Utilising Principles of Cinematography to Communicate
Anti-Violence and Anti-Vengeance Themes in a Revenge Film

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ABSTRACT

In this exegesis I discuss the context, rationale and methods involved in the development and production of Firebird (2016), a film created as the studio component of my Doctor of Visual Arts degree. The film, along with this exegesis, serves to address the research question: How can anti-violence and anti-vengeance themes be communicated through images in a revenge film?

Revenge films often gain audience sympathy for the protagonist through the presentation of an initial wrongdoing or harm, which gives licence for viewers to enjoy the portrayal of violent acts that the protagonist subsequently enacts on his/her revenge-targets. As a filmmaker and film researcher, I have a particular interest in revenge films that provide a more critical approach to the portrayal of vengeance and violence. For the purposes of this exegesis, the terms ‘anti-vengeance’ and ‘anti-violence’ will be used to describe films, or aspects of films, that portray violent vengeance in a disapproving, non-approving, or ambivalent manner.

The main contributions of this creative-art and research project are as follows. First, it provides a relatively rare example of a revenge film made with the conscious intention of communicating anti-violence and anti-vengeance themes. Second, it documents my experiences: the challenges I faced, my decision-making processes, and the techniques I adopted, all of which may be of some interest to other filmmakers. Third, it provides a systematic analysis of cinematic image techniques used in a number of contemporary revenge films to support either anti- or pro-vengeance sentiments. The actual process of making this film involved eclectic, iterative and fluid combinations of hands-on experimentation, reflection-in-action, and insights gleaned from the study of previous film works.

A distinctive aspect of Firebird is the gradual evolution in its portrayal of the revenge-target, who is also the lead antagonist. Initially, this character is depicted as mysterious, powerful and menacing, but as the film progresses, it allows the audience to see him in a far more humanistic and sympathetic light, thereby undermining the notion of justified vengeance. This nuanced treatment contrasts with the way many revenge films portray targets of revenge as outright villains, with few redeeming qualities. While revenge films that feature anti-vengeance themes generally avoid such damning depictions, they generally present a static, rather than evolving, view of these characters. In this context, the ‘gradual improvement in
understanding’ approach employed in *Firebird* is an innovation within the field of revenge films.

To implement this approach, initial shots of the antagonist were taken from low-angle placements that showed little of his face but suggested a dominating presence. Subsequent images of him included more humanistic aspects (e.g., warm-toned lighting cast on his face) and were further enhanced through post-production (e.g., selective brightening and resizing of shots to provide greater intimacy). The antagonist’s perspective was explored, not only through dialogue but also through flashback imagery, which often contrasted in form from surrounding images. The film also showed the antagonist as suffering from the negative psychological consequences of his own violent acts. In one particular scene, where he expresses a deep sense of guilt, blacks were used to isolate the figure, top-lighting was used to support the notion of psychological anguish, while green-gels on lighting were used to give a cold, uncomfortable atmosphere.

During the course of the film, the protagonist-revenger moves from a state of relatively good health, self-confidence and certainty of purpose to one of wavering resolve and physical frailty. Initially, as he speaks of his plan for revenge, the camera travels towards him, adding to the power of this moment and supporting a sense of his emotional resolve. As the film progresses, images begin to depict an emotional state of turmoil and indecision, including a close-up shot of a hand poised half-way between his bed and a weapon. Selective colour-grading was designed to depict him with warmer flesh tones early in the film and progress to colder tones in later scenes, to depict the deterioration in his physical health, but also to visually support the internal shift in the character.

The ending of the film is decidedly not a triumphant one. A sense of tragedy is conveyed not only through the death of the protagonist, but also through the notion that he is killed by his own quarry, who by that time has shown remorse for past acts of violence. An image of the dying protagonist is shown from what might be the antagonist’s point-of-view, followed by a lingering close-up of the latter’s horrified and grief-filled expression.

As for the depiction of moments of violent action, the film tends to focus on showing the effects of violence on the victim, rather than direct visual capture of the violent act itself. The effects are depicted through close-ups of the victim’s face. In this film, the pursuit of revenge
is shown as escalating conflict and perpetuating cycles of violence and retaliation, with no apparent satisfaction or redeeming benefits for anyone involved.
Statement of Originality

This work has not previously been submitted for a degree or diploma in any university. To the best of my knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the thesis itself.

Alan Nguyen, September 2017
WORKS ARISING FROM THIS STUDY
THAT HAVE APPEARED ELSEWHERE

The film *Firebird* (2016), which forms the studio component of this research study, has been screened at the following film festivals: Filmmakers World Festival (Jakarta, Indonesia: 2016), Madrid International Film Festival (Madrid, Spain: 2016), Portland Film Festival (Portland, USA: 2016) and Sightlines: Filmmaking in the Academy (Melbourne, Australia: 2016).

Ideas, analyses and discussions generated during the course of the study have been presented in the following papers:


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Secondly, I wish to acknowledge my indebtedness to collaborators in the making of Firebird. The entire crew and cast of this film would be too lengthy to list here, but they are credited in the film itself. Filmmaking is most definitely a collaborative art, and the making of the film was critically dependent on their hard work, efforts and dedication to the project, and their wonderful cooperative spirit.

Finally, I would like to express my appreciation for the personal support and encouragement provided throughout the years of this research study by my parents Tom and Ann, brother Jeremy, partner Katie Collins, mentor Khyentse Norbu, and other close friends and relatives – Thank you!

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract ........................................................................................................ iii  
Statement of Originality ........................................................................... vi  
Works Arising from this Study that Has Appeared Elsewhere ................. vii  
Acknowledgements .................................................................................. viii  
Table of Contents .................................................................................. ix  
List of Figures .......................................................................................... xi  

## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Research Question ................................................................. 1  
1.2 Research Context ................................................................. 1  
1.3 Significance of Research .......................................................... 7  
1.4 Research Methodology ............................................................ 9  
1.5 Research Scope ................................................................... 12  

## CHAPTER 2: USE OF THE CINEMATIC IMAGE TO COMMUNICATE VENGEANCE-RELATED THEMES IN REVENGE FILMS

2.1 Chapter Introduction ................................................................. 13  
2.2 Overview of Three Selected Films ............................................. 13  
2.3 Portrayal of Revenge Targets ..................................................... 19  
2.4 Portrayal of the Protagonist-Revenger ......................................... 26  
2.5 Portrayal of Violence ............................................................... 32  
2.6 Portrayal of Endings and Further Consequences ......................... 41  
2.7 Chapter Summary ................................................................ 45  

## CHAPTER 3: COMMUNICATING ANTI-VENGEANCE THEMES IN FIREBIRD

3.1 Chapter Introduction ................................................................. 47  
3.2 Portrayal of the Revenge Target in Firebird ................................. 48  
3.3 Portrayal of the Protagonist-Revenger in Firebird ....................... 59  
3.4 Portrayal of Other Characters in Firebird .................................... 66  

CHAPTER 4: CONCLUSION

4.1 Contributions ................................................................. 91
4.2 Reception and Intended Outcome ....................................... 95
4.3 Lessons for Future Work, or ‘What Would I Do Differently?’ ...... 96

LIST OF REFERENCES

Books and Papers ............................................................... 102
Films ................................................................................. 107

APPENDIX A: Selected Images from the Reviewed Films .................

APPENDIX B: Selected Storyboards from Firebird .........................

APPENDIX C: Selected Concept Art from Firebird .........................
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: Protagonist in Revenge-Target Environment (*Harry Brown* 2009)  20
Figure 2: Revenge-Target Shopping for Provisions (*Munich* 2005)  23
Figure 3: Wide Shot of the Schofield Kid after he has killed the revenge-target. William Munny stands screen-left (*Unforgiven* 1992)  27
Figure 4: Close-Up of the Schofield Kid after killing the revenge-target (*Unforgiven* 1992)  28
Figure 5: Protagonist-Revenger before committing violence (*Harry Brown* 2009)  29
Figure 6: Protagonist-Revenger after committing violence (*Harry Brown* 2009)  29
Figure 7: Protagonist-Revenger walking confidently (*Munich* 2005)  30
Figure 8: Protagonist-Revenger sitting in a closet, unable to sleep (*Munich* 2005)  31
Figure 9: Opening shot of protagonist (*Harry Brown* 2009)  32
Figure 10: Depiction of protagonist-revenger near film conclusion (*Harry Brown* 2009)  32
Figure 11: Moment of violent action (*Harry Brown* 2009)  33
Figure 12: Travelling shot revealing effects of violence (*Unforgiven* 1992)  35
Figure 13: Effects of bomb explosion in hotel (*Munich* 2005)  37
Figure 14: Couple before a bomb explosion at a hotel (*Munich* 2005)  39
Figure 15: Effects of a bomb explosion on bystanders (*Munich* 2005)  40
Figure 16: Initial shot of tunnel (*Harry Brown* 2009)  42
Figure 17: Final shot of tunnel (*Harry Brown* 2009)  42
Figure 18: Protagonist-Revenger (in foreground) after committing mass murder as vengeance for his friend’s death. His friend’s corpse is shown in the background (*Unforgiven* 1992).  44
Figure 19: Protagonist-Revenger showing signs of psychological disturbance (*Munich* 2005)  45
Figure 20: Wide Shot of Atum (*Firebird* 2016)  49
Figure 21: Protagonist looking at revenge-target (*Firebird* 2016)  50
Figure 22: Low-angle medium close-up of revenge-target (*Firebird* 2016)  51
Figure 23: Close-up of revenge-target (*Firebird* 2016)  51
Figure 24: Revenge-target as depicted late in film (*Firebird* 2016)  52
Figure 25: Close-up of revenge-target, protagonist-revenger's head in foreground (*Firebird* 2016)  53
Figure 26: Flashback image of young revenge-target (*Firebird* 2016)

Figure 27: Flashback image following young revenge-target as he walks near two figures (*Firebird* 2016)

Figure 28: Revenge-target displays signs of remorse and guilt over past violence (*Firebird* 2016)

Figure 29: Extreme close-up of revenge-target's eye (*Firebird* 2016)

Figure 30: Flashback image of murdered young man (*Firebird* 2016)

Figure 31: Flashback image of murdered 'Goats' gang member (*Firebird* 2016)

Figure 32: First shot of protagonist-revenger (*Firebird* 2016)

Figure 33: Protagonist being comforted after learning of his brother's death (*Firebird* 2016)

Figure 34: Protagonist's point-of-view image as he reacts to the news (*Firebird* 2016)

Figure 35: Protagonist states his plan for revenge (*Firebird* 2016)

Figure 36: Protagonist's point-of-view image of potential weapon for revenge (*Firebird* 2016)

Figure 37: Protagonist's hand struggling to reach weapon (*Firebird* 2016)

Figure 38: Protagonist peers at revenge-target (*Firebird* 2016)

Figure 39: Protagonist's hand poised mid-air (*Firebird* 2016)

Figure 40: Protagonist pale and bleeding from nose and eyes (*Firebird* 2016)

Figure 41: The Goats gang as Remy delivers news to Liam (*Firebird* 2016)

Figure 42: Goats gang in mourning (*Firebird* 2016)

Figure 43: Firebirds member 'Green Nose' during rap battle (*Firebird* 2016)

Figure 44: Liam/Sparrow as 'Fizzik' invades his personal space during rap battle (*Firebird* 2016)

Figure 45: Low-angle wide shot of Firebirds gang (*Firebird* 2016)

Figure 46: Firebirds members carry Liam to safety and treatment (*Firebird* 2016)

Figure 47: Firebirds member 'Planet' pays Liam a visit (deleted scene from *Firebird* 2016)

Figure 48: Protagonist is stabbed (*Firebird* 2016)

Figure 49: Protagonist's final dying movements (*Firebird* 2016)

Figure 50: Antagonist reacts to death of protagonist (*Firebird* 2016)

Figure 51: Liam walking along a bridge, an image that bookends the film (*Firebird* 2016)
Figure 52: Figures approach the young Atum, on the verge of violent action (Firebird 2016) 84
Figure 53: Young Atum's head falls into frame (Firebird 2016) 85
Figure 54: Liam's face as he is shot (Firebird 2016) 86
Figure 55: Liam being carried (Firebird 2016) 87
Figure 56: Liam's point-of-view as he is carried (Firebird 2016) 87
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Research Question

This exegesis will provide the rationale, context, and methods involved in the development and production of Firebird (2016), a short film created as the studio component of my work for the Doctor of Visual Arts (DVA) degree. Firebird, along with this exegesis, serves to address the research question:

*How can anti-violence and anti-vengeance themes be communicated through images in a revenge film?*

1.2 Research Context

*The Revenge Narrative Tradition*

While the focus of this thesis is on revenge in film it should be noted that the theme of revenge has had a long tradition in literature and theatre long before the advent of cinema. Jean Ma suggests that the theme of revenge may, “even be described as coextensive with the very existence of western drama” (2015, 49).

Homer’s ancient Greek epic poems *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* are thought to have been composed either in the late 7th or early 8th century BC and are considered to be among the oldest surviving works of Western literature (Croally & Hyde, 2011). Both works include revenge as a prominent feature of the narrative. In *The Iliad*, Achilles kills Hector and drags his body from a chariot as revenge for the death of Patroklos. In *The Odyssey*, Odysseus returns from a twenty year absence and kills one hundred and eight of Penelope’s suitors as well as his disloyal servants. Stanton (1984) suggests that current Western understandings of justice are informed by ancient Greek notions of justice, which were in turn informed by Mycenaean revenge justice recorded in Homer’s writings (Stanton, 1984).

A notable body of Western narrative focusing on revenge exists in Early Modern British Theatre (plays of the Elizabethan and Jacobean eras). A specific genre of theatre popular in this time, the ‘revenge tragedy’, focuses on the depiction of the pursuit of revenge and its fatal consequences. Well-known examples of this genre include Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*
(c.1599-1602), *Titus Andronicus* (c.1588-1593) and Thomas Middleton’s *The Revenger’s Tragedy* (c.1606).

It is of relevance to this thesis to note that Early Modern revenge tragedies often depict the pursuit and enactment of vengeance in a critical or disapproving manner (a quality that will later be discussed and described in this exegesis as ‘anti-vengeance’) (Simkin, 2006). Prosser (1971) studied twenty-one plays written between 1652 and 1602 and states “Elizabethan moralists condemned revenge as illegal, blasphemous, immoral, irrational, unnatural and unhealthy – not to mention unsafe” (Prosser cited in Simkin, 2006, p. 30).

In the same study, of the forty characters faced with the choice of revenge, Prosser identifies “six virtuous characters who turn villain when they embark on a course of vengeance, seventeen out-and-out villain-revengers, and many others whose threats or advice to pursue revenge are clearly judged as evil” (Prosser cited in Simkin, 2006, p. 32). This contrasts with many works of contemporary revenge cinema where the revenger-protagonist functions as a hero character.

Simkin (2006) provides a number of possible explanations for the anti-vengeance stance generally seen in theatre of this period. He highlights a societal transition of this period from disputes and justice being handled by families at the local level, towards a more centralized bureaucracy and the subsequent frustration that people may have experienced. In this climate, it is possible the revenge tragedies served as a stress relief for this frustration. Simkin also highlights the church’s negative line against vengeance, both leading up to and during this period.

In Asian cultures, vengeance has also been a recurring theme in literature and theatre. *The Great Revenge of the Orphan of Zhao* (shorter title: *The Orphan of Zhao*) is a Chinese play from the Yuan era, written by the 13th-century writer Ji Junxiang. Featuring power struggles and familial revenge (an orphan ends up killing the general responsible for his family’s death), some scholars believe the play may have been the playwright’s attempts at dealing with emotions within the national psyche during the period of Mongolian conquest and rule over China. It is notable as the first Chinese play to be known in Europe, having had numerous European translations and adaptations (Liu, 1953).

An example of vengeance narrative from Japanese literature is the *Soga Monogatari* (also known as *The Tale of the Soga Brothers*, or *The Revenge of the Soga Brothers*) is an epic tale
focusing on events in the 12\textsuperscript{th} century. Whilst some aspects of the story may have taken place in history, the tale likely evolved through its long history of expression in oral storytelling and various forms of Japanese performance. The text weaves in many long passages about shrines and Buddhist deities, with some scholars considering it a work of religious propaganda. Confusingly, the narrative does not portray vengeance as wicked, even though the lust and tenacity shown for blood vengeance would not be supported in Buddhist practice and philosophy. This contradiction is explained by a view shared amongst some scholars: that the original telling of the story was motivated to placate or comfort the spirits of the Soga Brothers (Mills, 1975).

\textit{Revenge in Cinema}

Vengeance has served as a central theme in many films throughout cinematic history. An example from the early years of cinema is D. W. Griffith’s silent film \textit{Broken Blossoms} (1918) in which a Chinese Buddhist man ultimately kills an American man for having murdered the woman he loves (she was the latter man’s daughter). The use of the vengeance theme in films can be seen as a continuation and extension of a longstanding narrative trope in religious, folk, literature, and theatre traditions (Kuhn and Westwell 2012). A number of films that portray revenge can be seen as referencing or being linked to older works in literature, theatre, and film itself (Tougas 2008).

Some notable academic discussions have focused on rape-revenge films, in which vengeance is enacted upon rapists, such as the films \textit{Virgin Spring} (Ingmar Bergman 1960), \textit{Last House on the Left} (Dennis Iliadis 1970) and \textit{Day of the Woman} (Meir Zarchi 1978) (later retitled and re-released as \textit{I Spit on Your Grave}, 1980). Rape-revenge films are also seen in Asian cinema. Yip (2017) suggests that at least one reason for the use of this trope during Hong Kong cinema of the late 1960s and early 1970s was to justify the depictions of sex and violence, which were popular ingredients of Hong Kong cinema of the time.

Rape-revenge films have often been discussed in terms of feminist theory (regarding depictions of rape, reversal of traditional gender roles, and female agency in relation to patriarchy) and psychoanalytic theory (regarding castration and male anxiety) (Henry 2014; Heller-Nicholas 2011; Read 2000).

It is important to note that the term ‘revenge film’ does not imply the categorisation of a separate genre; rather, it is being used here merely to refer to a set of films that share a
common aspect – namely, they all involve the pursuit and/or enactment of revenge as a core element of the narrative. Kuhn and Westwell define ‘revenge films’ as: “A group of films that set out a sequence of events in which the perpetrator of an unjust act is subjected to retaliation and punishment” (2012, 349). As such, revenge films span across multiple genres, including thriller, action, Western, samurai, horror, kung fu, ‘blaxploitation’, melodrama, film noir, and heist films (Ma 2015).

The genre-spanning nature of revenge film can be illustrated by considering the cinematic precedents that writer-director Quentin Tarantino drew inspiration from in creating Kill Bill: Volume 1 (2003) and Kill Bill: Volume 2 (2004): the chambara (or samurai), the yakuza, the kung fu, the Western, and the blaxploitation film (LeCain 2004). These genres all have multiple examples of their own revenge films.

Asian Revenge Cinema

Hong Kong kung-fu films of the 1970’s often utilized revenge as a narrative theme. Hong Kong cinema of the 1970’s saw the rise of kung-fu films, which were distinct from other previous forms of martial arts films, in that they featured actors with genuine martial arts abilities and were often placed in modern (rather than period) settings, if not involving characters with grittier, modern values (Chapman, 2004). Chapman also highlights the fact that Hong Kong 1970’s kung-fu films involved characters that were cynical and motivated by self-interest or personal revenge, contrasting with the more traditional and noble values of heroes in Hong Kong ‘swordfight’ films. Locke (2009) states that the theme of revenge in 1970’s kung fu films echoes the same theme in Blaxploitation films of the time and the genre was thus popular with African-American audiences in the US.

Bruce Lee, the biggest star of Hong Kong 1970’s kung fu films, performed in a number of films that include revenge in the narrative: The Big Boss (1971) (the main character, Cheng, seeks revenge against the leader of a drug smuggling ring for killing his family), Fist of Fury (1972) (Chen, the protagonist, exacts revenge against those responsible for murdering his master and others for denigrating his kung fu school and Chinese people) and Enter the Dragon (1973) (in a martial arts tournament protagonist, Lee, kills the man who murdered his sister).

Bowman (2010) points out that while Bruce Lee’s films communicated Chinese nationalism (and at times perhaps even anti-Western sentiment), they nevertheless appealed to a wide,
international audience. Bowman suggests that the cross-cultural appeal was due to the frequent positioning of the main character as underdog in a mismatched conflict. The device of situating the protagonist as underdog to gain audience sympathy will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 2.

Vengeance is a commonly recurring theme in contemporary South Korean cinema, including films such as *Broken* (2014), *Pietta* (2012) and *I Saw The Devil* (2010). Director Park Chan-wook’s ‘Vengeance Trilogy’ of *Lady Vengeance* (2005), *Oldboy* (2003) and *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance* (2002), is notable for its acclaim (*Oldboy* won the Grand Prix prize at the 2004 Cannes Film Festival), as well as its complex handlings of the theme of revenge. Kim (2006) posits that Park Chan-wook’s work took some certain cues from Hong Kong action films, stating that “the exaggerated male icons featured in Park Chan-wook’s films seem to be direct quotations of Japanese *manga* characters or Hong Kong action heroes” (p. 86).

While *Oldboy* was met with some acclaim, it also received criticism for its depiction of extreme violence in a manner which some saw as celebrating (or indifferent to the morality of) violence. Writing for the *New York Times*, Manohla Dargis states that the film is “symptomatic of a bankrupt, reductive postmodernism: one that promotes a spurious aesthetic relativism (it’s all good) and finds its crudest expression in the hermetically sealed world of fan boys” (Dargis, 2005, B14).

Others argue that each film in the trilogy problematizes revenge by showing the pursuit of vengeance as a failure to achieve satisfaction or happiness (Choe, 2009). Choe asserts that Park Chan-wook’s Vengeance Trilogy serves as a critique of past, more commonplace handlings of vengeance in: “films such as *Point Blank* (1967), *Straw Dogs* (1971) by Sam Peckinpah, *The Last House on the Left* (1972), *Death Wish* (1974) starring Charles Bronson, and *Pale Rider* (1985) and a host of other Clint Eastwood films. In contrast to these examples, where vengeance is often rendered morally unproblematic, whose logic in fact drives the narrative of the film, the Vengeance Trilogy turns retribution into a profound philosophical problem” (2009, p. 35).

In multiple interviews, Park Chan-wook supports the notion that his films are not intended to support or condone vengeance, but rather depict it as “an act of total stupidity” (2006, interviewed by McAllister) and “an endless circle of evil” (2006, interviewed by Hill). Choe
(2009) supports these sentiments of the filmmaker, stating that the Vengeance Trilogy depicts revenge as an act that fails in its aim of atonement and only serves to perpetuate itself.

**Pro-Vengeance and Anti-Vengeance Themes in the Revenge Film**

Revenge films often set out to gain audience sympathy for the protagonist through the presentation of an initial wrongdoing or harm, which then gives licence for the audience to approve, and even to enjoy through catharsis, the portrayal of violent acts that the protagonist enacts on his/her targets of revenge. According to Simkin: “More often than not, the revenge narrative establishes the revenger as a figure so profoundly wronged that the audience is coerced into feelings of sympathy and understanding that it will often find impossible to resist...” (2006, 23).

Simkin points to examples such as *The Punisher* (2004), *A Man Apart* (2003) and *Death Wish* (1974) in which the protagonists’ wives and children are murdered and therefore “the audience is invited to relish, within safe, fictional boundaries, the acts of vengeance” (2006, 23).

Simkin goes on to note that certain film reviews of Tony Scott’s *Man on Fire* (2004) reported that audiences cheered and applauded during the protagonist’s extreme acts of violence, including torture.

For the purposes of this exegesis, and for convenience, aspects of films which portray violent vengeance in a sympathetic or approving manner (e.g., as an effective means of obtaining justice) will be referred to as ‘pro-vengeance’ and, where relevant, ‘pro-violence’. Where a film contains many examples of pro-vengeance and pro-violence aspects, it may be described for simplicity as being generally pro-vengeance and/or pro-violence. It should be emphasised that there is no intention to suggest that such films are totally pro-vengeance or pro-violence: it is well recognised that they typically involve nuances, with varying degrees of ambiguity regarding the morality of violence and revenge. Rather, the above terms will be used simply to indicate that, in an overall sense, they present a viewpoint that is sympathetic to the use of vengeance, often with violence, to exact justice.

In discussing revenge cinema, theorist Jean Ma describes vengeance as “a tried-and-true method of motivating violence” (2015, 52). It may well be that some filmmakers involved with pro-vengeance films do not necessarily believe in the morality of vengeance (or are
perhaps not even interested in exploring morality issues), yet they still utilise this form because it has proven effective in offering thrills and catharsis to viewers. In discussing wuxia pian, a Chinese martial arts genre that contains examples of revenge narrative, Ma (2015) suggests that the genre’s moral discourse maybe be present primarily as a pretence for the graphic display of violence. Ma goes on to state that this is a shared quality with American vigilante films.

While many revenge films skew towards pro-vengeance in theme, there are some notable exceptions. Simkin observes: “[A] number of the [revenge films] challenge, disrupt, or attempt to subvert the concept of natural, or ‘poetic’ justice, and it is at these moments that the genre ignites some of its most potent and provocative flashpoints” (2006, 23–24).

As a filmmaker and researcher, I have a particular interest in revenge films that provide complex or critical portrayals of vengeance. For the purposes of this exegesis, and again for convenience, the term ‘anti-vengeance’ will be used in describing aspects of films that portray vengeance disapprovingly.

It should be noted that aspects of certain revenge films can neither be accurately described as pro-vengeance or anti-vengeance in that they do not demonstrate support nor do they present outright disapproval of revenge. While many contemporary revenge films appear to contain instances of pro-vengeance aspects there are also components of films that portray the pursuit and enactment of vengeance in a manner which is ambivalent or non-approving. It may be inaccurate to describe these aspects as simply ‘anti-vengeance’ and therefore I will refer to these aspects as ‘not-pro-vengeance’. These aspects are significant to this study because they do not adhere to the pro-vengeance elements often seen in contemporary revenge cinema.

1.3 Significance of Research

One intention behind the inception, development, production, and finishing of the short film Firebird was to create a revenge film that communicates anti-violence and anti-vengeance themes, as defined above. While atypical, it is only one recent addition to the set of existing revenge films which communicate these themes. Its contribution to the field is to offer a relatively rare example of a revenge film that has been created with the conscious intention, from the outset, to communicate such themes.
As an artistic project *Firebird* may be of interest to fellow filmmakers and researchers who wish to consider alternatives to the pro-violence, pro-vengeance revenge film – in particular, in considering how such alternative films might be created and function at the level of the cinematic image. As an academic study, the project serves as an opportunity to document in detail how one filmmaker grapples with these issues, both conceptually and technically. Thus, this exegesis will make transparent, and share, new knowledge gained from the practical experiences in making *Firebird*, particularly the identification and analysis of visual techniques used in this short film and in three previous key films from the field.

**Motivation for Research**

Narrative film is potentially a powerful means to reflect, reinforce or alter attitudes within society. As Gillett states: “Film and television have usurped many of the functions of religious art for secular Western societies, offering audiences stories which raise moral issues” (2012, 4). While the degree of influence that narrative film and television has on our ideas and behaviour is debatable, it is quite likely that there is at least some influence and interaction between society and its cinema.

Because I believe that narrative film has some impact and can at the very least contribute to conversations within our culture, as a filmmaker, I wish to produce work that contributes to these conversations that include my personal views.

There are a range of reasons why communicating anti-vengeance themes is of interest to me. As a pacifist, I believe in non-violent conflict resolution, at the individual, group and national level. Additionally, my personal view concerning justice leans towards a transformative justice philosophy. I believe that solutions to harmful acts should be less focused on punishing the individual, and more focused on improving the circumstances or societal factors that contribute to the likelihood of these acts.

While I hold pacifist views, I am interested in genre cinema that often involves the depiction of violence. This study is an attempt to produce a revenge film that contributes to the cultural conversation that is consistent with my personal views.
1.4 Research Methodology

Research Paradigm

The work being discussed here was conducted under the practice-led research paradigm. Stewart offers an explanation of the role of the practice-led researcher: “The practitioner researcher seeks to uncover, record, interpret and position, from an insider's perspective and experience, the processes they use within the context of professional contemporary practices in the field” (2003, 1). A significant aspect of creative practice-led research is the process of reflecting on one’s own practice. Douglas states: “One of the essential characteristics of practitioner research is that it is one’s own practice that is reflected upon… To look at one’s own creative practice means taking on both a creative and reflective role…” (1994, 5). Accordingly, my practitioner research aims to uncover, record, interpret, and put in context the processes I have used, decisions I have made, and insights I have gained in the creation of Firebird. The overall research process involves both my creative practice in making the film, and my reflections on the practice—contextually, thematically, and technically.

In keeping with this overall research paradigm, I have followed an action research model. This model involves a cyclical process: the formulation of a plan, implementation of this plan, observation and reflection on the outcome, and generation of a new plan which takes into account the above observations and reflections (McNiff and Whitehead 2002). This process may occur as reflection-in-action, whereby observations and reflections lead to a reshaping of plans during the time of action, or as reflection-on-action, whereby reflections are done retrospectively after the action, informing future actions only (Gray and Malins 2004).

The present research project involved both reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action. One example of the former is the reshaping of shots that took place while filming on set. As director, I would convey my vision of a shot to the director of photography. While the shot was being prepared with the appropriate lighting and framing, or in between shooting sessions, I would observe and reflect on the results and might suggest changes or adjustments. An example of reflection-on-action is the drawing of a conclusion, some months after the film had been completed, that a more direct approach to the visual capturing of some particular moments of violence would have nicely complemented the indirect approach
favoured for most such scenes in the film. Examples of both types of reflection will be provided in Chapter 3 and Chapter 4.

There has been growing discussion in recent years regarding what constitutes research in the context of filmmaking in academia, including doctoral research. For example, while many people in academia may accept that “making a documentary film involves activities commonly associated with research,” they will generally not consider “a fiction film, a drama or a comedy” as research (Berkeley 2014, online). Berkeley also observes that “research is about new knowledge” and that both fiction and non-fiction films could potentially contribute knowledge to the field of film production, for example, by “exploring and extending our knowledge of the potential of the medium”.

A recent comparative analysis of five Australian doctorates, all completed by early exponents of filmmaking research, demonstrates clearly that they “share a common purpose, designed to create new knowledge about screen production processes through creative practice research” (Kerrigan et al. 2015, 94). A comprehensive definition of ‘practice research’ is provided by Dean and Smith:

It can be basic research carried out independent of creative work (though it may be subsequently applied to it); research conducted in the process of shaping an artwork; or research which is the documentation, theorization and contextualization of an artwork – and the process of making it – by its creator (2009, 3).

Most of the present exegesis fits under the third (and last) part of the above definition – the documentation, contextualization and conceptualization of Firebird and the process of making it. One chapter (Chapter 2, which provides an analysis of key contemporary revenge films) can be seen as fitting the first two definitions: research that was conducted to shape this creative work, but could also have been carried out independently of it.

Research Design

Kerrigan et al. note that “Research in screen production … usually involves the production of a film (or other screen work), an iterative process of practice and reflection by a researcher who is also the screen practitioner, and a theoretical perspective that informs the overall research (2015, 16). In my own case, the process involved an additional component: the study of established films in the field.
As part of the research project, I viewed and analysed a number of existing revenge films, which helped me to identify aspects and techniques that communicate either pro- or anti-vengeance themes. While I viewed many such films, the discussion in this exegesis (especially in Chapter 2) will focus mainly on three key films, which I found particularly useful for the above purposes. They are *Unforgiven* (Eastwood 1992), *Munich* (Spielberg 2005), and *Harry Brown* (Barber 2009).

The second, and most substantial, component of the project has been studio practice in filmmaking to investigate, in a practical hands-on setting, the use of visual techniques to communicate the above themes. This work has resulted in a new cinematic work.

The third and last component has been to record and analyse experiences and insights gained from a practitioner’s perspective in the process of making the film. These are shared below, especially in Chapters 3 and 4.

While the above enumeration of the project’s three components is conceptually logical, I should not leave the impression that work on the project proceeded in a linear fashion, from the first-listed component to the second, then the third. In particular, I did not wait to only start working on the second component (i.e., making the film) after I had completed the first component. Nor did I have in mind a predetermined set of filming techniques (drawn from the study of existing films) which would be used, one by one, in my own filmmaking. As will be described more fully in Chapter 3, the actual process was far more eclectic, fluid, and iterative. A combination of hands-on experimentation, reflection-in-action, and insights drawn from analysis of previous works was used to meet the requirements of the project on any given day, and as the requirements varied over time, the exact form of the combination also varied.

In making *Firebird*, I was involved in a number of capacities—directing, writing, producing, editing, composing, and acting (in a minor role). In the scriptwriting phase, I worked on the narrative structure and scripting of images to communicate anti-violence and anti-vengeance themes. Later, as director, I worked with a storyboard artist in preproduction, directing the storyboarding of shot compositions and sequences that would communicate the desired themes. During filming, also as director, I worked closely with the director of photography to design and capture images intended to convey the relevant themes. In the editing phase, I and another editor assembled, re-worked, and shaped the material to communicate the chosen
themes. During the colour-grade and online edit, I directed the tweaking and alteration of images to meet the thematic needs of the film.

1.5 Research Scope

The present research project is, first and foremost, about the making of a film embracing anti-violence and anti-vengeance themes. Thus, while I do provide in this exegesis an analysis of revenge cinema, it is not my intention to attempt a comprehensive survey of revenge films. Rather, only a partial survey will be conducted, which will focus mainly on the three above-mentioned films, supported by references to a number of other revenge films. (Nevertheless, I believe that significant, new knowledge has been gained through this activity; see Chapter 2.)

All three of the key reviewed films, as well as the new short film *Firebird*, feature a male revenger-protagonist. It has not escaped my attention that female revenger-protagonists are featured in a number of prominent revenge films, such as *The Bride Wore Black* (François Truffaut 1968), *Lady Snowblood* (Toshiya Fujita 1973), *Foxy Brown* (Jack Hill 1974), *Kill Bill: Volume 1* (Tarantino 2003), *Kill Bill Volume 2* (Tarantino 2004), *Sympathy for Lady Vengeance* (Park Chan-wook 2005), and *The Brave One* (Neil Jordan 2007). However, extensive analysis of films that focus on the role of female revenger-protagonists is beyond the scope of this research.

Similarly, while music and sound design are important to *Firebird*, as they are to other revenge films, an extensive discussion of auditory aspects is beyond the scope of this research project.
CHAPTER 2: USE OF THE CINEMATIC IMAGE TO COMMUNICATE VENGEANCE-RELATED THEMES IN REVENGE FILMS

2.1 Chapter Introduction

This chapter’s main purpose is to set the cinematic context for this project’s creative work, which will be the subject of discussion in the next chapter. Section 2.2 below provides a brief introduction to three contemporary films, selected for having been particularly useful to me while I pursued this research project. The chapter then turns to the identification and discussion of a number of recurrent aspects of revenge films. More specifically, in Sections 2.3 to 2.6, respectively, I analyse the use of cinematic image to portray revenge-targets, revenger-protagonists, violence, and consequences and endings in revenge films. Of course, such portrayal may be, on balance, either supportive or critical of the use of vengeance and violence as a means to obtain justice. Where appropriate, examples will be drawn, mainly from Unforgiven (Eastwood 1992), Munich (Spielberg 2005), and Harry Brown (Barber 2009), to elucidate or illustrate key elements of this discussion. Section 2.7 contains a summary of some of the main points raised in the chapter.

2.2 Overview of Three Selected Films

In this section I will provide, first, a general discussion of Harry Brown (Barber 2009) as an example of a relatively recent film that contains many instances of pro-violence and pro-vengeance aspects. As for revenge films that contain many instances of anti-violence, not-pro-vengeance and anti-vengeance aspects, they appear to be rather less common. Nevertheless, Unforgiven (Eastwood 1992) and Munich (Spielberg 2005) serve as two exemplars that are well known in the field.

Protagonist-Revenger as Underdog

Harry Brown (Barber 2009) can be seen as a modern descendant of earlier revenge and vigilante films, such as Joe (Avildsen 1970), Rolling Thunder (Flynn 1977) and in particular Death Wish (Winner 1974). In Death Wish, the protagonist-revenger is an underdog. As an initially meek and mild-mannered middle-aged man, in the arena of violence he seems completely out-matched against the horde of criminals who have overrun the city and are responsible for harming his loved ones. He eventually grows stoic, confident, and displays
impressive feats in his acts of vigilantism, reducing the level of crime in the city. *Harry Brown* replicates this formula but amplifies the notion of the underdog even further by pitting a depressed, elderly widower against a gang of street youths. As noted in the prior chapter’s discussion of Bruce Lee films, Bowman (2010) explains that the positioning of protagonist as an underdog facing overwhelming odds is a device that has been used frequently to elicit audience sympathy for the protagonist and his cause.

It is perhaps unusual for a violent action film to make use of an elderly persona as the protagonist, but in doing so *Harry Brown* invites unambiguous sympathy for his character and consequently his pursuit of revenge. As will be discussed in more depth later in this chapter, images early in the film have been constructed so that the main character is portrayed as being feeble and docile. Because in *Harry Brown*, the device of the underdog is amplified, as well as other techniques that in this context may be considered pro-vengeance, it serves as a particularly useful example for this discussion.

Although there is little academic discussion regarding *Harry Brown*, the precursor film *Death Wish* has been discussed extensively as part of a wave of conservative American crime films of the 1970s. Theorists consider films such as *Joe* (Avildsen 1970), *Dirty Harry* (Siegel 1971), and *Death Wish* (Winner 1974) as right-wing reactions against the liberal social and political climate of the 1960s and 1970s (Lev 2000; Simkin 2006). It is noteworthy that these 1970s American conservative crime films were produced and released at the end of a period of liberalism, against which some public dissatisfaction may have started to grow. Similarly, *Harry Brown* was released towards the end of Labour Party rule in Britain, just before the Conservative Party came into power in 2010.

Elements of conservative crime films may focus on perceived problems associated with liberal approaches to crime and justice: in their narratives, these approaches are typically portrayed as being ‘soft on crime’, ineffective, and/or overly sympathetic towards criminals and their rights. The depiction of a purportedly lenient justice system further emphasizes the protagonist as underdog. The revenger-protagonist can be seen as unassisted in their fight against the criminal elements. Placing the narrative within a society with ineffective judicial control, tips the odds even further on the side of the criminals.

In *Dirty Harry*, for example, the serial killer character ‘Scorpio’ is set free because the protagonist, Inspector Harry Callahan, searched his home without a warrant. Similarly, in
*Harry Brown*, the elderly protagonist Harry is told by police that his friend’s murder would have to be downgraded to the less serious crime of manslaughter since it involved the use of the victim’s own weapon (a bayonet) against him.

In conservative crime films, the setting is often portrayed as overrun with crime. Thus, in commenting on *Death Wish*, Lenz remarks: “The criticism of liberalism is part of [its] setting and story line. The rampant street crime in New York City, a bastion of the liberal eastern establishment, is a comment on the failure of liberal governance” (Lenz 2005, 125). In the same vein, *Harry Brown* portrays a London community in which youth gangs dominate public spaces. In an early scene that mirrors a scene from *Death Wish*, Harry looks down from his window at a tunnel entrance, where a gang of youths routinely intimidate, harass, and assault those who come into the area. In a setting that is depicted as overrun with crime, the chances of the protagonist-revenger’s success seems less likely, further reinforcing the underdog dynamic.

While many conservative American crime films of the 1970s are, to varying degrees, pro-violence and pro-vengeance, *Death Wish* (which represents the most direct influence upon *Harry Brown*) is one of the least ambivalent about such stances. Lev (2000) discusses how in the films *Joe* (1970), *The French Connection* (1971) and *Dirty Harry* (1971) “a right-wing perspective on the necessity of extralegal violence is balanced by a certain amount of doubt (less doubt in *Dirty Harry*)” (p. 38). Lev goes on to argue that there is no such ambiguity in *Death Wish*.

As Lenz (2005) argues, while *Dirty Harry* shows a policeman confronting some internal conflict with the restraints of the law in pursuing justice, *Death Wish* shows an ordinary citizen suffering no self-doubt while undertaking vigilantism. In a more contemporary setting, *Harry Brown* portrays a case where citizen vigilantism seems naturally justifiable, and where it creates mainly positive effects upon the community.

Both *Death Wish* and *Dirty Harry* were sufficiently popular to spawn sequels, and to inspire numerous other films. Lenz offers an instructive overview of the broad lineage:

> The films were especially controversial because they endorsed the social utility of violence and the cathartic effect of vengeance as alternatives to law. Harry Callahan’s official vigilantism [in *Dirty Harry*] and Paul Kersey’s citizen vigilantism [in *Death Wish*] began what Edelstein (2002, 1F) calls “an
endless stream of movies” justifying “wanton vigilante retribution”, from the wholesome Sally Field as a suburban vigilante in *Eye for an Eye* (1996) to Arnold Schwarzenegger as a vigilante retaliating against terrorists in *Collateral Damage* (2002). (Lenz 2005, 130)

Thus *Harry Brown* is hardly alone in taking cues from *Death Wish*. Nevertheless, for our purposes, it is of particular interest, because it is a fairly recent example, and because it adheres rather closely to the old template, whilst amplifying certain pro-vengeance devices.

**Protagonist-Revengers who Question their Own Ethics**

While *Harry Brown* contains a protagonist designed to invite unambiguous audience sympathy for his pursuit of vengeance, other films such as *Unforgiven* and *Munich* feature protagonists who question their own ethics regarding the violent vengeance they pursue and enact in the film. The inclusion of this element throughout the respective films invites the audience to question the acts of revenge.

This questioning may take the form of the protagonist-revenger sharing their ambivalent or negative feelings towards violent vengeance with another on-screen character, and/or display signs of discomfort and even psychological distress before, during, or after committing acts of revenge. *Unforgiven* features numerous instances of such depictions. Psychological effects of committing violence appear to be lacking in much of director Clint Eastwood’s previous work, where as an actor in conservative pro-violence films, his characters were known for their stoic demeanour.

In discussing *Magnum Force* (the second *Dirty Harry* film), Kael states, “With a Clint Eastwood, the action film can—indeed, must—drop the pretense that human life has any value…. [k]illing is dissociated from pain; it’s even dissociated from life” (1994, 540).

It is natural to surmise that, after having portrayed violent protagonists (some of whom serve justice through violence) in so many films, Eastwood may have been influenced, when making *Unforgiven*, by reflections on, and reactions to, that earlier work. In his own words:

> People have always tried to see the West as something heroic and glamorous, and one could say that in my pictures I have followed the tradition of glamorizing violence. But in something like *Unforgiven* there’s nothing very heroic at all. Now, I’m certainly not doing any penance for any of the mayhem I’ve presented on the screen over the years. But at the same token, I
think it’s a time in my life and a time in history where violence should not be such a humorous thing. That there are consequences to both the perpetrator as well as the victim. (cited in Tibbetts 2007, 174)

Other interview material supports the notion that Eastwood’s intentions were to depict the use of violence in a non-approving, perhaps critical, manner: “I don’t think this is a tribute to violence, and if we do it right, it’s not exploiting it, in fact, it’s kind of stating that it [violence] doesn’t solve anything.” (Eastwood cited in Breskin 1997, 382)

*Munich*’s protagonist-revenger could be seen as following an inverse trajectory to that of the titular character in *Harry Brown*. Early in the film, the protagonist is depicted as an emotionally strong and confident hero, but is psychologically disturbed by the film’s end. One could see this character transition to be a modern version of the madness of the revenger trope seen in early modern theatre (Simkin 2006).

**Humanised Portrayal of Revenge-Targets**

In many pro-violent, pro-vengeance films, targets of the protagonist’s vengeance are depicted in a manner which others them.

In many traditional Westerns, characters who are in opposition to the protagonist contain visual signifiers that code them as evil or villainous. Grant explains how “Pinstripe suits, dark shirts and white ties define which side of the law characters are on in the gangster film as typically as black hats and white hats differentiate hero and villain in the western” (2007, 12). This association of black and darkness with villainy also extends to the use of harsh shadowing, as well as other visual aspects of a character. An interesting example of this can be found in a number of all-black cast Westerns of the late 1930’s in which, “taller, fine-featured, lighter-skinned African American actors were cast as heroes and heroines, while shorter, darker-skinned, broad-featured actors were cast in the roles of villains” (Bernardi & Green 2017, 910). The use of visual signifiers to clearly mark characters in opposition to the protagonist includes traditional revenge Westerns.

Other film genres also use visual codes and signifiers to clearly communicate villainy of character. Hart (2008) discusses how *Bond* films often use national and/or racial identity to clearly identify the villains as ‘other’. In Hiromoto’s study of kung fu films which include
castrated male characters (2017), all castrated males were identified as villainous. These characters were often portrayed as feminized, dehumanized and pale.

*Harry Brown* depicts its revenge-target characters in a manner that roots their identities and outward personas in criminality. The targets of vengeance often contain clear visual signifiers to code them as deviant: scars, tattoos and metal grills (jewelry worn over the teeth). Cinematic techniques such as green on-set lighting and colour-grading in post-production were utilised to communicate a cold, unsympathetic view of revenge-target characters. Specific examples of such techniques used in *Harry Brown* are discussed in detail later in this chapter.

In *Unforgiven*, clear visual signifiers of villainy are absent in the revenge-targets’ depiction. By removing these visual signifiers, the conventional sense of justice achieved through vengeance is partially disrupted. With a lack of these signifiers the design of these characters could be described as not-pro-vengeance.

However, *Unforgiven* does more than simply eliminate these usual visual signifiers. Images are constructed through composition, lighting and costume to actively humanize the revenge-target characters. Specific techniques are discussed and analysed later in this chapter.

Similarly, *Munich* portrays revenge-targets in a humanistic manner. Certain sequences, key images and supporting characters (eg. a revenge-target’s young daughter) appear to be included in the film primarily to offer a sympathetic view of the revenge-targets. Examples of these are provided later in this chapter.

*Selection of Key Films of Analysis*

*Harry Brown, Unforgiven and Munich* were chosen for this chapter’s analysis because they provide particularly clear examples of the three major mechanisms for communicating pro-vengeance, not-pro-vengeance and anti-vengeance themes as outlined above. While there are many instances of revenge films that utilise the characterization of the protagonist-revenger as underdog, *Harry Brown* amplifies this relationship by pitting an elderly man against a gang of young street thugs.

Many revenge films feature protagonist-revengers who pursue and commit acts of vengeance without questioning their ethics. In other cases, protagonist-revengers may appear less
confident in their pursuit, but often this is an early symptom of revenging that they grow out of (this is seen in both *Harry Brown* and *Death Wish*). *Unforgiven* and *Munich* are rarer cases of revenge cinema because the protagonist-revengers’ struggle with their own morality is foregrounded. In the case of *Munich*, the reevaluation of the morality of revenge continues to escalate as the film progresses.

Pro-vengeance films often dehumanise or avoid humanising characters who are targets of the main characters’ revenge. *Unforgiven* and *Munich*, once again, provide less common examples whereby revenge-target characters are actively humanised.

### 2.3 Portrayal of Revenge-Targets

**Othering vs Sympathising**

One technique used in revenge films that lean towards pro-vengeance is to *other* the enemy-target characters. In the context, the term ‘other’ is being used as a verb (Mackey 1992) to mean to perceive individuals who belong to another subgroup, group, culture or class as being fundamentally different from oneself. Drakulic states “I understand now that nothing but “otherness” killed Jews, and it began with naming them, by reducing them to the other. Then everything became possible. Even the worst atrocities like concentration camps or the slaughtering of civilians in Croatia or Bosnia.” (1992, 145). In cinema, characters may be designed to emphasize fundamental difference from the intended audience in order to achieve specific narrative purposes.

In revenge cinema, the depiction of revenge-targets as *other* (in relation to the protagonist and intended audience) may facilitate the production of the intended thrills and catharsis of violent images to be achieved with less audience ambiguity. ByOthering the target/s of violent vengeance, the likelihood of audience identification with revenge-targets is diminished. With a clear and unambiguous relationship between audience and revenge-target as ‘other’, the audience may enjoy images of violence inflicted on this character.

“Killing the enemy becomes easier if their humanity is played down, which was the rationale for caricatures of German soldiers bayoneting babies which appeared in the British press and on screens during the First World War” (Gillett 2012, 59). Gillett’s discussion highlights that actions as well as national/cultural identity can be used in film to identify the other.
In *Harry Brown* (2009), the enemy-targets of the titular character are drug addicts, criminals, and gang members. The audience has no insight into their lives apart from the vile behaviour that they display. They are depicted as being fundamentally different from the main character and display little humanity.

In a scene where Harry makes his first transformation to the role of a revenger, he purchases a gun from two young male criminals. The *mise-en-scène* is designed to communicate that the home of these men is an alien one, lacking in warmth, humanity, and solely concerned with criminal and immoral acts. In their home, Harry walks through a crop of marijuana plants that the criminals grow (see figure 1).

![Figure 1: Protagonist in Revenge-Target Environment (*Harry Brown* 2009)](image)

As soon as Harry enters this area and beyond, it is as if we were viewing an alien environment from a science fiction film. The image is graded with a sickly, yellow hue. Compositionally, Harry is a small figure among the large crop of marijuana trees. Large, silvery ventilation tubes and lamp cables hang from above. A high angle is used to make Harry appear vulnerable in the revenge-targets’ home environment. This scene, which does not serve any advancement of plot, is given adequate time to allow the audience to soak in the alien quality of the environment.
The lighting and colour-grading, in conjunction with the acting, make-up, and costuming, are all designed to depict the young criminals as unsightly and to contrast them with the conservative protagonist, who is dressed in a coat and tie. Make-up is used to give the criminals scars and tattoos. Multiple stage positions and camera angles are designed to allow actor Michael Caine’s face to catch a substantial amount of warm, orange-red light from some lamps, while the two young men’s faces by comparison receive far less of the warm tones of the lamp, causing them to blend with the green lighting and colour grade (see figures A1 and A2 in the appendix). These cinematographic choices communicate that the revenge-targets are the same as their environment: alien, solely concerned with criminal activities, and lacking in the humanity that the protagonist possesses. Harry later shoots and kills the young men.

In the film, the young criminals constantly snort and scratch themselves. We see them taking drugs in three different ways (injecting liquid into their toes, snorting lines of powder, and smoking methamphetamine from a gun chamber) all in the space of a couple of minutes during the gun deal. When one of the gun dealers scratches himself, the foley-sound is accentuated. Deep tones in the sound design contribute to a feeling of dread and unease. These elements contribute to a sense of disgust for the young men.

In contrast, films that offer anti-vengeance themes portray the targets of vengeance as being not entirely dissimilar from the protagonist. By depicting these targeted people as more fully fleshed characters with humanity, an uncomfortable tension can be created subsequently as the audience takes in depictions of violent vengeance. Through this tension, questions regarding the morality of vengeance may arise more readily.

Spielberg acknowledges that with *Munich* (2005), he and the rest of the filmmaking team did not want to “demonise our targets”. He states that “They're individuals. They have families” (Spielberg, interviewed by Schickel 2005, 70–71). Thus, in the film, we see glimpses into the lives of the characters targeted by Avner Kaufman and his team of revengers. In these moments, we see that the revenge-targets are relatively normal people with personalities, interests, and families that are separate from villainy and evil deeds.

The cinematic images are designed to communicate this theme. In an early scene, we witness the first revenge-target, Wael Zwaiter, talking in front of a small crowd of fans, as he discusses his recent translation of *The Arabian Nights* into Italian. The scene begins with a
continuous handheld shot (see figure A3) which begins behind him, giving a view of the street in Rome and his audience, thus drawing the real-live audience into his world. The shot continues, moving in close and pivoting around so that we see his face in a close-up, discussing his work (see figures A4 and A5).

Here Wael is not discussing villainous deeds, nor is he in a dirty or shadowy environment. He is out on an open sunlit street of Rome, discussing intellectual, creative pursuits. In the latter part the shot, when the camera pivots further and we see a front view of Wael (see figure A6), plants are included in the frame, as well as a colourful poster of his translated work and some books. This image is designed to communicate a character who has humanity and a life outside of terrorism or villainous acts.

Immediately following this scene, we see Wael enter a shop, where he buys milk and other household provisions (figure 2). The entire scene is covered in one wide shot, allowing us to see the friendly and ‘everyday’ interaction between Wael and the shop-owner in the same frame. The camera is brought in slightly closer to the shop-owner, favouring Wael in the angle, so that we see more of his face than a profile shot would allow. The shop environment is bright but softly lit, so that harsh shadowing is avoided. The frame includes a plethora of small-store food items, communicating a familiar, re-assuring scene. It is unusual for a revenge film to depict enemy-targets engaged in such commonplace activities. These images appear to be specifically designed for the audience to see Wael as a normal man and someone who may be empathised with at the time of his killing.
In the scene of Wael’s death, the images are constructed such that he still continues to project a sense of humanity. In the wide shot (see figure A7) depicting the first moment of Wael’s confrontation by the revengers, a low-angle shot is used, which makes the revengers loom high in the frame, while Wael is small and much lower. The revenge-target is not framed to appear dominating or threatening, as many adversaries in action-cinema are. Wael clutches at his brown paper shopping bag, his body language communicating submissiveness. White light streams in from above him, which may have been used to allude to goodness and/or an imminent death and the spirit world.

In the closer shots, such as the medium shot (see figure A8), lighting is designed to create catch lights in his eyes, accentuating Wael’s humanity and emotion. The environment of the revenge-killing is very dark and shadowy, fitting in with the dark and disturbing mood of a killing. However, Wael’s face is not obscured by extreme shadow. The earlier treatment of Wael’s imagery is not suddenly subverted to suggest hidden villainy inside his character being revealed.

As a brief aside from the Munich scene, it is of interest to note that a similar (but slightly less sympathetic) image appears in Unforgiven, wherein one of the revenge-targets is seen protesting the violence against him, just before his death. In both images (figures A8 and A9), a medium shot is used to show both the emotion of fear in the revenge-target’s face and in their body language.
One of the final images of the Munich scene is an extreme close-up of Wael’s blood seeping into his spilt milk, as a member of the revenge-team picks up a bullet casing (see figure A10). The image of milk was used possibly because it reminds us of the earlier commonplace scene from the shop, and because the whiteness of the milk communicates a wholesomeness that has been tarnished by the killing.

In another revenge sequence in Munich, the team of revengers plant a bomb inside the hotel room of revenge-target Hussein Abd Al Chir. Protagonist Kaufman is tasked with making sure that the target is in his hotel room before signalling to the others to detonate the bomb. In figure A11, we see the revenge-target chatting in a friendly manner to Kaufman. The characters are depicted enjoying the same view from their hotel, with a relaxed body language, mirroring each other. The two-shot is used, which means both characters occupy the same frame, communicating a possibility of connection between them, even though they are standing, at this stage, relatively far apart.

In figure A12, the revenge-target has moved closer to the protagonist and uses an open body-posture. In the scene, he makes friendly, light-hearted conversation with Kaufman. The revenge-target’s face is well lit and the angle favours his face as opposed to the protagonist’s. A two-shot is once again used to communicate a degree of human connection and understanding between the two. The revenge-target is later killed through a bomb explosion.

In Unforgiven, one of the revenge-targets, a character named Davey Bunting (a.k.a. ‘Davey-Boy’), is the riding partner of Quick Mike, the man who cut the sex worker’s face. While Davey did not do the slashing himself, Davey was present at the time of the incident, and as such is a targeted for vengeance.

In one scene, Davey offers his horse as restitution for his partner’s violence. Although the sheriff has ordered the cowboys to hand over horses to the brothel owner (rather than the sex workers) in compensation for “damaging his property”, Davey attempts to give his best horse directly to the sex worker who was assaulted, Delilah. In one shot (see figure A13), the brothel owner attempts to take this particular horse, but Davey refuses as he has reserved it for Delilah. In the frame, he is positioned higher than the other two men, making him appear powerful. Along with his posture and pale hat, this composition communicates a sympathetic, perhaps even somewhat heroic, figure.
Later on in the scene, when Davey addresses the sex workers directly, he is depicted with a close-up shot (see figure A14). This allows the audience to see the expression on his face: one of yearning to make things right. If the intention had been to ‘other’ this character, or make him seem wicked, the actor could have been positioned in such a way as to create dramatic shadows on his face. He could have been given stubble or a darker hat. In this instance, however, he is clean-shaven, wears a pale hat, and is positioned so that sunlight casts soft light onto his face in a flattering manner. Reflectors were likely used to create catch lights in his eyes, furthering the humanity in his face.

To help strengthen the audience’s sympathetic impression of Davey, the film includes onscreen expressions of sympathy for him from another character. While the leader of the sex workers, Strawberry Alice, yells at him and eventually leads the workers in throwing manure at him, Delilah watches him. One shot subtly dollies in towards her, amplifying the significance of her expressions as she first looks impassively at the interactions between Davey and her fellow workers (see figure A15), and then gazes downwards (see figure A16). The accentuation of this latter, softly sad look suggests that the survivor of the attack does not wish Davey to be persecuted for the crime—something that is significant but becomes lost among the chaos of rage and desire for retribution. In this scene, the cinematic images have reinforced the audience’s opportunity to sympathise with both the revenge-target as well as the survivor of the initial violence. While the gift of a horse may seem an overly simple gesture in comparison with the horrific crime, it is perhaps the best that Davey can come up with, and this scene represents the only respectful attempt at reconciliation and non-violent restitution for the survivor of the violence: the sheriff’s suggested solution offers nothing for Delilah, and would have added insult to her injury in that she would have been seen as property of the brothel owner – on a par with the horse.

The Revenge-Target’s Perspective

Another form of sympathetic portrayal of the revenge-target is the exploration of the latter’s perspective. This goes one step further than simply depicting revenge-targets as humanistic characters. Rather, the point of view, motivation, and feelings of the ‘enemy’ are provided.

In a section of Munich, for example, members of the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO) are sharing the same safe-house as Kaufman and his Israeli team of revengers. To navigate this situation safely, Kaufman and his team deceive the PLO team as to who they are
and their political allegiances. Late at night, Kaufman and Ali, a member of the PLO, share a conversation about conflicts between Israelis and Palestinians. Ali, unaware that he is speaking with a political enemy, expresses his views freely. Through this conversation, Kaufman and the audience gain insight into Ali’s perspective. By providing this insight, the film enhances depth of understanding and allows the audience an opportunity to develop a measure of empathy for the revenge-targets and their motivations. Given these, viewers are likely to experience some uncomfortable tension in seeing them killed subsequently.

The scene makes use of two-shot compositions (see figures A17 and A18), which display both Kaufman and Ali in the same frame, establishing a connection between them. Ali is staged higher than Kaufman, which gives Ali importance in the scene. In the second two-shot (figure A18), the two actors have drawn closer to one another, further creating connection between the two characters. In this composition, the angle and lighting favour the revenge-target. Protagonist Kaufman’s face is lit with harsh contrast and shadow while Ali’s face is softly lit. As we hear more of Ali’s motivations, perspective and feelings, a close-up shot (figure A19) is used to display the emotions in the actor’s face with intimacy and clarity.

2.4 Portrayal of the Protagonist-Revenger

The Psychological Consequences of Violence

Portraying negative psychological consequences for a revenger who commits violent acts in pursuit of vengeance is an element that can support anti-vengeance themes. In the context of early modern theatre works, Simkin notes: “The revenger protagonist’s tragic journey often involves a gradual descent into moral confusion and mental disorder” (2006, 70). In contemporary film works, we often see echoes of such psychological effects, although they tend to be presented in more subtle ways.

In Unforgiven, for example, the youngest member of the revenger team, the Schofield Kid, initially displays an eagerness to prove himself as a killer. At the beginning of the film, he convinces Eastwood’s character Munny to take part in the mission. In a later scene, the Kid succeeds in killing the main revenge-target, Quick Mike. After escaping to a safer and quiet spot, he begins to tell Munny of the experience. The audience’s first view of the Kid and Munny in this scene is via an extreme wide shot (figure A20). The Kid’s facial expression is indecipherable due to the shot size, and to his features being in shadow. The camera then
moves closer on the Kid (figure 3). As he recounts his experiences, he appears excited and very pleased with the killing at first.

![Wide Shot of the Schofield Kid after he has killed the revenge-target. William Munny stands screen-left (Unforgiven 1992)](image)

Figure 3: Wide Shot of the Schofield Kid after he has killed the revenge-target. William Munny stands screen-left (Unforgiven 1992)

Before long, however, cracks begin to appear in his façade of bravado. By the time the Kid is shown in a close-up shot (figures 4, A21 and A22) we have been given glimpses into his true internal state. The Kid’s face is red, his eyes are watery; he grimaces, sobs and swigs heavily from a bottle of alcohol. The close-up shots allow us to see the complex and changing emotions on his face as he confronts with the enormous reality of having killed a fellow human, even though his face is partially obscured by his hat and bottle (figures A21 and A22).
Not surprisingly, films that lean toward pro-vengeance generally do not show such adverse psychological effects on the part of characters committing violent acts: indeed, a lack of emotion tends to be associated with toughness or psychological strength. For subtlety and realism, however, some negative effects may be shown early on in the course of narrative, almost like a stage in the revenger’s journey that they will eventually grow out of: it is as if they gain strength from their revenger role as time goes on.

For instance, in a scene from *Harry Brown* (figure A23), Harry has just returned home after an altercation during which he stabbed to death a criminal who had attempted to mug him. He is depicted as being deeply affected by the violence. The *mise-en-scène* is designed to communicate the home environment of an average, elderly man. He is dressed in a mid-tone coat that blends in with his mundane-looking home. He stares in horror at the hand he used to stab the criminal. His face is lit un-dramatically with soft light and his house is treated with warm, soft lighting.

After growing into his role as revenger, however, Harry begins to carry out his acts of violent vengeance with little apparent emotional effect. In figure 5, he is shown shooting a young (and at this point, defenceless) criminal, after which he appears calm and unemotional (figure 6). A low-angle is utilised to portray Harry’s strength. In this scene he is dressed in a black
coat, which creates a strong form in the image. Dramatic lighting is used to make his features appear distinct.

**Figure 5: Protagonist-Revenger before committing violence (Harry Brown 2009)**

This transition from emotional to unemotional appearances mirrors the trajectory seen in *Death Wish* which, as mentioned earlier, is a precursor film to *Harry Brown*. After the protagonist Paul Kersey’s first retaliatory acts against a mugger in *Death Wish*, he is depicted shaking uncontrollably. After his first killing of a mugger, he goes home and vomits in his bathroom toilet. With subsequent killings, however, Kersey seems dispassionate and acts without hesitation. Thus, Simkin observes that “In *Death Wish*, Kersey seems to grow into his vigilante role as the narrative unfolds…” (2006, 71).
Deterioration vs Strengthening of Confidence, Resolve and Well-being

In contrast with Harry Brown’s upswing and with the numerous examples of stoicism displayed by protagonists in conventional revenge films, Munich’s protagonist-revenger Kaufman becomes increasingly disturbed over the course of the film. At the beginning of the film, Kaufman is a calm, steady man. In figure 7, he is shown centre-frame, with an erect posture, neat hair, and pale button-up shirt and dark tie (the contrasting colour values in costume helping to draw the audience’s gaze to the character). He and a colleague stroll down a sunlit path as Kaufman is briefed on details of his mission.

![Figure 7: Protagonist-Revenger walking confidently (Munich 2005)](image)

In a scene deep into the film, Kaufman experiences paranoia in confronting the idea of retaliations being possibly directed towards him. Unable to sleep, he turns his bed mattress over, slashes it apart frantically, and takes apart the room’s phone. It is significant that the places he checks (a bed and a phone) are the very places that he and his team used in their own violent acts. This may suggest that his mind is being plagued, Lady Macbeth-like, by his own deeds. In figure A24, he is taking apart his phone and peering inside for signs of explosive devices. In contrast to the earlier depictions, his hair and face are now drenched in sweat. The scene is lit with dramatic lighting to create harsh shadowing on the actor’s face. Much of this scene is shown with wild handheld camera movement.

The scene of paranoia ends with Kaufman climbing into a closet. In figure 8, we see him sitting in the closet, unable to sleep and disturbed. Subtle make-up has been used to add redness and darkness around the eyes. Closet door blinds pass across Kaufman’s face,
severing the completeness of his face, and contributing to a sense of poor psychological health.

Figure 8: Protagonist-Revenger sitting in a closet, unable to sleep (*Munich 2005*)

At the beginning of *Harry Brown*, images of the protagonist are designed to depict a weak person, both physically and emotionally. The opening shot of the film (figure 9) is a close-up of Harry in bed. Light is positioned to strike behind him on the headboard, indicating that he is still in bed when there is much daylight outside. Relatively little light is cast on his face, making him appear grey and indistinct. The image is graded with blues to give his face a lack of vitality.

At the end of the film, after he has become a successful revenger, he is depicted as strong and confident. The process of revenging has apparently strengthened him. In figure 10, he is shown wearing a black coat, which gives his form a dominating presence, while his white collared shirt lifts our attention to his face and creates strong, contrasting values. The actor is positioned so that sunlight strikes his face in a complimentary way, with enough contrast and shadow to make his features sharp and distinct.
2.5 The Portrayal of Violence

The way the violent acts themselves are portrayed can be a powerful means to convey either anti-vengeance or pro-vengeance themes. For example, the techniques used to depict these acts, the content of the depictions, and the flow of the narrative can be designed to either provide viewers with an enjoyable experience, or to lay bare the horror of violence and its consequences. Thus, an act of violence may be shown as impressive, skilful or heroic, in order to induce an exhilarating experience for the audience, or one which is the opposite: unimpressive, unskilful, or causing prolonged suffering for the victim, thus tending to cause discomfort for viewers.
An example that is relevant to revenge films is *Kill Bill: Volume 1*. The depictions of violence in this film draw in style and technique from various genres of Asian cinema. The stylised, violent fight sequences make up much of the film’s running time, and are central to the entertainment of the film. In this as well as many other revenge films, violent acts performed by the revenger-protagonist are portrayed as skilful, ingenious and even artistic, thereby allowing the audience to enjoy viewing those moments.

In a scene from *Harry Brown*, Harry kills a young criminal by shooting him squarely in the middle of the forehead (figure 11). The intended effect appears to be one of exhilaration for the audience. Harry’s aim and his cool efficiency are impressive. Other details have been included to accentuate the experience of the moment, such as the rather large amount of muzzle flash involved, and the bullet’s impact on a television set, causing an eruption of sparks.

![Figure 11: Moment of violent action (Harry Brown 2009)](image)

Ma argues that the appeal of the enactment of revenge by the protagonist-revenger is not in the “affirmation of a moral superiority that was never actually ever in doubt” but instead lies in “the style and method with which she or he plays a part in the economy of vengeance” (2015, 59).

Not surprisingly, anti-vengeance films often depict violent acts as unheroic, beset by blunders, mistakes, or mishaps. Orr describes how noir westerns including *Man of the West* (1958) instigated a tradition of “deglamorized violence” that was further developed in later films, with *Unforgiven* being one such film. Orr states that “*Unforgiven* extends the realism of the noir Western, promising to deliver a “real West” liberated from Hollywood artifice…
Indeed, contrary to the classical Western shoot-out, virtually every assault in the film is perpetrated against an unarmed and/or fleeing victim” (2016, 151–52).

In this film, the young man Davey Bunting is a target of vengeance. The revenger Ned shoots at Davey, only to hit his horse, causing the horse to fall and crush Davey’s legs. The shot is not impressive or satisfying for the audience, and the suffering of the revenge-target is drawn out. In figure A25, Davey is shown dragging himself to safety—his legs useless by now—as he is fired at from above. The emotional response of the targeted man, right up to the moment of his death is highlighted.

When the key revenger Munny finally shoots Davey, the moment of violence itself is downplayed. The audience never sees the impact of the gunshot wound. The instant after Munny’s rifle goes off, we see a close-up of Davey’s leg changing from a bent position to a straightened and perhaps slackened position (figures A26 and A27). Later in the scene, a long, continuous, moving steadicam shot (see the three panels of figure 12) reveals the effects of the violence: a bloody stomach wound and the pained expressions on Davey’s face.

In this shot, the movement of the camera serves to gradually reveal the relevant information, as well as to give emotional weight to the imagery. While the moment of violence is depicted unspectacularly, the effects of violence upon the victim are depicted clearly, deliberately, and with a camera move that imbues the image with emotion.
Figure 12: Travelling shot revealing effects of violence (*Unforgiven* 1992)
To further support the filmmakers’ intention to depict violence and its effects as unappealing, other characters are shown onscreen displaying discomfort at what they are witnessing. In figure A28, Ned finds himself no longer able to shoot, so that Munny has to take the rifle from him and fires the death shot. Ned is disturbed by the violence already committed and the violence about to come. A close-up is used to show Ned’s expression, thereby communicating the suggestion that violence is horrific. Similarly, in figure A29, Davey’s riding partners look on in helplessness and horror as Davey, weakened by his injuries, calls out for water. Once again, close-up shots are utilised to show the emotional responses of characters who witness the acts of violence, and to convey anti-violence sentiments.

The makers of *Unforgiven* use this technique (showing onscreen characters’ emotional responses as an indirect way to portray acts of violence) at other points in the film. Plantinga (1998) discusses another scene, where English Bob is publicly beaten unconscious by Sheriff Little Bill:

> The numerous reaction shots of the townspeople show them not to be satisfied by a justice done, but grim-faced and disturbed by what they see… After the crowd disperses, the camera lingers on Little Bill, whose uncertain movements express his discomfort with his own actions. (Plantinga 1998, 70)

In a scene from *Munich*, the team of revengers kill a woman who previously seduced and assassinated one of their team. Consistent with the notion of a humanistic portrayal of revenge-targets, she is first depicted engaging in a very normal, relatable activity: reading (figure A30). The shot is composed to clearly show her face, with a window behind her giving a view of a blue sky: a wholesome scene. Her costuming is bright and cheerfully coloured, contrasting with the revengers’ dark clothing.

The act of violence was neither heroic nor swift. At the moment of the act, her breasts are exposed (before that, she pulled down her robe, in an unsuccessful attempt to offer sex to the revengers as a bribe to spare her). Bullet holes appear on her bare chest (figure A31). Her face, bare breasts, and wounds are clearly displayed in the one shot, with no edits to distract the audience. The sight of an unarmed, naked woman being harmed was probably designed to make the audience uncomfortable, and perhaps disturbed.

Rather than dying instantly, the woman stumbles over to her cat and pats it (figure A32). This action is shot in a wide (again, without quick edits) so the audience is left to observe a
woman dying in her average-looking home, the revengers to her right, preparing to finish the job. In figure A33, she has slumped back into a chair. Here, a well-lit medium close-up shot is used to show her wounds gushing blood in the same frame as her face reacting to the sensations of dying. To further support the suggestion that this is a disturbing scene, we see an onscreen character reacting with discomfort and humanity: once she has died, protagonist Kaufman pulls her dressing gown closed over her bloodied and naked body (figure A34). One of Kaufman’s colleagues protests and re-opens the robe, again revealing the gruesome, naked body. Much of the action is covered in a wide shot, with no quick edits.

Another revenge sequence from Munich focuses on the unheroic, horrific aftermath of a bomb explosion centred in the hotel room of revenge-target Hussein (previously discussed in Section 2.2). After the explosion, Kaufman walks through the blast-affected hotel interior. In figure A35, we see a bloodied and dismembered forearm. The shot is composed to include the forearm centred and large within the frame, while the protagonist stumbles in the background. Many elements at play—a bloody body element, atmospheric haze, dim lighting and jagged, irregular elements to form a frame—serve to create a nightmarish scene. In figure 13, the reverse shot of the previous one uses the same techniques but, along with the dismembered forearm, includes images of an innocent young couple. Images of naked flesh are used to reinforce the tragedy of violence upon the vulnerable, human form.

Figure 13: Effects of bomb explosion in hotel (Munich 2005)
The Harming of Innocents

As Berkowitz and Cornell (2009, 125) observe, “in nearly every Hollywood revenge movie, the film’s omniscient viewpoint subdues the fear of unjust revenge with the promise that the heroic avenger will get the right man”. In films that contain anti-vengeance aspects, the same omniscient viewpoint can let the audience know that the relevant act of violence is being inflicted (or threatened) upon innocent characters.

This technique of depicting an innocent’s killing is also used in another Eastwood-directed revenge film, Mystic River (2003). In discussing this film, Berkowitz and Cornell state: “Beyond its merely filmic qualities, Mystic River also has a plot that separates it from traditional Hollywood revenge films. Most importantly, the act of revenge in Mystic River gets the wrong man” (2009, 124).

As Munich is based on true events, it is curious to note that the film omits a real life incident (known as the ‘Lillehammer Affair’) where an innocent person was harmed during ‘Operation Wrath of God’. Ahmed Bouchiki, a Moroccan waiter, was killed by Israeli agents who mistook him for their target Ali Hassan Salameh (Follath and Spörl 2006). To be fair, the film does tell the stories of a number of other events where innocent parties were affected by or threatened with violence.

In a previously discussed scene, a bomb is going to be detonated in the hotel room of a targeted man. The protagonist Kaufman’s room is situated between the targeted hotel room on one side and a young couple’s room on the other. Prior to the detonation, in figure 14, Kaufman looks across to see the young couple enjoying each other’s company. While the back of Kaufman’s head is lit with greenish light, the couple are lit with a golden light, communicating a sense of joy and wholesomeness. They are both clad almost exclusively in white, further reinforcing their innocence.
After the bomb blast, Kaufman walks through the damaged hotel interior and attempts to help the young couple. In figure 15, the woman (who screams that she has been blinded) is wrapped in a sheet. Once again, the use of white is used to communicate innocence. The colour grade and lighting are cooler and greyer than the first image of the couple, as if to suggest that joy and wholesomeness has been eliminated. The action is staged such that the blinded woman’s path travels close to the camera, so that we can see the pained expression on her face in detail.

Another sequence in Munich focuses on the targeting of Mahmoud Hamshari, and on the associated threat of violence against his innocent daughter. The young girl is first seen as she enters a room, where one of the revengers is taking measurements of the family home phone for later replacement by a disguised bomb (see figure A36). The shot is composed so that when the girl is first seen, she shares the frame with the telephone, which is a representation of the eventual bomb and which looms large in the frame compared to her small figure. Lighting is designed so that light frames her: brightly illuminated windows, as well as light cast on a wall, fanning out right to left in her direction. The white light surrounding her draws the audience’s attention and communicates innocence.
Later on, when the bomb has been planted and detonation is imminent, a long, continuous, tracking shot initially shows the protagonist-revenger Kaufman as he speaks with other members from his team (figure A37). The shot tracks from left to right, displaying a truck that blocks Kaufman’s view of the car that the little girl is in. The shot continues (figures A38, A39, and A40), showing the girl leaving the car and running back into the house. The one continuous tracking shot is used to connect the revengers, their activity, and the targeted man’s innocent daughter. It effectively shows the protagonist’s ignorance of the danger being imposed on the girl, without the need for edits. Tension is created whereby the audience is privy to some important information that is not in the protagonist’s possession. In this scene, the girl’s costume design includes a red sweater, contrasting with the colder blue-grey palette of the rest of the scene, drawing the audience’s attention. Moreover, the red sweater is an intertextual homage to the red coat (in an otherwise black-and-white image) worn by a young Jewish girl in Spielberg’s prior film Schindler’s List (1993) (Loshitzky 2011).

What follows is a suspenseful and tense sequence, of which a few key shots will be discussed. The protagonist finally realises that the girl has left the car (figure A41). The shot is composed to frame the protagonist within the car door window, conveying a feeling of anxiety or being trapped. In another shot (figure A42), the girl is shown answering the phone.
that contains a bomb. A wide shot is used here to show the small and vulnerable size of the girl within the context of an everyday home environment.

Next, the caller (a member of the revenge-team) hears the little girl’s voice on the other end of the line (figure A43). An extreme close-up is used to dramatically emphasise the moment of realisation by the revenger that the target’s daughter is at risk. In figure A44, the protagonist Kaufman runs towards his revenge-team in a desperate attempt to abort the detonation. Wild, handheld camera movement is used to convey the emotion of panic on the protagonist’s part.

In figure A45, a detonation device is being primed for use. An extreme close-up of the device is used to focus the audience’s attention on the small, precise movements used to go through with the violence. This same shot is reused (intercut between other shots) displaying movements closer and closer towards the detonation of the bomb. The individual shot choices and the design by which they are edited together in a sequence, work to create tension for the viewers. The tensions springs not from whether the protagonist will be successful in their vengeance, but whether the act of violence will be averted to save the little girl.

2.6 Portrayal of Endings and Further Consequences

Quelling or Escalation of Violence

In pro-vengeance films, the successful execution of vengeance often results in the quelling of violence. In Harry Brown, for example, the elderly revenger’s acts of retribution and vigilantism serve to reduce violence and help to create an environment of peace. At the beginning of the film, the tunnel underneath Harry’s apartment is overrun by a gang of youths. The image of the tunnel is used frequently throughout the film. In one scene, Harry watches from his window as the gang intimidate and harass people. In other scenes, Harry must decide whether to use the tunnel or to avoid it and take a longer route.

Figure 16 is the first shot of the tunnel. Its entrance is defaced by graffiti, and rubbish and leaves litter the path and grass. The colour grade is shifted to a cold blue hue. At the end of the film, Harry is able to walk along the tunnel unencumbered: he has reclaimed what is his. Figure 17 is the very final shot of the tunnel. It is framed with a near identical composition to figure 16 to echo the earlier image, while emphasising the characteristics that have changed. The entrance has been treated with a fresh coat of white paint, the path and grass are clean,
and the colour grade is much warmer. This contrast serves to communicate the notion that Harry’s violent acts have succeeded in promoting a peaceful and pure environment.

Figure 16: Initial shot of tunnel (Harry Brown 2009)

Films that include anti-vengeance themes may, on the other hand, depict vengeance as escalating or perpetuating violence, including reciprocating acts of retribution upon the
revengers themselves. In *Unforgiven*, the revenger Ned is captured by the sheriff Little Bill Daggett and tortured. In figure A46, Ned is staged with his back directly to the camera, displaying bloody wounds from the whipping he received. The camera angle is formal, not angled, and it centres the figure, accentuating the cross-like compositional shape formed by the actor’s body and arms, evoking a Christ-like impression.

Later on, Munny hears of Ned’s death and rides into town to seek vengeance. The next sequence of events depicts a scenario where violence and vengeance lead to an escalation of violence. In the final scene-proper of *Unforgiven*, Munny rides to the saloon where the sheriff and other townsfolk have gathered. The location is significant as it was the site of the original harm (the slashing of Delilah’s face).

As Munny approaches the saloon, we see a tracking shot from his point of view (figures A47-A49). Through the rain and darkness, we see an indistinct large object and sign, surrounded by two flames. Gradually, it becomes clear that the object is an upright coffin containing Ned’s body, with a sign underneath that reads: “this is what happens to assassins around here”. The shot allows the audience to experience the images of Ned’s corpse as the character Munny (Ned’s friend) would see it, which emphasises the emotional impact of the scene. The light source is motivated mainly by the flickering flames, placed low in relation to the actor Morgan Freeman. This lighting method creates an eerie, and perhaps even, frightening look.

After shooting multiple people in the saloon, Munny departs. As he passes the coffin again, he pauses and looks at Ned’s corpse (figure A50). This time, the lighting style has been subtly shifted to be softer and to illuminate Ned’s features to a greater degree. Munny then turns, allowing us to view his sullen face and Ned within the same frame (figure 18). Munny pauses for a moment in this position, as if ruminating or grieving. This image may communicate the notion that although Munny has succeeded in exacting revenge for his friend’s death, it has not brought Ned back nor any happiness for Munny.

The final image of this final scene, which is a handheld shot, is very dark. Munny has ridden out of frame, and we see a rain-drenched, dark town (figure A51). The lack of clarity and distinctiveness in the image communicates the notion that the multiple waves of vengeance in the story have not led to a simple, peaceful and desirable end result.
Triumphant Ending vs Tragic Ending

Contemporary film narratives often end with the protagonist succeeding in realising their goal. In the case of a pro-vengeance revenge film, that means the protagonist succeeds in exacting vengeance, with a sense of justice being restored. This is the case with the ending of *Harry Brown*, as discussed in the above section. Tragic endings, by contrast, may be used to communicate anti-vengeance themes. They could function as a warning: if one is to follow this path, then it will end tragically. In the early modern theatre work *The Spanish Tragedy* (written by Thomas Kyd between 1582 and 1592), the protagonist Hieronimo is unsuccessful in trying to obtain justice, and his attempts actually aid the antagonist, Lorenzo, in evading justice (Simkin 2006).

As the discussion in a previous subsection demonstrates, the psychological consequences of violence can be depicted with considerable effect in creative works, such as film or literature. In some cases, such consequences could be an integral part of the tragedy. For example, at the end of *Munich*, after successfully performing multiple acts of violent vengeance, lead protagonist Kaufman is shown shaking and sweating as he makes love with his wife (figure 19). The lighting has been stylised to cloak his surroundings in near-complete darkness, while actor Eric Bana’s face and shoulders are dramatically lit to accentuate sweat and create
shadowing. The dramatic shadows and absence of background suggest a character alone in his extreme mental anguish.

![Image of character in extreme mental anguish]

**Figure 19: Protagonist-Revenger showing signs of psychological disturbance (Munich 2005)**

While this scene clearly shows Kaufman’s descent, it is interesting to note that it represents a tweaking of the action from the original screenplay, in which the sexual act transforms from lovemaking to rough and angry action. In the film’s final version, Kaufman’s wife comforts him and says “I love you”, whereas in the original screenplay she screams in pain and pushes him away. Thus, Spielberg has softened the scene somewhat, while still retaining the essence of depicting Kaufman as a character transformed and tormented by the vengeful acts he performed.

### 2.7 Chapter Summary

The analysis in this chapter has shown that pro-violence and pro-vengeance themes may be communicated in films through various ways: by ‘othering’ revenge-targets, omitting the revenge-targets’ points of view, portraying the protagonist as growing from relative meekness to confidence during the pursuit of revenge, showing the protagonist as increasingly stoic with regard to their own violent actions, depicting acts of violence in a manner designed to leave the viewer impressed and perhaps exhilarated, showing that acts of vengeance quell further violence, or including a triumphant ending.

By contrast, anti-violence and anti-vengeance themes may be communicated in films through the following ways: by including a humanistic portrayal of revenge-targets, examining the revenge-targets’ points of view, portraying the protagonist as descending in confidence and
well-being (including being psychologically disturbed by their acts of violence), depicting acts of violence in a manner designed to leave the viewer disturbed or horrified, suggesting that acts of vengeance escalate and perpetuate violence, or including a tragic or unresolved ending.
CHAPTER 3: COMMUNICATING ANTI-VIOLENCE AND ANTI-VENGEANCE THEMES IN FIREBIRD

3.1 Chapter Introduction

Firebird is a short film completed in 2016 as partial fulfilment of the requirements for a DVA at the Queensland College of Arts, Griffith University. In keeping with its nature as a research graduate-student film, I was heavily involved with most aspects of its making, including scriptwriting, directing, co-production, co-editing and co-composing. My intention was, right from the outset, to make it a revenge film imbued with anti-violence and anti-vengeance themes.

The narrative is set in a fictional near-future dystopia and played out against the backdrop of ongoing conflict between two gangs: the ‘Goats’ and the ‘Firebirds’. The film begins with Liam (played by Nicholas Larkin), a junior member of the Goats, learning of his brother Johnny’s murder at the hands of the Firebirds (during Johnny’s unsuccessful attempt to take revenge for past grievances against Atum, a high-ranking member of the Firebirds). Whilst still dealing with the loss, Liam forms his own plan for vengeance: to infiltrate the enemy gang as a new recruit, so that he can get close enough to assassinate Atum (played by Li Yang). To convince the Firebirds of his ‘genuine’ background and motives, Liam arranges for himself to be shot and wounded by two of his Goats friends. Initially this ploy seems to work, in that Liam (by this time, known by the alias ‘Sparrow’) is brought to meet Atum. But Liam soon discovers that Atum is not the monster he previously imagined. On the contrary, Atum turns out to be quite empathetic towards him and actively takes care of him while he tries to recover from the wounding. As the film progresses, Liam becomes increasingly ambivalent about his initial goal of murdering the man. Towards the end of the story, he overcomes his indecision and strikes at Atum, but the latter fends off the attack, fatally stabbing Liam in the process.

In 2016, Firebird won a Platinum Award for Excellence in Filmmaking at the Filmmakers World Festival and an Award of Excellence at Canada Shorts. It has been screened at a number of other film festivals, including the Madrid International Film Festival (where it was nominated for Best Editing of a Short Film and Best Supporting Actor in a Short Film), the Portland Film Festival, and Sightlines: Filmmaking in the Academy.
In this chapter, I will discuss a number of aspects of Firebird’s making. The overarching question is how images in the film were designed, captured, rearranged and manipulated to communicate anti-violence and anti-vengeance themes. The chapter is organised as follows. The next section will discuss in some depth the portrayal of the revenge’s target, the character of Atum, who may also be thought of as the ‘antagonist’. The next three sections (Sections 3.3 to 3.5) are devoted to a discussion of the portrayal of, respectively, the protagonist-revenger (the character of Liam/Sparrow), other characters (mainly members of the Goats and Firebirds gangs), and the film’s tragic ending. The sixth section offers retrospection on some core questions engaged with and decisions made during the filmmaking process. A chapter summary is provided in the last section.

3.2 Portrayal of the Revenge-Target in Firebird

In this film, Atum represents a mystery that is revealed, layer by layer, over time to the audience. By contrast, viewers can directly relate to the emotions and thoughts of Liam, but Liam himself undergoes important changes over time – often as a result of his interactions with Atum. Thus, it will be easier to understand Liam’s portrayal after Atum’s portrayal has been analysed. The discussion of the character of Atum will proceed through three key themes: a gradual shift in the way he is portrayed, an exploration of his perspective and motivation, and the consequences of violent acts that he has committed.

A Shift from ‘Othering’ to a Nuanced Portrayal

Chapter 2 has already provided discussion on how othering can be a device to encourage the audience to feel little sympathy for the characters who are targets of revenge. In contrast, films that provide more complex, or critical, depictions of violence and vengeance may portray antagonists as people who share some common elements of humanity with the audience and/or the protagonist.

In Firebird, the portrayal of the revenge’s target, Atum, starts from an othering stance during the early scenes, but then, over the course of the film, it undergoes a transition to less unsympathetic, and more humanising, depictions.

The narrative drive of the film revolves around the protagonist Liam’s desire to murder Atum as an act of vengeance. For the narrative to be persuasive, it was deemed necessary to establish fairly early on that Atum is (at least potentially) a dangerous, powerful and
menacing character. Thus, when he is first seen in the film (in a shot displayed during a speech by Liam in his gang’s lounge-room; see figure 20) Atum is portrayed as a mysterious, dark, and powerful figure. He stands erect, centre-frame, with his back to the camera in a dimly lit, haze-filled environment. The red glow of the lamp communicates a sense of danger and power.

![Wide Shot of Atum (Firebird 2016)](image)

**Figure 20: Wide Shot of Atum (Firebird 2016)**

It is interesting to note that this shot was not a feature in the original conceptualisation and early edits of the film, but was instead part of material captured by the camera after recording had begun but before action had been called, during the shoot for a different scene (the ‘first healing ritual’). During the editing process, the appropriate footage was selected and re-purposed for this scene, where it serves to establish a distinctive image of Atum early in the film, thereby creating a visual cue for the antagonist in later scenes. In earlier cuts of the film, Atum did not appear on screen until well into the middle of the film, with the plan of a revenge killing already established and underway. But it became clear to me while doing these cuts that better motivation would be needed for the audience to develop sympathy for such a revenge plan.

In a later scene (the ‘first interaction scene’), when Liam first speaks with Atum, the sequence is edited such that a front view of Atum is delayed, adding to the impression of a mysterious and menacing character. In figure 21, we see Liam’s reaction during the
encounter, knowing that Atum has just walked toward Liam and may be about to sit close by him. At this point, however, we still only see Atum’s dark robes and the fear that is displayed in Liam’s eyes, before Atum’s robes begin to pass across our view and momentarily engulf the image of the protagonist. The scene conveys a sense of domination by Atum over Liam, who lies flat and weakened before his antagonist.

![Figure 21: Protagonist looking at revenge-target (Firebird 2016)](image)

When a front view of Atum is finally shown (figure 22), he remains mysterious and continues to project an impression of unusual power. He is dressed in long, dark robes and wears an exotic-looking helmet which partially obscures his eyes and maintains the emotional distance separating him from the audience. A slightly low-angle shot was chosen to re-inforce the impression of a dominant character (Mascelli, 1998).
As the scene progresses, tighter close-ups are utilised (figure 23 being one example), allowing the viewer to read the emotions in Atum’s face. Bit by bit, Atum’s humanising aspects are revealed. In this scene, his face has substantial warmth to it, with the orange glow from a lamp positioned to cast light on his face (as evidenced by the glint on his helmet). In the colour-grade, significant work was done to brighten Atum’s face in relation to the
surrounding image. The original footage featured a darker face for Atum, and I realised that such treatment would keep his character overly mysterious (given the evolving context) and difficult to empathise with.

In the colour-grade, a mask was used to isolate his face to allow brightening of this portion of the image, without over-brightening the rest of it. Similarly, in the initial edit, the tightest close-ups were found to be not intimate enough, making Atum appear too distant for the context. As the film was shot in 5K (5120 × 2700 pixels) resolution with a final output of 2K (2048 × 858 pixels), reframing was possible without a loss of image quality. Atum’s tightest close-ups in this scene were resized to 130% of the original, resulting in shots that portrayed Atum with greater intimacy and emotional detail.

Towards the end of the film (the ‘stabbing scene’), Atum no longer wears a helmet, allowing a clear view of his face (figure 24). Lighting was designed to give shape and definition to his face, while avoiding harsh shadowing. The expressions on Atum’s face are generally warm and at times caring. By this time, the rehabilitation of Atum’s character from the initial ‘othering’ portrayal is nearly complete.

Figure 24: Revenge-target as depicted late in film (Firebird 2016)
A component in this part of the film conveys a growing sense of Atum’s connection with, and care for, Liam. In Figure 25, Atum helps Liam to sit up from his lying position. The shot is designed such that both heads share the frame, communicating the impression of emotional bonds between the two characters. The shot is also close enough to reveal sympathetic expressions on Atum’s face. As discussed below, the progressive changes in the portrayal of Atum are coordinated with the changing experiences of the protagonist Liam. In turn, Liam’s journey through his revenge mission is meant to be in line with the gradual communication of a message critical of violent vengeance.

![Figure 25: Close-up of revenge-target, protagonist-revenger's head in foreground (Firebird 2016)](image)

**The Antagonist’s Perspective and Motivation**

*Firebird* goes much further than simply portraying the antagonist with a measure of humanity: the film actively explores Atum’s perspective and motivation at several key junctures. This is done not only through dialogue but also through visual devices, including flashback sequences. In a revealing scene, Atum is shown as being moved by Liam’s recollections about feeling scared while walking along his neighbourhood streets when he was younger. This prompts Atum to recall the night he himself but as a young man was attacked and left for dead. As Atum remembers the ordeal, we see flashback images of the
incident. As this sequence shifts the visual perspective from the present to a memory within the antagonist’s mind, all shots for the flashback were captured through using a travelling camera on a steadicam rig. The steadicam shots feature smooth movements that float with the young Atum as he walks through a tunnel. The flashback scene feels qualitatively different from the surrounding shots, which were captured with handheld camerawork and which represent the ‘present’ time of the narrative.

The flashback sequence features close-up shots of the younger Atum’s face, travelling backwards as the character walks forwards (figure 26). The shot size was used early in the sequence to establish the focus of the character in the scene, signalling that while this younger Atum is played by another actor, it is indeed the same character at a younger age. The young Atum is dressed in a white top and cap to communicate the character’s relative innocence. The white clothing was also useful for being clearly visible during a night shoot. The majority of the lighting in this flashback scene was simply what was available on location at the time.

![Flashback image of young revenge-target](Firebird 2016)

In figure 27, the camera follows behind the young Atum, showing a tunnel deserted except for two large figures in dark shadow. The actors cast to play these figures were selected for their height, ensuring they would create a dominating presence in the frame. Costuming was
designed such that they would appear shadowy or dressed in dark clothing, supporting the intimidating presence of the characters and contrasting with the young Atum’s white clothing.

Figure 27: Flashback image following young revenge-target as he walks near two figures
(Firebird 2016)

The development of the antagonist’s perspective serves to create additional understanding for the character. In this part of the film, insight is given into Atum’s past and how this may have influenced later choices in his life. This is designed to counter the effects of the initial ‘othering’ of Atum and to facilitate gradual audience sympathy for him.

The Consequences for the Antagonist of His Own Violence

Atum’s perspective is further explored in a later scene (the ‘third healing ritual’), in which we are allowed insight into the guilt and mental anguish that he suffers for the acts of violence he previously committed. The scene is meant to contribute to the overall expression of anti-violence sentiments. In figure 28, Atum is shown sitting, bathed in darkness. The near-complete blackness around his figure was used to communicate the idea of someone alone in his psychological torment. Although Atum is admitting his wrongdoings and feelings of guilt, Liam cannot hear and cannot understand, because he is unconscious and because Atum is speaking in his native language, Mandarin-Chinese. Only the audience is privy to this confession, through the subtitled monologue, which begins with the lines “Sparrow, all my
life I’ve lived in a violent world… but I’ve only served to feed it. I’ve left so many angry for their sons… sisters… and fathers.” The barrier in communication between the two main characters is a metaphor of the isolation that Atum must feel despite his sincere contrition.

Figure 28: Revenge-target displays signs of remorse and guilt over past violence

The blackness surrounding Atum was achieved by sectioning off an area of the set with *blacks* (black material that absorbs light). Top-lighting was used to create a harsh look, with extreme shadowing in the eyes and lower face. The downward focusing of the light, from a source directly above the subject, was used to communicate a sense of torment, by hollowing out the eyes and accentuating the furrowed brow. A green gel was used on the light to create a cold, uncomfortable effect. In the colour-grade, the green hue was reduced from the original captured footage, but is still evident. Although a green hue could potentially de-emphasise the humanity of Atum, the slight high-angle used in the shot portrays Atum in a vulnerable, no-longer-threatening manner. The angle also reinforces the effect of Atum’s violent past weighing upon his sense of self. Mascelli explains that “[H]igh-angling is excellent when a player should be belittled, either by his surroundings, or by his actions” (1998, 39).

While audio for this scene was captured on-set during the film’s shooting, the fact that the visuals did not show Atum’s speaking the words meant that the vocals could be re-recorded in post-production to give a greater sense of intimacy and emotionality to the voice. Thus, these lines were re-recorded in a dedicated sound studio, allowing for close placement of the
microphone whereby the actor could modify his performance, at times lowering his voice to a whisper. All these further support the notion of a private confession full of turmoil and extreme regret.

Within this scene, images are shown of people whom Atum has killed in the past -- these figures lie lifeless on the ground. To communicate the notion that these are flashback images, an extreme close-up of Atum’s eye is shown immediately preceding these shots (see figure 29). To capture this image, a macro lens was used. Catch-lights on eyes are often important to ensure that eyes do not appear lifeless. As Kelby somewhat humorously explains “Without [catch lights], your subject’s eyes won’t have any sparkle to them and will look, like dead, lifeless pools of despair” (2009, 49).

![Figure 29: Extreme close-up of revenge-target's eye (Firebird 2016)](image)

Although it was important that Atum’s eye did not appear lifeless and without humanity, an overly strong and defined catch light might run contrary to the intended sense of emotional anguish. In this context, some degree of “despair” was entirely appropriate for the image. The initial attempt, involving the placement of a light close to the subject, resulted in a catch light that was too prominent and defined. A bright rectangle of white was reflected on the eyeball, working against the intended mood. The light was then moved to a further distance, resulting in a subtler catch light and a tonally ‘darker’ image overall.
Immediately following the extreme close-up of Atum’s eye, images of various people murdered by Atum in the past are shown. Each of these shots was colour graded differently to suggest a variety of different time periods. The first shot (figure 30) depicts a young man lying with his head on a blood-stained concrete gutter. The young man is dressed in crimson monk robes, the same kind of costume worn by the figures who attacked the young Atum in the earlier flashback. The fact that these costumes are the same suggests that this young man is killed as vengeance for his (or his affiliated gang’s) prior attack on Atum. This connects with the overall theme of revenge and violence begetting violence.

Figure 30: Flashback image of murdered young man (Firebird 2016)

The final of these images is a shot of a dead man with a chest wound (figure 31). The shot is directed straight down at the character as he lies on the ground, suggesting that this is the image that was imprinted on Atum’s mind when he stood over the dead body. Lighting was designed such that illumination would fall off near the edges of the frame, producing a soft frame for the image, consistent with the feel of a memory-image. The dead character’s costuming is in a punk style, similar to that worn by Liam and other members of his gang, the Goats. Make-up was used to create a tattoo on the side of his neck, in a design similar to that shown on other members of the Goats gang. These visual elements were used to show that Atum has killed a member of the Goats in the past.
Figure 31: Flashback image of murdered 'Goats' gang member (*Firebird* 2016)

This visual reference closes a narrative loop, as it links to an early scene in the film where Liam discussed the death of a member of the Goats that had occurred many years ago at the hands of Atum. Indeed, it is this murder that triggered the whole chain of reciprocal retaliations between Liam’s gang and Atum’s. Initially, this past event was presented from the perspective of Liam and the Goats, as motivation for revenge. At this late point in the film, however, the same event is recalled from the perspective of Atum, who displays genuine (and unsolicited) emotions of guilt and regret.

### 3.3 Portrayal of the Protagonist-Revenger in *Firebird*

The portrayal of the protagonist Liam begins with images of a young man who is healthy, confident and certain of his mission of revenge. As the film advances, however, Liam is confronted with various developments which progressively affect his confidence, resolve and well-being.

**Initial Confidence and Clear Sense of Purpose**

At the beginning of the film, Liam is depicted walking across a bridge on a sunlit day (figure 32). While it is acknowledged through a voice-over track that he lives in a dangerous world, he strides with confidence, head upright, eyes focused, and body erect. Sunlight catches his face, predominantly on one side rather than the other, resulting in defined features. The
colour-grading in this section is warmer than in the majority of the rest of the film. Selective grading was applied to reduce warmth in the overall image (to convey a sense of a harsh, urban environment) while retaining warmth in Liam’s face.

Soon after this, Liam is shown as being deeply affected by the news that his brother has been murdered by Atum’s gang, the Firebirds. As he is hugged by his friend Remy, he gazes off-screen (figure 33). The very next image (figure 34) is a point-of-view shot that goes from sharp focus to out-of-focus, which was intended to portray Liam’s shattering experience and to engender audience sympathy. The focus shift was achieved ‘in-camera’ by a manual twisting of the focus ring.

Liam then begins to channel his grief toward planning revenge on the Firebirds – and in particular on Atum, their leader. At this stage, his purpose is clear. In the scene where Liam’s gang, the Goats, mourn the death of a member and discuss their next moves, Liam chastises his friends for their past approach to dealing with their enemy gang. When he speaks, his words are quiet but commanding.
As his dialogue moves to the details of his plan for revenge against Atum, the camera travels towards Liam (figure 35). His image grows in size within the frame, adding power to his speech and emotional resolve. He is positioned centre-frame. His arms are spread wide on either side, increasing the overall reach of his silhouette.
The ‘push-in’ camera move was achieved with handheld camerawork, to match the aesthetic of the surrounding shots, and to remove the need for a time-consuming setup of dolly tracks. The director of photography (who operated the camera for the shoot) needed to shift his body forward in a way that would minimise shaking. This proved difficult, with a high number of takes required to capture the desired shot, since many of the takes had undesirable amounts of X- and Y-axis movement (shaking). It became a challenge to capture the best acting performance while simultaneously striving for the best camera move. For the ideal shot, both factors (acting performance and camera move) needed to peak during the same take. For similar shots in future film work, I would consider using dolly tracks for a smoother look and more consistency between takes.

Later on in the film, when Liam regains consciousness in an inner chamber of the Firebirds’ lair, he soon spots a potential weapon for use against Atum: a blade. A horizontally moving shot, achieved with handheld motion, sweeps past various objects on the bedside table -- designed to represent Liam’s sweeping gaze of his environment. After a close-up shot of Liam peering in the direction of the table, an extreme-close-up shot of the blade is presented (figure 36). This latter shot is intended to be another point-of-view shot from Liam’s perspective. The change to extreme-close-up communicates Liam’s hyper-focus on one particular object. The image of the blade is used throughout the rest of the film as a symbol of Liam’s goal of revenge. Mascelli describes the use of this kind of shot:
Point-of-view cut-away close-ups are filmed from the viewpoint of a player in the scene. Another player, a clock or a small-scale action such as a cocking gun, may receive increased audience interest when shown from the viewpoint of a player in the scene rather than objectively. Such treatment creates stronger audience identity with the player and greater involvement in the event (1998, 182-183).

Figure 36: Protagonist's point-of-view image of potential weapon for revenge (*Firebird* 2016)

Figure 37: Protagonist's hand struggling to reach weapon (*Firebird* 2016)
After Liam carefully surveys the room, we see an extreme-close-up shot of his hand trembling and then making its way from the edge of the bed towards the blade on the bedside table (figure 37, previous page). By utilising a shot of this size, attention is drawn to the tremors in Liam’s hand, which are signs of great effort on Liam’s part. This image communicates Liam’s tenacity and resolve at this point in the narrative.

**Growing Ambivalence**

Later on in the same scene, Liam gets to know Atum, hears about some of his thoughts, and experiences first-hand Atum’s concern and empathy for others (including for Liam in this instance). These experiences cause Liam to become less certain and more ambivalent toward his plans for murder. The scene finishes with two shots. The first is a close-up shot of Liam peering at Atum (figure 38).

![Figure 38: Protagonist peers at revenge-target (*Firebird* 2016)](image)

Although much of Liam’s face is covered with a cloth, lighting and framing were designed to feature his eye prominently, in order to communicate the notion that Liam is re-evaluating Atum. The latter’s hand is placed upon Liam’s nose to stop the bleeding, creating an image of Liam in a vulnerable position. Camera placement, lighting and blocking of actors were crafted such that sufficient light would catch Liam’s eye. At this point in the film, it was
intended that the character Liam, while re-evaluating his entire relationship with Atum, would still have some degree of fear towards him.

The second shot is a close-up shot of Liam’s unmoving hand – it is caught between its resting spot on the bed and the weapon he has been struggling to reach (figure 39). Throughout the film, the image of Liam’s hand is used as a visual metaphor to connect with his pursuit of revenge. This shot of Liam’s hand pausing and unmoving, rather than reaching purposely for the weapon, was edited in as the last shot of the scene to signal a weakening in Liam’s resolve.

![Figure 39: Protagonist's hand poised mid-air (Firebird 2016)](image)

**Consequences for Protagonist of the Pursuit of Revenge**

In the latter part of the film, Liam (also known as ‘Sparrow’, after he has infiltrated the Firebird gang) undergoes significant physical and psychological changes. In the pursuit of revenge, he experiences high personal costs to himself, including deterioration in his physical condition due to his injuries. The mounting of consequences contributes to his already developing uncertainty in his original plan of vengeance. The depiction of Liam’s physical decline also provides visual support for the notion that his internal confidence and resolve are weakening. In one scene (the ‘second interaction’ scene), special-effects make-up was used to
give the impression that blood was seeping from his nostrils and eyes (figure 40). He lies flat and displays little vitality. The scene is lit in an unflattering way (from underneath the face), making Liam’s features ill-defined and in shadow. Colour-grading was designed to reduce warmth in the scene. The intended effect is an image of a pale, wan and gravely weakened Liam. After this, Liam breaks down and cries, marking the first time he is shown to weep since hearing the news of his brother’s death.

Figure 40: Protagonist pale and bleeding from nose and eyes (Firebird 2016)

3.4 Portrayal of Other Characters in Firebird

To facilitate discussion in this section, the portrayal of other characters in the film will be grouped under three headings: the portrayal of the ‘ingroup’ (Tajfel and Turner, 1979) that comprises the protagonist’s original associates; the shifts in the portrayal of the rival gang, from clearly an ‘outgroup’ of unsympathetic characters, to more nuanced depictions; and the ‘collateral damage’ to characters other than the two main ones.

Portrayal of Ingroup

In the first scene of the film, we are introduced to Liam’s gang, the Goats. Members of this gang have close ties to one another, as seen in the sharing of a particularly emotional moment. Liam arrives at one of the gang’s ‘hangout spots’ underneath a bridge. The camera follows behind Liam, and as he enters the space, the various members stand to acknowledge
his presence. One of the gang members, Remy (played by Kevin Dee) struggles to deliver to Liam the terrible news that Liam’s brother has been killed by the Firebirds (figure 41). Other members are visibly upset. One member, Anton (played by Kevin Kiernan-Molloy, with dyed-red hair) turns away – the scene is too emotionally raw for him to deal with. Susy (played by Anne-Lise Ah-fat, who has the side of her head shaved) bows her head low. Martin (played by David Watton, with an entirely shaved head) stands off to one side, watching helplessly and mute. Later on, the scene concludes with Remy comforting Liam in an empathetic embrace (figure 33, discussed above).

![Figure 41: The Goats gang as Remy delivers news to Liam (Firebird 2016)](image)

To help convey a sense of group cohesiveness and belonging, considerable attention was paid to the shared aspects of the gang members’ costuming and to the set design. The overall production design for the Goats was inspired by punk fashion and aesthetics. Punk patches and badges were added to the costuming. Hair was designed to give the impression of a subculture inspired by punk (with many actors of the Goats cast shaving parts of their head). Gang members are all dressed in a limited colour palette of mainly faded-denim-blue, maroon and black. The actor playing Anton (played by Kevin Kiernan-Molloy) had his hair dyed a deep red/maroon to match the palette. The location was, in part, selected due to the presence of the maroon wall. A temporary paint mixture was used to add graffiti, enhancing character and a ‘lived in’ feel to the environment. The graffiti on the wall (as well as in other parts of
this location and the next Goats environment being featured) share similar design properties: the use of straight lines (that often cross at the ends), even when depicting letters that are usually formed with rounded lines.

In the next scene, in which the Goats grieve and mourn the loss of one of their own before plotting his revenge, the shared emotionality of the moment is captured through body language, staging and environmental design, all orchestrated to further emphasise a sense of group. The *mise en scene* was designed to portray a group of people who had stayed up all night and into the next day, trying to cope with their loss by drinking and sharing their grief (figure 42). Their solidarity in the face of adversity encourages sympathy from the audience.

![Figure 42: Goats gang in mourning (Firebird 2016)](image)

For this scene, glass bottles were arranged to cover tables. A haze machine was used to give the room aerial perspective, creating an image with depth (Mascelli, 1998) and promote the impression that people have stayed in the room smoking and drinking. Members of the gang on each side of the frame (Susy and Anton) were positioned to hunch over, with their heads bowed. While the interior of the room was kept relatively dark to support the heavy mood of grief, lighting was designed to stream in through the cracks in the curtains, suggesting that daylight has arrived while the gang remain in their state of pain.
Aesthetic features that were associated with the Goats in the prior scene are maintained in this new location. The set was a living room in the house that I lived in at the time, allowing the art department good access and adequate time for dressing it in the days prior to shooting. Walls were completely covered in photocopies of punk music posters which were then stained with a coffee mixture and spray-painted with graffiti to create a ‘lived in’ look. The environment was designed using the colour palette associated with the Goats, including the prominent featuring of maroon curtains.

**Shifts in Portrayal of Outgroup**

Throughout the early scenes, the *outgroup* (the Firebirds) are never even seen, apart from an insert image of Atum, their leader. The gang is only referred to in a context of hate and of being the enemy. At one point, Anton declares: “We need to clean every Firebird between us and him” – meaning that the Goats should kill all Firebirds that are in the way of their revenge plot to kill Atum. Such portrayal is meant, at that stage, to convey a clear sense that the Firebirds are members of an outgroup who have much in common with Atum, the character being seen as ‘other’.

Later on in the film, we understand that Liam has successfully infiltrated his enemy gang (he is known to them by the alias of ‘Sparrow’). He is shown amongst the Firebirds, as the gang appears for the first time in the film, with its members being presented in a manner designed to create an intimidating impression. They are engaged in a rap battle. This activity was chosen to showcase unique music of a fictionalised subculture (based predominantly on hip hop, with elements of electronic and ‘noise’ music), and to display the gang in the midst of action which would appear energetic and aggressive, in contrast with the low-energy, mournful but caring depictions of the Goats.

Rap battles have the somewhat unusual (but not unique) characteristic of involving competitive and often antagonistic behaviour amongst the participants, even though this may be in a game-like manner between close friends or affiliates (Widawski 2015; Hadley and Yancy 2012). The first rapper showcased, a character named ‘Green Nose’ (played by Hayato Yoshinari) raps rapid-fire, using words in the actor’s native Japanese language (figure 43). As he raps, he bares his teeth, focusing his intense and possibly menacing gaze in the direction of Sparrow/Liam, the new member of the gang, and gesticulating with his arm.
Continuing in the same style, another Firebirds character by the name of ‘Fizzik’ (played by Benjamin Karikari-Yeboah) is the third person to rap (figure 44). At times, Fizzik encroaches upon Liam’s personal space. In the shot shown above, Fizzik leans in towards Sparrow/Liam, obscuring a full view of the latter, who gazes down submissively. The intention was to depict
a gang whose members would compete for dominance with one another and would not hesitate to intimidate a more junior member (such as the newly-recruited ‘Sparrow’).

The aesthetics of costuming and design associated with the Firebirds gang are intended to contrast with those for the Goats. The colour palette for the Firebirds includes purple, blue, green, orange, black and yellow, contrasting with the more restricted palette for the Goats. While faded denim, patches and badges are recurring features of the Goats costuming, Firebirds costuming includes coloured leather and synthetic materials. Figure 45 displays a number of the latter gang’s members in a low-angle shot which supports the impression that the group is dominating, causes Sparrow/Liam to appear small in comparison to the other members, and showcases the visual effects piece of ‘hologram graffiti’.

![Figure 45: Low-angle wide shot of Firebirds gang (Firebird 2016)](image)

At various times in the film (including its very beginning) images of ‘advertisement holograms’ are depicted to indicate that the narrative world is a near-future one. In this setting, the Firebirds are understood to have ‘hacked’ the holographic technology to display a piece that communicates their presence and visual identity in the environment. The graffiti piece features the colours of the Firebirds palette. While graffiti depicted in the Goats environment uses straight lines, Firebirds graffiti, by contrast, involves curved and twisting forms.
As the narrative progresses, the portrayal of the Firebird gang members begins to change, lessening the impression that they are an outgroup. This transition supports the parallel shift in the manner that Atum is depicted. These shifts can be traced to the pivotal moment when Sparrow/Liam is shot (by his own close friends from the Goats gang, in an attempt to manipulate the Firebirds’ sympathy and get close to Atum).

In this scene, Firebirds members are shown reacting emotionally to the shooting, crying out and rushing to Liam’s aid. The camera then focuses on the protagonist and on two of the Firebirds members who rush him away for treatment (Figure 46). Although these gang members (including Fizzik) were intimidating Sparrow/Liam just moments earlier, they are now showing considerable concern and care for him. The camera follows them, travelling forward as they do. Fizzik glances back in anger in the direction of the Goats attackers. The footage was captured with handheld movement to support a feeling of high tension and chaos.

![Figure 46: Firebirds members carry Liam to safety and treatment (Firebirds 2016)](image)

In a later scene (which regrettably had to be removed from the final cut of the film, due to length constraints) a Firebirds member named ‘Planet’ (played by Marque Benedicto) who carried Sparrow/Liam in the scene just discussed above, visits him as he lies on his sick bed (figure 47). Planet projects genuine care and concern for the gang’s new member, telling...
Liam to “hang in there… we’re all waiting for you to get back with us”. Within the dimly lit scene, soft light is used to enhance shape on Planet’s face. He tilts his head towards Liam in a sympathetic fashion. This scene contributes to the new depiction of Firebirds members as caring and unhostile, disrupting notions of ‘the enemy’ and ‘the other’.

![Figure 47: Firebirds member 'Planet' pays Liam a visit (deleted scene from Firebird, 2016)](image)

**Collateral Damage and the High Costs of Revenge**

The initial conceptualisation of *Firebird* features instances where characters other than the antagonist or the protagonist are harmed as a result of the pursuit of revenge. In the scene just described above, Planet also proudly tells Liam that the Firebirds have murdered the Goat gang member that had shot Liam. The audience is aware at this point (just as Liam is) that this Goat gang member was in fact his close friend, Remy. Still undercover as a member of the Firebirds, Liam must maintain composure, look Planet in the eye and thank him. The audience knows, however, that Remy was innocent of any malice in Liam’s wounding: the shooting was all part of their revenge plan. It was intended that the idea of an innocent person being killed as ‘collateral damage’ in the pursuit of revenge would help to convey anti-vengeance sentiments. Unfortunately the scene had to be cut from the film due to length constraints of the short film format.
3.5 Portrayal of Ending Scenes in *Firebird*

The film ends with the tragic death of the protagonist. In one of the last dramatic actions, which might be seen as the climatic scene, Liam overcomes his hesitancy and reluctance, and attempts to stab Atum, but does not succeed in physically harming him. Instead, the latter lashes out partly in self-defence, and in so doing stabs Liam fatally (figure 48). In keeping with the film’s general approach to the portrayal of violent acts, a close-up shot is used to focus not on the act itself, but rather on its impact on the victim. Through the close shot size, the image is directed at Liam’s face at the moment of impact.

![Figure 48: Protagonist is stabbed (Firebird 2016)](image)

In the second-last shot of this scene (figure 49, next page), Liam exhibits fading signs of movement that gradually dissipate, and then his eyes stare lifeless. Again a close-up shot is used. The camera angle is oriented such that a viewer could see this as representing Atum’s point-of-view of Liam’s dying moments. The final shot of the scene (figure 50, next page) shows Atum’s face as he gazes at Liam. Another close-up is used to portray the emotions welling up inside the antagonist. He appears completely devastated, his face racked with grief and regret. The shot lingers on Atum, allowing the audience time to take in his reaction to what he has done. As he draws a gasp, the screen cuts to black.
A tragic ending can be used to support anti-vengeance themes within revenge narratives. While such tragic endings are not very common in contemporary mainstream cinema, they were fairly common in Elizabethan and Jacobean theatre (Simkin 2006). Bowers posits that the average viewer of the time would have “sentimentally sympathized with the Kydian hero
revenger, and hoped for his success, but only on condition that he did not survive” (1966, 5). As it happened, the protagonist in Firebird does not succeed in killing his quarry, but instead is killed by him.

The tragedy springs not only from the death of the protagonist, but also from the fact that it was at the hands of Atum, who by then has begun to care for Liam. The tragic sense deepens when one considers that circumstances have more or less forced Atum’s hand so that, in a split-second reaction to emergency, this seemingly wise mentor (who is potentially turning pacifist in his outlook) abruptly returns to his old, violent ways.

The final section of the film echoes its beginning: Liam is again shown walking along a bridge (figure 51). At one point in the editing process, these final images were accompanied by a voice-over monologue, matching the use of voice-over at the beginning of the film, but conveying a new message. After reflection, however, it was decided that a message delivered directly through dialogue at this point was in danger of being overly didactic. The final version of the film features the images with no voice-over, allowing the audience to interpret and emote with less guidance.

Figure 51: Liam walking along a bridge, an image that bookends the film (Firebird 2016)
In initial edited versions of the film, there was no such repetition of these images; instead, credits appeared immediately after the black screen. However, it was felt that these versions gave little time for the viewer to fully process the death of the protagonist. In the final version, images of Liam walking along a bridge are meant to remind the audience of how Liam used to be at the beginning: a confident and healthy young man. The reminder of Liam’s former self is intended to support a sense of tragedy, of a young life having been wasted.

The audience is implicitly invited to supply other possible interpretations. For example, the images of Liam walking along the bridge can be seen as a visual metaphor for him passing from the mortal world into the afterlife. Supporting this, the final image before the credits appear is that of the screen turning white, a colour which is a symbol of death in some cultures (Geum and Jung 2013; Stewart 2006).

3.6 Retrospection on Key Choices and Decisions

In the process of making Firebird, I had to confront a number of important core questions for which I had to answer or to choose from a range of options. In hindsight, the four most important questions were:

1) In attempting to communicate anti-violence and anti-vengeance themes in the film, to what degree should I draw upon ideas and techniques used in pre-existing works, as opposed to relying on my own discoveries through a process of experimentation?
2) What is the right balance between, on one hand, the artistic pursuit of entertainment and aesthetics and, on the other, the desire to communicate an intended message?
3) How should violent acts be portrayed in a film that, at a fundamental level, does not approve of violence?
4) How should anti-vengeance sentiments be conveyed in a revenge film, where the focus has traditionally been on highlighting, and often celebrating, revenge and violence?

When I began to assemble ideas and approach potential collaborators for this film project, I did not have in mind a set of detailed answers to the above questions – and especially to the many practical questions that arise from each of them. But I did have clear preferences in terms of general positioning with regard to the first three questions, and similarly distinct preferences for a number of narrative devices and filming techniques with regard to the fourth
question. Subsequently a large number of choices and decisions on practical matters had to be made in the course of making the film (e.g., storyboarding, scriptwriting, filming, editing, and so on): these choices were based holistically on the array of considerations facing me at each point in time. Sometimes the choice must be made on the spot (as in directing) or within very tight timeframes. On other occasions, there was sufficient time for me to reflect and weigh things up, especially when trade-offs were involved between competing requirements. But throughout the process, the principles guiding the choices remained those basic preferences that I started out with. As the choices I took in addressing the last question have been described in previous sections of this chapter, in what follows I will concentrate on documenting the choices made in relation to the first three questions.

Learning from Previous Films vs Making Own Discoveries through Experimentation

Each of the two strategies in the above title has some obvious advantages as well as some clear potential disadvantages. As an extreme example, if a filmmaker who sets out to create a new film had very little prior knowledge of previous films that dealt with similar themes or involved similar issues, (s)he would run the risk of ‘reinventing the wheel’, and would be likely to make slow progress, with many costly but avoidable mistakes along the way. At the other extreme, if that filmmaker drew too heavily on existing film work, for example directly replicating an established structure and slavishly copying specific techniques, the result would be a highly derivative product, with perhaps little artistic merit in terms of creativity.

As Firebird is a research graduate-student film project, the choice of a suitable position in between these two extremes was of fundamental importance. From the outset, I knew that I would prefer not to err on the side of too much copying, but defining exactly where the line lay in various practical situations was not always a straightforward matter. A decision was made quite early in the project that it would not follow a linear process of, first, identification and analysis of techniques used in previous works and, second, replication or re-testing of these techniques. Rather, the emphasis would be on discovery through practice.

This is not to say that I did not wish to benefit from the experiences and insights of previous filmmakers. Indeed the opposite is true: I admire a great number of filmmakers. My fondest wish is to follow in their footsteps and to build on their legacies. So my core choice was based not on any misguided arrogance or ignorance but rather on a desire to learn through experimentation and self-discovery. In looking back it is clear that, while the process of
making Firebird involved experimentation, it was also influenced by existing films, but in a non-linear fashion.

The various components of the Firebird project (e.g., study of existing film work, experimentation and discovery through film practice, identification and analysis of various techniques) were conducted in an iterative fashion, with each component being active at various stages of the project and not in a rigidly predetermined sequence. Moreover, I tried to avoid making any attempts to explicitly copy techniques or solutions, even those from acknowledged master filmmakers. Instead, any copying would be largely subconscious: my admiration for a particular solution, for example, would have become part of my set of accumulated preferences, so that choosing to use it would be, for me, almost as natural as coming up with the idea or developing a new solution myself.

While I do not claim to have conducted an exhaustive review of revenge films, I believe it is fair to say that, within the group, films which tend towards anti-violence and anti-vengeance themes are less common than films that tend to portray violent vengeance with enthusiasm or approval. Part of my reluctance to draw too heavily on the examples set by previous revenge films is an assessment that if I were to do so, I would be drawing on a relatively small number of films that share a philosophical leaning with mine, and that would increase the risk of becoming captive to the ‘established’ ways of doing things, with adverse consequences for creativity. My hope has been to create an original work and, through the process of creating it, to broaden possibilities for this type of work, and to generate new, accessible knowledge about it.

As a result of this central choice, not all aspects of Firebird can be traced directly to a corresponding feature of the films that I studied, including those that convey anti-violence and anti-vengeances themes, such as Munich and Unforgiven. There are many aspects and techniques in these films that I have analysed and admired (see Chapter 2), but some of them are not present in Firebird, or are not implemented in the same manner. By the same token, there are some aspects in Firebird that are, to my knowledge, not present in the reviewed films.

For example, the portrayal of the antagonist in Firebird begins with an ‘othering’ stance but progressively becomes more sympathetic. In Unforgiven and Munich this ‘transition’ model is not present -- and where it arguably is, the application is to a much lesser degree. It may be
of interest to note that even though the progression from othering to sympathetic portrayal was, from the initial planning stages, always a part of the conception of Firebird, it was the actual, week-by-week work on the film and reflection upon such work that further sharpened my conceptualisation of this narrative device. In particular, after some early editing work and consequent reflection, I experimented with inserting, toward the beginning of the film, a shot depicting Atum in a formidable and mysterious pose.

One example of an aspect that was present in the reviewed films, but not present in the final cut of Firebird, is the portrayal of the harming of a supporter of the protagonist, or of an innocent character. During the filmmaking process, I experimented with the inclusion of such a sequence. I wrote and filmed a sequence in which Liam is told that his friend Remy has been killed (as an act of revenge for shooting ‘Sparrow’). This sequence was included in early cuts but ultimately did not make it in the final cut of the film, mainly due to the stringency of the length limit for this film format.

**Pursuing Aesthetics and Entertainment vs. Communicating Message**

Film potentially has the power to reflect, reinforce, influence and provoke thought and discussion among viewers with regard to moral dilemmas and notions of how we should treat one another. Gillett offers an interesting viewpoint regarding a possible role for contemporary film vis-a-vis issues of morality:

> Film and television have usurped many of the functions of religious art for secular Western societies, offering audiences stories which raise moral issues. This is something which film-makers play down given that audiences go to the cinema primarily to be entertained, while the term morality has religious connotations which can prove problematic at the box office” (2012, 4).

As a film practitioner, I do not believe that my primary role should be to preach or deliver messages in a didactic manner in doing film work. However, I do accept that narrative films play a role (whether intentionally or unintentionally) in contributing to culture, which, in turn, may be an influence upon how we think about, and treat, one another. Thus, I believe it is reasonable for me to aspire to contribute cultural products that are in line with my value system – which in this context happens to be predominantly anti-violence.
Throughout the process of creating *Firebird*, I worked to balance the communication of the intended themes with the delivery of an entertaining film experience. Chronologically, the first major motivation in making this film was to create an artistically satisfying, engaging narrative film. Thus, the premise of a revenge story developed fairly early on in the inception of the film concept. Once I had become interested in developing a revenge film, the question of how to portray the pursuit of vengeance emerged. Almost immediately, I settled on a vantage point of anti-violence and anti-vengeance, and the communication of these themes became a major driver behind many aspects of the filmmaking. Nevertheless, I always tried to balance this with the overall intention of creating an artistically satisfying film and an engaging viewing experience for viewers.

One way of conceptualising this basic tension is to refer to two ideals that Gillett identifies in art philosophy, namely *autonomism* vs *moralism*. *Autonomism* may be described as the perspective whereby art has an “autonomous existence and intrinsic value” and in its purest form “concern for beauty above all”. On the other end of the spectrum *moralism* “takes the premise that art can be evaluated morally” where the moral message is of utmost importance (2012, 12-13).

Facing this dilemma, my preferred stance could be characterised as being somewhere close to the mid-point between the two ideals, where neither the “autonomous existence and intrinsic value” of *Firebird* (i.e., its film aesthetics and entertainment value) nor its “moral message” clearly dominates the other.

It may be argued that, even if the message is of the highest importance in terms of the motivation of the author/maker of a creative narrative work, a prerequisite for its success (in achieving its ends) is that the work itself must be sufficiently entertaining or compelling to engage and retain the audience’s attention. William Golding, author of the novel *Lord of the Flies* (1954), puts it succinctly: “People do not much like moral lessons. The pill has to be sugared, has to be witty or entertaining, or engaging in some way or another” (2012, 250).

In recognition of this fundamental imperative, elements of *Firebird* (particularly early scenes in the film) were designed to engage the viewers. Examples of these elements include: creating a goal for the protagonist (namely the revenge) that the audience could readily understand and empathise with, initially ‘othering’ the antagonist, and initially ‘othering’ the
antagonist’s affiliates. These were included with the intention of encouraging the audience to emotionally ‘back’ the protagonist, and to hope that he will succeed.

The initial ‘othering’ of the antagonist, and the antagonist’s affiliates, was designed not only to create audience empathy for the protagonist’s goal, but also to increase dramatic tension. Tension is often identified as a key to the provision of engaging film experiences (Figgis 2017; Tan 2013). By initially portraying Atum and his fellow gang members as dangerous and formidable, tension could be created through promoting the hope that the protagonist Liam will survive in dangerous circumstances and succeed despite facing great odds.

Over the course of the film, I began to introduce a new tension -- or rather, to transform an existing tension into a new one: the hope that the protagonist does not succeed in his original goal (i.e., that Liam does not kill Atum), possibly because his goal has been amended (here, our hope is that Liam changes his mind about wanting to kill Atum). This tension is intended to serve both the anti-vengeance message and the audience engagement imperative.

**Portrayal of Violent Acts in a Film that Disapproves of Violence**

At first sight, the above heading might seem almost like a paradox: How does an anti-violence film portray acts of violence? Perhaps it would avoid them altogether? My guiding principles in relation to this issue is that I wish to avoid glorification or celebration of violence, but I do not wish to sidestep dealing with or depicting violence in my work.

I recognize that screen violence offers a particular appeal to many viewers who have a desire to witness violent imagery, and that such images may be used to great effect in film. Rothman argues:

> Why it is so pleasurable to view graphic images of violence (or of the effects of violence), how viewing such images can be pleasurable, is a perplexing question. However we might go on to answer that question, though, we can agree that viewing such images is, or at least can be, pleasurable. We have an appetite for film violence, an appetite that film violence feeds, and perhaps also creates (2001, 42).

While Rothman does not attempt to explain this appetite, other theorists do. Charney, for example, traces the attraction of film violence to the creation of moments of peak sensation. “The violent moment is a hypermoment, a hypostatized moment. Yet throughout film
history, these moments of heightened violence have done battle with a corresponding impulse towards storytelling” (2001, 48).

Charney goes on to suggest that depictions of violence create a feeling of ‘presence’ for the audience, stating that: “[Film] violence, like sex, becomes a way to feel present; or, more accurately, to mime presence, to manufacture a sensation of presence in the face of the impossibility of presence” (2001, 49).

Slocum notes that many academic and popular discussions of film violence focus on whether such depictions can be linked to, or cause, violence in real life. He argues that this preoccupation obscures or dominates other useful discussions of the topic. “[M]ore thoughtful inquiry raises larger questions about… the necessity to confront destructive tendencies in order to resist or at least comprehend them better” (2001, 3).

Thus one of the functions of depicting screen violence could be to confront, understand, and ultimately resist the use of violence. My preference was to design the representations of violence in *Firebird* so as to facilitate such ends, provided that they would also be consistent with the goal of effective engagement with the audience. The clear intention was to harness the powerful tool of screen violence to shock, engage and make audiences feel something during the viewing process. At the same time, the overall film structure and the depictions of violence themselves were crafted with the goal of eliciting effects that are quite different to those generated by most contemporary revenge films. Consistent with this overall approach, the threat of violence is used throughout the film to create dramatic tension, as discussed in the previous subsection.

As Charney (above) suggests, however, violent moments or events are also needed to provide impact and retain audience attention. As I see it, there exists a continuum of screen violence depictions, from ‘suggestive/indirect’ to ‘realistic’ to ‘heightened/accentuated’. For example, *Unforgiven* at times uses ‘suggestive’ techniques: for the lethal shot to Davey Bunting, we do not see the fatal gunshot hitting his body, rather we see a close-up of his legs slackening a moment after the gun fires. *Macbeth* also uses suggestive techniques to depict King Duncan’s murder: it occurs completely offstage. By contrast, *Munich* features examples of realistic depictions, such as the killing of the female assassin in her home in which we see wounds being made, the leaking of blood from them and the reaction of the victim’s face, within the one shot and frame. *Harry Brown* features heightened depictions: in one scene, where Harry
shoots a young hoodlum, muzzle flash blooms from his handgun, blood splatters from the wound directly in the middle of the man's forehead, and an explosion of sparks erupt from a nearby television that just happens to receive the ricochet of the bullet in the same instant.

In terms of this continuum, the general approach I took in *Firebird* is primarily ‘suggestive/indirect’. To depict the moment of a violent event, I would focus not on the violent act itself (e.g., brutalisation of the victim’s body), but rather on the effects upon the victim. Sound design would be calibrated to support close-up shots of the facial expressions of the victim in conveying the pain and sufferings. An example of this approach is the flashback scene where the antagonist (Atum) recalls how he was attacked as a younger person (figure 52).

![Image](image_url)

**Figure 52: Figures approach the young Atum, on the verge of violent action (*Firebird* 2016)**

First we see the young Atum walking down a deserted tunnel. The shot is sustained and unbroken, displaying two figures in crimson monk robes looming behind and getting increasingly closer to Atum. The intention was to create tension in the audience as viewers become aware that violence is imminent. As the figures are almost upon Atum, the screen cuts to black, suggesting rather than showing the violent actions themselves.

The next image shows young Atum’s head falling into frame and landing horizontally, as if hitting the ground (figure 53). His face is bruised and bloody. His eye and face are
expressionless, suggesting lifelessness. This shot was designed and executed to create a horrific impression of the effects of violence. The shot was achieved by having the actor drop his head sharply down onto a firm cushion, which was hidden below frame. The actor first positioned his head in the final position for the appropriate focus to be determined, before repeating the falling action a number of times. The foley sound of a body dropping to the ground was calibrated in the sound design so as to shock the audience. The intention was to couple a disturbing image with aural discomfort.

**Figure 53: Young Atum's head falls in to frame (Firebird 2016)**

In an earlier scene, where Liam is shot by the Goats in an effort to gain greater trust for him and enable him to obtain closer access to Atum, the moment of impact is again captured indirectly: One moment Liam is rapping, the next moment there is the loud sound of an impact, and then we witness the change in his demeanour indicating he is hurt, all in the same close-up shot (figure 54).
Figure 54: Liam's face as he is shot (Firebird 2016)

While two of the Firebirds pursue the Goats shooters, the other Firebirds carry Liam. In figure 55 (next page), the camera travels backwards as the Firebirds move forwards, focusing on Liam’s face as he shows signs of pain and shock. Amidst an action scene and during a backwards-moving travelling shot, the composition remains relatively tight in a medium close-up on Liam’s face, to focus attention on the effects of violence upon the protagonist.

Immediately following this shot, an upside-down forwards-moving travelling shot was used (figure 56, next page). This was designed to bring the audience inside Liam’s subjective experience, depicting his point of view as he is carried with his head upside-down. Sound design was stylised, with high frequencies turned down (creating the impression of muffled hearing) and delay effects on the voices of the men carrying him (creating the impression that Liam’s senses are affected after being shot). While these shots involved a lot of movement and were captured with handheld operation, the shakiness was deemed appropriate for suggesting the frenetic and disturbing quality of the scene. The intention was to create a victim/survivor-centred experience of the effects of violence.
Similarly, when Liam is killed by Atum, the act of violence is not directly captured by the camera which focuses instead on its effects on both the victim and Atum. (This scene has been discussed in section 3.5 above.) In all of these cases, at the critical moment, the physical act of violence (such as the brutalisation of the body) occurs outside of the screen frame.
Upon reflection, the artistic decisions relating to these portrayals were guided mainly by an aversion to conventional, spectacular depictions of violence. But by avoiding the direct depictions of violence at critical moments, I may have denied the audience opportunities for ‘hypermoments’ of peak sensation, when they would ‘feel present’ (in Charney’s terminology).

In hindsight, the portrayal of the attack on young Atum may have been the most successful of the three examples considered: the jarring image of the young Atum’s battered face falling into frame may shock and make a visceral impact on the audience, while at the same time also conveying anti-violence message. By comparison, the shooting of Liam (near the beginning) lacks impact. For future work, I should perhaps experiment with more direct and explicit depictions of the moment of violence. For example, the portrayal of Liam’s shooting could have been enhanced with a view of a projectile hitting Liam’s abdomen (perhaps within the same frame as the reaction on Liam’s face). Similarly, the scene of Liam’s stabbing and death could have included images of the blade making contact with Liam’s body (again within the same frame as Liam’s face). Relatively small shifts towards a more ‘realistic’ depiction of violence may suffice to enhance the film’s audience appeal, without necessarily working against the film’s overall anti-violence philosophy.

It should be noted that, even as it now stands, Firebird does contain a number of scenes where apparently violent things are being done to someone’s body. In particular, the film depicts several ‘healing rituals’ where attempts are made to help Sparrow/Liam get better. There are extreme close-up shots of flesh being cut, or penetrated by exotic surgical tools, involving images of blood and gore, all of which may help to create moments of ‘presence’, while also emphasising the vulnerability of the human body. But as they stand, these gruesome acts are performed in the context of quasi-medical procedures with the intent to heal, rather than with any malice.

3.7 Chapter Summary

My central intention behind the making of Firebird was to communicate anti-violence and anti-vengeance themes within a revenge film. Images were designed, created and manipulated, from the planning stages to final post-production, to support the communication of these themes.
Images of the *revenge-target* (antagonist) progressed from an othering approach to a humanistic portrayal. Initial shots were from low-angle placements that showed little of Atum’s face, making the character appear dominating and mysterious. Subsequently images of Atum begin to show more humanistic aspects (e.g., warm-hued lighting cast on Atum’s face) and were further enhanced through post-production (e.g., selective brightening and resizing of shots to provide greater intimacy in close-up shots). Atum’s perspective was explored, not only through dialogue but also through flashback imagery, which often contrasted in form from surrounding images (e.g., in the first flashback scene, shots were shot on a steadicam rig, which provided smoother quality of movement that contrasted from the handheld shots surrounding it). Atum was also shown as suffering from the negative psychological consequences of his own violent acts. In one particular scene (the ‘third healing ritual’) he confesses to past violent deeds and expresses a deep sense of guilt. Top-lighting was used to support the notion of psychological anguish: hollowing the eyes and enhancing expressions in the brow, while green-gels on lighting was used to give a cold, uncomfortable atmosphere to the whole scene. A high-angle shot was used to portray the character in a vulnerable position.

In a related arc, the film’s *protagonist* Liam moves from a state of self-confidence and certainty of purpose to one of wavering resolve and physical frailty. Initially, as he speaks of his personal plan for revenge, the camera travels towards him, adding to the power of this moment and supporting a sense of his emotional resolve. As the film progresses, images begin to depict an emotional state of turmoil and indecision, including a close-up shot of a hand poised half-way between his bed and a weapon. Selective colour-grading was designed to depict Liam with warmer flesh tones early in the film and progress to colder tones in later scenes, to depict the deterioration in his physical health, but also to visually support the internal shift in the character.

The *ending* of the film is decidedly not a triumphant one. A sense of tragedy is conveyed through Liam’s death and the futility of his (and other characters’) sacrifices in the pursuit of revenge. The return of the seemingly wise mentor Atum to his old ways of violence, and his killing of the young man that he has been caring for, add to this relentless sense of tragedy. An image of the dying Liam is shown from what might be Atum’s point-of-view, followed by a lingering close-up of Atum’s horrified and grief-filled expression. In the final version of the film, the images of Liam walking along a bridge are used to bookend the film at the
beginning and at the end. Closing the film, the images are used to support the notion of tragedy: to remind the audience of Liam’s happier state at the beginning of the film and to suggest the notion of a wasted young life.

In the penultimate section of the chapter, I provided a retrospection on how I resolved some of the dilemmas and strategic choices facing me as a research graduate-student filmmaker. For example, right from the beginning of the project I favoured an eclectic, fluid approach to filmmaking that favours experimentation but also respects study of celebrated film works. The process involved frequent, deep reflection, so that the whole process was iterative and did not involve any regimented plans to apply principles gleaned from analysis of existing films to the making of the current film. I also preferred to adopt a middle-way approach to the basic choice between, on one hand, the pursuit of aesthetics and entertainment and, on the other, the communication of underlying messages.

As for the depiction of moments of violent action, *Firebird* tends to focus on showing the effects of violence on the victim, rather than direct visual capture of the violent act itself. The effects are depicted through close-ups of the victim’s face – for example, Liam’s when he is shot relatively early on in the film, and again when he is stabbed near the end of the film; or young Atum’s face just after he is attacked during the tunnel flashback scene. The effects of violence are highlighted, with point-of-view shots conveying the victim’s subjective experience (such as the upside-down traveling shots after Liam’s shooting), or the perpetrator’s subjective experience (Atum’s view of the dying Liam after the final stabbing).

Throughout the film, the pursuit of violence and revenge is shown as escalating conflict and perpetuating cycles of violence and retaliation. The film begins with the protagonist Liam receiving news that his brother has been killed while attempting revenge. Images are used to convey states of grief and mourning, and resolve to continue pursuing the revenge. The film ends with yet another death, this time of the protagonist himself, with no apparent satisfaction or redeeming benefits for anyone involved. The intention is clearly to communicate disapproval towards the use of violence in seeking revenge.
CHAPTER 4: CONCLUSION

This exegesis comprises two core chapters. Chapter 2 provides an analysis of cinematic techniques and approaches used to communicate vengeance- and violence-related themes in a number of well-known revenge films, while Chapter 3 focuses on techniques and approaches adopted in the making of my film Firebird. As there is already a summary section at the end of each of these core chapters, this concluding chapter will present a brief discussion of what I see as the main contributions of this DVA film project, some thoughts about the lessons I have learned while making this film, and how they might help me and other filmmakers in similar circumstances in the future.

4.1 Contributions

This research and creative-art project has, I believe, made contributions in several respects. First, it provides a relatively rare example of a revenge film made with the conscious intention of communicating anti-violence and anti-vengeance themes. Second, it documents my experiences: the challenges I faced, my decision-making processes, and the techniques I adopted, all of which may be of some interest to other filmmakers. Third, it provides a systematic analysis of cinematic image techniques used in a number of contemporary revenge films to support either anti- or pro-vengeance sentiments.

In view of these three contributions, the present DVA film project represents an academic, practice-based study of the communication, via cinematic image, of themes relating to violence and vengeance in revenge films, with a focus on Firebird and three well-known films. It is my belief that new knowledge has been generated in connection with each of the three contributions claimed.

The Film: Firebird

While the film itself, being a research-student film, is only a modest addition to the existing body of film works, it has its own value in the context of the field of revenge films: contrary to the case with most other films in the field, it was made with the conscious intention from the outset of communicating anti-violence themes. Various aspects of the form and content of the film were informed by this intention, resulting in a relatively rare kind of a revenge film.
As has been seen in Chapter 3, the film contains a number of aspects and techniques which are not commonly found in contemporary revenge films (see also Chapter 2). To avoid unnecessary repetition, I will focus below on one particular aspect which, I would suggest, represents new knowledge within the field. (For other aspects, see Chapter 2, and also Chapter 3 for comparative purposes.)

A distinctive aspect of *Firebird* is its portrayal of the revenge-target, Atum, who is also the lead antagonist. In the film, this portrayal evolves gradually, from an ‘othering’ approach initially to increasingly humanistic and sympathetic depictions. In *Harry Brown* and other pro-vengeance films, targets of revenge tend to be portrayed as villains: undesirables, ‘the others’, lacking in basic humanity. While films that feature anti-vengeance themes generally avoid such damning depictions (in order to inject some complexity or ambivalence into notions of vengeance) they also tend to present a static, rather than evolving, view of these characters.

For example, in *Munich* the target Wael is portrayed in a humanistic manner, discussing poetry on the streets of Rome. Another target, Hussein, is portrayed as a friendly, ordinary man, chatting amiably with the protagonist who is posing as a fellow hotel guest. In *Unforgiven*, the associate-target Davey is shown with sympathetic qualities for much of the film. Although the film’s treatment of this character in the initial scene is somewhat less sympathetic, it never projects the impression of a villain (or a potential one). (For details regarding cinematic image techniques employed to support these portrayals, see Chapter 2.)

In this regard, the progression in *Firebird* is an innovation. Initially Atum and his associates are portrayed in a manner similar to that in conventional revenge films: they are seen as lacking in warmth, dominating, and menacing. These images are consistent with the protagonist's (and viewers’) initial preconceptions (for details, see Chapter 3). Gradually, however, these prejudices begin to give way to more nuanced understandings.

This aspect of *Firebird* is not a stand-alone one. It is coordinated with a number of other aspects and techniques to convey and support the central messages. In particular, the film breaks with most revenge films by exploring, in some depth, the revenge-target's perspective, motivations and inner feelings through the use of visual images. While *Munich* includes a scene where a target (PLO member) delivers his views through dialogue, and most revenge films do not go much into the targets’ motivations, *Firebird* includes multiple instances
whereby images from the revenge-target's mind are shown, thus providing some insights into his background and inner thoughts, and suggesting explanations for his actions and behaviour.

Further, *Firebird* shows images of the antagonist suffering negative consequences for committing violence, as when Atum confesses his guilt over violent acts committed during earlier stages in his life. This is an aspect rarely seen in modern revenge films. Even in films that are not pro-vengeance, such as *Munich* and *Unforgiven*, the focus of such portrayal of guilt tends to be on the revenger(s). To follow a humanistic approach and show the antagonist as suffering emotionally from guilt over his own violent actions, as is the case in *Firebird*, is not common at all in contemporary films.

Another example is the film’s ending. Not only does the protagonist Liam fail in his revenge attempt, he actually dies in making it, being killed by the quarry himself. The film then devotes visual attention to the antagonist’s reaction to this tragic event: Atum is shown to be deeply remorseful, even devastated perhaps. Such portrayals of the ending, and such attention to the antagonist’s perspective, are rare amongst contemporary revenge films.

From an overall perspective, the above aspects all fit in with the ways in which the protagonist Liam is portrayed. Liam’s arc of descent parallels the increase in complexity of the audience’s understanding of Atum’s motivations. Both are broadly consistent with a subjective approach to storytelling, where at first we are given Liam’s point-of-view, rather than a more neutral, ‘omniscient’ viewpoint. As the film progresses, the narrative increasingly cuts to Atum’s subjective viewpoint, and finally weaves between the two viewpoints, with Liam’s continuing to dominate, but also with Atum’s perspective being adopted with increasing frequency. Lest this discussion give the impression that all these aspects are only about narrative, recall that in Chapter 3 I provided numerous examples where specific cinematic image techniques have been employed to enact or support each relevant aspect.

**Academic documentation**

An integral component of any academic research film project is the systematic documentation of the process of making the film itself (Kerrigan et al 2015), including reflections about the process, in the form of reflection-in-action as well as reflection-on-action (Schon 1983; Euraut 1995). In my own case, I kept a project diary, successive versions of the script and
storyboards (see Appendix B), as well as concept art (Appendix C). I used these to facilitate reflection both during the iterative processes of making the film (writing, shooting, editing, post-production, and so on) and after the film has been completed. This exegesis represents a distillation of such information and reflection. As such, it also contributes new knowledge with regard to the practice of making a revenge film, especially under the constraints typically faced by research-student filmmakers. Insight is provided into my intent and motivations, decision-making processes, challenges faced, and details of technical solutions and methods. All this information may be of interest to other filmmakers, especially early-career ones, and to filmmaking researchers.

**Analysis of existing films**

While the analysis of key existing films in Chapter 2 was undertaken primarily to inform the making of *Firebird*, new knowledge has also been generated during the course of this systematic study, in a process similar to that of research by content analysis or critical review. In the present case, the analysis has led to the identification of a number of cinematic techniques and approaches that convey anti- or pro-vengeance themes. The approaches are:

1. Sympathetic vs. othering portrayal of revenge-target/s.
2. Revenge-target's perspective portrayed vs. not portrayed.
3. Portrayal of negative psychological consequences of committing violence vs. stoicism.
4. Deterioration vs. strengthening of the revenger-protagonist’s self-assuredness, resolve, and well-being.
5. Indirect/suggestive portrayal of violence that focuses mainly on the effects of violence on the victim(s) vs realistic or heightened visual captures of the moment of violent action,
6. Whether the pursuit of vengeance is shown to lead to an escalation of violence or a quelling of violence.
7. Tragic ending vs. triumphant ending.
In general, each of these approaches can be implemented through a combination of cinematic elements: scriptwriting, direction of acting, music, sound design, and so on. However, my focus in this study has been on the use of the cinematic image. The specific technical choices that are necessary to produce the desired images vary depending on a myriad of considerations. It would not be appropriate, therefore, to attempt to boil them all down to a short, prescriptive list of specifications regarding lighting, framing etc. Instead, this exegesis (particularly Chapter 2) contains many examples of how such specifications were calibrated and combined to produce cinematic images consistent with the identified approaches.

4.2  Reception and Intended Outcome

*Firebird* has screened at a number of international film festivals and conferences including *Madrid International Film Festival*, *World Filmmakers Festival*, *Portland Film Festival* and *Sightlines: Filmmaking in the Academy*. It was awarded the Platinum Award for Excellence in Filmmaking at the *World Filmmakers Festival* and the Award of Excellence at *Canada Shorts*. It was also nominated for awards Best Editing of a Short Film and Best Supporting Actor in a Short Film at the *Madrid International Film Festival*.

While I was pleased that the film achieved some recognition, given the scale of the production and the degree of research, development and effort, the film fell short of my intended outcomes. It failed to screen at any A-list film festivals, thereby reducing its audience and industry reach. In the domain of short films, film festival selection is an objective measure of industry and peer assessment of one’s work.

My objective for the film was to problematize the notion of vengeance, whilst simultaneously delivering an entertaining experience. Given that the film was not selected for an A-list film festival screening a re-evaluation of the creative techniques used to achieve these aims could help strengthen future work of this kind. In terms of achieving a satisfying, cathartic experience for cinemagoers, the film’s climax may have run counter to my aim.

In order to problematize revenge I included many aspects in the film’s climax to make audiences uncomfortable and disrupt the notion of vengeance on multiple levels. The hero is not successful in achieving his goal, but rather dies. Additionally, the revenge-target (who over the course of the film is portrayed in an increasingly sympathetic manner) is shown to murder the protagonist. While perhaps effective in creating a rare, if not innovative, example of a climax in a contemporary revenge-film, it may have been ineffective in achieving my
additional goal of providing a thrilling, satisfying experience. The climax may be shocking and impactful for the audience, however it may fail in providing a sense of satisfaction.

The following section is dedicated to identifying other weaknesses of the film and provides a discussion on lessons learnt and what I would do differently with a film of a similar nature.

4.3 Lessons for Future Work, or ‘What Would I Do Differently?’

In this final section, I provide some reflections upon what I would do differently (and how I might go about this) with future film work. By sharing these reflections, I hope that they may be of use to other filmmakers. In the discussion, it will be useful to keep in mind the distinction between (a) what I would do differently facing the same constraints of time, budget and the short film format of Firebird and (b) what I would do should I face less stringent constraints. Whereas the former relate to lessons I have learned that are applicable in the same situation as the one I faced while making Firebird, the latter are about lessons that may apply more generally – at least, to my own work. The lessons may usefully be classified under four headings: simplification of plot, a more gradual arc of character development, more direct depictions of violence, and some adjustments in aspects of cinematography.

Simplification of Plot

To engage viewers, and possibly to move them emotionally or persuade them of the validity of certain viewpoints, the filmmaker must first ensure that the audience can understand and follow the plot of the film. I did a lot of work on narrative clarity, particularly in the post-production process. In hindsight, the original script was overly complex for the length of the film, resulting in an early cut of the film that was difficult to follow. Post-production work helped to make it easier for the audience to follow the narrative.

In particular, three voice-over pieces were added, all from the perspective of the protagonist Liam. One voice-over accompanies the images at the very beginning the film, another comes in after the title screen (after Liam has adopted his undercover ‘Sparrow’ persona), and the final voice-over is presented after Liam wakes in Atum’s healing chamber. A fourth voice-over was written and recorded to accompany the final images of the film, but was dropped from the final cut to avoid an overly didactic or obvious message. The writing and direction
of the performance of the voice-overs were intended to convey additional layers of mood and character, in addition to aiding understanding.

_Firebird’s_ struggle with narrative clarity during the process of its making may have been due, at least partially, to an initial desire and ambition to achieve a grand, ‘feature film style’ portrayal of a complex narrative world, that included many locations, scenes, characters and rather elaborate backstories and contexts. This intent has resulted in a number of aspects that I am happy with (eg. visual and aural design which portrays novel, fictional subcultures). Yet this ambition also prompted me to attempt to pack too many elements in the narrative, so that it was difficult to make all of the elements readily understandable within a short film context. Given the same budget, time and target outcome of a short film, I would have focused on fewer scenes, characters and events, to allow greater time to craft and develop each of the remaining elements.

Apart from aiding narrative clarity, a simpler plot would allow for greater complexity, nuance and time for progression with the other important aspects such as characters, relationships, tensions and (inner and outer) conflict. Upon reflection, I have come to realise first-hand that the complexity of plot can compete with the complexity of these other aspects.

**Arches of Character Development**

The transition of Atum’s portrayal from othering to sympathetic could have been more gradual. This, in turn, would have allowed greater opportunity to explore and convey a similarly gradual shift in Liam’s mindset, from resolve to uncertainty. In addition, by delaying a sympathetic portrayal of the protagonist, there would have been greater opportunity to provide a sense of suspense and tension arising from the audience’s hope that Liam will survive in facing a dangerous adversary. Finally, a delay in the portrayal of Atum’s connection with Liam would have been more realistic (eg., in his ‘opening up’ to a junior member of his clan). Much of the revealing of Atum's sympathetic qualities (and his care and connection with Liam) develops over the course of the ‘first interaction scene’, in which Liam and Atum speak with one another for the first time. If I were to write and film _Firebird_ a second time, I would provide a more gradual progression with more overt sympathetic actions and dialogue from Atum being delayed until a ‘second interaction scene’.
Similarly, the film currently does not explicitly explain Liam’s tragic decision to revert to his original mission of revenge, despite his doubts and uncertainties. The audience is left to provide their own explanation, which might be one of the following:

1) despite his deeper understanding of his enemy, Liam is acting upon his prior convictions (and/or loyalty to his clan);
2) despite being aware that killing Atum will not bring about positive changes, Liam has already come so far and his past actions have their own momentum;
3) while Liam may have undergone some changes in his understanding, he is unable to change so completely as to abandon his original intentions.

While some degree of ambiguity in storytelling is not necessarily a bad thing, the experience of watching the film might have been enhanced with the inclusion of sequences that would better explain or motivate Liam’s final decision.

The above discussion related to both the 1) simplification of plot and 2) arcs of character development are relevant to the short film format of a film such as Firebird. There would potentially be more scope to explore a complex plot and better portray and motivate changes in character development in a longer-format film.

**Direct Depictions of Violence**

As discussed previously in the chapter, I see cinematic portrayals of violence as occurring on a continuum from ‘suggestive/indirect’ to ‘realistic’ to ‘heightened/stylised’. Firebird uses mainly ‘suggestive/indirect’ techniques in its depictions of violent acts. This was partly because I wanted to avoid creating spectacular and stylised screen violence that may communicate pro-violence themes. In hindsight, I perhaps erred on the side of too much caution.

For future work, I would be more willing to experiment with realistic techniques of portraying violence. I am aware that such techniques can produce scenes that are impactful on the audience, and can give them ‘hypermoments’ of presence (to use Charney’s expressions). However, in attempting to increase impact, my intention would still be to lean towards horrific, rather than exhilarating experiences for the audience in these kinds of depictions. I would retain my preferences in terms of highlighting the effects upon the victim, and avoiding any tendency towards a heightened/stylised treatment.
As discussed earlier, with the stabbing of Liam, I could have shown the blade entering his abdomen. I could have trusted that the narrative elements of the story building up to that point, would be sufficient to engender a sense of shock, horror and/or tragedy from the audience. To render a portrayal that focuses on the effects of the victim at the violent moment, the shot would include Liam’s face within the same frame as the blade piercing his body. To maintain a realistic portrayal, I would avoid creating an unrealistic spray or gush of blood, keeping any letting of blood at a realistic level.

It should be noted that my avoidance of direct depictions of violence was also due, at least partly, to factors relating to budget and time. Creating these shots (either with practical effects at the time of shooting, or digital visual effects in post-production) would have taken additional time and costs. On a whole, direct and realistic portrayals of violence may be potentially more challenging to achieve, particularly when calibrating the elements such that they maintain a non-affirming tone to violence. Nevertheless, in retrospect, it may have been wise to redistribute resources (budget, time and creative, problem-solving energy) to make the rendering of these shots possible for the depiction of at least one key moment of violence (eg. the stabbing or shooting of Liam).

I would like to clarify one point. Whilst I would now advocate for the design and inclusion of some realistic portrayals of violence in similar work, I am not suggesting that ‘suggestive/indirect’ techniques are not without merit. I consider the portrayal of the attack on young Atum to be reasonably effective in its ability to cause impact whilst avoiding an affirmation of violence. In addition, there are effective examples of ‘suggestive/indirect’ depictions in the field (such as the fatal shot to Davey Bunting in Unforgiven). I believe that the use of a variety of both ‘suggestive/indirect’ as well as ‘realistic’ depictions of violence should be selected, designed and included for appropriate moments in the narrative.

**Aspects of Cinematography**

I am reasonably pleased with the cinematographic choices I made in Firebird with regard to their aesthetic value, as well as their use in communicating the intended themes. However, given greater resources (eg. time and budget), I would make some adjustments in the overall approach to cinematography, particularly a greater proportion of wide shots, and of non-handheld shots.
In comparison to films created by more experienced (and famous) filmmakers, *Firebird* features a relatively small proportion of wide shots. Upon reflection (and direct comparison of shots from *Firebird* with those from the reviewed 'master' filmmakers), it is clear that wide-shots allow for much room and scope in compositional choices and provide strong contrasts with closer shots.

My choice in this regard was, again in part, related to budget and practicalities. As the film was set in a near-future dystopia, wide shots would often expose limitations of the locations and set design, breaking the illusion of the narrative world. Budget and time often dictated that sets and locations could only be appropriately dressed within a certain, limited range of view. Given the opportunity to work with greater resources, I would make greater use of wide shots, to explore various compositional opportunities in this size of frame, and to create greater variety and contrast in shot sizes.

*Firebird* features a large proportion of handheld shots in comparison to shots acquired through ‘camera stabilising’ techniques, such as the use of tripod, dolly and steadicam equipment. While I deem the look of the handheld shots in Firebird to be of a style and standard that I am happy with, some of the shots in the film that were most effective on an aesthetic level were captured with tripod, steadicam and dolly. The decision to use a large proportion of handheld shots was made early on in the film preproduction process for a variety of reasons.

One reason came from the creative decision to attempt a raw, cinéma vérité style aesthetic, within a 'genre film' context. I wished to balance the fictional-nature of the speculative narrative world with a sense of realism, and hoped that use of handheld camerawork would support this intention. Methods for capturing footage with a steadier frame were used more sparingly, to provide contrast at appropriate times.

Another reason for using so many handheld shots was, again, the budget constraints of the film. For example, use of steadicam would involve the hiring of both the equipment and a specialised operator, and would be relatively expensive in comparison to the film’s overall budget. Thus, only one scene in the film was captured using this method. The flashback scene of young Atum (on the night he was attacked in a tunnel) was one of the first flashback sequences presented in the film and therefore needed to contrast with the surrounding footage to indicate a shift in time. It was also deemed to possess an important role in the overall story.
Another reason for the predominance of handheld shots was that this method of camerawork is usually faster than other methods that involve stabilizing the camera through use of additional equipment (tripod, dolly, steadicam). This allowed us to capture our material in less time.

One final reason was the notion (based upon prior filming experience and research) that handheld camerawork can favor acting performance, as cameras can readily and dynamically adjust frame to match an actor’s movements; whereas when working with stationary tripod shots and pre-planned moving dolly shots, in some cases actors must work to the position of the camera (Oldham 2016; Mamer 2013; Simons 2007). In my experience, the previously discussed reason (the speed of handheld shooting) can also favour the performance of actors – gearing the production towards having more time spent on capturing performances and less time on camera set-ups and camera movement rehearsals.

Given the same constraints of time, budget and format, I would have good motivation to continue making considerable use of handheld filming, given some of the above stated reasons (speed and favouring of performance during filming). However, I would keep in mind the balance between these factors and the ability to produce powerful images through a variety of non-handheld techniques. With careful consideration to both practical and creative factors, I would perhaps include a small increase in the proportion of shots captured through these techniques, to add further variety in the language of the camerawork within the film.

I hope Firebird, along with the reflection upon its making, the identification and analysis of various techniques and approaches, as well as other discussion and knowledge contained in this exegesis, will be of use to fellow filmmakers and researchers.
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