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Reframing Visual Narrative: The Intersectional Gaze in Nina Menkes's *Magdalena Viraga*

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ABSTRACT

This article contributes to feminist film theory by introducing the concept of the 'intersectional gaze.' Building on Laura Mulvey's triad of cinematic looks—the camera, the audience, and the characters—it proposes three interrelated perspectives: the 'fractured lens,' 'reflexive visions,' and 'embodied perspectives.' Rather than simply inverting Mulvey's male gaze theory, the 'intersectional gaze' highlights cinema's capacity to reveal and interrogate marginalized identities and their experiences. A close reading of Nina Menkes's *Magdalena Viraga: Story of A Red Sea Crossing* (1986), a film influenced by Gertrude Stein's novel *Ida*, demonstrates how the film critiques patriarchal visual conventions and foregrounds intersectional oppressions. Drawing on Kimberlé Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's concepts of 'desiring-production,' the 'body without organs,' and 'deteritorialization,' as well as Jacques Lacan's notion of the uncanny, the analysis shows how Menkes disrupts dominant cinematic forms. The film emerges as a site of resistance, positioning the 'intersectional gaze' as a critical strategy for challenging hegemonic cinematic language and centering marginalized subjectivities. This study ultimately affirms the role of feminist cinema in dismantling oppressive systems and imagining more inclusive modes of representation.

Introduction

Kimberlé Crenshaw, an American scholar of critical race theory, coined the term "intersectionality" in 1989 to describe how overlapping systems of oppression, such as racism, sexism, and classism, shape the experiences of marginalized individuals. She observed that "the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism" (140), encouraging scholars to explore the complex interplay between multiple axes of identity. Social theorist Patricia Hill Collins further expanded this perspective through the concept of the "matrix of domination," emphasizing the interlocking nature of race, gender, class, and other systems of power that perpetuate inequality (277).

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These frameworks have become essential for analyzing marginalized identities in cultural representation.

Independent filmmaker Nina Menkes, a prominent figure in feminist cinema, employs visual and narrative strategies that resonate with these theoretical thoughts, especially in *Magdalena Viraga: Story of a Red Sea Crossing* (1986). Drawing on Gertrude Stein's novel *Ida* (1941), Menkes adopts a fragmented narrative structure to explore alienation, dislocation, and identity. Stein's experimental approach prioritized "creation (...) between the pen and the paper" (qtd. in Meyer xv), using repetition and "the minutest variation" (qtd. in Meyer 4) to generate a rhythmic immersion that resists classical storytelling. Her fragmented, "opaque compositions" (Meyer xxi) require active audience engagement, a demand echoed by Menkes through her disruption of cinematic conventions. Menkes similarly challenges viewers to respond intuitively to symbolic, fractured narratives. This shared resistance to linearity and causality positions both Stein and Menkes as radical innovators in their respective fields. Menkes reflects these thematic concerns through her exploration of alienation, informed by her background as a first-generation American of European Jewish heritage. She describes herself as "not really rooted in any one culture" (Menkes and Toufic 157), a sense of displacement evident across her films. This rootlessness appears consistently in *The Great Sadness of Zohara* (1983), *Magdalena Viraga: Story of a Red Sea Crossing* (1986), and *Queen of Diamonds* (1991), each of which confronts systemic oppression and occupies disorienting, liminal spaces.

Menkes's experience in choreography and dance has significantly influenced her cinematic practice. She credits this tradition—centered on movement and sound rather than dialogue—as enabling resistance to conventional narrative forms (Menkes and Toufic 155). As an auteur, Menkes maintains creative control over all aspects of production, including writing, directing, cinematography, and editing (Menkes, *Magdalena Viraga* press kit). Her longstanding collaboration with her sister, actress Tinka Menkes, further reinforces a singular cinematic vision. This uncompromising approach has earned her recognition as "one of the most challenging and provocative artists in film today" (Thomas, "Growing Apart").

In *Magdalena Viraga*, Menkes offers a radical feminist critique of systemic patriarchy through the life of *Ida* (Tinka Menkes), a prostitute caught in structures of economic and social exploitation. Menkes describes the film as "A HALLUCINOGENIC JOURNEY THROUGH THE BOUNDLESS VORTEX OF UNADULTERATED FEMALE SPACE" (Menkes, *Magdalena Viraga* script), emphasizing its intuitive, symbolic engagement with feminist discourse. Inspired by her reflections on objectification and gendered violence, the film shares thematic affinities with Chantal Akerman's *Jeanne Dielman, 23 quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975). However, Menkes

completed *Magdalena Viraga* before viewing Akerman's work (Menkes, *Magdalena Viraga* press kit).

Despite film's recognition at major festivals and the scholarly attention it has received (Willis 1992; Kinder 1999; Petrolle 2000; Naficy 2001; Privett 2002; Petrolle 2005; Reynaud 2008; Lehmann 2010; Pasternak 2012), intersectional analysis of Menkes's work remains limited. I seek to address this gap by extending and refining Laura Mulvey's seminal concept of the "male gaze" into an "intersectional gaze"—a theoretical framework that advances feminist film theory by incorporating the experiences and perspectives of marginalized identities within cinematic representation. The above framework provides a more inclusive analytical approach, one attuned to the complexities of intersecting oppressions, including—but not limited to—gender, race, class, sexuality, and nationality.

Feminist film theory and the gaze

To analyze the intersectional dimensions of *Magdalena Viraga*, it is first necessary to situate the concept of the "intersectional gaze" within feminist film theory. Feminism has profoundly influenced social movements and cultural discourses, significantly shaping the evolution of Anglo-American film studies since the 1970s. Patricia White observes that "as a critical methodology, feminism [...] makes salient the category of gender and gender hierarchy in all forms of knowledge and areas of inquiry. The female image—the female as image—has been a central feature of film and related visual media [...]" (White, "Feminism and Film" 117).

White's statement highlights feminism's crucial role in challenging representations of women in cinema, a medium historically dominated by patriarchal perspectives. Laura Mulvey's groundbreaking 1975 essay, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," introduced the concept of the "male gaze," demonstrating how classical Hollywood cinema reflected and reinforced patriarchal power through visual and narrative strategies (6). Mulvey's concept has profoundly impacted feminist film studies; it has challenged dominant cinematic norms and inspired filmmakers and scholars to explore alternative representations of women on screen.

Although Mulvey's theory remains a foundational pillar of feminist film theory, scholars have identified its limitations. In response, they articulated the concept of the "female gaze" as a critical counterpoint to reclaim female subjectivity (Kuhn 1982; Kaplan 1983, 2000; Doane 1987, 1991; Muir 1989; Williams 1989; hooks 1992; Silverman 1992; Ettinger 1995; Dirse 2011; Soloway 2016). Teresa de Lauretis asserts that the aim of women's cinema "is no longer that of destroying or disrupting man-centered vision [...]" but rather "to effect another vision: to construct other subjects and objects of vision" (135). However, theorists such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988),

Chela Sandoval (2000), Chandra Talpade Mohanty (2003), and Inderpal Grewal (2005) have shown that dominant feminist narratives, often grounded in Western theories, remain insufficient to address the complexities of global women's cinema (White, *Women's Cinema* 11). The "intersectional gaze" emerges from this tension; it extends debates began with the "male gaze" and further problematizes the "female gaze."

The intersectional gaze: New perspectives

This section extends Laura Mulvey's theory of visual pleasure by rethinking cinematic practices through an intersectional lens. Mulvey identified three looks in traditional cinema: "that of the camera as it records the pro-filmic event, that of the audience as it watches the final product, and that of the characters at each other within the screen illusion" (Mulvey 17). She argued that classical Hollywood cinema subordinated the first two looks to sustain the third, reinforcing phallogocentric narrative logic and privileging the voyeuristic pleasure of a presumed male spectator (Mulvey 17).

My model of the "intersectional gaze" builds on Mulvey's triad by introducing three interlinked modes of seeing: the "fractured lens," "reflexive visions," and "embodied perspectives." Each aligns with—but also complicates—Mulvey's schema by centering difference, marginalization, and transnational feminist critique.

The "Fractured Lens" (the filmmaker's gaze) corresponds to Mulvey's first look: that of the camera. While Mulvey argued that mainstream cinema conventionally erases the camera's presence to maintain diegetic unity and spectator immersion (Mulvey 18), an intersectional approach insists on the camera's visibility as a site of resistance. In marginalized women filmmakers' work, the fractured lens destabilizes cinematic illusion. Through non-linear narrative and spatial disorientation, this lens disrupts the seamless realism that sustains patriarchal visual pleasure. It draws attention to the filmmaker's subjectivity, particularly when that subjectivity exists outside normative structures of power.

The "Reflexive Visions" (the spectator's gaze) corresponds to Mulvey's second look: the audience's gaze. Mulvey emphasized how spectators are absorbed into the "voyeuristic-scopophilic" structure of classical cinema, identifying with male protagonists and objectifying female figures (Mulvey 17). Reflexive visions, however, account for how marginalized spectators—such as Black women, queer viewers, and diasporic audiences—actively negotiate rather than passively internalize dominant visual codes. They engage in what bell hooks terms the "oppositional gaze." These viewers often occupy what Patricia Hill Collins describes as the "matrix of domination," shaping their interpretations through critical distance, lived experience, and resistance rather than through identification with power.

The “Embodied Perspectives” (the characters’ gaze) aligns with Mulvey’s third look: the exchange of gazes between characters. Mulvey argued that classical cinema rendered women primarily as erotic spectacle, or “to-be-looked-at-ness” (Mulvey 11). Embodied perspectives confront the structural exclusions within Mulvey’s active-male/passive-female binary (Mulvey 11), presenting characters whose gazes are shaped not only by gender but also by race, class, sexuality, and geopolitical position. These figures are not static objects within the diegesis but complex subjects who actively see, desire, resist, and narrate.

While building on Mulvey’s original triad, this model interrogates its universalizing assumptions. It exposes how visibility is structured by power, revealing that acts of looking can operate as gestures of refusal, disruption, and transformation.

In theorizing the “intersectional gaze,” I engage broader discourses of power and representation. My framework draws on Kimberlé Crenshaw’s theory of intersectionality, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s concepts of “desiring-production,” the “body without organs,” and “deterritorialization,” as well as Jacques Lacan’s notion of the uncanny.

This reframing is particularly valuable when analyzing films such as Nina Menkes’s *Magdalena Viraga*, which disrupts both cinematic form and social expectation. By extending Mulvey’s insights through intersectional and transnational feminist perspectives, “the intersectional gaze” emphasizes the importance of theorizing from the margins, attending to *who* looks, *how* they look, and *why*. This analysis, then, asks: How does *Magdalena Viraga* illuminate intersections of gender, sexuality, and class within its narrative and cinematic language? What does the “intersectional gaze” reveal about the film’s portrayal of domination and resistance?

“Line of flight” in cinema: A Deleuzo-Guattarian approach to the “intersectional gaze”

As conceptualized in this study, the “intersectional gaze” interrogates the entangled dynamics of identity, power, and resistance within cinematic representation. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s concepts of “desiring-production,” the “body without organs,” and “deterritorialization”—from *Anti-Oedipus* (1972) and *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980)—offer critical tools for disrupting dominant visual logics and imagining alternatives beyond normative regimes.

In Deleuze and Guattari’s terms, “desiring-production” rejects the psychoanalytic model of desire as a lack. “Desire does not lack anything; it does not lack its object,” they write. “It is, rather, the *subject* that is missing in desire, or desire that lacks a fixed subject” (Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus* 26). This redefinition casts desire as

a productive, machinic force, one that generates flows, connections, and ruptures. Within feminist cinema, this shift reframes desire not as lack but as creative potential, allowing identity to emerge as a fluid process rather than a fixed category.

Central to this framework is the concept of the “body without organs,” defined as “the unproductive, the sterile, the unengendered, the unconsumable” (*Anti-Oedipus* 8). Deleuze and Guattari emphasize: “It is not a projection; it has nothing whatsoever to do with the body itself, or with an image of the body. It is the body without an image” (8). The body without organs resists stratification and rejects the organizing logics imposed by social institutions—including cinema. Within intersectional film analysis, it enables readings of cinematic bodies not as coherent or fully legible subjects, but as sites of intensity, fragmentation, and becoming. Filmmakers who construct such bodies disrupt dominant visual codes that anchor gender, sexuality, and class within normative representational regimes.

“Deterritorialization” expands this critique by disrupting fixed structures and forms. Deleuze and Guattari define it as “the movement by which ‘one’ leaves a territory” (Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* 508). It is not passive displacement, but a rupture that opens new possibilities. In cinema, deterritorialization occurs when films reject linear narrative, stable character development, or visual coherence, abandoning formal conventions that uphold dominant cinematic traditions. Feminist and intersectional filmmakers frequently deterritorialize representation itself, resisting the containment of identity, desire, and meaning within patriarchal and capitalist logics (*Anti-Oedipus* 277).

From this perspective, the “intersectional gaze” insists on multiplicity, fluidity, and resistance. It challenges molar representations and opens space for what Deleuze and Guattari term a “line of flight” (French: *ligne de fuite*). Philosopher and translator of *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Brian Massumi clarifies that *fuite* “covers not only the act of fleeing or eluding but also flowing, leaking, and disappearing into the distance,” emphasizing it “has no relation to flying” (*A Thousand Plateaus* xvi). A line of flight is not simply an escape; rather it constitutes a transformational process that “connect[s] with other multiplicities” and “change[s] in nature” (*A Thousand Plateaus* 9). It breaks from dominant codes, forms new configurations and enables the emergence of “asignifying and asubjective” forms (9).

In cinema, these lines of flight emerge when representation ruptures and recomposes itself otherwise. This approach aligns with feminist efforts to dismantle structures of domination and to invent new visual languages.

Filmmaker's gaze—"the fractured lens"

In *Magdalena Viraga*, Nina Menkes employs a distinctive visual language defined by her use of lighting, point of view (POV) shots, and framing. In an interview with *Cinemad*, Menkes states: "I'm not interested in re-creating regular life, but rather, in trying to express the aspects life wears in secret" (Plante 5). This aim informs her cinematic practice, where visual and narrative strategies expose hidden layers of experience and emotion.

Lighting in the film expresses themes of repression and constraint. Menkes constructs spatial compositions dominated by shadow, occlusion, and enclosure. Many scenes unfold in dim interiors, where light enters only through slits or obstructed windows. These visual constraints intensify the protagonist's psychological and physical entrapment, simultaneously reflecting broader cultural mechanisms that suppress female agency and obscure women's subjectivities. In the hotel-brothel, for instance, scenes frequently appear saturated in red—a visual metaphor for Ida's commodified body and the intrinsic dehumanization of her labor. Red, typically associated with danger, blood, and passion, acquires a suffocating quality that reinforces Ida's confinement within an exploitative system.

Natural light remains notably absent, especially in Ida's interior spaces. This absence symbolizes her disconnection from nature and underscores the impossibility of liberation. In one violent scene, a bulb briefly illuminates Ida's face before plunging her back into darkness as she screams: "Slowly, slowly, slowly!" (*Magdalena Viraga*, 00:39:03–00:39:05). This oscillation between light and shadow reflects fleeting moments of resistance, quickly extinguished by systemic oppression. Menkes's lighting is tightly integrated with her camera work. Her use of point of view shots subverts traditional cinematic techniques by aligning the spectator with Ida's disempowered subjectivity. Frequent ceiling shots from Ida's perspective symbolize both psychological and physical imprisonment. This strategy recalls Christian Metz's assertion that "the spectator can do no other than identify with the camera" (49). Yet Menkes disrupts conventional mode of identification by embedding Ida's affective state into the frame. The result is a viewing experience that compels the audience to confront the monotony and claustrophobia of Ida's world.

Menkes's point of view technique also invites critical comparison with pornography, which typically aligns spectators with male power and desire. As Laura Mulvey notes, "the determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly" (11). In contrast, Menkes dismantles this voyeuristic structure. Repeated use of ceiling shots and oppressive framing denies viewers control or pleasure, situating them within Ida's disempowered gaze. This feminist reconfiguration rejects the passive female spectacle, advocating instead a confrontational visual

grammar. While Teresa de Lauretis does not write specifically about Menkes, her theoretical framework helps situate Menkes's practice within a broader feminist lineage. Filmmakers like Chantal Akerman and Lizzie Borden shifted cinematic images away from objectification toward depictions of women as social subjects (145). Menkes continues this tradition redefining point of view shots not as instruments of mastery but as acts of resistance and reflection.

Menkes's inversion of the pornographic point of view resonates with Vivian Sobchack's phenomenological framework, which argues that point of view can evoke embodied, subjective experience, collapsing the sensory distance between character and viewer (296). Menkes shifts identification from a position of power to one of discomfort and empathy, compelling the viewer to viscerally inhabit Ida's entrapment. Her camera lingers on mundane, dehumanizing details—the rough texture of a wall, dull pillows, fragmented, unflattering close-ups of clients—subverting pleasure through alienation.

In *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the "Frenzy of the Visible,"* Linda Williams describes pornography as a discourse that transforms sexuality into spectacle, reinforcing male dominance (229). Menkes counters this logic by de-eroticizing Ida's labor, directing attention instead toward its brutality, monotony, and inescapability.

This critique extends beyond *Magdalena Viraga*. In her documentary *Brainwashed: Sex-Camera-Power* (2022), Menkes examines how cinematic conventions—including point of view shots—participate in the systemic oppression of women. "Sex scenes," Menkes argues, "have been shot with the male gaze appropriating and objectifying women's bodies" (*Brainwashed: Sex-Camera-Power*, 01:31:39–01:31:46). This critique underscores Menkes's ideological stance: her auteur gaze fundamentally opposes Hollywood's dominant values. She explicitly articulates this opposition:

I would never have anyone else shoot my movies or be the art director. If I would get more help on my future projects, I would get more help on the production manager level and have more production assistants . . . I feel like I am the enemy of Hollywood. I am in direct opposition to everything Hollywood stands for politically, socially, emotionally. (qtd. in Naficy 49)

This oppositional stance underpins Menkes's formal experimentation. Her narrative structures are fragmented, repetitive, and non-linear—qualities that Deleuze and Guattari describe as features of a "desiring-machine," a creative force that dismantles hegemonic notions of identity and desire. Her 1991 film *Queen of Diamonds* employs abrupt cuts and disjointed scenes to convey emotional detachment. Recurring motifs—a burning palm tree or the monotony of casino work—evoke stagnation and alienation. In *Phantom Love* (2007), non-linear storytelling generates a dreamlike, liminal space,

displacing viewers from conventional narrative time and prompting them to experience marginalization on a formal level.

In *Magdalena Viraga*, this formal language emerges through oppressive, labyrinthine settings Menkes describes as evoking “another dimension of time and space” (Menkes and Toufic 154). The resulting sense of dislocation reflects her personal experience of not belonging: “I don’t feel at home anywhere” (158). The fractured lens—her cinematic gaze—functions as both a personal and a political gesture. It becomes a line of flight from dominant cinematic regimes, enacting the “intersectional gaze” as a form of resistance.

Female characters’ gaze – “embodied perspectives”

While the “fractured lens” reflects the filmmaker’s marginalized positionality, the gaze of her female characters extends this exploration by embodying layered identities within the diegesis. Through “embodied perspectives,” Menkes examines how intersecting oppressions shape her characters’ lived experiences, emphasizing interiority and resistance.

In *Magdalena Viraga*, Ida’s arrest and imprisonment for the murder of one of her johns function as both literal and symbolic representations of societal control over marginalized bodies. The juxtaposition of a prison cell and a church in the film’s opening scene underscores the role institutional morality plays in maintaining patriarchal authority. The dialogue between Ida and the police officer precisely follows Gertrude Stein’s *Ida*:

Police officer: What is it that you like better than anything else?

Ida: I like being where I am.

Police officer: And where are you?

Ida: I am not here. I am very careful about that. No, I am not here. It is very pleasant. Very pleasant, indeed, not to be here (*Magdalena Viraga*, 00:03:48-00:04:23).

Ida’s assertion—“I am not here. I am very careful about that”—signals a withdrawal from the symbolic order, the socially mediated system of meaning that constitutes identity. This refusal evokes the uncanny (*Unheimliche*), as theorized by Sigmund Freud and later expanded by Jacques Lacan. Freud defined the uncanny as the reemergence of the repressed within the familiar, rendering the ordinary strange and unsettling. Lacan builds on this, linking the uncanny to anxiety, describing it as “the sudden appearance of the *Heimliche* within the frame” (Lacan 76)—a moment when the symbolic order fails to fully structure reality, exposing its gaps and inconsistencies. He further ties anxiety to the sense that “presence (...) lies elsewhere” (Lacan 47), a dislocation that

resonates with Ida's detachment from herself and her environment. Her refusal to participate in institutional logic—religious, legal, or linguistic—produces a liminal space of resistance. As Lacan writes, anxiety emerges in “the failing of the support that lack provides” (Lacan 53). Ida embodies this failure, revealing the instability of identity constructed and sustained by patriarchal and state power.

In another scene, the police officer's monologue reinforces institutional authority: “If I'm an officer, and I am an officer, I'm an officer and I give orders” (*Magdalena Viraga*, 00:12:08–00:12:14). This repetition reinforces a power dynamic aimed at reducing Ida to a passive subject, highlighting the officer's attempt to assert dominance over her both psychologically and physically. He enacts the state's disciplinary mechanism, using language to objectify and control a woman whose agency is already diminished by her socio-economic position as a sex worker (Foucault, *Discipline* 170).

Yet, this display of dominance reveals its own fragility. When the officer asks, “Would you, would you like to see me giving orders? [...] Would that impress you?” (*Magdalena Viraga*, 00:12:16–00:12:31) and presumes, “I know you like me, otherwise you would not even look at me” (*Magdalena Viraga*, 00:12:36–00:12:41), he exposes a reliance on Ida's acknowledgment—a need for validation that undermines his performed authority. This interaction exemplifies how the gaze functions as a mechanism for affirming dominance at the intersection of institutional control and male entitlement.

Ida, however, resists this logic. Her reply, “Yes and no,” disrupts the officer's demand for a definitive answer, introducing ambiguity that destabilizes his rhetorical authority. Her subsequent reflection—“You see, I do look at you but that is not enough. I look at you and you look at me, but we neither say more than how are you, and very well, thank you” (*Magdalena Viraga*, 00:12:48–00:12:58)—strips the gaze of its presumed intimacy, reducing it to a hollow social ritual. What might otherwise signify recognition instead becomes a critique of its emptiness.

Ida's remarks on names deepens this subversion: “And really, if I knew your name, I would not be interested in you. No, I would not. And if I do not know your name, I could not be interested. Certainly, I could not” (*Magdalena Viraga*, 00:12:04–00:13:12). This paradoxical statement highlights the futility of the officer's attempts to impose meaning on their interaction. By declaring that his identity—known or unknown—is irrelevant, Ida rejects the relational framework he seeks to establish. The recursive, ambiguous language mirrors Stein's own destabilization of meaning in *Ida*, challenging the coherence of subjectivity and social interaction. Menkes's use of Stein's language creates an intertextual space of resistance, in which patriarchal structures, represented by the officer, fail to extract clarity or submission.

Final scenes: Reflection and resilience

The closing scenes deepen the film's critique of oppression and affirm resistance through a mix of surreal imagery, evocative language, and symbolic gestures. Ida's final declaration—"Yes, I am a Witch; I am a Witch; I am a Witch!" (*Magdalena Viraga*, 01:21:26–01:21:37)—echoes her earlier church conversation about transformation through repetition. Historically, the figure of the witch has symbolized female rebellion and subversion. Silvia Federici argues that witch hunts targeted women who resisted state and capitalist control over female bodies (164). By embracing this identity, Ida becomes a symbol of feminist defiance, linking her to contemporary feminist movements such as *#HexThePatriarchy* or *Women's International Terrorist Conspiracy from Hell* (W.I.T.C.H.).

In the final scene, Ida's scream as she runs through a vast grass field visually and viscerally embodies her psychological and emotional state. Menkes describes landscapes as more than mere backgrounds:

I always try to capture places that seem otherworldly on some level. I'm not interested in "ordinary life." I'm more interested in secret landscapes. Tinka's performances tend to connect the landscapes and the characters. It's not that she just happens to be there, and the landscape is background. My landscapes are never just backgrounds. They evoke the emotional quality of the movie. (Privett, "Secret Landscapes: A Conversation with Nina Menkes")

The open field contrasts sharply with the earlier confining interiors, signaling deterritorialization—a movement away from imposed structures toward multiplicity and becoming. Ida's scream, as she calls Claire's name, marks a shift from isolation to connection. Claire (Claire Aguilar), Ida's friend and fellow prostitute, embodies solidarity and shared experience. The scream, then, becomes a refusal to remain silent or unseen—a reclamation of voice, visibility, and relational presence.

The gunshots leave Ida's fate unresolved—death, escape, or transformation—but the ambiguity is deliberate. It represents the culmination of the film's "Red Sea crossing": a passage through violence, dislocation, and oppression toward an uncertain but radically different horizon.

The final moment cuts to Claire reciting from Gertrude Stein's "Patriarchal Poetry" (1927):

A hyacinth resembles a rose.
A rose resembles a blossom,
a blossom resembles a calla lily,
a calla lily resembles a jonquil,
and a jonquil resembles a marguerite,
a marguerite resembles a rose in bloom,

a rose in bloom resembles
a lily of the valley,
a lily of the valley resembles a violet,
and a violet resembles a bird (*Magdalena Viraga*, 01:26:57-01:27:56).

Stein's repetition and fluid metaphors dissolve boundaries between entities, echoing the film's insistence on identity as mutable, interconnected, and resistant to categorization. The poetic structure affirms what Menkes's cinematic language enacts: that representation, like identity, need not remain fixed or singular. Instead, it can flow, resist, and reassemble, just as Ida herself does.

The critical reception of Nina Menkes's *Magdalena Viraga*

By proposing the “intersectional gaze” as a new critical lens, this article reframes *Magdalena Viraga* through a contemporary perspective, uncovering layers of meaning that may have gone unrecognized in its earlier reception. Although early critiques focused primarily on the film's aesthetic choices and thematic elements, these initial reviews reveal how *Magdalena Viraga* resonated with—and at times challenged—audiences and critics of its era. Examining the reception provides valuable context for understanding the film's immediate impact within the cinematic landscape of its time.

Aesthetics and cinematic innovation

Critics consistently highlight the film's bold visual style as one of its most striking features. Kevin Thomas of the *Los Angeles Times* described Menkes as “boldly imaginative” and able to “take a shot as long as Antonioni and get away with it” (Thomas, “Nina Menkes’ “Magdalena” a Stunning Feature Debut”). This comparison to Michelangelo Antonioni, renowned for slow cinema, underscores Menkes's ability to heighten emotional intensity through long takes and minimalist composition. Although challenging for some viewers, this technique was praised for immersing audiences in the film's oppressive atmosphere. Similarly, Jon Hoffer from *LA Reader* praised Menkes as a filmmaker who “does not compromise in giving form to her disturbing visions” (qtd. in Menkes, *Magdalena Viraga* press kit). The film's aesthetic language—characterized by high-contrast lighting, stark mise-en-scène, and careful composition—not only reinforces its themes of isolation, despair, and redemption but also embodies them formally.

A review from *Radio France Culture* emphasized the film's resonance with the visual tradition of European art cinema, especially through its meditative, formally rigorous aesthetic. The reviewer confessed, “I have not been so moved by a film since watching Tarkovsky” (qtd. in Menkes, *Magdalena*

Viraga press kit). Andrei Tarkovsky, known for metaphysical explorations through image and duration, provides an apt comparison. However, while this comparison captures the film's visual intensity, it risks overlooking the political stakes of Menkes's aesthetic choices. Her work should also be understood through the framework of the "intersectional gaze."

Menkes's long takes and compositional austerity enact what I have called the "fractured lens": the perspective of a filmmaker whose marginal position, both as a woman and as an independent artist, ruptures dominant cinematic language. These visual strategies do more than signal distance or restraint; they actively disrupt classical cinematic realism, producing an oppositional aesthetic of dissonance.

Menkes's aesthetic also demands an active and interpretive mode of spectatorship. The film's opacity, emotional intensity, and refusal to offer easy resolution cultivate what I term "reflexive visions"—a mode that compels viewers, particularly those situated at the margins, to engage from within their own positionalities rather than through a presumed universal gaze. By resisting normative identification and privileging affect over exposition, the film transforms the act of looking into a political gesture, aligning its formal difficulty with ideological critique.

Finally, "embodies perspectives" emerge through the film's rejection of conventional character psychology. Rather than offering coherent narrative arcs of explanatory backstories, Menkes foregrounds Ida's fragmented, affective experience—shaped by intersecting forces of gendered violence, class precarity, and sexual exploitation. These states are not merely depicted; they are formalized through aesthetic choices that mirror Ida's internal disorientation. The result is a film that does not simply represent suffering or resistance, but internalizes and expresses them through its very form.

Feminist undertones and thematic depth

Critics praised *Magdalena Viraga* not only for its visual style but also for its unflinching exploration of gender, power, and existential anxieties. *Paris Feministe* described the film as "a monument, a gold mine in feminist history" (Couttier qtd. in Menkes, *Magdalena Viraga* press kit). Bérénice Reynaud, writing for *La Vie en Rose*, highlighted Menkes's ability to convey the protagonist's complex emotional landscape, noting that the film captures "boredom, disgust, anger, anguish, revolt, and pain" of Ida's existence (Reynaud qtd. in Menkes, *Magdalena Viraga* press kit).

The intersection of form and content

Critical discussion of *Magdalena Viraga*'s often centers on the interplay between form and content. *Village Voice* critic J. Hoberman characterized the film as "a

dreamlike blend of brothel, prison cell, and baroque cathedral,” where “the bias is metaphysical—menstrual blood transubstantiated into the Blood of the Lamb” (Hoberman, “It’s a Jungle in There”). His vivid description highlights the film’s fusion of the sacred and profane, using religious symbolism to deepen its critique of social and sexual exploitation.

However, the film’s rejection of traditional narrative forms was a point of contention. While some critics admired its innovative approach, others viewed its stylistic rigor as a barrier to accessibility. For instance, a *Variety* review criticized *Magdalena Viraga* for its slow pacing and minimal action, remarking that “entire minutes tick by without a single movement—either by cast or camera” (“Magdalena Viraga Review”). The dialogue, drawn heavily from Gertrude Stein’s poetry, was described as “silly,” and the cinematography labeled “uninspired” (“Magdalena Viraga Review”).

In *The Hollywood Reporter*, Henry Sheehan acknowledged that *Magdalena Viraga* “picked up a considerable following among feminists and avant-garde enthusiasts,” but warned the film’s “unforgivingly stylized” nature demands patience from viewers unfamiliar or uncomfortable with contemporary theories about sexism and cinematic structure (Sheehan, “Magdalena Viraga”).

Conclusion

This article has introduced the concept of the “intersectional gaze” as both a critical and generative framework for reimagining cinematic representations from the margins. Through an in-depth analysis of *Magdalena Viraga*, it has demonstrated how Nina Menkes challenges dominant visual conventions and foregrounds intersectional experiences of gender, sexuality, and class.

Building on foundational feminist film theory, the “intersectional gaze” extends Laura Mulvey’s critique of the “male gaze” by accounting for intersecting forms of oppression that classical frameworks often neglect. Menkes’s “fractured lens” disrupts patriarchal visual logic through stylistic fragmentation, symbolic imagery, and immersive point of view techniques. Her work resonates with Deleuze and Guattari’s post-structural concepts—“desiring-production,” the “body without organs,” and “deterritorialization”—which reconceive cinematic space as fluid and resistant to hegemonic representation. These ideas support the construction of non-linear narratives that reject normative identity categories and open space for multiplicity and transformation.

Menkes’s formal strategies—disjointed editing, confined interiors, recursive dialogue, and surreal landscapes—transform the cinematic gaze into a “desiring-machine,” resisting patriarchal objectification and fixed meaning. This visual grammar enacts deterritorialization, collapsing linear temporality and spatial coherence in favor of psychic and symbolic rupture.

Moreover, Menkes's "embodied perspectives" foreground the relationship between marginalization and agency. Drawing on Lacan's notion of the uncanny and Deleuze's concept of fluidity, her work challenges normative representations of identity. Ida's refusal to fully inhabit a socially imposed subjectivity destabilizes the gaze and reconfigures the viewer's relationship to the image, demanding critical engagement rather than passive consumption.

That said, several underlying assumptions within this framework merit critical reflection. While fragmented narratives can effectively disrupt dominant visual logics, linear storytelling may also advance feminist aims—particularly in contexts where clarity and accessibility are paramount. Similarly, although marginalized viewers often approach media with resistance and oppositional readings, this cannot be assumed; dominant cultural codes may shape interpretation regardless of identity. Moreover, while formal opacity may evoke the complexities of marginal experiences, it also risks alienating the very audiences it seeks to engage. These considerations do not diminish the theoretical value of the "intersectional gaze," but rather underscore the importance of its careful and context-sensitive application.

This study contributes to ongoing debates in feminist film theory and proposes a model for rethinking visual representation through an intersectional and transdisciplinary lens. The "intersectional gaze" holds value beyond cinema; it can be applied to literature, digital media, and global cultural texts. It offers a generative framework for analyzing Islamic, African, LGBTQ+, and nonbinary narratives, extending critique beyond Western cisgender feminism to address broader structures of marginalization and resistance.

In summary, the "intersectional gaze" challenges reductive representations of womanhood, decenters normative spectatorship, and demands more expansive, inclusive, and nuanced modes of visual storytelling—laying the groundwork for a more critically engaged and radically imaginative visual culture.

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