

FILMMAKER

Nina Menkes on Cinema as Sorcery

By Deborah Kampmeier | March 9, 2012

I have fallen in love with Nina Menkes. Her films have taken me there, in their descent to the depths of her psyche, and by way of hers, to my own. I continue falling in love with her as she shares her experience of making her art. She speaks of her films as dreams that she interprets and uses to understand her self. Her journey is both creative and spiritual. She is committed to the inner life and intuitive filmmaking. She is committed to the alienated feminine. Nina Menkes' films have been recognized internationally as works of art on the highest level... brilliant, provocative, intense and utterly original. Over the past 25 years she has made six influential films. But they have not always reached their audience. Denis Lim, in his recent New York Times article, writes, "A distinct and idiosyncratic figure in American cinema, Ms. Menkes, has also remained somewhat overlooked, an outsider both on the indie film scene and in avant-garde circles. Her work is sometimes called experimental, but unlike most experimental filmmakers she makes narrative features."



Though I knew Nina's name, I'm embarrassed to admit her films did not reach me until I was contacted to interview her for her upcoming retrospective, "Cinema as Sorcery." And when I did watch them, I couldn't believe I had missed this essential voice. These films inhabit a space that combine a harsh, cold, brutal, political reality of living as a woman in a sexist world, with intimations of inner transformation, with connections to the inner life and the fruitfulness which might be found there. Watching the films, I realized I had missed years of opportunity to be inspired to trust my own voice and my own vision as a filmmaker, to trust my own instinct that treasures exist in the inner alienated feminine. And they exist in the outer alienated feminine as

well. Our industry has continued to support keeping the feminine an outcast, though there is much outcry against this at the moment, and more. Luckily this retrospective gives filmmakers, young and old an opportunity to discover or rediscover Nina Menkes, who's deeply personal films remain uniquely her own. All are part of a bi-coastal retrospective and can be seen March 9-16 at the Anthology Film Archives in New York City.

Kampmeier: This interview is taking place in relation to your retrospective occurring both in New York City and Los Angeles. I had the great fortune of watching your films in sequence and back to back and I would encourage everyone who has the opportunity to attend these retrospectives to do the same. It is overwhelming to be immersed into your work intensively that way. And incredibly rewarding. And in a way I feel I watched one long continuous film. Do you feel your films are connected and a continuum?

Menkes: Absolutely, yes. It's pretty complex but there is, without a doubt, a clear trajectory, and all the work forms a continuum.

Kampmeier: And your sister, (actress Tinka Menkes) plays the lead character in almost all of the films as well, which adds to that continuum.



Menkes: The way I see it, in short, is that the character that Tinka represented or embodied is this alienated feminine figure that was, at the beginning, very unconsciously inside myself. That figure appears in each one of the films in a different guise. And in fact the trajectory of my first 15 cinematic years was one of an intensification of her alienation, culminating in *The Bloody Child* (35mm/86 mins/1996) which is the most fragmented film, and carries the most frightening suicidal energy. I see the journey Tinka and I took as a sort of descent into hell. From my perspective, a necessary journey: that you have to face your own darkness all the way before you can transform, before you can move up and out of it.

Not by coincidence, it seems, my very first film *A Soft Warrior* (Super 8/11 minutes/1981) was linked to my relationship with Tinka. As a teenager, she had been very ill with Lupus, but then recovered. The film is about my experience of her illness, and she plays me in the film.

After that we continued to work together for 15 years, five major movies, until in *The Bloody Child* Tinka had a recurrence of the lupus. She became physically ill to the point of not being able to work at all, and on an emotional level she didn't want to continue inhabiting those very dark spaces, taking them so far and with so much depth and truth. Tinka is superb. She is really not acting, but being the characters on the deepest level.

Kampmeier: What was it like to work so intimately with Tinka and can you talk about the shift away from working with her?

Menkes: First of all she's a brilliant actress, beyond brilliant, but she also understands cinema on a very deep level and she did more than just act. For example, in *Queen of Diamonds* (35mm/77 mins/1991), that whole inner crazy structure with the centerpiece dealing sequence, that was her idea. She's a genius! It was incredible to work with her. She would take my ideas and make them deeper and more radical. And she gave me courage with her audacity. I said, "Are you kidding? We can't possibly have a 20-minute dealing sequence!" She said, "Why can't we? Just do it!" And then I just wanted to scream with happiness. Of course we also had the real-life dynamic of being sisters and on some level we were working out our own family history, on some very deep archetypal level, through these films. After *The Bloody Child*, when we separated, it took me a long time to have any desire to photograph someone else. The process that I went thru in terms of imagining my cinematic universe without Tinka was a long and very difficult interior road. I had always been working things out with her, but now I work things out within myself.

Kampmeier: So what happened after *The Bloody Child* cinematically?

Menkes: My next film project was an experimental documentary, *Massaker* (DV to 35mm/98min/2005), about the Sabra and Shatilla massacre in Lebanon in 1982. This film surely took my on-going thematic interest in murder and alienation to a new level of terror. But this time I faced it alone, through the camera, without Tinka to carry any of that for me. The film consists of documentary interviews with six of the Christian Phalangist Lebanese men who participated in the massacre of Palestinians in Beirut (the film *Waltz with Bashir*, which many people may have seen, deals with this from another angle). *Massaker*, for me, was the raw bottom, I guess one could say, of my cinematic descent into darkness: murder, alienation and betrayal up-close and very, very real. Although the film has a surreal visual style, which does make it dream-like, or maybe nightmarish would be a better word.

After that I started writing another fiction film, *Phantom Love* (35mm/88min/2007, and pictured at top). I was writing about another alienated woman, who was having sex in a very *Magdalena Viraga* (16mm/90min/1986) type of way (my feature about a prostitute who is falsely accused of murdering a john), and working in a casino, much as Tinka did in *Queen of Diamonds* (35mm/77min/1991). So I was writing about this character, this very same wounded disconnected woman, and I thought, no I can't, I can't, she has to change somehow, I just can't stay in that ice fortress anymore, and in fact, the second half of *Phantom Love* the walls do explode, a certain transformation does happen to the character. She starts to move towards the light. Thank God/dess!

Kampmeier: Which brings us up to your latest film, *Dissolution* (HD/87 min/2010) starring David Fire, a male protagonist...

Menkes: Perhaps because the interior feminine figure had achieved a certain measure of liberation from her demons, my cinematic interest sort of veered off in a new direction and my interest became magnetized by a masculine character: namely, David Fire's character in *Dissolution* – a figure which is loosely drawn from Dostoevsky's Raskolnikov. As Elvis Mitchell said last week on his radio program, "*Dissolution* seems to be Dostoevsky meets *Repulsion!*" Which I loved! So true. The mad woman meets her mad masculine counterpart. And this wounded masculine figure only appeared to me, for healing, one might say, after the woman character had made some progress. That's how I see it. Well, so all this explains at least ONE aspect of the whole trajectory. I don't know if all this makes any sense.

Kampmeier: It makes total sense.

Menkes: I guess it's kind of the basic Jungian concept of facing the shadow or the Shamanistic concept of going into the wound to find the jewel. It's a model that a lot of different systems use...from Dante to recovery... until you really face the darkness all the way you can't come out the other side. It's a primary mythic structure.

Kampmeier: Do you know what your images mean when you are creating them? Or do you let them create you? Do you let them create their meaning?

Menkes: I one hundred percent do not understand the meaning of my films until they are done and I'm watching them and I'm watching them a few times. I really respond to my own films as if they were my dreams. And as someone who's been in Jungian analysis I'm used to the idea that you write down your dreams and then you think about them. And you think about them deeply. I really take my films as dreams in the sense that they know more than me, that the films are truer and smarter than I am. And so I look to them for guidance about what the fuck is going on in my life, and sometimes its many years later that I see new layers. Because although my work appears rigorous and formal, I actually work very, very intuitively, very organically and very spontaneously, I have a relationship to the work that it is really informing me and not visa versa. Well there's probably a two-way street on some level, obviously I'm making the work at the same time. But I would say that my conscious mind lags behind my filmmaker self. Like my autonomous cinematic self is wiser and truer and more in touch than my ego self.

Kampmeier: What is the decision around using repeated images like the ring in the fish that's being eaten in both *Queen of Diamonds* and *Dissolution*. Is there a conscious decision and connection being made between films? Or is it you like the image and borrow from your self? (Menkes laughs) Or is it unconscious?

Menkes: The way I make all the films is images just appear to me. They appear to me over time and then when I've amassed a certain amount of them I find the narrative thread within the images that have appeared. And that becomes my script. I was aware that the ring-in-the-fish image had appeared in *Queen of Diamonds*. But since the image came to me again for *Dissolution* I accepted it.

The way the image works in the two films is both similar and different. In *Dissolution* it's his guilt. It's the ring that he sold to the pawn broker whom he murdered! It returns to haunt him

inside the fish he is about to eat. It's like the eye of God. He's talking about there is no meaning, there is no God, life is nihilism. And so God gives him a fast answer and he is terrified. In *Queen of Diamonds*, and this is really central to my work as I'm slowly understanding, is that her own ring returns to her, in this really magical way. But she doesn't pick it up. She tosses it away and she leaves. Her own ring, her own jewels, her own beauty, she somehow can't claim it. First she loses it, then it even comes back to her, and she discards it. Her alienation is, in fact, precisely this, her inability to claim her own jewels. That image of the ring coming back to Tinka's character, and Tinka rejecting it is a tragic image. Someone once said about Sylvia Plath that she killed herself because she couldn't name her own gods.

Kampmeier: Which leads me to another question. I think of myself as a woman filmmaker. I have a lot of colleagues who don't want to be called women filmmakers, they just want to be called filmmakers. I actually love identifying as a woman filmmaker. I feel both the content of my films and the forms I am searching for are directly related to my experience of being a woman in this world. I just wonder do you consider your gender part of your position as an artist? Or are you centered in yourself as an individual artist?

Menkes: I'm first and foremost an individual artist but since I happen to be a female individual there is no way I can escape that nor do I want to escape it. It's integral to who I am as an embodied person. Even if some of the struggles I'm talking about in terms of being cut off from self, cut off from spiritual source, going down into darkness in order to face the self, etc., all this is something that people of any gender do, of course! But there is no question that my films, and not only my films but the reaction to my films has been, in the past at least, quite gendered. Although, I don't come to the work with that in mind. And it is not my conscious focus at all. It's rather that by expressing my own lived experience I can't avoid expressing a woman's experience, which happens to be mine.

Kampmeier: Exactly. Well, I love your work and what you do so ferociously and purely, which in my mind is capture the inner life of women, and the experience of moving from inner reality to outer reality and the question of which is more real anyway, inner reality or outer reality, and something about that question feels very feminine to me, and is something I'm trying to find a form for in my own work, trying to find a form that holds a feminine structure of storytelling. Do you feel you have found the form that holds the space to tell your stories or are you still searching?

Menkes: I guess I would say each one of my films is quite different formally and each one has a different approach to cinematic structure and each one is true to itself in terms of what the film is conveying. I mean, like in *The Bloody Child* where it's about the total fragmentation of her inner life, that fragmentation is represented structurally. In the same way that the shots are formally precise, the structure of the movies are precise in terms of reflecting the quality of the inner experience of the main character.

It might be interesting to mention *The Great Sadness of Zohara* (16mm/40 min/1983), which has a more traditional formal structure, but with a twist. I had read Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, and I knew about this basic mythic structure: the hero leaves home, goes into foreign lands, overcomes obstacles, gets the princess, and returns home victorious. Right? Which is another way of talking about that descent we have been discussing.

Anyway, so when I started the film that was my idea, that was going to be my structure. It's going to be this Jewish girl from Jerusalem, she's going to leave home for the unknown lands, which in this case was Arab lands. From the perspective of the young Jewish girl in Israel, the Arab world is the Other. And then she's going to return home victorious after her quest. That was my conscious concept. But my hands had more wisdom than my mind.

What actually happened was that we shot the portion of the film where Tinka (playing a religious Jewish girl) separates from her world and goes on a spiritual quest of sorts within an Arab space, which was actually Morocco. I was really young and I had this grand, naive idea that we were going to travel from Morocco east, over land across North Africa to Israel and then we're going to arrive in Israel and it's going to be this big homecoming moment. Turns out we couldn't go east because there was a political problem on the border with Algeria, so we traveled and shot in Morocco for three months. Then we flew to Cairo, (you couldn't fly directly to Israel), and then we went overland from Cairo into Israel.

I should point out this whole film was made on a grand total of around \$5,000. We were taking buses and staying in \$2 a night hotels. Anyway to get to the point, when we arrived in Israel, I went out with Tinka to shoot the end of the film which I thought was going to be this glorious homecoming. I went out with the camera and I kept trying to get these victorious shots. Her head with Dome of the Rock, her face and the rising sun, or whatever, and I kept looking thru the camera and everything felt totally wrong. I could not get a shot that was good. I didn't even shoot one single second of footage that whole day. I said, "I don't know, I don't know, I can't get a shot, let's go home." Slept. Woke up the next morning and I'm like, the end is not victorious!! And then we went out and shot the end and it was all that rage and sadness.

But the interesting thing is, long after completing that film, I read somewhere this wonderful essay, I can't remember where I read it, that in women's fiction, and there weren't at that point even enough women's films to talk about women's films as a category. But they were talking about women's fiction and this person was saying that in women's quest narratives, that very often the seeker, instead of returning home victorious is re-accommodated to her secondary status, her labors are unrecognized. And I was like Whoa!!! I was in my early twenties, who knew, but my unconscious knew. My soul knew. That's a kind of twist on the traditional structure.

Kampmeier: I've come across much written about your work being an exploration of violence. It seems to me an exploration of vulnerability.

Menkes: Oh Wow.

Kampmeier: My experience watching your films was a constant sense of this impending threat on an excruciating vulnerability we all live with all the time. I'm thinking of the snail at the beginning of *Dissolution* and the sound of the shoe and the sound of the shoe and the sound of the shoe... and the feeling that the vulnerable flesh of the snail who you stay with in that opening shot long enough that I feel identified with it, the way it lifts its head and looks around...

Menkes: Right. Yes.

Kampmeier: ...it is about to be crushed. Or in *Phantom Love* the pan across all of the sharp objects as we hear the sister talk about something foreign inside she has to dig out and we feel

how vulnerable her flesh is in the presence of those objects and her words. So my experience wasn't about violence. Violence is in the world around this intense vulnerability in every single film is what I felt.

Menkes: That's so beautiful. Thank you. It's deeply true.

Kampmeier: You've managed to make six feature films following your intuition without compromising your voice... how have you done that? Hearing you talk is so inspiring and I wonder how you've really done it.

Menkes: Well, God knows!!! I think it's somewhat of a miracle. And actually every single film had a different path, a different miracle. But I guess one of the ways I did it was by working on excruciatingly low budgets. For example, for *Queen of Diamonds* I got the entire casino donated. Everything was donated. I got a small grant. I got a Guggenheim, which was \$27K and maybe one other grant. That's all. The rest was beg/borrow/steal. It was crazy. So I guess, somehow, thru the willingness to work with a small amount of money, I got my movies made. In fact, when I made *Magdalena Viraga* it got an L.A. Film Critics Award and we got some attention. So one of the major talent agencies in L.A. invited me to come in. I had my script for *Queen of Diamonds* and they said, "We like it, but would you consider changing the end?" And I'm like, "NO." They said, "Well, do you want to be a director for hire?" And I said "NO." After that the conversation died out.



Kampmeier: Do you feel there is anything you had to compromise, working on a lower budget? I mean other than the stress of it.

Menkes: I think that there's a certain strength in the films that actually come from that.

Kampmeier: Yeah.

Menkes: That you can almost feel the truth of the marginality of the space the characters inhabit. It would have been deeply false to make *Queen of Diamonds* a film about a drifter who feels unprotected, uncared for and unsafe everywhere, who has no savings account and no car. To make that film on a high budget would have corrupted the film deeply. It would have been structurally false.

Kampmeier: Yeah.

Menkes: When you are working with very little money there's no padding, there's no safety net, there's no café au lait brought to you by whoever — it's just not there. Which made sense because of the places I was going to in the films and what I was expressing. I mean it would have been absurd if I would be talking about this deep sense of endangerment, loss and lack of entitlement and yet had a luxurious set and personal assistant. How could have I made those films? It wouldn't have been truthful.

Right now I'm preparing a new feature that's a bigger movie and the characters are well-off in the film. The key characters are two women, sisters, of course. One is a movie star, the other is the wife of a hi-level U.S. diplomat. Neither one is financially marginal. So I can have decent money for this film and it won't contradict the inner meaning of the work. And I'm glad to tell you that Creative Capital is supporting this project. Their support is not only financial but also emotional and structural. All this is not without meaning.

Kampmeier: I'm sure each of these films is like a child. And one can't really pick favorites with their children; each has their own love. But do you have a favorite film?

Menkes: I really love all the movies. Each one is beloved to me in a different way. I think the reason I really love my films is that they are deeply truthful. That's somehow my gift, when I pick up the camera I can't bullshit myself. I can bullshit myself in my real life, but not when I'm behind the camera. I'm deeply grateful for that.