

**Open
Locks,
Whoever
Knocks!**

Open Locks, Whoever Knocks!
On Nina Menkes's 'The Bloody Child'
Alice Blackhurst

they will notice your thorns and
ask you to testify.
turn toward the shade.
smile.
say nothing at all

– Lucille Clifton, 'Directions for Leaving the Desert'

Nina Menkes's *The Bloody Child* (1996) immediately counters clichéd visions of the desert as a vast, open, and infinitely boundless space by offering its viewer tableaux of incarceration and restraint. A woman peering through a thickly padlocked gate; a man being led across a mountain range streaked with morning light in chained handcuffs; a woman's corpse, bludgeoned and bloodied, slumped in the back seat of a stationary car. Inspired by an article first encountered in the *Los Angeles Times*, telling the story of a Gulf War veteran arrested in the Mojave Desert for allegedly murdering his pregnant wife before digging her a shallow grave at dawn, the film orbits the disorienting wreckage of a violent crime. Yet, thinning borders between reality and fantasy, traumatic memories and psychic flight, it also succeeds in being cryptically oneiric. Its non-chronological form offers no neat linear causality of consequence. Any plot of psychic debt, retribution, or remorse is etherized by Menkes's drifting, stubbornly elusive style. The film's impressions sting, but also scatter, eddy, flit like sand.

The film's title is a reference to another work of curses, murders and acutely tortured masculinity: Shakespeare's 'Scottish play,' *Macbeth*. 'The bloody child' is one of the 'three apparitions' that materialize before the fated king in the work's fourth act, via the 'secret, black, and mid-night hags,' the brooding and conspiring 'witches.' Menkes further leverages this source material by having an eerily sing-song, disembodied woman's voice (identified in the film's credits as that of the murdered wife) chant snatched lines from *Macbeth* throughout, forming a discordant, otherworldly counterpoint to the coarser images of the arrest and the procession of prosaic, threshold spaces (dive bars, motel lobbies, desert highways) that make up the film's setting.

When shall we three meet again; Fair is foul and foul is fair; Open locks, Whoever knocks! The haunted 'three' at the core of *The Bloody Child* are the accused veteran, a taciturn, staunchly impassive figure whom we do not once hear speak throughout the film's 86-minute running time; the murdered woman, who materializes in a princess dress before a bathroom mirror, otherwise appearing solely as a cadaver; and a female Marine officer, played by Tinka Menkes, the director's sister and long-term collaborator, charged with overseeing the events and supervising the accused man in captivity. A three – the interruption of a couple by a third – is the motor of traditional narrative tension, yet Menkes's films refuse to traffic in staid formulae. Instead, unsettling all notion of stability, they trace asymmetric templates that arrest just as much as they allure.

The Bloody Child is both an exercise in ellipsis – it refuses to deliver the incisive, punctive moment of the grisly murder itself – and in sustaining a direct, unflinching gaze that does not veil the blunt contours of male violence. When a hopped-up male police officer repeatedly pushes

the face of the accused down into the crotch of the woman splayed lifeless in the car, shouting 'Do you see this? Do you *fucking see this?*', the film both bores against the blind spots of vision and entreats its subject and its viewer to look harder, not to shirk from brutality. Despite the fierce atrocity of the murder committed, what most enrages the rotating cast of male auxiliaries is the husband's failure to react to their increasingly invasive interrogations. He is stunned into a kind of muteness. *You have the right to remain silent.* But the corrosive fury that is stoked from feeling left out, unseen and unheard is one that Menkes's film declines to cauterize. Instead, enigma prevails in what have been termed the film's 'African sequences,' 16mm footage from Egypt and Sudan that stands in contrast to the 35mm Californian material. Also featuring Tinka Menkes – not as a Marine officer but ostensibly as herself – these sequences remain undecipherable, glitching and flickering, magisterial in their opacity. Are they connected to the crime? Or completely unrelated? The viewer does not get an answer, just as they are not made privy to the final verdict on the veteran's stark act.

It is hard, at present time of writing, not to watch *The Bloody Child* without thinking of the overturning of *Roe v. Wade* in the United States, and of all the women who will suffer bloody deaths for the sake of unborn 'children.' Menkes's film, despite the beauty of its startling, often visually rapturous images ultimately registers as a haunting meditation on the vulnerable lives that become disposable in a world of heedless domination. In her visionary essay, 'The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction,' Ursula K. LeGuin makes a distinction between what she terms 'the killer story' and 'the life story.' She describes the former as 'The story the mammoth hunters told about bashing, thrusting, raping',¹ the story in which someone – usually not a man – ends up dead. In contrast, she is careful to affirm that in her own fiction, 'I'm not telling that story. We've heard it, we've all heard all about all the sticks and spears and swords, the things to bash and poke and hit with, the long, hard things, but we have not heard about the thing to put things in, the container for the thing contained. That is a new story. That is news.'²

The Bloody Child repurposes a lurid news item and expands its reach beyond sensationalism. It asks what it might look like not to tell 'that story,' the killer story, the hero story, and instead to film from the perspective of 'the thing to put things in,' from the receptacle that is both fetishized and punished for what it might contain. Yet for Nina Menkes, and her sister Tinka, who must 'captain' a horrific sequence of events, the latter isn't a 'new story'. Cutting across media, timescales, sonic atmospheres and geographies in a multi-layered and enchanting bricolage, it is rather the oldest, most persistent story there is. *When shall we three meet again?* becomes, in this sense, a redundant question. We have met too many times and existed for too long in this constellation. The final sound the film emits is the beeping of a car door being automatically unlocked, then, after a quick beat, getting locked again.

1. Ursula K. LeGuin, 'The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction,' *Dancing at the Edge of the World* (New York: Grove Press, 1989), p.168.

2. Ibid.