



Director Nina Menkes in "Brainwashed: Sex-Camera-Power." (Sundance Institute)

'Brainwashed' Director Rails Against Hollywood Misogyny: 'The World Is Still in the Dark Ages'

by **BRENDA GAZZAR** | October 21, 2022 @ 1:51 PM



Nina Menkes addresses critics of her new documentary and why people have a need to defend how movies have historically filmed women

Independent filmmaker Nina Menkes can hardly believe that her new documentary "Brainwashed: Sex-Camera-Power" about the gendered politics of shot design is causing a stir.

The film is being released in theaters starting Friday via Kino Lorber at the Laemmle in the Los Angeles area and at DCTV's Firehouse Cinema in New York City, with a national rollout to follow.

"We've had a lot of rave reviews, but we've also been attacked and it's unbelievable to me that women would attack this film," Menkes, who also teaches film production at California Institute of the Arts, told The Wrap. "It's just like the whole way of cinema being based on these kinds of beautiful, fragmented female bodies seems to be like something people are dying to defend."

The documentary's premise is that male and female actors are often shot in very different ways regardless of the context, decade or genre of film, Menkes explained. Camera shots help sexualize females, for example, by focusing on select body parts such as their breasts and butts, while that's rarely done for men. In addition, the female is often the object of a shot — the one who is being looked at through a heterosexual male gaze — rather than the subject who's doing the looking. Females are also more likely to be bathed in fuzzy, male fantasy-like lighting rather than 3D lighting with shadow and depth.



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This system of shot design runs like an undercurrent consistently through films to such a degree that it often goes unnoticed, Menkes said.

Now that Menkes, who uses some 200 film clips as examples in her documentary, is calling attention to this power dynamic, "a lot of people are all upset about it," she said. "You know, 'How dare you say these things about cinema!'"

The L.A.-based filmmaker said it's hard to believe this would be open to debate in 2022. But "the world is still in the Dark Ages as far as misogyny," she added.



It's also reflected in other ways in Hollywood, too. She noted that Harrison Ford, who's 80 years old and has wrinkles to show for it, is set to star in "Captain America: New World Order" and is considered sexy while a woman's acting career in Hollywood is often considered over at 40 or 50.

"If your primary value is as a young sex object, then obviously if you're like 50 and over, it doesn't really work," she said.

Menkes' first feature film was Magdalena Viraga (1986) about a sex worker in East L.A. who has been imprisoned for the murder of her pimp. The film, which Menkes shot and has been hailed as a staple of feminist cinema, showed only the protagonist's face during sex. The protagonist, played by Menkes' sister Tinka Menkes, also never takes off her clothes on camera.

The film earned a Los Angeles Film Critics Award and it was shown at scores of film festivals but the director said she could not get another film financed in Hollywood afterward.

"People were very freaked out by the film in the industry," she said. "And it seems like people are still freaked out when you confront 'the male gaze.' It's very contentious. It's very, very ingrained in the way that cinema is made by male and female directors."

"Brainwashed" was executive produced by Tim Disney, Susan Disney Lord and Abigail Disney and received funding from the Disney family.

Menkes believes it got funded largely because of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission investigation into allegations of Hollywood's discriminatory hiring practices against female directors that launched in 2015 and [the force of the #MeToo movement](#).

Part of the solution is raising consciousness about these issues, she said. Menkes hopes "Brainwashed" will be able to do just that — despite the pushback the film has gotten in some reviews.

Though in [Elizabeth Weitzman's review of "Brainwashed" for TheWrap](#), she felt the documentary was must-see viewing. "If you've ever watched a classic movie and wondered why no one else seems uncomfortable with its portrayal of female characters, you'll want to see 'Brainwashed' as soon as possible," she wrote. "And if you haven't — well, that may be all the more reason to seek it out."

"What I hope from 'Brainwashed' is that the awareness of this and how pervasive it is will make people think twice instead of just automatically shooting in this kind of way," Menkes said.

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