

## The phantom worlds of Nina Menkes

### Uninvited

By CHRIS FUJIWARA | February 22, 2011



**PHANTOM LOVE** Is that your sister and your mother you see in the mirror, or just externalized parts of yourself?

A woman croupier drifts like a ghost through languidly lit hotel spaces, or submits to jackhammer missionary intercourse while an I'm-not-here expression hardens her turned-away face. A punk Raskolnikov, a Jew in a poor Arab section of Tel Aviv, walks up and down narrow staircases, dodges harassers on the street, and holes up in nearly empty bars where electronic dance music supplies a background to his encounters with prostitutes and a sympathetic detective. These are the people and the spaces of *Phantom Love* (2007; February 25 @ 7 pm) and *Dissolution* (2010; February 26 @ 7 pm), two extraordinary feature films by US-Israeli filmmaker Nina Menkes that ArtsEmerson is bringing to the Paramount Center this weekend, with the filmmaker in attendance. The very emptiness of these spaces becomes a source of conflict and even heat, eliciting a response from Menkes's figures or responding in turn to some lack within them.

*Phantom Love* is a pure psychodrama, in which the heroine's relationship with her sister and her mother (externalized parts of herself?) play out in elegant black-and-white images that carefully prowl their own borderline reality. *Dissolution*, a free adaptation of Dostoevsky's

*Crime and Punishment*, departs from narrative to study a recalcitrant visual universe (also shot in black and white). In *Dissolution*'s first shot, the landlady-avoiding, pawnbroker-killing hero (Didi Fine in a brilliant performance) contemplates a large snail; in a harrowing scene later on, he does battle with a chunk of cow lung, the only meat he can afford at the local butcher. These images of abjection are extreme signs of a meaninglessness and a powerlessness that the hero confronts throughout; meanwhile, Menkes counters this negative logic by showing women who stare back (at the hero, and above all at the camera). At the heart of the eat-or-be-eaten universe that the hero's nihilism implies, the dark stone of a ring found inside a grilled fish is a dark and bloody eye fixed on the camera — in accusation but perhaps also with love.

In both films, Menkes's camera plays the role of an uninvited guest — a role that involves her more and more deeply in the worlds she depicts. The films are not studies of (for example) alienation considered as a subject matter that the filmmaker views objectively and about which she has "something to say." Rather, they are shaped in terms of her analysis of her own disaffection from reality. The protagonists are not mere Others (the Raskolnikov figure, notably, is not *merely* a figure through which Menkes criticizes male violence) but individuals in whom the struggle and the flux of the films take vibrant (if also elusive) form.

With a few alterations that would surely have improved their commercial prospects, *Phantom Love* could have been a straight psychological drama about a woman living on the edge of a breakdown, and *Dissolution* a neo-noir set against the ethnic fragmentation of Israeli society. But narrative does not take the central place in Menkes's films. Neither does she rely on the rhetoric of expressiveness and gesture familiar from many experimental films. Instead, she works out an original style, drawing on both storytelling traditions and the traditions of personal filmmaking, but pitching her tent on neither side. Her unclassifiable cinema, whose fascination lies in the interplay among characters, space, and filmmaker, is truly all her own.

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