



**CHANTAL AKERMAN: ADVENTURES IN PERCEPTION**

# Histoires d'Amérique

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**(American Stories: Food, Family and Philosophy)**

*Director:* Chantal Akerman

*Production Companies:* Mallia Films, La Sept, Centre Pompidou, Paradise Films, RTBF (Télévision Belge)

*In association with:*

Bibliothèque Publique d'Information

*With the participation of:* Adine Duron,

Marcia Muraskin Shulman

*With the participation of:* Ministère de la Culture et de la Communication, Ministère de la Culture de la Communauté Française

*Executive Producer:* Bertrand van Effenterre

*Executive Producer (Belgium):* Marilyn Watelet

*Producer:* Bertrand van Effenterre

*Production Manager:* Edwin Bailly

*Production Assistants:* Ruth Sergel, Jamie Shapiro,

Joshua Astrakan, Robert Hilferty, Andrea Truppin

*Assistant Director:* Ellen Kuras

*Casting:* Marcia Muraskin Shulman

*Screenplay:* Chantal Akerman

*Director of Photography:* Luc Ben Hamou

*Editor:* Patrick Mimouni

*Art Director:* Marilyn Watelet

*Costumes:* Marilyn Watelet

*Make-up:* Ann Minahan

*Titles:* Marchetti

*Musical Conception:* Sonia Wieder-Atherton

*Sound Recording:* Alix Comte

*Sound Re-recording:* Gérard Rousseau

*With:*

Mark Amitin

Eszter Balint

Stefan Balint

Kirk Baltz

George Bartenieff

Bill Bastiani

Isha Manna Beck

Jacob Becker

Max Brandt

Maurice Brenner

David Buntzman

Marilyn Chris

Sharon Diskin

Carl Don

Pierre Epstein

Michael Grodenchik

Ben Hammer

Dean Jackson

Robert Katims

Mordecai Lawner

Boris Leskin

Elliot Levine

Justine Lichtman

Judith Malina

Jerry Matz

Charles Mayer

Roy Nathanson

Bruce Nozik

Deborah Offner

Irina V. Pasmur

Herschel Rosen

Joan Rosenfels

Herbert Rubens

Claudia Silver

Arthur Tracy

Victor Talmadge

France-Belgium 1988 96 mins Digital (restoration)

Restored by Royal Film Archive of Belgium (CINEMATEK), Fondation Chantal Akerman and Amazing Digital Studios, Paris

*The screening on Tuesday 4 February will include a pre-screening performance by cellist Sonia Wieder-Atherton*

*American Stories* is not the first time Chantal Akerman has travelled to New York with her camera. Once again she is in search of an identity, that of a Jew and an immigrant, the universal family history repressed by her parents in Belgium. The post-war generation to which Akerman belongs, having escaped the experience of the holocaust, found itself in an odd way culturally dispossessed, so *American Stories* is an attempt to recapture the tradition through storytelling. The subtitle, 'Food, Family and Philosophy', apparently intended to summarise the content, refers to the three 'F's which, according to one raconteur, represent the topics with which to seduce a girl. His interlocutor immediately tries it out, much to the bemusement of the girl who is the object of his attentions.

Akerman has set her subjects in a no-man's land, surrounded by identifiable New York icons, but itself the kind of geographical and spiritual place of transit which the displaced person might pass through or attempt to make their own. Here the troupe of superb Jewish actors she has assembled try to piece together the identity they allegedly left behind in Poland. The men tell how they tried to make out, and the women how they were married off, ghetto stories spiced with the inimitable humour: 'Jews are being beaten', 'Where?', 'Who knows where. I only wanted to know if anyone here gives a damn!'; the response to the woman suffering anxiety because she loves two men, one of whom is not a Jew: 'Everything is possible in this country!'; 'Moshe, lend me some money', 'I can't', 'But you're a rich man', 'That's why!'. This is life as it was lived in the pre-war period, stories which one might imagine a Russian Jew telling in Israel, but which are certainly nostalgia for an earlier American generation. This gives the scenes enacted a timelessness which matches the lack of identifiable location; were it not for the setting, one might imagine these episodes as curtain-raisers in a music hall.

Is the theatricalisation of everyday life perhaps a Jewish characteristic? This is a point of view which, despite the location, Akerman encourages with her minimalist camera, motionless as if before a proscenium arch, as the actors come and go, and through non-naturalistic lighting, which enables characters to emerge from the background briefly and then to fade back into it. At times, she achieves a poetry worthy of the modern masters: these men with their trilby hats and cardboard suitcases, uncertain whether their destination is Washington or Philadelphia, look just like Samuel Beckett characters, clinging to their pathetic objects while lost in space.

Initially, we believe that all these people have in common is their Jewishness and a particular world view. But gradually and subtly, despite the director's apparent lack of intervention, we become aware of crosscurrents, recurrences and encounters, which appropriately come together in the long restaurant scene towards the end, in which the men end up arguing with the waiter about food: 'Why didn't you recommend the chicken soup to me?', 'You didn't order the borscht!'. You travel halfway across the world, narrowly escape death and destruction, and you end up worrying about your stomach. Everything is possible in America.

Jill Forbes, *Monthly Film Bulletin*, February 1990

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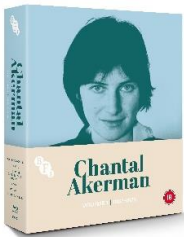
All restorations by Royal Film Archive of Belgium (CINEMATEK) and Fondation Chantal Akerman unless otherwise stated.

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With thanks to Céline Brouwez, Fondation Chantal Akerman; Joanna Hogg and Adam Roberts, A Nos Amours.

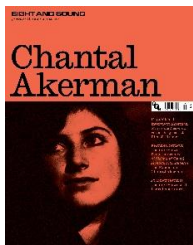
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**Chantal Akerman on 'Histoires d'Amérique'**

*Why did you make this film?*

I didn't learn anything about my family history through my parents. Instead, I discovered something of it through writers, like Isaac Bashevis Singer. But that was not enough. His memories could never become my own. Eventually, I began to invent my own imaginary memories. This film is built on memory, a succession of invented memories. I belong to the post-war generation whose parents desperately tried to forget. As the psychoanalyst Daniel Sibony has said: 'To spare their children, they cut all the living fibres of Jewish transmission ... leaving only a name empty of contents, the Jewish name, an absence, full of the violence of something inescapable.'

The silence has transformed itself into a flood of words. The children's task is sometimes to destroy the work of their parents. I shall probably never find out what is hidden behind the oblivion, although it probably evoked the idea of this film. The film contains many stories that were deeply distressing to the generation of my parents. The little tradition I was given expressed itself in the jokes scattered throughout the film. Funny stories are sometimes comforting, and they help survive through laughter, the laughter arising out of despair.

*How about the actors?*

They are all Jewish actors from New York. They were the first to give me confidence in the film. The script was not quite finished when we started auditioning. But the actors told the stories with such power, they adopted the text so fully, that I told myself I could go ahead and that this would be a great adventure.

As far as the actors were concerned, each monologue evoked a fragment of their lives. Through their vitality, they transformed the tragic element in some of the stories. This very vitality expressed something beyond the words, a story of death that becomes a hymn for life.

*It is a film about Jews, and yet it is universal.*

I don't know. I hope so. There must be many reasons and, once more, I would like to quote Sibony when he says that the Jewish question is grabbed from the Jews only to be found deeply rooted in everyone. That could be one of the reasons. But the film also evokes any transplantation from one world to another, for our times are so centered on transport and migration.

Interview by Jacqueline Aubenais, production notes

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