



DOCUMENTARY - BRAINWASHED: SEX, CAMERA, POWER



Ren Zelen watched Brainwashed: Sex, Camera, Power as part of the Premieres strand at Sundance Film Festival...

Director: Nina Menkes

Featuring: Laura Mulvey, Rhiannon Aarons, Kathleen Antonia, Rosanna Arquette, Penelope Spheeris, Charlyne Yi, Nancy Schreiber

Brainwashed: Sex, Camera, Power is a documentary, based upon a lecture tour by academic and film-maker Nina Menkes, where she dissects and examines the technical aspects of the male gaze in cinema. But the film goes much further than that – Menkes begins to outline how the consistent use of these techniques and images has affected society and influenced how women see themselves and more worryingly, how men have been inured into seeing women.

Cinema is shown to not simply be an art form seeking to entertain, amuse or intrigue – its influence on how we a 'see' the world cannot be underestimated, and according to Menkes, its subconscious conditioning has been neither neutral nor harmless.

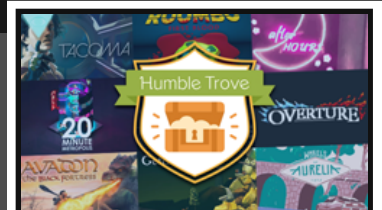
After over two decades of research Menkes has amassed a wealth of film clips and testimonies to support her case. The aim of her film is to make audiences aware of how their vision and perceptions have been conditioned since Hollywood came into existence and Wall Street money men became involved in its business.

Ironically, the early silent movies were a province where female film-makers were able to exercise their creativity and show their view of the world. Sadly, that opportunity was soon taken from them as the doors of male-run studios closed to their work.

Menkes makes the case that shot design is gendered and has been for decades, so much so that it has become the 'normal' way of shooting scenes. As her eloquent interviewee Amy Zierling notes: "It's invisible, and you don't notice the air."

Watching Menkes's interesting analyses will hopefully cause the cinema-going audience to be more aware of how they have become accustomed to seeing the world in a particular and simplified way - a binary way. They will never look at perspective, slow-mo, fragmented bodies or female faces presented in 2D without being more aware of how the visual image is presenting a skewed point of view.

Menkes proceeds to move beyond the predatory camera and the subject-object set-up. With her commentators - who include Eliza Hittman, Julie Dash, Laura Mulvey, the intimacy co-ordinator Ita O'Brien and Joey Soloway, amongst others, she talks about the implied power conflict hidden in familiar tropes - the female butt shot, the slow-pan down the body, the idea of the helpless unconscious woman (as so interestingly outlined in the sex games of the husband/wife characters



in *Killing of a Sacred Deer* and more recently in the tragic revenge tale *Promising Young Woman*). Actress Rosanna Arquette recalls that in Scorsese's *After Hours*, her dead character's body was examined by the camera in an oddly sexual way.



From dead/unconscious women to silent women - as with Cathy Moriarty's character in *Raging Bull*, who was gazed at but literally couldn't be heard, even though the male conversations taking place around her were given our attention. The female character is there to be looked at, to be lusted over, but not to be heard. It is not necessary to know her as a human being with thoughts and feelings and opinions. The common way the camera portrays women turns them into objects, examined as to their use, whose humanity (and therefore their consent) is immaterial.

The 'No' means 'Yes' trope is also glamorized, such as when a woman indicates she does not want to have sex but is 'persuaded' or forced to agree. There are telling scenes from Spike Lee films plus the well-known scene in *Bladerunner* where Harrison Ford throws a resisting Sean Young against a wall and insists that she say that she wants him. Likewise, the stair scene in *Gone with the Wind* or when Jessica Lange initially fights off Nicholson in *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1981).

These images seep into the collective consciousness through the global power of Hollywood, but in essence they are disempowering and negating female autonomy and, in Menkes words, they help to form "the bedrock of the language of rape culture".

She admits that female directors aren't exempt from viewing the world through the man-made lens that has become so familiar, even when they are supposedly being 'ironic'. It's therefore probably no surprise that Katherine Bigelow has become the most known and successful female director in Hollywood, as she makes male-oriented films about male stories.

This culture permeates into the real life of Hollywood. The documentary then has actresses come forward to testify how their careers were damaged because they refused to 'play the game'. The 'game' often being an abusive and exploitative one. They can be fired for no reason (or in the case of female directors, not hired at all) asked to work unusual or excessive hours, told to take their clothes off for scenes not in the script or bullied into doing upsetting sex scenes which invade their bodies and privacy.

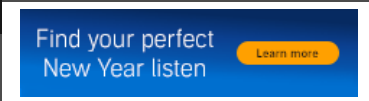
Menkes's film is predominantly Hollywood-English-language centric and shows clips from her own films to illustrate how shots can be handled differently, but unsurprisingly some European and Asian film directors also get a damning analysis. The cinematic community has always been deferential to the typically male-dominated film 'Canon', conscious of the fact that it's a male-dominated business.

Menkes pulls no punches in her well-researched and detailed examination in *Brainwashed: Sex, Camera, Power*, revealing how society has indeed been 'brainwashed' consciously or unconsciously by filmmakers through virtually the entire history of cinema.

Her documentary is a breath of fresh air in a stale environment and should be compulsory viewing in every film-school (but probably won't be, as it's too real). Hollywood deals in the cosmetic only, actual change is harder to instigate, as we have seen from the sidelining of the 'Me too' movement. It would be a pity if, as we have too often seen before, plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose.

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BRAINWASHED: Sex-Camera-Power by Nina Menkes is an official selection of the Premieres section at the 2022 Sundance Film Festival. Find out more and how to book tickets here.

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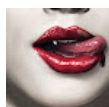


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