

Meredith Danluck on making your first narrative film



January 10, 2017 - Meredith Danluck is an artist and filmmaker. Her first narrative feature film, *State Like Sleep* (starring Michael Shannon, Luke Evans, and Katherine Waterston), will be released later this year.

As told to T. Cole Rachel, 2315 words.

Tags: [Film](#), [Beginnings](#), [Anxiety](#).

Your roots are in documentary filmmaking. What made you want to make a narrative feature film?

It's something that I never really put that much strategic thinking into, it just seemed like the inevitable path. Because on one side I was doing documentary work, but I was still sustaining an art career by making video pieces. The last major piece that I did, the last major art work that I did, was a four-screen narrative feature. It was experimental in its installation, but very conventional in its narrative scope. I guess after seeing how I responded to the process of making that—and seeing how other people responded to it—I saw that there was this kind of magnetism in the heightened reality that I could achieve via narrative filmmaking. You can do that in documentaries as well, by using the right music and editing, but there was something about the specificity of the storytelling in a narrative film that just felt like a natural progression for me.

I also just never felt like I was ready before. It's almost like I felt like I had to go through the stages of Samurai initiation with all of the other kinds of filmmaking in order to get to a level where I felt like I have the appropriate tools now to make a narrative feature. With documentaries I've listened to hours and hours—literally hundreds of hours—of people talking, so I know what people talk like, I know what people look like, I know what they do when they're lying. I had all these tools of humanity to put together towards narrative storytelling in a way that felt very legitimate.

It's interesting to consider the different kinds of psychological and people skills that both things require. It's not just technical know-how, but also being able to put people at ease, make people comfortable, but also cajole and coax people into giving you what you need.

At the end of the day, someone signs on to do whatever it is you're asking them to do—whether it's like, "Oh I want to film you for this documentary" or if it's an actor who signs on because they like your script. I think those people genuinely want to participate and do good work, especially actors. Actors want to do the work, as far as my limited experience goes. Every actor I've ever worked with is dying to engage and perform and explore and really work. It's fun, it's really fun.

I also think being on set is sometimes a little chaotic. It's like a construction site. There are countless hours that go into building the set and rigging the lights and fussing around in a hundred different directions and then when it's time to shoot you have 20 minutes or whatever it is, a very, very narrow window. Actors have to be ready to jump in and do it right on the spot.

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Are there other things that you wish you would have known when you started working on this film? I know it was a process that spanned many years.

I had a very fortunate thing happen early on in this project. I got into the Sundance Writers Lab and it gave me this boost of confidence that enabled me to just keep going. No one tells you when you begin working on a film what a long process—what a long series of false starts—it actually is. No one tells you that when you think you're done with your script, like when you type the words "The End" on your last page, that is actually so far from the end. You're years away from being finished with that script. Now I know that there are all these ups and downs and the ups and downs are so extreme. Ups from like, oh, you sign a financing deal and you're celebrating with champagne with your friends. Then a year later you still haven't made your movie because that financing company decided to drop out for no reason whatsoever.

It's the most extreme highs and the very most extreme lows and the only constant is that desire—the little kernel of interest that made you want to make that movie in the first place—THAT is the only thing that's going to stay constant. At some point last year I realized that was the only thing I could actually control. Everything else is subject to the whims of the world. I feel like I could've saved myself some extreme emotional torture had I just gotten a grip on that sooner.

Filmmaking is both wonderfully and painfully collaborative. You're dependent on so many people to realize your vision. If any one of the supporting parts is bad, the whole thing can be bad. It requires a tenacity and a force of vision that other kinds of art don't necessarily need. You don't, for example, need a crew of 100 people to make a painting.

It really takes vision and intense communication skills. Say that you have secured your financing and your crew, so now they're going to be looking to you for instruction. "Okay, what do we do next?" "Where do we put this?" "What is she going to wear?" and on and on and on. The questions never ever stop coming. That's the thing—if you assume that everyone's just going to understand your vision from reading a script then you've got another thing coming. It's so much communication. Even sometimes after so much communication people might not exactly come through with what you intended. That's something you hope happens infrequently. Maybe in the best case scenario people come up with something so much better than you would ever imagine... that's when you know you're really working with great people. Often production designers take all the stuff from the script, references, and the conversations and put together something you could've never come up with—an amalgamation of all these ideas that's so much bigger and better now. That's really exciting. Ideally, that's how you want it to go.

There are directors that are very open too. "Oh, you want to try doing it that way? Let's see, maybe it'll be better." Or people that are like, "No, we're going to do it 50 times and you're going to do it exactly like this until I'm satisfied with the way that you've done it." I think at least being able to attempt it in the spirit of collaboration must make the whole thing so much more pleasant.

I remember years ago, back when I was still primarily working in the art world, a friend asked me to direct a music video. It was pretty much the first proper "directing" thing I had ever done. I remember thinking that I had to control everything. I had to execute everything exactly as I planned and have a tight grip on every stage of everything. At some point I realized that my approach was just total bullshit. I realized "Oh my god, here are all these people that have all this experience, I'd be such a fool not to engage and be open to their experience and what they're bringing to the table." You can have a really, really good plan, but the most important part is the overall vision and moving towards that on the day of production and how you've communicated your vision to everybody involved. Then you show up and you just kind of see what happens.

Anything that doesn't ring true, that's what you swat away. Anything that does ring true, that's what you embolden. You have to really be open and present and let things happen or else it's like *Of Mice and Men*, you'll just squeeze the life out of it.

You'll love it too much and it will die.

Yeah, you will love it too much and it will die. That was a lesson I learned very, very early on.

You just directed your first narrative feature film, *State Like Sleep*, in the midst of a one of the most tumultuous political periods in American history. Did that have any effect on how you thought about what you were making?

I definitely thought about it. One of the things that I really tuned into early on in this election cycle was this conversation about likability and how Hillary Clinton just wasn't likable—she wasn't "charming" and she "seemed so cold", all of these different things. I just shot my movie and for the last four years have been working on this script with a female anti-hero, who does despicable things and what that means. I thought about how difficult it is to walk that line between a real human being and "likable" and how so often our female protagonists have to be one-dimensional and relatable in very obvious, annoying ways. I think that for me during this election cycle, that's been the most prominent or distinctly relatable concept into what I think is important and moving forward in what I do—presenting female characters that are complicated and challenging and real. It's a small thing, but it's a big thing. I think that's why she lost the election.

"Relatability" seems to be such an issue for people, not just in art but in life and politics as well. Can things only be good if we personally relate to them? Do we only want things we identify with?

I think that "relatability" is another thin veil for either narcissism or misogyny or bigotry or whatever it is, because if your worldview is limited to only being able to relate to your individual experience, guess what, you're automatically going to be very exclusive and you're going to miss out on so much. That just goes hand in hand. That was something else I've heard kind of bandied about over this past year—like this totally acceptable reason for not voting for a politician is because they're not relatable. Like what?? Of course they're not relatable! Hillary probably hasn't driven a car since 1992. Of course you can't relate to her, that's not the point.

It's just like it's the most extreme highs and the very most extreme lows and the only constant is that desire—the little kernel of interest that made you want to make that movie in the first place.

Having now made a narrative feature film, do you think you'll continue to work in this vein? Do you know what you'll do next?

I totally know. I'm actually working on a new script—a television series. I started it a year ago and so far it's been really different and challenging in a whole new way because like my movie, it really centers around one protagonist, so the whole time you're grounded with this one protagonist. In this series I have nine story lines and all these different people and I'm coming up with all of these personalities and dynamics. I feel like I'm creating a whole world. It's less about here's this one person's experience in THE world, it's like, oh, you have to create this dynamic that's the broad umbrella over which all these people are operating and that's really fun and pretty crazy.

Making a feature film takes a huge level of planning, but shooting a series or planning a story arc that will go anywhere from 10 to 20 episodes, the level of planning involved is so insane.

Insane! It's insane. I got to a place where I couldn't make sense of it anymore. I got lost, I got lost in my own narrative. I called Joan Tewkesbury, who was one of my advisors at Sundance and also wrote Nashville for Robert Altman, so she's no stranger to complex meandering layers of stories. I said, "I don't know what to do, I'm stuck.", and she was like, "Well, have you drawn a map?" I'm like, "What do you mean, like a story map?" She was like, "No, an actual map. Where do these people live? Who are the neighbors? What happens? How big is this place?" It was this incredibly straightforward tool that made so much sense. All of a sudden, everything just kind of slotted into place. It's incredibly complex. I feel like I've entered another level of a video game.

You've saved the princess and now you've moved on to whatever happens after that.

Exactly, another layer, another level of a creative video game.

Meredith Danluck recommends:

Binoculars! I take binoculars with me on every trip. I once watched a woman play piano from two blocks away. I watched her for 10 minutes. It was beautiful.

Empire of Signs by Roland Barthes Whenever I want to be reminded of the exquisite within the simple, I read a section of this book.

Topanga State Park Wilderness within the sprawl of Los Angeles, home to mountain lions, bob cats, hawks and coyotes. This place is an example of why state parks and wild spaces should be protected at all costs.

Double Indemnity ...And all Raymond Chandler really. I love the language and the women are so interesting. Everyone's smoking, drinking, cheating, double crossing, spying, snooping. It's all the dirty laundry of human behavior.

David Lynch's "On the Air" David Lynch had a short lived TV show called "On the Air" that was ironically pulled off the air. It was about the first live TV show in the 50's and is basically just slapstick of the highest form. It's pure comic genius.

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Vocation

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Helen Nishimura