

Circling the Thread: Catching Up with Nina Menkes

By John Gianvito

Having had the privilege of attending the Viennale in 2007, my first venture there, I left with the impression of having caught a fugitive glimpse of what one imagines cultural life to have been like in Paris or Berlin in the '20s and '30s, or perhaps Vienna itself in its *Rotes Wien* period. Most everywhere one looked—on stage, in the audience, along the canals, and in the restaurants, there appeared some of the most creative and stimulating film and video artists, critics, and media curators in Europe and beyond. All of them close at hand, in an environment that felt open, rich with possibility and exchange (the festival environs, that is, not the city, which I found somewhat stifling in its ornate facades and air of formality beneath which still weigh spectres of the past; perhaps that's why Vienna has among the highest suicide rates in Europe). But it wasn't just the coterie of free-thinking Europeans that impressed, it was the direct encounter with a wide-ranging group of US-based filmmakers who it seems I had to go to Europe in order to meet. Here was Jem Cohen, dashing about the city—Bolex in hand—shooting a film to be screened at the festival's close; Todd Haynes in the full flush of his Dylan success; Baltimore-based Matthew Porterfield of the neglected *Hamilton* and fellow native Staten Islander Rani Singh; the affable Tom Kalin and the ever-dapper Thom Andersen; Eve Heller; Esther Robinson, maker of the deeply affecting through-a-glass-darkly memoir, *A Walk into the Sea*; and, adopted son of San Diego, Jean-Pierre Gorin, who curated a phenomenal sidebar on the history of the essay film. But the individual I was most pleased to cross paths with, who was accompanying a retrospective of her work, was Los Angeles-based filmmaker Nina Menkes.

“Back home I often feel like a sewer-rat, and here I'm treated like a queen,” Menkes voiced in thanking the very receptive audiences who had attended her numerous screenings, many of them discovering the work for the first time. My own first encounter with the cinematic world of Nina Menkes was back in 1986, again, as it turns out, outside of the country, at the then-titled Montréal Festival of New Cinema and New Media where Menkes was screening her just-completed first feature, *Magdalena Viraga: Story of a Red-Sea Crossing*. The impact was immediate—visceral. Despite (or more likely because of) its intended, marrow-infiltrating discomfort, it was evident to me that I was in the presence of a mature, fully formed and fully *felt* vision. Rigorously constructed and strikingly shot, here was a rendering of the inner life of a woman profoundly wounded and flayed by the hands of men, and, by extension, patriarchy, unflinching in its indictment and as focused as a laser in its evocation of a soul's incremental journey toward awareness. Shortly thereafter I contacted Menkes by phone and she agreed to an interview. It was the first such journalistic piece I'd felt moved to initiate and, whether it was because of this inexperience or our mutual obscurity, I was alas never able to get the article placed. Over the ensuing years I regularly followed Nina Menkes' career, the jeremiads of *Queen of Diamonds* (1991) and *The Bloody Child* (1996), continuing to marvel at the extraordinary poetic power and depth of her vision, and continuing to believe it to occupy a most singular and distinctive place within the American film landscape. While some may argue that the relative invisibility of this body of work, especially stateside, is strictly a reflection of the hard realities of popular taste and market values, the films themselves speak volumes about the harder-to-accept realities of the still

all-too-pervasive suppression of women's voices, and of forms of address unconstrained by propriety and convention.

When we at last met face-to-face in Vienna, Menkes not only immediately recalled our long-ago dialogue but expressed to me her desire that we should still consider publishing it. Setting aside the fact that I wasn't at all sure I still had a copy of this text, it was unclear to me whether such an article would hold sufficient interest this many years later, given all that had transpired in the interim. With encouragement from *Cinema Scope*, the simple suggestion was put forward that Nina and I undertake a follow-up interview, focusing principally on her latest work, *Phantom Love* (2007), and we'd see how the two texts spoke to each other. What follows is the transcript of the 1986 interview—a heavily mildewed copy of which I was able to retrieve from my once-flooded basement—retaining its original, now dated, introduction, preceded by a conversation conducted via email over the past months and from various parts of the world. Time will tell whether Nina and I ever meet more than once in our lives. Regardless, I remain assured that with each new or repeated encounter with one of her films I am being granted, as is each individual viewer, an unrestricted entry down the winding path of a spirit with the courage to turn herself inside out, again and again and again.

I. *Magdalena Viraga: Story of a Red Sea Crossing*

Released in 1986, *Magdalena Viraga: Story of a Red Sea Crossing* is the first feature film by Los Angeles native Nina Menkes. Her previous work, a 40-minute film entitled *The Great Sadness of Zohara* (1983), about a young Israeli woman who wanders into Arab territory, won her critical acclaim and awards at both the San Francisco and Houston International Film Festivals.

Filmed on a minimal budget in the predominately Spanish neighborhoods of East Los Angeles, *Magdalena Viraga* chronicles, in a non-linear and highly poetic fashion, the experiences of a young prostitute named Ida, arrested for the murder of an anonymous client, and her inner struggle to discover genuine *self*-acceptance beneath layers of societal labelling, hatred, unvoiced anger, and a paralyzing ill-defined guilt. Following in a stream of contemporary female film explorations around themes of patriarchal oppression and prostitution—from Chantal Akerman's *Jeanne Dielman* (1975) to Marleen Gorris' *Broken Mirrors* (1984) and Lizzie Borden's *Working Girls* (1986), *Magdalena Viraga* stands out most distinctively through its ability to evoke a wholly believable gritty reality while simultaneously avoiding the confines of naturalistic performance or anecdote. The dialogue (incorporating Menkes' own writing with excerpts from the work of Mary Daly, Anne Sexton, and Gertrude Stein) is recited with a cold, abstracted delivery, the lines left to hover in the isolation of what the filmmaker refers to as "the boundless vortex of unadulterated Female Space." Visually, Menkes' style is equally austere and deadpan. Her compositions tend toward long-shots or extreme close-ups with little in-between, reflecting the film's intense identification with the interiorized world of its main character as well as Ida's remove from herself and the trauma of her situation.

As in *Jeanne Dielman*, many of the camera set-ups are held with such prolonged stares that the viewer becomes sensitized to Ida's smallest gestures and stirrings.

Powerfully portrayed by the filmmaker's younger sister Tinka, as Ida is repeatedly hammered at away in bed by a variety of men, the camera unflinchingly trains itself solely upon Ida's face until ultimately capturing each slow wave of disgust, forced distraction, and the first feeble glimmerings of rebellion. Unlike *Working Girls*, prostitution is not presented as a disagreeable but viable form of work: in *Magdalena Viraga* it is hell. The duration of the shots, the cramped, drab interiors, the sounds of distant music and celebration or that of cold wind howling outside, all combine to forcibly render each room, each corridor, into a nightmare, bending to the brink of cracking beneath the weight of dead, loveless Time.

Unlikely though it may be that such a film will ever enjoy a theatrical run, the merits of *Magdalena Viraga* have nonetheless not gone unseen. In 1986, the Los Angeles Film Critics Association awarded it Best Independent/Experimental Film of the Year, and since then *Magdalena Viraga* has been shown at more than 30 international film festivals and cinemathèques world wide, including the Beijing Film Academy in China, the National Film Theatre in London, and the Toronto International Film Festival. The film also travelled as part of the 1987 Whitney Biennial exhibition.

JOHN GIANVITO: When you introduced *Magdalena Viraga: Story of a Red Sea Crossing* at the Festival of New Cinema in Montréal, you said that you yourself were frightened by the film, particularly as you said you weren't precisely sure where it came from. I was wondering if you could talk a little bit about the genesis of the project and if you feel that there was, albeit obliquely, an autobiographical component to the film?

NINA MENKES: It's hard to pinpoint exactly where a film comes from. A lot of the feelings in this film are feelings I've lived with all my life, a result of the state-of-things for women intersecting with my own particular psychology. The reality shown in the movie—a prostitute in jail—is used as a symbol for a general emotional/political condition. What frightened me was the extent of the pain and alienation that appeared in the finished work. I did not consciously aspire to such a stark statement. One of the more immediate experiences that triggered the film's creation was a six-week stay in a yeshiva in Israel. I was lured there as part of a program where you're given a free plane ticket on the condition that you study at a yeshiva.

GIANVITO: What was the nature of the yeshiva?

MENKES: A Jewish school for the study of Torah—the Old Testament—and other books of Jewish law. The yeshivas are generally sex segregated, women and men studying not only in different buildings, but in different areas of town. We never met the male counterparts in our program, for example. I did feel a truly spiritual, giving quality in many of the teachers, but mainly, I found Orthodox Judaism up close to be essentially sexist and repressive. I really felt, viscerally, how religion interacts with other forms of oppression. I also started reading various feminist theologies, especially Mary Daly. Do you know her?

GIANVITO: I'm acquainted with *Gyn/Ecology* only.

MENKES: For me Mary Daly's exposé of the patriarchal system we live in was profoundly illuminating. It was after being at yeshiva, and reading Mary Daly, that I started writing the script.

GIANVITO: I'm curious to know how formal a script you had and how much, for instance, the editing contributed to the film's very prismatic and elliptical structuring?

MENKES: The film was edited directly from the script. Also, while shooting, I followed the script meticulously. Of course, my scripts are different than traditional scripts. I describe scenes in one sentence – more like a note to myself. Before *Magdalena*, I had been afraid to use a script at all. In my two previous films, I shot from a clear concept and a progression that I carried in my head. I felt that using a script would result in a contrived product.

This time, because of budget restrictions and because the nature of my idea meant that I needed a larger cast and crew than I had used before, it would have been impossible to proceed without a script. I *had* to have one. So, somehow, I wrote it, I believed there was a truth in it, and that there was room for expansion and creativity in the actual production. After writing it, and I wrote it very quickly, I never tampered with it at all. I knew it was held together by some kind of irrational thread that I didn't fully understand and that if I had tried to make changes when I no longer had the original impulse, I would only ruin it.

GIANVITO: I know that your sister Tinka was also the star of your earlier films, *The Great Sadness of Zohara* and *A Soft Warrior* (1981). Given the generally intense, oppressive nature of *Magdalena Viraga*, particularly the sex scenes, I wonder if this posed any unexpected difficulties in your relationship with each other?

MENKES: That's interesting. Yes it did. Can I ask you before I answer what gave you that idea? Because someone else asked me that too, and it's definitely true.

GIANVITO: For myself I imagine it to be hard enough to live through certain experiences that the film shows, let alone make a film about it which in some way you then relive, and then on top of that, to subject someone that you love to that sort of thing—and the way you film you are really looking at it hard and up-close—well, on some level, it becomes real.

MENKES: That's very true. And in addition to what you've described, Tinka and I have a complex relationship outside of the film, so the whole experience was pretty intense for both of us. I think the dynamic went something like this: on some level, my sister is playing me. Of course, all the characters are me, but mainly Ida. She's playing, let's say, certain shadow aspects of me taken to the nth degree. Now, in real life, as two sisters (there are only two siblings in my family), we adopted, to a certain extent, sun and moon qualities. So that when Tinka becomes Ida, it was experienced by both of us as if she had taken on repressed, even ugly, qualities that I had actually been subliminally carrying for a long time.

And I felt very relieved, and freed by this “transfer.” Although I did have a great love for the character of Ida, and for the whole film, I had a sense of happiness because I had managed to transform some of those horrendous images and feelings by actually making the film, and I thought I would cement those changes by creating some real distance between me and Tinka.

Naturally, Tinka took this as an unfair rejection, as if I had thrown her the shit and then deserted, just when she needed total support and love for having undertaken such an arduous piece of work—becoming Ida for the movie; and since it was my movie, becoming Ida “for me.” And that’s just a part of it. The entities Tinka, Ida, Me, the Film, and Real Life were intersecting in many different and unexpected directions for months after the film’s completion.

To judge from the intense reaction of audiences to *Ida*, I think variations on this dynamic apply to people other than myself. *Ida* embodies a culturally repressed female image. So, while some people have a lot of love for her, others violently hate her for even appearing. Most people probably feel some combination of both things simultaneously.

GIANVITO: What with the intimate nature of so many scenes and this intricate dynamic between you and Tinka, did this form part of your decision to photograph the film yourself?

MENKES: Yes, although while we are actually shooting, Tinka and I have no conflicts at all. We get into a sort of psychic groove; we have a great deal of telepathic communication. Things became explosive only after the film was shot. But, yes, I definitely had to shoot the film myself because of its intimacy—that’s the kind of filmmaking I like. I can’t imagine doing something that wasn’t intimate; it wouldn’t be exciting. And when I’m running the camera, it really happens for me. Even when we rehearse, I often watch through the camera.

GIANVITO: While there are marked differences in performance, I felt that *Magdalena Viraga* was in theme and in certain stylistic strategies indebted to another oppressed feminine model whose awakened consciousness erupts in an act of murder—*Jeanne Dielman* by Chantal Akerman.

MENKES: You know, a number of people have suggested this to me, but the fact is that I didn’t have an opportunity to see *Jeanne Dielman* until after *Magdalena* was completed. Stylistically, there are obvious, sometimes uncanny similarities. Thematically too, there seems to be a real affinity between the films, although there are also some important differences. For example, in *Jeanne Dielman*, Jeanne kills the man after she has an orgasm with him because he threatens her sense of control, a sense of control that is no control at all because it actually debilitates her. So in a sense she annihilates the force that is her liberation. At the same time, the man is clearly a symbol of her peculiarly womanly oppression. So he is simultaneously her liberation and her oppression—this is, to me, part of the brilliance of that work.

In *Magdalena*, the force for *Ida*’s liberation comes from seeing clearly the way she’s been labelled and ostracized. *Ida*’s problem is that she desperately yearns for validation from her oppressors. Her liberation begins when she realizes that they will

never validate her in a meaningful way, when she grasps that she has been serving as a living scapegoat. She also claims her power.

GIANVITO: This is the point during the mass sequence in which she renounces the Christian faith that she's held onto throughout the film?

MENKES: Yes, but it's a complicated situation. Ida is a sacrificial victim and she dies for speaking the truth. So you could say she is a Christ-like figure, and Ida, definitely identifies with Christ. At the same time, she's sort of an Anti-Christ. The nature of her struggle, and her essential style, force her to relinquish the Church—it's part of her larger understanding that she doesn't need, really doesn't need, validation from those who would judge her, from her accusers.

GIANVITO: At one point in the film Ida reveals that she was in love with a man once and she says, "I want to love someone but I don't know what to do." And later, Claire advises her, "You can just try never to be what he said." But by making all such references to a general unidentified He, and by the absence of any sympathetic male character on screen, do you think the film may present a reverse sexism towards men in general?

MENKES: I guess one could say yes in the sense that the film is very extreme and does portray men as a one-sidedly negative force. But that, to me, is historically a necessary part of an evolution towards something more balanced. It always astounds me that people will go to film after film where women are depicted as the peripheral love interest and no one questions it. But the moment men are "objectified," everyone goes crazy.

When the film was first shown, a very dramatic screening at the UCLA Theater, one young guy, in his early 20s, said, "This is the most violent film I've ever seen." Someone else said, "You do things even Brian De Palma wouldn't do." These comments, if you think about what actually happened in the film, are *absurd!* But they obviously reflect a strong feeling that when the knife is pointed in the "wrong" direction, it's the most violent thing they've ever seen.

GIANVITO: They find it aimed not at the flesh but at the heart, so to speak, at the spirit.

MENKES: Right. I think one thing that for some reason freaks men out a lot is expressions of female creativity. The menstrual blood disgusts them not only because menstrual blood is concretely creative, but because it *symbolizes* women's creativity that is somehow, unfortunately, the ultimate threat to the oppressive mind. On the other hand, a lot of men have been touched by the film. In fact, some of the greatest fans of the film have been men, maybe because on some level the film is a real call for love.

GIANVITO: Perhaps in some sense men are the real audience for the film. For instance, my girlfriend had a very violent reaction towards the film and, as best she can understand it, it's because she felt forced to relive sensations that were all too real and familiar, sensations that she had no desire to undergo again. In some way she didn't feel that she was really who the film was meant for.

MENKES: That's interesting. One thing I've found with this movie is that the range of response is very wide. One man told me it's the most romantic film he's ever seen; he said it was a film about love. Basically I would agree with that. But someone else says they've never seen a film so filled with hate. Or, as I mentioned before, it's the most violent film they've ever seen! Another interesting reaction is from women who, after a screening, feel the need to tell me how great their sex life is, or how many men are in love with them.

There's enough ambiguity in the film that people project all sorts of stuff onto it. It's partly the way the characters are—very symbolic, not grounded in realistic qualities, without histories or futures.

GIANVITO: You also intentionally leave ambiguous whether we ever know with certainty if Ida committed the murder. We suspect her capacity when she says, "I am never angry enough to die. I am angry enough to kill." But we also see a third woman stalking the hotel, a woman who's always naked, who's viewed once with a knife in hand. Plus there's also a second murder which, I'm not sure, is it Ida's friend Claire who commits it?

MENKES: No, not Claire. It's the hotelkeeper's wife.

GIANVITO: The woman who Ida predicts will commit suicide?

MENKES: Right.

GIANVITO: Do you think this ambiguity was to imply the potentiality for anyone in such a situation to respond with violence?

MENKES: Yes, that's definitely one side of it. Also, to me, there's this feeling that Ida is blamed for the worst, but, in fact, she's innocent. You know, it's interesting, I'm just re-reading *The Grass Is Singing* by Doris Lessing. Have you read that? It's about a woman in South Africa who gets involved in a strange kind of relationship with her black male servant. The story is extremely complex, but he murders her in the end and there is a whole discussion of who is really to blame? The victims of exploitation and oppression are always blamed for their own condition.

GIANVITO: You have a line in the film, "Which one is going to murder which one?"

MENKES: Right...I believe Sophocles said, "Who the slayer, who the victim—Speak." Everyone is implicated. The people who appear to be guilty are innocent and the people who are supposedly innocent are not innocent. There's another line in the film that refers to that issue in a different way. It's from a poem by William Blake: "By invisible hatreds joined/those who seem remote and separate/but are greatly together in the Deep."

GIANVITO: When I saw the film a second time, I realized that I'd forgotten that there are, in fact, "action sequences": the riot sequence after the mass and the shoot-out with

the prison guards. It reminded me of the way Godard often plays off traditional Hollywood dramatics.

MENKES: Yes, to me it was sort of a joke to have the police cars and guns and everything, cut in that “action” style, because those sequences are so deeply ingrained in my mind with the opposite of what I’m saying.

GIANVITO: Finally, I wanted to ask you about where we are left by the end of the film. You’ve described *Magdalena Viraga* as a woman’s journeying toward personal liberation and certainly the first step is taking some action and responsibility for her situation and, in this case, it’s quite possibly a murder that is her first act of revolt. But at the very end of the film, whether she’s truly innocent or guilty of this murder, we’re told that Ida is to be executed. However, we do see her in some sense running free around the bend of a hill, although the landscape is very desolate and the mood is as melancholy as the rest of the film. This is followed by the sound of a gunshot, followed then by Claire’s final speech in which the ultimate feminine symbol of the flower is transformed metaphorically into a bird, suggesting a sense of liberation. Over the final credits there is the sound of a baby being born although simultaneously we hear the very grey rumble of automobile traffic. Can you really describe this ending as optimistic?

MENKES: Let me say quickly that the sound at the end is not a baby being born—actually, it’s the sound of cats yowling in heat! Tinka came up with a tag-line for this film: “It leaves you empty of hope but full of desire.” So, the ending is mixed. Ida sees and names her condition, and her naming it takes her into her power. She ceases to be a silent, resentful, unconscious participant. That’s extremely positive. Her coming into power, however, results in her execution, which is tragic. And the end is, for me, very sad, but ultimately optimistic. It’s like, “The Queen is Dead. Long Live the Queen.” Claire is carrying on the battle. Ida has been sacrificed for the *cause* of truth, but the fight is *on*.

GIANVITO: So that Ida is only part of who Magdalena Viraga is.

MENKES: Exactly.

II. Phantom Love

“You have read Spengler? No: it is not so fashionable as it once was. But Spengler talks a great deal about what he calls the Magian World View, which he says we have lost, but which was part of the *Weltanschauung*—you know, the world outlook—of the Middle Ages. It was a sense of the unfathomable wonder of the invisible world that existed side by side with a hard recognition of the roughness and cruelty and day-to-day demands of the tangible world. It was a readiness to see demons where nowadays we see neuroses, and to see the hand of a guardian angel in what we are apt to shrug off ungratefully as a stroke of luck. It was religion, but a religion with a thousand

gods, none of them all-powerful and most of them ambiguous in their attitude toward man. It was poetry and wonder which might reveal themselves in the dunghill, and it was an understanding of the dunghill that lurks in poetry and wonder. It was a sense of living in what Spengler called a quivering cavern-light which is always in danger of being swallowed up in the surrounding, impenetrable darkness!”

—Robertson Davies, *World of Wonders*

An argument could be made that within the generally tortured annals of the history of mental illness, the history of mental illness among women—both real and imagined—and its relationship to the maintenance of male power remains the least reconciled mental health issue today (despite a growing body of literature, to say nothing of centuries of evidence). Even to characterize the complexity of the situation with words like “mental illness” and “mental health” in some sense circumscribes the broader social, institutional, and spiritual dimensions of the situation. And, as always, in the grappling to understand history one must also grapple with its representation.

In cinema, while not strictly a genre, the subject of “women and madness” has its own frighteningly vast chronicle of portrayal. The topic has lent itself to continuous acts of exploitation (far too many to summarize), captured the fancy of innumerable stylists (Hitchcock’s *Under Capricorn* [1949] and *Marnie* [1964], Polanski’s *Repulsion* [1965], Altman’s *Images* [1972], Truffaut’s *The Story of Adele H.* [1975], Beineix’s *Betty Blue* [1986], etc.), and brought forward some of the most powerful works of the medium. It’s hardly surprisingly that the vast majority of this latter category are directed by women or, when directed by men, are manifestly propelled by the soul investment of the female lead (Maya Deren’s *Meshes of the Afternoon* [1943], Rossen’s *Lilith* [1964], Barbara Loden’s *Wanda* [1970], Akerman’s *Jeanne Dielman*, Margarethe von Trotta’s *Sheer Madness* [1983], Mary Jiménez’s *Spelling Love* [1984], Jane Campion’s *Sweetie* [1989] and *An Angel at My Table* [1990], Cassavetes’ *A Woman Under the Influence* [1974], *Opening Night* [1977], and *Love Streams* [1984], etc.). By and large, most of these films tend to concentrate on the descent, often to the point of no return, of its heroines into unconstructive violence and self-abnegation (the worst among them inviting us with a kind of relish to watch the unfolding sad spectacle). Valuable and authentic as this can be when intelligently rendered, notably few are the works that proffer ways out of the labyrinth. In its own novel, serpentine fashion, Nina Menkes’ latest feature *Phantom Love* is one such work, a descent not into madness but into self.

Once more Menkes takes us into the bleak landscape of a woman (Lulu) enmeshed in a spiral of loveless sex, meaningless work, and family turmoil. Living alone in a stark apartment in Los Angeles, Lulu—like the character of Firdaus in *Queen of Diamonds*—makes her living spinning a casino roulette wheel. Across town, her younger sister, Nitzan, is wrestling with her own demons, brought on in part by prescription drugs, while their far-away mother incessantly pesters Lulu for help. Shifting mysteriously from Los Angeles’ Koreatown to locations in Rishikesh, India, and from the hyper-real to the surreal, the film is structured in Menkes’ words “like Chinese boxes, with each scene opening onto another,” leading us deeper into Lulu’s anguished inner journey toward the reclamation of self.

In a way, *Phantom Love* is Menkes’ *Juliet of the Spirits* (1965) seen through the other side of the mirror. Like *Juliet* and with a similarly engulfing visionary prowess,

Phantom Love follows a woman searching her subconscious in an attempt to deal with the oppressions of her life as she gradually gains self-awareness and the first stirrings of independence. Taking the parallel further, *Juliet* was Fellini's first feature-length experiment with colour (purportedly requiring a record-breaking 100 answer prints before Fellini was satisfied), and *Phantom Love* is Nina Menkes' first full-length film in black and white, stunningly and sumptuously photographed by Christopher Roos and Menkes herself as camera operator. *Juliet* however, despite whatever charms it possesses, must be recognized for what it is, the wish-fulfilling fantasy of a male director projected onto his wife, a fantasy in which the character of Juliet (Giulietta Masina) is expected to tolerate her philandering husband's relationship with the flamboyant and buxom next-door neighbour Suzy—played, as in *8 1/2* (1963), by Fellini's real-life mistress Sandra Milo—to loosen up, rid her inhibitions, and find her way to peace. Revealingly, according to Roger Ebert, Fellini and Masina argued about the meaning of the film's final scene wherein Juliet leaves home and walks off into the forest. "To Fellini, this meant she was free. To Giulietta Masina, we learn, it meant that she was alone, abandoned and lonely." With *Phantom Love* the corrective is not quite (or not just) the skewering of the ways in which men have fucked up the lives of women (and their own lives it should always be added). Ultimately Lulu's journey is not about the leaving of home but about coming home to oneself, stripped of illusions, awake to one's oppressors both within and without, and equipped, like the title of Menkes' first short film, to be ever the "soft warrior."

JOHN GIANVITO: So Nina, it's been 21 years since our last formal conversation, a trajectory spanning from your first feature film, *Magdalena Viraga* to your latest release, *Phantom Love*. In the interim, despite all obvious obstacles, a consistently potent, assured, and evolving body of work has been achieved. While I have followed this trajectory with the same avid admiration I had in first encountering *Magdalena Viraga*, had I not seen any of the films between, and just walked into a projection of *Phantom Love*, there would be no doubt whose cinematic territory I had entered. From the very first images we are back in a space of psychic anomie, observing a woman barely visible beneath a man, disengaged from his sexual mechanics, numbed, nearly catatonic. The man's body dominates the visual field; distant sirens haunt the aural-scape. Of course, I thought of the images of your sister Tinka in *Magdalena*. And like most followers of your career, anticipated that I would be seeing Tinka. We are then led into the story of two sisters, both struggling with their lives, with a domineering mother, with deadening work and relationships, social isolation, and for lack of another word, madness. Of the two, the younger sister, Nitzan, is seen as the more vulnerable, at the mercy of strong medications and deep-seated fears. Without asking you to reveal more than you're comfortable with, I am wondering if *Phantom Love* was intended again as a project for Tinka, or if it grew, at least in part, from arriving at a point in your paths where such a challenging collaboration was not possible?

NINA MENKES: My latest film began in 2005. Images were coming up for me of a woman trapped, as you noted, in *Magdalena*-type sex, and again back in a casino, like *Queen of Diamonds*. . . these images repeated, repeated—as they do in the film—but then what? I didn't know. Something had to happen. . . not just more alienation, more treading on the same hamster wheel of extreme loneliness and lack of connection. Yes, I did on

some level imagine Tinka in this role, as she had carried, for so long, my projection of the alienated woman who inhabited my cinematic world—and my inner world (the two being more or less the same place).

At the time that I was trying to write this new script, I was in Israel, and through a series of quite extraordinary and meant-to-be “coincidences,” I met a woman who was something between a psychic healer and a shaman. I received unmistakable inner and outer indications that I needed to work with this woman. So, the trip to Israel that I thought would be for three weeks turned into a seven-month odyssey. I met with her three times a week and most of the rest of the time I just lay in bed, half sick. As someone who had undergone quite a few years of deep and intense Jungian psychoanalysis, I can only say that this work made psychoanalysis look like pablum!

Through this process many intense and disturbing images that had been, it seemed, locked up beneath the icy alienation of my previous characters—these images erupted. And so I found out what happens in the second half of this, my new film; I found out more about that character—the frozen woman—that my sister Tinka had cinematically personified for so long.

Tinka had actually bowed out of working with me many years earlier—after *The Bloody Child*. Tinka is, as I know you agree, an utterly brilliant actress, her brilliance coming in part from the fact that she doesn’t “act” at all, rather, she truly becomes the character, and on such a deep level, that there is no separation between her and the film. This is genius, but she paid a heavy price for her astonishing talent and for embodying the darkness of our films...and she finally didn’t want to continue. In addition to her psychic refusal, Tinka is also very ill with Lupus, a debilitating condition with no known cure, which leaves her without strength to do anything except care for herself.

It took me well over five years to recover from our separation and try to imagine a different woman in front of my camera. In fact, almost a year after *Phantom Love* was completed, I had a very strong dream in which I was going to shoot another film in a casino, and there was a question of casting. I was discussing with Tinka about playing the croupier, and she said, no, it was over. And I knew it was over too. First of all, I had to cast someone else, and secondly: no more casino. And I understood that the casino is the trapped, circling energy—the ultimate in alienated labour because there is no product at all. In the dream I understood that the nightmare was over.

It’s quite interesting that this dream occurred many months *after* finishing *Phantom Love*, and more than ten years after my last film with Tinka. It seems like a late-arriving dream, dreams generally being ahead of the conscious mind. So, it seems this process of separation—from working with Tinka, from the alienated, frozen inner figure, is only now coming to some kind of end.

GIANVITO: Dreams in fact drive much of the momentum of *Phantom Love*, although the dividing line between dreams and “reality” is not always so distinct. In both dimensions, the character of Lulu often appears quite passive. The presence of the man in her room seems as removed as the seemingly numbing images of the world at war on her television set or the arrests unfolding outside her window or the parade of faces inside the casino. Yet, throughout, the dreamwork is unfolding. And, here and there, are signs of resistance—Lulu’s refusal to allow her mother to move back in with her and her continuous curtailing of her mother’s calls, to her eventual standing up to the man in her

room and to her mother in the dream (by holding a mirror up to her, as in a fairy tale). Having indicated that with *Phantom Love* there is a certain breaking through the frozen interior landscapes so searingly evinced in your previous films, I'd be interested in hearing your thoughts on where this pathway to the reclamation of self lies. In the film, one occasionally has the sense that some of the images that pass before her eyes have begun to penetrate, such as that of the woman activist coping with tear-gassing, or the startling image of the child dodging through a war zone. So there is a kind of awakening to empathy, perhaps most powerfully manifest in the literal merging of Lulu and her sister's face, reminiscent of the depiction of profound psychic merging in *Persona* (1966). Empathy combined with the ability to identify the source of one's oppression. Is this accurate?

MENKES: I think I have an easy answer to this question: Yes!!! Very accurate. The film follows a Jungian-type trajectory, where the main character, Lulu, always so precise and elegant, sees and digests her shadow, as represented by her sister and the sister's total chaos, as well as identifies one key source of her oppression: the mother. Whereas in most of my films I have focused on male oppression of my key female figures, here the mother is implicated. Lulu realizes that the mother used her as a vehicle to psychically destroy the sister. The sister says, "You're just her puppet, don't you see?" Lulu does see, eventually. This is what opens up her empathetic response. I did want a fairy tale-like atmosphere, mixed with urban brutality, and *Persona*-like depth. So, you really hit on all my intentions very precisely—with one exception. The woman in the documentary footage—which, by the way, I shot outside my house in West Hollywood—was not a peace activist dealing with tear gas. Actually she was an ill woman having a psychotic reaction to medication. She was screaming and acting crazy so the police arrested her! But I like your reading of that scene very much.

GIANVITO: I've mentioned Bergman. In *Phantom Love* there is a rather overt visual reference to Tarkovsky and his frequent motif of the levitating body. When pressed once to explain the significance of the image of the mother levitating in *The Mirror* (1975), Tarkovsky responded, "Neither nightmare nor symbol; a sense of floating is what we all feel when all our support is gone." This would seem to align with Lulu's sense of being unmoored from her own self and own life, though in your scene the woman dramatically implodes. While it is always treacherous to decipher a poetic image, could I press you to speak a little about the resonances of this moment?

MENKES: I had not heard that remark of Tarkovsky's, but it seems to fit so perfectly with Lulu's floating—that her known reference points are dissolving. For me, also, the bed is a place of dreaming—I am a big fan of sleeping and dreaming, it often feels much more interesting than real life. Lulu's transformation starts there—in her bed, in this case, her dream bed. She floats because she's lost her anchors, but also because she has the power to levitate herself, to transcend mundane reality. But most important is that she explodes and fragments—she explodes more than implodes: at that moment she deconstructs physically and also psychically; it is from that point on that all that the repressed inner material erupts. The levitation comes pretty much exactly at the film's

halfway point. Up till then she has been locked in her frozen world. After the explosion everything starts to move and transform. So I guess it's quite a violent transition.

GIANVITO: One of the many distinctive formal dimensions of the film is the fact that it transpires both in India and Southern California, though there is no clearly defined narrative separateness. From your very earliest films to your next project, you've had an interest in territories beyond the US—Israel, Lebanon, Iraq, India, Egypt. I gather that, at least in part, this emanates from your family history, in part from your political consciousness, but I suspect there are others pulls as well that lead you toward the cinematic geography in your work and in *Phantom Love* in particular.

MENKES: Yes, my parents are from Israel, via the Holocaust. Meaning that displacement, murder, and suicidal alienation (among other things) are part of my immediate family history. Also, I am a mystic at heart, and have been involved in yoga and meditation on and off for more than 20 years. The energy in the areas of the ancient civilizations, i.e., India, Egypt, Israel, is very intense. The vibration is totally different than here in the “New World.” I'm talking about a psychic energy field. Lulu runs for spiritual cover when things on the material front are too painful and impossible to digest...this to me is the meaning of the shots in India—the film cuts away to India after the most traumatic moments in Los Angeles.

I make inner-space fiction, to use a phrase by Doris Lessing, and I know very, very well that, ultimately, there's nowhere to go but in; still these external places do have their own unique resonance on many levels. Politically, there is also a tie-in, in many of my films, between the white female character and the Third World—perhaps a sense of shared exclusion from Western white male power—though now we are seeing something undeniably different with Obama...things are perhaps shifting at long last. Although the *New York Times* reported recently that many fear Obama will simply be assassinated. That's one way to get things back to “normal.”

In *Phantom Love* Lulu is trying to move towards the light, out of her own deep darkness, and her psychic journeys to India form part of that attempt. But the film ends on her own bed in Los Angeles (although there are some wet leaves still sticking to her from the River Ganges...).

GIANVITO: I'm not sure how much I'd posit the ascendancy of Barack Obama as a shift “toward the light” given his blatant defense of the policy of pre-emptive strikes, his unwillingness to endorse a complete withdrawal from Iraq (it seems he would maintain the 14 US military bases now set up there, as well as what is the largest US embassy in history), and, according to Jeremy Scahill's recent article in *The Nation*, Obama's openness to continuing the deployment of private security forces like Blackwater and DynCorp. That said, it is perhaps the energy that ones sees in the movement in support of Obama wherein a measure of hope resides, the fact that more people are turning out at the polls, younger voters, more African-American voters, and the kinds of aspirations folks are projecting on his candidacy. But as you say, amid all the clamour for “change,” truly meaningful, lasting, substantive change begins within. This is not only thematically explored within *Phantom Love*, its clear to me that the formal choices you make are an invitation to introspection. For me the form of the work is an act of generosity toward the

viewer. I'm curious however when you encounter resistance to the work, as I've encountered with my own films, what thoughts come up for you, particularly in light of this issue about strategies of shifting the paradigm?

MENKES: I agree about Obama. As they put it so eloquently in *The Onion*: "Rumor has it that politicians will be running for office..." But it makes me happy to hear you say that *Phantom Love* represents "generosity towards the viewer." Thank you!! Not too many people would see it like that. The ones who are resistant see the film as very hostile towards the viewer. And in a way they are right. In the same sense that psychoanalysis is hostile—it breaks down your construction of yourself. Some of us are praying hard for that deconstruction, but even those of us who consciously want it are still resistant—there's always more that has to go.

One woman at Sundance, who is a psychic healer, told me that I should stop "trying to help people" during the Q and A sessions. She said: "Just let them sit with that!" The film stirs up areas of inner darkness and activates a process—some people will allow that to happen to themselves, and some will resist—and the ones who really don't want the experience will walk out. Those that stay either consciously go through the experience or stay but resist it...either way the film works on subconscious layers of the psyche so if you've seen it, it will work on you, whether you want it to or not.

So, how does that fit into strategies to shift the paradigm? I thought my films would change the world, help end sexist oppression, win top prizes at Cannes, and be seen widely and on huge screens. I guess I was completely naïve. The webs of power, as Foucault so beautifully explains, are everywhere and so entrenched, so insidious that I can't see anyway out but in. "In" was always my direction, but now that feeling has intensified. I still want my films to be seen widely but...maybe I'm also understanding what Jonas Mekas said when he was asked how many people in the audience would be the minimum needed for him to project a film. He answered: "One."

GIANVITO: It strikes me that the challenge involved in developing forms that work on subconscious levels is the risk of insularity. In praising *Phantom Love*, a critic recently proclaimed you the natural heir to David Lynch, and while I acknowledge real visionary power in many of his works—*Inland Empire* (2006) was in many ways an astonishing trip—nonetheless, there is for me an increasing hermeticism and obscurantism that I find off-putting and frivolous. You clearly have the confidence to trust and empower your intuition to guide you (and by consequence, the viewer) through the process. I particularly feel this in your camerawork, its framing and movements but obviously as well in the overall dramatic construction and visual iconography. In the inevitable relay that an artist engages in between the analytical and the intuitive, can you talk about how you navigate these particularly treacherous shoals? My sense is it has to do with being guided by profound and always wholly authentic experience (sentiment). But do you ever get lost?

MENKES: I think you've answered the question already, which is that I feel my work has true power because it is rooted in lived experience, and there is nothing in any one of my films that I have not experienced deeply, myself, on a root energy level. For example, *Magdalena* is about a prostitute and, no, I never worked as a prostitute on the physical

plane. But the energetic space that the character inhabits, yes, I have lived there. I find images and stories that express the psychic journeys I have undergone, or the spaces I have been trapped inside. Most of my films have shown a woman whose soul is on ice, as Eldridge Cleaver put it, and at least in big part that's because she's not buying into the sexist set-up—and she pays the price!

I am not interested overtly in style or form, on any level—rather I am always trying, only, to express clearly and truly my own experience. That's all. I also come from a position of self criticism, meaning I guess one could express oneself and the result would be self indulgent—and certain viewers do feel that way about my films, I suppose, although not too many. I think on the whole people can sense that I'm stripping down to the bone, and sparing myself less than anyone else. That would be my critique of Lynch; as much as I admire his ability to roam around in the underground of his psyche, I'm not sure he does it with a double-edged sword—one to pierce the darkness, one to clear the bullshit.

There's more bullshit to clear, always, but I try to give myself no slack whatsoever, in terms of telling it like it is, and taking all the blame on myself. I don't know if that makes sense, but what I'm trying to say is that I think my films are deeply ethical and I'm not sure Lynch's are...The ethical position comes from a refusal to dump blame, a refusal to subscribe to conventional constructions of reality, and a commitment to speak my truth, however unpleasant that might be—firstly, to myself.

Insularity means...I think, protected, hidden-away or something like that. My films are never really insular because they are so strongly political—they are tied to harsh political realities, always, and they speak to forms of oppression on the outer as well as the inner levels—and, of course, draw connections. But they are special, and demanding, and speak their own language. So that means a huge audience...not! But I don't think that's the same as “insular.”

Although my work might appear partially analytical, it is, in fact, 100% intuitive. I'm sure my life looks quite strange from the outside—I am very alone, with no family, always travelling, a nomad of sorts, but my ties are to an inner truth; that's my best friend and, in fact, my only friend. I'm not a practicing Buddhist, but I identify deeply with the essence of the Buddhist refuge formula: I take refuge in the Buddha, I take refuge in the Dharma, I take refuge in the Sangha, I take refuge in the Triple Gems Inside Myself. The last part of that is the key.

I get lost all the time...But never on the set. Maybe that's why I like making films.