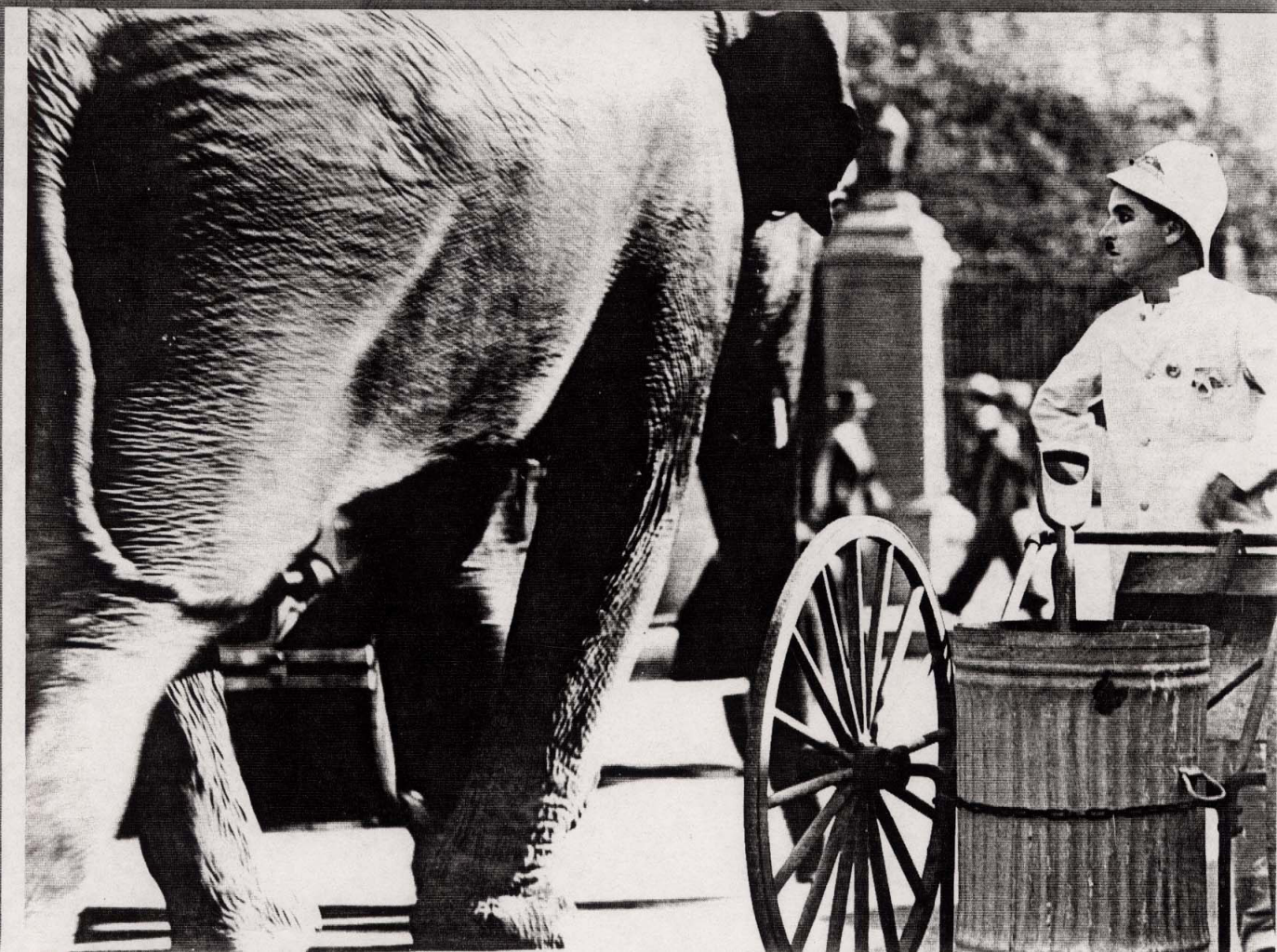


# Film Quarterly



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# An Interview with Nina Menkes

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In the early thirties, Pierre Klossowski coined the term “method of obstinacy” in reference to the unique and diffident work of Georges Bataille. In the nineties, the term regains currency, this time in reference to the work of independent film-maker Nina Menkes, an artist whose work is stubbornly uncompromising. A graduate of the film school at UCLA, Menkes claims allegiance to no one in cinema history, and while the aesthetic rigor of her two feature films, *Magdalena Viraga* (1986) and *Queen of Diamonds* (1991), has led critics to connect them with Chantal Ackerman and Michelangelo Antonioni, Menkes’s combination of feminist politics and an unnerving aesthetic style makes her work unique.

Although Menkes’s work is not widely known, she has received widespread recognition in the form of grants and awards. In 1984 *The Great Sadness of Zohara* won a special jury mention at the San Francisco International Film Festival and a Silver Medal at the Festival of Festivals in Houston. *Magdalena Viraga* has also won several prizes, including Best Independent/Experimental Film from the Los Angeles Film Critics Association. In 1991, *Queen of Diamonds* played at the Sundance Film Festival, the AFI Festival in Los Angeles, the Munich Film Festival, the Women’s Film Festival in Cambridge, Massachusetts, the Independent’s Forum at UCLA, and at a special benefit screening for Filmforum in Los Angeles.

Menkes’s career began with her 40-minute film *The Great Sadness of Zohara*, which was finished in 1983. This film establishes many of the themes and formal patterns that recur in Menkes’s work, as well as introducing to an international audience Tinka Menkes, Nina’s sister, who plays the protagonist in Menkes’s two subsequent films and who works as Nina’s collaborator.

*The Great Sadness of Zohara* follows the journey of Zohara from the streets of Jerusalem to the markets of Morocco and back again, a spiritual journey with no epiphany but rather a confirmation of alienation. Zohara’s alienation is elegantly evoked through precise framing and the careful placement of Zohara in a landscape. The camera is most often stationary, holding a carefully composed frame through which Zohara moves. When the camera becomes mobile, as it does on a few occasions, the result is a terrible uneasiness, as though the ground were being pulled out from under it.

Menkes is also very conscious of colors in the film, using them to demarcate Zohara and her surroundings. In the beginning of the film, Zohara appears dressed in brown, which clearly distinguishes her from the men around her, who are clad all in black. Later, Zohara awakens in a room bathed in an eerie white light. The lines of her metal bed frame swoop across the frame in an attempt to anchor the shot but to no avail—the





Tinka Menkes (right) in a street scene from *The Great Sadness of Zohara*

light pouring through the window makes everything in the room weightless and diffuse.

The sound track parallels the visuals, acting as an equal attribute in the film rather than a mere complement. Menkes uses a mix of diegetic and nondiegetic sounds—one hears voices whispering, speaking, chanting, and shouting, laughter and bells. The sounds are subjective and suggest an overloaded mind or a world of terrible confusion.

In Menkes's first feature, *Magdalena Viraga*, the narrative line is stronger. The plot of the film is brief—a young prostitute is wrongly accused of murder—and while the film may be seen as an unravelling of the truth and the eventual discovery of the real murderess, the *mise en scène* of threatening Christian iconography designates the implicit guilt of all women. Again, however, what is important is the figure in the landscape and the emotional tonality evoked through rigorous visual design.

As in *The Great Sadness of Zohara*, Menkes carefully composes her shots, and Ida, played by Tinka, either moves through them or remains adamantly still. Colors are also carefully chosen—Ida's deep black eyes, her flashing red lipstick and her blue rose dress, a bedroom of soft beige tones, a pale blue pool. . . . The notion of the long take reaches an extreme in *Magdalena Viraga*, but the

beauty of the colors and the detail that Menkes is clearly asking her viewers to note makes such an extreme reasonable, and even pleasurable, because it all fits. The oscillation between Ida's wrenching angst and the exquisite imagery of Menkes's camera eventually induces their reconciliation, an absolving of polarities that, not by coincidence, is also the elemental work of magic.

Inspired in part by the work of Gertrude Stein, Mary Daly, and Anne Sexton, *Magdalena Viraga* is difficult, discomfiting, and complex, evoking a reality of experience rarely depicted. Menkes describes the film as a descent into the underworld, home of the monstrous or shadow feminine, and Ida consecrates her negative power as any true feminist when she chants thrice, "I am a witch."

There is a similar path traced between two worlds in *Queen of Diamonds*, although the protagonist of this film, Firdaus, is less a victim and more a translucent onlooker. Once again, most of the shots of the film are a composition through which a story may make its hapless way. The film takes place in the Par-a-Dice casino in Las Vegas, and in the surrounding desert. Inside the casino, there is a cacophony of noise and lights, poker chips, and the flash of cards across the green felt tables. The scenes outside the casino are bright and clear. The sand is a glaring white, the sky a clear



dark blue, the water sparkling in the sun. Night brings some eeriness—a dead cat and Christ upside down on a cross—but also extraordinary beauty when three elephants appear in a soft light and dance a slow dance, trunks and tremendous bodies swaying with an amazing grace.

The film has the strongest narrative structure of the three films, and also its greatest subversion. *Queen of Diamonds* is roughly structured in three parts with a beginning, middle, and end, although—as Godard once said—not necessarily in that order. The beginning introduces Firdaus in a series of nearly static shots or tableaux. Again, some elements of plot are suggested, and these are returned to in the end, but the emphasis remains on the isolation of the central character and a range of connotations suggested by her link to the world, the landscape.

It is the middle sequence, however, which is the most astounding. It is a 17-minute scene that deviates from the long, still shots preceding and following it, thereby hinting at a climax through a burst of action. The camera zooms and tracks and the editing is fast and furious, but the action, the climax so emphatically celebrated, is a bluff. Firdaus deals the cards, and deals and deals in a scene that goes on relentlessly. As Menkes puts it, “Even when something is happening, nothing is happening,” a statement that sums up her delineation between the Real and reality, and her disdain for the Hollywood hoax of creating something out of nothing.

Nina and I met for this interview in May, 1991, following the Los Angeles premiere of *Queen of Diamonds*.

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HOLLY WILLIS: *With both Magdalena Viraga and Queen of Diamonds there is a connection to certain feminist film traditions—with Magdalena Viraga to both Jeanne Dielman and A Question of Silence and the explicit response to oppression through murder, and with Queen of Diamonds to, again, Jeanne Dielman through an aesthetic parallel. How do you situate yourself in regard to a feminist avant-garde tradition?*

NINA MENKES: I want to say immediately that I am not theoretically informed and that I never

work from that position. I have never tried to be “experimental” or feminist. The films *Tinka* and *I Make* come from an intuitive place. The fact that they have come out as being increasingly radical and definitely feminist is a consequence of giving true expression—whatever “true” means—to the reality of our own experience. Since I’m a woman in a sexist society, what I give voice to is pretty painful.

If your brain is always controlling your intuition, it blocks the stuff that might be able to move up and hit you from behind—hot (or ice-cold) from your unconscious. If you work intuitively, things fall into patterns that are more complex and interesting. It also means that the film can talk back to me, can reveal things to me; it’s not just me controlling it.

*Not being so worked out leaves room for other people to discover patterns . . .*

The structures of information are so oppressive that finding your own personal view and believing that it’s valid is the biggest struggle. When I’m shooting or editing, I really put on blinders. I don’t read papers, watch TV, or see films, and then between films I try to absorb a lot of information. But getting back to a feminist avant-garde, Chantal Ackerman’s work shares similarities with mine that are almost freakish—probably because there is a definite shared emotion or perception that manifests itself formally in similar ways.

*Is there anyone’s work that you particularly admire?*

Films I saw and loved when I was growing up were Antonioni’s *Red Desert* and early Werner Herzog movies, especially *Fata Morgana*. But I didn’t see a lot of work until after I was well into my own film-making, so I’m not especially film-literate. I have the feeling that I’ve struggled in many ways in the dark. This is sort of on purpose. I don’t like to be too inundated with other people’s ideas or their thought-prisons.

*What is most striking about Magdalena Viraga is the use of language. All three women noted as sources of inspiration are writers who have pushed the boundaries of language in terms of literature—how does that project change in a cinematic context?*

I guess I’ve been more influenced by writers and painters because women have made a lot more



strides in those fields in terms of breaking with oppressive traditions. I love Gertrude Stein because her emotions, her anti-patriarchal stance, are manifested formally and reading her unlocks my brain. And Anne Sexton spoke about taboo female things—she was one of the first to write about menstruation. These writers opened me up. I don't think the medium matters. What matters is loosening the mind.

*You work very closely with your sister, Tinka, on all of your projects—how would you characterize your collaboration?*

Our collaboration has evolved slowly. When I was just starting at UCLA, we had to make a ten-minute Super-8 film and my actress didn't show up. I thought, "Oh well, maybe Tinka would like to do it." When we saw the rushes we got very excited—something very beautiful was there. And then we did another film. We never said, "We are going to make films together." It was unplanned, but at this point it is a very profound partnership. I guess I would characterize our collaboration as a politically charged shamanistic love rite.

*In Queen of Diamonds there is no hierarchy between the character and the landscape—they merge together. . . .*

Tinka somehow becomes such a part of the film that it is hard to separate her from the frame—this is because she impacts every part of the frame. She doesn't just sit in a room, she transforms a room into her lair. And in *Queen of Diamonds*, Tinka really took this to a new level, because her challenge in that film was to be in every single scene, to be the lead, but yet to be invisible because the film is about the experience of being background. And she accomplished this.

*In your films there seems to be a disjuncture between the exquisite imagery and precise framing on a formal level and your protagonists, who are so oppressed. This raises the issue of pleasure. . . .*

Well, I always say when one talks about pleasure we have to ask—pleasure for who? Maybe a typical male viewer might enjoy watching an objectified female, but I would suffer from seeing the same thing. I get pleasure from watching Tinka in *Queen of Diamonds* because I identify with her intense rejection of the system. And in terms of the so-called pleasure of narrative, it's the same.

I hate Hollywood narratives and get zero pleasure from them. I get total cinematic pleasure, however, from *Wavelength*. So for me, the important thing is expressing my experience, even if it's painful—and why shouldn't it be beautiful?

*You use very long takes. Why?*

Well, I film stuff the way I feel, so I let the camera run until I sense that the shot is over. Hollywood film is structured to bombard you so that you cannot have your own experience or thoughts about what is going on, which of course is how the whole culture is organized—to obliterate the individual. A long take allows time to actually feel something in a different kind of way. It's also about that famous line by, I think, Virginia Woolf: "It's only when a walk is a little too long that everything can start to happen."

*Both Lizzie Borden and Ulrike Ottinger are women who, in very different ways, take on an explicit critique of patriarchy mobilized through both narrative structure and theme. How do you characterize the link between transgression on a formal level and on a thematic level? In other words, does a film with a feminist "story" have to incorporate a nontraditional or avant-garde aesthetic?*

I think that the whole idea of a traditional story with transgressive politics can work, although I would not put *Working Girls* into this category. But take *Broken Mirrors*, by Marleen Gorris, for example. It is a traditional thriller and you're on the edge of your seat and it looks like a Hollywood film and yet it's about a gang of lesbians and the message of the story is very radical. It's a call to arms, really.

Personally, though, I am becoming increasingly uninterested in standard cause-and-effect thinking. It is ultimately a reduction of reality. What I want to do with film is expand reality, show facets that are generally veiled by various pervasive and desultory ideologies, including narratives. I mean that narrative itself distorts reality. In narrative you have A then B and then C. But nature doesn't work like this at all. Not at all.

*The budgets for both Magdalena Viraga and Queen of Diamonds were extraordinarily low. Would you like to work with more money or is having a low budget a political choice?*





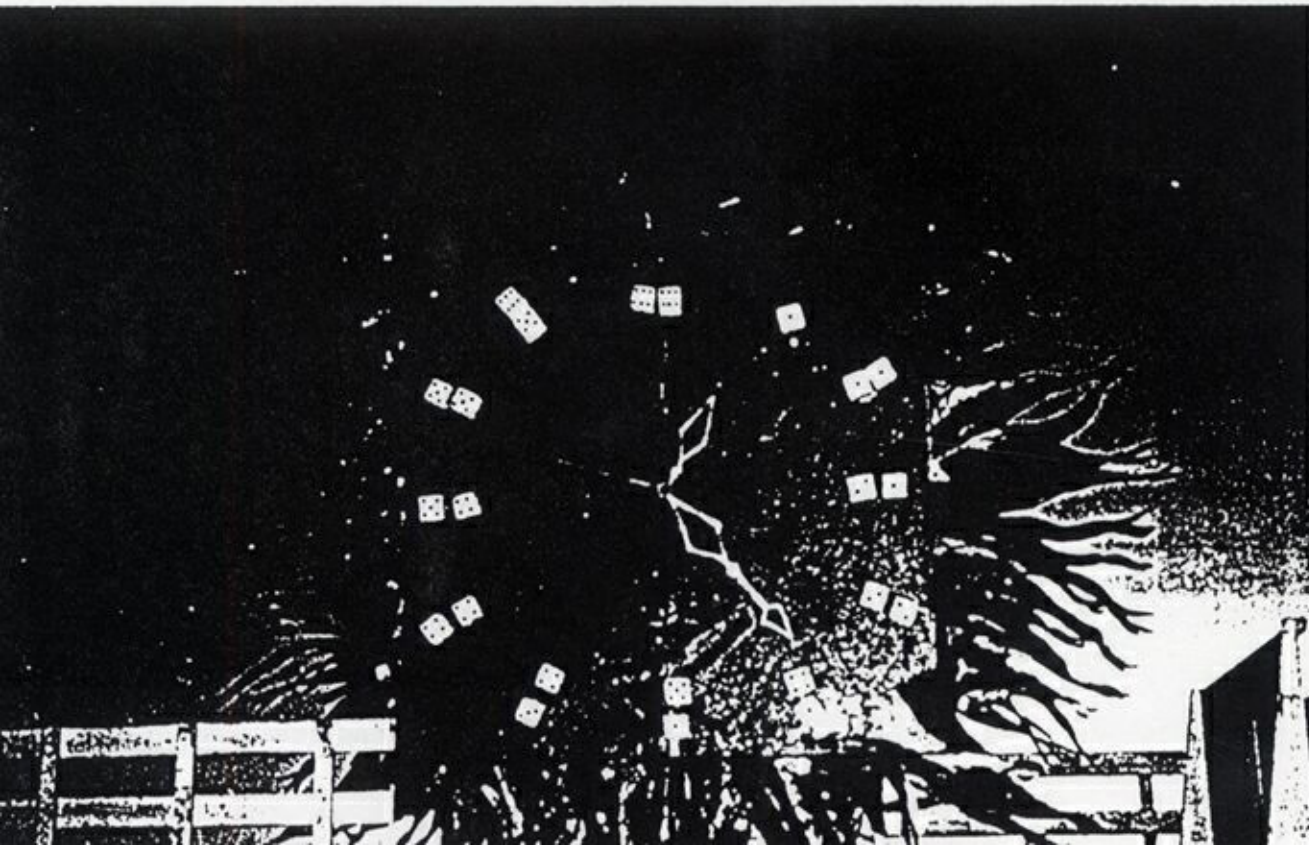
Magdalena Viraga with  
Tinka Menkes

Well, I'd like to work with a little more money but yes, a low budget is a political choice. The Hollywood system is inflated on every level, it is complete insanity. The number of people on sets is totally unnecessary and it's all an ego thing. In terms of my own work, I think it would be nice to be paid a reasonable salary and to be able to pay the people involved in the film. In *Queen of Diamonds* I got a lot of things free but even if I hadn't, I wouldn't have spent more than \$125,000 on the film, which is considered insanely low for 35mm color Dolby. I would also like more money because one of the projects I am thinking about now is very ornate with wild costumes, which will

cost a bit more, though I would still never spend as much as the Hollywood people. There is an Aboriginal saying that Tinka has been quoting a lot lately, and I think it speaks directly to this issue: "The more you know the less you need."

*At a recent screening you mentioned your notion of the shadow feminine. Can you talk about that a little?*

Well, the shadow feminine is very culturally specific, but I would say in the U.S. it's the pain and wounding that we carry around with us and that is absolutely taboo. In fact, all pain is taboo here. Old people and sick people are shunted away.



Giant dice clock in  
*Queen of Diamonds*



But in the case of women, it's so extreme. Women here are supposed to look and act in a very specific way that could be summarized as "friendly and fuckable." Also, we have to have perfect, flawless skin, which we can simulate by applying makeup. To be even minimally presentable, we have to fix ourselves up. Well, why do we have to cover up? Cover up what? You see, it's all that pain and rage and wounding that comes from not being seen at all, from being forced into this very unnatural shape. In *Magdalena Viraga* and *Queen of Diamonds* it is *this* wounded figure which appears, unveiled. She's sort of straight out of the menstrual hut, and she's not cleaned up. So you could say the shadow feminine for me has to do with these hidden layers.

Tinka's characters are always history-less and this connects, too, to the obliterated history of women, but the characters are also futureless. They come into being for the duration of the film and then they vanish. A typical Hollywood character, in contrast, always has a past, a backstory—they are supposed to be "real people." But recreating ordinary life doesn't interest me at all. I am more interested in the aspects that life wears in secret.

With Tinka's characters we are also exploring an alternative myth of personal transformation, different from the classic model of spiritual search. When Zohara returns from her arduous journey she is not celebrated but is quickly reaccommodated to her secondary status. The classic model doesn't work for the underdog. The whole idea of entering and plundering the underworld and returning home with this stolen treasure is profoundly imperialistic! What happens to the looted underworld? It's forgotten, never discussed. *Magdalena Viraga* takes place within this looted and forgotten underworld and Ida isn't making any round trips. She says, "Here I am and yes, I am a witch."

In *Queen of Diamonds*, there is a conflation of the Underworld and the Upper world. Firdaus, in rejecting dichotomous definitions, sees more objectively, more clearly. It is her act of witnessing which transforms the landscape—and the landscape is beginning to crack.

The so-called shadow feminine is also connected in my mind to the abyss and death, to chaos. In Christianity, Christ is committed to a victory over death, and in Hollywood, the correlation

between sex and death invariably leaves the female mutilated. Tinka, in *Queen of Diamonds*, doesn't overcome death and is not overcome by it. She coexists with it, she's unafraid of it.

*Can this notion of the shadow feminine then be construed as a political agenda?*

In a way, yes, because I'm saying, "Look at this, look at what is happening here," with the feeling, of course, that it's not so great. Well, we all know that the way our system is structured is a disaster for everyone, even those at the top. This is becoming so obvious with the collapse of the environment. On another level, though, I have no agenda. I just express myself, and I get a lot of intense pleasure from my work. And people have read the films in so many different ways. I guess I hope that my work will reverberate with other people's sense of self.

*Do you want audiences to like your films?*

It is becoming less and less important. I have learned the hard way that not everyone will love my films. When I showed *A Soft Warrior*, our first ten-minute film, at UCLA and someone criticized it, I was amazed. How can you criticize this work made with total love? Now I'm used to it. And I also realize that if masses of people loved my films, it would probably be a very bad sign.

A funny thing happened with *Queen of Diamonds*. Tinka and I were very committed to the structuring of the film just the way it is—with the 17-minute center section of dealing. And I thought—well, this is the right way to cut this film but it might be a disaster, maybe everyone will walk out during that scene. But then, it turns out that this film is more accessible to more people than *Magdalena Viraga*! So, you see, you never know.

*Do you have any plans for your next film?*

A non-meeting of the wounded feminine and the wounded masculine. And an ornate, alienated fairy tale. And Tinka wants to be a centaur. She says a centaur is so non-aggressive. A centaur was a witness to the creation of the world.

▪ Holly Willis is a graduate student in Critical Studies at the University of Southern California and is the editor of *Montage*.

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The films discussed in this interview can be rented from Menkes Film, 8996 Keith Ave., West Hollywood, CA 90069.