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'Brainwashed: Sex-Camera-Power' Review: How The Male Gaze Actually Harms Women [Sundance]

by [Lena Wilson](https://theplaylist.net/author/lena-wilson/) | January 22, 2022 7:47 pm

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The crux of **Nina Menkes**'s documentary feature **"Brainwashed: Sex-Camera-Power"** is that nearly all movies have been made using a specific visual language that teaches society to disempower, disenfranchise, and even abuse women. You may think that on-screen sexism is a thing of the past, or that it can't possibly affect our society, in which women can now run companies and win Best Director Oscars. Menkes is here to tell you, emphatically, that you are wrong.

In the 105-minute documentary, aided by some 175 film clips, Menkes presents a filmic version of her talk, "Sex and Power: The Visual Language of Oppression." With the entire cinematic canon — and the history of Hollywood itself — as her proof, she argues that sexist film language leads to employment discrimination, sexual harassment, and abuse, particularly within the film industry.

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You may have heard of "the male gaze," a term borne out of feminist film theory that has since been battered into near meaninglessness by mainstream discourse. Menkes takes great care to inform her audience of the male gaze's true definition, execution, and scope, including by interviewing the woman who coined the phrase, feminist film theorist **Laura Mulvey**. She outlines how films have taught us to view women as inferior to men through camera positioning, camera movement, lighting, and even sound design.

The film opens on a clip from **Denis Villeneuve**'s **"Blade Runner 2049,"** a movie nearly universally praised by critics (including [The Playlist's \(https://theplaylist.net/25-best-films-2017-20171212/5/\)](https://theplaylist.net/25-best-films-2017-20171212/5/)) in 2017. In the clip, a gargantuan, pink, naked, holographic **Joi (Ana de Armas)** shows her body off to protagonist **K (Ryan Reynolds)**. Incidentally, "J.O.I.," Menkes later points out, is also a common acronym in porn language that stands for "jerk-off instruction."

"Blade Runner 2049" is, of course, just a few of the films up for scrutiny here. Among others, Menkes also uses **"Vertigo," "Rear Window," "Metropolis," "Apocalypse Now," "Hustlers," "Spring Breakers"** (multiple times), **"Phantom Thread"** (multiple times), **"Once Upon a Time in Hollywood"** (multiple times), **"The Handmaiden," "Titane," "The Neon Demon," "Contempt"** (in an extended sequence), **"The Lady from Shanghai"** (in an extended sequence), **"Raging Bull"** (in an extended sequence), **"Requiem for a Dream," "Iron Man 2," "The Avengers," "Catwoman," "Wonder Woman," "X-Men: First Class," "Lost in Translation," "The Killing of a Sacred Deer," "Sixteen Candles," "Paris, Texas," "Do the Right Thing"** (in an extended sequence), **"365 Days," "Uncut Gems," "Under the Skin," "Pulp Fiction," "Carrie,"** and the original **"Blade Runner"** to showcase female objectification. **Denis Villeneuve, Harmony Korine, Nicholas Winding Refn, Orson Welles, Brain de Palma, Martin Scorsese, Jean Luc Godard, Paul Thomas Anderson, Spike Lee, Park Chan-wook,** and **Alfred Hitchcock** are among the directors who receive multiple or extended shout outs.

You might also recognize that list of filmmakers as Some of the Most Critically Acclaimed Male Directors Who Have Ever Lived. Indeed, while Menkes names a few known bad apples in the industry like **Abdellatif Kechiche** (who, for what it's worth, still debuts his films at Venice and Cannes), her focus lies resolutely on the ways in which we normalize and praise sexist filmmaking. That's how even female directors like **Sofia Coppola, Lorene Scafaria,** and **Julia Ducournau** are taught to use sexist film language. As an interview subject says early on, we are so steeped in this language that for someone to identify it is "like the idea of a fish asking if it's wet."

And yet Menkes does identify it, again and again, and she makes a strong argument for its real-life harms. "Brainwashed" is an extremely accomplished documentary, inasmuch as its goal is to make the viewer feel informed and outraged. A horror-esque score from **Sharon Farber** highlights the gravity of the subject matter without veering too far into melodrama. Cinematographer **Shana Hagan's** striking shots of Menkes in front of some of these films, projected, call to attention the meta nature of this very project, a film about filmmaking.

If "Brainwashed" occasionally stumbles, it is perhaps because Menkes is occasionally too self-reflective. Though she interviews incredible female filmmakers like **Eliza Hittman** and **Catherine Hardwicke**, she oddly does not use any clips from their films, instead relying primarily on her own body of work as an antidote to the toxic examples she shows. **Menkes** is an incredibly accomplished independent filmmaker, but audiences today are more likely to have seen **"Never Rarely Sometimes Always"** or **"Thirteen"** than they are **"Magdalena Viraga"** or **"Phantom Love,"** making these latter examples strange contenders against such modern heavyweights as Anderson and Villeneuve.

Overall, though, "Brainwashed" hits all of the most important notes for any activist documentary. The film is accessible, engrossing, urgent, and horrifying. It should be shown at film festivals, in classrooms, in boardrooms. It should be projected onto a building as large as Ana de Armas's naked body in "Blade Runner 2049" and played on a loop in Studio City. It should be sought out – and shared, and acclaimed – by anyone, of any gender, who claims to truly love cinema. [A]

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Meet the Artist: Nina Menkes on "Brainwashed: Sex-Camera-Power"