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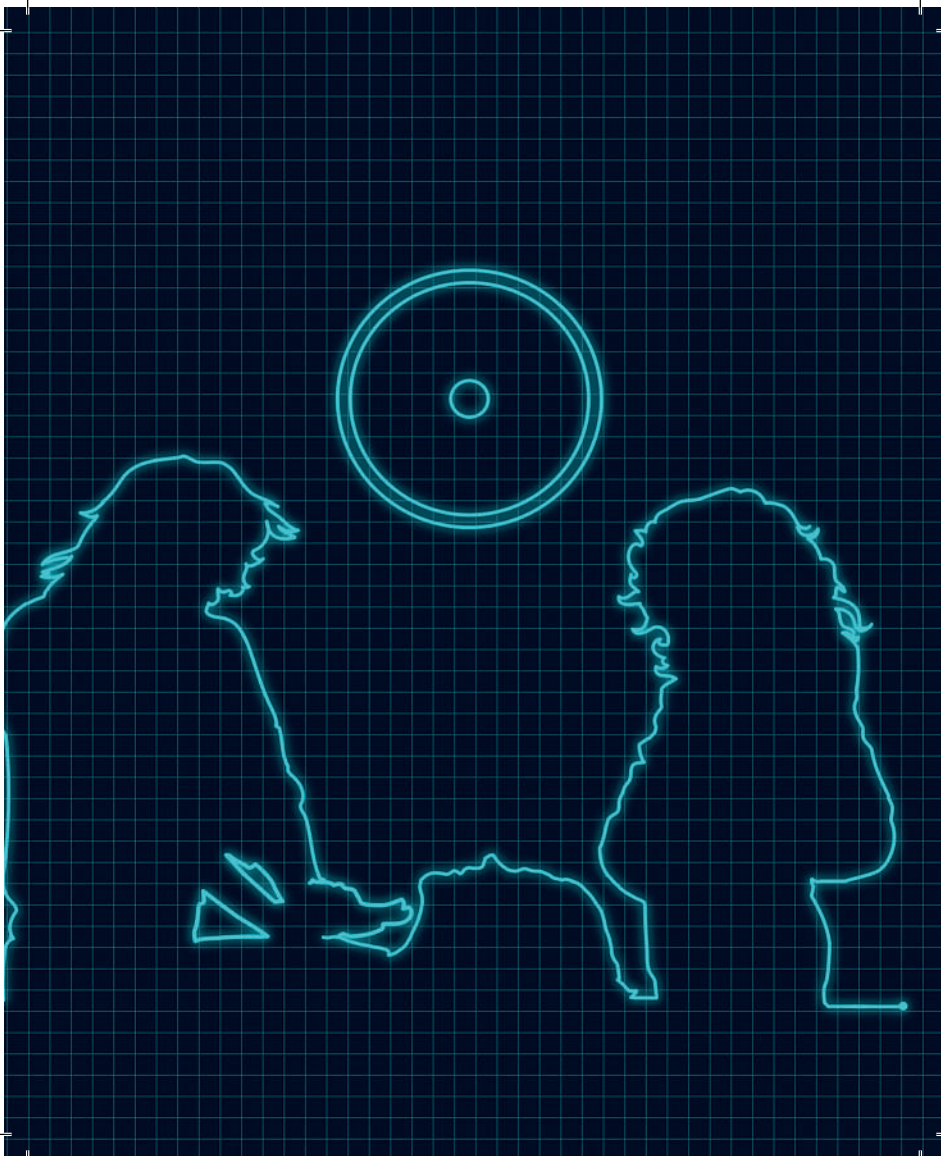
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## CAST

**Kiefer Sutherland** Nelson Wright

**Julia Roberts** Dr. Rachel Mannus

**Kevin Bacon** David Labraccio

**William Baldwin** Joe Hurley

**Oliver Platt** Randy Steckle

**Kimberly Scott** Winnie Hicks

**Joshua Rudoy** Billy Mahoney

**Benjamin Mouton** Rachel's Father

## CREW

Directed by **Joel Schumacher**

Produced by **Michael Douglas** and **Rick Bieber**

Written by **Peter Filardi**

Executive Producers **Scott Rudin**,

**Michael Rachmil** and **Peter Filardi**

Director of Photography **Jan de Bont**

Production Designer **Eugenio Zanetti**

Music by **James Newton Howard**

Film Editor **Robert Brown**

Costume Designer **Susan Becker**





# LAND OF THE ALMOST-DEAD: FLATLINERS AND A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF THE NEAR-DEATH EXPERIENCE

by Amanda Reyes

Since the dawn of man, we have struggled to understand death and to comprehend what lies beyond life on Earth. In ancient times, both the Egyptians and Tibetans produced different scriptures titled *Book of the Dead*, each of which offers guidance in helping others into the afterlife. Many of the great Greek philosophers, such as Plato, mused over the worlds beyond, and of course, Christians have long believed in heaven (and hell).

However, it wasn't until the 1700s that out-of-body and near-death experiences (NDEs) were given more serious study. A scientist named Emanuel Swedenborg published his findings on these occurrences in *Heaven and Hell* in 1758. Swedenborg's research would play a part in moving Western culture into the spiritualist movement of the 1800s, where psychology and the paranormal sometimes made for an uneasy mix of scientific exploration.

Afterwards, the 1900s became a watershed moment in our fascination with NDEs, culminating in the latter part of the century with the publication of several important studies.

In 1972, NDEs came to the forefront thanks to a study conducted by a psychiatrist named Russell Noyes. Noyes surveyed people who had come close to death, and he noticed similarities in the stories they told. While his study was more anecdotal, he moved away from the paranormal and provided a more solid scientific foundation to his research. Noyes' scholarship was followed by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, a noted fellow psychiatrist whose work with the terminally ill is lauded worldwide (most know her as the author of 1969's *On Death and Dying*). Because Kübler-Ross is such a renowned and popular personality, her interest in NDEs caught the attention of the general public.







However, the most important figure in this slowly emerging scientific world of the NDE came in 1975. Raymond Moody, who coined the phrase “near-death experience” in his book *Life After Life*, rooted his concepts and writings on the great Greek philosophers, and his secular approach opened the door for persons with varying religious (and sometimes lack of religious) backgrounds to come forward with their own experiences. He established 15 stages of an NDE, which were generally positive and peaceful encounters felt by people as they began the process of dying. He called these the core of all experiences. He further determined that, despite the similarities, no two NDEs are quite alike. Moody’s book became an international bestseller (published in 30 languages) and he is often referred to as the Father of the NDE.

The research did not stop there. In 1980, a professor from the University of Connecticut named Kenneth Ring conducted a prominent survey on over 100 survivors, and he narrowed down Moody’s list of fifteen commonalities of the NDE to five basic stages:

- Peace
- Body separation
- Entering the darkness
- Seeing the light
- Entering the light.

Although Moody had noted what he referred to as a “long, dark tunnel” to the process, Ring’s description of passing into a void seemed to catch some controversy, since it sits in opposition to the more pleasant facets of an NDE. Still, this spookier aspect seemed to touch on something the curious were interested in.

And P.M.H. Atwater was certainly interested in the darker side. A survivor of a near-death encounter and a friend of Ring (she wrote about her own experience while Ring was the editor of a journal titled *Vital Signs*), she penned *Beyond the Light: The Mysteries and Revelations of Near-Death Experiences* (1994). Her findings suggest that not all NDEs are positive, and these scarier incidents occur on a far more regular basis than originally believed. Her chapter “Unpleasant and/or Hell-Like Experiences” places a spotlight on

survivors who recall moments of pure terror – one interviewee even compares her experience to shaking hands with the grim reaper. Atwater surmises that some of these people are more sensitive to death, having already had a precognition of a loved one's passing before they almost died themselves, for example. Others are survivors of continual abuse, and had, according to Atwater, possibly experienced several NDEs throughout their life. For these unlucky ones there is no warmth, only feelings of coldness. There is no peaceful void; instead, it is either threatening screams or a jarring silence. Some also spoke about being pursued by scary apparitions. In her final analysis, Atwater speculates that the more calamitous NDEs are a function for the act of cleansing the soul.

Just with this brief history, it can be noted that throughout the centuries the concepts behind NDEs have become far more nuanced and scientific, and regardless of the core commonalities, are also somewhat fluid. Yet, despite the growing number of more rational studies legitimizing the phenomenon of NDEs, popular culture's depiction of these happenings tends to stay closer to the older spiritualist paranormal theories, and film and television gave their own, often wild, contributions to the subject.

*Flatliners* (Joel Schumacher, 1990) certainly isn't the first film to try to commit the experience of nearly dying onto celluloid. Perhaps the earliest attempt at portraying an NDE on film is a one-minute short from 1903 titled *An Extraordinary Cab Accident*. Mostly intended as an experiment for stop-motion camera techniques, the running time doesn't allow the film to explore more than a dark sense of humor and a couple of great special effects, but the victim's sudden (and outrageous) 'death' and extraordinary re-birth give the film a notable place in this category.

Other films, such as *A Matter of Life and Death* (1946), *Resurrection* (1980) and *Saved by the Light* (1995) have used the NDE to explore how looking death in the eye can bring enlightenment. In 1978, the Oscar®-winning *Heaven Can Wait* features Warren Beatty as a man mistakenly brought into the afterlife, only to be returned to Earth in another body.



One of the best examples of our fascination with this topic is 1978's pseudo-docudrama *Beyond and Back*, which features actors recounting dozens of supposedly true NDEs occurring during a variety of events – ranging from car accidents to work-related injuries to concerning medical procedures. While it follows the mostly positive similarities shared between those who have faced death and come back, there is one rather harrowing segment. In this portion of the movie, a bride-to-be who is jilted by her fiancé impulsively drives her car off the road. Much like Atwater would write about nearly two decades later, the woman finds herself in a dark netherworld, populated with demons and zombies.

However, it was the early 1990s that would turn out to be a particularly fascinating era for NDEs in both popular culture and, surprisingly enough, within the academic community as well. *Flatliners* would ultimately lead the pack of film and television projects concerned with those who returned from death's door, while the Father himself, Raymond Moody, actually experienced his own NDE after a suicide attempt in 1991. He later recounted his experience in his 2012 book *Paranormal: My Life in Pursuit of the Afterlife* (which follows the basic blueprint he set up in 1975).

With regards to filmic contributions, there is a wide variety of projects exploring different avenues. Released the same year as *Flatliners*, *Almost an Angel* features Paul Hogan as a career criminal given a second chance at life after he survives being hit by a car (Hogan also wrote the script for this light comedy). In 1991, Lifetime produced the melancholic thriller *Death Dreams*, which features Marg Helgenberger as a woman who comes back from being dead for over 5 minutes only to discover that she can now communicate with her daughter who was murdered the year before. Also from 1991 is *White Light*, a film that stars Martin Kove as a cop who meets a beautiful woman on his way to the other side. When he's brought back to this life, he sets out to find her, only to discover she's dead, which leads Kove to investigate her murder. Even television shows such as *E.R.* and *MacGyver* dedicated episodes to the topic.

Whether any of these examples are relying on actual conducted research or not, they provide a touchstone for viewers to begin









asking questions about not just the afterlife, but how they could possibly make their time in this world more fulfilling.

Still, *Flatliners* remains unique. Somewhere in between the peaceful transition into the light and potentially unleashing the darkest demons in our heart is the intoxication subtext underneath the flatline in *Flatliners*. This was screenwriter Peter Filardi's first produced screenplay. It is ambitious, and it sets out to challenge philosophy, religion and science. The film's heady hybrid mix of spiritualism and science allows it to traverse ideas that are secular, yet also embrace the concept of God. Likewise, it is daring enough to play with previously established philosophies, flipping them on their ear, which ultimately gives space for self-reflection. *Flatliners* uses the NDE to ask the audience to consider what it means when our guilt is so interwoven into who we've become that it can manifest itself into the physical world.

The genesis of *Flatliners* came from a very personal place. Filardi told journalists he was inspired to write his script in 1988 after a good friend recounted their own NDE to him. In fact, all of the major-behind-the-scenes players were drawn to the story for similar reasons. Producer Michael Douglas publicly recounted his own NDE when he nearly drowned off the coast of Santa Barbara in the 1960s. Director Joel Schumacher said he was drawn to the story because he was working on a documentary about people dying from the AIDS virus when the script arrived at his door.

Schumacher's highly expressive visual style both contrasts and compliments *Flatliners'* personal exploration by presenting an almost dream-like urban landscape that is wilting, decayed and desolate. A majority of the film takes place at night, or within some darkened recesses of a gothic, decomposing building. It's almost as if the characters are passing through worlds even before they've begun to cross over. We are immersed in the darkness Ring wrote about and Atwater expanded on. We are already walking with the dead.

For Filardi, who was in his mid-20s at the time of production, *Flatliners* is also an attempt to bring something new to the cinema fold for his generation. In interviews, he remarked that his film



was a combination of genuine wonderment with what lay on the other side, and the idea of accountability for trying to answer that question by manipulating the system. This idea of playing God would appear throughout the 90s in films such as *Malice* (1993) and *The Truman Show* (1998). However, *Flatliners*' existential conflict with Nelson's (Kiefer Sutherland) god complex serves to humanize the character who becomes more flawed than simply evil.

In fact, all of the characters who undergo the near-death experiment are able to grow from it. The manifestation of their darkest secrets forces them to finally confront and reconcile that which they'd fought so hard to repress. In this way, they don't necessarily get the 'white light' that so many NDE'ers experience, but they are able to – as Atwater stated in her writing – cleanse the soul.

In the end, *Flatliners* suggests that faith and science can coexist. If medicine can prolong life, and scholarship can enhance our understanding of longevity and perhaps even help us appreciate the worlds that lay beyond life, what would be the point if we cannot find meaning in the world we inhabit at this very moment?

Amanda Reyes is a film historian and the editor and co-author of *Are You in the House Alone? A TV Movie Compendium: 1964–1999* (Headpress, 2017).













# "SEE YOU SOON": THE SURPRISING SPIRITUALITY OF JOEL SCHUMACHER'S *FLATLINERS*

by Peter Tonguette

When Joel Schumacher died in the summer of 2020, moviegoers the world over lost one of the modern cinema's most reliable sources of hokum, cheese, and general shamelessness.

A former costume designer (*Blume in Love*; *Sleeper* [both 1973]) and occasional screenwriter (*Car Wash* [1976]; *The Wiz* [1978]), Schumacher lent his directorial imprimatur to nearly every disreputable contemporary film genre – from a starring vehicle for members of the benighted Brat Pack (1985's *St. Elmo's Fire*) to a corny English-language remake of an equally corny French-language comedy (1989's *Cousins*) to a pair of grandly over-the-top comic book adaptations (1995's *Batman Forever*; 1997's *Batman & Robin*) to an adaptation of the world's most sentimental musical (2004's *The Phantom of the Opera*).

Yet, if we are to apply the auteur theory without fear or favor, we ought to see in this career-long display of bad taste the makings of a vision: as much as Douglas Sirk, Schumacher was proudly unafraid of cinematic excess, and like Frank Capra, he was brazen in his willingness to manipulate audiences' emotions. Of course, Schumacher lacked the visual sophistication of Sirk, to say nothing of the class and wit of Capra, but as much as they did, he knew what the public wanted to see – and how boldly and mawkishly they wanted to see it. That's why Schumacher remained consistently employable in Hollywood: when *Se7en* (1995)-style neo-noirs were all the rage, Schumacher was tapped to make *8MM* (1999), and when the John Grisham cult took off, he got the call to make *The Client* (1994) and *A Time to Kill* (1996).

In the midst of these nakedly commercial ventures, however, Schumacher made at least one film that suggested that the







filmmaker had more on his mind than popcorn and chewing gum. At first glance, the 1990 metaphysical medical drama *Flatliners* has all the earmarks of a typical Schumacher project, including a super-glossy visual sheen, a tendency towards emotional simplification, and, above all, a trendy, up-and-coming cast consisting of Julia Roberts, Kiefer Sutherland, Kevin Bacon, Oliver Platt and William Baldwin. Incidentally, the way that Schumacher treats each member of this acting quintet equally – William Baldwin is presented as though he as big of a star as Julia Roberts, which, in a way, he was for the three months in 1990 before *Pretty Woman* came out – is rather quaint; this is a true ensemble picture.

Yet, beneath the superficial markers of Schumacher's style run deeper currents. Written by Peter Filardi, the film revolves around five medical students who willingly expose themselves to death for reasons of curiosity, scientific exploration, and, finally, a desire for personal growth. The group's leader is Nelson Wright (Sutherland), who is given to make pronouncements on the order of "Today is a good day to die" but who displays undeniable courage in offering himself as the first test subject in a grand, often grisly experiment: on the hunch that those who have near-death experiences are privy to sights and sounds that suggest a world beyond our physical reality, Nelson induces his fellow students to take measures to have his heart stopped for a brief period of time – a period during which, having "flatlined", he is by all measures dead – and then restarted to bring him back among the living. Once revived, Nelson will report on what he thinks he saw and heard. "When the EEG flatlines, the brain is dead," he says, "I'll be exploring."

Underlying Nelson's experiment is the belief that philosophical or religious explanations – Nelson would probably say *assumptions* – about life after death are insufficient in the late 20th century, a time that demands evidence, proof, documentation. He needs to experience life after death firsthand, and – not only that – so must others. After all, what good is one medical student's account of the unseen world? To that end, Nelson enlists his fellow students – Rachel Manus (Julia Roberts), David Labraccio (Kevin Bacon), Joe Hurley (William Baldwin), and Randy Steckle (Oliver Platt) – to not only bring about Nelson's temporary death and subsequent revival

but to undertake the same experiment themselves. (Only Platt's Randy never subjects himself to flatlining.)

In other hands, this setup could be profoundly silly – a kind of medical-drama gloss on George Pal's *The Time Machine* (1960), with stylishly dressed (for the time), appropriately backlit early 90s-era actors instead of Rod Taylor. Yet Schumacher confers a certain dignity on Nelson and the others, who, for the most part, come across as sincere in their desire to understand and learn from near-death experiences. Furthermore, Schumacher infuses the students' self-experiments with a kind of holy majesty: The students attend a medical school apparently associated with a church, and the setting of their flatlining sessions – as well as their ordinary classes, including those on the art of medical dissection – take place among ornate columns, statuary, and grand paintings.

Filardi's screenplay boasts plenty of one-liners as well as its share of dubious humor – much is made of Joe's proudly promiscuous lifestyle, including his penchant for videotaping sexual encounters with women – but Schumacher's heavy, relentless direction gives the film a weight it would not ordinarily have. Working with the pent-up energy of a cinematographer who, just four years later, would break into directing with *Speed* (1994), director of photography Jan de Bont makes the film look like a million bucks: the camera prowls the shadowy sets, and the actors (and their big hair) are photographed in a warm, golden light that reminds us that the film takes place around Halloween.

Halloween! Is *Flatliners* a horror film? Not quite, and certainly not at first. The process of flatlining is more clinical than creepy: the defibrillator paddles, those needles, the monitor that goes from *beep-beep* when the heart is pumping to *beeeep* when the heart flatlines. These scenes are never the stuff of a Universal monster movie but instead resemble a relatively straitlaced medical thriller on the order of Blake Edwards's *The Carey Treatment* (1972) or Michael Crichton's *Coma* (1978) – though one whose set design (by Eugenio Zanetti) suggests the influence of the illustrator of Dante's *Inferno* rather than the TV series *St. Elsewhere*. The cast is proficient at using plausible-sounding medical jargon, as well as

barking appropriately urgent-sounding orders when one of their test subjects fails to come back from the dead on cue.

Schumacher's seriousness of purpose again asserts itself when he shows what the students glimpse during their brief excursions to the afterlife. Although this imagery can be a tad trite – there are numerous shots of the camera whooshing over fields or around mountains – and has little of the subtle plausibility of the dream sequences in Luis Bunuel's *Belle de jour* (1967) or Roman Polanski's *Rosemary's Baby* (1968), Schumacher nevertheless tailors each student's taste of the afterlife to their psychology. Indeed, each of the four characters who willingly departs the land of the living – Nelson, Rachel, David, and Joe – are confronted not with angels and demons but versions of themselves at earlier moments in their lives when they failed to measure up: Nelson and David remember being bullies, for example. At one point, it's suggested that these visions could be produced by electrical currents that remain even after a subject has flatlined, but no one seems to really believe that. No, these visions are proof of something beyond science.

This approach to the students' visions reflects Schumacher's essentially religious understanding of life after death, even though the film is almost entirely free from religious dogma. Implicitly, the logic goes like this: if there is an afterlife, there must be a supreme being, and if there is a supreme being, that supreme being would likely use an afterlife as an opportunity for the deceased to reckon with, or atone for, sins. Because none of the students actually perishes for good, however, the terrain on which this reckoning takes place is not the afterlife but their real lives. That is why all four students are bedeviled by images from their visions; sometimes these images turn into poltergeist-like encounters, as when Nelson suffers physical injuries at the hand of the boy he bullied so long ago.

None of this is to say that Joel Schumacher had undertaken a deep study of the cinema of Robert Bresson, or that the subject matter of *Flatliners* was especially unique in its day. In fact, the film was part of a mini-spate of films in the late 1980s and early 90s that took life after death as a given, including *Chances Are* (1989), with Robert Downey Jr. and Cybill Shepherd, and *Ghost* (1990), the hugely popular







romance starring Demi Moore and Patrick Swayze. Yet *Flatliners* not only boasts a more novel concept than either film but a certain deranged solemnity that is nonpareil. Although the film was remade in 2017, the original film's lush, plush aesthetics – not just de Bont's photography but Zanetti's set design and James Newton Howard's score – are so operatic that a better repurposing of the material would be, simply, to turn it into an outright opera for the stage.

Confirming Schumacher's track record as a maker of hits, *Flatliners* was popular with ticket-buyers – the film debuted in the top spot of the US box office upon its release in August of 1990 – but, less true to form, it was greeted with a certain amount of respect among critics. Some reviewers thought its conceit was so much balderdash, but others recognized that Schumacher was pushing himself as he never had before. In the *Chicago Tribune*, critic Dave Kehr praised Schumacher for resisting the urge to turn the film into camp. "Despite two or three bad laughs, the picture retains a basic conviction," Kehr wrote. "Schumacher may not believe in the situations he portrays, but he does not abandon his actors and even finds a core of seriousness within such limited performers as Roberts and Baldwin (Alec's look-alike younger brother) that grants them some screen presence." For Schumacher, such seriousness was largely an aberration; other projects – including the revenge drama *Falling Down* (1993), starring Michael Douglas – may have had artistic pretensions, but by and large, the director was most comfortable with corn on the order of *The Client*, *Batman & Robin* or *The Phantom of the Opera*.

*Flatliners* may be corn, too, but it's corn with something on its mind. When Rachel says "See you soon" several times throughout the film – when someone else is about to flatline, or when she herself is – the plaintive way Roberts reads the line is infused with the hope and worry of spiritual questing.

*Peter Tonguetta is the author of Picturing Peter Bogdanovich: My Conversations with the New Hollywood Director. He has written for The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal, The Christian Science Monitor, Sight & Sound and many other publications.*







## ABOUT THE RESTORATION

*Flatliners* was restored in 4K by Sony Pictures Entertainment. 4K scanning by Prasad Corporation, Burbank, from the 35mm Original Picture Negative.

HDR color grading and conform by colorist Sheri Eisenberg at Roundabout Entertainment, Santa Monica. Digital image restoration by Prasad Corporation, India.

Audio restoration was completed at Deluxe Audio Services, Hollywood, sourced from the original 35mm LCRS stereo magnetic tracks.

Restoration supervised by Bill Karydes for SPE, with color approval by cinematographer Jan De Bont.







TODAY IS  
A GOOD DAY  
TO DIE.

## PRODUCTION CREDITS

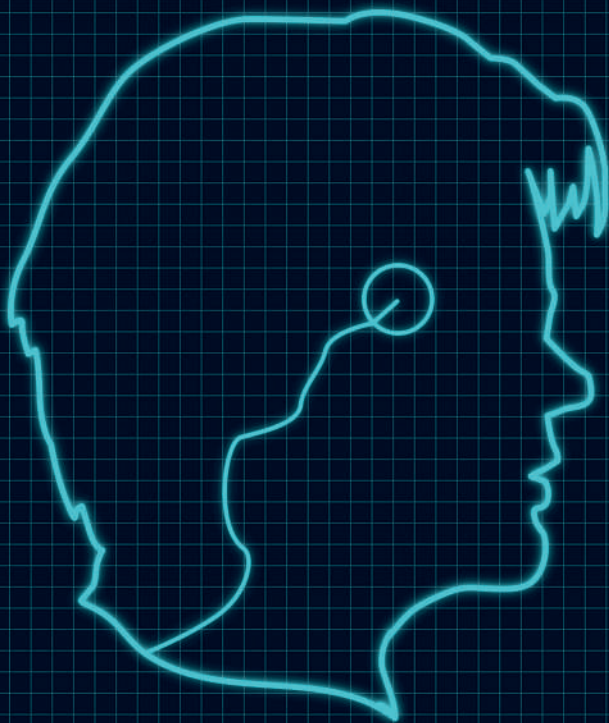
Discs and Booklet Produced by **Michael Mackenzie**  
Executive Producers **Kevin Lambert, Francesco Simeoni**  
Technical Producer **James White**  
QC **Aidan Doyle**  
Production Coordinator **Leila El-Khalifi Hall**  
Production Assistant **Samuel Thiery**  
Disc Mastering **Fidelity in Motion / David Mackenzie**  
Subtitling **The Engine House Media Services**  
Design **Obviously Creative**  
Artwork by **Gary Pullin**

## SPECIAL THANKS

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