'A CINEMATIC WITCH': AN INTERVIEW WITH NINA MENKES

by: May Santiago , October 5, 2023

Nina Menkes' cinematic language is defined by singularity. Operating outside conceived notions of what a feminist gaze or a body of work defined for a particular spectator should be, she has been making radical experiments with the camera since she attended UCLA Film School in the 1980s. Grants and awards from international festivals soon piled up, yet her work threatened to disappear with the passage of time. No spaces to grow an audience were made available to her in the late twentieth century.

Throughout her filmography, Menkes established a distinct perspective that portrays the violence one experiences as a woman across the Middle East, the Mojave Desert, and Los Angeles with films such as *The Great Sadness of Zohara* (1983), *Queen of Diamonds* (1991), and *Phantom Love* (2007). Here, she talks about how her cinematic sensibility developed, how she persevered against blatantly sexist hiring practices in the film industry, and how all the steps to break through a sexist cinematic gaze have led to her documentary, *Brainwashed*: *Sex-Camera-Power* (2022).

The first part of the interview took place when *Brainwashed* was in production, the latter after the film's release.

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May Santiago (MS): One of the things that you call yourself is a 'cinematic witch' because you conjure your images, you conjure your films. It feels very appropriate for your surreal, meditative work. How did you arrive at filmmaking in the first place?

Nina Menkes (NM): I was doing modern dance and choreography as a teenager, and then spent a few months one summer living with a few other dancers in an apartment in London. We were taking dance classes, and hanging out.

The boyfriend of one of my roommates was in film school. He was complaining that he was supposed to make a short film, but he didn't have any ideas. So I said, 'Hey, I have an idea! Let's make a dance film!' I basically ended up choreographing this short

little dance piece. I did the set design and directed the piece. There was something about it. I was very drawn to it. That was my first experience of filmmaking.

When I returned to the US, I started working at KEMO-TV, a Spanish-language TV station in San Francisco. I had taken Spanish in school, so I started speaking Spanish really fast, and then started doing camera for them and realised I was very good at camera work. It was natural for me. So, I was working at this TV station, but I couldn't stand working 9-5. I couldn't bear it.

I applied to the UCLA Film School, and I was thrilled when I got in. And the minute I got there—it was like I had come home. It was an amazing experience because I had all these very weird, diverse talents, which included my dance background, and my natural talent for camerawork. I also grew up with a mother who was into Jungian analysis. She always encouraged me and my sister to write down our dreams. So, dream worlds and dance, which means movement, and sound, and photography, suddenly these different random skills that I had all clicked. I just totally loved making films. If you talk to people who knew me at film school, I haven't changed. I was completely obsessed with my work. I'm still working 12 hours a day on my new feature documentary *Brainwashed*. I don't do it because anyone's telling me to do it, and I'm certainly not being paid well to do it. It's just that I love it so much.

Of course, I would love to be paid, I hope I will be paid, well, someday, for making one of my films. But the truth is that I have worked for 30 years practically without being paid at all for any of my films. Up until *Brainwashed* (2022), I never had a decent salary. But if it's your vocation, then of course I would rather be paid, but if I'm not paid, I'm still not going to stop. Somehow, I managed to keep going through grants and I guess… ingenuity (beg/borrow/steal-by any means necessary) and I paid my rent through teaching. I basically gave up everything and put filmmaking first, but that is the nature of a vocation.

MS: Another thing that I've heard you say before is that you felt from an early age, even though you weren't a filmmaker, a certain way about the way that women were shot. That's where *Brainwashed* sort of comes from, but you were working in the 80s starting to make your films. This is a decade right after exploitation cinema, this is

Reagan's America, macho conservatism in front of and behind the lens. Did you feel like the filmmaking atmosphere of that time affected you in any way? Or did the way that you made films come more from an inner place?

NM: It came more from an inner place. In fact, in a few ways I was lucky because my mother was against the idea of having a TV. So, we did not have a TV at home. Of course, when I was growing up in the 60s and 70s, there was also no video store, and no Internet.

In high school I remember we were shown *Last Year at Marienbad* (1961) by Alain Resnais which, by the way, I just revisited. I put a clip from it into *Brainwashed*. I realise, yes, it's a masterpiece, but it's an extremely sexist masterpiece. I hadn't remembered that there is wall-to-wall VO of this man obsessing on a beautiful woman who just walks around and says, in a sexy, breathy come-hither type voice 'Laissez-moi-Laissez-moi- Laissez-moi' She is the classic obscure object of desire. But I loved and still love what Resnais did with time and space, even as a teenager, I appreciated that.

I also always loved the surrealist painters including Frida Kahlo, Max Ernst, and also Francis Bacon, and I was impacted by the existential writers like Camus and also by Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*. Painters, poets, and writers influenced me much more than any filmmakers because actually I hadn't really seen very many films when I started making my own work.

MS: I can relate to that too. I know that you've spoken about how Tinka [Menkes], your sister, helped motivate a lot of the subjective framework that you were building, which I find interesting. What I feel like people often think is the subversion of the male gaze is just to do the opposite, just to girl-bossify, in a way, the visuals. But the remarkable thing about, your collaborations with Tinka, is that it's not like you're shying away from seedy backdrops. It's not like you're shying away from pushing your subject to the limit, yet the way that you photograph her and the way that your sister has such an inner vulnerable honesty that just elevates those films that you did with her is remarkable. How does shooting something like *Queen of Diamonds* or *Magdalena Viraga* (1986) come about? Those films feel so free form, but by the end, are political

statements, radical in their femininity, and in the fact that femininity isn't this neat little thing. I was wondering if you could talk a bit about how you began to build that cinematic language.

NM: I always find it, in a way, a boring answer to say it was intuitive, but it *was* intuitive. My sister helped me a lot in this sense. The first film we made together, *A SOFT WARRIOR*, on Super 8, was my first project at the UCLA Film School. My sister had been very ill, and I wanted to make a film about her illness. I remember I was talking to some random friend at the time and explaining that I wanted the film to be kind of neorealist about my sister in the hospital, but at the same time surreal. I had these strange, crazy life size figurines that I created that are hanging from the ceiling in my apartment [and] I wanted to include them. 'I don't know, should I do this or that?' My friend said 'Well, why don't you just do both together?' I was like, 'Oh my God. That's it. Do it together.' I never forgot that conversation. And it sort of became my style. My sister also had powerful intuitions. For example, in this film, I remember saying to one of the characters, 'Hmm why don't you go into this closet, and you lie up there on the shelf,' and then I stopped myself and said, 'but no—that is not in our script.' And my sister corrected me, she said 'If you love the shot, just shoot it.' I understood she was dead-on right.

So those two things became a mantra—something like 'Everything that arises must converge.' If different elements are arising simultaneously in my consciousness, while shooting—it's probably connected, you know. If I'm on set and I suddenly want to zoom in, I just zoom in. I just listen to that. I feel blessed that I have, maybe I would call it a bullshit detector that's very, very finely tuned, but it works the best when I'm looking through the lens. If I would make a film and I would be the director but someone else would operate the camera, well, actually I have no idea how to do that. That sounds to me like an impossible task. When I'm looking through the lens, I enter this space where I really know if something is true.

An example of that is when I was shooting *The Great Sadness of Zohara* with Tinka, I had an idea for the end of the film. In the movie, she starts her journey in Jerusalem, and she goes on a long quest through North Africa, and then we get back to Jerusalem. And the end was supposed to be triumphant. Tinka's character is home, dun-da-da-dun, the heroine's quest! She's done it! So, we went out. I had the camera, Tinka's in her costume, and I just kept trying to get the shot, this triumphant shot,

maybe Tinka's head against Dome of the Rock. But no—I don't like it. Okay, let's try something over here—no, don't like it. In the end, I just couldn't get a shot. We walked around for three hours. I couldn't find a single shot. I didn't know what was wrong, but I knew something was wrong. So, I said, okay forget it, we're not shooting today.

We went back to my aunt's apartment, and the next morning I woke up and realised that the end is not triumphant—it's tragic. In the end, she's re-accommodated to her secondary status, which is what generally does happen to a woman's quest. So, we went out and we shot the whole end in an hour. That's how I feel what's true—only through the lens. I mean, I hope, it's also outside the lens but it's very strong when I'm looking through the lens. So, I need to shoot to access that knowing. To my credit, I do listen when I hear the inner voice.

MS: Do you view yourself as a spectator in that exact moment, or do you view yourself as the creator of the image, or do you view yourself as an observer?

NM: I do two functions, you know, I'm the director and I'm the director of photography. I'm generally also the writer. So, the writer constructs this world or some kind of narrative story. Then we're going to go out, and we're going to film this story. I have a fear of being overly controlling because I want to allow things to happen, so I would never do a storyboard in advance. For example, the *Queen of Diamonds* script was, like, 17 pages long because each scene is just one line. For example, 'Tinka encounters the woman in her apartment with the wedding dress.' Then when we go to film it, I know what the scene is supposed to be about emotionally. I have an idea about that, but the actual framing is a process for me of finding the truth about the scene, and then creating it. That's the DoP side. And the director at the same time creates a container where this magical world will come to life. Then Tinka brings it to life with her own interpretation while the camera captures the moment as if it's a documentary.

MS: Do you see yourself in the characters you put on screen or is your positionality different?

NM: I do see myself, in a way. That's a good question. I would say, the answer to that is 'yes and no.'

I'm now making this doc feature film *Brainwashed*. It's very, very, very different than my other films, because it has a clear message and it's made for an audience. That's been an interesting process. My other films came from my inner world and are in service of something. I don't even know what they are in service of. I just know that I was compelled to make those films and the drive and the compelling nature of my need to make those films was so overwhelming that it overcame impossible barriers. Like, how can you make a film in Las Vegas and get everything for free? Me, I worked for free and most of the crew worked for free, and had a casino given to me for two weeks, a 35-millimeter camera package given to me—basically we had everything given to us. But there was no extra. I always got exactly what I needed. That's all, not even one extra penny. And, of course, no salary. The drive to do my work was so unbelievably powerful that it overrode any and all considerations that a normal person would have. But the figure in the film, is it me? No, it's definitely not me and it's not Tinka either. I don't know who that figure is. I would say that would be a mystery question.

MS: Would you say you created 'her,' whoever that undefined 'her' is?

NM: I don't know. I think that the figure was created somewhere in-between me and Tinka. I'm not sure. She is quite independent. She arose, and I documented her.

MS: It's not like you made any of your films expecting them to be commercial successes, but you made these films anyway. Did you ever expect them to be seen or to get seen?

NM: Yeah, I did because I knew from the very beginning… I did have a sense that my films were important.

MS: They are.

NM: Also, I get enough feedback from the world telling me that I wasn't deluded on that point, For example, *A Soft Warrior* (1981) was selected for Filmex, which was the big film festival in Los Angeles in the 80s. Then my second film, *The Great Sadness of Zohara*, won a prize at the San Francisco International Film Festival. *Magdalena Viraga* won a Los Angeles Film Critics' award, and so on. So, yes, I was getting, in fact, a

powerful critical response. I was invited here and there. But that response from the world did not translate the way it would have translated for a male filmmaker because of very severe sexist discrimination.

If you have a man who makes a first feature film and wins the Los Angeles Film Critics award, that man will get phone calls from Hollywood. 'What's your next project? Let me find some money for you.' I was subject to extreme sex discrimination because that is—or was—the nature of the film industry. Until very, very recently, the employment discrimination in the film industry was worse than in any other industry in the United States, even worse than in coal mining. Thanks, in great part, to the work of Maria Giese—who's also a co-producer on *Brainwashed*—the federal government started investigating the illegal sex discrimination in the film industry. So, there's been a change in the last couple years, but for the entire length of my filmmaking career, I was subject to a suffocating glass ceiling that was very, very low. You know, awards, rave reviews, festival invitations—but nothing made a dent.

MS: What did spectatorship of other people watching your films, especially women, mean to you? Did you ever have any expectations for that exchange?

NM: I was showing something on the screen that was very naked in a way, even though it's not really about me. Nevertheless, there's something raw that I'm exposing. There's something—I don't even know what I'm exposing, I'm exposing something that's like my inner life, I guess you can call it that, and a certain way of seeing. 'I go against it' was my mantra from early on, and in this sense, I probably lump myself more with poets and painters than I do with most filmmakers. I never, ever, ever think about the audience. I have to make something that's true, it has to be true to itself, and I cannot think about the audience, and I refuse to think about [them]. On that note, it's very interesting that all the films that I made with my sister—we never ever, ever showed those films to anyone until they were presented. So, the only person, for example, who saw *The Bloody Child* (1996) before it premiered at Sundance was the colour timer at the film lab FOTOKEM—Ray Morphino. We presented at Sundance sight unseen to the world. So, all my films—until *Brainwashed*—I never wanted comments or feedback. In fact, I was afraid to get comments because I knew people would screw me up. Imagine if I had shown *Queen of Diamonds* for

comments: 'Oh, the dealing scene is too long' [laughs] So how can I possibly show my work for comments? At the same time, I wanted my films to be very widely seen because I felt they were (are) important and need to be seen.

MS: I want to end by asking about *Queen of Diamonds*. One of my favourite scenes is the tree in the desert being set on fire. I know that there was no way that you could reset that shot. Can you talk about how it was achieved?

NM: My assistant, Kelley Miller and I were driving around the Salton Sea area, looking for a palm tree that's sort of isolated because we knew we couldn't set a palm tree on fire if it's in a grove because that would be dangerous. It has to be an isolated palm tree. We found a palm tree that seemed to be in the middle of nowhere.

Then we went to the local fire department station. We said, 'Hi, we're filmmakers and we're wondering: we have a scene in a film. We want to burn a palm tree and we saw this palm tree over here; you know, can you help us?' They said, 'Oh that palm tree? Yes, that palm tree is scheduled for demolition in two weeks because they're going to be building an apartment house right there. So, if you want to burn the palm tree, that's okay, you can do that. You can burn that palm tree because that palm tree is going to be cut down anyway.'

I was relieved because I didn't want to kill the palm tree. I said, 'Okay well, can you help us? I mean, we just have this team of five people. We don't know how to burn a palm tree. We would like to have the fire department there helping us.' They said, 'Oh absolutely, we can do that for you, no problem.' So, then… well… here comes the hard question, and we're crossing our fingers: 'And how much would that cost?' You know because we have so little money for this film. He said, 'What you need is a permit to make a fire in an open area, and that'll be $5, but as far as us coming out and burning it for you, we can do that no problem.' So that was our $5 shot.

MS: Finally, can you talk about how *Brainwashed* came about? I am inspired by the premise of how it's looking at how sexist Hollywood cinematography is and how early cinema and the rules for shot construction were sexist to begin with. I try to get my students to see this, and they struggle, so I am very much looking forward to the film pushing the conversation forward.

NM: *Brainwashed* is being made in a way that's 100 zillion times different than any of my other films, so it's been very interesting for me. I started teaching when I was a really young and still a student at UCLA Film School. I had a part-time teaching job, and I started teaching as a way to survive, and then I *kept* teaching as a way to survive. Pretty early on, I started noticing what you noticed, which is like, you know, your students don't understand what you mean. Over time, I got better because I used to say, like, I saw *Raging Bull*—I hate it. I didn't know how to say, 'why do I hate it?' or, 'what do I hate about it?' you know, I just find it deeply sexist. Over time, with teaching, I learned to be more articulate, and I started bringing in examples. Look at this shot and look how this shot is constructed. Over time, I developed this little talk that I would give to my students to show how shot design is gendered. After the #MeToo movement hit in October 2017, I was like, 'You know, this talk that I've been giving to my students about shot design is connected to the epidemic of sexual abuse, is connected to employment discrimination against women. This is all one. This is really all one big fat problem.'

I wrote an essay for *Filmmaker Magazine* where I state this thesis. The article went viral, which completely blew my mind. It seemed that people were ready to hear about this issue. To make a long story short, I was invited to give the talk at Sundance Black House, and it was a wild hit. Everyone absolutely loved it; they went crazy for it. Shortly thereafter, a woman approached me and said, 'Have you ever thought of making this into a feature film?' I said no, but that's a good idea because I'm sick of giving this talk. I was, like, running around giving the talk and it's tiring and not realistic to keep doing it.

The talk had maybe 15 film clips, the film has 175 film clips, and it represents a new lens onto the history of cinema. I'm saying … let's look at how women have been shot through the history of cinema by all of these A-list guys. It's old news to say, let's look at advertising, look how they have this girl lying on the car in her bikini to sell it. It's old news to say music videos are sexist and objectifying, but most people don't realise that you know Godard and Scorsese and Spike Lee and Tarantino and Robert Rodriguez, and even Sofia Coppola, do the same thing … Alain Resnais is a great filmmaker, but he's a sexist filmmaker. How all these people treat women photographically is the same, how boring, you know, there's no imagination. A friend of mine just came over, and he was looking at the movie. He said, 'It's like you're a

prosecutor, and you're winning your case. You're laying out the evidence. You're starting at the beginning and you're laying out the evidence and, at the end, you know, the jury votes in your favour.'

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Since *Brainwashed* debuted at Sundance in spring 2022, it has been accepted into numerous film festivals, including the Berlinale, CPH: DOX, and IDFA. The film has sparked conversations about the role of women in the film industry and pushed Menkes' work into the spotlight that had proven elusive despite all the accolades she has had since her feature film debut. A year later, in the summer of 2022, I followed up with Menkes to reflect on her experience of releasing *Brainwashed*.

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MS: One of my favourite quotes from when we spoke last time is that one of your friends watched the in-progress cut of *Brainwashed* and said it's like you're a prosecutor and you're winning your case. Now the film is done and you're figuring out a formal release strategy. How has your perspective or your feelings changed—if at all—from the time you were making *Brainwashed* to now that a lot of people have seen it?

NM: For one thing, I was afraid. With the editor, Cecily Rhett, who I worked with really closely, we thought, 'You know, maybe we're going to be stonewalled by the big festivals.' Maybe Sundance, for example, won't take it because they might feel like it's sort of—it's not really attacking these elitist films, but it's pointing out that these A-list directors, who everyone reveres all participate in this system of gendered shot design. So, we thought that they might put the kibosh on it. But we were invited to Sundance, to the Berlinale, to CPH: DOX, to Karlovy Vary, and all these other festivals around the world. That was kind of mind-blowing to us. We were like, 'Okay, people are ready to hear this now. The time has come, and people are ready to hear it.'

MS: Has *Brainwashed* received the most festival recognition out of all of the films in your repertoire?

NM: I would say yes. I mean, I did make it on purpose. The whole idea was to make a film that was more accessible and a bit more mainstream than my other films. That was done very consciously and on purpose. Indeed, that concept seems to have come

true. We have been invited to dozens and dozens of major film festivals, and we're getting the theatrical release with Kino Lorber. My previous films didn't get that kind of play.

MS: How do you feel about the success of *Brainwashed* compared to your previous films?

NM: Well, I'm really happy and I hope that it leads to me being able to make another movie that's more like my real own style movie, you might say. I have two scripts that I'm eager to make. I think that it's not just that my film has come out now, and people are ready to hear it. I mean, these are things I've been saying for thousands of years. Not only me, I mean, a lot of film theory type people have been saying it, but no one was really ready to listen until now. I was interviewed by this woman from Poland the other day, and she was like, 'Okay I've read Laura Mulvey, but your film is for a lot of people who never read Laura Mulvey, you know, who've never read these theorists. They can watch the film and understand some of these really important concepts. They're never going to be in a film theory class.' I think what we wanted to do, we wanted to bring some of these ideas to a much wider audience.

MS: What have you learned with the release of *Brainwashed*? We talked before that this wasn't a movie you set out to specifically make. First, it was a talk you've given for many years. Now it's a movie that is accessible. What have you learned now that it's out there? Has anything shifted for you?

NM: Just to clarify, as of right this second, the film has not been released yet. So, I feel like the film's story is just beginning. I mean, there's been a lot of excitement about the film everywhere that we've shown at, that I've been either invited to go or do a Zoom call or something like that. People come to me, and they're like, 'Oh my God, I didn't realise, you know, I will never watch a film the same way again.' I've heard that like 100 times. I've heard that from people who are not in the field of film, but also from people who are in the field of film. Tabitha Jackson, the director of Sundance, actually wrote me a private note and said, 'I'll never watch a film the same way again.' Tabitha Jackson is obviously a very film-literate person, and so that was very exciting. But at the same time, the film is just beginning its journey. We don't know what's going to happen when it actually comes out. Are people going to attack it? Are people ready to really embrace it? Is it going to go viral the same way that my

Filmmaker Magazine article did? The film is based on my lecture, and based on my *Filmmaker Magazine* article. That *Filmmaker Magazine* article which we thought maximum 50 people would read ended up being the most popular article of the year at *Filmmaker Magazine*. So maybe the film will have a kind of word-of-mouth thing where women tell each other, you know, 'Hey, you really have to see this film.' We'll see, right? We don't know yet.

MS: I watched *Brainwashed* when it premiered at Sundance. In a great way, it was kind of exactly what I expected, but one thing that surprised me when I watched it is I started crying when Rosanna Arquette began talking about how badly she wanted to work. You know, that's Rosanna Arquette, someone who I grew up with. I love her films. I also really loved the people that you include in the documentary. You included everyone from Cheryl Dunye to Julie Dash to Charlene Yi. Their naked honesty felt like the strongest piece of evidence in the film. Everything you say is brilliant, no matter what, but you have all of these women affirming exactly what you're saying, through their real-life experiences, in the process of making the film. What has been the most meaningful or exciting part of putting this film together?

NM: What was exciting is—and I worked really closely with the editor on this because, you know, it's not the kind of film I've made before—but it was like, how do we make a film that's—how shall I say it, this is the wrong word—not really fun to watch because it's painful to watch. But it moves along. It takes you along almost like a thriller or something. You want to see what's coming next. How do we take this painful subject matter and yet make it into a film that people are going to want to watch, and that can be accessible to a large audience and have that kind of flow. I mean, I think that really, I have to credit the editor with figuring out the way to do that. So, even though there's painful moments, and you're not the first person I heard who really broke down. One of my friends said when it was in the rape section, she just really lost it, you know, she had to turn off the film and come back to it later. I'm glad that there was a way to have it be accessible, but without really compromising the message being kind of harsh in a way.

MS: How has the response been from your collaborators, so not only your editors and your producers, but also all of the other women that participated and helped you with this film and made it what it is?

NM: It seems like everyone's really excited. Charlene Yi posted on our Instagram that she watched it twice at Sundance, and she's going to tell everybody to watch. The people who've seen it from the participants are, like, Joey Soloway, Amy Ziering, Charlene Yi, Maria Geise, Sandra De Castro Buffington, some of our team members [who] are in the film. They are all big supporters, and they feel like it's a game changer.

MS: Now that the film is about to be released, what do you hope people see in this film once it's released?

NM: I think that it has the potential to, as many people have said, change the way that we look at movies moving forward. We are now at a time period in history where people are sort of ready to think about these issues; and they've thought about these issues—the issues of representation are a huge topic of discussion now. What I'm adding to the discussion is this very specific thing at the formal shot design level. As we have examples in the movie, a protagonist, who is the main character, and she might even be like a bitchy rude main character, and yet she's shot in a way that objectifies her and sexualises her. And that is a subtle way, I mean, it's really not so subtle once you see it, you can't unsee it. But for too many people, it's not that noticeable. When they're watching a movie, they're kind of like, 'I don't know there's something about that movie that rubbed me the wrong way,' but they might not be able to say it. I think now they're going to be able to say it. They're going to be like, 'Wow, that female character was really shot in a very specific way that undermined her whole position in the film.' If the film really shifts consciousness around that issue, I think that will be kind of big.

MS: Do you think that there's anything that you would change about the film now? Either something you wanted to add, or something that had to be left behind.

NM: No, not really. You know, it's funny. When I showed the film in Israel, people really loved it, but they were like, 'It's a little too long.' They all told me it's too long. Then I had a dream that I had cut 10 minutes out. I watched the film with 10 minutes cut out, and it was terrible. I was like, 'No you're wrong, it has to all be there.' It's already kind of long, it's 107 minutes, which is considered long for a documentary. I mean, we could have easily had 15 more minutes because there were so many more film clips and more little side streets that we wanted to go down. You

always have to make a choice. There were certain things that were kind of more, shall we say, complicated. There was this whole idea, I had a section at one point, about the whole idea of lack, you know, and castration. I found film clips that supported that. But then the editor was like, 'People are going to have a hard time understanding that when we're going for a more general audience.' There was a certain decision to keep, you know, this film is not made for only PhD students in film theory. That's not who it's for. It would be a different film.

MS: This film is going to be coming out in a year that feels particularly difficult with things like the Amber Heard and Johnny Depp trial, but also Roe vs Wade being overturned. It has been one of the more difficult years for women, and we have this movie coming out. Yes, your film is about shot design, but your film triangulates the official language of cinema, sexual assault and abuse, and employment discrimination. It all connects. How do you feel about your film coming out in this time? Does it make you feel any sort of way either way?

NM: I think the film became more important actually after the reversal of Roe vs. Wade. It became more important because what you have in Roe vs. Wade is the idea that women are not full-on human subjects. Full-on human subjects make their own decisions, control their own bodies, but objects like, you know, somebody's wife, doesn't get to make her own decisions. There are countries in the Middle East where a woman cannot travel on her own passport without having a signature of her husband, and that's what we're looking at here. It's the pushing of women into the object position being now confirmed by the United States Supreme Court. That makes this film more urgent, in my opinion, as you have to look at how people have been trained to see women as less than fully human subjects. There's been stuff on the Internet, like people reminding us that until 1975 … a woman could not get a credit card without her husband's permission. The United States is supposed to be kind of progressive, but we know that's not true. We have an outrageous situation where the European Union just voted to make sure abortion was safe and legal and available for the entire European Union. Here we are in the United States, pushing women more than 50 years back, where we are back to where we can't get a credit card, you can't get an abortion. Can you even have a bank account? I don't know. I feel like *Brainwashed* is really more important now than ever because the issue is subject and object. I will say Roe v Wade is subject v object. I am not an object, I'm a full-on human subject. I think, I move, I do things for myself. I make decisions for myself.

This is a radical thought? Come on! I mean, it's absurd. But here we are. 100 years ago, women were not allowed to vote. 50 years ago, women couldn't get a credit card. 50 years ago, women couldn't get an abortion, and now again, women can't get abortions because it's someone else controlling our bodies. The reversal of Roe v Wade makes *Brainwashed* more urgent. Let's figure out why everyone thinks that women are not full-on human subjects who can make their own fucking decisions. It's just unbelievable!

MS: When we originally spoke, you were hoping that if things went well with *Brainwashed*, there would be renewed interest in your earlier work. So now that the film is about to be released and you've earned all these accolades, have you felt like that has happened?

NM: Yes, I do I think that I'm there. I'm lucky to have Arbelos film distribution handling my earlier titles. I think that it's not just that there's renewed interest in my earlier titles because of *Brainwashed*. There's also renewed interest in my earlier titles just because, you know, recently starting really with the work that Maria Geise did about women directors, the ACLU going to the federal government, the federal government threatening the Hollywood studios with violations of Title IX … We're talking about there's been a whole awareness that, 'oh whoops, women directors, whoops.' So then people are suddenly like, 'Oh well, this woman who had no money and was working totally outside the system made seven feature films.' There are not too many women who can say that they made seven feature films at all. So that has certainly been a good development in the last few years. I think that *Brainwashed* might give people a little bit of an excuse to say, 'well wait, let's go back and see her other films.' Obviously, *Brainwashed*—it's very different in terms of style, in terms of approach, but a lot of the core issues that are dealt with in my earlier films in a completely different way are the same issues. It's the same issues, it's just a different approach to those issues.

MS: How would you tell people to watch *Brainwashed*? What do you hope people do after they watch your film?

NM: Tell other people to watch it! [*laughs*] I think you have to be sort of ready on some level to possibly look at some of your favourite films and be like, 'Oh whoops, I didn't remember that the scene in *Blade Runner* is a prototype for rape culture. I

didn't remember that Sofia Coppola started her film with a close-up on Scarlett Johansson's butt.' I think some people get kind of upset. It depends on what perspective you're coming in with. Maybe it's just to say like, take a moment to reflect on how mainstream culture, including A-list movies, have positioned women as being in the object position over decades and how that brings us at the end of the day, to the reversal of Roe v Wade. These things go very deep. It's very threatening to have women turn into full-on human subjects. We're 51%. What's going to happen if all women really claim that? What's going to happen to male supremacy? Trump is ultimately popular because he's a white supremacist and a male supremacist. There are people who will throw democracy down the toilet in order to hold on to male supremacy. Male supremacy is so important to them.