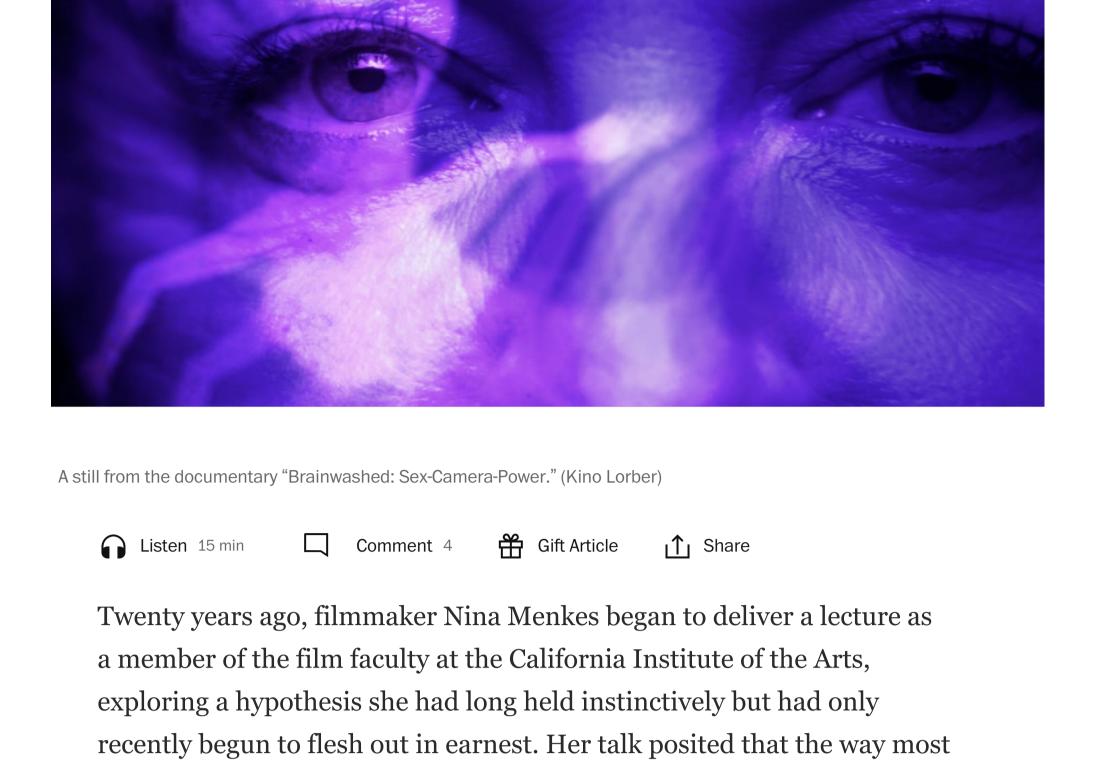
On-screen and off, men are subjects, women are objects With 'Brainwashed: Sex-Camera-Power,' director Nina Menkes connects the dots between fil m language and real-world sexism

By Ann Hornaday October 24, 2022 at 6:00 a.m. EDT





sexist, and that those fundamentals of cinematic style have real-world consequences, in Hollywood and beyond.

bell hooks and Laura Mulvey — who in the 1970s originated the concept of a "male gaze" in cinema — Menkes kept refining her talk, loading it with clips from films considered masterpieces and urging her students to look deeper than narrative structure and subject matter to how films are staged, photographed and put together. Her thesis: Virtually since its inception, filmmaking has hewed to unconscious but inviolable "laws" wherein women are routinely reduced to hyper-sexualized objects, even when they're the protagonists of the story. In 2017, Menkes wrote an essay for the cinema journal Filmmaker connecting the aesthetic language of film — the voyeuristic habit of

cameras panning up and down female bodies; the predatory metaphor

of fragmenting those bodies into close-ups of breasts, behinds or other

body parts; the flattening of women's facial images into airbrushed,

Weinstein and his fellow executives in real life. "Within this system,"

Menkes wrote, "men are subjects and young women are objects for

lifeless masks — to the behavior of former film producer Harvev

mainstream movies are photographed and edited — the basics of

composition, lighting, framing and camera movement — is inherently

Informed by the groundbreaking work of such theorists as Judith Butler,

gratification/consumption." Menkes's essay, titled "The Visual Language of Oppression: Harvey Wasn't Working in a Vacuum," became a viral sensation. And it led to Menkes's being invited to film festivals and conferences around the world to deliver what by then had become a provocative one-woman show

of liberation," adding that "I didn't even know I was in prison." You've been working with this material for over 20 years, and yet this was a process of discovery for you.

spectator?

A: My early films were automatically confronting that so-called male gaze way of filming intuitively, from very early [on]. And later, after three or four films, I did get introduced to Judith Butler and Laura Mulvey and bell hooks and all these great people who helped me articulate what I was feeling. And then I was like, "Okay, I've got to take this to my production students," because there's very often a split, I find. The production students never read film theory, and the film theory people generally don't make movies. So, I was looking for clips to show

propelled by germinal insights,

galvanizing outrage and

They bothered me without [my] having a label for them [as sexist]. I remember having this thought that I'd better get married by the time I'm 25, because otherwise I'll be too old. So thoughts like that I remember getting directly off the screen. Q: For me, it was the scene from "Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid" that you use in "Brainwashed," when Robert Redford's character is about to rape Katharine Ross's character at gunpoint, until it's revealed that they're already lovers. I was probably 10 years old when I saw that movie, and it totally confused me. I understood that I was supposed to find it funny and sexy, but I was also deeply uncomfortable with the latent hostility of it.

occurred to me that when I would go out on a date, I would leave myself at home. If you think about what is allowed for a heterosexual man in our culture, they're allowed to be full-on human subjects who are also sexual beings. They don't turn into objects when they're having sex; they stay subjects. But the idea that a woman would just be a full-on human subject who's also sexual without doing that little swivel to the object position, I don't see a lot of films where we get examples of that. **Q:** To me, that's a function not just of what's come to be accepted as film language, but the gatekeepers saying, "That's what I want to see."

authentic selves behind if we want to be loved. But there's also an element of play. There's a pleasure we get from looking pretty. **A:** But why is that objectification? I think that's really important to distinguish. Let's say it's Academy Awards night and Mr. So and So is going and he might get an award. Is he going to take a lot of time and get his best suit and maybe go have a massage [and] make sure he gets a

haircut or probably even a manicure, and look as flawless as possible? I

objectification. Even getting dressed up to look nice for work, that's not

objectification. Wanting to look good is a normal human thing, and men

want to look good, too. I think that what's wrong is when looking good is

the number one point and the only point, and the main determining

would say yes. Getting dressed up for a special occasion is not

point for, like you said, love and companionship.

walk me through "Hustlers."

Q: Actually, I'm going to loop back. When you talk about the split, I

think a lot of women feel that way - that we have to leave our

A: [In] "Hustlers," we have these women who are supposedly selfempowering through their own self-objectification. But if you look at the camera in "Hustlers," most of the shots in the strip club have the men foregrounded so that we understand that [Lopez] is being looked at. So she's embodying to-be-looked-at-ness. Also, this film brings up something that I have noticed is a key point for a lot of people, which is: Is self-objectification empowering? Studies have shown that teenage girls and young women who self-sexualize or self-objectify have higher levels of body surveillance and body shame. It also leads them to be desensitized to the victimization of girls and women in real life, and it translates into an increased tolerance for sexual violence and harassment. Another psychological study found that the more girls consume such images, the more they will suffer from low self-esteem, depression and eating disorders. So you have this incredible image of JLo, but she's there as a sexual object. I think we just have to question

the dodge of "commenting on." And this is where I want to talk about "Blonde," Andrew Dominik's movie about Marilyn Monroe. To me, that movie is such a bad-faith exercise in a filmmaker doing the thing he's pretending to critique. **A:** Let's look at it from the "Brainwashed" perspective. Let's start off with point of view: Is the film from her point of view? When we're talking about shot design, no, it isn't. Is she objectified within the shot design? Yes, she is. The most extreme examples are the shots taken from the interior of her vagina [during an abortion]. They do it twice, first in black and white and then in color. It's anatomically impossible for that to be from her point of view. So, okay, it's got to be from the

is all around it and on top of it and under it, and it's damaging. Does that mean we can't have beautiful women in films? No, that's not what I'm saying. I'm saying let's let consciousness illuminate and see what happens. **Q:** One film where I think we saw consciousness being brought to bear in a transformational way was "Good Luck to You, Leo Grande," with Emma Thompson and Daryl McCormack. Consent and humanism are

just woven through that film in a way that feels hopeful to me.

A: Yeah. One of the incredible things about "Leo Grande" is that,

and she's 60 and she's a subject. It's like, wow. That's absolutely

basically, the whole movie's about sex and having sex and sex scenes

revolutionary. The fact that ["Leo Grande"] was made and got a lot of

attention is very hopeful. The fact that "Nomadland" won an Academy

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hundreds of film clips from some of the most beloved films in the canon. In January, Menkes debuted Filmmaker Nina Menkes. (Ann Johansson) "Brainwashed: Sex-Camera-Power," the documentary version of her lecture, at the Sundance Film Festival. (The film will have a special screening at Suns Cinema in Washington on Nov. 9 and at the Alexandria Film Festival on Nov. 12, with producer Maria Giese in attendance.) In early October, Menkes discussed "Brainwashed" during a two-hour Zoom session. This interview has been edited for length and clarity. **Q:** Nina, in your introduction before the Sundance screening of "Brainwashed" in January, you said that making this film was an "act

my students, and that's how the lecture developed, [and later] how the

film developed. So, you're talking about a person, myself, who is very

well aware of all these issues, has made films that confront these issues,

has felt on my skin the oppression of all of this. And yet sitting there for

two years and reviewing 600 film clips and putting them together one

after the other, was like, "Oh my God." This poison has been sitting in

my blood. It's not that I'm completely free of it, but I'm *more* free of it.

disorienting and even damaging the act of movie-watching can be for

women, because we're constantly asked to internalize a point of view

A: I grew up without a television. We had no TV at home. My mom was

against TV. She thought it was a horrible thing. And obviously, when I

grew up, there was no internet and no DVD store down the street. So I

wasn't exposed to this barrage that people are now. And, for whatever

reason, I never got pleasure from those scenes. I was not the person who

got pleasure and then woke up later and said, "Eew, that's gross." When

I did see films, and it wasn't that often, I remember seeing films with

[images of] young, beautiful girls and I would dis-identify with them.

Q: One of the things that "Brainwashed" illustrates is just how

that is often leering or mocking or reductive or violent. Do you

remember the first time you experienced that disconnect as a

A: I remember when we found that example, because the process of

hunting for clips was quite massive, obviously. And we wanted to find a

Q: It's also the classic cake-and-eat-it-too that Hollywood has engaged

with for decades. How can we get the titillation, but with a fig leaf?

Q: Another idea you explore in "Brainwashed" is how our notions of

what's good and beautiful and of high quality cinematically have been

bound up with what the men who control this art form consider good

really hard to unpack. I fall into that trance along with everybody else.

images. But as a person who had to go on a date with a man who I knew

was looking at me like that, I couldn't navigate it. I remember saying to

and beautiful and worth looking at. For me, as a critic, that's been

A: As a film viewer and a filmmaker, I didn't get seduced by those

my psychoanalyst [while I was] making the film that it suddenly

sexual assault kind of scene from an A-list film, but that didn't — and

this is very on point for our whole discussion — that didn't [trigger]

people who've been raped.

A: Yeah.

I've gotten to the point where I think all mainstream cinema is fetish filmmaking. It's all just what those guys want to see and what turns them on. **A:** Are you going to segue into "Blonde" right now?

Q: One thing you dissect in "Brainwashed" is something I've long been vexed by, which is the degree to which women filmmakers have internalized these values. Let's talk about "Hustlers," about strippers who mastermind a credit card theft scheme. When I saw that movie, I was in that trance, where I was just blown away by Jennifer Lopez and her physicality and her mastery and her ferocious screen presence.

She's such a charismatic performer and dancer, I didn't have the

presence of mind to unpack it the way you do in your movie, so please

why that has to be the way that women are empowered.

Q: It also exemplifies that cake-and-eat-it-too syndrome I talked about

earlier. Now we have this concept of "agency" that is used as a

is to have the girl make the first sexual move.

sexuality.

"Sharp Stick," the list is long.

narrative dodge, while leaving dubious sexual politics intact. I'm

thinking of the movie "Red Rocket," about a porn actor grooming a

teenage girl, and the way the filmmaker gets buy-in from the audience

A: [Film producer] Amy Ziering calls it reversal of desire. "Lolita," "Red

Rocket," there are so many examples where the young woman is the

aggressor. What they're trying to say is that this object, this underage

Q: Another film that engages some of these issues but lands much more

ambiguously is Lena Dunham's "Sharp Stick." The protagonist isn't a

teenager, but she's childlike. And she's on this mission to explore her

A: "Sharp Stick" actually starts with fragmented close-up body parts [of

filming her, so it a little bit mitigates it. I can say that on the level of shot

actress Taylour Paige], which I was like, "Really, again?" However, it

does then cut, and we understand that the point of view is the sister

design, it does not reinforce the male gaze, with the exception of that

opening shot, which I'm really not sure had to be there, to be honest.

Why do so many films start with that? "Lost in Translation," "Titane,"

Q: I want to get back to the fig leaves. In addition to "agency," there's

person, is a subject when she's not a subject. She's the object of a

predator, and yet they're trying to make it okay by spinning it.

abortionist's point of view. **Q:** I thought it was the cervix's point of view, because the speculum was coming toward the viewer. But maybe I'm misremembering it.

Actually, I've been trying to block it for weeks.

A: Oh my God. It's worse than I thought. Whoa.

all of this?

Q: This gets into my own challenge unpacking pleasure. In

"Brainwashed," you use those creamy shots of Rita Hayworth in "The

Lady From Shanghai" as examples of 2D versus 3D lighting, where

men have crags and shadows and women look like these magazine

covers. And even watching your film, while you're critiquing it, I'm

A: Well, to return to something I said in "Brainwashed," if you are a

male director and you want to shoot someone's derriere, I am not the

sex police. I am not saying don't do that. I'm just pointing out that,

woman. It's just that it's part of this tsunami of images which have

unfortunately, the vast majority of films we see do that. I don't think

that by itself there's something wrong with seeing a shot of a beautiful

created a situation where women are the only oppressed people who are

a majority on planet Earth. We're 51 percent [of the population] and we

earn less, we have fewer rights, we can't pass the ERA in this country. So

thinking, "Oh, God, she is so beautiful." And I have the same experience

watching Marilyn Monroe. So tell me, where do we put our pleasure in

this beauty thing is just loaded down with all this massive baggage that

Award starring a 60-year-old woman and it's her perspective — whether you like the film or not, it doesn't really matter. It's like, there was this 60-year-old woman in a leading role and it was her vision and feeling about life. I'm not saying you have to make a film about a 60-year-old woman, but just that it exists can also give young women, when they go to the movies, the idea that life isn't going to end when they're 35. Maybe it's 45 now. **#** Gift Article **□** 4 Comments

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