

Magdalena Viraga

“Narrative has been the telling of anything because there has been always has been a feeling that something followed another thing that there was a succession in happening. In a kind of way what has made the Old Testament such permanently good reading is that really in a way the Old Testament writing there really was not any such thing there was not really any succession of anything...in the Old Testament writing there is really no actual conclusion that anything is progressing that one thing is succeeding another thing, that anything in that sense in the sense of succeeding happening is a narrative of anything...”—from *Narration* by Gertrude Stein

To suggest that Nina Menkes is an avant-garde filmmaker is to imply some apres-garde, some movement which will follow her. This supposition seems entirely ludicrous. Menkes is, instead, a difficult—not to say recalcitrant—and original director who disrespects the narrative, treading contemptuously on the stereotypes of a century of cinema. Her 1986 film *Magdalena Viraga* has been called, among other things, a “murder mystery.” Her style has been likened to Antonioni’s. Both observations are wholly specious. And wholly understandable. Criticism is such a comparative science that the unknown, the perplexing other that exists sui generis, defeats it utterly.

In *Magdalena Viraga*, the director’s sister Tinka Menkes plays Ida, a prostitute who, perhaps, is also a murderer. Time passes only with the greatest reluctance in her world; she looks always as if she would like to leave her overused body behind, separate from herself, cross to a purer reality. Her existence takes shape amid fragments of poetry—by Anne Sexton, Mary Daly, and most importantly, Gertrude Stein. These broken literary artifacts cast a long oppressive shadow of allusion over the film, Ida as herself, but not herself—her life as a murmuring echo of other lives, other testaments, other difficult journeys.

“There was a baby born named Ida. Its mother held it with her hands to keep Ida from being born but when the time came. And as Ida came, with her came her twin, so there was Ida-Ida.

The mother was so sweet and gentle and so was the father. The whole family was sweet and gentle except the great-aunt. She was the only exception.

An old woman who was no relation and who had known the great-aunt when she was young was always telling that the great-aunt had had something happen to her oh many years ago, it was a soldier, and then the great-aunt had had little twins born to her and then she had quietly, the twins were dead then, born so, she had buried them under a pear tree and nobody knew.

Nobody believed that the old woman perhaps it was true but nobody believed it, but all the family always looked at every pear tree and had a funny feeling.”

—from *Ida* by Gertrude Stein

—Mary Brennan of the *Seattle Weekly*