

On giving yourself the green-light



Filmmaker Vera Drew discusses the state of filmmaking, trusting collaborators, spirituality, and the importance of authenticity.

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As told to Fez Gielen, 2676 words.

Tags: [Film](#), [Independence](#), [Identity](#), [Inspiration](#), [Collaboration](#).

What is it about genre filmmaking that is appealing to you?

It's what I've always wanted. My first feature film, *The People's Joker* was made with the sensibilities of a genre movie, focusing on set pieces and environments, and then letting the rest fall into place.

While I was making it, my partner had to keep grounding me like, "What you're doing is actually very weird." I would catch myself talking about it like it was just a normal comic book movie. I like to think that my sensibility is very traditional, Amblin Entertainment. I wanted to be George Lucas when I was six—I just did a lot of psychedelics, and because of the subject matter I explore, it ends up in this avant-garde space.

I'm not comfortable with the way that queer art gets separated from other art. When my work gets lumped into "queer cinema" or "the trans film movement", that feels very surface level and not what I set out to do. Genre filmmaking has always felt right. I want to tell stories that are queer, I want to tell stories that are honest and true to my experience, but I really just love playing with toys and making things that are colorful and fun.

Many people have the experience of seeing a great film and thinking, "I want to make something like that." Conversely, some see gaps in the film landscape, and feel motivated to fill that void with their own work. You mentioned being inspired by mainstream films. What specifically has inspired you?

For *The People's Joker*, it's a combination of those two things. It was a lifelong love of comics and the Joel Schumacher *Batmans*. *Batman Forever* was a movie that helped me realize I was trans at a very young age, because I felt represented by Nicole Kidman. There was a lot of that influence in there, but maybe more the latter of what you described—seeing a void. When I started making this film, *We're All Going to the World's Fair* hadn't even come out yet. There weren't visible trans filmmakers. I had wanted to make a movie my entire life, but never knew what I wanted to say with it. Then this idea came to me, and I knew it was something I had never seen before.

It's uncomfortable releasing a movie like this, but what has been so gratifying is seeing how much it inspires people, and seeing trans people come out of a theater and go, "You can do that?" And they're saying that just about the fact that I made a fucking movie. It's so hard to be cynical about that. It feels like a closing of the loop. That void isn't there anymore.

It's cool what's happening right now with trans film. In 10 years we'll be able to look back at this moment and see where everybody's careers went, and see the influence that came from these films. It's a bleak time in Hollywood, but I have felt mostly very positive while getting this movie out there. Independent cinema is more alive than ever, and the people who are allowing it to thrive are usually queer, or at least nice to queer

people. Generally, they're making art that's coming from the heart, centered around community, and made ethically. It's amazing to be a part of that. One of the ways in which this film has saved my life is that it fixed my relationship to making art.

You've talked about being attached to irony and self-deprecation, which can be useful devices, but you said it also felt harmful. Was it scary shedding your reliance on those things? And now having people tell you how much your film means to them—that calls for some earnestness. Has it been a journey becoming comfortable with that?

Yes, and people have been very patient with me. People come out to me all the time now. They've just seen the movie, they have tears in their eyes, and they're like, "I'm finally ready to dive into the vat of estrogen or testosterone."

The first time it happened—I probably should apologize to that person because I'm sure I was not there for that conversation, but it's beautiful, and the second you started asking the question, I was thinking about them specifically. I was doing a meet-and-greet after a screening, and this person came up to me and said, "I don't know how to say this, but your movie makes me want to keep living."

Who wouldn't want to hear that, after making a piece of art that's so personal? I put all of myself and all of my friends into this movie, and the fact that it could resonate with somebody to the extent that they feel like it's saving their life is not something that I ever could have imagined. I made this film for myself and my friends, and I was worried that people wouldn't even get it.

That's also what's so exciting to me about where genre filmmaking is at right now. You can tell stories with this level of specificity, and it will deeply resonate with people. They might not get every single reference, but they'll get the general thing because there's earnestness and sincerity there.

I don't miss the irony crutch. It's exhausting, and it's so easy to lose yourself when you're constantly looking at the world as separate from you. I now think about art and identity in more of a community and spirituality minded way, and it feels good to know that there's no turning back.

Can you elaborate on how spirituality plays a part in your work?

I was so scared when the pandemic started. All of us were, but it wasn't just about the virus. It was this feeling of, "I haven't accomplished what I'm here to do, which is make a movie." So I put faith in the fact that it was my time to do it.

It was maybe the first leap of faith that I ever took in my life. The idea of, "I'm going to dump all of my resources, cash in every single favor, and I'm going to make a *Joker* parody film that I'm not sure I'll ever be able to screen." That was a huge leap of faith, and the second I took it, I started reaping rewards.

I got into some pretty hardcore magical practices. The movie itself was a giant chaos magic ritual in a lot of ways. Because of that, so much of it was beyond my control. There was no safety net. I was working without a line budget, it was just pay-as-you-go. I would never do that again. It was so reckless. But it never felt reckless; it just felt like what I had to do.

I was six months away from finishing the movie when I got into Transcendental Meditation, and that was the missing piece of it all: suddenly having a really simple tool like meditation to anchor my day around. I wouldn't have finished the movie otherwise, because I was going crazy.

I'm much more discerning now about people I work with and what I work on. If it doesn't line up with me on some soul level, I don't feel drawn to it. This project showed me that that's how you make stuff that has value.

Can you describe a moment when your faith in the project either faltered or renewed?

I had to step away from the project at one point because I got facial feminization surgery. After the surgery, it was hard to dive back into the film because at that point, I had 1,600 clips of footage. I had a whole movie shot, I just had to finish it.

I spent 10 months editing the movie, getting a backbone together, and not really worrying about it looking good. I reached a point where I had to decide whether to continue working on it, or finish it as it was and release it.

I screened that early cut of the movie just for friends. It was an amazing experience to see everyone watch the movie and realize it was good, because while we were making it, no one knew what the hell it was, and probably thought it was going to be pretty bad.

Getting feedback and having people talk me into continuing working on it was huge. I'm so glad I gave myself that room to get feedback and to get re-motivated. I think the only thing that gave me hope and helped me return to that place of faith was the community that was working with me, and the friends that I made along the way.

When collaborating, one has to relinquish some control. Is that challenging for you?

I never felt like I was giving any power away by working with other people. I think the way that society thinks about filmmaking in general is very informed by auteur theory in this way that disregards just how collaborative every film is.

The vision in my head was always very blurry. I would go to one of the people we'd be working with and be like, "Here are the things we need. Do whatever you want with these ideas." Then they would make the idea better. You have to approach collaboration with the understanding that you are working with these people because they're good at what they do. They're there to make your ideas better, and to actualize all the electricity that's happening in your brain. It's impossible to do that all on your own.

You had some massive ideas and a very limited budget. What helped you to pursue those ideas and not just give up?

I don't like working, and making movies doesn't feel like work. Part of the reason why the collaboration never felt confining was that it was my first time making something where I wasn't getting notes from anybody. I had been in an editing bay for decades with people hunched over me. With this, I got to do whatever the fuck I want. Now I'm chasing that.

I really feel like my life is finally starting. It's funny saying that, as a 35-year-old woman who thought she was going to die when she was like 27. I feel like this is what I was always supposed to be doing, and everything before making my movie was stepping stones to get here.

I'm burnt out on how things are made in the corporate structures of filmmaking. Seeing the development process, I finally understand why there aren't many good movies coming out, and why amazing stuff gets shelved. The thing that gives me hope is watching the streaming bubble burst; watching a studio like Sony just stick to their guns and not buckle. I'm not a company woman, but I really give props to Sony and Columbia Pictures for never setting up streaming platforms. I think a lot of stuff isn't getting made right now because executives are having to readjust to this idea that streaming kind of didn't work as a business model.

Filmmaking is certainly not going away. In a world where they're talking about how everything mainstream is going to be made with AI, the artist has more value than ever. There will be a need for actual indie filmmakers. That's exciting to me. The 2020s as it relates to film feel like the '80s, which is super exciting for me, as a Paul Verhoeven fan. I'm like, "Cool, let's convince some of these tech companies to make some weird art while we've got the chance."

Was there an experience that marked your shift from editing television to directing a movie?

I was at the end of my rope, and not in a depressing way. I had been trying to break into TV directing for years.

I got to direct a few things, but I had also done a lot of uncredited directing and writing. I was feeling very exploited by my industry. I knew that I was never going to get a green light to do the thing that I'm supposed to do, which is make a movie. Nobody's going to ever give me that permission, whether it's because I'm trans, mentally ill, or because I show up five minutes late to everything—15 in the case of this interview.

As far as I'm concerned, I got to the top of my field as an editor. When I worked on *Who is America?*, people said to me, "After this job, you're going to be able to edit anything you want. Every opportunity will be there for you." And I did get courted for many story producer positions. People finally took me seriously as an editor. But after putting so much of myself into that show, I realized that I didn't want to edit anymore. It didn't matter that I had more opportunities.

I reached out to [Tim Heidecker](#) and I was like, "I need to have lunch with you. I don't know what I'm doing in my career." I think he was shocked to hear that, because I had just edited this big Sasha Baron Cohen show.

I talked to him about how I had wanted to be a director my entire life. At this point, how am I supposed to do that? He said something like, "You need to figure out what you are. Do you want to be a gun-for-hire director? I think you'd be good at that, but that doesn't seem like what you want to do. Are you wanting to do something more like what I do, where I direct and I get to act and do all this other stuff?"

I don't remember what my answer was, because I think it was the first time that it had occurred to me: in order to actually fulfill my dreams, I need to be really honest with myself. I want to write and direct my own things, and I want to perform. That period also coincided with me coming out.

Like I said—that green light's never going to come. Nobody's going to hand you the keys to a project. The best you'll get is having a really positive lunch with a mentor who will ask you an existential question that leads to you blowing up your career for the better.

I knew the time had come, and it's interesting that it coincided with me starting to figure out my queerness. I think that's how it works for a lot of artists. Once you lean into authenticity, creating your own career isn't so scary because you don't have the option to be anything other than authentic. You can't game the system anymore; you just have to be yourself and go with the flow.

Vera Drew Recommends:

The transgender comedy-horror films of [Alice Maio Mackay](#), my favorite director working right now. Especially watch *Satanic Panic*, *TBlockers*, and her upcoming *Carnage for Christmas* (which I edited).

[Crimehot](#) by [Alec Robbins](#) (the guy behind *Mr. Boop*) - my current fav graphic novel series. Wildly horny, hilarious, and beautiful.

[Caitlin R. Kiernan's Tinfoil Dossier](#), a three part book series. A must read for fans of Lovecraft, people obsessed with conspiracy theories, and anyone on the lesbian/transbian spectrum.

[The Bhagavad Gita Museum in Los Angeles](#). Reading the *Gita* helped me understand my body and soul's place in reality (also David Lynch's *Inland Empire*). Life is a dream...a story within a story within a story. Because of this, in many ways, this museum is the best adaptation of the text itself: a physical space that frames the ancient story/essential nature of physical reality itself.

Grand Theft Auto 5. Don't judge me. I basically use it like a cop-killing simulator and it also scratches my perpetual itch to start a criminal empire.

Name

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Vocation

filmmaker and editor

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