

Looking, Really *Looking!*: The Films of Chantal Akerman

Looking, Really Looking! The Films of Chantal Akerman surveys the work of the influential, groundbreaking Belgian/French filmmaker and places it within a conceptual, thematic, and historical context at the intersection of film and contemporary art. Presenting us with a deeply autobiographical filmography that spans forty years—typically portrayed in long takes within the modest aesthetics of everyday life and often revolving around her personal family history, identity, memory, and displacement—Akerman (1950-2015) is often placed within feminist, queer, Jewish, and avant-garde circles, yet her expansive oeuvre freely moves across genres from the documentary/essay to the musical, psychodrama, structural film, and multi-media installation. Akerman, fiercely independent and always working outside established production systems, was “a paradoxical personality, at once rootless and deeply rooted,” and, in the end, “arguably the most important European film director of her generation.”—J. Hoberman.

Looking, Really Looking!, a film and performative program, is presented by the Northwest Film Center and Zena Zezza, a Portland-based contemporary art project, and is curated by Sandra Percival and Morgen Ruff. The program picks up following four screenings earlier this year and continues intermittently through May 2017.

Friday, September 23, 7 pm

Letter De Cineaste, Belgium, 1984

Dir. Chantal Akerman (18 mins., documentary, digital)

&

Chantal Akerman par Chantal Akerman, Belgium, 1997

Dir. Chantal Akerman (64 mins., documentary, digital)

&

Autour de “Jeanne Dielman”, France, 1975

Dir. Sami Frey (69 mins., documentary, digital)

Subtitles

This program presents three films across three decades on artist/filmmaker Chantal Akerman, who directs two of the films in which she interrogates herself as subject alongside the nature and *raison d’être* of cinema itself. In *Lettre de Cineaste* (1984), Akerman with Aurore Clément as a kind of stand-in or proxy asks “What is cinema for? Who is it for? If the Mosaic prohibition on making graven images includes film images, then where does that leave a Jewish filmmaker?” *Chantal Akerman par Chantal Akerman* (1996) turns a commission for *Cinéma, de notre temps* (a long-running French television program about filmmakers) into a study of herself in which she discovers a feminized sensibility and another way of seeing the world and self through a monologue accompanied by a montage of clips of her films including *Hotel Monterrey* and *Histoires d’Amerique*. The final film of the program is Sami Frey’s documentary

video *Autour de Jeanne Dielman* (1975), shot on the set of her most famous work, *Jeanne Dielman*, and edited by Akerman. In questioning Akerman on how she wants her to comb her hair, a frustrated Delphine Seyrig tells Akerman “when you explain something, you find you don’t want to explain it,” perfectly encapsulating the notoriously unclassifiable filmmaker.

Friday, September 30, 8 pm

Les Rendez-vous d’Anna, France/Belgium/West Germany, 1978

Dir. Chantal Akerman (127 mins., drama, DCP)

Subtitles

Before pursuing filmmaking, Chantal Akerman set out to be a writer. Like her earlier feature *Je tu il elle* (1975), *Les Rendez-vous d’Anna* was originally written as prose, not a screenplay. Longtime collaborator Aurore Clément plays Anna Silver, a filmmaker who Akerman described as “a sort of mutant... perhaps a heroine of the future.” Anna is seemingly rootless and traveling from city to city to promote her work; a nomadism as a form of existential crisis. The film spans several days and three countries composed in trains, train stations, cinemas, car interiors and hotel rooms. Visits to Anna’s parental home in Belgium are fleeting affairs—confessional intimacies between mother and daughter are taken wherever they can. Pick-ups are easy-come-easy-go affairs and commitment is provisional. ‘Anna, where are you?’, a voice enquires. Anna may not know or much care. “The reflexive, seemingly autobiographical nature of all these components needs no underlining, and this hall-of-mirrors effect can be superficially disorientating. But a true bearing is sustained by the luminous, painterly miracle of wonderful image-making, and the sure sense of a great mind at work, exploring the alienating topographies of contemporary Europe.”—Adam Roberts, *A Nos Amours*, London.

Saturday, October 1, 7 pm

Je tu il elle, France/Belgium, 1974

Dir. Chantal Akerman (86 mins., drama, DCP)

Subtitles

Like her spare, haunting portrait of a wandering filmmaker *Les Rendez-vous d’Anna* (1978), Akerman originally wrote *Je tu il elle* as a short story, and her imposition of a set of minimalist constraints creates space for an exploration of utter dissociation. Acting as herself, Akerman compulsively rearranges her few items of furniture, eats only from a bag of sugar, writes and rewrites a letter to a real or potential lover (rearranging the various drafts in a series of piles like a game of solitaire), and takes off her clothes and drapes them over her body. From the start, the film makes it clear that we cannot trust temporal continuity; the first line corresponds to the last action of the film. It is physical but formal. White bodies on white sheets. The film provides neither catharsis nor thesis. “[Chantal Akerman] movies give cinema heft. They have the rigour of a Poussin painting. She looks longer and harder than most directors, and almost seems to stop film’s flicker.”—Mark Cousins.

Tuesday, October 4, 7 pm

L'Enfant Aime ou Je Joue a Etre Femme Mariee, Belgium, 1971

Dir. Chantal Akerman (35 mins., documentary, 16mm)

&

Dis-moi, France, 1980

Dir. Chantal Akerman (45 mins., documentary, digital)

&

Le 15/8, France/Belgium, 1973

Dir. Chantal Akerman (42 mins., drama, digital)

Subtitles

These three early Chantal Akerman films (spanning the 1970s) bring together different structures by which Akerman finds her own voice—through listening to her mother, through a surrogate young woman, and through listening to the voices of three grandmothers she interviews. Domestic scenes that demand daily chores and food preparation identify the roles of these women; *Le 15/8* and *L'enfant aimé*, for example, share a sense of domestic space in which life is represented as a rhythmical process, with pulse, form, and function of all the parts made visible. In *Le 15/8*, Akerman presents a stream-of-consciousness in a voice-over, that of a young Danish woman in Paris. She is there looking for work, in an apartment that is not her own. Time passes and her thoughts are heard, but there is also judgment and taking issue with the woman's own body, presented as if the locus of criticism lies outside her own self, a trope that seems to emerge directly from the mirror sequence of *L'enfant aimé*. *Dis-moi* is a set of interviews conducted by Akerman as she travels from door to door, knocking and being asked in by a series of elderly, respectable-looking ladies. Over coffee and cakes, these women, all Jewish survivors of the Holocaust, share their dread tales, amid stories about food and love and family life.

Friday, October 7, 7 pm

Histoires d'Amérique (Food, Family, and Philosophy), France/Belgium, 1989

Dir. Chantal Akerman (92 mins., essay, DCP)

Subtitles

Shot in New York, Akerman's first English-language film *Histoires d'Amérique* conjures up an informal history of Jewish life over the past 100 years through a series of eyewitness accounts, re-created by a group of largely unknown actors. All are Jewish of the first and second generation and all have jokes, stories and anecdotal proof from real-life testimony that something that defines them has survived, despite loss, trauma and death. This may be the new world, but the horror of the old is never far from the surface. Akerman once said, "Instead of learning my family's story directly from my parents, I had to turn to literature." The film recalls *Waiting for Godot*, Isaac Bashevis Singer's shtetl tales, Woody Allen's *Broadway Danny Rose*, and the *badchen* of the old country (the jesters hired to add vim to Ashkenazi weddings before Nazis put an end to that world). As Akerman has said, "When history becomes

impossible to bear, there is only one thing to do: send yourself up and laugh.” Nominated for the Golden Berlin Bear award, Berlin International Film Festival, 1989.

Monday, October 10, 7 pm

News from Home, France/Belgium/West Germany, 1977

Dir. Chantal Akerman (85 mins., essay, DCP)

Subtitles

Akerman returned to New York in 1976, having blazed a trail in Europe with her extraordinary *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles*. She was travelling back to a city of decay (decidedly not decadence) with letters her mother had written to her when she was in New York in 1972. These letters provide the soundtrack for *News From Home*—accounts of daily life, life as lived in distant Belgium, invoked by means of observation and parcels of news. Who is addressing whom is no simple matter. The film shows New York, its streets, subways, tall buildings, diners and citizens going about their business. Sound might be in sync or not. Akerman has described her murmuring voiceover of her mother’s letters as psalmody (the singing of psalms or sacred canticles in public worship), which evokes the prayerful effect, the mingling of longing, the provoking of guilt and the offer of love. The closing scenes of departure and voyage play without the presence of the voice. Such an absence allows perhaps for a new note of optimism—to proceed, one must depart. “One of the best depictions of the alienation of exile that I know.”—Jonathan Rosenbaum.

Monday, October 17, 7 pm

J’ai Faim, J’ai Froid, France, 1984

Dir. Chantal Akerman (13 mins., comedy, 35mm)

&

Portrait de une Jeune Fille de la fin des Annees 60 a Bruxelles, France, 1994

Dir. Chantal Akerman (60 mins., documentary, digital)

Subtitles

Young female characters take the lead roles in Akerman’s early films in which they seek their own identities and sexuality. In *Portrait de une jeune fille* (1993), a girl has decided to ditch school forever; she tears up her report card. At the movies, a boy next to her touches her leg with his; they talk, they kiss. These simple events are full of poetry, of confusion, discovery, ambivalence, insecurity, beauty. “It moves beyond being one of the great coming-of-age films; it is simply one of the great films.”—Dave McDougall, Mubi. In *J’ai faim, J’ai froid* (1984), two young Belgian women in Paris finish each other’s sentences and they smoke each other’s cigarettes. The girls eat almost continuously in the film and no amount of food seems to satisfy them. Though Akerman uses this insatiability for comedic effect, there are also strong feminist motives for so unreservedly displaying women absorbed in eating. Ultimately, both films explore relationships between young girls, as one conventional girl-meets-boy tale

gives way to lesbian desire, and the other film portrays girls joined at the hip and ready for the challenges of the day—as women in the world—as long as they stick together.

Friday, October 28, 7 pm

D'est (From the East), Belgium/France/Portugal, 1993

Dir. Chantal Akerman (110 mins., documentary, 16mm)

Subtitles

D'Est is Chantal Akerman's first documentary film shot on trips taken as the Soviet system was about to collapse, and echoes her legenday *Jeanne Dielman* in its minimalist approach and long, uninterrupted sequence shots. Akerman has said she went 'while there was still time'—what kind of time, nor whose time, nor if there is any elsewhere, is not known. The film avoids dialogue of any kind—though people often enough exchange words, they are not audible, and never subtitled. It is a wordless winter travelogue through the countries of Eastern Europe, from East Germany, through Poland and the Baltic states, across Russia towards Moscow. The Soviet era has gone, a collapse leaving behind a seemingly stunned, endlessly waiting populace. Akerman alternates between existence in public spaces and in private spaces. She alternates day and night. And she alternates static shots with moving shots—but not just any old travelling shots. Bleak, for sure, but beautiful image-making and laying out of materials, the deft and caring work of a great artist. "In my films I follow an opposite trajectory to that of the makers of political films. They have a skeleton, an idea and then they put on flesh: I have in the first place the flesh, the skeleton appears later."—Chantal Akerman.

Monday, November 7, 8:30 pm

Letters Home, France, 1986

Dir. Chantal Akerman (104 mins., essay, digital)

Subtitles

On 11 February 1963, Sylvia Plath, poet and author of *The Bell Jar*, thirty years old, married, with two children, killed herself. In 1975, Sylvia Plath's mother, Aurelia Schober Plath, published *Letters Home: Correspondence 1950-1963*, an edited volume of her late daughter's letters. In 1979, Rose Leiman Goldemberg wrote *Letters Home*, an off-Broadway hit which addressed the factual and psychic dissonance between the Plath the public knew from her writings and work, and the dutiful one her mother wished to capture. Akerman's 1986 film *Letters Home* adapted theater director Françoise Merle's rendition of the play, staged in Paris in 1984. *Letters Home* is therefore an object passed from a poet to her mother, from her mother to a woman playwright, then to a woman theatre director, and finally to Akerman, a woman filmmaker. *Letters Home* elaborates Akerman's personal and perpetual concern with communication and exchange between mother and daughter seen also in her film *News from Home* (1977). The cast for *Letters Home*, like the Paris theatre production, are themselves a mother and niece: Delphine Seyrig (who features in *Jeanne Dielman*) and Coralie Seyrig.

**NWFILM
CENTER**

OFFICE 934 SW SALMON ST
MAIL 1219 SW PARK AVE
PORTLAND, OR 97205
TEL 503.221.1156
VISIT NWFILM.ORG