Document Citation

Title	**Chantal Akerman: the pajama interview**
Author(s)	Nicole Brenez
Source	*LOLA Press*
Date	2012 Aug
Type	interview
Language	English
Pagination	
No. of Pages	29
Subjects	Magnani, Anna (1908-1973), Rome, Italy Akerman, Chantal (1950-2018), Brussels, Belgium Snow, Michael Sirk, Douglas (1897-1987), Hamburg, Germany Van Sant, Gus Murnau, F. W. (1888-1931), Bielefeld, North-Rhine-Westphalia, Germany Wong Kar-Wai, Shanghai, China (Republic : 1949-) Varda, Agnès (1928), Brussels, Belgium Bresson, Robert (1907-1999), Bromont-Lamothe, Puy-de-Dôme, France Demy, Jacques (1931), Pontchateau Duras, Marguerite (1914-1996), Gia Dinh (formerly French Cochinc, Vietnam

Godard, Jean Luc (1930), Paris, France

Film Subjects

Elephant, Van Sant, Gus, 2003

La folie Almayer (Almayer's folly), Akerman, Chantal, 2012

Sunrise: a song of two humans, Murnau, F. W., 1927

Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles, Akerman, Chantal, 1975

Les rendez-vous d'Anna, Akerman, Chantal, 1978

Le journal d'un curé de campagne (Diary of a country priest), Bresson, Robert, 1951

Tabu, Murnau, F. W., 1931

Portrait d'une jeune fille de la fin des anneés 60, à Bruxelles (Portrait of a young girl in the late sixties in Brussels), Akerman, Chantal, 1994

Mamma Roma, Pasolini, Pier Paolo, 1962

Last days, Van Sant, Gus, 2005

Tom, tom, the piper's son, Jacobs, Ken, 1969

Un divan à New York (A couch in New York), Akerman, Chantal, 1995

Mouchette, Bresson, Robert, 1967

La captive (The captive), Akerman, Chantal, 2000

Cleopatra, Mankiewicz, Joseph L., 1963

Chantal Akerman: The Pajama Interview

Nicole Brenez

To meet Chantal Akerman is to experience someone incomparable: a person of uncommon force, capable of wresting a film from a well of the worst production problems, like those that arose during *Almayer's Folly* (2011); a person of immense vulnerability, to gauge the extent that she offers herself to others, provided they do not represent power of any sort, whether political, economic or symbolic; a creature capable of the most extraordinary gestures, small and large alike. What other filmmaker, for example, would have offered all her resources to her bankrupted producer, as Chantal did for Paolo Branco in 2008? Instinctively – never a matter of doctrine but of living proof – Chantal Akerman lives and acts day-to-day the teaching of Emmanuel Levinas: *thinking through the Other*. We shall see how this ethics structures a conception of the image. On the one hand, we find *iconophobia*, that is, the rejection of the idolised image ('in the Sanhedrin Tractate, it is written: one must not say to another, wait for me by such-and-such idol' – Maimonides, *Laws Concerning Idolatry*). On the other, *figurability*: an analytical relationship to the world founded on a deep understanding of the complex interplay of projections comprising human exchange – an interplay that the cinema can legitimately take as its very material.

In the heat of the summer of 2011, although busy with the release of her new film, Chantal Akerman offered all the time needed to elaborate on this interview – which she reread and corrected while scattering *I don't know* throughout, to reject, with characteristic tenacity and exactitude, any pretense of mastery. I have organised this wealth of material like a small, private encyclopedia, both alphabetically and chronologically, while interweaving commentaries on the films chosen by Chantal for the *carte blanche* series offered by the Viennale (The Vienna International Film Festival) and screened at the Filmmuseum. The title of the interview is, of course, a homage to the 1957 musical comedy *The Pajama Game* (the *Golden Eighties* of its era), which, Jean-Luc Godard wrote so well, yields to an 'unrestrained' joy in freedom, 'the pleasure and the need to dance'. (1)

1.Tom Miln
Godard (Lo
1972), p. 8

Akerman

Nicole Brenez: A for Akerman, it's logical. Let's give this interview a concrete, historical frame: it's July 2011, you've just finished *Almayer's Folly*, and we're talking against a backdrop of violent economic crises and revolutions. How are you taking them?

Chantal Akerman: I was born in 1950, in a very poor family, but in the context of the post-war era, things were getting better and better, at least in the Western world. Today, it's hard to imagine what will happen once we've suppressed everything that allows people to get by halfway-decently. Or unfortunately, maybe it's not so hard to imagine.

NB: Do you think that the next revolution could come from the extreme right in Europe, that the Arab Spring could be suppressed by the fundamentalists?

CA: Maybe. Maybe, yes, there are days when I tell myself that. I always believe the worst. Unfortunately, history has tended to give me reason. In 1941, the Americans knew that the war was won, and they started to organise the escape of the Nazi heads with the Vatican. In 1972, they appointed a criminal, an old officer in the stormtroopers, to the head of the UN [Kurt Waldheim, Secretary-General from 1972 to 1981]. Power has no soul. You can't be surprised by anything. Today, the neoliberal lobbies insist that we cut the budgets for education, health, assistance programs for the poorest people – everything that makes the world livable. Two years ago, during the first crisis: I was in Miami, and in the Haitian quarter I saw all the multi-coloured houses closed up and barricaded. I wanted to paint some sheets different colors and write a soundtrack taken from what happened to the people who lived in these houses, and make an installation.

NB: Why didn't you do it?

CA: When things don't happen right away, I lose my drive. And anyhow, I had to prepare *Almayer*. But I regret not doing it.

Amour fou

NB: 'The fall of a European in Malaya. That is what [Joseph] Conrad wanted to write about when he started his first book, *Almayer's Folly*'. So begins your note on the film's intentions before shooting.

CA: Yes, the first note. There have been so many more.

NB: For me, ultimately, I saw a film centred around primal feelings, a film about *l'amour fou*, a portrait of a man in terrible love with his daughter. Is it anything like an idealised portrait of your father?

CA: No, no, certainly not. I don't think we need to go rifling through my autobiography. It's imprisoning.

It's the problem of love in general: is it for the other person or one's self? Almayer is driven by the love he thinks he holds for his daughter; overwhelmed by his calamitous life, he has nothing else. He represents the anxious, depressed side that his daughter won't share.

Almayer and his daughter represent two characters and sides of me: the daughter who dares to leave home, as I did when I was a teenager; and the depressed father, who, like me, is immersed in his own sense of loss. We fall back on autobiography. Better not to. Anyhow, that's how I explain the film to myself, for the moment, and my desire to make it – but everything is always more complicated. Or much simpler.

When I read Conrad's book, there was one scene that struck me: the father is going to talk to his daughter, so that she'll stay with him, so she'll return. It moved me to the point of tears. I don't know why or how, but I genuinely believed this feeling. It's not the colonial who interested me. That same night, I saw Murnau's *Tabu* (1931). And I felt a

sort of spark between this scene and *Tabu*. And it was at that spark that the desire to make this movie came about.

NB: What exactly does Almayer want for his daughter?

CA: For his daughter, I don't know; he needs a reason to live. To exist. What could he give his daughter? Nothing.

When she leaves with a guy she doesn't love, it's because anything would be better than staying with her father. It's her mother who pushes her, her mother's who's more practical. Maybe it's better to get to know someone to be able to love them later on, like it used to be in arranged marriages. Little by little, they can learn to respect each other. Well, sometimes. In the end, I don't know.

Art Market

NB: You entered into the field of cinema on your own, without going through a school or institution or group, and little by little you've carved your own path through force of will, without ever compromising. How did you get into the sphere of plastic arts?

CA: By chance. I've never seen myself as an artist. Kathy Halbreich, who was working in a museum, asked me to do something. I set myself to it. It started like that. I enjoyed it, I kept doing it.

To make 'art' is usually wonderful. The art market is another thing. It's often tied to power, to the phallus – but not always.

In cinema, when you make a film, even for four people, anybody at all can enter the darkened theater; it's democratic. In the art world, there's an elitism that reigns sometimes that's tied to capital. Fortunately, not always. In the Renaissance, the Medicis let Michaelangelo make revolutionary work like 'The Slaves'. Claude Berri, who, like my father, was a small Jew who came from leather and fur, would get up and say he was looking at his Yves Kleins. They were his. What was he really looking at, the painting or its value? Both, without a doubt; I don't know. Ultimately, it's touching.

My father also started to buy paintings at the end of his life. Bad paintings, but he liked them. I find it very moving.

NB: Today the speculators don't buy the works they like; they put their names on a list and wait to acquire a painting they haven't seen by an eminent artist.

CA: Fortunately, they're not all like that. But it's true, for example, that the paintings sold at auction fetch astronomical prices.

After the revolution – and it really was one – of Duchamp, a kind of perverse spirit has quietly taken hold and now everything is supposed to be art. When Steve McQueen spits on the ground, he declaims that it's art. I know, it's a provocation – but not only that.

NB: So how do you manage to work in the context of the modern art market?

CA: It's turned out that, up to now, I've been able to work through intermediaries whom I've respected. Not only in public museums, also in private markets. I respect Suzanne Pagé, at one point the director of the Museum of Modern Art, who advises [Bernard] Arnault. There have sometimes been real modern patrons, like Sylvina Boissonnas, the Schlumberger heiress, who sponsored the Zanzibar group and then, unfortunately, the 'Psychoanalysis and Politics' Group. Or the De Menils, also from the Schlumberger family who, instead of locking their works up, founded DIA Beacon and transformed an old Nabisco factory not far from New York into an exhibition space.

But in the end, art usually serves the rich – the phallus. Occasionally, there are collectors who are really in love with art. Again, nothing's simple. Before the war, the gallery owners kept the artists alive – not through speculation, but through love for the artists and their works. Even when it's exhibited, often in palaces, art becomes just the exhibition of a limitless ego. But, all the same, it's good that it gets shown.

NB: Jonas Mekas had a line about Mankiewicz's *Cleopatra* (1963): why all this lavish delirium on-screen instead of just buying a big gold nugget and exhibiting it directly as is?

CA: Ah, I hadn't heard that one. The Golden Calf. Idolatry. And before the Golden Calf, slavery, the pyramids. We have to reread Exodus, it remains so true.

I'm not on-board with Polanski's *The Pianist* (2002): art doesn't serve a powerful purpose, it doesn't reconcile people with each other. And not European art. I sometimes have the impression that German Romanticism led to the war. But maybe it's just an impression.

Book

NB: Besides your scripts for *Les rendez-vous d'Anna* (Albatros, 1978) or *Un divan à New York* (L'Arche, 1996), you published two books: one play, *Hall de nuit* (*Night Lobby*, L'arche, 1992), and a story, *Une famille à Bruxelles* (*A Family in Brussels*, L'Arche, 1998).

CA: For many reasons, I believe more in books than images. The image is an idol in an idolatrous world. In a book, there's no idolatry, even if you can idolise the characters. I believe in the book; when you immerse yourself in a huge book, it's like an event, an extraordinary one.

NB: What books were events for you?

CA: It happened more when I was young. These past few years, one event has been Vasily Grossman's *Life and Fate*, published fifteen years after he died. And Varlam Shalamov's *The Kolyma Tales*.

NB: Two Russian stories that document the war and the camps.

CA: Yes. Always that.

There were heroes in the camps. My mother, when she was 15 in the camp, worked nights manufacturing battle supplies for Krupp. A soldier from the Wehrmacht visited the camps and said, 'it's not normal for children to be working at night', and he moved her to

the day shift – but everything else, the imprisonment, the exploitation, the death, all this he found normal! My mother and her aunts were taken care of by an older woman who would save them a bit of bread so they could stay alive. During the death march, when the Nazis saw that they were flanked by the Americans and Russians, they emptied the camps and made the prisoners walk barefoot, or with paper to wrap their feet, from one camp to another. My mother doesn't realise it, but her aunts supported her when she fainted, and they chewed her food for her so she could eat.

NB: 'The world is no more, I'll have to carry you', wrote Paul Celan.

CA: They were saved by some French soldiers who were heading in the other direction, when they suddenly heard these women talking in French; they stopped, wrapped them in their overcoats and led them to the Bremen bridge on the American side. They brought them to a hospital and fed them bite by bite, which saved them. So many people died by starting to eat again too fast.

***Bresson (Robert),* Mouchette (1967)**

CA: The ending of the film, with Mouchette rolling toward the river, is tremendous. With so little, Bresson makes us feel so much about the world: Mouchette rolls alongside all those who have ever been sacrificed; all those who haven't been just raped but destroyed. All those who have been rolled in the mud.

NB: Mouchette prefers to remain in solidarity with her poacher-rapist and to die rather than stay with the old village dignitaries. She's in solidarity with her class.

CA: Yes. I don't know. Perhaps. I only remember the ending. When I was shooting *D'Est* in the Ukraine, we ran out of gas. Some peasants siphoned the gas from their car to give it to us, but then didn't want us to leave and prepared a feast. Poor as they were, they cobbled together what they could to offer us a meal of a king. They didn't know Prokofiev or Shostakovich, but they knew that when someone's hungry, they have to eat. Stalin himself 'forgot' to plan for the plowings, and caused a famine in the Ukraine that led to the deaths of seven million people. Even though he came from there, the Ukraine. Nothing is simple. Those same peasants could still have massacred the Jews in the war. The same peasants or others.

NB: What's so frightening in *Mouchette* is that ferocious desire to die, this assertion of death. Mouchette tries three times before she manages to drown.

CA: Yes, it's often like that when one wants to die: keep trying and then it comes. It's also a film about France, which could be so beautiful and hides a kind of horror. Later, Mouchette is going to be buried, and the land is tied to the killing. It's why I don't trust the land. Blanchot wrote a beautiful text on the Jews and nomadism in *The Infinite Conversation*: he affirms nomadism and the book. (2) No land, no killings: Blanchot explains that land equals blood and that the world is nothing more than an enormous cemetery, still bloody, while the book can be a bloodless land. To live without one's own land is to risk becoming an enormous slaughterhouse. Nomadism is beautiful and it's heroic. But is it good to be heroic all the time?

2. Maurice
Hanson), 'I
Conversati
Press, 199

Desire

CA: I was living in a maid's chambers without heat. The winter after '68, it was frozen. I was living at 86 or 88, rue Bonaparte, and there was no water. Across from me there lived an old couple, a painter and his wife, in two maid's chambers where they'd lived their whole lives. I had just a small lamp with me that I put on my belly to keep warm. I went to the student's residence with my foam mattress that was three centimetres thick. I lived there and met plenty of people, strangers, and they welcomed me. Sometimes I'd put my gear in the hallway. Where I stayed, the ice was thick over the windows; I never lived in luxury, but in Brussels at least our place was warm. My father must have assumed all of his, but he let me go; he obviously knew I'd get by. Paris was the city of dreams, the city of writers, and I wanted to write in Paris in a maid's chambers. Not in Brussels. My cousin was in Paris, and she paid me a little to take care of her baby daughter. I didn't take the Métro; I walked. But I still don't know Paris. It's all been erased.

NB: You treat this situation of poverty and freedom in a lot of your films. *Almayer* gives one example, when Nina runs away from boarding school and wanders through the streets, penniless.

CA: Yes, certainly. You work with your material. That's all you have.

Later, I lived on the rue Croulebarbe, in the same building as François and Noëlle Châtelet. With Alex, a young man who was studying Chinese and Laozi, I'd go to Vincennes to listen to Deleuze and Lacan. Lacan was really sarcastic, especially with the girls; he'd take up their questions to mock and ridicule them. He was already into his Borromean knots, and nobody understood any of it. Deleuze, I only saw him one time, I don't remember it well but I remember the atmosphere: lively, impassioned, fun. I met Alex when I was 13, through DROR, the Zionist-Socialist Jewish movement. Alex had a small allowance to live on, and he came to live with me. He had a tiny hotplate, and I'd buy whatever was cheapest, carrots and rice – it got monotonous. There were showers and some underfloor heating that nobody liked. Alex wanted to take me hitchhiking in Japan, but I left him. He was handsome, despite his acne. He committed suicide, and I learned about it while I was waiting in line to see a film. He also wanted to be Rimbaud. He talked very little about himself.

NB: In your maid's chambers, what did you write?

CA: I wrote *je tu il elle*, but as a novel, not a film. It was only years later [1974] that I made the film. I hitchhiked back to Brussels to see the girl, Claire, who's in the film, and I had all sorts of adventures with the truck drivers who picked me up. It was dangerous. But that's how we lived at the time. I also helped my cousin Jonathan to write a play about Van Gogh, and I read Vincent's letters to his brother Theo. And then I cracked. I cut my hair close-cropped, I went back; my father was shocked, it was obviously an act of self-mutilation.

Directing the Actor

NB: Do you recount these episodes of your life to your actors, so they understand the stakes of what they're playing?

CA: No. I don't tell them any of that. And when I make a film, I don't think about any of

it. And the film isn't even tied to it. Here I'm talking, I'm letting myself go. I'm talking because I think it's what you want to hear. But a film is something else. I don't say anything much to the actors. I just try to make the right choice. That's all.

For *Almayer*, we didn't rehearse, I didn't give instructions; I gave them a space and they went for it. When they moved, we'd follow them, like in a documentary. They were each free to do as they pleased, or almost.

Rémon Fremont is a great documentary cameraman; it was with him that I shot *Sud*, *D'est*, *De l'autre côté*, and a narrative, *Portrait of a Young Girl in Brussels at the End of the '60s*. At the end of shooting, he cried in my arms; he told me he'd never been so happy. Everybody was really happy; everyone felt like they had their own room to breathe and, at the same time, they felt in harmony together. Stanislas Merhar especially, he understood the path we'd taken, but I hardly told him anything: just some suggestions, sometimes in the most discreet ways. While playing, Stanislas would talk about himself, I think, about his own relationship to life – or non-life: I could tell what he was doing and I accepted it. When we first met, for *La Captive*, he didn't say a word to the crew during shooting, except to me and Sylvie [Testud]. Everyone thought he was haughty but, no, he was just a little 'autistic'. He came on-stage and could only see his work. We have a very strong relationship, which nothing could ever undo; we each have total trust in each other. The kind of mutual respect we've attained makes everything peaceful between us; it will never be betrayed. As is often the case in cinema.

NB: Even for the last shot, which is so virtuosic and intricate, you didn't plan anything?

CA: Absolutely not. There was no need. We kept Stanislas' chair moving toward the sun, very slowly. He talked, he kept quiet, he listened to the sound of the river, he looked at me, I told him to keep going; the scene lasted 10 minutes and I selected a fragment from it.

Energy

NB: You've shown unparalleled energy. You salvaged *Almayer* from a black hole of extraordinary production problems, like a lot of your work.

CA: My energy comes in fits. I spend half my time in bed. Luckily there's a window now in front of me, and I look outside. Before, there was a wall. I had my first manic episode at 34. My life changed, something broke down: something of that energy that filled me when I was younger.

NB: What was the nature of this change?

CA: Previously, I had felt a kind of energy in life, with moments of depression of course – but I read constantly, took notes, was curious about everything. Then it was gone … The breakdown knocked me out. Before, I walked barefoot in the street, I brought poor people home, I wanted to save the world. Imagine, I telephoned Amnesty International to try to get them to dig a hole to the other side of the earth, to Siberia, so they'd get out all the people imprisoned in the camps! I wanted them to have 10,000 Socialist Jews brought to Israel to change the government and make peace … But I wasn't living there, and it's for the Israelis to know what's to be done. Not for us who live here, for the time

being, securely.

I want the days to end early. I go to bed at 5pm, at 8pm, with sleeping pills. Without complaining. That's how it is. I cope with my illness. It's an illness like any other.

NB: So what fuels you? How would you describe yourself?

CA: How would I describe myself? My first response would be, 'I'm a Jewish girl'. But if you asked me, 'what does it mean to be Jewish?' I wouldn't be able to tell you. I had to leave the Jewish community to get by, and sometimes I miss it. When I see orthodox Jews walking in my neighborhood – leaving the synagogue, with their black hats – I tell them, 'Shabbat, Shalom', and it does me some good. It's stupid, I know, but that's how it is. They look at me weirdly but they respond, in a low voice, 'Shabbat, Shalom'. At that moment, I feel like I belong – or the opposite, that I'm looking to belong, even for just a second. It's a funny thing – besides which, I love Israel, even if it's its own form of exile. One more type. I feel good there, usually, even if I don't agree with the government. Even if I know that, for Israel to exist, it has to act like other races. To shed blood, and seize lands.

When you're with Jews, even if you hate them, there's something already present, something unspoken there. (Except with self-hating Jews). There can't be any anti-Semitism.

Still, it was a Jew who denounced my mother. He was a doorman at a nightclub. He'd hidden my family to get money from them and, when the money ran out, he denounced them. He was taken down by the Resistance; he was an *Untermensch*. Nothing is simple, and whenever I say anything, I want to say the opposite as well.

NB: You don't hesitate reusing a Nazi term?

CA: No. Not for this man. Maybe I should leave their vocabulary to themselves, but it has left its marks.

My father never wore the yellow star. His sisters hid him in a convent, and the nuns tried to convert him. The Jews don't have the right to proselytise, unlike the Catholics and Muslims. My grandparents were so naïve; they couldn't imagine what was going to happen to them, and thought they were being taken off to work. My grandmother's paintings were stolen.

Filmography (Annotated by the Filmmaker)

Saute ma ville (*Blow Up My Town*), 1968
The opposite of *Jeanne Dielman*. Charlie Chaplin, woman.

L'enfant aimée ou je joue à être une femme mariée (*The Beloved Child or, I Play at Being a Married Woman*), 1971
A failure, lost.

Hotel Monterey, 1972
I can breathe, I'm really a filmmaker.

La Chambre (*The Room*), 1972
I can breathe but stay in bed. It was done the day after I finished *Monterey*.

Le 15/8, 1973
With Sami [Szlingerbaum].

Hanging Out Yonkers, 1973
Lost. It was on young junkies in rehab centers outside New York. It was really beautiful. I lent it to INSAS [School of Cinema of Brussels] and it was never found again, though not for want of trying.

je tu il elle (*I You He She*), 1974
Foolhardy.

Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles, 1975
Here things get complicated. I'd done what I wanted to do, so what to do next?

News from Home, 1976
I love it. Still not free from my mother.

Les Rendez-vous d'Anna (*The Meetings of Anna*), 1978
Tell me you love me, Chantal. (Always my mother.)

Aujourd'hui dis-moi (*Tell Me Today*), 1980
On grandmothers. I didn't have one anymore; in voice-over, my mother talks of hers.

Toute une nuit (*All One Night*), 1982
Fragments.

Les Années 80 (*The '80s*), 1983
Song.

L'Homme à la valise (*The Man with the Suitcase*), 1983
Absence.

Pina Bausch. 'Un jour Pina m'a demandé' (*Pina Bausch: 'One Day Pina Asked Me …'*), 1983
Sadistic horror amidst beauty.

Family Business, 1984
Charlie Chaplin (that's me) and Aurore [Clément].

J'ai faim, j'ai froid (*I'm Hungry, I'm Cold*, in *Paris vu par… vingt ans après*), 1984
My friend and I. A little musical comedy without singing.

Chantal Akerman (in *Lettre d'un cineaste*), 1984
A rose is a rose is a rose, but it's not an apple.

Golden Eighties, 1986
It took five years. *Les Années 80* was a test-run.

Letters Home, 1986
Sylvia [Plath]. With Delphine [Seyrig] as the mother, and Coralie [Seyrig] as the daughter. Suicide.

New York, New York bis, 1984
Lost. Third suicide (*Saute ma ville*, Sylvia Plath, and now me).

Le Marteau, 1986
Four minutes long, a commission, the hammer flies. A film on an artist.

La paresse (*Sloth*, in *Seven Women, Seven Sins*), 1986
Sonia [Wieder-Atherton] works, I stay in bed.

Rue Mallet-Stevens, 1986
I play at being pilot.

Histoires d'Amérique, 1988
The Jews. (In exile, as usual.)

Les Trois Dernières Sonates de Franz Schubert (*Schubert's Last Three Sonatas*), 1989
Schubert: dazzling. Entry into 'true' culture.

Trois Strophes sur le nom de Sacher (*Three Strophes on Sacher's Name*), 1989
Sonia's debut.

Pour Febe Elisabeth Velasquez, El Salvador (in *Contre l'oubli*), 1991
Catherine [Deneuve] recounts the death of Febe Elisabeth Velasquez. At the end, she leaves the shot, as if it has been too much.

Nuit et jour (*Night and Day*), 1991
Teenagers.

Le Déménagement (*Moving In*, in *Monologues*), 1992
Sami [Frey]. Sad and funny like Sami. Child of the war.

D'Est, 1993
An evocation of war. Implosion.

Portrait d'une jeune fille de la fin des années 60s à Bruxelles (*Portrait of a Young Girl in Brussels at the End of the '60s*, in *Tous les garcons et les filles de leur âge* ...), 1993
It's a man's, man's world.

Chantal Akerman par Chantal Akerman (*Chantal Akerman by Chantal Akerman*, for *Cinéma de notre temps*), 1997
I was born in Brussels and that's the truth.

Un divan à New York (*A Couch in New York*), 1996
Death of my father.

Le jour où (*The Day When*), 1997
At its heart, an homage to Godard.

Sud (*South*), 1999
James Byrd Jr. and the road. The road of death. Without a trace – or almost.

La Captive (The Captive), 2000
Yes.

Avec Sonia Wieder-Atherton (*With Sonia Wieder-Atherton*), 2002
Sonia again.

De l'autre côté (*From the Other Side*), 2002
… Smoke and mirrors (the United States).

Demain on déménage (*Tomorrow We Move*), 2004
Almost succeeded; I should have played the part.

Lá-bas (*Over There*), 2006
Chantal in Israel. Complicated.

Tombée de nuit sur Shanghaï (*Night Falls on Shanghai*, in *L'état du monde*), 2007
Not going well.

À l'Est avec Sonia Wieder-Atherton (*In the East with S.W.A.*), 2009
Sonia again.

La Folie Almayer (*Almayer's Folly*), 2011
Return to fiction.

Garrel (Philippe)
NB: You also appear in Philippe Garrel's *Elle a passé tant d'heures sous les sunlights* (1985) and *Les Ministères de l'art* (1988). Philippe is only two years older than you, and you have a lot of the same reference points, Rimbaud, Godard, and the same minimalist, anarchist tendencies …

CA: I don't know if we have the same references. Young men dream of Rimbaud, not young girls. Anarchist? I don't see myself in that word. I was there, of course, and I wanted to make films, in '68. Yes, Godard, of course, minimalist. I remember when Philippe came to the house to film *Elle a passée …* . I hadn't slept the night before. He had an old camera, nearly broken. He had to secure the lens with his hand.

NB: That's why that film is so stunning.

CA: Maybe.

Girl

NB: You always talk about yourself in terms of a *fille*, girl, daughter; one of your self-portraits is titled *Portrait of a Young Girl in Brussels at the End of the '60s*, and the main female character in *Almayer's Folly* is named Nina, *petite fille* or little girl. *Fille* signifies youth but most of all a filiation, a heritage. For you does *fille* mean not to be a *femme*, a woman?

CA: Possibly. Probably. I don't know. I never grew up. I was always an overgrown child. Almayer is a father who has a dream for his daughter and maybe for himself in regards to her. I never followed my father's dream, to have a family. I stayed a girl, the daughter of my mother. In the end, I don't know.

My sister, yes: she started a family in Mexico. She has two beautiful, intelligent children. My niece is getting married soon and the line will continue. Sometimes I regret not having kids. Maybe I would have gone from a daughter to a woman – but whether that was possible for me, I don't know. Probably not.

NB: So you determined to remain the girl.

CA: I wouldn't say determined. But it's what happened. I was the first child. My mother always scolded me for not eating, she obsessed over food. At three months old, I was sent to board in Switzerland, to eat porridge, always the same porridge, and they knocked my chin against the sink if I didn't eat it. Things got better when my sister was born. As a teenager, I ate voraciously – which bothered my father, since you had to keep skinny to get married. He was a Jewish father, nine years older than my mother, with three sisters he also took care of, and my grandfather who lived with us. To show us what we should or shouldn't do, he banged the palm of his hand on the table top.

NB: Something you often do yourself.

CA: Yes, probably. In the '50s, parents claimed their own authority; they didn't want to be friends with their kids.

NB: They were the trustees and guarantors of a law. What values did your parents want to impart?

CA: Yes, the Fathers, in any case. You had to be a good human being. To act properly: there was what one did and what one didn't do, and in the end it was that simple, even when you didn't agree.

But, on the other hand, they didn't encourage me to work at all. My father didn't pay any attention to school, and for months I didn't go. My mother signed my report card half-asleep on her bed. They never pushed me to study, even though I was quite good at school. But afterwards, high school was a disaster. Because I was a good student, they sent me to a very wealthy, rigorous high school for the intellectual elite, Belgian Freemason types. I met daughters of doctors, academics and captains of industry. I was an outcast.

My father became a worker when he was 12. On my father's side, I come from a family

that's tumbled down the social ladder. My family in Poland was rich, and my grandmother was accustomed to a grand lifestyle. Her three daughters learned to play piano. But then they fled Poland with nothing and my father became a worker, a glove-maker, to feed his family.

He would have liked a son in my place, so his name would have been carried on. One day I asked him: 'Have you seen what I've done with your name?' He'd read a few articles on me, but it wasn't enough; in any case I wouldn't perpetuate his name, so disappointment was predetermined.

NB: What was your mother's name?

CA: Leibel.

NB: Almost an anagram of 'Liebe', German for 'love'. [In Yiddish, Leibel signifies 'little lion'].

CA: In her family, the most important person was her mother. Her father was a cantor in the synagogue and their marriage, of course, was arranged. My grandmother was already a feminist; she wanted to become a painter and get married on her own. She was born in 1905, and her mother was very religious. She didn't get the life she wanted – no more than my mother, who admitted as much the day after my father died. With a kind of fury. This time, I was the one who couldn't understand. Am I the repository of all that? Doubtless – all that, and other stuff, too.

NB: If you go back to your life, your freedom, your creativity – don't you have the feeling of a kind of reparation?

CA: No, definitely not. What reparation? At first, I thought I was speaking out, since my mother never had been able to – but now I know that's not it. That I never had a choice. Not really. Well, I don't know.

I lack that kind of drive to be constantly turning my thoughts into actions … But everything comes from the journal of my grandmother. When I got sick for the first time, my mother fled, but left me the diary of her mother, who came from a very orthodox family. In 1919, at 15, she was writing: 'It's only in you, dear diary, that I can confide my feelings and my grief, since I'm a woman!' She would paint in secret on Saturdays. My mother thinks I'm her heir, that it all comes from her. My grandmother made dresses and drew the models herself. My mother's dream, before the war, was to learn to draw so she could open a fashion house with her mother. But that dream died in the camps along with so many others, and nothing more was possible.

When I wanted to make movies, my father didn't want it. He was scared I'd be overwhelmed, that it would go badly. But my mother said, 'let her'.

The diary was the only thing that was left of her mother. I've read it a dozen times. My mother wrote a couple lines in it, I did too, then my little sister as well. A whole female tradition. Thanks to it, my mother never believed that men were superior. Of course, she served my father, she gave him the best pieces at dinner … but not in her head. My

father admired his mother greatly; he never said so, but I could tell. I only knew her when she was crazy. She held it together during the war, and cracked after.

One night, I was writing *A Couch in New York* to please my father – thinking that it would bring in money and that money would finally satisfy him. My uncle (by marriage) told me how devoted my father was to his mother (whom I'd only known after she became crazy), more than to their father. That gave me some space to breathe, let me feel somewhat relieved. But it meant I had to save myself. If I didn't, as a daughter who's always withdrawn, what would I become? In a clinic my whole life, like one of my aunts.

Godard (Jean-Luc),* Pierrot le fou *(1965)

NB: You've often talked about how *Pierrot le Fou* began your love for cinema.

CA: Yes, it was like nothing I'd seen before. I didn't know that films could be like that. It gave me the force, the desire, this crazy desire to become a director. But watching it again, I don't like it as much. Well, it depends. I love the part in the South and that song, 'Ma ligne de chance'.

NB: And the explosion?

CA: Oh, of course, the explosion most of all. 'Shit, shit, shit'.

Hitchcock (Alfred),* Vertigo *(1958)

CA: *Vertigo* is visually sublime, a film about fetishism – that is, on not seeing the other person, making them an extension of yourself, reducing and denying them to feed your own anxieties. There are so many other things to say about this movie.

NB: As Lacan put it, a man can never see a woman.

CA: It's a nice phrase. But then, what are men and women? For the woman, it has to happen as a fantasy, it's not sex that makes her orgasm; she can be more polymorphous, like a baby. Patriarchal teaching makes her think it has to take place in the orifices, when it really happens somewhere else, without her needing to fetishise her own sex like men do.

Iconophobia

NB: You're coming back from Cambodia, a country that's gone through a sort of collective survival. For you, how was this trip through what they used to call the Third World?

CA: I had a great experience. If you don't know the history there, you can't imagine. You can sense that a generation is missing, but you won't see any evidence in the individuals or, rather, they don't let you notice. Everyone keeps smiling, happy, nice. You end up wondering how genocide was possible. The Jews feel the trauma. What really surprised me was the reaction of the little girl who plays the young Nina. She was six years old, she didn't want me to leave; when I proposed her coming to New York with me, she asked the translator if I had a good heart. It's the aftermath of genocide: the most important thing becomes kindness. Natalia [Shakhovskaïa], a cello teacher, would say it, too; she'd lived in a world of constant denunciations where they had to keep the water running so the sounds of their talking wouldn't be heard. In that kind of world, it's essential you

know who's got a good heart.

But Cambodia isn't the only Third World. I never went to Africa, as a filmmaker I couldn't have; you had to go as a doctor. In Judaism, in principle, images can't be exhibited; it's a religion that bans images. It's got to be part of me: I could never show people dying. I've seen it in some films, in those of a young Austrian filmmaker, a dead baby in front of his camera, or even in Depardon's *Faits divers* (1983) where he films a dead body right after its suicide, while someone asks him to stop. For me it's murderous, a crime.

NB: Abbas Kiarostami also filmed a child dying in *ABC Africa* (2001). But in the face of catastrophe, what to do?

CA: I can point the way, show the places the bodies are buried. It's better to evoke, it gets to you and the viewers more effectively. In the end, those literal-minded images aren't effective, you have to find another path, so that people confronting it can remain themselves and absorb it, actually face-to-face with the images. It's why I tend to film things frontally.

NB: But a face from the front, against a wall, is a Byzantine, formal schema and there's nothing more idolatrous. It's because of the close-up, as Jean Epstein put it, that cinema generates gods.

CA: But it's material and it moves, even when it seems fixed. And when you avoid low angles and subjective shots, you avoid fetishism. When you film frontally, you put two souls face to face equally, you carve out a real place for the viewer. So, it's not God-like. You contemplate something that's fixed. Not an eyelid batting, not a beat skipping.

NB: So your conception of the image is a battle fought on two fronts: on the one front against literal-mindedness; and, on the other, against the production of idolatrous images.

CA: Yes, literal-mindedness closes you off so often. Or rather, it depends what you call literal-mindedness. There's something for the Jews like ethical order, which concerns the relationship to the Other, something Levinas analysed so well. You're face to face with the Other. It's from this crucial face-to-face that your sense of responsibility begins. Levinas would say, 'now that you understand, you can't murder'. That's my idea of ethics. It's why I want equality, always, between the image and the spectator. Or the passage from one unconscious toward the other.

Individual

NB: The cinema creates prototypes for ways of living, ways to reside in the world. In your work, we can see how you constantly interweave two types of individuals: the sovereign individual, responsible for his/her acts, inventing his/her freedom; and the individual who's a victim to him/herself, prey to moments of total anonymity.

CA: Yes, that's probably true. It takes ten men to carry a corpse or sing the Kaddish. They can't be done alone. Besides which, you have to be sure of yourself, without glorifying the individual too greatly. That's why I've been in analysis for ten or twelve years, on and off. I take a breath, I step back. Am I conscious of being an individual? I

know that I'm just myself, even though I don't know what it means to be oneself. My analyst is like a friend of mine; I repeat the same things all the time, stories or situations taken from the Bible – in particular the Judgment of Solomon, in which the good mother is revealed. And of the forty years the Jews spent in the desert to lose all trace of slavery: something the blacks and concentration camp victims didn't have. The idea is sublime: taking time to shed the traces. Traces of slavery. For the camps, it will take three generations, they say. My youngest niece is sick to her stomach, she's 27, the third generation. As for my mother, she's waiting to become a great-grandmother; she's waiting for the fourth generation.

Installation

NB: Since 1995 and *D'Est: au bord de la fiction* (*From the East: Bordering on Fiction*), you've done installations regularly across the world, for example *Woman Sitting after Killing* in 2001, *Une voix dans le desert* (*A Voice in the Desert*) in 2003, *Women from Antwerp in November* in 2008. Often, although not always, the material of these installations re-emerges in your films. How do you navigate between them?

CA: An installation piece is cinema without the hassles – that is, without all the humiliating terms of production. It's free of all the burdens of cinema. I can work alone, at home, without waiting to find the money. It's artisanal work – practically by hand – which I adore; there's nothing like it.

NB: How do you 'install' yourself in all this material you gather?

CA: The process is much closer to documentary than fiction. For a documentary, I become an empty sponge: if you start off with a preconceived idea, you'll obtain it – but you won't see a thing. When I lock myself in with the material for an installation, it's like shooting a documentary: you don't know what will happen, you sculpt your material, it arranges itself on its own. And then, in the blink of an eye, it's suddenly there, it's self-evident. For fiction, there has to be a structure with a requisite beginning and ending; you can move the elements around, but you can't change which way they face; you have to follow the thread between them. With installations, I don't follow that thread, and it's magical: multiple possibilities can arise while I work out the material, and that material pulls me on. I work on it, it becomes something else, and then I'm there. Creation comes from transformation; the process is liberating and riveting, a pure joy.

NB: What are the differences in your installations, as you see their evolution from 1995?

CA: The main ones are exploring alternate forms to a single-minded fiction, and leaving new spaces open for the viewer. The technical devices have changed, some are more complex. Not all the installations are tied to my films. I conceived the last one, *Maniac Summer* (2009), out of some original images, and some that were nearly random. I wanted the installation to be a series of abandoned films left in-progress, as if marked by persistent traces after a violent dispersion. The ghosts of Hiroshima gave it its underlying structure. Better if I read you the text written for the occasion:

Essentially: from one orphaned film to another, in progress.
Without subject or object.
Without start or end.

A film that implodes.
Between Eden and catastrophe.

In progress. In shards. Shards of catastrophes.
A film that reproduces itself at least four times, maybe five, as it's taken toward catastrophe, as the speed of light seems to be surpassed.
Like at Hiroshima. And like at Hiroshima, it leaves its traces, but in progress.

A film that explodes and floats before dying.
Next to it, the phantoms still are swaying. They continue their *danse macabre*.

A film that replicates itself until it has lost its colours, like shadows, phantoms, traces.
A film that comes together in a landscape,
And drifts apart.
From black and white to white and black.
Almost unidentifiable.
Often almost abstract forms.
That's how it will become an orphaned film.
Without author, without subject, nor object. Silent.

Jeanne Dielman

NB: Your work includes a number of self-portraits, and one majestic figure who totally innovated the relationship between portraiture and narrative: the figure of a mother, Jeanne Dielman.

CA: While I was writing it, I didn't understand *Jeanne Dielman*. I didn't understand it until many years later: it was also a film on lost Jewish rituals, not just about an obsessive woman. If she's so obsessive, it's to avoid leaving an hour open to anxiety. And when that extra hour arrives, all her anxiety surfaces.

I understood it after the mental crisis and analysis. I wanted my mother to keep the Sabbath, to light the candles; it came from the death of my father's father (my mother's father died in the camps), the man who had accepted me as a girl. At his death, I was still little; they took me out of Jewish school overnight, and it was a shock, since it broke off another connection to my grandfather. To keep the Sabbath, for me, meant reviving my ties with this man who had accepted me as a girl. It's a really beautiful ritual, powerful and even philosophical when you grasp it. The idea of the ritual has to do with the passage from animal to human. According to the dietary rules, you have to know what's a milk-product, or product of other foods, you have to think before eating. I like that idea. I don't keep kosher, but at least I know the basics. I know why you can't eat shellfish: because they never fully developed.

NB: You make me think of Ken Jacobs, who's explained once that *Tom, Tom, the Piper's Son* (1969) is a film about a Jewish ritual of sexual initiation.

CA: A lot of sexual rites are made so that men might think a little before fucking women. In Judaism, the man is required to please his wife. If not, it's grounds for divorce. One of my cousins got divorced for just that reason. Friday night, the man has to please his wife, so that he has to get to know her, for five minutes he has to forget about himself. You

don't have to be a believer to subscribe to that. Unfortunately, the ultra-orthodox have changed all this, and often for the worse.

NB: What was your experience like at the film's release?

CA: At Cannes, after the screening, the first one up was Marguerite Duras. Right away she tried to dismiss the film. She said that she wouldn't have filmed the murder, she would have made a 'chronicle'. I don't think she understood anything. She said, 'that woman's crazy', so she could relate the character to her own world. I was furious. For me that woman was like all the women I'd known as a child. Were they crazy or was it a way to fight against craziness, anxiety?

Marguerite built up airs around herself that she would promote and flaunt non-stop. With Agnès [Varda], we were sometimes competitive, but Agnès is capable of moments of great generosity toward women, where Marguerite was only capable of generosity to men; she loved them madly. It would have been better if I hadn't met her. We spent three months together, since *Jeanne Dielman* and *India Song* came out at the same time and were shown side-by-side at all the festivals. Marguerite was often on the bad side, first during the war, then with the Communist Party … but there are these flashes in her work; I went to see *Eden Cinema* (1977) on stage, and it was magnificent. And, deep down, I nevertheless liked her.

Really, it's always better not to meet 'the creators'. Whenever anyone tells me, I love your work, I'd like to meet you, I always say: it's better not to. I'll disappoint you.

Levinas (Emmanuel)

NB: You followed Levinas' seminars much more closely than Deleuze's or Lacan's.

CA: Yes, every Saturday I went to ENIO [École Normale Israélite Orientale] at Michel-Ange Auteuil [subway stop]. Lévinas would interpret the verse of the week. Throughout the whole year he'd interpret the Bible, make a student translate a verse and, then, sitting so small on his chair, surrounded by books, he'd start the exegesis: Rashi, Maimonides, etc … The way we learned was by questioning, negation, but mostly questioning. To go to a yeshiva [Jewish religion school] means learning the art of questioning and negation, and this after millennia, after the Hebrew Bible. The Talmud means learning to discuss, to call things into question, to develop your thoughts.

NB: To acquire a dialectical sense.

CA: I don't think dialectics is the appropriate word. No. And, anyway, it's a word that's too associated with Marxism, even if Marx was Jewish and, one way or another, he would have been rooted in this sort of practice of reflection and still more reflection.

NB: Did you keep any traces from Levinas' seminars?

CA: No, I didn't take notes and I forgot everything after my first breakdown. Since then, my memory's been worse. It was a real disaster, just before *Golden Eighties*, which hadn't been made as I wanted.

NB: I remember just how out of place and explosive it seemed in the landscape of the time; nobody was expecting such a joyous, colourful musical. That kind of exhilaration ran completely against the dominant taste in auteur films of the '80s.

CA: They kept wanting me to remake *Jeanne Dielman*, but I wanted to *spurn* everything – spurn my father's name, not repeat myself. I did a number of trial runs for it, and *Les Années 80* (*The '80s*) and the others are possibly more joyous than the final film, which suffered from a lack of resources, among other reasons. In any case, I was very happy to write the songs. [She sings]

Ménilmontant

NB: Why did you decide to live in this underprivileged district of Paris?

CA: I don't consider it underprivileged – on the contrary. I love living in this hybrid neighborhood; I've lived here for 20 years, and before that at 107 rue de Ménilmontant. Like every town, there's a local crazy guy, Gaspard, and the village takes care of him. The building across the way includes 89 different nationalities. I've seen children grow up, the building decay; nobody does anything. A young man was thrown through a window, they amputated his leg. Now he spends his life on a bench with a giant radio listening to rap. When I go past him, he always says 'How's it going, Chantal?' Oh, it's going well. Sometimes he says 'Madame Chantal'.

Murnau (F. W.),* Tabu *(1931)

CA: Such simplicity, such economy, such beauty in how it treats its young characters. Such horror toward the persecutors. I love *Sunrise* (1927) too, but in *Tabu* things go worse, the couple doesn't recover like in *Sunrise*. There's no good and bad woman.

NB: In *Almayer's Folly*, the shot of the boat with all the young people asleep seems like a cross between *Tabu* and *The Night of the Hunter* (1955).

CA: It's possible. I don't have any visual memory, only emotional; I don't remember exact shots, only what they evoked for me.

No

NB: Often, when someone asks you a question, your first impulse is to answer 'No'. Like a lot of writers and artists, you've been given a powerful instinct for contradiction; you make me think of Faust's line in Goethe: 'the instinct that always says no'.

CA: But no! [Laughing] I answer no when the answers imprison me in a grid, a system of interpretation. And I don't want to take it, to accept being simplified. But after saying no, I open up. When I know a topic really intimately, I want to take my time to explain it well and open up. I don't want to hold just one thought; I want to have different thoughts that can play on different perspectives. So I say no when I find myself in the grips of some 'agenda' for example. One of the people I've really loved to have a dialogue with on art is Lynne Cooke, an Australian curator. She asks questions wonderfully, always in this open way. The first time we met, it was the day after the wrap party for *D'Est*; I'd drunk too much the whole night, I'd barely slept. Suddenly the bell rings, I open the door, and she's there. I don't remember anymore if I was even supposed to see her. I didn't even know who she was. She's pure in a way without being a purist. And she's made me think a lot,

one of the best thinkers when it comes to art these days, I think.

NB: What contemporary artists interest you?

CA: Richard Serra, always – for me he's the greatest sculptor, the greatest visual artist. To enter into his sculptures is to forget time and space, to be immersed in a physical geometry, which I love. In music, Kurtag, Scelsi and Monteverdi. In '68, Stockhausen's *Momente* came as a real shock, my first shock of contemporary music. Everything he's done chorally is very beautiful.

In 1971-3, when I was in New York, I was plunged into the discovery and emergence of all these aesthetic ideas. I especially loved Charlemagne Palestine, Phil Glass ... but now Phil Glass, it's turned into such a simple system, it doesn't interest me anymore. The others are still looking.

Novel [roman] and Family Romance [roman familial]

NB: In *Almayer*, Marc Barbé and Stanislas Merhar represent the two faces of the same father figure, the one an evil wheeler-dealer, the other a passive lover who lets himself get carried off in the dreams of adventure of the first; and both of them taking care of the girl, Nina, in the same ways. Otherwise, we don't know why it's Lingard (Marc Barbé) who pays for Nina's board, rather than Almayer.

CA: I hadn't thought of that. That comes from the book. But Barbé offers more of a paternal image than Stanislas. He's the bad father – that's why I put him in a tuxedo, we imagine he spends all his nights at the cabaret. He's not an adolescent like Stanislas; he's a man, with all the bullshit men will float, and the idiotic dreams of money with which he infects Almayer.

NB: In Conrad's book, the character of the young man, Daïn, plays a much more central role. In the film, we see very little of him.

CA: I shot more scenes with him, but they overloaded the film. In fact Daïn belongs to the dreams of the Chinese man, because he dreams of the best for Nina. I wanted a nice, sweet scene when Daïn meets Nina.

NB: In the book, Daïn leads an anti-colonialist revolt. In the film, you're explicit that he could have been an insurgent who was trafficking in drugs or arms. The battles for liberation that form the backdrop of Conrad's book aren't even hinted at in the film. It wasn't a loss, diminishing the character so much?

CA: It would have had to go into a history of the country. That would be another film.

NB: Where does the first scene of the film come from? It's not in the book. Did you improvise it on location?

CA: No, it was written. For Nina's song, I hesitated before taking Mozart's 'Ave Verum' in Latin, a Christian song in a greasy nightclub – but it's more amusing and totally out of place. It's one of the few songs I learned in school.

NB: Why did you decide to play the voice of the Mother Superior, i.e., within the film, the source of harassment and the law?

CA: I didn't decide to. At the moment of filming, someone said to me, 'do it'. When I say, 'he's one of us', it's a phrase from my father.

NB: I thought it was a phrase from Tod Browning's *Freaks* (1932), that awful refrain: 'one of us'.

CA: No, it's a question that my father always asked, 'is he one of us?'

Pajama

NB: While you're shooting, how do you set up a communal lifestyle?

CA: Each film is different, and finds its own life, its own grounds. The rules develop on their own, and are not spoken, even if that means they're not rules. I don't need to establish hierarchies. For *Jeanne Dielman*, I got into an argument with a sound mixer. She thought we were going to make the film collectively – it was the great era of Maoism. She would judge Delphine, since Delphine came from the haute-bourgeoisie. But it was Delphine who was taking the most risks for the film, not her. Rules prevent us from living. I go out in my pajamas, I've dispensed with fashion. I filmed all of my last film in pajamas. Today, I'm in my pajamas.

NB: You had a follower in Michael Jackson, who showed up one morning in pajamas for his trial.

CA: Michael Jackson was the master of transformations, nothing could stop him from remaking himself.

NB: In the end, nobody could assign Michael Jackson an identity anymore. He was the human being who transformed into a type of transformer.

CA: Yes.

NB: I remember how the example of Michael Jackson helped certain of my mixed-race students.

Pasolini (Pier Paolo),* Mamma Roma *(1962)

CA: I love this woman. Her generosity. I feel sad for her when she gives the money to the gigolo. Her son dies like another Christ – that's a weakness of the film, for me, without a doubt because I have a sort of revulsion towards Catholicism. Unfairly, I'm sure. The film is great, not for its fiction, but its documentary dimension, with Anna Magnani as female character. When she's walking with the other prostitutes during that uneven tracking shot, clearly taken from a car, and you follow along in her joy and that of the other women – for just this shot, the film is very great.

A Place on Earth

CA: I look at how determinedly my mother wants to live, even though everything in her is falling apart. She's got a lively spirit, completely the opposite of me. Because, for 15

years, before being taken to the camps, she could believe in the world. While for me, I was born into trauma. My sister Sylviane and I, we've had to take care of her these past three months but, even on a stretcher, when my mother sees a handsome young man, she flirts. Me, I was born with anxieties. My mother never let me negotiate a real separation from her – or maybe I'm the one who couldn't do it, as I have trouble even existing. When I was little, since I knew how much she'd suffered, I let her have her own space. I would never cry, never say no. Little by little, I've realised to what extent, when I was younger, I didn't have the space to be a woman. My mother still calls me 'mon amour' all the time, I can't stand it. In Judaism, you're not required to love your parents, only respect them. Sometimes I don't feel either love or respect and, sometimes, the very next day, there's too much of it. My mother's mother died in the camps, so she didn't have to take care of her when she was old. The last time my mother broke something, she fell down in the night but, thanks to the adrenaline she didn't feel anything for a little while. The next day, I had to take her to the clinic; I said to her, 'Mama, you're not 18 anymore, when you go in somewhere, turn on the lights'; she's 84, but she was so upset that she refused to eat for five days. There was nothing to do, I told myself: 'She's letting herself die, it's her choice, like the old dogs who'd rather not eat so they can die'. My sister came and, since my mother has a completely different relationship with my sister, she's started eating again.

NB: You think that your mother denied you any right to existence?

CA: Oh, I don't know, it's all too complicated. Sometimes, I think so. Sometimes, I hope for her death – in the sense that she would have to die in me. Not the woman, of course. Just the mother. But, in the end, I know it won't change anything.

Poverty

NB: We can infer that your never asking for anything, of being content with so little, even depriving yourself – that this structures both your relationship to the world, and a style that's characterised primarily by asceticism.

CA: I understood right away that my parents had nothing, that I couldn't have anything or ask for anything. When I do have something, I have to toss it away, disperse it to the winds. I don't have any great needs; when I was little, I was always put in the background so my mother could have her own life and room to herself, since she'd suffered so much in the camps. Well, that's what I tell myself now. In any case, I never showed signs of anger; above all, I couldn't make her suffer.

I wore my cousin's clothes, which didn't bother me. My father put me into Jewish school and, in 1956, there was already a class of parents who had remade their fortunes. Their children got their clothes from Dujardin's, like today kids buy brand-names. When I was 13 or 14, for the first time, my mother directly gave me the money that my aunts had entrusted to her for my birthday. I went to Dujardin's to buy a polo shirt, and immediately realised I was being foolish; it was the last time I did anything like that. Everyone was going to the beach at Knokke-le-Zoute, to the same place. The beach was divided up by windbreakers, and everyone would be at the same spot, 'Viaene'. Everybody would change in the little cabins in the woods; sitting in the beach chairs, all the mothers had on these sublime clothes and sunglasses. But my mother was the most beautiful. All the kids had bicycles. My father rented one for me at five Belgian francs a

half-hour. The kids played tennis, but I played ping-pong, because it was free. Their ice cream had three scoops, and mine had one. But I could see how much my father was working, and I didn't want to ask him for anything, or to reveal anything on the surface. One of my aunts was even poorer, I kept 25 cent coins for her. I didn't want to eat; my mother was going crazy. When my sister was born, things got better. When she became a teenager, she immediately wanted a bicycle, a record player. She went to Kadio-radio to try to get a record player. I was astonished.

NB: You transformed this existential asceticism into a style, this rigorousness into minimalism.

CA: Maybe. I made something of it. But it always means remaining secondary, never fighting for my films enough, never claiming a 'social' place for them, compared to many other directors. How could a child come to tell herself these things? What had someone gotten through to me, that I'd internalised so much? I can't explain it. When I was little and my parents would go out, I never cried. When my sister was born, my mother said, 'Chantal's not jealous'. So you internalise it, and you're proud of not being jealous. In all my emotional relationships, I'm not jealous, so I can keep proving this decree, which was more powerful than it would have been if it were issued as an order. My psychoanalyst tells me, 'You've accumulated so much rage, it could explode'. I'm scared of killing someone if it comes out. Everything is tied to the war and the camps; as a little girl, I had recurring nightmares, two that recurred the most often. In the first, Hitler was perched up on a giant chair in a camp and the Jews were playing violin with clenched smiles, like something out of Pina Bausch, making a circle. In the second dream, there was nothing to eat, and so people were being eaten. They were going to hang us, my mother and me, from butcher's hooks. I was so little and I managed to run away. At my house, I found my mom again, but only felt guiltier for having saved myself. Where did it come from? At my house, I'd hear the word *Läger*, 'camp', a lot in Polish, I must have surmised what had happened to my mother in the camps. But she never said anything, or almost never.

I was so scared to go to sleep, I asked my mom to repeat 'Bonne nuit, Chantal', 'Goodnight, Chantal', until she had found the right tone for it. I'm not complaining about all that; I hate people who are complainers. I'm just telling it to you.

NB: While making such stripped-down work, you must have found some models, in particular Robert Bresson.

CA: I came to Bresson late, when I was around 25, after the Nouvelle Vague. Bresson is also a great materialist. The priest's ear in *Diary of a Country Priest* (1951): in my whole life I've never seen such a great ear, I stared at it endlessly. This is why 'Catholic filmmaker', 'Jewish filmmaker', 'woman filmmaker', 'gay filmmaker' – all these labels have to be thrown away, that's not where things really happen.

Provocation

NB: You say that you remain hidden in the background, but your work also has a tremendous power to provoke. And you can be very provocative in life, like during the awards ceremony at the Venice Biennale in 2008, when you didn't hesitate to attack the American culture industry in public.

CA: Ah, I don't remember. In my work, I'm not into provocation. In life, when it's a matter of immediate impressions, I don't speak one word louder than another, I don't know what to say. It's only in the wider world of the public that I can be provocative, I can say everything – it's all the same to me. I usually follow a scorched earth policy.

NB: Still, your work has made you into a historic figure of freedom. You've made your place and you've become an emblem of emancipation.

CA: I was 18 in '68. In November of '68, I made *Saute ma ville*. For women, '68 was a scam; sexually, we still didn't have a choice. It was only later that the whole code was rethought; until then, we had to pretend.

As for being a historic figure or emblem of emancipation – well, I don't see myself that way.

Psychic Life and Resistance

NB: A historian friend of mine, Olivier Wieviorka, wanted to know if it would interest you to make a film about the Resistance.

CA: France doesn't interest me.

NB: Immediately, for you, I thought of Sophie Scholl instead of Jean Moulin.

CA: In fact, Aurore [Clément] wanted to do it. But I want to get away from anything concerning the camps, I've been so caged in by it that I need to breathe. I'd rather sing. Let's leave the others to make those films. But I'll tell you a story about my father, who refused to wear the yellow star. He had a bit of leather left, so he got out of hiding to keep earning a living. One day, he was in the tram, an SS officer came and sat down across from him. My father had a Jewish nose. He told himself, 'I have to get off', but he didn't move; it was the Nazi who finally got off. That's a kind of resistance, too. My grandmother also resisted during the whole war – she held on, and afterwards she went crazy. I love the little things: one can resist in a thousand ways, like my father in the tram.

NB: In reality, given what you've gone through, you're very resistant.

CA: Sometimes. What I need now is levity. It's a time in my life where I need to be feeling levity.

NB: Where will it come from?

CA: I don't know, I'll tell you in ten years.

Schroeter (Werner), 8mm Films with Maria Callas:* Callas Walking Lucia, Maria Callas Portrait & Callas Text mit Doppelbeleuchtung *(all 1968)

CA: I haven't revisited these films, in my memory the most beautiful of Werner's, since I discovered them in Cologne in 1971. Werner wasn't there but I'd met him in 1969 in Belgium; Jacques Ledoux, the director of the Cinémathèque royale, had had him come.

Werner was very handsome, he spoke every language, he was the blonde angel – very cultivated on his own account, clearly, not like an heir. We both meant a great deal to each other.

NB: You filmed his magnificent testament discourse in Venice, 2008.

CA: Yes, but I didn't record the whole thing; José Luis [Guerin] should have the ending. In any case, I really fought for him to win a prize.

Sirk (Douglas), Written on the Wind _(1956)_ & _Fassbinder (R.W.),_ In a Year with 13 Moons _(1978)_

CA: 'Written on the wind', that title is so beautiful. Douglas Sirk managed to sneak so much subversiveness into the melodrama, it's enough to think of *Imitation of Life* (1959) and the way he invites a white viewer to feel what a black woman would feel. Fassbinder was very influenced by Sirk, but he brought more rawness to it. Sirk doesn't give the impression of holding grudges against anyone; in his films, there's no trace of resentment. Whatever Sirk's conscious desire, it's completely surpassed by the film itself. That's what gives it its force, its beauty.

NB: However, whether in your films or installations, you've always shunned pathos and psychology.

CA: While my tendency has always been towards Bresson, I think that it's possible to go towards the same, essential materiality through the opposite path, through melodrama. Bresson and Sirk, two opposing paths that finally meet; the final shot of *Pickpocket* (1959) could be put at the end of a Douglas Sirk film. Sirk is already there in Dante's *Inferno*, and Bresson is still on the threshold, in transit. I bring up Dante because of the fire.

NB: In *Written on the Wind*, it's the fire of the derricks and the oilfields.

CA: The devil's gold that – it's insinuated throughout – fattens the land and soils the sea.

Snow (Michael), La région centrale _(1971)_

CA: I saw it in New York, when I was 21, thanks to Babette Mangolte, who brought me into a world I hadn't known about, a world at the time very small, very covert. The sensory experience I underwent was extraordinarily powerful and physical. It was a revelation for me, that you could make a film without telling a story. And yet the tracking shots of <--------> (*Back and Forth*, 1969) in the classroom, with movements that are purely spatial while nothing is happening, produce a state of suspense as tense as anything in Hitchcock. I learned from them that a camera movement, just a movement of the camera, could trigger an emotional response as strong as from any narrative.

NB: Your films of the time immediately rework these new experiences.

CA: Yes, but they're very different, too. I didn't want them to belong to scientific experimentation. I didn't adopt Snow's programmatic style, I'm not into the confirmation or repudiation of a hypothesis. On that point, I depart from him. But his films freed me.

NB: In the long run, don't you think you've come back to them in your installations, which are cut off from narrative?

CA: No, because I'm not into purely experimenting with an idea. I'm looking for something, I'm not sure what; I don't stick to the conceptual, ever. Besides which, he was a terrific ladies' man; he brought me up to his loft and I was helpless. But content.

Straub (Jean-Marie) & Huillet (Danièle),* Moses and Aaron *(1975)

CA: I saw it at Cannes at the time. The subject excited me greatly. It was so beautiful, captivating, intelligent – a beauty that doesn't want to be beautiful, and that's how it's achieved. Aaron lets the Golden Calf be raised; thanks to him, the Commandments are broken, so now they're not only Commandments, but among the most powerful ideas in the world. Straub & Huillet's materialism allows them to take off from the religious aspect, which is vital to us. The difference between Moses and Aaron concerns the question of exodus – a crucial moment for humanity, whether one is Jewish, Arab, or anything else. Everything is there: the Law, the broken law, the exodus of the slaves, the idol. We're still there, and we haven't quite realised it. Exodus is one of the most important books of the Western and Semitic world.

Survival and Mise en scène

NB: You often set bodies in states of pure survival, what they do when cold, when hungry, when threatened, where they get the resources to bear it physically. Your films often gauge the concrete strength of bodies.

CA: Yes, but also the joy of expending energy; I love to dance, it's like a drug, a liberation of all the bonds of pleasure – yes, as you say, definitely related to sexuality, but not only sexuality.

NB: However, that's not what your film on Pina Bausch is about.

CA: No. At first, I had been dazzled, I only saw the beauty, the aestheticism. But in making a film on her, I understood that in fact she makes you take pleasure in her sadism through formal beauty. But she's a great artist.

NB: Isn't the very principal of *mise en scène* intrinsically sadistic, to put bodies at your disposal and take pleasure in them?

CA: No, it's not the same thing because it goes through the image. On stage, we see the body in real life. And in the same moment. The cinema is both at the time now, the day when you're watching the film, but also the moment when the film was made. No, it's not the same thing at all. And moreover, for her, the actors fall down, throw themselves against the walls, for instance – but it's through the form, her aestheticism, that we take pleasure in it.

She talks with a soft, gentle voice. She's a guru, nobody dares to say anything. For each show, she takes notes, she bandies words, the dancers give themselves over to improvisation. And she works up a montage, an assemblage of what interests her. She dominates completely, with a sweet voice that's worse than a fistfight. In 1973, 'Psychoanalysis and Politics' with Antoinette Fouque – it boils down to the same thing.

She would psychoanalyse you savagely and almost kill you. Many mistaken ideas held reign after May '68; for example, there were many Jewish Maoists, I don't know how it was possible, I never believed in any ideology. After Stalin and the camps, you know for sure that an ideology leads to the worst. Even if it seems beautiful and good and like just a theory.

Trust

CA: I have always thought that my mother was the most beautiful woman and that she had a mad love for me, as I for her.

Finally, I realised that she couldn't love anyone but herself and, even so, not fully. She had to learn that to survive in the camps. To love herself to survive. It was a kind of force.

Only much later did I realise that my father loved me. When he was close to dying, I could feel that he wanted me by his side. The only thing that made him feel better was my singing him songs in Yiddish; he thought I was his mother, that I was 75 years old. Only my songs relaxed him. Or so I think – or so I want to think. He had cerebral embolism after cerebral embolism. They operated on his heart and he didn't die. No, his heart kept him alive while the rest of him was in agony and falling apart.

I telephoned the doctor to cut him off. Enough was enough. You can't live with just a heart. The doctor raised the morphine dose. Three days later my father was gone. It was my first act as an adult. My mother kept saying, 'You'll always be my baby'. I made the decision all alone, without saying a thing to anyone, quite calmly.

NB: How old were you?

CA: 45. It's one of the good things I've accomplished in my life. You do something for someone else that's difficult for you. During my first big mental breakdown, my father came to the hospital with my mother; I escaped from the hospital, went to Brussels, my mother ran off and I was left alone with my father. We talked for hours without realising that the light was dwindling. My father was there for me, not my mother. It was too much for her after what she'd been through. I asked my father, 'When I left at 18, without a penny, you weren't scared for me? You weren't scared I'd become a whore, a junkie, etc.?' He told me, 'No, I trusted you'. My father was born in 1919 in an orthodox family; he was a real father, like nothing now.

NB: A patriarch.

CA: Yes and no. An old-school father. It was really something that he had that kind of trust. He let me leave without a cent, doubtless deliberately. I don't really know.

Van Sant (Gus),* Last Days *(2005)

CA When I'm sick, I feel like Kurt Cobain. Michael Pitt, who plays him, told me that Gus van Sant screened *Jeanne Dielman* before shooting the film. But *Elephant* (2003), which is fascinating for its beauty, is more problematic.

***Varda (Agnès),* Le bonheur *(1965)* & *Demy (Jacques),* Une chambre en ville**

(1982)
CA: The idea is extraordinary: one love is worth the same as another, a person can be replaced by another. For me, *Le bonheur* is the most anti-romantic film there is. I talked about it with Agnès, she doesn't agree. But it was very daring at the time. Maybe it still is now.

Unlike Marguerite [Duras], Agnès has an intelligence that's attuned to the world. She experienced various hells, certainly when Jacques left her for a man. He was cynical about love; in the end, what mattered for him was to accommodate himself with life, like we see with the character of the garage owner in *The Umbrellas of Cherbourg* (1964).

NB: Couldn't you say they were a couple of lovers who invented their own emotional and sexual world?

CA: Yes, I could have said that, too. You do have to accommodate yourself with life, it's important. If you entrust your life to the dreams of literature, Romanticism for instance, you'll live in constant disappointment. That's why arranged marriages interest me: rather than being in love and bitterly disappointed, you get to know the other person. You become less of a fool. Well, at the same time, I tell myself that, but I'm not sure I believe it.

Wong (Kar-wai),* Happy Together *(1997)
CA: In a film that's this sensitive, I feel like I'm at home. A pure pleasure in cinema, in such beautiful young boys. For Wong Kar-wai, there's a kind of hesitation, of wavering in regards to sex, that's rarely found in a man. But he should have refused to make American movies, it's a disservice to his work – his last film, *My Blueberry Nights* (2007), was a lot less inspired.

NB: 'Hollywoodian' rather than 'American'.

CA: Everyone wanted to go to Hollywood. Even me, even Godard. It's Mecca, but not in the real meaning of the term – it's Mecca where you go to flay yourself alive. Even if our Jewish colleagues had the chance to work there during the war: the filmmakers, musicians, novelists.

I adore Los Angeles, although it's the city of crime. When you read the detective novels, you understand that, without cinema, there never would have been the young girls who head to Los Angeles with their dreams, only to end up whores or junkies. Cinema enables the worst there: power, money. And the American Way of Life has destroyed humanity little by little. It's also an ideology that's self-propagating, but without a book, without a discourse of saving the world. It just propagates itself poisonously.

Interviews recorded in Paris between Paris, July 15 and August 6, 2011.

Reprinted, with kind permission, from the now definitively out-of-print bilingual (French/English) Viennale 'Useful Book #1' publication: *Chantal Akerman, The Pajama Interview* (2011). English translation by David Phelps, revised by *LOLA*.

from Issue 2: Devils