

Strategies of alterity



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The paper "Chantal Akerman's Saute Ma Ville" is an excellent example of a movie review on gender and sexual studies.

Chantal Akerman is an independent Belgian film-maker who has earned a reputation for presenting themes that generally represent the plight and struggles of women since the 1960's when she first made the short film, Saute Ma Ville. While there were other women artists who also produced and directed films with the same themes, Akerman managed to set herself apart from them with her application of hyperrealism in her films. (Film Reference)

Instead of encouraging the viewer to detach herself from the realities that surround her, she employs the camera so that the viewer can watch real situations of real people as much as one does with a window. When compared to the mainstream cinema though, Akerman's seminal works do not use celebrated artists and sophisticated visual effects to capture the audience's attention. Saute Ma Ville, for example, shows only one character that happens to be played by Akerman herself. For about thirteen minutes, the camera is focused on nothing else but on the character and her actions. Most of the time, the scene is taken inside a small apartment. Therefore, there is basically no other visual object that can heighten the audience's interest. Nevertheless, Akerman is still able to make her first film appealing to the audience primarily because it manages to encourage scopophilia or the pleasure in just watching. As one watches the character does her routine work inside her apartment, actions which are generally too common and mundane, he or she cannot avoid creating subjective interpretations. For the male viewer, he may even go to the extent of taking in a sexual context the character's actions. It may be questioned whether Akerman actually

intended to produce such effect when the character apparently splashed her face with liquid detergent or not. However, this portion can actually be understood by a male viewer as sexually implicit. After all, according to Laura Mulvey, human instinct can be “ fixated into a perversion, producing obsessive voyeurs and Peeping Toms whose only sexual satisfaction can come from watching, in an active controlling sense, an objectified other.” (Visual Pleasure 17) Because of this, the film still manages to encourage the audience, whether male or female, to watch it until the end. The message, after all, is not just in character but in the very actions she does and in the place in which she does these, which may be considered as the external condition or the social context of her behavior.

About thirteen minutes of viewing cannot explain fully the meaning of the entire film. *Saute Ma Ville* leaves the audience with questions whose answers cannot be articulated by the film alone. To comprehend the film better, it is necessary to consider the cultural and historical context in which it was made. It is also important that one gets to learn first of the film-maker's social background. This is because an artist's work may be a product of her mind but it is also influenced by certain realities that surround or inspire her. Akerman's family background is Jewish. During World War II, her mother and grandparents were captured and were brought to a concentration camp and experienced the Holocaust. After the war, her mother came back but Akerman noticed her mother's serious bouts anxiety attacks. This became much a part of the themes of her films, including *Saute Ma Ville*.

Akerman's formative years happened in the second half of the sixties, a time when the feminist movement was beginning to peak again. While studying at the Institute Supérieur des Arts du Spectacle et Technique de Diffusion, a

renowned film school in her native Belgium, she began to be influenced by the rising tide of second-wave feminism. While the feminist movement that heightened in the United States in the late 1800s and the early 1900s pushed for the suffrage rights, it did not focus much on other gender-based issues. The second-wave feminism of Akerman adolescent years was concentrated on the achievement of equality in all spheres of society for women and the end of discrimination. Unlike the feminists of the 19th century, "second-wave feminists looked for more than equality with men before the law; they sought changes in the social and economic system, and the culture that would liberate them from concepts of femininity that... locked them into stifling, unfulfilling, slavish position." (Meade 107) The heavy influence can be seen in the subliminal feminist concept behind the *Saute Ma Ville*. Akerman probably sees her mother's personal experience from a political perspective. This is expected, considering that second-wave feminism espouses the concept that cultural, economic, and political subjugation of women can be observed even in personal lives, the underlying factor for the slogan 'the personal is political.' (Keetley 159) The film essentially showed how mechanical and routine a woman's life is expected to be. It started out with a description of what a woman usually does in the comfort of her own apartment. As the story progressed, she begins to see herself how she is actually kept in bondage by the routines she does every day. In the end, she decides to burn herself which symbolically represents her liberation from the boring and controlled life that she has in the current set-up. Ivone Margulies aptly describes the film as a "leap from the personal (the "intentional" self-annihilation by lighting a match over a gas stove) to the public (the "blow up my town" title figures her reach, which is both

formal and political.” (Margulies 4) For the male viewer, the character is not “ displayed as sexual object” or as the “ leitmotif of erotic spectacle” as described by Mulvey. (Visual Pleasure 19) Because of this, the male viewer may be able to understand the chores that the character does but would find the rest of her actions as absolutely eccentric.

Saute Ma Ville does not in any way fall under the category of the visual pleasure that Laura Mulvey describes. Instead of enticing the audience, particularly the males, with sexual undertones it shocks them with the incomprehensible actions. This seemingly eccentric behavior of the film’s only character is actually a narrative of how she felt of the routine she faces daily in her life. Without any script for the entire playing time, the narrative elements depended on the character’s actions, the symbolisms of the objects, and the sound effects and background sounds. The relationship between the sound and image are quite pronounced. This is very important, considering that there are no dialogues or monologues in which the character can just express her feelings through words. The retrogression of the character’s mood from nonchalant and gay to the display of neurotic behavior until she committed suicide by burning herself on the stove is accompanied by the transformation of a lady’s vocal expressions. Mulvey explains that during the mirror phase “ recognition... is overlaid with misrecognition: the image recognized is conceived as the reflected body of the self, but its misrecognition as superior projects this body outside itself as an ideal ego.” (Visual Pleasures 17) The character in Saute Ma Ville, however, experiences another case. As soon as she notices herself in the mirror, her depression turned for the worse. Instead of finding her ideal ego being reflected in the mirror, she sees herself in a more negative manner,

which only triggered her suicidal tendencies instead. At this point, Akerman employed visual and audio symbolisms to represent the character's dissociation from her rational self. The different voice and the camera's focus on the image reflected in the mirror instead of on the character are Akerman's implicit depiction of such dissociation. *Saute Ma Ville* "ends just as badly, with self-destruction... inherent in completely abiding by these rules as it is in destroying them." (Gandert) Akerman, therefore, explains from a feminist perspective that if women continue to follow the traditional concepts and roles imposed to them by a male-dominated culture and society, they will only be treading the path of self-destruction.