

# The power game



Review written by **Melita Zajc** AUGUST 11, 2022

Where does the pleasure of watching films come from? Today, when we can watch films practically everywhere, this question is more relevant than ever. In her seminal essay «**Visual pleasure and narrative cinema**», **Laura Mulvey** pointed to the distinction between the active «male gaze» and the passive female «to-be-looked-at-ness», expressed in the simple sentence «men act and women appear» as the origin of the cinematic pleasure. *Brainwashed: Sex-Camera-Power*, the documentary by Nina Menkes, a renowned US producer and filmmaker, is finally bringing this theory to the general public. It intertwines well-chosen clips from several old and new films, staged interviews with prominent female directors, producers, and theorists, and an easy-to-understand explanation by Menkes herself.

According to Mulvey, the fascination with film is enforced by the patterns of fascination already at work within the individual subject and the social formations. This latter is particularly important as it introduces the materialist view that individuals are, to a certain extent, shaped by historical and social conditions. The display of women as sexual objects was the leitmotif of erotic spectacle from pin-up to strip-tease. Mulvey showed how film medium normalized this, as all the main looks associated with the film are actually male, that of the director (mostly male) who organized the pro-filmic event, that of the camera as it records the event (mostly in the hands of male DOPs) and that of the male protagonists, all watching the passive female protagonist. The individual members of the audience watching the final product might have different identities, but they are all obliged to identify with the male gaze.



*Brainwashed: Sex-Camera-Power*, a film by Nina Menkes; PC: Hugo Wong

## Points of departure

This is the point of departure of *Brainwashed*. The film is based on the cinematic presentation «Sex and Power, the Visual Language of Cinema», in which director Menkes convincingly presented what she termed «the standard line of identification» and the extraneousness of such a position for others, say, «if you are female heterosexual, which would be me, how does this play out, how does this affect us?» She showed how film narratives often transformed the representation of women as passive into justifications for abusive behaviour. She condemned the all too frequent praise of such films as masterpieces, «think about how that affects us... deeply, internally, as women,... it's pretty intense». And she gave voice to her colleagues who recalled practical obstacles they encountered as women film directors. For example, when **Eliza Hittman**, the director of *Never Rarely Sometimes Always* (2020), went to **Sundance** with her first feature, she «couldn't get an agent and couldn't get a distributor».

Julie Dash, the director of *Daughters of the Dust* (1991), comments in the film, «The master's tools would never dismantle the master's house». Indeed. It is not easy to dismantle the language of film through the said language of film. But *Brainwashed* is rather successful in doing this. Talking about *Mandingo* (Richard Fleischer, 1975), a film in which a white female slave owner forces an enslaved man into sexual intercourse and the roles are reversed, Menkes concluded that these scenes «are not about sex; they are about power». This explains many things. Contrary to conservative belief, nothing essential binds men to the active and women to the passive position. The difference is structural, the active has the power, and the passive does not have it. It can be a woman, a man or a person of any other gender. This is why the most courageous contemporary directors even subvert the sexist shot design from within to create radical, fluid and deeply disruptive representations of gender, for example, as **Julia Ducournau** does in her film *Titane* (2021).

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## Power triangle

Power relations also underlie and connect the three elements of Menkes' triangle (the visual language of cinema, employment discrimination and sexual abuse/assault). The authors and producers of *Brainwashed* themselves are part of this. They have been working before and will, after this film, still have to work in an environment where, as we hear, 90% of actresses experienced abuse at work, so making this film might be even more courageous than it seems. I do not share the idea, suggested by the film's interpretation of *Raging Bull* (Martin Scorsese, 1980), that **Hollywood** executives are being brainwashed into abusive behaviour by the films they produce. However, I understand why the authors of *Brainwashed* avoided singling out specific abusers among their Hollywood colleagues. It is also perfectly reasonable that they focussed exclusively on sexist representations of women. Not because of some essential **femininity** but simply because, historically, this form of **sexism** prevails in Hollywood and other films we watch, and it is high time it stops.

Think about it. Mulvey published her essay in 1975. Interviewed for this film, she told Menkes: «I would have sworn that by the turn of the century, 50% of people making films will be women and that due to that the whole way of thinking about the image and

about gender would have been completely transformed and it just seems extraordinary how little progress has actually been made». Extraordinary indeed. To watch a film that focuses on women and on female voices that have been seen for such a long time silenced by the film (the most beautiful art form for many of us) is itself remarkable. *Brainwashed* should have been made long ago.