



Chantal Akerman in an interview broadcast on YouTube in 2011.

Akerman, Chantal (b. 1950)

by Joyce M. Youmans

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Belgian filmmaker Chantal Akerman made her first film, *Saute ma ville* (1968), a short, Chaplinesque tragicomedy, at the age of 18. Since that time, she has created numerous films that address various themes, but are most frequently centered on women, often lesbians. Akerman's films explore women at work and at home, women's relationships with men, women, and children, as well as such perennial topics as food, love, sex, romance, art, and storytelling.

Chantal Akerman was born to Polish Holocaust survivors in Brussels in 1950. At the age of 15, she decided to make films after watching Jean-Luc Godard's landmark film *Pierrot le fou* (1965). In 1967, she enrolled in the Belgian film school INSAS, after which she attended the Université Internationale du Théâtre in Paris. She soon left school because she was more interested in making films than in sitting in a classroom.

She saved money from clerical and waitress jobs to make her first film. *Saute ma ville*, though it was seen primarily at film festivals, brought her to the attention of critics who admired its innovativeness.

Akerman moved to New York in 1972 to further her filmmaking career. She returned to Europe in 1973, but her first stay in New York was crucial to her development as a filmmaker. Since that time, she has lived in New York, Brussels, and Paris, where she currently resides.

During her teenage years, Akerman decided to make films that would present scenes and characters to the viewer in a personal and immediate way. Viewers of Akerman's films gain intimate knowledge of the people and places that she presents. Ironically, however, the characters rarely speak. In Akerman's films the space created by silence is more important than dialogue in the revelation of personality.

Akerman's first feature film, *Je, tu, il, elle* (1974), is paradigmatic of her work. It can be interpreted as a study of the shifting boundaries of identity and sexuality. Based on a story Akerman wrote in Paris in 1968, the film is divided into three sections: "Time of Subjectivity," "Time of the Other," and "Time of Relationship."

In "Time of Subjectivity," the main character Julie, played by Akerman, is presented in solitude in a bleak, stripped-down room. Julie performs a series of repetitive activities--such as moving a bed around the room--that are completely without context. Julie, therefore, lacks any type of social placement. This creates discomfort for her, and she externalizes her emotions by removing all objects from the room and taking off her clothes.

"Time of the Other" shows Julie hitchhiking. When a trucker gives her a ride, she is intensely curious about him. She listens carefully to the story he tells about the changes he has experienced in his sexual desire for his wife and daughter. When he requests that Julie bring him to orgasm with her hand, she complies. When Julie masturbates herself, the trucker acknowledges the complexity of Julie/Akerman's identity. While Julie is outside the frame, the trucker looks directly at the camera, briefly confirming Akerman's double role as character and director.

During "Time of Relationship," Julie arrives at the apartment of a young woman. Although the woman at first refuses Julie's sexual advances, the woman feeds her and then makes love with her. During the lengthy lovemaking scene, both women are naked and presented frontally to the camera. Afterward, Julie exits the frame and is heard singing in the shower.

The lesbian sex scene at the end of *Je, tu, il, elle*, filmed in an uncomfortably direct yet distanced manner, investigates issues related to voyeurism, exhibitionism, and the female image on screen. Ostensibly erotic and potentially voyeuristic, the scene is flattened out and drained of any pornographic interest by the detachment of the medium-long shot and by framing that crops the sexually active areas of the actors' bodies. Since the camera never moves, all elements in the scene, from the bed sheets to the women's breasts, are presented as equal.

Je, tu, il, elle successfully undermines the concept of fixed identity. In the "Time of Relationship" section, Akerman addresses the complexity of her dual role as director and character; the distanced shots during the lovemaking scene situate Akerman both in front of and behind the camera. Finally, the film's title (in English: I, you, he, she) points to the shifting nature of personal and sexual identity.

Akerman's extensive filmography includes *Les Rendez-Vous d'Anna* (1978), which documents the journey of a female filmmaker through Western Europe, and *Window Shopping* (1985), a wacky musical that takes place in a Parisian shopping mall. *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975), her most famous film, is an exhaustively detailed study of a Belgian widow who commits murder when a man disrupts her regimented life. Each of Akerman's films presents a different world to the viewer, one that deserves to be fully explored and carefully analyzed.

One of the most innovative filmmakers of her generation, Akerman is intent not so much on telling traditional stories as on using a particular cinematic language and style to explore people and places.

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About the Author

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