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Feminism, Culture, and Media Studies

**On Chantal Akerman**

Guest Editor: Patricia White

for the *Camera Obscura* Editorial Collective

*Camera Obscura* and Chantal Akerman

Patricia White · 1

Our Way of Working: A Conversation with Claire Atherton  
about Chantal Akerman

Ivone Margulies · 13

With Chantal in New York in the 1970s:

An Interview with Babette Mangolte

Janet Bergstrom · 31

*Hanging Out Yonkers*: A Photographic Record

Jane Stein · 59

*NOW*, Chantal Akerman's Last Work

Babette Mangolte · 67

Souvenirs de Chantal

Sandy Flitterman-Lewis · 75

Tribute to Chantal Akerman

Claire Atherton · 91

Next to Chantal Akerman:

An Installation of Generations and the Shoah

Maureen Turim · 99

The Matrixial Borderspace: The Complex Inscription  
of Trauma in Chantal Akerman's *No Home Movie*

Brenda Longfellow · 113

Lyrical Akerman  
Kelley Conway • 139

### In Practice

On the Difficulty of Forgetting: Recollections of the Basel  
Symposium on Chantal Akerman

Edited by Eva Kuhn and Ute Holl

With contributions by Ivone Margulies, Cécile Tourneur, Alisa  
Lebow, Claire Atherton, Eva Meyer, Mathias Lavin, Ute Holl,  
Maureen Turim, Eva Kuhn, and Heike Klippel • 163

Chantal Akerman in London

Michael Mazière • 185

*CHANTAL?* A Dialogue with Sonia Wieder-Atherton

Sandra Percival • 197

Chantal Akerman Filmography • 219

List of Installations by Chantal Akerman • 233

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Joyrich, Homy King, Bliss Cua Lim,  
Constance Penley, Tess Takahashi,  
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*Camera Obscura* is also interested in short pieces (750–2,500 words) on current media practices, practitioners, resources, events, or issues for the section “In Practice: Feminism/Culture/Media.” The editors encourage authors to use the short format to experiment with form in a critical context. The section includes solicited contributions and open submissions, with the intention of enriching dialogue between feminist media scholarship and the practices—production, distribution, exhibition, organizing, curating, archiving, research, and so on—that sustain it.

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## On the Difficulty of Forgetting: Recollections of the Basel Symposium on Chantal Akerman

Edited by Eva Kuhn and Ute Holl

In October 2016, we organized a symposium in Basel, Switzerland, in commemoration of Chantal Akerman. Through screenings of her films, as well as talks, presentations, and accounts from friends and collaborators, the event focused on issues of remembering and forgetting. In Akerman's films, history insists, returns, refuses to disappear—memories are haunting and haunt those who were and are persecuted. The conference examined Akerman's cinematic strategies of taking time to forget, transforming the traces of history into resistant forms. In working with cinematic forms of alienation, repetition, and permutation; in inventing shots that point to the lacking and the missing; in transmitting unexpected voices and sounds; and in creating hybrid forms of unadaptable identities, Akerman unflinchingly produces forms of persistent memories.

Akerman masterfully deploys comedy, drama, the musical, documentary, essay, and adaptation to depict history as a bold confrontation of catastrophe and comedy, duration and explosion. In

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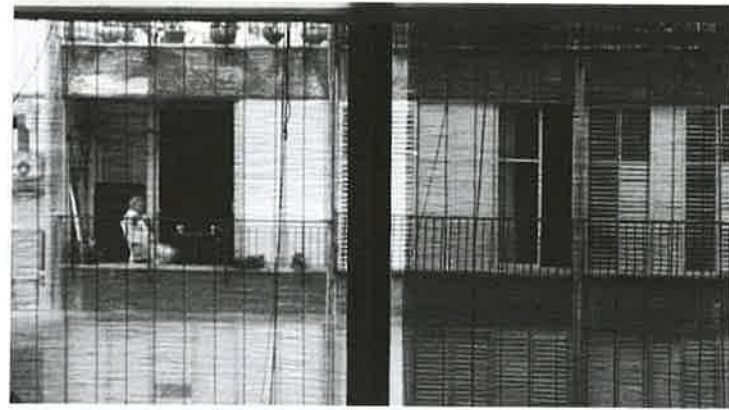


Figure 1. *Là-bas* (2006)



Figure 2.  
*Hotel Monterey* (1972)

her films, outbursts of rage are dealt with silently. The everyday takes place with force. Normality breaks through unexpectedly. Everything moves calmly against the grain. In her early film *Hotel Monterey* (Belgium, 1972), shot by Akerman together with camerawoman Babette Mangolte, the camera suddenly moves after forty minutes. An exit sign appears in the corridor, but there is no way out in sight (fig. 2).

The following short texts by the participants in the symposium condense their contributions, their thoughts, and the sometimes contradictory positions that surfaced after the viewing of Akerman's films. Films served as spaces of resistance, reconsidering the boundaries of history and presence, of fiction and document, and of biography and historiography. The authors are scholars, curators, and collaborators; some were her friends; many share several of these attributes. As organizers of the symposium, we asked them to shed light on their papers by returning to the theme of the difficulty of forgetting. "My story is full of holes, full of blanks," Akerman wrote.<sup>1</sup> The only thing she forgets, Akerman said, are her dreams. That's not entirely true. In her films we can see her transgressing the borders of memory and projection, dreams and reality.

### The Wish for Unknowing: Exhausted Finales

Ivone Margulies

Chantal Akerman's ruminative aesthetics balance the active wish for unknowing with the difficulty of forgetting. The object of for-

getting changes, but the exhaustiveness of the rumination and the flight from certainty are perceptible under the surface of her characters' faces as fatigue.

Emmanuel Levinas, a philosopher with whom Akerman felt a special affinity, invested fatigue with a moral dimension, seeing it as a horizon of subjective self-consciousness, a product of effort, and a confrontation with indeterminacy.<sup>2</sup> This indeterminacy courted by Akerman (and manifest in her shots' irresolution and her pronouns' and deictics' ambivalence) structures the memorial dynamic she installs through her sitting "portraits."

Starting with *Jeanne Dielman, 23 quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (Belgium/France, 1975), what is at stake for all of Akerman's tragic characters is the desire to endlessly retrace and erase what one knows. One could, of course, place pressure on the author's own thematic obsessions and ask what Simon (Stanislas Merhar) in *La Captive* (France/Belgium, 2000), Almayer (Stanislas Merhar) in *Almayer's Folly* (France/Belgium, 2011), and Jeanne Dielman (Delphine Seyrig) have in common. The last shot of each film provides some answers: these shots are protracted, and in each, the insistent focus on the protagonist produces at once a sharp image and a corresponding *horror vacui*. In these tour-de-force scenes in which barely anything happens, we watch, in a distilled form, the constitutive and destabilizing potency of Akerman's durational and cumulative strategies. The only conclusion for the films is to return their protagonists to a state of suspended, inconclusive uncertainty (fig. 3).

Working as a coda to the films, what I call Akerman's "portraits" unremittingly display characters who lose and belatedly



Figure 3. *Jeanne Dielman, 23 quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975)

attempt to reestablish their equilibrium. It is therefore not by chance that one recognizes in the weariness of Almayer some of the gestural components of Jeanne Dielman and her breakdown.

Abandoned by his beloved daughter Nina, Almayer vows to forget her, to erase her from his mind. In Joseph Conrad's novel, he reinscribes his loss as memorial mounds of sand, covering over the footprints that Nina has left on the beach. In the film, the ambivalence between forgetting and remembering appears through the un/certainty that flickers through Almayer's maddened face. We watch him as he understands something and denies it, exposing a disjointed consciousness coming, in spurts, into being. This extended close-up has a relentless continuity, growing closer under a cold light that spells out the inescapability of the present. We can make out the mesh of tears and sunlight, the inward smile, but this visual definition comes at a cost. We fully register the character's horrific will for, and the actor's terrific performance of, unknowing.

The matrix for this oscillatory unknowing dynamic is the mother, a character in Akerman's novel *A Family in Brussels*: "Thanks to her daughter from Ménilmontant she knows what's going on . . . and with what's going on there she'd rather not think about it anyway. If she thinks about it, she starts thinking about everything that she doesn't let herself think about. She's very good at not letting herself think about what she doesn't want to think about, at least she is trying to be good at it. She's trying and it's so tiring."<sup>3</sup>

In rethinking Akerman in the context of the Basel conference's "difficulty of forgetting" theme, the exhausting push-pull between fusion and autonomy (with her mother) that so thoroughly structures Akerman's work and her ruminative dynamic comes to the fore. *Exhausting* refers to the tiring succession of thoughts following one another in flight so as to avoid any flash of actual knowledge—in this case, of her mother's experience at a concentration camp. But I also have in mind Gilles Deleuze's distinction, regarding Samuel Beckett, between tiredness and exhaustion: "The tired has only exhausted realization, while the exhausted exhausts all of the possible. The tired can no longer realize, but

the exhausted can no longer possibilitate. . . . He exhausts himself in exhausting the possible, and vice versa."<sup>4</sup>

Akerman operates in between the psychic and the artistic notions of *exhaustive*. In true minimalist fashion, the artist exhausts the possible through alogical series, quirky dialogues, and a textured accumulation of time. Duration and seriality, formal strategies in Akerman's work, are the mechanisms of exhaustiveness, a Beckettian exercise around particularly haunting voids.

### The Partition of Absence

Cécile Tourneur

In 1972, the young Chantal Akerman left Brussels for New York. Four years later, she made *News from Home* (Belgium/France, 1976), a film about her experience of exile, superimposing different spaces and time frames through sound/image disjuncture, as well as two experiences of absence (fig. 4). Akerman reads aloud the many letters she has received from her mother since arriving in New York. Her voice attempts to extend the "home" of the title from Brussels to New York (and vice versa), across geographical and temporal distance, by creating a third space, the space of the correspondence itself. The vocal interpretation of her mother's written words is an echo of her initial, presumably silent, reading of them. These painful words, rehashing the absence of the daughter, resonate as a score among the other sounds of the city: the roaring of the subway, cars passing by, a boat leaving the harbor. Those recorded sounds are the symbols of movement and travel and are, in a certain way, addressed to her mother as a replay. If Akerman's life experience at this time was impossible to describe with words, she could share it with images and sounds, as if she were trying to find her cinematographic alphabet. These repetitive noises can be connected directly to the eternal return of the voice-over, singing the same melody over and over again, with slight variations, sometimes swallowed by the *rumeur* of the city. The frenetic rhythm of the writing style and the way Akerman chooses to read the letters seem to fill up any space that



Figure 4. *News from Home*  
(1976)

might have been available to tell another story, one relevant to Akerman's mother's life. The words are missing. The soundtrack could have been played more slowly, but its pace fits perfectly with the emergency contained within the letters. It is halfway between the hurried discourse of her mother and Akerman's own tone and rhythm, instantly recognizable to those familiar with her work. The fragile tie between the mother and daughter exists through a common breath. Each of them is the absent one, playing simultaneously the part of the one who is longing for the other and the one who is trying to compose with her memories but never forgets.

### On the Necessity of Forgetting

Alisa Lebow

Although our task was to write about "the difficulty of forgetting in Akerman's work," I feel compelled to write about its necessity. Memory and its correlate of forgetting have ample resonance in the themes and scenes of Akerman's films and installations; the invocation to remember drives much of her documentary work and her fiction films as well. Whether through the loving reenactment of her mother's gestures in *Jeanne Dielman, 23 quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* or the agonizing retracing of the length of rough Texas road on which James Byrd Jr. was dragged in *Sud* (South, France/Belgium, 1999), Akerman revisits sites and movements that clearly haunt her memory and in turn come to haunt ours. And yet, by her own admission, forgetting is an integral

aspect of her filmmaking. Two confessional moments attest to this: first as parable, second as method.

In the beginning of *Histoires d'Amérique: Food, Family, and Philosophy* (France/Belgium, 1988), as the Staten Island Ferry approaches Manhattan, Akerman recounts the story of a rabbi: "He passed through a village to get to the forest, and there, at the foot of a tree (and it was always the same tree), he began to pray, and God heard him." Generations pass, and his progeny increasingly forget the details: first the location of the tree, then the locations of the forest and village, and eventually the words of the prayer. The great-grandson only remembers the vaguest details of the story, yet at the mere telling of it, "God heard him." Akerman admits at the end of this parable that not only does she not know the place or the prayer, but she doesn't even have children to whom to recount the story. Not knowing as a form of cultural forgetting begets its own inquiry.

The second confessional moment that institutes forgetting as a structural necessity in and for Akerman's work, and even a guide by which others might also learn to make films, is when she tells us, in the last chamber of the installation *From the East: Bordering on Fiction* (1995), that "One must write when you want to make a film, although you know nothing about the film you want to make. And yet you already know everything about it. But you don't realize this. Fortunately, I would say. Only when it is confronted with the act of making it will it reveal itself. . . . And slowly we all realize that it is always the same thing that is revealed." The filmmaker must forget what she knows in order to begin the process of making a film, which will then reveal itself as something already known, indicating the latency of memory and the compulsion to repeat. Yet it is the forgetting that is essential if one is ever to start.



Figure 5. *D'Est* (1993)

**Introduction to the Screening of *Là-bas*,  
Basel, 22 October 2016**

Claire Atherton

I learned a lot about editing from studying Chinese philosophy. In Chinese thinking, particularly for the Taoists, efficiency is not planned in advance; it comes from the potential of a situation. That means process and effect are linked, and it also means that different layers of signification appear during the process of creation.

Each time Chantal wanted to make a documentary, she had this same approach. She needed to discover while doing. If she knew too well what she was looking for, she would no longer have the desire to make the film.

When Chantal was asked to make a documentary about Israel, she had some resistance. She said, “No, not me. Chantal and Israel: it seems a little bit too heavy.” But it was too late. Something had happened; she was feeling attracted to the idea. So she went there, to Israel, with a camera. Before going, she wrote a lot of notes, but she lost them.

She arrived in the Tel Aviv apartment, and she found herself unable to go out. She looked out her window. One day she made an image, and from that moment on she felt it was not about Chantal and Israel anymore; it was just Chantal filming. Since she couldn’t go out, she went on filming from her apartment, and she also did some writing every day. One day she went out, and she filmed on the beach.

When she came back to France, she called me to look at the images with her. She gave me the tapes and her writing, and she said, “Let’s see if something is possible.” It was always a very powerful moment when we discovered the images for the first time. We wouldn’t talk very much. Sometimes we gave names to the images. I usually wrote the names and our impressions in a notebook. I recently found this notebook, so I can tell you some of the names: the plant man, the wife of the plant man, the woman with the Marlboros, the workers, the sea, the workers between the curtains, the yellow building, the neighbor of the plant man, the woman from

across the street, the building of the plant man, the neighbor’s building, the building with plastic, the son of the woman with the Marlboros, the neighbors on their balcony . . .

When we heard the first phone call in the rushes, we felt there should be other calls, so we recorded them and added them during the editing. We did the same thing with the sounds of everyday life. It wasn’t a decision that was made in advance; it came during the process. Chantal was very receptive to chance. For instance, one day I was racing through some footage of a night sequence from the plane, and it occurred to us that the speed created tension. So we decided to use it in the film.

There is one last thing I would like to tell you. One day—I think it was about the fifth day of the edit—Chantal had an appointment and wasn’t there. I began to look at the images, and I couldn’t connect with them at all. It’s not that they were not well filmed; it’s just that I wasn’t feeling any tension. I began to worry. I started wondering if my response to the images had been linked to Chantal’s presence next to me. Then at one point in the rushes, the phone rang, and I heard a man’s voice answer and say: “No, Chantal is not here today. I am filming a little bit by myself.” I was incredibly relieved. When Chantal came back, I told her what had happened, and she smiled. I think she liked this story.

**When a Scene Breaks into Song**

Eva Meyer

One might think that Chantal Akerman’s *Golden Eighties* (France/Belgium/Switzerland, 1986) is her attempt to tap into an easy-going genre. She wants to get “away from the camps,” which cast a shadow over her life because of her mother’s history as a Holocaust survivor. She says: “I felt so trapped that I wanted but [to] breathe. These days I’d rather sing.” She longs “for lightness. I’ve come to a point in my life where I want to be lighthearted.”<sup>5</sup> But her gay and colorful film doesn’t satisfy the expectations of a musical comedy when it brings up an event that surpasses it: love or the burden of the past, whose repetition forms the series within



which this musical comedy unfolds. And we realize that a leap into the future can turn around so far back in time that it leads to the camps after all.

We need song and dance to understand this leap better. If there is an inexplicable event here, it will not be reconstructed. It is transferred to a rhythmic monotony that eludes the piety of memory by generating a collective tension and a collective spell. These do more than disenable the usual cinematic flashbacks of personal memories. They replace them, though without effacing their ramifications in time, which now involve numerous people, breaking down the individual law of causality into false continuities. These hold on to those tensions. They insert themselves into the tensions and carry on working with singing and dancing bodies. They get close to the point where the secrets of memory, of dream, and of time intermingle and where the real and the imaginary become indistinguishable.

Though we are given a story as a narration of memory, that story is punctuated by ruptures regulated by dance and song. These ruptures mutualize the distances and overcome blame cultures. We discover a work of nonrepression that neither talks nor keeps still. Through singing and dancing, *Golden Eighties* passes from the narrative to the spectacular and enters another world, another person's dream or past. This work is not a personal capacity of remembering, nor is it a collective story. It is a transference that divides and loses and recovers itself as an incommensurable or free and indirect relation.

### Food or Family?

Mathias Lavin

The difficulty of forgetting in Akerman's cinema can be examined in relation to the representation of food. As a social event, the meal can underline the filmmaker's relationship to a historical and familial heritage, as Maureen Turim points out in "Forgetting to Eat: A Commemoration" in this collection. In this respect, the subtitle of *Histoires d'Amérique* is indeed telling: *Food, Family, and Philosophy*.



Figure 6. *Jeanne Dielman, 23 quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975). Courtesy of Janus Films

From *Saute ma ville* (Belgium, 1968) to *No Home Movie* (Belgium/France, 2015), a culinary motif is recurrent: spaghetti with tomato sauce in *Saute ma ville* (the same meal returns in *Portrait d'une jeune fille de la fin des années 60 à Bruxelles* [France, 1993]); steak and fries, sandwiches with butter and cheese or Nutella in *Je tu il elle* (Belgium/France, 1974); potatoes, veal cutlets, and meatloaf in *Jeanne Dielman* (fig. 6); chicken, pizza, and clam soup in *A Couch in New York* (France/Belgium/Germany, 1996); and so on.

Although Akerman's cinema is deeply autobiographical, religious dietary restrictions that would connote her family's Eastern European Jewish origins rarely appear. One exception occurs in *Histoires d'Amérique*, perfectly described by Turim, during the sequence in an outdoor restaurant where (mostly) elderly men tell Jewish jokes. This collective meal also stands out because Akerman's characters often eat alone. The heroine of *Saute ma ville* locks the kitchen door as if she wants to eat in radical isolation. More comically, in *L'Homme à la valise* (France, 1983), the character avoids the man she's hosting and prefers to have breakfast alone. Sometimes the food theme implies the impossibility, sometimes the refusal, to eat. The reason can be economic (the two girls without

money in *J'ai faim, j'ai froid* [France, 1984]), physical (stomach flu in *Là-bas* [Belgium/France, 2006]), or more enigmatic (in *Demain on déménage* [France/Belgium, 2004], the protagonist and a man visiting her apartment are unable to eat a piece of chicken).

Food has a profound ambivalence in Akerman's films: it is nutritious and repulsive at the same time. Just think of Jeanne Dielman holding the veal cutlet with the extremities of her fingers as if the meat were a disgusting rag. The meals have a social value in this film, but they occur in silence or melancholic solitude—like in many of Akerman's other works. *No Home Movie* offers another interesting example with its numerous sequences showing Akerman and her mother eating and conversing. But the conclusion confirms the ambivalence: the evocation of the past (memories of the Akerman family reconstructed by the stories, questions, and answers of the daughter and her mother) is less about its preservation than about the beginning of mourning, as time is always lost.

### **Beyond the Windowpane: *Les Rendez-vous d'Anna***

Ute Holl

The sounds of train wheels hitting rails and of footsteps on hard floors dominate *Les Rendez-vous d'Anna* (France/Belgium/Germany, 1978). A cold light illuminates the images of train stations and searchlights on platforms, a functional light, as in train compartments or hotel rooms near train stations. "How are things in Germany?" the mother of the film's protagonist Anna (Aurore Clément) asks, as they talk in a station restaurant. Strangely, Anna answers with a smile: "There are curtains everywhere, there are tulips on every table, and . . . it is full of Germans." No trouble, no inquietudes. The second time in the film that Anna will smile is at the end when she sings the song of the suicide lovers.

There is no film on Germany in the seventies that is comparable to Akerman's relentless protocol of absence in *Les Rendez-vous d'Anna*. Shot by shot, the film captures the dark side of Germany's new wealth. Symptomatically, in the city of Essen, Anna is



Figure 7. *Les Rendez-vous d'Anna* (1978).

Courtesy of Janus Films

constantly hungry but unable to eat. She cannot participate in this country.

When she enters a hotel room, Anna draws the curtains, and a traveling camera follows her in a horizontal plane. On the other side of the window, there are again tracks and trains. When she opens the windows, the sounds of wheels and screeching brakes fill the room. Anna's movement of opening the curtains will be repeated at nighttime while she stands naked after she has thrown a German man named Heinrich out of her bed and room. Again, she is faced with transportation: with trains moving and people looking away.

*Les Rendez-vous d'Anna* is a portrait of a country and a people complacently self-absorbed, including perpetrators rehabilitated in a society of good citizens: an ice-cold image of Germany in brownish colors presents the reality of a country that has chosen to ignore the atrocities committed by its population. The film assembles symptoms. In its precision it proves, shot by shot and sound by sound, that the stuff of history was very present in the 1970s: in the shape of the trains, in the texture of the curtains, in the design of coffee cups and wallpaper, in the tulips on the table, and in the constant mentions of good food. As Ivone Margulies shows, Akerman's film can be seen as an account of Jewish experi-

ence, battling with speech and voice to counteract history as written by its winners.<sup>6</sup>

In the repeated opening of curtains there is, I feel, another dimension to the film. Akerman has construed an interface, a windowpane, opening toward the cruelties of persecution and murder committed against Jewish communities, families, and people that need to be acknowledged before any form of reconciliation can take place. But the film shows that, in reality, the curtains were not drawn, not in Germany in 1978. A country of refusal and dumbness is portrayed. As is the despair of a filmmaker.

### Forgetting to Eat: A Commemoration

Maureen Turim

אַלץ קען דער מענטש פאַרגעסן נאָר ניט עסן.

Alts ken der mentsh fargesn nor nit esn.

A person can forget everything but eating.

This Yiddish saying, marking the centrality of eating in Jewish culture, tears at the heart in remembering the films of Chantal Akerman, in commemorating the brave film artist, author of an installation whose title places her inside an empty refrigerator. “Nisht fargesn,” the Yiddish for “Do not forget,” so close to the German phrase, summons the issues of Jewishness I addressed in my Basel conference presentation that is here elaborated as an essay. Empty refrigerators, forgetting to eat, eating compulsively: immediately these evoke the constellation of eating scenes in Akerman’s films that Mathias Lavin addresses as well in his comments on “Food or Family?” in this collection. For example, the compulsive sugar-eating out of a paper bag in *Je tu il elle*’s first section accompanies the performative and conceptual display of writing as an apparent writer’s block spreads fragments discarded across the floor. I wrote of this before, in “Personal Pronouncements in Two Akerman Films,” and return to it now to rethink this sugar compulsion, this incorporation of reduced nourishment, as cinematic ritual.<sup>7</sup> As I noted in that essay, this scene is echoed in the third

segment of the film, as Akerman’s character Julie eats jam at the former lover’s apartment, an action reminiscent of Marie and the miser confronting each other as she tries to eat his jam from a jar in *Au hasard Balthazar* (dir. Robert Bresson, France/Sweden, 1966).

Food figures repetitively in so many of Akerman’s films, such as the food offered by two of the elderly Shoah survivors she interviews in *Dis-moi* (France, 1982), the minutely followed preparation of food in *Jeanne Dielman, 23 quai du commerce, 1080 Bruxelles*, and the kitchen table eating scene in *No Home Movie*. Here in this brief commemoration, I note both the running jokes about eating and the recurrent accounts of the tragedy of starving as depicted in *Histoires d’Amérique*, which bears the English subtitle *Food, Family, and Philosophy*. The monologue scenes, rendered by actors full face to the camera, tell of the dire struggles of immigrants to the US: a man who almost mercy kills his dying wife, only to rethink his action when she gasps for breath, tells us: “And she was hungry, she wanted to eat. And she began to get better.” In addition, there is the woman who tells of a period of despair when “her husband couldn’t feed” their two children, evoking the absence of food as a dire experience of poor immigrant Jews. Interspersed with these food-laced tragedies are comic dialogues, many also about food, that culminate in a long final sequence set in a restaurant, though staged outdoors like all the other scenes. The philosophy emanating from food stems equally from the comic Jewish humor scenes and from the tales of coping with economic difficulties.

### Encapsulated (Hi)Stories

Eva Kuhn

In *Jeanne Dielman, 23 quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles*, there is a tension between, on the one hand, the brilliant superficiality and bold visibility created by the hyperrealistic recording of everyday textures and details (fig. 8) and, on the other, a disturbing opacity caused by the complete absence of classical narrative or explanatory logic. And then there is the long duration of the images, their



Figure 8. *Jeanne Dielman, 23 quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975)

insistence on surfaces and on the rhythms of succession that work independently of the underlying story. In this manner, a presence is created that refuses to go away and that seems as if it could break open and escape at any moment.

Akerman's cinematic oeuvre bears witness to a longing for the everyday, which is not a matter of course, as her films clearly show us. Uniform sequences, patterns, recognizable rhythms, long lapses of time, repetitions, and routines characterize their structure and content. The films deal with the disruption of these rhythms and act it out. Things are subtly brought out of balance or the rhythm is interrupted; monotony is gradually derailed or an order abruptly explodes. The reason why remains open.

The mother never reveals much of her story—neither in *Jeanne Dielman* nor when directly confronted by the daughter's little camera in her last and most intimate film, *No Home Movie*. In this film, signs of her dwindling life are intermittently interspersed with images from the desert. In an interview famously held in her pajamas shortly after her stay in Cambodia, Akerman talks about the book of Exodus and the forty years that the Jewish people spent in the desert to cast off the marks of slavery.<sup>8</sup> It's a story about taking one's time to forget. In the case of the concentration camps, some survivors say that three generations are required.

Madame Dielman's history and the history of her neighbor—the histories of all the characters in Akerman's films—are embodied and thus internalized. History is encapsulated in people as experience. Akerman's films discern the symptoms of these experiences on the surfaces of the visible world—on faces, bodies, landscapes, city streets, and building facades. At the same time, her films show us the strength with which people offer resistance to these experiences. The neighbors on the balconies of the build-

ing adjacent to her apartment in Tel Aviv summon this resistance to the violence of history—by talking, smoking, sitting, drinking, and watering their plants (*Là-bas*). Or by filming, like the subject, respectively the auteur of these films who expresses the bigger historical picture in forms that are reduced and introverted to the greatest possible degree. This reduction lets us see film as a membrane on which inside and outside, private and public, (auto) biography and world history meet. Film—as a materially concrete, audiovisual perception—turns out to be the interface on which all these oppositions converge.

## Endings

Heike Klippel

Like *Saute ma ville* and *Jeanne Dielman, 23 quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles*, *News from Home* has a very clear ending: New York's slow disappearance in the fog, seen from the ferry leaving Manhattan (fig. 9). The extreme slowness seems to blind us to what happens: the disappearance conceals itself from us, and we are consigned to a state of an eternal too-late, confronted with the unpalatable fact that all our gaze can do at this speed is to compare an after with a remembered before. The gaze necessarily creates artificial differences because it can't keep pace with the fluidity of the change. The constant draw of the water, the ceaseless shrinking and gradual disappearance of what appears to be the only city left in an inhospitable world—all this simulates a sort of painless drowning.



Figure 9. *News from Home* (1976)

As at the ends of *Saute ma ville* and *Jeanne Dielman*, there is a death here, too. It is the result not of a linear development but of the negation of what has gone before. To understand these negations in terms of mortality is to follow Emmanuel Levinas's notion of death as absolute antagonism. For him, death is something so entirely different that it cannot be grasped: the absolute future, the astonishing, always outwits the present. Death "becomes the limit of the subject's manfulness. . . . What is important about the approach of death is that at a certain moment we are no longer *able to be able*. It is exactly thus that the subject loses its very mastery as a subject."<sup>9</sup> But what might this mean for a female subject who has neither potentiality nor mastery to lose? Of what does her Other then consist? Akerman replaces mastery with serial repetition of attempts to take control and, when they fail, of attempts to find compromises. Her films illuminate different kinds of compromise: in *Saute ma ville*, fragmentation and the renunciation of productivity; in *Jeanne Dielman*, an unattainable fulfillment; in *News from Home*, a patient biding of time that seeks to spellbind its object. The figurations of death at the ends of these films throw this seeming passivity into relief and thereby subvert it. Instead of trying to point to some heroic, absolute Other, they stage cessation as an end that knows not whether it should mourn for what happened before or for what was impossible before—for what it has missed.

## Notes

1. Nicole Brenez, "Das Pyjama-Interview," *Retrospektive Chantal Akerman*, ed. Astrid Ofner, Claudia Siefen, and Stefan Flach (Vienna: Schüren, 2011), 14.
2. As Alphonso Lingis comments: "Consciousness appears to Levinas as constituted in the horror of the indeterminate. The insomnia that endures the night is the very experience of this horror." Lingis, translator's introduction to Emmanuel Levinas, *Existence and Existents* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1978), n.p.
3. Chantal Akerman, *A Family in Brussels* (New York: Dia Art Foundation, 2002), 9–10.

4. Gilles Deleuze, "The Exhausted," trans. Anthony Uhlmann, *Substance* 24, no. 3 (1995): 3.
5. Brenez, "Das Pyjama-Interview," 19.
6. See Ivone Margulies, *Nothing Happens: Chantal Akerman's Hyperrealist Everyday* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996).
7. Maureen Turim, "Personal Pronouncements in Two Akerman Films: *I . . . You . . . He . . . She* and *Portrait of a Young Girl at the End of the 1960s in Brussels*," in *Identity and Memory: The Films of Chantal Akerman*, ed. Gwendolyn Audrey Foster (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2003), 9–26.
8. Brenez, "Das Pyjama-Interview."
9. Emmanuel Levinas, *Time and the Other*, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1987), 74.

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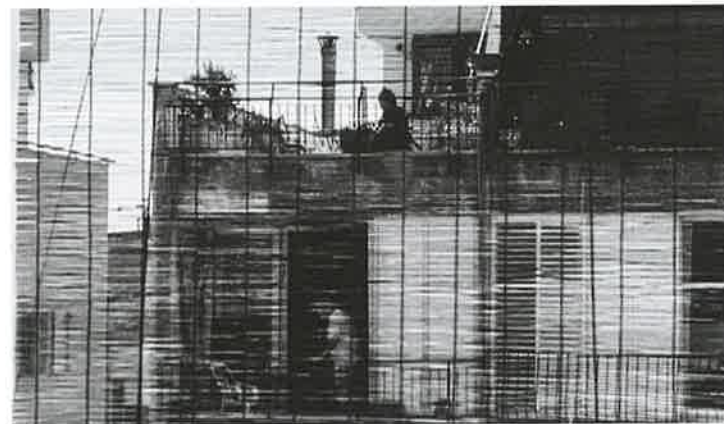


Figure 10. *Là-bas* (2006)