

RETROGRADE

ADRIAN MURRAY

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Abstract

Retrograde is a feature film screenplay that follows a disagreement between a police officer and a young woman who hold different interpretations of an incident leading to a traffic citation. After a jarring interaction with a police officer leaves her with a ticket for unsafe driving, Molly challenges the citation through the justice system. This battle bleeds into her personal life when Gabrielle, her housemate and key witness, doesn't come to her aid and seems to believe the “official” version of events. Molly refuses to pay the fine, and struggles to stand up to the system and hold the police officer accountable. When her driver’s license is at stake, Molly must decide if her ideals are more important than her comfortable commuter lifestyle. *Retrograde* is a dryly comic, layered exploration of accountability, justice, truth, and institutional power dynamics.

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Inspiration

At grad symposium, I shared my idea of writing a film based on a young woman fighting a traffic citation. During the break, several faculty members approached me, enthusiastic to tell me their own stories of fighting parking and/or speeding tickets. I heard Howie's successful appeal against an illegal right-hand turn, Phil's attempt to dismiss the demerits on a speeding ticket, Amnon's day in court citing arcane parking definitions to avoid paying his fine, and Tereza's story about why she can no longer drive in Quebec. While my story was still in flux, I was inspired by how worked up my professors were about their own struggles against traffic by-laws.

A ticket my father received was the structural base for this script – a fine he felt was unjust, leading to a court battle where he was forced to plead guilty for a reduced fine. I found something intriguing in this predicament: it could be a small-scale way to discuss the larger implications of an individual's relationship to authority. Here was an interesting combination of the quotidian and extraordinary – getting a traffic ticket is such a common occurrence, yet the pageantry of courtroom procedure gave it some theatrical gravitas.

The specifics surrounding my father's ticket also became important for the story. According to him, he was trying to merge on to the highway, but a police cruiser matched his speed at every opportunity. With the merging lane coming to an end, my father sped ahead of the cruiser in order to merge and avoid going off the road. Naturally, he was ticketed. Feeling wronged by this police officer, my father took the ticket to court. The police officer was there with a few lawyers. The judge listened to my father's side, lowered the fine significantly, and sent him on his way. In my father's opinion, the whole thing was a face-saving effort – the judge

seemed to sympathize with him, but couldn't allow his version of events to overturn a police officer's statement.

While these events may be the inevitable result of challenging a traffic ticket, I was compelled by the system's fail-safe that a police officer's testimony was worth more than a citizen's. Without evidence – video or otherwise – the police can pull an accusation from thin air, write it on a ticket, and have it be considered evidence. A statement from the accused, however, is seen merely as an excuse to avoid paying the fine.

In terms of speeding/parking tickets, this is a relatively low-stakes scenario, but the power dynamic it lays bare has dangerous implications. This small-scale event has the potential to show the futility of the individual vs the system in a straightforward and comedic way.

As a writer and filmmaker, I am drawn to the drama and quiet comedy of the small, everyday moments of our lives within the context of larger political events or systems. My short film, *Free Parking* (2012), follows a restless young man searching in vain for a political demonstration to join, and my feature comedy, *Withdrawn* (2017), examines debt and apathy against the oblique backdrop of the War on Terror.

In a similar vein, *Retrograde* is inspired by millennial pushback against power institutions and the fight to make one's voice heard by the establishment. I am interested in exploring how the stable routines of our lives, however extraordinary or mundane, can be what permit the continued existence and efficacy of power structures. With *Retrograde*, I want to explore how intertwined politics are with our habits, and how power structures naturally become rote and invisible. Molly struggles to be taken seriously – professionally, as a friend, daughter, and roommate. This film examines accountability (or lack thereof) of the powerful and powerless, and institutional power.

The Crime

In its earliest version, *Retrograde* was more of a collection of interlocking scenes depicting Molly, a put-upon young woman, making her stand for herself against a very minor traffic violation for which she was in the wrong. The guiding principle was to show a human reaction to petty attempts at control – the tipping point for one person to feel that enough is enough. In this draft, as in previous drafts, other aspects of Molly’s life inform her legal battle; however, what she is fighting for has changed significantly in the final script. Initially Molly was engaged in some combination of venting her personal life's frustrations through the court system, and arguing that although she broke the law, she felt it was unjust for *her* to be fined for such a petty offense. In one of my fruitful discussions with Amnon, I said she had become like Kelly Anne Conway: evading blame and responsibility by pointing to greater unaddressed injustices, such as the police brutality of the G-20 protests.

After reviewing this draft with Amnon, I realized that there were some problems, mainly a glaring one of character motivation. I had a good structure for an intriguing character study – getting an “unjust” ticket and fighting it all the way to court – but the first iteration felt muddy. There wasn't a clear through-line for Molly: she was simply fighting in the moment to avoid blame, grasping any tactic or motivation available in the scene.

To make Molly's motivation clear, I thought her indignation should perhaps come from a feeling of being genuinely wronged by the system. I suggested to Amnon that perhaps she had made an illegal turn and received the ticket, but that there was inadequate signage to indicate this illegality to drivers. This was a poor compromise from the get-go; Amnon spotted my reluctance to make her either right or wrong, and especially the implausibility of my proposed “crime” for

Molly to commit. “In Canada, driving law isn't a series of entrapments,” Amnon pointed out. My proposed solution was so far out of known practice that it pulled the reader out of the story.

After this discussion, I began to question my own motivations for writing the piece. In some ways, I was trying to have my cake and eat it too. By pointing out glaring oversteps of power from the government (the G-20 protests), I was trying to make a piece that held power accountable. But at the same time, Molly had knowingly broken the law, yet was hiding behind real issues. Why was I trying to make light of real struggles against institutional power? Perhaps I was shielding myself from writing in hyperbole, from making any strong statements about institutional power dynamics. The film was a “workings of fortune” story about an intricate series of events that left Molly frustrated, but laid no real blame.

“Your generation isn't angry enough,” was my reader Tereza Barta's response to early versions of the story. I protested – I was plenty angry with the system for many grievances – but my instinct to maintain the status quo was too strong. While I was angry, what right had I to rail against a system that worked so well for me so much of the time? I went back to my inspiration – the ticket my father received when he was trying to merge on the highway. When Tereza asked why I didn't simply use this event for the story I began to make excuses – I wasn't there, I didn't actually see it happen so I wasn't so sure it happened the way my father described, and I found it hard to believe that a police officer would do something like this. Tereza was surprised that I didn't believe my father's version of events, which led to a discussion of my implicit, almost blind trust of the system, a system that I had seen with my own eyes be unjust in small and large ways. “The system works so well, it's insidious and comfortable,” I concluded.

This discussion led to a re-focus for me, locking a few thematic elements into place. If Molly is fighting against an actual injustice – the same incident that my father described – then

her motivation is clear from the get-go. If people in her life react with scepticism, it becomes an interesting obstacle for Molly to overcome interpersonally, and one that reveals the Canadian/first-world trust in government and our existing power systems. In a “she said/ he said” situation with a police officer, Molly's fight could become a fight for the truth with far-reaching thematic implications to reveal the futility of the truth against power – or one's personal truth against the system.

With this re-focus in place, a major turning point in the script is when Gabrielle, Molly's housemate and passenger during the incident, refuses to come to her aid as a witness in court. Gabrielle argues that because she didn't see the police car as her view was obstructed, she cannot go to court and effectively lie about what she saw. Molly can uphold that it isn't a lie if it happened. By not directly showing the incident, the script took on a dynamic energy; that is, the audience was put in Gabrielle's shoes. Do we believe Molly's version of the story or not? As the audience, we are faced with hearing the “she said/ he said” versions of events – the official version and Molly's version – and we choose a side. Having Molly lie to her housemates about the result of her court hearing reveals the power of lies over truth. No matter if the audience believes Molly is in the right or wrong, this lie now shows Molly's dedication to her version of events. She uses a lie to maintain her story – was the system doing the same thing? The question of the story becomes what is true, and why do we believe it?

Proper Procedure

This film has no intention of being a demonstrative guide to the “proper procedure” for challenging fines. That being said, the script did demand I spend hours on YouTube, watching tutorials on this very subject. My recommended videos became a list of tips and tricks to overturn parking tickets, how to act as your own lawyer, and courtroom battles of people fighting speeding tickets – the latter of which were of the most interest to me, as at the time the script had a full courtroom hearing. Almost a sub-genre of its own, entire YouTube channels are dedicated to people's courtroom battles against minor citations. Most of the defenses these people put forward are based on libertarian notions that no law is just, and a common tactic for the defendant is to ask the issuing officer to recite the constitution. Much of the time the defendants are not denying the charges they received, but contend simply that any law is unjust, or that it is even unconstitutional to have a law they didn't vote directly for apply to them.

While it is interesting to explore this mindset, this situation wasn't what I had in mind for Molly. Molly is not a fervent libertarian – she isn't against the rules, but feels they haven't been broken by her. Oddly, I couldn't find any videos on these pages where someone was arguing that they *didn't* commit the act for which they are fined. To make matters even more difficult, all of these videos are American, so I couldn't be sure the same procedure applied to Ontario. I was wary of becoming too fixated on the procedures, but my approach did call for some adherence to real practices. For some real-world research, I contacted my father to glean the process from his perspective. At the time he went through the system, he had to fill out some forms, mail them, and then show up to his scheduled court appearance. I was a little disappointed in the lack of intermediate steps for dramatic purposes, but considering this was about a decade ago, I assumed some changes must have been made. A YouTube video made by the City of Toronto (Your Day

in Court - Toronto Court Services) explains the process over upbeat muzak. According to this video, an intermediate step is added to prevent the issue from going all the way to court: the Early Resolution Meeting, a one-on-one meeting with a prosecutor where some resolution can be made. If no agreement can be reached, then the next step is court.

With an eye to drama, I was happy to find this was the current practice. It gave me a chance to have Molly double down on her convictions – she could be offered a deal and refuse, believing that her story, along with Gabrielle as her witness, can overturn her fine. It was also an opportunity to meet the lawyer who would be prosecuting her case, so her enemy would no longer be the faceless system, but personified through the prosecutor. Structurally, this practice also allowed me to punctuate the escalation of this conflict.

“You'd better make your film soon, they're changing the system...” My father-in-law is a lawyer, and when I told him the premise of the film, he broke the news to me that in order to streamline the process, Toronto is removing the courtroom from the equation. Instead, violations such as Molly's will be handled in a less formal manner, similar to the early resolution meeting. Apparently this change is due to the high volume of challenged tickets the city has to contend with – it has become a huge financial burden to allow them all to go to court. This news disheartened me. I was still holding on to the pageantry of courtroom procedure as integral to the film.

I had to decide that while I should pull from reality, I shouldn't be completely bound to the current procedures. Not only was the film not about the correct procedure, but everyone I spoke to who had gone through the system had different processes. Some had email exchanges, some had meetings, and many never went as far as the courtroom. What mattered is that there was motivation for the procedures I had in the film that felt in line with reality, and offered

opposition to Molly's objective. I wanted to have four interactions with the system for Molly. These interactions would allow me to show the situation escalating, with each interaction a point for Molly to be given an opportunity to drop the issue. Now I had the structure of the film.

To this end, from research and personal anecdotes, I assembled appropriate escalating steps for Molly to take. The first one was a very simple email interaction with court services. This step was gleaned through discussions with my reader, Tereza, on citations she has received – the process simply being to send your side of the story to a faceless adjudicator online, who makes a judgment call and responds via email with the ruling. To add some history to their interactions, the nameless adjudicator became the prosecutor whom Molly would further encounter in the film.

The second step was for Molly to go in person to Service Ontario to schedule an early resolution meeting. This step could be done online or over the phone; in terms of the drama, I wanted to make a slightly bigger obstacle out of this for Molly and tie it into her work subplot by having her humble herself to request time off. Having had to take time off work myself for Service Ontario appointments such as license renewal, address changes etc., I felt it was appropriate that Molly would have to take action in person. It rang true to the type of irritating bureaucracy many of us have had to navigate. This step would mark the end of the first act.

The third step was found in my research – the early resolution meeting that I previously mentioned. This was the first face-to-face interaction Molly would have with her prosecutor, and would be the first time she is offered a deal. Molly would have a decision to make in the case – continue pressing on, or pay a substantially reduced fine. With her decision to press on, her objective now changes: she must get Gabrielle to be a witness for her. Because of this change of tack, this meeting offered a good midpoint.

On to the final confrontation between Molly and the prosecutor, where she is expected to present Gabrielle as a witness. This final confrontation had a few iterations. In early drafts, this confrontation took the form of a court appearance, which had the advantage of being visually interesting and a clear escalation of events, but the scene became bogged down in procedure and courtroom etiquette. I researched the procedure to present a case in court, what you were permitted to say and how you could say it, how cross-examination worked, when you could object, and so on. I made an effort to work with these rules and to allow them to shape the scene. However, the scene became unwieldy in length, and the humour and frustration of these rules were used up too quickly to be sustaining.

It became clear to me that, having tried writing the courtroom version of the scene, I wanted the final confrontation to be something more intimate: a forum where Molly was able to meet her accuser and level a response without the rigidity of the courtroom. However, this interaction needed to be a natural next step and escalation, a consideration that led me to research the judicial pre-trial hearing. According to www.lawintoronto.com:

“In certain circumstances, cases that do not resolve after a Crown Pretrial will proceed to one or more Judicial Pretrials (JPT). A JPT is a meeting involving the defence lawyer, the Crown Attorney, the Police Officer in Charge of the Case, and a Judge. Usually these meetings are held in the Judge’s chambers. Occasionally, they are held in court. The JPT allows the defence lawyer to discuss and negotiate the case with the Crown Attorney while receiving input from a Judge.”

An event like a JPT offered a meeting more casual than the courtroom, but the inclusion of a judge and the police officer that issued Molly's ticket gave it authority, and it was clearly an escalation of events. It allowed Molly to come face to face with the “monster” she had been fighting against the whole film. With a JPT as the setting, writing this scene became more focused on each character's objective as opposed to how well I could follow court procedure. When taking place in the courtroom, the scene ran over 20 pages, and much of that length was an

attempt to work through the correct procedure. While this scene still remains the longest in the script, it now feels much more lean and to the point.

Theme & Themes

When writing, I'm reluctant to start with a pre-determined thematic statement. Because I tend to be inspired by a character's objective or motivation, my first draft process is to let the character loose towards their goal. While the resulting draft offers fuel for the conflict – turning points, characters, etc. – it tends to lack a thematic statement. It's with great reluctance that I return to the draft and plumb it for meaning.

In the very first version of *Retrograde*, Molly's character struggles to make her point. She takes the court's offer for a plea deal for a reduced fine, and vents her anger towards her new housemate, whose only crime towards Molly is not doing the dishes and being too vocal about astrology. While this version laid the structural groundwork by clarifying the steps Molly takes to fight her ticket, very little was revealed about Molly or the thematic forces at work in the script. The ending offered little to crystallize Molly's motivations or her internal state. The script read like a downward spiral with no variation.

This draft led to fruitful conversations with Amnon and Tereza. Amnon posited that the script was an exploration of social agreements, an insight that helped me situate the script at a sociological level. We discussed the state of mind behind the “sovereign citizen” movement – people who drive without licenses and refuse to pay taxes as protest against overbearing government. Tereza zeroed in on the struggle of individual versus the system, and suggested that the meaning that should be pulled from the script is the dehumanizing effects of following the letter of the law. While each discussion was food for thought, the disparity between their interpretations was cause for concern for me, and I understood where clarification was needed. There was a through line between both of their interpretations, and it was my job to underscore this line.

My first insight into Molly was when I re-wrote the climactic courtroom scene where Molly faces off against the Officer, Judge, and Prosecutor. Instead of taking any deal, Molly refuses to admit any guilt, despite some financial motivation. This stance clarified Molly's force of will for me, and lead the way to the final version of the script.

When writing a first draft, I have to place some implicit trust in my instincts. Although I'm not against removing characters, scenes, or beats, I have to trust that the seemingly disparate elements I've included in the script have some connection. I took stock of what was important to me in this script. First was that Molly had to feel she was wronged, and must refuse to admit any guilt. Second was the B runner of the astrology-enthused roommate, and third, my reluctance to show directly the crime for which Molly was ticketed. I connected these dots with the force of truth: Molly is holding on to her truth, Gabrielle finds her truth through astrology, and by not seeing Molly's "crime" directly, the audience isn't given the truth. Hence, the film explores the futility of absolute truth.

Without seeing the crime Molly is citing, we are presented with two un-falsifiable claims. The scientific method holds that an assertion of something is not evidence for it. This is true in Molly's case and the police officer's, and without either of them holding evidence, what we think is true becomes a matter of belief. In Molly's case, it becomes clear that those with power will hold the truth, and Molly's only way to maintain her truth, ironically, is to lie.

Astrology has been a rising trend in our generation. At least anecdotally, it's become rare that a group of millennials meet up without sharing their signs – and that seems to have a polarizing effect on people. On the one hand, astrology can be argued to be pure pseudoscience and/or amusement, like reading your horoscope in a magazine. On the other hand, those who do take astrology seriously often ask why we are opposed to something that provides solace,

guidance, and insight – and what harm is there in believing in something completely harmless, unlike many religions? Of course, one could then ask why we even need to believe in anything at all, other than our need for comfort in truth, and a truth we can ostensibly trust.

The inclusion of astrology in the film led me to find an opposing thematic force to truth: as opposed to “truth vs. deceit,” the thematic conflict becomes “truth vs. belief.” Molly asserts throughout that holding a belief does not make something true – especially in her situation with the police officer where their disagreement is binary – they either did or didn't wave her in. Gabrielle, however, has a broader and more overlapping view of what constitutes truth. As Gabrielle says, “beliefs can become true when you act on them.” This statement is rejected by Molly as a petty defense of astrology pseudoscience, and indeed it's a statement that stretches her empirical understanding of truth.

This statement, too, informs and colours Molly's second hearing. When Molly challenges the police officer's judgment that her driving was “unsafe,” the prosecution cites that the law states a police officer need only deem it unsafe for a ticket to be lawfully issued – in effect, the officer needs to *believe* Molly's driving to be unsafe for it to be legally unsafe. Because neither the officer nor Molly has demonstrable evidence for their claims, they are effectively arguing contradictory beliefs. The final statement to Molly's assertion that “belief doesn't make something true” becomes that with enough power – in this case the power of the state – belief creates truth. When two beliefs oppose, power wins.

Thematically, I began to think of the script as the interaction between truth, belief, and power. Molly's struggle, on the surface, represents a struggle for truth; Gabrielle is the nexus for belief, and the police officer and court institution are power. I was happy to find that the Webster dictionary definition of truth was amenable to the statement of the film:

Truth (noun):

- a) (1): the body of real things, events, and facts
(2): the state of being the case
(3): often capitalized: a transcendental, fundamental, or spiritual reality
- b) : a judgment, proposition, or idea that is true or accepted as true

By looking at this definition, we can even separate each character by their understanding of truth: Molly understands part 1, Gabrielle part 3, and the state b. It was an interesting discovery to find that the definition contains these seemingly conflicting versions of a concept generally deemed solid and indisputable. Indeed, the closer I examined the concept of truth, the more unstable it became.

Situating in Current Culture

Given my age and the age of most of my story's characters, my concerns here are millennial – climate change, growing inequality, right-wing populism – and it feels impossible to enact any meaningful change in the face of these issues. Indeed, the millennial experience is one of comfortable powerlessness in the face of looming existential threats.

The stakes for Molly are predominantly intellectual. She has a job and safety net, so in a material sense the \$300 fine isn't going to cause her to lose any more than the dollar value. What's at stake for Molly for the majority of the script is that her notion of truth and justice is challenged. She feels she has to hold the system accountable for the wrong that has been done to her. Her discussion with Caleb puts her conundrum in a larger context: she now carries the outrage of Caleb's treatment during the G-20 protests, and can symbolically hold the police accountable for such treatment. For Molly, then, her seemingly petty traffic ticket becomes representative of all injustices. She has the opportunity to stand up to injustice, to hold the system accountable, and make the truth be heard. However, when it becomes clear she will lose her license if she doesn't pay the fine, she pays and saves face by lying about winning to her housemates.

Molly's struggle to be heard by the system is a struggle borne out of my own feelings of futility in the face of the government – the aforementioned feeling of powerlessness in the face of existential threats. Molly struggles to hold on to her convictions, but when maintaining them threatens her comfortable lifestyle – her ability to drive – she takes the easy out and pays up. The question the film posits is how much is Molly willing to give up for her cause? And the answer is not much. While this response isn't uniquely millennial, I hope the script puts this human behaviour in a modern context.

Influences

While there are many films I find inspiring, and I'm not above stealing an idea or two from produced work, I try to keep this theft formal; in writing terms, this theft mainly comes down to act structure and scene structure. Art does spur my analytical thinking about topics, but I do believe it's important to keep topical and content inspiration to real life. It's important to bring some ideas to the table that I have some claim to, as opposed to parroting others. The paradox, of course, is that there are no new topics for dramatization – whatever I write about has been written about before and will be again – and my only currency in this field is my honest and considered interpretation of a topic.

Keeping my influences to the formal, this has been influenced by Corneliu Porumboiu's films, especially *Police, Adjective*. The microscopic focus on one police officer's reluctance to arrest a young pot smoker elevates the topic to a profound and comic musing on what it means to obey the letter of the law. This tight focus was important for *Retrograde*, as Molly's crime is insignificant with relatively low stakes; what it means to her to get her truth acknowledged, however, becomes crucial, and can take on greater meaning in today's political and legal landscape.

My influences often come after I've made a creative decision. Once I made the structural decision that the film would climax with Molly's day at court, and would begin with her first encounter with the system towards this adjudication, I looked for existing films that supported this structure. From these films I could analyze what's important for this structure to work, as well as how others have successfully implemented it.

With regard to structure, the first 10-15 pages of all my previous drafts were extremely challenging. The film only started to walk on its own legs, so to speak, once Molly took the first

step to fight her ticket. The unavoidable lessons of Syd Field had me hardwired to place the inciting incident at roughly the 10-minute mark: set up the world, and break it with an event that ignites the need for the protagonist to go toward their objective. In all my drafts, then, Molly receiving the ticket was my inciting incident at roughly the 10-minute mark, and it wasn't until the end of act one that Molly took action towards appealing it. The first act was devoted to her decision to fight the ticket as opposed to pay it. While structurally sound, the plot read like aimless table-setting until act two. Additionally, what came to define Molly's character – her relentless fight to get this ticket dismissed – came too late; the first act then had to establish a character who *would* take the citation this far, but this character establishment had to be through other means, none of which were working to my liking.

In retrospect, the answer is that Molly's first action toward appealing her ticket should be the inciting incident. I began to envision a new scene in the first act: Molly describes in detail the events of her getting unjustly ticketed to Rose, her best friend/housemate. Rose feels that Molly must have done something to deserve the ticket, and Molly, frustrated, struggles to convince Rose otherwise.

When I suggested this new idea to Tereza, she recommended Zhang Yimou's *The Story Of Qiu Ju* to me as related viewing for *Retrograde*. Similar to what I now had in mind, *The Story Of Qiu Ju* opens with the titular character taking her husband to a doctor for treatment after he was kicked in the groin by their village Chief. From there, she immediately seeks an apology from their Chief for this action, but doesn't get one. The rest of the film follows escalating attempts from her to obtain this apology. The structure is satisfying and convincing. With the defining event of the film having already taken place, we are introduced to Qiu Ju, and she is permitted to be defined by her motivation to get her apology. I immediately could picture a

similar structure for *Retrograde*. All the necessary points of the place setting in the first act could be folded into Molly's actions toward fighting the ticket. The whole film suddenly felt tighter and more focused and character-driven.

Writing For Production

I rarely begin working on a script without some idea of how it will be produced. Because a script is by nature an unfinished work, I find the process of writing too frustrating and depressing if there's no plan to actually shoot it. My first feature, *Withdrawn*, was written knowing what locations, actors, and equipment would be used, and with the understanding that it could only be filmed on weekends between the crew's work schedules. While *Withdrawn* had some moderate success, I was not hounded by wealthy producers seeking to fund my second feature. As a result, I would likely be seeking arts council funding for the film, and in the best case scenario, be shooting on a micro-budget of under \$100,000. It's with this budget in mind that I wrote the screenplay.

I had to be conscientious with regard to practical details such as scouting and securing locations, casting talent, and even details as minute as making sure not to show the police car so that we would not have to rent one. While writing within my own limits of logistics and budget may seem as a restriction, I found it freeing and beneficial to the story in many ways. Fewer characters means more time for the audience to get to know Molly, her roommates, and colleagues. We are not inundated with a large cast, and as a result, I can focus more on the characters who are in the story. Fewer locations means challenging myself to give reasons to repeat locations, and to heighten 'easy' locations from a story perspective. One specific instance in which location restrictions informed the script is in scene 1, where Molly receives the ticket from the cop. Knowing that my best-case budget would not allow me to safely shoot curbside on a highway, I decided that Molly, being unfamiliar with the process of being pulled over, would take the next exit and pull into a carpool lot. This decision leads to a brief exchange where the cop lets her know how she's supposed to just pull off to the side for next time. What started as a

restriction led to a more interesting and comedic exchange that gave each character more definition.

A budget-conscious writing habit that carried over from *Withdrawn* was to give the lead many opportunities to be alone. From a production standpoint, this gesture reduces the cost of cast and generally speeds up production, as there are fewer on-set variables. However, what I really enjoy about writing solitary characters is the intimacy this narrow focus creates between the audience and protagonist. It's completely artificial to be able to observe someone when they are alone, and by doing so we get to see unfiltered behavior. Offering a change of dynamic, I can show how someone behaves when they are around others versus when they don't need to 'perform' for anyone, as they are free of any social scripts. One of my favourite scenes arose from this instinct – when Molly is driving to work and takes a detour in a parking lot to check her blind spots. I really like the opportunity that solitude gives me to show what's on someone's mind without dialogue.

I also wrote the film with actress Molly Reisman in mind, as well as other colleagues for other roles. This decision helped the characters come to life even more for me as I wrote them. That is, while the characters are not exact replicas of their real-life counterparts, the blurring of art and life helped me to brainstorm personalities, behaviors, and motivations.

Structure

My first feature, *Withdrawn*, wasn't filmed from a full screenplay, but a 15-page outline of roughly 50 scenes. While it was clear what the catalyst and conclusion of that story was, I had purposefully structured the rest – a few parallel storylines – to be spread evenly throughout. I didn't want an event to outweigh any other, and I wanted the story to be something mined for, as opposed to offered freely through conventions of structure. I did my best to eschew conventional film structure in favor of an oblique combination of seemingly insignificant moments. While *Withdrawn* had been informed by films such as *It's Impossible to Learn To Plow By Reading Books* by Richard Linklater, and by formalist filmmakers such as James Benning, the straightforward conflict offered by the traffic citation in *Retrograde* seemed to demand some emotional and narrative clarity as opposed to the opaque, formally driven films I had been drawn to on my previous work.

Having received my BFA in screenwriting, I was familiar with the structural conventions defined by Syd Field and Blake Snyder, but had not had significant practice implementing them. My short films, *Free Parking* and *Drinking Games*, are both straightforward narratives, but structuring a short versus a feature would prove difficult for me. A reluctance to use formula has me sceptical of the three act structure charts popular in writing classes; it seemed reductive for me to force an “all is lost” moment, or worry about whether my “fun and games” section was up to snuff.

When I begin writing, I let the characters take me on a structure-less journey. Knowing where they start, I let my mind wander with them as I jot down disparate scenes and isolated sequences. From this, I start to allow structure to take hold. As I found with theme, you cannot force structure – even when you know what you “should” be inserting on a certain page or in a

certain act. Sometimes structure needs to evolve organically through the very process of writing, and like theme, should be discovered along the way – and sometimes even at the very end. Yes, sometimes it helps to grocery shop before making a meal, but other times it is exciting and fruitful to see what you can whip up with ingredients on-hand.

In early stages of outlining, I am only concerned with where the story begins, where it ends, and the struggle(s) to get there. After a few drafts, I can then start to identify turning points. I may begin to see where the story can be 'divided' into acts and sequences. As was the case with *Retrograde*, I saw that each encounter Molly had with legal authorities was effectively a turning point. I identified an act structure based off these encounters, and revised the subplots accordingly, to give some balance to the script. While I find it hard to impose some of the more granular structural mainstays, I find that identifying turning points and revelations are an effective way to give shape to a story.

Non Sequiturs

Possibly the most well-known non sequitur in film is the 'royale with cheese' discussion from *Pulp Fiction*. As critic Roger Ebert writes, “It is Tarantino's strategy in all of his films to have the characters speak at right angles to the action, or depart on flights of fancy.” While I don't draw direct inspiration from Tarantino's work – so often parroted and mimicked with cringe-worthy results – I am inspired by Ebert's analysis of Tarantino's dialogue.

I try to layer non sequiturs into the thematic texture of the script. While they can feel unrelated to Molly's struggle, I've tried to make sure they have some tangential relevance to the film. The first recurring non sequitur is the reference to dating app biographies. This reference comes into play with Molly and her roommates, and is echoed at Molly's workplace when they are trying to write the appropriate 'about' section for their business, and again in the character descriptions in their birth charts. Thematically, these bios tie into the ‘truth’ debate of the film. As Gabrielle mentions to Molly, everyone lies in their bios. We then see Molly's colleagues at work massaging their ‘about’ section into something more flattering. Later, Molly vents frustration with Gabrielle and her birth chart readings, questioning their accuracy. The goal here was to forge a tangential connection between Molly's struggle with her work and with Gabrielle. While inconsequential on a textual level, this connection hopefully allows the audience to connect the themes. While things and events may not be directly related, there is intention and meaning behind their inclusion.

The references to Elon Musk strike me as the most disconnected non sequitur in the script, which is what makes them my favourite. On the surface, these references give Nathan a bit of characterization and act as comedic relief. The small thread follows Nathan spotting a Tesla passing outside their office. The next reference has him citing a quote from Musk during a

meeting – presumably after going on a Wiki-odyssey of Tesla and other Musk enterprises. The final reference has Nathan defending Musk to Caleb, citing his involvement in SpaceX as evidence for his business acumen. It's this SpaceX reference that connects Musk to other elements of the story: SpaceX is dedicated to spaceflight, solar exploration, and the colonization of Mars, and Mars, of course, is an important planet in astrology. While I explain the connection, I may sound like a conspiracy theorist connecting vague dots with coincidence and conjecture, but for me, this connection is not only a funny and hidden bit of comedy, but another bit of subtextual dialogue in the conversation about astrology. Gabrielle posits that the planets can have indirect effects on us, a notion dismissed by Molly as unrealistic speculation and pseudoscience. The mentions of Elon Musk and SpaceX can reframe Gabrielle's contention, however, as SpaceX's mission to colonize Mars can be seen as an example of the planets having a very direct effect on our actions; if Mars were not there, we would not be trying to colonize it.

The references to the 2010 G-20 protests are less non sequitur and more tangential. Thematically, there is a clear connection between this event and Molly's struggle. Its inclusion helps to place Molly's "petty" struggle into a larger context. Through Caleb's account of this event, we get a hint at some of the more severe consequences of the state's power. In early discussions, Tereza was concerned about the effectiveness of its inclusion, considering it dismissible because such a small number of people will understand the reference. While it's true that outside Canada, any reference to the G-20 protests will be potentially lost on an audience, I embraced this specificity and relative obscurity. On the surface level, we get all the information we need from Calab's re-telling of his experience – he was a peaceful protester who was arrested and never got the justice he felt owed to him. Dramatically, we don't need to know any more specifics; still, this reference, for people who remember the event, gives the film an added layer.

I liken its inclusion to the specific cultural references in Corneliu Porumboiu's *The Treasure*. The premise of this film has the neighbour of a young father seeking out his assistance to rent a metal detector to dig up treasure on his grandfather's property. Throughout the story, we get more specifics about the legend surrounding this buried treasure and the cultural events leading to its burial. These details – the rise and fall of communism in Romania and the role of key families – are perhaps too local to have an impact on someone who isn't familiar with the political history of Romania. The reality and specifics of these events do not need to be known for an audience to understand the story, but they add a layered specificity to the character's lives and living situation. Indeed, all of our lives are incredibly esoteric to someone looking in, and this specificity or local colour adds this texture.

Another recurring point is the matter of belief, which layered throughout the script – during any of Gabrielle's astrology talk it comes to play easily, whether someone believes in astrology or not – and is peppered in throughout the other non sequiturs. Caleb's G-20 talk has him discussing the implausible beliefs of a chemtrail conspiracy theorist compared to his rational beliefs in climate change. While joking about what a better neighbourhood this is than her old one, Gabrielle references having to wait for the bus next to an ever-present bible salesman. Rose comes home from work and tells a frustrating story about a customer who refused to believe their coupon wasn't for her place of work. And, of course, the matter of belief comes into play strongly in Molly's final meeting with the prosecutor, judge, and cop. The repetition of this topic, paired with Molly's external struggle with authority, reminds the audience of what forces are at play, and what will be important for the final confrontation.

These references are intended to create a thematic tapestry of disparate elements (the G-20 protests, a traffic ticket, astrology, Elon Musk) that are pulled together through Molly's

struggle and that become a comment on the nature of belief and power. Part of the appeal to me in this unlikely combination of topics is its comedic value. Another appeal is my own view of the chaotic nature of life and the connections we make despite this incoherence. There's humour in obvious diversions from the film's central topic into the tangential, and then satisfaction in being able to connect them thematically. It is a fine line: the references need to feel both tangential and tied to theme. Ideally, they can function in their own right in the scene – simply as comedic relief, as is the case with the Elon Musk thread, or as something more adversarial, as with Molly's relationship to astrology.

The Outline

Working from a robust outline has been immensely helpful for my process, and helps me clearly map out the intention and goal of each scene as a building block to the story as a whole. A bird's-eye-view of the story allows me to quickly and efficiently identify what works and needs more work. I often spend more time on my outline than the screenplay itself. I find that if I have the micro locked, the macro elements sort themselves out.

Part of the reason I prefer working with prose outlines is that I find it a better format to receive feedback. Some writers will claim that one of the purposes of a screenplay is to sell the story as a written document. Perhaps... but I have trouble seeing the screenplay as anything but a blue-print. A screenplay is never actually complete until it has been produced. When getting feedback on my work, I find a reader can get caught up in the macro elements of the screenplay – including specific bits of dialogue, formatting etc. With a prose outline, I find it easier to put the dramatic focus where I want it for a reading audience; the script gives me what I need to direct, but the outline can become something better suited for immediate feedback. Below is a scene (which isn't in the final draft) in outline form:

INT. MOLLY'S CAR - night

Driving home, Molly gets a call from her MOM, which she takes on speakerphone. Concerned, her Mom says that a summons has arrived for Molly from court services. She wants to make sure everything is okay. Molly realizes that her driver's license still has her parent's address.

Molly assuages her Mom's concerns, that it's no big deal; it's just a traffic violation. Molly's GPS notifies her of an upcoming turn, prompting her Mom to make sure Molly is using a hands-free device, because "they'll get you for that."

Molly assures her Mom she is driving safely, and that she'll come by later and get the letter and explain it.

I find this format much more cinematic 'on the page' for a reader. What would have been a 1-2 page scene in screenplay format is now less than ¼ a page, making a faster read with the key points intact. This format allows me to hear the dialogue with more clarity than if I were to begin with the scene in screenplay format. By keeping the dialogue prefaced with descriptive actions (realizes, assures, etc.), I let the dramatic purpose of the exchanges become what's important, as opposed to the macro content of the dialogue. In the early stages, I feel this is the appropriate emphasis to test the story and scenes.

Another way the outline allows me to test the script is through a verbal telling of the story. I can tell a few key colleagues the story with the outline, and I can immediately gauge reaction, attention, and points of confusion: are the jokes landing? Does the story hold their attention? Is this story worth telling someone? It's important to me that the story holds without requiring technical explanations, again, putting the emphasis on the drama. Storytelling is a social activity; just as a screenplay is incomplete without a film, a film is incomplete without an audience. When an important series of events happens to me, I often tell that chain of events to my friends and get their reaction – this telling of the outline puts the story in a social context. As a social tool, art is communication between an audience and the artist(s), and this format allows me to gauge this communication in a way that a private reading of a screenplay cannot.

The Scene

Each scene plays out in uninterrupted real time. I am not a fan of using montage, so I tend to write with fewer longer scenes. In part, I feel that montage offers too much freedom to the writer. If I have the ability to show whatever I want at whatever point in time, the film runs the risk of becoming didactic, as opposed to an exploration. By eliminating montage, I feel I partially negate my ability to fall into this trap. I like that the reveal of information becomes less expected and without a relative weight of apparatus; information isn't revealed through the construction of montage, but by the behaviour of character. This choice allows for a more effective hiding of the authorial voice, and the action becomes more observational and almost accidental. Though it can feel more efficient to have a montage for certain pieces of information or character moments, I enjoy the challenge of combining these with longer scenes or hiding things in plain sight.

While duration is important to each scene, it's important to me that this film is not durational by way of style. While this effect is important and effective for films such as *Jeanne Dielman, 23, Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles*, the temporal experience isn't weighted in such a way in this film. *Retrograde* isn't a comment on duration and so moments, though at times long, are required for the completion of an action of making a point. There are several scenes of Molly alone – such as when she tests her blind spots in a parking lot on her way to work, or takes refuge in her room during a party – that are intended to be quiet but not empty. Any duration is important for character motivation and/or audience reflection, as, for example, the scene where Molly pulls into a parking lot and tests her blind spots; though a brief scene on the page, the action will take some time to complete. The duration of the scene is important for the audience to realize what Molly's actions are. The audience has time to wonder what Molly is doing when she

pulls into this parking lot and gets into the passenger's seat. Then we need enough time to allow for the connection to her talk with Gabrielle and Andrew about blind spots. It's important that this required duration isn't forced, but is a by-product of Molly's actions.

Another challenge when writing fewer, longer scenes is editing. Any information or action becomes so imbedded in a scene and its context that small changes in the script have large ripple effects. Because there are few "single purpose" scenes, the removal of one scene means multiple story beats have to be layered into another. For example, they may have to be revealed in a new context, or another scene has to change contexts entirely. Such considerations may make for a better written scene overall, but they create complications and are time-consuming.

An inspiration for this style of writing is Radu Muntean's *Tuesday, After Christmas*. The film follows a man making the decision to leave his wife for his young girlfriend, and formally the film is made up of long, real-time scenes. A particular moment in this film that has informed my writing is one very subtle and clever two-beat thread – the man is Christmas shopping with his wife and is looking at a graphic tee with a particular monkey design. In that context, we presume he is considering it as a gift for his daughter. Several scenes later we see the same design on his girlfriends' laptop. No attention is drawn to this verbally, but it's a striking and subtle revelation that hits home for me how much can be layered into a scene. As the scenes play out in real-time, this layering must be simultaneous to the explicit purpose of each scene.

Similar in formal style, Jim Jarmusch's *Stranger Than Paradise* offered me a revelation about humour. The film is made up of 67 scenes, all playing out in "real-time." As a deadpan comedy, the style softens the punchlines and allows the humour to be less obvious and understated. In this instance, the style creates a comedic indifference – no jokes are forced on the audience.

This temporal and formal restriction was key in writing my first feature, *Withdrawn*. It was important when writing that not only would there be no montage, but each scene would play out in one single, static shot. I had to write around information that would easily be shown in a close up, reverse shot, or other formal means, and I had to focus my scenes on what could be shown from a distance. Given the ubiquity of computers and cell phones, this restriction was quite a challenge, as it is unrealistic to expect a millennial to only communicate face-to-face and without text and instant messages. I had to make sure that scenes were not dependent on the content of any screen/text information the characters were interacting with, and instead show that content through expectation and reaction. These restrictions led to some interesting discoveries and made scenes more visually compelling.

Despite my previous reliance on real-time scenes and long takes, I didn't want to be tied, in *Retrograde*, to the same restrictions I had previously used. Needing some constraints, I decided that there would be relatively few scenes and that there would be no temporal jumping and montage. However, because words are such an important tool for the characters in this film, I wanted to be able to show screens and texts, which would necessitate 'cuts' in the writing. I decided that stylistically, these 'cuts' could only happen to show text – emails, text messages, documents. This style is directly lifted from *Police, Adjective*, where we at one point linger on a sprawling document long enough to read it in full. I was sold on this style for *Retrograde* after writing Molly's email interactions with Michael, the prosecutor involved in her case. I found it interesting that we first meet him as words on a page in email format, and that his writing style is rigid and formal; his stock response highlights his indifference. I also enjoyed that their email exchange plays out in relative silence, which brings us closer to Molly, and underlines that she is alone in her mission.

After these emails, there are two more text inserts in the film, the second last being the text message Molly receives from Caleb while waiting for her judicial hearing – a moment of comic relief and reminder that she lied to be able to attend the meeting. The final close up is meant to join the narrative of Molly and her ticket with the astrology theme – cutting from Molly looking at the deal offered by the judge to a birth chart, as if this is the deal she is signing, thereby connecting the guilty plea to the fatalism of astrology.

The Dialogue

My previous films have largely featured anti-social leads, and as a result, have been much less dialogue-heavy than *Retrograde*. While my short films were entirely scripted, my first feature, *Withdrawn*, had all improvised dialogue based on an outline. One of the reasons improvisation was possible is that scenes in that film were structured around actions and brief verbal exchanges. Where there was a lot of dialogue, it came from one character over-explaining something, or someone indulging in a one-sided diatribe. For example, the following became a four-minute scene:

INT. LIVING ROOM – NIGHT

Aaron sits drinkless while KELLY (Molly's friend) and Molly listen to Adrian try to explain what is happening in Afghanistan. Aaron gets up and goes to the other room. While Adrian is talking, he secretly steals more of Adrian's booze, which Adrian has since marked 'Adrian' with a sharpie.

The single line "Adrian tr[ies] to explain what is happening in Afghanistan" became a meandering monologue which served as background noise for the action the character Aaron was taking. The choice of topics was precise, but the dialogue required no precision, as there were no intricate arguments or detailed exchanges. In effect, there was no way to incorrectly improvise the dialogue provided characters were on topic. I knew early on that *Retrograde* would have to be fully scripted because I was largely dealing with characters debating each other. The actions my characters took were more often verbal than physical. For this film, dialogue was a more pronounced medium than I was accustomed to working with in the past.

As I mentioned earlier, I used the outlining process to help keep my dialogue motivated. My days as an undergraduate film student made me wary of sharp exchanges and witty one lines that are transparently written, as opposed to motivated action-based dialogue. Particularly with comedy, writers can feel that dialogue is the medium of humour, and that the primary objective

of their characters is to make the audience laugh. I'm drawn to a drier style of comedy. Characters should never be looking for a laugh, but what they are looking for can make us laugh. Outlining made sure that any comedic moments were not dependent on specific line delivery, but context, action, and motivation. It can feel like a contradictory motive for me to be writing a comedy and to actively avoid the comedic, yet this is how I feel humour is best written – as a powerful by-product of the drama.

When it came to actually writing the dialogue, I wrote from improvisation. For several key scenes I would improvise and record the scene from its outline with an acting partner (often my wife), then transcribe and edit it. At times, verbatim lines were kept as they were improvised, but largely this transcript would serve as a scaffold for the rhythm of the dialogue. These improvised scenes as recorded were full of repetitions and/or imperfections. Though the scenes lacked the polish to be entirely viewable in their own right, the imperfections were important to capture in the script to keep the natural tone and dry humour I was aiming for.

I have no shortage of petty housemate altercations to draw from, and I've been involved in more debates about astrology than I would like to be. I had a deep well of experience to draw upon for these scenes when it came to writing the dialogue. While certain scenes were easy to improvise, the scenes involving authority figures – the lawyer, police officer, judge – were more difficult to write, simply because I have less contact with these professions and institutions. I'm fortunate not to be in contact with the police regularly, though I have had a handful of experiences with them through being pulled over while driving, or encountering them at protests. These experiences have led me to see police as irritatingly opaque and almost violently quiet, naturally reluctant to answer questions. This reluctance to speak became the primary trait of the police officer in the script. Not only was it true to my experience of police officers, but it is a

sneaky way to get around writing a character that “sounds like” a cop. I regarded The Judge in a similar fashion. When we encounter The Judge, her job is to listen to both sides of a disagreement. For the most part, this character's presence is her purpose as opposed to her words.

The lawyer character – Michael – proved more difficult. My brief interaction with lawyers is limited to a couple phone calls with an entertainment lawyer, which wasn't quite the same antagonistic situation Molly finds herself in. Podcasts and YouTube videos were helpful in giving me the confidence to write Michael's dialogue. I was apprehensive, thinking there would be a deep professional veil that would be difficult to penetrate. Early drafts had Michael incredibly wooden, and I realized I was afraid of writing him – afraid he was going to say the wrong thing. Should lawyers always be citing by-laws? Are there strict codes of conduct that lawyers have to follow when speaking to you? My research demonstrated that this wasn't the case, especially in traffic cases like Molly's. Yes, they were knowledgeable about their field, but when dealing with laymen like Molly, they need to be understood. I made sure then to research the terms and laws associated with Molly's “crime,” and when it came to Michael's scenes, I wrote the ‘human’ first and the ‘lawyer’ second. His job and legalese were something on top of his personality, not the other way around.

A challenge of writing dialogue that I find difficult to overcome is the feeling that I am micromanaging my characters. Overanalyzing the words a character speaks can make them sound as if they are giving a rehearsed keynote presentation. My response to avoid this pitfall is to write dialogue as quickly as I can to keep it intuitive as opposed to intellectual. While this technique often produces results I'm happy with, a danger is that all characters speak with my voice but from different objectives. In part, this problem must be unavoidable, and I'm reminded of one exchange in an episode of *The Sopranos* where a mobster asks a screenwriter character:

“So when you write on TV, what do they have, like one guy writes the words for Dylan McDermott and one guy writes for Nicholson's girlfriend?”

While funny, this exchange reflects what good dialogue should feel like – unique individuals engaging with each other. In a way, this silly idea of having two people write a scene is what I attempt to do when improvising the scene with a partner; instead of trying to split my voice into two, I actually get two voices in the scene.

Conclusion and The Role of the Screenwriter

What is my responsibility as a screenwriter? What do I “owe” my audience? I found myself reflecting on these deeper questions as I finished writing the screenplay. A huge issue for me was whether or not I should show the initial confrontation/issuing of traffic ticket between Molly and the Police Officer. I had first included this scene, and then removed it, only to realize that by taking it out, there was a risk that the audience would lose that emotional connection to Molly. For me, the role of a screenwriter is not only the obvious task of telling a story, but to create the strongest links of understanding between the audience and the protagonist. This bond is key – and it is not the same thing as empathy. Even if the audience may not make the same decisions as Molly, it is integral that they understand why Molly had to, in her context.

This process also helped me realize the importance of defining what I'm trying to say: that the film as a whole is a statement or comment, not just a series of questions or comments in the form of individual scenes. While this observation may seem obvious, it was a bit of a stretch for me to feel confident expressing an opinion or statement on the topic. I couldn't just rely on the event alone to offer up meaning to an audience; it was the screenwriter's job, *my* job, to mine these events for meaning, to create meaning from nothing.

In a more practical sense, I feel that a screenwriter's job is to give a blueprint for production. The screenplay is an intermediate tool towards a final product – it will never be perfect or complete. The screenplay has to be able to bend, to withstand the stresses and imperfections of the production process. After I began my Masters and started writing this screenplay, I received funding for *Retrograde*. I am writing this conclusion three weeks away from the first day of shooting, and at the time of my oral defense, the film will be in post-production. While it's exhausting to spend so much time, energy, and thought on what is

effectively the placement of a single stepping stone, the screenplay, this is as it should be. And now on to the next.

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