

RIDEAU

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ABSTRACT

Rideau is a feature-length dark comedy screenplay about a civil servant cushioned by routine, quietly unraveling in a city that mirrors his inertia. Inspired by my years working in government, *Rideau* forms the basis of this thesis's inquiry into the relationship between lived experience and dramatic form. Autofiction reshapes personal memory into narrative, whereas screen storytelling is typically guided by Classical Hollywood conventions that prioritize causality and character transformation. Through the development of *Rideau*, this thesis investigates what tensions and alignments emerge when lived experience is shaped into contemporary dramatic form.

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INTRODUCTION

“In times of peace, the militant man attacks himself” - Friedrich Nietzsche

Rideau began as an attempt to understand a feeling I lived with for a long time but did not have clear language for: the quiet unease of being comfortable, employed, and deeply stuck. On paper, my life looked stable. I had a secure job, predictable routines, and a clear path forward. In practice, I felt increasingly disconnected from myself and from any sense of momentum. This project grew directly out of that tension. While it draws heavily from my experience working in government and living in Ottawa, it is not a memoir or a satire of public service. Instead, it attempts to demonstrate the emotional translation of what it feels like to survive inside a system that rewards caution, restraint, and compliance, even as those qualities slowly erode a person’s sense of agency.

At the center of the story is Rook, a government correspondence officer whose job requires him to respond to concerns without ever truly addressing them. He is good at what he does. He meets deadlines, avoids conflict, and keeps his head down. His dissatisfaction is not dramatic or explosive. It manifests quietly, through routines, deferrals, and small acts of avoidance. Rather than actively pursuing change, Rook fantasizes about being removed from the system cleanly and without consequence, ideally through termination with severance. He wants escape without disruption, but what he receives instead is recognition, promotion, and deeper entrenchment. The further he settles into his routines, the more the city around him begins to feel oppressive, uncanny, and vaguely threatening, even though nothing overtly dangerous is happening.

From early on, I knew I did not want to write a story driven by conventional stakes or clear transformation. I was more interested in the psychology of stasis than in dramatic upheaval. I

wanted to explore what it means to remain largely the same while internal pressure builds, and how change can arrive in ways that are awkward, incomplete, and emotionally ambiguous. Films like *Inside Llewyn Davis*, *A Serious Man*, and *The Apartment* were important touchstones, not because I wanted to emulate them stylistically, but because they offered permission to trust mood, repetition, and discomfort over tidy resolutions. In those films, characters do not emerge fixed or redeemed. They simply become more exposed.

Ultimately, *Rideau* is a film about the cost of waiting. It examines how safety can become a form of paralysis, and how the desire to avoid embarrassment, risk, or disruption can quietly harden into a way of life. The story is less concerned with success than with alignment, with what happens when a person stops managing appearances and begins to act, however imperfectly, in accordance with who they actually are.

This thesis consists of both the completed screenplay for *Rideau* and a written reflection on the process of writing it. The written component traces how the project evolved from initial false starts to a finished draft, and how my own experiences with work, anxiety, idleness, and creative avoidance shaped the story's form and tone. It also considers the city as a psychological presence, the use of recurring motifs, and the film's restrained neo noir sensibility, where tension is atmospheric rather than plot-driven.

Because *Rideau* draws directly from lived experience while shaping that material into a crafted narrative, the project also became a site of inquiry. This thesis asks: What tensions and alignments arise when an autofictional screenplay translates lived experience into contemporary dramatic form? While autofiction privileges emotional truth and subjective memory, screen storytelling is often guided by Classical Hollywood narrative structure, with its emphasis on

causality and character transformation. Bringing personal material into that framework raises questions about what is preserved, what is reshaped, and what is lost when lived experience is structured for the screen.

NARRATIVE APPROACH

False Starts

I cycled through a number of ideas, outlines and scripts before settling on writing a feature that would eventually become *Rideau*. My initial idea – *Mount-Royal* – was a half-hour comedy drama pilot I wrote as part of my MFA Screenwriting course. Inspired by my own experiences, it chronicled a thirty-something second-generation Iranian immigrant, as he navigated family, mental health, love and fatherhood in Montreal. I was also yearning to take on another feature-length script. I hadn't attempted one since *Please After You*, which I wrote and developed in 2018.

I remember how arduous the process was from start to finish and vowed never to write another feature on spec. It wasn't out of laziness or intimidation, but based on conversations with other writers and literary agents who made it clear that television was where most of the opportunity was. I assumed this was because if a TV project moves forward, it can mean multiple episodes and potentially multiple seasons of work, whereas a feature film is usually a one-off contract. After writing *Please After You*, I focused almost exclusively on developing original pilots in the hope of attracting a literary agent. Despite writing several and submitting them widely, I wasn't successful in securing representation.

My thesis supervisor, Fabio Montanari, floated the idea of writing a feature. My initial feeling was that it was going to be a lot of work for not a lot of payoff. He did not push it but did mention that there's much less creative freedom in the TV landscape. This was a deal breaker for me. I did not want to pour my heart out on a script only to have it reduced to a common denominator in order to appeal to a wider audience, yet resonate with no one. That was how my

experience with *Please After You* felt, and I didn't need another repeat of that. The late filmmaker, Andrei Tarkovsky, eloquently articulated this tension between creative freedom and making money when he said:

I also feel sorry for those so-called artists, poets and writers who feel that they are in no fit state to work; what they are really talking about is not working but earning. One doesn't need a lot to be able to live. The great thing is to be free in your work. Of course, it's important to print or exhibit, but if that's not possible you still are left with the most important thing of all – being able to work without asking anybody's permission.

(Tarkovsky 12)

I wanted to write about a meaningful period in my life, but I found myself trying to shape that lived experience according to classical Hollywood narrative conventions, the kind promoted by screenwriting teachers like Robert McKee, where protagonists pursue clear desires, face escalating conflict, and undergo a transformative arc (McKee 33). The question underlying these false starts was not simply what story to tell, but how to tell it. In retrospect, I see them as necessary steps that got me to writing *Rideau*. I recognize how slim the chances are of getting a TV series or a film made, so why devote so much time and energy into writing for a perceived market demand, that will stifle my voice and likely not get developed anyway? I knew there would be more creative flexibility writing a feature screenplay rather than a TV pilot, but I knew there would still be creative constraints within that realm as well, especially with respect to story structure. Even in this space, I would still need to test the limits of Classical Hollywood structure to shape the story in a way that felt true to the lived experience that inspired it.

Pushing against convention

“The difference between a screenplay and real life is that a screenplay has to make sense” –

Joseph L. Mankiewicz

I always wanted to write a dark comedy based on my experience living in Ottawa and working for the government but I always envisioned it as a series rather than a feature film. I was not interested in writing a straight sitcom like *Parks and Recreation*. I wanted it to be darker, more surreal, and character driven (rather than joke driven). I decided to take a stab at writing it as a feature. My initial goal was to have a draft completed by the end of Summer 2025 but I underestimated how long the outlining process would take and did not even start writing a draft until the fall semester. In retrospect, that delay reflected the larger question at the heart of this thesis: the difficulty of shaping lived experience into dramatic form without forcing it prematurely into a conventional narrative structure.

Inside Llewyn Davis was my creative compass throughout this whole process. The film is a character-driven portrait of an antihero in stasis, drifting through a world that neither punishes nor redeems him. On the surface, little changes in Llewyn’s circumstances, but the film quietly reshapes how we see him. It felt real and deeply relatable. When I wasn’t watching it, I was listening to the film’s soundtrack. The Coen Brothers’ film gave me permission to set aside traditional screenwriting conventions. I wanted to avoid the false comfort of tidy resolutions, where every character emerges transformed. That never feels real in movies. Yes, people change, but not that dramatically. By the end of *Rideau*, Rook is more open to new experiences. He remains essentially the same person but with a better understanding of himself. Film scholar Francesco Sticchi, in his essay “Inside the ‘Mind’ of Llewyn Davis,” argues that the film is built

around a circular structure that returns us to a near repetition of the opening, making stasis structural (Sticchi 139–40). Failure works the same way. The setbacks repeat rather than escalate into a decisive turning point, so the story feels like a loop instead of a climb (Sticchi 140–43). And because the film keeps denying resolution, it turns the viewer’s hunger for catharsis into part of the experience (Sticchi 138, 143–44). That logic carried straight into *Rideau*. I wanted mood and repetition to do real dramatic work.

Film producers and financiers can become uneasy when creative liberties are taken with story structure. The concern, presumably, is that a film will struggle to resonate with wider audiences if its trajectory strays too far from familiar narrative patterns. As David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson note, film industries have historically sought to “standardize and differentiate” their products in ways that keep risks manageable (Bordwell and Thompson 14). Within such a framework, structural experimentation can appear economically hazardous. And yet, intimate, character-driven films are produced, celebrated, and critically acclaimed every year. This raises the question of whether established auteurs such as the Coen Brothers, Paul Thomas Anderson, or Sofia Coppola are granted a degree of latitude, and whether their reputations mitigate the perceived risks of working outside traditional structural conventions.

These filmmakers earned their status early in their careers by creating work that was both critically acclaimed and financially viable. Their established reputations attract high-profile actors, producers, cinematographers, and other key collaborators, allowing them to assemble a critical mass of talent with relative ease. Financiers understand that recognizable names, particularly marquee actors, offer a measure of commercial security through box office draw, festival visibility, or awards attention. Moreover, as Bordwell observes, contemporary directors often operate within a tacit “one for them, one for me” model (Bordwell and Thompson 28). As

Mark Banks argues, cultural industries are not open playing fields but systems in which opportunity and recognition accumulate over time, often reinforcing prior advantage (Banks 139). Seen this way, formal experimentation isn't just about artistic temperament; it's about where you're positioned within the industry. Most importantly, after a series of successes, even a significant financial failure is unlikely to irreparably damage an established filmmaker's standing within the industry. For a filmmaker without an established reputation, such as myself, the stakes are different. This tension sharpened the central question of this thesis: how can lived experience be shaped into contemporary dramatic form without relying on the structural safety nets that the industry leans so heavily on?

Memory in Search of Form

I still needed to outline the story despite the measured departure from traditional classical Hollywood screenwriting structure. The challenge would be striking a balance between mapping out the story without being too contrived. I usually write a scene-by-scene outline before I start writing a draft of a script and *Rideau* was no exception. As I outlined *Rideau*, I realized that the plot needed to serve tone and character, not the other way around. I wanted Rook's physical and emotional isolation to be a relentless through line throughout the story. More than being understood, I wanted Rook's inner turmoil to be felt and to accumulate through space, repetition, and ritual. This approach echoes what Robert Kolker identifies in Stanley Kubrick's work as "a cinema of habitations and rituals, overwhelming spaces and intricate maneuvers, of the loss of human control, of defeat" (Kolker 101). Much of this would ultimately need to be carried by the production itself, since there is only so much atmosphere and emotional texture that can be conveyed on the page of a screenplay.

While *Rideau* is inspired by lived experience, it is not a memoir. I still needed to add, remove, and refine plot elements to keep the narrative engaging. The project aligns more closely with autofiction. As Serge Doubrovsky famously described it, autofiction is “fiction, of events and facts strictly real” (Doubrovsky qtd. in McDonough 7). Rather than functioning as a straightforward autobiography, it reshapes lived experience into crafted narrative, privileging emotional truth over factual precision (McDonough 19). This distinction became central to the project. *Rideau* works as autofiction not because it documents events exactly as they occurred, but because it draws directly from my lived experience while openly reshaping it into fiction. The protagonist is not a stand-in for myself, yet he carries my anxieties, contradictions, and impulses, adapted through narrative design rather than factual history.

That approach requires acknowledging the instability of memory itself. Memory, of course, is not a clean record. My recollections of working in government and living in Ottawa are shaped by time, emotion, and the story I have already told myself about that period. As Paul John Eakin reminds us, the self that appears on the page is not simply retrieved but narratively constructed (Eakin 61). I am not accessing the past directly. I am arranging it. What felt stifling or surreal to me might not have registered the same way to colleagues or friends who inhabited those same spaces. In the conclusion to *The Limits of Autobiography*, Leigh Gilmore distinguishes between the sovereign autobiographical self, which claims authority over truth, and the knowing subject, who recognizes the limits of self-representation (Gilmore 147–48). That distinction clarified my position. I was not writing from authority over the past, nor was I offering any kind of objective testimony. I was working from a personal vantage point, and was being deliberately selective to shape the story to my taste. Autofiction, in that context, became a way of acknowledging subjectivity rather than concealing it.

I was not attempting to document my time in government, but to translate the feeling of inhabiting that system, and living in Ottawa, into dramatic form. There is a tension there. Lived experience does not unfold according to neat causality or decisive transformation, yet screenwriting is often shaped by Classical Hollywood narrative structure, with its emphasis on escalation and change. David Bordwell describes the rigidity of this structure, which dates back to the 1930s:

Screenwriters took pride in tight, ingenious plotting. Writers known as solid “constructionists” recognized the artisanal aspect of their task. Given an approximate running time of eighty to one hundred minutes, the screenwriter had to fill it out with a major plotline and a secondary one, along with progressions and reversals familiar from drama, the popular novel, and other films. (Bordwell 125).

My early script outlines leaned toward imposed turning points, artificial resolutions and gestures toward transformation that felt contrived. The more I tried to force the material into recognizable structural beats, the less truthful it felt. While I understood that the story did not need to be fully autobiographical, I still needed it to feel true. I ultimately spent more time outlining than writing the first draft. By the end of summer, I had gone through three outlines that Fabio reviewed and provided feedback on, but I was still missing key elements to maintain narrative cohesion. More importantly, I did not have an ending that felt earned. I understood that the story would evolve through the act of writing itself. A rigid, scene-by-scene treatment began to feel like an attempt to impose certainty where the material demanded more fluidity. Leaving the outline open allowed the draft to find its own direction, the same way that, for Robert Altman, “casual and loose narratives” create the “appearance of spontaneity and improvisation” (Kolker 333). My

hope is that, if *Rideau* ever gets produced, the filming process will adhere to an adjacent philosophical approach.

A few weeks into the 2025 fall semester, Fabio suggested that I start on the draft. He was optimistic (or pretended to be) that the story would come together once I started writing. Time was running out and I was tired of spinning my wheels, so I jumped into the first draft, not fully knowing how the story would go or end. Ironically, this is aligned with the film's central thematic concerns around risk aversion. I am prone to excessive self-editing as I write and this project was no exception. It wasn't until roughly the halfway point of the script—around page fifty—that the story crystallized for me. This required returning to page one for a rewrite, a step I had anticipated and one that ultimately confirmed Fabio's sense that the film would come together once I began writing.

I now realize that I was trying to force myself onto the environment instead of giving it the time and space to act on me. Sound artist and writer Jez Riley French writes about listening as a practice of patience rather than control, and that distinction landed uncomfortably close to my own process (French 11). The more I tried to plan the story in advance, the more distant it felt. This felt at odds with traditional screenwriting approaches but in line with playwright Lajos Egri's contention that plot must grow organically from character and premise rather than be imposed externally (Egri 9).

In retrospect, this was not simply a craft issue but an approach one. I was attempting to impose dramatic shape without tuning into the lived experience that motivated the project. The tension between control and attention mirrored the larger inquiry of this thesis: how lived experience resists, adapts to, and occasionally aligns with the demands of contemporary dramatic form.

My outlining was not just failing to help — it was getting in the way. I was solving problems that had not yet revealed themselves, mistaking preparation for attention. When I let go of the need to “solve” the plot, I found myself paying closer attention to what I was already carrying with me—memories, anxieties, and half-formed observations of the anarchic state of the world at the time. The story began to absorb these things quietly, in a way that echoes what anthropologist Anna Tsing describes as “unpredictable encounters,” moments that unsettle certainty and reveal vulnerability through connection rather than control (Tsing 20–23).

What happens when lived experience, with its ambiguity and stasis, is shaped by a dramatic form built around causality and transformation? What tensions and alignments emerge when autobiographical material is translated into a contemporary dramatic structure? It was not until I stopped trying to impose order on the material that the story began to surface on its own terms. What became clearer as I went was that the tension was not something to solve. The story did not need to be forced into a formulaic template, but it also could not remain untouched. It had to be shaped just enough to hold together without losing the messiness that made it feel real. In trying to find that balance, I began to see how lived experience could move through dramatic form without being completely overwhelmed by it.

Letting the story emerge organically perpetuated the reality that my relationship to storytelling has always been grounded in lived experience rather than invention. I often have trouble creating narratives from scratch, and when I do, they often feel contrived or generic. As Tarkovsky suggests, a film’s emotional structure should grow out of memory and lived observation and rest on “the kinship between the impressions of one’s own life and the fabric of the picture” (Bird 112). My approach to writing *Rideau* follows Serge Doubrovsky’s concept of autofiction as a fiction of strictly real events. In this sense, the work prioritizes emotional truth over factual

literalism. While there likely isn't enough autobiography here to state that it was "based on a true story," I can take some comfort in knowing that what I wrote came from a place of truth.

FORAYS INTO FILM

My entry point into filmmaking was through acting, an impulse I transferred directly into Rook's character. I remember watching Johnny Depp in *Pirates of the Caribbean* in an almost empty theatre and being struck by how free and playful his performance felt. I wanted to experience that same freedom. I began watching interviews with actors, buying the books they mentioned, and taking acting classes. I auditioned whenever I could, often without confidence, driven more by curiosity than ambition. Screenwriting emerged almost accidentally during this period. I was writing short pieces accompanied by images, songs, and video clips before realizing that I was writing scenes. The act of doing the work often felt more immediate and engaging than any distant notion of success, which mirrors how Rook comes to life once he begins pursuing the desires he has long suppressed, regardless of whether they ultimately take shape.

As the child of immigrant parents, I was repeatedly steered toward stability and practicality. When I expressed interest in acting, my mother suggested broadcast journalism instead. When I shifted toward screenwriting, my father encouraged marketing and advertising, which I eventually studied. Their advice was not cynical. It was shaped by their own experience of starting over in a new country where security was never guaranteed. For them, work was about durability. Art felt uncertain, indulgent, even risky in a way that was hard to justify.

It took me a long time to recognize that pursuing art carries a certain privilege. The ability to tolerate financial instability, to risk embarrassment or financial inconsistency, often depends on having some form of safety net. Earlier, I discussed how established filmmakers are granted more latitude within the industry because their reputations provide insulation from failure. On a smaller scale, something similar applies to individual artists. As Mark Banks notes, opportunity

in cultural industries tends to accumulate around those who already possess certain forms of capital, whether financial, social, or reputational (Banks 139). The freedom to “just create” is rarely neutral. That tension is embedded in *Rideau*. When Rook visits his anxious mother, her concern is not meant to be dismissed. It reflects a worldview where stability equals responsibility. His reluctance to fully pursue filmmaking is not simply fear; it is inherited logic. The debate is not just about passion versus practicality, but about who can afford to choose passion in the first place.

In my final semester of my business degree, I began writing my first feature screenplay and continued through the summer. Around the same time, I landed a part-time job as a video game tester, only to be laid off shortly after training. I didn’t tell my father, knowing he would insist I find something else immediately. Instead, I went to the McGill library every day and sat there from nine to five, writing the script in full. That experience directly informed Rook. He writes his own screenplay quietly, weighed down less by doubt than by a sense of embarrassment about wanting something that feels so out of reach. This tension between life stability and desire became the foundation of the thesis’s central theme, shaping *Rideau* into a test case for how personal experience can be translated into contemporary dramatic form without being reduced to melodrama.

THE CITY THAT NEVER WAKES

I graduated from McGill University right after the financial crisis hit in 2008. Unable to secure a job in my field, I applied and was admitted to the Public and International Affairs Master of Arts program at the University of Ottawa. My parents were probably thrilled that I decided to put this acting and screenwriting ambitions aside in order to pursue a graduate degree with the end goal of becoming a public servant. At the time, I held a largely positive image of Ottawa, the inspiration for the city of Rideau. I chose not to set the film explicitly in Ottawa, however. I needed some distance from the real place, both aesthetically and emotionally. The name Rideau was deliberate. On the surface, it refers to Rideau Street, one of the city's central arteries. But in French, rideau also means curtain. That double meaning felt fitting. Rook spends most of the film living behind a kind of internal curtain, keeping his creative ambitions out of sight. The name allowed me to preserve the emotional truth of Ottawa while reshaping the city into something larger and more imposing than it ever felt in reality.

I had taken occasional road trips there and carried fond memories of visits to Ottawa. The city always appeared lush and inviting in the tourism advertisements I encountered on bus stops and television. With that image in mind, I accepted the admission offer and moved to Ottawa. My mother and best friend drove down with me in a rented U-Haul, helped me settle into my apartment, and returned the van that same evening.

Once they left, I felt an immediate sense of loneliness, isolation, and regret. The city bore little resemblance to what I remembered. The lustrous imagery of its tourism campaigns gave way to a lived reality marked by visible drug use, homelessness, sporadic violence, and a pervasive, inescapable melancholy, which became the inspiration for the opening scene contrasting the

video tourism to the reality of life in Rideau. I felt stranded in a city I did not yet understand, committed not only to a two-year degree but, potentially, to a lifetime of work rooted there, given the concentration of public service employment.

That feeling found its way directly into Rook. He does not have much of a life outside the office and his apartment. His surprise party is made up mostly of coworkers, which is less a testament to popularity than to proximity. He moves between work and home, filling the evenings with familiar film rituals rather than building something new. The city intimidates him. Part of that intimidation comes from his own perception, shaped in part by the steady stream of complaints, crises, and grievances he processes in his correspondence role. The city becomes something to manage rather than inhabit.

I wanted the loneliness to operate on two levels. It is literal. Rook is socially isolated, hesitant to reach outward. But it is also metaphorical. He is passing time instead of investing it. He mistakes safety for stability and routine for meaning. The longer he avoids confronting what actually animates him, the heavier the city feels. In that sense, the urban melancholy is less about the city itself and more about deferred desire.

Taste of public service

One of the primary reasons I pivoted toward public service was a desire to contribute meaningfully to society through my work. I had hoped the program would focus on contemporary geopolitical issues, with discussions and assignments centered on how such problems might be addressed or mitigated. Instead, much of the coursework emphasized abstract philosophical theories with limited application to real-world conditions. In retrospect, this foreshadowed the rhetorical nature of much government work.

I completed two internships as part of the co-op requirement in my program. The first was in the Access to Information and Privacy branch at Passport Canada, where I was tasked with drafting a policy and procedure manual outlining how to respond to access to information requests.

Although the internship was scheduled to last four months, I completed the assignment within a few weeks. The remainder of my time was spent making and unmaking minor revisions to the document. The most exhausting part was not the work itself, but the sustained performance of busyness required to justify my presence, despite there being little else for me to do. My second internship followed a similar pattern. It was with the Seniors division at Service Canada, where I was tasked with reviewing the website and identifying areas for improvement, such as usability and information flow. As before, I completed the assignment within a few weeks and spent the remainder of the term making minor, largely cosmetic edits. It felt like I was performing the role of what Anthropologist David Graeber calls a “box ticker” in his book *Bullshit Jobs*:

The most miserable thing about box-ticking jobs is that the employee is usually aware that not only does the box-ticking exercise do nothing toward accomplishing its ostensible purpose, it actually undermines it, since it diverts time and resources away from the purpose itself (Graeber 56).

I understood there was no budget for major policy initiatives, but I tried to think pragmatically about how meaningful change might be achieved within existing constraints. One issue that stood out was that many Canadians eligible for public pension benefits were not applying for them at all. Because much of the process was online, we suspected that limited technological literacy or lack of internet access, particularly in rural communities, was a significant barrier. I proposed a modest intervention: that Service Canada partner with banks to help eligible clients apply for their pensions. People were already visiting banks to manage their finances, and such a

partnership could remove the burden of navigating online systems independently. It also struck me as mutually beneficial—improving access for pensioners while offering participating banks a meaningful form of differentiation. When I shared the idea with my supervisor, she listened politely before dismissing it. Policy, she explained, moves from the top down, not the other way around. As policy advisors, she said, we were essentially pawns. If I wanted to influence public policy, she suggested, I should consider journalism instead. It was a real example of what Graeber’s take on bureaucracies as systems that “invariably means ignoring all the subtleties of real social existence and reducing everything to preconceived mechanical or statistical formulae” (Graeber 119).

I made many friends in my graduate program, and there was no shortage of social functions to attend. Despite this, I felt increasingly alone and depressed in the city. My lowest point came during what should have been a routine errand. I was on my way to Gatineau to fill a prescription for antibiotics for a persistent cough, as accessing public drug coverage as a Quebec resident required crossing the provincial border to avoid paying out of pocket. I got lost on the bus. Eventually, everyone else disembarked, and I found myself alone on a dark road, with no clear sense of where I was or how to get back. Sitting there, I felt more strongly than ever that I had made a mistake coming to Ottawa in the first place, but it felt like I had invested too much time and effort to turn back now. The loneliness and bureaucratic repetition of that time shaped more than the character. They shaped the structure itself, challenging me to find movement in stillness rather than relying on contrived turning points.

Neo noir inflections

Looking back, I felt like a reluctant protagonist in a neo-noir film, moving through Ottawa with a persistent sense of dissociation and a vague, quiet dread. Everything felt overcast—the weather, my mood, and the brutalist concrete buildings around every corner. The city became an extension of my inner state, with its perceived dangers magnified by my own perception.

Likewise, Rook is in a state of constant unease where it remains ambiguous whether the threats are external or simply the byproduct of emotional exhaustion. As Alan Woolfolk observes, the noir protagonist often exists within “desolate urban landscapes” that reflect “dead and corrupt purposes” and embody the struggle to maintain a coherent sense of self in an “ethically irrational universe” (Woolfolk 108–09), which parallels both my experience in Ottawa, as well as Rook’s journey throughout story. This is where lived experience collided with structure. The dread I felt in Ottawa did not lend itself to dramatic escalation. It lingered. When translating that feeling into *Rideau*, I had to decide whether to convert it into concrete antagonists and conflict escalation or allow it to remain atmospheric. Keeping it ambient created friction with classical narrative expectations, which prioritize causality and visible conflict. That friction sits at the center of this thesis. The city becomes more than a backdrop. It becomes a formal expression of interior life, testing how this personal experience could fit and work within contemporary dramatic form. This challenges Robert McKee’s belief that “A protagonist and his story can only be as intellectually fascinating and emotionally compelling as the forces of antagonism make them” (McKee 317) – though it could be argued that internal antagonists are just as viable as external ones in this context.

While writing *Rideau*, I felt increasingly unsettled by the state of the world—the genocides, ongoing wars, and the looming political threats to the south. Caught between the urge to stay informed and the need to protect my mental health, I channeled that tension into the film. What began as a dark comedy about bureaucratic absurdity evolved as I realized the office setting was too small; I needed the city itself to function as a character; more specifically, as an antagonist and a metaphor for an unstable world. As Raymond Durnat says, noir comes from times of disillusionment and alienation marked by a bleak, cynical tone (Durnat 253). Ottawa felt like that to me once I moved there; a quiet city hiding an ominous unease.

In Ottawa, I navigated this ambiguity by retreating. I tried to convince myself that by staying confined to my home or friends' apartments, I could render the city invisible. After long days of classes or internships, I sought sanctuary in the dark, quiet isolation of my home, drawn to movies like *The Apartment*, *Lost in Translation* and *The Departed*, which reflected my own headspace at the time. I even began a ritual of ordering takeout to match the meals in the films I watched, which I would project onto Rook in the script. I would often choose the film based on what I felt like eating that night. I've always been oddly susceptible to food in movies.

Commercials don't do much for me, but if I see Tony Soprano drinking a Coke with an Italian sub, I suddenly want the same thing. Matching the meal to the film became a small way of creating immersion, of feeling closer to the characters on screen. That detail carried into *Rideau*. If Rook knows exactly what a character is eating in a scene, it shows how closely he pays attention. Film is not background noise for him. It is comfort, ritual, and connection. The food makes that attachment physical rather than abstract.

While my apartment was a physically comfortable refuge, the comfort was fleeting; the restlessness would inevitably take over as night fell. This tension between Rook's withdrawal

and unease aligns with what Jason Holt describes as noir's "realism of mood," where the textures of everyday life render the inner world of the character visible on screen (Holt 25). Even the "box ticking" nature of my government work reflects the noir worldview "that deception and falsehood may be built into the aspirations of human existence itself" (Woolfolk 112).

This period of stasis reached a breaking point when Stephen Harper, the Prime Minister at the time, announced widespread public sector job cuts. At the time, it felt disastrous; in retrospect, it was a blessing. The layoffs provided a necessary rupture, giving me permission to leave Ottawa for Montreal and pivot my career. In many ways, *Rideau* imagines the "what if": the version of my life where I stayed in Ottawa and ignored my creative inclinations. The script deliberately withholds that kind of interruption. Rook does not receive a convenient layoff or a clean external intervention that forces change. In retrospect, leaving Ottawa would prove to be less redemption than reprieve. I would return to government again in a more permanent capacity. There I would meet my colleagues who would later shape the plot and supporting characters in *Rideau*. The script resists the *ex machina*, a convenient external force that resolves conflict, asking instead: what happens when no one pulls the lever and the protagonist must remain inside the stasis he helped create.

THE QUIET ABSURDITY OF GOVERNMENT LIFE

Ministry of Health

A few months after completing my Master's degree, I sent out two hundred cold emails to government managers and directors, with my resume attached, in hopes of landing a job. I had a few phone chats with managers and directors, and one in particular that led to an in-person chat with a director at the Ministry of Health in Ontario. I was living in Montreal at the time and the meeting was set to take place in Toronto. "It's not an interview, just a chat", I was told by the director. I showed up in a suit, just in case, and within seconds of the 'chat', I realized that it was very much an interview for a contract position within the Infectious Disease Unit in the Office of the Chief Medical Officer of Health. The manager of the unit, who would end up being the inspiration for *Alina* was also present (I am going to refer to her as Alina for the sake of simplicity and anonymity). I was able to hold my own throughout the interview, despite my utter lack of experience and education in health or infectious diseases. At one point, Alina asked me, "What would you do if I gave you a task that you did not want to do?" It struck me as a bizarre question. The answer seemed too obvious – so I gave her a long-winded answer about how sometimes in life you have to do things you do not want to do and how sometimes you just have to take one for the team, even if it means doing something you do not feel like doing. She glared at me and after a long pause, she said, "You did not answer the question." I meekly responded, "I would do the task." The interview ended shortly after that, and I hopped back on the bus to Montreal.

Six weeks later, I received a phone call from Alina offering me a six-month contract as a policy advisor on her team; I would start in a few weeks. I found an apartment in Toronto and moved

there. The first few months of the job were intimidating. I seemed to be one of the only ones in the office who was not a doctor or public health professional. On my first day of work, we had a team meeting where we had to divvy up who would be responsible for which diseases. I cleverly volunteered to be the lead for plague and leprosy, assuming those things barely existed anymore. I was wrong about that and when cases sprang up in Ontario, they were forwarded to me to prepare briefing materials and media responses. Laurel became an embodiment of my early government self: eager, idealistic, and determined to prove my worth by improving public health outcomes. Instead of keeping that energy within Rook, I displaced it onto her. Autofiction made that fragmentation possible, allowing different stages of my own experience to exist simultaneously within separate characters.

I later learned that my marketing degree was a factor in helping me get the job since public messaging and optics were an essential part of the job. I proved my worth fairly early on in the job and was able to eventually secure a permanent position on the team. While I was relieved to have job security, it also felt like I was resigning the rest of my life to this career. This tension became central to *Rideau*. Rook is not failing at his job. He is comfortable in it. He moves on autopilot and is rewarded for staying within the lines, which is precisely the problem. His entrenchment comes from habit, not crisis. In translating that into dramatic form, I had to resist manufacturing incompetence just to justify his work troubles. Classical Hollywood structure often depends on collapse to force change. For McKee, a story culminates in an irreversible action that permanently alters the protagonist's world (McKee 303). My experience did not fit that narrative. Habit and comfort were the trap and the challenge was finding tension in that routine without being boring. By the end, Rook has not escaped his government job, but he is no longer immobilized by it and has begun pursuing the passion he long deferred. This became

another example of how lived experience, shaped through autofiction, could enter dramatic form without being exaggerated into crisis simply to satisfy narrative expectation.

Transition to correspondence role

I eventually transitioned into a correspondence role, where I was responsible for coordinating and drafting responses to public and media inquiries related to public health. This work took on new urgency during COVID, when I began responding to emails addressed to the Chief Medical Officer of Health. The objective was never to resolve the issue outright, but to acknowledge it without committing to anything. Or as someone once described it in a meeting: being “suitably vague.” Just like in *Rideau*, this often meant not truly addressing the concern at all. Many of the inquiries were quite trivial; for example, there was even a complaint about why golf courses were allowed to operate while boat clubs were not. The volume was overwhelming, and the backlog grew so large that managers were often barely reviewing the responses. I found myself having intrusive thoughts about answering candidly rather than diplomatically. This impulse would later form the basis of Rook’s ultimate defiant behaviour in the script. In reality, I never acted on the impulse; it remained internal. Autofiction allowed me to externalize that private temptation on the page, shaping it to serve the narrative while preserving its emotional truth.

Growing jaded

I grew more jaded the longer I stayed in government, and it became increasingly difficult to keep up a professional persona at work. In meetings, I would get bored and sometimes make unrelated comments, partly out of restlessness and partly to avoid listening to the same circular government language over and over again. I was occasionally called out for being too direct or transparent in meetings.

Over time, the work began to feel stagnant. What I once thought might be a career was quickly devolving into just a job. Despite that, I still took the work seriously. I met every deadline, supported my colleagues, and cared deeply about the substance of what we were doing. I had simply lost any interest in advancement. Promotions and internal maneuvering did not appeal to me, especially as it became clear that recognition often had less to do with impact than with navigating office politics. Much like the private sector, the people who knew how to manage optics and relationships were the ones who climbed the ranks. I was less interested in that and more interested in improving public health outcomes, which was, at least on paper, our team's mandate. In practice, however, priorities were often dictated by media attention. Issues that became "hot" in the news were the ones most likely to attract a minister's focus and resources. The challenge in writing *Rideau* was figuring out how to dramatize that quiet stagnation without turning it into something loud and on the nose. Nothing exploded. Nothing collapsed. The tension was internal, which meant I had to find a way to carry that feeling through a narrative form that usually depends on visible conflict and decisive turning points.

One of the projects I took the most pride in was my involvement in the development of Supervised Injection Services. This was the kind of work I had gone back to school for: developing programs, assembling evidence to justify them, drafting cabinet submissions, building budgets, and creating evaluation criteria. I was involved in reviewing applications and helping determine which sites would receive funding. For a time, the program expanded. When the Conservative government came into power, the sites were eventually defunded. Watching years of careful, evidence-based work unravel for reasons that had little to do with outcomes was deeply discouraging. Early on, I made a point of visiting program sites whenever possible. I visited needle exchange programs in Toronto that would later become Supervised Injection Sites,

and I met with the managers and nurses running the provincial Sexual Health Information Line, a program I was responsible for overseeing financially and evaluating annually. These visits grounded the work. They were a reminder that behind every briefing note or media line were real people—both those delivering care and those relying on it. As funding became more restricted, those visits grew more strained. I felt less welcome, and understandably so. No amount of advocating on my end could change decisions that were politically motivated and made far above my level. In earlier drafts of *Rideau*, I had Rook redeem himself at the end by initiating some small but meaningful change in his community. It gave the story a satisfying resolution and a clear sense of growth. But it also felt too neat. It framed him as a hero reclaiming his purpose, which pushed the script toward a conventional redemptive arc I was trying to avoid. Structurally, it worked. Emotionally, it felt like submission. It solved the story in a way that betrayed the tone that I was trying to preserve. Instead, I folded that earlier motivation into the backstory. Laurel's discovery that Rook was once more engaged suggests that his spirit was slowly narrowed by the bureaucracy, without turning the film into a story about his triumphant return. This shift reflects the central tension of this thesis: how to shape lived experience into dramatic form without forcing it into a structure of overt redemption simply because that is what narrative convention expects.

Return to filmmaking aspirations

I remember my girlfriend (now wife) visiting me at work one afternoon. She looked around my stark, greige cubicle and said, without hesitation, "This place isn't for you. You need to get out." She was in the middle of her PhD at the time, and we were talking seriously about moving in together, getting married, and starting a family, so leaving wasn't realistic at the time. I would

have to stick it out a little longer. The days dragged on, and the commute felt increasingly soulless.

The sense of being stuck had a silver lining: it pushed me back toward writing. I knew it was my surest way out. I wrote whenever I could—at night, on weekends, during lunch breaks, on my commute—any spare moment I could carve out. During this period, I wrote *Port of Call*, the second feature screenplay I completed. The script won the Daryl Duke Prize, a Canadian screenwriting award recognizing emerging talent, and was selected for the Whistler Film Festival’s Screenwriting Lab, a writing development and mentorship program. The project was eventually optioned after the lab. The producer meeting scene in *Rideau* is closely based on my own experience with the production company that would go on to option and produce the film. Giving Rook that same impulse required restraint. In my life, writing became a way out. In the script, it could not function as an easy escape. Instead of solving his life, it unsettles him. It interrupts his routines and forces him to confront what he has been avoiding. That difference kept the story from sliding into wish fulfillment.

After the prize, an article in *The Globe and Mail* circulated internally, and word spread around the office that I had written an award-winning screenplay. I was interviewed by an HR Communications Officer within the Ontario Public Service about my “pastime,” and colleagues soon began approaching me with film ideas of their own. Some suggested that I base characters directly on them. While *Rideau* draws heavily from people I worked with, none of the characters are modeled on those who volunteered themselves. Instead, they emerged from quieter observations: people who were open, a little strange, and disarmingly sincere — those who did not quite fit the system but learned how to exist within it anyway.

THEMES AND METAPHORS

Movies as Medicine

I grew up in a turbulent home. My parents fought often and eventually divorced. After that, my father gained custody of my brother and me, and things only became more volatile. The unpredictability at home made me anxious, and I learned early on to escape into imagined worlds, many of them shaped by the films my older brother introduced me to. For a time, he functioned as a kind of surrogate parent. The ritual Rook shares with his son is not accidental. It mirrors the evenings my brother and I spent in the basement, turning up the volume to drown out whatever was happening upstairs. I did not want to recreate that history directly in the script, but I wanted its emotional logic to remain.

In both cases, film becomes a way of managing chaos. For me, it was a bond with my brother and a buffer against volatility. For Rook, it is a bond with August and a way of keeping the world at a manageable distance. The difference is that what once functioned as protection has, over time, hardened into avoidance. The ritual connects them, but it also risks teaching August the same strategy of retreat.

I remember one evening after a family gathering went badly. I must have been around five, my brother fourteen. My parents were locked in a particularly calamitous shouting match, and to shield me from it, my brother brought me down to the basement and put on a rented VHS copy of *The Goonies*. He cranked the volume high enough to drown out the yelling upstairs. That moment became the beginning of a movie-watching ritual we would share for years.

One film we watched on repeat was *Young Guns*, a loose, mythologized adaptation of the life of Billy the Kid. Emilio Estevez played Billy with a levity and mischief not unlike Johnny Depp's later portrayal of Captain Jack Sparrow. Billy was fearless, almost recklessly so, and I envied his courage and confidence. In contrast, Charlie, one of his fellow horsemen, was afraid of everything, especially a bounty hunter named John Kinney who stalks them throughout the film. In the final showdown, the gang is trapped inside a house, surrounded by deputies, bounty hunters, and the army. Bullets tear through the walls. Glass shatters. The house is set on fire. Billy laughs and says, "I like these odds." Charlie breaks down, begging to see his wife one last time. Then something shifts. Facing the thing he has feared all along, Charlie loads his gun, fires out the window, and calls out Kinney by name as Billy cheers him on. Charlie spends the entire film afraid of reaching that moment, and once he arrives there, the fear dissolves. Seeing the thing clearly and confronting it head-on quiets his anxiety. That idea stayed with me. It still feels true in my life now and I'll still put on the movie if I need a little courage boost. It is no surprise that movies eventually became a kind of medicine for me. I developed a habit of watching the same films on repeat, depending on what I was struggling with or the mood I was in. In Ottawa, when I felt hopeless about my dating prospects, I would gravitate toward *Marty* or *The Apartment*, or a quiet Kazakh film called *Tulpan* about a shy herdsman searching for love. When I felt trapped, I found myself commiserating with Ray's miserable stasis in *In Bruges*. If I was blocked creatively, I would retreat into *Barton Fink* or *The Lost Weekend*. Later, when I grew disheartened with the entertainment industry itself, it was *Birdman*. This pattern of self-medicating through films eventually made its way into *Rideau*, where Rook uses movies not as escape, but as a way of calibrating how he feels when he cannot name it himself. This personal history shaped more than a motif. It influenced how I approached tone and structure of the film,

pushing me to embed emotional movement in ritual and repetition rather than in overt confrontation. In doing so, the film became another site where lived experience pressed against traditional dramatic expectations, testing whether subtle interior shifts could carry narrative weight without being translated into more visible conflict.

The Cost of Idleness

Once I was granted permanent status at the Ministry of Health, I felt more anxious and depressed than relieved. This was my life now and I would have to see it to retirement in order to gain access to my full pension. I had job security and was making enough money to pay all my bills. It was a dream job as far as my parents were concerned. However, I learned rather quickly after becoming a permanent employee that this job was not for me.

I was comfortable but miserable. I became prone to existential dread and anxiety spirals, the kind that fed on idle time. Around then, I started writing again and noticed something immediate: the anxiety quieted once I lost myself in a script. Writing gave my restlessness somewhere to go. I began attending film and screenwriting events and eventually met someone involved in a small film collective, not unlike the one that appears at the end of *Rideau*. The group met weekly to shoot no-budget films and was made up of actors, cinematographers, and directors who were either working in the industry or had been at some point. A few months in, we decided to make a one-minute silent short to submit to the now-defunct Toronto Urban Film Festival. Several of us wrote short scripts and mine was selected. The crew was modest and entirely volunteer. The film itself was unremarkable, and it did not get into the festival, but that almost felt beside the point. For the first time, I experienced what it meant to see my words translated into images. That moment, however small, felt like a genuine milestone.

It was enough to get me writing again. I worked on my second feature in the evenings after work, and the shift was immediate. Writing gave my days some shape. It gave me something to move toward instead of simply something to endure. I finished the script and sent it out. Competitions, fellowships, agents, producers. Mostly silence. A few polite passes. Nothing came of it. Still, the act of pursuing it felt preferable to doing nothing. Even rejection came with a sense of accomplishment. That difference carries directly into *Rideau*. In the second and third acts, Rook begins to act. He finishes his screenplay, reaches out, and takes small, awkward risks. None of it leads to anything concrete, but it pulls him out of stasis. Within a classical paradigm, those actions would escalate toward confrontation and resolution. As Screenwriting author Syd Field writes, “Act II is the confrontation,” a series of obstacles that drive the protagonist toward a decisive outcome (Field 53). Rook might have gotten his script optioned, landed an agent, and made his movie, allowing him to leave his soulless job and revel in a dream fulfilled. I even toyed with a similar plotline in an earlier draft, but it betrayed the tone and message of the film I was trying to write. The story is less concerned with success than with what happens once he stops waiting. What wears him down is not failure. It is standing still. Becoming a father shifted my perspective. Encouraging my son to follow his curiosity and ambition began to feel hollow if I was unwilling to do the same. Setting that example became more important than comfort. That decision, and the delay in making it, is woven directly into *Rideau*, where Rook slowly arrives at the same realization.

Writing a character like Rook meant pushing against the usual screenwriting logic that equates agency with big decisions and high stakes. Passive characters are often treated as dramatically dead unless something explodes around them. My challenge was to find movement in hesitation and to make small shifts count. That became another way of testing the core question of this

thesis: how to carry lived experience, with its delays and half-measures, through dramatic form without being on the nose about it.

Authenticity over everything

We live in a culture that tends to value decorum over honesty. Politeness over conviction. Compliance over sincerity. Being agreeable is often rewarded more than being real. As sociologist Erving Goffman suggests, everyday life requires individuals to perform versions of themselves that sustain social order, carefully managing impressions rather than expressing unfiltered truth (Goffman 22). That tension was especially present while I was working in government, though I imagine it applies to most corporate environments. You develop a work self and a private self, and over time the constant switching between the two becomes exhausting. There is an unspoken expectation to smooth out anything sharp, to keep opinions measured, emotions muted, and instincts in check. This split became central to Rook. Much of his discomfort comes from having to perform a version of himself that feels increasingly disconnected from who he actually is. Authenticity operates on two levels in *Rideau*. On the surface, Rook—and to a lesser extent Mayor Deakin—drift back toward versions of themselves that feel more honest. But that honesty does not resolve their problems or suddenly make their lives easier. Instead, it realigns them. It reconnects them to what they care about and reminds them of what they once wanted. Rook is not redeemed by authenticity, but he is no longer pretending by the end of the script, which felt like a true, inevitable resolution that mirrored my own experience.

Motifs

Many of the recurring motifs in *Rideau* grew out of small, lived moments that stayed with me and eventually found their way into the script.

The fridge sound – This is a true story from our old condo. For months, my wife and I kept hearing what sounded like an older man groaning somewhere in the building. It was unsettling and impossible to locate. Eventually, we discovered the sound was coming from our refrigerator. In *Rideau*, the fridge works as a metaphor for misplaced angst: the assumption that something external is wrong or deteriorating, when in fact the disturbance is coming from inside and is not actually any threat at all. This is an example of how I approached autofiction in the script. I did not invent symbols when lived experience was already offering them. The event itself happened, but its meaning is shaped and repositioned within the story. Autofiction, in this case, was more about selecting and reframing real moments so they can function dramatically while still carrying emotional truth.

Lewis and the VR headset – Lewis' near-constant retreat into virtual reality grew out of my own relationship to escapism. During my time in Ottawa, I often felt that the city was tolerable as long as I stayed indoors. If you were inside a cozy jazz bar or a restaurant, you could almost forget where you were and disappear into the atmosphere. The headset becomes a visual shorthand for that impulse to opt out rather than engage with the world around him.

The neighbour across the courtyard – The neighbour exists as a quiet reminder for Rook. She represents the world beyond his self-imposed perimeter, a subtle nudge that there is life, connection, and possibility just outside his window. Nothing stops him from entering that world except his own hesitation, which proves costly in the end.

TONE

While this paper focuses on the screenplay for *Rideau*, I have a clear sense of the tone and aesthetic I imagine for the finished film, which would be quietly stylized in a neo-noir tradition. I am not interested in black-and-white imagery or exaggerated hard shadows. What I am after is something colder and more restrained. I want the film to feel bleak without announcing itself as bleak. I want the viewer to feel dropped into the city and to experience it the way Rook does: emotionally muted, slightly dissociated, and never fully at ease.

Visually, this tone would come through in composition and a muted colour palette. The city should feel heavy and enclosing, but ordinary. I am drawn to films where the urban environment quietly dictates mood rather than calling attention to itself, such as *The Apartment*, *Manhattan*, and *Blade Runner*. In these films, the city is not a spectacle. It simply exists, and its presence shapes how the characters move through the world. What I respond to in those films is how the city just sits there and affects everything without announcing itself. It does not need a big event to feel oppressive. It is in the background of every scene. That is what I wanted for *Rideau*. Instead of turning the city into a dramatic obstacle, I let it quietly shape Rook's mood and behaviour. This connects back to my larger question: how to bring lived, atmospheric experience into a screenplay without forcing it into obvious plot mechanics.

The setting itself is meant to function as a character. The city in *Rideau* is not neutral. It presses in on Rook, reflects his internal state, and quietly antagonizes him. I am drawn to films where place feels inseparable from character psychology, such as *Glengarry Glen Ross*, with its uneasy, nocturnal urban spaces, and *Rear Window*, particularly the idea of the neighbour across the

courtyard as both presence and provocation. In *Rideau*, the city is something Rook tries to ignore or shrink, but it never fully recedes.

The humour in *Rideau* is deliberately dry, restrained, and often uncomfortable. I am heavily influenced by the Coen brothers, particularly *Inside Llewyn Davis* and *A Serious Man*, where comedy emerges out of frustration, repetition, and people talking past one another rather than from overt jokes. Much of the comedy in the film comes directly from lived experience, especially the absurdity of bureaucratic language and the way institutions attempt to manage discomfort through careful, overly calibrated phrasing. A recurring scene built around fine-tuning correspondence grew out of very real workplace situations, even if some of the specifics were exaggerated or invented for effect, such as the line about the pigeons acting strangely. That same instinct carries over into how the film treats *place*. The McDonald's restaurant alluded to during the tour bus scene is based directly on the real McDonald's that sat on Rideau Street in downtown Ottawa for years. It was unofficially known as the "world's worst McDonald's" and occupied a strange, widely understood position in the city: everyone knew about it, everyone joked about it, many people avoided it, and yet it remained an unavoidable fixture of daily life until it finally closed in 2023 (CBC News). That contradiction is where the film's humour sits: everyone recognizes that something is wrong, and everyone keeps going anyway.

I am also influenced by Martin McDonagh's work, particularly his fondness for mischievous characters and dialogue that makes people uneasy before it makes them laugh. In films like *In Bruges* and *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing Missouri*, humour often comes from confrontation rather than release. Characters say the wrong thing, push conversations too far, or fixate on minor grievances until they become absurd. That energy surfaces most clearly in Rook's attempts to provoke discomfort, whether by derailing conversations or by trying to drive people

out of his apartment through carefully engineered awkwardness. The comedy in *Rideau* is not designed to relieve tension. It is meant to sit inside it and quietly press.

Sound plays an equally important role. I imagine a lot of soft jazz but also a rhythmic, foreboding score inspired by the work of *Boards of Canada* and *Trent Reznor and Atticus Ross*. Their music often feels mechanical and emotional at the same time, which mirrors Rook's inner state. I am also drawn to how the Safdie brothers use music in *Good Time* and *Uncut Gems*, where the score quietly drives much of the tension.

CHARACTER INSPIRATION

Before getting into character inspiration, I need to clarify how I'm using real life in *Rideau*.

Autofiction is not memoir. It does not aim to document events as they happened. It borrows from lived experience while openly reshaping it. As Alison James argues, autofiction does not invent a completely separate fictional world. It keeps the real-life "I" in place, but reshapes it through storytelling (James 56).

The complication in *Rideau* is that I am not only fictionalizing myself. I am drawing from colleagues, managers, family members, and people I have observed closely over many years. That raises different questions. No character in this script is a direct portrait of a real person. They are composites. Traits are combined. Timelines are collapsed. Conversations are reconstructed. What feels specific is often assembled.

James also points out that autofiction makes visible "the work of fictionalization": the process by which real individuals become narratable characters (James 54). That idea is central here. I am not preserving people. I am transforming material. The goal is not documentary accuracy, but dramatic coherence. The characters in *Rideau* are rooted in lived encounters, but they are shaped to serve the story.

Rook

Rook is the character I understand most instinctively because he grew directly out of my own experience. He is measured, self-contained, and instinctively avoids making things harder than they need to be. He understands that his government job is unfulfilling, but it is safe, predictable, and asks very little of him emotionally. The alternative, pursuing something like filmmaking,

feels risky, unrealistic, and vaguely embarrassing. That unresolved tension shows up elsewhere, especially in the way he projects his own worries onto his son's aspirations, mistaking fear for foresight.

Even his name is literal. A rook in chess moves only in straight lines, up and down, side to side. It cannot move diagonally. It cannot improvise in unexpected directions. I liked the bluntness of that. Rook moves through his life the same way. He stays within lanes. He advances cautiously. He avoids sharp turns. The name felt almost too on the nose, which is partly why I kept it.

Once Harry dies, Rook can no longer ignore his inclination to be authentic, which for him means being provocative and a bit mischievous. Like Rook, I sometimes unsettle people socially without fully meaning to. I will ask questions that are a little too direct, such as, "What's something you wish you could change about your relationship?" or "How do you get along with your father?" If I cook a meal and someone compliments it, I might ask, "What would you say if you didn't like it?" It is never about provoking arguments. It comes from a genuine desire for honesty and more interesting conversation. In *Rideau*, I let Rook push that impulse further. He weaponizes it during his birthday party, trying to make Erik uncomfortable enough that people leave. That discomfort with prolonged social performance also made its way into the script. At my own wedding, sometime around midnight, I found myself hoping people would start leaving so I could finally go home and sleep. Instead, the dancing continued. That tension between obligation and the desire to retreat felt familiar, and it surfaces repeatedly in Rook's behaviour.

That same persona bled into the workplace. Near the end of the COVID pandemic, when the Chief Medical Officer of Health retired, I was invited to his virtual farewell over Zoom. The Deputy Minister, the Minister, the Chief Coroner, and even the Premier were in attendance. The

event was staged like a press conference, with select staff members playing journalists and asking questions about proudest accomplishments or retirement plans. My director volunteered me to be one of those journalists, and I used the opportunity to ask what the Ministry of Health should do in the event of a Sharknado. By that point, I had cast myself into a role. Not the polished civil servant, but the personality hire. Strangely, that version of myself felt more honest than the one I was supposed to perform.

In shaping Rook, I was careful to avoid self-pity. He is stuck, but he is not a victim. I avoided writing scenes where he breaks down or delivers long speeches about how misunderstood he feels. He does not cry in the kitchen or confess everything in a dramatic monologue. The only moments where he shows heightened emotion are when he is performing as an actor. That was intentional. Acting becomes the one space where expression is allowed, because it is contained and sanctioned.

I also resisted giving him a tragic backstory to justify his inertia. There is no hidden trauma revealed in act three that suddenly explains everything. I did not want the audience to excuse him. Making him an anti-hero helped with that. He is passive. He can be petty. He sometimes makes situations worse on purpose. Those flaws keep him from sliding into martyrdom.

Avoiding melodrama was equally important. I did not want a big heart-to-heart scene between Rook and his son that erupts into shouting and ends in revelation. That would have shifted the film into a straight drama. Rideau is a dark comedy. The emotion lives in small expressions, awkward pauses, and behaviour rather than exposition. Rook's growth is incremental and mostly internal. He does not announce it but inches toward it. That restraint felt more honest to me, and more in line with the tone of the film. Writing Rook became another way of testing the limits of

dramatic form. Could a character who barely moves outwardly still generate narrative momentum? Could his perspective shift register as change?

Alina

As mentioned above, Alina was inspired by my former manager. She could be intimidating on the surface but was deeply maternal and fiercely loyal to her staff. She never threw anyone under the bus. She had lived a hard life and carried a sharp, cutting sense of humour. I spent long stretches of time in her office while she drafted emails, often asking for my “writerly” opinion on grammar and punctuation. In those moments, she would also share stories about her past and her family. The motif in *Rideau* about her mother escaping Soviet forces is inspired by a true story she told me, framed not as a tragedy, but as an act of resilience and survival. As in the script, she presented it as a story of sly courage rather than abandonment. I intend to seek her blessing before including this detail in the final version of the film since it was a story that she had only shared with a few members of her team.

Adapting her into Alina meant refining rather than imitating, translating years of observation into gestures that function on screen while preserving her complexity and essence. It was a reminder that lived experience resists the neatness dramatic form often demands.

Erik

Erik is an amalgam of a particular type of man I encountered across multiple government jobs – someone who values status and financial security above all else. He entered the public service not out of conviction, but to optimize his quality of life, always with one eye fixed on the top of his pay bracket. The Erik type excels in interviews and knows exactly what to say, and how to

say it, to secure the job and gain favour among his peers. He is unsentimental and rarely lets his guard down, especially when it comes to workplace politics. Ironically, his true nature is obvious to everyone except him. I consciously did not want to turn him into an overt antagonist or a caricature. Too broad and he becomes satire; too subtle and nothing lands. Holding him in that space preserved the tone and supported my effort to translate this amalgam of a character into my story without inflating it.

Laurel

Laurel is also an amalgam character. She represents the doe-eyed, hardworking, well-intentioned new recruits who enter the public service believing the system works the way it is supposed to. She is strong in her convictions and earnest in her approach. Laurel is not particularly good at navigating the social games of the office, and when she stops by your cubicle, it is rarely for small talk. There is usually a purpose, a document, or a problem that needs solving. She takes her work seriously and grounds her arguments in credible evidence rather than politics or posturing. People like Laurel form the backbone of every team and, more broadly, are the reason the system functions in the first place.

Lily

Lily was inspired by a figure who seemed to drift through the office hallways. No one knew exactly what her role was, which team she belonged to, or how long she had been there and I do not think anyone ever questioned it. She is one of the few characters who required little transformation. She was less an act of autofiction than a direct transplant from lived experience.

Mayor Deakin

Mayor Deakin actually grew out of my time working alongside a senior medical official during the pandemic. He admitted to me that he loved the visibility of the role and quietly dreaded going back to a more anonymous life once it was all over. That stayed with me, the idea of someone being driven less by policy than by the feeling of being seen. I took that energy and channeled it into Deakin, but recast him as a social media influencer in his twenties. I had no interest in writing a smooth, practiced politician with fake charm.

What really interests me is how attention itself has become political currency. Data from the 2025 Media Ecosystem Observatory shows that influencers now drive over 60% of all political engagement online (Media Ecosystem Observatory). For a lot of people, these creators have replaced traditional institutions as the primary source of information. In *Rideau*, that shift gave me a way to rethink power on screen. Deakin doesn't need policy depth or institutional weight, he just needs an audience. Watching how visibility operates in real life helped me shape him into someone who understands that being seen equates to power in our current world.

I was also thinking about authenticity in politics. It is rare, but when it does appear, it tends to capture public attention quite effectively. Part of the appeal of the far right has been tone rather than ideology: people grew tired of listening to elected officials speak in rehearsed soundbites. Saying the wrong thing began to feel more honest than talking but saying nothing at all. More and more audiences are moving away from traditional news brands in favor of "personality-led" creators who offer unfiltered commentary rather than dry facts (Newman et al. 10). There is a clear parallel with social media culture. Influencers often build careers around exaggerated or

curated versions of themselves while claiming authenticity. But much like Rook, he eventually starts to reawaken from his hibernation once he gets a taste of his core, authentic self.

Mina

Mina is based on my mother. My mother was relieved, even proud, when I secured a government job, and deeply anxious when I later decided to leave it to pursue filmmaking. In early drafts of *Rideau*, Mina had a larger presence. I gave her more scenes and more explicit conversations with Rook about stability and risk. But the more I explained their dynamic, the more it felt heavy-handed. The tension became too clear, too resolved.

In *Rideau*, Mina now appears in only a single scene. My initial instinct was to give her a more prominent role, but I was inspired by *Inside Llewyn Davis*, where Llewyn's interactions with his sister and father exist as brief, self-contained moments rather than fully developed arcs. I realized that one scene could provide enough emotional context, hinting at where Rook inherited both his anxiety and the idea that stability should always come before satisfaction, without being too explicit.

Also, it is true that my mother once sequestered herself in her apartment after reading that a bear had escaped from a zoo a few towns over. The bear itself is incidental. What matters is the instinct to retreat, to treat a distant threat as immediate. In *Rideau*, that impulse becomes part of the film's texture, a quiet way of showing how fear shapes behavior without turning it into a dramatic event.

Rose

Rose was largely conceived as an original character, though several of her qualities were drawn directly from my wife and written into the script, particularly her ability to cut through noise and remain grounded while the world around her appears to be spiraling. She is present, practical, and focused on what is actually happening rather than what might go wrong next. She ended up being one of the only emotionally balanced characters in the film, which was not something I set out to do consciously. I wanted her to function as a voice of reason while still maintaining a tough exterior. The contradiction between steadiness and sharpness felt familiar and, more importantly, believable.

August

August is based on a younger, more idealistic version of myself. He represents a time before resignation set in, before security began to eclipse curiosity. Growing up, I watched my parents accept jobs out of necessity rather than fulfillment. Naturally, when my brother and I were deciding what careers to pursue, financial stability played a more important role than pursuing one's dreams. This speaks to why I never felt fulfilled in any of my jobs.

As a parent myself now, I can better appreciate their perspective, but I do not want my son to repeat the same mistake I made in settling for a comfortable career over one that he is truly passionate about. At the time of writing, my son is five years old and wants to become a scientist so he can design robots that fart. That earnest absurdity matters to me. It shapes how I think about August and about the responsibility of not passing down our fears to our loved ones. A friend's young daughter once learned that I wanted to make movies and asked, sincerely, "If you

want to make movies, why do you work in an office?" I had no clever response. Leaving the government became, in part, a decision made for my son. I did not want him to grow up believing that the best one could hope for was to quietly exist.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Writing *Rideau* meant drawing from a professional world that still exists and that I was part of for many years. Even though the film is not a commentary on policy or bureaucracy, it grows out of real experience inside a public institution. I recognize that that carries responsibility.

One concern is confidentiality. In government roles, especially during COVID, discretion is part of the job. Even in fiction, I have an obligation not to disclose internal communications, sensitive information, or anything that would compromise public trust. The script does not touch on classified material, private files, or privileged conversations. The bureaucratic tone in the film comes from lived experience, but not from revealing anything that was not already broadly observable.

Another issue is fairness. It would be easy to turn institutional frustration into cynicism and write characters as lazy, self-serving, or incompetent. That would not reflect my experience, and it would flatten the story. Most of the people I worked with were intelligent and trying to do meaningful work within constraints. The film critiques patterns such as caution, optics, hierarchy, and inertia rather than targeting real individuals. I am careful not to present public service as corrupt or hollow simply to heighten drama. I also resisted inventing clearer villains or dramatic betrayals simply to force momentum. That kind of escalation would have made the story structurally cleaner, but emotionally less honest.

Character representation required its own care. When you write from life, there is always the temptation to exaggerate someone's quirks or frustrations because they make good scenes. I tried to resist that. The characters in *Rideau* are shaped for narrative purposes, but they are not meant to be portraits or veiled versions of specific people. Traits are adjusted, contexts are shifted, and

motivations are simplified to serve the story. Just as importantly, I avoided writing anyone as a villain drawn from real life. Even flawed characters are treated as products of environment, pressure, and habit rather than as targets.

There is also the issue of perspective. Memory is subjective. My experience was shaped by my own temperament, ambitions, and anxieties. That perspective is partial. The film reflects how it felt to me to inhabit that world at that time. It does not claim to define the institution or the people within it. Recognizing that limitation is part of the ethical responsibility of writing autofiction.

Ultimately, the goal was transformation, not exposure. Lived experience provides emotional raw material, but it has to be reshaped carefully. The responsibility is to protect privacy, avoid reputational harm, and resist the urge to settle scores through storytelling. If the film works, it will do so because it captures truth, not because it reveals anything that was entrusted to me in confidence.

CONCLUSION

This thesis began with a question: what tensions and alignments arise when lived experience is translated into contemporary dramatic form? I played it safe with the first feature I wrote, *Please After You*. I set out to write something commercial and accessible, a script that felt viable within the industry. In some ways, it worked. The script sold, it was produced, and it reached an audience. But the experience left me underwhelmed. I realized that aiming for broad appeal was not why I wanted to make films in the first place.

With *Rideau*, I did not want to repeat that approach. I wanted to move away from writing “a script” and toward writing a film. That meant leaning into subtext, imagery, atmosphere, and mood rather than focusing solely on plot mechanics. I became less interested in scenes that existed to move the story forward and more interested in what lingered after they ended.

In the process, I encountered the core tension at the heart of this thesis. Classical narrative structure privileges escalation and transformation. Lived experience, at least mine, often unfolds through hesitation, routine, and incremental shifts. The temptation was to exaggerate that experience into crisis to satisfy structure. Instead, I tried to let the friction remain.

Rideau does not reject dramatic form, but it does resist forcing experience into something cleaner than it was. The story allows for partial change, unresolved feelings, and small movements that matter mostly to the person making them. That, for me, is where the alignment sits. Lived experience does not have to be inflated to become cinematic. It just has to be shaped carefully and honestly.

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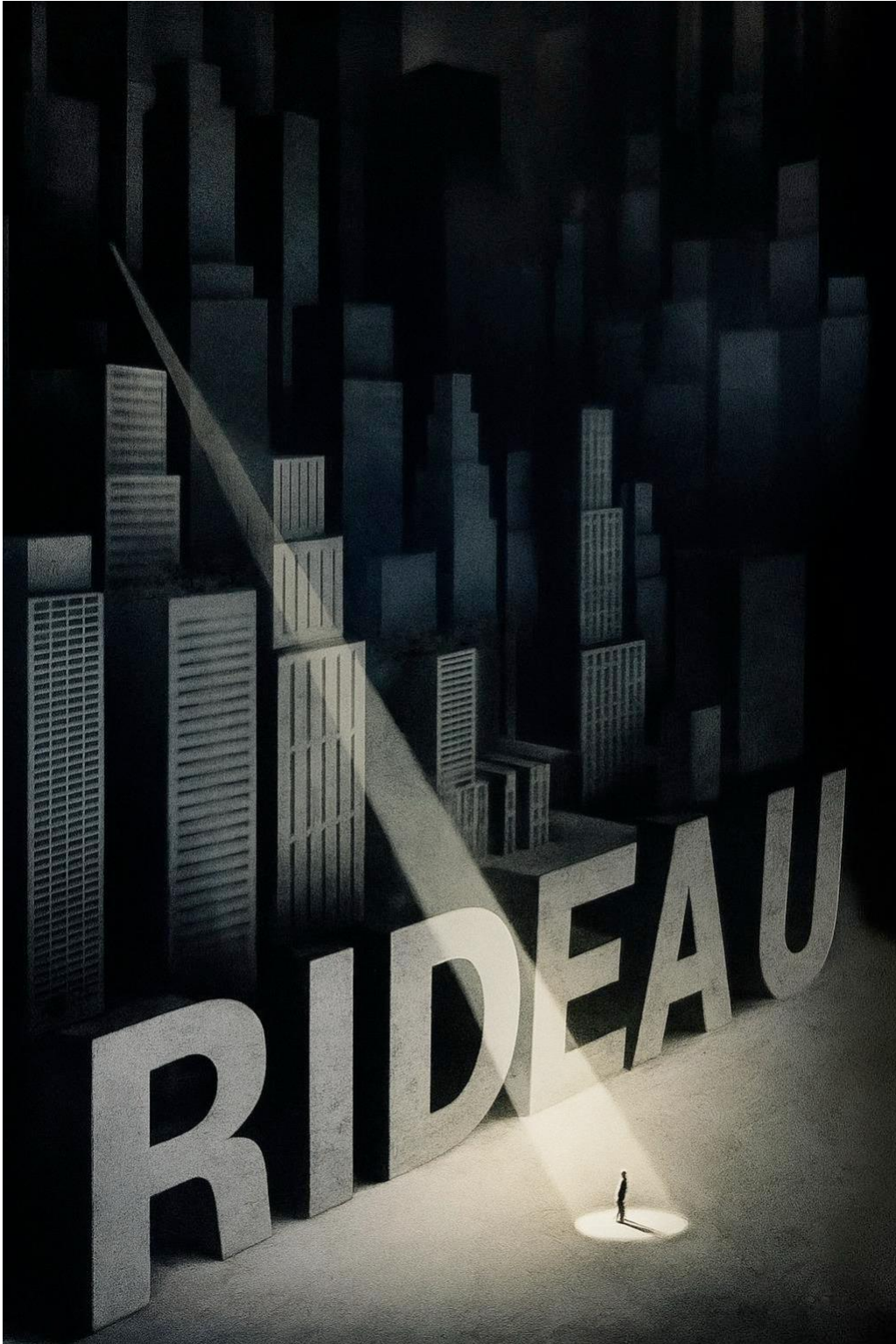
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APPENDIX A: MOCK FILM POSTER



Credit: Adapted from *The Double*, Dir. Joshua Ayoade

APPENDIX B: VISUAL INSPIRATION



Photo Credit: Amir Kahn mouee



Film still from *After Hours*, Dir. Martin Scorsese



Film Still from *Punch Drunk Love*, Dir. Paul Thomas Anderson



Film Still from *Inside Llewyn Davis*, Dir. Ethan and Joel Coen