

# **Smoke and Mirrors**

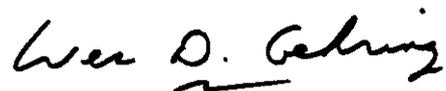
**An Honors Creative Project (HONRS 499)**

**By**

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A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Wes D. Gehring". The signature is written in a cursive style with a horizontal line under the "Gehring" part.

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## **Abstract**

This creative project is a short feature film centering on the spiritual journey of a young woman in America. She begins in New York City. After a disturbing dream, she sets off in her car for the West. Along her path, she “discovers” America through a series of encounters with a Divine spirit and nature. Her journey leads her to a hotel in the Midwest, where she takes her own life, in an attempt to escape the charade that her life has become. However, she soon discovers that the path has then only begun, and the afterlife holds for her an equally long road. This film corresponds with my own spiritual journey, as I filmically try to portray a spiritual quest.

## **Acknowledgments**

Many thanks are due to Dr. Wes Gehring for his support and advice. He has been my film mentor during my study at Ball State, and many of the ideas for the film’s themes and identity came from his classes. I would also like to thank Brian Kelley in the VIA Lab for his immense help and cooperation during the editing process. Finally, I wish to thank those who gave financial support to this tremendous undertaking, without whose help this film would have been impossible.

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Honors 499  
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### Smoke and Mirrors: Process and Rationale

Shortly after beginning this project in 2001, my career goal was transformed from film production to film scholarship. Although my new non-technical goal may seem remote from the library-intensive world of cinema studies, learning the productive aspect of the industry is essential for any film scholar. With my background in telecommunications production and extensive knowledge in the major forms of world cinema, it seemed a natural progression to attempt the making of my own short feature. As the single force behind the film, I was introduced to the dichotomous world of controlling both the creative and technical directions of the final product.

Creatively, I demand complete over projects in which I am involved. With a Hitchcock-like grip over the effort, I developed a loose framework for a storyline. My intention was to shoot without a script, as they can stifle the workmanship of the moment. Moreover, I was going for a stream-of-consciousness type of filmmaking. Over the next few months, the story developed and evolved from a topic close to my personal experience—spiritual evolution. Knowing this was to be an unconventional theme for a film, my next challenge was to formulate how to be cinematic with such a narrative. I was sure that to be a spiritual journey, I wanted only a single actress for the cast, thereby intimating the experience to an individual experience. After a brief search, I found a young woman who had the physical attributes as well as the alien persona necessary for the role, and Ms. Drilling and I began shooting in earnest during the summer of 2001, the cast and crew consisting only of her and I.

Technically, I wanted the film to create an aesthetic that would be parallel to the thematic dreaminess of the plot. It needed to recall a nondescript but former age in America. The choice was then made to use black and white. Nevertheless, black and white video did not have the indispensable aloof quality that was required. The next move would greatly alter the course of the film. Being a film purist, I believe that film is principally a photographic, not an electronic process. Along that train of thought, I purchased very expensive 16mm film equipment, and compiled a complete kit consisting of the camera itself, lenses, and varied accessories. The individual pieces of the kit I put together came from various sources, from Florida, California, and some from as far away as Australia. My next step was to pick an appropriate film stock on which to shoot. To give the film a grainy, textured feel, I finally chose a British stock, Ilford 16mm 200-speed black and white. I bought enough rolls to cover what would be adequate for the scenes I had already mentally storyboarded. Because of the enormous expense on a tight personal budget, economic shooting was vital to the survival of the film. Excessive takes were not financially possible, so a great deal of practice and rehearsal were necessary. Since shooting in sound would have been tremendously expensive, I decided to shoot a silent film, again a throwback to the films of yesterday. I would use music to “speak” throughout the film, and every song is figurative in its function. Sinatra’s “This Love of Mine” talks of a past lover, now gone—the lover substituted in this case with the American ideal. Gustav Holst’s Saturn Symphony represents the coming of old age, the progression of life, a metaphor for her journey. The conclusive piece is the final portion of Mozart’s famous Requiem, indicating a divine vindication of the young woman’s spirit, as in the Faustian myth.

As the story grew, I decided that the physical journey of the young woman would take place across the United States, beginning in New York City. Along with my assistant director, we spent a week on vacation in Manhattan shooting various scenes that would serve as an establishing sequence for the film. I used the music of Frank Sinatra as inspiration for each shot, as I knew I wanted the soundtrack to play a Sinatra piece as the audience sees the various skylines of New York. Visually, this opening was influenced by the famous Big Apple-ophile Woody Allen, especially the initial sequence from Manhattan (1979). Several scenes were filmed prominently depicting the World Trade Center. Since 9/11, this theme has brought special significance to the film, as a sense of the past is truly imprinted on the film. I chose New York as a location for two reasons: first, it is a very cinematic city—there are many ways to showcase the beauty of Gotham; second, I envisioned a westward journey across the country, starting in the East. This notion has significance, as historically in literature and culture, the West has always been associated with the unknown and death itself. Such an idea even mirrors the country's own history of manifest destiny.

The plot begins with the young woman watching a film on TV—deliberately chosen as Jean Renoir's La Grande Illusion (1937), a film that questions the meaning of existence. After a disturbing dream, the young woman leaves her New York apartment with great haste, and begins driving out of the city. To fully replicate a spiritual journey, the young woman goes on a search through Americana, a thought first explored in Easy Rider (1969). Therefore, she passes many metaphorical and significant symbols in the American myth on her trip. At the forefront of this ideal is the presence of the Christian religion in the middle portion of the United States. Even as early as her leaving her

apartment, we see the appearance of a sign that attempts to aid her in her pilgrimage, which she does not notice. Religious iconography repeatedly surfaces during the course of the sojourn, as the girl is continually passing images of Christianity and America. I wanted a “God” presence in the film, almost to the point of being another character in the story. This concept was influenced by the works of Swedish director Ingmar Bergman, whose films like The Seventh Seal (1956) place characters like Death and God in the framework of the story. I wanted to make very clear the connection of the Christian God to America. I do not, however, moralize on the positive or negative capability of such a connection.

In the middle of her journey, she approaches an abandoned church, which she enters and is seen having a silent communion with God. The religious significance is meant to be ambiguous—we do not know if she follows a particular faith, or is desperately searching for one. After her car breaks down in the Midwest, she begins an extremely fantastical trek on foot across every kind of terrain. She ends up in a sleazy motel where, when preparing for a shower, suddenly she removes a gun from her waist. I left what happens next to the viewer’s imagination by flooding the screen with a cloudy white color. We then see the young woman emerge, as if from clouds, at the gateway to death (shot at the Gateway Arch in St. Louis). As she passes through the arch, she begins down the road into the afterlife, where the film ends.

The film is purposely left equivocal and mysterious. The viewer leaves with a feeling of uncertainty, yet the strange sensation of hope or positivism. Like Stanley Kubrick, I prefer to let the images speak for themselves. It has been suggested that the young woman is Jesus, returning to Earth in the modern day. Constantly surrounded by

God the Father, she finally succumbs to His will. She could then be seen as the postmodern Savior—a woman instead of a man, she uses mechanized transportation instead of walking, and prefers suicide to being murdered. Again, one of the great strengths of cinema is its ability to speak differently to different people. It is my hope that the audience will associate their own spiritual uncertainties with this short film.

I believe the end result of this film is a work of art that I will always cherish.

Although my first attempt at filmmaking, the arduous and lengthy process, over a year in the making, was as important as the final product. The struggle of making the film itself underscores the thematic structure of the film—“it’s the journey that’s important, not the destination.” A man once said that if art isn’t hard, it’s not worth it—a notion to which I could not agree more. This film is literally a culmination of my own blood, sweat, and tears. Combining my creative, technical, and philosophical efforts proved a daunting but rewarding task. Nevertheless, the making of this film has helped relieve my own creative tension, and the payoff is metaphysical rather than tangible.