

## **Magdalena Viraga: A Red Sea Crossing**

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RED SEA: In alchemic symbolism “crossing the Red Sea” is symbolic of the most dangerous part of an undertaking or of a stage in one’s life. To leave Egypt for the Promised Land implies the act of crossing this sea bloodied with wounds and sacrifice; hence the crossing signifies spiritual evolution and also death, seen as the threshold between worlds of matter and of spirit. The one who sacrifices him/herself in a sense dies.

—J.E. Cirlot, *A Dictionary of Symbols*

Nina Menkes labels her first feature film, *Magdalena Viraga*, “inner space fiction,” describing it as a “hallucinogenic journey through the boundless vortex of unadulterated Female space.” This unique film is a poetic narrative that explores the spiritual evolution of a prostitute who has been accused of murder. Menkes expresses her heroine’s internal drama in an inventive, rigorously stylized manner. The film is at once extremely sensuous—with close attention to subtle physical details—and symbolic, with prostitution serving as a vivid metaphor for psychic imprisonment.

Films about prostitution have generally fostered the misconception that the prostitute is willingly acting out an erotic fantasy (Catherine Deneuve in *Belle De Jour*, 1966), or the reverse notion that she is simply doing a job and that her work involves no psychic oppression (Godard’s *Vivre sa Vie*, 1962). In both cases, the psyche of the woman is not taken into account; it is possible for her to somehow remain detached from the objectification and domination of her body.

In *Magdalena Viraga*, prostitution is viewed as an act of spiritual suicide that involves passivity and self-denial. For Ida, the heroine, prostitution is a psychic prison; its deadening effects are registered on her face during the film’s remarkable intense long-take close-ups during the sex scenes. Contrasting these scenes are Ida’s meetings with Claire, her “sister who is not a sister,” with dialogue and acting inspired by Gertrude Stein’s poetry. Menkes charts Ida’s “Red Sea crossing,” her symbolic journey toward spiritual catharsis and self-assertion. The film is set in an unidentifiable city of the near future, and the action moves freely between brothel, nightclub, and prison, all of which take on metaphorical resonance. *Magdalena Viraga* is a powerfully disorienting film, with rare spiritual intensity, an austere visual style, and cool distanced acting.

In 1983, Menkes made a forty-minute film, *The Great Sadness of Zohara*, which depicts another mystical journey, that of an alienated young Orthodox woman in search of Judaic spirituality. *Magdalena Viraga* has received numerous honors; it was included in the 1987 Whitney Biennial, and it won the Los Angeles Film Critics award for Best Independent/Experimental Film in 1986.