

## **Nina Menkes and the Hamburg International Queer Film Festival: A different way of depicting love and affection?**

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The aim of this paper is to examine some productions showed at the Hamburg International Queer film festival 2022 under the light of Nina Menkes' film/talk *Brainwashed: sex, camera, power* (USA 2022, D: Nina Menkes), particularly her 'list' of items that she uses to prove that shot design is a gendered practice.<sup>1</sup> Can we find those framing elements in queer films too? Are those settings challenged by the non-adherence of the characters to heteronormativity and the binaries associated with it?

I choose to focus my paper on the visual elements only, leaving the sound environment on the side. Even if Menkes did mention sound practices that are/were discriminating towards non-male characters, like in *Raging Bull* (USA 1980, D: Martin Scorsese), the festival setting didn't give me a chance to watch – and listen to – the movies again. Focusing retrospectively on the sound treatment was complicated and would be difficult to phrase without multiple attentive re-watchings. There would certainly be various things to say on the use of sound in the films shown at the Hamburg International Queer Film Festival, both in the films themselves as well as in the cinemas, but it would require another separate article.

Menkes' list is made of 5 items to help viewers understand that shot design is indeed gendered and that women are often disempowered through it, regardless of their narrative position in the story. These items are the follow-

<sup>1</sup> Cf. <https://intheirownleague.com/2019/11/05/the-menkes-list-6-camera-techniques-that-objectify-women-in-film/> (last viewed: 13.12.2022).

ing: the point of view, the framing, the camera movements, the lighting, and the narrative position (of a female character most of the time). The analysis of the films will be done using this list of items as a basis.

For the purpose of this paper, choices had to be made about which movies could and should be used. I settled on 2 titles, a long feature, *Les Meilleures* (France 2021, D: Marion Desseigne-Ravel), and a short film, *Uma paciência selvagem me trouxe até aqui* (Brazil 2021, D: Érica Sarmet), that could serve best my point. Both films focus on lesbian relationships, which is the reason why I picked them. I wanted to see if Menkes' list would fit on a queer, woman-on-woman perspective where the gaze is still orientated towards female characters, and where men are less (if at all) present in crucial positions.

I will try to focus my analysis on sexual and sensual scenes as Nina Menkes did it too in order to demonstrate the fragmentation and objectivation of the female body in male dominated movies. Four of the five shots used on the website of her movie are showing frames of women wearing little to no clothing and offered to the gaze of the audience/male character.<sup>2</sup>

Menkes' film was the last one I watched at the Hamburg International Queer Film Festival, and it made me reconsider all the movies and shorts I had watched the days prior. I could sense that some scenes, especially the ones filled with love and desire, were showing something different, something that I was not used to, but I couldn't put my finger on it. Was it the queer love, in opposition to the heterosexual one that mainstream media uses over and over again? Was it the surrounding audience during the projection, in a theatre filled with people that could see themselves in those representations, in a festival focused on their experiences? Maybe that was part of the feeling. But I was *seeing* something else. It was not what was shown that was utterly different – there was love, physical desire, experimentations, first times – but how it was framed, portrayed, and showed to the audience.

In her movie and talk, Menkes mentions the audience which (all) Hollywood movies are mainly targeting, consciously or not: cis-hetero males. She goes even further and, like theorized by Laura Mulvey, explains that all the positions of viewing (the three kinds of gaze, to use Mulvey's terminology) are assumed to be the ones of men. In this vision, the act of viewing is curated by men, as it is explained in *Feminisms: A Reader*:

the camera often looking at women as passive objects and usually operated by a man; the look of male actors within the film which is structured to make their gaze powerful; and the

<sup>2</sup> Cf. <https://www.brainwashedmovie.com/> (last viewed: 13.12.2022).

gaze of the spectator who is presumed to be male identifying with the camera and voyeuristically watching women acting often in stereotypical ways.<sup>3</sup>

Does this apply to a queer film (festival) and a non-cis hetero male viewership? Further in her presentation, Nina Menkes, using the example of *Wonder Woman* (USA 2017, D: Patty Jenkins), explains how this trope is reproduced all the time, even when the protagonist and/or director is/are female. Like many norms in today's society, this male gaze has been integrated into our daily lives making us accept it as the only 'normal' way of looking. This way of thinking would place the female gaze as the opposite of the internalized male gaze. But, again, these are mostly aimed at straight viewers, gazing at the other sex (mainly). Do queer people internalize those female and male gazes too, having to identify with the cis-hetero ways of watching? In their book *Queer: A Graphic History*, Meg-John Barker and Jules Scheele define queer theory as "all about breaking down these kinds of binaries."<sup>4</sup> So rather than qualifying everything that is not the male gaze as female gaze, it might be better to introduce the queer gaze, as Hollywood has slowly started to do<sup>5</sup>, as an alternative and inclusive way of making cinema beyond the binary distinction of male/female.

Expectations of queer people are thus different than the ones of straight people when watching a movie (or any other kind of arts in general). One example given by Menkes is how sex scenes are filmed and framed. In classic "male gaze" movies, sex scenes portray mainly straight relationships where the female body is fragmented through the editing and the focus is placed on the action, the movement. Menkes used an extract from one of her own film, *Magdalena Viraga* (USA 1986, D: Nina Menkes), to show another way of filming such a scene; the camera is focusing on the face of the female character to show her emotions and feelings rather than on the action itself. This way, she portrays the woman (actress or character) – here Menkes' own sister – as a human being and not just a sexual object.

The films I saw at the festival all had that alternative way of looking at human relationships, especially romantic and sexual ones. In *Les Meilleures*, Nedjma is discovering her attraction to her new neighbour Zina. Before having any visual proof of their attraction, the viewers understand their feelings through their looks, the way they gaze at one another when the other one is

<sup>3</sup> Laura Mulvey: Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema. In: Maggie Humm (Ed.): *Feminisms: A Reader*, New York 1992, p. 347.

<sup>4</sup> Meg-John Barker, Jules Scheele: *Queer: A Graphic History*, London 2016, p. 13.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment/movies/la-ca-mn-lgbtq-filmmakers-love-simon-20180316-story.html> (last viewed: 10.12.2022).

not looking. Their first kiss is really passionate and powerful but stops abruptly when the dark hall they are in lights up unexpectedly. Nedjma seems afraid, nearly disgusted, of what she has just done in the comfort of the dark. Later in the movie, the two lovers are portrayed on the roof, in the darkness of the night again, where they engage intimately under the stars. That is where the framing of the scene is important to me. If it had been filmed through a male gaze, like described by Menkes, the camera might have slithered up the two girls' bodies, showing how they intertwine and how their whole bodies are active. They might even have fragmented their bodies, focusing on different parts in each shot. That is not how Marion Desseigne-Ravel, the director, wanted to capture the scene. She focuses on the feelings, the experience, by framing their faces only, never going under their shoulders, except for a shot of their hands holding. The act itself is secondary, the point of the sequence is the connection between Nedjma and Zina, whatever way they use to achieve it. This is repeated later when Nedjma, doubting her attraction to Zina, goes to her male best friend's house to try and have intercourse with him. Again, the camera is stuck on Nedjma's face, pushing the male character out of frame, and never filming their heads in the same shot, contrasting the same setting with Zina earlier. After seeing those two scenes, there is no doubt left (at least for the audience) about who Nedjma really loves.

Except for the framing of those scenes, the plot of *Les Meilleures* is not that different from any other love story; a forbidden love (here, on two levels) between rival sides. A bit like Romeo and Juliet, Nedjma and Zina must find a balance between social expectations and love interest. In the microcosm of that Parisian neighbourhood, it is hard for Nedjma to see what is worse for herself and her reputation, being homosexual or sympathizing with the enemy. It is only after losing everything that she realises that the world should not dictate whom she loves, and it allows her to make a step toward Zina, toward who she really is.

The fourth point of Menkes' list is the lighting, and it plays a big part in Marion Desseigne-Ravel's film. In Menkes description, lighting is used as a tool to flatten women and take them out of their surroundings with 2D lighting while deepening men with 3D lighting. As there were no major male characters in *Les Meilleures*, I am not certain that 2D lightings of women can be found in the film. That doesn't mean that there is nothing to say about lights. As pointed out before, the first kiss between the two protagonists takes place in a dark hallway, bringing the lighting to its lowest use in the diegesis. For

other intimate scenes – like the secret meetings on the rooftop – the darkness is replaced by a soft blue and red lighting, sometimes mixing to form a purplish colour. This way of lighting a scene could fit in what Menkes called “fantasy lighting”<sup>6</sup> in her 5-points list, another way of pushing the female characters out of the narrative line of a film into an aesthetic object. Nina Menkes used the example of the hologram in *Blade Runner 2049* (USA 2017, D: Denis Villeneuve), taking the character of Joi as much as possible out of the story, to her whole materiality. I doubt that the lighting had the same purpose for Nedjma and Zina. Here the lights mirror the feelings of the girls and create a visual ambiance for the viewers too. This is later correlated by the dull colours and daylight, when Nedjma meets with Sidiki to “try with a man”. The daylight reflects Nedjma’s feelings, showing how untouched she is by Sidiki’s attention. By just a glimpse at the lighting, the viewers of *Les Meilleures* can easily understand how the scene should be understood and, most importantly, felt.

If Menkes’ analysis of lighting is mostly adapted for Hollywood’s mainstream films, a nuanced look might be needed at more alternative productions where the pressure of the norms may be not as strong as they are at the heart of the system. It is certainly true for the other items of the list. The context is important, and those codes can be played and used with another perspective, creating something else that does not necessarily disempower women (or other characters put in the same place).

Another film at the festival used that fantasy lighting (and setting) and took it to another level, *Uma paciência selvagem me trouxe até aqui*. During a motorcycle riding scene, the blue and pink lightings are once again used to portray the growing feelings between two women. The sensual blue light is back a couple of scenes later for a frontal masturbation scene while the female character is looking straight at the camera (and thus the audience). But the culmination of the fantasy setting is found during the orgy sequence. A new space is created, disconnected from the rest of the story and even reality itself. It seems out of time; the sensation being intensified by the clear cuts in the editing, shifting from close-ups to wide angles and jumping between all the women involved in the act. Cutting characters from reality by putting them in an undiscernible place, Caz Armstrong argues, cuts them from any power they could have had.

When a character is shown as disconnected from the space around them, they become less of a real person in a specific

<sup>6</sup> Cf. <https://www.brainwashedmovie.com/> (last viewed: 13.12.2022).

time and place who might have power or influence on those surroundings. They become more abstract.<sup>7</sup>

I might agree that the characters in this scene can be seen as a more abstract version of themselves, as an embodiment of their sensations. However, I do not think that they have less power than in previous scenes. On the opposite, they are seen embracing their physicality, even if the scene can be understood as an abstract vision of their sensations. The sequence could even be understood as a kind of dream sequence due to the unknown location and the cleanness of the action, in opposition to how the same acts would happen in a realistic life setting. That specific scene was, to me, the apotheosis of the short film, its culminating point. Putting the orgy scene in an undefined location, with little to no set dressing except for the blue curtains, really puts the focus on the bodies and their nudity. In her movie, Menkes describes dislocated spaces (through 2D lighting or indiscernible backgrounds) as male fantasy spaces. I am convinced that it does not apply here. It is a fantasy place indeed, but the target audience here is a female (homosexual) one. The five women are not here to be looked at only, they are the bearer of the gaze as well, changing from one to the other throughout the scene.

Unlike in *Les Meilleures*, the camera here does not focus solely on the faces of the protagonists, but does use wider shots covering the bodies in their entirety. This shot design brings us back to Menkes' list and its third item, camera movement. Usually, a camera doing a pan movement up a female body is associated with a man looking at the female character, therefore associating the camera to his gaze (which the audience must identify with as well). The absence of a man in this scene (and the movie as a whole) forces us to link the gaze to someone (something?) else. Considering the topic of the movie and author behind it, the gaze is clearly one of a non-hetero female and, as the director describes it, it is "a film about lesbians' [and the director's] deepest desires and discomforts."<sup>8</sup> The editing and overlays of footage thus must be associated with these people and not men. It is another way of showing the feelings and the interior of those characters; where the close-ups on Nedjma's face in *Les Meilleures* displayed her romantic feelings and sensations, the overlapping and wider body shots of *Uma paciência selvagem me trouxe até aqui* focus more on the sexual and sensual experiences of all five women at the same time. (The overlapping might rep-

<sup>7</sup> <https://intheirownleague.com/2019/11/05/the-menkes-list-6-camera-techniques-that-objectify-women-in-film/> (last viewed on 13.12.2022).

<sup>8</sup> [https://youtu.be/NxNLipOe\\_gM](https://youtu.be/NxNLipOe_gM) (last viewed: 13.12.2022).

resent the multiple points of view of the women, fusing into a single vision as their minds and bodies become a single entity where their personal beginnings and endings cannot be clearly defined). Even if the camera movement and framing could be seen as similar to the one described by Menkes, the purpose of the shots are very different and must be seen as empowering the women and their bodies. This further proves that Menkes' list needs to be kept in the specific cinematic context of a type of mainstream cinema dominated by male presences in front of and behind the camera.

In a queer cinema context, Menkes' list can be reappropriated by the queer filmmakers and characters to fit their narrative and aesthetics and free the women from the disempowering position they were given in these kinds of shot designs and narrativity. On top of those visual characteristics, Érica Sarmet's short film does not have a linear time<sup>9</sup> and mixes the order of the events happening over the course of one weekend. She said in an interview<sup>10</sup> with the Sundance Institute that she had been inspired by the American New Queer Cinema and some of its films. In *Queer Cinema in the World*, it is said that queer intimacy and (cinema's rendering of) time are deeply linked in a non-synchronic way.<sup>11</sup> *Uma paciência selvagem me trouxe até aqui* is a clear representation of this statement. It is a juxtaposition of events happening in a limited amount of time, but their order is not relevant to the story. The orgy scene is the perfect example of an alternate time perception; we do not know when the scene is happening, and we do not know for how long either. Combined with the undefined location, the scene is out of time and space, suspended in its own moment. "[T]emporal disintegration allows queer desire to present itself. In fact, it is the prerequisite for queer intimacy to appear."<sup>12</sup>

If Nina Menkes' list is quite accurate for standard Hollywood productions in mainstream media, alternative and queer films do not always fit her list, as this analysis has pointed out. Cinema has always been a very versatile art with multiple visions and aesthetics throughout time and space. Some items of her list can still be found in queer productions but have been reappropriated to fit the genre's own agenda. Queer people – as well as other minorities – should not have to try to fit in narratives that do not work for them, for example the male gaze, and should be able to create their own point of view. The two productions analyzed here were different on multiple points – aes-

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Karl Schoonover, Rosalind Galt: *Queer Cinema in the World*, Durham 2016, p. 275.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

thetically as well as narratively – but they were both able to use a new way of gazing, leaving the main male gaze and its codes behind.

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### **Filmography**

*Blade Runner 2049* (USA 2017, D: Denis Villeneuve)

*Brainwashed: sex, camera, power* (USA 2022, D: Nina Menkes)

*Les Meilleures* (France 2021, D: Marion Desseigne-Ravel)

*Magdalena Viraga* (USA 1986, D: Nina Menkes)

*Raging Bull* (USA 1980, D: Martin Scorsese)

*Uma paciência selvagem me trouxe até aqui* (Brazil 2021, D: Érica Sarmet)

*Wonder Woman* (USA 2017, D: Patty Jenkins)

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