

Nina Menkes' *Dissolution* and *Phantom Love*

By Phil Coldiron | Thursday, May 26, 2011

In the 25 years since her first feature, *Magdalena Viraga*, Nina Menkes has remained one of the few American directors working at feature length whose films — in both form and thought — are genuinely radical. Menkes' main preoccupation across her six films (including *Phantom Love* and her latest work, *Dissolution*, which screen at the Downtown Independent this week) is violence in all its forms, and her approach, oblique yet intuitive, has yielded results that have more to say on the subject than any American director since Peckinpah or Cassavetes.



Nina Menkes' *Phantom Love*

A loose interpretation of Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, *Dissolution* stars Didi Fire in the Raskolnikov role, here a scruffy, dour Jewish man living in a poor Arab neighborhood in Tel Aviv; he kills a pawnbroker and spends the following hour spiraling toward an inner oblivion. Menkes alternates between lengthy, unbroken long shots (chiefly of Fire sitting in a dingy,

underlit bar while awful trance and house music blare) and fidgety zooms that are both the source of what little drama the film has and Menkes' key analytical tool.

Dissolution is an example of that new event, a veteran filmmaker's first experiment with digital video. Menkes takes advantage of the clarity of the medium (along with some carefully chosen focal lengths) to render a world that frequently seems to be totally flat, with no depth. She breaks up these single-dimension compositions, and reintroduces perspective, via her probing zooms. The result is bluntly effective psychological realism told from Menkes' perspective. Generally favoring zooms over camera movement, her viewing position remains fixed while still offering a multitude of points of view.

Where *Dissolution* charts an existential crisis, *Phantom Love* presents a phenomenological one. Lulu (her name being one of the film's numerous points of contact with the world of David Lynch), a Russian croupier played by Marina Shoif, works at a Los Angeles casino. She has dully violent missionary sex, cleans up after her deranged sister, crosses a bridge, wards off various advances from her deranged mother and walks past an enormous snake in her apartment building.

These events circulate and recur throughout the film, and Menkes couples this repetition with a more subtle use of zooms than those of *Dissolution* and an evocative use of offscreen sound – layers of sirens, screams and news reports on the war in Iraq keep violence present even when it's absent from the frame – to construct a world that's forever collapsing onto Lulu's attempts to perceive it. That her final salvation comes in the form of a light that destroys the image couldn't be more fitting.

DISSOLUTION and PHANTOM LOVE | Written and directed by NINA MENKES | June 1-7
(*Phantom Love* screens only Sat.-Sun.) | Downtown Independent | downtownindependent.com