

CHANTAL AKERMAN, BETWEEN THE MOTHER AND THE WORLD

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Translated by Mark Cohen

From the first, Chantal Akerman's work seemed to express an oscillation between, on the one hand, a movement of leaving the world of the family (which is indistinguishable from her discovery of film) and, on the other, an opposite and recurrent movement of returning to it, in the form of reminiscence, a certain nostalgia, or even a quest for her cultural identity.

Polarizing this oscillation is, often, the figure of her mother, Natalia Leibel (married name, Akerman) with whom her work has pursued a long, imaginary dialogue. Constant, if not extensive, this dialogue with her mother—as further confirmed by her last book, *Ma mère rit* (2013), and her last film, *No Home Movie* (2015)—seems to me more fundamental than that of other filmmakers who have wanted to use their mothers as actresses in their films.¹ It haunts all of Akerman's work, a fact she has never tried to hide, and which she was able to admit in a direct way to this author in a discussion at the Pompidou Center: “the only subject of my films is my mother.”²

The mother is expelled in *Saute ma ville (Blow Up My Town, 1968)* where the filmmaker plays, in a burlesque register, at (not) being a housewife at home, with the result that she destroys the home because she lacks any vocation for this social role. Another view of the mother is sketched in *L'enfant aimé ou je joue à être une femme mariée (The Beloved Child or I Play at Being a Married Woman, 1971)*, where Akerman observes tenderly, in the role of a friend, the relationship of a young mother and her daughter. And she is replaced, in the third section of *Je tu il elle (1974)*, by a protective lover who puts up the protagonist after she has left her own house for a night. Finally, the figure of the mother becomes central in the image and dramaturgy of *Jeanne Dielman, 23, quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles (Jeanne Dielman, 23 Commerce Quay,*

1080 Brussels, 1975), a film the filmmaker says she made for her mother—admitting that she was one of the direct sources of inspiration for the character of the protagonist. And Akerman also has disclosed that she was thinking of her mother later on while making, among others, the highly idiosyncratic *Histoires d'Amérique (Stories from America, Food, Family and Philosophy, 1988)* and the strikingly beautiful *D'Est (From the East, 1993)*.³ When looking at *D'Est* more closely, it is possible to make out her mother again in the portraits of middle-aged housewives that run through the whole film as it journeys across Eastern Europe after the fall of the Wall, and suggest the maternal resonances in the filmmaker's quest.⁴

Present only diffusely in the films cited above, the representation of the relationship between the filmmaker and her mother is developed in many of her other films in various modalities and periods.

Playacted Meetings

Two of the filmmaker's narrative films, made twenty-six years apart, explicitly staged her meetings with her mother through the intermediary of actresses. In a parallel diptych, fifteen years apart, her two books of autobiographical prose published in 1998 and 2013 do the same in their way. And in 2015, in *No Home Movie*, Akerman repeated the gesture, this time filming the two women directly, her mother and herself, one already old and the other middle-aged.

Les rendez-vous d'Anna (The Meetings of Anna, 1978) devotes a section of seventeen minutes to the reunion of the protagonist Anna (played by Aurore Clément), the filmmaker's alter ego, with whom she shares an occupation, history, Parisian apartment, and even name, with her mother (played by Lea Massari), whom she is coming to meet in Brussels, taking a detour from a series of trips she is making to present her most recent film.⁵ Opening in the Midi Station where they meet up, this section then shows the beginning of their conversation in a café and moves on to a sequence

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Akerman deliberately fails at being a housewife in *Saute ma ville* (1968).

highly charged with feeling: the daughter (who prefers not to sleep at her parents' actual house) sharing a double bed, herself naked, with her mother in a hotel and telling her about a lesbian love affair that had evoked memories of her mother in her.

Mother and daughter will share a bed and memories again in certain scenes of *Demain on déménage* (*Tomorrow We Move*, 2004), a comedy in which the filmmaker projects and transfigures certain elements of her relationship to her mother Natalia, and of that of Natalia to her own mother Sidonie Ehrenberg, the filmmaker's grandmother, whose diary entries in an old notebook they find and leaf through. The same Aurore Clément is now playing not Chantal but Natalia (Sylvie Testud plays the daughter), lending the mother the body and the voice that she had lent previously to the daughter. Mother and daughter thus share their bodies and voices, played twenty-six years apart by the same actress.

They also share the narrator's first-person voice in Akerman's autobiographical novella *Une famille à Bruxelles*, which focuses up-front on their relationship.⁶ Their voices alternate throughout the narrative, with the narrator assuming each one in turn, in such a way that the two characters end up by covering or being superimposed upon each other, sharing

thereby a common fate. The situation is repeated in her more recent book *Ma mère rit*, whose narrative assumes the point of view now of the daughter, now the mother, reiterating in this way the interchangeable positions of the two women, without, for all that, hiding the difficulties of their love.

A short time after Natalia's death and prior to Chantal's, *No Home Movie* came full circle and completed the dispersed cycle of the works (three films and two books, spread out over more than thirty years) representing directly, at the dramaturgical level, the relationship of the artist and her mother. Struggling more than ever with the temptation of the "home movie" (by stating, Magritte-like, "this is not a *Home Movie*"), her final film shows Natalia at home and at length. Certain of its shots in the kitchen or the living room of her apartment seem to confirm retroactively, by way of echo and resemblance, the maternal inspiration for the portraits of middle-aged housewives presented in *Jeanne Dielman* and *D'Est*.

Hesitating between the Mother and the World

Two other films—*News from Home* (1976) and *Aujourd'hui, dis-moi* (1980)—also explore this dialogue with the mother,



Aurore Clément in the role of daughter and the role of mother, 26 years apart, in *Les rendez-vous d'Anna* (1978) and *Demain on déménage* (2004).

this time in her absence, by integrating its vicissitudes in their fabrication itself, through the disjunctive relationship between their images and sounds. I would argue that it is in these two films that the filmmaker manages, cinematically, to translate these vicissitudes best.

They are at the heart of *News from Home*, one of the filmmaker's most beautiful films, in which all of the sound track's words come from Natalia, or more precisely from the twenty letters of love, full of a mother's longing for her child, that she wrote from Brussels to Chantal when she was living in New York at the beginning of the 1970s. In a monotonous fashion, for the entire film, the addressee reads them in voice-over, in one- or two-minute segments or slightly longer increments, while documentary shots of public spaces in New York roll past on-screen, observed by an impassive camera that never reveals either the reader or the observer.

The disjunction between, on the one hand, these random images of New York (streets, sidewalks, pedestrians, cars, facades, piers, subway cars and passengers, shops, bars) and, on the other, the sound of equally random maternal words (we miss you, we are thinking of you, write, keep well, etc.) seem to represent, in the clearest manner up to that point in her work, the filmmaker hesitating between turning her gaze toward the world and her intimate memory of her family. In this way, the call of the family is projected onto the world, where it circulates and colors her extra-familial experience with a sort of incurable nostalgia. Without ever responding to her mother's letters on the sound track of the film, the filmmaker nevertheless manages to have a dialogue with her by lending her voice to the mother's words, by making them hers because she re-pronounces them.

Aujourd'hui, dis-moi confirms and extends this gesture four years later by once more inscribing the mother/daughter dialogue onto the sound track, again in a disjunction with

the images of the filmmaker walking in the street and then visiting three old women to ask them questions about their mothers. The general setup is therefore similar, but this time even more direct: besides the voice of the filmmaker, her own body and her mother's voice also come into play. They can both be heard, speaking in voice-over about Natalia's mother (Sidonie) and her grandmother as well.

At the very beginning, the filmmaker starts by asking her mother, in voice-over, the question that resonates across the entire film: "Tell me, Mom, what memories do you have of your mother?" The mother's answer is spread out, also in voice-over, across five passages of the film, in segments one or two minutes long and at less and less regular intervals, ranging from one to twenty-three minutes long. These segments of her answer, in turn, are heard over the images of the filmmaker getting closer to the grandmothers, or even going inside their houses, so as to suggest the personal motivation of her quest and to color her meetings with the other women. Everything happens as if her mother's experience functioned as a backdrop for her research about the memories of others.

Once again there is the superimposition of the filmmaker's curiosity about others' experience over the massive presence of her mother's. Natalia says, in the first portion of her answer, that her mother was a very beautiful woman, young, shapely, elegant, when she was deported at the age of thirty-five. When Natalia came back from the camp, she was welcomed, with the other people in her family, by her grandmother, about whom she will speak emotionally in the rest of this first portion and in the others that follow. Her evocations of the grandmother are projected on the scenes that show the other grandmothers visited by Chantal.

Despite their differences, the two films seem to represent, by virtue of the hiatus between the images (in which Natalia is absent) and the sound (in which her presence is notable),

the tension between the daughter's attraction to the world of her mother and the distance she needs from it in order to experience her own. The letters and memories of her mother accompany the thought and activities of the daughter, but their bodies do not exist in the same place. In the filmmaker's work, such a coexistence of bodies will occur only in extremis, in her very last film, *No Home Movie*, which is entirely devoted to their relationship, as if it were a response to *News from Home*, forty years afterwards, as if it were "*News from No Home*." [See Ivone Margulies's article in this issue.]

By way of conclusion, consider once again *Toute une nuit* (1982), a film made between them in time, in which these tensions find perhaps their finest resolution in a rather brief shot that marks the first appearance in her daughter's work of Natalia in person and which therefore permits Akerman to express her filial love in the most discreet and concentrated manner, a sort of haiku in the middle of a mosaic of amorous experiences.

The Mother and the Night, in the Middle of the Work

Well dressed and with hair well brushed, a middle-aged woman smokes in silence next to a white door adjoining a darker wall, outside a house. Positioned in front of this door, the camera frames her body down to the knee, thereby depriving the viewer of the hem of her beige dress and what glimpse it would allow of her legs. Three times, at three-second intervals, a girl's voice, which seems to come from behind the closed door, calls the woman: "Mom? . . . Mom? . . . Mom? . . ." without any immediate reaction. The mother ends up by throwing her cigarette butt on the ground, opens the door and goes back inside, responding at her own pace to the call of her daughter, never seen in the image.

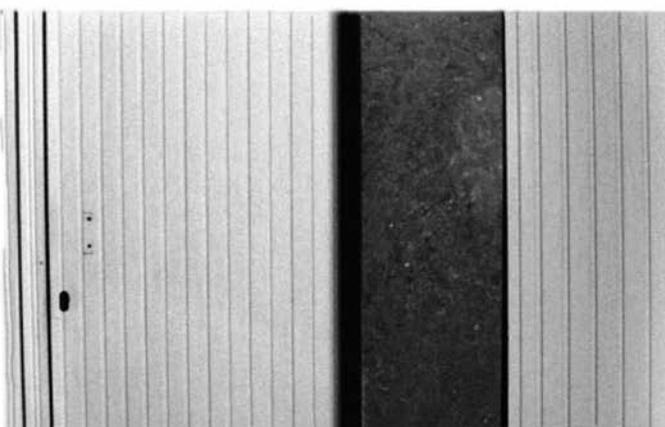
Because the dramatic situation that it presents is so banal, this fixed shot of a minute and fifteen seconds, to which I will return, tends to pass unnoticed in the flow of the other brief scenes that comprise *Toute une nuit*. When it appears, 22 minutes into the film, the viewer has already seen the 37 shots that have preceded it, and has therefore had the necessary time to get a sense of the rules of the game, which the following 111 shots will confirm, making Akerman's dramatic and stylistic choices in her sixth feature, one of the freest and most beautiful of her whole career, still clearer.

There was no question this time of telling, from beginning to end, a story with a main character, or of choosing a protagonist around whom the narrative would revolve—not Julie in *Je tu il elle*, nor Jeanne in *Jeanne Dielman*, nor Anna in *Les rendez-vous d'Anna*. After these three narrative features of the

1970s, centered on female protagonists, Akerman decided to try out stories full of characters who are given equal treatment for her three fictional features of the 1980s: *Toute une nuit*, *Golden Eighties* (1986), and *Histoires d'Amérique*. It is as if now she wanted to give a certain dramatic thickness to the anonymous bodies that appear fleetingly without taking on a life of their own in *Hotel Monterey* (1972) and *News from Home*.⁷

In the inaugural film of her new cycle of fictions without a protagonist, Akerman followed a small troop of almost always anonymous characters who find and lose each other in Brussels and the surrounding area during a summer's night. Never named and rarely identifiable by the non-Belgian viewer, the places shown are often tied to the affective memory of the filmmaker, whether streets she knew in her youth or apartments lent by her friends for some of the interior scenes. The action is limited to this night in its entirety, from the end of the afternoon to the dawn of the next day, thereby confirming literally the title's temporal indication. With a few exceptions, the eighty or so scenes of the film revolve around love, present or absent. It could be said, to paraphrase Luigi Pirandello, that the film shows some sixty characters in search of a lover. About the rest of their lives (their history, their work, their family), little is given to the viewer to see or to deduce.

Even in this search, moreover, only isolated instants are visible, subtracted from a narrative sequence that would have situated them clearly in the life of each of the characters, but here reinscribed in a sequence of everyday gestures that furnishes both the characters and the viewer a sort of choreographic context. A roundelay of bodies that wait, entangle each other, come closer or move away, sometimes dance, move inside or go out through doors. The dialogue is cursory and there is not much of it. Certain characters reappear during the night, giving a rhythm to the flow of the mini-narratives that succeed or alternate with one another. Of some others, nothing else is heard about them after their first appearance. Because it is organized as a study of the characters' gestures of love, the film shows the movement (or immobility) of their bodies in the streets, bars, and apartments of Brussels in an amorous choreography, danced sometimes in a duo, sometimes in a solo. The silent narrator who is watching or listening to all this activity has spent the night awake—or has dreamed the whole ballet. The ballet seems to reference the dance-theater of Pina Bausch, that so astonished Akerman in 1981 when she discovered it in Cologne through the choreographed pieces, *Bandoneon* and *Café Müller*, shortly before she herself filmed *Toute une nuit*.⁸ It was no accident that her filmmaking crossed paths with the work of the



Nelly Akerman responds at her own pace to the call of her daughter in *Toute une nuit* (1982).

choreographer a year after *Toute une nuit* was released, when she made the documentary about Bausch, *Un jour Pina a demandé* (*One Day Pina Asked . . .*, 1983).⁹

Out of the very familiar situations that the ballet of *Toute une nuit* allows the viewer to imagine (waiting, meetings, missed appointments, goodbyes, separations), the film isolates key moments for the climax, for its emotional charge; but the film's serial arrangement reduces them to the

condition of simple parts in a mechanism of amorous jolts, whose construction is at once simple and ingenious. By stripping them of their narrative context the filmmaker adopts a structure similar to that of a pornographic film that strings together orgasms untethered from a story, without for all that having recourse to its habitual materials. In the reorganized night of the film almost everything pants and quivers, but in a full visual chastity that is rather different from the

explicit sexuality of certain scenes of *Je tu il elle* and *Les rendez-vous d'Anna*. In *Toute une nuit*, as Serge Daney remarked in a wonderful essay, the characters are viewed before or after sexual relations, but there is no sex scene and, may I add, not even a visible kiss on the mouth!¹⁰ There are beds, pajamas, and people complaining of the unbearable heat, but no one appears naked in any of the living rooms or bedrooms exposed to the viewer, one after the other.

Now, in a film so full of bodies, the woman referred to at the beginning of this section is one body among many others, unable by herself perhaps to hold an uninformed viewer's attention. The ordinariness of her situation would not make her stand out nor justify my commentary if it were not for two significant details: the actress playing this discreet person is none other than Natalia Akerman, standing in front of her own house in Strombeek, not far from Brussels, and when the sound was mixed, she who lends her voice to the girl calling for her mother three times offscreen is the filmmaker herself.

In all of Chantal's films up until then, this is the only shot where her mother appears in person—which is doubtless why she tends to cite it and reproduce it in various places. Now although Natalia was already perceptible under the figure and gestures of *Jeanne Dielman*; and in *News from Home* her motherly love letters could resonate over images of an unglamorous New York in a disjunction between the image and the sound that seemed to represent a hesitation of the filmmaker between her family and the world; and although *Rendez-vous d'Anna* lent her the body and voice of an actress with Antonionian resonances (Lea Massari) so as to stage a meeting (one of four between the protagonist and another character) of the mother and her already grown-up daughter, with a whole dialogue written by Chantal; and the mother's actual voice appeared in *Aujourd'hui, dis-moi*, answering in voice-over Chantal's questions about her grandmother; nonetheless it is only in *Toute une nuit* that the dialogue is extended so as to produce a double effect of restitution and liberation.

On the one hand, Natalia enters the scene directly, without the mediation of other bodies and voices. The film finally gives her back her space (she is seen in front of her own home), her body, and above all her silence, leaving her daughter to proffer this fragment of loving speech, reduced to its essential demand: "Mom . . . Mom . . . Mom . . ." So, thanks to this shot, the imaginary confrontation between mother and daughter finds the most literal representation it had ever attained in Akerman's work, in the coexistence of the body of the one with the voice of the other, in the shared space of the Akerman house in Strombeek.



The heat of the night suffuses *Toute une nuit*.

On the other hand, by encapsulating in such a brief shot the dual relationship between mother and daughter, and by having this fragment enter the flow of that night without dominating the film, *Toute une nuit* frees Chantal to observe the world without projecting onto it the obsessive presence of the maternal figure, left here fixed in the past of her daughter's childhood. After Natalia turns her back to the viewer and closes the door from the inside, exiting the film, *Toute une nuit* can continue its lovers' tour, as varied as the experience of the city. Without actually crossing the door's threshold itself, the camera lets Natalia return to the house, from which the filmmaker exits definitively to return to the world after her short visit.

Notes

1. See Chantal Akerman, *Ma mère rit* (Paris: Mercure de France, 2013). Here, I think of Pier Paolo Pasolini and his mother Susanna; of Rainer Werner Fassbinder and his, Liselotte Eders; or of John Cassavetes and his, Katherine.
2. She gave this answer to my question during a public discussion on June 17, 2011.
3. "I always wanted to make a film about the Jewish diaspora. . . . it was doubtless a way of communicating with what my mother went through and left her incapable of speaking during my entire childhood, to the point that I got sick from it myself" (Alain Rou, "Au nom de la mémoire," *Nouvel Observateur*, September 28, 1989).
4. In a text written about the film, Akerman says that on a previous trip to Russia she had come across "on the table what my mother made to eat after fifty years living in Belgium" (*D'Est: au bord de la fiction* [Paris: Jeu de Paume, 1995, p. 21]).
5. Akerman recounts: "For a long time, I thought of Anna as my real first name. My name is Chantal Anne Akerman and my great grandmother called me Hanna" (see Chantal

Akerman, Claudine Paquot, Centre national d'art et de culture Georges Pompidou, *Chantal Akerman: Autoportrait en cinéaste* (Paris: *Cahiers du cinéma* and Centre Pompidou, 2004), 44–45.

6. Chantal Akerman, *Une famille à Bruxelles* (L'Arche, 1998); translated by Deborah Theodore and published in English as *A Family in Brussels* by the Dia Art Foundation in 2003.
7. Since the 1990s, all her feature-length films have returned to a more classical dramaturgy, based on a pair of protagonists or on a trio, a focus that only the documentaries manage to avoid.

8. Beyond the attention both artists give to everyday amorous gestures, transfigured by their respective aesthetic stylizations, Akerman's film and Pina's work are still waiting for a more detailed comparative approach.
9. Intense and fleeting, Akerman's initial fascination with Pina gave way to a definitive estrangement after the experience of the documentary, with the filmmaker feeling suffocated by what appeared to her more and more clearly as Pina's cruelty and sadism.
10. Serge Daney, "Toute une nuit," *Ciné-Journal, Volume I: 1981–1982* (Paris: *Cahiers du cinéma*, 1986), 191–94.