

Secret Landscapes: A Conversation with Nina Menkes

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One day in the early '90s, two police officers came across a man digging a hole in the middle of the Mojave Desert in California. A Gulf War veteran, he was digging a grave for his wife, whose dead body lay in a car nearby. A few days later, *The Los Angeles Times* ran a story about this event, a story the sisters Nina and Tinka Menkes took as partial inspiration for the film *The Bloody Child* (1996).



Nina Menkes was born in Michigan, the daughter of Holocaust survivors. She became a filmmaker in her 20s, when she did all the work on a dance film whose credits later read a film by someone else. She soon enrolled at UCLA Film School, where she produced *A Soft Warrior*. That film starred Tinka, who has gone on to star in and collaborate on four subsequent films her sister has directed.

Beautiful and intricately structured, *The Great Sadness of Zohara* (1983), *Magdalena Viraga* (1986), *Queen of Diamonds* (1991), and *The Bloody Child* are fascinating, unforgettable explorations of time and space, unique in form and style.

An acclaimed filmmaker, Nina Menkes has received an LA Film Critics award, fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Rockefeller Foundation, an American Film Institute Independent Filmmaker Grant, and many other awards. I spoke with her in mid 2001.

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Ray Privett: Let's talk about your background.

Nina Menkes: I grew up mainly in Berkeley, California, during the '60s. I think that had a big impact on my life, because when I came to UCLA film school 20 years later, I was amazed by

how un-political people were. I thought it was a given that the government was corrupt and lying to you, and everyone was a leftist. That was my world, and I was flabbergasted when I got to LA.

My parents are from the Middle East via the Holocaust. My father was the only survivor of a Jewish family from Vienna. My mother's family were Berlin Jews who escaped to Palestine. But my father's entire family was gassed, except for him. They grew up as Palestine became Israel.

RP: When and why did they emigrate from Israel?

NM: They emigrated to go study at New York University. They got married in Israel very soon after the state of Israel was declared. Then they left to study in the United States, because obviously there was nowhere to study in Israel at that time.

RP: How did you become a filmmaker?

NM: As a teenager, and into my early 20s, I was a dancer and choreographer. At one point I was living with a bunch of dancers in London. One had a boyfriend who was in film school. He had to do a project but was totally uninspired. He probably shouldn't have been in film school. But he asked me to choreograph a dance to make a dance film. Then I actually did everything. I choreographed it, I set up the shots, I designed the production, the costumes, the music, and so on. It was great. Soon after I left London and went back to Berkeley. They sent me a copy of it, and all it said was "choreography by Nina Menkes," and then "a film by" whoever that guy was. I thought that was really unfair seeing as I had done everything. That was my first film, though I've always been a still photographer. But it was then that I got really excited about film. After that I worked at a Spanish TV station for two years, as a cameraperson and as a director of news. So I did a lot of moving camerawork. But that first film experience was such a high that I wanted to become a filmmaker, and I think that film has been a real revelation for me, because it brought together the various talents I had. Dance and sound and movement and photography and creating imaginary worlds all coalesced in film.

RP: Then you enrolled at UCLA.

NM: I applied to UCLA while I was working at the Spanish TV station. I remember when I got in, I thought it was a big liberation. I was working 9 to 5, and I thought I was going to die. I thank the Lord I haven't had to work 9 to 5 since then, even though I don't make a lot of money.

RP: While there, you developed *The Great Sadness of Zohara*.

NM: Actually, I made a Super 8 film before that called *A Soft Warrior*. Part of it is on a CD-ROM I made later. That was the beginning of my collaboration with my sister Tinka, who has

appeared in all of my films. I had planned to shoot a film that dealt with her, because she had been very ill. I wanted to make a film about her illness and my relationship to her. I went up to Berkeley, where my sister was still living, to shoot. But the actress who was supposed to play my sister's part didn't show up. So I asked Tinka if she would play herself sick within the film. She said she didn't want to play herself sick, because that was bad vibes since she had just gotten well. So I said, maybe you can play me. And she played me, while someone else played her. When we looked at the rushes we were blown away. The combination of our talents and energies was electrifying. It was unintentional, but it was there.

RP: How close in age is she to you?

NM: She is four years younger than me. But don't ask me how old I am!

The films became a way for us to be closer. We weren't particularly close growing up, at least from my point of view. She was my sister, but it wasn't like a special closeness or something. I was pretty involved with my own friends and life.



Then I made *Zohara*. I liked the idea of a white woman in the Third World. It seems like there are a lot of stories about a Third World person who comes to the West – Africans in France, and so on. But it didn't seem like there were a lot of stories going the other way. I had the idea of a white woman seeker in the non-West, or the Third World, or whatever you want to call it, but not with a colonial approach. Then I had this other idea that she would travel all across Arab North Africa and end up in Israel, with

Israel being the signal of liberation, homecoming, enlightenment, consciousness, and so on. That is the traditional Old Testament construction: the Jews were locked in Egypt and then they went out to Israel, the Promised Land. So the story was informed by that idea. But I work intuitively, and things changed.

Tinka and I went on a trip with a camera and our costumes. We had no money at all, and did everything ourselves. We never even got a porter, which would have been cheap in these countries. We carried everything ourselves. We never took a taxi; we took public transportation. And it was just me and her.

We got to Morocco, and planned to go east across North Africa filming. But you couldn't cross the border into Algeria for political reasons. So we went south into Morocco for about three months. We would travel somewhere and then film a scene. The film evolved through our travels. Then we wanted to fly to Israel, but couldn't for political reasons. So we flew to Egypt then went overland to Israel. We were going to film the beginning and the end in Israel. The

end was supposed to be a happy homecoming. I went out with Tinka, wandering around all day. But I couldn't get a shot that I liked. I couldn't push "go" on the camera; I just didn't like the shots.

So we went home – we were staying with some relatives – and went to bed. When I woke up the next morning, I realized the end should not be happy. It was not a happy homecoming. Once I realized that, we went out and shot the whole ending in half an hour. I think that shows a lot about how I work. I'm pretty intuitive. That's why I always do my own camerawork. If I would go by my conscious ideas, I would go and shoot something, I would get the happy ending, and it would be wrong. But if I go by my intuition, unexpected revelations come to me on an intuitive level.

RP: How did you get from there to *Magdalena Viraga*?

NM: After I made *Zohara*, I showed it around a lot. Some people asked how I could make this film about Judaism when I didn't really know anything about Judaism. And I didn't know about it on a formal level, I just knew about it being raised as a Jew with parents from Israel. So, I thought, I should really learn more about this.

There was this thing offered where someone pays for your airfare to Israel and all your expenses if you spend a month in an ultra-Orthodox Yeshiva. And I said, okay, I'll do it. So I went to this place for a month. It was sex segregated, of course. The men were studying somewhere, and the women had a less nice place to study. They taught us various things, though not on a very high level. But I was getting intrigued. I was touched by certain aspects of the teaching. I thought, maybe they were right. This modern life is so crazy. We run around trying to find a boyfriend in a café; these people arrange marriages. Maybe they're right. My life is so chaotic.

Then two things jolted me. We had a party, with food and singing. But because it was women singing, they said, wait, we have to close all the windows, because the voices of women singing might arouse some guy walking by. So we were dying from the heat so that some guy walking by wouldn't get aroused. I was like, I don't think so. Then we went on a swimming trip to the beach in Tel Aviv, and it was really hot. The Americans there were all wearing bathing suits. But the religious people who we were being instructed by wore their full clothes, with turbans over their heads, long sleeves, and skirts all the way down to the ground. And they went swimming in that. Then they climbed out of the water, and got sand all over everything. I just thought, this is oppressive, and it has nothing to do with God. Forget it.

I left the Yeshiva, and then I started reading Mary Daly, a great feminist writer, and Gertrude Stein. They really impacted me. Mary Daly had written this book called *Beyond God the Father*, which I read right after the Yeshiva experience. It was 1985 or something, and the idea of the politics of spirituality appealed to me. I found this big volume called *The Politics of Women's Spirituality*. So a lot of people were writing about these kinds of issues. How can a woman

find some kind of spiritual framework when she is automatically excluded from all the spiritual frameworks around? That was a big part of where *Magdalena Viraga* came from. And of course the other part was just feeling like a sex object and questioning that kind of sexual oppression.

Magdalena, of course, refers to Mary Magdalene, the whore who was a friend of Jesus. Viraga is like a shrill woman or a bitch. So the title means whore bitch. You can say that the whole movie is about the shadow sides of femininity. There is a lot of Christian imagery, and that just kind of appeared in the film. I have the position of many paths, one truth. But all the paths around seem to have a lot of oppressive elements.

The way I showed sex scenes was pretty unusual. It caused a huge ruckus at UCLA when I showed the film.

RP: You mostly just show the face of the woman, who is a prostitute, as she is having sex. And she usually looks very bored.

NM: I wanted to say “fuck you” to the way sex is usually shown, with soft lighting, erotic cutting, and so on. I wanted to say there is something else going on here, beyond what you have been showing us.

RP: You also jumble the narrative order. The spectator is forced to assemble the story from all these pieces of plot that are laid out non-chronologically and non-causally.

NM: That’s just the way that I think. All my films are fragmented in that way, they all fragment space and time. And that was how it came out. But also, to analyze it on a formal level, that is a way to question the way narrative is put together, ideas of cause and effect, and of how time and space are constructed by traditional cinema.

RP: So it was an oppositional cinema gesture?

NM: Definitely. But it wasn’t only oppositional, it was also a true expression of how I experience the world, which happens to be oppositional.

RP: Tell me about *Queen of Diamonds*, which stars Tinka as a card dealer in Las Vegas, and is also jumbled in narrative order.

NM: For *Queen of Diamonds* it was Tinka’s inspiration that the film be constructed in that way. There is this monster-dealing sequence in the middle. There were a number of different dealing sequences, and through her inspiration we changed it to put it into one big sequence. That’s typical of how her mind works. No one else on planet Earth would have thought of that structure except for Tinka.



Queen of Diamonds is a film about loneliness, about someone who is completely alienated. All of my characters are alienated. *Magdalena* is about sexual alienation; *Queen of Diamonds* is about alienated labor. This woman played by Tinka is caught on a hamster wheel dealing cards in the casino, fueling this machine. But she herself is totally cut off from her own possible sources of nourishment. I position it socially and politically by making it a comment on Las Vegas. But there are emotional aspects, too, to her cut-off-ness, which are sort of mysterious. I think Tinka brought that out in her performance. I had the idea that this was a white trash drifter in Las Vegas, and that the film would be a portrait of Vegas as a symbol of American greed and exploitation within a desert landscape. I found the whole thing very symbolic of the brutality of our culture, especially as concerns women's positions. But she brought this damaged, wounded quality to the character. That's a good example of how Tinka impacts a film. She would say, I'm doing what you really want me to do but you don't know that you want me to do it. And I would say that is true.

RP: Like *Zohara*, it's a story of alienation within a desert landscape.

NM: Absolutely. The desert is one of my obsessions. The desert is an interesting, two-edged symbol. On the one hand, deserts have always been a place of spiritual awakening. But they're also barren. I think that all my films are located in that zone.

I feel close to what Tarkovsky has written about art as a spiritual path. That's what it is, ultimately. But what does spiritual mean? That's a big question. I just had a conversation with a friend who said that spirituality is connecting to the ultimate source of benevolence in the universe. And I was like, okay, that's pretty intense. I think my films are about being cut off from the ultimate source of benevolence. But there's a recognition in the films that that is actually important. It sort of makes the cut-off-ness explicit.

RP: Do you think this is related to your coming from a secular family that still has been very affected by religious issues?

NM: My family is secular, but still spiritual. I grew up in an atmosphere that was open to those experiences. But it probably is related to the experience of surviving the Holocaust. My father was the only member of his family who was not taken in trains and gassed. You've got to feel that. He never said a single word about it, which apparently is common among survivors. But that just gets into your blood. There's no way not to have a lot of questions raised by that experience being so close to you, even on a genetic level. Somehow this feeling is passed on.

My mother was very involved with excitement about the State of Israel. But now, everything has turned to such a disaster there. All the dreams have pretty much been shattered. But in the '40s, when my mother was a teenager, there was a lot of excitement about self-determination, and not being a victim, and we love Israel, and so forth.

RP: Tell me about *The Bloody Child*.

NM: Tinka showed me a clipping from the *Los Angeles Times* describing a U.S. Marine who had come back from the Gulf War. Two police officers found him at dawn, digging a hole in the middle of the Mojave Desert in California. His dead wife, who he had murdered, was in the car, and he was digging her grave. They arrested him. To me, this story had a lot of interesting elements. We had violence, the desert in Saudi Arabia, the desert in California, misplaced aggression, and so on. That was the jumping off point.



Meanwhile, Tinka and her husband had gone out to the 29 Palms area for a vacation. They stayed in a hotel with a lot of Marines. The hotel had a large hot tub, and they sat out there drinking beer with these Marines. The whole scene was intense. Tinka told me I had to go see this culture in the desert landscape. I went out and checked it out, and got excited about it.

RP: So these things collided.

NM: Yeah. And it's probably my most fragmented film. I think that with *The Bloody Child*, all the ideas that I had been working on were pushed to their maximum, with the total fragmentation of narrative and point of view, with extreme, almost suicidal alienation, and the evocation of the spirit world through the voice of the murdered woman who controls the air space with her disembodied, fragmented chanting of religious and other texts.

RP: This includes the witches' chants in *Macbeth*. And the title, too, comes from *Macbeth*, referring to one of the apparitions summoned by the witches to reveal Macbeth's fate.

NM: I once played the bloody child when I was six-years-old. We lived near a theatre group, and my mom was friends with the theatre people, who needed a child to play the part of the bloody child. I memorized my lines and was really excited.

The *Macbeth* idea was related to the women in *The Bloody Child*. One, played by Tinka, is the alienated Marine captain in charge of the arrest. The other female character is the murdered woman. She is very young, childish, and super "feminine." Her solution to the problem of being a woman is to be cutesy, and small. And she ends up dead. So when her spirit is hovering around, all of her pent up creative energy comes out in a malicious form, like the witches in *Macbeth*. Tinka's character, meanwhile, is trying this other sort of solution, being very masculine, just one of the guys. And that doesn't work out either. So the two women represent untenable solutions to being a woman in this violent, masculine environment.

I hope the film doesn't seem to point a finger of blame at anyone for the kind of thing that happens here. It's more that all these people are trapped in a constellation of violence and confusion that seems to offer no promise of redemption and relief.

RP: The films are very remarkable for their landscapes.

NM: I always try to capture places that seem otherworldly on some level. I'm not interested in "ordinary life." I'm more interested in secret landscapes. Tinka's performances tend to connect the landscapes and the characters. It's not that she just happens to be there, and the landscape is background. My landscapes are never just backgrounds. They evoke the emotional quality of the movie.

RP: What have you been doing since *The Bloody Child*?

NM: I created a CD-ROM, *The Crazy Bloody Female Center* (2000), with USC. It has fragments of all my films, but they're re-edited. You can click around, and move between films. You can see an image from *The Bloody Child* and quickly click to *Queen of Diamonds*, or *Magdalena*, or whatever. You can cut between the films without any sense of disjointedness. People who are unfamiliar with the films won't be sure which is which because of the visual and emotional fluidity between them. It becomes very clear that all my films occupy a single universe – I suppose the universe of my mind. And, of course, Tinka is in all of them.

If you're interested in learning more of Nina Menkes and purchasing her work, visit Nina's website at <http://www.ninamenkes.com>.

Nina Menkes' films are available for purchase on video through Facets.

About the Author

Ray Privett works with Facets Video in Chicago.