



# News from Home

Regardless of how often I've revisited Chantal Akerman's *News from Home*, I continually find new details to admire. The experience is much like strolling around a favourite neighbourhood and being pleasantly surprised by an alleyway or street corner that has previously eluded my attention. This time around, a slight movement in the documentary's many long takes catches my eyes. Placed squarely in the middle of a full shot observing a late-night eatery is a square window, through which one can glimpse the back of a customer who is enjoying his nocturnal meal at the bar counter. Barely visible near the windowsill – I notice for the first time – is the hand of an unknown person, dexterously pouring sugar into their coffee.

The brief movement feels like a dance, a part of New York's urban choreography beautifully captured in *News from Home* where every little quotidian moment is observed with astonishing care. Made in 1976, the film travels from one extended metropolitan tableau to another, over which is laid Akerman's own voice reading letters sent from Belgium. They were written by her mother, Nelly, between 1971 and 1973 when the director had just moved there. As the screen flickers with images of bustling Midtown streets, graffitied subway compartments and lonely car parks wrapped in the blueish hue of fluorescent street lamps, the content of the letters adds an intimacy to the city's anonymity.

They are a topography of day-to-day familial life. Amid Nelly's motherly worries, which range from Akerman's financial situation to her summer closet, are seemingly simple yet startling everyday events, which feel much more significant when one is far away from home. At times, Akerman's voice, though not recorded on location, is drowned out by the cacophony of traffic, an articulation of the way city living can eclipse and invade our inner lives. Still, the voiceover remains a patient constant. It's a dependable anchor, emotionally and cinematically, across the shifting urban landscapes.

*News from Home* is one of the best films that illustrate the principles of psychogeographical thoughts. It represents the kind of 'spatial stories' championed by French theorist Michel de Certeau in *The Practice of Everyday Life*. According to de Certeau, two manners of speaking about spaces exist. The first kind, executed by maps and tours, aims to produce legible figures and results. In contrast, the second kind, which he calls 'spatial stories', extend beyond numerical constraints. They lend a humanity to places. For example, a map can inform a reader of the size of an apartment but not of the tactile interactions between the space and its inhabitants. In the same vein, *News from Home* does not approach the New York landscape like a mechanical geographer. Favouring the long take, the film does away with the tradition of employing establishing shots to create a sense of spatial unity. As a result, viewers might find it difficult to visualise the geographical relationships between the different locations. Nevertheless, this spatial confusion is precisely what humanises New York, as the film drops the efficiency of a geographer and picks up the more playful approach of a psychogeographer. Furthermore, it also deconstructs the overly glamorised image of New York in cinema. In his 1967 book *The Society of the Spectacle*, the situationist

theorist Guy Debord posits the city as a spectacle consisting of consumerist locations such as shopping centres or stores, as well as tourist attractions, which further lull visitors into a faculty-numbing sense of leisure. According to Debord, the city spectacle is a 'commodity heaven', projecting a false sense of cross-class unity. This 'heaven', however, is nowhere to be found in Akerman's film, where a cloud of unproductivity lingers in images of trash-filled streets or people simply sitting on the subway.

*News from Home* also refuses to check off the city's obvious landmarks. Here, the New York panorama seen from the Hudson River makes its appearance extremely late, a mere ten minutes before the film ends. This introduction of the view resists the conventional cinematic impulse to exalt the city. Instead of a wide shot, the sequence begins with a nondescript building before pulling back, in a painstakingly slow fashion, to reveal the famous skyline. The result is wonderfully disorienting, as images of urban ennui and poverty effectively subvert this final illusion of prosperous skyscrapers.

Theoretical significance aside, this final shot also holds an autobiographical poignancy, a nostalgic look at the city that looms large over Akerman's personal and artistic growth. The daughter of Holocaust survivors, she felt perpetually displaced, saying in an interview: 'I don't have a relationship with any place. [...] I don't have the idea of land. Just the opposite. I have the feeling that I am not attached to the land under my feet.' Yet she had also spoken of New York as a place where she felt more at home than in Europe. Indeed, it is the city where the seeds of her formalistic obsessions, such as the long take, took root. Her short film *La Chambre* (1972) and her first full-length documentary *Hotel Monterey* (1973), both shot in New York, feature nearly uninterrupted shots of domestic and transient interiors, a style that culminated in the seminal *Jeanne Dielman, 23 quai du commerce, 1080 Brussels* (1975). As *News from Home* was made on her return to the city, a wistfulness hums along the flow of cars and the ripples of the Hudson River, compelling us to ponder our own changing journey through life.

**Phuong Le, *Sight and Sound*, December 2021**

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#### NEWS FROM HOME

*Director:* Chantal Akerman  
*Production Companies:* Unité 3, L'Institut National de l'Audiovisuel, Paradise Films  
*Producer (Unité 3):* Alain Dahan  
*Assistant Directors:* Paule Zadjerman, Epp Kotkes  
*Written by:* Chantal Akerman  
*Directors of Photography:* Babette Mangolte, Jim Asbell  
*Editor:* Francine Sandberg  
*Sound Recording:* Dominique Dalmasso, Larry Haas  
*Sound Editor:* Dominique Dalmasso

France-Belgium 1976  
85 mins

The screening on Fri 17 Feb will be introduced

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