

POSTED ON JANUARY 31, 2022 BY VALERIE KALFRIN

**“I’M INTO AN INDIVIDUAL GAZE”:  
DIRECTOR NINA MENKES AND  
COLLEAGUES AT SUNDANCE 2022 TALK  
SEXISM AND BEING “BRAINWASHED”**



## ***By Valerie Kalfrin***

Director **Nina Menkes** cues up nearly 200 film clips over 120 years in her new documentary "**Brainwashed: Sex-Camera-Power**," making audiences question how often we accept objectifying film techniques.

The film presents a wealth of evidence of how entrenched the male gaze is in shot design, using scenes from 1927's "Metropolis" to 2019's "**Once Upon A Time ... In Hollywood**." Yet while Menkes encourages creatives to do better, she doesn't think that the female gaze is a solution.

"The term 'the male gaze' for me has to do with this monolithic way of looking," she said on a Zoom discussion with critics after the film's premiere at the **2022 Sundance Film Festival**. "So, I kind of reject the idea of a female gaze, because I'm into an individual gaze. How do I see the world, or how do you see the world? How does each one of us see the world instead of having another monolith?"

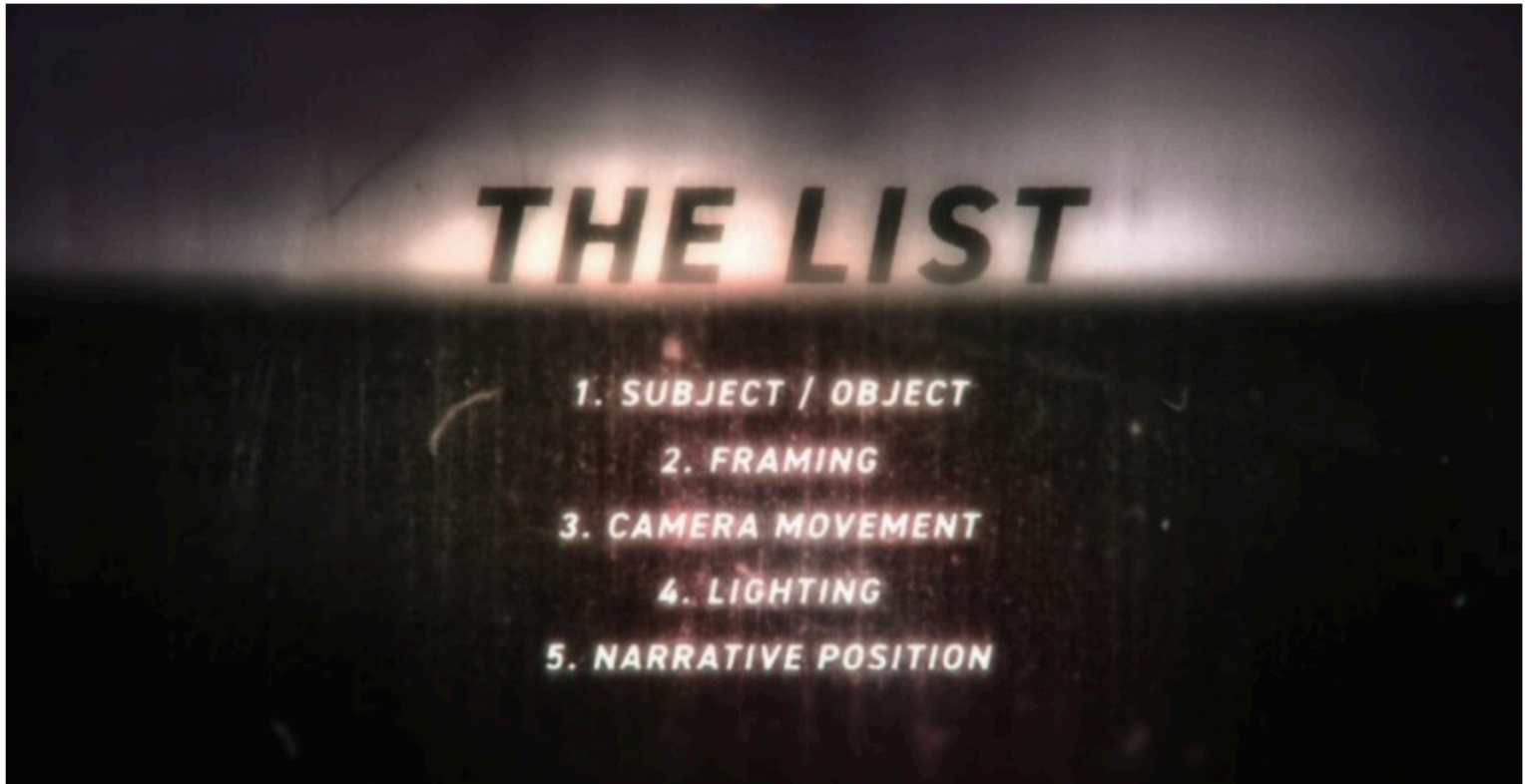
Other participants from the film joined in the Zoom discussion. They included producer and writer **Joey Soloway** ("Transparent"), activist and director **Maria Giese** ("Hunger"), film editor **Cecily Rhett**, producer **Amy Ziering** ("Allen v. Farrow"), and Stanford University professor, producer, and actor **Kathleen Tarr**.

"I've been kind of calling it 'the other gaze,'" Soloway added. "I mean, there's no great word for it. But for me what qualifies is, people who have traditionally been looked at [are] now looking."

## **"Express Your Own Way of Perceiving the World"**

A faculty member at the **California University of the Arts**, Menkes framed the film around her regular lecture, "Sex and Power: The Visual Language of Cinema." Academics and film professionals in "Brainwashed" draw connections between gendered filmmaking techniques, employment discrimination, and societal attitudes around sexual abuse and sexual assault.

The film highlights five techniques involving point of view, framing, lighting, and camera movement that *In Their Own League*'s Caz Armstrong called "[the Menkes list](#)" upon hearing Menkes speak [in London in 2019](#).



The filmmaking techniques that director Nina Menkes analyzes in "Brainwashed" / Courtesy of Nina Menkes

While [the website](#) for "Brainwashed" uses this term, Menkes doesn't want to police filmmakers' styles. Rather, she wants to educate viewers about these techniques and encourage creative exploration.

"I just wanted to say there are other ways to do it," she said. "Find your own path; express your own way of perceiving the world. Isn't that the beauty of the human experience? That we can be individuals instead of following these rules?"

## **"They've Inhaled the Same Poison We All Have"**

It's tempting to think, *Is it really that bad?* Yet some clips Menkes uses are so glaring, they might surprise viewers into realizing how often they've glanced over this sort of thing.

For instance, the opening credits of 1976's "Carrie" roll as topless girls cavort in a high school locker room. In "Once Upon a Time... In Hollywood," the camera puts the backside of a hitchhiker (Margaret Qualley) in the foreground as she leans through a passenger car window to talk with the driver (Brad Pitt).



Director Nina Menkes used this scene from "Once Upon a Time ... In Hollywood" as an example of framing that objectifies the woman in the shot (Margaret Qualley) compared to the man (Brad Pitt) / Courtesy of YouTube

Even female directors absorb these techniques because film schools have taught these as standards for decades, the film notes. It points out clips such as tween girls imitating the sexy poses they see in videos in Maïmouna Doucouré's "[Cuties](#)," the opening closeup on Scarlett Johansson's backside in Sofia Coppola's "Lost in Translation," Jennifer Lopez performing as a stripper in Lorene Scafaria's "[Hustlers](#)," and Agathe Rousselle spreading her legs on a car hood in Julia Ducournau's "[Titane](#)."

This prevalent gaze is not only male; "it's racist; it's homophobic," Ziering said. "What Nina's film does is, it shows how these white cis men, it's not even [that] they're culpable. They've inhaled the same poison we all have."

# **Filmmaking That Depicts “Power and Agency”**

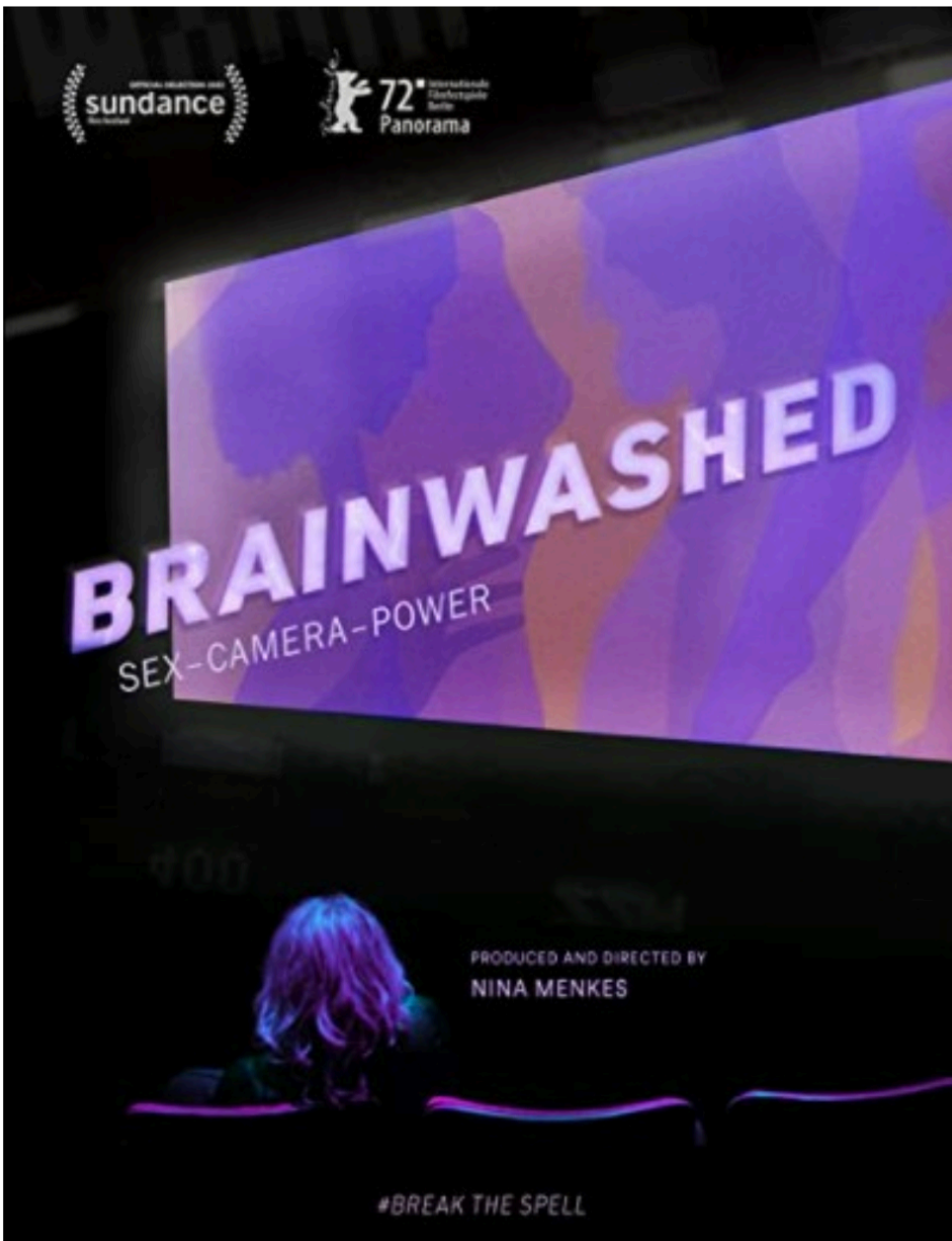
Asked about the filmmakers’ possible intent, Menkes said she didn’t include the clips’ context to maintain the focus on how widespread these techniques are. “This film is not trying to be balanced and give everybody a chance to give their point of view,” Menkes said. “It’s just to say that shot design is gendered—full stop. ... The position of power and agency is depicted by this way of shooting.”

However, she said her team approached “representatives of all the big directors, including Scorsese and Spike Lee and Sophia Coppola and Patty Jenkins. ... it was quite a long list.” No one wanted to respond on camera, she said.

This dominant viewpoint feeds sexual harassment on film sets and other industries, added Tarr, author of the law review article “Bias and the Business of Show: Employment Discrimination in the Entertainment Industry.”

People think of filmmaking as a “magical” industry, Tarr said. “They don’t think of these people on screen as workers and what they have to endure and what the issues are.”

## **“Put People into the Place Where They’re Allowed to Hold the Camera”**



The poster for the documentary “Brainwashed”

Giese, who spurred an industry-wide **federal investigation into employment discrimination**, noted that the American film industry distributes roughly 80% of the entertainment media seen around the world. Yet a 2020 study from **USC’s Annenberg Inclusion Initiative** shows that out of the top 100 movies in 2019 in the U.S., only **34% had female characters with names or dialogue**. Among roughly 1,500 people working above the line as directors, writers, and producers of these films, only **22% were women**.

“This very, very tiny group of people in Hollywood ... [makes] the decisions about the entertainment media that is really forming our cultural narratives around the world. And it all starts with who

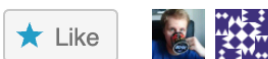
you employ, and what stories are you going to bring to the to the forefront, and who are you going to hire to direct to them,” Giese said. In the film, she talks about using Title VII of the Civil Rights Act to reduce discrimination against women in entertainment.

Trying to “dismantle the power structure when they’re the same people who fund us” puts some creatives in an awkward position, Soloway said. Yet bringing in different perspectives can add to the richness and variety of filmmaking.

“When we talk about shots, and when we talk about how to change things, it’s like, honestly, just bring in more women, women of color, people of color, trans people ... Put people into the place where they’re allowed to hold the camera. A lot of this stuff will take care of itself,” Soloway said.

“Brainwashed: Sex-Camera-Power” is awaiting distribution. It holds an 80% “fresh” rating on [RottenTomatoes.com](https://www.rottentomatoes.com).

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