



# Brainwashed – Sex, Camera, Power Review – LFF 2022

By [Sam Inglis](#) - Oct 14, 2022 0



Unavoidably, as a viewer and as a critic, I bring myself to every film I watch. In a lot of ways, I’m the default viewer that most filmmakers, male filmmakers at least, have in mind: white, male, heterosexual. At 41, I’ve aged out of the target audience for the blockbusters, but I’m also of an age where a lot of working directors are or were making films. They’re talking to me because in these broad terms a lot of them are me.

Nina Menkes definitely made me think about that, and the way this status makes me approach film, and film approach me, with this adaptation of her illustrated talk on the male gaze as a pervasive, and destructive, force in cinema. Menkes argues that the male gaze helps form part of a triangle: the visual language of cinema, employment discrimination and sexual harassment and assault, each feeding into the other. It would be easy, as someone who loves many of the films that Menkes uses to illustrate her points, to go on the defensive and say that these films are fundamentally about other things. Indeed, there are certain clips, especially the one from Raging Bull, that I might make that argument about. However, that’s not the overall crux of the argument here.

Menkes confronts five elements that add up to the way films – most films – depict women: Subject/object, framing, camera movement, lighting, and narrative position. For me, I’d say that the things she points out in the first and last areas have long been easy to see. You can hardly miss the fact that women are the subject of films far less than men are, or that they hold a strong, indeed controlling, position within the narrative far less often, but what Menkes does compellingly within each of these areas is make the argument granular, breaking it down to shots and frames.



The most striking thing, which I really hadn’t considered before, but suspect I will now never unsee, is the way she demonstrates how many scenes, particularly scenes of nudity, segment women’s bodies. It’s not hard to see, when you recognise this, how easy it is to detach physicality from character or personality, to objectify almost by default. This, and the observations about the subtle differences in lighting; how it tends to put men in more 3D space and women in a flatter plane, something also reflected in how faces are lit, because men are allowed to have the cragginess of their ageing faces emphasised, while women have to have any imperfections flattened out.

As the film gets into the section on sexual assault and rape culture, the examples Menkes pulls out remain startling and relevant, but the arguments – fortunately – are more familiar at this point. Where Brainwashed really strikes powerfully though is in taking those elements that I hadn’t thought about before and drawing them together with the broader examples, making the argument for how that triangle outlined at the beginning is a solid societal structure that we need to undermine, and that we can do so while still making great movies.

When I sat down to write this review, I wondered if I should hand it over to a female colleague (I do want to see a lot of writing on this film by women, and I’d welcome a counterpoint here), but it strikes me that a lot of what Brainwashed is saying is what women have been seeing in movies for years. It’s us (or maybe it’s just me) that some or all of this has passed by in the past, and maybe male critics should write about this film so they can confront that.

**REVIEW OVERVIEW**

Brainwashed – Sex, Camera, Power	★★★★☆
<p><b>SUMMARY</b></p> <p>Confrontational because it’s so persuasive, Nina Menkes’ documentary essay on the male gaze in movies will make you think about how you’ve watched films in the past and how you should watch them in the future.</p>	<p><b>4</b></p> <p>★★★★☆ OVERALL SCORE</p>

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