

Searching for Redemption in Nina Menkes' *Dissolution*

Posted: 09/19/10 11:17 PM ET

Persistent and unwavering in continuously producing independent work on her own terms, American director Nina Menkes has defied the odds posed against most alternative filmmakers by creating feature films for over two decades without compromising her creative vision. Based in Los Angeles, Menkes works outside of the Hollywood system, vehemently opposing the dominant forces that reduce films to products, instead honoring cinema as an art form. With roots in Israel and Germany, Menkes has made films that address her Jewish heritage and sense of family through the vantage points of isolated, marginalized, and roaming female subjects who can all be looked at as an extension of the other. She has situated her characters in locations spanning the East and West, in places including Morocco, India, Las Vegas, and Los Angeles. Weaving fairytale references, surrealism, and spiritual undercurrents into all of her works, Menkes fuses the hyper-real, alienated realities of her characters with the otherworldly, bringing alive on screen their quest into the unknown--their search for something greater to free them of their loneliness.

In her 2007 film *Phantom Love*, a series of events lead an underground roulette dealer to discover the family dysfunction that locks her in a cycle of unhappiness, making her go about her days dead alive. Becoming conscious of these destructive patterns, she moves toward an illuminating, ethereal clarity that ends the film with a sense of freedom and optimism unlike any other in a Menkes film. The last scene depicts the main character Lulu awoken from a dream where she has seen a magical, Indian temple situated by the Ganga River. She stands in her bedroom and turns nude to the camera, as the film grain overexposes to whiteness. Deeply resonant, the tone of this last work is very telling of the filmmaker's developing interest to move beyond darkness to find hope for her characters.

Now in her new feature, *Dissolution* (Hitparkut) Menkes traces the story of an Israeli Jewish man drowning in depression and alcoholism, forsaken, and lost in contemporary day Tel Aviv. Like Menkes' women, he lives in the periphery of mainstream society-- in Yafo, a predominantly Arab area of Tel Aviv, where many Arab families maintain their ancestral houses within a barely veiled atmosphere of tension caused by racial and religious friction. Barely an hour's drive away, never-ending hostilities and violence are more intensely played out within Gaza and the West Bank. Menkes places her protagonist in a part of the world long torn with ingrained political upheaval, where rivalries between Israeli Jews and Arabs is noticeable in the architecture of the surroundings. She points her camera in the winding alleys, nooks, and crannies of this location--echoing the interior thoughts of her character with images of an environment who like him, is also searching for salvation, longing to know if reconciliation and forgiveness are possible. This film sits in the territory of the antihero, looking at a complex man and place ridden with dysfunction, guilt, and sin--but still hanging on.

Opening with a close up of a soft snail displaced in an urban atmosphere of concrete and metal, it is clear that this creature is indeed symbolic of her protagonist who the filmmaker refers to as R, short for Raskolnikov--portrayed by the non-professional actor Didi Fire (who also participated in the film's writing and editing). Loosely adapted from Fyodor Dostoyevsky's literary masterpiece *Crime and Punishment*, Menkes' narrative incorporates elements of the novel as it unravels to reveal the effects of R's plan to kill and rob a local pawnbroker.

Without a job or involved family, this man has nobody and owns very little, living day by day in debt in a sparse apartment-- with one window overlooking his neighborhood, the sounds of ambulance, police sirens, and Arab pop streaming, periodically cut with moments of silence. The long flight of stairs he ascends to reach his residence evokes the feeling that he is close to the heavens while his room has an uncanny resemblance to a priest's bed chamber. Alone with R in his bedroom as he sleeps and thinks, one is reminded of scenes in Jean-Pierre Melville's gorgeous and hypnotic, *Léon Morin in* which Jean-Paul Belmondo plays a priest in wartime France who ponders some of the deepest questions of religion, faith, and the human soul. In Melville's work, bare white walls, a bed, and lone table frame the life of a persona devoted to a higher force--and Menkes' depictions of her subject's personal space parallel this. There is an honor to his misery-- he is unapologetic, though he suffers greatly and carries his own cross in solitude.

A filmmaker concerned with female subjectivity, it is fascinating to experience Menkes' treatment of a vulnerable male character. With patience, she keeps her camera close, capturing him with an intimacy and compassion that leaves one at times feeling as though they are watching a documentary. For the first time utilizing video, Menkes shoots *Dissolution* mostly with a hand held approach in black and white HD. Following R as he drifts from place to place, she takes us from gloomy, claustrophobic, anxiety inducing spaces to reveal others that are magical, enchanted, and vast. Toward the end of the film, R discovers an underground, seemingly desolate religious temple that draws him deeper and deeper, just as Alice becomes curiouser and curiouser of the mysteries of wonderland. The gray areas between reality and fiction are ever present as this movie treads from the secular to the sacred.

Interior and meandering, *Dissolution* puts an audience through the raw grit and torture of R's realities without any cinematic frills or pleasantries. The co-existence between misery and beauty is carried from scene to scene in all of the filmmakers compositions. Cinematically, the film has traces of Bela Tarr's *Satantango* entwined with Shakespeare's play *Macbeth*-- where themes of morality haunt one's psyche with poetry and striking visuality.

Confronting sin and redemption is at the core of this piece-- Nina Menkes' film is relevant and courageous, accented with her usual touches of cinematic sorcery and profound dedication. It is a look at a male character and place usually outcast by the movies-- machismo, bravado, and romanticism are gone. The strong hero audiences rely on has vanished and his mask has come off. *Dissolution* is making it's US premiere in Los Angeles at the REDCAT Disney Concert Hall this coming Monday.