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Episode 518: Brian Posehn, S. A. Cosby, "Brainwashed: Sex-Camera-Power"

AIR DATE: AUG 12 2023 • HEARD ON BETA

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Indie comedian Brian Posehn joins us to discuss his latest comedy special, "Posehna Non Grata." Also, Shawn Cosby on his recently republished debut novel, "My Darkest Prayer." And independent filmmaker Nina Menkes on her eye-opening documentary, "Brainwashed: Sex-Camera-Power."

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Comedian Brian Posehn finds the funny in life for his special, 'Posehna Non Grata'

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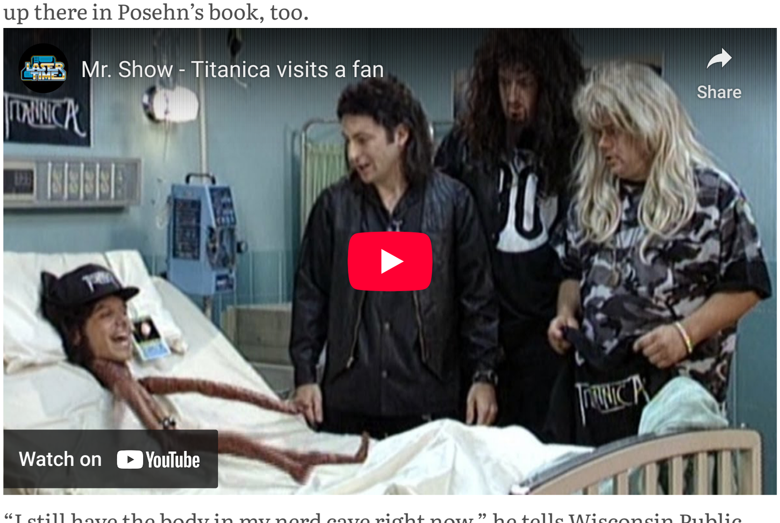
Editor's note: Some links contain language that may not be suitable for all audiences.

Comedian **Brian Posehn** has been a mainstay of the indie comedy scene for the better part of four decades. He's been an actor and writer and performer in cult classics like "Mr. Show with Bob and David," "The Sarah Silverman Program" sketch series and primetime comedies like CBS' "The Big Bang Theory."

Posehn's best known as the self-described nerd and metalhead comic. That was probably best on display early in his career during the groundbreaking HBO sketch series "Mr. Show" where Posehn penned the infamous Titanica sketch. Show co-creator **Bob Odenkirk** has called that sketch — about a metal band who meet their most metal fan — one of his favorites of the series' run, and it's up there in Posehn's book, too.



"I still have the body in my nerd cave right now," he tells Wisconsin Public Radio's "**BETA**," discussing the hilarious prosthetic that comedian David Cross controlled for the sketch. "I'm actually looking at the David Cross little shriveled cigar body."

Posehn's work on "Mr. Show" opened a lot of doors for him throughout his career.

"I owe everything to those two dudes. It really got me out there," Posehn said, adding that the right people — who know comedy — saw the show and his work.

"That's how I got on 'Big Bang Theory' and that's how I got on 'Just Shoot Me' and that's how I got on all these other shows. It's because the writers were fans of 'Mr. Show' and knew that I could do what I do," he continues.

Now, Posehn is doing what he does best. He's out with his latest stand-up special, "**Posehna Non Grata**." Posehn quipped that the title isn't reflective of any character flaws in himself, but rather fulfills a very silly qualifier for making his manager laugh.

"I've had the same manager forever, and we share a sensibility and when I pitch a show idea to him or a special name or whatever it is, I usually do it for him and this got the chuckle I always get," he said.

Recorded at the Beat Kitchen in Chicago, the special is Posehn's first post-COVID quarantine project and perhaps his most personal. A majority of the material isn't as much bits as it is polished storytelling of the zaniness in Posehn's day-to-day.

"I am so lucky that weird stuff happens to me because I wouldn't have an act if events didn't happen that I could just write about," Posehn said.

In his special, Posehn is riffing on high school nerd fights, optimizing food and weed delivery app timings, feeling fat-shamed by "The Simpsons," experiencing household dog civil wars and **Twitter back-and-forths with Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson**.

One standout story is how he scared a woman nearly to death by simply trying to work out in his street clothes. As someone with the figure of "**Jason Voorhees**," Posehn notes how that can be unsettling.

"I wear street clothes and I talk about that in my act. So, I already look weird. You know, I'm a huge guy. And then I'm not dressed for the gym," Posehn said. "The hotel gym really had their lights all set on a motion sensor. So, the strange thing is, she must have been working out alone in the dark before I walked in."

"Then when I walked in, the lights kicked on," he continues. "She turns around, startled."

Then, Posehn explained, he told her: "'Don't be scared.' And it didn't work."

Near the end of "Posehna Non Grata," Posehn begins mentioning all the heroes — mainly musical — his career has afforded him to meet, including the Canadian prog rock group, Rush. He said that if he could meet anyone in the world he's never met before, he'd forgo that to meet Rush again.

"If I could be in a room with Rush again and actually meet Alex (Lifeson) and Geddy (Lee) and just talk to them like human beings and not as a screaming fan … I had a moment with them, and I got to take a picture with them, but I botched it so hard. I called Getty 'sir' twice in the sentence," he recalls.

Posehn also has a quick aside about a past show in Chicago where he got to meet legendary insult comic, Don Rickles.

He talks about how that led to one of his favorite memories as a comic. Nearly 20 years ago he and fellow comedian Patton Oswalt were brought in by their respective agency — who also repped Rickles — to offer advice to Don who was about to embark on a college town tour.

"It's ridiculous. Like, how could we have anything to give to him advice-wise? But we still took the meeting. Patton and I were both like, 'This sounds so dumb, but let's go and let's go meet the man, you know?' It was one of the greatest hour-and-a-halves of my life," Posehn said.

"He made fun of the way we were dressed. He told Patton and I, 'Hey, if you kids come to the house, why didn't you dress up, alright? My wife will think you're the gardeners. Like cute kids. But where's their rake?' And we're just losing it," he continues.

For Posehn, that's the very reason he does what he does.

"I love comedy. I mean, I do it for a reason, and nothing makes me laugh harder than other comedians like (Rickles), or like David Taylor or whoever it is will make me cry tears of joy," he said.

Acclaimed crime fiction author S.A. Cosby on his debut novel, 'My Darkest Prayer'

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S.A. (Shawn) Cosby is quickly making a name for himself as one of today's top crime fiction writers. He's won several **Anthony Awards**, including one for his novel **"Blacktop Wasteland"** in 2021, one for his novel **"Razorblade Tears"** and the best short story award for "Not My Cross to Bear" in 2022.

As a result of his critical success, Cosby's publisher **Flatiron Books** decided to republish his debut novel, **"My Darkest Prayer,"** which was originally published in 2019 by a small Maryland publisher.

The new edition features an introduction in which Cosby writes about his fears of being able to maintain a reader's interest and attention for 250 pages. Fortunately, for us, Cosby overcame his self-doubt and wrote his powerful, suspenseful and unforgettable debut novel.

"I had written a lot of short stories and had some success with those, but I wasn't entirely confident that I had the chops to write a long form novel," Cosby told Wisconsin Public Radio's **"BETA."**

"And it was one of the things where I got into it, I realized it was infinitely more difficult than I had anticipated," he said. "But at the same time, it gave me the room to spread my wings, so to speak. I had been feeling stifled by the short story form, and so it was sort of this thing where I was afraid to do it. But once I did it, I felt so relieved because it allowed me to tell stories in much more detail than I had been able to previously."

After being in a rhythm of writing short stories, Cosby said it was a challenge to switch to writing a novel.

"With a short story, you're basically playing one note, and to equate it to a musical metaphor, with a novel, it's a symphony," he said.

"But that being said, having the opportunity to be flexible with the tone, with the atmosphere, to delve into more complex and more nuanced character interactions was gratifying to me as a writer," he continued. "So as difficult as I found it at times and as daunting as I found it at times, I also found it to be where I feel most comfortable today."

Much of the action in "My Darkest Prayer" occurs in a funeral home. Cosby said he chose this setting because he was working at a funeral home while writing the novel.

"I was the overnight person on call," he said. "And on nights that I didn't have to go make a call or what we like to call a '**removal'** in funeral home speak, I was writing."

"And there is so much storytelling fodder at funeral homes, because you're seeing people at the worst times of their life. But you get to learn a lot about folks as well. You also learn a lot about compassion and empathy and understanding," Cosby continued.

One of Cosby's favorite characters from his work is the protagonist of "My Darkest Prayer," Nathan Waymaker, whom Cosby says feels most like himself.

"Where Nathan differs from me is Nathan is an unmitigated bad —. He can handle himself in multiple types of different situations. I don't think I rise to that level," Cosby said.

"I like for my characters, especially the tough-guy characters, to not just be tough guys. I like for them to have a deep well of emotion to pull from, and you get to see what makes them tough. I think the idea of toughness, the idea of hard-boiled protagonist or noir protagonist can be sort of narrow," he continued. "And I wanted Nathan to be more diverse than that. I wanted him to have more layers than that."

Cover design by Keith Hayes Cover photograph. *David Leonard/Millennium*

Nathan is a former Marine and sheriff's deputy. His parents were killed in a car accident by a drunken driver. The driver didn't face charges because he's the son of a wealthy businessman in the story; this dynamic is a point of tension for Nathan throughout the novel.

"And he got into a confrontation with a fellow deputy named Victor Cutler, who sort of serves as his secondary antagonist during the course of the book. And Nathan resigned after he threw Victor through the window," Cosby explained. "And I use that story to sort of illustrate a lot of things about Nathan all at once. One, his sense of right and wrong; also that he has a temper and he has delved into ways to try to control that."

Nathan's father was white and his mother was Black. He wanted Nathan's character to "straddle both worlds" in the setting of the novel.

"As someone who has moved among both worlds and maybe felt like a stranger in both places, helps give Nathan that outsider edge," Cosby said. "And because of his outsider status, he is the person who can see more clearly into what the town is and what the denizens of the town are."

"What someone outside of his life or outside of his circle might see as some sort of millstone he has to carry is really his superpower. It's his ability to look past the surface and to see what people really are like when they stop being polite. And I think that he gets that from his background," he continued.

The objectification of women in film through the 'male gaze'

Listen

You're watching a film. The lighting is bold, and the camera focus is sharp. The male protagonist is walking in slow motion, with action happening all around him. The music swells with an almost military march feel, and we see him full-on, looking confident and determined.

He turns slowly, fixing his gaze on something or someone just out of the frame. The music softens and sounds like something you might hear in a lounge. A saxophone becomes the lead instrument with a sexy sliding solo.

Cut to a woman's legs in soft focus and soft lighting. The background is blurred and nondescript, as if she were floating. The camera slowly pans up her body pausing slightly near her middle and just below her shoulders, then stops and does a slow zoom-in until all we see is her lips glistening with fresh lipstick.

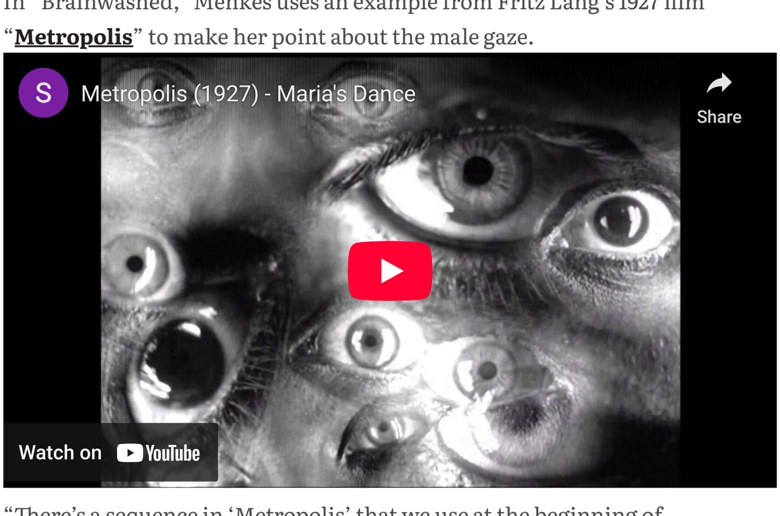
That type of scene has been christened **"the male gaze"** by British film theorist **Laura Mulvey**.

Nina Menkes' documentary, **"Brainwashed: Sex-Camera-Power,"** sets out to prove the male gaze is real and shows how film directors depict women and men very differently.

Wisconsin Public Radio's "**BETA**" talked with Menkes about "Brainwashed" and what she found out.

"We have almost 200 clips," Menkes said, "from the **Cannes Film Festival** winners, **Academy Award** winners, and the biggest names we all know in film: **Spike Lee**, **Quentin Tarantino** and **Sofia Coppola** often do it. We don't know if it's conscious or unconscious, but it's deliberate and a repeated pattern. So, if you see a film, you'll see this pattern repeatedly so many times that it's irrefutable."

In "Brainwashed," Menkes uses an example from Fritz Lang's 1927 film "**Metropolis**" to make her point about the male gaze.



"There's a sequence in 'Metropolis' that we use at the beginning of 'Brainwashed,' which is an overt and extreme sequence of the male gaze. You see men looking, you see close on their eyes, and then you cut to this beautiful woman dancing, then you cut back to their eyes, then you cut back to this woman dancing, and then you cut to a super close-up of their eyes. And then they're like a million eyes all over the screen. This is a prototypical male gaze moment," Menkes told "BETA."

Menkes said **five basic points** make up this pattern: point of view, framing, camera movement, lighting, and narrative position.

Menkes explains in the documentary that point of view is usually from the male perspective, making him the subject and a woman in the position of the object. Camera shots are constructed, so the audience understands who's the subject and the object.

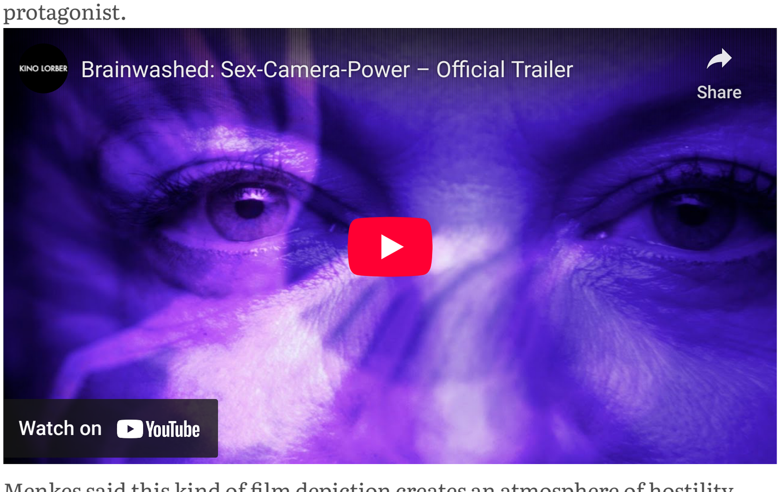
Framing of the shot is another factor. Women are often depicted with fragmented body parts such as legs, bare shoulders, buttocks, etc. This isn't so for male actors, Menkes noted.

Camera movement is also handled differently for women and men.

"You will see the camera body pans up and down or horizontally. But, again, that's reserved almost entirely for female actors. And then you have slow motion. Slow motion for male actors means action or military, and slow motion for female actors is sexualization," Menkes said.

Different lighting for male and female actors is used, as well. Women will be in soft light, giving them a two-dimensional effect. Men will be in bright, sharp lighting, with contrasting shadows that give a 3D effect.

The narrative position relates to how a character is depicted in the film. They are either rooted in the movie's real world as solid characters (usually male) or somehow disconnected from their surroundings through soft focus and lighting (typically female), conceding their authority in the film to the male protagonist.



Menkes said this kind of film depiction creates an atmosphere of hostility toward women.

"This system of gendered shot design…is pretty much irrefutable and is connected to the twin epidemics of sexual assault, sexual abuse, and employment discrimination against women. When you come to sexual objectification, it's often presented as a beautiful thing," Menkes said. "So, you lose the understanding that objectification is not a beautiful thing. Objectification is tied to seeing another person as having less than full agency. So, that is a pretty easy step to understand that if a particular group of people is consistently objectified, both in their minds and in the minds of the people who are subjects, in this case, the heterosexual male population.

"It's not a shock that research has shown extensively and over decades, numerous studies that watching sexually objectifying media is correlated to a higher rate of sexual harassment and even sexual assault."

Menkes said she thinks her film impacts how people may view movies in the future.

"I think there is a groundswell of excitement about 'Brainwashed' because it's something that many people might not have had a language for. That's what I've heard from a lot of audiences. Someone's come up and said, 'I've been going to movies my whole life, and I always have this slightly weird feeling, and I didn't have words to talk about that weird feeling, but now I do,'" she said.

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S. A. Cosby
Guest

Nina Menkes
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