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News from home

France/Belgium, 1976 Director: Chantal Akerman

Distr—The Other Cinema. *p.c*—Unité 3/INA (Paris)/Paradise Films (Brussels). *p*—(Unité 3) Alain Dahan. *asst. d*—Paule Zadjerman, Epp Kotkes. *sc*—Chantal Akerman. *ph*—Babette Mangolte; Jim Asbell. *col*—Fastman Colour. *ed*—Francine Sandberg. *a.d/m*—(none). *sd. ed*—Dominique Dalmasso. *sd. rec*—Dominique Dalmasso, Larry Haas. *narrator*—Chantal Akerman. 3,240 ft. 90 mins. (16 mm.). *English commentary.*

Images of Manhattan—fixed-camera shots, panning shots, travelling shots—are sporadically accompanied by the texts of letters to the director from her mother back home in Europe, letters recited, in English, in a heavily accented monotone.

The news from home which provides Chantal Akerman's film with its title in fact travels in two directions. While the letters from Belgium, with their catalogue of minor illnesses, domestic routine, betrothals and financial anxieties, paint a picture of claustrophobic family life, the images build a no less eloquent picture of alien urban life, initially as isolated and claustrophobic as anything the director has left behind her. Unlike most formalist films, this one is elegiacally emotional ("constructed according to my feelings" is Akerman's description of it); and cumulatively, its images build up a 'narrative' element at least as strong as that contained within the spoken texts. The counterpoint proves complex: while the mainspring of the film's tension lies in the lack of any direct connection between images and words, the latter—with their endless litanies of love and anxiety all minor variations on a single theme—explain the presence of the film-maker in this most alien of cities. Although Akerman appears nowhere in the film (unless one counts a reflection on a subway window that is arguably hers), her own motivations for leaving the over-protective, uneventful home are communicated obliquely but with an abundant clarity. As, too, are her shifting feelings for her home away from home. Babette Mangolte's extraordinary camera-work, most of it carried out in the penumbral light which evokes a wistful solitude, flattens the city streets, suggesting a hermetic world of impenetrable surfaces: if there is a life beyond them, it is one into which the film-maker, casting herself as the eternal outside observer, can never enter. New York appears alternatively as a domain of high walls and closed doors, or as a gigantic goldfish bowl. The only words one hears in the course of the film are the mother's, and even they are distanced from themselves by both the deliberately literal English translation and the dull monotone in which they are rattled off; they are also drowned out for whole phrases and paragraphs by the sounds of the city's traffic and its transportation systems—but never by the voice of its inhabitants. For the solitude the film-maker expresses is mirrored in her subject—both city and inhabitants alike. The normal proportions of narrative cinema are reversed—people become expressions of a landscape on which even their graffiti fail to produce a humanising effect. The film's opening shot provides an elementary example of the technique it will employ with advancing complexity: the camera, positioned some way down a street walled in by high brick buildings on either side, is pointed up the road towards a lateral street. A car crosses the first street, passes out of frame; another car makes a right turn, hesitantly, slowly passes the camera; a group of children carrying cardboard boxes appear from the horizon, etc.: the permanence and solidity of the street, rather than the ephemeral movements of cars or people, emerge as the camera's 'real' subject—an effect heightened by the fixed focus, by the fact that the camera makes none of the customary concessions to movements within the frame. Gradually, as the film progresses, the shots grow longer, even accommodating movement within them, and the streets of this New York ghost town (curiously evocative of *Paris qui dort*) become more crowded. The feelings of shyness and strangeness reflected in the construction of the film's first minutes gradually give way to a bolder curiosity: the first time the director takes her camera down into the subway, it is to observe only the graffiti-sprayed door of a compartment; later, she plants it firmly at the end of an aisle, observing her fellow travellers and their reactions, to it more than to one another. The people who fall within its field of vision remain curiously separate from one another, their lives the antithesis of that family warmth which punctuates the soundtrack. The letters from home, even if the news remains the same, also start to tell a different story. At first spaced out, they later merge together (two weeks between subway stops), conveying the effect that time is compressed by the very repetitiveness of events—on both sides of the Atlantic. Though there's also a point, about three-quarters of the way through the film, where time itself seems to become the subject, where the film slackens and the spectator grows exhausted from the effort of so many fresh starts and returns to zero, from watching people watching people, waiting for human contact or meaningful experience with the same weary resignation they, and we, wait for the subway train to draw into the early-morning platform. But then the film soars triumphantly into motion: first a long travelling shot from a car moving downtown to the port; then a fixed shot from the stern of a slowly departing boat. As camera and boat pull away from Manhattan, the city becomes a whole rather than a maze, the science-fiction skyline exerts its old mythical power before its sharp outlines are swathed in a rising mist, and seagulls lend their voices to the soundtrack. The final sequence-shot has all the mysterious poetry of a landscape by Monet or Turner. The film-maker departs, more confident, but still irrevocably alien.

JAN DAWSON