

Bonjour et bienvenue sur Qui a peur du féminisme ?, le podcast qui met en valeur la culture féminine et féministe. Aujourd'hui nous parlerons en anglais en l'honneur de notre invitée spéciale Nina Menkes, qui est avec nous aujourd'hui depuis la Californie. Pour celles et ceux qui le préfèrent, vous trouverez la transcription et traduction française de cet épisode sur notre blog.

Welcome in our podcast Who's Afraid of feminism? Today we speak English to honor our special guest Nina Menkes who is with us today from California.

Nina Menkes is an independent filmmaker born in Michigan raised in California. She teaches at the California Institute of the Arts in Santa Clarita.

Among her films, there is Queen of Diamonds in 1991 and Phantom of love in 2007. But to be honest we got to know Nina's work recently thanks to her documentary Brainwashed: Sex-Camera-Power that can be seen on Arte.

Today we are going to talk about movies, women and the visual language of oppression.

Hello Nina, thank you for being with us.

Nina Menkes (NM) : Hi! Thank you for having me on your program. I am excited to speak with you.

So first about your career and the story behind Brainwashed. The first question is this: when have you decided to become a filmmaker?

NM: Well, actually, I was very young. I think I was 17 and I was staying with some friends of mine in London. I was a summer dance program because I have been studying dance and choreography. My roommate who was a dancer, his boyfriend was in film school. His boyfriend did not have any ideas he was supposed to make a film and he had no ideas and I said : "Well I have an idea". And I had an idea for a dance film and I, they were like, great, great, you know, what's your idea? And we ended up creating this dance film that I basically directed. That was my first experience and I loved it. And that was really how it started. And, Then I got very excited about film, much more exciting than dance. And I applied to the UCLA film school. And when I got in, that was really the beginning of my film journey. And I, I loved UCLA. It was fantastic. Very, very free school. You could do whatever you wanted. So it was wonderful.

And so after this experience, what is it to be a woman in the film industry?

NM: It's terrible. I had you know, a very, very strong feeling and kind of knowledge of... We call it vocation. Yeah, if you know what it means, I don't know in French, but. Like the calling for me to be a filmmaker was almost like a spiritual calling and I just knew it was right for me and you know, I made a first film at film school called *The Great Sadness of Zohara* and it went to the San Francisco International Film Festival and won a prize and I thought like oh okay so now you know people will call me or something will happen oh... Nothing happened. Then I managed to make a feature film also at UCLA film school, a 16-millimeter film called *Magdalena Viraga* and this was made for \$5,000 on 16-millimeter film. But the film won a Los Angeles film critics award. And it went to festivals all over the world, including Toronto, got rave reviews. So I thought, okay, well someone's gonna call me or give me some money or something's supposed to happen now, you know? No. In English we have this phrase and I don't know if it's in French too, but they say, you know, "Could not even get arrested", you

know, so women in Hollywood... It's very, very, very recent that there's a little bit of change. And this change is also not very impressive, but it's, you know, it's better than it was, but the you know, when I was starting and when I was making all my films, you know, there was no such thing as a woman director. Yeah. I exaggerate. Of course, there were some, but you know. It was terrible discrimination, terrible.

And to come to Brainwashed, what is a story behind this movie? How did you get the idea to make this documentary?

N.M: Well, because the films that I made were very low budget and, I sort of, you know, I got small grants and I, you know, beg, borrow or steal... you know, somehow managed to make my films on very very low budget. So I wasn't able to live from filmmaking. I wasn't able to live in terms of paying my rent. So that's how I started teaching as a way to live.

And during the course of teaching, I started to develop this lecture that became the basis of brainwashed and the lecture was something that always was considered... just something for film students, you know, so and every year I would maybe add some clips or take out some clips and you know the students usually they were very shocked when they saw it, but it was something that I thought of really for a film school context.

And then in 2015 we had the big investigation into Hollywood for illegal sex discrimination practices that started to change a little bit, but the awareness started to get out in the world about this idea of women directors being terribly discriminated against. And then following on that was 2017 the MeToo movement, right? So those two things together, I thought, you know, I'm gonna write an essay about this, how the visual language of cinema ties to these twin epidemics of sexual assault, sexual abuse, and employment discrimination against women. What we call in the film this triangle. And, I wrote an essay about it. It was published in *Filmmaker Magazine*. It was right after the MeToo movement. So November, 2017. And amazingly, me and the editor of the magazine, we were shocked because the article went completely viral and it became their most read article of the entire year.

And then I started to get invited around the world outside of film school. You know. At the Rotterdam at the AFI film fest, at the BFI London. There was something called *The voice of women a series in con*. And I, so I gave, I started giving my lecture around the world and everywhere I went, people were very, very excited about it.

And this then drew the attention of Tim Disney. And Tim Disney and Abigail Disney and their sister Susan Disney Lord. They decided to finance the feature film version of my lecture. And that's how the film came. But the great thing about the film is, you know, in the lecture there's maybe 15 film clips. In the film, we have a 175 film clips from A-list movies from the very beginning, 1,896 up to the present.

Thank you. Now we are going into the core of the documentary. Could you maybe explain what is the male gaze as defined by Laura Mulvey in 1975? And maybe give an example from a movie.

N.M : Sure, Laura Mulvey was the first person to use this phrase "male gaze". I mean, she wrote in her famous essay, *Visual pleasure and narrative cinema*, she sort of pointed out how the whole of cinema is structured around what she calls the woman as to be-looked-at-ness. So the woman is essentially to be-looked-at-ness and the man is doing all the action and all the everything else. She's just there to be looked at and this, she said you know, when she

wrote her essay, she only mentions this word "the male gaze" I think one time but this phrase became the most remembered phrase actually out of, for most people, out of her essay.

So what are some examples of the male gaze?

There's so many, obviously there's 175 in the film... But let's see! Well one example that that tends to shock people is when you think about the opening of Sofia Coppola's film *Lost in translation* and I purposely pick the film by a woman director because the male gaze is not only done by male directors. It's you know, it's done by almost everybody, right? Not everybody, but a lot of people, including women directors.

So, the opening of *Lost in translation*... It starts with a close-up of Scarlett Johansson's derriere in seethrough underwear and fuzzy lighting. And this, her, behind is the backdrop for a whole long credit sequence. This is the first time we see her. This is how we're introduced to the main female lead character. And then it cuts and we're introduced to the male lead character who is Bill Murray. And we see his face. And he's in 3D light and he's having feelings and he's driving in a taxicab and he's looking around. And these two shots at the beginning of the film, how you introduce the female character and how you introduce a male character is classic male gaze.

In Brainwashed, you quote Audrey Lorde "The master tools will never dismantle the master's house" Could you explain how does that apply to filmmaking?

Yes, I would love to talk about this because there are a lot of people who, you know might disagree with that... ok.. But the idea is that the tool, which is the tool being in this case, you know, the male gaze way of looking cannot be used to take down the male gaze.

And, this is a sort of a controversial point because they're people, you know, like let's say in the film *Titane*. The whole opening sequence is the woman, on direct display in a very typical male gaze kind of way. She's, you know, close-ups on her body and she's, you know, this very typical male gaze way of shooting. And then people say, oh, but she's critiquing the male gazes. You know, she's critiquing it by doing it.

So. You know, you can agree with that or not agree with that. My opinion is that if you're doing it, you're reproducing it, you're reinforcing it. And if you say it's a critique. It doesn't make it into a critique.

Maybe as Julie Dash says in the film, quoting Audrey Lorde, you can't use those master's tools to dismantle the master's house. Why don't you try another way? A different way of approaching cinematography, a different way of approaching sex on screen.

And could you maybe recommend some movies that are using these different tools? Your movies, obviously, but maybe others.

Yeah, obviously. I will give one or two examples from my movies, then I'll give some other examples.

The basic way... okay, my film, for example, *Magdalena Viraga*, that I mentioned, you know, a few minutes ago, is about a sex worker who's very angry and very alienated and there's nine sex scenes in the film. They're quite long. This is from 1986. It's very radical at the time.

But the camera stays on her face. Only on her face and she's very upset, she's you know and in this way these sex scenes go completely against this male gaze way of looking because I'm with her subjective personal experience as opposed to viewing her as an object for someone else's viewing pleasure, right?

That's one of my films. But let's take like a film like for example *Saint Omer* by Alice Diop, which was one of my favorite films from a few years ago. This film has as well, really two main female characters, you know, the one who's the writer who's watching the trial and the woman who's on trial. Both of these women characters are troubled in many different ways, you know, but they are subjects, they are completely subjects. They are in no way objectified. They're human beings who are having a human experience. And one thing that I find sometimes people get confused, they think that if you're calling, you know, for an end to the male gaze, you're calling for only like very powerful women, who are, like, you know, overcoming obstacles... This is not the point! Another film that I absolutely love Agnes Varda film, *Vagabond*. I don't know the French name. So, *Vagabond* by Agnes Varda, shows has a woman subject. This woman is struggling with the issue of being a sexual object for other people. And in the end, it's a tragedy and she ends up dead. She ends up frozen in a ditch. That is an incredible feminist film for me because she's talking about the pain and the struggle of being an object from the position, the perspective of the woman character. So, this idea that you know, countering the male gaze is all about, you know, strong, empowered women, that's really not the point. The point is, are you an object? Someone is looking at you. You're not yourself. You're in this weird, crazy like... schizophrenia or you're actually a human subject with a full range of human characteristics and feelings.

And the movie you were talking about is in French Sans toit ni loi, avec Sandrine Bonnaire. So, if we go beyond brainwashed now, what are the links between the way women are filmed and the way women are treated in the film industry?

N.M: Yes, I mean, this is what's so important about the film is that, you know, we are not just talking about some, you know, aesthetic decisions, you know, that we don't like, you know, or some people have had the, ridiculous critique of the film that I am a prude and I don't like sex or something which is absurd. Absolutely ridiculous! even if you look at the examples that we show in the film, we show a lot of examples of sex scenes at the end that are not objectifying the woman. So, what we're complaining about is the objectification. Not sex per se, but people, in their minds sex is so tied up with objectification that they cannot separate these two things. So, they think if you're complaining about objectification, you're actually complaining about sex. That's hilarious, right? Or tragic, whichever you want to say.

Anyway, the connection is that the way that women have been photographed and this has been again and again and hundreds and thousands and tens of thousands of films and we've all watch these things and we've internalized it. Women have internalized it too. So, you have a problem that these type of ways of perception have completely infiltrated real life, you know, it's not just on the screen, right? It's in real life.

So, until very, very recently, you know, a male studio executive would not consider hiring a woman director. And, again, you have the situation with women that have to be, you know, ten times as good to go one quarter of the way.

Right? And the way that people perceive women in real life is directly linked, you're fed this information, it infiltrates consciousness.

You know, in fact, in our film, we have Sandra de Castro Buffington, who talks about research that was done, that when you're in a movie theater, in the dark, and you're having this experience of the film, if you get involved in the film, it does, they've proven this with, you know, testing, it does impact behavior and intention to act in a certain way. So, it's really you know not to say, I mean, I'm the last person who wants, any sort of censorship in the world at

all, but it's something that it's good to be aware of and conscious of. Especially if you're a filmmaker or a film viewer, which is almost everybody.

And tell me if I'm wrong, but I think I remember that your sister is very important to you in your creation. And so what means sisterhood and maybe sorority to you?

It's, really a good question because I think, you know, there's so much competition between women. I mean, maybe there's competition between men too, but you get the feeling that more they help each other. And I think that because women have been so pushed out, you know, and there's a feeling like there's so few places at the top. It's not easy to find a sense of sisterhood and support.

I think it's difficult. I've been very lucky. Like you said, I worked with my sister on five feature films and she's a genius. With *Brainwashed*, I had a wonderful, and she's a genius. With *Brainwashed*, I had a wonderful, wonderful collaboration with the other co-producers who are all women, with the director of photography who was a woman and maybe I might say most of all with the editor who was a woman. And those relationships are very strong and they've, they are strong after the film is finished. They have created a sense of community and friendship. So that's a beautiful thing that I'm grateful for.

And our last question, what's next on your agenda?

Well, I have two feature films that I'm trying to get financed right now, if anyone's interested @menkesfilm on Instagram. One of the films is based on the Greek myth of the Minotaur and it's set in Jerusalem and it has to do actually with the Palestinian-Israeli crisis. And this is a film I wrote before October 7th but now it's very, very sort of urgent. So, I'm looking for financing for that film.

I have, another feature film that's about two sisters and a crisis in the relationship of two sisters, that one's called *Heat Stroke*.

And thirdly, I'm working on developing a narrative TV series that's based on *Brainwashed*. So, it's sort of a narrative spin off of *Brainwashed* and there's you know there's a teacher and there's students in the class and there's a murder mystery. And so, it's actually based on the typical sexist trope of "Girl gone missing", murdered woman, but we twist it in a feminist way. So those are my three projects that I hope I can find support for. And if anyone who's listening would like to help, please reach out.

We definitely hope to see these projects become reality. Thank you, Nina, for answering our question.

Thank you Nina for answering our questions.

Brainwashed: Sex-Camera-Power can be seen on Arte if you are in France or Germany. It is also available on DVD. We will put the links in the description.

Thank you Listeners for your time. Thank you for talking about our podcast, liking and reposting on our social networks.

A bientôt dans un prochain épisode de Qui a peur du féminisme?