

# The Dark Realities of Nina Menkes



BY HELGA OSWALD

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ina Menkes is internationally recognized as one of the most challenging underground filmmakers in the United States. Her films have shown widely at major film festivals and she has received numerous honors including a Los Angeles Film Critics Association Award for her 1986 feature *Magdalena Viraga*, a fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts, three Western States Regional Media Arts Fellowships, and most recently, an AFI Independent Filmmaker Program grant. Her latest film, *Queen of Diamonds*, was shown at the Sundance Film Festival in January, 1991, and opened the Munich Film Festival in June, 1991. It will have a theatrical run in L.A. later this year. *Magdalena Viraga* will be shown as part of the AFI Independent Showcase from August 9-15 at the Monica 4-plex.

## People are so afraid... fear is just intense in this industry.

**MONTAGE:** Besides being the director, art director and cinematographer of your films, and editing them together with your sister Tinka who is the lead actress in all of them, you also raise the money yourself. Are you going to stick to your autonomy with your future projects?

**MENKES:** Doing all these functions is an active choice because my work is intensely personal. I would never have anyone else shoot my movies or be the art director. If I would get more help on my future projects I would get more help on the production manager level and have more production assistants.

**MONTAGE:** At Park City this year you introduced *Queen of Diamonds* by saying you didn't create the film to entertain; you said it asked the viewer's participation and requires work. Do you feel that people enjoy your films?

**MENKES:** There has been a great response to *Queen of Diamonds*. The screening at the AFI Film Festival was in a 500-seat theater and it was packed and people seemed to be very excited about the film. That was very encouraging because, sometimes, you feel you're working in a vacuum. I think that a lot of people are actually hungry for a film that doesn't just go along doing the same kind of thing in the same kind of way. Somehow they're ready to have a different kind of cinematic experience, a different kind of emotional experience.

When I see a regular Hollywood film, I suffer during this film because I am in such disagreement with everything that they're doing on every level including the portrayal of women, the idea of characterization, the whole idea of plot and how you put a film together, the whole disregard for the texture of film and what film can do. So I'm always infuriated and I don't enjoy it and there are other people who feel that way, too.

**MONTAGE:** How would you describe your relationship to Hollywood?

**MENKES:** Well, I feel like I am the enemy of Hollywood. I am in direct opposition to everything Hollywood stands for politically, socially, emotionally—their idea, really, of what's valuable in life on the most profound philosophical level. Everything that Hollywood stands for is stuff that I not only don't believe in, but that I have dedicated my life to fighting against. I feel that I'm waging a battle in many ways and on a certain level it seems like a battle against stupidity. On the other hand, they're not stupid because they're very powerful. There is this pervasive influence, especially when you live in L.A., of this way of thinking, this way of seeing, these ruinous values, that to maintain a sense of your individuality and your values in this system is very difficult.

I feel the little lights of sanity in this city are few and far between. It can be different. I was at the Women's Film Festival in Paris and it was the most amazing experience for me because, suddenly, I was in a context where almost everyone was kind of on my side. It was a mind-blowing experience for me.

**MONTAGE:** In your films, the female protagonist, played by your sister Tinka, is an onlooker. She is not acting out, she is acted upon.

**MENKES:** She is sort of a combination in that she's being acted upon but at the same time, she is a witness. She doesn't act in the usual sense in the way actors act, as in a movie like *Thelma and Louise*. In *Queen of Diamonds*, the woman is active but she is active in a way that's more subtle. It may seem she isn't doing anything and therefore some people see her as a passive victim, as one film critic wrote. This is a very reductionist view of the film. Let's put it this way: women, having lived in an oppressed and degraded condition, have a lot of dark feelings, have a lot of feelings of desolation, and to give voice to that desolation is profoundly different from saying, "oh yeah, women are victims."

**MONTAGE:** I think this attitude is very much rooted in an American mindset that emphasizes the positive and acting out in order to deny the darker side.

**MENKES:** Absolutely. That so-called "dark side" in *Queen of Diamonds* is a freak-out to people. They don't want to look at it or at Tinka's character. On a certain level she is a victim of the system but she also has a very strong quality of being this dark angel, transcendent; she is almost like a messenger. By witnessing the landscape as it really is she transforms it. I really feel strongly that you cannot move forward in any way without giving voice to these other levels and these hurting places, this pain.

**MONTAGE:** This new breed of independent, positive-thinking female screen characters—like Jodie Foster in *Silence of the Lambs*—seems so forced.

**MENKES:** Yeah, forced and also false.

**MONTAGE:** Isn't that exactly what this "realistic" kind of acting is trying to conceal?

**MENKES:** It's a cover-up. The whole idea that women wear masks, women are always supposed to wear make-up, they're supposed to cover up. But why do you cover up? Well, there is apparently something pretty ugly that has to be covered up. And what is that ugly thing, that black spider? It's the wounding, it's the pain from all that oppression and in *Queen of Diamonds* Tinka is coming out from under

*Nature... does not have cause and effect in that certain kind of Hollywood way. In nature, one person is not more special than another. We are all equal in the face of death.*

the rock with all that darkness and she is just standing out there and you have to look at her. For some people that's a very difficult experience.

**MONTAGE:** *I remember that the audience was quite irritated at a screening of Magdalena Viraga over a scene where Tinka's head is on fire and she says, "I am a witch."*

**MENKES:** [laughs] *Magdalena Viraga*, in a way, is similar because it exposes the fact that prostitution and self-hate are a disaster; it's a psychic suicide. And that's a very different point of view than, say, Lizzy Borden's *Working Girls*, where it's like, "Yeah, we're just doing a job" and "Everything's great" and "I've taken control of my life." Or, for example, I hear all the time that Madonna is in control of her life. But Madonna is actually the ultimate sex object, a commodity; she's become an image by which she is then controlled.

**MONTAGE:** *Some people declare her the ultimate feminist.*

**MENKES:** I know. To me, it's like this insane reversal where you just want to scream "What is happening?" I think the problem is that people are out of touch with certain levels of their own experience on a really deep level and they don't want to think about that.

**MONTAGE:** *The economic system is based on long working hours which leaves very little time for most people to see something challenging.*

**MENKES:** That's another thing about *Queen of Diamonds*—it's also saying: this system is exploitive, this system is a death. It's talking about that death, that's why it's not entertainment because it doesn't distract you from the fact that the system is a death. It just asks you, "Look at that" or "Feel these things in yourself," and that's not pleasant.

Tinka pointed out to me that the way regular movies work, where you have a little so-called cathartic experience inside the movie, is reactionary. What happens is you have your little cathartic experience and then you go home and everything is the same. You say, "I went to the movie and I cried, and then I go home and I don't have to cry at home." But in *Queen of Diamonds* you don't get this release. You have to sit with the stuff and it can be very unpleasant.

**MONTAGE:** *But sitting with "the stuff" makes you think long after the film and that can be quite an exciting experience, too. It can change your way of looking at things.*

**MENKES:** Yes, hopefully.

**MONTAGE:** *So, you think watching things on screen has replaced dealing with them or acting them out?*

**MENKES:** Yes. But if I go to a Hollywood film, it doesn't function as "escape." I just see everything that I want to work against, right in front of me. I am always looking for a sense of reality rather than total fantasy. I don't want total fantasy. I think that *Queen of Diamonds* is a movie that's very grounded in reality even though it has a surreal aspect whereas a film like *Thelma and Louise*, for example, is grounded in total fantasy. And the construct of that film, the fact that it's these two very wealthy white women who are playing poor women is very important to that movie.

**MONTAGE:** *It leaves the message, "You can be poor and still have a good time."*

**MENKES:** Exactly.

**MONTAGE:** *What different aesthetic approach do you use to question the dominant cinema?*

**MENKES:** To describe the whole way the "male bourgeois" cinema is constructed, I want to go back to the star system because it's very important. Events and people are foregrounded in a very specific way and there is a linear time frame. Time is always reconstructed in exactly the same manner and, essentially, to me, it is completely boring. It takes you from point A to point B to point C and there are a few characters that are foregrounded and you follow them along. And it manages to, among other things, always create insecurity in the viewer.

In *Queen of Diamonds*, instead of foregrounding foreground, it's foregrounding background and I think that Tinka's performance is especially incredible in that way because her challenge was to be in every single scene and yet never become that star figure, never stick out and take on that kind of "star" quality. Tinka somehow managed to be the lead and be invisible at the same time.

**MONTAGE:** *Your films tend to show the character's personal situation in a larger social and economic context.*

**MENKES:** I think that's really important and that's another thing that Hollywood films never explicitly address. The context is the hidden agenda—it's taken for granted, it's not questioned. That's very irritating to me, it makes me want to scream. The basic way all those narrative films are constructed is to veil the ideology that they are actually supporting. The position is false and it's going to crack.

**MONTAGE:** *The Judeo-Christian ethic is very central to how we think about story structures and you're using a lot of religious symbols in your movies. How does that connect?*

**MENKES:** The traditional archetypes within Christian symbology need to be completely reconstructed because they have nothing to do with reality. The whole Christian tradition is very involved in an idea about victory over death. If you believe in Christ you have eternal life. So

*It's impossible for me to construct a narrative like the Hollywood films because that's not the nature of my experience.*

Kelley Miller ©1990

people are living in this complete terror of death and in a pursuit of pleasure and entertainment as a way to believe they're going to overcome death. *Queen of Diamonds* is an attempt to rupture some of that ideology and to talk about a victory of death, you might say, over everything. Death is going to win. Your little Christian symbols are not going to give you any power over *that*. Actually, my mother pointed out to me that there are a lot of Christian symbols in *Queen of Diamonds* (which I didn't consciously put there) which are sort of "ruptured." Besides the whole feeling of death in the film and Tinka's relationship to it—she's not afraid of it—the crucifix is upside down, the palm tree which



Tinka Menkes in *Queen of Diamonds*

is a symbol of eternal life in Christianity is burning, the fish is fried, the wedding is an unholy wedding and the whole dealing scene in the middle is like a hellish concentric circle of trying to fill time. By filling time we try to keep death out and we madly attempt to stave off this fact, this force that is much more powerful than our little crucifixes or our little entertaining movies with their little characters. We are dwarfed as human beings within the bigger picture by the enormity of these elemental forces.

Another thing in *Queen of Diamonds* is the whole idea of fate, which is also anti-Christian. The Christian ethic says, "Well, you get your reward if you're good. If you do x, then you'll get y," which is also the way plots are structured in traditional cinema. However, that's not how the world functions at all. In *Queen of Diamonds*, the card that comes up is the card that comes up, regardless of whether you're good or bad. Nature works like that—it does not have cause and effect in that certain kind of Hollywood way. In nature, one person is not more special than another. We are all equal in the face of death. But these ideas are really contrary to the whole structure of our hierarchical system—

**MONTAGE:** —quite an existential quest—

**MENKES:** I think so [laughs].

**MONTAGE:** Maybe we should get clearer on the term "dark force."

**MENKES:** Well, what do you think?

**MONTAGE:** For me, it's the non-rational, the intuitive; it's a way of

*embracing qualities in human beings without evaluating "good" or "bad" but seeing them as balancing forces.*

**MENKES:** I agree with all that and I think there is also the power of death or the power of the abyss, in a sense, that the male western bourgeois construct is essentially a compartmentalization—it tries to keep all that stuff away. This is the basis of the idea that we can dump garbage in the Third World and then it's not a part of our experience. That's also connected with my films somehow. Take the wedding scene in *Queen of Diamonds*. A traditional wedding is supposed to be between a man and a woman and, let's say that the man symbolizes this whole rational force, and he connects with and marries the woman, and the woman is the dark massive spider that cannot be contained. This would be a real marriage. But, what happens instead is that women are denigrated and not seen as whole people and when they get married, it's a lie, it's just a ritualization of the lie. You can't

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have a union with something that you denigrate and which you essentially ignore and despise and which is forced to wear a mask.

**MONTAGE:** *You were talking about the necessity of reconstructing the symbolic order, the way that images are composed and put together, and the fact that viewing your films requires effort and participation from the viewer. What about pleasure?*

**MENKES:** First of all, whenever one talks about pleasure we have to ask: pleasure for whom? A heterosexual man who is not very enlightened may get pleasure from watching naked women bounce around on the screen whereas I'm not going to get pleasure from that. I get a lot of pleasure from watching Tinka in *Queen of Diamonds* because I identify with her position. I get a lot of pleasure in watching Chantal Ackerman's *Jeanne Dielman*. I get an intense pleasure from watching her films because I have an intense identification with what she's saying. If you have been Other in your experience and somebody represents that to you on the screen, that's an intensely pleasurable experience whereas if I go to a Hollywood movie and I watch a narrative that has nothing to do with my reality, I get no pleasure from that.

Another thing in terms of my own work is that all of this theoretical stuff is very exciting to me because I intuitively and intellectually agree with it. But none of the work that Tinka and I have done has been in any way affected by theoretical writing because we haven't read any of it and I am only just now learning about it.

My films are completely intuitive works derived from my experience. If you have an experience of being background and you make an honest film, your film is going to be about the experience of being background. It's impossible for me to construct a narrative like the Hollywood films because that's not the nature of my experience. I don't experience life that way, it's not my position. And if every person would be true to their own experience, they're going to come up with material that is oppositional to the dominant code—at least if they're not in a privileged position.


**MONTAGE:** *Does the fact that the dominant code is still prevailing indicate how much non-privileged filmmakers are out of touch with their personal feelings and how much they have internalized that code?*

**MENKES:** Yes, I think so and it's terrible. Hollywood succeeds because most people have gotten their individuality and their sense of self so beaten out of them that they can get pleasure from work which is actually functioning to make you feel like shit. As a woman, you inevitably compare yourself to the star who, of course, is taller, thinner, has bigger breasts, whatever, than you have. So you run out and buy new clothes and buy make-up so you can look better and the guys have to buy cars. It runs the whole economy, it works, it sells product. They believe it should be like that and they're always feeling bad because they're never achieving it. God forbid that you're just

okay as a human being.

People are so afraid, too. I mean, fear is just intense in this industry.

**MONTAGE:** *You don't seem to be afraid to speak up.*

**MENKES:** No, I'm happy to. I feel it is extremely important to express this other voice. I feel an urgency about it. People are dying inside, it's obvious everywhere. It is urgent. 

*Helga Oswald is a writer and filmmaker from Munich.*

**OTTINGER FROM PAGE 16**

**MONTAGE:** *Dominance seems to be at the heart of the sexual relations in your films. Is that too a masquerade or is it a genuine part of relations between people that you find dramatic?*

**OTTINGER:** It is more a masquerade but always a play between two people with one person being more powerful than the other. It is a permanent play in good relations.


**MONTAGE:** *Through exploration of women's fantasy life, you seem to be concerned with female subjectivity. Why does it manifest itself in such alien, freakish and domineering forms in your work?*

**OTTINGER:** One must work in extremes in art in order to better show reality in life.

**MONTAGE:** *Why is the picaresque tradition, or the journey film, so appealing to you?*

**OTTINGER:** For me it reflects reality in the best way; travel is also an interesting and simple structure upon which to place many themes through events and different characters—young and old, women and men. There is so much opportunity for differentiation through travelling. You can sightsee in the night and travel to the underworld.

**MONTAGE:** *Where are your films shown in Germany?*

**OTTINGER:** They are shown in cinemas all over Germany and in other European countries. They are also shown on TV. If it has been a co-production, it is first shown in the cinemas, then on TV for up to five years. 

*Mary Kuryla is a filmmaker living in Los Angeles.*