

# Special Ops: Lioness Director Paul Cameron On Making New Show With & Without Taylor Sheridan

Special Ops: Lioness director and DP Paul Cameron talks about working with the show's star-studded cast and stepping into the director's chair.

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***Special Ops: Lioness*** is a new spy thriller series based on a real-world CIA program. It's one of many upcoming Taylor Sheridan TV shows, but sees the showrunner exploring a different part of the world and telling a story about the U.S.'s war on terror. The series boasts a stacked cast that includes Zoe Saldana, Nicole Kidman, Morgan Freeman, and Michael Kelly, and was shot in Baltimore, Mallorca, and Marrakech.

One of the filmmakers responsible for creating and maintaining the series' look is *Special Ops: Lioness*' cinematographer and director Paul Cameron. Cameron was involved as a cinematographer through the whole series and also directed multiple episodes, keeping Taylor Sheridan's vision intact even as the showrunner spent production away from the set. Cameron was also heavily involved with *Westworld*, helping create the initial look of the show and directing episodes even in the series' final season.

Paul Cameron spoke with *Screen Rant* about finding freedom in restriction, how a cinematography background feeds working as a director, and more.

*Note: This piece was written during the 2023 WGA and SAG-AFTRA strikes, and the show covered here would not exist without the labor of the writers and actors in both unions.*

## Paul Cameron on *Special Ops: Lioness*



**Screen Rant: This era of American history has been explored quite a bit in film and TV. Was there something specific about this project that felt particularly exciting to you?**

*Paul Cameron: There are two things. One was that when John Hillcoat gave me a ring and asked me to come work as a DP on it, I asked about the other directors and realized they hadn't booked other directors. I talked to Taylor and put that together.*

*Then we only had a couple of scripts to start, and after reading the scripts, and after John and I spoke with Taylor, I was attracted to this idea of exploring this female world. It may be slightly different than what Taylor does with a lot of his other shows, but it's so female-oriented, with with Zoe, Laysla, and Nicole and Stephanie as the central characters.*

*It was that along with the reality that this is a unit in the CIA that stemmed from US involvement, particularly in Afghanistan, handling female prisoners. They found out it's very problematic for male Special Forces or soldiers to deal with prisoners--Muslim, female prisoners--so they started to use women more and more. I guess they caught on to this idea that the women were able to befriend women very easily, and they came up with this idea: "What if we take young Special Ops women and put them in situations with high terrorist targets?" Namely, befriend the daughter of [a target], a sister of [a target], whatever, female to female. This way, they could either track and/or take action against high level terrorists. That, to me, was a pretty extreme and interesting idea.*

**Did you work with consultants from the military or government on set?**

*Paul Cameron: [On] many projects that involve the military and/or Special Ops situations, they either directly make a relationship with the Defense Department and/or ex-members of Special Forces, et cetera. Here, because you've got to submit scripts to the Defense Department, like, 12 years in advance or something, they went ahead and basically utilized a couple of members of Taylor's security team down in Texas that are ex-Special Ops, and they brought in other Special*

*Ops advisors; Namely, those familiar with this group and/or similar Special Ops situations that we deal with in this show.*

**Taylor has such a specific vision, or at least seems to be very in control of his projects. How much freedom did you feel like you had, either directing or as a cinematographer?**

*Paul Cameron: I think what was a bit unique to this project was that I guess there was a previous showrunner/writer. I believe Taylor wrote one or two of the previous episodes, and they hired a showrunner/writer to do the other episodes and put the show together. The show was actually almost ready to go down in Baltimore last June when, I guess, Taylor and his group decided to replace that showrunner and have Taylor rewrite all the scripts. Basically, John Hillcoat took the job, called me and said, "We've got to be in Baltimore in a week and get things going, and we're going to start shooting in three weeks."*

*In this case, we had two scripts when we arrived, and [neither] Taylor nor anyone from his camp directly related was showrunning it. There were some people from his camp, but an actual showrunner per se wasn't present, so it was a lot of conversations with both Taylor and Michael Friedman, who works side-by-side with Taylor on the production side of things. It's basically long-distance showrunners.*

*I think there was a lot of freedom on one hand, but when it comes to working with Taylor, he's very, very specific about the scripts. The scripts are the Bible; you shoot the scripts. If there's time to do additional lines, or additional shots, or coverage, or anything of that manner, that's fine, but you've got to shoot the script, and you've got to treat it like the Bible.*

*That can sound kind of constraining, but in a way it's strangely freeing. As we work more and more in the streaming area, we're finding there are quite a few producers and sometimes quite a few writers, a lot of voices on the set, and actors with a lot of power. Suddenly you're on set and people want to change the scene, they want to change the lines, they want to change the blocking;*

*they want to change everything. Unfortunately, streaming doesn't have a longer schedule like a feature film, so there is a pace to it that you've got to adhere to make the schedule.*

*I felt it working with John as a DP and I could see we had to shoot the script, so by the time I was directing on episodes five and six, I knew that's exactly what I was going to do. Then, if there were any additional lines, improv, or any additional photography that I wanted to supplement the scene with, I would have to table it to the very end rather than structurally building into it.*

*The challenge is [that] you've got high-end talent like Nicole Kidman, Morgan Freeman, Zoe Saldana, Michael Kelly, Bruce McGill, [and] Jennifer Ehle. These are all high-end actors [and] once they're doing a scene and they start to do a line, they may have a question about the line or want to alter a line. It's just always that situation, like, "Listen, we're going to shoot the lines the way they're written and then, if there's an idea, we can either address it together or let's get Taylor on the phone, and we'll see if it's something we want to address or extend a little time to shoot as well." Again, it seems very constrained, but it's kind of freeing in the sense that you really have that voice of the writer and that showrunner, and that's what you're doing.*



**With Morgan Freeman being as experienced as he is, and Nicole Kidman and Zoe Saldana being executive producers, were there a lot of times where they were throwing ideas out there?**

*Paul Cameron: By nature, on set as you're working, riffing, rehearsing, and trying things, there's this tendency to maybe go a direction that that feels right. It was many times, I think with Zoe that we let her explore it and then tried to regroup a little bit and pull her--in a very diplomatic way--towards what I thought was the intention of the scene, or the line, or something like that. Then there was the occasional, "Pick up the phone again and call Taylor. See if it's something we want to maybe change," and I'd say 99% of the time we stuck to the script.*

*With Nicole, where Zoe is very physical and vulnerable and builds in an outward way on set, Nicole is very internal and really addresses the lines, and the intention, and the dynamic of the words between the people on the page. She would question a lot. [She would] occasionally question a line and the meaning or intention of that line, and we'd address it. We'd collectively look at all sides of it and try to figure out what the intention was. [On] a couple occasions, maybe, we talked to Taylor, but I don't remember changing any dialogue or anything like that.*

*Morgan's just a wonderful human being, a wonderful actor. He loves the exchange with directors and exploring ideas, and then finds a comfortable place and just goes like a racehorse. He's pretty interesting to watch.*

*And Mike Kelly--same thing. Mike Kelly, Jennifer Ehle: they're consummate professionals that are so, so good at their craft that they show up super prepared. In this case, they had quite a lot of dialogue and were just very, very willing and able to do the scenes as many times as required to get the performance, the reverse shots, etc. They were a pleasure to work with.*

**In terms of your relationship with cinematography and also directing, do you prefer to direct projects that you're also working on as a cinematographer? Does that make it easier for you?**

Paul Cameron: [In] so many years as a cinematographer, I've had relationships with [some] directors where they've leaned on me to figure things [out]--from the blocking to the shots--and they just dealt with performance, [and also] very specific directors like Tony Scott or Michael Mann that have strong ideas [on] where to put cameras and how to capture scenes. Out of my experience as a cinematographer, I go location scout and I think about, "What's the great natural light here?" and "Where do I see the scene happening?"

I break it down in my mind knowing that, since it is kind of a hurried schedule on the streaming side of things, you often don't have the luxury of that feature schedule, and yet you're dealing with feature actors that may want to try a few things a few different ways. I think I've always had a way with actors, helping them find the right areas to block the scene out a bit so that it works for them, and visually.

So, when it comes to relationships as a director working with directors of photography, I'm very specific. I'm very open to going to locations with [the director of photography] and exploring ideas, and then by the time we're on the technical scout, we're basically telling people how we're going to shoot it. If it changes, it changes, but we have a very specific plan. I'm very specific about light. I love to light faces--chiseling out features on people's faces and a slight ping in the eye when it's needed, and leaving a background or having something interesting in the background--and fall off and focus are very important to me. I'm very specific about that from having so many years being a cinematographer.

**It looks like there is a good bit of action in this. Is that more challenging for you as a director than getting to have control over a more static scene?**

Paul Cameron: Certainly, you'll see some fairly big action sequences in the first episode that I shot for John, some of which I directed and shot as well as the second unit in Morocco. I'm kind of used to shooting action so I can, again, kind of visualize it and shape it. [I know] that if we're going to shoot an explosion it only needs to be [so] big, or we only need this number of people instead of

having a vast amount of people, [and I know to avoid having] too much stuff and not putting it on screen. I'm good with that.

When it comes to directing, it's easy for me to realize how to make a bigger action sequence and make it more impactful--knowing what lenses I'm going to shoot it on, knowing the resources of the project, and being able to adjust numbers with the AD so that we're not wasting people's time.

**I know you were very involved with *Westworld*. It was a surprise to find out the show wasn't returning after season 4. Was there any sort of clue as you were working on it, in terms of on-set atmosphere or conversations you had, that that was going to be the end?**

*Paul Cameron: Working on Westworld was a fabulous experience because I worked with Jonathan Nolan and Lisa Joy in world-building that show. I really loved that, and that's something I was able to do with *Lioness* with John Hillcoat and Taylor. It's the visualization of the whole show, so you have a good idea of what the arc could be depending on the number of seasons that it's going to go.*

*For something like Westworld, it was a bit of a bit of a surprise that it didn't go one more season. By the end of season four, when they were writing the scripts, they knew there was a possibility it wouldn't move forward. It's amazing they were able to sustain that cast for so many years and actually shoot it with all those top-level actors, but it's tough. I think everybody wanted one more season to finish telling that story, and I think that's always the chance you take in streaming. You may be asked in the beginning to lay out five, six, eight seasons, but it could only last for a few, and when they tell you this is the last season how do you wrap things up? That's always the challenge, and it's going to leave some viewers happy with the choices, and some not so happy, I think.*

## About Special Ops: *Lioness*



*Inspired by an actual US Military program, “Lioness” follows the life of Joe (Saldana) while she attempts to balance her personal and professional life as the tip of the CIA's spear in the war on terror. The Lioness Program, overseen by Kaitlyn Meade (Kidman), enlists an aggressive Marine Raider to operate undercover alongside Joe among the power brokers of State terrorism in the CIA's efforts to thwart the next 9/11.*

**Special Ops: Lioness** premieres July 23rd on Paramount+.