



A film by Chantal Akerman  
**DOWN THERE (LÀ-BAS)**

"One of the great documentary self-portraits."  
—Richard Brody, *The New Yorker*

"[*Down There (Là-bas)*], which won the Grand Prize at the  
*Marseille International Documentary Festival* and was  
nominated for a *César*, is both the most fragile and most  
powerful of [Akerman's] works."  
—Amy Taubin, *Film Comment*

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## **ABOUT THE FILM**

According to director Chantal Akerman, she never planned to make a film in Israel. She was convinced that neutrality does not exist and that her subjectivity would get in her way. She was sure she would only be able to reflect on 'the Israel question' while she was outside the country.

It was only when she taught at the University of Tel Aviv, picked up a camera and 'found' suitable images that she decided to make a film. Akerman spends a brief period on her own in an apartment by the sea in Tel Aviv. She takes the chamber play to its ultimate form: it is almost entirely chamber. She films from the apartment and in her narration she talks about her family, her Jewish identity and her childhood. She wonders whether normal everyday life is possible in this place and whether filming is a realistic option. Akerman does not film here with any intentions defined in advance. She wants to be as open and blank as possible to ensure that things take their own course.

## **SELECTED FILM FESTIVALS & AWARDS**

Nominee

2007 Best Documentary Ceasar Award

Official Selection

2007 Mar Del Plata International Film Festival

Grand Prize

2006 FID Marseille Documentary Film Festival

Official Selection

2006 Jiahlava International Documentary Film Festival

Official Selection

2006 Viennale International Film Festival

Official Selection

2006 Berlinale International Film Festival

## IN THE PRESS

# filmcomment

May/June 2007

Review: "Down There (Là-bas)"

By Amy Taubin

Before, after, and between the narrative feature films—from *Jeanne Dielman* (1975) to *La Captive* (2000)—that anchor her status as a world-class filmmaker and one of the most indispensable of her post-Godard generation, Chantal Akerman has made some 20 works (films, performances, gallery installations) whose basic form is the letter—sometimes written to her by another, or by her to another, but most often by and to herself. As intimate as diary entries but more formal in the construction of their prose, these letters are read by Akerman in her husky, instantly recognizable voice, on soundtracks that personalize and narrativize the visual images against which they play—images that, because of their repetition, strikingly geometric composition, and the contemplative rhythm by which they're edited, might otherwise verge on abstraction.

[*Down There (Là-bas)*], which won the Grand Prize at the Marseille International Documentary Festival and was nominated for a César, is both the most fragile and most powerful of these works. It was made in Tel Aviv, mostly inside an apartment Akerman had rented for a month while she was doing a guest teaching gig. Xavier Carniaux, who produced many of her previous documentaries, encouraged her to use the opportunity to make a film about Israel, but Akerman, the daughter of Holocaust survivors, resisted. She found the situation too fraught, her own relationship to it too personal. Nevertheless, she brought a small DV camera with her, and one day she picked it up and composed a shot, pointing the lens toward the two large windows and glass balcony door that fill one wall of the apartment and which overlook the windows, balconies, and terrace of the building opposite. The windows are covered with matchstick blinds that are not quite flush with them, so that sometimes, from certain angles, the exterior is visible through the glass alone. Similarly, the door is sometimes open, sometimes shut, and sometimes covered by a second louvered door.

The film consists of a series of fixed, extended shots, some lasting several minutes, of these partial and partially obscured openings onto the outside world. (There is, notably, no reverse angle onto the interior of the apartment.) Through these veiled windows, we observe people going about their daily routines, most strikingly an elderly man who

constantly rearranges his plants and paces his terrace like a caged lion.

But as the film progresses we may find ourselves more aware of the changes in the light—angle, intensity, the way in which it's blocked by the opposite buildings and filtered by the semi-transparent blinds. The blinds, with their strong verticals (the cords that tie the slants) and narrow, delicate horizontals, structure the image and restructure it every time the camera changes position. One of the strongest influences on Akerman's work is minimalist avant-garde filmmaking. It's impossible to look at *Là-bas* and not recall the wall of windows and the changing light in Michael Snow's *Wavelength*, a connection reinforced by the qualities of the image produced by Akerman's low-end DV camera, particularly its flattening of the space so that the view from the window has the look of a late Cézanne where depth and surface become one (what Snow referred to as "the balancing of illusion and fact" in Cézanne and which he sought after in his own work). Akerman takes the aesthetic strategies of the minimalists and marries them to the humanist content that they suppressed.

Thus, when we look at the changing light in the room or we scan the horizon line on the nearby beach where Akerman occasionally sets up the camera, we also hear the voice of this invisible protagonist as she mulls over bits of family history or worries over her relationship with her landlady and how she will replace the things she's broken or eaten in the apartment. The quest for replacements will take her out onto the street, which we come to understand as something of a heroic act. Akerman leaves it to us to tie the clues and strands of her thought together—how, for example, her ruminations on the suicide of her aunt and of Amos Oz's mother connect to the report of a suicide bombing only a block away. Sometimes the sound of her voice mixes with that of fighter planes streaking across the sky, the most concrete sign that this is a war zone. Is *Là-bas* a political film? Not in the sense that it takes sides or applies a political analysis to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. As Akerman explained at a screening last month at New York's French Institute, the idea that Israel did one thing right and another thing wrong has become less compelling given the fact that it could in the near future be entirely wiped away by a nuclear weapon. "And that," she said, "would be terrible—at least it would for me."

# THE NEW YORKER

Review: "Down There (Là-bas)"

By Richard Brody

In this cinematic first-person essay about Israel, the Brussels-born and Paris-based director Chantal Akerman uses a lightweight video camera the way an artist uses a sketchpad to capture visual thoughts on the wing. The results are exquisite and darkly philosophical. She starts out recording her own literal standpoint—the view out the window of the apartment she's sublet in Tel Aviv, through the scrim of a bamboo shade, toward the neighbors in apartments across the way and in the street below. The metaphorical force of her obscured vistas becomes clear as Akerman's life imitates her art: she sleeps through a suicide bombing committed at a beachfront café a short walk from her flat. When she goes to that beach, the stunningly pictorial seascapes she composes, reminiscent of paintings by Seurat and Courbet, suggest the agonized state of permanent exile that she alludes to in her voice-over monologue: the troubled connection of Jewish identity to modern European culture, which are both in a seeming state of perpetual crisis.



## ABOUT CHANTAL AKERMAN

"Comparable in force and originality to Godard or Fassbinder, Chantal Akerman is arguably the most important European director of her generation." —J. Hoberman, *The Village Voice*

Born in Brussels, Belgium in 1950, Chantal Akerman was a filmmaker whose work gave new meaning to the term "independent film." An Akerman film is an exercise in pure independence, creativity and art. Her viewers must give themselves over completely to the experience of the film and watch with an open mind. Strong themes in her films include women at work and at home, women's relationships to men, women, and children, food, love, sex, romance, art, and storytelling. Each Akerman film is a world to be explored on its own terms. Her films are the subject of numerous books including *Identity and Memory: The Films of Chantal Akerman* by Gwendolyn Audrey Foster and *Nothing Happens: Chantal Akerman's Hyperrealist Everyday* by Ivone Margulies. Chantal Akerman died in Paris, France in 2015, having forever changed the history of cinema.

## SELECTED FILMOGRAPHY

|      |  |      |  |
|------|--|------|--|
| 2015 | <i>No Home Movie*</i>  | 1986 | <i>La Paresse</i>  |
| 2011 | <i>Almayer's Folly</i>   | 1985 | <i>Golden Eighties</i>                                     |
| 2006 | <i>Down There (Là-bas)*</i>  | 1984 | <i>Lettre D'une Cinéaste</i>                               |
| 2004 | <i>Tomorrow We Move*</i>   | 1984 | <i>New-York, New-York Bis</i>                              |
| 2002 | <i>From the Other Side*</i>  | 1984 | <i>Family Business</i>                                     |
| 1999 | <i>South (Sud)*</i>  | 1984 | <i>Paris Vu Par... 20 Ans Apres</i>                        |
| 1999 | <i>La Captive</i>  | 1983 | <i>One Day Pina Asked...</i>                               |
| 1997 | <i>Le Jour Où</i>  | 1983 | <i>L'homme A La Valise</i>                                 |
| 1996 | <i>Chantal Akerman By Chantal Akerman</i>                              | 1983 | <i>Les Années 80</i>                                       |
| 1996 | <i>A Couch in New York</i>   | 1982 | <i>Toute Une Nuit</i>                                      |
| 1993 | <i>From the East (D'Est)*</i>  | 1980 | <i>Dis-Moi</i>   |
| 1993 | <i>Portrait D'une Jeune Fille De La Fin Des Années 60, A Bruxelles</i> | 1978 | <i>Les Rendez-Vous d'Anna</i>                              |
| 1992 | <i>Le Déménagement</i>   | 1976 | <i>News From Home</i>                                      |
| 1991 | <i>Night and Day</i>   | 1975 | <i>Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai Du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles</i> |
| 1989 | <i>Three Stanza's on the Name Sacher</i>                               | 1975 | <i>Je Tu Il Elle</i>                                       |
| 1989 | <i>Les Trois Dernieres Sonates De Franz Schubert</i>                   | 1973 | <i>Hanging Out Yonkers</i>                                 |
| 1998 | <i>Histoires D'amérique</i>  | 1973 | <i>Le 15/8</i>   |
| 1986 | <i>Mallet-Stevens</i>  | 1972 | <i>La Chambre 2</i>  |
| 1986 | <i>Letters Home</i>  | 1972 | <i>La Chambre 1</i>  |
| 1986 | <i>Le Marteau</i>  | 1972 | <i>Hotel Monterey</i>                                      |
|      |  | 1971 | <i>L'enfant Aimé Ou Je Joue À Etre Une Femme Mariée</i>    |
|      |  | 1968 | <i>Saute Ma Ville</i>                                      |

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## FILM CREDITS

|                        |  |
|------------------------|--|
| Title:                 | <i>Down There</i>  |
| French title:          | <i>Là-bas</i>  |
| A film by:             | Chantal Akerman  |
| Running time:          | 78 minutes   |
| Year of production:    | 2006   |
| Year of release:       | 2016   |
| Country:               | Belgium / France   |
| Language:              | English  |
| Image:                 | 16:9, Color  |
| Edited by:             | Claire Atherton  |
| Photography and sound: | Chantal Akerman and Robert Fenz                              |
| Assistant editor:      | Fabio Balducci   |
| Mixer:                 | Thomas Gauder  |
| Assistant mixer:       | Cyrille Lauwerier  |
| Color timing:          | Olivier Cohen and Vonnick Guénée                             |
| Associate producers:   | AMIP, Xavier Carniaux, Paradise Films<br>and Marilyn Watelet |
| Produced by:           | AMIP, Paradise Films, Chemah I.S and Le<br>Fresnoy           |
| International Sales:   | Doc & Film   |

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Icarus Films  
32 Court Street, Floor 21  
Brooklyn, NY 11201  
(718) 488-8900  
mail@IcarusFilms.com  
www.IcarusFilms.com

