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The Meetings of Anna by Chantal Akerman

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*Film Quarterly*, Vol. 33, No. 1 (Autumn, 1979), pp. 40-46

Published by: [University of California Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1212063>

Accessed: 22/10/2013 18:06

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24. Doerflinger, p. 123.  
 25. Doerflinger, p. 113.  
 26. Doerflinger, p. 26.  
 27. Walter B. Gibson and Morris N. Young, eds., *Houdini on Magic* (New York: Dover, 1953), p. 118.  
 28. Mircea Eliade, *Myths, Dreams and Mysteries*, trans. Philip Mairet (New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1960), p. 117.  
 29. Again, as mentioned in footnote 5, it is significant that this film is attributed (by Reel Images, its distributor) to Pathé.  
 30. Parker Tyler, "Preface" to *Magic and Myth of the Movies* in Gerald Mast and Marshall Cohen, eds., *Film Theory and Criticism* (New York: Oxford, 1974), p. 586.

31. For the most complete discussion of the influence of magicians on movies see: Eric Barnouw, "The Magician and the Movies," *American Film*. Part I (April 1978), Part II (May 1978).  
 32. My comments on *The Magician* are, unfortunately, based on the published screenplay, since I was unable to view the film at the time of writing this piece. See Ingmar Bergman, *Four Screenplays of Ingmar Bergman*, trans. Lars Malmstrom and David Kushner (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1960).  
 33. Ingmar Bergman, "Introduction" to *Four Screenplays*, pp. xiv-xv. Most of the films that I have discussed in this article will soon be available on a single reel through Film Circulation, The Museum of Modern Art.

# Reviews

## THE MEETINGS OF ANNA

Director: Chantal Akerman. Script: Akerman. Director of photography: Jean Penzer. Editing: Francine Sandberg. New Yorker Films.

Chantal Akerman's *The Meetings of Anna* (1978) is a brilliant, innovative film that challenges our expectations with a simple clarity that is perceptually strong and emotionally compelling. As in her earlier work *Jeanne Dielman* (1975), its radical style forces us to become aware of filmic conventions that we normally accept as realistic but which actually distort our conception of experience.

The plot is minimal. A young Belgian filmmaker named Anna (Aurore Clement) travels to a German city to appear at the screening of her latest film, then returns home to Paris. Though this may sound like a potentially glamorous situation, Akerman's unconventional treatment goes against our expectations. We never see the glamorous scene of the celebrity appearing before her fans; instead, Akerman focuses on what is usually omitted in movies—the detailed physical actions of a character in isolation. Most of the time, we see Anna alone—walking through a train station, riding in a train, staring out a window, or lying in her bed in a hotel room. She is between films and between meetings with other lonely individuals.

The structure of the film is framed by these long stretches of isolation, interrupted by five

specific meetings: a one-night stand with a German grade-school teacher, who is looking for a wife; a brief visit in a train station with the mother of her former fiancé, who still wants Anna as a daughter-in-law; a chance encounter on a train with a stranger seeking romantic adventure; a one-night stop-over in Brussels with her mother, whom she hasn't seen in three years; and a reunion in Paris with her lover, whose anticipation of future disappointments destroys their enjoyment of the present. These five encounters raise expectations both in the characters and in the audience. Whom will she meet next—a stranger, friend, lover, or relative? What will the person want from Anna? What role will each be expected to play? What will result from the exchange?

By watching these encounters, we learn that Anna is a person who tries to minimize her expectations so that she won't be disillusioned, but she nevertheless is trapped into wanting more than she gets. Anna knows her commitment to her art means that she must give up other more conventional choices. Despite twice breaking an engagement and having two abortions, she still hopes to have children. It's as if Anna knows that the relationship between mother and child holds more potential for her both as an artist and as a woman. In fact, her meeting with her mother is the only encounter in the film that is emotionally satisfying. In her various meetings we perceive that there are marked differences in expectations between the sexes and the generations. In contrast to Anna who pursues work and independence, the men that she meets yearn for

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romance, babies, and security; the traditional sex roles seem to be reversed. Her lover Daniel fantasizes, "If I were a woman, I'd get pregnant and forget the rest." In her mother's generation, the men are falling apart and the women try to hold things together, hoping for a better life for their children. In both generations, it's the women who stay in touch with the physical and emotional reality; the men seem exhausted or broken and seek women to restore them, one way or another. By pursuing her own career and by rejecting the traditional female role of nurturing others, Anna tends to disappoint everyone she encounters—everyone except her mother.

When Anna is reunited with her lover Daniel (Jean-Pierre Cassel), she seems eager to please him. Her own expectations, though minimal, are still disappointed. When she comes to him fresh from a bath, smiling warmly and cheerfully singing him a song, she is obviously ready to make love. He says with self pity: "Soon we'll make love, and tomorrow you'll be gone, and I'll want you more than ever." As if familiar with this complaint, she replies: "And tomorrow at 8 you'll be at work." He says flatly, "We have 6-1/2 hours—lie on top of me." She complies by taking off her robe and embracing him. She is nude and vulnerable; he is fully dressed and suddenly feels sick. She is forced to go out for medicine and to switch from playing mistress to nursemaid. Alone in the back seat of a cab, she releases tears of frustration, repressed anger, and bitter disappointment. But this is just a brief interlude. Soon she returns to Daniel with medicine and is again punished for her independence with another sexual rejection. The film ends with Anna alone in her own apartment, listening to the telephone answering machine that has recorded messages from dejected people who didn't find her at home. The film leaves us feeling that no matter what life we choose and no matter how we try to control our expectations, we cannot escape disappointment.

Like *Jeanne Dielman, The Meetings of Anna* challenges the audience's expectations of how a film is to be experienced. At first, like the people she encounters, we tend to be disappointed by Anna. When she is alone, she seems drab, expressionless, cold, and withdrawn. Even when



Daniel (Jean-Pierre Cassel) and Anna (Aurore Clement) in *THE MEETINGS OF ANNA*

she is with others, she rarely smiles. Aurore Clement is not fascinating to watch the way Delphine Seyrig was in *Jeanne Dielman*. But this is a different movie; we must reject the expectations carried over from the earlier film or they will distort our experience of this one.

Jeanne's first encounter is with a stranger named Heinrich Snyder (Helmut Griem), whom she meets at a screening and takes back to her hotel room. While they are making love, she abruptly decides to make him leave, because "we don't love each other." He claims, "I feel I've known you for ages." She sticks to the facts, "But you haven't . . . get dressed." In the awkward moments while he dresses, he speaks to himself as if no one else were there: "You think it will be a wonderful evening . . . Then she says 'get dressed' and you're alone." Later in the scene with Daniel, Anna will experience a similar disappointment, but now she responds without emotion: "I never expect it to be wonderful. I never expect anything." Still, Heinrich persists in trying to get to know her and invites her to spend the next day with him, his daughter, and his mother. Her curiosity about the daughter and mother makes her accept. Yet in the scene that follows we see only Anna and Heinrich, who tells her the story of his life. Heinrich wants to cast Anna in the role of his missing wife. His professions of love are based on the power of his own romantic yearnings. They really have nothing to do with Anna, for he knows nothing about her. While her rejection of him may seem unfeeling, it is based on personal integrity—the desire to be known for what she is. There is no way she can fulfill his expectations and remain true to herself.

This encounter is analogous to the relationship between the film and its audience. Anna is a fictional version of Akerman (which she acknowledged following the screening at Filmex), just as Heinrich is presumably a member of her audience. The audience comes to the theater with expectations based on past film-viewing experience. Akerman cannot fulfill those expectations and remain true to herself as an independent artist. Her films are valuable precisely because they deconstruct the narrative conventions that mold our false conceptions of reality. Conventional dramatic features have trained us to expect to meet protagonists early in the narrative and immediately to love them, partly by identifying them with ourselves or with other loved ones from our personal past. This means that we really don't have to get to know the protagonist, for we can project qualities onto a two-dimensional figure in conventional situations and feel that we've known her for ages! But in this film we are forced to get to know Anna in an unusual way—partly because she is on screen alone so much of the time (we are used to getting acquainted with film characters through their interactions with others and their involvements in plots) and partly because her qualities are revealed very gradually. This process is actually closer to real experience, for we get to know ourselves in the time we spend alone, and we get to know others by a gradual exposure to a wide range of behavior. In both cases, we eventually recognize the combination of the unique and the conventional so that the person is no longer interchangeable with others. We can love someone only when we know that person and can distinguish him or her from others. Some people in the audience get impatient with Akerman's slow pace and leave before ever getting to know Anna, but those who stay learn to recognize her warmth and vitality, which make her more lovable. We see *how* she loves by watching the expressions on her face and the movement of her eyes as she watches her mother, or by the way she sings a song and smiles at Daniel. Once Anna has revealed herself, she is more vulnerable to rejection. She generates new expectations in those who know her, and then rejection is far more painful, as it is with Daniel in the last encounter, because only then

is it truly personal.

Our expectations concerning the characters are powerfully affected by Akerman's brilliant casting. Most of the performers bring expectations from former roles in other movies, which comment on their parts in *The Meeting of Anna*. In *Lacombe Lucien*, Aurore Clement played a young Jewish girl who was forced into hiding because of the war; in a desperate attempt to experience life, she has a romance with a young fascist who helps her and her grandmother escape. That role helps to reveal the cultural roots of Anna, who is also a Jew but of the next generation. We learn in the scene with her mother that Anna was born after her parents fled Germany and resettled in Belgium, a fact which adds another dimension to her present journey through Germany and her rejection of Heinrich. The casting of Aurore Clement strengthens the bonds between the two generations. Akerman seems to suggest that Anna's freedom is built on the actions of her mother, who had a very different struggle. In both *Jeanne Dielman* and *The Meetings of Anna*, the father is absent and ambiguous, but the mother is of central importance. Here she is much stronger and more vital than in the earlier film, particularly as played by Lea Masari, who is well known for her performance as another unconventional young mother in *Murmur of the Heart*. Masari and Clement look more like sisters or friends than mother and daughter. By putting them in the same bed, where Anna tells her about a sexual encounter with another woman who reminded her of her mother, Akerman suggests the possibility of incest between mother and daughter, which is practically unheard of in all of literature and film. The casting of Lea Masari, who is already associated in our minds with a positive experience of incest, helps to strengthen this dimension of the encounter.

Anna's strong attraction to her mother is foreshadowed in her earlier encounter with Ida, who is not only the mother of the man whom Anna almost married, but who is also like a sister to Anna's mother. When Anna tells her she still wants children, Ida offers to raise them for her. We begin to suspect that Anna is more emotionally involved with this woman than with her

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son, primarily because of the strong identification between Ida and her mother. Yet Ida is far more conventional and less insightful than Anna's mother; she tells Anna the story of her love for her husband, a sad narrative that can hardly make Anna regret her own broken engagement. The emotional involvement between the two women is strengthened by the casting of Magali Noel, who in Fellini's *Amarcord* played the young protagonist's prototype of the highly sexual older woman, who disappoints him by using her extraordinary erotic power to trap herself in a secure bourgeois marriage to a very ordinary man.

Casting also plays a significant role in Anna's reactions to the men she meets in Germany. She is likely to reject them not only because of the historical past, but also because of their past roles in earlier films. Helmut Griem plays the idealistic teacher who claims he doesn't understand the war or his relationships with his wife (who left him for a Turk) or his best friend (who was forced to leave his job and the town because of his leftist views); he laments over lost hopes and now seeks only peace and quiet. It is hard for us, as well as Anna, to believe in his blindness and innocence partly because we associate Griem with his earlier roles as the decadent aristocrat in *Cabaret* and the ruthless Nazi in *The Damned*. While she is riding on a train, Anna is approached by a man who is on his way to France, "the land of freedom," where he hopes to find love. It turns out to be the sixth country he's tried. This romantic passenger is played by Hanns Zieschler, one of the protagonists of Wim Wenders's *Kings of the Road*, which deals with a similar encounter between strangers in transit. This casting suggests that Zieschler will forever move from film to film playing the same role of the Eternal Wanderer. The casting of Jean-Pierre Cassel as Daniel is also a brilliant stroke, not only because he gives a great performance, but also because he has come to epitomize in the seventies the modern bourgeois sensibility as embodied in a self-centered, hyperactive, intelligent, boyishly attractive middle-aged lover—whether in a realistic melodrama like *No Time for Breakfast* or an unconventional satire like *The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie*.

As in *Jeanne Dielman*, Akerman's primary



*Anna with her mother (Lea Masari)*

challenge to our expectations comes through the symmetrical visual compositions, the recurring patterns of imagery, and the slow editing pace. The amazing thing is that the radicalism of her style depends so heavily on a basic simplicity. The visuals lack ambiguity and density; there is usually a solidity of form in the *mise-en-scène*. She always seems to know exactly where to put the camera and exactly how to frame the image, and then sticks with that choice. The typical set-up is a medium close-up of a symmetrical composition without any camera movement. Whenever the camera or a filmed object does move, it is always purposeful and direct. When combined with the slow editing pace and the pattern of recurring images, these visual choices create a strong quality of stability.

The opening image is a static, symmetrical shot of a train platform, with a descending stairway in the middle of the frame, behind which is an empty telephone booth. Although the camera never moves in the scene, motion suddenly breaks the stillness as a train roars into the station on the track that borders the right side of the frame and deposits people offscreen who hurriedly walk directly in front of the camera and rush down the stairs to the station. Only one figure emerges from the crowd—a woman who walks to the phone booth with her back to the camera, enters and makes a call. Only when she leaves do we briefly glimpse Anna's face before she turns and descends the stairs. The camera holds its position on the deserted, silent platform. Then another train rushes into the station on the track that borders the left side of the frame, signalling the beginning of a new cycle in the rhythmic alternations between stasis and motion, silence and clatter, isolation and encounter that dominate the film.

This unconventional opening raises a number of intriguing structural questions that are central to the film. The visual style makes it difficult to determine what is foregrounded, or what we are waiting to see—the empty, silent station (which could be perceived merely as a setting or background for the action), or the rushing people and trains (which could be perceived as temporary intrusions). Anna, in her phone booth, mediates between the two choices, as she is singled out in her attempt to make contact and in her slower lingering pace. When we learn in the next sequence that Anna is a film-maker on tour with her latest film, this pattern also applies to the creative process—her life is a series of intense, highly focused periods of creativity alternating with rambling stretches on the road. Each of her films is a form of one-way communication—like the phone call in the opening where she doesn't reach her party or the train of phone messages she receives in the final scene. Akerman accentuates this one-way communication by having the sound track alternate between silence and long monologues (where one person talks while the other listens), just as the visual track alternates between stasis and sudden motion. The opening image of the train station is a perfect representation of Akerman's view of her medium—a two-track system (audio and visual) for an imperfect one-way communication.

The second sequence opens with Anna entering a hotel through automatic doors, which snap shut after she passes through. A hotel clerk opens the curtains from left to right, allowing us to see through the window a train moving in the same direction. Once she is alone in her room, Anna opens the window and lets in the noise from the street below. This sequence quickly establishes a recurring pattern of trains, doors, and windows that represent Anna's cinematic view of experience. We are constantly aware of the train of thoughts, feelings, images, and sounds running through her consciousness; the doors that lead her into new spaces of action and close her off from others; the windows, like movie screens, through which she observes the rest of the world at a safe distance. The cinematic connection is underscored in a later sequence where she is looking through the window of a train as

it passes through the underground station in Brussels; the black passageways interrupt the brightly lit scenes like the shutter of a camera. In the early sequences Anna is more frequently associated with the trains moving restlessly in the distance than with the static forms in the frame. For example, in the scene where she is visiting the country house where Heinrich was born, they stand in the foreground facing each other symmetrically. He tells her his whole family loves her and reaches out to take her hand. She simply says no and leaves without a goodbye while he laments, "I feel so alone." The camera remains motionless, focused on Heinrich who stands still in the foreground as Anna walks away from Heinrich and his house, disappearing from the frame and then reappearing in mid-ground as she walks diagonally toward the train that is moving deep in the background.

The second sequence in the hotel also continues and elaborates the recurring image of telephone communication. When Anna entered the lobby, she was informed that she had missed two calls—one from Paris (presumably from Daniel) and the other from her mother (who mysteriously discovers where she is). When Anna tries to make a call, she is told she must wait two hours. The whole film, which is slightly longer than two hours (127 minutes), is like the waiting period. Alone in her room, she tries to pass the time—by listening to music on the radio, by letting in the street sounds, by exploring the closet where she finds a tie, which is both literally and figuratively the only tie between her and the former transient occupants of this room. She calls the hotel clerk to report the missing tie, almost apologizing for initiating the contact: "I realize the two hours haven't gone by yet." Then she decides to call Ida in Cologne, as if to fill in for her mother. She is surprised when she reaches Ida and hurries off the phone because she's expecting another call. This pattern of phone calls foreshadows the narrative development, for the brief meeting with Ida precedes the longer, more satisfying visit with her mother, just as the sexual encounter with Heinrich in this hotel room foreshadows the more painful hotel scene with Daniel. Thus the film is doubly framed by missed connections—abortive phone calls, and sexual rejections.

Yet one loving message mysteriously gets through—to Anna’s mother. Just as Akerman has described *Jeanne Dielman* as a loveletter to her mother, this film could be seen as a loving telephone call to the same person. Their meeting is preceded by the brief encounter with the romantic man on the train who travels to foreign lands, searching for an exotic woman to love. In contrast, Anna is on her way home to reaffirm her love for her own flesh and blood. The harmonious, symmetrical visuals in their reunion scene highlight the natural affinity between mother and daughter. The first time we see Anna smile in the film is the moment when she recognizes her mother in the station. Her face lights up, and suddenly our expectations for the character and the film are transformed. The two women slowly walk toward each other, embrace, and then stand in the center of the brightly lit room in long shot between two massive columns. We don’t have to hear what they say because we can see from their faces and movements that they are very happy with each other. Then they walk out of the frame together, leaving the camera in the empty station as in the opening sequence. Later in a restaurant, they are again placed near two columns, this time with a mirror placed symmetrically in the center. The loving identification between them, suggested in the *mise-en-scène*, is underscored by the dialogue. The mother tells Anna, “You have my mother’s eyes.” Anna says, “I wish I were like you.” In the hotel room, they both lie on their backs looking up into the camera, confiding in and listening intently to each other in a loving mutuality. Anna describes her lesbian encounter: “I felt nauseous, I felt sick. Then everything felt simple. I let myself go. It felt good . . . for some strange reason, I thought of you.” She asks her mother, “Have you ever loved a woman?” Although her mother replies, “I don’t know, I never thought of it,” we can see that she loves Anna. At the end of their visit, as the two women stand facing each other in the train station in the center of the screen, the mother says, “Anna, tell me you love me.” She replies, “I love you.”

However renewing this loving encounter may be, it makes Anna have greater expectations and thus experience greater disappointment in the

painful reunion with Daniel that immediately follows. In contrast to the dazzling smiles, leisuredly embrace, and spacious well lit setting in Brussels, her first moments in Paris with Daniel are dark, hurried, and confusing. Although we see them together in a symmetrical shot in the car, we can’t see their faces and are unsure of their feelings. She asks what’s wrong; he replies, “The usual grind. Tons of work.” He’s obviously unhappy, but claims he wants to be with her. Like Anna and her mother, they spend the night in a strange hotel, but the room he chooses is ultra modern; they stare out the window, reacting to each other’s reflections. Daniel turns on the television and leaves it flickering in the background, as if to create a distraction. In contrast to the scenes with her mother, here there is little mutuality. Daniel does most of the talking and makes most of the decisions, even questioning Anna’s desire to take a bath. When he is turned on, he fondles her ass; but later when she does the same thing to him, he impatiently makes her stop. Although he doesn’t know what he wants, he’s sure he’s not going to lose control. He can’t let go, as Anna was able to do in her lesbian encounter. Whenever Anna touches him, he seems dissatisfied or ambivalent, and quickly changes the mode of their interaction. He can’t decide whether he wants to play the authoritative father or the whining child, but his impulsive shifts demand that Anna change her role to suit his mood. One suspects that Anna wants to save her mothering for a real child.

The film ends with Anna alone in her own space. Just as in the earlier hotel sequence, as soon as she enters the room she opens the window to let in street sounds. The silence is also broken by the sounds of her footsteps echoing through the sparsely furnished apartment. In a prominent position is a large clean desk with a typewriter and overhead light. This space is clearly set up for work rather than pleasure or relaxation. It provides her with the stability that she didn’t find or was unwilling to accept on the road. It is a setting of simple clarity where she can examine the perceptions and feelings she has absorbed on her journey and transform them into a new script. In the final shot, the visual image is a static composition of Anna staring blankly into

the camera as she listens to the sound track—the long train of dismal phone messages with their varying accusations and demands. Although it is a depressing scene, we know that Anna will not be defeated by her loneliness and disappointment. The film assures us that she will continue making films that express her unique vision of the world. Both *Jeanne Dielman* and *The Meetings of Anna* raise our expectations that future films by Chantal Akerman will continue to reveal her bold creativity, courageous honesty, and lucid intelligence.

—MARSHA KINDER

## MAX HAVELAAR

Director: Fons Rademakers. Script: Gerard Soeteman, based on the novel by Multatuli (Eduard Douwes Dekker). Photography: Jan de Bont. Fons Rademakers Produktie.

For better or for worse, Edward Douwes Dekker's nineteenth-century novel *Max Havelaar* has been called the *Uncle Tom's Cabin* of Holland, an impassioned tract that prompted the Dutch government to correct at least some abuses in its administration of Indonesia.

But Dutch film-maker Fons Rademakers has now made this novel about colonialism in the 1850s into a three-hour epic for a late twentieth-century audience. The game—at least that particular game—is over. How is Rademakers to adjust the sights?

*Max Havelaar* goes one step further than Pontecorvo's *Burn!* whose cynical *agent provocateur* provides the ironic commentary and analysis that both the colonialists and the colonized are incapable of providing; it goes further than Tomas Gutierrez Alea's *The Last Supper*, whose Cuban sugar plantation owner thinks of himself as a sort of Christ bringing light to the natives who work his plantation (until it no longer proves profitable). It goes further than these films, also radical critiques of past European colonialism, because Max Havelaar, the liberal administrator at the center of this movie (and played with exquisite grace by Peter Faber), is not cynical, nor hypocritical, but, on the contrary, benign, innocent, and entirely unconscious of the malignant nature of the larger structure in which he has been assigned but a small supporting role. For as

Havelaar tries to correct abuses and imbalances within the colonial framework, as Havelaar tries really desperately to give *everyone* the benefit of the doubt, he gradually (as it were, against the grain of his character) becomes aware of the real and insidious nature of this system of interlocking interests where unofficial favors and the gentler arts of blackmail always give way, in the last issue, to outright extortion and murder. From the local level where the native regents rule through fear and intimidation, Havelaar is able to pick up and follow the threads that lead through higher and higher levels of colonial administration, leading finally to the throne of William the Third himself, King of Holland, to whom Dekker contemptuously dedicated his novel.

Most of *Max Havelaar* is set in Leback, Java, but the film is framed by sequences in Amsterdam (unlike the novel which continually cuts back to Holland), although the pre-credit sequence occurs in Java. In this sense metaphor becomes structural, the lush tropics hemmed in by the cold dark cities of northern Europe. And Havelaar himself, in spite of his good intentions, in spite of his essentially likeable character, remains an ambiguous figure.

We first see Havelaar, an unemployed poet and pamphleteer, wandering the streets of Amsterdam in 1860 (hence the story's outcome is clear from the start). He runs into an old classmate, a prosperous coffee broker whose interest in Havelaar is only awakened when Havelaar mentions among his pamphlets, "On the Price of Java Coffee" and "On Coffee Culture in Indonesia."

The story soon switches to Leback, Java, 1855, where Havelaar has been assigned to the post of Assistant Resident. Havelaar is not the ordinary Dutch administrator, timid or corrupt. But then neither was his predecessor, who married an Indonesian woman and was preparing corruption charges against the native regent when he was poisoned by the regent with local Dutch officials participating in the subsequent cover-up. Havelaar, unaware of the circumstances in which his predecessor died, is brave, even foolhardy. On the boat traveling to Leback he jumps overboard into shark-infested waters to rescue a puppy (this is just a warm-up for Leback). His adoring wife,