



News from Home by Chantal Akerman (image courtesy of Koninklijk Belgisch Filmmarchief - Cinémathèque Royale de Belgique)

The late French-Belgian director Chantal Akerman made her first film at age eighteen, her last at 64. All 40-plus of her works engage urban space—indeed, Akerman pursued it: as she told Jean-Luc Godard, ‘...I love to film cities. I love to film cities because they have lines’.¹

The 1977 essay film *News from Home* epitomises Akerman’s lifelong urban inquiry as she considers here the formal geometries and innate rhythms of New York City. Akerman had lived in New York from 1971–3, and in a brief span between producing her main features of the 1970s, *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Commerce Quay, 1080 Brussels* (1975) and *Les Rendez-vous d’Anna* (1978), she returned for a second time. Soon she began a project which became *News from Home*, sifting through letters sent by her mother Natalia in Brussels during Akerman’s initial New York stay. In her 90-minute movie, Akerman reads her mother’s notes over 16 millimeter master shots of urban scenes, recorded three years later. Natalia’s writing guides Akerman’s camera as she moves across city exteriors, along major and minor promenades, inside subway passages and platforms, and among the clamor of both pedestrians and cars.

News from Home commences with a peripheral view, a shot of an empty, nameless block from its vertical sight-line. Here and throughout, Akerman’s camera is positioned at human height as she locates city images and sounds in her own perspectival urban experience. *News from Home* was

photographed by frequent collaborator, French-American cinematographer and director Babette Mangolte, with whom Akerman made *Jeanne Dielman* as well as *Hotel Monterey* and *La Chambre* (1972), her early, experimental New York shorts. Scaling the city grid in natural light, Akerman and Mangolte bypass stationary landmarks to engage mobile New York tropes. The camera observes midtown crowds at crosswalks and intersections; rolling taxis and trains; and foremost, city people, clustering outside restaurants, walking dogs, closing and opening their shops. Per Akerman's edit, no one objects outright to her surveillance, recognising participation in public spectacle as a fact of city life.

News from Home assumes in its urban focus the role of historical document but, as essay, embraces it vaguely. Akerman's record of a now-bygone New York era traces a palimpsest not sociopolitical, but personal and empirical. For the decade of 'Ford to City: Drop Dead', Akerman's New York, verging on municipal bankruptcy, seems remarkably clean. The city's decay is evident mainly at its fringes, along the outer avenues contouring Manhattan's geographic centre where *News from Home* begins and ends. Akerman's documentary details are mere symptoms of her core self-portrait exercise, autobiography via urban tour. Yet *News from Home*'s images have no narrative order, nor any direct resonances in Natalia's stories of family gossip and anxieties. Rather, Akerman uses her mother's quotidian intimacy to demarcate New York's vast indifference. The city's spatial and temporal largess is invoked in stills and street-wide pans, lengthy fragments underscoring how Akerman's is a cinema that often seems more fun to make than watch. In the film's both French and English audio versions, Akerman speaks quickly, dipping in and out of dialogue in a soft, smooth monotone. The city's ambient noises swallow Natalia's sentences as rush-hour roars overwhelm her daughter's voice.

The eleven-minute sequence culminating *News from Home* is one of Akerman's best-known images, an extended shot from the Staten Island Ferry of a receding Manhattan skyline. As waves lap and fog shades the landscape a blurry blue, Akerman's camera proceeds forwards, into her audience's domain. No longer ventriloquising Natalia's words, Akerman signs off in purely present tense. Akerman concludes *News from Home*'s urban essay as a 'letter', between daughter and mother, camera and image, maker and viewer, city and inhabitants.

Notes by Moselle Kleiner, Courtauld Institute of Art.

¹ Akerman qtd. in Bergstrom, Janet. 'Chantal Akerman: Splitting', in *Endless Night: Cinema and Psychoanalysis, Parallel Histories*, ed. Janet Bergstrom (University of California Press 1999), p. 274.

Please note the version of the film screening today has been restored by The Royal Belgian Film Archive. Akerman made two versions of *News from Home*, one in French and one in English, and in her will made it explicit that neither should be subtitled, considering them an intrusion into the intended rhythms of the film and the viewers' attention. Due to the archive nature of the film, the sound quality is reduced, especially in scenes with heavy ambient noise.

City, Essay, Film is a series of discussions and screenings hosted by UCL Urban Laboratory to examine the concept and practice of the 'urban essay film'. Curated by David Anderson and Jordan Rowe, two further screenings will take place in the current series at Bertha DocHouse. *Handsworth Songs* (Monday 24 June) and *The Concrete Revolution* (Tuesday 9 July), both accompanied by shorts. Tickets can be purchased from the cinema today.