



La Folie Almayer (Almayer's Folly)

Director: Chantal Akerman

Production Companies: Paradise Films, Liaison Cinématographique, Artémis Productions

Executive Producers: Sovichea Cheap, Serge Zeitoun

Producers: Patrick Quinet, Chantal Akerman

Production Manager: Marianne Lambert

Written by: Chantal Akerman

Based on the novel by: Joseph Conrad

Director of Photography: Remon Fromont

Editor: Claire Atherton

Art Director: Patrick Dechesne, Alain-Pascal Housiaux

Costume Designer: Catherine Marchand

Sound: Pierre Mertens

Sound Mixer: Thomas Gauder

Sound Editor: Cécile Chagnaud

Cast:

Stanislas Merhar (*Almayer*)

Marc Barbé (*Captain Lingard*)

Aurora Marion (*Nina*)

Zac Andrianasolo (*Dain*)

Sakhna Oum (*Zahira*)

Solida Chan (*Chen*)

Yucheng Sun (*Captain Tom Li*)

Bunthang Khim (*Ali*)

Belgium-France 2011

127 mins

Digital

CHANTAL AKERMAN: ADVENTURES IN PERCEPTION

La Folie Almayer

Chantal Akerman's final narrative film, this hypnotic adaptation of Joseph Conrad's novel encountered unusual difficulties finding theatrical release – particularly surprising considering Akerman's profile and the film's payload of South-East Asia exotica, its superbly crafted old-school melodrama complete with a ravishing half-blood temptress (Belgian-Greek-Rwandan beauty Aurora Marion) and its hefty dose of colonialist comeuppance.

Characteristically, every shot has an idea for its battery, including a two-minute *tour de force* pan through the night jungle listening to two lovers plot their escape, and eventually happening upon them as if they were camouflaged animals.

Conrad's 1895 story is set in Borneo in the late 19th century, but Akerman knocked it up to 1950s Cambodia, where the weary, bitter titular Frenchman (Stanislas Merhar) nevertheless refers to his recalcitrant native wife as 'the Malaysian'. (The half of the movie that's not in French is in Khmer.) Almayer has been set up, so far disastrously, to find gold by Captain Lingard (Marc Barbé), whose adopted daughter Almayer has married, and who soon arrives to take his young granddaughter Nina away for a convent education.

But wait: we've seen Nina (Marion) grown up, in the film's entrancing opening, as a Khmer dandy lip-synchs to Dean Martin's 'Sway' in an outdoor café in Phnom Penh, backed by a gaggle of lazy dancers. He gets knifed mid-song, and everyone scatters except a dreamily dancing Nina, who is told by an offscreen whisper (Akerman's?) that her boyfriend is dead, and who then saunters up to the camera for a mega close-up and sings Mozart's 'Ave Verum Corpus' in Latin, top to bottom.

The crisis of the young Nina's apprehension (her mother spirits her into a swamp to hide her) and her offscreen containment in the gated school only pressurises Almayer's doom; when she returns, fierce and hateful and full-bodied, the sorrowful fallout from self-pitying white imperialism takes tragic shape.

The evoked sense of place and time is massive, and Akerman never hurries when she can dawdle and examine. This was new territory for the late Belgian – amid the colonial ghosts, in the bush of Conradistan, within the echo chamber of history – but few other filmmakers have made such a lustrous and ironic weave out of the iconography of maddened white men lost in Third World metaphors.

Michael Atkinson, *Sight and Sound*, December 2016

Chantal Akerman on 'La Folie Almayer'

Where did you get the idea for this film?

It stemmed from a kind of shock. Just as I was finishing reading Joseph Conrad's *Almayer's Folly*, I saw F. W. Murnau's *Tabu* at the movies. The penultimate chapter of the novel portrays the last encounter between the father and daughter in the jungle. That chapter upset me deeply. Yet it has nothing to do with *Tabu*. But I guess, the simplicity and sheer beauty of Murnau's film, its would-be paradise troubled by a predator somehow resonated with Conrad's story. This connection occurred a little over three years ago. In the end, though, I didn't at all deal with the father's scene in the same way as Conrad. In the book, it's a moment of redemption through heroism, when Almayer finally takes the young lovers to 'freedom'. I trivialised this journey to the beach. Almayer is no hero.

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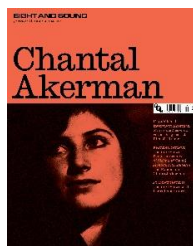
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How did you go about writing the script?

I kept writing right up until the start of the shoot. In the beginning, I really wasn't sure how to go about it. Nicole Brenez suggested I pick the parts I really like. That doesn't always work, but it enabled me to start. *Almayer's Folly* is Conrad's first novel, yet all his themes are already present – guilt, loss, redemption, the other. All Christian themes, which are quite remote to me, except for the other, but only in [Emmanuel] Levinas's meaning. I first started by writing a scene that doesn't exist in the novel, where Almayer and Lingard are tracking Nina as a child. It might be reminiscent of *The Night of the Hunter*, but I think it came from something else. My grandfather, a strict Orthodox Jew, lived with us. My father, trying to be a good son, lived all those years respecting his father and all the Jewish rituals. When my grandad died, the first thing my father did was to grab his daughter and throw her into a public school. He did it for his own self-emancipation, not for the sake of his daughter. I didn't count. Maybe it came from that. Who knows, it doesn't matter at all. Suddenly I saw this chase. It's the first scene I envisioned and I knew I had a movie.

It's less a chase than a kind of mad, screaming trek for Almayer.

Yes, he screams, out of helplessness, pain, grief. Everyone is a kind of victim in the film. The mother, the father, the daughter, even Dain – they are all victims of their prejudices and helplessness. I believe that Nina will make it in the end – probably by paying dearly for her escape, but she will pull through because she has no illusions.

In the film Nina has a more important role than in the novel.

Yes, she is more like the hero. But not in Conrad's meaning. Women didn't really matter to him, except in rare instances. Then it all started with the chase after the little girl... And the mother and father who gradually go mad. The Chinese character didn't exist in Conrad's book. Not this way anyway. There was no city either, all the stuff we shot in Phnom Penh. We don't really know it's Phnom Penh, it could be any Asian city. I got the urge to film the city when I went scouting there. That's also when the Chinese character came to me and the boarding school took greater importance, and all the wandering that leads Nina to realise that there's no place for her anywhere. You see it as she walks on. So she arrives at the harbour without knowing what to do there, and the young Chinese captain makes the decision for her, in a manner of speaking. If not for him, she might have stayed there, like Adjani in Barbados at the end of Truffaut's film *The Story of Adele H.*

La Captive prepared the way for the wholly 'mental film', whose images consistently border on the fantastical. And it, too, was shot in a style akin to your documentaries. That's an unprecedented mix for you.

It is. It really is a stage in the process. A broader kind of film, more deconstructed, I think. When I look at it, I think I dared to go for power, whereas I always used to aim for the minimal. It's kind of like a flow of lava that I might have held back or repressed. *Jeanne Dielman* is a uniquely radical film still today, but it is all about implosion. Here, it is the opposite. My psychotherapist, whom I call my little boy, always tells me that if I stopped withholding, or rather the reason I'm afraid of not withholding is that I'm afraid of my own bottled-up anger, I'm afraid of killing, figuratively speaking. Meanwhile, I'm killing myself little by little. The film was shot in a sort of hedonism, total pleasure. I didn't realise that a nearly telluric force would emanate from it. Up until that point, withholding gave power through implosion. Here, it's the reverse. That is how I progressed, it's my own liberation.

Interview by Cyril Béghin, production notes