

10 great

10 great films that challenge the male gaze

To coincide with the release of Nina Menkes's documentary *Brainwashed: Sex-Camera-Power*, we count down 10 films which defy the male gaze in cinema.

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By [Rachel Pronger](#)



Brainwashed: Sex-Camera-Power (2022)

"As a filmmaker, and as a woman, I found myself drowning in a vortex of visual language from which it is very difficult to escape." These are the first words of Nina Menkes's *Brainwashed: Sex-Camera-Power*, a new documentary that explores the dominance of the male gaze across more than a century of cinema.

Menkes speaks these words over an opening that draws on the famous titles of Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo*: a close-up of an eye, a spinning silhouette of a falling woman, swirling strings. This homage is significant. *Vertigo*, for all its transcendent cinematic qualities, is a textbook example of how the male gaze in cinema operates, one of many canonical classics that builds a world exclusively through the eyes of a male protagonist, objectifying and sidelining female characters – and audience members – in the process.

Vertigo is also cited in 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', the seminal 1975 essay in which the academic Laura Mulvey first described how the male gaze in cinema is "constructed through the skilled and satisfying manipulation of visual pleasure". Mulvey appears in *Brainwashed*, and her theory that the male gaze is constructed on three levels – the gaze of the camera, of the cinema audience and of onscreen characters – is central to Menkes's argument. Using hundreds of clips alongside interviews, Menkes compellingly illustrates this triangle, demonstrating how filmic visual language reflects and reinforces patriarchal dynamics in society with real world consequences.

The endless sexualised silent images of women that parade through *Brainwashed* can make for depressing viewing, but Menkes provides relief by also including examples of scenes that subvert convention. The below list draws upon those glimpses of an alternative route, spanning from early Hollywood to present day arthouse, which challenge the heterosexual male perspectives that continue to dominate mainstream film culture.

Vertigo, of course, was recently displaced from the top of Sight and Sound's [Greatest Films of All Time list](#) by Chantal Akerman's *Jeanne Dielman, 23 quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975), a film built around a defiant, unapologetic female gaze. As society shifts, our tastes may too; it appears that for many of us, regardless of how we self-identify, there is satisfaction, even pleasure to be had in seeing the world through a fresh pair of eyes.

Brainwashed: Sex-Camera-Power is [in cinemas](#) from 12 May 2023.

An accompanying season of Nina Menkes's films is currently [at BFI Southbank](#) and [on BFI Player](#).

Salomé (1922)

Directors: Alla Nazimova and Charles Bryant



Salomé (1922)

Before the arrival of talkies and subsequent formalisation of film as big business, Hollywood was a town of outsiders and misfits, many of whom were women. Tracing women's authorship in early Hollywood requires a degree of speculation – an estimated 75% of silent films have been lost – but enough evidence suggests that bold work centring both female and (coded) queer perspectives was being made during this period.

One example is *Salomé*, an astonishingly stylish adaptation that translates Oscar Wilde's play into a campy art-deco dreamscape. Although Charles Bryant is credited as director, the true creative force behind the project was Alla Nazimova, a Russian stage star turned Hollywood multi-hyphenate who worked variously credited and uncredited as a producer, director, writer and lighting designer, as well as acting.

Salomé was a passion project powered by Nazimova who, aged 42, cast herself as the teenage title character, setting the tone for an adaptation that reimagines the archetypal tragic femme fatale as a powerful symbol of female sexual agency. Art director Natacha Rambova's outré designs – a wig of pearls, chorus girls in gigantic shoulder pads – combined with Nazimova's own position within Hollywood's queer artistic circles of the time, have further cemented the film's status as a landmark LGBTQI+ and feminist work.

Dance, Girl, Dance (1940)

Director: Dorothy Arzner



Dance, Girl, Dance (1940)

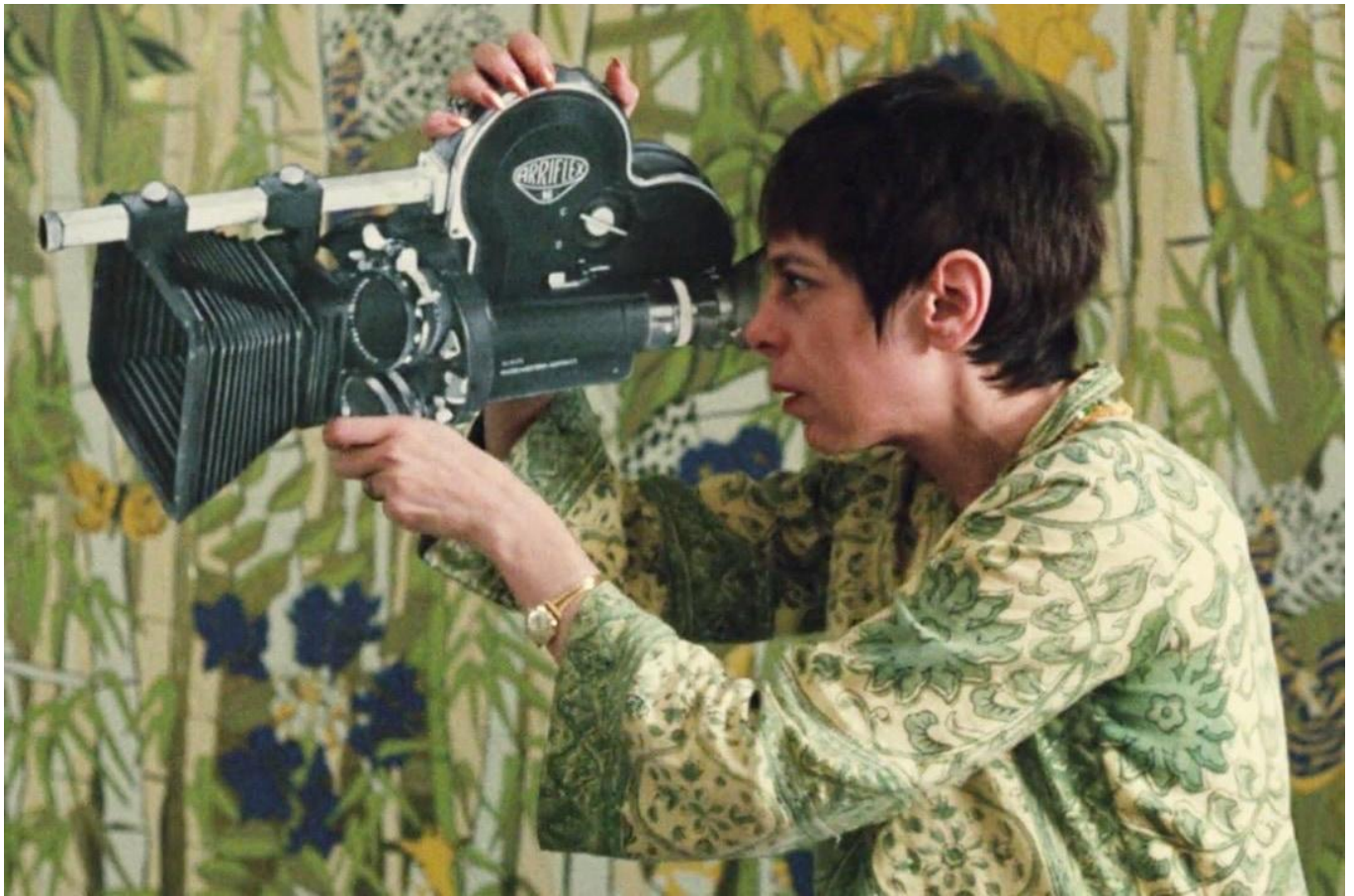
Dorothy Arzner was one of the few women who maintained a directing career during the 1930s, directing a series of films built around complex female characters and proto-feminist discussions of the cult of femininity and the limits of heterosexuality (Arzner, like Nazimova, was queer).

Fizzing showbiz buddy movie *Dance, Girl, Dance* (1940) is particularly remarkable because it anticipates both Mulvey and Menkes in its explicit critique of the male gaze. In one sequence, Judy (Maureen O'Hara), who has been performing at a rowdy burlesque club, confronts her audience. "Go ahead and stare," she says defiantly as the crowd falls silent. "I know you want me to tear my clothes off so you can look your 50 cents worth... So you can go home when the show is over and strut before your wives and sweethearts, and play at being the stronger sex for a minute? I'm sure they see through you just like we do."

By breaking the fourth wall, Arzner exposes the triangular relationship between the camera, audience and characters. Forced to confront our complicity in Judy's objectification, the division between the real world and the screen is temporarily severed – and with it the suspension of culpability that enables us to enjoy the male gaze as a purely pleasurable spectacle.

Lions Love (1969)

Director: Agnès Varda



Lions Love (1969)

Agnès Varda began her career as a photographer, and as a filmmaker she remained acutely aware of the power dynamics between the holder of the camera and the bearer of the gaze. This tension runs throughout such documentaries as *The Beaches of Agnès* (2008) and *Faces Places* (2017), and it's also a central theme in Varda's slippery counterculture satire *Lions Love*, where it finds expression in one especially memorable scene.

An underground filmmaker (Shirley Clarke, playing herself) is visiting Hollywood to make a film, when she learns that the project she is working on is about to collapse. Distressed, Clarke begins to take an overdose, but suddenly she stops, shakes her head and apologises to the camera. "I'm sorry, I just can't do this Agnès, I'm not an actress and... I certainly wouldn't kill myself about not being able to make any goddamned movie," says Clarke, and the fourth wall crumbles. Director and performer argue from behind the camera, until Varda angrily walks into the frame and performs the shot herself.

It's an uncomfortable scene that challenges the gendered hierarchy of the film set – the powerful male director, the compliant female star – and makes visible the manipulations that go into constructing the cinematic illusion. A curtain falls and we see two women directors, locking eyes, through the screen, with each other.

Illusions (1982)

Director: Julie Dash



Illusions (1982)

The default male perspective in mainstream cinema has also, more often than not, been white. In [a 1992 essay](#), bell hooks extended Mulvey's arguments by identifying "an oppositional gaze", describing how among Black audiences there has long been an unspoken understanding that "to stare at... mainstream movies, to engage in its images, was to engage its negation of Black representation." Hooks continues to argue that Black US independent cinema evolved out of an understanding of the political power of the gaze, and this idea is borne out by Julie Dash's short *Illusions*, a key work of the LA Rebellion, which confronts the invisibility of Black female perspectives in classical cinema.

Set in 1940s Hollywood, the film centres on Mignon (Lonette McKee), a Black executive who passes for white in order to build a career, but who eventually becomes disillusioned with the manipulative dynamics on which the industry is built. In one scene, Mignon watches on as an unknown Black singer records a voiceover for a white starlet; Black talent hidden behind a white face. "Now I've become an illusion, just like the stories made here... they see me, but they can't recognise me," Mignon later says, revealing the human cost of those rendered invisible by a single monolithic perspective. Dash would go on to expand on these ideas in her feature *Daughters of the Dust* (1991), which uses an ensemble cast to offer a multi-generational collective vision of a specifically Black female gaze.

Variety (1983)

Director: Bette Gordon



Variety (1983)

Few films confront cinema's voyeuristic tendencies so directly – and with such a fierce feminist outlook – as Bette Gordon's *Variety*. Set against the sleazy backdrop of grimy 1980s New York, this erotic drama meets conspiracy thriller follows a struggling writer, Christine (Sandy McLeod), who begins working at the box office of a Times Square porno cinema, and becomes embroiled in a web of intrigue involving a mysterious regular customer and a porn performer who appears to be her double.

Cinema has long pandered to heterosexual male desire on screen, but Gordon flips that dynamic, challenging the idea that the erotic gaze is purely the preserve of men. Like Hitchcock, *Variety* acknowledges and plays with the audience's desire to look, but by placing a woman at the heart of this exploration of voyeurism, Gordon unsettles the usual gendered power dynamics. What happens when a woman desires? And what happens when the objectified woman desires back? In digging into these questions *Variety* provokes and unsettles in equal measure.

Nitrate Kisses (1992)

Director: Barbara Hammer



Nitrate Kisses

© Barbara Hammer

Barbara Hammer was inspired to make films after watching the work of Maya Deren, an experience that led her to realise that “there was a cinema for me to make... because the content we have to express, as women, hasn’t been fully formed.” From the 1970s onwards Hammer created a body of work that carved out space for a distinctly queer female perspective – erotic, sometimes hardcore, but always tender; women shooting women. By often including her own body in her work, Hammer also displaces the potentially objectifying eye of the audience.

In *Nitrate Kisses*, Hammer uses archive fragments of a lost biblical epic, combined with quotes from the censorious Hays Code, footage of unsimulated queer sex scenes and first person testimony, to piece together a lost queer history of Hollywood. The first in a series of documentaries revisioning cultural history through LGBTQI+ lenses, Hammer’s film imagines a world without the censorship of queer desire, a sexy speculative filmography open to the many possibilities presented by a gaze unconstrained by bigotry or patriarchy.

Drylongso (1998)

Director: Cauleen Smith



Drylongso (1998)

Cauleen Smith's recently restored *Drylongso* is a lost gem of 1990s US indie cinema that, through its resourceful and rebellious aesthetic, carves out space for a perspective that still feels fresh and subversive today. The film follows photography student Pica (Toby Smith) as she begins photographing the Black men of her Oakland neighbourhood. Like Dash's *Illusions*, *Drylongso* attempts to find space for images locked out by the dominance of a single mainstream gaze. As Pica says to her photography teacher: "I'm capturing and preserving their image, some kind of evidence of their existence."

Part of what makes Smith's vision so refreshing is that she disregards the rules, mashing up genres – love story, buddy movie, murder mystery – and playing with colourful, vivid DIY imagery to create a visual world that reflects the energy and promise of her young protagonists. In common with other women-led films about female artists – see Lisa Cholodenko's *High Art* (1998), Cheryl Dunye's *The Watermelon Woman* (1996) and Céline Sciamma's *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* (2019) – *Drylongso* is also about the liberatory potential of seizing control of the production of images of yourself and your community.

Phantom Love (2007)

Director: Nina Menkes



Phantom Love (2007)

All of Nina Menkes's films are to some degree an attempt to capture visually the interior lives of her predominately female characters. In *Queen of Diamonds* (1991) a shot of a burning tree reveals the inner turmoil of her otherwise passive heroine, while in *Magdalena Viraga* (1986) two women undergoing a spiritual transformation sit by a swimming pool, angel wings sprouting from their shoulder blades.

Phantom Love (2007) is perhaps the film in which Menkes most fully attempts to place us inside the mind of the protagonist. Lulu (Marina Shoif), a lonely LA waitress, is attempting to extricate herself from her overbearing family. A series of anonymous sexual encounters are key to Lulu's liberatory journey, and what is striking is the way that Menkes shoots these sex scenes, rarely showing us much of her protagonist's body and instead using visual metaphors – a jelly fish in a tank, a slithering snake, a blurred face – to place us inside her experience. The result is strange, disorientating and sometimes transcendent, a world away from the objectifying sex scenes that are the norm in mainstream cinema.

Beach Rats (2017)

Director: Eliza Hittman



Beach Rats (2017)

Alongside the director, it is the director of photography who has the most control over the gaze of a film, so the fact that historically cinematography has been one of most stubbornly male-dominated areas of production helps explain why much cinema has remained set within a male-centric visual language for so long. Nevertheless, there are prominent women working as cinematographers who, in partnership with like-minded directors, consistently create dazzling work that pushes the boundaries of gender representation.

The renowned French cinematographer H  l  ne Louvart, who has worked with Eliza Hittman, Agn  s Varda and Alice Rohrwacher, is a case in point. In *Beach Rats*, Louvart and Hittman demonstrate how a female gaze goes beyond subject matter, offering a treatise on masculine identity centred on a young closeted gay man (Harris Dickinson) whose inability to accept his identity sends him into a destructive spiral over the course of a sun-soaked Brooklyn summer. Like Claire Denis's *Beau travail* (1999) – shot by another prominent female cinematographer, Agn  s Godard – *Beach Rats* is a treatise on masculinity that captures the male body, in all its eroticism, strength and vulnerability, from a distinctly feminist perspective.

Lingua Franca (2019)

Director: Isabel Sandoval



Lingua Franca (2019)

Growing acceptance of the complexity of gender identity in recent decades signals a cultural shift that has the potential to rewrite our relationship with the screen. As director Joey Soloway says in *Brainwashed*: “Now, as a non-binary filmmaker, I’m asking myself, where does the camera go? [...] Who am I looking at? Am I showing how it feels to be looked at? And am I showing how it feels to be seen while I’m being looked at?”

For a new generation of trans and non-binary filmmakers, throwing off the cis male gaze presents an opportunity to carve out a new visual language. American-based Filipina director Isabel Sandoval is one such filmmaker whose work offers an insight into what cinema beyond those conventions might look like. *Lingua Franca*, which centres on a forbidden love story between a trans woman Olivia (Sandoval) and her employer’s grandson, is revelatory because it centres the interior life of its heroine, showing us a trans woman as both object of desire and as the bearer of a powerful gaze. By showing us a three-dimensional trans woman who looks back at us, Sandoval acknowledges and subverts the triangular dynamics of looking that cinema is built upon and asks us to see the world differently.