

# ALEX PRAGER

## Part One: *The Mountain*

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Film  
Review

## At Sundance, new films tackle painful legacies through archaeology, urban design and more

Also featured is a visually stunning documentary about bird rescuers in Delhi and a cinematic essay about the sexual power dynamics of cinema

David D'Arcy

24 January 2022

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A scene from *Descendant* by Margaret Brown  
Courtesy Sundance Film Festival

The Sundance Film Festival often includes a mix of biopics about innovators in the arts, investigative art world documentaries or scripted features set around contemporary art or clubby connoisseurs. Not this year, when films screening as part of the all-virtual festival (until 30 January) range through architecture, visual innovation and archaeology.





On screen: Rita Hayworth in *The Lady from Shanghai*, an example of gendered lighting. (Menkes List #4)

A scene from *Brainwashed: Sex-Camera-Power* by Nina Menkes  
Courtesy Sundance Film Festival

*Brainwashed: Sex-Camera-Power* by the veteran independent director Nina Menkes might as well be called “An Inconvenient Truth 5.0”. Taking the stage lecture format of Al Gore’s ecological plea for engagement, recently applied to another urgent subject in *Who We Are: A Chronicle of Race in America* by Jeffery Robinson, Menkes marches through cinema, mostly American, arguing that a perspective in the mostly male profession produces ways of seeing that then lead to sexual discrimination, harassment and assault.

Menke’s point of departure is the notion of the male gaze, a dynamic whereby men use images and footage of women for men’s pleasure. The concept was put forth in the writing of film theorist Laura Mulvey, who speaks onscreen, along with many other women critics.

Few men are spared in Menkes’s survey—not Martin Scorsese, Brian De Palma, Ridley Scott, Spike Lee, Jean-Luc Godard, Abdellatif Kechiche, or even, god forbid, Sundance’s well-meaning founder Robert Redford in *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*. And no men here offer opinions on film history or films as they are made today. Are there men who have at least gotten things half-right? If we ever learn that, it will be in a different lecture.

There are positive signs for Menkes. She likes *Nomadland*, by Chloé Zhao. And she is echoed throughout *Brainwashed* by accomplished young critics. The Sundance Film Festival, with mostly women at the helm, is itself proof that management can also change. Yet experience shows us that progress in the movie industry can be as slow as an Eric Rohmer love story.

- [The 2022 Sundance Film Festival](#), online only, continues until 30 January