

'Brainwashed: Sex-Camera-Power': Sundance Review

BY **FIONNUALA HALLIGAN** | 22 JANUARY 2022

Feminist force of nature Nina Menkes takes on the male gaze



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'BRAINWASHED: SEX-CAMERA-POWER'**

Dir. Nina Menkes. US. 2022. 107 minutes

Brainwashed is a documentary for any woman in film who ever wanted, just even for a moment, to throw a grenade at the canon: Nina Menkes has the ammunition. What's more important, however, is that this documentary, derived from a lecture on the mechanics of the male gaze given by the forthright academic and film-maker Menkes, is a crisp, t generation. It's a crisp, t Cousins, who recently p answer to why they hav fighting the same old battles as she picks apart why they are still seen in the same old way.

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Best compared, stylistically, with last year's *Who We Are: A Chronicle Of Race In America* by Jeffery Robinson, *Brainwashed*, which premieres in Sundance and is already booked for Berlin's Panorama, should certainly travel a busy festival route - and Menkes has been to many of these places before with her source lecture. Like Robinson, it also takes a direct approach to a problem which is personal for the filmmaker and universal for the audience. She's a saltier soul, though, than the gently-insistent Robinson: an experienced and respected independent film-maker and artist who has provocateur etched on her soul.

Menkes wants her audience to learn, but she likes to swing her rifle around too - in 175 separate clips. Look out Vincent Gallo! Martin Scorsese! Paul Thomas Anderson! And, gratifyingly, that gyrating crotch shot in *Titane* and the whole of *Hustlers*, because, as Menkes explains, female directors aren't exempt from viewing the world through a man-made lens either, even when they are being 'ironic' about it. Camera footage captures Menkes striding around the Croisette at Cannes 2018 - is she going to rugby-tackle that gallic boys' club down the steps of the red carpet? You get the sense that if anyone could, it would be her.

Brainwashed doesn't deliver the opposing views you might like to see aired in a film like this - it's not a debate for her, even though some film professionals still think it is - and Menkes shows possibly too many clips from her own films (as illustrations of the right sort of take), particularly as this lucid documentary draws to a close. Yet still it's vigorous, often brash, and full of information. Audiences will hopefully never look at perspective, slow-mo, fragmented bodies or female faces presented in 2D in the same way again, thanks to Menkes' two-decades-plus of research. She certainly proves that shot design is gendered. As her eloquent interviewee Amy Zierling notes: "It's invisible, and you don't notice the air."

Menkes moves beyond the predatory camera and the subject-object set-up, though. With her commentators - who also include Eliza Hittman, Julie Dash, Laura Mulvey, the intimacy co-ordinator Ita O'Brien and Joey Soloway, amongst others, she talks about the implied violence hidden in these tropes. The up-the-bum shot, the slow-pan down the body, the whole idea of a beautiful unconscious woman - taken to an extreme, recalls Rosanna Arquette, when her dead character was embraced by the camera in a sexual manner in Scor in *Raging Bull*, who liter women whose consent smacks a resisting Sean *Postman Always Rings Twice* (1981). It's disempowerment at its essence and, as Menkes said, it worms its

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thy Moriarty's character
l - these turn into
ison Ford, for example,
Jessica Lange in *The*

way into the collective consciousness through the global power of Hollywood. (Or, in other words, forms the “bedrock of the language of rape culture”.)

Then there are the ‘magical people’ of the entertainment business - who aren’t viewed as working in reality so can’t resist when they’re asked for outrageous hours, fired for no reason (or in the case of female directors, not hired at all), or told to take their clothes off without any control over simulating sexual acts which invade their bodies and privacy.

Visually, even though DoP Shana Hagan has done a very warm job of making Menkes’ lectures appealing; this is pro forma stuff, content over execution, amid a lovely edit from Hagan. Music by Sharon Farber adds weight to the idea that this is all some sort of horror. And, yes, it’s very - but not totally - US-centric. (Godard gets a swipe, Kechiche a well-deserved name-check, and it’s hardly shocking to see some Korean directors referenced.) In a world of cinema which is very publicly polite, very reverent of the (typically male-dominated and -selected) ‘Canon’ and very conscious of the fact that it’s a (male-skewed) relationship business, Menkes is a real no-bullshit breath of fresh air. With a torch. And with any luck, she’s heading your way to set fire to something, soon.

Production companies: Menkes Films

International sales: UTA, McGrathJ@unitedtalent.com

Producers: Nina Menkes

Screenplay: Nina Menkes

Cinematography: Shana Hagan

Editing: Cecily Rhett

Music: Sharon Farber

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