

Sexuality, Gender and Destruction in Cinema

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Contempt for self is motionless. Despising and destroying inwardly requires little velocity. You just have to stay and contemplate. However, it is not inert. Visually, there is no outward momentum, there is no *other* to target any external energy so that force has to radiate back on its source in order to be observed. In film, illustrating a naturalistic suicidal character or a character in personal crisis, per se, will typically not involve them beating a large group of henchmen to survive and save-the-day because that would presuppose that the character “cares” about their being and future prospects. This extreme example notwithstanding, for this savior to suddenly cut their wrists or explode drastically into utter ennui would be illogical in painting an intended pensive emotionality. In other words, voyaging to a future has forward motion and, typically, a linear progression. Therefore, self-reflection’s tendency is static. It lies in the moment of how one sees oneself – possibly through a lens of their own making. In Nina Menkes’ *The Bloody Child* (1996), these lenses are mirrors of circumstance and they are unforgivingly disquieting.

The Bloody Child depicts its subjects and events -- which mostly occur after an off duty Gulf-War veteran is arrested outside Twenty-Nine Palms Marine base for attempting to bury his murdered wife in the desert -- in still shots. The static photography doesn’t allow the specimens to move and be released into the next frame. No one is set free; particularly, the poignant main figure of the cinematic experimentation, the female arresting officer, a Marine captain (Tinka Menkes). Essentially, the audience waits for medical assistance to arrive to formally complete the arrest with the captain, but never alongside the captain. The camera follows her and her inner life without letting go by placing her and its subjects often in front of a long lens, pushing them up into their surroundings and flush against each other even when the camera sits voyeuristically at a distance. Moreover, the story only studies a relatively small duration of time (i.e. we never see the crime or the murderer’s formal punishment). Compositionally and temporally, this leaves the figures little breathing room to gain comfort. Each shot, many with languid marinating takes, is often repeated and hammers in the shot before. All together, the accumulation of visual and audio strokes shapes the point that is deepening -- the defining moment of violence. In his examination of Menkes’ piece within *The Most Typical Avant Garde: History and Geography of Minor Cinemas in Los Angeles* (2005), David E. James states, “while drama was concerned with the ‘horizontal’ development of an action, the film poem was a ‘vertical’ investigation of a situation, in that it probes the ramification of the moment, and is concerned with its qualities and its depth. The kernel narrative is the discovery of a particular sexual murder, but it opens into discovery of the murder of sexuality in general.” Thus, like a stake getting pummeled downward into firm and arid ground, each reiteration of any shot within the diegesis vibrates in the muscles until it escapes back into the earth. In the cycle we find new meaning in each re-frame while simultaneously attempting to maintain a foothold, much like how a repeated line in verse changes essences in poetry. We are witnessing violence funneled through Woman where nowhere to go. Seemingly, what is once a scene illustrating an angry arresting officer forcing the murderer’s face into his dead wife’s bloodied torso while shouting

“Do you like it?! Do you like it?!!,” transforms from a roaring rhetorical into a sexually weighted allusion condemning violence towards the marginalized. Nothing physically changes in the frame between each appearance of the sliced-up scene yet the kaleidoscopic evolution of the moment shifts – violence itself becomes “organized confusion.”

Similarly to the key components of a kaleidoscope, the primary narrative functions through glass. The captain’s gaze, penetrating the young victim’s tragic spirit that permeates the ether, is often seen through a lens physically composed of sand that somehow escaped the world’s deserts. Whether the captain is sitting in a bathroom opposite a mirrored wall with her reflected image filling the screen or eating alone in a restaurant near a booth window we can often observe her only through the slight distortion of light refraction and reflection. So even when we have some access to her, the image is inherently indirect – it bends as it holds. Though the male arresting officer “stabs” the corpse with her perpetrator (i.e. violence begetting violence), the reflected image of the captain, who is standing nearby and witnessing the virulence, hovering on the car’s side-rear window maintains the specter of events. The haunted gaze folding back onto itself to observe a possibly blackened silhouetted soul that may only parallel the dark bodies, appearing at the beginning of the fragmented tale, floating on the desert’s shadows during the cusp of sunrise.