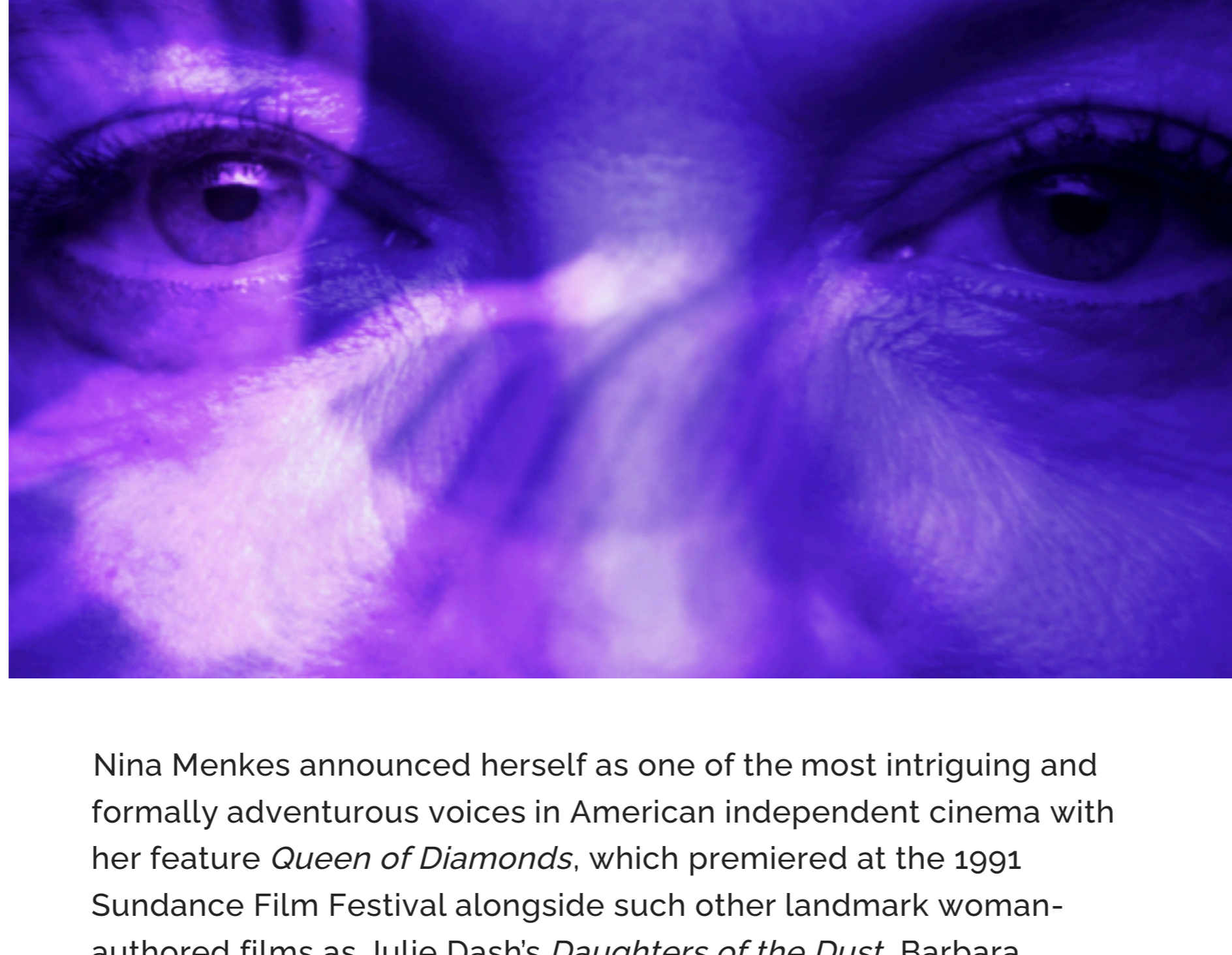


DOCS

“Brainwashed” helmer Nina Menkes on the uphill battle against cinema’s male gaze

By Andrew Tracy October 20, 2022



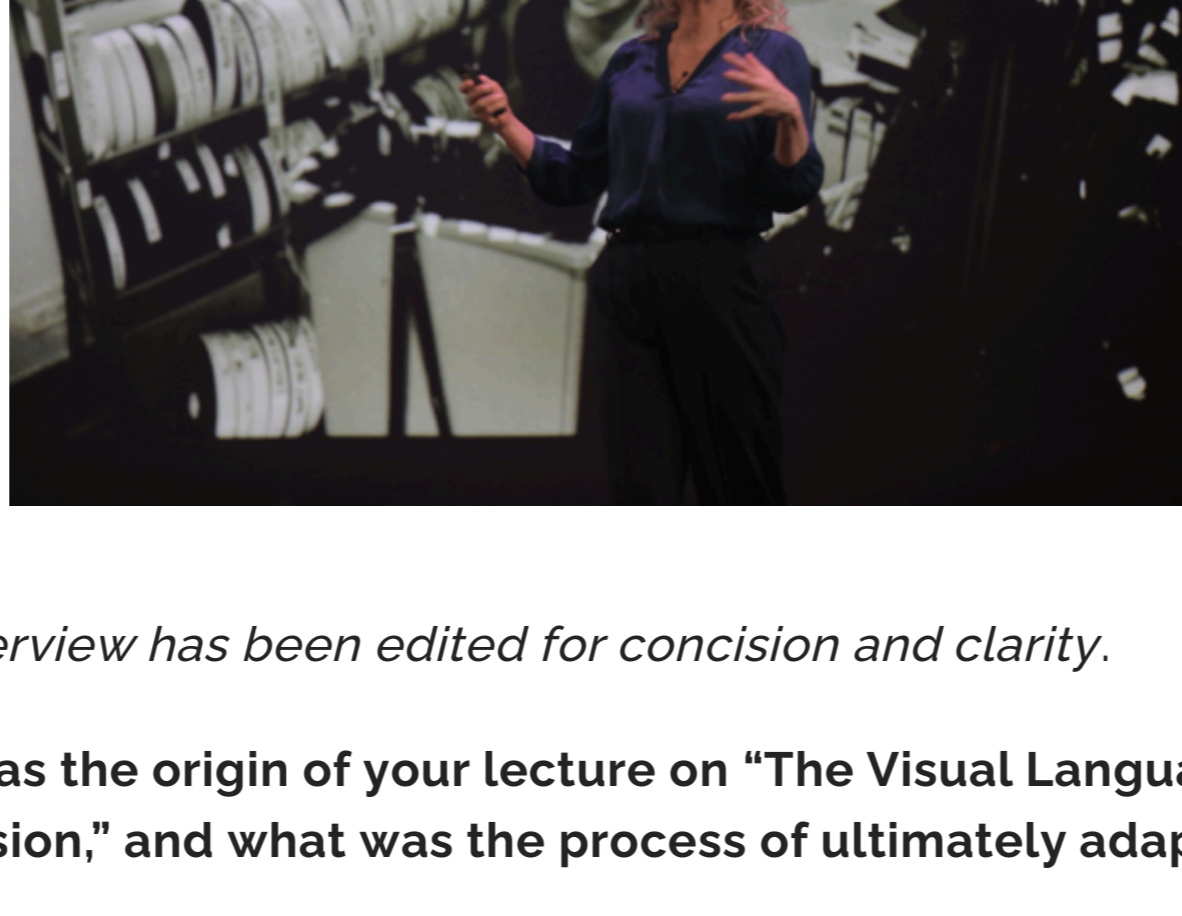
Nina Menkes announced herself as one of the most intriguing and formally adventurous voices in American independent cinema with her feature *Queen of Diamonds*, which premiered at the 1991 Sundance Film Festival alongside such other landmark woman-authored films as Julie Dash’s *Daughters of the Dust*, Barbara Kopple’s *American Dream*, Yvonne Rainer’s *Privilege* and Nietzchka Keene’s *The Juniper Tree*. However, like most of those aforementioned filmmakers, Menkes’ cinematic work since then has been sporadic, marginalized, or both. This makes it both exciting and sobering that her first feature-length work in over a decade is also a treatise on some of the systemic factors that have worked against her having a more robust filmmaking career.

Executive produced by Tim Disney, Susan Disney Lord and Abigail Disney, *Brainwashed: Sex-Camera-Power* fittingly premiered at this year’s Sundance Film Festival — “fitting” in that the film is an adaptation of a stage presentation that Menkes debuted at Sundance in 2018, and subsequently took on the road. Taking as its foundation film theorist Laura Mulvey’s famous conception of the “male gaze” in cinema, the lecture features Menkes analyzing dozens of “A-list” Hollywood and international films, breaking down their shot design (framing, lighting, camera movement), editing strategies, and even use of sound to demonstrate how, throughout film history, the conventions of cinematic grammar have consistently objectified and subjugated women while enshrining the subjectivity and agency of men.

As *Brainwashed* relentlessly demonstrates, the results aren’t pretty. Menkes incisively and unsparingly shows that even filmmakers working in art-house or supposedly critical/oppositional cinematic modes — e.g., Jean-Luc Godard’s “satirical” treatment of Brigitte Bardot’s de rigueur nude scene in *Contempt* — can utilize and thus propagate this objectifying language even when they believe themselves to be undercutting it. Perhaps worse, the few women filmmakers who have been able to find some foothold in the mainstream industry are no more immune to employing this lingua franca than their far (far) more numerous male colleagues.

*Brainwashed* was picked up out of Sundance by Kino Lorber, which will be releasing the film theatrically in North America this Friday (October 21), and educational streaming platform Kanopy, which will be the film’s exclusive streaming home. In advance of the theatrical release, the Critics Choice Association — the critics’ organization formed from the 2019 merger of the Broadcast Film Critics Association and the Broadcast Television Journalists Association — announced that the film would be the first documentary to receive its recently established Seal of Female Empowerment in Entertainment (SOFEE), which recognizes “films and television series that illuminate the female experience and perspective through authentically told, female-driven stories.”

Speaking to *Realscreen*, Menkes (pictured below) discussed the film’s origins in both her teaching at USC and the emergence of the #MeToo movement, the challenges of making a film very much outside of her typical wheelhouse, and the profound difficulty of reconciling one’s admiration for widely recognized “great films” with recognition of their often profoundly sexist visual strategies.



This interview has been edited for concision and clarity.

What was the origin of your lecture on “The Visual Language of Oppression,” and what was the process of ultimately adapting it as a film?

I started teaching when I was a grad student at USC film school, and there was this one specific incident that kind of blew my mind. A female student had shot a scene between a guy and a girl: the camera was on the guy’s face while he’s talking, then it goes over to the girl’s face as she’s talking, and then it goes down to her chest — you know, low-cut shirt — and then back up to her face and back to him for his next line. And I asked [the student], “What was the concept on that camera move? Because it was completely unmotivated.” And she looked at me like a deer in headlights. She was totally unaware.

So I thought, “I need to do some groundwork here,” and I started putting together a few clips for my students, usually once a semester. And when the Harvey Weinstein story hit, I thought this is the perfect moment to talk about how the visual language of cinema ties in to the epidemic of sexual harassment and assault that was revealed by the #MeToo movement, as well as the severe employment discrimination against women in the film industry — which I of course have been living for 25 years, along with a kazillion other women directors. That was the jumping-off point for my talk, and [every time I delivered it] I would be mobbed by people afterwards, saying, “Please make this into a film, because people need to see this.”

So that’s how the film came about — it was never really my idea in the first place. You’ve seen *Queen of Diamonds* and [my later film] *Phantom Love*, so you know that [*Brainwashed*] is not my normal style of filmmaking. It was created to reach a wider audience: we wanted to reach not just filmmakers, but everybody who watches films.

Can you discuss the positioning of the film as both a theatrical experience — which is increasingly rare for documentaries these days — as well as an educational resource, via the partnership with Kanopy?

I’m excited that it’s both. It definitely *is* educational, and in that way it’s very different from my other work. It’s calling out something very specific, and, judging from the reaction, it’s kind of hitting a nerve.

At the same time, I didn’t want it to be [*makes air quotes*] “educational,” you know? I really wanted the film to work as a piece of cinema, to be seen on the big screen. We have so many clips from so many great movies — a lot of them are sexist but a lot of them are great, they’re beautiful. My editor, Cecily Rhett, said that, “In order to qualify to be in *Brainwashed*, [a film] has to have all those [negative] elements of shot design but also has to look beautiful.” There are a lot of not-beautiful-looking films that do the same things [as the ones we chose], but we didn’t include them. So you will hopefully have a very cinematic experience because you’re seeing all these amazing movies, one after the other, up on the big screen.

The patterns of shot design that you highlight across so many movies — the visual fragmenting of women’s bodies, the privileging of male perspective and subjectivity, etc. — are undeniable. Speaking broadly, do you think that these sexist visual patterns trump the narrative context in which they’re employed? For example, the Rosie Perez–Spike Lee ice-cube seduction scene from *Do the Right Thing* that you analyze absolutely fits in with those visual tropes, but in terms of the film’s story it is a playfully sexual scene between a longtime couple.

That’s a complicated question, and I think it has two parts: the first part is context, and the second part is intention. To address context first, the point of *Brainwashed* is to say that regardless of context, regardless of genre, regardless of whether the woman is actually the protagonist of the film, you’re going to see these techniques used again and again and again that objectify the woman. So the first key point of the film is, let’s remove context — let’s look [strictly] at shot design, at the almost unconscious message that that gives to a viewer and how it infiltrates our consciousness.

Regarding intention, [the question] is: does context mitigate or change the meaning of these shots? I would say yes and no. Context *can* mitigate those meanings, but the fact that this “law” of gender-split shot design is so prevalent, it does affect us. In terms of the *Do the Right Thing* scene, I don’t think that was a scene about a couple having fun. I think that was the *intention* of the scene, but the way it’s shot so drastically foregrounds the objectification of the woman and the subjectivity of the male lead character that I at least get no fun vibes off that scene. And by the way, Rosie Perez was very upset about that scene, and she spoke out about how upset she was to do it — which adds a whole other level to it.

You use a scene from the trashy Southernplantation potboiler *Mandingo* as an example of an “exception that proves the rule,” in which a Black slave [Ken Norton] who is being forced into sex by the white wife [Susan George] of a plantation owner has his body treated by the camera the way women’s bodies so often are — which, you say, shows that these visual strategies are ultimately not about sex, but power. When you were researching the film, did you notice any ways in which depictions of race intersected with the gendered visual language you were exploring?

I don’t want to pretend to be an expert on that, though I’m sure there are interesting things to discover there. I will say, though, that in my research I’ve seen a lot of non-white male heterosexual directors shoot women in the same way [as white male filmmakers].

I just want to emphasize, one thing that really stood out to me about *Mandingo* is that the first time I saw that scene, I had a visceral experience of cringe, because I felt really bad for the male character. I felt he was being humiliated not only by the [context of the] scene — because the woman is basically raping him — but also that he was being humiliated by the camera. And I realized after that the reason I was so uncomfortable is because I’m not used to seeing heterosexual guys being put in that position. We so accept the objectification of women on screen that when you watch the body —if anything, [as a woman] you might think, “Wow, I wish I looked as good as her.” So it was interesting to me [that I read] a heterosexual male being photographed like that as humiliating to the character, because we have these pre-understood ideas of who gets to be objectified.

In the film, you directly link cinema’s visual language of gender discrimination to employment discrimination against women in the film industry. Do you think that increasingly equitable representation in the industry can transform this visual language, or do you think that its influence might manifest itself more in a widening of the kind of subject matter that is seen in mainstream filmmaking — that is, more in terms of content than form?

I think both, but it’s not going to be overnight, that’s for sure. I think it might change sooner on the level of script than on the level of some of the things that I’m talking about, but I do believe that when you have more diversity behind the camera, it is going to slowly change.

That said, to bring context into it again: I recently saw *Don’t Worry Darling*, which is being presented as a feminist film, and I did notice that the director [Olivia Wilde] did not shoot Florence Pugh [in the typical way]: there’s no fragmentation of the body, no body pan when she’s in the bath, etc. But at the same time, I find the script to be *really* problematic, and not very feminist at all! There’s always all of these different things that are going on in a movie, and the way they work together is complicated. But I hope that, if a lot of people see [*Brainwashed*], it *will* have an impact on how films are shot.

Photo of Nina Menkes by Hugo Wong, courtesy Kino Lorber

TAGS: Brainwashed: Sex-Camera-Power, Kanopy, Kino Lorber, Nina Menkes

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