

Nina Menkes: Obsessions From L.A.
From Cinemad #1, written by Mike Plante.

I've had an awkward time trying to describe Nina Menkes' films to others, usually relying on comparisons. "Tarkovsky—Antonioni—Brothers Quay." So let me step aside and give you what her bio says.

"Nina Menkes is recognized worldwide as one of America's most audacious and provocative directors. Called 'One of the most provocative artists in film today' by the Los Angeles Times, Menkes synthesizes inner dream worlds with harsh, outer realities, giving direct expression to shadow sides of contemporary consciousness. Menkes works closely with her sister, actress Tinka Menkes, who stars in each film. Together, the Sisters Menkes have conceived and created a body of work that Sight and Sound has called 'Controversial, intense and visually stunning.'"

I generally start to fade out when people start bringing up inner worlds and consciousness. I mean, how many films are about nothing but use that same claim? With Menkes' films I feel the opposite. I completely agree with that description. They are minimalist portrayals of 'inner' worlds, as she sees them, often deeply structured and alienated. I've found the films both easier and harder than the filmmakers I mentioned above. Some images were hard to watch, but that has nothing to do with a film being worth watching. It's not casual viewing. Her style is abstract and demanding: long takes, metaphorical objects, spoken words rather than dialogue. But the subjects are not obscure to film plots: a hooker in trouble, a bored casino card dealer, a Marine Sergeant on a murder case. And we can relate to the emotions. I wondered if her characters are entirely made up or have something personal or of a friend in them.

"I've never been a dealer, but I understand unrewarded alienated labor in other ways," Menkes says. "I've never been a whore, but I've felt like one, and so on."

How Nina chooses to interpret these subjects is what makes her stand out. As Tinka walks through Herzog-ian worlds (you wouldn't know it was earth if it wasn't for the signposts), one comes away from her films feeling them.

Another important fact: Menkes is the only woman alive to produce, direct, shoot, and edit her own 35mm features, maintaining complete creative control over every aspect of her productions. Few filmmakers have control as writer - producer - director and even then, they don't usually run the camera and edit the film as well. All in a film system designed to crush this independence, from financiers to distributors to theaters. Even Spielberg had to fight hard just to shoot a film in black-and-white. And other 'successful' women in the film industry spend their time writing INDECENT PROPOSAL and directing LITTLE RASCALS. It hasn't been easy for Menkes, but she has received grants and enjoyed festival support, including Toronto and Sundance, and among her fans you can count film personalities Allison Anders, Benicio Del Toro and Gus Van Sant.

An accomplished filmmaker for more than a decade now, Menkes had very little film background before she took up the process herself, growing up “without TV.” Before going to UCLA film school, she had experience with photography, dancing and choreography.

While at UCLA in 1984, Nina and Tinka served as the entire cast and crew on *THE GREAT SADNESS OF ZOHARA*. The 40-minute, 16mm film (made for \$6,000) was shot on location in Israel and Morocco and follows a Jewish woman leaving Israel for Arab lands. The trip is more mental and spiritual than physical with eerie narration and schizo images. It won awards at San Francisco and Houston film festivals and is one of Allison Anders’ favorites of the decade. It also started Menkes’ abstract style of images and metaphor, spoken word over traditional dialogue, real sound over score.

ZOHARA is similar in style and themes to *BLOODY CHILD*, made 12 years later. It seems she knew from the start what stories she wanted to tell and how to do it. But as Cassavetes put it when a reviewer commended his raw, doc style: “You stupid bastard, I couldn’t afford a tripod.”

“No—my style is not about money,” Menkes says. “I hope to have a bigger budget next time, but I don’t think my style will change that much. Maybe it will and I’ll be surprised. My themes and so on—these are lifetime obsessions, and have nothing to do with budget!”

Menkes’ films have little dialogue, and no traditional score, but are rich with narrated text from the Bible to Gertrude Stein to MacBeth.

“I hate ‘normal’ dialog, usually. I am not interested in re-creating regular life, but rather, in trying to express the aspects life wears in secret,” Menkes says. “Most of our secret lives don’t have regular dialog, at least mine don’t.”

The working relationship between Nina and Tinka doesn’t seem forced. It appears more like the strong, unexplainable bond between siblings. They also edit the films together.

“A central aspect of my work—my professional relationship with my sister, Tinka Menkes, who plays the lead in all my films and is also my creative collaborator—began almost by chance,” Menkes says. “I had wanted my first film, a super-8 short (*A SOFT WARRIOR*), to be about Tinka’s serious illness, from which she had recently recovered. I had cast two girls to play Tinka and myself, but one failed to appear. On a whim I asked Tinka to play me. The results were stunning: Tinka as my ‘alter-ego’ seemed to allow unconscious material to surface. This was the beginning of a profound partnership, which has continued and evolved until the present.”

Other actors are “found” on location, non-actors, friends, or in the rare case, through a casting agent. Menkes’ thesis film at UCLA was the feature *MAGDALENA VIRAGA* (1987), about the inner life of a prostitute imprisoned for killing her pimp. It won the Los Angeles Film Critics Association Award for Best Independent Film of the Year and was featured in the Whitney Museum of American Art’s Biennial. It might be the most controversial of her films; five-minute shots of sex but without showing any fake emotion or nudity, the prostitute’s hand covering her nose from the smell, and political overtones in the story.

I admit VIRAGA was a tough watch for me. It actually could be a Hollywood plot: hooker's life is tough, someone kills her pimp, who did it? But Menkes' style makes it completely different; the long takes rub the reality in your face. And I like it because it did that. A hooker's life shouldn't necessarily be comfortable to watch. Is it consciously an anti-PRETTY WOMAN?

"Never saw Pretty Woman. But it is consciously anti-the mentality that created Pretty Woman and 7 million trillion other films. It is consciously a statement about woman as object of sexual desire in cinema as well as my feeling about things—at that time—about my real life trying to deal with myself as a woman and men, etc."

Menkes' next film, QUEEN OF DIAMONDS (1991), premiered at the Sundance Film Festival in competition. Filmed on location in Las Vegas, QUEEN revolves around the life of an alienated black jack dealer and was named one of the 10 Best Films of 1991 by the Los Angeles Times. At Sundance, "People liked it, mainly," Nina says. "Industry types walked out, of course."

Tinka plays the dealer, who alternates her time working, taking care of an old man, listening to the neighbors fight, all while her husband is missing. QUEEN seems at once a metaphor for larger problems and attitudes in the glut of America and all the odd things that seem to happen only when you're alone and then try to explain the weirdness to someone else later. Some of the images, such as a long take of a burning palm tree, three elephants standing and swaying, extended sequences of her dealing cards and, later, the improv-looking wedding, bring up questions of structure, script control and research/background.

"Everything is created, i.e.—the seemingly documentary scenes in QUEEN are not documentary. They are all staged. There is very little research. I do most of my research inside my own head (inner journeys, etc.). Tinka and I went to Vegas for about a week, I think, over Thanksgiving and walked around. That was enough research, research being, in my case, absorbing the atmosphere. My films are all about real-life experiences, but by this I mean inner real-life experiences. But I like serendipitous events, things happening unexpectedly, and then I grab them for my film."

I should've known, but I was surprised the marriage scene in QUEEN was completely planned. The scene was structured in terms of the sequence of the wedding. The non-actors were just wandering about and then were told to dance, and so on. Does that mean the final product, everything in the frame, completely represents the script and/or storyboards?

"Yes. I have total creative control. I never use storyboards by the way," Menkes says. "And ZOHARA and BLOODY CHILD had no scripts. But the other films were scripted."

THE BLOODY CHILD (1996), shot in northwestern Africa and 29 Palms, California, combines Desert Storm Marines, text from Shakespeare's MacBeth and wife-murder into a harrowing hallucinatory journey. It is a mesmerizing look at the desolation of violence. Kevin Thomas of the Los Angeles Times called it "Brilliant...an awe-inspiring work of art on the highest level; one of the year's top five films."

CHILD is the most advanced of her films: the long take feel is present but there is also much more editing. The story of a female Marine Sergeant (Tinka) who comes along a male Marine digging a grave in the desert for his murdered wife was inspired by a true event. In the film, the Sergeant is later “possessed” by the wife’s spirit. What we see is a crime discovered and violence uncovered, how the violent act ripples, as Menkes puts it. The editing serves as detective, it covers each event and every little fact about the murder and the criminal. There are no answers given for the violence. The film goes forward, then backward, then introduces more information, then goes backward again, forming a circle. I am surprised that there wasn’t a script. Most filmmakers try and figure this type of form before shooting, and still fail. Yet CHILD came out coherent and stunning, Menkes’ best yet.

“It was the hardest film for me to make,” Menkes remembers. “For emotional reasons, but also because there was no script, so I had to figure out the whole structure in editing—(it was) groping in the dark.” CHILD, like her other films, could also be a Hollywood plot. But it concentrates on emotions rather than film genre expectations.

CHILD is the most mathematic of the films, an advancement in Menkes’ style. The physical math that the editing takes tries to examine the emotional subject every possible way, in the way people are fascinated with violence. The utter lack of answers for the emotions that arise becomes a search for any hard facts you can get. Especially as the American media has made violence as mundane and routine as stopping to fill up the car. Or is that just the human condition, a way of coping?

“No, I think the media worships violence,” Menkes says. “My film tried to show violence without worship—it’s abstract—an abstract film, in the sense of karmic, mystical, dissecting an event, looking for answers. But the answers are not on that level.... It takes a moment in time and turns it into a space.”

The Marines in CHILD are portrayed by real Marines and served as consultants and even crew on the film. The actors are interesting because they are so trained and so desensitized. They intimidate the prisoner but then turn around and talk about how to get a home loan. Menkes left the performances up to them.

“(It was) quite relaxed with the Marines. They were just being themselves! And they follow orders well, they are physical, so it worked fine.”

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