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From left to right: Nina Menkes, Girish Shambu, Bert Rebhandl, Christoph Hochhäusler, Djamila Grandits. © Top left: Ann Johansson, bottom left: 4.0 Andi Weiland / berlinergazette.de, right: Matthias Luedecke

# “We Need to Recover Work Made Outside of Auteurism”

How have new developments in society and politics changed our view of film history? What role do Black Lives Matter, #MeToo or post-colonial perspectives play in how we perceive films? Curator Djamila Grandits, filmmaker Nina Menkes, author Girish Shambu and filmmaker Christoph Hochhäusler look for answers to these questions. Moderator: Bert Rebhandl.

**Bert Rebhandl:** Hello everybody. I'd like to start by briefly introducing the participants. From California, we have Nina Menkes, a filmmaker and film scholar, who will be part of this year's Berlinale with her new film [BRAINWASHED: SEX CAMERA POWER](https://www.berlinale.de/en/programme/programme/detail.html?film_id=202200805)

([https://www.berlinale.de/en/programme/programme/detail.html?film\\_id=202200805](https://www.berlinale.de/en/programme/programme/detail.html?film_id=202200805)).

From Vienna, we have Djamila Grandits, a film curator and programmer for several festivals; she's actually calling us tonight from Dakar, Senegal. From Buffalo, New York, we have Girish Shambu, a film critic, film blogger and film scholar. And from Germany, I'm happy to welcome Christoph Hochhäusler, a filmmaker, who also teaches film directing at the DFFB film school here in Berlin. He also is a film blogger and co-editor of the film magazine Revolver. And finally, my name is Bert Rebhandl, I'm a film critic too and will be moderating this discussion.

We want to talk about how our perception of film history has changed in light of recent developments in society and politics. It has become less easy to see film history as a potentially endless field of interesting discoveries, or even to just be a fan of movies. Films are always based in the stereotypes of their time and often actively or even consciously promote racist or sexist positions. Cristina

Nord, head of the Berlinale Forum, gave an example last year when she wrote about THIEF by Michael Mann, a film she used to like, although its problematic depiction of gender relations became impossible for her to overlook upon rewatching it. Michael Mann is often held in high regard as a stylist or even a formalist of cinema, and his case is interesting to understand certain problems of how to reappraise films today, after movements such as #MeToo or Black Lives Matter or postcolonial discourses have changed our perceptions profoundly. I would like to start by asking Nina to say a few words about her film and her view of film history today.

**Nina Menkes:** My film is called BRAINWASHED: SEX CAMERA POWER. It includes 175 film clips from 1896 to 2021, and it ties the gendering of shot design, specifically the objectivization of women, to the epidemic of sexual harassment and assault that we have, particularly in Hollywood, as well as employment discrimination against women, especially in the film industry. I never had a moment, say, of liking Godard and blocking out his sexism. My look back hasn't changed. What has changed is the mainstream consciousness of how much was controlled by white heterosexual men, that the whole area of festivals, funding and distribution was controlled by them, certainly in Hollywood. Maybe Europa was a little better.

I had an intuitive revulsion for those films very early. My first feature, which I made on 16mm for 5000 dollars, is about a prostitute who hates her work. You only see her face, we never see her body, she never takes off her clothes. It was considered extremely radical. I never liked RAGING BULL, I haven't seen THIEF by Michael Mann actually, but there are a million examples. In my film, I have literally 175 of them, a lot of them by the so-called great names like Godard and Hitchcock. I actually like Hitchcock, he plays with the issue, but that doesn't mean that other people aren't still influenced by the fact that his women are always these sexualized objects. We see it across race as well. Spike Lee, Gordon Parks Jr., Park Chan-wook, they do the exact same thing. One film that was shocking to revisit was LAST YEAR IN MARIENBAD by

Alain Resnais. I was shown that film in high school and was completely wowed, I loved the cinematography, the editing, I loved how he played with time. When I reviewed it for BRAINWASHED, I suddenly realized that the entire soundtrack is made up of this man talking about his obsession with this woman, wall to wall. The woman is Delphine Seyrig, and she looks beautiful and nothing else, she doesn't have much of a personality, she is just a beautiful woman. I am aware that many people are stunned when they see my film. But I personally was never conned.

**BR:** Djamila, how would you say things have changed recently. How do you look at film history?

**Djamila Grandits:** You're right in saying things have changed. Its freeing in a way. I am part of this curators' collective where we have totally different ideas and necessities that we want to share and that we want to apply in communicating film. In my work in the collective, it is much more about rethinking accessibility and how to communicate film. We organize open-air cinema screenings in a public space (Karlsplatz in Vienna) where we try to lower the barriers. There is no entrance fee, and we ask ourselves whose stories should be placed at the center of these screenings, in the very center of the city itself? And what communities should we approach, how do we start a dialogue with our audiences?

In festival programming on the other hand, there are many more industrial necessities, like wanting to have recent films, a diversity of positions and countries of production, which is not always that easy considering that most co-productions are done with France or Belgium. How to label a film in terms of where is it from is not always easy when we talk about a diversity of expressions. Has it become easier? There are lots of responsibilities, but also lots of pragmatic decisions. There is a lot of effort needed to make sure calls for entry circulate and make submissions possible. It's a challenge for festivals to provide a platform for applicants who might not already be so integrated into the industry. That is why I don't like the word discovery,

because there is also a very colonial idea behind it. People and institutions are becoming more sensitized when it comes to anti-racism, anti-discrimination, when it comes to gender roles and the necessity of diversity. You mentioned #MeToo and Black Lives Matter as key events that made larger shifts possible, but the ongoing violence has always been there. I sometimes feel that many institutions now realize that they need a change in perspective, but have not yet reached the point of questioning their precise motivation for this shift, aside from pressure in society. It would be good if people in the industry would take the time to answer such questions. Why do we want different content, why do we want a shift in discourse and what is our actual role in it? It's not about just about going along with diversity management, which is close to tokenism, it's also about questioning well-intended but still often violent behavior that is a reproduction of violence.



**BR:** Girish, to what extent has your biography informed your work as a critic?

**Girish Shambu:** I grew up in India, and I am an immigrant to the US. Both those experiences were essential for my cinephilia. In both of those communities, the mainstream cinema communities were auteurist. To give my own example, a film like BIRTH OF A NATION was always held up to be canonical, and I always watched it with great discomfort. There were many detailed essays on it, and there was a strong pressure from communities, not only

white ones, but also brown communities who had been colonized by the white canon. I was brainwashed, to use Nina's term. I thought that questioning this film was not right for me, because I didn't have the expertise to challenge it. And when I did, I was told, "look, this is art, this is not life." I love that those borders between art and life have dissolved within the last decade, especially since #MeToo and Black Lives Matter. Now we know from historians that BIRTH OF A NATION created an explosion in activity on the part of the KuKluxKlan, a racist organization that had been dormant before. That's an extreme example. The more normal one is that most films are racist and sexist and colonialist and homophobic and ableist and speciecist. They have all kinds of problems. Films emerge from the world, which is a very impure place, a place of oppression. THIEF resonates with me because that is a more everyday film with problems such as these. We are surrounded by these films. Our task as cinephiles: what films am I going to refuse, and which ones will I accept, even if they are imperfect? That is the everyday navigation of a cinephile.

**BR:** Christoph, cinephilia is a concept that is still valued in Europe. Would you consider yourself a cinephile?

**Christoph Hochhäusler:** Maybe I can talk a bit about how I got started with cinephilia, which was very late. I grew up without television or cinema, I hadn't seen anything until I was 17. I eventually became infected by this disease called cinephilia when I tried to rescue a friend from it, who, in my view, seemed really sick from it. I always had the feeling that I started too late to get a proper overview, and that is still my dominant impression: I have never seen enough. The film history that I lived through felt like history itself. Yes, it is full of violence, stupidity, big crimes. But this is something I can also read through these films. Problematic films can help us to learn about such problems. I can identify with what Nina says. We need a diversity of viewpoints. I feel that white male film history is still very diverse, but it is, of course, blind to certain things. In a way it has to be. Film is so transparent. You can't hide what you are about and what you care for. That is at once wonderful and terribly

limiting, as we are obviously flawed human beings and have a very limited perspective.

**BR:** Girish, in the article Cristina Nord wrote last year for the Forum website, she made reference to your manifesto “For A New Cinephilia“, for which the notion of refusal is essential. Can you talk a bit about that?

**GS:** I wrote this manifesto “For A New Cinephilia“, which is what Cristina also referred to in her text. A cinema of refusal, which was a part of it, is a complicated question, as we know. Like Nina, I am not going to say that certain filmmakers should never make films. Instead, we have to see what we have centered on so far and what we should be centering on going forward. For me, one big issue here has to do with the fact that for the last 75 years cinephilia was famously mythologized by the directors of the French New Wave who were also the proto-auteurists. The aesthetic system of auteurism is at the very heart of cinephilia. When you embrace that, you marginalize so much of cinema, since most auteurism has revolved around white men. You are limiting the canon to a certain kind of film, although it doesn’t mean those films are bad. There is diagnostic work that can be done with them, they can still teach us about problems, like racism, sexism and colonialism. But we need to go beyond that and need to recover work that was made outside of auteurism. For example, a DVD box set called “Cinema’s First Nasty Women“ is soon to be released, which will include a collection of 100 silent films that mainstream cinema does not know about. These are non-auteurist films that are so subversive, so forward thinking, so funny. This is a way of recovering work by women, by people of color, by queer people. They are in the archives, they just need to be found and written about and get some reach. Questioning how auteurism has limited our view of the history of cinema is important.

**NM:** I have spent every single day of the last two and a half years making BRAINWASHED, not to mention my whole life. I am not interested in telling people how to make films or how to be politically correct. If you are a

white heterosexual male and you like to zoom in on some woman's behind, go for it. My problem is that the funding and distribution structure has excluded these other points of views completely. In an ideal world, you would have everybody: women and women that are gay and the whole long list, all these people would be able to make films and express themselves. The problem with the canon is that there was basically one viewpoint: the white male heterosexual one. All the others weren't accessible because we were shut out. I might hate a film like ONCE UPON A TIME IN HOLLYWOOD, and I don't care for close-up shots of women's derrieres on the screen, but I defend their right to do it. I just wish there were a million other films accessible.

**CH:** This topic of the real world impact of films is something I'm very interested in. I don't know if you're familiar with the term "Vorbehaltsfilm". After World War II, certain German films from the National Socialist era were semi-banned. It is still only possible to screen them if the screening is prefaced by a critical introduction. I always saw that as an insult to my intelligence, as if were necessary to have some professor tell me that this is a bad film. But it makes sense to be careful. People working in concentration camps had to watch JUD SUESS und DER EWIGE JUDE, and it had a real impact, it motivated people to perpetrate crimes, especially since JUD SUESS is a relatively well made, entertaining, Hollywood-like film. So it can be helpful to provide additional information, such as the fact that Leni Riefenstahl used concentration camp victims as extras in her film TIEFLAND. An even more contemporary example: recruitment for the US marines went up after TOP GUN. So films have an impact.

**NM:** One of the things that we looked into in when making BRAINWASHED is that the system of shot design is tied to real-life events. There has been extensive research conducted over decades that men are more likely to engage in sexual harassment and assault after viewing sexually objectifying media. They have actually shown it in research. It's not impossible to measure. TOP GUN and the marines, that's the power of storytelling on



the big screen. As a creative artist, I'm not into telling someone what to do and what not to do. I'm maybe repeating myself, but it's about who has access to the means of production and distribution. If my film VIRAGA about a prostitute who hates her work had had a 10 million dollar advertising budget, that would have balanced out other films with a huge reach. It has also been proven that films by women are discriminated against. For example, Eliza Hittman won a prize at the Berlinale for NEVER RARELY SOMETIMES ALWAYS, a female-centered film about abortion. But although she had all those acolytes, her distributor put hardly anything into the advertising budget. This discrimination has been documented. There are interlocking webs of ideology that keep these other perspectives at the margins.

**GS:** Some great work has been carried out by female film historians like Shelley Stamp and Jane Gaines. They wrote that women had actually a huge presence in American cinema in the silent era and into the 20s. Women were only purged from the industry when it became institutionalized as the capitalist commercial institution of Hollywood. All of the roles of director, editor and other departments were not as distinctly demarcated as today. Women took on multiple roles and were not always credited in a clean way. But that history exists. Women did make films.



**NM:** Revisiting film history is always tricky because of the lack of access to production and distribution that everyone who was not at the center was subjected to. I'm dying to see this boxset, Girish. After the #MeToo movement, I realized that we don't have a class at CalArts on the history of women directors. So I tried to put together a syllabus. Okay, we have Ida Lupino and Dorothy Arzner, the only women working in Hollywood for forty years. I was desperately looking for some women of color. We have *LOSING GROUNDS* by Kathleen Collins, Julie Dash with *DAUGHTERS OF THE DUST*, we have Nora Thurston's short films. We can't really revise film history in any meaningful way, because those films never got to be made. There have never been huge budget films by women of color. There are not too many people making films with no money like I did. They get discouraged. I remember reading an article on Moufida Tlatli, who died of Covid last year. I always showed her film *THE SILENCES OF THE PALACE*. When she went to France in the sixties to study film, they wouldn't even let her into the directing program, she had to study editing. We have a couple of films by her. There should have been twenty.

**GS:** An additional problem with auteurism is that it compels completism. Every single film by Fritz Lang or Alain Resnais is important, even minor films take on importance when they are made by a major auteur. That system compels you to stay within the same body of work over and over again and not investigate outside it. Few women have been admitted to the corridors of auteurism. So it is what I would call a manspreading machine. It is a way to hold on to and consolidate white male supremacy.

**CH:** I think you're right. Auteurism was way too successful. In a way, it was a very unlikely success. Some of the strongest ideas about it were uttered with a certainty that conquered everything. We have to fight this sort of overreach. Of course, canons have to be revised all the time, and "Cinema's First Nasty Women" sounds fantastic. Yet there is also a pleasure in the canon. It allows a community to develop subtlety of

argumentation, because a canon creates a rhizome of reference for all those in the know about it.

**GS:** As you know, there is a question in the US now about giving reparations to the African-American community. How do we reverse the effects of systemic injustice? If we apply that same idea to film culture: how can we imagine that? We all have to think about our own individual place in film culture. I don't write about white men any more. Because there are so many other people to be discovered, we have referred to white men enough, there are other writers, thinkers, filmmakers around the world. I see centering on and thinking about non-white male films as part of this project of reparations.

**BR:** From a traditional narrative perspective, the question arises: wouldn't you feel regret about removing someone like Howard Hawks from the story? He was a figure like Michael Mann in his period. A director liked for his body of work largely because of his masculine idiosyncrasies.

**GS:** I don't really feel that I've lost Howard Hawks. I've loved his films since my teenage years and I still watch them. It has been a masculine tendency to make lists all the times, to make these fine distinctions in the canon: great films, good films, not so good films. Sometimes now, I think more about what films might need me more rather than what I need to see. Most of my writing now is focused on marginalized peoples. I don't think Hawks needs my writing. His films are still fascinating for many reasons, especially gendered ones. There are very few women in his films, they have to be strong there. I don't miss his films, I still enjoy them and we can see them through a different lens than we did maybe ten or twenty years ago.

**BR:** Djamila, has the festival circuit also reacted to the greater awareness of the imbalances of film history that has emerged in recent times?

**DG:** It comes from a system of references that we are not entrusted with the nuances of, so this sort of differentiated discourse is missing in how works are currently selected. So there is change, but there are also

problems and new challenges that come with it.

Personally speaking, I appreciate all the colleagues that I am working with, because it really makes a difference as to how diverse a field is. Just because I am Black, I don't want to be the ambassador for all the marginalized work out there. It's not my position to educate, there is just much more knowledge beyond singular positions. I really appreciate diverse environments when it comes to committees, juries and selections. It starts in funding and ends in distribution. It is a question of decision-making and power throughout the industry. Who is actually making the decisions about what is being funded and what is being distributed? The whole idea of the festival circuit could itself do with some rethinking, for as more and more festivals hunt for recent works, ever bigger gaps in output emerge. A country with a European state-funded funding system will have a higher output than a country where the infrastructure of production and funding is lacking. So representation is also bound to that. With all those decisions, we can shape a new canon. It is important to question what a festival still is in 2022, what role does it play and what do we want it to be.

**NM:** I was sensitized to these issues very early on in my life. I didn't have to learn about them, I felt them. I never wanted to be a teacher, I only became a teacher because I couldn't get paid to make my films. It was only in the last couple of years that the outside world seemed to become interested in these things in a larger context. The film that I am presenting at the Berlinale would never have been financed five years ago. I think that is pretty incredible. And I'm not talking about thirty years ago, I'm talking about a few years ago: It would have been impossible. I am very amazed by that transformation and am very grateful for it.

**BR:** I think this is a good moment to close our discussion. Thank you everybody.



On screen: Rita Hayworth in *The Lady from Shanghai*, an example of gendered lighting. (Menkes List #4)



**Djamila Grandits** is a Vienna-based curator, programmer and cultural worker. As part of CineCollective, she is responsible for the artistic direction and management of Kaleidoskop Film und Freiluft. She has been part of the selection committees of DOK Leipzig, Kasseler Dokfest, frameout - digital summer screenings & tricky women | tricky realities.

**Christoph Hochhäusler** studied at the University of Television and Film in Munich. He has written about film in numerous settings, including as founder and co-editor of the film magazine "Revolver" (1998). His films MILCHWALD (2003) and EINE MINUTE DUNKEL (2011) were shown at the Berlinale Forum. From 2017 to 2021 he was the senior lecturer of directing at the DFFB.

**Nina Menkes** is a filmmaker whose films have screened at international festivals including Sundance, Cannes (ACID), Rotterdam, Locarno and Toronto. Her documentary MASSAKER, for which she was also cinematographer, premiered at the Berlinale and won the FIPRESCI Award. Her current film BRAINWASHED: SEX-CAMERA-POWER is based on her lecture "Sex and Power: The Visual Language of Oppression" and is screening at the Panorama section of the Berlinale.

**Bert Rebhandl** is a freelance journalist, author and film critic for the FAZ. He is also co-editor of the film magazine "Cargo".

**Girish Shambu** is a film scholar, writer and editor for Film Quarterly's online column Quorum. He teaches at Canisius

College in Buffalo, New York and blogs about film culture at girishshambu.net. He is the author of "The New Cinephilia".

## OVERVIEW

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