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“If for Araki the spatial metaphor for male homosexuality is the total cultural saturation of the mass-mediated city, for Nina Menkes the corresponding spatiality is the desert towns to the east of Los Angeles, places where culture is only a gaudy stucco veneer over a desolately beautiful natural world. Correspondingly, while Araki’s irony can only generate a film language that, despite its baroque extravagances, is pulled closer and closer to Hollywood and heterosexual narrative, Menkes’s work entails a categorical rejection of the industry and its narrative forms.

Menkes’s mature films—*Magdalena Viraga* (1986), *Queen of Diamonds* (1991), and *The Bloody Child* (1996)—all center on images of female sexuality but always as it is manifested in a maimed and alienated form. The dominant figures for the patriarchy that ruins women are, respectively in the three films, prostitution and the church, the gambling industry, and the military. The conflict between women and these forces is dramatized in minimal narratives that, again like von Sternberg’s, are little more than kernels from which expressive metaphors can be generated, or frames in which they can be made to cohere. More dreamlike, discontinuous, enigmatic, and diegetically heterogeneous than von Sternberg’s, these narratives are fractured by surrealist eruptions within them, often of startling evocative resonance. The structure of all the films relies heavily on repetition and periods of inert, static suspension, and exploit takes that endure so long beyond any narrative function that they distance or puncture the diegesis and foreground the formal composition and visual structure of the *mise-en-scène*. Menkes’s photography is austere, often using wide-angle lenses that distance the protagonists even as they situate them in metaphorically loaded environments. The camera is usually stationary and frontal, allowing for precise lucid compositions, that split the frame vertically into active and passive, or full and empty halves, creating figures for sexual difference in the visual language itself. Overall, her achievements in deploying the qualities of Maya Deren’s vision of the personal film in feature length is without parallel.

Menkes insists that she creates entirely intuitively with no rationalized sense of her procedures, and similarly insists on the integral role of her sister, Tinka, a remarkable actress gifted in the portrayal of ferocious isolation, who is always the main protagonist. Typically the films are produced, written, photographed, and edited by Nina, with Tinka the collaborator in writing and also especially in editing. In *Magdalena Viraga* (1986), she plays one of two prostitute sisters, and in *Queen of Diamonds* (1991) she is a black-jack dealer in a desert casino who also she cares for an elderly bed-ridden dying man. *Queen of Diamonds* is a dazzling, consummate work, but in *The Bloody Child* (1996), Menkes’s fundamental thematics are deployed in a structurally more complex form.

The Bloody Child originated in a *Los Angeles Times* story about a Gulf War veteran stationed at the marine base just outside Twenty Nine Palms in the Mojave desert, a hundred miles from Los Angeles, who murdered his pregnant wife. He was apprehended while digging a grave for her just before dawn in the desert at the edge of the base. The murder itself is not enacted,

only the discovery and arrest of the marine. Most of the film consists of shots of the marines in their monotonous, static wait on the roadside for paramedics to arrive so that they can remove the body and the murderer. They are all under the charge of a sergeant, played by Tinka, who controls them with an abrupt but swaggering military authority, but who does not intervene when one of the arresting soldiers periodically berates the murderer, violently pushing his face into the bloody wounds in his wife's body. The discovery of the murderer is presented only at the very end of the film and then in a series of temporally overlapping shots in reverse order, so that the last shot of the film shows the sun slowly rising over the desert and the marines closing in on the murderer as he digs the grave. This is also the film's opening shot, and so the discovery of the murder encloses the film, and all the intervening material is contained in that moment. The Bloody Child as whole is a single epiphany, what William Blake called an "opened center," and appropriately subtitled, An Interior of Violence. It is then a poetic film in the Romantic tradition that Maya Deren invoked in her proposal that, while drama was concerned with the "horizontal" development of an action, the film poem was "a 'vertical' investigation of a situation, in that it probes the ramification of the moment, and is concerned with its qualities and its depth."¹ The kernel narrative is the discovery of a particular sexual murder, but it opens into the discovery of the murder of sexuality in general.

The repetitive shots of the marines, with their stiffly deferential ritualized gestures and their barely audible conversations, recur throughout the film, but without any temporal progression. Towards the end, a huge riderless black horse—which they cannot see—appears in these scenes, an unexplained eruption of unbridled sexual energy into the stasis. These scenes are interspersed with other non-narrative fragments, primarily of three kinds, two within the main diegesis and one from outside it. First, scenes of the marines off-duty in a local bar, playing pool and listening to music, and competing for the few available women in boisterous displays of exaggerated masculinity. Second, shards of other narratives lines that tie into the main figures or trail off from the scene of the crime, a shot of the murderer cleaning up blood in his home, for example, other unmatrixed shots of people in the motels or restaurants of the desert city, and especially numerous scenes in a motel where Tinka has an unexplained sexual rendezvous with a marine, one who is visually indistinguishable from the murderer. And finally, scenes shot a decade previously on a trip the two Menkes sisters took through the Middle East. In these Tinka appears as an alienated vulnerable young woman in a variety of exotic locales—in a graveyard, on crowded buses or on a boat. Mostly she is static and posed, often alongside similarly alienated black men. The first of these interpolated scenes reveals her lying naked in a clearing in a tropical jungle where she writes by making marks in the white powder with which her body has been sprinkled, itself a figure for the somatic enigma of women's language that the film as a whole investigates. Contrasting with the fine grain of the 35 mm California footage, these are blown up from 16mm, suggesting that they are the film's dream or perhaps the dream of the Tinka in the main diegesis. Throughout the film ghostly children's voices chant fragments from nursery rhymes and from the witches' speeches in *Macbeth*.

These thematic clusters contain contrasting modes of male and female sexuality, but rather than corresponding to actual men and women, they co-exist within women, specifically within the three primary female images: Tinka who is herself divided into the personae of the psychically-armored marine sergeant and the lonely third world woman, and the dead woman in the car, with

whom she is also associated. These are all facets, not of woman in some absolute sense, but of the sexual beings they are forced into by the particular cultures that inhabit them: the repressed, masculinized military figure, the lonely waif in the third world, and the destroyed woman. And one of the lines quoted from Macbeth, “when shall we three meet again” suggests that each of these deformed women are so because each has repressed a different component in her psyche. The film invites analysis in Jungian terms, as a dream in which not only all characters, male and female, but also all other elements are understood as aspects or projections of a single consciousness, bringing the mise-en-scène into parity with the characters proper. So the road and the steel fences that have been imposed on the desert where the marines wait, the garish gas stations and stucco motels with their chintzy furnishings where assignments are made, and the seared desert landscapes all become metaphors for a ravaged femininity.

The immediate motivating consciousness is Nina’s, though in all her films authorship is always divided, split between the two “weird sisters” whose collaboration produces them. But the composite metaphor claims a wider relevance, demanding to be read as the situation of women under patriarchy, if not generally then certainly in the period of the geo-political tyranny of American imperialism. The images of Tinka in the Middle East affiliate with those of the murdered military wife to suggest the Arab women and children destroyed during the Gulf War, with the metaphor sustained by the topographical similarities between the Arabian and the American deserts. But the indictment of the American military also has cinematic implications, made inevitable by the mass media’s role in the Gulf War, its subordination to military while it was underway and its retroactive glorification of American belligerence that reasserted the violent masculinity undermined by the failure of the invasion of Viet Nam. The film indicts this oppressive culture explicitly in its narrative by exposing violence against women and implicitly in its form by rejecting the visual language of industrial culture. The kaleidoscope of its hallucinatory tesserae explodes the vacuous morality of Hollywood’s pre-digested narrative forms, even making the marines into the vocabulary of the feminist discourse.²”

¹ “Poetry and the Film: A Symposium,” Film Culture, 29 (Summer 1963), p. 56.

² Menkes’s hostility to corporate culture is vociferous and undisguised; see, for example, When I see a regular Hollywood film, I suffer . . . because I am in such disagreement with everything that they’re doing on every level including the portrayal of women, the idea of characterization, the whole idea of plot and how you put a film together. . . . I am in direct opposition to everything Hollywood stands for politically, socially, emotionally. . . . Everything that Hollywood stands for is stuff that I not only don’t believe in, but that I have dedicated my life to fighting against.” Quoted in Helga Oswald, “The Dark Realities of Nina Menkes,” Montage Magazine (August 1991), p. 23.