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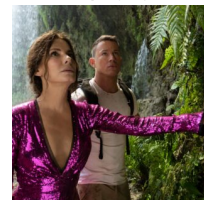
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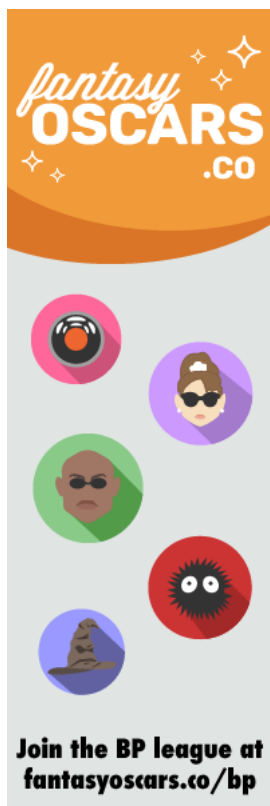
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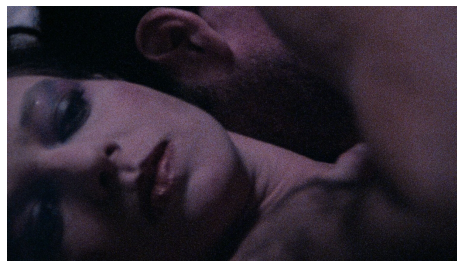


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Out Your Hand, by David Bax

BY · PUBLISHED MARCH 3, 2022 · UPDATED MARCH 22, 2022



Independent American filmmaker Nina Menkes—whose first film in over a decade, *Brainwashed: Sex-Camera-Power*, debuted at Sundance earlier this year—is having a moment, with retrospectives at BAM in New York City and at the American Cinematheque in Los Angeles. Among the films screening are two new restorations, 1986’s *Magdalena Viraga* (the screener I received was not of the restoration, it should be noted) and 1996’s *The Bloody Child* (which will also screen in Chicago in April).

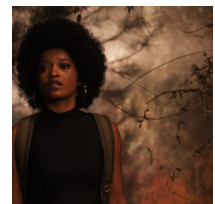
Watching the two films back to back—and already being familiar with the film that Menkes made in between, 1991’s *Queen of Diamonds*—the structural auteurist signature that stands out the most is a baroque form of nonlinear storytelling. *Magdalena Viraga*’s tale of a sex worker arrested and jailed under suspicion of having murdered a client only becomes clear over time, as the impressionistic fragments of her life accumulate into a fuller picture. Meanwhile, *The Bloody Child* takes the aftermath of a murder on a military base—in which a crime scene turns into a temporary workplace for marines, investigators and paramedics—as a trunk from which scenes can branch out in all temporal directions, only to return again and again to the gruesome but somehow banal central scene, where boredom and small talk make the site of a violent crime no less casual a space than a pool hall.

But Menkes’ even more recognizable calling card is her own sister, who plays

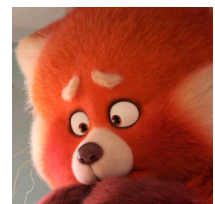
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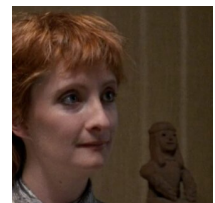
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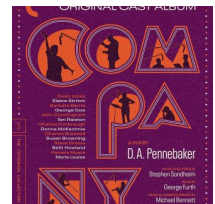


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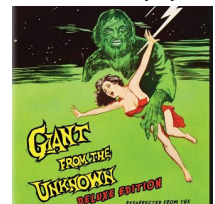


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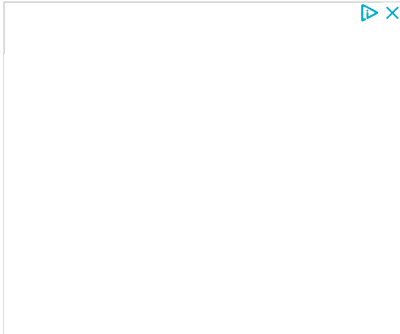
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the lead role in both films (as well as in *Queen of Diamonds* and the 1983 short “The Great Sadness of Zohara”). Tinka Menkes, small but with deep set eyes and full lips, is an indispensable physical performer even though her default mode (and that of the films themselves) is stillness.

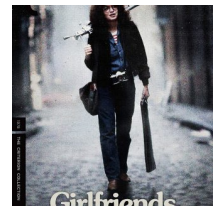
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Physicality and tactility are key descriptors for these films, which linger in the hot sun or in the filth of a dirt cheap motel. I would add sensuality to that list but for its sexual connotation; though sex is a fact in both movies, it’s transactional, violent, power-driven or some combination of all of the above, not sexy.

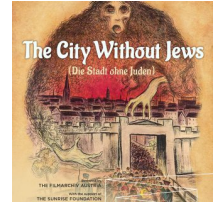
Feminism drives everything in Menkes’ work, not just through the narrative implications—in *Magdalena Viraga*, a woman’s body is reduced to a commodity, only seen as anything else by other women in the same line of work, “sisters who are not sisters”; in *The Bloody Child*, a marine is the only female presence except for the violated body of a murdered woman decomposing in the desert—but in form as well. Menkes is loathe to give the audience much more relief than her characters get, often lingering in uncomfortable moments. In these drawn out scenarios, we start to notice the textures of the space and the ongoing dull din of the world around until we realize that, like Tinka’s characters, we’re simply getting used to the discomfort.

Yet I keep thinking back to *Magdalena Viraga*’s subtitle, *Story of a Red Sea Crossing*. It implies that, however brutally Menkes depicts the world, her outlook is not fatalistic. There is the possibility, somehow, of escape and sanctuary. It’s hard to find in Menkes’ films but the knowledge that it’s there is what makes them sublime.

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