

‘Don’t Worry Darling,’ ‘Blonde,’ and the Faux Feminism of 2022’s Most Debated Films (Opinion)

“Brainwashed” documentarian Nina Menkes unpacks the botched messages behind this year’s “feminist” films with IndieWire.

Samantha Bergeson
Oct 18, 2022 11:50 am



“Don’t Worry Darling”

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[Editor’s note: The following article contains spoilers for both “Don’t Worry Darling” and “Blonde.”]

It’s been five years since the start of #MeToo, and mainstream Hollywood still doesn’t know what a truly feminist film looks like.

The releases of the highly debated, female-directed “Don’t Worry Darling” and the would-be awards darling that reimagines Marilyn Monroe’s trauma, “Blonde,” proved an even deeper issue when debating the gender politics of films: “Feminism” has been co-opted to the point of becoming meaningless. 2022 marked the Supreme Court overturn of Roe v. Wade... and also #MeToo film marketing jumping the shark.

Olivia Wilde’s off-the-rails press tour for “Don’t Worry Darling” started with the “Booksmart” helmer praising the film for being a beacon of female pleasure (spoiler: lead star Florence Pugh’s character is repeatedly raped in retrospect and cannot consent since she is chained to a bed and held captive unconscious). In a splashy pre-release cover story, Wilde made what seemed to be a sex-positive statement to *Variety*: “Men don’t come in this film. ... Only women here!”

Sure, but is a coerced orgasm in a simulated VR sequence really the climax of the feminist movement?

Meanwhile, “Blonde” writer/director Andrew Dominik has categorized any criticisms of his film being **anti-choice** as merely a trendy take in the wake of the Supreme Court decision. “Blonde” author Joyce Carol Oates tweeted that the film miraculously lacks a male gaze—all while still including multiple sequences that take place inside the embattled Hollywood icon’s vagina.

The present-day discussion on what is deemed a feminist feature has gone the way of the method acting debate: What are we even talking about anymore? A “feminist” film has become a token buzzword rendered meaningless in a time when it should be most meaningful. Forget about the “Feminine Mystique”: Modern marketing is all about the *feminist façade*.



“Brainwashed”

Sundance

“I noticed that people who read film theory and people who go to film school to make film tend to never meet or never know anything about each other,” “*Brainwashed: Sex-Camera-Power*” director [Nina Menkes](#) told IndieWire, citing the importance of her documentary on feminist film theory and the overwhelming amount of research findings linking pervasive sexist imagery and onscreen violence to sexual assault. “Brainwashed” premieres October 21 with a mission to [dissect the male gaze](#), something which isn’t at all tied to the gender of the director but rather the universal language of cinema.

So, allow Menkes to define feminist film theory: “Feminist film criticism illuminates the way gender is constructed in cinema and the political meaning of those constructions,” Menkes said. “The definition of feminist is that men and women have equal rights. Men and women are both full-on human subjects. It’s not like one gets to be a subject (the man) and one gets to be an object (the woman).”

She added, “I think there is a lot of disagreement and confusion, so people can say a film like ‘Blonde’ has a woman protagonist and she’s the main person in the film so obviously it’s a feminist film because it shows that she suffered at the hands of men: ‘It’s like a #MeToo movie!’ That’s their argument.”

Menkes continued, “But then as many people have said, ‘Yeah, but the way you shot it and the way the POV was constructed in that film, takes away her agency.’ Leaving out the script issues, which are many, but the way it was shot and the way the POV was constructed created a situation where the viewer is aligned with the POV of the oppressor.”

“Don’t Worry Darling” has been forced upon the zeitgeist as a female-branded film, starring a [#StrongFemaleLead](#) opposite the sensitive [gender non-performing](#) former boy bander turned androgynous pop star, and directed by a [#TheFuturesFemale](#) director. It’s Phase 5 of the Third Wave Feminist Cinematic Universe, one that emphasizes clickbait “[film movies](#)” like “Don’t Worry Darling” rather than moving works like Sarah Polley’s “Women Talking” or Maria Schrader’s [#MeToo origin story](#) “She Said.”

“Don’t Worry Darling” tells the story of a 1950s housewife whose life’s goal is to be the perfect wife to her perfect husband (Harry Styles), all while having perfect sex on the kitchen counter as Styles’ head slips below Pugh’s apron. The [steamy cunnilingus scene](#) all but broke the internet; that, and the never-ending gossip of how Styles, Pugh, Wilde, and co-star Chris Pine conducted themselves on set.



“Don’t Worry Darling”

Warner Bros.

A source revealed to IndieWire that the highly controversial set was without an intimacy coordinator, all while off-set Wilde emphasized just how sexy and Adrian Lyne-y the sex scenes between Pugh and Styles were on her year-long press tour. “[Why isn’t there any good sex in film anymore?](#)” Wilde infamously asked, promising that “Don’t Worry Darling” would rectify that.

“I think the idea that just because you have a female lead character, that instantly makes the film feminist, is a bit naïve. *bell hooks* said it best. She said, ‘Patriarchy has no gender,’” Menkes said. “As women, we have internalized a lot of these concepts on a very, very deep level to the point that they’re just reproduced. When women directors reproduce these tropes, you wonder how much is just automatic. I ask the same question of women that I ask of men: How do you think that reproducing the same shit is supposed to be revolutionary or commenting on it? Because we have had 120 years of the male gaze on our backs, because we have had 96 percent of films directed by men that objectify women all throughout history. It’s so ingrained, it’s so deep.”

While Menkes credited Wilde for employing a feminist shot design and use of visual language, especially when filming lead star Pugh’s nudity, Menkes noted that on a script level, “Don’t Worry Darling” is decidedly anti-feminist. Why?

Well, mainly because none of that hot sex Wilde boasted about is consensual. Spoiler alert: The ending of “Don’t Worry Darling” is that Pugh’s character is actually being held hostage by her abusive incel partner (Styles) and literally chained to a bed as they live out their “ideal” lives in a virtual reality simulation called Victory. Pugh eventually escapes, but there is no redemption. It’s a rape fantasy without the rape-revenge.

“If Olivia Wilde is saying this is a celebration of female pleasure, it definitely fails on that point, because all the pleasure we see is in that framework,” Menkes explained. “Pugh’s character is coerced, and she’s actually all dressed up and ready to go at night after she’s been cooking and cleaning all day, so how is that a liberation of female pleasure? The great majority of the film, if you look at the amount of minutes onscreen, is in the ‘Stepford Wives’ zone. She looks like she’s having fun but it’s all within the zone of her being tricked and Stockholm syndrome. It’s hard to read that as straight-up female power or female pleasure, in that view.”



“Blonde”

screenshot/Netflix

Menkes called “Don’t Worry Darling” to falling short of “A Woman Under the Influence” or “Gaslight,” two films that are directed by men, but what Menkes called “brilliant cinematic masterpieces that are actually really feminist.”

The plot of “Don’t Worry Darling” is hardly feminist when examined more closely, but behind-the-scenes issues are troubling as well: A source told IndieWire that more than half of the production assistants were not included in the film’s credits, despite being listed on IMDb. The production assistants left out, including COVID compliance officers, are all women. (IndieWire has reached out to representatives for the “Don’t Worry Darling” production for comment.)

But the marketing campaign has told us that “Don’t Worry Darling” is a feminist film. And similarly, we’ve been told that “Blonde” is utilizing the male gaze to turn it on its head and shine a light on the “[Hollywood meat-grinder](#)” that America’s sex symbol Monroe endured, as writer/director Dominik has stated and author Joyce Carol Oates has [defended](#).

“There are women who might look at ‘Blonde’ and say, ‘It talked to my experience of being abused,’” Menkes said. “My personal opinion is that continuing to objectify women onscreen even if there is some sort of angle to ‘make it OK’ is really problematic.”

“Blonde” star Ana de Armas is lit in very soft “2D lighting,” according to Menkes, with overly sexualized slo-mo capturing Monroe’s “Seven Year Itch” upskirt moment. But Dominik is emphasizing the predator’s camera to *deconstruct* the male gaze and call attention to the horrors of Hollywood with meta cinematography, right?

Menkes thinks that’s a leap: “In my personal opinion, that is double-speak for objectifying a woman onscreen. We heard the same thing from ‘Blade Runner 2049’: ‘I was making a point about objectification.’ If you want to jump back to ‘Contempt’ by Godard: ‘I’m making a point about female objectification.’”

She added, “Well, if you make a point about female objectification by objectifying women onscreen exactly the way they’ve been objectified for 123 years in hundreds of thousands of films, I don’t think you can do it. You’re actually just reinforcing the status quo, you’re perpetuating it while pretending to be cool. These male directors who’re recreating and reproducing these images are not part of the revolution.”

“*Brainwashed*” opens October 21 in theaters. For more information on screenings, [click here](#).

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