MALORIE URBANOVITCH

CHANTAL AKERMAN IS *FROM THE EAST*

IN THE PROCESS OF RESEARCHING A FILM about Soviet-era poet Anna Akhmatova in the early 1990s, the celebrated Belgian filmmaker Chantal Akerman travelled to Eastern Europe for the first time. The Akhmatova film was never finished. What Akerman discovered instead was a community living through a dramatic political shift—a transition she hoped to capture on film. With her small crew, she went to the former East Germany and then on to Moscow through Poland, Lithuania, and Ukraine, all the while filming ordinary daily activities after the fall of the Iron Curtain. The result was *D'Est* (From the East, 1993)—a markedly undramatic portrait of life in the former Eastern Bloc. The film unfolds through meditative exterior tracking shots passing over crowds in lineups and static interior compositions of people in modest domestic spaces. Faces, old and young, wait idle and unbothered with enduring patience for something that, at least within the scope of the film, never arrives.

With *D'Est*, Akerman presents a tentative community bound by this "unproductive" time of waiting. Indeed, you can feel the time pass. There is no documentary-style voiceover, and the voices that can be distinguished through the ambient noise are not subtitled. Akerman isn't interested in what the individual has to say. What she offers instead is an impression of the collective. The camera pans laterally left, then right, then back and forth and back again, but no space ever seems to get displaced. No enigmas are resolved, and no destinies are manifested. We repeatedly return to the same metro stations, charting the daily activities of regular citizens, a lot of which involve waiting. When nothing happens, *D'Est* turns the questioning around to ask us what we were looking for in the first place. Documentaries don't generally provoke more questions than answers, but this is not unusual for Akerman. The periods between the actions—the gestures and spaces that most filmmakers would deem unworthy of placing inside a frame—are what inform her cinematic exploration.

Fifteen years before she went east, Akerman made her first feature film, *Jeanne Dielman, 23, quai du commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975), which is now considered a classic of 1970s European cinema. The film runs close to three-and-a-half hours and depicts the repetitious daily chores of its protagonist in real time. One night, for example, she methodically prepares schnitzel for her teenage son, Sylvain; the next night, it's meatloaf. After dinner she works on a piece of knitting, and later she goes out to buy more yarn. She absent-mindedly peels potatoes in her kitchen, eventually taking a break to receive a customer. (She is a single mother who makes ends meet with daily sex work.) Save for these visits, she is alone most of the day. There is almost no dialogue—only an order placed at the butcher or a letter read aloud from her sister. She eats dinner with Sylvain each night in almost complete silence and only speaks to tell him, "No reading at the table," or to ask, "Is it good?"

Another one of Akerman's obsessions in *Jeanne Dielman* is architectural interiority. The camera stays with Jeanne as she moves through her most private spaces, such as when she bathes or makes her bed, but her psychic interiority is completely withheld. When she forgets a pot of boiling potatoes on the stove and ruins them, she has to break her routine to run out for more. What was her mind preoccupied with that made her slip in her well-practiced regimen? In one scene from the endearing behind-the-scenes footage shot on the set of the film (*Autour de Jeanne Dielman* [1975]), Akerman directs actress Delphine Seyrig to brush her hair *slower*. Seyrig demands that the young filmmaker explain why she wants her gestures executed in this unnatural way; she must have a reason. Akerman is caught off guard, shy, even inarticulate. Seyrig, already a well-established actress, confidently continues to press the director. The only answer Akerman is able to give is that she knows she wants it that way, but she seems unable to explain why. Everyday activities thus become a kind of theatre, but in a way that is very untheatrical. The speech of the actors tends to be overarticulated and comes across as rehearsed, for instance, yet Akerman dismantles the hegemony of dialogue by locating meaning in bodies and gestures.

Jeanne Dielman is certainly a challenging film to watch, especially for those unaware of its premise or unaccustomed to "slow cinema," as it clearly reflects the director's lack of concern for narrative entertainment. It also set the stage for her documentary *D'Est*, which similarly relies on

cinema's unique aspects: the movement of the camera, photographic composition, duration and sound, light and colour. The film expresses both unspeakable histories and a nagging discontent without exposition of any kind. There is a key moment in *Jeanne Dielman* where a consistent, strobing blue light, seeming to be from a flashing neon sign outside, reflects on the glass of Jeanne's dining room cabinet. It illuminates her face and body as she eats and reads, its rhythm persisting throughout. Somehow this blue light expresses a disharmony with the traditional surroundings of her dining room—a clash of temporalities, an insidious discontent. In what seems like a call-back to this part of the earlier film, neon signs cast an acid blanket on the snowy sidewalks and roads in *D'Est*. In the later film, though, the sign seems to function as a symbol of modernity, subtly announcing its presence, illuminating the darkened streets as people make their way home. The warm glow of apartment windows has a similar effect, as it seems to cast a grid of visual warmth; these windows are what people are on their way home to in order to escape the cold. The false warmth offered by the neon signs offers no such reprieve.

D'Est also diverges even further from a reliance on speech, and the total absence of dialogue brings the ambient sounds into focus, such as the recurring whistle of ungreased metal tracks, the squeaks of winter boots traversing uneven ice, distant highway traffic, the hollow rhythm of hooves, and people listening to music in homes, stations, community halls, and concert venues. Perhaps the most transcendent moment comes an hour and forty minutes into the film, when a cellist performs a song on stage. It feels as though the waiting has stopped; we have made it to the final show. When the song finishes, audience members line up to hand the cellist their individually plastic-wrapped roses. *D'Est* ends after the next cut to black, which puts an abrupt stop to the ceaselessly gliding camera. The rhythm that we have succumbed to is suddenly over, and we are faced with the fact that nothing ever really happened.

Yet the film is strikingly compelling, as the quotidian is rendered as a strange choreography. Though the film has no actors or script and simply captures people in their normal environments, Akerman conceived of the everyday as a show and described the film as "bordering on fiction" (a phrase that is also the title of her 1995 essay collection, which was part of a touring exhibition of the same title). It's true that the formations of people in *D'Est* feel prearranged, as the line-ups are organized with everyone fac-

ing the same direction, towards the camera, in an unusual horizontal configuration reminiscent of modern dance. People pose for the camera; they perform. The movement of the frame flattens the spaces they occupy, making them appear stage-like. Interior shots also feel overly composed. In one scene, for example, a woman puts on a record and sits down at her kitchen table to slice bread and salami, producing an image that is almost identical to the kitchen scenes in *Jeanne Dielman*. In another interior, a woman in a pink velvet dress sits perched on the arm of a green couch, smiling at the camera, expectant, as if waiting to be interviewed (which, of course, she never is). Old women sit at their dining room tables silently, as if posing for still-life portraits. Some of her compositions are also reminiscent of more menacing formations, such as lines of people being displaced or carried off to Auschwitz.

It is thus no surprise that the interiors in *D'Est* recall Akerman's made-for-TV documentary *Dis-moi* (Tell Me, 1980), in which she visits three women who survived the Holocaust. She doesn't prompt them with any questions; the women reminisce freely and with enthusiasm about their own grandmothers and grandchildren as they eat cake and drink tea. Akerman's own grandmother was killed in the camps, so she becomes a kind of surrogate granddaughter for these women. Still, their stories are unfocused. One laments, "I don't have much to tell," and later, "I have so much to tell, I could go on for another eight days and there would be even more to tell." Her stories are about sharing food with loved ones and her mother's singing voice. During another visit, Akerman agrees to stay for dinner, and they eat in front of the television in silence. Akerman stays late, dozes, but declines a touching plea to stay the night. While conversation is drowned out by the television in *Dis-moi*, in *D'Est* dialogue is completely absent; it gives the impression of spending a holiday with your Russian grandmother, with whom you have no idea how to communicate. In *Dis-moi*, Akerman is ultimately the one who is questioned: "Listen, I keep talking and talking, and you don't eat. Eat something!" and "Is it good?"

Akerman seems to be suggesting in her work that the act of questioning will never give us the answers we are looking for and that questions also predetermine their answers. She isn't interested in this manner of "showing" and instead gives screen time to the things that are universal, such as preparing food, eating, watching TV, commuting to and from work, and doing household chores. What emerges with *D'Est* is the kind of innocent

"truth" that a child gleans from an adult conversation: one that is inconclusive and too complex to fathom. What registers are tones of voice, rhythms of speaking, and body language. The camera movement in the exterior shots also evokes the gesture of searching for something, as though Akerman is scanning the crowd for a long-lost relative. What *D'Est* expresses, in other words, is not so much the never-ending search for meaning but rather a glimmer of recognition. She is looking for a family resemblance.

The connection to her family could be found in *Jeanne Dielman* all along. The title of the film—Jeanne's mailing address—seems to indicate that she is Belgian. After some consideration, however, the motivation behind this over-articulated title seems to signal that she has been displaced from somewhere else and that she is trying to memorize this new address. Jeanne also exudes displacement. In one scene her son practices reading a passage in French by Baudelaire, and Jeanne remarks that his accent is improving and wonders if it will start to sound like hers. Why don't they speak the same language? In one particularly enlightening moment in *Autour de Jeanne Dielman*, Akerman and her crew discuss Jeanne's comforter and decide that it must be put inside a duvet cover, which they all agree is a distinctly Eastern European habit. Akerman also described Jeanne's gestures as the kinds of gestures she observed her mother repeating when she was growing up. What comes into focus is perhaps Akerman's larger, life-long project: connecting to her mother. As a Jewish immigrant to Belgium from Poland, her mother was, after all, from the east.