



The Natural State

Directed by Matthew Dougherty
Executive Produced by Jane Campion & Mahesh Bhatt

Telluride Film Festival 2026 - World Premiere



United States | 2026 | 100 minutes | In English
thenaturalstate.film

Press contact:
Sylvia Savadjian PR
Sylvia.Savadjian@gmail.com

Sales Contact:
info@thenaturalstate.film

Logline:

A woman goes to a radical Indian anti-guru to be destroyed by him. She films everything.

Short Synopsis:

In 1989, Julie Thayer, a wealthy mother from New York City, went to the Swiss Alps to have her ego destroyed. The man she chose for the job was U.G. Krishnamurti, a radical Indian anti-guru who refused followers, refused donations, and told everyone who came to him to go away. Julie stayed — and filmed everything. *The Natural State* is built from that archive, hundreds of hours unseen for decades, and from the private journals Julie kept as U.G.'s psychological "blasting" carried her from states of ecstasy to the brink of devastation. The film's executive producers, Jane Campion and legendary Indian filmmaker Mahesh Bhatt, both knew U.G. personally. Bhatt spent decades at his side and wrote his biography; Campion modeled *Top of the Lake's* guru GJ — Holly Hunter's enigmatic mystic — on her late friend.

Long Synopsis:

In 1989, Julie Thayer—a wealthy New York mother driven by a lifelong pattern of seeking gurus and men—arrived in the Swiss Alps with a video camera. What she finds is U.G. Krishnamurti, a radical Indian philosopher who claims a catastrophic biological event in 1967 permanently destroyed his sense of self. He rejects every spiritual tradition, refuses donations, refuses followers, and tells everyone who comes to him to leave. Julie stays—and films everything.

The Natural State is constructed from Julie's raw home video, private journals, and U.G.'s own mythic origin story, braiding two timelines into a single escalating narrative. Julie's footage traces her deepening entanglement with U.G.—the gravitational pull of his presence, her growing inability to leave, and the sustained psychological "blasting" he directs at those nearest him. Intercut with this, U.G.'s backstory unfolds like dark religious lore: a life mirroring the Buddha's—prophecy at birth, obsessive quest, an *Amadeus*-like rivalry with his world famous guru, and finally, a violent spiritual transformation that left witnesses describing someone unrecognizable. The parallels mount: U.G. abandons his family in pursuit of enlightenment, Julie drifts from hers; U.G.'s wife dies of despair, Julie's son arrives in India to lure his mother back home.

As Julie draws closer, U.G. turns on her. His circle calls it 'blasting' — sustained psychological assault aimed at the people nearest to him. He calls her names, mocks her intelligence, tells her she has no place with him. Is this spiritual surgery or just negging with a metaphysical alibi? Julie's journals record night terrors, suicidal ideation, the inability to picture her own children's faces. Brought to total collapse, she makes an irreversible decision to offer U.G. everything. But what U.G. does upends every expectation the story has been driving toward.

Director's Statement:

I was born into a fundamentalist Christian cult. My mother got my sister and me out while I was still small, and not long after, I began to have recurring nightmares.

One night I woke frightened and ran to my mother's bed and nudged her awake. She lifted her head and turned to me, only she was not my mother. "Your mother is in the hospital." I was five years old.

My parents had joined the cult when they were teenagers. What had begun for them as an innocent yearning to share Jesus' love with the world became a horrific chronicle of abuse at the hands of the cult leader, who for decades abused countless young women, including my mother. She stayed in the psychiatric hospital for several months, and my sister and I went to live with my father, who had also left the cult but remained a practicing fundamentalist, determined to instill a love of God in his children.

As a teenager I started to practice meditation, and then later, with the help of psychedelics, I began to get glimpses of what to me felt like profound, egoless states of consciousness. The experience of myself as a distinct individual dissolved. Yet no matter how boundless the experience, my illusory ego always came bouncing back.

At some point I learned of a number of people who claimed to have had powerful and irreversible spiritual awakenings that left them permanently in the state that I had only tasted. They spoke of the urgency for an evolutionary shift out of the ego that had dominated our species for so long and was leading us to our collective ruin. I read all the books that I could find and watched video after video. Eventually I paid to go see a few of the teachers in person and sat in a crowd while they talked in soothing voices through miked headsets about Oneness. But it was impossible to see past their aloof demeanor, or peer behind their big foundations, the trademarked meditation techniques and expensive spiritual retreats, to see what it really meant for them, as regular people, to live in an awakened state.

In the spring of 2007, in a small town on the coast of Northern Italy, U.G. Krishnamurti passed away. About a year later, a video of U.G. from his deathbed, a man I had never heard of, ended up on my screen.

I felt repulsed. He didn't have any of the spiritual qualities of the teachers I had been listening to. He seemed angry, spewing almost, boasting about himself with a group of people scattered around him on the floor lapping it all up. I pitied anyone foolish enough to be lost in him.

A few months later I chanced upon another video, this one decades earlier. The combativeness was still there, yelling at people about their stupid questions, but this time I noticed an unusual softness in the way he moved.

After that it was over. I watched every video and read every book I could find. What I fell for was not only the ideas but the physical fact of him. The humor, the beauty, the fearlessness, the cruelty, the spark in the eye. He had no organization, no followers, no copyright on any of his

books. He kept an open door wherever he went, anyone could meet him without an appointment, free of charge. He refused donations. He was brutally dismissive of anything to do with spirituality and insisted he had nothing anyone could receive. Yet he claimed an awakening of his own decades earlier, one that left him in what he called the Natural State. An honest guru, I thought. A true one.

Then in the summer of 2008 I found the journal Julie Thayer kept while traveling with U.G., posted online. Julie was a wealthy American woman who met him in the late 80s and quickly became very close to him. Only the journal is not merely the chronicle of a spiritual path. It is the record of a woman handing herself over piece by piece to some sort of black hole. Reading it, I lost my footing. I could not locate the line between an ego being dismantled and a person being taken apart, and it was not clear that Julie had located it either. Her writing led me to her archive, hundreds of hours of home video shot from inside U.G.'s intimate circle. She had not filmed from a safe distance. She put herself in the fire and kept the camera running. Almost none of it had ever been seen.

How do you tell the difference between someone taking your ego apart and someone using you?

I borrowed a few thousand dollars and a camera from a friend and set out. Traveling country to country to meet people who had known U.G., I picked up scattered recordings, photographs and old films, much of it never seen or heard before. And the more people I met, the more the contradictions multiplied. Everyone held a different piece of him. Everyone had their own U.G. Was it all projection, or was there something there? Of course I wanted to believe.

But the blank stare one witness describes as a man with nobody home is the same stare a clinician would call dissociation and a skeptic would call a practiced effect. The testimony could not settle it. The footage could not settle it. I spent sixteen years assembling what is probably the most complete archive of this man that exists, and it does not settle it. At some point I stopped treating that as the obstacle in front of the film and started treating it as the film itself.

I did not want to make either of the two films this subject usually produces, the exposé or the hagiography. I wanted a spiritual film for a secular audience, one that does not ask anyone to believe anything but also challenges the quick-to-dismiss cynicism of our times.

This is a film assembled almost entirely from another person's footage, shot by a woman who was inside what she was recording. What she captured is not evidence in the ordinary sense. It is a record of one person's belief, and the film asks an audience to sit inside that belief without being told what to do with it.

U.G. called the Natural State a state of not knowing. That is the glimpse this film has aimed at.

Film Team Bios:

Matthew Dougherty (Director, Producer, Editor, Composer)

Matthew Dougherty is a filmmaker, editor, and IDA-nominated composer based in New York's Catskill Mountains. His composition work includes the IDA-nominated score for the 2025 SXSW Grand Jury Prize winner *Shuffle*; the HBO documentary *Lil Nas X: Long Live Montero*; and Sundance premieres *Kim's Video*, *Mardi Gras: Made in China*, and *Girl Model*. After more than a decade of development, *The Natural State* is his directorial debut.

Jane Campion (Executive Producer)

Jane Campion is an Academy Award and Palme d'Or winning director, writer and producer. Her films and TV series include *Power of the Dog*, *The Piano* and *Top of the Lake*. Jane knew U.G. personally and the character G.J. played by Holly Hunter - in her TV series *Top of the Lake* is based on him. Jane is actively involved as a creative advisor on *The Natural State*.

Mahesh Bhatt (Executive Producer)

Mahesh Bhatt is a five-time National Film Award winning director, writer and producer, and one of the most influential figures in Hindi cinema. His films include *Arth*, *Saaransh* and *Zakhm*. Mahesh knew U.G. intimately for over thirty years and has written three books about him, including the best-selling biography *U.G. Krishnamurti: A Life*.

Robin Schwartz (Producer, Editor)

Robin Schwartz is the editor of the 2025 SXSW Grand Jury Prize winner *Shuffle*, the Emmy Award-winning *Fathom* (Apple TV+), Film Comment Selects *Over the Rainbow*, the Emmy-nominated *Legion of Brothers* (Hulu), and the Spirit Award-nominated Sundance narrative *Results*. She was co-editor on the SXSW Grand Jury Award-winning and Emmy-nominated *The Great Invisible*, and recently co-edited the SXSW 2024 competition documentary *Roleplay* and *The Biggest Little Farm: The Return* (Disney+). She is a recipient of DOC NYC's 40 Under 40 award for emerging talent in documentary.

Keith Wilson (Producer)

Keith Wilson is a producer, director based in Athens, Georgia and NYC, whose films have screened at Sundance, the Berlinale, and MoMA. He is the producer of *Joonam* (Sundance 2023) and *I Didn't See You There* (2022), which won the Directing Award for U.S. Documentary at Sundance, the Grand Jury Prize at Full Frame, and a Film Independent Spirit Award. Keith is a member of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts & Sciences.

Subject Bio:

U.G. Krishnamurti (Film Subject)

U.G. Krishnamurti (1918-2007) had no teaching, no method, no ashram, and no interest in your suffering. He said enlightenment was a myth invented by holy men, that there was nothing to seek and no one to seek it, and that anyone who came to him was wasting their time. Groomed from his birth in India to become a messiah, he spent decades chasing enlightenment in the shadow of the world-famous teacher, J. Krishnamurti, whose surname he shared and whose fame he resented, before eventually abandoning his wife and children, giving away all his money, and wandering the streets of Europe. Whatever happened to him in 1967 — a violent week-long event he called "the calamity," which he said destroyed his sense of self for good — left a man with no discernible inner life, no ambition, and nothing to sell, who nonetheless drew people from around the world for forty years and sent them home worse off or truly free, depending whom you ask.

Credits:

Directed by: Matthew Dougherty

Executive Producers: Jane Campion, Mahesh Bhatt

Producers: Matthew Dougherty, Robin Schwartz, Keith Wilson

Co-Producers: Max Grey, Madeleine Molyneaux, Clare Manchon, Joey Carey

Editor: Matthew Dougherty, Robin Schwartz

Original Music: Matthew Dougherty

Additional Editing: Rik Chaubet, Chris Passig

Associate Producers: Jeff Peixoto, Mae Ryan, Raj Trivedi, Adella Ladjevardi

Story Consultant: Molly O'Shea, Richard Miron

Archival Footage: Julie Thayer, Paolo Marusig, Roberta Carr, Paul Arms, Lisa Tarranto

Interviewees: Julie Thayer, Mahesh Bhatt, Marisa Saetti, Paul Arms, Scott Eckersley, Louis Brawley, Christian Jessen, Narayana Moorty, Bob Carr, Jane Campion, Usha Narasimha Rao, Bharathi Tayudu, Barbara Salvatore, Lulu Ani, Douglas Rosestone, Jane Fleming,

Chandrasekhar Korlimara, Ted Zeitlin, Michel Langinieux, Edward Ani, Nataraj

Sound Design: Matthew Dougherty

Sound Mix: Coll Anderson

Color Correction: Bradley Greer

Music Supervisors: Douglas McGowan, Clare Manchon

Archival Research: Megha Barnabas

Poster Design: Iljen Put

Website: Toni Mager

Publicist: Sylvia Savadjian

Legal: Bianca Grimshaw

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