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LOLA

HOME

CURRENT ISSUE

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A Letter

Dana Linssen, Prinsengracht 770-IV, 1017 LE Amsterdam

She tells a lot of stories and not all true but there are some that are true and usually these are sad stories, not funny ones. She tells the funny ones when we're all together and they come to her and they're not always true either but sometimes they are.

– Chantal Akerman, *A Family in Brussels* (2002)

A Prologue (which is also an Epilogue)

It was one of those days when I wondered what the number of my house was again.

23.

It was 23, wasn't it?

It might seem like a funny question, I mean, why wouldn't you know what number your house is? Every day, you stick your key in the lock, open the door and your life can begin. Routine gives a sense of security. Some people even say the muscles in your body have a sort of memory; every time you turn that key, your hand automatically moves anticlockwise to unlock the door. You don't need to think about it. Problems only start when something happens to disrupt this automatic process.

The potatoes boil dry. You have an orgasm. The post office is closed. Those kinds of things.

Funny question or not, there are just days when you wonder about stuff like that. Why should you know your own house number? I mean, you know where your house is, don't you? You know how to get home, without having to know the name of the street and the number of the house, right?

Anyway. It's 23. I live at number 23. I realised this, as if for the first time. It was both reassuring – I have a house number, 23, so I must have a house, I am someone who has a house, I am someone, I am – and slightly disconcerting. Does having a *house* also mean you have a *home*? Do you then suddenly belong somewhere?

And furthermore. I was standing in front of number 23. In front of possibly one of the most famous house numbers in film history. 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles; but that wasn't my number 23. That's not where I live. Or then again, maybe it is. I can live in the film that takes place behind that door: *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* – Chantal Akerman's breakthrough film from 1975. Hall. Mailboxes. Stairs.

Lift. I don't even need to enter the building to see it. All I need to do is close my eyes, and I am there. I am someone who lives there, at number 23.

The film can start at any moment.

So there I was. In Brussels. At the end of a long journey through the work of the cineaste Chantal Anne Akerman, born to Polish Jewish parents on 6 June 1950, in Brussels. From East (*D'est*, 1993) to South (*Sud*, 1999) and to the other side (*De l'autre côté*, 2002) and over there (*Là-bas*, 2006), as they are called in her native tongue, French; which also (don't) just happen to be the titles of her crucial later documentaries.

A journey guided by two signposts. The milestones in Akerman's work. One says: 'You are fundamentally rootless.' The other: 'What does it mean to be a woman?'

I stood there feeling somewhat ridiculous. How many people would call a telephone number from a film in the hope of getting to talk to the protagonist? Or wear a yellow raincoat in order to dance as well as Gene Kelly? That wasn't it. I can dance in the rain like that without the yellow raincoat. Nor was it a pilgrimage to walk in the footsteps of actress Delphine Seyrig, who plays Jeanne Dielman; nor even to retrace the steps of Akerman herself. But, as I was standing there, I realised that, in a way, it *was*. I was standing on the paving stones over which they had walked; even if they weren't the *very* same ones. They were still the same footsteps. The footsteps of real people. And of fictional ones. And of others yet, who may just be a bit of both. Real and fictional.

It was a primary impulse, to be physically close to the space that remains, between film and reality; because there, in that no man's land between fact and fiction, between one reality and another, one flickering beam of light and another, lies the truth that only film can illuminate. More concrete grounds for identification are inconceivable.

Watching Chantal Akerman's films, there is an essential moment of receptiveness, somewhere between the being and non-being of her images. I could equally have gone to Hell's Kitchen, the backdrop to *News from Home* (1976), or *Hotel Monterey* (1972) – if it were still there. But New York is a long way from home, and Brussels much closer. What's more, Brussels is where it all started, with Jeanne Dielman: a film from which Akerman's oeuvre spreads out, like the ribbons of a maypole, from here to there. By bringing about that contact – between there and here; between an opus that is both history and alive, trend-setting, influential and iconic (although this is a problematic term in relation to her work) – a consciousness is born that, in Akerman's work, the essential question of 'who am I?' is always answered in terms of place: 'where am I?'

She herself summed up her main themes in the self-portrait *Chantal Akerman par Chantal Akerman* (1997): 'Language, documentary, fiction, Jewishness and the Second Commandment'. That last named item is the key to everything. In an interview with Jean-Luc Godard in *Ça cinéma* in 1979 (she summarily decided to become a filmmaker after seeing Godard's film *Pierrot le fou* from 1965), she explains how creating images always has something to do with idolatry. This is the reason she makes cinema that is as 'distilled' as possible. She also returns to this idea in *Lettre d'une cinéaste* (1984), and in the multimedia installation *Bordering on Fiction: Chantal Akerman's D'est* (1993-1995), which she created from her film *D'est*.

The commandment prohibiting idolatry (the creation of false images) inherently leads to questions about the legitimacy and the value of representation as it has been passed down to us throughout film history. This commandment naturally begs the question (or perhaps is preceded by the question) of whether it is possible at all to depict something, or to imagine it. A question of existential significance to cinema itself, and one that is occupying filmmakers now more than ever before.

Akerman's search for images that represent nothing, and mean nothing else (except perhaps themselves – and even this is difficult enough) while she focuses her camera on observing the minutiae of women's lives, is expressed in the first instance by her style: distant, clean, sober, looking at the image outside of the image. Rootless, detached images. Images in the Diaspora. Is it possible to return home, to where the image can exist, outside of the commandment? Is such an image even possible?

This fundamental rootlessness goes further than style, or the momentum within film history that linked this style to feminist film theory. It comes from Akerman's biography, as a child of Holocaust survivors; or from even further back, in the legend of the wandering Jew.

In the 'ego document' *Chantal Akerman par Chantal Akerman*, the filmmaker suggests that she is not the right person to talk about what her films are about, as that is what her films are about. The person best qualified to talk about this is the Other.

This is, of course, reminiscent of the ideas of philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, in which the transcendental is revealed in our meeting with the Other, 'in all his otherness'. In the case of Akerman, the viewer – the one who looks – is this unknowable, unannexable Other; like her characters, who – for her and for us – are also viewers. And because her cinema is not a cinema of seduction (in the traditional, Hollywood sense), nor a cinema of objectification, appropriation and subjection, there is no idolatry.

When she started making films, in the 1960s and '70s, this discussion took place principally within the feminist discourse, and although this frame of reference is still relevant to the understanding and appreciation of her work (and perhaps precisely still relevant now), I do not consider this to be an essential framework.

If we take the moment in film history where we currently are as the starting point for the perception of her work, this Diasporic, scattered image gains even more urgency. In a dominant image culture in which images are constantly being stretched into ever greater metaphors and language is being eroded, it is important to see past the image as sign with another meaning. If – as with Akerman – there is no representation, no subjection of the viewer to the dominance of the image, then there is also no hierarchical division between auteur and character, or between character and viewer.

Then, there is only a story.

Or maybe not even that.

Only an experience.

Being.

So there I stood. Me. Dana Linssen. The fictional narrator of this true story. I had no alternative but to invent myself in order to talk about the relevance of Akerman's films, without being doomed to repeat (and thereby to reproduce and to represent) what others have thought up and written about this when it wasn't yet here and now. 2011, or another year.

4.22 Light Years from Hoge Minstraat 5a, 4147 CM Asperen to Hoge Minstraat 8, 4147 CM Asperen, province of Zuid-Holland, the Netherlands, Europe, The World, The Universe, And Everything Beyond

Dear Judith,

Do you remember how, when we were small, we always used to send letters to one another? From Judith to Judith. Ottla would sit between us on the back seat – she was too young to write, but was really good at playing Post Office, and she gave us envelopes she had folded herself, with stamps and franking marks she had drawn herself. Three sisters travelling through Europe with their parents, on their way from one theatre show to another. We would also write about these. About theatre. About heroes and villains and the actors and actresses we had secret crushes on, being primary school girls and what-the-hell-did-we-know. And about how this Judith, who was us and about whom we wrote, would later also become an actress, and about all the roles she would play: Antigone of course, and Electra and Shen Te/Shui Ta from Bertolt Brecht's *The Good Person of Szechwan*.

You have now played them all.

I don't know any more exactly what I wrote about – the Judith I dreamed up for myself. You wrote about Judith the actress and I think I wrote about Judith who was writing. Which is why, I think, I didn't really mind giving up my name. I was more than happy with my little footnotes in the book of days.

The best thing was always to really post a letter, somewhere in Athens, Verona or Avignon and then find it waiting for us, many weeks later at home.

Everything went back to normal. In the morning we went to school and in the afternoon we returned to our bohemian enclave in an orderly rural street, where our housewife neighbours left and right scrubbed the pavement in front of their houses every day with befuddling, foul-smelling bleach, thereby reducing their world to those few clinically sterile square metres before their front doors.

They could have been called Jeanne Dielman, if we had known who Jeanne Dielman was – Jeanne Dielman who, at that very moment in Brussels was putting the potatoes on to boil, opening the door for her four o'clock client, until right there behind her closed bedroom door something happened that turned everything upside down. They were not our role models, because we had mothers and grandmothers and great-grandmothers

who knew their own minds and went to work and travelled the world.

Which is why it took a very long time for us to really see them. Although it could, of course, also be because their cleaning products stupefied us.

Then, one afternoon, a letter from the future dropped into our letter box.

Jeanne Dielman also receives letters from afar; from her sister Fernande, who lives in Canada, where she carries out the same endless repetitive housewifely tasks as Jeanne in Brussels: cleaning, polishing shoes, going for a stroll after dinner. Neurotic rituals meant to hold the discomforts of the world at bay. To not feel the rushing of the blood, that pounds, boils and seethes.

Letters play an important role in all of Akerman's early films. Letters from home. Letters to home. Letters from her overly concerned mother. As an eighteen-year-old, Akerman briefly studied film at Brussels' Institut National Supérieur des Arts du Spectacle et des Techniques de Diffusion, but quickly decided to quit the course to make her first film. Her 'Chaplin film', as she would later refer to it: the black-and-white *Saute ma ville* (1968), an absurdist Nouvelle Vague-like caper through the life of a young woman. It could easily be a day in your life, when you were studying theatre in Brussels twenty years later, at a school with a somewhat shorter name: an energetic whirlwind of a girl who did everything women were expected to do in those days, but turned upside-down and inside-out by the absolute conviction of her youthful/disarming overconfidence. Dancing up the stairs, cooking spaghetti, totally disorganising the kitchen in the name of cleaning, all the while whistling furiously and taping up the doors and windows, and when she was done: oops-a-daisy, head on the gas. Then just a spark and – boom!

This was not how she would live.

Nor we.

Two details. Prior to commencing her manic race through the stairwell, she takes the post from the letter box and, having arrived in the kitchen (which is in fact the kitchen from Akerman's parental home, in the same way that all her observations of everyday activities, in all their poignancy and pain, are also loving odes to her mother's life as a housewife), she pins one of the letters up on a kitchen cupboard. This image returns later in the short film *La chambre* (1972), which Akerman shot during a brief but highly productive stay in New York. The film consists of a 360° pan around Akerman's single room apartment in New York – a letter on which we can just read the salutation 'Dear Chantal' is pinned to the wall. It could easily be one of the letters from her mother, which would go on to play a role in *News from Home* – a film told entirely through letters.

In New York, she got to know the work of North American avant-garde artists Michael Snow, Jonas Mekas and Yvonne Rainer. This meeting with their work freed her from the conventions that dictated that film stories had to be told through emotion, suspense and plot. In their place, she put the real-time shots and long takes with fixed frames favoured by the Structuralists. As in the work of Mekas, which straddled the journal, travelogue and documentary formats. Here too, she met camerawoman Babette Mangolte, with whom, along with *La chambre*, Akerman went on to make a large number of other films

during the 1970s, including *Jeanne Dielman*.

There is another important moment in *Saute ma ville*. Before everything really goes pear-shaped in that kitchen, the protagonist just catches a glimpse of herself in the mirror. A little disruption. She sees herself. But she also doesn't. But, it is also the actress Chantal Akerman who sees herself. She is protagonist, performer and director. And just for a moment, in that mirror, all the walls of the theatre are broken through. It is not only the Brechtian fourth wall that disappears through an alienation effect.

In these early films, Akerman often plays herself. In her first feature-length film *je tu il elle* (1974), she even plays a pivotal role. But is she also acting? And is she also playing herself?

It is a question we must ask, but cannot answer. Bearing in mind the Second Commandment, she cannot create an image of herself. Neither can she ask this of the actresses in her fiction films, whether they are called Delphine Seyrig (*Jeanne Dielman; Golden Eighties*, 1986); Aurore Clément (*Les rendez-vous d'Anna*, 1978); Guilaïne Londez (*Nuit et jour*, 1991); Circé Lethem (*Portrait d'une jeune fille de la fin des années 60 à Bruxelles*, 1994); Juliette Binoche (*Un divan à New York*, 1996) or Sylvie Testud (*La captive*, 2000; *Demain on déménage*, 2004). Films about love, and relationships, and sexuality, and above all about the question of how the main characters they play can define their identities in a world in which they are always confronted by another. Levinas would say that the answer to this is only revealed at the moment you come face-to-face with the Other. Often, Akerman's fictional characters haven't yet even opened their eyes to really look at the Other. They are still grappling with the throes of the self.

In addition to *je tu il elle* and *Jeanne Dielman*, the semi-autobiographical (although, is this even a relevant label in relation to her work?) *Les rendez-vous d'Anna* (about a female filmmaker on tour), *Golden Eighties* and *Portrait d'une jeune fille* are on the list of films Akerman compiled when asked in 1997 to make a contribution to the long-running television series *Cinéma, de notre temps* by Janine Bazin and André S. Labarthe. The result was a self-portrait. She would really have preferred to tell her story purely through film fragments. But as this didn't suit the format, she read out a text on camera. You could see it as a letter to the viewer. In it, she states – among other things – that she is an unreliable teller of stories. And that honesty is always artificial.

48 °12'16"N 16°22'04"E

In 2005, Akerman taught briefly at the University of Tel Aviv, and lived in an apartment complex a few streets from the sea.

Producer Xavier Carniaux, with whom she had made the documentaries *Sud* and *De l'autre côté*, among others, encouraged her to make a film here, too. It was so obvious: her being a daughter of Israel, and having so often taken a place as the starting point for a film, and now being on the spot – but the idea didn't appeal to Akerman, at first.

The image made by the light falling through the blinds onto the ground proved

irresistible, however – and there, in that light, a new film was born. A diary-like testimony, in which Akerman remains indoors for most of the film, the camera fixed on that window with its blinds, and reflecting on the possibilities of making a film in or about Israel, and thinking about history, family, memory.

The title *Là-bas* refers to the fact that Akerman is finally over there, in the promised land, which is how Akerman's family called it when people left Europe to set up home in Israel; over there, in a country of war, which seems so far away from Europe; but also over there in the sense of being outside, in contrast to the inside where most of the film takes place. *Là-bas* is a radical refusal to show everything that is happening outside: the city; life; the traffic; the people; the children playing. We can only hear all this. Sounds and images of people on balconies opposite, leaking in through the gaps in the blinds.

There is such an 'over there' in many of Akerman's films. Her window is not only – like the cinema screen – a window on the world, but also a barrier between here and there. Windows, curtains, blinds work both ways – they shut us in and shut the world out. Every room is both a sanctuary and a prison. Home is never just home; a slight sense of unease is always present in this tension between safety and threat.

It can be seen in the blue neon light that shines onto the walls of Jeanne Dielman's living room. Or, for example, in how the first thing filmmaker Anna in *Les rendez-vous d'Anna* does in her German hotel room is open and then close the windows (and how many hotel rooms and other 'temporary' spaces can be found in her films!). She spends a lot of time standing, staring out of the window. Or the house swap Parisienne Juliette Binoche and New Yorker William Hurt undertake in Akerman's most commercial film, *Un divan à New York*, before finally meeting one another (or themselves) through the doors to a balcony. It can also be seen in the maze of corridors and rooms with far too many doors and mirrors that act as windows in the Parisian apartment of Simon in the film of Proust's *La captive* – a dark, obsessive work about the game of attraction and repulsion played by lovers, which she had portrayed in a generally less gloomy light in her fictional works of the 1980s and '90s. It is also heard in the testimony of the letter-writing protagonist of *je tu il elle*, who tries to shut the world out, until she is finally forced to go outside. There's no getting away from 'over there'.

In *Là-bas*, Akerman herself is also forced to go outside, to buy a pack of cigarettes, thereby allowing the world to come in. She witnesses the aftermath of a bombing and, at that moment, her film about refusing to make a film becomes a film about the impossibility of making a film.

You could call the documentaries Akerman made around the turn of the millennium 'accidental films'. *D'est*, a journey through Eastern Europe, was the result of a research trip for a film about Russian poet Anna Akhmatova. *Sud* was inspired by fragments of Harmony Korine's *Gummo* (1997), which Akerman saw while teaching at Harvard, and the works of William Faulkner and James Baldwin that deal with the south of the United States – in particular, Baldwin's musings on the beauty of the trees, on the one hand, and the invisible weight of the bodies that hung from them, on the other. But when she finally started filming there, another story pushed its way into the film. The shades of a violent past were reawakened when young James Byrd Jr. fell victim to a racist lynching. Nevertheless, *Sud* is not about this murder in the traditional documentary sense. In

keeping with her original idea and source of inspiration in Baldwin, *Sud* is an evocation of what the Dutch poet, sculptor and painter Armando has called the 'guilty landscape'.

This statement naturally gives rise to objections. The landscape is a landscape – not beautiful, not ugly, not guilty and not innocent, but free from value. But what Armando means is that the landscape bears no testimony. It allows the horrors to pass. The trees keep growing. The grass takes over.

For Armando, who as a boy grew up in the shadow of a transit camp during World War II, this is the only way left of understanding the world. Like Akerman's, his work is not narrative; he neither points the finger at perpetrators nor focuses on victims – the horrors of the war are fundamentally indescribable. We also find this idea of the guilty landscape in James Benning's *Landscape Suicide* (1986), for example, and in John Gianvito's *Profit Motive and the Whispering Wind* (2007).

If *Jeanne Dielman* is the pillar on which Akerman's early work rests, then the way in which *Là-bas* follows from her documentary work of the 1990s is the anchor for her current position.

She has stayed inside. She has exposed herself to her own camera-eye. Then she went outside. She has maintained a distance. But she has seen it.

She has come home.

That is a place where you can't stay for long.

Plxxx Vxxxxxxxx 23, xx22 AV Bxxxxxxxx

When Nanouk Leopold's film *Brownian Movement* premiered in the Netherlands in the spring of 2011, the film was discussed by male critics in almost all of the big Dutch newspapers, but no one mentioned *Jeanne Dielman*. I don't know whether this means anything, but it is striking. With the odd exception, the film was given a pretty rough ride, criticised for its psychology and ethics (the protagonist was accused of being unfathomable and acting in an objectionable manner) – even the argument that its slow pace was a disqualifying feature was dragged out of the cupboard. Charlotte (Sandra Hüller) from *Brownian Movement* is a contemporary sister to Jeanne Dielman; she is married, a mother, a successful career woman, who creates a safe haven for herself in an apartment in Brussels where she can live out her sexual fantasies. How and to what extent she actually puts these fantasies into practice is the mystery of the film, which – with its reserved camerawork, cinema of gestures and interiors, and thematic questions about the extent to which we can ever really know the other, even within a relationship – owes more than a little to Akerman's fictional works, from *Jeanne Dielman* to *La captive*. The way in which the film was received therefore also represents a big step back in time.

When *Jeanne Dielman* premiered, in 1975, the film's female perspective was an essential part of its reception. The film was seen as an indictment of the oppressed existence and suppressed sexuality of women, whose freedom of movement was limited pretty much to the space between the sink and the fridge. This was the heyday of feminist film theory.

Film theorists such as Claire Johnston and Laura Mulvey argued that, in traditional Hollywood films, women and the female were always defined in relation to the dominant perspective of the man and the male, and that feminist cinema would have to liberate itself from this cinematic viewpoint via a detached way of observing. Famous scenes such as Jeanne sitting in the bath or brushing her hair are classic examples of a de-eroticised cinema. Furthermore, the female perspective of *Jeanne Dielman* was also discussed in another way: Akerman's choice of a camera position at her own eye level – considerably lower than the standard Hollywood one – gave the film a literally different, female perspective.

I always find it difficult to look objectively at things like male or female perspectives. In film theory, being conscious of this is an essential instrument with which to identify dominant viewpoints, and thereby reveal hidden preconceptions. Unravelling these silent assumptions is the job of every film critic, and not only in terms of man/woman, black/white, young/old, East/West, heterosexual/homosexual; these are always quantitative results based on research in the field, not qualitative results. There is, of course, also a small additional problem in these times of post-modern relativism: are we ever really able to think outside the boundaries of our thought? In other words, as a woman can we ever really understand a male perspective, and vice versa? And etcetera. No one would dare maintain such a thing these days. Legitimate, but deadly: if you can't see past your own boundaries, why should you do your best to look the Other in the eyes? This eventually leads to a film perspective dictated by the largest common denominator.

Akerman's detached gaze has now become commonplace in contemporary art films. Feminist film theory is in hibernation. We wear our preconceptions on our sleeves. But consciousness is not enough to reveal these. There are still more male than female Jeanne Dielmans in film history, as in the surrounding worlds of filmmakers and evaluators. It is high time that film theorists got back down to it and investigated whether Dielmans like Misael in Lisandro Alonso's *La libertad* (2001) or Viorel in Cristi Puiu's *Aurora* (2010) – to name but two – are treated differently from Charlotte in *Brownian Movement*, or from Melanie in Maren Ade's *Der Wald vor lauter Bäume* (*The Forest for the Trees*, 2003), Mia in Andrea Arnold's *Fish Tank* (2005), Grace in Fien Troch's *Unspoken* (2008) or Eva in Lynne Ramsay's *We Need to Talk About Kevin* (2011). Or even from the way in which Valeska Grisebach looks at her male protagonist Markus in *Sehnsucht* (2006). Or.

Or.

À propos on a postscript
Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles

Dear Judith,

So what was I doing, standing there? To be honest, I had jumped onto the train to Brussels on an impulse, to see with my own eyes that Brussels was no longer Brussels, and the Quai du Commerce in particular no longer the prim middle-class thoroughfare from Kanaal to Noordwijk. I wanted to see that film and real life had gone their separate

ways. But I didn't find what I expected. After office hours, the streets around the megalomaniac office buildings of the Flemish Government at the foot of the Noord station are deserted; cardboard shelters erected by the homeless on the pavements the only signs of life. A fur coat lay on a bench. A bizarre image. It was 30°C and this fur coat was lying there, perspiring, alone. I was reminded of that endless tracking shot in *D'est* of all those women in fur coats, standing waiting for the bus in the cold of a winter evening. It seemed as if one of them had been teleported to here and dissolved in the heat. It was as if I suddenly found myself in the wrong science fiction film. Used future. Just as creepy as the empty streets of Hell's Kitchen, where Akerman filmed *News from Home*. The past becomes the future, and then back again. Close to Yser metro station, the scenery started to break down. Endless perspectives. Straight lines of escape. Fences. Vacant lots. The empty present. In my haste, I misread the street sign for Avenue de l'Héliport. I read Hellport. It seemed appropriate. There is always something to throw the status quo out of kilter. But number 23 was still there. The trees were still there. Grown and cut back. Grown and cut back. In other words, not a centimetre taller in thirty years. Set in time. No time to become a guilty urban landscape. In the early evening, a little grocer's shop was even still open, for illegal telephone cards, cassette tapes of African music – and even potatoes, should you need any. Sweet potatoes, though, no good for making chips.

Don't forget to turn down the gas.

Your loving sister (who will finally sign with her own name),

Danielle L.

Plxxx Vxxxxxxxx 23, xx22 AV Bxxxxxxxx

The Netherlands

Europe

The World

The Universe

And Everything Beyond

30 June 2011

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