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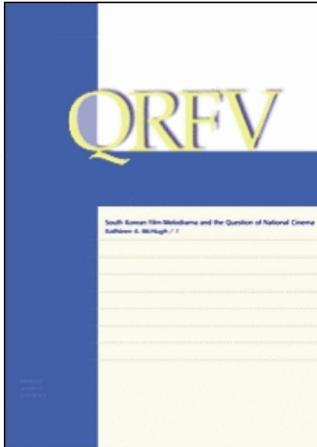
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Clichés of Identity: Chantal Akerman's Musicals

STEVEN SHAVIRO

Chantal Akerman's *Window Shopping* dates from 1986. The original French-language title was (the English words) *Golden Eighties*; the name was changed for the English-language release, apparently in order to avoid confusion with Akerman's 1983 earlier film, *Les années 80 (The Eighties)*. The two films are really parts of a single project; though *The Eighties* has a dynamic of its own, it was made as a kind of demo tape, or proof of concept, for the more ambitious *Window Shopping*, and it is mostly in relation to the later film that I will discuss it.

Window Shopping is a musical, set in an indoor shopping mall. It is an homage to—and/or a parody of—the Technicolor MGM musicals of the 1940s & 1950s, many of them directed by Vincente Minnelli. But the film's relation to Hollywood is filtered through Jacques Demy's remaking of the musical genre, particularly in *Les parapluies de Cherbourg* (1964) and *Les Demoiselles de Rochefort* (1967). In *Les parapluies de Cherbourg*, Demy turns a bittersweet (romantic and sad) lower-middle-class love story into an all-singing, pastel-colored spectacle. While there is nothing ironic about the gentle melancholy of the film, the emotions are oddly distanced by the ostentatiously artificial form of presentation. *Les Demoiselles de Rochefort* closely follows the conventions of the MGM musical, with its romantic plot and production numbers. Here, Demy self-consciously evacuates any depth of feeling in order to etherealize and subtilize the musical genre into pure formalism. The plot and emotions are deliberately frivolous, and the film is filled with clichés that signify “Frenchness,” both to the French and to foreigners. The cast is mostly French: but there is a guest appearance by an aging Gene Kelly, playing (of course) a visiting American, reappearing amidst these Gallic signifiers more than fifteen years after he appeared in Vincente Minnelli's *An American in Paris* (1951).

The overall effect of *Les Demoiselles de Rochefort* is one of pure whimsicality (if that isn't an oxymoron): nothing is permitted to interfere with the purity of the film's structure, and the charm of this structure's realization. Another possible antecedent for Akerman's musicals is “La circeuse électrique,” one of the short dramas that make up Jean Renoir's last film, a made-for-TV feature called *Le Petit théâtre de Jean Renoir* (1971). This little film is a mini-opera about a housewife obsessed with waxing her floors. The film uses its formal alienation-effect in order to foreground the alienating nature of household work and of feminized domesticity. I cannot find the reference now, but I recall reading a critic, at the time of the film's initial American release, who commented that Renoir had pulled off the amazing feat of combining (and simultaneously parodying)

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Demy and Jean-Luc Godard, the former's illusionism coinciding with the latter's critical reflexivity in a transmogrification of everyday life. This strange combination sounds almost Akermanesque.

Critics have not really known what to do with *Window Shopping*. It has often been dismissed as just a minor work. For instance, Ivone Margulies only devotes three pages to it in her excellent book-length study *Nothing Happens: Chantal Akerman's Hyperrealist Everyday*. The problem with *Window Shopping*, for many critics, is that it seems lightweight in comparison to most of Akerman's other work. It has neither the severe intensity of *Jeanne Dielman* (1975), nor the formal rigor of *News From Home* (1977), nor the political concerns of *D'est* (1993). But I think that *Window Shopping* actually fits quite well within Akerman's oeuvre. The film's Demy-inspired formalism resonates closely with Akerman's minimalist temperament. And Akerman's concern with minutiae of everyday life, with women's gestures and bodies, with housework, and so on, is a good match for the way bodies and their movements are so important in the musical tradition. Also, Akerman effectively takes up the lightness and frivolity of Demy's musicals, by translating them into the terms of her own deadpan approach. And Demy's deliberate use of clichés, his evocation of the most generically typical emotions, is well suited to Akerman's much more ironic purposes.

The action of *Window Shopping* takes place in a shopping mall called *The Golden Fleece* (*La toison d'or*). This mall is a self-contained little world. A stairway in back leads to the larger world outside; but the mall seems like a separate microcosm, almost hermetically sealed, a little bubble cut off from that larger world. Everything is clean and aesthetically orderly here, even when it is supposed to be busy or chaotic. This is already evident in the opening credit sequence, where we see a succession of feet, nearly all belonging to women in high-heeled shoes, hurriedly treading over the pristine tiled floors of the mall. Throughout the film, the lighting in the mall is always bright, uniform, and without shadows, recalling the high-key, three-point lighting of classical Hollywood film. Everything in *Window Shopping* has that lucid visual perfection that is only attained on a sound stage, never in (so-called) 'real life.'

In terms of content, as well, everything in the mall is about display and appearances. There's a beauty salon, a clothing boutique, a soda counter, and a cinema. The salon and the boutique take care of making their customers look good; the soda counter is the place to see and to be seen; and the movie theater (adorned with posters of classic Hollywood films) is not only a site of spectacle, but also the place to retreat to if you want some privacy. Of course, this mall really is a set on a sound stage; but Akerman makes the reference as overt as possible, to suggest that life is aestheticized and controlled in shopping malls in the same way as it is in the movies (and vice versa). The artifice of making the film and the artifice portrayed within the film are one and the same. This is Akerman's wry postmodern take on the self-referential formalism that popular Hollywood musicals had in common with contemporaneous High Modernist works. If the modernist utopian project (or at least, one of its projects) was to make art and life coincide, then the musicals' agenda was to offer a space of fun and spectacle in which such an identity could actually be accomplished. To quote the famous lines from the song "That's Entertainment" in Minnelli's *The Band Wagon* (1953), "the world is a stage, and the stage is a world of entertainment."

From a certain point of view, Antonin Artaud and Fred Astaire are engaged in the same enterprise. Of course, Artaud wants to revolutionize society, where Astaire wants only to entertain it; and Astaire celebrates the very bourgeois world that Artaud so fervently wishes to destroy. But in both the modernist and the MGM projects, an internalized unity of form and content replaces (and disparages, by contrast) the concerns of mimetic representation.

Artaud seeks to shatter representation in the name of a more vital life, while Astaire seeks to dissolve life into the froth of representation. But from their opposite sides, they both undo the dualism that would place representations on one side of an uncrossable divide, and the things that are being represented on the other. If we consider this parallelism, rather than setting up an opposition between heroic modernism and crass mass culture, then we can grasp the point of Akerman's applying her own modernist, Godardian heritage, as manifested in such things as her minimalist rigor in matters of framing and gesture, to the self-contained and highly self-reflexive world of the musical. Akerman discovers the precise point where MGM and modernism are indiscernible. She recapitulates the modernist aesthetic ideal of a unity of form and content; but her postmodern insight is to recognize that this unity is itself already a construction of the forces of entertainment, fashion, and commerce.

The shopping mall is where the movie's characters work and play, and sing and dance; above all, it is where they gossip and flirt. Like many classic musicals, *Window Shopping* is about heterosexual love: its yearnings, its fantasies, its hopes and fears, and (last but not least) its inevitable disappointments. Also like traditional musicals, *Window Shopping* emphasizes spectacle over narrative. The songs and production numbers do not advance the story, but rather bring it to a halt: the better to inhabit a particular dramatic situation, with its particular moods. In this way, even as the film gratifies the viewer's cravings for color and movement, music and dance, it also converts the feelings of being in love into a series of postures or poses. Subjectivity is fragmented, or analyzed into a number of isolated moments. Each production number freezes an emotion in time, magnifies it, and explores its every nuance. But isn't this, too, pretty much what Hollywood musicals have always done? In terms of romantic fantasy, Akerman gives a negative twist to the traditional musical formulas. Everybody in the film is frustrated in love. Everybody loves somebody who doesn't love them back. It's either the wrong person, or the wrong place, or the wrong time. Even when the passion is mutual, it doesn't last. Every love affair in the film ends the same way: with disinterest on one side, and disillusionment on the other.

But even this is less a satirical deconstruction of traditional musicals than a self-consciously knowing update of them. The great MGM musicals, like Minnelli's *The Pirate* (1948) and *The Band Wagon*, as well as Stanley Donen and Gene Kelly's *Singin' in the Rain* (1952), tell us that their romantic dreams are impossible in the real world. That is why these films all valorize performance as the only possible fulfillment. Judy Garland in *The Pirate* learns to give up the romantic pirate of her dreams, in favor of the actor who impersonates that pirate. Akerman slyly updates the message of these musicals for the postmodern era. Today, all of social reality has become performative, because culture and "entertainment" pervade the social sphere in a far more total and literal sense than they ever did in the 1950s. The whole world has been swept up into an MGM musical; Adorno's nightmare is our everyday reality. In this sense, *Window Shopping* continues the exploration of the everyday that Akerman began with in films like *Jeanne Dielman*; only it does so under the conditions of universal commodification, with visible, public performance replacing Jeanne Dielman's alienated and very private housework and sex work.

Everything in *Window Shopping* goes back to the precision of even the most momentary gestures. Jeanne (Delphine Seyrig) puts on a fake smile of greeting whenever a customer enters her shop. But her expression changes to a troubled frown when she recognizes one customer as her long-lost love Eli (John Berry). Lili (Fanny Cottençon) and Robert (Nicolas Tronc) tap their feet in a sort of dance, as they make out behind a fitting-room curtain. In one of the most spectacular and hilarious musical numbers, the hairdressers in Lili's

salon wash and dry their clients' hair, even as they gossip about all the latest breakups and betrayals.

Consider the scene, near the start of the film, where Sylvie (Myriam Boyer) first speaks, and then sings, the text of the letter she receives from her lover, who has abandoned her to go and try to make his fortune in Canada. The music is second-order generic. It is not just a lightly sentimental French song about love; rather, its style is such that it overtly connotes, indeed positively screams out, that it is a lightly sentimental French song about love. The absurdity of the lyrics (with its images of Canada's booming economy contrasting with those of the loneliness of a hotel room at night) only accentuates this generic quality.

The same goes for the obviousness of Sylvie's gestures and facial expressions. Near the start of the song, when she slowly pours herself a glass of wine, this gesture, and her melancholy face, express her feeling of abandonment and regret, as much as dancing in a musical ever conveys emotion. It continues: Sylvie's face lights up momentarily when she gets to the part of the song in which she envisions her man's return home. But then, the first part of the song recurs, and her face softens back into sadness. All this is only accentuated by the silly reaction shot of the extras swaying slowly in sympathy behind her. As with the music, so with the facial expressions and gestures: their total conventionality makes them all unambiguously legible. The fact that these emotions are treated ridiculously instead of seriously just underlines all the more that everything is a conventional sign.

The film's gestures are all marvelously transparent. Each of them is a perfectly realized pose, free of ambiguity or depth. And this is another way in which *Window Shopping* actually has a lot in common with Akerman's earlier films such as *Jeanne Dielman* and *Je, tu, il, elle* (1974). For Akerman frames all these gestures with exquisite care. She places the camera at just the right distance to call attention to the smallest details of the characters' movements. And she slows down the pace of the movie just enough to make us feel the full duration of each event. The result is an almost hallucinatory heightening. These everyday gestures are performed with such economy and precision that they seem to be larger than life. In consequence, the intense, microscopic hyperreality of the earlier films is here transmuted almost effortlessly into song and dance.

What this means in practice is that every affect is a stereotype. In *Window Shopping*, each person who falls in love suffers the same embarrassment, gets swept up in the same elation, is tormented by the same jealousy, and ends up feeling the same bittersweet regret. We would like to believe that our romantic experiences are unique. But in fact, they are all pretty much alike. That's why it is so easy to tell when somebody is in love. We all recognize the conventional signs. Each stage the lover passes through, each emotion the lover feels, is like another costume he or she puts on. The costume is the affect; there's only a blank beneath. Monsieur Schwartz (Charles Denner), Jeanne's husband, who owns the clothing store, sums it up at the very end of the film. Love is just like buying a dress, he says. If you can't get the one you want, try another. Sooner or later, you'll find something that fits. People can't go about naked, after all. That, he says, would be a catastrophe beyond imagining.

The characters in *Window Shopping* always seem to be trying on their moods and desires, in the same way that they try on clothes and hairstyles. Their postures and movements are as stylized as the poses of the mannequins in the display windows behind them. Their behavior conforms to stereotypes of romance and retail sales alike. The lines they speak are clichés, familiar from countless earlier films. Everything they do and say seems framed in ironic "quotation marks." The film thus suggests an equation between three things: first, deadpan postmodern irony; second, the ubiquitous commodification not just of necessities, nor even also just of luxury goods, but of all forms of self-expression;

and third, the conventional nature of the signs that indicate and communicate feelings, that is to say, that represent our feelings not only to others, but also (and even perhaps most crucially) to ourselves.

This is a point that is already raised in Akerman's earlier film, *The Eighties*, which she made as a kind of proof of concept for *Window Shopping*. That film contains fragments of the gestures, the scenario, the dialogue, and the songs of the later film. Most of *The Eighties* is rehearsal footage. We see screen tests of different actors trying out the same lines, and of the same actor trying out the same lines in different ways. We see dance steps being tested on an empty sound stage. The set-ups start out being extremely raw; they get progressively more polished over the course of the film, until at the end we see three full-fledged production numbers of songs that will be restaged and reshot for *Window Shopping*.

Many sequences in *The Eighties* correspond closely, therefore, to ones in *Window Shopping*. But the same lines and moves have very different effects in the two films. Hearing the same words repeated again and again in *The Eighties*, or tried out in these various ways, leads us to think about how the expression of feelings works, and how we are able to understand such expressions. *The Eighties* suggests that communication and comprehension have little to do with subjectivity on a deep level. We are led to bracket or forget questions of interiority and of sincerity. The question of actual intentions doesn't arise. We know that we are watching a theatrical simulation, but these variations challenge us to consider whether understanding or enacting simulated emotions is any different from understanding or enacting the real thing. Indeed, as educators, psychologists, method actors, and experts in religious or political indoctrination have long known, if you simulate, or act out, an emotion for long enough, you will end up actually feeling that emotion. Wittgenstein, who explored these issues in greater depth than anyone, would say that the only difference between truly felt and merely acted-out emotion is the fact that in one case the emotion is actual, and the other is simulated. But the emotion being experienced and conveyed is exactly the same in both cases.

Overall, *The Eighties* doesn't just show alternate footage. It develops a clear parallel between how actors try out and learn to project their roles in a script, and how people try out and learn to express emotions, and beyond that to perform gender roles and romantic roles, in society. The *Eighties* proposes a radically constructivist and performative account of subjectivity. But the only narrative in *The Eighties* is the one that implicitly shows the process of putting the production together. It is a postmodern version of the common musical theme of putting on a show (again, a good comparison is *The Band Wagon*, in the second half of which plot is totally dropped in favor of disconnected production numbers). This 'making of the musical' never becomes an entirely explicit narrative, but it comes closest in the scene where we see Aurore Clement singing a song about love and disappointment, and Akerman, wearing headphones, ecstatically dancing around as she conducts her, and jumping for joy at the conclusion.

This delight that comes up during rehearsal, as Jonathan Rosenbaum notes, is rarely or never seen in any of Akerman's finished projects: "Here we see Akerman joyfully conducting a singer in a recording studio, visibly even more taken by the music than the singer, and her grandiloquent gestures are much closer to dance than the swaying of the background figures in the finally realized number."¹ In any case, the story that the show in

¹Actually, Rosenbaum is commenting, not directly on *The Eighties* and *Window Shopping*, but on the reprise of scenes from both films in the filmmaker's 1996 self-portrait, *Chantal Akerman By Chantal Akerman*.

The Eighties tells (as opposed to the story of making the show) remains in fragments, hints of bits and pieces of sad romantic situations. The fragments only come together in *Window Shopping* itself, where the love-and-romance narrative is as self-consciously artificial and stereotyped, not to mention commodified, as the individual roles within the film are; or as the taking up of roles to put on a show is in *The Eighties*. The only difference is that *The Eighties* shows the process of the social construction of feelings and roles, whereas *Window Shopping* displays these feelings and roles in the perfection of their already having been constructed—which is why those critics who have looked at Akerman's musicals at all have generally preferred the earlier film to the later one. (I am trying to convince you that such a judgment is unfair to *Window Shopping*).

A scene towards the end of *Window Shopping* incorporates fragments of dialogue, and a song, from *The Eighties*. (Actually, the song is the very one I have already mentioned, that Aurore Clement sings for Akerman in the earlier film). Mado (Lio) has just been dumped by her fiancé, Robert, who has run back to the film's femme fatale, Lili. She stands there stunned, still wearing her wedding dress. Jeanne hugs her, as sad music swells up on the soundtrack. Extras gather in the background, swaying slowly to the music. We expect Mado to sing; but instead, someone else sings on her behalf. The lyrics repeat the story of Mado's disappointed love. A few of the extras dance a desultory waltz. Then, all of a sudden, the tempo picks up. The melody shifts to a major key. The lyrics become hopeful, and even triumphant. They proclaim, against all evidence, that love conquers all. Now the screen is full of motion. Everyone is dancing, whirling around, exchanging partners. Even Mado herself is caught up in the frenzy, and whirled away by a male dancer.

It's significant that Mado's feelings are represented here by proxy. Both in its expression of sadness, and in its illusion of happiness, the production number is no longer about Mado's particular plight. (Actually, even the actress who sings in her place in this number has her voice dubbed. In contrast, Delphine Seyrig's one song in the film is not dubbed, so that we hear the weakness and imperfections of this star's actual singing voice). Rather than being a personal expression, the number has taken on a transpersonal life of its own. This is what makes it ludicrous, yet at the same time in an odd way affecting. The feeling of being in love floats free. It appears in its pure state. It has become something more than human: an ideal, or a perfect stereotype. The affect is depersonalized by being turned into a cliché. It is now something totally recognizable, which applies equally to anybody and everybody. What makes it seem too trite to belong to anyone in particular is also what makes it transparent, and thus universally comprehensible.

But of course, this ecstasy, this fantasy of realized love, cannot last more than a moment. The evanescence of feelings is emphasized over and over again in the film. Every feeling is (as Gilles Deleuze might say) eternal in and of itself—it is a perfection realized in a pose, or a gesture, or an entire song-and-dance number. But such perfection is inhuman, which is why it is also a stereotype, a cliché; something we pass through but cannot sustain. Its coherence excludes ours (as the coherence of the Eternal Return excludes the coherence of the self and the world, to paraphrase Deleuze's paraphrase of Pierre Klossowski on Nietzsche). For me, the power of *Window Shopping* resides precisely in the fact that every feeling, and every situation, expressed in the film is presented to us in "quotation marks." This is the kind of thing that is so often dismissed as postmodern cynicism, in opposition to sincerity and true feeling. But I'd like to suggest that there is a sense in which affect is only "true" when it is a citation, an "as-if," in this way.

The central love story of the film also deals with these issues: the long-ago romance between Jeanne and Eli. She was a survivor of the Nazi concentration camps, and he was an American soldier in Europe after the War. A misunderstanding led to her departure;

and now they meet again, all these years later. Jeanne's old love for Eli is rekindled, but ultimately she is unable to choose the gamble of passion over the steadiness of her bourgeois, commercial life with Monsieur Schwartz. Then, when Jeanne reassures Mado, after Robert dumps her for Lili, she tells her that things will turn out OK in the end. Jeanne says that this is the case because, if things don't turn out right, there can only be horror; but as to that, she says, "never again." What is the point of these allusions to the Holocaust, given the film's otherwise totally frivolous context? Is it possible that the unspeakability of these shattering events is somehow shadowed, or even doubled, by the unspeakability of everyday banality?

The final shot of the film marks a rupture with all that has come before. It abandons the shopping mall and its fantasies. Instead, we are on a busy street, in the open air. Mado stands in her wedding dress, flanked by Jeanne and Monsieur Schwartz, while people pass by, going up and down the Champs Élysées. Eli comes by, with another woman; introductions are awkwardly made, and mild pleasantries exchanged. The incongruity of emerging into the 'real' world like this, after an hour and a half spent in the claustrophobic perfection of the mall, is dazzling. It is sort of like an inversion of Plato's myth of the cave: we go upstairs from the unreal world of commodified forms, to arrive at the irreducible facticity of the empirical everyday. Throughout *Window Shopping*, as in this ending sequence, affect appears in an absolute, stereotypical form, in comparison to which any individual experience is inadequate (unless it is, to the contrary, overly adequate, because it is too rich and too particular). There is no correspondence between inner and outer, or between experience and its expression. Yet it is only by means of these inadequate forms, these clichés of identity, that individual experiences can be communicated at all.

We are thus brought back to the enigmatic reflections of Kant's *Critique of Judgment*. I have written about this elsewhere,² and can only signal it in an extremely condensed way here. Kant says that beauty involves an intuition for which there can be no adequate concept. (This is what opposes it to the sublime, which involves a concept for which there can be no adequate intuition). This means that every instance of beauty is singular. The antinomy of beauty is that, on one hand, it is irreducible to representation (since it cannot be generalized, or subsumed under a category), while on the other hand, it is universally communicable (because formally it is instantly recognizable in the same way to everyone). Such is the double form of impersonal affect: on one hand an inner intensity that can't be captured by the form of a self, and on the other hand a merely conventional external sign, a pure cliché. This means, I think, that Akerman's films are political not in spite of, but because of, her stubborn formalism and aestheticism.

²Steven Shaviro, "Beauty Lies in the Eye," in Brian Massumi, ed., *A Shock To Thought: Expression after Deleuze and Guattari* (Routledge, 2002) 9–19.