

London film festival

Brainwashed: Sex-Camera-Power review – a good hard look at the male gaze

★★★★☆

Nina Menkes's rigorous film-theory docu-essay teases out the differences in the ways men and women are treated, both on screen and in the industry



Deeply embedded in power relations ... Brainwashed: Sex-Camera-Power, directed by Nina Menkes.



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Film-maker and theorist Nina Menkes takes to the stage in this docu-essay slash movie lecture: a fierce and focused polemic reviving the subject of the “male gaze” for the #MeToo era. Starting with an interview with British critic Laura Mulvey (described by Menkes as the “original gangster” who invented the term), Menkes shows us that the way the camera looks at women, and everything else, is not a transparent, value-free business. On the contrary: with men so overwhelmingly in charge, it is an activity of coercion and imposition, determined by gender politics. And sexuality as it appears on screen is not the natural, unmediated free expression of equal pleasure, but deeply embedded in male power relations.

One movie clip Menkes could have cited but doesn't is from *This Is Spinal Tap*: bassist Nigel Tufnell being told their album cover is sexist and replying: “What's wrong with being sexy?” The gap between sexy and sexist is where much of the discourse happens. Menkes goes on to take these concepts out of the movie screen and the seminar room, and into the commercial world: the male gaze has its corollaries in the film industry's sexist hiring practices and its tolerance of sexual harassment and assault - an iceberg of which Harvey Weinstein was the nauseous tip.

The way this works is broken down by Menkes: women are endowed with desirability in the way shots are set up and framed and camera-movements choreographed, and the way that so often, particularly in the studio era, male faces are lit with the lived-in 3D cragginess of someone who doesn't have to be attractive while female faces are lit with a flat 2D studio sheen making them inert, like models, very often not inhabiting the same space that the men appear to be inhabiting. (I admit it: I have watched the swimming pool scene in Scorsese's *Raging Bull* dozens of times, yet only after watching *Brainwashed* have I appreciated the way that Cathy Moriarty's image is detached from the male speakers.)



It all happens within the duality of subject and object; male desirer (with whom the audience is often tacitly invited to make common cause) and the female desirer. This is the anode and cathode of the male gaze, the male gaze's voltage and electromotive force.

But how about female directors? Menkes makes an exception for the heroic standouts of golden age Hollywood such as *Dorothy Arzner* and *Ida Lupino*. But rightly or wrongly, she often implies that many women directors in modern times have gone along with the traditional male set-up and are sellouts, effectively pastiching the male gaze for a male industry. At one point, in a montage of films showing the camera leering malely at women's buttocks, Menkes includes, without any discussion, a scene from *Julia Ducournau's Titane* which shows the semi-unclad heroine cavorting on a car for male onlookers. Plenty of critics believe that *Titane* - a Cannes Palme d'Or winner - is a triumphant example of progressive and sex-positive film-making. Menkes is evidently unconvinced (actually, so am I), but perhaps she could have made this explicit.

Moreover, Menkes is uncharacteristically hesitant when, in a bracing spirit of openness, she cites a movie widely loathed for its racial attitudes: the lurid, pulpy slave drama *Mandingo*, from 1975, which contains a scene in which the white mistress forces the black slave to have sex with her. Menkes shows us how the camera salivates over the slave's passive naked body in exactly the way it usually lingers over a woman's body. But perhaps wary of appearing to endorse this approach, she calls the film “cringe-making”. So it is. But aren't all these other male-gaze films cringe-making as well?

Brainwashed is a bracing blast of critical rigour, taking a clear, cool look at the unexamined assumptions behind what we see on the screen.

● Brainwashed: Sex-Camera-Power screened at the London film festival

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