

# FILMMAKER

## NEWSLETTER

Sign up for the *Filmmaker* newsletter for exclusive content every week.

(<https://account>)

sign up for the filmmaker newsletter for exclusive content every week.

(<https://flow.aquaplatform.com/cl.php?bannerid=76352&zoneid=903&sig=35f46984cd319904372a88e259c450da9c4be51f8ddeadfd67aef6c1f57banned=76444&zoneid=649&sig=35f46984cd319904372a88e259c450da9c4be51f8ddeadfd67aef6c1f57manage.com%2Fsubscribe%3Fu%3D60f8f9483669a60436f9bbedea%20id%3Dc53b9827eb>)

## “120 Years of the Male Gaze On Our Backs”: Nina Menkes on *Brainwashed: Sex-Camera-Power*



Nina Menkes in *Brainwashed: Sex-Camera-Power*

by [Erik Luers](https://filmmakermagazine.com/author/erik-luers/) (<https://filmmakermagazine.com/author/erik-luers/>) in [Directors](https://filmmakermagazine.com/category/interviews/directors/) (<https://filmmakermagazine.com/category/interviews/directors/>), [Interviews](https://filmmakermagazine.com/category/interviews/) (<https://filmmakermagazine.com/category/interviews/>) on Feb 4, 2022

Perception is not whimsical, but fatal.” — Ralph Waldo Emerson

Movies turn viewers into willing participants looking to break through the screen—the “fourth wall”—and temporarily adopt the POV of the camera and taking on its surveying gaze. Your own emotional response may vary—excitement, titillation, utter boredom—but the camera’s eye is your own, if only for the duration of the film. In her landmark essay, “[Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema](https://www.amherst.edu/system/files/media/1021/Laura%20Mulvey,%20Visual%20Pleasure.pdf)” (<https://www.amherst.edu/system/files/media/1021/Laura%20Mulvey,%20Visual%20Pleasure.pdf>),”

written in the 1970s, scholar and filmmaker Laura Mulvey introduced the concept of the “male gaze,” arguing that the camera’s eye was inherently male and could often be misogynistic in its depiction of the opposite sex. (https://accoun

In the new documentary by director Nina Menkes, *Brainwashed: Sex-Camera-Power*, the psychological and real world effects of that gaze are unveiled. Originally conceived as a talk/presentation that Menkes gave at numerous film festivals and events, Menkes’s documentary is a multimedia amalgamation of male spectatorship throughout the course of film history, analyzing the ways in which shot selection is gendered (subject/object, framing, camera movement and lighting) and how the repercussions can lead to employment discrimination and sexual assault. Including countless clips from films both domestic and foreign, Menkes’s documentary also includes the testimonies of those most affected by these sexist practices on how they have led to them being shunned from the industry.



If you think this topic sounds a bit like a polemic, Menkes and Mulvey would agree. In revisiting her essay 40 years later, Mulvey would later [admit to \*Another Gaze\*](https://www.anothergaze.com/suddenly-woman-spectator-conversation-interview-feminism-laura-mulvey/) (https://accoun that she “found that I was more interested in it as a polemical essay or, as my friend [the academic] Mandy Merck called it, a manifesto, rather than the actual accuracy, or lack of accuracy, of what it says. And, like manifestos or polemics, it’s very much a one- or two-idea piece and that, I think, is its power.”

A few days after *Brainwashed*’s world premier at Sundance (it makes its European premiere at this year’s Berlinale), I spoke with Menkes (primarily heralded for her narrative films, including *Queen of Diamonds*, *The Bloody Child* and *Phantom Love*) about transforming her talk into a film, the differing responses it had received thus far and how the project was always meant to be a conversation starter.

**Filmmaker:** I know this project originated as a talk you’ve given several times, but had you always planned to turn it into a documentary? It seems like an organic progression, to turn a film studies lecture into a documentary that further illustrates your points, but was that always the plan?

**Menkes:** No, it wasn’t. It was never on my mind at all. The original talk was much less in-depth: I would show my students [Menkes is on the film and video faculty at CalArts] a series of film clips pointing out the shot design issues I would wind up examining in the documentary. And, for whatever reason, I was invited in March of 2017 to the DFFB [the German Film and Television Academy Berlin] to screen my work and give a masterclass. I decided that instead of talking about my own work (which is what I normally do in these situations), I chose to give a version of the talk, “Gender and Power in Shot Design: Traditional Cinema and Beyond,” that I usually give to my students. I don’t remember my motivation for this exactly, but perhaps it was just due to my wanting to try something different. At the talk, I was amazed by the sophistication of the audience and how they were really into it. There were some film students in the audience as well, but most would not be classified in that group.

On my way home from Berlin, I stopped in Provincetown at the Women’s Media Summit and also gave the talk there. The attendees were women who worked in film, so there too it was a sophisticated audience, primarily women familiar with the ongoing problems they face in the industry on a daily basis. In a way, this was a kind of “focus group,” and they were all really into it, with one female DP coming up to me after the lecture to say, “Oh my God, I have to admit that I wasn’t consciously aware of all of this.”

A few months later (in October 2017), the [article on Harvey Weinstein](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/05/us/harvey-weinstein-harassment-allegations.html) (https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/05/us/harvey-weinstein-harassment-allegations.html) hit the *New York Times*, so I [wrote an essay for \*Filmmaker Magazine\*](#)

---

(<https://filmmakermagazine.com/103801-the-visual-language-of-oppression-harvey-wasnt-working-in-a-vacuum/>) that turned out to be their most popular piece of the year. I was amazed [by its popularity], and I think Scott Macaulay [Editor-in-Chief of *Filmmaker*] was too. I then started getting frequently invited to give the talk at different organizations, and everywhere I went, I was literally mobbed with people afterwards saying, “Oh my God, I wasn’t aware of all of this.” I even gave the talk at an event Sundance held with The Blackhouse Foundation and a few male DPs came up to me afterwards, saying, “I was dying during your film, completely cringing. I just shot a scene like that last week!” People kept telling me “you should make a film about this subject” and that “this information needs to get out to a wider, broader audience.”

Making a film about the subject wasn’t my idea, but there seemed to be some external excitement about it. It seemed like people wanted it, and trust me, I’m used to making films that people *don’t* want, like *The Bloody Child*, for example. One thing I want to say about *The Bloody Child* is that I noticed some new things when I was working on a recent restoration for its upcoming 2022 release. I hadn’t really sat down to watch the film in a very long time, and when I revisited it, I thought, “Wow, this film shares some similarities with *Brainwashed*.” *The Bloody Child* is about a Marine captain (played by my sister, Tinka Menkes) who arrests another Marine for the murder of his wife. The form of the film is put together in a radical way, definitely not for a mainstream audience. The character that Tinka plays is, in many ways, a prosecuting attorney, and, as I was in the middle of making *Brainwashed*, I felt myself becoming like a prosecuting attorney as well, presenting and backing up my specific case. *Brainwashed* and *The Bloody Child* are connected in that way, with Tinka playing a Marine captain arresting a guy for the murder of a woman; as a filmmaker, I’m doing a variation of the same thing in *Brainwashed*. The main difference between the two is that *Brainwashed* was made for a wider, general audience.

**Filmmaker:** Your editor, Cecily Rhett, [recently discussed](https://filmmakermagazine.com/113048-cecily-rhett-brainwashed-sex-camera-power-sundance-2022/#.YfsiN_XMI1L) ([https://filmmakermagazine.com/113048-cecily-rhett-brainwashed-sex-camera-power-sundance-2022/#.YfsiN\\_XMI1L](https://filmmakermagazine.com/113048-cecily-rhett-brainwashed-sex-camera-power-sundance-2022/#.YfsiN_XMI1L)) the process of assembling the more than 175 film clips in the documentary. I wanted to ask you about that organizational process. When did you feel like you had enough clips? Were there discoveries you made throughout your research? How did the form come into focus?

**Menkes:** It was a very organic process, as our first rough cut consisted of Cecily and I putting the lecture together. We filmed the lecture and thought, “Well, that’s cool, but it’s not really a movie.” We needed to focus on turning the lecture into a piece of cinema. The first step was to reorganize the lecture’s structure, as it was originally presented in chronological order (from early cinema to the present). Cecily recommended breaking it up, saying, “Let’s not do it chronologically. Let’s mix up the dates and show the newest examples right at the top.” Cecily wanted to organize the film using what she called the “green eggs and ham” structure, meaning that first we would lay out our five main points at the top, then show examples and investigate each one.

---

As a side note, some people have complained that the film doesn't go deep into film theory and that it doesn't include a balanced view. People want all of these things that the film is not! [The film](https://account) was never meant to present a balanced view. The film is a polemic that is balancing 120 years of the male gaze on our backs. I'm not trying to be balanced. That's the first thing I want to say. The second thing I want to say is that the film is purposely simple. The diagrams we present are simple on purpose. We want you to be able to apply a basic diagram to each of the different and complicated situations that unfold in the film. Cecily's idea was to introduce and explain our five points like *boom, boom, boom*, then show how and where it's true. It's true even if you're a subject in the film or if you're playing an action hero. It could be present on the film's audio track or in a composer's film score, etc. The idea was to show that everywhere you turn, you will see it, and I wanted to explore how that makes a viewer feel.

Of course, there's not *one* viewer, or one kind of viewer, but I can say that based on the deluge of Instagram messages I've been getting from women around the world saying "Thank you for expressing something we felt we couldn't really articulate," there's something there. I'm not trying to say that every single person is going to experience the clips in the way that we lay them out in the documentary, but a lot of people seem to resonate with the problems we dig into.

**Filmmaker:** Were you looking to interview a diverse group of people in the film? I know Joey Soloway and Charlyne Yi are publicly non-binary and you also include a clip from Julia Ducournau's 2021 film, *Titane*, which has inspired some interesting critical analysis from trans critics.

**Menkes:** One thing we did was reach out to a great majority of the living filmmakers whose clips are featured in the film. For the most part, they declined the opportunity to be interviewed. We did hear back from some filmmakers who responded positively, but then asked that their comments be off-the-record. That meant we couldn't include them in the film. The people who wanted to be in the film were people who were basically on board with what we were saying. They brought their own perspectives to the film, however. At one moment, Cecily and I said to each other, "Wow, I think we have like 98% or 99% women interviewees," and that wasn't planned. We do have one cis male heterosexual speaker, actor Freddy D. Ramsey Jr., but otherwise the interviewees are either women or nonbinary.

**Filmmaker:** You also speak with filmmaker Julie Dash and, at one point in your film, she quotes writer and activist Audre Lorde, saying that "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house." This quote was in reference to racial discrimination, but within the documentary's context, it's interlocked with the issue of gender discrimination. The quote takes on a different meaning. Were you looking to include how race adds another context to your initial argument about representation?

---

**Menkes:** Well, that's the thing. We've gotten a lot of rave reviews for our film, but we've also received some reviews that complained, "You didn't do this and you didn't do this." There are a lot of complicated issues around representation in cinema and I was not attempting to address every single one. I was specifically talking about the way that shot design is itself gendered and how it has positioned women in the "object" position, how that position is almost always a powerless one, and how that negatively impacts us.

We have seen this shot design strategy used on women of every race, of course, and there's so much you can discuss regarding representation. You can talk about the nuances that are present in the way that Asian women are sexually depicted onscreen, for example. There really are a million things to talk about, but the film was already a bit on the long side for a documentary and there's a limit to the amount of topics we could cover. For us, our north Star was centered around shot design, and specifically proving that shot design is gendered. I realize that everyone has a different idea of the things I should have covered, but I really wanted to cover one thing: how gendered shot design has affected us throughout film history. Of course, you can't prove this as if it were a math problem, i.e. two plus two equals four. I can't directly prove that the depiction of women in cinema is connected to employment discrimination against women. However, as we say in the film, there's been a wide range of research over the years showing that what we absorb in media (such as sexually objectifying media) does impact our behavior in very concrete ways. I realize there's no extreme proof, as if someone were to say, "I went and saw *Blade Runner*, then I went out and harassed a woman." It's not like that, but I think that many people can attest that when you see images like that, something happens internally. Our film is about raising that consciousness.

**Filmmaker:** Over the course of your research, did you see this more often pertaining to certain genres and less so to others? Growing up on horror movies, I often identified with what author Carol J. Clover deemed the "Final Girl," the sole survivor who fights back and ultimately defeats the killer (although I realize there's a male gaze associated with the killer in that scenario too). Sometimes the male gaze can be cleverly subverted in those scenarios.

**Menkes:** The issue of subverting the male gaze is interesting. I always go back to the classic scene from Jean-Luc Godard's *Contempt* where it pans across the body of Brigitte Bardot. Godard has always said that the scene is supposed to be a comment on female objectification, but is it a comment? Or in *Titane*, where she's spinning her legs over the car and the camera zooms into her crotch as she grinds her butt towards the camera...is the director subverting the male gaze or is she reinforcing it?

My position is that it's always a little tricky when you reproduce the so-called male gaze. As a shorthand, we say that some of these shot design techniques are part of the male gaze, but my schemata is saying that shot design genders your way of shooting. If you use it as a commentary

---

on the male gaze, are you really subverting the problem or are you perpetuating it? You may think you're subverting it, but by including it, the viewer still gets a direct inhalation of the poison it creates, at least in my view. But as far as different genres go, we really found this shot design structure present throughout all kinds of films, whether in horror films or action films, comedies, dramas. It's used a lot.

**Filmmaker:** Earlier you mentioned how shot design can lead to employment discrimination, and your film breaks that down by including the experiences of several people, including a former actress, Lara Dale, who receives a stark warning or threat from a casting agent. Other examples you include are the experiences of Léa Seydoux on director Abdellatif Kechiche's *Blue is the Warmest Color* and Ophélie Bau's experience on Kechiche's *Mektoub, My Love: Intermezzo*. These are real life examples of women being denied work or being pressured into doing something they're not comfortable with. Were you aware of these examples before beginning work on the film?

**Menkes:** Most of these people actually reached out to us, including a supermodel who you hear from in the film (who wished to remain anonymous) and her experience with a studio executive. Charlene Yi also reached out to talk about their experience as well. In the case of Laura Dale (and the subsequent voicemail she received from the casting agent of the film, *High Desert Kill*), Lara had seen my talk at a New Mexico Women In Film event and reached out to me to say, "I really loved the talk and would love to help in some way. Let me tell you what happened to me." That's how Laura's story arrived in the movie.

The same thing happened with the anonymous supermodel. She had seen the talk and asked, "Can I tell you what happened to me?" Her story is itself worthy of a feature-length movie, but we had to decide what to include and what not to include. We were trying to show a few examples where it's painfully, excruciatingly clear that each of these things are connected.

**Filmmaker:** While the male gaze is embedded in so much of modern filmmaking, are there certain industry changes you're becoming more optimistic about? There seems to be more female cinematographers now, but I guess it comes back to the question of what are the various subject matters they're being hired to shoot. Jane Campion's *The Power of the Dog* is shot by a female DP, [Ari Wegner](https://filmmakermagazine.com/112712-dp-ari-wegner-the-power-of-the-dog/) (<https://filmmakermagazine.com/112712-dp-ari-wegner-the-power-of-the-dog/>), and it's a film about masculinity in a lot of interesting ways. Are you seeing a change in opportunities being offered to women?

**Menkes:** I think the statistics speak for themselves. 5% of DPs today are female and 5% of composers are too. If you start seeing a shift toward female directors and the scripts they're hired to shoot (and female cinematographers start being accepted onto big budget sets), then things [will change]. One of the first examples of a female cinematographer being hired to shoot a large

movie was Rachel Morrison on Ryan Coogler's *Black Panther*, if I'm not mistaken. And yet you have wonderful, award-winning cinematographers like Nancy Schreiber, who have been shooting for decades but who never receive a shot at shooting one of those big budget films, most likely because the studio executives just could not visualize a woman taking on that role. (https://accoun

But one of the important points in *Brainwashed* that we wanted to bring to the surface was that you don't have to have a cis male-gendered body to create these images [of the male gaze]. Women directors have created them and, in the rare times they're hired, female DPs have too. Now, sometimes female directors and female DPs do something different that turns out to be amazing, like Claire Denis and Agnès Godard's work on *Beau Travail*. It's true that there are so many "side streets" we could have gone down in *Brainwashed*, but the film had to maintain a certain focus. We couldn't go through the many different variations of "Well, when you have a woman cinematographer working on a film directed by a woman and written by a woman, does that make the film completely different?" I would guess that it would be different, yes.

**Filmmaker:** But in the film's discussing of the #MeToo movement and what's widely known as the "Weinstein Effect (<https://www.usatoday.com/pages/interactives/life/the-harvey-weinstein-effect/>)," have you seen much progress take place in the industry, even however miniscule? A shift in some of those power dynamics either on-screen or behind the camera?

**Menkes:** I think the progress comes from our having seen a shift in the number of women directors currently working. There has been a positive shift there. There's been a minute shift in the number of working female composers, going from 3% to about 5%, and there's been a minute shift in female DPs. There's no doubt that we have seen a shift across these roles. I don't know the most updated statistics for every craft, but it's changing.

The most important shift has been the recent cultural shift in awareness. I can say for a fact that the things I've been talking about for however long now are finally being [paid attention to]. For a long time, no one cared, no one wanted to listen, and it was simply dismissed. As is normal in a situation like this, individual women then began to feel "Oh, I must not be good enough. I don't know how to schmooze the right way. Maybe if I had a better PR agent or lost 10 pounds, then things would be different." You start to think that it's your own problem. Eventually you discover that it's a systemic issue. When the filmmaker [Maria Geise \(https://archive.kpcc.org/programs/the-frame/2015/10/09/44774/how-filmmaker-maria-giese-helped-spark-a-federal-i/\)](https://archive.kpcc.org/programs/the-frame/2015/10/09/44774/how-filmmaker-maria-giese-helped-spark-a-federal-i/), went to the American Civil Liberties Union [ACLU], and then the ACLU went to the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission [EEOC] and these hiring statistics were uncovered, all of the women in the film industry who had been shafted one way or another said, "Oh my God, so it's not just me." We're talking about a systemic issue here.

---



Besides the fact that we have seen some concrete change, the biggest change has been the general awareness of the issue. For example, in the press release announcing this year's Berlinale lineup, they note that they have 50% female directors and a specific percent of non-binary and trans directors. Would this distinction have been made five years ago? It wouldn't have dawned on anyone to make it known. That's a big change. It's not enough, but it's a start.

**Filmmaker:** I'm glad those distinctions are being made and that interesting work is still able to get made. Your film feels like a real conversation jumping-off point that can at the very least get viewers talking amongst themselves.

**Menkes:** I'm glad you said that, because I'd really like to emphasize that for the whole team who put this film together, we all saw our movie as a conversation starter. It was not supposed to be the definitive take on the representation of women in film. It's not going to answer everybody's hopes and desires in doing that. It's a conversation starter. That's exactly what it is.

*Note: This interview has been edited after publication to correct a misstatement about the composition of the film's interviewees.*

