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Akerman Unbound

Life before and after Jeanne Dielman

by Karen Rosenberg

Chantal Akerman speaks for a generation born in the early '50s — a little too late for the New Left but just in time for the avant-garde (and feminist) movements of the '70s. By then, there was more money for avant-gardists to play around with, and film, like any art, requires plenty of playtime. Many of us grew up, got serious, and packed old manuscripts or canvases in a closet; Akerman got serious about her filmmaking, developing a distinctive style — still feminist, still avant-garde — that is gradually gaining her recognition. Boston isn't far behind: the Boston Film/Video Foundation will be screening four Akerman films in a two-day mini-festival (February 28 and March 1), and the Harvard Film Archive will present her *Je Tu Il Elle* on April 1.

The upcoming screenings focus on the little-known early Akerman — films made before *Jeanne Dielman*, 23 *Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975), which won her much praise in film circles. These are films without a plot, as opposed to *Dielman* or *L'homme à la valise* (*The Man with the Suitcase*), in which at least a minimal story is discernible. In *L'homme à la valise* (1983), an unexpected male apartmentmate becomes an obsession for a writer (played by Akerman). It's cute when she plots his daily movements on a chart to avoid his presence, but humor fades as the corridor becomes a war zone, her bedroom a prison. In *Jeanne Dielman*, a middle-aged housewife turns tricks to support herself and her son, but she's no happy hooker, only a virtual machine programmed to perform a rigid routine. Small deviations, like scissors out of place, signal her mental disorder, but what pushes her over the edge is experiencing pleasure — an orgasm — with a client; that wasn't part of her plan, and she reacts by sticking the scissors in his neck.

What excited so many feminists about *Jeanne Dielman* was the filmmaker's appreciation of chores traditionally assigned to women: in real time (rather than compressed "film time") Akerman showed you the care and patience that go into a good meatloaf or a spotless tub. But from nearly the start of her film career, this director has been recording the passage of time and the structure of a space. She has simply carried these early, abstract concerns into her narrative filmmaking.

In 1971, at 21, Akerman flew to the States from Belgium, where her parents — Polish Jews and survivors of concentration camps — had settled after the war. She'd finished high school in Brussels but had never gotten her baccalaureate, and she'd quit film school there after four months. Yet since the age of 15, when she'd seen Godard's *Pierrot le fou*, she'd been determined to be a filmmaker. A stranger in New York, she had no one to tell her that an untrained girl couldn't possibly become one.

Andy Warhol was already famous for presenting the minutiae of daily life in long, nonnarrative films. But other prominent names were known mostly to the cognoscenti: Stan Brakhage, Jonas Mekas. Michael Snow, whose works explored time, space, or light, rather than plots and characters. Akerman supported herself by working in a restaurant, a thrift shop, and a photo lab. "Then I worked at the 55th Street Playhouse, the porno pictures, as a cashier," she confessed to *Artforum* magazine. "In three weeks I stole \$4000, and made *Hotel Monterey* and *La chambre* with that."

La chambre and *Hotel Monterey* (both of which will

play at BF/VF on March 1) were shot in Manhattan's East Village in 1972. Abstract studies of light on a space, they demonstrate — perhaps a little too obviously — the influence of the cinema of Michael Snow *et al.* Both are named for the sites they scrutinize: a room (with a window and curtain) and the lobby and elevator of a Manhattan welfare hotel. The major "action" consists of changes in texture as the sun hits surfaces in different ways. Already you can see Akerman's characteristic technique: a largely stationary camera that lingers on each composition, so that the viewer can examine the various parts of a carefully thought-out tableau. "When you look at a picture," she explained to *Artforum*, "if you just look 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." Her shots are marked, too, by their low vantage point — which seems less surprising when you learn that the filmmaker is only five-foot-one.

Although these are abstract films, they express a personality through their rhythm and point-of-view. "The shots are exactly as long as I had the feeling of them inside myself," Akerman has said. "I don't have an idea. I have a feeling that I try to express." In later films

she uses sounds to intensify the impact: in *News from Home* (1976), which will play at BF/VF on February 28, views of New York are juxtaposed with the chatty, nudging letters of Akerman's mother, which are read aloud by the filmmaker herself. The contrast between a loving though stifling home life and a strange city — now grim, now attractive — re-creates what may have been the tension between Akerman's homesickness and her desire for freedom. And yet there's more to this film than self-exploration. "In the final view, it's not just New York [that's being shown], but a relationship to any large city," she told *Cinématographe*. Indeed, Akerman's estrangement in an urban environment is so strong that it comes as no surprise when Kafka's name pops up like a leitmotif in her conversations with journalists. New York is her Prague, the place where no one really feels at ease.

But wandering in a foreign city is an experience she can also view with nostalgia, as in 1984's "J'ai faim, j'ai froid (I'm Hungry, I'm Cold)," one of a series of short films by well-known directors — including Godard and Rohmer — produced by Frédéric Mitterand, the nephew of the French president, on the theme "Paris Seen by . . . Twenty Years After." In this little gem, which will play at BF/VF on February 28, two teenage girls run away from Brussels and go to Paris, searching for adventure in the Montparnasse night. It looks more traditional than most Akerman films (there are more cuts than usual, and a faster pace), but a shot of food in a window is held for long enough to remind us what it's like to be famished with hardly a sou. The girls are soon forced to sing for their supper, but that too can be a pleasure when you're young and in Paris for the first time. The playful humor

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Chantal Akerman: 24 times a second

Akerman

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of *L'homme à la valise* has become a secure part of Akerman's cinematic vocabulary.

What the girls find in Paris can't be revealed without spoiling the wry surprise ending — this tight little film is almost a parody of an O. Henry or Maupassant story. In fact, many of Akerman's recent films can be considered reactions to a genre: "Les années 80 (The Eighties)," a feature made in 1983 that has yet to play here, spoofs both French TV ads and Hollywood musicals, suggesting that we borrow too many lines in our daily lives from bad art. *Jeanne Dielman* has been read as a fractured melodrama in which murder, instead of being the focus, has become incidental. By making housework the center of her film, Akerman suggests just how much is omitted from melodramas ostensibly about women's lives. Similarly, *Je Tu Il Elle* (1974), her first full-length feature, plays with the conventions of pornography. In the opening scene, notes Richard Peña, curator of the Harvard Film Archive, "We expect an erotic sequence, as the character played by Akerman takes off her clothes. But we don't get it." The third part, which contains some 20 minutes of lesbian lovemaking, is

so long that it loses any association with a peep show, and the viewer is asked to see that Akerman and her lover enjoy more erotic pleasure than the truck driver who is masturbated by Akerman in the second section of the film.

Je Tu Il Elle was a turning point. The cold light from a white sky reflected on a wall recalls the early experimental films, only now characterization is added, albeit sketchily. Akerman plays a woman whose disintegration is revealed by her intense, obsessive interaction with her apartment: first she removes all the furniture except for a mattress, and then she writes an interminable letter to a man who has rejected her. The theme of alienation, implicit in *New from Home*, is more prominent in this figure of a woman alone, estranged from her lovers, especially if they are men.

Such are the basic ingredients of Akerman, combined in each film in different ways. Like the South African writer J.M. Coetzee, she is one of a small number of living artists who can employ avant-garde techniques with consummate control to create the sensations of lonely people in crisis. Kafka, you see, produced heirs. □