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## Menkes' hypnotic 'Bloody Child' a lyrical nightmare

**Movie review**  
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**M**any movies exploit violence, but few honestly try to examine its effects and implications. One of those few is Nina Menkes' "The Bloody Child," a genuinely experimental and visionary independent American film opening for a one-week run at Facets Multimedia.

Like Jon Jost, Jim Benning and a handful of others, Menkes is a true artistic film experimenter. Working on low budgets far outside the industry, she makes her films (1987's "Magdalena Viraga," 1991's "Queen of Diamonds") not as audition tapes for the big studios but as unabashed works of individual expression, voyages into the self and the mysterious world outside.

In "Bloody Child" — a lyrical nightmare set in the bleak,

hallucinatory landscape of California's Mojave desert and a Marine base near Twenty-nine Palms — she thrusts us into the psychological maelstrom caused by a Marine's murder of his wife and his desperate attempt to bury her body in the desert.

None of this, however, is initially clear. The first image we see in this hypnotic and disturbing film is an eerie shot of blackened sands at sunset, with unidentified people wandering dimly in the distance. We then get the story out of chronological order, in cryptic fragments cutting in and out of each other — as if the murder were a rock thrown into a placid pool and the images flashing before us



In "The Bloody Child," Tinka Menkes, sister of the film's director, Nina Menkes, plays a tortured Marine captain.

were ripples on the water's surface as the rock disappears.

Interrupted in his nocturnal flight by two other Marines — an unnamed man and woman (played by Tinka Menkes, the director's sister and main collaborator) — the killer is held in the desert through the night and the following day. Reinforcements arrive, and the other Marines either engage in low-key talk or, infuriated, shove the prisoner's face into the bloody aftermath of his crime.

We see the same images and actions and hear the same conversations over and over. And these repetitions gradually drive home the appalling reality of the murder. They make brutally clear what at first was inexplicable.

More scenes show the interactions of the Marine couple who arrest the killer and give us snatches of the local military culture, including a rowdy pickup bar. And there are also dreamlike tableaux accompanied by poetic speeches (including the witches' dialogues from "Macbeth"), which we gradually realize are spoken by the murder victim herself, whose soul seems to be hovering around the area.

The movie shifts its viewpoint among several characters and groups. But its main center of consciousness is probably the female Marine captain, and there's a rather mystical hint of an interchange between her spirit and the victim's.

The intensely dreamlike qualities of "The Bloody Child" are, almost paradoxically, heightened by the movie's liberal use of extreme naturalism and near-documentary methods. Except for star Tinka Menkes, the cast consists of actual Marines, who helped write the dialogue. And all of this was shot in images of rare austerity and vividness, both in the Mojave Desert and North Africa, by Menkes, who operates her own camera.

Strange as much of "The Bloody Child" may seem — especially to audiences who wander in without knowing what to expect — Menkes' images always grip and disturb. She leaves us with a shivery vision of America as a desert of violence haunted by the spirits of the dead.

*No MPAA rating.*  
*Adult: sensuality, nudity, language, violence.*

**"GENUINELY VISIONARY...Menkes' films are unabashed works of individual expression, voyages into the self and the mysterious world outside."**