

Cosmic Rays Film Festival 2022

Introduction by Campbell Mah

After being canceled in 2021 due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, the [Cosmic Rays Film Festival](#) made its fourth annual return to Chapel Hill, NC on March 31st and April 1st, 2022, celebrating the works of experimental filmmakers that expand our idea of what film is and explore the possibilities of what the cinematic medium can accomplish. The editors of *Aspect: Journal of Film and Screen Media* were fortunate enough to attend all four programs of this year's edition of the festival, which took place at both the Varsity Theatre and the Forest Theatre in Chapel Hill. The following reviews highlight some of the *Aspect* team's favorite short films showcased at the two-night event—those whose formal inventiveness and creativity not only emphasize the exciting nature of experimental cinema but also lend us a surreal sense of insight during an equally unconventional era. In addition, we were lucky to be able to speak with some of the filmmakers whose work was shown at the festival and gain a deeper insight into their creative processes.

SON CHANT

By Ben van Welzen



Photo Credit: Vivian Ostrovsky

Vivian Ostrovsky's *SON CHANT* is a celebration of the prolific filmmaker Chantal Akerman and her close friend and collaborator, the cellist Sonia Wieder-Atherton. Ostrovsky was a friend of the two artists and came across old footage of the three of them, inspiring her to make a film about the pair. The film is a series of her own footage spliced together with clips from Akerman's films and of Wieder-Atherton's music but as the film progresses, Ostrovsky blurs the line between the sound and image of the film. In one striking moment, the film image is replaced with the sound wave from the audio we are hearing, forcing the sound to dominate the image. However, Ostrovsky's film is one of harmony, whether that be between director and musician, across sound and image, or among all female artists. The film makes notable use of split screen, having Akerman and Wieder-Atherton share the screen while being in their own separate frames. Similarly, Ostrovsky shows the whole film strip, which includes the images as well as the optical sound frequencies that run alongside it. By the end of the film, the sound and the image become one, each coalescing into a singular voice, just as Akerman's camera harmonized with the voice of Wieder-Atherton's cello. Ostrovsky then generalizes this

experience and broadens it to the city life that she, Akerman, Wieder-Atherton, and so many artists inhabit. In a way, the film demystifies the complicated work of Akerman and inspires new artists to find a passion like the three women of the film. *SON CHANT* is not just a documentary giving a closer look into the lives of a filmmaker and a musician, it expands the canon of their work to welcome voices old and new into the boundless realm of art.

The following is a virtual interview I conducted with Ostrovsky about her film, her use of sound, and her relationship with Chantal Akerman and Sonia Wieder-Atherton. The transcript has been edited for clarity and brevity.

Starting off, what inspired you to make this film?

I met Chantal in the 1970s and we remained friends ever since, meeting in Paris, New York, Tel Aviv, Jerusalem, and our paths crossed various times. I loved her work and I very much appreciated her as a filmmaker, as a friend, and I appreciated her sense of humor. We had common things in our background also, our culture, this middle European background, the stories that we had heard of during our childhood, World War II, our parents generation. After she died, there was a memorial service for her in Lincoln Center and they asked if I wanted to speak and I said no but I wouldn't mind contributing some short filmic material. So I made a first film about her and that was right after her death. For two years I had shot on mini DVs, and instead of Super 8 material where you have to keep close records, you can see the result of DVs immediately so I kept the cassettes and put the date on it and wouldn't pay much attention to it. Years later I took my boxes of mini DVs, and I had about 200 of them, and I decided to really go through all of them. I thought most of it was flat and boring until I got to the end and I found this snippet of film we had had with Sonia, Chantal, and myself, and I really liked that little bit of film. I knew a lot about Chantal and I knew that she had lived with Sonia for a long time and even after they split up, Chantal would immediately call Sonia when anything serious happened so I knew that their collaboration meant a lot to both of them. I knew for Chantal that Sonia was like a pillar in her life and I had gone through a lot of the interviews and articles that were written about Chantal after her death and I noticed that one of the things that the articles did not mention that much — they mentioned the Holocaust, the rhythm of her films, the takes and the camera — was her use of sound, which I thought was one of her fortes. So I thought I'd make a film about their collaboration which was so important to her films and so important to both of them.

Something else I wanted to talk about was exactly that use of sound, which I agree isn't talked about enough. In your previous work, how have you worked with sound?

*Well I forgot another detail about where this film comes in in the scope of my own work. There's a movie house here in New York called Film Forum that acts kind of as a cinematheque for me. I was commissioned by Film Forum to make a short film between two and four minutes of whatever I wanted but with no sound. For me sound is always a really important element, and it has the same importance that the images have. So after toying around with ideas I came up with a work called *Unsound* which is a film without sound but it's about sound. Chantal's film came after that so I really went back to using the sounds in her film.*

So after you had met Chantal, what was your relationship with Sonia?

Well first I met Chantal and then afterwards when we got closer she introduced me to Sonia. They were still living together at that point but actually Sonia was really important to Chantal because she introduced Chantal to music. When they met Chantal was kind of depressed and she was sleeping a lot; she had nowhere to stay and somehow she ended up staying in an apartment where both she and Sonia were staying. Sonia rehearsed like eight hours a day and Chantal slept many hours a day but when she'd wake up, there was Sonia. So Chantal, being a very good observer, started focusing on Sonia and her cello, and then she really got into using music a lot. Chantal filmed Sonia a lot also, there's a series of films called Around Sonia Wieder-Atherton.

In your work how do you manage to maintain that importance of sound relative to image? Does the sound ever come before the image?

I started out as a Super 8 filmmaker and I shot silent material because the sound track was very thin and very poor, so I never used direct sound. So I come from that place, I would very often start editing and edit about three quarters of the film and sound would come in later. Obviously there were some moments when I thought of putting this or that sound in, but usually it was after having around three quarters of a rough cut that I would start coming in with sound. Even now when I shoot on video I very often add or subtract sound from those and use other sounds.

What was your experience making a found footage film? What new mindset do you have to take?

Well today it's tricky because you're sort of embedded in images, everywhere you go, you take the ride on the elevator here and you have images, it's almost too much. So when I started using found footage it was one thing, today when I use found footage I usually try to do something to it so it's not just face-to-face found footage. I try to process it in some way to make it my own, otherwise it loses its interest. But I love filmmakers like Bill Morrison whose work is purely found footage and Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi who worked on beautiful archival footage together that they processed and changed the look of. So that's a different take on it but I love researching and working with found footage but I really find that I have to do something to it to make it my own.