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Sundance 2022 Film Review: Brainwashed Sex-Camera-Power ★★★★★

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Independent filmmaker Nina Menkes returns to Sundance with the explosive *Brainwashed Sex-Camera-Power*, based on her own lecture (*Sex and Power, the Visual Language of Oppression*), a compelling illustration of the pervasive objectification of women in the history of Hollywood film and its off screen, real world implications such as employment discrimination and a culture of sexual harassment and assault. Menkes argues that the cinematic language which places the cisgender heterosexual man in the subjective position, essentially as the voyeur, and the woman in the objectified position, the one being viewed, is repeated throughout much of the post-silent era of Hollywood in a way that is “so specific it almost feels like a law”.

Clear and compelling, Menkes’ rigorous examination breaks down the ways in which shot design, camera movement, lighting, sound, music, and narrative all contribute to “perpetuating different positions of power”, with male and female characters consistently treated differently. For example, women’s bodies are frequently lingeringly surveyed by the camera or shown in fragments in a way that men’s aren’t, while slow motion and nudity is generally reserved for when men are involved in sport, combat, or some other “manly” action, whereas for women it is invariably used to sexualize.



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Throughout, Menkes skillfully weaves persuasive clips from over 175 films as her argument builds, including classics that continue to be studied and influence filmmakers such as Orson Welles' *The Lady from Shanghai* as well as contemporary films by female directors such as Lorene Scafaria's *Hustlers* and Julia Ducournau's *Palme d'Or*-winning *Titane*. Menkes also features some of her own work, not in a self-aggrandizing way, but reflectively questioning how she has disrupted conventions around female objectification with her films. Primarily narrated by Menkes and featuring segments of her lecture, appealingly shot by Shana Hagan, along with her students' reactions, the extensive use of movie clips keeps *Brainwashed* feeling cinematic, while Sharon Farber's unsettling score helps sustain the tension of a thriller and editor Cecily Rhett gives the film a propulsive force.

Brainwashed is rich with insightful, authoritative contributions from over twenty filmmakers and experts such as feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey, who first used the phrase "male gaze" in her 1975 essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*. Menkes builds on this idea, surveying the film industry's assumption of a cis male heterosexual audience; "lined up with a cis male heterosexual director; lined up with the DOP who controls all of the shots; lined up with the male subject in the frame; and they're all looking at the female object".



Joey Soloway in *BRAINWASHED: Sex-Camera-Power* by Nina Menkes, an official selection of the Premieres section at the 2022 Sundance Film Festival. Courtesy of Sundance Institute.

We also hear from directors like Penelope Spheeris and Joey Soloway, who describes the tradition of objectifying women on screen as "propaganda for the patriarchy". *Beach Rats* filmmaker Eliza Hittman considers the emotional alignment that the viewer has when watching a film with male subjectivity, while *Twilight* director Catherine Hardwick examines how having been saturated in work that objectifies women has subconsciously impacted her own approach to filmmaking. In terms of employment opportunities, Hittman and director Julie Dash go on to describe their experiences of having their work premiere at Sundance evidently not delivering the same momentum for their careers as they witnessed their male peers receive.

Drawing on her experience as an actress, Rosanna Arquette reflects on the film industry's continued focus on youth, revealing she frequently misses out on roles because she's told that filmmakers have decided to cast someone younger, and in a devastating example of how the on screen power imbalance has often moved into real world film industry situations she shares a distressing encounter with Harvey Weinstein. Later, one fascinating sequence questions how a depiction of sexual harassment on screen in Jay Roach's *Bombshell* featuring Margot Robbie is handled. Although emotionally we might be connected to her character, the visual language of the scene nevertheless objectifies her and Catherine Hardwicke suggests how the scene could have been shot differently in order to keep the subjectivity with Robbie's character.



Nina Menkes in BRAINWASHED: Sex-Camera-Power by Nina Menkes, an official selection of the Premieres section at the 2022 Sundance Film Festival. Courtesy of Sundance Institute.

As we see clips from some of Hollywood's most acclaimed films of all time, May Hong HaDuong, Director of UCLA's Film and Television Archive, reflects that analyzing a film through today's social lens and recognizing it as problematic for specific reasons needn't take away from its merits or status as a classic. Similarly, Menkes doesn't criticize the visual language of objectifying women in itself, saying at one point, "I'm not the sex police", nor does she villainize any individual filmmaker whose works she highlights. Instead, the issue she wants to press is how pervasive this way of shooting has been in male dominated Hollywood.

In examining the recurrence of the presentation of women as passive, highly sexualized objects in Hollywood film, one particularly powerful sequence explores the portrayal of female characters who do not give sexual consent then being shown to submit to men and enjoy sex, with illustrations from films like *Bladerunner* and *Do The Right Thing*. This is juxtaposed with disturbing real footage of male students at Yale viciously chanting outside a sorority house, 'No means yes' and 'Yes means anal'.

Not only has film shaped men's view of women, but it has also heavily influenced women's self-image, Menkes argues. Films that have female subjects like Brian De Palma's *Carrie* have also objectified their subjects, as we see in that film's opening credits locker room and shower sequence, with male filmmakers' names appearing over the naked bodies of young women. While more recently, even empowered female figures such as superheroes like Catwoman, Black Widow, and Wonder Woman have all been objectified on screen.

Menkes takes us back to Alice Guy-Blaché's 1896 film *The Cabbage Fairy*, when the medium itself was in its infancy, going on to survey the era before the dominance of the male perspective and the objectification of women had become the pervasive language of film. The turning point came, it is noted, when Hollywood caught Wall Street's interest at the dawn of sound motion pictures, following which there were only a few exceptions of prolific female directors, such as Dorothy Arzner, for the next four decades.



Adèle Haenel as Héloïse and Noémie Merlant as Marianne in *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* directed by Céline Sciamma. Courtesy of Neon.

Some queer films are examined for various reasons, such as Abdellatif Kechiche's *Blue Is The Warmest Colour*, Cheryl Dunye's *The Watermelon Woman*, and Gus Van Sant's *My Own Private Idaho*, with a focus on a sequence in that film where male and female bodies are treated equally by the camera, likely homage to Agnes Varda's *Happiness*. An example of particular interest given the thesis of *Brainwashed*, is writer-director Céline Sciamma's *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*, an exploration of the dynamics between subject and object, painter and sitter, with equal desire for one another. While cultural transformation scholar Dr. Raja Gopal Bhattar dissects the impact, particularly on trans viewers, of the portrayal of Buffalo Bill's internalized misogyny in Jonathan Demme's *Silence of the Lambs*.

Menkes points to signs of hope for the future, with directors actively working against Hollywood's established visual language. Julie Dash discusses how intentional she was in making *Daughters of the Dust*, placing her camera in "the culture of women to depict something that had never been seen before". While Joey Soloway considers, "Now, as a non-binary filmmaker, I'm asking myself where does the camera go? And who am looking at? And am I showing how it feels to be looked at?" When it comes to awards, while Kathryn Bigelow was the first female director to win an Oscar for a film about men in 2010, surrounded by a chiefly male filmmaking team, as Rhiannon Aarons a faculty member of California State University points out, last year Chloé Zhao became the first woman to win both Best Picture and the directing Oscar for her film that centred a female character in her sixties.

At one point, Menkes describes her lecture as being "confrontational...built on her sadness", but it's a confrontation that is arresting and involving, never off-putting. She pulls off the tricky balance of making *Brainwashed* digestible and illuminating for the casual cinemagoer while being stimulating and paradigm-shifting for fellow filmmakers and scholars of film. Given the expansiveness of Menkes' subject, *Brainwashed* can't possibly cover every angle comprehensively, but the film opens the door to infinite lines of inquiry, arming its viewers with the ability to examine any film they encounter in a new light. Menkes doesn't just open a conversation, she ignites one, with the passion and knowledge from decades of studying and making films. *Brainwashed Sex-Camera-Power* got my mind racing and I'll never watch a film in the same way again.

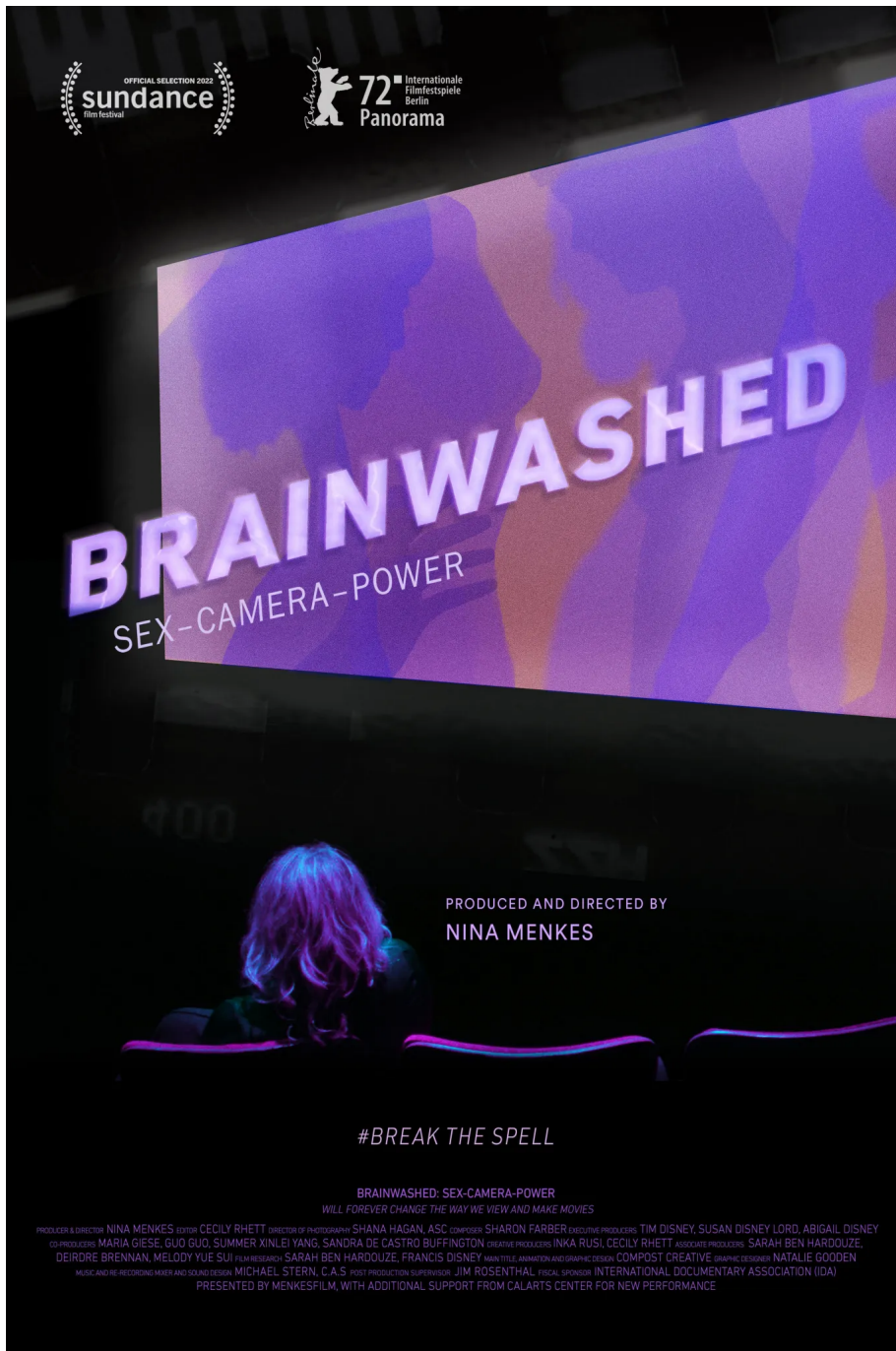
By James Kleinmann

***Brainwashed Sex-Camera-Power* had its world premiere at Sundance 2022 and will play the Berlin International Film Festival in February 2022.**

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Poster image of *BRAINWASHED: Sex-Camera-Power* by Nina Menkes, an official selection of the Premieres section at the 2022 Sundance Film Festival. Courtesy of Sundance Institute.



Published by James Kleinmann

Editor of The Queer Review, James Kleinmann has had over twenty years of media experience, both LGBTQ and mainstream. He was the on air film critic on both Gaydar Radio and Gaydio's breakfast shows and has contributed to the UK's best selling LGBTQ publication, Attitude Magazine. James is a member of GALECA The Society of LGBTQ Entertainment Critics. He's been a long-standing regular broadcaster on the UK's most listened to national station BBC Radio 2 contributing on air film reviews and interviews alongside presenters such as Zoe Ball, Claudia Winkleman and Richard Madeley, as well as review and interview slots on BBC Radio 5 Live, BBC Scotland and BBC Manchester. James has also contributed interviews with the world's leading actors and filmmakers to outlets such as MTV, Bauer, Global, Marie Claire, Loaded, HeyUGuys.com, Fun Kids, W!zard, ITN Productions, MyMovies, Unilad and Joe.co.uk. James is a graduate of University College London (UCL)

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