



The New Yorker praises *Thank You and Good Night*, IndieCollect's latest restoration!

We are thrilled for our latest 4K restoration, Jan Oxenberg's *Thank You and Good Night*, to premier at the [Queens World Film Festival](#) TOMORROW at 7pm at the Museum of the Moving Image! [Tickets](#) are \$15 or free with the museum's Film Lover membership. The screening will be followed by a discussion with Jan Oxenberg.

Below, please see the wonderful review the film received by the [New Yorker's](#) Richard Brody on March 16, 2018.



The best new movie this weekend isn't playing this weekend and isn't really new—it's the restoration of Jan Oxenberg's 1992 documentary "Thank You and Good Night," at Museum of the Moving Image next Tuesday, with the filmmaker herself on hand for a discussion. The film is only new in the realm of artistic originality, and in that regard, it far outpaces most films released today. What's more, after its release at Film Forum, in 1992, and its VHS release, it seems to have vanished—no DVD, no streaming, no recent revival—so the preservation and recirculation of "Thank You and Good Night" is cause for celebration. What's no cause for celebration is that it's the last feature film, to date, that Oxenberg has directed. In what is an infuriating litany regarding extraordinary films by female directors, it ought to have launched her directorial career and it didn't.

The subject of "Thank You and Good Night" is simple—it's a hybrid personal documentary in which Oxenberg, learning that her grandmother is terminally ill, films her grandmother's last days and explores their relationship along with other family bonds. But what Oxenberg does with the premise is breathtakingly original. She redefines the very essence of the genre, and does so from the start. The movie's first scene—set after her grandmother's death, and setting up the documentation of her grandmother's final illness—is a burst of lucid but immensely complex dramaturgy and assemblage, a marvel of associative imagination, both inner and artistic. It sets the tone and the style for the entire film, which blends documentary and fiction, drama and comedy, spontaneous confession and analytical contemplation, intimate experience and historical resonance, observation and artifice. It's one of the most thrilling, astonishing opening sequences to a movie that I've ever seen.

Oxenberg describes, in voice-over, the search for her late grandmother—and her camera scans a waiting line of bus passengers for her grandmother's shoes—while a near-life-size painted cardboard cutout of Oxenberg's childhood self stands sentinel at the bus stop. Oxenberg reminisces about being taken, as a child, by her grandmother to an old-style movie palace to see "The Pajama Game." She shows documentary footage of the lavish theatre—into which life-size painted cutouts of Oxenberg and her grandmother are inserted, in the lobby, in seats. Her grandmother's cutouts multiply to fill the theatre, take the place of the theatre's many ushers, fill the screen, and even reach the gilded ceiling, all to the strains of "Hernando's Hideaway," while Oxenberg muses and confesses on the soundtrack about being gruff and mean to her grandmother as a child and wondering—now that she knows that her grandmother is dying—"how to say goodbye."

That's when another clip from "The Pajama Game" takes over, "Racing with the Clock," which, of course, is what Oxenberg must do, throughout the film, to spend time with her grandmother and film her before her death. The cutout of Oxenberg introduces a filmed interview with her grandmother—followed by faux-documentary footage of movie-house patrons, dressed in the styles of the nineteen-fifties, emerging from the theatre and being interviewed, person-in-the-street-style, in the lobby, about Oxenberg's grandmother. (Each person is identified in a subtitle—a neighbor, a friend, a pharmacist, a sister-in-law, a sister, a caterer.) In those first five minutes, Oxenberg binds these disparate elements with her own voice-over by way of canny, incisive, resonant editorial juxtapositions (the editor is Lucy Winer), and the rest of the movie maintains the same level and scope of intimacy and loftiness, confessional pain and self-deprecating distance.

Oxenberg's grandmother, Mae Joffe (1900-1979), called Grandma throughout the film, was robust and vigorous in earlier days (as seen in home movies and family photographs), but when Oxenberg films her she's frail and moves with difficulty. She's revealed to have had a difficult life—an unhappy marriage, an oppressive mother-in-law, a strained relationship with her daughter, Helen—Oxenberg's mother, who's a presence throughout the film. (The crucial source of tension seems to be Helen's escape from her mother's indoctrination in domesticity by getting an education and becoming a social worker.) Mae, Oxenberg, and the entire family is scarred by the trauma of a family tragedy, when Oxenberg's sister Judy was hit by a car and killed decades earlier. (The story of Judy's death, and its place in Oxenberg's own memories, is woven throughout the film with a sensitive and wounded ingenuity—also including a cardboard cutout in a dramatic reenactment—that seems to replicate, in its various and divergent forms and fragments, the power of memory and repression, of torment and guilt.)

Mae expresses her sharp, blunt critiques of her family—including her own grandchildren, Oxenberg, her brothers, and her sister—yet her love of her family is unflagging. On her deathbed, she says that her happiness in life is her grandchildren (and two great-grandchildren), and her familial devotion is never stronger than in her commitment to Oxenberg's own film. For that matter, her relationship to Oxenberg, and to her own participation in the documentary, seems refigured in the course of the filming. What appears, at first, to be a patient tolerance for Oxenberg's cameras develops into something strangely and passionately symbiotic: as Oxenberg asks Mae speculative questions (as about the afterlife), Mae—one of whose lifelong torments, Oxenberg says, was the failure of those closest to her to pay attention to her—blossoms, despite her frailty and her pain, in the spotlight.

Gravely suffering in a hospital bed brought into her apartment, Mae jokes after learning that Oxenberg filmed, without her knowledge, her radiation treatment in the hospital: "They must have thought I was some celebrity coming down the hall." Mae's mortal agony is horrifying to observe—and Oxenberg punctuates it with her cardboard-cutout alter ego looking in, through a window, while her grandmother struggles to murmur, "Mama! Mama!" When Oxenberg asks what she's saying, Mae responds, "Goodbye," and adds, "I'm going to send for you." But as Oxenberg jokes about sending for her "if you have any trouble there," Mae says, "Don't forget to bring these cameras—bring the cameras, bring the film, bring everything. ... Show 'em the pictures, show 'em the movies." In some strange, disturbing, yet deeply moving and touching way, Mae appears aware that she is bearing witness to an extraordinary process, starring in an extraordinary drama—the drama of death. The subject of "Thank You and Good Night" is more than the effort to film a relationship or a family; it's the effort to film the unfilmable—to film death from the other side.

Oxenberg devises ever more wondrous theatrical mechanisms to represent the work of death and the confrontation with death, including a faux quiz show in which Oxenberg is the contestant, a Rube Goldberg-esque machine that would cure Mae's cancer, a celestial diorama with a toy spaceship to represent Oxenberg (the cardboard-cutout astronaut) imagining her journey into her own death, and—the very summit of her inventive genius—a sequence, too good to spoil, representing one mourner's citation of the psychiatrist and author Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's likening of death to passage through a tunnel. The development and realization of the sequence, featuring a large cast of extras and the music of Curtis Mayfield, is one of the grandest cinematic metaphors I've ever seen. The closest thing to it is in Raúl Ruiz's own musing on death in his final film, "Night Across the Street," from 2012; Ruiz, who had much more directorial experience, makes his metaphor cinema-centric. Oxenberg, a documentarist, transforms daily life and daily observation with a whimsically lofty, hands-on sense of spectacle.

Interviews with Oxenberg's brother Ricky, in which he ponders matters of life and death in the family circle, bring Oxenberg's overarching theme even more clearly to light—the extraordinary in the ordinary, the metaphysical power and cosmic import of quotidian existence and inevitable death, the enduring subjective treasure of a single relationship. Oxenberg's film exalts the immortal grandeur of every life and death—and the urgency of the power of art, and of artists, to recognize, record, and reveal it.

