

# KEYFRAME

## Nina Menkes: ‘Electrifying’

PHANTOM LOVE and DISSOLUTION define what cinema is all about—or should be.

By [Mark Rappaport](#) August 5, 2014

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‘Phantom Love’

Full disclosure. I do not know [Nina Menkes](#). I never met her. I was familiar with the name but that was all. Even though many of her films are in 35mm, I don’t recall them ever playing theatrically in any city I was in. When they talk about important “indie” filmmakers—past or present—I don’t recall her name having ever being mentioned. When they talk about “avant-garde” films, again, she’s a no-show. Nor is she especially affiliated with “feminist” films, whatever they are and wherever they’re hanging out. I had never seen any of her films, until

very recently. When I did, the scales fell from my eyes. Thank you, all you folks at Fandor, who are helping to fill all kinds of gaps in my film education.

How to describe the films—[\*Phantom Love\*](#) and [\*Dissolution\*](#)? One can more easily talk about what they're not. They're not about the story, even though there is some vague narrative tissue connecting the various events and the people who experience them. They're not about psychology. The characters, such as they are, do things or have things done to them but you will be unable to come up with reasons or explanations for their actions or behavior. Forget back stories. Dialogue is of very little importance. Even though most of the dialogue, spoken in a variety of languages in both films, is subtitled, I imagine one could understand the films equally well without even reading the subtitles. To say they are exercises in mood and atmosphere suggests a precious formalism which describes a certain brand of art film but, in this case, would belittle the power of the films themselves. You are swept up into a world of extreme black-and-white gorgeousness that, in its admittedly minimalist and low-budget manner, suggests unexplored universes. They're ravishingly beautiful landscapes that you immediately want to be part of and actually are, before you even know it. The images hypnotize you into a world outside of time and, despite the specificity of the locations, to someplace one can only describe as universal.



'Eraserhead'

If I am being vague and swooningly rapturous at the same time, it's not by accident. I would be hard pressed to tell you what either of the films are *about* or even what Menkes herself *thinks* they're about. And I don't even want to know. They're about the same thing that those damned steles, those impenetrable slabs of whatever-they-are from outer space and beyond time in **2001** are about. They're about the elemental muck that the woman across the hall in ***Eraserhead*** sinks into. Give it a name, I double-dare you. I can only say that some of the images have stuck with me for weeks after seeing the films. I can't contextualize the images, nor do I want to. *Phantom Love*. A woman works as a croupier in a hotel in some unidentified city. Is it in India? Las Vegas? Some Arab emirate? Can anyone be sure? Who knows? We see her at her job in an extravagantly exotic gambling den. We see her repeatedly having disinterested, mechanical sex with a man we never see. Is it the same man? Or are they different men? Who knows? We see her walking down her hotel corridor. There is a live boa constrictor—not a CGI effect— parked in the middle of the carpet. Maybe she sees it, maybe she doesn't. She steps over it, not even acknowledging or being surprised by its presence, and continues walking. My heart stopped beating. **THAT'S** what it's about.

After one of her sexual encounters, after the man has left, the woman horizontally levitates from the bed and, reflected in the mirror behind her, explodes like a nova into nothingness in an uncaring galaxy. That, *too*, is what the movie is about.

Menkes makes images like no one else. Seeing these images was like the thrill of seeing the ape throwing the bone in the air and then—CUT TO: forty million years later—a space ship languidly drifts through never-ending darkness to a Strauss waltz. It was as thrilling as the sound cut, which chilled me to the marrow the first time I saw it in 1966 and every time subsequently, in Bresson's ***Au Hasard Balthazar***, from the Schubert piano sonata to the sound of a donkey braying, and back again. I haven't felt this kind of movie frisson in decades. Sure, I was a lot younger then—as I imagine everyone else was—but these magical moments become rarer and rarer as the years go by and are, it seems to me, rarer than they should be. Maybe they're all used up. Maybe it's a function of age. But seeing Menkes' films make me doubt it.



'Dissolution'

Another example—in *Dissolution*, a movie which is a riff on Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, we see a close-up of the pawnbroker's hand covered by an elegant lace glove. She is examining an ornate ring. Much later in the film, after her death, her murderer is having dinner in a restaurant with perhaps his only friend. He has ordered a whole fish. He removes the skin. With his fork, he takes a bite of fish. And then another. As he prepares to take another portion with his fork, the very same ring turns up in the belly of the fish. What does it mean? Before I could even give a name to it, I jumped a foot in the air. I may even have been catapulted out of my skin for a second or too. This doesn't happen very often. Nor do I even want it to. I'll tell you what it may mean but I'm not betting any money on it—the ring is summoned by the murderer's subconscious. He can't escape his actions, they follow him everywhere. It becomes a living, poetic example of his guilt, which is always with him. But that's a rather banal, term-paper-for-film-appreciation-class explanation to describe an image that, in itself, defines what cinema is all about. Or should be.



‘The Turin Horse’

Also, in *Dissolution*, the Raskolnikov-character has a dream in which he watches a horse being beaten to death. This is taken directly from a chapter about Raskolnikov’s dream in the book. It’s also an incident that reappears in *The Idiot* and, parenthetically, is the “back story” of [Bela Tarr’s \*The Turin Horse\*](#). It refers to a similar story in Nietzsche’s life, although he was undoubtedly familiar with both of Dostoyevsky’s novels which had been written more than two decades earlier. At the end of *Dissolution*, our psychopathic, murderous maniac is begging for a sign. When he receives the sign, he promises himself, he will confess to his murder. I can’t tell you what the sign is—I’m not being coy about this, I just don’t want to ruin it for you—but it’s one of the most electrifying endings to a movie I’ve ever seen. If it doesn’t freeze your blood to ice and at the same time send you rocketing through the ceiling, don’t tell me about it. We probably won’t have that much to talk about.

No, Nina Menkes is not an indie filmmaker, not an avant-garde filmmaker, not a feminist filmmaker. This woman doesn’t need and can’t use tired labels to hem her in. She is a giant in a landscape of pygmies.

I very recently read that Menkes is preparing to shoot a modern-day version of the Minotaur legend re-framed in terms of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. History, myth, cultural identity, absorption of the self into grander unseen but ever-present thematic patterns, false borders between dreaming and consciousness, between ethnic identities and national boundaries in which geography is only a starting point, a world in which language is both a lie and a trap which makes prisoners of us all ...

I can't wait.