

Dennis Grunes

THE GREAT SADNESS OF ZOHARA (Nina Menkes, 1983)

Posted by Dennis Grunes on December 8, 2012 at 9:54

The shot comes so early in the film I am not exactly sure that that is the protagonist, Zohara, with her back to the Wailing Wall while she is chewing an apple; but it must be. In the first of the film's few interior scenes, the Jerusalem apartment she shares with (I assume) her parents finds Zohara on her bed in the throes of angst—and then eating again. Food, for this young Orthodox Jew, apparently, feeds her spiritual hunger. Zohara hastily packs a suitcase and, after a slapstick farewell to her (I guess) businessman-father, hits the road to the Moroccan desert—as the film's promotional material puts it, “in Arab lands,” where she can sidestep distractions and spiritually self-commune. Our minds flash back to the Wailing Wall, to which writer-director Nina Menkes's *The Great Sadness of Zohara* will eventually return: the remnant of a sacred past, part of the ruin of either a Jewish temple or (under a different name) an Islamic mosque, depending on which article and artifact of which different history and faith helps identify one, and thereby a perfect symbol for humanity's alienation from itself.

Zohara's solitary journey is by foot, train and boat—and foot again; we see this subjectively. Walking down a pathway between buildings, Zohara is disappearing as young children at equally serious play sturdily dominate the foreground of the shot. The children are in a holding pattern; Zohara is on her way.

But how real is her journey? Does it actually occur in grounded space, or is Zohara purely engaged in an interior journey whose symbolical signposts make up much of the film? There is no way of separating the spiritual from the material—although we do see after a while that Zohara's suitcase has dwindled in form down to a bag. That magnificent subjectively-angled shot of Zohara looking down at throngs of humanity in the street: are we magically back in Jerusalem here, or are we at an intermediate point along the route of the journey? Is Zohara as isolated and alienated as ever, or is she absorbed by a crowd that she now wants, somehow, to be part of? Such ambiguity “plays fair” with us only when the alternative possibilities apply.

Menkes is her own exquisite color cinematographer. In perhaps her finest visual moment in this film, Zohara is at great distance from us in the Moroccan desert, walking away from the camera unswervingly. Typically, we are about to lose sight of her; beyond her, at a great distance from her, a line of buildings stretches horizontally, possibly a phantom-image or a mirage, mysterious and shimmering in a haze of heat. The

grandeur of the image evokes both the freshness of the spiritual territory that Zohara is traversing and the illusory nature of the civilization that humanity has constructed on solid-seeming though shifting sands. Throughout the film, long-shots of Zohara's becoming a distant dot as our eye loses its grip of her doubles ironically as a suggestion of her deepened intimacy with herself, her own spirit. This is profound and gorgeous filmmaking!

Menkes has underscored the autobiographical element in her film by casting her sister, Tinka, in the central role. Menkes holds Israeli, U.S. and German citizenship, and has used English for the haunting voiceover that accompanies Zohara's journey: "He who descends to The Pit will not come up again. He will not return to his home. His home will never see him again. . . . How many exiles?" Menkes's mother's family settled in Jerusalem after Hitler's rise to power in Germany; her father's family, also Jewish, were killed in the Holocaust. *Losses; separations; divides*. The "great sadness of Zohara" is the same great sadness of all Jewish people everywhere.

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