

Nina Menkes: giving voice to female rage and despair

The women at the heart of the feminist director's potent, oneiric films are all refuseniks, turning their backs on the roles assigned by a capitalist patriarchy

BY SOPHIA SATCHELL-BAEZA

"I hate working. I can't stand working. I hate working. I can't stand working." Ida, a young and alienated sex worker in East Los Angeles, insists in a disaffected cadence on how much she *hates* work. Soon she will be accused of killing a john and sent to a prison ruled over by nuns, where she retreats deeper and deeper into her inner world. This is *Magdalena Viraga*, American independent filmmaker Nina Menkes's dream-like yet urgent feature debut from 1986. Like so many of Menkes's female protagonists, Ida is beautiful and she is alone. Profoundly alienated by work but dependent on its income to survive, she will eventually refuse to cooperate.

"If you're a woman artist, everything is against you. This feeling can take you to the edge of suicide," Menkes tells me flatly. A feminist director of bewitching and elliptical narrative art cinema, Menkes has independently produced, directed and photographed her films from the beginning, in an ongoing struggle to raise money while staying true to her artistic and political vision. Her output is small but indelible: six features, a handful of shorts and now, a new documentary, *Brainwashed: Sex-Camera-Power*. This post-#MeToo exposé of the sexist representation of women in film and its wider social implications is her most accessible – and certainly most literal – film to date. Menkes's estranged fictional characters, at some level, represent a part of her: "Not me in my normal, day-to-day life, but an archetypal aspect of trying to survive as someone who does not accept what is being dishd out."

Whether engaged in sex or care work or ploughing away in the military or gambling industries, Menkes's low-income heroines are trapped in a vortex of patriarchal violence, alienated labour and capitalist consumption. Though shot in long takes and exquisitely framed in oneiric,

often static compositions, the American Dream sure looks like a living nightmare. "My characters generally don't have solutions to what makes them rage and despair, but at least they express it and they refuse at a certain level to participate." These women are "saying no but haven't really learned what they can say yes to. Maybe there isn't anything they can say yes to?"

Menkes grew up in a leftist Jewish family in Berkeley, California, during the 1960s. Her parents, refugees from Nazi Germany, had initially resettled in Jerusalem before moving to New York to study, and then to California, where they started a family. Though Menkes didn't grow up around the cinema, she did have an "early inclination towards performance and magic", putting on plays with her sister Tinka, running a witch school for the neighbours and dreaming vividly.

"My mother was in Jungian analysis when I was growing up. She was always writing down her dreams and encouraged us to write ours down... They say whatever you water, it grows. I grew up paying a lot of attention to my dream life and my inner psychic life." Menkes followed her into Jungian analysis. Specific dreams rematerialise in her films, for reasons she doesn't always understand. In this and other interviews, Menkes asserts her reliance on the intuitive process: "I resist an intellectual understanding of my work until after it's done because I feel my intuition is stronger than my rational brain." The editing process is, however, different: "Gathering material is one hundred per cent intuition," she says, "but the editing process is where the intellectual rigour can come to bear."

Menkes started making films while at UCLA in Berkeley. The first of these, *A Soft Warrior*, from 1981 – a short, ritualistic film shot on Super 8 – marked the start of an intense collaboration with her sister,

OPPOSITE TOP
Nina Menkes

OPPOSITE BOTTOM
The Great Sadness of Zohara (1983)

BELOW
The Bloody Child (1996)





Tinka. A punk cipher of feminine rage and resistance, and a defiant performer with an astounding physical presence, Tinka is the magnetic centre of Menkes's early films through to *The Bloody Child* (1996).

In *The Great Sadness of Zohara* (1983), Tinka plays an Orthodox Jewish woman on a journey to the other side. ("For a Jewish girl from Jerusalem, the so-called 'other side' is the Arab world"). Borrowing \$5,000 from UCLA, the Menkes sisters set off for Jerusalem and North Africa. This densely incantatory short rewires the archetypal hero's quest – explored in the work of Jung or Joseph Campbell's 1949 study of quest narratives, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* – from a distinctively feminine perspective: "In classic narratives you have a hero who leaves home, travels into foreign lands, slays dragons, grabs the princess and brings her home. A perfect example of sexist imperialism." Shooting on 16mm film, they didn't see the footage until they got back to LA. Menkes was shocked when she saw the material: "My god, this woman is so alienated. It was as if the camera captured my inner truth. The film was like a dream that was talking back to me. And this was before I got into analysis!"

Menkes's films have minimal, albeit potent, narratives, which fracture and split apart, and even double in later films. They return to symbolically redolent, barren landscapes (the desert, the casino, the run-down motel) and are punctuated by periods of extreme stasis in which nothing much happens. A gesture or act is extended beyond its normal duration in a film, like the unforgettable 17-minute blackjack sequence in *Queen of Diamonds* (1991), a hypnotic portrait of alienated labour. But then an image will suddenly conspire to take your breath away. Protagonists seem numb to extraordinary events – a death, a burning palm tree in the desert – but audiences, if they submit, may be riveted. "Some people think *Magdalena Viraga* was influenced by Chantal Akerman, but I made that film before I saw *Jeanne Dielman*. *Queen of Diamonds* was certainly influenced by it though."

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Why, then, does she reject the term 'experimental'? "At least in Hollywood, 'experimental' was something of a dirty word. It gave the impression of very low budgets, which was true, although I always wanted one! It also suggested completely non-narrative films. I've always been interested in narrative arcs and characters. Do people call David Lynch, Antonioni, Tarkovsky experimental filmmakers? No, they are just original. One of the reasons my work was labelled experimental was that it went against the whole male perspective on life. I don't think my films are experimental, they are just oppositional."

The Bloody Child shows Menkes at her most intense and hallucinatory. Originating in a *Los Angeles Times* news clipping about a Gulf War veteran who murdered his pregnant wife and was found digging her grave in the desert, "this little story contained everything: about violence and patriarchal constructs. I knew I had to dive into it, but also knew I had to approach this differently." Menkes shot the film without a script, because she wanted to take her philosophy ("We jump into the unknown and find the truth") and push it to the max. We never see the murder but follow the unfolding story horizontally, through piercing shards of repetitive, cyclical action, like the displays of toxic masculinity from the off-duty Marines. At times, I find the film almost unbearable because of its claustrophobic tension, but am dragged back in by the startling beauty of its images.

Menkes calls *The Bloody Child* "the descent into hell... there was nowhere to go but up towards the light." The films that come after it are more accessible, more narrative in a traditional sense. *Phantom Love* (2007), her first film in black and white, is also her most explicitly surrealist, with evocative dream images that can be parsed relatively straightforwardly.

Menkes returns us to the bustling casino and the disaffected female croupier of *Queen of Diamonds* ("I couldn't believe this character kept haunting me!"), although coordinates have shifted from Las Vegas to Koreatown in L.A. In a startling sequence, the wounded woman levitates above the bed and shatters, fragmenting into droplets. The wound has finally burst. There is a glimmer of hope.

Because *Phantom Love* portrayed "a sort of illumination" after the darkness of *The Bloody Child*, Menkes felt ready to explore something different next. Her first film shot digitally, *Dissolution* (2010) also features her first male protagonist, played by Israeli actor Didi Fire. Menkes takes on the "wounded male counterpart to the alienated female character I'd been tracking all these years." His violence towards the feminine is also tied, Menkes notes, to Israeli violence against the Palestinians. Male violence is not glorified or celebrated, because he's shown as "morally corrupt and weak inside".

Placing a man at the heart of her work for the first time prepared her to make a film like *Brainwashed*. Though it sounds like a bold step into the unknown, she is also revisiting familiar terrain, mining subjects and themes she's explored before. "I just didn't have the reverence for the masterful male filmmakers that others had. This is not to say I don't revere great filmmakers, but I was always aware that the position of women in these films was not representative. I didn't see some of the classic patriarchal films until fairly late in my filmmaking. I was literally afraid to see those films. I thought they would destroy me."

The season 'Cinematic Sorceress: The Films of Nina Menkes' runs at BFI Southbank in May. Menkes will be in conversation on 10 May, following a screening of *Brainwashed: Sex-Camera-Power*, which is released by the BFI on 12 May. A two-disc Region A Blu-ray of her films is out now from Arbelos Films

