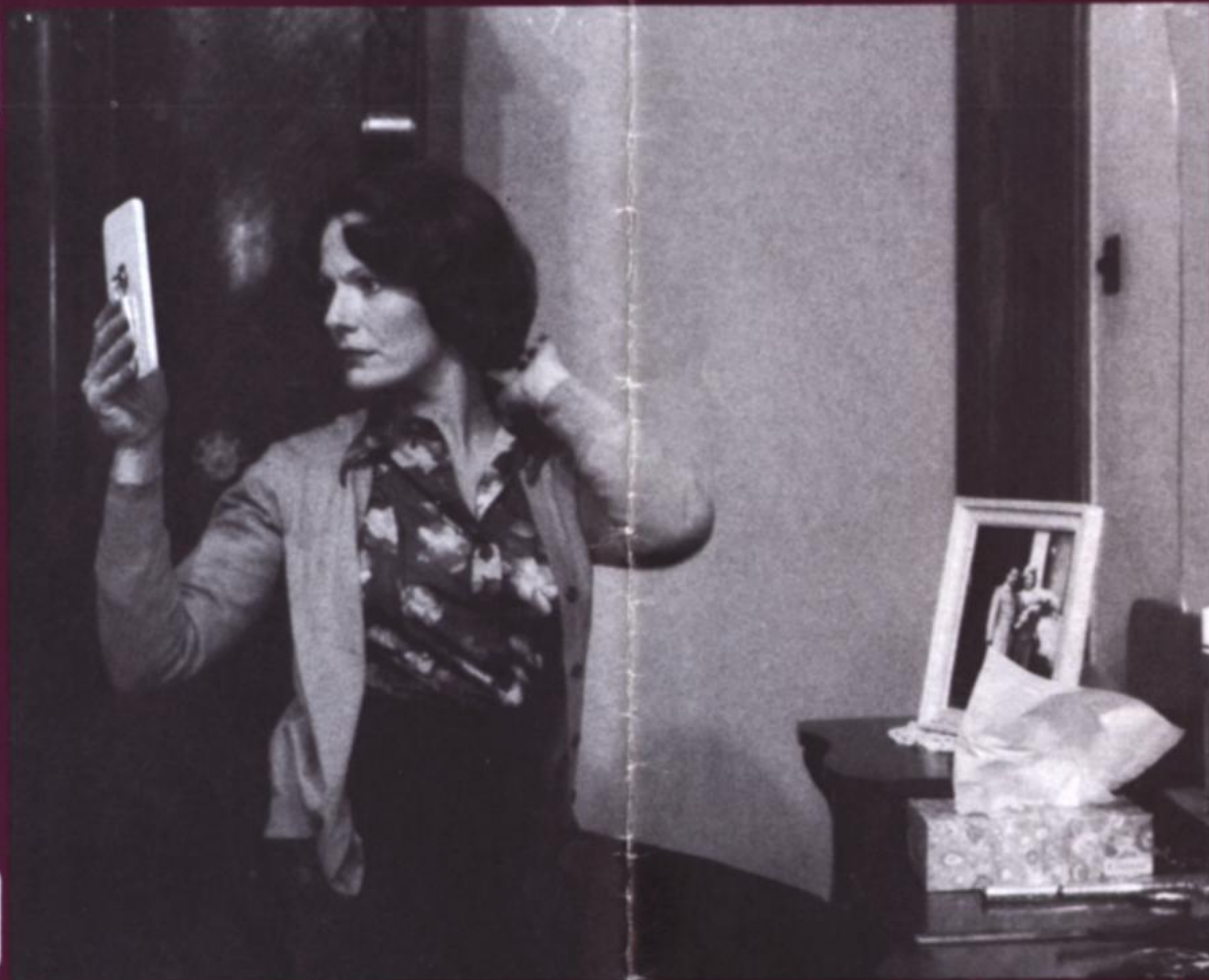


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GETTING READY FOR THE GOLDEN EIGHTIES: A CONVERSATION WITH CHANTAL AKERMAN



Chantal Akerman, *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles*, 1975, still from color film in 35 mm, 158 minutes. Cinematography: Babette Mangolte. Courtesy of Paradise Films, Brussels.

Gary Indiana

It was an early and widespread recognition that Chantal Akerman's work is indisputably brilliant, and that it would perhaps place her, one day, in the same master class occupied by Jean-Luc Godard, Robert Bresson, and Michelangelo Antonioni. Because Akerman analyzes the properties of constructed space and light independent of the human content that passes through it, her films have often been used for the theoretical arguments of structuralist film; similarly the films have been used to illustrate feminist critiques. The confluence of these mutually accommodating but by no means identical interests about the work of the same filmmaker has helped keep Akerman in the critical limelight, but although her films circulate on the festival and art-house circuits none of them are readily available in the United States. Any Akerman enthusiast is obliged to support at least one feminist point that has often been made: no male director as widely considered great as Akerman is would be as neglected by distributors and producers.

In her films, the viewer is not the secretly privileged witness of selected epiphanies and tragedies in the lives of characters, but the spectator of little disturbances within the frame. A hotel corridor may disclose in its depths the blurred fact of a human presence, or it may not; a symmetrically broken plane containing a person we know about persists on the screen after that person is gone, so that we can know about the plane, too.

In *Hotel Monterey* (1972) the camera remains fixed at Akerman's eye level—she is about 5 feet, 1 inch tall—giving a low angle. Except for a few crepuscular tracking shots, there are no camera movements. Shots are sustained so far beyond normal duration that the eye, even when confronting static space, experiences a lavish range of optical events. The film's survey of a seedy welfare hotel is more architectural than anthropological; human beings stray in and out of the frozen frame, sometimes registering mild surprise at the presence of the camera, and eventually disappear from the film altogether. No soundtrack, no cutaway shots, and no characters besides the random presences that occupy the hotel lobby and use the elevator: what Akerman's camera records, without distraction or augmentation, is the experience of space over time, how the eye receives information, breaks it down into constituent parts, and recomposes it.

Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles (1975), Akerman's most famous film, is an exhaustively detailed study of three days in the life of a woman whose life is described by a determinedly mechanical lack of outward emotion—whether she is dipping veal cutlets in egg batter or performing the chore of once-a-day prostitution. Each day of the week has its own ritually fixed agenda: cutlets and Mr. X on Wednesdays, meatloaf and Mr. Y on Thursdays, etc. The only conventional dramatic moment is also the least convincing: near the end of the film the heroine stabs a customer with a pair of scissors. (The scissors, I think, found their way into *Jeanne Dielman* . . . from Godard's *Pierrot le fou* (1965), perhaps as an homage to the film that inspired Akerman to become a filmmaker.) The murder, combined with the film's relentless inventory of "women's work" shown in real time, won Akerman the tenacious support of feminist film critics and engendered reams of related theoretical writing, much of it persuasive and just as much of it projected. Real life seldom coincides with theory, and neither does real art. "The true is not encrusted in the living persons and objects you use," Robert Bresson remarks in his *Notes on Cinematography*.¹ "It is an air of truth that their images take on when you set them together in a certain order. *Vice versa*, the air of truth their images take on when you set them together in a certain order confers on these persons and objects a reality."

What is astonishing about *Jeanne Dielman* . . . is hardly what it signifies, but what is right there on the

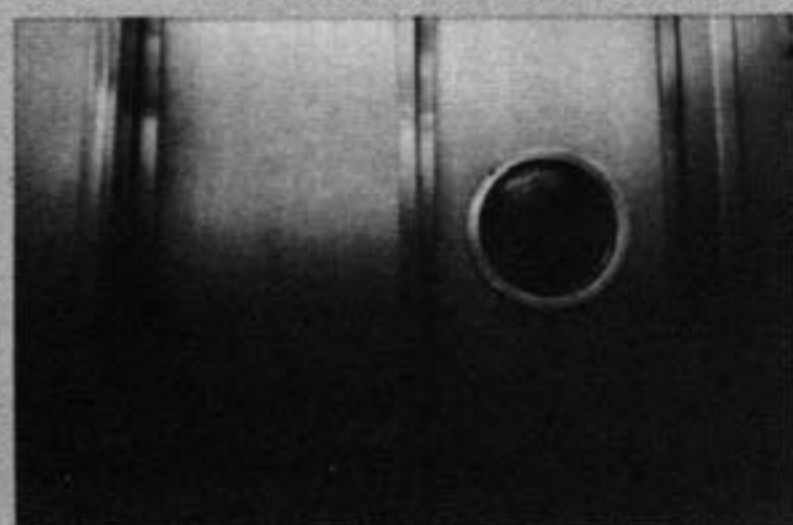
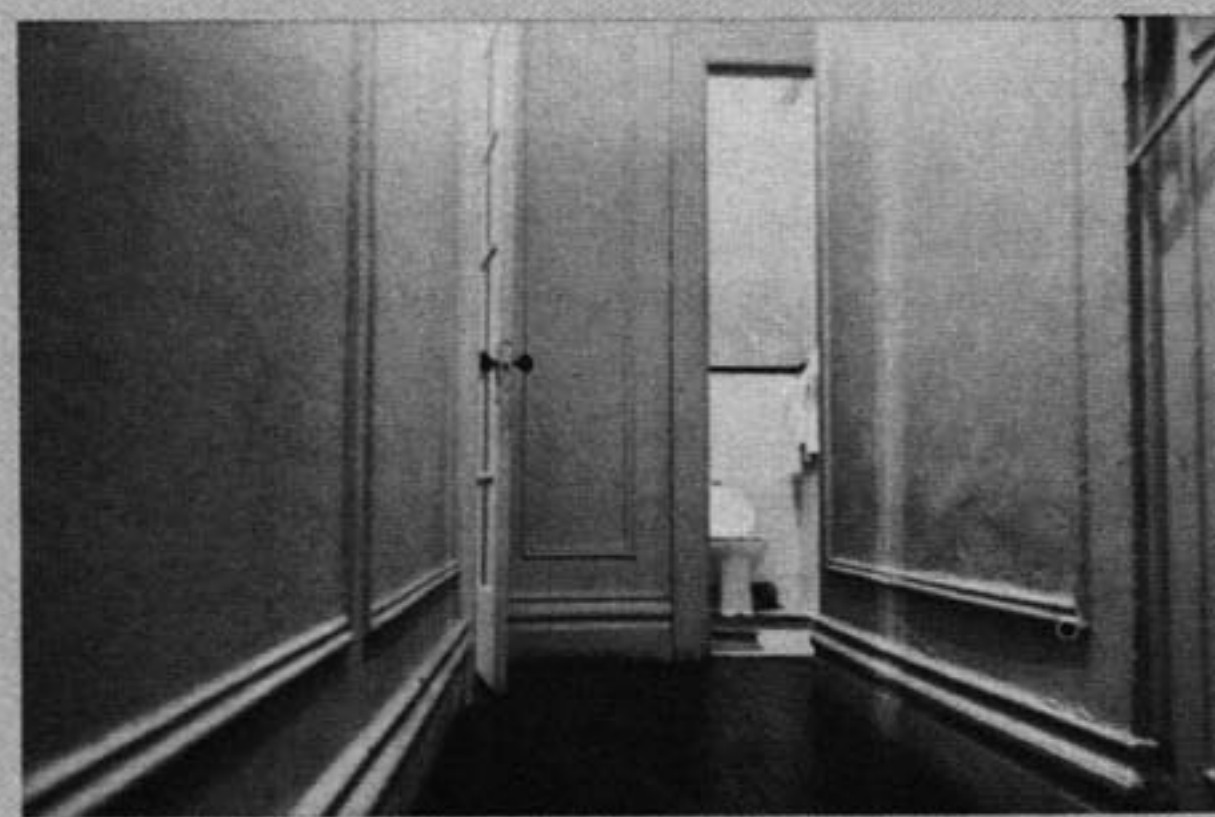
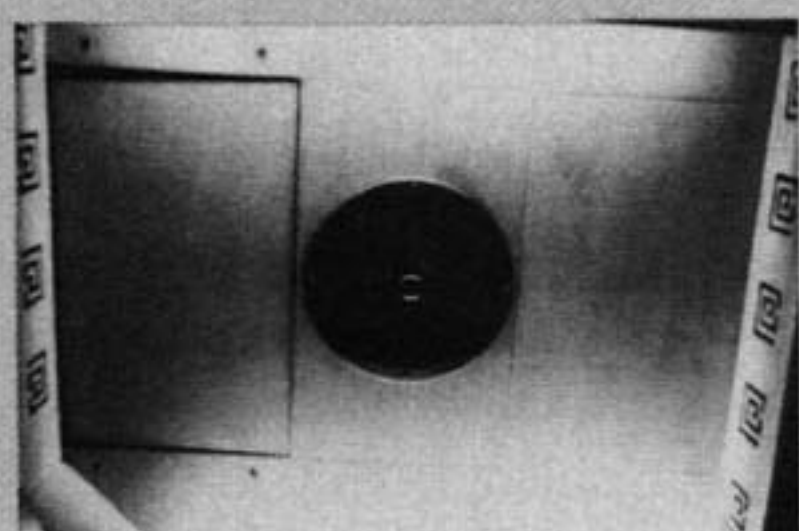
surface: a meticulous record of a life held in rigid check by habit, slipping subtly out of control, its derailment evident in the minutiae of forgetting to switch off a light or button a button. Akerman's brilliance is her ability to keep the viewer fascinated by everything normally left out of movies, everything customarily elided by cutting and compression. Her humor has seldom been remarked on, although *Jeanne Dielman* . . . is one of the funniest serious films ever made, full of slow-building gags and deadpan absurdities.

These are profoundly personal films—in a pure sense—that seem impersonal because of their lack of emotional clutter. Akerman takes one feeling and plays it out to the end, so the audience really feels it, too. In *News from Home* (1976) we hear Akerman's voice competing with the direct sound of traffic, reading her mother's weekly letters. The immobile camera, gazing at New York's streets, subways, and people, transforms the retinal field into a space of meditation. The repetitive content, the message of maternal longing recited in a soft, rapid, neutral patter, bathes what the eye encounters in melancholic reverie. The sound track of noise and reading peels the frontal information from its connotative possibilities, usurping the dominant role of the look of the picture in a perfectly adhesive relation of off-camera text to image.

In her later films, *Les Rendez-vous d'Anna* (1978) and *Toute Une Nuit* (1981–82), Akerman continues her audacious experiments with subject matter and its tendency to dissolve as its visual presence is pro-



Chantal Akerman, *Hotel Monterey*, 1972, still from color film in 16 mm, 65 minutes. Cinematography: Babette Mangolte.



Above: stills from *Hotel Monterey*.

longed. The train trip from Germany to Belgium that comprises most of *Les Rendez-vous d'Anna* slides in and out of its role in the narrative simply by being maintained onscreen, producing the same vaguely erotic tedium as actual train travel, as well as the tendency of the mind to lose its place as landscapes ribbon past the eye. *Toute Une Nuit* is a night of gratuitous romantic encounters in Brussels; each meeting is released from any narrative justification and culminates in an embrace of the sort featured in Hollywood musicals. Over the course of a long night you see men and women, maybe in a bar, in a hotel room, in the street. There's one scene with two people sitting at adjacent tables in a cafe; they don't seem to know each other and don't look at each other. When the cafe is about to close, after spending five minutes or so preparing to leave they turn to each other and embrace. The gesture, endlessly reenacted in variations (like the reading of the mother's letters in *News from Home*), isolated from any dramatic context by murky temporal and physical space, comprises the entire *raison d'être* of each sequence. The viewer quickly learns to anticipate it; the film plays with this anticipation. The absurdity in *Toute Une Nuit* isn't an aberration within Akerman's work. She is an artist of consummate irony. Her style is so authentic and powerful it can flaunt its own peculiarities as jokes and provocations—and still sustain the dignity of her genius.

The following interview was conducted in Brussels over two days in March 1983. Chantal Akerman was pleasantly exhausted from work that was going well. She is preparing *The Golden Eighties* (formerly titled *La Galerie*), a musical she has wanted to shoot for several years, and had also completed work on *The Eighties*, a film about auditions and rehearsals, inspired by auditioning actors for the musical.

GARY INDIANA: I'm interested in things you did for money. Jobs you had while you were making your first films.

CHANTAL AKERMAN: With my first film I wanted to make a feature film so I decided to sell stock in the film. I made a stock book and went to Antwerp and sold certificates on the Diamond Bourse, selling the pages for \$3 each. By the end I had only \$200 or \$300, not enough to make a feature film. I made a short film with that. It wasn't enough to finish the film, so I worked in banks, in shops, sending telexes; Phillips Petroleum

telex, American Express telex. Then, when I went to New York, first I worked in a restaurant, La Poulade, in the Fifties. I took care of coats and hats, putting glasses of water and butter on the tables. The best thing was going to the cellar, to this big machine that made ice cubes. I had a red dress I had bought in a thrift shop, I was really the *petit chaperon rouge*, Little Red Riding Hood. I worked at the New School, modeling for sculpture. I also worked in a photo lab blowing up pictures. Later I worked in a thrift shop, and then on Orchard Street. Then I worked at the 55th Street Playhouse, the porno pictures, as a cashier; and in three weeks I stole \$4000, and I made *Hotel Monterey* and *La Chambre* [1972] with that. That was the end of it for stealing, I stopped. Then I made *Je, Tu, Il, Elle* [1974]; for that I worked as a typist. Then that was finished because I got some grants from my government.

GI: You were very young, 21, when you first went to America [1971]. Had you already made a film?

CA: I had made two films just before: my first film, *Saute ma ville* [1968]; I don't even have a print of the other one, *L'Enfant Aime* [1971], because it was such a bad film.

GI: I haven't seen *Saute ma ville*. The descriptions I've read sound almost like *Jeanne Dielman*...

CA: No, it's a funny movie. It's nice. It's like a Chaplin movie. I'm acting myself in it. Maybe it's a bit harder than a Chaplin movie—though Chaplin can be hard, too. It's a comedy, a tragicomedy.

GI: Your own kitchen explodes in the end.

CA: Everything explodes. You don't see it, but you hear the sound. It's very fast. I'm acting, and I go really fast, fast, fast.

GI: When you were in New York in the early '70s did you see the films of Andy Warhol where he used the static camera?

CA: No, I only saw *Chelsea Girls* [1966] and something with mushrooms.

GI: *Eat* [1963]. Robert Indiana eating a mushroom.

CA: I also saw *Trash* [1970], but that's Paul Morrissey. A critic said I have something from Warhol and something from Robert Wilson, that I'm a mixture of that. I think it's by chance. It was in the air. Probably Warhol is a big, big originator of all the things like that, but it wasn't because I saw it; it was something that was there. I think my films are more sentimental.

GI: Warhol doesn't have very much sentiment.

CA: He does, but it's different. It's WASP sentiment.

GI: Anyone coming to Brussels for the first time would see René Magritte and Paul Delvaux reflected; do you think this might be true for your work?

CA: In the organization of space, perhaps. I can't say that I'm crazy about every Magritte painting; when I first saw them I had done a lot of things already. The atmosphere is similar to my work—the station, and so on. Some people say the way I shoot the space is more like paintings done at the beginning of the century in the United States. But yes, the colors—the dark blue; sunlight, here, when it's clear, the blue is very dark. I didn't manage to get that in *Toute Une Nuit* because we should have had a different film stock. We had Fuji 16mm, pushed. But I liked it anyway.

GI: When did you meet Babette Mangolte [cinematographer on *News from Home*, *Jeanne Dielman* . . . , and *Hotel Monterey*]?

CA: When I first arrived in New York. I got her number through Marcel Hanoun. Babette is very important in my life. She brought me to all the films, all the dance things, all the music things in New York. She opened my mind, really. I was just a child when I arrived there.

GI: Your first feature, *Hotel Monterey*, reminds me of Susan Sontag's essay on the esthetics of silence, where she writes about the difference between the look and the stare.

CA: *Fixé*. Yes. My films are more *fixé* than look. I'll explain with *Hotel Monterey*, because it's easier: when I first did that film, I didn't know exactly how it would look. But I directed the shots like this: I put the camera down, found the frame, and when I felt the shot was finished, stopped it. So the shots are exactly as long as I had the feeling of them inside myself. That's one point. When you look at a picture, if you look just one second, you get the information, "that's a corridor." But after a while you forget it's a corridor; you just see that it's yellow, red; that it's lines; and then again it comes back as a corridor. If you don't stay long enough, if you don't stare, you will never forget that this is information about a corridor. I want people to lose themselves in the frame, and at the same time to be truly confronting the space.

GI: The cinematographic frame is normally organized so that the first visual registration is a piece of information that tells everything about the space. In *Hotel Monterey* you organized each frame so that the first impact, visually, didn't tell everything.

CA: I didn't realize that, though. Nothing was planned



Above and next page: stills from *Jeanne Dielman*, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles. Cinematography: Babette Mangolte.

when I made that film. I knew I'd start at the beginning of the day on the main floor of the hotel, and would finish on the top floor. But the rest of it, I decided according to my feelings each day. Everybody says I'm structuralist and things like that, but structuralism is very much planned.

GI: I don't ever think of Michael Snow or the other structuralists when I look at your films.

CA: No, because you can describe Michael Snow's films on a piece of paper. Okay, you have to experience the time and everything, but in fact it's one idea; he pushes one idea until the end. He's a conceptual artist. I don't have an idea. I have a feeling that I try to express.

GI: What I love in your films is the appearance of images you don't expect, and that you give the viewer time to figure out what there is within the shot. In most films the frame a cinematographer makes tells you as much as it can tell you immediately, bang.

CA: That's because of publicity work, to be as efficient as you can. That's not my problem, to be efficient.

GI: In *Hotel Monterey*, when the camera goes up to the window and then back from the window, the movement from beginning to end disorients the eye while following a completely straight line.

CA: Everything there was my rhythm; I was pushing the camera myself, using my own rhythm.

GI: In *News from Home*, the emotional movement comes from the juxtaposition of city images with the spoken text of your mother's letters. It's strange that this is from you—it's a typically American story.

CA: The letters my mother wrote me? They're my mother's letters—but you know why it is typical for the United States? Because it's a Jewish mother, and in

New York the typical mother is the Jewish mother. My mother could be in Brooklyn and write the same letters. The way she writes, the way she puts one sentence after another, I'm sure it's the exact translation of Yiddish. It's not really French—it's French but the rhythms are Yiddish. I tried to keep that rhythm in my speech.

GI: The rhythm of your speech changes during the course of the film.

CA: Yes, but for me it was very difficult to control in English. I don't know what I did.

GI: At first it was very rapid, and then—

CA: I got tired. It was done in one day in the studio. I have never seen the English version finished. It's not the real version. In fact I didn't know they had an English version in Brussels. Usually I speak very fast, so probably because it is in English it's even faster.

GI: The kind of shot in *News from Home* where the people coming in didn't know the camera would be there is usually very voyeuristic; but the way the camera picks them up in your film negates this problem of the camera. And again, in *Je, Tu, Il, Elle*, ostensibly erotic, voyeuristic material is flattened out and drained of any pornographic interest by the detachment of the medium-long shot, by framing that crops the sexually active areas of the actors' bodies, and, in its final sequences, by exhausting the voyeurist *regard*, depleting one variety of visual pleasure, replacing it with the pleasure of abstraction.

CA: It's not voyeuristic because the camera doesn't move. If the camera had moved, and picked up something, singled out something, it would have been different. But the way the camera stayed, fixed—it's very dignified.

GI: People on the subway car in *News from Home*

either don't register the presence of the camera or ignore it; then after a long time they begin reacting to it. It's at exactly that moment that the subway lurches, everything jumps toward the lens for a second, and they all go back to their original indifference. This momentary jolt of the train makes everyone on it into characters in fiction.

CA: Exactly, like fiction. Never like a documentary. In *Hotel Monterey*, when the door opened in the elevator, the people didn't know we'd be there, and they didn't react at all.

GI: Paul Morrissey said in an interview that character is always revealed through dialogue. Since there is hardly any dialogue in your films, what do you think?

CA: I don't agree. It's also revealed by gesture, even from the back and from every side. When characters aren't on the screen they can also be revealed.

GI: Perhaps he was thinking of a character who is

emptied out in the film, through dialogue—exhausted as a character, through speech.

CA: There's no rule about it. It depends on what kind of movie you do. I'm not a big intellectual. I will not give you a lot of theoretical statements.

GI: For you, though, the space created by the silence of the character seems to be more important than the revelation of personality.

CA: That is true for me. Of course there are some very talkative films, and in these, character is revealed that way.

GI: Warhol said that the longer you look at something the less you understand it.

CA: That's true. But I think the Japanese people have known this for a long time before.

GI: Certain of the shots in your films remind me of what Roland Barthes said at the beginning of *S/Z* [1970], about Buddhist philosophers who see the whole uni-



verse in a bean. Like the one at the end of *Jeanne Dielman* . . . : the audience is made to look at something for so long that it's no longer the thing we are looking at. It separates into colors, and forms—in this case, into an hallucination.

CA: There's something else: the first night you were in Brussels you told me that Werner Schroeter had quoted Thomas Mann as saying that the single thing that is important to respect is the secret of human beings—not the mystery, the secret. People were a little bit angry at me because of the murder at the end of *Jeanne Dielman* She does it and then she sits for seven minutes. And then you don't understand her. You will never. I hope you never will—that's the strength of the film. You will never know what is happening in her mind and in her heart. I don't know either. It's the secret of Delphine Seyrig, not the character she's playing. It's not Jeanne Dielman's secret, it's Delphine's secret.

GI: I'm especially interested in your relationship to the feminist movement. When your films were first seen in America they were very quickly assimilated by the movement. How did you react to that? In Los Angeles in 1977, you said you were interested in working collectively with other women.

CA: I'm not interested in working collectively in the sense that word is usually used. In collaboration, yes. At the time of *Jeanne Dielman* . . . there were many things against women in movies. So I wanted to show that you could make a movie with only women. It was a point to make at the time. It was funny to do it, also. Well, it wasn't so funny when we were shooting, because it didn't work that well—not because they were women, but because I didn't really choose them. It was enough just to be a woman to work on my film. At the time, if a friend of mine said, "Oh, I know a woman who can do that," I said, "Okay, she's engaged." I sometimes hadn't even met them before. They didn't have enough experience, and they wanted to show off, pretending they did. They were acting like men. Not all of them, but some of them. The more insecure were awful, because they were insecure. At the time, I was too young to understand what was going on: some of them were older than me, and I didn't realize that they could be insecure. I didn't react well; I should have understood, and tried to clear up the situation. But I couldn't at the time, I was too obsessed with my shooting. I just kept going. So the shooting was awful. But I love the film.



With *Les Rendez-vous d'Anna* there was a problem because Gaumont gave some money to distribute the film. All the women who went to see *Jeanne Dielman* . . . didn't want to see *Les Rendez-vous d'Anna* because they said I was already corrupted. Can you imagine that? I don't think *Les Rendez-vous d'Anna* is at all a corrupted film. It's not an issue anymore; everything has changed. For feminism bad things have happened: *sur le retour de bateau*, they hit you back. So now the feminists won't think I'm corrupted just because Gaumont gave me some money. For example, *Kramer vs. Kramer* [1979]. For me, that's a good example of how they hit you back. It was a success because it was about a man who had a child, and the woman was the villain.

GI: We call it backlash in America. They were even running *Kramerova vs. Kramer* in Czechoslovakia when I was there.

CA: It's an obscene, obnoxious movie. I cried like everybody else but I was ashamed of myself.

GI: You had a long project that didn't work out, a film based on *The Manor* [1967] by Isaac Bashevis Singer.

CA: I couldn't find the money. I lost two years of my life. I thought, I'm finished; I will never do any more films. What happened was that I finally realized it was not a good idea for me—it's very difficult to take things from a book, unless you go very far away from the text. I had had the idea ten years ago, to make a film about the



Above and next page: Chantal Akerman, *Les Rendez-vous d'Anna*, 1978, stills from

Diaspora. Okay, a little like *News from Home*, but not exactly. To start out in Russia, then Poland, to start anywhere—in the street, the woods, city, anywhere. Then Germany, and so on to Brussels. I wanted to write from my memories—not fantasies—to write something coming from both inside myself and from very far away. I wanted to have lots of people speaking and telling things, and to do the sound like *News from Home*, coming from off-camera. *Les Rendez-vous d'Anna* was a commercial failure. So I said, "If I don't make a commercial film now, they will stop me." I wrote to Singer. I love his books. I thought this could be the commercial phase of what I wanted to do. I probably didn't find the money when I went to L.A. because somewhere I just didn't believe in this kind of project.

GI: You liked the idea of it.

CA: Yes. Also, I don't think I'm someone who should make a film in costume, a period film. It's not my type of film.

GI: I don't even understand why it's an attractive idea for a filmmaker like Andrzej Wajda, for example with *Danton* [1983]. You have to put so much work into the mise-en-scène. In *Danton* the acting is gone, and the camera work is gone, too. He was so fixed on showing how much work went into it that finally he doesn't show you anything. Except Gérard Depardieu losing his voice.

CA: I didn't see *Danton*. I don't like Wajda, anyway. I hate his movies. Not all of them, but I think he's a dishonest man: he exploits the situation of Poland. You can write that down.

GI: I'm interested in what attracted you to the work of Isaac Singer. Because you're Jewish?

CA: Yes, I feel it. It's so luxurious, so full of sensuality, and truth, and things about death. He's such a wonderful person. I met him. I really felt close to him, he was so funny and nice with me. It was—you know where?—Miami Beach. That man—small, nervous, energetically funny, full of humor and love. He's so young, like a kid sometimes. When I met him he said, "You will never get married. You are too well to find a man. To meet a man is impossible for you. Don't do it!" He's living in a kind of condominium. He wanted me to eat and eat and eat. "Take a sundae, Chantal! Do you want a sundae? It's

finally people like us can't do it. Another point is that Kafka doesn't make pathos.

GI: How many couples are there in *Toute Une Nuit*?

CA: I don't know, I didn't count them.

GI: It's been well received in Europe.

CA: Yes. I don't think it's my best film, but it has opened a new route. I was stopped after *Les Rendez-vous d'Anna*. I thought I'd just write a story. But I didn't feel like it after awhile. I found some notes from the year before: a first sentence here, a first sentence on the next page; and I looked at them facing each other and realized I wanted to make a film with fragments. That's how it came about; I wrote more and more fragments.

GI: It's another way to escape narrative filmmaking.

CA: I'm not obsessed by that, I don't care. I think it's the same, narrative, non-narrative. I've done both, I know it's exactly the same. When you do both, you know you're dealing with the same kinds of problems anyway. It's from the end of the '60s.

GI: Some people have talked about your films, especially *Jeanne Dielman* . . . , in terms of Brussels, in terms of Belgium, and the Baudelairian view of Belgium. Do you feel Brussels is a dead city?

CA: I feel Paris is much more of a dead city. Paris has too much culture; that culture is over your shoulders like a big, heavy weight. Here it's freer, because although there is a Belgian culture, it's not recognized as a big culture. So, in fact, it's like for Kafka, in

CA: It's going to be a big musical, all music, but not all the time singing. It's going to have five hundred actors, in a set we'll construct. It's going to be about love, and commerce, about people who are working in a shopping center. Hairdressers, vendors, shopgirls, snack bar girls, these people.

GI: Did you always want to make films?

CA: Since I saw *Pierrot le fou*. That was the first shock in my life. Because I didn't know anything about movies. I didn't go. I saw *Pierrot le fou* by chance. I got crazy about movies immediately and I decided to make movies the same night. I was 15. I didn't have the right to go into this movie theater, because it's very strict here, you have to be 16 for a lot of movies. I was with a friend and we got in. I didn't know anything about the film, I just liked the title. I later went to a lot of movies trying to find the same *Pierrot le fou*. I missed a lot of good movies looking for that film in those other films. Each film I saw, I said, "It's no good, it isn't *Pierrot le fou*." And finally, you know, I don't know what's in *Pierrot le fou* because I never saw it again. I was afraid it wouldn't be the same. Now maybe after 17 years I can see it again. ■

Gary Indiana is a freelance writer who lives in New York.

1. Robert Bresson, *Notes on Cinematography*, trans. by Jonathan Griffin, New York: Urizen Books, 1977.



color film in 35 mm, 122 minutes. Cinematography: Jean Penzer.

good, sundaes!" I hope I will be like that at his age. His wife showed me all the pictures of when he got the Nobel Prize, saying, "Can you imagine, my husband near the Prince," or the King—she showed me all the pictures, very slowly one by one, like my mother does when people come to see her. My mother keeps all the articles.

GI: I imagine you're drawn to Kafka too.

CA: I love Kafka's diary more than anything else. I feel very close to him for many reasons. Not exactly what he writes, more his letters; also the book [Gilles] Deleuze and [Felix] Guattari wrote about him, and the fact that he's not using his own language, but another language that isn't his mother tongue. I feel the same way when I speak French, it's not exactly my language. Also, he always wanted to get a fiancée, and he never could;

Czechoslovakia. It's a good place to work.

GI: At the end of *Les Rendez-vous d'Anna*, though, when Anna gets to Paris it feels like a liberation.

CA: It is, for me too.

GI: Why do the French like Jerry Lewis so much?

CA: I don't know, I haven't seen any films of Jerry Lewis.

GI: What films do you like now?

CA: *Gertrud* [1964] of Carl Dreyer. Yasujiro Ozu. And I like some things of Martin Scorsese; I like *Raging Bull* [1982] very much. And I love Godard's *Passion* [1982]. Jean Renoir: *Rules of the Game* [1939]; *La Chienne* [1931].

GI: About *The Golden Eighties*, one of the films you're working on now—this has been a long project. It's even famous without having been made yet. Will it really be a musical?