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CHANTAL AKERMAN RETROSPECTIVE

Bio-filmography of Chantal Akerman:

Born in June 1950, in Brussels. Spent two years at the film school of INSAS in Brussels (1967/8), then a year at the 'Universite Internationale du Theatre' in Paris. She lived in New York for most of 1972, and returned there the following year to complete the film HANGING OUT YONKERS. Her first feature, HOTEL MONTEREY, was shown at the NFT's Festival of Independent Avant-garde Film in 1973.

Films:

1968 - SAUTE MA VILLE (short); 1971 - L'ENFANT AIME (short); 1972 - HOTEL MONTEREY, LA CHAMBRE (short); 1973 - LE 15/18 (40-minute film, co-directed with Samy Szlingerbaum), HANGING OUT YONKERS; 1972 - JE TU IL ELLE; 1975 - JEANNE DIELMAN, 23 QUAI DU COMMERCE - 1080 BRUXELLES; 1976 - NEWS FROM HOME; 1978 - LES RENDEZ-VOUS D'ANNA.

LES RENDEZ-VOUS D'ANNA

Belgium/France/West Germany, 1978; Dir./Script: Chantal Akerman; Prod: Helene Films/Unite Trois (Paris), Paradise Films (Brussels), ZDF (West Germany); Camera: Jean Penzer; Editor: Francine Sandberg; Cast: Aurore Clement, Helmut Griem, Magali Noel, Lea Massari, Hanns Zischler, Jean-Pierre Cassel.

JE TU IL ELLE (I...YOU...HE...SHE)

Belgium, 1974; Dir: Chantal Akerman; p.c: Paradise Films. In association with the Ministere des Affaires Etrangeres (Brussels). p/sc: Chantal Akerman. ph: Benedicte Delsalle; Charlotte Slovak; Renelde Dupont. ed: Luc Freche. a.d/n: (none). sd: Gerard Rousseau. sd. rec: Samy Szlingerbaum. Sd. effects: Marc Lobet; Alain Pierre. Collaborators: Genvieve Luciani, Paul Arias, Eric Dekuyper, Emile Poppe, Marc Maes, Michel Fradier, Paul Paquay, Marilyn Watelet, Marc Mopty, Nicole Ceres, les Camions Berliet. l.p: Julie (Chantal Akerman) (Young Woman), Niels Arestrup (Truck-driver), Claire Wauthion (Woman's Lover).

JEANNE DIELMAN, 23 QUAI DU COMMERCE - 1080 BRUXELLES

1975. Belgium/France. Dir: Chantal Akerman; Prods: Paradise Films/Unite 3, Alain Dahan, Evelyne Paul; Screenplay: Chantal Akerman, Marilyne Watelet; Photography (Colour): Babette Mangolte; Editor: Patricia Canino; Art Director: Philippe Craff; Sound: Bennie Deswarte; Cast: Jeanne Dielman - Delphine Sayrig, Sylvain (her son) - Jan Decorte, First caller - Henri Storck, Second caller - Jacques Doniol-Valcroze, Third caller - Yves Biscal.

NEWS FROM HOME

1976. Belgium/France/West Germany. Dir: Chantal Akerman; Prod: Paradise Films (Brussels), INA/Unite Trois (Paris), ZDF (West Germany); Screenplay: Chantal Akerman; Photography (Col.): Babette Mangolte; Editor: Francine Sandberg; Sound Recording: Dominique Dalmasso, Larry Haas; Sound Editor: Dominique Dalmasso; Asst. Directors: Epp Kotkas, Jim Asbell; Prod. Manager: Alain Dahan



I first met Chantal Akerman in 1973. Then 23, she had come to London to show her third film 'Hotel Monterey' at the Avant-Garde festival held at the NFT. Last month, having recently finished 'Les rendez-vous d'Anna', a million dollar production, she was in London again to set up a June retrospective of her work.

Akerman's recent films confirm a rising suspicion that cracks are beginning to appear in the pallisade marginalising experimental film. She is making the breakthrough, becoming the first avant-garde film-maker to move into big budget productions building on, not compromising with, her aesthetic principles.

In 1974 her three and a half hour feature 'Jeanne Dielman, 23 quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles'—a film depending for its beauty and also its meaning on an extreme stylisation, an inextricable intertwining of narration with form—had a successful run in several Paris cinemas. She comments on her use of elongated shots and symmetrical design: 'I think people understand why. It goes with the films. So far, at any rate, she has applied it to the subject of women, digging deep down to touch the rawest nerve of men's emotional confusions: love for the mother, the mother's love, difficult to reconcile with heterosexuality, difficult to escape, persistently in pursuit.

Chantal Akerman was born in Brussels in 1950. She describes how she used to go to the movies with friends, indifferently, as something to do, until one day they hit by chance on Godard's 'Pierrot Le Fou'. From then on she knew she wanted to make movies, and started in '71 with 'Saute Ma Ville', about a girl who finally blows up her home town. She then left Brussels (almost ran away, her later film 'News From Home' suggests) and went west to New York. There she made 'Hotel Monterey', her first long film, the first film made with her characteristic visual style, using the camera to record shapes in the hotel and then shifts in the shapes as space is transformed by changes in light. 'Hotel Monterey' has no story, the hotel guests sometimes move in and out of frame. The film establishes an Akerman style and also a theme: fascination with hotels, their transitory guests, the buildings' permanence, impersonal but particular.

This same sense of place, already there in the building, interior or space photographed but extracted and transformed into self-awareness by Akerman's framing, continues in 'Jeanne Dielman'. You almost feel that her cinematic space, narrative less in 'Hotel Monterey', had gradually been peopled with characters, and also very gradually been given the outlines of a story. But the visual, the background, still remains an element that can at any moment take on independent life.

Chantal says: 'There is a strange balance between the abstract and the concrete. After a while you lose sense of what is on the screen. At first you recognise an image representing a



*This week the ICA begins a much-anticipated season of the work of experimental film-maker Chantal Akerman. Laura Mulvey, herself the co-director of*

*'Riddles of the Sphinx' and 'Penthesilea', recently talked with Akerman about her films.*

corridor? Really it's just lines. Then maybe you see lines and colours. And then it changes back into a corridor again.' She remembers the impact Michael Snow's 'Back and Forth' and 'La Region Centrale' had on her when she saw them in New York—an impact she describes as a liberation, an unveiling of cinematic possibility. Although it is tempting to trace influences on Akerman's development, it is ultimately reductive. The encounters with Godard and Snow simply widened horizons. More important and harder to define is the influence on her work of feminism and psychoanalysis when she returned from America to Paris in 1972. Certainly recurring themes (sexuality and repression, childhood memory, childhood experiences, sexual difference), bear witness to the moment when psychoanalysis was taken up by feminists in the interests of a new consciousness. And the twists are there too: female sexuality in relation to other women as well as to men, the implications of the fact that a little girl's first erotic involvement is with her mother... But these points are made obliquely, not held up for scrutiny but touched on as some of the problematic yet interesting conditions of living as a woman.

It is hard to know where an influence ends and an intellectual climate begins. Chantal's films belong to the feminist era without any doubt, but recently she has become wary of being type-cast. She says 'Yes, for sure they are women's films but they are mine first. At the

beginning it helped. Now theoreticians have started trying to find similarities in women's work. I would prefer them to find differences... I don't think women's cinema exists. But of course women's work comes out of oppression and whatever comes out of oppression is more interesting. You have to be more definite. You have to be.'

Akerman ascribes her direct and non-prurient attitude to sexuality to her Jewish background. It is a background that has affected her work in other ways. In 'Les rendez-vous d'Anna' (yet to be released in the UK) Anna's journey takes on a historic dimension echoing the Jewish emigration west. But in other films you can see a tension between the strength of family ties and the heritage of an unsettled past. Present restlessness, self-imposed uprooting brings absence, particularly of the mother, into relief. It is difficult to tear away the difference between Chantal's use of her own life and experiences and her narrative, her transformation of her life into the raw material of fiction.

For 'News From Home', she went back to New York to make one of her most complex but apparently minimal works. With a series of fixed camera positions, the film records the streets, the subway and so on. There is nothing particular happening, but the rigorous form and symmetry of the shots take them out of context and give them the exoticism a city acquires through the eyes of a stranger, evoking the long hard look of first arrival. The ordinary becomes extraordinary. The long takes accentuate this impression.

Akerman says: 'I try to give pace and tension. It isn't just the slowness there's tension from the symmetry too. And then, when there's no narration (of course there is always some narration), when it's less important, the tension comes from waiting for the next shot.' On the soundtrack of 'News From Home' Chantal's voice reads letters from her mother, written to her at the time she left home and went to New York. The letters give the news, and between the lines, you can hear the anxieties and demands of a mother separated from her daughter.

'Je, tu, il, elles' is also the story of a journey, here a journey taken by a woman who cannot write satisfactorily to the person she loves. This first section of the film is very stylised. The journey itself is shot more like a documentary, and the final part, more psychological, is the arrival and a love scene between the two women. Chantal herself played the main character to give the part a roughness of style that a professional would smooth over. 'I always wanted to play the part myself. I tried using someone else but it was too aesthetic. I knew really that I should do it.'

Then came her first major film 'Jeanne Dielman', with Delphine Seyrig as the Belgian housewife who combines a meticulous domestic routine with afternoon prostitution—both tasks carried out with passionately controlled detachment. Chantal says: 'Really it is about the fact that I'm fascinated with gesture. I care about the story but unconsciously I took that story because I wanted to show those gestures. It's related to childhood and that the first person you see doing things is your mother. You see the repetition and it makes you feel secure. That's my explanation afterwards—perhaps it's too easy.'

Chantal Akerman's work demands an adjustment to pace, a discovery of a different tension than that normally associated with the cinema. It has a beauty of its own, stretching out form like an elastic band until it touches abstraction, letting it snap back to reveal the melodramatic intensity invested in the smallest minutiae of detail. As she says of Seyrig's performance in 'Jeanne Dielman':

'For me, Delphine was perfect. She knows very well what style means, what it is to perform. We rehearsed with video so we could work on the representation. I'd show her the tape and say "Move your body the other way. Take more time here, not less." Movement, gesture, precision. The more precise and concentrated she was, the more presence she acquired. Actors think they have to show an inside. They do, but it's them themselves, not another character. It's enough anyway for me, so far.'

Table d'hôte Akerman in 'Je, tu' (top). Seyrig in 'Jeanne Dielman'.



Chantal Akerman on *Jeanne Dielman*

*Excerpts from an interview with Camera Obscura, November 1976.*

I *do* think it's a feminist film because I give space to things which were never, almost never, shown in that way, like the daily gestures of a woman. They are the lowest in the hierarchy of film images. A kiss or a car crash come higher, and I don't think that's an accident. It's because these are women's gestures that they count for so little. That's one reason I think it's a feminist film.

But more than the content, it's because of the style. If you choose to show a woman's gestures so precisely, it's because you love them. In some way you recognize those gestures that have always been denied and ignored. I think that the real problem with women's films usually has nothing to do with the content. It's that hardly any women really have confidence enough to carry through on their feelings. Instead the content is the most simple and obvious thing. They deal with that and forget to look for formal ways to express what they are and what they want, their own rhythms, their own way of looking at things. A lot of women have unconscious contempt for their feelings. But I don't think I do. I have enough confidence in myself. So that's the other reason why I think it's a feminist film—not just what it says but *what* is shown and *how* it's shown.

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I didn't have any doubts about any of the shots. I was very sure of where to put the camera and when and why. It's the first time I had that feeling so strongly.

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You *know* who is looking; you always know what the point of view is, all the time. It's always the same. But still, I was looking with a great deal of attention and the attention wasn't distanced. It was not a neutral look—that doesn't exist anyhow. For me, the way I looked at what was going on was a look of love and respect. Maybe that's difficult to understand but I really think that's it. I *let* her live her life in the middle of the frame. I didn't go in too close, but I was not *very* far away. I let her be in her space. It's not uncontrolled. But the camera was not voyeuristic in the commercial way because you always knew where I was. You know, it wasn't shot through the keyhole.

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It was the only way to shoot that scene and to shoot that film—to avoid cutting the woman into a hundred pieces, to avoid cutting the action in a hundred places, to look carefully and to be respectful. The framing was meant to respect the space, her, and her gestures within it.

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CO: There are no subjective shots in any of your films.

CA: Just one in *Je, Tu, Il, Elle*, when I look at the back of his neck. That was me looking.

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It's really a hard problem to try to say what differentiates a woman's rhythm in film because a man can use these same forms of expression. I don't know if we have the words, if they exist yet. I don't think we know enough about women's films even to... I can talk about myself but I can't speak in a general, theoretical way at all. I just think that I've finally reached the right point, meaning that I agree with what I do. It's not like I feel one way and my work expresses something else. But I can't define it any more theoretically. We speak of 'women's rhythm', but it isn't necessarily the same for all women. I also think that Hollywood doesn't express a man's rhythm either, but the rhythm of capitalism or fascism. Men are cheated by it too.

But you know, some theorists say it is because we experience pleasure in another way than men do. Sexual pleasure. I really think that in movies it's right there. When I saw *Hotel Monterey* again this morning, I really thought it was an erotic film. I felt that way—*la jouissance du voir*.