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Film Forum 2's Chantal Akerman retro continues apace with her 1976 *News From Home* (today only). Most simply described, the film is a portrait of Manhattan, in which a generally static camera presents a succession of geometrically framed streetscapes—it's a spare and ravishing "city symphony" that takes its cues from Manhattan's own relentless grid.

Although Akerman's New York is largely a city of non-sites—empty Tribeca alleys, dingy Midtown parking lots, an abandoned gas station tucked into the crook of another building's wall—the symmetry of her compositions gives it the classical aura of ancient Rome. If New York isn't exactly transfigured, it certainly is defamiliarized. (A long stare at Veselka's fluorescence and chrome makes that humble luncheonette seem as machine-tooled as a Harley Davidson.)

The movie has its own mysterious logic. Akerman travels from neighborhood to neighborhood, varying her rhythm with a few long pans. There's a sequence shot from a car traveling up Tenth Avenue that unfurls like an endless, rundown Mondrian, but the strongest sequences are those filmed in the underworld. Akerman plants her camera in the middle of the Seventh Avenue local and lets it ride three stations, the doors opening and closing with majestic indifference.

The camera's imperturbable gaze is similarly bracing. Akerman and cinematographer Babette Mangolte are connoisseurs of harsh urban forms. As in Ernie Gehr's *Still* or Ken Jacobs's *Sky Socialist*, New York is at once monumental and ethereal—its gray mass eroded by unseen forces and phantom tears. Akerman, however, is more interested than they in the city's human presence (or rather absence). Her cool, visceral images are accompanied by occasional readings of letters from her mother back home in Belgium. Barely audible over the ambient street noise, these naïve, repetitive expressions of maternal concern underscore New York's strangeness, its distance from Europe, and the impossibility of describing the city's affect. Albeit reversing the archetypal greenhorn view of harbor and skyline, *News From Home* is the tale of a belated immigrant. (The movie could be called *A Brivele der Mamen* [A Little Letter to Mama], after the ferociously popular turn-of-the-century Yiddish ballad.)

Even though *News From Home* was obviously filmed during the summer, there's almost no nature here. It's a world of iron and stone—the only natural element is human. (Each one of us is that tree grown in Brooklyn.) Bathed in harsh green light, surrounded by graffiti and cigarette ads, subway riders are stolidly indifferent to noise and camera alike. This movie should always be playing in New York, not once every six years in a sadly beat-up print.

Rounding out the bill are two early Akermans, both made in New York. The 12-minute *La Chambre* (1972), a tenement still life with the camera panning around the filmmaker's pad as she lies in bed munching an apple, is mainly of interest to Akerman completists. The hour-long *Hotel Monterey* (1972), however, is a different story. This formalist investigation of a seedy SRO hotel on the Upper West Side fragments the building into a succession of leisurely contemplated vistas—the lobby, the rickety elevator, the cramped rooms, the inexplicable fixtures.

Initially impressionistic, *Hotel Monterey* is actually quite rigorous in its painterly—not to mention eroticized—use of

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narrow corridors and light-smeared reflections (Mangolte again). Made when the structuralist tendency was at its height, the movie suggests a fruitful engagement with the movement's sacred texts (Michael Snow's *Wavelength*, Ernie Gehr's *Serene Velocity*), even as it presages the new narrative forms the filmmaker herself would later explore. *Hotel Monterey* doesn't have the same explosive content as Barbara Rubin's *Christ-mas on Earth* or Yoko Ono's *Rape*, but it joins them on the honor roll of women's

films that have been written out of avant-garde history.

Anyone suffering from the post-*Batman* blahs could do worse than investigate *Mr. Canton and Lady Rose*, the new Jackie Chan vehicle, which opened in Chinatown over the July 4th weekend and should still be playing the Music Palace. Be forewarned though: It's no *Police Story* or *Armour of God*. Instead, the Hong Kong superstar has cooked up a variant on Frank Capra's *Lady for a Day*, giving himself the Warren William role of a sentimental gang-

ster who passes off an elderly street peddler as a wealthy dowager.

Even more overproduced than 1987's *Project A Part II*, this glorified sitcom is mainly a posh, chintzy spectacle of period cars, Borsalino hats, and nightclub floor shows. Still, three extended action "numbers" amply demonstrate Chan's genius for choreographed violence. These ballistic ballets justify the movie: A gangster powwow turns instant Three Stooges, with Chan using his windmill moves to confound a half dozen adversaries, then zooms into the show-biz stratosphere. Chan's acrobatics are not simply a matter

of kicks and jumps. When he does his stuff, he's a one-man circus—vaulting stairs, or brandishing chairs with a juggler's sense of timing. One moment he grabs the blade of a whirling electric fan, the next he uses a handy rickshaw to scoop his adversary.

There hasn't been so kinetic a movie star since Fred Astaire—and, as his trademark coda of outtakes and miscues shows, the 35-year-old superhero is still taking his knocks. Still, *Mr. Canton and Lady Rose* is a definite change of pace. The writing is on the wall: There must be an easier way to make a living. ■