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- Jello Biafra



Festival de Cannes Interview | 2019

Nina Menkes: "Any man who had the kind of critical response to their work which I've had would have people throwing money at him!"

HEATSTROKE | Breaking Through The Lens
Pitching Session



Nina Menkes talks to TNC about BRAINWASHED, the recent restoration of QUEEN OF DIAMONDS and HEATSTROKE, which is part of Breaking Through The Lens pitching session at Cannes 2019.

Hi Nina, thanks for talking to TNC, how is everything going?

I'm excited about all the renewed interest in my work, and I have three projects "cooking"!

It never rains but then it pours!

Your classic film Queen of Diamonds has enjoyed a re-release after being restored what has it been like for you to revisit this film?

I had an amazing experience watching the restoration premiere at the AFI Film Festival this past November in Los Angeles.

The film has an interesting quality of being completely fresh and new, even though it was made in 1991. To me, this is a testament to the inner force and soul of the movie, which had and has nothing to do with fashion, trends, cinematic style or hipness, but has a core power all it's own. It's an independent entity.

When you made Queen of Diamonds did you imagine it would have such a lasting impact?

Yes and no. On the one hand, I loved the film from the beginning. I felt and I knew that this movie was an original, beautiful and powerful work. On the other hand, I have faced many, many obstacles in my life as an artist.

I was lucky to have a mother who always encouraged me to focus inward and not pay attention to external cues, or social convention. She always said, regarding popularity; "Don't forget, Hitler was elected!" She also pointed out that Coca-Cola, which rots your teeth and your stomach, is the world's most popular drink. She would remind me that MOBY DICK, the genius novel by **Herman Melville**, which is now considered one of the most important American novels of all time, was

panned and ridiculed when it was first published. This is how I was raised.

So, I had to just know what I know, and keep going. Anyway, I don't feel I really make my movies...they make themselves, I'm just a channel. Still, I am very happy and amazed to hear the film now being described as a "seminal, feminist classic"! This is very welcome news for my beloved QUEEN OF DIAMONDS.

What does it mean for you to be at Cannes?

I love Cannes! It is such a beautiful place, good weather, beautiful cafes, everything is walking distance.... It's possible to meet friends and see movies near the sea, how wonderful is that! But precisely this visit, I plan to advance financing for my fictional feature MINOTAUR REX, and close financing for my fictional feature HEATSTROKE. We are also shooting footage for my documentary feature BRAINWASHED.



Heatstroke will be part of the new Breaking Through The Lens pitching session how important are opportunities like this for women in film?

Women have been systematically excluded from the Filmic Canon since forever. Any man who had the kind of critical response to their work which I've had would have people throwing money at him! This almost never happens to women. A majority of the (few) female filmmakers whose names are known, come from very wealthy families, and/or "film royalty" families. So, women need special support like this pitching forum. We are still far, far, light years away from sexual equality in the world of cinema.

You are also currently shooting Brainwashed, can you tell me a little bit about this project?

BRAINWASHED (that is our working title), is a feature documentary, based on my cinematic talk *Sex and Power: The Visual Language of Oppression*.

In my talk, I analyze film clips from A-list directors from 1940 through the present to show how the visual grammar of cinema--how actual SHOT DESIGN ITSELF- is completely gendered, and contributes to the conditions that create discriminatory hiring practice, pay inequity and the pervasive environment of sexual harassment and assault that have corrupted the film industry and our culture at large.

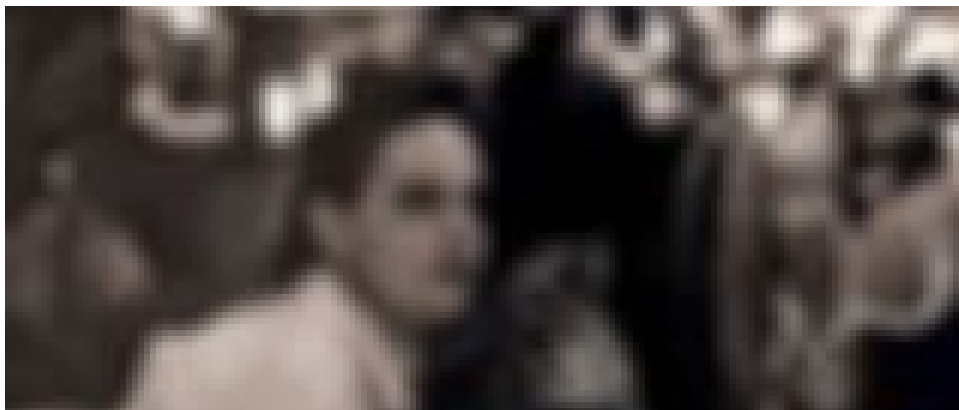
BRAINWASHED also includes interviews with other female and marginalized filmmakers speaking about the ways they've interrogated and interacted with the visual language they've inherited from the "masters". We also plan to meet with some of the performers depicted in the clips to hear about their experience and feelings regarding the way their bodies were used in the scenes shown. Our team will be shooting in Cannes from May 17-20.

When did you realize you wanted to make a documentary about your Sex and Power: The Visual Language of Oppression talk?

I've been giving my talk--or variations on my talk-- for many years, for my students (I now teach at California Institute of the Arts, I previously taught at USC's School of Cinematic Arts). In March 2017, **Nicolas Wackerbarth** invited me to give my talk publicly on the occasion of the 50th Anniversary celebration of *The Deutsche Film- und Fernsehakademie Berlin* (DFFB).

In October 2017, the **Harvey Weinstein** story broke in the NY Times, launching the #MeToo movement. I wrote an essay for FILMMAKER magazine, on the subject, which went viral.

People were obviously hungry for this information. It seemed right and necessary to turn the talk into a film, in order to reach a wide audience with this important subject matter.



Did you have any apprehensions about making *Brainwashed*?

No! You mean, because I critique the “masters” of cinema? No, I'm not afraid, I've been critiquing the masters, just by making my own radical movies, since I was a very young person!

Where does the name come from?

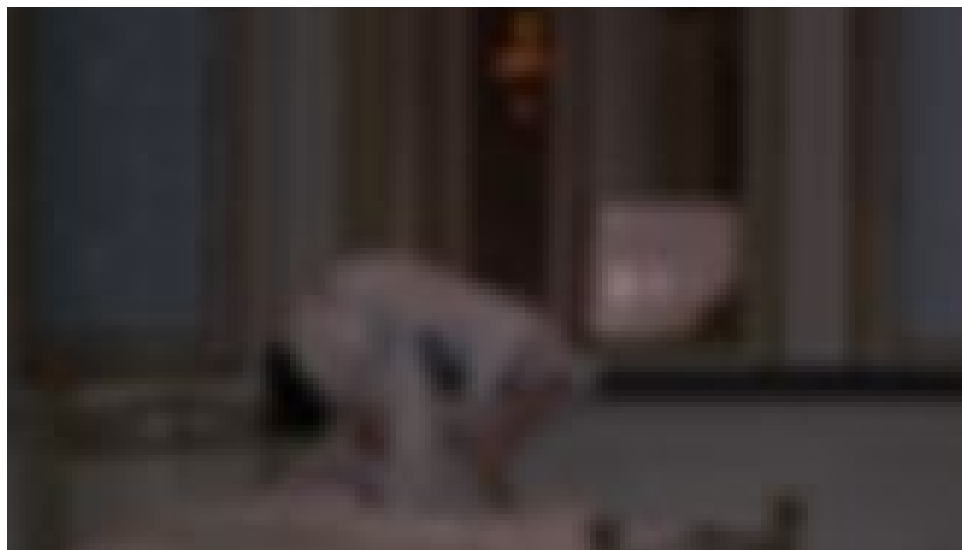
The name comes from the idea that we are so inured to the way women are normally photographed on film, to the way shot design is gendered, that we take it for granted, we don't even notice it. We don't question it at all. We are all “brainwashed” to think that this is “normal”, and even constitutes great art. Think of **Godard's** CONTEMPT or **Kubrick's** CLOCKWORK ORANGE.

These films, are indeed, very strong in very many ways, but when you look at the shot design, the way women's bodies are photographed, it's amazing how consistent (and how debilitating, for those of us who are women!) these gendered shot design strategies are.

Now that you can be reflective about this what has it been like for you looking back at your talk?

The talk is still evolving. Every time I present “*Sex and Power*”, people are moved and excited. But also: depressed. It can be uncomfortable to face this stuff. Most people tell me they can never see the films the same way after watching the deconstruction, over decades, of work by the top filmmakers we so admire.

I want to credit the feminist theorists whose work informed my talk—most importantly **Laura Mulvey** of course, but also **Teresa de Lauretis**, **Mary Ann Doane** and **Judith Butler**, among others.



Are you able to enjoy festivals like Cannes or does it get stressful?

Yes, it's very stressful! But I am also excited and happy to be attending Cannes 2019.

Have you always had a passion for filmmaking?

When I was a kid I created a Witch School. Neighbourhood kids came to learn spells and we would put on magical theatre plays in my backyard. Later as a teenager, I was a serious modern dancer (a bad knee injury ended that career path), and I also did still photography, spent hours in the darkroom. When I got into the UCLA film school in the 1980's I was ecstatic because of all my many different talents, sensations, tendencies and understandings came together powerfully, and I was able to create my own kind of cinema.

How much has your approach to your work changed since you started?

Actually, it hasn't changed too much. I always listen to inward. I "receive" the films I'm supposed to make, it's a sort of mystical process.

Do you have any advice you would offer a fellow filmmaker?

People make films for different reasons. Some do it to tell a story, an important story, others to create entertainment, and/or make money and move to Malibu. For those who approach cinema as art.

I would like to quote Lorca to answer this question:

"I want to sum up all the good will, all the purity of intention that I have, because like all true artists I yearn for my poems to reach your hearts and cause the communication of love between you, forming the marvellous chain of spiritual solidarity that is the chief end of any work of art."

And finally, what do you hope people will take away from your work?

I hope my films inspire resistance to conventional views of reality, including conventional views of women but also conventional constructions of time and space. I hope my films light a fire of openness and freedom in the hearts and minds of viewers, inspiring courage for each one of us to walk a highly personal path of glittering inner integrity.

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