

The Visions of Nina Menkes:

The waking dreams and persistent concerns of an uncompromising filmmaker

By Karina Longworth | March 7, 2012

Filmmaker Nina Menkes has made five features in the past three decades. All of them appropriate Hollywood genres—noir, horror, procedurals—as raw matter for wildly nonlinear works, and all are dedicated to scrambling conventional narrative logic and gender politics. To mark the release of her latest film, *Dissolution*, Anthology Film Archives is hosting a comprehensive retrospective of Menkes's independently produced, largely grant-funded work.

Repetition is a key theme: Events reoccur within Menkes films and across them, reflections and mirrors complicate compositions, and characters are psychologically marked by oppressive routine. Tracing her pet concerns (gorgeous, sad women; the emotional fallout of violence) across locations as disparate as Las Vegas and Tel Aviv, from vivid color 35mm to crisp black-and-white HD, Menkes's body of work is a fluid continuum of dreams and nightmares.

In *Queen of Diamonds* (1991)—my pick for the must-see rediscovery of the program—Menkes's sister and frequent collaborator Tinka Menkes plays Firdaus, a bored, beautiful blackjack dealer at an off-strip Vegas casino. The first shot, a close-up of blood-red press-on talons and a tangle of curly black hair on a hotel-white pillowcase, clues the viewer into Menkes's attitude toward femininity: sexy tipped over into scary, natural clashing with artificial, and totally visceral. Firdaus, all mile-high legs and high-waisted short-shorts, is impossibly implacable, her keel as even as the constant beeping of machines inside the casino. Its "action" broken up by long sequences of Firdaus at work—a cog in a machine of stimulation—the film's narrative (or what there is of it) concerns the nearly imperceptible effect this city's sunbaked, manufactured desire has on an ice queen.

The film's most fascinating scene takes place at the wedding of Firdaus's neighbor, whose daily violence against his wife-to-be has been the only thing to provoke a real response from Firdaus. In what would become a Menkes signature, the camera stays far away from the wedding party, taking it all in and implicitly highlighting the protagonist's isolation in a long, unbroken crowd shot. Firdaus, dressed in diaphanous white, floats through the party like a ghost, her presence more out of place than the bride's black eye.

Diamonds premiered in narrative competition at Sundance alongside Richard Linklater's *Slacker* and Hal Hartley's *Trust*, and as much as it's a formal exercise in withholding, the film also makes sense within the context of the early '90s American indie: Firdaus's affectless affectation is compatible with the era's X-Girl brand of cool. Sixteen years later, when Menkes returned to the theme of a statuesque, obsessively manicured brunette sleepwalking through a casino job in the L.A.-Koreatown-set *Phantom Love*, she'd take a tonal and visual U-turn. *Phantom's* hazy black-and-white cinematography and silent-film-reminiscent spookiness suggest Guy Maddin without the wink, its women-in-surrealist-peril plot distinctly David Lynchian. (Indeed, *Phantom Love* and Lynch's *Inland Empire* would make for a fascinating early 21st-century L.A. double feature.)

The film begins with and frequently returns to imagery of Lulu (Marina Shoif) enduring the thrusts of a male lover whose face we can't see. The repetitive motion of his rutting back and the perfectly percussive rustle of sheets and breath convey mechanization. (Satisfaction is a scant commodity for women in Menkes films.) But while Lulu's "womanly duties" might be as joyless an occupation as her job at the casino, the film is increasingly concerned with the trauma she suffers from her overbearing mother and troubled sister in waking life and dreams. In Menkes's mystical vision, the people who are supposed to provide unconditional love for Lulu instead become sources of terror.

Menkes's interest in crimes of passion and the ghosts they create is dramatized most directly in another pair of features, *The Bloody Child* (1996) and her most recent film, *Dissolution*. Based on a real incident in which a Gulf War veteran was found digging a desert grave for the wife he had just killed, *Child* is essentially a backward procedural, telling the story of the crime's prelude and aftermath and the mark it leaves on a female Marine (Tinka Menkes) in fractured chunks, more or less beginning at the end and ending at the beginning.

Menkes's most ambitious narrative scramble is also her most successful experiment in frustrating genre expectations—specifically, her refusal to identify characters in this "procedural" in any traditional way, often keeping the camera so far from dialogue scenes that voices can't be matched to faces. What we see is all we get, and given Menkes's periodic drifts into surrealism and non sequiturs, what we see is often intentionally disorienting. The murder might be the film's motivating action, but Menkes avoids depicting it, a structural absence defined as the film's subject by a movie-closing on-screen Biblical quote.

Menkes continues to explore the fallout from unseen acts of violence in *Dissolution*. Based loosely on *Crime and Punishment*, the film stars Didi Fire as a penniless Jew in an Arab section of Tel Aviv who robs and kills a female pawnbroker offscreen and becomes increasingly paranoid. A stark noir, the film is both a departure from Menkes's previous work (for the first time, the protagonist is male, and the shooting format is video) and the culmination of it, deliberately pointing back to images from her earlier films but from a different perspective. Setting *Dissolution* almost entirely in hallways, bars, alleys, and stairwells—dark spaces ripe for hallucinations—Menkes and her far-away camera seem to be emphasizing not just the isolation of her subject, but also that her subject is isolation.

This is familiar territory for Menkes, with a twist. In her previous films, men are at best a physical burden and at worst a physical threat to a female protagonist. That's still true in *Dissolution*, but this time, Menkes explores the behavior and psyche of the man after he commits the act of violence. It's not that *Dissolution* has a different worldview—it's the same fatalistic feminism, but this time seen, as things so often are in Menkes movies, from the flip side.