

Sister, Sorceress, Screen: The Films of Nina and Tinka Menkes

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For me, cinema is sorcery; a creative way of interacting with the world in order to rearrange and affect perception/experience—especially my own.... I describe my work as sorcery because it both constructs/evokes this separate (but very real) reality, and at the same time acts as a spell which tries to change it.

—Nina Menkes

To practice sorcery is to wield awesome, and possibly dreadful power. To attempt to understand what Menkes can mean by characterizing her film craft as sorcery, one must ask what kinds of powers avant-garde aesthetic practices can mobilize. Marxist cultural theorists have been debating this question since at least the expressionism-realism debates of the inter-war years (see Bloch's *Aesthetics and Politics*, especially Lukacs, 28–59; Bloch, 16–27 and Brecht, 70–85). In the late sixties and early seventies, feminist film theorists continued the debate, attempting to gauge the revolutionary efficacy of the women's avant-garde film tradition that began flourishing during this period (for a historical overview of this discussion, see Kaplan 125–141). However, the academic rationalism guiding these debates—purpled a bit, perhaps, by Benjamin and Brecht—remains tonally inappropriate to Menkes's project, though conceptually germane (see Benjamin, "Surrealism," 177–192 and Brecht, "Organum," 179–205). A radical, magical cinematic practice requires a critical lexicon commensurate with its promise of trickery and wickedness: to understand sorcery, one needs a theory of magic.

Numerous scholars have, in recent decades, offered extended definitions and analyses of magic, construing it as a social activity linked to language, ritual, and symbol (see O'Keefe, 1–11 for a thorough archaeology of these ideas).

In *Stolen Lightning: The Social Theory of Magic*, Daniel Lawrence O'Keefe defines magic as both social action and metaphor for social action. While asserting that "Magic is real action" (25), O'Keefe also acknowledges less literal functionings of magic, noting that "the word 'magic' appears to be a strikingly indispensable metaphor for making statements about certain striking qualities of human action, speech and thought [internal quotation marks added]" (1). Building on O'Keefe's

foundation, William Covino, in *Magic, Rhetoric, and Literacy*, traces his own history of magic, linking magic to language, and suggesting that "Magic is not the instant and arhetorical product of an otherworldly incantation; it is the *process* of inducing belief and creating community . . . Magic is a social act whose medium is persuasive discourse . . . magic becomes a term through which we can address the ways in which words make real things happen" (11).

Anthropologist Michael Taussig enters the discussion from another angle, unearthing the magical properties of mimesis. For Taussig too, magic means power. Taussig draws on fellow anthropologist Erland Nordenskiöld's analysis of Cuna figurines, through which "one can protect oneself from evil spirits by portraying them" (qtd. in Taussig, 13), proposing that "the magic of mimesis is the same . . . the making and existence of the artifact that portrays something gives one power over that which is portrayed" (13). All three writers locate magical power in verbal or visual languages—the realm of rhetoric, symbol, and representation.

Here theories of magic overlap with theories of the avant-garde, because it is at the level of representation that experimental film can be said to impact reality. In "Film, Feminism, and the Avant-Garde," Laura Mulvey describes experimental films by women as fueled by a "drive to forge an aesthetic that attacks language and representation, not as something naturally linked with the male, but rather as something that soaks up dominant ideology" (112). Following Mulvey, in particular her pioneering work in "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," numerous feminist film critics have emphasized the ability of the avant-garde to remake spectatorship and visual pleasure by inventing new forms of representation. Patricia Mellencamp writes that, among other things, experimental film accomplishes the "restructuring of conventions of visual pleasure," and an "assault on the dominance and hold over the spectator of chronological, cause-effect logic" (xvii). These aesthetic strategies disrupt identification processes and shift pleasure from identification to the detective work of interpretation (see Fischer, 301–329 for a detailed analysis of how experimental film form disrupts processes of identification).

Such disruptions and shifts prove essential to reconstituting consciousness forged in patriarchal terms, altering an ossified imaginary in which woman figures as object "to-be-looked-at," to use Mulvey's terminology ("Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema", 19). In a discussion of Latin-American women writers and literary experimentalism, Mary Tierney-Tello describes the change-making mechanism of avant-garde aesthetics: "experimental texts actively propose modes of reading whereby meaning is not immanent in the narrative but produced, constructed, deconstructed, reconstructed therefore showing meaning (and, by extension, truth) as difficult to know, far from transparent or 'natural'" (15).

The concrete applications of this destabilization of "meaning" and "truth" should be obvious. Once these categories appear constructed, any number of particular *meanings* or *truths* become suspect. Beliefs like "women are primarily irrational," or "the government serves its people," or "war protects democracy," or "soldiers protect the peace" dissolve. Once these beliefs loosen their grip over consciousness, people can entertain ideas of resistance and reinvention through personal and political action. Feminist film theorists, in articulating how the avant-garde disassembles normative categories of thought, resemble theorists of magic; both describe

how manipulations of language and symbol act upon the human imagination and thereby alter material reality. These theoretical conjunctions illuminate what sort of bewitchments the Menkes sisters have cooked up.

Nina Menkes, whose sister Tinka stars in and collaborates on each film, has to date evolved a small but increasingly renowned oeuvre containing one forty-minute short and three features. (Menkes is currently at work on her first multimedia endeavor—an interactive CD-ROM entitled *The Crazy, Bloody Female Center*.) Film critics around the world praise and puzzle over the hallmark characteristics of her work—nonlinearity, formal austerity, surrealist tendencies, allusiveness, *bricolage*. Both in process and product, for filmmaker and audience, Menkes's films undertake to infiltrate and reengineer consciousness. By manipulating language, image, and symbol, her films reimagine women, men, and gender relations in the context of military-industrial-capitalist culture, seeking to alter material reality by persuading her viewers that all is not well—a profane illumination that constitutes the seed of social and political change and, wherever fruitful, works magic (Benjamin explains his notion of “profane illumination” in his essay “Surrealism.”)

Understanding magic in this sense requires an articulation of how Menkes's films intervene in the level of the symbolic, the level of the imaginary and, insofar as possible, the level of the unconscious. I borrow these terms from Mulvey, of course, who borrows them from Lacan. In the following discussion, I sometimes use the “symbolic” in the Lacanian sense—the realm of language—and sometimes in a literary sense, in which a symbol is simply a trope.

The symbolic order also figures prominently in O'Keefe's definition of magic. “Magic works with symbols,” he writes; it “appears sometimes to be a celebration of them, a half-exuberant, half-terrified flexing of their dangerous powers, or a dawning discovery and exploration of their remarkable uses. Above all, magic frequently appears to be the use of these symbolic powers to counter the terrors of the symbolic world that man has created and to get some control over it” (39). This is how Menkes's cinema operates, as analyses of individual films will demonstrate. Although without undertaking a systematic reception study, it remains impossible to offer precise assertions about the efficacy of Menkes's interventions in the symbolic order. Numerous reviewers, however, report similar psychic effects from watching Menkes's films: a lingering sense of uneasiness, images that stick in the mind, inarticulate disturbances.

Jonathan Rosenbaum describes *The Bloody Child* as “a maddening, obsessive minimalist movie that refuses to leave me alone” (“Arresting Images” 40). Amy Dawes writes of *Queen of Diamonds* that “Menkes finds images which stick in the mind and gain power as one dwells on them” (23), while Rosenbaum calls *Queen of Diamonds* “a cult classic using a rigorous visual composition to penetrate the innermost recesses of the soul” (“*Queen of Diamonds*” 11). Godfrey Cheshire, writing somewhat elliptically in *Variety*, comments that the “pic's poetic approach disturbingly evokes pervasive tapestry of psychic and actual violence....[it] weaves a spell that's hard to shake for days afterward” (15). Rosenbaum also describes Menkes's work as “cast[ing] a spell” (“Arresting Images” 40). In the *Chicago Tribune*, Michael Wilmington suggests that *The Bloody Child* leaves viewers with “a shivery vision of America as a desert of violence haunted by the spirits of the dead” (5).

Remarks like these recur frequently throughout commentary about Menkes's work. To an extent, viewers play off of Menkes's own characterization of her work as sorcery, but also, their reactions suggest that Menkes's cinematic methods somehow mark consciousness palpably. Without presuming to understand perfectly how these films affect viewers (wildly differently, no doubt), we can safely say that for at least some viewers, Menkes's admittedly intuitive filmmaking methods achieve the desired effects. Menkes claims: "When I do the films, I work out of a unique place in myself. The film resonates in that space. So if the viewer tunes in, then they—BOOM—they'll match it. They match it and they can go there. It's pretty mystical" (Smith, 15; see also Thompson, 16–18 for a detailed account of the production process of *The Bloody Child*).

"Magic actions are rituals that make or change something," O'Keefe suggests, "They operate mysteriously and what they create is mostly mystical—but these mysterious actions have social effects.... They often create an object or change of state, usually by a transfer of quality or infusion of a power" (28). Menkes's magic action is, of course, filmmaking. The changes of state her actions catalyze occur in viewers. Taussig considers changing state—achieving alterity—the objective of all mimetic activity. Likening mimetic art to shamanistic ritual, Taussig proposes that "the fundamental move of the mimetic faculty taking us bodily into alterity is very much the task of the storyteller" (40). Menkes describes her collaboration with Tinka as a "politically charged, shamanistic love-rite" (Willis, 10). Benjamin too imagined art—particularly surrealist poetry—capable of provoking alterations in consciousness. Benjamin supposed that "the true overcoming of religious illumination...resides in a *profane illumination*, a materialistic, anthropological inspiration, to which hashish, opium, or whatever else can give an introductory lesson" ("Surrealism", 179). Benjamin credited the profane illumination with the power to alter collective consciousness:

The collective is a body And the *physis* that is being organized for it in technology can, through all its political and factual reality, only be produced in that image sphere to which profane illumination initiates us when in technology body and image so interpenetrate that all revolutionary tension becomes bodily collective innervation, and all bodily innervations of the collective become evolutionary discharge, [reality has] transcended itself . . . ("Surrealism", 192)

Here, Benjamin traces explicitly a creative mechanism rarely acknowledged because of its incredible obviousness: *any humanly engineered material reality begins in the imagination*. This dynamic makes readily palatable the idea that avant-garde film could affect material reality. Film, after all, helps construct the image sphere out of which human beings operate. As Mulvey observes, this image sphere retains gender inflections; insofar as it has evolved within the context of patriarchy, the pressures it exerts on material reality usher the collective toward embodiments of patriarchal ideologies. Mulvey postulates that this process poses for women filmmakers "the ultimate challenge: how to fight the unconscious structured like a language...while still caught within the language of patriarchy?" (15) Menkes's cinematic practice attempts to "fight the unconscious" and innovate an aesthetic language uncaught by "the language of patriarchy."

Menkes's first film, *The Great Sadness of Zohara* (1983), initiates habits of representation that thread through each subsequent film. The most obvious intervention

she makes in a patriarchal image sphere involves the manner in which she, and sister-actor Tinka Menkes, represent women. In *Great Sadness of Zohara*, as in all Menkes's films, the woman is neither. Zohara, with her sullen and pained expression, drab clothing, and permanently smudged eye make-up, certainly defies any ideal of female appearance deployed by mainstream American film. Menkes comments on this ideal in an interview with Holly Willis:

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 make-up. 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. (12)

Zohara also embodies this woundedness. Far from projecting structures of the patriarchal unconscious (the threat of castration and attendant fetishization necessary to containing the threat), Zohara figures elements Menkes perceives in the female unconscious: the wounded woman and the witch. The film therefore constructs a female subject through a female gaze. The social significance of portraying women as subjects instead of objects cannot be underestimated. Insofar as film viewing constitutes, as Mulvey claims, an activity similar to the mirror phase identified by Lacan, real women spectators form unconscious (and sometimes conscious) beliefs about themselves as a result of film viewing (see Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure," 17–19, for Mulvey's application of Lacan's theoretical model to the cinema). Imagining oneself as an *object* can cause one to behave like an object—to practice self-display and court external approval. Imagining oneself as a *subject* leads to increased focus on one's own interior experience, reactions, desires, and objectives—an enlarged sense of selfhood, of subjectivity.

The idea of female subjectivity—connoting both agency and interiority—emerges as the central force in all Menkes's work. *Great Sadness* presents a female *flâneur*, Zohara, watchfully wandering, head covered, alone and brooding about the streets of an unidentified Israeli city—probably Jerusalem, icon of two of the world's three monotheistic and aggressively patriarchal religions. The film's allusions to the book of Job, long takes, and heavily textured soundtrack further evoke Zohara's interior struggle. Recontextualized within the domain of film and with reference to Zohara's psychospiritual distress, the film's epigraph bespeaks not only a human being's bewildered complaint against inconceivable hardship visited by a brutal god, but a woman's complaint against the scopoc regime that confines her:

Am I the Sea, or a Dragon, that You watch over me?
 How long will you not look away from me,
 Nor leave me alone, until I swallow my spit?
 What harm have I done you, Watcher?
 Why have you made me your target,
 So that I become a Burden to Myself?
 Shortly I will lie down in the dust,
 And when you look for me, I will be gone. (Job 7:12)

These questions implicate the many men who, in the context of the film, glance or stare at Zohara, intentionally or unintentionally enforcing the notion that young

attractive women walking about Jerusalem are neither seemly nor safe. The passage draws attention to the scopic oppressiveness of a patriarchal cinema, entrapping woman as object-to-be-looked-at.

Another allusion to Job, modified to pertain to a woman, recurs twice in the soundtrack, emphasizing Zohara's inner pain: "The arrows of God were in her, and she feels their poison" (Job 6:4). Zohara's unease impels her to travel from Israel to North Africa, apparently searching for something unknown and possibly nonexistent. The film depicts her internal difficulty aurally and in spatial metaphors. Devoid of dialogue, the soundtrack contains snatches of Job and other poetry, along with prelinguistic utterances—Meredith Monk-like stuttering vocalizations, wailing, moaning, crying, sighing, swallowing, gasping for air. Periodically, rumbling thunder, devotional chanting, and snatches of Luciano Berio's soaring tenor punctuate this assortment of sounds. The whole creates a sense of disturbance and claustrophobia, evoking a confused, crowded consciousness threatened, at moments, with mental asphyxiation.

The spatial contours of the film reinforce Zohara's interior bereftness. She appears in bleak, empty rooms with little or no furniture; in streets populated with people who do not speak to her; in doorways, hallways, and thresholds; in boatyards filled with expanses of painted wood and metal; in deserts and sand-filled squares. Always, the space around her underscores her aloneness, her outsider status; the long takes allows the depths of her loneliness and discomfiture to emerge. In the *Daily Bruin*, Sergio Fernandez writes "as we watch her staying in starkly empty rooms and wandering through crowded streets or barren landscapes we get a feel for her inner state...an odyssey of searching, unfulfillment, and self-destruction" (12). In these spaces, Zohara paces, tosses in her bed, snips her scissors over her already closely shorn head, looks out the window. Her quotidian activities in lonely spaces represent aspects of female existence and consciousness in which patriarchal cinema remains uninterested.

Redding and Brownworth, in their discussion of Lizzie Borden's *Working Girls* and Chantal Akerman's *Jeanne Dielman*, identify attention to dailiness as a feature of the female gaze. Akerman, the authors observe, "details the extraordinarily dreadful life Jeanne leads by training her narrative and her lens on the tedium of her character's definingly routinized life" (14). Akerman herself explains this focus, suggesting, "If you choose to show a woman's gestures so precisely, it's because you love them. In some way, you recognize those gestures that have always been denied or ignored" (qtd. in Redding and Brownworth, 14). *Great Sadness* functions similarly, probing a woman's consciousness, and representing the hurt and plaintive selves of the female unconscious through the listless, anguished gestures of Zohara's daily life, juxtaposed against powerful spatial metaphors and aural collage.

The film also pictures a bright blue river, though fleetingly—the peaceful water suggesting a lost or longed for feminine space of safety, renewal, and rebirth. *Great Sadness*, like all of Menkes's films, startles spectators with rich images of natural beauty, rendered tenderly in brilliant or muted greens and blues, amidst its preponderance of arid landscapes, dreary architectures, and dismal interiors. The soundtrack often enhances these images with sibilant ghostly voices, swelling winds, or chattering birds. Three-quarters of the way through *Great Sadness*,

Zohara discovers an abandoned city, which she approaches through a thicket of bulrushes. Her approach, photographed in a lengthy close-up, allows the mint-green blades of grass and beige stems to fill the screen, moving gently, attended by a fibrous rustling and crunch of the stalks made by Zohara's footfalls. Zohara's face moves into the frame only gradually. She emerges into a clearing and sits before the city, seeming to relax. Shortly thereafter, we see her standing before a turquoise strip of river, splashing herself. The sequence cuts to a medium shot of the river by itself, fresh and serene amidst an ochre expanse of sand. This startling swatch of beauty, nested inside litanies of inhospitable images on either side, has readily recognizable symbolic overtones of birth, rebirth, and peace, imagining a difficult-to-reach interior space of serenity and succor inside a desert of inchoate psychic pain.

By inventing ways to picture both the woundedness and resourcefulness of the feminine unconscious, Menkes brings to the screen psychospiritual events intended to mirror elements of her spectators' experiences. Zohara's journey, though undefined and undefinable at the last, involves hovering between visibility and invisibility, and being propelled by discomfort and longing in search of her lost city, her own flowing, renewable source of momentary safety, relief, stability, and comfort—a metaphorical womb.

This journey, a suggestion of what is necessary for being female in a patriarchal world, engages each of her heroines, from Zohara, to Ida, to Firdaus, to the Marine Captain. Like Zohara, each of the heroines embody not "to-be-looked-at-ness" but a looking into the self, thereby abandoning the female role in the symbolic order of patriarchy, and creating a new symbolic order which attempts to picture feminine interiority. By presenting female subjectivity onscreen, Menkes makes it real, conjuring images that externalize both the inchoate pain of living female in a man's world, and a hope or memory of peace connected to the natural world. This work moves female subjectivity, and the female unconscious, from invisibility to visibility, oblivion to being-in-the-world. Such feats of conjuring occur in all the films; and they become increasingly specific in their evocation of the violences of patriarchal culture, as well as increasingly pointed in their determination to circumvent a linguistic order and symbolic repertoire grounded in logocentric, patriarchal thought-forms.

Magdalena Viraga: The Story of a Red Sea Crossing (1986) foregrounds the subjectivity of its central character Ida, a prostitute who either does or does not murder one of her johns. (It is worth noting that critics have published interpretations that impute both possibilities. The film itself deliberately obfuscates its own diegesis by showing multiple versions of the same scenes.) David Schwartz aptly describes the difference between *Magdalena Viraga* and two male-authored films about prostitution:

Films about prostitution have generally fostered the misconception that the prostitute is willingly acting out an erotic fantasy (Catherine Deneuve in *Belle De Jour*, 1966), or the reverse notion that she is simply doing a job and that her work involves no psychic oppression (Godard's *Vivre sa Vie*, 1962). In both cases, the psyche of the woman is not taken into account; it is possible for her somehow to remain detached from the objectification and domination of her body. In *Magdalena Viraga*, prostitution is viewed as an act of spiritual suicide that involves passivity and self-denial. For Ida, prostitution is a psychic prison . . . (16)

Indeed, the film opens with a shot of Ida in prison, face contorted with tears, the bars of a cell door clanking shut. Her literal imprisonment provides a visual analogue

to the psychic imprisonment of her prostitution. Because the film does not unfold in linear fashion, with her prostitution, arrest, and confinement succeeding each other, the prison images alternate with images of her encounters with johns, establishing and sustaining the parallel. Besides the prison symbolism, *Magdalena Viraga* has myriad strategies for representing Ida's subjectivity. Her physical appearance—depressive posture, raccoon-style mascara, blood-red lipstick, morose expression—indicate pain, boredom, hopelessness, disgust, and decline. Ida's lack of even feigned enthusiasm with her customers further demonstrates her utter despair and resignation. The screenplay, which draws heavily from Gertrude Stein's novel *Ida*, also gives voice to Ida's suffering, as well as to her dreams of redemption.

Ida and her friend Claire, whom Claire describes as, "sisters who are not sisters," share confidences; to Claire, Ida expresses disgust for her life. She says in a chilling monotone, "I hate working. I hate working. I hate working." The screenplay also, however, evokes Ida's sense of a space untouched by her smarmy marathon of work. "I dream that I...I dream that I often long for water," she muses absently, "I dream that when I close my eyes I see water. When I close my eyes, I do see water." Ida also plays with being absent while present, no doubt a useful, if pathological, maneuver for a woman whose existence traumatizes her. When an officer asks, "What is it that you like better than anything else?" Ida answers, "I like being where I am," adding, "I am not here. I am very careful about that. No I am not here. It is very pleasant, very pleasant indeed not to be here" (see Stein's *Ida*, 28–29 and 50–51 for the source material for these sections of the screenplay). These words, spoken not like dialogue, but as prose-poetry, without dramatic inflection or verisimilitude, present the notion of an absence within presence—a subtle dimension of female experience.

Consistently, the language in the film, inspired by the writings of Gertrude Stein, Anne Sexton, and Mary Daly, and often borrowed from Gertrude Stein's *Ida*, fails to *mean*, in the conventional sense. It must be *apprehended* instead of *understood*. While Claire and Ida are sitting by the pool for the second time, an electronically doctored soundtrack overdubs their voices, intoning variations of "You can try you can just try never to be what he said never to be what he said never let me never let me never let me be what he said." Stein readers will recognize the novelist's cryptic pronouncements and hypnotic repetitions. While this utterance refers to no one in particular and relates to no situation within the diegesis, it captures poetically an abstract notion of feminist resistance—a determination to keep the patriarchal word from defining female selves. Language becomes non-transparent and non-referential; its utility resides in its capacity for indirect expression, its built-in propensity for hinting at what lies just outside its reach.

In addition to picturing female subjectivity through language—this disjointed language detached from the requisite orderliness of everyday *speech*—*Magdalena Viraga*, like *Great Sadness*, proliferates spatial metaphors of emptiness and pain, relieved by images, again about three-quarters of the way through the film, of an inviting natural space. Poor Ida can only run through this space, anxiously calling for her sister Claire, whose very name, in a shrieked interrogative, denotes precisely what eludes numerous women, who search desperately for self in a morass of ill-fitting patriarchal structures.

Excepting the verdant hills, in which clarity is sought in vain, the landscape of the film is largely grim, using "seedy, vivid L.A. locales to suggest an unnamed Latin American police state" (Thomas, 10). Cracked plaster and peeling paint with muddy greens, browns, and yellows dominate the interior of the hotel where Ida meets John—a vision of decay. The prison cell is equally dingy. The nearly unremitting visual gloom of the film vanishes unexpectedly, however, with the pastoral image of rolling green hills, laced through by a winding road receding into the distance. Ida runs across these hills and down the road. This unexpected pocket of green, read as an externalization of Ida's psyche, becomes a frenzied search for some unpaired state—a lost or longed for state characterized by safety, clarity, peace, and pleasure.

The glimpse of this state remains fleeting, however. Even the film's two comparatively playful images occur in an ugly public bath. In a sardonic echo of Ida's dreams of water, Ida and Claire sit, at one point, by a pool whose bare concrete floor and white walls remain unadorned by even the slightest aesthetic improvement. Resting their legs in the water whose chlorine reek viewers can practically smell, the two women talk. Inexplicably, Claire has plastic butterfly wings attached to her back. In the next poolside shot, Ida wears gaudy, grotesque blue wings taller than her. These pathetic wings drily parody traditional symbols of the soul in flight. Ida's passage more closely resembles a slow walk over hot coals or, as the title suggests, a crossing through a bloody sea. The film repeatedly overturns symbols whose relevance to Ida's experience proves fragile, at best.

Magdalena Viraga inverts other traditional symbols of spiritual passage: specifically, symbols of purity, sacrifice and redemption evolved by a patriarchal religion. Ida, who on several occasions appears in the frame next to a painting of the Virgin Mary, is Magdalena Viraga—the virgin Magdalena, virgin whore—after the woman of Christian legend associated with the prostitute Jesus saved from stoning. By calling Magdalena/Ida a virgin, the film denies the virgin-whore dichotomy of patriarchal, and specifically Judeo-Christian mythology. Ida's self-immolation and objectification at the hands of men fail to diminish her spiritual worth. The film also posits a parallel between Ida's suffering (her passion) and that of the Christ's: on several occasions, she appears in the frame with an image of Jesus. The menstrual blood (and/or blood of her John) that stains her arms and legs as she emerges from a bathroom stall becomes an analogue for the blood of the Lamb.

Thus, the film asserts that Ida's suffering equals Christ's in importance. The prostitute, after all, is a sacrificial victim of another sort—a vortex for a culture's anxieties about its own sex and lust, located in the loathed, vilified body of a female. *Magdalena Viraga* complicates and ironizes all of Christian iconography. As Kay Armatage notes, "The prison in which the film opens, the one into which Ida is dragged, manacled and brutalized by the guards, is overseen by nuns and shadows of the crucifix" (Toronto Festival of Festivals Program).

The film's rebellion against patriarchal Christian iconography culminates in sacrilege. While attending a Catholic mass, listening to a liturgy packed with patristic rhetoric, Ida stands and announces, "To become a witch, all you have to do is say three times: I am a witch, I am a witch, I am a witch." Flames erupt from her head, and panicky parishioners flee the church. The image of the witch acts as an antidote to the facile, routinized piety of the Catholic mass, which presumes to

admonish and reform the women its symbolism reviles. By embracing the female archetype most feared and reviled in patriarchal symbol systems, *Ida*, and the film *in toto*, seizes power by emptying the numinous glamour out of traditional Christian iconography, revealing the close association between this glamour and hatred/imprisonment of the female body.

In *Magdalena Viraga*, the imaging of female psychic pain and peace; the disruptions of linguistic order; and the deconstructions and reconstructions of symbol all work to indict the specifically sexual exploitation of women in patriarchal culture. In so doing, the film conjures the female spectator by presenting aspects of female sexual experience left unnamed and unpictured by a patriarchal cinema. This alone accomplishes an impressive cinematic prestidigitation. To the degree that the archetypal wounded woman of *Great Sadness* and *Magdalena Viraga* illuminates aspects of women's experience outside fiction, the film has worked another sorcery. To the degree that the film's strange language and estranged symbols lead a viewer to notice how conventional language and symbol contribute to the suppression, dismissal, or denigration of women's experiences, the film has worked yet another sorcery. Such alterations in perception spark sites of local resistance which, even when birthed within the scope of an individual consciousness, lead cumulatively to the gradual restructuring of social formations.

Queen of Diamonds: A Horseless Western (1991), continues several patterns established in the first two films—the wounded woman, metaphorical spaces of pain and peace, deliberately stilted language, and subversive symbols. The director describes *Queen of Diamonds*, set in and around a Las Vegas-style casino, as a

painting of the U.S.: an over-enlarged, profit-motivated core, surrounded by mute and arid alienation. The protagonist, Firdaus, is both deeply estranged and psychically powerful. Her loner position is the backside of centuries of Western Heroes—she stands in the center as watcher and victim of a system which—for many of us—is neither nourishing nor rewarding. (*Queen of Diamonds* Press Kit)

Firdaus, a blackjack dealer by night, wanders by day, following the train tracks, sitting by a lake, traipsing through parking lots, and visiting an ailing, old man in a decrepit motel, to whom she ministers. (Menkes lists Nawal el Sadaawi under "Inspiration" in the closing credits. El Sadaawi's novel *Woman at Point Zero* features a hero named Firdaus.) Her steady watchful presence, another manifestation of female subjectivity and *flaneurie*, registers glumly the unsensational suffering of the denizens of the town—a battered woman whose black eye mars the effect of her elaborate wedding dress, her churlish husband who fails to see his violence as remarkable, overweight men gazing wistfully out over the water, elderly gamblers waiting for their big hit, an unlucky customer who commits suicide in the parking lot. The characters' oppressive ennui and emotional bankruptcy, filtered through Firdaus's perspective, find outward expression in the landscape: a dry and grayish wasteland cut only by pavement, dilapidated shacks, leafless trees, and scrub. There occur again the hallmark Menkes shots of a shimmering body of water, lapping comfortingly at sandy banks, extending a promise of solace that it never fully provides.

The language in *Queen of Diamonds* sounds familiar as well: characters speak but don't connect. When the abusive husband bursts into Firdaus's apartment complaining of noise, and Firdaus counters with "I have to listen to you beating

your girlfriend every night!" the man replies, "She's not my girlfriend! She's my fiancée, okay?" His response skirts Firdaus's implied criticism. When Firdaus leaves the wedding of this ill-fated couple, two of the other guests ask her, "Did you like the wedding?" Firdaus returns flatly, "Not really," a socially awkward and unexplained retort that immediately damps any comfortable chatter or substantive exchange that might have ensued. Language subverts communication in Firdaus's world instead of facilitating it, sabotages community instead of building it. In the space between the characters' lines, the spectator can hear the petty horrors left unexpressed by the words.

The symbolism in the film, some of it surrealist, proves as disorienting and subversive as the language. A palm tree spontaneously combusts; three chained elephants sway repetitively back and forth; a playing card (the Queen of Diamonds, of course) revolves slowly in a black space. These deeply overdetermined images proffer significance but lead nowhere in particular except to a vague mood of destruction, heaviness, confinement, restlessness, immobility, temptation. The film as a whole, of course, as its subtitle indicates, subverts the symbolic system developed by the American western. Instead of horses, cowboys, and "Indians" signifying rugged individualism, macho heroism, and glorious expansion/conquest, Menkes's western presents a frontier desolated by greed, destroyed aesthetically by the tacky appurtenances of consumer culture, and inhabited by ghost-like people drained of vitality—the other American way. This intervention at the level of symbolism drains the glory out of timeworn constellations of iconic masculinist narrative and character-types, and thereby interferes with the cultural work these fictional artifacts do.

By altering the values of symbolic currency, Menkes's work contributes to the derailment of the ideologies circulating through those symbols. Generally, the ecofeminist perspective of Menkes's work informs this process of deconstruction and reconstruction. All her films illustrate a profound psychospiritual uneasiness and speculate about its roots. *Magdalena Viraga* targets sexual objectification as the source of spiritual dis-ease; *Queen of Diamonds* targets mammon. *The Bloody Child* targets the military-industrial culture that undergirds American life. *The Bloody Child: An Interior of Violence* (1996) was inspired by a real incident reported in the back pages of the *Los Angeles Times*—two military police on patrol discovered a young U.S. marine, recently back from combat in the Persian Gulf, digging a hole in the Mojave desert. The young man's car, parked nearby, contained the bloody body of his wife; he was arrested on suspicion of murder (*Bloody Child* Press Kit 4). Menkes's handling of the material, however, jettisons conventional representations of violence, and develops a radically revised understanding of violence while toppling numerous stereotypical images of femininity and foregrounding, once again, female subjectivity.

The film revolves around the perspective of the marine Captain supervising the arrest and detention, metaphorically illustrating how the event reverberates in her psyche. The film unfolds through repetition, fragmentation and accretion, alternating between scenes of the desert arrest and images of a woman (Tinka Menkes) kneeling in a dense green forest, tracing mysterious letters on her sand-covered arm, or swimming alone in a palm-surrounded pond. These two characteristic metaphorical spaces—connoting emptiness/pain/alienation and a wistful

longing for or memory of growth/serenity/peace—have counterparts in the soundtrack. The clipped, strained exchanges between the marines and the thickly textured aural collage of the jungle image (lines from the witches in *Macbeth*, fragments of Christian liturgy, moaning and crying) contrast the Captain's brisk external efficiency with her melancholic inner spaces where both routine and extraordinary brutalities lodge as sorrow, emotional withdrawal, and longing. Kevin Thomas suggests that Menkes "intercuts the northeastern Africa [jungle] sequences as a way of expressing the female officer's state of mind—of how the murder has affected her behind her implacable, resolute facade" ("*Child*": F6).

The Captain's cold efficiency, at work and in her personal life, overturns a number of stereotypical notions of femininity. As a marine captain, she inhabits a position typically occupied by males. When she gives orders, she dramatizes something rare: a woman wielding power over men in the workforce. Spectators can appreciate by their own recognition of the novelty of this situation how rarely it gets portrayed. The Captain is also active instead of passive in her sexual relationship. She chooses her partner, enjoys him in her quarters, maintains her professional schedule, and cues his leave-taking. Their association remains incidental to the other movements of the plot: nothing builds to or centers around their relationship. The dramatic tension derives from the tension between the Captain's own external and internal worlds. This revision of stereotypes and marginalization of romance departs from numerous conventions of representation regarding women.

In an interview with Eric Freedman, Menkes acknowledges how such departures from convention alter a language of gender and create the potential, at least, for women to revise their self-perceptions:

There's something about conventional narrative structure which I find both boring and all so set, because it represents experience in a set way, like a set language. Angela Carter says, and this is not a direct quote, that women will be lulled by the propaganda of romantic stereotypes until they have the courage to believe in the truth of their own experience . . . most people don't have access to their own experience very clearly because they're interpreting it through all these screens like language and narrative structure. (35)

By manipulating the screens—language, narrative structure, stereotype, symbol—and inventing new ones, Menkes's films change people's access to their own experience. Awareness of these screens, these "set languages," along with the ideologies they entail, amounts to an awareness of the constructedness of social formations, including gender, and selves. Taussig suggests that mimesis, which all narrative artwork performs or subverts, breeds this awareness: "the magic of mimesis could re-invigorate the once-unsettling observation that most of what seems important in life is made up and is . . . as a certain turn of phrase would have it, "a social construction" (xv). Monkeying with mimesis as Menkes does, by revealing the flexibility and plasticity of meaning itself, increases the array of available meanings, and thereby affords a subject multiple technologies of selfhood.

By expanding the possibilities for representing women and consciousness onscreen, Menkes invents new languages through which to conjure female experience, to make it present, visible, and therefore, *real*. When spectators learn, or even simply encounter, these language-forms—whether verbal, visual, aural, narrative, or symbolic—they enlarge their capacities for representing, constructing, and

manipulating their experience. Their creative power grows with their increasingly supple language. Covino addresses this connection between language and creativity, identifying it as magic: The magical world is one in which language can bewitch the soul, and it is also unstable and dynamic, spirited and licentious. For the magus, words transform reality, and facility with language makes multiple realities possible (6). For Menkes herself, her facility with languages actually conjures another reality—the reality of the female unconscious, and interior psychic spaces both ravaged by patriarchal culture and capable of renewal. When asked about the self-proclamation, echoed in *Magdalena Viraga*, that Menkes herself is a witch, the filmmaker embraces the role ironically while claiming fully its creative connotations, "It's a little tongue-in-cheek," she says about witch-hood, "For [Tinka and I], making a film is a ritualistic and magical act of entering another reality" ("*The Bloody Child*," *Film Threat*, 51).

In entering this other reality, Nina and Tinka Menkes presence it for the rest of us, and domains of feminine consciousness and experience hitherto hidden become public. In joining other discourses that speak and picture the feminine into being, Menkes films perform the cultural work of rendering women visible, not as a fetish object to stroke masculine fantasies of potency and contain the threat of castration, but as active subjects, messy and imperfect, powerful and implacable, thoughtful, hungry, and unrelenting. The witch and sorceress, victorious flip sides to the wounded woman, have with their promise-threat of awesome power, become feminist symbols, asserting and celebrating female potency. Menkes uses them in her filmmaking to wrest powers of creation away from patriarchal languages, films, representations. Menkes resembles Ida, whose repetitive, incantatory language casts a spell that counters the power of patriarchal language to define a woman. Ida repeats, "never let me be what he said never let me be what he said never let me never let me never let me be what he said." Menkes's avant-garde aesthetics constitutes a powerful counter-language, actively intervening in the power of patriarchal language to speak woman into being as the patriarchy wants her. In determining "never to let her be what he said," the weird sisters Menkes make room to ask themselves and their viewers "what shall she be instead?" In engaging this question, they and their audiences begin to conjure possibilities through language and image—a practical magic indispensable to the crafting of selves and societies.

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