

the visions

notes about cinema

34th MDQFILMFEST (2019) | A palm tree that catches fire in the middle of the desert: Nina Menkes retrospective

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In the screening of *The Great Sadness of Zohara*, Nina Menkes held something that may be a possible clue to think about her work: the hero's path is not the same for women. That structure that Joseph Campbell identified in dozens of myths in *The Hero of a Thousand Faces*, and that always concludes with the triumphant return after a journey through strange lands, does not work in the same way for female characters. If the hero returns home victorious with his loot, the heroine returns to discover that his adventures have not changed their place in the world; that after all that has gone through, no recognition awaits her.

If there is no place for women in the epic, new ways of telling their experiences may have to be invented. In that sense, the cinema of Nina Menkes explodes the structure of the classic story without abandoning the story altogether. If their protagonists survive in a world in which they can only lose, how could their stories take the form of a victorious journey? How to do, then, to shape alienation? How to count violence without reproducing it?



The Great Sadness of Zohara It is, in its own way, the most direct criticism of that classical structure, because it relies on it to construct other things. In this hybrid medium-length film, where a fictional character tracks the portrait of the real, Tinka Menkes - the filmmaker's sister and alter ego - plays a young Orthodox Jew who embarks on a journey through a universe that is completely alien to her. The protagonist leaves Jerusalem behind to immerse herself in the Arab world; there is no more absolute otherness for her. This is also the story of another trip: that of Nina and Tinka, who toured Israel and Morocco camera in hand and returned with a handful of images full of beauty and desolation. Both, inside and outside fiction, gradually reveal the experience of that new world. But their presence is also a catalyst: in those eyes that rest on them, in the reactions they wake up in their wake, and even with the impunity that gives them to be foreigners, inequality is recorded in the film. However, Menkes does not want to be a documentary filmmaker: when reality cracks for his character, realism is also breaking; even if it is as small as a tuft of colored hair that appears under a veil. A trip is always an inner journey: *The Great Sadness of Zohara* is the portrait of a disheveled woman who tries to find out, even if she fails, if there is any other place in the world for her.



The Bloody Child part of a disturbing police news - the story of a *marine* who, upon returning from the Gulf War, killed his wife and was found digging a grave in the middle of the desert - to build a portrait of the violence that underlies the American society Tinka Menkes plays one of the officers who arrest the murderer here, shaken by the investigation of an act as absurd as rooted in a background of horror. But this is not a police film but a fragmentary account that blurs the boundaries between the subjective and the real, while portraying the military culture of the United States in an almost documentary manner.

Menkes does not give rise to femicide in the film. Not only to avoid reproducing the violence it calls into question; perhaps also because in his world violence cannot be confined to a point in time, but it unfolds and stalks even in the most everyday. What we see are its consequences and its conditions of possibility, which take on a fragmentary, spiral shape, which is amplified with each turn, and where the trauma stalks us again, like the protagonist, again and again and again. Murder is a black hole that devours everything.

In contrast to what some of the characters hint at - "maybe he cheated on it," the Marines who guard the detainee and the corpse murmur - gender violence is a punctual event whose justification must be found, but a network that sustains the world as it is. as it is, whose plot, in any case, must be unearthed. Their layers accumulate and, when we believe that we are going to find the exit, they drag us back to the bottom. *The Bloody Child* has the form of despair.



If *The Bloody Child* works with the fragment, *Queen of Diamonds* builds the experience of alienation from duration. If the protagonist of *The Bloody Child* is locked in an instant that condenses the violence that goes through her whole life, Firdaus endures the existence in the middle of that nightmare city that is Las Vegas. Incarnated again by Tinka Menkes, the protagonist of *Queen of Diamonds* She is a young blackjack croupier immersed in a devastating world. Between the incessant noise of the machines, the violence that is heard in the air and the tedium of their work nights, Firdaus is caught in a claustrophobic repetition - although here too, at times, the mundane seems to begin to crack before his eyes and those of the spectators.

With a rigorous work of composition and a time management that brings up the tension of duration, Menkes paints the portrait of a desolate universe like the desert landscape. *Queen of Diamonds* is the counter of a country made of sequins and neon; the portrait of those who have nothing left but to resist. Perhaps, when everything is over, nothing has changed for Firdaus. But both she and her spectators *have seen*: neither she nor we will be the same.

An oasis, a palm tree that burns in the middle of the desert: that is also Menkes' movies.



Festivals

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