



The Formalist Film-Maker with a Subtext:

Chantal Akerman

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Chantal Akerman began her cinematographic career as a minimalist. A dual value structure defines her aesthetic. Her films, at least until *A Couch in New York* (1996) eschewed the characteristic bombast of conventional Hollywood film making. Her films foreswear the frenetic pace of action, the overwhelming operatic and interactive background musical score, and the linear (condensation) of events to film time. Typically her films emphasize nonlinear narrative, discontinuity of thought and action, the illusion of real time, and the random inscrutability of a surface image. Akerman trains her camera on appearance's facade by that offering a simulacrum of unorganized, meaningless phenomena lacking teleological significance.

Akerman's approach to film making resembles the pop realism of Andy Warhol but stands in the French formalist tradition of the *nouvelle vague* movement in film and literature. A convergence in aesthetics and social theory provided a superstructure for arts of suppression and repression (for an exhaustive study of French structuralism cf. Fosse, 1997; Calvet, 1994).²

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2. The French intellectuals and artists were explicitly aware of what they were creating. Roland Barthes, Lévi-Strauss, and Lacan agree to the erasure of the self in the new social theory. I suggest both repression and suppression because the former is inevitable and necessary for memory and remembering. The latter is willful and desires nothing more than providing barriers to remembering. In practice the differences are hard to discern. The problem presents a hermeneutical challenge. For an exhaustive study of every aspect of French structuralism see Francois Fosse, *History of French Structuralism* two volumes, translated by D. Glassman (Minneapolis, 1997) and Louis- Jean Calvet, *Roland Barthes: A Biography* (Bloomington, 1994).

Formalism dictates that works of art are exclusively self-referential and encrypted. This principle enables the formalist artist to justify rationally the evasion of responsibility for his or her art. In France in the hands of its supreme practitioner Alain Robbe-Grillet, formalism provided the rationale for the willful repression of unwanted cultural and personal memory of France under occupation, the deportation of French Jews and the shoah that followed.³ The formalists examine repression to re-inscribe it. The holocaust survivors' generation mostly colluded with the formalist repression of historical memory.⁴

Paradoxically, the radicalism of formalist doctrine produces results opposite to its structures. To generate meaning the viewer/reader must locate it in references that transcends the artwork. Therefore, the formal denial of meaning forces the viewer to generate the sense or significance of the work. All language is purposeful and encoded and therefore allows itself to be decoded and interpreted irrespectively of the speaker's intent. However, in the formalist work of Robbe-Grillet breaking the code yields a communication that the buried past cannot, must not, be unearthed. A generation later young artists, particular French Jewish writers, such as Dan Francks, and film makers like Chantal Akerman began the task of examining the wounds caused by the repressed past. What is of particular interest and significance is that their project remains within the framework of aesthetic formalism engendering acute tension between the desire to reveal everything and the human exigency to shield oneself from the memory of the painful burden of the shoah. The formalist doctrine is acutely appropriate for this project. The tropes signifying the wound's expressions are linguistic homelessness and silence. In Akerman's work the tropic strains reward the viewer with an experience of fractured identity, the pain of the harrowing past, and the gulf separating the generations and the resulting vacuum. In her purview Jewish identity is an erasure. It is at home neither in Jewishness nor in French universality.

Chantal Akerman is a Belgian Jewish film director working in Paris, a child of holocaust survivors. While Akerman does not mention the holo-

3. Bernard Zelechow, "Aesthetic Formalism: Repression and Post Holocaust Writing: A Moment in French Culture," (Jewish Studies, 1998). And Bernard Zelechow, "Michel Tournier: Falling for the Fall," ISSEI, CD-ROM.

4. Bernard Zelechow, "Georges Perec: The Sign of the Void," ISSEI Utrecht CD ROM, (1997) and Bernard Zelechow, "Is There a New Derrida?" European Legacy, Special Issue vol 2 # 1, (1997).

caust, or ethnic particularity, the shoah is the central traumatic event of her oeuvres. Her artistry in the typical French manner frames the issues in universalist terms understood as cultural uniformity. She subsumes the question of Jewish identity in Europe in the closing decades of the century under the general problematic of postmodern identity crisis. The mutilation and fragmentation of the Franco-Jewish identity are the foregrounds articulating the splintering of the ego in postmodernism. Jewish identity represents the latent content exposed between revelation and concealment. Only gradually and in a peculiarly French manner does Akerman articulate the specific Jewish dimension of post-modernity. She reveals this through the specifically French valorization of language. In her work the self is reduced self-consciously and effectively to near silence by linguistic fracture and homelessness.

Given her explicit silence about the shoah it is easy to dismiss attributing interest on her part in the issue particularly in movies such as *Je, tu, il, elle* (1974). The film superficially highlights literally sexual intercourse and discourse. In one long scene the male protagonist directs his casual female pick up in the proper technique of masturbation. She obliges more or less. An extended lesbian coupling starring the same young woman follows filling the final third of the film. These scenes are peculiarly unerotic. This was, I believe, intentional on Akerman's part. For the film's theme asserts that sexuality is the only remaining connection between persons. And sexuality fails to provide for mutuality, relationship and love. It remains a pure mechanical, mostly violent, reaction for the release of sexual energy and tension.

The title of the movie *Je, tu, il, elle* states the whole meaning of the film, a movie about pronouns without connectivity. The protagonists remain nameless. There are no nous or ils and elles in this work. The work expresses a world without relationships or meaning. Speech is almost entirely absent. The "heroine" represents the extremity of adolescent alienation. For much of the film she remains barricaded in a sparsely furnished room writing and rewriting a letter than is never finished and whose content remains undisclosed. During this agonizing sequence she spends most of her days and nights crouched in a corner in a fetal position or lying naked on a mattress. Occasionally she stops to eat some powdered sugar. Mostly she waits! In a casual throwaway line she announces that she waits either for God or for an unidentified other to deliver a pair of gloves. When the film concludes abruptly the viewer knows nothing more of the heroine than what one sees in the opening of the first scene. She is without identity, personal and cultural, geographic or religious.

Superficially, in *Je, tu, il, elle*, Akerman endows the male protagonist with more of an identity: He speaks! However, his speech is mechanical and monotonic revealing only a psycho-sociological generality. All the viewer is privy to is that although he is in his thirties emotionally his development is arrested in early adolescent desire. Pointedly, Akerman gives few clues to context. The time and place of the film are nowhere and everywhere.

Akerman's female protagonists generally are no strangers to the numbness and solipsism of the nameless heroine of *Je, tu, il, elle*. Nevertheless, in *Les rendez-vous d'Anna* (Calling Anna) (1978) Akerman explores the reasons for the anomie of her protagonists. The question Akerman poses for the actors is who are we? And who can we be in this postwar world? Akerman is only slightly more forthcoming about the film's meaning than in her earlier ones. Anna's alienation is acute. She chooses literally never to go home. Although she possesses a Parisian apartment, she conducts her life from hotel rooms and trains. Indeed, the whole of the film takes place in hotel rooms, and trains with only the closing shot occurring in Anna's apartment. The apartment lacks personal signs of significance. The emptiness expresses Anna's sense of belonging nowhere. The film ends abruptly with Anna listening to disembodied messages. The only apparent relationship in her life is the tenuous link to other voices on the automatic answering machine.

Despite the exteriority of Akerman's narrative technique her text allows for decoding the repressed material. Anna Silver, the heroine of *Les rendez-vous d'Anna* is a cinema director on tour flogging her most recent film. Doing some minor calculations, we can extrapolate that the heroine and her ex-fiancé Daniel were born in 1950, children whose parents were displaced persons who had become very intimate friends in Belgium. They have been engaged twice to each other but are incapable of making the commitment to marriage and family despite their professed mutual affection.

The film's narrative occurs in 1978 somewhere in Germany, on intercity trains between Cologne and Brussels and Brussels and Paris. Akerman focuses markedly on the naming of the geographic locations along the route from Germany to France while intentionally avoiding naming the German city in the film's opening segment. That episode begins with a long shot of the platform of an unnamed train station followed by the station seen from the hotel window. This suggests an unidentified German everywhere.⁵ Later a long sequence from a window of a moving train – the most extended seg-

5. Even the singular clue, a visit to Bottrop, tells us merely that the action takes place in North West Rhein-Westphalia. Bottrop appears to be something of a film centre.

ment in the film – evokes a landscape of desolation and eerie bleakness reminiscent of Chirico. The passing scenery plots a technological industrial nightmare punctuated by endless rows of railway boxcars. And everywhere visions of train tracks accompanied by the sound of the train rhythmically and relentlessly marking time.

Chantal Akerman's camera creates the illusion that it records just what there is to see. And the silent visual communication registers tropically the holocaust. But, can we be sure that the holocaust is the spectral image looming over Akerman's cinematography? What are the clues? Recall, the heroine's name is Anna Silver. Her ex-fiancé is Daniel. Are these Jewish names? Perhaps, but we cannot be certain. None of the protagonist mentions the word Jew. And there is only the barest of hints of the shoah. Anna, like Akerman, is a passive receptor for just what she hears and what attracts her gaze. So, it is mostly from others that we might learn what is going on. And it is from her intense inability to respond that we learn of the raw wound of the shoah thirty years after the event. Displacement, psychological and geographic in relation to identity is the recurrent motif of the work. Beneath the cool surface of postmodern affluence the Jewish trauma controls the film's narrative without the word Jew or holocaust or survivor ever being uttered.

Comments about language and its implied link to being give the film its haunting tenuous coherence as a holocaust narrative. And it is in these explicit, albeit offhanded remarks about language facility and appropriate accents that reveal the lost and splintered identities of most of the actors. Akerman equates the formation of the abandoned self with linguistic inadequacy, perceived or real.

Anna's meeting with Daniel's mother Ida in the Cologne railway station provides the occasion for an exchange pointing to the dislocation and simultaneously the long term psychological scars resulting from the war time experiences. Ida's superficial composure belies the underlying insecurity and anxiety she feels. She expresses this in metaphors of linguistic confusion. Ida, although Polish by birth, a resident in Belgium for twenty-five years, a returnee to Germany in 1975 speaks German to Anna. She says that she never mastered French and she learned to get by in German. It was a necessity. Unease and the edge of the abyss are Ida's existential condition. The return to Germany was economic, and as she says, "you never know what awaits us around the corner". Her husband, we learn from her account, has bouts of rage directed at her because there is no other person or group to focus on. She understands the rage. It comes from the experience of the camps and the war overall. Ida says the abuse is better than having a silent

husband. He is all she has. Daniel, her youngest lives in Paris while her oldest son has emigrated to America with his family and vows never to visit his parents while they live in Germany.

Ida recognizes that she is at home nowhere. She comments sardonically that living in Germany is almost like the good old days. Sequentially and pointedly Akerman sandwiched her remarks between Anna's encounters with two German men who speak familiar German responses to the holocaust. In the first, she has a casual date with a divorced man whom she meets at her film showing. Anna cannot relate to him but she listens to his remarks about his sense of alienation. He too has a fractured identity. Incongruously he claims to lack a *Heimat* although he lives in the same house that served his grandfather and a father. He is unwilling to know the past apart from the fact that his father was killed at Stalingrad. He expresses a simplistic confusion of his identity and his own condition. His unreflective speech is indeed non-communication. His German may be perfect but his repression denies him an authentic self. He sees himself as a bewildered victim who seeks only the comforts of bourgeois marriage and the peace of the tomb. Anna listens silently but sympathetically although she refuses his sexual advances and leaves him.

Her second encounter occurs on the train from Cologne to Brussels. A German fellow starts a casual conversation. He is Berlin born, lived in Hamburg and in South America, Spain, and he is on his way to his sixth "home" or at least he hopes it will be, Paris. Anna compliments him on the finesse of his French. He confesses that the motivation for his linguistic prowess was his love of a French woman. Sadly, she left him for a young Swede, who was according to this fellow stronger, better than himself. In turn he compliments Anna on her French. Pointedly, although it is presumably her first language, Anna insists that she doesn't speak it well. To italicize the point, later in the film when Anna meets her mother in the Brussels Midi Station she chides her mother for her poor French accent. A judgment her mother rejects with the assertion that others tell her that she has a fine accent. In Akerman's eyes Anna's mother is paradoxically a more integrated person that her daughter despite the direct experience of the war. She is comfortable living in French. Her other-directedness signifies both resignation and relative acceptance of her place in the world. Her attitude is that complaining is useless. She is reconciled. If she is not happy at least, she is not miserable. She muses aloud that the time may have come to forgive the Germans. Anna's response, "perhaps!" Linguistically, culturally, sexually Anna knows not who she is.

The inferences we make in *Les rendez-vous d'Anna* about the Jewish subtext are confirmed more explicitly in *Window Shopping*. Anna's mother's outlook on life is the central focus of this film. A shimmering veneer of a musical comedy replaces the grim surface of *Les rendez-vous d'Anna*. Superficially, *Window Shopping's* sensibility differs radically from the earlier films as to suggest a different writer and director. This is no longer the work of a formalist aesthete. Technically Akerman employs all the devices of a Hollywood film. It has a soundtrack that parodies the soft rock of the American musical of the era and it satirizes both American sitcoms and more pointedly the French traditional obsession with the overwhelming mostly destructive desire intrinsic to romantic love. Akerman draws her picture of youthful desire as love from American teen culture, something that now affects France and also the rest of the world.

The film's setting is a marble-clad shopping mall complete with a cinema, clothing stores, hair styling emporium and coffee bar below the Champs-Élysées. Infatuation denoted as love appears as yet another consumer product. One shops for romantic satisfaction as for a new dress or suit. The film pits grandiose infinite insatiable desire and gratification against sobriety, mutuality and the bourgeois satisfaction with life as the realization of the possible. The work celebrates the small victories possible in a world full of suffering compared with the demand for instant and ephemeral gratification. Akerman explores competing conceptions of happiness and contentment with a light touch despite the painful subtext of the film. Notwithstanding the comic touch Akerman does not demean the reality of desire. Nor does she turn the contentment of bourgeois marriage into a maudlin sermon.

Akerman sets the tone with an apparent paean to North American existence. Sylvie the coffee-bar attendant reads from a letter from her boyfriend extolling the limitless possibilities in the pursuit of happiness on that continent. This position is countered by Jeanne to the effect that love (life) is the same the world over. Anna's mother is the prototype of Jeanne Schwartz, polish-born wife of a clothing shop owner, a survivor of the concentration camps, and mother of the emotionally adolescent Robert, the son in training for a life as a shopkeeper. Schwartz, like all the fathers in Akerman's films lacks a given name. He is hard working with an imagination limited apparently to the platitudinous possibilities of commercial enterprise. He loves his wife and despairs at his son's lack of sobriety. He presents his son with all of the bourgeois advice warnings against the fickleness of the passions. While he tells his son that he too was once young we do not really believe him.

That will be different when Jeanne reveals her story. At the beginning of the film *Monsieur Schwartz* is a figure of fun whose dignity is ultimately quietly acknowledged. Madame Schwartz repeats her husband's view of existence giving it a deftness, poignancy and elegiac dignity.

Akerman makes use mostly of a conventional plot. Girls Mado and Pascale want the unapproachable boy, Robert Schwartz. Robert yearns for unattainable blond Lilli. Lilli, the cynical mistress of Monsieur Jean does not know what she wants. Monsieur Schwartz covets Lilli's shop that Monsieur Jean underwrites. Enter Eli Jackson into these comic triangles. For more than thirty years he has pined for the Polish Jewish refugee he met in Paris at the war's end. Eli finds her. It is Jeanne and he tries to sweep her off her feet. She finds his attentions exciting but she refuses. He professes that his chaste love for her has been the sole love of his life. Poignantly, but without self pity she explains her rejection of his offer. First she says that after the camps her heart is dead. Love can never be for her. And desire is the prerogative of the young and she insists that she is old. She was born old. However, her acts undercut her words. And she articulates a different explanation for her refusal to abandon her husband and son. With the possibility of fulfilling an old desire she realizes that she has a good life. She loves her husband and son. She is pleased to serve customers in the shop and wants nothing more. The time has passed for romantic love if that time ever was. Akerman underlines her critique of romantic love in a world that has known the holocaust. Even yearning romantic love cannot transcend the linguistic homelessness of war-torn world. Neither Eli nor Jeanne had the words to express the feelings they held for each other when they first met in the early days after the liberation of Paris.

Yet Jeanne's words of the annihilated spirit are not the speech of bitter resignation. Nor are her actions. Significantly, she does not express this to Eli. Instead she speaks of love touched by grace of *tikun olam* as words of consolation for Mado, the young woman rejected by her son Robert, a day before their wedding. She speaks of the true meaning of love. Jeanne's words of consolation distinguish love from mere desire without negating desire. Mado has loved Robert and it was not in vain. To love another, even unrequited love, adds to the store of good in the world. She assures Mado that a man will love her in a way worthy of her.

The viewer does not know whether Mado will find a man who loves her. Presumably in a comic film that end can be predicted. However, Akerman's goal is to redeem unrewarded desire, with the jubilation of authentic bourgeois marriage. Undoubtedly Akerman shares Jeanne's words.

For within moments of Jeanne's rejection Eli makes off with the infamous Lilli for what will be a short three month affair. He appears again in the final frames of the film with his new French wife. Monsieur Jean appears in the finale reconciled with his wife and two daughters.

With the exception of the Jewish subtext Akerman appears to have made a conventional comedy. But the exception counts in Akerman's corpus and in the context of French cultural life. In *Window Shopping*, a most unpromising venue, alienation is overcome, reconciliation and mutuality become realizable existential goals. What Anna in *Les rendez-vous d'Anna* could not understand about her mother, Ida and their shop owner husbands is now not only understandable but presented as desirable existential precepts. Akerman presents French Jews to themselves all the while universalizing the theme. Pointedly Akerman sets these films in periods of an economic downturn. The illusion of identities based on American consumerism fall by wayside but without undermining pride in work, and the commercial spirit.

One wonders what prompted Akerman's transformed vision of existence? What psychiatrist worked his/her magic? What change of time and place? Both are suggested by the subject matter and setting for her most recent film *Un divan à New York (A Couch in New York)*. It is her most removed from French formalism. Its sophisticated dialogue leads to the conventionally happy ending: Akerman has made a romantic comedy with a twist. The film is set mostly in New York and satirizes psychoanalysts chiefly of the Lacanian kind. The protagonists swap apartments with the young woman moving into the high tech meticulously decorated Central Park West apartment of a prominent New York analyst while he moves into her bohemian, dishevelled Paris garret. She leaves behind her thwarted lovers while he leaves his morose dog and his bedraggled patients. The analyst is a repressed anal neurotic and she is an anarchic gypsy. Neither is capable of commitment. By a series of accidents she begins offering analytic sessions to his patients with great success. Her winning technique comprises of a few supportive grunts and the advice that loving your mother is okay. The analyst returns to New York to check out what is going on. He becomes one of her more resistant analysands. Nonetheless, they fall in love and eventually manage to make the commitment to one another so that the film can conclude with the audience knowing that they will live happily ever after.

The advice that loving one's mother is okay resonates within Akerman's narrative. Although in this film it receives comic treatment and the protagonist, unable to relate, is male instead of female, repression and alienation are

similarly present. While unimportant to the film's meaning, the phrase points to the silence evident in Akerman's other films. By inference the viewer recognizes that the analyst left behind his mother and most of his childhood friends somewhere in Brooklyn for Harvard and Central Park West. Upward mobility rather than the holocaust is the repressed material. Perhaps not a very serious or traumatic matter. I suspect that Akerman could not have made this film in Europe. It is only in the expansiveness of American life that she can leave the Holocaust behind for American anonymity common to a certain segment of American Jewry. Her flirtation with America is common to many postwar French Jews. One recognizes the yearning in Georges Perec, and Jacques Derrida. The appeal is especially strong for Jewish identity that is lacking either Zionist or religious content. Yet, as a group they recognize that French universalism has failed them. It may be too much to say that Akerman's next film will return to a Jewish theme in which the protagonists have a richer Jewish identity. What we can say however is that the flirtation with America ends with the newly committed couple returning to a shared life in Paris.

Filmography

- Je, tu, il, elle*. Written and directed by Chantal Akerman, with Niels Arestrup and Claire Wanthion. Co-prod. France and Belgium (Paradise Films), World Artists, 1974.
- Les rendez-vous d'Anna*. Written and directed by Chantal Akerman, with Jean-Pierre Cassel and Aurore Clément. Co-prod. France, Belgium, Germany (Helene Films Unité Trois; Paradise Films: Z.D.F), World Artist (1988), 1978.
- Window Shopping* (also know as the *Wonderful 80's*). Dir. Chantal Akerman. Written by Chantal Akerman and Leora Barish, with Myriam Boyer and John Berry. Co-prod. France (Ministre de la culture française) and Belgium (Communauté française de Belgique), World Artists, 1986.
- Un divan a New York (A Couch in New York)*. Dir. Chantal Akerman. Written by: Chantal Akerman & Jean- Louis Benoît; with Juliette Binoche and William Hurt. Co-prod. France, Belgium and Germany (Union générale cinématographique); PolyGram Filmed Entertainment, 1996.

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