

**POLYESTER**

New Zine! Features Podcast

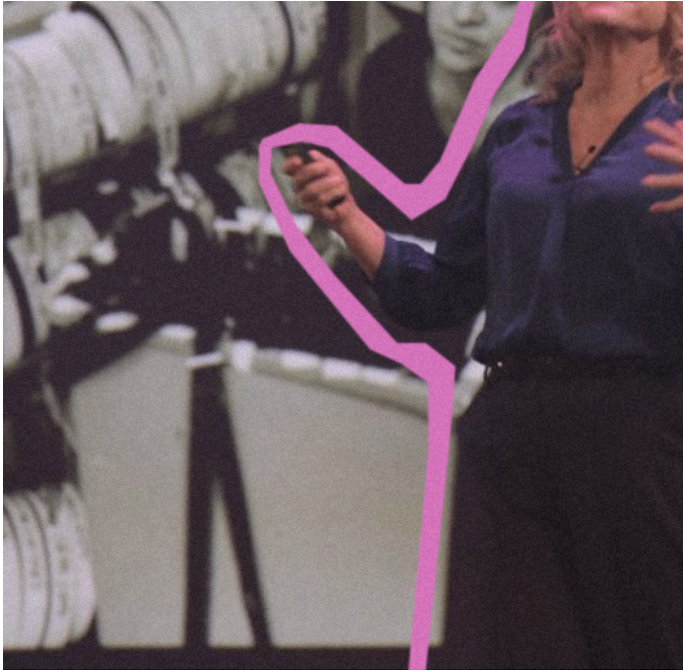
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*Nina Menkes on the  
Male Gaze, Misogyny in  
Cinema and Brainwashed*

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them. A long standing name in the feminist film genre, using a multitude of classic cinema clips, Menkes is establishing five pillars that dissect Hollywood techniques that are used by filmmakers, that go beyond Mulvey's "male gaze" and cause the audience to submit to certain power relationships as dictated on screen. We've become so accustomed to this way of seeing, that yes, we're brainwashed. We chat to Nina Menkes about subjects, objects and how a female revolution in Hollywood could help retrain our way of seeing.

*In your film Brainwashed you hold Hollywood accountable for rape culture and misogyny. Do you think the film and fashion industry go hand in hand in this?*

I think they definitely go hand in hand. I focussed on movies because I'm a filmmaker and the movie is many things. One of the things is that it's really my personal life story in terms of being a woman and a filmmaker and how it's affected me both in my personal and professional life.



*it...*

Totally, I completely agree. In the Louvre you have 95% naked women and 95% of the painters are men. I'm making up those statistics but it's probably something like that. It's a very long problem and it started before cinema but cinema intensified it greatly because of the way that film reaches. How many people can actually go to the Louvre? Not too many. How many people see Hollywood films? Billions.

*One of your interviewees Julie Dash says poignantly that the master's tools will not dismantle the master's house. What does the female revolution in Hollywood look like?*

She was quoting Audre Lorde, she's saying let's find a new way to photograph women that is not so profoundly disempowering. My call is for people to become aware of this cinematic language which is some sort of law in a way. And to use their imagination to think of new ways to imagine sex scenes where women are not always in the object position.

We've been subjected to this way of thinking about ourselves and our sexuality where we're objectified, where we're always worrying about how we look and how the other person perceives us, as opposed to wondering how we actually feel.

*"Speaking of Audre Lorde, she talks about "the erotic" as a life force that is not to be reduced to sex."*

If you're a heterosexual woman I think it's worse. We've been subjected to this way of thinking about ourselves and our sexuality where we're objectified, where we're always worrying about how we look and how the other person perceives us, as opposed to wondering how we actually feel. What she says is let's not let that ruin the erotic for us. Many people have that

like, oh ok, everything to do with sex and erotic makes me feel completely disempowered so I'm just gonna skip it. I'll do something else. I'll do painting or I'll do yoga. The erotic can be experienced in the sense of Audre Lorde, where the erotic is the same as creative force. But I would say that there is something specific about sexual energy and sexual erotic courses, that are part of our lives and it's too bad that a lot of women just cut that off after they experience sexual harassment and assault. There is a good percentage of women who just don't wanna do it anymore. It's tragic because that is something that should be a positive, important part of our lives but for many people it's been too painful and traumatic.

*Do you think that over the years misogyny has been largely internalised by women and that they are therefore more accepting of seeing those images on screen? Do we need to retrain ourselves?*

The problem is the position of the object and you cannot be an object in a vacuum, you're always an object in relation to a subject. So the subject who is objectifying is what is the problem here. The power relationship between subject and object. Have women internalised it? Absolutely yes. We've all internalised it, that's the worst part about it. It's very hard to escape. The first step is awareness and then hopefully we can retrain ourselves, yes. There are a lot of different ways. I've done many years of psychoanalysis and that helped me to feel more empowered. If cinema changes, that's gonna help us. When people like Trump and Weinstein are being held accountable, these things will start to help shift the situation where women are powerless objects.

*You offer some solutions in your film Phantom Love, where the female protagonist turns towards the camera and drops her cover in the end...*

Nudity per se is not the problem, it's when the characters are consistently objectified in terms of the power relations, and that's what I break down in the film. In the case of Phantom Love, in the end, it's supposed to be that she does feel a sense

of liberation through exposing her own pain instead of internalising it and having it eat at her.

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*You also mention Buffalo 66 as an example, but she eventually saves his life and becomes somewhat the heroin of the film. Should the storyline matter despite the visuals?*

The story matters but the reason we presented it like that is that we were making the point that it's a common trope, that an aggressive, abusive man is violently assaulting a woman, and then becomes the love interest. This is a very common narrative arch. It's a very unfortunate storyline that we've seen thousands of millions of times.

*One of the pillars is the light on women's faces, making them look ageless and detached whereas the man is lit in 3D, giving away his age and surroundings. How would a reversal be perceived?*

That's very difficult to imagine. I don't think that would really be possible because the whole point of these techniques are to disempower the feminine. Let's talk about the sleeping beauty story. You have the man galloping on a horse through the forest and he cuts down all the branches and he finds the sleeping princess and he kisses her and she wakes up, right? If we do a reverse, most heterosexual women will not find that story very sexy because the guy is lying there asleep which is kind of associated with a passive limp dick vibe. So it's hard to do a reverse because the whole concept of the man is active, go getter! move! subject! full body! That's what's sexy for the man. And we've been trained that what's sexy for the woman is to be alluring, to-be-looked-at-ness, gorgeous, blah blah. Usually if there is a flip like that it would be a satire.

*So ideally both would fight through the forest and meet each other.*

Yeah, two subjects.