

Filmmakers Work to Reframe the ‘Male Gaze’

By [RANDEE DAWN](#)



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In the opening shot of Sofia Coppola’s “Lost in Translation” (2003), Scarlett Johansson is lying on a bed, back to the camera, shown in partial view, wearing underpants. In Denis Villeneuve’s “Blade Runner 2049” (2017) a banged-up Ryan Gosling stares up at a bone-thin, enormous nude projection of a woman. More recently, Jay Roach’s “Bombshell” (2019) featured Margot Robbie lifting her dress for John Lithgow as the camera takes in her legs.

All typical images from Hollywood films, all doing their job: telling story, building character and providing context. These are images that have been used in cinema almost since its beginnings more than 100 years ago. But what if many shots framed and filmed by directors and cinematographers — men, women, nonbinary — actually do something else, too — like undercut every other progressive stride women make on the camera, and in real life?

That thesis is being put forward by independent filmmaker [Nina Menkes](#), who’s been making waves with her talk, “Sex and Power: The Visual Language of Oppression,” at festivals. Now, with her upcoming documentary “Brainwashed,” set to be released in the fall, Menkes is aiming to take the discussion about how shot design affects our perception of women to a wider audience. As she notes, there’s a direct connection between how women are shown on the screen, their lack of proportional presence in key industry roles and the abuse and harassment that fueled the #MeToo movement.

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"I am not here to tell you how to shoot your film," she says. "The point is to bring consciousness and awareness to a way of photographing women that has been so normalized no one even notices it."

And because it's not obvious, it's harder to weed out.

"For years, as women we've been expected to relate to the white male protagonist — because that's the person whose perspective is illuminated, and they're the most complex, entertaining person in the film," says director Marielle Heller ("A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood").

"It's about asking filmmakers what they're trying to achieve," says Madeline Di Nonno, CEO, Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media. "What are they trying to say? Is there a way to depict their vision without objectifying the female character?"

The answer seems to be "yes," but it requires conscious thought to rewire long-held notions of how to light, frame or block a shot.

"If I feel that Spidey sense that something is cringey, I ask, 'Can this be done in a more powerful, respectful way?' " says Catherine Hardwicke ("Miss Bala"). "Certain shots don't work that I've had imprinted on my brain. It's a challenge to walk the line."

Asking the questions is a start, but in many cases filmmakers unconsciously hew to long-established rules or tropes in their camera setups that inherently disempower female characters.

"People are replicating a system and bias they aren't even aware of," says Kirsten Schaffer, executive director, Women in Film. "Even well-intentioned male directors don't realize how easy it is for cultural norms to pass on."

"I am conscious of it," says writer-director-showrunner Noah Hawley ("Lucy in the Sky," "Fargo"), who adds that he's made efforts to avoid the male gaze where relevant. "The reality is, it has the insidious power of being considered 'normal,' in that the history of cinema is primarily male, and male directors tend to film women the way they see them, as opposed to the way women see themselves."

And one reason it may be critical to redefine "normal" in shooting women on film is, as several directors point out, it's a short hop from portraying female characters as objects or symbols on screen to doing so in the real world.

“Objectifying women on screen emphasizes a huge gap between us, which is where MeToo begins,” says Phyllida Lloyd (“The Iron Lady,” “Herself”). “It emphasizes a woman’s powerlessness with a come-hither sexuality that might be completely unrelated to what women are trying to communicate.”

Menkes says: “Once you’ve seen it, you can’t unsee it. If you want a shot of this woman’s derriere in transparent underwear — fine. But understand that these images repeated ad nauseam create an atmosphere where, if a young woman walks into a room, a young man doesn’t think he’s looking at a person, but a sex object.”

Still, pinning down the discussion can be a challenge. Menkes’ presentation hones in on films through the ages, where women are filmed in flattening soft focus; shown as body parts (torsos, buttocks, legs); or, even when the emotional pivot of a scene is the woman’s, the camera shoots over a man’s shoulder, which sustains the male point of view or gaze.

The term “male gaze” was coined in 1975 by film theorist Laura Mulvey; the “female gaze” is a more recent, less-explored theory, but is not necessarily the exact opposite.

Kristy Guevara-Flanagan, director and UCLA assistant professor, has also been working on a documentary, “Body Parts,” which examines how women are seen on camera; she also made a short about showing women on camera post-mortem.

“There’s a fetishizing going on, with the way the camera pans and tilts down women’s [dead] bodies. It’s like the body becomes symbolic, rather than related to character,” she says.

Issues are not only limited to the camera; multiple directors reference the importance of the editor in the process. “It’s about how you handle the footage and what footage you select, or if you move the voice around and place it on different images,” says director Numa Perrier (“Jezebel”). “There’s often an utter neglect and dismissiveness that’s present — a director could have made choices to focus on a woman, but they only focus on the man.”

Ageism in hiring non-20something performers can also contribute to that desire for flattening soft focus, says DP Natasha Braier (“Honey Boy”). “Women are expected to be treated with more care with lighting, if they are not super-young, or anything after 30,” she says. “Sometimes it comes from the director, but many times from the actress herself.”

Nor is it only about live-action female portrayals; Marge Dean, president, Women in Animation, says the issues Menkes raises “are living hard in adult animation. The character design, camera angles ... movement or action [and] lighting are all set up to render women as narrow characters that are disempowered.”

Of the Oscar-nominated toons, only “Toy Story 4” has a powerful female lead: Bo Peep, who clearly chooses to embrace an independent life away from a child “owner.”

What can throw the discussion offtrack, though, is that film — like all art — is subjective, both in the creation and the consumption.

While several directors referred to “Bombshell’s” dress-lifting scene as problematic (“The Assistant” director Kitty Green says, “I was specifically trying not to do what ‘Bombshell’ does”), Martha Lauzen, executive director, Center for the Study of Women in Television and Film, says it was “effective” — because it made her uncomfortable.

“It’s common for two people to watch the same scene and come away with two different interpretations,” she says. “Saying that showing torsos and body parts could never be in service of a positive message is too strident.”

Although “Bombshell” director Roach declined to comment for this report, in December, Variety’s Amy Nicholson wrote about the scene in a story about how filmmakers create safe sets, noting that Roach used extra cameras, which recorded the moment simultaneously from three setups to get through the assault in fewer, fresher takes.

“It was a disturbing scene to read. It was a disturbing thing to reenact,” says Robbie. “But Jay is one of the most sensitive and emotionally in-tune directors I’ve ever worked with, so I felt completely safe.”

One area of general agreement, though, appears to be in the solution: Get more women into jobs where they control all sides of the storytelling. To some, this is more critical than realigning whether women's stories are told with the correct lighting or point of view.

"I can't help but feel this discussion [of camera angles] is premature," says Lloyd. "We've got to get there first. Right now, it feels as if when we're not there on screen — men don't even notice."

And to "get there," says director Jill Soloway ("Transparent," "Mothertrucker"), the camera has to be shared more diversely.

"White male people have plenty of access to their own gaze," they say. "They should seek out, mentor and distribute the work of people of color, trans people, women. Hollywood tells the world how to feel about itself. We have had ourselves described to us by white men. I just want the camera in the hands of other people. What they do with that camera — is up to them."

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NINA MENKES

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