

Nina Menkes: The Warrior and her Jiang Hu

by **B er nice Reynaud** | March 2008 | Issue 46, Spotlight on Nina Menkes

As I am working on this text on Nina Menkes, I am also in the process of writing a book devoted to the woman warrior in Chinese martial-arts cinema. This is a welcome coincidence and not only because Menkes' first film is called *A Soft Warrior* (1981). And not only because, toward the end of her latest feature, *Phantom Love* (2007), the female protagonist transcends the limitations of her body and literally levitates – a distant echo of the flying swordswomen's feats. In traditional Chinese society, a woman could be



worth less than a dog, but if she mastered martial-arts skills she became the equal of generals, bandits and knights-errant, she didn't need a man to protect her, she could roam about, unattached. Whether a prostitute or a housewife, her fighting skills turned her into a goddess. There was often a price to pay. Romance eluded her, as good men were either afraid or killed by her foes. Angry at her martial-arts prowess, villains often tried to resort to sexual violence; so she had to be twice as good as any man. Yet, the woman warrior was able to live some kind of utopia – in a fantastic space unregulated by societal constraints, where she was wandering alone, often angry, but free. In martial arts, they call this space the *jiang hu*.

Yes, in the course of her idiosyncratic and remarkable career, Menkes' films have outlined the topography of a certain *jiang hu*, an alternative space ruled by another logic than what we sheepishly call "reality". It is not a "symbolic" space either (in the Lacanian sense), as Menkes' * uvre* is a splendid illustration of how woman is not-wholly-inside (1) the symbolic order. It is a space *designed by the wanderings, metaphorical or physical, of the female protagonist* – following the contours of her body and mind; a space defined by the desires, the dreams, the fears, the fantasies, the shortcomings, the violence, the heartbreaks of women; a space where the place of the Father is empty, where men are the "floaters" (2): they come and go, as guests, passing objects of desire, sometimes victimizers – mostly out of reach, as if they were

shadows projected on the wall of Plato's cave. (3) Or rather, *they are the ones who can't reach the woman* (as made clear in the way Menkes films sex as an act of senseless and boring violence between two strangers). Maybe, as the Marilyn Monroe character says so beautifully in *The Misfits* (John Huston, 1961) when explaining her divorce, "because he wasn't there ...". Or because it is the woman herself who is absent from the space occupied by the man, as stated by the heroine of *Magdalena Viraga* (1986): "I am not here. I am very careful about that."

While fleetingly intersecting with that of men, the *jiang hu* of women exists on a different layer of reality. So exploring it entails loneliness, in spite of the prestigious grants and the numerous critical awards. While David James accurately describes Menkes' "achievement in deploying the qualities of Maya Deren's vision of the personal film" (4), she does not inscribe herself in a recognizable avant-garde tradition, she has no master and no disciples, which forces her to reinvent the history of cinema in her own terms, to struggle alone with formal and conceptual issues, and ... to spend a lot of time trying to raise money ... This loneliness – both aesthetic and economic – is also embedded in the texture of the work. Yet, it is not the cliché loneliness of the romantic victim – it is more akin to the "night of the soul" evoked by the mystics, Dante's travel through a dark wood – or the heroic solitude of the knight-errant.



All her films involve a journey. *A Soft Warrior* is about the ambiguous zone in-between sickness and health – a zone crossed by the filmmaker's younger sister, Tinka Menkes. As the woman cast to play her didn't show up, Tinka accepted to step in, providing she'd play Nina's role (to avoid re-enacting her illness). This marked the beginning of a unique, remarkable collaboration, with Tinka becoming the screen embodiment of Nina's psyche, while also present at all the stages of the filmmaking

process, from conception to editing – a fact all the more poignant that another onset of illness, in the late 1990s, put an end to their work in common. In this short super-8 film, Tinka plays the warrior, tending to and hugging a woman lying on a bed. At some point, she covers her face with what looks like war paint (or a Peking Opera mask); then her entire body is coated with a black substance, that resembles the leotard uniform donned by Irma Vep (Musidora) in Louis Feuillade's *Les Vampires* (1915), or by the female cat burglars of Hong Kong action thrillers in the 1960s.

Such psychic bond between two women is quietly subversive. In mainstream cinema, female actors often "go to war" *to embody, enact, transcend and suffer through the inner conflicts of a male director*: for example Marlene Dietrich and Josef von Sternberg, or Liv Ullmann and

Ingmar Bergman. (5) Some male directors have developed a special collaboration with their actors (John Ford and John Wayne; Martin Scorsese and Robert de Niro), but in the case of *female* directors and *female* actresses I can only think of the intimate bond between Chantal Akerman and Aurore Clément. Too much *contiguity* between women is a source of anxiety in the culture at large. Female bonding is not encouraged, and women are taught very early to be suspicious of each other, to see every other woman as a rival for the affection of men, and even to despise other women for being only ... women. The feminine *jiang hu* is a fractured space, and it takes a brave and sagacious strategist to try and piece it together, all the time taking the risk of being swept along by wild currents like Anna Moore (Lillian Gish) on the broken ice in *Way Down East* (D. W. Griffith, 1920). For these reasons, the collaboration between Nina and Tinka Menkes has been a rare, if not unique, event in film history.

The Great Sadness of Zohara (1983, 16mm) marks the first appearance of an ever-present trope in Menkes' cinema: the parched immensity of the desert, sometimes interrupted by a benevolent expanse of water. It was shot, without a script, as Nina and Tinka were travelling the Middle East. The film starts in the orthodox Jerusalem neighbourhood of Mea Shearim, segues into a journey (real or metaphorical) into Morocco – then returns to Mea Shearim. To play the lone traveller, Tinka keeps her war paint – in the guise of an abundant amount of black kohl around her eyes; she looks like an Oriental courtesan (maybe “the whore of Babylon”), a silent-movie star, a Greek tragedy or Peking opera actress. While the ultra-stylisation of the make-up renders her handsome face even more striking, it also becomes a sort of uniform (6), a combat gear. True enough, in the first Mea Shearim sequence, Tinka appears as an uncomfortable “mole”, hiding the “scandalous” aspect of her make-up under the plain kerchief and loose-fitting frock of an orthodox Jewish woman. Once taken off in the privacy of her room, the kerchief reveals the shaven head of a married woman (7) – yet the short strands of hair have been dyed blonde, in punk fashion. Tinka's attire and body language outline her position of being within-and-without. She has to “fake” being a traditional woman, and yet her true being, hidden inside, aches with the desire of being liberated. Then, without transition, she's on a train to Morocco; stops in a small hotel; walks through narrow streets; sits at a sidewalk café; has an unexplained, almost violent encounter with a man; exits through the gates of a city; boards a small ship that takes her across the water; and finally arrives at the edge of the desert. As she goes deeper into the Moroccan South, the colour of her hair changes (red, blue and then jet black) and her clothes become more masculine – so, with her cropped hair, she becomes an androgynous figure.

By leaving the confines of Mea Shearim, “Zohara” enters an alien zone in which, as the voice-over reminds us, she “will wander like a drunken man” (8). In the *jiang hu*, disguises and drunkenness have the same goal: they give a fighter the necessary resources to fight a formidable opponent. And the enemy that Zohara has to wrestle in the desert is not only patriarchy – but God the Father himself. *The Great Sadness* starts with a quote from *The Book of Job* (7:12), which I reproduce integrally because it could introduce each of Menkes' subsequent films:

*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, till 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.*

“Genesis” contains an equally mysterious passage, in which the patriarch Jacob wrestles with an angel all night. In the Bible, only men had the privilege of duelling with their Creator. (9) Yet it is women who, in the Christian mystical tradition, become the privileged heroines of an intimate fight with God (which is also an heavenly union with Him) (10) – a trope further explored in *Magdalena Viraga*.

The subtitle of the film is “Story of a Red Sea Crossing”, another biblical reference. In a poignant moment, the protagonist, a prostitute called Ida (Tinka Menkes), tells a john (Scott Edmund Lane) that she “dreams that [she] often longs for water”. The desert of her crossing is the *underworld* (another possible translation for *jiang hu*) – a cluttered landscape of gaudy dance halls, cheap hotel rooms, dim hallways and baroque churches in the Los Angeles *barrio*.

The story unfolds around a temporal pattern that will be fully developed in *The Bloody Child* (1996) – starting with the arrest of Ida (Tinka Menkes), then unfolding through a series of flashbacks and flashforwards that oscillate between the real and the surreal. Yet, both categories often overlap. An unexplained shot of Ida running and screaming in a non-descript open space reoccurs again, in a slightly different manner, after



the commotion created by a gaol-break. The inside of the gaol looks like a church or a monastery – with crucifixes, altars, burning candles and wrought iron. *Magdalena* is structured around nine static shots, held to the point of discomfort and showing Tinka’s face in close-up as while a john’s head, neck and naked torso rhythmically enter and leave the frame, following his movements. Prostitution had never been shown this way – nor the excruciating pain of being “the female underdog”. Yet, breaking the “realism” of the scene, Ida looks up at the ceiling, where the icon of a smiling Christ is painted – a witty reminder that the real plot is played between Ida and Christ, Ida and God, and not Ida and the pathetic man who crushes her body.

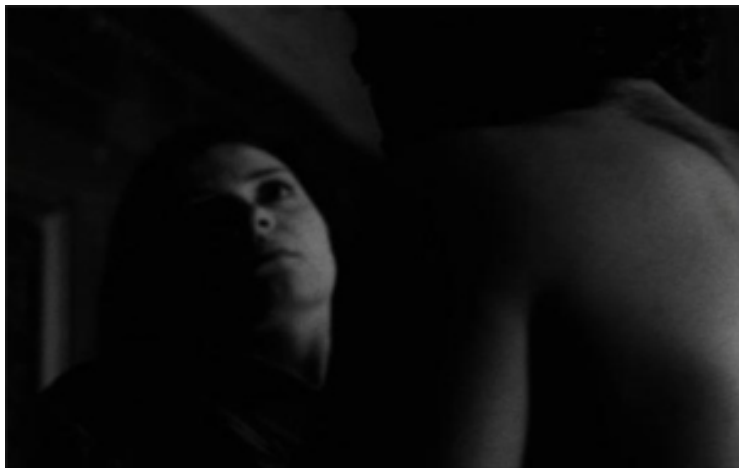
Ida, the sullen, angry prostitute who “hates working”, goes through space as a ghost – apart from her friend Claire (who may be nothing more than a mirror image, a figment of Ida’s imagination, considering the exquisite surreal quality of the scenes in which she appears), people don’t see her for what she is – she will be arrested for a murder she didn’t commit and the name of “Magdalena Viraga” is thrown at her by a strange man. *Magdalena* calls to mind the ‘prostitute’ of the Gospel, who became the voluptuous image of the repentant sinner, spreading her hair, her bosom half-exposed. For feminists and Bible scholars, she’s also the author of one of the *Gnostic Gospels* that was later suppressed by the Church Fathers. (11) *Viraga*, on the other hand, is a variation on the word *virago*, which in contemporary speech denotes “a bold, turbulent, loud, bad tempered woman; a shrew” – while its original Latin meaning was “a heroic maiden, a heroine, a female warrior”. (Webster’s).

A change in letter will also allow Ida to slip from being a “bitch” to being a “witch”, a fate she embraces with detached anger, as a halo of flames surrounds her. As male-centred religions were taking over Asia Minor and Europe, the cult of the original goddesses/mothers had to go underground and took the forms of sacred “Mysteries” until their followers were branded as “witches” – in a major instance of mass murder. The witch’s powers and wisdom are inherited from these long-forgotten cults – and, even after the eradication of witchcraft, her figure keeps haunting the culture – the fairy godmother, the woman warrior, the killer bitch.

Following in the way thus opened, Menkes’ subsequent heroines are warriors, lone travellers, opaque beings haunted by the figure of the double. Starting with *Queen of Diamonds* (1991), that expands the *mise en scène* through the use of 35mm stock, the protagonists (and the filmmaker) seem to have shaken the hold that the B/book(s) had on them: the Bible or feminist poetry. (12) There is less language, but the silence (or at least the absence of word, for Menkes’ soundtracks are charmed textures of ambient noises and off-screen sounds, diegetic and incidental music), framed in spectacular visuals, becomes a powerful device to structure the cinematic space. Like Zohara, Firdaus (Tinka Menkes) (13) travels alone in a desert – this time around Las Vegas – and is a transient. We don’t know when she arrived in town, her domestic relationships are concealed (she had a husband, but he’s been “missing for some time”), she lives in a motel, and the last shot shows her, in flimsy clothes and without luggage, hitching a ride at night, on an impulse. Her femininity is exaggerated through artefacts that mark her as “odd” – she’s a blackjack dealer but sports unfittingly long red fingernails, that look like bloody weapons. Like Ida, her professional activity is presented through a series of obsessive, repetitive shots (a 16 minute sequence in the casino) that foreground her almost static isolation in the midst of the agitation of her clients. They have something to gain (maybe); she does not. They partake in the excitation of the moment; she belongs to eternity. They don’t know they are trapped; she does.

The mirroring effect is almost absent in *Queen*, as the two other women – the black girlfriend, the battered fiancée – are secondary characters, casual acquaintances living in the motel. Firdaus’ relationship with them is more at the level of contiguity and identification than interpersonal exchange – which adds a novel dimension (that of empathy with the victim) to her alienation. The most original, complex figure of the double occurs in *The Bloody Child* (1996),

in which Tinka plays a “real” warrior – with a military uniform and a position of command. A Marine captain, she supervises the arrest of a Gulf War veteran who had murdered his wife and attempted to bury her in the Mojave Desert (California). As an officer, bossing her men around and occasionally having sex with one of them, Tinka cuts a fine figure. Yet the film’s complex structure, unfolding in reverse temporal order, reveals a series of overlapping layers and intricate Chinese boxes – and a mysterious connection between the captain and the murdered wife. The latter appears as a voice on the soundtrack, but also through an imaginary journey, reconstructed through 1982 16mm footage of Tinka’s wandering through Egypt and Sudan. (14) The two women become almost one, as if the captain were arresting her own murderer, or, conversely, she recognized that all the power conveyed to her by the Army could not prevent her from being singled out as a potential victim by the male establishment.



All these strands reconvene in the splendid *Phantom Love* – the first film not featuring Tinka, and the first to be shot in black and white. Like *Magdalena*, it takes place in the urban wasteland of Los Angeles (Koreatown rather than the *barrio*); like *Ida*, Lulu (Marina Choif) looks sad and bored when a man is on top of her; like *Firdaus*, she works in a casino.

What sets *Phantom Love* aside is the insightful way Menkes connects the themes of the mirror, the journey and the heroine’s spiritual awakening. The mirrors are shattered, and Lulu has finally a chance to look at herself, naked. But what a long journey, my sister, did you have to take to reach that point? The first mirror is that of the lover’s gaze – in which, like most of us, Lulu was probably seeking a reassuring image of herself; as the film starts, it is clear that this is not happening (15), hence her growing alienation from the relationship, that she, however, lacks words to express.

Lulu’s sister, Nitzan (Juliette Marquis), who lives alone in an unkempt apartment, on the verge of a psychotic breakdown, offers the second mirror image, culminating in a moment à la *Persona* (Ingmar Bergman, 1966), in which her face is superimposed in transparency over that of Lulu. And finally there is the (sexually) threatening mother, who materializes as a scolding voice on the telephone, appears in inserted shots, some of them in which she is holding a mirror reflecting Lulu’s face, or emerges in nightmares too awful to be recounted, but powerful enough to be *shown*. A lone warrior, Lulu has to keep her boss and her customers happy, her mother at bay, her boyfriend more or less satisfied, and her sister protected against and in spite of herself. The real fight, though, is with her inner demons – for which the boa that keeps uncoiling in the hallway of her apartment building may be a fitting

metaphor – the threat that something terrible, coming from hell or from the entrails of the earth, might take a hold of her.

As the three women speak with an Eastern European accent (sometimes in Russian), we guess that Lulu's family are immigrants. Los Angeles is a borrowed resting place – a stop in a long journey that started before she was born. Yet, if she had no say in the way the trajectory was mapped out for her, Lulu gradually takes charge of the rest of the journey. As for Zohara and the veteran's murdered wife, it takes the form of an imaginary trip outside the confines of Judeo-Christian civilization. Lulu puts on her stylish black dress, her high-heel pumps (her "uniform") and suddenly she's on a hanging bridge somewhere in India. There she is joined, not by phantoms as in F. W. Murnau's *Nosferatu, eine Symphonie des Grauens* (1922), but by a crowd of Indian people on their way to a Shiva Temple on the other side of the bridge.

It may be precisely at this moment that the film and Lulu's destiny change course. Like an expressionist work, it was haunted by wild beasts and doppelgangers. Yet the phantoms dissipate – they are worshippers looking for spiritual enlightenment. The ghost-like quality of the woman warrior, her estrangement from the world, can dissipate as well. She can even borrow the white horse of Jean Cocteau's *La Belle et la bête* (*Beauty and the Beast*, 1946) to embark on a new journey. She is still alone in the *jiang hu*, but she has (re)discovered her powers and, after the truly magical moment in which she flies above the room, she can look at herself and start fighting back.

This text, written in English, was originally published in German (under the same title) in Michael Pekler (Ed.), Viennale Catalogue 2007, pp. 181-5. The portion of this text pertaining to Phantom Love appeared, in a different form, in my report on the Sundance Film Festival in Senses of Cinema, Issue 43, April-June 2007.

Endnotes

1. See Jacques Lacan, *Encore – The Seminar – Book XX – On Feminine Sexuality, the Limits of Love and Knowledge, 1972-73* (New York and London: Norton, 1988), pp. 72-3.
2. Here I am reversing the original (slightly sexist) application of the term that Elia Kazan used to describe his wife, the filmmaker Barbara Loden (writer-director of *Wanda*, 1970), who had just died, in an interview with Marguerite Duras. ("L'Homme tremblant – Conversation entre Marguerite Duras et Elia Kazan", *Cahiers du Cinéma*, December 1980.) There are uncanny similarities between *Wanda* and Menkes' work. See my text, "For *Wanda*", *Senses of Cinema*, No. 22, October 2002.
3. Following Jean-Louis Beaudry's landmark text ("The Apparatus", *Camera Obscura*, No. 1, Fall 1976, pp. 97-103, originally published as "Le Dispositif", *Communications*, No. 23, 1975, pp. 56-72), Plato's fable has become a metaphor for cinema, and this is not without incidence to understand Menkes' work.
4. David James, *The Most Typical Avant-Garde – History and Geography of Minor Cinema in Los Angeles* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), p. 408.

5. It has often been argued (by the great Jack Smith in particular) that “Marlene Dietrich was Von Sternberg in drag.” In an interview with Teri Gross on NPR, Liv Ullman once said, “I understood what my role as an actor was. I was supposed to *be* Bergman.”
6. In *Dishonored* (Von Sternberg, 1931), Maria Kolverer (Marlene Dietrich) speaks about the “uniform” that women wear to go to war as well as men – especially the sexy attire of prostitutes.
7. Orthodox and Hassidic Jewish women are supposed to shave their head after their marriage – to prevent them from being attractive to men other than their husbands. They often wear a wig.
8. *Zohara* was edited as a silent film, then Menkes worked several months on the multi-layered soundtrack, composed of Cathy Berberian’s voice singing onomatopœias from Luciano Berio’s *Visage* and *Sequenza III* – sometimes mixed with the beautiful grave voice of a *hazzan* (cantor) – and the text of Tinka’s poem: “*They call her Zohara, but she is grayness, and graceless, and thickness, and lost. For the arrows of God are in her, and her spirit feels their poison ...*”
9. A Jewish joke, whose meaning is more profound than it sounds, says: “In Judaism, men have the Wailing Wall; women have their families.”
10. See Lacan, and Amy Hollywood, *Visible Ecstasy – Mysticism, Sexual Difference and the Demands of History* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2002).
11. See Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels* (New York: Random House, 1979).
12. *Magdalena Viraga* specifically quoted texts from Gertrude Stein, Mary Daly and Anne Sexton.
13. The name is inspired by the protagonist of Egyptian feminist writer Nawal El Saadawi’s *Woman at Point Zero* (London and New York: Zed Books, 1983) – a prostitute having killed a customer ...
14. Nina asked Tinka to play the role of the dead woman, but she refused. It was finally decided that she’d play a Marine captain instead, and that some 16mm footage shot in Egypt and Sudan the sisters had shelved years ago would provide a surreal metaphor for her character’s (or that of the murdered woman’s) psyche.
15. As Virginia Woolf stated it is men, not women, who can hope to find such reassurance in their partner’s gaze – they usually don’t return the favour. See *A Room of One’s Own* (San Diego-New York-London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1929, renewed 1959), pp. 35-6.

About the Author

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