



## Dissolution ★★☆☆

by Joseph Jon Lanthier on March 7, 2012

Rife with rhythmic, haunting meditations on violence and misogyny, the cinema of Nina Menkes has often been described as feminist, but it's more playfully situated in the tradition of fringe auteurs whose deeply personal image-making transcends theoretical frameworks. Her coarsely black-and-white feature from 2007, *Phantom Love*, intersperses quiet depictions of intense sexual drudgery with stock footage of octopus tentacles seemingly borrowed from Ed Wood; Lynchian serpents, meanwhile, slouch about the halls outside the harried protagonist's quarters. Something of a tonal homage to Chantal Akerman's *Jeanne Dielman* that suffuses its climax of distaff aggression throughout its ellipses-prone duration, the film is less an examination of gender than a dismantling of sexual perspective through flourishes of near-magical realism.

The more recent *Dissolution* is the first of Menkes's fiction films that was conceived collaboratively (with Didi Fire, an Israeli artist whose unamused, muscular presence calls to mind that of John Lurie), and it accordingly focuses on the tumultuous internal experience of a young Jewish male living in an Arab slum who, via a minimalistic nod to Dostoyevsky, murders a junk peddler. The act has concrete value as both spiritual defiance and economic-minded scheme, but it's framed as a disturbance of scant sharpness amid the grotesque monotony of the unnamed man's quotidian existence—insofar as lunchtime discussions of eerie dreams with acquaintances punctuated with languorous visits by scorpions and gargantuan snails can be considered quotidian.

When the protagonist cooks slabs of meat in his apartment, the camera frames the crackling flesh in unceremonious close-up, occasionally cutting to the man's distantly disgruntled face. Just as the woman in *Phantom Love* endures the harsh frequency of connubial coupling with frank listlessness, Fire's Jewish fish-out-of-water confronts brunt, priapic realities with tetchy withdrawal. In one long, static shot reminiscent of Claire Denis, the young man stands bare-chested atop a nightclub, assuming variously tense, boxer-like stances; he eventually and gently bundles himself into a fetal heap on the roof before bothering to piacularly vent.

Menkes, working with digital formats for the first time, adopts camcorder-specific grammatical devices—such as sharp, jagged zooms—to suggest the putatively objective opticon of surveillance mechanisms and journalism tools. (In one notable instance, the fourth wall is even broken, significantly within the confines of a government building.) At several points in the drifting story, we're also thrown from the protagonist's brooding perspective to witness the aftermath of Tel Aviv street violence from aerial vantage points, as if drawn from the raw feed of a single news camera. None of this has any identifiable socio-political resonance, but the aura of municipal as well as cerebral unease becomes essential to Menkes's aesthetic of prosaic horror.

Surreal morsels worm their way through her vague narratives, appearing to signify not only the characters' disorientation, but Menkes's own toward the content she explores; there's a sense in which her camera is usefully frustrated by ghastly surfaces it cannot penetrate. In one of *Dissolution's* finest scenes, a man compares the fish on which he's dining to his mother's prospective corpse, and then we watch him retrieve a piece of junk jewelry from the animal's broiled innards. This image is just-barely thematically relevant, and almost fogged with the protagonist's guilt, but it's presented with such awkward sangroid that we don't bother questioning what it might hide. Menkes's achievement here is even more rare than those of her fêted influences: Her camera is at its most effective when it, too, seems dumbfounded at what it's indexing.

- Director(s): Nina Menkes
- Screenplay: Nina Menkes, Didi Fire
- Cast: Didi Fire
- Distributor:
- Runtime: 88
- Rating: NR
- Year: 2010