

A Woman of Substance and Style



She has always been a daring and vital voice in world cinema. She shows no signs of deviating from her chosen course and continues to make waves. Marion Schmid profiles CHANTAL AKERMAN, a bold visionary who has been invited to present her work at this year's landmark 20th edition of the French Film Festival.

In a career extending over more than four decades, Brussels-born Chantal Akerman has produced one of the most singular and influential bodies of work in the history of modern cinema – intimate yet detached, formally daring and startlingly beautiful, socially committed, but never dogmatic or didactic. The director shot to prominence in 1975, aged only twenty-five, with *Jeanne Dielman*, her ground-breaking portrait of a

Belgian widow cum prostitute that was to change forever the ways in which we look at women on screen. Hailed as the 'first masterpiece in the feminine in the history of cinema' by the French daily *Le Monde* and rated among the hundred best films of the twentieth century by *Village Voice*, the film came to epitomise an era with its pressing questions about class, social identity, gender and sexuality and became a landmark in feminism and women's cinema. With more than forty films to date, straddling a dazzling range of genres from burlesque comedy to experimental documentary, Akerman has confirmed her status as one of cinema's great innovators, comparable to Godard and Fassbinder in her prolific output and highly personal vision and style.

Akerman explosively entered the film world with *Saute ma ville* (1968), a tragi-comic short about a disturbed teenager memorably played by herself (she stars in several of her films of the 1970s and 80s revealing great dramatic and comic talent). If Godard's *Pierrot le Fou*, which she saw aged fifteen, incited her to make films, it was the American avant-garde – the structural films of Michael Snow and Andy Warhol; the pioneering work of choreographer, dancer and film maker Yvonne Rainer – which she discovered during two extended stays in New York that was to have a lasting influence on her film style, especially her preoccupation with cinematic time and perception. Many critics consider her work of the 1970s, which comprises such early masterpieces as *Je tu il elle* (1974) – dubbed a 'cinematic Rosetta Stone of female sexuality' – and the autobiographically inspired *Les Rendez-vous d'Anna* (1978), as her finest and it is here that she developed many of the thematic concerns that reoccur in her oeuvre: coming of age and adolescent crisis, gender and sexual identities, wandering and exile, life in the margins of society. In the last thirty years, she has ventured into more mainstream territory, taking inspiration from popular genres such as romantic comedy, melodrama and slapstick and experimenting with a more playful, effervescent tone and style. Highlights of this period include *Golden Eighties* (1986), a sprightly musical in the

tradition of Jacques Demy; *Histoires d'Amérique* (1988), a sensitive docu-fiction on New York's Jewish diaspora; the poetic love-triangle *Nuit et jour* (1991); her celebrated adaptation of Proust, *La Captive* (2000); and the burlesque comedy *Demain on déménage* (2004) – her commercially most successful film to date.

In the last decade, Akerman has completed a distinguished series of documentaries 'bordering on fiction' and carved out a niche as a highly acclaimed video artist exhibiting in museums and art galleries. After a seven-year break from narrative cinema, she is back in great form with *La Folie Almayer/ Almayer's Folly* (2011), brilliantly adapted from Joseph Conrad's debut novel, a visually and aurally stunning meditation on colonialism, racism and one man's obsessive love for his daughter.

Blurring the boundaries between fiction and autobiography, and between cinema and the other arts, Akerman's work, like that of the late Chris Marker, continues to propel cinema into new, uncharted territory. Rebellious and intuitive, hypnotic and seductive, it exerts a fascination that is difficult to resist.

Marion Schmid, Professor of French Literature and Film at the University of Edinburgh, is curator of the Akerman retrospective.