

## Introduction: the multiple faces of Chantal Akerman

One of Europe's most acclaimed and prolific contemporary directors – critic J. Hoberman calls her 'comparable in force and originality to Godard or Fassbinder ... arguably the most important European director of her generation' (Hoberman 1991: 148) –, Chantal Akerman is also one notoriously difficult to classify. The director came to prominence with *Jeanne Dielman, 23, quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975), her minimalist portrait of a Belgian housewife and daytime prostitute which, overnight, brought the twenty-four-year-old international recognition and placed her at the centre of debates surrounding women's cinema and feminist film-making. At its commercial release in 1976, the French daily *Le Monde* hailed the movie, which runs to a demanding 3 hours and 20 minutes in length, 'le premier chef d'œuvre au féminin de l'histoire du cinéma'<sup>1</sup> (Marcorelles 1976); the influential New York newspaper *Village Voice* has since rated it among the one hundred best films of the twentieth century.

More than thirty years on, Akerman has authored over forty films, straddling a wide range of genres – burlesque and romantic comedy, epistolary film, musical, experimental documentary, video installation – and embracing such diverse thematic concerns as coming of age and adolescent crisis, the construction of gender and sexual identities, wandering and exile, Jewish culture and memory. Strongly indebted to 1970s experimental film-making, she has gradually ventured into more commercial cinema, but remains true to the detached, anti-illusionist style that has become her signature, even in more mainstream works. Labelled a feminist and a queer

<sup>1</sup> 'the first masterpiece in the feminine in the history of cinema.'

director, an experimental ethnographer and a conceptualist, a hyper-realist and a minimalist, a diasporic film-maker and a great European *auteur*, she, to a greater or lesser degree, at different stages of her career, has been (and continues to be) all of these, but cannot – and refuses to be – pinned down to any one denomination. Expounding a dazzling diversity, her work resists easy appropriation into theoretical debates, artistic movements or national schools or traditions. Intensely personal but always distanced, blurring the boundaries between fiction and autobiography, obsessed with borders and liminal spaces, her cinema is characteristically *entre deux* (in-between). Her self-portrait *Autoportrait en cinéaste* (2004), an invaluable source for understanding the ideas and aesthetic principles that have shaped her films, in its meandering style and multilayered narrative, testifies to her resistance to conventional forms of (self-)representation and to her profound distrust of simple binaries and rigid categories.

Akerman was born in Brussels on 6 June 1950, the first child of Jewish Polish immigrants who settled in Belgium in the late 1930s. Her family history is intimately bound up with the horrors of the Holocaust. Both her maternal grandparents were murdered in Auschwitz. Her mother survived deportation and internment, her father hid in a small apartment in Brussels. In both interviews and *Autoportrait*, Akerman has repeatedly commented on the decisive influence her parents' – especially her mother's – silence about their experience has exercised on her work. The incomplete passing-down of stories from one generation to the next, she explains, prompted her to invent false memories – alternative fictions, indeed an alternative autobiography – that were to act as a substitute for the blanks in her family history: 'Un enfant avec une histoire pleine de trous, ne peut que se réinventer une mémoire ... Alors l'autobiographie dans tout ça ne peut être que réinventée'<sup>2</sup> (Akerman 2004: 30). Film-making, for her, was an imaginative and creative engagement with the silence that weighed heavily on her childhood: 'j'ai voulu remplir ce silence bruyant de bruyant silence, dans un espace-temps. J'ai voulu faire du cinéma'<sup>3</sup> (ibid.: 56). In a process she calls 'ressassement' (turning-over), and which she explicitly associates with a return of

2 'A child with a history full of blanks has no option but to reinvent her memories ... So, autobiography, given all of this, can only be reinvented.'

3 'I wanted to fill this noisy silence with silent noise, in a space-time. I wanted to make films.'

the repressed that haunts second-generation Holocaust survivors,<sup>4</sup> many of her films relentlessly revisit the traumatic experience of her parents' generation whilst working through her own feelings of loss and uprootedness.

Akerman's relationship with her Jewish heritage is ambiguous. She received a religious education in her early childhood, but was moved to a non-confessional school after the death of her grandfather. In recent years, in line with a more open engagement with her Jewish roots, she has revealed her continuing attachment to Jewish ritual despite the fact that, as she states, she is not a religious person, and has stressed her indebtedness to Jewish prayer and litany in the scripting of her chant-like film dialogues. Her marginal status as a Jew in a predominantly Christian society and her belonging to a minority group of immigrants with distinct cultural customs and traditions fostered in her, from an early age, a sense of alterity and non-belonging, which has crystallised as a major theme in her work. The economically modest environment in which she grew up (her parents owned a leather goods shop in a Brussels shopping arcade, but, in the immediate post-war, struggled to make ends meet) and the middle-class culture which was imposed on her at school alerted her to class and cultural difference and to the realities of social division, another dominant concern of her oeuvre.

Considering cinema an 'impure' art form, an inhibition she attributes to the Jewish prohibition against visual representation in the Second Commandment – 'Thou shalt not make graven images' –, Akerman was initially more inclined towards writing rather than directing. Although she happily defies this injunction in her work, nonetheless, as she states in an interview with Jean-Luc Godard, it profoundly influenced her attitude to visual representation, making her prefer indirect, 'distilled' images over more direct representational strategies (cf. Bergstrom 2003: 94). Literature and other forms of writing remain an important reference point for her as is evinced in her frequent mention of works of fiction and philosophy – in *Autoportrait*, she cites Kafka, Proust, Faulkner and Baldwin alongside Lacan, Deleuze, Didi-Huberman, Benjamin and Levinas – as well as in her own activities as a writer. She is responsible for most of her film

4 'Je pense que nous représentons la génération où il y a un retour du refoulé' (I think we are the generation where the repressed comes back) (cit. in Bergstrom 2003: 98).

scripts and has also authored a play, *Hall de nuit* (1992), in addition to an autobiographically inspired prose work, *Une famille à Bruxelles* (1998). The written, especially in the form of letters, is present in many of her films and the figure of the writer, an autofictional<sup>5</sup> incarnation of the director, is central to her latest feature film, *Demain on déménage* (2004).

According to her own testimony, it was the discovery, at the age of fifteen, of Godard's *Pierrot le fou* (1965), one of the most emblematic works of the French New Wave, that incited her to become a director, having revealed to her the experimental and intensely personal quality of a certain type of independent cinema. Thanks to Godard, who remains a constant reference point in her work, Akerman realised that the cinema could vie with the most original of creative writing. In interviews, she deliberately avoids aligning herself with any cinematic tradition or movement, but has nonetheless given some clues to her preferences in terms of film style. As we will see, she is deeply indebted to the American avant-garde of the 1970s, but she also mentions fellow European directors Eric Rohmer, Jean Eustache and Rainer Werner Fassbinder alongside Godard as directors with whom she shares thematic and aesthetic concerns, and stresses her affinity with the cinema of the silent era, whose anti-naturalism and anti-mimetic approach converges with her own film aesthetic (Philippon 1982: 22). It seems more than mere coincidence that the films to which her style is often likened are those she herself remembers having seen in her youth: Robert Bresson's *Pickpocket* (1959), Alain Resnais's *L'Année dernière à Marienbad* (1961) and Michelangelo Antonioni's *Le Désert rouge* (1964) (Akerman 2004: 125).

In professional terms, Akerman is an autodidact. She has followed none of the official circuits of film school and assistantships with prestigious directors that helped to establish other film-makers of her generation like, for instance, Claire Denis. Having dropped out of high school aged seventeen, she enrolled at the INSAS, the Belgian academy of the performing arts and broadcasting, in 1967, but left after a mere three months, disappointed by the Academy's stifling theoretical approach and eager to make her own films. The following year, she briefly studied at the Université internationale du théâtre in Paris. Her first short, *Saute ma ville*, made in revolutionary 1968,

5 The term 'autofiction' designates a blending between autobiography and fiction. It was coined by the French critic and writer Serge Doubrovsky.

is self-taught, self-financed and features Akerman as a teenager who blows up herself, and her eponymous town, during a performance of domestic routine which escalates into self-destruction. Lacking the necessary funding to have it developed, this audacious first film was left gathering dust in a lab for two years until Akerman showed it to the director who was to give her contacts in Flemish television. It was broadcast in Eric de Kuyper's *Alternative Cinema* series, where it received a rave review from Belgium's best-known film-maker, André Delvaux, and was screened at the prestigious Oberhausen Short Film Festival.

After a second short made in Belgium, *L'Enfant aimé ou je joue à être une femme mariée* (1971), which shows a similar preoccupation with women's everyday life, and exhibits Akerman's predilection for long takes, she left first for Israel, where she briefly worked in a kibbutz, and, then, in November 1971, for New York, which became her adoptive home during two extended stays in the course of the 1970s. Much more than the French post-New Wave where she is sometimes classified, it was her discovery of the American avant-garde that was to have a determining influence on her work. Akerman, critics agree, is part of the adventure of American modernity, of the predominantly underground culture animated by a few hundred artists, many exiles like her, who, in a variety of media, challenged conventional forms of artistic expression and representation and opened up exciting new avenues for artistic production. Under the wing of Babette Mangolte, a friend closely bound up with the American avant-garde who was to become director of photography for most of her films of the 1970s, Akerman discovered North American experimental cinema, the minimalist music of Philip Glass as well as New American performance art and dance.

Canadian director Michael Snow's *La Région centrale* (1971), one of the masterpieces of experimental film-making which she first saw at the Anthology Film Archives, the newly opened New York showcase for avant-garde cinema, had a decisive impact on the development of her film aesthetic. Mangolte recalls that she and Akerman spent twelve hours watching the film a total of four times, considering it the most beautiful film they had ever seen (Mangolte 2004: 174). The hypnotic quality of Snow's non-narrative documentary, a cosmic portrait of a barren mountain top in Quebec filmed through a rotating camera anchored to a tripod, revealed to Akerman film's

singular power to render the lyrical dimension of time and space without necessary recourse to words or story. The work of Jonas Mekas, Yvonne Rainer and Annette Michaelson, all directors engaged in finding a new film language outside the commercial channels of production, proved similarly inspirational. The avant-garde's subversion of the traditional divide between 'high' and 'low' art, its emphasis on time, duration and perception, most evident in the work of directors like Snow and Andy Warhol, as well as the militant political stance behind the most radical of New York art, especially feminist cinema, profoundly shaped her attitude to filmic representation. The non-narrative stance of many experimental films of the period, moreover, radically altered her outlook on film aesthetics: considering narrative modes as 'obscene', she henceforth privileged more abstract forms of representation in a quest for a pure cinema liberated from representational constraints.

Developed within the minority culture of American underground art and marked by her own marginal position as an exile earning a living from irregular, low-paid work (among other occupations, she worked as a barmaid and a cashier in a porn cinema), Akerman's cinema has from the outset settled on minority issues and developed alternative themes and strategies to the dominant form of production, Hollywood. In analogy to what Deleuze and Guattari, in their seminal study of Kafka, have termed 'minor literature', she calls her practice that of a 'minor cinema', that is, an art form that consciously embraces its own marginality, rebels against the dominance of big production systems and makes exile – from social and linguistic norms, from fixed conceptions of gender and sexuality, from restrictive forms of belonging – one of its central themes. Although it embraces a wide social spectrum, ranging from destitute rural labourers to the gilded Parisian *grande bourgeoisie*, her work has mainly focused on under-privileged and underrepresented groups who are traditionally denied the right of a place in mainstream cinema: the homeless, illegal immigrants, ethnic minorities, displaced people, housewives, adolescents, the poor, the elderly. Rather than with the extraordinary lives favoured by commercial cinema, she has concerned herself with the quotidian, the triteness and banality of lower-middle-class life that forms the backdrop to many of her fictions, but which, through her rigorous *mise en scène*, is instilled with an unprecedented potential for drama and tension.

Her films of the 1970s most strongly epitomise this minority position, both thematically and formally, although, as we shall see, the themes of exile and alterity are present in virtually all of her output and resurface strongly in the 1990s, especially in her documentary work. *Hotel Monterey* (1972), her first New York documentary strongly influenced by structural film-making practices, is set in a welfare hotel where Akerman herself lodged for some time during her first stay in the US. A second, unfinished documentary, *Hanging out Yonkers* (1973), originates from her work in a day centre for young delinquents and drug addicts in Yonkers, in the New York suburbs. *Je tu il elle* (1974), produced and directed by Akerman who also plays the lead role, is a remarkable study of adolescent crisis and a milestone in the exploration of fluid sexual identities. *Jeanne Dielman* (1975), the film that was to establish her reputation, chronicles the obsessive routine of a widowed mother and prostitute. *News from Home* (1976) and *Les Rendez-vous d'Anna* (1978), finally, two autobiographically inspired pieces, in different film styles, dramatise wandering and uprootedness as forms of personal and artistic exile.

Akerman's output in the 1980s marks a significant departure from her earlier minimalist, single-protagonist narratives and begins an ongoing experiment with more commercially oriented modes of production. Whilst her earlier films are clearly indebted to experimental practices, especially in their use of extended duration and their static, fixed-camera work, in the 1980s, she takes inspiration in more popular genres: melodrama, the musical and slapstick comedy. Abandoning the linear narrative of films such as *Les Rendez-vous d'Anna*, the director now experiments with serial structures based on repetition and accumulation. Likewise, the dry documentary style of some of the earlier work gives way to a more exuberant choreography and to a lighter, more playful tone. The turning point in this development is *Toute une nuit* (1982), a burlesque comedy centred on amorous and sexual encounters during a hot summer night in Brussels. Her next film, *L'Homme à la valise* (1983), in which Akerman once again plays a central role, that of a female director whose privacy is invaded by a male guest, inflects themes of imprisonment and exile in a comic register.

Intermittently, Akerman had embarked on a project of adapting Isaac Bashevis Singer's epic Jewish tales *The Manor* (1967) and *The Estate* (1969), but, unsurprisingly, given her reputation as an

experimental director, failed to raise funds from Hollywood for this monumental and costly film. Fascinated by Minnelli's and Cukor's musical comedies, she decided to experiment with the musical, a genre relatively underdeveloped in Europe, but made popular in France by Jacques Demy. Two films result from this venture: *Les Années 80* (1983) and *Golden Eighties* (1985), the former a 'work in progress' documenting the making of the latter. In the first, Akerman's multiplication of performers, scenes and textures (video and film), evinces a distinctly post-modern aesthetics of juxtaposition (Margulies 1996: 185). The second, deploying a more homogenous texture, but showing a similar affinity with post-modern strategies, parodies love and commerce in 1980s consumer culture. Lastly, *Histoires d'Amérique* (1989) seems, on the surface, to return to Akerman's ethnographic documentary style of the 1970s yet, deceptively, this film on New York's Ashkenazi diaspora uses professional actors and applies the comic mode that dominates this period to a more serious and intimately personal topic.

Whilst Akerman's films in the 1980s, at first sight, appear to depart quite radically from her earlier thematic and style, they nonetheless pursue a distinct set of concerns and an ongoing experiment with film form and visual style: deepening the director's exploration of human relationships, of questions of identity and belonging, and of the dramas of everyday life, they at the same time accentuate the burlesque quality that characterises works like *Saute ma ville* and develop her attention to rhythm and performance already manifest in the preceding decade. In fact, the anti-naturalistic choreography of *Toute une nuit* and *Golden Eighties* seems only one step removed from the stylised gestures and dialogues of *Jeanne Dielman* and *Les Rendez-vous d'Anna*. As Ivone Margulies points out, 'the comedy and the musical forms only exacerbate the manic compulsion of the protagonists' behaviour in the earlier films, and they remain vehicles for Akerman's consistent concern with rhythm' (Margulies 1996: 172).

The last twenty years of Akerman's career, that is, roughly speaking, the early 1990s to the late 2000s, have seen a further diversification of her work. On the one hand, she has ventured deeper into the mainstream with movies such as *Nuit et jour* (1991), a much-acclaimed post-feminist story of a Parisian love triangle, the poorly received Hollywood-style comedy *Un Divan à New York* (1996), her adaptation of Proust, *La Captive* (2000), and her burlesque comedy



*Demain on déménage* (2004). On the other hand, she has produced a remarkable series of experimental documentaries that revert to the minority issues of the 1970s, whilst, at the same time, developing a stronger political edge. The first of a tetralogy, *D'Est* (1993), draws the seismographic portrait of Eastern Europe after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union. The second and third parts, *Sud* (1999) and *De l'autre côté* (2002), centre around racism in the American South and the plight of illegal Mexican immigrants in the US respectively. Finally, *Là-bas* (2006), a more autobiographical work set in Tel Aviv, examines Akerman's relations to the state of Israel and to her Jewish identity.

While the documentary series testifies to Akerman's continued social and political commitment, it also foregrounds an aspect crucial to her oeuvre in general, and one which is more directly graspable in these later works: her conception of the cinematic image as a privileged bridge between past and present. The documentary tetralogy takes the form of a quasi-archaeological process by means of which Akerman seeks to uncover traces of the past behind the deceptive banality of the everyday. Her own interpretation of the first three works of the series within a Holocaust framework and her meditation on her relationship with the state of Israel in the fourth signal a more direct engagement with Jewish memory and with her own family history, an engagement that culminates in the autofictional *Demain on déménage* (2004), an unsettling burlesque comedy that, for the first time, directly addresses the relations between and different existential positions of first- and second-generation Holocaust survivors. If the Holocaust and the Jewish Diaspora were omnipresent in Akerman's work from its very beginnings, but were often merely alluded to in the film narrative or were treated obliquely through the tropes of confinement and wandering, the tragedy of the camps has become more explicit in her later work, be it documentary or fictional. In a career stretching forty years, the autobiographically inspired, individualistic portraits on the turmoil of adolescence and the crystallisation of a social, sexual and artistic identity have gradually given way to a greater engagement with collective History, intimately bound up with personal family history.

This panorama of Akerman's oeuvre is far from exhaustive. In addition to the main works mentioned above and discussed in detail in this book, she has authored some twenty more films, many

of them in shorter format, on a range of topics and for a variety of outputs: a documentary on Jewish grandmothers for French television (*Aujourd'hui, dis-moi*), art films on Austrian concert pianist Alfred Brendel (*Les Trois dernières sonates de Franz Schubert*), German choreographer Pina Bausch (*Un jour Pina a demandé...*) and French violoncellist Sonia Wieder-Atherton (*Avec Sonia Wieder-Atherton, Trois strophes sur le nom de Sacher, A l'Est avec Sonia Wieder-Atherton*), two remarkable studies of coming of age (*J'ai faim, j'ai froid* and *Portrait d'une jeune fille de la fin des années 60 à Bruxelles*), three autoportraits (*Lettre d'une cinéaste: Chantal Akerman, Chantal Akerman par Chantal Akerman, Portrait d'une paresseuse*), a homage to Salvadorian trade unionist Febe Elisabeth Velasquez played by Catherine Deneuve (*Pour Febe Elisabeth Velasquez*), a filmic appeal against the closure of the Brussels Cinémathèque (*Rue Mallet-Stevens*), and, in 2007, a meditation on East and West in a globalised world (*Tombée de nuit sur Shanghai*).

In virtually all of her output, Akerman has proven a radical innovator and adapter of forms and genres: she has given a phenomenological twist to the documentary, has offered variations on the confession or diary film, has revisited traditional genres such as the romantic comedy and the musical and has ventured from the medium of cinema in the narrow interpretation of the term into the domain of expanded cinema (Païni 2004: 171). As Dominique Païni points out, 'avec Godard, Ruiz et Marker [elle est] l'artiste qui a le plus contribué à é mousser les frontières du cinéma vis-à-vis des autres arts'<sup>6</sup> (ibid.). This crossover between the cinema and other art forms is notably manifest in her installation work since the 1990s, some of which is done in parallel with, or subsequent to, her films and which adapts elements from her cinematic oeuvre to a multimedia format. *D'Est: au bord de la fiction*, which she created for the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, and the Jeu de Paume, Paris, in 1995, and *From the other side*, created for the Documenta, Kassel, in 2000, are examples of this transposition from the projection room to the art gallery or museum environment. A work that centres around her mother's experience in Auschwitz, her installation *Marcher à côté de ses lacets dans un frigidaire vide* (To Walk Next to One's Shoe Laces in an Empty Fridge) created for the Tel Aviv Museum of Art and subsequently shown in the Jewish

6 'with Godard, Ruiz and Marker, [she is] the artist who has contributed most to blurring the frontiers between cinema and the other arts.'

Museum, Berlin, and at the Camden Arts Centre, London, for the first time substitutes imaginary memories with lived ones and, thus, signals an important move in Akerman's work from autofiction to (auto)biography.

At the crossroads between avant-garde and commercial cinema, Akerman has resorted to a wide range of production modes: whilst her early films were self-financed, the critical reputation she acquired with *Jeanne Dielman* has assured her subsidy from both the State and other public sources, in Belgium as well as in her adoptive France. The public funding of her work sharply distinguishes her from the American experimental tradition, which, in financial terms, is largely self-reliant. Like her fellow French film-makers, André Téchiné and Benoît Jacquot, Akerman has moved from a marginal cinema reputed to be hermetic and difficult to a more commercial outlet, even though her brief flirtation with Hollywood has borne no fruit (Philippon 1982: 22). Whilst continuing to work with her own production company, Paradise Films, co-founded in 1975 with her friend Marilyn Watelet, she also collaborates with a range of independent producers as well as with national and European television channels, including Canal+, ZDF and Arte.

Her uniquely personal vision and style and the multiple roles she adopts in some of her films, where she is, at once, director, screenwriter, producer and main actor, resolutely place Akerman amongst the ranks of *auteur* cinema, a concept that emerged with the French New Wave which she embraces wholeheartedly and which, from early on, has won her the support of leading French cinema magazine *Cahiers du cinéma*. She has consistently rejected attempts to assimilate her into a collective discourse – most importantly feminism – and has adopted an individualistic *auteur* stance instead (Margulies 1996: 12). This authorial positioning should, however, not blind us to the fact that her work is a collective enterprise, reliant on the input of a set of, mainly regular, collaborators. The work of cinematographers Bette Mangolte in the 1970s, Luc Benhamou in the 1980s and Raymond Fromont and Sabine Lancelin (amongst others) in the 1990s and 2000s, of editor Claire Atherton and of co-scriptwriter Eric de Kuyper has shaped the changing aesthetics of her films and facilitated the crossover between the experimental and the mainstream. In addition, the presence of three generations of French actresses, the iconic Delphine Seyrig, the enigmatic Aurore Clément and the versa-

tile Sylvie Testud, has allowed her to create her own filmic genealogy. Finally, her truly international output, shaped by both American and European film traditions, and her own status as a transnational director working between France, where she has settled since her return from New York, her native Belgium and the United States, eschew simplistic appropriations of her as a quintessentially Belgian or French *auteur*. Akerman reiterates her liminal position and her sense of non-belonging in many of her interviews:

Je ne suis pas plus parisienne que belge. Si je devais me sentir de quelque part, ce serait sans doute plus de New York que de n'importe où ailleurs. Je n'ai pas la notion de terre, j'ai au contraire la notion que je ne suis attachée à la terre que là où sont mes pieds. Et même là où ils sont, ça tremble un peu, souvent.<sup>7</sup> (Dubroux et al. 1977: 36)

Whilst in histories and studies of national cinemas she tends to be grouped with Belgian film-makers (unlike Godard, who, despite being Swiss, is quintessential to the French cinematic canon), given her self-proclaimed position of rootlessness, her residing outside her native Belgium, and, most importantly, her status as the daughter of diasporic Ashkenazi Jews, it may be tempting to group her, as Hamid Naficy suggests, under the more elusive, non-national category of exilic or diasporic film-making. Yet, whilst her early New York phase does align her with this category, with which she does indeed share many thematic and stylistic characteristics, her self-chosen exile in a francophone country with close cultural ties to her native Belgium sets her apart from the linguistic and cultural alienation experienced by the many Asian, African or Middle Eastern directors living in the West who are discussed on a par by Naficy (Naficy 2001). Her case throws into relief the deceptiveness of national or transnational labels – after all, the aesthetic category of the avant-garde, within which she is traditionally theoretically framed, arguably, may still be the most meaningful to describe her oeuvre.

Akerman's reception, even at a time when she is acknowledged as one of the leading directors of her generation, remains mixed: whilst the esteem in which she is held critically has continued to grow ever

7 'I am no more Parisian than Belgian. If I had to feel that I am from somewhere, it would probably be New York more than anywhere else. I don't feel I belong anywhere. On the contrary, I have the feeling that I am only attached to the land under my feet. And even there the ground is often a bit shaky.'

since the ground-breaking *Jeanne Dielman* – a fact reflected in her numerous exhibitions at the most prestigious international arts fairs, as well as a 2004 retrospective at the Centre Pompidou, Paris, and also her visiting professorships around the globe – her exposure to a broader public remains limited. To date, only *Demain on déménage* has had respectable box-office success. Each of her new films receives substantial coverage in the quality press and in cinema magazines, but her distribution is limited largely to art-house cinemas in a few capital cities. A good selection of her films is now available on DVD (a box set contains all of her major works from the 1970s, others have been released individually), but none of her latest work has had official releases in the United Kingdom. Her name rarely figures in recent histories of French and European cinema<sup>8</sup> and, even in critical reference works, remains associated mainly with a formalist approach. Ivone Margulies' excellent study of Akerman's aesthetic and brilliant contextualisation of her work within American avant-garde traditions and European anti-naturalism, whilst having paved the way for a fuller appreciation of the director's work (and made our own study possible through its manifold insights and minute critical analysis), with its title 'Nothing Happens' and its focus on cinematic form, has, arguably, enhanced the predominant view of Akerman as a 'difficult' director of interest mainly to an elite of professional film critics, academics and 'intellectual' film viewers.

This book seeks to redress this one-sided appreciation of her work. Though close attention will be paid to her evolving film style, it also wishes to pay tribute to the social, ideological and ethical ramifications of her prolific oeuvre. The largely chronological and thematic presentation is intended to show the extraordinary diversity of her output, but also, no less importantly, to capture the dynamics of *ressassement* that we have already mentioned as one of the central driving forces behind her work. Comparable to authors such as Beckett, Thomas Bernhard, Hélène Cixous or Marguerite Duras, who are similarly known for their 'brooding', circular enquiries, Akerman kaleidoscopically reconfigures, behind a multitude of guises, recurrent tropes and preoccupations that haunt her imaginary and find visual form in her

8 She is mentioned neither in Rémi Fournier Lanzoni's *French Cinema: From its Beginnings to the Present* (New York, Continuum, 2002), nor in the collective *European Cinema* edited by Elizabeth Ezra (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2004).

cinematic universe: the loss of ritual and the fluidity of identities – be they social, sexual or gendered; the relationship between self and Other, in family and love relations as well as in the dealings between individuals and nations; the presence of the past and the threat of dehumanisation in the domestic as well as the political sphere. Her intransigent avant-garde style, manifest even in her more mainstream works, in its problematisation of questions of perception, representation and spectatorship, as we will attempt to show, is a direct correlate of as well as an instrument for the profound questions raised by her work.

Chapter 1 will identify the characteristics of her avant-garde work of the 1970s, the period most closely influenced by American structuralist film and performance art. Chapter 2 surveys her work in the following decade in the context of post-modernism, the new aesthetic of kitsch and the emergence of a new hedonism in Western critical discourses. Chapter 3 is dedicated to her documentary work of the 1990s and 2000s, which, in its construction of an archaeology of suffering and its quest for historical traces in the present, sheds light on the central ethical and aesthetic concerns behind her work. Chapter 4, finally, discusses her attempts to penetrate into the mainstream, her renewed engagement with the themes of love and desire, and her further exploration of the permeable boundaries between autobiography and fiction. Whilst greatest attention is given to works that are readily accessible, we will also discuss lesser-known films that are, hitherto, only available in film archives.

Behind the multiple guises of Chantal Akerman, this book seeks to present a cinema that crystallises questions that are at the heart of our post-war, post-Holocaust, post-feminist sensibility, yet succeeds in remaining remarkably timeless, a cinema that is socially committed without, however, pretending to be any form of universal representation. Perhaps most importantly, it will present an oeuvre that, whilst asking probing questions about marginality, exile and suffering, preserves a great sense of humour and is imbued with a profound humanity.

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