

Interview with Nina Menkes

by David E. James | March 2008 | Issue 46, Spotlight on Nina Menkes

Nina Menkes was the subject of a retrospective, titled “Queen of Diamonds”, at the 2007 VIENNALE (Vienna International Film Festival). This interview was conducted by email in the period 13 June–31 July 2007; during this time, Menkes was on a two-month visit to Israel. It was originally published in Michael Pekler (Ed.), *Viennale Catalogue 2007*. It is reprinted here with the kind permission of the authors and Michael Pekler.



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DAVID JAMES: As you know, I admire your work without reservation and also share your abhorrence of the depredations of the current Bush administration, both here in the U.S. where we both live, and in the Middle East where you are integrally involved. I'd like to get to the point where we can see your art and our political environment in the same frame as it were, but I'll start with a simple question about your filmmaking. The photography in your films always takes hold of me; its discipline, precision and elegance are always exquisite. Could you begin by talking about what happens when you look through the camera, perhaps in reference to a particular scene in one of your films?

NINA MENKES: I've always done my own camera work, starting with my first super 8 movie in 1981, my 16mm films and my 35mm films. There was a point, when I shifted over to 35mm, where various people (though not my sister Tinka, I should add) kept suggesting that I give up the camera, in order to concentrate more completely on directing. But I realized that I couldn't, that that would be a fatal error. The reason is that I never plan shots; I like them to unfold in the moment, and also because I feel everything through the lens. This is perhaps just an idiosyncratic talent. I know how to frame my shots on the one hand, and I also know that if I would tell someone else what to do I would lose the Zen miracle of the one moment, so to speak. Gertrude Stein in her great essay, "What Are Masterpieces and Why Are There So Few of Them", explains perfectly this point that, if you *re-create* something, it doesn't have the organic precision of the spontaneous moment of creation. So, to be

sure to create, versus re-create, I have been quite sure that I need to do my own camerawork and never (or almost never!) plan shots in advance.

In the case of *Phantom Love* (2007) I worked with a wonderful DP, Chris Soos, who was in charge of all the lighting (I mean, of course, I gave my feedback, but basically he did it), but in terms of the camera I did it all. I couldn't make a film if I didn't do the camera.

What happens, precisely, is that I feel the scene through the lens. Henri Cartier-Bresson says it best: "To take photographs means [...] putting one's head, one's eye and one's heart on a single axis [...] it is a means of understanding, which cannot be separated from other forms of visual expression. It is a way of shouting, of freeing oneself, not of proving or asserting one's originality. It is a way of life."

I understand your commitment to the existential moment of perception in photography. But are you conscious of any standing pictorial preferences on your part, or any compositional priorities that you find yourself frequently using? Are you aware of your distinct, signature photographic style? Behind this question are several others.

Well, I am aware of my preferences only in the sense that I know when I find my shot and, even if it is one inch off, I know it's wrong. For example, we had one shot in *Phantom Love* where the main character, Lulu [Marina Choif], is talking to the police outside her sister's house. The camera is way high up, in fact it was on the top of a tripod ladder about twenty feet up, and it seemed pretty scary to climb up there, and I was wearing flip-flops, so the assistant cameraman volunteered to do it, and Chris Soos, the DP, reassured me that, since it was a static shot, it should be fine, but, when he went up and framed it, it just was minutely off and it bugged me, so I climbed up the ladder in my flip-flops and I shot the scene. This is supposed to show how I am aware of my preferences down to a millimetre but it is not a conscious awareness; it is more a feeling-sensation. My own "signature style"? I think the same answer. I recognize my own images when I see them.

Are you aware of any influences in this respect?

Negative.

Is there any deep difference for you between still and motion-picture photography? Stan Brakhage used to say that being a good still photographer was detrimental to moviemaking.

I have to say no. Actually, I started taking pictures when I was a teenager and I spent many hours in a darkroom printing; when I started doing films, I stopped doing still photography, but, in terms of the sensation of framing and knowing when it's right, it's the same – although the main difference for me is that, when I was doing stills, it was pure documentary photography, and my films, of course, are fiction and have a fictional character at the centre so that's different but not different in terms of the sensation of framing. Also, I was always hoping to achieve in my "real life" what I can achieve on the set – which is this subtle hit where you are in total control and totally open and spontaneous at the same time. While I can do this perfectly when I am behind a camera, I fail constantly in my life. For example, on a date with someone who I am falling in love with (current situation), I cannot achieve total openness and surrender and total awareness. ... I fall into fear. The reason I am good as a filmmaker is that for some unknown magical reason I have been given the gift of being able to find that magic centre when I direct and operate camera and frame shots, and I am fearless. I want to

clarify that: not fearless in the sense of reckless, but rather the absence of fear, a deep calm and knowing.

This is another reason I would not be able to hand over camera-operating, because it is while looking through the camera that I get to that place.

Do you believe your compositional emphases are in some way gendered? Given your insistence on the absolute primacy of a general female experience in your work, do you think your photographic aesthetic is, in some sense, feminist – or at least one that mobilizes a difference from how men see in either/both Hollywood or other independent cinema?



No. I mean if I think about Josef Koudelka, or Cartier-Bresson, any of these great master photographers, they all create these riveting but quiet

compositions; it's not about gender in terms of the composition. The gender issues for me are in the content versus the composition, although I guess there is a certain amount of grey area in there – like, the sex scenes in *Phantom Love*. I definitely frame so that the woman's body is never on display and that's a political, gendered decision and the ambivalence or freeze of the main character during sex (*Magdalena Viraga* [1986] and *Phantom Love*) is also a direct reaction against the fetishising/objectifying, etc., of how women are normally photographed by men. But that's the content of the shot, whereas the actual shape of the forms within a shot, that's a different thing. It's pure beauty that I want to find, meaning I guess my own idea of a beautiful shot – which is private.

I want to create a magical world, a separate reality, and I know how to frame out the real world (the so called "real world"), and only include in my frame the inner world. That's the essence I think.

I'd like to turn to the script. How do you begin to conceive of feature-length narrative. I know that *The Bloody Child* (1996) was sparked by a newspaper report. How did some of the others begin? How do you develop a script and do you in some sense have a vision of the film as you write? Do you produce a full script and/or do you storyboard?

Feeling a bit down here in Jerusalem. Think I'll write something unrelated to your question: I grew up in Berkeley, California, during the 1960-70s, in a very leftist family and a leftist environment where money was not the main criteria in terms of assigning value to work and people. But after twenty plus years in LA/Hollywood, I fear I have lost the ability to maintain this perspective. Films that don't make money do not command respect, except among a very small group of people. I wonder if anyone really cares what I have to say about my work, besides maybe you and three others! People want to know how directors work if their films are successful; and as my films do not make a lot of money, they are not seen as successful in the eyes of the world.

When I consulted the *I Ching* about this problem, it gave me a direct answer: Do not look to externals, as this will confuse you, return to inner clarity – or something like that. I don't remember the hexagram, nor the direct quote, but that was the gist. I know this is true but when I lose the connection to that inner place; everything feels very black and hopeless, and I fall into self-pity.

Back to your question: Different films have emerged in very different ways. One way (*A Soft Warrior* (1981), *Magdalena Viraga*, *Queen of Diamonds* (1990), *Phantom Love* – and my yet-to-be produced film *Heatstroke* – now a feature script) is that images come up in my consciousness. When those images feel urgent enough to grab my attention, I write them down. The images generally appear disparate, even to me, for quite awhile, it could be a period of a year or more. But when there is a sort of feeling of maximum – and at this point I have all these little cards with scenes written down – like “woman in hallway with snake” or “woman filing nails desperately” – then I sort of go into a trance state and look at them and then I find the narrative within the images.

There almost always is a strong narrative in there, so my process of screenwriting, so to speak, is quite the opposite of traditional Hollywood, where you start with a story outline and then fill in the images. My way of working tends to produce a more organic interior product for obvious reasons.



Another way I have worked is way more open and free form (*The Great Sadness of Zohara* [1983] and *The Bloody Child*). In these films, I had a loose concept – actually, *Zohara* had more structure than *The Bloody Child* – but both had a very rough structure that emerged during the actual filming process. For example, for *Zohara*, I had the idea that it would be about a white woman in the third world, a stranger in a strange land, a seeker, a sort of alienated religious quest. She moves towards the light and the light moves towards her. That was the

entire script. In addition, I had the idea that we would travel overland across Arab Africa and then end up in Jerusalem for a glorious homecoming. The film was structured, in my mind, along the lines of Joseph Campbell hero's quest with its stages of leaving home – entering unknown lands – discovering treasure – and returning home victorious. That was the concept as we started off on our overland journey in Morocco, Tinka and I, alone with our camera (16mm Arriflex) costumes, make-up and film raw stock. I was in my early twenties, I had a lot of strength and courage, but my strength and courage are wearing out now.

Zohara: first it turned out we couldn't go overland towards the east, because the border between Morocco and Algeria was closed. So we spent three months in Morocco, travelling in buses and creating scenes in each new location as I felt it was right. We didn't see footage till after our return to LA, so it was a very organic document, though it turned out to not be a document, much, of outer realities. When I saw the footage finally back in LA, I was stunned at how alienated the images were. My own conscious experience of the trip was great fun, a great adventure; but how strongly the inner

sadness and alienation came through. I am a channel more than a conscious filmmaker – or I was. *Phantom Love* was almost completely conscious. I have changed in that way.

When we finally got to Israel, I went out with Tinka and tried to film the victorious homecoming. We walked around all day and I didn't like any of the shots, I just could not push GO on the camera. So I went home, fell asleep, and the next morning I woke up and understood that the end of the film is not happy and not victorious. So then we went out and shot the entire end part in thirty minutes, and its fabulous: really strong, amazing footage.

So this is my unconscious guiding me ... and I listen. At the moment (July 2007) I am back in a dazed and confused state, I don't know which way is up. Art has always been my religion, but I am not sure it is nourishing me enough for me to make it. I need love in my life and have none, on any level. I am very alone and it's very painful.

As for *The Bloody Child*, in this film, I *really* took a huge risk, because I wanted to film this arrest of the marine; and I had a crew and a 35mm camera and everything on location, with absolutely no script at all, just a few scenes that I wanted to grab: the marines in the bars, the arrest itself and the magnificent black horse. So *The Bloody Child* was the film with the least amount of script and not even any structure. That film was created entirely in the editing, which was absolutely gruelling.

In all my films, I have never used a storyboard, as explained earlier, because this would mean that I would then re-create images, which for me is not a good way to maintain the precision and spontaneity of the moment.

Two inter-related issues: your commitment to narrative and to theatrical feature-length films, and hence to a distribution system that, if not entirely controlled by the capitalist film industry, is aesthetically administered by it. When I have seen you in those terrible periods when you have been trying to raise



money for your next film, I have often wondered why you don't make short films and to try to find a place for your vision in the various quasi-alternative cinemas and co-operative distribution. I know these have their own contradictions, but at least there you would find generations of filmmakers who are more aesthetically sympathetic to you and who have chosen to work more completely outside the commercial entertainment system – “avant-garde” rather than “indie” filmmakers, if you like. Yet you seem to have little interest in this mode of production and its formal freedoms and social possibilities, even though you would find many friends there.

Well, I make the films that emerge from me, organically, and they seem to be long and complex (translation: expensive). Or, I should say, relatively expensive. The expense demands a recoupment, and in a country (USA) where there is no public support for the arts, and none for art films, as there is *everywhere else on Earth*, including remote African countries, and Europe and South America, etc. So, then, one gets involved in the whole financial thing, out of necessity.

Also, I guess I see myself more in the tradition of filmmakers like Andrei Tarkovsky, Robert Bresson, Michelangelo Antonioni and Luis Buñuel, to name a few long-time favourites, versus the more non-narrative experimental short filmmakers I think you have in mind. I have never identified myself as an “experimental” filmmaker to myself, but rather as a film director, even though those are likely the people that understand me best, you are quite right. I have always been interested in certain radical forms of narrative, in character, and the expression of deep emotion. I want my films to be seen widely and on huge screens. I guess I really want to be Madonna, after all, not in content, but in reach – however, this is apparently an irresolvable contradiction. And it probably fuels my despair that I refuse to accept a small audience for my work.

Israel is hot and not very fun, so far ...

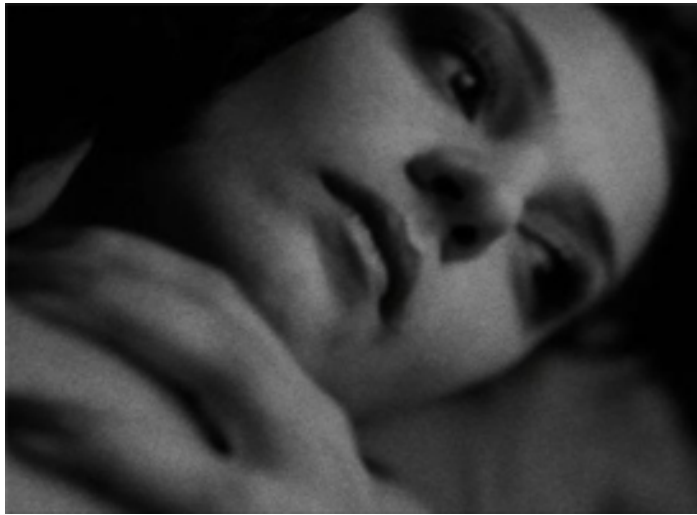
Not infrequently your films invoke the Middle East in one way or another. Can you address the significance for you of this area, its landscapes and people? And how do you relate it to the US?

Both my parents grew up in Jerusalem. They were Jewish refugees from Nazi Europe.

As this interview is for the Vienna Film Festival, it might interest people to know that my father was born and grew up in Vienna, and at age fourteen he was secretly rescued and sent to Jerusalem. He was the only one from his family who survived; the rest were sent to a Nazi death camp and gassed. My mother’s family, with unusual foresight, left Berlin in 1933; she was then a tiny baby. My parents were both in the Israeli army in 1948 and, as part of the “palmach”, an élite fighting unit, fought in the war of independence and rejoiced in the very unexpected victory. The Jews living in Israel before ’48 did not believe they could win a war with the Arabs. After the war, they married and went to the US to study at NYU; I was born and raised in the US. But we always went back, almost every summer, as I was growing up. I speak fluent Hebrew and feel very attached and connected to Israel. Through my relationship to Israel, I became interested in the Arab world, and later, as an undergraduate at the University of California at Berkeley, I studied Arabic, and I have spent a lot of time in the Arab world: Morocco, Egypt, Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt, Sudan and the West Bank. From this perspective, I feel mainly intense sorrow and despair at the inability of Jews and Arabs to live in peace together, and I fault both sides. Of course, the biggest fault lies with the American administration, which fuels the conflict for its own nauseating interests. The actual people who live in Israel and the surrounding areas, Lebanon and the Palestinian areas especially, who suffer the acute results of the conflict, are, in my opinion, the sad pawns of the voracious greed and racism of the Western money powers.

The Middle East appears in my work because my work is so intensely personal: I am part of this area and it is part of me. I love Israel and I cry when I think about what has happened here, to the dream of peace, to the sorrow and suffering that Israel grew out of and the suffering of the people here now, as well as the suffering Israel causes the Arab peoples – it’s horrendous.

I am sitting in Jerusalem right now as I write this and I am crying. I don’t know what to say. We are in apocalyptic times, and the fact that Bush has gotten away with murder, literally, rape and murder, and is not locked up in prison for life is uncomputable for me. I feel that, on the deepest level – without for a second discounting the economic motives for Bush and company’s actions – but on the deepest level, the inability to face and acknowledge and deal with our own inner darkness is the driving force behind racism and war. *Phantom Love* tries to express this and speak to this situation.



In fact, the script for *Phantom Love* emerged while I was living in Jerusalem in 2005. I spent seven months working with, for lack of a better word, a shaman, who was an Iraqi Jewess. I did this work, with her, meeting three times a week and doing active-lucid dreaming in a light trance state.

It was a descent into my own inner darkness, and it was not easy. I was quite ill, physically, for much of the seven months. A lot of images emerged for me and these images became the basis of *Phantom Love*. People who are willing to watch the film

and endure the duration, the pain and the darkness, will themselves experience a sort of mini-version of my process – the film will “vibrate” with the areas in the viewer that are blocked and painful and the viewer can then work with that in himself, or not.

I do believe that working on ourselves relentlessly, and without a shred of self pity, is the only way out.

For further on Nina Menkes’ work see her website at www.ninamenkes.com

About the Author

David E. James is the author of *Allegories of Cinema: American Film in the Sixties* (Princeton, 1989) and has written about Nina Menkes’ work in his book, *The Most Typical Avant-Garde: History and Geography of Minor Cinemas in Los Angeles* (University of California Press, 2005).