FALSE PROFITS

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Abstract

False Profits is a fifteen-minute dark comedy short film drawn from an unsolved true-crime case in Georgetown, Ontario, in which two young men impersonated Jehovah's Witnesses to burglarize homes in their own community. Because the perpetrators were never identified, the film treats their story as modern myth rather than documentary reconstruction, fictionalizing its characters entirely and resisting the conventions of the cautionary tale. This paper asks how a filmmaker can responsibly adapt an under-documented real event when the factual record is incomplete, and how personal and cultural experience can fill the gaps that history leaves open. It traces the film's research, development, and production, drawing on psychological literature on boredom, impulsiveness, and social exclusion; literary portrayals of disengaged masculinity; and my own experience of rural Ontario community life. Principal photography took place over six days in September 2025, and post-production was completed in 2026.

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Introduction

False Profits is a short film about a true crime event which took place in Georgetown, Ontario, in the fall of 2011. It focuses on Oliver Irvin and Terrence Roberts (fictional characters), who successfully masqueraded as Jehovah's Witnesses to burglarize several homes in their meek small rural Ontario township. The film formally diverts from any direct recounting or suggestion of an exact retelling of said events, preferring to explore the story as a modern myth, a comedic character study, and a moral quandary about what can happen to disaffected youth today in a modern landscape.

In July of 2023, I was attending a literary, philosophy, theology and arts-focused academic retreat/conference known as "Linlathen", hosted in Beckwith, Ontario, near where I grew up and organized by Kirstin Jeffrey Johnson, Ph.D. Kirstin is a lifelong mentor and friend whose farm I would work on as a labourer in my high school years. She has always been a strong and encouraging champion of my film work and has introduced me to some seriously interesting and brilliant people. I became close with a poet at these retreats, Maya Venters. She was from Georgetown, Ontario and told me of this story of two young drifters who noticed in their hometown that they had the largest basecamp of operations for all North America for Jehovah's Witnesses, known as "The Watchtower." These two unknown men had successfully robbed multiple houses close to Thanksgiving one year and devastated their community. I raced home that evening and scoured the internet to see if anyone had developed or touched on this story, and to my relief, it had remained rather unknown. It had fallen into my lap beautifully, and I was simply enthralled with it.

My Background

Growing up the son of a Reformed Presbyterian minister in Almonte, Ontario, afforded a particular vantage point on rural community life. I had intimate access to its structures of care and those in the community outside of said frameworks. The way faith-based social capital sustains those inside it and the inherent differences of those outside of the community were at times quite noticeable. The young men I knew on football teams and in trailer park communities on the outskirts of town were not the two lead characters of my film, but they rhyme with them in some ways. I had friends whose specific relationship to time felt directionless; their destructive outbursts were born out of a boredom that had no obvious outlet, and their detachment seemed to stem from subliminally knowing of a future the community around them had already organized without them in mind. When I say that my background informs *False Profits*, I mean something practical: that my lived cultural experience is a legitimate form of evidence when the documentary record of the crime runs out, provided that my filmmaking is honest about its status as interpretation rather than fact.

I first formally became engaged with filmmaking at the age of 13. My father was and is the local Reformed Presbyterian Minister, and we grew up with somewhat limited access to media or the internet compared to others in school. Once a week, we were permitted to rent a movie for the weekend from the local video store in town, and I had always been drawn to the more irreverent and controversial titles on the shelves, which were never permitted.

As one can imagine, in tight-knit communities such as Almonte, people are incredibly involved and curious about each other's lives. Church wives with busybody demeanours would often let a little too much gossip off their tongues on the way to a football practice or during potlucks. The local veterans would share the most unworldly tales regarding certain odd characters in the town, which captivated me.

I also saw the impact of what an involved spiritual community could have on a town and for those less fortunate. This sort of community can be incredibly sustaining and encouraging, but with those without strong and supportive members alongside you, it can also feel suffocating. Many of my close friends were less fortunate. These worlds would often collide in unique and odd interpersonal interactions around me, and it deeply shaped how I see the story and my understanding of intimate social communities.

Since I started making short film work in my undergrad, I have always been drawn to characters living on the fringes of society or wrestling with deeper moral questions about how they ought to engage with the world. The story of *False Profits* pulled me in because it sat at the intersection of those interests and my own theological grappling, and because it held room for empathy toward young men who desperately wanted to escape but saw little evidence that such an escape was possible. That was an unspoken desire I could often feel radiating off my own friends growing up, even when none of us had the language for it. The fact that this true crime story had gone unsolved is what opened the door to fictional invention in the first place.

The Story of False Profits

There is also something unmistakably Canadian about this story. It is not a heist. It is not a mastermind plan. It is twee, and somewhat naive, and almost embarrassing in its smallness. Modern comedic satire is generally quite comfortable condemning the uber wealthy, and while that target is often earned, I think it is ideologically convenient to spare the lower economic classes the same scrutiny, as though poverty alone confers moral clarity. It does not. The young men I grew up around could be indecently wise at times. They could also be catastrophically foolish, full of fault, and prone to comic levels of self-delusion. My characters are fictional. The retelling is fictional. But I hold their ethos close, because it is the formal lens through which I chose to tell this story, and because these characters come from a place that is genuinely my own. It is honest to where I am from, and to what I believe to be true.

As seen in the film, the story follows Oliver Irvin and Terrence Roberts, who decide to masquerade as religious figures to rob their neighbours one afternoon, before running into Bethany, an elderly Baptist woman whose otherworldly level of kindness and simplicity shakes Oliver's feelings towards their plans. When I began my master's program in the fall of 2024, I found myself between two different concepts. I had pitched another project to the program, and I had been reserving this concept for a larger feature film ambition, later to come. Through guidance and support from Tereza, Fabio and my peers, I was encouraged to consider a shorter version of the film for my thesis as it was rich with cinematic potential. I feared that I had too much that I wanted to say about this world and these young men to contain in a short film.

A keystone suggestion from my supervisory committee during the script writing stage was to open the film with their heists. All the didactic “whys” regarding their motives can be implied by their foolishness and economic surroundings. This was liberating for me and brought a level of nuance and an ingrained degree of respect for my audience, which I should have been initially comfortable with.

In late 2024, I requested a Freedom of Information Act release of the police reports on the incident from the Georgetown police department to see if there were any intriguing tidbits from the case I could glean and incorporate into my script. I spoke with the chief of police at the time, and he explained that there was very little to the case. All the victims had described similar suspects, leading them to believe they were the same two impersonating Jehovah’s Witnesses, but they were never found. Their real-life ploy was slightly more dynamic. They had asked to speak with the homeowners about their lord and saviour, and then, upon their suspected frequent denial, they would quickly ask if the homeowner would be around later that week to speak more. Many of the victims unknowingly admitted that they would be out of town. They targeted these likely out-of-town homeowners later that week at night. This was a lot to fit into a 10-15-minute runtime-based short film for me. So, I simplified their deviousness towards only robbing the homeowners who naively let them in on the day of their arrival.

The emotional crux of their story revolves around their interaction with Bethany. The thematic idea of the film, stemming from her question, is how one’s internal justification for such misdeeds reconciles when faced with someone of undeniable decency and selflessness? My great aunt Margaret, like my fictional character Bethany, served in the Red Cross and lived her entire existence incredibly selflessly and truly gave more than she ever took.

Terrence, the more brutish and brash character, in the later stages of the film, attempts to dissuade our protagonist Oliver and his concerns with a misguided suggestion of Bethany's home insurance, and that their misdeeds will be washed over by the market's protective olive branch. This does not rectify Oliver's existential dread, and he elects to return some personal and sentimental goods to Bethany at the end of the film. Upon his final visit, he notices she has a large, unprotected wad of cash on the table. As Bethany retreats to the kitchen to make them tea, we linger on the final image of Oliver reaching out towards the cash. His greed and need for an escape outweigh his desire to ease his own conscience. His worldly desire for quick reward creeps back in and subtly asks the audience to consider where the limits of their own morality and sense of justice lie. How definite is that line for anyone and harkens back to the ironic biblical principle of there being no true worldly good.



Figure 1: Still from the end of the film.

The Research Question & Theoretical Framework

The Object of Study

The question that largely informed the making of *False Profits* and that this paper now looks to ask is not a criminological one, nor really a sociological one, though it brushes against both. It is an adaptive one: how does a filmmaker transform a real event into a cinematic narrative when the event itself is largely undocumented, its principals unknown, and its facts irrecoverable?

And what obligations do I as a filmmaker carry when the gaps in the historical record must be filled not with research but with imaginative interpretation, with personal memory, cultural observation, and a formal commitment to myth over reconstruction? I ruminated with these questions before the theoretical framework came into place that would come to support them and this paper. The Georgetown case, two unidentified young men, a spree of home invasions, no arrests, no trial, no public record of consequence offered almost nothing to me as a researcher and everything to the fiction writer. The file was thin. The witnesses described similar suspects. The chief of police confirmed that very little remained on the record. What that thinness suggested was a cleanness and openness, which I must admit to have enjoyed. The film could not be an account of what happened. It had to be an account of what it means that something like this could happen to young men of this type, in a community of this kind, in a country whose particular brand of masculine aimlessness tends not to announce itself before the damage is already done.

That reformulation from reconstruction to interpretation, from event to condition consideration, is the commitment at the heart of this project. The psychological research on boredom, meaninglessness, and cognitive deconstruction gave the characters their architecture for me as I thought about them as characters. To be clear, the writing tone was and is obviously quite comedic. That being said, I did keep in mind this sense of deep existential frustration behind their actions and dialogue while writing, even if not always incredibly apparent in the film itself. The literary and cinematic influences gave the film its tonal register. The personal background of my own formation in a rural Ontario community structured by faith, tight social bonds, and the quiet desperation of those excluded, both gave the material its emotional credibility and general grammar. Each of these elements is a response to the same adaptive problem: how do you tell the truth about an event you cannot fully know?

Boredom, Meaninglessness, and Impulsiveness

The most clarifying piece of psychological research I encountered during the development of this film was from Moynihan, Igou, and van Tilburg's 2017 study, *"Boredom Increases Impulsiveness: A Meaning-Regulation Perspective."* The paper's central argument is precise. The authors propose that boredom's relationship to impulsive action is not direct but is mediated by a third variable: perceived meaninglessness. When a person experiences boredom as a state, they are under-stimulated. They write, "they cannot find meaning in their current activities or circumstances. The fundamental conception that life should be meaningful, should make sense, and should hold some kind of purpose... is thus challenged, as boredom provides an experiential cue that existence, at least in the moment, has been rendered meaningless. Therefore, boredom can be considered to be an existential threat.'" (Evan Tilburg & Igou 2012,

2017, p. 294). Oliver and Terrence are, at a more fundamental level, confronted with the sensation that their present existence lacks any coherent purpose. The impulsive behaviour that often follows, the reckless decision, the gratuitous cruelty, the poorly planned crime, is not a symptom of their low character, although it clearly plays a role in their decision-making. It is a regulatory strategy. It is the self-attempting to exit a perceived state of meaninglessness through the only door that feels immediately available.

The study's findings are worth dwelling on because they reframe moral judgment in ways that my fictional world is uniquely able to metabolize and visualize. Across their three studies, the authors found that perceived meaninglessness is defined not as philosophical nihilism but as a felt, situational sense that one's actions are purposeless and gives a deeper insight into the mediated relationship between boredom and impulsiveness. What is particularly striking for the purposes of understanding characters like Terrence and Oliver is the role self-awareness plays in this dynamic. The researchers found that boredom promotes impulsiveness through meaninglessness, particularly at greater levels of self-awareness. In other words, the person who is most attuned to the gap between what their life is and what they feel it should be is precisely the person most vulnerable to impulsive action when boredom increases in their day-to-day lives. This is not the profile of the unthinking brute. It is the profile of someone who thinks too much about themselves and too little about the future, because the future has ceased to feel real around them in a society where old vanguards of meaning and traditional honour-based systems have eroded around them.

Oliver and Terrence, as I wrote them, are not equivalent figures in this regard. Terrence is the engine of the scheme. He is impatient, performing with confidence, unwilling to linger in the emotional aftermath of what he is doing. His boredom is the blunter instrument. He wants stimulation, and the moral complexion of that stimulation is mostly secondary to him, not because he is without conscience, but because his conscience has been effectively decoupled from consequence thought through habitual disengagement with the world around him in his seemingly hopeless town in his eyes. Oliver, by contrast, is the reluctant participant; he is not without agency or wrongdoing, but he is dragged into the day's events as much by the gravity of Terrence's certainty as by any calculation of his own. But Oliver is the more self-aware figure, which the film's research suggests makes him not more moral but possibly more vulnerable. His self-awareness does not function as a brake. It functions as an amplifier of meaninglessness. He knows, on some level, what he is doing. That knowledge does not stop him. It makes the doing worse, and it is precisely this quality that the film's ending. Oliver's hand reaching for Bethany's cash after he has ostensibly returned to make partial amends is designed to render without editorial comment on my behalf as the omnipotent filmmaker.

Cognitive Deconstruction in Oliver and Terrence

Moynihan et al. gave me the psychological understanding for why Oliver and Terrence act so recklessly; the work of Twenge, Catanese, and Baumeister gave me insight into how young men like my fictional characters can act without apparent distress. To be clear, this research was not conducted to permit intellectual or academic legitimacy to my writing and filmmaking, but instead, I engaged with it to sharpen my dialogue and immerse myself in a deeper understanding of their psyches, going into the pre-production stages. It would be

dishonest of me to suggest I was cross-referencing this research while writing the script, but instead, just allowing the understanding of the research to hopefully, subliminally inform their lines and choices throughout the film.

So, how can two young men without any notable hatred for their neighbours enter those neighbours' homes and rifle through their belongings with a kind of flat, procedural calm? The 2003 paper, *"Social Exclusion and the Deconstructed State,"* concerns itself with what happens to a person psychologically in the wake of social rejection. They write, ″People may use the deconstructed state as a defence against the negative experience of social rejection... people may respond with empty, neutral, and even bored feelings when their need to belong is thwarted, rather than the acute emotional distress that at first seemed plausible.” (Twenge, J. M., Catanese, K. R., & Baumeister, R. F. 2003, p. 410). The authors argue that social exclusion produces a distinctive cognitive condition they term deconstruction: a defensive mental state characterized by emotional detachment, a collapse of future orientation, an immersion in the narrow present, lethargy, and a marked avoidance of meaningful thought. They continue, "Deconstruction is a defensive state of mind, designed to ward off the negative consequences of rejection. This state may be mildly aversive, but it is preferred over the alternative of intense emotional distress and detailed ruminations about all one's misdeeds and faults that might have caused the rejection." (Twenge, J. M., Catanese, K. R., & Baumeister, R. F. 2003, p. 421). This way of avoiding the acute self-awareness and emotional distress that would attend any honest reckoning with their circumstances is at the crux of my characters’ arcs, or rather, their lack thereof. You cannot be inhibited by a rule you cannot bring yourself to think about. You cannot be deterred by a consequence you have placed beyond the horizon of your immediate attention.

This framework explains something that a purely moralistic reading of False Profits couldn't in my eyes: the film's characters have no animus toward the people they are robbing. They do not hate their community. They are not acting from calculated malice. They are acting from within a cognitive state that has, through years of quiet social marginalization, effectively decoupled from consequences, obligation, and basic understandings of empathy, as their phycological stated environment has pushed them towards neglecting such ideas altogether, as they do not bear any immediate present function for them in their stagnated lives. The Twenge et al. research is particularly useful here because of what it finds about the emotional flatness of excluded individuals. Across their experiments, participants who had been socially rejected showed almost no increase in reported negative affect on detailed mood measures, despite showing significant behavioural changes consistent with distress, overestimation of time intervals, present-orientation, and reduced impulse control. The authors interpret this not as evidence of resilience but as evidence of a sort of numbing: the person has entered a state of inner emptiness precisely because the emotional distress is too costly to inhabit or dwell on. I found it to be quite heartbreaking the more I read. This is all not to say that I view my characters as faultless in their actions or somehow justifiable, but rather I saw it to understand how such young men are often pushed towards these sorts of actions with almost unworldly levels of calm.

What struck me most in thinking about Oliver and Terrence through this lens was the finding about time perception. Socially excluded participants in the Twenge et al. studies significantly overestimated the duration of experimentally controlled time intervals; they experienced time as dragging, as emptily passing, as severed from any meaningful connection to a future toward which they were moving. This is, I would argue, one of the most important structural qualities of the deconstructed state for understanding the kind of young men I grew up

alongside. Time that has no direction has no stakes. A day that does not connect to any anticipated future is a day that can be spent any way they choose, if it is slightly more engaging than doing nothing. Oliver and Terrence's crimes are not a plan in any meaningful sense. It is something to do. Sure, they may make some momentary, minimal financial gains from the robberies, but how far will it get them? The impersonation, the performance of religious identity, the grotesquerie of choosing Jehovah's Witnesses, tells us something about the relationship between the aesthetic impulse and the destructive one. But the premise of the exercise is more fundamental: it is a way of filling time that has been emptied of any personal direction.

The Aesthetic Dimension: Destruction and Its Proximity to Creativity

The final major research component I encountered, which helped shape False Profits, was that of Nancy C. Andreasen's work on the neuroscience of creativity. Andreasen's research, developed across decades of work with highly creative individuals, proposes that the neural processes underlying creative insight and those underlying certain forms of neurotic or impulsive behaviour share significant proximity. They write, "Studies of creative individuals also indicate that they have a higher rate of mental illness than a noncreative comparison group, as well as a higher rate of both creativity and mental illness in their first-degree relatives. This raises interesting questions about the relationship between the nature of the unconscious, the unconscious and the predisposition to both creativity and mental illness." (Andreasen 2011, p. 42). Oliver and Terrence are clearly creative young men, as this sort of plan has some obvious wit and creative thinking behind its construction.

Although Oliver and Terrence are fictionalized characters drawn from an unsolved and largely unknown true crime case and any direct application of Andreasen's framework to them carries the caveat of fiction's necessity to distance it from any form of clinical fact or use case, I would argue that their archetypes nonetheless inhabit this sort of neurological and psychological territory she describes: the restless, associatively overactive, future-severed mind that is, by some cruel irony of neuroscience, most alive in its creativity precisely when the individual is at times unwell. The scheme Oliver and Terrence devise has, undeniably, an aesthetic quality. The choice of disguise is inspired by its local specificity. The choreography of their approach, the religious ties, the careful enquiries about the homeowner's afterlife plans, the patient exploitation of small-town social trust, has the structure of a performance, of something staged and then repeated. They are not simply thieves. They are, in some dim and unexamined way, authors of an event they are during, whose shape they are partly determining as they go along, foolish as it may be. I am not interested in romanticizing this. I hope those who watch the film do not feel as though I tried to do so. What they are doing causes real harm to people, and the film is not designed to exempt them from that. But I am interested in the creative-destructive proximity because it is what makes them human rather than simply criminal, and humanization is the film's primary ethical commitment and concern throughout.

Literary and Cinematic Influences

The literary model I returned to most consistently during the development of False Profits was Guy Vanderhaeghe's short story collection Man Descending, published in 1982. Vanderhaeghe's men, and they are almost always men, stranded in the cold middle distances of the Canadian prairie, failing quietly at the expectations the culture has handed them, are not

sympathetic in the conventional sense. They are not pitiable. They are recognizable, which is a more demanding thing to achieve and a more honest one. Vanderhaeghe does not ask us to excuse his characters. He asks us to see them, to sit with them long enough that the distance between their failures and our own begins to feel less absolute than we would prefer. I'm not sure if my short film achieves this, nor is it my place to say, but this was the tonal register I sought for False Profits. It was never the warm exculpatory light of the redemptive narrative, and not the cool prosecutorial distance of the social-problem film, but something in between. A gaze that is genuinely interested in these two young men without being naïve about what they are doing.

The distinction I kept pressing on throughout the development of this script was the difference between a cautionary tale and a myth. The cautionary tale is morally efficient; it presents transgression, consequence, and lesson in legible sequence, and its function is prescriptive. It tells you what not to do. I've always appreciated that a myth is a different instrument. Myths illuminate conditions rather than prescribe remedies. They give shape to the forces operating within a culture and looks without judgment at forces that are too large and too ambient to be addressed by individual instruction, and they often do so by rendering those forces through specific, embodied, particular human beings in specific circumstances. The story of False Profits is not a lesson about what happens to young men who choose crime. It is a myth about what it feels like to be without a future in a community organized entirely around futures. The future of one's family, one's faith or lack thereof, one's standing in a place where everyone knows everyone, and that knowledge about their standing in the world is inescapable.

Alan Clarke's “Made in Britain”, from 1982, is the cinematic reference that most clarified for me what I did not want to make. Clarke's Trevor is ferocious, legible, and almost thesis-driven in his refusal of the social contract. Tim Roth plays him at maximum speed, all aggression and ideological coherence. Clarke's film is brilliant, but it is not the story that my film requires. Oliver and Terrence are not ideologues. They have not consciously rejected anything. I thought about this a lot when writing them. I was tempted to give them a moment for a grandiose anti-society-based monologue. But it never felt fitting as it does in Clarke’s film. Their disengagement is softer and more Canadian in its depiction of how young men drift towards the edges in our softer-spoken and tamer culture. It is not through dramatic rupture but through the gradual accumulation of days that felt like they were leading nowhere and eventually weren't.

If Clarke gave me the clearest negative example, or at least an example of a good film which I was determined not to mimic, then Wes Anderson's debut feature, *Bottle Rocket* (1996), gave me something closer to a permission structure, a precedent for the particular tonal register I was reaching toward without yet having a name for it. Anderson and co-writer Owen Wilson's film concerns itself with young men of similarly unexamined ambition and similarly compromised execution, drifters in the warm Southwest who have convinced themselves they are criminals without ever quite becoming ones, and whose schemes carry the same quality of performance-for-an-internal-audience that I recognized immediately in the Georgetown case. What *Bottle Rocket* understands, and what I found myself returning to repeatedly during the scriptwriting stage, is that the comedy of disengaged young men is never really about the failure of the plan. It is about the gap between the grandiosity of the self-conception and the modesty of the actual circumstances, and that gap, handled with enough affection and enough honesty, produces something that is neither satire nor tragedy but occupies the uncomfortable middle

register between them. Anderson's camera in that film does not condescend to its characters; it watches Dignan with the same patient, slightly bewildered attention that a fond but clear-eyed older sibling might bring to bear, and this quality of watchfulness without judgment was closer to what I wanted for Oliver and Terrence than anything in the social-realist tradition.

There is also something important in *Bottle Rocket*'s relationship to place. The bleached parking lots and roadside motels of Texas and New Mexico are not glamorized, but neither are they deployed as symbols of spiritual poverty in the heavy-handed manner of lesser films about masculine aimlessness, and I wanted Georgetown, Ontario, to sit in the frame with the same matter-of-fact specificity, its low-slung subdivisions neither condemned nor romanticized. The film is also, crucially, funny without being cruel, which is a much harder thing to calibrate than it sounds: the humour arises from recognition rather than from superiority, from the audience's awareness that the distance between Dignan's self-image and his actual capacities is a distance most of us have privately inhabited at one point or another. I was also drawn to the way Anderson and Wilson handle the question of loyalty between the two central figures. The asymmetry of need, the way one character's investment in the enterprise always exceeds the others, and how that asymmetry quietly generates all the film's dramatic tension without ever being named or resolved.

Development and Pre-Production

The development of False Profits had begun the moment my friend Maya had told me about these events of 2011, all the way back in 2023. It wasn't until the fall term of 2024 that I seriously started to put pen to paper and engage in the worldbuilding of them in the form of a short film, however. I had made vague outlines and drafted some tidbits of dialogue for them in

past journals, but the structure and support of the MFA program is what truly helped me focus and start working towards its eventual conception and creation.

In Fabio's Master's level screenwriting course that fall, I had developed the feature version more and started to privately discuss with Tereza and Fabio my vision for the project. They had some notable initial concerns about the project as a short film. They knew that I had my sights on the story as a feature, and the work I had done thus far that fall was predominantly within that framework. I often think about something Matt Johnson told my directing class in the fourth year of our undergrad. A good feature is like a short story, and a short film is like a compelling piece of poetry. The idea being that a short story needs to be a revelation about a human truth, an idea or moment where a decision is made or something of note is revealed about the human condition in a concise and honest way. Tereza and Fabio both recommended many short films for me to watch in these initial meetings, and ideas on what the reveal or moment of uncertainty should be for our protagonist, Oliver. I recall Tereza brilliantly suggesting that Oliver should find something so deeply personal or tragic in someone's home that he feels guilty about taking it and has a crisis of conscience moment. I latched on to that and made the moment more about meeting someone so utterly selfless that he felt this crisis of conscience regarding the person more so than a particular item.

From there, I was off to the races. The other notable writing stumbling block was how much we needed to know why these young men were committing said crimes. I included a few moments of them at a car wash, where they vaguely discussed needing the funds to buy a meek business in order to jump-start their blue-collar lives. Although I enjoyed some of these scenes, I just couldn't pull myself to shoot them as I found it more interesting to just have them doing the

crimes, and periodically throughout the film, we gradually gain an understanding of who and why they are the way they are.

By this point in the spring of 2025, the script was nearing completion, and I had been awarded the Ontario Graduate scholarship, so I knew the film was going to be able to be made that coming summer. As a final assignment in Manfred Becker's production class, we were to shoot some sort of test material. I had known of Tavis Putnam's acting abilities for some time and Donald Jr. Maclean's notable acting work, but in all truth, I stumbled upon them as a duo for these characters as they were two friends who I could presumably believe or envision as them, and they were both simply free that weekend for the test shoot I needed to complete for the assignment's completion. I wrangled them along with a small crew of past collaborators and shot two scenes from an earlier draft of the script.



Figure 2: Tavis and Donald performing during a pre-visualization shoot.



Figure 3: Tavis and Donald performing during a pre-visualization shoot.

Shortly after filming, about five or six takes of the first scene, the rain started to become prohibitive. We drove down the street, and I went to a local neighbour in the Hillcrest Village neighbourhood where I lived at the time and knocked on someone's door who had permitted me to use their home for a past film project. They kindly let us use their doorstep and porch for our pre-visualization test shoots, second scene. I quickly googled "odd bible verses" and had Donald and Tavis misguidedly and foolishly recite said verses improvisationally, as their characters, as if they were trying their shtick on a homeowner in the world of the film. I fell in love with their dynamic immediately. They freely and courageously took the scene by storm. They not only quickly understood the dynamic of their characters but also made them specifically their own.



Figure 4: Still from pre-vis work as Tavis and Donald performing an early version of the script.

Casting

With my two main leads nailed on for their respective roles, I reached out to a close friend, Paul Villenave, who had worked as a casting director for several years. He agreed to help me publish my breakdowns through the company he worked for, Groundglass Casting. The greatest difficulty was finding our “Bethany”. Her character had a lot of dialogue and was in an age range of 75-90, which is hard to find affordable and well-trained actors for. We posted our breakdowns on the casting workbook and Breakdown Central websites, and away we went. He even reached out to a few casting agents in the city to find our Bethany. We eventually found Lynne Griffen, who was a major coup for our project. She had a very accomplished career, and her audition knocked the role out of the park. She even dressed the part for the audition and gave us readings with different regional accents. Her having acted in the cult classic film “Black Christmas” was especially exciting for me. We finalized all our ACTRA paperwork and insurance needs, and on we went.

Location Scouting and Other Prep Work

I have always personally found that a short film's world can be uniquely built most honestly from real locations rather than a dressed set. There is a quality of truth in a place that has been lived in, which no amount of production design can often fully synthesize. My practical constraints of a master’s student budget only reinforced this, which was already a personal aesthetic conviction. My method for sourcing locations on previous short films had been to post in Facebook neighbourhood groups and local community “buy-and-sell pages” across Toronto and the GTA, identifying us as a student production offering a modest honorarium. It is unglamorous work, and it requires a tolerance for silence and polite rejection, but on False

Profits, it delivered something I could not have designed or found by scouring the pre-listed locations on production-friendly online databases. My main need had been to find the hero location for Bethany's home interior in Georgetown itself, keeping faith with the film's specific geography.

A posting in a Toronto North York location group changed that plan. A middle-aged couple had inherited their late parents' home in East York and were preparing to demolish it. The foundations were failing, the structure was worn, and they were holding out for a buyer who hadn’t come yet. When William Shepard, my DOP and long-term collaborator, Emmanuel, our production designer, and I first walked through it, the decision was almost immediate. The house was empty in the particular way that only a recently vacated life can make something empty. The shape of the family was still legible in the wallpaper, the light fittings, the grain of the hardwood, and in that specific vacancy, it had more character than anything we might have fabricated. It also had a trailer in the backyard, which became, without any deliberate casting on our part, the perfect hideout for Oliver and Terrence. It was wonderfully rugged, unloved, and quietly eloquent in how it displayed what their environment looked like when left to decay.



Figure 5: William and I on a location scout.

We negotiated a flat fee with the couple and began scheduling around the one variable we could not control: whether a purchase offer would arrive before our shoot in September. I spent most of July in a state of low-grade anxiety about this, conducting prep work on the script and shot list in parallel with scouting the exterior locations needed for the film's opening montage sequence, all while knowing that our hero location could theoretically be pulled from under us at any moment. Thankfully, it was not. The couple proved generous and engaged throughout the process, eventually appearing on set themselves and spending a day watching us transform their parents' empty house into something warm and inhabited again.

The one material discovery we made on our third and final scout of the location, by which point it was too late to reconsider, was that the house had no running water. The pipes had been disconnected in preparation for demolition. This meant no bathroom facilities for a crew of eighteen people over three consecutive shoot days. The solution arrived in the form of Liam Cooper, a set dresser I had worked with at the York University Motion Media Studio, who lived five minutes from the location and whose address became our de facto facilities annex, with a production assistant running shuttle routes between setups. It was, by any reasonable measure, deeply indie in its logistics. Lynne Griffen, our Bethany, navigated this with a grace that said something about the kind of actor she is. She offered, without complaint and with complete sincerity, to bring her own bucket and a blacked-out tent to set up if needed. She never needed to. But the offer alone set the tone for what kind of shoot this was going to be.

Production:

Before production began, I was fortunate enough to be awarded the “Ontario Graduate Scholarship”, the “Canadian Film Equipment In-Kind grant”, and the “Academic Excellence grant”. They were instrumental in the creation and execution of my film. The first day of principal

photography took place at the York University Motion Media Studio, where my role as studio coordinator gave me both familiarity with the space and a genuine affection for what it could be made to do. The standing studio was divided into four distinct corner sections, each painted and dressed to represent a different home interior from the film's opening montage for the various houses Oliver and Terrence move through over their afternoon. Will and I, along with Emmanuel, her art assistants, Megan, and Liam, worked late the night before to prepare each section so that the first shoot day itself could be given over entirely to maximizing setups and coverage. It was a detail-oriented start, and it set a pace and an expectation for the rest of the week.



Figure 6: BTS still from Day 1 of Tavis and Donald rehearsing the script.

Will and I were living together at the time, which meant that most of our evenings and mornings in the weeks preceding the shoot had been spent at the kitchen table with shot lists and reference images, talking through how to make four corners of the same room read as four distinct domestic interiors, how framing, light temperature, and set dressing could do the work

that different real world locations could not. This was a richly fortunate dynamic. Most directors do not have the luxury of that kind of extended, low-pressure creative conversation with their cinematographer. It produced a shorthand between us on set that made the day efficient in ways I am always grateful for. The first day went quite smoothly, and the crew was in good spirits. We were able to wrap up at a reasonable hour before the more demanding days to follow.



Figure 7: BTS still from Day 1 of the crew working.

Days Two and Three: The Hero Location

The second and third shoot days were at our East York hero location. Day two went relatively smoothly: we shot nine pages within eleven hours and wrapped on the twelfth hour. I drove the equipment truck to and from Cinespace, where we had secured full twenty-four-hour security parking for the duration of the shoot. I spent approximately sixteen hours each day in

some working capacity connected to the project, a fact I mention not as self-congratulation but because it reflects a directing ethic I have always held: if every grip, electric, set dresser, and production assistant is working at full capacity, a director who is not also physically working beside them, has been dishonest about the nature of the collaboration to some degree. I also drove equipment trucks for several years after my undergrad, working as a transport driver on higher-budget productions in and around the city, and I have never entirely lost the satisfaction of it.

The third shoot day, our second day at the hero location and the longest of the entire shoot, ran fourteen hours. I dislike long days on small-budget productions. When crew members are working for modest honorarium rates, and the shoot extends into overtime, you are drawing on goodwill that takes time to replenish, and you feel it in the energy levels the following morning. I try to treat the wrap time as a commitment rather than a target. We did not always manage it on this project.



Figure 8: Still from the end of the film.

The gaffer I had hired for these days had been recommended by past collaborators. He was young, technically accomplished, his equipment knowledge was impeccable, and eager for the experience of working in the independent register, having spent most of his career thus far within the IATSE structure. What became apparent over the first two days was that technical competence

and the interpersonal velocity of an indie set are different skills, and that the latter is largely a matter of practice. Some of our setups ran longer than Will and I had planned for. We adjusted, and to his credit, so did he.

Directing actors on this project, I operated from a position I have settled into over several short films: I do not schedule formal rehearsals before a shoot if the casting process has already shown me what I needed to see. I had had phone conversations with Lynne, Tavis, and Donald about their characters and the internal lives they imagined for them, but we had never run the scenes together until we arrived on set. There is something about this approach that trusts the actor's preparation in a way that protects the spontaneity of the first few takes. The roughness of an early take is often, paradoxically, part of its value. I have found that by the third and fourth take, once the technical requirements have been absorbed and the actor has stopped managing their own performance and started simply inhabiting it, something consistently truer comes through.

Working with Tavis Putnam was a particular pleasure in this regard. He is also a filmmaker, which meant he understood intuitively that a director's note between takes is not a critique of his capacity but an invitation to a different interpretation. A distinction that not every actor has fully internalized. The gap between receiving a note and implementing it was essentially instantaneous with Tavis. Lynne operated from a different but equally generous place: seasoned, precise, and wholly uninterested in protecting her own choices at the expense of the scene. She would hear what I was asking for, say she had it, and then simply do it. When she improvised several lines in one extended exchange, I felt something shift in the room. I quickly called for a reverse pickup of Tavis, reacting. It was a shot that had not been in my plan, and that is, in the cut, one of my favourite moments in the film. On the final day at the hero location, she brought signed photographs from *Black Christmas* for every member of the crew, with a personalized note on

each one. It made a great many people's day, and it revealed something about her that was not confined to her professional generosity.



Figure 9: BTS still from Day 2 of the crew working.

Emmanuel, our production designer, deserves acknowledgment here. She has worked extensively as an art director and production designer in the commercial industry but found in False Profits an opportunity to work on a project whose aesthetic vision she felt she could genuinely express, and she gave the entire project her labour for free, as a friend, because she wanted the work on her CV and because she believed in the film. Every item of art direction was sourced by hand: from Value Villages, from her own shared prop warehouse, and from personal collections contributed by the crew. She, Megan, and Liam arrived an hour before call each morning to dress the set according to the day's scenes. When the homeowners arrived on the third day to visit the set, they found their parents' empty house transformed into a warm, inhabited-feeling domestic world. The look of that house in the finished film belongs substantially to

Emmanuel. We wrapped out of our hero location later than we would have liked on the third day of production and left no trace. The art team donated furniture nobody wanted, and away we went. The home was set for destruction, so there was no chance for re-shoots. We gave the home one last loving memory before its eventual demise.



Figure 10: BTS still from Day 2 of Lynne reading the script.



Figure 11: BTS still from Day 2 of Donald napping.

Days Four: Exterior Sequences

The fourth shoot day took us into Etobicoke and Newmarket for the exterior doorstep sequences that open the film. Oliver and Terrence are moving through the neighbourhood, working their way down a row of doors. Will and I had spent three separate prep days walking through

different residential streets, knocking on doors ourselves and asking homeowners if we might use their front foyer for a few hours with a small crew of six and a couple of actors. We received two or three yeses, which was enough. This kind of direct, low-infrastructure production is, in many ways, what I find most satisfying about short filmmaking: a crew of seven or eight heads of department and single assistants, everyone carrying something, the whole operation responsive and mobile and honest about its own scale.



Figure 12: BTS still from Day 4 of Donald and Tavis on set.

The day ran away from us slightly. The travel times between locations absorbed more of the schedule than we had accounted for, and we ended up needing a subsequent pickup day later in the fall, just Will, one actor, and the camera rig, in order to fill out several moments we had not had time to complete. It was the day on which I felt I dropped the ball most noticeably as a production coordinator, though the material we captured was strong. Because it was the final day for the art department, Dina, my first AD, had organized a cake to mark both the crew's wrap and our production. It was a good afternoon. Much of the dialogue in the doorstep sequences had been scripted, but I always build room in comedic material for the actors to run once I have what I need on paper. I enjoy seeing where actors want to take line readings, to see how their scene partner

responds, to find the specific texture that improvisation produces and that scripted performance rarely replicates. Tavis and Donald, having done the pre-vis work together months earlier, had a fluency with these characters that made that room genuinely productive.



Figure 13: BTS still from Day 4 of the crew on set.

Day Five: Tweed

The final day of principal photography was in Tweed, Ontario, where we shot the car sequence. Oliver and Terrence in motion, the film's most formally distinct and most logistically complicated material. I had found the car on Facebook: a burgundy Buick with velvet upholstery, owned by a man who agreed to rent it to us for three hundred dollars, a full tank of gas, and the promise we would return it in the condition we found it. He was easy to coordinate with and welcoming until we arrived at his property. He was a bit prickly about the number of people we had, but the interaction was manageable.

The shoot itself went well in terms of performance. We rigged the camera in various positions on the exterior of the car and shot on dirt backcountry roads, keeping the windows open

to accommodate the equipment. What I had not adequately prepared for was sound. My sound recordist, Amy, was on set, but because I had placed myself in the backseat with a pair of headphones next to the recording receiver, I wanted to hear the performances directly and give notes between takes without intermediation. She was not positioned to make the technical adjustments the environment required. The car was older and noisier than I had anticipated. The combination of open windows, gravel roads, and engine noise produced a degree of sound disturbance that lavaliere mics and a boom from the backseat could only partially mitigate. Several moments in the sequence will require ADR, and the responsibility for that sits squarely with me.

The performances, however, were strong, and the visual quality of the sequence the burgundy interior against the Ontario back road, the grammar of the car rig brought something to the film that more cautious planning might have foreclosed. There is a cost-benefit to that, and I am still working out where I come down on it.



Figure 14: BTS still from Day 5 of Donald and Tavis on set.

ETHICS:

The ethical questions raised by False Profits are not, at their core, questions about the criminal acts the film depicts. They are questions about the act of depiction itself, about what a

filmmaker owes to the people whose stories, however distantly, have been borrowed, fictionalized, and utilized for their own artistic interests. I have thought about this throughout the development of this project, and I do think they can be resolved. That discomfort feels appropriate to a film that is itself suspicious of clean resolution.

The first obligation was to the victims of the real events in Georgetown, Ontario. The film fictionalizes both perpetrators and victims entirely. No real names are used, the timeline has been altered, and the composite character of Bethany is drawn from my own family rather than from any identified individual connected to the actual case. The Freedom of Information Act request I filed with the Georgetown police department in late 2024 confirmed that the case remains unsolved and that no victim identities were ever made public. I am satisfied that the film does not expose or implicate any real person, and I have been careful throughout not to sensationalize in ways that would compound the original harm.

The question of the perpetrators is more complicated. Their anonymity is not something I conferred on them; it is something history has already conferred, and it is, in a meaningful sense, the condition that makes fictional invention both possible and necessary. Oliver and Terrence are composites, built from psychological literature, from a literary tradition of compassionate portraiture of disengaged masculinity, and from my own experience of growing up alongside young men whose trajectories rhyme with, but do not replicate, the characters on screen. The ethical risk I was most alert to was not that I might be too hard on them, but that I might be too easy, that the film's refusal to condemn might shade, without my noticing, into the kind of exculpatory warmth that is its own form of dishonesty. That distinction, between illumination

and excuse, is the ethical spine of the film, and it is where I believe the initial concern resolves itself.

The Georgetown case is small and local and entirely unresolved; nobody was caught, nobody was named, nobody spoke on the record about what it meant. Stories like this one tend to simply disappear, absorbed into the ambient noise of a small town's collective memory, too minor for national attention and too strange for easy interpretation. Fiction is one of the few instruments capable of recovering them. It can ask what the story means for the place it came from, what it says about the social conditions that produced it, and what kind of young men leave a community so imperceptibly that their departure registers only as a crime. These are questions that serve the community as much as any individual within it.

The ethical case for *False Profits* rests finally on that premise: that shining a light on the stories that shape local identity and myth, even uncomfortably, even without resolution, is an act of respect for the places and people those stories belong to. Not despite the discomfort, but because of it.

CONCLUSION:

There is an old African proverb, attributed in various forms across several traditions, that says, *"A child who is not embraced by the village will burn it down to feel its warmth"*. *False Profits* began as a true crime curiosity: two unknown men in a small Ontario town, a scheme of almost comic inadequacy, no arrests, no resolution and became, over the course of its development, a film about exactly that: about what a community produces when it runs out of room for certain of its young men, and what those young men then produce in return. Whether the film succeeds in dramatizing those conditions rather than merely gesturing toward them is a

question I leave to its audience. What I can say is that the attempt was genuine, and that the attempt itself taught me things about the form I could not have learned any other way.

The myth dimension of *False Profits* matters to me because myth does something that realism alone cannot: it lifts a specific story out of its particularity without erasing that particularity, and in doing so allows the story to speak to conditions larger than itself. Oliver and Terrence are not symbols. They are specific, flawed, recognizable young men from a specific place. But the forces operating on them, the meaninglessness that boredom amplifies, the cognitive deconstruction that social exclusion produces, the foreclosed futures that make the present feel like the only available register of experience, are not specific to Georgetown, Ontario, or to the fall of 2011, or to any community's failure of imagination. Myth holds both things simultaneously: the irreducible specificity of the case, and the broader condition that the case illuminates. Realism, at its most scrupulous, gives you the former. Myth, I argue, reaches for both.

The film's governing theme crystallized for me, finally, in the image it ends on. Oliver returns to Bethany's home. He returns what he can. He sits with her long enough to feel the full weight of what she is: a person who has given more than she ever took, whose goodness is not performed but structural, who extends kindness to him even now without knowing what he has done. And then, as she retreats to the kitchen, he reaches. The selfishness returns. It was never gone. The film's definitive statement is not that Oliver is irredeemable; it is that redemption was available, tangibly and concretely available, in that room, in that moment, and was not taken. Selfishness, the film suggests, does not serve the self. It erodes it. Oliver leaves that house diminished in a way that has nothing to do with the money.

What this production taught me about directing dark comedy is that the comedy and the darkness cannot be managed as separate registers, modulated in and out to control audience response, without the whole thing collapsing into something dishonest. They must coexist in the same frame, in the same performance, in the same line of dialogue, or the tonal contract with the audience breaks. What it taught me about writing morally compromised characters is that empathy and accountability are not opposites. The research that grounded this project, the psychology of boredom and meaninglessness, the sociology of cognitive deconstruction, and the neuroscience of creative-destructive proximity gave me the tools to understand Oliver and Terrence without excusing them, and that understanding was the precondition for writing them honestly. Research and dramatic writing, I have learned, are not in tension. The research is what keeps the writing from becoming either a prosecution or an apology.

False Profits positions my work going forward in ways I am still discovering. It deepened a formal interest in the Canadian comic register that I intend to continue exploring, in the specific texture of masculine aimlessness as it manifests in this country, quieter and more rural and less ideologically legible than its American or British counterparts. Fiction can recover an emotional truth that an incomplete record withholds, but it cannot recover the record itself, and I do not think it should try to. What this project taught me is that the value of adapting an under-documented event lies precisely in resisting the temptation to fill its silences with invented certainty, motive, consequence, resolution, and instead letting the silence remain legible in the finished work. The audience does not know why Oliver reaches for the money in the final shot, because I do not know either, or because the real men this story is drawn from were never asked. That unknowing is not a failure of research. It is the most honest thing the film has to offer, and

it is the closest I expect to come, in this project or the next, to telling the truth about an event I could never fully know.

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