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PHANTOM CINEMA: THE FILMS OF NINA MENKES

In her 2012 cinematic manifesto for the German film journal *Revolver*, Nina Menkes reveals her directorial ethos: to bring to light "things that have lain veiled in the dark." Fusing the familiar and the strange, Menkes's films uncover the unnerving condition of feminine alienation enforced by patriarchal cruelty. Her phantom worlds are often made up of archetypically transient spaces, such as ramshackle motel rooms and glitzy casino halls, while her experimental use of space and long takes has drawn comparisons to other feminist filmmakers such as Chantal Akerman. Yet Menkes remains ambivalent about describing herself as an "auteur". In positioning herself as a "willing vehicle for stories and images that wanted to come into being," she radically rejects the limiting ideal of the all-seeing creator in favor of a more intuitive and collaborative approach.

Frequently embodied by her sister and muse Tinka Menkes, the director's complex heroines drift on the margins of society. Tracing the mystical journey taken by a young woman who leaves her Orthodox community in Jerusalem for the Moroccan desert, her early short *The Great Sadness of Zohara* (1983) is consumed by the same atmosphere of displacement that haunts her subsequent features *Magdalena Viraga* (1986) and *Queen of Diamonds* (1991). Revolving around a sex worker charged with murdering her client and a blackjack dealer worn out by her transient existence, the latter two features counter the brutalities of female subjugation with startling flashes of beauty. In *Queen of Diamonds*, for instance, the striking, crimson manicure sported by Tinka's character feels like a gesture of resistance against the drudgery of casino life. The figure of the alienated croupier returns again in Menkes's hypnotic, black-and-white psychodrama *Phantom Love* (2007), which wrestles with familial trauma and the inner demons of the female psyche. A shamanistic reworking of Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, *Dissolution* (2010) features a troubled male protagonist, a departure from her most famous works. Nevertheless, its reckoning with the aftermath of gender-based violence through fragmented, psychologically opaque imagery is also painfully reminiscent of the shattering *The Bloody Child* (1996). Combining feminist politics with an avant-garde style, the films of Nina Menkes cast a powerful spell.

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