Shadow Sides: The Spiritual Journeys of Nina Menkes

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For years now, when watching narrative movies—especially those in which tone or mood is paramount—my running internal monologue often surfaces variations on the same question: Could you accomplish something similar in literature? It's not novelization per se that interests me—whether you could make a specific movie into a book. The questions that rattle around in my mind have more to do with narration or how the story is told. Consider the way that Chantal Akerman's *Jeanne Dielman, 23, quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles,* by presenting a litany of household chores performed in their entirety, makes the viewer's experience of time crucial to the film's efficacy as commentary on women's labor. Or the way that in Claire Denis's *Beau travail* the camera's oscillation between parched salt flats and bronzed, muscular bodies suffuses the plot with an ominousness—a climate of repressed desire and its complement, violence—that is not manifest in the dialogue alone. An image can telegraph considerable information all at once, an economy of means that gives film an edge when it comes to description; words and sentences, by contrast, must be arranged one after the next. The novel, though, can better penetrate the inner consciousness of its characters, to relay precisely what a character thinks about herself and the world—there are of course ways to achieve this effect in film, but a camera can never access sustained interiority the way that writing can.

When I play this game with the work of American filmmaker Nina Menkes, the question I ponder most often is whether a character in a novel could be the protagonist and at the same time appear "minor." In each of Menkes's five narrative features and two shorter pictures to date, she uses wide, static shots, elliptical editing, and layered soundtracks to conjure the personalized worlds of her protagonists—including all of their biases, illusions, and distorted perceptions, which shape the reality we see on-screen. Her protagonists, in all but one case a woman, are also stand-ins for Menkes herself. It's not that her movies are autobiographical; rather, they are explorations of alter egos—what Menkes, who spent seventeen years in Jungian analysis, has spoken of as her shadow sides. In a novel, seeing the world through the

protagonist's consciousness tends to make the reader feel "close" to them. But Menkes's main characters retain a sense of being far-off, unknowable, almost as if they are background figures in the films about them. If this conflict is disorienting, it's also transfixing; in many ways, it's the engine that powers her films.

Menkes was raised in Berkeley, California, in the 1960s, born to European Jews who as children had fled Nazi persecution and immigrated to Palestine; after marrying, the couple relocated to the United States, where Menkes and her younger sister, Tinka, were born. Growing up, the two girls spent their days outdoors playing games and bouncing around the streets (there was no television at home). In the summers, they regularly traveled with their parents to Israel to visit relatives. Although not observant, the family maintained a secular relationship with Judaism, a connection that would prove influential on Nina's work. Other childhood encounters with spiritual ideas would also endure: at around age ten, Nina hosted a "witch school," leading a group of neighborhood children through a book of spells she herself assembled. (A 2012 retrospective of her films had the title Cinema as Sorcery.) Barring the occasional visit to the Pacific Film Archive in her teenage years, she seldom watched movies, instead nurturing an attraction to the arts through dance, choreography, and still photography. It wasn't until she was in her midtwenties, after a brief stint as a camera operator for a local news station, that she recognized film as an apt substrate on which to explore her aptitudes—for making images, for combining movement with sound.

In 1980, Menkes arrived at UCLA's film school. She was intent on creating narrative-driven work, but her own narrow exposure to cinema meant that she had not brought with her an internalized catalog of references to align with or push against. Rather than feeling deterred by her relative unfamiliarity with the medium, Menkes found freedom in it, from the start crafting a sui generis approach distilled from intuition and interiority, and in which she would take on nearly every role: writer, director, producer, cinematographer, editor. She landed on the ideal cinematic surrogate for herself—her sister, Tinka—while making her first film, *A Soft Warrior* (1981), a short based on the siblings' relationship and Tinka's illness with lupus. For this, Menkes has chance to thank: when the actor she had cast in the Tinka role failed to arrive, the elder Menkes turned to her sister, asking if she would be willing to play herself. Tinka, reluctant to act out her own sickness, agreed to be in the film on the condition that instead she play Nina. Nina then found another actor to play Tinka. Watching the footage after it came back from the lab, the sisters were astounded by the intensity of their dynamic, captured in Tinka's on-screen performance. Their collaboration, which would continue through Menkes's subsequent four films, became a way of working through their real-life relationship as sisters on "some very deep archetypal level," Menkes has said, the trauma in

their family history.

Top of page: *Queen of Diamonds;* above: *The Great Sadness of Zohara*

Menkes released her featurette, *The Great Sadness of Zohara,* two years later, in 1983, while still a student. The film follows an agitated, despondent Zohara (Tinka)—the picture's only character—as she leaves Jerusalem's Mea Shearim neighborhood, home to the city's Haredi Jews, for Morocco's sunburned lowlands. Framed in wide, static shots, Zohara wanders through narrow, labyrinthine streets and open-air markets, motors through arid terrain, curls up to rest against painted doorways, all the while speaking to no one—rendering plausible the interpretation that everything is taking place in her head. Eventually she returns home to resume her previous life, still detached, isolated, and unrooted, the voyage having offered no means to transformation. Menkes enhances the film's moody, searching atmosphere through careful attention to color and sound: as Zohara begins her solitary voyage, the film's hues shift from muted grays and browns to blushing pinks and aquatic blues—both in the painted plaster of her new surroundings and in the textiles of her changed wardrobe. The nonsynchronous soundtrack features whispering, wailing, chanting, and stuttering voices (some of them selections from compositions by Luciano Berio); bells peal and wind chimes gently ring.

Though the film's setting immediately calls to mind conflict and oppression, Zohara's precise geographic locations, what city or country she's in, are not the picture's primary concern; what matters more is that she is traveling through the desert. It's an environment Menkes returns to repeatedly in her films, both for its biblical resonances (the spiritually lost Israelites forced to wander for forty years; the temptation of Jesus Christ in the desert) and its New Age ones, as a site of infertility, desolation, imperilment, and death, but also of clarity and discovery, an enchanted void whose nothingness compels the mind inward and facilitates purification.

Menkes's first feature, *Magdalena Viraga* (1986), which concerns sexual exploitation and women's marginalization by the church, takes place in east Los Angeles. But the desert reappears in her second feature, the exquisite *Queen of Diamonds* (1991), a consideration of economic exploitation and America's great religion: capitalism. Here Tinka's character—called Firdaus, after the 1975 novel *Woman at Point Zero,* by Nawal El Saadawi, in which a woman is sentenced to death for murdering her oppressor—wanders through a different

desert, Las Vegas, that modern-day Sodom and Gomorrah. This time the geographic specifics are important. Firdaus is a croupier at a second-tier casino; she lives in a run-down motel apartment and, in a city inhospitable to pedestrians, often walks on foot. The camera follows her to the lively blackjack tables where she works; to the motel room of a dying elderly man she cares for; to a nearby lake where she lies out in the sun. Meanwhile we receive a slow wash of impressions cast back to us with Firdaus's characteristic dispassion, everything in her path—a man crucified, three elephants swaying in a parking lot, the fronds of a palm tree ablaze—austere and radiating futility, the city girdled by an aura of violence.

Menkes has never fit neatly into a particular lineage of American filmmakers or with a group of peers who share an affinity. In interviews, she has flat-out rejected the label *experimental*. Although her films make use of techniques more familiar to the avant-garde—elliptical editing, nonsynchronous sound, rapid montage—they cannot be reduced to them; her investment is in narrative. But to slot her in with low-budget-indie directors working in opposition to the Hollywood system also seems like a category mistake. "My own films," she has said, "were not . . . *against* anything." They were simply an expression of self.

By her own description, Menkes doesn't *make* films so much as perform a kind of mediumship; images reveal themselves to her, and she is merely the channel through which they end up on the screen. Some films she begins shooting with only the germ of an idea, the structure materializing along the way. Others she has made by generating a script that incorporates the images she has either seen or visualized over a period of months and recorded onto index cards. Menkes's commitment to psychic excavation holds something in common with filmmaker Maya Deren, who spent years in Haiti, inspired by the spiritual implications of Vodou. Although their aesthetic output is nothing alike, like Menkes, Deren used film to try to visualize the inner reality of the mind and bring nonverbal thoughts to the screen. In this respect, Menkes also shares an affinity with the women artists of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries who in spirit drawings, psychic portraits, and metaphysical landscapes channeled inner mystic forces or forms conjured from the spirit world—figures such as Agnes Pelton, Hilma af Klint, Emma Kunz, and Georgiana Houghton. Through their participation in spiritualism, theosophy, the healing arts, and other esoteric beliefs, these artists found a form of freedom and autonomy that Christianity had denied to them. Although much has changed for women over the past hundred years, Menkes's own spiritual search and corresponding creative one have led her to look outside of the Abrahamic frameworks for much the same reasons.

In the midaughts, Menkes arrived at a kind of spiritual breakthrough. She was meeting several times a week with an Iraqi shaman and psychic healer in whose care she practiced active lucid dreaming, a physically exhausting experience she has described as a "descent into my own inner darkness," as long-repressed images forced their way into her conscious mind. But with the arduousness came a kind of release, one her subsequent films would mark.

Phantom Love

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The images that erupted during this spiritual odyssey formed the script for her 2007 picture, *Phantom Love*. It's the first of Menkes's films to be shot in black and white and to rely on a cinematographer, Christopher Soos, to help set up the shots (though Menkes operated the camera). It's also the first to be made without Tinka. The opening scene introduces the elegant Lulu (Marina Shoif) as she lays expressionless beneath an animated lover, his cadenced breath and the metrical creaking of bedsprings a backing track to the sirens cawing on the street outside. It's a bleak start; again we are in the company of a woman estranged from the world, alive but inert, as if trapped in aspic. The moodiness persists as the mostly static camera follows Lulu carrying out quotidian tasks—applying makeup, filing her manicured nails, going to work (like Firdaus, she is a croupier)—and observing sometimes menacing events in the environment around her (an arrest on the street, an abandoned baby in a basket in an alleyway, a man berating his wife as their two small children cower behind a chair). These episodes unfurl with the logic of a dream, the film's luminosity and velveted shadows amplifying the hallucinatory quality of the repeating images (an enormous anaconda snake, brutal news footage of the Iraq war) and elliptical editing. Are the events we are witnessing real? Or are they wandering reveries, small eruptions from the subconscious that Lulu experiences while having sex? For Menkes, the distinction is beside the point: all experience is real.

Around halfway through, a majestic if also violent scene of a woman hovering far above her bed (an homage to Andrei Tarkovsky's *Mirror*) announces a transition. From here, we begin to see in the alienated Lulu the stirrings of a transformation, as she contends directly with her overbearing mother and psychically disturbed sister (Juliette Marquis). As the film moves

toward its spiritually inflected denouement, Lulu starts to recover something like self-awareness, even empathy, as represented in a scene in which Lulu's face melds with her sister's (another homage, this time to Ingmar Bergman's *Persona*).

Dissolution

A similar note of sanguineness creeps in amid the torrent of despair in *Dissolution* (2010), Menkes's most recent film. Loosely based on Fyodor Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment,* the black-and-white feature is set in Jaffa, an Arab neighborhood in Tel Aviv, the setting once more carrying an implication of a fraught history not otherwise part of the diegesis. The script, Menkes has said, came to her during a short stay at a silent Trappist monastery, arriving "like a revelation." The first of her works to be shot on video, *Dissolution* is also a departure for Menkes in taking a man (Didi Fire) as its protagonist; as in the Dostoyevsky novel, he kills a pawnbroker and thereafter suffers anguished guilt. Despite his gender, he is no less a stand-in for Menkes than any of her women protagonists, a manifestation of her shadow masculine side—or animus, in the Jungian tradition. (And as if to remind us who is behind the camera, nearly all of the film's woman characters meet the viewer's eyes, staring directly through the fourth wall.) As with her earlier protagonists, he is also a marginal, alienated figure living on the periphery.

The moment of hopefulness arrives toward the end of the film, when the Raskolnikov figure seeks out a church confessional, albeit remains reluctant to speak. The priest tries to engage him. "My son," the priest says, recognizing the confessor's distress, "you can ask for faith." It's a first step for the man toward reckoning, accountability, and the eventual possibility of redemption; it's also a curious place for Menkes to land, given the skepticism she has previously shown toward the religions of the book—even more so because *Dissolution* seems to bring to a close a cycle of films chronicling her spiritual search. Has she returned, in the end, to ideas she rejected at the outset? Perhaps, although it seems unlikely. There is, I think, another way to understand the image. After all, the confessional booth is a darkened box into which secrets and dreams are projected, and the priest a kind of mirror, or light, eliciting self-examination. And isn't this, in the end, a lot like cinema?

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