

**An Account of the True Economics
of a Low Budget Motel / Film**

In 14 Rooms

By A.O. Cloud

1.

Sitting in my office one day about a year ago I got a call from my old friend Joey "Chin-up" Christiana. Last time I saw him, he was breaking the neighborhood chin-up record at the local playground. Hence the nickname. Joe had heard that I was working in "high finance," as he called it, half reverently and half irreverently, and he needed a favor. Why he would call me—an old mook from the block—was no mystery to me. Joe has always liked to work with members of his own family, his close friends, friends of friends. I imagine that even when he finds his way to LA with a multi-million dollar budget and a huge set, he will work this way. And me—I'll be happy to go along for the ride. I joined his bicycle gang when we were ten, and I've kind of never left.

Joe had an interesting proposition for me.

"I need an accountant for my next film," he said.

"What's your budget?" I asked, warming to his game.

"Nothing. Or barely nothing. A few hundred here and there. We'll be running a deficit from the start."

I knew not to ask the question that most professional bean counters would have asked—why do you need a god damn accountant if you have no budget?—because Joe's logic has very little to do with capital L logic. It's more like dream logic. The oil dripping from the hoagie you bought from the parakeet reveals a face, the face starts telling the funniest joke you've ever heard, but the punch line needs a little vinegar and suddenly you say, "exactly, precisely, that's it!" Or you don't. You're either with him or against him.

"I'm in," I said. "When do I start?"

And that's how I ended up on the set of these little films that became a great big, film.

As for the notes and my authoring . . . "You were our accountant, so account for what happened," is all Joe said post film.

"Okay," I said, but he was already off the phone and on to the next thing before he could hear me. Enthusiasm burns clean and pushes its vessel quickly forward.

2.

Joe, Billy, and Benjamin made these movies like an old peasant woman haggling over the price of a chicken bone at the local market. The wild gesticulating was part send-up, part pragmatism, part soul-building exercise. They showed up at the motel fresh from jobs or family headlocks, with cars full of film equipment, actors, doughnuts, sandwiches, and newspapers, and then they headed straight for the front desk. While the rest of us stood in the parking lot drinking coffee, introducing ourselves, smoking cigarettes, and figuring out how we all ended up outside a motel in Jersey, Joe, flanked by Billy and Benjamin, negotiated through bullet proof glass the price of the room in which we would be filming. Sometimes he would call me in, as his official accountant, and spit some numbers at me, asking, "can we afford this?" I usually tried to look grim and shook my head no and then left, and I'm told the shtick usually helped us shave a few bucks off the price.

3.

By way of background: Since its emergence as a cultural institution in the 1940s, the motel promised respite for the weary traveler who had no need for the formality and expense of the city-centric grand hotels of the day; a "home away from home," as the slogan goes. But almost from their inception, motels were perceived with suspicion, as a "place between places" where the potential for unlawful activity loomed large. Published in *The American Magazine* in 1940, J. Edgar Hoover wrote: "Behind many alluring roadside signs are dens of vice and corruption;" and though Hoover's paranoid proclamations should always be taken with a grain of salt, there must have been something to it. A more reliable source for the reality of America's early perception comes, ironically, from fiction. The opening

lines of Nabokov's *Lolita*: "...I soon grew to prefer the Functional Motel—clean, neat, safe nooks, ideal places for sleep, argument, reconciliation, insatiable illicit love." Thus, two characteristics factored into the emerging notion of motels as harbors for the illicit: First, motels were anonymous. Second, they were located outside city limits, beyond the force of municipal law.

4.

The title *Motel Americana* merits careful study and attention, the kind of close reading you might have performed on a sonnet back in high school. First off, is the word "motel" a noun or an adjective? If it's a noun, it creates a phrase that's a stand-in for a place (either real or imagined). For example, you might physically check into a motel. "Which one?" your family or business associates might ask. "The Motel Americana, off Route 46," you might say, "you can look it up online."

Or it could be the kind of place you could not look up online, the kind of place you could only imagine, putting it in the category with expressions like, "he's in a brown study" or "he's in his cups." So you might ask, "what's wrong with that guy." And someone might answer, "oh, he's just been spending a little time in the Motel Americana." Meaning what? This is just one man's opinion, but I'd say that "spending time (of which you can only spend too much) in the Motel Americana" means you're in a particular kind of trouble, one brought on by a mix of personal stubbornness and impersonal absurdity. Man vs. World stuff, you know.

Flipping the coin, if we consider "motel" an adjective, we have a whole other set of options because "motel" Americana is a very particular kind of Americana indeed. It implies a particular set of artifacts—Gideons Bibles, ashtrays—a particular set of scrimshaw—stiletto heels, airplane bottles.

And either way, as I was saying earlier, "motel" anything means it's beyond the force of law.

5.

"Beyond the force of law" is a characteristic that Hollywood loves, and so it didn't take long for the

industry to embrace the motel for its dramatic potentials. The roles historically written for it can be broken down into roughly two categories: 1. A retreat for society's outcasts, and 2. A surrealistic den of horror. As a last refuge of the desperate shoved to the fringes of society, the movie motel provides the frame for voyeuristic gratification. Propelled by impulses triggered by real-life motel experiences—guttural noises emanating from beyond paper-thin walls, rooms inhabited by derelicts, transients, prostitutes and other dubious types (imagined or actual)—cinema sets out to do what it does best: allow entrance to those worlds. From the darkness of the theater Middle America is free to identify with dramas that are all but impossible in the neighborhoods and predictability of suburban life. It is the desperate who act with no regard for societal norms and it is in motel rooms where their triumphs and tragedies play out.

6.

In real life, the motel room is a kind of set. When it is *actually* a set, in reel life, it's a set within a set. So this can happen: A sound guy and a screenwriter are drinking coffee in a motel. They have no history together, but they both kind of knew a guy who knew a guy who made films. They are brought together over the canvas of film to talk, tango, or arm wrestle. At one slow point (of which there are few on such outings), the sound guy tells the kind of story you could only tell to someone you just met. Something about his grandmother's sure fire cure for pain. "My grandmother was a big Italian grandma kind of lady. When she got mad, she used to bite her own fist. Hard. But it took care of the pain. It calmed her." And the story went on, but the screenwriter was doing his best to hold onto that detail—the fist biting—to resist the torrent of words that were trying to infiltrate his memory and steal the very particulars of the scene he had begun constructing. Later, the sound guy will hear a bit of his grandmother's story coming out of the mouth of an actor portraying a two-bit gangster; the sound guy will hear his story, which he dressed up a little bit to begin with, dressed down, rehearsed, rehashed, and put on film. If it survives the editing room, it will be fully mythologized. It might be quoted, reinterpreted, called on for laughs. So yes, even in motels, myth can begin its steady trek through the lives of men and women.

Oh, and here's one more.

The crew is shooting a scene with their clown. He's supposed to march into the hotel, led by his clown shoes, trailed by his clown suitcase. The light's really disappearing fast, and the meter's running on the room. They've got to get this shot or they might never make it back. (Honestly, with this kind of film process, one slip up might translate into a shoddy film because you can't pay your way out of your mistakes. Your mistakes either enhance the film or destroy it.) At one point, Joe rushes out from behind his camera to straighten something on the set. Or, that's normally what he would be doing. Not so this time. Instead, he grabs the clown's suitcase, rips it open, pulls out a toy, and hands it off to a young girl who, at that precise moment, is walking through the set and into the impending evening. Lesson # 1 of the low budget film: Sometimes you make the myth, and sometimes the myth makes you. And that was one beautiful mistake.

7.

Billy and Joe approach the lighting of the set like two guys arguing over a parking spot in New York City. (When you park in New York City, it's your job not to give an inch and to take every inch you can. The suckers who try to be kind, who try to let people pass, cause the whole system to shut down. There's a ruthless efficiency to it. You cut me off because you can, not because I let you. But that puts me an inch closer to my own parking spot, which I will lift out from under someone else's nose.) Joe and Billy have been working like this for years. They understand the history of lights, the lore of lights . . . and neither one is prepared to give an inch. It's not an argument so much as a wrestling match between brothers, the most primitive form of play. And, to skip back to my metaphor, this allows thousands upon thousands of cars to move in and out of the city, to park for delightful rendezvous or to pick up groceries, to drop off kids and pick up nannies. Or in the case of my two wrestling brothers, to allow light itself to be born again as if for the first time.

8.

In *True Romance*, Christian Slater and Patricia Arquette break violently from the pattern of their everyday lives

and, in turn, concoct a scheme to escape societal constraints entirely. Their quest finds them holed up at The Safari Inn Motel with half a million dollars worth of the mob's coke. There the adorable Arquette undergoes her final rite of passage—a merciless beating by a hulking James Gandolfini. When Slater finally drags her out to safety she's beaten and bloodied, and as they stumble down the corridor, cocaine in tow, the tenants peer from doorways with looks that say this is nothing new. Here the motel is the heroes' final stopover before achieving complete freedom.

The motel also serves as "gateway" in *Thelma & Louise* where the heroines seal their shared fate. It's in a motel room where Thelma symbolically leaves her husband by sleeping with a two-bit transient thief. In the next room, Louise breaks irrevocably from the man she loves in order to pursue a higher state of being—independence. And it was in the motel room where their escape plans are revealed to the thief, information that eventually corners them on the lip of the Grand Canyon, poised for their ultimate break from the oppressive patriarchal society from which they're fleeing.

9.

To reduce it to a simple formula, Motel Americana multiplied by any numeral equals: Doubles. Edges. The complete flip of a personality. And then the flop. Shaving off a beard. Growing one. Living up to the most deep-seated expectations of our mothers. Throwing a mustache against a wall. Being clowns at heart. Gentle men who go too far. Damaged men who do damage. Life reduced to what you can fit in a small, spare room. Mirrors. Night reduced to a small fee. Love running on a meter. A rent you can swing as your money runs out. Broken beasts walking Spanish down the hall. The proverbial fight or flight position. A man in a corner and another man coming at him. Bodies crashing against each other. Men, women, tight spaces, bad lighting.

10.

Sometimes Joe would send Ben Valentine out for coffee and he would come back with dialogue from the night clerk—and no coffee. We'd be complaining until the cameras started rolling and the new dialogue would start to crackle and

catch in the perfect lighting and the actors would hear themselves tramping new ground and the scene would creak along like a pump organ or an accordion or anything that breaths to music. Lesson # 2 about the low-budget film: when you burn a new fuel, you find a different kind of action, one you didn't expect, one that redefines your typical categories (efficiency, aesthetics, acting, etc.).

11.

One sub-category of motel films should be noted—that of motel as low-rent movie studio for indie pictures. Motels are easy to shoot at—rent a room and you have a location. The two most notable films in this sub-category are the brilliant films *Bug* and *Tape* but a quick internet search will return more DV motel film titles than you can shake a stick at.

Motel Americana is one such film at which the stick aims its shaking. As I contemplate the history of the motel in cinema and consider how this little film fits into the bigger picture, I realize that over the past year or so of production, each short shot at this seedy hideaway has not only explored (desperate) characters and their stories, but has simultaneously investigated the motel space as related to the mechanisms of cinema itself. Each film in the collection utilizes its own genre—noir, horror, absurdism, surrealism, documentary—to present its tale. It occurs to me now that this group of filmmakers instinctively toyed with the idea that the physical experience of entering a motel is akin to the psychological experience of entering a film. Through the motel room door or through the shimmering movie screen we (as guests, as audience members, as filmmakers) anticipate and create new worlds born into our imaginations. It seems to me that the mythological conception of motels and the need for the magic of movies work harmoniously to that end. One nourishes the other.

12.

And nourishment is at the heart of the economics of the low-budget film. Back at my desk job as word leaked out that I was spending more and more time "keeping the books" for a project that would never officially compensate me, I ate my fair share of shit. My colleagues, useful sharks that they are, absolutely could not understand how my hours away from clients and billables could possibly pay off

(especially as the economy took the dive that crushed the lives of so many financial folks like myself).

Economics. You trade this for that. And if you understand economics, you learn how to get more *this* for less *that*. But I was paid in better wages. In the tedious, groin-thrashing game of duality, the freest man sometimes finds a way to go beyond the game, to turn his back on the game. "You go ahead and balance the scales," he says, "I just have to use that restroom over there." And as he turns the corner, he breaks into a slow jog and never looks back.

13.

The most famous movie motel, of course, is The Bates Motel, (*Psycho*). The film itself has been psychoanalyzed ad nauseam but it's important to note that this, the most notoriously Freudian of all films, is housed in a motel. Hitchcock defined the motel as a mysterious netherworld (beyond city and societal limits) where inner psychological urges can be released and permitted to reign free. When Janet Leigh enters the room of The Bates Motel it's as if she's entering into the mind of Norman Bates himself. Once inside, she's ensnared in his private traumas, subject to his secret urges. The investigators, representative of "functioning society," spoil all the fun when they enter with all their righteous, self-imposing normalcy.

14.

That the motel staff was rarely accommodating and extremely, deeply uninterested in the film, put the economics of the whole endeavor in the proper perspective. Nobody stopped and looked. The staff and clientele in this particular motel didn't care to see or be seen. They had no use for the romance of the artistic process. To be personally reminded of this during almost every moment of the filming process was perhaps the best thing that could have happened in the evolution of the film and the filmmakers.

For, at least to my eyes, maybe the most important thing a filmmaker can learn is also the thing that sets him finally and fully free. Lesson # 3: It's highly likely that nobody outside your small circle of friends and family cares about your film. As such, the film isn't *for* anything. Except

itself . . . its very nature and the nurturing it takes to unfold it.

Under these conditions, the range of a filmmaker's decisions becomes very clear and clean. So these filmmakers followed their own logic and the discipline implied by it; followed the rant only as far as it needed to go; let the drunkard walk only as far as he could go without falling down.

Far from being economic-less, the economics of the low-budget film reside in the spiritual realm, they transact beyond the limits of the body. You put in time, but what do you get? What's your bottom line? Primarily, it's the chance to see and hear what you imagined. To live alongside it as it learns to breath and walk and even waltz.

I'm telling you what I could never tell my colleagues at the accounting firm. These filmmakers, like all passionate individuals, paid the proverbial blood, sweat, and tears for the privilege of living alongside their imagined worlds. Then, when they walked off the set and back into their lives, they reaped the reward of a lifetime: wakefulness . . . being fully open to participation in the entire human affair.

You become what you do, what you are. As you practice the art of making film with no money, you work the basic mines, extracting pure minerals. You tend to dialogue, making sure it says what it has to and no more. You look at faces, really tending to them. You paint on walls and bodies. You straighten the light. You think deeply about exactly how long a lover should mourn the loss of her loved one . . . and what this might actually look like and sound like.

From this doing, this making of free and passionate films, you bring new existential skills to your own free life. You learn to tend to story—your own and others'. You learn to act with grace when that's called for or to perfect anger, which is also sometimes called for. When you practice over and over again crying over loss or kissing under wildest gain . . . when you coach someone to punch more honestly, to love the rough edge of a curse word, to hold another body better . . . you yourself get better.

You can't help it. Making low budget films is making life,
inch by everloving inch.

Or at least that's what I learned when I spent a little
time in the Motel Americana.