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Breaking Down the Male Gaze in “Brainwashed: Sex-Camera-Power”



Lisa McNamara (<https://Blog.Frame.io/Author/Lisamcnamara/>)

There’s always so much to discuss during Women’s History Month it’s hard to know where to begin.

So let’s start with the current state of our industry. According to this year’s *The Celluloid Ceiling* (<https://womenintvfilm.sdsu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/2021-Celluloid-Ceiling-Report.pdf>) report, there’s not much that’s newsworthy. For example, there were fewer films directed by women compared to 2020, and still far too many inequities in behind-the-camera crafts—only 6 percent of the top 250 movies in 2021 had female cinematographers, and only 17 percent were edited by women.

But if you dig beneath the surface you'll uncover less obvious forms of inequity—some so subtle that even women filmmakers have (https://blog.frame.io/) 



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Nina Menkes, producer/director of *Brainwashed: Sex-Camera-Power* in front of an image of her sister, Tinka. Image by Hugo Wong

It's why we feel especially lucky to have discovered Nina Menkes' new feature documentary, *BRAINWASHED: Sex-Camera-Power*, which premiered at Sundance 2022. Directed, shot, and edited by women, it shines a bright light on the darkly destructive trope called "the male gaze," and once you see it, you'll never look at the way female characters are filmed the same way again.

At least, that's what Nina, and her editor, Cecily Rhett, hope.



What's the male gaze?

Feminist film critic Laura Mulvey coined the term in an essay entitled "[Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema](https://www.amherst.edu/system/files/media/1021/Laura%20Mulvey%2C%20Visual%20Pleasure.pdf)" (<https://www.amherst.edu/system/files/media/1021/Laura%20Mulvey%2C%20Visual%20Pleasure.pdf>), which was published in 1975—way before there was an internet.

Unless you were a serious cinephile or film school student, there was little chance you'd have discovered it.

In the essay, Mulvey examined the depiction of women in numerous films spanning cinema history. The more she watched, the more she observed the difference between how female characters are portrayed to deliberately objectify them for the pleasure of male protagonists and viewers.

In Conversation With Laura Mulvey (Interview)

Nina, herself a feminist filmmaker and a current instructor at CalArts, not only discovered Mulvey's work, but has furthered and amplified it. "Over two decades I developed a lecture for my students that illustrated my understanding about shot design and the established cinematic canon," she says. "This presentation evolved—each year I added new clips and new insights."

Fast forward about 40 years. With the eruption of the #MeToo movement, Nina's 2017 essay "The Visual Language of Oppression (aka Working in a Vacuum)" (<https://filmmakermagazine.com/103801-the-visual-language-of-oppression-harvey-wasnt-working-in-a-vacuum/#.Yg2Cty-B3xg>) for *Filmmaker Magazine* went viral. As a result, she was invited to present her lecture at the Sundance Black House in 2018, where it was a smash hit, and various attendees suggested she turn her lecture into a film.

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Nina Menkes draws the line that defines the male gaze in *Brainwashed: Sex-Camera-Power*.

BRAINWASHED is the product of two-and-a-half years of work, as Nina culled through the past century of film history to support her thesis. In her artist's statement, Nina describes the film as "exposing a harsh, interlacing system of oppression which includes this gendered system of visual language, the still-ongoing epidemic of sexual harassment and assault, and employment discrimination against women—especially in the film industry."

With interviews ranging from film scholars to industry professionals working today, Nina sheds light on how deeply these tropes are ingrained in cinematic language—and how they harm women in areas that extend well beyond the big screen, inciting violence against them and jeopardizing their career opportunities.



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Charlyne Yi discusses her industry experiences in *Brainwashed: Sex-Camera Power*.

Triple threats

As a self-contained filmmaker who directs, shoots, and edits her own work, Nina thought she would cut *BRAINWASHED* herself. But it soon became clear that the task was too big.

So she called on former USC student and teaching assistant, Cecily Rhett, to help her through the process. Cecily's background is nearly as varied as Nina's. After Columbia undergraduate, she found herself in film school as an extension of her love for experimental theater and has been a working editor, writer, and teacher since.



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Nina Menkes called on Cecily Rhett to edit *Brainwashed: Sex-Camera-Power*.

Cecily originally turned Nina down. “I hadn’t done much documentary editing except for the show *Biography*,” she says. “But that’s different, in that it’s always a linear, chronological story. I didn’t really think I was the right person for the job.”

Nina persuaded Cecily to come on board, which she did in October 2020—at the height of the pandemic. This meant, of course, that the team was never physically together until the very day that they locked the cut. Throughout the post-production process, the team had to design a workflow that allowed them to stay in sync creatively while working remotely.

Clipping along

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Even before Cecily joined, post supervisor Jim Rosenthal had already been using Adobe Premiere Pro on *BRAINWASHED* for a number of reasons.

Chief among them was the way that Premiere Pro helped them deal with the hundreds of clips they had to ingest. All new material was transcoded to ProRes proxies internally, and from there they found it very easy to test the clips.

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Brainwashed: Sex-Camera-Power was edited in Premiere Pro.

The more intricate graphic elements (created by design studio Compost) play a significant role in the film to help illustrate and underscore Nina's thesis. The simpler titles, however, were created in Premiere Pro, which allowed them to scale them up without losing quality—as long as that was done in the Sequence and not the Export setting. After Effects was used for shot patching and comping, or for modifying basic visual effects.



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Motion graphics are used to highlight key points throughout.

But perhaps most significantly, Nina was also editing along with Cecily—from her home. The two relied on Jim and their assistant editors, Maria Freire and Juliet Janklow, to keep three sets of mirrored drives current and deliver them to both.

“We had lots of people suggesting and sending clips to us,” Cecily says. “Premiere Pro makes it easy to just grab an asset and start cutting with it. But then the assistant would have to come in to make sure that Nina had exactly the same clips, named exactly the same way, so we could send the project back and forth. We had to be very disciplined to keep our drives mirrored.”

When Nina first presented her Sundance 2018 talk, it contained approximately 15 film clips. In the final cut of *BRAINWASHED*, **there were 175**—culled down from many more possibilities. “We looked at and worked with so much material, it ended up being a good system for us,” Cecily says.



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There was no shortage of reference material to support the movie's premise.

It was not until the final conform phase that the process became more complicated. "We relied on Fair Use laws for the film clips, so we often didn't have masters with timecode. Everything had to be eye-matched and audio matched without it," she explains.

All the eye matching and prep for the online took almost three months. "I don't think anyone embarks on a project like this knowing how intense it's going to be," Cecily says. "Jim started off as one of our assistant editors but moved into the post supervisor position when we realized that we badly needed him to take on those responsibilities."



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Nina Menkes speaks with passion.

Another important component of the film required that Nina capture a number of new interviews, which were primarily handled by DP Shana Hagan, ASC. Shooting at UHD on an assortment of cameras, from RED to Canon C300 to Sony FX6s also meant that, when they finally handed off the locked edit to FotoKem's Mike Sowa for grading, Jim had to give him both an XML and an AAF. According to Jim, "For some reason, RED does better with AAF and everything else seems to go more smoothly with XML, so we wanted to ensure that as much as possible, the edit translated properly into Resolve."

Creative shorthand

Every documentary comes with challenges, but some are trickier than others.

Converting what is essentially a lecture into a film is already one challenge. Incorporating 175 film clips is another. But when you add nearly two dozen interviews into the mix, the challenge increases exponentially.



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Transparent creator Joey Soloway adds their voice to the film.

Especially when those interviews are with such accomplished and articulate directors, scholars, actors, and psychologists including Laura Mulvey, Julie Dash, Joey Soloway, Catherine Hardwicke, Rosanna Arquette, Penelope Spheeris, Amy Ziering, and so many more. It's an embarrassment of riches.

Because Cecily and Nina knew each other so well, they were able to successfully work together even at a distance. The two also used an application called Dynalist to create a paper edit of the transcripts. "We did that so we would be on the same wavelength before I started spending a lot of time cutting and then have Nina say, 'Well, that just doesn't work or make sense.' We would lay everything out on paper and then have a big discussion. It was collaborative so we could go back and forth before moving on to cutting picture," Cecily says.

The two also had epic FaceTime sessions. "I would put my phone down and edit and then pick it back up and we would talk. We did that almost every day."



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Maria Giese was co-producer for *Brainwashed: Sex-Camera-Power* alongside Sandra de Castro Buffington, Guo Guo, and Simmer Xinlei Yang.

Working together for more than a year, Nina and Cecily pieced the narrative together. And the final result is, while deeply disturbing, also genuinely eye-opening. "*BRAINWASHED* is a journey to the underworld of objectification that is also leading to a liberation of perspective," Cecily says.

Seeing is believing

As you watch *BRAINWASHED*, it becomes obvious that "the male gaze" is pervasive throughout movie history.

Look at the shadowy lighting Orson Wells uses to disembody Rita Hayworth in *The Lady From Shanghai*. Or Alfred Hitchcock's gauzy treatment of Kim Novak in *Vertigo*.



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Observing gendered lighting on Rita Hayworth in *The Lady from Shanghai*.

Then there's Brian DePalma's slow-motion shower sequence that serves as the title sequence in *Carrie*. And Martin Scorsese's *Raging Bull*, in which his female lead can be seen but not heard. All are blatant examples of the way the directors objectify their female characters.

"But those are old movies," you might say. The truth is that even as strong female characters—superheroes, Bond girls, and bad girls like Harley Quinn—have increasingly populated recent films, they still get the same treatment.

It's become so ingrained in the cinematic lexicon that even some of our more notable contemporary female directors mimic what their male counterparts have created.

Look, for example, at the opening of Sofia Coppola's *Lost in Translation*. The camera pans slowly across Scarlett Johansson's underwear-clad bottom as she lies on the bed. Or at *Titane*, directed by Julia Ducournau, in which she points the camera directly at the female lead's crotch during a sequence of her performing a lewd dance on the hood of a car.



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Spot the difference. Harley Quinn in *Suicide Squad* (2016), directed by David Ayer...

...and Harley Quinn in *Birds of Prey*, directed by Cathy Yan.

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The fact that Harvey Weinstein's abusive treatment of women across the industry catapulted these issues into the mainstream conversation only begins to expose the consequences they suffer.

A workflow that video teams love - finally

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Nina includes one poignant interview with actor Rosanna Arquette, who speaks about both objectification and ageism. As a young woman, her character is depicted as an object of desire, even while apparently dead, in Martin Scorsese's *After Hours*. More recently, she (along with so many women in Hollywood) has all but lost her career, the result of being "too old" to be bankable, a euphemism for *desireable*. If that doesn't illustrate the problem, nothing will.

Shifting perspective

So how does the industry change what seems so irreparable?

Well, first it starts with women in the industry. As a director, Nina's films are representative of the ways in which female characters on the screen are not as an object but as a subject. Included in *BRAINWASHED* are clips from her films *Queen of Diamonds* and *Phantom Love*, along with examples from renowned directors Chantal Ackerman and Agnes Varda.

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For Cecily, it begins with choosing her projects more judiciously. There was a time in the early 2000s during which Cecily was an editor on *The Bachelor*, about as non-feminist a show as exists. After that stint, she stepped away from editing to pursue writing and teaching for nearly a decade.

Since her return, "I've been fortunate enough to work with some of the coolest women in television," Cecily says. "Kerry Ehrin [*The Morning Show*], Raelle Tucker [*True Blood*], Jami O'Brien [*NOS4A2*], who are creating shows with women characters who are photographed and depicted as the subjects of their stories."

Currently, Cecily is finishing up *The Thing About Pam*, a crime drama starring Renée Zellweger, with another of the women showrunners cementing their places in the mainstream—Jenny Klein.

That said, there are still so many other segments of the industry that have a long way to go. *BRAINWASHED* doesn't even begin to touch on, for example, music videos or games.



"If you've ever felt a little bit less, or a little bit alienated walking out of a movie, that wasn't just you."

Cecily feels encouraged, however. Recently, she and her 12-year-old daughter watched *Apollo 13*. "My daughter said, 'This is sexist. I don't want to watch this.' And I realized that there was no awareness on the part of the filmmakers that these guys are out in space and the women are sitting around in their pink dresses crying," Cecily says. "Thinking back, my own feminist mother must have been horrified that I was watching movies like *Flashdance* when I was a teenager."

Making *BRAINWASHED* wasn't easy. But it was gratifying. "The film has brought me to a deep place of understanding about how much there is to explore in terms of how being objectified affects us in our lives," Cecily says. "If you've ever felt a little bit less, or a little bit alienated walking out of a movie, that wasn't just you. It's helped me focus on what I've inherited and what I'm trying not to pass on."

Can one movie change an entire industry? Of course not. Is it essential viewing for the current and future generations of filmmakers? Absolutely.

As we've seen from the statistics, change happens slowly and incrementally. But if this movie helps women filmmakers gain more access and equity to tell their stories the way they want to, and helps male filmmakers become allies, Nina and Cecily will take their places in women's history as not just showing the problem, but being part of the solution.