

I N T E R V I E W

NINA MENKES

b y L I N D A B R O O K S

EXPERIMENTAL FILMMAKER NINA MENKES ENJOYS INTERNATIONAL RECOGNITION, SUMMONING IMAGES OF TARKOVSKY,

Antonioni, and Andy Warhol. Critics dub her work "powerful and extraordinary," "controversial, intense, and visually stunning"; a good number of them—including most of the French and German contingent—hail her films as "the rebirth of American underground cinema." Her first feature, *The Great Sadness of Zohara*, on a young woman's anguished journey through the deserts of Israel and Africa, swept Paris, Munich, and Beijing in 1986. Her second film, *Magdalena Viraga*, on a prostitute's self-hatred, her false arrest for murder, and her final apotheosis as a gentle, black-winged witch, won the L.A. Film Critics' Association Award and outdazzled *Zohara* in Europe, Asia, and the U.S. 1991's *Queen of Diamonds*, about a woman blackjack dealer in Las Vegas, has garnered an American Film Institute award in addition to its original support by the National Endowment for the Arts. It played to enthusiastic Sundance Festival audiences in Utah, captured 1991's AFI Festival in Washington, DC, and was chosen to open the 1991 Munich International Film Festival. Described by the LA Times' Kevin Thomas as "taxing, shimmering and hypnotic," *Diamonds* is Menkes' most difficult and most rewarding film to date.



photo by L. Ginsberg

Linda Brooks: How did you become interested in film?

Nina Menkes: Well, I guess it started when I was a teenager. I was a dancer and a choreographer until I had a bad knee injury. Every time I would get to a point of competence I would have problems with it. But I did love choreography. I was living in London with a few other dancers. And I had an idea for a dance film. I don't really know where I got the idea for film. I think it was actually because my great aunt gave me this Super Eight camera and I thought we would make a little dance film. For fun. And then one of my roommates, whose friend was involved in a film school in London and who had no idea what to do for his film, suggested that he do my idea, basically, and I would just do the choreography. He would film it, bring in professional equipment, and do a whole deal. I wound up directing it myself, designed the music, everything. But when I saw the final print he had put "a film by" whatever his name was—I can't remember.

Brooks: So you actually directed it yourself.

Menkes: I had essentially directed it. The only thing he had done was to edit it and finish it. I had nothing to do with the editing because I had left London to go to California. Anyway, it was very successful. They sent me a print despite the credit issue. I was excited by the film.

Brooks: What happened?

Menkes: I went back to Berkeley to finish my B.A. degree.

Brooks: The press release for *Queen of Diamonds* describes the protagonist Firdaus as a character "whose every hand seems to play out oppression." Did you intend that?

Menkes: Yes. I saw Firdaus as a very oppressed character; I saw her as a drifter, a "white trash" kind of figure. My sister Tinka, who plays Firdaus, made her a lot more than that. But I think she is chiefly a victim. The whole middle sequence with her dealing is similar to the fucking scenes in *Magdalena Viraga*. It's just this endless, endless dealing—17 minutes actually.

Brooks: The long shot of her in the casino with the ceiling lights whirling like a merry-go-round?

Menkes: Yes. And that's almost half of a real blackjack dealer's shift. They work 45 minutes and then they take a break.

Brooks: And she trained for that?

Menkes: Yes, she spent about two weeks practicing.

Brooks: Why the title *Queen of Diamonds*?

Menkes: Diamonds are like glittering jewels that are under the earth; they're like buried treasure. And Tinka's character is like a queen of the underworld. She's a shadow character, very much an underworld character, but she's also like a buried treasure. I think the notion of the female, the value of the "feminine," if you will, in this country is so devalued, so held in contempt that it's like buried treasure. Buried in the sense that no one has access to it. We as women don't have access to it; men don't have access to it because they objectify and degrade women. It's ironic, but the *Queen of Diamonds* is an unrecognized queen very much like *Magdalena Viraga*. Ida says at the end: "Woe to the inhabitants of the Earth for my people are foolish; they have not known me." I think that that's the feeling in *Queen of Diamonds*: the sense of being unrecognized. The oppressed are never recognized. The important work that they do, that women do, that Mexicans do, and so on, is never valued, never recognized openly. A lot is exploited, but it's not recognized. And I think that on both sides of the equation there is a kind of death.

Brooks: Both sides of the question being both men and women.

Menkes: Yes, or the exploiter and the exploited. I mean it doesn't really have to be men and women.

Brooks: You mentioned during the Sundance panel on women directors that film should be a medium whereby our culturally or racially determined perceptions are shifted and wrenched. How would you say that *Queen of Diamonds* does this?

Menkes: Well, for one thing, I think *Queen of Diamonds* is my most advanced film in that, unlike *Magdalena Viraga*, it doesn't have a moral point of view. It doesn't let you orient morally. It doesn't let you orient in terms of story and it doesn't let you slip into your normal categories. It disrupts those categories and

fragments meaning in a lot of different ways.

Brooks: How?

Menkes: Well, I'm not sure in the sense that I didn't make the film consciously with an intent to do that. I work intuitively. But for instance, at the beginning you see this hand.

Brooks: The single hand with the long nails coming out of the bedsheets.

Menkes: And the hand is not contextualized. Then you see this dealer and then an old man. By not contextualizing these elements the film works on you. But people don't want to allow it to work on them. That's why they leave or get upset. They showed *Queen of Diamonds* in the AFI's "Women Make Movies" festival at the Kennedy Center in Washington, DC. There were about four people who walked out of the screening. A few people also booed at the end of the film. Three guys. I wanted

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have the film *Absolutely Positive* [shown at the Sundance Film Festival]. They talk about the fact that they're HIV positive, they talk about being gay, they talk about the dysfunctional family. But the film doesn't get into the more profound levels about the experience of being cut off and disconnected. What does it mean to be "other"? What is that really all about? We don't even

know. We don't have a clue. I don't think anybody does. But let's say women who are interested in it—I can't look at great works by women filmmakers about this issue because there hasn't been anything done. Even a film like Yvonne Rainer's *Privilege*, which I respect very much, is again *talking* about it: it's not *IT*, it's not the beginning of otherness. I think in all my films I've tried to get at it. In *Queen of Diamonds*, I've gotten at it the best in terms of abstracting that experience and presenting it in an unadulterated form. Which is another thing that freaks people out. It's a presentation of an experience without translation, so there's no telling about it. It just is *it*: the fragmentation, the cut-offness, the alienation, the beating the head against the wall. That whole middle section of *Queen of Diamonds*, it's just unadulterated. Untranslated.

Brooks: You said you think that *Queen of Diamonds* gets at it best of all; better than *Magdalena Viraga*. Why?

Menkes: I shouldn't say "better," it's just step three. In *Magdalena Viraga*, Tinka's character Ida is a suppressed character who's just beginning to confront her own internalized self hate and say no to it. Or at least acknowledge it: "Yes, I am a witch." Ida's still dying for some sort of validation from the oppressor. She wants a man to say, "You're o.k. I love you." And she thinks that that will heal her or something. But the point is, she's still very hooked into it. Her main thing is battling against the walls of the patriarchy. And as long as you're battling, you're wrapped up in it.

Brooks: They didn't have problems understanding *Magdalena Viraga*?

Menkes: Oh, they did. But in a way, it's easier to get *Magdalena Viraga*. It's more obvious what it's about. She's oppressed by men, she's angry, she's trying to fight back, and so on. In *Queen of Diamonds* she has withdrawn from the battle.

She's no longer interested in the moral question. I think the lack of moral stance is a big issue in *Queen of Diamonds*. People are used to thinking about oppression in moral terms. *Queen of Diamonds* is just this experience. Firdaus has withdrawn from an active battling and she doesn't allow the environment to define her in the way that Ida does in *Magdalena Viraga*. And because of this, the environment starts to decay. There is the sense in *Queen of Diamonds* that the environment is decaying and dissolving around Firdaus.

Brooks: How is Firdaus's refusal to fight related to the environment decaying?

Menkes: The environment can oppress her only to the extent that she gives it the power to oppress her and that she sees it as empowered. The reality is that she's oppressed as a dealer



Tinka Menkes in *Queen of Diamonds*.

to ask them, "What is bugging you here?" But I didn't get an opportunity. I think that people want to put things in understandable categories. Categories that are familiar. And there are not really familiar categories in *Queen of Diamonds*. It all feels like it doesn't connect, and yet on a deeper level it connects profoundly.

Brooks: How would you say it connects?

Menkes: As the experience of oppression. The experience of being the other has not been explored very much in film except from an explanatory point of view.

Brooks: You mean through the documentary.

Menkes: Documentary and telling about; not *showing*. So you

WHEN TINKA AND I STARTED MAKING FILMS TOGETHER

she became the "creative," the "female." And I as camera and director played the "male." I was controlling; she was evoking. At the same time, we both are women. In many ways I identify more deeply with her and what she's representing.

because she has to be in there dealing. She needs the money. But on a more personal level, it's not getting to her. She's not as involved...she doesn't want to prove to the guys that she's beautiful or cool or "Please love me." She's not in that position. She's very cut off and profoundly hurt, but she's not masochistic. That's a big jump into liberation, although some people still find Tinka's character painful in *Queen of Diamonds*. Someone

In a way that's what *Queen of Diamonds* is about.

Brooks: I'm reminded of the manipulation of the environment in the film *El Norte*. Does *Queen of Diamonds* critique commercial film rhetoric in the way that *El Norte* does?

Menkes: *Queen of Diamonds* is an anti-movie pretty much on every level. It doesn't allow you to use the normal ways that you're used to engaging in cinema. Even *El Norte* has an obvious point of view you aren't normally shown. It tries to shift your awareness, but it does it through a traditional narrative structure which has a strong moral base. *Queen of Diamonds* tries to disrupt your moral base in the first place, because any kind of hierarchical moral base is going to have the good guys and the bad guys. As long as you have the good guys and the bad guys, you're stuck in that old dichotomy. That's why you get these leftists who are just as fanatically stupid as the right wing. People have said to me that after they saw the movie they felt peaceful and liberated. It was like something "opened in their throat" they said, and they felt peaceful and free. To me, that's the best.



Tinka Menkes (right) in *The Great Sadness of Zohara*.

told me they walked out because they couldn't handle the pain of the film.

Brooks: You had said: "I want to restructure how we see things in terms of the feminine perspective." How does Tinka's not fighting back in *Queen of Diamonds* relate to this project? Is it connected to a non-adversarial position?

Menkes: It's not exactly non-adversarial. I think that you have to really let go. And this is so hard, at least for me. I let go of wanting "them" and "it." I really do not want a deal from Paramount Pictures. Really, I really do not want a boyfriend who thinks I'm a little bit gross and kind of degrades me on a certain level. The sort of "every woman loves a fascist" thing. When you really don't want it anymore, you're very far along. When you abandon that desire, and you commit to yourself. But it's a painful road to travel, to let go of it, because you let go, in a way, of the whole world. And then you gain the whole world. But when you're in the process of letting go, it's pretty terrifying.

Brooks: The serenity the film evokes?

Menkes: Yes. Because it opens up these categories which are so ultimately reductionist. It's not that I don't believe in the struggle of the undocumented worker. Obviously I do. *Magdalena Viraga* is still very hooked into them. *Queen of Diamonds* is not, although it refers to them. That throws people off, because they want to locate morally even more than they want to see narrative continuity.

Brooks: Do we have a point of view of Nina Menkes as self-conscious film-maker, constantly reminding the audience of the camera, of its manipulative gaze, warning them not to get lost in the illusion?

Menkes: Well, I would say the film probably does that in the way it cuts, the editing. It never lets you just lethargically get involved. The scenes are always throwing you off. Suddenly it's this scene, then it's that scene. Then it's this scene forever. Then it's that scene, and so on. You're very aware of the cutting.

Brooks: *Queen of Diamonds*' intrusive editing technique creates a kind of narrative wrenching that aborts any possible linearity or plot.

Menkes: Yes. *Queen of Diamonds* does that. Tinka and I work shamanistically, in a way, because our personal relationship gets very much into the films or I should say maybe the films get into our personal relationship. Or both.

Brooks: What do you mean?

Menkes: I mean that when Tinka and I started making films together she became the "creative," the "female," let's say. Like a muse figure. And I as camera and director played the "male." I was controlling; she was evoking. At the same time, we both are women. In many ways I identify more deeply with her and what she's representing, if you follow me. In a typical male-female thing it's just A and B; here it's like A and B, but at the

same time I'm also B. I have a lot of the issues of self-hate that she has.

Brooks: "She" as a character.

Menkes: As a character. I'm denigrated and held in contempt by the larger culture as an experimental filmmaker. So in *Queen of Diamonds*, we reached a kind of crisis over this dialectic of me using her in a way and yet still loving her. "Using her, identifying with her, hating her" reflects this larger problem much more than a personal gestalt. In *Queen of Diamonds*, much of the emotion is between the camera and the figure, and there's a lot of fear and aggression on the part of the camera. This figure, this kind of "Wounded Feminine" that Tinka plays in *Queen of Diamonds*, this dark muse—like in my first film *The Great Sadness of Zohara*—

there's an innocence to it. The camera is the watcher, and she's like a muse character. It's still weirdly dark and twisted. But she functioned as an embodiment of the "Damaged Creative" or the "Wounded Feminine." The difference between let's say most male-female/director-actor relationships, these famous ones, like Bergman and Liv Ullman, and Fellini, is that

their relationship never gets problematic. It's probably very problematic, but it never appears problematic because the woman is this kind of wonderful, creative, magical, thing; then, there's a film about this character. It's all very straightforward. It's not tortured. The reason it's so tortured between me and Tinka is it doesn't work in the easy way because I'm also in this damaged position.

Brooks: When I first saw you on the women directors' panel at Sundance, I hadn't seen *Queen of Diamonds*. Then I saw the film. And I thought Firdaus was you. You resemble each other quite strongly. In a way, it's as if you're directing and starring in your own films. How much of these films is autobiographical?

Menkes: Well, none, in a concrete way. But all in a metaphoric or a psychic way. I've never been a prostitute; I've never been a blackjack dealer. But on an emotional level, *Queen of Diamonds* is very personal. I see the three films as a slow progression

out of a deep exile from self, out of an internalized self hatred, a progression in a very weird path. This is what I was talking about at the Sundance panel. Without any conscious intention, my work is emerging as a progression, and the spiritual search, the search for the identity of the "Other," the "Female" is producing an entirely different equation. We don't know what that equation is yet. But these three films *The Great Sadness of Zohara*, *Magdalena Viraga*, and *Queen of Diamonds* are mapping out an equation that is completely different. Entirely without plan, just Tinka and me working in the dark. *The Great Sadness of Zohara* is the prototype of a spiritual search. She leaves home, she goes on a journey and she returns home. But when she returns, instead of being crowned king or whatever, she's re-accommodated to her secondary status. She's back in the marketplace. And she's pissed. It didn't work. She went out

and did all this work and it failed. That was "try number one."

Then in *Magdalena Viraga*, this little "round-trip, Joseph Campbell" routine gets thrown out. *Magdalena Viraga* takes place entirely within the underworld. And Tinka says, "Yes, I am a witch. I am a permanent member of the underworld. I'm not going to the underworld and then coming back, taking the treasure." That whole model is so exploited: here's the hero, he goes into the

underworld, he takes the treasure and he takes it home. The underworld is left robbed, and he is left enriched. What about those underworld characters? They've just been ripped off. What is their story? So *Magdalena Viraga* is a little bit about their story. Their story is, "I'm stuck in the underworld and the first, the only thing I can say is 'Yes I am a reptile,' 'Yes, I'm a witch,' 'Yes, I'm here in the mud, yes, O.K. At least I recognize that and I get empowered by recognizing that and it has nothing to do with going home because there is no home.'"

Brooks: Or "I am home."

Menkes: Yes, "Home is here," or "I have to transform the environment." That's the next step. And I think that's what starts happening in *Queen of Diamonds*. Firdaus says, "O.K., I'm in the underworld. This is home. I have to start transforming my environment." And it happens in the film—magical, weird transformations in her surroundings, although they're like little eruptions. It's not all over. The palm tree burns: you could say

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that she almost sets it on fire, that she's burning the palm tree. An upside-down crucifix comes down the street. Jewels suddenly appear in the middle of her house, and that giant dice clock.

Brooks: Is she part of or does she cause these eruptions?

Menkes: I think that she inadvertently causes it by her presence, by her consciousness. There isn't any like A-B causality. But her consciousness of moving from *Magdalena Viraga* to there and saying, "I redefine my world"—that is the only power that she really has. It's in her refusal to see herself as others see her and in her different view of the world.

And in her gaze, in her transformational gaze, the environment starts erupting. But it's just the beginning. It's just like little, little kind of buds, you might say.

Brooks: Why did you make her a dealer?

Menkes: Vegas has a lot of these women who are drifters, down and out characters. They go into town, live in these apartments, and they just work. Some of them do it for a long time and they have normal family lives. But many, most don't. So on this level the film can be read as a picture of the desolation of a Vegas



Tinka Menkes (left) with Nina Menkes on the set of *Queen of Diamonds*. (photo: Kelley Miller).

dealer. Here in the middle of Vegas, which is such a symbol of the glories of capitalism, is the real thing: behind that blackjack table is sheer desolation. And those dealers are what keep the whole system running. So on that level, it's just another picture of an oppressive situation. But, on a more magical level, there is the burning palm tree and the jewels. And dealing the cards is kind of god-like...

Brooks: The hand of fate. What kind of hand is she going to deal me?

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Brooks: Maybe it's easier to see her ability in *Magdalena Viraga*. For instance, when the warden pushes Ida into the cell, she turns around with this incredible look on her face—twisted in pain. Then she cries. That's very powerful. But it's hard to tell her attitude as a character in *Queen of Diamonds*. What is her attitude in *Queen of Diamonds* when she's bathing this old man in the motel?

Menkes: That's a funny scene. I see her as a kind of messenger from the other side. There are a lot of these old men dying in *Queen of Diamonds*.

Brooks: The only significant male in the film is a feeble, dying old man. Any reason?

Menkes: Right. She kind of nurses him into death. She's messengering him out. You know, like "Sayonara to that old order." So she's like an angel of death. But again, you could just see her nursing him as a side job for the money. And when he dies, she doesn't give a shit. That's the whole thing with the film—everything has a double meaning. I see her very much as a messenger of a new order, but at the same time she's hurting and she's cut off and she's alienated. So it's not the usual set-up where the messenger comes and etc., etc.

Brooks: Apart from Tinka's acting, how do you feel that you convey this hurting?

Menkes: Well, cinematically, there are probably two main devices that make the landscape speak about Firdaus' condition. So that it's not just the regular Hollywood model: "there's a woman in the house and she's crying, so that means she's sad," and so on. In *Queen of Diamonds*, as in all of our films, the whole frame expresses the emotion, the condition of the character—the frame, the length of the shot, the way it's cut.

Brooks: Can you give an example?

Menkes: O.K. Well, there are two main techniques: holding the shot (very long takes), and endless repetition. In the dealing scene and the wedding, we have this cut, cut, cut, but nothing's happening. It goes on and on. And then there are these long

Menkes: Firdaus has a quality of being very powerful even though she's oppressed and grounded. I think that connects to this dark female symbol, this denigrated, creative but unrecognized figure who is really powerful but whose power is veiled and dark. It's not clear. It hasn't come up to air. And actually Tinka, who plays these dark unrecognized characters so strongly, really has this power, on a very concrete level. She's a superb, a brilliant actress—so different in each film. Of all the stuff written about our work, very few people talk about her acting. It's as if even on that level she's ignored.

shots, like the 17 minute dealing scene. To me these are two important aspects of alienation. In the long shot, you're sort of trapped and suffocated in this claustrophobic thing that doesn't move. It's as if she's imprisoned in the frame. And then, the other manifestation of the same thing is the endless intercutting, as if you're cut off from some nurturing source, say, your self. So the length of the shots and the way the shots are fragmented is an evocation of emotion. In *Magdalena Viraga* there are a lot of close-ups. I wanted to get close-ups on *Queen of Diamonds*. But as I told you, we work really intuitively, and when I would try to move in—I'd say, "Tinka, I haven't gotten a single close-up of you," and I'd move closer. But I wouldn't like the shot. I'd tell her "No, this doesn't seem right. Better back up." I just couldn't get close to her. There was something wrong. I think it has to do with the nature of the character and the nature of our relationship. The camera, me, my consciousness, or whatever you want to call it was afraid of this figure. The main drama in *Queen of Diamonds* is my fear, my inability to get close to this figure. It's a film about that. It's a film about the fact that I cannot reach this character who is in every single fucking shot. So it's a film about a defensive structure in a way. It's a portrait of a defense in the sense that you want to scream for a close-up, or scream for her to say something at the end of the film, like "Please say something!" But no, she's just gone. And once she's gone, it's like she never said it, and you never heard it, and you didn't love her in time and it's too late.

Brooks: At the end of the picture, she gets in the car and disappears.

Menkes: Yes, but the end is ominous. When she's picked up by the car you're not sure who it is. She may be hitch-hiking. She might be killed. And here is another example of the doubleness that the film creates at every step. That's not what happens to the western hero. He rides off into the sunset. It's not a situation as in *Queen of Diamonds* where he might be killed on the road. The film creates this double perspective at every step to show that she can't be that "normal" hero. It doesn't work that way when you're in the "other" position.

Brooks: Would you buy Laura Mulvey's idea that the image of woman breaks up cause-effect linearity in the sense that by centering on Firdaus, you've banished logical narrative movement; you've got one unbroken free association?

Menkes: Well, that might be true, but I don't like to reach that conclusion as a result of Mulvey's ideas. In other works I think it's true that that's how men—or it could be a woman—see things from, let's say a "sexist" perspective. Sexist positioning says that you have this narrative going on and then there are these things that get in the way or that are disruptive, but that are essentially irrelevant to the main line.

Brooks: Right, and these things are usually women.

Menkes: Yes. In a sense that relates to Mary Daly's idea about background. *Queen of Diamonds* is definitely a background movie: the whole movie is background; there is no foreground. So, yes, Mulvey's ideas do work in that way.

Brooks: Your long shots have been compared to Antonioni. What do you think of that comparison?

Menkes: I'm complimented because though Antonioni is a sexist, he's a great filmmaker, a great visual artist. In the film

courses I teach at USC, I give one exercise that's always amazing to watch. At the beginning of the class I ask people: "Write down any feelings you have about yourself as a human being and as a woman, or as a man—issues regarding sex and issues around who you are sexually. Do you have any conflicts?" What always happens is that the women always have these incredible conflicts, and the men are always saying: "I don't get the assignment. What do you mean?" It's no problem; they're totally integrated. I think that for women this is such a loaded question. It's such a can of worms just to be a human being and to understand that you're not a sex object: to really get it.

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Brooks: I want to bounce Mulvey off you one more time. She says there are three different looks associated with the cinema: the camera's as it records, the characters' at each other, and audience's as it watches. Narrative film denies the first two in order to subordinate them to the third, the conscious aim always being to eliminate the intrusive camera presence. So the first blow against traditional film is to reinstate the audience's sense of the camera. Does *Queen of Diamonds* address that technique?

Menkes: Definitely. Conventional film wants the audience to forget that there's a camera and to just get involved in the narrative. *Queen of Diamonds* subverts that. It makes you excruciatingly aware of yourself while you're watching it because there's not enough action on the screen to make you lose yourself in the film. It's also related to how Tinka plays the lead in *Queen of Diamonds* versus the way that the star system works. When someone plays the lead in a Hollywood film s/he becomes larger than life. The Hollywood film works by making you revere the star. You think less of yourself, as if the star were superior in some way. Your life seems inconsequential compared to theirs and so you read about them in *National Enquirer* in order to augment your own useless life. The sign of Tinka's genius is though she's the lead—she's in every shot—she's never overwhelming. She has a quality of being invisible.

Even in documentaries about the oppressed, the "Other" characters—homosexuals, or HIV-positive people, or transvestites, or whatever—still assume this kind of a glorified position in the film cinematically. So that, in a way, these documentaries don't break down that glorification of the screen person. Even in a documentary about a figure who's not usually glorified, say, a cleaning woman, she still becomes "This Cleaning Woman," this big charwoman on the screen. In *Queen of Diamonds*, there's a lead character who's not a lead character.

Brooks: There's no visual spectacle, there's no emotion to pull you into it.

Menkes: Right. In that sense *Queen of Diamonds* is a shadow movie, a background movie. We set out to make a film about the background that really is a film about the background, rather than make a film about a background character foregrounded. All my films are about shadow, but *Queen of Diamonds* most of all. The whole thing is about a shadow character and it's a shadowy movie.

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