



Sinéad O'Connor in 1988

NOTHING COMPARES

Directed by Kathryn Ferguson

Out on Showtime in November

KATHRYN FERGUSON'S DOCUMENTARY *Nothing Compares* shows how everything conspired to keep singer/songwriter Sinéad O'Connor quiet; yet when she was given a guitar and a microphone, her voice became a thunderous force of nature that still resonates in these insidiously theocratic times.

Nothing Compares is as powerful as its subject. Belfast-based filmmaker Ferguson uses a blend of dreamlike footage shot in Ireland and archival news footage, along with O'Connor's words in voice-over, to take the viewer back to a time in which it seemed as if the entire world stopped to ridicule a young woman speaking the truth. What's striking in the film's clips is that she was so young, shy, and introverted when the industry tried to make her into a pop star. But none of that prevented the media or the public from savaging O'Connor when she spoke up against the Catholic Church's coverup of sexual abuse, America's so-called patriotism, and Ireland's abortion laws—all topics that we're still protesting decades later.

The film's compressed focus on the years 1987 to 1993 brings home just how precocious O'Connor was, and how fast and bright both her pop culture ascendancy and fall were. Only at the very end of the film do we see her today, barefoot and beatific, her voice as powerful as ever. "They tried to bury me," she concludes. "They didn't realize I was a seed." —RUFUS HICKOK



Director Nina Menkes

BRAINWASHED: SEX-CAMERA-POWER

Directed by Nina Menkes

Out October 21

A depiction of something—be it "bad," like violence, or "good," like a strong female protagonist—should never be conflated with the artist's endorsement of it. But what is the cumulative effect of a medium like film that so frequently shows women being beaten, killed, and violated while si-

multaneously objectifying them?

Nina Menkes' expansive documentary *Brainwashed* touches on those repercussions—the absence of women behind the camera, the lack of agency female actors have in sex scenes—while also picking apart the cishet male gaze encoded in film form. This is demonstrated through alternately grisly and humorous movie clips from different eras. For example, a gratuitous shot of *Black Widow's* cleavage as she's being interrogated raises questions about the efficacy of reappropriating sexist tropes.

Unlike other art forms, cinema largely obeys the same formal conventions that were established in the 1930s. Menkes does not argue that a "female gaze" should replace the current male-dominated paradigm, nor does she proselytize for the abo-

lition of all on-screen eroticism. Rather, she calls for a radical reinvention of how shots and film grammar are formulated.

Crucially, Menkes' documentary is not calling for cancelation. Viewers are meant to wrestle with this film, not passively consume a simple message—and they'll leave invigorated. —VIOLET LUCCA



Raffiella Chapman as Vesper

VESPER

Directed by Kristina Buozyte and Bruno Samper

Out September 30

Vesper takes well-worn dystopian young-adult tropes and makes them new again—or at least more compelling than they seem on paper—through its sheer plausibility, an immersive atmosphere, and strong performances.

Vesper (Raffiella Chapman) is a 13-year-old girl scrounging to survive in a post-apocalyptic landscape. The most pressing enemy is food insecurity, brought on by earlier events but maintained by men like *Vesper's* neighbor Jonas (Eddie Marsan), who relishes the power he has over other, less-fortunate folks. Her bedridden father (Richard Brake) communicates through a homemade drone, which serves as her companion through the weird wasteland. When *Vesper* discovers a mysterious woman (Rosy McEwen) in need of help, the teen agrees in exchange for a way to the Citadel, where the powerful live in relative luxury. Jonas and others like him, however, are on the hunt for this glamorous stranger, too.

Vesper is a singular experience, blurring the lines between sci-fi and horror. The filmmakers trust the audience to work out the finer details of this seemingly timeless dystopia themselves, which is especially refreshing in today's exposition-heavy blockbuster landscape. At times, the film feels like an extended prologue to a larger tale, if only because it introduces viewers to a world demanding further exploration. —SARAH LAHUE

RENTAL FILMS