

# ‘The Sleepwalker and the Prophet’: Existentialism on Film

Part B: Written component

Karuna Pillay  
211517804

Supervisor:  
Professor Jean-Philippe Wade

# **TABLE OF CONTENTS**

1. Acknowledgements	3
2. Introduction	4
3. Characters	5
4. Plot	12
5. Themes	25
6. Visual Choices	30
7. Philosophy on Film	36
8. Critical Appraisal of Experience	45
9. Conclusion	54
10. References	55

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# **INTRODUCTION**

I am drawn to film for its many capacities. It has the laudable ability to be entertaining and educational, visceral and intellectual. This popular medium allows a creative combination of image and sound, and as such it is story telling in its most engaging level. As an aspiring film maker, it is my aim to learn the craft from the inception of an idea through to its execution on film. This project serves as a personal investigation into film-making codes and techniques, and as practice to build up a formidable skill set.

It is also my ambition to reconcile my two greatest interests, of philosophy and film. I aim to utilize my undergraduate studies in philosophy to create a film that tells a meaningful and significant story which will echo the contribution that philosophers (and other intellectuals) have made toward our understanding of the world. I have previously completed a short film (*“Rhapsody in Cogito”*) for my Media and Cultural Studies Honours project, which relayed the story of an author struggling to find an ending to his novel as he likewise struggles to find any meaning in his own existence.

It is my hope to expand on that experience and improve on the skills required for such story telling.

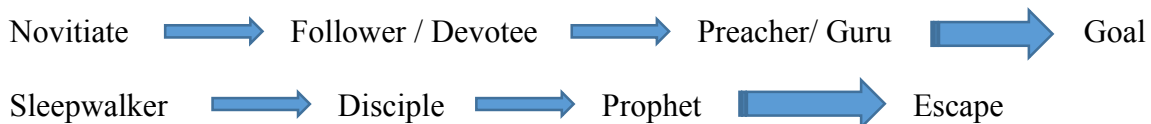
The following discussion aims to expand on the story of the short film (part A) by explaining its narrative components such as plot, character, setting, style and aesthetics as well as how these choices served to convey the themes and meaning of the story. This discussion will include an elaboration on the themes (namely of suffering, escape, self-determined destiny, victimhood etc.) such that their significance may be more overt to the viewer. Following a brief account of how philosophy and film can relate to each other, I will detail how this short film engages with existentialism on different levels. On one level, through the subjective world of the characters i.e. how they use existentialism to make sense of their lives. On another level, objectively i.e. what philosophical statement can be gleamed from this story. I will then critically reflect on the making of this short film, by discussing how I went about producing and shooting the film and the various factors that surrounded it. It will perhaps serve as a guide to practical low budget filmmaking as I reflect on the lessons learned, mistakes made and the overall appraisal of this experience.



# CHARACTERS

The story centers around three young Indian women living in Chatsworth, who band together over their shared desperate circumstances. They are all victims in some way, each with varied degrees of understanding of how to carry that pain and overcome it. As the story (in its most basic form) relates one woman's journey toward a liberation from her suffering, the path she is on (*with existential undercurrents*) can be seen to mimic a religion, with its specific answers and beliefs in response to her questions and with a specific end goal in mind. Consider Hinduism for example, where balanced karma from good deeds as well as worship helps achieve the goal of escaping the cycle of birth and death.

These characters therefore are meant to parallel the formal roles in a religion and more specifically the different points on the path toward the goal. The Prophet is the leader (the preacher), and most knowledgeable of the world. She is the one that puts forward a philosophy and strategy for what should be done to overcome their burdens. The Disciple is the most devout (the follower), she buys everything the Prophet sells, believing her to be all knowing and all powerful. The Sleepwalker (the novitiate) is new to the group and to the philosophy/strategy.



Each of these characters are named for their archetype and their real names are never mentioned onscreen. This is to draw attention to their dynamic and what their characters represent, rather than who they are as individuals, since this is a story of the general relation to the existential path rather than about specific people.

Given the time restraints of a short film, the story kicks off right in the middle of the action, where everyone is already established and known to each other. Their backstories are only revealed through references, so as to not take away from the urgency of the action. Though not explicitly mentioned on screen, backstories and motivations were written and discussed collaboratively with the actors in order to ensure an accurate and nuanced portrayal of these characters.

## SLEEPWALKER



**Alisha Authbehari** as Sleepwalker

The main protagonist. An innocent, meek and timid girl who suffers a trauma then has to resort to risky and violent means to help herself. She is the youngest of the group (being in her early 20s) and with her diminutive physique, she does not cut an intimidating figure in the least. She has a passive predisposition which is exacerbated by her doe-eyes, mousy stature, and her soft voice (as she speaks softer than the other characters). These physical attributes serve to establish her as the innocent and pure one of the group. Her youth makes her impressionable, and so she is easily taken in by the charisma and confidence of the Prophet. She is brought to the Prophet by her instinctive albeit passive seeking of a way to understand her suffering and a way out of it. Prophet herself has been a victim of sexual abuse and so Sleepwalker views this beautiful, brilliant and strong woman as her role model. This is also what convinces her that Prophet has the solution to her problems.

Prophet is the only source of comfort and support she receives, so she is wholly attached to her.

In the religious context, Sleepwalker is the novitiate- who is new to the teachings, coming from a lack of knowledge and understanding, as well as direction in life. In this way, Sleepwalker is a searcher and her sleepwalking can be seen as a metaphor for this – walking unconsciously, having no sense of destination or direction. It is only through the guidance of Prophet that Sleepwalker becomes conscious to her life and gains a way of viewing her experience and her goal in life.

Although not overtly mentioned in the film (but implied in pieces through the dialogue), Sleepwalker's backstory is that she comes from a poor household, something she has in

common with Prophet and Disciple. She lives alone with her grandfather in a flat in Chatsworth. Her world is turned upside down when she is gang raped at a house party. The pain of this trauma takes over her life, leaving her suicidal and in constant agony. She truly struggles to recover from this, which shows in the instability and restlessness of her mind as she starts sleepwalking. At the start of the film we learn (through Disciple telling Prophet) that the men that attacked her are getting released and so they are getting off easily while Sleepwalker still has to live with the consequence of their horrendous actions. She is robbed of justice and her pain cannot be assuaged, thus this motivation to escape her life at whatever cost, makes her welcome to the congress of Prophet and Disciple for that is another thing they all share.

True to being a newcomer, Sleepwalker approaches Prophet's strategy with skepticism. She believes in the Prophet and that she has all the answers but is still navigating Prophet's ideas with her own reality and we see this unfolding in the restaurant when she tries to back out of their plan for fear that they will fail. Prophet is able to convince her however, appealing to her sense of desolation and empowering her by turning her perception of victimhood as weakness into that of resilience.

### DISCIPLE



**Sivani Chinnappan** as Disciple

In her late 20s, also an Indian woman, Disciple is almost the complete opposite of Sleepwalker. She is muscular, imposing and aggressive. She is uninhibited with no care for decorum or politeness. Her language is often crass and vulgar, and she displays immature tendencies (for example, sprinkling milk on Sleepwalker's face while she was sleeping). She has a short fuse and has trouble controlling her outbursts. She is unrestrained and unrefined,

and perhaps that is something Prophet has tried to help her with. Though very little is given of her backstory and her relationship with Prophet, the way in which she interacts alludes to these details. Disciple also comes from tragic circumstances where she had to raise herself up the hard way and could rely on no one else. Her mother was a drug addict who neglected her as a child and eventually ended up being killed outside of her home. Disciple's family abandoned her and so she had to grow up very quickly in order to survive. She comes from extreme poverty and so the wealth that would come from their plan is very appealing to her. She has known Prophet the longest and the two live in the same neighborhood and grew up together. Prophet sees her desperation and offers her a way out. While she may not intellectualize the philosophy put forward by Prophet, she is a person who has always been in need of someone to look out for her and tell her what to do – a parental figure to give her guidance. Disciple is also captivated by the eloquence and intelligence of Prophet, for that is where she lacks. Disciple is visceral where Prophet is cerebral, she is the brawn where Prophet is the brain. On the parallel of religion, Disciple is the devotee. She wholeheartedly buys everything Prophet has to say with fervor and dedication, striving only to earn her approval (again, mimicking the parent-child dynamic). Disciple is the follower who thinks that her journey can only be successful if she is most loyal and devoted to the path and sometimes this means being unquestioning. As such, she does whatever is asked of her, and in this way Prophet harnesses her motivation and willingness to please.

With Disciple's reverence of Prophet as a Godly figure, it also parallels how, much like in religion, the preacher often becomes the object of devotion rather than the deity. This perhaps occurs through the preacher being the living embodiment of Godliness and the teachings.

Disciple is older than Sleepwalker and has been with Prophet longer so she does not see Sleepwalker on her level. This leads her to be a little impatient with her at times. Although, given the young age of Sleepwalker and her petite and passive demeanor, Disciple is also physically protective of her. This is seen in various instances during the heist when Disciple steps in front of the gun in the dream sequence, when she pulls her out of the path of the guns' lasers and when she does the heavy lifting in terms of the crowd control. Her dual nature of impatience and protectiveness when it comes to Sleepwalker draws the comparison to the classic older sibling role - not overly kind but always looking out for the younger ones.

## PROPHET



**Pelisha Somiah** as Prophet

Prophet is the leader of the group and the orchestrator of the heist. Like Disciple, she is in her late 20s. She is disarmingly beautiful, charismatic and eloquent, which makes her quite intimidating to the others. She is reserved, thoughtful and strategic, often seen in silence, observing the behavior of the others or deep in thought. Prophet is a self-educated philosophical thinker, seeing life in a greater context, as well as understanding how to deal with their suffering and circumstances. She is the awakened one, conscious of the ‘true’ nature of the world and she tries to shepherd the others into this consciousness as well.

In the religious context, Prophet parallels the role of the preacher or priest. She has a specific philosophy and leads them on a very specific path (namely that of the existentialist self-actualization and the plan to steal money from a drug dealer). The worldview she teaches stems from her experience that it is idealistic to assume that their problems will automatically be solved. She knows that if anything is to change, it will be by their own doing. She knows better than to rely on anyone or anything else to help them get what they want. (As their ideology is understood best by how it helps them understand the world and helps them achieve their goals.) She pushes the existentialist line of self-creation and autonomy, meaning taking control of one’s agency and not relying on external influence such as justice, fate, the law etc. to help them. In this sense, she encourages them to become active agents instead of passively accepting their circumstances.

To the Disciple and Sleepwalker, she appears as Godly (to continue the religious parallel) or at least as the closest thing they have to a savior. She is seen as their beacon of hope, their protector and their only ally. This is because she saw these women in their struggles and

reached out to them. She rallies them behind her with her encouraging words, her striking confidence and empowering them with hope. She is fully aware of how to get to Sleepwalker and Disciple, and this allows her to be manipulative when she needs to be. For as some leaders in attempt to gain followers prey upon the weaknesses of people and their willingness to believe, so too does the Prophet. This is seen when she invokes the sexual violence that she endured, using graphic language to reel Sleepwalker back in just when she was about to walk away. She also tells them of visions she has (“ . . . *I saw into the future. . .*”), as though she has a Godly gift which makes her seem all powerful and infallible. She explains that they must harness their pain, for that is what makes them strong, and use it to ‘earn’ their escape.

There is a dark ambiguity to this character. She says very little and when she does speak, she always manages to get what she wants. Also, she asks them to put themselves in harm’s way and for this she requires their complete and absolute trust, which she manages to receive. She implies that she knows what is best for them and that their best shot is with her (as when she ends her inspiring speech to Sleepwalker with “*trust in me*”). For the level of control that she has over them, it rouses suspicion as to the nobility of her intentions. It is not clear whether her interest in them is merely pragmatic or whether she genuinely cares about helping them as well. In my view, it is a similar ambiguity to any preacher/pastor/priest or leader who will have their ‘followers’ so wholly committed to a singular cause and a singular teaching.

Things become clearer in the end however, as she makes the decision to sacrifice herself to protect them, when they are cornered by armed forces (off screen). She is seen stepping in front of Sleepwalker and Disciple, effectively shielding them from the crosshairs of the guns. This sort of saintly self-sacrifice affirms her role as savior as in her final act, she takes the fire so that the two of them can escape.

Though it is only referred to briefly, Prophet has been sexually abused by her step father since she was a young girl. This is what propels her quest to escape her life of abuse. Sitting with this sort of grief and injustice is no doubt what led her to self-actualize, the way she encourages the others to do so. It is also what makes her reflect on life in such a penetrating way. As she was thrown into the uncertain world of chaos and violence, she sought to reason with it and find understanding. It would take a particular level of intelligence and planning to pull off what she did; approaching her goals pragmatically and recruiting people to help execute the plan. This is a strength Sleepwalker and Disciple do not have. She comes to the

conclusion that the world is indifferent, sometimes brutally so, and there is no substantial accounting for the things that happen to us. She finds the metaphysical concepts of God, destiny, karma etc. unsatisfactory. As she explains to Sleepwalker, *“no one is coming for us, we have to do it ourselves. . . You be justice. You be reckoning, become the hand of God.”* With this she asserts that they need to give up hope for external salvation and become saviors to themselves. They need to double down and put all their hope back into their own actions, for as far as she can tell they can only trust themselves.

# PLOT

The movie begins with a fade in, slowly revealing a zoomed in image of a road. A foot interrupts the frame, and the journey begins. The next frame reveals a young woman, apparently still asleep, walking on the road. She looks vulnerable walking in the middle of the road at night, with her thin pajamas and bare feet. The young woman can be referred to as Sleepwalker. As she walks, unconscious to her surroundings, a figure dressed in black and wearing a silver mask passes her, then stops to look back at her as she walks on, completely unaware of it. The sound of a hooter abruptly jolts her awake and a woman calls out to her. This woman shouts out, "*Cherry!*" - a colloquial South African-Indian term used mostly by men to refer to a girl or a girlfriend. This use of slang indicates where these characters are from and also the type of familiar relationship they have with one another. Sleepwalker grapples to find her bearings, realizing then that she is in an unfamiliar place and that she must have been sleepwalking. Sleepwalker and the woman share a brief exchange and is then impatiently told to get in the car. We see two women sitting in the front; the woman that called out to her (referred to as Disciple) and another silent woman (referred to as Prophet). When Sleepwalker is in the car, Disciple teases her about trying to "*make a break for it*", implying that she was trying to run away at night. Sleepwalker is too disorientated to respond in any meaningful way however, and Prophet, who has been silently observing, commands Disciple to give Sleepwalker her jacket. Disciple obliges and with this shows that she obeys the instructions of Prophet. After realizing that Sleepwalker cannot account for her own actions, Prophet offers to take her home but fails to get a reply as Sleepwalker falls back into a deep sleep against the window. Disciple asks Prophet if Sleepwalker is aware of "*those guys*" getting released from prison. It is implied that those guys hurt Sleepwalker badly enough that they were arrested. Prophet snaps back at Disciple as if the answer is obvious, suggesting that this incident is the root cause of Sleepwalker's unusual behavior. Disciple appears slightly embarrassed for not knowing something Prophet thought was obvious, and then in frustration and disgust she exclaims "*rapist pigs!*". Though never overtly stated, the inference here is that Sleepwalker was gang raped and now her attackers are getting released early as if being let off the hook for their crimes.



They drive off, the car cutting through the scenery like a creature of the night; emerging from the darkness and weaving through the busy and quiet parts of the neighborhood undetected. We get glimpses of the neighborhood of Chatsworth; the previously Indians-only area during the segregation of Apartheid. Even in the low light of the night time we see that it is cramped and congested, the roads are uneven and steep. The montage serves to locate the story and give a brief glimpse into the lives of these women living in this neighborhood that is not well developed. Multiple locations are shown in this montage, and this is to give the impression of time passing, as though they have been driving for hours. The angles alternate and with the slow build of the accompanying soundtrack, this creates a feeling of disorientation and insidious chaos. A sign of what is to come.

Cut to: Sleepwalker is asleep using her hand to support her head. She is not in the car anymore and we do not where she is. Little white flecks of milk land on her face and this sensation wakens her. She is confused and struggles to focus her eyes. Next to her sits Disciple, laughing to herself with a maniacal look in her eye. She licks the milk off of her fingers and taunts Sleepwalker with a smirk. Then Prophet approaches and we get a better look at her. She has immaculate posture and every look seems calculated. She brings them a pink lamington and questions Sleepwalker about her well-being. Sleepwalker is a little embarrassed to have been found exposed on the road without any sense of how or why she was there. Her voice is soft and weak. It is obvious to everyone that she is not coping very well with what happened to her. It is as though all her vulnerabilities have been laid bare in front of everyone. This sense of shame makes her a little defensive and dismissive. Prophet and Disciple, can see that she is skirting around the issue and the way they deal with this is very telling of their character. Disciple, being unrefined continues to tease her while Prophet, the one who is always in control, approaches the topic gently and cautiously. While it is established that Sleepwalker is in more trouble than she thought, not being able to recall parts of her days and not even knowing what day it is, Disciple grows impatient with the lack of constructive discussion and unceremoniously draws a gun from her waistband to show Sleepwalker. This startles Sleepwalker and Prophet is quick to push the gun out of sight (lest they be noticed) and to contain Disciple's reckless behavior.

Disciple wants confirmation that their plan is still on as scheduled. It becomes apparent that these women are not just friends but are involved more intimately in what turns out to be a plan to steal money that is kept by a drug dealer at his club. Confronted with the reality of her

situation and realizing how dangerous it is, Sleepwalker starts to express reluctance and tries to back out. She is caught off guard by the gun, which brings her uncomfortably close to a very real danger. She might have thought that in her desperation to escape her pain, stealing enough money to start a new life somewhere else was a great idea (as the other two women also thought), but now she is not sure if she can actually go through with it. Disciple responds by telling her to be brave and honor her commitments.

Through this back and forth of Sleepwalker pulling back and Disciple attempting to convince her, more details of their plan and their history emerge. It is revealed that they have been planning for months, observing a very dangerous drug dealer as he goes about his ‘business’. Disciple does all the talking while Prophet observes silently. She explains the amount of work that went in to this plan, how they have calculated the best possible way of carrying out the heist successfully. Disciple is convinced that they cannot fail since they are making a move in the early hours of Monday morning where they are sure no one will be around to stop them. However, this does little to persuade Sleepwalker, as she still resists. This enrages Disciple, who loses her patience and has an outburst accusing Sleepwalker of not wanting to get better as the rest of them do. *“Then you stay here! Stay stuck in this dead end place with these dead end people. But not me. I’m not going to die here, bleeding on the roadside like my fucking mother!”* With that, she lets her own pain show and reveals a bit of her own personal trauma – having her mother die in a brutal, inelegant way. She lashes out with vulgarity and gives up on Sleepwalker. Here, she visibly loses the fight against her good sensibilities to remain calm and collected.

A deafening silence is left in the aftermath and Sleepwalker, not knowing what else to do, tries to leave. Prophet however seems unfazed and calmly invites her to stay, offering her a piece of cake. Sleepwalker hesitates, but is captivated by the authority and charm of Prophet as she starts to speak. Prophet notices from Disciple’s failed attempt that she will have to use another strategy to convince Sleepwalker to go ahead with the plan. As reason proved fruitless, she appeals to her passion to really get to her.

Prophet calls back to their first meeting, referring to a situation whereby they first realized that they are intimately connected by shared traumatic experiences. Here it is implied that Prophet has been assaulted by her step-father, as she says *“you told me what happened to you and I told you about my step-father”*, and this serves to invoke the strong feelings

Sleepwalker would have about that incident, which led her to trust Prophet in the first place. Prophet sees that this gets her attention and so she advances slowly, gradually revealing more and more details about her experience. She paints a vivid and poignant picture of her rape by the hands of her step-father. She says “*this one time*” as if to signal that it was a recurring thing, and retells her experience with gruesome details, appealing to the senses by revealing how her body went numb from the pain. It is difficult to listen to and perhaps more so for Sleepwalker who unfortunately knows off this experience first-hand.

Prophet has her on the hook with this, and then she explains how that experience gave rise to an ethereal, powerful kind of superhuman experience, whereby she was ‘enlightened’. “*This one time, after he was done, my body went numb, I couldn’t move. I just laid there on my back and I stared up at the roof. I saw the stars, I saw the universe, I saw into the future. A path cleared in my mind and at my feet a threshold, and I walked right over it! I escaped it.*” With this, she describes a divine insight of seeing all things. She claims to have transcended time and space and saw through the universe, through the past, the present, the future such that she has profound insight now and she knows exactly what to do. She explains that with this insight she saw herself being successful in her goal to escape. Worth noting is in this shot, Prophet is framed with an “Exit” sign above her, suggesting that she is their escape/ the way out is through her.

Prophet uses poetic language, like a holy scripture, to describe her vision for the future. Here she draws Sleepwalker and Disciple in by making herself and by virtue, the plan sound infallible, as it is legitimized by her divine vision. She throws in some rousing words to motivate. She appeals to their desires and makes their goal of stealing the money, escaping to some place far away and leaving their worries behind, sound achievable. She leans in as she talks to Sleepwalker, with her subtly emotive inflection and unwavering gaze. It is as though she is looking right through Sleepwalker, seeing all her hopes and dreams, her pain and fears. Seeing that Sleepwalker is at least reflecting on this, Prophet continues by again bringing up their shared desperate circumstances, but this time she uses it to empower. She reasons that although they have all had bad things happen to them, they are all stronger for it since they survived it, and since that is not something easily survived, they must have extraordinary strength. Here, she appeals to them to not let their circumstances make them weak, instead they should realize their resilience and use it as a source of strength. This touches Disciple and she vehemently agrees to everything Prophet says, nodding along and punctuating

Prophet's statements with a *'hmm! (yes)'*. This mirrors the way in which a member of the congregation would yell out and affirm everything the preacher has to say, in a 'call and response' fashion.

Prophet concludes by emphasizing their desolate situation, stating that they have been abandoned in their suffering, and that if they were ever to escape it would be by their own doing. She asserts that they have to be completely self-reliant now. This alludes to the existential tenet of "self-determinism" and self-creation, which describes how we are the only ones responsible for our lives; not a God, not the government or any external structure for that matter. (*For further discussion, see themes and philosophy*). Here, she utilizes this philosophy to make sense of her life and thusly guide her actions.

Prophet lifts a piece of Lamington cake and offers it with her hands to Sleepwalker, still holding intense eye contact. Sleepwalker is now seriously considering that Prophet may be right and that her best shot to redeem what is left of her life and save herself from suffering is to go through with the plan that they propose. She thinks to herself and then limply reaches out to take the cake from Prophet's fingers. Prophet watches her closely, then bats Sleepwalker's hand away, slamming it on the table and insists on feeding it to Sleepwalker herself. Sleepwalker is surprised by the intensity of Prophet's gesture, and Prophet is even more intent now. She goes in for the final blow: *"You be justice, you be the reckoning, become the hand of God. See that door for yourself and see yourself getting out. End of suffering. Trust in me."*

With this, she tells Sleepwalker that she holds all the power because she is in charge of her own agency. She tells her to visualize her escaping the suffering and then to make it so. She promises her salvation and declares that she can deliver on that promise by asking for her trust.

Sleepwalker contemplates this, silently weighing her options and everything Prophet just said. She gives in and leans forward accepting the cake into her mouth, letting Prophet feed her. This symbolizes her accepting of the plan, her accepting Prophet as her leader and accepting that Prophet is right. It also mirrors holy communion, whereby Christians accept a wafer into their mouths as a symbol of the body of Christ, their savior and leader, thusly accepting that they put their faith in him.

Sleepwalker chews on the cake as she “chews” on the implications of her accepting the plan. She tries to process her decision, while, in the background there are rowdy drunk men who begin to argue and get into a fight. Things turn violent when the men swear loudly at each other and attempt to push each other. As distracting and disruptive as this is, Sleepwalker as well as the other two do not react. None of them look back at them, which shows twofold how focused and intent they are, as well as how they have been desensitized to violence. The sound of this fight carries over to the next scene where Prophet and Disciple are waiting at a vacant ground. True to their characters, Prophet sits meditatively in the car, while Disciple is sitting on the ground leaning against the car. She smokes a cigarette and fidgets with the grass. We hear the aggressive shouting and scuffle of the fight, which provides the soundtrack to this short glimpse into the lives of these 3 young women: the inescapable hostility that surrounds them and follows them with everything that they do. This serves to build the tension, making visible the stress of the situation and adding a sense of danger. Their empty surroundings emphasize the feeling at that moment, being all alone – the quiet before the storm. The moment allows for contemplation, as we see these women on the brink of committing a crime and risking their lives and have to wonder how they got here. This question pervades the story as an existential meditation. What should we do with our lives given the circumstances? Who is in control of the outcome? How much of a choice does one have? Etc. While this story may not provide any satisfactory answers, it is my hope that simply viewing the scenario (of people desperately trying to improve their lives) play out will lead to more thoughtful opinions by the viewers themselves.

We see Sleepwalker walking downhill. She is surrounded by darkness; with there being light only in front of her. Her path is cemented, there is nowhere else to go but forward. The steepness of the bank and her difficulty in scaling it shows how unsteady her footing is going forward. The outcome and course of action is as unstable/unpredictable as her footing. Given that the back story is not explicitly revealed in detail, nor are their exact motives spelled out on screen, this visceral segment serves in its place to show rather than tell what leads them to this volatile course of action, and their need for escape. Here, one is made to feel their desperation and motivation rather than hear about it.

The segment ends just as the sound of the off-screen action peaks and cuts off abruptly. From the loud and stressful sound to the sudden cut to the boot popping open. The disruption from the smash cut is to give a sense of being thrown into the action. They reach into the boot to

pull out their equipment as lightning strikes in the distance, adding an ominous and foreboding feel to this scene. They retrieve their masks which look familiar, as we first encounter this on the figure that passes Sleepwalker unnoticed. This is a signal to the audience to say that this all links up somehow; as though there is an inevitable path being laid out, and that this is perhaps the beginning of the end.

Sleepwalker looks at the masks and the gun and knife and wonders why they are taking precautions when they expect it to be a smooth operation. Disciple answers with *“just in case”*. Perhaps it is anxiety and paranoia or perhaps deep down they know that no plan is ever fool-proof, either way they had better be safe rather than sorry. Then there is a smash cut to the three of them cautiously entering the club. The abrupt change of scene serves to show how they are thrown into the situation. There is no time or space to reconsider, rethink or re-plan. This is it, all the parts are in motion.

They enter a silent, dark club, which indicates, as they expected, that the club is closed and they are alone. This is soon proven false, as loud music starts to play from somewhere, and through the doorway some club lights turn on and slowly a man appears into frame. They take a moment to adjust. Sleepwalker panics while Disciple looks to her leader, Prophet for direction. Although shocked, Prophet is adamant that they carry on with the heist even though they have not planned for people to be there during the robbery. Disciple would follow Prophet anywhere and so steps out of the doorway bravely to confront the situation; such is her trust in Prophet. She drags the hesitant Sleepwalker along with her, knowing that they all have to play a part if they are to be successful. Disciple is seen whispering an instruction into Sleepwalker’s ear as she hands her the gun and takes the knife from her instead, and then moves out of frame, leaving a trembling Sleepwalker aiming the gun at the man. He appears inebriated and does not notice them. Instead he lazily adjusts the sound system. She tries to get his attention, her voice lacks strength and quivers as she speaks. Anything could happen at this point. She clears her throat and tries again, louder this time, and this gets his attention.

The man takes a moment to react, he is disorientated from being drunk and the club lights flashing around him. At first he reacts with confusion, which then turns into shock. As she continues her attempts to get him on the ground and neutralize the threat, the man sizes her up and given her small stature, he decides to take his chance. Just as he lunges forward,

Disciple comes up behind him with a knife pressed against his throat, she pushes him to the ground. Once she has him apprehended, on his knees and hands on his head, Prophet appears to question him. Sensing that he is not alone and that their lives are in danger, she tries to assess the situation. The potential danger weighs heavy and her calm voice is now more urgent and frantic. The man resists answering the questions when suddenly they hear a cheer from another room and realize that there are more people to take care of in this situation. Prophet goes off to look for the money, taking the bag from Sleepwalker and leaving Disciple and Sleepwalker to deal with the others.

By coordinating their movements in this way, with each having their own part in the action, it is apparent just how much these women rely on each other and their working together to succeed. The hierarchy is also revealed, as Prophet gives the instructions/directions, which pass down to Disciple who then brings Sleepwalker into it. This is much like many religious hierarchies where the priest gives instructions/sermons, the devotees receive and then pass it on to others. I draw this comparison here because these women band together over common goals and ideals, as it is in religion, and this shows that their pursuit for a better life requires discipline and structure. However, the contrast between the passive paths devotees take in attaining their goals and the actively austere path these women take, are striking.

They walk the man over to the next room, Disciple takes the gun from Sleepwalker and gives her the knife in return. There is a brief moment of silence before they burst into the room, which is littered with the remnants of a party and a few poor souls that remain in the club after hours. Disciple wastes no time in getting everyone on the floor. The camera is shaky, unsteady, following the action with the same uncertainty as the characters. The possibility of being over-powered in this dire situation weighs on Disciple's mind. As a result, she is increasingly paranoid and agitated, and this exacerbates her reckless nature even more. She frantically and angrily attempts to disarm everyone. A violent tirade spews out of her mouth, she is belligerent. Their lack of response is seen as defiance and this just spurs her on. Her aggression builds and bursts from her throat, like a volcano erupting. Sleepwalker watches on, she is shocked and in awe of the pure anger that spills forth from Disciple. Disciple's strength and power entrances Sleepwalker, her gaze fixated on Disciple. The image starts to skip and jitter as though there is a glitch in her reality. It is as though the stress and confusion of this situation is made visible in Sleepwalker's eyes. Disciple quotes Prophet by feverishly screaming "*I am justice. I am reckoning. I am the hand of the lord!*". She says this to

intimidate everyone and also as a way of comforting herself. In this moment of insecurity, she needs to re-affirm her own strength and importance to herself. This also shows just how much she subscribes to the sentiments of Prophet, and how she applies it to herself.

Sleepwalker then slips into a trance like state. She watches smoke pour out of Disciple's mask, much in the same way the profanity and aggression did. This imagery alludes to violence as a poison and indicates that Sleepwalker has lost touch with reality.

Suddenly she is seen in the previous room, and the impracticality of her ending up there indicates that she is dreaming/hallucinating. It is empty and she appears to be all alone when suddenly, she happens on the man they just apprehended. He stands in the shadow, shoulders hunched, chest heaving, like a bull ready to charge. He is wearing a different shirt, furthering the impracticality of her vision. His eyes are fixed on her. She is stuck, she cannot move out of the way as he approaches her. She is stuck in place, and this is all shown in a point of view shot. All she can do is move her head, and so the camera pans slowly, but is still fixed in one place. The camera continues to pan as the man gets closer, we hear a few clicks of a jammed gun and Disciple is then revealed to be struggling with the gun. The man fixes on Disciple and tries to attack her, but then Prophet comes into frame and strangles him with a shoelace, effectively pulling him out of frame. True to the dreamlike quality of this scene, Disciple disappears suddenly (just as she appeared suddenly). The camera pans intrepidly, regardless of whatever is unfolding. Another man appears on screen, he aims a gun directly at the camera/ Sleepwalker. Sleepwalker is powerless and all she can do is watch. Just as he pulls the trigger, Disciple jumps in front of the gun and her head cocks back. The sound of the deafening gunshot rings out in a high pitched tone. Her whole body shakes with fear. Prophet approaches her and tries to get her to calm down, showing that this is now what is really happening. Although what we just saw did not really happen, these dreamlike scenes serve as expressionistic tools to make visible what Sleepwalker is feeling, what she worries could happen and also serves to show the potential danger of the situation and make it more immediate for the characters. Here, her experience is her reality. She feels the anxiety and so it is played out in front of her. Sleepwalker cannot bear any more of this stress and insists that they leave, Prophet agrees, just as they are interrupted by the loud shouting of Disciple.

Back in reality, in the room with the people, Disciple is losing her mind. She continues her tirade and it is making her unsteady. Prophet approaches her to get her to calm down.



Sleepwalker catches a glimpse of the first man looking up at her. She remembers him from her 'vision'. In her mind, he looks menacing, and given her last experience with him, she is convinced that he is going to attack. While this is going on, the three of them hear a bang on the door. They fall silent. Tension builds... and then BANG! They focus on the door. There is sporadic knocking on the door from the other side- people are trying to get in. However, Prophet and Disciple try to figure out what is happening. They hope that the banging will stop soon, but whatever is to come they must be ready to deal with it. As they wait in anticipation; suddenly Sleepwalker is panicked and starts screaming, aiming the knife at the first man. She is insisting on him; her screams intensify with desperation. Prophet and Disciple are startled by this, Prophet makes a snap decision and grabs them and runs out of the room. In the confusion, another man screams out for his father to save him. This implies that his father is the club owner and he is the one responsible for the banging, as he is leading a rescue effort on the other side of the door. His childish screams add absurdity to the situation, as this grown man calling out for his father might be comedic, in stark contrast to the seriousness of the situation, and this awkward juxtaposition serves to highlight that. Also in real life, awkward and absurd things happen in these stressful situations, so in this way perhaps it also lends itself to realism, as it is true to real life.

The three women race across the club and lock themselves in the room that they entered through. While Sleepwalker and Disciple hysterically look for an exit, Prophet is more resigned, assessing the situation. Disciple calls out and confirms what Prophet had already suspected – they were locked in and stuck in this room. Prophet knows that their chances of getting out alive with the money are slim. They are cornered. Just then she notices a red laser shine right next to her foot. This is indicative of a target laser from a rifle. She steps into it, effectively shielding the other two from the aim of the gunmen, as a martyr. More lasers appear on her back and she knows then that this is the end, she is out of moves. She takes off her mask, resigned to her fate. Disciple has now realized this and is bowed down in front of her. She pulls Sleepwalker down so that she too is out of the firing line. They look up at Prophet, lit up with lasers and it is as though she is a living deity, and the two are bowed in reverence of her.

She gives them a final word, drawing their attention to the door they just came from. She instructs them to not waste time and just make a break for it, thinking that they would be able to escape in the confusion of the situation. With her last word, "*run.*", Disciple and

Sleepwalker take the bag of money and run in a frantic haze. Disciple and Prophet are not seen and their fate is left ambiguous.

The following scene cuts in, showing Sleepwalker as she runs from the shouting that chases after her, and out, with pauses to obscure the perception of time such that it is not clear how far she has run, or where she is. Sleepwalker suddenly stops, fighting to catch her breath. She finds herself in a black room that is indiscernible to her, it looks as though she is nowhere in particular. This dark room could possibly be a quiet place somewhere in the club, or it could perhaps be a corner in her own mind. Since it is quiet there, seemingly away from harm, she tries to find her bearings. Then a figure steps past her and she hears Prophet's voice. It is more ethereal and distorted. She cannot see too far in front of her since she is in darkness. All she sees is a single light ahead of her, which she takes to be the light from Prophet's torch as she walks ahead. Sleepwalker keeps walking but grows concerned that she cannot see where she is or where she is going, she still struggles to make sense of what just happened. The lack of answers makes Sleepwalker agitated, as she starts pleading with Prophet for help. Prophet responds in an eerily calm demeanor and asks her to keep walking and following her. This exchange serves to represent the dynamic between priest and devotee. In times of desperation, begging, pleading, crying for help from a being that cannot be seen and in fact could be made up can be seen to mimic prayer.

In this scene, the dialogue sounds off, their tones don't match (Prophet responds illogically calmly to Sleepwalker's panicked cries). Also the voice of Prophet does not sound real. It is then wholly possible that this exchange with Prophet could all be in Sleepwalker's head; another one of her visions that play out her feelings. As she keeps walking in the darkness, continuing to plead with Prophet for answers and for her not to leave her alone, Prophet assures her that she is close to getting out. Prophet also remarks that she was once like Sleepwalker, in the darkness but now the light shines on her. This refers to, in vague terms, the fact that Prophet has moved on from the place Sleepwalker is now. This could signal that she has escaped (perhaps through death) while Sleepwalker is still seeking a way out. It could also allude to the 'darkness' of ignorance and being in the 'light' of enlightenment.

Sleepwalker puts her mask back on and Prophet seemingly leads her out of the room. She is then seen on a road, the very same one she walked on in the beginning. Here, Sleepwalker moves in a straight line between reality and unreality. As she walks, a figure wearing her pajamas walks past her. The scene is now reversed - where she was once the unconscious one

walking in her pajamas past the masked figure, after her journey she is now the masked figure watching herself walk past her. Upon noticing this she whips around, takes off her mask and stares on, off camera. She stares back in shock and awe. One, for the surreal visuals of seeing her past self, for another, for realizing that she did not escape, and on a deeper level realizing the true nature of one's actions. That she is exactly where she brought herself. Just then, a red dot (the red lasers from the rifle) appears on her forehead. This is the laser from the rifle finding its mark, just as it did with Prophet. This shows that the gunmen have her in their sights, and this image of a red dot in the middle of her forehead represents the third eye opening, as it is symbolic in Hindu culture, the third eye being the access to a supreme knowledge, which is equated to enlightenment. In that moment she sees her life as it is. She sees herself sleepwalking, she sees herself now as something she should have realized she would become, she sees that she is exactly where she put herself.

While it would be impossible for her to physically pass her past self, and for the gunmen to catch her at the same time, it is then more probable that her warped reality (influenced by her strange sleeping patterns, and disturbed brain chemistry) led her to combine the metaphoric realization with the literal events of what is actually unfolding.

With this new insight (knowing now what she didn't know then) she realizes two-fold that, for one, she was not successful in her attempted heist, and for another, that she is going to die. She also has to come to terms with the limited power of her actions. In this way, she is enlightened to the true nature of herself and to the limits of her agency. She also sees that her self-determinism did just that- determined her end, but not in the way that she had hoped. If she had any destiny it was a self-fulfilling one; much like a cup falls when it is pushed, so too did she end up where she did when she walked down this path. For despite her best efforts, in the end we all succumb to cause and effect. (*For further discussion see the Theme and Philosophy section*).

Abruptly, just as she closes her eyes, we cut to black and 'Bomma Tha' plays. This Tamil song, with its jarring old sound quality and piercing whistling, is grating to hear as it closes the film and plays over the credits. Its upbeat tone contrasts with the severity of the scene it plays over. It is left open-ended however, as to how Sleepwalker feels about her fate, and how we should feel about her fate. She closes her eyes in what can be seen as defeat or peaceful surrender. For on one hand, she is about to die, but this would provide her with

escape in a sense, just not the one she expected to have. She wanted to get out of her current circumstances so that she could have a fresh start; a good chance to live a better life. Instead, in the end she faces her death and so she transcends her circumstances but does not get a chance to live better. She ultimately gets what she wanted but not in a satisfactory sense. On another consideration, she realizes the true nature of her actions and this is an enlightening realization, and on the Hindu/Buddhist reading, being enlightened is the ultimate escape.

As such, her fate is ambivalent and so the mood of her ending is too. With this, the song is not dramatic or dire to suit her imminent death. It is instead upbeat and a little wonky to add to the surreal feel of the scene. This was chosen for the confused mood it invokes, so that it does not decide one way or the other for the audience, whether the ending is a happy or sad one. It should perhaps be viewed as both, for both are true on one level or another.

Also worth noting is how this oddly jubilant song serves to enhance the tone of irony. There is an almost laughable irony of Sleepwalker (as well as Disciple and Prophet for that matter) not being able to get what they sought after, despite doing all the right the things to get it. There is irony also in their outcome being ultimately what they wanted, but not in the sense that they wanted. The dark humor of this irony in this scene is akin to laughing in the face of the abyss. Sometimes when confronted with the absurd and ironic, one can do nothing else except laugh.

# THEMES

To better discuss the ideas at the core of this short film, a distinction shall be made between the thematic concept and the thematic statement. Here, the thematic concept includes the overall, central theme (i.e. the subject itself, what the story is about), whereas the thematic statement is the more specific idea, a comment on the thematic concept (i.e. what the story says about that central subject).

The main theme (i.e. thematic concept) of this short film can be summed up broadly with one word and that is **escape**. To expand, it is **escaping suffering**, a way out of their bad circumstances and fundamentally, seeking the means toward it. This is what binds the characters together and gives them a common goal and drives them to their attempted heist. The main character is in pain, and so she seeks out (passively at first and then actively), an improvement. This theme is expanded on with the minor themes of spiritual escape and self-determinism. Here, escape is a pithy explanation of what they want, and self-determinism is the notion that informs their way of getting what they want.

The thematic statement then is that **escaping suffering is a fallible endeavor**. This is because the problem and solution come from the same fallible source - being human. This story shows that there is no sure-fire way of ridding oneself of suffering so long as we are bound by the confines of an indifferent world. We do not get what we want, or what we deserve because some things are beyond our control. While we may make decisions and take action by our own accord (as these three characters have) there are still rules of the world that we must abide i.e. laws and circumstances. Though they took charge of their lives and adopted an attitude of self-reliance, they could not control their outcome since there were other factors at work; such as the resources available to them, the effect of the other people involved and their physical abilities. Human action is fallible as Sleepwalker discovers, and to suffer is to be human.

To supplement the thematic concept and statement, the minor themes in this film are as follows:

### Escape and suffering

The driving force of action for these three women is their desire to escape their circumstances. They all share a common background of misfortune; whether it is poverty, being abandoned (as it is implied Disciple has been abandoned with the death of her mother, and all of them abandoned by anyone that could help them), being victims of abuse (as Prophet describes her sexual assault at the hands of her step father, and it is implied that Sleepwalker was raped). On this level, their desire to escape their dire lives can translate into the desire for them to escape their earthly bounds and the human burden of suffering in the world. This regards escape in a spiritual sense, and it comes to be expressed in the end shot of Sleepwalker looking back in awe at her former self on a different plane, with a red laser dot on her forehead. This red dot mimics her third eye opening, which is significant in Hinduism as the third eye is the all-seeing eye, it represents the window into eternal knowledge and enlightenment, which is regarded as the highest form of being and ultimate goal. With this, Sleepwalker achieves a spiritual escape, as the imagery implies she finally grasps the true nature of all things, and escapes her ignorance. The red laser also implies the rifle bringing her to her demise, as one pull of the trigger would kill her, thus she escapes her earthly human bounds. The escape that Sleepwalker receives may not have been her intended one, but is one that resulted from her own actions within that context. Thus, her actions have brought her to her goal, but her limited power over her situation prevented her from having it in her human life.

### Cycle

The movie and the journey of Sleepwalker goes full circle; she ends up right where she began. She is sleepwalking on a road in Chatsworth at the beginning of the film, and then is seen walking along the same road in the reversed direction, at the end of the film. The fact that she ends up in the same location she was in at the start of the movie serves to show the contrast between her past and present self. After all the events that transpired, she is not the same person as she was when she started walking. She has made decisions and learnt much on her path, so that when she returns to that same spot, she has changed. This is seen literally when she is the different person (she is now the masked figure watching the Sleepwalker, when it was reversed in the beginning) but also more subtly when she notices the other figure

(Sleepwalker in her pajamas). It is in noticing this that her progress is evident, for this is something she failed to do as her past self, at the beginning.

### Self - determinism

As per the existential tenet (*further discussed in the Philosophy On Film chapter*), encouraged by Prophet, these women realize that they can only rely upon themselves and not some metaphysical force such as God, destiny etc. or anyone else for that matter. They realize that their lives are entirely in their hands, and so if they are to get what they want, they must get it for themselves. With Prophet as their guide, they reject the concept of destiny, that they should accept their lives as they are, and they reject the concept of determinism, that their whole lives have already been pre-written and decided for them. Instead, they choose the notion of self-determinism, which allows them the freedom of choice (within the realm of their capabilities and possibilities) and thus they only have themselves to answer to. This is seen in the beginning, where we get a glimpse of a masked figure dressed in black, that turns out to be Sleepwalker's future self. The fact that we see this at that point implies that the path has been laid out before Sleepwalker, and that is her eventual fate. Of course, she does not notice that figure at all and so does not know what awaits her in the future, as her actions and choices that follow, puts her on that trajectory. Here, it can be seen as destiny since the imagery implies that she was bound to end up there. However, it was her actions and not a supernatural force that leads her there. It is destiny by way of cause and effect. To re-use the example previously stated, a cup falls when it is pushed. We can say that it is the cup's destiny to fall once pushed because there is no other outcome; it will have to fall. With this, it was Sleepwalker's destiny to end up cornered by gunmen after their heist goes awry, because she made all the choices that would lead her there. She trusted Prophet and Disciple, she went ahead with their plan etc. Her destiny is alluded to in the beginning, with the masked figure appearing as she unconsciously walked past it, indicating that she was already going down that path – that the cup was being pushed, and there was no other outcome to be had.

## Victimhood and The Feminist Perspective

As discussed, the themes in this short film deal with struggle, escape and seeking. However, by telling this story with female protagonists, especially ones who have been victims of male violence, it is impossible to ignore the feminist perspective.

From the conception of the idea through the execution, the fundamental idea of this story has always been the searching. However, I cannot deny that the opportunity to make a statement about the female struggle was too tempting to pass up, and this aspect became intertwined with the central idea. The characters are shown to have been victims of their gender, as they have experienced sexual abuse, violence against women and young girls and being taken advantage of. Looking further beyond the fact that they have struggled is the perspective that these women have experienced the brute force of the male dominated world, as their perpetrators are mostly men and this is emphasized by the aggressive male fight that occurs in the restaurant. It was my goal for the hardships of these characters to be seen as a general human struggle (on the Existentialist reading), but it has however been presented as a female struggle (with the primary narrative). While I understand that the interpretation of a film is often taken at face value, i.e. the primary narrative is the one that makes the biggest impression, it is my hope that the deeper meaning also comes through and this film does not just represent a female struggle, but a human struggle at its most essential level.

I wanted to use this opportunity while depicting characters in dire straits, to show how women would rise up to meet this challenge. I feel the stories of women (and especially women of color) are severely under-represented in film. As such, it was important to me to contribute to a cinema that I wanted to see; with women subverting the usual roles of supporting characters and objects for the male gaze. With this in mind, I did not concede to the norms and specifications of what a movie like this would require. Usually a movie with some violence or action is led by white male actors. Similarly, movies that have some intellectual depth (like the films of the French New Wave) focus on the white male subject. With this short film, I wanted to depict women of color as the leads of their own story, where they are not reduced to stereotypical caricatures or have their experience watered down for the audience. Instead, in this short film it was my goal to make a movie in which these women who have been victims of their race, gender and economic standing, are able to demonstrate their strength and prove themselves to be their own heroes. Here, they match the



male force in aggression as they engage in violence while carrying out the heist. They draw great strength from the fact that they survived what other people could not, and as such they change the perspective from weak victim to resilient survivor. To make this a more meaningful effort in representation and storytelling, caution was taken to show their circumstances as truthfully as a film will allow. This is to say I have endeavored to present their circumstances honestly and without salacious or indulgent details. For example: when Prophet recounts in gory detail her last sexual assault at the hands of her stepfather - “*This one time. . .after he was done. My body went numb. . .*”, I did not want to depict her assault in gory detail. Often films tend to fetishize violence against women and so I saw this as a chance to turn the focus away from watching a woman being attacked to watching how she processes this incident and how she overcomes it.

# VISUAL CHOICES

*“A film is never really good unless the camera is an eye in the head of a poet.”*

– Orson Welles

This quote by Orson Welles has inspired me to deeply consider the influence of the visual choices in film. I have come to the understanding that, much like poetry, an image can convey things in a much more profound way than plainly stating them. Figuring out the semantics of the image, how to construct it such that it conveys a message or tone, and the virtue of its aesthetic quality is where the artistry of filmmaking comes in.

This section shall serve to elaborate on the inspiration and intention behind the visual choices in this short film, by providing examples from other movies and real life situations where possible.



*A Clockwork Orange (1971). Dir: Stanley Kubrick*



*Prophet, Sleepwalker and Disciple meet for a late night talk*

With this scene, the mise-en-scene was made to mirror the scene from A Clockwork Orange (above), with the three glasses of milk. Part of the reason for this detail was for the fact that

the troupe pictured in A clockwork Orange were joined together in a sort of cult, dressing alike, sharing the same values, objectives and world view. The milk here represents childlike innocence and purity amidst the stark contrast to the very sinister things that these characters get up to.



*Christian follower receiving holy communion*



*Sleepwalker accepts the cake and thus the plan*

This scene was meant to mirror the receiving of the Holy communion in Christianity, whereby a follower consumes a wafer that symbolizes the body of Christ and thus bestowed with his Holy spirit. Similarly, Sleepwalker here accepts the piece of cake into her mouth to symbolize her acceptance of the Prophet's words of wisdom and her plan of action. Prophet insists on feeding the cake to Sleepwalker, even batting her hand away, as a gesture of asserting her dominance over Sleepwalker and also requiring her to let Prophet feed her, as a sign that Sleepwalker trusts in Prophet and respects the power dynamic.



*Prophet offers Sleepwalker the cake and with it, the option to follow her.*



*The Matrix (1999) Dir: The Wachowskis*

In this scene, Prophet offers a piece of Lamington (local cake) to Sleepwalker. She holds it in her hand and recites her last refrain “*You be justice, you be reckoning. Become the hand of God*” and then puts it to Sleepwalker’s mouth waiting for her to decide whether to accept the piece of cake, and thus the plan, or not. This mirrors the pictured scene from *The Matrix* whereby the lead character is given a choice between knowing the truth about his existence (the red pill) or forgetting everything, and going on blissfully ignorant (the blue pill). The red lamington here alludes to the red pill and to its connotations of truth and action, as seen in *The Matrix*.



*Donnie Darko (2001). Dir: Richard Kelly*



*Sleepwalker found wandering the roads late at night*

Like *Donnie Darko*, this short film also begins with its lead character waking up from sleepwalking. They are both found in the middle of the road, still in their pajamas to show how far away from a normal night's sleep they have gone. The pajamas also serve to give the character a sense of vulnerability, with the thin fabric and its perception of being akin to undergarments. This makes the character seem exposed and caught in the act. Also, in this shot, *Sleepwalker* is wearing all white, to symbolize her innocence and purity. When she gets into the car in the next scene, Disciple gives her black leather jacket. The black here symbolizes the opposite of *Sleepwalker*'s white clothing, it symbolizes something corrupted and tainted. *Sleepwalker* drapes the jacket over herself in the car, an image which alludes to her adopting this nature of Disciple and Prophet as her own. She is later seen draping it over her white clothes in the restaurant scene as well, to show the two influences surrounding her; one of her pure nature, and the other of a darker, dangerous turn. This is appropriate for in that scene she is still making up her mind about how far she is willing to follow Disciple and Prophet (who both wear black, proving that they are already committed to that plan). IN the next scene she is seen wearing all black, a symbol of her joining them.



In Sleepwalker's vision, smoke bellows from Disciple's mask

Sleepwalker slips into a trance like state. I saw this as an opportunity to be more visually expressive of the internalized violence and anger. This scene was the perfect time to let the hurt and anger and pain of these women show. They had to deal with the harshness of life in the most brutal way and now, they express it back. In this dreamlike/trance state, Sleepwalker watches smoke pour out of Disciple's mask, much in the same way the violence and aggression did. This is the poison of anger and hatred made visible.



Prophet shields Sleepwalker and Disciple while they look up to her in reverence

In this shot, Prophet is shown to be a martyr as she shields the other two women from the rifles/instant death. This mirrors the actions of a saint, Godly figure or Prophet (e.g. Jesus Christ dying for humanity), and this allusion is emphasized with the way that Sleepwalker and Disciple look up to Prophet, in shock and awe. This image suggests that they revere her as they would a God or saint.



### Third eye imagery



The laser light from the gun finds its target on Sleepwalker's forehead, where her third eye would be.

As Sleepwalker stares down her impending death, having just seen her past-self walk by, she grapples with the profound realization of the nature of her existence. (As discussed above).

The red dot on her forehead is meant to allude to her third eye, a symbol of her attaining the knowledge needed to reach enlightenment.

*"In Eastern and Western spiritual traditions, the third eye is known as the "inner eye"; the mystical and esoteric concept referring to the "ajna" chakra. The third eye is associated with clairvoyance, out-of-body experiences, visions, and precognition. People who have developed their third eye are known as "seers". Hinduism and Buddhism use the third eye as symbolism of enlightenment. It is referred to as "the eye of knowledge" in Indian tradition."* (Token Rock, 2017)

# PHILOSOPHY ON FILM

As this short film engages with Existential philosophy, an extremely broad topic on its own, it deviates from the traditional standards of what a film should be and expands its scope further than entertainment. This brings the topic of philosophy in film into view, and so it is pertinent here to be more specific about the relevance of philosophy in this project, in both the subject matter and the general discussion of film (i.e. a philosophical film). Here, I shall divide the discussion into two sections; A) to examine the concept of philosophy and film, and B) to elaborate on the specific philosophies exhibited in this project.

## **A) Film and philosophy**

For the purposes of this project, it is not important to distinguish between those films that ‘illustrate’ philosophical positions, and those (much rarer) films that more properly ‘philosophize’, in the sense of generating original concepts. This project learns from both, discovering the complex ways in which philosophical ideas can materialize in (mostly narrative) films. Richard Gilmore thus puts forth the powerful argument that “*there may be a larger narrative at work simultaneous to the explicit narrative of the primary plot of the movie. This might be called the meta-narrative of the movie...that derives from philosophical ideas from the great philosophers*” (2005 viii). To expand, here, the narrative is divided into the primary plot, concerning the overt goals and actions of the characters, and then the ‘meta-narrative’, which is a wider view of the primary plot and includes the overarching lessons and commentary on the story. So, if philosophy is incarnated in film, it would be at the level of the meta-narrative.

A central area of debate concerns the narrative form of cinema, whether or not it allows for conceptual philosophizing - and here I have relied on those many (non-film) theorists who have defended the value of a specifically ‘narrative knowledge’. For Barthes, “nowhere is nor has been a people without narrative” (1966/1977). For philosopher Alistair MacIntyre, ‘man (*sic*) is not essentially, but becomes through his history, a teller of stories that aspire to truth’ (1984: 216). In recent years, the importance of a specifically *narrative* knowledge has been re-affirmed: what better way to understand Victorian Britain or apartheid South Africa than the novels of Charles Dickens and the plays of Athol Fugard? For those who oppose narrative



to scientific or philosophical knowledge, Polkinghorne points out that the thinking behind the shaping of a narrative plot is similar to the process of hypothesis development, in that the plot is “tested by fitting it over the facts” (1988: 19), although he does recognize that the difference between ‘logico-mathematical’ reasoning and narrative is that “narratives exhibit an explanation instead of demonstrating it” (1988: 21). Literature ‘shows’ rather than ‘tells’.

If therefore films are capable of being philosophical, and if narrative ways of making knowledge are acceptable, then I was finally drawn to those enormous amount of ‘film philosophy’ studies applied to specific films (and directors): it is through these studies that one can learn how philosophical ideas are integrated into the many cinematic narrative codes and techniques. For Kovacs, the remarkably difficult films of Russian director Andrei Tarkovsky are fundamentally shaped by the director’s immersion in the philosophy of Russian Christian Personalism, and this can even explain Tarkovsky’s notoriously ‘long- take style’, since for Personalism an image (such as an icon) is a window to the divine world which therefore needs to be meditated upon slowly (Kovacs 2009). For Vincent Gaine (2011), Michael Mann’s films are “dramatizations of existentialist philosophy...the existential analysis serves as a unifying framework for Mann’s films”. For James McRae (2013), Ang Lee’s *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* is defined by a tension between the competing philosophies of Confucianism and Daoism. Paisley Livingston adds to our understanding of the films of Ingmar Bergman, where more usually Existentialism and particularly Kierkegaard are seen as powerful influences (Ketcham 1986; Lauder 1989; Singer 2007), by identifying the importance to Bergman’s cinematic outlook of the philosophical ideas of a relatively obscure Finnish philosopher of psychology, Eino Kaila (2009). In the studies of *The Matrix*, it is its radical Cartesian epistemological skepticism that has been most discussed. These studies, and for example the many also referred to above published by the University Press of Kentucky, enable us to sharpen our understanding of how abstract philosophical concepts diffuse themselves into concretely realized audio-visual narratives.

Furthermore, unlike say Logical Positivism, Existentialist writings constantly move between philosophy and creative texts: Sartre would write novels (such as *Nausea* (1938)) and plays (such as *The Flies* (1943) and *No Exit* (1944)), as well as many film scripts; Camus was as well known for his novels (such as *The Stranger* (1942)), plays (see e.g. *Caligula* (1938)), and short stories (see e.g. *Exile and the Kingdom* (1957)). Dostoevsky and Ibsen are also often identified as ‘Existentialist’ writers. This loose boundary between abstract

philosophizing and creative expressions, a consequence of Existentialism's ontological focus on what it means to be a human being, makes this philosophy eminently translatable into narrative modes such as this film project.

## **B) Philosophy of *The Sleepwalker* and *The Prophet***

This short film draws heavily upon the philosophy of Existentialism to articulate its central themes. This project's understanding of Existentialism takes its intellectual cues from Jean-Paul Sartre's (1905-1980) *Existentialism is a Humanism* (1946), and *Being and Nothingness* (1943), as well as Albert Camus's (1913-1960) *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942), aware of course that not only is the Existentialist movement a broad church with many tendencies and disagreements, but also that many earlier philosophers, such as Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, are drawn on to enrich our understanding of it.

I am drawn to Existential philosophy because it is the closest we have to a theory of human existence. This branch of philosophy concerns questions pertaining to the nature of existing in the world. With the theories it puts forward and the terms created to explain these ideas, it provides us with a language to investigate and understand the human condition. One of the endeavors of Existentialism, beyond understanding the human experience, is to have a tangible effect in a person's life. This is to say that these concepts must not merely be theoretical; it must also be applicable to how a person lives their life. This idea of a so called 'lived philosophy' or philosophy as a way of life, can be viewed as a tangible path. As Prophet recalls to Sleepwalker, "*A path cleared in my mind, and at my feet a threshold and I walked right over it. I escaped it.*" (2017).



At the beginning of this path we must first recognize ourselves in the world, acknowledge our existence, only then can we respond to questions about it. In *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche asks, 'What were we doing when we unchained this earth from its sun?' (2001: 125). With the death of God (the 'sun'), Sartre argued, humanity is alone, with the result that 'existence precedes essence'. "This means that man (*sic*) first exists... and is only defined later. Man...is not definable because he is, at first, nothing. He will not be until later, and then he will be as he makes himself. Thus, there is no human nature, since there is no God to conceive it... Man is nothing other than what he is" (2007: 22).

Bereft of the consolations of *a priori* truths, ontological stability and the securities of

immanent meaning, humanity finds itself orphaned in an indifferent universe, not only ‘condemned to be free’, but weighed down with the burden of responsibility of having actively to make and re-make itself through freely-chosen commitments to individual life-projects (which simultaneously define humanity as a whole). A radical insecurity produces a radical freedom which produces a radical anxiety – the torment of an inescapable duty to commit oneself to *self-determination*. As Sartre shows in *Being and Nothingness*, ‘authenticity’ in existence is to live one’s life in this awareness, and in this text ‘being-in-itself’, succumbing to ‘facticity’ (the determinations of life’s circumstances), and ‘inauthenticity’ are closely related terms for those people who live in ‘bad faith’ by refusing that existential ‘duty’. Thus, in Sartre’s famous illustration, the café waiter is too ‘waiter-esque’, robotically following the script of being a waiter, rather than confronting his heady responsibility to invent a self. Sartre suggests that once he becomes aware of this and commits to utilizing his freedom to live only as he truly wants to, then he will be living authentically. (Sartre, 1943.) In *The Myth of Sisyphus* Camus foregrounds not an image of radical freedom but of Sisyphus condemned by the gods to heave a rock up a mountain for eternity, his only victory a ‘scorn’ at his fate. For Camus, life is *absurd* because, despite our deep desire for reality to be intelligible, what we instead experience is the ‘unreasonable silence of the world’. We desire order and harmony, but encounter only chaos and the mute indifference of reality. In such a despairing context, ‘There is but one truly serious philosophical problem and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy’ (2000: 11).

While drawing from the discussions on the above existential questions, this short film endeavored to respond to the fundamental question of “what should one do with their life and what success can they have in doing it? This question plays out, and in so doing, offers insight through the narrative of these three women walking along their chosen paths. Over the course of the existential writings and the philosophies put forward in religions (such as Hinduism), a pattern emerges. All these philosophies include the human subject finding themselves on a path toward a certain goal.

Based on the theories put forward in these works, the underlying path can be generalized thusly:

	Awareness 	Action 	Goal
<b>Existentialism</b>	Consciousness	self- creation	self-fulfillment (authentic self)
<b>Hinduism &amp; Buddhism</b>	Find the teachings/practices	Understand the teachings, succeed with it in practice	Release from cycle of suffering. The cycle of birth and death. Enlightenment
<b>This film</b>	Realize have to take responsibility	Carry out heist to get money for escape	Escape.

As described previously, this short film tells the story of a traumatized young woman searching for a way out of her suffering. She starts off as a sleepwalker, the embodiment of a waking state of unconsciousness. The parallel can be drawn here to the existentialist notions of being in an ignorant ('unconscious'), primary state before one takes control of their life. In *Either/Or*, Kierkegaard also references this state with his concept of the 'aesthetic stage' of life, which describes an unengaged, hedonistic and meaningless state of being. Here, one is more concerned with personal pleasure than personal growth and so lives a shallow life. He suggests that a more fulfilling and better life comes with the concern for living ethically and religiously, and thus adding meaning to their lives (Kierkegaard, 1843).

Similar to Sartre's waiter and Kierkegaard's aesthetic stage, Sleepwalker is in a state of discontent. She withdraws into her pain and suffering and has cut herself off from living to her best potential. She lacks the motivation from something to believe in and the discipline of ambition. Prophet helps her with this by encouraging her to believe in total self-reliance as a noble way of life, as well as making a plan of action that she must abide. With this, she becomes aware of her discontent and realizes the discrepancy between what her life has become and what she wants it to be.

Both Prophet and Disciple are like her in many ways. They all come from similar circumstances, and they all seek an escape from their pain. They are all on an existential path, trying to find their places in the world and live their best lives. The path can be seen as a straight line from one point (being unconscious) to another (being fully awake/ aware of what self-determinism). As such, each of them are at different points on that path. Prophet is

furthest ahead, with Disciple behind and Sleepwalker further behind her.

The character of Prophet is what Disciple and Sleepwalker could be; knowledgeable and seemingly rid of her suffering. Prophet has self-actualized and become fully aware of herself, of her place in the world, and most importantly of her own autonomy. As such, she is the one to impart wisdom and direction to the other two. She pushes the line of self-reliance; inspiring them in a united goal and distancing themselves from the outside influences. As she says *"Look around, we're abandoned. Left begging. Left with nothing. . . No one is coming to save us. We have to do it for ourselves. Give ourselves a chance."* (2017).

Prophet uses these lines to get Sleepwalker to recognize her isolation and responsibility for her own life. This line also serves to assert another theme in Existentialism; that of Freedom. Existence is isolated from any outside force such as a supreme deity, destiny, justice, morality etc. While subjectively these forces might affect the way one views their experience, objectively there is no empirical evidence to support this and therefore, one shoulders all of the freedom and responsibility of their actions *"I am abandoned in the world ... in the sense that I find myself suddenly alone and without help, engaged in a world for which I bear the whole responsibility without being able, whatever I do, to tear myself away from this responsibility for an instant."* (Sartre, 1943)

Disciple is however more like Sleepwalker than Prophet, as she is also only learning how to overcome her problems and become self-reliant as Prophet has done. While she wholeheartedly believes in everything the Prophet says, she lacks the intelligence and control to actualize it.

As the story progresses, Sleepwalker moves ahead on this path. She starts off new to the self-realization, stepping out of her unawareness (from her state of sleep) into action. Once she accepts Prophet's plan to rob the nightclub, it is a sign of her taking a step toward self-actualization, as she puts the outcome of her life into her own hands. By the end of the story, having realized herself in the world, having nursed a desire and acted toward living according to her own terms (living authentically, as Sartre would put it), she comes to the end of her path. The story ends with her cornered by the men with guns and facing her death, as symbolized by a red laser from the rifle landing in the middle of her forehead. This red dot also symbolizes her third eye opening, as at the end of her path, she sees the true nature of all things. The truth in this story is that one does not get what one deserves but what one earns. The true nature of the world is the brutal indifference of cause and effect.

This bitter realization highlights the concept of 'Freedom' in Existentialism. Here, freedom is defined by the loneliness of existence, which is to say that human existence is isolated from any external force or influence, and so we exist on our own. As such, we have absolute freedom over our actions and decisions. As Sartre says, "*Man is condemned to be free; because once thrown into the world, he is responsible for everything he does*" (1943). Further, if the freedom of one's actions is absolute since there is nothing else acting through us, except our own will, then so too is the responsibility for the consequences of those actions.

Also of note in the discussion of freedom is 'Situating-ness', which relays that although our existence allows for absolute freedom, there is always a specific context within which our actions take place. Here, we are free only so far as our circumstances allow. This is illustrated with the path chosen by the three desperate women in the film. They all seek a better life for themselves, and have all the freedom to act towards that goal, yet they ultimately cannot escape their limiting circumstances. As previously described, they all come from poor households with little to no support from anyone of power to help them up. Their options are severely limited and they are unable to follow the usual channels of progress i.e. invest in schooling to get a good job, to earn well, to live well. This is taking into account that money would make a huge difference in their lives as it would allow them to escape the dire situations they are in. Their lives would improve if they had enough money to run away and start new lives, so that Sleepwalker would not have to live in the same community as her attackers, Prophet could save herself from her abusive step-father, and Disciple could live more comfortably without having to work extra hard to care for herself. They make the free choice to go through with a plan of action, though with consideration to their circumstances, their limited resources leave them with desperate and risky options. Still, they must shoulder the outcome of how the situation unfolds. For, as deserving as they may be of a good life given the suffering they have endured, these women still only exist within the confines of a brutally indifferent world. With no external force to guide the outcome of their actions (i.e. there is no deity or universal balance of power at work), they are bound to the law of cause and effect. Their outcome iterates the notion of self-determinism.

It can be said that once they started down the path, the end was already aligning. This sense of an immovable path, with the end already being set up, is represented by Sleepwalker being in the exact same scene from the start of the movie, seeing her past-self walk by (differing

from the start when she was in her night clothes, failing to see her future-self pass her by).

In terms of the success of her actions, it can be said that she indeed achieves her goal of escape as she would either die and find an end to her suffering in that way, or she will be arrested and escape the life she once knew in that sense. These alternatives are indeed bittersweet because it is not the escape she aimed for. (She perhaps saw herself eloping to a different country and living comfortably off the stolen money). Ultimately, she does not get the escape she wanted, but she escapes nonetheless. This can be seen as a comment on the nature of human endeavor and the effectiveness of our actions.

### **The Eastern philosophy of life**

These concepts of the path, suffering, escape, enlightenment, awareness, unconsciousness, searching etc. are drawn on heavily from the Eastern philosophies of Hinduism and Buddhism.

In this short film, the plot is driven by Sleepwalker as she seeks a way out of her suffering. Analogously, the spiritual paths in both Buddhism and Hinduism (as they share many similarities) are also defined by seeking liberation. In Buddhism, this liberation is characterized by transcendence from the earthly bounds of suffering, and marked by reaching a state of absolute peace, referred to as *Nirvana*. (Wilson 2010). In Hinduism, it is believed that the soul journeys through many life times in a cycle of death and rebirth (known as *Samsara*), with each lifetime a chance to build up good *karma* and transcend ignorance. Thus, the ultimate goal in Hinduism is to end this cycle, and the end to this cycle of death and rebirth is called *Moksha* (Juergensmeyer; Roof, 2011). It is this notion of a cyclic path that is alluded to with Sleepwalker ending up in the same place she started in – as though she has come full circle.

The end image of a red laser dot in the middle of Sleepwalker's forehead has also been used in reference to the Indian concept of the third eye. As it has been described, "*Hinduism and Buddhism use the third eye as symbolism of enlightenment. It is referred to as "the eye of knowledge" in Indian tradition . . . The third eye is known as the gateway to higher consciousness. It may alternately symbolize a state of enlightenment.*" (Token Rock, 2017)

In this way, the significance of the Sleepwalker's ending can be expanded upon. Though she faces imminent death, it is implied with this imagery that she escapes by way of transcendence. Her third eye opens, as she views her past self-walking by, she grapples with the profound truth of her actions- that there is limited power, that she is alone in the universe, that her fate was of her own making. Thusly, she becomes knowledgeable of the nature of all things, gaining a freedom from ignorance and perhaps reaching a state of enlightenment as the Third eye symbolism suggests.



## **CRITICAL APPRAISAL OF EXPERIENCE**

The process of making this short film has been in many ways challenging, but it has enriched my understanding of film production. Through this experience I have gained valuable insight into the practicality of filmmaking, as the endeavor has brought me to ask important questions and seek out certain skills that I could only be aware of through doing. Besides the logistics, I have also learned about the intellectual workings that go into communicating complex and abstract ideas in a film. What follows is an account of this process and the things that I have learned along the way.

This short film is the second narrative short that I have made, but the first one of this scale. I have previously made (written, produced, directed and edited) a nine-minute narrative short called '*Rhapsody in Cogito*' and a documentary short of the same length called '*Dance Nagara*'. The modest scope of these projects lent themselves to the minimal resources and skills that I possessed at the time. '*Rhapsody in Cogito*' required a maximum of five actors overall and the scenes were relatively short, playing like a trailer, relying on narration to tie the story together. I was able to cast my friends and colleagues in the roles as it did not require any previous acting experience (save for the lead character who was portrayed by an aspiring actor and drama student at UKZN). I was also able to use the university (Howard campus) as a central location as it had many versatile areas that could be repurposed for the required locations. For example: the cafeteria doubled as a coffee shop and a classroom doubled as a study. With this convenience, I was able to complete shooting over one weekend.

Compared to that, this short, '*The Sleepwalker and The Prophet*' was quite a step up in terms of scope. The run time is a little more than doubled (coming in around twenty minutes long) and there are three main characters with greater significance to the story, as well as extras. To tell this story convincingly, I required more authentic locations and trained actors who could carry the emotional depth forward. For this, I had to branch out of my immediate circle and look to the local independent production industry, such as it is. I appealed to the UKZN drama department for assistance in casting the three main roles and they kindly allowed me to advertise the roles and hold auditions at their studios. I was also lucky enough to meet a casting agent, Kajal Bagwandeem (of the local casting agency, Imagine Worx) at the Durban

International Film Festival, who used her reach and expertise to aid my search for professional actresses. This led me to successfully cast the roles with actresses who fit the physical profile for each part and were keen to work on a student short film.

My ultimate goal was to produce a more polished and professional looking film than my first one. While I shot the first short by myself and with my own mid-range 'pro-Sumer' camera, as I was aiming for a better product this time around, I sought after a cinematographer. This was to allow better video quality as the cinematographer would have a more professional, higher end camera, and they would be much better versed in the technical aspects of cinematography than I am. Also, having someone else operate the camera and adjust to the different locations and lighting setups, would free me up to concentrate on directing the actors, staging the scene and ensuring that the cast, crew, locations, props etc. are in place for a productive shoot. I also hired two LED photography lights to better light the scene and give it a more professional look.

These actors and the cinematographer, like myself, are attempting to break out of the independent circuit and into major film production. With respect to the self-funded, student production nature of this film, we were all in agreement that the work would be done on a voluntary basis with no financial compensation. It is my regret to have failed to prioritize funding, as I would have paid these hard working artists their due. Unfortunately, this was not feasible as our limited budget only allowed for the hiring of the lighting and catering. As such, all involved understood that they would not be getting paid for their work, but instead this film would provide them with a platform to hone and showcase their skills as well as a credit to their filmography.

To speak to specifics, I shall briefly review the technical aspects of this production. I was working with a budget of R3000 to cover the cost of an estimated two weekend shoot. Ultimately, I exceeded this budget given the delays and setbacks as well as the cost of post-production sound mixing (done by Elvis Gangiah at the Playhouse Company studio). This included the hiring of lighting equipment at R500 for two LED lights (with stands to secure it) per weekend, hiring a gimbal (movable tripod- to achieve steady tracking shots) at R450 a weekend and catering, which amounted to R300 a day. My cinematographer provided her own camera and I provided the tripod and shotgun mic (i.e. boom) to record sound. As for locations, we relied upon the generosity of the various establishments to let us use their

venues at no charge. Thankfully, the managers of each venue proved to be gracious enough to accommodate our shoot. For the restaurant scene, we used a bar and pool hall located in Kharwastan, Chatsworth called *The Aces and Eights*, and filmed for 6 hours on a weekday while the establishment was closed. For the club scene, we used a real club called *Club Fahrenheit* on Stamford Hill, also filming on a day it is not open to the public, namely Sundays. The club scenes were the longest of the film and so took the longest to shoot. They also required more work in terms of the logistics of executing the action properly. Partly as a result of this (and other factors to be discussed), we ended up having to attempt shooting these scenes on three different occasions. For the outdoor scenes, which include the road at the beginning and end, as well as the grounds that they rendezvous at, we used a random/quiet road in Kharwastan and a ground in Unit five, Chatsworth. The shoot took place in October and November, in what unfortunately turned out to be rainy months. The poor weather coupled with the fact that we needed to shoot at night to suit the scenario, significantly reduced the time available for filming. As such, we did not complete those scenes on the first attempt either and had to reschedule the shoot multiple times to allow for better weather. Another factor that delayed production was the availability of the actors and the cinematographer. Finding a date and time when the location, cinematographer, and all the actors are available proved to be quite challenging. This was because most of the cast and crew had day jobs and prior commitments.

## **Challenges and Lessons Learned**

There is one thing universally agreed upon by every filmmaker, from the Indie sphere to Hollywood- filmmaking is never easy. This is mainly due to the fact that there are many moving parts that require attention and coordination to ensure that the shoot is possible- let alone a good one. The hard and fast rule seems to be: Expect everything to go wrong because it will! One must plan so thoroughly that every possible setback is accounted for, and even then, things can still go wrong, but that is just part of the process and one must be able to 'roll with it'. This has been my experience in a microcosm.

Working with a limited budget meant that we had to make the most out of each day of shooting. We did not have the luxury of spreading the shoot out over many days, since we had the lighting equipment, locations and actors for a limited amount of time. Adding to the

time sensitivity was the unfortunate timing of the rain, which rendered the outdoor scenes impossible to film and as a result, constantly needed to be postponed and tacked onto the other filming days. As such, the shoot had to be more vigorous, with few breaks and discussions in between, in order to get through the set number of scenes that needed to be completed on the day. Since the schedule was quite cramped, there was no time to spare on meditating on the performance or the camera angles. I was surprised by how time consuming simply setting up the shot could be, for as easy as it may seem, it takes a few attempts to get the *blocking* right. (This refers to the positioning of the actors, in relation to the lights, sets, props etc. for a scene). There are a number of things that must be considered when blocking a scene. Besides being practical to shoot it must also look authentic, visually pleasing and in keeping with the themes of the story. Another factor is getting the lighting right, such that there are no shadows and it does not over expose the image. The combination of moving the lighting stands, the tripod and clearing the scene of any unnecessary objects, as well as human error (like the actors missing their mark or forgetting a line) that causes a re-take; all take up time that should be used shooting usable footage. As such, there is absolutely no time to think the blocking up on the spot. From this, a vital lesson was gleaned in hindsight:

### **1. Plan! plan! plan!**

Herein lies the absolute necessity of thorough pre-planning and rehearsals. While some notorious directors (such as Werner Herzog) reject the rigid structure of a planned shoot in favor of the raw creativity of spontaneity, I have found that strategy to be counter-productive. In my case, neglecting to plan the practical aspects of filming, e.g. the blocking, the specifics of camera angles, how long the shots should be etc. resulted in valuable time being wasted trying to figure these things out. On our first attempt at filming the club scene, I went in with very little planning. I did not have a shot list or time allocation for how to manage the day. Despite advice to the contrary, I made the mistake of leaving it all to the vision in my mind, which did nothing to effectively materialize in reality. This resulted in confusion and more time spent on the minor details rather than making the day i.e. getting all the shots needed for that day of filming as per the schedule.

Having a shot list prepared is extremely useful in this instance. Considering in detail how the scene should play out and how one wants to capture that on camera beforehand, not only

creates a better mental schema of the scene but allows better tracking of the shoot. It is absolutely essential for the director to know the basics of the shoot so that they are properly prepared on set. The basic preparation includes knowing where the actors should be placed and what their characters should be thinking, feeling etc., as well as knowing how many more shots are needed within the allotted time. By having this primary view of the shoot, the director is better equipped to consider what has to be done in order to get the shots needed. This often means making decisions to accommodate the rest of the schedule, such as leaving out certain angles or not doing an extra take. With the more nuanced details of the shoot, like the actor's portrayal of the character and how they would deliver a line or react in that situation, it is preferable to rehearse beforehand. In the rehearsal the actors and director are able to share their thoughts and instincts with each other. The actors get a sense of what is required from them in a way they may not have known before, and the director gets a sense of how the actor is approaching their character and can then communicate their ideas better.

I took this into consideration on the second attempt at the club scene, which was necessary when the actress playing Disciple dropped out and we had to re-shoot the whole scene. I was sure to be better prepared and have all the schematics of each scene thought out, and most importantly, written down. Having already assessed the location on the first attempt, I had a better idea of how to block the scenes. I made a shot list for each scene, which detailed the different camera angles we needed, and roughly sketched the positions of each character, the camera and the lights so that everyone on set could visualize where they needed to be and how the scene should progress. This ensured a time efficient shoot, where we managed to get the shots we needed and stuck to the time allocated. Though there are some shots I wish I could have done better and spent more time on, the important thing is that we made the shot-list so the film could be completed. The film was completed, perhaps not perfectly, though such is the nature of creating anything- at some point one has to stop and let it go for it to exist, otherwise it will always be an intangible thing. This part of planning, often referred to as storyboarding, is now an essential step in my productions to come and I dare not step onto set without it.

## **2. Collaboration**

Another aspect of filmmaking that is often overlooked but should also be considered, is the working relationship between everyone involved on the production. Film production is actually quite an intimate process, requiring the artists and crafts people to be vulnerable as they publically share their talents and put themselves on the line. It is also a process of having to spend long days together, listening to other people, sacrificing and compromising. As a result, there are disagreements and frustrations on set that are bound to come about, and the way in which this is dealt with can make all the difference between a successful project and a ruined one.

To start with, there is a hierarchy on set that exists to ensure that everyone is contributing in the way that is required. It is in the best interest of the production for there to be a singular, clear cut vision; for while it is indeed a collaborative process (with each bringing a particular set of skills to the achieve the goal), it is important to not clutter and confuse the ultimate goal with too many other visions. The technicians such as camera operators, sound recordists, assistant directors etc. may give input as to how best to execute the shoot and should be receptive to taking direction. However, it would be inappropriate for them to attempt to change the creative direction of the shoot to their own liking as this would undercut a clear and concise vision. In this instance, I started off working with two freelance videographers and aspiring cinematographers to shoot this short film. As they have been accustomed to directing their own material, taking direction from someone else proved to be difficult to adjust to. It would be the case that they disagreed with the shots and blocking that I, as the writer and director, preferred. It was important to me however, to be faithful to the style and story that I chose, and not concede to a different one just to avoid disagreement. I have found that it is best to stay firm in the direction, keeping it professional and avoiding any unnecessary personal comments.

Despite my best efforts though, it was apparent that they took my decisions personally, which amounted to palpable tension, noticeable by them snapping back in frustration or performing their reluctance to shoot a certain way. This combined with the setbacks the production had to overcome (which resulted in postponed shoots and longer shooting hours) brought a

distinct drop in their enthusiasm and mood. Eventually we parted ways, and I recruited a recent AFDA cinematography graduate to help me complete filming. This cinematographer seemed to understand the nature of production, the importance of the on-set hierarchy, and was able to take direction better.

This proves to me that the human element is just as important a factor as any other in production. People make mistakes, people do not always react in the rational way, people have different opinions. This could potentially make for an explosive mix on set which could be unavoidable at times. The best one can do is to remain respectful of each other and focused on the end goal.

## **2a. Still a job**

With this I learned that it is not necessary for the actors and crew to share one's passion, or for the project to be as important to them as it is to oneself. While creative work is deeply personal and it is easy to feel sentimental and protective of it, it is ultimately still work to actualize that idea. There is some grind in doing the less glamorous work like repeating lines, paying attention to technical aspects and having the stamina to stand for long periods of time. It is not always a constant stream of creative decisions and energy. It should be a fundamental understanding that everyone may be on set for different reasons, but the ultimate goal is shared – to do their job. Everyone must be committed to their work first and foremost (if not to the story or the film). As such, much like any other work, it is the job of the director to use the workers to the best of their individual ability in achieving the goal.

Since this was a modest independent production I had to wear many hats, and in doing so learned an important lesson.

## **2b. Every Good cop needs a bad cop**

This is to say that there must be a mediator between the employers (producers) and employees (cast and crew). Directing people is a dynamic process as it relies upon the different personalities and perspectives all coming together as one to achieve a common goal. From the technicians to the craftspeople to the actors, everyone has a unique view of the project in terms of its personal significance, the direction of the film, etc. It is the job of the

director to negotiate these different views and rally everyone behind a common vision. As such, the director, as leader of the ship must be able to communicate with the cast and crew effectively. It is then best to separate the technicalities of the project from the artistic direction, for the technicalities are often tedious and tiresome. As a result, the director has a hard time inspiring the cast and crew when they also have to nag and scold them to adhere to the practical requirements. Sometimes an actor or crew member will become frustrated with the demands of the shoot. It is better for someone other than the director to take the hard line and be tough, so that they do not resent the director and thus, the director's instructions. This is to say that there should be someone (usually a producer, line manager, assistant director etc.) tending to the fact that the shoot runs smoothly. They would be concerned with everyone arriving on time, knowing where to be and what they need etc.

### **3. Performance**

In terms of directing the actors, I was cautious to not confuse them with the philosophically heavy themes of the story. My main line of thinking was: you could give direction to produce understanding or you could give direction to produce action. I found it important to not stray too far away from the internal world of these characters, for as much as it is a story about existentialist tenets and spiritual longing, it is firstly a story about the lives of these three women. The story of these women and the lives they lead, the actions they are forced to take as well as the struggles and triumphs they go through, are what the audience reacts to instinctively. On a visceral level, we care first about the internal circumstances, the pain and pleasure the characters will feel and secondly about the implications thereof. For this reason, my focus was on giving direction that would keep the actors focused on the feelings of the story rather than their role in the greater context of things. We had rehearsal sessions whereby the three main actors and I discussed the story and its significance, as well as the themes and the philosophical underpinnings of such. I fielded questions to clarify the message of the movie and the way in which their characters should come across. We also developed their background stories and motivations for their actions. Once the fundamentals of the characters were established and everyone was clear on what was needed for their characters (mentally and physically), the path was cleared to then focus on giving direction to produce action. On set, I did not have to spend time explaining concepts and motivations. Instead, I briefly reviewed the scene and revised the emotional context, then 'blocked' the



scene so that everyone was in the right place in terms of lighting and camera angles. From there it was a matter of asking the actors to hold a look for longer, say a line a louder or clearer, to be more forceful or more reserved, to react or not etc. These are the practical steps of filmmaking often taken for granted.

#### **4. Communicate complex ideas simply**

I enjoy films that are intellectually stimulating. Films where one is inspired to contemplate ideas that are unlikely or unusual and in doing so leads to a better understanding of the world or life itself. As such, I am inspired to make films of this nature as I have endeavored to do so with this project. I was keenly aware that the notions of existentialism and metaphoric escape are complex to understand on their own, let alone through a story that does not call it out by name. As a result, I was cautious to not overload the subtext or introduce ideas that are too obscure. I decided that the best way to go about doing this was to focus on the primary narrative, such that by following the characters and their pursuits, one (perhaps subconsciously) follows their deeper meaning. For example, by following these characters' desire to escape from their circumstances, the viewer is also following (on some level) the existential need to try and take control of one's life and determine their own outcome. Though existing knowledge of these concepts (such as self-determinism, existentialism, destiny etc.) may give a richer understanding of the material, it is not necessary to follow the story. As such, the viewer is able to project their own understanding onto the story and make sense of it for themselves.

As such, I have determined that the best way to present complex ideas is to have a clear and concise plot that the audience can easily follow. This would include avoiding the use of opaque or specialized terms that would alienate the audience. It should rather be said in layman's terms and as simply as possible. Also, the primary narrative should not be as intricate and complicated as the ideas that are being expressed. This means abstaining from a confusing storyline with elaborate plot twists and unnecessary subplots. The narrative should be as clear and concise as possible; sticking closely to the baseline format of what a character wants and what they do to get it. The goals and motivations for the characters must be apparent to the audience, the reason for the turn of events must be discernible; and from this simple telling there is room for a more complex subtext to shine through.

## **CONCLUSION**

The above discussion has expanded on the story of the short film (part A- *The Sleepwalker and The Prophet*) by explaining the narrative components; such as the plot, character, setting, style, themes and motifs, as well as the motivation behind those choices. It has also discussed how the film engages with Existentialism through the subjective world of the characters (the philosophy that they engage with in the narrative i.e. the primary narrative) and objectively (the statement the film makes with this narrative i.e. the meta-narrative). It also contains a critical reflection of the making of this short film, with an examination of how I went about producing and shooting the film and the various factors that influenced it. I have also reflected on the lessons learned, mistakes made and the overall appraisal of this experience.

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