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Temps mort: Speaking about Chantal Akerman (1950-2015)

Eric De Kuyper & Annie Van den Oever

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On 5 October 2015 the esteemed Belgium filmmaker Chantal Akerman passed away unexpectedly. Her sudden death created an outpouring of tributes in journals and blogs all over the world, full of sadness about the loss of an extraordinary filmmaker who has been celebrated ever since she made her masterpiece *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975) at age 25. Forty years after its premiere, she opted for a *Freitod*, as some of her friends had long feared.

The Belgium filmmaker, writer, and scholar Eric de Kuyper (from Brussels, like Akerman) met Akerman in the late 1960s. They not only became friends and stayed so for most of her life, they also worked closely together on several projects (e.g. *La Captive* [2000]). De Kuyper has made several films, including *Naughty Boys* (1984), and is now in pre-production on *My Life as an Actor*. His best-known work as a film scholar is on the representation of the male body in classical Hollywood from 1933-1955 (*De verbeelding van het mannelijk lichaam*, published in 1993). This dialogue reassesses some of the topics regarding Akerman's work in the personal context of their friendship: her early debut at 18; her sudden fame at 25; her extraordinary writing talent; her lightness; her minimalism; her strong voice; her use of dead time, or *temps mort*; her work on Proust; her feminism; her Judaism.



Eric de Kuyper

van den Oever: As so many others, when hearing about Chantal Akerman having died, I re-watched the unforgettable sequences in *Jeanne Dielman*. I remember the early screenings you organised as a film scholar while founding the first program in film studies in the Netherlands, at the Catholic University of Nijmegen. The rigour and clarity of Akerman's filmic vision have remained undimmed and undated, as written in *The Guardian* obituary.¹

de Kuyper: I agree. I also remember these screenings.

van den Oever: I clearly remember how completely swept away we were as young students by these incredibly long sequences of a woman preparing food *in real time* in a mundane apartment in Brussels. The sequences of a young widow with an unfashionable haircut and a light blue cardigan peeling potatoes in medium close-up while processing her life as a woman does *not* end with the murder of one of her clients (the killing takes less than a minute of screen time!), but with that extraordinary, seven-minute sequence of Jeanne facing the camera, motionless, her expression seemingly oblivious of what has just happened.² Akerman was a master of dead time, an extraordinary filmmaker. You have known her for a good part of her life, haven't you? How did the two of you first meet?

de Kuyper: It was spring, and the year was 1968. The bell was ringing, I opened the door. A very young girl – 16 years old I thought, but actually 18 – with a glorious smile said to me: 'I brought you my film!' It was Chantal Akerman bringing me her first film, *Saute ma Ville / Blow Up My Town* (1968). The filmmaker André Delvaux sent Chantal to me for good reasons. At the time I had a film program on Flemish Television (BRT), *De Andere Film / The Other Movie*. I showed experimental films, underground movies, and other bizarre things. I was impressed by the direct spontaneity of the film as well as by the maker. So of course I showed the film.

van den Oever: So this was a very early and important moment of recognition for her as a filmmaker?

de Kuyper: Modesty should forbid me to say that it was Flemish television, with myself and in the first place André Delvaux, who helped Chantal to start her film career... Anyway, let's forget about modesty. It is so important for an artist to be discovered, and not necessarily with fantastic applause. What is needed is just that one voice welcoming a new talent... I

know for myself, without the voice of Hubert Bals of the Rotterdam Film Festival (showing *Casta Diva* in 1982) I would never have made another film. If that one important voice is missing at the beginning it must be called... a shameful mistake. Only recently, an important Flemish critic, Patrick Duynslager, admitted that he had not recognised the talent of Chantal at the beginning. That's a shame. He should have! That was his job, as it was my job – to discover young talent. And then, it is of course the responsibility of the audience too...

van den Oever: And then the two of you became friends?

de Kuiper: Yes, then Chantal and I became friends.

van den Oever: In interviews she declared that her first film, and indeed her film-making desires, were sparked at 16 by Jean-Luc Godard's *Pierrot le Fou* (1965). Do you recall Godard being important to her in this early phase?

de Kuiper: One thing Godard meant to her was the discovery that movies could mean... freedom. In a narrow, closed-off, stuffy family world, where *other* worlds were to be imagined by reading novels, being confronted with a movie like *Pierrot le Fou*...

van den Oever: You mean that Godard first of all radiated freedom to her and playfulness? If it was allowed to make playful films like this, then she herself wanted to make films too? Was this part of what she celebrated in *Saute ma Ville*: her escape from family life? The title itself seems indicative of this, and of her playfulness. *Blow Up My Town*.

de Kuiper: In fact, Godard was referred too no more. Did she ever meet him? I don't think so. Of course, he was from another generation and well-established. I don't recall Chantal telling me about other films by Godard either. On the other hand, she did stay in contact with Agnes Varda, and she did like her films...

van den Oever: So *Pierrot le Fou* ...

de Kuiper: ... was more like a 'fetish'. The film helped her to discover filmmaking as a way to escape the fatalism of a petit-bourgeois family life: their tiny family flat in Brussels; the small family business, a leather

shop; her younger sister, accepting the established rules and meeting the expectations of becoming a good daughter. Don't forget that these were the sixties! Her quest was to find out how to lead a different life, how to divert from the mainstream and be 'marginal' and make 'marginal films'. However, we must not forget that family life continued to be present most of the time in most of her films, from the very beginning until the end. And one can argue that all her films are autobiographical. She was an authentic 'auteur'.

van den Oever: And she had quite an impact. For instance, one may argue that *La vie d'Adèle / Blue is the Warmest Colour* (2013) echoes the sequences with the lovers in her *Je tu il elle* (1976).

de Kuyper: She enlarged the genre of auteur cinema. She changed non-commercial, avant-garde, and experimental cinema. Her impact was evident. She has also been copied in many ways and there are some pseudo-Akerman films around.

van den Oever: She was an auteur and an actor. In her debut she plays the main character herself. She seems to have liked acting from the start. She had a talent for acting, right? She acted in several of her films and did many of the voice-overs herself. Her acting instructions to Delphine Seyrig during the filming of *Jeanne Dielman* are also noteworthy. Seyrig, playing Jeanne, asks her how to brush her hair in front of a mirror *as Jeanne*. 'How can I play her if I don't know her secrets?' Akerman's response is very detailed and interesting. She tells her leading lady, so much older than she was herself, that she must brush her hair slowly, not fast. And not dreamily. For Jeanne, she explains, this is a moment of rest ('repos') she creates for herself. She suggested that Seyrig brush her hair continuously *but with uneven strokes*. 'Now I get it!', Seyrig said.³

de Kuyper: She really liked acting and writing. One example: we did a reading, one scene, of Chantal's book *Une Famille à Bruxelles* with Aurore Clément and Chantal for the Kunstenfestival des Arts in Brussels. Chantal read her whole book, live, in a very simple setting: her kitchen. As she was afraid that her voice was perhaps not strong enough to sustain for the whole performance, we then asked Clément to alternate with her in the reading. The same reading, one scene, was repeated live in Avignon for a radio recording on France Culture.⁴ She loved acting, yet she never saw

herself as an actor. Writing was very important to her. If she had a good publisher she would have written and published more.

I remember when she wrote her first real script for a feature film, which would become *Jeanne Dielman*. She got a grant for it. But before starting the shoot she suddenly was not satisfied with the script anymore. I remember a discussion we had in Brussels between doors – yes, I remember staying in the corridor – about how she wanted to change the original script.

van den Oever: To me, she is the true master of *temps mort*. *Jeanne Dielman* made her the master of dead time. It is used by her more radically than by Godard, and one may argue that she invented a new film language based on it. This new language was fully developed in 1975 in *Jeanne Dielman*, which, perhaps inevitably, became her most discussed movie.⁵ It can be read as a feminist film, and a very fitting one for the mid-seventies. And it can be read as a tribute to *dead time*... In this film about a young widow who is prostituting herself to provide a living and who happens to kill a client in passing, she forces a complete reversal of focus upon us, viewers. Akerman dramatised and de-dramatised against the grain. The film hardly shows Jeanne in the act of prostituting or killing; the presentation of these acts is radically elliptic. Yet the sequences with Jeanne peeling potatoes and making a meatloaf in real time are quite memorable, as are the sequences with Jeanne caught in front of the mirror brushing her hair while acting out the unconscious processing of her life in real time.

de Kuypere: We should not forget that she was also much impressed by the American underground. She got to know the work of Warhol, Snow, and other postwar American avant-garde artists at an early age. I showed them on Belgium Television in my programme *De Andere film* in the same period I showed her *Saute ma ville*. And in part her so-called minimalism was also pragmatic, a kind of way of doing things: let's keep it simple.

van den Oever: If you allow me to go back to the chronology of her life and your personal friendship, what more happened between her debut in 1968 and *Jeanne Dielman* in 1975?

de Kuypere: A few years after *Saute ma ville* she wanted to make another movie. With my 2CV, Emile [Poppe], Chantal, and I drove to the Côte d'Azur where she had managed to find a villa where she could make *L'Enfant Aimé*. After a few weeks the shooting, which took place in the



Fig. 1: Delphine Seyrig as Jeanne Dielman in Akerman's *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975).

garden of the villa, was abandoned. The film was never finished and disappeared. I never saw what was shot in Hyères.

van den Oever: And then she decided to move to New York?

de Kuyper: I already said that she was really impressed by postwar American avant-garde filmmakers. She really was very impressed, and then she decided to leave for New York, where she could see a lot of the American underground at Jonas Mekas' Anthology Cinema. She came back with a new film, *Hôtel Monterey* (1972). Again, I showed the film on *De Andere Film*, though we had a bit of a problem... The film is silent, and therefore it would have been impossible to show it on television! So I added music... for one or another reason, Mozart's *Don Giovanni*! Some years after this she wrote her first real script for a feature film, which was *Jeanne Dielman*.

van den Oever: And then suddenly she became famous worldwide?

de Kuyper: Something strange happened. In a way, Chantal became a kind of diva for the emerging American film studies and gender studies programmes. One may call it a kind of misunderstanding, however fruitful, as she had no feeling or interest at all in what is called 'academia'... or 'theory'. She was not at ease with institutions. She had a very abstract kind of intelligence. For instance, while Emile and I were writing our doctorate, she was incredibly quick in understanding – intuitively, I may say – struc-



Fig. 2: Delphine Seyrig as Jeanne Dielman in Akerman's *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975).

turalism and the most difficult aspects of Greimasian linguistics, which is not easy!

van den Oever: Did she thrive on her success?

de Kuyper: The enormous impact and success – alas, non-commercial – of the film was, in a way, a heavy burden.

van den Oever: At times it seemed she felt she was expected to create something similar to that masterpiece she made at 25? And then there was the constant stream of interviews? Too many invitations, yet too little money for new film projects?

de Kuyper: There were finished as well as some unfinished projects. Once again, I worked closely with her on one of her next feature films: *Les rendez-vous d'Anna* (1978). As I knew the region of the Ruhr quite well, we did the scouting for the locations together. In Paris, for several years, Emile and I slept on her couch in her flat, enjoying going to the movies together. Emile and I were finishing our doctorates. Then there was the big adventure of Chantal's and my work on Isaac Bashevis Singer. She obtained the rights from the Nobel Prize winner, so we went on adapting *The Manor and The Estate*. A big production, this saga of Polish Jews emigrating to the United States. In Hollywood, where we stayed for several weeks, she found

a lot of producers who thought this was ‘fantastic’! It all sounded very promising. But then... nothing came of it.

van den Oever: This became one of the unfinished projects?

de Kuypers: In a filmography there are always these blind spots: written scenarios which were never shot, projects which never materialised. For instance, after working on *La Captive* (2000), we wrote a wonderful adaptation of *Chéri* and *La fin de Chéri* by Colette. Too late, we discovered that all the rights for the French writer were blocked by Stephan Frears, who made a rather mediocre film on Colette some years later. Our next project was the adaptation of Patricia Highsmith’s *The Price of Salt*, which was later published under the title *Carol*. Again, our work had to be interrupted because of film rights. We had learned our lesson. *Carol* is coming out now, but by Todd Haynes, not by Chantal Akerman. And then there were different projects for the theatre and even one for an opera by Xenakis. Chantal was not really motivated to do them. I regret that, because I would have been very much involved in these projects.

van den Oever: But in between you also made an adaptation of Proust together, *La Prisonnière*, released in 2000 as *La Captive*, book five of *À la recherche du temps perdu / Remembrance of Things Past*. That was a success.

de Kuypers: She liked Proust a lot and she was very clear about what part of the novel she wanted to work on. *The Captive* was fun to write. Sometimes we could not really find out who wrote what. Was it a dialogue by Proust, or by Chantal, or me? I truly enjoyed writing scripts with Chantal. Her scripts were always well-written – they really existed as a text. So later I wanted to adapt ‘our’ *Captive* for the theatre. I myself was more interested in the ‘lighter’ aspects of Proust... This does not mean that I disagreed with her way of reading Proust. On the contrary. As a co-writer, I am always ‘jumping’ in the head of the filmmaker to try to feel as she feels... But then, as a director I have my own feelings! And for me Proust was lighter, more humorous... I liked Chantal’s writing style very much, and I also really regretted the fact that she did not publish more after *Une Famille à Bruxelles*.

van den Oever: You felt she was not only a true filmmaker but also a true writer?

de Kuyper: The feature films she made, in my view, in the scripts, there was a lot of lightness, fantasy, and humor, yet these were partly missing in the films. For instance, *Demain on déménage* (2004), which we really wrote as a comedy, in the end did not become a film comedy. As everyone knows, shooting a film can be so heavy that it affects everything. Lightness and humor are much easier obtained at your desk, writing, drinking coffee, smoking, going for a walk with the dog, chatting about the movies one saw last night, or a book one was reading... She was of course always interrupted by calls for interviews, meetings... Lots of them she did – from her bed. That was her favorite place, together with her kitchen. We agreed on a lot in everyday life. Privately, she was an adorable and a very generous person. Professionally? Less so. There, she was the Author. Of course she was... but...

van den Oever: What did she do when projects were rejected and remained unfinished?

de Kuyper: In between her feature films and projects which were rejected she made these wonderful documentaries – *D'Est / From the East* (1993), *Sud / South* (1999), *De l'autre côté / From the Other Side* (2002) – with a very small crew. She acted as an explorer of the landscape and the people living in it: Russia, the South of the United States, the Mexican border. Patiently, she looked and looked. I remember her telling me that as a child she could observe people for many hours – a workman, a carpenter, or a street cleaner, just doing his work.

van den Oever: Her mother and Judaism played an important role in the last ten years?

de Kuyper: Yes, indeed. In fact, her Jewish identity did not play an important role at all in her earlier life, nor in that of her family. Of course, some of the projects I worked on with her, like the Singer script, had a direct connection. And during the last years, in a time when I had no contact with her, Judaism became more important to her, I think. We all had seen her quest for a Jewish identity coming for longer. It was of course related to her mother, towards whom she was full of feelings of guilt as a daughter. In the last part of her life she was at times fully absorbed with Judaism and her Jewish identity. It can be compared with her feminism. It was a kind of reference. A frame or 'hold' in a chaotic world. This was more or less present and changing during her life, I guess.

van den Oever: Her last ten years were devoted to other projects too?

de Kuyper: Yes. In part, this was also due to changing circumstances. In the first years of this century video installations became fashionable in the world of the arts. Big business indeed, but, as with academia, I am inclined to say that she did not have much affinity or a natural bond with that 'world'. The art world certainly appreciated her, and she was invited to Kassel and to Venice, but it was not really her thing at all! Movies and literature – that was her world.

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Notes

1. *The Guardian* obituary as written by Jonathan Romney, 8 October 2015:<http://www.theguardian.com/film/2015/oct/08/chantal-akerman>.
2. An evocative analysis of *Jeanne Dielman* can be found in Pravadelli 2000.
3. See 'Chantal Akerman and Delphine Seyrig filming Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles (1975)'. Upload 16 May 2009 by Lachambreverte.
4. Akerman's *Une Famille à Bruxelles* was published as a 'Récit' in 1998 by L'Arche.
5. See Margulies 1996, 2006.