

Not Akerman's Subtitles

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The recent TIFF Cinémathèque retrospective *News from Home: The Films of Chantal Akerman* screened many of the late Belgian filmmaker's raw, minimalist explorations of being human. In austere form, her films spotlight life's apparent monotony, its simple structures and movements; their spacing and spaces create visual syntactic intensity, belying the ordinariness of the content. Language is sparse, dry, barren. *Jeanne Dielman, 23 quai du commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975) 201 minutes are rhythmized by domestic routine over three days in a small apartment; *News from Home* (1977) is composed of long-takes of New York accompanied by the director's voice reading letters from her mother. Plot and narrative are not part of Akerman's cinematic lexicon.

Then there's *Golden Eighties* (1986), a loud, colourful musical-comedy that takes the piss out of the Hollywood genre and seems to eschew Akerman's aesthetic on all fronts. Set entirely in an underground shopping mall—the theme of enclosed spaces provides perhaps the only similarity to *Jeanne Dielman*—the film twists tales of love, longing, and lust accompanied by a somewhat catchy, decidedly cringe-worthy, score. Characters dance and sing their way around a central, agora-like space, which is fenced on four sides by a clothing boutique, a café bar, a hair salon, and a staircase leading up and out. Everything in the film, from the costumes to the music to the performed emotions, is highly stylised in exaggerated, gaudy 1980s spirit. If in other Akerman films dialogue and language are redacted to a minimum, the lyrics in *Golden Eighties* punch and pop, and seem to want to erupt out of the closed, controlled space of the mall.

Cinematic references are woven into the bubble-gum erotics of the film. There are politics, too. John Berry, the blacklisted Hollywood director, plays the role of Jeanne's past lover who has returned and Jeanne is concentration camp survivor. There are feminist currents, notably a number performed by the women in the salon, singing *off with his head, the scissors!* fermenting memories of guillotines and revolutions from within the caves of commercialism. These subtler elements strike an odd tune with the plastic aesthetic and bubbly dialogue. Ackerman wrote the lyrics herself; unfortunately, much of their bounce and flair is lost in the English subtitles.

Translating film dialogue into subtitles is more precarious than translating an essay, for example. Subtitles take an element of a whole and render it foreign to the other parts, splintering the cinematic work of art. *Golden Eighties* is not an enclosed, completed ideal, a hermetic "whole" before the subtitles were added; the addition does, it would seem, disturb the craft of the work in the sense that, for the most part, subtitles are only able take into account the basics of *what* is being said, and not *how*. One wouldn't only translate the descriptions of gardens in Proust, or just the bits of Duras' novels that narrated in the first person singular. Yet with film, the mode is different... subtitling is a form of translation that necessarily fails.

The point is not to argue against subtitles as such, in favour of, say dubbing—that clownish attempt to make cinema "accessible"—nor is the point to criticise Ciné-Titres, the agency

responsible for the subtitles, but to point to an uncanny phenomenon. *Golden Eighties'* cunningly crafted kitsch, worthy of telenovela drama and choreographed to 1980's bling, is lost in translation such that the English drip with everydayness, recalling the aesthetic of Akerman's other films for which she is most known. In this film, the translations of her confectionary lyrics came as *minor literature*.

Akerman has explained that her visual language is influenced by Deleuze and Guattari's work, the immanent potential of deterritorialisation, and rethinking identities from within liminal spaces. There's a peculiar resemblance between translation in general—as a destabilising, productive encounter of two languages (W. Benjamin)—as well as the specific example of *Golden Eighties'* English subtitles, and the concept of minor literature Akerman borrows from Deleuze and Guattari. In *Différence et Répétition*, Deleuze's most significant solo work, translation belongs to the realm of repetition, distinct from reproduction. While repetition is reserved for singular events, reproduction deals with generalities. Repetition is transgressive, not in an avant-garde, ex nihilo sense, but because it relies on difference; repetition is a *minor* destabiliser that works with and within what is here and now.

The hallmark of a bad translation, per Benjamin, is one that seeks to reproduce content. Short of pleasurably whiling away time in the archives of French cinema—and even then...—any insight into Ciné-Titres' process is spurious, not to mention uninteresting; intent is as symptomatic as reproduction. curiously, the “poorly” translated English subtitles in *Golden Eighties* create a pastiche that befits the film's veneer and it's “minor” rhizomatic politics. Akerman's experiential exploration of Hollywood tropes—generously, one could include *Un divan à New York* (1996), an unbearable rom-com starring Juliette Binoche and William Hurt—are amusing but ultimately lifeless. In an edifying but no less unsettling way, Akerman's comical, painful venture into American culture is redeemed by said culture's linguistic failures, which are magnified in the English subtitles. Like a fun-house mirror, translation addresses language's glitches by discordantly repeating what it attempts to say.