

HAARETZ

Nina's war of liberation

By Yham Hameiri | Aug.19, 2008

Nina Menkes, considered one of today's most provocative filmmakers, depicts surreal inner worlds amid a cruel and difficult reality in her films. Sight and Sound magazine described her experimental films, which have been shown at international festivals and aired on television, as "controversial, intense and visually stunning."

The director, 44, who lives in Los Angeles, has five films that focus on women who go through painful self-discovery processes. For example, her 1983 film, "The Great Sadness of Zohara," follows the spiritual journey of a girl who wanders from Mea She'arim to a remote village in an Arab land. While crossing geographical borders she tries to find sealed territories within herself, as she feels blind and mute.

Another film, shot in Lebanon in 2005, is unusual amid her body of work and deals with the world of men. "Massaker" follows six Christian Phalange fighters who participated in the killings in the Sabra and Chatila refugee camps in 1982. The film won the International Film Critics Association (Fipresci) prize at the Berlin Festival.

In early November, Israeli viewers will have their first chance to see her films, which will be screened at the cinematheques in Tel Aviv, Jerusalem and Haifa. "Massaker," of course, is stirring particular interest.

"I think that it's very relevant to screen this film here, which touches on Ari Folman's film 'Waltz with Bashir,'" says Menkes, who co-directed the film, during an interview in Tel Aviv. Next semester she will be a visiting lecturer at Tel Aviv University's department of film, with the assistance of the Fulbright Foundation.

"It's no coincidence that these subjects are rising to the surface specifically now," she adds.

Nor was the decision to collaborate on "Massaker" a coincidence.

"As far as I'm concerned, I entered the lion's den," she says.

Menkes is the daughter of Germans who met in Palestine in 1945 and lived in Jerusalem. Her mother served in the Palmach; her father's family was murdered during the Holocaust. The two decided to study in the United States - her father studied mathematics in Michigan and her mother studied English literature - and then they moved to California, where Nina and her sister Tinka were born. A few years later, her parents divorced.

"My mother never got used to the U.S.," says Menkes. "She always told us we're not Americans, and soon we will return to Israel."

It is not easy to feel detached all the time, she adds. "This difficult sensation accompanies me and is highlighted in my films. In order to be in touch with things inside me, I felt a need to connect to the difficult aspects, even in the political reality, to places of conflict."

Everyone was a time bomb

Her weak connection to Israel led her to study Arabic.

"I wanted to enter the devil's camp, the other side, which for me is the Arab world," she says.

From 1997 to 1999, she lived in Cairo, where she met the German journalists Monica Borgmann and accepted her offer to be a co-director and cameraman for a documentary film about Sabra and Chatila. She had a difficult time staying in Beirut under an assumed identity and filming 80 hours there, she says.

"On the streets, I constantly saw giant signs with pictures of shahids, and I heard lots of expressions of enmity toward Jews," she recalls.

Six of the interviewees were paid and filmed in closed spaces that look like interrogation rooms. The camera does not reveal their faces, but moves close to their bodies, and zeroes in on their hands and legs. The lens pans among them, and the monotonous voices describe the nights of massacre, the cruelty and the rapes. Every interviewee continues his colleagues' testimony.

At the beginning of the film, one interviewee says: "The day they assassinated Bashir was the saddest day of my life, sadder than the day my mother died. Everything we had lived for suddenly disappeared."

And his colleague carries on: "When we arrived, the Jews had surrounded everything, from the Kuwait embassy to the airport bridge. They were sitting on their tanks. (Our commander said) don't leave anyone behind. Kill everyone. I want to erase Sabra and Chatila. We told him: 'Yes, sir, at your service.'"

And another interviewee continues: "Every one of us was a time bomb. None of us knew what to do. We were angry. They killed Gemayal and we will wipe them out."

"Women came out of the houses, crying and shouting 'mercy' and things like that. They thought it would have an affect on us. It left us colder than ice. They died first. After them, the rest of the family came out the door, the children, the grandchildren; anyone who showed himself was shot immediately. Even if they raised their hands to surrender we killed them. What we wanted to do was send a message. I have no idea to whom. The message was: 'We're sad.'"

To what extent did you identify with their feelings?

"While I am filming someone, I have to love them," says Menkes. "I have to find a way inside of me to feel some connection to them. I had to make them feel comfortable, that I'm not judging them. I had to flirt with them. We would drink coffee and they would drink whiskey; we filmed at night to let them drink. This was the only way to get them to talk."

Is their testimony historically accurate?

"The film does not discuss scientific facts. Rather, it is about the psychology of these people. I filmed each person for seven hours. The editing, not at my recommendation, was done using a technique of cutting from shot to shot. What emerges is a kind of six-headed monster. A monster of revenge, hatred, madness and murder. A kind of chaos for which violence is its legitimate solution."

The camera also documents their reactions to the pictures of the massacre. Most of them are indifferent; one person crumples up the photos angrily, but stops at the photos of dead horses.

"I always loved horses," he says in the film. "I remember them, I remember the dead horses clearly. I also remember the dogs. In principle, I shot at people, but there were also dogs."

Later in the film, when they continue to describe what happened inside the refugee camps, the interviewees stress the active assistance they got from the Israel Defense Forces troops.

"There was no electricity in the area," says one of them. "At around 10 P.M., we asked the Jews that were around to light up things so we could see. They launched fireworks into the sky until 5 A.M., so that we could see what we were doing and could continue. We got rid of the bodies during the night between Friday and Saturday, before morning came and the journalists and photographers could document the scandal. We worked hard all night. We had to gather the bodies and toss them in a pit. At first we tossed the bodies into the pit without sacks, but we had to wrap the bodies on top in plastic to stop the stench from spreading. The sacks weren't ours. The Jews prepared everything. From the beginning. They brought everything and said 'You'll need this afterward.'"

Watching the filmed material was the hardest, she says.

"Certain parts reminded me of images of the Holocaust and stories that were instilled in me by my father. Mostly the part about handling the bodies. While I was still watching the material, I came close to the black hole, but I suspended my emotions until the end of filming. When the filming finished, suddenly all the demons that were nesting inside me surfaced in my consciousness. Suddenly I experienced with intensity the sensations that accompanied my father, all the horrors and the silence that had lived inside me all that time.

"In a retrospective of my work they did in Vienna, one of the organizers told me, 'Your father's story and the story of the Holocaust are present in all of your films, not just in this documentary film.' Until then I thought my films talked about a detached woman in a world of men, but that woman was right, they talked about memories and traumas from the Holocaust that were

ingrained in me. This project helped me cope with all these parts. It helped me advance to the next project, where despite the harsh reality, there is some kind of hope."

Her last project, "Phantom Love," from 2007, was filmed in black and white. Israeli actress Marina Shoif plays the lead role. Lulu, the heroine, lives in Los Angeles and speaks English with a heavy Russian accent. The first part of the film depicts a routine of mechanical sex and work in a casino.

"It's repetitive and frozen because there is something in her that she isn't willing to see," says Menkes. "In the next stage, it blows up. Her quest for liberation is difficult and frightening, and requires courage to deal with the truth. The moment she finds the strength to do so, another possibility is created. In this film, the friend tells the heroine: 'You can fill in the black hole in love.'" Now, says the director, I too, am slowly coming out of my black hole and my nightmare at last."