

MARIAN GOODMAN GALLERY

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A Hard Road Home

By, Max Nelson
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Chantal Akerman in her film Je tu il elle, 1974. Cinémathèque Royale, Brussels

In 1990 the Belgian filmmaker Chantal Akerman set out on a trip across the former Soviet Union to do research for a movie about the poet Anna Akhmatova. She said “it was almost like home, or close enough.” Akerman’s Polish-Jewish parents had both immigrated to Brussels from Eastern Europe some fifty years before. Her mother survived Auschwitz, where her own parents were killed. In her 2013 memoir *Ma mère rit*, Akerman remembered that in her old age her mother would sometimes announce out of the blue, “without anyone having asked,” that she no longer remembered much Polish. Wherever Akerman went during that first trip, she found “the same food on the table that my mother always made.”

But the movie she shot when she returned to the region in 1992 made no reference to Akhmatova and didn’t mention her family background at all. Filmed in Russia, Poland, and what had just ceased to be East Germany, *From the East* is elliptical and radiantly cold. It consists entirely of shots, often long, of landscapes, interiors, and the people who inhabit them: snowy roads and sidewalks, tenants sitting in living rooms or watching television, middle-aged women cooking, dancers taking to the floor in a gloomy recreation hall, a pianist rehearsing at home, a cellist playing onstage. No one speaks.

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Akerman committed suicide in 2015, when she was sixty-five. Since her death, retrospectives of her more than forty films—documentaries, fictions, essay films, musicals, and somber elegies—have passed through New York, Los Angeles, Berkeley, and, most recently, Paris, in an exhaustive season at the Cinémathèque Française. Like much of this elusive director's work, *From the East* sounds dreary in description but plays out in a hypnotic, exacting rhythm onscreen. Each shot gets enough time to ripen, then cuts off just before the viewer's impatience sets in. It was as if Akerman had decided that invocations of her own life and that of her family could be powerful sources of energy for her movies as long as she scattered them widely, covered them up thinly, and let them glow through their concealment.

"I don't have an idea," Akerman told Gary Indiana in a 1983 interview. "I have a feeling that I try to express." But to be expressed in her films, feelings often had to first be chiseled down or left to chill. At the end of her early feature *Je tu il elle* (1974), which she made in her mid-twenties and in which she also starred, she used a static, detached shot to show her character making love with an ex-girlfriend for ten unbroken minutes. *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975), the dread-filled masterpiece for which Akerman remains best known, centered on a widowed single mother—her sister lives elsewhere and her parents, we learn, both died in the concentration camps—who picks up sex work on the side to support her teenage son and eventually commits an unexpected act of violence. Much of the film's two hundred minutes, however, show her doing such domestic jobs as peeling potatoes and kneading veal in tense long takes that leave us looking for mistakes and glitches in her immaculate routines. By the age of twenty-four, Akerman had arrived at a style at once taut and permissive, rebellious and disciplined, candid and cool.

Akerman never put much trust in biographical readings of her work. The cover of Corinne Rondeau's brief, ruminative *Chantal Akerman: Passer la Nuit* (2017), the first such study to appear since the filmmaker's death, carries a quote from a 2014 interview: "I don't think one should look around in autobiography; that seals things off." In 1978 Akerman cautioned another interviewer against reading too much into *Les Rendez-vous d'Anna* (1978), despite the fact that, as Rondeau points out, the film centered on "a filmmaker, a single woman, a Jew, a postwar European transplant, a troubled rapport between a mother and a daughter." Its most affecting scene shows the adult heroine lying in bed beside her mother, coming out to the older woman for the first time. Still, Akerman insisted, none of the film had come from her lived experience, "except that I travelled."

She was born in 1950 and was still a teenager when, in 1968, she made her first short, *Saute ma ville*. She paid for the shoestring budget by going to the Antwerp Diamond Bourse and selling shares in the film itself for \$3 each. The movie was a slapstick performance—she compared it to Charlie Chaplin—that turned into a suicide fantasy: she played a young woman who tears apart her family kitchen, seals the door, sets a newspaper on fire, and turns on the gas. She spent the following winter living in freezing, unheated maid's quarters in Paris, and then with a Laozi scholar she met, as she remembered, "through DROR, the Zionist-Socialist Jewish movement." After they parted ways, she said, "he committed suicide, and I learned about it while I was waiting in line to see a film."

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Her time in New York, where she spent her twenty-first birthday, produced a pair of magnificent collaborations—*Hotel Monterey* and the short *La Chambre*—with the cinematographer Babette Mangolte, who would go on to shoot *Jeanne Dielman*. (A third film, called *Hanging Out Yonkers*, about “young junkies in rehab centers outside New York,” went astray on loan and never resurfaced in full. “It was really beautiful,” Akerman said.) She worked a series of odd jobs: between 1971 and 1973 she was a restaurant coat-check girl, a sculptor’s model, a thrift store clerk, a photo technician, and a cashier at a porn theater, from which she later admitted she stole \$4,000 in less than a month.

When she wasn’t at a day job or making films, she seems to have been at Anthology Film Archives absorbing the experimental productions of Yvonne Rainer, Jonas Mekas, and Michael Snow. Those films would be a formative influence on the string of masterworks she went on to make during the rest of the decade, all while still in her twenties: *Jeanne Dielman, Je tu il elle*, *News from Home* (1976), and *Les Rendez-vous d’Anna*. In these movies Akerman arrived at a tone—choked, hushed, achingly lonely—that let her commit wholeheartedly to characters who made their lives in exile and passed between lovers, across borders, or into personal crises. She would stay preoccupied with such figures but broaden her range in the films she made from then on: her numerous comedies and musicals, including *The Eighties* (1983) and *Golden Eighties* (1986), *A Couch in New York* (1996), and *Tomorrow We Move* (2004); her documentaries about Eastern European Jewish transplants in France and New York; her portraits of dancers and musicians; her intimate late essay-films.

The world her movies evoke is one of hotels and apartments through which people come and go; long drives and trips by train; calls home from abroad by phone and, in her last film, *No Home Movie* (2015), Skype. She was drawn to settings like the shabby New York motel whose nooks and crannies she explored in *Hotel Monterey*, or the more posh venues through which the nomadic filmmaker at the center of *Les Rendez-vous d’Anna* passes during her months on the road. In *Toute une Nuit* (1982), dozens of couples whose names we never learn fall in and out of one another’s company over the course of a single night in Brussels.

The people in Akerman’s films move awkwardly and lose track of the space they take up. In *Je tu il elle*, her own character takes a Buster Keaton-like pratfall across the threshold of her ex’s apartment. Two reunited former lovers—a married Holocaust survivor and the American who took care of her after the war—get forced apart by a crowd of shopping mall customers amid the antic choreography of *Golden Eighties*; in *From the East*, a hall fills up with ungainly dancers to a kitschy live band. “I can’t have actresses playing my clumsiness,” Akerman said in a 2011 interview about why she appeared in *Je tu il elle* herself. “It seems impossible for me to be in a restaurant without knocking something over: my gestures are too large, or I’m pursuing my thoughts and get startled.” Behind the camera, on the other hand, she was never less than precise.

Whatever story she was filming, Akerman always let it develop from a distance. For some—including many of her admirers—it seemed that her lengthy, often static shots were meant to be grueling or tedious to watch. Eric de Kuyper, the semiotician who cowrote *Je tu il elle* and two of Akerman’s later films, once praised her movies for the “slow and diffuse boredom” he thought they induced. Her early films in particular succeed in part because they test our

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patience and make us weather their long takes of, for instance, the cleaning of a tub or the making of a roast. “Never before was the materiality of women’s time in the home rendered so viscerally,” the scholar B. Ruby Rich wrote about *Jeanne Dielman* in 1983, when it finally had a theatrical run in New York. Its tempo, she said, was one “of endless time, repetitively restoring itself.” Bracing for long scenes of potato peeling or bathroom scrubbing, many viewers have tended to approach *Jeanne Dielman* and the films Akerman made around the same time as if they were unpleasant gauntlets to run.

Are Akerman’s early films so boring or diffuse? Their overarching dramas develop slowly: the disintegration of Jeanne’s practiced kitchen rituals, for instance, or the gradual convergence of seemingly independent plotlines in *Toute une nuit*. But the scenes that deliver those dramas unfold with great tension, vigor, and purpose. The metronomic rhythms of Jeanne’s kitchen routines keep us sensitive to the next stutter in the pattern they create; the terse cuts between vignettes in *Toute une nuit* leave us in nervous suspension. The moment a given shot’s reserves of energy run dry, we move to the next one; no image lasts a second too long. In *Chantal Akerman par Chantal Akerman*, her self-portrait film from 1997, she compares her movies to a lean, bony cow that a desperate farmer tries and fails to sell.

That line was her characteristically self-deprecating way of describing an important feature of her style and politics. What interested her was not the sprawling indefiniteness of boredom but the nervy tension and clipped rhythms of anxiety. The women in her films pass through worlds that can’t accommodate them and set them on edge. They end up imprisoned in suffocating domestic arrangements, like the young woman locked up by her paranoid boyfriend in *La Captive* (2000), a loose Proust adaptation; they get abandoned by men they trusted or reencounter men they used to love (*Golden Eighties*); they project independence as well as precariousness, like the two underage friends who traipse through Paris in the short *J’ai faim, j’ai froid* (1984). For the most part they come off as runaways fleeing the cozier, more settled domestic arrangements that their parents—and, in particular, their mothers—might have wanted them to inherit.

Most of Akerman’s films find some occasion to ask what daughters owe their mothers and what they lose in going their own way. It was the one autobiographical subject to which she herself laid claim. “The only subject of my films is my mother,” she said in 2011. Over the ghostly, roaming footage of Manhattan’s subways and streets that dominates *News from Home*, she recited the letters she’d received from her mother, Natalia, during her stint making films in New York two years before. Nearly three decades later, *No Home Movie* documented Natalia’s physical decline in the months before her death at eighty-six: Akerman’s visits to her apartment in Brussels; their conversations over Skype; hushed exchanges between the filmmaker and her sister or her mother’s housekeeper. In that film and in *Ma mère rit* she laid out her interactions with the ailing woman in stark, meticulous detail and tended to refrain from broader comments about what, exactly, her relationship with her mother was like. But both works are defined by the ambivalent tenor of the interactions between Natalia and her daughter, which suggest intense love as well as mutual disappointment and regret.

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The director at the center of *Les Rendez-vous d'Anna*, we learn, twice broke off her engagement with the son of one of her parents' friends. ("You would have had such beautiful children," the elder woman chastens her when they have a run-in at a train station.) She could never have married that inadequate, unseen man; her most satisfying relationship, she tells her mother, is the one she has recently undertaken with a woman voiced (in the phone message that remains the character's only appearance in the movie) by Akerman herself. But once she diverges from the life her mother has had in mind for her, the movie insists that she has forgone a comfort she can never replace. Her melancholy independence becomes the price she had no choice but to pay for leaving home.



A scene from Chantal Akerman's film *Golden Eighties*, 1986. Cinémathèque Royale, Brussels.

Akerman tended to deny her characters stable romantic arrangements. What she gave them instead were close friendships with other women, which become the nearest things they have to emotional lifelines. Characters like the two friends in *J'ai faim, j'ai froid* might dally with men (one loses her virginity to their older male host while the other hovers in his kitchen), but they move with one another in a space where men can't follow them. "I'm burning to know what goes on between women that doesn't between a woman and a man," the obsessive young man in *La Captive* asks two of his girlfriend's female friends when he suspects her of having an affair with another woman. Each of his subsequent questions prompts a cutaway to the two women sitting together, discussing his unanswerable queries between themselves as if he's no longer there.

The tone Akerman often found in her fiction films from the 1980s onward was a kind of grim drollery. While her earlier films had sustained a note of majestic melancholy, her later ones swerved between registers, sidestepping unexpectedly from the comic to the bleak. *La Captive* moves from that absurd exchange to a climactic oceanfront passage of drowning and despair; *J'ai faim, j'ai froid* passes from that unnerving, joyless sex scene to a closing shot of the two young women sauntering away from the camera like Chaplin's tramp. Such odd tonal combinations did for these films much what the precision of *Jeanne Dielman* or the luxurious sadness of *News from Home* had done for those movies: they gave Akerman permission to

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explore matters that bore directly on her family history without seeming to talk about herself too directly or transparently.

After *Les Rendez-vous d'Anna* premiered to some hostility (Clement remembered having to sneak out of the premiere to avoid the audience's angry reproaches), Akerman told Gary Indiana, she resolved to "make a commercial film" based on *The Manor*, Isaac Bashevis Singer's novel of nineteenth-century Poland. As would later be the case with *From the East*, she was energized by the thought that a movie could take a long, sprawling view of the Eastern European Jewish Diaspora. Singer invited her to visit him in Miami Beach, she remembered:

When I met him he said, "You will never get married. You are too well to find a man. To meet a man is impossible for you. Don't do it!" He's living in a kind of condominium. He wanted me to eat and eat and eat. "Take a sundae, Chantal! Do you want a sundae? It's good, sundaes!" I hope I will be like that at his age. His wife showed me all the pictures of when he got the Nobel Prize, saying "Can you imagine, my husband near the Prince," or the King—she showed me all the pictures, very slowly one by one, like my mother does when people come to see her.

The money for that film never came through. But others about Jewish identity soon followed, especially as Akerman started devoting more energy to documentaries. *Dis-moi*, an extraordinary forty-five-minute-long TV movie from 1980, collects her candid interviews with female Holocaust survivors old enough to be her grandmother. "You should have children," the first tells Akerman when she admits she doesn't have any. "It's very nice when you have children. On the other hand, it's sad when you don't. You feel alone."

Childlessness in these films becomes a sign of exile, a mark of having left the family fold. "My own story is full of missing links," Akerman reflects over nocturnal footage of the Manhattan waterfront at the start of *Histoires d'Amérique* (1989), having just recited a parable about the virtues of telling stories to one's children. "And I do not even have a child." The movie is one of her strangest: an assemblage of Borscht Belt jokes, absurdist folktales, and harrowing stories of immigrant life, recited in stagey, formal English by first- and second-generation Jewish immigrants against such backdrops as an empty Williamsburg lot.

The stories succeed one another with little connective tissue. Undated, sometimes unattributed, they make a pattern by the odd solemnity of their delivery and the grim recurrence of their themes: pogroms, roundups, expulsions. The shadows of those threats lie too over Akerman's later documentaries *South* (1999)—in which the story of a savage lynching in small-town Texas occasions a digression on the resurgence of American anti-Semitism—and *Là-bas* (2006), a highly personal monologue shot mostly inside a Tel Aviv apartment she was subletting at the time. ("I love Israel, even if it's its own form of exile," she told the film theorist Nicole Brenez in 2011. "I feel good there, usually, even if I don't agree with the government. Even if I know that, for Israel to exist, it has to act like other races. To shed blood, and seize lands.")

By the 1990s Akerman was increasingly inclined to talk about her movies as if they were tragicomic Jewish parables. She took inspiration from Singer and Kafka. "I feel very close to him for many reasons," she said about Kafka in 1983. "He always wanted to get a fiancée, and he never could; finally people like us can't do it. Another point is that Kafka doesn't make pathos." To not "make pathos" was perhaps the closest she came to a definite statement about her

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ethics as a filmmaker. She wanted to play with despair, render it both deeply and with a cutting irony. To introduce any distorting or melodramatic devices into her movies would entail ruining that tone and violating the viewer's trust. She talked about this prospect as if it were equivalent to breaking a divine commandment, sometimes the second—"I am fighting against idolatry," she told two interviewers in 2011—and sometimes the fifth. Whenever she pictured herself facing down another person from behind the camera or confronting a viewer through the screen, she thought: "Thou shalt not kill."

Matters of moral responsibility recur across the stories Akerman invented and the documentary subjects she pursued. The daughters in her movies worry about their mothers. ("I've often wanted to kill myself," she wrote matter-of-factly in *Ma mère rit*. "But I told myself I could not do that to my mother. Afterwards, when she's not there anymore.") They steel themselves against pressures to start families and waver about what they owe themselves. In *Tomorrow We Move*, a chain-smoking writer of erotic fiction named Charlotte sets up house with her mother—a Holocaust survivor—in an immense Paris apartment through which several troubled, eccentric secondary characters pass. In an old piece of furniture she finds a diary written in Polish by her maternal grandmother. The words with which it begins—"I am a woman! Therefore I can't express all my feelings, my sorrows, and my thoughts"—come directly from the diary Akerman's own grandmother kept from when she was a teenager until her deportation to Auschwitz. Earlier in that film, an elderly realtor who likewise fled the Nazis tells Charlotte that it was lucky he never had children. "Even for the third generation," he thinks, he wouldn't want to subject a child to the pain of knowing what their recent ancestors had suffered. Charlotte nonetheless ends the film cradling a child she's just agreed to help its mother raise.

In her last decade Akerman took an interest in stories about women who, to the joy of their families, inherited children later in life. She told a radio interviewer, as the scholar Marion Schmid paraphrased it, that the title of *Ma mère rit* "was inspired by the biblical story of Sarah, who laughs when the angel of God announces to her that, despite her advanced age, she will bear a child."¹ The book itself is a performance of the tension between Akerman's private priorities and what she considered her duties as a daughter. Vignettes about her depression, her breakup with a younger woman identified only as "C," and her movements between Paris and Harlem (she taught film for some years at CUNY) are interwoven with an agonizing, detailed account of her mother's declining health. In Mexico, where Natalia flies for her granddaughter's wedding, a pulmonary embolism sends her to the hospital. Her doctors warn that she might not live. A broken shoulder limits her mobility. Akerman marvels at how quickly she seems to have aged.

These observations are collected in plainspoken prose not unlike the steady, self-controlled long takes that show Akerman's mother frail and dying in *No Home Movie*. They keep precarious company over the course of the book with confessions about how ragged Akerman's nerves have gotten and how prone she is to tears. Even these more eruptive passages, however, have the tough, parsimonious emotional register that had by then become her distinctive style.

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In her last works, she kept carrying that style to the frayed edges of what words and images could do. She made a number of video installations in the last two decades of her life, and her later films bear the influence of these immersive productions in the way they plunge us into turbulent, threatening environments. For long wordless scenes in her Conrad adaptation *Almayer's Folly* (2010), the camera navigates down rivers, across marshes, and through torrential storms. *No Home Movie* repeatedly returns to images of desert landscapes hurtling past a car window to the sound of abrasive gusts of wind, as does Akerman's installation *NOW* (2015), currently on view at the Jewish Museum in New York, where similar footage plays out against a cacophonous soundtrack on five different hovering screens.²

"When the films are finished it's as if I'd made nothing but mist," Akerman wrote in *Ma mère rit*. For much of her adult life she had been a figure of renown—respected, debated, interviewed. She hardly recognized herself in what was said about her. "When other people talked about me using my first and last name I knew that they were talking about a person who for them had made more than mist but something like an oeuvre. I didn't want to contradict them," she wrote. "So I said nothing."