Mathias
Lavin*

Vol. XII
No. 22
2024

comparative cinema
36-51

Variations in Minor Mode: The Question of Accent in Chantal Akerman's Cinema

This article looks at the question of the accent in cinema, i.e. the latent, inaudible, often spectral dimension of our listening to films. By analyzing certain accents in film, we are reminded of the extent to which they testify to the irreducible presence of the body in the voice. In this way, we are placed at the center of any interrogation of the filmic voice. The corpus of study is taken entirely from the work of Chantal Akerman. This work first shows a tension between denial and the discreet presence of the Belgian accent (Walloon accent from Brussels). Moreover, the filmmaker's voice in her works reflects the same ambivalence towards her place of origin, but it also constitutes a vocal signature, a singular inflection like an irreducible dimension, impossible to erase. Besides, recording the mother's voice allows us to hear an accent marked by exile and History.

Keywords

CHANTAL AKERMAN
CINEMA AESTHETICS
ACCENT IN CINEMA
VOICE IN CINEMA
EXILE IN CINEMA
MINOR LITERATURE

Date submitted: 24/03/2024
Date accepted: 04/09/2024

*** Mathias Lavin**

Mathias.Lavin@univ-paris1.fr / orcid.org/0000-0001-8614-4846

Professor in Film Studies at the University of Paris 1 – Panthéon Sorbonne (France). The question of voice and speech in cinema is an important aspect of his research, as his most recent book (*Puissance(s) de la parole. À l'écoute des films*, Éditions Mimésis, 2022) indicates. He is currently finishing an essay on Chantal Akerman.

DOI: 10.31009/cc.2024.v12.i22.03

The accent is a subtle dimension, sometimes unnoticeable or unheard, or, on the contrary, appearing as an excess or as a sign of an incomplete fluency in the language spoken. At once singular and typical (the accent always belongs to a group, even if one of a minority), such a vocal signature can contribute to forging an identity and even endow the speaker with a particular charm. In the French cinema, to give an example, Jane Birkin never tried to hide or soften her British accent. To deal with our subject, we could say that the accent is the often ghostly or spectral part of our film experience, so much so that its identification depends on familiarity, and even intimacy, with the language or languages spoken. The artist and writer Alain Fleischer quite rightly referred to the accent as a ghost language (Fleischer 2005). To see this clearly, we need only refer to an example taken from a culture far removed from our European point of view. In *Early Summer* (*Bakushu*), directed by Yasujirō Ozu in 1951, Noriko, the heroine, has taken the sudden and almost contingent decision to marry her neighbor, who happens to be her brother's colleague, a doctor. She decides to follow him to Akita, in the north of the archipelago, where he has just been transferred. Informing her best friend Aya of this new situation, they both imitate the accent of this remote province, giggling. The subtitles may simulate a possible or vague accent, but even if you listen carefully to the dialogue, it's almost impossible, without a deep knowledge of the language, to notice any difference, albeit obvious to ears familiar with the practice of the Japanese language.

This simple but decisive observation, as the lesson of Ozu's film indicates, justifies the decision to work solely on a French-language corpus, the only one, unfortunately, in which I am able to grasp the nuances of regional or social accents accurately and without risk of confusion. This restriction of the scope of the study implies a historical comment. We know that the dominant use of the spoken language in France is relatively peculiar compared with that in other countries, particularly neighboring countries (Spain, Italy, and even England and Germany): as a result of a long-standing centralized state and administrative tradition, there was a strong tendency to restrict or even prohibit the use of dialects and then regional accents in the public sphere, which had a major impact on their exclusion from the mass media (radio then television) (see for example De Certeau, Julia & Revel 1975). Thus, regional accents are reduced to a kind of folklore, either picturesque or caricatured, and in fact limited to two characteristic and easily identified accents: the "Marseille" accent, and the accent from the north (the "Ch'ti"), to be heard in many films, mostly comedies, which is hardly surprising. So, what is the significance of questioning accents (or some of them) in film?

First of all, we might think that it is an important way of making the uses of what Michel Chion calls "spoken language" ("*la langue parlée*") in cinema more sensitive. As part of his wide-ranging theoretical research on sound, Chion has devoted a specific work to this question, offering a rather free and playful historical overview of the presence of "spoken" French from the generalization of the talking films in the early thirties to the contemporary period (the book was published in 2008). The aim is to contribute to a better understanding of the vocal landscape of a cinematography, and to become aware of its limits.[1]

DOI: 10.31009/cc.2024.v12.i22.03

Two other related benefits can also be expected from the analysis of accents in cinema. Identifying and questioning the expression of a particular accent is a reminder of the extent to which it testifies to an irreducible bodily presence in the voice. So, we are really at the heart of any investigation into the filmic voice, or more precisely of the constitutive tension between speech and voice—and I shall return to this link between vocality and corporeality in a more detailed way later on. Moreover, the accent—at least when perceived by the spectator—helps to highlight the value of the voice as an important, and often neglected element of filmic figuration. It is then worth not schematically opposing the visual and auditory spheres, but assessing how they complement each other.

If we wanted to map and study accents in French or to say it more accurately, French-speaking cinema (considering Switzerland, Belgium, Quebec, overseas territories, speakers of foreign origin, etc.), we would need several books. My ambition will therefore be more modest, and my corpus of study considerably reduced, since it will focus mainly on one single work, that of Chantal Akerman. The critical discourse has rightly focused on Akerman's traumatic relationship with history (the extermination of the Jews of Europe and the deportation of her mother), and the persistent geographical displacements associated with the theme of exile, but has said very little about the linguistic or phonetic consequences. On the other hand, Akerman's Belgian citizenship, and the fact that she lived her entire childhood and youth in Belgium seem anecdotal and, surprisingly, do not call for any specific development. On the contrary, I would like to lend an ear to this regional and vocal dimension, not to situate the filmmaker within a national cinematography, but to analyze her relationship to a way of speaking rooted in a founding experience and to find traces of it in certain titles of her filmography. My analysis here enters into a dialogue with the hypothesis of "accented cinema" formulated by Hamid Naficy in his important essay (Naficy 2001). However, it is obvious that for Naficy the accent in linguistic and vocal terms is only a minor aspect of a much larger whole: "accented cinema" has above all a metaphorical value, as a trace of origin and displacement, which explains why it is defined by the author with spatial, thematic, narrative, formal, economic and other characteristics.

In addition, while it was difficult for Akerman to assert herself as a woman filmmaker in the face of sexist prejudice, we should not forget the patronizing attitude that might have been attached to her Belgian origin. The ambivalent presence of accents in her films is therefore a (partial) response to the stigma of the Belgian accent in French-speaking culture, as well as the trace (unconscious no doubt) of wider geopolitical displacements. So, it is necessary to consider the presence of a repressed accent, which is also the symptom of a complex history. On this point, it is also interesting to compare Akerman's work with the analysis proposed by Derrida in *Le Monolinguisme de l'autre* (Derrida 1996): on the one hand, the philosopher proposes a reflection on belonging to a language as a place of alterity, while, on the other hand, honestly testifying to a very ambivalent, even hostile, relationship to the resurgence of an accent rooted in its territory of origin, North Africa (specifically, colonial

DOI: 10.31009/cc.2024.v12.i22.03

Algeria under French administration). In this way, we can take into account not only the fact of speaking a foreign language with an accent (that would be Naficy's approach) but one's own language with an accent—from the point of view of a dominant use.

The question will thus be approached from a kind of journey through the whole of the filmmaker's work, without distinguishing between fiction and documentary. As Marion Schmid writes about *News from Home* (1976), the film "closely interweaves a documentary style with an explicitly autobiographical content" (Schmid 2010, 50). Such a statement takes on a much more general value, the intimate dimension and the formal demands displacing the overly encompassing and restrictive categories in the issue that interests us here. The distinctions between fiction and documentary thus appear definitively porous, displaced by the repetition of autobiographical themes and the tendency towards self-portraiture, which is also a vocal self-portrait.

Denial and discretion of the Belgian accent

To speak of a Belgian accent that would be heard in Akerman's films is obviously an inaccurate and even incorrect formula, since there is no such thing as "one" accent. Belgium is a multilingual country with three official languages, even if the German, on the eastern fringes of the country, is still very much outnumbered, the main division being, as we know, between Flemish and Walloon. Therefore, the Belgian accent I'm interested in concerns the accent perceptible in a French-speaking context (Walloon), and more particularly in Brussels—which should be distinguished from the accent of Liège, Namur, etc. *Jeanne Dielman, 23 quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975) is a particularly interesting case on this subject, since it is probably the only title in Akerman's filmography which gives voice to this linguistic bilingualism specific to Belgium. It does so, however, in a paradoxical, if discreet, way. Delphine Seyrig, who plays the heroine, is a French star (who, incidentally, grew up in a multilingual environment—Franco-Swiss, she spent her childhood and adolescence in Lebanon, then in the United States) with a remarkably distinctive voice, previously highlighted by Resnais and Truffaut, for example. There is no trace of a Belgian accent in her performance as Jeanne, and it is obvious that any attempt to imitate it would have been ludicrous, given that the actress's identity depended on her elocution. The situation is quite different for Jeanne's son Sylvain, played by Flemish actor Jan Decorte (Fig. 1). Although he expresses himself clearly and fluently in French, his Dutch accent remains distinctive and very marked. The linguistic problems specific to the Belgian kingdom are also the subject of an explicit dialogue between mother and son about the choice of the school, Sylvain preferring to go to a Dutch-speaking school to stay with his friend Jan (a Flemish name indeed… and the actor's own name). The young boy goes on to say that now that he has mastered the language that is not his parents' and that is spoken at home: "*plus personne ne se fout de mon accent*" ("no one makes fun of my accent anymore"), a detail that undoubtedly refers to the debates on the linguistic frontier that were particularly heated in the 1960s, especially in school and academic settings.[2] Decorte's Flemish accent is particularly striking when he recites

Vol. XII **Article**
No. 22 MATHIAS LAVIN
2024 Variations in Minor Mode: The Question of Accent in Chantal Akerman's Cinema

DOI: 10.31009/cc.2024.v12.i22.03

Fig. 1: *Jeanne Dielman, 23 quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (Chantal Akerman, 1975).

Vol. XII
No. 22
2024

DOI: 10.31009/cc.2024.v12.i22.03

Vol. XII Article
No. 22 MATHIAS LAVIN
2024 Variations in Minor Mode: The Question of Accent in Chantal Akerman's Cinema

Baudelaire's poem *L'Ennemi*, taken from *Les Fleurs du mal*. After their evening meal, Jeanne tries to get her son to learn the sonnet, and his difficulty in memorizing it underlines the roughness of the accent and the peculiarity of its use. At the end of the recitation Jeanne said to her son: "*Je me demande si tu sais encore dire les 'r' comme moi*" ("I wonder if you can still say the 'r' like me"). Of course, this is in no way intended to contrast the elevation and superiority of French poetry with inadequate and idiosyncratic pronunciation. On the contrary, the effect is one of distancing, giving a new hearing to Baudelaire's famous sonnet.

Because of the insistent silence of the protagonist played by Seyrig caught up in the repetition of her various household chores, often filmed in their duration, we tend to forget that the film also offers, though in a highly impressionistic mode, a series of portraits, generally linked to the capital's commercial activities. And it is in this very limited setting that the Belgian accent can be heard from time to time. The film opens with the first customer, played by the filmmaker Henri Storck, leaving the flat after paying Jeanne and saying with characteristic pronunciation: "*Alors, à la semaine prochaine*" ("So, see you next week"), with the two "-*ai*-" [/*ɛ*/] very open, and the penultimate syllable stressed at the end of the sentence, whereas in standard French you'd expect the first syllable to be stressed.[3] By comparison, the second customer, played by another well-known filmmaker (also film critic and actor), Jacques Doniol-Valcroze, utters an equally laconic sentence, but without an identifiable accent. Otherwise, it's the few words exchanged during Jeanne's various purchases that bear witness to her territorial roots. The baker, for example, hands her a loaf of bread wrapped in a paper bag and says "*s'il vous plait*" in the polite local way—meaning "here" or "please." (Fig. 2, bottom) The short sequence at the haberdashery on the third day also offers a perfect example of phonetic idiosyncrasy when, after Jeanne's long speech about trying to replace a button on Sylvain's winter coat, the saleswoman explains that it is impossible to find one in that shape and that they must all be changed (Fig. 2, middle).

In addition, we may notice that earlier on the second day, the shoemaker to whom Jeanne was handing a pair of her son's shoes spoke with a pronounced foreign accent, which is neither Flemish nor Walloon, and whose precise origin is difficult to identify (Fig. 2, top). This brief exchange is obviously important because it serves as a reminder that Belgium is a country of immigration, and Brussels a cosmopolitan capital. However, the presence of the Belgian accent, or other foreign accents, remains very limited, and more generally it can be argued that even in films set in Belgium, more precisely in Brussels, the accent is either absent or largely neutralized in most of Akerman's films.

Toute une nuit (1982) is a revealing case on the subject. Shot entirely in Brussels and its surroundings, the film features a succession of brief sequences, often enigmatic and with no real fictional motivation, focusing on the encounters or separations of a few couples, or on solitary portraits. The whole is supposed to take place over the course of a heat-wave summer night. The project thus appears as an updated and distanced reworking of the city films, or urban symphonies, typical of avant-garde cinema in the 1920s, albeit

DOI: 10.31009/cc.2024.v12.i22.03

Fig. 2: *Jeanne Dielman, 23 quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (Chantal Akerman, 1975).

DOI: 10.31009/cc.2024.v12.i22.03

reversing their usual chronology—in this case from night to morning rather than morning to evening as in Alberto Cavalcanti's *Rien que des heures* (1926) and the famous Walter Ruttmann's *Berlin. Symphony of a Great City* (*Berlin: Die Sinfonie der Großstadt*, 1927) or Dziga Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera* (*Человек с киноаппаратом,* 1929).[4] As a director, Akerman chose to record the soundscape of the nocturnal city, while proposing a kind of choreography that links or separates the different bodies involved. This well-orchestrated work is done at the expense of the speech itself. Dialogues are scarce, and they are always short, usually reduced to a few words of performative value ("*Si on sortait?*" ["If we got out?"]; "*Viens!*" [Let's go!"]; etc.) or phatic ("*On étouffe*." ["It's suffocating."]). Two passages seem particularly revealing for my purposes. In the first, we see a couple, framed frontally, in front of a hotel room window overlooking railway tracks (it is probably the Gare du Midi). Because of the open window, the few sentences exchanged are partly muffled by the ambient sound generated by the railway activities—so the sounds of the world are as important as the words being spoken. In the second example, a young man stays in his kitchen at dawn, when his lover has just left the flat as we saw earlier; he starts to write him a letter and begins to read the contents aloud: "*Cher Vincent*" ("Dear Vincent…"). Then he pauses, runs his hand through his hair, seems to be thinking as if seeking inspiration, and says aloud again but without writing: "*Tu me manques déjà*…" ("I miss you already…"). Then he remains silent in the same posture that echoes the traditional iconography of melancholy (Fig. 3). Words are sparse, as they are throughout the film, but this is perhaps one of the few moments in the film (if not the only one) when a Belgian accent seems to rise to the surface. And so it is significant that the writing, associated with the voice, is immediately interrupted. Should we conclude, then, that because of her long-standing roots in Brussels, her hometown, the filmmaker wanted to drastically limit any manifestation of a Brussels accent that might appear misplaced in the context of legitimate French-speaking culture? And how are we to understand such a choice? Moreover, shouldn't we understand this sentence ("I already miss you…") on another, more metaphorical level? There is indeed a loss, the object of which is difficult to pinpoint. Could it be his hometown? Or the way in which a singular and intimate form of speaking manifests itself?

Made for French-German television channel Arte (for the series *Tous les garçons et les filles de leur âge*), *Portrait d'une jeune fille de la fin des années 60 à Bruxelles* (1993) indicates from its title the location of the diegesis, as does *Jeanne Dielman*… Are phonological particularities still present here? As we have already seen in the two previous films referred to, they tend to disappear again. Circé Lethem, who plays Michèle, the young girl in the title, is Belgian but her accent is hardly distinctive, even though there are plenty of opportunities to notice it because she is so talkative. If we're paying attention, we might just notice a way of emphasizing the "o" in the word "*école*" ("school") for example, and especially the fact that the diphthong "ui" is pronounced "*oui*" when she says "*huit heures*" ("eight o'clock"). Her male partner is French, both in fiction (he's a deserter who crossed the border to escape military service) and in reality (Julien Rassam). The film is set in April 1968, just before the famous events of May (which took place in Paris…), although the filmmaker has not attempted to

DOI: 10.31009/cc.2024.v12.i22.03

Fig. 3: *Toute une nuit* (Chantal Akerman, 1982).

Vol. XII
No. 22
2024

DOI: 10.31009/cc.2024.v12.i22.03

recreate the original period, creating a form of anachronism through certain architectural features, car models, details of passers-by's clothing, etc. The question then arises as to whether travelling through history has the effect of making us forget geography, in this case the phonological specificity of an idiom?

Her voice

After analyzing *Portrait d'une jeune fille de la fin des années 60*..., we can logically move on to the question of self-portrait. From her first short *Saute ma ville* (1968) to the last *No Home Movie* (2015), Chantal Akerman is present in several of her films, sometimes only through her voice (as in *News from Home*), and sometimes even anonymously, as in *Jeanne Dielman*..., where we hear her, off-screen, interpreting the neighbor who leaves her baby with the heroine and a café employee. Over four decades, we have a truly moving archive of the filmmaker's voice, which also shows how it evolved. Like men's voices, women's voices also change over the lifecycle, for hormonal reasons (even if they don't undergo the same perceptible changes as men's voices during adolescence), dental changes, muscular changes, and so on.[5] Besides, in her case, intensive smoking undoubtedly had an impact on the transformation of her voice. For example, we may only compare Akerman's voiceover in the first part of *Je, tu, il, elle*, which is rather high-pitched, with almost childlike intonations at times, and that of *Là-bas* (2006), which is deeper and raspier, to appreciate the difference. Following on from what we have noted, we might then ask whether the filmmaker's voice, in her works, betrays or translates the same ambivalent relationship to her place of origin, to say the least, of which the presence of a singularity of pronunciation would be an indication. In a fragment of *Le Monolinguisme de l'autre*, Jacques Derrida sets out in detail his relationship to French language and literature based on his former status as a "*Français d'Algérie*" ("Frenchman from Algeria"), who was also a victim of the anti-Semitic policies of the Vichy regime when he was a child. Thus he writes:

> One entered French Literature only by losing one's accent. I think I have not lost my accent; not everything in my "French Algerian" accent is lost. Its intonation is more apparent in certain "pragmatic" situations (anger or exclamation in familial or familiar surroundings, more often in private than in public, which is a quite reliable criterion for the experience of this strange and precarious distinction). But I would like to hope, I would very much prefer, that no publication permit my "French Algerian" to appear.[6] (Derrida 1998, 45–46)

The philosopher clearly shows the extent to which the acquisition of a symbolic position—access to a culture and the social recognition it can bring—presupposes a radical distancing from what would mark such an origin, supposedly removed from any stylistic value or any elementary system of distinction. Hence the desire to have erased all signs of it from his writings, while at the same time noting that traces of it remain in his elocution, still likely to manifest themselves in certain situations where social constraint weakens. Clearly, the historical context evoked by Derrida is different from that experienced by Akerman, but this does not rule out a similar ambivalence. In the

Vol. XII Article
No. 22 MATHIAS LAVIN
2024 Variations in Minor Mode: The Question of Accent in Chantal Akerman's Cinema

DOI: 10.31009/cc.2024.v12.i22.03

quotation, we should also note the separation between the public (without accent) and the private sphere (where it may reappear in an unwanted way). It is the private sphere that is, for the most part, evoked in *News from Home*, using as material for the voiceover the letters sent by his mother during her first visit to New York in 1972, while the images, shot four years later, show the streets of the metropolis, the corridors, platforms and trains of the underground, or New York Bay. We will come back to the mother's voice later, but it is worth highlighting that her written words are read out by her daughter at a fast speed and in a monotonous tone, sometimes competing with the noise of traffic. Does this emotional neutrality serve to maintain a distance from her country of origin? This seems more likely given the mother's frequent complaints about not receiving enough news. In any case, the Belgian accent seems to have been neutralized, but through the mother's words we can recognize some more idiomatic expressions: for example, the use of the adverb "*fort*" ("*fort bien*," "*fort étonnée*," etc.), instead of "*très*," a formulation that would be more common in France.[7]

Although the device is quite different (no reading of the text written by someone else), and the filmmaker's own voice has changed as we have noted, the distancing of linguistic origin is the same in *Là-bas*, a film shot in Israel and set almost exclusively in a rented flat in Tel Aviv. The film is based on the frequent disjunction between gaze and voice, and the long shots taken from inside the flat play on the insistence of a gaze on the world that is both attentive and distant. Akerman's body is never seen, although we hear her voiceover or sometimes off-screen depending of the moment as a series of various noises indicating her presence in the apartment. In her words, while she curiously pronounces "*Bruxelles*" in the French style (and not /brysɛl/ [Brusselles] as is done in the Belgian capital), signs of the Belgian accent occasionally make a comeback: she pronounces "*ouït*" for "*huit*," for example, a particularly characteristic mark already noted.

Both films are shaped by the question of geographical displacement and exile: young Chantal's voluntary and emancipatory departure for the United States; her confined stay in Israel, which could have been the place where her family settled after the Second World War—an aspect directly evoked by the filmmaker in voiceover. While the linguistic marker of origin tends to disappear, it is important to note that the disappearance is neither radical nor total. There are still manifestations of it, however subtle or discreet. More profoundly, to quote Derrida again: "The accent indicates a hand-to-hand combat with language in general; it says more than accentuation"[8] (Derrida 1998, 46). Is it because the fusion is impossible with the mother tongue? But language itself is plural. This is one way of understanding the paradoxical formula that serves as Derrida's title: "monolingualism of the other." As the philosopher explains we only have one language, the one we really master, and we have inherited it from others—concretely from the family, school, social relations, etc. and in a more fundamental way because language, according to the tradition inaugurated by Saussure, is indeed an inheritance from history. The accent thus appears as a vocal signature, a singular inflection. There is a striking detail to be noted here: while Akerman spoke a quite good English, in expressing herself in that language she retained

Vol. XII **Article**
No. 22 MATHIAS LAVIN
2024 Variations in Minor Mode: The Question of Accent in Chantal Akerman's Cinema

DOI: 10.31009/cc.2024.v12.i22.03

(deliberately?) a very marked French (or French-Belgian?) accent, as can be heard from several interviews given from the 1970s (which can be found on the internet[9]), and the reading of her story, *Une famille à Bruxelles* (*A Family in Brussels*), given in English at the Dia Center for the Arts in New York in 2001—the artistic foundation having released a CD of the performance (Akerman 2002). The use of a foreign language is a sign of belonging to another language, as indicated by the more or less discreet presence of an accent.

The mother's voice

Referring to the importance of the mother figure and the presence of the filmmaker's own mother seems obvious, even commonplace, when commenting on her work. But what about her voice, Natalia Akerman's voice? We have already heard the director read out letters written by her mother from Brussels in *News from Home*. And her mother is also seen but silent in *Toute une nuit*, where she is shot smoking in front of her house before going inside, under the injunction of an off-screen voice (Akerman's own) who calls out to her three times ("*Maman*!") (Fig. 4). Concerning the mother character, *Golden Eighties* (1986) is partly a fictional and fantasized portrait of Akerman's mother. The story takes place in Brussels once again, in the Toison d'Or shopping arcade (where Akerman's parents owned a clothes shop), totally recreated in the studio. This choice imposes a form of abstraction, amplified by the genre of musical comedy. What's more, and perhaps more importantly, the cast is based almost exclusively on French performers, once again rendering any Brussels accent completely inaudible. However, the character played by John Berry, named Eli, the youthful love of the character played by Delphine Seyrig, uses a different accent, and refers to a different historical context. The American accent alludes here to the liberation of the extermination camps (of which Delphine Seyrig's character is said to be a survivor, taken in by this man after World War II), and on another, intertextual level, a reminder that John Berry was a victim of McCarthyism too. Once again, the question of exile is at stake, with all that this implies in terms of linguistic displacement. It should be remembered that French is Akerman's mother tongue, whether spoken with an accent or not, as we have noted, with inflections or certain expressions specific to the Walloon used in Brussels. For her parents, and her mother whose voice can only be heard in her work, French (from Belgium) is indeed an adopted language in which the return of a language of origin can be marked—Natalia Leibel, her birth name, was born in Tarnów, near Kraków in Poland, in 1928.

Another telling example is *Aujourd'hui, dis-moi* (1980), made for French television, in which Akerman herself interviews three elderly women (grandmothers, to use the title of the program in which the film was included) from Eastern Europe (Russia and Poland) who found refuge in Paris and then fell victim to Nazi persecution. At the same time, at the opening of the film and between each interview with the women, we also hear the voice of Akerman's mother, in voiceover, talking to her daughter about her own grandmother (so the filmmaker's great-grandmother). As a counterpart to *News from Home*, and without her being seen on screen, Natalia Akerman expresses herself in some detail, and we hear, in her perfect mastery of syntax

Vol. XII **Article**
No. 22 MATHIAS LAVIN
2024 Variations in Minor Mode: The Question of Accent in Chantal Akerman's Cinema

DOI: 10.31009/cc.2024.v12.i22.03

and vocabulary, an unmistakable presence of the Brussels accent, sometimes with a slightly different inflection. It must be emphasized that the mother's voice is linked to that of the three other women interviewed by Akerman. The first two (neither of whom is given a first or last name), who arrived in France as young women in the 1930s, do not speak with a noticeable accent—there are only their words, not their accent, that reveal their Eastern European origin. The third woman, on the other hand, who found refuge in Paris after the war, speaks with a very pronounced accent (undoubtedly Polish, but it would be necessary to be more precise), sometimes with some words being difficult to understand. Significantly, this third woman is the one who receives the longest attention from Akerman—more than two thirds of the film are devoted to her. Through her gestures, her stories and her voice, and maybe her culinary skills too, the aim is to give a real substance, if spectral, to the absent grandmother, Natalia's mother, who died in the deportation, and whose French accent could perhaps have been closer to the woman who insists on force-feeding cakes to the youthful-looking filmmaker. Because of the link between the two works, despite their difference in medium, *Aujourd'hui, dis-moi* can be compared to the installation *Marcher à côté de ses lacets dans un frigidaire vide* (*Walking Next to One's Shoelaces in an Empty Fridge*, 2004), in which Natalia Akerman's voice can also be heard. In the second part of the installation, there is a video projection of a discussion filmed in black and white, with a rather rough video image, between Akerman and her mother about the filmmaker's grandmother.[10] (Fig. 6)

The movement is definitively fulfilled in *No Home Movie*, Akerman's ultimate film, which accompanies the last months of her mother's life (Fig. 5). In general terms, *No Home Movie* is made up of long shots of dialogue between the filmmaker and her mother (mainly in the kitchen, or via interposed screens when the filmmaker is away from Brussels), shots that resemble portraits of the mother or her living space, and others that have a more uncertain meaning and location—notably the long and powerful opening shot of a tree being blown over by a violent wind, or the travelling shots over a deserted area that is quickly crossed by car. The long attention given to Natalia Akerman allows us to listen to her and note, once again, that her Brussels accent is obvious. It's also easy to pick out several distinctive intonations that undoubtedly reflect her native language, perhaps with traces of Ashkenazi Hebrew which was spoken in her native community.

By exploring some of the sonic margins of Chantal Akerman's work, we are reminded of the extent to which the accent includes the relationship to others and to the law or to a social order. As Mladen Dolar points out, an accent is defined by a deviation from standard speech, but both major and subordinate usage, and even the dominant pronunciation, can be the subject of a linguistic (or phonetic) description. Thus, the dominant pronunciation, the ruling norm "is but an accent which has been declared a non-accent in a gesture which always carries heavy social and political connotations"[11] (Dolar 2006, 20). In Akerman's filmography, accent seems to play on a tension between the near and the far, between the intimate and the historical.[12] The Belgian accent may be denied in her films, but it nonetheless returns as an irreducible dimension that cannot be totally

DOI: 10.31009/cc.2024.v12.i22.03

Fig. 4: *Toute une nuit* (Chantal Akerman, 1982).

Fig. 5: *No Home Movie* (Chantal Akerman, 2015).

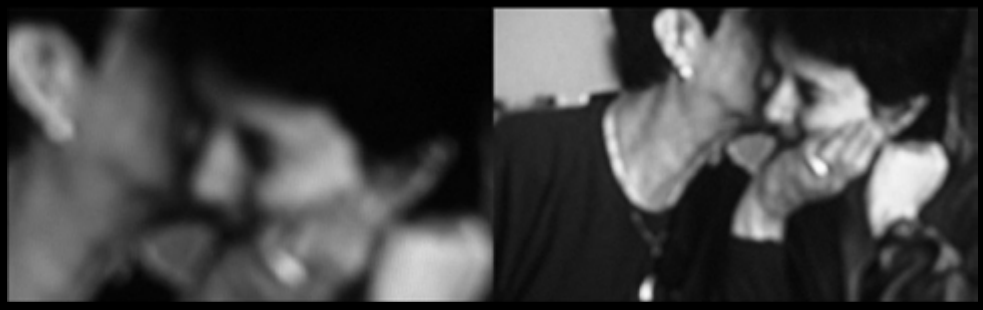

Fig. 6: *Marcher à côté de ses lacets dans un frigidaire vide* (Chantal Akerman, 2004).

Vol. XII
No. 22
2024

DOI: 10.31009/cc.2024.v12.i22.03

erased. The origin itself is displaced by these vocal resurgences, since the origin itself is plural, which means that the accent cannot be thought of as a simple deviation from a norm. On several occasions, Akerman has expressed her interest in Deleuze and Guattari's book on Kafka (Deleuze and Guattari 1975; 1986), in particular the notion of "minor literature." We can follow this line of flight: the accent would be a possible operator of what the two authors advocate, a displacement of the opposition between major and minor, in other words the art or practice of continuous variation.

Special thanks to Elisabeth Dellmann

1/ After indicating that he is developing "a history of the French language spoken on screen, of the French-language-on-screen, a specific language heard only in films" ("une histoire de la langue française à l'écran, de la langue-française-d'écran, une langue spécifique qu'on n'entend que dans les films"), Chion insists from the outset on: "the complex relationship that French cinema has with the real country, and therefore with the language, or languages, spoken in the country; it is a cinema that rarely gives voice to the variety and truth of French speech" ("le rapport complexe que le cinéma français entretient avec le pays réel, et donc avec la langue, ou les langues parlée dans le pays ; c'est un cinéma qui fait rarement entendre la variété et la vérité des parlers français") (Chion 2008, 6 and 8). All the quotes from sources which are not in English have been translated by the author.

2/ The language border between Flanders, in the north, and Wallonia, in the south, was fixed by a law in 1962, supplemented by laws on bilingualism in the Brussels Region (located in Flanders, but with a majority of French speakers) and on the difficult issue of the use of languages in the education system.

3/ To put it more precisely and technically with Jacques Pohl: "nasalisation of /ɛ:/ in the final syllable, by regressive assimilation, before n" ("nasalisation de /ɛ:/ dans la syllabe finale, par assimilation régressive, avant n [laine, peine, scène, vaine, avec [ɛ̃]]") (1983, 30), a phenomenon which is all the more notable here because the nasalisation of /ɛ:/ in "semaine" and "prochaine" highlights "the muffling of the final sound consonants" ("l'assourdissement des consonnes sonores finales") (1983, 31) which are precisely the two major features of the phonology of Belgian French according to the linguist.

4/ Concerning the Belgian city symphonies, see Jacobs 2019. The text is included in a volume about city symphonies in different countries.

5/ Of course, technical standards also need to be considered, since we are relying on films, as well as cultural factors.

6/ "On n'entrait dans la littérature française qu'en perdant son accent. Je crois n'avoir pas perdu mon accent, pas tout perdu de mon accent de 'Français d'Algérie'. L'intonation en est plus apparente dans certaines situations « pragmatiques » (la colère ou l'exclamation en milieu familial ou familier, plus souvent en privé qu'en public, et c'est au fond un critère assez fiable pour l'expérience de cette étrange et précaire distinction). Mais je crois pouvoir espérer, j'aimerais tant qu'aucune publication ne laisse rien paraître de mon 'français d'Algérie'" (Derrida 1996, 77).

7/ In his book, Naficy devotes a few pages to analyzing *News from Home*, but he only considers the version with the English voiceover, where he points out the filmmaker's strong accent in a dominant language. This analysis seems accurate, but it overlooks the version with the French voiceover, in which we hear the original text of the letters from the filmmaker's mother. See Naficy 2001, 111–15 and 129–31.

8/ "L'accent signale un corps à corps avec la langue en général, il dit plus que l'accentuation" (Derrida 1996, 78).

9/ See (and hear) for example: *A Conversation with Chantal Akerman* (Venice Film Festival, 2011): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GUStWsegZ0k [access: September 04, 2024]; *Telling*

DOI: 10.31009/cc.2024.v12.i22.03

Time Projects - Chantal Akerman Interview (Telling Time Projects, 2010): https://vimeo.com/120513329 [access: September 04, 2024].

10/ For a more precise description of Akerman's installation, see the website of the Marian Goodman gallery (Paris) where the installation was shown: https://www.mariangoodman.com/exhibitions/403-chantal-akerman-marcher-a-cote-de-ses-lacets-dans-un/ [access: September 04, 2024]

11/ The author adds in footnote: "Imagine someone reading the evening news on TV with a heavy regional accent. It would sound absurd for the state, by definition, does not have an accent. A person with an accent can appear in a talk-show, speaking in her own voice, not in an official capacity. The official voice is the voice devoid of any accent" (Footnote 8; Dolar 2006, 191).

12/ We might find here certain aspects of the accented cinema conceptualized by Naficy.

References

Akerman, Chantal. 2002. *A Family in Brussels.* 2 CDs. New York: Dia Art Foundation.

Chion, Michel. 2008. *Le Complexe de Cyrano. La langue parlée dans les films français*. Paris: Cahiers du cinéma.

De Certeau, Michel, Dominique Julia & Jacques Revel. 1975. *Une politique de la langue. La Révolution française et les patois*. Paris: Gallimard.

Deleuze, Gilles, & Félix Guattari. 1975. *Kafka, pour une littérature mineure.* Paris: Minuit.

_____. 1986. *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature.* Translated by Dana Polan. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Derrida, Jacques. 1996. *Le Monolinguisme de l'autre. Ou la prothèse d'origine.* Paris: Galilée.

_____. 1998. *Monolingualism of the Other: Or the Prosthesis of Origin.* Translated by Patrick Mensah. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Dolar, Mladen. 2006. *A Voice and Nothing More*. Cambridge: MIT Press. https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/7137.001.0001

Fleischer, Alain. 2005. *L'accent, une langue fantôme*. Paris: Le Seuil.

Jacobs, Steven. 2019. "Belgian Variations on the City Symphony Theme." In *The City Symphony Phenomenon: Cinema, Art, and Urban Modernity between the Wars*, edited by Steven Jacobs, Anthony Kinik and Eva Hielscher, 106–16. New York: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315619989-8

Naficy, Hamid. 2001. *Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking.* Princeton: Princeton University Press. https://doi.org/10.1515/9780691186214

Pohl, Jacques. 1983. "Quelques caractéristiques de la phonologie du français parlé en Belgique." *Langue française* 60: 30–41. https://doi.org/10.3406/lfr.1983.5173

Schmid, Marion, 2010. *Chantal Akerman*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

How to quote Lavin, Mathias. 2024. "Variations in Minor Mode: The Question of Accent in Chantal Akerman's Cinema." *Comparative Cinema*, Vol. XII, No. 22, pp. 36-51. DOI: 10.31009/cc.2024.v12.i22.03