

EMANUEL LEVY

CINEMA OF OUTSIDERS

The Rise of American Independent Film



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lesbian all her life; Doris is attracted to a woman for the first time. Told from Doris's perspective, the movie explores the pleasures, uncertainties, and ambiguities of late-life lesbianism in a culture obsessed with youth and heterosexual romance.

Nina Menkes is an uncompromising filmmaker committed to a radical and personal cinema. A combination of feminist politics and aesthetic rigor links her work to Chantal Akerman's, particularly her precise composition and framing. Menkes's bleak portraits of women are based on her explorations of their reactions to narrowly defined roles in society. Thematic motifs and formal patterns recur in Menkes's films, all of which feature Tinka, Nina's sister, as protagonist. Menkes's work is manipulative in a subtle, mystical way. Like Maya Deren, Menkes uses cinema to create new forms and new spiritual experiences. Menkes's films are challenging in their unusually long takes and repetition of imagery. Viewers are asked to abandon preconceptions and expose themselves to images imbued with the power of consciousness altering.

Menkes's career began with a forty-minute film, *The Great Sadness of Zohara* (1983), which follows the spiritual journey of a woman named Zohara from the streets of Jerusalem to the markets of Morocco and back again. Inspired by the work of Gertrude Stein and Mary Daly, Menkes's first feature, *Magdalena Viraga*, is a discomfortingly complex film evoking a reality rarely depicted on-screen. Set in seedy hotel rooms and decaying dance halls in East Los Angeles, it's about an emotionally numb prostitute who is seeking acceptance in an oppressive world. The narrative revolves around the spiritual liberation of a prostitute who is wrongly accused of murder. Menkes described the film as a "descent into the home of the 'monstrous feminine,' a journey through the vortex of unadulterated female space."²² Stylistically, the film is marked by longeurs and a rigorous visual design.

In *Queen of Diamonds*, set in Las Vegas's Par-a-Dice casino, the protagonist, Firdaus, is less victim and more onlooker. The film is punctuated by long takes and sparse dialogue, contrasted with Firdaus's expressive facial and body gestures. Some plot elements are suggested, but the emphasis remains on Firdaus's isolation. Within the casino, there's a cacophony of sounds and lights, of poker chips and cards flashing across green tables, but outside, the lights are bright, the sand

is glaring white, and the sky is dark blue. Night scenes bring eeriness (a dead cat and Christ upside down on a cross) and beauty (three elephants move with an amazing grace). Said Menkes, "The difference between the two films is that in *Magdalena*, the oppressed woman recognizes what's going on, and she's really involved in battling against the oppressors, yet she desperately wants validation from them. *Queen of Diamonds* is light-years ahead of that. Firdaus has relinquished that desire; she's much less involved in that judgement. The self-hate is lifted."⁵⁹

Menkes continued to explore alienation in *The Bloody Child*, her most powerful film to date. A meditation on violence, inspired by the real and infused with the surreal, it's loosely based on an actual incident in which a marine was arrested for murdering his wife and burying her in the Mojave Desert. The murder represents an intersection of different kinds of violence. On the most obvious level, it's a case of homicide, but implicit in the narrative is an indictment of the mass media and the military for perpetuating violence.

Bloody Child is at once an anatomy of a specific murder and a meditation on violence, gender, and power. In most American films, violence serves as a plot point and is related to external events, whereas Menkes is interested in the "inner condition" of violence, the constellations inside individuals that causes violence. Rather than assign the blame, she is looking at the trap that links the victim, the perpetrator, and the investigator. Subtitled *An Interior of Violence*, the film examines the echoes of the shock waves that crime sets off in the lives of all those involved. Like ripples in a pond, the murder impinges on everyone. A collective portrait of damage, Menkes described the film as a "vision of hell, because real evil goes unnamed and unrecognized."

Menkes repeats one unsettling image: an enraged marine captain (played by Tinka) shoving the murderer's face into the bloody remains of his victim. The sequence implicates the viewers, forcing them to feel the murderous rage. Menkes explained: "It's not that there's one moment of violence and then it's contained and resolved. There's no sense of closure. The violence of the murder is ricocheting around and has nowhere to go."⁶⁰

Tinka serves as Nina's alter ego, allowing the director to explore her own psyche. The powerful alchemy with Tinka may explain the intensity of Menkes's films. Is it like Cassavetes's relationship with Gena Rowlands, in which the various roles Rowlands played in his movies

could be seen as one character on a single trajectory? Is Tinka playing one evolving persona as she moves from one film to another?

Menkes finds mainstream narrative to be as predetermined as a codified language. She quotes Angela Carter, who believes 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. Menkes's fiercely personal oeuvre is marked by visual experimentation and feminist critique, along with intimate exploration of her own psyche. "My struggle as a woman and artist is to allow myself to be who I am," Menkes said. That sounds easy, but it's not: "A lot of women are struggling with the idea of themselves as subjects."⁶¹

Menkes holds that power means "to look in the mirror and say 'I have a wrinkle, therefore I am less valuable.' To not internalize it." She asserts: "Women are denigrated in our society, they're held in contempt, violence against women is rampant. As a woman, if you pick up on any of these vibrations, you will either become political, or you're going to believe there are some things not good about you."

Experimental filmmaker Kelly Reichardt described her 1995 debut, *River of Grass*, as "a road movie without the road, a love story without the love, a crime story without the crime." It's an accurate description, for Reichardt evokes the familiar lovers-on-the-run genre, only to stand it on its head with fresh meanings and droll humor. In the process, she confounds predictable formulas, forcing the audience to recognize the banality of her characters.

A lonely thirtysomething mother of three, Cozy (Lisa Bowman) lives in a drab suburb of Florida's Broward County with her police detective father and her dull husband. One Friday night, she dresses up and heads for the local bar, where she meets Lee (Larry Fesenden). Lee is an equally lonely layabout who grew up in a broken home and has been thrown out of the house he's shared with his mother and grandmother. Cozy and Lee could hardly be more ordinary; everything about them, starting with their looks, is average. Lacking the opportunity to live anything but a bleak existence, they somehow ignite within each other the possibility of a more adventurous life. Circumstances lead them to believe they could be killers, although they are clueless—they are stopped at a toll gate because they lack a quarter.

Cozy narrates the film in a deliberately flat and affectless voice,