

MURIEL ANDRIN

## **The Intuition of the Body, Time and the Sixth Sense**

### **– from Chantal Akerman to Contemporary Women Directors**

Whenever Chantal Akerman's films are mentioned, the question of time rapidly comes up. Raising questions amongst everyone, she imposes her presence in short and medium length films (*Saute ma ville*, *L'enfant aimé ou je joue à être une femme mariée*, *La chambre*, *Le 15/08*), shot between 1968 and 1972. Far from being isolated, she fits into a whole, a film representation that is closely linked to both language and the body, but to the desire to destroy, at the same time, female stereotypes and the traditional performance rules of the cinema. Curiously, this "all for the art of film" did not depend on the film-maker's own state of mind or on those years when she was working, and has been passed down to contemporary women directors: Marion Hansel, Jane Campion, Claire Denis, Marina De Van, Lucie Hadzihalilovic, Julie Taymor, Isabel Coixet, Mira Nair or even Naomi Kawase who, thus, have revisited this film configuration of the world of characters and of the utterance of narrative. Yet beyond this, these directors have introduced these reflections in the field of classical narrative or even commercial films, setting them apart from their original experimental value.

What Akerman's films established right from the start is the rejection of imposed language and the absolute necessity to come up with other forms. Akerman's heroines are thus split between two extreme alternatives: silence (in the case of the young woman confined to bed in *La chambre* - the first version of which was a silent one), or the Woolfian stream of consciousness where language is carried away by hesitations, pauses and associations of ideas (in *Le 15/08*, where a young blonde woman in a Parisian apartment tells her story or in *L'enfant aimé* where the young mother confides in her friend). In the same way, contemporary filmmaking considers this perpetual questioning about the alternatives to the dominant language. The films of Claire Denis are practically silent, communication only occurs through gestures, the melodic rapport between voice and music. *Nénette* (Alice Houri in *Nénette et Boni*, 1996) says practically nothing compared to Boni (Grégoire Colin) who excessively uses language (oral, written); *Coré* (*Trouble Every Day*, 2000) is entrenched in her world of impulses and only comes out to seek her death and the end of her suffering. The characters directed by Jane Campion only suffer as a result of their language "disorders".

Janet Frame creates her own poetic language, which lets her escape from male writing which, in turn, does not let her describe her emotions (*An Angel at my table*, 1990), *Sweetie* chooses non-verbal communication as the way to reject the symbolic order of language – to protest against her father she barks and even goes as far as biting him; Ada, confronted with Stewart and the world, refuses to talk (*The Piano*, 1993), and creates a new form of language through multiple voices: her own internal voice that comments on the narrative, her daughter who translates her feelings and requests, her notes, Baines, but also her piano and her music.

This new rapport for language should not only be considered from a thematic point of view, as it also implies the structuring of film language itself. In her first films, Akerman thus created another relationship with narrative time. Just like in the experimental work of Michael Snow where she sought her inspiration, she considers the question of time to be closely linked to the objectivity of the film shot/captation (such as the circular pan shot of *La Chambre*) and also, paradoxically, to sensation, to subjectivity: “*And is time the same for everyone? Some people say that that was long, others say it was short and others even say nothing*”.<sup>1</sup> Her short and medium-length films are created in reaction to the "classical" or "dominant" design of film representation, by imposing a stream that is not governed by the rules of narration, but subject to the slowing down or the stretching of time (the fixed shots of inside the *Hotel Monterey* which seem to be autonomous from the presence of the characters).

Distancing themselves from this radical stance while returning to the subject of film time, contemporary directors focus on a permanent coexistence between classical narrative logic and the insertion of narrative breathing spaces. Universal time, dependant on pre-established time strata (days, hours, minutes or seconds) is replaced by subjective temporality, based on synesthetic experience, phenomenological time or “freed from the restraints that require it to be reserved to the time of the universe”.<sup>2</sup> The linearity and pro-tension are maintained and they are strewn with moments of counter currents that impose a different rhythm to the progress of the narrative. The *Passionless moments* (Campion, 1983) series is an ironic example of this idea where image-action has been replaced by moments “when nothing happens” and in *Two Friends* (Campion, 1986), Dana Polan is amazed by an *in media res* structure that “leaves causes and effects of individual narrative developments unexplained even if one can sort out their place in the overall temporal order”.<sup>3</sup> Claire Denis’s films are perceived as developing a “highly individual style, favouring optical and sound elements over

*dialogue, psychological realism, scenic continuity and other traditional modes of narrative storytelling*” based on “*its expository gaps and elliptical cutting*”.<sup>4</sup>

Bergson’s conception of duration seems to provide essential keys to understanding this new form. When he determines pure duration, Bergson envisages it as the succession of our states of conscience when our self exists and does not establish a separation between the present state and previous states, thus proposing a continuation of “what is no longer in what is”.<sup>5</sup> He believes that it is the experience of the duration that is important. The way that women directors shoot film seems to be aimed at rendering this idea of internal duration “of the self or conscience as interiority – the primacy of the interiority appears in fact as the conditions where no experience of the duration is not possible”, while being removed from any area of sociality”.<sup>6</sup> The opening sequence of *In the cut* (Campion, 2003) showing Pauline (Jennifer Jason Leigh) walking under a shower of golden petals; when an unknown couple kisses in a car, or the desired, caressed and devoured body in *Trouble Every Day*; the disappearance of the brother, bicycle rides in the town or even the dance during which the liberating storm occurs in *Shara* (Kawase, 2003), the clouds that appear, disappear and endlessly change in Hansel’s film (*Nuages*, 2001). What is clear here is the a-temporality, the entrenchment of any contextual or social data, as well as the duration (in its literal sense) or the exhaustiveness of the experiences lived. The point where the sequence stops in the image-action naturally continues here when representing an interiority between “what is no longer in what is”, which is here structured around a space where the self is “let live”; the happy childhood with the mother and sister, simple desire and fusion in the sexual act, the return to life after the experience of disappearing.

This specific attitude to language, together with establishing an experience of duration, allow the body to discover an essential place. Gilles Deleuze thus explains that: “*women directors do not owe their importance to a militant feminism. What is more important is the way in which they have brought innovation of these films of the body, as if women had to overcome the source of their own attitudes and their temporality as individual or common gestus*”.<sup>7</sup> In *Saute ma ville*, *La chambre* or *Le 15/8*, the female body is therefore defined both by its confinement in the claustrophobic and highly symbolic interiors (the kitchen and bedroom which are repeated as leitmotifs) turning imprisonment into a social role, but also its confrontation with carefully chosen objects (the spinning wheel, the teapot, the apple in *La Chambre*, the household accessories in *Saute ma ville*, the mirror in the later and in *L’enfant*

*aimé*). In the case of the contemporary directors, it takes on another meaning and the body no longer has context, decor, *it is the decor*. In its double conception of outside envelope and internal substance, it becomes the predominant element and imposes the structuring of time and of the film contents. Yet it is also the frontal object. The point of frontality is expressed through characters in the case of Akerman (such as in *La chambre* or in *Le 15/08*), here it is the skin that becomes frontal and which defies the spectator's gaze.

Even if it is always taken in its everyday life, the body (either male or females, the examples are not more restrictive) is no longer simply a social body, it is above all exposed in its carnal value, the living subject that is literally now gashed to better expose the internal turmoil. The (r)evolutions are numerous, from the known example of the stomach stretched by maternity and the specific temporality that it involves (*Nénette et Boni*, *Shara*) to the stranger and newer one of the torn and tortured skin (*Trouble every day*, *Dans ma peau*). Pleasures currently mix with traumas, and the emphasis is therefore placed on the accident, which breaks the corporal envelope, as in the emblematic framework of *Frida* (Taymor, 2002), where, in a dizzy dive, the body of the adolescent is revealed to us in a heap of rubble (but also a shower of gold) after the coach accident that would deform her spine for ever. In *Beau travail* (Denis, 1999), Gilles Sentain's skin (Grégoire Colin) is charred, burnt like a parchment when he is lost in the desert after his officer has tampered with his compass. The body becoming the place of the communicational link but also the interiority, the tested sensations are the motor of this representation, both at the level of the plot and in the relationship with the audience. According to Bergson, "when we talk about sensation as an interior state, we mean that it is created in our body".<sup>8</sup> The sense of cinema, synesthetic is one of the main elements of contemporary cinema; *Shara* is thus depicted as belonging to the "physiological genre" and *Beau Travail* as a film where ones sees "the fine-honing of flesh and muscle into sensory-motor machines that the actual world has no place for".<sup>9</sup>

Where Akerman reduces the techniques in his short and medium-length films to impose a critical distance between the audience and the bodies, whether by capitulation by a mechanical movement (*La chambre*) or the fixed states of the sequence shots (*Le 15/08*), favouring the overall shots to the detriment of any dramatic connection, the close up is currently the determining film principle, which better illustrates the tactical relationship that the character has with his surroundings. It is not so much the faces that are the target, but rather the scraps of fragmented bodies, mainly hands (or feet) and what they touch, to provide that tactile

sensation that reflects day-to-day movement (which seems to be a sensitive tribute to the gestures of Akerman's characters) and also those of a fantastical restless wandering, such as the feet of Pauline in the damp grass in the garden (*In the Cut*), Boni's hands stroking the rabbit or kneading the dough (*Nenette et Boni*) or even Leo's (Alex Ducas) cleaning the blood off Coré's white, naked skin with a sponge dripping with water after one of the massacres (*Trouble Every Day*) Omnipresence of the skin, as Jean-Luc Nancy points out when, describing *Trouble Every Day*, he makes it the essential element and speaks about a "*pellicule expeausée (Pellicula, petite peau)*" (play on words using *peau*, the French for skin, as part of *exposed*. »<sup>10</sup>

The bodies are no longer envisaged as a whole but rather in their capacity to exist as nearly autonomous elements. The cut is everywhere, in the shot and on the surface. The fragment and blood are found in the sharp scar of the hero of *L'intrus* (Denis, 2004), who received a new heart, or in the feast of Coré who dissected her lover while still alive in *Trouble Every Day*; in *Titus* where they become the motif of the revenge of the Queen of the Goths (Jessica Lange), contrary to Titus (Anthony Hopkins) who sacrificed his oldest son by cutting him up and offering his limbs to be burnt on a pyre so that his son could be buried according to Roman tradition when returning from combat. Finally, in *Dans ma peau* (De Van, 2002), where the use of a *split screen* no longer falls within the idea of a reduction of the points of view but rather in that of an identity construction; the cut in the skin is split in the cut in the shot, the skin and film subject merge – the body dictates its time on the film, as if the flesh imposed a structuring on the time line and to the ordering of the film editing.

The essential place given to the body and to sensation imposes a temporality of the *ressenti*, of the non-ponderable experience that it has to represent in its duration linked to the present in order to be transmitted and communicated to the audience. A certain form of *derrealisation* is achieved here and thus extends that one imposed by Akerman's extreme duration shots: "*I also know that at the end of a certain time, we quietly slide towards something abstract. Yet not always. We no longer see a corridor, but red, yellow, material (...). The very material of the film. In a sort of coming and going between the abstract and the specific.*"<sup>11</sup> The realist, nearly documentary premise no longer exists and the represented world is directly set in a characteristic subjectivity, or even a plastic abstraction. Filming closer, in a macrocosmic view of the object shown, allows one to enter in an abstract dimension, to open the plan up to the imaginary space of the audience – the skin filmed by Agnes Godard in Claire Denis's

films loses its legibility and often offers a blurring that makes it difficult for the audience to recognise. We are facing the poetic moment, where “*the being goes up or down, with accepting the time of the world that would bring ambivalence to antithesis, the simultaneous to the successive*”.<sup>12</sup>

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#### NOTES & REFERENCES

<sup>1</sup> Chantal Akerman, *Autoportrait en cinéaste*, Paris: Centre Pompidou/Cahiers du cinéma, 2004, pp. 35-36

<sup>2</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Temps et récit, Tome III Le temps raconté*, Paris: Seuil, 1985, p. 230.

<sup>3</sup> Dana Polan, *Jane Campion*, London: BFI Publishing, 2001, p.86.

<sup>4</sup> Damon Smith, « *L'intrus – An Interview with Claire Denis* », June 2005, [www.sensesofcinema.com](http://www.sensesofcinema.com)

<sup>5</sup> Henri Bergson, *Durée et simultanéité*, Paris: Quadrige/Presses Universitaires de France, 1968 (first edition : 1922).

<sup>6</sup> Jean-Louis Vieillard-Baron, « L'intuition de la durée, expérience intérieure, et fécondité doctrinale » dans *Bergson – la durée et la nature*, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2004, p.45.

<sup>7</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *L'image-temps*, Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1985, p.256.

<sup>8</sup> Henri Bergson, *Matière et mémoire*, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1939, pp.58-59.

<sup>9</sup> Brice Pedroletti, *Le Monde*, 31 Mars 2004; Fergus Daly, « Immanence and Transcendence in the Cinema of Nature », Décembre 2000, [www.sensesofcinema.com](http://www.sensesofcinema.com)

<sup>10</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, « Icône de l'acharnement », dans *Trafic*, n°39, Automne 2001, p.60.

<sup>11</sup> Chantal Akerman, op.cit., pp. 35-36

<sup>12</sup> Gaston Bachelard, *L'intuition de l'instant*, Paris: Stock, 1992 (original edition 1965), pp.104-105.

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