

## LOVE LETTERS TO THE MOTHER: THE WORK OF CHANTAL AKERMAN

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### I

When I speak of the relation to the mother, I mean that in our patriarchal culture the daughter is absolutely unable to control her relation to her mother....there is no possibility whatsoever, within the current logic of sociocultural operations, for a daughter to situate herself with respect to her mother: because, strictly speaking, they make neither one nor two, neither has a name, meaning, sex of her own, neither can be "identified" with respect to the other.

Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*.<sup>1</sup>

Reconstituer l'image de la mère, la voix de la mère, la présence de la mère. Lui donner un lieu fictif: terre promise. Mais loin d'Israël. A Manhattan par exemple, et pourquoi pas?

Eric de Kuyper.

Introduction to the published script of *Les Rendez-vous d'Anna*.<sup>2</sup>

If there is a recurring phantasmatic core to the work of Chantal Akerman, it lies in the desire to reconstitute the image of the mother, the voice of the mother. By phantasmatic I am employing Kaja Silverman's definition as "a cluster of fantasies" or "erotic tableaux or combinatoires"<sup>3</sup> which mark a certain symptomatic continuity of authorial inscription. While not all of Akerman's work bears traces of this symptomatic quality, the four films I am most concerned with — *Je tu il elle* (1974), *Jeanne Diel-*

BRENDA LONGFELLOW

*man*, *23 Quai de Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975), *News From Home* (1976), and *Les Rendez-vous d'Anna* (1978) — are intimately related as phantasmatic variations on a theme.

No other cinematographic work, I believe, is so singular in its evocation of the relation between daughter and mother and in its tracing of an explicitly homosexual economy of narrative and spectatorship ordered by and through this relation. Desire in these films circulates around the maternal body, around the variable presence and absence of the mother, around the enduring gaze of the daughter at the mother.

In their persistent articulation of the primacy of the mother/daughter relation, Akerman's films share common terrain with much recent feminist theoretical writing on female subjectivity. The political urgency of both projects bears on the possibility of articulating a different economy of desire and subjectivity as symbolic resistance to the law of the Father and the interminability of phallic mediation. Both theorize an account of female subjectivity explicitly opposed to the classical Freudian version of a normalizing oedipalization which results in the obliteration of the daughter's relation to the mother and the reversal of love for the mother into hatred and *ressentiment* as the daughter enters the world of language and desire.

Before developing a more explicit textual analysis of Akerman's films, I want to take an extended theoretical detour through certain textual fragments of Irigaray, not in the interests of establishing a metatheoretical discourse which the films will be induced to reflect, but as a kind of companion text, a work which is equally focused on the mother/daughter relation and which, in its peregrinations through this territory, reveals certain symptomatic and endemic theoretical pitfalls.

II

To start with, I would insist that the journey back to the mother, as imaginary as it might be, is neither direct nor invulnerable to psychic overdetermination. Is it imaginatively possible, we might first ask, to reconstitute that relation without the usual phobias, phantasms and idealizations which attend our relation to that space/place/memory/figure we represent as the mother?

In "Stabat Mater", Julia Kristeva observes that "we live in a civilization where the consecrated (religious or secular) representation of femininity is absorbed by motherhood".<sup>4</sup> One of the central objects of feminism, both theoretical and practical (the struggle for reproductive rights, for example), has been to disassociate these two terms, to reserve a space for female desire in society exclusive of maternity. It is a task taken up by Irigaray in her massive deconstruction of western metaphysics and by Kristeva in "Stabat Mater", both of whom endeavour to expose the "consecrated" representation as fraud, as a phantasmatic projection of a phallogocentric imaginary. As Kristeva writes:

## POSTMODERN CINEMA

this motherhood is the *fantasy* that is nurtured by the adult, man or woman, of a lost territory; what is more, it involves less an idealized archaic mother than the idealization of the relationship that binds us to her, one that cannot be localized — an idealization of primary narcissism.<sup>5</sup>

It seems, however, that there is something indestructible about that idealization, something which returns, with the force of the repressed, to haunt even the most theoretical of daughters (theory, as we know, providing no defence against the return of the repressed). And in that return, the theoretical investigation of the mother/daughter relation occurs, less as a writing from the place or perspective of the mother, than as a continually renewed repetition of our narcissistic relation to her. In this, Irigaray's work seems particularly symptomatic.<sup>6</sup>

In *Speculum*, Irigaray argues that the psychic damage inflicted on the female subject under patriarchy is rooted in the fact that women are denied any representational means, any access to the "minting of signifiers" which would allow them to repeat, re-produce and re-present their relation to origins. Under the current symbolic economy, it is only the male subject, possessor of a penis "or better still — the phallus", "**Emblem of man's appropriative relation to the origin**"<sup>7</sup>, who is provided with the representational wherewithal to effect an imaginary return to the originary place of the mother. In the absence of any symbolic equivalent "to make up for, substitute for, or defer this final break in physical contact with her mother", the female subject can never "lay claim to seeing or knowing what is to be seen and known of that place of origin; she will not represent "her" relation to "her" origin; she will never go back inside the mother; she will never give the mother a drink of sperm from her penis..."<sup>8</sup> The therapeutic and political task of feminism would thus involve the obligation to "trouver, retrouver, inventer, découvrir, les paroles qui disent le rapport à la fois le plus archaïque et le plus actuel au corps de la mère, à notre corps, les phrases qui traduisent le lien entre son corps, le nôtre, celui de nos filles"<sup>9</sup>

In Irigaray, the resolution of this task is most frequently represented as an imaginary regression where mother and daughter are bound in a corporeal fusion which dissolves all difference and where homosexuality is constituted by the mirroring and similitude of these two bodies. While it is difficult to deny the visionary potential inherent in Irigaray's tracing of female subjectivity in the imaginary — metaphoric and theoretical — regression to the pre-oedipal "corps à corps" with the mother, the theoretical problem remains that the relation to origin is consistently displaced to a utopic territory of nonmediated identity and desire, before language and differentiation, before, in some instances, birth itself. The mother, in this encounter with origins, remains, to all intents and purposes, silent, a matter of blood, womb, placenta, milk, less a subject than body matter consistently associated with "intra-uterine life" or even the placenta, "cette

BRENDA LONGFELLOW

première maison qui nous entoure et dont nous transportons partout le halo".<sup>10</sup> The daughter's desire for the mother is subsequently represented, not as the result of loss or separation, but as anaclitic, in direct continuity (if not collapse) with the female infant's love/dependency on the mother as physiological support, as womb and breast.

Irigaray's harmonious portrait of the mother/daughter relation, however, is not without its breaks or contradictions, its violent repudiation and nightmarish other, its nightmarish mother — who returns in the essay "Et l'une ne bouge pas sans l'autre". Composed as a paranoid treatise written/spoken by the infantile daughter to her mother, the essay begins with this reproach: "Avec ton lait, ma mère, j'ai bu la glace. Et me voilà maintenant avec ce gel à l'intérieur".<sup>11</sup>

Here the maternal phantasm is not the loving, erotically cathected, mother of Irigaray's other writings but the persecutory mother, the mother who provides not warmth, but cold, not fluid, but the cruel glacial stolidity of ice. The "corps à corps" with her is experienced as a suffocating annihilation, an oppressive violation of the daughter, who is held "prisoner", too close to the body, too stuffed full of food to flee. Here what the daughter desires is not fullness, but emptiness, an experience of hunger that might alone provide a boundary between the two, a space for a relation that would not be interminably bound to the exchange of food. A space, also, of resistance against the oral mother who has no other desire but to maintain the daughter within her own phantasm as corporeal extension, to fill the daughter with her milk, her honey and the detested meat.

N'y aura-t-il jamais d'autre amour entre nous que ce comblement de trous? Fermer-refermer indéfiniment tout ce qui pourrait avoir lieu entre nous, est-ce ton seul désir? Nous réduire à consommer-être consommées, ton unique besoin?<sup>12</sup>

But it is not only the daughter who incorporates the mother. In this exchange, everything is reversible, reflexive. The mother also incorporates the daughter, inhabits her through the implantation of her images, her phantasies, her melancholic emptiness. This mother, in fact, is nothing without the daughter — has no image of herself, no self knowledge. By a strange reversal of terms, it is she who is dependent on the daughter, the daughter who guarantees the mother life through the mere fact of her existence, her provision of a mirror in which the mother can postpone the recognition of her nothingness, her absence, her non-identity. "Et si je pars", the daughter claims:

tu ne te retrouves plus. N'étais-je le dépôt cautionnant ta disparition? Le tenant lieu de ton absence? La garde de ton inexistence? Celle qui t'assurait de pouvoir toujours te rejoindre. De te tenir, à toute heure, entres tes bras. De te maintenir en vie. De te nourrir indéfiniment pour tenter de subsister?<sup>13</sup>

## POSTMODERN CINEMA

The piece ends with the daughter's plea for a relation to the mother without the mutually annihilating effects of a too obsessive proximity, for a relation that could incorporate a measure of distance, allowing the daughter to look at the mother, to touch her, to know her body, experience her volume. If desire is to remain between them, then a definitive separateness is called for in which the mother and daughter could remain two, in exchange, neither "béante ni suturée". Neither polarized by an irreducible opposition nor sutured into an imaginary oneness. But "Entr'ouvertes, sans déchirure".<sup>14</sup>

I am at a loss to situate this very odd and bewildering essay which arrives without markers, without a "meta-language" that could contextualize, balance even, this public denunciation of the mother. The conceit of the piece, of course, is that it speaks of or from the unconscious, from the depths of the paranoid-schizoid attitude toward the mother. According to Melanie Klein, the characteristic of this stage is that the child is incapable of containing or reconciling its ambivalent feelings toward the mother. Oscillating between the extremes of hatred and passionate love, she projects her ambivalence onto the mother who is split into "good" mother and "bad" mother, a split, it seems, which is reproduced across the body of Irigaray's writing.

What would it mean to recognize that ambivalence, to acknowledge that the difference projected into an opposition is a difference internal to the subject herself? Given that Irigaray has been foremost in the theoretical effort to deconstruct the binarism of sexual difference, why is she so reluctant to deconstruct the binarisms inherent in her relation to the mother? Jane Gallop reads Irigaray's narcissistic monologue in "Et L'une ne bouge pas sans L'autre" as the daughter's phallicization of the mother, this being to whom the demand is made but who offers no response. "In Lacanian terms", writes Gallop, "the silent interlocutor, the second person who never assumes the first person pronoun, is the subject presumed to know, the object of transference, the phallic mother, in command of the mysterious processes of life, death, meaning and identity".<sup>15</sup> For me, though, the question and the demand in the text seem more rhetorical than imperative, and the mother less phallic, less a spectre of a full and terrifying plenitude, than a site of absence, emptiness and non-identity. Pathetic really: a clinging, wimpy mother who can only ascertain her existence and desire through the daughter. The problem then lies not, as Gallop suggests, with the refusal on the part of the daughter to recognize the identity she shares and exchanges with the mother, but with her refusal to acknowledge the mother as anything else but a figure within her own infantile phantasm. Perhaps, the path toward a healthy reconciliation of opposites would begin here in the recognition of ambivalence, not only on the part of the daughter, but on the part of the mother: that her desire, like the daughter's, is dual and contradictory; that she (a daughter herself) might have conflictual feelings about maternity; that her desire, contrary to the nar-

cissistic fantasy, may not be trained exclusively on the child; that the daughter may not be everything to the mother.

To what extent then, we might ask ourselves, is this question of the daughter's ambivalence and the mother's desire repressed within feminist investigations of the mother/daughter relation? If the mother is condemned, as Freud would have it, for repressing the daughter's sexuality, what of the converse, of our inability to recognize the mother as desiring and sexual subject<sup>16</sup> in a manner that does not reconstitute her as idealized and romantic projection? This projection seems to haunt our cinematic representations of the mother. In *The Gold Diggers*, for example, the mother appears only as a recurring phantasmatic trace, her desire for the father and/or for gold experienced as a kind of betrayal. Or still more in Michelle Citron's *Daughter-Rite*, the mother is conspicuously absent, figured ironically as the derisory object of the daughters' investigation of her affects, present only as in the cinematographic memory of the Super 8 footage. And yet with this latter, I can think of no other film (perhaps, only *Jeanne Dielman*) which so evocatively succeeds in representing the actual, the experiential, contradictoriness of our relation to our mothers: the obsessive curiosity tinged with obstinate indifference; the disdain for her values and morality coupled with the frightening reappearance of these values in our own lives; and underwriting all, the recurring, indestructible memory of our desire for her, as evoked by the Super 8 footage.

In order to bring up the question of sexuality, in order to bring the sexual into play, we are confronted with the necessity of moving from the closed economy of duality, of the two, of the mother/daughter trapped within an endless refractory dialectic in which, as Irigaray suggests, the life of the one can only be affirmed through the murder of the other. To move beyond two, a third is called for. An other, a third term capable of introducing the necessary distance required to sustain and mediate the recognition of desire.

The formulation of this third remains a continuing problem for feminist theory. Kaja Silverman in *The Acoustic Mirror* proposes that this third would be language itself; that the effect and operation of castration has to be deliteralized, taken at its most existential level as the separation of meaning from being, a split which is simultaneous to the separation of mother and child. This originary "cut" would precede and be distinguished from all rigid assignation of sexual difference as both sexes are equally traumatized and marked by the lack which the entry into language inaugurates. Silverman argues, moreover, that object choice and identification, as constituting instances of sexual difference, are only made possible through the mediation of this originary division.

Re-emphasizing Freud's hesitant (and often elided) assertion in "The Ego and the Id" that the positive Oedipus complex (heterosexual object choice and same sex identification) is "by no means its commonest form"<sup>17</sup>, Silverman insists that it is the negative oedipus complex which constitutes

## POSTMODERN CINEMA

the primary strata of female subjectivity. For the daughter, this negative traversal of the oedipus complex is represented by the cathexis of the mother as erotic object, a choice which may co-exist or supersede the girl's positive Oedipus complex. The daughter's desire for the mother is, thus, not dependent on the primal nurturing and physiological support which the mother provides but is, necessarily, contingent on the daughter's separation from the mother, on her turning "après le coup" to the mother as object of desire.

While the implications and usefulness of the negative oedipus complex as a paradigm (and of desire rather than love as the constitutive basis of the mother/daughter relation) remains to be worked out, Silverman's theoretical move does have the important advantage of resurrecting difference in the theorization of female desire and subjectivity.

### III

I would argue that the theoretical contribution of Akerman's films lies equally in their singular attentiveness to the ambivalence and difference that structures the mother/daughter relationship, a difference which informs both the diegesis and the structural articulation of her films. I would go so far as to say that it is precisely the particular structural articulation of her films which functions as the third term, triangulating the mother and daughter relation and framing the films both as a mode of reparation and as evidence of an irreparable divide. Like Irigaray, Akerman's work gives expression to the desire of the daughter for the mother, but it is a desire that originates, and most emphatically so, from the side of the symbolic, from the side of the daughter's insurmountable difference from the mother, a difference that is at once spatial, generational, political and sexual.

"Maman", whispers the filmmaker in *Toute Une Nuit* over an image of an older dark-haired woman, Akerman's mother, who stands by a suburban house in the waning heat of a summer evening, smoking a cigarette. There is a painful repetition of loss here in the difference between these two spaces of daughter and mother, between the offscreen voice of the daughter and the maternal image, between the subject behind the camera and the object, ephemeral as a phantasm before it. Before the steadfast gaze of the camera, the mother is uneasy, embarrassed, perhaps, before the fathomless demand of the daughter, this "immoderate demand", as Freud puts it (always too little milk, never enough love)<sup>18</sup>. And it is precisely the mother's impassiveness, her seeming inability to hear the daughter's call, which produces the incredible nostalgia of the sequence, recalling our narcissistic desire for fusion while denying that possibility. The denial is inevitable. It is structurally conveyed through the irrevocable difference of those two spaces of the off-screen voice and the onscreen image and by the mediation of the cinematic apparatus itself.

BRENDA LONGFELLOW

On the other side of that "immoderate demand" of the daughter, however, lies the equally insistent and relentless demand of the mother, a demand observed through the textual and linguistic folds of *News From Home*. On the soundtrack, Chantal reads letters from her mother, letters full of impassioned pleas for the daughter: "My dear little girl, write to me. I think of you all the time. I love you". Here the mother's voice is mediated through the daughter not with a collapse of distinctions, but with a certain intermingling of subject positions, the "I" and the "you", which observe no fixed address of identity. "Mother" and "daughter" are always and only effects of a continuous exchange, of a writing/speaking through and with the other. Addressee and addressor unknown, nowhere. At least nowhere in the image. Letters are sent and circulated back in a perpetual reciprocal fold: Chantal's through the mother, the mother's through Chantal. "I only learn of you from what the letters tell us. I live for your letters. That's all that matters: a letter from you, Chantal. Everyone asks of you". "Last week I received three letters, this week, only one. Please write". "I live to the rhythm of your letters. We only ask you don't forget to write. Your loving mother".

Set against the melodious refrain of the news from home — the domestic details, the family's health, the onset of menopause, the engagements and birthday parties, the arrangements for sending Chantal bits of money, her sandals and summer clothes — is the daughter's detached and protracted gaze at the subways, traffic and streets of New York. Marked by their extended duration and by the absence of camera movement, these scenes are marked by an impersonality that contrasts radically with the fervoured tone of the mother's letters. Not, however, with the daughter's delivery which, like her gaze, remains observant without direct emotional implication. She is a little like Dora before the Sistine Madonna, impassive in her contemplation of maternal desire. A matter not of indifference, perhaps, but of the "correct distance", "neither too close nor too far"<sup>19</sup>, the space required for the daughter to live and to create. To oblige the maternal desire with the intensity it demands would mean the obliteration of both possibilities, a tipping of the balance into an imaginary fusion in which neither, to paraphrase Irigaray, could move without the other.

In this film, however, something does keep moving — the camera and with it the gaze of the daughter over the discontinuous spaces of the city, an ocean removed from the mother. Beyond the image track, a structural distance from the mother is articulated through the fluctuating use of ambient sound. Apart from the voice over, the only other sound which punctuates the silence of the barren New York landscape is post-dubbed traffic noises. While the absence and presence of this traffic ambience marks out a formal rhythm and serves to emphasize the inhumanity of the city, its varying levels function (and humourously so) as active defences against the immoderateness of the maternal demand. As the mother's letters attain new (and to many viewers, uncannily familiar) heights of emotional

## POSTMODERN CINEMA

blackmail ("I'm beginning to get depressed but as long as you're happy that's the main thing"), the level of traffic ambience is exaggerated to the point of drowning out the reading of the mother's letters, as if the suppression and muffling of the mother's voice were necessary to the continued sanity of the daughter.

This good humoured resistance continues throughout the film, as in the sequence which begins with the mother admonishing the daughter not to go out at night ("it's dangerous") and is followed — almost as a deliberate provocation — with shots of New York streets in the dead of night and early morning. However, a certain sense of reconciliation is suggested by the end of the film. There, for the first time, the camera begins to move in an extended travelling shot through the streets of New York. This shot is followed by one of equal duration in which the camera, stationed at the stern of a ferry, observes the departure from the harbour and the New York skyline as it diminishes into the horizon. Contrasted to the austere and stationary gaze which preceded it, this sudden and unexpected movement suggests a kind of liberation from the oppositional nature of the mother/daughter relation in which the daughter, refusing to acquiesce to the maternal demand, nonetheless, had remained passive and immobile before it. In that last movement toward the other shore, a new possibility is suggested in terms we have yet to conceive.

*Jeanne Dielman* is Akerman's most sustained and powerful meditation on the mother. "I didn't escape from my mother...", Akerman noted in an interview; " ... this is a love film to my mother. It gives recognition to that kind of woman, it gives her "a place in the sun".<sup>20</sup> On one level, *Jeanne Dielman* functions as an act of reparation, a repairing of the distance between daughter and mother, a "love-film" which provides for a sublimated return to the corps à corps with the mother. Equally, it is an act of political reparation, in its loving attentiveness to the domestic world of the mother, in its precise documentation and cinematic validation of the gestures which constitute her experiential space.

The mother figured in *Jeanne Dielman* before the protracted (225 min.) gaze of the daughter is not the mother of primary narcissism, but the historic mother, the mother as she is inserted into the circumscribed space of the domestic, of the economy of reproduction, of the production of oedipus. The film as is well known documents three days in the life of a Belgium petit-bourgeois housewife, the temporal passage marked through the repetition of the daily tasks of domestic routine which the camera records in "real" time, from commencement to completion: the washing of dishes, the preparation of wiener schnitzel, the kneading of a meat loaf. Women's work, the work that is never done, that work, which in our current social order remains unpaid, invisible, at the lower end of the hierarchy of values.

Of all Akerman's films this one is the most "documentary" in its observation of the conceit of real time and real space, in its phenomenological

BRENDA LONGFELLOW

investigation of the repeated gestures which fill the space of the domestic.

For my cinema...the most suitable word is phenomenological: it is always a succession of events, of little actions which are described in a precise manner. And what interests me is just this relation to the immediate look, with how you look at these little actions going on. And it is also a relation to strangeness.<sup>21</sup>

(Emphasis mine.)

In *Jeanne Dielman* this loving gaze of the daughter is also overcoded as a search for knowledge of the mother, an epistemophilic gaze which makes of the film something of a primal scene. It is a primal scene, however, which resists the habitual voyeurism of the psychoanalytic scene where the child stumbles upon its parents engaged in coitus, or the habitual voyeurism of classical cinema which overdetermines the look as one of penetration and appropriation. "The camera was not voyeuristic in the commercial way", Akerman notes, "because you always knew where I was. You know, it wasn't shot through the keyhole"<sup>22</sup>.

The spectator enters this film "not through the keyhole"; as Akerman insists, but in "a relation to strangeness". This strangeness at once recalls Brechtian aesthetic politics, the "making strange", as Brecht puts it, of a materialist practice of art which operates to break down the processes of imaginary involvement, the habitual norms of perception and identification, in order to produce a knowledge about social relations. In *Jeanne Dielman* this strangeness works against the collapsing of difference to maintain a distance in which the spectatorial position is shaped as one of detached observation. It is precisely this quality of formalism — the absence of the reverse shot, the prolonged duration of each sequence, the editing structure which remains as predictable as Jeanne's activities — that denies the viewing subject the possibility of control and possession.

This strangeness of the film, however, bears not only on the observational distance between the spectator and the image but on the nature of Dielman's gestures themselves which, to this viewer at least, seem pathological. In this very silent film, the body language of the housewife speaks the most profound alienation, an anal retentive obsession with order, cleanliness and routine shading into "housewife's psychosis". Her world is structured by an economy of saving, of penny-pinching which involves the refusal of excess, of expenditures of money or of libido without return. Within this economy, her relation to her body is completely de-eroticized. The body, for Jeanne, is simply one utilitarian instrument among many, to be scrubbed, deodorized, sanitized with the same rigorous sense of duty and self-denial as the bathtub, the breakfast dishes. For Jeanne, her prostitution occurs at the same level as her other duties, an activity with no more or less significance than the peeling of potatoes or the washing up of dishes.

## POSTMODERN CINEMA

Only the endlessly repeated routine, the obsessive protraction of her domestic tasks, saves Jeanne from confronting that which these things are most designed to prevent: a confrontation with the emptiness of her life. "Not to have pleasure"; Akerman says, "is her only protection". Within such a rigidly defensive order, such a confrontation could only be responded to with annihilation or through a radical restructuring of the relations to the self, to objects and to others.

If the film is a love letter to the mother, it is also a film about the daughter's remove from what the mother represents and denies. About a love that returns across the territory of the daughter's experience, education and politicization to regard the mother at a distance, with a healthy measure of ambivalence. In the previous section, I argued that without the intervention of a third term this ambivalence traps the female subject in an eternal oscillation between the extremes of love and hatred. In *Jeanne Dielman* what intervenes in the space between the daughter and the cinematographic return to the mother is feminism, a collectively engendered understanding of the mother's significance, of her place within a symbolic and political economy which denies her worth and the possibility of desire. The intervention of this third political term structures the film as double, split as Janet Bergstrom has observed:

between character and director, two discourses, two modes of the feminine: the feminine manquée, acculturated under patriarchy, and the feminist who is actively looking at the objective conditions of her oppression — her place in the family. It is the absence of the reverse shot which guarantees the separateness of the logics.<sup>23</sup>

It is this third, her feminism, which prevents Akerman from repeating the daughter's symptomatic repression of the mother's desire in the interests of her own.

In *Jeanne Dielman*, the issue of the mother's desire is raised through its absence, through the investigation of the symptoms of its repression and hysterical conversion into memory lapses, accidents, slippages which increasingly invade the ordered routine of Jeanne's life. Seemingly set in place by a condensation of events — the son's oedipal interrogations and the sister's suggestion of a remarriage — the intensifying force of desire marks the second movement of the film.

The return of the repressed is first evidenced when Jeanne mysteriously prolongs her engagement with a male customer. This lapse sets in motion a chain of effects in which the potatoes boil dry, dinner is late, Jeanne neglects to button her housecoat and increasingly begins to lose the security of her bearings. Given the previously established rigidity of Jeanne's domestic routine, these lapses begin to assume the proportions of the grotesque. On a formal level, this hysteria emerges with the exaggeration of the sound effects: the whirl of the coffee grinder, the thump of the brush hitting the shoes, the kettle boiling, the sound of a spoon hitting the side

of the pot, the clatter of dishes. Within the pervasive silence of the domestic landscape, these noises stand out as eruptions of excess within the textual body. This excess receives its penultimate expression in the murder which concludes the film.

What are we to make of this so very impassionate murder, this gesture which annihilates order, which finalizes the system of exchange? And what of the shot which precedes the murder: that groping and movement of Jeanne under the man. How do we read her contorted expression: one of pleasure or of pain, orgasmic or disgusted? In a random survey of women friends who had seen the film, the readings seem to divide, interestingly enough, according to the sexual preference of the spectator. For the lesbian spectator, Jeanne's response represents a flash of consciousness and a frightening recognition of her own alienation, her own status as sexual object. For the heterosexual female spectator, the movement of the head and arm connote sexual pleasure, an eruption of the disordering possibility of desire against which Jeanne reacts with a gesture of violent negation.

In this difference of interpretation, I arrive at a certain impasse. To side with the former would mean denying the unconscious, the pressure of repressed desire which, as I had argued, was responsible for the gradual dissolution of order. On the other hand, to exclude the possibility that any element of consciousness attended her gesture, would be to repress the significance of who her victim was (a customer, a john) and deny the murder its negatory potential. The difference in interpretation seems, finally, to revolve around the question of what is being negated — her desire or the Law — a question of what the man represents for the spectator: an erotic substitute for the absent husband or the "Nom du Père" incarnate. A univocal interpretation appears impossible. Is she a hysteric or a feminist revolutionary? Perhaps the only answer is both, and simultaneously so.

Within the range of domestic gestures the film has documented, the murder stands as the one singular act of unbridled affirmation, of violent refusal. While the murder implicates Dielman too in a symbolic death, as she waits in silent resignation for the son to return, the sirens to roar, the forces of law and order to descend, the final image of this woman sustains the memory of her refusal and something else: a rage and a passion which might just permit the journey of the mother to the side of feminism.

While I have spent some time arguing for the necessity of a third term in thinking through the dialectic of the mother/daughter relation and of posing feminism, language or symbolic mediation as possibilities, I have yet to elaborate the relation between this dialectic and the economy of homosexuality. It has long been an insight of feminism that lesbianism, the love of women, is profoundly connected to the archaic mother/daughter relation. This connection is often read in moving poetic celebrations of lesbianism as a direct analogue, a repetition of the daughter's love for the body of the mother.<sup>24</sup> While certainly not denying the role that this phan-

## POSTMODERN CINEMA

tasm continues to play in the sexual experience of both homosexual and heterosexual couples, I think we have to recognize the extent to which this notion of repetition as replication is based on the narcissistic phantasm of the mother, the mother with no frustration, no ambivalence, no breaks. Perhaps a way out of this theoretical impasse is to investigate the way in which the emergence of desire marks that repetition with serious implications of difference. It is a point that is theorized by Irigaray in a frequently neglected passage of *Speculum*.

Freud's observations on the phallic phase of infantile sexuality provide her point of departure. In "On Femininity", Freud writes that of the many perverse and variable desires represented within this stage one is "most clearly" expressed — that is, the desire "to get the mother with child and the corresponding wish to bear her child"<sup>25</sup>. Now for Freud, this incestuous offspring, conceived within the usual penis/baby exchange system, is unquestionably regarded as male. But, writes Irigaray:

One might advance the hypothesis that the child who is desired in the relationship with the mother must be a girl if the little girl herself is in any degree valued for her femaleness. The wish for that girl child conceived with the mother would signify for the little girl a desire to repeat and represent her own birth and the separation of her "body" from the mother's. Engendering a girl's body, bringing a third woman's body into play, would allow her to identify both herself and her mother as sexuate women's bodies. As two women, defining each other as both like and unlike, thanks to a third "body" that both by common consent wish to be "female"....

In other words, this fantasy of the woman-daughter conceived between mother and daughter would mean that the little girl, and her mother also, perhaps, want to be able to represent themselves as women's bodies that are both desired and desiring — though not necessarily "phallic".<sup>26</sup>

The introduction of the third woman, then, re-negotiates the terms of the mother/daughter relation, provides both with a necessary mediating detour to the other which allows for the affirmation of self and other as sexual and desiring. Most importantly, however, this third (and we could follow Irigaray in suggesting that she is not only the phantasized baby but simply, another woman, another female body) at once opens the mother/daughter relation to the social and, most emphatically, to the political, erotic and unconscious relations of feminism. "I love you", writes Irigaray, "who are neither mother (forgive me, mother, I prefer a woman) nor sister. Neither daughter nor son".<sup>27</sup>

The third woman is the focus of the narrative trajectories of *Je tu il elle* and *Les Rendez-vous d'Anna*, the final destination of the metonymic movement of desire that has circulated around the mother/daughter relation in

this corpus of Akerman's films. Of all Akerman's films, these two are the most similar in narrative structure. *Les Rendez-vous*, in some ways is a palimpsest rewriting of the black and white starkness of *Je tu il elle* in which the third woman is figured only as a textual trace, a possibility which remains on the other side of representation.

*Je tu il elle* is divided into three sections, each corresponding to specific shifters: the "je", "il" and "elle". The "tu" remains unassigned, addressed, perhaps, to the space of the spectator. The first sequence features a character (played by Akerman herself) who endeavours to occupy the oppressively barren space of a ground floor apartment, a space (with perhaps a too Kleinian emphasis) which is reminiscent of the mother's body, where objects (an old mattress, a table) are moved around in an obsessive desire to control the dissolution of identity, the marking of boundaries. She is a little hysteric, trapped in a closed economy where "things circulate without inscrip[tion]"<sup>28</sup> around a psychic core of emptiness which she endeavours to fill through the repeated ingestion of sugar and through a violently excessive outpouring of writing.

This writing, however, functions less as an act of communication than as a transitional object, a tactile object. Multiplying kinetically, the pages of a letter are spread all over the floor, tacked up on the walls, scratched out, erased, written over, crumpled and filled endlessly with the volume of that emptiness. It is a letter without any obvious destination or end until, suddenly, the cycle stops. "I've been here twenty-eight days", the character observes in voice over. "It stopped snowing, it melted and I got up".

The second section of the film involves the character's encounter with a disillusioned truck driver who has picked her up hitchhiking. Throughout the long night, punctuated only by brief stops in a bar and restaurant, he recounts his life story of an early marriage, sexual frustration and alienation. The character listens silently, though not unsympathetically, and obliges him with a hand job.

The final section has the character arrive in the middle of the night at the apartment of her former female lover, a woman who only reluctantly obliges the character's monosyllabic demands for food and drink. While admonishing the character that she can only spend one night, she, however, does allow herself to be seduced and the final sequence of the film features an extraordinary and powerful scene of their rough and tumble love-making. While "graphic" — the images feature their nude bodies and a gesture of cunnilingus — the scene resolutely resists voyeurism both by the distance of the camera which frames their bodies in long shot and by the gentle awkwardness of their body movements. Their love-making is a representation not of imaginary fusion, but of playful and ironic defiance.

The narrative structure of *Les Rendez-vous d'Anna* also involves the peregrinations of an existential heroine, Anna, who is touring Europe with her new film. Like the character in *Je tu il elle*, Anna is stricken with a pro-

## POSTMODERN CINEMA

found melancholia, a sense of loss and emptiness which is only ever possibly relieved through the recovery of the maternal in the other woman.

*Les Rendez-vous* opens with Anna's arrival at a hotel. The receptionist hands her a telephone message. It is from her mother. "How did she know I was here?"; inquires Anna. Retiring to her room, she moves toward the telephone and informs the operator she wants to place a long distance call to Italy. As in so many of the efforts at communication in Akerman's films, the destination of this call is unclear. A call received, a call returned. Is it to the mother?

Throughout the film, Anna engages in repeated and aborted endeavours to call Italy, calls that never go through, connections that are never made. While she journeys in the opposite direction, her desire and longing lean towards this other land, this land of the other, Italy. The name itself, as Freud pointed out, represents an anagram of sexual promise. ("I recalled", he writes, "the meaning which references to Italy seem to have had in the dreams of a woman patient who had never visited that lovely country: 'gen Italien [to Italy]' — 'Genitalien [genitals]'"<sup>29</sup>.) For Anna, the return to Italy is postponed indefinitely as she moves away, recovering the other, in absentia, only at the end of the film.

Throughout the endless train trips and stopovers, Anna's melancholia is manifested by her impassiveness and growing sense of disquietude in the face of others. Silent herself, Anna becomes a catalyst for the discursive explosions of these others: an abandoned single father, an older Belgian friend of her mother's, a man on a train, her leftist Parisian lover — all of whom deliver monologues offering a contemporary psychological landscape of recession, political withdrawal, romantic disillusionment. Anna, however, by her silence and by her profession as a wanderer, represents a profound threat to these individuals. Voluntarily exiled from the community, from home, family and dependency, her freedom provokes their bitter self reflections. As her estrangement intensifies, she can no longer engage in sexual intimacy with men. While reluctantly allowing herself to be seduced by the single father, she abruptly terminates their love-making because of her overwhelming fatigue with the dispassionate routine of it all.

At the conclusion of the film and the end of her adventures with the others, Anna arrives in Brussels, the long since eclipsed home of the filmmaker. She meets her mother and they decide to take a hotel room for the night, a special treat. On entering the room, Anna insists that she must phone Italy. "What", her mother responds, "in the middle of the night? ... Tell me". Finally it is Anna's turn to speak. With the camera held stationary immediately over the bed in which the two women lie, staring at the ceiling, Anna tells her mother of meeting an Italian woman who came to see her film and of talking with her until the cafes closed:

Then she accompanied me to my room. We were tired. We lay down on the bed and continued to talk. By chance, we touched. Then

BRENDA LONGFELLOW

we just started kissing, I don't know how that happened. I felt a sort of disgust, I was going to be sick, it was too much. I no longer know, but we continued to kiss and then everything was so simple, I let myself be carried away. It was good .... I never imagined it would be like that between women. Not at all. We didn't separate all night. And you know, bizarrely, I thought of you.

The story ends, the light is extinguished, and Anna, nude, curls up next to her mother's body.

Within the metonymic movement of desire in *Les Rendez-vous d'Anna* the homosexual economy is structured by a repetition in which the love of another woman replays, with a difference, the love and atavistic relation to the mother. A doubled repetition in which the presence of the one recalls the other: the mother remembered in the lovemaking scene with the Italian woman, the encounter with the Italian related to the mother. The circle moves without a break or violent renunciation, the one offered to the other as the most precious of gifts. Each scene, the narrated one and the one onscreen, replayed as a trace of the other: two women in a hotel bed who touch each other, with a difference. That difference is sexuality, a difference which insinuates itself between these two scenes and which insists that the one is never an immediate or direct analogue of the other. Here the love of the other is not modeled on an infantile phantasy of fusion, of the obliteration of difference, but assumes the distance required for the realization of desire.

In the next-to-last sequence, Anna returns to Paris where she is greeted by her lover whose intense despair and sudden fever terminate their sexual encounter. After providing him with medication, she arrives at her apartment, her final refuge with its barren fridge and resounding emptiness. She turns on the answering machine which echoes with a chorus of meetings missed and promised and with the announcement of a new tour with the film that would once again commit her to a life of wandering. Finally she hears the voice she has been waiting for, the voice of the woman who asks first in Italian and then in English: "Anna, dove sietta? ... Anna where are you?"

It is a question which bears a full existential resonance concerning Anna's positioning within a heterosexual or a homosexual economy of desire. Equally, however, it is an utterance which does not demand a resolution but which articulates desire precisely as a question. A question posed by this third, neither mother nor daughter, whose linguistic otherness vehiculates difference and situates the other as radically ex-centric to the mother-tongue. Alone and offscreen, this voice (the voice of Akerman herself) registers a possibility, on the edge of representation, of a lesbian sexual economy in which two remain, as Irigaray put it, "entr'ouvertes, sans déchirure".<sup>30</sup>

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## POSTMODERN CINEMA

### Notes

1. Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1985) p. 143.
2. Eric de Kuyper, "Par Elle(s)", *Les Rendez-Vous D'Anna* (Paris: Editions Albatros, 1978), p. 14.
3. Kaja Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), p. 216.
4. Julia Kristeva, "Stabat Mater", *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. Toril Moi (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), p. 161.
5. *Ibid*, p. 161.
6. I would strongly argue that Kristeva herself is certainly not exempt from a certain return of the repressed. As Kaja Silverman has so brilliantly argued in *The Acoustic Mirror, The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988), Kristeva's elaboration of the maternal may be read as a repetition of the narcissistic phantasm of the mother, the phantasm that Kristeva herself warns against: "the full totally englobing mother with no frustration, no separation, with no break producing symbolism, with no castration, in other words" ("Women's Time", *The Kristeva Reader*, op. cit. p.205). Silverman argues that Kristeva's work is subject to a curious reversal in which it is the mother who is situated in the interior of the chora, the semiotic or the enceinte and attributed with the infant's undeveloped hold on language and the symbolic. While disavowing the possibility that the mother could accede to the position of speaking subject (and here Kristeva is close to Lacan), and while situating herself, through her own inimitable rationalized discourse, on the side of the Law and the symbolic, Kristeva maintains her own (repressed, according to Silverman) cathexis of the mother precisely through the repetition of the maternal phantasm.
7. Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, trans. Gillian C. Gill (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1985), p.42.
8. Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, op.cit., p.42.
9. Luce Irigaray, *Le corps-à-corps avec la mère* (Montreal: les Éditions de la pleine lune, 1981), p.28.
10. Irigaray, *Le corps-à-corps avec la mère*, p. 22.
11. Luce Irigaray, *Et L'une ne bouge pas sans L'autre* (Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 1979), p.7.
12. *Ibid*, p. 11.
13. *Ibid*, p. 16.
14. *Ibid*, p. 21.
15. Jane Gallop, *Feminism and Psychoanalysis/The Daughter's Seduction*, ed. Stephen Heath and Colin MacCabe (London: Macmillan Press, 1982), p. 115.
16. On this issue of the mother as desiring subject, perhaps it is only Kristeva (and Mary Kelly in a different context) who presumes to speak from the place of the mother as subject. Certainly, she is unique in her exploration of the divisive nature of the mother's desire, of the mother/artist; mother/theoretician, of the mother divided, balancing the rational with the irrational, the semiotic with the Law, the creation of children with creation of texts. This is to say nothing, however, concerning the contradictions in her work which are too vast and difficult to approach within my limited time and space.
17. Freud, "The Ego and the Id", *The Standard Edition*, vol. 19, p.24.

BRENDA LONGFELLOW

18. Freud, "Femininity", *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, vol.2, trans. James Strachey (New York: Penguin, 1983), p.155.
19. Catherine Clement, *The Lives and Legends of Jacques Lacan*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), p.76-78.
20. Chantal Akerman, quoted in "Reflections on Jeanne Dielman", *Marsba Kinder, Film Quarterly*, 30, no.4, Summer 1977, p.2.
21. Chantal Akerman, "Entretien", *Cahiers du cinéma*, no. 278, July 1977, p. 41.
22. *Ibid*, p. 119.
23. Janet Bergstrom, "Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles by Chantal Akerman", *Camera Obscura*, no. 2, Fall 1977, p.17.
24. Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born* (New York: Bantam, 1976) p. 234.
25. Freud, "Femininity", *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis* (New York: Penguin, Pelican Freud Library, vol.2, 1983), p.153.
26. Irigaray, *Speculum*, op.cit., p.36.
27. Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, op.cit., p. 209.
28. Catherine Clement, "Sorceress and Hysteric", *The Newly Born Woman* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), p. 37.
29. Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams* (New York: Penguin Books, Pelican Freud Library, vol.4), p.328.
30. Irigaray, *Et l'une ne bouge pas sans l'autre*, op.cit. p. 21.