

Look Up Here!': 5 Female Directors Reject the Male Gaze

These directors are acutely aware of Hollywood's tendency to objectify female characters. So in their own work, they're taking steps to avoid that trap.

By John Anderson

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International Women's Day arrives Sunday on the heels of another season of #OscarSoMale and another prize for the director Roman Polanski, who fled the United States in 1978, after he was convicted of unlawful sex with a minor.

And yet, there are bright spots. "I went to see 'Portrait of a Lady on Fire' yesterday," said the filmmaker and CalArts film professor Nina Menkes, "and there were trailers for three other films by women. It's impossible! It's the first time anything like this has happened in my life."

Menkes is the creator of "Sex and Power: The Visual Language of Oppression," a lecture and clip show she has been staging at film festivals around the world. In it, she uses scenes ranging from Hitchcock's 1946 "Notorious" (1946) to Sofia Coppola's 2003 "Lost in Translation" (with its opening shot of Scarlett Johansson's barely clad backside) to demonstrate the nuances of objectification, the male gaze and how it's perpetuated.



Menkes presenting her lecture plus clips at Cal Arts. Rafael Hernandez

And not just by men. "I've had women students come in and show footage that begins on the woman character's face," Menkes said, "then for no apparent reason it cuts down to her low-cut shirt. And goes lower. And then back up. And I'd say, 'Why did you film that way?' And there'd be this deer-in-the-headlights look. They were doing what they'd seen a million times. And weren't even aware of it. Heterosexual male actors are almost never filmed that way."

Right now there's a surge in cinema made by women — not just "Portrait," but also recent and forthcoming movies like "Harley Quinn: Birds of Prey," "The Assistant," "Lost Girls," "Never Rarely Sometimes Always," "Zola" and Menkes's documentary "Brainwashed." I spoke to the directors to find out how they have been incorporating Menkes's lessons into their work.

Liz Garbus, 'Lost Girls'

Garbus, a veteran documentarian, is making her narrative feature debut with a drama (due March 13) about the case of unsolved serial killings on Long Island. She tells her story through one victim's mother, played by Amy Ryan and based on the real-life Mari Gilbert.

Given that the dead women were involved in sex work, Garbus said, a male director might have approached things differently. "But the point of view of my protagonist, her subjectivity, informed the shooting almost entirely. In the scenes with her family, we would break her off and put her at a distance, but in terms of her walking into a man's world — which is everywhere apart from her family — that informed

everything.” Mari is never scrutinized by the police, for instance, and their disregard for the killings is read through her. “This is about making women’s voices heard, so it’s ingrained in the entire movie.”

The perspective does shift in a sequence involving a retirement party for a detective named Dormer (Gabriel Byrne). “The cops call strippers to the party and there was an opportunity to objectify a lot of beautiful women,” Garbus said. “But that scene is told through his point of view, which involved a growing sense of alienation and disgust with his colleagues. It’s one of the few scenes not anchored by Mari’s perspective, but Dormer is coming to a realization, and is looking at his colleagues in a different way.”

Cathy Yan, ‘Harley Quinn: Birds of Prey’

In this recent follow-up to “Suicide Squad” focusing on Margot Robbie’s antiheroine Harley Quinn, there’s a moment when a Gotham billionaire (Ewan McGregor) forces a woman to get on a table and strip. “We were pretty conscious not to muddy what the scene was meant to be about, by not offering anything remotely vulnerable or titillating,” Yan said. “There are choices like that which felt very deliberate; we were making sure we were protecting our female actors, even in a scene that was about humiliation.” But she said other choices were more intuitive: “It was less, ‘I’m going to unpack and reject the male gaze of every director who’s come before me’ and more of an unconscious, innate reaction about what feels right.” All the while keeping the camera on her actors’ faces. “That’s where you tell the story,” Yan said. “‘Look up here! I’m talking to you!’”

Janicza Bravo, ‘Zola’

“Zola,” which recently debuted at the Sundance Film Festival and is set for a summer release, is based on a notorious Twitter thread about a waitress and a stripper on a real-life road trip. It’s told from the server’s perspective, Bravo said, but “takes place inside of sex work. I wanted it the moment I read it. No one was going to protect this narrative like I would.”

Bravo said she did her homework: “Most of what was out there that dealt in this space was prescribing to a male audience. By men, for men. I made what I wanted to see. I know what a breast looks like. I have a vagina. I didn’t feel I needed to add more to what is already a strong library of these images.”

Eliza Hittman, ‘Never Rarely Sometimes Always’

Female filmmakers are working to reclaim their point of view, Hittman argued. She does that in her new drama, opening March 13, by studying the faces of her lead characters: a young Pennsylvania woman (Sidney Flanigan) trying to obtain a legal abortion in New York City with the help of her cousin, Skylar (Talia Ryder). The exception to that focus is a scene in which Skylar is about to roll a bowling ball down an alley and the camera — shifting to the perspective of a guy they’ve met on the bus — follows her longingly. “That’s the one point where the movie plays with the male point of view. You’re supposed to see him watching and desiring.” But that one moment is a long way from some of Menkes’ favorite examples of gratuitous voyeurism, like the naked locker-room romp at the start of “Carrie.”

“I do think there is a systematized approach to making a studio film in terms of the expectations of how a film is shot and edited,” Hittman said. “But I do think there’s room within that to control the points of view of the film.”

Kitty Green, ‘The Assistant’

Green’s film, released in January, was directly inspired by the Weinstein saga. “It’s told from the perspective of the youngest female at a production company, the person with the least amount of power at that company,” she said. Outside the office of a predatory executive (who remains offscreen), the woman (Julia Garner) watches as other women go in and out of his office, but, Green said, “I was very careful not to linger or zoom or do close-ups of their bodies, but rather see them the way a young woman would see them, without leaning into any of those traditional tropes of the male gaze, seeing them as objects and not human beings.”

The obvious comparison is with “Bombshell,” the Jay Roach-directed tale of past sexual exploitation at Fox News, but it has been accused by some of being exploitative itself, as in a scene when the camera is trained on a female character hiking up her skirt at the behest of a man. “With something like ‘Bombshell,’ the problem is at the scriptwriting level,” Green said, “where they’ve seized on the most scandalous and sensational aspects of a story and ignored the structures and systems in which these behaviors are embedded. Perhaps they’re blind to it because they’re unwittingly participating in it. As women we’re more aware of the broader points.” Among them: “Just getting rid of Harvey Weinstein isn’t going to fix the problems.”