Cloud.

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'I am restricted to the resources of my own mind'[1].

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[1] Nagel, T. (1974). *What is it like to be a bat?* The Philosophical Review Volume 83 No.4, October 1974, pg. 3.

I was inspired to write, shoot, and create 'Cloud', a black comedic short film, from my personal reading and interpretation of one of the most renowned philosophical essays, Thomas Nagel's 'What is it like to be a bat?'[2]. The conundrum presented in this essay is one which eventually consumes the relationship between my intended audience and central character: how can we comprehend an experience that is so foreign, in terms that are, by contrast, suited for what is familiar and well understood? How can we know what we *don't* know?

I want 'Cloud' to inspire these challenging questions within the audience. More importantly, I want the audience to formulate their own answers that are unique and individual in every way. Each individual will respond to the film from the vantage point of his or her own subjective position.

The purpose of my film therefore is to creatively investigate how human beings have an inability to understand what is outside our subjective character of experience, or as Nagel states, 'Our experience provides the basic material for our imagination whose range is therefore limited'[3]. At the same time, I wanted my film to be an original piece of cinema, creating a unique depiction of a man's struggle to feel a sense of place and acceptance in society.

As part of this purpose, I have tried to prompt the audience to abandon all preconceptions of familiarity. A general motif that is repeated throughout the film is the idea of rendering the familiar unfamiliar, and I have therefore presented cinematic

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[2] Ibid.

[3] Ibid, pg. 6.

themes that can be considered outside common expectations. For example, I have presented a less common definition of cloud[4], the central character deviates from normal expectations of human behaviour, and the inevitable question of why the man is behaving like a bat is deliberately left inconclusive. At the same time, I have also strived to create scenarios which highlight how human beings struggle to understand what is outside our common expectations. The central character himself struggles to understand what it is like to be a bat, and is an example of what Nagel describes as a 'human behaving like a bat'[5]. At the same time, the audience is left to question why the central character exhibits unusual behaviours. Both these examples are indicative of the fact that there will always be concepts that will remain unknown, whether that is what it is like to be a bat, or even what it is like to be a dissimilar individual in society.

In terms of audience, my major work is aimed at audiences of the 'Future Shorts Film Festival', a worldwide and online short film collection well known for highlighting independent and low budget short films that are original and quirky in nature. This target audience would be appropriate as viewers are not only willing, but also expected, to embrace unconventional cinematic themes, and project their own personal opinion to the questions and problems my major work raises.

I was originally inspired to create a film as part of the English Extension 2 course because of my analysis of film in the preliminary HSC Course. I found that my study

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[4] Cloud is the collective noun for bats.
[5] Nagel, T. (1974). *What is it like to be a Bat?*. The Philosophical Review Volume 83 No.4, October 1974, pg. 4.

of *American Beauty*[6], directed by Sam Mendes, enabled me to understand relevant cinematic techniques, and also inspired my creative decision to focus on the idea of isolation, and personal struggle to find a sense of identity in a more modern society. Because of my critical analysis, I also felt comfortable and inspired to explore the form of film as a major work, and to emulate what I had studied in an original context.

Mt stylistic decision to focus on the ambiguous qualities of black comedy was based on my initial research into successful films of this genre. Adam Elliot's *Harvey Krumpet*[7], Tropfest finalist of 2009 'Fishy'[8], and several Coen brothers films particularly *Burn After Reading*[9], allowed me to understand the importance of exploring awkward and unconventional cinematic moments in black comedy. I found that the strength of black comedy films was their ability to unsettle audiences, and to create scenarios that are either highly unusual or unrealistic. I tried to emulate a statement made by the character Meurice in Joel and Ethan Coen's *Blood Simple*[10], a statement where Joel and Ethan Coen offer a personal critique of their own unique style of black comedy; 'something pretty f***ing weird is going on. These things always have a logical explanation. Usually'.

I therefore tried to create an immediate impact on the viewer in the opening sequence. I was inspired to film the sequence in one shot because of the success of this technique in two critically acclaimed black comedy short films by Spanish director

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[6] Mendes, S. (1999). *American Beauty.* Dreamworks Production.
[7] Elliot, A. (2004). *Harvie Krumpet.* Madman Studios.
[8] Sidney, D. (2006). *Fishy*. Tropfest Australia.
[9] Coen, J & E. (2008). *Burn After Reading*. Working Title Films.
[10] Coen, J & E. (1984). *Blood Simple*. Circle Films.

Chema Garcia Ibarra, 'El ataque de los robots de nebulosa-5'[11], and

'Protoparticles'[12]. My decision to focus on silence and at times unusual sound effects

(such as the water drip sound) was done in order to unsettle the audience, and

establish the motif of rendering the familiar unfamiliar. The sequence was also a

metaphor that represented the idea of changing ones appearance and identity, an idea

that is associated to the eventual struggle of the central character. I thought this

opening metaphor would most effectively be represented visually by the action of

painting the subject's hands black. Colour imagery was also important as the colour

black created a strong connection to a bat, and the colour's sinister appeal contrasted

to the at times humorous sound, and thus helped establish the genre of a black

comedy.

My research into the Coen Brothers also led to a stronger understanding of music and

sound. The acoustic version of 'You Are My Sunshine', performed by Norman Blake,

was taken from the soundtrack of *O Brother Where Art Thou*[13]. I agreed with Ethan

Cohen's statement, 'There aren't reasons why you like this song or this piece of

music, or don't like it. It's just, it's either right or wrong, you know?'[14]. Consequently I

applied his practical advice by focusing on the immediate aural experience of music

and its relationship to cinematography.

The next major stage of my research was creating a strong and convincing central

character. My protagonist's personality was based on a particular patient described in

Oliver Sacks' *The Man Who Mistook his Wife for a Hat*[15]. Sacks described a middle-

[11] Ibarra, C. (2008). *El ataque de los robots de nebulosa-5*. Sundance Honourable Mention 2009.
[12] Ibarra, C. (2012). *Protoparticles*. Sundance Film Festival.
[13] Coen, J & E. (2000). *O Brother Where Art Thou?* Universal Studios.
[14] Coen, J & E. (2002). Collected Screenplays 1. Faber and Faber, New York.
[15] Sacks, O. (1985). *The Man Who Mistook his Wife for a Hat*. Simon and Schuster,

aged man with a traumatic induced state of amnesia, where the experience of a horrific accident resulted in a complete identity transformation. My central character in 'Cloud' was inspired by this patient's struggle against his uncontrollable mind, a struggle that ultimately destroyed his own identity.

However, my creative intent, although enthusiastic, was given much needed direction after I coincidentally discovered 'What is it like to be a bat?' in a review[16] of Oliver Sack's most recent book, *Hallucinations*. After rigorous research into 'What is it like to be a bat?' involving extensive reading of critical assessments such as 'Nagel on Moral Luck'[17] and 'What is it like to be a bat? Critical Assessment'[18] I saw a link between Nagel's philosophical discussion, and my analysis of Sacks' work. This stage of the research process was crucial as my wide range of initial ideas for a film was narrowed into what I believe is the overarching motif of 'Cloud'. Empathy. At this point I wrote an initial premise for a film: *A young man thinks he is a bat, and in his struggle to find his cloud, copes with isolation from human society.*

In my initial film shoots I realised that even though a level of uncertainty was intended to exist between the audience and the central character, there had to be some reason cinematically for the audience to want to know more, to question and to feel connected to him. In my first film shoot, my over reliance on distancing the central character provided an obvious flaw. Although I wanted an open, ambiguous and essentially unknown justification for the central character's predicament, he would

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[16] Kirsch, A. (2012). *Life on the edge of consciousness*. Prospect Magazine. November Issue 2012, pg. 15.

[17] Vokov, J. (2009). *Nagel on Moral Luck.* Vokov Lectures

[18] Thurston, M. (2010). *What is it like to be a Bat? Critical Assessment*. Southern Alberta Magazine, pg. 17.

have to be relatable at the same time. In subsequent film shoots I found that manipulating framing, shadow contrast and focus made the central character more cinematically centralised, and therefore, easier to connect with. At the same time, long shots, and saturated lighting provided a sense of distance, and ultimately gave a sense of isolation to the central character.

Cinematically I strived to emulate Andre Bazin's theory of realism - 'It adds nothing to the reality, it does not deform it, it forces it to reveal its structural depth, to bring out pre-existing relations'[19]. What I liked about Bazin's theory is his preference for simple cinematography, focusing instead on stationary shots, long takes and relying less on distortion through cross-cut editing.

A focus for cinematographic simplicity inspired my decision to shoot in black and white. I felt that an absence of colour created a more direct relationship between the audience and the central character. I agreed with renowned photographer Chris Bucher's statement, 'Removing colour from an image enables the viewer to see the essential parts of that image - the textures, tones shapes, and composition'[20], and have tried to emulate his views in my film.

As I became more comfortable with the camera, I began to see some very obvious flaws in the script. I felt that two components of the film were missing: a deeper insight into the perspective of the central character, and a satisfying ending. My solution to the first problem was to include elements of Sergei Eisenstein's theory of montage - creating associations between cinematic moments that combine to form a

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[19] Taken from Bazin, A. (2005). *What is Cinema? Volume 1* and *What is Cinema? Volume 2*. University of California Press, Berkeley.
[20] Bucher, C. (2011). *Black and White Digital Photography*. Wiley Publishing, British Columbia.

unique perspective[21]. I thought this approach would give my film some cinematic variety, and would create a more intimate critique of the central characters perspective. My initial ideas for a montage sequence changed rapidly before I concluded on the 'puppet' sequence. I found that the sequence allowed the audience to see his perspective of how he 'fell into the human world'. At the same time, associations to childishness and innocence through montage gave the character a sense of naivety and sympathy.

A childish portrayal of the central character paved the way for my research into writing the monologue, which was done post filming. I researched the creation of a passive child's voice, focusing on sincere naivety. My analysis of films such as *The Informant!*[22], *Up*[23], the novel *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*[24], and children's books such as *Joan of Arc*[25], and *For the Love of Vincent*[26], proved invaluable. Such research allowed me to understand the relevant language techniques necessary for a child's voice. These included the incorporation of stream of consciousness thoughts, involving often absurd and irrelevant references (for example the definition of 'bat-ology'), overly long and incomplete sentences, anaphora to create repetition in speech, and extensive use of pronouns (a technique which helped to make an idea seem more significant, and inspired the repetition of 'I hope I will find them' in the voice over).

[21] Summary taken from my analysis of the following:
Eisenstein, S. (1977). *Film Form.* Harcourt Publishing, New York.
Eisenstein, S. (1977). *Film Sense.* Harcourt Publishing, New York.
Eisenstein, S. (2010). *Writings 1922-1934: Sergei Eisenstein Selected Works Volume 1.* I.B Tauris and Co, London.
[22]Soderbergh, S. (2009). *The Informant!.* Groundswell Productions.
[23] Docter, P. (2009). *Up*. Pixar Animation Studios.
[24] Haddon, M. (2003). *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time.* Jonathan Cape, London.
[25] Pode, J. (1998). *Joan of Arc*. Red Fox, London.
[26] Northeast, B. (1995). *For the Love of Vincent*. Reed for Kids, Melbourne.

My research into resolution began with Robert Mckee's *Story*[27], and Brad Johnson's 'Four Things That a Good Ending Needs to Accomplish'[28]. I found Johnson's analysis more useful, but nevertheless have tried to incorporate elements of both, focusing not only on closure to conflict, derived from McKee, but also a form of psychological change, derived from Johnson. I decided that the film should finish with the central character clinging to the false hope of finding his cloud; hence he finishes with 'I hope I will find them'. I found that this theme gave the resolution a heightened sense of sadness and tragedy.

I have found that the process of creating this film has not only renewed my passion for the medium, but has also enhanced my understanding of film as an English text. I felt that the experience of trying to find my own unique creative voice is not only rewarding, but also inspiring, and I have consequently felt compelled to explore film as a creative medium after my studies in high school. Completing this major work has also opened my eyes to the wonderful art of cinema, and I consequently have a greater depth of appreciation for this wonderful creative medium, and the prominent filmmakers who have shaped it to this day.

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[27] McKee, R. (1999). *Story: Substance, Structure, Style, and the Principles of Screenwriting*. Methuen Publishing, Boston.
[28] Taken from the following article, Dale, D. (2013). *The Beginning of the End*. The Sun Herald. 3rd March 2013, pg. 28.

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