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Up Against the Kitchen Wall

CHANTAL AKERMAN'S META-CINEMA

By B. Ruby Rich

Chantal Akerman is a cause célèbre, an enfant terrible, a filmmaker's filmmaker. Her films routinely play commercial runs in Paris, get distributed in England, get broadcast on television in West Germany. The 32-year-old Belgian has made five feature films and an equal number of shorts that have played at film festivals and been toasted in retrospectives internationally. And in the United States? Not a single Akerman film in distribution. And in New York City? Until this week, when *Jeanne Dielman* opens its two-week run, none of her films has shown in any form but a one-night stand. Why did Julie Christie tell me, in an interview this autumn, that whenever she plays the what-films-would-you-take-on-a-desert-island game with friends, *Jeanne Dielman* is on her list?

And why did Peter Handke confess, when his *Left-Handed* (Cont. p. 51)



Chantal Akerman: Designing Desire

By B. Ruby Rich

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Woman premiered at Cannes, that his major influence had been Akerman? Chantal Akerman is one of the most important European directors of our (post-'60s) generation. Not only are her films handily brilliant, but they're profoundly feminist as well, in form as well as subject matter. It's about time New Yorkers got to find out, first hand, just what all the fuss is about.

Akerman's work can be suggested through its themes. The exercise and repression of sexuality. Systems of desire. The nature of voyeurism. Explosions of repression. Hunger and appetite. Woman's isolation. Woman's exclusion from language. Housework. The maintenance of order. Mother-daughter bonds. Mother-son ties. The relation of woman to woman, and of woman to man. Travel.

Outlining themes, however, even in such an epigrammatic fashion, is misleading. Akerman's films aren't really "about" any subject so much as they're about cinema itself. In her greatest work, the meditation on cinema is matched to a thematic investigation worthy of its endeavors; in even her slightest films, the purely cinematic flourishes command attention. The camera, in her early films, never moved. Now, when it does, it is always with a compositional rather than a narrative purpose. The frame is always perfectly composed, often in a classical symmetry. The zoom—hallmark of an exploitative film practice that closes in on pathos and stripmines private space—is resolutely absent.

Akerman's version of cinema returns to a sort of "filming degree zero" in which shots are held so long that meaning dissolves into play, interest into detachment, detachment back again into involvement. Akerman scorns the realistic speeded-up tempo of movieland, opting instead for the artificiality of real-time pacing. Making meat loaf, making love, making conversation, all occupy their necessary screen time. The style is minimalist, stripped of all distractions, concentrating on the most basic and mysterious component of cinema as a medium: the passage of time. Akerman designs films that interrogate the march of time in the form of narrative, playing with audience desire, thwarting even the most humble expectations, and providing an entirely unprecedented sort of pleasure.

When *Jeanne Dielman* became Akerman's breakthrough film in 1975, it seemed to speak directly to all of us engaged in feminist theory and film criticism. It was a time dominated by Adrienne Rich's influential *Of Woman Born* and a concentration on the nature and tensions of domestic life. In many films, this took the form of documentary scenes, on-camera interviews, history through film clips, or struggle through filmed demos. Akerman started from a different point altogether: the point of gesture. She studied her memories of her own mother and aunt, fashioning a 200-minute film that described three days in the life of a woman, a mother, a once-a-day prostitute. In black-and-white stills, the film looks severe. In its true color, however, the film is downright lush. Delphine Seyrig, as Jeanne Dielman, ensures the pleasure of the three-and-a-half-hour gaze.

Never before was the materiality of woman's time in the home rendered so viscerally. Never before had the tempo of endless time, repetitively restoring itself, been demarcated so precisely. Prufrock may have had the luxury of measuring out his life in coffee spoons; Jeanne Dielman has the task of measuring hers by washing them. To the extent that we internalize these rituals, learn to count to her rhythm of gestures, come to feel instinctively the precise calibrations of her daily routines

... to that extent, we as viewers inherit a sense of drama that lies closer to the bone than any witnessed before in cinema. It is this transformation of the literal into the symbolic and, ultimately, the political, that defines Akerman (no matter what she says, year to year) as a feminist filmmaker. She does what feminist cultural theory has called for: she invents a new language capable of transmitting truths previously unspeakable.

In her modernism of the emotions, Akerman calls to mind a sinister fairy tale. In that story, a couple are magically granted three wishes but fail to secure what they want owing to the form of extreme, unpredictable literalization that the wish-granting takes. Akerman deals with the wishes/expectations of the Holly-

wood-trained spectator in much the same manner. You want a story about murder and prostitution? Okay, you got *Jeanne Dielman*. Precisely because the expectation is sensationalist, there is no sensationalism in the film. Because the desire is voyeuristic, there is no voyeurism. Because the wish was for sex, the sex acts aren't shown (until, briefly, at the end). In place of the connotative trappings of a *Belle de Jour*, Akerman literalizes the situation to give us a view of a woman making coffee, turning lights on and off, shopping, cleaning herself and her house, and gradually, barely perceptibly, imploding under the pressures of a repressed sexuality and a suppressed existence.



BABETTE MANGOLTE

Akerman invents a new language to transmit unspeakable truths.

Akerman has turned audience expectation inside-out in this fashion throughout her films. *Je, Tu, Il, Elle*, arguably her most radical film, offers the filmmaker herself in a three-part sexual journey. Akerman is astute at psyching out her audience: she detects our assumptions as coolly as F. Lee Bailey finds our lies.

If *Jeanne Dielman* plays on a less-than-touching faith in the genre safety of melodrama, it falls to *Je, Tu, Il, Elle* to address the cynically voyeuristic attraction of pornography. A summary would fit the fairy tale well, seemingly satisfying the most explicit desire. Akerman plays around at home, naked, all through the first section, which ends in her writing a letter to an unidentified beloved; she hitchhikes somewhere in the second part, jerking off a friendly truckdriver along the road; and, in the third section, she arrives at her goal—her woman lover's apartment—where the two make love for a very long time on-screen. So far so good? Like the fairy tale, though, the film deliberately frustrates complacent desire while satisfying quite other hungers. Akerman may be naked, but the ascetic framing and her utterly nonerotized be-

havior thwart any sexual pleasure. She may give her trucker a hand job, but the action is off-screen: all we see are talking heads (so to speak) while the sex act takes place literally below the belt, in this case, below the frame line. Finally, the graphic scene of lovemaking occurs with such violence and hungry abandon and lasts for so very long that its excess tends to embarrass or exhaust the voyeuristic gaze.

One of the clearest examples of Akerman's cat-and-mouse game is *Les Rendezvous d'Anna*, a big-budget film produced by the prestigious Gaumont in 1978. Akerman must have seemed commercially compliant by virtue of her casting. Aurore Clement played the central role, with a full-house combination of Lea Massari, Jean-Pierre Cassel, Helmut

Griem, and Magali Noel. It is easy to imagine the eager French filmgoer attracted to the roster of matinee idols, expectant in the glow of movie romance. Instead, the arch-professional actors deliver their lines in the style of amateurs, every sex scene ends in coitus interruptus, the hottest moment occurs when Anna goes to bed with her mother to confess

VOICE ARTS

Akerman makes a spectacle unique in film history out of Seyrig's daily chores—cleaning, folding, straightening, cooking, shopping, and fucking.

love for another woman, and the climax of the film is the closing shot of Anna's face as she listens to this never-glimpsed woman's voice on her answering machine. (Yes, light years before *O Superman!*)

Akerman's newest film, *Toute une Nuit* (just shown at the Museum of Modern Art), exemplifies her fairy tale wish-granting on a grand scale. As in the other films, extremes of hunger and appetite, need and excess, too-much and not-

enough retrain our senses. Avant-garde filmmaker Anne Severson once made a film of animals running, culled from archive footage, in order to satisfy her own childhood hunger to see more jungle every time the Hollywood camera returned to Ava Gardner or some such colonial-abroad star, wiping sweat from her brow. I can imagine Akerman indulging the same hunger for the archetypal movie embrace, that mad dash into (or out of) each other's arms in the cathartic moment of numberless Hollywood or French movies of the '30s. Enter the fairy tale. Akerman stacks her film with these embraces—and virtually nothing else—so that they are totally stripped of psychological definition and narrative meaning. The embraces become, like many of the actions in her films, very nearly existential. They have no meaning beyond their visual literalization. And yet, having given up the expectation of emotional drama, the viewer is rewarded with a semblance of a postmodernist musical in which the tableaux, rhythm of shots, exchanges of looks, even falling of glasses, become a choreographed and scored performance played to the hilt. The film turns itself inside out, embodying a critique of romance and the musical genre all at once.

Akerman adds an extra layer to her meta-cinema by seeding her films with jokes and references to earlier work. In *Toute une Nuit*, Akerman's own mother smokes a cigarette as her daughter cries "mama" on the soundtrack, in a simultaneous invocation of *News from Home* (her earlier film about New York City letters written home to mom) and *Les Rendezvous d'Anna's* pillow-talk sequence. In *Les Rendezvous d'Anna*, Anna cannot seem to eat, complaining that she is not hungry or eating too much or too little in a confusion of appetite that parallels her blocked sexuality; the result is a grand form of anorexia nervosa that reversed the early scenes in *Je, Tu, Il, Elle* of an almost hypoglycemic consumption of sugar and Nutella culminating in a sexual frenzy. The films build on each other in the finest auteurist tradition. But *Jeanne Dielman* has the cool self-sufficiency of a certified masterpiece, making it the perfect introduction.

Reached in Brussels this week, Chantal Akerman was buoyant over her New York opening and over the auspicious start of 1983. Why? After the commercial failure of Gaumont's *Rendezvous d'Anna*, Akerman couldn't raise the funds to film I. B. Singer's *The Manor & the Estate*. Her brash move to Los Angeles to raise \$25 million for the ambitious project was a catastrophe. Back in Belgium, she didn't make another film until last year's *Toute une Nuit*, done on less than \$60,000 with a cast of virtually every friend she had in Brussels. The four-year silence had ended.

Today, Chantal Akerman is on the verge of a renaissance. She is making three films in 1983: a television production starring the director, a musical about "love, sex, and commerce," and a third film about which she would divulge nothing. It seems as though Akerman don't need Gaumont no more ("Tell them," she shouted cheerfully by transatlantic telephone, "Gaumont has lots of money but no balls!"). But she still needs a U.S. distributor.

Imagine repertory houses without Fassbinder. Imagine that we never saw Godard. Imagine that the Taviani brothers just couldn't get a theater. Imagine that New Yorker Films hadn't stashed *Les Rendezvous d'Anna* in a closet for four years.

Imagine a distributor for Chantal Akerman. And write them a letter. ■