with creating a beginning, middle and end for a story. They are points throughout a film which make filmmakers able to jolt their audience and tell them what they want to say in the simplest way possible. A good storyteller is one who keeps the audience on track and shocks them at the right moment, with the narrative alongside the visuals. In that moment, filmmakers can transfer any ideas into the minds of the people who are watching and listening to the work. Being equipped with cinematic language and the tools it provides, filmmakers have had one of the most powerful tools of communication in the past century. This can also become a tool for propagandists.





As Martin Scorsese observed in a 2006 interview with the Edutopia website, a filmmaker such as Leni Riefenstahl used this opportunity in perhaps the worst way possible: her films created a successful outcome for her and the Nazis. In 1930 she used the power of cinematic language to depict the strength of the third Reich in *Triumph of the Will* and *Olympia* (Edutopia, 2006). These films sent a message to the world in a powerful way. Obviously, I am not trying to be a propagandist as she was. At the same time there is much that can be learned from her mastery of narrative, visual and sound. These are the helpful assets of cinematic language. The more effectively I am able to use these assets, the more convincing the result I achieve will be.





*Image Courtesy: Psycho (1960) shower scene. Directed by Alfred Hitchcock | Paramount Pictures*



The master of suspense, Alfred Hitchcock, once said “There is no terror in the bang, only in the anticipation of it.” He redefined the medium of cinema by his mastery of creating tension in the audience. There are multiple ways in which tension is built in films. Every camera shot, angle or movement helps to add or build tension within a certain scene. The way that the camera is placed (whether in low-angle or high-angle, wide shot or close up, etc.) determines the effect it has on the audience and this

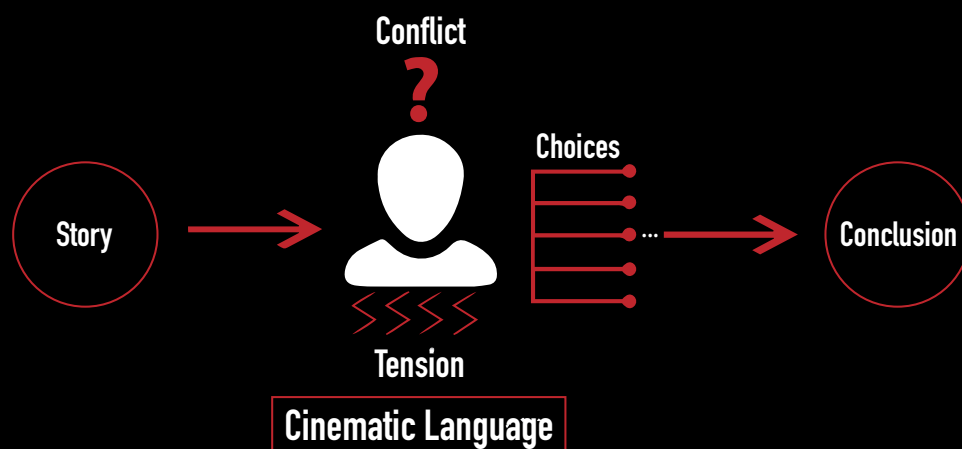
simple technique can profoundly affect a scene, making a sequence play as either comedy or horror. Likewise, sound plays a vital part in any film to help build tension. A frightening ambient sound effect or a rhythmic piano soundtrack could make a sequence dramatic or into a thriller. The setting of a scene is vital in any film. For example, the setting of a dark, scary forest is totally different to a sunny day in the countryside. The former has the potential to build a lot of tension, whereas the latter could build posi-

tive emotions for the audience. Lighting can also be used to build tension. There are two types of lighting: high key lighting and low key lighting. High key lighting is when the light in a scene is bright and sets a happy atmosphere. Low key lighting is the opposite: dark light is used to create a scary atmosphere. Lastly, acting can be a strong tension builder. An actor's facial expression and body language is vital to any performance—it can determine to the audience what type of role they are playing as well as their emotions towards what is happening or what has happened in the scene. These are the cinematic language's alphabet, which can be used to create tension in time-based visual storytelling.

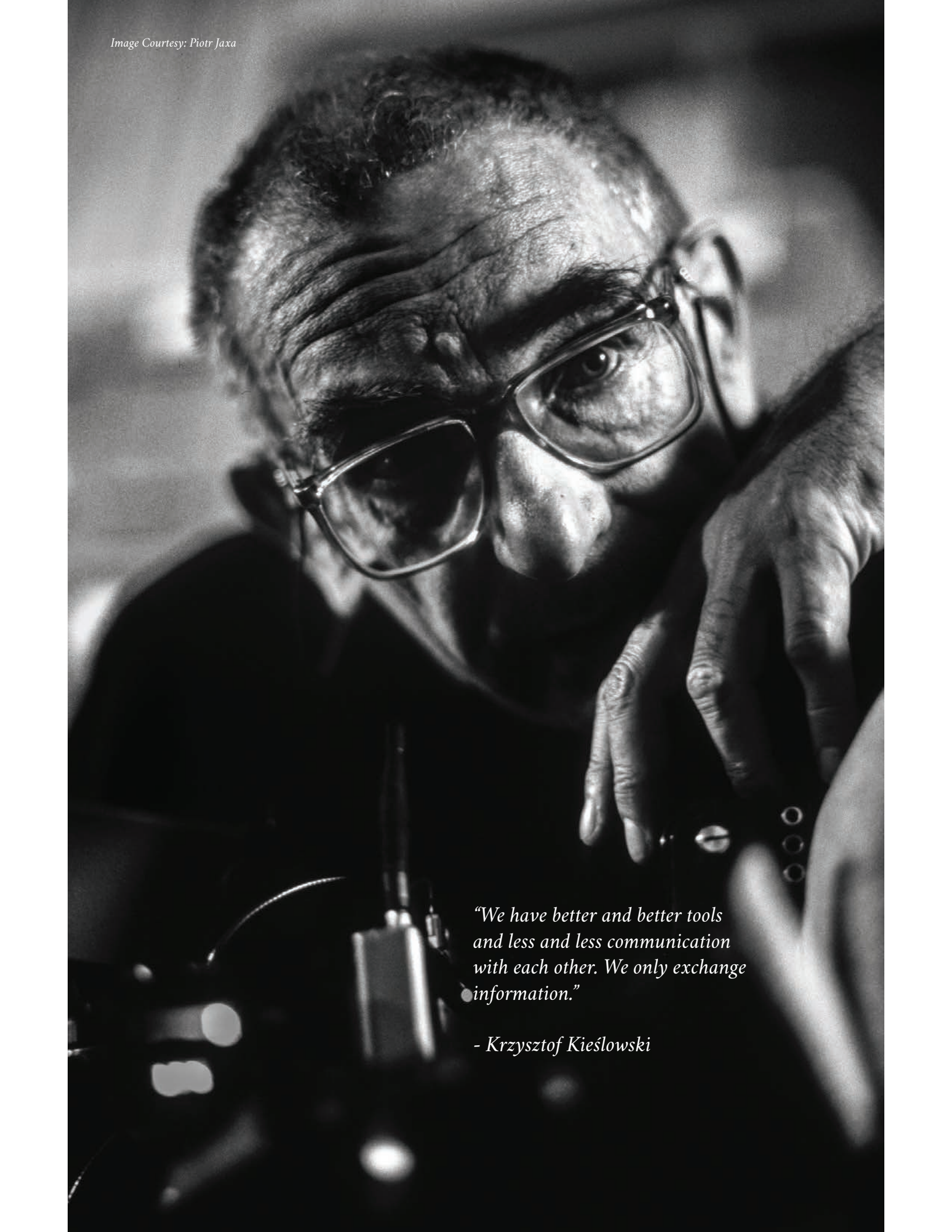


*Image Courtesy: A Clockwork Orange (1971) Directed by Stanley Kubrick | Warner Bros.  
The use of low key lighting and wide camera lens to create tension.*

In the process of the interactive stories I make, tension acts as a stimulant to evoke the audience's emotions and reactions. Cinematic language provides the means and framework to create tension in a meaningful way. The black and white visuals and dark ambient sounds in the *One* trilogy are examples of this kind of approach. Also, as in the *Elevators* + *KOOK* project, the power of cinematic language can help me add a new layer of implicit meaning to my work as an art piece. If I provide proper tension, alongside the conflict with moral dilemma (which will be discussed in the next segment) in this process, I can anticipate a functioning first stage leading to the decision-making stage of the narrative process.



*Image Courtesy: Piotr Jaxa*



*"We have better and better tools  
and less and less communication  
with each other. We only exchange  
information."*

*- Krzysztof Kieślowski*



# MORAL DILEMMA

We all encounter a point in our lives at which we have to make a decision. Accepting or declining a job offer, continuing or ending a relationship, and lying or telling the truth are some examples of these occasions. We also have to consider the consequences of our choices, although we are not sure what they will be: will I find another job opportunity after declining this one? These moments require choosing between what we perceive to be “the hard way” or “the easy way” and facing the sometimes challenging outcomes for each one. Sometimes these decisions have to be confronted with our morality and ethics: will I hurt my friend if I tell him the truth about me betraying his trust? These kinds of decisions cause a moral dilemma, which makes us sacrifice something in order to make a choice and overcome the conflict inside our minds. In this segment, I will discuss an important component in my projects—moral dilemma—and how this narrative tool can stimulate the conflict in the audience of my works.

In Book I of Plato’s *Republic*, Cephalus defines “justice” as speaking the truth and paying one’s debts. Socrates quickly refutes this account by suggesting that it would be wrong to repay certain debts—for example, to return a borrowed weapon to a friend who is not in his right mind. Socrates’ point is not that repaying debts is without moral import; rather, he wants to show that it is not always right to repay one’s debts, at least not exactly when the one to whom the debt is owed demands repayment. What we have here is a

conflict between two moral norms: repaying one’s debts and protecting others from harm. And in this case, Socrates maintains that protecting others from harm is the norm that takes priority.

Nearly twenty-four centuries later, Jean-Paul Sartre described a moral conflict the resolution of which was, to many, less obvious than the resolution to the Platonic conflict. Sartre (1957) tells of a student whose brother had been killed in the German offensive of 1940. The student wanted to avenge his

brother and to fight forces that he regarded as evil, but the student's mother was living with him, and he was her one consolation in life. The student believed that he had conflicting moral obligations. Sartre describes him as being torn between two kinds of morality: one of limited scope but certain efficacy—personal devotion to his mother—the other of much wider scope but uncertain efficacy: attempting to contribute to the defeat of an unjust aggressor.

What is common to the two well-known cases is conflict. In each case, an agent regards himself as having moral reasons to perform each of the two actions, but doing both actions is not possible. Ethicists have called situations like these *moral dilemmas*. “The crucial features of a moral dilemma are these: the agent is required to do one of two (or more) actions; the agent can do either one [or the other] of the actions; but the agent cannot do both (or all) of the



Video Still Courtesy: *Sophie's Choice* (1982) Directed by Allen J. Pakula | Universal Pictures





*Image Courtesy: Tom Koch | The Wreck of the William Brown book's cover*

actions. The agent thus seems condemned to moral failure; no matter what he does, he will do something wrong (or fail to do something that she ought to do)” (Sinnott-Armstrong, 1988).

These two cases strike many as perhaps too easy to be characterized as a genuine moral dilemma. In the Platonic case, the agent’s solution is clear: it is more important to protect people from harm than to return a borrowed weapon. And in any case, the borrowed item can be

returned later, when the owner potentially no longer poses a threat to others. In Sartre’s case, some might say that our uncertainty about what to do in this case is simply the result of uncertainty about the consequences. For example, if we were certain that the student could make a difference in defeating the Germans, the obligation to join the military would prevail. But if the student made little difference whatsoever in that cause, then his obligation to tend to his mother’s needs would take precedence, since

in that situation he is virtually certain to be helpful.

In order to consider moral dilemmas in a more complex way, moral precepts could be arranged and their level of difficulty in terms of making a decision could be escalated. Followed by that, situations can arise in which the same precept gives rise to conflicting obligations and there will not be a hard or an easy choice, as we saw in the previous examples. Perhaps the most widely discussed case of this sort is taken from William Styron's *Sophie's Choice* (Greenspan, 1983). In the novel, the character Sophie and her two children are at a Nazi concentration camp. A guard confronts Sophie and tells her that one of her children will be allowed to live and one will be killed. But it is Sophie who must decide which child will be killed. Sophie can prevent the death of either of her children, but only by condemning the other to be killed. The guard makes the situation even more excruciating by informing Sophie that if she chooses neither,

then both will be killed. With this added factor, Sophie has a morally compelling reason to choose one of her children. But for each child, Sophie has an apparently equally strong reason to save him or her. This type of moral dilemma, with no "good" answer—like *Sophie's Choice*—are the ones that I bring to my interactive stories.

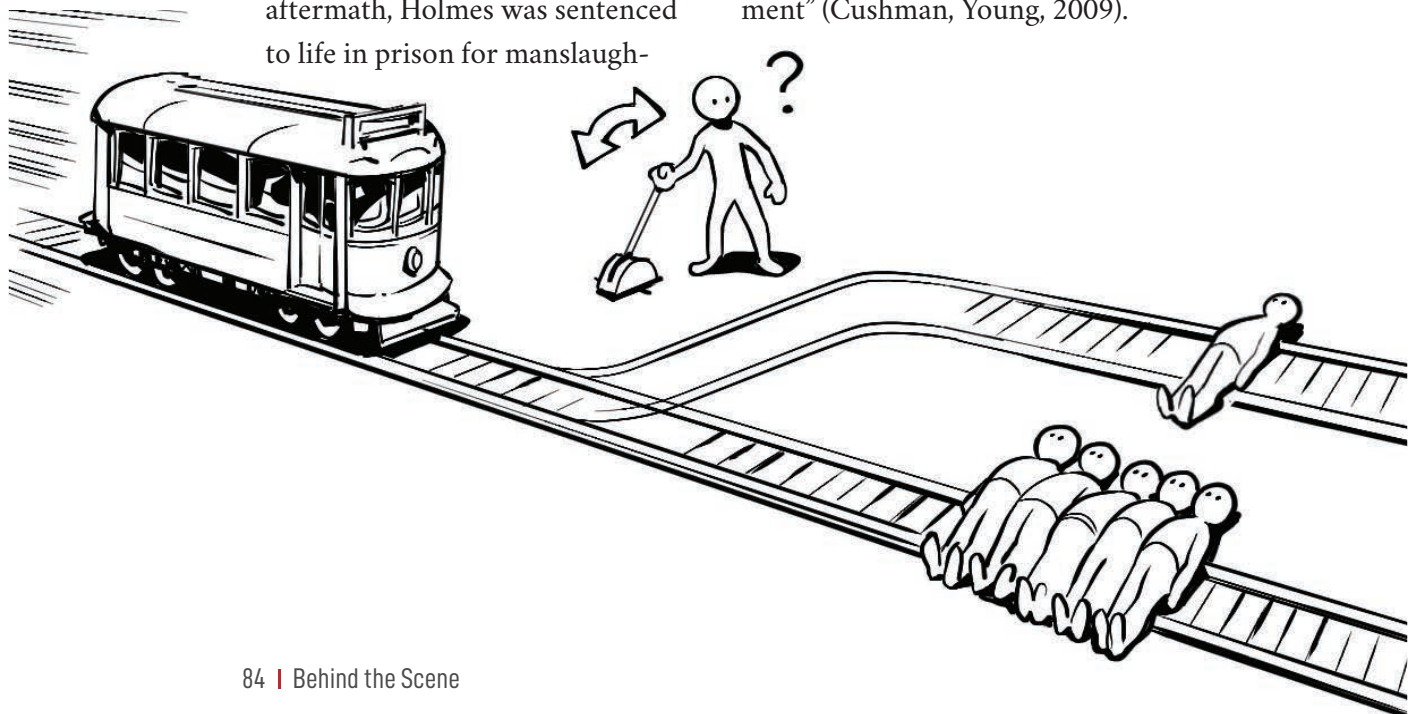
Iranian professor in Policy and Science, Amir Nazemi, expands the idea of a hierarchically moral dilemma in his article *Who Must We Choose to Kill?* (2017). He mentions "The Lifeboat Case" which examines the William Brown ship that left Liverpool, England for Philadelphia, Pennsylvania On March 13, 1841. In addition to her cargo, she carried seventeen crewmen and sixty-five passengers, who were mostly Scots and Irish emigrants. On the night of April 19, 250 miles from Newfoundland, the William Brown struck an iceberg and began to sink rapidly. There were two lifeboats, one small and one large. The captain and most of the crew took the small lifeboat, and



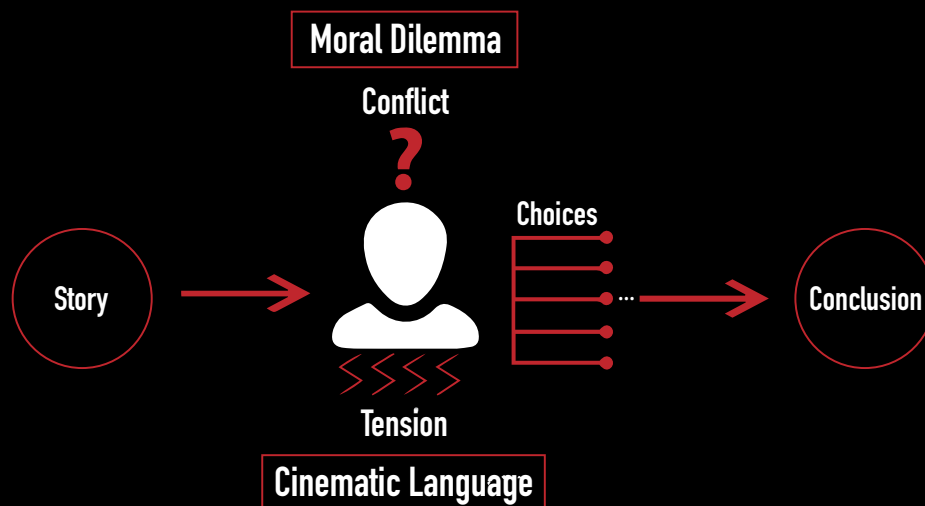
the passengers crowded aboard the large lifeboat. However, there was not enough space on the large lifeboat for all the passengers and it started to sink. A seaman named Holmes and the other crewmen began throwing people overboard. They threw 14 men and two women into the freezing water. They chose single men only, spared the married men on board, and threw the two women overboard only because they were sisters of a man already thus ejected and had demanded to be sacrificed with their kin. None of the crew was thrown out because they were needed to save other people's lives. In the aftermath, Holmes was sentenced to life in prison for manslaughter-

ter. Nazemi debates: what are the criteria for making such a decision? Do those criteria justify the consequences? How would we overcome the conflict inside us, if we had the same situation? (Nazemi, 2017).

The matter of "conflict" is the most important mechanism in human's psychology system arisen by moral dilemma: "Patterns of brain activation in some cases reveal signatures of cognitive conflict: a neuronal reconciliation between the competing demands of separate psychological mechanisms. Whichever process is more strongly activated determines the final moral judgment" (Cushman, Young, 2009).



Behind every decision-making process, there could be a conflict. The debate is not always about choosing between good or bad and right or wrong, it is about facing the consequences. The main conflict is a result of previewing the potential consequences in our mind and wondering whether we could bear them or not. Then, we become more focused and detailed on what matters and potential issues we are up against. In my case studies, moral dilemma is supposed to act as a stimulant to evoke conflict in the audience. This conflict makes the experience more engaging and gripping for them; the audience feels closer to the characters and what they are going through. Then, they make their final moral judgment and choose their own path in the story that I created.



# EMPATHY

My audience decides to participate in my interactive experiences, to engage in an interactive story. Then, provided with multiple choices and paths in the story, the audience decides to change the storyline in the way that they desire, though the tension and conflict in this process can escalate the difficulty of the decision-making process. The choices that they make ultimately end the story with a distinguished conclusion. What is supposed to happen to the audience after this experience? Reading books, listening to music, and watching movies all leave an impact on their audience's minds, even for a brief moment. If they are meaningful experiences, this cognitive process of thinking and learning can last longer.

The cognitive process I'm looking for includes "empathy." Empathy is a broad concept that refers to "the ability to understand and vicariously share the feelings and thoughts of other people" (De Vignemont and Singer, 2006). Having empathy increases the likelihood of helping others and showing compassion. According to the Greater Good Science Center, a research institute that studies the psychology, sociology, and neuroscience of well-being, "Empathy is a building block of morality—for people to follow the Golden Rule, it helps if they can put themselves in someone else's shoes" (UC Berkeley GGSC, 2018). Empathy facilitates prosocial (helping) behaviors that come from within, rather than being forced, so that we behave in a more compassionate manner. In my works, this process happens after the conclusion to the story. The audience is supposed to empathize with the character player or the other characters in the story after finishing the experience.

Recent studies suggest that we can keep our unconscious prejudices and biases in check by trying to see the world through someone else's eyes and that we can significantly improve our real-world interactions with people who look different from us. In the study *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* published in June 2011, researchers showed participants

a five-minute video depicting a black man named Glen and a white man named John. Both shopped in a department store, tried to buy a car, and interacted with police, but Glen clearly experienced discrimination. Some participants were then asked to imagine Glen's perspective—what he might be thinking, feeling, and experiencing. Others were asked to imagine what thoughts and feelings they would have if they were in Glen's situation. A third group was supposed to remain objective; they were not told to consider Glen's thoughts or emotions.

Then the researchers gave the participants a sophisticated test that measures unconscious biases. The results show that participants in both perspective-taking conditions were less biased than participants who were asked to be objective. What is more, it did not seem to matter how the participants went about taking Glen's perspective: Participants who imagined Glen's thoughts and feelings showed the same reduction in unconscious bias as those who imagined how they would feel if they were Glen.

In a variation on this experiment, the researchers found that participants showed less automatic bias even when they were simply shown a picture of a black man and asked to imagine his thoughts, feelings, and experiences. Another experiment in the study showed that perspective taking did not lead participants to ignore racial inequality, as previous studies have suggested. The study's final experiment showed that perspective taking actually improves real-world interactions between black and white people. First, participants—college students—were shown a photo of an African-American man and were asked either to take his perspective, remain objective, or were given no instructions. Then they wrote an essay about a day in his life. Afterward, an African-American woman—who was working with the researchers but did not know what instructions each participant had received—led participants into another room with a hid-



den video camera and asked them questions about their introductory psychology course; soon afterward she assessed the quality of her exchange with them. In general, the woman felt she had more positive interactions with participants who were perspective takers. Analysis of the video also showed that perspective takers had more positive body language (Todd, Bodenhausen, Richeson, Galinsky, 2011).

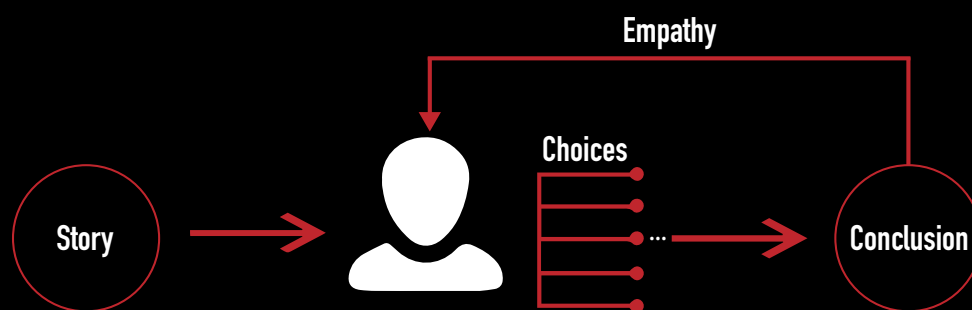
The results identify concrete social benefits of “putting oneself in another person’s shoes,” according to Andrew Todd, the study’s lead author and an assistant professor of psychology at the University of Iowa. “I think our work provides some much needed first steps toward identifying a practical strategy that individuals can implement during encounters with outgroup members,” he says. Still, he cautions that “it’s unlikely that perspective taking is a cure-all de-biasing strategy for everyone or in every intergroup situation” (Todd, 2011).

Empathy as a cognitive process which can affect racism and biases has a psychological aspect that cannot be overlooked. Some experts have questioned whether racism and other forms of bigotry can be classified as mental illnesses. After the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s, a group of psychiatrists attempted to have extreme racism named as a diagnosable psychiatric disorder. This request was denied as racism was determined to be more of a cultural than psychological issue, an idea with which most psychologists today agree. Experts believe that education and public dialogue are the two most important assets for dealing with racism by a cultural and social solution which can lead to a psychological solution. More public dialogue among adults regarding racism and other forms of bigotry is also needed. “In order to fight this epidemic, we must engage faith-based communities, colleges and universities, nonprofits, and law enforcement,” says Dr. Richard Gregory Johnson, professor in the Master of Public Administration program at the University of San Francisco. “It

will take the intersection of allies, thought leaders and the like to eradicate racism on a global level. But even more important is the continued attention to the problem” (Abrams, 2017).

Experts suggest talking with people who hold different ideas, asking them to explain why they feel a certain way, which will lead to them explaining their thinking—or the absence of it. After thinking and learning, when people notice that there is a gap somewhere in their beliefs, empathy rises as a tool to fill that gap.

My works bring up conversations about important social and cultural issues in our world and try to be educational to and raise empathy within their audience, so that they can rethink their opinions on those issues. It is not going to change overnight, but the more we fight against racism and teach acceptance of others, the sooner people of all races and religions can live in peace with one another.







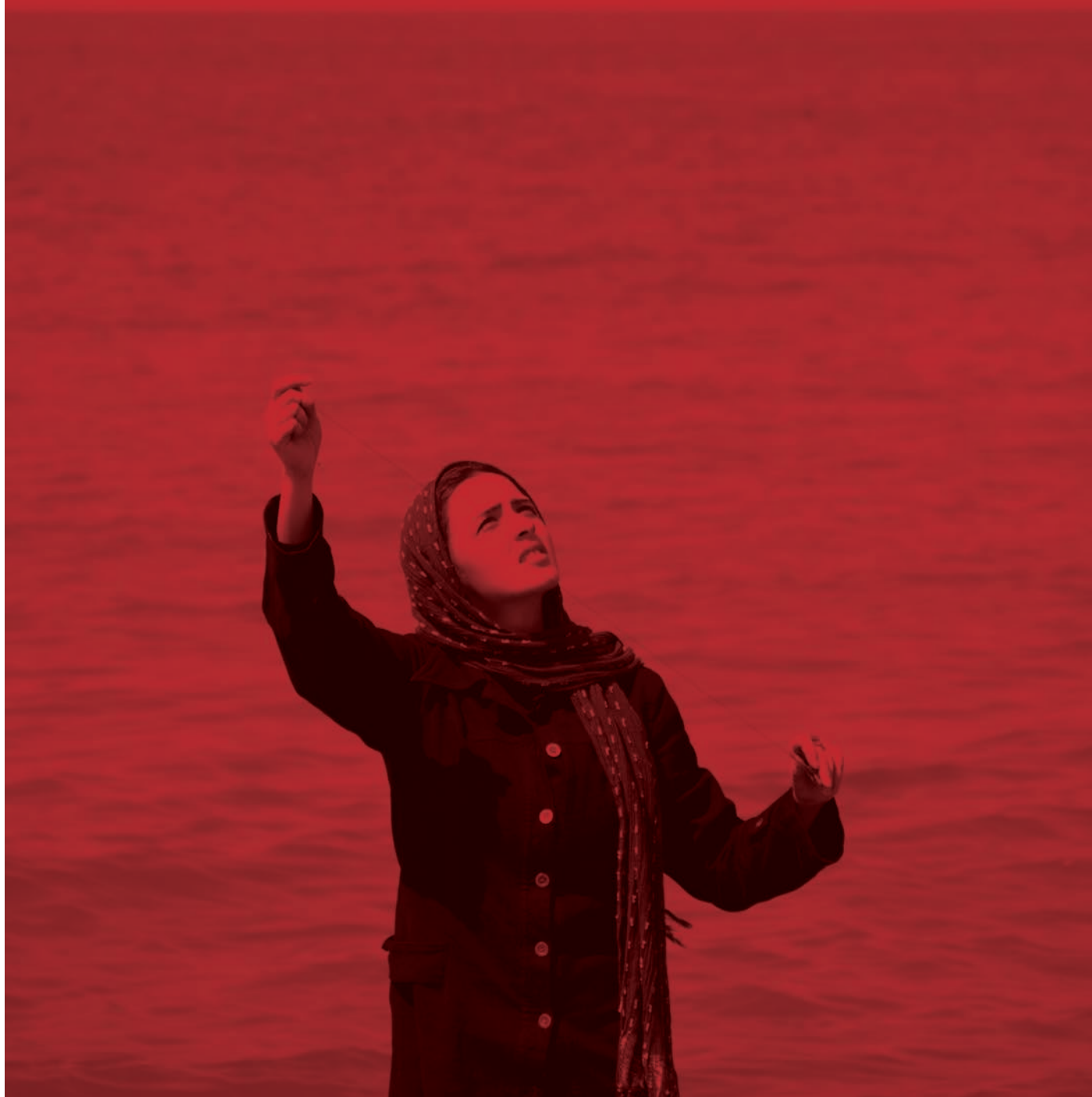


*"In whatever way and through whatever means a cognition may relate to objects, that through which it relates immediately to them and at which all thought as a means is directed an ends is intuition."*

*—Immanuel Kant, Critique of Pure Reason*







Chapter IV  
**INSPIRATIONS**  
آثار الهمام بخش

I am always inspired by many artists, designers, and filmmakers—film and art pieces open doors to new worlds for me. The vision I have in my current works is the product of these inspirations. In this chapter, I will discuss the works that are relevant to this thesis and three people who helped shape my character as a creator in my recent projects.



## WHAT IT'S LIKE, WHAT IT IS

Adrian Piper



*Image Courtesy: Adrian Piper Research Archive Foundation Berlin*

“What It’s Like, What It Is” by Adrian Piper is a created environment and video installation constructed for the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1991. This artwork contains lights, disks, four videos, bleachers, and music. The cube in the center of the installation shows four videos on its four sides. Each of the videos portrays a different profile of an African American male while reciting stereotypical cultural narratives. This is a minimalistic installation: white, clean, and simple. The white color of the environment plays a major role in this piece—it is as if the African American male is surrounded by the white society in America. Piper’s examination of her personal hurt around her blackness opens us to the covert nature of racism as well as the more visible manifestations of it, such as the Rodney King beating.

“What It’s Like, What It Is” is challenging, infuriating, and surprising. Along with its poetic wordplay, didactic tutorials, and the transformation of museum space into a loaded social arena, it also provokes honest and questioning discussions about race long after the audience exits the exhibition.



## HOME SWEET HOME

### Azzah Sultan

To preserve a sense of safety and acceptance, today's American Muslims feel compelled to hide their faith and religiosity. Azzah Sultan, a native Malaysian artist who moved to the US in 2013, has witnessed her fair share of Islamophobia and has taken up the challenge of tackling the issue through art.

To compile material for *Home Sweet Home* (2016), Sultan took to social media to invite Muslim women around the country to donate a red, white, or blue headscarf for her project. She received scarves from all over the country and stitched them together to create an American flag. *Home Sweet Home* is a testimony to Muslims' various backgrounds, coinciding with stereotypical views of what it means to be both Muslim and American (Blumberg, 2016).



*Image Courtesy: Azzah Sultan*

## ILLUMINATION PROJECT

### Portland Community College

*Image Courtesy: PCC's website*



The *Illumination Project* (IP) is Portland Community College's innovative student leadership and education program designed to foster a climate of equality, compassion, justice, and respect for all people in the PCC academic community and the community-at-large (PCC website, 2009).

This project uses interactive social justice theater as a venue for student educators and audience members to join together to rehearse ways of solving problems. Interactive theater, with its capacity to engage diverse learning styles and members of a community, is an ideal way to challenge racism, sexism, heterosexism, and other forms of oppression. In performances, audience members enter a scene and dynamically change its outcome. In this way, the *Illumination Project* challenges the viewpoints of both the audience and the actors or student educators in a performance.

## BEYOND SACRED: VOICES OF MUSLIM IDENTITY

### Ping Chong + Company

*Beyond Sacred* is an interview-based theatre production exploring the diverse experiences of Muslim communities within New York City. The five diverse cast members share the common experience of coming of age in a post-9/11 NYC at a time of increasing Islamophobia. Participants come from a mix of cultural and ethnic backgrounds and include young men and women who reflect a wide range of Muslim identities, including: those who have converted to Islam; those who were raised Muslim, but have since left the faith; those who identify as “culturally” Muslim; and those who are observant on a daily basis (Golballab, 2015).

*Beyond Sacred* is part of Ping Chong + Company’s *Undesirable Elements* project, an oral history theater project exploring issues of culture, identity, and the difference between the lives of individuals in specific communities. The goal of *Beyond Sacred* is to use theater and personal testimony to foster greater understanding among Muslim and non-Muslim communities in New York and beyond.



Image Courtesy: Kyla Goggin

## OUT MY WINDOW

Katerina Cizek

Image Courtesy: Katerina Cizek



Concrete gray apartment buildings have been the most common form of housing for the past half-century. You can find them all over the world, and they all look exactly the same. But in *Out My Window* (2010), the kick-off to the extensive documentary project *Highbury*, a plethora of variety is lurking behind all of those identical windows.

Directed by Katerina Cizek, *Out My Window* is a web interactive documentary. On the main screen, we see a collage-like apartment building. We can click on each of the thirteen windows. Behind them, thirteen apartments in thirteen different cities around the world are represented: Chicago, Toronto, Montreal, Havana, São Paulo, Amsterdam, Prague, Istanbul, Beirut, Bangalore, Phnom Penh, Tainan, and Johannesburg. After clicking, we will see a 360-degree view of the apartment's interior, including its residents and their view of the city, composed of separate photos. The stories of their lives can be navigated by means of various clickable objects. Occasionally they are represented in still images with sound, at other times with 360-degree films in which viewers can move about at their own discretion. *Out My Window* explores high-rise living in all its dimensions—social, cultural, and environmental. This interactive environment gives its audience the opportunity to become engaged in different people's lives and stories, socially and culturally.



## THE ENEMY

### Karim Ben Khelifa

Karim Ben Khelifa's fifteen-year career as a war photographer has been driven by an ever-more ambitious quest to address a crucial issue: what is the purpose of war images if they fail to change people's attitudes towards war and the suffering and violence it causes? What is the purpose of these images if they fail to change people's minds, if they don't bring peace? *The Enemy* breaks with the mainstream media's usual war imagery.

*The Enemy* brings people face-to-face with combatants from three conflict zones: in Salvador, in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and in Israel and Palestine. Their testimonies and confessions about their lives, experiences, and perspectives on war allow the audience to better understand their motivations and their humanity. Khelifa made this experience in the format of a virtual reality installation and an augmented reality app on smartphones, which allowed people to hear testimonies from both sides of the same conflict and to step into the community of *The Enemy*.

By giving voice to those who carry violence within themselves, by letting them introduce themselves and explain their motives and dreams, this project not only confronts its audience with the perspectives of combatants, it also causes them to confront their own.



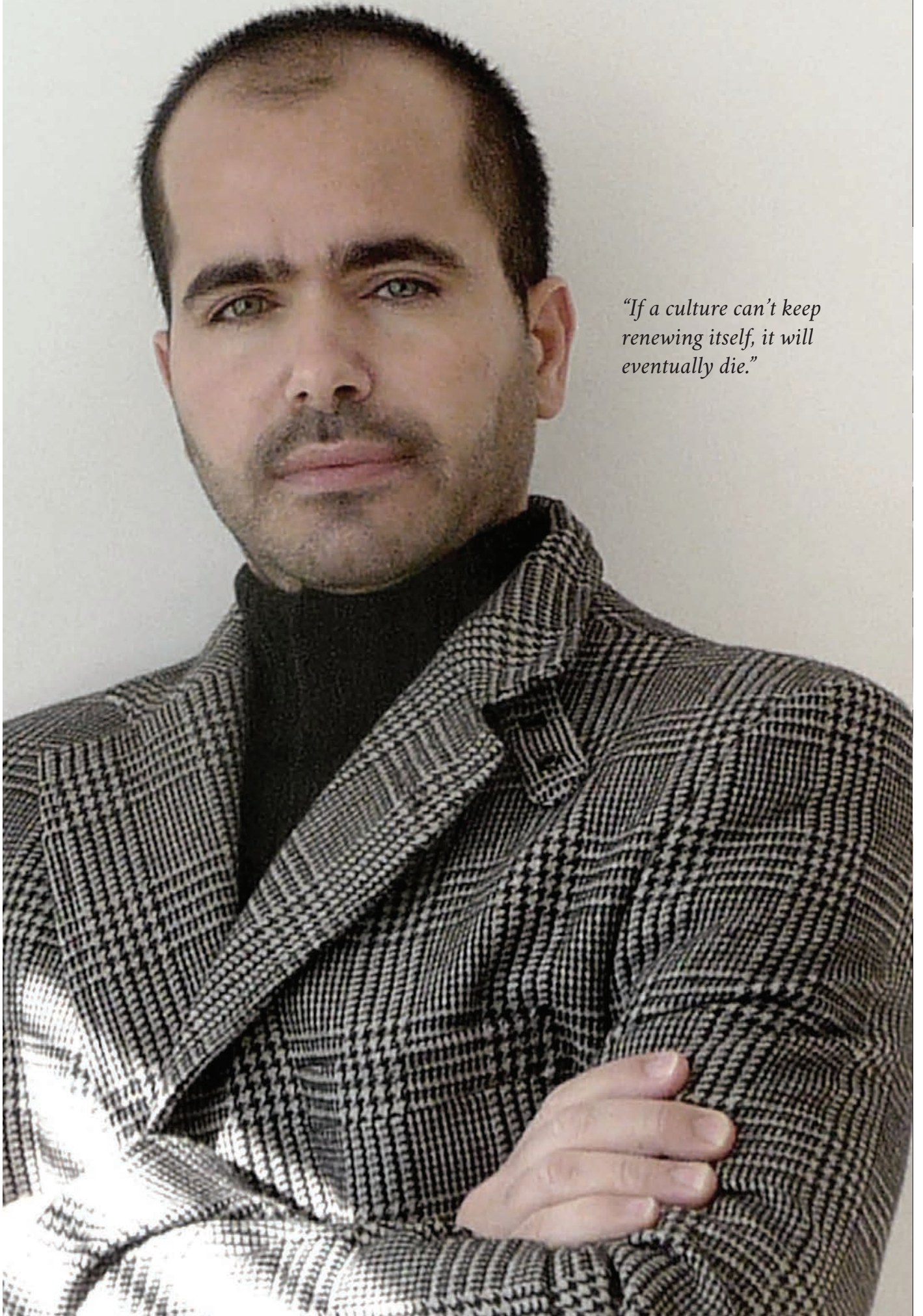
Image Courtesy: Karim Ben Khelifa | "The Enemy" Exhibit at MIT







*"If a culture can't keep  
renewing itself, it will  
eventually die."*



## WAFAA BILAL

Wafaa Bilal is an Iraqi American artist, a former professor at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and currently an associate professor at the Tisch School of the Arts at New York University. Bilal's family is from Najaf, Iraq. As a student, he dreamed of becoming an artist, but was prohibited from studying art in a university in Iraq (because of the alleged disloyalty of a member of his family); he studied geography instead. He continued to work on art and was arrested as a dissident for his art being critical of Saddam Hussein. He fled Iraq in 1991 and lived in a refugee camp in Saudi Arabia for two years, teaching art to children. He came to the US in 1992. Wafaa's brother was killed by a U.S. missile strike at a checkpoint in 2004, an experience which deepened his condemnation of the Iraq War. He has traveled the world and spread the word of the situation of the Iraqi people, and of the significance of peaceful conflict resolution.

Over time, Bilal has become known for his provocative interactive video installations. Many of Bilal's projects over the past few years have addressed the dichotomy of "the virtual vs. the real." He is concerned with the relationship of the viewer to the artwork, one of his main objectives being to transform the normally passive experience of viewing art into an active experience. His core concepts are war, politics, and terrorism. He created his ideas in different media and this is the most fascinating aspect of his work in my opinion.



## DOMESTIC TENSION

In one of his most famous pieces, *Domestic Tension*, viewers can log onto the internet to contact or “shoot” Bilal with paintball guns. Bilal’s objective is to raise awareness of virtual war and privacy, or lack thereof, in the digital age. During the course of the exhibition, Bilal confines himself to a gallery space. Over the duration of the exhibition, people have 24-hour virtual access to the space via the Internet. They have the ability to watch Bilal and interact with him through a live webcam and chat room. Should they choose to do so, viewers will also have the option to shoot Bilal with a paintball gun, transforming the virtual experience into a very physical one.

Bilal’s self-imposed confinement is designed to raise awareness about the life of the Iraqi people and the home confinement they face due to the both the violent and the virtual war they face on a daily basis. This sensational approach to the war is meant to engage people who may not be willing to engage in political dialogue through conventional means. *Domestic Tension* depicts the suffering of war not through human displays of dramatic emotion, but rather through engaging people in the sort of playful interactive video game, a format with which they are familiar.



## A VIRTUAL JIHADI



In the widely marketed video game *Quest for Saddam* (2003), players fight stereotypical Iraqi foes and try to kill Saddam Hussein. Al Qaeda did its own take, creating an online video game using the structure of *Quest for Saddam*, but adding a new “skin” to turn the game into a hunt for Bush: *The Night of Bush Capturing* (2006). Bilal hacked the Al Qaeda version of the game to put his own nuanced spin on this epic conflict.

In *The Night of Bush Capturing: A Virtual Jihadi*, Bilal casts himself as a suicide-bomber in the game. After learning of the real-life death of his brother in the war, he is recruited by Al Qaeda to join the hunt for Bush. *Virtual Jihadi* is meant to bring attention to the vulnerability of Iraqi civilians to the travesties of the recent war, as well as to their vulnerability to recruitment by violent groups such as Al Qaeda (due to the US’s failed strategy to secure Iraq). The work also aims to shed light on groups that traffic in crass and hateful stereotypes of Arab Culture with games like *Quest for Saddam* and other media.

## IRAN/IRAQ

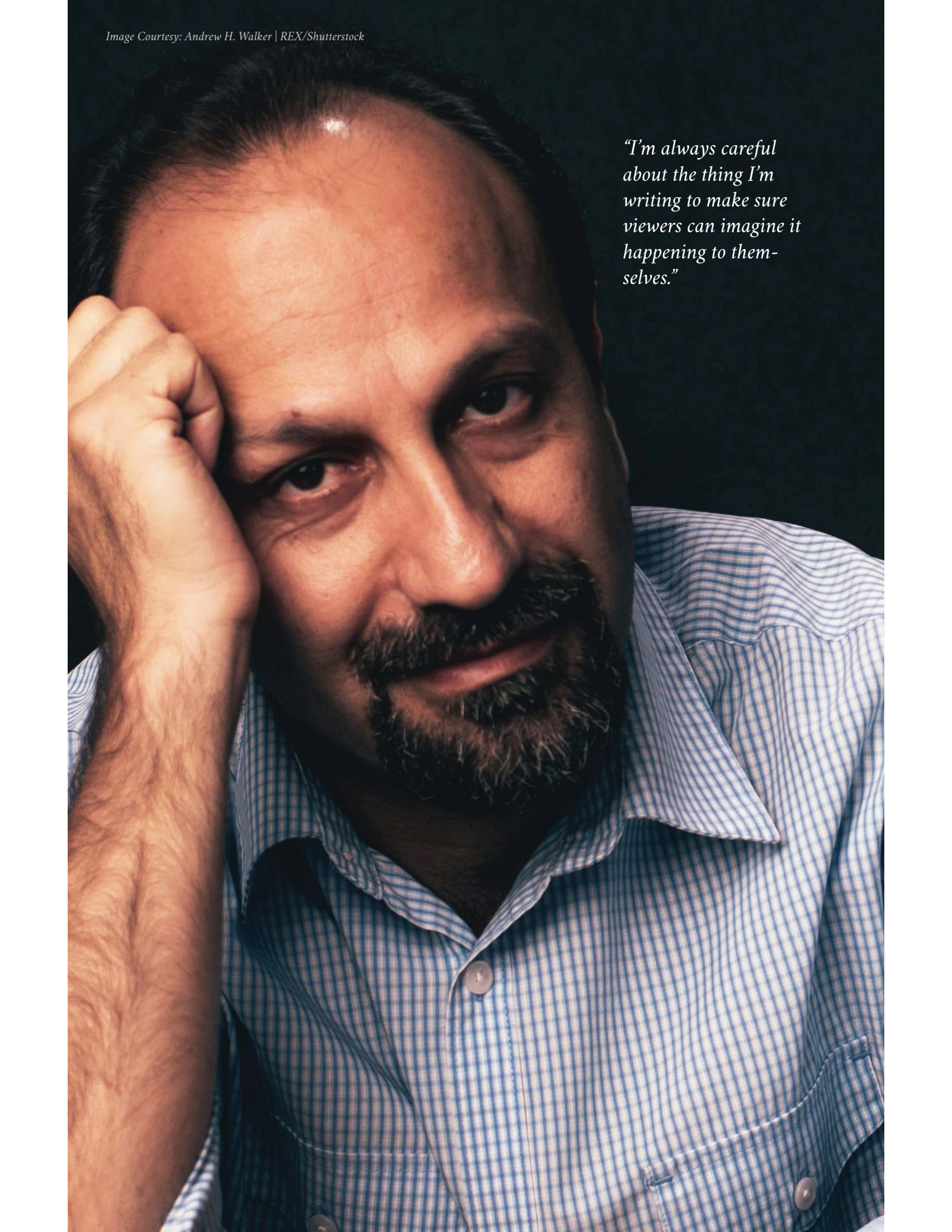
*Iraq/Iran* examines the Western idea of Orientalism through playful use of the English language signifiers for these countries—the words “Iraq” and “Iran”. Though the differences between these two countries are significant, Western culture’s tendency to mistake one for the other and to fuse them into the broad category of “The Orient” is the basis for this project.

*Iraq/Iran* is a text-only green neon sign that constantly switches between spelling “Iraq” and “Iran” in English, rendered in a handwritten fashion. The last letter is the only part of the sign to change, flickering back and forth from “Q” to “N” at a continuous rate. To the viewer’s eye, this transition between letters will be just a blur and speaks to the simple ways in which societies view and make assumptions about cultures different from their own. The division between the two countries named in *Iraq/Iran* is simplified to the difference of just one letter. The transitional act of this flickering character, in its minimal aesthetic, functions as a playful, provocative look at intercultural engagement and assumptions.

The sign occupies the totality of one entire wall in a room devoid of any additional ambient light, resulting in an experience that is fully immersive for the viewer. *Iraq/Iran* casts light on the viewers, drawing them into the artwork and making them part of its implications.







*"I'm always careful  
about the thing I'm  
writing to make sure  
viewers can imagine it  
happening to them-  
selves."*



## ASGHAR FARHADI

I have always been interested in dramatic movies with stories that revolve around the consequences of human choices. One of my favorite filmmakers is Iranian filmmaker and two-time Academy Award winner Asghar Farhadi. His films put characters in moral dilemmas, and Farhadi leaves the audience to decide what they would do if they were the characters. As the films proceed, we watch lies, judgment, and revenge as reactions to the consequences of moral dilemma that challenge human beings, played out on the screen. His vision looks at old moral issues in new ways.

In *About Elly* (2009), a group of young couples travels to the north of Iran with a new female friend. They do not know anything about her. After her mysterious disappearance at the beach, each of them begins to judge her from their own points of view. In *A Separation* (2011), a married couple must decide whether to improve the life of their child by moving to another country or to stay in Iran and look after a deteriorating parent who has Alzheimer's disease. In the end, they have to choose who is going to live and who is going to die. In *The Salesman* (2016), a teacher's wife is sexually assaulted in her new home. The husband is conflicted about whether to seek vengeance despite his traumatized wife's objections or let the predator (who is a dying old man) get away.



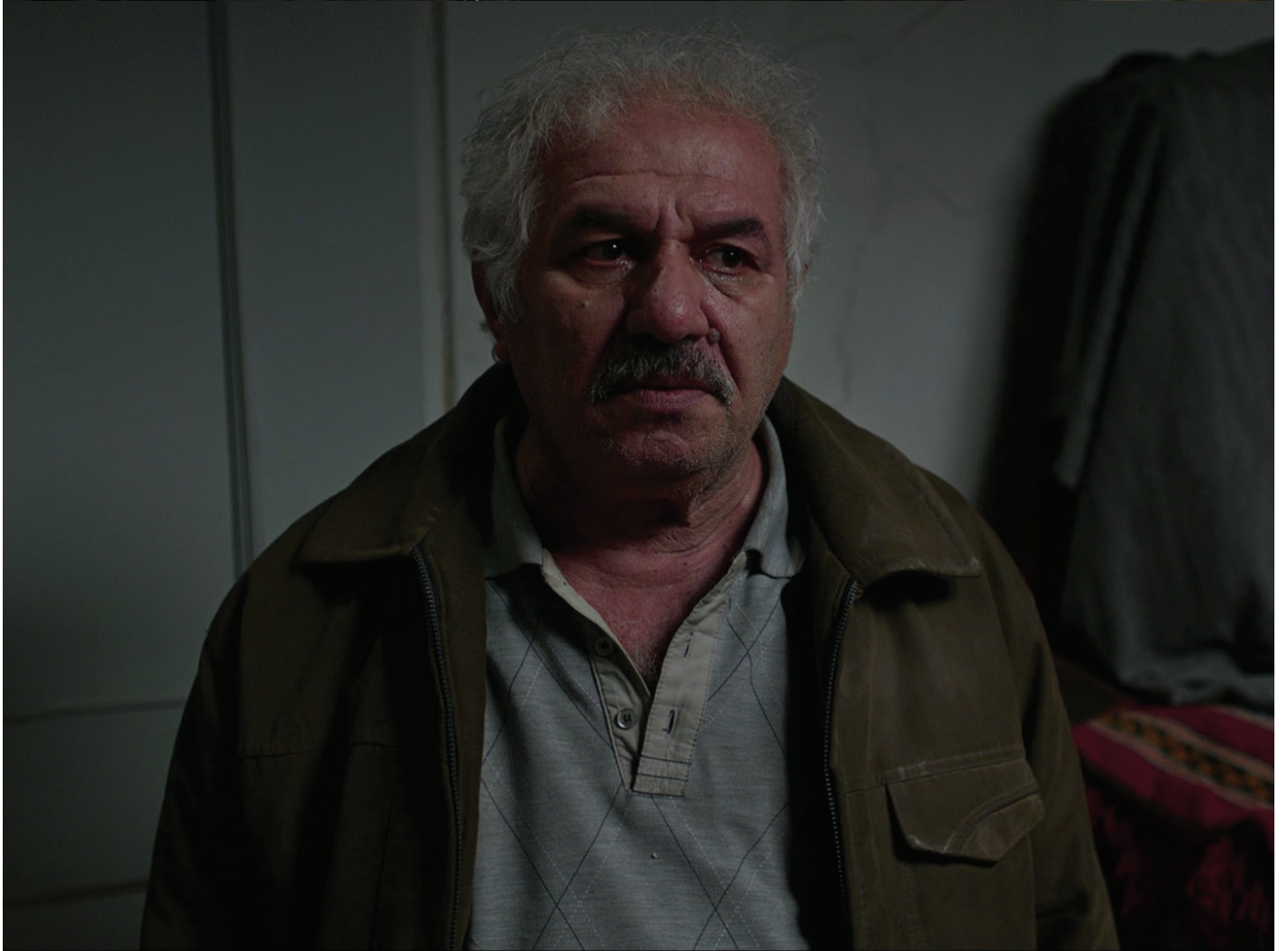
Image Courtesy: Siavash Naghshbandi | *About Elly* (2009)




Though mostly based in the contemporary social spheres of middle-class Iranian life, Farhadi's themes are universal. Characters are situated within conflicting situations that anyone with a human brain and heart can relate to: a man's desire to see his ex-wife one last time in person (*The Past*), a servant's shock and anger at being wrongly accused of theft by her employer (*A Separation*), a recently attacked woman's determination to get back to work, as if that will erase her pain (*The Salesman*). Farhadi's films make the viewer appreciate the degree to which morality plays a role in our everyday actions, despite how morality has been diluted from public awareness. We lie more easily than ever, and we do not consider the consequences of those lies. His work asks the viewer to understand the perspectives of all of the films' characters, and while the stories never feel didactic, they question why we treat people with discrimination and fear, an idea that feels particularly pertinent in today's political climate.

Challenging circumstances evoke contemplation of our humanity, ethics, and beliefs. They are Farhadi's movies' core concepts and they can happen to all of us. Though his films are not directly interactive, they reach to a level of narrative interactivity with his open-ended directing style. His approach has always inspired me as a storyteller in my short film and interactive narratives.







A portrait of a middle-aged man with a beard and mustache, looking slightly to the left. He is wearing a blue button-down shirt. The background is a solid dark red color. The lighting is soft, highlighting his facial features.

*“Whatever you create whether you are a painter or a filmmaker or a writer or a game maker, you want to trigger emotions. There is one efficient way for achieving this and it is called storytelling.”*




## DAVID CAGE

David De Gruttola (known by his pseudonym David Cage) is a French video game designer, writer, and musician. He is the founder of the game development studio Quantic Dream, owned by Sony's PlayStation. He is the mastermind behind choice-driven and multi-branched storyline video games such as *Fahrenheit/Indigo Prophecy* (2005), *Heavy Rain* (2010), *Beyond: Two Souls* (2013), and *Detroit: Become Human* (2018).

A choice-driven narrative video game presents its gameplay in a cinematic, scripted manner, often through the use of full-motion video of either animated or live-action footage. Often during scenes, the player has limited control of the character and chooses certain actions to progress the story. Other scenes are “quick time event action” sequences, requiring the player to hit appropriate buttons at the right time to succeed. These games have numerous branching storylines that result from what actions the player takes or fails to complete properly, which can include, for example, the death of major characters, the failure to solve the “mystery” of the story, or a “game over.”




Image Courtesy: *Heavy Rain* (2010) | Quantic Dream



Cage has been critical of “game over” events in story-driven, non-action video games, calling them “a failure of the game design”. In a 2013 interview with Engadget, promoting *Beyond: Two Souls* he indicates that players will not be able to die at all in this game, but rather, they will either end up in a successful state or a failure state depending on the endless result of each section of the game (Conditt, 2013). For example, in one area of the game, the player will either be able to escape from enemies on a train, or be caught and then have to deal with an alternative story path in which they have been caught. This idea expands on narrative elements that Cage has explored in his previous games, including *Heavy Rain*.





His games have evolved with the passage of time. At first, they were just “Point and Click” video games. After a while, he focused more on branching storylines and alternative endings. Cage engages players by triggering their emotions and morals. His games became something more than interactive films, as some game critics were suggesting at the time. I was inspired by his approach in interactive storytelling, using emotion as an important asset. Although, some critics still believe that he is a “failed filmmaker”, I’m following his path by creating my own interactive stories.





**Chapter V**  
**CASE STUDIES**  
آثار خلق شده

A black and white photograph of a hand reaching out from the left side of the frame into a dark, shadowy space. The hand is open, palm facing forward, and is the only illuminated object in the scene.

ONE TRILOGY:

**I'M NOT THE ONE**  
AN INTERACTIVE FILM





*I'm not the one* is a short film with an interactive narrative that gives audience members the opportunity to change the storyline by the choices that they make. The medium for *I'm not the one* is a touch screen which is mounted on the wall. Audiences stand in front of the screen, put on a pair of headphones and touch the screen in order to choose various options in the story.

The film takes place in a dark dystopian future version of the United States. It is 2024. All Muslims are being captured and tortured by the CIA. The government believes that every single Muslim may be in communication with terrorists and they should be vetted and interrogated by any means necessary. This story focuses on one of those Muslims, Hessam, a young Iranian student.

The film takes place in an interrogation room at the CIA. The film is a comprehensive conversation between Hessam and a CIA officer. The audience uses an interface to assume the officer's role and choose his dialogue. The plot of the film is guided by these audience choices, culminating in an ending that is a direct result of their narrative choices.

This project is a reflection of events in politics, the media and society which are occurring today. Many have struggled with xenophobia and Islamophobia before. Now, the emergence of a new power in the United States—which supports these movements more than ever—is the beginning of a new era. By engaging with my project, people will be put in the disturbing situation of being a CIA officer deciding Hessam's fate. His destiny will ultimately be in their hands.

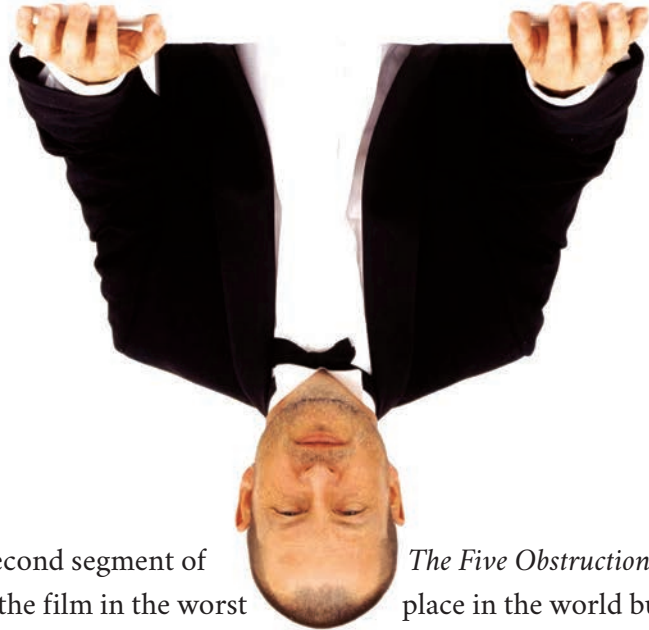
## CONCEPT AND RESEARCH

I created *I'm not the one* in response to the short film *The Perfect Human* for Jan Kubasiewicz's Design Studio II class. Directed by Danish filmmaker Jørgen Leth in 1967, *The Perfect Human* is a thirteen-minute film which depicts a man and a woman, both labelled "the perfect human" in a detached manner, functioning in a white boundless room, almost as though they were subjects in a zoo.

In 2003 famous Danish filmmaker Lars von Trier asked Jørgen Leth to remake *The Perfect Human* into five separate films. This process was documented in the film *The Five Obstructions*. Each of these films features a different creative "obstruction" (or obstacle) imposed by von Trier. The result is amazing and impressive.



*Video Stills Courtesy: Perfect Human (1967) | Directed by Jørgen Leth*



In the second segment of *The Five Obstructions*, Leth must remake the film in the worst place in the world but not show that place on screen. Additionally, Leth must play the role of “the man” himself. A meal (which is part of the original film) must be included, however the woman character is not to be included. Leth remakes the film in the red light district of Mumbai.

Leth eats a fancy meal in front of a translucent screen while a crowd of hungry men, women and children stand behind the screen and look at him. I was shocked the awkwardness of this segment. What would a perfect human do in this situation? What kind of moral challenges is he faced with? Again, morality and ethics in storytelling absorbed my attention. I became inspired by this episode which led me to my final idea.



As I began working on *I'm not the one*, I also was struggling with challenging circumstances - the post-2016 election atmosphere. The new President of the United States had clearly demonstrated his ideology before the election. His comments on Islamophobia, xenophobia, racism and Iran were extremely

radical and quite scary for people like me. After his inauguration he proved that he was going to keep his campaign promises. The controversial "Travel Ban" was an executive order which targeted me and many other Muslims. The idea behind this ban was to keep America safe by not allowing terrorists



Image Courtesy: Forbes (Holly Warfield, February 2017) | "Mapping POTUS' Travel Ban Vs. His Business Interests in Muslim Countries"

into the United States. The Travel Ban's logic was absurd.

The seven countries targeted by the executive order (including Iran) excluded Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and other Muslim-majority countries where The Trump Organization had conducted business or pursued business opportunities. According to *The New York Times* reporter Scott Shane, the seven countries in the executive order had a "random quality." The list excluded Saudi Arabia and Egypt (where many

jihadi groups were founded and attacked the United States in 9/11) and Pakistan and Afghanistan (places where extremism has a long history, and both of which have "produced militants who have occasionally reached the United States"). Statistics showed the various people who have committed terrorist acts in The United States, from 9/11 on, none of them came from any of the seven countries that were the subject of the president's executive order. (Shane, 2017)

The United States became like a prison for me. I was experiencing a hard time in the country which I entered with hope of achieving my creative goals. I decided to bring this experience into the Perfect Human project and put it alongside the inspiration I received from *The Five Obstructions*.

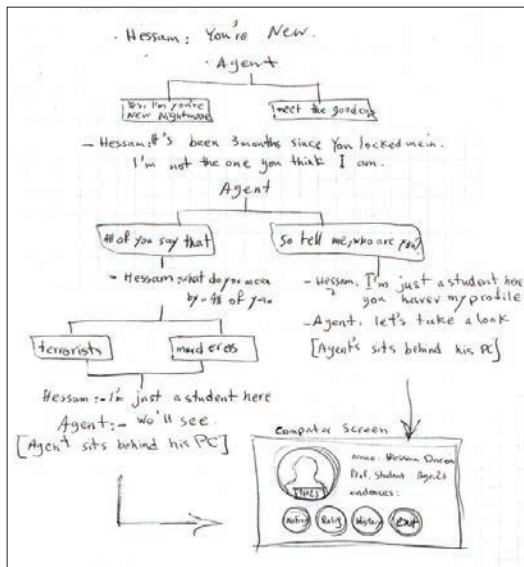


# DESIGN PROCESS

Based on my experiences, I began to think about the concept and the plot for an interactive film. I brought my ideas to paper through writing and tried to develop them. I wrote a plot summary; in a dystopian future of the United States, all Muslims are being captured and tortured by the CIA. The government believes that every single Muslim may be in communication with terrorists and they must be interrogated in order to make them confess. In my film, a CIA officer has a conversation with a Muslim man who is tied to a chair in a

dark interrogation room. By the end of the conversation the officer will determine the prisoner's fate. For this interactive film I drew algorithms and mapped out the narrative. I used the dialogue tree and branching structure, as each dialogue choice altered the path of the storyline.

Storyboarding became an inseparable part of my filmmaking process. I drew a schematic sketch for each scene and shot in order to recreate what was in my mind.



Dialogue Tree and Branching Structure



Early Storyboards



*Storyboard Vs. Final Shot*

Casting was difficult and time was tight. At first, I was not going to play the prisoner's role myself. Then I thought, this movie is about my experience. Why should I not play the role? For the officer's role, at first, I could not find an actor. Ultimately, I asked my friend to play him. I modified some scenes and I decided to put the officer's character in front of a strong light—this would allow the audience to only see a silhouette of him. The audience needed to feel that they were the officer and this lighting technique made that situation more potentially conceivable for them. I shot the film in black and white to add more tension and contrast to the atmosphere of the film.

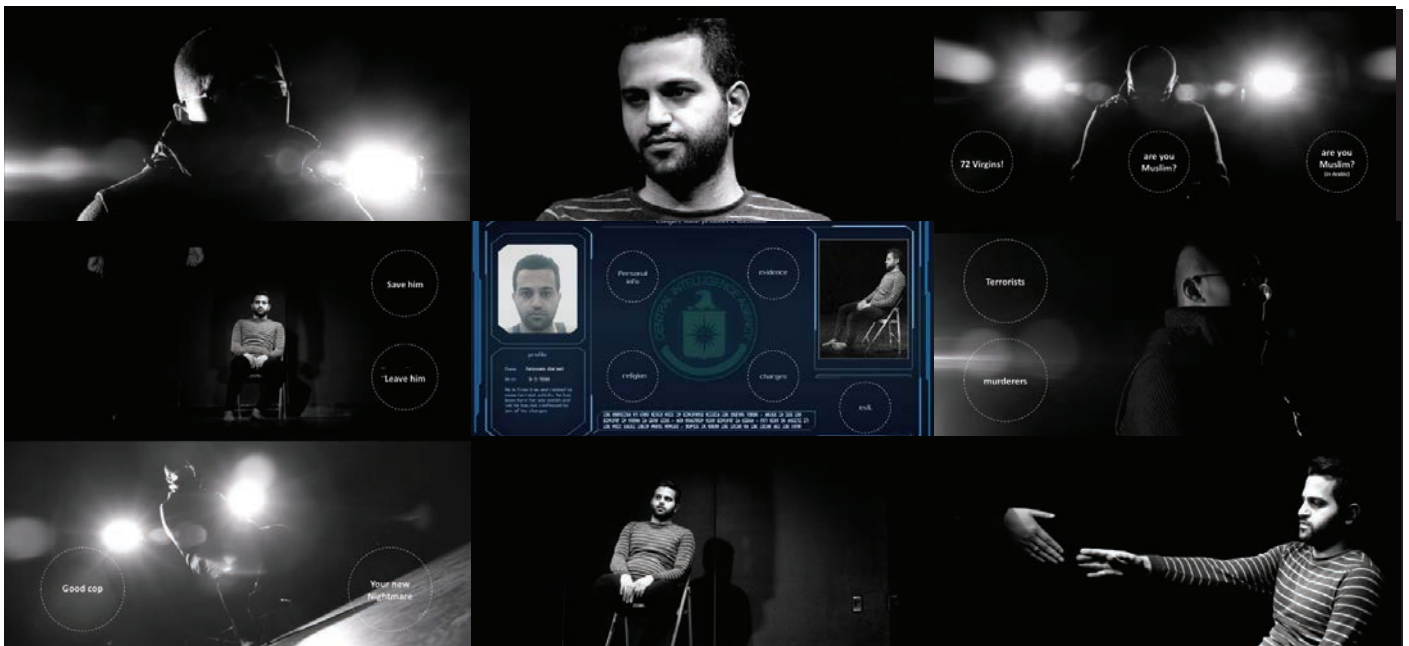


## PRODUCTION AND EXHIBITION

I had done one-man film productions before; the experience helped me to be both the cinematographer and actor simultaneously. From a logistical standpoint, it was difficult to put the camera on the tripod, set up the scene, adjust the camera, press the record button, jump into the scene and act. Additionally, I then had to go behind the camera and check the results of the shot—the focus, the performance, the lighting. If the take was not satisfying, I had to do the whole process all over again. When I was content with the creation of the shots, I needed to find a software application which was able to play algorithmic and clickable videos.

I searched online and asked various experts at MassArt to help me to find qualified software that was able to run an interactive film. I considered options such as Unity and Adobe Flash. Eventually, I decided to use Microsoft PowerPoint. Creating slides and connecting them with links gave me the ability of making an algorithmic structure for playing videos. There are scenes in the film in which the officer checks the prisoner's profile on his tablet. For these scenes, I designed an interface which shows the prisoner's information and background to the audience. In entire scenes of the film, words in circles were used as clickable objects for the audience. The circles acted as links which connected slides to each other.

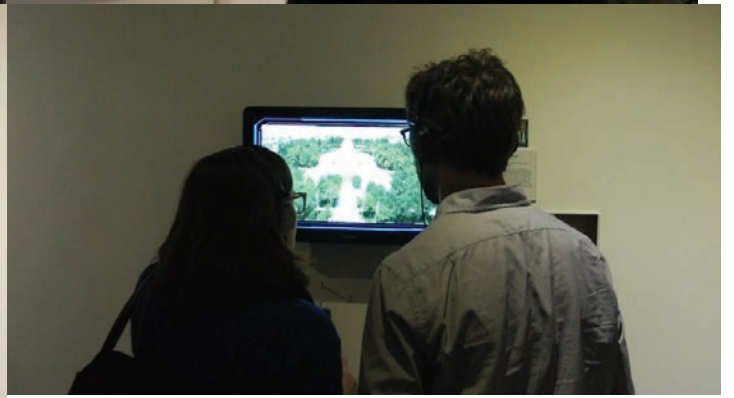
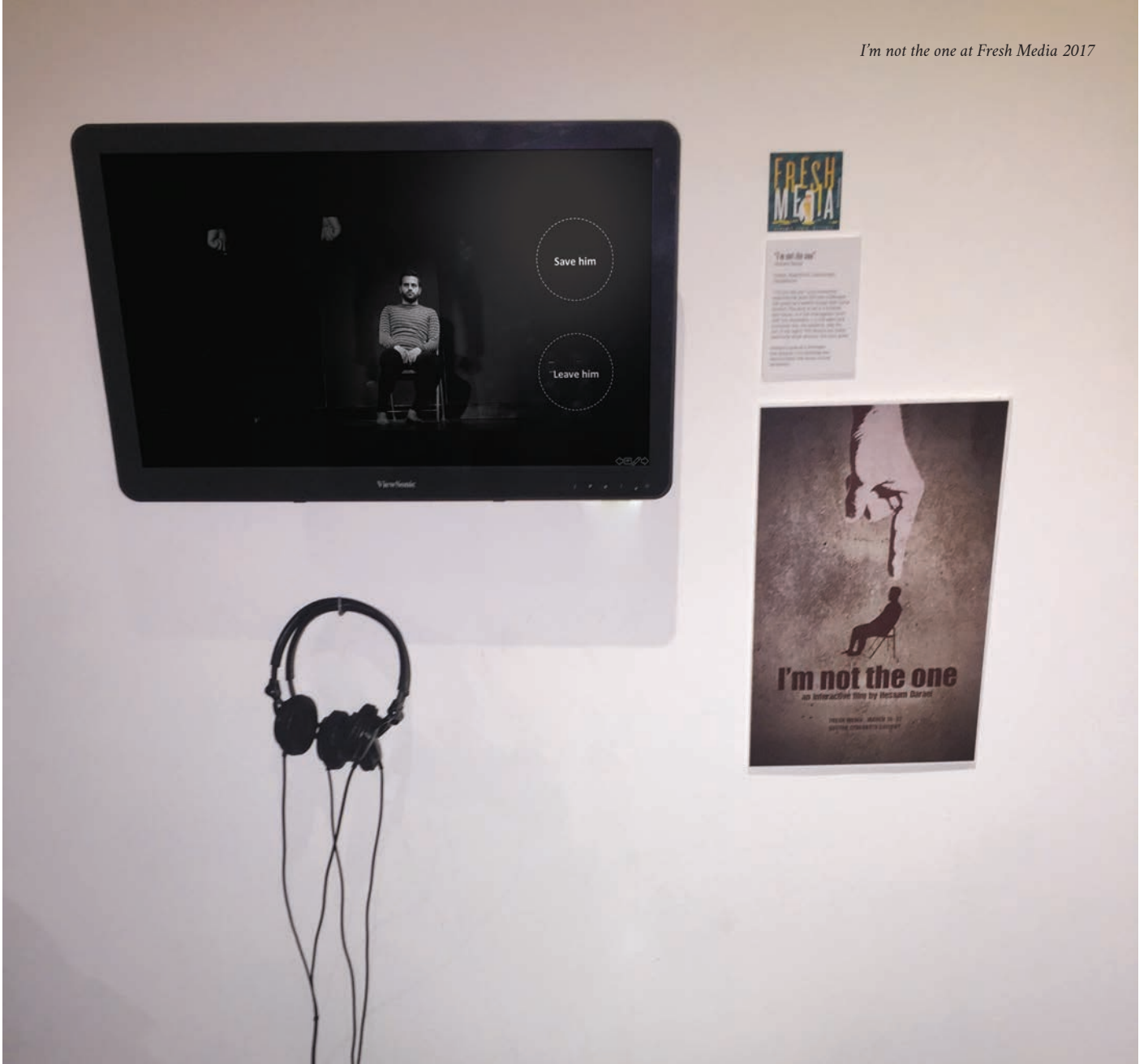
*"I'm not the one" Stills*



Now my project could be run on a computer. I was given the opportunity to show my work at the Cyberarts Gallery as part of the *Fresh Media* exhibition. I installed my project at the gallery using a touchscreen, headphones, a prominent restart button and also my laptop (obscured in a box). It was a great experience to see people watch my film for the first time. I stood in a corner and observed how they chose different options. I closely watched their reactions during each scene and I talked to them after they watched the film. Most of them wanted to try this experience again even though I explained at the beginning of the film as a sort of disclaimer, “this is a one-time experience, please watch this film only once.” I believe when you choose a path for your life, there is no going back. I wanted

them to be the character in the film in their real lives.

I received many positive feedbacks from the audience: “Well written and shot”, “Gripping process in the story”, “Absorbing mixture of interaction and storytelling in a film”, “Great reaction to the daily events in politics and the media.” There were also some critical comments on this project. Some people indicated that this was an “Extremely serious and disturbing situation” for them. Also, a group of audience members demanded “more options for the dialogues.” Despite some logistical and technical problems (such as the gallery’s noisy environment, which made the audience unable to follow all of the dialogue, some PowerPoint glitches and touchscreen sensitivity), I felt contented with the work I exhibited.



## ALTERNATIVE DIRECTIONS

Before creating an interactive film, I evaluated other media, such as video games. I thought about the “point and click” adventure genre, David Cage’s approach, and one of the field’s pioneers, the Telltale Game company.

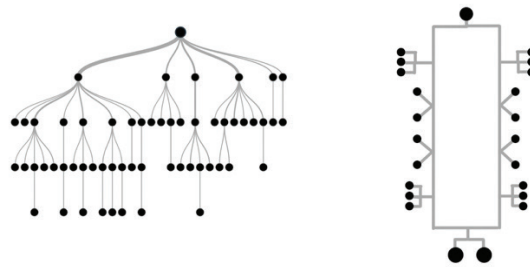


Image Courtesy: *The Walking Dead* (2012) | Telltale Games

Telltale’s critical breakout title, *The Walking Dead* (based on the comic book series of the same name) introduced a more narrative-directed approach to game play. It gives the players the ability to make choices that may affect how future events in the game or its sequels play out. This video game allows players to craft their own personalized take on the offered story. All of Telltale’s games since then have featured this player choice-driven approach. Telltale’s video games are low budget and visually simple without using a big graphic engine. The story is the most important element in their games. As a result, I am pondering the idea of turning *I’m not the one* into a future video game.



In the beginning I had considered a more complex branching structure for the storyline. Because I ended up using PowerPoint for the prototype, I was not able to build my idea as I'd envisioned. My original idea was like a tree of choices—each had their own branches. The final prototype featured two parallel lines with two endings.



*Expected Branching Structure Vs. Final Branching Structure*

## CONCLUSION

*I'm not the one* is an experiment. My idea was to create this project for all types of people and ideologies. It could be exhibited even in a room full of xenophobic audience members. Eventually I want to see their responses and their conversations with the Iranian prisoner. I had the chance to show my film in a moderate environment. What if I exhibited it in a conservative atmosphere? What would be the result? I am interested in pursuing this experience in the future.

*I'm not the one* was the first part of the One trilogy which had specific goals: How can I challenge people's emotions and beliefs through the power of interactive media? In *I'm not the one*, I focused on mixing interaction and storytelling in the context of a short film. In the next parts of this trilogy, I tried other approaches—experimenting with different media could offer very different results.



**ONE TRILOGY:**

**AND THEN THERE WAS ONE**  
A CHOICE-DRIVEN NARRATIVE



*And Then There was One* is a choice-driven narrative in the style of a short video game experience. It gives players the opportunity to interact with 4 characters and change their fates forever. The medium for *and Then There was One* varies. It could be a mobile application or a console game. For the early prototype, I tried a touchscreen mounted on the wall; players stand in front of the screen, put on headphones and touch the screen to interact with the narrative.

Inspired by real stories of people trapped in US airports after the Travel Ban happened, this narrative revolves around four Iranian passengers held by the TSA in Boston Logan airport. With different backgrounds, they have traveled to the US for different reasons. A TSA agent is commanded by his superior to check these four Iranian passengers and their belongings and eventually let only one of them enter the US. Players take over the role of the TSA agent. They meet the passengers, go through their belongings and choose one of them to be allowed to enter the country. After making the final decision, a video shows the fates of the four Iranian passengers and what will happen to them because of one choice.

The second part of The *One* trilogy is about exploring a different medium and focusing more on empathy. *And Then There was One* depicts the other side of the decision making process in politics, which is destroying lives and separating families from their loved ones. The ultimate goal of this project is to let players experience this feeling closely.



## CONCEPT AND RESEARCH

This project is directly inspired by the people who were trapped in US airports after the Travel Ban executive order was issued and also my own experience almost 8 months later. The president of the United States expressed no doubt about his orders, saying: “It’s not a Muslim ban, but we were totally prepared. It’s working out very nicely. You see it at the airports, you see it all over.”

The only thing the executive order could do was to make chaos in the airports, not just in the US. Mana Yegani, an immigration lawyer in Houston, said she had heard of several people with Iranian passports who were barred from

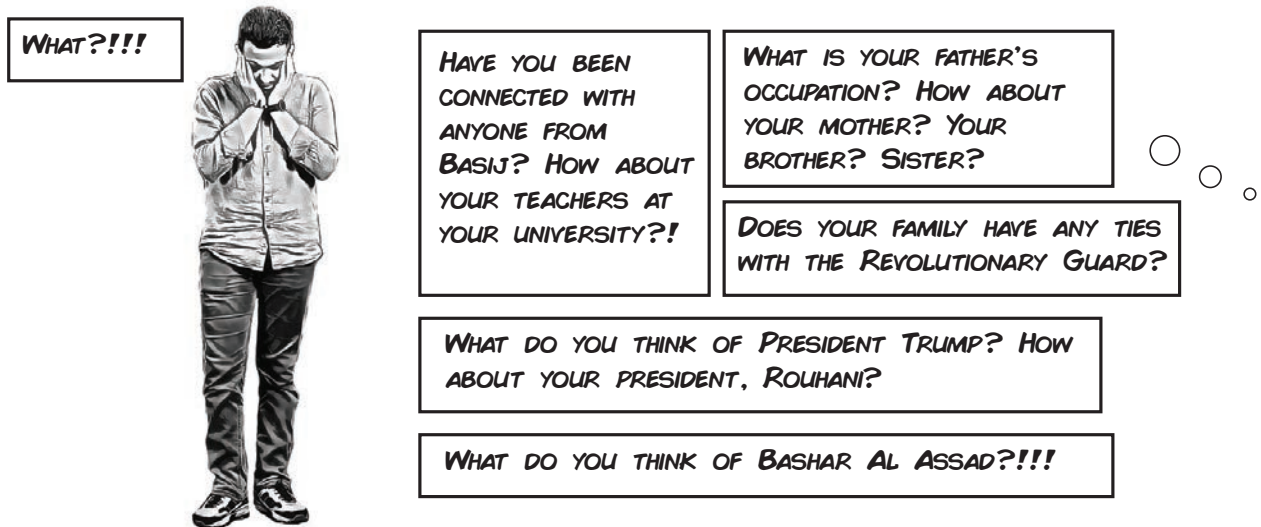
US-bound flights leaving Amsterdam and Frankfurt. A number of other passengers were removed by security personnel just before take-off from the European cities (The Guardian, 2017). This order did not include any specific detail on how to approach enforcing it. Unexpectedly, Green Card holders were also detained in airports. The Travel Ban threatened to strip people from their families and homes. There were students who had gone back home for a short visit and when they came back, they were not allowed to pass the security checkpoint. Some of them traveled back to their countries and never came back.

*Image Courtesy: Michael Stravato/NYTimes/Redux | A man who was temporarily detained because of an executive order signed by the POTUS is reunited with loved ones at an airport in Houston, Texas, on January 29, 2017.*



I decided to travel back home in May 2017 and I was advised not to. I packed everything I had because I was not sure about coming back. I spent two and a half months back home reconnecting with my family and friends. Eventually, my father pushed me to go back and finish what I had started. I remember he told me one sentence at the airport before my departure. “I hope they won’t let you in if it is not your fate,” he said.

My flight landed at Boston’s Logan Airport. I was standing in the line for the security checkpoint when two officers came, pointed at me and asked me to go with them. They took me to an interrogation room and started to ask me some bizarre questions while they were investigating my suitcases in front of me.



I was ready for the “NO” response from them. The absurdity of these questions made me angry, though I kept myself under control and answered their questions with honesty, perhaps because I really did not care whether they wanted to let me in or not. Eventually, they let me in. I combined my story with other people’s stories who had the same experience in order to write my new narrative.

The preliminary idea that I developed was an arcade mobile game called *Make America Safe*. It was supposed to be both propaganda and parody of the Travel Ban at the same time. The goal of the game was to stop Iranian passengers from entering the United States by detecting their suitcases among all others.

The intro reveals the title with the president's voiceover "we will make America safe again" and then the main menu appears. After tapping on "New Game", the main interface pops up. Suitcases with three colors white, red, and black appear and slide from right to left. The ones that belong to the Iranian passengers are black. The player must

tap on the black suitcases to make them disappear. The player's score depends on the number of black suitcases the player taps on. As the game progresses, the suitcases move faster. There are five chances (stars) to tap on the wrong suitcases or miss the black ones. If a player misses all of the stars, they will achieve a trophy. In Persian culture, when we travel to a foreign country, we bring something from our culture to the people we meet as a souvenir. I brought this tradition into the game: the trophy for losing the game will be a Persian souvenir. The two sides of winning and losing in this game cause a paradox which may challenge the idea of "safety" in the player's mind.



"Make America Safe" Arcade Game



Image Courtesy: *Papers, Please* (2013-2017) | Lucas Pope , 3909

After receiving feedback about the game, I decided to step back and return to my thesis roots—storytelling was missed from the game. The final message was not delivered as I expected and empathy would not be transferred to the audience as I had imagined. One of my friends mentioned a game called *Papers, Please* (2013-2017). It is a puzzle video game created by indie game developer Lucas Pope. *Papers, Please* has the player assume the role of a border crossing immigration officer in the fictional dystopian, Eastern Bloc-like country of Arstotzka, which has been and continues to be at political hostilities with its neighboring countries. The game takes place at the border of East and West Grestin, in a fictional parallel to East/West Berlin. As the immigration officer, the player must review each immigrant and returning citizen's passports (and other supporting paperwork) against a list of ever-increasing rules using a number of tools and guides, allowing in only those with the proper paperwork, rejecting those without all proper forms, at times detaining those with falsified information. The player is rewarded (via their daily salary) for how many people they have processed correctly in that day, while being fined for making mistakes; the salary is used to help provide shelter, food, and heat for the player's in-game family. In some cases, the player will be presented with moral decisions, such as approving entry of a pleading spouse of a citizen despite the lack of proper paperwork, knowing this will affect their salary. I was inspired by *Papers, Please* and it gave me a new approach to my idea.



I started to write a short story and create an interactive choice-driven narrative based on it. My intention was to bring the audience or the players inside the story. I chose the TSA agent role for them as someone who could make decisions and change the conclusion of the narrative. Then I thought about creating four different characters based on the true experiences I mentioned earlier. This was the most important part, because I needed characters who could engender empathy (as much as it was possible) in the users. Each of these characters was designed to sit in a separate room with their

belongings, waiting for the TSA agent to interact with them. In the final stage, the player would choose between the four passengers, and decide who could pass the border! This choice decided the passengers' fate, because their lives were dependent on it. A video that showed the passengers' lives after the TSA agent's choice was edited to be effective as the final narrative punch. The only way to reach an influencing conclusion was to build an influencing story. The characters were the major player in this story and they had to be designed carefully.

## DESIGN PROCESS

Based on the people I knew, heard of or saw on the news, I started to sketch the four passengers and write a one paragraph story for each of them. I tried to make their characters as detailed as possible. They were trying to enter the US for different reasons. Two of them were in a critical situation and the other two were not, though banning them from passing the border could change everything for all of them. Let's take a closer look at these characters:



# VARTAN MALEKIAN

Professor Vartan Malekian is a well-known Iranian-Armenian neurosurgeon. He travels throughout different countries and participates in delicate surgeries all over the world. Boston General Hospital has officially asked him to be in charge of the surgery of a 9 year old girl. Similar to other Iranian-Armenians, Vartan is Christian and holds a Green Card. In this story, he represents Iranians who have dual nationality or green card and are not even Muslims. After the Travel Ban, there were doctors (and patients whom their lives were dependent on) that were prevented to pass through the US border. Vartan is in Boston to save the girl's life. Will he be able to succeed?

Hadi was designed based on my own experience, my photographer friend who is a student at MassArt, and all Iranian International students who were frightened by the Travel Ban. In Summer 2017, most Iranian students wanted to travel back home, even for a week. However, they could not risk their lives and future if they were not allowed back into the US. As I mentioned above, I risked everything in returning to Iran. Hadi is a 36 year old graduate student at Massachusetts College of Art and Design. He was in the middle of his program when he decided to go back home for a month to visit his family and friends. Hadi has been interested in Journalism and war photography for years. He spent two months in Syria two years ago. He is being held in the airport not only because of his nationality, but for his belonging and the sensitive pictures in his camera. He was going to have his first serious exhibition in New York before his travel, what will happen now?



**HADI  
KIA**





# MANI RAAD

Mani is a 28 years old filmmaker who makes short experimental films. In his latest effort, he has won an award for the best short film from Boston Film Festival. Two months ago, he received an invitation letter to participate in the awards ceremony. He came to Boston to accept his award and he was excited to see what could happen to his future film career.

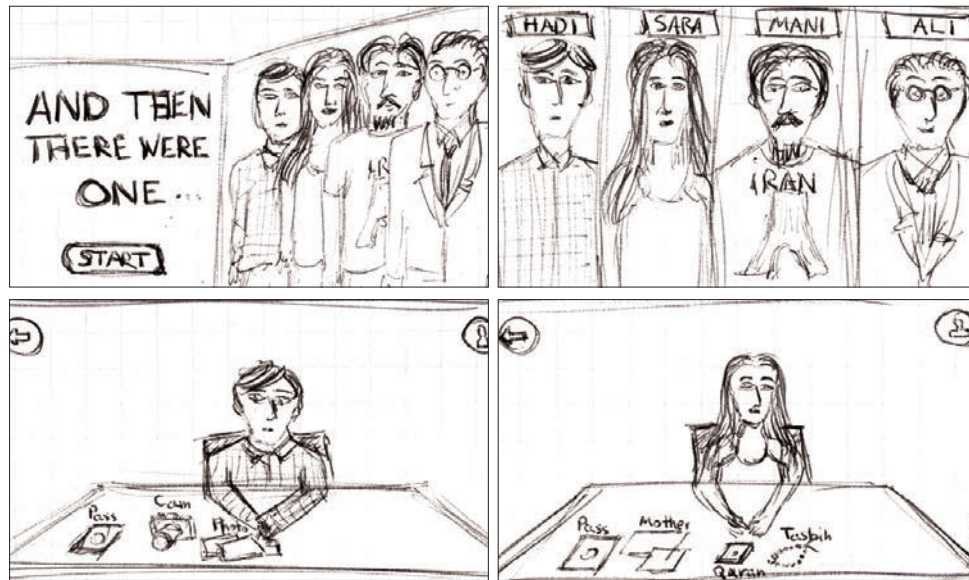
Mani is an alternate younger version of Asghar Farhadi. In 2017, His movie *The Salesman* was Oscar-nominated for Best Foreign Language Film. It was right after the Travel Ban executive order and although the White House gave a statement that Farhadi could travel to the US, he said: "I would rather stay beside my people." Eventually, his movie won the Oscar. I wondered what if Farhadi was a young experimental filmmaker who was seeking his dream in the US. What could happen to him if he returned to his country?



Sara's mother (who lives in Boston) was recently hospitalized after an emergency medical condition. She went through a lot to obtain a visa to be with her mother. Although Sara does not pray and wear hijab, she thinks that being connected and believing in God could comfort her. She has some belongings that could make the TSA agent's choice an easy one: Sara carries a small Quran to help her feel peaceful and to pray for her mother's health. Sara Amiri is the symbol of those Muslims who are being discriminated against because of their beliefs and their Middle Eastern appearance. She has only one wish: to reunite with her mother one last time. Will the TSA agent let her enter the US?



**SARA  
AMIRI**



Early Sketches

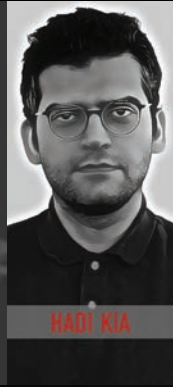
After creating the characters for my story, I was ready to design the scenes and the interface. I started to sketch and then build the scenes. The narrative begins with a motion comics-type animation (made in After Effects) which set up the story. I chose my cast, took pictures of them with the poses I needed and then transformed them into black and white illustrations. Eventually, I put them in the scenes that I created.

After passing through the main menu, there is a page where the players choose the passenger whom they want to inspect; this selection leads to four rooms in which the passengers sit behind a desk and their five (clickable) belongings are on the table. The player interacts with the objects on the table in order to gain more knowledge about the passenger. The objects are the pieces of a puzzle that shape each character's story. In each room, there is a button that can lead the player to a page where they have to make the final decision about the character. The player is allowed to pick one of these characters as a qualified person to enter the US. In the end, a video is played which shows the consequences of the choice that the player made. The video is a flash-forward that depicts what has happened to the passenger who could enter the US and the passengers who could not. I created eight videos, two for each character. One video is for the case that they can pass the security and the other one is for the case that they are rejected. The outcome of the final video depends on the player's final choice.



AND THEN  
THERE WAS  
**ONE**

PLAY



HADI KIA



MANI RAAD



SARA AMIRI



VARTAN MALEKIAN



HADI KIA  
PHOTOGRAPHER



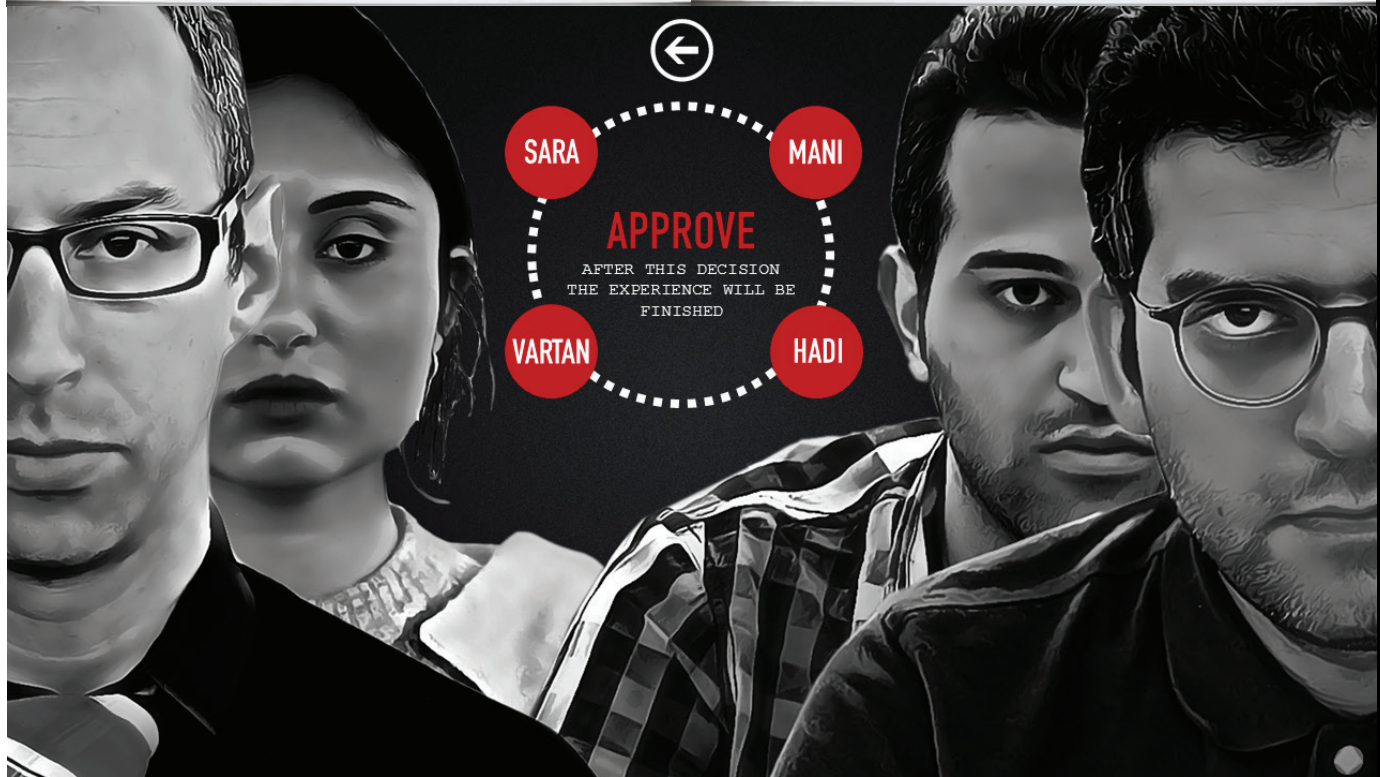
SARA AMIRI  
VISITOR



MANI RAAD  
FILMMAKER



VARTAN MALEKIAN  
NEUROLOGICAL SURGEON





HADI'S CAMERA



AWARD CERTIFICATE

OPEN IT



### MEDICATIONS

Olanzapine (Zyprexa)  
Quetiapine (Seroquel)  
Risperidone (Risperdal)

SEARCH



### VARTAN'S NECKLACE

PROBABLY HE IS CHRISTIAN





**MANI RAAD WENT BACK TO IRAN. HE WAS BANNED FROM FILMMAKING FOR POLITICAL ISSUES. TODAY, HE IS WORKING AS A FILM EDITOR.**



**MANI RAAD ACCEPTED HIS AWARD. HE WENT TO LOS ANGELES TO MAKE HIS FIRST FEATURE FILM.**



**SARA AMIRI WENT BACK TO IRAN. TWO DAYS LATER HER MOTHER PASSED AWAY BEFORE SHE COULD GIVE HER LAST GOODBYE.**



**SARA AMIRI VISITED HER MOTHER. SHE FELT BETTER AFTER SEEING HER DAUGHTER. SARA TOOK HER MOTHER BACK TO IRAN. TODAY, THEY ARE LIVING TOGETHER.**



**VARTAN MALEKIAN WENT TO CANADA FOR ANOTHER SURGERY. HE FOUND OUT LATER THAT THE SURGERY IN BOSTON WAS NOT SUCCESSFUL.**



**VARTAN MALEKIAN PERFORMED A SUCCESSFUL SURGERY AND SAVED AN 8 YEAR OLD GIRL'S LIFE.**



**HADI KIA RETURNED TO IRAN. HE HAD TO JOIN THE MANDATORY MILITARY SERVICE. TODAY, HE IS SERVING IN SYRIA.**



**HADI KIA RECEIVED HIS MFA IN PHOTOGRAPHY AND HE WORKED WITH SEVERAL NEWS AGENCIES. TWO YEARS LATER HE WON A PULITZER PRIZE.**

Fresh Media 2018 was coming up and I looked at it as a great opportunity to exhibit this work. Time was once again tight and I decided to run my project using PowerPoint and a touchscreen, the same format of installation I worked with in Fresh Media 2017. This time, I designed a flyer-questionnaire to collect some information from the players' experiences and to act as a sort of "user testing." I asked the players these questions:

- *Who did you let in? why?*
- *What did you learn?*
- *How do you feel after your decision?*
- *Do you have other comments or feedback?*

I received many intriguing responses on paper and by email. Based on my observations, Vartan was the most chosen character among the four passengers. Sara had the 2nd rank, although she was close to Vartan's numbers. Hadi and Mani were placed in the next ranks with low numbers. The players expressed different reasons for their choices. Most of the people who chose Vartan over the other characters indicated "the emergency situation or the matter of life and death" as the stimulating element behind their decisions.

Sara elicited "empathy" more than other characters. One player chose Sara because of his "personal experience" and the fact that his mother had been hospitalized for many years and passed away recently, "I don't want to stop her from seeing her loved one maybe for one last time" he said. The players who chose either Hadi or Mani, expressed their "personal connection" to the characters. The fact that most of them were artists or international students made them empathize with those characters.

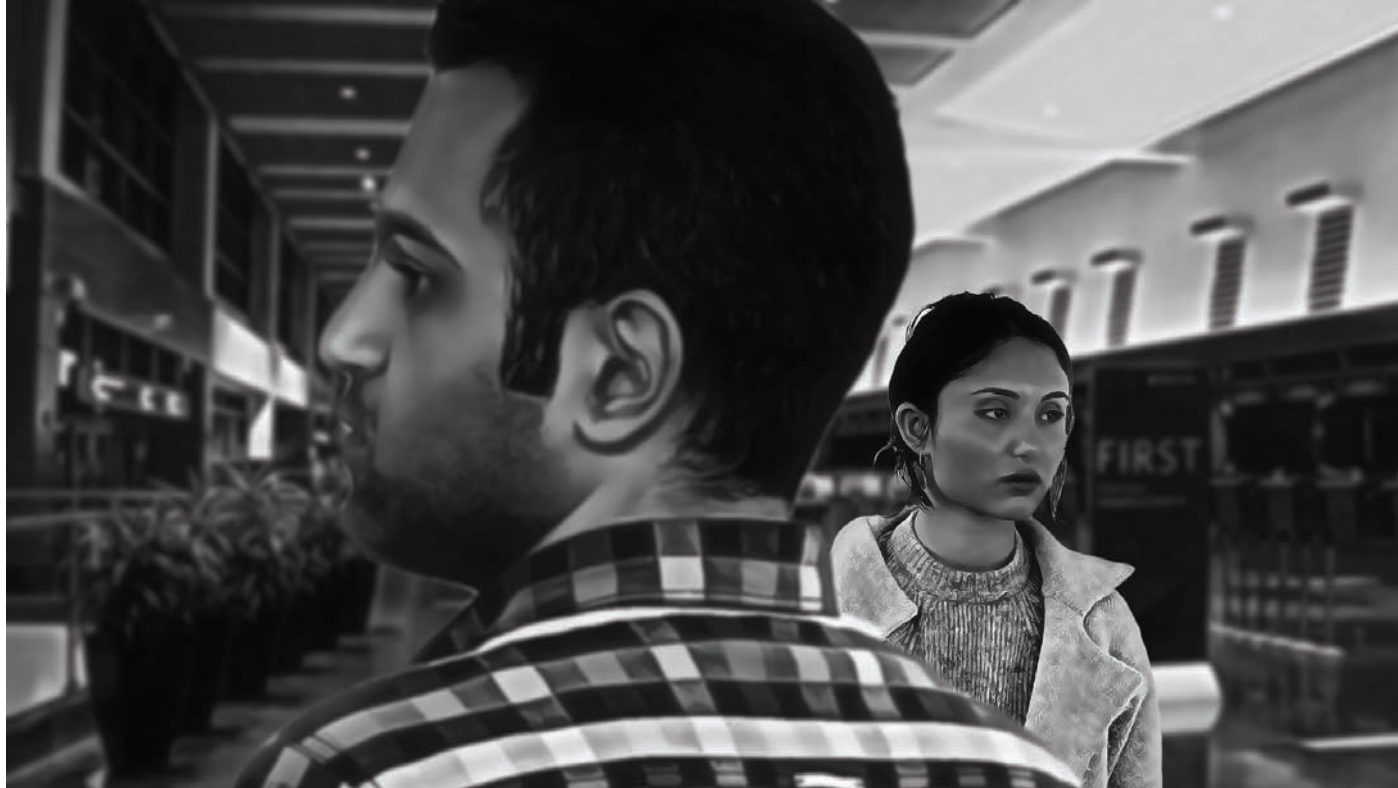


The real inflection point for the players was the ending, after they were faced with their decisions' consequences. They stood in awe while they were standing there and watching the passengers' fates after the choice has been made. "I didn't know politics could affect people's lives like this, change their fates forever," a player said. They seemed to closely feel what people who were banned behind security borders have felt. The ending was more than a dramatic conclusion for some players. "I thought that I saved someone's life, but destroyed

the other three lives," a player expressed, describing how she felt after the experience was finished. "This situation is terrible."

I had the chance to export a playable version of the project and send it to other people (and "experts") in order to hear their experience of the piece. I also had the idea of conducting a user-test with a couple of conservative people who had biases against me and people like me. With the help of a friend in LA who knew these potential players, they experienced the narrative





although without my presence. After having a discussion with my friend, the players seemed more open-minded than before and became enthusiastic to the notion of having more discussions while we put our biases aside. “Well, I don’t necessarily think that we can ban terrorists from entering our country in this way, but it certainly helps it. Now I’m thinking that it also could hurt people’s lives. We might need another background check system” one of them said. Reacting to the actor who played Vartan, one of them said “Is that a white dude?” My friend responded, “All Iranians don’t look like what you think they would look like”. They showed a genuine interest and mental flexibility in their conversations with my friend after

finishing the experience. This was the first time that I could reach out to the target group I have always have been seeking. It was a good start.

Receiving positive feedback from experts in UX/UI design and Interactive Storytelling made me satisfied with my work. Their comments also opened doors to new areas for expanding the idea: “This could be a great model for transferring insights and knowledge”, “I really liked the story behind their belongings, the culture and the history I learned about. You should expand that”, “The fact that we could use this project as a learning tool for every topic we have in mind is fascinating.”



## ALTERNATIVE DIRECTIONS

I'm looking forward to turning this project into a mobile application which could be playable on phones and tablets. I want to develop a game that has multiple stories and that would allow players to choose which story they want to play. I also want to create a system that could collect data from the players' choices. This could provide a huge amount of statistics, which will help me study the players' decisions and beliefs.

For this version of the project, I created only two different endings for each character, one in which they enter the US and one in which they have to go back to Iran. That means that in any case that the player does not choose a specific character, the final video will be the same for that character. I want to create more videos (of their different, varying fates) which could motivate players to experience the narrative again.

I intend to bring more diversity to the characters. Different nationalities, races, and religions could make the story identifiable to more audiences. At the end of the day, the Travel Ban is not specifically about Iranians—there are currently six other countries targeted by this ban. I tried to speak out on my people's behalf because I have experienced “how does it feel when you have an Iranian passport?” closely.



## CONCLUSION

As the second part of The *One* trilogy, *And Then There was One* is the most ideal model I have built towards my thesis goals: an interactive choice-driven narrative in the form of a game that talks to its players about a salient issue which is happening around them. I was able to present this project to a group of people who could challenge my thesis goals for the first time. The idea of having an influence on human beliefs through creating an interactive narrative is an immense claim and I made a significant attempt with this project, which prompted empathy in the players, opened up a dialogue for a fair discussion of morality, and showed players a potential flexibility in rethinking their basic beliefs about immigration in the US.

Preliminary success with the project pushed me to move forward in the path I started. I decided to think more broadly and be more speculative. I planned to combine the positive points that I'd achieved in the previous segments of the trilogy and move them to a new domain: virtual reality.







WHERE ARE YOU FROM, SIR?

IRAN.

PLEASE FOLLOW ME, SIR.









ONE TRILOGY.

# THE LAST ONE

AN IMMERSIVE VR EXPERIENCE



The final segment of The *One* trilogy is called *The Last One*. It is a combination of the successful aspects of the previous two interactive experiences I've previously detailed and the virtual reality domain. *The Last One* tells the story of three men who have been arrested as suspects of a car attack in Boston. A car plows into pedestrians which results in killing 8 and injuring 34 people. The driver flees the scene, although the police apprehend three men who were close to the incident and looked suspicious. A lawyer watches the news and goes to the precinct where the suspects are being detained. He/She wants to visit the three men in order to take this case for one of them. The lawyer reviews the evidence, talks to the suspects, and determines on who is innocent and needs to be represented.

There has been a familiar plot in recent years revolving around a car used as a deadly weapon. This kind of attack has caught the media's attention, specifically when terrorism is involved. I selected this situation as the background plot of my new story. This time, the audience was in the position of saving someone as opposed to what happened in *And Then There was One* and *I'm not the One*.

I have always been interested in the virtual reality domain as a tool for storytelling. The *One* trilogy (which could be presented in multiple media and platforms) provided the opportunity to use VR as the medium for the last segment of the trilogy. I believed that VR could create a more realistic atmosphere in a role-playing interactive experience and that the audience could feel the interaction more closely.

## CONCEPT AND RESEARCH

This story revolves around a vehicle-ramming attack, a form of mass murder in which a perpetrator deliberately rams a motor vehicle into a building, crowd of people, or another vehicle (Rapoport, 2006). Deliberate vehicle-ramming into a crowd of people is a tactic that has been used by terrorists more often in recent years, specifically after 2010.

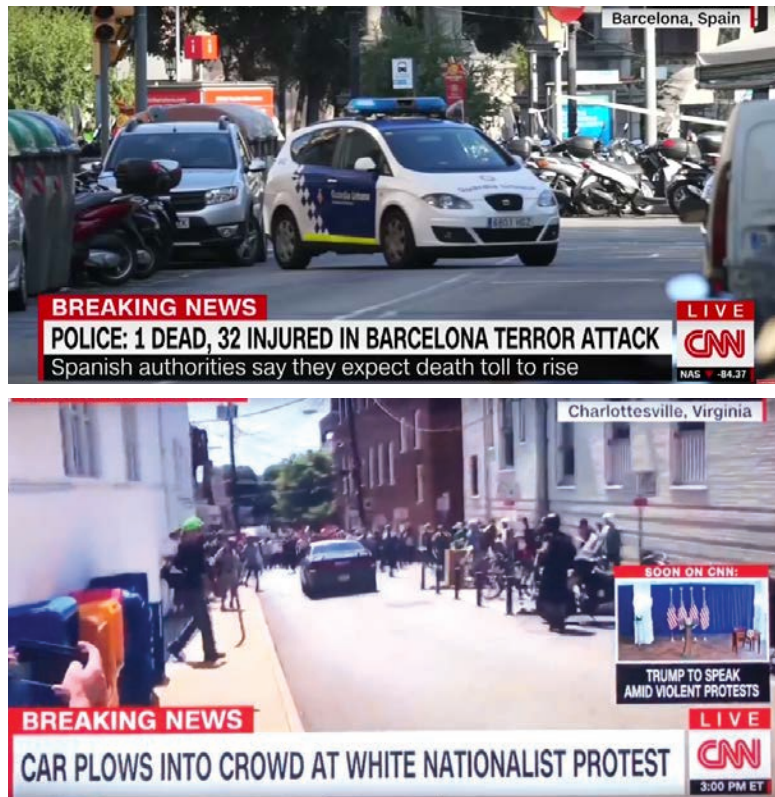
Although the media covers only the attacks that are considered terrorist acts, these kinds of attacks also happen for other reasons. Vehicle-ramming has been carried out in the course of other types of

crimes, including road rage incidents. These incidents have been ascribed to the driver's psychiatric disorder. Dr. Alan Felthous in a journal called *The American Psychiatric Publishing Textbook of Forensic Psychiatry*, describes this issue as "when the patient deliberately crashes into another vehicle, neuropsychiatric conditions that can be associated with an increased risk of vehicular crash include psychotic exacerbation of schizophrenia, profound or suicidal depression, dementia, and disturbances in consciousness, such as epilepsy and narcolepsy" (Felthouse, 2017).



Cartoon Courtesy: Michael P. Ramirez





Video Stills Courtesy: CNN | Media's Word Choices  
Barcelona Attack Vs. Charlottesville Attack

Generally, when these attacks happen, the eyes of the media and the authorities focus on the terrorism aspect—both follow the driver's identity and ethnicity. They expect to find out that the driver is not a citizen. If the perpetrator is a citizen, they will follow the person's heritage, looking for a sign that he/she is Muslim. In the case that they fail to find any of that information, the media would lose interest in covering the story and the authorities will stop treating the case as a high priority terrorism incident.

The earliest known use of a vehicle-ramming goes back to 1973, when Olga Hepnarová, who was a sociopath, killed 8 people in

Prague, former Czechoslovakia. She described her action in a letter sent to the newspapers as “revenge for the hatred she felt was directed against her by her family and the world” (Svobodné newspaper, 1973). This attack happened long before cars became a deadly weapon for terrorists. It was a beginning for other similar actions committed by sociopaths and psychopaths who had a psychiatric disorder.

Since 2014 there have been 14 vehicle ramming attacks in the West, according to a count by New America, a nonpartisan think tank, most of them considered as terrorist attacks (Bergen, 2017). An interesting fact is that even

some of the recent attacks such as Charlottesville attack in 2017, Edmonton attack in 2017, Times square attack in 2017, and 2018 Toronto Van Attack in 2018 are not listed as terrorist attacks, probably because they were done by white male citizens. Another fact: some of the attacks are not listed, either because they were not covered in the mainstream media or because they had a small number of casualties. Currently there have been 42 attacks since 1953 reported by the media as non-terrorism attacks (CNN, 2017).

While I was in the middle of the development of my idea, three attacks happened: one in Toronto and two in New York. The first two attacks were covered by the media for a few days and after the revelation of the driver's identity and heritage, the coverage was ended. The third one that happened in Manhattan did not have much media coverage because the driver

was a white male citizen who did not have any terrorism connections other than family matters. After watching and listening to these samples which were being represented in the media, I became more motivated to pursue my new idea.

The reason I chose this topic for my new story was the judgment aspect behind it. When one of these attacks happens, why does the media insist on looking for the driver's heritage to reveal the terrorist goals behind it? Why does the President of the United States send his prayers to the Canadian people because he thinks an Islamist terrorist attack happened when it was just done by a psychopath?

My idea was to put three suspects in front of the audience's eyes and ask them what they think about it. Which one of those characters do they think could be innocent? Would race and ethnicity block one's eyes from seeing the truth?

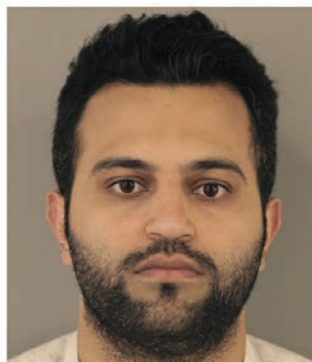
## DESIGN PROCESS

Similar to what I did in the second segment of *The One* trilogy, I started to write the plot and design the characters. I created three suspects with different backgrounds, races, and professions who were apprehended close to the incident for dissimilar reasons. I will describe these suspects' background, characteristics, and their belongings as I designed them before I started to write the screenplay.

### Ahmed Farhi

Ahmed is a 38-year-old Syrian refugee. He is working at a Lebanese restaurant in Boston's downtown. He fled from Syria after his wife and 5-year-old daughter were killed during ISIS attacks on his village. One of his relatives found a job for him at a restaurant. He has been involved in a street brawl case recently that put his asylum case in jeopardy. Ahmed has claimed that a group of racists started the fight and he did what he had to do to defend himself. On the day of the car attack, the restaurant was closed. Ahmed asserts that he was doing

some cleaning when the incident happened and then he went out to see what was going on. At that moment the police arrested him. He does not have an alibi to prove his claims.



7663423

**AHMED FARHI**

#### ***AHMED'S BELONGINGS:***

*Wallet with a picture of his wife and daughter inside it*

*Small Quran*

*knife*



## David Duncan

David is a 35-year-old American citizen who served five years in Afghanistan and returned two years ago. He has been struggling with PTSD, which has been exacerbated by his separation from his wife. David has been trying to stay ahead of the curve and take the control of his life. He has been working in a real estate agency that belongs to his uncle. David's claims indicate that on the day of the incident, he was in a café nearby and he saw what happened from the café's window. After watching the attack closely, he had a trauma attack himself. He went out to the street

and grabbed a person's neck who David thought might be the driver and tried to choke him to death. The police saw David and stopped him. They moved him to the precinct and he became a suspect himself.



43145461  
**DAVID DUNCAN**

### *DAVID'S BELONGINGS:*

*Empty capsule bottle*

*Gun*

*Military dog tag*

## Leon Bonnet

Leon is an Afro-French tourist who has been in the US for two weeks. He is a computer engineer back in Lyon. Leon was across the street where the incident happened. He ran away after the police tried to ask him some questions. Eventually, he was apprehended and moved to the precinct. He has claimed that he was shooting some pictures of the car attack when he saw the police, which made him terrified and caused him to run away (though there was no picture of the incident in his camera). The officers found

some electronic boards and wires which seemed suspicious to them, but Leon specified that he bought the equipment for his computer works.



5467843  
**LEON BONNET**

### *LEON'S BELONGINGS:*

*Camera*

*Passport*

*Electronics and wires*



After designing the characters, I wrote the screenplay the way I did for the *I'm not the One* interactive film: drawing a branching storyline and writing the dialogues. *The Last One* begins with multiple scenes of the news covering the car attack and discussing it as a terrorist act. The next scene happens in the precinct, from the point of view of the lawyer, which represents the audience's point of view. An officer enters the room saying "Good afternoon... You're the lawyer who called us today, right? As you know we detained three possible suspects close to the crime scene... They're being locked up in three different rooms. I heard that you're gonna take this case for one of them... FBI is gonna be here any minute and take them. You can talk to them, also they had some belongings, you can take a look at them. The statements are on the table. Let me know when you're ready." Then the clickable hotspots are revealed on the scene, with which the audience can choose which suspect they want to meet.

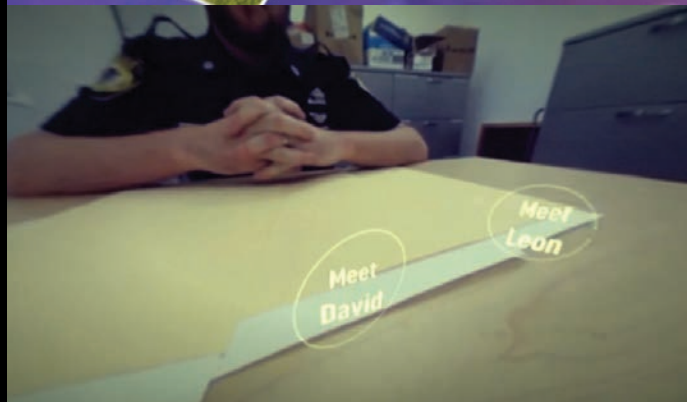
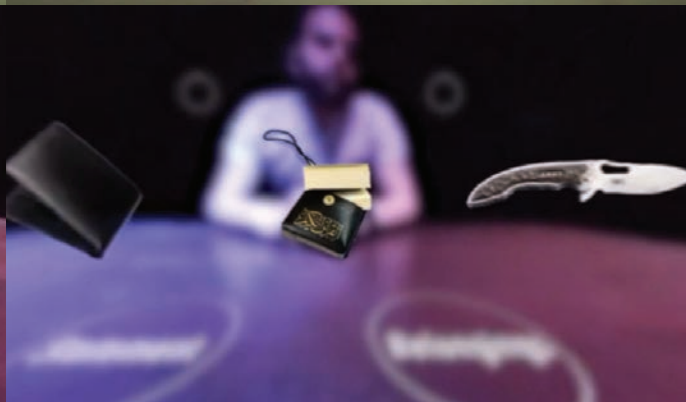
Each of the suspects is locked up in a different room. The objects they had while they were arrested and the police documents are on the table, with clickable hotspots, as well as the three dialogues on the top of the scene. The audience can go back and forth between the rooms to choose the one person they really believe to be innocent. Inspecting the objects and

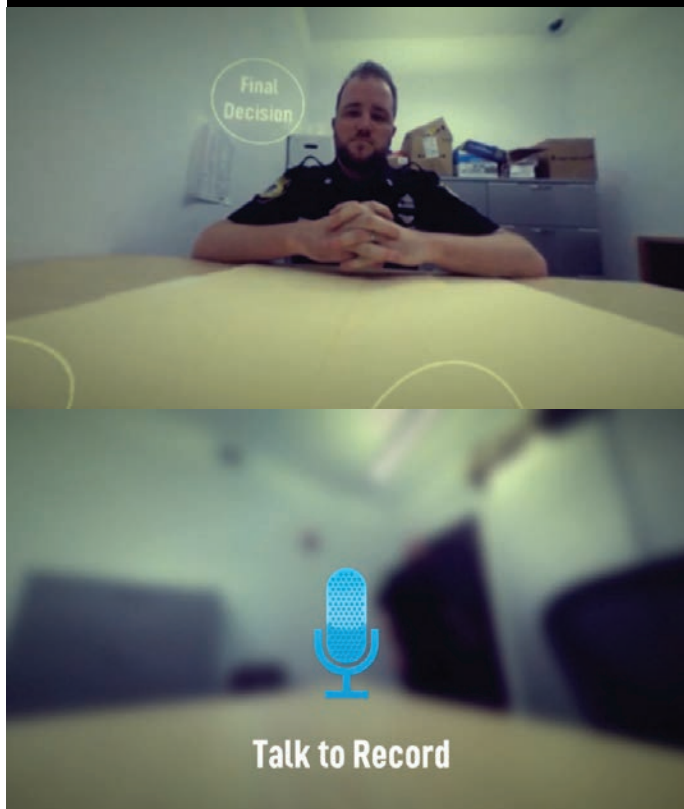
reviewing the documents and talking to the suspects are the main parts of this experience. In the end, the audience will either choose one of the suspects or leave without believing that any of them could be innocent. Then, when the officer leaves the room he asks you “Why did you choose that one?” and a microphone icon appears on the screen in order to collect data from people’s choices. The ending scene is another scene from the news in which the anchor says that the police have finally released a picture of the perpetrator. The movie ends here and we do not see the picture. I wanted to leave the ending open in order to make the audience think about their choices, not the ending that I have written for them.

The next step was to shoot the videos that I wanted to convert to 360 virtual reality videos. The fastest production option was a 360 Samsung camera. I imported the videos in After Effects, which has added a helpful asset for creating VR videos. Technically, I tried to make a schematic video of what was going to happen in the real experience. I edited the videos, placed the hotspots on the scenes, and added ambient music which could make the experience more gripping.

I made a 360 video which I could upload it to a phone and put it in VR goggles that could create an immersive VR experience. However, in this format the hotspots were not clickable. I could call it a preliminary prototype in which people would explore the environment in the video and feel the experience as much as it was possible by that time. I used many online and offline platforms to build this interactive VR piece but each of them had its own restrictions. Eventually, I came up with the Unity game engine. Unity’s assets provided enough tools for me to build a 360 environment with clickable hotspots and to put my videos in it. However, Unity demands a high level of skills in programming for creating such a VR project. At this point, I’m working with people skilled in Unity to make the first polished prototype. It is an ongoing process.







*The Last One Stills*

## CONCLUSION

Tech companies, the entertainment industry, and artists are all now entering the freshest visual domain we have had in recent years: virtual reality—an interactive, computer-generated experience taking place within a simulated environment. This immersive platform can create a whole new environmental and visual experience for its audience. In the last segment of the *One* trilogy, I intended to use this medium to bring my story into an environment that I created, one with more tension that could potentially help the audience feel more engaged in a realistic, interactive narrative process. *The Last One* is an attempt to use this powerful medium that could provide helpful tools and assets for telling a story in an intuitive way. For me, VR is a vast ocean with many precious living beings and treasures beneath it that I have just started exploring. I am certain that this medium will be a helpful tool in the stories I am going to tell in the future.





KOOK + ELEVATORS

Inspired by American musician and philosopher John Cage and his ideology, *KOOK + Elevators* is a multimedia project that provides the audience an interface which lets them compose a soundtrack with Persian instruments for a short film named *Elevators*.

The idea behind this work is a direct response to John cage's three-movement composition called *4'33"*. This piece was composed in 1952, for any instrument or combination of instruments, and the score instructs the performer(s) not to play their instrument(s) during the entire duration of the piece throughout the three movements. The piece consists of the sounds of the environment that the listeners hear while it is performed, although it is commonly mis-perceived as "four minutes thirty-three seconds of silence" (Lienhard, 2003). "Indeterminacy" and "nonintentional" are the two keywords in Cage's philosophy and his work *4'33"* that shaped the idea of *KOOK* (which means "tuned" in Persian)—a platform for the audience (who theoretically has no knowledge about music or Persian instruments) to show their emotional response toward a film with the music they compose.

*Elevators* is a short film without any dialogue that I made. It tells the story of a man who is trying to use the elevators in a building, but none of them seem to be working. After a while, he notices that the elevators are working properly for other people, but not for him. He feels trapped in the building at the end of the film. The movie includes only ambient sounds.

I tried to bring an intercultural experience to this project. The audience is able to use six Persian instruments (each with six motifs), to add another layer to the short film they're watching. While they are interacting with the interface and thinking about the film, they are also learning about Persian culture and music. *KOOK + Elevators* intends to be a meaningful and instructive multimedia experience about sound, visual, and culture.

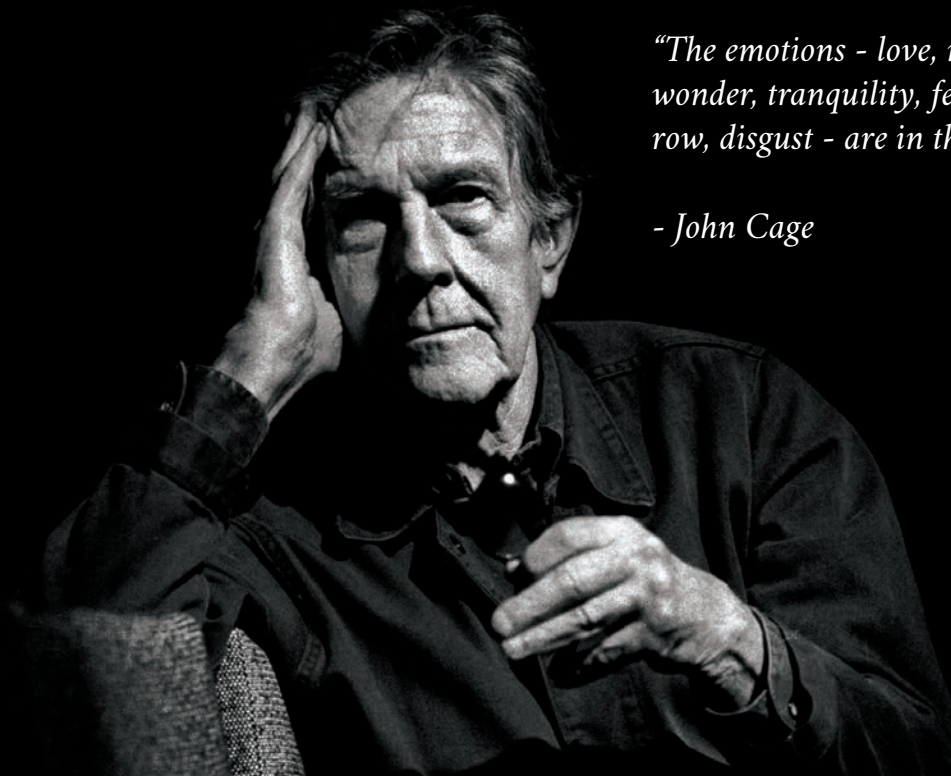
## CONCEPT AND RESEARCH

John Cage once said: “There is no such thing as an empty space or an empty time. There is always something to see, something to hear. In fact, try as we may to make a silence, we cannot” (Cage, 1961). In 1951, Cage visited the anechoic chamber at Harvard University. An anechoic chamber is a room designed in such a way that the walls, ceiling, and floor absorb all sounds made in the room, rather than reflecting them as echoes. Such a chamber is also externally sound-proofed. Cage entered the chamber expecting to hear silence, but he

wrote later, “I heard two sounds, one high and one low. When I described them to the engineer in charge, he informed me that the high one was my nervous system in operation, the low one my blood in circulation” (Stein, 2004). Cage had gone to a place where he expected total silence, and yet heard sound. “Until I die there will be sounds. And they will continue following my death. One need not fear about the future of music” (Cage, 1961). This realization of the impossibility of silence led to the composition of 4'33”.

*“The emotions - love, mirth, the heroic, wonder, tranquility, fear, anger, sorrow, disgust - are in the audience.”*

*- John Cage*





# 4'33"

*for any instrument or combination of instruments*

John Cage



The premiere of the three-movement 4'33" was given by David Tudor on August 29, 1952, in Maverick Concert Hall, Woodstock, New York, as part of a recital of contemporary piano music. The audience saw him sit at the piano and, to mark the beginning of the piece, close the keyboard lid. Later he opened it briefly, to mark the end of the first movement. This process was repeated for the second and third movements. The piece remains controversial to this day, and is seen as challenging the very definition of music and silence.

4'33" challenges, or rather exploits to a radical extent, the social regiments of the modern concert life etiquette, experimenting on unsuspecting concert-goers to prove an important point. "First, the choice of a prestigious venue and the social status of the composer and the performers automatically heightens the audience's expectations for the piece. As a result, the listener is more focused, giving Cage's 4'33" the same amount of attention (or perhaps even more) as if it were Beethoven's Ninth" (Taruskin, 2009).

Thus, even before the performance, the reception of the work is already predetermined by the social setup of the concert. Furthermore, the audience's behavior is limited by the rules and regulations of the concert hall. They will quietly sit and listen to 4 minutes and 33 seconds of ambient noise. It is not easy to get a large group of people to listen to ambient noise for nearly five minutes, unless they are regulated by the concert hall etiquette.

I believe that the redefinition of music of which Cage presented us with his philosophy of, is about reversing the position of the music stage and its audience. The interaction happening between sound and human ears is beyond the classical musical instrument's capability. When the audience finds itself in an absolute silence, its minds and ears still look for a trace of sound and that is where they find it: Silence is a music itself. In silence our minds become a music composer unintentionally, looking for instruments in and around nature.

Cage felt that since everyone else was exploring intentional sounds, someone had to do the same kind of experimentation with the "nonintentional." He wished to pursue whatever others were not—whenever others started following him and doing what he was doing, he did something else. When we speak of chance when listening to Cage, we are not speaking of random occurrences or accidental happenings or freely chosen, desire-based results. Rather, we

are speaking of nonintentionality, removing the personal self, escape from the choices and desires of the self, divorcing the final product of composition from the conscious desires of the composer, and thus coming to live with all the sounds we do not intend. That was how Cage created many experimental musical instruments with natural materials and objects such as wood, stone, and water.

Cage was one of the pioneers of "indeterminacy" in music. The classic definition of indeterminacy derives from John Cage, according to which it "refers to the ability of a piece to be performed in substantially different ways" (Pritchett, 1993). In this approach, some aspects of a musical work are left open to chance or to the interpreter's free choice. By presenting the audience (theoretically without any musical background or training) with musical instruments that they do not know, the process of making a soundtrack for the film will have an indeterminate and nonintentional outcome.

I was in the process of developing the *Elevators* idea when I started to think about John Cage's philosophy as part of our studio project. I knew that my film was going to be without any dialogue or music. I started to involve my new film in the Cage project. The idea behind *Elevators* came to mind after the travel ban happened. The film is a metaphorical depiction of my life during those days, when I could not return home because I knew I would not be able to reenter the US and when I experienced racism closely for the first time. *Elevators* begins with a shot of an elevator's call button with printed flyers and ads about fighting racism and Islamophobia around it. A man (played by me) presses the button and waits. He enters one of the elevators and pushes one of the floor buttons. The elevator does not move. He pushes the button again and again. Nothing happens. He goes out. Another person tries the same elevator and successfully goes to another floor. The man wonders what is going on. He pushes the call button again to try another elevator. At the same time, another woman enters the elevator with him and pushes the button. Again, the elevator does not move. After standing in the elevator for a couple of seconds, smiling to each other in an awkward moment, the man decides to exit. After that, the doors close while they are looking at each other in the eyes. In the end, the man is left in the hallway staring at the elevators and feels trapped while the doors in front of him close.

"Elevators" Stills





I started to ask these questions: how might a soundtrack change this film? Could it add more emotional levels to the film? Does music help with transferring the film's message to its audience? Will I be able to analyze the audience's reactions to the film based on the soundtrack they make?

## DESIGN PROCESS

The production of *Elevators* was finished when I started to think about the instruments and the interface. The interface was not supposed to be designed for professional musicians, so I intended to provide six modular motifs for each instrument, so that even users with no musical background could create a soundtrack by putting them together. I started to collaborate with my musician

friend Ramin, who lives in Tehran. I wanted our instruments to be varied in terms of being a string, woodwind, or percussion instrument. We selected six instruments: Setar (string), Oud (string), Santur (hammered dulcimer), Ney (woodwind), Tonbak (percussion), and Kamancheh (bowed string). We spent weeks recording and sound-testing the motifs while video chatting.



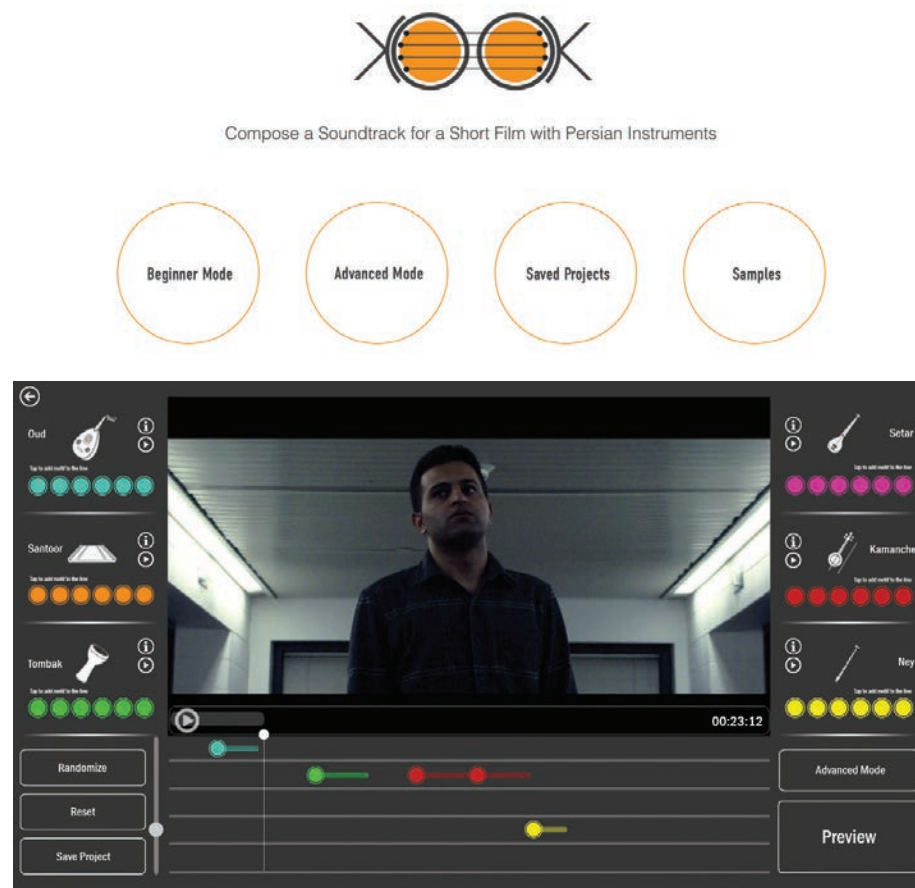


*Me and Ramin on Skype, recording Setar's motifs*

Simultaneously, I was sketching and thinking about the interface. I wanted it to be as simple and as comprehensive as possible. I considered creating it as editing software with audio timelines but in the shape of a “tap and drag” experience. Eventually, I ended up with two interfaces: “beginner mode” and “advanced mode.” In the “beginner mode” the film is played at the top center of the screen. Three instrument icons are placed at the left and three instrument icons are placed at the right, with six motifs at the bottom of the screen. There is also an info icon for users who want to know more about the instrument. A “play” icon is provided

for those who want to hear a sound sample of each instrument. The motifs are represented by colored circles. The user can tap on each of them and hear the sound of it, then drag it to the timeline. There is the “random” button that places some motifs in the timeline randomly for users who want to engage in the experience in perhaps an easier way. Users can arrange the music by moving around the motifs and preview their final work and save it. The “advanced mode” has more options for those who have acquired sound mixing skills. Each audio line in the timeline could be modified in term of volume and sound effects.

I started to build a prototype of this interface. I started with programming platforms such as *Processing* and *MAX*, though I did not achieve the results I desired. I asked myself: what if I modified an existing piece of editing or sound mixing software, changed its interface, and made it something close to KOOK? Would the result be something to show to users as a prototype? I chose the film editing software *Vegas*. I started to play around with its interface, deleted unnecessary tools and assets, and added the motifs and instrument icons. Then, I put it on the touchscreen, made it ready for user testing, and asked users to play with it. The final result was great.



Main Menu, Beginner Mode Interface





*Advanced Mode Interface*



*The Final Prototype Built in Vegas*

Although the interface I designed was not there, the experience I designed was absolutely there. I observed users watching *Elevators*, thinking about it, enjoying Persian instruments, and bringing their emotions into the film. That being said, there were people who chose to leave the film the way it was, with no musical soundtrack. They chose silence because they believed the film and its message could stand on their own. Either way, both groups showed empathy towards the main character. The group who chose music became close to him through Persian culture and instruments. The other group became really entranced with the film and they believed that only silence could make the conclusion stronger.

## CONCLUSION

Would John Cage choose silence or music for this film? The most important of Cage's lessons for me was that silence itself is music and the means of communication are there in front of us—we just need to look more closely. Experimenting with new domains like sound and music was a tremendous experience for me. As a filmmaker and storyteller who has always considered sound as sort of an additive to the main course, this project taught me that sound and music are powerful tools for storytelling on their own. *KOOK + Elevators* tried to engage its audience in a new and different way than the interactive experiences I had encountered before. This time, users were not in the position of making decisions to change the storyline. They were music composers who composed a soundtrack for a film by their emotions, not by their skills. *KOOK* is an interface which has strong potential to be a standalone platform. It could also be used for other films, feature instruments from different cultures, and create an enjoyable, meaningful experience for its users.



# UNUSUAL SUSPECTS





In a direct response to the media and society's perception of the stereotype of a criminal, *Unusual Suspects* depicts a lineup room with three suspects (with the same face) standing in it. It is an interactive video installation that places its audience in the room as the witness to a crime. This is an individual experience. When individuals step into a darkened room, they see a projection on a wall, which is supposed to resemble the two-way mirrored glass of the lineup room (with the suspects behind it). There are three spots marked on the floor that urge the audience to step on them; each spot is aligned with one of the suspects. When the audience stands on one of the spots, the corresponding suspect comes forward and his information appears next to him. The audience can try all three spots—they see three men with different races and ages (according to the information displayed). Still, they look like the same person.

The mainstream media's misrepresentation of minority races and ethnicities (in terms of being a criminal) has already changed people's perceptions. According to these stereotypes, blacks are gang members, Mexicans are drug dealers, and Middle Easterns are terrorists. These are only a few examples of the stereotyping that is currently happening in the world. *Unusual Suspects* aims to address this issue in a new way by engaging people in an interactive video installation. This experience speaks to its audience about an important issue: the existence of racism and discrimination in the media and the criminal justice system.

## CONCEPT AND DESIGN PROCESS

After I finished *The Last One* project, I was still intrigued by the background topic that I chose for the story, specifically how crime is reported in the media based on criminal identity, how the police investigate a crime when race, ethnicity, and religion are involved in the investigation process, and how prejudicial beliefs affect the criminal justice system. The statistics of minority incarcerations prove that something is wrong in this process.

Based on a report by The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, between 1980 and 2015, the number of people incarcerated in America increased from roughly 500,000 to over 2.2 million. In 2014, African Americans constituted 2.3 million, or

34%, of the total 6.8 million correctional populations. African Americans are incarcerated at more than 5 times the rate of whites. Though African Americans and Hispanics make up approximately 32% of the US population, they comprised 56% of all incarcerated people in 2015 (NAACP, 2016), which might lead people to suggest that the crime rates are higher when a colored person is involved. In the 2015 National Survey on Drug Use and Health, about 17 million whites and 4 million African Americans reported having used an illicit drug within a month (SAMHDA, 2015). Although African Americans and whites use drugs at similar rates, the imprisonment rate of African Americans for drug charges is almost 6 times that of whites.







Here is a scenario: Imagine yourself as a witness to a murder. It happened in a dark street at night. You could only see a shadow of the murderer before he ran away. The police ask you to come to the precinct and identify the killer out of the three suspects they have in custody. In front of you, behind the glass in the lineup room, three men are standing still – a white man, a black man, and a Middle Eastern man. What would you feel in that moment? Would you see the real thing behind the glass or the perception that the media and society gave you? I tried to recreate this moment in a video installation with this project.

I started by filming myself standing, while I imagined myself in a lineup room. I did this three times with different poses and then I merged these shots together, into one frame: now three different versions of me were standing next to each other. This became the main video loop, which was supposed to be projected on the wall in the dark room. I created

three other videos for the moments when each suspect was supposed to come forward (when the audience stepped on one of the spots). I chose the same characteristic for the suspects that I used in *The Last One* story. I put Ahmed Farhi, David Duncan and Leon Bonnet as the suspects in this story, although they were all visually represented by me this time. In order to change

the videos based on the individual's movement in the room, I needed to use a webcam, *Processing*, and a program named *Video Trigger*. This program allows you to define specific regions of what your camera is recording. If anything changes in those regions, the program triggers the action you have chosen for it, which in my case was changing the video. I set up the camera direction to be where the audience was supposed to step on

the spots. I defined three regions for the camera on top of the three spots. When someone entered one of the regions, a specific video was played – one of the suspects came forward. To provide the proper tension in the room, I added a loop of dark instrumental ambient music. I also added a “police officer’s” voiceover, who asked the suspect to come forward when the video was triggered.





I held a class critique in my installation. This class included diverse students with different backgrounds. Soon after they experienced interacting with the piece, the critique became a place for social, historical, and political debate. They talked about the history of the immigrants in the US, police brutality, racism, Islamophobia, and the criminal justice system. One of them said a sentence that I will never forget: “I totally see myself in there.” This was the point that I have always been trying to achieve in my projects. I have always wanted the audience to feel as close to the experience as possible, and to feel as if they’re the character in the story. I believe I achieved this goal in *Unusual Suspects* better than in my other case studies, which was a great accomplishment for me in my thesis process.



## CONCLUSION

Thinking outside of the box of technology, VR, films, and video games for the first time in this thesis led me to a gallery setting; I had never considered myself an artist who could create a gallery installation. With *Unusual Suspects*, I experienced a new medium for telling a story – an interactive video installation. Based on my audience reactions, I believe this project was the strongest case study in this thesis. It could address some of the most important social and cultural issues today in America and engender conversations between people at the same time. Initially, I did not have any intention of, creating such a project. During a class when I was working on my programming skills and starting to know more about camera sensors and movement detectors, suddenly, this idea came to my mind. The final result was a great achievement for me and my research. I imagine that *Unusual Suspects* has a future and that it can be improved and exhibited in galleries and museums.



**THE END?**

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Every beginning has an end, but this end has a new beginning. I started a new part of my life by coming to the United States. I pursued my goals in DMI to create the interactive media I have always wanted to make. While here, I have been a victim of racism and stereotyping as a Middle Eastern man on many occasions. At first, I was angry. I wanted to confront anyone who wanted to insult or humiliate me. Then I gave up. I told myself, as the old Persian expression says, “The answer to the fools, is silence.” I still felt something in me like a burden. I already knew that I was going to create multimedia and interactive works focusing on storytelling for my thesis. But for what use? I look at my thesis as an opportunity to unburden myself and finally confront my fears with the tools that dynamic media provided for me – the tools of communication.

I did not intend to invent a cure for racism, but to search for its roots and try to understand them better, because then I could say I am in a

position to make something useful to counter it. I gave up confronting people in real life but tried to have a conversation with them in my works. With the help of cinematic language, I created my own worlds and put the people in them, worlds filled with moral dilemmas and ethical questions that push people towards questioning their ideals, beliefs, and biases. My intent was to build potential roads and bridges that were supposed to lead to empathy, a place where I could have a conversation with people far from their stereotypical way of thinking, where we could stand at the same level.

The case studies that I have included in this thesis were my reactions to the political, social, and cultural experience that I had during my research and design process. The political environment, which was the result of the aftermath of the 2016 election, led to the creation of the One trilogy. A new wave of Islamophobia (*I’m not the one*), the travel ban (*and Then There was One*), and the portrayal of Muslims

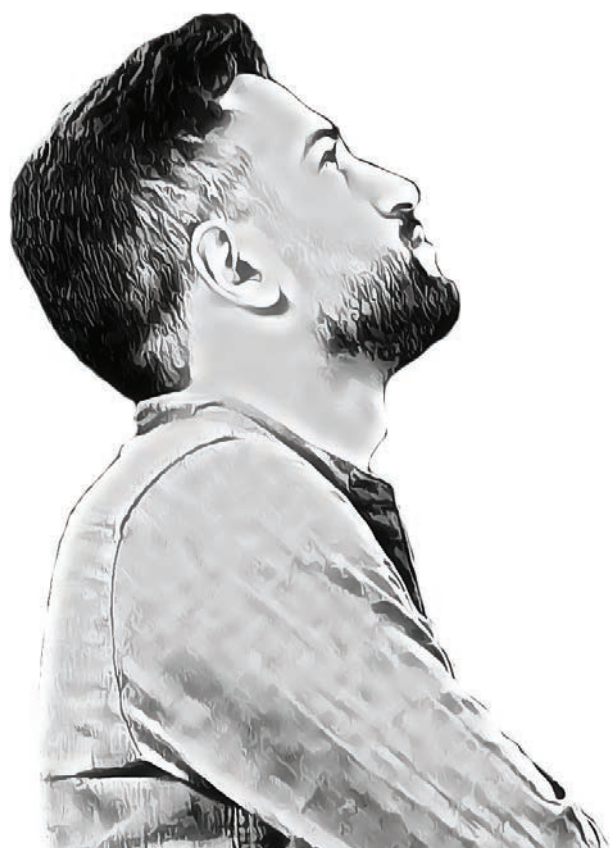
in the news (*The Last One*) were the topics that became the subjects of my projects. As I created each project, I learned more about my audience and how I should communicate with them for a better result. Step by step, I became closer to creating empathy inside the audience's minds, which had the potential to lead to changes in their biases against people like me. Bringing part of my culture into my work and mixing it with sound and visuals shaped a different experience in a different medium (*KOOK + Elevators*). My most recent work, an interactive video installation, acted like a mirror—a mirror that people could see themselves in and feel what it would be like to be perceived as a criminal (*Unusual Suspects*).

I tried to avoid being involved in the debate of whether or not to consider racism a mental illness, but instead to search for the roots behind it, the biases and stereotypes that have been part of our daily lives and conversations. I tried to use the power of dynamic

media to create intuitive experiences that might bring people to a place where they could communicate with each other without any filters or barriers: A place where they could interact, learn, and think.

I decided not to give up on having conversations with people and instead to use interactive storytelling, cinematic language, moral dilemma, and empathy to have these dialogues. I created a medium that I believe can be developed for other social and cultural matters that have a cognitive aspect, that can become a tool to teach and learn—a tool for transferring insights and knowledge, even for children. No one can honestly claim they have a solution for removing racism from society. I believe that I have started a path which has a bright future for fighting and affecting racism. I am delighted with what I achieved in my research and case studies, and excited to continue this work until a day when all of us will be recognized with the color of our blood, not by the color of our skin.

I hope one day we all will be seen as equal...





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