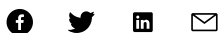




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#### CULTURE



## Male gaze into the abyss

*Nina Menkes's new documentary 'Brainwashed' takes on the sacred cows of Hollywood and shows how they contribute to a culture of objectification*

By Peter Hoskin

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“The way we see is everything,” says the independent US filmmaker Nina Menkes as I watch her, and she watches me, on a transatlantic video call.

Menkes is gearing up for the release of her new documentary, *Brainwashed: Sex-Camera-Power*, in the UK in May. Its subject is the male gaze: the hungry, objectifying way in which men have looked at women for centuries—though the term itself was both conceived and related to film in an essay that the British theorist Laura Mulvey wrote 50 years ago, titled “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”.

I was talking to Menkes a few weeks after attending a preview screening of *Brainwashed* and couldn't help relaying my experience to her. Ahead of the screening, I was certainly expectant—I'd seen and admired a number of Menkes's previous fiction films, including *The Great Sadness of Zohara* (1983) and *Phantom*



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A lot, it turned out. *Brainwashed* is—or was for me—a revelation. By combining clips of famous movies with a sprightly commentary, based on a lecture she has been delivering to students for years, Menkes examines not just the prevalence of the male gaze but also the pathology of it—how it infects the rest of the culture and even human behaviour. It's no exaggeration to say that this film will change how I see film forever. And don't forget: *the way we see is everything*.

Part of *Brainwashed*'s power comes from its selection of clips. Menkes's examples aren't trashy 1970s flicks or modern teen sex comedies. They're the works of directors such as Martin Scorsese, Spike Lee and Jean-Luc Godard. They're sacred cows, led towards the slaughterhouse.

“That was a very conscious choice,” says Menkes. “We wanted to focus on A-list films or well-known cult classics or movies that are notable in some other way. We also wanted those films to be cinematically fabulous—we did not choose scenes that were kind of *blah*.”



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poolside scene from Scorsese's *Raging Bull* (1980) and shows how it subverts physics so that its female participant is very much seen but not heard. Other movies featured include Disney's *Sleeping Beauty* (1959), Godard's *Contempt* (1963) and Brian De Palma's *Carrie* (1976). It's a cavalcade of award-winning objectification.

Menkes smiles as she recalls one viewer's reaction to this approach: "I love your documentary, but now you've ruined all my favourite films!" Though, in truth, she isn't trying to take down these behemoths so much as point out their dirty little commonalities. Indeed, one of Menkes's favourites, Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927)—[included on her list of the 10 greatest-ever films for Sight & Sound magazine](#)—also provides material for *Brainwashed*. "*Metropolis* is like the origin of the male gaze [in cinema]... however, that doesn't mean it's not a masterpiece."

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## Menkes examines not just the prevalence of the male gaze but also the pathology of it—how it infects the rest of the culture

Still, by picking—some would say, picking *on*—particular films, *Brainwashed* has already provoked some disgruntlement; though not, publicly at least, from the filmmakers themselves. "We reached out to almost all the living directors whose clips are included in the film, to see whether they might participate or respond in some way," explains Menkes. "And we were just turned down."

The disgruntlement has instead come from critics and filmgoers who disagree with Menkes's selections. And not just men defending Marty, but also women defending Kathryn Bigelow and Sofia Coppola, two female directors whose work is used in *Brainwashed* to demonstrate the male-centricity of Hollywood. Women, too, have criticised Menkes for being prudish: what's wrong with showing off the curvier reaches of Brigitte Bardot's body, anyway?

On both counts, Menkes is unrepentant. "Lots of people are invested in the idea that a woman director can do no wrong," she says. "I think that that's a reactionary position. You don't have to have a male body to perpetuate the male gaze." The problem, she believes, is a systemic one: filmmakers of all sexes and genders are taught certain ways of framing shots and handling characters in film school and, if they then manage to make it to the male-dominated world of Hollywood, end up with crews full of men.

"This is about consciousness," continues Menkes. "It is not about cancel culture. I'm not interested in attacking individual directors. I'm just saying: take a look, think about this... what does it mean?"



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subject, object, positioning. Who gets to be the subject in a scene? Who's the object? And if the traditional, male-gazey subject-object split is shown to us a billion times a day, what does that do to us?"

What, indeed? To focus on criticisms of *Brainwashed* is to overlook the many messages of thanks and support that Menkes has received "from around the world"—including from women who have experienced the film industry's terrible hiring practices or the grim advances of its worst men.

It is, in a roundabout way, the rapist Harvey Weinstein who made *Brainwashed* possible. Menkes cites two contextual developments that enabled her to go beyond the "genius insights" proffered by Laura Mulvey. One is Maria Giese's pioneering legal battle, circa 2015, against the lack of jobs for women in Hollywood. The other is the #MeToo movement. "I am 99.5 per cent sure that, before those two things, no one would have given me the money to make *Brainwashed*," says Menkes. "And even if I somehow had gotten the money, I don't think the film would have shown all over the world."

But *Brainwashed*'s broader argument is that it's the visual language of cinema that made Weinstein possible. "Harvey wasn't working in a vacuum," points out Menkes. Here is an artform that, often in casual, surreptitious ways, denigrates an entire gender—is it any wonder that some of its practitioners denigrate women in real life, too?

And not just women. "Objectification tends to be something that's used as a power move, a way to keep certain people away from power," says Menkes. "It's used in a racist context, too. We ought to be aware of that. And if you still want to get that shot of a woman's derrière, go ahead and do it. But know that, historically, that kind of shot does have implications."

In a happy conjunction, *Brainwashed* is showing at the British Film Institute's Southbank stronghold alongside a season of Menkes's other, fiction films. On the surface, they could hardly be more different: a relatively straight documentary set against a series of elliptical, experimental, dreamlike experiences. But really, underneath, they are of a piece. They are all concerned with doing cinema



Which brings Menkes back to a word that has come up a dozen times in our conversation: consciousness. “When you become aware of something, something’s going to shift. If a million people see *Brainwashed*, is something going to happen?” she asks, before answering herself: “Yes.”

Meaning it’s down to us—you, me—to be among the million. Go and see *Brainwashed*. Under Menkes’s direction, let’s try to make something happen.

*“Brainwashed” is in cinemas from 12th May. “Cinematic Sorceress: The films of Nina Menkes” runs at BFI Southbank until 31st May*

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Film Culture Identity