

Sexism in the Film Industry

# "They Infiltrate Consciousness"

Director Nina Menkes explores systematic sexism in the film industry. Your film "Brainwashed: Sex-Camera-Power" is shown at the Berlinale.



The filmmaker Nina Menke

Photo: Ann Johansson

*As a feminist film pioneer, **Nina Menkes** has been making independent films since *Queen of Diamonds* in 1991, which have received many international festival appearances and awards. She has also been teaching film at the California Institute of the Arts for almost as long and in this context has developed a lecture with many film excerpts on "Sex and Power: the Hidden Language of Cinema". Her first documentary film "Brainwashed" complements these lectures with analytical illustrations and many interview partners to create a combative and insightful tour de force through the conflict area of the cinematographic view of the female body.*

**taz: Nina Menkes, thank you very much for your inspiring film. It will certainly be an important treasure trove of material for further research. In it you speak of a "crass intertwined system of gender repression" in the Hollywood film industry. Could you explain to us how this system works?**

**Nina Menkes:** The system consists of networks of ideology and practice that interact. There is still severe labor discrimination against women in the film industry, worse than in the coal mines. There is a widespread epidemic of

sexual harassment. Studies show that 94 percent of women in the film business have had experience with it. And there is the staging of the female body that objectifies women and thus reinforces and legitimizes male positions of power.

**They say that this objectification of women occurs not only at the level of script and narration, but with practical choices of framing and lighting strategies. How does that concrete look?**

---

**IN THE INTERVIEW:  
NINA MENKES**

---

Nina Menkes graduated from UCLA and is a member of the film department of the California Institute of the Arts. Her films have been shown at international festivals. Her feature film *The Bloody Child* (1996) was voted one of the most important films of the last 50 years by the Vienna International Film Festival.

In the Hollywood cinematographic tradition, but also in many European art house films, the procedure is completely different depending on whether a woman or a man is filmed. This refers to parameters such as the position of the camera view in relation to the bodies, where the women – often undressed – are dismembered by the framing or subjected to an (evaluative) camera scan. The faces are dematerialized by the lighting and dissolved into two-dimensional flatness.

The interesting thing is that films that want to transport feminist content also like to use this shot design. For example, "*Bombshell*" (directed by Jay Roach, 2019) [<https://taz.de/!/MeToo-im-Film/!5659814/>], which is about women taking legal action to defend themselves against sexual assault. Yet in depicting this assault itself, the film reproduces the perpetrator's perspective of the perpetrator's gendered gaze on the woman's legs and panties.

### **What are the consequences?**

Most people are unaware of these systematic sexist decisions when they watch a film. But they infiltrate our consciousness. It affects how we look at the woman walking down the street in front of us. And also how we see ourselves. We can see how these forces infiltrate our brains and decision-making processes at all levels and help determine how we relate to the world. And it is women and men who internalize it in this way.

### **What does that mean in particular for a filmmaker?**

We are caught in a vicious cycle of sexual objectification. Trying to get out of there and shift the paradigms is extremely hard work. Even if you're a strong powerful woman who somehow managed to make a film. But when you then look for a distributor, you encounter the same barriers again. As I say in the film: If the women in the film are staged in such a way that they cannot be seen as objects of lust by the men who are supposed to judge and buy it, then they will not find the film attractive and you will not get the production deal or the Rental Agreement.

**In the press material you report that you have been involved in the film school of the California Institute of the Arts for two decades with the analysis and teaching of this "gendered shot design" with lectures from which your film emerged. Can you tell me something about this work?**

First of all, I would like to emphasize that it was never my goal to teach. I started because I couldn't get reasonable conditions for my film work. I became a teacher to pay my rent. That's important to me. As a professor, I had to find a way to talk about the barriers I experienced. So I started putting together film clips of lectures to illustrate the problem. Many are familiar with Laura Mulvey's theses on the "male gaze". But very few people realize how strongly this still determines most of the films that we see - and thus our lives. It was so long ago. But we still get the same pictures (*laughs*).

**How do the students react to this realization?**

---

#### EVENTS

February 15, 12.30 p.m., Zoo Palast 1

February 16, 3 p.m., Zoo Palast 2

February 18, 8 p.m., Cinemaxx 3

February 19, 11 a.m., Cubix 9

February 20th, 2.30 p.m., Cinemaxx 4

In fact, most are shocked and say they haven't seen it before. They know the films, they are the role models from whom they should learn the art of film. But they had never noticed. CalArts is a progressive film school, but camera classes still teach gender-specific lighting. It's easier for those studying there to recognize plot points than the specific point of view in which something is shot.

**Do you think it would be important to teach young people without film studies a basic critical visual knowledge?**

Definitely, that's one reason this movie is here now. Also because of the increasing importance of the visual. But not just the boy. I have given my lectures to a non-student audience several times since 2018. As a result, I was almost urged to make a film out of it to expand availability. The inspiration came from outside.

**In an article for *filmmakers magazine* in the fall of 2017, you wrote that you were not a bit surprised by the allegations against Harvey Weinstein. But also from the hope that his fall could be the beginning of a change in consciousness. How do you feel about it today?**

I do think something has changed. Awareness has grown a lot. At the time, my article was about the most read of the magazine in the whole year. The Harvey Weinstein affair and the Me Too movement also made a big difference in terms of financing my film.

**So far you have mainly made feature films that have traveled to many festivals and have been highly praised by the critics, in which you consciously redirect the "shot design". What aesthetic decisions did you make when staging the women you interviewed in your first documentary?**

I'm sure I've tried to make her look good too. But it was particularly important to me that you could see the difference between the 2D characters in the film stills and the three-dimensional women with real bodies and wrinkles sitting in the armchair and talking about their experiences.

**What are your hopes for yourself from the film?**

In the future maybe more chances to get money and time for more feature films..

**What would be the next steps towards societal change?**

I think it would be important that my film gets a wide distribution. We are in the process of looking for a distributor.

## Would you like to add anything else to the conversation?

That it is about a complex and theoretical subject. But the film is also very entertaining and by no means just something for academics.

---

Found an error on taz.de?

We look forward to receiving an [e-mail to fehleranleitung@taz.de](mailto:fehleranleitung@taz.de) !

Content feedback?

Gladly as a reader comment under the text on taz.de or via the [contact form](#) .

---

Culture / Movie

February 15, 2022

---

### CONDUCTED THE INTERVIEW

**SILVIA HALLENSLEBEN**

---

### SUBJECTS

[##Me too](#), [#film industry](#), [#sexism](#)

---

### PICTURE GALLERY



The Berlinale turns  
70

6 images

<http://taz.de/!g5665495>