

Document Citation

Title	Film : Kitchen stories
Author(s)	Scott Foundas
Source	<i>L.A. Weekly</i>
Date	2004 Mar 05
Type	review
Language	English
Pagination	44
No. of Pages	1
Subjects	Akerman, Chantal (1950-2018), Brussels, Belgium
Film Subjects	Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles, Akerman, Chantal, 1975

KITCHEN STORIES

Listening to
Chantal Akerman

BY SCOTT FOUNDAS

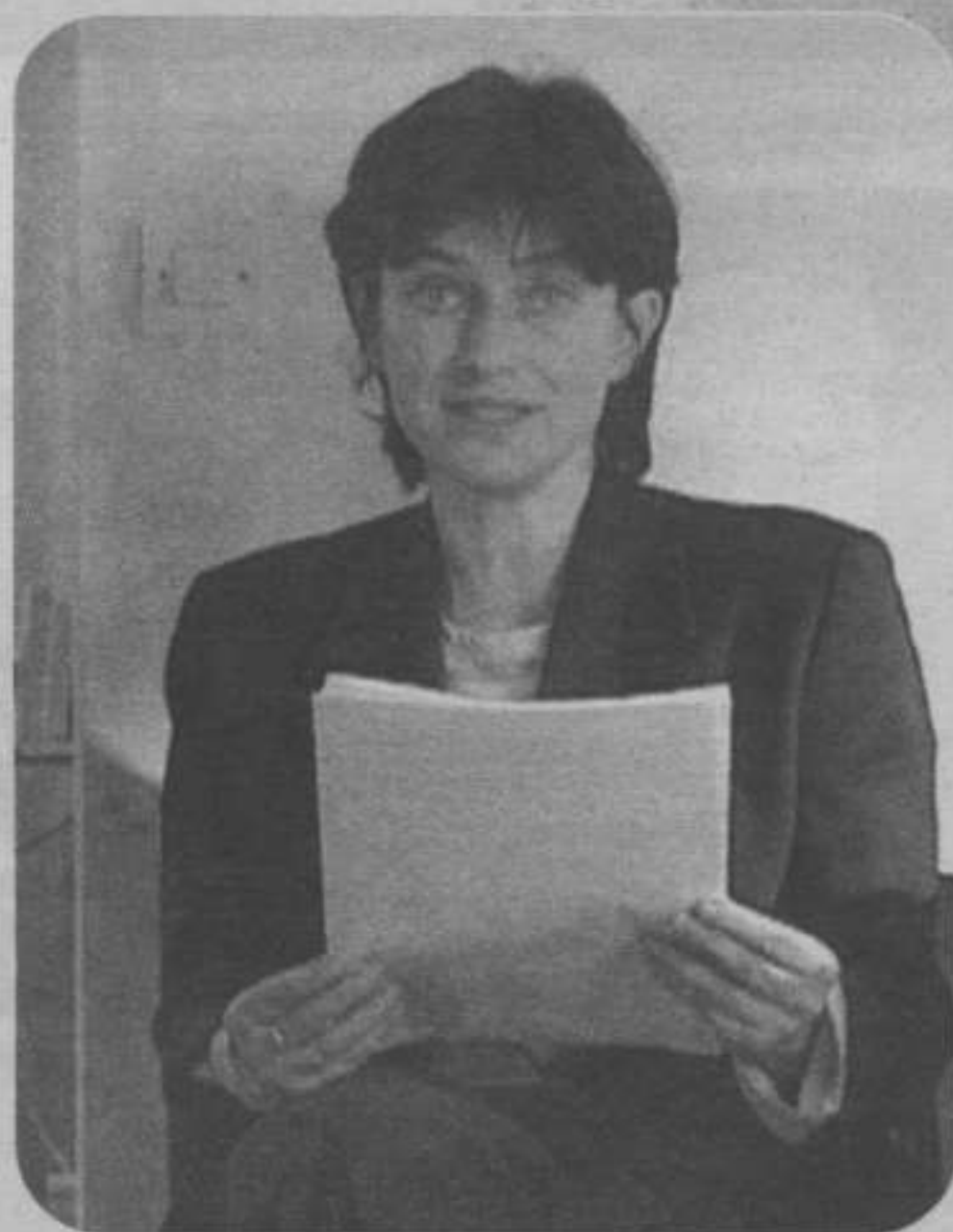
CHANTAL AKERMAN'S first masterpiece came early in her career. In the Brussels-born filmmaker's second feature-length production, *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975), a steely Delphine Seyrig plays a middle-aged widow who, over the course of nearly three and a half hours of screen time, does her shopping, tidies the kitchen, takes out the trash and, oh yes, periodically entertains "clients" in her bedroom while her teenage son is away at school. Then, slowly, other cracks begin to show in Jeanne's prim and proper façade — she lets some potatoes boil for too long; the lid is carelessly left off of a candy dish — all en route to a climax that is as shocking as it is entirely logical.

Like many Akerman films to follow, *Jeanne Dielman* — screening this week as part of a retrospective co-curated by REDCAT and the UCLA Film and Television Archive — is an account of domestic habitats and the people and objects that move through them. (In a famous review in *Film Comment*, fittingly titled "Kitchen Without Kitsch," Manny Farber and Patricia Patterson called it "a still-life film," though I guarantee you've never seen a fruit bowl quite like this one.) It is also about repetition and routine as a justification for existence, and how such things might drive someone mad without anyone realizing it, least of all the person herself. That it was all told from a woman's point of view, at a historical moment that was not particularly robust for women either as subject or makers of films, sealed the movie's status as a classic — albeit one that has been nearly impossible to see for the last two decades.

"There was a lot about *Jeanne Dielman* that I didn't understand when I wrote it," the very charming, very chain-smoking Akerman told me last month when I visited her Paris apartment. "I had a script that was quite precise, but I didn't even know before I started the first few shots that it was going to be a long movie. After two or three days, I said to the actress, 'You know, it's going to be a very long movie.' But it was not planned."

Already by the time of *Jeanne Dielman*, Akerman had attracted significant attention with a radical debut feature, *Je Tu Il Elle* (1974), and even before that, with an explosive (literally and figuratively) short, *Saute Ma Ville* (*Blow Up My Town*) (1968), which she made when she was only 18 years old. However, Akerman had never seriously entertained (or even flirted with) the idea of becoming a director until, famously, she happened into a cinema showing Godard's *Pierrot le Fou* and emerged — as I suspect many have from that film — as a changed person.

"You have to imagine that I was 15 and I was not interested by cinema, because the only films I had seen were, I don't know, war films or Walt Disney or whatever," says Akerman. "When I went to see the Godard film, I didn't know it was Godard. I'd never even heard that name. I just liked the title — *Pierrot le Fou*.



CHANTAL AKERMAN
BY CHANTAL AKERMAN
(BY CHANTAL AKERMAN)

And it was just so different, and I realized that movies could be art, and so free and so close. I felt it was for us, for our generation — suddenly, a movie with freedom and poetry and strength. Can you imagine, in '65, someone in Brussels who had only seen bad films and who went to the

cinema to flirt and eat ice cream and nothing else? It was a shock, really. I cannot explain it beyond that." Nor does she have to, for the 13-minute *Saute Ma Ville* — starring Akerman, in full-blown Anna Karina homage, as a young woman who seals the kitchen door shut and proceeds to polish both her shoes and, literally, herself — radiates such convulsive energy that it seems the product of someone who ran immediately from the cinema showing *Pierrot*, picked up a camera and began to shoot. Akerman also made herself the focal point of *Je Tu Il Elle*, and the result is an unnerving, darkly comic panorama of binge-eating, writer's block and anonymous sexual encounters that set the stage for even such recent female auto-portraits as Asia Argento's *Scarlet Diva*, Marina De Van's *In My Skin* and the video diaries of Gina Kim.

THUS BEGAN AN EXTRAORDINARY RUN OF PROJECTS in which Akerman fine-tuned an aesthetic which, like that of Godard or Bresson, sought to use film as its own expressive language divorced from the influence of narrative literature and drama-turgy. In other words, movies composed of the everyday bits of business most movies don't bother to show at all, recorded by Akerman's patient, searching camera. For the films of Chantal Akerman are those that lurk stealthily behind seemingly familiar surfaces, forcing us to look longer, harder, deeper — indeed, beyond the image — until the distance we ordinarily feel between ourselves and the screen has collapsed, and we no longer recognize what we are seeing. In *News From Home* (1976), incandescent fragments of memory and experience from Akerman's time spent in Manhattan accompany letters written to the filmmaker by her mother (and read aloud on the soundtrack by Akerman herself), culminating in a now-eerie shot of the World Trade Center creeping into view. *All Night Long* (*Toute Une Nuit*) (1982) is a desultory collage of dozens of lovers coming together and falling apart over one 24-hour period — it has no protagonist, no "character development" per se, and yet conveys more genuine feeling than most movies that take two hours building to one such moment. *Les Rendezvous d'Anna* (1978) stars the great, glassy-eyed Aurore Clément as a filmmaker who, not unlike Akerman, is a curious observer of the things that are and those that might have been; it is an investigation into the disconnect between men and women, parents and children, self and notions of self, and it is Akerman's second masterpiece.



JEANNE DIELMAN, 23 QUAI DU COMMERCE, 1080 BRUXELLES

As Akerman puts it, "Most of the time you go to the cinema and the best thing you can say is, 'I didn't feel the time passing.' In my movies, you feel the time passing, then you also feel yourself. It's your own body, your own sense of time interacting with mine. It's the same thing I do in framing things head-on — again, you are there, and it's not voyeuristic, but it's interacting. You feel that you are there. You feel that you do exist."

Yet, in the ever-frantic rush to categorize, many have failed to acknowledge that Akerman herself exists beyond the oft-applied label of "feminist filmmaker" — a syndrome that Akerman acknowledges as both troubling and strangely useful. "It's frustrating and it's boring and it's annoying," Akerman told me. "But at the same time, because of women's studies in the States, my films are screened. Maybe they are screened in a way where the discussion is only about feminism, which is too bad, because then you miss the point. I remember the time I went to Cornell University, every teacher had another agenda — one was obsessed with the body, one was obsessed with the feminism — and I said, 'Can't you come without any agenda? Just be free and look at the movie.' And the teachers were really sad, because they were thinking for years about these things and suddenly I'm telling them, 'Come without any agenda. Come free.'"

In recent years, Akerman may have flummoxed some viewers all the more by veering, in a series of brilliant, deeply humanistic nonfiction efforts, as far from home as the crumbling Soviet bloc (in *From the East*); Jasper, Texas (in *South*); and the U.S.-Mexico border (in *From the Other Side*). Collectively, these films are as much studies in space and place (or, as the case may be, placelessness) as Akerman's fiction features, while simultaneously examining the borders that exist not just between people and countries, but between varying forms and styles of cinema. (*From the Other Side*, for example, has been presented both as a conventional film and as a multipanel installation.) "Let's say that for a fiction film, I have a script and I have actors," notes Akerman. "But I don't think there is such a strong border. You are, in a way, freer when you are doing a documentary, because you don't follow a script. But it's not so far. In a way, you can say about *Jeanne Dielman* that, because Delphine is not alive anymore, it is also a documentary about Delphine at that time in her life. I say that in every good fiction there is documentary and in every good documentary there is fiction."

And in the films of Chantal Akerman, there are also Brussels and New York, English and French, tragedy and musical comedy, fantasy and autobiography, all swirling about in a uniquely confessional filmmaking galaxy that ought to keep the academics scratching their heads for some time to come. **A**

"Chantal Akerman: I You He She" screens at the UCLA James Bridges Theater and at REDCAT, March 6–19, with appearances at some screenings by the filmmaker. See Film & Video Events for more information.