

Beneath Clouds

A film by Ivan Sen

WINNER

BERLIN INTERNATIONAL
FILM FESTIVAL 2002



Best New Talent Award – Dannielle Hall
PREMIERE First Movie Award



A Study Guide

Australian Film Finance Corporation Presents
In Association with New South Wales Film & Television Office and Axiom Films
An Autumn Films Production BENEATH CLOUDS Dannielle Hall Damian Pitt
Costume Designer Katrina Pickering Production Designer Peter Baxter Director of Photography Allan Collins
Editor Karen Johnson Sound Designer John Cowper-Patterson Original Score by Alister Spence and Ivan Sen
Executive Producer Douglas Cummins Written by Ivan Sen Produced by Teresa-Jayne Hanlon Directed by Ivan Sen
Financed by the Australian Film Finance Corporation Produced with the assistance of New South Wales Film & Television Office
Produced in association with SBS Independent Developed and Produced by Autumn Films Developed and Produced with the financial assistance of the Australian Film Commission
A Dendy Films Release

RECOMMENDED FOR MATURE AUDIENCES 15 YEARS AND OVER
MEDIUM LEVEL COARSE LANGUAGE
MEDIUM LEVEL VIOLENCE
ADULT THEMES

M 15+

FTO

autumn films

axiom FILMS

STAGES & SCREEN

DENDY



Introduction

Beneath Clouds takes us on a journey with its two main characters, Lena and Vaughn, as each tries to escape their past, and head into a different future. Lena is a fair-skinned Indigenous Australian girl who lives with her Aboriginal mother and brother in a small, isolated country town. She feels that there are no life choices for her there, other than teenage pregnancy and unemployment. She longs for the Irish father she never knew, and the chance to find the part of her identity that is not connected with the Australian bush. One day, when she has had enough and her family problems seem overwhelming, Lena impulsively decides to leave. She hits the road with little money, a backpack, and an album of photos that are her only connection with her father.

Vaughn is an angry, Aboriginal teenage boy living in a minimum-security prison in country western NSW. He is doing time working in the prison's plantation pine forest. Like many young men who have been in trouble with the police, he is hardened by his experiences of the world. He also clearly feels that as an Aboriginal young person, he has been victimised by white Australians. He has lost contact with his family, but when his sister brings the

news that his mother is ill, he decides to break out of prison in the hope of reaching her before it is too late.

Vaughn meets Lena at a truck stop on the road to Sydney. Initially, they are both suspicious and wary of each other, but events during their journey bring them together. They are both searching for purpose in their lives, and trying to find a sense of identity and family love.

Curriculum Links

Beneath Clouds will have relevance to students of Cultural Studies, Indigenous Studies, Australian Studies, Studies of Society and Environment, English, Drama and Media Studies. The film is suitable for students from middle to senior secondary school and at the tertiary level. Many of the activities below are based on an integrated curriculum approach, drawing on English skills, as well as content understanding from other disciplines.

Students need to be warned that some scenes in the film may be disturbing.

Activities

Note: Many of these activities could be completed either as oral or written tasks with the whole class, or as small group or individual work.

- Write down a few of your thoughts about *Beneath Clouds*.
- Write a short description of your reactions to the film and then compare your descriptions with those of other class members.
- In a class discussion, talk about whether you think the film is realistic. Could the events portrayed happen in real life?
- What is your opinion of the film's title? Could you suggest another title for the film?
- Discuss what you think are the film's key themes.
- Write a film review of *Beneath Clouds* for a daily newspaper or present an oral review of the film for a radio or TV film review programme.
- Give the film a ranking from one to five stars and justify your ranking.
- Write a review of the performances of the actors who play Lena and Vaughn.

The writer and director, Ivan Sen, says of the film:

"I have never been certain myself of what I was setting out to achieve with *Beneath Clouds*. I knew I wanted to explore the two themes close to my heart; purpose and identity, in a framework of dramatic realism. Since commencing the screenplay over four years ago, I have always felt a mixture of emotions surrounding the journey of the two teenage protagonists."

- Do you think the genre of *Beneath Clouds* can be described as dramatic realism?
- How would you describe the genre of the film?
- What mix of emotions might a viewer feel as they watch Lena and Vaughn's journey?
- What do you think are the powerful messages in the story?
- How do you think an overseas audience might react to the film?

Setting

In *Beneath Clouds*, the settings change constantly as the two continue on their journey. The physical environment changes to reflect the changing emotions of the characters.

- Make a list of the film's various locations.
- How would you describe the setting at the start, as the film progresses in the country areas, and in the industrial city outskirts at the end? How does the choice of setting affect the mood of the scenes?
- What is the symbolism of the different clouds?

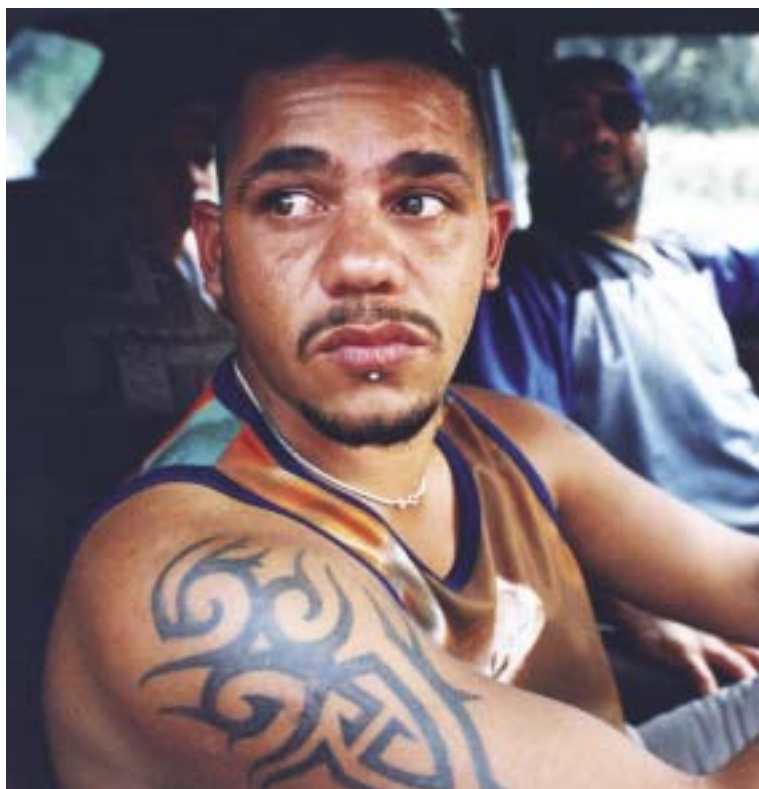
The Beginning of the Film

- How does the film begin?
- Why do you think the film-maker chose the images of rolling clouds?
- What impressions do you gain of what life is like for Lena in the first few minutes of the film?
- Why do you think the film-maker decided to make the pace so slow at the start of the film?

In the opening scene, the young girls are walking along a desolate road, in the heat haze.

- What adds to the mood of desolation in the opening scenes?
- Why do you think Lena says to her friend, "You are never going to get out of this shit-hole?"
- What impact does the rain have in the opening scenes?
- What impressions do we gain of Lena's family life?





- Why is Lena's brother taken away by the police?
- What contradictory images are there in Lena's home setting?
- How does the use of music add to the mood?

Meeting Vaughn

When the film moves from Lena's story to the first meeting with Vaughn, the viewer is thrown into a very different scene.

- What images change the scene?
- How do you know that Vaughn is in a minimum-security prison?
- What impressions do you get of Vaughn?
- How do you know that Vaughn has not seen his sister for a long time?
- When the young boy asks Vaughn why he never talks about his family, he says he doesn't have any. Why do you think he responds in that way?
- How does Vaughn escape?

Continuing the Story

- Why do you think Lena might have been sick?
- How do Lena and Vaughn react to each other at first?
- Why do you think Lena lies to Vaughn and tells him that she is from Ireland?
- The Aboriginal driver who picks up the pair calls Vaughn 'cuz'. Why?

- How do the police treat the group when they pull the car over?
- Why does Lena get out of the car?
- What incidents draw the pair close together?
- Do you think Lena is right when she says to Vaughn that he should give himself up?

When Lena and Vaughn are moving through sunflower country, the music creates a gentler mood and the pair speak about happier things.

- Why does Vaughn say that he likes working in the forest?
- Why does Vaughn say to the farmer on the tractor, "You stole this land?" What does he mean?
- How does Lena react?
- How do we know that Vaughn has a connection to his Indigenous heritage?
- What is the significance of the thunder clouds at this stage of the film?

Sheltering in the Church

In this part of *Beneath Clouds*, we gain more insights into Lena and Vaughn's attitudes and identity.

- What are Lena and Vaughn's attitudes to religion? How are they different?
- Do you think Vaughn has a 'chip on his shoulder'?
- Lena asks Vaughn why he broke out. Vaughn asks Lena why she is searching for her father. Do you think there are common answers to these two different questions?
- How important is family to each of the pair?
- Why does Lena think that Ireland is where she belongs?

In the Blue Mountains

- Do you agree that by this stage of the journey, Lena and Vaughn are growing much closer together?
- Vaughn says to Lena that he has never known any whitefellas like her. Why do you think Lena doesn't reveal her Aboriginality to Vaughn at this point?
- When Vaughn's cousins pick the pair up, the older woman realises that Lena is Aboriginal. She asks Lena where her people are from. Why do you think she asks that question?
- Why does the situation turn nasty when the police stop the car?
- What reasons can you suggest to explain why Vaughn spits at the policeman?

- Do you think Vaughn is trapped by a history of family violence?
- What happens when Vaughn arrives at his family home?
- What do you think the future might hold for Lena and Vaughn?

Exploring the Characters

Lena

- Lena is both Irish and Aboriginal. Sen says that “Lena is of two bloods, but feels only one”. Do you agree with this view of her? Is this how she is depicted in the film?
- Do you think she rejects her Aboriginal identity? Why or why not?
- How does she react to the Aboriginal groups she meets in the two separate car trips along the road to Sydney? How can you explain her reactions?
- Explain why Lena is Aboriginal, even though she ‘looks white’.
- Why do you think she so desperately wants to find her father?
- Write your own description of Lena and then compare what you have written with the work of other class members.
- Write a description of Lena as though you are expressing Vaughn’s impressions of her character and qualities.

Dannielle Hall, who plays Lena, is a fair-skinned Indigenous Australian who comes from the cotton country where part of the film is set. Sen comments that when he auditioned Dannielle:

“She was so convincing that it was almost like she was originating the lines herself. Her voice was full of tone and texture and it was capable of being very aggressive. Her physical presence was absorbing, as was her non-verbal ability.”

- In an English or Drama class, discuss your view of Dannielle’s performance as Lena. You could focus on both specific scenes and her overall performance.

Vaughn

Sen had a very clear view of how he wanted Vaughn’s character to be portrayed and what kinds of qualities he wanted in the actor to play the part. He found Damian Pitt in Moree. He simply walked up to a group of 20 boys, including Damian, in the street. He says,

“I told them I was looking for someone to act in a movie. They all laughed and asked, ‘How much do you get paid?’ Damian thought I was joking to begin with, but he was keen to do a reading. He had the perfect look. I saw him as visually aggressive, with a faint ember of sensitivity. A high percentage of Indigenous boys live the real life of Vaughn.”





- What is your opinion of Damian Pitt's performance as Vaughn?
- In a Drama or English class, talk about the challenges that Damian and Dannielle may have faced as first time actors in a film.
- Do you think that Damian had 'the perfect look' for the character, Vaughn?

Exploring Other Themes

Who Are Indigenous Australians?

Students need to be able to answer the question, 'Who are Indigenous Australians?' if they are to understand many of the issues of identity that Lena and Vaughn face. Some people assume that for people to be Indigenous Australians, they must be dark-skinned, but many Aboriginal Australians have mixed heritage. The official Commonwealth Government definition of Aboriginal Australians states that Indigenous Australians are descendants of the first Aboriginal Australians, people who are accepted to be Aboriginal by Aboriginal communities, or Torres Strait Islanders, directly descended from people of the Torres Straits. It is now considered racist to make judgements about people being Aboriginal on the basis of skin colour. Lena is entitled to claim Aboriginal identity because her mother and other descendants are Aboriginal.

Indigenous Issues

Statistically, Indigenous Australians are the most disadvantaged group in Australia today. They have the highest rates of unemployment, imprisonment, infant mortality, poor health, incidence of preventable disease, and many other indicators of disadvantage of any group in Australian society.

Many young Indigenous people like Lena and Vaughn come from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds, marked by poor educational opportunities and family problems.

- What can help young people like Lena and Vaughn break out of the cycle of family violence and crime?

There has been considerable progress in reconciliation between Indigenous and Non-Indigenous Australians in recent decades and improvements in conditions for Indigenous Australians.

- Define reconciliation. What can you do to advance the cause of reconciliation in your school and community?
- To find out more about reconciliation and current Indigenous issues, visit:

<http://www.austlii.edu.au>

http://www.atsic.gov.au/default_ns.asp

<http://www.loreoftheland.com.au>

- In every state and territory of Australia, there are Indigenous communities, often living in many areas. Find out more about the past Indigenous history and current issues in your local communities.

Identity

Lena and Vaughn both escape from situations where they feel they don't belong and they are both searching for another identity. Lena wants to find her father, and Vaughn wants to reconnect with his dying mother. Both characters are also struggling with their Indigenous identities. What factors influence identity? Work through the following activity to clarify your views on identity.

- Make a list of factors you think have influenced who you are and where you belong. Compare your list with the lists of other class members. Then look at the following list of possible influences on people's identities. Make a copy of the list and rank the list from the most to the least important influences on your identity.

Factors Influencing Identity

- where you were born
 - where you live
 - ethnicity
 - parents' and family's origins
 - sexuality and relationships
 - social life
 - groups you belong to
 - gender
 - your age group
 - peer group
 - media influences
 - culture
 - heritage
- Repeat the previous activity listing in order of importance what you think might be the most important influences on Lena and Vaughn's senses of identity.
 - Do you think Lena has chosen to reject her Aboriginal identity? Why or why not?



Adolescent Issues

Beneath Clouds explores many issues that confront both Indigenous and Non-Indigenous Australian adolescents today. Lena and Vaughn are both burdened by dysfunctional families. They have been touched by alcoholism, violence and loss of identity. They want to be accepted and loved, and they want to be able to look forward to a happier future.

- Where can young people find support when they face these kinds of pressures?
- In a class discussion, talk about what support there is for young people in crisis in your school and local community.
- What do you think Lena and Vaughn would hope for most in their futures?

Media Studies

Sen says,

'I don't believe in the concept of using one distinct camera style for the whole story. For me, the drama of each scene is what dictates the use of the camera'.

- Make a running sheet of various scenes in the film and discuss the reasons why the film-makers may have made the editorial and production decisions to use particular camera styles in each sequence.
- In a class discussion, talk about the various techniques used in the film.
- Select a few scenes for close analysis. Discuss the mood generated by the choice of location, music, voice-overs, images and editing.

Sound and Music

The music was co-composed by Alister Spence and Sen as he wrote the screenplay. It was a source of inspiration well before the actual shoot. Sen says:



"I always had intentions of exploring the Irish pipes to represent Lena's romanticised feelings about Ireland and her father. Distorted electric guitar was a main factor when representing Vaughn's aggressive state of mind. These two instruments combined with a contemporary electronic feel, in tandem with a conventional string section. The sound design was important to the journey of the characters. The natural atmospheres have a direct link to the physical and emotional changes Lena and Vaughn face. From the hot, uncomfortable winds to the cooler, tranquil bird-life, these sounds help represent the diverse canvas the characters move through. They also represent the movements within the characters."

- Choose specific scenes and analyse the sound and music used.

The End of the Film

- How does the film end?
- What do you think happened to Vaughn's mother?
- Did you find the end of the film satisfying? Why or why not?
- For life to be better for Lena and Vaughn in the future, what would have to happen? What obstacles would they have to overcome to achieve better lives?
- In small groups, devise alternative endings for the film and share your ideas with the class.

Further References

Other excellent web sites to explore Indigenous issues are:

The Journey of Healing Reconciliation:

<http://www.alphalink.net.au/~rez/Journey>

Yarra Healing:

<http://yarrahealing.melb.catholic.edu.au>

Reconciliation Australia:

<http://www.austlii.edu.au/orgs/car/index.htm>

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission:

<http://www.aiatsis.gov.au/>

Face The Facts:

<http://hom.vicnet.net.au/~aar/factfile.htm>

This site has frequently asked questions about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people prepared by the Federal Race Discrimination Commissioner.

Beneath Clouds is released in capital city cinemas around Australia from May 23, 2002. Check local cinemas and newspapers for more details.

Beneath Clouds is distributed by Dendy Films - for further details of the cinema release, school group bookings, study guides, etc; contact Dendy Films head office - Sydney. Phone (02) 9233 8558 Fax (02) 9232 3841 Email: dendy@dendy.com.au

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