

# Sundance Review: *Brainwashed: Sex-Camera-Power* Passionately Promotes the Female Gaze

David Katz • January 22, 2022



Though the different eras of global feminist thought are known as “waves,” which implies successive awakenings of liberation and critique, the film world takes an inordinately long time to develop alongside it. Amidst the social upheavals of the ‘60s, where previously “permissive” sexual content was finally allowed to be seen in mainstream cinema, the industry arguably became even more sexist, lecherous, and restrictive around female subjects.

There’s also a more subtle way to see the pervasive sexism of film culture: through documentaries, and broadcast TV on film criticism and history. While a titan like Pauline Kael could flourish on public radio (leading to her influential reign at the *New Yorker*), from Siskel & Ebert, to Scorsese’s *Journey Through American Movies* and onto the video-essay era, it is a sausage fest. Faint as it may seem, it makes a difference when an authoritative-seeming, patriarchal figure is alone on that pedestal, guiding you through the art form, and excluding so much more of what could be said.

It’s interesting, still, that Nina Menkes, a radical American independent filmmaker, has chosen to take up this mantle of something so pedagogic, when her own slippery and ever-mysterious films (such as *Queen of Diamonds* and *Phantom Love*) are not. But it does clarify, with the articulacy of a really good film-studies seminar leader, what was bubbling beneath the eerie surface of those works. Criticism can be poetry, but in *Brainwashed: Sex-Camera-Power* it is definitely prose, reserving the expressiveness for her own oeuvre.

Following from and documenting a public lecture she gave at Cannes 2018, along with her own teaching work at CalArts, Menkes’ background as a practicing filmmaker gives a bit more precision to her close readings, which can be vaguer in the hands of those without experience actually “doing”—the remarks on 3D lighting and sound mixing, using an ensemble scene from *Raging Bull*, being an example. Harder to judge is how impactful it will be: for anyone immersed in cinephilia, especially the culture of debate within it, Menkes’ arguments have become a kind of received wisdom—the viewer can nod along a bit impatiently, if not doubting their validity for a second. It also, more reductively, treats the issue like a problem with a clear solution in sight: that if only we could be reconditioned from this brainwashing, the resulting film culture—not to mention other aspects of society—would be washed of bad influences. This latter point is where the hermetic use of the film world to speak more broadly about feminism doesn’t quite fit.

It’s pleasing to see the well-liked-enough *Blade Runner 2049* used as a defining example for her thesis—if the film were released now, only five years later, it would certainly have fewer titillating images and, via Ana de Armas’s copious nudity, be less catered to a kind of horny adolescent imagination. If the intent to objectify and depersonalize women is one thing, the pragmatics are just as telling: Laura Mulvey’s visual semiotics, of the seer and seen, are drawn upon time and again, and Menkes gives a persuasive, sometimes nightmarish sense of the leering perspectives found across much visual media.

Later in the film, the awards success of *Nomadland* and *Promising Young Women* is seen as evidence that the tide is turning, but the industry’s greater openness to female stories is not going to dispel everything else Menkes diagnoses here. In her talking-head segment, Julie Dash (famed for *Daughters of the Dust*) repeats Audre Lorde’s exhortation that “The master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house.” Accordingly *Brainwashed* should help some viewers’ understanding of what they’ve only cursorily considered while irritating others with its didacticism. What’s most important is how we can act on its prescriptions—if it’s not too late.

*Brainwashed: Sex-Camera-Power* premiered at the 2022 Sundance Film Festival.

Grade: B-

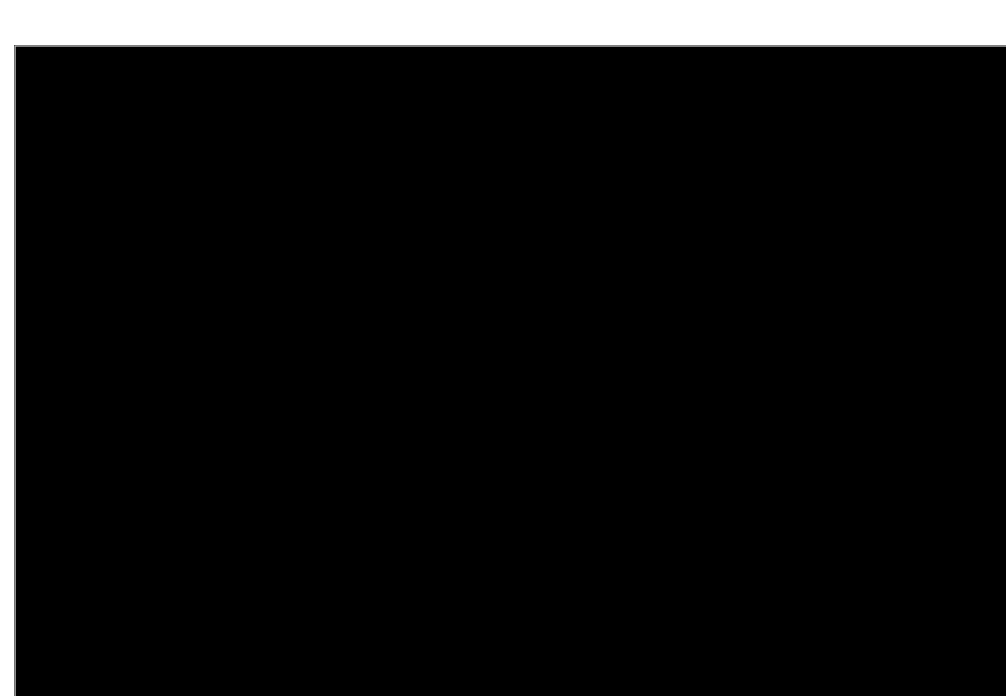
Brainwashed Festivals Nina Menkes Sundance 2022



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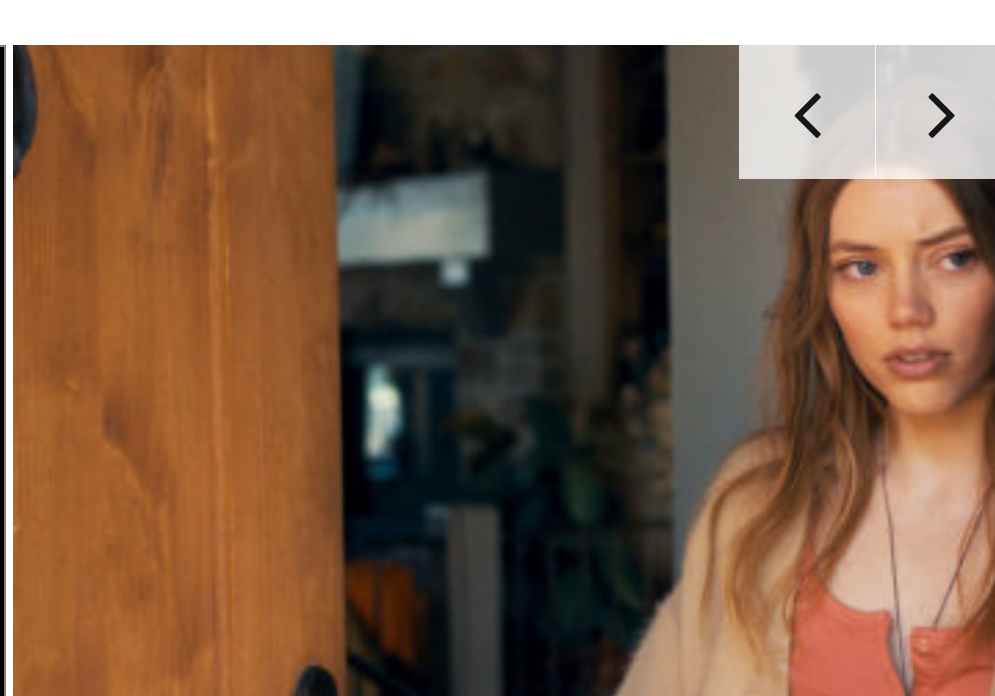
David Katz has been a freelance film journalist for over a decade. Born in Columbus, Ohio and raised in London, he primarily writes for the trade publication Cineuropa, but also loves popping up at The Film Stage from time to time.

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