



Heartworm

written & directed by Miriam Louise Arens



“Those who suffer loss live suspended between
the past for which they long
and the future for which they hope.”

Jerry Sittser, *A Grace Disguised*

Logline



In a post-pandemic world dependent on NeuraLife technology, a virtual platform where all human interaction takes place, a bereaved mother battles to bring her grief-stricken husband back to reality and escape the confines of NeuraLife's fabricated world.



Synopsis



A kaleidoscopic journey traversing reality, virtual reality, and memory, *Heartworm* is about how we rebuild ourselves in the face of insurmountable grief.

When Avena's five-year-old daughter, Zamira, falls into a coma while in NeuraLife, she and her husband Mark are sent on diverging paths: Avena stays in Reality to care for Zamira's body, while Mark waits for her consciousness to return in NeuraLife.

When Zamira dies, Avena begins to process her loss and rediscover her place in the physical world, searching out the surviving remnants of her once authentic "reality." Mark, however, trapped in denial, digs deeper into the virtual realm. To save him, Avena must confront her devastating new existence, free herself and Mark from their guilt, and expose the poisonous nature of NeuraLife's fabricated world.



Director's Statement

Heartworm is a deep exploration of what humankind stands to lose if the virtual realm takes us captive.

In today's society, everyone has a digital persona. For some, this is a useful tool, but for many, it's an augmented version of their core identity. Since the genesis of Facebook, depression is on the rise, feelings of isolation affect 47% of Americans, and the average person spends four hours a day on their mobile device, checking it upwards of 84 times.

As it stands, *Heartworm* has never been more relevant. In this time of a global pandemic, when social distancing and Zoom hangouts are becoming the norm, humanity is sitting on a precipice. Will we rediscover the strength and importance of human connection or will the safety and convenience of a virtual lifestyle win out?

NeuraLife Technology



NeuraLife is based on Elon Musk's NeuraLace, a brain implant that creates a digital intermediary between your thoughts and the internet. Musk's goal is to create a virtual reality for the mind, allowing you to go to work, a concert, a PTA meeting or even on vacation, all from the safety and comfort of your own home. NeuraLace is currently in prototype and has been embedded into both mice and pigs.

Theme



Inspired by social media's growing dominance over the human experience, the film explores the grieving process in a world stripped of authentic human connection. At its core, *Heartworm* is about identity, the insular nature of technology, and the fragility of reality.

Genre



Heartworm collapses science fiction and drama, bringing a uniquely feminine touch to the sci-fi setting while delivering a refreshingly original take on the deteriorating marriage story.

Tone



Heartworm merges Spike Jonze's *Her* with Kenneth Lonergan's *Manchester by the Sea*, all the while straddling the dual worlds of *The Matrix*.

The World



Set in a post-pandemic world, *Heartworm* bridges two realms: NueraLife and Reality.

Reality



After civilization went virtual, people began living out reality in isolation, leaving the real world stark and deserted.

NeuraLife



The vast majority of people now live their entire lives in the virtual realm, going to work, attending school, visiting the library, getting married, the list is endless. NeuraLife can be anything you want it to be: cozy, opulent, rustic, pristine.

****From a production stand point, nothing in NeuraLife will be created using CGI. Everything will be achieved in camera with real actors on location.****

Cast of Characters



Heartworm has a small core cast made up of Avena's immediate family: her husband Mark, her daughter Zamira, her mother Lillian, and her brother Steven.

Avena's Journey



Avena's journey is defined by rebirth. After the tragic death of her daughter, she begins to reforge herself, traversing an antagonistic world dominated by the technology that took Zamira. As she battles to save her husband from the same fate, she discovers the artificial "perfection" of Virtual Reality, and in turn, her eyes are opened to the healing power of nature and the physical realm.



Amber Gray is attached to play Avena.

Amber is best known for originating the role of Persephone in the Tony Award–winning musical, *Hadestown*. Her performance earned her nominations for a Tony Award, The Lucille Lortel Award, and The Drama League Awards. Additionally, she won the Outer Critics Circle Award. Amber also won the Theatre World Award for Outstanding Debut Performance for her portrayal of Helene Kuragina in *Natasha, Pierre & The Great Comet of 1812* on Broadway. Amber holds an MFA in Acting from NYU Tisch and has starred in plays on and off Broadway for the past fifteen years, including, but not limited to *On The Razzle*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *An Octoroon*, and *Oklahoma!* She can also be seen in Barry Jenkins' upcoming series *The Underground Railroad* premiering this spring on Amazon Prime. She is extremely excited to be collaborating with Miriam for the first time since they went to undergraduate together at Boston University.

Mark's Journey



In the aftermath of Zamira's passing, Mark becomes convinced her consciousness is trying to communicate with him in NeuraLife. Overtaken by denial, his anguish propels him deeper into the virtual realm where he starts to build a fantasy in which Zamira never died.

Mark Casting



Much like Avena, Mark is challenged with embodying different physicalities in Reality and NeuraLife. In Reality, he grows increasingly more fatigued and enfeebled, while in NeuraLife he remains seemingly unwounded as his fantasy plays out.

Lighting



The realm in which a particular scene is set dictates the lighting style. For scenes taking place in Reality, the film embraces naturalistic and non-invasive 360 lighting. In NeuraLife however, the lighting is theatrical and painterly, and not necessarily motivated by a source, but rather the feeling the programmed space is meant to elicit.

Lensing



Heartworm is lensed with antique anamorphic glass, striving for a cinematic realism that is at once engrossing and disorienting.

Color



The color palette is summoned by the earthly and organic.



Inspiration

While the concept for Heartworm was birthed out of my frustration with people's inability to communicate without a digital interface, the story is greatly inspired by my cumulative encounters with death.

After a devastating miscarriage, I delved deep into how the passing of all loved ones becomes engraved within us. My grandfather bestowed me with his dark sense of humor; my aunt granted me self-empowerment; my grandmother taught me to live the life I desired; the untimely death of a childhood friend gifted me with a deep appreciation of life; and my miscarriage gave me the strength to become a mother. Each loss graced me with a higher understanding of self and the world around me. Avena experiences a similar evolution as she rebuilds her identity after the death of Zamira.



Miriam Louise Arens is an award winning writer/director whose narrative and documentary shorts have screened worldwide. She received her BFA from Boston University College of Fine Arts where she majored in playwriting and performance. After spending several years working as the finance director at David Mamet's Atlantic Theater Company, Miriam found her true calling and returned to graduate school at New York University's Tisch Asia, where she received her MFA in film direction. Her filmmaking debut, *Black Horn Night Heron*, shot in Cambodia, won The Director's Guild of America Best Student Director Award and premiered at the Berlinale International Film Festival. Since then she's had short films screened in Australia, Europe and the United States, and streamed in Asia on Viki TV. Miriam now lives in Los Angeles, where she works as a writer, director, producer and editor. She has created commercials for companies including Mobil One, Virgin Hyperloop, and Chevy. Additionally, she produced and edited music videos for Nils Lofgren's *Pretty Soon* and Elton John's 2020 Oscar winning song, *I'm Gonna Love Me Again*. She is now focusing her creative efforts on women's empowerment through narrative film.

Nancy Foy ... Casting Director

Nancy began her career at Francis Ford Coppola's Zoetrope Studios, where she assisted in the casting of numerous films including *The Outsiders* and *Reds*. She soon broke off on her own. She was twice honored with the prestigious Casting Society of America's ARTIOS Award for *The Rat Pack* and *James Dean: An Invented Life*. And was nominated for *October Sky*, in which she cast Jake Gyllenhaal in his first leading role. She served as Vice President of Motion Picture Casting at both Paramount Pictures and 20th Century Fox, respectively. She supervised casting on hundreds of films most notably, *Forrest Gump*, *Wayne's World*, *Indecent Proposal*, *School Ties* and *The Firm*. Nancy has cast for such distinguished directors as Robert Redford, Warren Beatty, the Farrelly brothers, Mike Figgis and Guillermo Del Toro.

Mitchell Arens ... Co-Writer and Director of Photography

Mitchell received his MFA from NYU Tisch Asia. He has shot documentaries and narrative films all over the world, including *Oh Lucy!* (short, dir. Atsuko Hirayanagi) which premiered at Cannes and received the International Short Jury Award at the 2015 Sundance Film Festival. More recently he shot *Dandelion*, (feature doc, dir. Basil Mironer) currently in post, *Seven Days*, (feature, dir. Corey Kupfer) currently in post, and *Kate Nash: Underestimate The Girl* (feature doc, dir. Amy Goldstein) which premiered at Los Angeles Film Festival. Additionally, he has shot commercials for clients such as Chevrolet, Mobil1, Hyundai, Virgin Hyperloop-One, and music videos for artists such as Natasha Bedingfield, Nils Lofgren, and Elton John.

Kyle Haskett ... Producer

Kyle is an international filmmaker who has produced films in Singapore, Malaysia, India, Ireland, Kurdistan, Bolivia and the United States. After graduating with his MFA from NYU Tisch Asia in Singapore, Kyle received the Panavision New Filmmaker's Grant for his directorial debut, *New Earth on the Barrens*. He went on to edit multiple short films that screened at film festivals worldwide, as well as *Tana Bana* (feature doc, dir. Pat Murphy) which premiered at Vancouver International Film Festival. After wearing so many different hats, Kyle decided to take his cumulative wealth of cinematic knowledge and channel it into producing. Most recently Kyle produced *Black Box* (feature doc) currently in post-production. He is trilled to be collaborating with Miriam on *Heartworm*.

“I want nothing more than to live in a world where my daughter didn’t die. A world where my life played out as I imagined: one with graduations, and birthdays, and boyfriends and grandkids. But that’s not the life I got handed. I got handed this one. And I have to believe it was for a reason. I have to believe there’s truth in it!”

Avena, *Heartworm* (page 64)

Market

Independent films form a major component of both domestic and international film consumption. Lower costs of production and increased avenues of distribution have fostered an exciting time for independent films in the U.S. and abroad. Where the traditional model of independent filmmaking which relied on a theatrical release has vastly diminished, powerful paid rental and streaming services have taken its place. Through online marketing and distribution, there is unprecedented access to an audience hungry for quality content.

Audience

Our core audience will be sci-fi genre lovers and cinephiles in both the younger and older demographics. Cinephiles reliably turn out for critically acclaimed independent films, particularly in online rentals and subscription-based services. And thanks to Black Mirror sci-fi as a genre has had a resurgence with the mainstream movie watcher.

Distribution

Our goal is to premiere at a top film festival like Sundance, Toronto, or SXSW while also seeking distribution from a reputable distributor to find the best deal for both domestic and international distribution.

The Production will seek a profitable all-rights deal with an initial cash buyout and a percentage of future profits. If no such deal is deemed favorable enough, the Production will seek a partial-rights deal combined with self-distribution through theatrical screenings, self-distribution to online platforms, and other methods.

Independent films are traditionally distributed in “windows,” all of which continue to generate revenue for investors/producers:

1. Theatrical release(if financially feasible)
2. International Sales
3. TVOD-pay-per-play platforms like iTunes, GooglePlay, Amazon and Syndication (licensing to individual TV channels) and pay-per-view like HBO and Showtime.
4. SVOD platforms like Netflix, Hulu, AmazonPrime

Distributors deduct a fee and the Adjusted Gross Income is passed along to the investors/producers according to their deal.

There is no guarantee of a distribution deal, but we will find the most favorable financial outcome possible for our investors. This can be through any combination of distributors and/or self-distribution of the film.

The Budget

I conceptualized *Heartworm* to make it not just work well but excel under financial limitations. While writing, I pushed the boundaries of my imagination to strike the balance between a sci-fi genre film and a character study, allowing the scope of production to remain small while tackling large issues and gaining a broader audience.

I designed *Heartworm* to be filmed on Martha's Vineyard, which offers a ton of budgetary advantages. For one, I'm from Martha's Vineyard and have very strong ties to the community, opening the door to major discounts that would otherwise be unavailable. Being a seasonal community, the island has a very stark dichotomy of wealth, which helps create the two contrasting worlds of Reality and NeuraLife all within a 20-mile radius. To top it off, many of the costs usually associated with filmmaking simply don't exist there.

I am fortunate enough to be able to say the majority of my core crew are dear friends and close collaborators. Over the last five years, our collective has produced two feature documentaries, one narrative feature, and numerous music videos and commercials. The language we have built as a team has allowed us to keep our crews minimal and our sets very intimate. Not only does this reduce production costs, it allows me to build scenes with a strict focus on performance, which *Heartworm* demands.

Investment Opportunity

Investors will recoup 110% of initial investment pro rata/pari pasu with other investors, and from there will share in 50% of all profits with producer in perpetuity. For a more detailed breakdown, please see the LLC structure on the next page.

As at least 50% of principle photography is scheduled to be filmed in Massachusetts, which makes *Heartworm* eligible for the state's film incentive tax credit. The production expense credit may be equal to 25% of the taxpayer's Massachusetts production expenses in connection with the filming and production in Massachusetts. This guarantees a small portion of the initial investment being paid forward before the distribution of the film.

LLC Structure

A single purpose Limited Liability Company shall be formed for the sole purpose of developing, producing and distributing HEARTWORM (the “Picture”). HEARTWORM, LLC (the “Production”) will be managed by Normandie Films, the production company for the Picture. Investors will not participate in the management of the LLC. The sole business of the LLC will be production and sale of the Picture.

Plan Structure: 50/50 (The Production shall own 50% of the Picture and the Investors shall own 50% of the Picture.)

When the film becomes profitable The Production will return 100% of the investors initial investment +10%. The Production will then pay any deferred compensation (“back end” deals). Third, additional profits will be divided 50/50 between investors and the Production. Investors receive a percentage of profits proportional to their number of shares.

Contact

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