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Interviews: Sean Mannion Talks About His Indie Drama Meme



Jennifer, an independent designer disappointed in her stalled relationship and career, discovers a surreal mashup videotape, labeled "Meme," among a friend's VHS collection. She goes in search of Meme's creator, tracking down people who appear on the tape to gain greater insight into what it is and why it exists. As she pursues the creator of the tape she takes greater control of other aspects of her life including her relationship, difficult clients, and a drinking problem that increasingly interferes with her life.

Written and directed by Sean Mannion, *Meme* stars Sarah Schoofs, Shivantha Wijesinha, Lauren A. Kennedy, Kitty Ostapowicz, Chaz Cleveland, Rory Lipede, Tara Cioletti, Matthew Addison, June Dare, Alex Bone, and Carolyn Maher.

Sean Mannion is a writer/director/producer based out of Brooklyn, New York. Sean grew up in Anchorage, Alaska where he built his appreciation for film browsing the shelves of the local video rental stores. As founder of the 4MileCircus production company he has been creating narrative, surreal non-narrative, and documentary short form content for almost a decade. Meme is his first feature film project.



Director Statement: *Meme* began when I walked out of a screening of Harmony Korrine's *Spring Breakers* in early 2013. I was inspired not by the content of the film, but by it's form and what I saw as an interesting approach to reinforcing the drama of a film with nonlinear editing. It wasn't the first time I'd seen this approach, Soderbergh's *The Limey* had also struck me in this way years earlier.

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This formal approach sat in the back of my mind for several days as other pieces began to fall into place. Much like *Meme's* protagonist, Jennifer, I began to assemble *Meme* from the pieces of my life. An outline for a sequel to Cronenberg's *Videodrome* I'd assembled just for fun, my experience meeting collectors of VHS tapes at a Halloween event just a few years earlier, the frustrations of being a freelancer, the bizarre dehumanizing behavior of corporate clients, struggles with self-medicating with alcohol, fringe science, viral ideas, and the tension between authorial intent and audience experience that had fascinated me through my Bachelor's Degree in literature.

What ultimately came together and slowly evolved through these influences and further influences is a film that embraces a chaotic view of experience and questions the value of authorial intent in favor of audience reaction and action.

Through the film Jennifer transforms from a woman shyly accepting her lot in life to one who in fits and starts stands up for herself and takes charge of the direction of her life. It is a film about relationships: relationships with our lovers, with our friends, with our employers, and our relationships with our ideas. It embraces these relationships as fluid and understands that even when they don't go as we'd prefer, they can still be positive.

The experience I'm trying to communicate in this film is that of a time when someone makes the choice to change their life. It is never as simple as deciding to make a change and it is never just one thing that changes when the choice is made. The experience is messy and it can be hard to figure out exactly when it started and sometimes even what the sequence of events was. It was my desire to capture this in the form of the film, reflecting what I'd experienced in the aforementioned *Spring Breakers* and *The Limey*. The film presents events not with a temporal progression but an emotional one. It is a film about making the messy choices that are necessary to change.

Ahead of its world premiere at the Art of Brooklyn Film Festival, we had the opportunity to speak with Sean Mannion about the film.

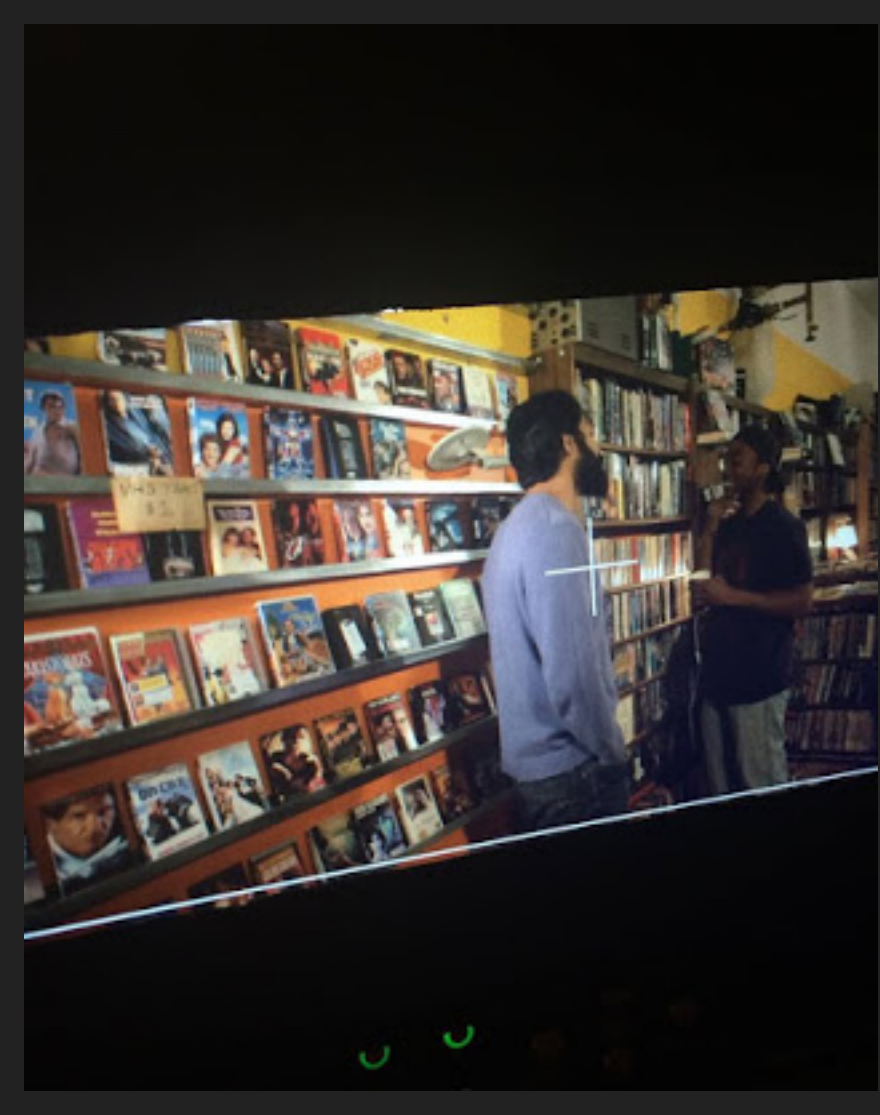


TMS: First off, can you provide us with a little bit of background information. Did you always want to be involved in filmmaking? What type of training or schooling did you have?

SM: I have always loved film, but I did not always want to be a filmmaker. I worked in local politics, Human Resources consulting, and Information Technology before I chose to pursue filmmaking. I did fine working in the other fields but they weren't for me and after a layoff I decided to move to New York and dive in to filmmaking. I attended the New York Film Academy's One Year Screenwriting Program where I learned about story and for the first time got hands on with cameras, directing, editing, and even a bit of acting. I loved the whole process of filmmaking and knew I'd found the field where I belonged. I've spent the last nine plus years working on my own and others projects and exploring every aspect of the process so that I could to learn more.

TMS: What's up with *Meme*? Where can people see it? And what do you want them to know about the movie?

SM: Right now people can see *Meme* at film festivals. We are premiering in Brooklyn on June 9th at 9PM at the Art of Brooklyn Film Festival and we'll be announcing future screening dates very soon. I want people to know that this is a film about making the choice to change and that I believe, and I think the film reflects, that that is a fundamentally messy process. There isn't a direct line from inspiration to execution and we endeavored to reflect that not just in our story but in the form of the story and the way we edited it.



TMS: Do you remember when the idea for this project first sprouted?

SM: *Meme* came from so many sources it would be difficult to pinpoint the exact moment. It was a combination of inspirations that ultimately merged and became Meme. It probably all started with attending the VHS Possessed event put on by Horror Boobs, Wild Eye Releasing, and VHS Vault. That's where I first learned about VHS collecting and that there were still people who loved the format. I didn't have the story or the characters yet, but I knew it would be interesting to integrate VHS collecting and the VHS aesthetic into a future project.

TMS: What was the inspiration behind this story?

SM: I can't point to one inspiration for *Meme*, which is in some ways the thesis of the film. There isn't one moment of change or inspiration. The story of our lead, Jennifer, choosing change and choosing to advocate for herself and choosing to create is really inspired by everyone in my life who I've seen make the hard choice to embrace uncertainty and dive head first into new experiences. People who chose to move cross country, end a toxic relationship, change careers, or just say yes to a new opportunity when it was so much easier to say no inspired me and fed into the story of Jennifer. There are a lot of people in my life who I've seen make those brave choices and I am always inspired by them.

TMS: How long did it take to get out that initial draft?

SM: The initial draft of the screenplay came together very quickly. It was a short script at first. I tend to get my first drafts done quickly and then rewrite and rework a lot. My process for writing is all about getting the words on paper as quick as I can and then reworking them as needed as many times as it takes. I don't remember exactly how long it took to write but it was probably two or three weeks.



TMS: How much did the script change over the course of the next few drafts?

SM: There were a lot of major changes to the script. Tommy, the lead character's boyfriend, was originally the lead. It wasn't working and I'd started talking with Sarah Schoofs about, the now leading, role of Jennifer and she

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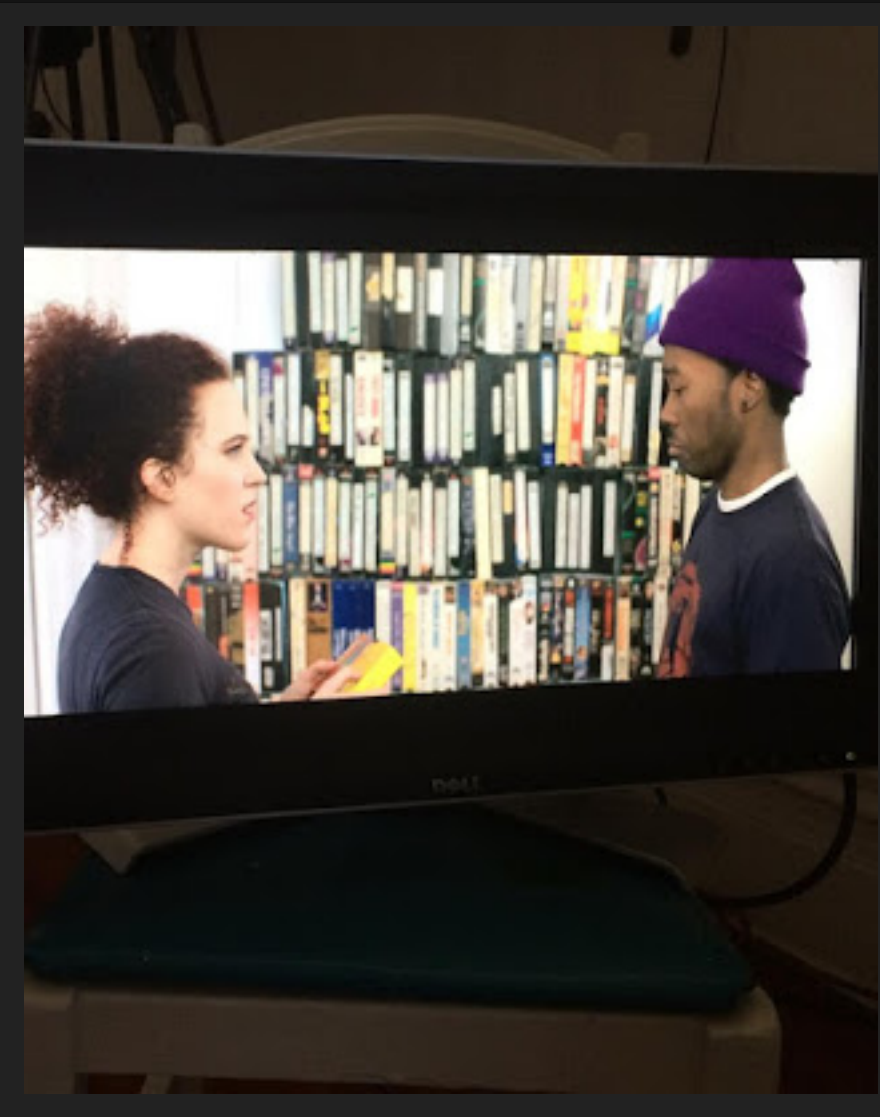


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inspired me and I tried giving the main action to her character and it clicked. At one point there was a cult that worshipped the Meme videotape in the film. That eventually got cut. There were a lot of things that transformed about the details of the script as it went from draft to draft but the thing that stayed the same throughout is that it was fundamentally about making the choice to change. I have the wonderful producers who worked with me at different stages of the project--first Katie Carman-Lehach and then later Carolyn Maher--to thank for helping me develop and mold the story through the writing process. They gave me great feedback and helped me make it work far better than it would have without their input.

TMS: Is there anything you found more challenging when penning the screenplay?

SM: The biggest challenge I had when writing the screenplay was turning off my internal Producer. I have produced a lot of my own work and because of that I have a really good understanding of the cost, both monetary and logistical, of making a film. That can be really hard on you as a writer. That internal Producer keeps chiming in on scenes and moments you love and saying "that's going to be too hard/expensive" and that kept slowing me down throughout the process. That internal Producer is still something I struggle with.



TMS: Did you write any of the roles for specific actors?

SM: I didn't really write any of the roles with someone specific in mind for the role. I did rewrite some of the roles for the actors we brought on. The most significant instance of this was rewriting the film to focus on Jennifer after meeting Sarah Schoofs. We really clicked after she came in for the role and I adapted Jennifer with her in mind. That ultimately lead to Jennifer becoming the main character and carrying the plot.

TMS: Where there any direct cinematic influences or homage in this film?

SM: The direct influences are films like David Cronenberg's *Videodrome* for the transformative relationship between media and consumer; Harmony Korine's *Spring Breakers*, Steven Soderbergh's *The Limey*, and Nicolas Roeg's *Walkabout* for the non-linear presentation of the story; the animated portions were in part inspired by the "Everybody Wants Some" claymation cheeseburger scene in "Savage" Steve Holland's *Better Off Dead*; and the use of the television content, and even some of the tone of the television content, that plays in and between scenes was inspired by Paul Verhoeven's *Robocop*. Val Opielski's score is very influenced by the score for David Lynch's *Inland Empire*. The homages mostly appear in the animated parts with an animated version of the infamous head explosion from *Scanners* and an animated version of the Ludovico Technique from *A Clockwork Orange*, which also references John Carpenter's *They Live*.



TMS: In terms of directing choices, anyone that you try to emulate? Or ones that have influenced you?

SM: I don't know that I really consciously try to emulate anyone in particular in my directing choices. Maybe David Lynch as I've heard he tends to embrace accidents and imperfections and make them part of the story. I think at my best I try to do the same.

TMS: Can you talk about how the other actors were ultimately selected?

SM: For the last 6 years or so I've stopped doing traditional auditions. I post my casting call and select five or six actors from the headshots and reels I get that I think really stand out. Then, I meet them for coffee and we discuss the role and the project. It's more personal. I get a much much better sense from that process if we can work together. You have to be able to be in a room with people for hours in often stressful conditions. You need to find people who have compatible personalities. That's how most of the casting went. Some people I had worked with before or knew in some capacity and thought they would fit the role. Most I had coffee with and we clicked and they got the role. Probably the only major variations on that were Shivantha Wijesinha for Tommy and Kitty Ostapowicz for Carrie. Sarah Schoofs joined me for an afternoon meeting guys at a coffee shop for the role of Tommy. I wanted to get her sense of the actors and see them interact casually. We met four or five guys. Shivantha was the third one we met that day, I think. He was pretty much our guy from the moment we started talking to him. Both Sarah and I were enthusiastic about him after the conversation ended. Kitty was different because she showed a good balance of dedication and practicality right off the bat. The day before I contacted her about the role she'd been struck by a car while jogging. It was relatively minor but required a brief hospital stay and she asked if she could delay meeting by a week, but emphasized she really wanted to meet about the role. I'd had people miss some of these coffee meetings because they'd overslept, forgot, or even just hadn't checked how long it would take to get to the meeting and they would've been extremely late. Kitty was struck by a car and emailed me less than a day later. I was happy to defer the meeting and meet somewhere more accessible while she was recovering from her injuries. We've worked together several times since and she even helped with the production side for Meme when she wasn't in front of the camera.



TMS: How long of a shoot was it?

SM: We shot the film over an 11 month period. Mostly we shot on weekends. Inclusive of the principal photography for the film itself, the film-within-a-film *Beneath the Black Moon*, and the in story Wotan brand beer commercials, we shot for 22 days over those 11 months.

TMS: There is a lot of VHS scenes in the film. Can you talk about how you filmed those scenes?

SM: The VHS scenes in the film were all shot the same way as the rest of the film. We shot them on a DSLR, or in the case of the film-within-a-film, *Beneath the Black Moon*, a Canon C100, and then after the scenes were edited and we knew what we'd be using in the final film, I burned those shots that needed to look like VHS onto a DVD, then ran the DVD player into a VCR and recorded the DVD to a VHS tape, then I digitized the VHS output again and brought that back into the edit. For parts of the film the VHS is intentionally heavily degraded we got that result by hooking one VCR into a second VCR and duplicating the tape contents using the VCRs six or eight times. The VHS quality degraded really fast when duplicated. It was a fun process to play with during post.

TMS: How important was it to shoot in Brooklyn and use local cast and crew?

SM: I live in Brooklyn and I love it here. We were shooting on a low budget, really what most would call no budget, so we needed to shoot locally and we couldn't afford to bring anyone in and put them up somewhere for the shoot, especially because we were shooting over such a long period. So, shooting locally and using local cast and crew was the only realistic option for the film.



TMS: Is there anything you learned from working on *Meme*?

SM: I learned a lot. I like to think I learn something if not every day I'm on set, then at least from every project. On *Meme* I learned to try and get out of my head and remember the other people working on the project have whole other lives they're living, which can be easily forgotten when you're neck deep in producing and directing your film. I learned more about animation, something I'd toyed with before in other projects. I learned sound editing and sound mixing. I learned to let go sometimes and ask for help when I needed it.

TMS: If the movie was playing as one-half of a double feature at a Drive-in theatre what would be the perfect support feature?

SM: I might pick Rachel Talalay's *Tank Girl* for the other feature. First, because it's a delight to watch. Second, because some cast and crew had never heard of it when we shot the scene where the characters are talking about wanting to watch *Tank Girl*. So, it would be some context for that scene.

TMS: If you had a choice to write the remake of a genre movie, what movie would you like to remake?

SM: There's a lot I think I could have fun with. The first one that comes to mind right now is *Hellraiser*. The first two movies in that franchise are really interesting. I've read the original novella by Clive Barker, I've read some of the recent comics series, and I've read the Epic Comics series from back in the 90s. I find that whole world interesting and I would love to be able to explore it.



TMS: *Meme* is going to have its world premiere at the Art of Brooklyn Film Festival. Is there any films or filmmakers that you're looking forward to seeing or meeting there?

SM: There's several films I'm interested in at the festival. Everything looks really interesting and I kind of want to just go to everything happening. Specific films I'm looking forward to that I hope I can make it to are *Exit Interview*, *Pair of Normals*, *Creative Block*, and *Page One*. I've met some of the filmmakers behind those projects in different contexts and I'm excited to see their work at the festival.

TMS: Can you tell us anything about the other projects that you are working on or planning on working on? Or, anything else that you would like to plug?

SM: I have a few balls in the air right now. I just started submitting a new short film, *Rubber Ducky*, to festivals (teaser below). I've also been producing some short films with my company 4MileCircus. One of those films, *Sanctuary* by Jeanette Sears and co-directed by Nicole Solomon, is **screening** in Queens on June 5th at CongestedCat's IndieWorks. We also do a **podcast** at 4MileCircus, The 4MileCircus, which is primarily conversations with filmmakers and other artists about how they fund and promote their work. Our most recent episode was a great conversation with KitSplit CEO and co-founder Lisbeth Kaufman.



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