



CULTURE >>

In two rarely-shown films, a different view of Israel

By PJ Grisar

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Nina Menkes made two films set in Israel nearly 30 years apart. Both are about not belonging anywhere.

The director, who just debuted the documentary “Brainwashed” at Sundance, comes to her setting and subject in earnest, if perhaps at some remove. Born to European immigrant parents, who fled the Nazis and fought in the Palmach during the War of Independence, Menkes was born in America and raised in Berkeley, but made regular trips to Israel as a child. She’s fluent in Hebrew and studied Arabic in college and has lived in Jerusalem, where her parents grew up.

Her liminal identity – and \$7,000 – set the stage for her 1983 short “The Great Sadness of Zohara,” which had a crew of two: Menkes behind the camera and her sister and regular collaborator, Tinka Menkes, acting in front.

We meet Zohara carrying a suitcase and walking through the courtyard of an Orthodox housing complex in Jerusalem, white *talitot* swinging from clothes lines above her. No one takes much notice of Zohara, as she bites an apple while Haredi men take inventory of lulavs, but her dark eyeshadow betrays her. Underneath her *tichel* is dyed blonde hair with dark roots. She may be living among these people now, but she is not of them. Where she comes from, and where she should be, is not known even to her.

“Zohara” has only one character, and she has no dialogue. Menkes and a team assembled an eerie soundscape – complete with threatening text from the Book of Job – that assails Zohara as she journeys from a Jewish quarter to a Muslim one and on to locales in North Africa, changing wardrobe and hair color as she goes. Zohara’s name, reminding us of the Zohar, tells us her sojourns have a mystery to them and it’s largely one of montage, with Menkes proving her talents as a location scout and cinematographer.

Tableaus of street life, shot long, give way to sailors loading ships and a stunning vista of sheep marching with the wind-bent grass, sand stirring just above them and stone structures and rocky escarpments even further back. Menkes, with her dream logic and patient, far-off grandeur, gives us a heady blend of David Lynch and David Lean.

Menkes’ camerawork is so meticulous that it makes the hissing, whispering, voiceover interrogations seem overdone and the hazy angst driving Zohara seem superficial as she drifts off to sleep in different places – once resting her head on a rock like Jacob before his vision of the ladder.

An outstanding moment breaks the mannered tension. As Zohara awakens from a dirt floor, much later than her large host family, she winces at the sun and chews gum, unprepared to start her day. Just as she walks off frame, a young girl leans into the shot, gesturing as if to say “Go ahead, your majesty.” Whatever sadness Zohara is shouldering, means little when measured against this girl’s daily existence.

In 2010, Menkes once again turned her camera to Israel, this time filming entirely on location in Jaffa. Where before she found stunning, disparate architecture, “Dissolution,” a loose adaptation of “Crime and Punishment,” finds its subtle differences in the sociological. Actor Didi Fire, the unnamed Raskolnikov, blows off his Arab landlord’s requests for rent. His Palestinian neighbors view him suspiciously – and they’re right to. He menaces a post office employee about a letter and, of course, he kills a woman who pawns jewelry – offscreen, as the camera lingers in the hallway.

Shooting in black and white, Menkes nonetheless kept her trademarks, allowing us to watch the killer at a distance as he recedes down a narrow street or alleyway. In moments of greater urgency she also goes handheld, tracking Fire’s rangy, twitchy motions as he stalks around his victim’s home or rummages, in real time, through a chest of her belongings. As he kneels there, picking through clothes and spare change, a pool of dark blood gathers at his knees.

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If Menkes’ expansive shots had a Lean quality in “Zohara,” here she plays Edward Hopper. The desolation Zohara navigated in crowds now suffocates a lonely bar, where there’s droning electronic music that no one dances to. The unnamed protagonist is nearly as enigmatic as Zohara, an animating mystery being why no one has managed to apprehend him, While we see police at the scene of a car crash and sirens wail throughout, the answer may be the same thing that torments him: even in his most audacious act, he remains insignificant.

With “Dissolution,” Menkes provides a study of violence in contemporary Israel. But that examination is vaguer than Fire’s alienation, which, while a partial product of his being a Jew among Arabs, taps into something more primal. As Menkes’ first male protagonist, this Hebrew Raskolnikov proves a failure of a prototypically masculine type, preparing a raw hunk of meat and whetting a knife to a metronome (shirtless). Despite obvious differences, though, he shares features with Zohara, waking up alone in the same strange places to the same muezzin calls.

Viewed as companion pieces – they will be shown together at a BAM retrospective on March 6 – the works offer a rare opportunity to see a director’s progress on a theme and, in this case, a region of the world. Menkes’ strengths in each reside in imagery and mood rather than societal critique, but her perspective makes the films like little else produced in Israel.

Like her characters, she exists of and outside these worlds, allowing for a cinematic detachment that finds a detail of a rusted metal gate, and matches it to the horns of a snail on the gravel below. As she follows Zohara or Fire through narrow arcades and scuffed stairways, she maps out their mental state. That Menkes dreamed up much of “Dissolution” in a [silent Trappist monastery](#), and studied “[active lucid-dreaming](#)” with an Iraqi Jewish shaman, can account for the rest of the films’ atmosphere, accessing an unconscious that often makes you squeamish.

Menkes’ dreams of the Israeli and Arab world may not be lucid – nor should they be. But like most dreams they bear the impressions of waking life. They are a grander and more brutal reality and, at their best, a truer one.

The Brooklyn Academy of Music’s Nina Menkes retrospective begins March 4. “The Great Sadness of Zohara” and “Dissolution” are showing Sunday, March 6. Tickets and information can be [found here](#).

Nina Menkes’ Israel films are portraits of outsiders

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