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Pushed Back Upon Myself: Nina Menkes' Queen of Diamonds (1991)



by Sage Crusier

Nina Menkes' *Queen of Diamonds* (1991) is among the best films I've watched this year. At its conclusion, I'm left with a sensorial reeling unlike any I've experienced with other films. That's something to at least attempt to write about, although I'm sure I'll fall short of all that could and should be expressed – my certainty here stemming from the fact that in many ways, I find the experience of watching it comparable to when I wake up from a nap on a sweltering

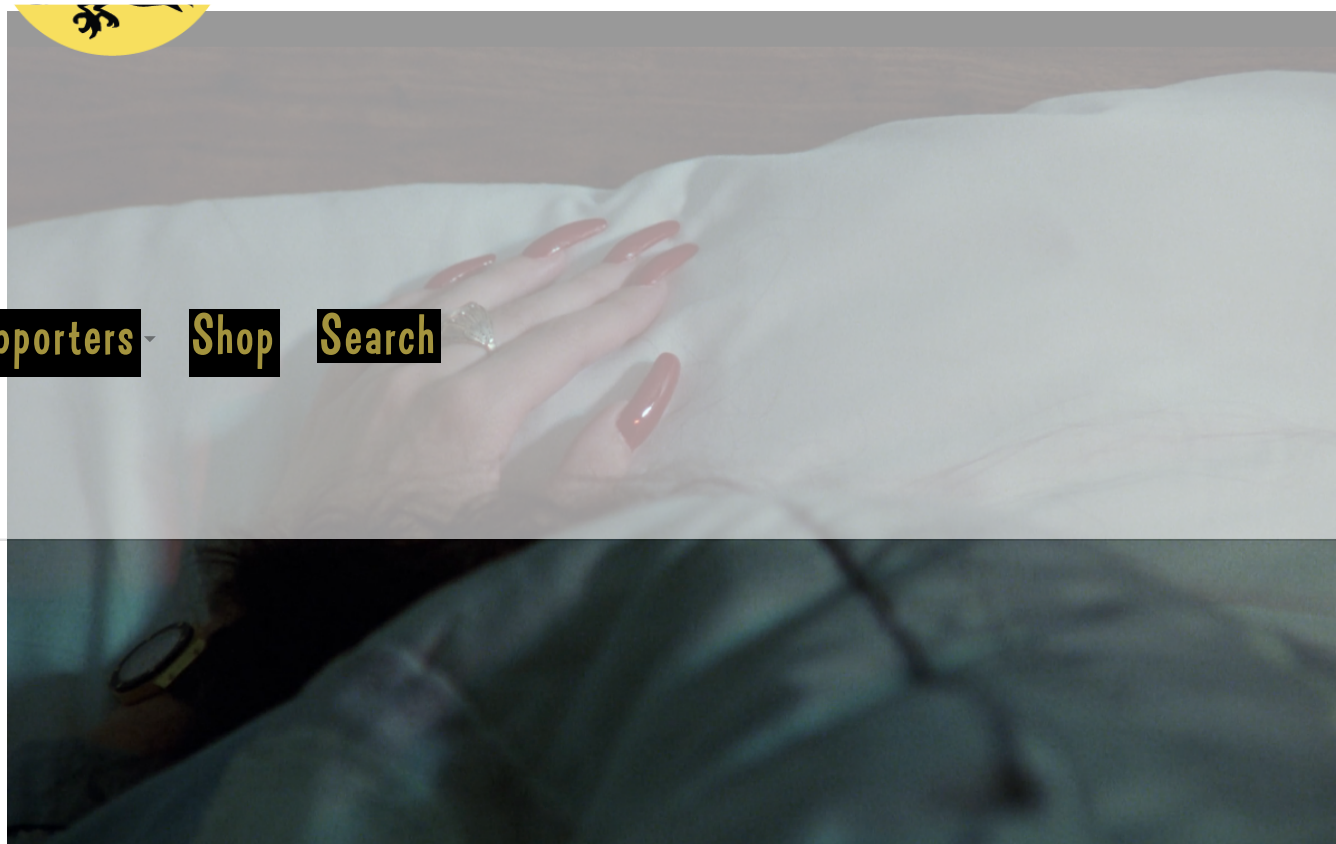
afternoon and can't quite manage to orient myself for the rest of the day; remnants of my dreams still linger in my mind, popping up at unexpected moments and luring me back. Comparable, of course, only if that groggy haze includes some of the most beautiful images I've ever seen and leaves my jaw hanging open in something akin to awe but perhaps closer to mystification.

Firdaus (Tinka Menkes) – an alienated Las Vegas casino worker with a propensity for hip dropping, leaning, arm crossing, and catwalk-style striding – is our uninterested guide through the entrancing journey that is Queen. In high heels and a full set of long nails, she traverses her dry world. Nevada heat creates a mirage-like backdrop as she makes her way along train tracks. With a measured gait and chalky make-up, her presence seems to haunt the spaces she inhabits. Nina Menkes said of Queen in a 2019 interview with filmmaker Anna Biller (creator of *The Love Witch*): “The film is not ‘entertaining’ and it pushes you back upon yourself.” I’m certainly off balance from that bold, gorgeous push. Only in seeking out this extraordinary (and overlooked) film for yourself will you fully understand what I mean, so I hope you decide to.



The way Menkes uses sound and editing throughout the film creates mesmerizing disorientation, a pull-and-push that doesn't allow me to settle. Just as my ears become used to the cacophony of casino floor bustling, I'm confronted with silence or the ambient noise of a fan. Just as I might be getting comfortable in a drawn-out visual moment, I'm pulled from it and thrust into another, often strikingly different composition. In the opening moments, casino sounds play over a sparkling queen of diamonds card that rotates in a black void, creating a hypnotizing effect before a hard cut displays Firdaus's red nails against her white pillow; the ticking of her wrist watch is the only audible sound. Another abrupt cut then shows her standing behind a blackjack table, arms crossed, her projected disinterest contrasting with the bright and noisy atmosphere. Next, she's walking in silence under a pair of giant orange-red dice, then sitting by the bed of an elderly man she's taking care of. The

first words we hear from Firdaus are those she speaks to him with neutral delivery: "Are you in pain?" "Are you hungry?" "It's hot." "Are you tired now?" Their flat interaction contributes to a tone of inevitability that carries through the rest of the film, a tone that is highlighted by some of the imminent results of time (such as pain, hunger, discomfort, and exhaustion). And with each of Menkes' beguiling artistic choices, a comparable sense of admission rises within me: I'm on her time.



Scenes piece together without through lines, and I'm taken from one place to the next without explanation. This keeps me in a state of uncertainty and forces me to accept my inability to predict how things will go or make much sense of what I've witnessed. A palm tree burns in a field as Firdaus stands at the opposite side of the frame, motionless. Three elephants sway and trumpet near a fluorescent-lit parking garage; they seem to go unnoticed by those around while emergency vehicles take away a dead body. Tail lights against dark hills become increasingly smaller, distancing themselves from the camera before disappearing. I hope they'll come back and illuminate something for me, but they don't, and I'm left to sit with myself. Menkes wields the power, and with it she consistently challenges my notions and heightens my curiosity.



To a certain extent, Firdaus and other characters seem to be aware of the fact they're being watched by the camera. Although they don't appear to care much. Firdaus will glance over, or a sun-burnt shirtless man will turn to the camera and comment on how "terrible" the landscape has become: "This used to be a beautiful place once." These odd moments of engagement are uncomfortable reminders of my role as an observer – and given the film's emphasis on the act of observation, that self-consciousness is quite fitting. When the characters have their backs to the camera, this watcher-and-watched dynamic is layered further. They look off at pale horizons, bodies of water and dry fields, as if to signal their lack of interest in my surveillance. Leaning on one leg, a lone child on a beach faces the distant hills. Later, near a run-down building, Firdaus stands with her hip popped as a truck carrying a massive purple clock crosses in front of her, serving as an almost whimsical reminder of the looming presence of time. I wonder what these people are looking at, curious about the expressions on their faces and what they could be waiting for, hoping for, if anything. The physical positioning of their figures denies me any of that potential access and adds a component of quiet defiance to the fabric of the film.



Over the course of an incredibly extended scene, Firdaus goes through repetitive motions during a shift of blackjack dealing at the casino: deal cards, press cash into a table slot, collect chips, deal, press, chips. Lights flash and roll in swells over the ceiling, bells ring and machines release their congratulatory noises. Muffled voices carry over the space. A sound that resembles a ticking clock comes and goes and ranges in intensity. But there aren't any visible clocks placed in the area: a common tactic used by casinos to make you lose track of time. And as the scene stretches on, that's precisely the effect. Menkes' use of the ticking amplifies the impression of endlessness because it's a reminder that this invisible time – her time – does exist, and she's the one in control of the spell it casts.



The long, loud dealing scene bluntly ends with a cut back to the room of the elderly man Firdaus has been looking after, and it's jarring – like not consciously registering all the lights have been on until the power suddenly shuts off. Firdaus pulls a sheet over the man's head. Visible in the window's reflection are a couple cats and someone passing by in the parking lot. With her signature flat tone that fills the otherwise quiet moment, Firdaus tells the person on the other end of the phone line the status of her patient: "Yeah he's dead." And then