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THE BLOODY CHILD – Review by Diane Carson

📅 February 28, 2022 👤 Diane Carson 🎬 actual criminal case, Nina Menkes, the bloody child, Tinka Menkes

The central scenario in director **Nina Menkes'** *The Bloody Child* is straightforward and simple. Soldiers arrest a U.S. Marine, a veteran of the Gulf War, found in the Mojave Desert digging a grave for the wife he's murdered. However, this deceptively uneventful apprehension unfolds predominantly in reverse chronological order, with two other primary locations frequently interjected: a bar and a jungle scene. In addition, several other fragments from diverse arenas interrupt the narrative flow, with events possibly connected to or witnessed by the unnamed murderer in wartime experiences, all of this suggested thematically but never made explicit.

Supplemental, recurring images include: a young, nude woman in a jungle clearing toying with palm fronds and marks on her arm; a bar crowded with

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✓ 15 Feb



Congrats to **#TheAutomat** and
director **#LisaHurwitz**
The Automat is **@AWFJ's**
#MovieOfTheWeek! A must-see
#Documentary with pure NY
nostalgia and delightful



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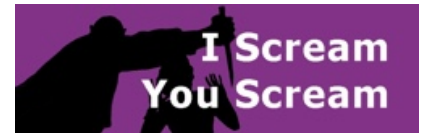
soldiers off duty drinking, playing pool, and lasciviously dancing; a ship drifting slowly in long shot on an unnamed sea (shot on location in North Africa); a man swimming away from the camera in an outdoor pool; an apartment and a bathroom with a man and woman in minimal dialogue; a Marine screaming at and shoving the detained man's head into his wife's bloodied corpse lying across a car's back seat. The camera frames the perpetrator from behind in those and all other scenes (as he drives to the desert and when apprehended), more a generic, brutal killer than a specific individual.

There's more. At the desert arrest location (shot in 29 Palms, California), late in the eighty-five minute film, a large, beautifully groomed black horse trots down the road toward the two Marines standing to the side of the now relatively abandoned site, though this could signal the beginning as opposed to the conclusion of the incident. While other tableaux intervene, I briefly describe only principal, repeated images to offer an idea of the jigsaw puzzle organization distinguishing *The Bloody Child*.

Defining separate spaces, the three primary locations contrast visually: the dominant desert site in sharp focus dominated by denuded, brown landscapes with mountains in the distance and soldiers moving about in open spaces; the darkly lit bar claustrophobic and noisy; the jungle site presented in soft focus and muted colors. Complementing this visual blend, voiceover narration, bar music, and barely discernible exchanges among Marines add another challenging, at times perplexing element as we strain to understand what is spoken. The discernible audio comprises: quotations from Macbeth's witches, heard several times (described in film notes as the disembodied voice of the murdered wife); the aforementioned angry, cursing Marine violently manhandling the murderer in the car with the dead body; sparse dialogue between the man and woman in the apartment; country music in the bar; and random environmental sounds.

Based on an actual criminal case covered by the Los Angeles Times, the male Marines from Desert Storm play themselves, with Nina Menkes' sister Tinka as the ranking Marine captain who finds herself haunted by the dead wife's voice. The handful of bar patrons, men and women, are never identified or differentiated.

In her own words, experimental filmmaker Nina Menkes offers the best perspective on her film, stating, "In contrast to most Hollywood films, *The Bloody Child* doesn't use violence as a dramatic element. As in real life, the violence in the film damages, it ricochets in multiple directions, and generates negative energy which circles back and perpetuates itself." She thereby offers a stark reminder of sensationalized content and reassuring resolution of mainstream narrative films; that is, conventional films present a lurid murder with, typically, an investigation resulting in the apprehension of the culprit, law and order restored, viewers leaving satisfied and relatively unbothered by the heinous act. Menkes explores further the impact of such savagery on all closely and tangentially affected. Her newly restored 1996 film is accurately described in



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several postings as an hallucinatory meditation on violence. Indeed, tentacles of violence reach far beyond immediate, government-sponsored warfare to haunt and affect an inclusive 'civilized' society through all individuals impacted. Subtle and complex, *The Bloody Child's* rich, complex reflection on violence offers a poignant, important consideration of state-sponsored and individual brutality.



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Diane Carson

Diane Carson, Ph.D., Professor Emerita, has reviewed films for over 25 years and has covered the Cannes, Telluride, Toronto, Palm Springs, and Sundance festivals. She writes for KDHX, 88.1 FM. St. Louis' community radio. One of the founders of the St.

Louis International Film Festival, she continues to serve on juries. A past president of the University Film and Video Association, she taught film studies and production at St. Louis Community College and at Webster University. Her new book, written with two colleagues, is "Appetites and Anxieties: Food, Film, and the Politics of Representation," Wayne State U. Press, 2014.

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