

Kathleen Gyllenhaal: Health meets Hollywood Q&A



By *Jamie Wells, M.D.* — October 25, 2016



Welcome to the continuation of our series discussing the science behind director [Kathleen Gyllenhaal](#)^[1]'s latest documentary, [IN UTERO](#)^[2].

"[To Avoid Adult Dysfunction Start 'IN UTERO'](#)"^[3] took a deeper look at the health ramifications of toxic stress in prenatal life and its role in contributing to adult disease. Her husband, [Stephen Gyllenhaal](#)^[1], is a producer.

Now, we pivot to the behind-the-scenes of how and why such a story gets told. The interview will reveal interesting parallels between funding for films versus scientific research, how to deliver an effective public message and issues of motherhood, health and Hollywood.

You were a tenured Professor at Vassar and now are in the film and television industry. What are the benefits and drawbacks of both academia and Hollywood? Documentary vs entertainment film?

Kathleen:

Just for the record, I haven't done tv yet, but hopefully that will change, since I think television reaches a wider audience. Stephen and I are developing a reality tv show that would follow several pregnant women from different socio-cultural-economic backgrounds through their pregnancies, birth, and several months after.

But to answer your question, in academia, you really have the freedom to pursue work that you think is meaningful, without having to think about market or entertainment value. It's a wonderful thing to get grants and make an educational social documentary, for example. I did that with *Sita*, what I call my "ethnographic, narrative documentary", which featured a girls group in rural Nepal

who put on street drama performances to raise awareness about HIV/AIDS. Though it won a bunch of awards and played at over 30 festivals, it nevertheless has flown relatively under the radar because it sort of defies categorization.

After making several shorts and documentaries during my time in academia, I reached a crossroads. I wanted to move into larger scale projects — feature films — but found it difficult to do within the academic setting. One of the benefits of working in Hollywood is that you're in the cradle of the industry, so there are many opportunities to collaborate. But it's a business with bigger investments and higher stakes, which means you have to always take into consideration entertainment value and where your piece fits into the marketplace. If you can make it work — that is, keep your core message or vision in place *and* get green-lit — then you can take that message to a huge audience.

How do you envision successfully merging the two so that responsible and informative messages about science and health/medicine reach the masses? Is that even important to you?

Kathleen:

It's very important. And I spent a lot of time mulling this over when I was making *IN UTERO* [2]. First, let me explain that even within the documentary world, there is also pressure to entertain. We're lucky to be living in a time when documentaries are getting mainstream exposure, but it also means that certain formulas can also begin to creep in. For example, audiences really connect with personal stories — totally understandable — so the majority of feature documentaries are constructed around a personal story. And I love those documentaries, don't get me wrong, but it's actually come to the point where some funding organizations are only funding personal documentaries. In other words, more conventional, "talking heads" documentaries are viewed as not entertaining enough to warrant funding. Luckily, we found funders who believed in the importance of the science that we were exploring in *IN UTERO* [2], so we were good to go.

But I was very concerned about being pigeon-holed as an informational documentary (which sounds dry), when I knew how compelling our material was. So, I approached the making of the documentary in the same way I would approach making a narrative film. In the sense that I wanted to create an emotional journey for the audience. As well as a stylistic, cinematic experience. It meant, on one level, asking my experts to offer their personal stories (which in some cases had profound relevance with their research), but it went much further.

We had an incredible score by Pinar Toprak, who normally scores big budget feature films, and the editor, Kinga Orlikowska, created a very dynamic pace which propels us "down the rabbit hole" of all of this compelling research around our earliest experiences. I use the *Alice in Wonderland* reference deliberately, because I actually used several movie clips (from Hollywood films like *Alice in Wonderland*, *The Little Mermaid*, *Superman*, *Aliens*, *The Matrix*) in the documentary to illustrate some of the more psychological points that are being made. I also used a ton of b-roll to illustrate the wider, societal implications of all the research — research that shows how the trauma which is passed from generation to generation (unimpeded, as it were), shows up in how we

behave, and in our relationships to each other and to the environment.

**Why do you think doctors and scientists are not the celebrities and rock stars of our time?
How can we make that so?**

Kathleen:

Well, that's an interesting question. Was Galileo a rock star in his time? Einstein? Curie? If so, then I think what has historically made a scientist a rock star is the sheer magnitude of his/her discovery. Being a true pioneer. Are there huge, pioneering, earth-shattering discoveries being made in science and psychology that we're not hearing about? Maybe.

I think that some of the experts in my film are rock stars. They're pushing the envelope back to the prenatal period — looking at epigenetics, transgenerational trauma, the placenta, stress, how what affects the mother affects the fetus she carries — it's mind-blowing stuff, and it's the kind of stuff that dares to chart a path towards understanding why we are the way we are. Towards understanding what it means to be human.

That we are emotional entities before we are intellectual entities, and that our pre-verbal, emotional memories are stored in our body, and in our unconscious, and that they drive us in ways (both psychologically and physically) that we as a society are only just beginning to understand.

So, how do we shine a light on these discoveries, and these rock stars? I guess I'm trying to do that by always underscoring the wider perspective, the "big picture" in [IN UTERO](#) [2]. Trying to show the magnitude of these discoveries and how they really resonate with history and show us where this species is headed.

What is a 'social documentary'? Why was *Beauty Mark* which explores America's obsession with body image something you pursued?

Kathleen:

I was approached by the producers of *Beauty Mark* midway in the production. At the time, I was teaching film production at UC-Boulder. I was really attracted to the project because it connected body image disorders with America's obsession with perfection and success.

I've always been kind of a "Type A" personality, a perfectionist, but it's taken me many years to understand that my drive for perfection was a reflection of damage. Don't get me wrong, I think being hard-working, efficient, and so on are good traits, but if you're becoming chronically stressed, and it's beginning to negatively affect your relationships, then there's a problem.

I thought Diane Israel, the subject of the movie, and the executive producer, was and is a very brave woman who wanted to explore her own issues (champion triathlete suffering from anorexia) in an honest way. She was willing to dig deep and look beyond the façade of her picture-perfect, upper middle class family and uncover the mental illness, depression, and pain that surrounded her during her childhood — the roots of her illness.

As you can probably guess, I'm really interested in finding causes, not getting lost or distracted by symptoms. And Diane wanted to get to the root causes, which not many people are willing to do. As one of my experts says in [IN UTERO](#) [2], people flee from that initial pain because they never want to experience it again. However, identifying and understanding that early trauma may be your best bet to overcoming it.

Do you have unique concerns about raising a child in Hollywood as opposed to anywhere else?

Kathleen:

Yes. My son just turned two, and my husband and I have daily conversations about where we should raise him. We live in the Hollywood Hills, and when we drive down Laurel Canyon Blvd, we find ourselves suddenly in billboard land. I imagine that Luke, pinned to his car seat in the back, is forced to see these horrible images of tough guys with guns and clenched jaws and fetishized images of passive women, all selling something. It's like we're all being consumed as we drive along Sunset Boulevard.

What drew you to the subject of child sex trafficking for your drama, *Sita, a Girl from Jambu* ? What surprised you most from that experience? What should the public take home message or messages be?

Kathleen:

While living in Boulder, CO, I served on the board of a small 501(c)3 called Free A Child which worked with grassroots NGOs in Nepal to fund micro-lending programs and raise awareness about child sex trafficking and HIV/AIDS. I was invited to visit the office in Hetauda, Nepal (near the Nepal/India border) and shoot interviews with the women and girls who participated in the programs, as well as the staff.

When I got there, however, I was so inspired by the girls' street drama performance, that I immediately changed direction and scripted an adaptation of their play. I did location scouting all around the region and then filmed the play as a movie, with all the girls acting. I shot it myself on the then- new Panasonic DVX-100 with a graduate student from UC-Boulder doing sound. NGO workers became line producers — it was fantastic!

I had an interpreter with me at all times so I could explain each scene to the girls and get their feedback. Then I intercut their street performance (which I filmed several times) with the film

version, so that we get the feeling of watching a real event, then going deeper emotionally into the story when we cut to the cinematic scenes.

I think the biggest take away was how empowered these girls were, with just a little help from the NGO and Free A Child. Give them a little support, and their voices come out. I loved to see them take such pride in their work — not one of them had any training, and yet their acting is superb, in my opinion. I was humbled by the experience. I've never done anything since that remotely approaches the purity of that project. I think I did it all with a \$2500 grant!

**Do you have family in medicine or science that drew you to such themes in your work?
Why and how did you decide on your career?**

Kathleen:

No. But my father is a film historian and professor. I grew up watching movies from the age of three. *The Rescuers* was the first movie I ever saw. If you remember, it's about two mice, Bernard and Miss Bianca from the "Rescue Aid Society", saving an orphan girl named Penny. I loved that two tiny creatures could do something so heroic. (I'm only 5'2", and my mother would always tell me that good things come in little packages.)

And this is why I'm also a huge fan of *The Lord of the Rings*. I love the message that "Even the smallest person can change the course of the future" (Galadriel). When Frodo offers to take the ring to Mordor, during the Council of Elrond, I always mist up at Gandalf's reaction — he's so moved by Frodo's innocence and selflessness. And then everyone is so ashamed for having argued over who should go. Frodo's selfless act brings them all together and prompts them to put their grievances aside so they can save Middle Earth.

I guess that's why I chose my career — I was exposed to movies very early on, and to be perfectly honest, it was the way my family bonded, which is not the healthiest thing, but it's what happened. So stories/movies became my moral compass. Luckily, my parents made us see really good movies — that is, both uplifting movies and also more complicated ones that really made you think about human nature.

The films that had probably the most impact on me growing up were *E.T.*, *The Music Man*, *The Empire Strikes Back*, *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, *Chariots of Fire*, *Gandhi*, *Lawrence of Arabia*, *Witness*, *A Room With a View*, and *Amadeus*. I know, it's eclectic. And they're all mostly about men, with the exception of Princess Leia, Marian the Librarian, and Lucy Honeychurch.

Maybe that's why everything I do now either has strong, female characters or focuses on women and children. Not that that means I'm still not incredibly fond of all those films. In fact, I'd say the male characters' strength (T. E. Lawrence, Mozart, Eric Liddell, Luke Skywalker, young Elliot) comes from their so-called "feminine" qualities — their vulnerability, sensitivity, and compassion. Still, I think we really need to bring to light more women's stories.

Please return tomorrow for the [final piece in this series](#) [4] with [Kathleen Gyllenhaal](#) [1], director of [IN UTERO](#) [5]. She will continue to share her insights into motherhood and the impacts of her recent film.

NOTES:

[Kathleen Man Gyllenhaal](#) [1] was born and raised on Oahu, Hawaii and currently lives in Los Angeles. She is the writer/director of a diverse body of award-winning dramas and documentaries, including *Beauty Mark*, a social documentary exploring America's obsession with body image, perfection and success, and *Sita, a Girl from Jambu*, an ethnographic drama about child sex trafficking in Nepal. Kathleen taught at the University of Colorado-Boulder, then Vassar College, where she obtained tenure. From there, she transitioned to Hollywood, co-producing the feature film *Grassroots*, starring Jason Biggs, Cedric the Entertainer and Lauren Ambrose, released by Samuel Goldwyn Films. Kathleen wrote and directed the award-winning *Lychee Thieves*, a multicultural tale set in Hawaii, which was an Academy Award qualifying live-action short. Her most recent film is the feature documentary *In Utero*, which explores the impact of the environment on pregnancy and the next generation.



Stephen Gyllenhaal ^[1] is a film and television director, writer and producer. His directing credits include *Paris Trout*, for which he received a DGA Award for Outstanding Directorial Achievement in Dramatic Specials, as well as the theatrical films, *Waterland*, *A Dangerous Woman*, *Losing Isaiah* and *Homegrown*. In 2012, he received a DGA nomination for Outstanding Directorial Achievement in Movies for Television for *Girl Fight*. In 2012, he co-wrote and directed the indie film *Grassroots*, and he recently directed the indie film *So B. It*, based on the best-selling young adult novel, coming to theaters in 2017. He currently directs the Peabody award-winning dramatic series *Rectify* for the Sundance Channel, *Billions* for Showtime, and *Bosch* for Amazon. His producing credits include the documentary, *In Utero* ^[2], released by FilmBuff in 2016.

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Links

[1] <http://www.inuterofilm.com/filmmakers/>

[2] <http://www.inuterofilm.com/trailer/>

[3] <http://www.acsh.org/news/2016/10/24/avoid-adult-dysfunction-start-utero-10348>

[4] <http://acsh.org/news/2016/10/26/kathleen-gyllenhaal-utero-hollywood-qa-10365>

[5] <http://www.inuterofilm.com>