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EXPANDING THE FRAME ON INTERNATIONAL CINEMA

Far from Paradise: Nina Menkes' Queen of Diamonds

BY ERIKA BALSOM IN CS81, FEATURES, FROM THE MAGAZINE

By Erika Balsom

Diamonds are sharp and hard, rich in myth and violence, soaked in desire, totally under the putrid spell of money. They are, in other words, a lot like Las Vegas—especially as it appears in Nina Menkes' searing 1991 film *Queen of Diamonds.* Across 75 taut minutes, Sin City's fabulous hedonism recedes from view, giving pride of place to the death and boredom that make up its core. A casino croupier,

played by the director's sister Tinka Menkes in the fourth of their six collaborations, drifts between work and home, down empty streets, to the ruined oasis of the Salton Sea, and through the night, usually filmed at some distance in static shots that resist psychologization. She is called Firdaus, Arabic for "paradise." The name is borrowed from the title character in Nawal El Saadawi's 1975 novel *Woman at Point Zero*, a life story of female genital mutilation, rape, and sex work, told by a woman in prison while she awaits execution for stabbing her pimp. Paradise, meanwhile, is also the little-used name of the unincorporated town that contains the Vegas strip. If Firdaus is the monarch of this blue-lit realm, where all of life is a transaction, she reigns not in a state of sovereign glory, but in exhausted alienation. In blackjack, all face cards are equal. Menkes knows, however, that in reality, things are different: to be a queen is to be forever secondary, trumped by the power of invisible kings.

Firdaus is first seen asleep in bed, little more than a hand resting on a white pillow, adorned with a ring and acrylic nails, long and red. A tuft of dark hair escapes from beneath a blanket pulled up high, hiding the head and blocking out the day. Menkes cuts away before Firdaus wakes up, a fitting gesture given the trance-like somnolence of what follows. With flowing curls and a pale powdered face, Menkes' protagonist is a resurrection of Maya Deren as she appears in *Meshes of the Afternoon* (1943) and *At Land* (1944), remade for the '90s, alive within a filmic language that trades Deren's lyricism for the hard edge of structure. Drawing on the tradition of experimental cinema as much as independent narrative, *Queen of Diamonds* follows Firdaus as she skirts the margins of a story that never quite becomes her own. An uncle dies, a husband is missing, but such events—such men—are incidental, out of view, reduced to elliptical hints that go nowhere. The plot gets lost in the abyss of the cut. What remains is Tinka Menkes' profound presence, at once tough and wounded, laced through a succession of indelible images that somehow marry the hallucinatory intensity of dreams to the routine banality of a woman's daily slog through an inhospitable world.

At the centre of this routine, and at the literal centre of *Queen of Diamonds,* is Firdaus' work as a blackjack dealer. The film's first image, the only one to appear before the glimpse of her asleep, is a queen of diamonds playing card, presented in lieu of a title as if to signal from the start that the film will give precedence to the mysterious allure of images over the communicative force of language at nearly every turn. The card also quietly gestures to something else: the film's rigorously symmetrical form. The queen is doubled across the card's horizontal axis, with a stamp of gold foil at her core, rotating in a black void, sparkling seductively, accompanied by casino noises.

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These sounds are heard again during the 17-minute sequence of Firdaus at work that divides the film into two equal halves and serves as its conceptual anchor. *Queen of Diamonds* begins with the playing card, but it is tempting to say that its true origin is found some 30 minutes later, in this folded middle.

Menkes has evocatively described the casino set piece as "a vision of hell in which the main character is trapped." Gambling is an activity that can be infused with suspense and emotion, a territory often mined in the many cinematic depictions of Vegas that traffic in the thrill of risk, the joy of winning, and the devastation of loss. In *Queen of Diamonds*, all such affective punctuation is levelled into interminable repetition. Unlike the gambler, for whom every new wager promises a revision of circumstance, be it good or bad, for Firdaus every hand is the same. Her job is vapid and she is at best indifferent. Inside this windowless interior, nothing ever really changes. In the garish artificial light, even diurnal cycles are cancelled; it is never too late or too early, just a perpetual neon evening of endless work, cloaked in lurid colour. The sequence lasts and lasts, but no narrative arcs emerge, not even the most minor. Any conversation between dealer and players goes unheard in the din. Now and then, the sound of a metronome intrudes, striking with agitated regularity. Firdaus is on the clock, prey to the predator of empty time. Viewers familiar with the director's previous film, *Magdalena Viraga* (1986), starring Tinka Menkes as a sex worker accused of killing her john, will remember the words the actress repeats there again and again, like an incantation: "I hate working. I can't stand working. I hate working. I can't stand working."

In the casino sequence, Menkes breaks away from the vocabulary used throughout much of *Queen of Diamonds*, moving the camera, cutting often, and deploying close-ups to fragment the scene. While the long take is the unit of filmic language most often associated with duration, here it is the use of relatively short, proximate shots that creates a sense of temporal protraction, instilling a bewildering sense of monotonous sameness. This is an anomic world, an arid domain of chance and exchange, in which any possibility of meaningful intersubjective encounter has been foreclosed. Chips, hands, cards, and cash predominate; Firdaus' back is seen more than her mask-like countenance. This unrelenting immersion into the gestures and objects of gambling is at once bracingly concrete and suggestively metaphorical, casting the viewer into a nightmarish vortex of what life looks like when sucked dry as the desert by the reign of capital.

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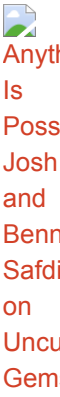
Anything Is Possible: Josh and Benny Safdie on Uncut Gems

From the dead heart of this central sequence, the film pours out images, sad and gorgeous and strange, on either side. Firdaus cares for a frail, elderly man who wears a horseshoe charm long after his luck has run out. "Are you tired now?" she asks him; in *Queen of Diamonds* there is no other way to be. She is tired, too, living in a crummy apartment from which she overhears her neighbour beating up his fiancée. If the vanished husband weren't enough, the bride-to-be's black eye makes a mockery of marriage as a promise of happiness. Decrepit mobile homes and run-down buildings dot the land. At the Salton Sea, a lake as beautiful as it is polluted, a shirtless old man exclaims, "What the hell happened here? It's terrible." The hell of the casino overflows; it is the hell of the world. Death is everywhere, entropy inescapable.

Yet alongside all this grind, all this bleakness, are moments of wonder and mystery. When attempting, and failing, to file a missing person's report for Firdaus' husband, her friend abruptly holds up a wounded wrist and proclaims, "I did it for love." People sing unprompted, maybe to signal that all semblance of feeling is but performance, maybe to prove that scraps of emotion still exist. A Christ figure is carried upside down on a cross as part of a neighbourhood procession; a palm tree burns in the desert while Firdaus gazes on, arms akimbo, long after her male companion has left; elephants sway in the still of night. While an older man lectures her on their romantic prospects, Firdaus finds her ring lodged in the belly of the dead fish on her plate. To try and assign these oneiric visions a stable significance would be to miss the point, as they are more like spells than messages. Nonetheless, associations do accumulate: captivity, sacrifice, mortality, and, above all, despair at the crushing demands of heterosexuality. Tinged with surreal enchantment, these moments are patiently arranged amidst the parched exteriors and more quotidian episodes, collapsing internal and external landscapes, blurring the line between psychic life and the material environment. Although nothing patently fantastical happens, *Queen of Diamonds* does not quite abide by the reality principle. It hints at how things could be more, could be otherwise—and maybe already are. Given the setting, it is appropriate: in Las Vegas, a city of simulacra, a sense of unreality is perhaps the most genuine feeling of all.

In an interview conducted shortly after the film's initial release, Menkes said that *Queen of Diamonds* "is about the experience of being background," commending her sister for her keen ability to "be the lead, but yet to be invisible." In some sense, this is the key to the film's formal and ideological wager. At the casino, Firdaus stands in front of the cruel wheel of fortune, but it does not spin for her. Near the film's conclusion, the abusive boyfriend marries his fiancée; while



At this point, the Safdies are young masters of their own aesthetic, which was in formation at the time of Daddy Longlegs but felt more fully realized in Heaven Knows What:a roving, probing, pulsating audiovisual weave that doesn't so much privilege pace over clarity as locate one in the other. Their movies can be exhausting, enervating, and even annoying (and Sandler, to his credit, achieves genuine annoyance in many passages here), but they're never confusing, and the lucidity of their storytelling—which never wavers even when their characters have no earthly idea what they're doing—has become one of contemporary American cinema's true and distinctive marvels.

They Are All Equal Now: The Irishman's Epic of Sadness

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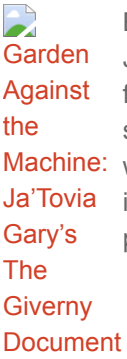
most guests participate in the charade, Firdaus all but disappears from the scene. There is no place for her in happy endings that are nothing of the kind. She just *can't* anymore, so she escapes, hitching a ride to nowhere. Erased by the world, she makes its erasure her own.

Almost 30 years after its Sundance premiere, when *Queen of Diamonds* is circulating once more following a 2018 restoration by the Academy Film Archive, this embrace of invisibility and resignation has lost none of its power as a feminist strategy. In fact, if anything, as a certain brand of so-called feminism buys into emphatically neoliberal tendencies—think the Wing, "pantsuit nation," and #girlboss—its importance has only grown. *Queen of Diamonds* returns to cinemas at a time when feminist demands for better representation, onscreen and behind the camera, are strong, and rightly so. Yet such demands too frequently come down to women asking for a bigger piece of the Hollywood pie, and to representations of "strong female characters" that conform unsettlingly to hegemonic injunctions to succeed, optimize, scheme, and profit. You go, girl! Get what's yours! But Firdaus doesn't go. She is recalcitrant, unaccommodating, unmotivated. *Queen of Diamonds*—refreshingly, vitally, radically—is part of another women's cinema, one that knows that any feminism worthy of the name cannot be grounded in an ideology of individual achievement and must set capitalism within its crosshairs. With poetic obliqueness, it questions why women should fight so hard to be part of a system that doesn't want us—and, more importantly, why we should fight so hard to be part of a system that we shouldn't want in the first instance, a system that extinguishes life in the interest of profit. To the trap of "empowerment," it says: I'd rather not.

The director most often name-checked in association with *Queen of Diamonds* is Chantal Akerman. The formal affinities are clear, but what should not be overlooked is the suspicion of positive images she and Menkes share. Firdaus is a sister to Julie, the sugar-eater of *Je, tu, il, elle* (1974), and the murderous Jeanne Dielman, all three of them women who embrace bad feelings to contest a brutal world that denies them agency. Menkes has mentioned her admiration for Agnès Varda's *Sans toit ni loi* (*Vagabond*, 1985), a film whose French title captures much better than the English the lawless revolt of its main character, Mona, who lies dead in a ditch, forever unreconciled to society's demands. I think, too, of Barbara Loden's Wanda Goronski, who abandons not only her children but respectability itself, inciting, in the words of Elena Gorfinkel, "a reckoning with all those ill-advised, risky, 'unsympathetic,' ambivalent tendencies that roil within any woman who confronts the cruelties of subsisting in the exhaustion of just being, in facing, time and again, the circumscribed terms of her value, a value defined by men, by capitalism, by law." These

Garden Against the Machine: Ja'Tovia Gary's The Giverny Document


Garden Against the Machine: Ja'Tovia Gary's The Giverny Document

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antiheroines form an exhilarating chorus of women who have had enough. Menkes follows Loden, Akerman, and Varda in imagining the potentials of withdrawal, while uniquely infusing this space of negation with an entrancing, witchy magic that comes from, and stands against, the prolonged experience of patriarchal violence. In our affirmative times, instead of leaning in, shattering the glass ceiling, and having it all, *Queen of Diamonds* follows a different, more truly feminist path: a path of inassimilable refusal. It is a film for now, for dreaming.

GARDEN AGAINST THE MACHINE: JA'TOVIA GARY'S THE GIVERNY DOCUMENT
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